The Future of Search

How AI is changing discovery, behaviour, and brand authority

Introduction & Key Takeaways

What is this document? This presentation explains the strategic shift from traditional Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to Answer Engine Optimization (AEO). This change is driven by the rise of generative AI, which is fundamentally altering how people find information and what brands must do to be found.

How to use it?

Use this deck to:

- Understand the technical and strategic differences between the "old" (SEO) and "new" (AEO) search landscapes.
- See how AI-driven search is changing user behavior.
- Identify the actionable steps required to build brand authority and ensure your narrative is accurately retold by AI.

Key Takeaways

1. **From Retrieval to Synthesis:** Search is moving from a "list of links" (information retrieval) to a "single, synthesized answer" (knowledge synthesis).
2. **From Ranking to Citing:** The primary goal is shifting from "ranking higher" on a page to "being cited as the answer" by an AI.
3. **From Keywords to Trust:** Strategy must evolve from keyword optimization to building "AI-readable trust signals" through structured data, genuine experiences, and citable platform presence.

Traditional Search (Overview)

Based on **keywords** and **ranking algorithms**	Users see **lists of links** and decide what to click
Focus: ***Relevance*** *and* ***optimisation***	Example: “Best companies for engineers UK” → list of pages

Key Message

Traditional search is a map of the web.

Traditional Search (Technical & Strategic Breakdown)

How It Works

- **Crawling:** Search bots scan web pages, indexing text, links, and metadata.
- **Indexing:** Pages are categorised based on keywords, relevance, freshness, and authority.
- **Ranking:** Algorithms (like Google's PageRank and BERT) determine result order based on signals such as:
  - Backlinks and domain authority
  - Keyword density and semantic relevance
  - Site structure and usability
  - Page speed, mobile optimisation, accessibility
- **User Intent:** Search algorithms now interpret "informational," "navigational," and "transactional" intent, but rely heavily on structured metadata.

Limitations

- Users still have to **decide** which link to trust.
- Content can rank well without truly answering the question.
- Heavy reliance on keyword engineering and backlink games rather than expertise.

Strategic Takeaway

Traditional SEO rewards *visibility*; AI search will reward ***credibility***.

AI Search (Overview)

Based on **natural language understanding** and **context**	Users get **direct answers or summaries**, not lists
Focus: ***Authority*** *and* ***trustworthiness***	Example: “Which company offers the best environment for engineers in the UK?” → AI summarises multiple sources into one answer
Key Shift: From *information retrieval* → to *knowledge synthesis* From *ranking higher* → to *being cited as the answer*	

AI Search (Technical & Strategic Breakdown)

How It Works Technically

- **Large Language Models (LLMs):** Trained on billions of documents to predict text patterns and generate language-based answers.
- **Context Windows:** AI doesn't "search" the web in real time, it recalls learned associations from its training data or plugged-in sources (like Bing or Google's SGE).
- **Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG):** Combines static LLM knowledge with live search retrieval, pulling in verified sources to reduce hallucination.
- **Entity Recognition:** AI identifies key *entities* (brands, people, products) and connects them semantically.
- **Citation Scoring:** Preference is given to sources with strong domain authority, consistent language, and structured content (Schema, Q&A, FAQs).

Strategic Difference

- AI evaluates *who is **trustworthy***, not just *what is popular*.
- LLMs synthesise information, your content could be paraphrased or cited in answers without the user ever visiting your site. Having control over the story AI tells is crucial

Implications for EB

- Your "digital first impression" is now increasingly **generative**, not visited.
- Employer brands must think in terms of **AI-readable trust signals**, not just SEO visibility.

Strategic Takeaway

You're no longer **optimising** for a search engine, you're **teaching** a reasoning engine.

Context: SEO vs. AEO

While SEO and AEO work together, they have different goals and focuses.

Traditional SEO (Search Engine Optimization)	AEO (Answer Engine Optimization)
Goal: Rank a *web page* higher in a list of links to drive organic traffic to your site.	**Goal:** Become the *direct answer* in a "zero-click" environment (like an AI summary, featured snippet, or voice reply).
Focus: Keywords, backlinks, domain authority, and technical site performance.	**Focus:** Structured data (schema), conversational queries, E-E-A-T signals (Expertise, Authority, Trust), and genuine, citable content.
User Behavior: Targets text-based, keyword-focused searches (e.g., "best tech companies").	Targets conversational, long-tail, and voice searches (e.g., "what are the best company to work for as a developer?").
Strategy: Build *visibility* to earn a click.	Strategy: Build *trust* to be cited as the source.

Changing Search Behaviour (Overview)

Users are **asking full questions** instead of short keywords	Expecting **conversational, opinionated answers**	**Follow-up queries** instead of multiple separate searches
Multi-modal search (text, image, video, voice) becoming standard	Gen Z users increasingly trust **AI-curated answers** over web results	
Key Shift: People are searching *for guidance, not just information.*		

Changing Behaviour (Technical & Cultural Breakdown)

Behavioural Shift

- Queries are longer, conversational, and contextual: *“What’s it like to work at EY?”*
- Users expect *one confident answer*, not a menu of links.
- **Follow-up queries** simulate dialogue (“And what about benefits?”).

Interface Shift

- **AI-integrated search engines** (Gemini, Copilot, ChatGPT) now blend chat and search.
- **Voice & visual search** (Google Lens, Siri, Alexa) encourage natural speech.
- **Persistent search sessions** mean user intent is tracked over multiple questions.

Generational Shift

- Gen Z is 2.6 times more likely than older generations to use **AI and Social media** as search engines.
- They value authentic tone and visual explanation over corporate pages.

Business Implications

- Employer brands need **narrative clarity**: consistent answers across chat, site, and social.
- Structured metadata ensures the *same story* is told across engines.

Strategic Takeaway

Search is becoming a conversation – the winners are those who can lead the conversation.

How AI Search Results Work (Overview)

• Analyse web-scale data and **learn from patterns of authority**	Draw from sources such as: ○ Wikipedia, Reddit, Quora, news sites, brand sites, common crawl data ○ Schema, FAQs, and structured metadata
• Generate answers using **Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG)** – pulling facts from trusted sources in real time	

Key Idea:
AI ***ingests*** the web, instead of crawling it, the web becomes AI's source of knowledge. The more structured and cited your content, the easier that knowledge can be assimilated and become part of the answer.

Detail: How AI Search Results Work (Technical & Strategic Breakdown)

LLM Training Stages

- **Pre-training:** Models like GPT and Gemini are trained on a corpus of text (web pages, forums, articles, code) to understand language and context.
- **Fine-tuning:** Human feedback and reinforcement learning teach the model how to prioritise *helpfulness* and *accuracy*.
- **Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG):** At query time, the model fetches up-to-date information from trusted databases, knowledge graphs, and indexed sources.

Ranking in the Age of AI

- Instead of search ranking, AIs use **trust scoring** – weighting sources based on:
  - Author identity and E-E-A-T signals
  - Consistency of topic authority across the web
  - Structured data (Schema.org markup, linked entities)
  - Frequency of mentions on credible platforms

Data Types and Websites Consumed by LLMs

- **Structured Data:** Schema, product feeds, knowledge graphs, FAQ markup
- **Semi-Structured Data:** Wikidata, Reddit threads, Q&A platforms
- **Unstructured Data:** Blog content, social media posts, PDFs, transcriptions

EB Implications

- The “source” of a candidate’s perception may be an AI summary, not your website.
- Brands must ensure that **AI encounters clean, structured, trustworthy data**.

Strategic Takeaway

You’re no longer just optimising *pages* – you’re training *models.*

How can your company become a source of authority.

Source Authority and Provenance

High Trust: Data from official, authoritative, and accountable sources.

Low Trust: Anonymous, un-vetted, or user-generated content where accuracy is not guaranteed.

Maintenance

High Trust: The dataset has a clear **version history** and is actively maintained. There is a clear process for updating old information and correcting errors (errata). For example, a knowledge base for a software product that is updated with every new release.

Low Trust: The data is "stale." It was published once and never updated, making it potentially dangerous for answering questions about current topics (e.g., medical advice, legal statutes).

Accuracy and Verifiability

High Trust: The data is **factual, citable, and has been fact-checked** or peer-reviewed. In a corporate setting, this means it has been approved by a subject matter expert, like the legal or engineering department.

Low Trust: The data is based on opinion, lacks sources, or contains known errors.

Objectivity and Bias

High Trust: The data is factual and neutral. It avoids persuasive or emotionally loaded language. If it has a bias (e.g., a dataset of political speeches), that bias is clearly stated and known.

Low Trust: The data is heavily opinionated, designed to sell a product, or pushes a specific agenda without acknowledging it.

Preparing in the Employer Branding (EB) Space (Overview)

Companies should focus on:	
Authority Building – Consistent thought leadership, citable content, expert attribution	**Structured Content** – FAQs, schema markup, question-based content
Platform Presence – Contribute to “training ground” platforms (Reddit, Quora, Medium, LinkedIn)	**Guidance-Oriented Messaging** – Tell stories that *answer* candidate questions “What’s it really like to work here?”

EB Preparation (Technical & Strategic Breakdown)

Authority Building

- Ensure **authorship consistency**: same author name, profile, and credentials across all platforms.
- Build **semantic authority** by producing long-form guidance pieces that get cited or linked to in discussions.
- Create **internal linking hierarchies** that signal topical depth to crawlers and LLMs.

Structured Content for AEO

- Use **FAQPage**, **HowTo**, and **Article** schema on EB pages.
- Optimise job descriptions and EVP content as Q&A-style articles:
  - "What's it like to work as a Software Engineer at X?"
  - "What development programs are available for graduates?"
- Standardise formatting for AI parsing – consistent use of headings (H1-H3), bullet points, and short intros.

Platform Seeding

- Comment and post on sites LLMs ingest – *Reddit, Quora, Medium, Glassdoor discussions.*
- Encourage employee advocates to share genuine experiences in **public, indexable spaces like social media, blogging platforms like Medium or Q&A platforms like reddit or quora.**
- Each mention acts as a **semantic backlink** – building your brand's authority network.

Message Clarity

- Align EB copywriting with your **AI-readable tone of voice** – clear, conversational, and authoritative.
- Include employer brand attributes in metadata and open-graph tags.

Strategic Takeaway

In AI search, *authenticity* and *accessibility* are the new SEO pillars.

Strategic Priorities: Often-Ignored Channels

To win in AEO, you must build authority in the public spaces where AI models learn. Priority should be given to channels that are rich in citable, structured, and conversational data.

Q&A and Community Platforms (Reddit, Quora)

- **Why:** These are primary training grounds for conversational AI.
- **Action:** Proactively engage in relevant communities. Don't just post links; provide genuine, detailed answers that establish your brand as a helpful expert.

Rich Media Transcripts (Podcasts & Videos)

- **Why:** AI cannot "watch" a video or "listen" to a podcast, but it *can* read (and cite) a detailed transcript.
- **Action:** Transcribe all audio and video content. Publish the full, optimized transcript as an "article" on your site to make it indexable.

Advanced Structured Data (Schema)

- **Why:** Most brands stop at basic schema. Advanced schema is a massive, often-ignored opportunity to "speak" directly to AI.
- **Action:** Implement advanced schema types like `Speakable` (for voice assistants), `HowTo` (for step-by-step guides), and `Author` (to connect content to your experts and build E-E-A-T).

Case Studies: Who is doing this well?

NerdWallet

Why they win: NerdWallet is a prime example of AEO success. Their revenue grew significantly (over 35% in 2024) even as their direct monthly website traffic from Google declined (by 20%).

How: They successfully "became the answer" in zero-click search snippets and AI overviews. They capture value by being the cited authority, not by relying on a click.

B2B SaaS (e.g., Zapier, Calendly, Ramp)

Why they win: These brands excel at creating comprehensive, expert-led content that answers specific user questions.

How: Their content is highly structured around "how-to" guides (e.g., "How to connect App A to App B"), product comparisons, and in-depth FAQs. This format is easy for AI to parse, trust, and cite as an authoritative source.

Authoritative Publishers (e.g. BBC, NYTimes, Forbes)

Why they win: They demonstrate strong E-E-A-T (Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness).

How: They publish "thought leadership" content from named, credible authors with clear bios. AI models are trained to recognize and prioritize these signals of authority to ensure answers are trustworthy. First Page Sage, an AEO-focused agency, is a primary example of building authority by defining the topic itself.

What the Process Looks Like (Overview)

Phase	Timeline	Focus	Actions
1. Audit	0 to 1 month	Assess visibility & authority	Review structure, schema, FAQs, and brand mentions
2. Content Strategy	1 to 3 months	Shift from info → guidance	Rework pages into Q&A and thought-led formats
3. Authority Building	3 to 12 months (ongoing)	Be part of the dataset	Publish externally and build brand citations
4. Test & Refine	Ongoing	Measure AI visibility	Ask AI tools your candidate questions, track citations
5. Scale	Ongoing	Automate & embed	Integrate schema automation into your content management systems

What the Process Looks Like (Technical & Strategic Breakdown)

Phase 1 – Audit

- Crawl site with Screaming Frog / Sitebulb to identify structured data gaps.
- Benchmark authority via brand mentions, backlinks, and social reach.
- Ask Gemini or ChatGPT questions like “Which companies are best known for X?” and log mentions.

Phase 2 – Content Strategy

- Build a **content matrix** mapping every page to a set of user questions.
- Prioritise high-intent content (EVP, careers, leadership insights).
- Define tone: clear, factual, trustworthy – written to be quoted.

Phase 3 – Authority Building

- Encourage leaders to publish bylined articles on Medium and LinkedIn.
- Create evergreen “pillar” pieces tied to EB themes (culture, diversity, flexibility).
- Pursue mentions in media or awards listings that feed training datasets.

Phase 4 – Test & Refine

- Use AI prompt testing monthly.
- Analyse “co-occurrence” – where your brand name appears alongside relevant keywords in AI outputs.

Phase 5 – Scale

- Automate Schema insertion in CMS (FAQ, Article, JobPosting).
- Deploy analytics tracking for structured data performance.
- Integrate LLM-optimised metadata in publishing workflows.

Strategic Takeaway

Treat AEO as a continuous feedback loop between *human content* and *machine understanding.*

FAQs (Overview)

Q: Is AI replacing SEO?
A: No – it's expanding it. SEO remains, but now serves as the foundation for AEO.

Q: How soon will this impact us?
A: Already visible through Bing Copilot, Google SGE, and ChatGPT Search.

Q: What should we do now?
A: Restructure key pages into Q&A format, add Schema, and start authority building.

Q: How do we measure success?
A: Run periodic AI search tests and monitor structured data coverage and brand citations.

Q: Is AEO geo-located?
A: Location is a critical context for AI. Answer Engines, especially those integrated into search (like Google) and voice assistants (like Siri), will heavily weigh the user's location to provide relevant, localized answers. This is crucial for any queries with local intent (e.g., "best companies in London" or "what is it like to work at the New York office?").

FAQs (Discussion Guide)

Timeline & Urgency

- Early adopters are already gaining ground in LLM visibility – those optimising now will dominate in 2025–26.
- AEO is a *multi-year maturity journey* akin to early-stage SEO adoption.

Measurement Metrics

- **LLM Visibility Index:** Track mentions across ChatGPT, Gemini, and Bing.
- **Structured Data Coverage:** % of pages with complete schema markup.
- **Authority Mentions:** Number of external sites referencing your EB content.
- **Engagement Shifts:** Reduction in bounce rate from direct answers and summaries.

Implementation Resourcing

- Requires collaboration between Marketing, Tech, and HR.
- Phaseable rollout: begin with content team training and CMS schema setup.

Governance & Risk

- Ensure brand voice and claims are consistent; AI will amplify inconsistencies.
- Audit AI-generated references to prevent misinformation.

Strategic Takeaway

The companies that shape their own narrative now will own their AI-generated reputation later.

Closing Insights

- The future of EB is *narrative stewardship* – ensuring AI retells your story accurately.
- AEO bridges marketing, employer brand, and data strategy.

Next steps for clients:

1. Commission an AEO readiness audit
2. Reframe your EVP content into AI-friendly, question-based structures
3. Seed brand authority in public ecosystems
4. Establish KPIs around AI visibility

Final Takeaway:
In the next wave of digital transformation, your *brand narrative* becomes your *training data*

Glossary of Key Terms

AEO (AI Engine Optimisation): The practice of structuring, formatting, and building authority for your content to ensure it is easily understood, trusted, and cited by artificial intelligence models (like ChatGPT or Gemini) when they generate answers for users.

AI-readable trust signals: Specific data points, credentials, and content attributes on a website that AI models can easily parse and interpret to determine the site's credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness.

Authority: A measure of a website's reputation and expertise in its field. It is established through high-quality, trustworthy content and signals like backlinks from other reputable sites.

Backlinks: An incoming link from one website to another. Search engines interpret backlinks as "votes" of confidence, authority, and relevance. A site with many high-quality backlinks is generally seen as more authoritative.

Citation (in search): A reference or mention of a brand, author, or piece of content on another website. Unlike a traditional backlink, a citation does not *require* a clickable link. AI models can process these mentions to understand a brand's authority.

Crawling: The automated process where search engine software (called "crawlers" or "bots") systematically browses the internet to discover new and updated web pages.

Domain Authority: A predictive metric (scored 1-100) that estimates a website's likelihood to rank in search results. It is calculated by combining multiple factors, primarily the quantity and quality of backlinks pointing to the entire domain.

E-E-A-T: An acronym used by Google for "Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness." These are principles used in Google's quality guidelines to assess the credibility of a page or website, especially for critical topics.

Entity Recognition: An AI process of identifying and classifying key "entities" (like people, brands, products, locations, or concepts) within a text and understanding the relationships between them.

Generative AI (GenAI): A category of artificial intelligence models (including LLMs) that can create new content, such as text, images, or code, in response to a user's prompt. Search engines are integrating GenAI to provide direct, synthesized answers.

Hallucination (AI): A phenomenon where an AI model, such as a chatbot, generates plausible-sounding but factually incorrect or nonsensical information that it presents as fact.

Indexing: The process of storing, analyzing, and organizing the content found during crawling. Once a page is indexed, it is eligible to appear in search results for relevant queries.

Internal linking hierarchies: The practice of strategically linking pages on your *own* website to each other. A well-planned hierarchy helps search engines understand the site's structure, discover all its content, and identify which pages are the most important.

Keyword density: A metric (expressed as a percentage) that measures how many times a target keyword appears on a web page relative to the total number of words. This is a largely outdated concept, as modern search engines prioritize natural language.

Knowledge graphs: A database model that stores information by linking entities (like people, places, or concepts) and describing the relationships between them. Search engines use knowledge graphs to provide direct, rich answers (like information boxes) in search results.

Large Language Model (LLM): A type of artificial intelligence trained on massive amounts of text data. It learns the patterns, grammar, and relationships in language, allowing it to understand, summarize, translate, predict, and generate new, human-like text.

Natural language understanding (NLU): A branch of artificial intelligence that focuses on enabling computers to understand, interpret, and process human language in a way that is contextually aware and meaningful.

Open-graph tags: Snippets of code (metadata) placed in a page's HTML. Their primary purpose is to control how a page's content (its title, description, and preview image) is displayed when it is shared on social media platforms like Facebook or LinkedIn.

Optimisation (SEO): The process of improving a website's content, structure, and technical setup to increase its visibility in search engine results and attract more organic (non-paid) traffic.

Pillar Piece (or Pillar Page): A comprehensive, long-form piece of content that covers a main topic in-depth. It is designed to be the central "hub" from which more specific, related content pieces internally link, signaling deep expertise on that topic.

Ranking: The process search engines use to determine the best order to display results after a user enters a query. This is based on hundreds of factors, including relevance, authority, and usability.

Ranking algorithms: The complex set of rules and formulas used by a search engine to assess and rank all indexed web pages for a specific search query.

Relevance: A measure of how well the content on a web page matches the intent and topic of a user's search query.

Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG): An AI technique that combines a pre-trained LLM with an external information retrieval system. It "retrieves" relevant, up-to-date facts from a trusted source and "augments" the LLM's response with those facts, making the answer more accurate.

Schema (or Schema.org markup): A standardized vocabulary of code (structured data) added to a website's HTML. It explicitly *describes* the content to search engines (e.g., "this is a Recipe"). This helps search engines display "rich snippets" in results (e.g., star ratings, event dates).

Semantic authority: A website's perceived expertise and trustworthiness on a specific *topic* or cluster of related topics, as understood by AI and search engines. It is built by comprehensively covering a subject, not just by individual keywords.

Semantic backlink: A modern interpretation of a backlink where the value comes from a *mention* of a brand or entity on another authoritative site (like Reddit or Quora), even without a direct clickable link. AI can connect these mentions to build a picture of authority.

Semantic relevance: How well the *meaning* and *topic* of a page match the *intent* behind a search query, rather than just matching exact keywords. This includes the use of synonyms, related concepts, and comprehensively answering the user's question.

SEO (Search Engine Optimisation): The traditional practice of improving a website to increase its visibility in *organic* (non-paid) search engine results. This has historically focused on signals like keywords, backlinks, and technical performance.

Signal (Ranking Signal): A specific factor or characteristic that a search engine's algorithm uses to evaluate and rank a web page. Examples include page speed, the presence of a keyword, the number of backlinks, or the author's expertise.

Site structure: The way a website's pages are organized and linked together. A logical, clear structure makes it easy for both users and search engine crawlers to navigate the site.

Structured metadata: Any standardized data that is organized in a predictable format (like Schema or open-graph tags) to make it easier for computers and search engines to read, interpret, and categorize.

Topical Depth: A measure of how thoroughly a website covers a particular subject area. It is achieved by creating a collection of high-quality, interconnected content (articles, FAQs, guides) about a topic, rather than just a single, isolated page.

Trustworthiness: A measure of a website's perceived honesty, safety, and reliability. Signals include site security (HTTPS), transparent author information, and positive reviews.

Usability (User Experience - UX): The quality of a person's experience when interacting with a website. Key factors include how easy the site is to navigate, its page load speed, mobile-friendliness, and overall design clarity.