



# Don't Outsource Your Humanity:

How to run HR with people and technology in an age of AI-mania

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### INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence isn't a "someday" topic for HR leaders anymore. It is already present in recruitment workflows, learning and development platforms, employee help desks, and increasingly visible in the strategic planning processes of organizations of every size.

The question isn't whether AI will be part of HR, but rather: **how do we use it well?**

HR functions that lean too heavily on automation risk losing the relationship qualities that make people management effective. Those that resist AI altogether can forfeit meaningful efficiency gains and risk falling behind. The challenge is balance; AI should strengthen HR, not replace the judgment, care, and accountability that only humans can provide.

### 1. WHERE AI IS SHOWING UP IN HR

When HR leaders are asked how they are currently using AI in their organizations, the responses span a surprisingly broad range of functions:

- Recruitment
- Onboarding
- Learning and development
- Employee support
- Data analysis
- Policy drafting
- Administrative processing

Which is to say nearly the entire spectrum of HR responsibility. Note that where AI adoption is highest is also some of the most deeply relational parts of HR. Recruitment involves assessing fit, building candidate relationships, and representing organizational culture to potential employees. Onboarding is fundamentally about helping someone feel welcome and connected. Learning and development require understanding individual growth needs and designing experiences that motivate people to grow.

The presence of AI in each of them raises important questions about the line where the tool ends and where human judgment begins.

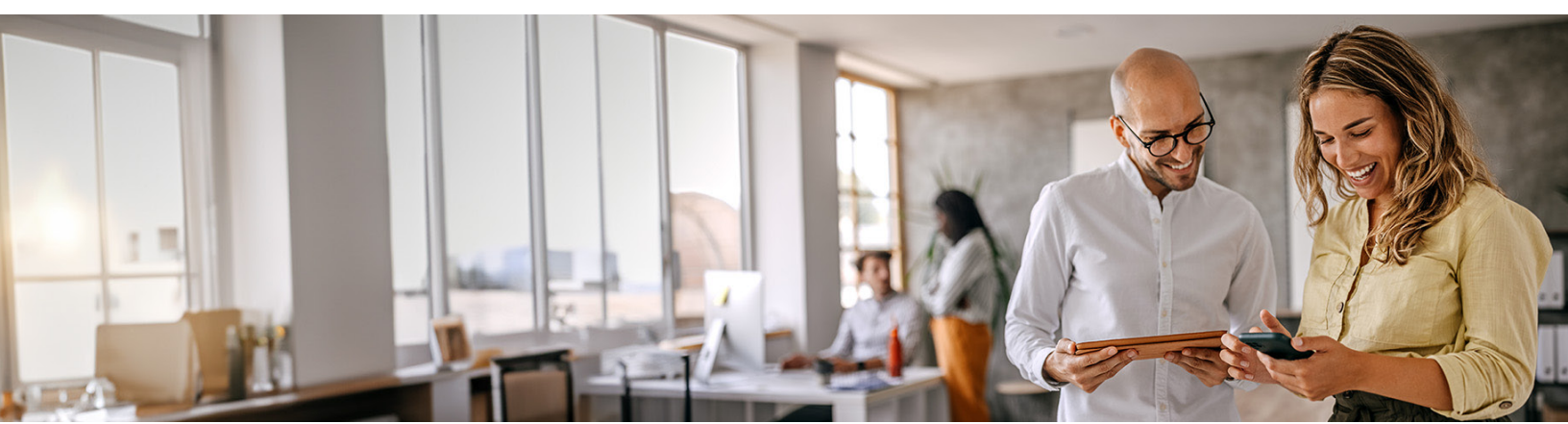
AI adoption at the business level is accelerating, but the preparation around it hasn't kept pace. In 2024, most HR leaders told SHRM their organizations had not adequately trained employees to work alongside AI. The core issue now is less about whether organizations are using AI, and more about whether employees understand the uses and risks therein.<sup>1</sup>

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But, the pressure to adopt AI usage is real. In one widely reported example, Accenture informed senior employees that regular use of the company's AI tools would be a requirement for promotion eligibility, and began tracking weekly login data to monitor compliance<sup>2</sup>. Mandatory adoption policies of this kind might be unusual, but they signal the direction of organizational expectations.

At the same time, a Google survey from the same period found that only about two in five U.S. employees are actively using AI in their jobs<sup>3</sup>, suggesting a meaningful gap between organizational mandates and actual workforce practice.



## 2. PRESSURE POINTS SHAPING HR TODAY

### Compliance Complexity

The regulatory environment governing employment has become substantially more complex in the post-pandemic period. Multi-state employment, which was once the exception, has become the norm for many organizations as remote work dispersed workforces across state lines. An organization headquartered in one state may now have employees subject to the employment laws of a dozen others, each with their own requirements around paid leave, wage transparency, worker classification, etc.

For lean HR teams, navigating this patchwork of requirements without the infrastructure of a national employer is a significant burden. The compliance checklist that once covered an organization's obligations is no longer sufficient. The ground continues to shift, and HR functions are expected to keep pace.

### Rising Employee Expectations

At the same time, what employees expect from their organizations has evolved (and increased). Flexibility remains the most commonly cited want, followed closely by clarity, consistency, and transparency. They want to understand the reasoning behind decisions, not just the decisions themselves. They want communication that is timely, honest, and very important in this context, human.

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These expectations create real pressure on HR and leadership teams. Faster, clearer, more personalized communication is increasingly the standard, and falling short of it is not just a satisfaction issue, but one of trust. When compensation decisions, policy changes, or organizational shifts are communicated poorly or inconsistently, the damage to organizational trust can be significant and slow to repair.

### Financial Strain

Post-pandemic inflation, shifting consumer behavior, and continued margin pressure mean that most organizations are watching costs very carefully. Efficiency is not a “nice-to-have”; for many it is a genuine constraint. HR is not immune to that pressure, and AI’s promise of better, faster, lower-cost processing of routine tasks is attractive to many companies in that context.

The risk again is in how that efficiency pressure is applied. Moving fast on AI adoption without adequate thought to communication, training, and human oversight can and will create new problems: compliance gaps, employee trust erosion, or well-intentioned automation that produces outputs nobody actually reviewed. The pressure to be faster must be balanced against the cost of getting it wrong.

### 3. THE RISK OF OUTSOURCING JUDGMENT

To quote IBM’s now infamous 1979 training material<sup>4</sup>, “...a computer can never be held accountable. Therefore, a computer must never make a management decision.”

There isn’t an inherent problem with using AI in HR; but there is a distinct difference in outsourcing tasks, and outsourcing judgment.

Generating first drafts, processing routine data, surfacing relevant compliance information is perfectly valid and increasingly necessary. AI can do these things faster and more consistently than a person working alone, and freeing HR professionals from routine administrative work creates space for the higher-value work that only humans can do.

Outsourcing judgment is a different matter entirely. When an AI system generates performance feedback that a manager sends without reading it, the problem is not that the tool was used; it is that the human reviewed nothing, and contributed nothing. Worse, if the information was invalid, people’s livelihoods may be improperly impacted, the company damaged, and liability opened to the company for the sake of mere convenience.

Humans are still pretty good at identifying AI-generated content, and it can erode confidence when they are being communicated with by a tool rather than a person, especially on matters that feel personal.

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### WATCH FOR: Signs of Outsourced Judgment

- Performance feedback or sensitive communications that read like unedited AI output, including visible template placeholders or generic phrasing.
- Policies distributed to employees without any internal review for organizational fit or context.
- Personnel decisions made with heavy AI input but without clear documentation of the human judgment that shaped the final call.
- Managers using AI tools to avoid having difficult conversations in person rather than to prepare for them more effectively.
- AI-generated content being treated as final rather than as a starting point for human review and refinement.

### 4. TRENDS TO EMBRACE AND TRENDS TO AVOID

There are several ways we see AI being deployed within the HR function. **Augmented HR** uses technology to make people and their work better. **Automated HR** replaces human judgment with any number of variants of Large Language Models (LLMs). The former is a competitive advantage; the latter is a risk.

#### Trends to Embrace

1. Human-centered AI governance: Organizations should make deliberate decisions about how AI will be used in their HR functions: what tools are approved, what they will be used for, how outputs will be reviewed, and how those policies will be communicated to employees. Without governance, AI adoption happens on its own on a case-by-case basis, and often in ways that create more problems than they solve.
2. Leadership as a competency: Not everyone arrives in a leadership role equipped to use AI well, and that's OK and not unexpected; it's brand-new technology. Leadership skills, including the ability to have clear and honest performance conversations, to develop people, and to exercise judgment under uncertainty, are learnable competencies. Organizations that treat leadership development as a priority can be better positioned as AI becomes more embedded in daily business life.
3. Difficult conversations, done in person: One of the clearest risks of AI in HR is that it gives managers a reason to avoid the conversations that need to happen face-to-face. Performance reviews, sensitive personnel decisions, and awkward interpersonal situations require a real human presence; someone who can read the room, respond to an individual, and take genuine accountability for the outcome. AI can help a manager prepare for those hard conversations; but it cannot and should not replace them.

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4. Strategic partnerships: No organization has all the expertise it needs internally, especially in a period of rapid technological change. Engaging external partners, whether that's fractional HR support, specialized consultants, or platform providers who specialize in AI adoption.
5. Intentional use of freed-up time: When AI does create efficiency gains, the most important question is what HR professionals and leaders do with the time they get back. The answer should not be more administrative processing. It should be investment in the relational, developmental, and strategic work that AI cannot do: building stronger managers, designing better employee experiences, and strengthening organizational culture.

### Trends to Avoid

- Doing it alone: The pace and complexity of AI adoption make external perspective and support more valuable, not less. Organizations that try to navigate this landscape without any outside input are more likely to make avoidable mistakes.
- Treating AI as a strategy in itself: AI is a tool. What the organization is trying to achieve—for its people, its culture, and its business—is the strategy. AI adoption decisions should follow from clarity about those goals, not precede it.
- Delegating sensitive communications to tools: Employees notice when they are being addressed by a template rather than a person. The damage to trust is real and cumulative.

### CONCLUSION

AI is not going away, but adoption without intention is its own kind of risk. The pressure to move fast, the complexity of the compliance landscape, the demands on lean HR teams, and the very real efficiency gains that AI offers can combine to push organizations toward outsourcing judgment when they intend only to outsource tasks.

The framework is straightforward, even if the execution requires ongoing attention:

- Use AI to augment HR, not to automate it. Let the technology handle what it does well—administrative processing, data analysis, first drafts—and protect the human elements that it cannot replicate.
- Establish governance before broad adoption. Make deliberate organizational decisions about how AI will be used, reviewed, and communicated to employees.
- Invest in leadership development alongside AI adoption. The time AI frees up is only valuable if it is invested in the relational and strategic work that drives long-term organizational health.
- Build partnerships. The landscape is complex and changing. Outside perspective and expertise are not a luxury—they are a practical necessity for most organizations navigating this terrain.
- Keep the difficult conversations human. Performance feedback, sensitive personnel decisions, and complex interpersonal situations require human presence and human accountability. AI can help prepare; it cannot replace.



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