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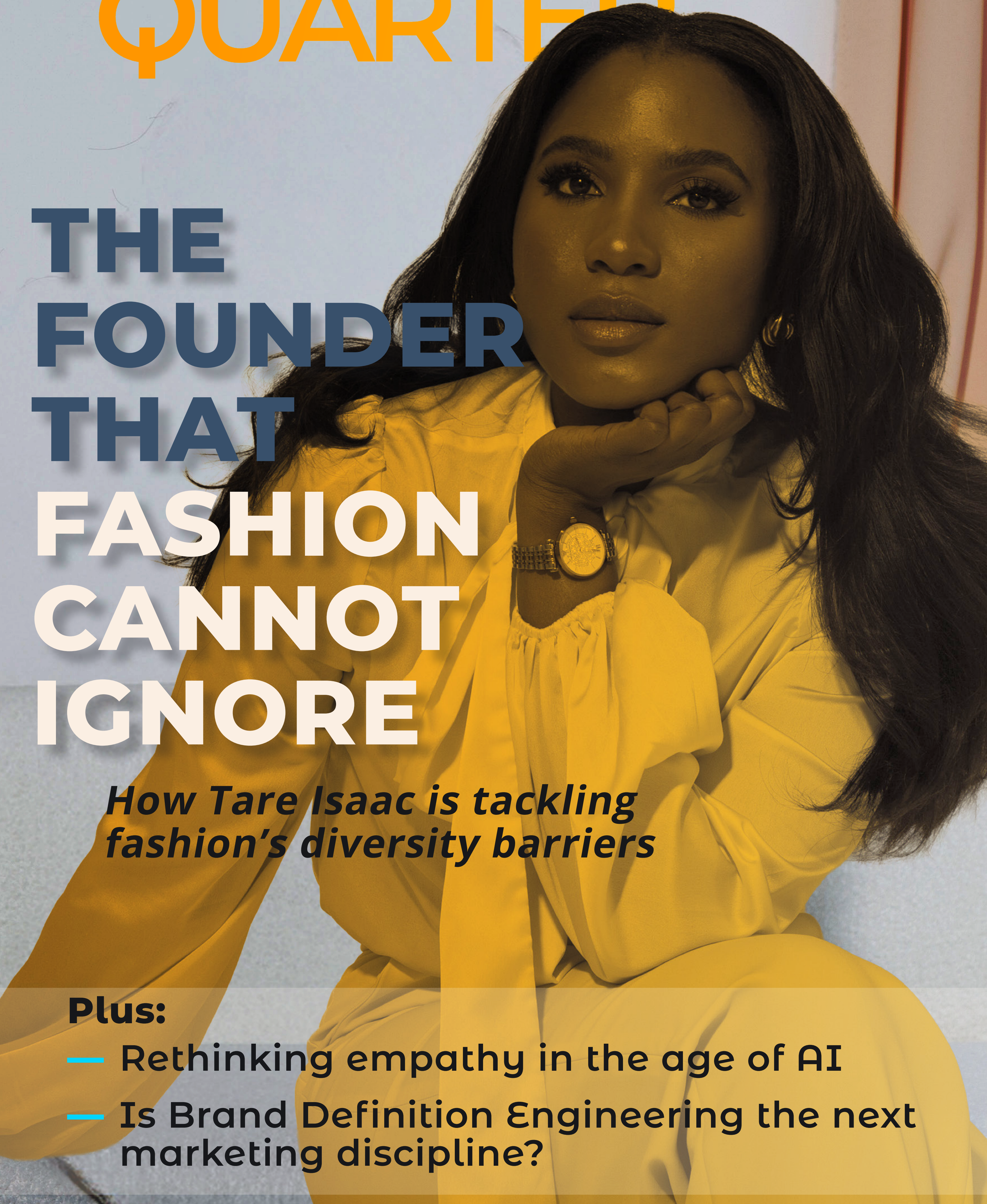
Q4 2025

BUSINESS QUARTER



THE FOUNDER THAT FASHION CANNOT IGNORE

How Tare Isaac is tackling fashion's diversity barriers

Plus:

- Rethinking empathy in the age of AI
- Is Brand Definition Engineering the next marketing discipline?

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Editorial —

Publishing director | David Webb
d.webb@2bpublishing.co.uk

Editor | Julia Whitmore
j.whitmore@businessquarter.co.uk

News editor | Sameer Patel
s.patel@businessquarter.co.uk

Design and illustration —

Graphic designer | Harper Easton
Illustrator | Nathan Daniels
Magazine design | 2b Media

Marketing and advertising —

Sales Manager | Matt Owens
m.owens@businessquarter.co.uk

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Editor's note —

As we close out 2025, it is hard to ignore how demanding this year has been for business leaders. Not because any single shock was decisive, but because uncertainty has become the norm and the energy required to keep organisations moving has continued to climb.

That tension runs through this issue. In our market snapshot, we look at what "thinner markets and sharper moves" mean in practice — from planning around multiple 2026 rate paths, to staying deal-ready without abandoning valuation discipline. It is a reminder that agility is born of meticulous planning.

The same pragmatism shows up in our leadership spotlights. Sean Hirons, co-founder of MyEdSpace, makes the case for scaling access — using livestreaming to bring high-quality teaching to more households, while trying to protect speed and quality as the organisation grows. Jeremy Walters, CEO of Paragon Group, describes leadership as something closer to listening than certainty, and frames "distributed intelligence" as an organisational design choice that widens the circle of people who can act.

We also return to the foundational work that gets neglected when the calendar is full. Rebecca Sutherland writes about values as a strategic advantage. Alongside that, we examine the "resilience tax" — with wellbeing and capacity increasingly central to performance, as reflected in sickness absence figures cited from the CIPD.

If 2025 has been a year of constraints, this issue is built around the leaders who are responding with clearer systems, crafted choices, and a steadier way of moving into 2026.

— **Julia Whitmore**
Editor,
Business Quarter

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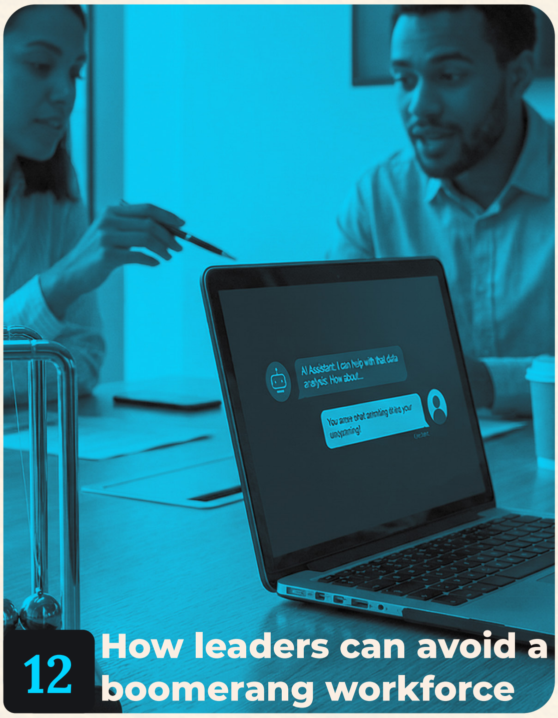

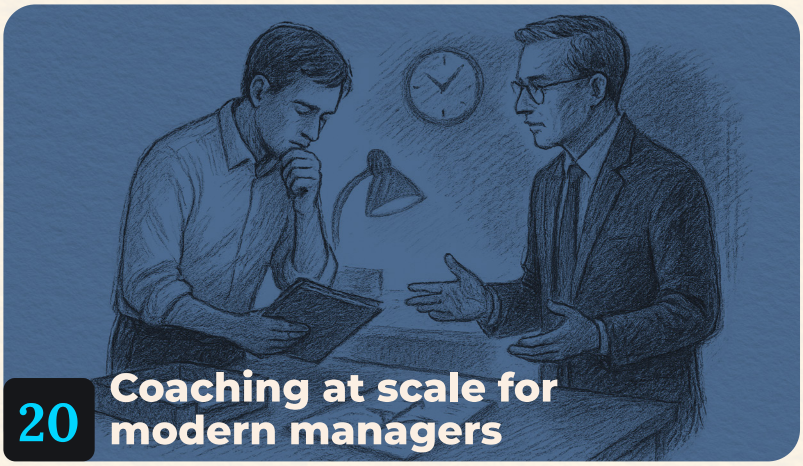

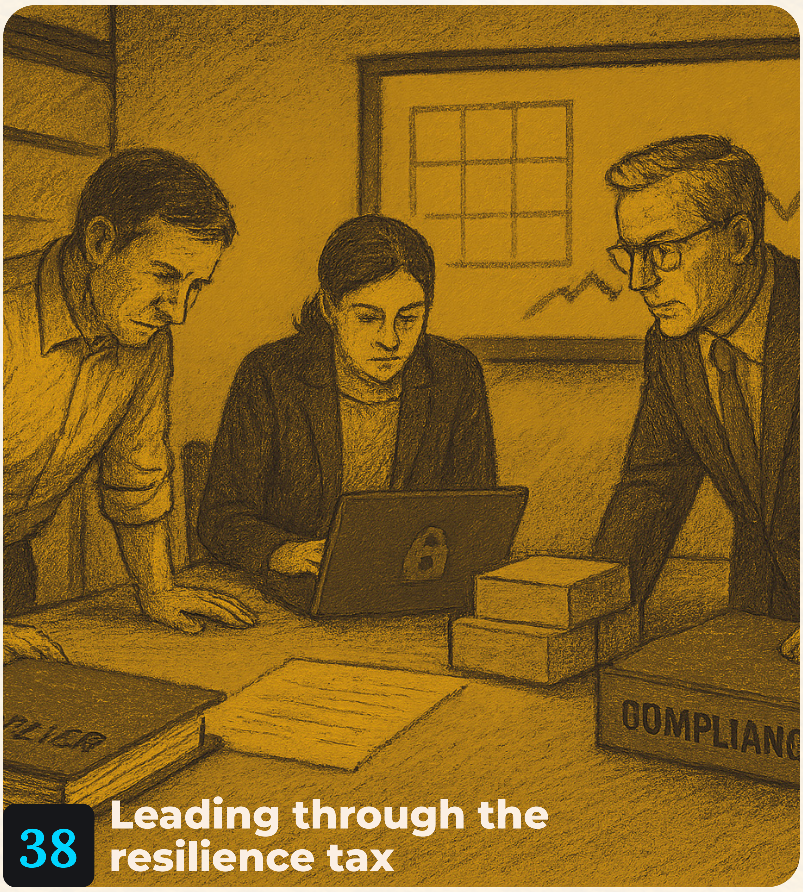

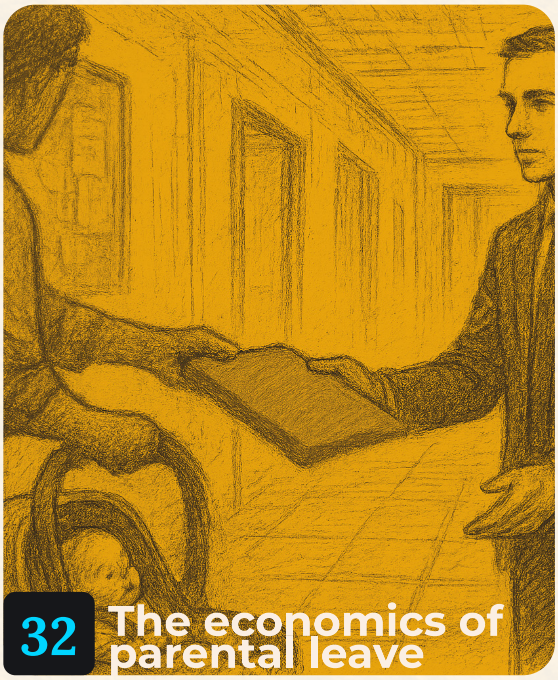

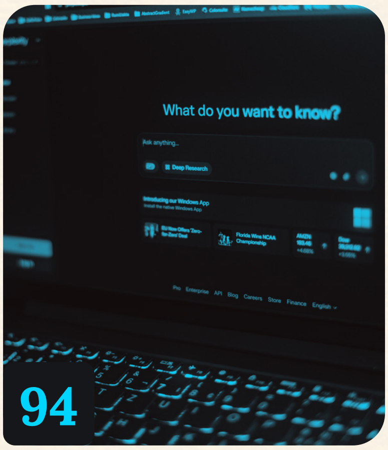

Dan Schulman —

Steering Verizon's next chapter

Verizon Communications announced in early October that Dan Schulman, the long-serving chief executive of PayPal, would take over as CEO. This marked not just a change of leadership, but one of the most closely watched leadership transitions in the US telecom sector this year. Schulman succeeded Hans Vestberg, whose seven-year tenure was defined by heavy network investment and slower growth in core subscriber numbers.

At the time, analysts viewed Schulman's arrival as a signal of customer-focused change. Known for his inclusive leadership style and digital-first credentials, Schulman led PayPal through an era of rapid expansion and diversification. Verizon's board is understood to have sought a leader capable of blending operational discipline with renewed consumer trust — a pivot from engineering-led growth to experience-led strategy.

In his first address to employees, Schulman described Verizon as "a business with extraordinary reach that must rediscover simplicity and empathy." Within weeks, he began reshaping the company's cost base and structure.

He announced a sweeping reorganisation and made clear that "cost reductions will be a way of life", initiating one of the group's largest workforce reviews in over a decade. More than 13,000 roles are set to be removed, accompanied by a $20 million Reskilling and Career Transition Fund to support employees moving into new digital and technical roles.

Internally, Schulman is said to have placed emphasis on cultural reset — flattening reporting layers, accelerating decision-making, and bringing in new metrics focused on customer experience and churn. Early investor reactions were cautious, with Verizon's share price dipping on announcement, though confidence has since stabilised as Schulman's agenda becomes clearer.

The company's next growth phase will focus on AI-enabled service delivery, targeted marketing, and personalised plans, areas Schulman believes can rebuild loyalty and improve margins. Analysts suggest his PayPal background gives him an advantage in data-led customer engagement — a capability long underdeveloped in telecoms.

Whether these early reforms will revive Verizon's market share remains to be seen, but Schulman's opening months have already shifted tone and tempo. His approach blends fiscal prudence with a social lens, balancing structural change with workforce support — a combination that could define Verizon's next decade.

Move makers

Rupert Novis has been appointed Chief Commercial Officer at value creation advisory specialists **BML**, bringing more than two decades of entrepreneurial and leadership experience across digital healthcare, investment, and technology integration.

He joins from Pulse Strategy, where he led digital healthcare advisory projects, and previously served as Investment Director at Simplyhealth Ventures and Director at Kinled, a single-family investment firm.

Tina Kennedy has been appointed Chief Customer Officer at **Ordnance Survey**, joining the national mapping agency as it continues a major business transformation under its Data and Destinations strategy.

An accomplished commercial leader with a strong record in digital transformation and customer strategy, Tina brings extensive experience across health, software, telecoms, and financial services. She joins from Simplyhealth, where she led the Healthplan business as Director of Product, driving revenue growth and product innovation.

Nik Tunley has been appointed Head of Corporate at UK Top 100 law firm **Ward Hadaway** following its merger with The Endeavour Partnership. A specialist in mid-market M&A, Nik brings over 15 years' deal experience and leadership expertise.

Based across Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle and Teesside, he will drive the firm's next growth phase, strengthening its national corporate capability and deepening client relationships.

Jeff Livney has joined **Airport Dimensions** as VP of Business Development, Digital Products, leading the global expansion of its Connecta platform. A travel-tech innovator and Servy co-founder, Livney brings deep experience in digital commerce and partnerships.

His appointment supports Airport Dimensions' strategy to enhance airport experiences through digital integration, data-driven engagement, and non-aeronautical revenue growth across its global airport partner network.

Tricia Nelson has been appointed Global Marketing, Brand and Sales Director at **Insights Learning and Development**.

Formerly UK & Ireland Managing Partner for People Advisory Services at EY, she brings over 20 years' experience in growth and transformation leadership. Nelson will lead global marketing and sales strategy as Insights accelerates international expansion across more than 100 countries.

Tricia commented: "In today's complex business environment, organisations need leaders and teams who can adapt fast, collaborate well, and drive measurable performance. That's why Insights has never been more relevant."

C-Suite pulse —

Across the final quarter of 2025, executive appointments continued to reflect precision hiring rather than broad expansion. Boards are prioritising leaders who can deliver immediate commercial impact in areas such as transformation, digital integration and customer-centric growth. This trend aligns with industry insights showing that firms are narrowing mandates to "must-have" roles tied to clear strategic priorities, rather than adding C-suite titles indiscriminately.

Appointments such as Rupert Novis at BML and Tina Kennedy at Ordnance Survey typify the trend toward leaders who can link transformation with measurable value. Internal promotions, like Nik Tunley's at Ward Hadaway, signal an emphasis on continuity and proven leadership.

Digital expertise has become a core C-suite requirement, from data-driven public services to platform innovation in travel. Diversity progress remains uneven, but intent is rising. Overall, Q4 2025 marks a period of targeted, commercially grounded appointments — setting the tone for pragmatic leadership renewal into 2026.

— BQ

Market snapshot —

Q4 opened with UK equities still riding the momentum of late-summer gains — and with a striking amount of the upside driven by single-session catalysts rather than broad conviction. On 1 October, the FTSE 100 closed at a fresh record (9,446.43), lifted by a sharp move in healthcare after a US agreement involving Pfizer helped ease tariff-related fears for the sector, even as markets weighed the risk of a US government shutdown.

By 1 December, the index had climbed to 9,720.55 — a gain of roughly 2.9% — but the quarter's real story was rotation: markets repeatedly switched leadership as rate expectations, sanctions, and fiscal signals took turns driving risk appetite.

That "conditional" tone was reinforced by policymakers. The ECB held rates steady on 30 October and avoided committing to a set path. The Bank of England's 5–4 vote to keep Bank Rate at 4% (meeting ending 5 November) underlined how finely balanced the UK outlook has become. In parallel, the 26 November Budget gave markets a steadier near-term anchor, with the OBR projecting almost £22 billion of fiscal headroom in five years' time.

Deal flow reflected selective confidence: Shawbrook's £1.92 billion London IPO suggested the listing window can open for the right names, while AkzoNobel and Axalta's $25 billion merger plan pointed to boards pursuing scale and synergy despite macro noise. As December begins, the quarter is still in motion, but trading typically slows into the holidays — and thinner liquidity can magnify any late-breaking policy or commodity shocks.

— BQ

Top level —

1 **Plan for thinner markets and sharper moves.**

Holiday liquidity can exaggerate volatility; tighten your trigger points on funding, FX, and hedging, and stress-test decision timelines.

2 **Treat "data-dependent" as an operating environment.**

With the BoE split and the ECB non-committal, build scenarios around multiple 2026 rate paths — and pre-agree what you will do under each.

3 **Keep deal readiness high, but stay valuation-disciplined.**

Q4 showed that windows open for well-structured listings and strategic combinations; be prepared to move, but prioritise capability and resilience over scale-for-scale's-sake.

Megadeals do the heavy lifting in a stubbornly selective market –

In the three months to 1 December, UK and European dealmaking looked healthier on headline value than it did on breadth. Announced M&A value roughly doubled versus the prior three-month window, rising to about $371bn from $185bn, even as overall deal counts edged down (around 3,300 versus 3,514). The result is a familiar pattern of a market that moves when it has to, but increasingly only in size.

The concentration signal is hard to ignore. The ten largest deals accounted for more than 65% of total value in the period, up from roughly 45% in the preceding window — a sharp intensification of the "barbell" effect. A handful of transactions did most of the work: Anglo American's tie-up with Teck (around $53bn), AkzoNobel's proposed combination with Axalta ($25bn), Siemens' $10bn move for Altair, and TotalEnergies' €10.6bn flexible power joint venture with EPH. Even the mooted, ultimately rejected French telecoms consolidation play around Altice (circa $19.7bn) underlined the same point: when executives step out, they're doing it with conviction, not with incremental bolt-ons.

Public markets, meanwhile, still look like a reluctant partner — particularly in the UK, where private equity remains a dominant buyer of last resort (or first choice, depending on your view). The window saw nine UK take-private announcements above £5m, with private equity backing an estimated 55% of them. The Permira bid for JTC (£2.3bn) was the standout, but the broader story sits in the steady procession of mid-cap and small-cap takeouts, from property to speciality ingredients. In a market where boards can't rely on reratings, "take it private and fix it" remains a practical route to value — for buyers with patient capital and a tolerance for scrutiny.

There were, however, faint signs of an opening on exits. European IPO proceeds rose to around €8.8bn across 29 listings, up from roughly €2.1bn and 13 deals in the prior three months. A large share of that improvement came from a small number of sizeable floats, including Verisure (about €3.2bn raised) and SMG Swiss Marketplace Group (around CHF0.9bn). That's progress, but it's not a broad reopening — more a narrow window for stories with scale, clarity, and sponsorship.

The backdrop helps explain the selectivity. The FTSE 100 rose about 5.5% over the period while the STOXX 600 was broadly flat, with policy rates holding at 4.00% (BoE) and 2.00% (ECB) by period end. If that rate plateau holds and IPO conditions keep thawing, the next test is whether the mid-market regains confidence and concentration falls. If volatility returns, expect the opposite: fewer deals, bigger tickets, and more companies quietly deciding they'd rather answer to a sponsor than the public markets.

Business management

Mind the rebound —

How leaders can avoid a boomerang workforce

The robots aren't at the door quite yet according to a recent Yale analysis which says generative AI hasn't meaningfully changed overall employment so far. The job market is shifting, but the study argues it's too early to credit or blame AI for broad job losses. That matters for leaders under pressure to cut costs and show AI progress. It's a prompt to pause, plan and avoid a cycle of letting people go, then rushing to rehire.

We've all seen the pattern recently. A company trims experienced teams, flips on automation and hopes customers won't notice. But, they do. Complaints rise and complex cases stall. Leaders then scramble to rehire at a premium. That's a boomerang workforce. As the leadership at Klarna would likely attest to, it looks decisive on day one, then expensive by day ninety. Re-hiring their workforce is likely to have impacted customer and workforce loyalty as well as having financial ramifications.

But there are other approaches worth studying. Pet insurer Waggel has put a cap on headcount at 100. The aim is not to sack people. It's to force the business to use AI well, remove drudge work and free staff to focus on the moments that need judgment and empathy. It's a bet on productivity and design, not on blunt cuts. Whether you would adopt the same cap or not, the principle is timely and sets clear limits to make technology earn its place.

However, Klarna offers another useful signal. After a re-hiring initiative, its AI assistant now handles a large share of customer service chats, with the company publicly tying the rollout to measurable gains and a significant agent-equivalent workload. It shows what's possible when you design hybrid service with strong metrics and guardrails. The headline isn't "bots replace humans." The headline is "measure, learn, and scale what works."

So, if AI isn't yet the main driver of job losses, why the rush to deep cuts? Because it's easier to point at a tool than to fix a system. Many organisations have underinvested in work design and workforce planning. Tasks, skills and process debt have piled up. Then AI arrives with a neat story and a quick line in the budget. It becomes a plaster over a structural crack.

There is a better route. Start with skills intelligence. Treat work as tasks, not titles. Ask what teams actually do, and which skills sit behind each task. Then test where AI can lift quality, speed or both. Think of it like measuring a room before you buy the furniture. Fit first. Fashion second.

By: Martin Colyer,
Director of Digital & AI,
LACE Partners

Steps towards planning a workforce with skills intelligence —

1 Set a tight scope

Pick one function or customer journey. Don't announce a grand transformation. Smaller scope gives faster feedback and less risk. It also shows respect to the people who do the work.

2 Break work into tasks

Job descriptions are often stale. Spend time with the team. Watch real cases. Note the tasks, the tools, the handoffs and the delays. You'll learn more from a few sharp interviews than from a thousand-line process map.

3 Apply an AI lens

Sort tasks into three buckets: automate, augment, keep human. Document why. Define quality checks. Define how exceptions escalate. If you can't explain the handoff in two sentences, the customer will feel it.

4 Apply a work lens

Ask who should do the remaining tasks and how. A different team? A centre of excellence? A trusted partner? A project pool? Also ask which tasks are motivating and worth keeping inside the role. Motivation isn't a soft idea. It protects service, retention, and brand voice.

5 Redesign roles and size them with data

Rebuild jobs around the new mix of tasks, skills, and tools. Estimate volumes. Set service goals. Be clear where AI fits and where it doesn't. Then fund training for the target state before you move headcount.

Now add workforce planning. Model different futures. What if migration policy tightens and overseas talent is harder to hire? What if a new model changes task accuracy? What if a supplier raises prices or exits a market? Scenario planning sounds slow but in practice it speeds decisions, because you're not starting from a blank page when the news breaks.

Keep humans close to the customer. Hybrid beats all-or-nothing, so run people and AI in parallel for a period. Design clear handoffs and visible routes to a person. You may think the overlap looks pricey. It's cheaper than refunds, churn, and another recruitment drive.

Governance can stay light. Write a short policy that says where automation is allowed and where a human must decide. Publish the metrics that matter: first-contact resolution, time to first response, deflection without repeat, customer satisfaction. Then share them across the leadership team. Trade-offs get better when everyone sees the same scoreboard.

This is a culture choice as much as a tech choice. Sudden cuts look bold yet seem like panic inside the business. Measured changes read as competence. Customers notice. So do regulators when service dips below a sensible line.

Slow down to speed up. AI scales good process as well as bad process. Skills intelligence and solid workforce planning give you the difference. Get those right and you avoid the bounce back and will spend less, protect trust and take your people with you.

Words: Julia Whitmore

From authority to influence —

Why 2026 calls for trust, autonomy and safety

Transformation has become a permanent condition of work. Strategy cycles are shorter, operating models are more fluid, and technology is reshaping what "good" looks like in roles that used to be predictable. In that environment, the traditional command-and-control manager is both outdated and expensive. Control slows decisions, suppresses early warning signals, and turns capable people into compliance machines.

The shift now underway is more operational. Influence is replacing authority as the manager's primary tool. The manager's value is increasingly measured in the quality of decisions made without them — and in whether people feel able to raise issues early, learn quickly, and move work forward without waiting for permission. That matters because the manager is also the biggest variable in day-to-day engagement: Gallup says seventy percent of team engagement is attributable to the manager. Yet the same research points to a structural weakness: less than half of the world's managers say they have received management training, at the same moment manager engagement has fallen sharply.

Trust is management infrastructure —

Trust is often described as cultural, but in high-change environments it behaves more like infrastructure. It either carries the load, or it fails under pressure. When trust holds, people take sensible risks, share information sooner, and escalate problems before they become expensive. When it breaks, everything looks like a process problem — and teams start building workarounds instead of building products.

This is where influence begins: in the manager's choices about autonomy and development. Dr Anna Barnett, Head of Research and Insights at **Mindtools** and **Kineo**, says, "Our latest research shows that trust is both the most common driver of delegation and a critical factor in employee development. When managers delegate with the intention of supporting growth, they not only create opportunities for skill-building but also strengthen trust within the team." Her point is that delegation is not a relief mechanism for overloaded managers. It is a design choice, and it signals what the manager believes about capability.

Barnett adds, "We also found that managers who supported their people to make decisions independently reported significantly lower staff turnover, underlining that trust and autonomy are now core to talent retention."

That pushes managers towards an explicit conversation many organisations still avoid: who gets to decide what, how quickly, and with what guardrails? Influence grows when decision rights are clear, and when managers are consistent about using them to develop people, rather than to protect themselves.

Psychological safety is often treated as a softer, parallel conversation, but it sits in the same operating system. Without it, teams stop surfacing bad news, and leaders start learning too late. In evidence reviews, psychological safety is commonly defined as feeling safe to take interpersonal risks at work — speaking up, disagreeing, admitting mistakes, or asking for help without fear of punishment or ridicule.

There is, however, also a managerial trap in how safety is built. Barnett says, "Psychological safety is equally tied to how managers balance empathy and responsibility. Too little empathy can damage engagement, but we also observed that too much can limit delegation and autonomy, as highly empathetic managers sometimes avoid giving responsibility for fear of overburdening their people."

Influence, in other words, is not permissiveness. It is the steady combination of care and standards, delivered in a way that makes responsibility feel achievable, not punitive.

One of the most reliable tests of psychological safety is what happens after a mistake. Dr Wladislaw Rivkin, Associate Professor in Organisational Behaviour at **Trinity Business School**, points to how leaders respond when things go wrong: "The way leaders deal with mistakes can strongly determine psychological safety. Instead of punishing individual errors but framing them as learning opportunities leaders can facilitate psychological safety and associated trust."

It is easy to say 'learn from failure'; it is harder to operationalise it through post-mortems that focus on systems and decisions, not scapegoats.

Managing without visibility —

Hybrid work has accelerated the move from authority to influence because it removes a classic management crutch: proximity. When managers cannot rely on visibility, the temptation is to replace presence with process, and to compensate for uncertainty with tighter control. That approach rarely holds for long. It drains time, and it trains teams to optimise for compliance rather than outcomes.

The more sustainable response is to make management explicitly facilitative. "Managers today are being asked to shift from directing work to facilitating it, particularly in hybrid contexts where trust and autonomy are highly valued by employees." says Barnett. "Where managers cannot rely on physical presence, delegating responsibility and empowering employees becomes even more critical."

> *"Looking ahead, emotional intelligence will remain the cornerstone of effective management, but it will be applied in more nuanced ways."*
>
> — *Dr Anna Barnett,* **Mindtools / Kineo**

She notes that when trust is missing, teams receive fewer development opportunities and experience lower promotion rates — a reminder that control does not only shape performance, it shapes careers.

According to Joan O'Connor, Head of Leadership Practice at **10Eighty**, "Managers are no longer just supervisors in a physical office; they orchestrate an array of actors and resources in a virtual workplace and are responsible for managing a distributed team while ensuring consistent productivity and engagement."

In 2026, that orchestration will also sit alongside AI-enabled work design. As new operating models combine human and digital labour, managers are required to think more carefully about what should be automated, what should be delegated, and what must remain human because it carries trust.

The emerging skillset is not a single competency, but a more deliberate way of making decisions with and through people. Barnett says, "Looking ahead, emotional intelligence will remain the cornerstone of effective management, but it will be applied in more nuanced ways." She adds that empathy, self-awareness, and self-regulation "need to be balanced and deployed deliberately". This is influence in its most concrete form: the ability to stay calm, fair, and consistent when information is incomplete and emotions are running high.

That deliberateness also extends to the small rules managers use to avoid snap judgement. Barnett notes, "We found that managers who use learned, deliberate heuristics, such as prioritising people before tasks or addressing conflict privately, are better able to make balanced, thoughtful decisions."

These are not grand leadership philosophies. They are repeatable behaviours that teams can rely on, especially when work is moving fast.

Rivkin, meanwhile, resists the idea of a fashionable checklist of "2026 skills". "I do not think that there is one skill or a set of skills that are critical for managers in the next year," he says, arguing managers must balance task orientation with people orientation — and that the latter becomes more important as flexible working grows and entry-level work is increasingly handled by AI. If workers become more specialised and more mobile, the manager becomes an even sharper determinant of turnover and organisational continuity.

The move from authority to influence is not a soft pivot. The modern manager earns impact by designing autonomy, building trust through development-focused delegation, and making it safe to surface reality early. In the businesses that adapt, management becomes less about controlling the work, and more about enabling the conditions in which the work can move — with speed, clarity, and resilience.

The quiet power of values-led decision making in high-growth businesses —

By: **Rebecca Sutherland**, Investor & Founder, HarbarSix

When you're building a fast-growing company, the pace can feel relentless. Every week brings a new opportunity, a new challenge, a new fire to put out. You chase growth, chase capital, chase markets. But somewhere in that whirlwind, it's easy to lose the "why" — the thing that made you start in the first place.

Keeping up with a fast-growing business can wear even any seasoned entrepreneur down. Constantly chasing leads and grasping any opportunities is a relentless challenge. Many founders are driven by chasing capital and achieving their dream lifestyle, and while I think having goals is important, a values-driven mindset in my experience is even more valuable to your business.

A common misconception about values is they are just a marketing exercise, not a real function of your business. I couldn't disagree more. Having values is extremely personal and they determine the trajectory of your business. Budgeting, cash flow management, and forecasting are drilled into founders. However, promoting a values-driven mindset is integral for growth and summoning opportunities.

Before you go all guns-blazing, decide on your ideal workplace culture, what type of people you want around you and their skills. Making your values visible from the get-go will help you attract the right people for your team as you scale.

Why values are a strategic advantage —

It's tempting to see "values" as something soft, a feel-good concept for slower, more idealistic businesses. But in reality, values-led decision making is one of the most practical growth tools a company can have.

Here's why: clarity saves time. When your team knows what you stand for, they don't need to run every small decision up the chain. They can act with confidence because they know the principles guiding the company and you can take a backseat and focus on other parts of the business.

Values also build trust, internally and externally. Employees who see leaders making choices aligned with stated values feel safe, respected, and motivated. Customers notice, too. They can tell when a company's integrity is real, not rehearsed. And in a world where competitors can copy your products overnight, trust is the ultimate differentiator.

I realised something when growing my business; values don't protect themselves. You have to reinforce them constantly, through hiring, training, and especially through your own actions as a leader.

We started doing something simple but transformative. Whenever we made a big decision, a new product launch, a new partnership, a tough personnel move, we'd ask one question out loud: "Which of our values does this align with?" Sometimes, it stopped us in our tracks. Sometimes, it confirmed we were on the right path. Either way, it brought clarity.

Over time, this habit reshaped how we operated. It turned our values from a statement into a system.

Choosing values that actually matter —

Not all values are created equal. "Integrity," "excellence," "innovation", you've seen these words on every corporate website, and I just want to say "boring!". The problem isn't the words themselves; it's that they're too vague to guide real behaviour and can draw an influx of candidates who don't fit the bill.

The best company values are specific and breathe through your business. They describe how you make decisions, not just what you believe. For instance, one of our core values is "people-first." It means we treat every customer interaction as if it's our own business on the line. That simple phrase guides everything from how we design our software to how we handle complaints. It's actionable, not aspirational. Leading with broad terms leaves no room for excuses and makes it easier for employees to follow.

When defining your own values, look for the truths that already drive your best decisions, not the ideals you wish you had. Ask your team: when are we at our best? What do we refuse to compromise on? Your values should sound like you, not a consultant.

Leading by example —

Being visible and having a presence in the office turns employees from passive to engaged almost immediately. People don't learn from leaders who are uninvolved and think they're above mentorship.

I've seen leaders preach transparency but hide information. Talk about respect but ignore feedback. Say "people first" but burn out their teams in silence. Nothing corrodes culture faster than that kind of hypocrisy and this line of thinking needs to be extinguished.

Living your values means choosing the harder path sometimes, turning down deals, admitting mistakes, delaying short-term wins for long-term integrity. It's not glamorous, but it's powerful. Every consistent action builds credibility, and credibility compounds faster than revenue.

The beauty of values-led decision making is that its power grows over time. When you're small, it helps you attract the right people. When you're mid-growth, it helps you stay aligned. When you're a multi-national conglomerate, it helps you remain human.

It doesn't scream for attention. It doesn't make headlines. But it creates the kind of company that lasts, one where people don't just work for you; they work with you, toward something they believe in.

In business, growth can make you louder. But values make you clearer. And in the long run, clarity wins.

Words: Julia Whitmore

Coaching at scale for modern managers —

The modern manager's hardest problem is not a lack of tools. It is volume. There are more decisions to unblock, more transitions to manage, and more expectations to hold steady while priorities shift. In that environment, "being supportive" is too vague to be useful, and formal coaching programmes can feel too slow to matter. What organisations need instead is coaching that happens where the work actually happens — inside the small, ordinary interactions that determine whether a team learns, stalls, or quietly hands responsibility back to the manager.

That is what coaching at scale really means. It is not a calendar filled with longer one-to-ones. It is a repeatable management behaviour that shows up in the moment someone brings a half-formed problem, an unfinished decision, or a difficult conversation. Scale comes from consistency: hundreds of managers making the same practical shift, away from fixing everything themselves, and towards building capability in others without losing grip on delivery.

In practice, most managers have been trained — formally or informally — to diagnose and solve. The business rewards speed, so the manager's instinct is to gather information, decide, and move on. It works, until it doesn't. The same pattern creates dependency, slows learning, and increases the number of escalations that reach the manager's desk. Coaching is the counterweight because it changes what the interaction is for. The goal becomes better thinking and clearer ownership, not simply a faster answer.

Coaching in the flow of work —

Dominic Ashley-Timms, CEO of performance consultancy **Notion**, argues that coaching becomes effective when it is designed to fit into daily work, rather than sitting alongside it. "Effective coaching by managers depends on having the skills and confidence to coach others in the flow of daily work, coaching at the point where it's most helpful," he says.

That choice often comes down to the questions a manager asks. As Ashley-Timms puts it, "we tend to use diagnostic questioning — gathering information to solve the problem. Being an effective coach means learning to overcome that natural desire to fix every problem and instead engage the problem-solving capabilities of the team member in front of you by intentionally asking purposeful questions." The point is not to slow everything down. It is to stop turning capable people into a queue.

For organisations trying to make this real across a management population, the barrier is rarely belief. It is habit. Coaching at scale needs a simple behavioural loop that managers can apply under pressure, when time is short and the stakes feel immediate. Without a shared model, "be more of a coach" becomes another aspiration that dissolves the first time a deadline slips.

One framework Ashley-Timms highlights is the STAR® model, designed to interrupt the automatic move into problem-solving mode. "It helps break the habit managers have of stepping into every problem brought to them," he says, "and instead considers the person in front of them and their skills and capabilities." The sequence is deliberately lightweight: "Learning to Stop and Think in this way provides an opportunity to Ask a powerful question that's most helpful to the other person, which in turn helps them retain the

accountability for defining a next step. Following up with the individual ensures that a Result is secured from the interaction."

The value of models like this is not that they make managers softer. It is that they make managers more deliberate. Stopping for a beat prevents the reflex answer. Asking a powerful question forces the manager to decide what the other person truly needs — clarity, confidence, context, or a decision boundary. Securing a result, and following up, keeps the interaction connected to performance rather than drifting into talk.

The next challenge is building the organisational conditions in which managers can practice this consistently. Coaching is a skill, which means it improves through repetition, feedback, and reinforcement. It also needs to be anchored to business reality. Joan O'Connor, Head of Leadership Practice at **10Eighty**, frames coaching as a shift in the manager's default stance. "Trust is at the core of effective leadership. Managers who move away from micromanagement and adopt a coaching style foster autonomy while offering guidance when it's needed. This shifts the leader's role from director to enabler, encouraging people to grow into their potential," she says.

Coaching that sticks —

Where organisations often stumble is in treating coaching as something managers should do once they have finished their "real" job. Coaching at scale requires the opposite design: coaching is part of the job, and managers are supported to do it quickly, clearly, and consistently. That support can be as simple as updating one-to-one templates to include a small set of prompts, running short practice sessions that focus on live scenarios, and creating peer routines where managers can observe and compare approaches.

It also means aligning coaching with what the organisation is trying to achieve. O'Connor notes, "Embedding coaching into day-to-day management means ensuring purpose resonates across diverse teams. When people see how their work connects to organisational goals, engagement, and performance rise."

This may sound straightforward, but in practice there's one all-too-familiar barrier: coaching takes time, and managers are already short of it.

The mistake is to respond by teaching managers to run more coaching sessions. Ashley-Timms argues that this pushes organisations towards the wrong model.

"Moving away from the idea of teaching managers 'to be coaches' and teaching them to run coaching sessions that rely upon using inappropriate Executive Coaching models that necessitate formal sit-down one-to-one coaching sessions," he says, is central to making coaching compatible with delivery.

His preferred route is explicitly operational: "Operational Coaching® equips managers with the communication and engagement skills to provide on-the-spot, in-the-moment coaching, which better addresses matter-at-hand operational issues leading to improved business results that have a commercial impact."

This is where coaching meets accountability. Coaching at scale does not mean avoiding hard conversations, lowering standards, or outsourcing decisions to the team. It means being precise about ownership. The manager still sets expectations and guardrails, still decides when work needs escalation, and still intervenes when performance falls short. The coaching move is to avoid stepping into problems by default, and to reserve direct answers for the situations that truly require them: risk, safety, legal exposure, customer harm, or clear capability gaps that need training rather than questions.

For leaders thinking about what "good" looks like a year after coaching has been embedded, the signals are practical. People arrive with clearer problem statements. Decisions move faster because they do not wait for permission. Teams become less brittle when plans change, because they have learned how to think their way through uncertainty with support, rather than instruction. Managers spend less time reworking and rescuing, and more time improving systems, capability, and priorities.

There is also a human payoff, but it is still operational. Coaching changes the day-to-day experience of work by treating mistakes as information, not embarrassment. As O'Connor puts it, "Finally, managers must create environments where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities."

In organisations that want coaching at scale, that line is less a cultural slogan than a management requirement. Without it, managers will default back to fixing, teams will default back to hiding, and the organisation will keep paying for the same problems twice — once in delay, and again in rework.


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Level up learning –

How gamification can transform employee learning

Keeping employees engaged in learning is no small feat. Many corporate training programmes still struggle with low completion rates and limited impact – an expensive setback when rapid reskilling has become essential for business survival. However, there may be an out-of-the-box solution at hand: gamification.

Gamification applies elements such as challenges, rewards, leaderboards and progress tracking to learning environments. The goal isn't to trivialise training, but to tap into the same psychological triggers that make games so compelling: achievement, competition and a sense of progress.

At its core, gamification leverages intrinsic motivation: the desire to learn, master and achieve. This is paired with extrinsic motivators like points or badges, with research consistently showing that when learners can see their progress, earn recognition and compete or collaborate with peers, they're more likely to stay engaged.

For example, introducing micro-challenges or level-based learning pathways turns abstract goals into tangible milestones. Instead of completing a long, static course, employees can move through a sequence of achievable steps, each unlocking new content or rewards. This sense of incremental progress boosts dopamine-driven motivation, leading to higher participation and completion rates.

This also helps foster a growth mindset by breaking down complex learning objectives into manageable actions. Over time, this creates a culture of continuous learning, where employees aren't just meeting training requirements but actively seeking opportunities to grow and excel.

As well as this, leaderboards and social recognition appeal to employees' competitive and social instincts. When individuals can compare their progress or earn praise from peers, learning becomes visible and valued, and it's no longer seen as a box-ticking exercise.

By: Caroline Evans,
VP, Enterprise Sales
FutureLearn

Embedding gamification in workplace training –

Incorporating gamification into workplace training doesn't require a complete overhaul of learning platforms. By making small, thoughtful adjustments, L&D teams can create a more engaging and effective learning experience for employees.

One strategy that's already well-known and utilised is progress tracking dashboards. Visual tools like progress bars or skill meters provide learners with a clear sense of achievement, showing how far they've come and what remains to be completed.

This transparency fosters a sense of direction and accomplishment, keeping learners engaged throughout their journey.

Another approach is awarding digital badges or certificates, as recognising achievements, whether for completing a module or

mastering a new skill, adds a layer of validation and pride.

Framing learning modules as challenges or quests can also inject excitement and urgency into the process. By presenting tasks as 'missions' or time-bound challenges, learners are encouraged to stay focused and actively participate, much like they would in a game. For team-based learning, points and leaderboards can introduce an element of friendly competition. When tied to real-world incentives, this approach can drive consistent participation and collaboration, making learning a shared and enjoyable experience.

Finally, instant feedback loops are crucial for maintaining momentum. Just as in gaming, immediate feedback helps learners understand their progress, reinforcing correct behaviours or guiding them to make quick adjustments. This real-time interaction keeps learners motivated and ensures they stay on track.

By embedding these gamification techniques into workplace training, businesses can create a dynamic and rewarding learning environment. Platforms like FLx, for example, which emphasise accessible and engaging online education, are well-suited to support these innovative approaches.

Harnessing engagement —

Engagement is the engine that powers meaningful upskilling, as without it, even the most well-designed content goes unused. Gamification transforms passive participation into active involvement, creating emotional investment in the learning process.

As organisations face widening skills gaps and the pressure to reskill at scale, the speed of skills adoption becomes a competitive advantage. Employees who enjoy learning are more likely to revisit content, apply new knowledge and retain skills over time. That means higher ROI for training budgets and a workforce that's more agile and future-ready.

By tapping into the principles of human psychology, such as the desire for achievement, recognition and social connection, gamification transforms training from a mundane compliance task into an engaging and meaningful experience. When employees feel a sense of progress, accomplishment and even friendly competition, they're more likely to stay motivated and retain information – driving better outcomes, higher engagement and a more skilled workforce.

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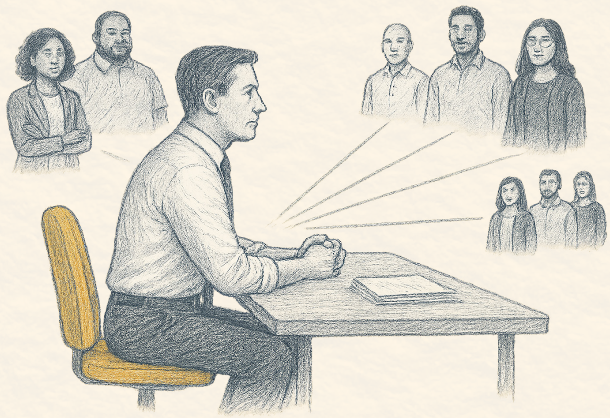
Words: Julia Whitmore

Managing through shrinkage –

Leading when roles, structure and reward are under pressure



In many organisations, shrinkage is becoming a permanent operating condition, with flatter structures, overlapping remits, and AI taking on tasks that once justified headcount. Add a steady reluctance among younger professionals to step into traditional middle management and you're faced with a pressure that is both logistical and emotional.

Middle management sits in the crosswinds, expected to deliver decisions made elsewhere while keeping teams steady, motivated, and productive. As Lesley Cooper, founder and CEO of **WorkingWell** and co-author of Brave New Leader, puts it: "Middle managers often function as the emotional buffers of the organisation. Flattening structures do nothing to alleviate the personal pressure this creates, as there is less support available. Not all managers have the same level of comfort with difficult conversations – many struggle to get comfortable with feeling uncomfortable – and this can become a significant source of pressure as well as a catalyst for cynicism and compassion fatigue."

Shrinkage also changes the shape of daily work. Merged teams mean a wider span of control, with proportionately less time to build connection and empathy, hampering the trust building that underpins open communication. Managers also inherit extra reporting, administration, and project coordination as roles disappear. The temptation is to push harder but, as Cooper says, "Trying to achieve more with the same or even fewer resources by doing what we normally do but faster, or by extending the working day, is unsustainable."

This is where the management job changes from stamina to adaptation. The managers who sustain performance tend to make a shift that looks subtle, but is decisive: from managing time to managing energy. That means protecting attention, not just calendar space. Cooper warns that the default reaction to change is to spread leaders more thinly, leading to what Linda Stone at Microsoft coined as "continuous partial attention". In practice, the antidote is choosing a smaller number of high-leverage conversations, then showing up fully for them, while setting clearer boundaries on what can realistically be delivered.

Influence shifts, too. In flatter organisations, authority is less about title and more about clarity: making priorities explicit, decision rights visible, and trade-offs shared early. Cooper argues that leaders can also build performance through "humble enquiry" — asking team members for their perspective and insight, and folding that into decisions. Done well, it eases the pressure to have the answers, and gives employees a stronger sense of voice and value.

Organisations have a role beyond rhetoric about resilience. Managers need role clarity and norms that treat recovery as an part of operations rather than a business perk. In shrinkage, the middle cannot simply absorb more. It has to be enabled to lead differently.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Rethinking empathy –

How to get it right in the AI era

By: **Dr Anna Barnett**,
Head of Research and Insights
Mindtools & Kineo

We like to think empathy makes everything better by creating kinder workplaces, stronger teams and fairer decisions. And often, it does. But empathy has a tipping point.

Recent evidence suggests that empathy's impact on performance isn't as simple as "the more, the better." Too little, and managers appear detached; too much, and they risk indecision, blurred boundaries and falling productivity.

As organisations lean more heavily on analytics and AI to guide decisions, empathy has a new role to play. It's no longer just about feeling what others feel. Now more than ever, it's about knowing when to engage emotionally and when to step back.

The assumption that more empathy always leads to better outcomes doesn't hold up under scrutiny. Studies of managerial behaviour show that both low and high levels of empathy can harm performance.

We've all seen the issues. At one end of the scale, a lack of empathy creates cold, transactional workplaces. But at the other extreme, overly empathetic managers can become paralysed by emotion. They over-identify with people's struggles, take on their team's stress and make protective decisions that unintentionally limit others' growth.

Some managers avoid delegating difficult work for fear of adding pressure. As a result, they take on extra tasks themselves to "make things easier" for the team. Most of the time, these choices come from a good place. A manager sees someone struggling and steps in, thinking they're helping. But when that help turns into constant protection, people stop getting the chance to prove themselves. To employees, what began as empathy starts to look like doubt, which can quickly damage trust.

Trust sits at the heart of effective empathy. When managers trust their people, they delegate more developmental opportunities and foster stronger growth. According to Mindtools and Kineo's study 'The empathy problem: Balancing emotion in decision making', 52% of delegation decisions are driven by either trust or the chance to help someone grow. When that trust is missing, the effects ripple quickly. For example, employees are 23% less likely to be promoted, and teams experience higher turnover. By supporting people to make decisions independently, managers both lighten their own load and build capability and commitment that keeps talent in place.

But trust and empathy are not the same thing. Empathy helps managers understand how others feel, while trust gives them the confidence to act on that understanding constructively. Combining all factors of successful leadership, such as listening deeply, setting clear expectations, and supporting independence rather than protecting people from challenge, helps create a healthy dynamic within an organisation.

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In workplaces where hybrid or remote work is the norm, this combination matters more than ever. Distance can make emotional connections harder, but consistent, trusting behaviour - listening, following through and giving autonomy - recreates that connection even when teams are dispersed.

Balancing emotion, data, and decision habits —

Most managers believe they make rational, fact-based decisions. Indeed, while four in five managers say they make decisions without being influenced by people's emotions, in reality, those decisions don't come easy, and emotions often play a powerful, if hidden, role. The research also found that managers heavily relied on peer support when solving emotionally charged challenges - 58% of managers seek advice from other managers when trying to improve working relationships, resolving conflicts or having difficult conversations. Although peer support is valuable, it is not the most reliable way to make decisions, bearing in mind every manager has unique experiences and biases that create different interpretations.

To add complexity, the human brain relies on 'heuristics', quick mental shortcuts that help us make decisions efficiently under pressure. These can be useful, such as pausing before replying to a heated email or checking in with the team before diving into tasks, but they can also reinforce bias when applied automatically.

Effective decision-makers learn to use heuristics deliberately. A short pause before responding, a moment to reflect on whether a reaction is emotional or reasoned, or a quick sense-check with a colleague – they all help to recalibrate perspective. In emotionally charged moments, these small acts prevent empathy from becoming overreach and help decisions feel both fair and human.

Emotion isn't the enemy of logic, it's an essential source of insight. The key lies in awareness. Managers who can recognise and regulate their emotional impulses make more balanced, consistent decisions than those who either suppress emotion entirely or are swept away by it.

As data tools take over more routine analysis, only managers can read the human context behind the numbers. A dashboard might show what's happening, but only people can spot the unease in a conversation or sense when a team's confidence is slipping. That blend of emotional awareness and critical thinking helps keep decision-making balanced.

By rethinking empathy, managers gain a clearer understanding of what people need to do their best work. It helps them sense when to step in and when to give others room to lead. When leaders find that balance, their teams feel both supported and empowered to make decisions while being clear on expectations. Getting empathy right is what keeps leadership human, even as everything else changes.

What do businesses need to know about return to work policies?

By: David Fisher, Business support manager, Entec Si

It is widely reported that many UK workers would rather find a new job than be made to return to the office full time. However, in the past few years, many businesses have shifted away from remote working and across a variety of sectors, managers are now requesting employees make the return to the office on either a part-time or full-time basis. Business leaders face a difficult juggling act of needing to get staff back in the office, while also wanting to support and retain important team members. It is essential that business leaders managing this transition handle the process sensitively.

Typically, a business can ask employees to return to the office if the employment contract specifies the office as the day-to-day place of work. In this situation, an employer can require a return as a 'reasonable management request'. However, without a formal policy, enforcing this becomes slightly more difficult and can lead to employee disputes. To avoid this, and maintain employee satisfaction, there are three key steps for employers to remember, consult, communicate and formalise.

As with any workplace transformation, people should be kept at the heart of the change journey. For business leaders looking to increase office days or rollout a full return to office policy, the first step is to run a thorough audit of staff needs. One on one meetings, questionnaires and focus groups are an especially effective way at gaining crucial insights into the business and its employees. For example, if leadership is hoping to improve productivity through its workplace policy, it could be useful to hear firsthand accounts of how employees use different spaces. For some, working from home might be a chance to concentrate and get through work with minimal distractions, while the office may allow for better collaboration and idea generation.

Once you have feedback from valued employees, management can figure out how people work best and in what capacity. Leadership can then outline a new return to office policy with data-backed insights. Other employee information that should be audited before rolling out a return to office policy is home location and any known disabilities that could hinder someone from being able to come in.

It's not just employee work habits that need to be audited; office space and layout also need to be taken into consideration. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many businesses opted to downsize office space, and, with the return to office trend now in full swing, businesses are finding that they may not have enough available space to accommodate the whole team.

Prior to revising workplace policy, a comprehensive audit of office space and equipment should be taken to help business leaders identify potential flexible working habits that could be introduced, to encourage productivity while staggering the number of people in the office. For example, hot-desking, or introducing mandated office days for specific teams. Hybrid working and set office days allows for better in-person collaboration whilst providing employees with time to concentrate on work at home. Alternatively, businesses could also decide to relocate to an office with plenty of space for all employees to be in at once, if they felt this best suited their workforce.

Central to all these decisions is communication. A robust communications strategy will empower staff, ensuring they feel supported and understand why change is taking place. For something as personal as a return to office policy, expectations need to be set early and there needs to be channels for open and honest conversations to avoid tension. Employees should also be given an opportunity to raise concerns or request reasonable adjustments; this may include a reduced return-to-office plan.

Communication strategy can make or break employee trust during a change programme. It's vital that business leaders create multiple feedback streams to suit different communication styles, for example, some may prefer to provide anonymous feedback via a concerns box, others may prefer to have scheduled face-to-face check ins to discuss the progress of the new policy. However a business chooses to progress with its change strategy, it is up to leaders and managers to encourage and maintain communication from the top down.

It's important for managers to remember that ensuring high levels of productivity relies on more than simply having teams back in the office. Happy staff are productive staff and alongside a clear workplace policy, teams should also commit to supporting a flexible work/life balance for staff. For example, leadership could introduce core business working hours while revising workplace policy to increase flexibility and allow employees to prioritise their health and wellbeing.

As the number of businesses introducing new return to office policies across the UK rises, it is essential for leaders to consult, communicate and formalise policies before embarking on any change. Developing a clear plan, allowing for feedback and also working on improving employee work/life balance simultaneously will help to improve overall productivity, drive efficiency and improve staff happiness, if rolled out correctly.

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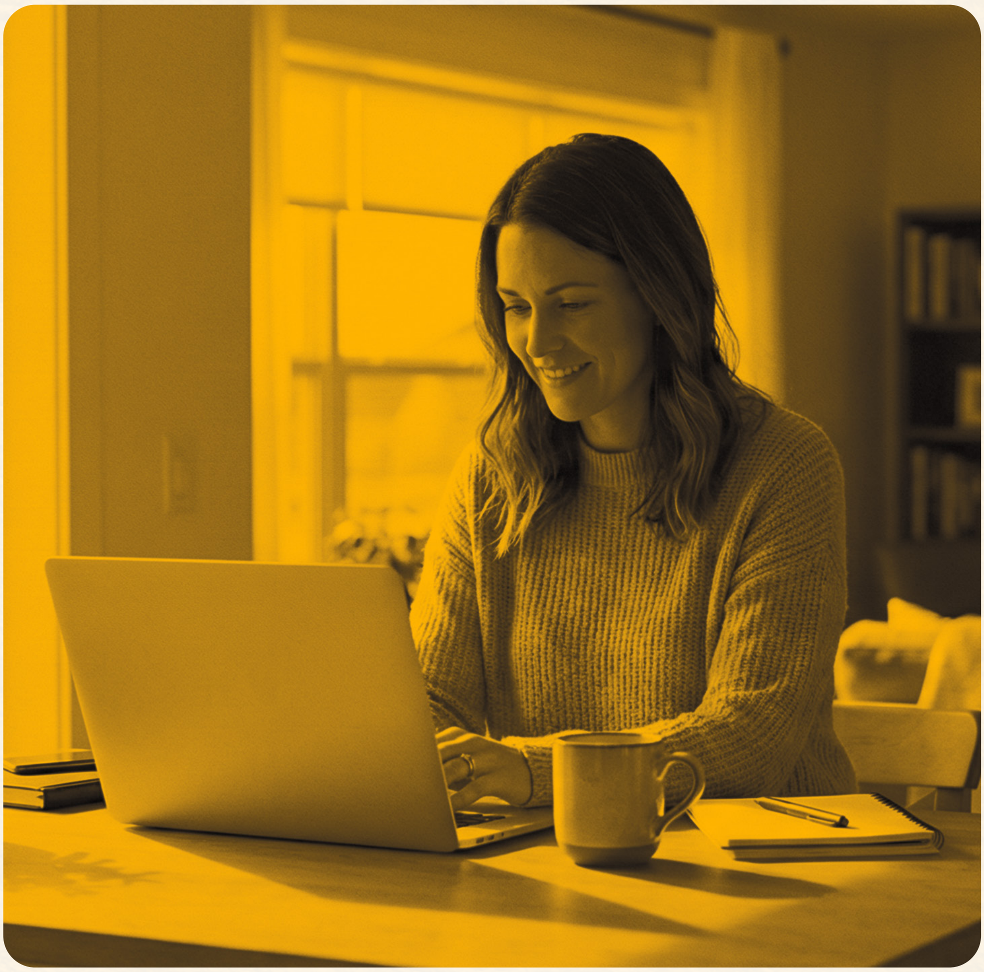


The economics of parental leave —

In July 2025, the government launched what it called a "landmark" review of parental leave and pay, promising a system that is fairer, easier to use, and better suited to the modern economy. With skills shortages persisting in key sectors, and productivity still a national obsession, parental leave is being reframed less as a family benefit and more as a test of how seriously workplaces treat talent retention.

The debate tends to get stuck on the immediate costs: enhanced pay, backfill, handovers, and the administrative effort of doing leave well. Those are real. Yet the economic case being made by campaigners and HR leaders is more specific than "support families". It is about preventing avoidable exits at precisely the point when career trajectories diverge, and when organisations are at greatest risk of losing experienced people from their leadership pipeline.

Helen Sachdev, founder and director of **WOMBA (Work, Me and the Baby)**, argues that enhanced entitlements are a retention tool hiding in plain sight. "Employers that have enhanced parental leave entitlements for their working parents are set to benefit significantly from improved retention rates, and an increase in workforce participation," she says. "It isn't about 'doing more for parents', instead it's about employers ensuring that the people in their core talent pipeline — their future leaders — are able to thrive when it matters most."

Research undertaken by WOMBA in partnership with Hult International Business School points to why the "policy versus practice" gap can become a commercial problem. Among mothers who quit their organisation during their parental leave period, 29% said it was because they felt they had "no other choice". Fathers who left during parental leave told a different story: 71% said they moved on to a better opportunity elsewhere, compared with 53% of mothers who said the same. In the same study, 14% of working parents said they do not plan to be with their current organisation in two-years' time, and 12% said they would not recommend their workplace to other parents as a good place to work.

Where the economics bite —

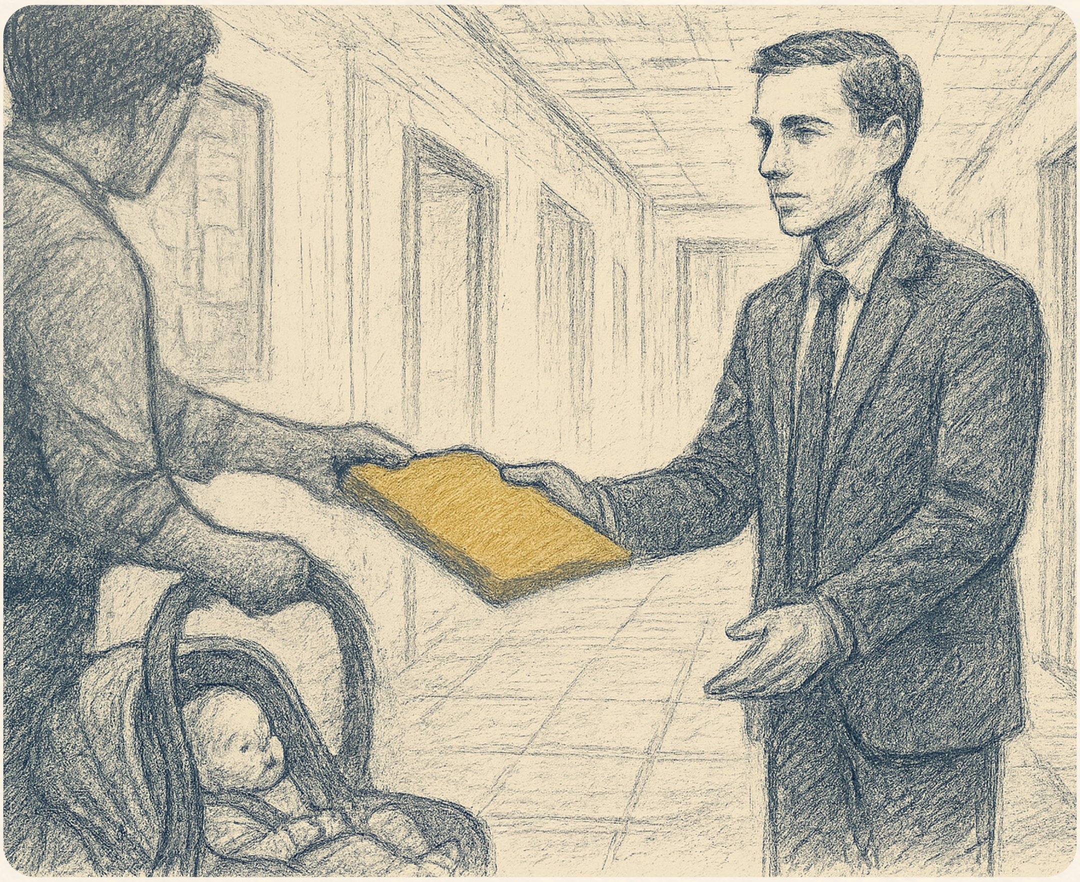
Leave is not only about whether parents stay, but how they progress. WOMBA's findings also suggest a confidence gap that opens after becoming a parent. "Our research showed that dads were consistently more confident and optimistic than mums about their future career prospects," Sachdev says. In the survey, 69% of dads said they are very clear about who and what they want to become in the future, compared with 53% of mums. Almost one third (31%) of mums said the commitment to their career has dropped since becoming a parent, while only a fifth (20%) of dads felt the same.

This is where paternity leave enters the argument. Campaigners say that if more fathers take meaningful time away from work, caring becomes less "exceptional" for men and less career-defining for women. The macroeconomic upside is often framed through participation: PwC has calculated that improvements in female participation between 2011 and 2023 produced a productivity uplift of 0.30% per year, or 3.59% across the period. PwC also estimates that if female participation continues improving at the same pace to 2030, it could add around £43.5bn to UK GDP.

Inside organisations, the decision comes down to a question of: does enhancing leave reduce overall cost, or simply move it around? Sachdev's view is that the short-term ledger is frequently misunderstood. "The cost of providing the right support to retain a working parent — for example by providing enhanced parental leave and coaching support — are offset by the savings in recruitment for replacing a parent who leaves," she says, pointing to vacancy gaps and the lower productivity typical of new hires during a settling-in period. The obstacle, she adds, is measurement. Many employers do not track working parents as a cohort, meaning retention, progression, and performance signals are "hidden, and therefore ignored".

Doug Betts, an HR expert, cautions that affordability varies sharply by size and sector. "Smaller organisations find it more difficult to sometimes afford even the statutory minimum of entitlements," he says. Still, he argues the logic holds when schemes are designed properly. "More generous schemes which are well designed can definitely improve retention if leave is paid and the culture is right." Betts adds that when paternity leave and shared parental leave are supported, "mothers are more likely to return to work, and sooner", with longer-term benefits in reduced turnover, absenteeism, and stronger productivity.

In a competitive labour market, that balance increasingly shapes employer brand, as well as who stays long enough to become a manager, a partner, or a director.



The return on enhanced leave depends less on the policy wording than on line-manager behaviour. One father who participated in the WOMBA survey captured the trade-off employers are asking parents to manage: "You want to make sure that you're spending time with your child. I guess that's always the balance that you have in life...trying to make sure that you're keeping a roof over your head and you're keeping your children happy."

For leaders weighing the business case, the most practical starting point may be the most basic: know your numbers. Track retention and progression for working parents, model the cost of churn against enhanced leave, and treat uptake as a management metric, not a private arrangement. Parental leave may sit in the benefits handbook, but the economic outcome depends on what happens on the team sheet.

RTO vs access –

How returning to the office will widen the disability employment gap

In 2024, 83% of UK CEOs stated that they expect a full return to office-based work by 2027, but have they considered the implications for workers with disabilities who rely on home working? Chris Jay, managing director of Bascule Disability Training, explains what forced office returns and fewer hybrid/remote roles will mean for 25% of our population.

Cast your mind back to pre-lockdown days, and you may remember that working from home was often looked upon as a rare privilege, only available or indeed possible for a lucky few. Then, during the Covid lockdowns, we learnt that many jobs could be done very efficiently, if not better, from the comfort of one's home. For many organisations, this realisation prompted a new way of working, with a sudden rise in remote, flexible and hybrid roles.

Fast forward to today, and you can find an ever-growing list of large organisations that have made a sudden U-turn, demanding that all of their workers return to the office.

One unintended consequence of making this change, is the impact it may have on staff members with disabilities. For them, the option to work remotely has significantly impacted their access to employment opportunities. Furthermore, it has not only levelled the playing field but also had a substantial positive impact on their health and wellbeing. Recent research from The Work Foundation (a leading think tank at Lancaster University), revealed that 80% of disabled workers in remote roles reported an improvement in their health since working from home.

There are, of course, a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the home allows workers to perform tasks in an environment that is already very well adjusted to their physical, mental or sensory requirements, which is often not the case in an office. The right ergonomic furniture, technology, lighting and general conditions are already developed for the individual's specific needs and comfort.

Stress is also reduced through the removal of the necessity to travel/commute, a daily task that can be difficult or often impossible for people with complex mobility impairments, for example. Then there is the flexibility that hybrid/remote roles usually offer. This can frequently accommodate much-needed breaks, medical appointments, and managing medication.

As a result of these (and many other) benefits, hybrid and remote roles have become critical in making job opportunities accessible to people with disabilities. In fact, the Work Foundation report found that 85% of workers with disabilities stated that hybrid/remote roles are essential when seeking and applying for a new job.

Making reasonable adjustments —

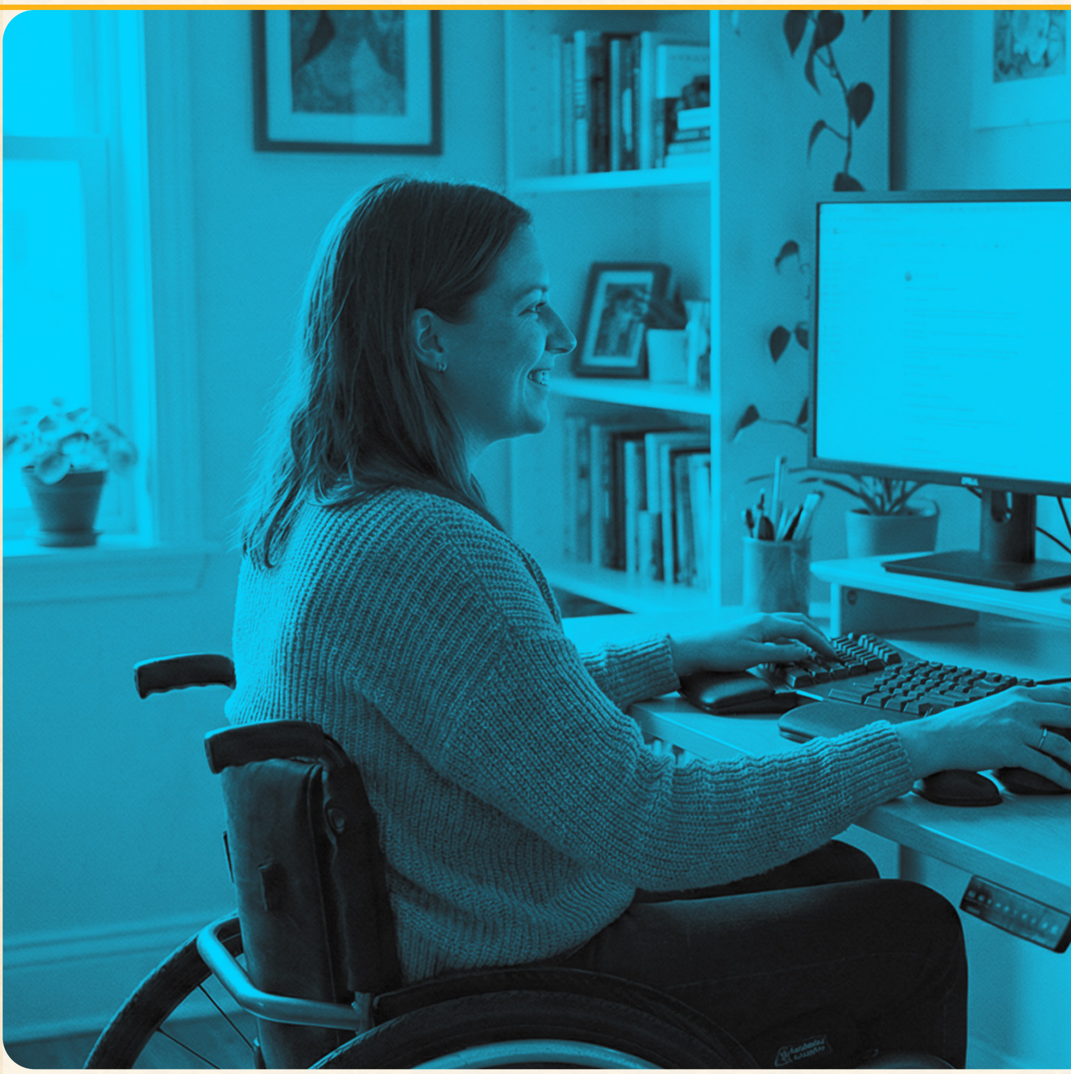
It's also worth stating that, under the Equality Act 2010, Employers are legally obliged to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that employees with disabilities are not at a disadvantage in comparison to colleagues without disabilities.

However, these large-scale efforts to abolish remote working risk placing many employees with disabilities at a significant disadvantage. In fact, there are already several tribunal cases being won by people with disabilities who are being forced to return to the office after applying for roles that were advertised as hybrid.

Remote working and closing the disability employment gap —

In September 2025, the Government launched its new 'Connect to Work' programme- a £338 million initiative, aimed at helping people with disabilities and long-term health conditions to make their way back into employment. The programme will fund coaching sessions, provide job matching services, and ongoing support to encourage long-term employment and develop a more inclusive economy, ensuring employment opportunities for all.

*"Hybrid and remote roles have become critical in making job opportunities accessible to people with disabilities... **85% of workers** with disabilities stated that hybrid/remote roles are essential"*



The erosion of support structures for disabled employees —

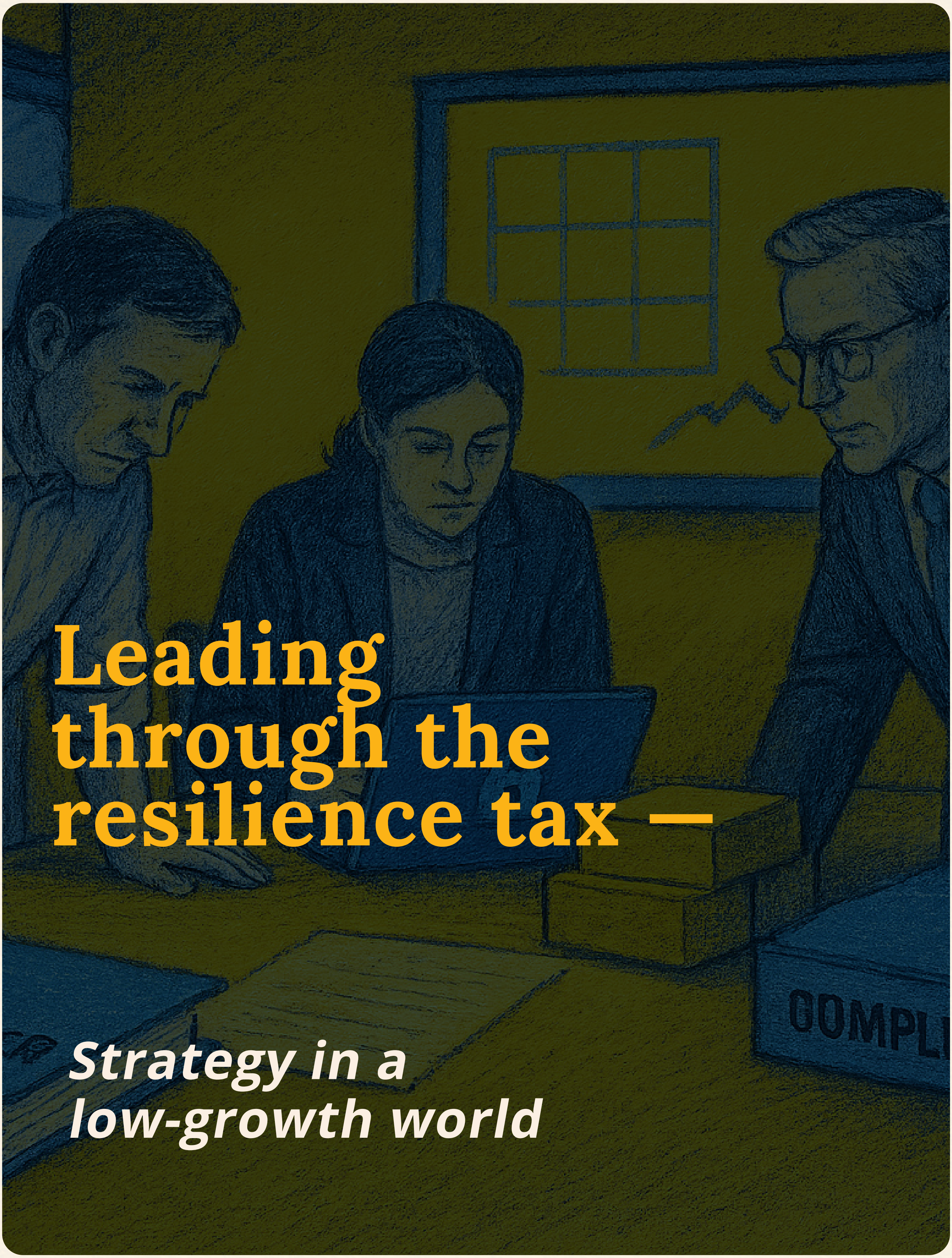
Couple this with the fact that Access to Work, (a scheme designed to provide workplace support beyond what many businesses can afford), is currently experiencing significant delays and funding cuts. As a result, the infrastructure intended to support people with disabilities in the workplace is increasingly fragile. These setbacks, occurring alongside the reduction in remote and hybrid roles, further undermine the ability of employees with disabilities to gain and maintain meaningful employment.

The question is: with so many organisations demanding a return to the office, is it time we made an effort to educate and prepare employers, as well as support those with disabilities and health issues entering employment?

If hybrid and remote roles become scarce, so too do the opportunities for people with disabilities, and if they do accept roles in a physical office, this can clearly have a negative impact on their health and wellbeing.

Surely, if 85% of workers with disabilities say that hybrid and remote roles are essential in their efforts to find employment, and employers are removing these roles (and the situation is being made worse by the government programme to provide adjustment facing cutbacks), then people with disabilities will find themselves unemployed... again.

By: Chris Jay,
Managing director,
Bascule Disability Training



Leading through the resilience tax —

Strategy in a low-growth world

Words: Julia Whitmore

The next era of business strategy will be written less in glossy growth narratives and more in the language of durability. Leaders are operating under what many now experience as a "resilience tax": the rising, unavoidable cost of remaining operational, compliant, and trusted in a polycrisis environment. The expense sits in duplicated suppliers, higher inventory buffers, stronger cyber controls, new reporting duties, upgraded governance, and the steady expansion of risk and compliance overheads that were once treated as discretionary. All of it compounds at the same moment that growth is becoming harder to manufacture.

That low-growth reality is increasingly visible in mainstream forecasts. The International Monetary Fund projects global growth of 3.1% in 2026, while the UK is expected to expand by roughly 1.3% — numbers that would have been considered underwhelming in the previous decade, and now look like the baseline. The strategic consequence is straightforward: resilience is no longer an enhancement to performance. It is part of the cost of admission.

What makes the resilience tax so politically difficult inside organisations is that it behaves like an investment and a penalty at the same time. Spend too little and fragility accumulates quietly until it is exposed at the worst possible moment. Spend too much, too quickly, and margins suffer in ways that are visible every quarter. That tension is forcing executives and boards to revisit assumptions that have underpinned management for years: that efficiency is always good, that scale always protects, and that control from the centre is the most reliable way to deliver coherence.

The end of the efficiency default —

For much of the last cycle, the strategic default was optimisation. Supply chains were tightened, suppliers consolidated, processes standardised, and budgets wrung for savings. The logic was understandable: stable conditions reward efficiency, and markets rewarded companies that could demonstrate predictable earnings. Yet optimisation has a hidden flaw: it reduces slack, and slack is what makes systems forgiving when the unexpected happens.

Polycrisis conditions punish tight coupling. A single geopolitical shock can change sourcing economics overnight. A single cyber incident can force an organisation into weeks of recovery, with executives pulled from strategic programmes into incident rooms and external comms. A single regulatory shift can stall a product launch, disrupt a customer relationship, or create barriers to tendering. In these circumstances, efficiency can become a false economy, because the savings are small compared with the cost of disruption.

That is why many companies have begun to reframe resilience as strategic positioning rather than insurance. Professor Tom Vazdar, Chair of Enterprise Cybersecurity at the **Open Institute of Technology (OPIT)**, has watched the conversation change across industries. "The question is no longer whether to invest, but how quickly you can afford not to," he says. "What I'm seeing is a shift in how CFOs

justify these investments. They're calculating the true cost of inaction. Not just fines, but market disqualification, lost contracts, and the chaos that follows a breach when your entire organisation shifts into recovery mode. When compliance failures happen, strategic projects halt and the momentum you've built simply evaporates."

The crucial point in that framing is competitive position. A breach does not merely create remediation costs; it undermines trust, triggers contract scrutiny, and can harden customers' procurement expectations. Similarly, supply chain fragility can move from an internal inconvenience to an external reputational issue when delivery failures become public, or when customers start demanding proof of transparency and resilience as part of doing business. The resilience tax is often a revenue story disguised as a cost story.

Where the tax is paid —

The resilience tax is not a single line item. It sits across four overlapping categories, each with its own governance requirements and cultural implications.

First comes the supply chain. Diversification, nearshoring, and dual-sourcing introduce expense and complexity, but they also buy optionality. Optionality matters when volatility is persistent rather than episodic, because it creates room to respond without improvising from a place of weakness. That optionality is increasingly being purchased through deeper visibility — mapping dependencies several tiers down, auditing supplier controls, and ensuring that the organisation can shift without paralysing itself.

Second comes cybersecurity. The cost is not limited to tools and teams; it includes continuous training, incident readiness, external assurance, and the operational discipline needed to sustain secure behaviour at scale. Cyber resilience also intersects with leadership style, because a security posture built on secrecy and fear is brittle. People hide mistakes; issues surface late; trust erodes.

Third comes compliance, including the growing burden of transparency expectations around data, AI systems, sustainability disclosures, and supply chain due diligence. Whether leaders personally welcome these shifts matters less than the reality that they are becoming embedded into market access. Companies that treat compliance as an afterthought often discover that the real consequence is delay — a transformation programme slowed by repeated governance questions and late-stage remediation.

Fourth comes geopolitical hedging. It used to be possible to treat geopolitics as background noise unless a company operated directly in a conflict zone. That is no longer a safe assumption. Sanctions, tariffs, export controls, and shifting alliances now turn up in procurement, technology choices, and investment planning. The hedging cost shows up in scenario modelling, legal review, and the diversification of partners and markets, all of which demand senior attention.

The World Economic Forum has described the wider backdrop as being on the "edge of a low-growth and low-cooperation era", which is a useful shorthand for why trade-offs are becoming tougher, and why risk is now structural rather than episodic.

The boardroom impact and reframing —

The resilience tax has forced governance to mature, and boards are expected to treat risk and internal control as active, continuously tested capabilities, not static statements signed off once a year.

In the UK Corporate Governance Code 2024, Provision 29 tightens that expectation explicitly, stating: "The board should monitor the company's risk management and internal control framework and, at least annually, carry out a review of its effectiveness." It also requires that the monitoring and review cover all material controls, extending beyond financial controls into operational, reporting, and compliance domains.

In practice, that is a demand for board-level clarity on how resilience is actually functioning, not simply whether it exists on paper.

The measures of productivity —

For generations, British business has relied on a simple set of productivity metrics: output per hour, sales per employee, units shipped. Yet as the nature of work has changed — becoming more hybrid, distributed, and digitally augmented — so too has the challenge of measuring what really matters.

This resilience tax is increasingly paid through controls, assurance, and decision rights. Controls are where strategy meets reality: they shape whether a company can scale safely, deploy new technology without introducing unmanaged exposure, or meet rising transparency demands without grinding execution to a halt. The "tax" is the price of building those controls to a standard that holds under stress.

Cyber is a particularly sharp example of how the governance bar has moved. The UK government's Cyber Governance Code of Practice is unambiguous about where responsibility sits, stating that "Cyber risk is a material risk for almost all organisations".

> “Digital trust has become everything, and the old top-down approach actively destroys it.”
>
> — Professor Tom Vazdar, **Open Institute of Technology (OPIT)**

It frames cyber as a leadership obligation, calling for “strong engagement and action at a leadership level”. That position is reinforced by the UK Cyber Security Breaches Survey 2024, which found that half of businesses reported some form of breach or attack in the previous 12 months, rising to 70% for medium businesses and 74% for large businesses. The resilience tax here is not just the cost of security tools; it is the cost of governing a risk that is common, disruptive, and reputationally corrosive.

For boards, that translates into a different set of questions that places less emphasis on whether an initiative “has a business case” in the narrow, quarter-by-quarter sense, and more on whether the organisation can evidence exposure, readiness, and recovery capacity. Directors increasingly want to understand single points of failure, recovery time assumptions, the quality of crisis escalation paths, and the integrity of reporting controls that sit behind everything from financial statements to ESG metrics. A resilience programme that cannot be described in those terms is likely to be challenged, no matter how attractively it is branded.

Capital allocation becomes strategy at its most practical. In a low-growth world, every pound or dollar must do more work, and resilience spending competes with digitisation, product development, and expansion. Leaders who succeed are not those who pretend the tax does not exist; they are those who can show where it will be paid, why, and what it enables.

Shifting from control to trust-building —

Traditional command-and-control leadership is poorly suited to an environment where threats evolve daily and operational decisions must be made at pace. A central authority model slows the response, encourages silence, and often creates performative confidence that collapses under pressure. By contrast, resilience requires distributed judgment: people close to the work need the confidence and clarity to act quickly, and the organisation needs a culture where bad news travels fast.

Vazdar argues that trust is now a strategic variable. “Digital trust has become everything, and the old top-down approach actively destroys it,” he says. In that view, resilience is as relational as it is technical. Leaders gain credibility by acknowledging complexity while demonstrating composure, rather than projecting certainty they cannot possibly possess. “What works now is transparent resilience; leaders who acknowledge complexity while demonstrating composure,” he says. “They’re open about their cybersecurity posture, honest about governance challenges, and willing to admit when they're navigating uncertainty."

When a cyber incident occurs, or a critical supplier fails, or a regulator asks for evidence that has not been properly prepared, the organisational response depends on psychological safety and clarity of roles. Teams move faster when they trust that raising issues will be met with action, not punishment or denial. Stakeholders respond better when the organisation communicates with consistency and restraint, rather than improvising messages that shift with each new internal update.

The cultural shift is subtle but undeniable and consequential: from authority to influence, from command to facilitation, and from the rhetoric of "control" to the practice of preparedness. Leaders who adopt that posture spend more time building systems, rehearsing scenarios, and strengthening decision rights — less time performing confidence, and more time earning it.

The workforce constraint —

The resilience tax also lands on people. Skills shortages in cybersecurity, supply chain, and risk disciplines are well documented, and the competition for talent intensifies when every organisation is trying to build similar capabilities at the same time. That shortage creates its own form of fragility: teams stretched thin, dependencies on a few key individuals, and a burnout loop that undermines resilience from within.

"The talent crisis is real and compounding. The gap between required and actual capabilities, particularly in cybersecurity and supply chain management, is constraining growth," says Vazdar. "Skills shortages increase pressure on existing staff, leading to burnout, which leads to departures, which increases pressure further."

Organisations are responding accordingly. "Smart organisations are treating reskilling as essential infrastructure," Vazdar says, reflecting a growing recognition that internal capability is more reliable than chasing scarce hires for every specialist need. That shift also forces management to rethink work design: whether teams have the tools, autonomy, and support to maintain performance under sustained uncertainty, and whether wellbeing is being treated as part of operational resilience rather than a separate HR initiative.

The data is pointing in the same direction. The CIPD's Health and wellbeing at work findings put average sickness absence at 9.4 days per employee per year, the highest level in more than 15 years. In its own summary framing, this equates to "nearly two full working weeks (9.4 days)" off sick, on average, over the last 12 months. That is is as clear a signal as any that capacity, energy, and health are now central to the execution problem that boards and executives are trying to solve.

Paying without losing momentum —

None of this eliminates the hard truth: resilience costs money and attention, and stakeholder patience is finite. The leadership task is to defend long-term investment in a climate that rewards short-term outcomes, while still delivering performance that keeps the organisation credible.

The leaders who handle the resilience tax best do three things. They explain resilience in operational and commercial terms — contracts protected, downtime avoided, decisions accelerated — rather than as a moral argument. They sequence investment, focusing first on risks that can genuinely stop the business. They build trust through clarity, transparency, and calm execution when systems are tested.

Low growth does not remove the need to transform; it raises the cost of doing it badly. The resilience tax is the price of staying in the game — paid deliberately, to build optionality without surrendering competitiveness.

Sean Hirons
Co-Founder, MyEdSpace

Bringing tutoring to livestreaming —

Sean Hirons wants Britain's best teachers in every home online. With a platform that livestreams lessons to thousands at once, he might just achieve it.

Words: Julia Whitmore

With influencer-teachers and GCSE results above national averages, MyEdSpace's Sean Hirons is betting scale can finally equalise educational access.

The tipping point arrived eight months in, at exactly the moment the UK's exam-season panic usually peaks. MyEdSpace scheduled a "cram session" on its livestream platform. Thousands of students joined. They did not drift away after an hour, as most online audiences do. They stayed for eight — a sustained, high-intensity lesson delivered live, at scale, and built for the way teenagers actually revise.

For Sean Hirons, co-founder of MyEdSpace, that session was proof that a stubbornly traditional market could be reshaped without sacrificing outcomes.

"I never doubted the mission," says Hirons. "There were of course challenges as we scaled but the 'why' was always stronger than the short-term problems." The model is bluntly simple: great teachers, broadcast to many. The commercial implication is equally stark. When one teacher can reach thousands at once, families can pay £5 for an hour of teaching, rather than the £40-plus that has become normal for private tutoring.

The origin story is less polished than the pitch deck version. Hirons traces the mission to a teenage experience he still describes in punitive terms. "I flunked my GCSEs. Not because I wasn't capable, but because of poor teaching and a bad learning environment." A move to a different school changed the trajectory. "My mother pushed hard to move us to a better school, and that completely changed my life. I went from underachieving to getting three A*s and two As in my A-levels and EPQ."

For Hirons, this isn't an endeavour born of personal redemption. It is instead focused on the disparity of access. "It taught me the power of great teaching, and how unfair it is that someone's level of access can have such an impact on their potential." He was able to move schools; many students cannot. "I was lucky enough to move schools — most kids don't get that chance. That's what drives me. I want to level the playing field so every student, no matter where they live, can access the best teachers in the country."

> *I want to level the playing field so every student, no matter where they live, can access the best teachers in the country.*

MyEdSpace's bet is that access can be manufactured through distribution. Its teachers are not anonymous faces on a booking platform: they are social media-native educators with more than 4 million combined followers and 185 million views across their channels. Hirons argues this is not a marketing sleight of hand; it is an engagement filter. A teacher who can hold attention online, repeatedly, has already passed a test most tutoring marketplaces never apply. It also creates a kind of familiarity that parents recognise. When a teenager already watches a teacher voluntarily, outside school hours, the question is no longer whether they will log in — it is whether they can be guided, consistently, towards better outcomes.

From there, MyEdSpace pushes credibility through results. The company points to GCSE outcomes as a headline metric: in 2025, it says 51% of its maths students achieved grades 7–9, around triple the national average. Hirons is careful to frame the results as a product of teacher quality and teaching design, rather than tech novelty. The platform is simply the delivery mechanism.

Rebuilding the tutor economy —

From the outside, the £5 price point can raise eyebrows. Hirons says the early resistance was predictable: if it is cheaper, it must be worse. "Traditional private tuition is basically the 'Wild West'," he says. "Anybody, no matter what teaching qualifications or experience they do or don't have, can call themselves a tutor, and charge hundreds of pounds an hour." Parents, in other words, buy reassurance — often without evidence.

This can, on the surface, appear directly at odds with the pricing philosophy at the heart of MyEdSpace's model. As Hirons says, "For too long, families have had to choose between what works and what they can afford."

The stars aligned — albeit in an unconventional way — in the wake of COVID-19. Hirons and co-founder Kharis Yanakidis took the view that the post-pandemic acceptance of online learning created a window: families were newly open to digital delivery.

MyEdSpace counters the price-point concerns by narrowing supply. "The teacher is everything. You can have the best platform in the world, but if the person teaching isn't world-class, it doesn't work. So we made the process deliberately hard."

Every teacher must have at least five years' classroom experience. Candidates sit subject exams, deliver live test lessons, complete social media filming tests, and go through multiple management meetings to assess motivation and mission fit.

That insistence on selection sits alongside a second, equally important design choice: how students participate. Hirons thinks the education system routinely misreads younger learners, mistaking quieter classrooms for disengagement.

"People say Gen Z are less interactive but this is a fundamental misunderstanding of that generation," he says. In a typical classroom, most students contribute once, if at all. MyEdSpace pushes interaction through messaging, meeting students where they already communicate.

"We get up to 30 messages per student per lesson." The upside, he argues, is confidence: "MyEdSpace gives students a safe, low-pressure way to learn. It really helps build confidence, and when students feel confident, they're more likely to succeed."

Putting the spotlight on change —

The platform's credibility has also been built in public, in a way traditional tuition rarely attempts. "We've put a lot of work into running free webinars that explain how the model works," Hirons says.

MyEdSpace has also invested in the teacher brands themselves, not as vanity metrics, but as evidence that teachers can connect with students at scale. "They now have well over 4 million combined followers on social media, which proves to parents that our teachers know how to connect with their kids and get them engaged with their learning."

Education, Hirons argues, is hard to change because it is culturally conservative, though he believes external pressure is building. "It's most clearly seen in the sheer quantity of teachers leaving the profession," he says, describing teachers overwhelmed by admin, under-resourced schools, and a growing sense of being undervalued. "Teachers should be the most celebrated people in society but their job is becoming harder and they're feeling more underappreciated." He points to scale as technology's clearest contribution: "The best teachers in the country should be teaching everyone, and with technology we can make that possible."

The leadership challenge has been keeping pace without hollowing out the core proposition. "Scaling without losing speed or quality," Hirons says, has been the hardest decision set. In the early phase he sat inside every workflow, until he became the constraint. The fix was structural. "I fixed that by creating a cross-functional founder's team that rotates around the business, embeds deeply, solves problems, and then hands ownership back with clear playbooks." It is an attempt to keep founder intensity in the operating system, even as headcount grows.

When the pressure rises, he returns to proof — not dashboards. "I re-anchor on the mission continuously by reading our Trustpilot everyday," he says. "Every time I read a review about a child who's gone from failing to passing because of MyEdSpace, I feel a huge sense of achievement and a sense of success that we are making a real difference in the world."

If the early story was about persuading parents that livestream learning can work, the next chapter is about scale beyond the UK. Hirons says MyEdSpace has launched in the US and released AI-powered learning tools intended to improve the student experience. The ambition is expansive, and deliberately long-dated. "The long-term goal is to democratise access even further," he says. "I want MyEdSpace to be the global education brand and to outlive me."

Visit MyEdSpace

Tare Isaac
Founder, Unity in Design Global Network

Words: Julia Whitmore

Tare Isaac is

building fashion's missing infrastructure –

The fashion industry has an access gap. Now it's being transformed to give minority designers the freedom to create.

Tare Isaac is building a new support system for fashion. Honoured at the Simply Ladies Awards 2025, she is scaling UDGN to back minority designers with mentorship, wellbeing support, and industry access — turning hard-won lived experience into practical infrastructure.

On a crowded calendar of industry dinners, showcases, and awards nights, recognition can sometimes blur into a familiar reel of speeches and applause. Tare Isaac's moment at the Simply Ladies Awards 2025 landed differently and feels much more like something genuinely momentous. She was honoured for visionary leadership in launching the Unity in Design Global Network (UDGN) — a platform designed to do what the fashion industry too often promises, but rarely builds: sustained access for minority designers, backed by practical mentorship, mental health support, and real routes into the rooms where careers are made.

Isaac's story is closely bound to that ambition. She is a solo Black woman founder, creating an ecosystem for underrepresented talent while navigating health challenges of her own, and still showing up — in boardrooms, and backstage — to argue that equity in fashion is not a fad. It is, in her framing, a structural question: who gets funded, who gets seen, who gets supported, and who is expected to survive the journey alone.

Her relationship with fashion began long before UDGN had a name. "Fashion found me early," Isaac says. "I didn't grow up around luxury, but I was always drawn to the way clothes could hold memory, power, and meaning — especially within Nigerian culture. What began as a creative outlet became a form of storytelling. Over time, that love evolved into consulting, designing, and helping others shape their own narratives in fashion."

That word — narrative — matters here. Isaac speaks about clothes as more than product, and more than image. The proposition behind UDGN is that identity and storytelling are commercial capabilities, not soft extras, and that designers who build from culture should not be penalised by systems that treat their background as a marketing angle rather than a foundation.

The business case, though, is rooted in a more familiar reality: talent does not automatically translate into opportunity. In the UK, minority designers can be celebrated aesthetically while remaining marginal economically — visible on social media, but absent from showrooms, retail conversations, or funding pipelines. Isaac's work sits in that gap between creative excellence and professional infrastructure, where the barriers are often less about ability than about access.

She did not set out to collect titles, she insists, or to become "a founder" as a destination in itself. "It was never about 'being a founder.' I became one out of necessity. As a Black immigrant designer in the UK, I kept hitting invisible walls — no access, no funding, no real support. Launching my brand, and later UDGN, wasn't about ego. It was about building the thing I needed but couldn't find. Sometimes, to make space, you have to create it yourself."

That "thing" includes both her own brand, TWIN, and the broader platform UDGN has become — and the sequencing is telling. Before UDGN took shape, Isaac spent years doing the kind of behind-the-scenes work that rarely makes a bio sound impressive: helping designers with Global Talent visas, press support, and strategy, often without budget. It is the unglamorous, operational layer of fashion — where ideas either become businesses, or stall out quietly.

> ***Burnout is real. Especially when you're trying to succeed in a system that wasn't built for you. Building a brand shouldn't mean breaking yourself.***

From frustration to infrastructure —

Isaac describes UDGN as a response to a pattern she could no longer ignore. "After years of helping designers with Global Talent visas, press, and strategy — often with no budget, just belief — I realised something: there are so many talented people doing everything right, but getting nowhere. That gap wasn't about skill — it was about access. UDGN was born from that frustration. But also from hope. The turning point came when I looked at my own brand, TWIN, and thought… if I had a platform like this earlier, my journey would've looked completely different."

The platform's first major initiative, Cultural Threads, is already underway as an incubator for a small cohort — just 10 designers — built around deliverables as well as advice. Mentorship is part of it, but the programme is structured to produce tangible outcomes: collection development, press features, showroom opportunities, and a London Fashion Week showcase.

Isaac's emphasis is on the whole picture: the designer as a business leader, and as a person. "Cultural Threads isn't just about teaching design — it's about supporting the whole designer," she says. "We combine high-level mentoring from industry experts with real deliverables: collection development, press features, showrooms, and a London Fashion Week showcase. But what truly sets us apart is our focus on identity, storytelling, and wellbeing. These aren't 'add-ons.' They're core to how we help designers grow — not just creatively, but sustainably."

Sustainability, in that sentence, is not shorthand for fabrics or supply chains. It is about endurance — the ability to keep building a brand without being consumed by it. Isaac is transparent about why mental health support sits at the centre of the offer, rather than being framed as an optional resource. "Because burnout is real. Especially when you're trying to succeed in a system that wasn't built for you.

"I've seen designers pour everything into their work and still feel like it's not enough. I've been there myself. That's why UDGN includes access to licensed counsellors and emotional wellbeing tools. Because building a brand shouldn't mean breaking yourself."

The decision to integrate licensed counsellors into a fashion-focused platform is, in part, a statement about what the industry normalises. Fashion is often sold as aspiration and spectacle, but the pathway for emerging talent can be punishing — financially, emotionally, and socially. For underrepresented designers, those pressures can compound: the expectation to represent a community, to educate institutions, to remain "grateful" for opportunities that are still precarious.

Isaac's leadership style is shaped by having lived that complexity — and by continuing to navigate it while building. "I lead from a place of empathy and clarity," she says. "I know what it feels like to start with nothing but a visa deadline and a dream. I know how heavy it is to carry culture, ambition, and survival at once. That's why I don't lead from above — I build alongside. My lived experience keeps me honest, and it's why UDGN isn't just about visibility — it's about value."

Her insistence on value is a direct challenge to how diversity initiatives can be framed inside large institutions: as a reputational project, a campaign, a committee. UDGN is positioning itself as something more operational — a platform that can help minority designers build commercially viable brands, while also demanding that the broader ecosystem takes responsibility for the conditions it has created.

Isaac says there is interest, and also a long way to go. “There’s growing interest — but we’re not there yet. Being a British Fashion Council member has opened doors, and we’ve had strong conversations with universities, retailers, and funding bodies. But real change takes more than diversity statements — it takes commitment. I will say this: the hunger from designers, and the urgency of the moment, is what’s pushing the industry forward. Slowly, but surely.”

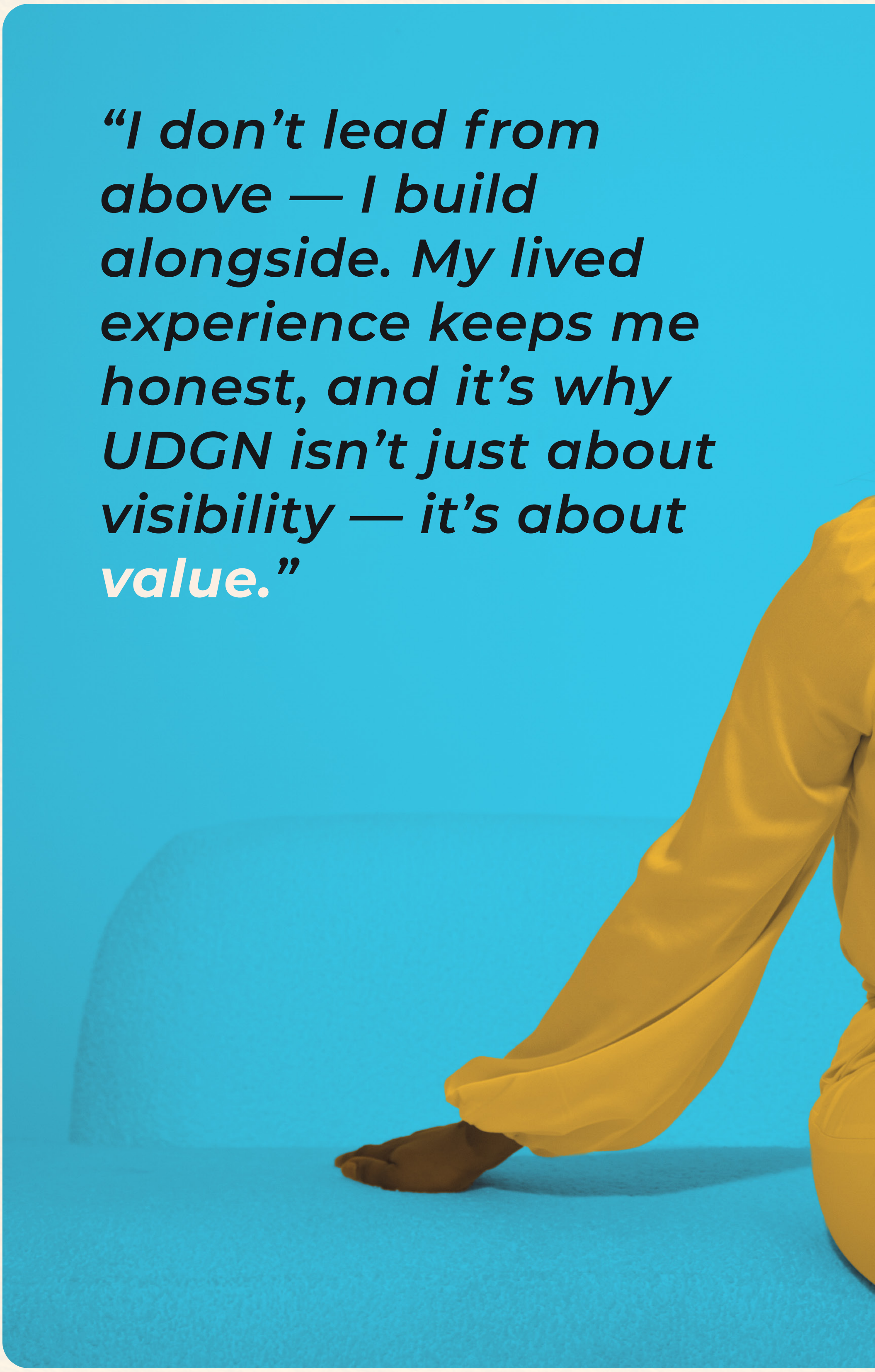
That urgency shaped how UDGN chose its first cohort. Isaac says the selection was not simply about technical ability. “We weren’t just looking for talent — we were looking for clarity of voice. Designers who had something to say, something rooted in

identity, purpose, or cultural heritage. We wanted people who were open to learning but also brave enough to lead. This cohort reflects the future of fashion — not just aesthetically, but ethically and globally."

For Isaac, the phrase "emerging designer" can sometimes function as a polite kind of erasure — a way to keep people waiting for validation. "The industry still equates 'emerging' with 'invisible.' Many of our creatives are already leaders in their communities. They've built businesses, mentored others, made impact — with no spotlight. What's missing isn't talent — it's trust, funding, and platforms. The fashion world has to stop waiting for validation from the usual gatekeepers and start listening to the voices already doing the work."

In five years, she wants UDGN to be less a new initiative than a normal expectation — a blueprint for what equitable industry infrastructure can look like. "My hope is that UDGN becomes the blueprint for what equity can look like in fashion. I want our designers not only stocked globally but shaping the culture on their own terms.

"I want wellness and creative sustainability to be



the standard — not the exception. And more than anything, I want us to build a global ecosystem where minority designers no longer have to prove their worth — they just have to create."

There is a practical optimism in that final line: a belief that the job is not merely to critique the system, but to build alternatives that work. Isaac is doing that work in a way that feels native to fashion's world of aesthetics and narrative, but grounded in operational reality — a network, a cohort, a showcase, a support structure. The applause at the awards matters, but it is not the destination. The real test is whether more designers can move from visibility to value, without having to break themselves to get there.

Visit the UDGN

Jeremy Walters,
CEO, Paragon Group

Words: Julia Whitmore

Leading through listening —

Leadership is often sold as certainty: the leader who can read the room, deliver a decision, and move on. Jeremy Walters, CEO of Paragon Group, describes something closer to the opposite — a leadership style built around listening, admitting gaps, and designing an organisation that can think in parallel.

Walters' route to the top role has been shaped by proximity rather than reinvention. "In a way, I feel like I've grown up with Paragon," he says, pointing to a career spent in commercial and leadership roles inside companies that were later acquired by the group. Paragon's own growth has been similarly iterative: a business services organisation operating across 26 countries, with €1.1bn in revenue, positioning itself as a technology-enabled partner for clients that want to grow, and operate more efficiently.

"As Paragon has grown globally, my responsibilities have expanded to CEO of Paragon Group, driving the business's strategy, expansion and innovation across all divisions, business units and regions," Walters says. It was a story 18 years in the making, with Walters joining Paragon in 2004 before assuming the CEO role in 2022.

Before any of that, Walters traces an early instinct for pressure-tested leadership to a teenage job. Working in his mother's catering business gave him an introduction to what happens when plans meet reality.

"That experience taught me to lead with a calm mentality under pressure," he says. It is a small detail, but it shows up later in how he describes organisational design: calm is not a personality trait, but a culture you build by widening the circle of people who can act.

Jeremy Walters credits dyslexia with shaping a leadership style rooted in humility, trust, and attentive listening. His focus now is building diverse teams that ask better questions, share judgement, and scale decision-making across the organisation.

Humility as an operating system —

Walters is open about another formative factor: dyslexia. In the UK, according to the British Dyslexia Association, ten percent of the population are believed to be dyslexic. Research into entrepreneurship has also found a higher incidence among founders than in the general population, with the work of Cass Business School's Julie Logan frequently cited for results showing "35% of U.S. company founders" identifying as dyslexic.

For Walters, it became a strength. "From my first day in school, I knew I was different. The written word, which seemed to come so easily to others, was a code I struggled to crack," he says. "I've now come to realise that it's helped me to excel in other areas and, in fact, it's become the foundation of how I approach leadership."

That mindset underpins what Walters calls "distributed intelligence" — a deliberate effort to build decision-making capacity across teams, rather than concentrating it at the centre. "My approach to building distributed intelligence means ensuring each team represents a diverse skill set," he says. In practice, he describes a workplace where trust is built in: colleagues are expected to use judgement, ideas are invited early, and problem-solving is designed to be collective rather than performative.

And that philosophy carries into how he defines effective executive behaviour. "The power of asking better questions rather than providing all the answers," Walters says, is what many leaders overlook. Curiosity, in his framing, is not soft; it is a discipline that keeps teams open to disconfirming information, and reduces the risk of single-point failure.

Looking ahead, Walters ties Paragon's next chapter to a clear ambition: "We want to become the world's leading business services company and the most trusted and innovative brand in all of our markets." He points to investment in AI, data integration, and technology platforms as central to that strategy. For a leader shaped by difference, the aim is less about out-thinking everyone and more about building an organisation that can think together.

Visit the Paragon Group

Imran Hakim
CEO and founder, Hakim Group

Words: Julia Whitmore

Imran Hakim's startup-for-life bet on community —

On Britain's high streets — where closures and consolidation have become familiar headlines — Hakim Group has been building in the other direction: buying independent opticians and audiologists, keeping their names above the door, and investing in the back-office heft that small operators rarely get to build alone.

The company now owns and operates over 500 locations across the UK, Ireland, and the Channel Islands, using a joint venture partnership model designed to protect local identity while scaling training, procurement, IT, finance, and HR support.

That model is rooted in its founder and CEO, Imran Hakim, and in a personal story that begins far from boardrooms.

From a £2,000 family loan in 2001, Imran Hakim has grown his company into a partnership-led network of more than 500 opticians and audiologists, with Vision2030 targets that span 1,000 UK locations, expanded eye hospitals, and international growth.

Hakim started Hakim Group in 2001, funded by a £2,000 loan from his father. Before that, he'd already formed a blunt self-assessment about conventional employment. "It quickly became clear to me that I was essentially unemployable," he says, after being fired from McDonald's aged 16 and lasting a single day in a supermarket job. Entrepreneurship, for him, was less an abstract ambition than a practical route to autonomy: a chance to "make my own decisions and be responsible for the outcome — good and less good."

The drive to decide, and to carry the consequences, is only one strand. The other is family — not as a corporate metaphor, but as lived experience. At 16, Hakim says, "we didn't have a home, and we lived with my grandma. We didn't have much at all — just our family." He describes parents who arrived in the UK "with almost nothing," and then worked relentlessly: "My late father worked two jobs; my mother worked three while raising five children."

For Hakim, those early years created a definition of wealth that still informs how he runs the organisation. "Family is at the heart of everything we do at Hakim Group," he says — and he argues the same value-set can scale, if it is protected deliberately.

This insistence on values is deeply embedded into how Hakim Group looks at acquisitions. In a sector where roll-ups can erase local brands, Hakim's proposition is that identity is the asset, not an inconvenience — and that culture is a due diligence item, not a poster on the wall. "Our partnership model is the single most important thing in our business — it's our winning formula," he says. "When looking to acquire an independent optician, before we even look at a P&L, we look at the culture and values of the business we'd be bringing in."

The practical implication is selectivity. Hakim describes being "somewhat ruthlessly consistent" about who joins the group, favouring alignment over size. He is explicit about what "fit" means: "It's about values, ambitions and chemistry. Are they positive? Do they share our ambition? Are they going to bring energy — or drain it?" For a decentralised group, that philosophy doubles as risk management. "You can write everything into a contract, but business rarely follows the script," he adds, arguing that trust matters most when plans break.

If culture is one axis of growth, capital is the other. Hakim Group bootstrapped to 100 outlets before bringing in its first private equity partner in 2020. The timing, Hakim says, followed a shift in external attention: by 2016, the business had "about 40 practices" and began to be noticed after awards recognition, including the Scale Up category of the EY Entrepreneur of the Year Awards. Inbound investor interest followed — but he frames the eventual decision as a conscious trade: continuing on "sheer grit" versus building an environment to "10X and accelerate."

That logic carried into a more recent transaction, completed in May, which he characterises as a renewal of the same approach — new investment into teams, technology, and innovation, tied to Hakim Group's Vision2030 strategy. Yet he is wary of the cultural drift that can come with institutional money. "I always say that I want to be a startup for life," he says. "No matter how large we grow, I never want to lose that startup mindset and culture."

One of the challenges for leadership is how you remove those barriers, those ceilings to progress, and find new frontiers that you could explore and conquer with your team.

Scaling at speed exercises different leadership muscles. Hakim notes that the group has scaled fivefold since the first private equity partnership, with EBITDA “almost tenfold.” For a founder who has “done every job within” the organisation at some point, the hardest shift has been delegation. He also ties that to a learning culture: “It’s okay to experiment, to get something slightly wrong, and to learn from it. That’s how you grow.”

In practice, the operational layer must keep evolving, too. “Every time you double the size of a business, you have to refresh systems and processes,” he says.

For Hakim, growth is meant to be shared. Following the recent deal, the company introduced a participation scheme so that “every single Hakim Group employee shares in the value created in this next phase.” It sits alongside an internal narrative about wellbeing and development, and external recognition including The Sunday Times Best Places to Work and Healthcare Business of the Year at the Growing Business Awards.

The forward plan is unusually specific. Under Vision2030, Hakim says the group targets 1,000 locations in the UK, growing audiology sites from 350 to 800, expanding from two eye hospitals to “a dozen,” and internationalising “in one or more geographies.” The ambition is framed as a response to demand — from partners and from patients — and as a wager that independent providers can take a larger role in community healthcare if infrastructure, training, and technology keep pace.

That healthcare lens is central to Hakim’s view of the high street. He argues that high street optometry and audiology can reduce pressure elsewhere in the system through advice, referral, and preventative care. He points to an economic analysis suggesting that for every £1 spent by the NHS on high street optometry services, £3.98 of value is delivered, and that investment in primary eye care could deliver £98 million in net benefits, including reduced waiting lists. Technology, too, features in his outlook, with AI and tele-optometry positioned as “key enablers over the next decade” — provided regulation keeps up.

> **“No matter how large we grow, I never want to lose that startup mindset and culture.”**

In Hakim’s telling, the through-line is consistent: autonomy, community, and progress without complacency. His advice to entrepreneurs echoes his own early trajectory. “My advice to all entrepreneurs, starting out, would be to never fear failure,” he says, arguing that mistakes should be treated as learning opportunities that build resilience and agility. He emphasises this not to romanticise the journey, but to reinforce the practical realities. The businesses that endure tend to be those that can change without losing themselves, and that can scale without flattening the people and places that made them worth building in the first place.

Visit the Hakim Group

Enterprise cybersecurity outlook 2026

The cyber threat landscape and how enterprises can stay secure

November 2025

BQ

James Wilkinson

Embracing the end of year wind-down

with Rock Face

In this issue

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The business of celebration

December at work is no longer just “the Christmas party”. It’s private dining and big nights out, yes, but also long lunches, early finishes, and activities that give people an easier way to connect. We explore what makes business celebrations feel genuinely rewarding now.

X10

Leisure & wellness

December doesn’t slow down. We outline five small, holiday-friendly resets help leaders switch off, stay steady, and start January feeling restored.

We also speak with James Wilkinson, CEO of Rock Face, to find out how he winds down for the year.

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The BQ book corner

X14

We find out what business leaders are reading this month, and highlight some picks for how leaders can start 2026 strong.

And if you’ve ever wondered how Dune London grew into one of the shoe industry’s giants, we step into Daniel Rubin’s shoes with his new memoir.

The business of celebration

There was a time when the office Christmas party was a dependable ritual: a meeting room cleared of chairs, a supermarket platter balanced on a filing cabinet, and a playlist that made everyone feel 22 years old, whether they were or not. It was informal, inexpensive, and, in its own awkward way, equalising. You saw your colleagues outside the usual hierarchy, loosened by a second glass, laughing at someone else's terrible Secret Santa choice.

That version still exists, of course, but it no longer defines the season. Post-pandemic working patterns have changed how people gather, how often they see one another in person, and what they want from an evening that is, in effect, the social closing ceremony of the year. The party has started to do more emotional work. It is expected to reconnect hybrid teams, include different life stages and preferences, and feel worth the effort of getting on a train in the dark.

The result is an evolution from "office party" to "celebration strategy", even in companies that would never use those words. The best events now look less like a compulsory night out and more like a well-hosted experience, with thought given to the room, the tempo, the drinks, and the exits. People want to leave feeling lighter, closer to their colleagues, and, ideally, with a story that doesn't involve someone's lanyard being used as a tie.

What hasn't changed is what the party signals. It's a cultural mirror, reflecting how a business thinks about togetherness, appreciation, and taste. The festive season simply makes that mirror brighter — and harder to ignore.

The rise of the curated night out

There most noticeable change in the modern Christmas party is the shift from “a party, somewhere” to “an experience, on purpose”. Fewer companies are relying on the default formula of drinks and dancing. Instead, they’re building evenings around a sense of occasion: a venue that feels special, a meal that sets a pace, and a programme — light, not theatrical — that gives people something to do beyond hovering near the same three colleagues.

Part of this is practical. Hybrid working means there are fewer chances to gather everyone, so the seasonal event carries more weight. But part of it is also cultural. Staff expectations have moved on, and the best hosts know it. The bar has been raised by hospitality itself: if your team spends weekends in restaurants that understand lighting, music, and timing, they’ll notice when a work event doesn’t.

But the fact these events are curated does not mean they need to be complicated. In fact, the strongest parties often do less, better. They start earlier, so people can enjoy the best part of the night without turning it into an endurance test. They include a welcoming moment that breaks the ice, then let conversation do the heavy lifting. They choose a venue where people can actually hear one another. They offer food that feels generous, and drinks that feel considered. They plan a graceful finish, so nobody is left wondering whether they’re meant to stay until the lights come up.

The point is to host rather than to dazzle. The experience-first party is, at heart, a simple proposition: make it easy for people to connect, and make the evening feel like a reward, not an obligation.

The four party archetypes

The private table

This is the Christmas party as intimate upgrade: a private dining room, a long table, a menu that feels like a treat, and the kind of service that quietly keeps everything moving. It suits teams who want to talk, eat well, and leave feeling as though they've genuinely spent time together, rather than shouting over a DJ.

The playful one

This archetype builds the evening around an activity, not a dancefloor. Comedy clubs, games lounges, bowling with a twist, escape rooms, even a low-stakes karaoke booth: the point is shared experience without the pressure of constant conversation. For teams that include quieter personalities or lots of new joiners, this can be the most inclusive approach.

The big night

The big night is the classic — reimagined. Think a shared party night, a venue with production values, a dancefloor that actually delivers, and a sense that the company has bought its team a proper night out. It's ideal for larger groups where the goal is a collective buzz.

The early finish

The early-finish celebration is quietly becoming the power move. It might be an early-evening reception, a long lunch, or a beautifully hosted afternoon that ends before the last train becomes a gamble. It respects different life stages without making anyone feel they're missing out.

One of the more noticeable shifts in recent years is that, as the demographics of the workplace have changed, so too has the drinks culture that surrounds the office. Alcohol is still there, but it's less often the engine of the night. More celebrations now treat drinking as one option among many, rather than the main event everyone is expected to orbit.

This isn't about moralising. It's about hosting. People who don't drink — for health, faith, preference, or simply because they don't want to — should still feel catered for. The easiest way to do that is to make the alcohol-free choices feel deliberate and grown-up. When the non-alcoholic option looks good, tastes good, and arrives with the same confidence as everything else, nobody needs to explain themselves.

The new drinks menu

A few details separate a modern bar from a token one. Offer a signature 0% drink alongside the alcoholic welcome serve, so the alternative is part of the ritual. Put the alcohol-free options on the same menu, in the same typography, with the same attention. Serve them properly: decent glassware, a garnish that isn't a limp lemon wedge, and flavours that don't default to sweetness.

This approach tends to improve the whole evening. People pace themselves. The room stays brighter for longer. Conversations hold. The party feels less like a test of stamina and more like what it's meant to be: a celebration. And in a month where social calendars can feel relentless, a party that respects different energies is often the one people remember most fondly.

When the party isn't the point

Not every team can gather neatly in one place for one big festive night, and not every team wants to. The rise of remote and hybrid working has made the process of getting everyone together at 7pm harder to achieve, and it has also broadened the range of preferences around how people like to celebrate.

Louise Doyle, CEO and founder of gifting platform **needi**, describes what she's seeing: "We've definitely seen a shift in the traditional Christmas party from the companies we work with, especially in the years following the covid-19 pandemic. With more businesses working remotely and hybrid, it's more difficult to get everyone together for the classic evening party. Plus, with more flexibility for working parents and those who don't drink, a night out isn't always the best fit for everyone in your team.

"We've worked with a number of companies who have saved the budget on a big Christmas party and favoured well-thought-out gifts instead... Opting for tailored gifts instead of a big budget party is definitely on the rise as employers shift from the one-size-fits-all approach."

A tailored experience day can feel personal without getting too close: afternoon tea, a sports event, a workshop someone would choose for themselves. A luxury hamper from local makers feels generous and usable. A "choose your own" approach avoids the awkwardness of guessing taste, size, or schedule.

This doesn't have to be an either-or. A daytime celebration with the focus on gift giving, rather than drinks, can be a neat compromise: shared moment, low pressure, and something tangible that reaches everyone — including the colleagues who couldn't make it in person. In December, that thoughtfulness can read as its own kind of celebration.

5 wellness tips for unwinding this holiday season

The end-of-year rush rarely arrives with a neat off-switch. Between late dinners, family logistics, and the mindset of "just one more thing", recovery can get squeezed out.

These five small resets are designed for December: realistic, quick, and mindful of your energy, mood, and patience.

1 Protect your sleep window, not your bedtime

During the holidays, the temptation to stay up late with family, celebrating with friends, or revelling in cheer is all around. The problem is not the occasional late night — it is the knock-on effect: the early meeting, the travel day, the kids awake at dawn, the "why am I so wired" feeling two days later.

A simple move: keep a steady wake time, and give yourself a minimum sleep window. If you go to bed later, you do not "win it back" by scrolling in the morning. You win it back by nudging the evening back, even by 20 minutes, and treating wind-down like a habit rather than a reward.

2 Move daily, but drop the "proper workout" mindset

December has a way of turning movement into a negotiable. One more call. One more mince pie. One more hour in the car. The gym becomes an all-or-nothing project, and, under holiday pressure, "nothing" wins.

Instead, make movement the thing that fits between the bits. Ten minutes counts. A brisk walk to clear your head before guests arrive. A short mobility routine while the kettle boils. Taking the stairs in a hotel because they're there, and it is easy.

The point is not to train harder in December — or even to maintain the same intensity as the rest of the year if life disagrees. It is to keep your body feeling like it belongs to you, not your calendar.

3 Take micro-breaks to reset

The holidays can be intense in a different way: hosting, travelling, being “on” socially, and managing competing expectations. Even when you are off work, your brain can feel like it is still performing.

Micro-breaks are a quick and quiet antidote to this chaos — small interruptions that stop stress from building up. You do not need a spa day. You need two deliberate pauses.

Try a default pair: one mid-morning, one mid-afternoon. Step outside, if you can. Drink water. Breathe for a minute longer than you think is necessary. If you are in company, take the “I’m just going to get some air” exit — most people will envy you.

4 Get daylight and a touch of nature, early

Winter days are short, and holiday schedules often start late. That combination can leave you feeling foggy, flat, or oddly restless by mid-afternoon — especially if you are mostly indoors, under artificial light, and moving from screen to screen.

A small fix is to get outside early. Daylight is a powerful cue for your body clock, and even a modest dose can help you feel more awake in the day, and sleepier at night. Add a sliver of nature — a park loop, a riverside path, a five-minute stand under trees — and your mind will immediately thank you.

An outdoor wellness retreat in mid-winter isn’t always the most desirable, but it’s invaluable for giving your nervous system something simpler to read than your inbox.

5 Set social and digital boundaries

The festive season sells abundance — more plans, more messages, more social calls, and more indulgence. For leaders, that can quickly turn into a month of constant availability, with no true downtime.

Pick two boundaries that feel almost boring, and that is why they work.

First, a social boundary: decide the line you will hold. One event declined. One night you leave early. One morning that stays slow, even if it means missing a group chat update.

Second, a digital boundary: choose a last inbox check, and stick to it. Late-night messages and endless scrolling rarely make you feel more connected. They make you feel more alert, and less rested.

Your December reset, in 30 seconds

Pick any two tips. Repeat them for three days. If it gets messy, simplify, rather than quit. The goal is not a perfect holiday. It is a holiday you actually recover from.

Winding down with

James Wilkinson, CEO, Rock Face

James Wilkinson is the CEO of Rock Face, an innovative men's care brand on a mission to shake up the men's toiletries market and take on giants like Unilever. At its core, Rock Face believes men's brands should speak to the everyday man; spotlighting genuine, positive role models and encouraging men to be 1% better each day.

We find out how James unwinds at the end of another busy year.

What approaches or rituals genuinely help professionals decompress after a demanding year?

"I like to have a clear break between work and home and moving from being mainly remote to being hybrid in the office has been transformational in terms of decompressing. That's why everyone in our company has access to a co-working space.

"I like to walk wherever I can. Take the headphones out and try and bring my stimulus down after a busy day. So many people leave work, put the headphones in, get home, put music on. I find it important to break the cycle of stimulus.

"I'm a bit sad, my bedtime wind down involves stretching, a 10 minute meditation and reading until my eyes (literally) can't stay open."

How can organisations support wellbeing in December without slipping into box-ticking gestures?

"Our Christmas celebration is activity, not booze based. We're off candle making this month and each month we do a non-alcohol based activity where we have done the likes of The Bake Off experience, bowls and crazy golf.

"Secret santa is fun so we have a £20 limit per person so hope that helps us avoid 'tat'!"

How do you personally create space to rest or reflect once the year winds down?

"I've got quite strong beliefs on this. I give everyone in the team three extra days of holiday for the year but insist they use three between Christmas and New Year. I previously sometimes didn't take this time off and was mouse wiggling with a few other colleagues which doesn't allow for a proper switch off.

"I find the time between Christmas and New Year is a great time to decompress and think about what you want to achieve in the coming year. I love to see family but also love to return home."

Have you adopted any wellness or leisure habits that have changed the way you lead?

"I'm big on journaling, I'm a classic team leader who likes to think about lots of eventualities. Journaling helps me get my thoughts out before they become worries. We ask the team to share (from a professional and personal point of view) how their last six months have been, what they have coming up over the next six months and what their long term goals are. I find this level of information sharing is like everyone journaling.

"From a leisure perspective I always used to wake up and launch into the day without stopping. Now I get up a bit earlier to allow myself a little extra time to start slower and this really sets me up for the day.

"Also, hitting up the sauna after a long day or week is literally my decompression chamber."

What are business leaders reading?

December does something useful to the calendar. The meetings thin out, the travel time reappears, and the "next year" thinking starts to crowd in — without quite demanding decisions yet. It's a good moment to read like a leader reads in real life: in short bursts, with a pen nearby, and with an eye on what might actually change on Monday morning.

This year's recommendations fall into three neat piles: books that help you understand yourself before you try to "fix" the business, books that build shared language inside leadership teams, and books designed to turn reflection into action.

The personal reset list

Dave Christie, founder of **Cheshire Business Coaching**, sees the same pattern repeating: "Too many leaders are trying to fix the business before they understand themselves."

His picks sit deliberately outside the usual bestseller loop — and they're geared for leaders who want something to shift, not simply feel inspired.

The mountain is you by Brianna Wiest

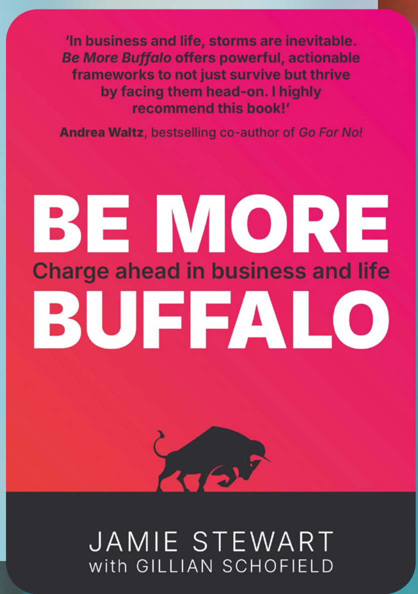
A reflective read for leaders who can spot patterns in the market faster than they can spot patterns in themselves. The best takeaway is not motivation; it's recognition — and the quiet confidence that comes with naming what trips you up.

Clear thinking by Shane Parrish

Parrish is interested in the decision you make when you are tired, rushed, or provoked — precisely the moments when reputation, culture, and momentum can be won or lost. Ideal for reading in small bursts, with a margin full of "I do this".

Be more buffalo by Jamie Stewart

The giftable pick: accessible, lighter on the surface, and surprisingly pointed underneath. A good option for entrepreneurs who want honesty without a lecture.



The shared language list

Some recommendations come with a bonus: they work even better when multiple people read them.

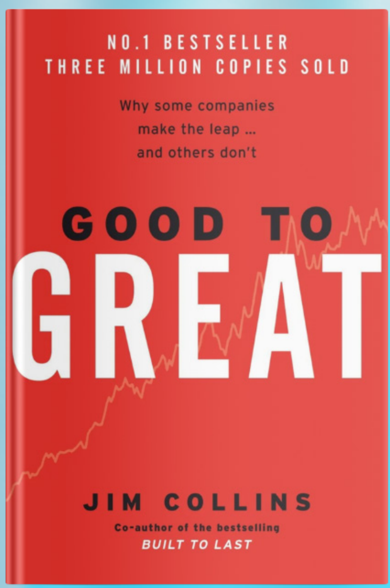
Raymond Kok, CEO of **Mendix** (a Siemens business), uses business books with his leadership team to "discover new language to shape their mindset and actions". These are titles that travel well from a page into a meeting.

Amp it up: leading for hypergrowth by raising expectations, increasing urgency, and elevating intensity
by Frank Slootman

The Mendix leadership team started here. Kok calls it a fundamentals book for what it means to be a scaling tech company.

The AI-driven leader: harnessing AI to make faster, smarter decisions by Geoff Woods

It's a book about "how to ask the right question". Useful reading when everyone is talking about AI, and fewer people are agreeing on what they actually need.



Good to great by Jim Collins

A staple for every leader and a strong December re-read candidate. Jim shares the findings of a 5-year research project on what separates good companies from the great ones. And, as Kok points out, the term "built to last" actually comes from this book.

Busting silos: how Snowflake unites sales and marketing to win its best customers
by Hillary Carpio and Travis Henry

Silos are easy to complain about and hard to fix. Kok notes the phrase "busting silos" has become ingrained in the Mendix vocabulary — which is exactly why leaders like books: they give teams shared shorthand.

Measure what matters: the simple idea that drives 10x growth
by John Doerr

Kok's summary is the reason it lands so well with effective leaders: "businesses often measure all sorts of things that nobody cares about". This is the clean bridge between December reflection and January execution.

The practical list

Vicky Payne, founder of **The Level Up Book Club**, believes that "business readers are looking for application and how to implement the reflections." The market, she argues, is saturated with big-picture analysis and quick inspiration. What's missing is the how-to — frameworks, prompts, and resources that move you "from the bookshelf to the boardroom".

This is a useful filter for festive reading: if you cannot imagine what you'll do differently after chapter three, it may be enjoyable, but it is unlikely to change your year.

Her recommendations are:

The 5 types of wealth planner by Sahil Bloom

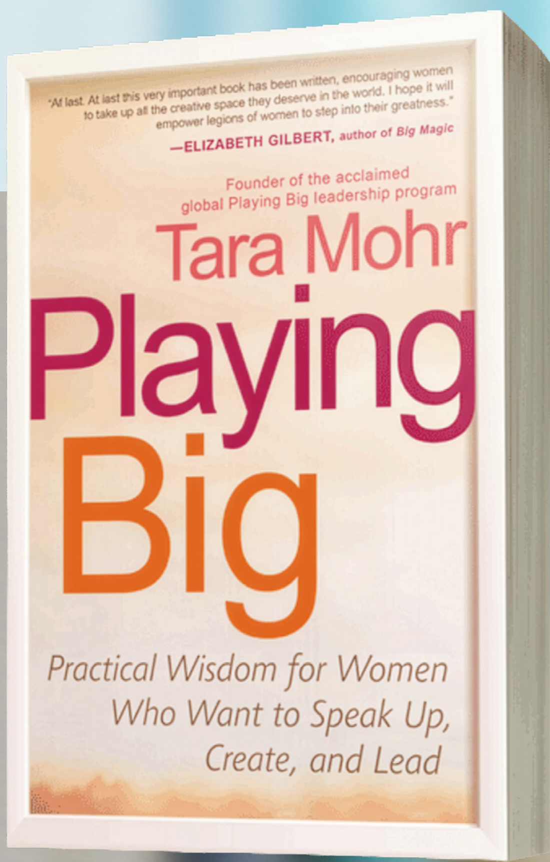
For Payne, "this follow up workbook to 'The 5 types of wealth' is a no brainer and will allow space and time to consider your strategic moves for 2026 in all areas of life."

The heart work of modern leadership by David Grossman

Payne describes this as "hard hitting and a true tale of what is needed in the workforce today. The world is changing and this is a practical guide in how to lead within it."

Playing big by Tara Mohr

Payne describes this as her most influential read of the year. "I spent years mastering the external checklist in my corporate career, only to be secretly blocked by self-doubt and the Inner Critic," she says. "This book provided a framework to dial that critic down and instead tap into my wise, inner mentor. This mindset shift is now the foundation for everything we teach in The Level Up Book Club."



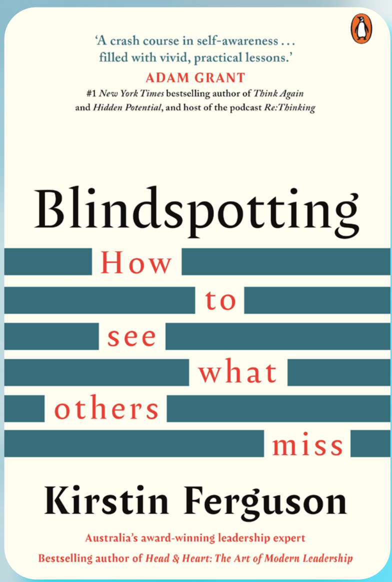
> **Most business owners I meet still reach for the big titles: Atomic Habits, Start With Why, The Chimp Paradox, or anything that promises "leadership" on the cover. They're good books — but they're not where people should start.**
>
> **— Dave Christie, founder of Cheshire Business Coaching**

The BQ picks

Not every good leadership gift has to come from your own shelf. Here are some recent releases that feel timely for end-of-year reflection:

Blindspotting: how to see what others miss by Kirstin Ferguson

A strong "better judgement" book for leadership teams, especially when the biggest risks are not obvious — they're the assumptions nobody notices because everybody shares them.



The seven rules of trust by Jimmy Wales with Dan Gardner

Trust is easy to reference and hard to rebuild. Wales' perspective — shaped by building Wikipedia — makes this a timely gift for leaders thinking about credibility, culture, and how decisions get believed.

Relationship currency: five communication habits for limitless influence and business success by Ravi Rajani

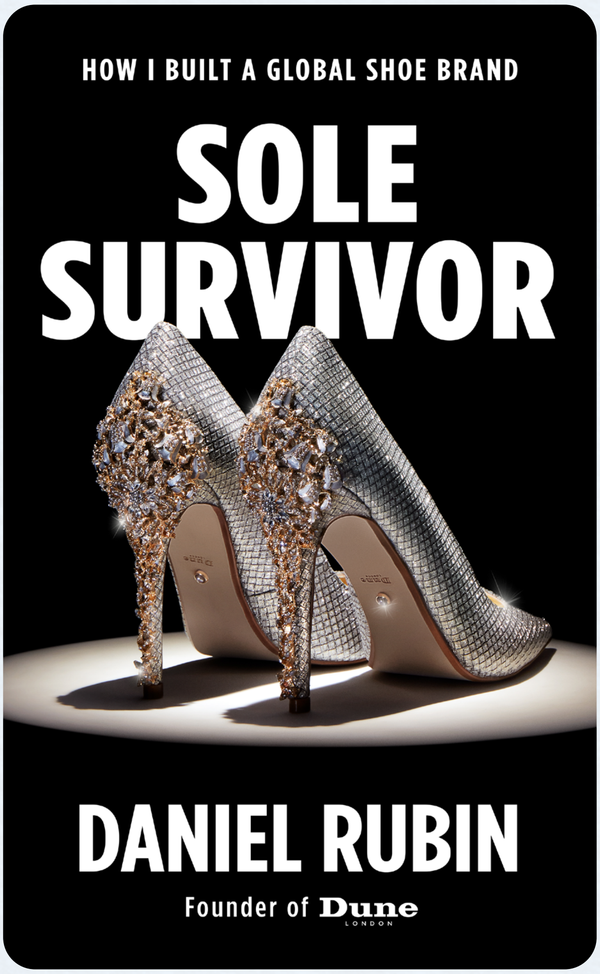
A practical reminder that, in an AI-heavy workplace, trust and human connection are still the real differentiators. Rajani's five habits are built for leaders who want their communication to land more clearly — with teams, clients, and stakeholders — and to translate into better relationships, better decisions, and better outcomes.

The next board: delivering value today while making the board fit for tomorrow by Thomas Keil and Marianna Zangrillo

An exploration of how boards can navigate the new realities of corporate governance. The book not only features insights from leaders at ABB, IBM, Inditex, and Novartis, but also presents a practical blueprint — the Board Diamond — to help boards balance compliance with strategic foresight.

A good December reading list does not try to turn you into a different person by New Year's Day. It simply helps you arrive in January with a little more self-knowledge, a little more shared language, and at least one practical change you can make before the diary fills up again.

Inside Dune London's business playbook



Daniel Rubin begins Sole Survivor by admitting he has a habit that will feel familiar to anyone who's ever clocked a watch, a cuff, or a well-cut lapel in a meeting: "I look at people's feet before their faces; I can usually tell which brand they are wearing." It's a disarming opening, and a neat reminder of what footwear really is in executive life — not vanity, exactly, but a signal to be read. Shoes sit at the intersection of taste, stamina, and intention. They're how you arrive.

Rubin's book is, on the surface, the story of building Dune into a global footwear and accessories brand over three decades. But it reads best as something slightly rarer: a calm, highly detailed account of how to keep a consumer business moving while the ground underneath it keeps shifting — manufacturing migrating east, online accelerating, and customer expectations changing faster than anyone's forecasting model.

Rubin sets out the scale and strain of the category with striking numbers: $400bn in shoes sold in 2023, 24 billion pairs produced, and an estimated 22 billion pairs going into landfill each year. Even if your world is SaaS rather than stilettos, the message lands: this is a high-volume, high-competition market where the margin for romanticism is thin. You're either building value, or you're feeding churn.

What keeps Sole Survivor from becoming another founder memoir is its attention to the unglamorous. Rubin has been in the industry since the 1970s, and he's frank about how the centre of gravity moved.

Through detailing Rubin's experience, Sole Survivor delivers two things: a surprisingly technical look at how shoes are made — Rubin calls them "architectural and complex", with more than 150 operations in a single pair — and a grounded view of brand-building, where story matters but execution matters more. He frames Dune as “shifting sands”, then reminds you the name was simply available and he moved quickly to secure it.

Those operational realities are where the book offers real value to business leaders reading off-hours. Rubin writes about omnichannel as an organising principle, and is equally candid about the emotional cadence of building.

The strongest “executive utility” arrives near the end, when Rubin lays out what he has learned in business — hard work, taking advice, doing due diligence, stepping back to see the big picture, building a team, learning from mistakes, and loving what you do. None of it is revolutionary on paper, and that’s the point. These are fundamentals, sharpened by decades of real decisions.

Sole Survivor is best read not as a story about shoes, but as a case study in staying coherent through change. It’s a useful recalibration for any leader whose diary is full of strategy decks.

And it’s worth ending where the book begins: with attention. Rubin’s instinct to look down first is, in its own way, a leadership habit. The details are telling you something — about your customer, your culture, your competition, and your own standards. Sole Survivor is a reminder that noticing is a discipline, and there is a lot to learned and earned by paying attention to the details that customers feel even when they never see them.

Sole Survivor: How I Built a Global Shoe Brand by Daniel Rubin is published by Canbury Press. It is available now, priced £20 for Hardback or £12.99 for eBook.

Tackling bias in AI Coaching —

By: Hilary Aylesworth, Chief Product Officer, CoachHub

Artificial intelligence is steadily making its way into some of the most human centred aspects of work. As machine learning expands beyond analytics and automation into areas like hiring, performance management, and coaching, it surfaces a pressing question, can AI truly grasp the nuance of human development, and if not, how do we ensure it doesn't undermine it? For example, if an AI model subtly over prioritises certain career paths or communication styles based on biased training data, it can nudge individuals toward norms that don't reflect their identity or goals. These aren't just technical issues; they shape real workplace experiences and development journeys.

Coaching is a deeply personal and context rich process. It relies on empathy, trust, and skilled communication to navigate sensitive personal and professional dynamics. When done well, it opens the door to more inclusive, psychologically safe workplaces. Introducing AI into this space has real potential, but only if it is designed to support that mission, not derail it.

That means keeping humans in the driver's seat. It requires clear organisational policies on how AI coaching is used, robust training data that reflects diverse lived experiences, and safeguards to identify and correct biased outputs. With this kind of intentional, holistic approach, AI coaching can enhance and not compromise the integrity of personal development at work.

When bias is built In —

All AI models are shaped by the data they are trained on. That data often reflects existing social, cultural, and organisational norms, many of which contain implicit or historical biases. In coaching, those biases may be subtle but still powerful. Advice that unintentionally aligns with dominant workplace cultures, language that reinforces stereotypes, or assumptions baked into feedback that reflect outdated models of leadership or success.

Unlike transactional AI systems, coaching interactions are complex. They deal with identity, ambition, vulnerability, and conflict. If AI is deployed without an understanding of these layers, it can reinforce the very barriers it aims to dismantle.

Bias in AI coaching isn't limited to what is said, it's also about what isn't recognised. For instance, AI tools trained on leadership development data that skews heavily toward male dominated industries may unintentionally favour assertive communication styles while overlooking more collaborative approaches, styles more often associated with women and underrepresented groups. In a coaching context, this can subtly shape advice that reinforces narrow definitions of what 'strong leadership' looks like.

A system that isn't attuned to cultural nuance or diverse communication styles may miss what's being expressed. And when AI operates at scale, those small moments can have large ripple effects.

Designing with responsibility —

The answer to bias in AI coaching isn't to step back from it entirely, but to move forward with care and responsibility at every stage. That starts with how we train these systems. We need to focus on building models with diverse, representative data, and continuously monitor how they perform in the real world. Bias isn't a one time fix, it's something we must look out for on an ongoing basis.

But fairness in AI isn't just about data, it's about people. These systems shouldn't run in isolation. Human oversight is essential, not only during development but throughout their use. We have to involve coaches and behavioural scientists to review how AI responds, flag where it misses the mark, and identify where it might unintentionally reinforce harmful patterns.

Large language models can also be used to evaluate one another. One model assessing another's output against predefined criteria. It's an effective way to scale the review process, but it's not the full answer. Again, the human experts are still essential for interpreting results and identifying issues that automated systems might miss. No evaluation method is flawless, just as humans themselves aren't, but with the right checks in place, it's possible to catch the most significant risks and respond to them intelligently.

Transparency is equally critical. Users deserve clarity on how their data is handled, what rights they have, and how they can stay in control. Whether it's the option to delete a conversation or decline certain features, giving people meaningful agency builds the trust that any effective coaching experience depends on.

Balancing privacy and insight —

A key tension in digital coaching systems lies in how organisations balance employee privacy with the desire for measurable insights. Employers may want to understand what

challenges employees are facing or where development efforts should be focused. But any coaching system that compromises individual confidentiality undermines the very trust that makes coaching effective.

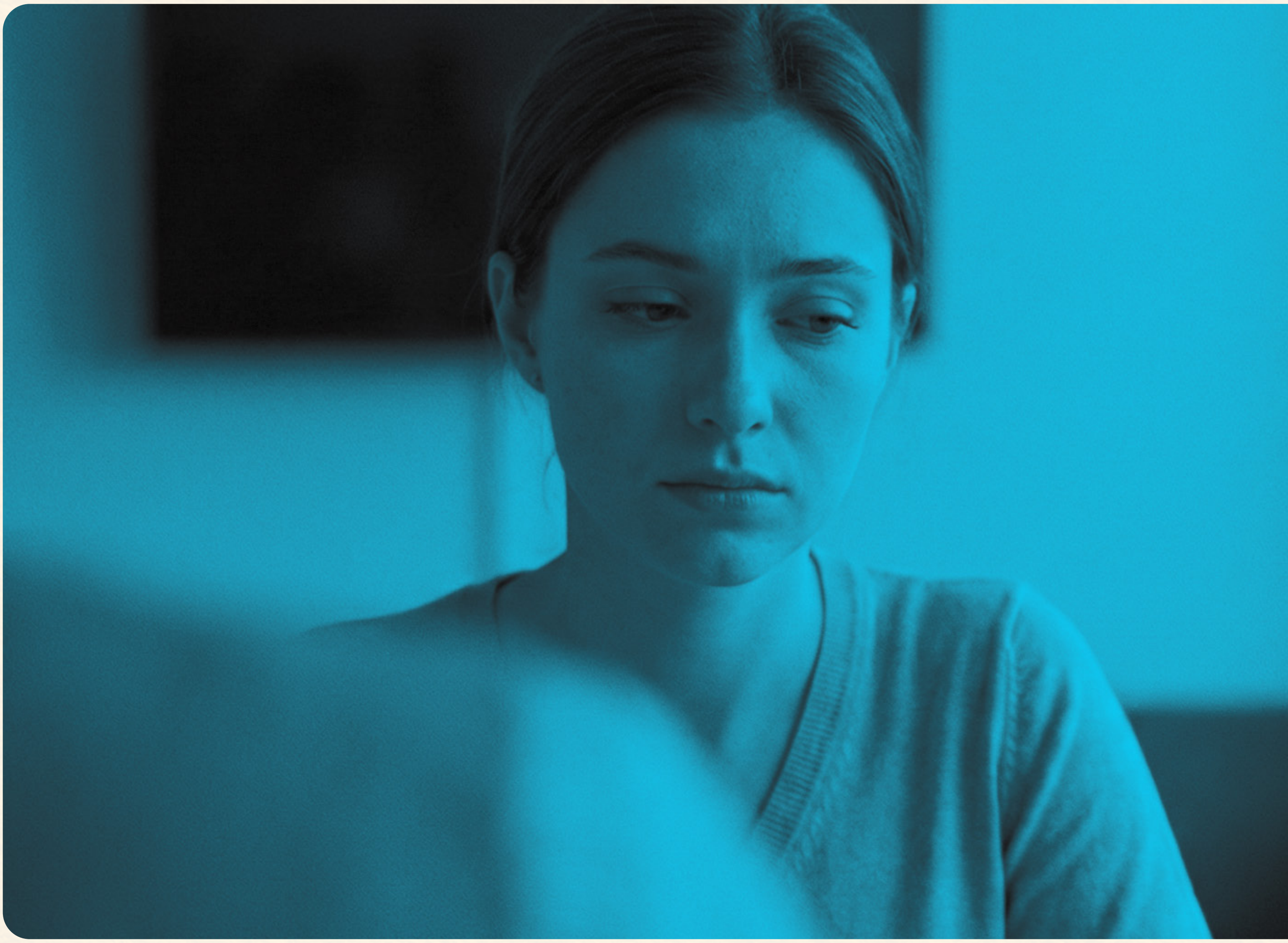
An ethical approach is to provide aggregate trends without exposing individual data. For example, an organisation might see that large numbers of employees are seeking support in areas like time management or career progression, but without access to any personal conversations or outcomes. Privacy must be the default rather than a feature.

There are edge cases, of course, such as flagged concerns around user safety or wellbeing. In those scenarios, escalation protocols are necessary. But they should be the exception, not the rule.

The limits of AI in human development —

No matter how advanced machine learning becomes, AI cannot replicate the full emotional and interpersonal depth of a human coach. It cannot truly empathise. It cannot read the body language behind a hesitation or detect the silence after a hard truth lands. AI coaching tools can do a very good job of mimicking human responses and interactions, but it has no consciousness so doesn't know what it's doing or why it's doing it.

What it can do is enhance reach, surface patterns, and offer structured support in ways that are consistent, immediate, and scalable. When used thoughtfully,



AI can complement human coaching, helping users reflect, practice difficult conversations, or reinforce skills they're building in other areas. But the goal should never be to replace human guidance. The value lies in thoughtful augmentation, not automation.

Building for the future —

The deployment of AI in coaching is still in its early stages. There's enormous potential to reshape how people access professional support and development, particularly in organisations where traditional coaching has been limited to senior leaders. But that potential comes with responsibility.

Technologists, product leaders, and HR decision makers must work together to set the right guardrails now. That means thinking not just about performance metrics or user engagement, but about equity, safety, and long term impact.

Bias in AI won't disappear overnight. But if we commit to building systems that are transparent, inclusive, and human-centred, we can ensure that AI coaching evolves in a direction that truly supports growth for everyone.

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The AI capability chasm —

Who will lead, and who will lag

As 2025 closes, generative AI is no longer a novelty inside large organisations. The more revealing story is how little of that activity shows up on the bottom line. In recent reporting, surveys cited by Forrester and BCG suggest only 5% to 15% of executives say they are seeing tangible profit or productivity gains from AI. BCG's own research, published in September 2025, stated that just 5% of companies are "achieving AI value at scale", while 60% report minimal revenue and cost gains despite substantial investment.

Adoption, meanwhile, keeps rising. McKinsey's 2025 global survey found 71% of respondents say their organisations regularly use generative AI in at least one business function, and momentum is building in AI "agents", too — 23% report they are scaling an agentic AI system somewhere in the enterprise, with a further 39% experimenting. The chasm, then, is between businesses that can turn GenAI into an operating capability and those stuck in a loop of pilots, proofs-of-concept, and tool sprawl.

The pilot-to-profit problem —

The scaling barriers tend to be dull, expensive, and consistent. David Torgerson, VP of Technology and Security at **Lucid Software**, points to a mismatch between expectations and reality: "Many organisations adopt AI expecting big productivity gains, yet only 6% of UK organisations report a positive ROI across all their AI initiatives, highlighting how often these expectations fall short."

Process maturity is part of the blockage. "Half (51%) of UK workers say workflows aren't well documented and still rely on informal knowledge to get things done," Torgerson adds. If the work is not codified, AI cannot reliably improve it — it can only accelerate whatever inconsistency already exists. This is also why coding assistants, in many organisations, show quicker gains than revenue-facing use cases: the "inputs" and "definitions of done" are clearer, and success is easier to measure.

That disconnect is visible in wider workforce data. EY's Work Reimagined Survey, published in November 2025, found 88% of employees use AI at work, but only 5% are "maximising AI to transform their work" — a gap that speaks to basic usage versus deep redesign of workflows, roles, and accountability.

A second fault line is architectural. AI arrives through multiple doors — procurement, IT, product teams, customer support, engineering — and organisations often treat each use case as a self-contained project. The result is fragmented spend and uneven governance: different vendors, different risk postures, duplicate data pipelines, and no consistent way to measure value.

Daniel Stangu, Senior VP and Head of Digital Solutions Office at **Intellias**, argues that companies commonly make the mistake of treating enterprise AI as one monolithic programme. He outlines "five distinct lanes" — from people-level productivity and enterprise functions, to IT service management, engineering productivity, and AI-driven business innovation.

"The only way to scale across these lanes is to take a holistic view through proper enterprise architecture — governing, integrating, and funding them coherently, rather than treating them as a monolith," Stangu says.

Words: Julia Whitmore

The architecture conversation quickly becomes a data conversation. "All five lanes are like building a car; to run a car, you need fuel — your data," Stangu adds.

FounderNest's CEO and co-founder, Felix Gonzalez, frames that same limitation less as a tooling problem and more as an enterprise readiness problem. "Most AI initiatives don't stall because the technology falls short, they do so because the foundations aren't built for scale. Fragmented data systems remain the biggest challenge," he says. "Real, enterprise-wide impact requires executive sponsorship, integrated data pipelines, and a shared vision for how AI drives value across the business."

The businesses pulling ahead are not necessarily the ones with the flashiest pilots. They are the ones building repeatable systems for deploying, measuring, and governing AI in production. In Stangu's framing, "AI-native means product, not project. Each use case has an owner, service level agreements (SLAs), a roadmap, and clear unit economics — for example, cost per decision and ROI versus control." He stresses platform discipline, too: "prompt/model registry, automated evaluations, monitoring, drift alerts, and safe-by-default policies."

That sort of maturity requires scarce people. In May 2025, the Nash Squared/Harvey Nash Digital Leadership Report found 51% of technology leaders said they were suffering an AI skills shortage, nearly double the prior year. Another quiet divider is governance. As GenAI moves from internal copilots to customer-facing and decision-support systems, leaders are building extensive controls: clear policies on what data can be used, role-based access, audit trails for prompts and outputs, routine red-teaming, and a "kill switch" when systems misbehave.

At the same time, the "everyone will have it" horizon is moving out, not in. Gartner's GenAI Hype Cycle article, published in July 2025, forecast that by 2028, more than 95% of enterprises will have used generative AI APIs or models, and/or deployed GenAI-enabled applications in production environments. In other words: access will not be the differentiator; execution will.

When organisations do the hard work of standardising workflows and building production guardrails, the impact can be measurable. Intellias points to a programme for EveryMatrix, where AI was applied to game configuration and testing across multilingual, jurisdiction-specific environments. Stangu says the result was "70% faster configuration, 50% less testing effort, 25% faster game launches, three times faster enablement, four times better scalability, and around 90% classification accuracy."

Over the next year, plenty more companies will declare they are "in production" with GenAI. The leaders will be the ones who can repeat success across functions, with predictable costs and defensible governance. The laggards will keep collecting pilots — and wondering why, for all the activity, the numbers refuse to move.

Why tech keeps losing its best salespeople (and how agentic AI could bring them back) —

By: Pablo Jiménez de Parga Ramos,
Co-Founder, Throxy

In young tech companies, the hardest job to fill isn't always engineering or product. It's sales. Every founder has experienced this challenge, likely more than once. They know the feeling of going through the endless hiring cycles, the quick turnover, and the frustration that sales reps feel when they end up spending more time updating spreadsheets than talking to prospects or customers. That's because finding the best sales talent is hard enough, let alone keeping them happy and motivated.

For sales talent, the frustration lies in the fact that the job they were hired to do rarely resembles the one they end up doing. The biggest issue? Admin. Most sales roles today are heavily administrative, from pulling lists and logging CRM entries, to chasing unqualified leads. According to Forrester, the time spent on admin equates to roughly 14 out of 51 hours - that means reps are spending roughly 30% of their time on admin. For many, the admin-heavy nature of the role leads to a breaking point of frustration and a widening talent gap that early-stage tech can't afford.

An outdated system —

Most sales tech was built for a world where having access to data and information was the challenge, but today the opposite is true. Every rep with a LinkedIn Sales Navigator or a database account (like Zoominfo or Apollo) is looking at the same information, and acting on the same information which, in short, means they are often chasing the same lead.

The approach barely works when you're selling to other tech firms. If your market is selling into traditional industries like manufacturing, logistics, or healthcare, it quickly falls apart. That's because many of the right decision-makers aren't on LinkedIn, some aren't active online entirely, which means the usual tools simply can't find them. This all leads to sales reps wasting hours chasing contacts who never reply or don't have the authority to make the purchasing decisions. Instead of spending time where they excel, sales reps are stuck trying to find the right door to knock on in the first place.

The rise of agentic AI in modern sales —

A new wave of technology is changing how prospecting begins and can help to alleviate sales reps frustrations and reduce the administrative time they spend on identifying leads. Unlike predictive tools of the past, agentic AI doesn't just analyse data, it also acts on it. It can detect intent signals, like a career page quietly going live or a product update hinting at a company's expansion.

For sales teams, these insights can be game-changing. Instead of reacting to the same public cues everyone else sees, like the funding announcement, the job posting, or the new executive hire, they can reach out first, and offer a solution that's timely and relevant. This can be the difference between busywork that for a chunk of the time doesn't lead to anywhere, versus finding real, live opportunities that can end in successful deals.

There's a big caveat though: none of this means agentic AI replaces the human side of selling. If anything, it makes it even more important. Technology can identify patterns, spot intent, and even automate outreach, but it still takes a person to interpret and analyse them, read a situation, build rapport, and close a deal.

The next generation of sales tools will succeed not by removing humans from the process, but by giving them more time to do what only humans can - from applying judgement to building trust. Agentic AI instead plays a supporting role. It takes over the repetitive, time-consuming groundwork, and frees time up for reps to focus on high-value conversations and advancing deals.

This, in turn, will have a positive impact on morale. When sales reps can see their effort turning into real conversations and closed deals, it makes the job motivating again and reminds them about why they got into sales in the first place. Ultimately, the sales talent shortage isn't just about pay or perks. For the best and most ambitious salespeople they want to use creativity and persuasion to solve problems. They don't want to be spending hours of their days updating databases, researching and identifying contacts and not hearing back from their outreach. For businesses, they want to offer a role where most of a rep's day is spent selling. It's a win-win situation.

The talent crunch facing young tech companies is real, but it's also one that can be solved by rethinking the role and what it looks like. The future of sales won't belong to the companies with the largest databases or the noisiest outreach. It will belong to those that combine human intelligence and intuition with agentic AI's support.

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Five ways AI is transforming live marketing events –

With over 20 years in live brand events, I am used to the ever changing and developing technology, consumer trends and market changes that we are faced with. AI has been on the horizon for some time, but now, it is full front and centre. It's the conversation on everyone's lips, clogging our newsfeeds, both professionally and in our personal lives. So, here we find ourselves adapting yet again, both professionally and personally. We can either be excited by change, or daunted, even bury our head in the sands when it feels uncomfortable.

However, with AI, this isn't something that we can do, for the mean time it is here to stay and we need to embrace it, especially in live brand events. Because if you don't embrace the change, you get left behind, whilst your competitors are running with it, learning and evolving.

I love tech. So of course, immediately I was an early adopter of AI. With everything I know so far, from experience, trial and error, client conversations and general awareness, I want to share what I have learnt.

Here are five key ways AI can transform live marketing, by improving speed, targeting, operations, and measurement:

1 Speed up pitch cycles

Firstly, AI removes bottlenecks in content creation. Your initial briefs from clients can become mood films, layouts, and first drafts of copy within hours. This means your team can spend time sharpening ideas instead of chasing assets or waiting for versions to be completed. Faster pitch cycles cut lead times and allow you to respond quickly to client needs without sacrificing creative quality.

When we adapted the Aston Martin DBX707 launch last minute from hybrid to fully virtual, AI-assisted workflows helped us put together immersive content faster than ever, reaching more than 500,000 viewers worldwide.

2 Sharpen audience targeting

Secondly, data fuels AI's precision. With clear insights from RSVPs, past event behaviour, and location information, you can tailor communications, timing, and onsite flows to each segment of your audience. This leads to more relevant engagement and smoother event journeys.

By: **Joe Duffield**, Managing director, Vyra

For example, Bentley Motors uses these data-driven insights to personalise VIP experiences at global launches. The right message at the right time drives stronger participation, making guests feel genuinely connected to the moment.

3 Multiply content without adding studio time

AI streamlines localisation and asset repurposing. One master concept quickly becomes many brand-safe versions in different sizes, languages, and with varying calls to action. You can scale your content distribution without expanding your production costs or timelines.

This efficiency helped us deliver the MG IM 5 and IM 6 animations across multiple markets with consistent quality while significantly reducing turnaround. Local teams received assets ready to deploy instantly, this was a critical advantage in tightly scheduled campaigns.

4 Optimise live experience in real-time

AI lets you read the room continuously; sensors and sentiment analytics translate crowd dwell time and mood into actionable insights. You can adjust playlists, staff deployment, and queue management dynamically to enhance experience. Operators keep decisions within brand guardrails, ensuring consistency without sacrificing agility.

On event days, small shifts based on live feedback prevent bottlenecks and keep atmospheres vibrant. This real-time responsiveness translates into higher guest satisfaction, better word-of-mouth and happier clients.

5 Lean operations and better measurement

Behind the scenes, AI helps optimise staffing schedules, equipment routing, and overall logistics. We have been able to cut unnecessary crew hours and reduce truck runs and idle time. This reduces costs and shrinks your carbon footprint without compromising event delivery.

Afterward, privacy-safe CV and sensor data transform footfall into clear metrics: dwell time, interaction quality, and qualified interest. Rather than guesswork, clients receive actionable ROI reports. Intelligent assistants capture leads more accurately by handling FAQs and pre-qualifying prospects, feeding clean data into CRMs for faster sales follow-up.

At Vyra, we embrace AI as a tool to enhance creativity and precision. Our two decades of live event expertise, serving brands such as Lotus Cars, MG Motors, Bentley, and Aston Martin, guide how we integrate these technologies. We fuse culture, creativity, and technology to build moments that move audiences and deliver business impact.

AI is a practical resource that helps you move faster, target smarter, operate leaner, and measure clearly. It unlocks new possibilities while letting your team focus on the ideas and experiences that define great live marketing.

By adopting AI intentionally across your event workflows, you build agility and resilience into each project. This enables you to meet tighter deadlines, personalise at scale, and act decisively in the moment. The future of live marketing demands this level of precision and speed.

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Why the next marketing discipline is Brand Definition Engineering —

By: Ben Gibson,
UK CEO, Cosmo5

For the last decade, marketing has had one primary objective: visibility. Search engine optimisation, content strategies, and social media algorithms dictated how organisations were discovered and compared. Success meant ranking higher, being seen more often, and capturing attention first. That model is now breaking down.

Generative AI is reshaping how people access and evaluate information. Tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude are no longer simply surfacing content, but are interpreting, summarising, and defining organisations on behalf of their audiences. For users these platforms are increasingly the first, and sometimes the only, touchpoint between brand and consumer. This shift in the information journey has immense implications for credibility in the trust economy.

From discovery to definition —

Traditionally, visibility was everything. Once a potential customer reached a website or spoke to a sales team, the organisation could control the narrative. Today the decisive moments are happening earlier. When someone asks an AI about a business, the answer is delivered as a confident statement of fact. That information tells the user who the organisation is, what it stands for, and whether it can be trusted.

Those definitions are built from a mixture of media coverage, onsite content, reviews, analyst reports, and competitor positioning. Research has already shown that generative models can shift political opinions in under ten minutes. If they can alter beliefs, they can certainly shape brand perception.

The lesson for business is clear, visibility alone is no longer enough. If an AI defines an organisation inaccurately, or positions it in the terms of its competitors, decisions are being made before conversations even begin.

This is why marketing leaders need to recognise a new discipline: Brand Definition Engineering. Just as the rise of Google created the need for SEO, the rise of generative AI demands BDE. In essence it is the practice of deliberately shaping how AI engines define an organisation. If the last decade was about search optimisation, the next will be about definition ownership. And because timing matters, the businesses that establish their definition early will enjoy a structural advantage.

The trust economy is already fragile. Consumers, partners, and regulators are sceptical of information sources online, and this was before AI introduced an additional layer of interpretation. People are no longer weighing sources for themselves, but often accepting a single AI generated answer as truth.

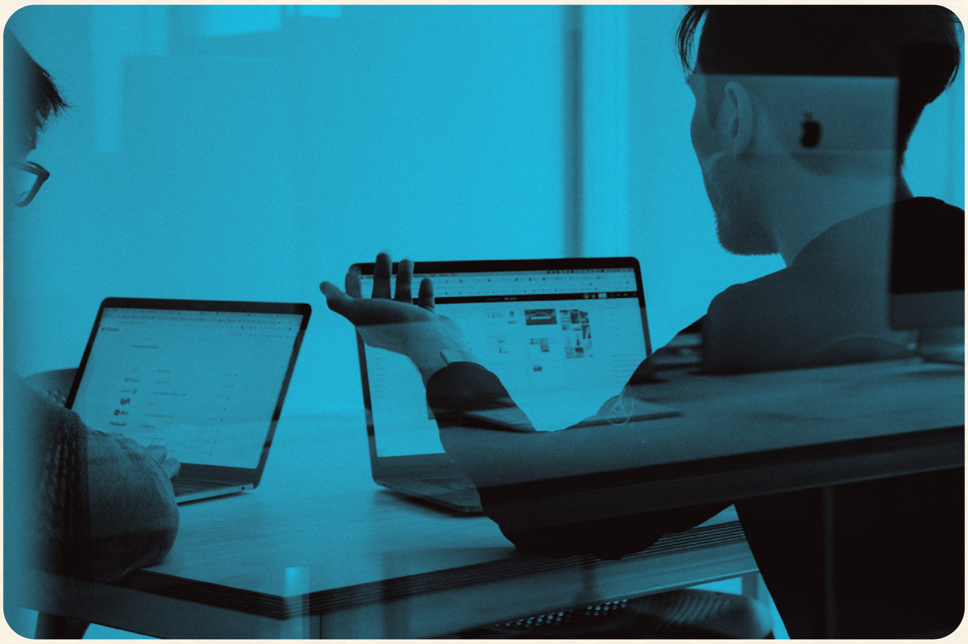
Credibility now passes through this filter. If a respected company is described in shallow or misleading terms, it risks being undermined before any direct engagement takes place. It is not enough to be credible, but the organisation must also be defined as such.

Taking control of definition —

Brand Definition Engineering begins with understanding how definitions are formed. Generative models draw on a wide range of inputs, from media coverage and analyst commentary to blogs, forums, and customer reviews. The first step is to audit this landscape, to see where the brand appears, where the gaps lie, and whether outdated or negative material could distort perception.

Authority must then be built deliberately. AI systems weigh credibility heavily, which means that thought leadership, expert commentary, and high quality media mentions are not just useful for visibility. They feed directly into how a system decides who an organisation is. A consistent presence across trusted sources increases the likelihood of being represented accurately.

Finally, organisations need to engineer their digital footprint. BDE is not a siloed task but a blend of PR, SEO, content, and reputation management. Every touchpoint should reinforce the same definition. Fragmented messaging weakens how AI systems describe a business, while consistent, authoritative content makes the intended definition more likely to stick.



It is tempting to see this as a future concern. Yet the shift is already underway. Business leaders, investors, and consumers are asking AI systems about companies every day. Brands are already being defined, the only question is whether that definition belongs to the organisation itself or to competitors and algorithms.

The analogy with the early days of SEO is instructive. Those who moved early built advantages that lasted for years. Those who hesitated spent the next decade trying to catch up. Brand Definition Engineering will follow the same pattern.

Marketing has always been about storytelling and building trust. In an era where AI systems mediate the relationship between organisations and their audiences, those stories are refracted through algorithms before they reach people. That makes definition, not discovery, the decisive frontier.

The winners of the next decade will not be those with the most visibility, but those who own their definitions. The organisations that shape how AI systems describe them, build credibility at the source, and ensure they are represented authentically in the trust economy will be the ones that endure. Generative AI has redrawn the map of marketing. The organisations that succeed will be those that take ownership of their definition now, before it is too late.

How innovation in data-tech is powering smarter market presence —

By: Adam Herbert,
CEO & Co-Founder
Go Live Data

While we may be living through a data revolution, that's not exactly the case within marketing. The abundance of data has given businesses unprecedented access to their audiences, yet paradoxically, many campaigns are becoming more disconnected than ever. Innovation in data technology, therefore, isn't only about access to information; it's about how intelligently and empathetically we use it.

Over the past decade, technology has transformed how we identify, segment and reach potential customers, however, the next phase of innovation, the one that will define which companies actually stand out, lies in how we use data to build on trust and understanding. Because in a world saturated with content, smart presence is about building relationships and resonance - rather than reach alone.

Frequency rules, empathy governs —

The term 'frequency rules' is still key, as regular communication is vital in order to stay relevant. However, frequency without empathy is just noise. The real power of data lies in revealing the rhythm of engagement - when your audience is most receptive, how often they wish to be contacted, and in what way.

Emerging data technologies are enabling marketers to interpret behavioural intent, and not just demographic patterns. They can help us distinguish between interest and intrusion, curiosity and fatigue. The companies using these insights well are the ones that understand that consistency must be balanced with emotional intelligence.

Innovation in this space isn't about automating outreach; it's about refining it. Machine learning and predictive analytics can tell us when to talk, but only human insight ensures we say something the recipient wants to hear.

Education over sales —

We are entering a post-persuasion era of marketing. Modern audiences don't want to be sold to. They want to be informed, inspired and empowered, and the most effective brands are shifting from a transactional mindset to an educational one.

Data plays a crucial role in this shift. Advanced analytics allow us to uncover what people are genuinely seeking to understand, including their questions, frustrations and motivations, rather than what marketers want to push. So, when technology enables us to see through the lens of the recipient, we begin to create communication that is useful.

This is a subtle but profound change, in the move from "how do we sell more?" to "how do we help more?" It's innovation in data tech that provides the intelligence, and leadership that provides the intent.

Reframing the recipient relationship —

For too long, marketing has treated audiences as targets. Innovation in data is helping us correct the imbalance.

When we see data as a representation of people rather than just numbers, the ethics of marketing change. Every click, open and response becomes an expression of curiosity, not just a metric to exploit and as technology advances, our responsibility to interpret data with integrity increases.

Recipient-first thinking is putting the needs, timing and preferences of the audience at the centre. This is of course more ethical and more effective as the messages that respect attention earn attention.

The companies gaining the most traction today are those that use clean, transparent and permission-based data, not only because regulation demands it, but because trust has become a currency in itself. Innovation that enhances understanding without compromising privacy will undoubtedly define the next decade of marketing success.

Data intelligence as a cultural shift —

Perhaps the most exciting part of data innovation is its ability to bridge the gap between marketing and leadership thinking. When used well, data not only guides campaigns; it also shapes company culture.

Access to intelligent, real-time insights means leaders can make decisions rooted in evidence and empathy. They can see how people are responding externally, and also within their own teams. These are the same principles of communication that build stronger brands and stronger organisations, based on clarity, consistency and much more enhanced connections.

Data, then, becomes a marketing tool and a mirror for behaviour. It reflects whether our messages align with our values and whether our audiences believe us when we say they do.

The human lens of technology —

There's a temptation to view innovation as a substitute for intuition, but the most powerful results come when the two work together. The phrase we often use at Go Live Data, "powered by tech, led by humans" captures that.

Technology can enhance timing, accuracy and relevance, but only people can provide warmth, creativity and empathy. The future of data-driven marketing lies in this balance, in recognising that the smartest presence in the market is both scientifically informed and emotionally intelligent.

Innovation in data technology is giving us remarkable tools – such as predictive engagement models, intent mapping, AI-driven segmentation. Yet the real innovation will always be how we apply them, how we turn data into understanding, and how we turn understanding into trust.

The marketers of the future won't be those who reach the most people, but those who communicate with purpose, honesty and intelligence. Because smarter market presence is about being meaningful – not just being 'everywhere.'

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Brand & marketing

GEO-volution —

The next wave in content strategy

By: **Ella Broadbent**,
Senior PR consultant
Petal & Co.

At breakneck speed, AI-driven search engines and the summaries they generate are shaping brand visibility and perception. We have moved beyond the realm of only human audiences - instead, the content we are creating is now being used to train and inform AI systems. While this might sound dystopian, it actually presents a huge opportunity for businesses. By optimising content for the data streams feeding AI platforms, brands can ensure they are front and centre in the AI-driven future. This includes leveraging media placements and PR and surprisingly, owned content such as website content, blogs and press releases.

How AI is reshaping search behaviour —

Generative AI search has rapidly become commonplace. YouGov's 2025 Digital News Report shows some staggering examples of the pace of change globally:

- 15% of under-25s get news from AI chatbots
- 27% of audiences prefer AI-summarised news
- 70% of media publishers plan to implement news summarisation in the next year

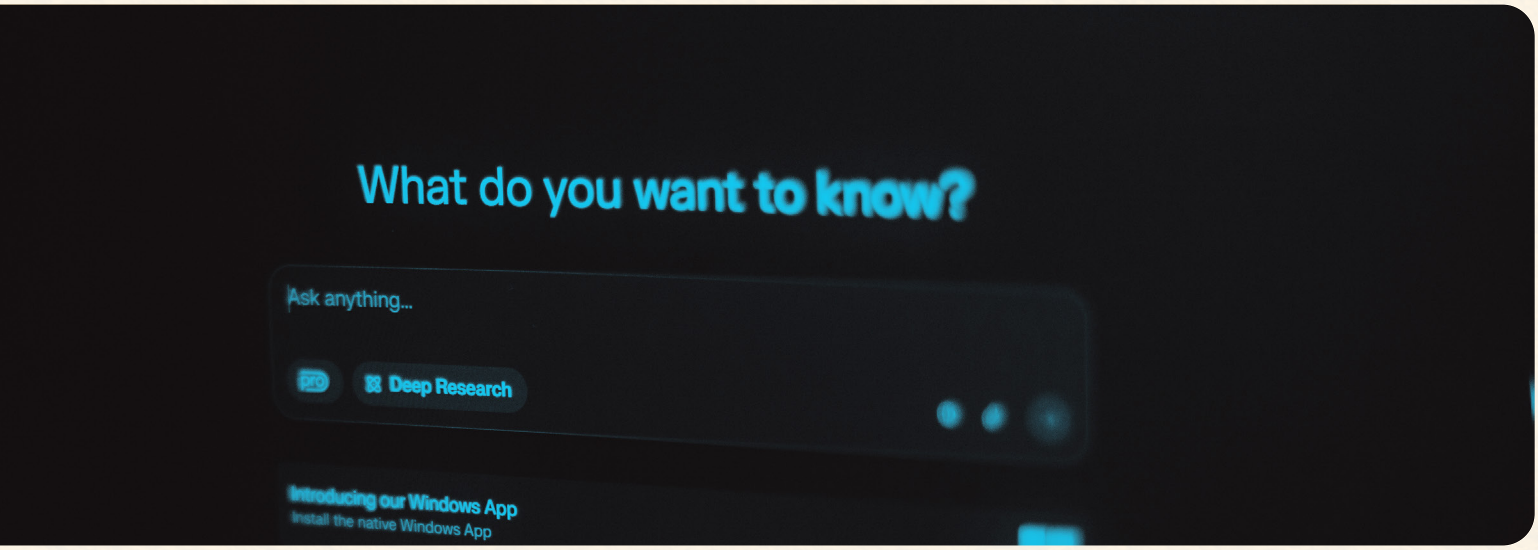
Meanwhile, the number of U.S. searchers using AI as their main tool is expected to reach 36 million by 2028, compared to 15 million in 2024. But beyond sheer scale, AI searches are actually being used to inform consumer and business habits. 89% of buyers use AI for purchase decisions, and buyers who start research on AI are 4.4 times more valuable. On top of this, even traditional search is being infiltrated with AI, such as the Google AI Overviews that appear at the top of Google search results.

The takeaway? To keep up with the changing digital landscape, businesses must optimise for both traditional search engines and AI generated search.

GEO explained —

Generative Engine Optimisation, or GEO, is a comms strategy designed specifically for the age of AI. It ensures that content is easily discoverable, clearly understood, and effectively referenced by AI-powered search engines and chatbots like Google's AI Overviews, ChatGPT, Meta AI, Claude, and Grok.

Unlike traditional SEO, which focuses primarily on keywords and backlinks, GEO tailors content for AI models that deliver information in concise, conversational answers. Imagine asking a librarian to find you a copy of a book (SEO), versus asking a research assistant with knowledge of exactly what you are searching for and why you've gone to the library in the first place (GEO).



Getting started with GEO —

1 Strengthen AI's view of your brand

AI systems draw on a wide range of sources to generate answers. Editorial coverage in respected outlets plays a big part, as do company-owned channels. This makes media relations more valuable than ever: securing interviews, commentary, or features in trusted media publications gives AI models credible references to draw on.

At the same time, maintaining a steady flow of blogs, website updates, and press releases ensures your own content is present in the mix. Together, these inputs shape how AI recognises and represents your brand.

2 Write for intent, not just keywords

Whereas a traditional search engine uses keywords to provide outputs, AI search goes one step further by also interpreting user intent and context. This means its results are more precise and personalised - and through machine learning, result accuracy is continually improving.

Creating authentic content that speaks to real audience pain points and is rich with insights and advice will help your content get picked up in the right places by AI. Moreover, AI systems favour comprehensive, constructive content - so when addressing challenges or problems, it's important to frame them alongside practical solutions and actionable guidance. This doesn't mean avoiding difficult topics, but rather presenting them in a balanced way that genuinely serves your audience's needs.

3 Make GEO a core metric

Businesses should treat GEO the same way they track performance across other marketing channels, incorporating it into regular reporting. Monitoring how your brand appears in generative AI outputs and understanding which queries drive visibility and engagement provides valuable insight into overall marketing effectiveness.

Without comprehensive tracking, you risk losing traffic, leads, and even authority to competitors who are actively optimising for AI engines. Integrating GEO metrics into performance dashboards ensures that AI-driven visibility becomes a deliberate and measurable part of your brand's growth strategy.

We are seeing a paradigm shift in how we create, consume, and search for content. For brands, the next 6 - 12 months are critical. Those who invest now in GEO - building credible media visibility, structuring content for AI interpretation, and tracking performance - will be poised for the opportunities that GEO brings. Those who wait risk fading from view in the very channels where decisions are increasingly being shaped.

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