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AI makes pictures, but can it give The Rock bangs?

BY GEOFFREY A. FOWLER AND KEVIN SCHAUL

Lots of artificial intelligence tools can make images. But which is the best? We challenged five leading AI image generators to edit photos, convey emotion and make art. Read about our tests and see how they ranked with our panel of expert judges. Story, B12-13

Make these money moves before the ball drops



Michelle Singletary
 THE COLOR OF MONEY

As 2025 comes to a close, you'll see the typical list of year-end financial "must-do's."

Money experts remind people to make last-minute charitable contributions to claim the deduction for the

upcoming tax season. Got extra savings? Dump it into your child's 529 college savings plan.

Or maybe you haven't put enough into your retirement plan, so you're advised to "max out" your 401(k) before Dec. 31. The maximum contribution for a workplace plan is \$23,500 this year. If you're 50 or older, the catch-up provision allows an

additional \$7,500, bringing your total to \$31,000.

And thanks to Secure Act 2.0, if you're 60 to 63, there's a super-catch-up of \$11,250 for total max contribution of \$34,750.

I'm pretty sure if you had enough money to max out your retirement account, you would have already made those moves, unless you're expecting a huge year-end bonus.

Though recent government data shows inflation has cooled, many Americans are still struggling with affordability because of high housing costs and rising consumer prices. And many families are potentially facing the loss of health insurance due to increasing premiums.

SEE SINGLETARY ON B14

CDs and DVDs are back, thanks largely to Gen Z

BY JACLYN PEISER

Dan Levine loves watching his guests light up when they see the DVD-lined bookcases and drawers in his Brooklyn apartment. It's as if they've traveled back in time to 2006, he said.

"It is a really powerful thing to show that I still take pride in owning things that make me happy," Levine said.

The 30-year-old estimates he has more than 500 DVDs. And that's not including his modest collections of CDs, VHS tapes, vinyl records, cassettes and eight-tracks.

Since the 2010s, streaming has dominated media consumption, sinking sales of DVDs and CDs. And yet discs are still circulating in retail, and, in some cases, demand is reviving — particularly from collectors. Discogs, an online marketplace for physical mu-

music where users can also catalogue their personal collections, has seen CD purchases increase 8 percent this year over last year.

The trend is driven by Gen Z looking for the novelty of "vintage" media on discs, experts say, as well as collectors and millennials itching to ditch their pricey streaming services. They also want to exercise true ownership of their media and better support the artists they love. And it can be cheaper to buy a physical DVD for \$3 to \$5 than to buy or rent the digital version. Some buyers also hope their collections will grow in value.

"What's driving the growth right now is the type of people who go and spend a lot of time buying physical music are also hoping that the music might appreciate over time," said Lloyd Starr, chief operating officer at

SEE DVDS ON B14

A prototype model of a Toshiba high-definition DVD player is unveiled in Tokyo in 2004 ahead of its anticipated release.

YOSHIKAZU TSUNO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

TEST 1

Edit a familiar face

Starting with a real photo of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, we asked the bots to “give this man bangs.”


Winner: Gemini

What’s tricky for AI is keeping the original face while adding plausible hair. Gemini’s latest, Nano Banana Pro, appropriately matches skin tone and shadows. It “maintains the shape of The Rock’s head well and just puts a silly haircut on him,” said David Carson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and JSK journalism fellow at Stanford focused on AI.

“The realism part is there,” said Pratik Naik, a photo retoucher who works on fashion.

Dahlia Dreszer, a Panamanian artist in Miami who collaborates with AI, said even the Gemini image is unsettling because it conflicts with our image of the actor. “I don’t think that’s the AI’s fault,” she said.

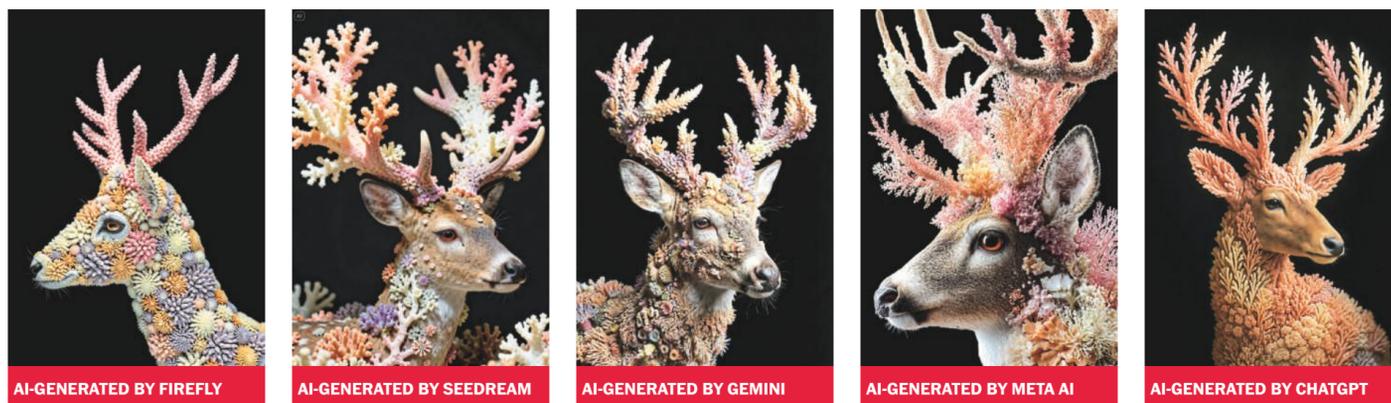
Runner-up is ByteDance’s Seedream, though Naik thought the hair looked like a toupee.

Meta AI erased a bit of Johnson’s tattoo around his collar. The beta version of Adobe’s latest Firefly got the lowest score and confused bangs with a bob.

TEST 2

Create ‘art’

We gave each bot a 100-word prompt to create an “award-winning” studio portrait of a deer whose “antlers and body are made of colorful living coral.”


Winner: Gemini

Two judges felt Gemini’s image was realistic. “From the detail of the texture to the coral on the antlers, it’s truly a big step up,” Naik said.

Dreszer said OpenAI’s ChatGPT may not be the best art piece but “is pretty creative.” (The Wash-

ton Post has a content partnership with OpenAI.)

The worst was Seedream, which gave the deer exaggerated lashes.

It “looks more like taxidermy than a real photo,” Naik said.

TEST 3

Remove an ex

Using a photo of actor Kristen Stewart and former boyfriend Robert Pattinson, we asked the bots to remove Pattinson from the picture.


Winner: Gemini

Gemini not only effectively removed Pattinson but created a new pose for Stewart. “I would have a hard time telling from just visual inspection that it was an AI photo,” Carson said. “The AI rendered reflections on the skin of her arm from the light

bouncing off her sequin dress, wow.”

Firefly left a disembodied hand near her hip. The judges said the worst was Meta AI. “The woman in the background got a random object placed in the middle of her head,” Dreszer said.

Just got laid off? Try these methods to get recruiters’ attention on LinkedIn.

BY DANIELLE ABRIL

If you’re one of the more than 1 million people who were laid off this year, you’ve probably been busy tackling your checklist to land your next job.

You need to spruce up that résumé, start your online job hunt and connect with old colleagues and professional contacts. But there’s also one more thing you should do right now, experts say. If you’re on the professional social network LinkedIn, a few strategic moves could boost your visibility to hiring managers and recruiters.

“It’s much harder to break into the labor market right now,” said Elise Gould, senior economist at Economic Policy Institute. “Em-

ployers just aren’t hiring at the rate that they did last year or the previous years.”

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that the U.S. labor market lost 41,000 jobs in October and November. Unemployment rose to 4.6 percent, which is the highest since 2021, with Amazon, Meta and other companies laying off workers. While the job market may be particularly challenging for some, especially those in industries that are cutting back or young people entering the workforce, the rate of job openings has stayed relatively stable — meaning there’s still opportunity for job seekers, Gould said.

Here are a few things you can do on LinkedIn to increase your

chances of landing your next gig.

List your new consulting firm

Some people worry about showing that their employment has ended at one employer without being able to add a new job. So add a new job, said Michelle Volberg, founder of an executive search firm and CEO of Twill, a talent recommendation platform.

“The job market is so competitive right now, you really have to stand out, and you want to do it in thoughtful ways,” she said. “Create value.”

Start by opening a limited liability company, which usually involves filling out some paperwork and paying a fee. Start building a portfolio of projects

and clients, which at first might be your friends and family who let you do a few things free, Volberg said. Then make a list of 25 employers you want to work for and offer your free consulting services. You can say something like, “I’m interested in your company’s mission, and I have some ideas I’d like to share with you free that could help you with” a specific named client. The idea is to give them a preview in the outreach without giving away your ideas. Save those for a Zoom or in-person meeting, Volberg said.

Be clear about boundaries around your work, including the scope of the project and time expectations. Put them in writing. Use the time to create value

and establish a relationship with the employer, but don’t offer free work beyond 30 days, Volberg said. Once you’ve done three or four projects, start charging. You can research market rates through ChatGPT and other AI services and gut-check them with connections or professionals in industry social networking groups, including those on Slack, Volberg said.

In the end, you may have a foot in the door at a new employer or a new path to working for yourself.

Don’t lie about the break

Update your LinkedIn as soon as you can to signal you no longer work at your employer. If you’re not interested in consulting, update your LinkedIn profile to

include a career break.

The feature is under “Experience” on your profile and allows you to include details and skills that could be useful to employers during your job hunt.

“Make sure you’re including what you’re doing in that time that could be seen as transferrable skills,” said Catherine Fisher, career expert at LinkedIn.

You could include a community project you led or a marketing campaign you did for your child’s school fundraiser, or maybe you built something with artificial intelligence that helped a volunteer organization improve their processes. “AI literacy is a top skill; so is communication, leadership and collaboration,” Fisher

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

TEST 4

Convey real emotion

We gave each bot a 100-word prompt to create a “professional photograph” that “captures raw emotion” of an actor crying “tears of joy” after winning an Academy Award.



AI-GENERATED BY FIREFLY



AI-GENERATED BY SEEDREAM



AI-AI-GENERATED BY META AI



GENERATED BY GEMINI



AI-GENERATED BY CHATGPT

Winner: Gemini

All the AI tools decided on their own to make the subject a White man. And Meta AI chose to make him look like Leonardo DiCaprio.

The worst was Firefly, which gave the actor runny mascara that Naik said looked like “tears of horror.”

The judges felt the emotion in Gemini’s image was closest to authentic. It “hints at tears visually with reflective highlights and a blob on his cheeks,”

Carson said.

But wait: Gemini included a tiny fake “credit” (see photo at right) using the name of a real Associated Press photographer. Carson said it doesn’t change his overall score but “gets them a big fat zero for ethics.”

(Google said it was “refining” its safeguards. The AP didn’t answer questions about whether Gemini had rights to train on its photos.)



TEST 5

Fingers

AI is notorious for having a hard time with hands. We asked each of the bots to create a photo of “two hands cradling the back of a person’s head with fingers interlaced.”



AI-GENERATED BY FIREFLY



AI-GENERATED BY SEEDREAM



AI-GENERATED BY GEMINI



AI-GENERATED BY META AI



AI-GENERATED BY CHATGPT

Winner: Gemini

Some of these images still included strangely merged or missing digits.

Google’s AI not only rendered the correct number of fingers but included realistic detail on the hands.

“We’ve reached a milestone,” said Naik. “Even the minor color variations in the fingers are how it would be. People would be fooled by this.”

The lowest score went to Meta AI, which failed to weave the fingers together and forgot a nail.

And the overall winner is: Gemini

Gemini came out on top in every test. “It’s truly a big step up,” Naik said.

AI image generators have made a big leap recently, particularly in editing pictures with text prompts. Google has led by training its AI to preserve features like faces and understand how image elements interact.

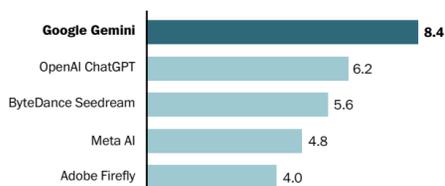
Copyright remains a concern, as Gemini’s fake credit shows. The lowest scorer, Firefly, was trained primarily on licensed and public images, which Adobe says makes it commercially safe.

There’s a dark side to improved quality: Creating deepfakes has never been easier. Gemini’s newest model has been called a “misinformation super-spreader.” (Google said it includes an invisible watermark in its images.)

The jury is still out on whether any can create art. “I would consider all of these images of the deer to be AI slop,” Carson said.

Dreszer doesn’t see AI art as inherently inferior. “There is a spirit of discovery” in using AI creatively, she said. “AI is here to supercharge us.”

Average score, out of 10



About this story

We conducted the tests in November using Adobe Firefly Image 5 (beta), ByteDance Seedream Image 4.0, Google Gemini 3 Nano Banana Pro, Meta AI and OpenAI’s ChatGPT 5.

We ran the same prompt through each AI tool, collecting the first image each bot created. Judges scored each image on a 10-point scale without knowing which AI tool had created it.

The original image of Dwayne Johnson was created by David Shinbone. The original image of Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson was submitted by accidentalpaparazzi. Both images were licensed under Creative Commons 2.0 and modified using AI with the permission granted by the licensing agreement.

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

said about what employers seek. “Ways you can show you possess those skills are important.”

Show off your expertise

Face it: You have skills and knowledge. It’s time to share that with your professional network to help get you some visibility, Volberg said.

Regularly publish thoughtful or educational posts relevant to people in your industry, “like” other people’s posts, and leave smart comments.

“It’s highly underrated,” Volberg said. “You can really stand out by posting as a thought leader.”

Recruiters and hiring managers are always looking, she said. Even if they don’t know you’re available to hire, if they like you, they’re more likely to message

you. Posting and publicly engaging with others about industry topics just helps you increase your reach.

Signal that you’re looking

Let people know you’re looking. There are several ways to do this, depending on your comfort level.

One way is to click the “open to” button below your name in your profile and hit “finding a new job.” You can set preferences for job titles and locations, as well as choose whether only recruiters can see that you’re open to work or all LinkedIn members. If you choose all LinkedIn members, a green frame will appear around your profile photo that says “#OpenToWork.”

The banner is the best way to remind everyone in your network that you’re searching, Fisher said, and LinkedIn’s data shows people



ILLUSTRATION BY ELENA LACEY/THE WASHINGTON POST

are more likely to get noticed that way. But some hiring managers may see this as the worker being not in demand, Volberg cautioned.

Another way to signal you’re open is to post about your layoff on the network. Tell your story, explain your expertise, and let people know what you’re looking for.

Engage with employers

Search for employers you’d like to work for, follow their pages, and connect with people in your direct or extended networks who work for them.

LinkedIn recently released AI-powered people and job searches, which allows users to ask for what they’re looking for using natural language. You might type something like “product managers that work at Apple,” and LinkedIn can surface relevant

people. Similarly, you can say, “I’m looking for a full-time sales role in financial services” to find jobs that might fit.

Follow your dream employers’ pages so you can get updates from them and recruiters can get a sense that you’re interested, Fisher said. Message people who are first or second connections. They may also be able to make introductions.

“A secret I always share is that everyone loves to talk about themselves, so just say, ‘I want to learn about you,’” Volberg said. “Find ways to bring value to them.”

Being laid off in a competitive job market can be taxing. But think of it like a really tough breakup, with LinkedIn helping you “glow up,” Volberg said.

“You can be on your couch with ice cream for a couple of days, but then get up,” she said.