

**CENTER
FOR**

**TALENT
INNOVATION**

Borrowing from Tomorrow

**How to Fight the Hype and
Design the Future of Work
on Purpose**

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Foreword

“Same as it ever was.”

That line from Talking Heads’ “Once in a Lifetime” came to mind as I read this report. Maybe that’s my Gen X showing.

There is so much happening at once that it is strangely easy to get numb to it. AI. Restructuring. New regulations. Political volatility. DEI backlash. Workforce anxiety. Another reorganization. Another transformation. Another urgent priority that suddenly has to happen now. We answer the email, join the meeting, decode the new operating model, and get on with it.

That capacity to adapt is useful. It can also make seismic change feel routine.

There is nothing routine about the choices organizations are making right now. They are deciding what work people will do, what technology will do, how teams will be structured, how people will learn, where judgment will live, who gets access to opportunity, and what capabilities the organization will build for the future. Those choices are the ingredients in the next operating model, one decision at a time.

In financial services, we used to talk about running the bank and changing the bank. Running the bank meant keeping today’s organization operating. Changing the bank meant building what came next. That distinction is getting harder to maintain because everybody is being asked to change the bank now, all the time, while still running it.

We call this condition Crisis Creep. Urgency becomes part of the operating model. Time horizons shorten. Exceptional ways of working become normal. People stretch. Decisions accelerate. The next disruption arrives before the last one has fully landed.

And inside that urgency, organizations are making decisions with long tails.

A task gets automated. A management layer disappears. A team gets smaller. A junior role changes. A process gets handed to AI. Each choice changes where people learn, where relationships form, how expertise develops, who gets visibility, and what capabilities remain available to the organization over time.

That is the risk of Extractive Transformation: an organization can create value today while weakening the capabilities and contributions it will need later. One consequence can be what this report calls a Human Talent Deficit—a gap between the human capabilities an organization will need and what its operating model enables people to develop, sustain, and contribute. Judgment. Institutional knowledge. Relationships. Creativity. Candor. Mentorship. Sponsorship. The willingness to flag a problem early. The ability to recognize an exception that the system does not.

Those things are easy to take for granted when they are still present. They become painfully visible when they are gone.

Foreword

Then there is Tracy Chapman's "Talkin' 'bout a Revolution."

Because we are in one.

Work is being redesigned at extraordinary speed. Apprenticeship is changing. Performance is changing. Management is changing. Careers are changing. The relationship between people and technology is changing. And with every redesign, organizations are making choices about who gets to participate in what comes next.

That is where our organization's history matters.

For more than two decades, our work has examined who gets access, who gets heard, who gets sponsored, who advances, how people experience the same organization differently, and what formal systems fail to show on their own. Inclusion still matters deeply because fairness and access shape who gets the chance to build the capabilities the future will require. Different perspectives help organizations see more clearly. Different experiences reveal risks, opportunities, and consequences that aggregate data can miss.

The future of work is also a future of access.

A revolution in work is also a revolution in who gets to learn, contribute, advance, and lead.

That is why reclaiming the name the Center for Talent Innovation was important for us.

We have spent more than two decades studying how organizations unlock human talent, how opportunity moves, how systems shape outcomes, and how people experience work differently. Those

questions now sit inside some of the biggest business decisions organizations are making.

The four Design Bridges in this report give leaders a way to work with that reality, wherever transformation is already underway. Get clear about the value you are trying to create. Keep authority and accountability connected. Build enough Depth Perception to understand what your choices may set in motion. Learn from what you build while it is still changeable.

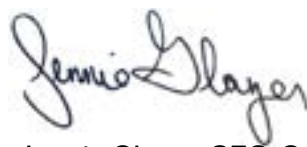
The revolution is already here, and there is no shortage of people talking about it. Predictions. Pronouncements. Hype. Fear.

Our job is to cut through that noise. To ask better questions. To understand what is changing, what those changes are creating for people and organizations, and what choices are still ours to make.

That is talent innovation.

And that is the work ahead.

In Partnership,



Jennie Glazer, CEO, Center for Talent Innovation

Executive Summary

The race to transform organizations is underway. Nearly all C-suite executives surveyed in recent research say their operating models are jeopardizing growth and performance, and nearly 3 in 4 say they must overhaul those models to become more resilient.¹

The forces driving this race are persistent, profound, and very loud. AI may be the most visible force reshaping how work happens, what people do, and how many people are needed to do it, but it is hardly the only one. Geopolitical instability, economic shocks, demographic changes, and declining institutional trust are all adding urgency to decisions about how organizations—and work itself—must change.

Our foundational premise is that organizations create value through and for people. People contribute knowledge, judgment, relationships, creativity, labor, and decisions. They are also the customers, employees, investors, suppliers, communities, and other stakeholders for whom organizations create and distribute value. No matter how extensively work is automated, people will continue to determine what organizations are trying to create, exercise judgment where judgment remains necessary, build relationships, interpret consequences, serve human customers and stakeholders, and decide how technologies should be used.

That is why speed carries its own risk. Under relentless pressure to produce results now, organizations can create value today while eroding the conditions they will need to create value tomorrow. They can reduce headcount while allowing critical knowledge to disappear. Automate work while weakening opportunities for people to develop judgment and expertise. Centralize decisions for efficiency while narrowing the perspectives that inform them. Raise output while becoming less capable.

We call this **Extractive Transformation: borrowing from tomorrow to create value today**. One consequence is a **Human Talent Deficit: the gap**

between the human capabilities and contributions an organization will need to create future value and what its current operating model enables people to develop, sustain, and contribute.

Our mixed-methods research—which combines a survey of 173 executives in the United States; interviews with 50 organizational leaders, inclusion practitioners, consultants, and subject matter experts in the US and Europe; and deep, ongoing listening across our global Task Force—reveals warning signals that organizations may be transforming without a sufficiently clear view of what they are building or what they risk losing along the way.

Transformation is moving faster than executive understanding. Just 40% of CEOs and executives we surveyed report an expert understanding of their organization's strategic priorities for the coming year; 37% say the same about how AI and emerging technologies are affecting work; 35% about workforce priorities; 33% about how organizational decisions affect employees differently across roles and identities; and 30% about the profile of their customer base.

Critical perspectives are missing from consequential decisions.

Knowledge exists throughout organizations, but authority, accountability, and insight do not always meet in the same place. Nearly half of leaders say a broad range of human perspectives, experiences, and needs are never, rarely, or only sometimes intentionally considered in AI governance or workflow redesign. Over a third say the same about product or service design, and about a third say the same of customer strategy and experience. Different positions within an organization reveal different information about how it actually works. In conditions of radical uncertainty, perspective is organizational intelligence.

Organizations can be data rich but insight poor. Seven in 10 CEOs and executives we surveyed regularly review employee performance data to inform business decisions. Measures that could help reveal whether an organization is building or depleting its future capacity—from learning and retention to well-being, collaboration, and customer feedback—receive less

consistent attention. Performance can tell leaders what the organization was able to create today. These other signals can help reveal what it may remain capable of creating tomorrow.

Even when organizations collect signals about how work is or is not working, they do not always have the structures, relationships, or habits required to learn from them and adapt. The imperative is to become more discerning about what transformation is designed to accomplish—and what an organization must preserve, strengthen, or build to make progress sustainable.

There is an alternative to extraction. **We define Sustainable Transformation as creating value today while building and renewing the conditions required to keep creating value tomorrow.**

Here, inclusion offers useful lessons. For decades, inclusion work has grappled with questions that now sit at the center of enterprise transformation: Who experiences the same organization differently? Whose knowledge reaches decision makers, and whose does not? How do relationships distribute access, opportunity, learning, expertise, and trust? Where do formal structures diverge from people's actual experience of work? Who has responsibility for an outcome versus the authority to change it?

The last operating model for inclusion has reached its limits. Inclusion's strongest capabilities have not. At its strongest, inclusion work developed ways of seeing what aggregate measures and dominant perspectives can obscure, connecting human experience to organizational decisions, working across boundaries, anticipating unintended consequences, and translating insight into change.

This moment of transformation creates an opportunity much bigger than recreating yesterday's inclusion function under a different name.

As organizations redesign roles, workflows, technologies, decision rights, metrics, incentives, and governance, they can embed what inclusion work has learned into how the organization itself creates value. Everyone cannot become an inclusion practitioner, nor should we eliminate specialized expertise. Rather, better human outcomes can and should become part

of how work gets done, while dedicated expertise helps the enterprise see consequences, build capability, and learn.

Organizations are already transforming in different ways and at different speeds. Wherever they are starting from, leaders can strengthen the disciplines that help them design wisely amid uncertainty. This report identifies four **Design Bridges**:

- **Strategic Coherence** asks what value the organization is trying to create—and whether its decisions reinforce it.
- **Distributed Accountability** clarifies who owns outcomes and whether responsibility is matched with the authority to act.
- **Depth Perception** helps leaders see organizations from multiple vantage points and understand what consequential changes could set in motion.
- **Applied Insight** turns organizational signals into evidence leaders can use to test assumptions, learn, and adapt.

Together, these disciplines offer a way to pursue transformation without borrowing too heavily from tomorrow.

The future of work is under construction.

Every day, decisions about technology, talent, cost, authority, measurement, and value are shaping what organizations become. Their effects accumulate: changing how work gets done, where judgment lives, what people learn, and what organizations remain capable of doing next.

The four Design Bridges help leaders bring greater intention to those decisions by connecting transformation to the value they are trying to create and the conditions they will need to keep creating it.

What will you build today—and what will you leave behind?

Introduction

The Future of Work Is Under Construction

A 20-year-old lands an ultra-competitive internship on Wall Street.

Internships at this firm have traditionally followed a familiar path. New hires received a desk, a mentor, and a carefully choreographed rotation through the bank's major businesses. The experience was intentionally designed to develop judgment, forge relationships, and lay the foundation for a career in finance.

This internship is different.

On his first day, this intern gets to work building a set of AI agents. Once running he will use the agents to trade a pool of company money small enough that client regulations do not apply. Whatever the agents earn, he and the firm will split equally.

So, he watches the agents, day in and day out.

The agents research markets, execute trades, and work around the clock. They never sleep. They never eat. They never stop.

Occasionally he intervenes. Mostly, he supervises.

He is, in the emerging language of the AI Era, "the human in the loop."

He grows restless, bored, and worried. He starts taking anxiety medication.

By every measure the firm rewards, he is a huge success.

The bank makes money. He makes money.

Bring in the next cohort.

This story is true.

This internship took place not long ago in an office not far from yours. It may have happened in yours.

Different leaders will see different things in this story. Some will see a brilliant young person given the go-ahead to outperform older, less efficient ways of working. Others will see a smart business experiment. Others may wonder what happened to professional apprenticeship and human connection. Some may see all of these things at the same time.

What do you see?

This story is a Rorschach test for modern leaders. It reveals not only what we think about artificial intelligence (AI) at work, but our beliefs about the purpose of an organization.

In this report, we will not tell you what you should see or prescribe a single path toward the future of the private sector.

Should your organization automate roles? Deploy AI agents?² Reduce management layers? Reconfigure entry-level work and career pathways? Slow adoption or embrace acceleration? These are commercial and strategic choices. They are also philosophical ones. None have a single, simple answer that applies across organizations and contexts.

Our interest lies deeper:

Is your organization designing its future or allowing one to emerge by default?

Today, organizations of all sizes and across sectors are in a race to transform, making consequential choices about technology, talent, workflows, management, and organizational structure at extraordinary speed. No leader can know exactly what future those choices will produce, but they can be made with greater intention and a clearer view of what they may set in motion. The danger is transforming so hastily, reactively, or

shortsightedly that value today is created by drawing down the conditions needed to create value tomorrow.

In this report, we examine that risk and offer a different approach.

We explore how the normalization of emergency ways of working—what we call **Crisis Creep**—can become a warning sign for **Extractive Transformation**: creating value today by eroding the conditions required to create value tomorrow, risking consequences including a **Human Talent Deficit**. We offer **Sustainable Transformation** as the alternative: creating value today while building and renewing the conditions required to keep creating value tomorrow. One of its hallmarks is **Disciplined Speed**: the capacity to move quickly without abandoning the practices that make speed sustainable and useful.

We then introduce four **Design Bridges** to help leaders put Sustainable Transformation into practice: connecting transformation to the value the organization exists to create; keeping accountability connected to authority; widening the range of consequences and perspectives leaders can see; and learning what their choices are actually producing. The Bridges do not tell leaders what future to build. **They help leaders shape it more deliberately while there is still time to do so.**

We then ask what decades of inclusion work can teach leaders about this broader transformation challenge. Its strongest practice has taught organizations how to see policies, processes, and products through multiple perspectives; surface consequences that aggregate data can obscure; and understand how organizational choices are experienced differently across people and groups. We argue that these capabilities are core components of successful and sustainable transformation.

Finally, we explore how leaders can apply these ideas to the choices already in front of them, using design to imagine better futures rather than allowing the future of work to emerge by default.

Transformation is underway

The future of knowledge work is being built right now.³ Nearly all C-suite executives surveyed in recent research say their operating models are jeopardizing growth and performance, and 3 in 4 say they must overhaul those models to become more resilient.⁴

But declaring a transformation and designing one are different things. The future organization will not be created by proclamation. It will emerge through thousands of choices about how work gets done, who holds power, what gets measured and rewarded, and well beyond. Some of those choices will be formally encoded in structures, policies, roles, and technologies. Many more will take shape through individual judgment calls across teams, functions, and markets—and become norms long before anyone writes them down.

Together, those choices become the next operating model. The leadership challenge, then, is ensuring that thousands of distributed choices add up to an organization capable of creating value not only today, but over time. That requires clarity about where value comes from—and whom it is ultimately for.

Our foundational premise is that organizations create value through and for people.

Organizations create value through people's knowledge, judgment, relationships, creativity, labor, and decisions. They create and distribute value for people: employees, customers, investors, suppliers, communities, and societies at large. Their choices can also impose costs across those same systems, and across generations.

No matter how many people an organization ultimately employs—five, five thousand, or fifty thousand—people will continue to determine what the organization creates, exercise judgment where judgment remains necessary, build relationships, interpret consequences, serve human customers and stakeholders, and decide how technologies get used.

That makes intentional design, with humans in mind, essential to any transformation.

As the next industrial revolution unfolds, what organizations will transform into is not yet written.⁵ We distinguish between two possible patterns of transformation:

Extractive Transformation creates value today by eroding the conditions required to create value tomorrow.

Sustainable Transformation creates value today while building and renewing the conditions required to keep creating value tomorrow.

The difference lies in what today's design choices build—and what they consume.

Extraction need not be intentional. It can emerge when individually reasonable decisions accumulate without sufficient consideration of their combined, longer-term consequences. The organization still changes: decisions still get made, technologies become embedded in workflows, roles and relationships evolve, norms form. The future emerges through choices without sufficient attention to what they may be building together.

That is drift, and avoiding it requires designing on purpose. But intentionality alone does not make transformation sustainable. Leaders must also consider what their choices could set in motion, whose perspectives can help them see what they might otherwise miss, and what they will do with what they learn.

This does not mean leaders can control every decision through which transformation takes shape. Nor are senior leaders the only people now making consequential design choices. As technologies become easier to build and deploy, decisions once concentrated among specialists or senior leaders are increasingly distributed throughout the organization.

What We Mean by Design and Transformation

Throughout this report, we use **design** to describe the intentional shaping of arrangements to influence how something works and what it produces. In organizations, those arrangements can include roles, workflows, authority, incentives, management structures, talent processes, technologies, and measures.

Transformation is the process through which an organization moves from one state toward another. Transformation can emerge through many changes whose combined effects no one fully intended. Design brings intentionality to that process: shaping consequential choices around an understanding of what the organization is trying to build.

Leaders can, however, create the conditions for those decisions to be made with greater clarity about what the organization is trying to create, greater visibility into what those choices are producing, and greater capacity to change course.

That is the design challenge at the center of this report.

Transformation under pressure

Sustainable transformation is especially difficult in the current environment. The rapid expansion of AI across the private sector, propelled into the mainstream by the rapid emergence of generative AI, has arrived amid a much larger context of upheaval.⁶ Organizations are navigating geopolitical instability, economic uncertainty, diverging regulatory environments, intensifying global competition, and a continuous information environment in which each new disruption becomes immediately visible.⁷ AI has added another source of urgency, amplified by extraordinary investment and a relentless cycle of promises and warnings about the consequences of falling behind.⁸

These pressures do not occur independently but interact and compound, contributing to what researchers have described as **polycrisis**.⁹ For leaders, the pressure of polycrisis is not abstract. One leader at a large multinational told us:

“Every morning I wake up wondering if today’s the day our business model is rendered obsolete.”

Our conversations suggest that many leaders are trying to build more durable, competitive organizations while operating inside a culture of urgency that mirrors the pressure surrounding them.

AI Hype Is Part of the Pressure

Research on AI discourse has identified narratives ranging from extraordinary promises to warnings of profound societal consequences. Hype can shape decisions and resource allocation before promised technological futures fully materialize. Our interest here is not in adjudicating whether current expectations for generative AI are overstated or understated, but in how this information environment can intensify the pressure leaders feel to act quickly.

That creates a paradox. The pressure to secure the future can make it harder to design for the future.

Crisis Creep: When urgency becomes the operating model

"We operate so well in crisis mode; how can we operate like that all the time?"

An inclusion leader in the financial industry told us recently about catching this remark from a very senior executive. The comment was casual, but the mindset it revealed is increasingly familiar. There is always another restructuring. Another technology to adopt. Another competitor to watch. Another efficiency target to meet. Another reduction in force looming. Another disruption in the market leaders cannot afford to miss.

We call the normalization of emergency ways of working **Crisis Creep**: when shortened time horizons, heightened urgency, and exceptional practices of crisis response gradually become the expected, even idealized, operating model.

The phrase has appeared previously in crisismanagement literature to describe gradually accumulating or slow-burning crises, and more recently in workplace commentary to describe urgency becoming an organizational default. Our usage extends the concept to examine how sustained crisis conditions can shape the choices through which organizational transformation takes place.

Crisis can temporarily produce extraordinary performance. Priorities narrow, decisions accelerate, bureaucracy recedes, and teams stretch. Yet those

conditions draw on reserves of human attention, energy, flexibility, and resilience that require replenishment.¹⁰

The risk emerges when the emergency never ends. In addition to the human toll, the immediate can crowd out the important, and reaction can crowd out intention. Temporary responses to navigate today's crisis can harden into permanent ways of working.

The alternative is not simply to slow down. Speed itself must become a design choice. **Disciplined Speed**, as we use the term, is the **capacity to move quickly without abandoning the practices that make speed sustainable and useful**. It means knowing where acceleration creates value, where greater understanding is required before acting, and when slowing a decision can enable better and faster execution later.

Early evidence suggests that disciplined speed need not mean retreat nor technological nostalgia. As banks move from deploying discrete AI tools toward automating larger and more consequential processes, some implementations are taking longer because workflows must be broken apart, tested, governed, and made verifiable.¹¹

Continuous transformation may be the new steady state. Crisis cannot be. Sometimes, slowing down is how an organization learns to move faster, better.

“People can be working 12 hours a day, six days a week, but that's burnout. When you do that, your productivity decreases.”

– Inclusion Executive

Borrowing from tomorrow

The underlying tension between immediate demands and long-term value is not new. Corporate short-termism has been documented for decades. In one influential 2005 study, 4 in 5 financial executives surveyed said they would reduce discretionary spending on areas including R&D, advertising, maintenance, and hiring, to meet short-term earnings targets; more than half said they would delay new projects even when doing so sacrificed value creation.¹²

Those tradeoffs were consequential. They were also relatively legible. Cut R&D today, and you may sacrifice innovation tomorrow. Defer maintenance, and future costs may rise. Reduce hiring, and the talent pipeline may narrow.

AI-enabled transformation introduces a more elusive risk: **Organizations may consume sources of future value without recognizing what those sources were producing.**

AI did not create corporate short-termism, but it may give organizations unprecedented power to encode today's choices into tomorrow's way of working. A task eliminated for efficiency may also have been where junior talent developed judgment. A management layer removed for speed may have carried vital relationships or institutional knowledge. A decision automated for consistency may also have been where people learned to recognize exceptions.

The metaphor of debt helps make this risk visible. Technical debt has long described the future costs created by expedient technological choices. More recently, researchers and practitioners have extended similar logic to human and organizational capability. Emerging concepts such as talent debt warn that eliminating entry-level work can weaken the pipeline through which tomorrow's expertise is built. Capability debt has been used more broadly to describe liabilities created when organizations adopt new ways of working without building the capacity required to sustain them. Writing about AI, Kurtis Johnson extends that idea to interacting forms of governance, data, and judgment debt.¹³

The concepts differ, but the warning is similar: today's performance can mask liabilities that become visible only later.

Taken together, these emerging ideas point to a broader human risk: Organizations may preserve or increase output while weakening the human capabilities and contributions on which future value will depend.

We call that risk a **Human Talent Deficit: the gap between the human capabilities an organization will need to create future value and what its operating model enables people to develop, sustain, and contribute.**

We do not yet know how widespread or consequential this deficit will become. The evidence is still emerging. But the choices that could produce it are already being made. The risk extends beyond a shortage of people or a broken entry-level pipeline. A Human Talent Deficit can emerge when organizations weaken people's capacity to contribute—or their willingness to do so.

Transformation can weaken the experiences through which people develop judgment, expertise, relationships, and institutional knowledge. It can also affect whether people choose to make the capabilities they already possess fully available to the organization. The consequences could include weaker judgment, lost institutional knowledge and relationships, diminished discretionary effort, or an innovation capacity that proves harder to replenish than it was to consume.

“Executives are authorizing their companies to move faster on AI. I'm guessing that in two, maybe four years, organizations will look around and go: wait—we need to be training our new leaders. We haven't been building their skills.”

– Michael Welp, PhD, Founder, Full Partner Leadership

Organizations depend on forms of human contribution that no employment contract can fully compel: candor, creativity, mentoring, knowledge sharing, experimentation, discretionary effort, and the willingness to surface problems before they become crises. Yet organizations may be asking employees to invest more deeply in transformation at the same moment employees are becoming less certain that the organization is invested in a future for them.

An organization can retain human capability on paper while losing access to it in practice.

A Human Talent Deficit is one way Extractive Transformation can take shape: an organization creates value today while eroding human capabilities and contributions it may need tomorrow. But human talent is not the only source of future value transformation can deplete. Organizations can accumulate governance or data liabilities; damage customer trust or brand legitimacy; externalize costs onto communities or the environment; reshape access to economic opportunity; or create legal, societal, and political consequences that no single function—or even organization—fully owns.

Such breadth is part of what makes Extractive Transformation difficult to see. It does not necessarily look like failure. Productivity may rise, costs may fall, and decisions may accelerate. The transformation may appear to be working. Yet immediate gains can mask what is being consumed. An organization may create value for one stakeholder while shifting costs onto

“Every time you come into your office, you choose how much effort you’re going to put in each day. That’s your choice. No one can control that, right? We want people to willingly to give that discretionary effort to the work that they’re doing.”

– Inclusion Executive

another. It may produce extraordinary results today while eroding its own capacity—or the capacity of the systems around it—to produce value tomorrow.

Early evidence suggests the opportunities and costs of AI-powered transformation will not be distributed evenly. Existing patterns of occupational segregation and unequal access to opportunity mean that the same transformation can create mobility for some people while concentrating displacement or disruption among others.¹⁴ **Who gains access to the work that remains, who bears the costs of work that disappears, and whose knowledge and perspective remain inside the organization are not incidental effects of transformation. They are design consequences, too.**

The Evolving Evidence on AI at Work

Decision making around AI-powered transformation is further complicated by the fact that emerging evidence about AI at work does not consistently point in one direction.

Early evidence has demonstrated meaningful gains in some forms of knowledge work.¹⁵ Center for Talent Innovation's own research found that teams led by Convergent Leaders, leaders who combine fluency in technology with human-centered and inclusive leadership, were up to 12 times more likely to be highly productive.¹⁶

But emerging research, including our own, complicates a linear story of technological progress. Studies are examining whether heavy AI reliance can weaken critical thinking or create "cognitive debt"; how AI-mediated work affects anxiety, alienation, and job insecurity; and whether apparent efficiency gains always translate into actual time saved.¹⁷ Other evidence suggests that how organizations implement AI matters: clear norms and procedures, for example, have been associated with lower AI-related anxiety and job insecurity.¹⁸

The evidence is not uniformly optimistic or pessimistic, but it is certainly conditional. Outcomes vary by technology, task, worker, positional power, organizational context, and how AI-powered work is designed. That uncertainty matters because organizations are redesigning work now, before the long-term effects are fully understood.

Here, we focus on the organizational design challenge this evidence exposes: How can leaders distinguish immediate gains from changes that create durable value for people and the enterprise?

Center for Talent Innovation's forthcoming research on inclusive AI will further investigate the immense potential and the equally real perils of AI-enabled work.

The intern we introduced at the start of this report makes one version of the risk tangible. Perhaps supervising AI agents will prove to be an extraordinary new form of apprenticeship. But if the old internship developed judgment, relationships, institutional knowledge, and professional identity through experiences that have now disappeared, leaders need to understand what will develop those capabilities instead.

Creating durable value therefore requires leaders to ask not only how much value transformation creates, but for whom, at whose expense, and over what time horizon.

We went looking for the future of inclusion

Following the evidence outward changed how we understood the question we started with.

The future of inclusion could not be separated from the future of the enterprise.

In one sense, that brought us back to where the Center for Talent Innovation began. For more than two decades, we have studied how organizations can unlock the contribution of human talent. The technologies have changed dramatically. The underlying enterprise challenge has not.

At precisely the moment many organizations are dismantling, renaming, or reinventing inclusion, they risk overlooking some of what its strongest practice learned. Experienced inclusion practitioners have spent decades examining whose knowledge enters decisions, how relationships distribute opportunity, how formal structures interact with people's experiences, what aggregate measures obscure, and why intended outcomes and actual outcomes can diverge.

That body of knowledge offers a powerful foundation for the work of transformation now underway.

Where we are headed

This report is about learning to transform sustainably by designing on purpose.

We begin with four Design Bridges: disciplines our research suggests can help leaders put Sustainable Transformation into practice.

We then look backward to move forward, examining what the last era of inclusion work can teach us about designing organizations around human talent, where its operating model reached its limits, and what should be carried into the future. The fate of an operating model should not be confused with the value of the capabilities developed within it.

Finally, we return to the intern. His story is one small construction site inside a much larger one.

Your organization is already building its future. Can you see clearly enough to build it on purpose?

Research Methodology

The forces reshaping work are moving quickly, interacting with one another, and cannot be contained neatly within a single function or field. So rather than examining the future of work through one lens, this research integrates multiple forms of evidence and professional perspective.

For this project, we combined:

- A survey of 173 organizational decision makers.
- Semi-structured interviews with 50 organizational leaders, inclusion practitioners, consultants, and subject matter experts.
- Insights generated through executive convenings and a design thinking Design Lab (read more about the Lab on page 94).

- Scholarship spanning organizational behavior, leadership, systems thinking, psychology, sociology, economics, management, and design.

This report grew through ongoing dialogue with leaders redesigning organizations in real time. Across these sources, we looked for patterns that could help leaders make better decisions amid changing technologies, organizational structures, political environments, and expectations of work.

Our research participants were largely based in the United States and United Kingdom, many working in or advising multinational organizations and several in global roles. We do not assume that the conditions described in this report manifest identically across markets. Legal systems, cultural norms, labor structures, political environments, and beyond shape how transformation is experienced—and what effective responses require.

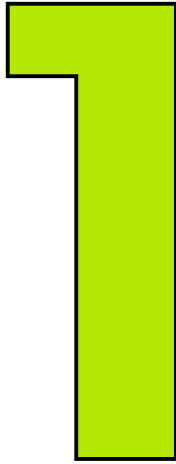
We also looked back. We revisited more than two decades of Center for Talent Innovation research into how workplace cultures, relationships, leadership, and organizational systems can enable—or hinder—people across intersections of identity from contributing the full measure of their talent, ambition, and potential.

Taken together, this research reinforces a premise that runs throughout this report: **there is no single blueprint for the future of work.** The challenge is to equip leaders to understand their own contexts, make more intentional choices, and learn from experimentation taking place across organizations, sectors, and markets.

A Note on Generative AI

As part of this project, we used generative AI tools for tasks including exploratory research, project planning, thematic synthesis, drafting, and editing. Human researchers remained responsible for interpretation, validation, and final conclusions. We authored and stand behind this work.

For a full description of our research methods, sample, analysis, and limitations, see Appendix 1.



Design Bridges for Sustainable Transformation

The future of knowledge work will emerge through thousands of choices about technology, talent, structure, roles, relationships, and how work gets done. Without sufficient intentional direction, those choices can accumulate into an operating model no one fully intended. With it, they can cohere around what the organization is trying to create. No CEO can personally make all of those choices. Nor can any leader predict with certainty where AI, geopolitics, regulation, labor markets, or competition are heading. The leadership task is to create the conditions for thousands of consequential choices to add up to an organization capable of creating durable value.

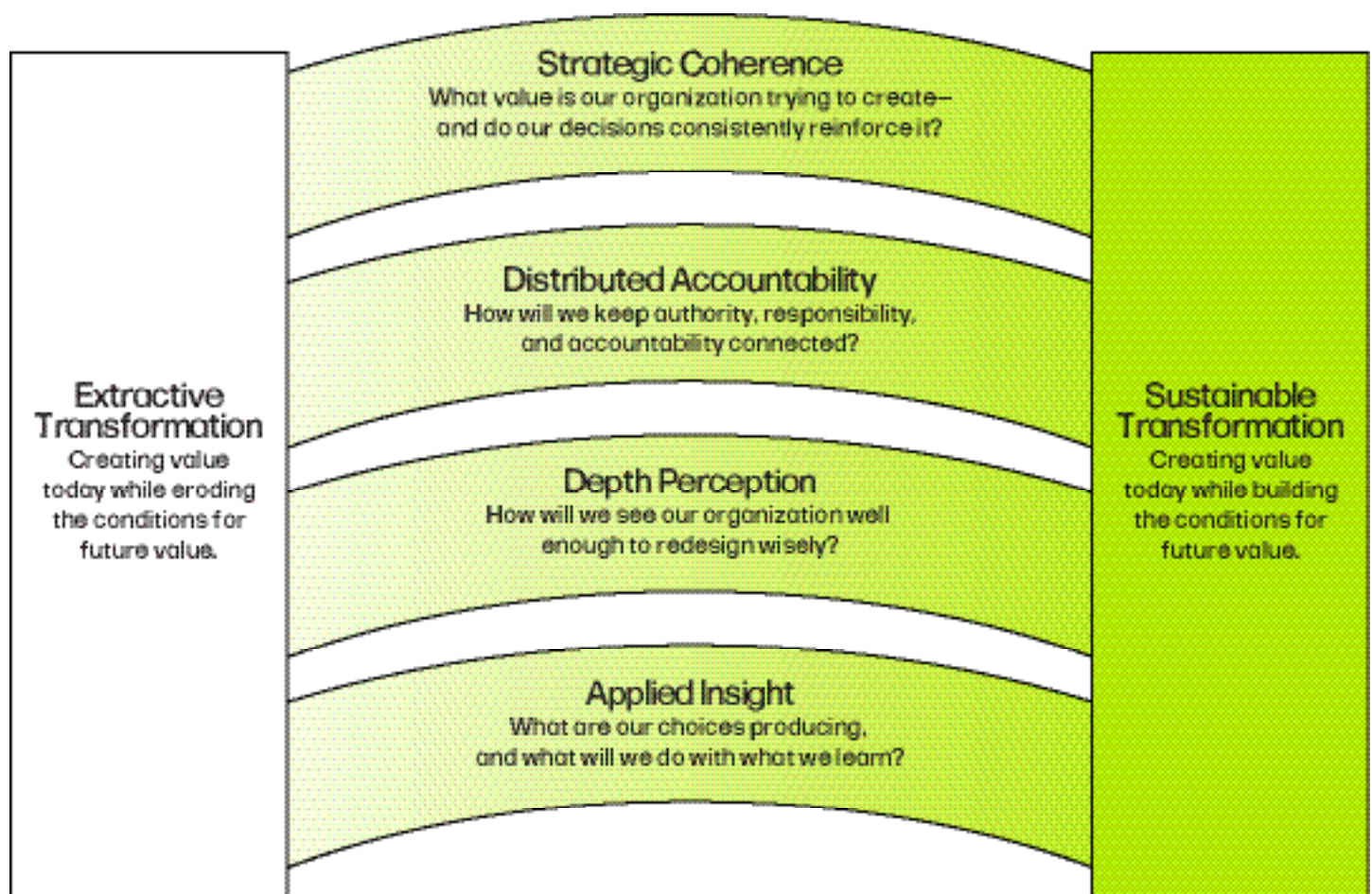
Our research points to four disciplines that can help leaders do that. We call them Design Bridges.

Together, these Design Bridges help organizations move from transformation by default toward sustainable transformation by design.

They are not a blueprint, nor are they sequential. Organizations will return to each bridge repeatedly as technologies evolve, new talent arrives and departs, markets shift, regulations change, and new opportunities emerge.

Each begins with a transformation challenge revealed in our research, explores the design opportunity it creates, and ends with questions leaders can bring into consequential decisions today.

The future of work cannot be predicted. But it can be designed on purpose.



Design Bridge

Strategic Coherence

A global company launches dozens of initiatives and AI-enabled tools to improve culture, accelerate AI adoption, strengthen customer experience, increase productivity, reduce costs, and retain talent. Every initiative has an executive sponsor and gets included in status reports. Yet employees are exhausted. Engagement is slipping. Leaders struggle to explain how the pieces fit together. New priorities arrive before old ones have taken root. Nothing seems obviously wrong, but everything feels disconnected and untrustworthy.

This kind of fragmentation rarely begins with bad intentions. It begins when everyday decisions stop reinforcing a shared understanding of what the organization exists to create. As we argued in the introduction, transformation emerges through thousands of choices and changes. Redesigning the organization so those choices cohere starts with a clear understanding of the value they are meant to create.

Design Bridge leadership question: What value is our organization trying to create—and do our decisions consistently reinforce it?

Strategic Coherence is the discipline of aligning thousands of daily decisions around a shared understanding of how, for whom, and over what time horizon the organization creates value.

The Roots of “The Why”

This bridge builds on a long tradition of scholarship and practice exploring the effect of organizational purpose, mission alignment, and compelling direction on team effectiveness, from Simon Sinek’s viral TED Talk to J. Richard Hackman and Ruth Wageman’s work on 6 Team Conditions.¹⁹ It also extends ideas developed in earlier Center for Talent Innovation frameworks, including the Strategic Navigator, by examining how organizations continually determine, communicate, and redesign around the value they exist to create.²⁰

The Risk: Activity Becomes Untethered from Value

We asked survey respondents to select up to five priorities from a list of 21 strategic business priorities spanning growth, risk, AI transformation, workforce capability, and trust (see Appendix 1 for full list). The response options were informed by current research on corporate strategy, workforce transformation, AI adoption, organizational resilience, and talent priorities.²¹

Despite operating across different industries and regions, survey takers converged around five common priorities:

- 1 Revenue growth**
- 2 Innovation**
- 3 Brand trust and loyalty**
- 4 Maintaining competitiveness in changing markets**
- 5 Understanding and serving customers, clients, or consumers**

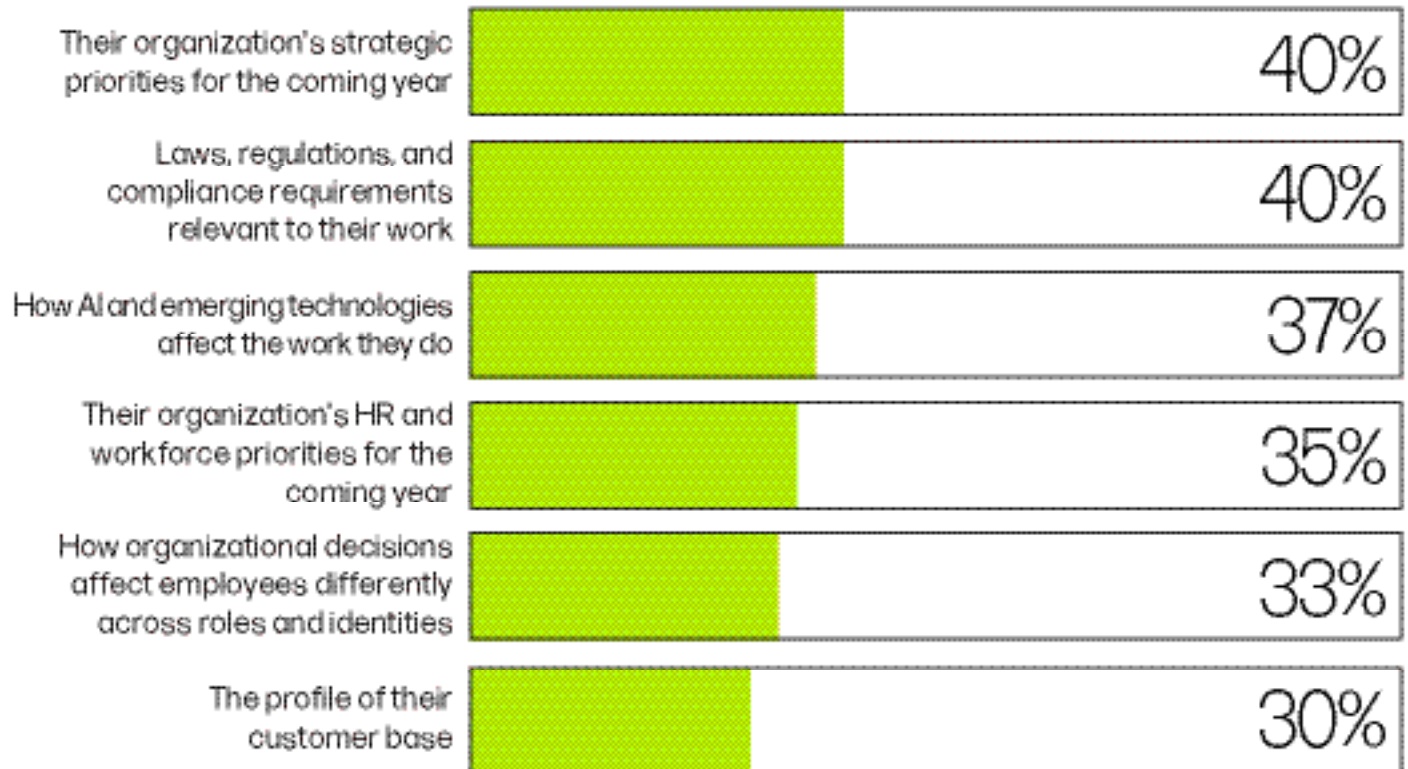
Yet our survey suggests many leaders are navigating transformation without strong understanding of some of the fundamental inputs and constraints shaping value creation: strategy, technology, workforce priorities, customers, regulation, and how organizational decisions affect different people.

Across every dimension we measured, from strategy to customer understanding to informal norms to cross-functional collaboration, fewer than half of executives reported having the highest degree of understanding on the topic.

No executive needs to be an expert on every dimension of their organization. But consequential transformation decisions increasingly require leaders to connect these dimensions. What are we trying to accomplish? What capabilities will our workforce need? How is technology changing what is possible? How will our choices affect different people? Who are our customers and what do they value?

Fewer than half of executives reported having the highest degree of understanding on fundamental topics.

CEOs and executives who have an expert understanding of:



When that understanding is fragmented, thousands of individually reasonable decisions can pull the organization in different directions.

Transformation takes shape through the interaction and accumulation of many decisions and changes.

Some are enormous and centralized: *We're eliminating 3,000 roles.*

Some are functional: *We're buying this AI system.*

Some are managerial: *I'm redesigning these five jobs around it.*

Some are individual: *I've figured out that an agent can do this task.*

Each may be reasonable on its own, but the people making them may not share the same understanding of what the organization is ultimately trying to create. Taken together, those choices can pull the organization in different directions—or build an organization no one intended.

The risk facing organizations attempting to transform is therefore not necessarily a lack of ambition, investment, or activity. It is activity untethered from a sufficiently clear and shared understanding of value.

Organizations are making decisions now about what to automate, what to eliminate, where to invest, which capabilities to build, and what work people should continue to do. Without clarity about what the organization is trying to become more capable of creating, the means can quickly become the ends: efficiency, automation, AI adoption, or even transformation itself becomes the objective.

Strategic Coherence provides a different starting point: What value are we trying to become better at creating?

Bridge Vocabulary

Value: The meaningful outcomes an organization exists to create for its stakeholders. Throughout this report, we use the term value broadly. Organizations create value when they transform their capabilities, relationships, and resources into outcomes that matter to the stakeholders they serve, including employees, customers, investors, regulators, and communities in which they operate. Depending on the organization, those outcomes might include revenue, innovation, customer value, trust, resilience, knowledge, or social impact.

The Opportunity: Get Clear on the Why and for Whom

Organizations today are overhauling operating models and implementing changes at remarkable speed. The temptation is to begin with questions like:

- What can we automate?
- Which roles do we no longer need?
- Where can we reduce costs and improve efficiency?
- Which technology should we deploy?
- How do we increase productivity?
- What are our competitors doing?

Tony Bynum, founder of LYMNL and Associate Professor of Practice at Illinois Tech's Institute of Design, argues that this instinct often sends organizations in the wrong direction:

"We have to start with 'why' before we move to 'what.' The 'what' is the thing we're creating—the program, the initiative, the intervention. You can get everyone in a room and come up with 2,000 'whats.' But without a grounded 'why,' you haven't really taken the problem apart—and you'll have a hard time creating something that's truly unique and effective."

Organizations rarely suffer from a shortage of possible whats. The harder discipline is establishing a shared understanding of why those choices matter to the value the organization is trying to create. Without such shared understanding, a proliferation of good ideas can become the very mechanism of drift: initiatives, technologies, restructurings, and efficiency measures each make sense on their own but fail to add up to a coherent organization.

At a recent convening, we asked leaders: What question is your organization trying to solve today? One response appeared immediately: "Who we are anymore." Such an existential musing may be more strategic than it first appears.

Purpose, identity, values, and strategy provide organizations with different ways of articulating what they exist to create, for whom, and what they are unwilling to sacrifice in the process. It is difficult for distributed choices to cohere around a strategy when the organization itself is unclear about what it is becoming.

As we noted earlier, the power of a compelling *why* is not new. What is changing is the speed, scale, and distribution of the decisions it must guide. As more people—and increasingly more agentic technologies—gain the ability to reshape workflows, roles, capabilities, and experiences, Strategic Coherence cannot remain concentrated in a strategy document or leadership team. It has to travel with the decisions.

Once that *why* is sufficiently clear, proposed changes become easier to evaluate:

Does this help us create the value we said matters, in a way that is consistent with who we say we are and where we are trying to go?

If not, why are we doing it?

Value Is Created Through and For People

The priorities that rose to the top in our survey—revenue growth, innovation, competitiveness, brand trust, customer understanding—describe forms of value organizations hope to create. None exists independently of people.

Technology can perform work, generate possibilities, identify patterns, make decisions, and increasingly operate processes end-to-end. But as we wrote at the outset, organizations still create value through and for people. People determine which outcomes matter. Customers decide what is useful. Employees contribute judgment, expertise, relationships, and knowledge. Leaders decide what the organization is willing to optimize for—and what it is not.

Technology changes how work gets done. People ultimately determine what the work is for. That makes understanding people more, not less, important

as technology becomes more capable. Organizations can become extraordinarily sophisticated at optimizing for outcomes their customers no longer value, or redesign work around assumptions their employees do not share. Strategic Coherence therefore requires more than aligning decisions to a stated purpose. It requires continually testing whether the value an organization believes it is creating is actually experienced as valuable by the people it depends on and serves.

Joseph Santana, CEO and Principal Consultant/Advisor of Joseph Santana, LLC, argues that this distinction may become increasingly important to competitive advantage:

“It becomes a race to the bottom if all you're doing is automating old processes. The real competitive advantage today is: do you understand the evolving tastes of a very diverse market so that you can corner that market before others do? As automation becomes more ubiquitous, understanding people and their evolving perspectives becomes an increasingly important source of competitive advantage.”

This is particularly important at a moment when organizations and the people they serve may not share the same assumptions about what technological progress looks like. In a 2026 Gartner survey, half of U.S. consumers said they would prefer to give their business to brands that do not use GenAI in consumer-facing content.²² Another study showed employees are navigating their own uncertainty: among Europeans already using AI at work, 41% reported being somewhat or very concerned about job displacement from AI.²³

“Just because we can automate something doesn’t mean that we should.”

– Inclusion Executive

These findings make a strong case for understanding people. Customers may value human judgment, connection, or authenticity even when automation is faster or cheaper. Employees interpret transformation not only through what leaders say, but through what organizational choices reveal about the future of their work.

Automation can make an organization more efficient, but it cannot tell an organization which outcomes matter or what is worth optimizing.

From the Moon to Tomorrow

There is a mythic exchange between U.S. President John F. Kennedy and a NASA janitor that has had remarkable staying power in the American imagination. As he tours the facility, Kennedy spots a janitor and asks what he does there. The janitor pauses mopping and replies: “I’m helping put a man on the moon.”

Apocryphal or not, the story has endured because it captures Strategic Coherence in its simplest form: someone far from the center of formal decision making understands how their work contributes to something larger.

Strategic Coherence requires strategy to mean something beyond the people who wrote it. Our moment of AI-fueled transformation poses a more consequential version of the same question. It is no longer only: *Do all employees understand what we are trying to accomplish?* It is also: *What happens when we redesign their jobs?*

What do we automate? What do we augment or eliminate? How do we change the judgment work requires or the capabilities it builds? Those choices cannot be evaluated on efficiency alone. They have to be evaluated against what the organization is ultimately trying to create.

An organization might ultimately decide that it needs five people to create that value—or 50,000. Strategic Coherence does not prescribe the answer, it provides the basis on which to make the choice.

Nor will every choice be made in the C-suite. A major workforce redesign may be approved centrally, but its consequences take shape through countless subsequent decisions about workflows, roles, technologies, customers, and people. Strategic Coherence means that someone making one of those choices far from the original strategy discussion has a usable basis for deciding what matters.

That is the contemporary version of the janitor's answer. Employees throughout an organization should not just be able to recite a mission statement, but have a shared understanding precise enough to guide choices about how the organization changes.

They need a sufficiently clear strategic why against which to test the choice: Does this help us create the value we said matters, for the people it is meant to serve, in a way that is consistent with who we say we are and where we are trying to go?

Sustainable transformation adds another test. A choice can create value today while depleting the capabilities, relationships, trust, or talent required to create it tomorrow. Leaders must therefore look beyond the immediate outcomes of their decisions and become more adept at seeing what a choice may build, weaken, or make possible over time: Will this choice strengthen or draw down on our ability to keep creating that value?

The Next Leadership Questions

Before your next consequential transformation decision, ask:

- What value are we trying to create?
- Why does this matter to the value we are trying to create?
- Who are we creating that value for?
- What problem are we actually trying to solve?
- How does this choice connect to our purpose, identity, strategy, and stated values?
- What are we trying to become more capable of creating?
- What do the people we depend on and serve actually value?
- Will this choice strengthen or draw down on our ability to keep creating value over time?

Design Bridge

Distributed Accountability

A company deploys an AI system to streamline hiring. Months later, concerns emerge that qualified candidates are being screened out unfairly. HR points to Procurement. Procurement points at the vendor. IT says it just maintains the infrastructure. The media picks up on the story. Executives are surprised. Employees are outraged. Everyone feels someone else is responsible.

Accountability doesn't always disappear all at once. It can diffuse gradually as decisions become distributed across different parts of a process.

Design Bridge leadership question: How will we keep authority, responsibility, and accountability connected?

Distributed Accountability is the discipline of intentionally connecting responsibility, authority, and accountability across the people, processes, technologies, and decisions that shape organizational outcomes.

The Risk: Responsibility, Accountability, and Authority Become Disconnected

Most of the outcomes organizations care about are shaped by decisions no single person or function controls. That creates a challenge: keeping responsibility, authority, and accountability connected.

Inclusion provides a particularly clear example. For years, inclusion practitioners have often been given responsibility for improving human outcomes without sufficient authority over the processes producing them. Our survey reveals how easily these distinctions can blur.

87%

of respondents say inclusion work is most effective when accountability is shared across the organization.

Yet...

84%

say creating an inclusive workplace is primarily the responsibility of HR and/or inclusion teams

And...

74%

say those teams are held accountable for outcomes they do not fully control

Consider how this tension can play out in promotion. Paradigm's analysis of 220 organizations found that fewer than half had a documented promotion process, while just 1% tracked how this can play out in how work was assigned.²⁴ Yet promotion outcomes may depend on both: high-value assignments build visibility, experience, and credentials that can affect who advances.

An inclusion leader may therefore be accountable for representation among promoted employees while Talent owns the promotion process and line managers determine who receives career-building assignments—and little is clearly documented. The outcome is shared. The authority to shape it is fragmented.

The outcome is produced through many decisions, with different actors holding authority over different parts of the process. One former Chief Diversity Officer described the disconnect from her seat:

"You can't put the gender representation target in my scorecard because I don't own that process. Let's be really clear on what the roles and responsibilities are in terms of the process owners and the skills that the process owners need to have. I'm just monitoring and managing up effectively."

Inclusion makes the disconnect particularly visible, but it is not unique to inclusion. Organizations increasingly seek outcomes such as innovation, trust, responsible AI, accessibility, customer understanding, employee well-being, and resilience. None is produced by a single initiative or specialist function. Each emerges from decisions distributed across processes, technologies, incentives, managers, functions, and everyday work.

The more distributed the production of an outcome becomes, the more deliberate its accountability must become.

Bridge Vocabulary

Accountability: Answerability for the outcomes and consequences of decisions, including the obligation to explain them, learn from them, and act on what is learned.

In Part II, we return to what the experience of inclusion work can teach organizations confronting this challenge.

Authority: The formal or informal power to make, approve, change, or direct decisions that shape an organizational outcome.

Process owner: The individual or group responsible for how an organizational process operates and evolves. Examples of processes include hiring, performance management, budgeting, AI governance, promotion, and product development.

Responsibility: An expectation or obligation to perform a particular role, task, or function.

The Opportunity: Connect Accountability to Authority

Distributed Accountability requires making explicit how responsibility, authority, and accountability connect across the people, processes, technologies, and decisions that shape any given organizational outcome.

Responsibility without authority creates frustration. Authority without accountability creates risk.

Organizations often respond to new priorities by creating initiatives: an innovation initiative, a customer initiative, a responsible AI initiative, an inclusion initiative. Initiatives can coordinate action, concentrate attention,

and accelerate progress, but an initiative does not necessarily control the conditions producing the outcome it was created to improve.

Innovation may depend on incentives, budgeting, collaboration, manager behavior, technology, and tolerance for experimentation. Customer experience may depend on product design, staffing, workflows, technology, sales incentives, and frontline discretion. Responsible AI may depend on procurement, data governance, technology design, legal review, manager judgment, and everyday employee use.

Lasting change therefore requires more than assigning ownership of an aspiration. Leaders need to understand the processes through which that aspiration becomes an outcome—and who has the authority to shape them.

Know How the Work Actually Works

Every organization relies on processes: hiring, promotion, performance management, budgeting, product development, customer service, AI governance, and many more.

Accountability becomes difficult when leaders cannot clearly see how a consequential process operates end to end: where decisions are made, where human judgment enters, where technology acts, where handoffs occur, and who has authority to intervene.

AI raises the stakes.

Automation can make processes faster, more consistent, and in some cases more reliable than the manual human processes they replace.²⁵ Increasingly capable AI systems can also do more than execute predefined tasks. They can initiate actions, establish or recommend priorities, coordinate workflows, make or inform decisions, and interact with other systems and agents with varying degrees of human involvement.²⁶ None of that eliminates the need to establish who remains accountable for what those processes produce. Accountability cannot apply only when the outcome is favorable.

As AI performs more tasks and shapes more decisions within organizational processes, the relevant question is not simply where a human remains “in the loop.” Leaders need to understand how the process actually operates: What decisions can the system make or initiate? What can it change without human approval? Where does human judgment enter? Who establishes acceptable outcomes and boundaries? Who monitors performance? Who has authority to intervene or change the system? And who remains accountable for the consequences?

These are leadership questions about how work is governed that must be asked well beyond technology team meetings.

Recent litigation involving Workday makes the stakes tangible. In *Mobley v. Workday*, job applicants allege that AI-powered candidate-screening tools unlawfully filtered people based on protected characteristics. Workday disputes those allegations and maintains that customers control hiring decisions, yet courts have allowed several claims to proceed, including on the theory that a vendor performing traditional hiring functions may act as an employer’s agent.²⁷ The ongoing case illustrates the governance challenge: when a consequential process stretches across employers, vendors, data, algorithms, and human decision makers, who has the authority to intervene and who remains accountable for the outcome?

Even among the most advanced AI users, only about a quarter report that agent workflows, human handoffs, and quality standards are documented and repeatable at the team or organizational level.²⁸ As these processes become more complex, disconnection can give way to diffusion. Economist Dan Davies uses the term accountability sink to describe a danger that can emerge in complex organizations: decision making becomes so distributed across people, processes or technologies that no one meaningfully owns the final outcome.²⁹

As Davies observed in a recent podcast: “in the modern world, industrialized decision making happens, and because decisions are taken through industrial processes, people don’t feel like they are responsible for them.”³⁰

This danger confronts AI-enabled organizations at scale:

“The vendor built the algorithm.”

“The algorithm made the decision.”

“AI did it—not me.”

Each may accurately describe part of what happened, but none answers the leadership question: who owns the consequences?

As decision making extends across humans and intelligent machines, leaders must make accountability more explicit.³¹

Clear ownership is essential, as is collaboration. A process owner may control an important lever while other conditions shaping the outcome sit elsewhere in the organization. Leaders therefore need clarity about who has authority to act alongside strong enough relationships for people with interdependent responsibilities to solve problems across boundaries. This allows organizations to enable people throughout the organization to exercise meaningful agency while keeping authority and accountability connected.

People need enough authority to exercise judgment, respond to what they see, and change course. But greater agency cannot mean less accountability for the consequences.

The design challenge is to distribute the power to act without allowing accountability for consequences to disappear.

The Next Leadership Questions

As you consider your organization's most important outcomes, ask:

- What outcome are we trying to create?
- Which processes, policies, technologies, incentives, and everyday decisions shape it?
- Who has the authority to shape those levers?
- Does accountability sit with people who have sufficient authority to act?
- Where are the critical handoffs among people, functions, vendors, and AI systems?
- Who can intervene when a process produces an unintended outcome?
- Where could accountability diffuse or disappear?
- Are we giving people enough authority to exercise judgment while keeping accountability for consequences clear?
- Are performance expectations and incentives aligned?

Design Bridge

Depth Perception

An organization has experienced AI specialists, risk and compliance leaders, skilled HR professionals, and a cross-functional task force charged with preparing the organization for the future. As part of the task force's plan, an executive announces on social media that the organization has eliminated 3,000 customer-facing roles through automation. Six months later, productivity has fallen. Customer complaints have risen. Managers are overwhelmed. Recruitment begins for many of the same roles.

Organizations rarely make changes with the intention of creating worse outcomes. More often, they optimize what they can easily see while overlooking factors that may be equally consequential.

Design Bridge leadership question: How will we see our organization well enough to redesign wisely?

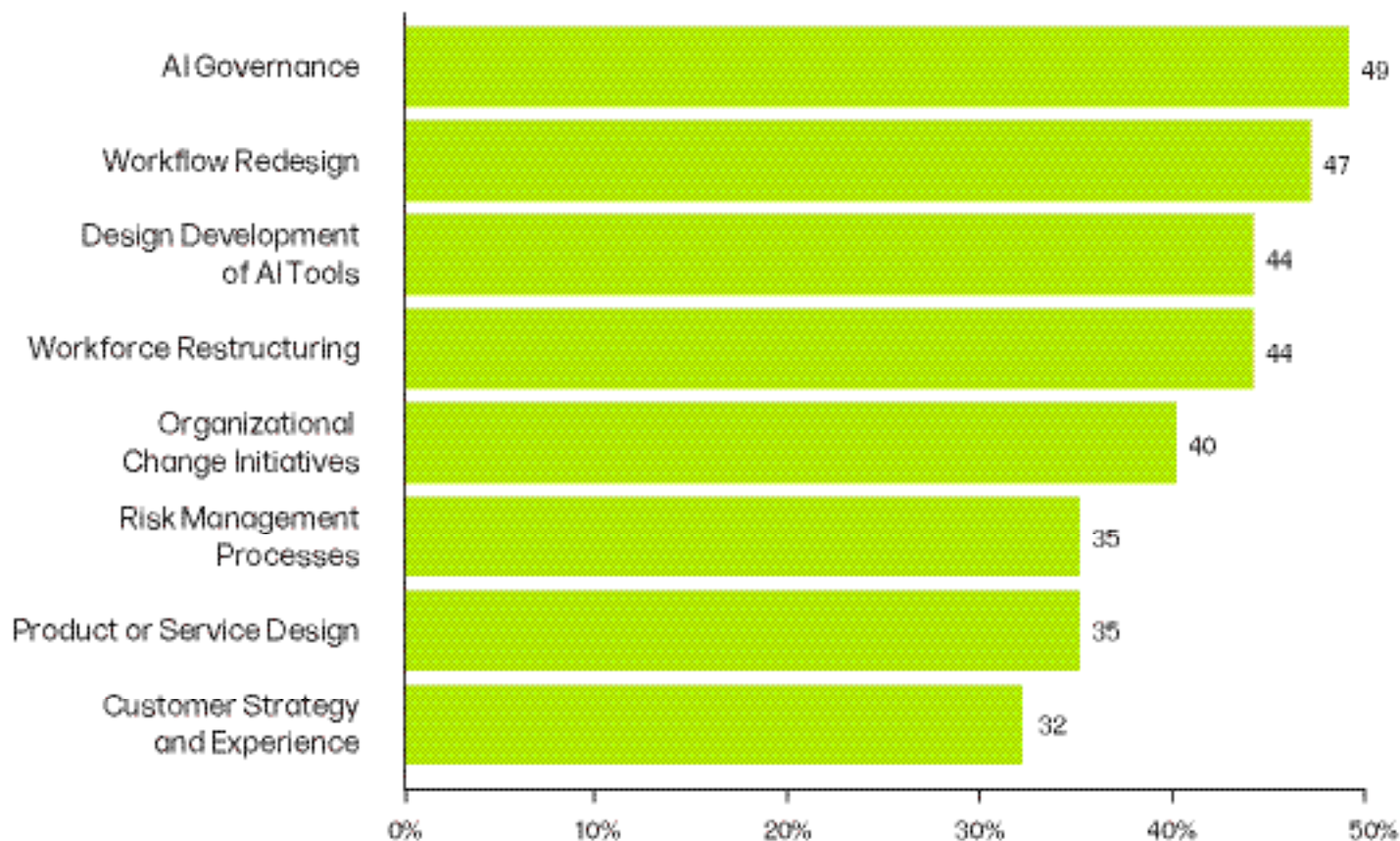
Depth Perception is the discipline of seeing consequential decisions through multiple vantage points to better understand what a change could set in motion before it scales.

The Risk: No One Can See Far Enough

Our survey suggests many organizations are transforming work without a deep, holistic understanding of how their organizations create value today.

We asked leaders how often diverse human perspectives are intentionally considered as work gets done. Large proportions reported they are considered only *sometimes, rarely, or never* during AI governance, restructuring, workflow redesign, organizational change, and customer strategy.

Decision makers who say a broad range of human perspectives, experiences, and needs are **never, rarely, or only sometimes** intentionally considered in:



These gaps matter because an organization that makes its more consequential operating decisions without a consistent process for incorporating a broad range of human perspectives may leave important consequences, dependencies, and opportunities outside leaders' field of view.

Modern organizations are filled with highly skilled professionals, and many already use sophisticated cross-functional approaches to consequential decisions. AI-enabled transformation increases the number of dimensions leaders must hold in view at once. Technical feasibility, economics, regulation, workflow, customer experience, human capability, relationships, identity, and unintended consequences can interact within the same

decision. Each expert may see important features of a decision, but none can see all of them.

The technologies reshaping work are evolving too quickly, and their consequences reach too far across the enterprise, for any single department, role, or profession to possess all the answers. Yet our interviews suggest that consequential transformation decisions can still be shaped by relatively narrow groups of technology leaders, consultants, and senior executives.

“Right now it is the same three people with the same three backgrounds in the room controlling the technology and transformation conversation. That is all wrong. Without more perspectives we cannot design the future for everybody.”

– Inclusion Executive

“When you have a group of people in the same room who think pretty much the same way, you’re bound to make catastrophic mistakes.”

– Tina Opie, PhD, Chief Vision Officer, Opie Consulting Group LLC

No form of professional expertise, no matter how deep, provides a complete field of vision. A technologist may see capabilities others cannot. A finance leader may see economics and capital constraints. A frontline employee may understand where a workflow actually breaks. A customer may experience consequences invisible from inside the organization. Different vantage points reveal different dependencies, risks, opportunities, and forms of value.

In conditions of radical uncertainty, perspective is organizational intelligence.

Organizations cannot redesign complex workflows, processes, and policies wisely using only the vantage points of the people with the greatest authority to change them.

The leadership challenge is therefore not simply to acquire more expertise but to build an organization capable of seeing from more than one vantage point before consequential choices scale.

Bridge Vocabulary

Operational Lens: Seeing how an organization creates value through its structures, processes, workflows, technologies, governance, incentives, customers, and decision making.

Human Lens: Seeing how people shape, enable, and experience that value creation through their roles, expertise, relationships, and social identities.

Relational Intelligence: The ability to intentionally build trust, partnerships, and coalitions through which organizations solve problems, learn, and create value.

The Opportunity: See More of the Organization

Architects design with materials such as glass, steel, concrete, light, and space. Software designers work with code. Organizational designers work with structures, technologies, incentives, relationships—and, at the root of all of them, people exercising judgment and agency.

A workflow does nothing until people use it. A decision is not made until someone exercises the authority to make it. Technology creates value through the choices people make with it. Formal structures interact with relationships, expertise, identities, and experience to determine how work actually gets done.

That makes organizational design fundamentally different from designing with inert materials. Silicon Valley famously popularized the ethos of “move fast and break things.” But when organizations are redesigning work, the things being changed are not only technologies, processes, or structures. People live inside those systems. As Tony Bynum, founder of LYMNL and

Associate Professor of Practice at Illinois Tech's Institute of Design, reminded participants in a Design Lab (see Part 3 for more on the Lab):

"It hurts when you break a human."

The implication is not that organizations should move slowly. Disciplined speed requires seeing consequences early enough to learn and change course while the design is still malleable. That requires seeing more of the system than any single vantage point can reveal.

Two Lenses. One Organization.

Organizational challenges can be examined through two complementary lenses: the **operational lens** and the **human lens**.

Leaders are accustomed to examining complex problems from different perspectives. Often, that means shifting from one perspective to another. But organizations do not separate themselves so neatly. Consequential transformation decisions rarely divide into distinct technological, financial, operational, or human questions. The same decision can be all of them at once.

Depth Perception therefore requires more than moving from one lens to another: it requires seeing through both at once. Leaders need to hold multiple dimensions of the organization in view at the same time—and understand how a change visible through one lens may produce consequences visible through another.

“Go hard on structures, soft on people.’ That’s something we say all of the time. The trick is, it is hard to reimagine structures because fields tend to be segregated. There are people who just work on policy or legal issues, people who work on infrastructure, people who just work on interpersonal or group dynamics. We’re saying that they are all connected.”

– Cecilie Surasky, Director of Partnerships, Othering & Belonging Institute

The Operational Lens

The operational lens helps leaders understand the systems through which value is produced: how strategy becomes work, how work moves through processes, where decisions are made, what incentives shape behavior, how technology participates, where dependencies sit, and how value ultimately reaches customers and other stakeholders.

Leaders looking through an operational lens ask:

- How does work actually happen?
- What organizational conditions produced this outcome?
- If we redesign one part of the organization, what else changes?

It reveals how the organization's operating model produces outcomes.

The Human Lens

The operational lens can show leaders how work is structured. The human lens reveals knowledge about how that work actually functions. Because organizations create value through and for people, understanding how people enable, experience, and respond to change is part of understanding whether that change will work.

People encounter the same organization from different vantage points. A frontline employee sees something a senior executive cannot. A long-tenured employee carries knowledge a new hire does not. A customer experiences a process differently from the team that designed it. Roles, expertise, relationships, identities, and experiences all shape what people can see.

Those differences are sources of organizational intelligence.

For decades, inclusion practitioners, scholars, and organizations like Center for Talent Innovation have developed ways of noticing differences that aggregate views can obscure: who experiences the same environment differently; whose knowledge enters decisions and whose does not; how

access, opportunity, learning, expertise, institutional knowledge, and trust travel through relationships; and how formal structures interact with people's actual experience of work.

Different positions within an organization reveal different information about what a proposed change could set in motion.

“As we’re rolling AI out, who’s the voice in these rooms saying: are we aware of this type of bias? This type of risk? Who’s speaking up?”

– Inclusion Executive

Leaders using a human lens ask:

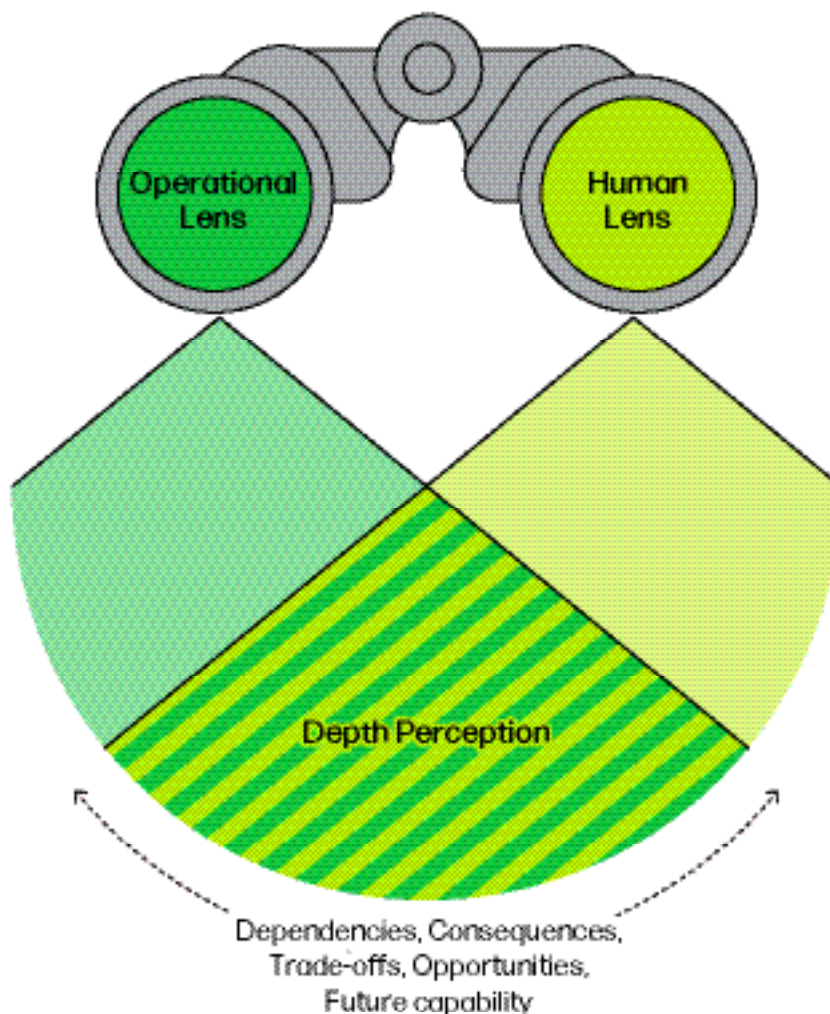
- Who experiences this differently from how I do?
- What might they see that I cannot?
- Whose knowledge is missing from this decision?
- Who understands how this work actually happens?
- What do relationships make possible here?
- What human capabilities are we strengthening— or unintentionally weakening?

The human lens extends beyond employees. Organizations create value through relationships with customers, candidates, communities, regulators, investors, vendors, and other stakeholders. Each occupies a different vantage point from which risks, needs, opportunities, and consequences may become visible. Looking through a human lens therefore means asking not only who gets to participate inside an organization, but who benefits, who bears risk, and who may be harmed by the organization's choices.

That matters even more as organizations redesign work with AI. Fewer people performing a task does not necessarily make human knowledge about that task less valuable. As organizations increase the speed and scale of technological change, the knowledge held by the people closest to the work can become an increasingly important source of insight into what those changes are actually producing.

Like binoculars, neither lens provides sufficient depth on its own. Together they create organizational **Depth Perception** : a fuller view of the dependencies, consequences, opportunities, and forms of value that consequential change may set in motion.

Building Organizational Vision



No executive can personally observe everything happening across a modern organization. Depth Perception therefore requires multiple channels through which different kinds of knowledge can enter leaders' field of view.

Some are human: frontline managers, employee resource groups, customer councils, communities of practice, mentoring and sponsorship relationships, and employee listening.³² Experts tell us others are increasingly technology-enabled: AI-powered workforce intelligence, customer sentiment tools, knowledge graphs, always-on listening systems, and emerging organizational digital twins can synthesize signals at a scale no individual leader could achieve.³³

These technologies can dramatically expand what leaders are able to observe. Yet more information does not necessarily mean more perspective. Human insight remains essential to supply context, test interpretations, correct errors, and turn AI-generated signals into usable knowledge. Even successful AI adoption can require substantial human effort behind the scenes: one 2026 study estimates that employees spend an average of 6.4 hours per week checking, correcting, and making AI outputs usable—work its authors call “botsitting.”³⁴

What becomes visible still depends on what organizations choose to examine, what their data captures, whose knowledge enters the picture, how signals from different sources are connected, and whether decision makers are equipped to interpret and act on them.

Organizational vision comes from combining vantage points that reveal different parts of the whole.

Perspective Travels Through Relationships

Seeing from multiple vantage points requires more than collecting information. People have to be willing and able to bring what they know across organizational boundaries—and decision makers have to be willing to hear it.

Impact scales through relationships.

Organizational redesign crosses functions, markets, and levels of authority. Leaders and teams therefore need the trust, credibility, coalitions, and shared language required to move knowledge across those boundaries and influence what happens next. This capability is **relational intelligence**: the ability to intentionally build and strengthen the relationships through which organizations solve problems, learn, and create value.³⁵ It may become one of the defining leadership capabilities of the AI era.³⁶

A frontline employee may see a problem first. A customer may experience it first. A technologist may understand its cause. A process owner may have

“We need to build leaders’ relational capacity—the ability to sit with difference, sit with conflict, and have courage.”

– Michael Welp, Founder, PhD, Full Partner Leadership

the authority to change it. Depth Perception depends on those vantage points reaching one another.

Building on The Convergent Leader

This Design Bridge extends ideas introduced in *The Convergent Leader*, where Center for Talent Innovation and Catalyst found that leaders in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom who combined **AI skills, inclusive leadership, and a flexible mindset** reported stronger outcomes over the prior 18 months compared with organizations led by non-Convergent Leaders: nearly 3x as likely to report stronger team productivity, 2.5x as likely to report market-share gains, and 2x as likely to report revenue or profit-margin gains.³⁷

One expression of that flexible mindset is especially relevant here: the ability to hold multiple dimensions of a problem in view without assuming that any one perspective reveals the whole.

The Next Leadership Questions

Before your next consequential decision, ask:

- What are we seeing clearly—and what might be outside our field of view?
- Which operational and human dimensions of this decision have we considered?
- Who experiences this work closely enough to see something we cannot?
- Whose knowledge or perspective is not yet represented in this decision?
- What dependencies or consequences might become visible from another vantage point?
- Do we have the relationships needed to bring those different vantage points into the decision?

Design Bridge

Applied Insight

A company celebrates record engagement survey scores after the rollout of a company-wide AI tool. Adoption is high. Employees praise the company's new tool for saving them time on their individual tasks. Executives declare the tool a success. Months later, productivity slows. High performers begin leaving. Customers complain about declining service. Adoption and usage dashboards never showed a problem—but they weren't built to highlight whether work was just being augmented with AI or if workflows were actually being redesigned to deliver better outcomes.

Organizations don't become adaptive because they collect more data. They become adaptive when they learn from the data early enough to adjust what they do next.

Regardless of the size of the organization, every day generates new evidence about how work is functioning: performance metrics, customer feedback, collaboration patterns, feedback from frontline managers, employee concerns, AI adoption data, informal conversations. Every completed process, every new technology, every redesigned role reveals something that can tell leaders about how the organization is changing—if leaders have access to insights and the desire and bandwidth to listen.

Today's challenge is not a lack of evidence, especially not when AI is capable of generating so much more data than organizations ever had before. The challenge is recognizing which signals matter, interpreting them wisely, and using what they reveal to decide what to try, change, investigate, or test next. As organizations redesign work to be fit for the future, they cannot afford to wait until consequences become business problems before they begin learning from them.

Bridge leadership question: What are our choices producing—and what will we do with what we learn?

Applied Insight is the discipline of recognizing meaningful signals, using evidence to understand what they reveal, and using the resulting insights to inform what the organization tries, changes, or learns next.

Bridge Vocabulary

Signal: An observation that suggests something important may be happening.

Example: Customer complaints begin mentioning longer wait times, while several employees independently report that teams seem less willing to collaborate across functions.

Evidence: Qualitative or quantitative information gathered to better understand that signal.

Example: Leaders examine customer feedback, collaboration patterns, employee interviews, workflow metrics, and meeting data.

Insight: An understanding drawn from evidence that helps explain an issue, opportunity, or trend and changes how the organization understands what is happening or what it does next

Example: Analysis suggests that a recent organizational restructuring reduced cross-functional meeting opportunities and created unclear decision-making responsibilities. Leaders now have a hypothesis they can test: that these changes are making collaboration harder and contributing to delays in resolving customer issues.

The Risk: Data Rich, Insight Poor

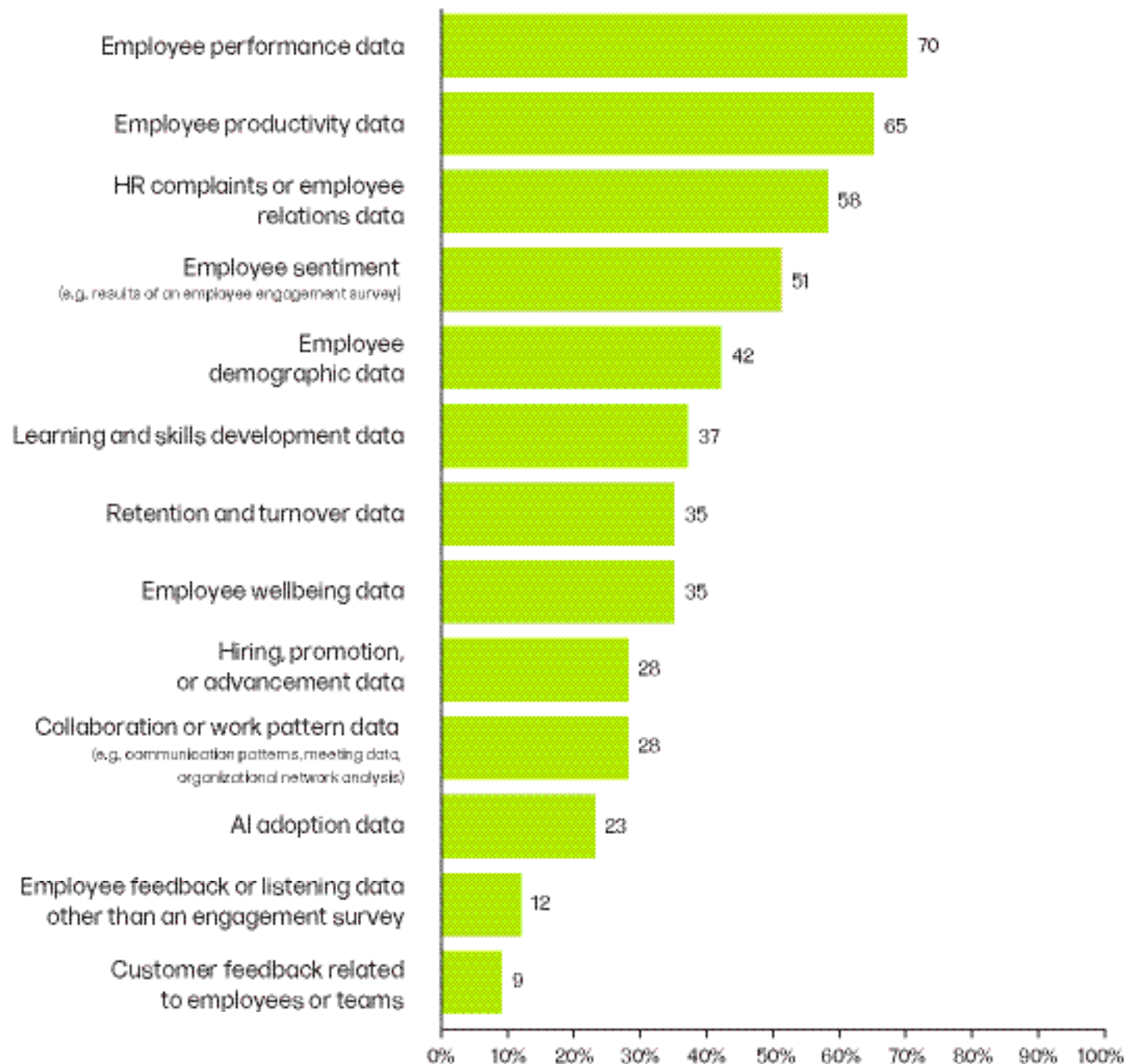
Organizations have never had more workforce data or greater technological capacity to gather it. The global HR analytics market alone exceeded \$5 billion in 2026.³⁸ Companies routinely monitor productivity, engagement, learning activity, collaboration, performance, retention, and other aspects of work life. A rise in “always-on,” “ambient” workforce technology promises continuous streams of information.³⁹

More data does not necessarily produce more understanding.

To understand what evidence organizations actually use, we asked CEOs and executives which workforce data they regularly review to inform business decision.

The pattern is revealing. The measures executives review most consistently tend to provide visibility into what the organization is producing today. Measures that could help reveal whether it is building or depleting its capacity to create value tomorrow receive less consistent attention.

CEOs and executives regularly review this data to inform business decisions:



Performance and productivity data matter because organizations need to know what they are accomplishing. During transformation, leaders also need signals about what their choices are doing to the conditions on which future performance depends: learning and skills, retention, well-being, collaboration, advancement, and the experience of customers.

Why is one team becoming more productive while another is burning out? Why did customer experience decline after productivity increased? Why is an AI tool producing impressive adoption numbers while employees quietly spend hours checking and correcting its output? Why are some employees learning from new technology while others are losing opportunities to develop judgment?

No single measure answers those questions. Answering them requires connecting multiple signals to understand what transformation is producing—and learning from that evidence quickly enough to adapt.

Organizations can become increasingly data rich while remaining insight poor.

The Opportunity: Turning Evidence into Learning

Distributed Accountability requires responsibility for human outcomes does not rest with HR or inclusion teams alone. Responsibility for organizational learning cannot rest exclusively with them either. People functions may collect workforce evidence. Data teams may analyze it. Employees may surface emerging problems. Managers may notice patterns. Customers may signal that something has changed.

None of that becomes organizational learning until the people with authority to shape work use what they learn. If leaders are not routinely examining the evidence needed to understand how work is changing, who is? Middle managers and senior leaders in our survey were no more likely than executives to regularly use these sources of evidence in decision making. The gap does not appear to be filled elsewhere.

There are many reasons why, and better technology alone will not resolve them. Our research surfaced obstacles across the entire journey.

- **Fear of what the evidence might reveal.**

Some organizations may avoid examining questions whose answers could create pressure to act. For example, comparing AI adoption or workforce outcomes across employee populations could reveal disparities that leaders would then be expected to investigate or address. Not knowing can become a form of risk avoidance. **In practice:** *If we measure it, we may have to explain it—and do something about it.*

- **Limited employee trust in data collection and use.** Organizations can only learn from information employees are willing to provide. Employees may choose not to self-identify, participate in surveys, raise concerns, or provide candid feedback if they do not trust how that information will be used. This can leave organizations with incomplete or distorted evidence—particularly about the experiences of people who have the greatest reason to be cautious. **In practice:** *The dashboard looks reassuring because the people with the greatest concerns stopped answering the survey.*

What gets in the way of better evidence

The barriers to evidence-based decision making can emerge at every stage of the journey from inquiry to action:



- **Fragmented evidence and limited access.** Relevant information may exist but remain difficult to retrieve, combine, or examine across HR systems, employee surveys, operational dashboards, customer data, AI platforms, and individual functions. Leaders can have abundant data without a coherent view of what it means. **In practice:** *Everyone has a piece of the picture; no one can see the whole.*
- **Too much data, too little signal.** More dashboards and metrics can create the appearance of greater visibility while making it harder to distinguish what actually matters. Leaders need ways to identify meaningful patterns and connect signals that may sit in different datasets or parts of the organization. **In practice:** *The leadership team has 40 metrics and still cannot answer whether the workflow redesign is a success.*
- **Limited data literacy.** Decision makers may lack the confidence or capability to interpret workforce evidence, distinguish correlation from causation, ask useful follow-up questions, or understand what the data cannot tell them. **In practice:** *A key metric moves from one quarter to the next. Leaders can see the change but cannot explain what is driving it.*
- **Limited trust in the evidence.** Leaders may question whether workforce data is sufficiently accurate, complete, current, or representative to support consequential decisions. Poor-quality data can undermine confidence even when useful signals are present. **In practice:** *A concerning finding appears—and the conversation becomes about whether the data can be trusted rather than what the finding might mean.*
- **Unclear business relevance.** Workforce measures are often presented separately from the commercial and operational outcomes leaders are accountable for. Without a clear connection between human conditions and enterprise outcomes, people data can remain interesting rather than actionable. **In practice:** *Employee engagement is down. So what does that mean for customer experience, innovation, quality, or performance?*
- **A weak culture of evidence-based decision making.** Even in organizations that aspire to make data-driven decisions, seniority,

intuition, precedent, or the views of the most influential person in the room can carry more weight than evidence. Better data will have limited effect if organizational norms do not reward questioning assumptions or changing course in response to what is learned. **In practice:** *The dashboard says one thing. The most senior person in the room says another. Everyone moves on.*

- **Competing priorities.** Even useful evidence can lose out to immediate operational demands. We hear time and again that review of workforce metrics is often placed at the end of leadership agendas—only for the meeting to repeatedly run out of time before anyone reaches them. What an organization makes time to examine is itself a signal of what it considers important. **In practice:** *The people discussion is item eight on a seven-item meeting.*
- **Unclear accountability for action.** Producing an insight is not the same as assigning responsibility for what happens next. When no leader or function owns the response, important findings can circulate without changing decisions. **In practice:** *Everyone sees the finding. Everyone agrees it matters. No one owns what happens next.*

Applied Insight requires the organizational capacity to generate and interpret useful evidence—and the willingness to know and act on what that evidence reveals.

From Measurement to Insight

Periods of disruption can create pressure to move faster. Paradoxically, that makes disciplined learning even more important. History offers no shortage of cautionary tales showing that when the pace of change exceeds an organization's capacity to learn, human and business risks can compound.*

* See, for example, the Boeing 737 MAX investigations; the Wells Fargo unauthorized accounts scandal; and Knight Capital's 2012 software deployment failure—three very different examples in which organizations failed to detect, interpret, or act on critical feedback during periods of rapid operational change.

Many organizations still use workforce data primarily as a report card. They compare this quarter to last quarter, benchmark themselves against competitors, celebrate improvements and investigate declines. Those measures remain essential, but they tell only part of the story.

Learning organizations also ask different questions:

What should we learn from our organization?

What evidence would help guide our next decision rather than simply evaluate our last one?

Instead of asking only whether engagement declined, they examine what is changing in the day-to-day experience of work. Instead of waiting for turnover to increase, they look for the conditions that may be making departure more likely. Instead of asking only whether AI improved productivity, they investigate how it is changing judgment, collaboration, learning, customer experience, and accountability—and whether those changes are being experienced differently across the workforce.

The task is to understand how the conditions people experience at work connect to the outcomes an organization is trying to create—and to use the organization's own evidence to make those relationships visible.

Companies must move beyond measuring outcomes alone and seek to understand the organizational conditions producing them.**

** Many readers will recognize this way of thinking as Root Cause Analysis and may recall various frameworks such as 5 Whys. These methods typically work backward from an observed problem to investigate the conditions that produced it. Applied Insight extends that discipline: organizations must not only diagnose problems after they appear, but continually look for the conditions and early signals that reveal whether work is moving toward—or away from—the outcomes they seek. Our research and advisory work suggest that while many leaders use root cause methods effectively within specific functions, applying this way of thinking consistently to organizational redesign and human-centered work remains far from an enterprise-wide capability.

Return to Your Why

Alaina Szlachta, PhD, Chief Measurement Architect at By Design Development Solutions, argues that organizations often overcomplicate measurement by trying to quantify every downstream business outcome. Instead, leaders should begin with the organization's purpose and ask what evidence would demonstrate that people are increasingly able to fulfill it.

She shared, "Everything that you do should roll up to a core metric that defines the health of the organization based upon why it exists."

Her observation brings us back to Strategic Coherence. Every organization defines value differently. You cannot know what evidence matters until you know what value you are trying to create.

Applied Insight therefore asks a follow-on question:

What evidence would tell us we are becoming better at creating that value?

Look for Signals Before They Become Outcomes

If your organization's future were beginning to emerge today, what would you expect to observe?

- What would employees experience differently?
- What behaviors would become more common?
- What decisions would change?
- What conversations would happen more—or less—often?
- What might customers begin to notice?

These may be early signals that an organization is becoming—or drifting away from—the future it intends to create. This does not make traditional workforce measures less important. It means organizations need to look both backward at outcomes and forward for signals of what may produce them.

“We [recently] took a really hard look at what we were measuring and why. What was it telling us? Could we take action on the findings in this current environment? *We want to focus not just on what we call ‘curiosity data,’ but on actionable insights.* Hopefully we can go beyond traditional HR metrics—hiring, promotion rates, representation, etc., which tend to be lagging indicators because we’re always looking backwards—to leading indicators.”

– Senior Inclusion Practitioner

Seeing More Requires Governing Evidence Well

Building stronger organizational sensing capabilities does not mean maximizing access to workforce data for everyone. The ability to learn more does not create an unlimited right to know more. Organizations may have access to a wealth of employee data, but there will be some employee information and insight that they are not entitled to.

Workforce evidence is governed by privacy law, employee consent, organizational policy, and other legitimate restrictions on who should have access to sensitive information. Several inclusion practitioners told us that their access to demographic and employee-lifecycle data has changed. Those changes should not automatically be interpreted as organizational retreat. In some cases, they reflect necessary corrections to weak data-protection and access practices; in others, organizations may be responding cautiously to evolving legal risk.

The challenge is becoming more complex as AI tools and workforce analytics make increasingly granular observation possible. Organizations need to understand not only what data they can collect and analyze, but what employees have agreed it may be used for, who *can* legitimately access it, and what purposes justify that access.

The future goal is not maximum visibility but responsible visibility: enough evidence to learn what the organization needs to learn, governed in ways that protect the people whose information makes that learning possible.

Governance is also essential to trust. Employees decide whether to self-identify, participate candidly in surveys, raise concerns, admit mistakes, or remain silent. At the same time, advances in AI, workplace analytics, digital monitoring, and increasingly emotion and behavioral data make it possible for organizations to observe more aspects of work without asking employees directly.⁴⁰

Greater technical visibility can strengthen organizational learning. It can also erode the trust and candor on which learning depends.

Not every listening system builds trust. Not everything an organization can observe should necessarily be observed. Organizations that learn well are transparent about what they collect, why they collect it, how it will be used, whose interests it serves—and what they learn and do as a result.

Learn Before You Scale

No organization can know exactly what a redesign will produce before people experience it. That uncertainty is not an argument against transformation but an argument for learning.

Every organization is already running experiments. Each new workflow, AI tool, redesigned role, team structure, policy, and human-machine handoff tests an assumption about how work should function. Organizations must recognize these as experiments and learn from them before scaling their consequences.

Leaders can make an assumption explicit, identify what they expect to happen, determine what evidence would confirm or challenge that expectation, watch what actually occurs, and adjust accordingly. This becomes particularly important when the first results look positive. A new workflow may increase output while weakening learning. Automation may improve consistency while eliminating opportunities to develop judgment. A restructuring may reduce costs while disrupting relationships or institutional knowledge. An AI-enabled process may work well on average while producing very different outcomes for particular employees or customers.

Applied Insight allows leaders to ask not only whether a change appears to be working, but what it is producing—and what it may be building, renewing, or eroding for tomorrow.

That is how organizations begin to distinguish sustainable transformation from extraction while there is still time to change course.

Applied Insight turns transformation from a series of bets into a capacity to learn.

The Next Leadership Questions

As your organization changes, ask:

- What are we trying to learn?
- What signals would tell us our assumptions may be wrong?
- What evidence would help us understand what those signals mean?
- What organizational conditions may be producing what we observe?
- What have we learned that should change our understanding?
- What will we do differently as a result?

2

What Inclusion Work Teaches Us About Sustainable Transformation

For more than two decades, organizations have conducted one of the largest experiments in organizational redesign in modern management. It has gone by different names, but many call it some version of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Organizations were not merely launching employee programs or responding to legal and social change. They were experimenting with a far more fundamental question:

How do organizations intentionally design for better human outcomes?

Different organizations answered that question differently. Some focused on representation. Others on culture, belonging, accessibility, leadership, employee experience, product design, supplier diversity, or community engagement. Much of this work understandably focused inside the organization: who worked there, who advanced, who belonged, and how employees experienced its systems. But organizations also shape human outcomes through what they produce and the consequences they create

beyond their own workforce. No single operating model ever emerged—nor should we have expected one. Organizations were learning in real time. As one experienced inclusion leader reminded us, the work has always been “a living discipline.”

Many of those experiments improved workplaces, expanded opportunities, and changed countless lives. They also revealed important limitations.

Recent legal changes, political polarization, technological disruption, and the rush towards organizational restructuring did not simply create those limitations. They exposed what was already there. They revealed how tightly many organizations had coupled an enduring purpose—the creation of better human outcomes—to particular forms of implementation. As the operating context changed radically, some of those forms became increasingly difficult to connect to the organization’s evolving priorities, some of which became increasingly difficult to connect to the outcomes the business was trying to create.

The stakes of getting the next operating model right are rising.

Organizations are making consequential decisions about automation, workforce reduction, job design, and where human judgment will remain. Those consequences will not be distributed evenly. Historically marginalized workers have often borne the costs of economic and technological disruption earlier and more severely, and emerging evidence suggests the AI-enabled redesign of work could follow the same pattern. To name just one signal: women of color make up nearly one in three workers in jobs considered the most AI-vulnerable.⁴¹

Such unequal exposure to harm is an injustice in its own right, but there is another consequence organizations should understand. When transformation disproportionately pushes out people with less power or security within the organization, organizations do not just lose headcount. They stand to lose knowledge, relationships, experience, and perspectives through which they understand customers, challenge assumptions, detect

unintended consequences, and see how their systems operate under different conditions.

Extractive transformation can therefore compound harm: concentrating its costs among those with the least structural protection while simultaneously eroding the human capability an organization needs to create value tomorrow.

Rather than asking whether inclusion work should continue, we set out to understand what decades of inclusion practice and research could teach us about Sustainable Transformation: creating value today while building and renewing the conditions required to keep creating value tomorrow.

Looking across our interviews, survey data, and more than two decades of Center for Talent Innovation research, several lessons emerged.

“Let’s reflect on what we did. Let’s listen to some of the criticisms—even if some were made in bad faith, some of them are valid. How can we improve the practice? How can we advance the practice to appeal to a broader audience?”

- Ifedapo Adeleye, PhD, Professor of the Practice and Faculty Director of the Master’s in Human Resources Management Program, Georgetown University

Lesson 1

Purpose survived. Strategic connection weakened.

We argue that organizations create value by intentionally designing themselves around the outcomes they seek to produce. That observation helps explain both the promise and the limits of the operating model that has shaped much of modern inclusion work.

For years, organizations debated the case for inclusion. The moral case. Business case. Innovation case. Talent case. Customer case. Legal case. Reputation case. Center for Talent Innovation and many others contributed to this conversation, helping organizations understand both the risks of exclusion and the opportunities created when more people could contribute and thrive.

We see these not as competing arguments, but as different ways of connecting human outcomes to organizational value. The underlying insight has become even more consequential in an age of intelligent technologies: Organizations depend on understanding the people who create value, experience its consequences, and are affected by the choices made in its pursuit.

But those connections have always been contextual. A hospital and a software company do not create value in the same way. A bank, a retailer, a tech startup, and a pharmaceutical company face different strategic realities, different stakeholders, different types of consumers, and different constraints. We should never expect every organization, even competitors in the same industry, to make precisely the same case or give the elements of the case the same weight.

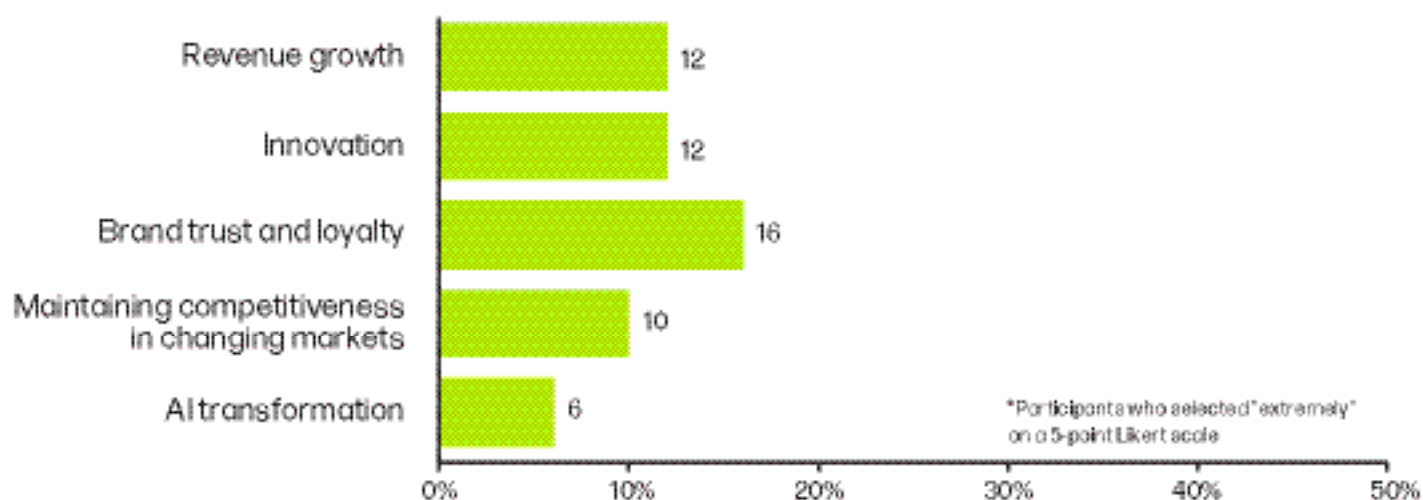
The more urgent question is whether organizations can see the connection at all.

Earlier, we showed the top strategic priorities identified by CEOs and executives in our survey. For each priority they selected, we also asked how strongly they connect it to their organization's formal inclusion-related work in practice.

Even among leaders who identify each issue as a top strategic priority, few see a strong connection to inclusion work:

Leaders see little connection between inclusion work and their own top strategic priorities.

Leaders who strongly* connect inclusion-related work to...



This **strategic decoupling**—the weakening of the perceived or actual connection between a function's work and the organization's evolving strategic priorities—matters whether the disconnect is perceived or actual.

The aspiration to create inclusive organizations may endure even when leaders no longer understand how formal inclusion work contributes to the outcomes the enterprise values most. When that connection weakens, inclusion work can become easier to marginalize or separate from consequential decisions—even when the capabilities developed through that work remain valuable.

Transformation Without Inclusion Practitioners

A senior technology leader in financial services described work already underway to fundamentally rethink how knowledge work gets done.

She and her leadership team are considering how employees can use AI more effectively, what work should remain human, where AI agents could take on greater responsibility, how teams might change, and what capabilities people will need in a workforce increasingly composed of humans and machines. She described one possible future:

“We think there will be smaller teams—what are now teams of 8-12 will become teams of 2-3 people, working alongside a dozen or more autonomous AI agents.”

She is helping to build that future and create what she describes as a template for operating model transformation that many other businesses across sectors may choose to follow.

She sits daily with the mixed implications of this work. She spoke candidly about the uncertainty leaders themselves face and the potentially profound consequences of the choices they are making: “What we’re doing right now, I think it will have a societal impact, not just a company impact. I worry about that all the time.”

As agents absorb more tasks, she argues, organizations will need to examine which jobs disappear and what remains inside the jobs that survive. She wonders: “In this future of work, what will it mean to be a team?”

Contrary to the early AI narrative that technology would absorb boring, repetitive work so humans could focus on more interesting and higher-value activity, she worries that AI could take on much of the interesting work while humans are left primarily to monitor its output.

Yet organizations will continue to need human judgment, evaluation, creativity, and the ability to explore questions the technology cannot answer. These are, in other

words, profoundly human questions. They are questions about work design, opportunity, capability, judgment, experience, and whose talents organizations will need in the future.

When we asked whether the formal inclusion function had meaningfully intersected with this work, her response was striking:

“No, I don’t even know why it would. I’ve never had a conversation with our CDO. She seems to be working on other things.”

This did not mean questions of bias or fairness were being ignored. She described governance, compliance, audit, and regulatory processes intended to address them embedded in her team’s workflows—with no formal inclusion practitioner in sight.

That is what makes the disconnect so consequential.

An organization can maintain robust inclusion infrastructure while decisions with enormous consequences for people—what work exists, how it gets done, where human judgment remains, how people develop, and which capabilities and perspectives the organization values—are made elsewhere.

The most consequential human outcomes of the next decade may be determined outside anything called an inclusion strategy.

This is what strategic decoupling can look like in practice: inclusion work continues while some of the decisions that most profoundly shape people’s working lives are made elsewhere.

Our data cannot tell us why the strategic connection is weak. We see at least two possibilities.

One is that inclusion teams are already helping organizations innovate, strengthen trust, better understand customers, and navigate workforce transformation, but some leaders do not recognize those contributions. If so, inclusion teams face a significant perception challenge.

The more concerning possibility—one shown in sharp relief in the sidebar—is that some formal inclusion functions remain organized around activities whose connection to the organization’s most pressing strategic priorities has weakened. In those organizations, inclusion work may continue alongside the business without meaningfully informing the decisions reshaping it.

There is no single answer across organizations, but our data tells us something equally important: **the connection is no longer widely understood.**

Rebuilding that connection does not require a universal business case for inclusion. Human value should not be reduced to economic value. Organizations are also complex systems; innovation, productivity, trust, retention, or growth can rarely be traced neatly to a single intervention or function.

The more useful question is contextual: **How do the human outcomes an organization seeks relate to the value it is trying to create?**

One inclusion executive argues that this is where the work must now go. The moral and human case does not disappear; organizations also need to understand how the conditions people experience connect to business outcomes in their own context. In her words, “it’s an *and*.”

“We have to be able to move to being able to demonstrate that correlation... us[ing] data from the organization.” Inclusion work, in her view, “has to be great for the employees, internal communities, [and] we also need to show the link to the business impact.”

Her distinction is important: correlation, not causation. The goal is not to manufacture a tidy ROI calculation for every human outcome. Nor does the absence of one make dignity, fairness, voice, or opportunity dispensable.

These principles can stand on their own while organizations also seek to understand how human conditions relate to organizational outcomes. The Applied Insight Bridge provides the discipline for doing so: examine the organization's own conditions and evidence, test relationships, and avoid claiming more than the evidence can support.

Inclusion practitioners may be particularly well positioned to help cultivate this capability in leaders across the organization.

Inclusion Practitioners See a Connection

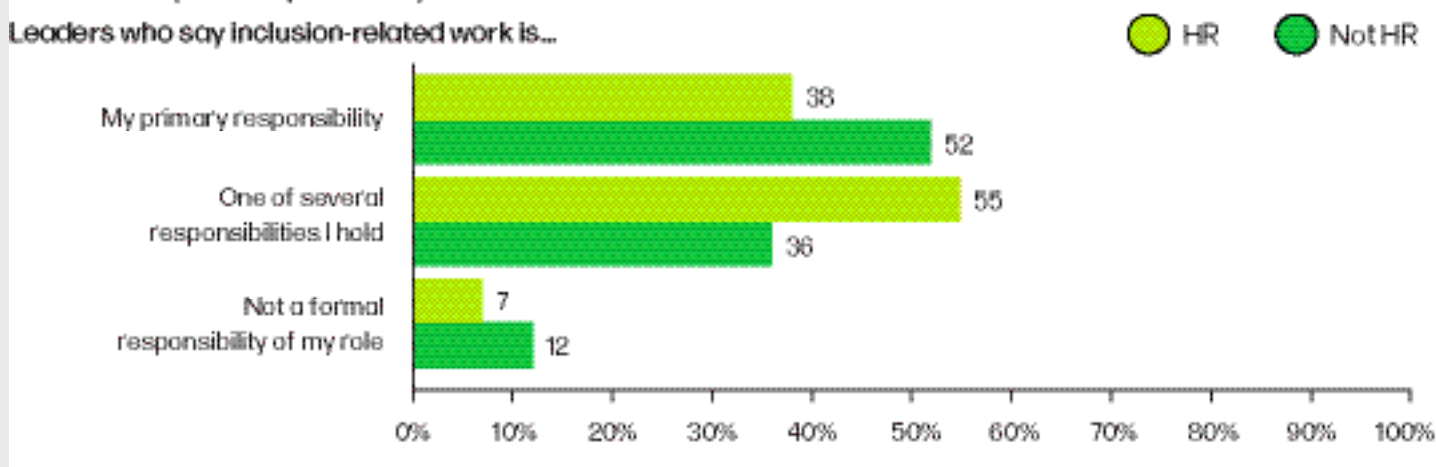
We did not set out specifically to survey inclusion practitioners. For the purposes of the survey, we defined inclusion-related work broadly as work focused on “people, culture, belonging, accessibility, opportunity, diversity, equity, and/or related priorities,” then asked respondents how much of their own role involved that work.

A substantial share told us it was their primary responsibility: 38% of HR decision makers and more surprisingly, more than half (52%) of non-HR decision makers. Only 7% of HR and 12% non-HR decision makers said that inclusion-related work is not a formal responsibility of their role at all.

That gave us an opportunity to compare people whose primary responsibility is inclusion-related work with respondents for whom it is one of several responsibilities or not a formal responsibility.

Is inclusion your responsibility?

Leaders who say inclusion-related work is...



Majorities of both groups identified revenue growth as one of their organization's top five strategic priorities, but inclusion practitioners were significantly more likely to say their organization's inclusion-related work is strongly connected to revenue growth.

As we noted earlier, this finding does not tell us whether inclusion practitioners are correct about that connection. Nor does it establish that their work causes revenue growth. Still, it raises an intriguing possibility: people whose roles require them to understand how organizational conditions shape people's experiences may become more practiced at seeing connections between human conditions and organizational outcomes that others overlook.

If so, inclusion practitioners may bring a form of organizational pattern recognition that becomes increasingly valuable as the conditions of work change.

“This isn't necessarily new and different from what we have faced in the past. The tension between performance and people is familiar. What is different is the level of risk. The risk of not being at the table for a conversation about a sales transformation program is very different than the risk that exists when we talk about augmenting or replacing human beings with technology at work. The threat level is higher because AI has more significant impact on the current and future workforce. And the right executives need to be at the table to weigh in.”

- Sumona de Graaf, PhD, Founder & CEO, idealis

Lesson 2

Identity helps organizations see.

For decades, inclusion work has helped organizations see patterns they might otherwise overlook in who gains access to opportunity, who advances, and how different groups experience work.

Scholars, researchers, practitioners, and employees themselves have documented how people could occupy the same workplace and experience profoundly different organizations. Our own research has examined these dynamics across gender, race and ethnicity, disability status, LGBTQ+ identity, age, class and socioeconomic background, religion, region, veteran status, nationality, parent and carer status, caste, and beyond. We have learned that who is othered is contextually specific: identities associated with advantage or disadvantage in one organization, geography, or culture may carry different meanings and consequences in another. We have explored how identities intersect with one another—and with role, hierarchy, geography, and power.

This body of work also taught organizations something enormously valuable about how they function: **Different perspectives reveal different things about the same system.**

An employee who encounters an inaccessible technology platform learns something about how that platform was designed. An employee resource group may identify a customer need—or serious marketing gaffe—before the product or marketing team sees it. A Black employee repeatedly overlooked for advancement may see informal sponsorship dynamics that aggregate promotion data cannot explain. A working parent struggling with a return-to-office policy may reveal assumptions about where and when valuable work happens.

These experiences are not interchangeable, and identity does not automatically confer insight. People who share an identity do not share

a single experience, perspective, or worldview. Humans resist such easy categorization. Identity can shape how and where people encounter an organization, and therefore what they are able to see about how it works. Patterns across those experiences can provide vital intelligence.

Scholars in the standpoint tradition have long argued that knowledge is socially situated: where people stand within a system shapes what they are able to see. Over decades, inclusion practitioners have operationalized a version of that insight inside organizations. They listened across difference, disaggregated data, and created affinity spaces. They surfaced patterns hidden by averages. They asked who was missing from decisions and whose experience contradicted the dominant organizational story.

In the language of the Depth Perception Bridge, they developed the human lens.

Communities Help Organizations See

Employee resource groups, affinity networks, reciprocal mentoring, employee survey feedback attached to demographic data, and other forms of collective voice have given organizations ways to see themselves more clearly.

At their best, these mechanisms surface emerging needs, identify unintended consequences, challenge assumptions, and reveal opportunities in talent, products, customer experience, leadership, and organizational design. They can transform lived experience into organizational learning.

Representation has long raised a familiar question: Who gets access to the opportunities an organization creates? That question remains. Workforce transformation adds another: Which opportunities will continue to exist—and who will remain when there are fewer of them? If the number of humans in once massive multinational organizations continues to shrink, the composition and range of perspectives among those humans may matter more, not less.

There are at least three things at stake:

- Justice: Who gets access to increasingly scarce opportunities, income, development, authority, and influence?
- Capability: Whose knowledge, judgment, relationships, experiences, and perspectives remain available to the organization?
- Learning: Can the organization still detect when its increasingly automated systems produce consequences that their designers, data, or models did not anticipate?

These questions become still more important because AI systems are imperfect representations of human knowledge. Large language models are trained on vast stores of human-produced data that contain historical inequalities, uneven representation, and gaps in whose knowledge and experience have been recorded.⁴² AI can dramatically increase the speed, scale, and reach of organizational decisions—and of the biases and blind spots embedded within them. A problem that was once contained within a team, office, or individual decision can now travel through an AI-enabled workflow across an enterprise and out to candidates, customers and other external stakeholders, *fast*.

As organizations increasingly rely on machine-generated representations of people and the world, preserving ways of seeing what the models may miss becomes more important.

The people experiencing friction first may therefore be carrying information the organization needs urgently. Their experiences can function as early signals of emerging risks, unmet needs, unintended consequences, and opportunities that formal metrics have yet to capture. Those human signals are strategic intelligence.

This lesson from prior inclusion work is worth preserving: Identity helps organizations see. Difference brings crucial new ideas and insights. **Those human signals are strategic intelligence.**

Decades of inclusion work have taught organizations ways to surface some of those signals: listen across difference, disaggregate data, create spaces for collective voice, and pay attention when edge cases contradict or complicate the dominant organizational story.

If identity helps organizations see, seeing creates another question: Who is responsible for fixing what becomes visible?

That is where the previous operating model often broke down.

Lesson 3

The operating model conflated seeing a problem with fixing it.

The people closest to a problem often know something important about it. That does not mean they should be responsible for solving it. Over time, many organizations blurred that distinction.

Employees experiencing barriers were asked to surface, explain, and document them. They had to educate colleagues, advocate for solutions, help design interventions, build support, implement change, and monitor whether or not the change worked.

Inclusion practitioners frequently inherited the same expanding responsibility at an organizational level. As organizations recognized more dimensions of workplace experience, specialized functions accumulated increasingly broad portfolios: representation, culture, learning, communications, leadership, affinity networks, employee experience, accessibility, product and service development, community engagement, and more.

As the scope of the work expanded, responsibility often grew without corresponding authority. The people charged with improving human outcomes frequently did not have authority over the workplace processes producing them, such as hiring, promotion, team development, employee benefits, or performance management. Yet they could still be held accountable for outcomes produced through those processes. This is the disconnect explored in the Distributed Accountability Bridge: responsibility, authority, and accountability had come apart.

That disconnect is becoming even more consequential as organizations redesign work around AI. Many inclusion leaders we interviewed described being excluded from critical conversations about AI implementation and

organizational restructuring—even when those decisions could significantly affect representation, opportunity, employee experience, and other outcomes they were expected to influence.

The irony is difficult to miss. Responsible AI frameworks increasingly recognize risks related to bias and disparate outcomes across the AI lifecycle. Yet practitioners with deep experience examining how organizational processes produce different outcomes across populations may not be meaningfully connected to the decisions reshaping those very processes.

Within that operating model, practitioners understandably concentrated effort on levers they could more easily control, such as training, networks, events, toolkits, communications, and listening sessions. Those interventions were not inherently misguided. Many created substantial value. Many will continue to do so. The problem emerged when organizations expected collections of interventions to produce outcomes that could only be generated by the organization as a whole.

As we explored in the Distributed Accountability Bridge, **organizations were trying to create system-level outcomes through interventions that were organized, owned, funded, and measured in pieces.**

Inclusion is hardly alone in confronting this problem. Modern organizations divide work into functions while seeking outcomes that emerge across them: innovation, trust, sustainability, customer loyalty, culture, and transformation.

Inclusion offers an unusually revealing case study because responsibility, authority, and accountability became so visibly disconnected. The result was an unfair division of labor. Employees experiencing problems firsthand became both sources of insight and engines of remediation. Inclusion practitioners were expected to improve—and sometimes held accountable for—outcomes produced through processes and policies they could rarely change themselves.

Communities help organizations see. Process owners must help organizations change

The Distributed Accountability and Depth Perception Bridges point to complementary organizational needs: organizations need ways to see problems clearly and clear responsibility, authority, and accountability for acting on what becomes visible.

Employees and communities can surface experiences, risks, needs, and opportunities that decision makers might otherwise miss. The people closest to a problem may understand it in ways those with formal authority do not. Their knowledge is an essential part of organizational Depth Perception .

Seeing or surfacing a problem does not create responsibility for solving it. Acting on what becomes visible requires connecting that insight to the people with sufficient authority over the processes, policies, resources, incentives, and decisions producing the outcome.

The people who can see a problem most clearly may not have the authority to fix it. The people with the authority to fix it may not be able to see it on their own. Organizations need to connect the two.

Something unexpected happened while inclusion practitioners spent years working across that divide. Navigating the gap between what they could see, what they were expected to change, and what they actually had authority to control required them to develop capabilities far larger than the functions many organizations had built around them.

Those capabilities matter now.

Lesson 4

The capabilities outgrew the function.

Organizations may have underestimated what their own inclusion practitioners were becoming.

While the field was often evaluated through programs, participation rates, representation goals, training completion, and employee events, many of its most experienced practitioners were learning something much harder: how organizations change.

They learned to see how the same organization could affect people differently and translate lived experience into organizational insight. They learned to work across functions, build coalitions without always possessing formal authority, and navigate resistance, conflict, and ambiguity. They learned to spot bias and unintended consequences in seemingly neutral processes and policies, connect human experience to organizational decisions, and help groups imagine possibilities beyond what existing structures made easy to see.

As one senior inclusion practitioner described the work:

"We are facilitators of change... organizational developers with a workplace mindset for improvement."

Another executive describes a similar role through a different metaphor:

"We are the conductor of the orchestra. We bring all the players together. It's about helping everyone to harmonize in a way that everyone gets in lockstep about the issue we're trying to solve... we let data drive our decisions... everyone knows their role in keeping us honest and accountable... and that's how we've been able to achieve collective impact."

These capabilities were never exclusive to inclusion, nor did every inclusion practitioner develop all of them. But inclusion became one of the places where organizations practiced them intensively because practitioners were repeatedly asked to work across identity, power, organizational boundaries, competing interests, and human experience.

The work they were assigned and the capabilities many developed gradually became two different things. That distinction matters now.

The Field Must Change Too

Carrying forward what the field has learned does not require preserving the form in which that knowledge developed.

Jennifer Brown, author of *How to Be an Inclusive Leader* and *The Shape of Change* and founding member of Center for Talent Innovation's Luminary Exchange, described wrestling with this distinction in her own work: "I'm carrying it with me, and yet the form of all of it is going to change." The task, as she put it, is to "build something unexpected that speaks to the world as it

“[B]uild something unexpected that speaks to the world as it is now and as it will be.”

is now and as it will be.”

As Ifedapo Adeleye, PhD, Professor of the Practice and Faculty Director of the Master's in Human Resources Management Program at Georgetown University, observed, professions across the global economy are being forced to reconsider their contribution as technology changes the work around them: "Every profession needs to have an existential conversation. To ask: how can we add the most value given where we see society's headed?"

AI is changing workflows, roles, decisions, and the distribution of work between humans and machines. Organizations are reconsidering what

work people should do, which capabilities they need, how small teams can become, and where human judgment remains essential. If work that once required twelve people can be accomplished by two people working with AI, every profession faces a consequential question: What makes those two people uniquely valuable?

Inclusion is no exception.

Nobody gets grandfathered into the next era of work.

The capabilities developed through inclusion work remain valuable, but that does not mean every practitioner—or every existing inclusion strategy—is prepared for what comes next.

Inclusion practitioners cannot help shape decisions they do not understand.

To remain relevant, practitioners will need to connect inclusion strategy clearly to business strategy; build enough technical fluency to understand how AI systems operate, where human risks can enter, and how responsible AI is governed; and understand how inclusion principles apply to the redesign of roles, workflows, processes, technologies, and human-machine interactions.

Data is another critical capability gap. Diversity data is among the most sensitive and complex workforce information organizations hold, yet its collection, governance, interpretation, and appropriate use remain unevenly understood. That was already a vulnerability. In an AI-enabled organization—where data shapes what systems learn, what patterns they reproduce, and what leaders can see—it becomes more consequential. Inclusion practitioners do not need to become data scientists, but they do need enough fluency to ask informed questions about what data exists, how it was produced, what it can and cannot reveal, who should have access to it, and how it is being used.

The shift is not only about acquiring new knowledge. It requires a different posture toward expertise itself. Much of the last generation of inclusion work

developed in a world of frameworks, benchmarks, established practices, and comparisons with peers. Those tools remain useful, but **many of the questions organizations now face have no established best practice.**

There may be no benchmark for where human judgment should remain in an AI-enabled workflow, no template for developing junior talent when traditional learning experiences disappear, and no proven structure for teams combining people and AI agents in ways that have never existed before.

Nobody has all of these answers yet. When established answers are scarce, expertise has to include the ability to navigate questions without them. Practitioners will need to become as skilled at experimentation as they have been at applying established practice: framing unfamiliar problems, questioning assumptions, bringing different forms of expertise into the room, imagining alternatives, testing ideas, learning from consequences, and changing course. Systems thinking, critical inquiry, creativity, and complex problem solving become essential precisely because nobody can simply look up the answer.

Here, the field has an inheritance worth building on. Inclusion work has developed practices for noticing what dominant perspectives leave out, bringing missing perspectives into decisions, tracing how apparently neutral systems can produce different human outcomes, and challenging organizations to imagine alternatives. Those capabilities are well suited to a period in which established answers are scarce. But that inheritance does not automatically qualify anyone for the next era. It must be extended into the new problems organizations are trying to solve.

That is also a larger lesson for the enterprise. An important risk in this period of rapid experimentation is that any one form of expertise provides only a partial view of what is being designed. Technologists can see possibilities others cannot. Business leaders understand strategic and commercial constraints. People closest to the work understand realities invisible from the top. Inclusion practitioners may see human consequences, differences in experience, and patterns of exclusion that others miss.

Sustainable transformation requires bringing those perspectives together while the design is still changeable.

Some inclusion practitioners are already making that transition. Others will need to move quickly. The capabilities may have outgrown the old function, but they cannot remain static while the organization around them transforms.

“We have to be futurists. But looking to the future is informed by looking at the past.”

- Tina Opie, PhD, Chief Vision Officer, Opie Consulting Group LLC

An Opportunity to Embed

Capability alone is insufficient if organizational design renders it powerless.

One senior inclusion practitioner asked a question about strategic priorities we heard in different forms throughout this research: “In this very complex world that we’re in, why aren’t we with the teams from the beginning?”

The answer cannot simply be to invite an inclusion leader into more meetings. Senior leaders should identify the people already skilled at applying the human lens, connecting perspectives, anticipating human consequences, and translating insight into organizational change—and involve that expertise from the beginning of consequential redesign.

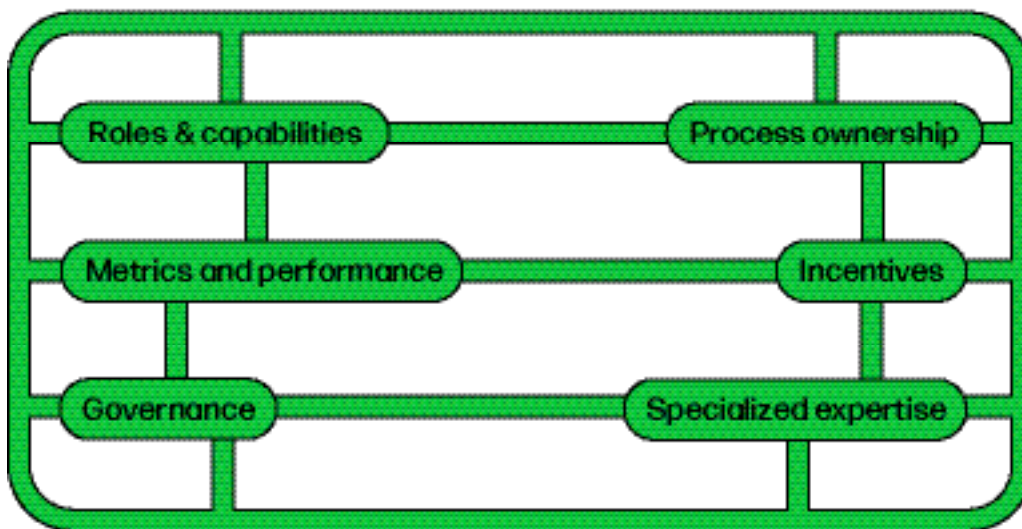
The larger opportunity is to embed what the last generation of inclusion work learned directly into how the organization operates. As organizations redesign processes, workflows, roles, policies, technologies, and governance around new combinations of humans and AI, they can embed what the last generation of inclusion work learned directly into how the organization operates—not as the responsibility of a single function, but as capability built into how the organization creates value. That means designing the capacity to create better human outcomes for stakeholders into the work itself:

- **Roles and capabilities:** Build expectations for inclusive outcomes into individual responsibilities and equip people across businesses and functions to apply a human lens to the decisions they make.

What Inclusion Work Teaches Us About Sustainable Transformation

- **Process ownership:** Give process owners responsibility for understanding how the processes they control affect different people and the authority to respond when those systems produce unintended outcomes.
- **Metrics and performance management:** Identify meaningful measures of human outcomes and incorporate relevant expectations into how individual, team, and organizational performance is assessed.
- **Incentives:** Align rewards and consequences with the human outcomes the organization says matter, rather than expecting those outcomes to emerge despite incentives pointing elsewhere.
- **Governance:** Ensure consequential decisions about technology, workforce design, and organizational change incorporate relevant human expertise and remain accountable for the outcomes they produce.
- **Specialized inclusion expertise:** Maintain dedicated capability to identify patterns across the enterprise, connect insights that individual process owners may not see, challenge assumptions, build organizational capability, and help the organization learn and evolve.

Inclusion as an embedded organizational capability



The capability to create better human outcomes is built into how the organization operates. Dedicated expertise helps the organization build, connect, and sustain that capability.

Embedding inclusion does not mean making everyone an inclusion practitioner or eliminating specialized expertise. As responsibility for organizational design becomes more distributed, the capabilities required to design well must become more distributed too. Leaders and process owners do not need to become inclusion specialists. They do need to know how to seek perspectives they do not possess, recognize differentiated consequences, connect decisions across organizational boundaries, and know when specialized expertise is required. At the same time, specialists need the relationships, access, and influence required to bring what they know into consequential decisions.

The next era of inclusion will be defined less by what a specialized function owns than by whether the organization itself is designed to produce better human outcomes—and, through them, durable value.

“There are more people than not who are worried about how AI will impact work. There's an opportunity to find champions of humanity across organizations and create a force field within. Train them and teach them and build a better community among them. Those are the people who are sitting at the table when AI conversations are happening. They're the ones making decisions about profit and loss. They've been identified in the business as champions of the business and of the change. When we try to make change from the top down, we miss out on the tremendous potential of the broader workforce.”

- Sumona de Graaf, PhD, Founder & CEO, idealis

The Evolution of a Living Discipline

If you have spent years doing inclusion work, you may recognize many of the four Design Bridges. That is not accidental. **The Bridges emerged in conversation with inclusion practitioners and reflect capabilities the field has spent decades developing:** connecting work to purpose, navigating disconnected authority and accountability, seeing organizations through multiple vantage points, and translating evidence into action.

The operating model may have reached its limits. The capabilities did not. A living discipline evolves.

“Inclusion leaders can lead the future of work. There is not another department in multinationals that has a stronger understanding of humans and their ability to stretch beyond their comfort zones, communicate, and work in radically new ways. And that is exactly what we need for an AI-enabled future.”

– Isis Fabian, Executive-in-Residence, Center for Talent Innovation

Looking Ahead: The Contract Is Being Rewritten

Every transformation decision changes more than a workflow. It can also change what employees believe they owe their organization—and what they believe their organization owes them.

Organizational psychologists have long described the unwritten expectations between employers and employees as the psychological contract. That contract has never been fixed, but AI-enabled transformation may be renegotiating it at unusual speed.

Organizations are asking employees to experiment with technologies that may change or eliminate their roles; contribute knowledge that can be encoded into automated systems; adapt continuously as structures and career paths change; and continue bringing judgment, creativity, candor, collaboration, and discretionary effort to work.

What are organizations offering in return?

The answer matters because much of what makes an organization work cannot be mandated in an employment agreement. People choose whether to share an unfinished idea. Whether to mentor a colleague. Whether to flag a problem before it becomes a crisis. Whether to lead an employee resource group. Whether to give an organization more than the minimum their job requires.

Transformation is therefore rewriting two things at once: the design of work and the relationship between organizations and the people whose contributions they depend on.

Leaders may not yet know what the next workplace contract should be. But, as with transformation itself, declining to design it does not mean it isn't being designed.

3

Imagining Better Work Futures

“People need to be pulled by a vision of what could be.”

– Lily Zheng, FAIR Strategist & Consultant, Zheng Consulting

The future of work is often described as though its major contours have already been decided: which jobs will disappear, how small organizations will become, where AI agents will operate, and what work humans will have left to do.

Perhaps.

But organizations are making thousands of choices right now that will help determine which of those futures comes to pass. Every workflow redesigned around AI, every management layer removed, every entry-level task automated, every new role created is a design decision. Some will produce extraordinary value. Some will produce consequences nobody anticipated. Most will do both.

The four Design Bridges cannot tell leaders exactly what to build. They can help them see more of what they are building while there is still time to shape it.

New Era Internships

Consider again the intern whose story opened this report.

We know too little about his firm, its strategy, its people, or what happened next to prescribe a better internship. But after crossing the four Design Bridges, we can see more of the design problem and pose many sharper questions.

Strategic Coherence

Align decisions around value. How does the firm create value for its stakeholders, and what role is this internship meant to play in that larger system? Immediate output may matter. So might developing future traders, building judgment, or learning how humans and AI can work together. The design should follow from the value the firm is trying to create, now and over time.

Distributed Accountability

Design accountability. Who is responsible for what—and do they have sufficient authority to act? If an agent makes a consequential error, who can intervene? Who will be held accountable for the consequences: the intern, the manager, the people who designed the system? Who owns the intern's development as the work around him changes?

Depth Perception

See through multiple vantage points. Revenue illuminates one part of what this new operating model is producing. Look wider. What is the intern learning? What is his manager learning about supervising human-machine work? What forms of judgment or expertise are becoming more valuable as others are automated?

Then widen the lens again. If the firm needs fewer entry-level employees, how will it decide who gets those increasingly scarce opportunities? If fewer people enter at the bottom, where does the firm expect its future expertise to come from? What kinds of intelligence, experience, and aptitude does it want entering the organization? Who might this new model make easier to see—and who might disappear from consideration altogether?

These are questions about inclusion and the future capability of the firm.

Applied Insight

Learn from what the evidence reveals. The first version of the internship does not have to become permanent. The firm can watch for meaningful signals, understand what they reveal, and change course as it learns. Perhaps agent supervision becomes a powerful new form of apprenticeship, paired with mentorship and opportunities to exercise judgment. Perhaps the firm discovers that some of the work it automated was developing capabilities nobody knew to value until they disappeared.

We do not know. And that uncertainty is precisely why design matters.

From Possibility to Experiment

Imagining a different future is only the beginning. Leaders need ways to make possibilities concrete enough to examine, test, and improve. The Design Bridges help leaders ask better questions about what they are building. Design methods can help them begin building alternatives.

There is a rich body of practice to draw from. Human-centered design brings human experience into the design process. Design thinking offers methods for understanding problems, generating possibilities, and learning through experimentation. In *Building for Everyone*, Annie Jean-Baptiste draws on her experience leading product inclusion at Google to show how inclusion can be built into the design and development process from the beginning, asking whose perspectives and experiences shape what gets built.⁴³

Targeted Universalism, or TU, developed by John A. Powell and colleagues at the Othering & Belonging Institute, starts by defining a shared goal, then examines how differently situated people and groups are positioned relative to it and what structures and conditions explain those differences.⁴⁴ The goal is universal; the paths toward it may not be. Crucially, the framework does not assume in advance which differences will matter or what strategies they require. As Ashley Gallegos, Director of the Places of Belonging Program at the Othering & Belonging Institute, explains, “Once you have a universal goal, the work is to identify targeted strategies that help bring all groups to

that goal. The strategies are determined from the whole data set reviewed with considerations of how far groups are from the goal, not focusing so much on disparities between the groups but, instead, emphasizing targeted strategies that bring all groups towards the attainment of the shared goal.”

These traditions are distinct but share a useful premise for this moment:

Who and what you can see changes what you can design.

What if organizations brought that same discipline to the design of work itself? We partnered with Tony Bynum, founder of LYMNL and Associate Professor of Practice at Illinois Tech's Institute of Design, to experiment with using design methods as a way to reimagine workplace challenges.

Designing the Work, Not Just the Technology

In one Design Lab, participants took a complex workplace challenge—reimagining their inclusion function—and moved rapidly from understanding the problem to imagining different ways the organization could create impact.

Bynum pushed the group toward rough prototypes rather than polished solutions. A polished pilot, he explained, can make people reluctant to challenge what has already been built. A rough prototype makes disagreement easier. People can point to what is missing, test assumptions, propose alternatives, and reshape the idea before too much organizational commitment and capital has accumulated around it.

Human-centered design can be a crucial component of disciplined speed because it allows organizations to learn while building and adjust course while a design is still changeable. For example, a rough prototype or small experiment can expose an assumption before it becomes a workflow or reveal whose work has become harder before a new operating model reaches thousands of people. A conversation with people for whom a product, service, or process does not or might not work well surfaces consequences invisible to those for whom it does. Often, an experiment will reveal possibilities that nobody could have anticipated from the conference room.

That is the promise of applying design thinking to work itself. What's possible? What else could we build?

The intern's organization may have asked a narrow question:

How much work can one person accomplish with AI agents?

It could also ask a more generative one:

What might an extraordinary AI-enabled apprenticeship look like?

Perhaps the repetitive work that once served as apprenticeship can disappear while the learning it provided is rebuilt intentionally. Perhaps junior employees can gain access to consequential problems earlier because AI handles work that once consumed their first several years. Perhaps managers freed from administrative tasks can spend more time teaching judgment. Perhaps AI can widen access to expertise that was once available only through proximity to the right person.

Those possibilities are no more predetermined than the darker ones. But they have to be designed today.

And the same is true far beyond the internship. An organization redesigning management can ask what managers uniquely contribute before deciding which layers to remove. A company deploying agents can decide where human judgment must remain visible and accountable. A team using AI to accelerate decisions can build mechanisms that bring more perspectives into the process without recreating every cumbersome approval structure it hoped to escape.

We need not strive to preserve every feature of the workplace we inherited. Plenty deserves to change. We have an opportunity to understand what people and organizations actually need from work, then use new capabilities to design for those outcomes deliberately.

The Future Is a Design Space

No single methodology will tell an organization what its future should look like. Human-centered design offers different ways of seeing and solving. Other fields will add still more.

The choice is not between preserving yesterday's workplace and accepting whatever technological future arrives fastest. We can preserve what people and organizations still need from work—relationships through which people learn, consequential experiences through which judgment develops, opportunities to stretch and contribute—and combine those things with possibilities previous generations could scarcely imagine: intelligent collaborators, new forms of expertise, more accessible ways of working, faster experimentation, and entirely new relationships between human and machine capability.

We can design something better.

We offer the four Design Bridges in that same spirit. They are equipment for exploration. **Strategic Coherence** keeps the value the organization is trying to create in view. **Distributed Accountability** keeps authority connected to consequences as decisions spread. **Depth Perception** brings more of the organization and its stakeholders into view. **Applied Insight** helps leaders understand what their choices are producing and change course as they learn.

“[W]e must step up, examine, and experiment, even if some of those will fail. We must organize. We need new stories, new institutions, and new expressions and ways of thinking.”

– john a. powell, Director, Othering & Belonging Institute⁴⁵

Then the real work begins. A role gets redesigned. An agent enters a workflow. A team tries something nobody has tried before. Leaders watch what happens. People closest to the work reveal something the original designers could not see. The design changes.

This is how alternatives become imaginable, and how imagined futures become testable.

The future of work is being built through decisions like these every day. The future is still a design space.

Conclusion

What Will You Build?

Throughout this report, we have acknowledged the extraordinary pressures facing today's leaders. Technologies are evolving quickly. Agile, young, AI-native competitors are emerging. Geopolitical conditions are unstable. Investors expect returns. Customers expect more. Employees are exhausted. And nobody credible can tell you with certainty what the organization you lead today will need to become tomorrow.

The fear of falling behind is real. So is the temptation to respond by stripping away anything that appears to slow the organization down.

Your challenge is to understand which parts of institutional weight are ballast and which are load-bearing.

A management layer may be bureaucracy. It may also be where judgment, accountability, and knowledge reside. An entry-level task may be inefficient. It may also be how expertise develops. A meeting may be unnecessary. It may also be where relationships form and information travels.

Sustainable transformation does not mean preserving all aspects of a former operating model no longer fit for purpose. It means understanding what they produce before removing them—and designing intentionally for what comes next.

The four Design Bridges offer a place to start:

- **Stay clear about the value you are trying to create.** Ask not only what a change produces now, but for whom, at whose expense, and over what time horizon.

- **Keep accountability connected to authority.** Know who can make decisions, who experiences their consequences, who can intervene, and who ultimately owns the outcome.
- **Widen what you can see.** Bring different forms of expertise and human experience into consequential decisions while those decisions are still changeable.
- **Learn from what you build.** Treat design choices as experiments. Watch what actually happens, including outcomes your original measures may not capture, and change course as you learn.

No leader knows exactly what the future will or should look like. Leaders still have agency to shape that future rather than allowing it to emerge by default.

The stakes extend beyond the organization itself.

Organizations do not exist apart from society. They are among its most powerful institutions. Work remains one of the primary ways through which people access income, opportunity, learning, relationships, purpose, and influence. Multinational organizations have an even wider reach: their choices shape suppliers, customers, industries, communities, technologies, and norms far beyond their own employees.

Carolyn Buck Luce, a co-founder of the Center for Talent Innovation, has long put it directly:

"Business is the most powerful engine for transformation that we have in the world."

That power comes with stewardship.

Leadership is temporary. The institution is not yours forever. For however long you occupy your seat, you are one of its stewards. Eventually, someone else will inherit what you build.

Which brings us back to the intern.

What Will You Build?

The internship model that opened this report may prove to be an inspired new form of apprenticeship. Its immediate return is much easier to see than what it will produce over a decade.

What will the role build in him? What will experiments like it build in our institutions?

Every automated workflow, redesigned role, eliminated task, and flattened hierarchy is drafting answers to questions like these, whether leaders intend them to or not.

And those answers will not remain inside today's organizations. People will carry forward what their institutions teach them about judgment, responsibility, relationships, technology, power, whose perspective matters, and what human beings uniquely contribute. They will bring those lessons into the teams they lead, the organizations they build, the industries they shape, and the communities of which they are a part.

Today's leaders are designing more than jobs. They are helping shape what another generation will believe institutions can be.

What will the organization you are building teach people to notice, question, create, and own?

What capabilities will it cultivate?

What will it make possible?

And when your time leading it is over, **what will you leave behind?**

The future is under construction. Build it on purpose. Build something worth stewarding.

Appendix 1

Research Methods

This report draws on a mixed-method research approach designed to bring together current organizational experience, quantitative evidence, expert perspectives, prior Center for Talent Innovation research, executive convenings and Design Labs, and relevant external scholarship.

Quantitative Data Gathering & Analysis

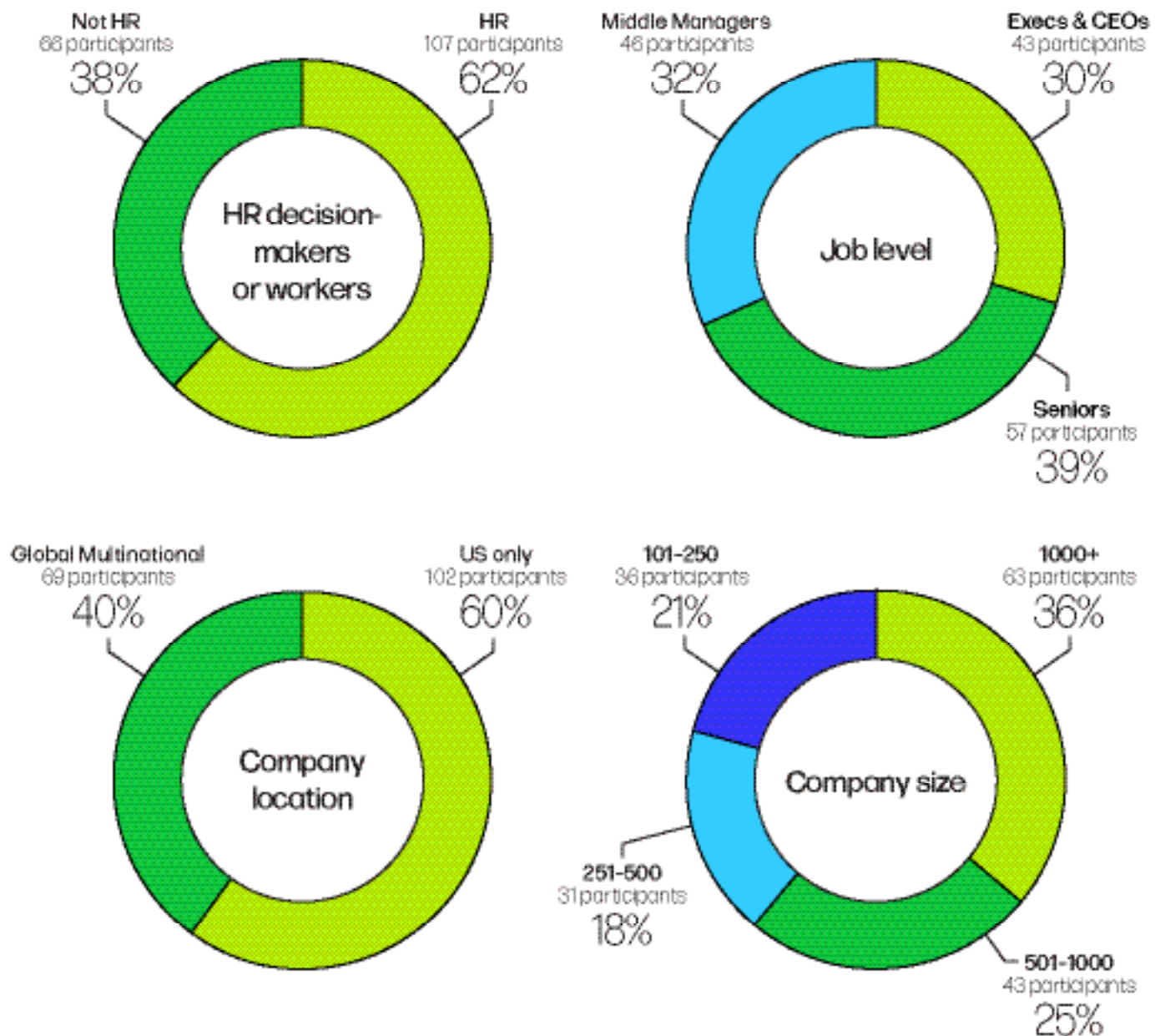
We collected responses from 173 survey respondents from the United States. All respondents were full-time employed decision makers at their workplaces, which had a minimum company size of 100. “Decision-maker” refers to professionals who have influence or decision making authority over spending/purchasing at their organization, which we used as a proxy for leadership status.

Survey respondents were categorized as “HR” if they met at least one of three criteria: 1) selected “human resources or other office and administrative support” as their job role; 2) reported working primarily in their organization’s Human Resources department; or 3) were categorized by our survey vendor as having influence or decision making authority over Human Resources spending or purchasing. Of the sample, 107 were categorized as “HR” and 66 as “Not HR.”

Data collection took place in June 2026 and was administered by Alchemer under the auspices of Center for Talent Innovation . Alchemer fielded the survey and cleaned the data. Center for Talent Innovation developed and programmed the survey instrument and conducted the analysis in R Studio.

Given the sample size and composition, survey findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than nationally representative of organizational leaders.

Sample characteristics



Qualitative Data Gathering & Analysis

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 50 organizational leaders, inclusion practitioners, consultants, and subject matter experts. Interviews took place primarily between April and August 2026, with some conducted outside that period. Respondents were recruited through professional networks and snowball sampling.

Interviews were designed to explore participants' experiences of the changing workplace, the organizational challenges they were encountering, approaches they were testing, and their perspectives on what leaders will need to navigate the future of work.

Interviews informed hypothesis development, interpretation, and revisions throughout the research and writing process. Of the interviews conducted, 26 transcripts were included in a formal qualitative analysis. Those 26 transcripts were cleaned and anonymized by members of the research team. Researchers manually reviewed the anonymized transcripts and developed and refined themes through an iterative process. An LLM-based classifier was used to assist with categorizing statements by theme. Human researchers remained responsible for interpretation, analytical judgments, and conclusions.

Note on Global Context

This report was developed primarily through interviews with leaders working in multinational organizations. Nearly all were based in the United States and United Kingdom, although several held global roles. We also drew on scholarship and perspectives from around the world.

Many of the forces reshaping work cross borders, but their consequences are shaped by customer expectations, legal systems, cultural norms, political environments, labor structures, and social histories. The Design Bridges are intended to help leaders examine their own contexts, make more intentional choices, and consider their consequences from multiple vantage points.

Important experimentation is taking place across regions, sectors, cultures, and regulatory environments. Future research should continue surfacing and learning from those differences.

Note on Use of Generative AI

As part of this project, we used generative AI tools, including ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, and Microsoft Copilot, for tasks including exploratory

research, project planning, transcription, thematic synthesis, drafting, and editing.

Generative AI outputs were treated as inputs to the research process rather than as evidence in themselves. Human researchers remained responsible for interpretation, source validation, analytical judgments, and final conclusions. We authored and stand behind this work.

Selected Survey Questions

The following survey question and response options are provided for additional context on quantitative findings presented in the report.

Strategic Business Priorities

Which of the following are the top strategic business priorities for your organization overall today? Select up to 5.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Revenue growth | 14. Attracting and retaining diverse talent (i.e., talent representing a range of demographic characteristics) |
| 2. Maintaining competitiveness in changing markets | 15. Employee well-being |
| 3. Innovation | 16. Preparing for changing workforce demographics |
| 4. Brand trust and loyalty | 17. Employee trust |
| 5. Understanding and serving customers, clients, or consumers | 18. Ensuring fair access to opportunity |
| 6. Navigating economic volatility | 19. Fostering an inclusive workplace culture |
| 7. Navigating geopolitical tensions and instability | 20. Living our organizational values |
| 8. Managing cybersecurity and data privacy | 21. Serving the communities in which we operate |
| 9. AI transformation | 22. Other [open response] |
| 10. Adapting to changing business conditions | |
| 11. Upskilling/reskilling employees | |
| 12. Productivity/efficiency | |
| 13. Attracting and retaining skilled talent | |

Appendix 2

Glossary

This glossary defines key terms as they are used in this report. Some are concepts introduced by Center for Talent Innovation ; others draw on established fields of research and practice or use familiar language in a specific organizational context. Where relevant, we identify the source or tradition in the report and endnotes.

Accountability: Answerability for the outcomes and consequences of decisions, including the obligation to explain them, learn from them, and act on what is learned.

Applied Insight: The discipline of recognizing meaningful signals, using evidence to understand what they reveal, and using the resulting insights to inform what the organization tries, changes, or learns next.

Authority: The formal or informal power to make, approve, change, or direct decisions that shape an organizational outcome.

Crisis Creep: The gradual normalization of the shortened time horizons, heightened urgency, and exceptional practices associated with crisis response until they become the expected—even idealized—way of operating.

Design: The intentional shaping of arrangements to influence how something works and what it produces. In organizations, those arrangements can include roles, workflows, authority, incentives, management structures, talent processes, technologies, and measures.

Disciplined Speed: The capacity to move quickly without abandoning the practices that make speed sustainable and useful.

Distributed Accountability: The discipline of intentionally connecting responsibility, authority, and accountability across the people, processes, technologies, and decisions that shape organizational outcomes.

Evidence: Qualitative or quantitative information used to investigate what is happening and why.

Extractive Transformation: A mode of transformation that creates value today by eroding the conditions required to create value tomorrow. Contrast with Sustainable Transformation.

Human Talent Deficit: The gap between the human capabilities an organization will need to create future value and what its operating model enables people to develop, sustain, and contribute.

Human Lens: Seeing how people shape, enable, and experience value creation through their roles, expertise, relationships, and social identities. Most powerful when combined with the operational lens.

Insight: An understanding drawn from evidence that reveals something meaningful about what is happening or why, and changes how the organization sees a problem, opportunity, or possible response.

Operational Lens: Seeing how an organization creates value through its structures, processes, workflows, technologies, governance, incentives, customers, and decision making. Most powerful when combined with the human lens.

Depth Perception : The discipline of seeing consequential decisions through multiple vantage points to better understand what a change could set in motion before it scales.

Process Owner: The individual or group responsible for how an organizational process operates and evolves. Examples of processes include hiring, performance management, budgeting, AI governance, promotion, and product development.

Relational Intelligence: The ability to intentionally build and strengthen the relationships through which organizations solve problems, learn, and create value.

Responsibility: An expectation or obligation to perform a particular role, task, or function.

Signal: An observation that suggests something important may be happening.

Strategic Coherence: The discipline of aligning thousands of daily decisions around a shared understanding of how, for whom, and over what time horizon the organization creates value.

Strategic Decoupling: The gradual weakening of the perceived or actual connection between a function's work and the organization's evolving strategic priorities.

Sustainable Transformation: A mode of transformation that creates value today while building and renewing the conditions required to keep creating value tomorrow. Contrast with Extractive Transformation.

Transformation: The process through which an organization moves from one state toward another.

Value: The meaningful outcomes an organization exists to create for its stakeholders. Depending on the organization, those outcomes might include revenue, innovation, customer value, trust, resilience, knowledge, or social impact.

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