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Reimagined:

Development in
the Future of Work

2025 Perspective on Evolving Trends in L&D

McKinsey's Research and Innovation Learning Lab

A navigational tool
for the trends of tomorrow

It is essential that organizations see development as an act of care, treat resilience and adaptability as a shared responsibility, and embrace transformation not as a future state but as a permanent and positive condition.

In a world defined by constant disruption – economic volatility, geopolitical tension, rapid technological advancement, and widespread organizational change, boundaries are rapidly blurring. Roles, systems, and scopes of influence that once seemed defined or distinct – learning vs operations, people vs technology, work vs life – are now interdependent, overlapping, and inextricably linked. To succeed in this new paradigm, the solutions too must be interdependent.

It's no longer enough for organizations and individuals to simply bounce back from change or even to establish a new working order. Instead, they must learn to bounce forward, to reimagine how work gets done, how people learn and develop, and how organizations function as resilient, adaptive systems. Doing so requires more than trend-spotting; it requires a commitment to evolving the very models, tools, and mindsets we use to navigate the future of work.

For this reason, we have transitioned this document from a trends digest to a navigational tool. The three themes explored in this report – fluid development ecosystems, responsible AI adoption, and adaptability and resilience – are not standalone topics, nor are the sub-trends that we explore within each. These three macrotrend areas represent fundamental shifts in how people development is defined, delivered, and sustained across organizations.

These trends are mutually reinforcing and cannot succeed in isolation: resilient organizations are better equipped to adopt emerging technologies; technology used wisely can foster connection, creativity, and care; and integrated operating models break down silos to make all of this possible. Together, they demand a holistic, forward-looking approach, one that sees development as an act of care, treats resilience and adaptability as a shared responsibility, and embraces transformation not as a future state but as a permanent and positive condition.

About the 2025 Learning Trends Perspective

Through an extensive analysis of trends disrupting the globe, we develop a deep perspective on how these trends will impact the future of people development.

The McKinsey Research and Innovation (R&I) Learning Lab reviewed 45+ global trend reports that transcend industries including learning, psychology, HR, tech, finance, geopolitics, travel, and design.

The research team consisted of senior leaders and experts in L&D, People Analytics, Talent Attraction, and McKinsey's People and Organization practice. Following our initial analyses, we clustered commonalities, summarized our detailed data, conducted debates, identified the impact to people development, and constructed our perspectives.

AI Agent team members

The research team was assisted by AI agents throughout the process and helped in resource identification, clustering, and copy-editing. While the agents were considered thought partners, human team members were responsible for theme and trend selection, developing the perspectives, and writing.

Our 2025 visuals represent an adaptive, living network

The flowing lines and interconnected spheres reflect the report's themes of integration and progress. The hero image and section dividers showcase dynamic pathways. They symbolize the fluid movement and synergy among people development professionals, as well as the seamless, effective journeys employees will experience when acquiring new skills and knowledge in the future.

This also represents the evolution of development, as it must be adaptive, continuous, and embedded "in the flow of work" to support a rapidly changing landscape.

Reimagined development in the future of work

Acting on today's trends, tomorrow's people development organizations will feature fluid development ecosystems, adopt AI responsibly and build resilience and agility for individuals and organizations.

1 Fluid development ecosystems

In a world marked by constant change, blurred boundaries, and rising expectations, we must design work to be inherently developmental. Achieving this requires shifting from rigid structures to a dynamic, interconnected ecosystem that uses meaningful data and fosters continuous learning, adaptability, and collaboration. *Leaders must:*

— De-silo People functions
— Create data-driven development ecosystems
— Make strategic decisions based on meaningful foresight

2 Responsible AI adoption

This is a defining moment for the next era of work and learning. But trust is fragile, and mishandling this moment could erode confidence. The path to responsible AI adoption must send a clear message to employees that leaders care about their contributions and are committed to ensuring that AI will help them succeed. *Leaders must:*

— Preserve employee trust to accelerate AI adoption
— Foster collaboration between humans and AI
— Equip employees with higher-order skills

3 Resilient and adaptable individuals and organizations

The organizations that thrive will not be those that resist disruption or merely recover from setbacks, but the ones that anticipate challenges, adapt, and grow. To do this, they must reimagine work environments and build structural and cultural foundations that support adaptability and resilience for their employees. *Leaders must:*

— Unlock the potential of a diverse, multigenerational workforce
— Support recuperation to ensure sustained performance
— Enable organizational resilience at- scale through sustainable workflows
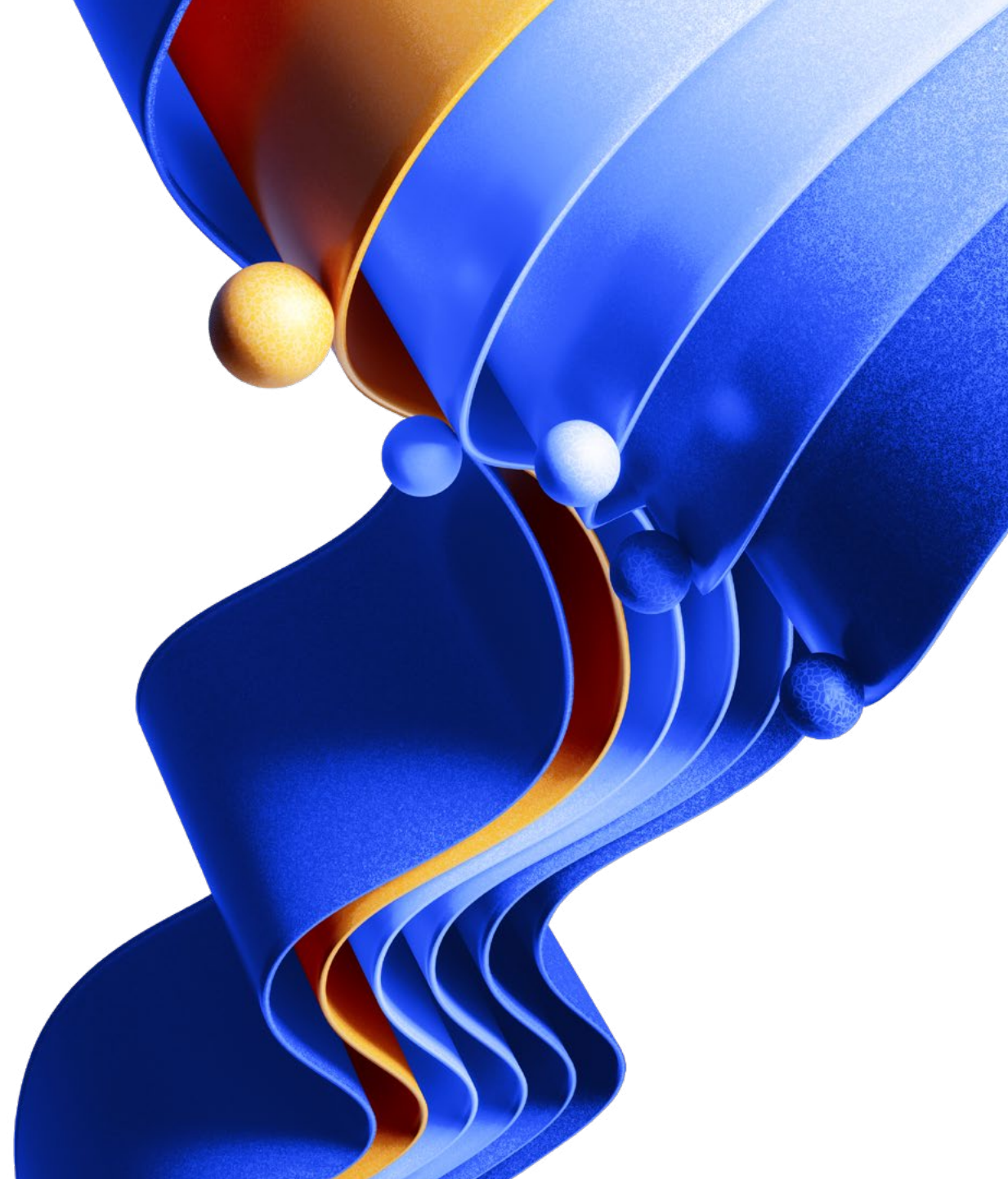
Fluid development ecosystems

The future of people development offers an opportunity to bring clarity, hope, and progress to the complexities employees and organizations face today.

Employees want a seamless development experience—one that feels natural, supports their growth, and helps them thrive in a rapidly changing world. Development is one of the greatest acts of care employers can provide. Year after year, evidence reinforces that leaders must demonstrate this care not just as an organizational value but as a strategic imperative for long-term success. To achieve this, learning and development must be woven into every aspect of the employee experience—from recruiting to daily work to feedback—transforming work itself into a catalyst for growth.

This requires more than new tools or programs. It demands breaking down silos across people functions, aligning on shared goals, and creating systems that feel frictionless and are integrated to the employee experience. When employees see that these efforts reduce complexity, foster collaboration, and prioritize their growth, they feel supported by their leaders. And when leaders get this right, they unlock resilience, innovation, and sustainable success for their organizations.

Real, but not radical, progress towards fluid development

Employees experience more in-the-moment learning support with AI agents playing a growing role - guiding practice, coaching through tasks, and supporting real-time reflection. Skills take center stage, and organizations are starting to move beyond self-reported data, toward a more complete picture of skill validation. Still, learning often feels like something you stop work to "go away and do," rather than something that happens naturally in the flow of daily activities. Learning is closer to the workflow than it's ever been before, but it's not yet embedded.

People development professionals are feeling a growing momentum to break down silos. Teams spot more opportunities to collaborate across L&D, talent, HR, and other people functions, and that shared energy creates ideas for new possibilities.

Despite this progress, L&D still finds itself in a reactive stance, often treated more as a support function rather than a strategic partner. Structures and decision rights continue to reinforce old boundaries. The fences haven't fallen; they've just shifted.

AI augments work in powerful ways, but the real unlock —cohesive, strategic impact— still lies ahead.

People functions operate as one. Silos dissolve

Growth is the shared purpose of all People functions. The boundary between learning and work has disappeared. The goal is no longer to add learning into the flow of work - it's to merge work and development. Daily work is now designed as a developmental engine. Instead of asking how to encourage employees to make time to learn, organizations are now asking: *How do we make daily challenges catalysts for growth?*

Employees rarely step away from work to upskill - they grow through the work itself. Tasks are designed to stretch employees, build new skills, and offer just enough challenge without overwhelm. AI copilots act as real-time mentors, adjusting their support based on performance, stress, and cognitive load. Learning is continuous, highly personal, and largely invisible.

Learning teams collaborate with product, operations, and talent to embed growth into workflows. Data and analytics play a central role, helping teams interpret individual performance and progression and adjust the systems and tools in real time. Foresight helps stretch today's work towards tomorrow's skill needs.

De-siloed people functions

Organizations are striving to become skills-based—using skills as the foundation of talent processes to build a more agile, adaptive workforce. Achieving this vision requires embedding skills development into the flow of work and breaking down silos between HR, L&D, and other people functions to create a unified, skills-centric approach. Yet progress remains slow. A 2023 ATD survey found that while 72% of respondents recognize the importance of transforming HR into a cross-functional discipline, only 11% report meaningful progress.[1]

Breaking these silos down is essential to merging learning and work. This will enable employees to develop skills dynamically as part of their roles. To move forward, organizations must replace fragmented, function-specific processes with cohesive systems that integrate learning, talent, and workforce planning.

Change management is critical: while 83% of leaders believe leadership is key to the skills-based transition, only 28% of employees feel the strategy is being clearly communicated.[2] Bridging this gap requires active engagement, transparency, and collaboration across all people functions. Ultimately, de-siloing people functions is more than a structural change— it's a mindset shift. By aligning around skills as the currency of the future, organizations can unlock the agility, innovation, and resilience needed to thrive in the rapidly evolving world of work.

Create data-driven development ecosystems

As organizations rethink their operating models, people development must shift from a support function to a strategic business driver. Central to this change is the use of purposeful, actionable data - not just tracking course completions or attendance, but leveraging analytics to understand impact, track growth, and identify skill gaps and high-performing employees.[3] To stay relevant, L&D must adopt capabilities like predictive modelling and impact visualization,[4] offering employees personalized insights into their own development and tying learning more directly to business outcomes.

This evolution is powered by a convergence of new technologies (e.g., AI, LLMs), integrated systems (e.g., HRIS), and changing workforce expectations. Learning measurement must move beyond measuring events to becoming full data ecosystems that track what's being learned, how, and toward what goals. When data flows across functions and to the individual, it supports smarter talent decisions and continuous, in-the-flow-of-work development. As people data becomes more integrated, accessible, and reflective of all types of learning, it will help to support more resilient and agile organizations.
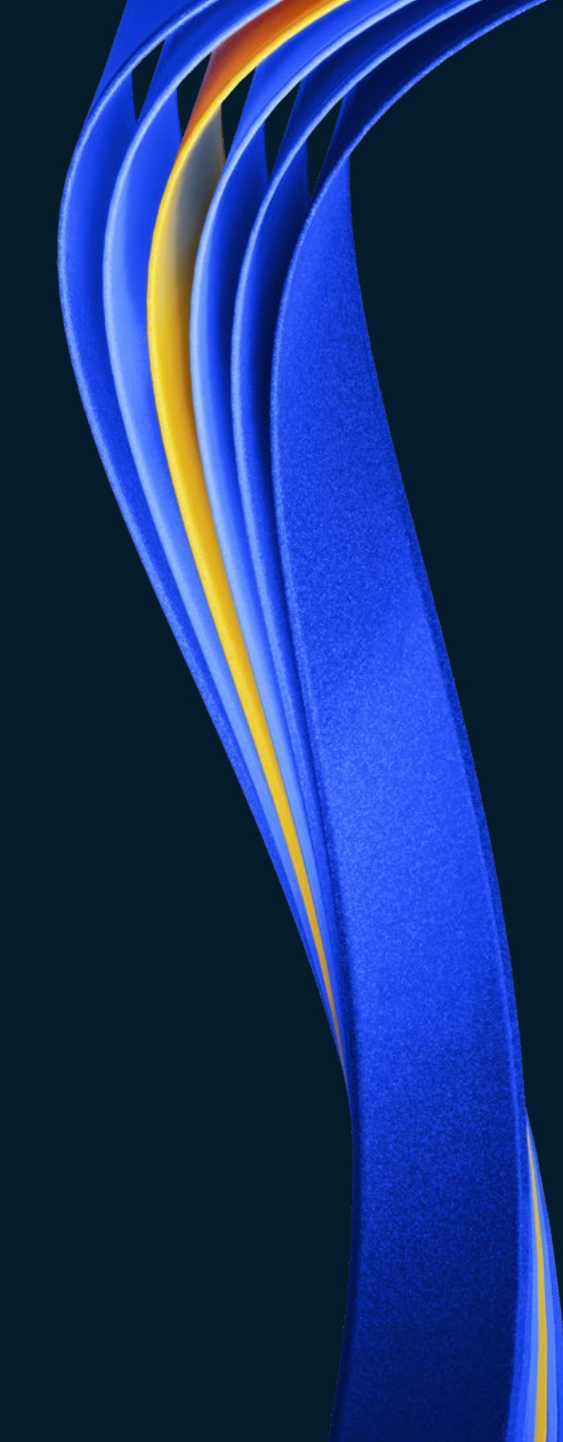
Make strategic decisions based on meaningful foresight

According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs report, 39% of existing skill sets will be transformed or become outdated between 2025 and 2030.[5] Talent and development professionals are already aware of this ongoing 'skill instability,' but the pressure has increased. They're now responsible for finding, assessing, and validating talent and skills from broader, more complex candidate pools—while also defining the individual value of each new skill, technology, or change their organization adopts.[6,7] Yet despite this awareness, most organizations remain in a reactive state. 61% still plan their workforce strategy only one year out,[8] leaving little space for meaningful foresight.

The challenge isn't just predicting what's next, it's making sense of what's emerging and turning those insights into a long-term development strategy. This can no longer be done in silos. People development leaders across functions must collectively shift from short-term forecasting to collaborating based on meaningful foresight. Leaders and teams must build the capability to interpret signals from multiple sources—labor trends, technological shifts, economic changes, geopolitics—and use them to shape development ecosystems that flex, adapt, and grow.

"In a tech-powered future, people management will be much more proactive, data-driven, and fluid. Organizations will have the fact base they need to launch interventions such as hiring, insourcing, outsourcing, upskilling, or reskilling. And these interventions themselves will not be one-off activities—rather, the practice of adapting, reallocating, adjusting, and improving will become the norm." [9]

McKinsey & Company, February 2025

Additional evidence that supports the need to build development ecosystems

"Forward-thinking organizations are responding by creating skill-development ecosystems. These new approaches combine formal learning with experiential opportunities, creating more engaging and effective paths to mastery. We see a bright future for organizations that use advanced analytics to anticipate future skill needs. This predictive approach allows them to prepare their workforce proactively rather than reactively, ensuring they stay ahead of industry changes" [10]

Brandon Hall Group, HR Outlook 2025

85% of people believe that businesses are obligated to "train or reskill" employees so people and societies remain competitive due to global uncertainty and impending AI tech disruptions.[11]

Over the next five years, AI technology could create 11 million jobs globally while displacing 9 million. As technologies advance, similar shifts are likely, increasing the urgency for dynamic reskilling efforts and predictive measures to stay ahead of these changes.[12]

Employees increasingly expect the ability to track their own skill development. Leveraging skill data can enable dynamic learning ecosystems that adapt in real time to both business needs and individual learner profiles.[13]

Cross-border data flow policies can lead to disjointed employee experiences. When policies vary by country, establishing global standards becomes challenging, resulting in inconsistent technology usage and development experiences for employees.[14]

Organizations need a unified data and innovation strategy. As pressure mounts to identify meaningful use cases for AI and other emerging technologies, leaders must avoid impulsive adoption. Instead, they should align a broad set of stakeholders and continuously monitor and identify future tech opportunities that deliver meaningful value.[15]

How to take action

People leadership

— Intentionally form cross-functional working teams to solve organization-wide people challenges

— Establish strategic groups to regularly monitor and track labor trends, technological shifts, economic changes, geopolitical strategies, and internal needs

— Develop a collective vision on how aggregating development data (e.g., feedback, skill levels, evaluations) may benefit team staffing, individualized learning opportunities, and systemic workstreams

— Adopt capabilities like predictive modelling and impact visualization for skill development and learning needs

— Champion a skills-first mindset shift across leadership—not just a structural reorganization

Managers

— Bridge gaps between organizational strategy and employee awareness, as well as between leadership goals and employee sentiment and readiness

— Develop rotational apprenticeship programs so employees can work across functions and build adjacent skills

— Collaborate with formal L&D teams to integrate learning into daily tasks and team interactions

— Provide employees with regular access to their development data and support them in creating personalized plans

Individual contributors

— Request access to meaningful employment data and seek mentorship—formal or informal—for guidance on building future-focused skills

— Use development insights to make informed decisions about areas to prioritize for future skills growth

— Engage in feedback processes following learning programs or performance evaluation interventions
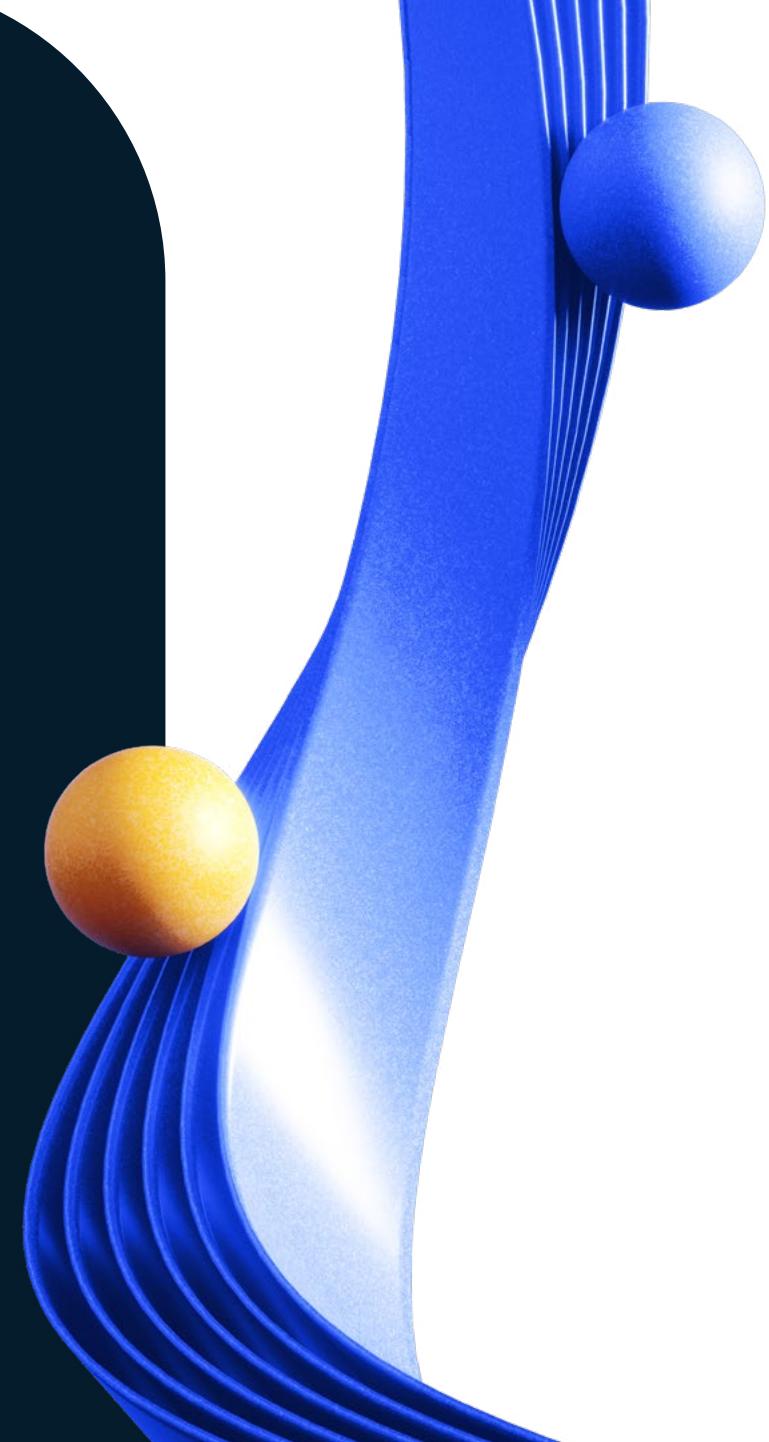
Responsible
AI adoption

This is a defining moment for the next era of how work and learning will be done in an organization.

For years, we've been promised personalized learning, curated expertise, and simplified support structures. Yet, employees are still feeling overwhelmed, fatigued by constant change, and unsupported in their development. While people leaders are actively experimenting with AI—building AI agents, forming partnerships, and piloting new features—these efforts may create more complexity for employees rather than delivering clear value.

At its best, AI has the potential to transform people development: streamlining operations, enabling personalized learning at scale, and unlocking higher-order skills. But trust is fragile, and mishandling this moment could erode employee confidence. Leaders must now make deliberate choices that prioritize employees' growth and well-being while driving organizational impact. The path forward must send a clear message to employees: "we care about your development, and we're committed to using AI to help you thrive."
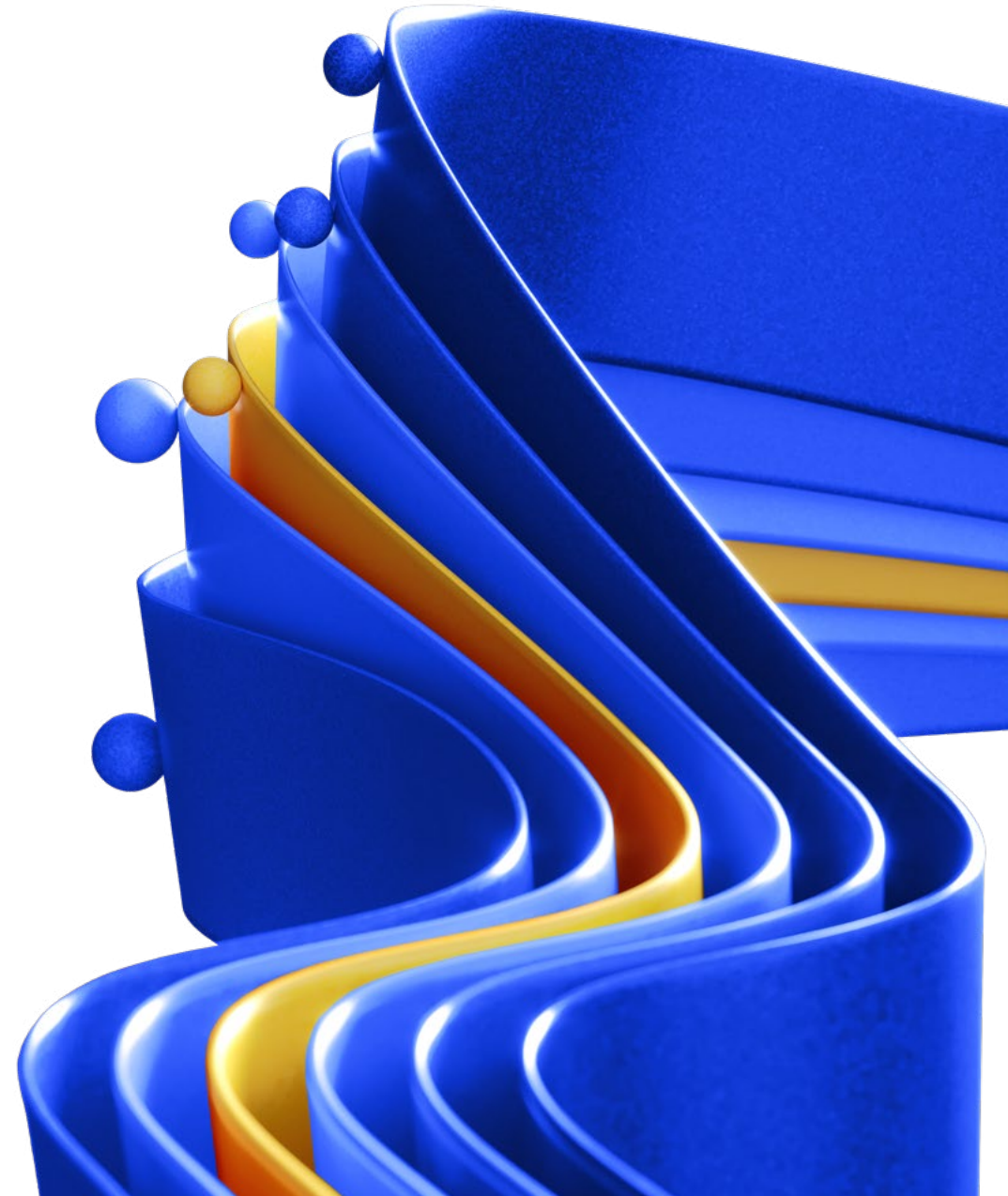
The costly toll of rapid innovation

Outside organizational walls, AI innovation surges forward at an impressive pace. In the months leading up to this report, major LLMs rolled out powerful enhancements—such as deep research capabilities and reasoning—fueling a new wave of hype. This chaotic external pace strains people development functions as they continually anticipate shifting talent and skill needs.

People development professionals often find themselves stuck in fragmented experimentation, focused on productivity and speed, yet struggling to translate AI efforts into clear business and people value.

Meanwhile, employees grapple with constant directional shifts, new and bespoke tech platforms, data privacy concerns, organizational restructuring, and growing fears of redundancy due to AI. Skill requirements feel uncertain, adding to cognitive strain.

Despite these challenges, employees remain hopeful and trust their employers will responsibly integrate AI, reduce workplace noise, and create frictionless experiences that accelerate their growth and development.

AI provides clarity and support

AI's growth surge slightly tapers and organizations learn to embrace uncertainty and adopt clear, strategic opportunities. AI and emerging technologies have become indispensable allies for people development. The administrative burdens that limited managers' ability to develop talent have faded away, freeing them to provide meaningful feedback and apprenticeship.

AI's cross-functional integration unlocks real-time, actionable insights from diverse data streams—project feedback, formal feedback, formative assessments, skill data—enabling targeted interventions and personalized development.

People development teams use AI-powered analytics to proactively identify, and support, struggling individuals and teams and apply science-backed learning innovations at speed and scale.

Employees have universal access to learning, seamlessly integrated into everyday work tasks. Employees receive and trust the tailored guidance from AI-driven tutors, on-demand practice, and powerful skill analytics to accelerate skill growth and provide transparency on their progression.

Preserve employee trust to accelerate AI adoption

Moving fast in the AI innovation race offers competitive advantages—but also introduces significant risks. For instance, rapid yet siloed experimentation across departments can lead to a fragmented and inconsistent employee experience. Employees may resist ongoing change due to psychological barriers—such as perceiving AI as a "black box," overly autonomous, emotionless, or incapable of replacing meaningful human interaction.[1] In addition, evolving global AI regulations can slow innovation and complicate the potential promise of AI. This could impact opportunities like personalized learning, which depends on accessible and integrated talent data.[2] Trust in business remains relatively strong, but it's trending downward—and becoming more fragile. When organizations fail to account for these factors, that trust will erode quickly.[3]

Now more than ever, L&D and People leaders must take a central role in supporting AI innovation. But working in isolation can make it difficult for employees to connect AI with personal value. To preserve trust and support meaningful adoption, leaders must help employees envision how AI can accelerate their growth and development—not just automate their work.[4]

Foster collaboration between humans and AI

The partnership between humans and machines is not just transforming industries—it's fundamentally redefining the nature of work, problem-solving, and innovation. In 2025, this synergy has reached new heights, fueled by AI's growing ability to analyze complex datasets, automate tasks, and amplify human capabilities. Workers are increasingly offloading repetitive and computationally intensive tasks to AI, unlocking time and capacity for creativity, collaboration, and higher-value contributions. Meanwhile, the rapid evolution of generative AI tools has made them more accessible and versatile, empowering organizations to design tailored, industry-specific solutions at scale.[5,6]

To fully unlock this potential, organizations must go beyond adapting to AI—they must actively design the future of human-AI collaboration. This means fostering the skills, mindsets, and systems that empower people to thrive in partnership with intelligent machines. The opportunity isn't just to push boundaries but to reimagine them entirely, creating a future where human ingenuity and AI innovation amplify one another.
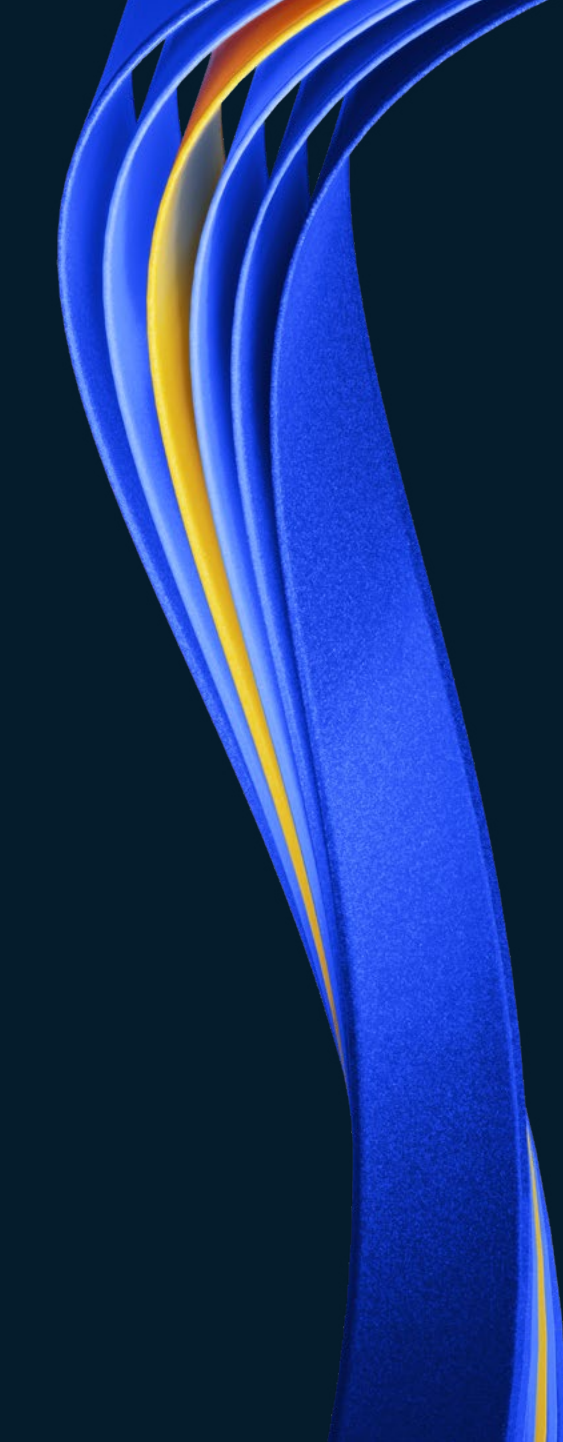
Equip employees with higher-order skills

AI has already surpassed human capabilities in speed, knowledge, and creativity at the task level.[7] It can analyze vast datasets, automate workflows, and generate solutions faster than any human. Still, AI remains fundamentally limited: it cannot yet independently set direction, contextualize complexity, or make value-driven decisions.[7] These uniquely human contributions—defining purpose, interpreting ambiguity, and applying ethical judgment— are essential for ensuring AI serves meaningful goals. However, heavy reliance on AI risks eroding the very skills that make humans indispensable. As AI takes on more tasks, humans may lose opportunities to practice critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving. Without intervention, this cognitive atrophy could leave organizations less innovative and adaptable.[8]

Organizations must foster continuous learning to ensure AI enhances, rather than diminishes, human capabilities. By equipping employees with the skills to collaborate with AI and tackle challenges it cannot solve, they can safeguard the creativity and judgment needed to drive progress. The goal isn't just to integrate AI into workflows, but to expand human potential. By empowering employees to lead, adapt, and innovate, organizations can unlock the full promise of human-AI collaboration—transforming not just tasks, but entire industries.

"The AI age will shape how all companies operate. The challenge lies in determining how to best use technology, including to truly simplify—without losing the unique value that complexity offers, nor the ability for humans to engage with it." [9]

McKinsey & Company, February 2025

Additional evidence that supports the need to drive responsible AI adoption

"While companies eagerly invest in AI, they often overlook crucial investments in change management and employee support. This oversight could lead middle managers to view AI as a threat rather than a tool, fostering resistance that may dramatically slow implementation and adoption." [10]

Future Today Strategy Group's 2025 Tech Trend Report

Agentic AI will empower workers even more in certain tasks. AI agents use multiple types of models and modalities to reason, plan, and carry out goals on behalf of users. These agents further increase productivity, particularly for less experienced and less skilled workers.[11]

AI is enabling workers to accomplish tasks completely outside their expertise domains. "Vibe coding" is enabling people with no programming knowledge to create scripts and apps entirely through prompting LLMs to code for them.[12]

71% of employees trust their employers to use AI ethically and responsibly. In McKinsey's Superagency in the Workplace report, employees trust their employers more than other institutions like "universities, big-tech, and startups."[13]

People are generally still unclear on how AI will shape the future in a positive way.[14] From job loss concerns to lack of transparency in AI model training, and strong belief (76%) that AI tech will never take creativity away from humans.[15]

Two-thirds of global executives say they plan to prioritize soft skills. Hiring for uniquely human skills is essential, especially those that enable organizational agility (e.g., problem solving, adaptability, and collaboration).[16]

Today's higher-order skills will also be needed in the next 5 years. Analytical thinking tops the core skills for 2025, followed by (2) resilience, flexibility, and agility, (3) leadership and social influence, (4) creative thinking, and (5) motivation and self-awareness.[17]

How to take action

People leadership

— Promote a human-centered vision for AI integration, emphasizing how it drives growth and enhances human skills, rather than solely how it increases productivity and efficiency

— Establish cross-functional governance groups to prevent AI silos, balance innovation speed with organizational trust, and ensure ethical oversight

— Train internal systems to assess and reward adaptability, ethics, and experimentation with AI and technology

— Build AI fluency programs to reduce fear and confusion among employees

— Champion, celebrate, and reward higher-order human skills like critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving

Managers

— Translate organizational AI strategy into team-level opportunities aligned with role needs

— Communicate the human benefits of AI while fostering open discussions about change- and tech-related concerns

— Design team AI adoption as a series of sequential changes to prevent tech overwhelm

— Establish opportunities for employees to practice critical thinking and creativity

— Celebrate success stories of how AI has augmented human contributions and added value at work

Individual contributors

— Share AI tools that have work benefits and provide candid feedback on new organizational tools and platforms

— Practice using AI tools daily at work, and in personal settings, to explore how they can help individuals to learn, reskill, automate tasks, and spark creativity

— Propose strategies to leadership for reducing overload or clarifying priorities when managing multiple, simultaneous changes
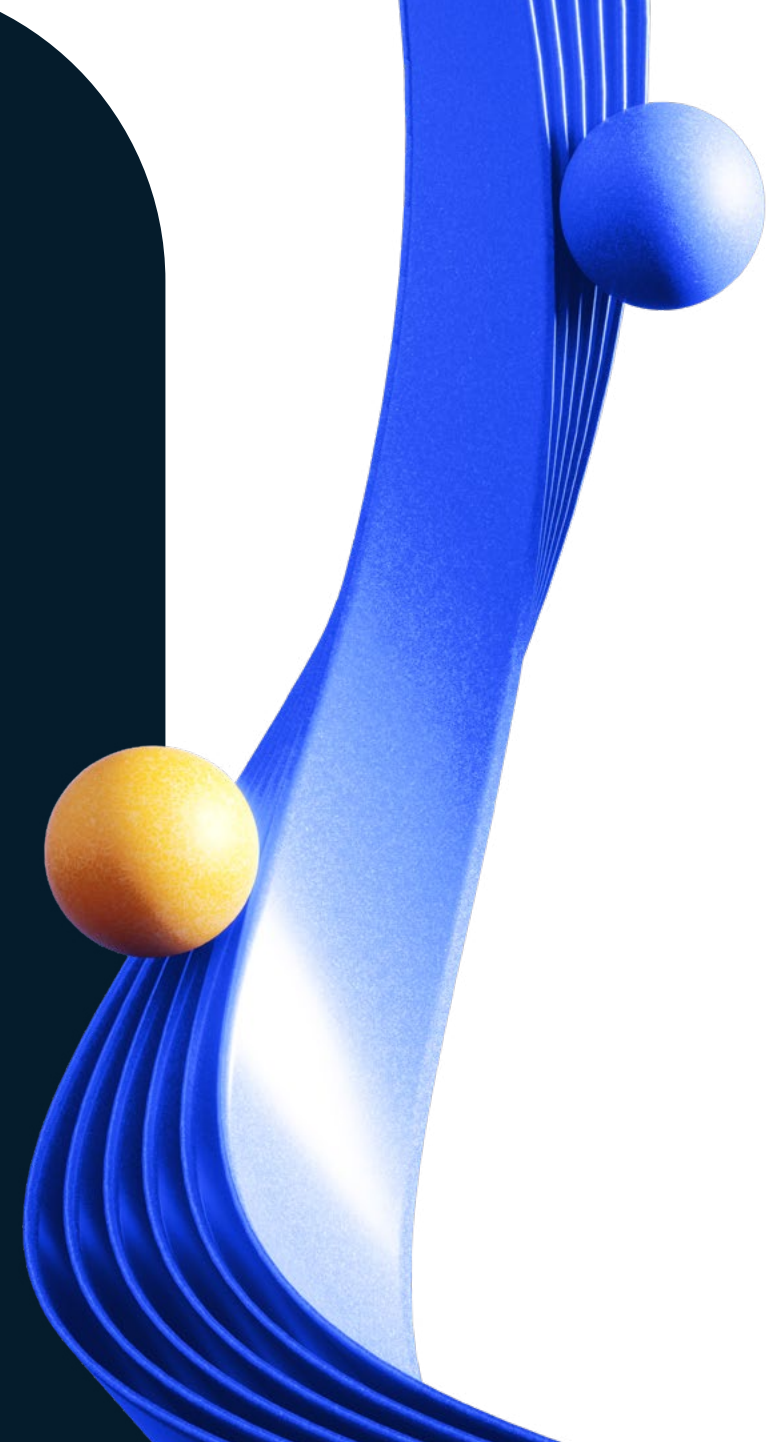
Resilient and adaptable individuals and orgs

The organizations that thrive in the future will not be those that resist disruption or merely recover from setbacks, but those that anticipate, adapt, and grow. To do this, they must build the structural, cultural, and personal foundations that support and foster adaptability and resilience for their employees.

Today's workforce operates in what the Future Today Institute calls a technology supercycle[1]: an era of relentless innovation and unpredictable consequences. However, the pace of change is certainly not limited to these advancements or to purely external factors. Workforces across the globe are now made up of an unprecedented diversity of experience, with employees spanning five generations. In a post-COVID world, the boundaries between personal and professional life have, to a great degree, blurred. Expectations regarding life balance have shifted, as burnout and information overload reach critical levels.

And yet, most companies continue to position resilience and its necessary partner, adaptability, as a personal trait or responsibility. If they wish to develop into the resilient organizations necessary for success in the future, companies must create and cultivate structures, cultures, and skill sets that support the resilience of individual employees.
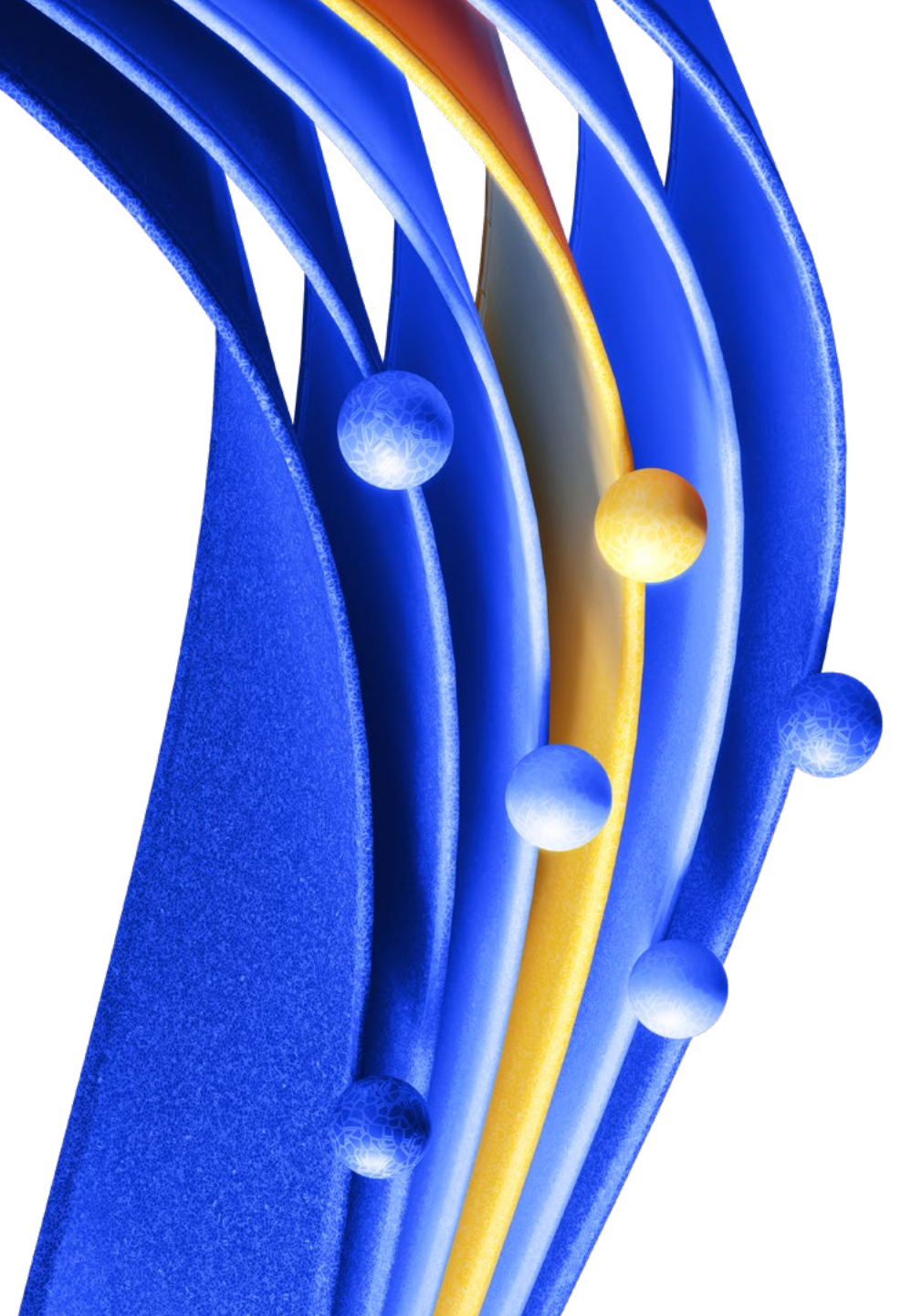
Unsupported individuals cannot support strong organizations

Today's world is changing quickly; resilience and adaptability are essential. Meanwhile, organizations are constrained by outdated mindsets, team structures, and ways of working that make resilience and adaptability a challenge at both the individual and organizational levels.

The result is a workforce stretched thin. Burnout is widespread, especially as the boundaries between work and life have permanently blurred. A multi-generational workforce brings a wide range of values and expectations. And while many return to physical offices, they carry the weight of broader disruptions: rapid AI advancements, geopolitical volatility, and changing approaches to inclusion and belonging.

Yet resilience is framed as something employees must manage alone. Well-meaning workplace responses often put additional responsibility on already overextended individuals and don't address the systemic issues that contribute to burnout in the first place. The outcome is a troubling disconnect: individuals are exhausted and unsupported, and organizations need resilience and adaptability to thrive but fail to create the conditions for it.

Individuals and organizations are flexible, rooted, and resilient

Organizations view resilience and adaptability as shared capabilities that can be intentionally cultivated and sustained. Work environments, expectations, and processes are designed to support the adaptive resilience of both employees and the organization. This support is embedded in the design of work. Leaders model adaptability and prioritize well-being for themselves and others as a neuroscience-based foundation for professional success. Evolving technology is embraced as an ongoing opportunity to automate tasks and enhance the ability to focus, reflect, and create.

Volatility is not seen as an existential threat, but as a catalyst for reinvention. Diversity in experience and perspective is celebrated and put into practice through mentorship, apprenticeship, cross-generational collaboration, and inclusive lifestyle policies. Work environments and workflows are designed to allow ample time for recuperation as a necessary element of sustained performance. "Work" and "life" are understood to be interconnected, as are the adaptability and resilience capacities of individuals and the organizations they power.

Unlock the potential of a diverse, multigenerational workforce

With five generations working side-by-side, today's workforce is more age-diverse than ever[2] – and that diversity is reshaping how organizations must learn, lead, and develop talent. Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X now form the largest employee segments,[3,4] and many Boomers continue working.[5,6] This generational mix brings valuable perspectives, but also tension. Differences in communication styles,[7] career expectations,[2,4] and views on professionalism (e.g., work hours, time off, dress codes, remote flexibility)[4] are fueling conflict, and at times, incivility.[8] Yet a shared desire for purpose and impact cuts across all age brackets.[9,10] Many employees are also driving grassroots innovation, utilizing their own AI tools and platforms.[11,12] This bottom-up shift in knowledge-sharing is transforming how organizations operate. Meanwhile, companies report that identifying and preparing the leaders of tomorrow remains an urgent challenge.[13]

Learning and development must become dynamic and continuous. Upskilling alone is not enough; reskilling will be essential. Leaders should promote cross-generational apprenticeship and reengineer work environments. The goal should not be static mastery, but rather enduring curiosity and receptivity to change. Intentionally-designed, in-the-flow-of-work learning will be critical to meeting the needs of a diverse workforce and to bolstering adaptability and resilience.

Support recuperation to ensure sustained performance

High-performing teams don't just push through adversity, they strategically recover from it. Due to a multitude of factors, including the ongoing swirl of constant change,[14] increasingly blurred boundaries,[15] excessive stress,[16] and changing expectations regarding work,[2,17] burnout rates are rising.[18,19] Studies show that it is impacting workers at younger ages and with more debilitating effects.[20]

Organizations must address not only the issue of over-work, but of under-recuperation. Without the systems and structures to restore energy, gain clarity, and renew motivation, employees feel drained and disconnected. This isn't just a personal wellness issue – it's a productivity and retention crisis. Burnout erodes team cohesion, innovation, and long-term organizational sustainability.[21]

Recuperation should not be thought of as avoiding responsibility or taking endless PTO. Rather, it's an active, strategic approach to restore the foundation necessary for sustained performance. While the world needs those who "run toward the fire" – people willing to tackle tough problems with courage and urgency – even elite firefighters don't battle flames nonstop. Recuperation enables people to meet demands, maintain focus, and innovate without sacrificing long-term well-being.
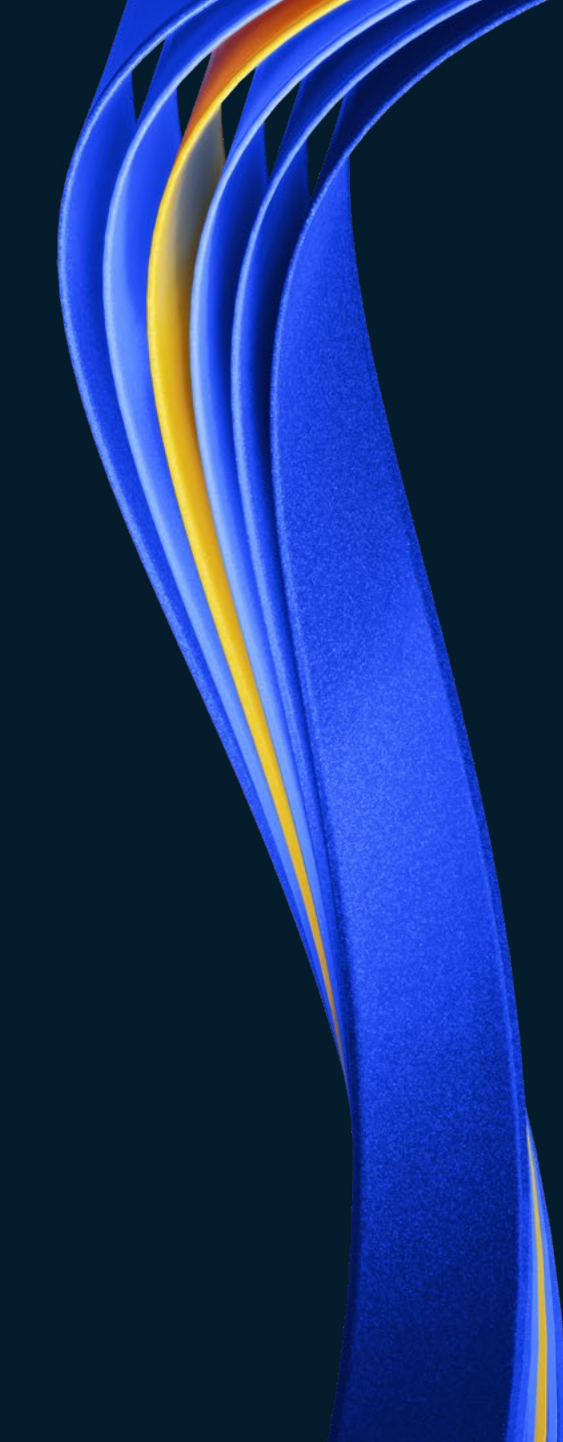
Enable organizational resilience at-scale through sustainable workflows

Organizational resilience – a company's ability to forecast, manage, and adapt to all manner of change – cannot be sustained with a workforce performing at sub-optimal levels.[21] Many companies make efforts to support individuals through resilience-focused benefits like meditation apps or gym memberships.[22,23] While these are helpful options that may be well-received, such offerings can seem like bandages, not effective solutions.[24] They don't go far enough to address the root cause of diminishing resilience and continue to put the burden of change disproportionately on individuals.

As companies redesign work for AI collaboration and technological augmentation, they must also prioritize creating long-term sustainability for humans. Leaders must work cross-functionally to set clear priorities, design workflows that support recuperation, and establish project pacing that allows for reasonable autonomy to meet the diverse needs of a changing workforce. AI and other tech can be used to create more flexibility and foster community and creativity. And, while organizations would do well to scout for talent with curiosity, adaptability, and resilience, they should also reinforce the importance of these areas through their evaluations and reward systems.

Now is the time to redesign work to create the long-term organizational and individual sustainability that will help companies to navigate toward the future.

"To be resilient, leaders and employees need to view change as a challenge or an opportunity to bounce forward, regulate thoughts and emotions, take lessons from prior experiences, and execute on change. To be adaptable, they need to approach uncertainty with an open, learning mindset and to think flexibly and creatively about problems as they arise."[25]

McKinsey & Company, December 2024

Additional evidence that supports the need to build individual organizational resilience and adaptability

"To cultivate organizational resilience and to ensure adaptability, companies will need to think differently about how teams are structured and managed... Adaptable leaders] preserve employees' (and their own) energy by emphasizing well-being versus pushing for 24/7 performance and by serving as role models for employees under pressure. [They] enable organizational agility and team empowerment and ultimately set the tone for resilience."[21]

McKinsey& Company, 2022

Employee stress is widespread. A Wiley Workplace Intelligence report found that nearly all employees (96%) are experiencing some level of stress about workplace changes.[26]

Workers feel overwhelmed. A survey about stress in America revealed that 67% of adults ages 18 to 34 say stress makes it difficult for them to focus, and 58% describe their daily stress as "completely overwhelming."[27]

People are looking to "log off" due to tech overload and need for balance. In 2024, AirBNB reported a 100% YOY increase in searched for 'off-grid accomodation.'[28]

It has been reported that, on average, 1 in 4 employees within an organization is at high risk of burnout.[29] The Future of Jobs report indicates that supporting employee health and well-being has become a top priority for organizations. However, employees placed a much higher value on working hours, pointing to a need to go beyond surface-level solutions and address the systemic root causes of this problem.[30]

The Future of Jobs Report 2025 predicts that resilience, flexibility, and agility will be considered core skills in 2030.[30] The reason for this is the pace and magnitude of technological change, geopolitical fragmentation and economic uncertainty, demographic shifts, and the green transition.

Lifelong employment is becoming more widespread. Due to economic pressures, aging populations in developed countries will increasingly stay in the workforce well past traditional retirement age."[31] This trend, which the World Economic Forum calls "super-aging societies", poses global economic and labor-market challenges."[14]

Investing in employee well-being has significant economic opportunity. According to McKinsey Health Institute, the total global opportunity for optimizing employee health and well-being is $3.7 trillion to $11.7 trillion, which is equivalent to raising global GDP by 4 to 12 percent."[32]

How to take action

People leadership

— Design and fund cross-generational apprenticeship and mentorship programs

— Invest in the leadership development of adaptive, curiosity-driven leaders at all tenure levels

— Prioritize in-the-flow-of-work learning, reskilling, and tech enablement across the organizations

— Align the talent strategy lifecycle (e.g., recruitment, evaluations, promotions, and awards) to attract, retain, and reward curiosity, adaptability, and resilience

— Reward leaders who model sustainable work behaviors and build high-performing, well-rested teams

— Redesign work systems to make resilience a shared priority rather than solely an individual responsibility

Managers

— Establish project pacing and communication styles that enable reasonable autonomy

— Promote collaboration across age groups by staffing projects with intentional diversity

— Set clear priorities for teams and project plans, allowing time for focused work and recuperation

— Model resilience, adaptability, and recuperation as a manager and informal coach

Individual contributors

— Embrace cross-generational collaboration and engage in apprenticeship/mentorship at all tenure levels

— Intentionally design resilience practices - like rest, physical movement, and social connection - into the work week

— Proactively reduce information overload by minimizing notifications, limiting unnecessary screen time, and taking meaningful breaks away from the desk

— Champion and model recuperation as an essential element of high performance
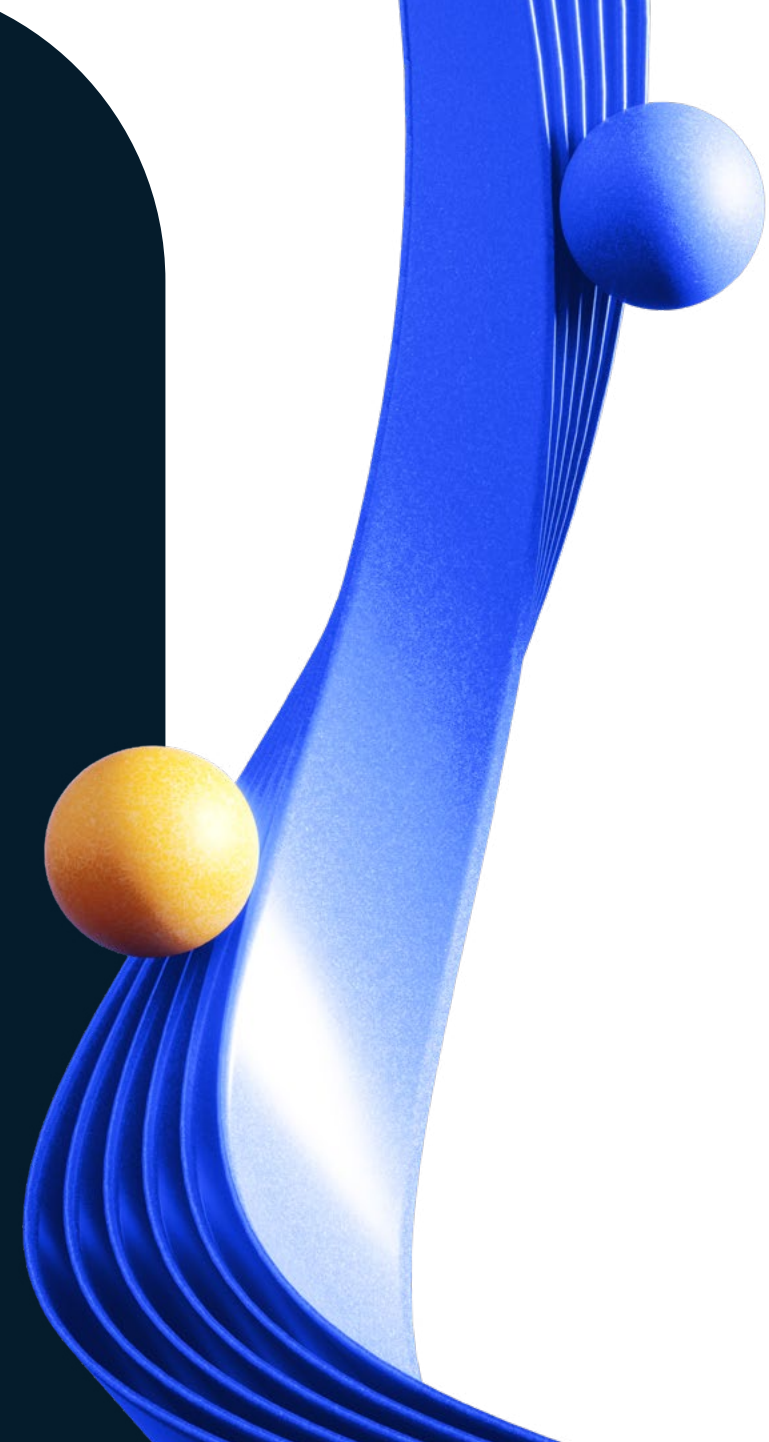
Resources

Everyone and everything that
helped develop this report
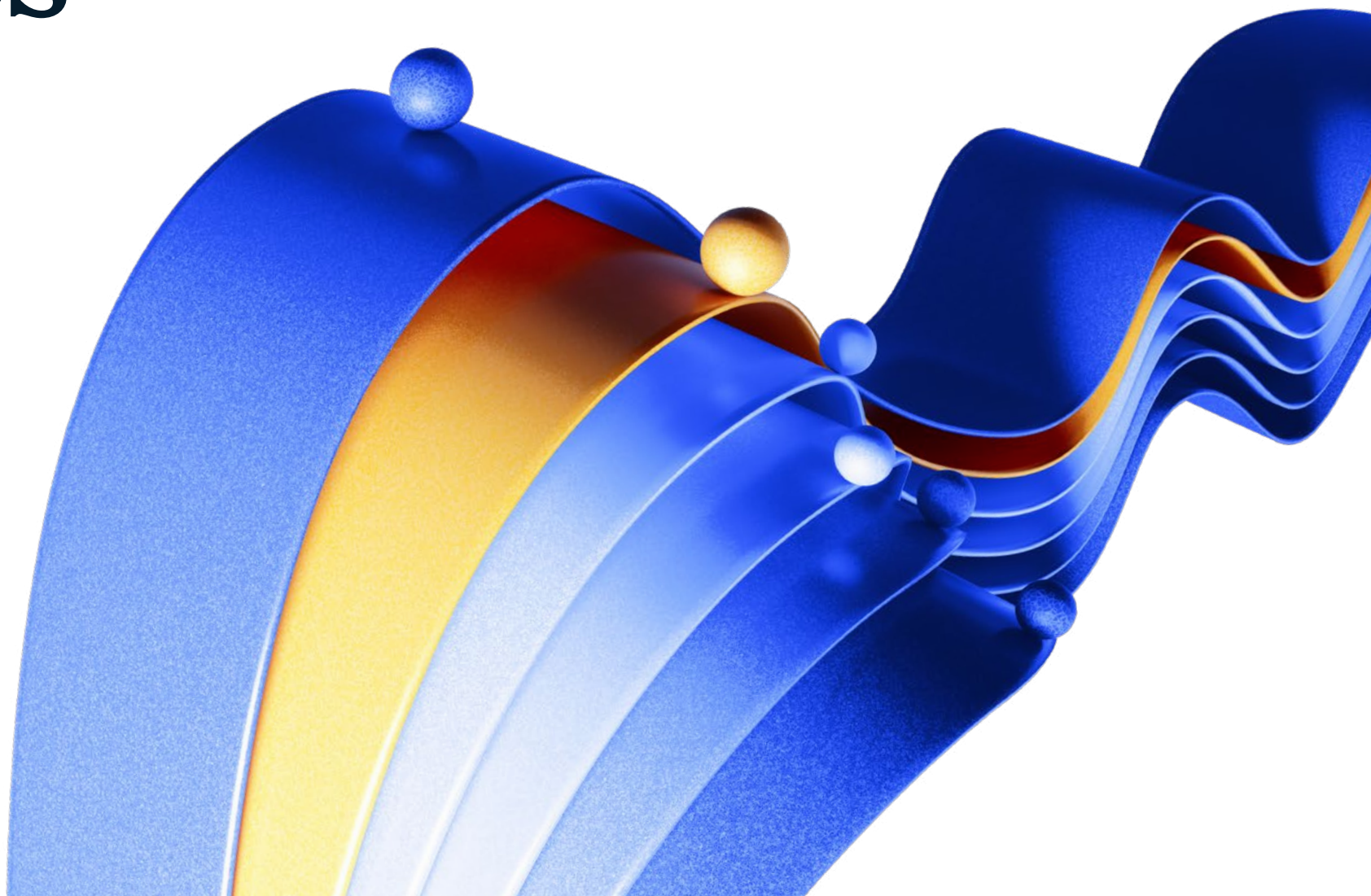
Researchers and authors

Project owners

Lisa Christensen
Director Learning Design

Jake Gittleson
Senior Expert,
Learning Design

Jessica Glazer
Expert, Learning Design

Contributors

Nicolas Carr
Head of Product
Management

Sandra Durth
Partner, People &
Organization Performance

Priscilla Fuentes
Analyst, Learning
Design

Stephanie Gabriels
Senior Expert,
Learning Design

Stef Geiger
Expert Lead,
Learning Design

Veronica Gomez
Expert, Learning Design

Terry Hackett
Associate Director of
Learning, Design

Karen Henke
Senior Expert,
Learning Design

Sarah Jordaan
Senior Manager,
Recruiting

Bob Kaeding
Expert Lead,
Learning Design

Karen Merry
Associate Director of
Learning, Design

Dianne Miller
Senior Expert,
Learning Design

Francesca Pacitti
Director of Analytics

Ron Rabin
Senior Expert,
Learning Design

Nina Rodriguez
Senior Media
Designer

John Sangimino
Associate Director of
Learning, Design

June Zhang
Senior Manager,
Analytics

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