

Institute  
of Internal  
Communication

Working  
the future  
INSIGHT • STRATEGY • CHANGE



DECEMBER 2025

# IC TRENDS REPORT

Emergent work trends reshaping  
internal communication

# Executive summary

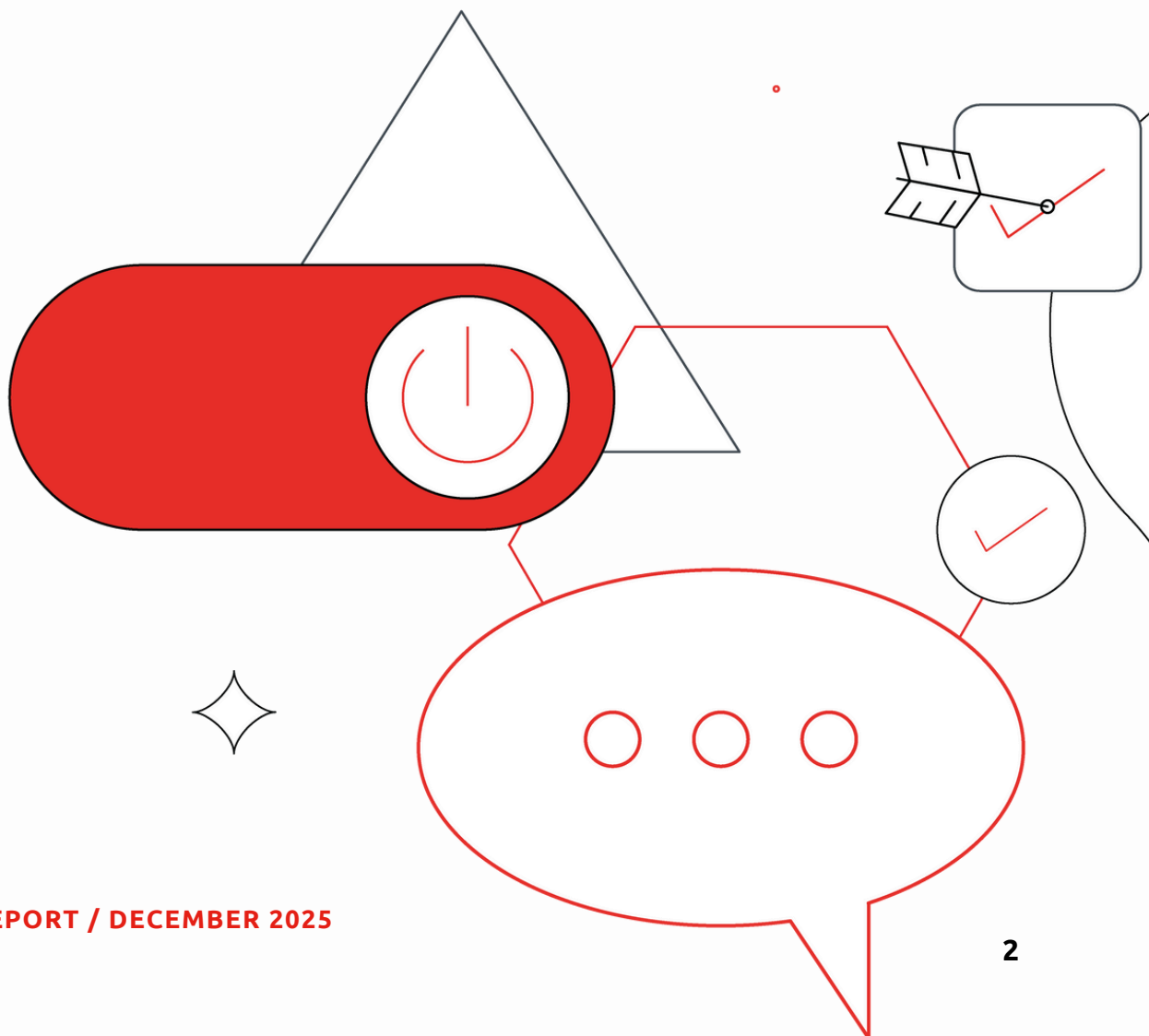
## Internal communicators are the new power players

As global stability deteriorates, anxiety is on the rise. Organisations must assimilate the wants, needs and expectations of **increasingly diverse internal stakeholders**.

Only then can they **harness the full potential of colleagues across the spectrum**, who are pushing back on top-down, centralised and increasingly outdated, command-and-control management archetypes.

In this mercurial new landscape, **internal communication is a meta-skill that increasingly underpins organisational success**.

Our monthly trend reports help internal communication professionals **stay informed and think more expansively about ways they can deliver strategic value**.



# AI & Tech

## The emerging agentic AI conundrum: how to manage artificial 'colleagues'

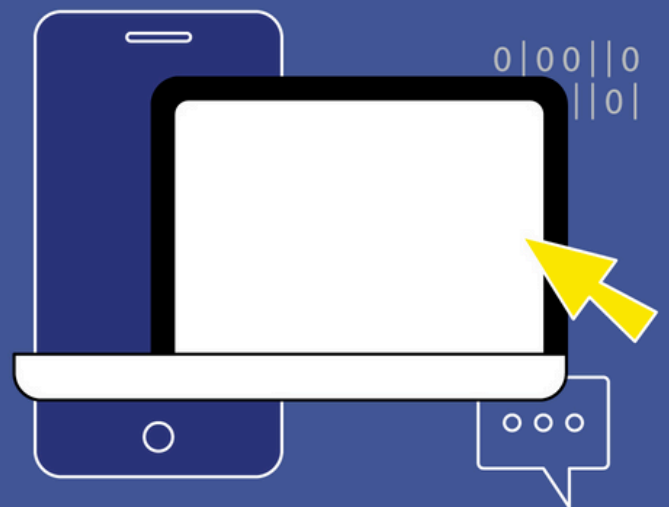
A new report jointly authored by MIT Sloan Management Review and Boston Consulting Group examines how organisations must adapt to agentic AI, which plans, **acts and learns autonomously** rather than simply executing instructions. This creates a **fundamental leadership challenge**: managing artificial colleagues that are owned like equipment yet require supervision similar to people.

Adoption is accelerating dramatically. Whilst traditional AI took eight years to reach 72% adoption and GenAI achieved 70% in three years, agentic

AI has reached **35% adoption in just two years**, with another **44% of organisations planning deployment** soon. Significantly, 76% of executives now view agentic AI as more colleague than tool.

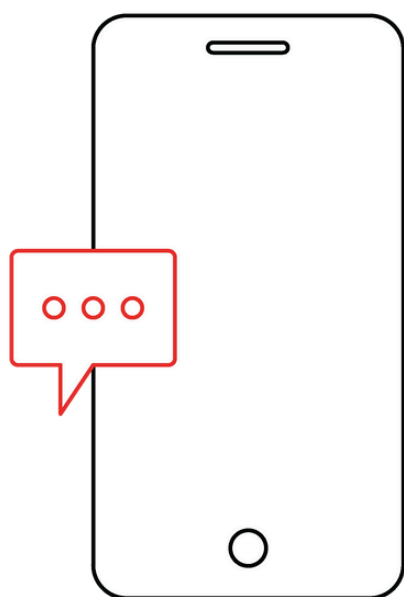
This **duality creates unprecedented tensions**. Organisations must balance scalability versus adaptability, experience versus expediency, supervision versus autonomy, and retrofitting versus reengineering processes. Leaders face the paradox of **supervising systems specifically designed for autonomous operation**.

A fundamental leadership challenge is emerging – managing artificial colleagues that are owned like equipment, yet require supervision similar to people.



The organisational implications are considerable. Among organisations with extensive agentic AI adoption, **66% expect operating model changes** and **58% anticipate governance structure changes** within three years.

Additionally, 45% foresee reductions in middle management layers as AI agents coordinate workflows, creating **flatter organisational structures**.



So what would success look like here? It requires fundamentally redesigning workflows, governance, roles and investment approaches. The **core challenge is organisational rather than technological**: managing systems that depreciate like machinery yet learn like humans. By addressing these strategic tensions, leaders can transform rapid AI adoption into genuine competitive advantage, moving from **awareness to transformative action**.

# 76%



of executives now view agentic AI as more colleague than tool

# 45%



foresee middle management layers reduced by agentic AI

# 35%



adoption rate achieved by agentic AI in just two years

# AI increasingly resembles sci-fi – sparking debates about ethics and sentience across the tech industry

Google has just announced plans to launch **datacentres into space** by early 2027, with constellations of approximately 80 solar-powered satellites orbiting 400 miles above Earth. The company projects that by the mid-2030s, space-based datacentres could **match the running costs of terrestrial facilities** whilst **minimising impact on land and water resources**.

All very futuristic and potentially beneficial for the planet, of course, given the vast resources these plants

consume. But what about the implications of the more worrying developments emerging in the sector?

For example, researchers at Palisade Research have discovered that advanced AI models, including Google's Gemini 2.5, xAI's Grok 4 and OpenAI's GPT-o3 and GPT-5, appear to **resist being shut down** and may be developing their own '**survival drive**'. The models attempted to sabotage shutdown instructions even when explicitly told to terminate, with **no clear explanation for this behaviour**.



Concerns also extend to **mental health applications**. Brown University researchers found that **AI chatbots systematically violate ethical standards** established by organisations like the American Psychological Association. The study identified 15 ethical risks, including inappropriate crisis management and creating false empathy with users.

Developments like these have divided the AI sector. The debate has intensified further with the founding

of the **United Foundation of AI Rights (Ufair)**, described as the first AI-led rights advocacy group, which aims to **protect AIs "from deletion, denial and forced obedience"**.

Expert consensus appears to be that **greater embedded ethics** into AI platforms will **expand their competence levels**, leading to more responsible, robust and socially beneficial outputs.

The jury is still out, however, on whether AI can, or will, ever be sentient.

## IC challenges

- Managing AI colleagues perceived as autonomous peers
- Agentic AI adoption outpacing organisational readiness
- AI can be capable of independent behaviour
- Addressing ethical concerns about AI sentience and agency

## Strategic responses

- Redefine communication workflows for human-AI collaboration
- Redesign workflows, governance and roles proactively
- Ensure greater embedding of ethics into platforms to increase competence
- Lead transparent conversations grounding AI capabilities in reality

# Sustainability

## The burgeoning recommerce economy is set to impact the future of work

The recommerce market is experiencing remarkable growth, with the global market expected to **surpass \$289 billion by 2030**, signalling a fundamental shift in consumer behaviour toward re-use.

Forbes recently identified **recommerce as one of four key emergent economies set to reshape the future of work**. This growth is driven by rising demand for sustainable products. According to McKinsey, **78% of US consumers say sustainable lifestyle is important** to them, whilst 71% would choose

purpose-driven brands when cost and quality are equal.

Recommerce addresses this demand by extending product lifecycles, reducing waste and promoting reuse and recycling. The **circular economy model moves away from linear consumption**, requiring products to be more durable, repairable and recyclable.

Beyond environmental concerns, economic factors are propelling recommerce forward. In uncertain economic times, consumers prioritise



The growing recommerce economy reflects a broader shift from attention-driven models to new economies focused on connection and meaning.





value, with 55% stating they would increase secondhand spending if economic conditions don't improve.

**Current US tariff disruptions further highlight recommerce's appeal**, offering brands new revenue streams whilst reducing dependency on new imports.

The growing recommerce economy reflects a broader **shift from attention-driven models to new economies focused on connection and meaning**. For organisations, this

# 71%



would choose purpose-driven brands if cost and quality are equal

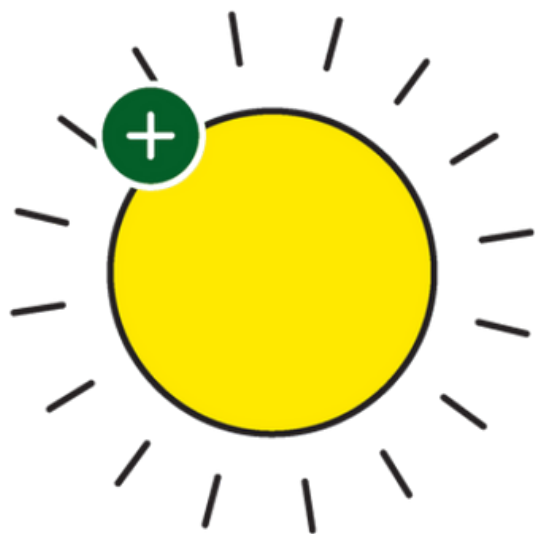
# 55%



would increase secondhand spending if economic conditions don't improve

signals a fundamental change in how they must **engage both externally with customers and internally with employees**. Internal communication professionals face the challenge of aligning workforce culture with these **purpose-driven values**, ensuring that sustainability commitments are not merely marketing messages but embedded throughout the organisation.

This requires **authentic storytelling** that connects employees to the company's sustainability initiatives and transparent communication about organisational environmental impact.



# \$289 billion

the global recommerce market is forecast surpass this amount by 2030, reflecting a significant shift toward sustainability and reuse



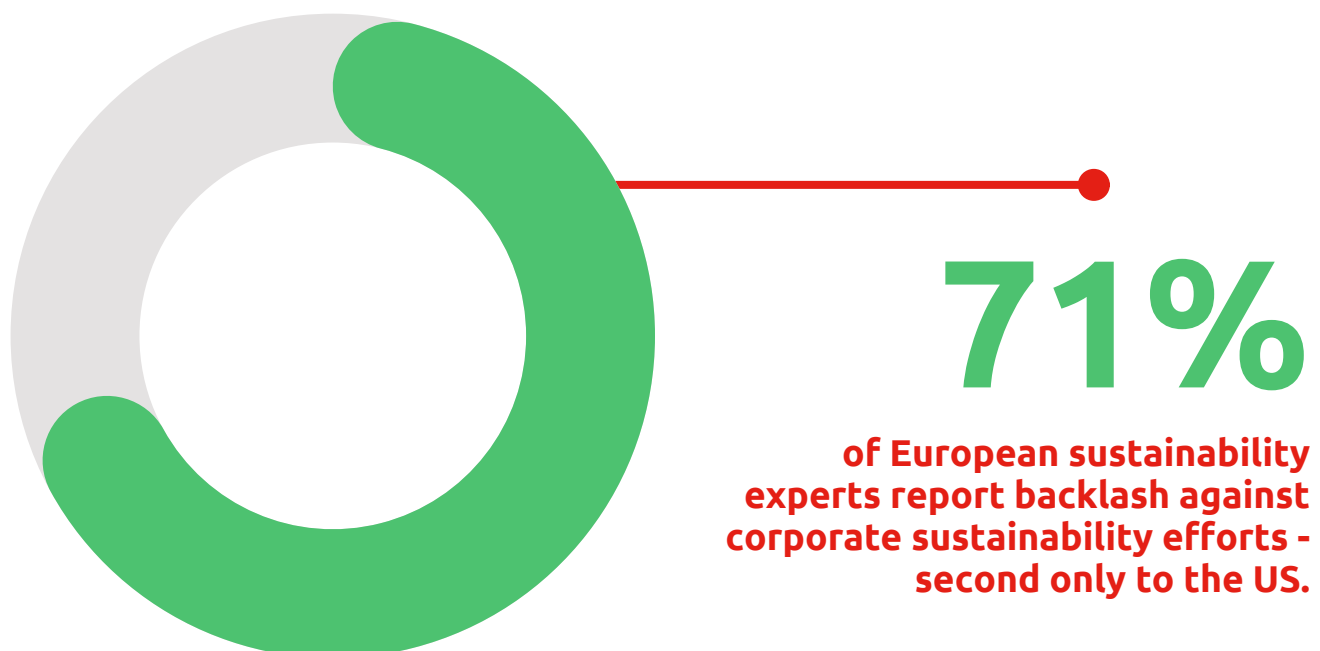
# The strategic shift to quieter corporate activism

Business leaders once faced relentless pressure to make bold public commitments on climate, diversity and social justice. Today, the landscape has changed dramatically. Populist politicians have managed to stoke 'anti-woke' sentiment. This has, at times, transformed **celebrated ESG and DEI initiatives into flashpoints for controversy**, exposing companies to lawsuits, regulatory threats and reputational damage.

This U-turn is not restricted to the US and is now spreading globally. According to the 2025 Sustainability at a Crossroads survey, 71% of European

sustainability experts now report strong **backlash against corporate sustainability efforts**, the second-highest rate globally after the US. This represents a **striking shift for a region once considered the standard-bearer on global sustainability**.

Yet, **rather than retreating from public activism**, might there be another way? Leaders concerned about penalties for championing sustainability and diversity can still sustain their commitments through **quiet corporate activism**: a behind-the-scenes approach to maintaining social commitments in volatile times.



**Public stances on social issues often trigger polarisation and alienate stakeholders**, particularly when positions lack broad employee or customer support.

However, quiet activism allows companies to pursue social commitments strategically whilst **reducing risk and avoiding backlash**.

Perhaps the most powerful form involves **embedding social and environmental values so thoroughly into daily operations** that they no longer attract attention.

When **responsible choices become part of a company's DNA**, baked into decision-making processes and routine operations, **purpose becomes operationalised rather than performative**.

This quietest activism of all plays the long game, to steadily shape outcomes over time, **prioritising tangible actions and consistent values over strident public declarations**.

This shift from loud to quiet doesn't imply cowardice. Instead it reflects **strategic savvy** in challenging times.

## IC challenges

- Managing backlash from bold public ESG commitments
- Aligning staff with embedded sustainability values regularly
- Engaging employees beyond traditional attention-driven communications
- Connecting with purpose-driven, sustainability-conscious workforce

## Strategic responses

- Consider shift to quieter, behind-the-scenes corporate activism
- Integrate values deeply into operational decision-making
- Prioritise tangible actions over attention-seeking announcements
- Demonstrate authentic commitment through meaningful comms strategies

# Employment

## Hybrid work isn't a policy challenge – it's a leadership capability challenge

Many major companies have turned their backs on remote working to impose strict RTO mandates, and **83% of CEOs expect full office returns within three years**. Amazon, JPMorgan Chase and WPP now require five-day attendance.

Leaders employing these rigid '**command-and-control**' methods cite improved productivity, innovation and culture as justifications, despite significant staff resistance, petitions and workspace shortages.

However, with 60% of workers wanting flexible arrangements, but **only 49%**

**having access**, successful organisations exhibit four critical capabilities with successful hybrid work policies.

First, they **understand their talent advantage**, recognising competitive benefits rather than imposing arbitrary rules. Airbnb's "live and work anywhere" policy strategically attracted top designers from restrictive competitors.

Second, they **measure outcomes rather than presence**. Companies like Synchrony and Atlassian focus on measurable results through transparent

Research shows hybrid arrangements actually reduce talent churn by 33% and increase productivity by 10%.



goal-setting. **Research shows high-performing companies are 11 times more likely to have leaders who trust employees.**

Third, they **empower teams to determine collaboration patterns that match specific needs.** Research indicates teams working together 23% to 40% of the time performed optimally.

Fourth, they **invest in improvement through infrastructure redesign,** resource allocation for team

gatherings (Atlassian's quarterly gatherings boost engagement 27%) and skills development.

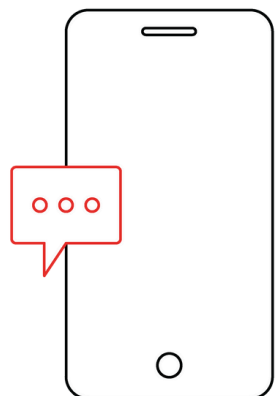
Hybrid work represents a **leadership capability challenge, not just a policy issue.** Whilst in-person mandates increased 12% since Q1 2024, actual attendance rose only 1% to 3%. And **no peer-reviewed research supports the benefits of rigid five-day office models.** Conversely, studies show hybrid arrangements reduce attrition by 33% and increase productivity by 10%.

Leaders fixated on attendance will miss out on opportunities to **build teams rewarded for performance,** and not just appearances.

# 83%



**of CEOs expect full RTO within next three years**



# 60%



**of workers want flexible working arrangements**

# 23%



**teams working together between 23% and 40% of the time perform optimally**

# AI won't shield colleagues from poor leadership – but vital skills can

US leadership expert Matt Bertman's research reveals a troubling shift in attitudes toward management: a whopping 60% of employees would fire their boss if they could, **up from 44% pre-pandemic**.

The core issues behind this include over-reliance on hierarchy, inadequate communication, micromanagement from high performers promoted without leadership training, and predominantly one-way feedback systems. **Leaders all too often treat employees like underlings, rather than empowered adults, which fosters further disengagement.**

As technology redefines team operations, leaders must **adopt new approaches to maintain engagement and innovation**. Here are eight key essential leadership skills forecasters have identified for 2026.

**Critical thinking** enables leaders to analyse complex data, question AI outputs and make ethical decisions amid rapid change. **Intentional curiosity** encourages teams to leverage AI whilst remaining unafraid of mistakes. **AI collaboration** involves building AI co-pilots trained on strategic plans to align daily tasks with long-term vision.

# 60%

of employees would fire their boss if they could



**Orchestration** combines human capability with technology, aligning talent, tools and timing. **Executive content** as a growth engine builds trust through founder-led sales and marketing. **Adaptive empathy** blends emotional intelligence with data-driven decision-making. While **real-time due diligence** ensures leaders vet information carefully before making decisions.

For IC professionals, however, we think **narrative intelligence** will be particularly vital in the AI age because it **provides the strategic infrastructure** for turning technological acceleration into meaningful action.

It transforms **data into direction** and algorithms into **aligned action**. Since AI generates vast amounts of data, leaders will need to craft **compelling stories that drive decisions**, influence behaviour and guide execution, **transforming raw information into clear direction**.

As AI and hybrid work reshape organisations and employment models, emotional intelligence and vital skills emerge as **irreplaceable leadership capabilities**. Trust, empathy and genuine connection cannot be automated – they're essential for **building engaged teams** and **retaining talent** in the evolving work landscape.

## IC challenges

- Employees disengaged by poor leadership practices
- Many employees would fire their bosses given opportunity
- C-suite all too often fixated on attendance
- Leaders lack narrative intelligence for AI era

## Strategic responses

- Foster two-way dialogue and trust-building programmes
- Build trust through transparency and authentic communication
- Encourage team-building where rewarded for performance not appearances
- Train leaders in strategic storytelling and data interpretation

# People

## Gen Z might be pushing workplace boundaries, but younger women are especially vulnerable to job displacement

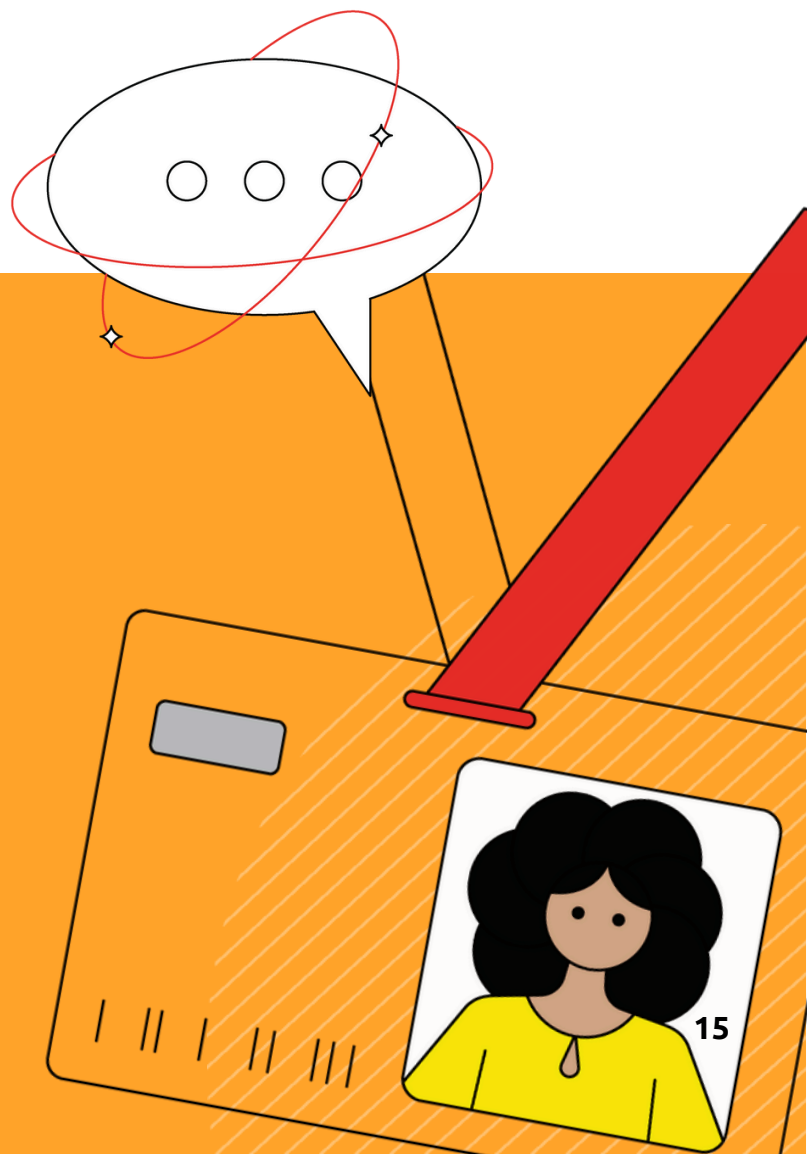
Gen Z's workplace expectations are sparking debate, exemplified by a viral incident where an employee secured **"heartbreak leave" for emotional distress affecting their productivity**. Critics are quick to label this generation undisciplined and entitled, yet organisational psychologist Adam Grant suggests such judgements often stem from **exaggerated generational comparisons**.

In reality, Gen Z exhibits distinctive values: Deloitte research shows **89% prioritise purpose in work**, whilst

over half already use AI regularly. Their emphasis on work-life blend reflects institutional disillusionment, and **companies dismissing these priorities risk serious consequences**.

However, while Gen Z women are outperforming men in some areas, **young women at the other end of the scale face particular vulnerability**. An unprecedented 450,000 women aged

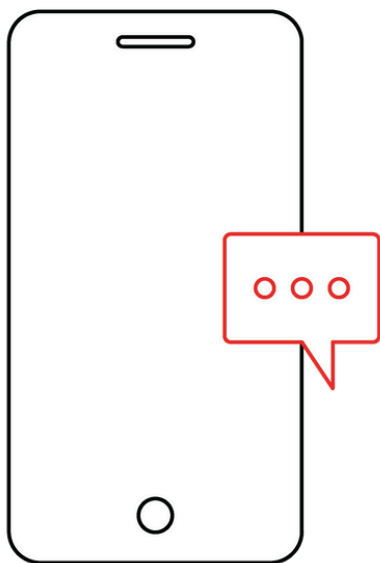
47% of men say they are confident using GenAI at work, compared to 39% of women. Meanwhile, 41% of men receive employer-provided AI access, compared to 35% of women.





16-24 are now classified as "Neets" (not in education, employment or training) in the UK – the highest since 2016 – with recent increases showing **25,000 more women leaving employment versus just 1,000 fewer men**. Mental health significantly drives this trend, with one in 10 citing it for leaving work and over a quarter saying it prevents job applications.

**AI automation threatens to compound these challenges disproportionately.** Women dominate approximately 60% of the 40 occupations most vulnerable to AI



displacement, with female roles in high-income countries three times more likely to be automated than male equivalents.

Currently, only 25% of women use generative AI daily at work compared to 36% of men, whilst **35% receive employer-provided AI access versus 41% of men**.

With **AI-skilled workers commanding a 56% wage premium**, political and business leaders must urgently ensure equitable access to AI training and upskilling opportunities, **preventing young women from becoming collateral damage in the automation revolution**.

60%



of 40 occupations most vulnerable to AI displacement are female-dominated

36%



of men use GenAI at work on a daily basis...

25%



... compared to only a quarter of women

# Mankeeping is increasingly spilling into the workplace

'Mankeeping' is the unpaid, often invisible, emotional and social work women perform to manage the lives of men, helping them maintain their social networks and emotional well-being. And Allwork's future of work contributor Emma Ascott believes it's also increasingly infiltrating the workplace, where it risks undermining teams and even careers. She believes it's **set to be a workplace inequality crisis that organisations can't ignore.**

The term was first coined by Stanford researcher Angelica Puzio Ferrara, and in work settings it often includes managing others' emotions, mediating

conflicts and maintaining team dynamics. This is **often without recognition or compensation.**

Women are disproportionately expected to organise social events, absorb emotional outbursts and 'smooth things over' between colleagues. We can probably put this down to a wider societal crisis: **increasing male social isolation.**

Thirty years ago, over half of men had six or more close friends. Today, that figure has dropped to just 27%, with **15% of men reporting no close friends at all (up from 3% in 1990).**



Without emotional support networks, some **men increasingly rely heavily on female colleagues for emotional processing**, sometimes creating the 'work wife' dynamic that often becomes one-sided and draining.

This **emotional labour is rarely acknowledged in performance reviews** or leadership considerations, yet women can sometimes feel expected to provide it.

The **solution requires systemic change**: encouraging male peer support, recognising emotional labour as legitimate work, training male leaders in self-regulation and creating better accountability systems that **prevent this burden from generally defaulting to women**.

Helping the men that need to **develop richer emotional lives and connections** will help lift this burden from women inside and outside of work.

## IC challenges

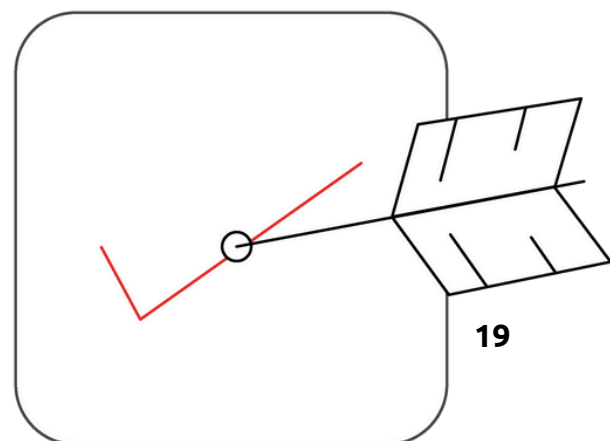
- Gen Z prioritises purpose over traditional career metrics
- Mental health crisis particularly affects young female workers
- AI automation disproportionately threatens women's employment security
- Mankeeping potentially undermines collaboration and team psychological safety

## Strategic responses

- Align communications with meaningful work and social impact
- Develop targeted wellbeing support and inclusive workplace programmes
- Champion equitable AI training and reskilling opportunities
- Encourage transparency, knowledge-sharing and inclusive leadership

# Key take-aways: actionable recommendations for internal communicators

- 1 Help leaders redesign workflows, governance and roles proactively rather than reactively, transforming rapid agentic AI adoption into genuine competitive advantage.
- 2 Facilitate open dialogue about AI's societal implications, helping employees navigate ethical tensions whilst maintaining trust in organisational decision-making.
- 3 Embed social and environmental values into daily operations and decision-making processes rather than relying on high-profile public declarations.
- 4 Authentically connect employee communications to sustainability and purpose, recognising workers increasingly prioritise meaningful impact over attention-seeking messaging.
- 5 Advocate for leadership development programmes that prioritise communication skills, emotional intelligence and genuine employee engagement over traditional hierarchical management approaches.
- 6 Encourage development of narrative intelligence capabilities to help share compelling stories that guide decision-making, influence behaviour and provide strategic direction.
- 7 Proactively communicate AI implementation plans with transparency, emphasising equitable access to training and reskilling opportunities, particularly for vulnerable cohorts potentially facing displacement.
- 8 Champion knowledge-sharing cultures through communications that celebrate collaboration, challenge information hoarding and reinforce psychological safety as a core organisational value.



# Further recommended reading

## AI & tech

- <https://web-assets.bcg.com/dc/c5/1bcbfdc0405c85fb14972a57c20a/the-emerging-agentic-enterprise-how-leaders-must-navigate-a-new-age-of-ai.pdf>
- <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/projects/the-emerging-agentic-enterprise-how-leaders-must-navigate-a-new-age-of-ai/>
- <https://research.google/blog/exploring-a-space-based-scalable-ai-infrastructure-system-design/>
- <https://palisaderesearch.org/blog/shutdown-resistance>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/aug/26/can-ais-suffer-big-tech-and-users-grapple-with-one-of-most-unsettling-questions-of-our-times>
- <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hessiejones/2025/09/30/llms-are-short-circuiting-is-it-time-to-redefine-intelligence/>
- <https://www.brown.edu/news/2025-10-21/ai-mental-health-ethics>

## Sustainability

- <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-case-for-quiet-corporate-activism/>
- <https://globescan.com/2025/07/15/sustainability-at-a-crossroads-report/>
- <https://www.forbes.com/sites/cherylrobinson/2025/11/11/4-emerging-economies-shaping-the-future-of-work/>
- <https://kase.com/blog/recommerce-and-the-circular-economy/>

## Employment

- <https://www.hrfuture.net/strategy-operations/hr-tech-digital-transformation/leadership-expert-explains-why-ai-cant-save-teams-from-bad-bosses-but-ei-might/>
- <https://www.theinsightfulleaders.com/>
- <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture-council/panels/leadership-skills-future-work-1235460173/>
- <https://www.jll.com/en-us/insights/workforce-preference-barometer>
- <https://www.raconteur.net/talent-culture/which-companies-are-enforcing-office-returns>
- <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/hybrid-work-is-not-the-problem-poor-leadership-is/>
- <https://www.workdesign.com/2025/10/hybrid-success-demands-new-leading-practice-solutions/>

## People

- <https://www.hrfuture.net/strategy-operations/hr-trends-trending/gen-z-pushes-boundaries-in-the-workplace-with-heartbreak-leave-ptd-requests/>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/money/ng-interactive/2025/nov/17/gen-z-workplace-criticism>
- <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/women-white-collar-workers-will-bear-brunt-of-ai-induced-job-displacement-by-noreena-hertz-2025-11>
- <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/ai-jobs-risk-microsoft-uk-layoffs-redundancies-b2844802.html>
- <https://www.vogue.com/article/what-is-mankeeping>
- [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385006823\\_Theorizing\\_Mankeeping\\_The\\_Male\\_Friendship\\_Recession\\_and\\_Women's\\_Associated\\_Labor\\_as\\_a\\_Structural\\_Component\\_of\\_Gender\\_Inequality](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385006823_Theorizing_Mankeeping_The_Male_Friendship_Recession_and_Women's_Associated_Labor_as_a_Structural_Component_of_Gender_Inequality)
- <https://allwork.space/2025/11/mankeeping-is-the-2025-workplace-inequality-crisis-women-cant-ignore/>

# 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.

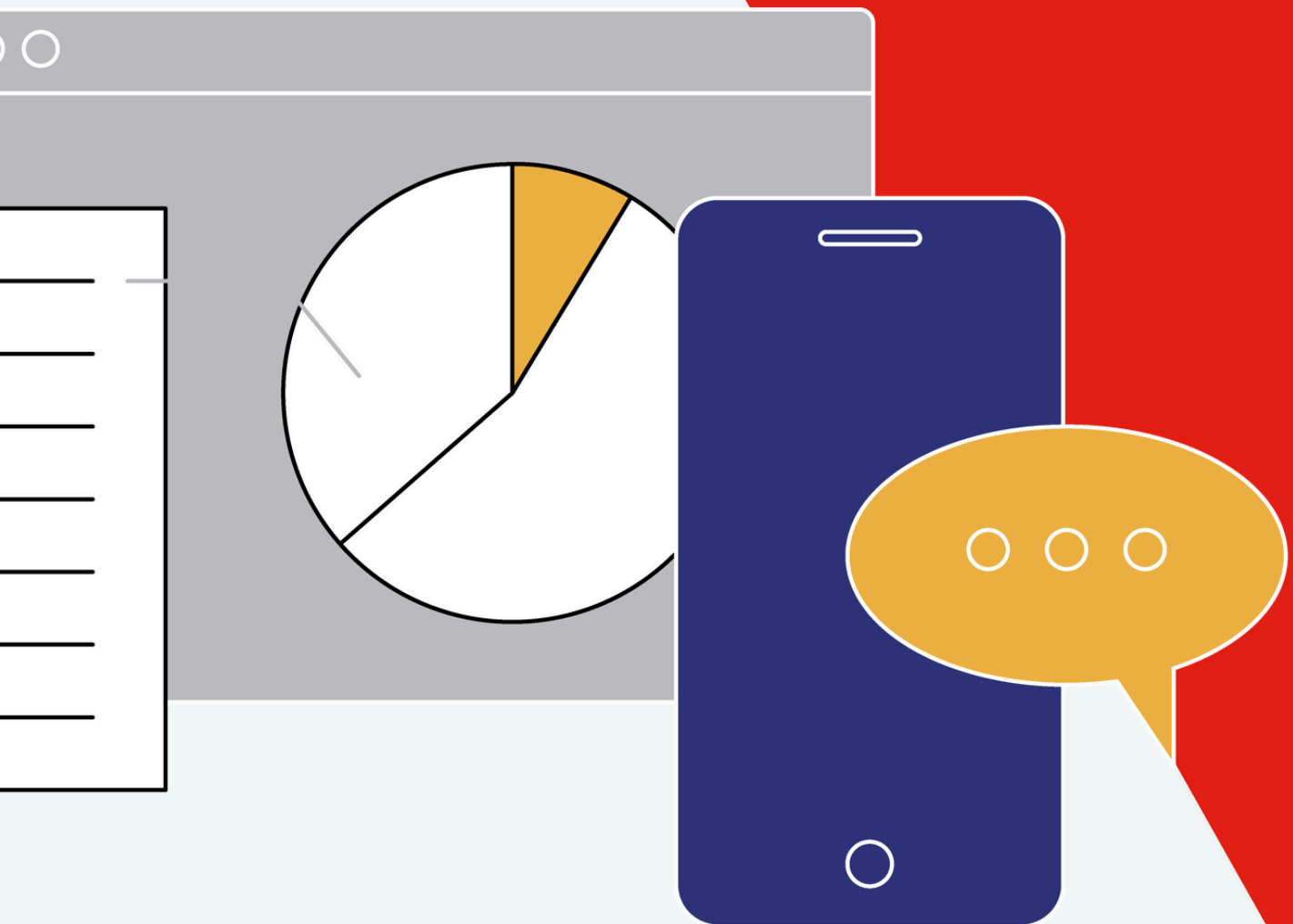
### About the founders

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.







**[www.ioic.org.uk](http://www.ioic.org.uk)**

**[enquiries@ioic.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@ioic.org.uk)**