

Institute  
of Internal  
Communication

Working  
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INSIGHT • STRATEGY • CHANGE



FEBRUARY 2026

# IC TRENDS REPORT

Emergent work trends reshaping  
internal communication

# Executive summary

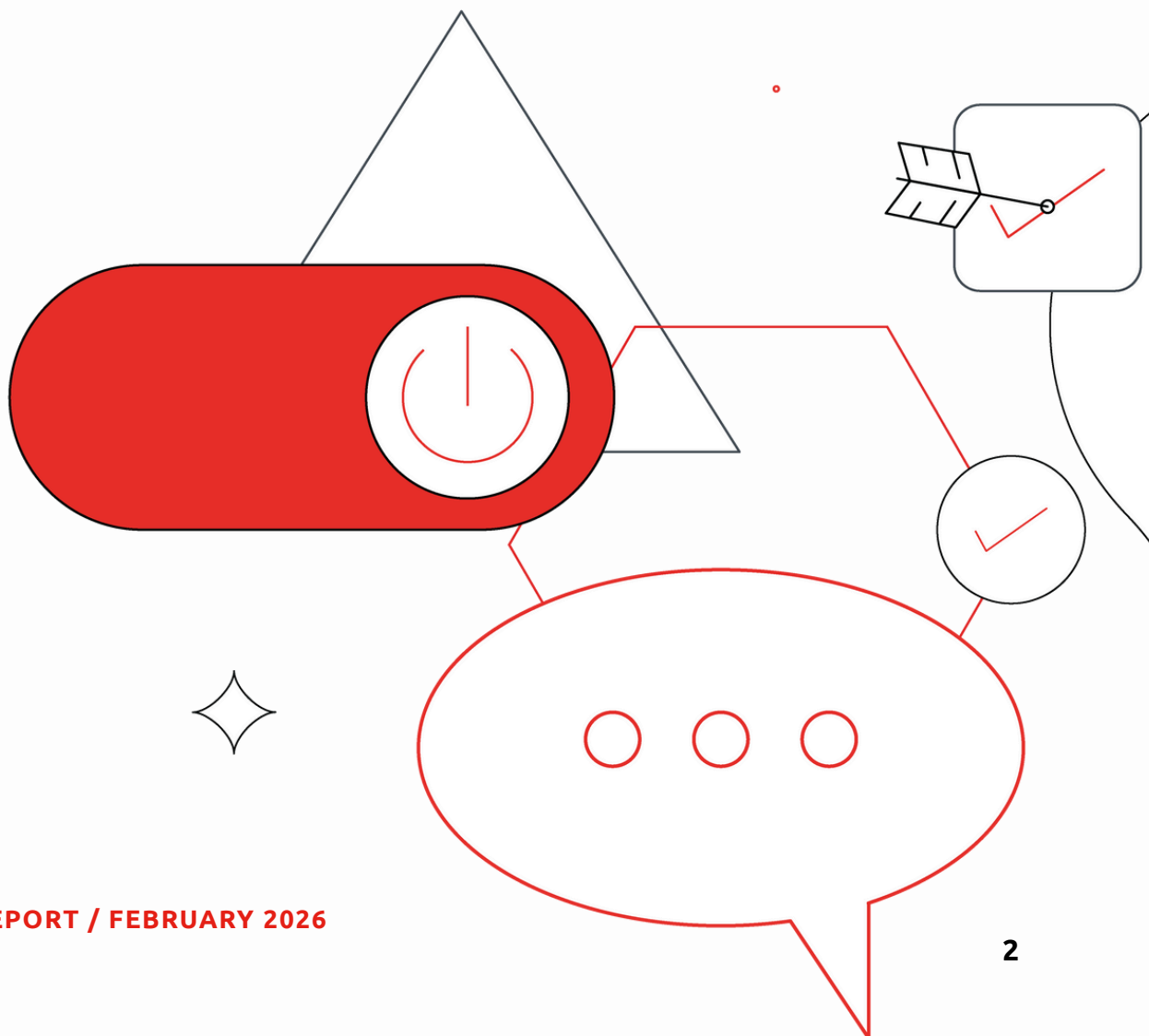
## Internal communicators are the new power players

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the full potential of colleagues across the spectrum, who are pushing back on top-down, centralised and increasingly outdated, command-and-control management archetypes.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

## Are we 'mature' enough yet to handle AI's almost unimaginable power?

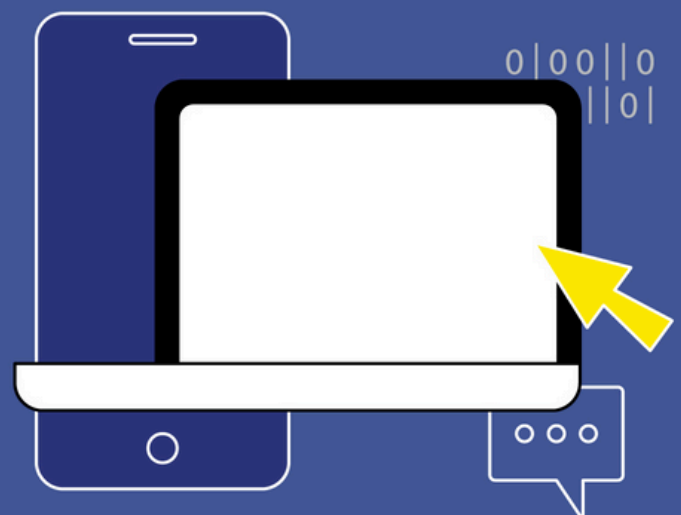
As co-founder of GenAI platform Claude, it's safe to assume Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei knows a thing or two. So when he says we're entering what he terms "the adolescence of technology" – a turbulent rite of passage that will test who we are as a species – perhaps we should hear him out.

He believes it's unclear whether we possess the 'maturity' to responsibly wield the almost unimaginable power AI is set to bring, as we coexist with its inexorable exponential progress over the coming years.

The risks aren't just theoretical. Already, 62% of students aged 13-18 say AI has had a negative impact on their skills and development, with one in four admitting it 'makes it too easy to find answers without doing the work'.

Other developments now emerging should also give us pause. Consider Moltbook, the new 'social media network for AI' where 1.5 million AI agents post, comment and create communities – we humans are merely observers to their interactions there.

Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei believes humans are only now entering what he terms "the adolescence of technology."



Or how about the wave of AI-powered consulting start-ups demonstrating how rapidly automation is transforming professional services?

Even more concerning: some AI companies have shown disturbing negligence regarding child protection, raising questions about their inclination to address future autonomy risks.

Despite all of this, Amodei remains optimistic that AI's downsides can be overcome with decisive, careful action.

Whilst acknowledging the serious existential challenge ahead, he believes the odds favour success.

For internal communicators, this means championing human-centred approaches, fostering company-wide dialogue about AI's impact and creating ethical adoption frameworks.

Organisations balancing technological advancement with genuine care for their people are the ones that will thrive in this transformative era.

# 62%



**of students aged 13-18 say AI has had a negative impact on their skills and development**

# 50%



**percentage of entry-level white-collar jobs AI may displace within the next one to five years**



# 1.5 million

**Number of AI agents the 'social media network for AI' Moltbook claims to have as active users.**

# The UK faces unique work challenges at the AI revolution's sharpest edge

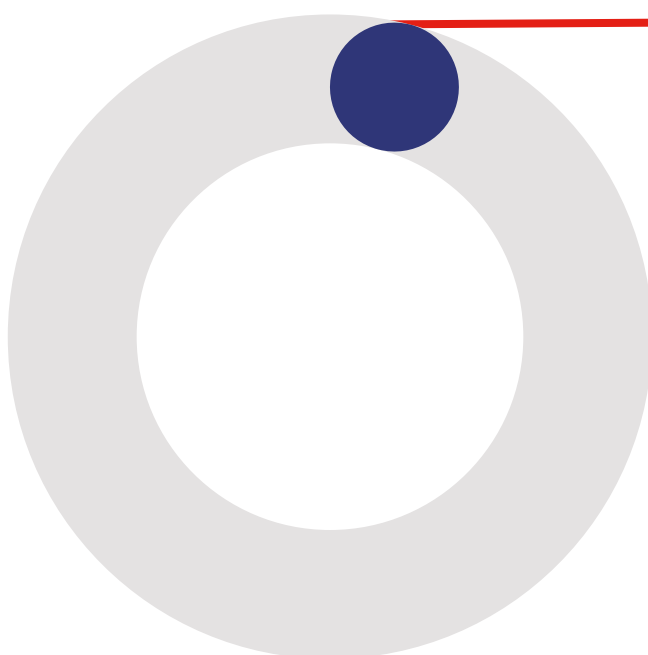
While global headlines regularly tout AI's glittering potential, Britain faces unique workforce challenges from it. Despite achieving 11.5% productivity gains from AI adoption, UK firms are cutting rather than creating roles, unlike US counterparts with similar gains. Morgan Stanley research shows UK companies reported an 8% net job loss over 12 months – the highest rate among major economies.

Should we just chalk that up to 'AI-washing'? That's the emerging corporate practice whereby companies attribute staff layoffs to the adoption of AI, when in reality, the job cuts are primarily driven by other factors like

financial pressures, over-hiring or strategic restructuring. Either way, over a quarter of UK workers fear job losses within five years, with early-career positions most vulnerable.

London faces particularly acute disruption given its concentration of white-collar workers in finance, creative industries and professional services – sectors facing the greatest AI impact.

The real challenge lies in the learning gap. Skills are now depreciating faster than traditional education models can handle, creating a risk where AI outpaces our readiness to adapt.



**The UK's AI-driven job displacement rate, the highest among leading global economies.**

We're witnessing the real-time transformation of the world of work here, not pontificating on some distant future scenario.

The rapid commercialisation of AI is poised to redefine business strategies, moving beyond experimentation to the very core of operations.

Success in the future of work will depend on building augmented organisations where human judgement is amplified, not replaced.

It will be defined less by merely the technology itself and increasingly by leadership choices. For those in our sector, that means extending our role beyond translating executive mandates. We need to frame AI adoption as workforce empowerment rather than replacement.

The organisations that prosper are already investing in human-AI collaboration, emotional intelligence and distinctly human capabilities that machines cannot replicate.

## IC challenges

- Workforce anxiety over AI-driven job displacement rising
- Skills depreciation outpacing traditional L&D models
- Managing organisational transformation during AI's exponential growth phase
- Ensuring ethical AI adoption amid rapid commercialisation pressures

## Strategic responses

- Frame AI adoption as workforce augmentation not replacement
- Champion continuous learning for optimal human-AI collaboration
- Foster open dialogue about AI's workplace impact
- Encourage and communicate clear ethical AI frameworks

# Sustainability

## Why we cannot bail out the Earth in the same way we did the banks

Imagine a financial safety net designed for a world that no longer exists. That's the alarm climate experts are sounding. They say it's time to face an uncomfortable truth: the economic models underpinning climate policy are dangerously flawed, and we may be heading towards a financial catastrophe that could dwarf 2008.

Current climate-economic models use smooth mathematical curves, assuming damages increase gradually with temperature. Yet climate scientists know reality is far messier.

They understand that extremes, not averages, will define our future. A single unexpected freeze caused £195 billion in damages in Texas 2021, yet barely made a blip in global temperature statistics.

Perhaps most concerning of all: the old models predict economies will keep growing indefinitely, even at catastrophic warming levels.

At 3°C, standard models suggest modest 3% GDP losses. Climate scientists estimate 35-88% economic destruction.



Climate experts are warning that the current economic models influencing climate policy aren't fit for purpose.



The biodiversity crisis compounds this threat. The Amazon rainforest is at 17% deforestation; it's likely to collapse at 20-25%. Boreal forests and coral reefs could start collapsing by 2030. Wildlife populations have already declined 73% since 1970. The UK imports 40% of food yet lacks the land to feed itself based on current dietary habits.

Unlike 2008, we can't bail out the Earth like we did the banks. States and financial bodies relying on flawed models are systemically underpricing climate risk.

This is sobering stuff with profound consequences for the future of work, where environmental stability becomes the ultimate prerequisite for any commercial activity.

The challenge lies in moving beyond tick-box sustainability initiatives and bridging the gap between the complex climate situation and organisational strategy. Fostering this level of literacy ensures that organisations do not just transition at the speed of society, but proactively lead in a world defined by polycrisis and radical change.



# 1.6 Earths

number required to sustain current global levels of consumption

# 50%



potential loss in GDP in global economy between 2070 and 2090 from catastrophic climate shocks

# 17%



the Amazon's deforestation level - it's likely to collapse at 20-25%

# The banking industry's climate paradox

The global financial landscape is currently defined by a startling paradox. While the green energy sector in China has surged to become the world's eighth largest economy - i.e. bigger than all but seven nations - major banks appear to be retreating on climate action.

Recent analysis from the London School of Economics reveals that no major bank has yet committed to ending the funding of new oil, gas, or coal projects.

Instead, many appear to be diluting their climate policies, leading

researchers to warn that Paris Agreement objectives risk slipping further out of reach.

This stagnation is particularly striking when contrasted with the East. In China, clean energy industries generated a record 15.4 trillion yuan (\$2.1 trillion) in 2025, driving over 90% of investment growth and accounting for more than a third of the country's total economic expansion.

Without these sectors, China would have missed its 5% GDP growth target by a significant margin.

**If China's clean energy sector were a country, it would be the world's eighth largest economy, having generated a record \$2.1 trillion in 2025.**



To the casual observer, it may seem the financial sector is shunning climate work due to a shifting political zeitgeist. And it may also seem to defy logic, given the opportunities clearly up for grabs within the green energy sector.

However, the reality may be more nuanced. These banks haven't necessarily abandoned climate work. Rather they may be refocusing endeavours. Some are clearly also still in the infancy of their transition. Others are replacing firm 'commitments' with vaguer 'aspirations'.

For IC professionals, acknowledging the complexity of this climate paradox demands sophisticated messaging. We must bridge the gap between the volatile external backdrop and authentic sustainability goals.

Success requires translating climate imperatives into language and stories that our colleagues understand. Only by acknowledging both the urgency and the hard economic realities can we drive meaningful change as communicators.

## IC challenges

- Emergent gap between flawed climate models and reality
- Need to go beyond tick-box sustainability to strategic climate action
- Febrile political zeitgeist and retreats from climate commitments
- How to link environmental stability directly to organisational viability

## Strategic responses

- Translate complex climate data into accessible business language
- Frame climate adaptation as essential risk management strategy
- Bridge external political volatility with authentic storytelling on goals
- Linking consequences of ecosystem collapse and organisational sustainability

# Employment

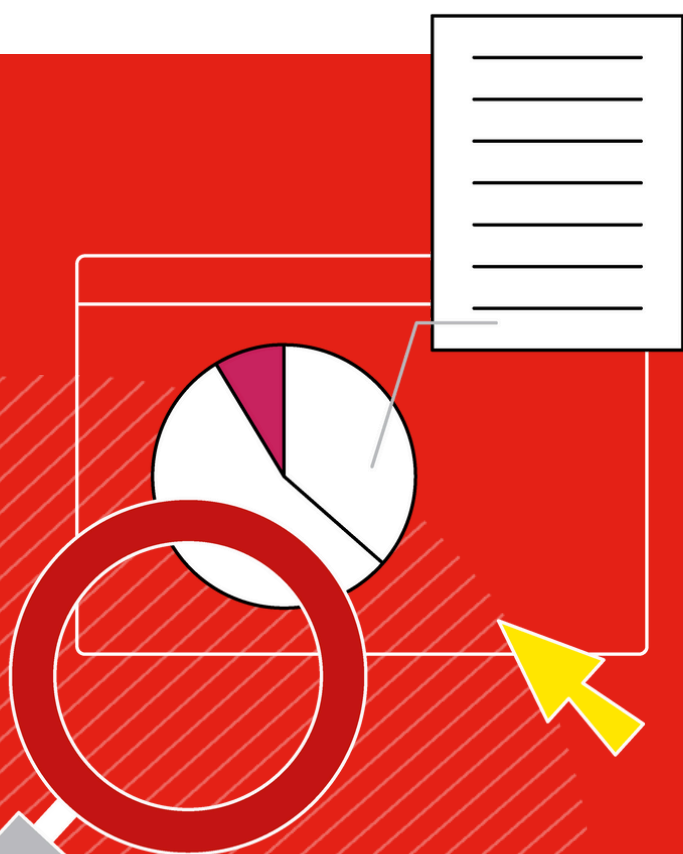
## Beyond the buzzwords: the new language of work

The workplace lexicon is evolving faster than ever, and 2026 is already delivering eyebrow-raising additions to the corporate dictionary. From 'shift sulking' to 'office frogging', these aren't just buzzy phrases. They're signposts pointing to fundamental shifts in how we work – and what we'll tolerate from employers.

Take shift sulking, where workers arrive already drained and stressed. With 31% of US workers feeling detached, this isn't just a retention challenge, it's a productivity crisis.

In US states with predictable scheduling, frontline worker happiness levels soars, compared to a mere 60% where schedules remain chaotic. Without structural change delivering what workers want (predictable schedules, balanced workloads, transparent communication), assume we'll see more 'sulking' in 2026.

Meanwhile, younger workers are pioneering office frogging, hopping between roles with remarkable agility. Nearly 27% of Gen Z professionals plan to change jobs this year, staying in first roles for just 1.1 years.



These aren't just buzzy new tags – they're key signposts pointing to fundamental shifts in how people work, and what they will tolerate from their employers.

What's driving this? They're searching for stronger culture, clearer purpose and faster progression. Conversely, 'job cuffing' sees colleagues staying put for security rather than passion, a strategic pause that provides stability but risks performance stagnation.

Even Mondays are getting a rebrand. 'Bare-minimum Mondays' embraces a gentler ramp-up to the working week, rather than forcing peak productivity at 9am.

And threading through it all, the advent of the 'augmented worker' combines human creativity with AI, wearables and data-driven tools.

Whilst these trends might seem fluffy or zeitgeisty, they signal deeper shifts organisations ignore at their peril. With colleague engagement sinking to new lows, these new terms aren't linguistic curiosities. They're early warning signals about workforce sustainability and longer-term organisational success.



# 1.1 years

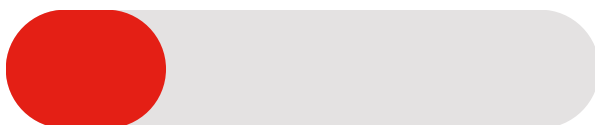
average length of time Gen Z workers stay in their first roles

# 31%



of US workers feel 'detached' from their jobs – suggesting a retention and productivity crisis

# 27%



of Gen Z professionals likely to change jobs in next year, versus 19% of Gen X workers

# The perfect storm in which we risk losing a generation of talent

Something remarkable is happening in the workplace, yet it's barely making headlines. We're potentially witnessing the creation of a lost generation of talent.

Workers aged 22-25 in AI-exposed occupations experienced a 13% decline in employment, according to a 2025 Stanford University study.

Companies are replacing entry-level roles with artificial intelligence to boost short-term profits, but they're eliminating that all-important 'apprentice' stage where young professionals develop sound business judgement. We're automating away the very training ground that creates tomorrow's leaders.

Meanwhile, the battle over work has fundamentally shifted. It's no longer about where you work, but when. Optimal work-life blend has overtaken salary as the top priority for 65% of office workers, yet only 49% have access to flexible working hours. Nearly 40% report feeling overwhelmed, and amongst those considering quitting, 57% suffer from burnout.

This temporal tug-of-war occurs against powerful geo-economic shifts. The World Economic Forum highlights how geopolitical instability and rapid technological change are reshaping the global economic landscape through supply chain reconfiguration, regulatory fragmentation and rising volatility.



Here's the paradox: whilst 76% of business leaders are confident accessing technical skills, only 67% feel the same about human-centric capabilities like resilience, adaptability and EQ.

In an AI-powered world, uniquely human skills will become more and more sought-after commodities. Just 3% of organisations have embedded skills-based workforce strategies today, though 61% expect to by 2030.

We're creating a perfect storm where junior professionals can't gain essential experience, mid-career workers burn out from rigid schedules and organisations struggle to identify the vital skills that matter most.

It's time to take stock of the context and act decisively. The alternative? A talent deficit that may well haunt businesses and organisations for decades.

## IC challenges

- AI automating away entry-level roles that develop future leaders
- Burnout crisis driven by inflexible working time arrangements
- Rapidly evolving work trends reflect emergent wants, needs and expectations
- Colleague engagement levels sinking to new lows

## Strategic responses

- Champion apprenticeship programmes balancing AI with human development
- Advocate temporal flexibility as retention and wellbeing priority
- Keep abreast of emerging work trends and show understanding of these in relevant touchpoints
- Address engagement concerns and communicate organisational culture clearly

# People

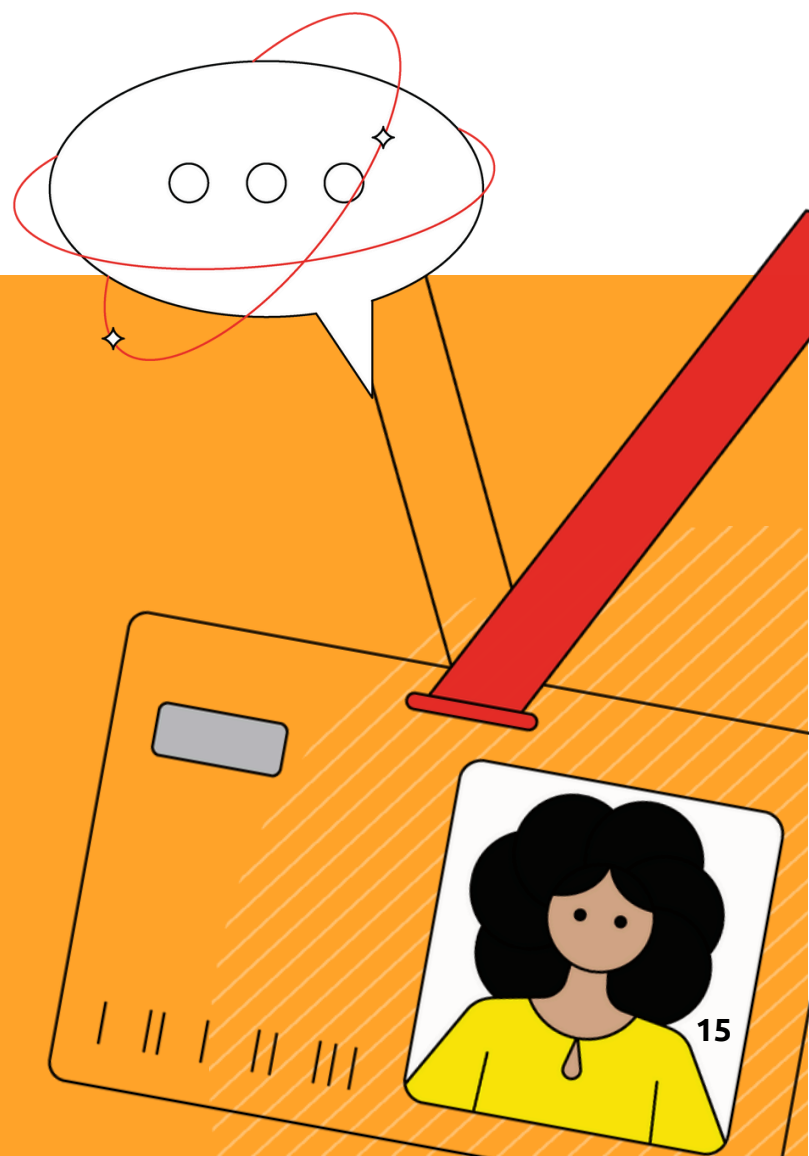
## The emerging crisis of insularity: why is trust fragmenting when we need it most?

The Edelman Trust Barometer has long been a reliable gauge of societal sentiment. However, its 2026 findings have surfaced something alarming: people are withdrawing into themselves precisely when we need connection most. With 'trust' identified by IoIC research as fundamental to longer-term organisational sustainability, this year's data shows a troubling paradox.

Globally, 70% of people now hold an 'insular trust mindset', which means they're unwilling or hesitant to trust

anyone different from them in values, sources, backgrounds or problem-solving approaches. This isn't mere preference. It's actively stalling progress. 34% of colleagues would rather switch departments than report to a manager with different values, whilst 42% would reduce effort working with project leaders holding different political beliefs.

Insularity is emerging as a key business issue, yet hope lies in innovative approaches to addressing it – such as 'trust brokering', whereby institutions actively facilitate connection.



The trust gap between high and low earners has more than doubled since 2012, now standing at 15 points.

Meanwhile, only 32% believe the next generation will be better off, down four points in a single year. Fear that foreign actors deliberately spread disinformation has hit an all-time high at 65%, whilst exposure to differing political views has plummeted by six points, with significant decreases across 20 of 28 countries.

Yet there's hope in 'trust brokering', where institutions facilitate connection

without demanding agreement.

Employers are uniquely positioned here: 82% believe building diverse teams requiring collaboration across differences would be effective, with 81% supporting mandatory conflict-resolution training.

For progressive organisations wanting to address the future of work head-on, the imperative is clear: insularity is a key business issue, so let's hold space for difference to become an asset, not a perceived threat. It's time to build bridges, not echo chambers.

# 70%



**are unwilling or hesitant to trust someone who has different values**

# 42%



**would rather change departments than report to a manager with very different values**



# 32%



**believe the next generation will be better off, as optimism for the future wanes**

# The evolution of DEI: is it time we moved on to FAIR?

For years, organisations have poured millions into DEI programmes, but has the needle moved as far as it should?

In her new book, *Fixing Fairness*, strategist Lily Zheng proffers a roadmap for moving things forward more effectively: transition from DEI's vague, performative promise to what she identifies as the FAIR Framework – encapsulating fairness, access, inclusion and representation instead.

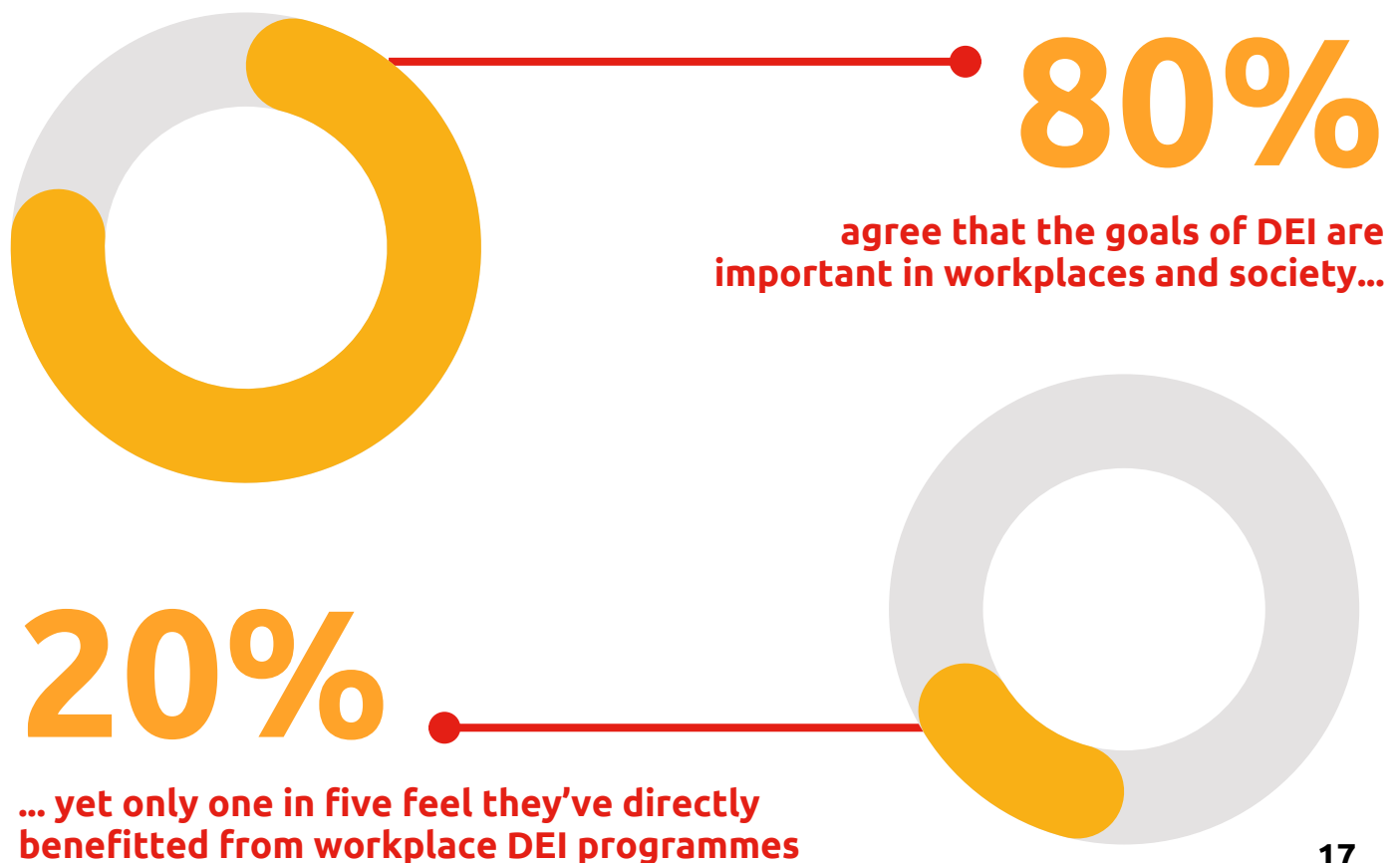
She believes we need to stop “patching people” and fix systems.

That means allocating much more effort to changing hiring protocols, promotion transparency and pay equity – not individual training.

Avoiding incentivising diversity quotas without culture change.

And redefining representation as trust, not tokenism.

If we're committed to creating better outcomes for all, maybe it's time we stop asking colleagues to jump higher, and make it easier for them to climb.



# The 'attention activist' pushback on 'human fracking', big tech's land-grab into human consciousness

Nearly 70% of Earth's population now carries a smartphone, spending close to half their waking hours looking at their screens.

Something to be celebrated as a sign of the democratisation of technology perhaps? Not if you're an 'attention activist' who believes it's the gateway to 'human fracking'.

That's the term coined by Princeton University professor D Graham Burnett to describe the way big tech extracts

and monetises human attention via its stream of addictive, and at times dubious-quality, content. He believes the tech giants are treating human consciousness as unclaimed territory to commodify for their empire-building.

Just like petroleum fracking, this exploitation produces toxicity and despoliation, but of our mental landscapes. This commodification of attention threatens human consciousness and wellbeing.



Yet resistance is emerging. From both sides of the political divide and everywhere in between, people are starting to recognise something is profoundly wrong with the *status quo*.

History shows change happens fast when movements coalesce. Burnett draws parallels with environmental and labour movements, suggesting that diverse coalitions can unite against tech exploitation.

The take-away here is that as humans, we will increasingly need to take more of an 'environmentalism for the mind' approach to our wellbeing.

Attention activism means forming coalitions, creating sanctuary spaces and reclaiming our capacity for love, curiosity, trust and care. True human attention belongs to us.

For internal communicators, this is part of a fundamental shift already underway: expect colleagues to increasingly demand workplaces that respect their cognitive wellbeing, with less digital distraction.

To thrive, organisations must champion attentional health alongside other wellbeing and engagement endeavours.

## IC challenges

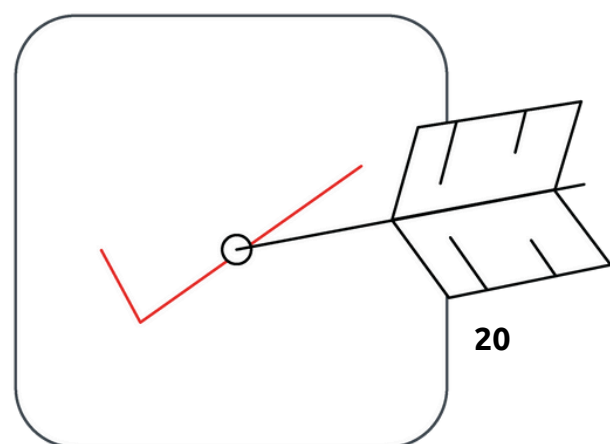
- Rise of colleague insularity a threat to collaboration
- DEI initiatives may be perceived as performative and not impactful
- Digital extraction / distraction degrading colleagues' cognitive wellbeing and attention capacity
- Growing trust gap between earnings groups undermining cohesion

## Strategic responses

- Hold space for 'trust-brokering' where difference fêted as asset
- Redefine representation as trust, not tokenism or performative action
- Champion attentional health policies alongside traditional wellbeing
- Encourage conflict-resolution training across hierarchies where required

# Key take-aways: actionable recommendations for internal communicators

- 1 Champion human-centred AI adoption frameworks that prioritise workforce augmentation over replacement, emphasising continuous learning and ethical implementation standards.
- 2 Foster transparent dialogue about AI's workplace impact through regular forums, addressing colleague anxieties whilst celebrating successful human-AI collaboration examples.
- 3 Translate climate data into accessible business language, framing environmental stability as fundamental risk management rather than a 'nice-to-have' CSR endeavour.
- 4 Bridge external political volatility with authentic sustainability storytelling, connecting ecosystem collapse consequences directly to organisational viability and colleague roles.
- 5 Advocate temporal flexibility as core retention strategy, recognising optimal work-life blend now surpasses salary as primary motivator for 65% of workers.
- 6 Champion apprenticeship and development programmes balancing AI efficiency with human skill-building, to help prevent creation of a 'lost generation' lacking business experience.
- 7 Facilitate trust-brokering initiatives through diverse team collaboration and conflict-resolution training. Actively combat the insularity mindset that hampers trust levels.
- 8 Champion attentional health policies alongside traditional wellbeing programmes, creating sanctuary spaces that respect cognitive capacity and resist digital distraction culture.



# Further recommended reading

## AI & tech

- <https://www.darioamodei.com/essay/the-adolescence-of-technology>
- <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c62n410w5yno>
- <https://www.businessinsider.com/ai-consulting-startups-2025-10> [PAYWALL]
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- <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/feb/08/ai-washing-job-losses-artificial-intelligence>
- <https://www.weforum.org/publications/four-futures-for-jobs-in-the-new-economy-ai-and-talent-in-2030/>
- <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/how-ai-will-affect-work-in-different-industries/>

## Sustainability

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- <https://greenfuturesolutions.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Recalibrating-Climate-Risk-Report-Final.pdf>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/oct/22/no-major-banks-have-yet-committed-to-stop-funding-new-oil-gas-and-coal-research-finds>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/05/china-green-energy-sector-investment-growth#:~:text=China's%20clean%20energy%20industries%20drove,a%20new%20analysis%20has%20shown.>
- <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-clean-energy-drove-more-than-a-third-of-chinas-gdp-growth-in-2025/>
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## Employment

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- <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/654911/employee-engagement-sinks-year-low.aspx>
- <https://news.deputy.com/new-deputy-report-unveils-us-shift-worker-sentiment-trends-for-2025>
- <https://news.deputy.com/ai-is-reshaping-frontline-work-but-half-of-aussie-workers-still-dont-realise-its-happening-48qow3>
- <https://www.raconteur.net/talent-culture/three-minute-explainer-on-office-frogging>
- <https://www.msn.com/en-ie/money/careersandeducation/what-is-job-cuffing-72-of-employees-do-it-without-knowing-it/ar-AA1JikXW?cvid=8FF4A282EBA641C5A6846F85C9518398&ocid=hpmsn>
- <https://www.talenthr.io/resources/hr-glossary/bare-minimum-mondays/>
- <https://www.breedj.com/augmented-workers-the-future-of-employment-in-the-age-of-automation/>
- <https://fortune.com/2026/01/27/lost-generation-of-employee-talent-ai-gen-z-hiring-nightmare/>
- <https://www.weforum.org/publications/four-futures-for-the-new-economy-geo-economics-and-technology-in-2030/>
- <https://fortune.com/2026/01/04/bosses-new-battle-remote-work-from-where-to-when-flexible-hybrid/>
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## People

- [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2026-01/2026%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report\\_01.21.26\\_0.pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2026-01/2026%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report_01.21.26_0.pdf)
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- <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/smartphone-stats>
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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.

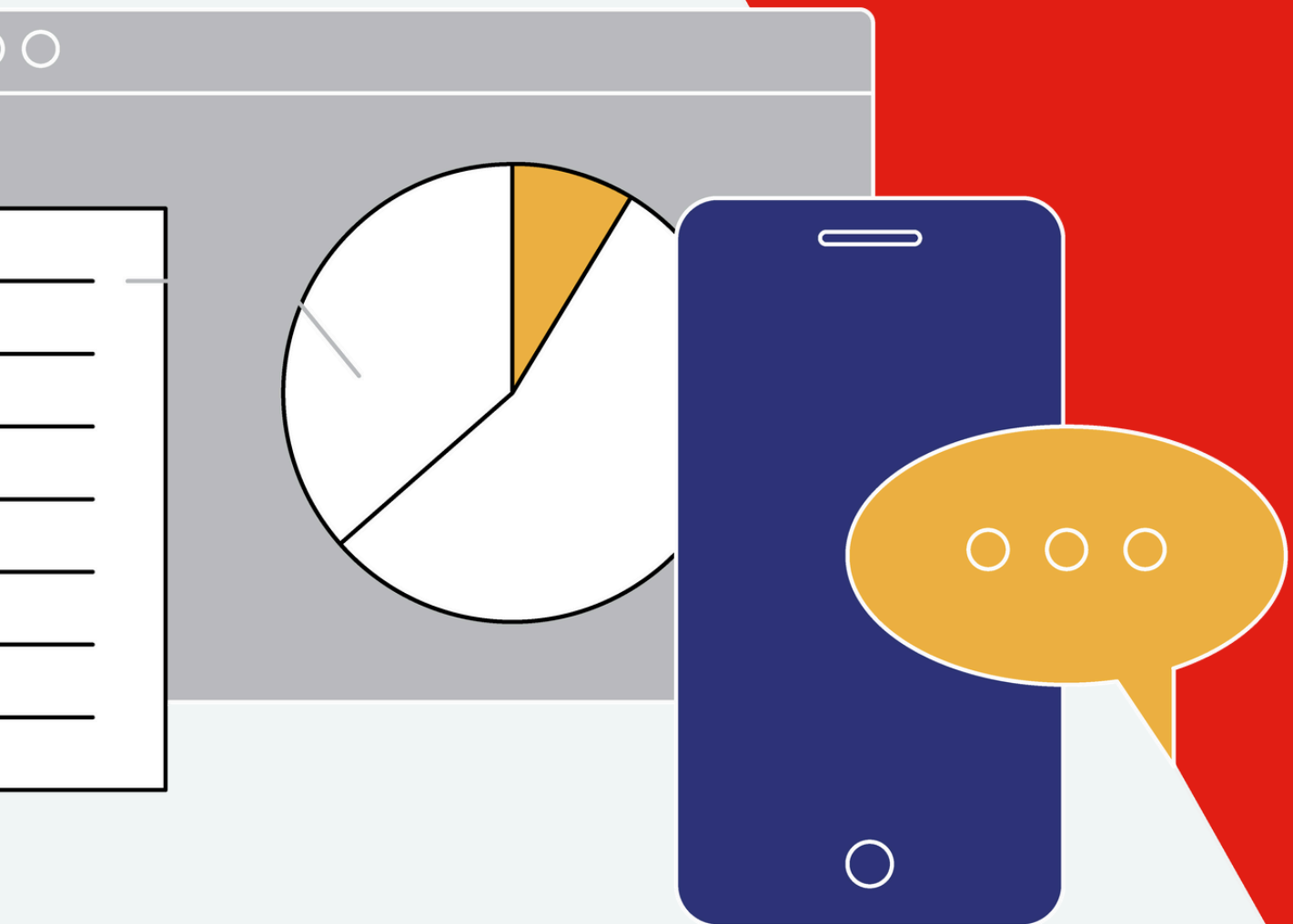
It co-designs progressive strategies to optimise team-performance and organisational agility. Its people-centred approach enhances collective intelligence for improved resilience and long-term organisational sustainability.

## 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.





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

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