FOCUS IS THE NEW IQ. CONNECTION IS THE NEW EQ.

Dr. Elke Geraerts argues that resilience is not the ability to absorb unlimited pressure. It is the capacity to protect mental space, use deliberate thought, and stay connected to what matters in a world designed to fragment attention.



THE ARGUMENT

"The real price that we all pay is the loss of depth."

Distraction does more than slow execution. It weakens critical thinking, imagination, empathy, and the relationships through which people make sense of change. HR's task is to create conditions in which the human brain can perform.

BY HR WEEK EDITORIAL

Ideas by Dr. Elke Geraerts

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RESILIENCE IN THE NEW NOW

Mental space is the first resilience resource

When the external world becomes brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and hard to comprehend, the internal response cannot be permanent acceleration.

Geraerts calls the present environment the new now: a period in which certainty extends little further than the current moment. Tomorrow's conditions can change quickly, and the psychological cost is visible in the chronic stress created when people feel control slipping away.

She uses futurist Jamais Cascio's BANI model to describe the pressure. Systems can be brittle, appearing secure until they suddenly snap. The resulting loss of control creates anxiety. Cause and consequence become nonlinear: a small event can reshape a global supply chain, while a major investment can produce little impact after the context shifts.

Finally, the world becomes incomprehensible. Data is abundant, yet the logic behind algorithms and decisions can feel like a black box. More information does not automatically create greater understanding. It can increase the sense that events are happening faster than people can interpret them.

The answer is not to eliminate uncertainty. It is to improve the mind's ability to meet it. Geraerts describes the brain as the most powerful tool available to an organisation, yet one whose operating principles are rarely treated as part of management practice. She cited an average of 128 billion nerve cells and some 80,000 kilometres of wiring as a reminder of both its potential and its complexity.

This becomes more important as AI enters everyday work. Organisations can acquire technology faster than people can adapt their habits of attention and judgment. If the working environment prevents concentration, reflection, and connection, the company may attract talent while still allowing its cognitive capacity to drain away.

For HR, mental resilience is therefore not a wellness programme at the edge of work. It is an operating question: do workloads, technologies, leadership habits, and communication norms create enough mental space for people to think, adapt, and remain human under pressure?

THE HUMAN COUNTERWEIGHTS

BRITTLE	ANXIOUS	NONLINEAR	INCOMPREHENSIBLE
Resilience	**Empathy**	**Improvisation**	**Intuition**

THE COST OF DISTRACTION

The attention crisis is a depth crisis

The short-term cost of distraction is unfinished work. The long-term cost is the erosion of critical thinking, imagination, empathy, and purpose.



Dr. Elke Geraerts at HR WEEK Warsaw, addressing the lifetime cost of scrolling.

Geraerts uses the word smombie - smartphone zombie - for the familiar posture of walking, commuting, working, or sitting at home while attention remains captured by a screen. It has become difficult to be fully present even when we have chosen to attend a meeting, a conference, or a conversation.

The idea that young people have a fundamentally different 'digital native' brain offers little comfort. A brain does not evolve radically in one generation. In the talk, Geraerts cited research suggesting that, if current behaviour continues, young people could spend 25 years of their lives scrolling. She also cited a European average of about four hours a day on devices - 28 hours a week.

Those hours are only the visible cost. Every notification and feed competes with the mental processes that make knowledge work valuable. Geraerts calls the overload infobesity: drinking from a fire hose of information while gradually losing the ability to think and relate in depth.

The result is fractured attention and a world that moves faster than the brain has changed. Speech, media, walking pace, and work all accelerate, while the underlying cognitive system remains the same. People then interpret pressure as a personal failure rather than a predictable response to an environment that their brain cannot continuously follow.

AI adds another layer. Geraerts acknowledges its potential to increase productivity, but warns that relying on it without active thought can reduce critical thinking and engagement. If people only prompt, copy, and adapt an output, expertise may be present in the organisation but underused in the work.

That is her alternative meaning of brain drain. It is not only talent leaving a country or company. It is talent remaining on the payroll while the way work is organised prevents the brain from performing well. The managerial response is not digital abstinence; it is a deliberate balance between technological leverage and human depth.

"I tried to live, but I got distracted."

A life of potential can be lost one interruption at a time.

FROM AUTOMATIC TO AUTHENTIC

Put the authentic pilot in charge

Fast thinking gets us through the day. Deliberate thinking decides whether the day is taking us somewhere we chose.

THE COMPASS

"What is it that we really want to want?"

In a chaotic world, authenticity is not self-expression alone. It is the ability to interrupt routine and choose with purpose.



Dr. Elke Geraerts speaking at HR WEEK Warsaw.

Geraerts makes automatic pilot visible with a simple audience exercise: answer three easy questions incorrectly. Asked for the capital of Poland, a number, and a favourite colour, most people supplied a wrong city, number, and colour. They obeyed a frame that had never been required.

The exercise illustrates Daniel Kahneman's distinction between two modes of thought. System 1 is fast, effortless, and useful for most everyday decisions, but it also jumps to familiar patterns and makes mistakes. System 2 is slower and energy-intensive, yet it supports reliable judgment, critical thought, problem solving, and empathy.

Geraerts estimates that people engage deliberate System 2 thinking for only about 10% of the day. That is efficient, but it is not necessarily sufficient for roles that demand careful judgment more often than one decision in ten.

The goal is not to suppress System 1. Intuition can be powerful when it draws on a deep store of expertise and experience. The problem is allowing routine to make choices that require reflection. Geraerts calls the deliberate alternative the authentic pilot: the part of us that acts with purpose, direction, and awareness of what matters.

For leaders, activating the authentic pilot means creating pauses in which assumptions can be questioned. It means asking whether a decision reflects strategy or habit, whether an AI output has been examined or merely accepted, and whether a response belongs to the present or is inherited 'yesterwork.'

A resilient culture does not demand slow thought for everything. It protects slow thought for the moments when people need to doubt, imagine, empathise, and decide. Without that protected capacity, the organisation may move quickly while remaining trapped in yesterday's frame.

AUTOMATIC PILOT

Fast / familiar / efficient / vulnerable to frames

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AUTHENTIC PILOT

Deliberate / purposeful / critical / connected to values

FOCUS IS THE NEW IQ

Stop switch-tasking. Start with the elephant

Intelligence creates little value when priorities are repeatedly displaced by messages, meetings, and the issues of the day.



Dr. Elke Geraerts at HR WEEK Warsaw: the brain cannot multitask, but it can be trained to focus.

The human brain does not multitask. What feels simultaneous is switch-tasking: rapid movement between tasks, each switch consuming attention and energy. Geraerts cited research suggesting that after a distraction it can take up to 25 minutes to return to full focus.

The cost appears in more errors, weaker memory, less creativity, and reduced flexibility. Attention stays near the surface because the brain is repeatedly reconfiguring: where was I, what was I doing, and what matters now? The body can also interpret constant switching as a sequence of possible crises, releasing stress hormones and turning an ordinary workday into chronic strain.

Her prescription is deliberately modest. Begin with 10 minutes of single-tasking and stretch the habit gradually. The brain learns through practice; a small block protected consistently is more useful than an ambitious hour that never survives the calendar.

The metaphor is memorable: when you are going after an elephant, do not get distracted by chasing rabbits. The elephant is the strategic priority. The rabbits are emails, calls, chats, and daily requests. Opening the mailbox first opens the rabbit hutch and lets the world's priorities into the day.

Geraerts recommends starting the day with the elephant, even for half an hour. The practice creates meaning as well as progress: people are too capable to spend every day chasing rabbits. Organisations can reinforce it with visible signals, shared focus windows, and a culture that treats concentration as collective infrastructure rather than a private preference.

Leadership sets the tone. Being present, showing gravitas, looking beyond short-term rewards, removing yesterwork, and saying no to attractive but secondary ideas are all forms of focus. So is unfocused time: allowing the mind to wander creates room for nuance, strategic thinking, and creativity that constant effort cannot produce.

THE FOCUS RESET

10 MINUTES

Protect one short block and extend it only after the habit holds.

CLOSE THE HUTCH

Delay email and messaging until the day's elephant has moved.

UNFOCUS

Schedule space for the mind to wander, connect, and imagine.

CONNECTION IS THE NEW EQ

Connection starts with the self

Before people can build better relationships with others, they need contact with the values, energy, and boundaries that guide their own choices.

Automatic pilot can carry a person through an impressive career while gradually weakening contact with what the career is for. Geraerts describes meeting people in midlife who have 'hit a wall' after years of following a mission that no longer feels like their own. Resilience begins by restoring that internal connection.

She uses five nightly questions as a practical compass. The answers reveal which activities create energy, where contribution is recognised, when presence becomes possible, what repeatedly pulls life off course, and which small change is worth attempting tomorrow. The value lies in repetition: patterns emerge before a crisis forces the reflection.

Connection then extends outward. Geraerts's example of a restaurant advertising 'the worst salad one woman ever had' captures a culture of absolute judgments. Nuance requires System 2. It creates enough room to consider another person's story, appreciate difference, and replace immediate categorisation with curiosity.

Her account of the Marubo people in the Amazon makes the trade-off concrete. Satellite internet brought medical knowledge and information beyond the forest. It also drew people away from hunting parties and quieted campfire conversations as screens captured attention. The message is not to reject connectivity, but to notice what digital access can displace.

Focus and connection are therefore complementary. Focus makes presence possible; connection gives presence a human purpose. Geraerts argues that these are not soft skills but future skills: the capabilities that preserve judgment, empathy, and collective resilience as technology becomes more powerful.

FIVE QUESTIONS

1. What energized me today?
2. What did I do that someone else appreciated?
3. What made me feel present?
4. What distracted me from the life I want?
5. What one small change will I make tomorrow?

THE CONNECTION TEST

Can people in this team be fully present, disagree with nuance, and remain part of the relationship?

"Connection is the new EQ."

THE RESILIENCE OPERATING SYSTEM

Build the conditions for human performance

The brain can adapt to change, but not while every minute is filled. HR makes resilience practical by protecting the human capabilities that uncertainty and technology place under pressure.

Geraerts's argument turns mental resilience into a design brief. Work should contain moments for deliberate thought, real presence, and recovery from concentration. Technology should release human capacity rather than immediately refill it with more inputs. Leaders should model the attention they expect from others.

This requires subtraction as well as training. 'Yesterwork' consumes mental space simply because it survived from an earlier context. Meetings, reports, routines, and projects need the courage of what Nassim Nicholas Taleb calls the via negativa: remove a little, observe what changes, and keep subtracting what no longer helps.

Boundaries are equally important. Focus is not only saying yes to one priority; it is saying no to the many good ideas that would displace it. In a culture that rewards responsiveness, protecting concentration can feel antisocial. HR can make it legitimate through shared norms, leadership example, and explicit permission.

The same discipline applies to AI. Use it to extend capability, but keep people responsible for doubt, interpretation, and judgment. Efficiency without engagement creates a faster form of brain drain. The aim is not simply more output; it is deeper and more human output from the same finite attention.

The BANI world makes these skills strategic. Brittleness needs resilience. Anxiety is reduced by empathy and the story behind another person. Nonlinearity requires improvisation, which needs unfocused space. Incomprehensibility calls for informed intuition built from experience rather than instant reaction.

Focus and connection make that operating system usable. One protects depth; the other protects meaning. Together, they allow people to step off automatic pilot, meet uncertainty with a fuller range of intelligence, and choose a direction that remains recognisably their own.

START ON MONDAY

- Begin with one elephant before opening the rabbit hutch.
- Protect a 10-minute single-task block and extend it gradually.
- Create one screen-free conversation and practise full presence.
- Remove one piece of yesterwork and observe what improves.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article develops ideas shared by Dr. Elke Geraerts at HR WEEK Warsaw 2026. It is based strictly on the recorded presentation; examples and figures are presented as attributed in the talk and have not been independently verified.