THE OPERATING MODEL HR WAS BUILT FOR IS DISAPPEARING

Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez suggests that AI is exposing a deeper organisational problem: companies still manage people through stable roles and hierarchy while more value is created through temporary, cross-functional projects.



THE ARGUMENT

"The future of work is project-based."

Organisations are designed around repeatable operations, but more of the work that determines their future now takes the form of temporary, cross-functional initiatives. The challenge for HR is to make talent as mobile as strategy.

BY HR WEEK EDITORIAL

Ideas by Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez

HR WEEK Warsaw / 3 March 2026

THE ARGUMENT

The operating model has changed. The organisation has not.

The tension between stable operations and temporary projects is becoming the defining design problem for HR.

Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez suggests that the future of work is project-based. The claim is not that routine work will disappear. It is that a growing share of the work that determines an organisation's future now arrives as a temporary effort: launching a product, redesigning a customer journey, integrating an acquisition, adopting AI, or changing how the business operates.

Most organisations, however, were built for a different kind of work. Their structures assume repeatability, defined roles, stable reporting lines, and decisions that travel through hierarchy. These mechanisms are well suited to running today's business. They are far less effective when the task is uncertain, cross-functional, and urgent.

The result is a two-speed organisation. Employees retain a day job inside the formal structure while also being assigned to projects intended to change that structure. When priorities collide, operational work usually wins because it is visible, measured, and reinforced by the manager who controls the employee's career.

That creates double accountability without a corresponding release of capacity. The employee is expected to protect this month's performance while building next year's capability. A delayed operational task is immediately visible; a delayed project is often absorbed into a revised plan. The system therefore teaches people which work really counts, regardless of what the strategy says.

AI makes this tension harder to ignore. For decades, management methods such as total quality management, business process reengineering, Six Sigma, and enterprise software have reduced variation in operations. AI continues that trajectory by taking on more routine analysis, coordination, and execution. What remains requires judgment, collaboration, experimentation, and accountability for outcomes.

Nieto-Rodriguez uses the banking sector to illustrate the direction of travel: many banks now employ large technology organisations, while the bank itself has moved into the customer's pocket. He points to robotic services in hairdressing as a signal that even work considered resistant to automation may be redesigned when new customers accept a different experience.

His most aggressive prediction is that repetitive work performed with the same people every day is especially exposed. The timetable he proposes is a forecast rather than an established fact. The more useful management implication is diagnostic: roles built mainly around repetition require a deliberate path toward judgment, learning, and project contribution before automation forces the transition.

The strategic question for HR is therefore not simply which jobs AI will change. It is whether the organisation can repeatedly assemble the right people around its most important work, give them enough authority and time, and move talent again when the mission is complete.

"The future of work is project-based."

This is a design challenge, not a forecasting exercise. HR has to make project work possible without abandoning the operational discipline the business still needs.

THE STRUCTURAL CONFLICT

Why operations keep winning - even when strategy depends on projects

Project overload is often treated as an execution problem. Nieto-Rodriguez sees it as a portfolio and governance problem. Organisations find it easy to start initiatives and unusually difficult to stop them. Every launch attracts a sponsor and a promise. Few cancellations generate equivalent recognition.

The pattern resembles a gym subscription: organisations keep paying for projects they rarely use because admitting that an initiative should end feels like failure. The cost is not limited to budget. Attention fragments, teams become part-time, and critical decisions wait while people switch between competing commitments.

Part-time staffing compounds the problem. People attend periodic meetings, return to their functional work, and then re-enter the project after the context has changed. Coordination expands while ownership weakens. Nieto-Rodriguez links this pattern to initiatives that are planned for three years and continue for nine: duration becomes a symptom of fragmented attention rather than inherent complexity.

Leaders also tend to return to the environment in which they became successful. Hierarchy offers control, predictable reporting, and time to escalate. Project work is less comfortable. Decisions arrive before the evidence is complete, authority must move closer to the work, and specialists from different functions need to act as one team.

This is why the language of agility often coexists with an operating system that rewards stability. The organisation announces transformation but allocates talent through annual structures. It asks for speed while preserving layers of approval. It calls a project strategic, yet staffs it with people who can offer only a small fraction of their time.

The gap between strategy and staffing is revealing. A project is not truly prioritised because it appears in a portfolio or has an executive sponsor. It becomes a priority when the organisation stops other work, assigns capable people, and gives the team timely access to decisions. Without those commitments, the project is an aspiration competing with an operating system designed to defeat it.

Nieto-Rodriguez's warning is that there is no return to a more settled environment. If disruption is continuous, transformation cannot remain an occasional programme staffed by outsiders. It must become an internal capability that the workforce can deploy repeatedly.



TWO LOGICS OF WORK

OPERATIONS

Repeatable
Stable
Role-defined
Hierarchical
Run the business

PROJECTS

Temporary
Uncertain
Cross-functional
Outcome-led
Change the business

The challenge is not to choose one logic. It is to make both work without allowing today's operating pressures to consume tomorrow's priorities.

SIGNS OF PORTFOLIO OVERLOAD

More initiatives launched than completed

Critical teams staffed part-time

Decisions waiting for hierarchy

Projects extended without a new value case

A NEW MANDATE

Five priorities for a project-driven workforce

Nieto-Rodriguez's framework moves HR from supporting transformation to designing the conditions in which transformation can happen repeatedly.

1 Build transformation muscle inside the organisation

Companies often rent transformation capability from consultants and specialists, then lose momentum when the assignment ends. Nieto-Rodriguez argues that change capability should extend beyond a small expert group. The aim is not to turn every employee into a project manager. It is to help the whole workforce understand how priorities become initiatives, how decisions are made under uncertainty, and how people contribute beyond their formal roles.

2 Move talent to priorities, not vacancies

The organisation chart explains who reports to whom; it does not reveal where the most important work should happen. A project-driven workforce needs a more fluid talent market. Nieto-Rodriguez recalls a strategic sustainability initiative at GSK that could not secure 20 full-time people from a workforce of roughly 50,000. The example captures a recurring failure: a project may be strategically important in rhetoric and structurally impossible in practice.

3 Redesign the career ladder for contribution

Traditional career paths rewarded people for becoming coordinators and controllers. Self-managed teams and AI-assisted work weaken that bargain. At the same time, automation is absorbing some of the repetitive early-career tasks through which people once learned the business. HR must create new pathways for judgment, craft, leadership, and cross-functional contribution - without assuming that advancement always means managing a larger hierarchy.

A USEFUL DIAGNOSTIC

If a supposedly strategic project cannot obtain a small, dedicated team, the problem is rarely a shortage of talent. It is a mismatch between stated priorities and the mechanisms used to allocate people.

FROM HEADCOUNT TO CAPACITY

The GSK example points to a distinction that conventional workforce planning often misses. An organisation can have enough employees in aggregate and still lack usable capacity for its priorities. Headcount shows where people belong; it does not show how much focused time can move to a strategic mission. In a project-driven model, HR needs visibility into commitments, scarce expertise, and the work that must stop before a team can be staffed full-time.

THE APPRENTICESHIP GAP

Automation is removing some of the repetitive entry-level work through which earlier generations learned the business. Nieto-Rodriguez raises a question HR cannot leave to chance: if the old apprenticeship disappears, where will young professionals develop context, judgment, and confidence? Learning design can no longer depend on routine work providing that foundation informally.

A NEW MANDATE CONTINUED

Make it safer to commit - and easier to see what teams deliver



Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez at HR WEEK Warsaw. His framework positions HR as an architect of project capacity, not simply a custodian of roles.

4 Engineer psychological safety and volunteerism

Project work asks people to enter uncertain territory, challenge assumptions, and sometimes fail in public. That requires more than a value statement. Leaders must make risk discussable and create genuine space for initiative. Nieto-Rodriguez recommends asking for volunteers when a project matters. If no one is willing to join, the absence of volunteers is information: the purpose may be unclear, the conditions may be poor, or the initiative may not deserve to proceed.

5 Measure performance through team delivery

Most performance systems were designed for recurring individual responsibilities. They record what a person does inside a role, often through platforms such as Workday, but reveal much less about the temporary teams through which strategic value is delivered. A project-driven model needs to recognise outcomes, collaboration, learning, and the quality of handoffs - while avoiding a new bureaucracy of project metrics.

VOLUNTEERISM AS DATA

A volunteer request does more than staff a team. It tests whether employees find the mission credible, whether they trust the conditions, and whether leaders have made room for the work. Silence is a signal to investigate, not a cue to assign people by default.

"If nobody raises their hand, don't do that project."

Commitment is an early test of strategic credibility.

THE SYSTEM, NOT FIVE SEPARATE INITIATIVES

Capability is built internally. Talent flows to priority work. Careers reward contribution beyond hierarchy. Teams can speak honestly about risk. Performance follows outcomes. Each element reinforces the others; adopting only one leaves the old operating system largely intact.

PRACTICAL TESTS

Two experiments that reveal how the organisation really works

Neither experiment is a universal prescription. Both are designed to expose hidden assumptions about priority, power, and coordination.

01

Cut the project portfolio in half

Nieto-Rodriguez proposes an intentionally severe test: eliminate 50% of current projects. The point is not that every organisation has exactly twice as many initiatives as it needs. It is that scarcity forces a conversation that incremental prioritisation often avoids.

A credible review asks which projects directly serve strategy, which have a realistic path to value, and which continue only because stopping them is politically uncomfortable. It also examines whether the surviving initiatives have dedicated people, decision rights, and executive attention.

The immediate benefit is focus. The deeper benefit is truth. A smaller portfolio shows whether leaders are willing to translate strategy into choices rather than additions.

02

Suspend titles and hierarchy for one week

The second experiment removes familiar status signals and reporting relationships for a limited period. Nieto-Rodriguez expects an initial crisis: people no longer know where authority sits or whom to ask for permission.

That confusion is the diagnostic value. As formal coordinates disappear, people have to connect around the work itself. They seek expertise, negotiate responsibilities, and form teams. The exercise can reveal where hierarchy supports coordination and where it merely substitutes for it.

A short test should be bounded and observable. Leaders should track which decisions stall, which relationships emerge, and which rules teams recreate on their own. The goal is not an organisation without structure. It is a structure designed around contribution rather than inherited status.

WHAT TO WATCH

Decisions that slow down

People who become natural connectors

Work that no longer appears necessary

THE IMPLICATION

From process steward to organisational architect

If projects deliver the future, HR's most consequential work is to design how people move, decide, learn, and perform across them.

Nieto-Rodriguez's argument is ultimately about the architecture of work. The familiar HR system - jobs, reporting lines, annual goals, promotion through management, and individual performance reviews - assumes that the organisation's basic unit is a stable role. A project-driven organisation treats the mission and the team as equally important units of design.

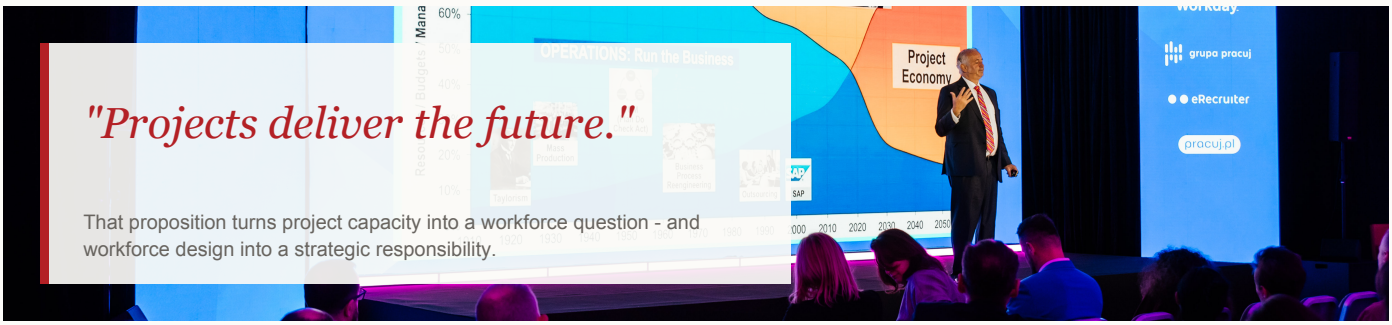
That shift does not make operations irrelevant. Companies still need reliability, compliance, service quality, and clear accountability. The challenge is to keep those strengths while creating a second capability: the ability to redirect talent quickly, form focused teams, make decisions close to the work, and disband or reconfigure when the outcome has been delivered.

For HR leaders, the opportunity is significant. Workforce planning can become a view of strategic capacity rather than headcount alone. Learning can build judgment for uncertain work. Career systems can reward expertise and contribution without forcing people into managerial ladders. Performance can reflect what teams deliver as well as what individuals maintain.

The practical risk is to relabel the old system without changing it: more projects, more committees, more part-time assignments, and the same hierarchy underneath. That produces motion without transformation. A credible project-driven model requires choices about what to stop, who works full-time on the priorities that remain, and which decisions those teams can make.

Nieto-Rodriguez frames the destination in human terms. When people can choose meaningful missions, contribute beyond a narrow job description, and see what their team has achieved, project work can become a source of empowerment rather than permanent chaos.

The emerging role for HR is therefore not to manage a temporary disruption until normality returns. It is to help the organisation operate when transformation is normal. In that environment, the quality of the workforce will depend not only on who is employed, but on how quickly and intelligently their capabilities can be assembled around the future the business is trying to create.



EDITOR'S NOTE This article develops ideas shared by Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez at HR WEEK Warsaw on 3 March 2026. Examples and projections are attributed to him and have not been independently verified.