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The future of work and HR in the Age of AI

Introduction

With each passing week, AI gets better at doing work. It now has skills and memory.¹ Agents can complete tasks and even some workflows autonomously. AI can complete spreadsheets, create presentation decks, run analysis, code new applications and do extensive research. Incredible capabilities, and all within a few years of this technology being widely available.

But as AI capabilities progress, so has the public outcry that AI is going to disrupt work at best, and take our jobs at worst. Headlines assume that AI is a like-for-like substitute for human labour, and that companies can and will eventually replace a substantial part of their human workforce with digital, AI-enabled workers. This dominant narrative tells us there is nothing we can do, and that this situation is 'just the way it is.'

Our problem with this sort of thinking: it leaves no room for alternatives. There is no space to explore an incredibly complex, multifaceted situation with optimism and creativity. And sadly, the hype around AI and the future of work is no different – almost all narratives point to a bleak future filled with joblessness and economic instability.

But what if this is just not true? That the future is NOT a foregone conclusion. What if there is still time to shape the future of work? And it doesn't have to come at the cost of millions of jobs. What if we still have time to design and create organisations that value our human workforce for their unique contributions AND make the most of the advanced technology available to them?

We believe this is a YES / AND situation. It is also a matter of Duty of Care: HR leaders have a responsibility to their organisations and their people to help shape the future of work rather than wait to see how it unfolds.

In March 2026, we brought together circa 25 senior Human Resource Leaders to discuss the Future of Work in the age of AI. We explored the qualities of the Future Human Workers and explored what the Workforce Lifecycle could potentially look like.² We discussed what this means for HR, and briefly discussed what's next.

While the discussions were highly valuable, we acknowledge that they fall short of truly rethinking the role of Human Resources 7 – 10 years into the future. There is much to figure out, however, our core belief is that we can begin to work this out together, as a collective that believes in humans. This paper is a record of where that thinking has taken us so far, and an

¹ Artificial Intelligence is used to describe a WIDE range of technologies that have fundamentally different approaches and utility. For the purposes of this paper, we are focusing largely on the changes brought about from Generative AI, including Large Language Models and Agents.

² We recognise 'the workforce' may comprise of a mix of different types of labour. However, for the purpose of this paper, we focused largely on Knowledge Workers – those who use a laptop and digital technologies to complete their work.



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invitation to keep shaping a future of work that makes the most of both people and AI, while the choices about it are still ours to make.

What is the change before us?

The future of work in the Age of AI is coming at us faster than we think, but it's first important to understand what this actually means.

There is little debate that AI is impacting work. But it cannot yet transform work at full scale because material barriers to scaling AI still exist: data centres need to be built, water and energy resources are constrained, we are in an overhyped AI funding bubble, and anti-AI sentiment is growing.³ This builds on the view that AI is “normal technology,” where it will be several years before AI is fully embedded in how we operate.⁴

So if diffusion is real, then we have some time to transition: think months, not years. Right now, we are in ‘Horizon 1’ (now – 3 years), where most companies are experimenting, piloting and figuring out what AI means for their workforce and organisations with mixed success. In a few years in ‘Horizon 2’ (3 – 7 years), we will start to see the impact of AI when job losses peak. We could also begin to see ambient AI take hold and new approaches to AI (i.e. World Models) change workplaces even further and faster than we are experiencing today. But in both Horizon 1 & 2, progress isn't linear: the jagged frontier means that as AI gets better at some things faster than others, the impact on work and jobs is uneven.⁵

For this paper, we are focusing on the far future. Specifically, we are examining work from the perspective of Horizon 3, looking 7 to 10 years out when AI has fully diffused across our organisations and society. Likewise, we will narrow our focus on exploring what the transition to the Age of AI means for the humans in our organisations, the work they do, and the systems we build around them.

Yet it's important to note we are intentionally setting boundaries when discussing the future of work in the Age of AI. We've purposely set aside manufacturing, scientific research and work that requires connection to the physical work (i.e. sales forces, care roles, etc). We don't weigh in on the AGI debate. Likewise, we do not cover regulatory frameworks, environmental impact, education and the broader socio-economic systems in which we operate. There is zero doubt that all aspects are critical to explore, but we need to limit focus for your attention, our expertise and everyone's capacity to think about the future.

³ For further discussions on current backlash against AI, explore [this essay on Work Evolved](#).

⁴ A framing from [Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor](#) that treats AI not as an imminent superintelligence but as a technology whose impact unfolds gradually through societal diffusion, in the way electricity and the internet did before it.

⁵ [The Jagged Frontier](#): a term coined by Dell'Acqua, Mollick and colleagues to capture how AI is unevenly capable, handling some tasks better than people while stumbling on others of seemingly similar difficulty, so its impact on work lands in a patchy rather than uniform way.



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When we are talking about the future, our focus is on what this means for human labour in knowledge work, including the future workforce, the HR function, the workforce lifecycle and the organisational implications that follow.

To ensure we kept to task, we built our inaugural HoRizon Collective on seven assumptions about what work could look like in Horizon 3, the 7 to 10 year point where AI has fully diffused. They were never meant as predictions, but rather a shared starting point, a way to say 'if this is true, then what does it mean for work,' so the group had something concrete to work from and push against.

Our assumptions about Horizon 3 in the Future of Work:

1. **The time-and-place labour equation breaks down.** Since the Industrial Revolution, we have priced knowledge work by hours and location. When AI can work around the clock and anywhere, neither holds up as the basis for what human work is worth.
2. **We stop managing 'employees' and start managing the 'workforce ecosystem'.** Most workforce planning today counts only permanent staff. The workforce widens to include contract, gig and fractional humans, service and managed labour, and digital labour, all sourced and coordinated together.
3. **Knowledge alone is no longer the primary value driver of labour.** With PhD-level knowledge on tap across nearly every domain, what we prize in people shifts from what they know to what they do with it: orchestration, translation, connection, judgement and the ability to build belonging.
4. **Jobs are fundamentally redefined.** Static job architectures stop making sense when AI capabilities move faster than we can re-map them and job families collapse into one another. The traditional job gives way to something more fluid.
5. **Organisational hierarchy is no longer fit for purpose.** When every person manages digital labour and the manager's role shifts from overseeing people to enabling them, the pyramid stops being the natural shape of an organisation. We move from managing people vertically to distributing work horizontally.
6. **Operating models impede, not enable, AI-forward working.** Today's decision-making processes and culture were built for a human-only, permanent workforce, so they work against AI rather than with it. This is much of why AI investment is not yet showing up in performance.
7. **The current economic system does not work in the Age of AI.** Taken together, the shifts above raise a much larger question about whether late-stage capitalism holds when AI becomes a new form of both capital and labour. We didn't take this one into the workshop itself, as it sits well beyond what a single day could meaningfully tackle, but it felt important to acknowledge as the backdrop to everything else.



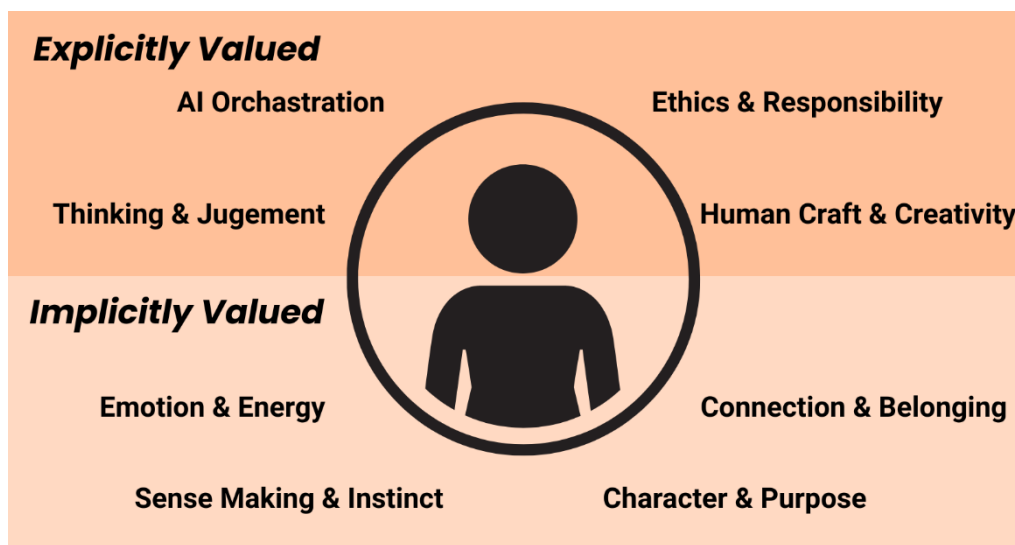
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Defining the Future Human Worker

Exploring the future human worker requires us to start with today. Most organisations have a set way they value their employees. Job descriptions are the foundational template for acquiring talent, and explicitly seek out knowledge, expertise and skills gained through education and experience as it relates to a role. Once inside a company, employees are evaluated and rewarded against these requirements, as well as several implicit qualities shaped by an organisation's culture, ways of working and team dynamics.

So what changes in the future? We expect that in Horizon 3, even when knowledge is widely accessible and digital labour uses skills to deliver end-to-end workflows, **humans will still be an essential part of the workforce**. Future human workers will be valued for a much broader, wide-ranging set of qualities that are harder to articulate, in addition to traditional indicators such as degrees earned or years of experience. In short, we will value them for their intrinsic human qualities alongside quantifiable qualifications.



What we will explicitly value

Thinking & Judgement

Humans will be valued for their 'big picture skills': the qualities that will help them **connect the dots** and manage capabilities across multiple domains, environments and situations. This includes **critical thinking, systems thinking, out-of-the-box / breakthrough thinking** and the ability to **think about end-to-end impacts**. Humans will also be valued for **defining outcomes**, which often involves applying their **judgment** and **discernment** if those outcomes meet expectations. They will have to **manage complexity** and **navigate polarities**, often for situations



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that don't have a clear answer, and demonstrate **dynamic range**. We expect human value to concentrate at the intersections between disciplines, where someone connects across domains rather than going deep in just one, and in the work that is hardest to codify, where judgment is highest and the path is least clear.

Dynamic Range: The ability to move between different realities: look into the future to understand what's coming and deliver their day-to-day activities, all while monitoring and adapting to signals from their environment.

Human-AI Orchestration

In Horizon 3, AI is fully integrated into the workplace, and the future human worker will be valued for their **ability to work with AI**. They will be valued for their ability to **maximise collaboration** across all working relationships, including human-to-human, human-to-AI and AI-to-AI. They will be valued for **adaptive leadership**, changing based on their human-AI team configurations. Increasingly, this includes building and shaping the agents themselves. Several peers in the room were already doing this, designing their own agents to extend their reach.

Ethics & Responsibility

A human's ability to demonstrate **ethics** and **values** will be sought after in Horizon 3. They will be expected to work on **ethical dilemmas** that require understanding multiple variables and where the path forward is not always clear-cut. Humans will also be expected to **provide oversight** and will be responsible for **enabling the agents / AI they manage**, and increasingly for **coaching both the humans and the agents around them** to do the same. This means it's the human's job to ensure AI is efficient, safe, ethical and compliant.⁶

Human Craft & Creativity

In Horizon 3, the future human worker will be valued for their **uniqueness** and the ability to **be creative**. We expect there will be a **premium on 'human-made'** creation and may even be a competitive advantage (think '100% human' labels). Humans will also be explicitly valued for their **'human touch'**, through human-to-human interactions, their ability to compromise and make and learn from mistakes as part of innovation.

What we will implicitly value

Emotion & Energy

Harder to quantify and measure, the future human worker will be valued for their **empathy** and ability to **manage emotions**, both their own and in those around them. They will be valued for bringing **joy, heart & soul, fun** and humour to the workplace. Humans will be implicitly valued for the **intangible energy** they offer to their colleagues and to their organisations.

⁶ Ethics and responsibility likely will be needed far sooner than in Horizon 3; however, we expect this to be streamlined into most if not all knowledge work jobs eventually.



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Connection & Belonging

In Horizon 3, with digital labour now commonplace, humans will be valued for their **physical presence** and **human connections**. They will help create a **sense of belonging** and will be valued for their **ability to build relationships** across their organisations and externally. Humans will be valued for their **loyalty**, both to the organisation and for the ability to cultivate it across their teams. We expect that the companies that will be most sought after are the ones that are **contributing to humanity** and other humans.

Sense-making & Instinct

Future human workers will be valued for their **sense-making**: the ability to understand and process vast amounts of information, from our five senses, the physical world and the data in front of us, which may not be 'language-based'. They will be valued for acting as a **filter to the physical environment** and for applying their **instincts**.⁷

Character & Purpose

In Horizon 3, showing your human matters. Humans will trust leaders and managers who are genuinely **authentic**. **Imperfection** and **vulnerability** will be applauded and encouraged. Human workers will be valued for their ability to **adjust to and welcome change**, as well as their ability to help others along the journey.

In Horizon 3, where we dramatically shift what we value in our Future Human Worker, then how HR recruits, develops, manages and rewards their human workforce also needs to change. Which is why as part of the HoRizon Collective, we next explored the impact on the Workforce Lifecycle to build out the changes required.

Impacts on the Workforce Lifecycle

In the future, the traditional 'employee lifecycle' will change dramatically. To start, we need to expand the lifecycle to include the range of both human and digital labour, and then think about HR's core processes holistically. We already see in the last section with the Future Human Worker that our recruitment process will need to seek out and evaluate for very different criteria than today.

How will the lifecycle change? In the HoRizon Collective, we explored the ways we can be creative with how we recruit & onboard, develop, learn & grow, and manage & reward mainly our future human workers.⁸ Participants gave us a range of ideas, many of which need further

⁷Arguably instinct is the result of knowledge and expertise applied to lived experience, and is hard to cultivate without a solid understanding to build on.

⁸ Note this exercise also should be applied to digital labour as well: however, due to our limited time and capacity in the HoRizon Collective working session (1 Day), we started with the humans.



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exploration, but do offer signals of how the workforce lifecycle may change in Horizon 3. It's hard to imagine a completely different future when we are very much operating in the constraints of today. Yet one thing is for certain: we need to rethink and adapt the workforce lifecycle in the future of work.

Recruit & Onboard

In the Age of AI, how we source, interview, assess and onboard human workers will shift substantially, focusing more on the human rather than the knowledge and expertise they possess. This process becomes a two-way conversation, where organisations need to offer learning and growth opportunities, a dynamic culture and be transparent upfront about expectations on performance. It also changes how we find and assess people in the first place. Sourcing leans more on relationships, networks and live portfolios of work than on digital search alone, and interviewing moves toward in-person, situational assessment, including assessing the agents a candidate brings, not the human on their own.

How will recruiting and onboarding change in the future?

Sourcing • Connecting with co-located communities of interests • Relationship and network driven sourcing, beyond AI digital sourcing • Move beyond static CV to live portfolio of work • Closed LinkedIn-type networks used for finding candidates	Interviewing • Focus on in-person interviews over virtual for key relational positions • Move towards structured, situational assessments as standard • Designed for in-depth conversations and questions • Interview both the humans and their Agents, not the humans alone
Selecting • Assessing for the mindset and the ability to adapt within a particular context, where EQ > IQ • Focus on propensity and resilience in the face of change • Selecting for creativity and uniqueness	Onboarding • All new humans get a personalised AI onboarding buddy • New candidates participate in evolved immersion to rapidly understand a company's culture and ways of working • Focus on a multi-disciplinary approach over narrow focus

Develop, Learn & Grow

In the Age of AI, the Future Human Worker's ability to be agile, adapt to a constantly changing environment and develop new skills rapidly will be greatly valued and necessary for career growth. How people develop their skills on the job and holistically throughout their career will continue to evolve and change. What and how people learn will be continuously changing. Linear career paths shift away from ladders and more into diverse tracks that value diversity of experience. And building a culture to support these changes will be the key enabler of success.



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How will people develop, learn and grow in future?

Developing • Focus on 'big picture' skills (i.e. critical thinking, systems thinking) and fostering a growth mindset • Distinguish knowledge possessed to 'know how' • Invest in empathetic encounters to drive collaboration • Divergent thinking and embracing diversity of thought key • Building verification skills: checking and improving the output of AI and agents, and how humans and agents work together	Learning • Demand for in person experience and connected accountability increases • Personalised learning considered standard • Train for improved H2AI collaboration and workflows • Continuous, immersive learning with own AI coach for support
Career Design • Linear career ladders fading, and replaced by career webs or M-shaped careers of diverse experiences • Focus on interdisciplinary teams with different seniority • Work organised in experience clusters with iterative roles designed to be adaptive	Culture • Focus more on the 'crew' over the individual • Incentivised collaboration and diversity of resources leveraged • Supports creativity and uniqueness

Manage & Reward

Traditional models of management and reward are no longer fit for purpose in the future of work in the Age of AI. Time is no longer the main constraint related to work, and the standard way of remunerating individuals based on seniority, experience and individual performance artificially limits an individual or team's ability to deliver. Whilst we are a long way from figuring out the alternative, the HoRizon Collective did provide some unique ideas of how we may manage and reward in the future.

How will we manage and reward humans in future?

Manage • Manager / team lead now an enabling role with focus on deploying their human skills effectively • Considered an orchestrator and integrator of the workforce	Performance • Define human accountabilities clearly, with focus on continuous improvement • 360 feedback now inclusive of Agents and 'neighbouring' clusters of humans, not just teammates
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• Focus on facilitating inter-disciplinary and multi-way collaboration: H2H, H2AI and AI2AI	• Humans remain accountable for the agents they direct, answerable for their outputs as well as their own work
What to Reward • Rate of learning, adjusted for pace of complexity • Relevant contribution considered alongside impact and outcome • Team focused reward with different incentive schemes for types of collaboration	How to Reward • Performance based outcomes and how they were delivered (i.e. – with diversity of resources). • Human contribution: impact minus AI's contribution • Leverage AI to capture more accurate reward indicators • NFT / Blockchain AI intelligence: the human receives ongoing payment for their IP • Recognise the work of building, verifying and improving AI as something the reward system should value in its own right

The Future of Human Resources

The Age of AI will fundamentally change how humans work, with each other and with AI. To manage this transition effectively and make the most of both human and AI capabilities, the Human Resources function must evolve, and quickly.

AI is rapidly being deployed across enterprises and teams, and workflows are being designed and shaped to accommodate. Traditional HR processes and how Strategic HRBPs have supported the business are falling short of what's needed to help their workforce and organisations handle these significant changes.

As part of our last working session, we explored and agreed on aspirational statements for HR with the HoRizon Collective, which includes:

- **HR becomes the owner, manager, and enabler of work across the organisation, and is responsible for workforce orchestration.**
- **HR owns the skills and 'capabilities' (strategic + core) for humans, and potentially digital labour as well (e.g. Agents).**
- **HR must create a dynamic organisation that responds continuously/resiliently to change.**



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- **HR evolves to include technology, process, UX, etc and design frictionless experiences to get work done.**

These statements are a great starting place, but clearly further depth is required if they are to lead to tangible action. Likewise, on reflection, it's clear that we were limited in our thinking. It's a struggle to escape the realities facing HR professionals today. But it's essential if we are to ensure HR remains relevant, let alone lead their people into a brighter future of work in the Age of AI.

There are real structural, organisational and cultural barriers to AI transformation across the business and also within HR. Many HR leaders highlight that they are stuck in a system of their own creation. The function sometimes struggles with the basics. Processes that should be easy are burdened by too much complexity and insufficient / poor quality data. The business wants its current HR support to remain, which can sometimes be operational rather than strategic. While many organisations say they do strategic workforce planning, most are focused on permanent employees rather than a blended human workforce, and we have yet to hear of an organisation that plans for digital labour as part of their planning.

The size and scale of the change required can be overwhelming. But HR doesn't have to do everything at once; the function cannot wait: HR needs to start building for the future today.

HR needs to begin with itself. Most large organisations have deployed some form of AI-enabled chatbots to their workforces and have embarked on communications and training campaigns to teach the basics. This is a great place to start, but it's not enough. HR must understand this is as much an operating model challenge as it is a technical one, and needs to demonstrate how AI transformation is done well within their own function.

When thinking about implementing AI into HR, take a holistic approach to operating model design. Consider what needs to change: from decisions, to capabilities, to workflow design, to the organisational structure and those in roles. Think about the skills and expertise your people need to effectively work with AI platforms and agents. Only when HR has effectively shown they can adapt their own workforce and wider function to the Age of AI will the business give them a seat at the table to strategically transform the rest of the business.

What can HR do today?

In the meantime, there are some things HR can do to support themselves to be ready and able to lead the business to an AI future, including:

- **Learning and sense-making:** HR leaders should think about how they will support the future of work, intentionally and concretely. This means setting aside time for your people to educate and learn about the latest in AI, and spend uninterrupted time considering how this will change their area of expertise, both alone and together.



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Collective sense-making about AI and the impact on work is just as essential as individual understanding.

- **Language matters:** HR can also start bringing some of the key concepts about the future of work to their business: speak about blended workforces; fluidity in operating models; human-to-human, human-to-AI and AI-to-AI interfaces; AI-enabled workflow design, etc. Even if HR does not yet have the mandate to dramatically shift the operating model. Starting to talk about the future of work and the operating model changes required will help business leaders to realise AI-driven change is more than just a technology.
- **Proactive agility:** HR has always had to walk a tightrope of pursuing innovation while operating within legal and compliance guardrails. And yet, as the pace of change is accelerating rapidly, HR must find a way to be more fluid, more dynamic and more customer-focused. HR could be responsible for curating and shaping the identity of a company in the Age of AI, if the business knows that the function will respond quickly to their changing needs and as work evolves.
- **Governance as a multiplier:** Most organisations do not have sufficient ethics, privacy and governance standards / frameworks to effectively manage AI risk. They are necessary, but should be seen as an enabler rather than a bottleneck. Setting guardrails that allow for work to evolve with AI rather than slowing it down will be critical to move effectively towards an AI future. This also sits at the heart of HR's Duty of Care: work and organisations will change, but creating effective guardrails and oversight protects the business and its people.

What's next

We began our discussion with a choice. Either we accept the dominant narrative, that AI replaces human labour and there is nothing to be done, or we treat the future of work as something still open, still ours to shape. Everything in this paper follows from choosing the second.

What the HoRizon Collective surfaced is that the future of work in the Age of AI is a human-focused challenge. The qualities we will value in our people, the way we bring labour together and reward it, the shape of our organisations, and the role of HR within them – none of these are decided by the technology alone. They are decided by the choices we make about how to use it, which gives HR an incredible opportunity to change itself and its wider organisations.

We did not solve the future of HR in a single day, and some of the hardest questions, like – how do we redesign work for both human and digital labour, how do we define human value before it gets defined for us, and what holds when the economics themselves shift – remain genuinely open. But the direction is clear enough to act on. HR can begin with itself, earn the right to lead the wider change by changing first, and start talking about a blended, fluid, human-centred future of work long before it has the full mandate to deliver it.



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This is where the Duty of Care becomes real. It is not enough to observe the future arriving and manage its consequences. The leaders in this Collective believe HR has a responsibility to shape it, to protect both the business and the people in it, and to make sure that as work changes, our humans are valued for what only they can bring.

The future of work is not a foregone conclusion. There is still time to design organisations that make the most of both people and AI, and the choices about how we do that are still ours to make. We would rather make them together, as a collective that believes in humans, than wait to see how it unfolds. This paper is our invitation to keep doing exactly that.