THE FUTURE OF WORK IS HUMAN - IF HR BUILDS IT THAT WAY

Hertta Vuorenmaa argues that technology will not determine the quality of working life. Human judgment, psychological safety, inclusive intelligence, and the systems that make learning possible will.



THE ARGUMENT

"AI does not do anything you do not allow it to do."

The future will be as good or bad as the choices organisations make. Technology can amplify productivity, quality, and learning - but only when people have the expertise, voice, belonging, and fairness required to remain in the driver's seat.

BY HR WEEK EDITORIAL

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CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

Work is changing. Human needs are not

Geopolitical instability, technological acceleration, and ecological transition are reshaping work inside an institution people still use for identity, belonging, and connection to society.

Vuorenmaa places work inside a wider pressure chamber. Organisations are not adopting AI, redesigning jobs, and responding to skills shortages in a vacuum. Employees are absorbing several overlapping transitions while the institution of work itself remains one of the central ways people understand who they are and how they belong to society.

That makes change emotionally consequential. A new tool is not simply a technical addition when it shifts professional expertise, changes a role, or unsettles the path through which someone expected to build a career. Predictions about the future often underestimate the importance of that identity layer.

The historical pattern is reassuring and demanding at the same time. Technologies have always changed work. Some jobs disappear; new ones emerge, including jobs earlier generations could not imagine. At each industrial breaking point, however, people have had to learn new ways of working and unlearn routines that once appeared permanent.

Vuorenmaa argues that the structures most in need of examination still carry the logic of Henry Ford's factory. The length of the working day, the length of the working week, the meaning of supervision, and the assumption that activity must happen in a familiar place and sequence all deserve to be questioned when new tools change what an effective day can contain.

Yet human psychology has not accelerated alongside technology. People still need to be seen. They still need to belong. They still learn through relationships, feedback, experimentation, and social recognition. This is the friction inside future work: a great deal of change in the systems, and very little change in the core human needs those systems must serve.

The future is therefore neither predetermined nor automatically progressive. The same technology can create learning, autonomy, and better work - or isolation, uncertainty, and weaker professional identity. The difference lies in the choices made by people and the structures built around those choices.

THE CENTRAL FRICTION

CHANGE

Tools, jobs, roles, location, pace, and the design of the working day.

NO CHANGE

The need to be seen, to belong, to contribute, and to learn with others.

THE MOST USEFUL LEADERSHIP TOOL

Ask "How are you?" - then stop and listen

Psychological safety begins when a human question is treated as a real invitation rather than a conversational flyby.



Hertta Vuorenmaa at HR WEEK Warsaw: advanced technology increases the need to be better at being human.

Vuorenmaa's most practical tool is also the simplest. During the pandemic, she faced a screen of 200 middle managers whose cameras were off. Instead of beginning a lecture on future work, she asked how they were. Cameras came on, people spoke, and the conversation revealed what the technology-mediated setting had concealed.

The point is not the wording alone. Leaders can ask 'How are you?' while already moving to the next task. The leadership act is to stop, look at the person, and make room for an honest answer. That space signals that reality is discussable - the foundation of psychological safety.

In a cross-occupational study she described, involving people from engineers and bankers to hotel cleaners, one factor connected well-being across very different jobs: my immediate supervisor knows who I am and how I am doing. The need to be seen survives every wave of technological change.

Being seen is not a soft alternative to performance. It creates the conditions in which people can reveal uncertainty, ask for help, question an output, and admit that a skill is missing. Those behaviours are essential when tools, roles, and expectations are changing faster than established expertise can comfortably absorb.

The question also begins with self-leadership. Vuorenmaa suggests a weekly check-in: How am I? Do I need more water, more sleep, more fun, or less work? Leaders who cannot notice their own condition are less able to recognise what is happening in the people around them.

Psychological safety is therefore not an abstract climate score. It is built in repeated moments when people discover that they can speak honestly without losing standing. In the future of work, that is the gateway to the central task: learning and unlearning.

"Humans need to be seen. We all want to be seen, and we want to belong."

Presence turns a question into a leadership practice.

HUMAN ON THE DRIVER'S SEAT

AI creates value only when expertise stays in charge

Technology does not produce transformation by being present. People need the skill and authority to direct it, judge its work, and redesign the system around it.

The research Vuorenmaa presented points to a conditional productivity story. Organisations see improvements in productivity and quality when people are skilled enough to act as guardians of the technology: they can lead the tool, apply professional expertise, and evaluate the quality of what it produces. Simply placing AI inside the organisation does not create the benefit.

This is why technological determinism is a weak management position. AI does not decide its organisational role. People decide what it can access, which tasks it performs, how its outputs are reviewed, and where accountability remains. Blaming the tool after a poor implementation only hides the human design decisions that made the failure possible.

AI can also increase individual autonomy. People may work effectively with their own agents and learn through the interaction. At the same time, Vuorenmaa warns that hybrid work plus personal AI agents can weaken the social collectivity of work. If each person becomes a high-performing island, the organisation loses the shared context through which knowledge, identity, and responsibility are built.

Professional identities will change as job roles are reconfigured. Some future occupations are as difficult to imagine now as earning a living by filming cooking for social media would once have been. The uncertainty produces conflicting emotions that implementation plans need to acknowledge rather than dismiss.

The strategic question is therefore not how quickly AI can be deployed. It is whether the organisation is increasing the human capability required to use it well - and whether autonomy is being balanced with enough shared work to keep people part of a meaningful whole.

WITHOUT CAPABILITY

Install the tool

Assume value will appear. Accept outputs without enough professional challenge. Treat the consequences as technological inevitability.

WITH CAPABILITY

Lead the tool

Define the purpose. Apply expertise. Evaluate quality. Keep accountability human. Redesign work and learning together.

THE COLLECTIVITY TEST

As individuals gain more autonomy with AI, what shared work keeps knowledge, identity, and responsibility connected?

SKILLS FOR FUTURE WORK

The ability to learn is not an individual burden

People need future-facing skills, but organisations remain responsible for creating the time, access, relationships, and safety through which those skills can grow.

THE CONTEXT

A world under pressure

Geopolitical instability, technological acceleration, and ecological transition intensify the need to learn while making attention and confidence harder to protect.



Hertta Vuorenmaa speaking at HR WEEK Warsaw.

In Vuorenmaa's research with many of Finland's 50 largest companies, the strongest obstacle to inclusion was skills. People felt they did not have the capabilities required for what was coming, or the opportunities to learn them. That turns a skills gap into an inclusion gap: some employees can move with the transformation while others experience it as something being done to them.

Her first future capability is adaptive and critical thinking - the ability to evaluate what technology does and what it should do. The second is human-technology collaboration: treating the tool as something people direct rather than a force they passively receive.

The third is digital innovation fluency, the ability to absorb new technologies and imagine useful applications. Vuorenmaa's AI research colleagues repeatedly pointed to imagination as the scarce skill: adults need to recover some of the creative possibility that comes naturally to children.

The enabling capability is inclusive intelligence: the practical skill of working constructively across difference. Ageing labour markets and skills shortages mean organisations cannot afford to waste human capability. Diversity alone does not create an advantage if teams lack the skills to include different knowledge, identities, and perspectives in the work.

Vuorenmaa reframes inclusion from a normative position into a working-life capability. It can be described, practised, reinforced, and learned. It enables constructive engagement and turns difference across communities and teams into innovative thinking.

None of these capabilities can be assigned to the individual alone. Telling people to reskill without changing workload, access, feedback, or opportunity makes learning another demand. Sustainable future work requires the organisation to become a learning environment, not simply a buyer of courses.

THE CAPABILITY STACK

THINK	COLLABORATE	IMAGINE	INCLUDE
Adaptive and critical thinking	**Human-technology collaboration**	**Digital innovation fluency**	**Inclusive intelligence**

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Inclusion is a capability, not a sentiment

Learning scales when people can contribute an authentic voice, remain part of the change, and trust that the systems around them are fair.

When Vuorenmaa asks students, executives, and employees to remember a powerful learning experience, three answers recur. They were not alone. They were allowed to make mistakes and reflect. And they felt valued by people who encouraged them to try again. Together, those conditions describe a psychologically safe learning climate.

Psychological safety matters because learning and unlearning require visible imperfection. People have to admit what they do not know, test an unfamiliar approach, challenge an AI output, and expose an idea before it is finished. A culture that punishes those moments can invest heavily in skills while preventing learning from becoming part of the work.

Good intentions do not scale on their own. HR builds the systems that determine who receives an opportunity, whose voice is rewarded, which mistakes become learning, and whether participation in change is real or ceremonial. Vuorenmaa identifies three outcomes those systems should reinforce: authentic voice, belonging, and fairness.

Authentic voice means that when people are asked how they are doing, they can describe reality rather than maintain a front. Belonging means they experience themselves as part of the transformation rather than an audience for it. Fairness means that access, decisions, and consequences are credible across groups.

Taken together, these practices make inclusion a strategic capability. They improve the organisation's ability to use all available talent, learn across differences, and adapt without dividing employees into those who can access the future and those who cannot.

AUTHENTIC VOICE

Reality can be spoken

People can ask, disagree, disclose uncertainty, and question the quality of an output.

BELONGING

Change is ours

People learn with others and remain connected to the social purpose of work.

FAIRNESS

Systems are credible

Access to learning, recognition, opportunity, and consequence does not depend on hidden advantage.

BUILD THE CYCLE OF GOOD

Future work becomes sustainable when the system learns

Individual effort, organisational design, and societal incentives must reinforce one another. Otherwise learning remains a promise made to people without the conditions to fulfil it.

Vuorenmaa closes with a three-level cycle. Society shapes the incentives and protections within which organisations act. Organisations translate those conditions into structures, technologies, jobs, and learning cultures. Individuals then gain - or fail to gain - the opportunity to learn, unlearn, and use new capabilities.

The cycle can reinforce progress. A learning culture increases capability; capability improves the use of technology; better use makes it possible to redesign work; redesigned work can create more sustainable and inclusive participation. But the cycle can also reinforce inequality when access to learning, autonomy, or voice is uneven.

This is why inclusion capability is a strategic choice rather than a side programme. It determines whether the organisation can use its full human capacity while roles change and labour markets age. It also determines whether innovation emerges from difference or is blocked by the inability to work across it.

HR is the system builder inside that cycle. It can assess practices through the lens of psychological safety, measure and reward authentic voice, protect belonging during transformation, and test whether learning and opportunity are distributed fairly. These are mechanisms, not messages.

The larger ambition is to escape the Henry Ford factory cage: not by discarding every established structure, but by refusing to assume that yesterday's working day, supervision model, or division of responsibility is the natural shape of work. New technologies create a reason to ask again what effective, human, sustainable work should look like.

The future of work remains human because humans still make the defining choices. The task is to build organisations in which people are skilled enough to direct technology, safe enough to learn, included enough to contribute, and connected enough to remember that transformation is something they are doing together.

START WITH THE SYSTEM

- Ask how people are - and make time for the real answer.
- Define the expertise required to challenge AI outputs.
- Treat future skills as access, workload, and opportunity questions.
- Measure voice, belonging, and fairness in the practices HR controls.