

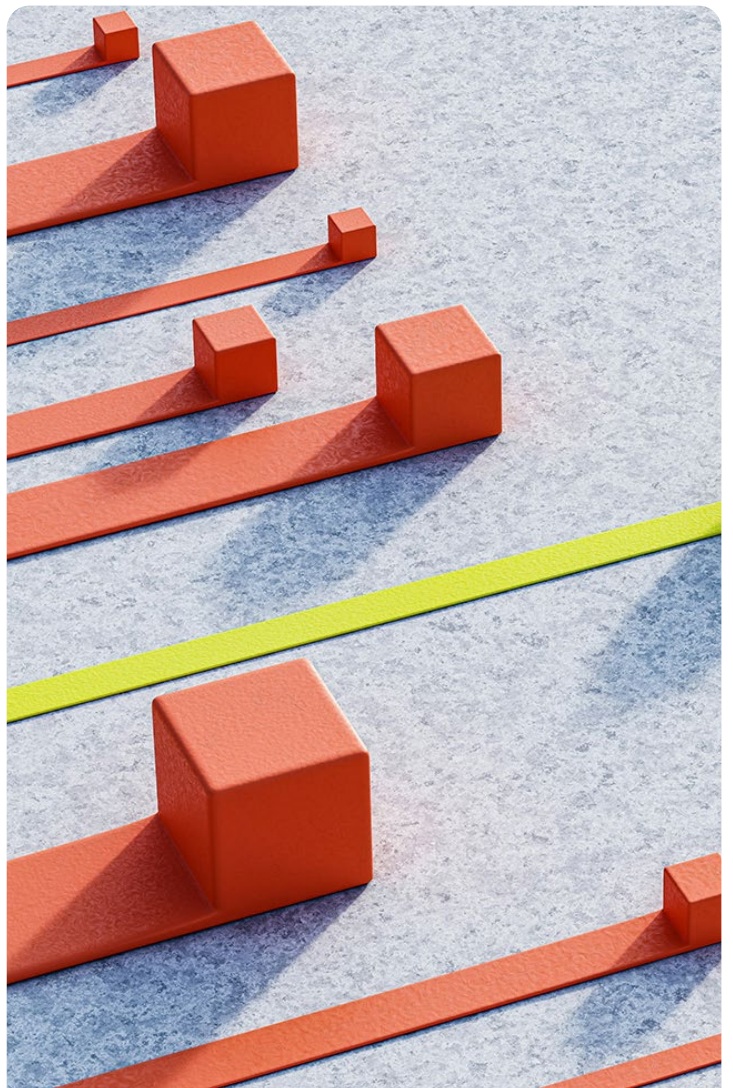
FUTURE-READY NOW

HR LEADERS ROUNDTABLE

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CRF and BTS convened a diverse group of senior HR leaders from a wide range of industries to explore how organisations can prepare for the future through unlocking 'bottoms-up' AI innovation and building future-ready talent pipelines. With insights led by Jessica Skon, Global CEO of BTS Group, the discussion focused on how organisations can encourage grass-roots experimentation, scale up successes and strengthen their future-ready talent practices.



ABOUT BTS

BTS Group is a global professional services organisation of more than 1,200 people across six continents, united by a clear purpose: to inspire and equip people and organisations to do the best work of their lives. BTS partners with many of the world's leading companies to turn strategy into action through a distinctive blend of strategy execution, leadership development, culture change, and data-driven talent solutions. Since its founding in 1986, BTS has been a pioneer of simulation-based learning, creating sophisticated, immersive experiences that enable leaders to rehearse decisions, test strategic choices, and build the mindsets required for high performance - long before those decisions play out in the real world. Today, BTS is extending this heritage through the thoughtful use of artificial intelligence, using AI to personalise learning at scale, enhance decision-making in simulations, and unlock new insight for clients navigating rapid transformation.

ABOUT CRF

CRF is a research-led learning network for HR leaders and their teams. CRF builds capability in HR through a programme of evidence-based research, technology-enabled learning, AI tools and events delivering expert-led insight, development and peer exchange. We partner with our clients to build solutions tailored to their specific context and needs. Our community benefits by gaining the tools to build capability, drive organisation performance and create a future-ready organisation.



INTRODUCTION



EMAIL

Richard Hargreaves
Managing Director, CRF



Most organisations currently remain in Phase One of AI adoption, where experimentation happens in isolated pockets and is largely driven by individuals using single tools. When asked to rate their organisational use of AI on a scale of 1-10, the majority of participants at the session scored their organisations between 1 and 4, with pockets of sophistication in certain areas. However, there is widespread ambition to progress toward organisation-level value, created by integrating tools, data, workflows and people.

Identifying how to move from curiosity to capability will be critical. This includes shifting from pilots to transformation and understanding HR's role both in redesigning work and in developing future-ready talent.



CREATING A 'JAZZ-LIKE COMPANY SPIRIT'

TO UNLOCK AI'S TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL



Jessica Skon
Global CEO, BTS



Jessica introduced the topic and led the group through an exploratory discussion, with key takeaways highlighted below.

The Context

Jessica opened by sharing that according to the MIT Sloan School, fewer than 10% of organisations have achieved meaningful financial impact from AI. Leaders are therefore under significant pressure to show tangible proof of AI's impact on business value (e.g. P&L impact). Companies that are realising value from AI differentiate themselves by:

- Investing as much in people as in technology. Organisations that build capability alongside tools are 3.5 times more likely to realise value from AI.
- Recognising that while large AI "big bets" will have significant long-term impact, these take time to mature. They therefore also focus on rapid, bottoms-up experimentation.
- We are currently at a historic turning point where both organisational structures and talent models will shift. This moment could be the historical chance to have a truly frontline-inspired, empowered company culture, but organisations must trust their people to explore and experiment.



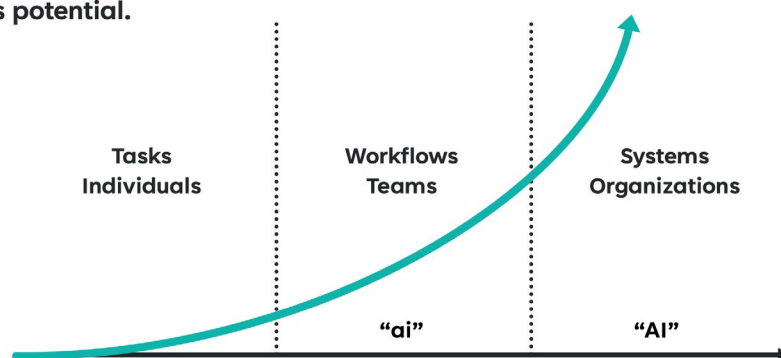
"Breakthroughs often come from pairing a deep expert with an early-career colleague who is unhindered by legacy habits."

CREATING A 'JAZZ-LIKE COMPANY SPIRIT'

REINVENTING HOW WORK GETS DONE

AI “big bets” at the organisational or systems level will ultimately have significant impact, but they require millions of data points and take time to operationalise and realise value. Jessica encouraged organisations to also focus on workflows and teams - the middle section of the diagram below - where bottoms-up value can be created more quickly. This can be viewed as lower-case ‘ai’ work, in contrast to the capital-letter, enterprise-level ‘AI’ implementations.

Leaders assume that P&L value from AI comes from reimagining big **systems and big tech investments**. Few are reinventing how work gets done which limits potential.



“Almost all the AI investment to date has been on ‘hard problems’ mostly led by the IT team, and AI today is very different. It is technically much easier and re-wiring involves other teams. So maybe it was 70% Tech & Data a year ago, and it’s flipped to 70% People & Process now.”

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CREATING A 'JAZZ-LIKE' CULTURE OF INNOVATION

Creating bottoms-up AI experimentation and breakthroughs “looks like jazz”; people closest to the work experiment, adapting and riffing off each other in real time. This is supported by the following:

- AI transforms work activity by activity - the goal should be targeted reinvention rather than vague, top-down ambition. Senior leaders simply don't have visibility into everyday tasks, so they cannot dictate innovation through mandates alone.
- Leaders must trust teams to experiment and actively inject energy around experimentation - encouraging teams to try things, share insights and celebrate learning.
- Curiosity is becoming the standout leadership characteristic. CEOs must become comfortable not being the expert in everything and shift from providing answers to enabling exploration.
- Most employees' use of AI has so far been individual, but the real breakthroughs - those that go beyond small productivity gains - are emerging from teams. The next wave of value will come from teams using AI together, activity by activity, creating deeper impact and often more enjoyable work.
- Breakthroughs often come from pairing a deep expert with an early-career colleague who is unhindered by legacy habits.
- If breakthroughs lead to the realisation that fewer people will be needed to do tasks, organisations need to acknowledge this and ensure workers are upskilled with the right stories, tools and thinking.
- Governance between IT and HR teams needs to be lightweight but responsible, rather than reliant on large, bureaucratic controls.
- The right stories, tools and thinking.

HR has long struggled to define effective performance models and articulate what “high performance” looks like. When teams redesign work activity by activity, they are forced to make this explicit - because they must train the tool to mirror what “good” looks like. This process builds models you can trust, scale and use to reinforce great performance in specific roles.



BUILDING THE RIGHT AI TOOLSET

- Do not rely solely on off-the-shelf tools and instead consider how you might use AI solutions tailored to specific workflows. Most employees are still using AI only as a personal assistant or faster search engine and therefore do not realise its full potential
- In practice, reinventing work typically requires three or four different tools, not just one. Giving people access to free trials is critical for experimentation, though in many organisations, this remains a cultural barrier that must be addressed.
- Avoid multi-year software contracts, freeing up cash to experiment. Once something proves genuinely valuable, you can then scale it.
- You don't necessarily need to be at the front of everything; you don't always need to be an early adopter or even a fast follower. In some cases, new tools will emerge rapidly that allow quick progress.

SCALING EXPERIMENTATION

- *Scaling requires visible senior stakeholder support.* This is the point to return to the top of the organisation with clear insights: "Here's what we learned, and here's what it means for how we work." This is the time to be more top-down and spread a breakthrough from one area to another more deliberately.
- *In fast-moving markets, teams closest to the customer should be empowered to make real-time decisions and shifts.* This requires leaders to let go of detailed control, trust the frontline with data and allow teams to shift resources quickly. This will mean leaders being comfortable in meetings without all the answers, but it creates space for a new operating model and culture.
- *Create a culture of permission and trust.* When a team wants to try a new tool, the organisation's role is to ask for the hypothesis, allow a short trial and request a quick read-out. This doesn't require full-scale transformation, but it does require recognising that top-down control cannot solve this type of work. And the reward is significant - for example, being able to tell investors that a cross-functional team has reinvented a workflow and halved the resource needed.

WHAT BTS HAS LEARNED ABOUT BOTTOMS-UP AI IMPLEMENTATION?

What we have learned (so far) on how to spark bottoms-up breakthrough AI innovation in real work

AI is surgical in nature, activity by activity, so aim for surgical reinvention, not vague ambition

Start where strategy meets workflow, not where hype meets budget.

Create permissionless experimentation, often with more than one AI tool

Fail fast, learn faster with legal, IT, and leadership in the loop, not in the way.

Pair the wise and the fearless

Cross-generational collisions bring judgment, the other brings play.

Let the frontlines find the breakthroughs

Execs don't invent the use cases; they scale the ones people prove.

Turn discomfort into curiosity

Breakthroughs start when the status quo feels unacceptable. Dial up the curiosity mixed with survival instinct.

Make AI a team sport

No one wins by prompting alone. Teams that share and build on each other's hacks turn isolated experiments into enterprise capability and connected workflows.



BTS'S APPROACH TO EMBEDDING AI IN ORGANISATIONS

From quick wins to sustained advantage: At BTS we help you develop a people-approach that builds capability, culture, and P&L impact quarter by quarter

- 1 Set the AI ambition**
 - Align leaders on the AI vision, value pools, and culture they want to build.
 - Create conditions for safe, fast innovation across functions (IT, Legal, Risk).
 - Establish ownership so leaders drive - not delegate - the transformation.
- 2 Activate critical teams: get them over “the hump”**
 - Give teams hands-on experience to show what AI can actually do in their workflow.
 - Deliver visible impact within a week using ML predictions, synthetic data and agentic workflows.
 - Shift mindset from uncertainty to confidence through rapid wins.
- 3 Celebrate and embed an AI innovation culture**
 - Help leaders role-model experimentation - the good, the bad, and the messy.
 - Replace fear with new habits, rituals, and meeting norms that reinforce curiosity.
 - Build momentum by celebrating early wins and encouraging continuous tinkering.
- 4 Retool your people processes for the AI-era**
 - Redesign talent systems to identify, develop, and promote AI-ready talent.
 - Integrate AI tools into learning, coaching, assessment, and job design.
 - Ensure the workforce evolves quarter-by-quarter alongside the technology.



Q Is there a danger we're focusing on the technology first before building the culture it requires?

A *AI tooling and experimentation can accelerate the cultural shift. If you pick a team and get them to start reinventing their work activity by activity, once they achieve a breakthrough, that story will move the culture. People will start asking, "How did you do that?" and see that change didn't require heavy governance - it required trying things.*

Practitioner Insights

Attendees shared the following insights, challenges and examples from their own experiences:

GOVERNANCE & RISK MANAGEMENT

- Coordination is a major challenge. Many organisations see pockets of promising experimentation, though teams may unknowingly duplicate or contradict one another's work. Some are investing in governance and shared tools to mitigate this.
- Some participants expressed scepticism about AI's readiness for certain types of work, questioning whether hallucinations are an inherent feature of generative AI rather than a temporary bug. They therefore advocated for extreme caution when applying AI to any mission-critical tasks.

CULTURE, LEADERSHIP & WAYS OF WORKING

- Experimentation is often blocked by cultural barriers - including rules that stop people from trying out tools through free trials.
- Leadership capability must evolve. A new generation of leaders will need comfort with experimentation and permission-giving.
- Existing innovative subcultures (e.g. IT teams) need to be scaled beyond technical functions.

STRATEGY AND VALUE CREATION

- AI should be anchored in customer value. HR leaders should start every AI conversation with: "How does this improve delivery for customers?"
- Many organisations are still thinking today-forward (i.e. focusing on making current processes faster or more efficient). Instead, leaders need a future-back perspective: How do we reimagine the organisation for a different future? A useful test: If you were a competitor trying to disrupt your business model, what would you do?
- In the short term, the services industry will be affected more strongly by disruption (and real breakthroughs) than the product or manufacturing sectors.
- Business models may need redesign, not just incremental optimisation - several participants are now exploring AI-enabled operating model change.



FURTHER RESOURCES

BTS, A Brave New World:

What AI Means for Leadership and Culture

[FIND OUT MORE](#)

Parisi, Dan & Shrestha, Darshan. Built to Shift

A Playbook for Downturns, Disruption, and What Comes Next

[FIND OUT MORE](#)

Skon, Jessica.

How Learning Simulations Can Help Organizations Reach Peak Performance

[FIND OUT MORE](#)

Skon, Jessica AI Co-Innovation Briefing on Vimeo.

[FIND OUT MORE](#)

Vaccaro, Ignacio & Amsden, Alex.

Test Drive Your Strategy with Business Simulations

[FIND OUT MORE](#)

Q *Jessica, if we were having this same conversation in three years' time, what would you expect to have changed?*

A We will have moved much further toward dynamic planning and a simulation-led culture. The ability to simulate will become a core organisational superpower in the AI era. As high-performance computing scales, companies will use AI across supply chains, operations and manufacturing, making dashboards dynamic rather than static. This enables real-time scenario planning using live data.

In the talent space, we will see dynamic planning and dynamic preparation become the norm. Organisations will practise new behaviours, new ways of working and new decision-making at scale using high-fidelity simulations. Until recently, these were costly and reserved for elite leadership programmes; now, budgets can stretch much further, making simulation-based development accessible to many more people.

FUTURE-READY TALENT MANAGEMENT



EMAIL

John Whelan MBE
Director, CRF



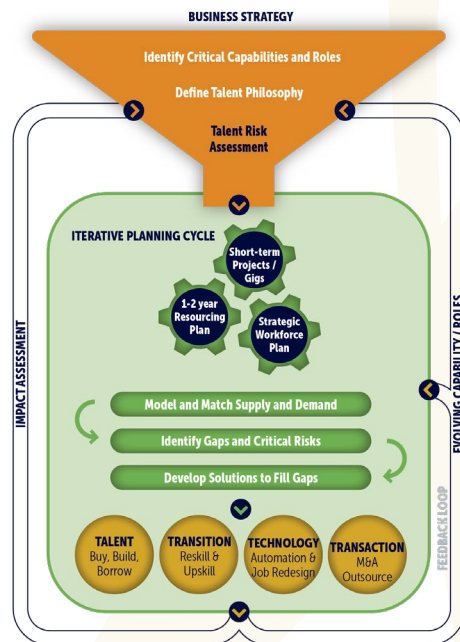
John Whelan outlined CRF's recently published research, Future-Ready Talent Management.

The Context

Businesses face a central paradox in talent planning; the rate of disruption makes future scenarios harder than ever to predict, yet planning is more essential than ever. With traditional long-range planning no longer fit for the current level of uncertainty, organisations need to plan differently and use scenarios and simulations.

Within this dynamic environment, a future-fit talent strategy must be:

- **Strategic** - anchored in business strategy and key priorities
- **Pacy** - operating at the rhythm of the business
- **Adaptable** - able to shift direction quickly
- **Targeted and risk-based** - focusing on the capabilities and roles that matter most, rather than trying to plan for everything
- **Data-led** - making use of increasingly available and richer data.



CRF'S MODEL FOR DYNAMIC TALENT PLANNING

CRF has developed a dynamic planning model that reflects how organisations now need to approach workforce and talent planning. Traditional 5–10-year, linear planning models are no longer fit for purpose. Instead, planning should operate through multiple, interconnected cycles, running in parallel and addressing the following:

- **Short-term, emerging needs:** How do we stand up teams quickly? How do we redeploy resources in real time? Do we have the mechanisms, visibility and culture required to enable talent mobility?
- **1–2 year visibility for Talent Acquisition and resourcing:** TA and resourcing teams often struggle because workforce requirements are communicated too late. They need forward visibility of workforce priorities so they can understand talent markets, build pipelines and respond with greater speed.
- **Longer-term strategic workforce planning:** Establish the overall direction of travel based on anticipated shifts in the business, while ensuring these longer-term plans remain informed by insights emerging from the shorter planning cycles.

As employees experiment with and adopt new technologies - often without formal oversight - a feedback loop becomes essential. This allows organisations to observe any grassroots shifts and feed these back into planning.

KEY ENABLERS

Future-ready talent processes are enabled by the following:

A culture of mobility and development.

Leaders who role model talent movement rather than talent hoarding.

HR processes and systems that support dynamic movement.

Technology and AI that help match people to skills, roles and work (e.g. skills taxonomies, internal gig platforms).

Applying skills-based approaches selectively in parts of the business where they enhance flexibility and planning accuracy (rather than applying skills-based principles wholesale).



KEY TAKEAWAYS



EMAIL

James Blaker,
Senior Vice President at BTS



- **AI adoption remains low across delegates' organisations,** though the aspiration to unlock value is high. Real tensions persist around governance, trust and the pace of progress.
- **Early gains are most likely to come from unlocking capacity, improving sales productivity and driving operational efficiencies.** Industry context matters: service industries may see quicker wins, while high-stakes sectors such as manufacturing, pharmaceuticals and energy will need greater caution.
- **Breakthrough moments tend to emerge from bottoms-up experimentation,** activity by activity, with "jazz leadership" enabling teams to riff off one another, share what works and scale ideas quickly.
- **Cross-functional collaboration is essential.** Too much weight is placed on CIOs/CTOs; HR and CFOs also play critical roles, particularly when shifting from short-term productivity gains to long-term value creation and business model reinvention.
- **Entry-level talent and workforce shape must not be overlooked.** Some organisations are aiming for a more "diamond-shaped" workforce, with investment focused on mid-level roles rather than large graduate intakes.
- **A 'future-back' mindset is needed** - not only improving today's processes but reimagining how the organisation will create value in the future. Simulation will increasingly enable real-time decision-making.
- **Ultimately, progress depends on culture:** curiosity, relearning, psychological safety and the permission to experiment. This moment represents an opportunity to accelerate learning and reshape how work gets done.



CRF ON-DEMAND COURSE DIGITAL HR

Harness the power of digital to lead with impact.

This course helps HRBPs navigate the digital transformation of HR. Learn to use AI, analytics, and automation to drive smarter decisions, improve employee experience, and align HR technology with strategy. Gain tools to tackle implementation challenges, manage ethical risks, and step into a more strategic, tech-savvy role.

FIND OUT MORE

THE AI-POWERED RESEARCH TOOL, PART OF CRF'S AI SUITE, PUTS OVER 30 YEARS OF RIGOROUS, EVIDENCE- BASED RESEARCH AT YOUR FINGERTIPS.

Built exclusively on CRF's trusted research library, the Research Tool saves you time, accelerates your thinking and gives you instant access to trusted intelligence.

Whether you're building a business case, writing a board paper, exploring new initiatives or deepening your understanding of HR strategy, CRF's Research Tool is your thinking partner.

Available exclusively to the CRF network, our Research Tool brings the full value of CRF's expertise directly to you. If you are not a part of the network, but are an in-house HR leader looking to find out more and gain access, please contact jessica@crforum.co.uk

THE CRF 2026 INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME

of research, events and learning is available to view now, and event registration open.

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