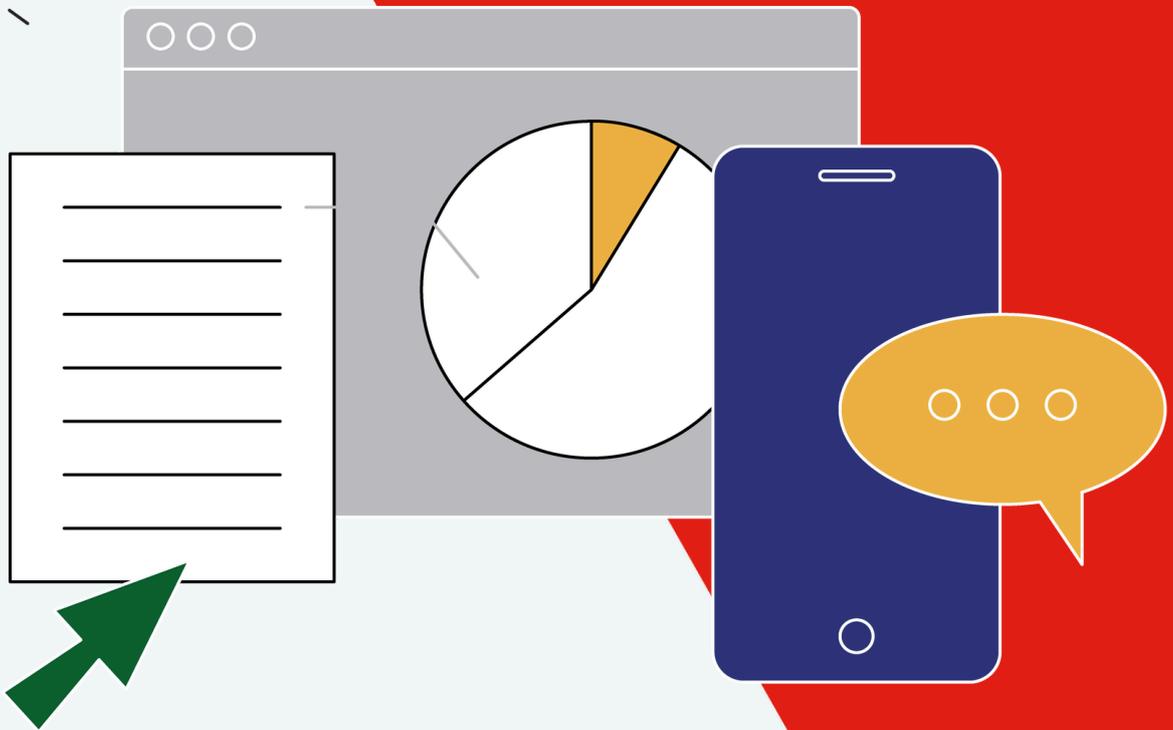
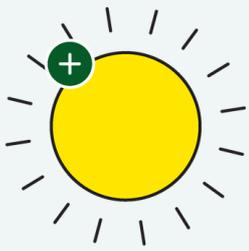


Institute
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MARCH 2026

IC TRENDS REPORT

Emergent work trends reshaping
internal communication

Executive summary

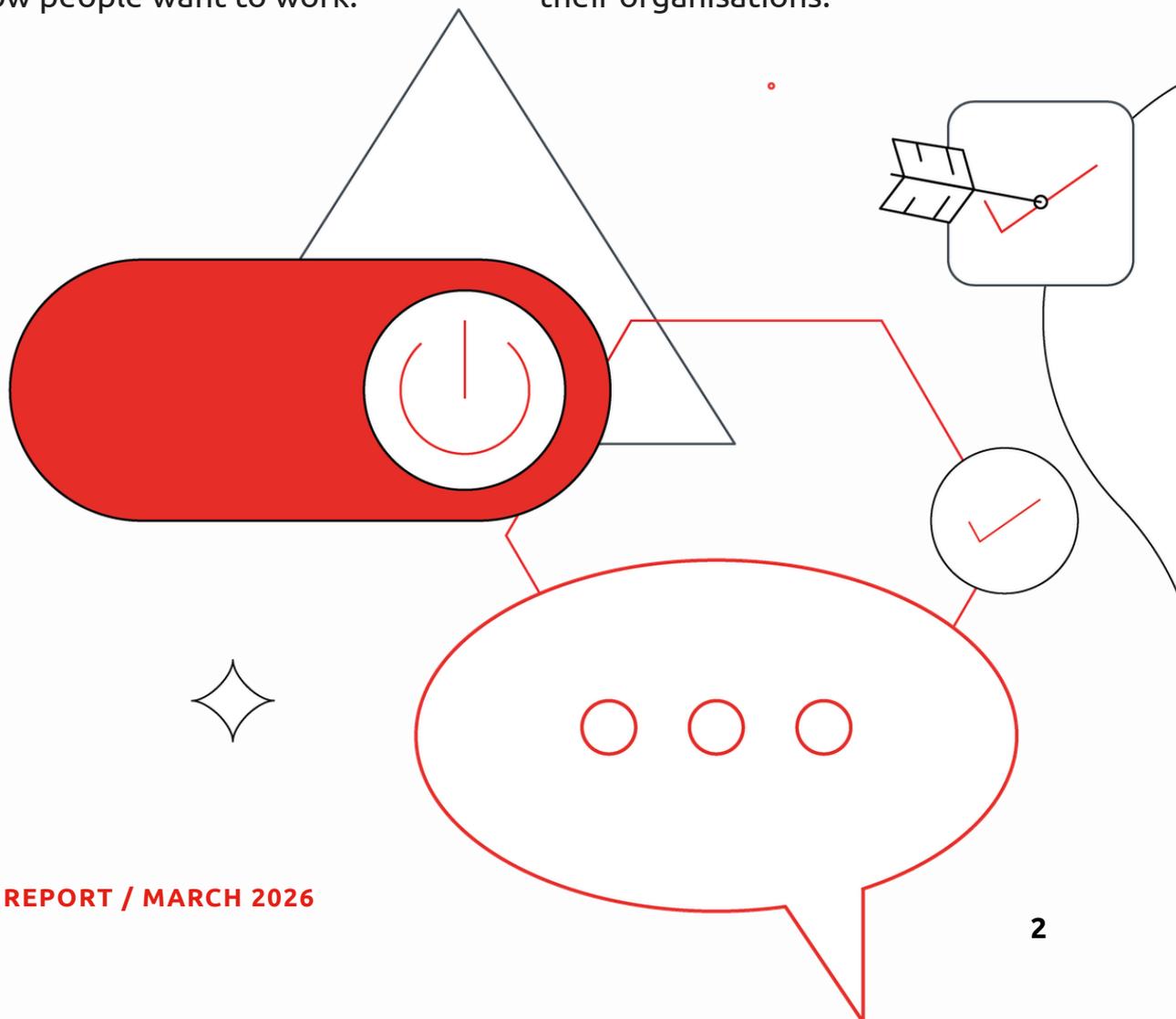
Internal communicators are the new power players

As global certainty continues to erode, unease is spreading. In an age of 'permacrisis', organisations are under growing pressure to understand and respond to the expectations of an ever more diverse workforce.

Only by doing so can they unlock the true potential of colleagues at every level, many of whom are increasingly distrusting of the hierarchical, top-down management models that no longer reflect how people want to work.

In this fast-shifting, 'nobody knows' environment, internal communication has become a core capability, one that sits at the very heart of how organisations perform and adapt.

Our monthly trend reports help internal communication professionals stay ahead of the curve – and think more boldly about the strategic value they can bring to their organisations.



AI & Tech

The disappearing ladder: AI and the future of entry-level work

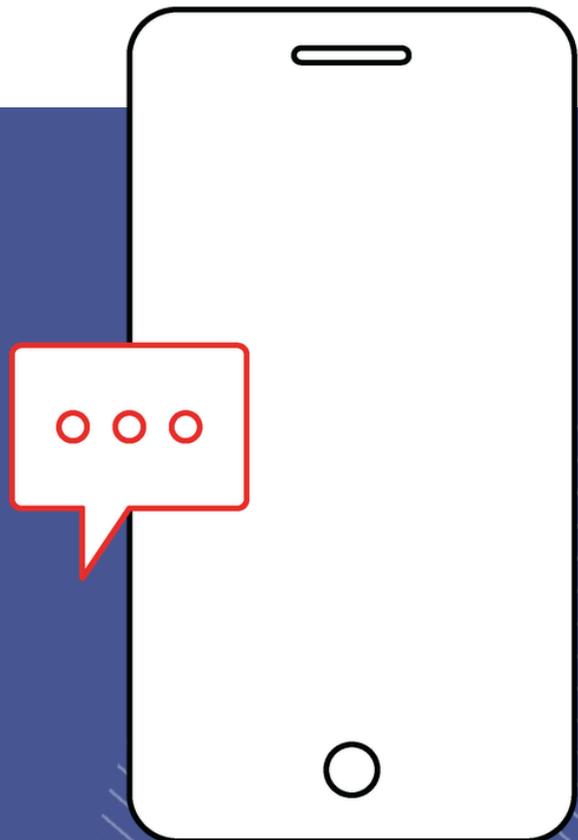
The graduate on-ramp is vanishing, and the numbers tell a stark story. A landmark Stanford study, drawing on payroll records from 25 million workers, found that employees aged 22-25 in the most AI-exposed occupations have experienced a 13% decline in employment since late 2022, while older workers in the same roles saw growth of 6-9%.

In software engineering alone, entry-level employment has fallen nearly 20%, and big tech firms have

simultaneously cut entry-level hiring by 25% whilst increasing recruitment of experienced professionals.

We're entering a world of augmented competence, compressed career ladders and distributed intelligence. AI is flattening the field: as it automates codified, 'book-learned' tasks, performance gaps close and the traditional apprenticeship bargain begins to collapse.

AI is flattening the field: as it automates codified tasks, performance gaps close and the traditional graduate on-ramp disappears.



As always, there's nuance in a broad trend. IBM is a notable outlier: the tech giant is tripling its entry-level hiring. Its CHRO believes companies that double down on graduate recruitment now will be best placed in three to five years' time. Rather than cutting junior roles, IBM has rewritten them around AI fluency, shifting engineers towards customer interaction and higher-value problem-solving.

Where junior roles are being eliminated, it's not because young people lack ability, but because it's deemed that the rote work that once trained them no longer needs a human to do it.

This raises a provocative question: if the ladder is gone, might new entrants

simply step in at a higher level, if they have the requisite skills? Workers using AI to augment rather than replace their skills are thriving, and the skill to reskill now outweighs fixed expertise. Tacit knowledge, judgment and relational intelligence remain distinctly human buffers against displacement.

AI doesn't remove the need for human organisation – it demands we organise ourselves differently. Organisations can automate the bottom rungs and hollow out their own talent pipelines or evolve as platforms that actively amplify what humans alone can bring. Those that thrive will be the ones that shift leadership energies from enforcing hierarchy to actively thinking about what this all means for growth.



13%

percentage decline in employment that people aged 22-25 in the most AI-exposed occupations have experienced since late 2022

Your next role probably doesn't exist yet – and that's your opportunity

A cross-asset research report from Morgan Stanley published last month offers a grounding counter-narrative to the - sometimes worrying - hype surrounding AI and jobs: most colleagues won't be permanently displaced. They'll transition into new posts, many of which probably don't yet have names.

History backs this up. Every major wave of automation – from the tractor

to the spreadsheet – reshuffled rather than eliminated labour.

Morgan Stanley argues AI will follow the same pattern, changing “job types, occupations, and needed skills” rather than erasing the human workforce entirely.

The numbers are certainly striking. The WEF's Future of Jobs Report 2025 projects 170 million new roles globally

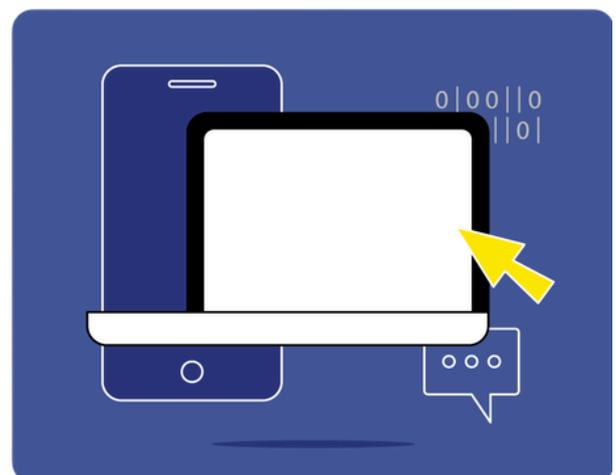
**170
million**
new roles globally by 2030

**92
million**
roles set to be displaced by 2030

63%



of employers cite skills gaps as their primary barrier to navigating the transition to further automation



by 2030, even as 92 million are displaced – a net gain of 78 million jobs. Yet 63% of employers cite skills gaps, not job losses, as their primary barrier to navigating the transition.

The internal communication profession is no exception to this reshuffling. The IoIC's recently published *Future of Internal Communication* white paper identifies nine potential IC-related roles, including Chief Trust Officer, Head of Listening, Head of Culture and Community, and Digital Transformation and Change Communication Manager.

As AI automates routine content production, the real opportunity lies in deeply human capabilities: active listening, coaching, sensemaking, ethical communication and data literacy.

For IC professionals, the mandate is clear: let's use this moment to advocate for IC as a strategic function. Because the organisations that communicate the transition well will be the ones that navigate it successfully.

IC challenges

- Entry-level talent pipelines are quietly disappearing
- AI is closing performance gaps and reshaping role definitions
- Many colleagues likely to transition into roles that don't yet exist
- Skills gaps, not job losses, emerging as organisational barrier

Strategic responses

- Encourage talent pipelines to cultivate distinctly human capabilities
- Reframe IC roles around listening, coaching and sensemaking
- Position IC as the function that helps guide workforce transitions
- Champion IC as the function that can help close organisational skills gaps

Sustainability

Silence is golden: why 'greenhushing' could be corporate sustainability's unlikely saviour

What if the best thing companies could do for sustainability is stop talking about it? Evidence is emerging that suggests there's a counterintuitive case for saying less but doing more.

That is the paradox at the heart of one of 2026's emerging sustainability trends: 'greenhushing'. Up to 70% of businesses are now choosing not to publicise their environmental progress, and a Harvard-backed study

of 75 firms found that while 85% maintained or expanded sustainability programmes, only 16% publicly reaffirmed doing so.

What's driving this? Over 100 bills were introduced in US state legislatures in 2025 to restrict ESG policies.

High-severity greenwashing litigation has risen 30%, with fines potentially reaching 4% of annual revenue. Meanwhile, more than half of global consumers are already sceptical of



Evidence is emerging that suggests there's a counterintuitive case for saying less but doing more.

brands' sustainability claims. Silence, in this climate, reflects legal and reputational prudence.

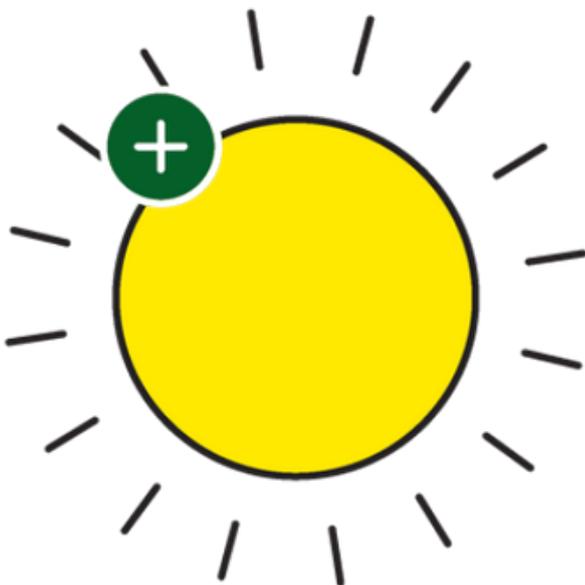
Yet the deeper opportunity might be this: a Deloitte survey of 2,100 C-suite executives found 83% had increased sustainability investment year-on-year. So, the work is happening. Greenhushing forces a shift from claim to craft, communicating sustainability through product quality, material choices and process transparency rather than slogans.

What does this all mean for internal communicators? It suggests we should resist cascading top-line ESG pledges.

Instead, we can encourage the embedding of sustainability into everyday operational narratives: efficiency gains, supply chain resilience, product longevity. Less announcement, more evidence. Less pledge, more proof. Amplify employee voices sharing concrete actions. Because if our own colleagues aren't convinced, external messaging is unlikely to land either.

100 bills

to restrict ESG policies introduced in US state legislatures in 2025



70%



of businesses are now choosing not to publicise their environmental progress

83%



of C-suite executives have increased sustainability investment year-on-year

Soon there may be no such thing as sustainability jobs – just jobs. Here's why that matters.

One of the defining sustainability trends of 2026 is not a new net zero pledge or reporting framework. It's structural: green skills are becoming a baseline workforce competency, and most organisations have not caught up. These competencies are moving from specialist ESG teams to a baseline expectation in every role, across every sector.

LinkedIn data shows green hiring growth between 2024 and 2025 was strongest in financial services (16.3%), technology (14.9%), retail (14%) and

supply chain and logistics (11.8%), sectors few would instinctively label as climate-focused industries. Crucially, the majority share of green hires is now landing in traditionally non-green roles.

Demand is surging, but supply is not keeping pace. Between 2022 and 2023, job postings requiring at least one green skill grew at nearly twice the rate of green-skilled talent entering the workforce. Without intervention, one in five green jobs globally will lack a qualified candidate by 2030.



The shift is already landing in job design. Procurement roles are acquiring sustainable sourcing KPIs. Finance roles are increasingly being held accountable for climate exposure.

The Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) is accelerating this further, making green competency a technical requirement, not an optional extra. As the Institute of Sustainability Studies puts it: “Soon there will no longer be sustainability jobs, just jobs.”

For internal communication professionals, the imperative is clear: we can reframe green skills as an evolving professional expectation for every colleague, segment messaging by role, and embed the language into performance frameworks and career conversations rather than treating it as a periodic campaign.

The organisations that get this right will not just be reflecting a trend; they will be helping to build the workforce the future demands.

IC challenges

- ‘Greenshushing’ on the rise due to fear of greenwashing litigation
- Colleagues increasingly sceptical of top-line ESG messaging
- Green skills are outpacing green talent across every sector
- Sustainability competency is becoming a technical requirement

Strategic responses

- Shift from pledges to proof embedded in everyday narratives
- Amplify colleague voices sharing concrete, operational sustainability actions
- Reframe green skills as a baseline expectation for all roles
- Embed green skills language into performance frameworks and career conversations

Employment

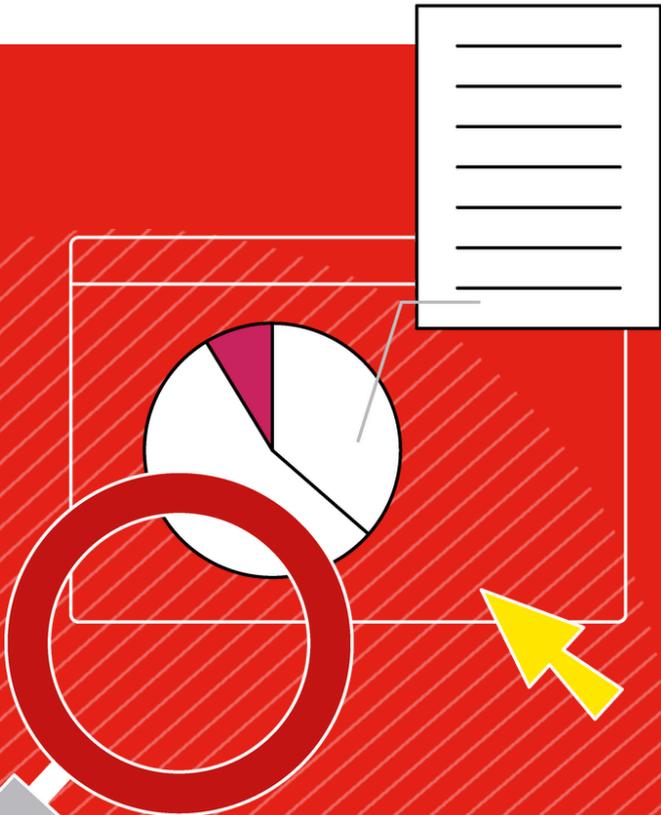
The rise of the polymorphic organisation: why shapeshifting is a superpower

At the IoIC's inaugural Leader's Forum in London last month, organisational change thinker Perry Timms delivered a compelling keynote on a concept that feels both timely and urgent: the polymorphic organisation.

The forces disrupting business today are relentless. Geopolitical turbulence, generative AI, climate pressure, stakeholder activism and intergenerational tension are confounding leaders at every level. Meanwhile, global colleague engagement has fallen to just 21%,

with disengagement costing the global economy \$438 billion a year in lost productivity. Is that any wonder, when many of the operating frameworks still in use have been designed for a world that simply no longer exists?

Perry and his colleague Kirsten Buck frame the polymorphic organisation as a living system that adapts to multiple forms based on context, one where roles must evolve from maintaining order to orchestrating continuous transformation. In short: purpose stays constant, but form changes freely.



“We’ve spent centuries learning how to control people. Now we need to let them go.”
Ricardo Semler, CEO of Semco Partners and workplace democracy champion

This reflects a decisive break from industrial-age thinking. A polymorphic organisation changes its structure, logic and leadership energy depending on the challenge it faces. It doesn't run a single business with a transformation programme bolted on. It runs two simultaneously: the legacy and the future.

Boards are going to need to wake up to this. Designing for adaptability should be among the most exciting things on any agenda in 2026.

IC's role shifts fundamentally in a polymorphic world: from broadcasting to sensemaking, from campaigns to conversations, from managing change comms to enabling continuous evolution.

In tandem, colleagues need three kinds of story: why the organisation exists, what is evolving and why, and how people are experiencing it. The key take-away? The future of IC won't just be about storytelling. It will also need to incorporate story-hosting.

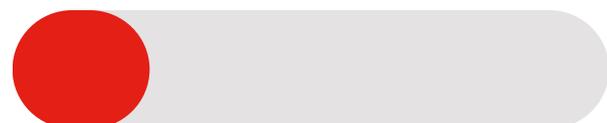
10%



UK colleague engagement level...



21%



... compared to global engagement level

\$438 billion

cost of disengagement to global economy in lost productivity per year

Friction-maxxing: the workplace trend to be across in 2026

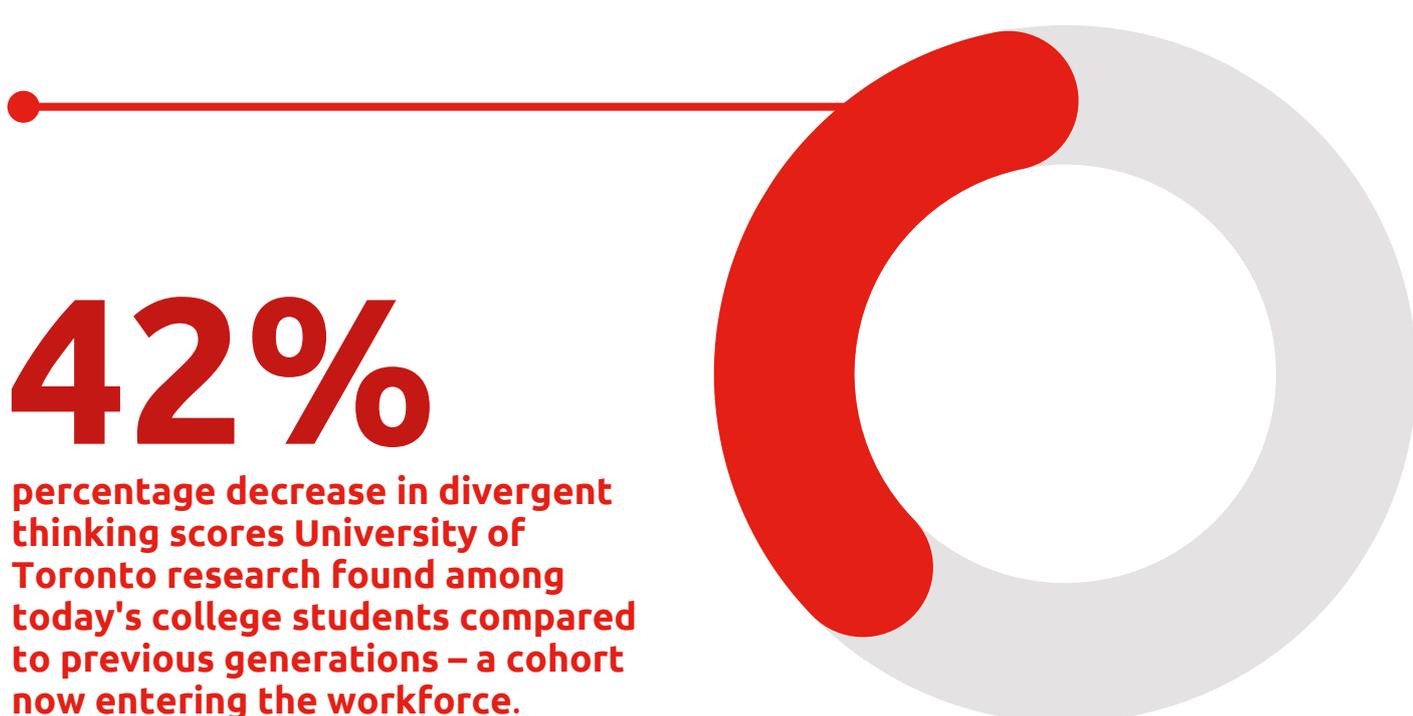
A quiet revolution is underway in a world engineered for ease. "Friction-maxxing", a term coined by columnist Kathryn Jezer-Morton in early 2026, describes the deliberate choice to reintroduce inconvenience into work and life. Rather than eliminating every obstacle, it argues that small friction builds judgment, deepens engagement and cultivates resilience.

The data is certainly compelling: a study by SBS Swiss Business School found a significant negative correlation between AI tool usage and critical thinking scores, with frequent

AI users showing diminished reflective problem-solving ability.

A separate University of Toronto study found that repeated exposure to AI-generated ideas reduced the originality of participants' thinking, and this narrowing persisted even after the AI was removed.

The response to all of this is already visible. Workers are reintroducing friction voluntarily: favouring in-person meetings, reading full documents rather than AI summaries and taking handwritten notes.



42%

percentage decrease in divergent thinking scores University of Toronto research found among today's college students compared to previous generations – a cohort now entering the workforce.

Unchecked convenience risks producing professionals who, perhaps like overprotected children, struggle to learn to manage complexity under their own steam.

Friction-maxxing in practice means slowing key decisions, reinstating written agendas and resisting the urge to outsource our thought processes to algorithms.

In a hyper-automated world, the edge lies not in speed but in stamina.

For internal communication professionals, this is both a challenge and an opportunity. Rather than over-automating every message, we should champion formats that demand genuine human thought: facilitated listening sessions, deliberate slow-burn campaigns and leadership communications that invite reflection.

Modelling productive friction signals that thoughtfulness, not just throughput, is what our organisations truly value.

IC challenges

- Outdated operating frameworks are fuelling disengagement and lost productivity
- Organisations must run legacy and future business models simultaneously
- AI overuse is measurably weakening critical thinking and original thought
- Hyper-automation risks producing professionals unable to manage complexity

Strategic responses

- Move IC from broadcasting change to hosting continuous sense-making conversations
- Give people narratives about purpose, evolution and lived experience
- Champion formats that demand genuine reflection, not just efficiency
- Model productive friction through slow-burn campaigns and deliberate communication

People

What leaders need to hear: the case for listening more in 2026

In a world of overlapping polycrises, might the most powerful leadership tool right now be listening?

New research from Gallup, presented at the World Governments Summit 2026, makes this case compellingly. Drawing on Gallup World Poll data across 107 countries, the report reveals what people most need their leaders to understand.

Globally, a median of 23% of adults name the economy as their country's

most pressing issue, but the data goes deeper than that headline figure.

Work-related problems are cited by 10% of adults worldwide, political and governance concerns by 8%, and safety and security by 7%. Together, these four themes account for roughly half of all responses.

Crucially, recent GDP growth is not meaningfully related to whether people name economic issues as their country's biggest problem.

People judge progress by lived experience, not statistics. In 2026, the most potent leadership tool is simply listening to what their preoccupations are.



Instead, subjective perceptions of household finances colour national priorities far more than macroeconomic indicators. People judge progress by lived experience, not statistics. Younger adults feel this most acutely, with 34% of those aged 15-34 citing economic concerns, compared with 30% of those aged 55-plus.

As Gallup notes: ninety years after George Gallup first asked people to identify their most important national problem, the importance of listening remains the same.

For internal communication professionals, this is the clearest of signals. Listening is a key priority.

That means effective listening strategies, from pulse surveys and focus groups to always-on feedback channels, help leaders understand what employees truly experience, not just what the data suggests.

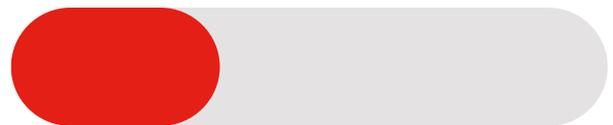
Acting visibly on that insight is what transforms listening from a passive exercise into a driver of genuine, people-centred change.

23%



of people name the state of the economy as their country's most pressing issue

35%



of women cite economic concerns as a key source of anxiety (compared to 31% of men)

79%



of people are disengaged or actively disengaged at work



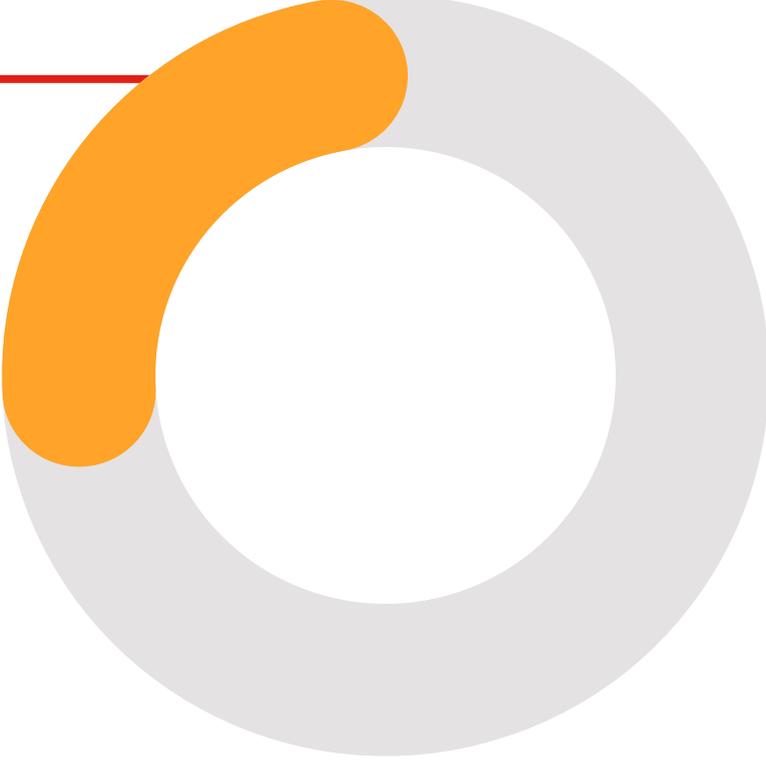
The silent productivity crisis: why keeping a weather eye on colleague financial wellbeing pays dividends

Money worries have become one of the most corrosive forces in the modern workplace. Our recent podcast with LCP's Heidi Allan unpacked how financial worries clearly link to poor engagement, in turn impacting wider organisational performance.

LCP's *Employee Wellbeing: Building Brighter Financial Futures Together* report reveals that the proportion of UK workers lacking confidence in their financial future rose from 47% in 2020 to 53% in 2024. That's not a blip – it's a structural shift.

The picture is equally stark elsewhere. ADP Research's *People at Work 2025* survey of 38,000 workers across 34 markets found that nearly half of UK employees are living paycheque to paycheque.

Meanwhile, nudge's *2025 Global Financial Wellbeing Report* found that 31% of UK colleagues experience financial-stress-related mental health issues, yet those with strong financial literacy are 37% less likely to suffer stress – pointing directly to the power of education.



31%

of UK workers experience financial-stress-related mental health issues

The Centre for Economics and Business Research puts the wider cost at 4.2 million working days lost annually, equating to £626 million in lost UK output. LCP's own data reinforces this: 41% of employees say financial worries directly impair their job performance.

Vulnerability is not uniform. Renters, neurodiverse employees and those with mental health conditions report the lowest confidence scores – yet remain the groups least well served by standard benefits packages.

For internal communication professionals, this demands a shift

from broadcasting benefits to building genuine financial confidence. We can segment messages by life-stage and demographic, equip managers to have early, empathetic conversations and normalise money talk as part of our workplace culture.

Ultimately, colleagues who feel their organisation understands pressures beyond the office door are far more likely to trust it and stay. Progressive organisations recognise that financial anxiety does not clock off at 5pm – and that addressing it honestly is not a perk, but a cornerstone of people-centred change.

IC challenges

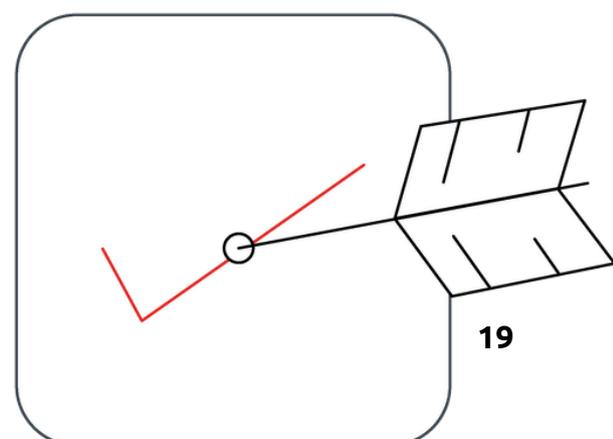
- Leaders are making decisions based on data, not lived experience
- Listening without visible action fails to drive meaningful change
- Over half of UK colleagues lack confidence in their financial future
- Vulnerable groups are least served by standard benefits communication

Strategic responses

- Build always-on listening strategies that surface genuine lived reality
- Close the loop by communicating what you heard and what changed
- Shift from broadcasting benefits to building real financial confidence
- Segment financial wellbeing messaging by life-stage and demographic

Key take-aways: actionable recommendations for internal communicators

- 1 Reframe IC roles around human-centred skills like listening and coaching, and position IC as the function guiding workforce transitions as AI reshapes entry-level work.
- 2 Advocate now for IC as a strategic function by championing the skills gaps narrative, helping colleagues make sense of a workforce in transition.
- 3 Replace top-line ESG pledges with proof embedded in everyday operational narratives, and amplify employee voices sharing concrete sustainability actions.
- 4 Reframe green skills as an increasing baseline expectation for every role; embed that language into performance frameworks and career conversations, not periodic campaigns.
- 5 Shift IC from broadcasting change to hosting ongoing sensemaking conversations, giving people stories about purpose, evolution and real lived experience.
- 6 Champion formats that demand genuine human reflection, such as facilitated listening sessions and deliberate slow-burn campaigns, rather than over-automating every message.
- 7 Build always-on listening strategies that surface genuine colleague reality, then close the loop by visibly communicating what you heard and what changed.
- 8 Shift from broadcasting benefits to building real financial confidence, segmenting messaging by life stage and demographic to reach those most at risk.



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About Working the Future

Foresight specialists helping organisations harness opportunity in the future of work

Established in 2016, Working the Future is a boutique consulting and advisory firm helping businesses adapt to the future of work.

It provides executive education to help business leaders, managers and decision-makers develop their understanding of the rapidly changing world of work, allowing them to prepare and mitigate risk accordingly.

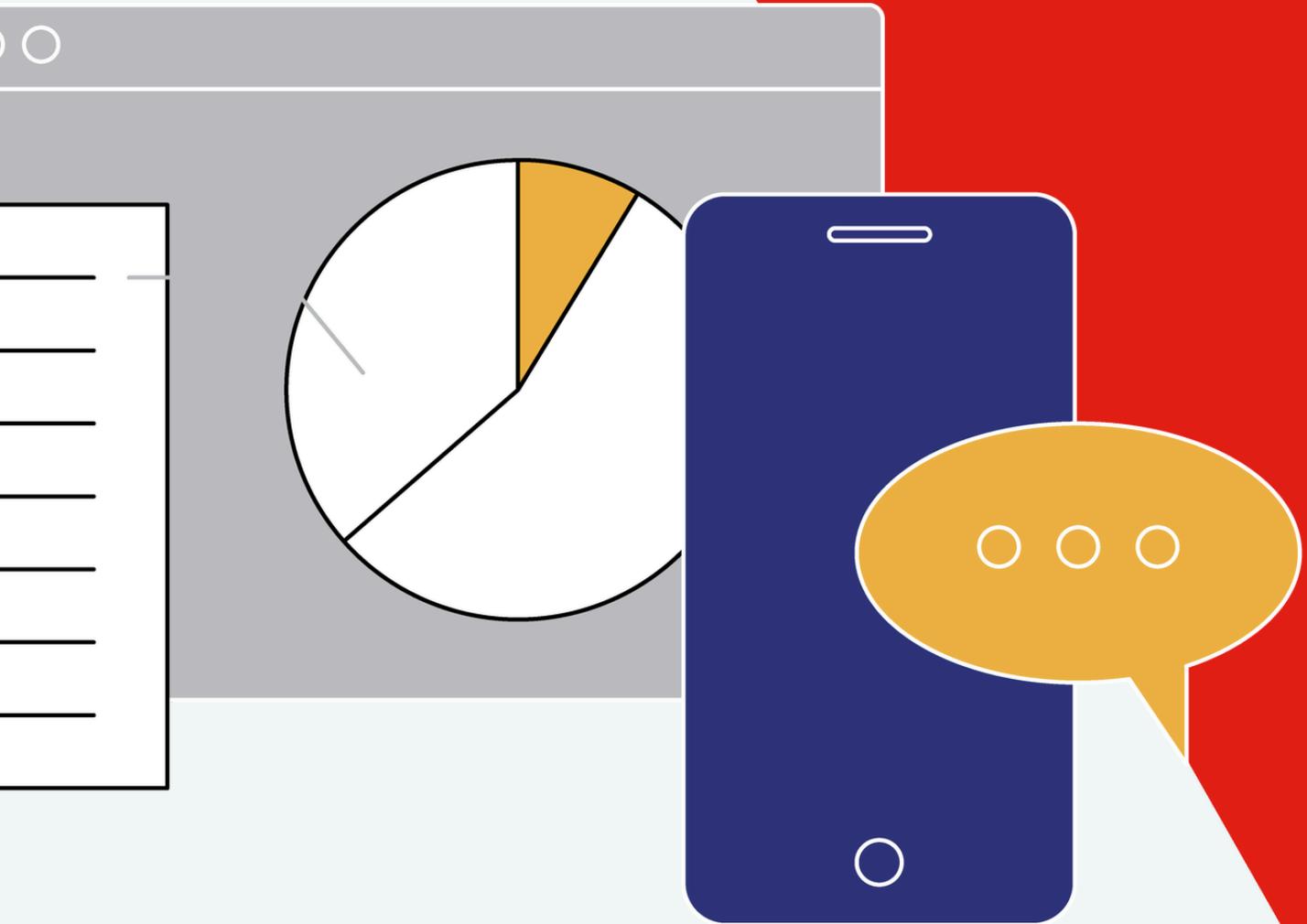
It co-designs progressive strategies to optimise team-performance and organisational agility. Its people-centred approach enhances collective intelligence for improved resilience and long-term organisational sustainability.

About the founders

Cathryn Barnard has a long background in building and nurturing high-performing teams. Her interest in human dynamics has transferred across into her expert analysis of the future of work, and her insights help business leaders future-proof their commercial activities.

Patrick Lodge is a futurist and emerging trends expert, with 20 years' experience in horizon-scanning. He has a particular interest in generating and demystifying business intelligence applicable to all forms of upstream future-planning activity.





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