

Briefings

THE VOICE OF LEADERSHIP

**HELP
WANTED:
HUMANS?**

Essential skills still required.

CREATIVITY

CURIOSITY

JUDGMENT

EMPATHY

CRITICAL THINKING

INTEGRITY

ETHICS

HUMOR

COMMON SENSE

\$14.95



WHY SOME FIRMS ARE
REVERSING THEIR STANCE ON
REPLACING PEOPLE WITH AI



OFFICIAL TALENT & ORGANIZATIONAL
CONSULTING PARTNER

POWERING PEOPLE WHO THE OLYMPIC

BEFORE THE WORLD IS WATCHING, THE WORK BEGINS

At Korn Ferry, we power performance for the world's leading organizations through their people. Now, our work moves to the world's biggest stage. As the Official Talent & Organizational Consulting Partner of the LA28 Olympic & Paralympic Games, we're focused on powering the people behind the LA28 Games: the leaders, teams, and systems that help make Olympic & Paralympic moments possible.

Together with LA28, we're helping build and align a workforce of nearly 5,000 people around a shared purpose, designed to perform when the world is watching.

Follow along to watch moments of great performance unfold.



An aerial night view of a large stadium, likely the London Olympic Stadium, featuring a red running track and a green field. The stadium is illuminated by bright lights, and a city skyline is visible in the background. The text "BRINGING THE WHO POWER PIC GAMES" is overlaid in white, sans-serif font.

BRINGING THE WHO POWER PIC GAMES



MISSING

COMMON

SENSE

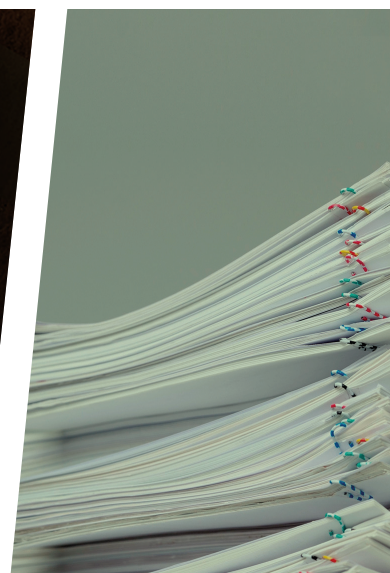
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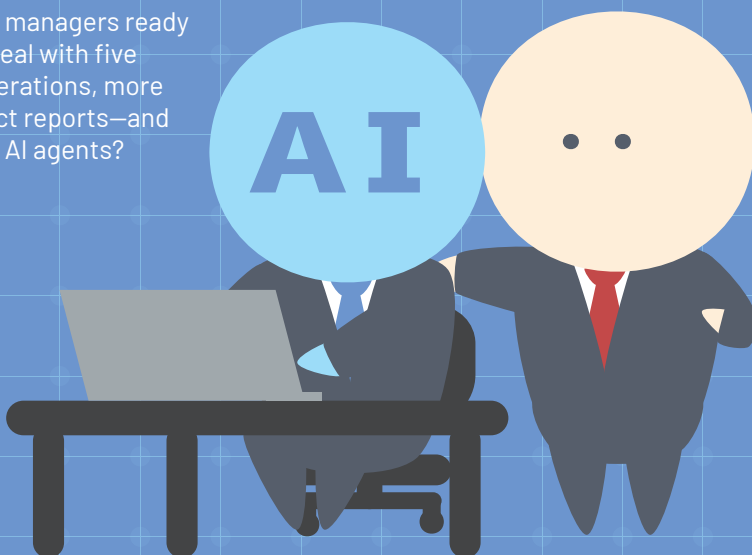
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KinoMasterskaya, Youkinco/Stock, Francesco Carta fotografo, Asiaselects/Getty Images

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Leadership News, Every Week KornFerry.com/Insights



CHIEF
EXECUTIVE
OFFICER
**GARY
BURNISON**

That 'Something' We Don't Want to Hear

"Every time we have a discussion, there's complete alignment—100 percent buy-in." It sounded too good to be true—and, as it turned out, it was.

I can distinctly remember the interview we conducted with an executive several years ago. When we asked about his process for getting buy-in from others, he couldn't wait to give an example. "During a meeting with my team, we had a particularly important decision to make. So, I went around to everybody and asked for a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down on my idea. Before they voted, I told them that, for me, this was definitely a thumbs-up."

"And how did that work for you?" we asked.

"Amazing—it was unanimous!" the executive said. "It was just incredible to see ten people, completely aligned."

Needless to say, this isn't really alignment.

And that brings up a question we've all heard and asked: "I've got good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?"

Most people prefer the bad news first, and research bears this out. It's not that people revel in bad news; they simply want to reduce the uncertainty so they can relax.

There's also a psychological phenomenon at work: the peak-end effect. Simply put, we tend to judge an experience two ways: by the peak moments and by how things end. So, when the bad news is shared first, that

allows the good news at the end to leave a positive impression.

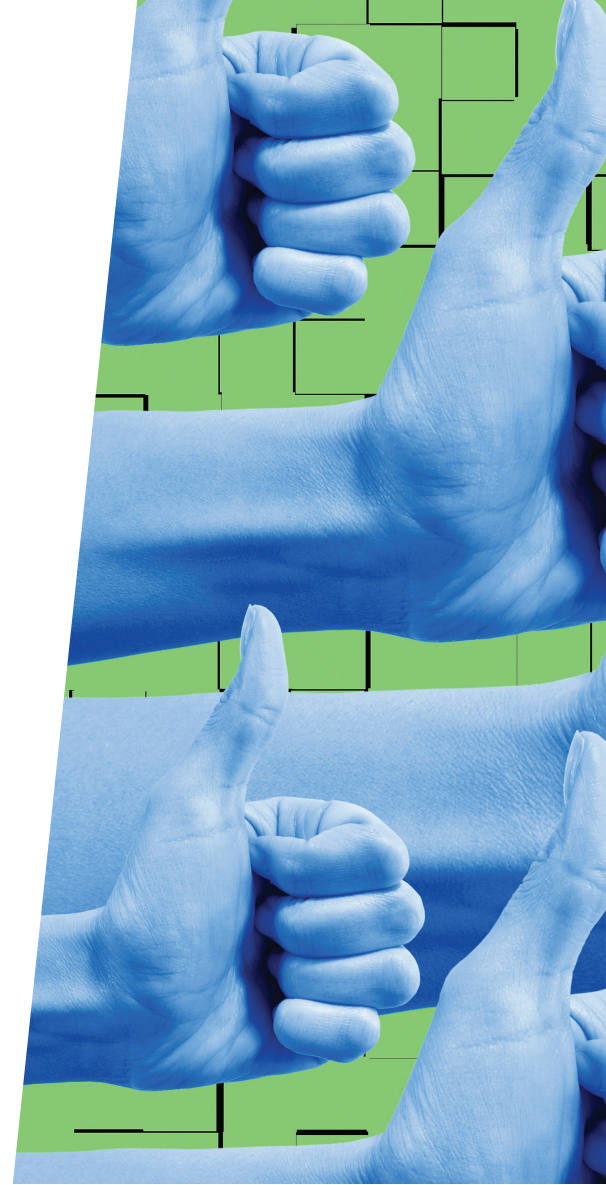
The challenge, though, is that the bearer of that bad news often wants to put off the discomfort for as long as possible. It's like that team discussion where nobody wants to be the one who disagrees.

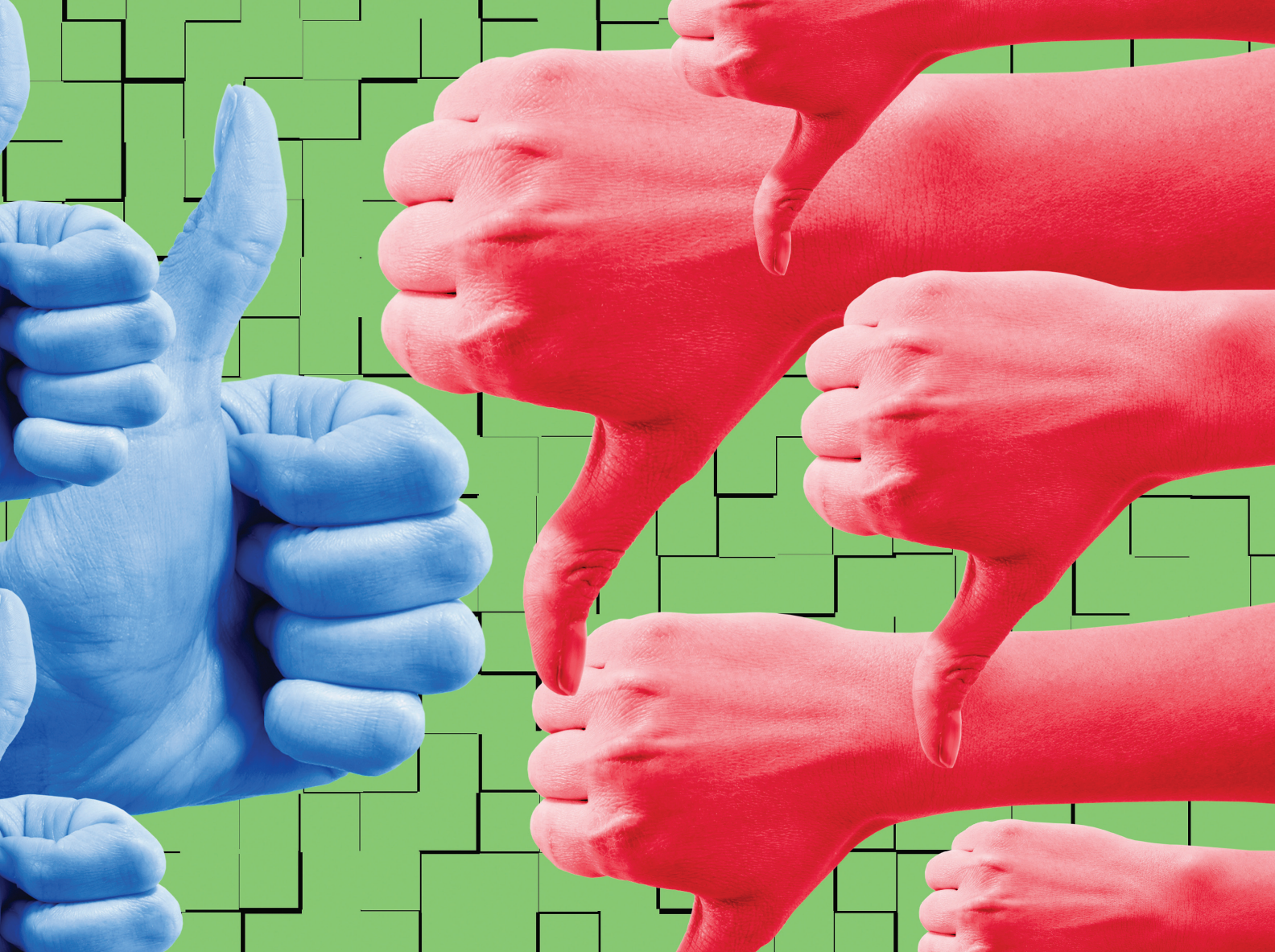
In some meetings these days, I'll simply start with a question: "Tell me something you think I don't want to hear."

What usually follows is a pause, then a very curious look and then something like "I didn't expect that."

Admittedly, what matters most is not what we are against, but what we are for. That's the desired outcome. However, it's never the starting point.

At a time when everybody seems to be opposed to something—with differences overshadowing commonalities—engaging with others is not always butterflies and rainbows.





But real issues only get raised when disagreements are aired.

Too often, though, leaders want the agreement and shun the argument. We've all seen those meetings where everyone automatically concurs—no discussion necessary. Candidly, that's dysfunctional.

Pleasantly agreeing with everyone serves no one. Appeasement is not the same as alignment. What's needed is a healthy dose of constructive conflict to bring out collective genius.

This isn't the equivalent of posting an anonymous two-star Yelp review on last night's meal and never looking back. It's both expressing a viewpoint and helping find a solution.

Only when we assess what's wrong can we construct what's right.

And that's not easy. Whether a roomful or a Zoomful, half the people will have one per-

Leaders too often **want the agreement** and shun the argument.

spective and half will have another.

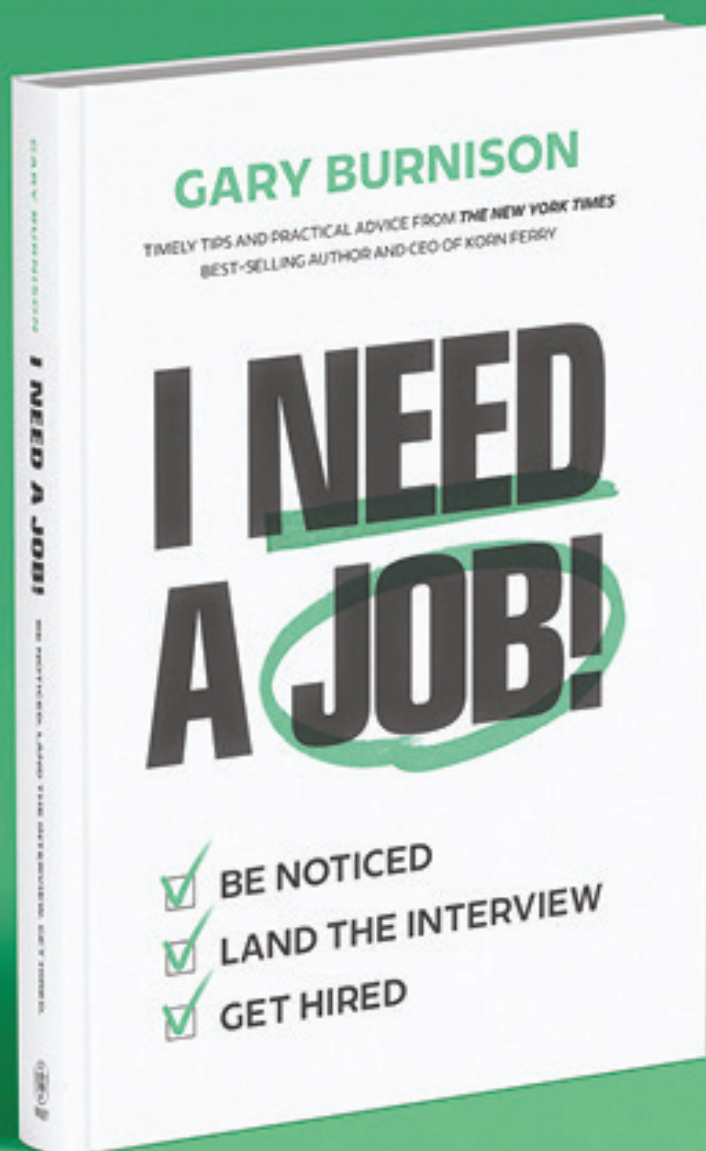
Leadership means creating an atmosphere that elicits candor, with no fear of retribution—fostering transparency and authenticity, mirroring the behaviors we want to see in others.

Because leadership is listening for the silent voices. It's making the uncomfortable truths comfortable. And always seeking that something we don't want to hear. ▮

*For more career advice, read Gary Burnison's latest book, **I Need a Job!***

LEARN WHAT **REALLY** GETS YOU THE JOB

FROM AI AND ASSESSMENTS TO NETWORKING AND INTERVIEWING,
HIRING HAS CHANGED – AND SO CAN YOU.



BRIEFLY ON...

MANAGEMENT

"Conventional management training doesn't work."



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MANAGEMENT

A Management Crisis in the Making

THE TAKEAWAY

Corporate neglect of management training is catching up with many firms.

The tension between **what firms expect of managers** and how they prepare them for the role is coming to a head over AI agents. **By Peter Lauria**

It didn't matter where he got his MBA. It didn't matter how many books he read on management theory and philosophy. It didn't matter how much coaching or training he received from his firm (which likely wasn't much). Nothing prepared him for what he now faced—a team of anxious humans spanning five generations and a network of AI agents, all waiting for him to tell them what to do.

The work of management today is about as foreign and unrecognizable as it was when it first emerged as an area of focus for academics and authors in the first half of the 20th century. Dale Carnegie and Peter Drucker could hardly have imagined a universe where managers oversee dozens, if not hundreds, of employees, many of whom never come to the office, aren't interested in advancing, and increasingly aren't even human. "There's been a real paradigm shift in terms of what it means to

be a manager over the last five years," says Brad Bell, director of the Center for Advanced Human Resources at Cornell University. "Conventional management training doesn't work."

Small wonder then that nearly 80 percent of managers—who are a critical link in any firm's success—report being disengaged at work and roughly the same percentage say they suffer from stress and burnout, the largest of any employee group. At the same time, managers are a dying breed—41 percent of firms reduced management layers last year, and seven out of 10 Gen Z employees



say they wouldn't accept a promotion to manager.

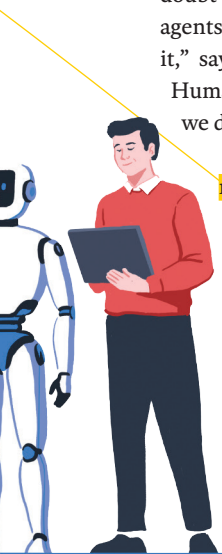
Today, the typical manager oversees 12 direct reports, a 50 percent increase from a decade ago, with that number climbing to 100 or more at some firms that have deployed AI agents. But training managers to deal with AI agents is a lot different than training them to deal with humans. And that's if they are getting any training in those areas to begin with. "I doubt any firm is training employees to manage AI agents, not only because they don't want to pay for it," says Peter Cappelli, director of the Center for Human Resources at Wharton, "but also because we don't yet know how to 'manage' AI agents."

That's not hyperbole. **Only 44 percent of managers say they received formal training.**

Economic conditions are leading companies to cut training budgets, with one recent survey showing that 16 percent of talent development professionals have already experienced cuts, and another quarter expect them before the year is out. Even more telling, despite ranking learning and development as a top priority in survey after survey, employees of all levels only received 40 hours of training on average last year, down 25 percent from 2024.

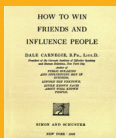
Firms will point out that they are redirecting money and refocusing training funds around AI. And indeed they are: 25 percent of firms expect AI training to receive more funding and resources. The problem, says Cappelli, is that it is the wrong kind of AI training. "The simple issue of checking the output of AI agents isn't managing," he says. Put another way, firms are racing to deploy vast networks of AI agents and putting managers in charge who have only a limited knowledge of how humans work with each other, and no idea how humans and agents interact between and amongst each other.

Paul Cheek agrees. The MIT lecturer and advisor and author of an upcoming book about the "post-human organization" argues that firms are at more risk from the combination of the "Great Flattening" and the emergence of AI agents than they realize. Right now, he says, firms are training people to use AI tools to boost productivity through efficiencies. Instead, he says they should be focused on training managers on how to introduce AI agents into the organization and redesigning how they can work together with humans. "Training has to shift to building shared agency between humans and AI agents instead of just between people." ▀



FROM WINNING FRIENDS TO BECOMING CHANGE AGENTS

What it means to be a manager has changed dramatically over the last 100 years.



1936

Management becomes an area of study with the publishing of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.



1950-1960

As firms grow larger and more complex, management evolves into a distinct profession.



1980s

The focus turns to culture and shareholder value, with firms telling managers to develop talent and drive results equally.



1990s

As the computing and tech age arrives, managers focus on workflow coordination and process redesign.



2000s

With the help of the internet, managers become innovators, focusing on customer experience, experimentation and agile learning.



2020s

Remote work, AI, and other disruptions reshape managers into change agents focusing on adaptability and skill-building.

TECHNOLOGY

BY PETER LAURIA

Hitting the Gas on Driverless

THE VIDEOS AND STORIES were everywhere. A gaggle of autonomous cars stuck in an unrecognized construction zone. A robotaxi stopped dead in traffic. A self-driving car failing to sense a traffic signal and crashing into another car—or, even worse, a person.

Normally, firms and industries don't recover for years from this kind of negative attention—and some never recover at all. But remarkably, business

for self-driving vehicles has only sped up. Once considered experimental, unpredictable, and even dangerous, autonomous vehicles are suddenly being embraced. In cities such as Phoenix, San Francisco, Atlanta, Dallas, and Miami, they've quietly become just another transportation option. "Once people experience a ride in a self-driving car, they get over their initial fear and using them becomes commonplace," says Matt Wayne, managing director

THE TAKEAWAY

Firms facing AI challenges may be able to learn from the driverless sector.

and partner at research firm L.E.K. Consulting.

According to an L.E.K. study, one-quarter of people in cities served by autonomous vehicles have ridden in one. Of those, 92 percent said they felt safe during their ride—seven out of 10 said they felt safer than they would have with a human driver. Getting more people to experience self-driving vehicles is one key to the industry's growth, which is why it's in the midst of its biggest expansion phase to date, with plans to put self-driving cars on the streets in at least a dozen new markets by the end of the year.

To be sure, the industry spent heavily on PR campaigns and lobbying to convince more cities and the public to accept the use of self-driving cars. As experts point out, autonomous-vehicle firms rolled out the vehicles exclusively in metropolitan areas, with their lower speed limits, in order to boost safety records. A government stat the industry often puts out: Since 2021, only about 4 percent of crashes involving self-driving vehicles have been attributed to the autonomous system itself; most were caused by another driver or road user. "The runway to grow gets longer the more the safety aspect improves," says John Buechli, a principal in Korn Ferry's Global Industrial Practice specializing in automotive and manufacturing.

For leaders, there are parallels to some of the challenges presented by AI in the workplace. As Wayne notes, self-driving cars won't completely replace existing modes of transportation, just as AI won't take over every job. But the more exposure humans get to the technology, the more comfortable they'll become with it. "There's always going to be a fight against perception," says Wayne, "but the proof is in the pudding."

The question now is whether all this one-sided publicity will stick. Driverless cars still make mistakes, of course. And, like airplane crashes or virus outbreaks on cruises, those events tend to stick in peoples' minds. Brad Marion, global sector leader for Korn Ferry's Automotive practice, cautions that public confidence remains fragile. He notes that the electric-vehicle market swung from exuberant growth forecasts to production cutbacks and multibillion-dollar write-downs, and warns that "all it takes is one or two high-profile accidents to revive the public's mistrust." ▀

Supatman/Getty Images

TALENT

BY VIVI MELKONIAN

The Endless List of Needed Skills



THE POST WANTED AN "EXPERIENCED" marketing leader. Check! It wanted a candidate who could develop unique strategies. Check, again. But then the list of other needed skills and desires just started piling up: strong collaborator, five years in stakeholder management, clear writer, comfortable operating across ambiguity. And that was before requiring a host of AI skills.

THE TAKEAWAY

Firms need to appear more confident about what employee skills they're looking for.

DATA

LATE TO THE GAME...

Many leaders say their last CEO transition wasn't planned early enough.

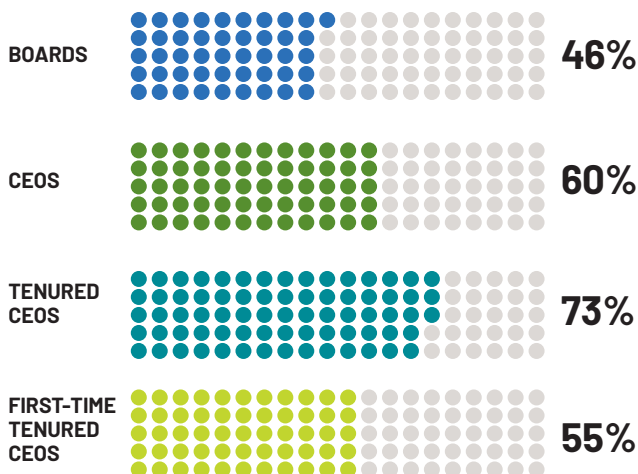
Share who say firm's last CEO succession began too late



AND UNSURE WHERE TO START

Leaders also say the new CEO struggled to balance time and energy.

Share who identified time and energy as the biggest challenges for first-time CEOs



Source: Korn Ferry's 2026 Board and CEO Risk Study.

It's no surprise that firms want some critical skills from job candidates, but the list has turned job postings into what candidates call "tireless manifestos." One study found the average number of words in job postings jumped nearly 15 percent between 2020 and 2025. But for many, it's the list of qualifications firms now demand that seems to have ballooned.

To be sure, in a job market as tough as today's is, it's no surprise that companies would place more demands on candidates. And repeatedly, CEOs have cited the "skills shortage" among workers as the Achilles' heel of their operations. But experts say the paradox of such laundry lists is that by adding more information in an effort to draw better hires, companies can appear unsure of what they're looking for.

"The more I see job descriptions getting longer and longer, it comes back to me as almost corporate indecisiveness," says Angela Blum-Finlay, an adjunct professor at Columbia University and author of *Skill Stacking: Taking Ownership of Your Career in Changing Times*. "We're in a space where a lot of organizations don't know what jobs are supposed to look like anymore."

To no one's surprise, AI is part of all this, with both sides—candidates and hirers—relying on it. Ask AI to write a job description, and it will likely produce an exhaustive inventory of responsibilities and qualifications, lacking the context to distinguish what's truly essential. "If the best prospects need AI to summarize the post before they'll read it, you've probably already lost them," says Quincy Valencia, Korn Ferry's vice president of talent transformation.

This creates an AI feedback loop: companies use AI to write increasingly detailed job descriptions, candidates use AI to tailor their résumé to those postings, and companies use AI to filter applications. Candidates face prolix and restrictive postings, while employers face a flood of nearly identical, AI-generated résumés. "All we're doing is having AI talking to AI," Blum-Finlay says.

Experts say AI should still be a part of the hiring process; indeed, it needs to be in a world with so many applications pouring in. But it should be evolved to account for candidates' practical skills and potential—not simply their past titles or ability to match keywords. One study found that job

previews that gave candidates an accurate picture of what the role would entail are associated with lower voluntary turnover and higher performance. Investing in more human-centric hiring can lead to better-fit hires, lower turnover and stronger long-term growth for employees and organizations.

As candidates place greater weight on organizational culture and values, most HR pros say companies are better served defining their mission and trusting people to bring the skills that help them advance it. “If we get to a skills foundation and less fluff, we get a better alignment,” says Blum-Finlay. ▀



RETAIL

BY ARIANNE COHEN

Who's Buying Toys? Not Just Kids.

AT RECENT TOY INDUSTRY events, it has made for an odd sight: The adults were enjoying themselves just as much as the kids were. Perhaps more.

In the latest example of how nimble retail leaders—and corporate leaders in general—need to be, the toy business started creating and stocking store aisles with

THE TAKEAWAY

Leaders must be careful not to overreact to a current trend that may fade.

fidget toys and figurines geared toward a rather surprising demographic: grown-ups. With fertility rates dropping, a rising number of adults seem to be yearning for some fun and games themselves. Add in the legions of retirees, who increasingly have no grandchildren, and you have yourself a bona fide trend. “If I’m a toy manufacturer, I’m looking for ways to stretch my market,” says Paco Underhill, the author of *What Women Want: The Science of Female Shopping*.

What are the toys? Buildable flowers marketed to women. Make-your-own-stuffed-animals marketed as a couples activity. Endless figurines and toys from TV shows and movies that only adults would watch. Sports-star dolls. Approximately a third of adults now work remotely sometimes, which has an impact on all of this, too. “You wouldn’t use adult Play-Doh in your office in midtown, but you could use it in your home office,” says Underhill.

The industry term for all of this, “kidult,” now represents nearly 20 percent of total toy sales, a figure that has doubled since 2020, based on figures from market researcher Circana. The market

is now worth approximately \$9 billion. Before the pandemic, much of the kidult market was limited to video games and Lego kits geared toward men and nostalgia—think memorabilia and collectibles. This is still partially relevant: Toy firms have found that adults will pay for nostalgia related to iconic brands, often in the form of toy revivals. Experts say it’s filling a need. “We have lost ‘playtime,’ or the ability to power down and be more creative,” says retail expert Denise Kramp, senior client partner at Korn Ferry.

Developing toys for adults is not always smooth sailing. Hit toys are unpredictable. “Toys often succeed or fail in spite of themselves,” says Underhill. Often a toy will organically gain social media momentum, or appear in a TV show or movie by chance—not as a product placement—and watchers will buy it.

Of course, there’s a lesson here for other industries: many of these kidults have been around for decades, just lying in wait for the play activities of their dreams. Now, **the question for toymakers is whether the popularity of kidult toys will last.** Or will the kidult toy market prove to be as fickle and trend-based as the child toy market? ▀

WHAT’S ON THE NEXT BOARD AGENDA

1

GEOPOLITICAL RISK

Nearly three-quarters of executives in a recent survey cited geopolitics as the biggest threat to global economic growth.

2

PAY DISCLOSURE

Boards are weighing changes to executive compensation disclosures following an SEC proposal to reduce requirements.

3

BOOMERANG CEOs

Some boards are actively recruiting experienced CEOs to steer firms through unprecedented disruption.

CBS Radio News: Good Night and Goodbye

Forget watching or scrolling. For some generations, nearly all the news they got was just from listening.

DURING THE NAZI BOMBING of London during World War II, the voice of Edward R. Murrow, the famed journalist for CBS Radio News, was heard in living rooms across America. “This... is London,” he would intone in his baritone voice, bringing vivid descriptions of the Blitz to a rapt audience. At the end of each broadcast, he signed off with “Good night and good luck,” a phrase that would become his calling card during an iconic broadcasting career.

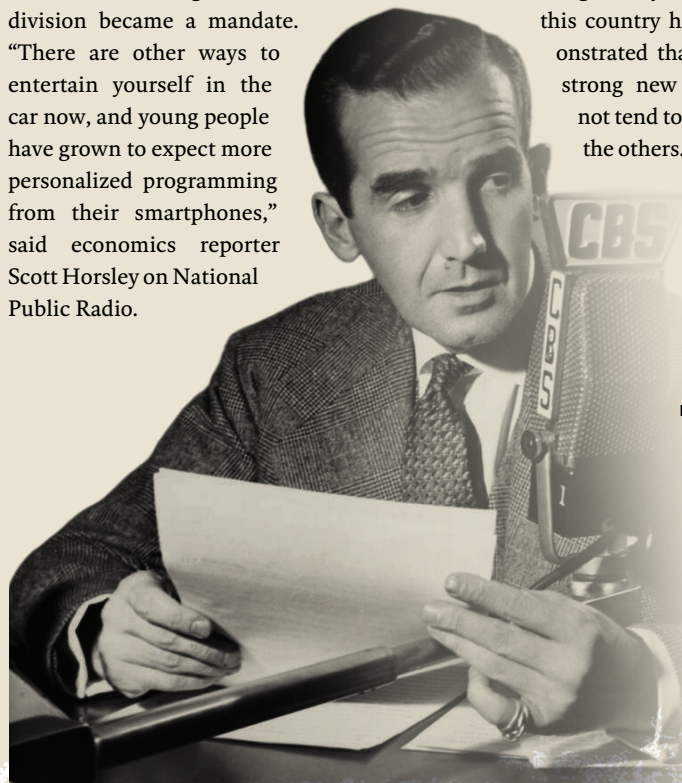
In the era before television, radio was the global technology that connected the world. Murrow was the first among a long list of legendary broadcasters whose voices were heard by generations of Americans on CBS Radio News. Founded in September 1927 by a young William S. Paley as the precursor to his eventual CBS News empire, CBS Radio News was a broadcast-news magnet for such famed radio voices as Walter Cronkite, Eric Sevareid, Dan Rather, and Judy Muller. These voices were among the many notable broadcast newsmen and women who reached the masses through its sacred place on the radio dial. Among media outlets, CBS Radio News was the gold standard, building a high trust factor and providing detailed, quality reporting about wars, domestic politics, the JFK assassination, the Civil Rights Movement, man walking on the moon, the 9/11 attacks, and every other major news event of the day.

After nearly a century on the airwaves, CBS News shut down the CBS Radio News syndication service last spring. Even though CBS Radio News was still carried by 700 stations nationwide, Paramount Global, owner of CBS News, felt it was time to pull the plug. It cited declining radio listenership and shrinking advertising revenue due to dramatic changes in the media landscape. Fewer young people listened to the radio, favoring social media, streaming channels, and podcasts. Cost-cutting in the news division became a mandate. “There are other ways to entertain yourself in the car now, and young people have grown to expect more personalized programming from their smartphones,” said economics reporter Scott Horsley on National Public Radio.

In the midst of such media transformation, the profession remains in flux, but the fallout is clear. “The loss isn’t just sentimental. It’s foundational,” said Lisa Mullins, veteran public radio reporter and anchor in Boston. “We’re seeing, in real time, the chipping away at news outlets that have earned our trust.”

Still, not everyone believes that radio news has met its demise. In a prescient comment in the 1948 CBS annual report, Paley, pointing to the compatibility between radio and television, wrote,

“The long history of mass media in this country has amply demonstrated that the rise of a strong new medium does not tend to displace any of the others.” Stay tuned. ▀



Edward R. Murrow reported for CBS for over two decades.

‘We never got over the COVID pandemic.’ Stuck in Stagnation



G

enerally, the world economy grows quickly, lifting more and more people out of abject poverty as time goes on. From 1997 through 2025, average global economic growth was 3 percent annually, says the World Bank. During that time only two years showed negative growth: 2009, during the global financial crisis, and 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

But recently, the world economy has slowed down, a trend that probably will continue. The years from 2023 through mid-2026 show a consistent decline in growth, to below 3 percent. The World Bank projection for 2026 is now set at 2.5 percent growth, with a further decline to 2 percent likely by 2028. This may not seem like much, but spread across the globe, it translates into very slow growth, far below the level seen prior to 2020. It definitely fits the word “stagnation.”

A confluence of events caused the slowdown, says Pete Earle, senior director of research at the American Institute for Economic Research, beginning with surges in inflation and energy prices, which

tend to move in lockstep. When energy prices rise, inflation typically increases. Most of what we buy requires energy to produce and transport. This makes almost everything more expensive and takes a bite out of personal earnings. “It’s a global tax on the world,” Earle says.

The fiscal hangover from the pandemic hit many countries. The lockdowns during the crisis reduced output and decreased employment, lowering those nations’ income-tax revenues. In turn, smaller tax revenues caused national debt to balloon. For example, the US and leading European countries such as France, Italy, and Spain all have a debt-to-GDP ratio of at least 100 percent. “Financially, we never got over the COVID pandemic,” says Jonathan Fortun, a senior economist in the global macroeconomics department at the Institute of International Finance.

Inflation is also making the cost of debt more expensive. Central banks such as the Federal Reserve, Bank of England, and the European Central Bank (ECB) are all committed to containing inflation. Typically, they increase interest rates to do so. For example, the Fed and the ECB dramatically increased interest rates from less than 1 percent in 2022 to as high as 3.75 percent recently.



“The new model is likely to be regional.”

But higher rates put pressure on governments to increase taxes on citizens, which further slows economic growth. “To raise rates to deal with higher prices is terrible for much of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development,” says Jay Hatfield, founder, CEO, and portfolio manager at Infrastructure Capital Advisors. The OECD includes the US, Western Europe, and other rich countries.

During the pandemic, the global trade system changed dramatically. Global supply chains built under the World Trade Organization (WTO) began to break down. The WTO had helped reduce tariffs to minimal levels, which made trade easier and cheaper.

Now the supply chains need to be rebuilt, all the

while taking on geopolitics, with some countries forming political pacts. For instance, China and Russia seem to be working together. At the same time, tariffs are back in fashion over the last few years. In 2024, the average tariff was 2.5 percent, but by 2025 it jumped to an estimated 18 percent-plus. That tariff increase makes global trade more expensive. “We are far away from going back to the old WTO in Europe, Asia, and the US,” Fortun says.

However, there is good news in the long term. Changes in global trade come and go. The 1930s trade wars eventually ended, and the world economy bounced back. Sooner or later, there’ll be another bounceback, experts say. “Probably the new model is likely to be regional,” Fortun says. ▀

Constable, a former TV anchor at The Wall Street Journal, is a fellow at the Johns Hopkins Institute for Applied Economics, Global Health, and the Study of Business Enterprise.

‘Today’s nonprofit leader must navigate *and* fundraise well.’

CEOs In Need



N

ot too long ago, an organization I know was looking for a new leader who could fix its revenue problems, navigate a big AI investment, curb an exodus of employees, and mend fences with some of its most important stakeholders. That’s a laundry list of challenges that wouldn’t sound

out of place in most Fortune 500 boardrooms. But the organization looking for this type of multitasking leader wasn’t an aerospace contractor, a big-box retailer, or some massive manufacturer. It was a nonprofit that normally focuses on disaster relief and senior housing.

It’s easy to focus on all the leadership turnover in the corporate world: When a CEO steps down at a multinational company, it makes headlines. And in recent years, a record number of CEO departures has made a lot of headlines. The (at times) quieter world of nonprofits is going through its own succession challenges, but without the same headlines as

the commercial sector. There are around 1.9 million registered nonprofits in the United States, ranging from all-volunteer neighborhood groups to multistate hospital systems with more than 240,000 employees and \$120 billion in revenues. And if you look at the CEO turnover rate at nonprofits, you’ll find it’s about 12 percent a year. That’s only slightly less than the rate at which S&P 500 companies change their top leaders.

Some of that churn is because of demographics: Many nonprofit CEOs are baby boomers reaching retirement age. But it’s also because of stress. According to various studies, about 70 percent of C-suite nonprofit executives are at risk of burnout. Nonprofits these days hope they can get at least five good years out of their CEO—enough to successfully complete one multiyear strategy and get started on a new one.

More important than the turnover rate is what



those nonprofits are seeking in their new leaders. A decade ago, if a nonprofit executive had a deep knowledge of their organization's mission, a savvy ability to fundraise, and a good rapport with the organization's directors, they had a really good chance at being successful. But these days, nonprofits are massively prioritizing the same particular leadership trait as many of their for-profit counterparts—namely, agility: the ability, and even desire, to successfully tackle multiple new challenges at once.

You hear nonprofit directors use the term “change management” these days, and it's not surprising. Much like their for-profit cousins, a lot of nonprofits are dealing with operating costs that are significantly higher than they were a few years back. They're also dealing with finding new sources of revenue, as more baby boomers pull back on donations and Gen Z finds themselves not earning enough income to donate. In response, some of the new leaders in the sector are trying to figure out how AI can be used to

cut costs, deliver better services, or improve productivity. All of these disruptions are moving at a faster pace than pre-pandemic challenges. On top of that, political polarization is having a disproportionate impact on many nonprofits. Some themes that got steady support for decades are now unpopular (and vice versa). A new nonprofit leader has to navigate all that *and* fundraise well.

The good news, at least for nonprofits, is that there are plenty of agile executives in the for-profit world who might be willing to make a change. Recently, a healthcare nonprofit picked a new leader who had no experience in the nonprofit world or as a CEO. But in his other roles, the new boss had successfully dealt with revenue issues, staffing troubles, government relations, and healthcare disruptions... often simultaneously. I expect many more nonprofits to consider embarking on similar succession plans, as the two worlds of for-profit and nonprofit begin to collide. ▀

Williams is a Korn Ferry sector leader of its Nonprofit and Higher Education practice.

‘You mistake motion for progress.’

Solving Chaos—Or Creating It?



S

ome leaders stay calm under pressure. They’re the ones everyone turns to in a crisis for quick decisions, clear thinking, and steady hands when everything feels uncertain. But here’s a question most leaders never ask: *Am I calm in the storm, or do I quietly create the storm specifically so that I can feel calm?*

After nearly two decades of coaching executives, I’ve noticed a pattern. Many leaders who excel in chaos don’t just respond to it, they unintentionally create it. Not because they want problems. Not because they enjoy stress. But because somewhere along the way, they learned to equate urgency with purpose, and problem-solving with their worth as a leader.

For years, that wiring serves them well. They work harder, solve the impossible, become indispensable. Eventually, though, their identity evolves into being the rescuer, so when things run smoothly, they feel discomfort instead of relief. Some respond by manufacturing new initiatives or inserting themselves into problems others could solve. Others respond by going quiet: withdrawing, second-guessing, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The organization gets constant motion or

constant hesitation. The leader gets relief. The team gets exhausted.

The biggest misconception about chaos creators is that they’re always high-energy and outspoken. They’re not. I’ve coached driven extroverts who create chaos by moving too fast, piling on new priorities, changing direction midstream, and treating stillness as a warning sign. And I’ve coached quiet, reserved leaders who create just as much disruption by avoiding hard decisions, delaying action, or withdrawing emotionally at the moment things get uncomfortable.

Both create uncertainty. Both force everyone else to compensate. Both leave teams reacting instead of executing. Are you one of these people—or do you know someone who is? In general, there are five signs that you might be a chaos creator.

1. CALM MAKES YOU UNCOMFORTABLE. When things are running smoothly, you feel restless, so you go looking for a problem, or start bracing for one that hasn’t happened yet.



2. YOU MISTAKE MOTION FOR PROGRESS. Nonstop activity and excessive caution can both substitute for real progress—whether it's an overflowing calendar and constant firefighting, or endlessly deliberating over and revisiting a particular decision.

3. YOU CREATE CHANGE INSTEAD OF LEADING IT. Some leaders reorganize and relaunch simply because movement feels productive. Others resist every change until circumstances force their hand. Both extremes create instability.

4. YOUR EMOTIONAL STATE DRIVES THE ORGANIZATION. When you're anxious, everyone becomes anxious. Some leaders broadcast their anxiety through urgency and frustration. Others get silent and unreadable. Either way, people spend more energy managing your mood than doing their work.

5. YOU NEED TO BE NEEDED. You jump in before others get the chance to solve a problem themselves, or you hold so tightly to your own judgment that no one else's decision feels safe. Being needed feels rewarding. But over time, it creates dependence instead of capability. Strong leaders don't build followers—they build other leaders.

Many high achievers were rewarded early in their careers for fixing things. They became the dependable one, the firefighter, the one who could always figure it out, or the one whose caution kept things from going wrong. Either way, solving (or averting) a crisis becomes the thing that makes them feel competent, valuable, alive.

The irony: What built your career can eventually stifle your leadership. As organizations grow, leaders stop being paid for solving every problem and start being paid instead for building systems in which fewer problems happen in the first place.

The strongest leaders aren't just good in a crisis. They build environments where crises become rare. They prioritize before reacting, let others solve problems, and rely on systems instead of heroics or hesitation. They've learned that calm isn't evidence they're becoming less valuable. It's evidence they're leading well.

The greatest compliment a leader can receive isn't "Thank goodness you saved us again." It's "Things are running smoothly because of the culture and systems you built." That's leadership at its highest level. ▀

Bentley is the founder and CEO of Liz Bentley Associates, a consulting firm focused on empowering leaders and their teams.



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HELP WANTED: HUMANS?

By **Russell Pearlman**
Illustrations by
Tim Ames



It's a shocking reversal: A third of managers say they've rehired the human workers AI was going to replace. Will the about-face last?

THE PROBLEM

Firms haven't figured out the right balance between AI and humans.

WHY IT MATTERS

Billions of dollars and millions of jobs are at stake.

THE SOLUTION

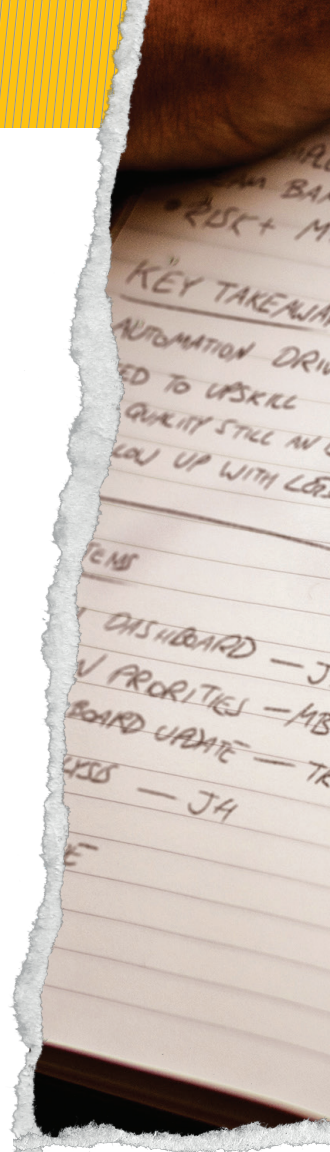
Rethink strategies that assume AI can automate everything.

When one of the copywriters left his marketing agency, Cubic Promote CEO Charles Liu wasn't worried. He was excited, even. Presentations, emails, marketing copy: It was all stuff that large-language AI models were supposed to handle with ease. So instead of replacing the employee, the firm started using one of the world's leading AI products, Claude, to do its work.

Claude certainly churned out drafts quickly—far faster than any human could. Indeed, its output enabled Cubic Promote, which sells more than 15,000 custom-branded products to companies across Australia, to expand its own business. But that, Liu discovered, was also becoming a problem. The reams of content the AI model was producing needed to be edited, fact-checked, formatted, and prepped before any of it

could be shown to other people at Cubic Promote, let alone customers or vendors. "Automating those later stages was much more complex than generating the drafts themselves," Liu says.

Before long, Liu found himself hiring someone who could not only edit the AI content but also assist with the other tasks that transformed an output from interesting raw material into a client-facing finished product. AI is effective, he says, but it needed human help to solve his organization's problems. "It helps the business grow faster but also creates a need for people who can manage, improve, and complete the work it begins."





By the millions, workers have been worried stiff that AI will replace them. After all, not long after the technology's coming-out party—the public debut of Open AI's ChatGPT—economists and tech pros alike were saying the technology would soon eliminate the need for 10, 20, even 40 percent of human employees. Today, business leaders seem eager to use the tech wherever they can, because labor is often an organization's biggest business expense. Plus, even the best human employees are flawed (we can be slow, or stubborn, or demand things like time off). Why pay 100 software engineers when AI can write and test code faster than all of them put together? Who needs 200 salespeople when AI can make all the cold calls and answer client questions? Plenty of organizations, big and small, rushed to implement AI, then slashed jobs by the thousands—or didn't hire for open roles—certain that the technology would make their firms far more productive.

But in a rare reversal, companies are quietly backpedaling on many aspects of the AI revolution. Most importantly, they're rehiring many members of the human species because of their real human traits. The total number is hard to know, but a 2026 survey of 2,000 hiring managers found that 32 percent—almost a third—had eliminated a role primarily due to AI, only to be

**“FOR LITTLE
DETAILS, YOU NEED
THE HUMANS.”**

forced to rehire someone for the same or similar position. In some cases, it's a cost issue—AI has become far more expensive since the major platforms changed their pricing models this spring. Some tasks firms once delegated entirely to AI are now far less expensive if humans do them. Other leaders found that they miscalculated how much work they could automate. But in most cases, leaders are finding that humans have skills, experiences, and decision-making abilities that AI can't replicate—at least, not yet.

Of course, nobody is guaranteeing any favoring of human



“IT’S THE MARKET REDISCOVERING SOMETHING THAT WAS TRUE ALL ALONG.”

over machine will last—not by a long shot. Executives, for one, are loath to admit that their AI plunge was a mistake. But the rapid adoption of AI has certainly been a costly decision, with non-technology organizations on track to spend \$280 billion this year alone. Many firms redirected money to AI that had been

earmarked for salaries, onboarding, and other people costs. Now they’re faced with spending even more money on those exact things. Aaron Strout, author of the book *Wired for Purpose: Why Humanity Is the Biggest Differentiator in a Digital World*, calls this phenomenon “the AI boomerang effect,” and he believes it’s not a fluke or a correction. “It’s the market rediscovering something that was true all along: The future belongs to the most human among us,” he says.

AI’S SIREN SONG

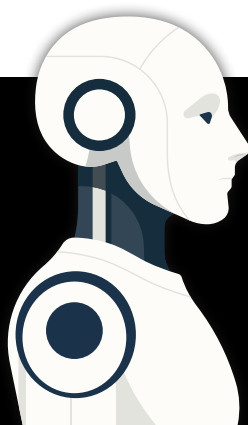
There’s always been a gap between what a technological leap promises and what it actually delivers. During the 19th-century railroad expansion in the United States and Europe, promoters convinced small-town merchants that a rail line would turn their local burghs into bustling commercial centers where products could be sold to customers hundreds of miles away. But in many cases, the advent of the railroad backfired as trains simply flooded small towns with cheap, mass-produced goods from major indus-

trial cities, forcing local merchants out of the business.

More recently, when the World Wide Web was being built out in the 1990s, business leaders were promised that jumping online immediately and at scale—and buying all of the necessary hardware and software—would lead to massive increases in sales and fat profit margins. In truth, many of those first-moving firms spent catastrophic amounts of cash (remember Pets.com or Webvan?) to attract customers. Then they collapsed, because things like warehousing and delivering goods to customers were hugely expensive (and the World Wide Web did nothing to lower the price).

Most of the current crop of business leaders were alive in the 1990s, and while they might not have been running firms back then, they should remember that the early hype of the web did not

match the eventual reality. But AI's siren song, in many cases, was enough for CEOs across industries to dive in headfirst. After all, AI could be the one technological breakthrough that would solve years of frustratingly slow revenue growth. And indeed, some of the early results have been downright magical for firms large and small. Waste Management, in its earnings call this summer, said that AI is generating \$300 million in extra annual earnings by upgrading services and routing garbage trucks more effectively. Then there's Centerfield, a marketing firm which helps connect customers to other organizations. It incorporated AI into its sales calls, then studied more than 260,000 customer conversations. Thanks to AI, the firm doubled the number of potential customers it reached, and the AI agents were, in many circumstances, just



AI VS. HUMAN: A SCOREBOARD

More than three-quarters of US firms have implemented AI in some way. But where has AI outdone humans, and where has the human touch proved more valuable?



AI BETTER

HUMANS BETTER

Drafting presentations. Analyzing and interpreting market research.

MARKETING

Understanding client sentiment. Building client relationships.

Parsing documents. Speeding up brief writing.

LEGAL

Arguing in court. Creating novel legal arguments.

Building account plans. Maintaining communication with clients.

SALES

Closing tough sales. Reading emotional responses of customers.

Recognizing patterns within investing. Flagging potential fraud.

FINANCE

Making high-stakes capital-allocation decisions. Managing crises.

Staging virtual home tours. Targeting potential buyers with properties.

REAL ESTATE

Interpreting homeowner-association documents. Understanding local development issues.

COVER STORY: HUMANS

as effective at closing a sale. “AI is revolutionizing the sales process,” says Aniketh Parmar, Centerfield’s chief technology officer. Stories like those have convinced plenty of leaders to commit, in some cases, millions of dollars to AI rollouts. Many firms also worried that competitors would beat them to the punch if they didn’t jump on the AI bandwagon.

Perhaps more important to many leaders was AI’s promise to cut most organizations’ biggest expense: people costs. Sure, some of those promises from AI-model developers seemed ridiculous—estimates suggested 40 percent of white-collar jobs would be eliminated—but non-tech leaders certainly believed that AI would let them trim their workforces, at least on the margins. Indeed, US business leaders believed that AI could, on average, lower their head counts by 1.2 percent by the end of the decade,

according to an early 2026 survey conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. That might not sound like much, but as a share of the country’s civilian workforce, it represents two million workers US firms wouldn’t need to hire, train, or pay. Leaders around the world subscribed to the same belief to varying degrees. Plenty of firms have used AI to justify cutting their workforces. In the US, about 15 percent of all layoffs over the last year were motivated by AI, and it was the reason for 40 percent of job reductions between March and June of this year.

HUMANITY MAKES A COMEBACK

Quietly, a bunch of firms that carried out AI-driven layoffs have realized that they still need people. A car manufacturer rehired hundreds of engineers to work on quality-control issues. A big technology firm is now bringing some of its HR professionals back because AI can’t handle the many ethical dilemmas their jobs entail.

↓
REPLACE HUMANS
WITH AI
↓
UNEXPECTED
CONSEQUENCES
↓
HELP WANTED
HUMAN

FINDINGS
TOMORROW
UNKNOWN
G?
FIRST

HELP
WANTED:
EMPATHY

IMPROVE AI... AND PEOPLE



REDESIGN ROLES WITH AI IN MIND.

Instead of just assuming AI will cut head count, think about which aspects of a role AI can take over to free up an employee for higher-value tasks.



CHECK AI'S WORK.

Never let AI-created products go out the door without being reviewed by a human employee.

bounward, Medina Creatives/Getty Images

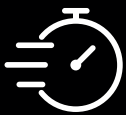
HELP WANTED: CRITICAL THINKING

DATA
+
CONTEXT
+
JUDGMENT
=
DECISION

HUMANS
NO
QUANTITIES
ES
WANTED:
NS?

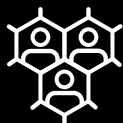


Some leaders think AI will solve all their problems, and some don't want to touch it. Experts suggest leaders make these adjustments to balance AI and human workers:



USE AI TO SPEED UP "INVISIBLE" ASSIGNMENTS.

Focus first on tasks that require minimal human interaction, such as retrieving information or processing transactions.



GIVE PEOPLE FREEDOM TO EXPERIMENT.

Encourage and reward individuals and teams for finding creative ways to use AI and sharing best practices across the organization.

Indeed, 39 percent of business leaders said they made employees redundant as a result of deploying AI, but more than half of those leaders, 55 percent, said some of those decisions turned out to be wrong, according to a 2025 survey by software firm Orgvue. Firms are learning that the AI hype—the idea that the technology would allow firms to cut their workforces immediately—was misconceived from the start, says Bryan Ackermann, Korn Ferry's head of AI strategy and transformation. "We're getting our first experience, at scale, of what AI can and can't do," he says.

**"WE'RE GETTING OUR
FIRST EXPERIENCE,
AT SCALE, OF WHAT AI
CAN AND CAN'T DO."**

COVER STORY: HUMANS

Experts point to a couple of reasons why organizations might have miscalculated. The first was somewhat out of their hands. After many firms spent large sums to get their back offices and data computers ready to implement the technology, the big AI firms that hadn't been charging for their tools dramatically raised their prices by 20 percent to 40 percent. (The firms had burned through so much cash.) That caught everyone off guard. Suddenly, as fees matched how much work the AI agents performed, AI-automated workflows were no longer cheaper, and in some cases, they were far more expensive than human employees had been. Even those who have the most to gain from the AI revolution say the changing costs of the technology are an issue. "For my team, the cost of compute is far beyond the costs of the employees," says Bryan Catanzaro, vice president of applied deep learning research at NVIDIA, the major supplier of microchips for AI use.

But the biggest reason may be that leaders, pulled in by the hype, overestimated how much work AI could actually do. AI does lots of things pretty well, but it needs a human to bring its output—whether it's a software program or a marketing presentation—to the finish line. Many leaders assumed that since AI absorbs tasks, it actually eliminates jobs, Strout, the author, says. That's why many companies stopped hiring entry-level employees: They thought AI agents could do all the basic collating, data analysis, website building, and coding often expected of young people entering the workforce. But give AI a situation that requires judgment, negotiation, or relationship building, and it sputters. Even junior employees often perform better in those situations than AI does. "There are still moments when people prefer to speak to another human," says Petr Chocholka, director of IP development for the Korn Ferry Institute. It's not because the AI has necessarily failed, he says, it's because trust, familiarity, and accountability feel different when another person is involved.

THE AI/HUMAN BALANCE

Experts say that firms realize within six to 18 months of implementing a full AI rollout whether or not they got the AI/human balance right. If they got the balance wrong, it winds up being costly. In one case, Strout says, for every dollar a company saved

HELP WANTED: HUMANS?

Essential skills still required.

JUDGMENT

CRITICAL THINKING

ETHICS

HUMOR

COMMON SENSE

CREATIVITY
EMPATHY

when it laid off its 350 employees, it had to pay \$1.27 to rehire them. Plus, there's the opportunity cost firms faced not having humans in the organization to do the work when the work needed to be done.

To be sure, there are many leaders—in both the public and private sectors—who believe AI will still upend the global job market. The World Economic Forum estimates that AI and

other automated systems will displace 92 million jobs by the end of the decade. But the group also says the technological shift will create 170 million new roles. "Do we need more people? Do we need less people? We have no idea," notes Paul Osterman, a professor emeritus at MIT and the author of *Disposable Workers: The Transformation of Employment*. At least for now, most employers aren't exactly racing to rehire. The \$32 trillion US economy has only added, on average, 16,000 jobs a month over the last year.

Outside of the COVID-19 pandemic, that's the lowest rate since the Great Recession.

Still, savvy leaders have learned that AI can only take them so far. They need a human touch to excel, even if it costs them more money in the short term. Tarik Khribech found that a cheap monthly AI subscription lets him effectively run the website, marketing campaign, and several other things involved with the day-to-day operations of his company, AllBetter, which connects landlords and homeowners with contractors for repair work. After he turned the site over to AI, Khribech fired the various agencies helping him with web design and sales. But AI wasn't improving the site's appeal or services—both of which Khribech needed in order to attract more customers. It wasn't long before he brought in different agencies—run by people—to help fine-tune AllBetter's operations. "The AI model gives you the big picture," Khribech says, "but for little details, you need the humans." ▀

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IN A WAY THAT I'VE NOT HEARD FROM A POWER AMPLIFIER."**

ROBERT HARLEY, *THE ABSOLUTE SOUND*, ISSUE 371



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THE ERA OF

REJECTION

BY ARIANNE COHEN

✕ THE PROBLEM

AI-powered applicant-tracking systems reject billions of job candidates.

✕ WHY IT MATTERS

Even if people are hired, their self-esteem (and production) can drop dramatically.

✕ THE SOLUTION

Return to human-centered screening, which improves hiring and reduces the sting of rejections.



With job rejections
reaching unprecedented
levels, even hired
candidates can suffer
emotional harm. Are we
creating a despondent
workforce?



Alan's confidence was fairly low when he stepped away from his C-suite marketing role. Leaving the job felt like the only option to him. "It simply wasn't sustainable anymore," he told his career coach, Gustavo Imhoff, owner of Transformative Journeys Ltd. "It had taken a real toll on my mental health."

If only he knew that the mental harm was just beginning. He found a polished-looking CV template and began applying for marketing leadership roles. First he responded to 10 job postings. Then 20. Then 30. Then 40. Month one came and went. As he sat in his home office, the silence was broken only by his keystrokes and the occasional automated rejection email.



DNV59/Stock/Getty Images



According to Imhoff, Alan was already feeling fragile: After years in an exhausting job, he was swiftly draining his savings. He worried whether he'd be able to cover his bills, yet struggled to pick up the phone to network. Every incoming rejection landed as a verdict on him—his personality, his abilities, his career. “That’s the part of job hunting that people underestimate,” says Imhoff. Every “no” is received by the candidate as something wrong with *them*. “Job hunting right now really tests your sense of self,” he says. And for Alan, each week added more rejections, ghostings, and emotional harm.

Rejection is a part of life, but what happens when the pounding to your psyche never seems to stop? Back during the Great Recession, a job applicant sent out one or two applications a day, each manually—and, in the worst-case scenario, racked up a couple dozen rejections in a month. Today some candidates apply to 20 to 30 jobs per day and accumulate 500 rejections monthly, amid a sea of blurry rebuffs and depressing ghostings. One leading AI-application platform rejected 1.1 *billion* applicants over a seven-year period. A single company’s system

“There’s this **real fear** that maybe hirers are seeing the *real* them.”

can cause psychological damage and motivational issues that experts say can persist even when a job offer comes in.

“It’s this black hole,” says Ofer Sharone, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst who studies job rejection. “In the US, people tend to see the process as a reflection of something deeper about themselves.” Most job applicants, he says, rationalize the situation at first—there are too many applicants, and not enough jobs—but slowly, “there’s this real fear that maybe hirers are seeing the *real* them.”

The totality of all this rejection has no historical precedent,

“They are starting their jobs as **survivors**, feeling exhausted and depleted.”

and leading business psychologists say it's causing a similarly unprecedented magnitude of harm. This year, the average job search will last 6.6 months, according to a 2026 survey by United Way; for millennials and boomers, it will drag on a bit longer—to an average of 7.2 and 7.4 months, respectively. For tech workers, the average is 9.7 months, meaning that many are weathering rejections for a year or more. The typical applicant will send in 63 job applications, spending 44 minutes per application—and land just five interviews. That's 58 rejections, without interacting with a human.

To be sure, not everyone falls into the depths of the rejection blues. Some people shift gracefully from laid-off to unemployed to employed. But psychologists and managers are noticing an increase in certain underlying psychological tendencies, as well as poor coping skills in the workforce. Beyond the individual harm, there may be an irony in all this: Firms are paying the price of their own high-volume rejection processes—which leave many new employees scarred, emotionally exhausted, and tentative because they fear falling into the black hole again. And as more post-rejection distress seeps into corporate hallways, HR leaders say they have little choice but to dramatically rewrite the rules of applying. Or at least try to.



HOW JOB SEARCHES BECAME MASS REJECTION EVENTS

The concept of mass rejection is not entirely new. The Depression era saw thousands of hopeful employees waiting outside factory gates for a dozen jobs. But that rejection was collective: A hopeful worker was turned away once, alongside many others.

Once the economy recovered, many workers expected to work for the same company for their entire lives. From the 1950s to the 1980s, applying for a job was perceived as manageable because it was a once- or twice-in-a-lifetime task. A job search meant buying the Sunday paper, typing cover letters, mailing résumés, and weeks of waiting. The ensuing rejection letters would say, We

will keep your résumé on file, which was true—firms had literal filing cabinets. A job seeker sent out a dozen or two dozen applications, not hundreds. Once hired, sure, they encountered other, milder rejections: They might be overlooked for a promotion here and a raise there, but that would be only a couple of rejections over a few years—for someone who was still employed.

The process began to change when recruiting shifted from paper to the internet. The job board Monster, then called Monsterboard.com, launched in 1994. Though no one appreciated it at the time, employers were dependable about responding and, often, providing feedback. “It was very anxiety reducing,” says Sharone, author of *The Stigma Trap: College-Educated, Experienced, and Long-Term Unemployed*. “You can organize your life around the second-round interview or next set of applications.” With the advent of one-click applications in the 1990s and aughts, applicants could apply more often, and while rejections soared during the pandemic, the process for many people was manageable, albeit depressing.

Now head into 2022, when gen AI appeared and automated both applying and hiring—increasingly removing humans from the loop. This is the point at which applying for jobs became, quite literally, inhumane. Ask Bradley Hankins, who has been searching for an operations leadership role in Alabama for two months. He submits six to 10 applications daily. “I try to be selective, but even closely matched applications often receive no response at all,” he says. When he does hear back, it's an automated rejection. “The most frustrating part is not necessarily being turned down,” he says. “It's investing time in tailoring an application and then receiving no indication that a person ever reviewed it.”

That lack of human communication is damaging, says organizational psychologist Cathleen Swody, managing partner at Foster Talent Consulting. Humans are wired for feedback and the pursuit of behaviors that yield rewards; few of us are capable of remaining upbeat in the face of a black hole of no rewards. Absent any clear feedback or explanation, she says, “our brains fill in the gaps—with self-criticism and judgement.” Candidates experience a negative spiral, which quickly lowers their confidence and can lead them to falter in their other job-seeking efforts, like networking and interviewing. “After weeks or months of rejection, they come across as flat and underengaged, because they're half-expecting to be rejected,” says Swody.

Swody advises applicants to remind themselves

FEEL THE STING—AND MOVE ON

Some applicants weather a dozen rejections a week—and still enjoy their weekends. Others climb into bed and stay there. Psychologists point to five common negative reactions and how to respond.

THE PROBLEM

WHY

THE ANTIDOTE

"My job is my identity."



Your self-worth is built on your professional life, so rejections feel like attacks on your identity. Ouch.

Learn to perceive yourself based on internal traits and values unrelated to work, like kindness and family.

"I'm unemployable."



You've internalized and globalized a rejection.

Externalize and specify: "The hiring manager chose someone with an MBA and 10 years more experience."

"They ghosted me, because I'm a schlub with no future."



When you hear nothing, you fill in the blank with the most personally damaging hypothesis.

Remind yourself of the likely reality: Hiring managers are inundated with résumés right now.

"I absorb every rejection as a personal wound."



You experience minor rebuffs and critiques as deeply personal rejections, and overreact accordingly.

Respond to precisely what was said ("Your interview skills could use improvement") not to your translation ("I'm terrible at this and they hate me").

"I'm still thinking about the rejection from three weeks ago."



You replay and re-analyze rejection—behavior that's associated with mental-health challenges.

Stop ruminating. Let yourself feel the sting—and move on.

that the search doesn't define them. She encourages them to measure their progress in terms of controllable metrics, such as interview prep and the number of colleague coffee dates they've arranged in a given week. She doesn't hesitate to admit that this is very challenging in the midst of ongoing rejection. For his part, Hankins is trying. "I am doing my best to stay disciplined about the search rather than treating every rejection and unanswered application as a personal judgment..." He trails off.

WHY IS REJECTION SO PAINFUL?

We all understand why one perfectly talented and skilled job candidate might receive hundreds of rejections. Yet why is it so hard to gracefully endure the process? It turns out that in other countries, the job market is not quite so brutal on candidates' mental health. In Israel, for example, hiring is generally seen as based on qualifications, professional experiences, and skills—to a fault, says Sharone, who has studied both the US and Israeli job markets. Cover letters are rare. In the US, of course, "it's a chemistry game," he says. "People think that what really matters is making employers like the person behind the résumé." Networking, a tiring and painful process for many, becomes mandatory.

Repeated job-search rejections tend to distort how accomplished and talented people see themselves—and how they may perform at their next job. Some begin internalizing the voice of the job descriptions, so much so that their own voices begin to disappear. "It's a kind of professional-identity whiplash," says Golda Inquito, founder of career-advisory firm The Talent Treehouse.

Meanwhile, months of being ignored have

Reject All



“Early in the hiring process, **filter in** rather than filter out candidates.”

“Early in the hiring process, we want to filter in rather than filter out candidates,” to gather as big a qualified funnel as possible, says Karena Man, senior client partner in the Technology and Digital practice at Korn Ferry. This means catching traits like potential, which might be hidden amid a candidate’s unorthodox mid-career pivot, or experience in two unrelated fields that together are useful. Humans are excellent at reading those signals. For instance, if an applicant grew up working at the family restaurant, a human will immediately grasp that they likely understand more about customer service than most retail executives. But a bot will reject the applicant’s résumé due to their lack of formal

customer-service experience.

Though the problems of the job-application process are systemic, Sharone notes, their roots can be narrowed down to the 15 seconds of consideration that most applicants receive. If he could wave a magic wand, he says, he would have employers spend more time reviewing applications. “We already know that who works in the organization is everything. So don’t you want to invest more in a process that leads you to bring in the best people?”

As for Alan, he did indeed survive his job search. His first task with Imhoff, his career coach, was not retooling his résumé, but retooling his self-talk and self-perception. “No one is going to bet on you if you don’t feel you’re worth the bet,” says Imhoff. Together, they reshaped his résumé to give it a point of view. Alan landed a couple of interviews, and began hearing back about genuinely exciting opportunities. Within two months, he landed a role that met his compensation needs and promised a reasonable work-life balance. He took the leap.

Hiring experts note that this moment—when the candidate’s rejection crisis is seemingly over—will require extra attention. Once a job is accepted, relationship building must commence immediately, long before onboarding. “If an organization remains distant or bureaucratic during this transition, the initial cynicism can turn into disengagement,” says Erdogan. Think warmth and human contact, with intentional investment in relationship building. In an era of rejection, it may be the wisest next step for employers. ▀

reshaped candidates’ attitudes toward employers. This is particularly true of early-career workers, who already tend to see the system as broken and impersonal, and cast a cynical eye on the corporate world, says career-transition researcher Berrin Erdogan, professor of management at Portland State University. Long before onboarding, the candidate already sees their relationship with their employer as transactional, she says: “They are starting to look at their job as only a paycheck.”

When an American applicant finally does get hired, they often have weathered months of capricious-seeming AI screenings, cold rejections, and ghostings. “They are starting their jobs as survivors, feeling exhausted and depleted,” says Erdogan.



IS THERE A BETTER WAY?

Firms, of course, are entirely in control of the hiring process—one that is currently leaving new hires as basket cases by the time they reach onboarding. Researchers advise bringing humans back into the process early and often, as emerging data shows that being turned down is more hurtful when it comes from an algorithm, says Erdogan. “The dynamic is especially problematic with AI-driven video interviews,” she says.

Human screening happens to align with best hiring practices.

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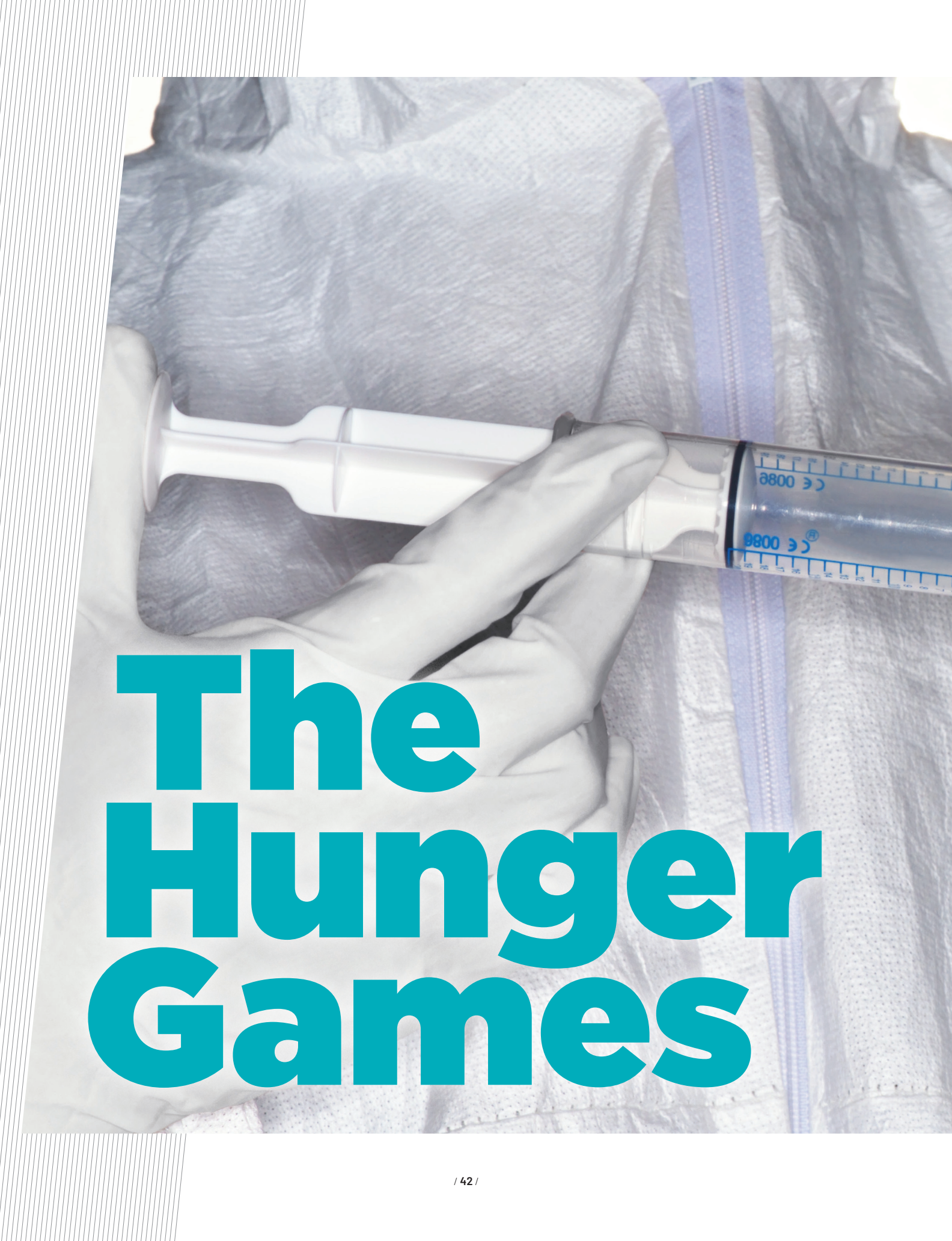
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The Hunger Games

THE PROBLEM

The nutritional quality of fruits and veggies is down, creating an epidemic of hidden hunger.

WHY IT MATTERS

Low nutrition causes a range of health issues and overeating.

THE SOLUTION

Use science and tech to reimagine the future of food.



Food's nutritional value has dropped sharply. Can new science—and a handheld device—jolt a \$10 trillion industry?

By Meghan Walsh



Imagine this: As shoppers peruse the produce aisle at the grocery store, they keep their smartphones at the ready. When they come to the carrots, they find a multitude of options, each with a slightly different hue and aroma, as well as varying qualities. The shoppers point and shoot, and a spectrometer built into each phone's camera scans the veggies, revealing the nutritional composition of each carrot, including which has the most vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients.

Like many a technological fantasy, this one may not be far off. But regardless of whether it comes to pass, it is a prescient reminder of a stubborn and disturbing problem: What we are eating today isn't what we used to eat.

Over the last 75 years, fruits and vegetables have gotten bigger, juicier, and more aesthetically appealing. Grain yields have skyrocketed. A massive, complex global network of food producers that can feed more than 8 billion people has arisen, with annual revenues reaching almost \$10 trillion. But other metrics have moved in the opposite direction, as the nutritional quality of some supermarket staples trends downward. The reasons for this are manifold and the consequences far-reaching.

Healthcare professionals are raising concerns about a distinctly modern phenomenon known as hidden hunger, a condition that develops when people eat food that is calorie rich but nutrient poor, and one that can lead to deficiencies and disease, as well as overeating. Some experts are saying the quality of the food supply will be the biggest challenge to the well-being of future generations. "Food is foundational to everything we do and think and who we are," says Mary Purdy, an integrative dietitian and member of the adjunct faculty at the Culinary Institute of America.

But after decades of trying, science and technology may be on the brink of reimagining the future of food. Seed breeders, for one, are using cutting-edge gene-editing techniques

to create new takes on common crops, the aromatic likes of which shoppers may already have come across at grocery stores and fine dining restaurants; farmers and biologists are collaborating to better understand the growing conditions that improve nutrient quality; and while large agriculture corporations may not be changing industry practices at the moment, they are quietly investing in emerging technologies that someday might.

"If you talk to most farmers, they agree that improving soil health will make the crop healthier," says Andrew Smith, chief scientific officer at Rodale Institute, an agricultural research and education nonprofit. "If you talk to doctors, they will agree that eating healthier improves patient health. Now we are making the connection that if we improve the health of soil and what grows in it, humans will be healthier."

And then there's the prospect of putting more power in



“Food is foundational to everything we do and think and who we are.”

testable in real time. While spectrometers have long been used to measure such things in labs, researchers have now released a design that is magnitudes smaller—small enough to run on a phone—and that will empower consumer decision-making and potentially pressure the market to adapt.

“Once smartphones started coming out, it changed everything,” says Dan Kittredge, executive director of The Bionutrient Institute, which helped design an open-source handheld consumer-spectrometer prototype. “Once pocket ray guns, once truth meters are out—and they become normalized—the impact will be massive.”

the consumer’s hands—literally. Though questions certainly remain about real-world reliability, some observers predict that by the end of the decade, new tech on smartphones could allow consumers not only to assess the nutritional content of their food, but also to test for the presence of chemical contaminants or heavy metals. Even air and water quality will be



The last green revolution took place in the mid-20th century. Prior to the 1940s, crops were grown organically. Then the food shortages and scientific breakthroughs of World War II led to a number of new developments in farming, including chemical herbicides and genetically modified crops that produced higher yields (and were resistant to those chemical applications). The impact was profound: Between 1961 and 2014, the global cereal yield rose more than 150 percent, with wheat production skyrocketing from an average harvest of 1.1 tonnes per hectare, or metric unit of land, to 3.4 tonnes per hectare.

But prioritizing yield has come with downstream consequences. Some industrial farming practices are now being linked to depleted soil health because they reduce nutrient levels. Meanwhile, fast-growing genetically modified crops can't draw up nutrients from the soil quickly enough to keep pace with their rapid growth. Elevated carbon-dioxide levels are further accelerating plant growth and creating soil imbalances. All of this has led to crops with higher water and carbohydrate content but often less protein and fewer nutrients—a phenomenon known as the dilution effect. So while consumers are paying more for a bigger tomato, they may be getting fewer nutrients (in this case, as much as 25 to 50 percent less). “We have pumped as much efficiency into produce as we possibly can to reap the benefits of weight gain, but it has come with costs,” says Pablo Golfari, market leader of the Industrial practice for Korn Ferry’s Professional Search team in North America.

It’s hard to say exactly how much nutrient composition has changed. For starters, few studies reach back far enough. Analytical methods have evolved over time. And there are also many variables to control for, because farms use different techniques and reside in diverse climates. But a growing collection of research reveals cause for contemplation. The Broadbalk Wheat Experiment in the United Kingdom has been testing and archiving wheat and soil samples since 1843. It has found that mineral levels remained stable until the mid-1960s, when high-yield cultivars were adopted. Since then, these levels have decreased significantly. Other studies from across the world have found that the nutrient density of a number of fruits, vegetables, and cereal crops has also fallen over the past 80 years. With the exception of phosphorus, most minerals found in the produce we consume, including iron, zinc,

calcium, copper, potassium, and magnesium, have declined—in some instances by 5 to 15 percent, and in others by more than 50 percent. In many cases, vitamins A, B, and C have also experienced double-digit slumps. While the USDA releases nutrient averages for produce, those numbers can vary widely.

The good news: Consumers don’t need a study or a spectrometer to tell them what to eat. As it turns out, humans have built in nutrient-monitoring tech—we call them taste buds, noses, and optic organs.

**“The potential to
shift agriculture at
scale is quite easy.”**



Overfed and Undernourished

Roughly 2 billion people worldwide suffer from hidden hunger. In the United States, 92 percent of the population is below recommended levels of at least one essential vitamin or mineral. **Common deficiencies include:**



Calcium More than 40 percent of Americans don't get enough, leading to weak bones and cardiovascular issues.



B Vitamins The eight varieties that compose the B complex support immunity, metabolism, and brain health.



Iron The most common mineral deficiency worldwide, especially among women and children, lack of iron can cause extreme fatigue.



Iodine Eradicated in many places in the 20th century, iodine deficiency is returning as a significant cause of mental impairment.



Back in 2009, Dan Barber, the Michelin-starred chef of Blue Hill in New York City, went to a renowned seed breeder at Cornell University to ask if a tastier butternut squash could be designed. Pretty soon, Barber's pricey tasting menu included a first-of-its-kind creation called the honeynut—a smaller, sweeter, and more carotene-packed version of the stately butternut winter squash. Soon after came the Badger Flame beet and Sweet Garleek.

Then, in 2018, Barber launched Row 7 Seed Company to bring more flavorful and healthier produce to the masses. This year, Row 7 was named one of the world's 50 most innovative companies. The purveyor has expanded its seed catalog to 22 boutique varieties and has partnered with Whole Foods to sell tinned designer vegetables preserved at peak ripeness.

Last year, Row 7 reported that it sold 4 million pounds of fresh produce through large retailers, with sales nearly in the double-digit millions.

When people hear

about gene-edited food, they might think of GMOs, the controversial, genetically modified organisms created after World War II by enhancing or deleting existing genes or moving foreign genes from one species to another. These days, seed breeders are using CRISPR technology to selectively modify the molecular structures of plants. Traditionally, it takes an average of eight to 12 years, and sometimes up to 20, to breed a new variety. But with gene editing it can be done in as little as two years. "The genetic approach to return nutrients back to required amounts is the way to go," says Steve McGrath, a soil scientist at Rothamsted Research in the UK. "If we did it conventionally it would take a very long time. Precision and speed are going to be very important."

To be labeled as organic in the US and Europe, produce can't be genetically modified. The UK has relaxed laws for gene editing, and the EU is considering new rules. Meanwhile, the USDA has called for more funding for seed-breeding research. Already the technology is showing promise in a variety of applications.

While some, like McGrath, contend that gene editing is the fastest and most effective path to restoring nutrient density, others are turning their focus to the substrate from which food crops grow. Just a teaspoon

Dan Barber,
Michelin-
starred chef of
Blue Hill.

of soil contains more microbes than there are people on the planet. Research—and millennia of traditional farming knowledge—suggest that the more microbes and fungi in a plant, the better its health. It's a symbiotic relationship: Fungal networks called mycorrhizae act as root extensions, transporting nutrients from the earth to the plant. In return, the plant sends carbon it has converted into sugar back into the teeming ecosystem beneath it. An industry of startups are working to create soil inoculants that not only improve nutrient uptake and carbon sequestration, but also have the potential to replace chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

Till or no till. Organic versus conventional. Cover crops. Regenerative. Local. Kittredge emphasizes there is no one answer to these conundrums, because many externalities influence the internal composition of crops. His organization's research has yet to find a clear link between any particular farming method and nutrient density. He contends that food growers have to once again learn to listen to the land and respond to the unique needs of place, plant, and person.

"The potential to shift agriculture at scale is quite easy," says Kittredge, who has spent his entire life farming. "We have the technology to transition very rapidly. That's what's exciting. It's a matter of economic incentive and what metrics we're giving the farmers."

"Food has been devalued."

Just as environmental ecosystems are complex, symbiotic networks of reciprocity, so, too, are markets. The next green revolution won't happen unless consumers, corporations, and governments collaborate. "It has to be a whole-system approach," McGrath, of Rothamsted Research, says. Shoppers will need to choose the healthy option. Farmers,

he emphasizes, will need to be paid based on nutrient yield, rather than weight and appearance.

While economic incentives may not be there yet, there are signs of shifting public sentiment. From granola-crunching liberals to meat-and-potato conservatives, there is bipartisan demand for governmental policies to regulate crop nutritional quality.

Meanwhile, people are starting to think beyond macros as new understanding emerges about the role phytonutrients—found in colorful fruits, vegetables, nuts, and legumes—play in combating disease.

But Purdy, the integrative dietitian, argues that perhaps something even more foundational must change first. "Food has been devalued," she says. "There is something we've lost about gathering around food and eating together. Food is about connection." What if, she suggests, leaders began by bringing together employees for healthy, delicious, family-style meals? What if, instead of the lab, the next green revolution starts with all of us breaking bread together in the company cafeteria? ▀

Phyto, Huh?

Science is just discovering the **vital role that phytonutrients play in human health**. Generated exclusively by plants, these compounds are responsible for the vibrant colors, fragrances, and flavors inherent in produce. But what exactly do they do?

Support vision.

Scavenge disease-causing free radicals.

Protect against memory loss.

Improve immune function.

Make food smell and taste good!



AHEAD OF ITS TIME.



French luxury watchmaker B.R.M Chronographes is celebrating the 50th anniversary of legendary German tuning house bb-auto with an automatic chronograph limited to 50 numbered pieces.

Founded in Frankfurt, bb-auto released its most famous build—the Polaroid commissioned Porsche 911 “Rainbow” Turbo Targa—in 1976. New-age materials, leading-edge technology, and audacious style made bb-auto creations ahead of their time then, and classic icons today. Just like B.R.M

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Battling Boredom

By
Arianne
Cohen



Henrik Sorensen/Digital Vision/Getty Images



A shocking number of workers are bored—and AI may only make it worse. How boredom and job redesign can be put to good use.

THE PROBLEM

Nearly half of workers say they are bored for the majority of the week.

WHY IT MATTERS

Boredom may be one of the biggest drags on productivity hiding in plain sight.

THE SOLUTION

Firms need to redesign jobs while also teaching workers how to use periods of boredom to their advantage.

By her third year, Julie had a theory: Somewhere in America, there had to be a more boring job than hers—but she couldn't picture it. "Stultifyingly boring" was the description she used with friends. By her second year, she could finish a month's work in nine days. During the other 12, she refreshed four news and gossip websites on rotation.

Three years earlier, she had taken a senior analyst role at a regional insurance company, following an exciting interview about redesigning innovative insurance models. Her part in the redesign turned out to be minor, because the models, built mostly by others, ran themselves. By the end of the second year, she could do a month's work in less than half the time, leaving her with little to do but refresh news sites or search for a new job that never materialized. Boredom can be painful, but Julie had done the calculus in her head: The hours were flexible, and the paychecks supported her family, so she stayed.

Who would have thought that at a moment of unprecedented global activity—power shifts, AI, conflicts—*anyone* would be bored? Indeed, survey after survey has revealed that many workers are overworked and burned out. But it turns out that nearly half of everyone else has quietly drifted into a realm they never expected. According to the Society for Human Resources Management, fully 46 percent of workers say they are bored for at least three days of the workweek—a grand total of 24 hours or more of workday boredom. Other research from a 2026 University of Illinois report found that 61 percent of US workers are "languishing" at work.

The problem occurs in many fields but experts say it is rampant in the ranks of so-called knowledge workers. For them and others, boredom has now become a primary reason for leaving a job, ranking ahead of compensation, according to data from job search engine Metaintro. New employees say that new tasks initially engage them—but soon become rote.

But they're not likely to say much publicly: Who wants to hire someone who finds working dull? It's easier—and safer—to simply endure the hypoactivity.

Of course, the world is still full of worker bees who, endlessly intrigued by their work, would find their colleagues' boredom incomprehensible. Experts say it's hard to imagine how much more companies would be growing—and maybe hiring—if half of their employees weren't watching the clock tick. "Boredom is a systemic issue that often goes unaddressed," says Melonie Boone, PhD, founder, and CEO of Boone Management Group. "It directly impacts the bottom line."

Experts blame much of this on a stagnant job market that's making people stay at jobs they mastered years ago. "Boredom is a key sign of underemployment," says organizational psychologist Cathleen Swody of Foster Talent Consulting. And, of course, there is AI, which was supposed to solve drudgery, yet seems to be doing the opposite—by stripping away the engaging parts of many jobs. A scientist who once loved designing experiments now supervises a bot that designs them.

A software engineer who adored typing the perfect line of code now prompts a machine to do it. Less obviously, AI is also eating up the repetitive work that used to offer a welcome change of pace. Either way, the obvious question remains: How to get people out of the boredom zip code?

BOREDOM IS A MANAGEMENT FAILURE

For decades, no one measured boredom in the workplace. Research instead focused on engagement, which assesses an employee's vigor, dedication, and absorption in their job. Boredom is something else: an unpleasant state of being understimulated—what Tolstoy called "the desire for desires."



People are “checked out because there’s nowhere useful for their energy to go.”

And unlike disengagement, it can be hiding in plain sight. The two get conflated because their outcomes look the same, whether working quietly or checking out. But boredom is fueled by a unique combination of low workplace resources, such as career-development opportunities, *and* not enough work to do, whether that means a worker is finishing the day’s tasks by 11 AM, or enduring prolonged waits for approvals or handoffs, or being staffed on a stalled project. Boredom strikes at every level of cognitive complexity, from call centers to astrophysics labs—which is part of why it’s so easy to miss.

What it isn’t is benign. Boredom is associated with burnout—what’s recently been called “boreout”—and it metastasizes fast into low life satisfaction and fewer positive day-to-day behaviors, as well as higher levels of anxiety and depression, as a 2024 Finnish study recently found. *Blah* quickly becomes bleak.

Many managers and executives are unintentionally inflicting boredom on their people. It happens like this: Various levels of the org chart inadvertently descend into the weeds of the level below. The C-suite, rather than handling big-picture strategy, gets their fingers in the tactical details of their direct reports; the VP level takes on director-level matters; and the director level absorbs managerial tasks. This is a death spiral for the individual contributors below, as everything meaningful has

been pulled up the chain. “It’s a symptom of leadership operating at the wrong altitudes,” says Boone. Employees are functionally bored, because their roles have been hollowed out by the levels above.

Bored employees invariably try to leave. The workers who quietly reach out to San Diego-based career coach Kolby Goodman often spend their days managing the same easy-to-solve recurring problems. “I’ve seen this pattern in tons of clients,” he says. His clients are typically plenty occupied, but they’ve “checked out because there’s nowhere useful for their energy to go.” His inbox is full of employees who spend their days solving problems they don’t care about solving.

BOREDOM’S LONG, DULL RÉSUMÉ

Back in the 4th century, monks were plagued by *acedia*, whose symptoms will ring familiar to any cubicle worker: a restless despair that made the monks’ quarters feel unbearably cramped and their spiritual practice pointless. We know it today as the afternoon slump, which workers often address with coffee and a less-than-nutritious snack. Spiritual leaders took *acedia* much more seriously: It was a deadly sin, because it directly threatened the very

A woman with dark hair, wearing a white shirt and a dark blazer, is looking upwards with a thoughtful expression. Above her, several yellow pencils are suspended in the air, as if they have just been dropped or are floating. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

underpinnings of monastic life. Leaders might take note.

Boredom in the modern sense of the word is a relatively new human phenomenon. Sure, the French have long had their *ennui*, a metaphysically tinged weariness, but the noun “boredom” only arrived in the mid-1800s, when Charles Dickens featured it a half dozen times in *Bleak House* to describe a world awash in industrialization and urbanization. Fast-forward a few centuries to the mid-1980s, when famed psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi presented it as a failure to reach what he called flow state: One was bored because one was too skilled for the challenge at hand. For the first time, millions of employees became aware that there was a flow state, and that they weren’t in it. They also were keenly aware of boredom during the pandemic, when Google searches of the word more than doubled, and lockdowns provided near-laboratory conditions for studying the effects of understimulation.

Since then, boredom studies has become a cottage industry. At large companies, internal mobility is stalling, stunting employees’ development and leaving them in the same role for years. “They check out emotionally long before they resign,” says Lacey Kaelani, CEO of job-search engine Metaintro. Recent college graduates, finding themselves frozen out of the corporate job market altogether, often rely on jobs in retail or food to survive. That’s not inherently a recipe for boredom, but boredom thrives when workers aren’t actively learning, being stretched, or gaining new skills, says Swody, the organizational psychologist. “Humans do best when they have a sense of forward momentum and trajectory. Otherwise, they get a sense that they’re not where they’re supposed to be,” she says.

Not surprisingly, AI has complicated the boredom puzzle, hollowing out interesting areas of jobs instead of just automating their most tedious parts. Companies have known this for a couple of years, but have refused to do the hard work of redesigning millions of jobs. And there’s a broader challenge: According to Dutch researchers Carina Schott and Caroline Fischer, firms need to reframe boredom entirely—not as a problem to be avoided, but as a signal worth reacting to. Much like loneliness, guilt, and jealousy, boredom is an internal signal that something needs to change.

BECOMING ‘UNBORED’

When people are bored, they tend to do the one thing that makes it worse. Imagine you’re at work, slogging through invoices. You plod along for 20 minutes, then click over to a gossip website or scroll a bit on your phone. Academics call this “cyberloafing,” and it’s both a sign of boredom and a coping strategy.

But cyberloafing is precisely the wrong strategy, because it’s just another unfulfilling, non-goal-directed behavior. Piling one meaningless activity on top of another only compounds the problem. Sure, scrolling—or any other temporarily distracting task—*feels* like relief (and it might be, for a split second), but it doesn’t address the underlying source of the boredom, according to a 2023 Dutch study. You’re still at work doing

“Humans do best when they have a sense of forward momentum and trajectory.”

nothing meaningful; you're still bored; your day still feels lacking in purpose.

Experts say the solution is the opposite behavior: seeking out activity that is engaging or goal directed. Research shows that

alternating an engaging activity with a boring one improves a worker's experience significantly. For example, switching back and forth between a fun project and administrative tasks successfully wards off boredom. Another solution is “job crafting,” reshaping tasks to involve a challenge or otherwise make them more interesting. For example, you could challenge yourself to finish a report in 90 minutes, or to create an agent to do some of the work for you, or gamify the task, or try to do the same work with a different approach. Novelty tends to help, such as mixing up who you interact with or teaching a task to others.

On an organizational level, Schott and Fischer suggest that firms train employees to manage their boredom. That can include learning something new; healthy daydreaming, such as the creative and problem-solving reveries that can lead to aha moments; or engaging in another activity, such as helping others or networking. The idea is that boredom *can* lead to good outcomes, including mobilizing AI to cut through repetitive work in unique ways. “Examples are incredibly helpful here,” says Swody. “You gotta make it real for people.” ▀

Channeling Boredom

Recent research suggests that boredom may not be a problem per se, but a signal. Studies suggest that workplaces should be set up to make boring time more useful.

BUILD IN SLACK

A fully booked workday leaves no room for productive responses to boredom—like learning something new or rethinking roles.

TOLERATE EXPERIMENTATION

Cultures that punish minor deviations from the script eliminate productive dabbling.

MAKE THE MEANING VISIBLE

Connect employees to the larger goal they're contributing to. This helps reduce despair when there is no line of sight.

PROVIDE REAL AUTONOMY

Employees with autonomy can adjust their tasks, try new approaches, and reshape their work.



BROADEN ROLES

Hyper-specialized jobs trap people, since workers have nowhere to redirect energy when the tasks go flat. More generalist-leaning roles offer productive areas to turn to.





KORN FERRY

Briefings *Podcast*



A new deep dive
into **leadership**



DOWNTIME

Pursuits 57 | Visit 60 | Suggested 63 | Endgame 64

PURSUITS

You're Invited

With workplace loneliness mounting, many executives are reviving an age-old tradition: intimate dinner parties.

By Meghan Walsh

Julio P. Gatti / Images

The year 2024 was coming to a close. Amanda Litman and her husband were working demanding jobs, they were parenting a toddler and a newborn, and they were lonely. “It felt like everyone was lonely,” recalls the cofounder and chief executive officer of the political organizing firm Run for Something. “It felt like in order to rebuild our social life, we needed some structure.”

The couple decided they would host dinner at their home every Saturday night for the year ahead. Not only did they uphold their New Year’s intention, but they have kept the tradition going into 2026. “As people came over, we made real friends, which feels so hard to do as a grown-up,” the 36-year-old says.

Sure enough, surveys show social isolation has persisted as a cultural contagion long after the imposed quarantines of the pandemic, with one in five modern workers reporting significant daily loneliness. But people aren’t just looking for more interactions—they’re looking for deeper ones. So enterprising executives like Litman are reviving the age-old practice of gathering around the dinner table, with the support of agendas and spreadsheets, of course. “You can’t improve what you don’t measure,” Litman says. The trend is so strong, some

have dubbed this the “hosting era,” with companies emerging that sell specialty wares to dinner hosts, cookbooks popping up with themed meal plans, and social-media influencers offering inspiration.

Litman, who keeps a log of menus and guests,



THE HOST WITH THE MOST

How to create an experience that produces lasting memories and connections.



Create a clear intention. Whether it’s a themed or casual gathering, set expectations ahead of time.

Pick an anchor. Build around food, a conversation topic, or decor, but don’t try to do too much at once.

Prepare in advance. Design a menu that can be made ahead of time with only one dish that requires last-minute attention.

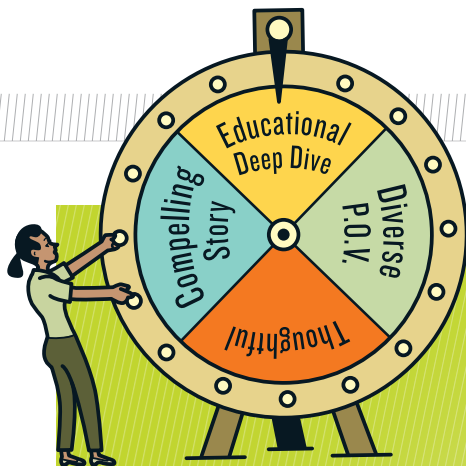
Get guests involved. Ask them to bring a dish, get dressed up, or think ahead about contributing to a specific discussion.

Let go. Control the controllables, then allow the experience to be emergent. Leave room for the magic.

Amanda Litman
hosted dinner every
Saturday for a year.

uses her skills as a business leader to intentionally set the tone for the evening, which is relaxed and real. The intended outcome: genuine connection. Some weekends, only one guest makes it, and on others as many as 15 cram into her





1 Check the label. Opt for a wide array of nourishing content, including educational deep dives, diverse perspectives, and emotionally resonant storytelling.

2 Beware of timing. Consuming stimulating media at work can distract the mind and disrupt sleep before bed. Be intentional with when, what, and how you consume while minimizing multitasking.



3 Practice intermittent fasting. Keep first thing in the mornings content free and dedicate one day a week to a cognitive detox, opting for time in nature, creative expression, or movement.

4 Avoid junk food. Strictly audit unfulfilling subscriptions, toxic scrolling, or draining conversations. If a book, show, or album isn't resonating 10 percent into its runtime, let it go.



THE ART OF

Healthy Media Consumption

The mind absorbs stimuli the way the body digests food. What we read, watch, and listen to directly shapes our thoughts and moods. Developing a wholesome information diet requires us to be as vigilant about the content we consume as we are about the food we eat.

family's small Brooklyn apartment. The menus range from tacos or ribs to more ambitious offerings, such as when the couple served pork rolls, disco fries, and salt water taffy in a nod to the Garden State.

After sharing about the experience on Substack, the political operative began to receive hundreds of messages from readers who were inspired to follow suit. But many were unsure how to have people over for a meal. They would ask logistical questions: What did you talk about? How did you invite people? "We've lost the muscle of socializing," Litman says.

Not all have forgotten the fine art of hosting. Leadership consultant, author, and former CEO of Redken Worldwide Minter Dial has held a dinner party once a month for the last 30 years. Whereas Litman prefers to keep it casual,

Dial and his wife strategize every detail, coordinating themes, guests, menus, and, most importantly, topics of conversation. The 61-year-old often sends out prompts in advance for guests to ponder, then serves as MC the night of. He might instruct attendees to bring an object that describes who they are or dress up like a beloved literary character, or simply come ready to discuss beauty in its endless contours. "When it's not just monotonous small talk, we get to meet and know each other in a different way," he says.

As a business and thought leader, Dial says sitting regularly around a table with at least half a dozen wildly diverse individuals from different occupations, generations, and demographics has taught him what it means to listen and to empathize. "I get to learn about someone else's context," he says.

While he is rigorous in his planning, as a host and leader Dial tries not to be heavy-handed in the moment. "I leave room for the magic to emerge," he says. ▮



Minter Dial has hosted dinner parties for 30 years.

Litman: Barb Kinney; Dial: Jess Littlewood, Amanda Litman

DOWNTIME

VISIT

Da Nang, Vietnam

A place that contains multitudes.



The iconic Dragon Bridge breathes fire and water in the evenings every Saturday and Sunday.



My Khe Beach is consistently ranked as one of the world's best beaches.



Da Nang is known for its street food, in particular turmeric noodles, called mi quang, and crispy pancakes, or banh xeo.

Aapsky/istock, Westend61/Vu Viet Dung, Berk Ucak, Kokkai Ng/Betty Images



The city of about 1 million residents is flanked by the Marble Mountains, five limestone peaks harboring hidden Buddhist shrines and caves.

Known as the Miami of Vietnam, Da Nang is emerging as Southeast Asia's next global business hub, bringing together manufacturing, high tech, and logistics. The country's fourth-largest city aims to have its digital economy account for 40 percent of GRDP by 2030, with a large data center slated to be operational within the year. At least 70 international businesses have signed on to join the Da Nang semiconductor ecosystem. But as the coastal city evolves from a resort town into a serious economic player, it's intentionally working to preserve the local lifestyle that has long drawn digital nomads with its white-sand beaches, surrounding mountains, and reasonable cost of living. //



The Vietnam International Financial Centre launched in Da Nang this year, orienting the region as a global hub for innovation, digital technology, and sustainable finance.



READ, **LISTEN**, WATCH

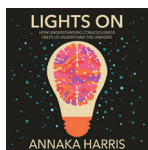
Listen Closely

As the global podcast market continues to grow, adding an estimated \$33 billion to its market cap by the end of the decade, there is a shift away from lengthy, loosely structured talk shows toward tightly produced, story-driven audio docuseries. Usually told in fewer than a dozen

episodes, these are deep dives into a single subject, company, scandal, or scientific controversy.

Episodes are constructed like a limited TV series or documentary. Publishers, especially in Europe, are pushing these high-end productions to attract subscriptions. The subscription audio

product launched last year by the German new paper *Die Zeit* is mostly driven by exclusive documentaries and miniseries, with the first few episodes typically free before a cliffhanger moment triggers a paywall. Here are *Briefings*'s picks for audio series that pack a big reward for a modest time investment. ▀



LIGHTS ON

A deeply reported exploration of whether consciousness is a fundamental building block of the universe.



INVISIBLE HANDS

The tracking of how a radical set of ideas led to free-market capitalism, reshaping global economies, politics, and society.



FELA KUTI: FEAR NO MAN

A critically acclaimed telling of the life and legacy of the Nigerian musician and activist credited with inventing Afrobeat.



BROOMGATE: A CURLING SCANDAL

How a new "super broom" tore apart the competitive curling community and nearly destroyed the sport, in the words of a comedian and semi-professional curler.



FIRST AMERICA

A recontextualizing of the current political moment that looks at the founding of the United States from the perspective of Indigenous nations.

SUGGESTED

The Everyday Work Bag

Aer, the San Francisco brand known for thoughtfully engineered travel gear, has added a versatile over-the-shoulder design to its collection. The Aer Pro Brief blends the professional aesthetic of a briefcase with the relaxed function of a messenger bag. The 13-liter tech bag is made from recycled Cordura and includes a padded laptop pocket, smart internal organization, and several easy-access pockets to hold a phone, water bottle, and other essentials. The removable strap lets the Aer Pro Brief shift from briefcase by day to shoulder bag by night.

Aer Pro Brief, \$139



PRO TRAINING

FloatFit instructor **Sheryl McHale** shares why people are working out on water instead of in the gym.

WHAT IS FLOAT-FIT? "A low-impact 30-minute workout on a board that's

floating on water. You can do HIIT, balance, or yoga."

WHY ON WATER?

"You've really got to engage your core and focus your

mind, otherwise you risk falling in."

AND IF YOU FALL IN?

"You leave with a big smile on your face. Falling in is part of the fun and getting back up on the board burns extra calories."





CHIEF CONTENT
OFFICER
JONATHAN DAHL

#Pleasantly Perfect

Sometimes the words just leap out at you. You're reading something and suddenly a phrase opens your mind to a whole new idea. The words, I swear, become bigger on the screen (or page). So it was for me, when I read a recent "Special Edition" weekly message from our CEO, Gary Burnison, in which he observed that AI has created a new phenomenon: the "pleasantly perfect" résumé.

See? The words just leap out at you! Our CEO was talking about résumés that are polished and formatted to a fault, but lack persona or heart. But it occurred to me that "pleasantly perfect" is becoming an epidemic in the workplace in many other ways, too. Like a "pleasantly perfect" team project that meets the stated goal, but never stretches beyond. Or the "pleasantly perfect" staff meeting, where everyone is quick to say "Great job!" or "Love it!" in response to a PowerPoint they may a) never have read, or b) don't care about. And then there is

the "pleasantly perfect" employee, doing her job by making sales phone calls, but with no energy in her voice. She dryly follows a script in her head without listening to the person on the other end of the line.

I won't go on, but I do propose we start a #PleasantlyPerfect hashtag. As they've done with AI-generated résumés, more people are learning that they can go through the motions without fully engaging with the task at hand. They can sit on the sidelines, scrolling through social media or texting, while a clone of themselves acts out their day.

It is a harsh description, I know, and there have been many other recent terms for this, like "quiet quitting" or "coffee badging." But in most cases, I think, the "pleasantly perfect" trend isn't employees' fault. Take away significant raises and most promotions, and fire managers who were serving as mentors, and ultimately, this is what will land in leaders' laps. And as AI enters the picture, capable of doing so many tasks at lightning speed, those same leaders may wind up with a "pleasantly perfect" workforce, lacking any human spark.

There can be only one solution: Companies need to use AI not to replace humans, but to inspire them. Show them that when workers partner with this technology's incredible capabilities, the possibilities—critical innovations, hard-to-execute strategies, game-changing products—are endless. And if workers do form this partnership with AI, it will be incumbent upon leaders to restructure their roles and give them more exciting responsibilities.

It's time for leaders to find the words that will leap off the page and get staffs excited. ▀



AHEAD OF ITS TIME.



French luxury watchmaker B.R.M. Chronographes is celebrating the 50th anniversary of legendary German tuning house bb-auto with an automatic chronograph limited to 50 numbered pieces.

Founded in Frankfurt, bb-auto released its most famous build—the Polaroid commissioned Porsche 911 “Rainbow” Turbo Targa—in 1976. New-age materials, leading-edge technology, and audacious style made bb-auto creations ahead of their time then, and classic icons today. Just like B.R.M.

Bernard Richards Manufacture

usa@brm-manufacture.com @brm-americas

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