Navigating change: Leading the workforce of the future

2025 report

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Research methodology

This research was conducted by YouGov between 9th–23rd April 2025. It surveyed 1,944 employees, 898 senior managers and 569 HR decision-makers in the UK.

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Future works: UK staff shed light on tomorrow

Far too often, future of work talk only gets framed in black and white. Tech shall set us free, *or* it's coming for our jobs. We'll outsource every task to AI, *or* become beholden to a digital overlord. Humankind will become empowered and rich, *or* powerless and poor.

On and on and on it goes.

The reality is neither black *or* white, of course. It's countless shades of grey.

In fact, the core takeaway from our exclusive, data-rich survey with YouGov is that the UK workforce has a lot of feelings—many of them complex, or even conflicting. People are optimistic yet anxious about the future. AI's a problem, and also an opportunity. Do staff worry about losing their job? Sure. But not as much as burnout.

And that's before we dig into demographics.

Among our panel of around 3,400 people (made up of employees, HR decision-makers, and senior managers), there are notable differences between how certain groups use and understand AI. Whether they trust organisations to support, train, and treat them well. Or what a better world of work would actually look like.

People are optimistic yet anxious about the future. AI's a problem, and also an opportunity. Do staff worry about losing their job? Sure. But not as much as burnout.

By now, the notion that technology will play a lead role in the future workplace is all but guaranteed. Exactly *how* this plays out remains up for grabs, however, and will be shaped by a million separate decisions—most of them human.

But, as you'll find out below, opinions on these matters can wildly vary.

Optimism, pragmatism & outright fear: The workforce's complicated relationship with AI

Half of senior managers believe AI will create more solutions than problems at their organisation—roughly two-and-a-half times more than those who feel the opposite. The same is true for HR decision-makers (HRDMs) and employees, albeit with a bit less oomph.
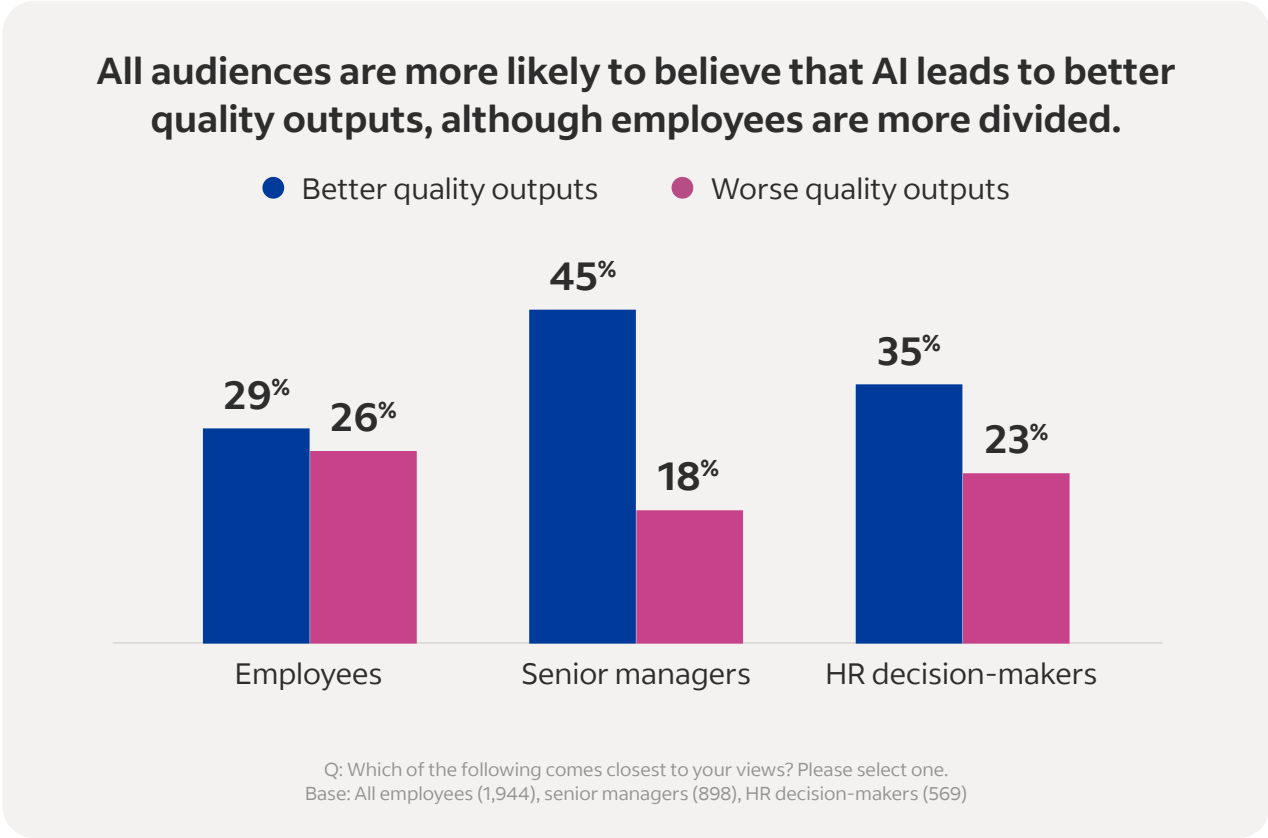
Some 4 in 10 HRDMs say AI will be a force for good—with 1 in 4 predicting problems—and there's a 10-point difference between optimist and pessimist employees. The most popular response among staff? 'Don't know'.
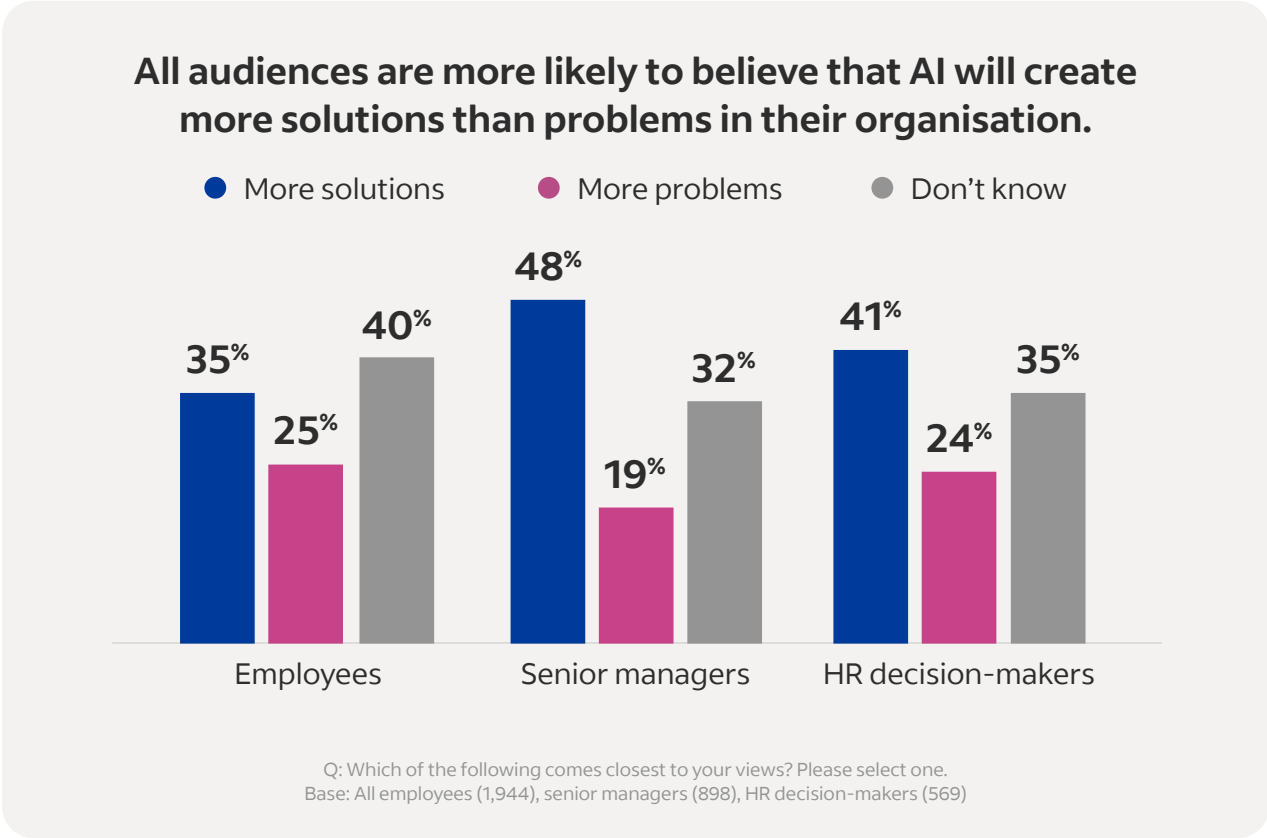
Employees, HRDMs and senior managers agree that AI will more likely deskill than upskill workers.

Similar, all groups are more likely to say using AI gets better outputs (see below), yet strength of feeling varies. Among senior managers, 45% back AI to get results, compared to 18% who disagree—a 27-point margin. For employees, however, the space

between pro and anti is a mere 3%. This divide is echoed on the question of technology's impact on skills—as all three groups agree AI will more likely deskill workers than upskill them, albeit to varying degrees.

All audiences are more likely to believe that AI will create more solutions than problems in their organisation.

● More solutions ● More problems ● Don't know

	Employees	Senior managers	HR decision-makers
More solutions	35%	48%	41%
More problems	25%	19%	24%
Don't know	40%	32%	35%

Q: Which of the following comes closest to your views? Please select one.
Base: All employees (1,944), senior managers (898), HR decision-makers (569)

All audiences are more likely to believe that AI leads to better quality outputs, although employees are more divided.

● Better quality outputs ● Worse quality outputs

	Employees	Senior managers	HR decision-makers
Better quality outputs	29%	45%	35%
Worse quality outputs	26%	18%	23%

Q: Which of the following comes closest to your views? Please select one.
Base: All employees (1,944), senior managers (898), HR decision-makers (569)

This view is most pronounced among HRDMs and employees (49% and 47%, respectively), with senior managers all but tied on whether tech will improve (37%) or impair (38%) the workforce's skillset.

Elsewhere, almost 6 in 10 employees feel AI adoption will result in a net loss of jobs (followed by 55% of HRDMs, and 46% of senior managers), and a quarter say job security is their top workplace concern (see right). This last stat is telling, given job security doesn't make the top three for managers or HR leaders.

And though all three groups agree that career stability will decrease in future—55% of employees and HRDMs say so, and half of senior managers—managers are again the most optimistic. One in five (19%) think jobs will become more stable in future—twice the number of employees and HRDMs who feel the same.

Likewise, 52% of managers (and 50% of HRDMs) expect AI will have a positive impact on the recruitment process, compared to just 38% of employees. And, asked about tech's impact on our brains, this optimism deficit endures. More employees believe

52% of managers (and half of HRDMs) think AI will have a positive impact on the recruitment process, compared to just 38% of employees.

AI will diminish critical thinking skills in the workforce (46%) than improve them (25%), with the opposite true for managers: 39% say AI will sharpen human skills, with 32% saying it'll blunt them.

When viewed as a whole, the data tells a compelling story about workplace power dynamics. It seems management is more likely to see coming tech as a tool to solve problems, drive efficiency and land talent—freeing human minds to tackle high-level issues. Moreover, they're more established in their role and careers alike, which could encourage the feeling of AI as an opportunity, not a looming threat.
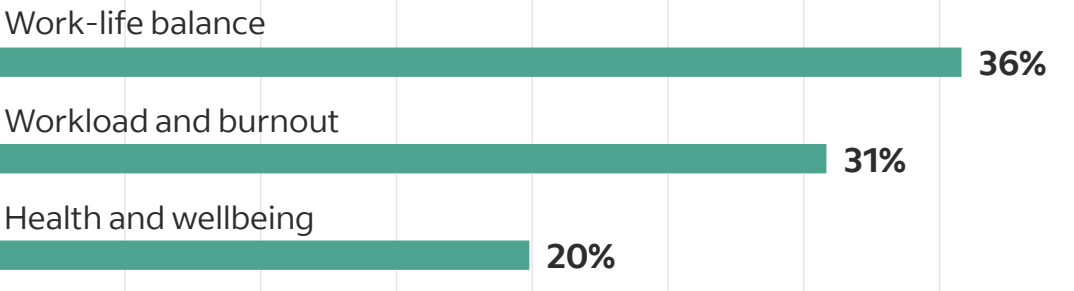
For employees, they appear clear eyed about technology being able to boost how work gets done—they're just unsure whether it'll be to the benefit, or cost, of their jobs.

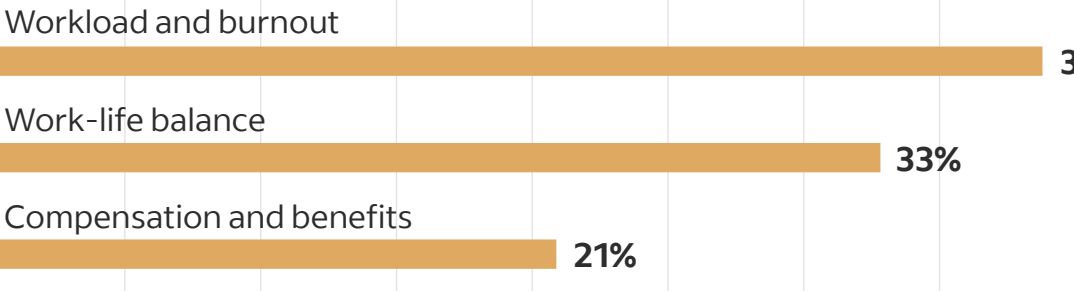## All audiences are most concerned by workload and work-life balance in their current role.

Top 3 concerns for employees

Workload and burnout	34%
Work-life balance	26%
Job security	25%

Top 3 concerns for senior managers

Work-life balance	36%
Workload and burnout	31%
Health and wellbeing	20%

Top 3 concerns for HR decision-makers

Workload and burnout	39%
Work-life balance	33%
Compensation and benefits	21%

Q: What are your biggest concerns about your role currently? Please select up to three.
Base: All employees (1,944), senior managers (898), HR decision-makers (569)

AI use splits down generational, gender & sector lines

AI, in all its many forms, is already running hot in our workplaces—as made clear by the YouGov data. What's less even, however, is the level of adoption and awareness across the workforce.

In our survey, 30% of employees aged 18-34 use AI tools daily—three times more than staff aged 55–64. Young professionals are also far more likely to notice their employers adopting AI: 62% of under-35s say their organisation uses it (either 'extensively' or 'somewhat'), versus a quarter of employees aged 55-64.

That said, a vivid symbol of AI's growing workplace role is that the majority of employees in almost every age group say they use AI tools in their job at least once a week. Even then, exceptions come with a caveat—among 45-54 year-olds it's half, and though only 39% of the over-65s surveyed use AI at least weekly, the sample size is small.

Elsewhere, older employees are also much more likely to say they 'don't know' whether their company is adopting AI (22% of 55–64-year-olds aren't sure). This suggests they could be less included in, or clued up about, workplace tech talk—and is something for company leaders to consider.

A small divide is also present between the sexes. A quarter of male employees use AI daily, versus 17% of female employees, with men a bit more likely to say their company has adopted AI (48% vs. 42%). These gaps aren't vast, but may imply the outdated assumption that technology is more 'for' men still lingers. (For more on this topic,)

There are even sharper splits across sectors, although not in the areas you might expect. Notably, 4 in 10 public sector workers, and nearly the same amount of care staff (37%) say their organisation uses AI to some degree. This finding subverts the stereotype of a slow-moving, tech-shy public sector, while also speaking to the quiet spread of AI tools (from admin automation to diagnostics) across the healthcare industry.
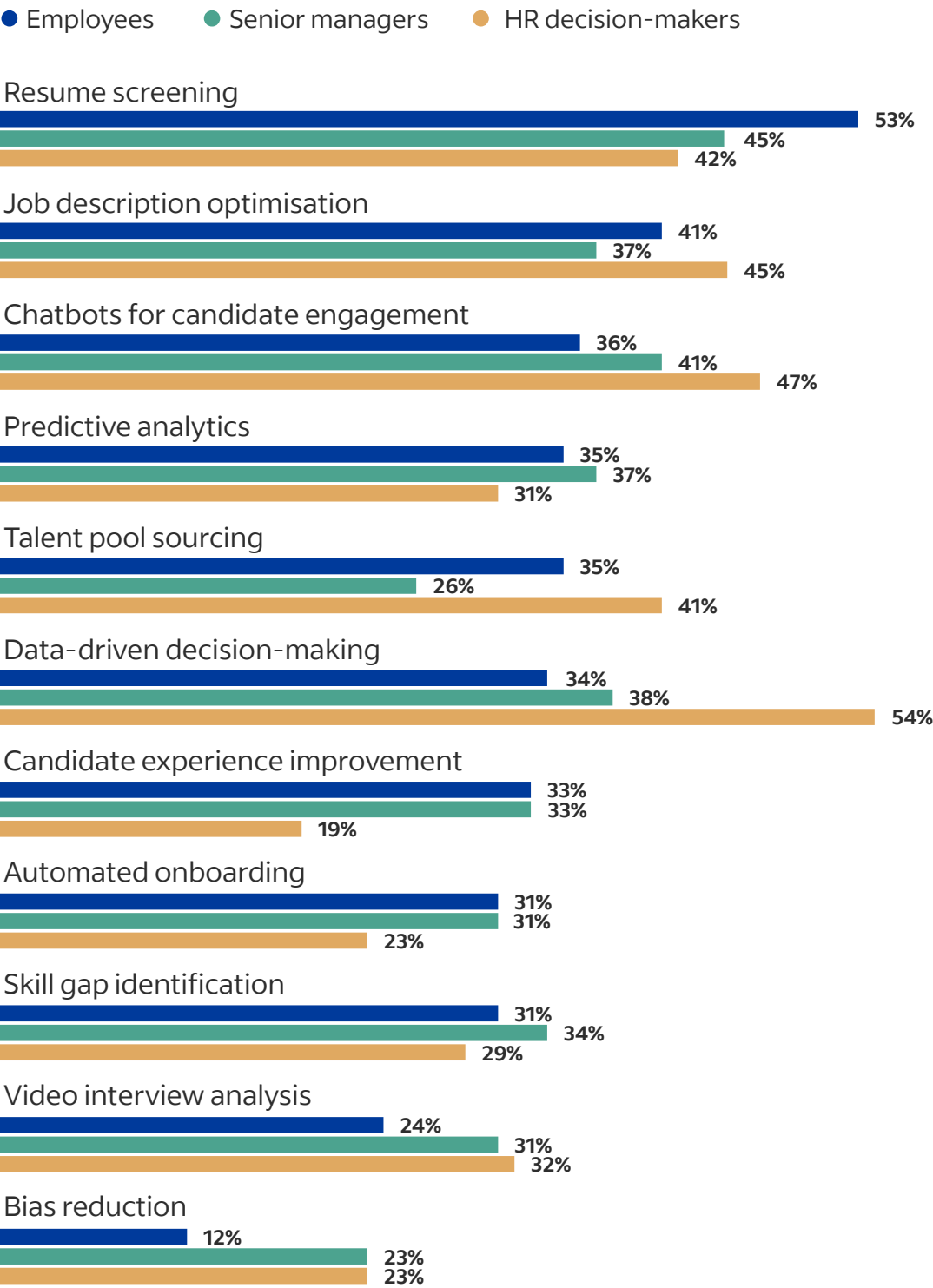
While neither comes close to AI use in tech (where 72% of staff say their organisations have adopted it), it does serve as a counterpoint to more 'machine-led' industries, like manufacturing and construction. Here, only 28% and 25% of employees are aware of AI use in their workplace. Retail, meanwhile, falls in the middle: 30% say their firms have adopted AI.

A quarter of male employees use AI daily, versus 17% of female employees, with men a bit more likely to say their company has adopted AI.

Across the board, the most common AI use case is task automation, although data analysis and managing patient info also ranks high in tech and healthcare, respectively. Yet AI optimism doesn't automatically translate to a whole-company rollout. Back to our workplace groups, and only a minority of HRDMs (18%), employees (16%) and managers (39%) who use AI have built it into their recruitment process—an area where where many champion it as a proverbial game-changer.

Of those who *do*, they mainly deploy AI for CV screening, chatbots for candidate engagement, data-driven decision making, and job description optimisation (see right). What's interesting is that once teams see it in action, they're far more likely to back AI as a hiring tool. This is shown by near perfect reviews from HRDMs and senior managers (96% and 95% of whom say using AI is beneficial to their recruitment processes), with a strong vote of confidence from employees too (86%).

Resume screening is the main use of AI in recruitment processes, with data-driven decision-making, job description optimisation and chatbots also frequently used.
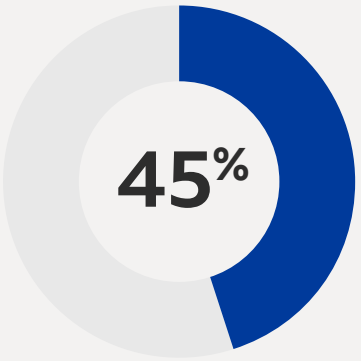
- Employees ● Senior managers ● HR decision-makers

Resume screening
- 53%
- 45%
- 42%

Job description optimisation
- 41%
- 37%
- 45%

Chatbots for candidate engagement
- 36%
- 41%
- 47%

Predictive analytics
- 35%
- 37%
- 31%

Talent pool sourcing
- 35%
- 26%
- 41%

Data-driven decision-making
- 34%
- 38%
- 54%

Candidate experience improvement
- 33%
- 33%
- 19%

Automated onboarding
- 31%
- 31%
- 23%

Skill gap identification
- 31%
- 34%
- 29%

Video interview analysis
- 24%
- 31%
- 32%

Bias reduction
- 12%
- 23%
- 23%

Q: What effect, if any, do you believe AI will have on…
Base: All employees (1,944), senior managers (898), HR decision-makers (569)

The reason why employees are more muted in their praise may well be a result of lagging awareness. In some parts of our survey, the words 'Don't know' speak volumes. Indeed, when asked whether AI will create more solutions or problems, it's employees' top answer. And while 45% of staff say their firm uses AI in some firm, 14% aren't sure. That's more than double the number of HRDMs, and almost *five times* that of senior managers.

Does this imply a failure of comms—where companies struggle to keep staff in the loop about AI rollouts? That some leaders see tech innovation as being on a 'need-to-know' basis? Or both?

Either way, any awareness shortfall is neither good nor sustainable. When organisations don't bring staff at every level along for the ride—especially on something as potentially seismic as AI—this opens up space for people to sketch out their own visions of the future. Vacuums can easily create confusion, fear, or even distrust—which is where the data takes us next.
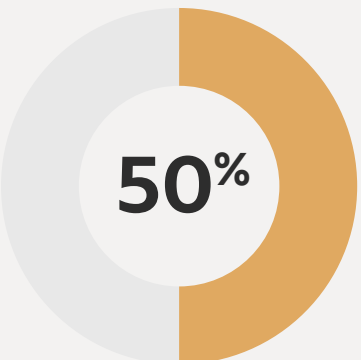
Senior managers are most likely to say their organisation uses AI, with employees the least likely.

45%

Employees

57%

Senior managers

50%
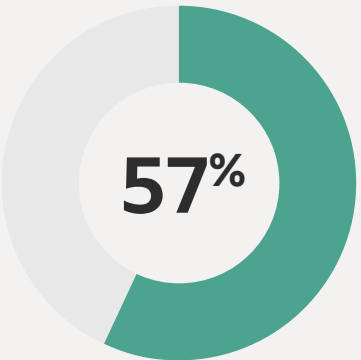
HR decision-makers

Q: Does your organisation currently use AI in any capacity?
Base: All employees (1,944), senior managers (898), HR decision-makers (569)

Trust matters: The future depends on people, yet some lack confidence in leaders

Like we said up top, our future workplaces may be defined by technology, but they'll be *decided* by human beings. The challenge, however, is that a lot of employees aren't convinced leadership has their back.

Our survey asked if respondents trust their organisations on several fronts, and the difference in opinion is stark.

For instance, less than half (42%) of employees say they 'mostly' or 'completely' trust their employer to act in workers' best interests. But the majority of HRDMs say so (53%), as well as two-thirds of senior managers. It means those in charge back their own benevolence more than the people on the shop floor do—rarely a good sign for workplace culture.

Similar fractures appear on the topic of support. Three-fifths of senior managers are 'quite' or 'very' positive about the support they receive in their role, compared to 1 in 2 employees (with HRDMs in the middle: 57%).
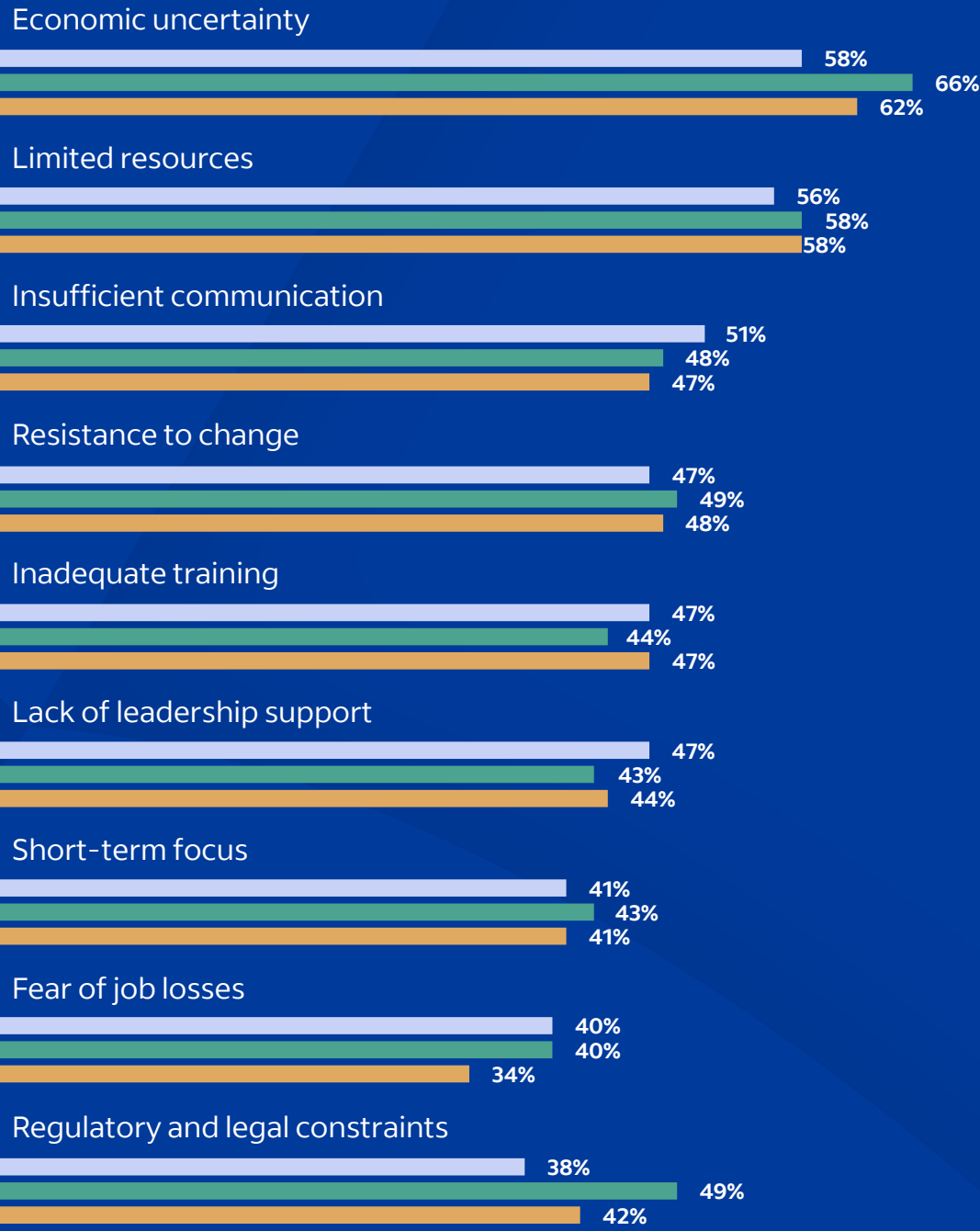
And only 4 in 10 workers feel positive about their career development—something that every good employer should care about by default.

This insight is bleak in isolation, but even more so when you consider the 20-point gap to managers—59% of whom are 'quite' or 'very' positive about career development. (Again, HRDMs are in-between: 53% are positive.)

These stats aren't rogue outliers. Quizzed about the barriers to workplace transformation (see right), a range of top-down issues—such as bad comms, resistance to change, subpar training and a lack of leadership support—all rank high. And in almost every case, it's employees who have the least faith in those above them.

All audiences are most likely to say economic uncertainty is a barrier to workplace transformation in their organisation, with limited resources and poor communication also key

● Employees   ● Senior managers   ● HR decision-makers

Economic uncertainty
- 58%
- 66%
- 62%

Limited resources
- 56%
- 58%
- 58%

Insufficient communication
- 51%
- 48%
- 47%

Resistance to change
- 47%
- 49%
- 48%

Inadequate training
- 47%
- 44%
- 47%

Lack of leadership support
- 47%
- 43%
- 44%

Short-term focus
- 41%
- 43%
- 41%

Fear of job losses
- 40%
- 40%
- 34%

Regulatory and legal constraints
- 38%
- 49%
- 42%

Q: To what extent, if at all, do you believe the following are barriers to workplace transformation in your organisation?
Base: All employees (1,944), senior managers (898), HR decision-makers (569)

No leader should sleep on these findings—rather, see them as a blinking light on the organisational dash. Because far worse than bad optics, distrust like this risks a real-world impact. When employees doubt their leaders' aims, intentions or honesty, they're far less likely to fully embrace new initiatives.

And what makes this even more intriguing is that HR professionals—whose job it is to champion company culture—aren't immune to doubts of their own. In fact, an almost identical number of HRDMs (21%) as employees (22%) flag 'leadership and management' as a concern in their current job. It means a sizeable portion of HR leaders don't love their company's senior team. (Senior managers themselves? Only 16% cite leadership quality as an issue.)

A theme starts to emerge: as we teeter on the cusp of monumental change, a chunk of company leaders are out of sync with their staff. None of this is irreversible, yet left unaddressed, these issues could lead to lasting damage—on both sides.

An almost identical number of HRDMs as employees flag 'leadership and management quality' as a concern in their current job.

On one, staff that ask why their managers don't see or hear them. On the other, oblivious leaders who wonder where it all went wrong.

It's important to remember that data is data—it doesn't take a stance on whether employees or managers are right. Yet contrary views can't coexist for too long. Think about whether a similar divide might exist in your organisation, *especially* before moving forward with any revolutionary new policy.

And if there is an issue, don't forget that open dialogue, greater transparency, and giving employees at every level of the business a voice is rarely a bad move. (For more guidance,)

The workforce is clued up on skills—present and future, as well as when hiring

Amid fears about job security, staff aren't shying away from the idea of learning new skills. If anything, they're ahead of the curve.
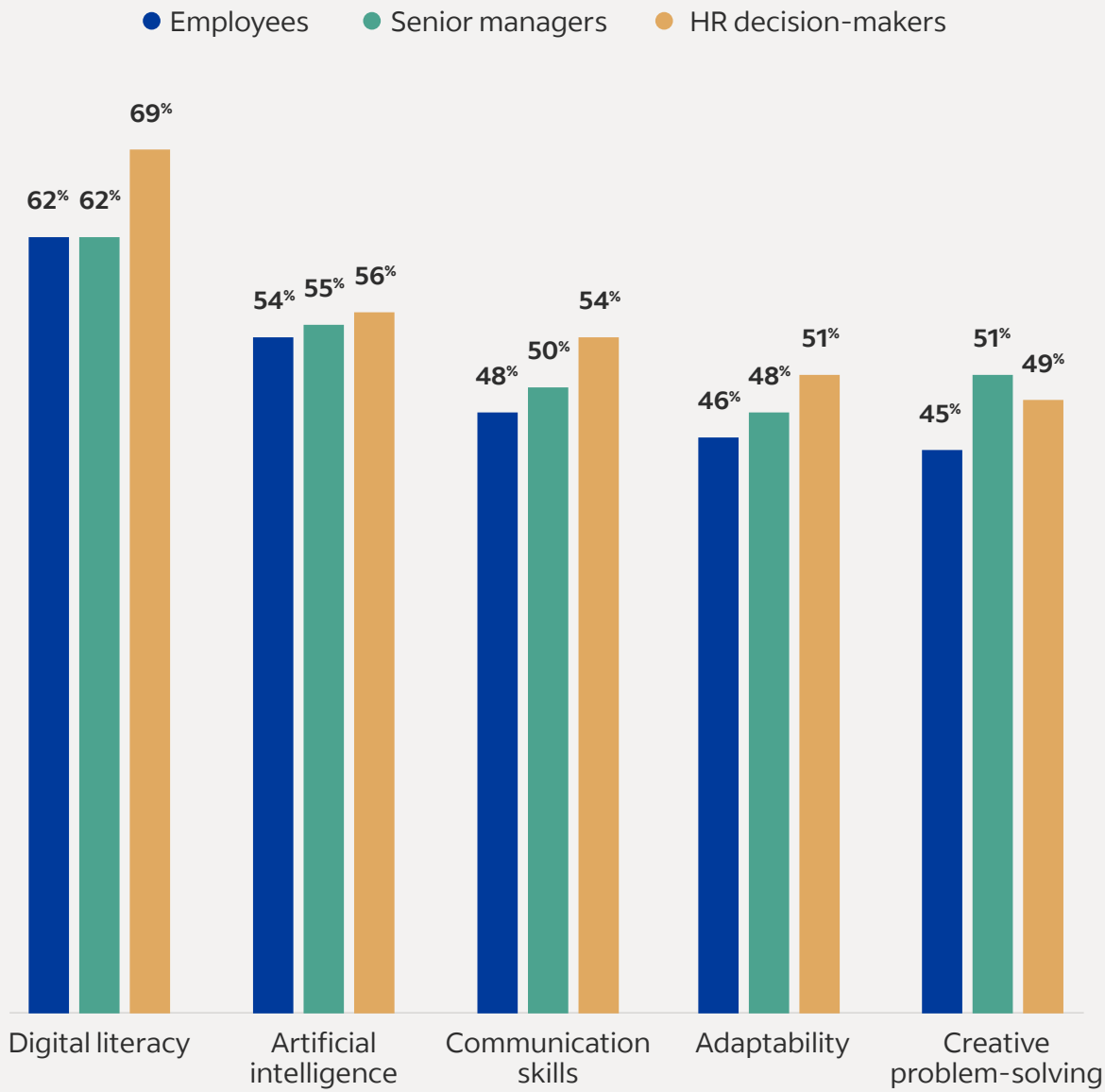
As noted earlier, virtually every age group uses AI tools at least once a week in their job (and some much more, with younger staff the most frequent users). Whether their motivation is DIY L&D, productivity, or to not get left behind, this implies that the workforce is willing to self-teach itself new tech.

And yet, for all the talk of all-powerful AI, each audience is assured—unphased, even—in the here and now. A whopping 87% of employees say they feel prepared to handle the challenges in their current role, with even stronger majorities among HR decision-makers (90%) and senior managers (93%).

Don't mistake this confidence for arrogance. On the contrary, all groups pinpoint digital literacy as the most important skill across the next 10 years (see right). This demonstrates an awareness that tech know-how is now a non-negotiable, not a nice-to-have.

And the skills debate runs deeper still. Though all three groups see AI ability as key, it's striking that a variety of human (aka 'soft') skills—like communication, adaptability and creative problem-solving—also rank high. Put together, this creates a clear-yet-nuanced vision: a better world of work will require strong digital skills *alongside* innately human ones.

Digital literacy is seen as the most important skill for job roles in the next 10 years by all audiences, with AI, communication and adaptability also frequently cited.

● Employees ● Senior managers ● HR decision-makers

	Digital literacy	Artificial intelligence	Communication skills	Adaptability	Creative problem-solving
Employees	62%	54%	48%	46%	45%
Senior managers	62%	55%	50%	48%	51%
HR decision-makers	69%	56%	54%	51%	49%

Q: Which of the following skills, if any, do you think will be key for job roles in the next 10 years,? Please select all that apply.
Base: All employees (1,944), senior managers (898), HR decision-makers (569)

The answer could well be upskilling, however views differ on whether organisations are up to the task. For instance, nearly half of employees see inadequate training as a barrier to their company's future success. Yet HRDMs and senior managers are both more likely to believe insufficient training is not a blocker to success (50% and 51%, respectively).

Despite staff fears over the perils of poor training, it's senior managers and HRDMs—not employees—who see 'more opportunities for skills development and career growth' as the top priority for the future of work. Half of HR decision-makers say this, alongside 48% of senior leaders. Though 39% of employees agree, they back more flexibility, increased job security and higher wages in greater numbers.

Despite staff fears over the perils of poor training, it's senior managers and HRDMs who see 'more opportunities for skills development and career growth' as the top priority for the future of work.

But, as before, this hints at an uneven playing field. It's almost certain that HRDMs and senior managers' pay packets will far outweigh those of employees, and it's human nature to fret far less about something you have (i.e. a generous salary) than an out-of-reach ambition. And so it figures that employees value financial security above hypothetical training schemes.

On a brighter note, the survey signals growing awareness of skills-based hiring. More than two-thirds of senior managers and HRDMs say they're aware of the trend, as well as 1 in 2 employees.

Senior managers and HRDMs are most likely to say that more opportunities for skills development is the top priority in shaping the future of work. For employees, higher pay is key.
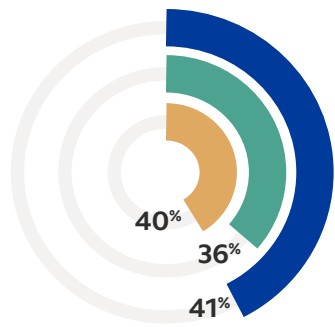
● Employees   ● Senior managers   ● HR decision-makers

50%
48%
39%

More opportunities for skills development and career growth

38%
33%
44%
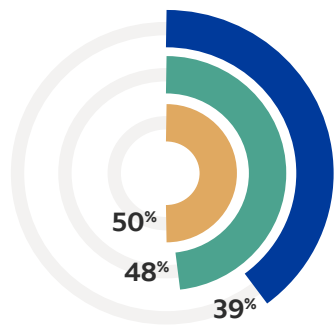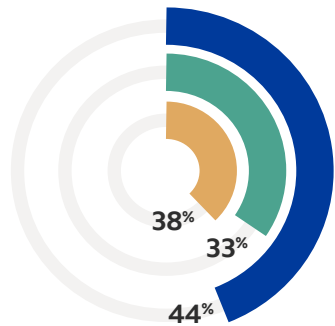
Higher wages and compensation packages

40%
36%
41%

Increased job security and stability

Q: What should be the top priority in shaping the future of work? Please select up to three.
Base: All employees (1,944), senior managers (898), HR decision-makers (569)
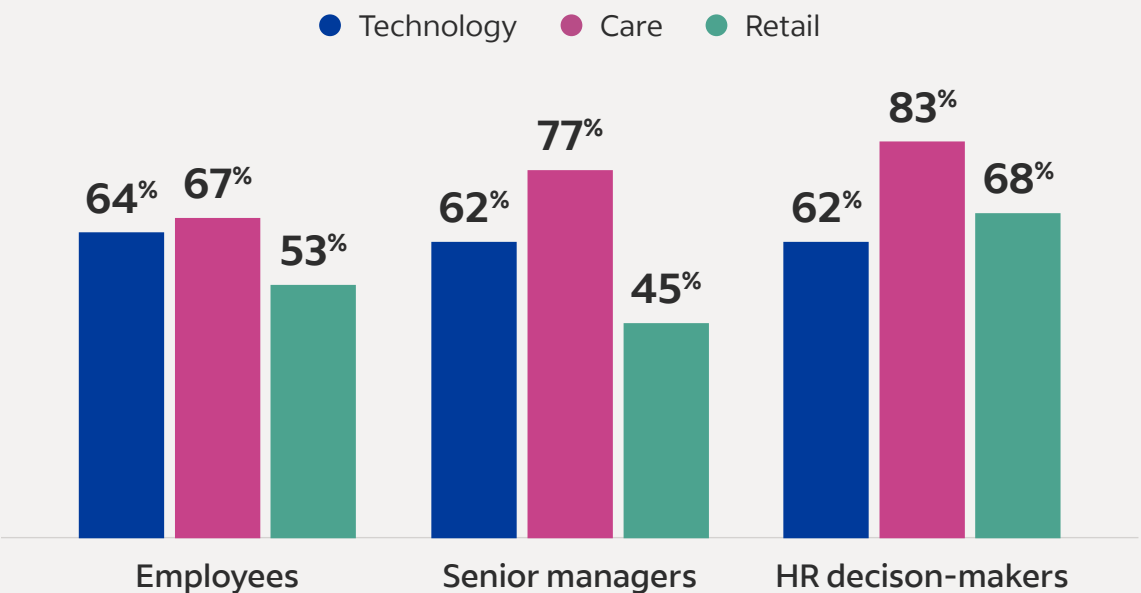
Not only that, big majorities from each audience rightly identify its definition: judging applicants on their abilities, not credentials. Seeing as many view this hiring approach as a dual fix for the future workplace—for performance and gaping skills gaps alike—greater understanding inside organisations can only be a good thing.

Proof of the problem is clear across several industries. For example, survey-takers working in retail, tech, care, and public sectors all say it's challenging to find staff with the right skills (see below)—with the issue most acute in healthcare. As for methods to combat this, upskilling the existing workforce is broadly the most common strategy.

While this is no doubt a daily pressure for hiring teams today, the fact employers are at least aware of (and, in some cases, moving towards) a skills-based approach hints that tomorrow may be brighter.

A majority from the technology, care and retail sectors say it is challenging to find workers with the necessary skills, with those working in care roles finding it hardest.

● Technology ● Care ● Retail

	Technology	Care	Retail
Employees	64%	67%	53%
Senior managers	62%	77%	45%
HR decison-makers	62%	83%	68%

Q: How challenging is it to find workers with the necessary skills in your sector?
Base: All employees (757), senior managers (414), HR decision-makers (187) working in technology, care and retail

Never mind the AI, burnout remains a blight on the modern workplace

Despite differences in various areas, all groups share some common enemies: burnout, workload, and work-life balance.

Ignore *all* the techno-talk, trust concerns, or debates over skills, it's these factors that managers, HRDMs and employees alike cite as their biggest concern right now. It's a rare (and somewhat bleak) moment of unity among the data.

Of course, you could interpret this as a persuasive advert for AI tools—able to ease the pressure heaped upon a languishing workforce. Or that human beings are (you guessed it) human, that stress and overwork are often universal, and no amount of technological transformation will ever truly solve it. But then this is no time for black and white thinking, is it?
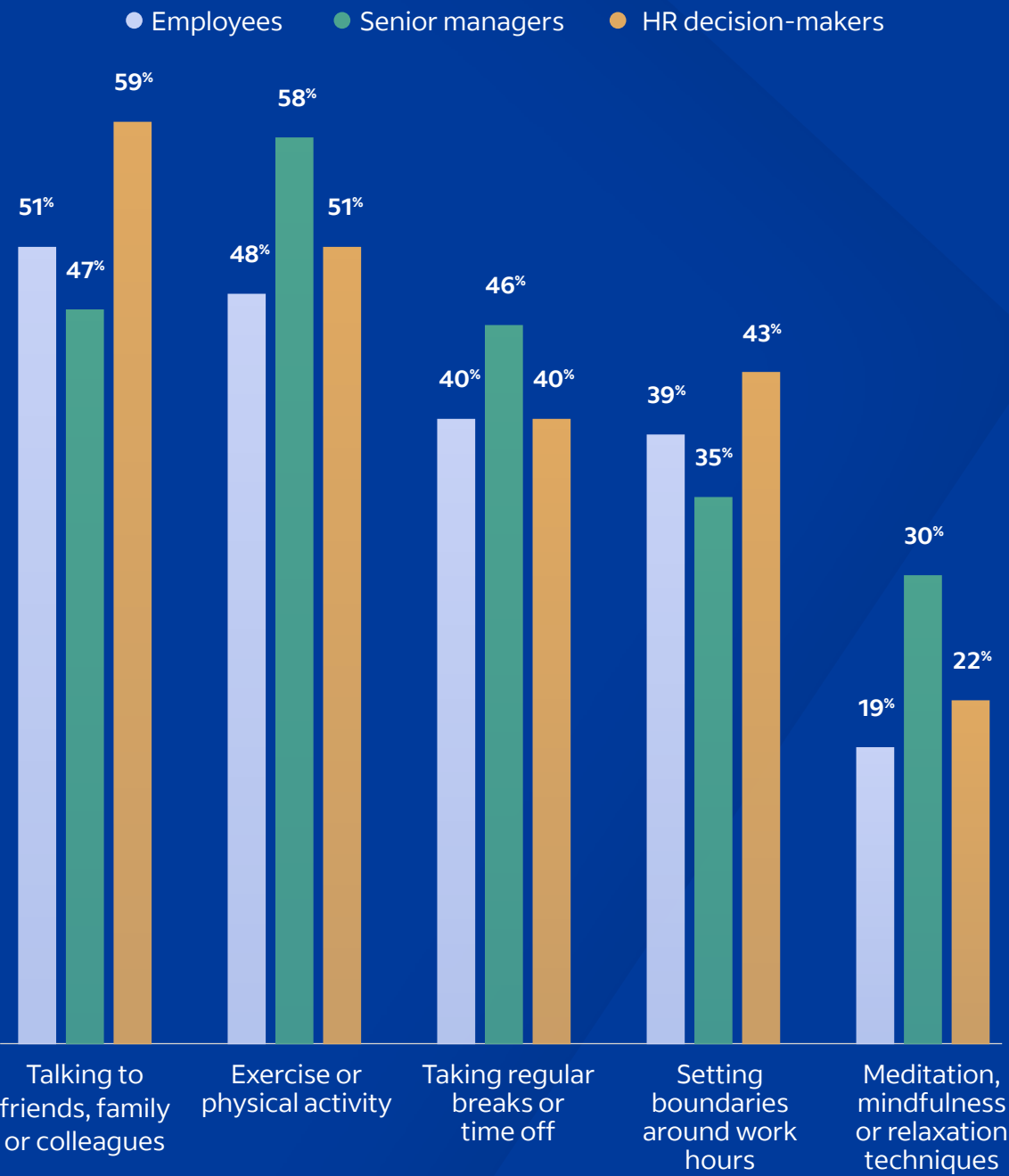
Companies should not discount either argument, and should instead think about macro trends, alongside the day-to-day, lived experiences of their staff. From there, it'll be easier to craft a truly joined-up strategy— ideally, one that helps on both fronts.

On a more positive note, majorities in all groups feel able to manage their stress and mental wellbeing at work.

On a more positive note, majorities in all groups feel able to manage their stress and mental wellbeing at work. Senior managers are the most confident (79% rate their ability 'quite' or 'very' well, vs. just 10% who say not well), with the same true for over two-thirds of employees and HRDMs. Among the most popular strategies for supporting mental health: talking to friends, family or workmates, exercise, and regular breaks or time off (see right).

Employees and HRDMs are most likely talk to friends, family and colleagues to support their mental health, while senior managers more commonly exercise.

Top 5 most common tools or strategies

● Employees ● Senior managers ● HR decision-makers

	Employees	Senior managers	HR decision-makers
Talking to friends, family or colleagues	51%	47%	59%
Exercise or physical activity	48%	58%	51%
Taking regular breaks or time off	40%	46%	40%
Setting boundaries around work hours	39%	35%	43%
Meditation, mindfulness or relaxation techniques	19%	30%	22%

Q: What tools or strategies do you use to support your mental health? Please select all that apply.
Base: All employees (1,944), senior managers (898), HR decision-makers (569)

The future is now: Will you sail or stutter into it?

Bringing the many threads together, our exhaustive YouGov survey paints a nuanced, unvarnished, yet also hopeful picture—of a workforce already in flux.

UK employees, HR pros and senior leaders are neither starry-eyed optimists or downbeat doomsters about what lies ahead. In some cases, they veer towards one view, in other instances, another. It's why—and we'll say it once more, in the hope it sticks—we must not coat the future workplace with the same, black and white paint.

But what of our grey-shaded tomorrow? The workforce is buoyant about AI's potential, and confident in their ability to learn, but also mindful of the dangers if change isn't handled right by those higher up.

Across this commentary, we've explored five core themes: a balance of optimism and uncertainty, how a suite of tech solutions is already in the building, the beefy trust gap between leaders and their staff, a need for skills and support, and how better wellbeing remains a top priority. Combine them, and the seed of an answer emerges: it's about joined-up thinking.

The workforce is buoyant about AI's potential, and confident in their ability to learn, but also mindful of the dangers if change isn't handled right by those higher up.

Navigating 2025 and beyond requires companies to align tech advances with the humans who'll use them. Align leader optimism with employee reality. And align workplace transformation with a culture that's high-trust and mentally well. Joining up all these factors could be the difference between a company that either sails, or stutters, into what comes next.

Primary concern: The future of tech, skills & talent, for ages 4+

Want a diverse, tech-focused workforce with future-ready skills? You'll want to start early, as Becky Patel explains…

Becky Patel
Head of Education & Learning,
Tech She Can

Hiya Becky, can you give us a quick intro to Tech She Can as an organisation?

Tech She Can is a tech careers inspiration charity, founded in industry, and supported by multiple partners across different sectors.

We believe in technology for all and alongside our focus on gender we also target areas of low social mobility. We want to encourage more young people—especially girls—to consider pursuing future careers in tech.

What are some of the biggest barriers girls still face from getting into tech?

When you ask a child, 'Who works in tech?', they often draw men. White men. Or they think of hackers, coders, and people committing crime, as they've watched a lot of movies where there's a hacker, and lines of code popping up on the screen, *Matrix*-style.

What we need to do is help children—as educators, as parents, as organisations—understand what's going on behind the tech. A misconception students often have is that tech is computing and science. What we say is, 'Are you a budding gymnast or a footballer? There's tons of tech in sport roles. Do you love sustainability, or want to be a vet? There's tons of tech roles in those areas too.'

You used to be a teacher. How does your current role compare?

The reason I became a teacher was to make a difference to the children. What I love about working for Tech She Can is that I still get to do that but, actually, much more broadly. We've reached almost a quarter of a million children in-person and around a million children have accessed our resources online. That's amazing.

What I get to see is that my work, my knowledge, and the work of leading the team still leads to that impact, but in a way that I could never have dreamed of. Not only the children but the teachers, parents, and all the different volunteers and companies that work for us as well. It's taken the impact I used to have as a teacher and scaled it nationally and globally.

With technology already a fundamental part of our lives, why is it important we equip children with tech-centric skills before they reach the workplace?

It's so important for two reasons. First, so we have diversity in the people going into these tech roles. And also, so everybody feels like tech's an opportunity for them.

We always say this when we talk to teachers: 70% of children aged around 11 and under will work in jobs that don't even exist yet. The world of work is changing so quickly, so even if they want to be doctors, nurses or teachers, what those people do on a day-to-day basis in 10 years will look drastically different.

So, for the children who do want to be doctors and nurses, or dancers and professional footballers, they need insight into how technology's going to affect it.

With Tech She Can straddling education and business, what changes have you personally seen since the mainstream adoption of genAI tools (like ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini)?

I've worked in the corporate world for six years now, and it's very different [to education]. Often, something new gets introduced, training will be provided, a part of the organisation will trial it, and then there'll be a rollout.

In the world of teaching, however, things like new technology can land quite quickly on a teacher's desk. There will always be specialists in certain departments that understand it, but everyone else is expected to just learn.

Yet what has happened with AI is the children have adapted, and began to use AI—often quicker than many of their teachers. They have started to use it to do their work—naturally, as you would—then schools got scared and banned it. I know of a lot of schools that have an outright ban of AI for use by students, yet the teachers will still use it to create lesson plans, or help reduce their workload. This doesn't seem fair to me.

"70% of children aged around 11 and under will work in jobs that don't even exist yet. The world of work is changing so quickly, so even if they want to be doctors, nurses or teachers, what those people do on a day-to-day basis in 10 years will look drastically different."

So is consistency the answer, or giving equal access to AI tools?

If we're using it to teach the students and create lesson plans and the things that they need, we should also be teaching the children how to live in that world. If we hide them from a huge bit of tech that they're going to use eventually, and not training them to responsibly use it, I feel like we'll miss a key element of their education.

It comes from fear. Fear of, 'Oh my gosh, we don't know exactly how this works, they're all going to use it to cheat, let's just ban it until we figure it out'. But how long will it be until we figure it out? How many years do we not let the current children in school use it appropriately and responsibly?

You said earlier that 70% of kids aged 11 or under will work in jobs that don't exist yet. Is it even possible to equip people—young or old—with the skills they need for the future workplace?

Yes. At a school level, we often think children need a particular skill—like, you must be able to do Python to this level—whereas, actually, because of how fast tech is moving, that's not going to be relevant within a few years.

I don't like the word, but those 'soft' transferable skills are the ones we need to teach more. Like teamwork, communication, resilience, adaptability—they're going to need all these things. Any child going out into the world of work now is going to be there for what, gosh, 50 years?

Currently, schools do all this knowledge-based teaching, then you go for an interview at a large-scale company and they do these very clever psychometric tests. They watch you in a group, they watch you chat, and they test you. So many students rightfully say, 'No one's ever properly taught me that', and it's so harsh. *We* actively teach these things as skills.

Tech She Can forms a bridge between the education system and the working world. How vital is it to start conversations about future careers early on?

It's why we exist as a charity. We cannot give the experiences and resources to schools and children for free without the support of the organisations and partners that work with us, and help to fund and donate to Tech She Can. We work really closely with all of our partners to understand the work they do and the skills they need for the future workforce. We then distil this into a language that works for the younger children.

And when I say young, I mean from the start of school. Many people assume we only work with GCSE and A-level students—so 15, 16, 17-year-olds—but actually, careers aspiration work needs to happen when children start school.

Basically, if you ask a reception child what they want to be, they'll say anything. For example, one boy once said to me, 'The moon', bless him. What's lovely is that nothing limits their choices, but then they go through school and it drastically narrows in terms of career aspirations. By 15 or 16, they have no idea. We come in and we try to broaden that out and tell them all the different options they can be.

If you constantly talk to children—and if industry reaches down to create resources for them, in partnership with organisations like us, to show them what happens behind the world of technology—they won't still want to be the moon by the time they're 10. Instead, they'll have a really broad knowledge of what it is that they could be, not based on their gender, sexuality, background, socioeconomic status or race, but simply: 'What do I love? What do I want to do?'.

How can employers play a role earlier in the journey—before young people become jobseekers?

My suggestion to industry would be to work with younger children, work in partnership with people like us, and make the amazing role models in your company visible. Often that's quite tricky, because organisations don't know how to frame things. Like, 'I'm an actuary. How do I explain that to a seven-year-old?'. Well, work with people that are specialists in education—they can help you communicate it in a way that's interesting for a seven-year-old to hear.

Last question: is there anything we've not talked about that you think people reading this report should know?

One thing I haven't mentioned is male allies. The reason our free learning materials are called Tech We Can rather than Tech She Can is that, if we were only persuading girls to go into the world of technology, my big worry there is that boys wouldn't fully understand how amazing *they* could be as well.

Male allies are as important, and that's why we ask male volunteers to go into schools as well. Our work is female-friendly but delivered to all, because it's possible to inspire everyone, and take them on that journey.

Within the workforce itself, it's incredibly powerful for women when male allies stand up and advocate for them. This alone can make such a brilliant difference.

The AI trust dividend

Building trust around tech isn't just a moral duty, it's a strategic must. Here's how leaders can create an open and honest culture that, in turn, upgrades staff performance

Many of your employees use AI at work. That's not an assumption, it's a fact.

Whether you know it or not. No matter if you've banned or blocked it. And should you ask them outright, they'd probably say no. Why? They're afraid you might get angry. Or worse—replace them with AI.

As our exclusive YouGov survey data makes clear, the workforce's optimism for the future is tinged with unease. Almost two-thirds of employees use AI tools weekly, and believe it'll solve more problems than it creates at work. But they also think it'll cause a net loss of jobs, with a quarter saying they worry about their career prospects.

Yet it's employees' faith in leadership (specifically, the lack of it) that should sound the alarm at organisations everywhere.

Only 4 in 10 staff trust their employer to make decisions that are in their best interests, and almost half think a lack of leadership support is holding back workplace transformation.

That's daunting.

Put together, this makes for a strange, mostly unspoken standoff. Where workers use use AI—potentially scared of getting caught, while fretting that it will make them obsolete. And bosses are keen to realise the vaunted 30-80% productivity gains—but don't want to stoke fears of mass layoffs.

Yet a high-trust, high-performance culture is possible. Here are five ways to start building one.

Bring AI use into the open

First, address the AI-lephant in the room. You know staff use it to help them in their roles—*and that's great*. Far from a secret, this is a massive, shared opportunity.

To kickstart this open dialogue, have senior managers lead the way. Hold an all-hands meeting where senior figures talk about the parts of their job they outsource to, or augment with, AI. Explain where the company already uses tech, as well as its future plans. Follow this with an AI AMA, where nothing's off limits.

Be honest, even with unvarnished or uncomfortable truths. Staff will soon sniff out insincerity—or see it, if later actions don't match up to what's been said—so your newfound culture will fall at the first hurdle unless it's based on honesty.

Democratise AI skills across all levels

Don't assume AI expertise lives at the top. As Ethan Mollick (a professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania) points out: "No company hired employees based on their AI skills, so AI skills might be anywhere."

This means your best AI users could be your most junior or low-skilled, and who are almost certainly self-taught. Harness this. Think about setting up a dedicated channel within your internal comms (e.g. Slack), where staff can share use cases,

prompts and playbooks. Create a peer-to-peer learning scheme—that further normalises AI talk, and ensures a high baseline level of know-how.

Go further: name a dedicated AI lead (as you would a wellbeing champion), create working groups, and invite as many people as possible—from all levels of the business—to meetings where tech and strategy intersect.

Foster human-AI collaboration

Staff should treat AI as an associate, not a stand-in. This starts by defining roles: what tasks can be delegated, which ones require oversight, and when do human beings need to go it alone?

For example, you might suggest that staff use genAI for ideas, first drafts and routine admin (though always with a human-led review), then preserve anything that involves strategy, nuance and empathy for uniquely human ingenuity.

To put this all into practice, make it official. Create an AI code of conduct that outlines a series of mutually-agreed rules for when and how to use AI. You may want to include performance metrics, as part of your broader aim to boost productivity (and to help reward those who excel—see below).

Then stick to it, with regular check-ins to appraise or change the policy—again, with the involvement and sign-off of your people.

Guarantee security, and reward innovation

To build trust, you need clarity. If possible, start with a vow: no one will be made redundant due to AI adoption. Such reassurance (even if time-limited) could flip the narrative from fear to opportunity.

To help inspire bottom-up innovation among the workforce, consider setting up a recognition scheme that rewards any staffer who successfully uses tech tools to help

the business. This might be a cash bonus (if budget allows), promotion, or something more basic like an early finish on Fridays.

Whatever the outlay, this could be a small price to pay versus the potential upsides, whereas going big on incentives sends a clear signal to staff that the company's serious about its collaborative AI vision.

Encourage experimentation and safe learning

Your in-house pioneers need the freedom to fail. Create AI sandboxes (where employees can test tools without fear of judgment), peer review clubs, and frequent 'AI fails' threads— to open source what didn't work, and how this shaped new learning.

More important: stitch AI training into your L&D strategy. Don't just show what tools

do, guide employees on how to use them effectively, and how this speaks to the company's mission.

At every turn, insist on reflection. AI is imperfect, so ensure staff remain inquisitive—always looking out for glitches and errors, or where a better question might get a better outcome.

Built different: The need for intelligent design in mental healthcare, staff support, & AI

Every brain is different, yet too many firms fall into the trap of one-size-fits-all—even *as* they try to make work better. Zareen Ali, a self-proclaimed "techno-optimist", thinks we can curate a brighter future.

Zareen Ali
Co-founder, Cogs AI

Hi Zareen. As Cogs AI's own FAQs point out: "there are lots of mental health apps out there." What makes yours different?

We're neurodiversity-specific, so that's really our USP, but it's more than just a way of differentiating it from a marketing perspective. If you're neurodivergent, your brain processes information very differently, and you interface with the world in a very different way. What that means is if a mental health solution hasn't been built for the way in which your brain is different, it just won't be effective for you.

What we've done is flipped the whole thing on its head. We've gone out and spoken to neurodivergent people in a very qualitative way—doing interviews and focus groups—to build it together, and co-design the concept.

We also aligned with a few universities, mainly the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Cambridge, and done work with the NHS as well. Through all of this, we've collected a really big dataset of how neurodivergent people think about their mental health, and also the types of solutions they're already using.

How does the app work, and what results can users achieve?

So we start with a concept called neurodivergent burnout. This is similar to the burnout that everyone experiences, but if you're neurodivergent, it'll feel a lot more extreme, and also show up a little differently.

For example, I'm autistic, and I am pretty good at communicating generally. But when I'm burnt out, you'll see me lose my words, and I'll be a lot less fluent in the way that I'm talking. So a trait that is significant for my autism then becomes harder for me to handle.

What we do is help people understand their neurodiversity profile. What different traits do they have? Then, out of those traits, which ones become harder to handle when they're having a bad day or when they're approaching burnout?

Based on that tracking, we have an algorithm that's personalised to that user's data, and identifies whether they're burnt out, in a balanced state, or in a really energised state. Based on that, they can essentially pace the activities they're doing that day.

It's about giving people permission. If you're burnt out, you don't have to push yourself, as that's going to be negative for you in the long run. Whereas, actually, if it's the opposite—and you're feeling really energised—today's the day to do those challenging things. So it gives people permission to take care of themselves, but also push themselves as well.

If we broaden this out the workplace, what do companies get wrong when trying to support neurodivergent staff?

It probably all stems from a lot of misconceptions around neurodiversity. This isn't just companies, it's also education and general society. People still don't know that much about neurodiversity, or they're exposed to lots of stereotypes, so they don't truly understand how it manifests for people.

In a workplace, I think the biggest problem is that people are like, 'Okay, if we just create some sort of diversity programme, that's going to solve it for everyone'. Whereas actually, it needs to be personalised. One-size-fits-all doesn't fit anybody.

I think it takes a lot of education of, say, a HR team to begin with, for them to really understand, and then it takes a cultural shift. Rather than, 'Oh, we can just give this neurodivergent person this reasonable accommodation, then it will be fine', it has to be, 'Okay, we all need to change the way that we communicate with everyone'.

> "We trust people to get work done in their own time. We have certain touch points during the day, but otherwise people do the work as they want. Because of that flexibility, we find quite a lot of creative people want to work with us."

If you want to make a real, long-term systemic change within an organisation, this starts with someone at the top really pushing it. A good example of this is Universal Music Group, who were really ahead of the curve when it comes to neurodiversity research and education within their workforce. They released something in 2020 called the *Creative Differences* handbook, where they did a bunch of research with their own neurodivergent artists and employees.

It's a good example because the impetus came from the top, then trickled down to the whole organisation. Most organisations aren't going to have that, so I'd say maybe the biggest problem for organisations is trying to put a sticking plaster on something, when larger cultural change is needed.

You're autistic, and your co-founder (Felix de Grey) is neurotypical. How do your different thinking styles help—or hinder— growing a business together?

That's an interesting question. I've never thought of a hindrance from it being like, 'neurotypical versus neurodivergent'. I think our partnership works very well because we balance each other out in lots of ways.

For example, I think in quite a systems-level way. I almost have this big vision idea of how the whole thing will work. It can sound very visionary, which is good, but sometimes you need to translate it into, 'Okay, what are the actions that we need to do right now to operationalise it?', and bring it down from this big vision down to Earth. That can take quite a few steps.

Actually, if I can explain it to Felix and he understands it, then we can explain it to the team, investors, or people we're speaking to on the outside.

Communication is probably a big thing, but then I'm quite direct. This is often a benefit with our team, because people appreciate the fact that if I'm telling you something about how the company's going, I'm telling the truth, not trying to fluff it up and sell it to you.

I think we've created a culture based on who the founders are, and then the people who came into the company are part of that culture, and that's why they joined—because they appreciate that dynamic.

You mention the Cogs AI team there. How big is it, and do you find people join based on the company's mission?

We have three full-time people, and then everyone else are contractors that we use as and when we need them, for different projects. Even though we don't recruit for people being neurodivergent, I think everyone apart from Felix is, so that's an interesting thing.

We've had a bit of a selection bias in terms of people who believe in the vision and want to contribute to it, and we're also very flexible because of the way that we run the company. We are remote first, and asynchronous— which means people just choose the hours that they want to work.

We trust people to get work done in their own time. We have certain touch points during the day—like a standup in the morning, and everyone has to be there—but apart from that, people do the work as they want. Because of that flexibility, we find quite a lot of creative people want to work with us, so we've been very lucky in that sense.

Last, Cogs AI sits at the intersection of health and tech, two sectors where vast change feels inevitable. Yet the debate is often framed in absolutes—i.e. AI will empower people in their jobs, *or* replace them—what's your view on what's ahead?

So, when we talk about AI, we should split it into two different use cases. There's bog-standard machine learning, which is in a lot of stuff that we use. Like the way Spotify gives you recommendations, where it clusters you into a certain category, then personalises within that category. That stuff has been happening for a very, very long time in healthcare, with larger levels of complexity.

I think people are less worried about that kind of thing, because they almost don't see it. Whereas when it comes to generative AI and large language models, because people interact with ChatGPT and it's been much more in the news, that tends to be what worries people the most.

I'm obviously a techno-optimist, but I also think, especially when it comes to healthcare, it's really about how much you safeguard the data you are putting into the models to train it for use cases. This may be for good, but you need to make sure that people putting in their data understand the benefits, and that they're giving up a privacy consideration.

There's also the fact that the model can take on the biases of whoever's designing the system. Similarly, it can take on any biases that exist in the dataset—if you're giving it a dataset that isn't representative of the experiences of different types of groups, the people who aren't in the data may also not benefit from the solution.

A lot of the harms in AI systems can be designed out of the system if you think about them beforehand. Maybe, when people are a little bit nervous about it, it's because they're seeing systems that have been designed without thinking about equality or representation beforehand.

But if you think about that, then you can build systems—including AI systems—which are fair.

To boldly grow: Rethinking workplace skills

Transformation is about much more than tech innovation. Matt Burney, Senior Strategic Advisor at Indeed spotlights 6 ways leaders can evolve their organisation from the inside-out

Scrap the job spec status quo

We're still very tied to job titles, but they probably won't exist in five years' time. By then, it'll be much more about what projects you've worked on.

We're also very wedded to fixed working hours, and what job fits into which box. I don't know many people whose job fits into a box any more. Mine doesn't. Some weeks I'll do less than 40 hours a week, other weeks I'm away working four nights in a row.

We need to be realistic that things are changing, and therefore roles will evolve to fit specific projects, not outdated boxes.

Build an internal talent market

Why not set up a marketplace for talent within your own company? Instead of saying, 'This is your job, this is your lane, this is where you stay and you stay there forever', let's say, "Here's a project that's really important to the business—who has the right skills for it?'

Within your internal talent marketplace, you might take someone for a six-month secondment, and then they go back to their team. That kind of career ecosystem could be a much better way of working. Make it normal—and respected—for people to shift laterally, and move between various business functions.

Make time to reskill staff (even if that means losing them)

If we want to foster a more skills-based hiring ecosystem, but don't give people the time and space to reskill, we're probably missing a trick.

Some of this is linked to fear. Because when people reskill, it obviously means their skills change, and that may mean you lose them to another department. We shouldn't be scared of losing people—actually, we should celebrate the fact they've learned or done something new. It means they've become an asset to another part of the business.

Yes, you might lose someone who was great on your team. But you've also helped to create a massive asset to the business, and that looks great on you as a leader. It's our job to be career advocates, not hoarders of talent.

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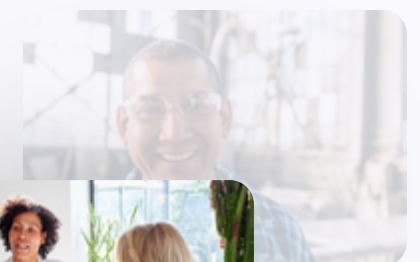
Help staff go 'off the rails'

If people pivot, or make a move for six months, they shouldn't lose progress. Too often, someone will go on a secondment, impress everyone on a project, but as they missed half a year's worth of work, they're almost punished for it.

We often look at careers as being on rails, but we need to start thinking more about the journey, where there are waypoints—

and people can go off and explore those waypoints—but it ultimately speaks to an overall career.

We need to make sure we respect people for the changes they make, and recognise the investment they put into their own development. We should be on-hand to design truly curated skills paths for people.

Reskill to retain

If you're not aware of your talent gaps—right now, and in future—you won't know what might hurt your growth as a business. Put another way, reskilling your internal team is as much about risk management as it is employee wellbeing.

Because if you don't reskill now, in two years' time you'll be hiring for skills that don't exist in your team, and that will cost a lot of money. You may also find yourself explaining

to leadership why that high potential individual—who asked to go on a course, but wasn't given the space to—is now leaving.

We need to let employees talk about what they want to learn, rather than be too prescriptive about L&D.

Managers must L&D by example

Leaders should talk about their own learning journeys. This proves they've done it themselves, and shows that they are adaptable.

More than that, leaders need to be honest with people. What jobs are changing, which will disappear, and what new roles are appearing? Fear thrives in silence, so if you're clear about what's ahead, this clarity will help to support staff wellbeing.

It's not (just) rocket science: The gravitational pull of public service

From employer branding to AI ethics, Edmund Knollys shares how the UK Space Agency stays human-focused, while navigating pay caps, talent gaps, and distant galaxies.

Edmund Knollys

People Director & Head of HR Operations & People Services, UK Space Agency

Hi Edmund. Across the past quarter of a century you've worked at a wide range of public bodies (including the Met, Probation Service, DFID & HMRC). Have you seen any change in what candidates look for?

All sorts of factors are at play here, but the key difference I've seen is that people seem to be less likely to expect a lifelong career in one organisation. And that can have an impact on, for instance, whether a good pension is seen as a positive or a neutral benefit.

In a highly competitive market for STEM and digital skills, how does the UK Space Agency stand out versus the private sector?

We're working on what our USP is, and also what our candidate market is. For people looking for a career in space, we offer experience of the government and regulation aspect, including public funding mechanisms.

Whereas, for people looking for a public sector career, we offer the excitement and challenge of space, while still serving the British public. This includes working on exciting science and exploration missions and technological developments they might not get elsewhere—like the James Webb Space Telescope, Mars rovers, or the training of astronauts.

In our survey with YouGov, 8 in 10 public sector HR leaders say it's hard for their organisations to find and attract talent. From your own experience, what are the biggest challenges?

Salaries are an obvious place to start, especially when competing in a sector where innovation is such a key element, while we also have to conform to Civil Service rules and practices.

We need to make sure our existing people, and potential candidates, are aware of the wider range of benefits—including non-financial—that working in the public sector can offer. This includes the pension, working flexibilities, and sense of pride in delivering a public service.

If you can't outpace the private sector on pay, how important are things like employer brand and employee experience at the UK Space Agency?

Well, as I said, it really depends on which bit of the employment market we're aiming at—the space sector or the public sector. But it's a Venn diagram with quite a clear overlap where we sit, and we just need to make sure that potential candidates know that we exist, and what we offer in terms of our position in both areas.

The UK Space Agency is quite distinct from other public bodies—in that it's quite cool—but needs to exist within a wider government structure. What challenges or opportunities do you face in creating a recognisable employer brand?

Thank you for saying we're cool—I think we are. But we mustn't lose sight of the fact that as part of the Civil Service we serve the government of the day and the wider UK public. That's why we need to latch on to the public service part of our role at the same time as the rockets and space missions.

We also have a key role to play in facilitating national security, and using space technology in tackling the climate emergency. People from different generations and backgrounds will be attracted to their own combination of those and other factors.

In our survey, more than half of HR decision-makers in the public sector say they use AI for administrative efficiency and automation. What opportunities might this create for HR leaders, who want to make a difference within their organisations?

It's important to distinguish between AI and more general automation, and I think there are both opportunities and risks from an HR perspective. I've seen candidates submit job applications that have clearly been written using AI, which does not allow you to hear an authentic and personal voice.

But AI could also be really useful in finding key qualification or experience requirements in a large batch of job applications. So there are definitely opportunities to be grasped, as long as we don't lose the human element of managing people.

"What have I learned? It's not very profound, but just getting some basic human interactions right—being honest, being open, being kind, being friendly—can all help oil the wheels of work. And that public service is a powerful motivator."

What role does AI currently play in your HR operations, and how do you see this evolving?

We have been part of a wider Civil Service AI pilot, but at present we don't use AI routinely in our HR operations. We are however looking at our longer-term workforce and skills strategy, which will certainly include how AI is likely to develop in the workplace.

The UK Space Agency is forward-facing by nature. What does future readiness look like for you and your staff?

We have the challenge that political and government timescales—such as spending reviews and electoral cycles—don't cleanly match the timescales for space missions and investments, which are often much more long term. So future readiness really means making sure that we build in flexibility and agility as much as we can into our forward planning.

One of the most startling stats in our dataset is that 58% of public sector HR decision-makers are most concerned about workload and burnout in their current role. This is a 19-point gap to HR leaders—both public and private sector—overall. What unique pressures drive this, do you think?

In the public sector we always have to balance normal, operational business planning with the decisions that, quite rightly, ministers—who are accountable to the public—make about policy and spending. We also have some additional legislative requirements, such as the Public Sector Equality Duty, which have to be built into how we manage our people.

In your role, what tools, policies or practices have you put in place to actively reduce the burnout risk among your HR staff?

We are always looking for ways to manage workload, not just for our HR team but across the whole organisation. Part of that challenge is making sure we regularly check how our people are feeling through regular pulse surveys, as well as the annual Civil Service People Survey. It's also making sure that we help managers to have the skills and support needed to fill vacancies quickly but fairly.

As someone who's devoted their career to it, what do you think people misunderstand about working in the public sector?

The obvious factor for me is that a lot of people don't understand how strong an incentive to good performance public service can be. Not everyone is motivated by competition or money, and for people like me who get job satisfaction from serving our communities or trying to make the world a fairer, more sustainable place to live, seeing the connection between that and the work we do each day can really drive our performance.

Finally, is there anything you've learned over your career that you feel the wider HR community should know or think about?

It's nothing very profound, but just getting some basic human interactions right— being honest, being open, being kind, being friendly—can all help oil the wheels of work. And that public service is a powerful motivator, as long as we help people understand how we contribute in all our roles.

The meaning of ~~life~~ *work*

A fully AI-optimised future could sweep away boring admin, leaving time for tasks that are more meaningful. But what would this actually mean, and how can HR leaders make jobs (and the staff who do them) matter?

For centuries, work has broadly defined human existence.

We spend a third of our lives on company time. Careers can dictate our health outcomes and life chances. Yet the reason why we work may be starting to shift.

Money has always ranked high—paying bills, providing for loved ones, or buying new trainers is never easy without it—but it isn't everything. In fact, for many, a sense of purpose and meaning matters way more.

In a 2018 study, 9 in 10 people said they'd choose a meaningful job, even if it paid less. So much so, they'd gladly sacrifice a quarter of their lifetime earnings.

As we look ahead—not just to the future, but to how the world can work better—there's a strong argument that every business should try to foster more meaning.

Why? Well, beyond the most upbeat vision of tomorrow—an admin-free utopia, where meaningful work becomes the default—the business case for meaning is quite astounding:

- Employees who report high levels of meaning at work are **64% more fulfilled, 4.5 times more engaged,** and **69% less likely to quit.**

- There's an estimated annual gain of **$10,000 per employee** who finds their work meaningful.

- Feeling the impact of your own work **boosts productivity by 142%,** and **revenue by 172%.**

- Across 10,000 employees, meaningful work unlocks **$82 million in annual productivity gains.**

Why meaning matters

These insights (and plenty more) form the basis of _Meaningful Work: How to Ignite Passion and Performance in Every Employee_. Wes Adams and Tamara Myles' new book declares that meaning is no longer a nice-to-have for individuals, but an urgent KPI for organisations.

This claim is borne out in yet more data. Almost 50% of workplace meaning is linked to what managers do (or don't do), say the authors. Under 40% of staff feel duly recognised for their efforts. And in the absence of positive feedback, employees are three-quarters more likely to leave within a year.

Amid growing shortages in talent and skills alike, this is not something good leaders will want to ignore. Especially when, according to Adams and Myles, a single thank you from a manager, once a week, can double engagement and halve turnover.

The meaning of mattering

This quiet crisis is explored in another new book, albeit through a slightly different lens.

In _The Power of Mattering: How Leaders Can Create a Culture of Significance_, Zach Mercurio digs into mattering, and how rarely talked about issues like loneliness can squash job satisfaction, productivity and company culture.

Separate from meaning, Mercurio writes that mattering is also not the same as belonging or self-esteem. Instead, it's a need we're all born with and, "As we age, this instinct to matter crystallises into the fundamental need to be seen, heard, valued, and needed."

Far from a nebulous concept, mattering has been explored by a whole host of academics. And, notes Mercurio: "It never goes away. Our quest for significance permeates every culture, generation, and occupation."

Employees who feel lonely are three times more likely to have low job satisfaction, with a far higher chance of mental and physical health problems.

A massive 85% of the global workforce is persistently disengaged, and in 2022, US productivity slumped to its lowest point in 75 years.

The quiet scourge of modern workplaces

In case it's not yet clear: mattering matters, especially to businesses. Because the opposite—loneliness—is another quiet scourge of the modern-day workplace.

In _The Power of Mattering_, Mercurio notes a study of 4,000 staff where 82% said they'd felt lonely at work. And that employees who do are three times more likely to have low job satisfaction, with a far higher chance of mental and physical health problems.

Worse, though the past decade has seen a major focus on both the so-called 'loneliness epidemic' and employee experience, the rates of people who feel disconnected to work keeps going up. A massive 85% of the global workforce is persistently disengaged, and in 2022, US productivity slumped to its lowest point in 75 years.

And, before you think your staff can't possibly be lonely, as they're always in meetings, don't. Since 2020, meetings have almost tripled, with daily users on Slack seeing a similar rise, yet workplace disengagement rates have still risen.

Loneliness, as Mercurio frames it, is "an outcome of feeling that you don't matter. That's why the opposite of loneliness is not having more people around you, but feeling significant to those around you—feeling truly seen, heard, and valued."

How to develop a meaning-driven approach, where staff feel like they matter

So, the problem is real, and really scary. Yet the opportunity's enormous.

The question is: how can leaders deliver meaningful work, and make staff feel they matter?

By combining some key insights from *Meaningful Work* and *The Power of Mattering*, here are three things you can do today, to make a difference.

Make time for friendships

A team filled with work*mates*, not coworkers, is rocket fuel for engagement.

Some 70% of staff say friendship is the most important factor for workplace happiness. And employees who have a best friend at work are far more likely to enjoy their job, innovate and share ideas, get more done in less time, and have fewer accidents.

How can leaders curate this? Easy. Across any month, make sure there are various opportunities for in-work collaboration, as well as out-of-office socialising (whether team bonding, community events, or a volunteering scheme).

It's doable for remote teams, too. At the start of each virtual meeting, encourage colleagues to catch up, or build some form of 'show and tell' (where one person talks about something that's meaningful to them) into the agenda.

Do note that this isn't a passive task for leaders—you're a participant, not a party planner.. Taking notice of the tiny details in employees' lives (both personal and professional)—and taking *interest* in these things again later—is vital for staff to feel seen and heard.

Community can't be forced, but it can be fostered. Leaders who actively prioritise it may soon find it has a positive impact on team wellbeing and, longer term, performance.

Join the dots between daily work and the big picture

When staff see how the work they do adds value, their job instantly becomes more meaningful. Mercurio calls this 'affirming' (which "involves the skills of showing people how their unique gifts have a unique impact"). For Adams and Myles, it's 'contribution'.

So affirm and acknowledge people's contribution. Don't assume employees will know when their effort advances the company mission, helps a customer, or they've shone on a project. Tell them—out loud and often.

Quantifying a person's contribution might not seem simple, yet it starts with just five words: "If it wasn't for you…"

This simple phrase immediately captures an employee's personal input, and helps tie their efforts to real outcomes. Though constructive criticism of course has its place—to help staff avoid the same pitfalls in future—only positive feedback lets people know their work is valued.

There's a reason the famous (and unverified) story about a janitor telling JFK he was "helping to put a man on the moon" gets retold so often. It's because connecting employees with a wider purpose works.

Nurture professional growth

Supporting staff to fulfil their talent is the sign of an A+ leader.

In *Meaningful Work*, the authors frame this as having one hand on an employee's back ("pushing you to the best possible version of yourself"), the other under their arm ("supporting you to navigate the trickiest terrain").

Employees believing in themselves is not simply a win for engagement, it's often a core driver in success. Being a cheerleader is not nearly enough, of course. (In fact, telling someone they can do something without giving them the tools they need is the opposite of good management.)

The sweet spot is when high challenge and high expectations meet high support. This is where growth happens, and people are able to become better versions of themselves.

Last, speaking of sweet spots, don't forget that all three tips are needed to create a sense of meaning and mattering in your workplace. According to Adams and Myles, leaders investing in each area creates "a powerful multiplier effect", whereas avoiding your responsibility in one "can bring it crashing down" in another.

PROFILE

Talking shop: Retail's future needs fluency, trust & inclusion— not just tech solutions

AI will make retailers "smarter, leaner, more efficient." And yet, without buy-in from staff, bad culture will soon filter through to shoppers. Natalie Berg unpacks the issues…
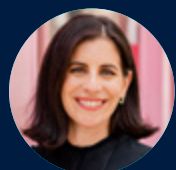
Natalie Berg
Retail analyst, author, podcast host & founder, NBK Retail

Hey Natalie. One of your many jobs is to spot retail trends before they transform the sector. What's the current landscape?

Retail is always evolving—that, in itself, is nothing new. Consumer habits continue to change, whereas I think technology has levelled the playing field. As consumers, it's made us want more and more and more. We're ubiquitously connected—armed with our little personal shopping companions when we walk into a store, with everything at our fingertips. We are in the driving seat. That has always been the case to some extent, but I think we're super empowered right now.

The best retailers today are the ones that are continuing to raise the bar, and to give customers something that they want before they even know it. Something I always say is that today's innovations quickly become tomorrow's norm. I think that the retailers that are doing really well, and really thriving despite all this instability and disruption, are the ones continuing to innovate, and putting the customer at the heart of their strategies.

Like most sectors, AI is a big trending topic in retail. But a surprise finding in our survey was that only a minority of companies claim to use it. Is it the future, or has this been overblown?

What I would say is that, obviously, AI is a big part of it, and will fundamentally transform the sector. But then it's like, how do you separate hype from reality? If you went to a retail event three years ago, we were all talking about the metaverse, and look where we are now.

AI is different. AI is solving genuine problems today. In a nutshell, I think AI is going to help retailers to become smarter, leaner, more efficient. And it's going to make our experiences as shoppers more compelling, more relevant, even more seamless, and more engaging.

At the employee level, our data showed many worry that AI will cost more jobs than it creates. Is it possible for retail leaders to allay these fears?

You can't put your head in the sand—it's here to stay, and we have to learn to coexist with it.

Yes, there will inevitably be job losses, and it already is in certain areas. In retail, it's hitting marketing in particular. I had the CEO of David's Bridal—a big US retailer—on the podcast recently, and she said that 100% of their communications are now AI-produced. *One hundred per cent.* That's pretty incredible.

Another good example is call centres. We're starting to see the rise of these genAI chatbots that are a lot more interactive. You can ask it questions like, 'What size was that dress that I ordered from you last May?', and the response is instant. So it's taking away some of the more menial things that should be automated, and making people's jobs easier.

Another major survey theme that emerged was skills. Many believe that, for all of AI's power, it could deskill the workforce. Is it a retailer's job to combat this, and ensure their employees keep pace?

It's such a good question. The retail leaders that I speak to, it really comes through that a lot of things can be taught, right? The digital side, that could be taught, and it should be. But yes, soft skills are important too.

I talk a lot about the importance of equipping your staff with the right tech, and a lot of this comes down to digital fluency. I interviewed the former chair of John Lewis [Dame Sharon White] a couple of weeks ago, and she talked about the importance of apprenticeships for over 40s. She said, 'We need to make sure that we have a digitally fluent workforce, and we can't leave anybody behind'. I thought that was interesting.

With this in mind, might the fight for talent improve in future?

It's a sector where there's a ton of churn, attracting and retaining talent in this climate is really difficult. Although we have seen a whole host of pay rises recently—especially amongst the grocers—to try to keep people happy and staying put.

There's also the perception problem—that retail is a low-skilled job. For many of us, it's our first job. I think retail is unique and very special, in that it's not uncommon for a retail CEO to have started out stocking shelves. Stuart Machin at M&S is a great example of that.

Things like CEOs walking shop floors, that is all about breaking down the silos, bringing store managers into the broader decision-making, and just seeing what customers experience. I know M&S and a lot of other retailers require their head office staff to work in the stores, and half of their time has to be during peak trading. So they're out getting their hands dirty, at the busiest time of year.

"AI will fundamentally transform the sector. But then, how do you separate hype from reality? If you went to a retail event three years ago, we were all talking about the metaverse, and look where we are now."

For the retail firms that can't attract staff with higher salaries, how effective are things like employer brand?

Yes, I think that's important, because it's not just about pay. It's about having that clear career progression, flexibility and—this is a bit more of a bigger piece—being really clear on the values of the company.

Something that Nick Beighton—the ex-CEO of ASOS—said, that I thought was really interesting, was that 'If you have a transactional internal culture, then you also have a transactional external culture, and shoppers will notice that'.

You have to really be clear on your values, what the brand stands for, and then make sure that everyone in the organisation—from the shop floor through to the boardroom—are living and breathing those values.

Last question: what do you make of the argument that retailers should include employees from all levels of the business within long-term strategy discussions—particularly around transformation and AI?

I think it's essential. I think you have to today. I did an AI panel a couple of weeks ago, which had Paul Wilkinson—who was then at Deliveroo, but has just left—on it. He said the one thing, when it comes to AI, is to just get people using it. Because it makes sense to tap into your employees' own experiences and skillsets, and regardless—that one thing helps make technology accessible to everyone.

So yes, I think you absolutely have to bring your staff with you. They need to feel that they are part of this transition. 'The hardest part of digital transformation is bringing your people with you'—I hear that time and time again from retailers. It's the trickiest, least tangible part, but it's so important.

Onboard: 8 tips for talent leaders

Many in talent acquisition want to sit at the top table. Too few know how to earn it. Matt Burney, Senior Strategic Advisor at Indeed, makes the case for change.

1

Want to nail strategy? Get better at economics

Lots of people in TA talk about strategy—they like to think they're a strategic thinker—but often don't know what it is. Why? Because they've sat within their own little silo for too long, the needs of the business have changed, and they've not thought to keep up.

You need to think more clearly about what it is that TA's doing and why. Sure, we talk about being a massive driver of business: 'No TA means no people, and no people no business'. Cool. But do you understand the economics behind it?

If not, it's very hard to explain to a leader who sits there and thinks, 'Whenever you come in, my costs go up'.

2

Leadership's a language. Learn it

You can't get a seat at the table if you're not fluent in headcount, return on investment, productivity per FTE. The big one for me is always GDP per capita versus wage inflation. I talk about that all the time, because if you don't understand it, or why it's important, you can't articulate what it is you do.

3

Look beyond metrics, and dig into trends

Knowing your time to hire and cost per hire is fine. Great, even. But if you don't understand what the wider market is doing, where economic pressure is going, where salary is going, where inflation is going, what this all means to the average person, and *then* articulate it to somebody in leadership, that's a serious blind spot.

4

Show ROI, not slide decks

The biggest challenge with C-suite meetings is that every department arrives with an Excel spreadsheet and bottom-line number, then TA and HR turn up with a PowerPoint and expect people to listen.

For TA leaders who want to go further, the answer won't be found in a slide deck. You need to prove your worth with hard data.

5

Don't complain, retrain

If something is strategically important to your business and you can't do it—like workforce planning, for example—go and reskill. Find somebody who can show you how, then build the resources for it. It means you can go to your leadership team and say with confidence: 'Here's why this is important and requires investment'.

The alternative is to just sit there and say, 'I don't know how to do it—it's too difficult'. Ultimately, your CFO will want to know what your plan is.

6

Be a partner, not a vendor

A lot of people in TA act like vendors to internal stakeholders. That's fine if you're a profit centre, but very few are. And you don't want to be seen as an overhead.

You need to clearly articulate—to leaders in the business—what talent acquisition actually does beyond filling jobs, and show a really strong return on investment. Because what stakeholders really want is someone to partner with them to deliver long-term value.

That should be the aim if you work in TA.

7

Make company KPIs your metrics

Align your hiring strategy to the business growth plan. Your TA metrics should be your business KPIs—you have to clearly articulate them to everybody and tie it to everything you're doing. You're not hiring for hiring's sake, because it's tied directly to business outcomes.

Your TA metrics should be your business KPIs—you have to clearly articulate them to everybody and tie it to everything you're doing.

8

Smash silos for good, then guide the workforce

Too often, TA exists in a silo. To make a genuine impact, this has to change.

Partner with other people in the business who are not tied to recruitment and talent acquisition. Finance, ops, and to an extent HR—because HR and TA are not necessarily mutually exclusive. You've got to reframe that TA is not a HR function. Why not make it part of growth infrastructure instead?

If you're tied to business needs and business goals, you're not just hiring, you're shaping what the workforce looks like. You're giving guidance to leaders about skills, managing risk, building ROI, forecasting growth, and competitive edge.

The road ahead: 7 tips to ensure the future *works*

The only way to equip an entire organisation for tomorrow is to act right now. And, from tech trust and skills strategies, to backing your TA leaders to lead, there's no shortage of things to get started on.

Rebuild trust by reminding staff they matter

In our survey, just 4 in 10 employees say they trust their employer to act in their best interest (compared to 2 in 3 senior managers), and only 50% feel supported in their role. A fast-track way to reverse this is to create a culture of mattering (see page 58). Once staff feel seen and heard, understand their work makes a difference, and know they're essential to the company mission, engagement, performance and trust will no doubt follow.

Reboot your tech comms

Even though 45% of staff say their firm has adopted AI, 14% aren't sure. The fact this is almost five times the number of managers who don't know suggests a communication breakdown, or even a lack of transparency. To combat this, talk to staff at every turn, using plain English (not tech jargon). If you do roll out AI, make sure employees right across the business know knows what it is, how it's used, and the ways it can help (not hurt) them in their job. Which leads on nicely to the next point.

Focus on AI performance, not panic

While scary news headlines can stoke techno-fear, most of the UK workforce already uses AI, and broadly feel it will solve more problems than it causes. As explored on page 38, the key to harnessing this fully—among staff, as well as the AI itself—is to bring it out into the light. Normalise use, offer (ideally insist on) training, and reward those who achieve anything that benefits the company.

Make skills a retention tool

Skills gaps aren't a tomorrow problem. Survey-takers in retail, healthcare, tech and public sectors say it's tough to find talent with the right abilities today. Another issue in the here and now is the fact that almost half of employees see poor training as a barrier to workplace transformation, and only 39% are positive about their career development. Smart employers will fix this, fast. Firms that upskill the workforce—or, as detailed on page 48, allow existing staff to *reskill*—may unlock a solution to such shortages, and create a compelling reason for employees to stick around long-term.

Don't ignore wellbeing—even when AI looms

Tech talk is loud, and burnout often silent. Yet it's the latter that our survey-takers (across almost every demographic) worry about most, so don't allow transformation to distract from the fundamentals. Build a supportive structure that proactively looks for burnout risks—such as workload reviews, line manager training, and frequent check-ins with staff.

Let your TA leaders lead

Too many talent acquisition pros still struggle to gain influence at the exec level. This matters, as the future of work will be in-part defined by who and how you hire, as well as the skillsets you search for. The answer is easy, but remains elusive: give TA leaders the seat they crave at the top table. Because if your business strategy depends on talent, it makes sense that TA should help shape it.

Start with alignment

In area after area (tech, skills, tech, transformation and more), the most glaring insight from our survey is that employees and senior leaders are often out-of-step. Left unchecked, this could foster confusion, or even anger. But if you tackle it head on—with an internal audit, as well as a million, cross-business conversations—you can bring about change that's both constructive and meaningful. Done right, problems get swapped for opportunities, delivering a joined-up workforce where everyone races towards a better world of work, as one.

The world
can work
better

indeed