Talent in a Year of Compounding Complexity

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- Transformation is now constant: complexity is permanent, traditional talent models are weakening, and organisations are asking for more adaptability just as capacity is under pressure.
- AI is widespread but under-controlled: adoption is fragmented, confidence is low, and risk (skills anxiety, candidate distortion, governance gaps) is rising faster than capability.
- Resilience must be supported, not assumed: sustainable performance now depends on systems, leadership and clarity—not individual grit or "toughing it out."

In our first Virtual Forum of 2026, the dominant mood across the discussion was not necessarily one of panic or pessimism, but perhaps more of unease.
The group didn't describe a world in crisis; instead, they described a world in which **complexity has become permanent**: transformation is no longer episodic, it's continuous.

This "transformation-as-usual" environment is reshaping how leaders think about talent, capability and organisational health. Traditional anchors—stable role definitions, linear career progression, predictable hiring volumes—are weakening. In their place, organisations are being asked to operate with **greater agility, tighter cost discipline, faster decision-making and higher tolerance for ambiguity**, all at the same time.

The result is a paradox: organisations are demanding more adaptability from people at exactly the moment when **capacity—emotional, cognitive and organisational—is under strain.**

AI Everywhere, Confidence Nowhere

Artificial intelligence was present in almost every strand of the conversation, but notably **not as a solved problem.** Every organisations is using AI across the recruitment and talent lifecycle, to some degree but few claimed to have clarity on outcomes, standards or long-term operating models.

Several consistent challenges emerged:

- **Fragmented adoption:** AI tools are often introduced in pockets—by TA teams, HR, L&D or IT—without a unifying framework. This creates duplication, confusion and cognitive overload for employees.

- **Skills anxiety:** Employees are being urged to "upskill in AI" without clear guidance on *which* skills matter, to *what* depth, or *how success will be measured.* This ambiguity is driving anxiety rather than empowerment.

- **Candidate distortion:** AI-enabled applications are creating a "sea of sameness," with polished CVs and interview responses that collapse under scrutiny later in the process. This is increasing risk rather than reducing it.

Rather than accelerating confidence, AI adoption is currently **exposing gaps in governance, communication and expectation-setting.** The technology is moving faster than the organisational muscle needed to absorb it.

From Skills-Based Hiring to Outcome-Based Work

Skills-based hiring remains a major strategic aspiration, but our discussion also touched on a more subtle evolution: a shift towards **outcome-based thinking.**

Participants described growing frustration with traditional role profiles—lengthy, prescriptive documents that list qualifications and experience without clearly articulating what "good" actually looks like. In response, some organisations are simplifying roles down to a small number of **core outcomes**, then working backwards to identify the skills required to deliver them.

This shift has several implications:

- It enables greater flexibility in who can do the work, opening doors to transferable skills and adjacent experience.
- It supports more honest conversations with candidates and employees about expectations and performance.
- It creates a stronger foundation for internal mobility, reskilling and workforce planning.

However, this approach also demands more from managers, who must be clearer about priorities and more disciplined in defining value. Without support, this can increase managerial burden rather than reduce it.

Cost Pressure Without Strategic Retreat

Despite continued hiring in specific areas, many organisations are operating under tight headcount and overhead constraints. This has produced a cautious approach to recruitment, with greater use of contingent labour, redeployment and internal mobility.

Importantly, this is not being framed as a retreat from talent investment. Instead, it reflects a recalibration:

- **Early-career hiring is becoming more selective,** with some organisations shifting from graduate intakes to apprenticeships or "earn and learn" models.
- **Internal talent marketplaces** are gaining prominence as organisations look to redeploy skills rather than buy them.
- **Geographic optimisation**—near-shoring, off-shoring and "best-value country" strategies—is accelerating, often driven by skills availability rather than pure cost.

The challenge is that these moves increase complexity for employees, who must navigate changing expectations, locations and career pathways with less certainty than before.

Recruitment as a Material Business Risk

One of the most striking themes was the reframing of recruitment from a transactional function to a **material enterprise risk.**

Participants highlighted growing concerns around:

- **Identity verification and fraud**, particularly in contractor and contingent workforces.
- **Cybersecurity exposure**, where poorly vetted hires or third-party workers can create vulnerabilities.
- **AI-mediated deception**, where candidates use technology to misrepresent skills, identity or availability.

In this context, talent acquisition is increasingly seen as a **risk-mitigation function**, not just a delivery engine. This elevates the strategic importance of TA—but also raises the bar for governance, consistency and accountability.

The Limits of "Resilience"

The most human—and arguably most important—moment in the discussion came when participants began to question the language of resilience itself.

While resilience is widely cited as a critical capability, several participants challenged the idea that it should mean "toughing it out" or absorbing ever-increasing pressure. Framed this way, resilience risks becoming a **moral obligation placed on individuals**, rather than a shared organisational responsibility.

Concerns raised included:

- **Resilience language can silence vulnerability**, making it harder for people to say they are struggling.
- It can normalise **excessive workloads** and **sustained pressure**.
- **It often lacks specificity**: organisations ask for resilience without defining what support looks like in practice.

This critique led to the emergence of a more constructive concept.

Supported Resilience: A More Sustainable Model

The idea of "supported resilience" resonated strongly across the group. Rather than positioning resilience as an individual trait, supported resilience reframes it as a systemic capability—one that is enabled by structure, culture and leadership.

Supported resilience has several defining features:

- **Clarity over expectation**

People are more resilient when they understand what is expected of them, what success looks like, and where boundaries sit.

- **Permission not to have all the answers**

In a world of continuous change, supported resilience acknowledges that learning is iterative and uncertainty is normal.

- **Human checkpoints in automated systems**

AI can accelerate processes, but resilience is strengthened when humans remain “in the loop” to apply judgment, context and care.

- **Language that legitimises pause and recovery**

Supported resilience allows people to say “I need help,” “I need to stop,” or “this is too much,” without fear of being seen as weak.

- **Collective responsibility**

Leaders, managers and systems share accountability for resilience, rather than outsourcing it to individual grit.

Crucially, supported resilience is not about lowering standards or slowing progress. It is about making **high performance sustainable** in an environment where change is relentless.

Conclusion: A Test of Organisational Maturity

The forum revealed a talent landscape defined less by discrete trends than by **interlocking pressures:** technological acceleration, cost discipline, skills disruption and human fatigue. The organisations that navigate 2026 most effectively are unlikely to be those with the most advanced tools alone.

They will be the ones that combine:

- Strategic clarity with operational flexibility
- Automation with human judgment
- Ambition with care

Above all, they will recognise that resilience is not something people *bring* to work—it is something organisations must actively *build and support.*