

BUSINESS QUARTER

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Q2 2026

Building ahead of demand with JS Pelland

ELAND
CABLES

Plus:

- The career revolution nobody is ready for
- Can AI growth and green goals coexist?

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Editor's note —

The Office for National Statistics' final business survey of Q2 landed recently, bringing with it the sort of figures that will be all too familiar for most business leaders. 29% of UK businesses are using AI, 64% are concerned about energy prices, 68% are concerned about fuel prices, and 32% are concerned about the impact of climate change. Together, they tell a tale of a business environment where concern outstrips the focus on tech innovation — but the two are linked.

It's within this context that much of business now gets tested, because AI plans depend on data quality, power costs, supplier assurance, and people able to turn tools into judgement. Sustainability commitments move quickly from reporting language into procurement, cooling, logistics, finance, and audit, while growth plans are only as convincing as the stock, systems, standards, maintenance, and delivery that protect customer reliability.

JS Pelland's story at Eland Cables sits comfortably in that territory. His approach to building ahead of demand is grounded in testing, stock, logistics, and service discipline, which is why the story speaks beyond one company or one sector. Electrification may sound like a national transition, yet it is also a series of decisions about quality, timing, capacity, and trust.

Elsewhere in the issue, our reporting on AI and green goals follows the physical estate behind digital growth, while pieces on careers, compassionate leadership, and financial sector supply chain risk examine the human and organisational dependencies that strategy often assumes will be there when needed.

Times like these are not the times to rest on assumptions, however. Knowledge and insight is more valuable, and right now business leaders need to know what has to be strengthened before pressure turns weakness into consequence.

— **Julia Whitmore**
Editor,
Business Quarter



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Move makers —

The end of the Cook era —

Apple's leadership shift will be one to watch

Apple rarely changes chief executive. When it does, the succession carries more weight than a standard corporate handover. Not only have its leaders tended to define internal management style, but they've also guided the company's wider sense of ambition and risk.

In September, that responsibility passes from Tim Cook to John Ternus.

Cook's move to executive chairman after 15 years as chief executive closes one of the most commercially successful leadership tenures in modern business. He took over in August 2011, when Steve Jobs resigned and Apple's future without its founder remained an open question. The appointment placed an operations

specialist at the head of a company widely defined by product mythology, design instinct, and the personal authority of Jobs.

Cook's answer was not to imitate his predecessor. Instead, he made Apple more deeply embedded in the daily routines of its customers. Apple's market capitalisation grew from about \$350 billion to \$4 trillion during his time as CEO, while annual revenue rose from \$108 billion in fiscal 2011 to more than \$416 billion in fiscal 2025. Services became a business of more than \$100 billion, and the active installed base expanded to more than 2.5 billion devices.



Those figures explain why Cook's leadership is usually judged through scale, resilience, and operational control rather than through a single defining product launch. Apple Watch and AirPods opened new categories around the iPhone, while Apple Pay, iCloud, Apple TV, and Apple Music widened the services layer. The shift to Apple-designed silicon tightened control over performance and efficiency, particularly across the Mac line, and strengthened the company's ability to differentiate through hardware and software working together.

Of course, the Cook era was never free of strain. Apple remained heavily dependent on the iPhone, even as the Services business grew around the installed base. China continued to sit at the centre of its supply chain and international growth story, despite diversification into other manufacturing markets. Regulators in the US and Europe increasingly challenged the company's control over its ecosystem, from app distribution to smartphone-market competition. And more recently, the ascent of artificial intelligence has added an even more acute strategic test, with rivals moving quickly and Apple under pressure to prove that its slower, integrated approach can still set the pace.

Ternus inherits that mix of strength and constraint. A mechanical engineer by training, he joined Apple's product design team in 2001, became vice president of Hardware Engineering in 2013, and entered the executive team in 2021.

His career runs through several of the company's most important product lines, from the iPhone, iPad and Mac through to AirPods and Vision Pro.

His most important credential may be the Mac's transition to Apple silicon, a project that showed how deeply Apple's competitive advantage depends on control of core technology. Ternus has also been associated with work on durability, materials, repairability, and lower-carbon product design — areas where product engineering, regulation, customer expectation, and brand trust increasingly overlap.

His public philosophy is notably consistent with Apple's culture. "We never think about shipping a technology," Ternus has said. "We always think about how can we leverage technology to ship amazing products." In a period dominated by artificial intelligence, that sentence will be tested heavily.

Apple has built its reputation on making complex technologies feel fully realised and useful. The AI market is rewarding speed, openness, and constant iteration. Managing the dissonance between these two philosophies will be a test for any leader.

Cook proved that Apple could outgrow Jobs without losing its commercial discipline. Ternus must now show whether that discipline can still produce the next era of consumer technology.



Move makers —



Paymentology has appointed **Peter Theunis** as principal advisor as the global issuer-processor moves into its next phase of international growth. Theunis will support the company's expansion into new markets, with a focus on unicorn fintechs, retail banks, and corporate banks.

He joins after serving as country manager for Belgium and Luxembourg at Visa, where he led market development and strategic partnerships. His career also includes senior roles at BPC, Endava, OpenWay, and Clear2Pay, alongside work with the UAE Ministry of Finance on financial innovation initiatives.

Theunis has co-founded two fintech ventures and is also an angel investor, speaker, and adviser across the payments sector. His experience spans card issuing, merchant acquiring, money movement, and modern payments infrastructure.

Anna Porra, chief revenue officer at Paymentology, said his contribution would be invaluable as the company expands its global presence and strengthens its market position.



Insight Enterprises has appointed **Jack Azagury** as president and chief executive, succeeding Joyce Mullen as the technology solutions provider accelerates its AI-first strategy.

Azagury joins after 29 years at Accenture, where he was group chief executive for consulting, leading global consulting teams across 42 industries and enterprise functions. He has also served as senior adviser to TowerBrook and chair of BRG and EisnerAmper.

Graham Kitchen and **Hannah Philp** have been appointed independent non-executive directors of **TR Property Investment Trust**.

Kitchen, currently chair of AVI Global Trust, joined on 1 May, while Philp, a non-executive director at The Bankers Investment Trust and JPMorgan UK Small Cap Growth & Income Trust, joins on 1 October.

Chairman Kate Bolsover said they bring the "right blend of skills and experience".

Will Newman has joined **Crescendo** as VP EMEA, to lead European expansion following its April launch in the region.

Newman brings more than 12 years' experience scaling go-to-market operations across AI, data infrastructure, and edge computing, including early international roles at Confluent, Riverty, Truera, and Ditto. CRO Michelle Donnelly said he understands how to turn "technical differentiation into commercial momentum."



Benifex has appointed **Mohamad "Mo" Awada** as chief services officer, with responsibility for its global professional services and consulting functions from London. Awada joins from SAP Emarsys, where he also served as chief services officer, and brings international experience across sales, services, product, strategy, and consulting.

His appointment comes as Benifex invests in the service layer behind its employee benefits technology, aiming to help customers move faster from strategy to implementation and improve adoption. Awada said the opportunity was to help customers "bridge the gap between benefits strategy and day-to-day reality". He will focus on scaling delivery, supporting smoother implementations, and helping employers demonstrate stronger outcomes from benefits investment.

Aimee Gethin has taken the wheel of **Zuto** as chief executive, with the move coming as the UK car finance fintech prepares to pass £100m in revenue in 2026. Gethin joined the business in 2015 and has served as chief operating officer since 2020, helping drive transformation and sustained growth.

She succeeds founder Jim Wilkinson, who will remain with Zuto as founder and ambassador following a planned multi-year succession. The company says one in 16 used cars is now financed through its platform, giving it strong insight into buyer behaviour.

Gethin will lead Zuto's next phase of growth, including deeper partnerships with lenders, dealerships, and Bridgepoint, its investment partner.



Move makers —



Spendesk has appointed **Quentin Vigneau** (L) as chief product officer and **Alan Wright** (R) as chief technical officer as the AI-powered spend management and procurement platform enters its next phase of growth. The appointments follow the company's first year of profitability and support the rollout of Spend Planning & Analysis, a new finance category focused on AI-led spend decisions.

Vigneau joins after senior product and payments roles at Checkout.com and Swile, while Wright brings 25 years' technology experience from Spotify, Monzo Bank, and Signal AI. CEO Axel Demazy said Vigneau's product vision and Wright's operational expertise would help Spendesk deploy "AI-powered capabilities at scale" for European SMEs.

C-Suite pulse —

As we near the end of another quarter, it's difficult not to see leadership capital following the same current as capital investment more broadly. It is taking shape around AI, but with a sharper emphasis on execution, integration, and control.

From looking across many of the appointments of the quarter, AI is being drawn into the responsibilities that already determine performance: product development, customer adoption, services delivery, finance workflows, operational resilience, and commercial return. The leaders being appointed are being asked to make it useful, durable, and measurable.

That shift gives the quarter its underlying character. Companies still talk about AI in the language of growth and scale, as they should, but the management response is more grounded than the rhetoric often suggests. In some ways, it's akin to consolidation. Greater attention is being given to making sure AI improves the business rather than merely decorating its strategy, and that has to come from the top.

Across sectors, senior hires are being chosen for their ability to connect transformation with delivery, and to turn technical capability into processes and practice. Dedicated AI knowledge still matters, but it increasingly has to live inside the broader leadership architecture. Boards appear to be placing a premium on leaders who can absorb complexity without adding noise. The valued executive profile is commercially literate, technically conversant, and boasting enough judgement to separate usable innovation from illusions of value.

AI remains one of the clearest growth levers available to companies, yet the appointments of the quarter suggest that growth alone is not the focus. The brief is to make the promise of AI repeatable inside the business.

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Market snapshot —

Throughout Q2, UK and European markets have had to absorb a more hostile trade environment, renewed energy volatility, and a dealmaking cycle that stayed active despite uneven equity sentiment. Investors were not simply reacting to isolated shocks; they were recalibrating assumptions about margins, inflation, financing costs, and asset values as several pressures converged at once.

Washington's April tariff measures, including a 10% baseline duty on UK imports into the US, complicated pricing and sourcing assumptions for companies with transatlantic exposure. As further details emerged in June, exporters had to weigh market access against the risk of retaliation, particularly where supply contracts and inventory models relied on predictable customs treatment.

Energy markets added further instability, as conflict around Iran, Israel, Lebanon, and the Strait of Hormuz pushed oil prices higher before ceasefire hopes and renewed tanker movement eased immediate supply concerns. Those swings fed into inflation expectations, particularly across transport, manufacturing, food production, and consumer demand.

Monetary policy reflected that pressure. The Bank of England held Bank Rate at 3.75% in June, although two

members of the Monetary Policy Committee voted for an increase to 4%, while CPI inflation at 2.8% kept attention on whether weaker activity would contain price pressure.

Across the euro area, the European Central Bank faced a similar constraint, with June projections putting inflation at 3.0% for 2026 as higher energy prices filtered through wider parts of the economy. Growth forecasts weakened, but funding conditions remained tight enough to keep leveraged sectors and capital intensive investment plans under scrutiny.

Equities produced gains in parts of the quarter, although the rally was narrow and repeatedly interrupted. The STOXX 600 reached a record high in mid-June after a preliminary US-Iran agreement improved sentiment, while technology, mining, and energy stocks continued to trade around rates, metals prices, crude oil movements, and capital expenditure concerns.

London carried a sharper contradiction. Although the FTSE 100 was weighed down at points by energy, mining, rates, and political uncertainty, UK-listed companies became active targets in global M&A, with UK dealmaking

reaching \$192 billion by mid-May, more than triple the equivalent point in 2025.

Foreign buyers accounted for most of that value, encouraged by sterling dynamics, relative valuations, and the availability of companies with defensible market positions. Ingredion's £2.7 billion deal for Tate & Lyle, GSK's \$10.6 billion acquisition of Nuvalent, Drax's £561 million acquisition of Bluefield Solar Income Fund, and EQT's £10.9 billion takeover of Intertek pointed to strategic conviction outweighing short term volatility.

By mid June, capital was still flowing, but with greater discipline. Healthcare pipelines, food ingredients, testing and inspection, renewable infrastructure, energy assets, and undervalued listed companies attracted interest, while tariffs, energy access, inflation, rates, and geopolitics continued to shape financing, pricing, acquisitions, and investment decisions.

— BQ



Selective dealmaking has been key to early 2026 dealmaking —

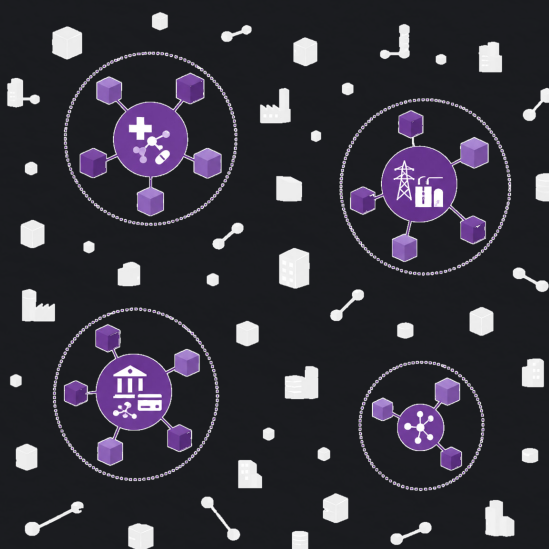
The early-2026 M&A market was busy in places, but not indiscriminately so. Buyers were willing to move where control offered a clear strategic prize: scale, infrastructure exposure, product depth, access to regulated assets or a stronger position in a consolidating market. What the data does not show is dealmaking spreading evenly across the economy.

Analysis by 2b Intelligence identified 52 announced control transactions in Q1 across the UK, Europe and North America that met the stated value threshold, with an indicative disclosed value of around US\$341.8bn. That figure should be handled carefully. It is not an FX-audited total and it blends several value bases, including enterprise value, equity value, pro forma merger value and contingent consideration. Even with those caveats, concentration is visible: the five largest Q1 rows accounted for roughly 42% of disclosed value, while the top ten

accounted for around 58%.

The pattern points to selective consolidation rather than a broad revival. Healthcare and life sciences remained active, with buyers looking for pipeline, product depth or specialist capability. Boston Scientific's proposed acquisition of Penumbra sat alongside later transactions involving Gilead, Lilly and UCB, although several of those life-sciences deals included milestones, CVRs or other contingent elements that complicate headline valuations.

Large-ticket activity was also prominent in energy, utilities and real assets, where control can bring scale, infrastructure exposure and stronger positioning around long-term demand. Devon/Coterra, Engie/UK Power Networks, AES, Shell/ARC Resources, NextEra/Dominion and the AvalonBay/Equity Residential combination all point to buyers focusing on assets and



platforms where size still carries strategic value.

Financial services and market infrastructure added another layer to the picture, with banking, asset management, wealth technology and issuer-services deals appearing across the logs. Here too, the logic was less about opportunistic buying and more about platform position, distribution or operating scale.

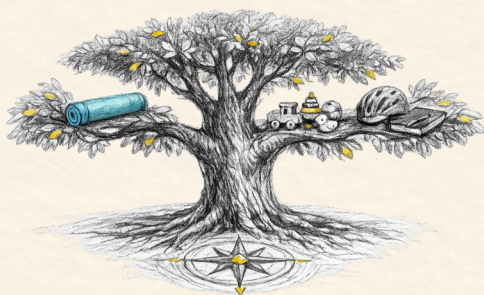
Ultimately, we can look at the quarter in a simple way: early-2026 dealmaking picked up where buyers could clearly justify taking control. The market was open, but not to every story in the same way.

Think global, act local —

Three moves for a benefits programme that actually works

One in five UK employers has no clear objective for their employee benefits. Yet 53% of workers now rank benefits in their top three reasons for switching jobs and that gap is where you unnecessarily lose great people. The most interesting fix I'm seeing is embedded finance, when payment cards and digital wallets are integrated into the HR tech tools companies already use, letting employees buy what they value wherever they live, within the parameters their employer sets.

Most benefits packages aren't designed, they're inherited. People teams are squeezed, budgets are tight, and rarely does anyone step back to ask whether the same old mix of life insurance and private medical is making a difference. Having led people teams through globally distributed workforces, there are three shifts every people leader needs to make.



Start with what you want people to feel —

Benefits are a statement about what you value. When you tell your team to bring their whole self to work, your benefits package is where you put your money where your mouth is. Before touching the budget, ask: what do we want our people to feel? Covering the basics, moderate, or genuinely generous? Once that's clear, every benefit either earns its place or it doesn't.

This is where embedded finance earns its place. A benefits card loaded into Apple Pay turns an abstract statement ("we care about your wellbeing") into something concrete when an employee taps their phone for a yoga class or therapy session. HR still sets the parameters - the monthly budget, the merchant categories that are allowed, the ones that aren't - and the card enforces them automatically. Real-time spend data then tells you whether your intent is landing.



By: **Charlotte Livingston**,
Head of People, Weavr

Centralise the controls, not the benefits —

If you have people outside your HQ country, you know that 10 days' holiday feels standard in the US and like an insult in the UK. Private medical is a nice-to-have here and non-negotiable there. 80% of benefits managers have employees across borders, yet only one in five manages anything close to a consistent experience.

Embedded finance is what makes "think global, act local" operationally possible. Rather than negotiating suppliers market by market, you set the guardrails centrally - approved categories, spend limits, rollover rules - and vary them by team or country. The employee in Berlin spends her wellness allowance on a gym

she uses. The one in Austin spends his on therapy. The one in Edinburgh puts it towards childcare. Same strategy, locally relevant spend, same controls. Fair means relevant.

Make flexibility actually flexible —

Toggle-style flexible benefits platforms were a genuine step forward - employees could switch private medical on, add a partner, opt in through

payroll. But they still assumed HR could predict the right menu of options for everyone. Embedded finance takes that flexibility further, because everyone lives a different life, even within the same postcode.

For the people building the next generation of HR platforms, the real opportunity isn't another marketplace of pre-negotiated suppliers. It's embedding financial capability - cards in mobile wallets, employer-

defined spend controls, real-time reporting - directly into the product. Tapping your phone is how people already prefer to pay. Meet them there, with inbuilt guardrails, and benefits stop being a line item and start being a reason that people stay.

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From credentials to capability: rethinking talent in the age of AI —

Being part of hiring committee in a corporate sector organisation, I recently witnessed AI screening tool-based shortlisting. It returned candidates with compelling profiles; substantial experiences and the tool placed them on high priority. During the process, one member of hiring committee looked up and questioned; do any of these applicants know how to think and make decisions when the system collapses? Nobody answered. This question remained with me and echoed constantly in my work at Rabat Business School, where preparing graduates for AI-shaped vocations is not a future plan. It is already on the table, across classrooms, research and our school's strategy. The question is not about whether AI will reform hiring, it already has modified it. The focal point is whether our graduates, partner companies and region are prepared to lead this change or just respond to it.

The magnitude of change is substantial, and workplaces are altering quicker than most hiring arrangements can pursue. Well before the current wave of AI, the World Economic Forum estimated 85

million jobs may be replaced by automation while 97 million new jobs might surface by 2025. McKinsey warned that up to 375 million workers might face forced career transitions by 2030, reflecting generational disruption. Job tasks formerly requiring expert training are now automated. New job roles that didn't exist a few years back are now fundamental to competitive strategy. The traditional CV mapping which told what you have done (credentials) is inadequate to clarify where you are moving in your careers in the future.

We are witnessing a revamping of what talent means. Organisations like Delta, Apple, IBM and Google have eliminated degree requirements from substantial hirings, arguing that qualifications can just forecast educational advantage rather than real competence. LinkedIn reported a 90% increase in skills-based hiring in just two years. IBM and Unilever acknowledged improvements in diversity and employment quality after embedding AI-assisted screening. Though, they both knew that AI based hiring tools are not bias-free by design. Also, Amazon in 2018 did not abandon its AI



By: Fauzia Syed,
Professor,
Rabat Business School

recruitment tool because of system fault; instead it had absorbed a decade of biased hiring patterns and was applying them into every hiring decision, at a pace and volume impossible to manually catch.

At Rabat Business School, we understood the gravity of these issues from the beginning. RBS has put in place a formal AI policy that treats ethics as foundation and does not treat innovation as progress only but ethically grounded. This shapes how we teach and what we expect of graduates who will build AI-integrated workplaces across Morocco and the African region.

RBS has thoughtfully positioned these skills at the base of how we teach, assess,

and train graduates. Students do not simply learn about AI, they practice AI tools directly via applied projects, simulations, and cross-disciplinary real organisational cases. Likewise, faculty development is intact, because the curriculum cannot reside fixed while the workplaces change. We have a specified digital/e-learning centre to keep the infrastructure proactive in response. Furthermore, industry collaborations are developed across a question we now probe in routine; Not what tools does your organisation use, but what human competencies do you need to use those tools?

For Morocco and Africa, this dialogue holds distinct weight. The region has an average age below 20 years. Young employees with no outdated capabilities to abandon, entering the market suitably when AI expertise is in high need, exhibits an extraordinary strategic position. But it only matters if the institutions responsible for preparing them are honest about changes. Thus, youth prepared for yesterday's market is not an asset but a missed opportunity. Through applied research, executive education and partnerships with organisations and policymakers, RBS is contributing to how Morocco thinks about workforce strategy in an AI-driven economy. The conversation we are pushing forward is not only about technology adoption. It is also about talent architecture and the

people equipped to use it responsibly.

Preparing talent is the most consequential form of innovation available to us; not for today's jobs, but for careers that will evolve in ways we cannot yet fully predict.

The CV will not disappear but should be redesigned to measure potential through competency-based credentials, skill portfolios and capability assessments that look forward rather than back. The institutions who will proactively redesign them will be better placed than others. Rabat Business School is committed to leading this redesigning for our students, partners, and region on getting this recruitment strategy right in unknown turbulent times of AI.

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The career revolution nobody is ready for —

and why career management has never mattered more



By: **David Morgan**,
CEO,
Career Development
Institute

The world of work is not 'changing' - it has already changed. The question now is whether the systems, institutions and individuals responsible for navigating careers are keeping pace - because the evidence suggests that they are not.

We are living through a convergence of pressures unlike anything we have encountered before. AI is restructuring job roles at a speed that outpaces traditional retraining cycles. Demographics are shifting dramatically, with an ageing workforce extending its working life at one end, and young people entering a labour market that bears little resemblance to the one their parents navigated at the other. The gig economy, hybrid working, portfolio careers and the erosion of the linear career path have rendered the old model of "get qualified, get a job, stay on linear career path" obsolete. The average person will now change careers, not just roles, multiple times

across their working life.

Against this backdrop, careers are no longer something that happen to people. They are something people must actively manage. And yet too many are ill-equipped to do so.

Aspiration without confidence —

The CDI's Valuing Careers research cuts to the heart of a profound and troubling paradox at the centre of the UK's careers landscape. The data shows that while aspiration remains high - the vast majority of adults continue to hold real ambitions about where they want their careers to go - confidence in knowing how to achieve those ambitions declines markedly with age and circumstance. People want more. They simply do not believe they have the tools, the knowledge or the support to get there.

More troubling still is where that confidence gap is most

acute. Those who most need access to quality careers support are the least likely to access it. Lower-income adults, those in insecure employment, people returning to work after a career break, older workers facing redundancy - precisely the cohorts for whom the stakes are highest - are least likely to see the benefits of accessing careers support.

This is not a marginal issue. It's a systemic failure with real human and economic consequences. When people cannot manage their careers effectively, they stay in roles that do not suit them, leave the workforce prematurely, make costly transitions without guidance, opt not to undertake development opportunities or simply give up on the ambitions the research shows they quietly carry. The cost - to individuals, to employers and to the economy - is vast.



AI: Accelerant or equaliser? —

Into this already pressured landscape comes AI, and the stakes rise sharply. AI is not a distant prospect. It's already reshaping job roles across every sector, automating tasks once considered skilled, and simultaneously creating entirely new categories of work. The World Economic Forum estimates that over 40% of core skills required in the labour market will change within five years. In practice, many workers are being asked to evolve faster than any previous generation.

The risk is that the confidence and access gaps identified in the Valuing Careers research are not simply maintained in an AI-accelerated world - they are amplified. Those who already struggle to access career development support will find it harder still to understand how AI is affecting their sector, harder to know which

skills to build, and harder to anticipate where their next opportunity lies. Without intervention, AI becomes not a great leveller but a great divider.

This makes proactive career management not a luxury but an imperative. The individuals who will navigate this landscape most effectively are those who treat their career as a living project - continuously assessing, learning and adapting - rather than a fixed path. The careers profession has a central role in enabling that shift in mindset, but it needs the resources and reach to do so at scale.

The employer imperative —

The conversation about career management must also move into the boardroom. For too long, organisations have conflated career management with talent management - the

internal process of identifying high potentials, managing succession and retaining key people through promotion. But it's not the same thing, and the distinction matters.

Real career management helps employees understand their own values, strengths and aspirations, and helps them make decisions accordingly. Sometimes that decision is to stay and grow. Sometimes it is to move. The enlightened employer recognises that both outcomes, handled well, are better than the alternative.

Employees who have been supported with their career development may also be more likely to invest in developing their skills, for the benefit of their current as well as future employers. With professional careers support, they are more likely to be aware of development opportunities within their employer, to see the



relevance of investing time in undertaking training to their future aspirations, and to look for the right opportunities to progress.

The evidence is striking. Research conducted within the NHS, which faces chronic retention challenges across multiple workforce groups, found that offering structured career management support to staff produced a counterintuitive result: rather than accelerating departures, it frequently prevented them. Employees who had been considering leaving, when offered genuine support to explore their options, often found that what they actually needed was a change within their existing employer - a move to part-time hours, a lateral shift to a different team, a structured conversation about development. The organisation retained experienced staff it would otherwise have lost, and the employees found a path that suited their lives without the disruption of leaving.

The lesson is clear. Investing in career development support is not a retention risk - it is a retention strategy. As AI continues to alter the shape of roles within organisations, the employers who equip their people to navigate that change with confidence will be the ones who hold onto talent when the pressure is greatest.

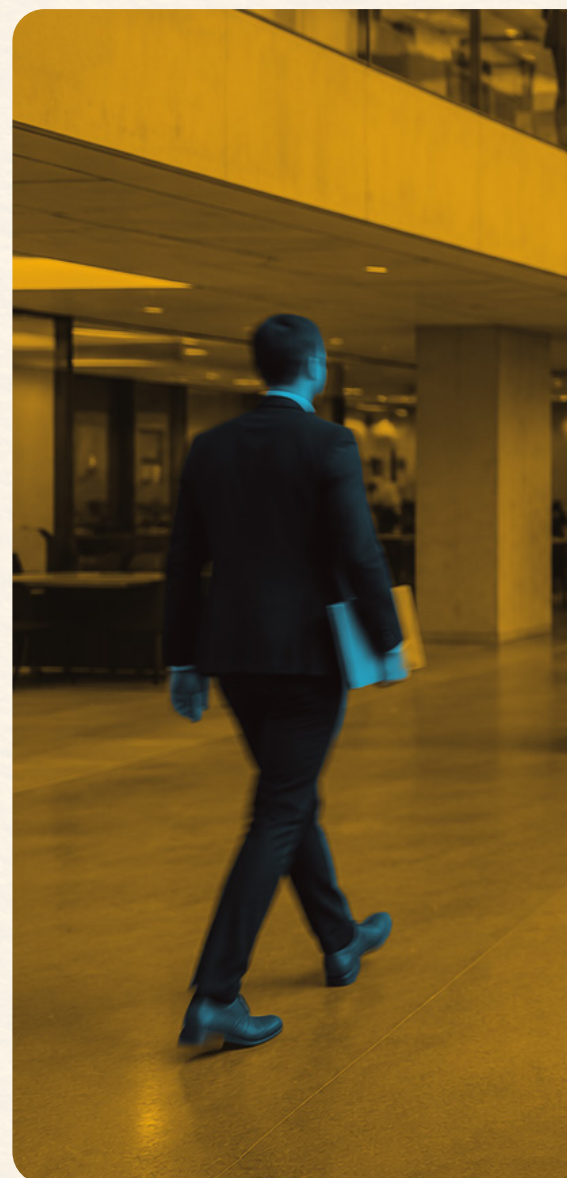
Providing high quality careers support in an AI-enabled world —

The conversation about career management must also move into the boardroom — but when it does, organisations need to understand what genuine career support actually looks like. Career development is a specialist discipline, delivered by professionals with relevant qualifications and, ideally, listed on the CDI's professional Register. It is distinct from, though complementary to, talent management. Where talent management focuses on organisational need, qualified careers professionals offer something different and arguably more powerful: informed, impartial advice, delivered in accordance with a professional Code of Ethics, and therefore genuinely trusted by the people they support.

That trust is not incidental. It is the foundation on which effective career conversations are built. Employees are far more likely to engage honestly with a careers professional they believe is working in their interest, not the organisation's, even when those interests happen to align.

Companies that invest in careers programmes staffed by qualified professionals give their people access to both group and one-to-one support, helping individuals navigate opportunities within

the organisation, explore development pathways, understand skills needs, and make informed decisions about what is right for them. Sometimes that leads an employee to seek a new role internally. Sometimes it clarifies a development opportunity they hadn't previously considered. And sometimes it helps someone recognise that their next step lies elsewhere. Handled by a skilled professional, all of those outcomes are better than leaving people without support at all.



There is a final dimension that the sector cannot afford to ignore: qualified careers professionals can increasingly be supported by a growing range of AI tools that help them extend their reach and maximise impact across organisations. Used well, and under proper professional oversight, these tools allow careers staff to serve more people more effectively, while preserving their most valuable hours for the nuanced, human work that no algorithm can replicate.

A call to action —

We need investment in careers support that reaches the people who need it most, not just those who are already well-placed to navigate change. We need employers to recognise that career management is not a perk but a performance lever. And we need individuals - all of us - to take a more active role in managing careers that will be longer, more varied and more demanding of adaptation than any that came before.

The aspiration is there. The Valuing Careers research tells us that. What we owe people is the confidence, the support and the tools to act on it.

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It's not easy going green —

Can AI growth and green goals coexist?

Words: Julia Whitmore

Going green was never going to remain a matter of switching to LED lighting or publishing a net zero target and moving on. As cost pressures have increased, reporting expectations have multiplied, and supply chains have come under heavier scrutiny, the harder phase of business transformation has come into view. This is the point at which sustainability has started deeply reshaping procurement, operations, finance, risk, and capital allocation.

However, another transformation agenda has gathered pace at the same time. AI has moved rapidly from experimentation to deployment, and with that shift has come a fresh set of demands on power, data centre capacity, cooling, and cloud infrastructure. The promise is productivity, speed, and competitive advantage. The constraint is physical. Compute depends on electricity, water, resilience, and an energy system that is already under pressure.

Set alongside one another, those two shifts expose a more difficult question than the one many organisations began with. The issue is not as simple as choosing between becoming more sustainable or investing in AI. Rather, it's how to pursue both without allowing one ambition to undermine the other.

The targets and the trade-offs —

Much of the earlier sustainability agenda was visible and relatively straightforward. Now, the more consequential work sits deeper in the business, especially in the value chain, where environmental ambition collides with commercial reality and operational complexity.

Sam Stark, CEO and founder of **Green Project Technologies**, says that “for most large businesses, 80 to 90 percent of emissions sit in Scope 3. That’s where environmental ambition, commercial reality, and operational complexity collide.” Decarbonising a supply chain, he argues, means working across “hundreds or thousands of suppliers”, many of them under cost pressure themselves, while trying to align incentives in systems no single company fully controls.

That challenge is beginning to sort the players treating sustainability as an operating discipline from those still treating it as a communications exercise. A credible strategy, Stark says, is one that is “grounded in data, integrated into procurement, and tied to real business outcomes”. It should show up in supplier engagement, sourcing choices, and financial planning, rather than remaining confined to an annual report or a specialist

team.

That’s become all the more important as volatility has changed the terms of the discussion. Higher energy costs, supply chain disruption, tighter reporting requirements, and limited capital have forced companies to become more selective about where sustainability spending goes. Projects that can be linked to resilience, efficiency, and future cost reduction stand a far better chance of advancing than those framed only as longer-term obligation. Under those conditions, the language of transformation has shifted. The emphasis now falls less on declarations and more on whether carbon performance, energy exposure, and supply-chain risk influence everyday decisions.

Benjamin Richardson, co-founder and chief sustainability officer at **Zevero**, sees the same pressure building inside the value chain. “Most know they need better supplier data and stronger engagement across Scope 3, but getting high-quality data from suppliers takes time, money and cooperation on both sides,” he says. The commercial case may not look urgent at first, he adds, yet it usually intensifies once regulation comes calling or a major customer demands proof.

That shift is also changing who owns the issue. Sustainability, Richardson argues, is moving beyond the



sustainability and procurement teams and into finance, internal audit, and risk. “The direction of travel is moving from reporting environmental performance to understanding business exposure and optimisation,” he says.

In practice, that broadens the discussion from emissions reduction to something more exacting: how climate-related decisions affect asset risk, supplier continuity, insurance, and future operating costs.

Physical climate risk has not always received the same attention as transition planning, yet it is increasingly difficult to relegate it to the background. Flooding, heat stress, asset damage, supply disruption, and resource constraints do not arrive as abstract ESG concerns. They arrive as operating problems. Where businesses are still underprepared, it is often because climate hasn’t been comprehensively factored into continuity planning and investment decisions.

AI meets the physical world —

Although AI is often discussed in terms of software capability, automation, and output quality, its expansion is tied to a large and growing physical estate. Models may be digital, but the infrastructure beneath them is not. Data centres need land, grid access, cooling, backup capacity, and hardware, while the organisations buying AI

capability through cloud or platform providers remain exposed to the cost and availability of that underlying stack.

Maria Nugroho, an AI enterprise strategist, says too many conversations still stop at the surface. “The conversation in most boardrooms I encounter still centres on productivity gains and ROI - which is the right conversation, but it is dangerously incomplete,” she says. “The infrastructure layer that makes AI possible is one of the fastest-growing cost and risk variables in enterprise technology today, and most organisations have yet to fully account for it.”

Her argument is less a warning against AI adoption than a demand for fuller accounting. Energy is part of that. So is water, especially in regions where cooling capacity is constrained. Then there is compute itself, which cannot be treated indefinitely

as an abundant commodity when demand is rising sharply and infrastructure build-out is uneven. Once those factors are brought into the investment case, AI becomes harder to assess as a simple productivity play. It starts to look more like a strategic dependency, with its own exposure to price volatility, geography, resilience, and carbon intensity.

Infrastructure costs, Nugroho says, need to be treated as “a first-class input in the business case for AI - not an afterthought managed by the infrastructure team”. That means modelling total cost of ownership properly, including compute, energy-related cloud inflation, and the operational overhead of resilience. It also means understanding where workloads sit, which energy systems support them, and whether those assumptions still hold if demand, regulation, or pricing shifts.

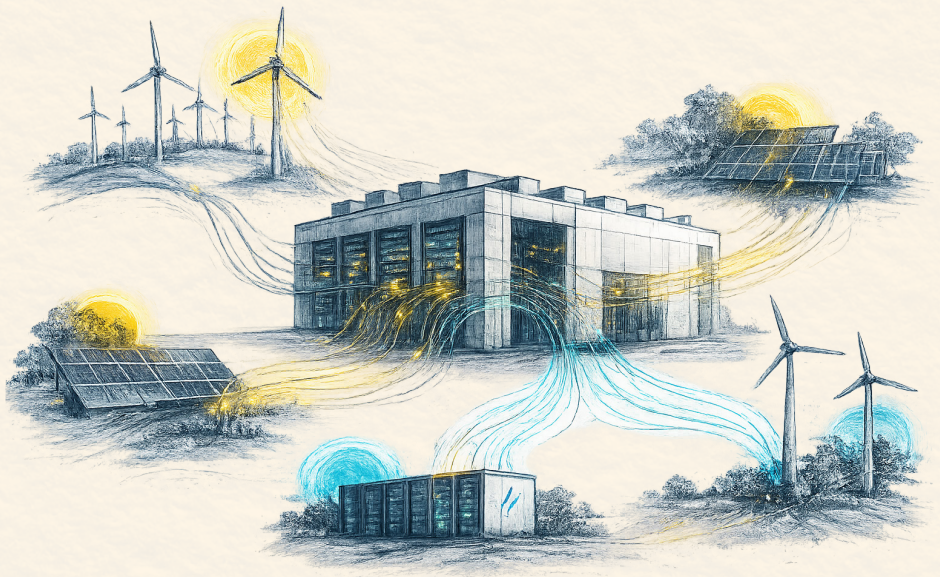


Once AI is viewed through that lens, the question is no longer whether digital growth is compatible with green goals in theory. The question becomes whether organisations are willing to align technology strategy with the realities of power sourcing, infrastructure planning, and transparent reporting.

What good practice looks like in action —

One indication of where that alignment may be heading can be found in the data centre sector itself. **Stellium**, a UK-based operator of high-performance computing data centres, supports customers across AI, technology, government, and other data-intensive industries, with facilities designed for up to 180MW of capacity. According to the company, customer scrutiny has intensified around where electricity comes from, when it is generated, and whether sustainability claims can withstand audit.

Historically, Stellium relied on renewable electricity backed by Renewable Energy Guarantees of Origin, or REGOs, which remain common across the sector. The limitation, as the company describes it, is that annual certificates do not show whether renewable power was available at the moment electricity was actually consumed. A business can therefore present power use as renewable on paper even if its demand falls



during periods when fossil generation is dominating the grid.

To address that gap, Stellium partnered with Good Energy to move to a 100% renewable, hourly-matched electricity supply. Instead of relying on annual averages, hourly matching links electricity consumption with renewable generation on an hour-by-hour basis, allowing the company to identify more precisely how much of its demand is being met by renewable power at the time it is used.

The level of granularity changes the discussion. Through Good Energy, Stellium says it can source power from more than 3,300 independent UK renewable generators and show which assets powered its data centres, when they did so, and where they are located. It reports a 95.4% hourly matching score, more than double a market average of around 43%, alongside a 75% reduction in reported carbon emissions. Planned additions, including MW-scale battery

storage, are expected to lift the matching rate further.

Of course, no single case study resolves the wider tension between AI growth and environmental pressure, and data centres remain large, energy-intensive assets regardless of how carefully their electricity is sourced. Yet the Stellium example does point to a more exacting standard of proof. It moves the discussion away from generic green claims and towards auditable detail about timing, source, location, and system impact.

That is likely to become more common, because the old distinction between digital strategy and sustainability strategy is becoming harder to maintain. Where AI deployment depends on ever larger infrastructure footprints, energy sourcing can no longer be treated as a secondary issue. Nor can procurement be separated neatly from climate objectives when supplier standards, data quality, and reporting burdens all affect whether a target is achievable in practice.



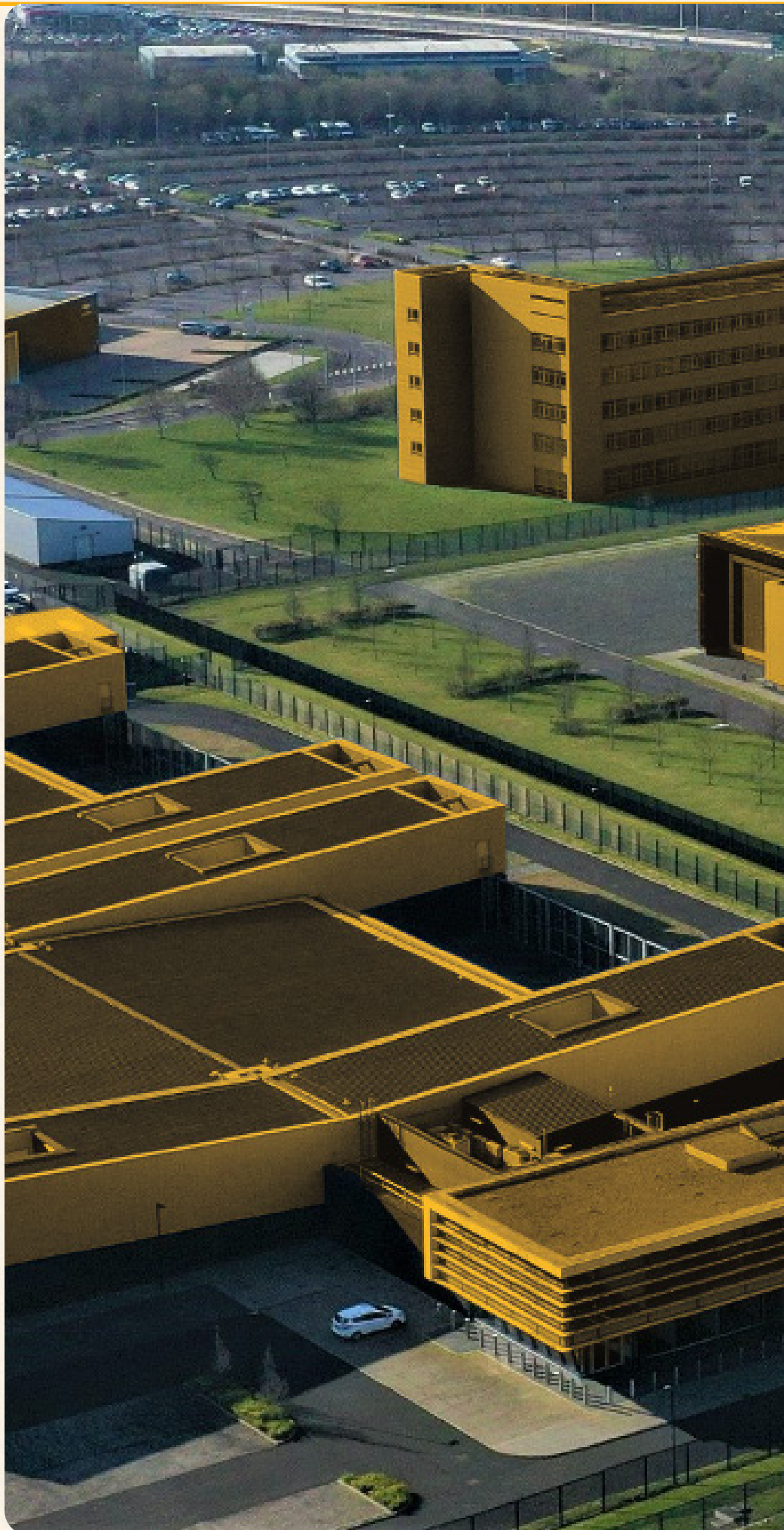
A tough transition phase —

The unfortunate reality of the current moment is that many of the easier alignments have already been found. Energy efficiency can still cut cost as well as emissions and better supplier data can still improve visibility as well as compliance. But, even so, the room for symbolic progress has narrowed.

What remains is slower, heavier work. It involves embedding carbon and energy intelligence into sourcing decisions, product design, technology planning, and risk management. It involves asking harder questions of vendors, infrastructure partners, and internal teams, and then acting on the answers. It also involves recognising that AI may help companies understand supply chains, optimise design, and improve efficiency, while simultaneously increasing their dependence on energy-hungry infrastructure.

Green goals and AI growth can coexist, but not by default, and not on the strength of broad commitments alone. They coexist only when organisations treat sustainability, infrastructure, and commercial discipline as parts of the same operating model, rather than as separate narratives running in parallel.

An aerial view of Stellium's site »





Cyber insurance won't save your business from a £4 high-vis jacket —

Cyber insurance has become one of the most heavily marketed business products of the last decade, and the reasons are easy to understand. Headlines are dominated by warnings of nation state actors, organised ransomware cartels and supply chain compromises that can bring entire sectors to a standstill.

Against this backdrop, boards across the world are under mounting pressure from brokers, regulators, and investors to purchase ever more comprehensive cover. Yet in an ironic twist, the most damaging security breach is rarely the one any insurance policy was designed to anticipate or cover.

The uncomfortable truth is that an intruder is far more likely to walk through the front door in a four pound high-vis jacket and a clipboard in hand than to tunnel through the firewall with a zero day exploit.

That is not a marketing line, it is an operational reality our consultants observe during physical and social engineering assessments.

The person asking to read the meter, or holding the door while an employee swipes their pass, represents a far greater form of risk that no policy wording has yet managed to capture.

The pressure to insure against the wrong threat —

Cyber insurance premiums have climbed steadily since 2021, and the questionnaires that accompany them have grown longer and more prescriptive with every renewal cycle.

Businesses are being asked to evidence multi factor authentication, endpoint detection, immutable backups, and further controls that stretch into dozens of line items. These are sensible measures and we would encourage any organisation to of course adopt them as standard practices.

The difficulty arises when leadership teams mistake the completion of an insurance schedule for a genuine programme of cyber resilience.



By: **Glen Williams**,
CEO,
[Cyberfort](#)

A policy is a financial instrument that responds after an incident has occurred, and the payout, where it materialises at all, rarely covers reputational damage, regulatory consequence, or the loss of a customer who decides your organisation is no longer a safe pair of hands.

Treating insurance as the centre of strategy also distorts investment priorities, and we regularly see finance directors commit significant sums to premiums while the budget for staff awareness, access reviews, and physical security remains untouched from one year to the next.



Where risk actually lives —

Risk does not reside exclusively in technology, and any assessment that treats it as such will miss the majority of the attack surface.

Risk lives in the new starter who has not been briefed on processes, in the third party supplier whose engineer has unsupervised access to your server room, in the printer that still holds a cached copy of last quarter's board papers and in the leavers process that allows a departed contractor to retain working credentials for months after their engagement has ended.

The organisations that weather incidents most

effectively are those that have mapped their genuine risk landscape across three dimensions, namely people, processes, and data. People covers the behaviours, training, and culture that determine how employees respond to the unexpected visitor or the unusual email. Processes covers everything from vendor management to visitor control and physical access through loading bays and back entrances.

Data addresses where information is held, who can reach it, and what would happen in commercial terms if it were exposed, altered, or held to ransom. When these dimensions are understood together, technology investment becomes far more effective because it is targeted at genuine exposure rather than at threats that happen to be fashionable.

Resilience is earned, not purchased —

Cyber insurance has a legitimate role to play in any mature risk programme, and I am not suggesting for a

moment that a responsible business should be without it. It should, however, be regarded as a backstop rather than a strategy, the equivalent of the business interruption cover that sits alongside a well run continuity plan rather than replacing it.

True resilience is earned through discipline, through honest assessment, and through a willingness to look beyond the firewall to the receptionist's desk, the loading bay, and the coffee shop where a contractor is working on an unsecured network.

The £4 high-vis jacket will remain one of the most effective tools in an attacker's inventory for as long as organisations spend more on insuring against the wrong threat than on understanding the one that is already walking, unchallenged, past the front desk.



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AI ambition is at an all-time high — so why are so many projects still failing? —

There is a real contradiction sitting at the heart of enterprise AI right now. Investment is accelerating, boardroom confidence is at a record high, and barely a leadership conversation goes by without AI featuring prominently on the agenda. Yet, the organisations declaring themselves ready are simultaneously identifying data as their single biggest obstacle. The ambition is real. The foundations, for many, are not.

AI readiness is not the same as AI success. The gap between the two is where most organisations currently find themselves. Closing it requires more honesty about what readiness actually demands and putting in the work to get there.



By: **Craig Gravina**,
CTO,
Semarchy

What 'AI ready' actually means in practice and where it falls short —

Being AI-ready encompasses far more than many businesses recognise, and it starts with infrastructure, not just intention.

Readiness is a measurable state of data infrastructure and when you look past the confidence and ask specific questions about what your business actually has in place, the cracks appear quickly. Semarchy's State of Data Management in 2026 report found that only 66% of organisations enforce data quality controls before feeding information into AI systems, meaning more than a third are running AI on unvetted data, and only 50% have Master Data Management (MDM) in place. These are foundational gaps that determine whether or not your business reaches AI success.

When data foundations are weak, AI doesn't encounter the problem and stop. It scales the problem, embedding errors at a pace that can outrun human oversight entirely - or worse, go unnoticed until it has already compromised the outcome. The consequences are playing out publicly across

the industry. If the right foundations aren't in place, the label "AI-ready" is not only premature, but also actively misleading.

Why MDM is non-negotiable —

MDM is vital to AI success. It's the dividing line between organisations that can trust their AI and those that cannot. MDM works by consolidating data from across the business into a single, authoritative source of truth, ensuring that every system, and every AI model, draws from the same consistent, verified information.

Roughly half of organisations are currently building AI on unified, trusted master data. The other half are trying to scale on fragmented, inconsistent sources and encountering problems at every step. Without MDM, you don't just move slower, your foundations become less stable the more weight you put on them.

The difference shows up quickly in practice as those with MDM can deploy use cases faster and trust outputs more readily, scaling confidently because every initiative draws from the same

trusted foundation. Governance becomes more effective too, because centralised master data supports access controls, audit trails, and consistent compliance rules across the board.

With agentic AI, the tolerance for weak data drops further still. An agent acting on unreliable master data doesn't make one bad decision; it scales that error across every action it takes, at machine speed, with minimal human oversight to catch it. The organisations that understand this now and act on it will not only avoid the failures already playing out across the industry, but they will also build AI systems that earn trust and sustain it.

The governance gap —

Governance retrofitted under pressure is not true governance. Many organisations are updating policy documents in response to regulatory pressure or recent incidents rather than designing controls in from the outset, and the result is governance that exists on paper but doesn't travel with the data.

So, what does good data governance look like in practice?

Genuine ownership.

Governance only works when C-suite leaders treat it as a strategic priority, not a compliance obligation delegated downward. Clear accountability for data

decisions must sit at the leadership level.

Visible and automatic lineage. Knowing where data came from, how it has been transformed, and who has accessed it should not require forensic effort. When lineage is built into data flows from the outset, compliance checks and audit responses become routine.

Consistent access controls. Role-based governance should apply uniformly across the organisation, including to AI systems and agents. Patchy access controls are one of the most common ways well-intentioned governance frameworks break down in practice.

Data quality as a continuous process. Quality should be monitored, measured, and enforced on an ongoing basis. Organisations that operationalise quality build a feedback loop where problems are caught early and consistently, rather than discovered downstream when an AI output goes wrong.

Ultimately, good governance brings AI and data strategy under the same roof. One of the most common structural failures is treating them as separate workstreams. The policies and controls that govern data must extend seamlessly into how AI models are trained, how agents are deployed, and how outputs

are monitored. A unified governance framework is what turns governance from a gate into an engine.

Capability must match ambition —

The biggest risk facing AI-ambitious organisations right now isn't a lack of investment or the wrong choice of technology. It's the assumption that confidence is the same as capability and that declaring readiness makes it so.

There is a version of AI adoption that ends in stalled projects, costly rework, and eroded trust in both the technology and the leadership that championed it. That outcome isn't the result of bad intentions; it's the predictable consequence of building on data that was never genuinely ready. The warning signs are visible long before the failure arrives.

The organisations pulling ahead share one defining trait: they stopped treating data management as the thing that slows AI down and started treating it as the thing that makes AI work. Built-in governance, continuous quality controls, and MDM are what make ambition sustainable. The window to build properly is open, but businesses need to take the opportunity now and create the strong foundations that turn AI readiness into AI success.

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Breaking the chain of risk in the financial sector —

Financial organisations are navigating an increasingly complex cyber threat landscape. Rapid advancements in AI are expanding access to sophisticated cyber capabilities for threat actors while rising geopolitical instability increases the likelihood of organisations being targeted directly as a result of a conflict, or indirectly disrupted through attacks on critical suppliers exposed to those same geopolitical tensions.

These risks are especially amplified for the financial sector given the deep and interconnected supply chain ecosystems in which they operate. To improve resilience in this threat environment, organisations must work together to develop a holistic, sector-wide response.

As dependency on external suppliers increases, so too does exposure to systemic risk that can propagate quickly across interconnected ecosystems. This is reflected in the World Economic Forum's Global Cybersecurity Outlook 2026 survey, which shows that

65% of large companies now identify third-party and supply chain vulnerabilities as their greatest challenge, up from 54% in 2025. This trend is being driven by a number of factors, including increased outsourcing, the shift to cloud-based services and the growing reliance on specialised third-party providers to deliver critical functions at scale.

In response, new regulations like the Financial Conduct Authority's (FCA) PS26/2 guidance on reporting material third-party arrangements represent a meaningful step change in improving transparency and the FCA's awareness of previously hidden supply chain dependencies. It sets clearer expectations for firms and improves visibility for regulators; however, it still only provides partial visibility into the sector's extended supply chain and lacks mechanisms to enable financial entities to identify shared systemic risks.



By: **Justin Kuruvilla**,
Chief Cyber Security
Strategist,
Risk Ledger

Regulatory sets the baseline, not the full picture —

The FCA's guidance marks an important evolution in how financial institutions are expected to manage supply chain risk. It strengthens reporting requirements and helps bring greater structure to how critical supplier relationships are identified and monitored. For firms operating across multiple jurisdictions, it also helps reduce fragmentation and aligns more closely with frameworks such as DORA in the EU.

But reporting frameworks are, by design, structured and retrospective. While they support oversight and accountability, they do not provide the real time intelligence needed to respond to fast moving threats. As a result, compliance alone cannot deliver a complete picture of risk exposure or improve operational resilience.

The blind spots beneath the surface —

To move beyond a compliance-driven approach, financial institutions need deeper visibility into their supplier ecosystems. This includes understanding not just direct vendor relationships but also the broader network of dependencies that sit beneath them. This is where risk becomes harder to see. A single compromised dependency within the wider supplier ecosystem can quickly cascade across multiple organisations.

Public reporting on disruptions affecting both high-profile manufacturers and retailers as well as lesser-known organisations highlights how issues linked to third-party providers can quickly impact entire sectors at scale, even where the affected organisations themselves have robust internal controls in place. These incidents reinforce how interconnected supply chains create exposure that extends far beyond a single organisation's direct oversight.

Improved visibility enables organisations to identify such concentration risks, shared dependencies and emerging vulnerabilities before they can be exploited. It also supports more informed decision making around procurement, risk appetite and incident preparedness. Without this broader perspective, institutions remain reactive rather than proactive,



addressing issues only once they have already begun to materialise.

Collaboration across financial services —

While individual visibility is essential, it is not sufficient in isolation. Many supply chain risks are systemic in nature, affecting multiple organisations simultaneously through shared suppliers or common technology stacks. This makes sector-wide collaboration a critical component of effective risk management.

By sharing supplier intelligence and risk signals across peers, financial institutions can begin to build a collective view of systemic exposure. This approach helps identify patterns that would otherwise remain hidden to individual organisations.

Driving more active cyber risk governance —

When financial institutions work together to share supplier intelligence, they create a more unified view of systemic risk that goes beyond what regulation alone can provide. This enables faster and more confident decisionmaking in response to emerging threats.

Crucially, this approach brings previously unseen systemic risks within the supply chain into sharper focus. When these insights are elevated to senior leadership and board-level discussions, they strengthen cyber risk governance. This will lead to more informed decisions and support a more active, resilient approach to supply chain security.

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Risk Ledger



Leadership spotlight —

Matt Huntly,
CEO and founder, Sampl

Words: Julia Whitmore

Making samples go further —



Visit Sampl

Product sampling occupies an uneasy place in the marketing budget. It can put a product directly into a household, but traditional campaigns have often offered limited evidence of who tried the product, whether the same households were being reached repeatedly, or how trial affected purchase.

Matt Huntly, CEO and founder of Sampl, has built the business around that accountability gap. The platform is designed to connect samples with people who actively request them, while capturing first party data, reviews, and engagement signals that can be tied to subsequent action.

"My background has always sat somewhere between marketing, technology and growth," Huntly says. Before founding Sampl, he spent around ten years as a director at a specialist workplace experience agency, working with brands on strategies designed to drive engagement and commercial impact.

That experience shaped his understanding of how

brand interactions influence behaviour. The idea for Sampl took form during the Covid pandemic, when shopping moved further online and brands lost the confidence-building effect of in-store trial.

"The idea for Sampl really took shape during the Covid pandemic," he says. "Overnight, people's habits changed. Shopping moved online, discovery became digital-first, and brands lost one of their biggest confidence drivers: in-store trial - that moment where you can pick something up, touch it, try it, and decide if it's right for you."

With budgets under scrutiny, reach alone was no longer enough. Teams needed to know who received a product, what they did afterwards, and whether activity created value beyond distribution. Sampl was created to link product trial with declared interest, data capture, reviews, and online purchase behaviour.

Colour Catcher provided an early test. The brand had been investing significant budget in mass sampling, but trial rates were low, purchase

conversion was modest, and recipient visibility was limited. After switching to Sampl's requested sample model, distribution volumes fell sharply, but each sample went to a unique household with stated intent. The campaign delivered almost twice as many purchases from a fraction of the samples.

As Sampl grew, Huntly's role changed. In the early phase, he was close to brand conversations, product decisions, and operational problems. That proximity gave the business speed, but could not remain the rhythm of a larger platform.

"As the business has grown, the challenge has been stepping back just enough," he says. "My role now is much more about setting direction, being clear on priorities, and trusting the team to execute - while still staying close enough to the customer and the product to add value where it counts."

Priorities had to be understood across the team, decisions had to be linked to outcomes, and the business had to retain the customer

Matt Huntly is scaling Sampl with a clearer view of product trial. The founder and CEO is building the sampling platform around customer intent, data discipline, and the belief that growth only works when quality travels with it.

and product sensitivity that shaped its first stage of growth. "That shift isn't always comfortable, but it's essential if you want to build something that scales sustainably," Huntly says.

Sampl's approach to data follows the same discipline. Martech businesses often risk adding complexity in the name of insight, particularly when customers are dealing with budget pressure, fragmented channels, and limited time. Huntly argues that measurement only becomes useful when it helps teams act.

"There's no doubt that expectations on performance are higher than ever, but adding layers of complexity rarely helps brands hit their targets," he says. "Our view has always been that data should be an enabler of better decisions - not the end goal in itself."

The platform focuses on a narrow set of signals: who received a product, who engaged with it, and whether trial led to a purchase, review, or opt-in. In a campaign with Lily's Kitchen, Sampl saw strong engagement and 50%+ marketing opt-in, while also identifying price point as a barrier to purchase. That finding informed later positioning and promotional strategy.

Sampling has also had to overcome a perception problem. Huntly says one of the most difficult assumptions to challenge is that the channel is inherently soft: suitable for awareness and brand affinity, but held apart from performance channels measured against outcomes rather than impressions.

Sampl's answer is clearer targeting, verification, data capture, and outcome measurement. Once brands ask performance-level questions of sampling, waste and poor targeting become design flaws, rather than unavoidable trade-offs.

International growth now puts that standard under pressure. Sampl is localising its services in the 35 markets where it already has customers and is delivering campaigns across three continents. Huntly's focus is consistency and depth, rather than geographic reach alone.

"The question is not whether the model works internationally. It does. The question is how we maintain the same level of experience, data integrity and commercial clarity in every market we serve," he says.

Retail dynamics, media ecosystems, and consumer behaviour differ by market. Huntly sees verification standards, data quality, and outcome measurement as non-negotiable, while local teams need flexibility to adapt to cultural and retail nuance.

As Sampl expands, the balance between control and local judgement will shape how the business carries its model into new markets. Its value depends on trust from brands, partners, and consumers who choose to engage with products before they buy.

"Scale only works if quality travels with it," Huntly says.



Leadership spotlight —

JS Pelland,
Executive Director, Eland Cables

Words: Julia Whitmore

How **JS Pelland**
learned to
build ahead
of demand —



JS Pelland arrived in London with ambition, a one-way ticket, and no job lined up. Two decades later, the Eland Cables executive is helping to scale a business built around quality and the unsung infrastructure behind electrification.

When JS Pelland arrived in London from Montreal in 2001, he had no job waiting, no lasting visa security, and no carefully arranged route into British business. What he did have, as he puts it, was “ambition and a one-way ticket.”

London was competitive, expensive, and unforgiving to a young graduate trying to break into finance. Pelland delivered pizzas on minimum wage, found his way into audit, and worked to get closer to the corporate finance roles he wanted. By day, he was building the technical grounding of a chartered accountant. By night, he was volunteering on the corporate finance floor, taking whatever work would give him experience and proximity to the people already doing the jobs he wanted.

“I did whatever was asked to get more experience and to meet more people who were working in the roles I wanted,” he says. “It taught tenacity... and that you can create your own opportunities if you persevere.”

That appetite for proximity — to the work, the opportunity, and the people who could sharpen his understanding — would later shape his approach at Eland Cables, the UK electrical cable supplier where he is now Executive Director.

Pelland first encountered Eland in 2005, while advising on its management buyout. Cables were not an obvious destination for someone trained in finance. They carried little of the glamour attached to technology, energy, or infrastructure, even though they were essential to all three. They sat behind the wall, under the ground, and inside the systems that keep projects live.

For Pelland, that relative invisibility was part of the attraction. “What struck me immediately was the scale of the opportunity,” he says. “Here was a sector that most people overlooked, yet it underpinned every power, control, and infrastructure system.”

The more time he spent with the company, the more clearly the business case took shape. “Cables weren’t a commodity story,” he says. “They were a critical infrastructure story with huge potential for innovation and growth.”

He joined Eland’s board in 2008, three years after

the buyout, drawn by a strong connection with the leadership team and a sense that his finance background could be applied directly to the company’s next stage. Advisory work had given him access to the business; the board role brought consequence.

“The hardest adjustment was shifting from an advisory role to being directly accountable,” he says. “Decisions suddenly had immediate consequences for both the business and its people.”

That sense of accountability shows in the way Pelland talks about scale. Eland’s turnover has risen from just over £100m during Covid to £315m this year, but he is careful not to describe growth as a simple product of market demand. Demand creates opportunity; it also exposes weak stock management, thin systems, stretched people, and fragile logistics.

At Eland, the constraints changed as the company grew. First came pressure on people, then stock, then the systems and logistics needed to keep service standards intact. Pelland’s answer was to invest before each pressure point became visible to customers.



Growth only works if the customer experience stays consistent, and that's the principle we used to unlock scale without compromising quality.



“The key was recognising that you can’t solve those challenges sequentially,” he says. “You have to build ahead of demand on all fronts.”

That meant hiring and developing people before gaps appeared, strengthening supply chain relationships before resilience was tested, and expanding operational systems before volume outpaced reliability. Growth, in that reading, is not only a commercial target; it is an operational test. The customer experience has to survive the expansion.

Quality became another point of discipline. In 2015, Eland established The Cable Lab, a technical and testing facility offering more than 40 accredited tests. Pelland saw compliance not as a defensive exercise, but as a practical way to reduce risk for customers working on critical projects.

He points to the long running issue

of non-compliant cable in circulation, with risks that go beyond procurement. Poor cable can bring premature failure, unplanned maintenance, downtime, and safety exposure. “The Cable Lab was created to eliminate that risk from the outset,” he says. “By embedding rigorous testing and verification, we ensure customers don’t inherit hidden vulnerabilities.”

Alongside testing, Eland built its own logistics capability, including an HGV fleet that gives the company greater control over timing, sequencing, and delivery reliability. For customers managing infrastructure projects, the value sits in fewer surprises: the right cable, tested properly, delivered when the project needs it.

Pelland’s view of the market has also sharpened as electrification has accelerated. Rail, renewable energy, EV charging, battery storage, data centres,

and wider infrastructure upgrades all depend on the less visible materials and systems that allow power to move. He is direct about where he sees the UK's pressure point.

"The real bottleneck isn't generating renewable power, it's connecting it," he says. "Renewables aren't the limiting factor; the grid is."

Cables, substations, planning delays, grid reinforcement, skilled labour, and long horizon investment are not peripheral details in that equation. They determine whether generation capacity can be used, whether projects can connect, and whether infrastructure plans can move beyond announcement.

Inside the business, Pelland's leadership style appears practical rather than performative. When he asked a colleague how they would describe him, the answer was "demanding but practical, fair, and focused on identifying what needs to be done to achieve results." He adds that he is consistently can-do and solutions oriented, "and that the only real difference between a good day and a bad day is that my jokes land better on the good ones."

The humour is light, but the standards are not. Pelland says his non-negotiables are rooted in behaviour:

genuine care, commitment to excellence for customers, and doing what is right ethically and professionally, even when it is difficult. His finance background still shapes the way he reads decisions, though he does not present judgement as a spreadsheet exercise. Data plays a role; so do experience, expert input, instinct, and the willingness to change course quickly when something is not working.

Sustainability sits inside the same operating logic. Pelland does not describe ESG as a separate corporate layer, but as part of how the business is run. Paying the Living Wage supports fairness and retention. Recycling copper and aluminium reduces waste and recovers value. Repurposing insulation materials connects environmental practice with commercial sense.

"The leadership behaviour required to make all of this stick was consistency," he says, "embedding ESG thinking into every decision rather than treating it as a separate programme."

The next stage for Eland may include new segments and geographies, although Pelland's language is measured. He talks about durable demand, deeper capability, technical confidence, and service

consistency. He is more interested in resilience than speed for its own sake.

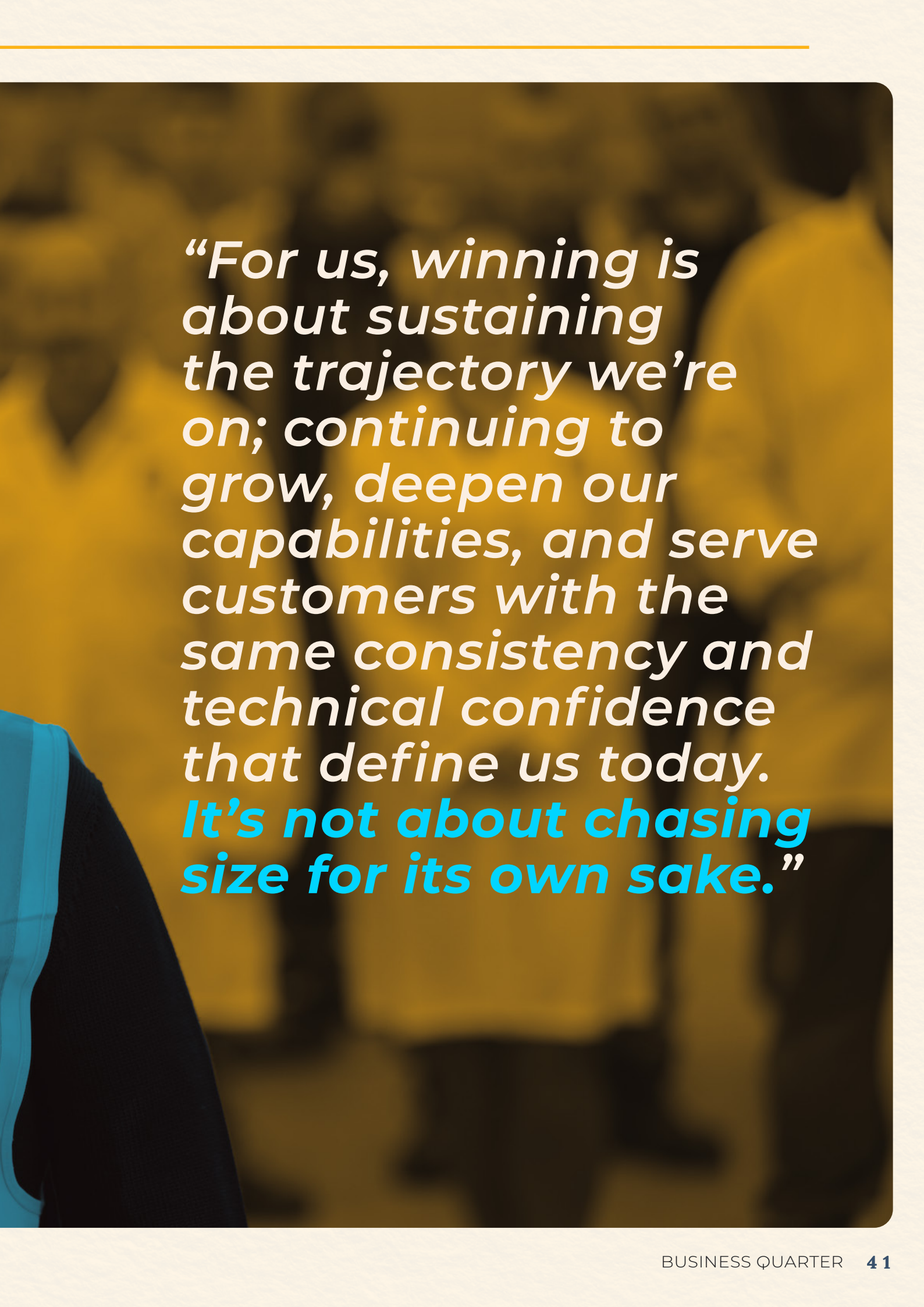
"We won't stretch ourselves thin or pursue opportunities that look attractive in the short term but don't align with long-term market fundamentals," he says. "And we won't compromise on quality, culture, or customer experience for the sake of volume."

Two decades after arriving in London with little certainty, Pelland is still working with the same instinct that carried him through the early years: get close to the opportunity, understand the constraint, and move before the pressure arrives. At Eland, that instinct has become a way of operating. The work may sit behind the wall or beneath the ground, but the discipline is visible in the business built around it.



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*“For us, winning is about sustaining the trajectory we’re on; continuing to grow, deepen our capabilities, and serve customers with the same consistency and technical confidence that define us today. **It’s not about chasing size for its own sake.**”*

Leadership spotlight —

Lee Rorison

Founder & CEO, Seriös Group

Words: Julia Whitmore

One entrepreneur's journey to get Seriös value from data —

Long before artificial intelligence became the boardroom shorthand for reinvention, Lee Rorison had already formed a clear view of what was slowing data transformation down. Across years spent working in data solutions, business intelligence, and large-scale transformation programmes, he saw the same pattern repeat itself: ambitious projects, heavy delivery teams, long timelines, and too little clarity on when value would actually arrive..

By the time he founded Seriös Group in 2020, that frustration had hardened into a sharper conviction. The problem, as he saw it, was rarely a lack of technology. More often, it was the way data programmes were being designed and delivered — spread across multiple vendors, tied to time-and-materials models, and weighed down by process long before they produced useful outcomes. Seriös Group was built in direct opposition to that model, with

Rorison setting out to create a business organised around pace, accountability, and measurable results.

His route into the sector had not been accidental. With a degree in Biochemistry and an MSc in Bioinformatics, Rorison entered the world of enterprise data with a strong technical base, then spent close to two decades working across complex environments where data platforms and warehouses sat at the centre of larger ERP and digital transformation programmes. Those years gave him a detailed view of what large organisations were trying to achieve, and of how easily those ambitions could become diluted once delivery began.

What emerged from that experience was less a rejection of consultancy than a rejection of consultancy that had lost sight of the end user. Organisations were investing heavily in data, yet too many were left navigating sprawling engagements that consumed time and money

without delivering durable capability. Rorison's answer was to strip the model back to fundamentals: begin with the outcome, remain open on technology, and reduce the distance between project start and business value.

That approach now runs through Seriös ONE, the company's product-led delivery model, which sits at the centre of its five-year growth plan. The point is not simply speed for its own sake. Nor is it a pitch for one technology stack over another. Instead, the company has shaped its offer around a practical problem that continues to frustrate large organisations: fragmented systems, inconsistent data, and delivery models that ask for prolonged commitment before producing anything sufficiently robust to support decision-making. Rorison's proposition is that strong data foundations, good governance, and usable outputs do not need to sit at the far end of a drawn-out consulting process.

Lee Rorison founded Seriös Group after years of watching data programmes promise more than they delivered. Six years on, the Newcastle business is growing quickly on a simple proposition: helping organisations get value from data faster.

That argument has found an audience. As organisations have accelerated their interest in analytics, automation, and AI, many have discovered that poor data quality, weak governance, and disconnected systems do not disappear simply because new tools arrive. In some cases, those weaknesses become more visible. Advanced analytics may promise sharper insight, but it still depends on whether the underlying data can be trusted. AI may offer speed, but it also exposes the cost of inconsistency. Against that backdrop, the appeal of a more disciplined, outcome-led model is easy to understand.

Seriös Group has expanded quickly on the strength of that proposition. The business, based in Hoults Yard in Newcastle, now works with clients across financial services, gaming, built environment, healthcare, retail, and technology, while its client roster includes Bank of Ireland, JLL, Northern Powergrid, True Potential, Vertu, Grainger plc, NHS Business Services Authority, and tombola. In 2025/26, the company recorded 53% growth and increased headcount from 55 to 63, a pace that has demanded as much from Rorison's leadership as it has from the business model itself.

Growth of that sort changes the job of a founder. The

qualities that help establish a business — intensity, direct oversight, instinctive decision-making, and close control over standards — rarely remain sufficient once the organisation becomes larger, more layered, and more commercially exposed. Rorison has had to adapt to that shift without loosening his grip on the principles that defined Seriös Group from the outset. Delegation, structure, and leadership depth become unavoidable once a business reaches a certain scale, yet those additions can also blunt what made a challenger brand effective in the first place if they are handled poorly.

His response has been to strengthen the leadership team while keeping quality at the centre of the company's growth. Recent senior appointments across operations, finance, commercial leadership, and technology suggest a business preparing itself for a more mature phase of expansion, but they also reflect a founder willing to build beyond his own immediate span of control. That is often the harder part of scaling: not deciding to grow, but deciding how to grow without losing the essence of the original idea.



I have spent close to three decades in institutional environments. That experience teaches resilience, accountability, and respect for operating alongside extremely capable peers.

Inside the business, the same discipline can be seen in its approach to talent. Rather than chasing headcount as a signal of momentum, Seriös Group began with a deliberately small, high-quality team and invested early in graduates and emerging talent. That decision has given the business a different texture from consultancies that rely heavily on scale alone. It also points to a longer-term view of capability, one rooted in building sustainable data careers and creating an environment where people can work on complex, commercially relevant problems without being reduced to interchangeable delivery resource.

There is substance, too, in the company's Newcastle base. Technology and data capability in the UK has long been discussed through a London lens, yet the growth of businesses such as Seriös Group says something about where expertise, ambition, and opportunity now sit. Hoult's Yard is not simply an address in the story of the company; it is part of a broader regional confidence in building nationally relevant businesses outside traditional centres of gravity.

Rorison's ambitions for the next five years remain expansive. Seriös Group

is targeting national and international growth, planning to double turnover, grow the team significantly, and reach £20m in revenue by FY2030. Those targets are bold, although they follow a line already established in the company's first years: build strong data foundations, shorten the path to value, and challenge the assumption that meaningful transformation must be slow, sprawling, and prohibitively expensive.

That view has shaped the business from the beginning, and it continues to set its tone

now. Beneath the language of platforms, frameworks, and AI readiness sits a simpler idea, pursued with unusual consistency: data work should earn its place early, hold up under pressure, and remain tied to outcomes that can be seen, measured, and used.



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By: **Amrit Sandhar**,
Founder & CEO,
&Evolve

Why compassionate leadership is the new driver of high performance —

Organisations were sold on the promise that improving employee engagement would lead to better performance. After all, who could argue with the logic of the service profit chain - satisfied employees create satisfied customers, which in turn drives profit and growth? What followed was years of global surveys, workplace initiatives, and billions spent on engagement programmes. Yet one problem consistently surfaced: leaders wanted a clear business case before committing meaningful resources, while engagement teams struggled to move beyond the accusation of "correlation, not causation."

Despite major initiatives, including a UK government task force under David Cameron established to better understand employee engagement and productivity, many organisations still failed to see measurable, lasting improvements in performance. Engagement scores rose and fell, surveys became more sophisticated, but the link to sustainable business outcomes often remained unclear. Over time, this became the elephant in the room. Businesses

continued investing because it sounded right, not necessarily because the evidence consistently proved transformative impact.

Compassionate leadership now appears to be following a similar path. There are countless articles, conference discussions, and leadership frameworks promoting empathy, humanity, and care at work. The argument is compelling and intuitively logical, but the same unresolved question remains underneath it all: does compassionate leadership actually improve organisational performance?

Beyond engagement —

More effort has been placed on debating the definition of engagement than on understanding its true outcome. Entire industries have been built around measuring sentiment, creating surveys, and analysing workplace behaviours, yet many organisations still struggle to answer a more fundamental question: what do people genuinely need from work in order to perform at their best?



If we step away from decades of corporate conditioning, the answer is often surprisingly simple. Most people want to feel respected, trusted, supported, and judged fairly. They want clarity around expectations, opportunities for growth, and environments where they can contribute without fear of humiliation, politics, or unnecessary pressure.

This is harder to untangle than it sounds because years of being assessed on presence and process rather than progress have shaped what people believe work is supposed to feel like. Many employees have internalised the idea that visibility matters more than value, and that appearing busy is often safer than being honest about challenges, limitations, or mistakes.

Whilst the psychological contract makes academic sense, many parents already understand the reality instinctively. When our children first venture out into the world of work, we ask how they are being treated. We rarely ask whether they are sitting at a desk for enough hours or following rigid processes correctly. Instead, we ask whether they are learning, whether they are being encouraged, whether they are respected, and whether the environment is helping them grow into the best version of themselves.

Hardened leaders —

The path to senior leadership is itself a

conditioning process, one that rewards certain behaviours and quietly punishes others until those behaviours become normalised and invisible to the people carrying them.

Sacrifice, drive, resilience, and relentless ambition got many leaders to where they are. Long hours become a badge of honour. Pressure becomes familiar. Emotional detachment can become mistaken for strength. With every promotion, confidence grows, but so too can expectations of others. Leaders who endured difficult environments themselves may unconsciously expect others to tolerate the same conditions.

Whilst we no longer hear phrases such as “don’t bring me problems, bring me solutions” as openly as we once did, the sentiment often remains embedded within leadership culture. Heightened expectations, combined with personal journeys of sacrifice, can reduce tolerance for anything other than what leaders themselves would do in the same situation.

This creates a dangerous gap between organisational values and lived experience. Companies promote wellbeing, inclusion, and people-first cultures externally, whilst internally some employees still navigate environments shaped by impatience, fear, pressure, or emotional distance. In many cases, the behaviours creating the greatest cultural damage are not dramatic or

intentionally harmful. They are small, repeated moments where people feel dismissed, unseen, or unsupported.

Human contract —

The workplace has become highly regulated, with policies and procedures designed primarily to ensure compliance rather than inspire genuine care. Many of these rules were introduced to manage risk and protect organisations from the behaviour of a minority, rather than to support the majority of people who simply want to contribute meaningfully.

Over time, many organisations have unintentionally created environments defined more by protection and caution than by trust. The psychological contract, without any true arbitrator, often became another mechanism through which employers reinforced expectations of employees rather than mutual responsibility.

Now consider a parent watching their child start work for the first time. Who would not want their child supported by a compassionate leader? How would we want our children, parents, partners, or loved ones to be treated at work?

Most people answer immediately. With patience. With fairness. With encouragement. We would want our loved ones judged



Business management

on outcomes rather than presenteeism. We would want mistakes handled with dignity rather than humiliation. We would want them supported in their development, challenged appropriately, and led by someone who genuinely cares about their wellbeing as a human being, not simply as an employee.

Viewed through this lens, many corporate debates suddenly feel unnecessary. Engagement scores and workplace frameworks become secondary to a far more human question: are people being treated in a way that allows them to thrive?

The performance case —

This is not merely a human argument. It is a performance argument.

Every organisation that fails to treat its people with the care it would extend to a loved one imposes an invisible tax on those individuals. People spend enormous amounts of cognitive and emotional energy navigating environments where they feel judged, guarded, undervalued, or unsafe. They manage impressions rather than focusing fully on the work itself. They protect themselves instead of contributing openly.

That energy comes at a cost.

The mental effort spent second-guessing leadership

reactions, avoiding criticism, hiding mistakes, or managing workplace anxiety is energy that never reaches innovation, collaboration, creativity, or performance. Compassionate leadership does not improve performance simply because people feel happier. It improves performance because it removes friction, fear, and emotional waste from the system.

Compassionate leadership —

Imagine if every leader asked themselves one simple question: Am I treating the people in my care the way I would want my own loved ones to be treated?

Not as a policy or HR initiative, but as a private and honest reckoning with the gap between how we currently lead and how we would want the people we care about most to experience work.



Because when leaders begin viewing people not as resources, headcount, or productivity metrics, but as human beings with lives, pressures, families, and ambitions, something shifts.

You start noticing things you may have stopped seeing. The person who has gone quiet in meetings. The individual working the longest hours whilst insisting everything is fine. The employee whose confidence has slowly disappeared.

These are not simply data points in an engagement survey. They are people spending the majority of their waking lives inside environments leaders help shape every single day.

The organisations that will matter in the years ahead will not be defined by engagement scores, wellbeing slogans, or people policies alone. They will be distinguished by how it genuinely feels to work within them — by the quality of care present in conversations,

decisions, expectations, and leadership behaviours.

Somewhere in every organisation right now, someone's child is deciding whether this job, this culture, and this leader are worth giving their best to.

That decision, repeated across every team every day, may be the only measure of performance that has ever truly mattered.





The hidden management issue holding SMEs back —

There is a management problem that most business owners don't even recognise. It's not cash flow. It is not recruitment. It is not even strategy.

I've spent decades working with founders to improve the value of their business and the problem that is holding them back more than any other is that all the decisions still flow through one individual. The founder signs off key hires, approves pricing, resolves operational issues, manages major client relationships and often acts as the default problem-solver across the organisation. In many cases, upwards of 80% of meaningful decisions ultimately route back to that one person.

At the early stages of a business, this is entirely natural. Founder-led decision-

making is often the reason the business succeeds in the first place. Speed, instinct and personal relationships drive growth. But what builds a business is rarely what scales it.

From strength to structural weakness —

Our recent White Paper, *The Owner Dependence Problem in UK SME Businesses*, highlighted the scale of the issue. It showed that founder dependence is not just a leadership style, it is a structural risk embedded in many businesses generating between £3 million and £30 million in revenue and it has devastating consequences.

Around 80% of UK private companies that go to market fail to sell, and excessive owner dependence is



By: Kevin Harrington,
Partner,
Exit Factor

one of the most common reasons. Even among those that do sell, businesses that rely heavily on their founders typically achieve valuations 20–40% lower than comparable companies.

This is not because the businesses are unprofitable. It is because they are perceived as fragile. If the business cannot operate without the founder, it is not viewed as an asset. It is viewed as a risk.

The day-to-day cost of dependency —

The impact of founder reliance is not limited to exit scenarios. It shows up every day in four key areas:

Bottlenecks - Decisions slow down because everything queues behind one individual. Opportunities are missed simply because the founder does not have the bandwidth to respond.

Reduced management capability - Talented managers become implementers rather than leaders. Over time, this erodes confidence, initiative and ultimately retention.

Reduced organisational resilience - When one person holds the knowledge, relationships and authority, the business becomes vulnerable to absence, burnout or distraction.

Limited access to funding - Investors and lenders look for businesses that can operate predictably and independently. A business that depends on one individual introduces key-person risk, which is priced into funding decisions (if funding is available at all).

In short, what feels like control is often constraint..

Why it happens —

Founder dependence is rarely deliberate. It develops gradually as the business grows.

In the £3m–£30m revenue bracket, complexity increases quickly. More customers, more employees, more moving parts. But management structures often fail to keep pace.

The founder remains central because they always have been. They know the clients, they understand the product, and they're trusted to make decisions. Delegation feels risky, and building formal systems can feel like a distraction from growth.

So the business continues to scale, but the operating model does not. Then at some point, the founder becomes the system.

The cultural trap —

There is also a cultural dimension that is often overlooked. Many founders take pride in being indispensable. Being needed feels like validation. It reinforces their identity as the driving force behind the business. But indispensability is not a sign of strength. It is a sign that the business has not yet matured.

A well-structured business should not depend on any single individual to function. It should be able to deliver consistent outcomes through systems, processes and empowered leadership. The role of the founder should evolve from doing to enabling.

What good looks like —

Reducing founder dependence is not about stepping away overnight. It is about building a business that can operate independently over time. In practical terms, this means focusing on four areas.

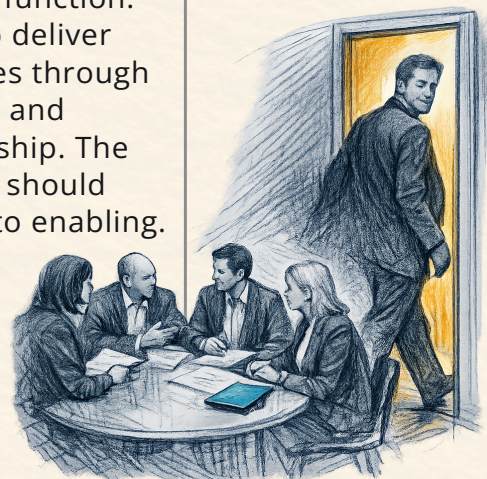
Leadership capability - Developing a management team that can make decisions, not just execute them.

Process & documentation - Capturing how the business operates so that knowledge is shared, not held.

Relationship transfer - Ensuring that key client and supplier relationships are owned by the business, not the individual.

Governance & structure - Introducing rhythm and discipline into decision-making, from regular reporting to defined decision frameworks.

These changes do not happen overnight. In my experience, it typically takes two to five years to build a genuinely owner-independent business. But the impact is transformative.



Business management

A question every founder should ask —

There is a simple test that every business owner should consider: If you stepped away from the business for three months, what would happen?

If the answer is that decisions would stall, clients would call you directly, and the business would slow down, then the issue is not performance. It is dependency. And dependency comes at a cost that you can't afford. It limits growth, it frustrates your team, it limits funding and destroys the value of the business. And it means you can never take a holiday or be ill.

From job to asset —

Too many founders assume that strong revenue automatically translates into strong business value. It doesn't. A business that depends on its owner is, in effect, a job with overheads. It may generate income, but it lacks the independence that creates real, transferable value.

The opportunity for UK SMEs is significant. They represent more than 99% of all businesses and drive a substantial proportion of employment and economic activity. But unlocking that potential requires a shift in mindset.

The goal is not to build a business that needs you. It is to build one that works without you. Because that is when a business becomes not just successful, but valuable.

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Sleep is the most important tool a leader has —

and most are ignoring it.



By: **Natalie Mackenzie**,
The Cognitive Strategist

We invest heavily in our businesses. Our teams, our strategies, our systems, our growth. But most of us are chronically underinvesting in the one thing that makes all of it possible. Our brain. And one of the biggest levers for how well that brain performs? That costs nothing. Sleep.

I know how this sounds. I've sat with enough founders and leaders to know that sleep deprivation is practically a badge of honour in business. The 5am starts, the late-night emails, the quiet pride in running on empty. I've done it. And I can tell you from both clinical experience and hard personal experience that it is one of the most expensive habits a leader can have.

Many of the leaders I work with are convinced they are one of those people who can function on five or six hours. They wear it as a point of pride. When we look properly at their decision-making patterns, their emotional reactivity with their team, and their strategic clarity, the picture tells a very different story. They aren't performing at the level they think they

are. They just don't have the cognitive capacity left to accurately assess that.

Entrepreneurs who aren't sleeping adequately are up to 20 times more likely to make impulsive, less strategic decisions. Twenty times. That's not a marginal difference, but fundamentally a different quality of leadership.

So what's actually going on? The prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for strategic thinking, sound judgement, emotional regulation and complex decision-making, is the first thing to suffer when sleep is cut short. Even one poor night measurably degrades its function, quite considerably? Anyone that's had a new baby knows exactly how this feels.. Sleep deprivation also impairs your ability to accurately assess your own impairment. You genuinely can't tell how compromised you are. The very system you're relying on to evaluate your own performance is the one that's gone offline.

Sleep is also when memory consolidation happens.

Everything absorbed across a demanding day, the insights, the conversations, the strategic thinking, is being processed and embedded overnight. Skip it and you're leading on incomplete data. Every single day. Less sleep and the impact compounds, as the need for consolidation builds up but can't happen.

There is also something most leaders have never considered. Sleep is when the brain cleans itself. The glymphatic system, the brain's waste clearance mechanism, is primarily active during deep sleep. It flushes out metabolic waste products that accumulate during waking hours, including amyloid beta and tau proteins, the same proteins whose accumulation is associated with Alzheimer's disease.

Chronic sleep deprivation doesn't just impair performance but allows those waste products to build up over time. The research linking consistently poor sleep to significantly increased dementia risk is now substantial enough that it can't be ignored.





For leaders who are planning to be at the top of their game not just this year but decades from now, this should land hard. You can recover from a bad quarter. The long-term cost of years of insufficient sleep is a much harder debt to repay.

This is why I feel so strongly about changing the conversation around sleep, particularly for people in business. We talk constantly about protecting our financial future, our physical health, our pension. But we are not talking nearly enough about protecting our cognitive future.

Sleep is not something you can shortchange now and make up for later. The damage accumulates quietly, invisibly, over years, often long before any symptom appears. By the time cognitive decline becomes noticeable, the process has frequently been underway for a decade or more. The habits you are building now, including how seriously you protect your sleep, are shaping the brain you will have in your sixties, seventies and beyond. That is not a consideration for later.

Emotional regulation is also impacted. When sleep is compromised, the brain becomes significantly more reactive and significantly less able to put the brakes on. Muscles tense, breathing shortens, patience shortens with it. The leader who finds themselves snapping, retreating, or becoming difficult to be around is frequently a leader who isn't sleeping enough. Those ripples move through a team faster than almost any other leadership behaviour.

Sleep is non-negotiable. Not a luxury. Not something to fit in when everything else is done. It's the golden rule. Everything else, the strategy, the decisions, the people, the culture, runs on the brain. And the brain runs on sleep.

Don't try to convince yourself sleep is for wimps. It isn't.

More about
Natalie
Mackenzie





Is it time to rethink marketing leadership earlier? —



By: **Madeleine Barnes**,
Director of interim &
Permanent Placements,
Robert Half UK

Over the last few years, I have noticed a fundamental shift in how fast-growth businesses think about the makeup of their marketing leadership, helping the function move from a reactive, static resource to a truly strategic enabler for fast-growth firms. Notably, I'm seeing founders and investors increasingly turn to fractional CMOs not as a stopgap, but as a way to accelerate growth with intent and discipline.

I work closely with founders, boards and investors navigating rapid change. Across the market, particularly in SaaS, insurtech and private equity-backed environments, there is a growing recognition that marketing cannot sit on the sidelines until scale is achieved. It must be embedded early, structured properly and closely aligned to commercial outcomes. The

fractional CMO model reflects that reality.

From short-term solution to strategic accelerator —

Historically, interim or fractional marketing leadership was often reactive. A senior marketer would be brought in to cover a departure, implement a change management programme or tackle an immediate challenge. The remit and, in turn, its objectives have been narrow and time-bound as a result.

What I see now, though, is fundamentally different. Businesses are bringing in fractional CMOs deliberately, often pre-emptively, because they want senior-level expertise shaping their growth strategy from the outset. Rather than waiting for complexity to appear, they are building the infrastructure needed to scale with confidence.

This is especially common between funding rounds, when scrutiny increases, and every decision feels magnified. Founders need to demonstrate momentum without wasting capital, and investors expect clarity on how growth will be delivered. A fractional CMO brings credibility, structure, and

experience at a time when flexibility matters just as much as pace.

Importantly, these leaders are not being asked simply to advise, but are instead being entrusted with ownership. That includes sharpening positioning, aligning marketing to revenue, introducing meaningful reporting and building teams that can deliver consistently.

Why fractional makes sense —

There are several forces driving this shift. The first is the growing complexity of marketing itself. Data, technology, CRM systems and automation now sit at the heart of marketing performance. Add generative AI and evolving search behaviours into the mix, and the skills required in marketing functions have multiplied.

Businesses in the early stages of their growth journey cannot afford to experiment for long. They need leaders who understand how marketing connects to valuation, investor confidence and long-term scalability. At the same time, committing to a full-time CMO too early can create pressure on budgets when agility is crucial.

Fractional CMOs provide a solution that balances both of these needs. Businesses gain access to senior expertise without long-term overheads, while retaining the ability to adapt as priorities change. There is also a significant talent shift underway. Many experienced CMOs are choosing fractional careers deliberately. They are motivated by variety, fast-paced environments and the opportunity to make a tangible impact in a shorter timeframe.

From a business perspective, these individuals bring a depth of experience that can be transformative. These leaders know what good looks like because they have seen what happens when foundations are weak and when they are built well, and they bring a wealth of knowledge from other roles, sectors and geographies that can be invaluable.

Commercial discipline over cosmetic marketing —

One of the biggest misconceptions I encounter is the idea that marketing leadership is primarily about output. New campaigns, refreshed messaging or a redesigned website can all feel productive, but without commercial alignment, they rarely move the needle in a meaningful way.

Fractional CMOs tend to focus on what sits beneath the surface. Their priority is ensuring that marketing activity is accountable,

measurable and directly linked to growth outcomes. That might mean rebuilding reporting frameworks, improving CRM usage, or introducing marketing operations capabilities that connect marketing spend to revenue performance.

In investor-backed environments, this discipline matters greatly. Boards want confidence that marketing is effective, and fractional leaders play a critical role in translating marketing performance into a language that finance teams and investors trust. They are also helping marketing teams evolve. The role of the marketer is changing fast, and today's teams are expected to combine creativity with technical fluency, drawing insight from data while keeping pace with new tools and platforms. Fractional CMOs are well-placed to guide that transition because they see how different businesses respond to the same pressures.

What businesses need to get right —

The success of the fractional model, however, depends entirely on how it is used. Treating a fractional CMO as a consultant who operates on the margins undermines the value they can truly deliver. It's critical that fractional leaders have access to decision-makers, the authority to influence direction and a clearly defined set of outcomes aligned to the wider growth plan. When

they are positioned as part of the leadership team, even on a part-time basis, impact follows quickly.

Founders also need to be realistic about readiness. A fractional CMO cannot compensate for the absence of delivery capability across the business. Their role is to set direction, build frameworks and challenge assumptions. Execution still matters, and teams must be supported accordingly, but a fractional CMO isn't there to handle delivery.

Ultimately, the rise of the fractional CMO reflects a broader shift in how ambitious companies think about growth. It signals a move away from viewing marketing as a cost to be delayed or diluted, and towards treating it as a strategic asset that shapes credibility, trajectory and valuation.

In today's market, where capital efficiency and speed are under constant scrutiny, bringing in the right experience at the right time can be decisive. Fractional marketing leadership gives fast-growth organisations a way to move faster with confidence, without locking themselves into structures that no longer fit. The most successful founders I work with are not asking whether they can afford senior marketing leadership. They are asking how early they need it to build the business they want to scale.

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Winning in the search for visibility —



By: **Heather Delaney**,
Founder & MD,
Gallium Ventures

Historically, Marketing and PR have worked hand-in-hand to 'game' SEO – and just when we'd got it down to a perfect science, enter AI.

You can make the case that SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) is dead, and some certainly have, but it's not dead yet. Instead, AEO (Answer Engine Optimization) and GEO (Generative Engine Optimization) are what SEO is evolving into as AI innovation continues.

The game hasn't changed entirely. It's just a completely new playing field that brands have to navigate for visibility, as a game of credibility, humanity and confidence - a triple threat to consider if you want to secure a spot in the results.

The question of credibility —

Large Language Models (LLMs) are becoming search engines, and where they are not, AI summaries fill in those gaps (with 'zero-click' searches being upward of 70%). The first page of Google is now what the second page used to be (the uncharted depths); it's no longer a question of ranking, but of being cited.

As AI models prioritise authority and credibility, the question is, 'What makes your brand credible?'

The answer: ensuring your brand is included in reputable publications, talked about by trusted journalists and providing a fresh perspective that sets your brand apart from the rest.

With PR, the strategy shifts to create earned stories that pick up across different channels, as many as possible, really, from National, to Regional and New Media (i.e. Blogs, Social Media and Podcasts) to relay to the LLM that the information is readily and widely available because it is trustworthy and worth recommending.

A human premium —

As people, marketers and PRs are driven by stories. For a world increasingly skeptical of the ever-growing amount of AI-generated content, it's more important than ever for brands to leverage storytelling, a profoundly human skill, to break through the 'slop' and establish themselves as real, reliable and trustworthy.

Hand-in-hand with storytelling, injecting a more personal element into your brand DNA can elevate your positioning. This goes beyond things like empathy or lived experience; it's the brand's passion and people behind it, or the experiences of your user base. It's establishing a connection with your audiences that an AI can't replicate.

A currency of confidence —

Neutral content is alive and well in the AI-age (often because it's AI-generated...), so communicating your thoughts and opinions is a refreshing approach that many brands dismiss as an option.

An important distinction: confidence is not a measure of the loudest, or most controversial, voice. Confidence is leveraging your brand's identity proactively, by offering your brand's human perspective, or human story, when there's an industry shift, a cultural moment or something you, as a brand, believe in.

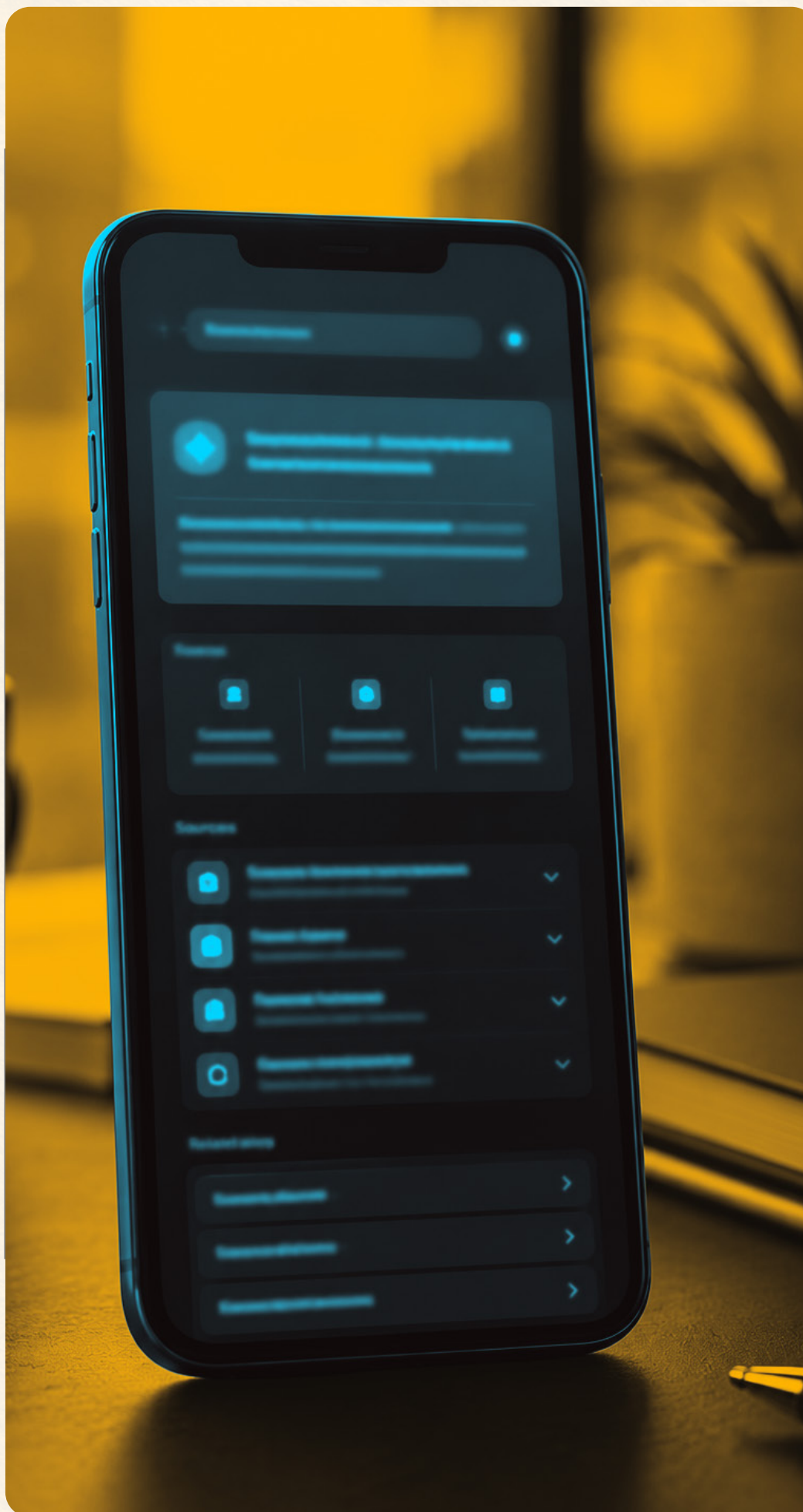
Adapting your voice to align with the moment signals not only that you are consistent but also that your brand is a thought leader when it matters, not just for the buzzword.

Navigating the transition away from SEO is not an exact science, but we have formulas that yield the results we want; it's just making the case for why they should continue to be used and built on.

The bottom line is that brands looking to be visible should be, first and foremost, credible. Boost that credibility with elements that shouldn't be lost: humanity and the magic of storytelling, and be confident about the stories you tell.

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Why content localisation breaks at scale —

and what brands can do about it.

A company creates a strong campaign. It might be a product shoot, a brand film, or a set of digital assets. Then it has to be recreated. Again, and again. Each market needs its own version, each channel its own format, each audience its own variation. What starts as a creative exercise quickly turns into a production problem. Most of that work is not creative. It is functional, repetitive, and tied to scale. For businesses operating across multiple markets, that pressure has been building for years.

The challenge is not just producing more content. It is making that content work across different markets. Global teams define the brand. Local markets are expected to make that work feel relevant. In practice, those teams are often working under time pressure, with limited budget and little creative support. What follows is predictable. A campaign that feels cohesive at the centre starts to fragment as it moves across regions.

Localisation has never been a mechanical task. It involves decisions about tone, casting, environments, and context. Even the mighty Nintendo missed a step around the launch of

the Wii, a console whose name British audiences could not help but associate with a trip to the bathroom. It is a small example, but it reflects a broader truth. Adapting creative work requires judgement, not just execution.

That challenge becomes harder as the volume of content increases. Content demand has outpaced how brands are set up to produce it. Brands are now working with more channels, more audience segments, and more frequent campaign cycles than their production models were ever built to handle.

Multiply that across several markets and the number of assets required can quickly escalate. In the past, that either limited what could be produced or placed sustained pressure on creative teams.

AI solves the production layer —

AI is often presented as a way to solve this. It can generate content faster and in far greater volume than traditional production models. That is useful, but it only addresses part of the problem. In most organisations, the strain sits in the production layer. The need to create, adapt, and deliver



content across markets and channels is where most teams spend their time.

AI fits naturally into that layer. It can take on the executional work that sits beneath the core idea. It acts as the engine room for the kind of output that large organisations need but struggle to sustain. What it cannot do on its own is hold a brand together. Left unmanaged, outputs begin to vary. Tone shifts, visual quality changes, and content produced by different teams start to feel inconsistent.

Creative direction moves upstream —

This is where art direction becomes more important. In a traditional approach, creative teams focus on producing assets. With AI in the mix, more of that work moves earlier in the process. Creative teams instead focus on defining how content should be created before it is produced at scale. That means setting a clear visual language, establishing how the brand should behave across different contexts, and putting boundaries in place that guide what good looks like. AI does not replace creative judgement. It amplifies whatever sits upstream of it.

We worked with a company that needed to speak to very different types of users. Instead of relying on a single set of assets, the work was developed into multiple variations, each tailored

to a specific audience. The underlying direction stayed intact, but the execution shifted to reflect different needs. What would previously have required multiple shoots and significant budget was handled through a single production and extended from there.

That approach allows content to become more relevant without losing its core identity. It also avoids the need to rebuild everything from scratch each time.

Content production becomes distributed —

When direction has already been set, teams in different markets can generate and adapt content without starting from scratch each time. The need for repeated briefing and long feedback loops reduces. At the same time, the brand holds together because the boundaries are already clear.

Instead of everything being produced centrally, more of the work moves closer to the market. Teams are not starting from scratch each time. They are working from a direction that has already been defined and extending it.

Creative expertise moves it to the front of the process. The work shifts from producing individual assets to defining the direction those assets come from and making sure it holds together as it is used across different contexts.

There is a common concern that AI will produce poor quality content. In practice, the bigger risk is inconsistency and bad art direction. Content that is slightly off in tone or execution might still be usable on its own. When that happens repeatedly across markets, the overall brand begins to lose clarity. Most organisations only see that problem once it has already taken hold. Avoiding it depends less on the tools being used and more on the creative direction and structure defined upfront.

Control is what scales —

The brands getting this right are not simply adopting new tools. They are rethinking how content is produced. The work starts with direction. That direction is then extended across markets, audiences, and contexts without being rebuilt each time.

In multi-market environments, that is what makes scale possible without losing coherence. AI can extend creative work. Whether it holds together depends on the guardrails and pipelines that have been defined before it begins.

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