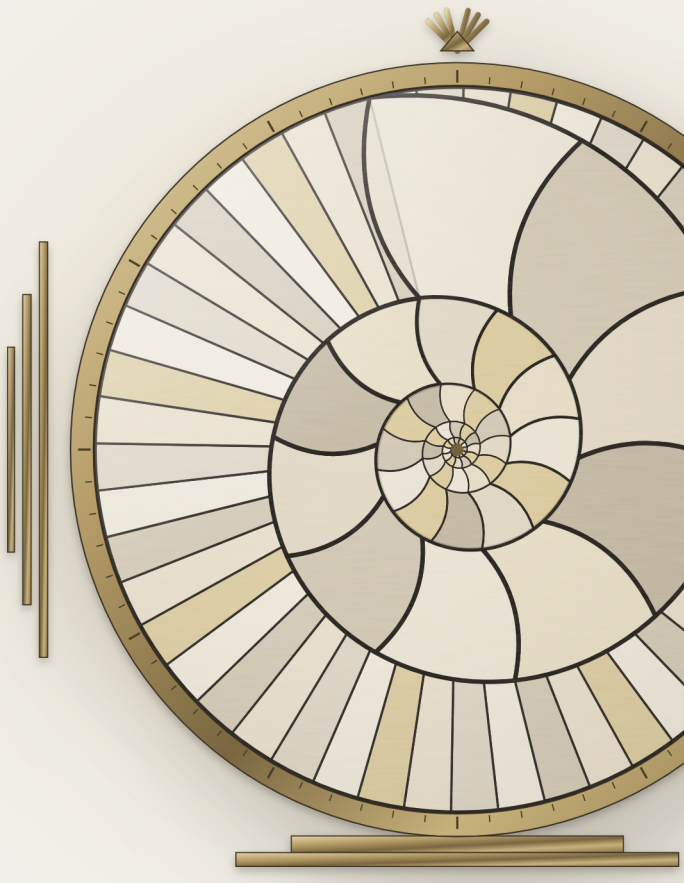
ASPLUND
TALENT ADVISORY

AN INTERVIEW STUDY · AUTUMN 2026

Talent *in* Tech *2026*

How AI is changing the talent market, HR work and organisations in Swedish tech

KAJSA ASPLUND · ASPLUND TALENT ADVISORY



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About the report

Talent in Tech 2026 is based on in-depth interviews with people in HR and recruitment functions at Swedish tech companies. The aim is to paint a broad picture of what is on their minds right now: the challenges they face, how they prioritise and where they believe things are heading.

The material consists of 17 interviews with CHROs, Chief People Officers, VPs/Heads of People, a Senior People Partner, a Head of Performance, five recruitment leads and, finally, the head of a tech recruitment firm. The companies range from SaaS and fintech to travel tech, media tech and data centres, along with four interviewees from what the report calls AI scale-ups: companies founded on AI and growing at a pace without precedent in Swedish tech. The interviews were conducted between August and October 2026. The material has been analysed thematically.

As this is an interview study, the aim is not to produce statistically representative data, but to gain a deeper understanding of how the interviewees reason. When the text refers to "several" or "most", it means patterns in the interview material, not statistically established trends. The AI scale-ups are relatively well represented in the sample, which means that some themes, particularly the war for top talent and how HR's own work is changing, draw heavily on their experiences. The quotes are taken from the interview material and have in some cases been slightly shortened, without changing their meaning. They have been translated from Swedish. All interviewees and company names are anonymised, although roles and company types are given where appropriate.

Summary

If a single sentence were to capture the material in Talent in Tech 2026, it might be this one, from a VP People at a SaaS company: "No one knows how work will get done going forward." HR leaders in Swedish tech find themselves in the middle of a transformation in which technology is moving faster than organisations. The tools HR has traditionally relied on, such as role descriptions, annual cycles and career frameworks, were built for a stability that no longer exists. In this transformation, the HR function faces a series of fundamental questions: Which capabilities will be decisive in taking the company forward in a new era? What does an organisation look like in the AI era? And how does the HR function's own way of working need to change?

Ten themes emerge from the interviews:

01 **A two-tier talent market**

More candidates and a tough situation for juniors, while competition for senior people with high AI maturity is fiercer than during the war-for-talent era.

02 **The scale-ups set a new bar for talent attraction**

The AI scale-ups spend hours, sometimes days, on individual candidates. Other companies highlight other competitive advantages.

03 **More senior, broader, fewer**

The link between growth and headcount is weakening. Several companies have stopped hiring juniors in tech, even though everyone sees that this is not sustainable in the long run.

04 **Back to basics in recruitment**

When AI writes CVs and solves take-home tasks, recruiters shift their focus to what can actually be known. And the most tech-heavy companies have understood something important about AI in case exercises.

05 **Mindset, judgement and holistic understanding: the capabilities rising in value**

Holistic thinking, judgement, curiosity and ownership are rising in value. Purely operational skills are falling.

06 **How do you organise for the AI era?**

Functions are merging, the manager role is changing and new roles are emerging, but no one knows what the organisation should look like.

07 **Focus, prioritisation and governance**

When anything can be built, building the right things becomes critical. A thousand flowers are blooming, and someone has to hold the pruning shears.

08 **The big roll-out is happening now**

The employee-driven phase has created an A team and a B team. Learning and development must become more top-down.

09 **Frameworks and tools aren't keeping up**

Role descriptions written into employment contracts, five-year career frameworks and annual performance cycles collide with a reality that changes every quarter.

10 **HR work is changing, but the future is unevenly distributed**

The AI scale-ups have built away the admin layer and spend their time on people, data analysis and systems thinking.

FOR THE LEADERSHIP TEAM

What does this mean for leaders?

- **Create a deliberate strategy for the junior pipeline.**

  Throttled junior hiring will soon lead to a dwindling talent supply. Deliberate choices are needed: Plan for more external hiring? Hire juniors in a few areas with strong onboarding? Or seize the chance to be contrarian and bet on potential while everyone else is chasing experience?

- **Make sure recruitment tests understanding and judgement, not just AI-generated output.**

  Producing something that looks good and sounds professional is now the easy part. The hard part is deep domain knowledge, understanding and deliberate trade-offs.

- **Make AI adoption an organisational issue.**

  The companies most satisfied with their use of AI are those that have made it a shared project, where everyone is expected to take part and where the organisation takes responsibility for creating the right conditions and incentives. Individually driven development is not enough.

- **Clarify what should be built – and who is responsible for quality and maintenance.**

  When everyone builds their own AI solutions, focus easily fragments and maintenance is neglected. One of leadership's most important tasks becomes sharp prioritisation of what creates value for the business.

- **Review whether role descriptions, career frameworks and performance cycles still measure the right things.**

  Goals, expectations and tasks are changing markedly faster than before. Many of HR's core tools need updating – perhaps several times in a single year.

PART I

I

The talent market is changing

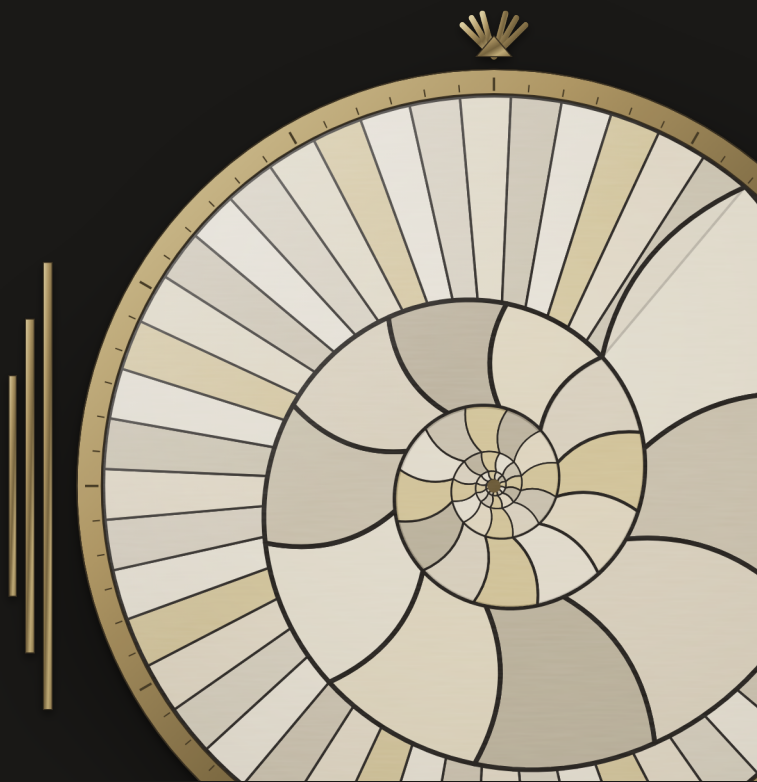
1 A two-tier talent market

2 The scale-ups set a new bar for talent attraction

3 More senior, broader, fewer

4 Back to basics in recruitment

5 Mindset, judgement and holistic understanding: the capabilities rising in value



THEME 1 · PART I

01 A two-tier talent market

> *"Somehow it feels as if we're living in two parallel realities."*
>
> VP PEOPLE, SAAS COMPANY

Five years ago, everyone was still talking about *the war for talent*: demand from employers was enormous, most people who wanted a job got one, and it was very much a candidate's market. Asked what things look like today, the interviewees are remarkably unanimous: the market has split in two. On the one hand, there are far more candidates on the market, it is harder to get a job and recruiters have more to choose from. On the other hand, competition for the most attractive candidates has become even fiercer. As the head of a tech recruitment firm puts it: "It's no longer a candidate's market or an employer's market. It depends entirely on which segment you're recruiting in."

What is clear is that many are now experiencing a veritable flood of applications when they advertise roles.

> *"Every time we've had roles out, we've had an overwhelming amount of interest. I've never seen anything like it in all my years of recruiting. What's going on? We used to bring in firms to source candidates; now we have to bring in firms to handle the flood of applications. They sit there screening – and sourcing. Because even with huge numbers of applications, there's no guarantee that any of them is right..."*
>
> CHRO, SAAS COMPANY

As the quote above shows, the higher candidate volume has not necessarily made the job of Talent Acquisition (TA) easier. More time has to be spent on ensuring high-quality screening and on giving every candidate feedback. But the most important point is that requirements for the people being sought have risen at the same pace as the volumes. The interviewees are in strong agreement that juniors have the toughest time: newly graduated developers, systems developers, junior finance roles. As one HR leader puts it: "You always ask yourself: couldn't I get someone just a little bit more senior?" This also has the paradoxical effect that many companies spend as much time on sourcing as a few years ago, or more.

That brings us to the second reality, where competition for the right people is fierce. Here one group stands out: those who combine seniority with a very strong ability to use AI. This group is seen as best placed to leverage their expertise and deliver in the new reality. It applies across functions, from engineering to sales. The HR leader at a fintech company describes how they are not only looking for these people in recruitment, but also fighting to keep the ones they have. People at mid-senior level are currently receiving many offers, often ones that involve stepping up a level and SEK 20,000 more a month. "Overall, this group seems to be the most attractive on the job market right now."

THEME 2 · PART I

02 The scale-ups set a new bar for talent attraction

In a short time, the AI scale-ups have set a new standard for what companies are prepared to do to bring in the people they really want. They talk about an extremely high *talent bar*: the threshold for how good you have to be to be considered. Finding the very best requires advanced search and major investment in building relationships.

> *"We're looking for the people who are the best in the world in their field. We don't get them through applications; we have to find them. We have a dedicated sourcing function that works only on search."*
>
> RECRUITER, AI SCALE-UP

A recruiter at one of the fastest-growing AI companies describes the change compared with a couple of years ago, when they lured young talent to drop out of KTH. Today the company is looking for senior key hires, identified by mapping international environments, previous growth journeys, visibility, clear expert standing and personal networks. The Swedish market is described as exhausted; attention is now turning to London and the US. Competition for the best is tough even for the strongest brands. Several interviewees speak of a new appetite for risk in the talent market. Because many have seen that it really is possible to make journeys from zero that were not possible before, experienced people are increasingly moving to smaller AI labs with lower pay but great potential upside.

"Best in the world" means two things: being among the leading people in one's field – having given keynotes, trained others, contributed to new ways of working – and an entrepreneurial mindset. You should love building, not maintaining. This means that experience from the right phase carries a lot of weight:

> *"What we look for is people who have been on that huge journey, for example at Spotify or Klarna, to name a few, in the early days when the processes didn't exist and they had to build them themselves. That's a completely different muscle from joining a finished company, and that's the muscle we need. Being employee number fifty when everything is on fire is something completely different from being employee number five thousand."*
>
> RECRUITER, AI SCALE-UP

An HR leader at another AI scale-up describes the same logic. Applications pour in, but the best are closed through search: "In Stockholm's talent world, we know who *everyone* is. You'd have to be living under a rock not to end up on our radar."

For the junior roles that do still exist, some scale-ups have developed a different method: close relationships with teachers and students at the top programmes. "We have contacts there whom we call and who know who the best are, and once you get a few in, you can ask them who was really smart in their class," says one recruiter. The company has

also held exclusive events where the CTO spoke to hand-picked students.

Attracting the best: premium candidate experience

Getting a world-leading tech leader or sales director to move from California to Stockholm takes a competitive offer. A recruiter at an AI scale-up describes three keys.

01

Intrinsic motivation

Finding exactly the right role, where the person gets to work on what they are passionate about.

02

Compensation

"We benchmark against international companies, not Swedish ones, and position ourselves around the top percentile. That's a prerequisite for competing with the rest of the market for the best talent." Another AI scale-up, still scaling, competes with ownership instead.

03

Lifestyle

Relocation support, housing, schools for the children, paperwork – and conversations about what it is like to raise children in Sweden. The recruiter becomes almost a coach, exploring motivations and talking with the person about what life they want to lead. "You have to find the hook that tips this particular individual over. Often it's about lifestyle: what it's like to live and work in Stockholm, what you get for your time, how close you are to family, how children grow up in Sweden and the school system."

The time freed up through automation goes almost entirely to candidates. "I can spend a couple of hours on a single candidate. For our senior roles we're happy to fly people in and let them spend a day with the team at the office. That's where you see whether it clicks. If they want to bring their family and get a feel for life in Stockholm, we make sure it's a good visit." The company calls it *premium candidate experience*.

The same generosity shapes the terms for those already employed. "It's about not getting stuck in 'we have breakfast on Mondays'," says an HR leader at an AI scale-up. "We cover all meals if needed. Take a taxi home if you've worked late! Need a babysitter – fine, what does it cost?"

At the same time, a great deal is expected in return. The AI scale-ups are open about looking for people who want to work very hard and who thrive in chaos. "This isn't a job; it's a lifestyle," as one puts it. Being in the office five days a week is the norm. One recruiter acknowledges that this doesn't suit every candidate, but stresses that the choice is deliberate: "The founders are rock-solid on office presence, but not out of principle. We see it as one of our biggest competitive advantages. It's in the room that we solve things fastest, and it's there that we build something together that lasts."

Other tech companies highlight other competitive advantages

Few companies can match the scale-ups' salaries and pace. Several of the other interviewees instead describe how they are once again considering highlighting values that have not been as fashionable over the past five years, but where they can stand out. An HR leader at a SaaS company notes that work-life balance is "rather… out" in the spirit of the

times, with lots of talk about working long hours and being in the office five days a week. That is precisely why the company sees an opportunity:

> *"If we want to be in the fight for the same people as everyone else – how do we make sure we have reasonable compensation, when some other players pay EXTREMELY well? One way, then, is actually to offer a somewhat more moderate salary but good conditions for, say, parents of young children."*
>
> SENIOR PEOPLE PARTNER, SAAS COMPANY

One recruiter describes how many developers have become more purpose-driven since the pandemic and want to "do some good in the world" – which gives the company a pull that salary alone would not. A data centre company also stresses the importance of a good culture with sound values.

An exciting journey and a long-term perspective can still attract people. One fintech company in the sample attracts people with the transformation journey the company is on: "We have people who would even consider taking a pay cut to work for us." Another fintech company says that many are drawn to its ambition to invest long term in the people it hires, rather than throwing them in and seeing whether it works out.

At the same time, adjustments are being made that are considered necessary. HR leaders describe internal advocacy to get leadership to accept that terms have to differ between groups. Compensation and benefits are mentioned by many in the material as one of the HR issues getting the most attention from top management right now. "Part of my job is trying to build understanding that we may have to allow things to be different in tech, for example allowing promotions more often there, and sometimes we need to pay for people's housing to get them to come here."

THEME 3 · PART I

03 More senior, broader, fewer

The fact that many tech companies are hiring fewer people now is, of course, partly explained by macroeconomics and the much more limited access to cheap capital compared with the years around 2020. At the same time, the interviews make clear that these are not the only explanations. The higher bar and lower hiring rate are not a temporary trend, the interviewees predict.

> *"We believe we'll be fewer, broader and more senior in the future. That mid-senior and senior employees with a lot of experience will lead smaller teams and train and coach agents. We already no longer recruit junior developers. That's not because we THINK juniors will become redundant, but because they already are, given how much code we produce with AI."*
>
> HR LEADER, FINTECH COMPANY

The productivity gains from AI mean that several see a weakening link between growth and more employees. Asked how many people they think the company will have in a couple of years compared with today, the great majority – apart from the AI scale-ups – answer the same number, or slightly fewer. One HR leader in fintech even answers "the same to fewer, even though we have expansion ahead of us."

This development is driven to a large extent by pressure from above.

> *"Now the board and owners are coming and asking why we can't go as far with as few people as the fast-growing AI companies. The demands to do more with less are much tougher."*
>
> VP PEOPLE, SAAS COMPANY

It is also striking how many of the companies in the report have more or less stopped hiring juniors, in engineering but often also in a range of other functions: product, design, finance, marketing and HR, to name a few. They see that AI can carry out a large share of the tasks previously done by juniors. The exception is customer-facing roles, above all in sales and customer success. There, most judge the human touch to be considerably harder to replace. In many situations, customers simply want to talk to a person. Even in customer service, some say human contact has been considerably harder to replace than they perhaps first thought.

At the same time, the great majority of companies recognise that it is not sustainable in the long term to stop bringing in juniors. This is one of the strongest tensions in the report.

> *"This is a really difficult question that we talk about a lot internally: how can this learning curve become faster, so that we can still bring in juniors but they reach the level we want to see more quickly? Because the way we're doing it now isn't sustainable; we won't have anyone who becomes senior in a few years."*
>
> SENIOR PEOPLE PARTNER, SAAS COMPANY

The head of HR at a fintech company is candid about the dilemma: "We do understand that this is going to be a problem in the longer run – because if we stop recruiting juniors, we'll run out of mid-seniors sooner or later… But right now I'm thinking a bit: we're so small, can't someone else solve it for now? [laughs]"

In other words, this becomes a so-called collective action problem: for each individual company it is rational not to hire any juniors, but if no one does, the pool of mid-seniors – already the most sought-after group on the market (see theme 1) – will soon shrink. Several companies have started discussing possible solutions. One mentioned is to identify a number of areas where the company has particular internal strength and could therefore train juniors especially quickly. Others are considering how AI itself could help speed up the learning curve. These are, however, described as ideas only, not something anyone has yet acted on.

There are also a few dissenting voices. A recruitment lead at a database company says they continue to hire a relatively large number of juniors each year, and also take on master's students:

> *"We think it's completely wrong not to hire juniors. We never write senior or junior in our job ads; we take whoever we think will be best. And the people we hire that way stay much longer than those with ten years' experience. Who else is going to be tomorrow's senior talent?"*
>
> RECRUITING MANAGER, DATABASE COMPANY

Another larger tech company offers internships for juniors struggling in the job market, to give them at least a foot in the door. An HR leader at a media tech company also questions what she sees as a reflexive focus on seniority:

> *"In the tech team there used to be a lot of ideas about needing more seniority; now people are starting to see that maybe it's the seniors who are holding us back. Experience can be a blocker; it's the attitude that matters. People coming straight from university, who read loads, who are curious, who keep up, who dare to try things. Maybe that's what we need to move forward as an organisation."*
>
> TALENT ACQUISITION PARTNER, MEDIA TECH COMPANY

So juniors are not out of the picture, but the bar for getting in has been raised considerably.

THEME 4 · PART I

04 Back to basics in recruitment

When AI is used for everything from writing the CV and answering screening questions to solving case assignments, the conditions for recruitment change. By far the most common response is to go back to basics: background, references and more conversations early in the process.

In recent years there has been growing talk of the weakened signal in recruitment, perhaps above all in the early screening phase, as a result of AI. Many interviewees recognise this development, but also say it is manageable – by going back to what they feel they can know for certain. More time and energy is spent on human contact early in the process, often in the form of recruiters bringing the first phone interview forward. "CV screening is useless!" says the HR leader at an AI scale-up. "We talk to a great many people, very early on." The recruitment firm agrees: "Our answer has been to move much more of the assessment to the here and now." Throughout, the interviewees say it is very hard to get away with faking it in interviews: if the candidate is reading from an AI script, you notice immediately. But many also describe relying increasingly on actual track record:

> *"What happens is that as a recruiter you retreat to the LinkedIn profile. Which jobs has the person had, and where? Is there a line about what they did there? Who are their connections and what have they done? That way you work your way back to a more stripped-down picture."*
>
> SENIOR TALENT PARTNER, AI COMPANY

An HR leader at a fintech company describes how the signal problem becomes manageable when you are selective: "The thing is that there are still only certain backgrounds that are interesting. It becomes clear quite quickly: [...] Did they do this programme at this school that we know works well for us? If we were recruiting in bulk, it would probably be quite a big problem."

Technological development also helps. Many say they now get good help from fraud flags and other filter functions in their recruitment tools, so that pure AI spam is sorted out. Almost all screen CVs with the help of AI – and here again they stick to sorting on what they see as the most important and hardest to fake: education, previous jobs and employers, specific experience.

Other methods that several say they now rely on more are references, in-person case exercises and simulated sales meetings where the craft of selling is observed. One AI scale-up invites candidates it is unsure about to work a day at the office. "Then you notice very quickly who fits in here."

Case exercises, which until quite recently worked as pure take-home assignments and an effective screening mechanism, now often look completely different. "Our concrete recommendation to clients is to spend less time on the case presentation and much more on questions and discussion," says the head of the recruitment firm. In one AI scale-up's *Most Impressive Project* session, the candidate demonstrates the project they are proudest of. But the questions are mainly about how the work was done: "Which stakeholders did you need to involve at which stage? How did you do that? How did you communicate X and Y and Z?"

The head of HR at an AI scale-up also highlights the question he considers the most underused in recruitment: "What do *you* want to do?" At the same time, he is self-critical: the ability to predict future performance is his biggest challenge. "At the moment we put a lot of emphasis on interviews. But we need to get better. And then there's always the question of how much accuracy you're willing to sacrifice for speed."

Prioritising AI skill or genuine understanding?

A particularly interesting dividing line in the material concerns attitudes to AI in case exercises and technical tests. The answers differ in a pattern one might not expect. At many of the SaaS and fintech companies, it is seen as forward-looking and more or less self-evident to allow AI in case assignments. The travel tech company tells technical candidates they are expected to use AI in interviews and cases, as long as they can explain how, and believes this will soon be a requirement for all roles. The HR leader at a SaaS company says you cannot contradict yourself: "We want an AI-first mindset, so we can't ban AI in recruitment."

The most AI-intensive companies have partly drawn a different conclusion. Even though engineers at these companies have more or less stopped writing code themselves, these companies are very careful to test the underlying understanding – in many cases more than AI skill as such.

> *"Our reasoning is that you still need to be able to code; you have to have the craft. Some developers, especially the more junior ones, push back: 'I haven't written a line of code in a year!' And neither have our developers. But we still believe the understanding is important."*
>
> SENIOR TALENT PARTNER, AI COMPANY

The same recruiter tells of another leading AI company that tried allowing AI in its coding tests but went back, because it did not work: it became too easy for candidates to sweep knowledge gaps under the carpet. "When you scratch the surface a little, you sometimes notice that they don't understand how it works and what goes wrong."

A database company says AI is allowed, but the focus has shifted from the take-home task to the subsequent pair programming and technical interviews, in which the candidate goes deeper into their own solution. "Quite often it turns out they don't understand what they've done. We allow AI, but we're very keen that they understand."

There is an interesting paradox here: the companies where AI is most firmly part of the way of working are the ones that have most clearly realised that deep understanding is what separates a really good engineer from a less good one. When AI can produce the output, the ability to assess, debug and improve it becomes more important. Allowing as much AI as possible in recruitment may therefore mean measuring precisely what no longer distinguishes candidates from one another.

THEME 5 · PART I

05 Mindset, judgement and holistic understanding: the capabilities rising in value

Most interviewees consider it obvious that AI is changing skill requirements. The most self-evident change is that AI capability has risen sharply in value, "specifically the ability to use AI effectively in your own work", as the head of the recruitment firm puts it. Beyond this, however, a range of more elusive capabilities are becoming more important.

Holistic understanding

Interestingly, holistic understanding stands out as perhaps the most frequently mentioned quality. At a time when the boundaries between roles are blurring and more people can contribute on many fronts, everyone will need to understand more about the business, how the pieces fit together and, above all, how value is created in the organisation.

> *"Everyone has to grasp much more about the whole product. Because if you have the context, we'll all run in the same direction – but if we have silos and blinkers, it'll just be a patchwork. It's no longer enough just to know your job, because then you won't be able to add value."*
>
> VP PEOPLE, SAAS COMPANY

For most, this means a requirement for broad business understanding. At the AI scale-ups this has always been a given, says the head of HR at one of them. Even candidates for People or Engineering are asked about their previous employer's ARR and CAC: "If you don't have that business understanding, it's absolutely impossible."

Some say the persona they will be looking for in future is more of a generalist. "Think of the product-oriented salesperson or the business-oriented HR person," says the HR leader at the data centre company. Others describe it as more people needing capabilities previously associated with leaders:

> *"The capabilities you need are coordinating, understanding the whole, checking. The ability to delegate naturally and then take what you get back and make a decision critically and with confidence. Things that come completely naturally to me as a manager, but certainly not to all ICs. But that's how you work in relation to the agents."*
>
> CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, FINTECH COMPANY

Judgement and domain knowledge

The increased demands for generalist skills are, however, combined with equally clear demands for deep domain knowledge and understanding of one's field, which might be read as a sign of the markedly higher *talent bar* that many companies talk about. It is also a response to the risks and limitations of AI. Without domain knowledge, there is neither a guarantor of quality nor the ability to really build on the output.

> *"Industry- and company-specific knowledge is really important. […] These are often areas that are extremely complex and often hard for the machine to understand, at least at first. That's where people need to step in and tell the machine so it learns. And check that it doesn't go wrong. We need to look for that expertise when we recruit, but also make sure we keep that expertise internally."*
>
> TALENT ACQUISITION PARTNER, MEDIA TECH COMPANY

Some describe how the centre of gravity in many roles is moving back to professional judgement: a designer no longer needs to spend time on mock-ups, but really must be able to judge the aesthetics. "You need to spend your time on decisions that require much more context." This connects to a related and constantly recurring theme: that elusive quality, judgement.

> *"Certain qualities and capabilities become much more important in this reality. Judgement, critical thinking and – for lack of a better word – taste. We can teach people AI, but not basic judgement."*
>
> VP PEOPLE, SAAS COMPANY

Several interviewees say they see examples of employees who are extremely productive thanks to AI, but who do not always think through what they produce. "When I then stress-test them on 'how does this fit with that' […], I notice the logical thread isn't really there. They haven't really thought it through," says one.

Curiosity, mindset and agency

Beyond understanding, there is also a recurring focus on mindset and attitude. At a time of extremely rapid change, it is crucial to stay open and curious, dare to try and not cling to the old. You also have to be able to live with the great uncertainty that currently prevails without becoming paralysed. Many notice clear differences within their workforce here.

> *"Curiosity is more important than ever. And the reason, fundamentally, is that in theory I could now go and do lots of other specialists' jobs. A smorgasbord has opened up for everyone."*
>
> HEAD OF PEOPLE, SAAS COMPANY

The AI scale-ups agree. "Openness is far more indicative of performance today than in a traditional company," says the HR leader at one of them – who, incidentally, challenges the idea that experience from previous company journeys is so important: "What experience are you even supposed to go on in a market that changes once a month? No one has ever done this before!"

Another interviewee says mindset is the new seniority: "It's almost as if seniority becomes equal to this mindset and way of working. The people who are used to tackling problems with AI as a tool." A TA leader at a larger tech company makes a similar point: "The concept of seniority is changing. Seniority now is having the ability to apply this technology [in your field]."

Curiosity, however, is only valuable in combination with strong ownership and drive – what is increasingly called *agency*: the drive to solve problems yourself and make things happen. The AI scale-ups in particular stress this. "Not people who identify a problem and then start looking for the right person to pass it on to, but people who just solve it," says one recruiter. Candidates from large corporates and mature tech often fall down on precisely this: "They may say they're used to working in small teams, but [...] it's not an entrepreneurial enough environment."

Social and customer-facing skills

Social skills and communication are also becoming increasingly important, for at least two reasons. First, they are needed for the ever closer cross-functional collaboration most companies want to achieve. Second, practically everyone predicts that customer-facing roles will remain people-intensive. Good customer relationships become even more important at a time of increasing competition from both direct competitors and the broad AI tools.

Roles and capabilities at risk

What is expected to lose value, by contrast, are purely operational and administrative skills, which is already visible in which roles are being redesigned or disappearing. "It's mainly about roles that are only about carrying out a manual part of a process," says the Chief People Officer at a fintech company, who also singles out pure analyst roles. Capabilities that used to guarantee quality can become a hindrance when AI delivers the details and the human contribution is seeing the whole. "Attention to detail has been a huge strength in many roles but can become a millstone now."

A travel tech company sees that the QA teams in tech could be taken over entirely by AI. Several companies expect not to hire anyone else into administrative roles. The HR leader at a data centre company recently rewrote their HR colleague's job description, because it contained far too much admin to be sustainable in the AI era. And at one AI scale-up, the classic project manager is also a foreign concept: "We've built our own agents that do what a project manager usually does; they follow up, send reminders and compile things for us. That's why we need very few coordinating roles. "

PART II

II

The organisation is being reshaped

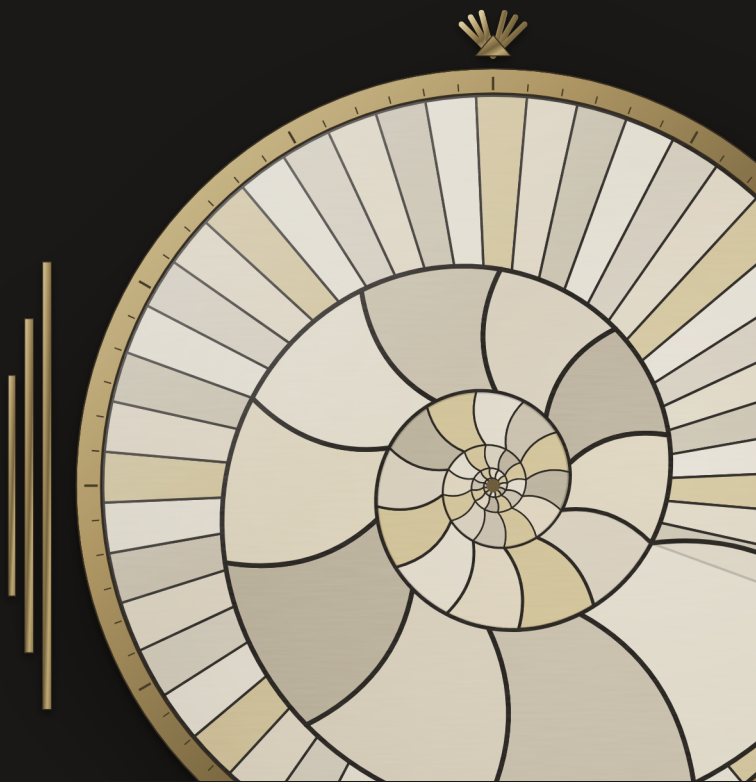
6 How do you organise for the AI era?

7 Focus, prioritisation and governance

8 The big roll-out is happening now

9 Frameworks and tools aren't keeping up

10 HR work is changing – but the future is unevenly distributed



THEME 6 · PART II

06 How do you organise for the AI era?

Asked which topic most often keeps HR leaders awake at night, one answer is more common than others: what does an organisation look like in the AI era? Ways of working are changing rapidly, as are the demands on what is produced. Most carry a nagging feeling that the current organisation chart does not fit the new reality, but exactly what it should look like is far from settled. What is clear is that organisational forms are needed that enable more cross-functional collaboration, more agility and less rigid boundaries between roles.

The classic example where the need is visible is the triad of engineer, designer and product manager. These roles are increasingly merging, and flow efficiency is being affected by AI.

> *"If the developers can suddenly work almost twice as fast, then PMs and designers can't work the same way as before. [...] We've had several occasions when our developers have run out of tickets."*
>
> HEAD OF PEOPLE, SAAS COMPANY

Some have already started making changes. One SaaS company is in the process of moving engineers out into all teams, to enable more sophisticated building with AI. An interviewee at an AI scale-up notes that "I think we have engineers in every team now". In the great majority of cases, however, companies are still waiting. "Things are moving so fast. In six months everything could have changed again. I think it's better to wait until this transformation has settled a bit," says the Head of People at another SaaS company.

Many of the plans being made are about creating more cross-functional collaboration. One SaaS company has just moved from organising around functions to a matrix organisation. Another is about to move from a functional structure to business units. Several are considering moving to tribes or similar.

> *"I think this idea of just sitting in your function is dead. Generally speaking, I think the org chart becomes less important. What we should organise around is the problem we're trying to solve. For example, customer retention becomes a tribe, with people from tech, sales, legal and so on."*
>
> CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, FINTECH COMPANY

The AI scale-ups seem the most agnostic about where things are heading, perhaps because they see most clearly how different a reality their employees operate in. The classic career structure probably won't hold, believes the VP People at one of these companies:

> *"What does it even mean to 'move up'? When every person has six agents working for them! That means I have 36 people rather than six in my reporting line, and it's not as if I have 1:1s with them. It probably means completely new ways of building organisations, but no one can say they know."*
>
> VP PEOPLE, AI SCALE-UP

From functional silos to individual silos?

The interviewees are very much in agreement that more collaboration is the goal. At the same time, several report that the effect of AI is often the opposite: "On the one hand there can be more collaboration, on the other hand less, because a team might discover that 'we can do this without IT'," says a Head of People in SaaS. More getting done is positive, she stresses, but it also creates problems: friction arises when teams tread on other functions' territory.

A particularly apt observation about the risks comes from a Chief People Officer in fintech:

> *"We used to talk a lot about functional silos; now there's also a risk of getting stuck in individual silos, because everyone sits with so much context in their own AI. And that also means people start having opinions about other functions. But then it's easy to forget that my context contains one set of things – theirs contains something completely different."*
>
> CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, FINTECH COMPANY

Here human coordination is absolutely crucial, she stresses. The issue is also visible at the AI scale-ups, where a VP People carries a concern that it is not yet clear how the organisation should handle: "What happens when people start talking to AI instead of to each other?"

Roles are changing

Some roles in tech are also changing in unexpected ways. At one fintech company, engineering managers have previously led teams of 5–6 people; now they may lead 1–2 people plus agents. "Then there's much less focus on people management and more on architecture and systems thinking – the role becomes more technical again." A similar development is described for senior engineers at a media tech company: "We talk a lot about how senior software engineers, who used to decide a lot of things and influence others in the team, should now write skills and eventually make themselves redundant. They should still enable others, but perhaps less through coaching and more through AI." Several also describe how the designer role is moving closer to the engineer's and requires much more coding skill than before.

At the AI scale-ups, a range of new roles has emerged: tech evangelists who inspire customers to build, vibe coders, AI ops engineers in the HR team. "People used to a traditional org chart often look for their box: who reports to whom, what's my mandate? Here, that box doesn't exist. Your mandate is what you take. For some that's liberating, for others it becomes uncomfortable, and you notice fairly quickly who thrives in the discomfort. The people who thrive here see ambiguity as an opportunity, not a problem." Several interviewees believe at least as many new roles will be created as disappear.

For the roles that disappear, the Chief People Officer at a fintech company sees a clear responsibility for HR. Employees in operational roles have valuable contextual knowledge of the company, but rarely an overview of which roles will exist in the future: "They can't work out which roles will exist in Product in two years that they could move into. That's where we in HR have to be proactive."

THEME 7 · PART II

07 Focus, prioritisation and governance

AI challenges not only established ideas about what the organisation should look like, but also about how it is governed. Many HR leaders see a greater risk of fragmented focus when every employee and team can suddenly build their own solutions. A recurring answer to what they will spend most time on in the coming year is: "Making sure everyone is working on the right things."

A thousand flowers blooming

The picture of a great many initiatives currently under way in the organisation recurs in many interviews. Employees are building their own tools and launching their own AI-driven projects, often without knowing what others are doing.

> *"People sit in parallel tinkering with their own stuff and reinventing the wheel again and again. Then they discover that the person at the next desk has built exactly the same thing. It's hard to get an overview, both of what's being built and of what's being used."*
>
> VP PEOPLE, SAAS COMPANY

It is of course good that employees are building with AI, the interviewees stress, but when everything becomes possible, the organisation risks losing focus and momentum. And whatever is built also has to be looked after:

> *"We notice that we have to be extremely sharp with our priorities in the AI era, because it has become so easy to build things yourself. And just because something is easy to build doesn't mean it's right. Everything that's built also has to be quality-assured, implemented, maintained. So we have to be really clear about what matters most right now, otherwise it balloons."*
>
> SENIOR PEOPLE PARTNER, SAAS COMPANY

The VP People at an AI scale-up – where one would reasonably expect the greatest inclination to build – is strikingly restrained: "It's incredibly easy to build apps today. But maintaining an app and making sure it always shows the right thing – that's incredibly hard! That's why we think very carefully about what we choose to build."

The core question is formulated by the HR leader at a fintech company: "How do you maintain a high rate of innovation while always delivering business value?" Her answer is that it has to be a top-down process – which places heavy demands on top management, who must be at the forefront of what the technology makes possible. She also warns of what she sees as a dangerous shortcut:

> *"Many will probably fall back on trying to let an AI coordinate these things, but I'm convinced that's the wrong way to go. We're making a mistake if we build away human coordination, not least for reasons of engagement and culture."*
>
> CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, FINTECH COMPANY

Who holds the baton?

Companies handle the governance question in different ways.

Formalised prioritisation. A travel tech company has created a prioritisation process in which teams submit requests and a central AI team decides which tools are built first. Within HR, three AI tools are being built this year and seven next year, including one to analyse staff turnover and one to prepare managers for the Pay Transparency Directive.

The HR function takes ownership of its area. An HR lead in SaaS describes how her team actively owns the implementation of AI support within HR processes, to avoid everyone doing things their own way. Ahead of development reviews, they know that managers and employees are already using AI, "but we want them to do it our way! We know, for example, what we consider good forms of feedback." The company is therefore rolling out a shared AI skill for the whole organisation to use in upcoming performance reviews.

Calls for clarity. Others are asking for clearer direction from leadership, arguing that it is now more important than ever for top executives to be razor-sharp about the company's priorities. But several also note that leadership does not have the answers:

> *"And now that we're supposed to do it at scale, no one knows how it's going to work. It's not as if the leadership team says 'listen, we've figured it out! Come here, my little lambs'. No one knows! And living with that uncertainty is hard for many people."*
>
> VP PEOPLE, SAAS COMPANY

Governance requires goals, and here there is a challenge of its own. One company, for example, sets six clear company goals a year, but what they mean at employee level has time to change many times during that period. Sometimes entire goals become obsolete. This tension – between the need for direction and a world that is changing ever faster – is also one of the driving forces behind the need to redesign HR frameworks (see theme 9).

THEME 8 · PART II

08 The big roll-out is happening now

Even though every company in the report has worked with AI since at least 2022, many – the AI scale-ups excepted – say that the broad implementation of mandatory AI-driven ways of working is only happening now. Several interviewees describe a clear turning point:

> *"Right up until the end of 2025, my sense was that the attitude was that it was enough to have a few enthusiasts. Now the attitude is much more that everyone has to get on board."*
>
> VP PEOPLE, SAAS COMPANY

Until recently, several say, they were content as long as employees were using and experimenting with AI. AI initiatives were encouraged and the additional costs usually approved. Use was largely driven by employees' own interest and initiative. This autumn, many have launched broader initiatives in which implementation is more managed. New AI-driven routines and processes are being rolled out, sharper targets are being set for how much time automation should save, and employees are being asked to produce a plan for how their role will change as a result of AI. The rhetoric has also been ramped up. One HR leader stresses: "We're very clear that AI is a non-issue; we won't accept people not using AI. We require everyone to work smarter. […] If you don't have an agentic mindset, you don't have a place with us."

Several interviewees have long felt stressed about this roll-out, and several are also self-critical that it did not start earlier. Employee-driven AI use has also created a problem: AI capability is now very uneven. In several places an A team and a B team have already formed, and the gap is often so large that it is becoming hard to bridge:

> *"We have some who are way ahead and learning loads, and others who have buried their heads in the sand – for so long that it's starting to get embarrassing. There are perhaps those who don't dare, but there are also those who don't even believe in it. The levels are already so different! It also means you can't solve this with ordinary enablement. 'Right, let's run a training session!' Because everyone knows such incredibly different amounts."*
>
> VP PEOPLE, SAAS COMPANY

Another interviewee quotes their Chief Product Officer, who has noted that the tech team as a whole is about 50 per cent more effective today than before AI – but that this improvement is because some are seven times more effective, while others have improved only marginally.

The gap lies both in sheer skill level and in attitude to the new. This raises difficult questions. The HR leader at a SaaS company describes an increasingly common dilemma: a highly AI-literate employee starts scaling themselves to the point where they begin doing parts of a less AI-literate colleague's work:

> *"Should the averagely skilled person go, then? Or is it just a matter of everyone having time to develop to a high level, and then the big synergies appear? There's no simple answer to that; in some cases the person probably should go, but at the same time you can't demand that all employees sit up all night vibe-coding and coming up with new tools."*
>
> HEAD OF PEOPLE, SAAS COMPANY

Learning and development becomes more top-down

The A and B teams are to a large extent a consequence of how skills development has been organised over the past decade. For many years, Learning & Development (L&D) has moved towards self-directed learning in which employees drive their own development. That model works well for the curious and self-motivated, but falls short in times of disruptive change. The HR leader at a fintech company draws the clearest conclusion:

> *"Generally I think L&D will need to become much less centred on the individual, and that the organisation will need to take a much more structured approach. Previously there has been a lot of focus on the individual's motivations: what do you want? How can we make that possible? But in a change this big, I don't think you can expect employees to work out for themselves what's required, and as an organisation you can't lose the initiative. Instead it has to become more top-down. Whether that's the curling-parent method or something more enforced."*
>
> HR LEADER, FINTECH COMPANY

This is a marked break with the trend. The formats described are rarely traditional training courses. The companies in the report are freeing up time for employees to practise, organising hackathons and learning on the job, and trying to have a strong presence in the teams. Some have brought in external coaches to show people hands-on how it is done, and set up knowledge sharing in chat channels.

Skills development also takes up a lot of space on the leadership team's agenda. At least a couple of the interviewees say that AI skills development, linked to performance and efficiency, is the issue on which leadership presses them hardest.

THEME 9 · PART II

09 Frameworks and tools aren't keeping up

A clear sign of the strong pressure for change is that many of the HR function's fundamental tools – role descriptions, career frameworks, performance reviews and pay structures – are becoming outdated at an ever faster pace. Several interviewees describe how frameworks have become obstacles rather than support. One clear example is all the structures built on the assumption that roles are relatively stable.

> *"For example, all our employees have their role description written into their employment contract. It's almost becoming a legal problem! It was probably convenient for the company to be able to say 'this is what you're employed to do', but now it's becoming a big problem because people can refuse to do other things. It's going to be a major shift, because the legal side of HR hasn't kept up at all here."*
>
> VP PEOPLE, SAAS COMPANY

What used to protect the employer has thus become a brake on the agility the AI era demands. A recruitment lead illustrates the speed with an example from the tech side: "We've hired a lot of people into AI roles, and those roles have already changed a lot. In 2023–2024 it was all data science and machine learning engineers; now the focus is more on being able to build things in the cloud."

Another clear example is the career framework. A Head of People in SaaS describes how it has gone from being a stable structure to a living document, because the content of roles is changing so quickly: "The career framework will be updated several times this year. Before that, we had the same career framework for five years!" The question she expects to spend most time on going forward is understanding the need in each role: which skills are actually required.

Performance management: from shorter cycles to radical redefinition

Performance management is also facing major changes. Most agree on that – but exactly how transformative they are varies. One of the most common measures is to introduce shorter cycles, usually quarterly check-ins.

> *"We have a full-year review and a lighter mid-year today, but that's no longer enough. You have to recalibrate expectations and goals much more often, because things change so fast now. If, for example, a new tool comes along that you can work with, the job description and focus suddenly look different."*
>
> SENIOR PEOPLE PARTNER, SAAS COMPANY

Elsewhere the change is more radical. At one of the AI scale-ups, the performance process has been redesigned from the ground up. The starting point was a classic problem: managers lack sufficient evidence to assess performance, and preparation takes too much time. The solution was to change the division of roles:

> *"I often turn the perspective and the question around. 'Our managers don't have the right evidence to assess performance.' OK – then we make employees responsible for their own development. That means they have to collect the evidence of their own performance themselves. Gather the evidence, from whatever systems you work in."*
>
> HEAD OF PERFORMANCE, AI SCALE-UP

An AI agent collects data on the employee's actual work from the systems where the work happens. Another agent helps the manager assess whether the material constitutes good evidence: does it clearly show results, the desired collaboration? The manager then makes the assessment. AI is not used to set ratings that translate into rewards, which according to the company's interpretation of the AI Act is not permitted. However, the company says the AI support makes the scale more granular: an employee rated 2.9 and one rated 2.1 are both below the bar, but the first is probably coachable while the second will probably require more effort from manager and HR to reach the expected level.[1]

The company has also made its career framework fully transparent. Everyone knows which level they are at and what is expected. "The employer has already lost the ability to be secretive, and next year pay transparency is coming."

At the same time, the same company stresses that the human conversation remains central: "Now, for the first time, we'll have really good performance data between you and your manager. We'll have it in black and white [...] what you've actually produced during the year. But the dialogue is what matters!"

Other companies are more sceptical about AI-driven performance management. The Chief People Officer at a smaller fintech company believes it can bring significant benefits in large organisations, but could have negative consequences in a small company. She does not want to risk undermining the interpersonal focus she has built up by drawing managers' and employees' attention away towards figures and technicalities: "I've actually had to work hard on 'talk to each other instead'."

Behind the practical questions, however, lies a bigger and more philosophical one: what is performance in the AI era? Several highlight the distinction between output and understanding.

> *"If I'm really good at prompting AI – if I constantly deliver loads of superficially good output, but know nothing about employment law or HR – how is my performance then? You might ask whether underlying understanding or contextual knowledge becomes a performance dimension in itself."*
>
> CHRO, SAAS COMPANY

Another interviewee stresses the growing importance of attitude for what is seen as good performance. In the AI era, she argues, performance depends entirely on a mindset of approaching the task with curiosity and openness to how AI can help. "In my mind, mindset is performance today – and efficiency is what you get out of your mindset."

The VP People at an AI scale-up describes how almost everything can now be measured: messages in open channels, committed code, contributions to discussions. But the real question is which of these measures are actually indicative of success and impact. Some voices in the material also wonder whether pay should in future be more variable, now that AI can track what each person produces – and how well they get their agents to perform.

This links back to theme 5: if judgement and deep understanding are rising in value, but what is easiest to measure is volume and output, performance systems risk rewarding the wrong things.

THEME 10 · PART II

10 HR work is changing – but the future is unevenly distributed

At the same time as the HR function is to lead the organisation through the transformation, its own work is also changing. The pace and approaches, however, differ.

From admin to human encounters – or?

At the AI scale-ups, things have moved very fast. In recruitment, they have often managed to automate away a large share of the administrative work, frequently by building their own tools. Beyond AI taking over things such as scheduling, note-taking during interviews and coordination with hiring managers, they have often also redesigned their sourcing work: agents listen in on the kick-off conversation between manager and recruiter and immediately start sourcing. Other agents are used specifically to look for candidate groups that are not on LinkedIn. At one of the scale-ups, HR has built its own tools for initial screening, workforce planning, talent mapping and sourcing. An AI ops engineer is now being hired into the HR team to improve and connect what has been built.

The most interesting thing, however, is where the freed-up time goes. The answer is almost unanimous: to the candidates. "With the time we've freed up by not having to sit and answer emails, we can now spend much more time on in-person meetings," says a recruiter at an AI scale-up.

In other tech companies the picture is more mixed. The great majority say they have automated things with AI. Among the most common are AI transcription of interviews, drafting of role requirements and calendar bookings. At the same time, several feel that the truly transformative change has not yet happened.

> *"I feel the TA role still has a foot in each camp. On the one hand we want to invest in automation and full AI; on the other we hesitate and ask ourselves: are we ready? How will it work for us? How do we avoid automating away the parts where people matter?"*
>
> TALENT ACQUISITION PARTNER, MEDIA TECH COMPANY

Some also say the freed-up time tends to go on doing more of the same. "If it's faster to make candidate presentations, I just make more of them," says the recruitment lead at a database company, who despite the tools describes being fully booked and an increased cognitive load: "You're in the loop all the time. I'd never dare let the agents roam freely."

Not everyone shares that picture, however. There are SaaS and fintech companies in the material where the interviewees agree with the AI scale-ups: the time goes to more human contact. "All the admin, all the repetitive tasks, all the most boring parts I outsource to AI. I spend the freed-up time out among the employees," says, for example, a CHRO in SaaS. Another stresses how much has happened in just under a year: "[Back then] there was a lot of focus on starting to use AI for personal efficiency; using it in the calendar and so on. Now people have moved beyond the purely operational and started focusing more on questions like: Which capabilities are becoming more important? How should we hire? How should we in HR change our ways of working?"

New organisational forms, new roles – and more focus on the hard questions

The AI scale-ups are also reorganising the HR function. At one of the companies, a central programme office builds all frameworks and tools – onboarding, leadership, performance management – and also handles much of the implementation work and enablement for managers out in the organisation. "This is tricky, because HRBPs like to own the whole scope," notes one interviewee, explaining that in their organisation it is instead a given that all the "offensive" work is owned centrally. HRBPs out in the organisation focus more on handling the exceptions: when something has gone wrong, when there has been a conflict or when an exit needs to happen.

The same interviewee has also chosen to build her own tools and dashboards rather than adapt to traditional HR systems.

> *"What's happening with HR is that all the admin goes out. Instead the focus is on what has always been the most important thing: understanding the business through HR data. Say we have 15 per cent attrition – what does that mean? That figure is meaningless unless I can relate it to what we're trying to achieve and exactly who it is that's leaving."*
>
> HR LEADER, AI SCALE-UP

She describes several traditional HR tools, such as annual engagement surveys, as meaningless. What her team looks for is domain knowledge, a holistic view and project management skills: owning the process, keeping to the timeline, sorting out dependencies and staying within budget.

These changes, several interviewees at the scale-ups emphasise, are however the opposite of HR being automated away.

> *"What goes out of the window in traditional HR? Nothing! Of course we've automated away a lot of admin, we build tooling, we have better tools, better data. But all the hard tasks are still there! As HR you still have to enable managers to have those conversations and create engagement and motivation. You still have to coach them to dare to have the tough conversations about expectations. You still have to build a really good process."*
>
> HR LEADER, AI SCALE-UP

The same person stresses the importance of looking up and seeing beyond efficiency: "What do we actually want this whole technological revolution for? Because if it were just about being able to build agents and tell them to do our job for us, then I for one don't want to be part of it. It has to be about actually solving some of the big questions."

Even though the AI companies have come furthest, practically all HR leaders in the material are thinking about what their function will actually look like going forward. The Head of People at a SaaS company believes the HR profession may split: one part under the banner of People Ops or People Enablement, organising teams and ways of working close to the business, and a more classic HR responsible for heavier processes, employment law and handling exceptions. Above all, though, she predicts a long period of divergence:

> *"I think we'll see a long period ahead – maybe ten years – when there will be an enormous range in what HR can be. From AI first to those still talking about digitalising processes."*
>
> HEAD OF PEOPLE, SAAS COMPANY

PART III

III

Analysis and conclusions

Experience or mindset?

Despite major efficiency gains, recruitment quality receives limited attention

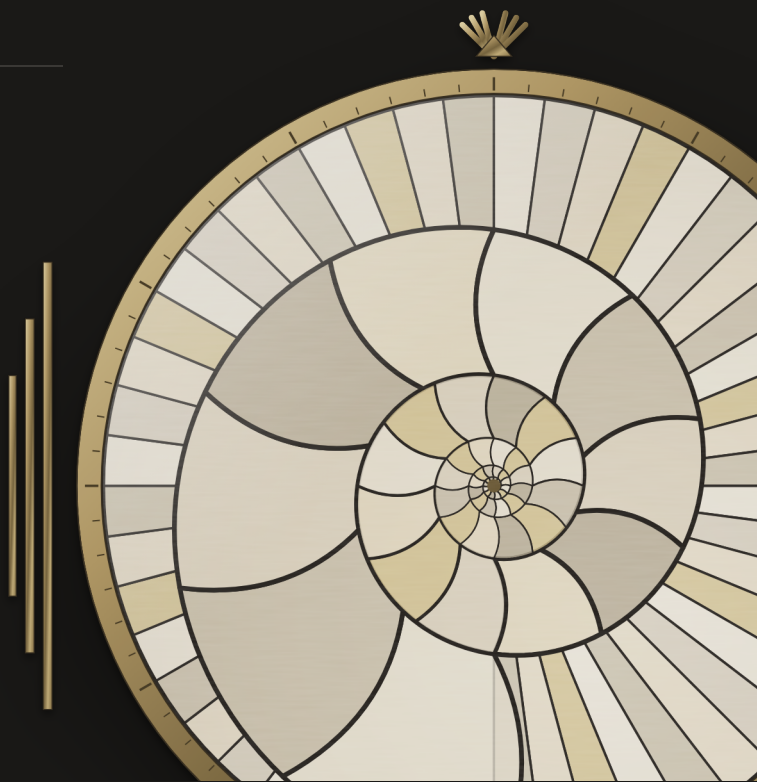
The concept of a role is changing

Centralisation, matrix or cross-functional teams? Different answers to the same challenge

A revival of the "humanist" employer brand – with junior hiring as a new element

Shared understanding – a new arena for collaboration between HR and Operations

Where is HR in tech heading?



Talent in Tech 2026 describes a shifting talent logic, HR practices moving at high speed and an HR function going through something of an identity crisis of its own.

Experience or mindset?

The material contains a contradiction worth highlighting. On the one hand, almost all interviewees stress that they are now looking more for mindset, curiosity and drive. On the other hand, the same industry is increasingly seeking senior profiles. Several companies say they have become considerably more selective about relevant experience.

One way of understanding the contradiction is that what companies are really looking for in senior people is not experience in itself, but the judgement and holistic understanding that experience often brings. If so, it poses a major challenge for recruitment: distinguishing between experience that has built judgement and experience that has merely built routine. We know from selection research that experience as such is not particularly useful for predicting success. What matters is capturing the capabilities that experience has in some cases helped develop, and that requires more sophisticated selection methods.

Another interpretation is that companies today do not need to choose. When the talent market favours employers, they can afford to demand both the right mindset and solid experience. This could, however, also mean there is an arbitrage opportunity in the market for those willing to relax some of the experience requirements: finding the talent that is currently undervalued, but which has the mindset everyone wants so much.

Despite major efficiency gains, recruitment quality receives limited attention

In TA, practically all interviewees mention major efficiency gains from AI. Interestingly, though, few seem to spend the newly won time on raising the quality of actual hires. Few measure how the people hired actually perform, or use the data to improve the process next time. A clear exception is the head of HR at one of the AI companies, who names prediction of job performance as his top priority for the coming year. Otherwise, the question is hardly mentioned at all.

One explanation may be that AI automation has coincided with tough economic times and therefore extensive staff cuts within TA. The time freed up by AI then has to be used to make day-to-day work add up. Tellingly, there are examples in the material of TA managers now carrying the same recruitment load as everyone else in the team – hardly an arrangement that encourages stepping back and driving long-term improvements.

Another possible explanation is that efficiency is seen as a considerably lower-hanging AI fruit than data-driven process improvement. In TA, creating feedback loops between process and outcome, and making something useful of the data, is often seen as overwhelming. Yet this is precisely where AI could lower the barriers. The TA teams that look beyond efficiency and dare to take the first steps towards better recruitment quality will have a head start.

The concept of a role is changing

For decades it has been fairly self-evident what a "role" means: a set of tasks and responsibilities, formalised in a job description. Now the very concept of a role is in an identity crisis. Tasks are changing faster than ever, and the boundaries between roles are becoming less and less clear as a result of the greater reach AI gives employees and teams. As some of the interviews show, HR in tech is also starting to talk less about the number of full-time positions and more about the impact it wants to achieve. Whether that impact is to be achieved through hiring or with the help of AI is often an open question.

When tasks become less relevant as the building blocks of a role, something else comes to the fore as all the more central: accountability for results. Which KPIs are you actually responsible for? Which end results are on your desk? What needs to happen for you to be considered successful in your role?

This is likely to affect how roles are designed going forward. The development raises legal questions that need to be resolved, but the direction is clear: in the AI era, a "role" is likely to mean something like "a set of accountabilities for results" rather than "a set of tasks". Even with this shift, however, frameworks will need to allow for roles changing faster and more continuously than before.

Centralisation, matrix or cross-functional teams? Different answers to the same challenge

There is hardly an HR leader in the interview material who does not name organisation design as a key priority going forward. The changes they are planning can all be understood in terms of the literature in the field.[2]

The American organisation theorist Jay R. Galbraith has been called the father of organisation design. He was early to formulate a fundamental principle: the greater the uncertainty, the more information the organisation needs to process. When uncertainty increases, the organisation must act – either by increasing its capacity to process information, or by reducing the need to do so. If the organisation does not adapt, the inevitable result is blown budgets and/or production delays. This is exactly the challenge the tech companies in the report face: a brutally greater uncertainty.

According to Galbraith, three basic strategies are available. We see examples of all of them in the material:

1 Introduce cross-functional teams responsible for a clear outcome

The classic example is moving from a functional organisation to, for instance, a product- or customer-based organisation. This reduces the need for information exchange between teams, because all the specialist skills needed to create a particular outcome are brought together in the same team. We see several examples of this in the material. Larger companies are considering moving from a functional structure to business units, and several interviewees name set-ups with squads or tribes as their preferred structure going forward.

2 Increase leadership's capacity to take in information

Here one accepts that a larger amount of information needs to be processed. For the system to cope with the increased load, one invests in information systems and decision support: dashboards, analytics tools, or giving leadership the help of a data analyst.

What is particularly interesting now is that AI creates entirely new possibilities for this strategy. The organisation can not only gather many times more information; it also has access to a qualitatively different information system. AI can summarise, prioritise, interpret and explain what you are seeing and what it means. Together, this creates new possibilities for leadership to stay well informed without necessarily becoming overloaded. That, in turn, may lead to a more centralised organisation.

We see signs of this in the material too. At one of the fast-growing AI companies, for example, HR leadership is using new AI-driven tools and data collection to build a much more comprehensive and granular picture of where the organisation stands. Similarly, short performance cycles are made possible by a sophisticated agent architecture that collects evidence for the assessment. Other companies are introducing shorter and more frequent performance cycles, which according to Galbraith is also a variant of this strategy. Interestingly, most tech companies outside the AI scale-ups do not talk about enabling this through agent-based collection of performance data, but rather by making the assessment itself more condensed.

3 Enable more horizontal communication

This strategy means moving decision-making down to the level where the information actually sits, without rebuilding the organisation into cross-functional teams. Instead, horizontal decision processes are created. This can happen informally, through more frequent conversations between team leads; in semi-formal ways, such as task forces; or in highly formalised ways, of which the matrix organisation is the most far-reaching example. Sure enough, the material contains at least one example of a larger tech company moving from a functional organisation to precisely a matrix structure.

The biggest cost of a matrix organisation is more managers. But this is also a truth that AI may come to challenge. At least one HR leader in the material raises the possibility of letting the same manager lead several teams, supported by the far greater context that can be maintained with the help of AI. This could mean that a leaner version of the matrix organisation emerges in larger tech companies.

Another way of enabling horizontal communication is internal rotation, which helps employees understand the whole business and value chain. This too is already happening in forward-looking tech companies: product managers working hands-on with customer success, salespeople sitting with the engineering teams and so on. In the AI era, this may go from being something driven by ambitious individuals to a strategic way of working that is expected of everyone.

A revival of the “humanist” employer brand – with junior hiring as a new element

As we have seen, tech companies outside the scale-up segment are looking for new ways to stand out in the talent market. After five years of focus on a hard-driving work culture and high demands, the time may be ripe for a more humanist approach again. The new humanist employer brand does, however, have a somewhat different character from the 2010s. Rather than emphasising “potential”, which was a keyword then, “mindset” is likely to be in focus going forward. But perhaps the most important addition is that junior hiring is likely to be integrated as a central element.

The companies in the report that continue to hire juniors often present this as part of a larger paradigm: a belief in people, a pursuit of diversity and the ambition to be a strongly values-driven organisation with a humane work culture.

These organisations may have understood something important. Done right, junior hiring can be an effective tool for building a stronger brand among the next generation of customers. In addition, companies gain access to a talent pool that is currently undervalued in the market, making it possible to hire very strong talent at relatively low cost.

A more humanist employer brand also has the advantage of riding a considerably more long-term trend than 996. For even though employers have swung sharply in the work culture they emphasise, the values of candidates and employees have not changed very much. A large share still value work-life balance and a humane culture very highly. This applies to the younger generation too.[3]

Shared understanding – a new arena for collaboration between HR and Operations

A recurring theme in the report is that the HR function in tech seems to be moving closer to Operations. In some places there is even talk of renaming the function People Ops. This largely has to do with the theme above: that AI is pushing for a change in organisation design.

While Operations will probably have the final say on the exact shape of the org chart in many companies, HR will play a key role in achieving the shared understanding that so many in the study talk about. As the boundaries between roles become more fluid and individual employees extend their reach, more people must understand more about how the organisation works and how value is created.

There is a concept for this in research: **shared mental models**. Research has long suggested that teams whose members share a mental model of how the business works also perform better. How to achieve this shared understanding is, however, another question. Part of the answer lies in typical Operations questions: who reports to whom, how information and tasks flow. But much is also decided in classic HR arenas – such as job design, L&D, leadership and culture. HR in tech will probably spend considerably more time going forward on making sure learning happens across functions, that an explicit part of leaders’ remit becomes building understanding of the business, and that the culture supports a shared picture of the value created for the customer.[4]

Where is HR in tech heading?

The tech industry has always done HR its own way. Now new long-term shifts are under way. One of the clearest is the tendency towards centralisation, with several forces contributing. First, AI enables vertical information flows that are many times better than before, which means a small, centralised HR team can stay up to date on considerably more of what is happening in the organisation. Second, cost savings have led many organisations to cut HR roles out in the business, such as HRBPs and HR administrators, and these positions will not necessarily return in the same form. But there is also a third explanation, linked to the need for AI skills development: L&D is becoming considerably more top-down, out of strategic necessity.

All this means a new way of organising and carrying out HR work, but also new strategic priorities. The companies at the forefront start from the KPIs they want to be able to show to company leadership. Then they ask themselves: what does a system that drives precisely these KPIs look like? These senior HR leaders need strong analytical ability and solid business understanding. In their teams they look for deep specialist expertise, systems thinking and a holistic view of the organisation. But also strong ownership and the ability to drive large projects from start to finish.

This also changes the HRBP role. Today the HRBP often acts as broad support to managers and as the person who drives implementation, management support, coaching and adaptation to the specific context. In the material we see examples of the central HR function now taking over enablement as well. What mainly remains for the HRBP in that context is handling the exceptions. Some go even further and say that "the HRBP of the future is an agent".

Not all organisations will choose this way of working. Some tech companies may instead use HRBPs to enable horizontal communication and other key behaviours required for cross-functional collaboration. But the vertically integrated, more centralised model is likely to become one of the AI era's most important contributions to the way HR works.

Notes

1. The company's interpretation is given here. The AI Act does not impose a general ban on AI-based performance assessments. However, certain AI systems used in work management and evaluation are classified as high-risk systems and are subject, among other things, to requirements for human oversight. See Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council, Annex III point 4 and Article 14.

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3. Deloitte (2025). *2025 Gen Z and Millennial Survey: Gen Zs and Millennials at Work: Pursuing a Balance of Money, Meaning, and Well-being*. Deloitte Global.

4. Mathieu, J. E., Heffner, T. S., Goodwin, G. F., Salas, E. & Cannon-Bowers, J. A. (2000). The Influence of Shared Mental Models on Team Process and Performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85(2), 273–283. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.85.2.273



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