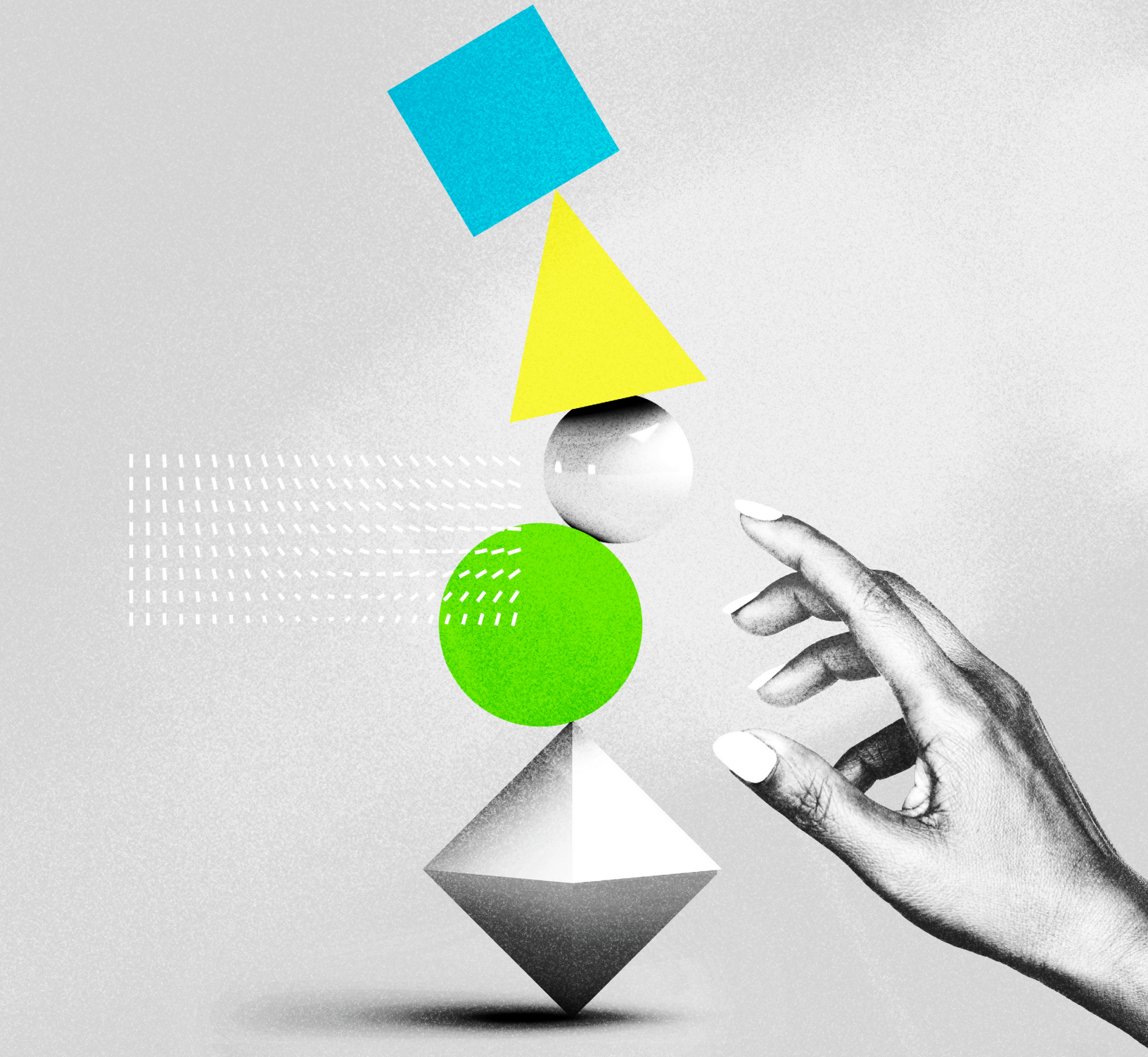
2026 Global Human Capital Trends

From tensions to tipping points: Choosing the human advantage



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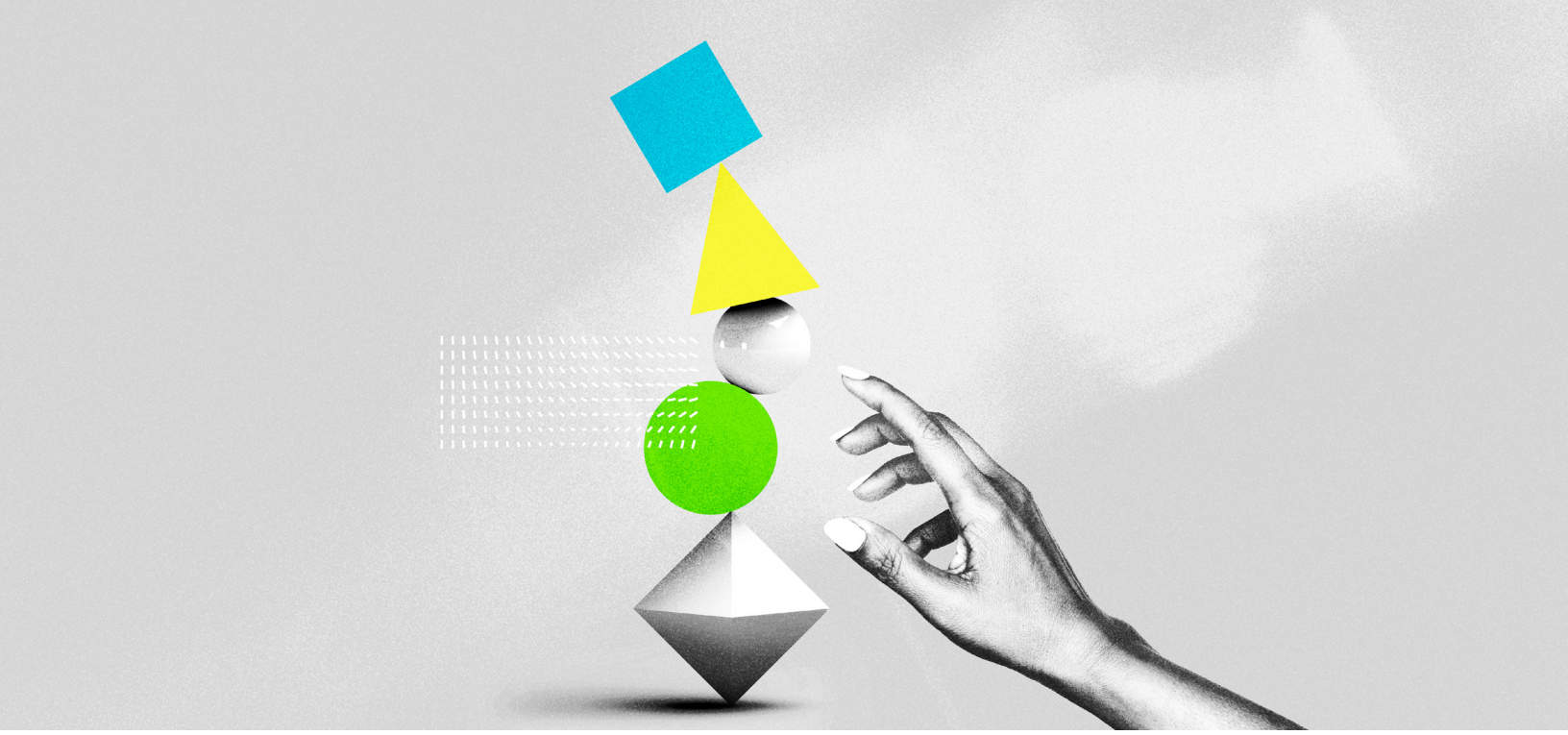


From tensions to tipping points: Choosing the human advantage

The 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey reveals the intentional choices organizations can make to adapt continuously, move with speed, and lead with a human edge

Shannon Poynton, Jason Flynn, Nic Scoble-Williams, Victor Reyes, David Mallon, and Sue Cantrell

Control or empowerment? Stability or agility? Automation or augmentation? Last year, we explored these tensions and the need to navigate the polarities at play. But in 2026, the pace of change is sharpening the edges of these questions. Organizations are no longer just trying to balance competing forces: They are standing at a tipping point.

In our 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey, 7 in 10 business leaders say their primary competitive strategy over the next three years is to be fast and nimble—to quickly adapt to and capitalize on changing business, customer or market needs. Leaders also report that the two most important drivers of success are accelerating how people and resources are orchestrated to perform work and increasing their organization's and workforce's ability to adapt to change and speed.

The classic S curve of growth has long described how businesses and work evolve: gradual lift, rapid acceleration, and eventual plateau. Today, that curve is compressing. AI and workforce transformation are accelerating the climb and bringing the plateau sooner (figure 1). Organizations are pressed to leap to the next curve more quickly to remain competitive. Long cycles of planning and predictable execution may no longer hold in a world where markets, technologies, and worker and customer expectations shift in real time. Success may now depend more on sensing change, experimenting quickly, and adapting continuously.

Today, new data and workforce insights—ranging from organizational digital twins to real-time analytics—make it possible to see where an organization sits on the curve and actively steer how and when to jump to the next one.

Figure 1

The traditional 'S curve' that defines business evolution is compressing

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Historically, organizations jumped the curve by adding new technology, a strategy that may no longer be enough. Organizations will likely need to make the leap differently.

Competitive advantage is now primarily less driven by technology differentiation and more by cultivating the human edge. Technology—especially something as increasingly ubiquitous as AI—is replicable. People aren't. Humans create competitive differentiation through adaptivity, creativity, and judgement amid uncertainty and change. When it comes to AI, value is unlocked through a reimagination of work that brings the best of humans and machines together in concert.

Indeed, recent Deloitte research with 100 C-suite leaders reveals that most organizations (59%) are taking a tech-focused approach when it comes to AI. But those taking a tech-focused approach are 1.6x more likely to *not* realize returns on AI investments that exceed expectations compared to those that take a human-centric approach.[1]

This human-centric focus allows organizations to confidently jump the curve rather than stay on the same curve, or worse, fall off the curve entirely (figure 2).

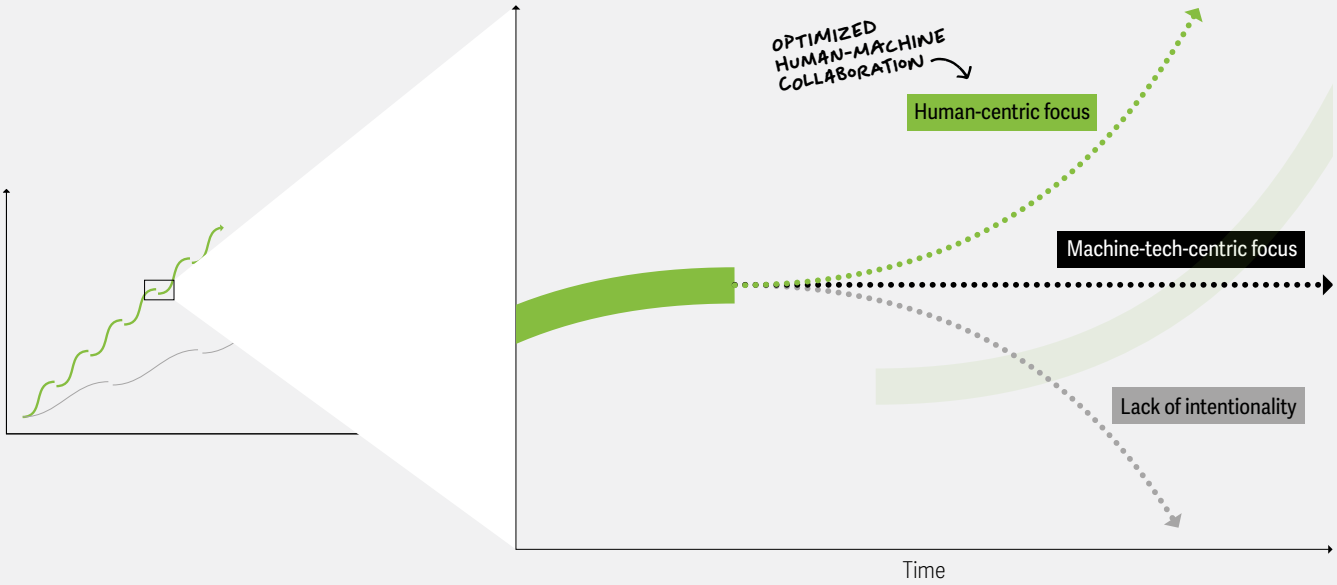
Three tipping points shaping the future of work

What makes this moment different is that the pressures on organizations are no longer sequential, but compounding. Technological advancement is converging with economic volatility, geopolitical tensions, societal expectations, and a rapidly shifting workforce. The boundary between planning and execution is collapsing, even as cost pressures, efficiency mandates, and questions of trust and clarity intensify. Many leaders feel overwhelmed—aware of the challenges but struggling to act decisively. Tensions once manageable over time are now tipping points, where hesitation risks missed opportunities and lasting consequences for organizations, their people, and society.

In moments of discontinuity, leaders face a choice: remain tethered to the old curve or leap boldly to the next. Winning organizations see tipping points as an opening rather than a crisis but changing that mindset isn't easy. Letting go of familiar models, rewiring assumptions, and bringing people along require courage, discomfort, and persistence. By constantly embracing reinvention, they can turn disruption into momentum—unlocking new value, human potential, and growth on the next S-curve. The next curve isn't on the horizon—it's unfolding now.

Figure 2

A human-centric focus can help organizations jump the curve



Source: Deloitte analysis.

In 2026, three tipping points stand out as especially important—moments where leaders will need to decide whether to cling to the old curve or leap to the next. Each tipping point represents a shift that organizations can no longer defer. They are not distant possibilities but present realities, demanding choices that will define how organizations create value, build trust, and unleash human potential in an AI-powered world. Given the speed and complexity of change, these tipping points can either sweep leaders along or become moments to act with precision and intention.

From human + machine to human x machine

The boundaries between humans and machines are blurring. Organizations will likely need to redesign work to harness human–machine synergy, moving beyond having humans and machines work side by side. This includes a rethinking of culture, decision rights, and trust in data itself. The questions are fundamental: How does culture evolve when people and intelligent agents work side by side? Who has the authority to decide when algorithms act and when humans intervene? And how can organizations protect themselves against misinformation and untrustworthy outputs in a world where AI is both a collaborator and a risk?

From cost efficiency to value creation

Relentless cost pressures, changing consumer and worker behaviors, and geopolitical shifts have pushed many organizations toward efficiency at all costs. But as that model tips, the focus should shift toward value. This means evolving functions to be fit-for-purpose, investing in innovation, and prioritizing growth through adaptability rather than simply reducing expense. At the same time, **demographic shifts and disappearing workforces** are making human capacity itself a scarce resource, elevating the need to invest where humans create unique and irreplaceable value. Organizations that succeed will likely not be those that automate the fastest, but those that channel efficiency into reinvestment, fueling new forms of value creation and worker performance.

From static plans to dynamic orchestration

The future is both here and unknown, making curiosity a core organizational capability. Staying relevant means continually reimagining how workers change, learn, and grow. And as strategy and execution merge, organizations will likely need to move beyond structured jobs and workers, orchestrating capacity and capabilities to meet shifting demands. This means building systems for perpetual

learning, experimentation, and reinvention, where workers are not only adapting to disruption but empowered to shape it. Purpose, values, and culture should evolve from static statements into living parts of the organization, anchoring them while providing the freedom to adapt, compete, and thrive.

Exploring the tipping points in this year's trends

Each tipping point presents an opportunity for leaders to test new possibilities and accelerate toward the next curve, while also surfacing questions that can no longer be deferred. The promise of AI is expanding rapidly, reaching further into work and the workforce than ever before; yet the gap between its potential and today's reality remains wide. Bridging that gap will likely require organizations to intentionally evolve how work is designed, how workers stay relevant, and how leadership and culture enable adaptation.

This year's report focuses on choices that our research shows, despite being powerful levers of value, are often overlooked. Many organizations are not yet making intentional decisions in these areas. The chapters that follow examine these questions in depth, illuminating the decisions leaders will need to navigate to thrive in an AI-powered, constantly shifting world.

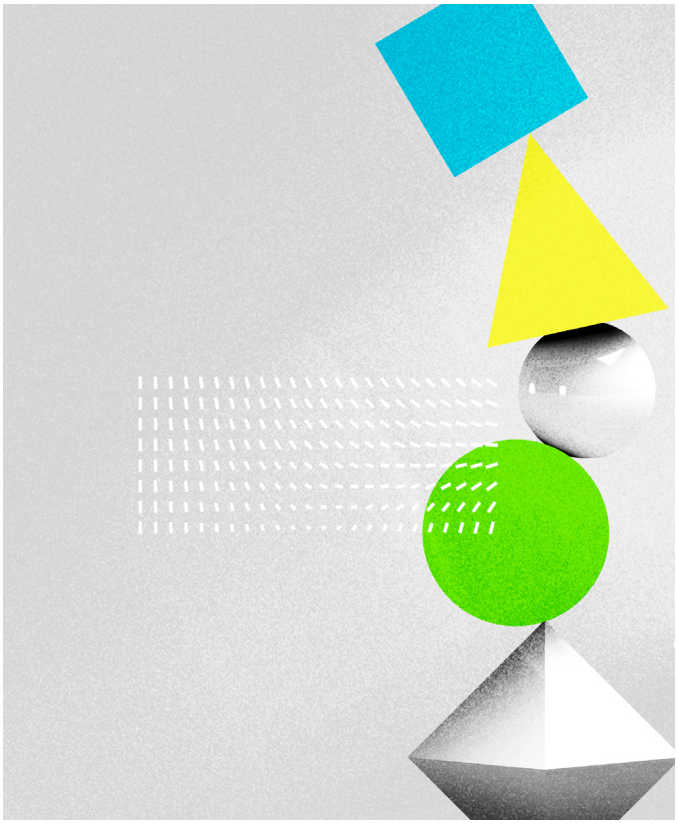
- **How do we maximize the value of humans and machines working together?** What choices matter most when redesigning work for humans working in concert with AI—and how do these choices shape the experience and performance of the humans in the system? As AI becomes part of everyday work, most organizations still aren't intentionally designing how humans and machines interact, limiting returns and reinforcing outdated processes. Our research shows that those who intentionally redesign roles, workflows, and decision-making to support human–AI collaboration are more likely to exceed expectations on investment returns and deliver meaningful work. With AI access widening, intentional design—not technology alone—is becoming the real differentiator.

- **How do we know what is true about people and work?** How can organizations trust the data they rely on to make decisions about people and work? AI is increasingly blurring authorship and eroding confidence from both workers and organizations. Yet according to our 2026 survey, few organizations are making significant progress to address these concerns. To stay resilient, leaders will likely need to expand from focusing on cybersecurity to focusing on disinformation security and establishing stronger foundations of digital trust.

- **Who's accountable when both humans and AI are making decisions?** When humans and machines interact, who's the boss? Who decides? And how will accountability, decision rights, and leadership evolve? AI is increasingly influencing organizational decisions and authority. Treating decision-making as a strategic discipline—and intentionally designing how humans and AI share judgment and accountability—is important to maintaining trust and protecting human agency. Done well, AI can strengthen rather than override human decision making.

- **How is AI changing our culture?** How does culture shift when intelligent machines are part of the workforce? What are the implications for connection, trust, and the human fabric of organizations? Many organizations are overlooking AI's impact on human-to-human behaviors, allowing misalignment, distrust, and unaddressed norms to accumulate as "cultural debt." With workers questioning what counts as effort, ownership, fairness, and accountability—and most organizations rarely evaluating AI's cultural effects—trust and cohesion are eroding just when they matter most. To avoid this quiet deterioration, leaders should intentionally reinforce and evolve culture so that AI strengthens, rather than undermines, shared values and performance.

- **How do we orchestrate capability and capacity at speed?** AI is accelerating how work happens, and advantage is shifting from allocating talent in static structures to orchestrating people, skills, data, and technology in real time. Speed now outpaces scale, yet most organizations aren't moving fast enough. Those that continuously reconfigure capabilities around outcomes are more likely to outperform financially and create meaningful work, turning volatility into opportunity.



- **How do we get more value from our functions?** As cost efficiency gives way to value creation, how should core functions like human resources, finance, and IT evolve to be fit for purpose? Traditional functions are increasingly too slow and siloed for today's business demands, yet few organizations are making progress in moving beyond them. As work becomes more multidisciplinary and AI and innovation require seamless collaboration, organizations may need to rethink and deconstruct functions, reassembling capabilities around outcomes rather than rigid structures.

- **How do we stay relevant?** Traditional change management and training may be too slow to help organizations and workers adapt as the pace of change accelerates. Few organizations manage change effectively, and even fewer meet continuous learning needs. AI is reshaping both, enabling workers to learn, adapt, and apply new skills directly in the flow of work. Organizations that build this always-on, real-time adaptability can avoid stalled transformations and disengaged talent, turning workforce growth and responsiveness into a new competitive advantage.

Making the leap with human advantage

Reinvention is no longer episodic: It's the new baseline for work and the workforce. The organizations that thrive will likely be the ones to treat discontinuity as momentum, moving quickly to redesign work, roles, and value rather than reverting to old strategies in response to AI and other advances.

As the S-curve compresses, so do the capabilities required to navigate it. Where innovation, scaling, and efficiency once happened in sequence, today they increasingly need to coexist, often within the same teams and even the same individuals. Building the human advantage is now as critical as managing technology itself. That means not simply preparing workers for the future, but building a workforce that can continually learn, adapt, and reinvent in real time. Those that make bold, intentional choices to strengthen their human edge will set the benchmark for success.

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Getting human and machine relationships right

To multiply human potential with AI, organizations can deliberately design human and machine interactions

Nic Scoble-Williams, Sue Cantrell, David Mallon, and Stefano Besana

Nearly 60% of workers now use artificial intelligence intentionally at work, according to a recent study by the Melbourne Business School, yet few organizations are intentionally designing for how humans and machines actually interact.[1] Organizations routinely design human-to-human relationships, and increasingly machine-to-machine workflows as well. But many are still designing work for people and technology separately, rather than designing for both together.

This lack of intentionality is leaving many organizations struggling to realize value from AI. While some organizations are seeing results, most aren't realizing a return on their investments at the speed they need.[2] Organizations can't count on cohesive human-AI interactions to happen organically, considering that only 14% of leaders responding to our 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey say they are adept at shaping those interactions.

The problem, according to recent Deloitte research, is that most organizations (59%) are taking a tech-focused approach to AI.[3] They layer AI onto legacy systems and processes, rather than reimagining how humans and AI interact, collaborate, and make decisions. This is similar to the way historic cities are often forced to add new infrastructure onto old foundations rather than redesigning for flow and connection from the ground up.

But in a world where access to AI is rapidly democratizing, technology alone no longer sets organizations apart—people do. It's how people interact with AI through intentional design that can make the difference.

Deloitte research shows that organizations are twice as likely to exceed their return on investment expectations for AI when they prioritize work design, thoughtfully redesigning human and machine interactions and roles.[4] Consider the results when one European telecommunications company added an AI "expert" to customer service without changing roles or workflow and saw a small 5% productivity lift. But dedicating 90% of the full rollout budget to redesigning human-AI interactions—new workflows, trust thresholds, escalation paths, and robust training—unlocked a 30% productivity increase, as agents learned to partner with AI.[5]

Leaders increasingly recognize what's at stake: Sixty-six percent acknowledge that the intentional design of human-AI interaction is important to organizational success. Yet only 6% say they're leading in this area (figure 1). Our analysis shows that organizations leading the way on intentional design of human-AI interaction are nearly 2.5 times more likely to report better financial results and twice as likely to say they provide meaningful work.

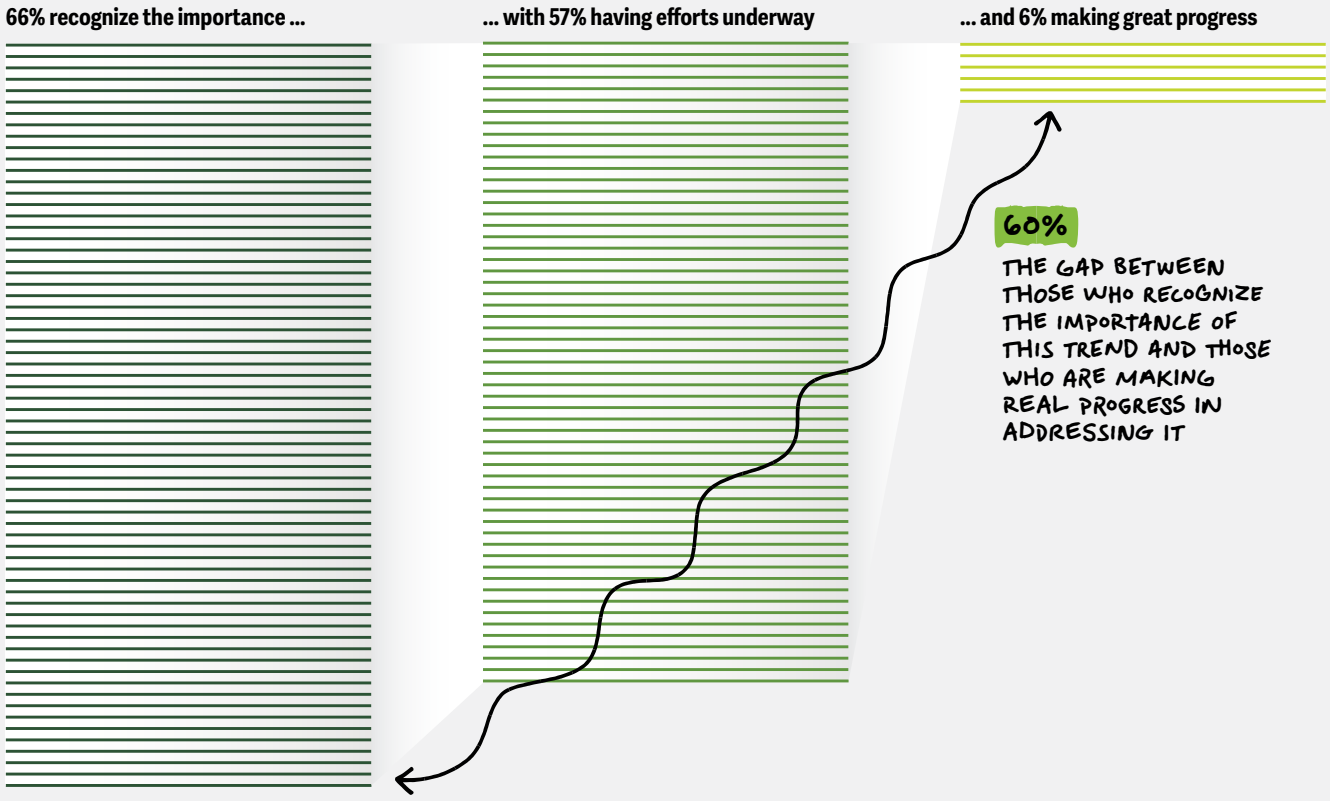
The scaffolding for intentional interaction design

Effective human and machine interaction isn't intuitive; it won't happen by accident or default. Organizations should intentionally design human-AI interactions at both the organizationwide macro level (including design principles, governance, and strategy) and the more granular micro level (specific interactions for particular work, workers, and teams).

Figure 1

Organizations say it's important to design human-machine interactions, yet only 6% are making great progress toward doing so

Percentage of respondents answering the questions, "How important is designing effective interaction between machines (e.g., AI, robots) and your human workforce to enhance both organization performance and workforce trust and well-being?" and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

For design to succeed at both levels, it needs to consider both hardwiring and softwiring. Hardwiring includes formal elements like redesigned roles, accountability, decision rights, and clear escalation protocols that dictate when work shifts from AI to a human. Softwiring includes informal elements such as leadership behaviors, culture, and psychological safety that give people the trust and confidence to question, escalate, experiment, and learn with AI.

Design at the macro level

Organizations need a clear view of the macro dimensions of work design along with the hardwiring and softwiring choices that shape how humans and AI actually collaborate (figure 2).

Starting with a clear strategic ambition of the desired human and business outcomes is foundational. For example, Michael Ehret, senior vice president and chief people officer at Walmart International, highlights how the company brings the outcome-driven and human-centered design principles to life through its AI strategy. He explains, "We design the way our people work with AI so that it provides an outcome. Too many organizations treat AI as an adoption problem without first asking how you can achieve the outcomes desired. What's really required is behavioral change—not technical training."[6] While 56% of surveyed leaders say they are designing primarily for business outcomes such as cost or speed, a growing number of leaders (40%) are designing for both business and human outcomes (such as well-being).

Another key macro dimension is governance and accountability. As the dimensions of human-AI collaboration expand—spanning technology, people, process, risk, and culture—the C-suite should increasingly operate as a symphony. Business, information technology, human resource, finance, operations, risk, and legal each play their part, all following the same score.

To move beyond traditional silos, some organizations are adopting cross-functional governance models. For example, Moderna has merged IT and HR to unify technology and people strategy;[7] Skillsoft's AI council enables cross-functional oversight;[8] and Disney's chief AI and collaboration officer focuses on enabling better collaboration across the business.[9]

Once the organization establishes governance, leaders can set overall design principles to guide teams in creating optimal human and machine interactions. These principles should be anchored in the enterprise's values and mission, so they might vary by organization. Some design principles to begin with include:

- **Outcome-driven:** Define the human and business outcomes to amplify, focusing on results that transcend what humans or AI could achieve alone.
- **Contextual:** Tailor solutions to each workflow, team, risk profile, and human-AI relationship.
- **Transparent:** Make roles, decision rights , trust thresholds, and accountability explicit, so everyone understands how human and AI contributions combine to drive superior outcomes.

Figure 2

Macro dimensions of work design

Dimension	Examples of hard wiring	Examples of soft wiring
Strategic ambition How can the interactions between humans and machines improve business and human outcomes? **Governance and accountability** Who makes these design choices? Who owns the consequences? How are outcomes monitored and evaluated? **Design principles** What principles are going to guide your design choices? **Ethics and trust** What ethical frameworks guide efforts? **Infrastructure** What physical and technological foundations are required?	• Board or stakeholder governance • Strategic planning • Risk and organizational controls • Decision rights • Organizational structure • Technology stack • Partners, alliances, and ecosystems • Labor relations	• Culture • Leadership • Purpose • Brand

Source: Deloitte analysis.

- **Adaptive:** Design human-AI systems for continuous learning, feedback, and evolution, ensuring they sustain outcomes and adapt as needs change.

- **Human-centered:** Elevate human agency, creativity, judgment, empathy, and leadership. AI should amplify and never diminish what makes us uniquely human.

- **Empowering:** Design AI systems and culture so workers are confident to challenge, escalate, experiment, and learn from both success and failure.

Save the Children demonstrates how choices around trust can accelerate adoption and impact. The organization's early gen AI pilots delivered fragmented adoption. To address this, the organization worked on building a culture of curiosity, learning, and collaboration through a variety of mechanisms, including training, leadership engagement, and an ambassador network. The organization also established clear guardrails on when and how to use gen AI. This approach quickly doubled weekly usage (from 36% to 71%), and as fluency and adoption increased, the organization was able to apply AI to more value-creating use cases (quadrupling complex task application from 10% to 45%). Guardrail awareness increased from 42% to 70% and collaborative learning from 36% to 60%. Having strengthened its capabilities and culture, the organization is now positioned to redesign work and roles for greater impact.[10]

Design at the micro level

Beyond establishing the foundations at the organizational level, leaders need to consider how to design human and machine interactions that are optimal for each team and type of worker. The micro dimensions of work design will vary based on the work, the relative roles for humans and AI, the team composition, and more (figure 3).

Consider, for example, how 7-Eleven redesigned roles for humans and AI. When rapid AI automation threatened to make the company's specialized recruiter role obsolete, it used the rollout of "Rita"—an AI assistant automating 95% of routine hiring tasks and freeing 40,000 hours weekly—to redesign the role rather than replace it.

Figure 3

Micro dimensions of work design

Dimension	Examples of hard wiring	Examples of soft wiring
Work What specific work journeys or flows are in scope? **Roles for humans and AI** What work do humans do? What skills and capabilities do humans need? What tasks are AI models or agents designed to perform? **Human-AI relationship** How do humans and AI work together? What are the relative levels of human agency and AI autonomy needed? **Team composition and activation** How are the right groups of humans and agents combined quickly and efficiently to get work done? How are humans and AI prepared for working with each other? **Performance, learning, and reflection** How are the performance and growth of humans and AI supported? **Evaluation and adaptation** How are work effort and outputs monitored, evaluated, and improved over time? **Security/data access** For workers and AI alike, what applications or data resources are essential? How is this data monitored and optimized over time?	• Job/role design • Job architecture • Processes and procedures • Workspaces, tools, and equipment • Talent acquisition • Workforce management • Onboarding • Human learning and development • AI and AI agent training and reinforcement • Knowledge management • HR service delivery • IT service delivery • Data engineering and data management • Cyber	• Management practices • Culture • Collaboration and teaming

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Recruiters shifted from transactional tasks to a strategic focus on enabling store leaders, partnering more closely with stores to improve hiring quality and strengthen onboarding. With redesigned roles, streamlined workflows, and strong leadership support, recruiters elevated talent fit and reduced turnover, showing how intentional redesign can transform the risk of displacement into greater organizational value.[11]

A critical yet often overlooked dimension is choosing the right human and machine interaction type. Workers can interact with AI in a variety of different ways. There are many types of daily interactions workers can have with AI—ranging from people working with AI to supervise AI's work, to the reverse when AI acts as the boss and directs someone's work, to people working with AI in open-ended, highly iterative, and interactive ways where AI plays the part of a muse, thought partner, mentor, or performance coach (figure 4).[12] To optimize the relationship between people and AI, organizations should explicitly define the types of interactions they want workers to have with AI and support them in achieving healthy, productive relationships with it.

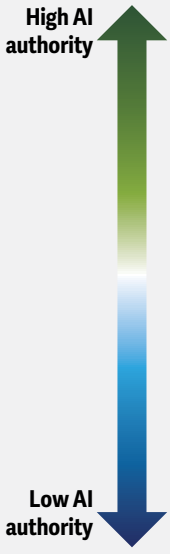
MetLife, for example, chose AI as a coach for its call center workers, using AI-powered real-time coaching tools to help staff navigate emotionally charged calls with greater empathy and effectiveness. This approach has improved both experience and outcomes—boosting customer satisfaction by 13%, reducing call times, and lowering associate stress. The company's latest innovation, Thrive Resets, uses AI to monitor associate stress and proactively prompt personalized recovery breaks after difficult calls. By pairing human empathy with AI insight and relentlessly evolving these interactions, MetLife is setting up a new standard for care, resilience, and performance.[13]

How can organizations choose the right interaction type? In addition to selecting the relationship that suits the type of work and their desired business and human outcomes, organizations need to select and tailor interaction types to the workers themselves. Preferences vary: For example, creative professionals may resist what they perceive as AI micromanagement, while other groups may prefer more direct oversight or guidance from AI. Involving workers in the selection process and providing clarity on how to interact with AI are important for adoption and engagement. As Marcia Oglan, senior vice president of enterprise HR at Highmark Health, notes, "For change with new technologies like AI to succeed, employee engagement must be ongoing and multilayered—not just a single communication. Employees need repeated, clear guidance on how to work with AI."[14]

Each interaction type calls for distinct approaches to hardwiring and softwiring. For example, an AI "direct report" requires strict protocols and training, while an "iterative collaborator" relies more on trust, open communication, and adaptability. An AI "coach" benefits from structured feedback and a culture of continuous learning, while AI in a "boss" role demands clear escalation paths and ethical guardrails.

Figure 4

The many ways to design human-machine interactions



AI as a boss, with the human being directed, allocated, and monitored by AI that sets priorities and manages performance, and with the human executing work with limited agency

AI as a coach, with the human receiving feedback, guidance, nudges, and insights from AI to learn, adapt, and improve performance or skills

AI as an iterative collaborator and thought partner, with the human collaborating with AI and sharing responsibility for creative or complex tasks and decisions

AI as an assistant, for example, prioritizing a list of tasks or suggesting opportunities to follow up on, with the human making decisions based on AI's recommendations

AI as a direct report, with the human directing, controlling, reviewing, or validating AI outputs

AI as a doppelgänger, where AI learns from a human or group of humans to mimic their behaviors, actions, and decisions so that human value can be scaled

AI as an autonomous worker, with the human having very little to no interaction with AI as it works autonomously on less value–added tasks to free the human to focus on more value–added or complex tasks

Source: Deloitte analysis.

One multinational consumer products company puts this tailored approach into practice. Business leaders collaborate with the teams from digital and technology services, HR, legal, and insights to match each interaction type to the work and the needs of specific workers. As the vice president of global talent strategy and succession, explains, "As we deconstruct work, we're asking: What can we trust AI to fully handle, and where do we draw the line to hand over from agent to human? Sometimes it's a combination—AI does the work and a human checks it, or vice versa. Ultimately, we ask: which interaction type is most useful for which workers?"[15]

Organizations should be aware of the hidden consequences that can emerge with each interaction type. For example, shifting routine tasks to AI when using AI as a direct report often leaves humans with more complex, demanding work, requiring **greater problem-solving skills and new forms of recognition**.

Increased reliance on AI can also lead to worker isolation as intelligent technology replaces peer collaboration. Organizations should work to anticipate and address these silent impacts from the outset to ensure healthy, effective relationships between people and AI.

Multiplying potential by design

Intentionally designing human and machine relationships does more than create efficiency; it opens new frontiers for value creation, human flourishing, and organizational resilience. The future may reward not the fastest adopters, but the most intentional designers: those who see AI as an invitation to multiply the people who make their organizations truly exceptional.

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Fact or fabrication? AI is blurring the line when it comes to people and work

In the age of generative AI, it's getting more difficult to know what is true, relevant, or meaningful about people and work. How can we manage disinformation at scale?

Stefano Besana and Sue Cantrell

Organizations are losing trust in data about workers and work at the very moment they depend on it most.[1] For decades, data has been a fundamental substrate of modern organizations—an essential resource that powers decision-making, enables predictive insight, and sustains resilience. But data without trust has the potential to do more harm than good.

Generative artificial intelligence and agentic systems can now produce content at a staggering scale, potentially blurring authorship, amplifying bias, and creating echo chambers where people are only exposed to information that reinforces existing beliefs. The challenge of distinguishing what is real from what is fake is growing, and this problem will likely worsen over time.

For example, according to SEO firm Graphite, as of May 2025, more than half of new web articles were generated primarily by AI,[2] up from just 5% before ChatGPT.[3] Though Graphite reports that 86% of the top-ranking pages on Google are still human-written,[4] this synthetic wave could contaminate data quality for everything from SEO to model training.

Many organizations are now questioning the legitimacy of data about both people and their performance at work. How reliable is the data we have on our workers' skills and capabilities? Can we trust the resumes of job candidates?

This is not a distant technological problem; it is a pressing business risk that could affect an organization's brand, reputation, finances, and operational performance. Yet, according to Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey, only 5% of organizations are making great progress in addressing the decline in quality and trustworthiness of work and workforce data (figure 1). To address these challenges, organizations should consider expanding beyond cybersecurity to disinformation security and establishing a digital trust pact to protect worker-related data.

The coming AI storm

Organizations have long worked to create a clean, single source of truth for their people data. Despite progress, the rise of AI may introduce new complications.

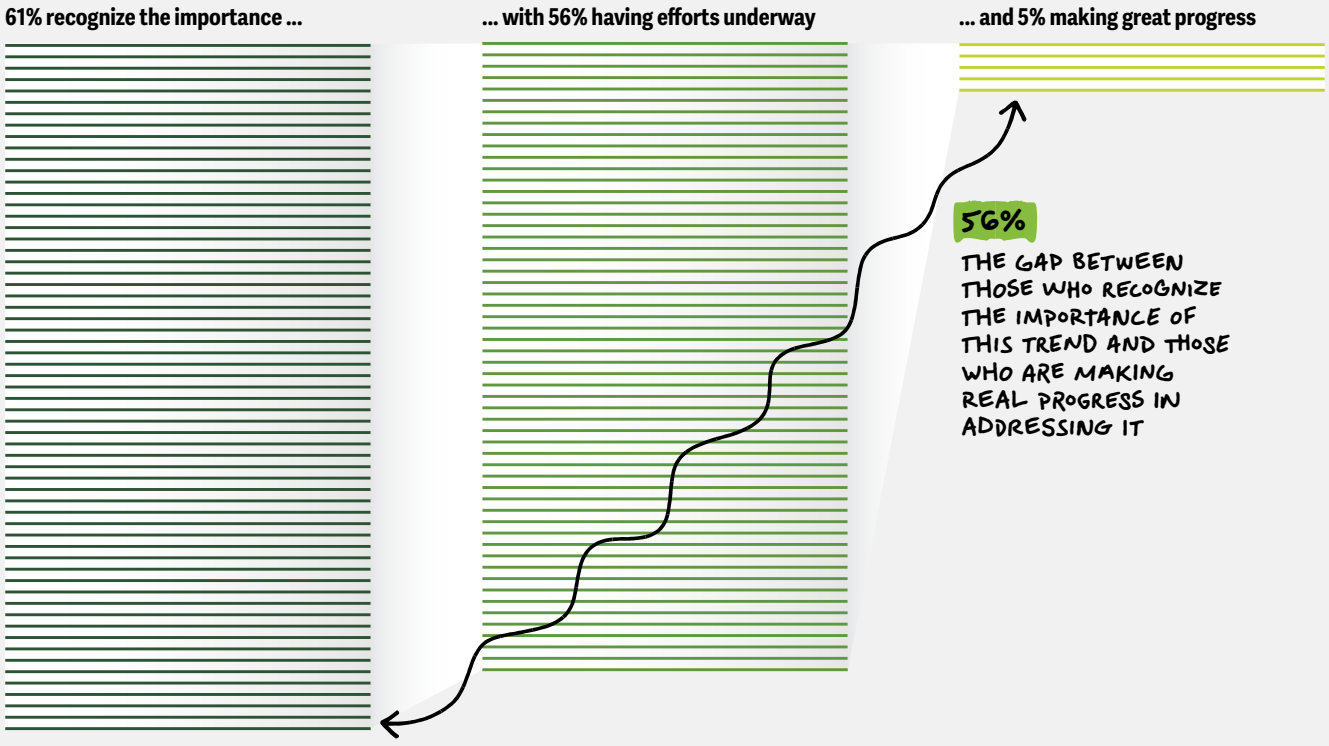
The erosion of authenticity

Trust in data or information comes from knowing that it's authentic—that it's unaltered and originates from a verified source. But AI-generated content is challenging authenticity, often making it difficult to distinguish between genuine human talent and sophisticated fabrications.

Figure 1

Organizations say it's important to address the decline in the trustworthiness of workforce data, but only 5% are making great progress toward doing so

How important is addressing "the decline in quality and trustworthiness of work and workforce data (e.g., disinformation)" and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

This is a particular problem in talent acquisition. Data in talent markets is more abundant than ever, but identity and capability are often unclear. Our 2026 survey reveals that 95% of executives are concerned about the accuracy of the data gathered on candidates' skills and capabilities—and with good reason: Just over a third of workers admit they regularly use AI to embellish their personal profiles.

AI-generated resumes can exaggerate a candidate's job scope or skills, invent quantifiable results, or align content too perfectly with a job description, suggesting deeper expertise than the candidate actually has. Likewise, candidates can submit portfolios—designs, writing, or code—they didn't personally create.

Authenticity is further strained by synthetic identities. AI can now fabricate entire candidates, complete with deepfaked interviews. One security firm, for example, interviewed an AI deepfake candidate and discovered the deception in part by asking them to perform a simple physical gesture—waving a hand in front of their face—that the bot could not execute, according to reporting in *The Register*.[5] A projection by Gartner suggests that by 2028, one in four job seekers could be artificial,[6] raising not just hiring concerns but risks of malicious infiltration.

Even when the candidate is a real person, interviews are becoming harder to trust. Employers report that AI-assisted responses mask applicants' true capabilities, leading to disappointing performance on core human skills once hired.[7] Some organizations, including Google, are considering bringing back in-person interviews to reassert authenticity.[8]

Meanwhile, automation has created a "bot-versus-bot" dynamic: candidates use AI to mass-generate applications and complete assessments,[9] while employers use AI to screen them.[10] The result is résumé noise and "hiring slop," where indicators of genuine human experience are lost.[11] The rise of ghost jobs—in 2024, 4 in 10 organizations posted jobs with no intention to hire, according to Resume Builder—only compounds the sense that talent markets are awash in inauthentic information.[12]

But the issue extends beyond talent acquisition in the workplace. Consider how AI-driven deception has already enabled multimillion-dollar frauds, with cybercriminals, for example, using deepfake technology to pose as a company's chief financial officer in a video conference, ultimately convincing a worker to pay out $25 million.[13]

While organizations are increasingly aware of external misinformation risks, internal data quality issues are often neglected. Nearly half (48%) of executives in our 2026 survey worry that AI may introduce misinformation directly into company datasets, where small inaccuracies can cascade into major operational and ethical failures.

The erosion of agency

As authenticity crumbles, so too does agency—the clear, unambiguous link between an action and its author. It is becoming more difficult to determine what work is human-created and what is AI-generated, fueled in part by a growing shadow economy of unregulated AI tools. Forty-one percent say they have used AI to automate part of their job, often without employer awareness.

The result is a parallel data ecosystem in which AI obscures or simulates human contributions at work. Not surprisingly, 80% of executives in our survey are concerned that workers are using AI to appear more productive than they are. If we don't know who did what, how do we reward and value workers?

Agency is also eroding due to the evolution of the technology itself. AI is moving from a supportive tool to a co-author of work, blurring authorship. When AI-generated outputs become indistinguishable from purely human work, it can be challenging to accurately assess workers and their work. Should human and machine contributions be evaluated jointly? Should disclosure of who—or what—created key work products be required? Or does the distinction matter at all when the outcome is strong?

The erosion of critical judgment

Perhaps the most dangerous long-term threat is the erosion of cognitive capabilities. As workers increasingly rely on AI to perform tasks, there is growing concern that they may lose critical judgment[14] and domain expertise,[15] disempowering and deskilling themselves in the process. In our survey, 42% of executives say they are already concerned about employees becoming overly dependent on AI for essential cognitive tasks.

"People are treating AI as a technology that provides answers. Rather, we need to see AI as a thought partner who might not always have 100% accurate answers—if we view it as a knowledge partner, then a light switch goes off," says Michael Ehret, senior vice president and chief people officer at Walmart.[16]

Two major risks emerge under these conditions:

- **Workslop:** Emerging research reported in *The Wall Street Journal* indicates that AI doesn't always level performance—it amplifies it.[17] Experienced workers can use AI to extend their expertise, while less-skilled workers are more likely to generate "workslop": passable but shallow outputs that mask weak reasoning and slow their own development.[18] Once this low-quality work enters organizational data, AI models begin learning from it, contaminating training sets in ways that later training can't fully undo.[19]

- **The AI echo chamber:** AI tools increasingly mirror a user's past inputs, tone, and preferences. Instead of broadening perspectives, AI may narrow them, reinforcing existing beliefs and organizational norms. For example, if a marketing professional often frames campaigns around one audience type, AI is likely to suggest similar strategies rather than varied or unconventional approaches. Likewise, if AI is trained on internal company data—such as reports, policies, emails, and prior projects—it inherits the culture, norms, and blind spots of that organization, reinforcing "the way we've always done things." Over time, workers may receive fewer challenges to their thinking and more validation of what they already assume, leading to digital groupthink and a further decline in independent judgment.

How can leaders and workers address these challenges with work and worker data to help establish authenticity? There are two potential paths: a mindset shift to disinformation security and taking steps to help workers evaluate what's real and what's not.

Disinformation security: Creating a new digital trust pact

As authorship, agency, and judgment come into question, a shift from cybersecurity to disinformation security is essential to protect the authenticity of work and worker data. Organizations should no longer merely protect systems from external threats; instead, they should also safeguard the integrity of worker-related data against manipulation and fabrication. This means creating a new digital trust pact with the following practices:

Implementing AI lineage mapping

AI is only as reliable as the data it is trained on, and unreliable data can create problems even when internal systems seem sound. One media company, for example, is actively cleaning and validating its data to support ethically trained AI systems for internal and client use. Explains the chief human resources officer: "The most important thing we can do to be effective with AI is to get the data right. We've been experimenting internally and working with outside experts to learn what they are doing. And the more we learn, the more we realize the potential but also the limitations. Without authentic, reliable data, we may not only be at risk, but we won't realize AI's potential value."[20]

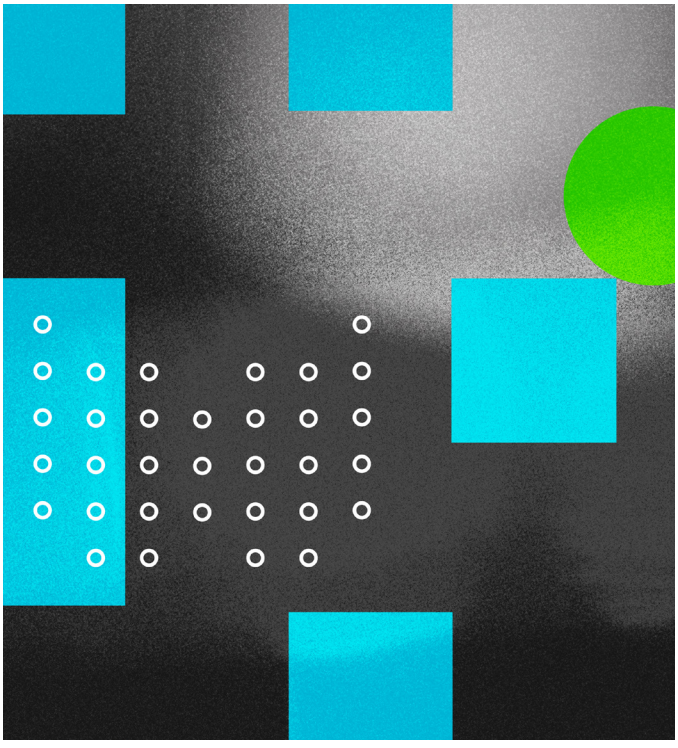
AI itself can support this work through automated lineage mapping: tracking the origin, transformation, and use of data across training and inference. Technologies such as blockchain can further strengthen lineage by creating immutable, time-stamped records of every data transaction, embedding trust directly into the architecture.

A group of human resources vendors is working together to increase trustworthiness and interoperability in talent data using blockchain.[21] Related, blockchain skills-verification solutions aimed at verifying the credentials of job seekers and project team members are emerging. Organizations can verify a person's work experience, skills acquired, job titles, and more, and workers can then decide which parts of their verified credentials they want to share with prospective employers and for how long.[22] The public sector is getting on board too; SkillsFuture Singapore issues tamper-proof digital certifications to verify the authenticity of workforce skills and qualifications.[23]

Conducting AI risk simulations

Discover where your organization's particular vulnerabilities lie by running stress tests or red-teaming exercises. These exercises can help identify potential failure points, including data poisoning, model bias, or misalignment with organizational objectives, before they cause significant damage.

While AI risk simulations are still an emerging application, many cyber companies are now creating virtual platforms that allow clients to simulate potential scenarios. For example, Identifi Global has created a platform with live biometric verification, audit trails, and fraud-checking mechanisms that allow human resources departments to simulate deepfake candidates and train their workers to spot them. One client was able to avoid a hiring security breach when the platform helped recruiters identify background inconsistencies during the final interview stage for a C-suite role. Manual follow-up confirmed a deepfake impersonation attempt, saving millions in potential losses.[24]



Real-time, dynamic identity authentication

When cybersecurity company Pindrop realized it needed to take action, it discovered that 1 in 6 job applications in its own organization were showing clear signs of fraud and that many candidates was using deepfake technology during live interviews. Candidates were bypassing every existing layer of defense: things like resume scanning, keyword matching, reference checks, and authentication checks. To address the issue, the company developed tools that allow talent acquisition and security teams to authenticate the candidates' identities continuously, ensuring that the person on screen is the same individual throughout the process. It also developed technology to detect signs of synthetic media or third-party coaching, as well as a way to flag discrepancies across assessments, interviews, and onboarding steps.[25] It is increasingly important to not only verify the identity of humans but also that of AI agents.

Judgment calls: Helping workers understand what's real

While the technical tools are evolving quickly, it's important to note that they are still probabilistic, not deterministic. Google chief executive Sundar Pichai says in an interview with the BBC, "We take pride in the amount of work we put in to give us as accurate information as possible, but the current state-of-the-art AI technology is prone to some errors."[26] Human judgment skills still play an important role in determining what's real. Organizations can build these skills with the following practices:

Educate hiring managers and recruiters

Hiring managers may not be aware of the rise in fake job candidates. Ben Sesser, CEO of BrightHire, tells CNBC, "They're responsible for talent strategy and other important things, but being on the front lines of security has historically not been one of them."[27] It is particularly critical to ensure that recruiting and talent acquisition processes account for AI-related risks, as well as synthetic or unverifiable candidate data.

Training for reflexivity and judgment

As AI becomes more embedded in work, organizations should build reflexivity—the ability to reflect on one's own actions and thinking—as a core skill, encouraging individuals to question how AI influences their judgment and decision-making.

"As we increase AI adoption, we're vigilant about maintaining human judgment, especially for complex or sensitive decisions," says the vice president of global talent strategy and succession at one multinational consumer goods company. "A lot of our attention is on striking the right balance: We want to automate where possible, but we're keenly aware of when human oversight is nonnegotiable."[28]

Promoting transparency in work outputs

Organizations may also consider clearly disclosing when work products have been created or cocreated by AI to help others use judgment in evaluating them.

For example, Autodesk has created AI transparency cards. Modeled after nutrition labels on food packaging, each card clearly displays how AI was utilized in the creation of the content, including what the model did, what data was used, how the data is protected, and what safeguards were in place.[29]

Other organizations, like one large pharmaceutical company, are experimenting with putting labels on everything from emails to slide decks, disclosing on a spectrum how much of the content was produced by humans versus AI.[30]

A path toward more trustworthy data

Distrust in work and workforce data will likely persist—even as organizations strengthen validation and authentication systems—because gen AI will continue to reshape how information is produced and perceived. The real challenge is not only technical but also foundational: preserving meaning, authorship, and accountability in an age of synthetic intelligence.

Organizations that fail to address these shifts risk eroding the foundations of human judgment and organizational culture. Overreliance on AI without critical oversight can lead to decisions that are efficient but not ethical, fast but not fair, measurable but not meaningful.

In such environments, human-AI collaboration becomes accountable by design: Technology accelerates insight, while humans remain the ultimate stewards of interpretation and judgment.

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AI and the future of human decision-making

As AI transforms decision-making, how can organizations make quality decisions, anchored in human agency and trust?

David Mallon, Julie Duda, Stefano Besana, and Maya Boda

A tech company launches an AI résumé screener meant to speed hiring, only to find it has been quietly learning past biases and rejecting qualified candidates. A retail service bot makes promises that the company doesn't want to keep. Clinicians in a hospital lean on a condition-alert tool that speeds treatment but degrades their ability to spot nuances the model isn't trained to detect. An industrial manufacturer puts AI on the board to surface risks; the directors learn it could be manipulated for personal agendas.

These stories are not science fiction. They can and are happening to organizations every day, and they raise important questions: What could have been done differently? How do organizations improve input and oversight when AI is involved in decisions? What is the best mix of AI and human in each decision, leveraging enough machine autonomy to improve speed, consistency, and scale while also maintaining sufficient human agency?

AI has the potential to transform human decision-making. However, organizations should first treat this process as a strategic discipline and then design human-machine decision-making relationships accordingly.

Do this well, and AI is more likely to sharpen human judgment, not crowd it out. Today's cautionary tales can become tomorrow's competitive advantage.

Running with scissors: AI and decision-making

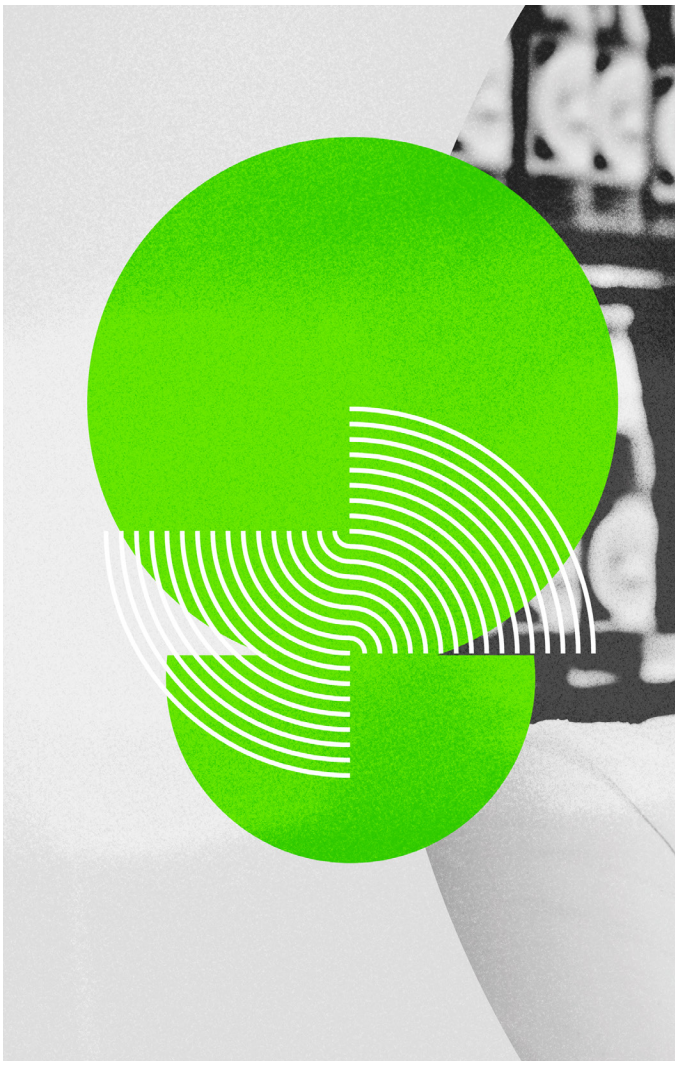
Leaders today face a torrent of choices in conditions that are noisier, faster, and riskier than ever. Dashboards multiply and data streams expand, but leaders rarely stop to question where that information comes from or whether they can trust it.[1] In a 2023 Oracle study, 85% of business leaders regret or question decisions they had made in the past. Additionally, 72% of those leaders say the volume of data and their lack of trust in data has stopped them from making *any* decision at all.[2]

Many are turning to AI as a solution. In our 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey, 60% of executives now regularly use AI to support their decisions. Gartner projects that, by 2027, half of business decisions will be augmented or automated by AI agents.[3] Even boards are beginning to use AI to inform decisions.[4]

But AI use in decisions may be racing ahead of organizational oversight. As a fundamentally new technology, AI brings distinct challenges.

- Establishing clear chains of responsibility between decisions and consequences, which can be difficult with "black box" algorithms and the potential for biases or inaccuracies in model data[5]
- People feeling less ownership over AI-made decisions[6] and becoming more likely to be dishonest when delegating decisions to AI[7]
- AI agents acting at vastly different speeds and scales from humans, blurring oversight and stressing traditional controls
- Managers not being prepared to be "supervisors" of AI,[8] and many executives lacking sufficient AI literacy to contribute to oversight[9]
- Organizations lacking necessary ethical frameworks or struggling to translate them into practice[10]
- Insurance companies not wanting to cover corporate use of AI because of the scale and unpredictability of potential risks[11]
- Keeping up with complex and constantly changing regulatory requirements around AI[12]

Our survey data suggests that the issue of AI and decision-making is still emerging despite the risks: Nearly two-thirds (64%) of respondents consider it very important to their current success, and a similar number are taking steps to address it. However, only 5% consider themselves to be leading the way (figure 1).



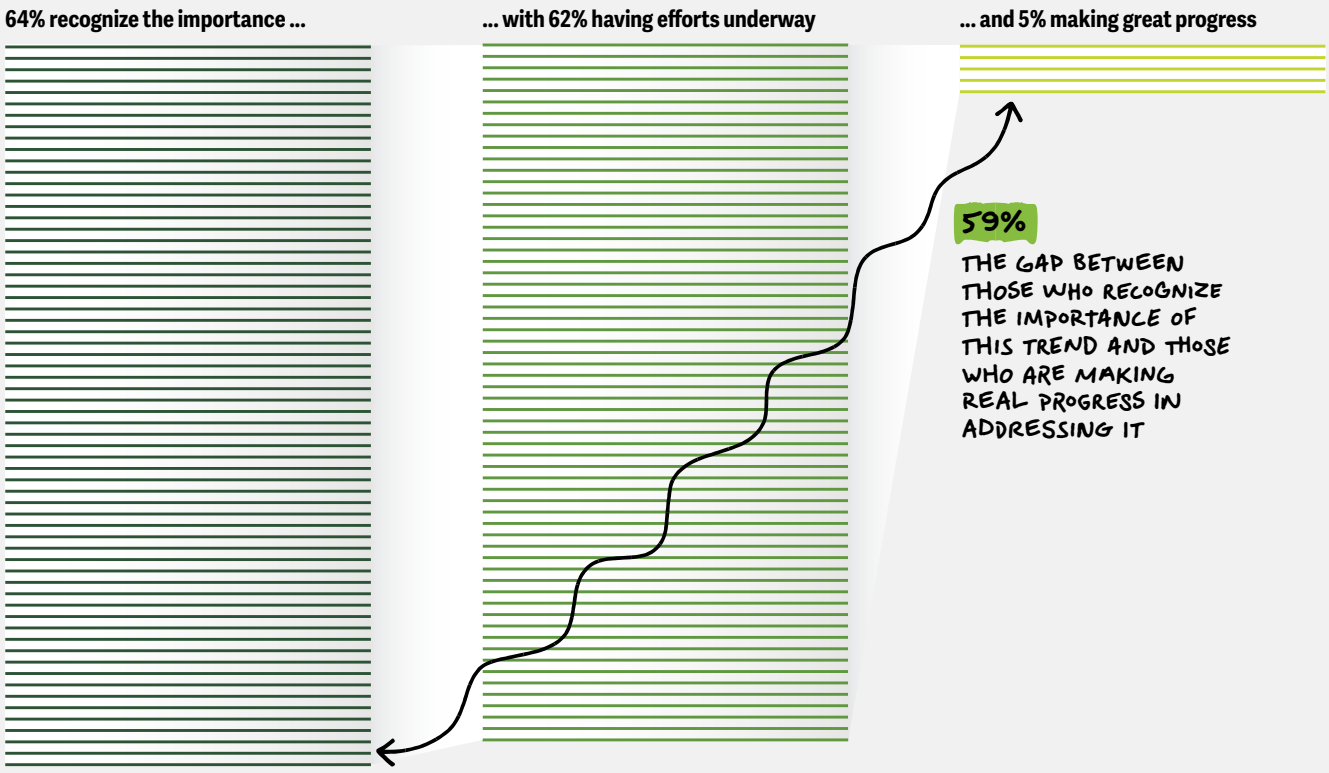
As organizations expand AI-enabled decision-making, many find AI to be amplifying existing deficiencies instead of solving them. Deloitte's High Impact Decision Intelligence research has found that high-quality decision-making is a discipline that can be learned, improved, and scaled. Yet, more than half of organizations in that study (57%) operate at low decision-making maturity, with few teaching decision skills or providing the necessary tools to support decision-making.[13] High-maturity organizations are far more likely to do both and to make decision strategies explicit.[14]

AI is reshaping organizational decisions, whether organizations are ready or not. To strengthen decision quality and mitigate risks, organizations should first hone decision-making as a discrete capability and then intentionally design how humans and AI interact as deciders.

Figure 1

Organizations say it's important to address AI's implications for decision-making, but only 5% are making great progress toward doing so

Percentage of respondents answering the questions, "How important is addressing AI's implications for decision-making and leadership, including related skills and human capabilities, decision rights, systems of accountability, and balancing human and machine agency?" and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

Elevating the discipline of decision-making

AI-enabled or not, organizations that practice decision-making as a rigorous discipline consistently outperform peers.[15] Simply thinking about decisions as a capability is a good start.

Organizations can use decision frameworks to classify choices and pre-assign owners, data, guardrails, and speed for each category (figure 2). Amazon's one-way vs. two-way door model provides a simple example: Decisions that are difficult or impossible to reverse—one-way doors—require methodical decision-making, while easily reversible decisions—two-way doors—can be made quickly.[16] This framework helps teams make reversible bets quickly, while giving irreversible moves higher scrutiny.

Figure 2

Elements of a decision framework

Element	Defining question	Implications
Risk profile	• Potential consequences and reversibility	• Higher risk: Greater diligence and consultation
Frequency	• Often made or one-off	• Frequent: Opportunities to experiment or automate • One-off: Bespoke analysis and explicit leadership calls
Urgency vs. importance	• Time sensitivity vs. strategic value	• Route as: Do now, schedule, delegate, or ignore
Time horizon	• Timing of consequences	• Align KPIs, funding, and risk to the time horizon: win now vs. build for the future
Certainty/risk/uncertainty	• Knowns vs. predictable unknowns vs. true unknowns	• Knowns/quantifiable: Model risk • Uncertain: Use adaptive playbooks
Level of chaos (Cynefin)[a]	• Obvious connection between cause and effect	If the environment is ... • Clear: Use best practice • Complicated: Use expert analysis • Complex: Probe-sense-respond • Chaotic: Act to stabilize
Option-creating vs. commitment	• Expands or constrains future choices	• Expands: Treat like experiments • Commits: Treat like capital investments
Guardrail-critical vs. value-seeking	• Degree of sensitivity, regulation, or special requirements for decision makers (i.e., certifications)	• Guardrails: Use rules and audits • Value-seeking: Use creative risk-return calculus

Notes: [a]A conceptual framework used to aid decision-making, created in 1999 by Dave Snowden at IBM Global Services. Cynefin is a Welsh word for "habitat." CognitiveEdge, July 11, 2010.

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Design for decision rigor and integrity

Most organizations still treat decisions as by-products of meetings and dashboards rather than worthy of explicit design and focus. To add rigor and integrity, consider the following:

- **Surface the decisions that matter.** Decision rigor and integrity start with surfacing the important decisions, clarifying owners and inputs, and making those structures explicit in workflows. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's concept of intelligent choice architectures is useful here: Instead of trying to predict a single "right" answer, leaders should intentionally shape the environment in which decisions happen so better choices are easier and more reliable to make.[17]

- **Encourage sound decision basis and culture.** A strong decision basis (that is, data and hypotheses) is important to decision-making hygiene, and even more so with AI. Define what constitutes fit-for-decision evidence and how it will be used, in advance of using AI. Build norms that value candor, evidence, and decision quality over politics or hierarchy.

Design for decision rights and governance

Deloitte research in organization design found that a surprising number of organizations lack clarity about decision rights.[18] AI will likely increase the pressure here and muddy decision rights further. To achieve clarity, organizations can take the following actions:

- **Modernize decision rights for AI.** Most organizations have already acknowledged that humans need to be *on* the loop when it comes to AI making decisions—having humans oversee the results. They are also working to involve humans *in* the loop by ensuring humans work iteratively with AI, passing work back and forth. In defining who does what, legacy, person-centric decision-rights models (for example, the classic RACI project management tool with four key responsibilities: responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed)

can be a first step.[19] The challenge is that they presume static authority. With AI, rights need to be more dynamic, incorporating override privileges, escalation paths, and consensus rules engineered into the system so humans and agents coordinate who decides, when, and on what basis.

Atlassian, for example, recognized that unclear boundaries between AI-led and human-led decisions were creating bottlenecks. Instead of creating a rigid rulebook, they treat decision rights as something that evolves, regularly revisiting where AI should handle routine tasks and where humans need to step in for higher-risk calls. Teams gain a clear understanding of what's automated and what requires human judgment. This transparent approach builds trust.[20]

- **Modernize governance for AI.** AI's role in decisions should find its way onto the agendas of existing governance bodies. AI can introduce board-level concerns like reputational and financial risks. Yet, Deloitte research on AI and boards finds engagement is, so far, limited. According to the study conducted in 2024, nearly half (45%) of surveyed board members and C-suite executives said AI is not on the agenda, and only 14% discussed it every meeting.[21] In an updated survey in 2025, 40% say AI has caused them to think differently about their boards' makeup, recognizing the need for change.[22]

  IBM puts AI decision governance into practice through dedicated ethics boards that review high-impact uses and are guided by the company's published principles for trust and transparency. Its approach blends policy, cross-disciplinary review, and tools that track compliance and help teams act with confidence. By treating governance as a design system—not just a control—IBM is able to scale AI while preserving trust.[23]

  As AI rapidly evolves, so, too, does global regulation. Regulatory frameworks like the European Union AI Act[24] are **requiring** boards to establish clear AI oversight mechanisms and evidence trails well before enforcement deadlines. Organizations should start by understanding the strategic impacts of regulations and creating clarity around the operational challenges.

Elevating both humans and machines as decision makers

Even the best decision processes can fail if the decision-makers—people and AI—aren't prepared, supported, and evaluated. Organizations should design for the decision-making competence they need: building human decision-making skill and measuring AI performance with rigor befitting their mission-critical contributions.

Design to grow decision-making skills

There's an irony: Many organizations teach AI how to decide while assuming humans already know how. These practices can help:

- **Treat decision-making as a critical foundation of leadership development efforts.** AI-enabled decision-making is rising to the top of what defines a modern leader, and it's teachable. In leadership development programs, for example, leaders can learn how to build and test hypotheses to inform decisions and pair it with data fluency so leaders can interrogate uncertainty with data.

  To accelerate frontline judgment, BAE Systems rolled out a case-based learning program that places leaders in realistic, high-ambiguity scenarios. Teams practice making decisions under pressure, testing what information to trust and how to frame hypotheses, then debrief against clear criteria. The repetition builds rigor without slowing pace, and early feedback shows better cross-functional coordination and faster, more confident decisions.[25]

- **Train managers to manage AI.** Management skills now include managing machines as well as people: scoping agent autonomy, judging model outputs, and knowing when to override are likely new skills for most.[26] This issue is likely to get more difficult as organizations flatten and increase spans of control.[27]

  DBS Bank reinforces decision integrity through its PURE principles—purposeful, unsurprising, respectful, explainable—and a responsible AI/data use framework overseen by senior committees. These standards guide employee-facing tools like iGrow, an AI platform used by most staff, which helps leaders make transparent, data-informed choices about learning and mobility. By pairing clear frameworks with governance and training, DBS speeds everyday decisions while maintaining strong human oversight.[28]

Design to evaluate AI performance

AI's role in decision-making requires explicit evaluation, including quality criteria, regular retraining, and fit-for-risk oversight. This is not a new version of employee performance management. AI evaluation is a growing discipline requiring its own expertise and scale, which can be built through the following practices.

- **Monitor and evaluate AI behavior continuously.** Use processes and standards to track AI model performance, fairness, and reliability after deployment. Emerging human-AI collaboration research argues for tracking human outcomes such as the degree to which interaction supports trust and healthy judgment, not just model accuracy.[29] Spotify, for example, relied on humans to define the standards for evaluating a high-quality podcast summary, then used those to inform automated evaluation.[30]

- **Create anchors for accountability.** Build quality checkpoints into workflows—risk thresholds that trigger human review, and logs of all human-AI disagreements—so choices can be traced and learned from over time. It is essential to understand and record AI agent steps and reasoning, and to maintain audit trails, especially for more autonomous systems.

- **Be aware of cognitive asymmetry.** Humans are physiologically wired not to notice everything around them. Pair that fact with AI's expanded scale and speed, and it's likely that humans will not always be the best monitors of what can be opaque systems. The European Union's TechDispatch on human oversight cautions against assuming that a human-in-the-loop ensures safety; organizations should explicitly design authority, interfaces, and escalation so humans can effectively intervene.[31] For example, some enterprises are introducing "guardian agents"—specialized agents that watch, test, and gate other agents to keep autonomy within bounds.[32]

Elevating human agency in the human and machine decision-making relationship

Human agency underpins the degree to which individuals feel influence and responsibility for events around them. People more readily accept responsibility when they feel real influence.[33]

Design for human agency

Leaders should be intentional about supporting human agency and building trust as humans and machines interact to make decisions, including these practices:

- **Build accountability through human agency.** Clearly connect choices to choosers, giving decision-makers confidence grounded in comprehension (not mere compliance). Liberty Mutual Insurance enables claims adjusters to explore scenarios using AI but with the ability to override AI's suggestions. As one leader told *MIT Sloan Management Review*, "The moment AI enters the workflow, the real question isn't 'What does the model say?' It's 'Who gets to disagree with it, and how fast?'"[34]

- **Determine the level of AI agency based on desired outcomes.** Design how much autonomy AI agents have based on the risk profile of the decision and the human and business outcomes desired. Researchers at Stanford recently introduced an auditing framework that matches the level of AI agent autonomy to the degree of human agency desired. When the work is mission-critical or ambiguous, greater human agency is needed. However, for well-defined and low-risk tasks, decisions can more easily be shifted to fully autonomous agents. This taxonomy helps calibrate oversight while preserving the human capacity to intervene where stakes or uncertainty are high.[35]

Design to build trust in AI

Trust is an essential element of human collaboration. It is also essential for humans working with technology such as AI that interacts and evolves. Deloitte's Trustworthy AI research shows that workers who trust the AI agents they work with are 10 times more likely to see those agents as critical to creating value.[36]

People extend trust to technology when it consistently demonstrates reliability, capability, transparency, and humanity.[37] Our recommendations given in this chapter address these four factors and are likely to lead to greater trust.

Humans can confidently collaborate with AI and accept responsibility for the results when they know how the decision was made and how they materially influenced it. Trust rises when AI is used where people welcome it and is constrained where they don't. Many users want AI to play some role in analytical, high-stakes domains (for example, fraud detection, weather forecasting, and drug discovery) but little or no role in more personal or value-laden decisions.[38]

Decision-making that works for humans and machines

Organizations that elevate decision-making as a discipline, improve decision-making skills, evaluate AI's involvement in decisions, and design for human agency in decision-making can gain speed and quality without sacrificing trust. Those who don't could risk opaque choices, diluted accountability, and the slow erosion of human agency at precisely the moment when clarity matters most.

Evidence suggests the upside is meaningful: Technology can accelerate analysis and clarify uncertainty, but it cannot replace human purpose, values, and judgment behind choices. This is the path to AI as a trusted adviser—improving the speed, scale, and quality of decisions while keeping humans firmly in charge of the "why."

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Special thanks to **Maria Neira** and **Phillip Perry** for their careful support, which helped bring this work across the finish line.

Dealing with AI's cultural debt

AI may be creating an unnoticed, steady accumulation of negative cultural behaviors. How do we manage it so culture can be an advantage in the age of AI?

Jason Flynn, Yves Van Durme , Stephen Harrington, and Ashley Reichheld

In moments of uncertainty when cultural coherence may matter most, organizations often struggle to maintain it. Behaviors and norms may begin to diverge from an organization's stated values; faced with more urgent matters, organizations may fail to address unresolved issues like poor communication or lack of psychological safety. This neglect can cause organizations to develop "cultural debt"—the negative consequences an organization accumulates by neglecting its culture, similar to how financial debt accrues interest.

Such is the case as we begin 2026. Amid rising tensions in the worker-organization relationship, artificial intelligence is adding even more complexity as it transforms work in profound ways. However, much of the organizational focus of this disruption seems to center on how workers interact with AI rather than how AI impacts the human-to-human work interactions that shape organizational culture. In fact, 42% of workers in Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey report that their organization rarely evaluates the impact of AI on people—an indicator of mounting cultural debt.

Culture is built on a foundation of trust, and AI is breaking that trust in many ways, as reflected by the statistic from our 2026 survey that 80% of leaders, managers, and workers are concerned their co-workers and teams are using AI to appear more productive than they are. As a result, workers are often quietly adopting or challenging norms, values, and behaviors in light of fundamental new questions that organizations are not addressing, like: Is it cheating if I use AI to do my work? What is hard work if AI is now doing the heavy lifting? Who is to blame if AI is wrong? If I don't use AI, will I lose my job—or will AI take my job anyway?

When organizations don't answer these kinds of questions, workers are left to navigate new ethical and value-based decisions in ways that can accumulate cultural debt.

While even the strongest cultures will likely need to be reinforced to weather the influence of AI, AI's infusion into work can further degrade weak cultures, quietly eroding organizations from within. But organizations that intentionally nurture and evolve their cultures can unlock AI's potential and create sustainable competitive advantage.

The cultural costs of AI in the workplace

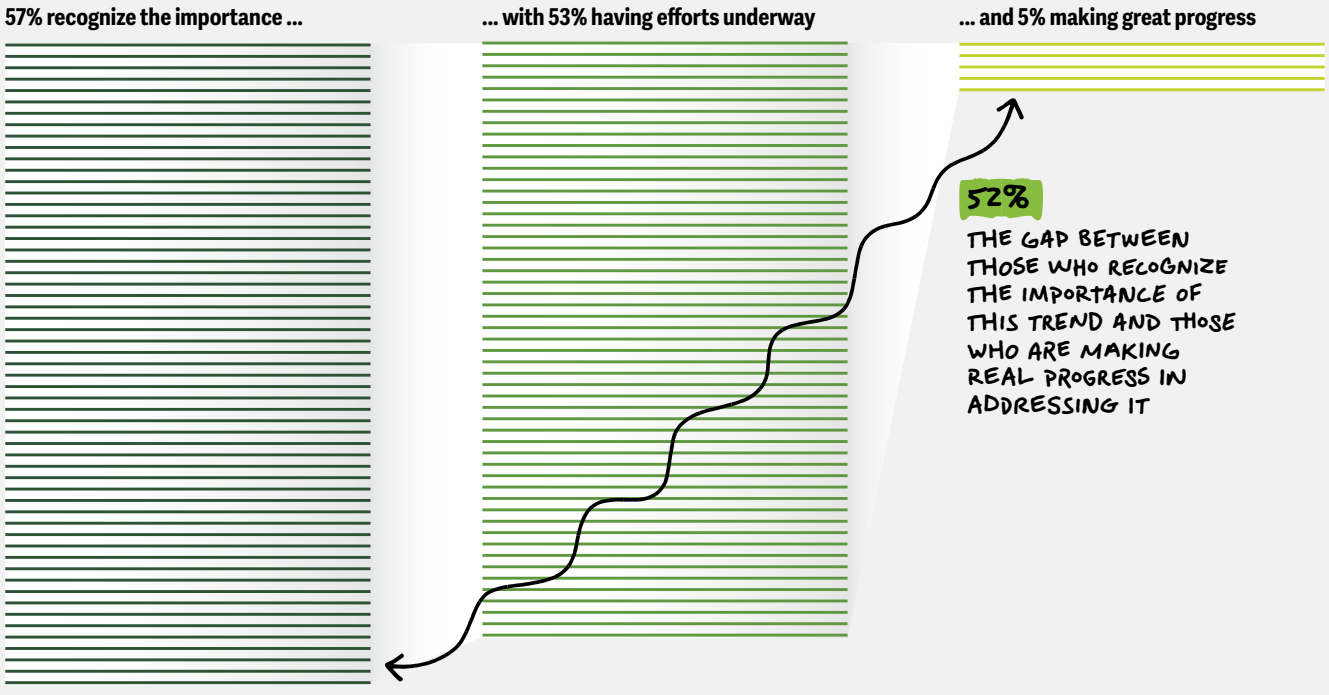
As we discussed in our 2025 Global Human Capital Trends report, AI is reshaping work in ways that affect people daily—increased workloads and stress, reduced well-being, higher levels of loneliness, and decreased autonomy. More broadly, AI is posing big-picture questions about employment. While many experts say that AI is more likely to transform jobs than to fully replace them, a report in *Forbes* indicates that, on Wall Street alone, industry analysts forecast that AI and automation will eliminate up to 200,000 jobs by 2028 or 2030.[1] The World Economic Forum reports that 41% of employers globally plan to reduce their workforce due to skills obsolescence by 2030.[2] And as a growing number of organizations brand themselves as "AI first," workers receive implicit messages about their perceived value. If AI is first, does that mean human workers are second?

These impacts are happening amid a broader power shift from workers back to organizations. The post-pandemic hiring surge has pivoted to an uncertain job market. Workers have moved from job hopping to job "hugging," as data from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis shows fewer US workers voluntarily quitting their jobs[3]—a potential indication of declining confidence—while hiring has slowed substantially.[4]

Figure 1

Organizations say it's important to understand and manage AI's impact on organizational culture, but only 5% are making great progress toward doing so

Percentage of respondents answering the questions, "How important is understanding and managing how AI affects human relationships in your organization, including effects on culture, trust, and collaboration?" and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

This confluence of changing power dynamics and AI's impact on workers' jobs has pushed us to a tipping point. Culture is now showing strain: A 2025 Gallup poll found that only 20% of US workers feel strongly connected to their company's culture.[5] And trust appears to be eroding in both directions. Edelman's Trust Barometer found that trust in employers declined in 2025 for the first time since 2018.[6] Leaders, likewise, are losing trust in their workers, according to survey respondents.

The good news is that organizations are taking note of the problem. Our survey this year indicates that 34% of organizations recognize culture as a direct inhibitor to their AI transformation goals, and 65% of respondents believe their culture needs to change significantly considering the impacts of AI.

So why do some organizations seem to be struggling to address the potential impact of AI on culture, connections, and trust? Our 2026 survey found that while just over half of respondents felt the impact of AI on culture was important or very important, only 5% are making great progress.

From cultural debt to culture as an asset

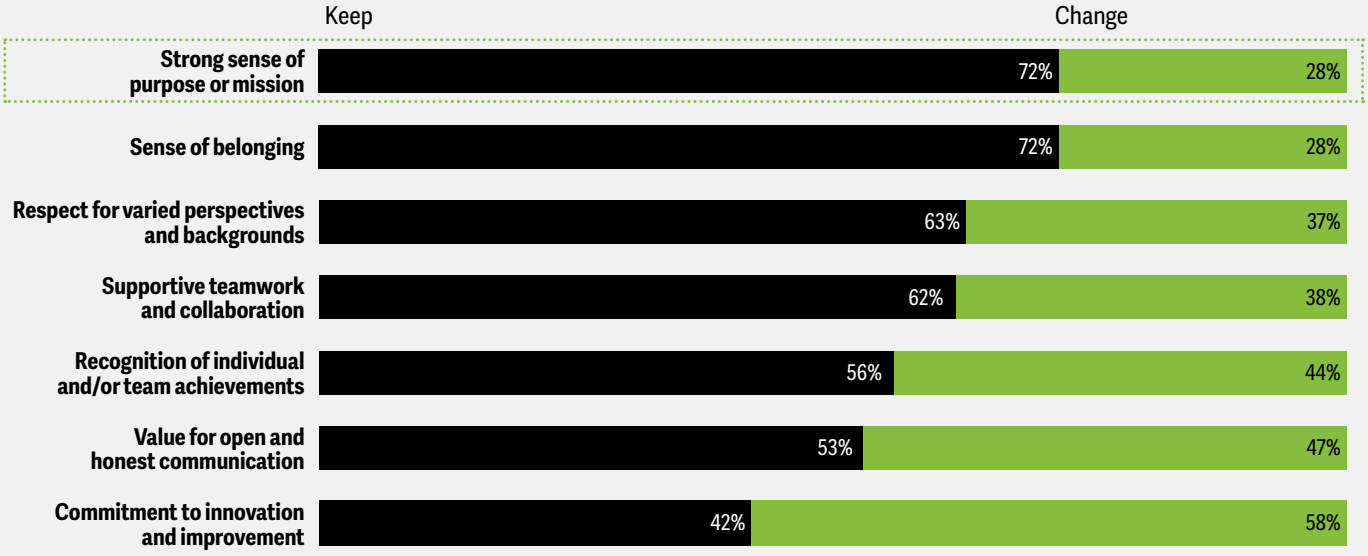
Leaders should take stock of their existing culture and map that against where they believe culture could become a true competitive asset. How culture needs to shift is a case of "best fit" over "best practice" and may vary. Our research this year showed many organizations recognize they need to sustain their sense of purpose, mission, and belonging within their existing culture while looking to improve recognition, open communication, and commitment to innovation (figure 2).

With an understanding of current cultural strengths and weaknesses and clarity on a desired future state, organizations can begin the important work of shaping their culture to help them thrive in the age of AI. To do so, organizations need to set a strong foundation for cultural evolution, build trust by activating the change in the flow of work, and recognize that AI itself can be a helpful tool for the journey ahead.

Figure 2

Respondents say their organization's commitment to innovation and open and honest communication needs to evolve, but the sense of purpose and belonging should be preserved

Percentage of respondents identifying whether each aspect of their organization's current culture needs to be kept or changed in light of AI



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

Set the foundation

With a clear idea of the current state and desired future culture, organizations can put several foundational items in place. The basics still hold true: leadership alignment, anchoring on purpose and values, and communication. But understanding how we do those things is changing in the context of AI.

While leaders alone cannot drive culture change, they play a pivotal role in creating the environment for desired changes to take hold and be sustained. "Leadership and culture are inextricably linked," says Zach Parris, former director of organizational effectiveness at Atlassian. "The attitude and example set by those at the top have a significant impact on individual behavior throughout the organization. There's a powerful connection between leadership's comfort with technology and the tone it sets for company culture, adoption, and how deeply new tools are integrated."[7] Indeed, Cisco research found that employees are twice as likely to use AI if their leaders do.[8]

Mission, purpose, and values are also important. In fact, a strong sense of purpose and belonging is ranked by respondents to this year's survey as the most important element of culture they are looking to sustain.

Walmart describes its AI transformation as people-led and tech-powered—positioning AI as a tool to amplify human potential, rather than supplanting it. "Change is constant, and there's no time to craft a case for each new shift. The best thing an organization can do is stay clear and connected to its purpose and values, reinforcing why the work matters during challenging transitions," says Michael Ehret, senior vice president and chief people officer at Walmart International. "Those that use technology and AI to advance their mission and values will be better positioned to adapt over time."[9]

Embedding the ethical use of AI into culture is also important. Leading organizations are establishing groups to review AI projects for fairness, bias, and transparency, and encouraging workers to voice concerns about automation, data privacy, and algorithmic decision-making. For example, IBM created an AI ethics board, composed of people with diverse life experiences and professional backgrounds, to oversee AI exploration.[10]

Finally, open and transparent communication remains more important than ever. When asked to name the most important actions to drive organizational culture, the top two responses in our survey were creating an open dialogue between workers and leaders and providing clear and regular updates on how AI is affecting work and jobs.

One example of prioritizing this kind of communication comes from Highmark Health. As they redesign work to integrate AI, they are building a culture of agility, accountability, and innovative care via ongoing communication between leaders and the workforce. As senior vice president of enterprise human resource at Highmark Health, Marcia Oglan says, "Tech won't solve trust issues. Only visible, consistent leadership and accountability can do that." She added, "The angst around AI and job security is real, so the deeper conversation is about reskilling and supporting people as roles evolve. If HR is the glue between technology and people, our real work is helping everyone see their place in our changing organization."[11]

Build trust and human connection in the flow of work

Leadership messages and formal programs play a role, but culture is primarily shaped by the countless daily interactions and experiences across the organization. AI is evoking many unexpected behaviors when it comes to human-to-human connections. For example, cultural debt may accumulate when people work less with one another due to working more with AI. Intentionally building in human connection and trust in the flow of work is an important step toward paying down cultural debt.

Organizations can foster these conditions by designing interventions and rituals that encourage connection and trust as AI is adopted. They can actively redesign work to embed AI with a focus on both human-to-human and human-to-machine interactions. Forward-thinking companies often frame AI as a collaborative partner, even redesigning job descriptions to emphasize uniquely human skills like creativity, empathy, and complex problem-solving alongside technical agility.

Leading organizations may also evaluate how machines affect values, behaviors, and relationships, and foster open dialogue about the role of machines, including their limitations and their impact on workers. At Trek Bicycle, a technology team interviewed workers at all levels in every department to understand how AI could improve the work environment. The team ultimately identified nearly 40 concrete AI use cases that prioritize current employees' well-being.[12]

Talent practices and ways of working should also evolve to support better human connections when introducing AI. Technology company Cisco believes dynamic teaming and collaboration are critical to its future success. The company has built these attributes directly into its performance management approach, supporting them with an internal tool called Team Space. The tool enables real-time communication and continuous assessment, making it easier for teams to stay focused on collective goals.[13]

Aligning goals and behaviors with how people are rewarded and recognized is another important lever. Consider Singapore-based DBS Bank. It reimagined its culture to encourage employees to disrupt its own roles, experiment, and drive automation and

digitization. Employees earn recognition and reward points for contributing to transformation initiatives or participating in digital experimentation teams and hackathons. The company also instituted transformation days, carved digital skill-building time out of regular schedules, and embedded digital transformation metrics into performance evaluations and compensation systems[14]—initiatives that have contributed to record profits and the distribution of companywide bonuses.[15]

Use AI to promote healthy cultures

While AI is creating some cultural challenges, it can also be a key tool to amplify traditional practices that create healthy cultures. Using AI tools in this capacity directly reinforces culture through targeted analytics and actions. It also aligns with organizational messaging on being human-centered as a key to AI transformation. There are several ways organizations are using AI in specific practices to improve culture.

Leading organizations recognize that shaping workforce culture should start from the very beginning of the hire-to-retire cycle and are using AI to help.

For example, Atlassian uses AI agents to improve onboarding, delivering targeted training and upskilling to new members of distributed teams with a focus on transparency and safeguards to build trust. As Zach Parris explains, "Onboarding is a moment where you get a real opportunity to rewire behaviors. We approach it as the front door for new hires, integrating AI-driven practices grounded in organizational psychology experiments. This isn't just about process—it's about shaping how people connect with tools, teams, and leadership from day one."[16] As a result, Atlassian has seen a jump from 57% to 93% in average weekly AI usage among new hires.

Organizations can also use AI to coach workers—if such coaching is complementary to, not a replacement for, personalized coaching. To enable effective AI coaching, a member of the renowned Van der Schaar AI and Machine Learning Lab at the University of Cambridge developed SculptureAI, a tool that guides workers toward their organization's core values by coaching their everyday digital interactions. Organizations train the tool on their values, then throughout the day it suggests culture-reinforcing tweaks to chats on Teams or Slack as well as workers' emails.[17] Other organizations are implementing tools like CultureAmp's AI Coach to help leaders and managers run real-time employee sensing, analyze sentiment, and build targeted action plans to enable change.[18]

AI cultural intelligence tools can also mine information from peer-to-peer recognition programs to identify key skills, star performers, and culture-enablers in real time. Employee recognition provider Workhuman now offers human intelligence functionality to help HR teams submit prompts and questions through the platform to understand organizational culture drivers and develop targeted actions. The tool also provides real-time data to help enable peer-to-peer recognition for employees who live the company's values.[19]

Turning debt into differentiation

AI is transforming how organizations operate across industries, reshaping human experience at work, as broader dynamics are shifting the worker-organization relationship. In this environment, clinging to the cultural status quo is not a neutral choice—the cultural debt AI creates is real, and it's a risk. Acceptance of an outdated or misaligned culture may erode trust and sacrifice competitiveness.

The alternative is to treat culture as a strategic asset that boosts productivity, drives innovation, and anchors workers navigating disruption. Looking ahead, the adaptivity most organizations strive for could come more through culture than process and structure. As culture becomes a competitive advantage, organizations that shape and deploy culture to harness AI's potential are likely to drive better outcomes—for workers, for the organization, and for society at large. Those who do not may find themselves left behind, undone not by AI itself, but by a culture they failed to cultivate.

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The orchestration advantage

AI can enable quick intent-to-action. But turning speed into competitive advantage will likely come from learning to orchestrate capabilities and capacity in real time.

Sue Cantrell, Stephen Harrington, Nic Scoble-Williams, Kevin Moss, and Russell Klosk

Competitive advantage today depends on more than what organizations own—large customer franchises, product portfolios, and supply chain capabilities. Increasingly, it depends on how they can steer intent into action, fluidly reconfiguring capabilities and capacity as business conditions, customer demand, or technologies shift. Scale still matters, but the edge is tilting toward speed and agility: Some 67% of leaders responding to our 2026 Deloitte Human Capital Trends survey say their primary competitive advantage over the next three years will come from being fast and nimble, while only 28% believe scale will be their main differentiator.

Artificial intelligence is accelerating this shift by making previously scarce capabilities widely available and reshaping how work gets done. It is upending traditional assumptions around capability (the ability to effectively perform work), capacity (how much can be done and how fast), and the classic speed-quality-cost triangle of strategy. Where organizations once had to choose two of the three, AI is creating a new performance frontier where speed, quality, and cost can improve simultaneously.

Scaling, for example, no longer automatically requires more people or more spending, as shown by many new ventures that aim to operate as primarily AI companies, simulating the operations of a large firm using AI with very small human teams doing high-leverage work. Rapid learning cycles can also convert speed into quality. Consider how close collaboration between doctors and AI can help detect diseases earlier and with higher accuracy than either humans or AI could achieve alone. It's the difference between humans *plus* machines and humans *times* machines.

But the key to speed and agility is not just planning for a new math of capabilities and capacity and organizing or allocating resources into fixed structures. It is the ability to fluidly orchestrate people, skills, data and technologies around business-critical outcomes—continuously sensing, assembling, and recombining the right elements as needs evolve. Allocation is assigning a musician to play a specific part. Orchestration is the conductor's role, adjusting elements in real time to deliver the outcome.

Consider Levi Strauss as an example of orchestration in action. The company increased sales in its loose fit jeans category by 15% in three months by rapidly bringing together the skills and expertise of people across functional domains (including designers, merchants, and marketing) and pairing them with AI to sense weak signals, identify the surge in demand for baggier silhouettes, and iterate quickly from insight to design to market response.[1]

An organization that effectively orchestrates its capabilities and capacity can become both big and fast, escaping the traditional zero-sum relationship between scale and speed. It can simultaneously improve speed, quality, and cost—not just two of the three—and can consistently rewrite its own source code as the world changes. In the process, it can transform unpredictability from a source of risk to a source of opportunity.

Our survey suggests orchestration is more than just a future aspiration; it offers present-day competitive advantage. Analysis of our 2026 research shows that organizations leading the way in this area are about twice as likely as their peers to report better financial results and to say they are providing meaningful work for workers.

The ability to dynamically orchestrate work ranks No.1 among trends of importance this year, with 88% of leaders saying it is extremely or very important to accelerate how people, skills, and resources are orchestrated to get work done. Yet only 7% of leaders say they are making great progress toward this goal (figure 1). The 81-point difference between importance and action is the largest such gap in this year's survey.

Four actions to orchestrate capability and capacity

Orchestrating capability and capacity involves four critical actions. Together, these actions can help organizations not just adapt, but adapt at least as fast as the world around them is changing.

Identify and create capability and capacity

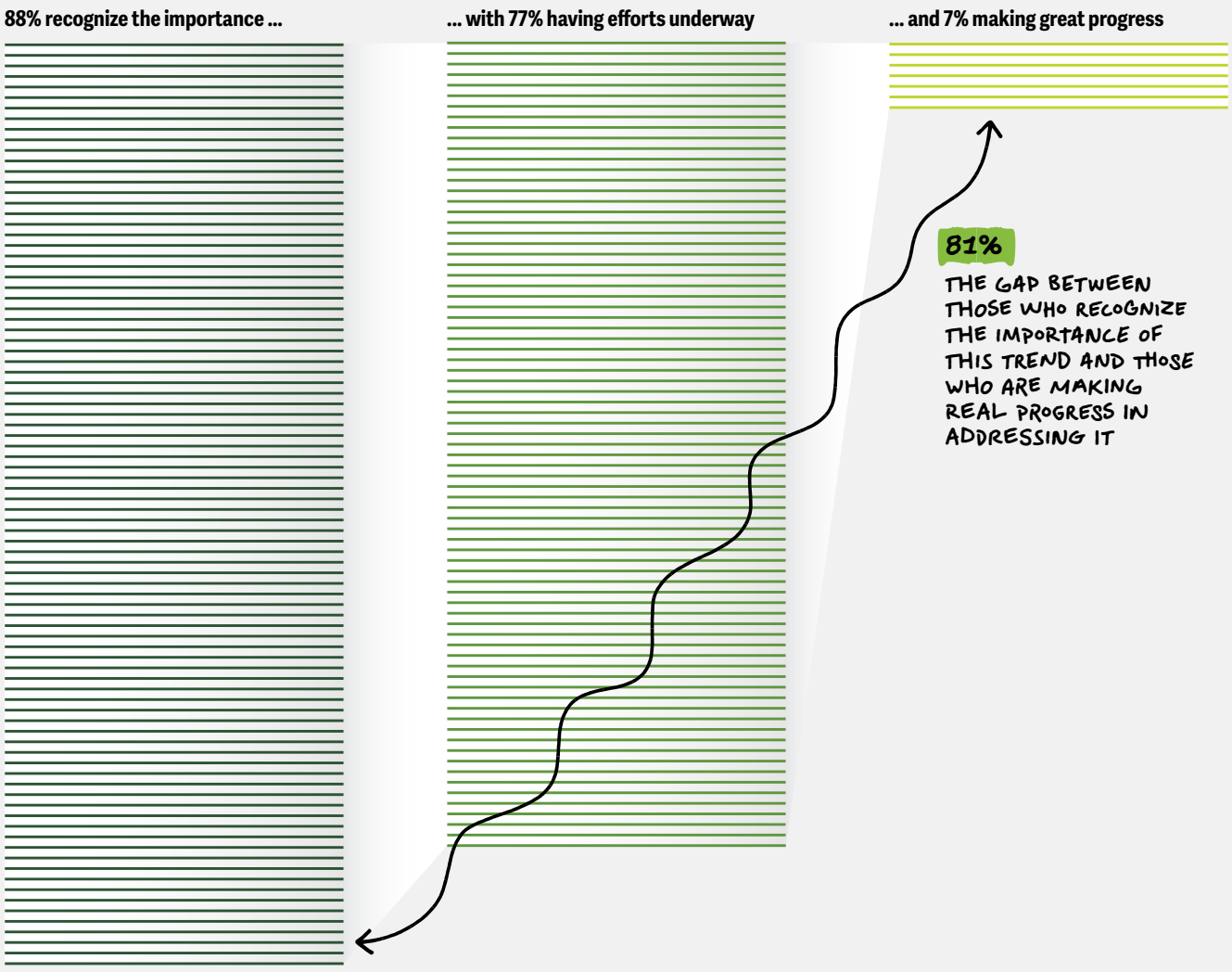
Organizations can start by defining the mission and outcomes they want to achieve, and then aligning the capabilities and capacity required to deliver against them. At Walmart, this has meant setting a clear focus on efficiency and encouraging leaders across its international business to explore how AI could unlock new capacity and reinvest that time into innovation and growth.[2]

This is the "bot" (or AI) strategy—a newly added "b" to the traditional build (train and develop internal talent), borrow (temporarily access capabilities through external sources like contractors or outsourcing), and buy (hire talent) menu of options to access capacity and capability. Fifty-six percent of leaders in our survey say they now organize and evaluate AI agents as digital workers and 60% say their teams have the right human and AI capabilities to effectively perform the work that needs to be done.

Figure 1

Organizations say it's important to orchestrate resources, but only 7% are making great progress toward doing so

Percentage of respondents answering the questions, "How important is accelerating how people, skills, and resources are organized to get work done?" and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

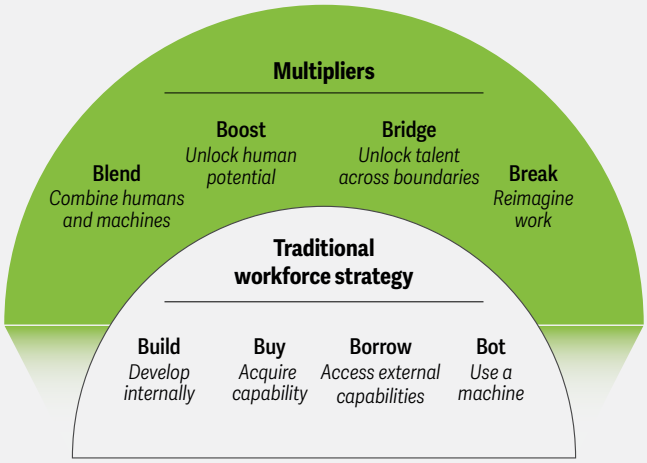
Although these four "bs" are foundational to accessing capability and capacity, there are some specific approaches organizations can take to multiply and extend them (figure 2).

For example, organizations can blend human and AI capabilities. Instead of treating digital labor as a separate cohort, the blend strategy recognizes a new category, in which AI dramatically enhances workers' productivity, performance, and creativity as an exponential multiplier of outcomes. This is an example of humans *times* machines.

Already, just over half (51%) of leaders in our survey say they account for human and machine collaboration's potential to unlock value when they plan the size and composition of their human workforce. We expect understanding and capitalizing on the human/AI multiplier effect to grow in strategic importance. That seems to

Figure 2

Expanding options for identifying capability and capacity



Source: Deloitte analysis.

be happening already: Of the one-third of surveyed leaders who exited workers due to AI, more than half (57%) say they have come to question their decision. For example, a year after claiming that its AI chatbot could do the work of 700 representatives, a financial tech company is now rehiring those people to work with AI, combining AI's speed with human empathy to deliver better customer outcomes.[3]

As we discussed in last year's trends, another way organizations can unlock capacity is to boost the productivity of their workforce by **reducing nonessential work** so workers can focus on what matters most.[4] Once nonessential work is reduced, workers can better realize their potential and take on more value-added work. Only 50% of workers and managers say their organizations are tapping into their full potential.

One multinational consumer products company practices another "b" of bridging, unlocking talent across organizational boundaries. After fully automating its plants, the company bridged production and warehouse workers into new roles monitoring the AI and performing quality checks.[5] Bridging also can mean unlocking capacity by moving people into temporary assignments through internal talent marketplaces or into agile, mission-driven teams, all while workers remain in their current jobs. Megan Bazan, vice president of people at Cisco, explains: "The rise of rapid mobilization of cross-business squads—including humans working alongside machines or agents—means the static team is becoming a thing of the past."[6]

Only 28% of organizations say they currently use dynamic teams organized at the point of need or by the problem to be solved. But more than twice as many (59%) say doing so will be important for their organization's success in the next three years.

Finally, break—redesigning work, roles, and organizations—is another approach. In responses to talent shortages in health care, for example, Cleveland Clinic's workforce planning group turned to role design, breaking down tasks and asking whether each needed to be done, and whether they could be automated, performed remotely, reassigned, or rescheduled.

For medical assistants, this analysis led to shifting most tasks (37 of 40) to lower credentialed or non-clinical staff and automating or augmenting others with technology. As a result, this approach created the capacity equivalent of 430 full-time employees and generated more than $2 million in cost savings, while boosting employee engagement by enabling staff to spend more time on patient care instead of paperwork.[7]

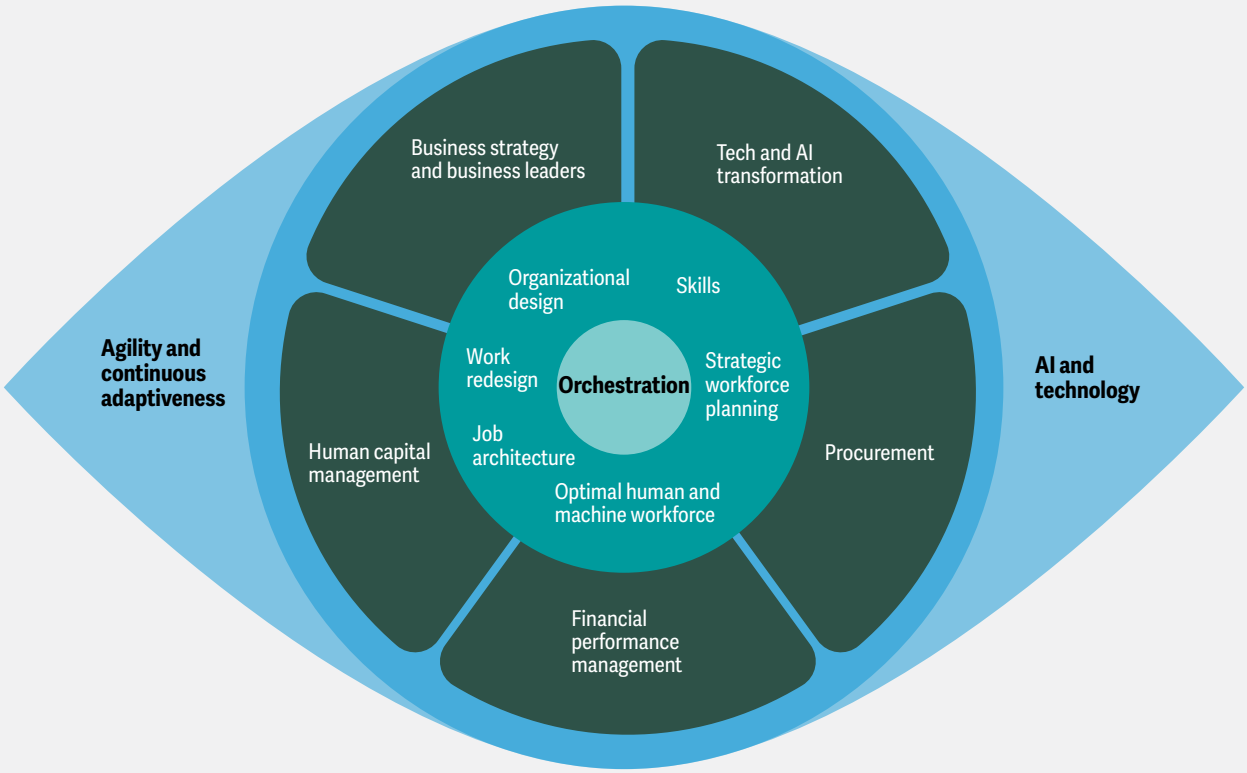
Right people, right decision, right time

Orchestration requires quicker, more effective decision-making, placing the right decisions with the right people at the right time.

Walmart exemplifies a new approach to decision-making designed to support the orchestration of capabilities and capacity (figure 3). To support this approach, Walmart uses a cross-functional leadership

Figure 3

Orchestration is at the heart of the new operating environment for AI-powered, agile organizations



Source: Deloitte analysis.

model that brings together people across functions including human resources, technology, finance, and procurement. Rather than working in silos, these leaders take a holistic view of work across different roles, capabilities, and delivery models to determine how work is best designed and supported in this new era.

This approach also integrates a wide range of capabilities, including work redesign, fluid job architecture, workforce planning, human and machine collaboration, effective organizational structures, and improved skill utilization. For example, Hewlett Packard Enterprise recently integrated its strategic workforce planning and organization design teams—and the combined team works closely with finance, business operations, and IT to explore how certain roles could be automated or augmented.[8]

Orchestration should also happen at the point of need. Top leaders typically don't experience the changes that workers see on the ground every day. To be truly adaptive, workers at all levels will also need to be able to dynamically orchestrate capabilities and capacity. Mastercard, Seagate, and Standard Chartered, for example, are using an orchestration platform to integrate skills, tasks, and AI as a performer of work, according to Gloat. Workers can specify the types of work they want to do or outcomes they want to achieve. The system then identifies relevant workstreams, people in the organization who have the skills to execute those workstreams and can be pulled into temporary projects, and technologies (including software, gen AI, and AI agents) that can either work with these people or perform the work autonomously. The result: All workers can design and orchestrate work in real time.[9]

So far, it appears that relatively few organizations are joining the leaders mentioned above. Only 11% of managers in our survey strongly agree that their organization provides them with relevant data and tools to make effective decisions around the distribution of work. That said, certain signs suggest an orchestration mindset is beginning to inform organizations' thinking: More than six in 10 (61%) organizations say they now align and deploy workers based on tasks, skills, and outcomes, compared with only 33% that use job or position-based models.

Create plug-and-play modularity

Leaders have traditionally relied on formal organization structures to deploy capabilities. Now, they're asking a different question: "How fast can we move around what matters?"

Six in 10 (60%) leaders in our survey say they are working to redeploy internal capabilities such as people, technology, and expertise across the organization to meet the areas of greatest need. Creating diverse human-AI teams can be challenging: People may not speak the same language, data might be trapped in silos, and teams may not have established trust and working norms. Organizations can overcome these hurdles by creating modularity so they can plug and play capabilities and capacity as needed. More than six in 10 (62%) leaders say they are adept at plugging in external people and technology capabilities, but that it can be difficult to do so internally.

The job starts with establishing a shared mission based on outcomes, not outputs. Jon Pitts, founder and chief executive officer of ihp Analytics, uses the analogy of a Formula 1 team. "All functions, data streams, sensors, and analytics are unified around a single mission: making the car go fast and stay fast," he says. "Egos are set aside as everyone collaborates in real time, guided by data and a shared outcome."[10]

Creating modularity can help clarify situational leadership (what type of leadership is needed based on the needs of the situation, the task, and the makeup of the team) and create team roles such as AI-human interaction designer or toolchain specialist (someone who brings or integrates the right set of AI tools).

Cultivating trust is also essential. Marcia Oglan, senior vice president for enterprise HR at Highmark Health says, "The more cross-functional and integrated our teams are, the more trust and collaboration become strategic assets. We want a networked culture, not isolated silos."[11]

AI can play a valuable role in creating modularity. As one senior vice president explains, "When collaboration between functions is automated, the workflow becomes more efficient. Automated handoffs help bring people together."[12]

AI can also create a shared body of knowledge and help people get up to speed in new roles and teams. One leader we interviewed trained AI agents on different stakeholder personas (for example, chief human resources officer, chief financial officer, chief information officer), so he could dialogue with them, have them review his work, and learn their language and context.[13] If AI democratizes expertise, generalists could work across multiple areas, helping organizations benefit from so-called M-shaped workers—professionals with deep expertise in at least two different areas, supported by a broad base of general knowledge across disciplines. Over time, agentic AI may also increasingly orchestrate workflows, potentially giving rise to multidisciplinary teams that oversee and evaluate end-to-end outputs.

Eventually, AI could help create a new operating model in which structures are no longer the primary axis of control. Instead, the focus shifts to fluid, mission-driven teams of humans working closely with AI (figure 4).[14]

Figure 4

Evolving from cost efficiency to adaptive orchestration

Focus	Cost efficiency	Productivity	Process redesign	Value creation	Adaptive orchestration
Role of AI	Task automation; replace repeatable human work	AI tools assist humans in existing roles	AI drives decisions, forecasting, personalization	Humans-plus-machines structured around outcomes	AI continuously optimizes org structure and work allocation, humans-times-machines create exponential outcomes
Organization design	Leaner functional structures	Job-level augmentation; tools embedded in workflows	Process-level reengineering with embedded AI	Cross-functional, time-bound missions; dynamic resourcing	Org-as-platform: missions dynamically staffed by human-machine mix
Talent impact	Role reduction; reskilling optional	Upskilling required; copilot model emerges	Analysts become prompt engineers or process curators	New roles in orchestration, governance, and AI teaming	Org design is fluid; roles become skill sets; agency is key
	MOST ORGANIZATIONS			SYSTEMIC VALUE CREATION	

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Use AI to help orchestrate capabilities and capacity

With AI, strategies can emerge and develop in real time, as capabilities and capacity inform strategic decisions and vice versa. Already, 58% of leaders say they prefer to shape strategy through frequent experimentation at the ground level; only 37% prefer to shape it through careful, centralized planning.

One of these experiments is employing a digital twin—a live, AI-powered model of an organization and its workforce. Only 15% of organizations we studied are currently using digital twins, but nearly half of leaders (49%) say they will be important to their organization's success in the next three years. Leaders can use digital twins to test decision-making and simulate scenarios, giving them insights they can use to prioritize initiatives, predict needs, and take action. One organization, for example, uses a digital twin to simulate the impact of decisions like increasing AI investment, changes in outsourcing, and shifts in location strategy on talent needs and organizational structure. This approach helps organizations make better decisions about moving and optimizing capabilities and capacity.[15]

Agentic AI in particular can enable more dynamic and iterative orchestration. Teams of humans and AI agents working together can anticipate needs and deploy resources in real time. For example, AI agents can continuously monitor signals indicating workforce changes, such as shifts in the supply of particular skills, or changes in worker capacity. AI can alert leaders at key moments, prompting them to reassess workforce plans and potentially to redesign roles and work. And AI agents can then even execute a decision (after a human approves)—initiating a job posting, for example, or scheduling a learning event based on skills gaps.

One US hospital network deployed agentic AI to create dynamic shift scheduling, resulting in enhanced patient care and reduced clinician workload and burnout, according to a technology firm specialized in health care.[16] A global pharmaceutical company is piloting using AI agents to track changes in shipment routes, notify supply chain planners of the disruptions, summarize the implications, and suggest options to solve the problem. Planners oversee the AI agent in executing the preferred choice, creating a self-healing supply chain. Other AI agents could track how this worker and others choose to reallocate resources in light of disruptions, signaling when workforce plans may need to be adjusted or when a role might be ripe for redesigning.[17]

Only 20% of leaders say they are currently using AI to monitor signals of workforce changes, inform decisions, and take action, even though 52% say doing so will be important for their success over the next three years.

Orchestrating a way forward

The rise of AI is rewriting organizations' nervous systems. The cycle of planning, locking in resources, and execution can no longer keep pace with reality.

Adaptive orchestration is the alternative. It enables leaders to continuously align people, processes, and technology, coordinating workflows that flex and adapt in real time. The future may belong not to the best planners, but the best orchestrators—those who can turn uncertainty into momentum and complexity into advantage.

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Have organizational functions outlived their function?

The time has come to question the usefulness of traditional organizational pillars

Victor Reyes, Yves Van Durme, and David Mallon

A CEO is preparing for a major expansion of the company's product line. Speed is critical: Staying ahead of the competition means getting the newly designed product into manufacturing as quickly as possible. But the CEO still needs to develop an integrated financial, workforce, and supply chain plan, which requires onboarding people from multiple corporate functions.

The challenge: Functional capacity is limited. Functional capability is mismatched, and end-to-end data and processes are lacking. Ultimately, the functions aren't set up to orchestrate across the business at speed. Meanwhile, functional headcounts and leadership layers have expanded, adding cost without enabling business growth. The CEO has a nagging thought: Is there a better way?

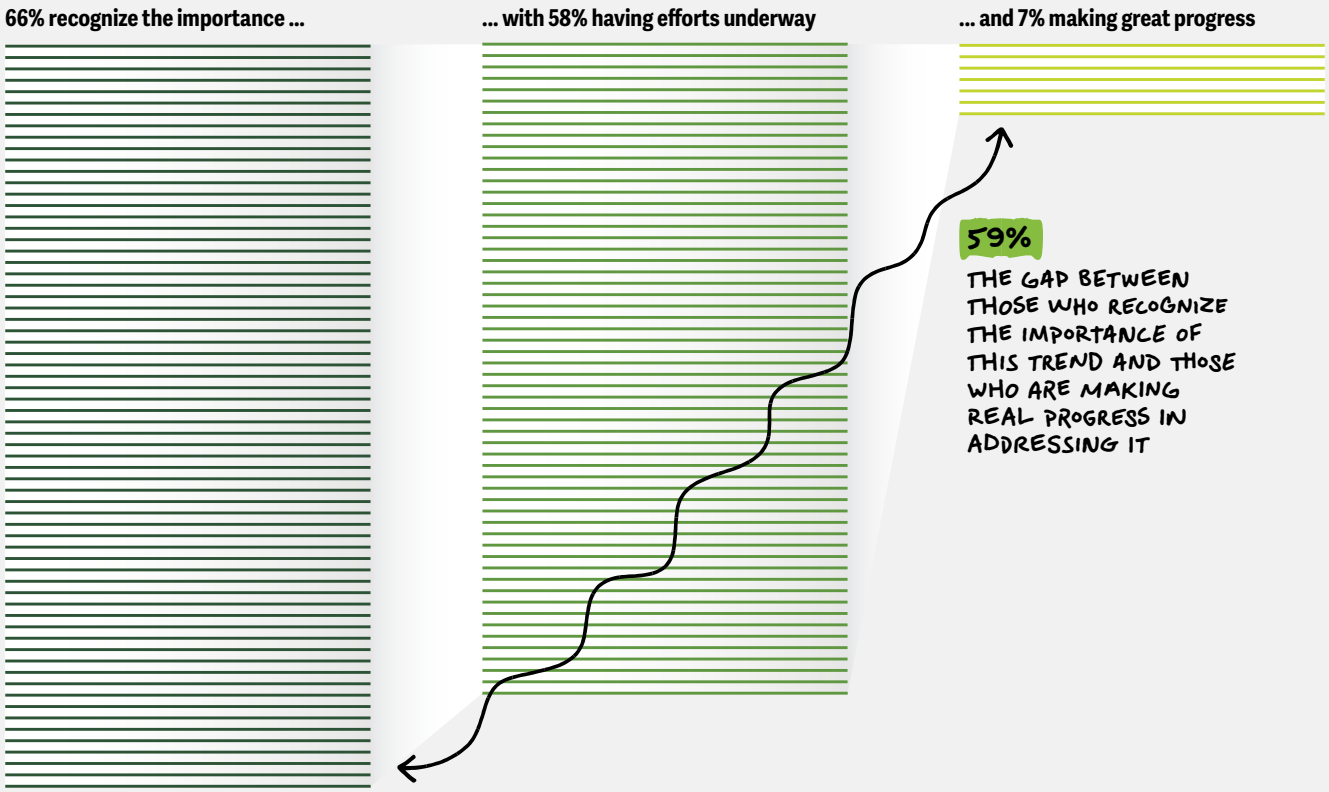
This is just one scenario that points to the opportunity for organizations to rethink the very concept of corporate functions. Are they fit for purpose as they are currently configured? How can they work differently to help the business deliver on its strategic priorities with the speed, scale, and agility that today's environment demands?

The functional pillars that have long been foundational at many organizations increasingly feel outdated. In Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey, 66% of C-suite leaders agree that it is very or extremely important for their organizations to push beyond the boundaries of traditional organizational functions, but only 7% are making great progress in doing so (figure 1).

Figure 1

Organizations say it's important to push the boundaries of traditional functions, but only 7% are making great progress toward doing so

Percentage of respondents answering the questions, "How important is pushing beyond the boundaries of traditional organizational functions (e.g., HR, finance, IT) to address cross-disciplinary challenges and drive higher overall outcomes?" and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

Functions such as human resources, finance, information technology, legal, and procurement were originally designed for dependability, efficiency, and specialization. These days, traditional functions may be misaligned with the dynamic, multidisciplinary needs of modern organizations.

For example, organizations today need expertise from multiple functions to realize value from artificial intelligence by redesigning work and optimizing human and machine interactions. The ability to adapt and be resilient in the face of a turbulent business environment now requires collaboration across functions to fluidly orchestrate capability and capacity. Sustainability and environmental, social and governance programs; innovation and new product development; and transformation and change all now rely on functions that work together, not separately.

To meet this moment, organizations may need to rethink the very concept of functions. Rather than clinging to rigid silos, they have an opportunity to deconstruct traditional corporate functions and reassemble their capabilities around human and business outcomes.

Functions under pressure

A confluence of factors has contributed to the need for organizations to reimagine traditional functions. Organizations are under constant pressure to rein in the cost of corporate functions while also increasing speed to value. In the last three years, headcounts in areas such as HR, sales and support, and business management have shrunk considerably, and US public companies have cut white-collar workforces by 3.5%.[1]

Cost pressures and a push to increase operational efficiency have led many organizations to turn to global business services that provide shared and outsourced services in corporate functions. Over half of organizations using a global business services model include finance, HR, IT, and procurement in scope for shared services, and 58% expect to increase that footprint over the next three years. In Deloitte research, more than half of organizations with a global business service leader role reported savings of more than 20%.[2]

But with this focus on cost, functional leaders such as chief human resources officers, chief financial officers, and chief information officers are struggling to bridge the gap between the cost of services and the value they deliver.

As work increasingly gets automated, augmented with AI, or consolidated into global business services, what's left are domain experts who have specialist expertise but sit outside the core value chain. Increasingly, they will be challenged to broaden their expertise around business problems (for example, mergers and acquisitions, transformation, etc.), collaborating and connecting with one another to bring a multidisciplinary perspective on core business problems to realize outcomes.

Our survey revealed that while over half of executives say that their corporate functions work together, more than half also say that those functions are in need of substantial reinvention in both capability and mission to meet rapidly changing demands in the future. Almost half of all respondents agreed that internal constraints, such as organizational structure, were the primary barrier to pushing beyond the boundaries of traditional organizational functions.

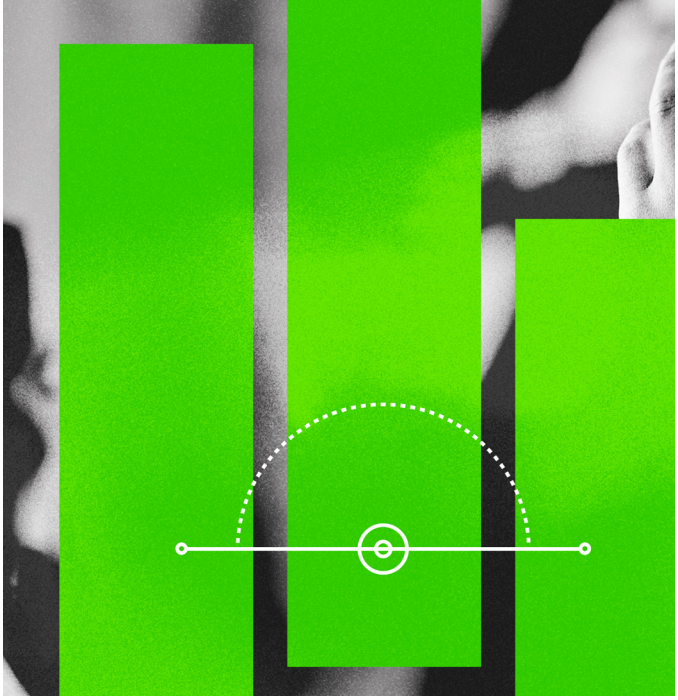
Meanwhile, AI is increasingly making it possible to reimagine the way functions deliver value and how they are defined. In addition, end-to-end processes and integrated data that transcend organizational boundaries are prompting leaders to rethink their functional structures.

Getting intentional about the future of functions

In many cases, organizations are responding to these factors by tweaking at the margins; for example, building more dotted-line reporting relationships between functions, or reactively standing up ad hoc teams.

But without a clear future strategy, these responses don't necessarily create a long-term solution. What's more, they can be counterproductive, creating an organizational model that introduces greater complexity and confusion—especially if they're undertaken without a vision of why corporate functions exist and what value they need to deliver to the business.

The accelerating pace of change is creating urgency for a more agile and adaptive approach. How can organizations ensure that



transformation efforts are more sustainable and scalable? To truly transform an organization, leaders should consider reimagining those functions by breaking them down and building them up in new ways.

Run the business versus grow the business

The first step in this process is to separate those elements that support running the business day to day from those that support growing the business. The tables below illustrate some of the adjacent processes and capabilities across functions in both of those categories.

While "run the business" activities may require unique domain knowledge, they also share many similarities. These include repeatable processes with the opportunity for substantial automation and enablement through technology and shared data (figure 2). For example, the handling of many routine workforce inquiries and transactions has been transformed by self-service technology and AI that can address the need for tier 1 support—whether that need arises from HR, IT, finance, or procurement. Increasingly, the data to satisfy those requests and the workflow technology supporting them are already integrated.

Meanwhile, "grow the business" activities tend to be linked together by the business situations they support. They often involve a common set of stakeholders, project life cycles, and business objectives (figure 3). Leaders want professionals who can bring together various types of data to produce fully integrated forecasts that put the right people, materials, and technology in place to deliver products and services. They also need agile teams that can execute all aspects of a merger or acquisition, from diligence to integration. These teams need to bring not just functional expertise but also pattern recognition around how to drive results in that specific business context.

Figure 2

Common "run the business" processes and capabilities

Common processes/ capabilities	HR	Finance	IT	Supply chain
Risk and compliance	Employee data privacy, workplace safety, labor law compliance	Internal controls monitoring and compliance	Cybersecurity protocols, data protection	Regulatory adherence, supplier compliance
Transaction handling	Employee inquiries, data changes	Invoice processing, expense management	End user support	Procurement orders, payment approvals
Analytics/reporting	Workforce analytics, turnover trends	Financial statements, forecasting reports	System uptime analytics, incident reports	Inventory optimization, logistics KPIs
Vendor management	Benefits providers, recruiting agencies	Banking partners, audit firms	Cloud software and service subscriptions, consultants	Raw material suppliers, logistics providers

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Figure 3

Common "grow the business" processes and capabilities

Shared business scenario	HR	Finance	IT	Supply chain
Planning/forecasting	Workforce planning, succession planning	Budgeting, cash flow forecasting	Capacity planning, tech roadmap	Demand planning, inventory forecasting
New market entry	Workforce strategy and sourcing, local talent acquisition, policy localization	Market-viability assessment, funding review	Infrastructure localization and support	Local supplier sourcing, regulatory reviews
Mergers, acquisitions, and divestitures	Culture integration, retention planning, org design	Due diligence, asset valuation, integration plans	Systems integration, data migration	Supply network rationalization, logistics realignment
Product development and launch	Training programs, change management for new products	Budgeting for product development, investment analysis	Supporting technology, development environments	Supplier onboarding, production-timeline planning
AI deployment	Role redesign, reskilling, workforce transition	Value case development and tracking	Enabling technology architecture and provisioning, data governance	Technology and services acquisition, contingent labor planning

Source: Deloitte analysis.

The move toward cross-functional global business services can help address "run the business" functions. However, many organizations that have deployed global business services have made only limited strides in recombining the remaining components of corporate functions to be more effective in "grow the business" capabilities.

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to rethinking corporate functions. Organizations have a range of options, with varying degrees of integration and disruption, to best fit the needs of the business and its appetite for change (figure 4). An organization choosing a reimagined approach with significant M&A activity, for example, may create a dedicated M&A team with expertise in people, finance, technology and data integration, legal, and risk.

Regardless of how much complexity an organization decides to take on in rethinking corporate functions, there are several areas of opportunity to consider:

Follow data and tech across functional boundaries

It is likely that organizational technology and data are already more integrated than organizational boundaries. There is an opportunity for the structure of organizational functions to integrate along these paths.

Some organizations are already taking the leap. HR and IT are key functions that many organizations are considering integrating: Ninety-three percent of IT leaders in a Nexthink report believe HR-IT integrations can boost productivity, satisfaction, and engagement.[3]

For example, recognizing that many talent practices are now being reimagined with technology and AI, and with data being integrated from across multiple functions, Moderna merged HR and IT under a newly created role of chief people and digital technology officer. Teams were built to focus on work that required human input while delegating other tasks to AI tools—a process that included deploying more than 3,000 tailored ChatGPT versions for specific HR tasks, streamlining performance management and employee support. The effort also helped improve responsiveness and efficiency in addressing Moderna's workforce needs.[4]

AI talent management platform Workleap encountered difficulties in delivering a consistent and supportive experience for its globally distributed employees. By bringing together HR and IT expertise, the company redesigned its onboarding and daily support processes, using technology to create smoother interactions for remote and hybrid staff.[5]

In early 2025, Unilever gave its CFO responsibility for a range of other corporate functions, including supply chain and procurement, digital and technology, and business services, in connection with a new five-year growth plan.[6]

Decouple domain expertise from organizational structure

Keeping expertise locked in functions can stifle collaboration and innovation. Instead, organizations can encourage leaders and their teams to apply their expertise across different functions, promoting broader understanding and more balanced exposure across various domains. This flexibility broadens individual perspectives, enabling workers to contribute more broadly throughout the organization rather than being confined to a single function.

Megan Bazan, vice president of people at Cisco, notes that their model for leadership includes multiple roles managing technology and talent transitions. That model places an emphasis on dynamic teaming that is cross-functional; hybrid, including humans and AI agents; and able to drive rapid activation.[7]

Figure 4

Options for transforming corporate functions

Enhanced collaboration	Solution-based teaming	Reimagination
Organizations accelerate efforts to drive collaboration across corporate functions, embedding cross-functional representation into ways of working and developing selective shared metrics.	Organizations create standing, solution-based teams around business scenarios and events that require cross-functional expertise, such as business planning, M&A, new market entry, or new product development.	"Run the business" capabilities come together under common leadership, enabled by integrated technology and agentic AI. "Grow the business" capabilities are organized into solution-based teams or corporate-services partners who are supported by domain experts and augmented with AI.

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Organizations can establish communities that help specialists deepen their expertise, share best practices, and mentor colleagues. Cultivating these communities can foster an ongoing exchange of knowledge that helps maintain high standards and drives continuous learning across the organization. Meanwhile, robust communities supported by incentives and infrastructure can help professionals advance their domain knowledge in areas such as HR, finance, and IT, while also playing new roles in more fluid corporate support structures.

Enhance cross-functional accountability and collaboration

What gets measured gets done. Clear, shared cross-functional metrics can help hold teams and individuals on track to reach outcomes aligned with overall business objectives. Tracking progress can also build transparency and foster an ownership mindset across the organization.

In addition, the design of collaborative structures and processes should ensure that team members are jointly accountable for the success of a project. Doing so will help cultivate a culture where individuals take responsibility for their own contributions as well as the collective results of the larger group.

IT and HR could share accountability for workforce experience measures, and finance and supply chain could share working capital optimization metrics. A full range of functions could also share accountability with the business for speed to market.

One senior vice president of people and operations at a global digital entertainment company notes, "Every function or team offers an AI bot for something, but our challenge is bringing together that world for employees and aligning collectively around the shared outcome metrics we want to drive."[8]

Enable new capabilities and insights in the business

Finally, organizations can explore ways to build capabilities across the business. Our 2024 Global Human Capital Trends report, for example, spoke of **boundaryless HR**, in which the HR function can provide access to data to help leaders make better people decisions. Our 2025 Global Human Trends report discussed focusing on **the role of managers** in redesigning work, reallocating resources, and optimizing human and machine interactions. Imagine a world in which corporate functions are measured on how successfully they have built new capabilities into the business.

This shift moves organizations away from a model where functions are essentially gatekeepers of data, processes, and expertise and toward a model of cross-functional teaming that bolsters efforts to democratize insights and catalyze change.

As an example, Marcia Oglan, senior vice president of enterprise HR at Highmark Health, points to the role of HR as "the glue between technology and people—our real work is helping everyone see their place in a changing organization." To that end, HR is forming a workforce innovation team to help deconstruct jobs, analyze tasks, identify where technology fits, and reconstruct roles accordingly across areas ranging from nursing to customer service. "The more cross-functional and integrated our teams are, the more trust and collaboration become strategic assets rather than accidental byproducts," Oglan says. "We want a networked culture ... that's about creating connections and visibility, not just new org charts."[9]

There will always be a need for human expertise, capability, and courageous, independent perspectives. For example, the role of a CFO, CHRO, or chief legal officer often includes the ability to deliver an unpopular opinion to the leadership team in the interest of protecting the enterprise and its many stakeholders. Any changes to functions should strive to preserve the expertise and stewardship that are the professional cornerstones for these leaders. These changes should also leave room for constructive friction among leaders.

Leaders hoping to reimagine functions must be clear-eyed about the human tendencies to protect turf and political power within an organization—regardless of what the most agile or cost-effective future structures may be. Bold leaders should create a safe space to work through these issues and present a vision for how those aligned to the organization's goals and direction can be individually successful.

Organizing the enterprise for a more dynamic world

Functions may have outlived their function. Organizations today have the opportunity to arrange themselves not around these traditional pillars, but in ways that provide greater fluidity, agility, and cohesiveness throughout the enterprise. Doing so will position organizations to act as dynamically as the world around them and create new roles and career paths for those who do their essential work.

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Staying relevant in a world that won't sit still

Real-time adaptability is emerging as a competitive differentiator. How can organizations build worker resilience on the fly?

Sue Cantrell, Chloe Domergue, Allyson Dake, Jeroen Van Eeghm, Matt Stevens, and Ishani Purohit

Organizations and workers alike are striving to adapt to the ever-increasing pace of change. Change management and corporate training and learning initiatives have traditionally been the go-to tools for staying relevant in a quickly shifting competitive environment. The problem: These rarely evolve fast enough to keep pace with what workers actually need as their roles and realities shift.

Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey found that only 27% of respondents believe their organizations manage change effectively, and only 8% believe their organizations are highly effective at meeting the continuous, "always-on" learning needs of their workforce.

But AI is flipping the script, upending change management and forgoing the need for traditional, top-down change techniques. AI is also disrupting traditional approaches to learning: Instead of pushing out content to workers in hopes they'll absorb it, AI is now enabling workers to sense, practice, and apply new ways of doing things directly in the flow of work itself.

Indeed, the words *change management* and *training* may now be outdated, no longer fit for purpose to drive human performance. We need an entirely new vocabulary focused on growth and adaptiveness to describe how organizations and workers can stay relevant at speed, where the pace of change only continues to accelerate. And we need to consider both change and learning together, given that both have the shared purpose of helping workers grow and adapt to stay relevant.

Without a new paradigm, organizations face stalled transformations that fail to meet their intended

return on investment. They also face talent disengagement and a widening relevance gap that can threaten their very survival. Meanwhile, workers face the risk of skill misalignment, reduced employability, stagnant career growth, and feeling exhausted by change—or simply feeling left behind.

What marks an organization's advantage today is how fluidly it can steer intent into action by developing adaptive capability in its workforce. Used well, AI can be a game changer: Embedded directly into the very core of the work itself, AI enables organizations and workers not just to operate and execute, but to adapt and grow.

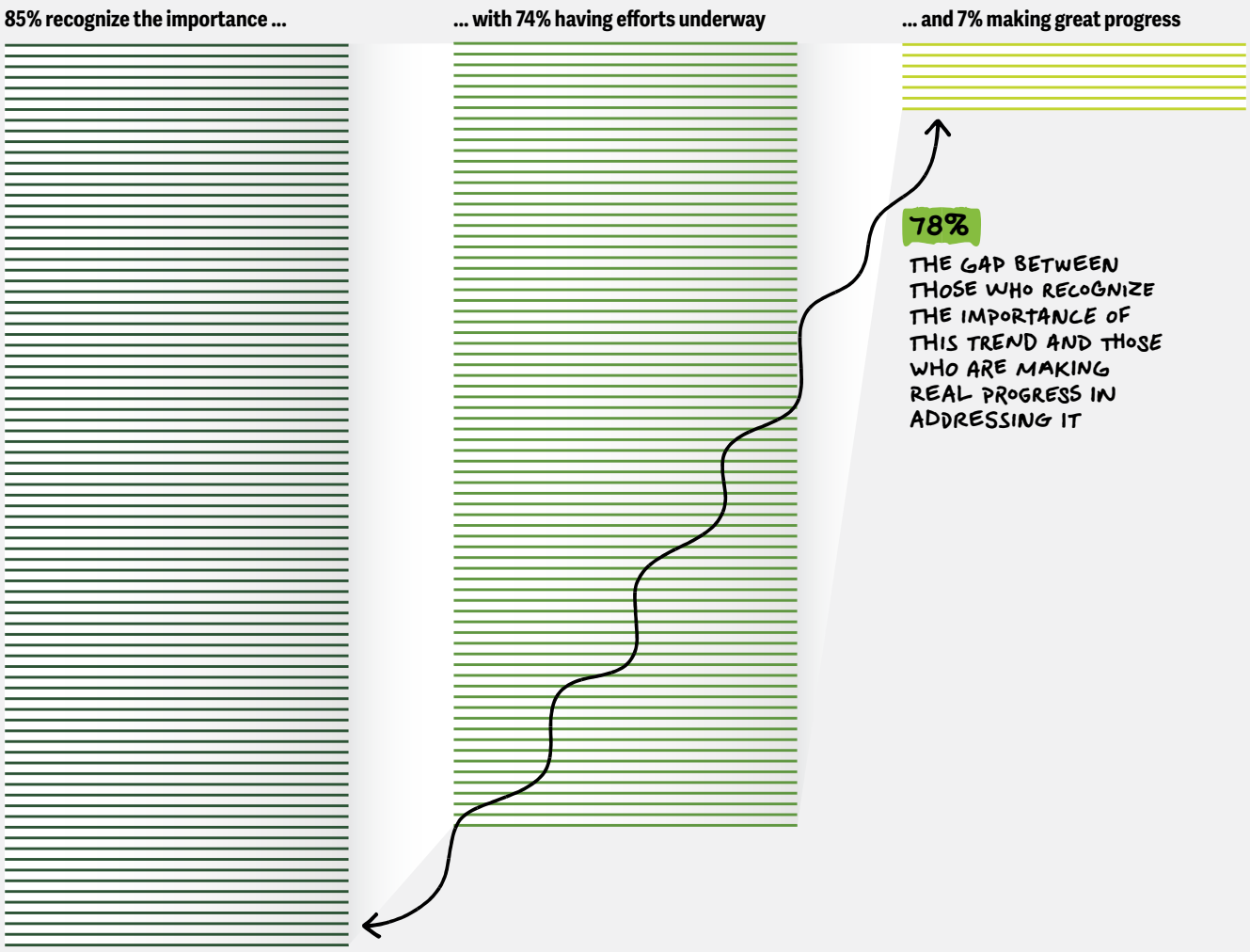
Creating an adaptive experience for workers

Creating an adaptive experience for workers is increasingly important. Respondents to our 2026 survey ranked it as the second most important trend this year, with 85% saying it is critical to develop the ability for the organization and the workforce to adapt at the speed required by today's world. However, only 74% say they are making any kind of progress, and just 7% say they are leading in this area (figure 1).

Figure 1

Organizations say it's important to develop adaptiveness, but only 7% are making great progress toward doing so

Percentage of respondents answering the questions, "How important is increasing the ability of the organization and workforce to adapt at the speed required by today's world?" and "Where is your organization on its journey to address this issue?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

Changefulness goes beyond these traditional approaches and cultivates workers' abilities to adapt, experiment, learn, and evolve as a daily muscle embedded in work, not as a disruption.

Workers are being asked to adapt to changes at a dizzying pace. Our 2026 survey found that one-third of workers experienced 15 major changes in the past year alone, from evolving customer expectations to shifts in strategy or business models. The most frequently cited changes involve the work itself and the skills required to do that work, followed by artificial intelligence and other technology disruptions (figure 2).

Any change will have an impact on workers. But as organizations respond to the accelerating pace of change through traditional approaches, the impact on workers can be negative. Our 2026 survey found that the steady cadence of organizational change has led to impacts such as decreased well-being (68%), increased workload (60%), and feeling less relevant or left behind (58%) (figure 3).

Clearly, an intentional, more empathetic approach is needed—one that changes the narrative from "change exhaustion" to "changefulness." Change exhaustion stems from traditional top-down change and learning approaches. By contrast, changefulness goes beyond these traditional approaches and cultivates workers' abilities to adapt, experiment, learn, and evolve as a daily muscle embedded in work, not as a disruption. As one chief human resources officer put it, "We don't need more change frameworks or reskilling programs."[1]

Doing so can pay off: Our 2026 survey analysis reveals that organizations that successfully cultivate this adaptive approach are 2.4 times more likely to report better financial results and provide more meaningful work to workers. Although organizations have long sought to achieve this level of adaptiveness, it has only now become possible at scale, thanks in large part to advancements in AI.

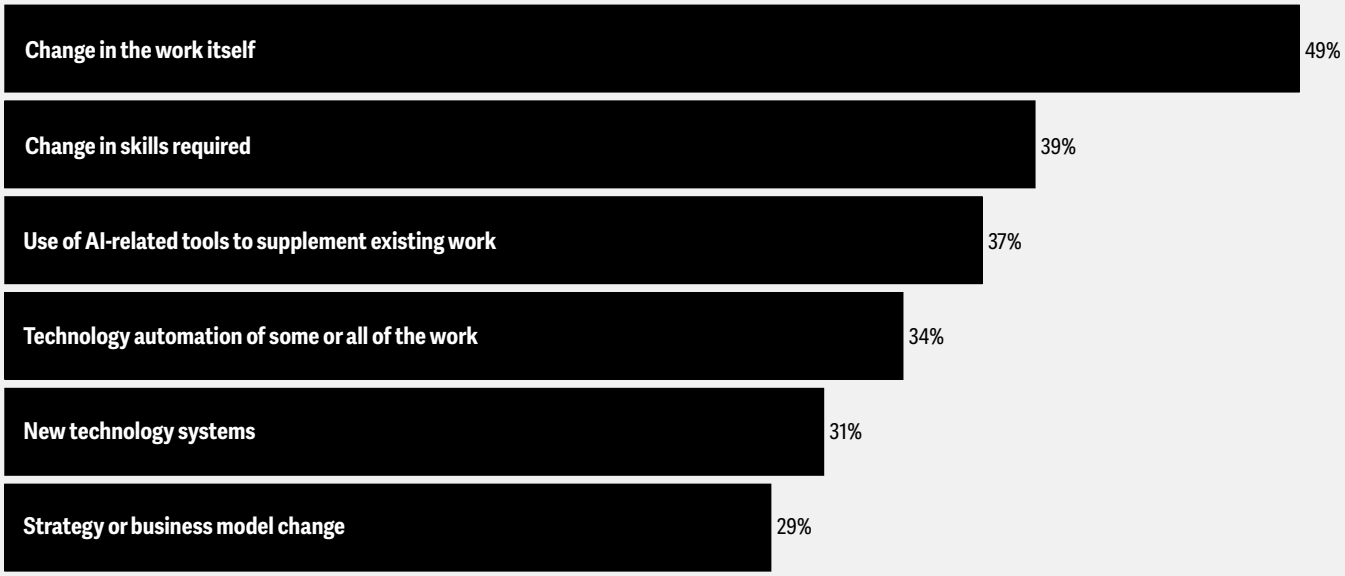
Leaders can consider the following four approaches to adaptiveness and growth.

Create a surround-sound system

Today's workers increasingly expect change and growth to be a part of their work experience rather than an added obligation. However, in many organizations, they can still feel like something outside of daily responsibilities—activities that require stepping away from "real work."

Figure 2

The top six changes experienced by workers over the past year



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

Figure 3

Workers say decreased well-being and lack of clarity are the top impacts of the work and workplace changes they've navigated over the past year

Percentage of respondents answering the question, "What has been the collective impact of the changes you've experienced in the past year?"

Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

Instead, some leading organizations are adopting a strategy from their marketing playbook and creating an omnichannel experience for workers. This experience surrounds workers, meeting them where they are with a variety of adaptive experiences embedded in the work itself.

Organizations have been making progress with real-life experiences. These include optimizing the team mix so workers can learn from one another, peer coaching, and creating opportunities for hands-on practice and experimentation. But AI is changing the playing field, enabling far more opportunities to embed learning and change in the flow of work itself (figure 4).

What might those experiences look like in practice? Instead of offering traditional training to sales professionals, for example, organizations can now embed AI into the flow of their work to provide real-time coaching based on specific behaviors. Or they can use AI to help them role-play with customers and offer AI-powered micro-challenges that help identify ways to practice new behaviors on a daily basis.

Workers say these types of experiences will help them adapt and learn in the flow of work (figure 5).

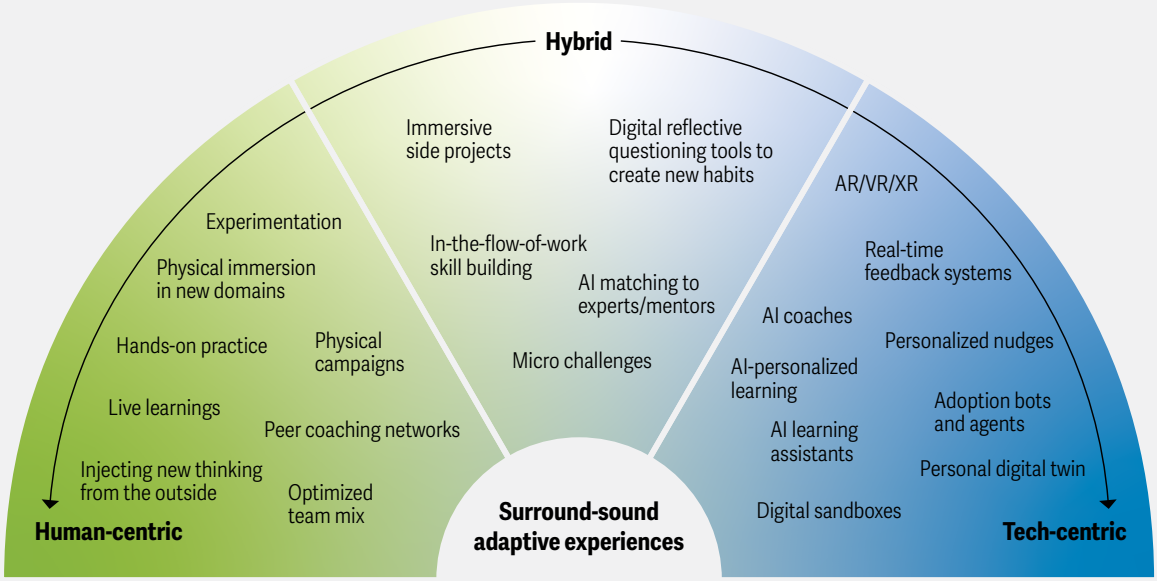
The marketing team at The marketing team at one multinational consumer goods company now uses an AI tool that provides context-aware digital assistance in the flow of work that, with permission from workers, will track their work and offer suggestions, insights, questions, and the names of colleagues working on similar challenges.[2]

Surround-sound approaches apply equally well to change and learning. The vice president of global talent strategy and succession at one multinational company says: "We used to push a lot of formal learning, but now we make support accessible in the natural flow of work so leaders and employees can get timely help. We're shifting the focus from traditional workplace learning to AI-enabled tools and AI coaching that meet people where they are, making the process more tailored and interactive."[3]

Consider how one global pharmaceutical organization is forgoing its traditional change management playbook altogether when implementing a new customer relationship management system. Instead, the organization uses a variety of approaches to help workers adapt to and learn new ways of working, including in-app guidance, AI-powered adoption agents, and behavioral nudges. For example, if a sales representative hesitates while entering data, an

Figure 4

A surround-sound system of adaptive experiences at work

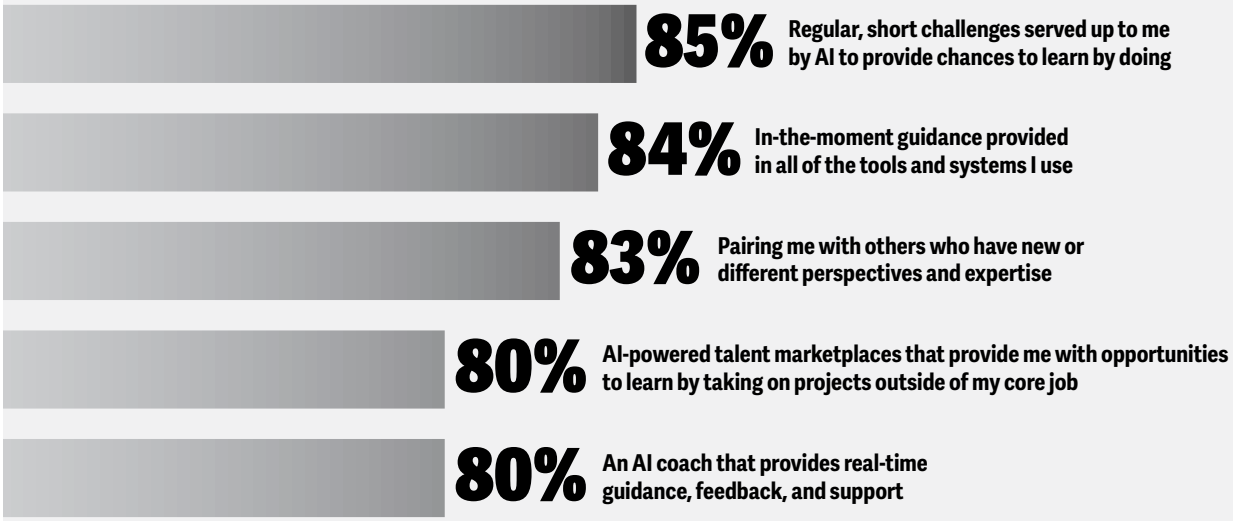


Source: Deloitte analysis.

Figure 5

Workers say surround-sound approaches can help them adapt and learn in the flow of work

Percentage of workers responding "moderately," "very," or "extremely useful" to the question, "To what extent would the following be helpful to you as you navigate and adapt to changes?"

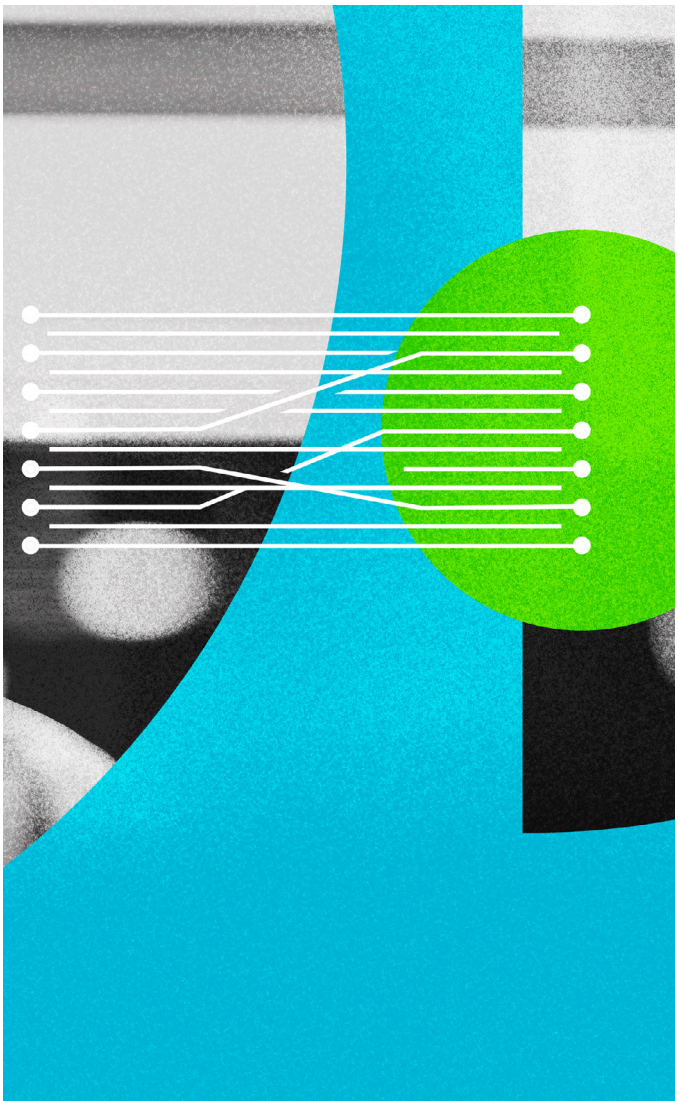


Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

agent can prompt the next best action or share a short tip video, reducing time out of the field. Or an agent might notice that the worker had a customer meeting two days ago and ask if the worker would like the agent to put the meeting notes into the system and schedule a follow-up. AI-powered insights personalize learning and communication for each user, identifying what motivates them and how to reduce barriers to engagement. Digital learning sandboxes also provide hands-on practice and experimentation with the new system. With this approach, 95% of employees are expected to adopt the new system confidently without any formal training at all. The result is a seamless experience—embedded in the flow of work and tailored to each individual.[4]

Shift to change and learning at the unit of one

The conventional approach to change and learning focuses on consistency in processes, cycles, and models, but often ignores the human element. That one-size-fits-all approach is becoming outdated: It prioritizes homogeneity where there is complexity, and it does not always account for workers as individuals with differing motivations, work, emotions, needs, and preferences, or the neuroscience of how workers process what happens around them in different ways. Contextualizing at the unit of one—the individual—is the last mile of growth and adaptiveness.



AI can now help close the gap. With AI, organizations can localize and hyper-personalize their initiatives. It can embed the ability to adapt into individuals' daily work by:

- Identifying and influencing specific behaviors that drive performance and growth
- Modeling the impact of changes on specific workforce segments
- Providing real-time individual feedback
- Tailoring approaches to each worker's motivations to change or learn
- Pacing changes and learning to each worker's personal bandwidth
- Customizing communications or content for each individual
- Contextualizing what the change or learning means for the individual—and for their work
- Identifying and influencing emotions and sentiment

Georgia-Pacific uses digital adoption platforms and AI to personalize its change communications related to a new systems implementation. One way is through personalized videos that can be customized at the touch of a button to change the content, script, and even the speaker's tone and dialect to better engage each individual viewer. Emails about the new system are personalized and sent by their individual senior leader. AI will be used in the future to track individual engagement and tailor ongoing communications. In addition to the AI solutions, a digital adoption platform generates in-app guidance to support end users at the point of need. The result, explains change leadership director Melissa Collier, is "the ability to make changes more quickly—in minutes rather than days—and greater confidence in team members using the tools to effectively execute their work."[5]

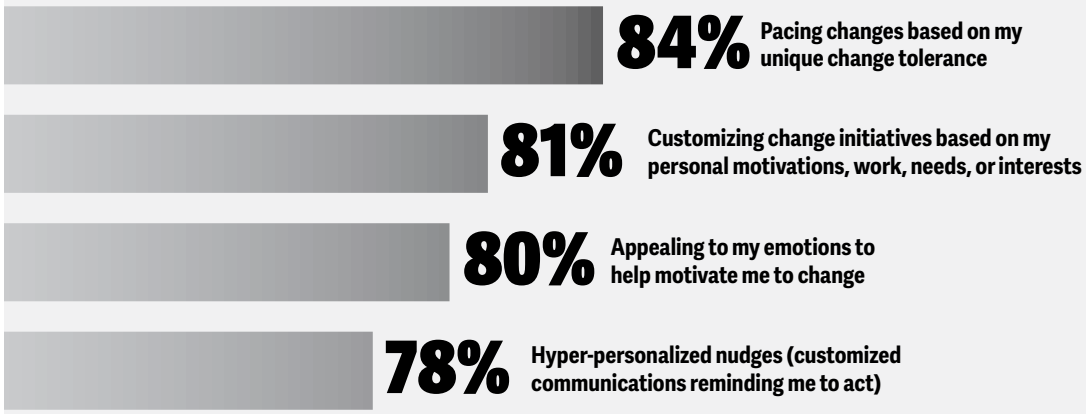
Other advancements are also enabling organizations to contextualize change. Plum, for example, now offers an AI tool that enables managers to predict how a team will react to a new change based on each individual's level of agility and personal adaptiveness. In turn, managers are able to create personalized change plans.[6] Other AI systems can identify an individual's personal influencers and have them reach out to that person to bring them along with the change.

Workers say personalization will help them resolve some of the barriers that get in the way of adapting to change (figure 6). The top challenge cited by leaders and managers in our 2026 survey? Change not seeming directly relevant or personalized to the individual, cited by 44%. Barriers for workers include a lack of understanding of how the change relates to them (30% of respondents) and a lack

Figure 6

Workers say personalizing change will help them adapt

Percentage of workers responding "moderately," "very," or "extremely useful" to the question, "To what extent would the following be helpful to you as you navigate and adapt to changes?"



Source: Analysis of Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends survey data.

of personal motivation to address the change (21%). Both of these barriers can be resolved when change is tailored to an individual's work and motivations.

Personalization is a fundamentally human-centric approach, which Deloitte research has shown pays off. Organizations taking such an approach are nearly three times as likely to report better business and human outcomes.[7]

Create continuous feedback loops

Seeing what people do, what they ignore, or what they revisit provides crucial information to drive progress. Real-time data and feedback loops are critical to those efforts. Understanding and encouraging behaviors is a science, and organic feedback and data-backed loops can pinpoint what is—and isn't—working.

Consider one pharmaceutical organization that shifted from thinking of change in terms of neat, episodic phases to embracing a nonlinear approach of constant adaptation through continuous feedback loops. Rather than relying on static key performance indicators and sequential rollouts, it used AI to surface real-time insights from employee sentiment, social media behavior, and internal feedback loops. This information helped create tailored interventions for specific workforce segments that could be adjusted instantly based on how employees are actually working and feeling.[8]

Likewise, at Nike, data analytics is used to identify adoption barriers and inform targeted interventions, which in turn has helped the company act on real-time behavioral signals and improve change outcomes.[9] And at Toyota Memorial Hospital in Japan, frontline staff are provided with real-time data and feedback loops that link learning and continuous improvement (known as Kaizen) directly to care outcomes.[10]

Empower workers to sense and respond

Traditional change management is often top-down: Leaders decide the direction, and workers are told what to do as the recipients of change. Many learning programs are the same. But what if workers are empowered with data and AI to sense and respond when signals in markets and customers are first seen? That marks a shift from managing change to providing workers with the autonomy to be co-creators and innovators of adaptiveness, helping shape how the organization evolves in real time. Organizations get to adapt, and workers get to continuously learn.

One senior vice president explains, "Enabling people to experiment where possible becomes a hallmark of resilient organizations. People need permission and support to build new things, explore, and adapt."[11] Workers agree: Eighty-seven percent of workers in our 2026 survey say that providing what we call **digital playgrounds**—safe, digital spaces to practice and learn new things—will help them better adapt to change.

When leaders set transformation targets and rely on lower levels of the organization to meet them, it rarely produces lasting results. Why? Because transformation requires changes in both the work being done and how it is accomplished, and leaders often are too removed from day-to-day operations to understand what truly needs to evolve. Empowering workers to adapt on the fly builds trust and positivity; our research shows that workers are twice as likely to feel negatively about an employer-imposed change as a self-imposed change.

Consider how AI can help workers experiment at scale and adjust in real time. Walmart uses AI to empower associates to test different stocking and staffing models to optimize operations, adjusting based on local conditions where change happens first.[12] At Unilever, AI labs give workers opportunities to experiment with product formulations and marketing strategies.[13] AI can also analyze how work is performed and suggest changes to the people doing it in real time, creating emergent processes that continuously adapt based on changing conditions.

Empowering workers to adapt and grow requires organizations to rethink their leadership and management layers. For instance, that may mean a shift from hierarchical management to networked decision-making driven by AI's real-time insights. One multinational technology company does this by encouraging workers to be "positive pivoters," embracing change as a constant and empowering employees to actively shape it rather than simply adapt. This shift calls for moving away from top-down management and rigid hierarchies toward agile, networked teams.[14]

A path through uncertainty

In an environment where change and disruption are the rules rather than the exceptions, the greatest source of competitive advantage may just be the ability to organically adapt in real time. Change and learning, especially today, don't happen in neat phases. They are unpredictable and require constant adaptation. Competitive advantage is built not by how quickly you move humans through programs, but by how organizations and workers can be rewired to rewrite themselves in real time.

While AI is one of many disruptors facing organizations today, it also offers the chance to redefine how organizations adapt, shifting from static playbooks to dynamic, data-driven models that mirror human adaptability. Organizations should shift focus from control to curiosity, from training to experimentation, and toward a deeper recognition that adaptability isn't new at all. It's hardwired into us—a survival instinct that has always helped humans navigate change and uncertainty.

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Decisions that echo

Amid eroding trust and accelerating technology, board decisions reverberate beyond the organization. The question is whether those decisions will strengthen society—or strain it.

Julie Duda, Sue Cantrell, Yves Van Durme , Brad Kreit, and Corrie Commisso

We are living in a moment when confidence in institutions—public and private—is eroding at an unprecedented pace.

The 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer finds that 61% of people globally now feel a moderate or high sense of belief that government and business make their lives harder and serve narrow interests. Only 36% believe the next generation will be better off.[1] Inside organizations, trust is faltering as well: According to HP's 2025 Work Relationship Index, which surveyed workers across 14 countries, only 16% of knowledge workers trust their senior leaders to make the right decisions for their people—a double-digit drop in one year.[2]

Even foundational narratives are cracking: A recent *Wall Street Journal* poll shows that 70% of Americans believe that the "American Dream"—the idea that hard work reliably leads to upward mobility—was never real at all.[3]

These statistics are signals that the relationship between people, institutions, and work is under strain. They may also hint at something more profound: that the decisions of leaders, organizations, and boards now reverberate far beyond corporate walls. The boundaries between business decisions and societal consequences are becoming more porous, and major decisions now land not just on balance sheets, but also on communities, institutions, families, and the fabric of civic trust.

At a time when confidence is slipping and norms are shifting, leaders and boards are faced with an important question: What future are they building—by design or by default—for the people their organizations affect?

The expanding mandate of the board

In the introduction to the 2026 Global Human Capital Trends report, we described the shift organizations are experiencing from navigating tensions in the worker-organization relationship (which we explored in our 2025 report) to confronting tipping points—moments at which inaction is no longer an option.

The statistics cited above are evidence that leaders and boards are quickly reaching that tipping point. Those that look beyond traditional governance and bottom-line oversight to consider their broader impacts can transform their organizations and also the ecosystems around them. But those that ignore wider implications risk more than reputational damage. They risk real legal, financial, and strategic consequences—and more importantly, they risk doing harm.

This is why human sustainability—the degree to which an organization creates value for people as human beings—matters so deeply now. Human sustainability is not simply about worker well-being or productivity, but whether individuals leave their work with stronger skills and employability, better health, and a deeper sense of belonging and purpose. It is about whether the organization contributes to human flourishing.

Traditionally, boards have focused on strategy and vision, leadership and talent, financial performance, risk and compliance, governance and legal oversight, and stakeholder engagement. These responsibilities remain essential. Historically, board decisions have been oriented toward protecting the interests of the organization and its financial stakeholders. But boards should have a heightened awareness that any decision they make can have an impact on broader societal outcomes, such as:

- **Health and well-being:** The mental, physical, and social health of people, including happiness, sense of purpose, and meaningful work; whether work enriches their lives or erodes it; and whether communities gain meaning and connection or experience stress and isolation
- **Labor market health:** The ability of the workforce to grow and adapt—or to fragment into those with the right capabilities and those without—as obstacles arise to deploying skills and trustworthy employment practices, all influenced by whether technology bridges opportunity gaps or widens them
- **Truth and trust:** The degree of transparency organizations maintain, the integrity of their data and the workforce's access to it, and the public's ability to believe in what both leaders and algorithms communicate
- **General economic health:** The overall state and performance of the economy and whether business contributes to sustainable economic growth through broad prosperity and financial security

Each of this year's human capital trends identifies the tipping points where leaders have the opportunity to influence organizational outcomes. Here, we turn to a different question: How might those choices influence broader societal outcomes, and how can those outcomes in turn impact the business? The impacts can be subtle or profound. Below, we explore the questions each trend raises that can shape whether organizational choices strengthen or strain the societies around them.

The decisions ahead: How today's choices shape the future

Across this year's trends, boards face decisions that can ripple beyond the walls of their organizations. Choices made now—large and small—can accumulate into vastly different futures. For each trend, we've identified an immediate question that most boards tend to ask now regarding their business, and a longer-term question that considers potentially outsized impacts both within and beyond their organization.

Getting human and machine relationships right

Today's question: How do we realize the returns on our AI investments?

Long-term considerations: Without positive, intentional design of human and machine interactions, organizations can hollow out empathy, nuance, and contextual judgment. But when organizations design healthy human and machine relationships, it can become a force multiplier, deepening innovation and preserving the dignity of human experience in the work.

Fact or fabrication? AI is blurring the line when it comes to people and work

Today's question: How do we protect our data and prevent intrusions into our systems?

Long-term considerations: Synthetic data and algorithmic manipulation can drive flawed strategy, alienate top talent, and erode stakeholder confidence. At scale, these fractures can extend to markets and institutions, fueling a crisis in which truth becomes contested. Strong data governance driving transparency, accuracy, and accountability can preserve institutional legitimacy, market efficiency, and the ability of both human and algorithmic decision-makers to operate from a shared foundation of truth.

AI and the future of human decision-making

Today's question: Do we clearly define accountability for AI decisions?

Long-term considerations: Unchecked decision-making by machines amplifies already imperfect decision-making and can threaten trust. Yet, with deliberate governance and ethical oversight, AI can extend human capability, enabling faster, more consistent, and data-rich decisions without surrendering human agency.

Dealing with AI's cultural debt

Today's question: Do we have the right culture for our organization to thrive?

Long-term considerations: AI will influence our culture whether or not we are intentional about it. A culture mediated by technology without intention becomes hollow—undermining belonging, creativity, and well-being. Over time, disengagement and social isolation can corrode collaboration, trust, and even civic cohesion. However, when intentionally guided, AI and digital tools can be harnessed to enhance connection and inclusion, strengthening the social fabric of organizations and communities.

The orchestration advantage

Today's question: Are we confident that the organization has the necessary talent, infrastructure, and operational capacity to achieve our strategic objectives?

Long-term considerations: Organizations that fail to align capabilities with meaningful strategic advantage risk becoming fast followers—moving quickly but without purpose. Talent disengages and feels untethered, inequities widen, and speed replaces substance. But when speed is intentionally combined with purpose, trust, and strong human capability, organizations build resilience and prosperity is shared rather than extracted.

Have organizational functions outlived their function?

Today's question: Are our functions designed to meet the needs and pace of the business, while delivering at a lower cost?

Long-term considerations: If corporate functions blur and roles evolve haphazardly, organizations risk creating bureaucratic confusion and losing the very expertise that sustains quality and trust. By contrast, deliberate evolution enables professions to unlock new opportunities while still remaining credible stewards of their domain expertise, ensuring that progress continues to be guided by wisdom, integrity, and public trust.

Staying relevant in a world that won't sit still

Today's question: Do we possess the leadership, talent, and workforce capabilities to compete and adapt in an environment of accelerated change?

Long-term considerations: If the workforce fails to evolve as conditions change, organizations may face widening skill gaps and stagnant productivity, while workers face mounting social and economic exclusion. Workers left behind risk long-term employability challenges, deepening divisions between the digitally fluent and those excluded from opportunity. Organizations that commit to continuous reskilling and curiosity build more creative, resilient teams—capable of growing with technology rather than being displaced by it.

Near-term actions for long-term impact

Underscoring the long-term questions in each of this year's trends are two foundational questions that will likely shape the future of work for many years to come.

- How will value and opportunity be distributed among individuals and organizations?
- What is our human advantage? What remains uniquely human and how will we preserve and elevate these qualities?

Answering these questions will take time. But boards can begin laying the groundwork now, revisiting structures, expectations, and practices to help ensure decisions made today align with the future they hope to create.

In addition, boards can make commitments that help bridge the gap between the future they hope to see and the decisions they make today—commitments that anchor governance in human sustainability and responsible progress.

- **Ensure executive teams have what they need to act on the immediate questions raised in each trend.** This means going beyond simply surfacing issues and empowering leaders to address them by providing clarity, resources, decision rights, and cross-functional support.

- **Actively engage with the long-term considerations, using them as a lens for all decisions.** Make conversations about human advantage, accountability, trust, and societal impact a recurring feature of board deliberations, ensuring that long-term implications are considered alongside short-term results.

- **Extend influence beyond organizational boundaries through consortia, community partnerships, educational alliances, and public-sector collaboration.** The ripple effects of organizational decisions are unavoidable; collaboration helps ensure those ripples move society forward.

Stewarding a more human future

Technologies like AI will continue to evolve, but they are only part of the story. The future will likely be defined not by the technology we adopt, but by the judgment, values, and courage we bring to the decisions ahead. As boards increasingly find themselves in roles of greater influence, now is the time to ask difficult questions, widen the lens, and make choices that serve both organizational performance and human sustainability.

The human advantage remains real and irreplaceable. The question now is whether leaders will use that advantage to shape a future that elevates people, strengthens institutions, and rebuilds trust. And that work begins with the choices we make today.

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Methodology

Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends worked in collaboration with Oxford Economics to survey than 3,000 business and human resources leaders across multiple industries and sectors in 15 countries. In addition to the broad, global survey that provides the foundational data for the 2026 Global Human Capital Trends report, Deloitte supplemented its research with surveys of 6,000 workers, managers, and executives to uncover where there may be gaps between leader and manager perception and worker realities. The survey data is complemented by more than 50 interviews with executives and subject matter experts from some of today's leading organizations. These insights helped shape the trends in this report.

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