DESIGNING JOBS IN THE AGE OF AI

CORPORATE RESEARCH FORUM



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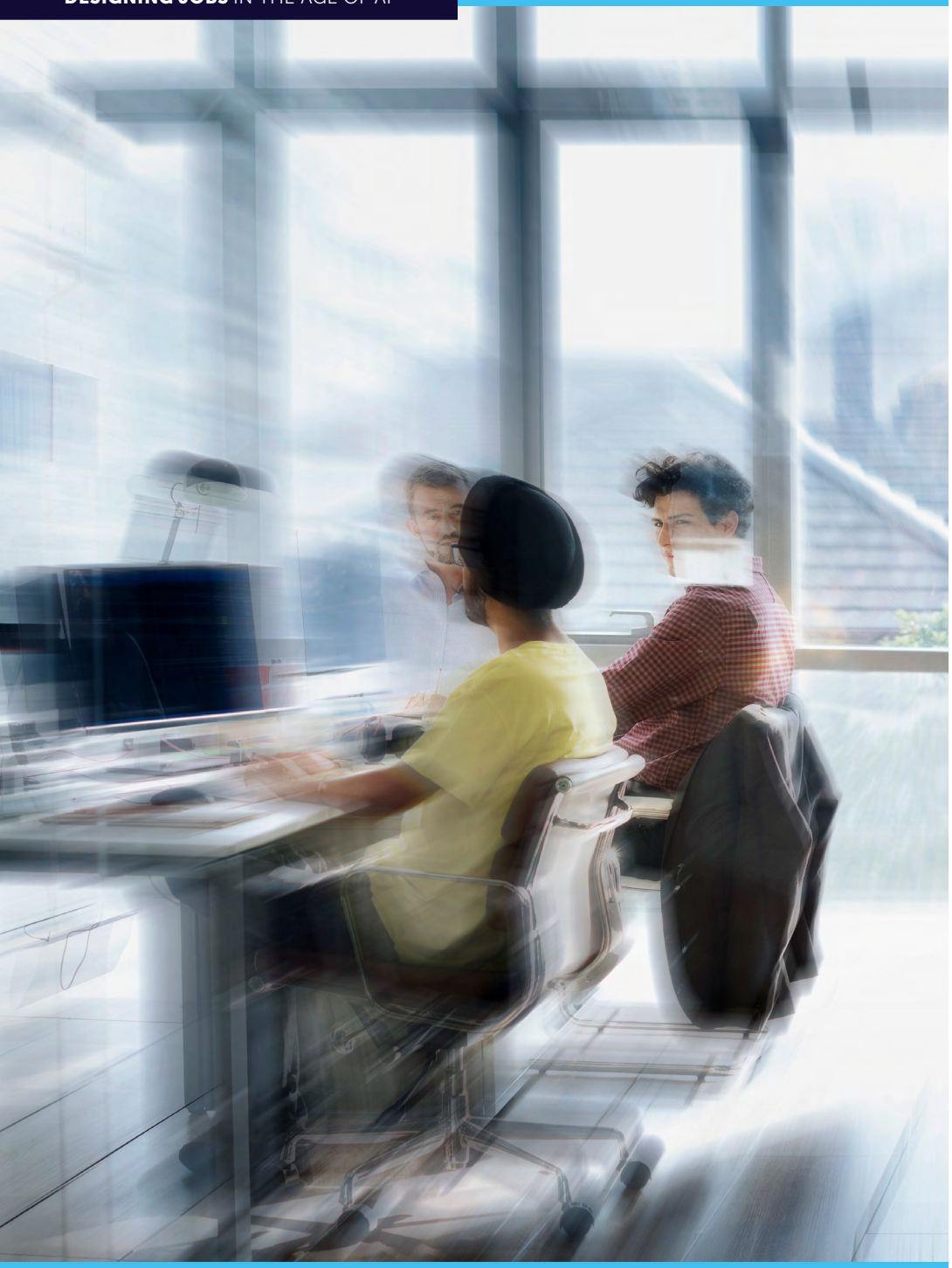

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ABOUT CRF

Corporate Research Forum (CRF) builds the capability and effectiveness of the HR function, enabling stronger business focus, better people decisions and a greater contribution to organisational performance. We provide HR leaders and their teams with trusted insight, senior peer intelligence and research-led development enabling better judgement, capability and confidence in applying ideas in ways that fit their own organisation.

Our approach combines high-quality research and external evidence with practitioner expertise, independent expert challenge and a senior network of peers. We promote evidence-based practice and critical thinking: helping HR practitioners assess the evidence, learn what others are doing, evaluate their practices and decide what will work in their own context. Research, events, learning programmes, communities and technology make this support accessible across the HR function and relevant at different stages of experience.

THE AUTHOR



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FOREWORD
FROM OUR PARTNER

AI can change how work gets done almost overnight. Yet the roles, skills, structures, and relationships that underpin business performance take longer to evolve. As this report demonstrates, making individual tasks more efficient does not necessarily make the business more effective.

At HiBob, we believe the real opportunity of AI lies in building smarter, more adaptable organisations. This starts with understanding how work actually happens: where value is created, what holds teams back, and where people and technology can make the greatest contribution together.

This is the thinking behind our vision for Organizational Intelligence. By connecting trusted people context with wider business information, leaders can better understand the skills and capacity available to them, make informed investment decisions and rethink how work is designed and distributed.

Equally important is developing the capabilities businesses will depend on tomorrow. This report highlights a critical consideration: automating routine tasks can inadvertently remove opportunities for people to develop expertise and judgment. Building human capability is therefore an essential part of the return on investment in AI.

For HR, this presents an opportunity to move from supporting business transformation to actively shaping it. Bringing workforce context and employee perspectives into decisions alongside Finance, Technology and Operations can help businesses evolve their roles, skills and ways of working in line with strategic priorities.

CRF's report provides a valuable framework for approaching these decisions with both business performance and the quality of human work in mind.

As AI becomes more widely available, access to technology alone will no longer be a competitive advantage. What will differentiate businesses is how well they understand their people, how intelligently they redesign work, and how continuously they build the capabilities to adapt.

FOREWORD
FROM OUR PARTNER

AI will not shape the future of work on its own. People will. And the choices organisations make now will determine whether that future creates value or resistance.

That is the conviction at the heart of this research, and it reflects what we see every day in our work with clients.

Across sectors, organisations are moving quickly to adopt AI, often under pressure to improve productivity, move faster and transform at scale. The ambition is understandable. But too often, transformation starts in the wrong place. The conversation begins with the technology-what it can automate, accelerate or replace, rather than with the work itself, what the business is trying to achieve, how value is really created, and what combination of human and machine contribution will deliver the best outcome.

When organisations take a technology-led route, the consequences are rarely confined to process design. We see leaders frustrated when promised efficiency gains fail to materialise because bottlenecks simply reappear elsewhere. We see organisations investing significant time and effort to unwind early decisions, redesign workflows, restore clarity and rebuild trust. We also see the human cost when employees feel change is being done to them, not built with them: scepticism grows, resistance hardens, and the energy needed to make transformation succeed declines.

This is why the humanity of work matters so much. Work is not just a set of tasks to be optimised. It is where people apply judgment, build expertise, solve problems, support one another and find meaning in what they do. Those human dimensions are not peripheral to performance; they are fundamental to it. As this research makes clear, automating tasks does not necessarily improve the performance of the wider system, and outcomes depend on the choices organisations make about how work is designed.

Ultimately, this begins with choice: what work needs to be done, how it should be done, and the optimal combination of people and machines. That is the real opportunity-and the real responsibility.

MARSH



KEY TAKEAWAYS

AI creates an opportunity to redesign work, not simply automate tasks. While GenAI can lead to improvements in individual productivity, this does not necessarily translate into better organisational performance. Realising the full benefits of AI requires organisations to rethink how tasks are combined into jobs, how responsibilities are distributed and how people work with one another and with technology.

AI could result in jobs that are more productive and meaningful. Equally, it could leave employees with less autonomy, greater job demands and fewer opportunities to develop. Improvements in organisational productivity do not necessarily go hand in hand with improvements in the quality of work. Which of these outcomes emerges depends on the choices organisations make about how work is designed.

Professor Sharon Parker's SMART work design framework synthesises decades of research into the characteristics of work that support employee motivation, performance, learning and wellbeing. It provides an evidence-based framework for evaluating how different options for automation and augmentation might affect the quality of work. Parker's research identifies five overarching dimensions of good work:

1. **Stimulating**
2. **Mastery**
3. **Agency**
4. **Relational**
5. **Tolerable**

The five dimensions provide a framework for evaluating different approaches to AI implementation against a consistent set of criteria. SMART also provides a shared language for HR, operational and technology leaders to discuss the human consequences of AI implementation. The objective of work design is not to maximise each dimension individually, but to identify the most suitable design that supports both organisational effectiveness and high-quality, sustainable work.

The following seven principles can help organisations translate work design thinking into practice when redesigning work with AI:

1. **Start with the work, not the technology.** Adopt a sociotechnical systems approach that starts with desired organisational and employee outcomes and considers how people, technology and work processes can best be combined to deliver them.

2. **Understand how work is actually performed,** looking beyond formal job descriptions to uncover the informal activities, relationships and interdependencies on which effective performance depends.

3. **Use a structured, participatory redesign process,** such as Parker's PARRRTH approach, which takes organisations from diagnosis and redesign through to implementation, evaluation and embedding new ways of working.

4. **Develop alternative options for combining human and AI work** and use SMART alongside criteria for organisational effectiveness to evaluate these options.

5. **Align the wider organisation,** including performance criteria, people policies and leader behaviours, to support the new design.

6. **Involve employees throughout the redesign process,** recognising that they are a key source of design intelligence, not simply recipients of change.

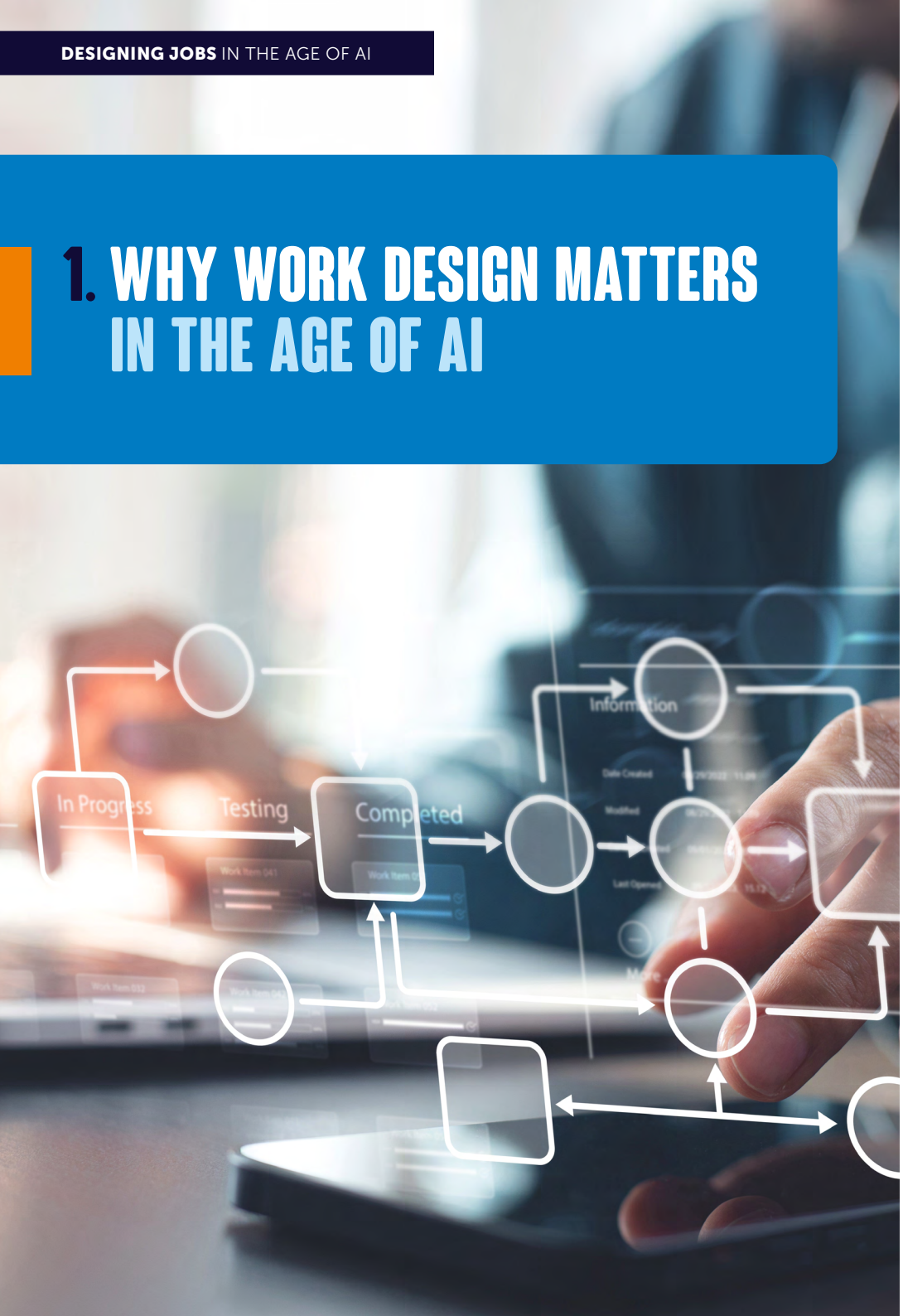
7. **Measure outcomes** for both organisational performance and the quality of human work, establishing baselines and continuing to experiment, learn and adapt as new work designs become embedded.

The implementation of AI is an opportunity for HR to play a more strategic role in shaping how work is organised and to influence decisions about technology adoption, ensuring they are informed by a deep understanding of people and work. This means:

- Ensuring work design choices are proactively considered from the outset, before decisions about technology selection and implementation constrain the options available.
- Working alongside technology and operational leaders to bring work design thinking and expertise into the design and procurement of technology solutions.
- Aligning wider people policies and practices, including performance management, incentives and development, to support effective work redesign.
- Developing work design capabilities, both within HR and among managers and employees, rather than focusing exclusively on equipping people with the skills to use AI.



1. WHY WORK DESIGN MATTERS IN THE AGE OF AI



AI creates an opportunity to redesign work, not simply automate tasks

Since the launch of ChatGPT in 2022, the use of generative AI in the workplace has snowballed. According to the Office for National Statistics, 51% of UK businesses with 250 or more employees were using AI technologies by September 2026 compared with 19% three years earlier. Similar trends are seen across the globe.

Much of the debate about generative AI and its impact on the workforce has focused on which jobs are most exposed to automation, how many roles might disappear, and what new skills employees will need. These are important questions, but more fundamentally organisations must address how work itself should be redesigned as AI becomes embedded in organisations.

Emerging research shows the potential of generative AI to increase individual productivity and decrease time to productivity for less experienced workers (e.g., Brynjolfsson et al. (2025), Dell'Acqua et al. (2026), Noy and Zhang (2023)).

However, improvements in individual performance do not necessarily equate to an increase in organisational productivity. For example, a company introduces an AI tool which means that recruiters can screen twice as many candidates per week as they could manually – a 100% productivity improvement. However, the organisation doesn't change its interview or approval processes and hiring managers still have limited time to interview candidates. Consequently, candidates wait longer for decisions, and some withdraw. The overall time to fill vacancies increases. Individual productivity has increased but organisational productivity hasn't improved. The bottleneck has simply moved elsewhere in the system.

Automating tasks does not necessarily improve the performance of the whole system

AI presents organisations with choices that go well beyond deciding which activities can be performed more efficiently by machines. It creates opportunities to reconsider how tasks are combined into jobs, how responsibilities are distributed, where decisions are made, and how people collaborate with one another and with technology. The

resulting changes could make jobs more productive and meaningful. Equally, they could leave employees with reduced autonomy, greater work intensity and fewer opportunities to develop their capabilities.

Which of these outcomes emerges will depend on the decisions organisations make about how work is designed.

The distinction between jobs and tasks is fundamental to understanding these choices. As economist David Autor (2015) explains, jobs comprise bundles of tasks, and technological advances rarely affect every task within an occupation equally. Automation therefore does not necessarily eliminate entire jobs; it changes the combination of activities that people perform.

This distinction is particularly important in the context of generative AI, which can perform or support a wide range of cognitive activities previously considered the preserve of human workers. AI may take over specific elements of a role, such as information retrieval or routine analysis, while leaving other activities dependent on human judgement, interpersonal skills and contextual understanding.

AI can affect work in many ways, for example removing routine tasks, freeing employees to concentrate on more complex, valuable work. Automation may strip away the more straightforward tasks through which employees build expertise, leaving them with a narrower range of activities or a disproportionately demanding workload. AI may also introduce entirely new responsibilities, including supervising agents, handling exceptions and managing the consequences of errors.

These outcomes are not inevitable consequences of technology adoption. They reflect choices about how tasks are allocated, combined and coordinated. Whether AI broadens access to expertise or concentrates control and decision-making in fewer hands will depend on how organisations deploy it.

Moving from job design to work design

Using the job as the unit of analysis is familiar territory for HR. However, this report adopts the broader perspective of work design. Parker (2014) defines work design as the *content and organisation of tasks, activities, relationships and responsibilities within a job or role, or across a set of jobs and roles*.

This broader perspective is particularly valuable when considering AI. Technological change may begin with individual tasks, but its consequences extend beyond the boundaries of existing jobs. Automating one activity can change the knowledge, decisions and relationships required to perform others. It may alter the way work moves between teams, the extent to which employees can exercise judgement, and how responsibility for outcomes is assigned.

Effective redesign therefore requires organisations to consider not only which tasks should be allocated to humans or AI, but how the wider system of work should function.

Even where organisational productivity increases, the quality of human work may deteriorate

AI can create opportunities to redesign work but does not determine the quality of the jobs that result. As Maisch et al. (2026), Jooss et al. (2026) and Bakker et al. (2026) have suggested, depending on how it is implemented, AI could increase or decrease the quality of work. Organisations therefore need to understand the characteristics of jobs that support motivation, learning, wellbeing and sustained performance and apply these principles as they redesign work.

For example, in customer service, AI may be able to handle routine enquiries, retrieve account information and provide standard responses. Automating these activities could improve efficiency and allow employees to concentrate on more complex cases. However, the resulting human role may become considerably more demanding as employees deal almost exclusively with dissatisfied customers, unusual problems and situations requiring difficult judgements. It could also remove opportunities for individuals to develop their knowledge progressively.

Organisations need to design for both organisational effectiveness and high-quality work

A sociotechnical approach, which looks across the broader design of work, can help organisations address productivity and work quality challenges simultaneously. Sociotechnical thinking recognises that organisational performance depends on the interaction between social elements such as people, skills, relationships and work organisation and technical elements including tools, systems and processes. These elements need to be designed together rather than optimised independently.

This requires organisations to ask a different set of questions. Rather than focusing exclusively on what AI can do, they need to consider how human and technological capabilities can best complement one another, and what conditions are necessary for the resulting work to be effective and sustainable.

Why this matters for HR

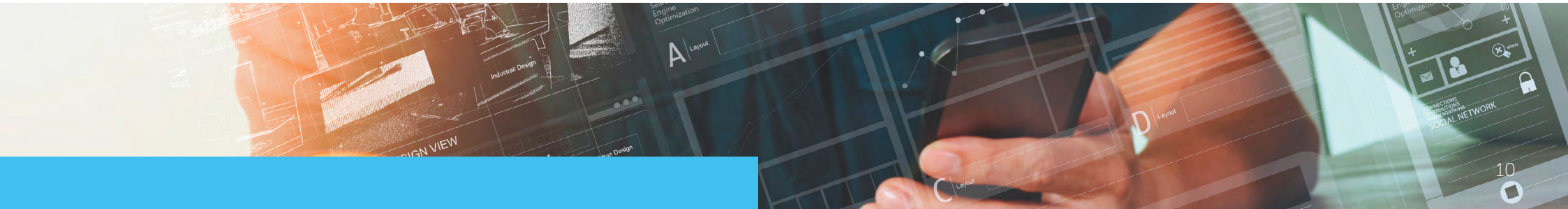
In many organisations, decisions about AI investment and deployment are led primarily by technology, operations or finance functions, with HR only becoming involved once implementation decisions have been made. However, by the time a technology has been selected, many of the most consequential work design choices may effectively have already been made. We argue HR needs to adopt a more proactive role, with full involvement earlier in the process when organisations are defining the objectives of AI adoption and considering the implications for how work is organised.

Parker and Grote (2022) propose that work design should play a central role in technology adoption. They identify four key intervention strategies that provide a call to action for HR:

1. **Work design choices need to be proactively considered when introducing technology.** Efficiency and cost reduction goals need to be weighed against considerations such as service quality, employee capability and wellbeing.
2. **Incorporate human-centred principles into technology design and procurement.** HR should work alongside technology specialists, operational leaders and employees to understand how work is actually performed, where difficulties arise, and how different configurations of human and AI activity might affect outcomes.
3. **Support organisational interventions through wider policies,** such as aligning performance management and incentives.
4. **Develop work design capabilities, rather than concentrating exclusively on employee upskilling.** Employees and managers need to develop the ability to recognise how technology changes the characteristics of work, identify potential risks and opportunities, and participate in redesigning roles and workflows.

The objective is not for HR to take sole ownership of AI implementation, but to ensure decisions about technology are informed by a deep understanding of people and work.

This report sets out what work design looks like in practice. It starts with Professor Sharon Parker's SMART work design model as a framework for evaluating how AI might improve – or undermine – the quality of work. It then considers how the model can be practically applied to redesign work.





2. EFFECTIVE WORK DESIGN: THE SMART MODEL

In this chapter we set out the SMART model – an evidence-based framework which can be used to assess the quality of jobs, identify opportunities for improvement and evaluate alternative work designs.

Decades of research have established that the design of jobs has important consequences for employee motivation, performance, learning and wellbeing. Good work design influences whether employees can use and develop their capabilities, exercise judgement, work effectively with others and sustain high performance over time.

Professor Sharon Parker's SMART model offers a way of bringing this evidence together into a practical framework for understanding what constitutes good work.

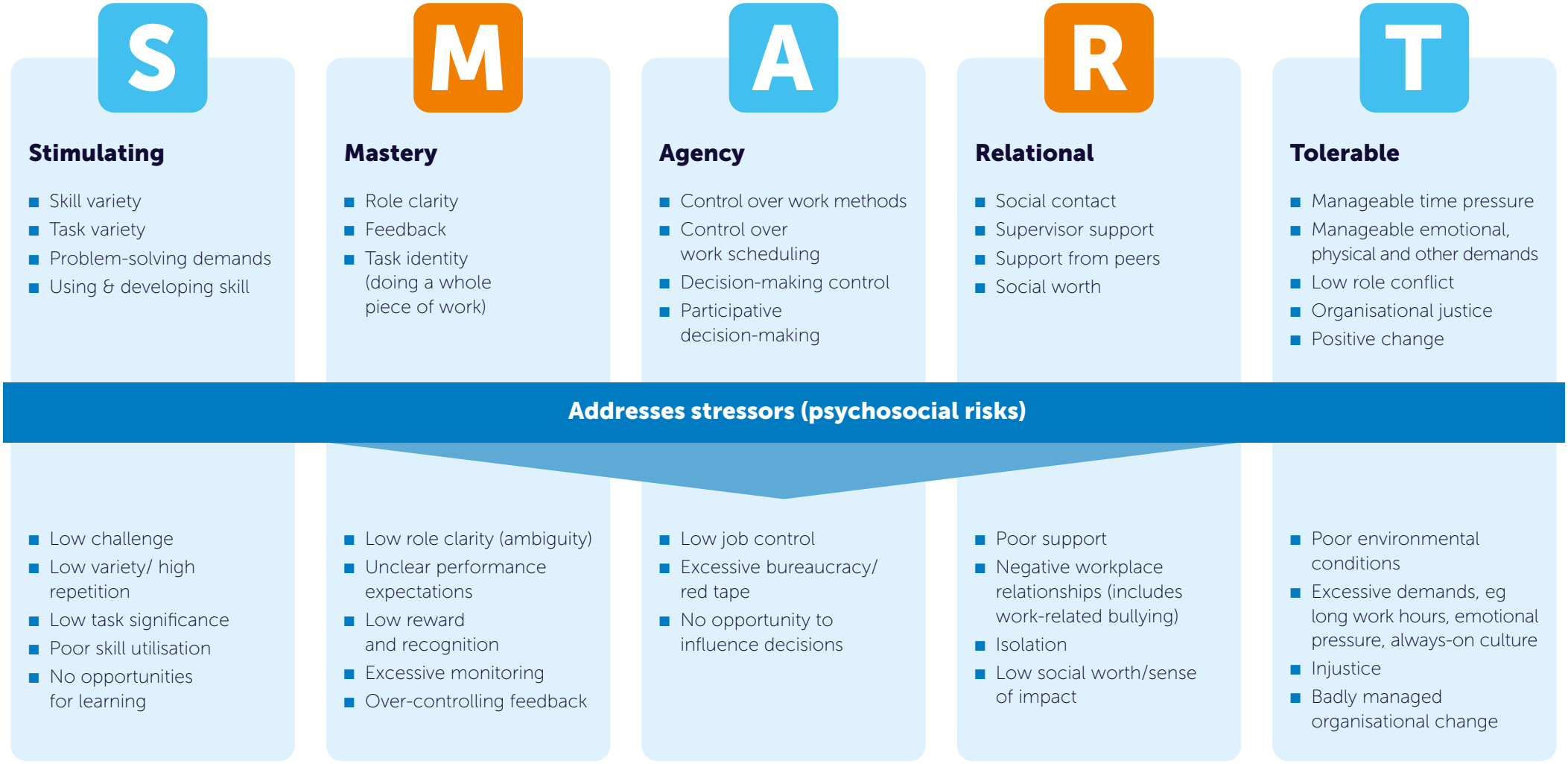
The SMART model of work design

The SMART model identifies five overarching dimensions of high-quality work: Stimulating, Mastery, Agency, Relational and Tolerable. The table below provides definitions for each dimension:

Dimension	Definition
Stimulating	High degree of mental complexity and variety due to the nature and organisation of one's work tasks, activities, responsibilities and relationships.
Mastery	Work is organised in a way that one can understand what one's tasks, activities and responsibilities are, how they fit in the system and how well they are being executed.
Agency	High degree of autonomy, control and influence over one's work tasks, activities, responsibilities and relationships.
Relational	High degree of support, connection and the opportunity to positively impact others, arising from one's work tasks, activities, responsibilities and relationships.
Tolerable	Low degree of costly quantitative demands arising from one's work tasks, activities, responsibilities and relationships.

Source: Parker and Knight (2024)

The five dimensions can be further subdivided as shown in the diagram below, which shows the work characteristics studied by Parker and Knight and the psychosocial risks they can help organisations address.



Source: Professor Sharon Parker, Centre for Transformative Work Design

SMART builds on established work design models, such as Hackman and Oldham's (1976) Job Characteristics Model. It is also supported by empirical research. Parker and Knight (2024) validated SMART's five-factor structure and found that all five dimensions predicted subsequent job satisfaction. The dimensions were also correlated with different aspects of job performance, including core task, proactive and adaptive performance. The findings support SMART as a practical, evidence-based framework for assessing work quality.

Applying SMART to AI-enabled work

SMART is not specifically a framework for designing AI-enabled work. However, it provides an evidence-based definition of good work against which the consequences of AI adoption can be evaluated. Organisations can use it to examine how different options for automation or augmentation affect the job characteristics that matter for employee satisfaction and organisational performance.

Below we set out how AI might impact each of the five dimensions with diagnostic questions which HR practitioners can use to evaluate work design options. This section builds on recent research by Jooss et al. (2026) and Bakker et al. (2026) which examine the impact of AI in different work contexts.

Stimulating

– work that offers variety, challenge and opportunities to develop skills

Stimulating work involves a variety of tasks and skills, opportunities to solve problems and the need to process information. These characteristics help make work interesting and meaningful, encouraging employees to engage with challenging activities and develop their capabilities.

The balance of challenge is important. Work that is excessively repetitive or requires little use of employees' skills can undermine motivation. Equally, work that is intellectually demanding without sufficient resources or support may become overwhelming.

AI has considerable potential to change how stimulating work is. By automating routine information gathering, documentation and administration, it could free employees to concentrate on more challenging activities requiring judgement, creativity and problem-solving. It may also enable employees to undertake tasks that previously required specialist expertise, broadening the scope of their roles.

However, the opposite outcome is equally possible. If AI performs the most cognitively demanding parts of a role, employees may be left checking outputs, monitoring systems or dealing with a narrower range of activities. Their work may become less intellectually engaging, even if it is more efficient.

There are also implications for learning. Activities that appear repetitive to experienced employees may provide essential opportunities for less experienced workers to build knowledge and judgement. Automating these activities could remove important steps in the development of expertise.

For HR, the challenge is to ensure that AI-enabled roles retain sufficient variety, challenge and opportunities to develop skills. This may involve deliberately preserving learning activities, expanding responsibilities or designing new opportunities for employees to practise judgement rather than simply accept AI-generated answers.

Diagnostic questions

- Which activities will AI remove, and which will remain? Will the resulting job be more or less varied and challenging?
- Will employees continue to use and develop important skills, or become increasingly dependent on AI?
- How will less experienced employees acquire the knowledge and judgement needed for more complex work?

Mastery

– work that provides clarity, feedback and a sense of competence

Mastery concerns employees' ability to understand their responsibilities, know what good performance looks like and receive feedback on how well they are doing. It contributes to a sense of competence and helps employees learn from experience.

Clear expectations and useful feedback are particularly important in complex or changing environments. Without them, employees may struggle to prioritise their activities, understand their contribution or identify opportunities to improve.

AI could strengthen Mastery by providing timely feedback, helping employees identify mistakes and making relevant information more accessible. It may also enable people to take responsibility for more complete pieces of work, reducing the administrative effort involved in coordinating activities.

However, AI can undermine Mastery if responsibilities become fragmented or accountability becomes unclear. When work is divided between employees and AI systems, it may be difficult to establish who is responsible for decisions, how performance should be evaluated and what employees are expected to understand or check.

For example, an employee who previously managed a customer problem from beginning to end may instead be responsible for reviewing isolated exceptions identified by an AI system. Although these exceptions may require considerable skill, the employee may have less visibility of the overall outcome and fewer opportunities to learn from the consequences of their actions.

HR practitioners should therefore consider how AI changes role clarity, accountability and feedback. Employees need to understand where their responsibilities begin and end, how their work contributes to wider outcomes and how they can assess whether they are performing effectively.

Diagnostic questions

- Are responsibilities and accountabilities clear when tasks and decisions are shared between employees and AI?
- Can employees see the results of their work and receive meaningful feedback on their performance?
- Does the redesigned job allow employees to take ownership of complete pieces of work, or does it fragment their responsibilities?

Agency

– work that provides autonomy and control

Agency refers to the extent to which employees can influence how they perform their work, organise their activities and make decisions. Research has consistently linked autonomy with motivation and job satisfaction. Parker and Knight (2024) also found positive associations between Agency and managers' ratings of both core task performance and proactive behaviour.

AI could increase Agency by providing employees with better information, reducing administrative constraints and enabling more independent decision-making. For example, an employee supported by AI analysis may be able to resolve problems without referring them to specialists or seeking multiple layers of approval.

However, AI may also reduce discretion. Algorithmic systems can determine which tasks employees undertake, prescribe how they should be performed, recommend decisions and monitor performance in considerable detail. Employees may formally retain responsibility for outcomes while having little practical authority to question or override AI recommendations.

This raises an important distinction between AI as a tool that supports human judgement and AI as a system that effectively directs employees' activities.

A recent experimental study (Maisch et al., 2026) of large language model use found that requiring AI use reduced participants' perceived decision-making autonomy while also reducing perceived role overload. Allowing voluntary use appeared to mitigate some of the negative effects. This study illustrates how the way AI is introduced can affect employees' experience of control.

For HR, Agency raises questions about decision rights, the scope for professional judgement and employee involvement in designing AI-enabled workflows. It is not sufficient to retain nominal human oversight if employees lack the information, authority or confidence to challenge AI outputs.

Diagnostic questions

- Does AI increase or reduce employees' control over how they organise and perform their work?
- Can employees question, modify or override AI recommendations, and do they have the authority to act on their judgement?
- Are employees involved in decisions about how AI is introduced and used in their roles?

Relational

– work that provides connection, support and social value

The relational dimension recognises that work is fundamentally social. High-quality work provides opportunities to build positive relationships, receive support and understand how one's contribution benefits other people.

These characteristics matter for motivation, learning, job satisfaction and wellbeing. Relationships provide access to knowledge, feedback and assistance, while seeing the impact of one's work can strengthen its meaning and purpose.

AI could improve relational aspects of work by removing administrative tasks and allowing employees to spend more time engaging with colleagues or customers. It may also make specialist knowledge more accessible and support collaboration across organisational boundaries.

However, automation can reduce opportunities for human interaction, particularly where employees increasingly work through technological interfaces rather than directly with others. Informal exchanges through which people build trust, share knowledge and learn from colleagues may diminish.

AI can also change the nature of human interactions. In customer service, for example, employees may increasingly handle only the most difficult or emotionally charged conversations, while losing the more straightforward and positive interactions that previously formed part of their jobs.

HR practitioners therefore need to consider not only how frequently employees interact with others, but the quality and purpose of those interactions. The objective should be to preserve opportunities for collaboration, support and meaningful relationships, even as technology changes how work is performed.

Diagnostic questions

- How will AI change opportunities for employees to interact with colleagues, customers and others who benefit from their work?
- Will employees continue to have access to the support and informal learning that comes from working with others?
- Can employees still see how their work contributes to outcomes that matter to other people?

Tolerable

– work with manageable and sustainable demands

Tolerable work involves demands that employees can reasonably manage without excessive strain. This includes avoiding role overload, conflicting expectations and excessive interference between work and home life.

This does not mean eliminating challenge or pressure. Demanding work can be rewarding when employees have sufficient control, support and resources. Problems arise when demands are excessive, contradictory or sustained beyond employees' capacity to manage them.

AI could make work more tolerable by reducing administrative burdens, repetitive activities and time pressure. It may help employees manage information, prioritise tasks and complete work more efficiently.

However, productivity improvements can also encourage organisations to increase expectations and workloads. If AI enables employees to complete activities more quickly, the time saved may simply be filled with additional work. For example, Jiang et al. (2025) found that workers in occupations with greater AI exposure tended to work longer hours and spend less time on leisure.

Automation may also concentrate demanding activities in human roles. Employees could find themselves dealing almost exclusively with complex exceptions, dissatisfied customers or difficult judgements. New responsibilities for checking AI outputs, identifying errors and managing failures may create additional cognitive demands.

Bakker et al. (2026) highlight how AI can simultaneously alter job demands and the resources available to employees. This suggests that organisations need to consider the net effect of AI on workload and wellbeing rather than assuming that removing tasks necessarily reduces demands.

For HR, the priority is to assess whether the resulting workloads and expectations are sustainable. This includes examining how productivity targets are adjusted, whether employees have sufficient resources to manage complex cases and whether responsibility for AI-related errors is clear.

Diagnostic questions

- Does AI genuinely reduce workload and pressure, or are employees simply expected to produce more?
- Will the remaining work be disproportionately complex, emotionally demanding or difficult to manage?
- Are employees given sufficient time, support and resources to check AI outputs, handle exceptions and manage errors?

The following table summarises the potential positive and negative impact of AI on each of the five dimensions and diagnostic questions to assess the effects in specific work situations.

SMART dimension	Potential positive effects of AI	Potential negative effects of AI	Diagnostic questions for HR
Stimulating	■ Removes routine tasks, freeing time for more challenging work. ■ Broadens opportunities to use and develop skills.	■ Narrows roles to monitoring and checking AI outputs. ■ Removes opportunities to develop expertise and judgement.	■ Will work become more or less varied and challenging? ■ Will employees continue to use and develop important skills? ■ How will less experienced employees build expertise?
Mastery	■ Provides timely feedback and helps identify errors. ■ Enables ownership of more complete pieces of work.	■ Blurs responsibilities and accountability. ■ Fragments work, reducing visibility of outcomes and opportunities to learn.	■ Are human and AI responsibilities clear? ■ Can employees see outcomes and receive meaningful feedback? ■ Can employees take ownership of complete pieces of work?
Agency	■ Improves access to information and supports independent decisions. ■ Reduces administrative constraints and approval requirements.	■ Prescribes tasks, decisions and working methods. ■ Reduces discretion and ability to challenge AI recommendations.	■ Does AI increase or reduce employee control? ■ Can employees challenge or override AI recommendations? ■ Are employees involved in decisions about AI implementation?
Relational	■ Frees time for meaningful human interaction. ■ Improves access to expertise and supports collaboration.	■ Reduces social interaction and informal learning. ■ Concentrates difficult or emotionally demanding interactions.	■ How will opportunities for human interaction change? ■ Will employees retain access to support and informal learning? ■ Can employees see the value their work creates for others?
Tolerable	■ Reduces administrative burden and time pressure. ■ Helps employees manage information and prioritise work.	■ Increases workload and performance expectations. ■ Concentrates complex work and adds demands from checking AI outputs.	■ Does AI reduce workload or simply raise expectations? ■ Will remaining work become more demanding? ■ Are there sufficient resources to manage exceptions and errors?

Using SMART to evaluate AI-enabled work

The five dimensions provide a way to evaluate different approaches to AI implementation against a consistent set of criteria. They also highlight why there is no single optimal way to divide work between humans and technology.

Consider a customer service organisation introducing AI. One option is to automate as many interactions as possible, leaving employees to handle exceptions. Another is to retain human ownership of customer problems while using AI to support information retrieval, analysis and documentation.

Both approaches may improve efficiency, but they could produce very different work design outcomes. The first might reduce task variety and autonomy while concentrating emotional demands. The second could preserve opportunities for problem-solving, learning, decision-making and customer relationships, although it might also create excessive workloads if employees are responsible for too many cases.

SMART helps organisations make these differences visible before decisions are made. It also highlights the trade-offs involved. Removing routine tasks may reduce workload but diminish opportunities to develop expertise. AI-generated recommendations may improve decision quality but reduce independent judgement. Greater responsibility for complete pieces of work may strengthen Agency and Mastery while making demands less Tolerable.

The five dimensions should therefore be considered together. The objective is not to maximise every characteristic independently, but to achieve an appropriate balance that supports both organisational effectiveness and sustainable, high-quality work.

For HR, the model offers three practical benefits.

- It provides a shared language for discussing the human consequences of technology decisions with operational and technology colleagues.
- It can be used diagnostically to identify where existing jobs are poorly designed or where proposed changes create risks.
- It provides a basis for evaluating whether redesign has improved work quality alongside more conventional measures of productivity, cost and service quality.

The next chapter considers how organisations can translate these principles into practice through a participatory, sociotechnical approach to work redesign.



3. PUTTING WORK DESIGN INTO PRACTICE WITH AI



This chapter considers how organisations can translate the principles of SMART work design into practice when redesigning work with AI.

Introducing AI is not simply a question of identifying tasks that technology can perform and reallocating the remaining work to employees. It requires organisations to reconsider how work is organised, how people and technology interact and how the resulting arrangements support organisational performance and high-quality work.

The chapter sets out seven principles for putting these ideas into practice.

1 Start with the work, not the technology

Organisations comprise interacting social and technical systems. Optimising one element in isolation does not necessarily improve the performance of the whole. This is the risk of adopting a technology-led approach, which starts by identifying what AI can do and then considers how existing jobs and processes should change to accommodate it.

A better way is to take a sociotechnical systems approach which starts with the outcomes the organisation wants to achieve and considers how people, technology and work processes can best be combined to deliver them.

For example, a customer service organisation might introduce AI with the objective of reducing the number of enquiries handled by employees. If successful, the technology may reduce costs and improve response times. However, it could also leave employees handling a disproportionately high number of difficult cases, reduce opportunities to develop expertise and create problems when customers move between AI and human agents.

A sociotechnical approach would begin with a broader set of objectives: improving customer outcomes, reducing unnecessary work, increasing productivity and creating sustainable, high-quality jobs. It would then explore different ways of achieving those objectives through combinations of human and AI activity. This is important because decisions about technology can constrain subsequent work design choices. Once an organisation has committed to a particular system, workflow or operating model, it may be difficult or expensive to change how work is allocated or decisions are made.

HR therefore needs to be involved before technology choices become fixed, working alongside operational leaders, technology specialists and employees to define what successful implementation should look like.

2 Understand how work is actually performed

Effective redesign depends on an accurate understanding of existing work. However, formal job descriptions, organisation charts and process maps rarely capture everything employees do.

Parker distinguishes between a *job*, comprising the formal tasks and responsibilities associated with a position, and a *role*, which includes the wider range of activities that individuals undertake in practice which often rely on informal relationships to solve problems across organisational boundaries.

Narrowly focusing on job descriptions and organisation charts while overlooking relationships and informal responsibilities is a risk for AI work redesign. Tools that analyse job descriptions or break occupations into tasks can provide useful starting points, but they cannot necessarily reveal how work is performed in practice or how activities depend on one another.

Organisations therefore need to understand work at several levels: the activities individuals perform, how tasks are combined into roles, how work moves between people and teams, and the organisational arrangements that support or constrain performance.

This requires combining different sources of evidence. Task and process analysis can help identify activities and interdependencies. Employee interviews, observation and workshops can reveal informal work, adaptations and sources of difficulty. Performance data, customer feedback and employee surveys can provide additional perspectives.

Therefore, before redesigning work, organisations should establish a sufficiently detailed picture of how it currently operates. In particular, they should understand:

- What employees actually do, including activities outside their formal job descriptions.
- Where work depends on informal knowledge, relationships and coordination.
- Which activities contribute to learning, judgement and capability development.
- Where employees experience bottlenecks, duplication, conflicting demands or unnecessary constraints.
- Which aspects of existing work should be preserved or improved.

This understanding makes it possible to assess not only what AI could replace, but what might be lost or changed as a consequence.



3 Use a structured, participatory redesign process

Work redesign is more likely to succeed when it is treated as a deliberate process rather than a series of isolated technology or workforce decisions. Parker (2025) has developed a participatory approach known as PARRRTH, which provides a structured process for diagnosing work design problems, developing solutions, implementing changes and sustaining improvements.

PARRRTH: A pathway to work redesign

Stage	Purpose	Application to AI-enabled work
Prepare	Establish objectives, sponsorship, stakeholders and resources	Define desired outcomes and establish a cross-functional team
Assess	Understand existing work and identify strengths and problems	Map tasks, workflows, interdependencies and SMART characteristics
Reflect	Interpret the evidence and identify priorities	Determine where AI creates opportunities or work design risks
Redesign	Generate, evaluate and select alternative solutions	Explore different allocations of tasks, decisions and responsibilities between people and AI
Realise	Translate proposals into action and establish accountability	Assign responsibilities, resources and implementation milestones
Track	Evaluate whether changes achieve their intended outcomes	Measure productivity, service quality, work characteristics and employee outcomes
Habituate	Embed improvements into everyday organisational practices	Align leadership, performance management, recruitment and development with the new design

Source: Adapted from Professor Sharon Parker's PARRRTH approach, presented at CRF's Designing Jobs in the Age of AI event, November 2026.

Several features of this approach are particularly important.

- **Assessment precedes redesign.** Organisations need to understand the causes of work design problems before deciding how to address them.
- **Redesign involves generating alternatives rather than immediately selecting an apparently obvious solution.** Parker describes this as a divergent process, in which different possibilities are explored, followed by a convergent process in which options are evaluated and choices made.
- **Implementation requires explicit accountability.** Parker added the *Realise* stage to her original model after observing that participatory redesign projects could generate promising action plans without sufficient follow-through. Employees and managers may struggle to implement changes unless time, resources and responsibility are clearly allocated.
- **Work redesign is not a one-off exercise.** Tracking outcomes and adapting the design are essential, particularly when AI capabilities and patterns of use are changing rapidly.

4 Explore alternative ways of combining human and AI work

Decisions about how to allocate activities between people and technology should not be reduced to a binary choice between automation and augmentation. There are often several ways of configuring work, each with different implications for efficiency, service quality, employee experience and capability development.

For example, in customer service, AI could be adopted in multiple ways:

Option 1: AI handles routine enquiries, employees handle exceptions.
May reduce cost and improve response times for straightforward cases but employees may lose opportunities to develop expertise through routine interactions.

Option 2: AI triages enquiries and allocates work to employees.
This could improve the matching of cases to expertise but reduce employee discretion.

Option 3: Employees retain responsibility for decisions, supported by AI.
AI could retrieve information and suggest responses while employees retain decision-making authority. This could preserve Agency and opportunities for learning, provided employees have the knowledge and authority to challenge AI outputs.

Option 4: Employees retain end-to-end ownership of customer cases, with AI supporting delivery.
This could strengthen Mastery through deeper customer relationships and accountability for outcomes but may increase the complexity of individual roles and require changes to scheduling and workload management.

These alternatives illustrate why work design cannot be determined solely by technical feasibility. The same technology can support very different operating models and employee experiences.

Use SMART to evaluate alternatives

The SMART model provides a consistent basis for comparing different designs. For each option, organisations can consider whether the resulting work would be sufficiently stimulating, provide clarity and feedback, preserve meaningful autonomy, support relationships and create manageable demands.

The dimensions need to be considered together. For example, giving employees end-to-end ownership of customer cases may improve Mastery and Agency, but it could also increase demands if employees have responsibility for too many cases. Automating routine tasks may reduce workload while removing opportunities to develop expertise.

An important consideration is how employees develop the expertise required to exercise judgement over AI outputs. If AI undertakes tasks through which less experienced employees traditionally acquire knowledge, organisations may need to create alternative opportunities for practice, feedback and learning. AI may enable new entrants to perform some activities more quickly, but organisations must consider whether they are developing the understanding needed to evaluate outputs, recognise errors and handle unfamiliar situations independently.

5 Align the wider organisation to support the new design

Changing how tasks are allocated does not necessarily change how work is experienced. The quality of work also depends on leadership behaviours, organisational policies, performance measures, technology, culture and the opportunities employees have to influence their roles.

Parker identifies four complementary strategies for creating better work: employee job crafting, everyday leader actions, work redesign and organisational alignment.

These operate at different levels and reinforce one another.

- **Job crafting** (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) involves employees proactively adapting aspects of their work such as changing how tasks are performed or taking on additional responsibilities. In an AI-enabled workplace, employees may identify opportunities to use AI to reduce administrative work or take on more challenging activities. However, job crafting has limits. Where work is tightly controlled by systems, targets or prescribed processes, employees may have little opportunity to influence their jobs.
- **Everyday leader actions** shape employees' experience of work through delegation, feedback and support. A manager who encourages employees to question AI recommendations and exercise judgement may help preserve Agency. A manager who uses AI-generated performance data to monitor employees more closely may have the opposite effect.
- **Work redesign** involves more fundamental changes to how tasks, responsibilities and relationships are organised. Unlike improvements that depend on an individual manager's behaviour, structural changes can become embedded in the operating model.
- **Organisational alignment** ensures that wider policies and practices reinforce the intended design. Performance management, incentives, recruitment, development and technology governance can either support or undermine changes to work. The broader lesson is that organisations need to examine whether their management systems reward the behaviours they are trying to create.

6 Involve employees as partners in redesign

Employee participation is a core principle of Parker's approach. People who perform the work possess knowledge that may not be available to managers, technology specialists or external consultants. Parker describes employees as a source of *design intelligence*. Their contribution is not simply a matter of consultation or gaining acceptance for decisions already made. It is essential to developing better solutions.

This becomes particularly important with AI because technology decisions can be made by specialists who have limited direct experience of the work being changed.

For example, a technically feasible solution might automate a particular activity without recognising that it provides opportunities for learning, customer contact or informal coordination. Employees may identify these consequences and propose alternatives that preserve important features of the work.

However, participation needs to be meaningful. Asking employees for views after technology and workforce decisions have already been finalised is unlikely to generate the same benefits as involving them in defining problems, exploring alternatives and testing solutions.

Employee involvement should continue through implementation and evaluation. Employees are often well placed to identify unintended consequences, workarounds and opportunities for further improvement once new arrangements are in use.

7 Measure outcomes, learn and adapt

The final principle is to treat work redesign as an ongoing process of experimentation, evaluation and improvement. This is particularly important with AI as technological capabilities evolve and employees develop new ways of using tools.

AI might initially reduce the time required to complete certain tasks, but over time employees may need to spend more time checking outputs or handling exceptions. Similarly, employees may initially welcome the removal of routine activities but subsequently find that their roles have become less varied, more demanding or less supportive of learning. These consequences need to be identified and addressed rather than treated as unavoidable side effects of technology adoption.

What should organisations measure?

Evaluation should cover both organisational effectiveness and the quality of human work.

Organisational outcomes	Employee and work design outcomes
Productivity and cost	SMART work characteristics
Customer satisfaction and service quality	Job satisfaction and engagement
Quality, accuracy and error rates	Workload, stress and wellbeing
Speed and reliability of processes	Learning and capability development
Innovation and adaptability	Employee autonomy and opportunities to exercise judgement
Workforce capacity and retention	Role clarity, collaboration and support

Organisations should establish baseline measures before introducing changes and track results over time. Where feasible, pilots or comparison groups can help distinguish the effects of redesign from other changes taking place.



CONCLUSION: WHAT THIS MEANS FOR HR

AI creates an opportunity for HR to take a more strategic role in shaping how work is organised and to help influence those decisions from the outset.

This requires HR to develop expertise in work design and to work more closely with operations, technology and business leaders. It also requires a shift in emphasis from managing individual jobs towards understanding how tasks, responsibilities, decisions and relationships operate across the wider system of work.

Implications for HR:

- First, HR should ensure that AI implementation begins with a clear understanding of the outcomes organisations are trying to achieve, including the quality of the work that will result.
- Second, HR should help organisations develop the capability to diagnose existing work, explore alternative designs and assess their implications using evidence-based frameworks such as SMART.
- Third, HR should bring in work design as part of the success criteria for AI projects.
- Fourth, HR should establish ways of involving employees and managers in redesign, drawing on their knowledge of how work is actually performed.
- Finally, it should ensure that changes to work are supported by the wider organisational environment and evaluated against both employee and organisational outcomes.

The central message of this report is that AI does not determine how work will be designed. Organisations make those choices.

The opportunity is not simply to use AI to perform existing tasks more efficiently, but to reconsider how work can be organised to achieve better outcomes for employees, customers and organisations. Realising that opportunity requires work design to become a deliberate part of AI strategy and implementation.

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