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The ONE Group

GLOBAL HR LEADERS ROUNDTABLE

AI ADOPTION, ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE, AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

A White Paper from an HR Leaders Community

Hosted and convened by
The ONE Group

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Executive Summary

In July 2026, a small group of Global HR Directors from technology, life sciences, and manufacturing organisations met for a candid, off-the-record roundtable. The group spans startups and established multinationals, with headcounts ranging from around one hundred to several thousand, and operations stretching across the UK, continental Europe, the US, Latin America, and Asia Pacific.

The conversation was wide-ranging, but four themes dominated: how organisations are (or are not) turning scattered AI experimentation into a coherent strategy; how leaders sustain trust through restructuring and uncertainty; the widening gap between commercial targets and employee wellbeing; and how global organisations balance one employee experience with local reality. This paper summarises what was said, in anonymised form, and draws out the practical implications for HR leaders navigating the same terrain.

> “We are all learning as we go. Nobody in this room has a finished AI strategy, and I am not sure a twelve-month plan would survive contact with how fast the tools are moving.”



1. AI: From Experimentation to Strategy

Every organisation represented has some form of AI usage policy, typically a shortlist of approved tools such as Copilot or ChatGPT, paired with restrictions on what data can be entered into them. Beyond that baseline, formal strategy is rare. Most leaders described their organisations as still experimenting rather than executing against a plan, and there was open scepticism about whether a comprehensive strategy could realistically be built within the next six to twelve months given how quickly the underlying tools change.

Where AI Is Genuinely Helping

Participants were consistent that AI earns its keep on administrative and low-value tasks: drafting, summarising, first-pass data cleaning, and internal knowledge lookups. One organisation had merged a patchwork of local staff handbooks into a single global handbook, with updates flowing automatically through workflow automation into team chat and the HR information system. The savings from this kind of work were seen as legitimate, provided they are redeployed rather than used purely to justify headcount reduction.

Where AI Is Creating Friction

- Employees and candidates increasingly notice, and resent, communications that read as AI-generated rather than human.
- Comfort and skill with AI tools varies sharply by age and tenure, creating a two-speed workforce within the same team.
- Senior leaders sometimes overestimate what AI can replace, expecting it to substitute for experienced judgement rather than augment it. One organisation replaced a retiring specialist with two AI and data engineers, who are now shaping the organisation's internal AI direction, a reminder that AI still requires skilled people to operate it well.
- In recruitment specifically, heavier use of AI in screening and interviewing is starting to erode candidate experience, with some candidates reaching second-round interviews without ever speaking to a person.

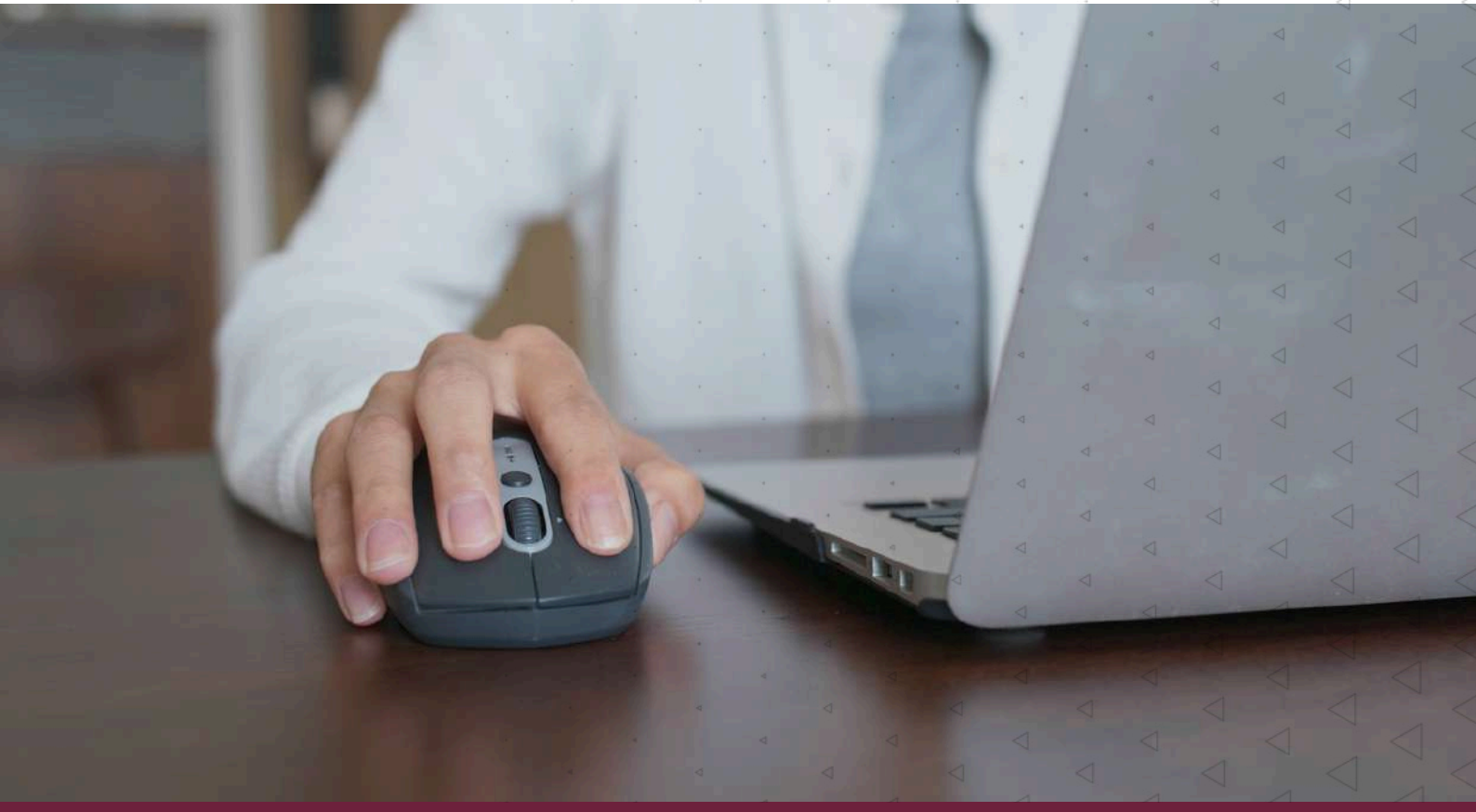
Build Versus Buy

Several organisations are under pressure from founders or technical leadership to build proprietary systems in-house rather than continue with established HR platforms. The appeal is understandable, but the group was candid about the risks: ongoing validation and maintenance cost, the skills required to keep a bespoke system alive, and the tendency for offshore development to look cheaper on paper than it proves in practice once salaries, tooling subscriptions, and technical debt are accounted for.

There was real interest in newer HR platforms that build AI-driven analytics on top of existing data, for example generating suggested objectives or manager prompts from survey results and one-to-one notes. Questions of data residency, and how a vendor's location affects GDPR and other jurisdictional obligations, came up repeatedly as a gating factor in vendor selection.

Legal And Ethical Guardrails

More than one participant described AI tools producing confidently wrong employment-law guidance that later had to be corrected, and one described a case where an AI-assisted consultancy deliverable led to a billing dispute once errors surfaced. The consistent conclusion was that AI output on anything touching grievances, maternity, or other complex employee relations matters must be treated as a first draft for expert human review, never as the final word.



2. Leading Through Organisational Change

Restructuring, and the trust cost that comes with it, was the second major theme. Several participants were mid-restructure or recently through one, and the discussion moved quickly from theory into specific, hard-won lessons.

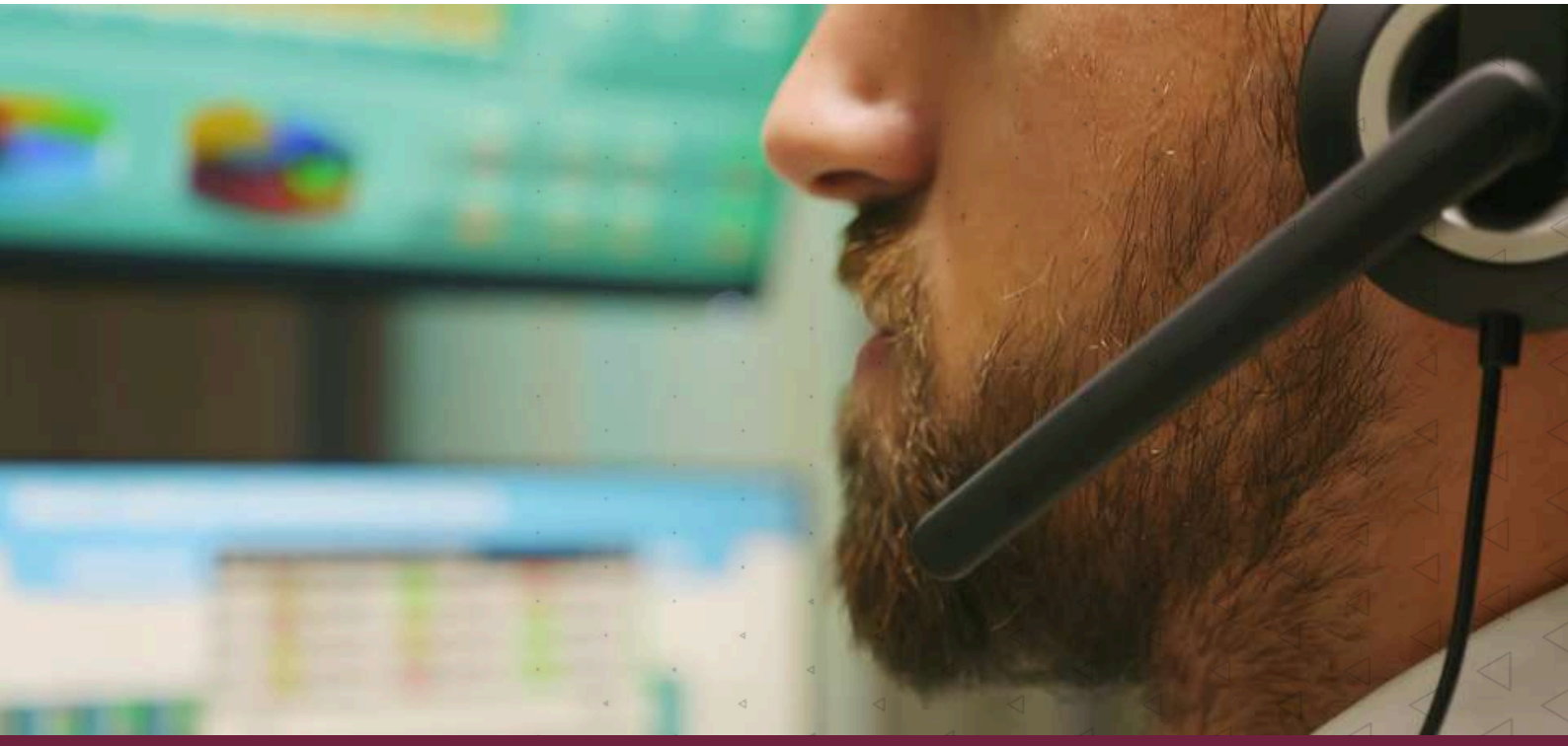
What Tends To Go Wrong

- Excluding key decision-makers from planning conversations, which leads to inaccurate assessments of which roles are genuinely at risk.

- Treating a restructure as a single announcement rather than a sustained process, leaving room for rumour to fill the silence, particularly in distributed teams where engagement surveys often fail to surface what people are actually saying to each other.

- Statutory “quiet periods” during settlement negotiations that restrict what can be communicated, which can quietly erode trust even when they are procedurally necessary.

- Repeated rounds of restructuring in a short period, or exits handled as an unannounced “tap on the shoulder,” which one participant described bluntly as prioritising public relations over the people involved.



What Tends To Help

- Clear, honest financial targets shared with leaders, so difficult decisions are seen as following from the numbers rather than arriving as a surprise.
- A CEO or senior leader who is visibly transparent about what has not gone to plan, rather than presenting every decision as fully resolved from day one.
- Daily updates and a living FAQ during the active period of a restructure, plus outplacement support for those leaving.
- Monthly all-hands sessions covering strategy, financial performance, and product progress, which several participants credited with reducing the space rumours have to grow in.

> “What separates the organisations that recover well is not that they avoided pain. It is that the leadership team owned its own mistakes out loud, instead of pretending everything had gone to plan.”

The group also discussed the retention risk that follows a restructure: remaining employees often reassess their own position once roles or reporting lines change, and short-term retention agreements were mentioned as one practical, if partial, stabiliser.



3. Productivity, Wellbeing, and Performance

Commercial pressure and employee wellbeing were framed less as opposing forces and more as a balance that keeps shifting, sometimes further than leaders intend. One participant described joining an organisation shortly after a sale, only to discover a fifty-million-pound deficit with an expectation that it be recovered within two years, a target that has driven real strain on the wider team.

A Spectrum Of Cultures

The organisations represented sit at very different points on the wellbeing spectrum. Some described an implicit “always-on” culture; others offer sabbaticals every four years and annual leave allowances well above statutory minimums, alongside flexible core hours built around a two-block working day. Even in the more generous cultures, though, participants noted a persistent stigma around managers actually taking the leave they are entitled to, with some leaders working through extended breaks rather than fully switching off.

The Management Layer Under Strain

Flatter structures, introduced to cut cost or increase pace, were flagged as a specific risk: newly promoted or first-time managers can burn out quickly once the initial enthusiasm of a new role wears off and the underlying workload becomes clear. Expanding operations into new time zones to extend coverage, for instance a move toward round-the-clock support from an additional regional hub, was discussed as raising real questions of ethics and cultural fit that need answering before, not after, the decision is made.

4. The Future Employee Experience

Benefits And Flexible Reward

Traditional benefits platforms were generally seen as functional but administratively heavy. Several participants are evaluating flexible benefits wallets that let the organisation fund a fixed monthly allowance and let each employee choose how to spend it, whether on critical illness cover, vouchers, or other options, specifically to reduce the back-office burden of the current approach.

Low-cost cash health plans, covering everyday costs such as dental, optical, and therapeutic treatments, were highlighted as good value relative to their take-up, though one participant noted some employees opt out once they realise the benefit is taxed as a benefit-in-kind, suggesting communication has more work to do than the benefit design itself. Others have moved away from group private medical cover, which can create large cost disparities between employees, in favour of a flexible monthly allowance that can be put toward private medical or other benefits of the employee's choosing.

Flexibility, Globally Applied

For organisations with teams spanning Asia Pacific to the Americas, flexibility is less a perk than an operational necessity: split shifts and midday breaks were mentioned as ways to provide overlap across time zones without pushing anyone into a fourteen-hour working day. The group was candid that founders and senior leaders are often the biggest obstacle to flexibility in practice, finding it hard to model the boundaries they publicly advocate for.

Leave, Localisation, And Seasonal Reality

Statutory and cultural norms around annual leave vary sharply by country, from roughly thirty-five to forty days in Sweden to the low twenties in the UK, and an “unlimited” US-style policy does not translate well into a UK context. A “workcation” policy, allowing two weeks of remote work adjacent to a period of leave, was cited as a practical way to smooth the transition back from an extended break, though it requires repeated manager education to land well.

Seasonal capacity was flagged as a planning gap rather than a policy gap: European teams typically see a large share of staff away between mid-July and mid-September, yet product and delivery roadmaps are often set as though full capacity holds year-round. Protected collective breaks, such as a shared Christmas shutdown, were seen as a rare example of a seasonal rhythm that genuinely protects rest, and a model worth extending to other quiet periods.

Fairness In A Tightening Skills Market

As scarce skill sets shift, for example from traditional software engineering toward AI and mechanical engineering roles, organisations are granting more flexibility to the people they most want to retain. The group agreed this is understandable but risks favouritism if boundaries are not applied consistently, and that the answer is a shared framework for flexibility rather than case-by-case discretion.

A related theme was the degree of parental and third-party involvement in the working lives of younger employees, including parents contacting HR directly or attending grievance meetings, and, separately, candidates bringing a spouse into salary negotiations. Participants were clear that supportive accommodations such as translation or accessibility support are entirely appropriate, but that HR needs clear, consistently applied boundaries to distinguish genuine support from inappropriate interference.



Key Recommendations

Drawing the discussion together, the group's practical takeaways were:

- Treat AI strategy as a living document, not a fixed plan: define goals, guardrails, and ownership now, and expect to revisit them every few months rather than annually.
- Audit current AI tool usage and consolidate around a shortlist of approved, data-safe tools before expanding scope further.
- Name who is accountable for validating AI output, especially anywhere it touches legal or employee relations matters, and put a QA step in place before that output reaches an employee.
- Before building anything in-house, cost the ongoing maintenance and skills requirement, not just the build, and weigh it honestly against buying an established platform.
- During any restructure, over-communicate: daily updates, a live FAQ, and visible ownership of mistakes do more for trust than a single well-crafted announcement.
- Set explicit workload and escalation thresholds for newly promoted managers, who are often the first casualties of a flatter structure.
- Localise benefits and leave policy by country while holding a small set of global principles constant, rather than applying one country's norms everywhere.
- Build seasonal capacity, particularly the European summer, into roadmap planning rather than treating it as an exception each year.
- Create a written framework for flexibility in scarce-skill roles, so accommodations are consistent and defensible rather than ad hoc.

Closing Note

None of the organisations in this room have fully solved the questions raised here, and that was, in its own way, the most useful part of the conversation: a candid comparison of what is working, what is not, and what everyone is still figuring out together. The group plans to reconvene online in roughly three months and in person in around six, with this paper intended as a starting point for that next conversation rather than a final answer.

About the Host

This roundtable was convened and hosted by The ONE Group, a national HR recruitment specialist with around twenty years in the market and a network spanning Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Milton Keynes, Northampton, and Peterborough. The ONE Group works with organisations from early-stage startups through to established corporates on permanent, interim, and contract HR hiring, and runs this leaders' community as part of its ongoing commitment to the HR professionals it serves.

Sessions like this one are held twice a year in person and twice online, with a shared community channel keeping the conversation going between meetings. Organisations interested in joining a future session, or in The ONE Group's wider HR recruitment and executive search work, can get in touch directly.

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