



Looking ahead to 2026:

# Culture, Performance & Connection

# Foreword



Elle Davidson, Head of Strategy



**2025 has been a year defined by change – from shifting political climates, to economic uncertainty, to technology evolving at breathtaking speed. Around the world, our clients are working hard to navigate that change: balancing long-term plans with immediate pressures, balancing tighter budgets with the need to maintain engagement, and aiming for high performance in environments that rarely stay still for long. It’s overwhelming, and looking ahead can feel challenging, but it’s also more important than ever. In a landscape that keeps shifting, preparation is a competitive advantage.**

This report brings together the themes we’re hearing most often in our conversations with leaders and People teams across industries and geographies. Drawing on our collective experience, the People Made team has gathered what we believe are the key forces shaping 2026 and some of the ways organisations can respond with clarity and confidence. We’ve grouped these into three areas that consistently show up as priorities for the year ahead: Culture, Performance, and Connection.

One thing we do know is that more change is coming – and the organisations willing to adapt will be the ones that stay ahead. Those who don’t risk falling behind, with a detrimental impact on their people and their performance. Inside, you’ll find a mix of ideas, perspectives, and provocations designed to help you think about the future in a practical and energising way. I hope you find it useful, thought-provoking, and a helpful guide as you plan for the next year ahead.

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# Culture



Emma Winter, Client Director

## From change fatigue to change fitness in 2026

Unpredictability has become the backdrop to everything we do, and the past five years have proved that the only thing we can reliably predict is more change. When my colleagues and I spoke to our clients ahead of this report, they shared that one of their biggest risks and fears for 2026 is uncertainty. Some were still feeling the aftershocks of Covid, sharing concerns about

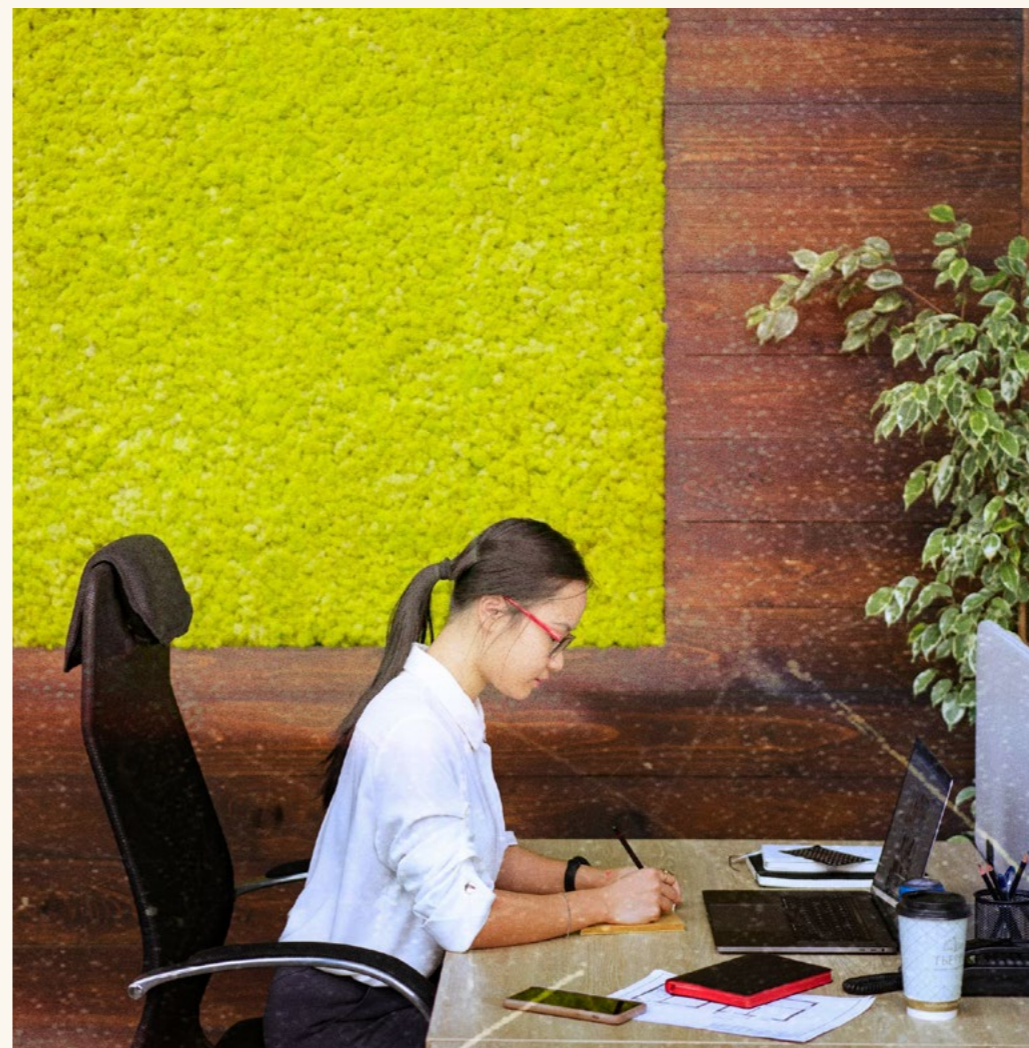
another pandemic, large-scale shutdowns, industry walkouts, leadership turnover, mergers, acquisitions, and unclear legislation shaping the road ahead. Change is still the biggest fear across industries, and yet the hope that stability will return is steadily fading.

We're living in a world where change no longer arrives in cycles followed by comforting

periods of calm. That sense of stability people once relied on isn't coming back, and for some, there is a very real sense of grief in recognising that. But waiting for the world to settle is no longer a viable strategy. Businesses need to stop bracing and start adapting, shifting away from traditional, linear approaches to change management.

You might have heard a buzz around 'change fitness' already. Looking ahead, I think that's what's needed now, and it's what we'll see more of in 2026. And, at People Made, we're supporting clients in this area already. It's all about developing the mindset and muscle that allow organisations and their people to embrace constant movement.

Success in 2026 will belong to those who view change as fuel rather than friction, who channel uncertainty into innovation, agility, growth and resilience. Change fitness means expecting the unexpected and finding energy in solving for it and thriving in an ever-shifting landscape instead of being drained by resisting it.



“I’m telling my team, you need to get comfortable with living in the grey every day.”

Head of Talent Acquisition,  
FTSE 250 business

# Navigating the 2025 DEI shift: from reversal to real impact



Katie Hollis, Senior Client Manager

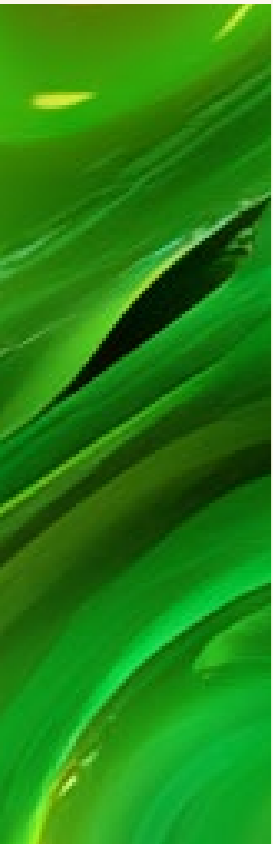
2025 marked a turning point for diversity, equity and inclusion. Following the Trump Administration's termination of federal DEI policies in January, corporate programmes came under scrutiny, and many organisations scaled back initiatives globally.

The impact was a quick and concerning reversal of progress; according to a July 2025 survey of 965 US companies, organisations cutting DEI reported a decline in retention and hiring of diverse employees and fewer women in leadership roles, as well as reputational damage and lower employee morale.

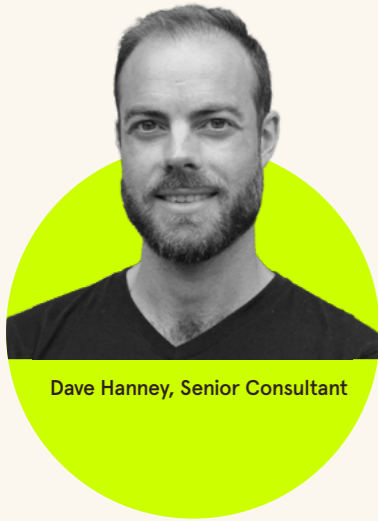
Despite the turbulence and political pressures, it's encouraging to see several major companies maintaining or strengthening their inclusion commitments. Apple, for example, continues to defend its representation goals, Cisco's leadership reiterated that a diverse workforce is a core business advantage, and BT's CEO confirmed that DEI remains a priority, highlighting the importance of inclusion in the company's long-term strategy.

Many others are simply reframing - moving away from explicit DEI language and instead embedding inclusion into governance and culture. So, while this shift doesn't seem to mark a full retreat, my concern for 2026 is that the drop in public targets and transparency may make it harder for stakeholders to track progress.

On the other hand, my hope is that it will drive a move from optics to impact, with leading organisations positioning inclusion as business-critical and integrating it deeply into culture. While representation and diversity metrics remain important, the recognition that true inclusion depends on emotional connection is gaining momentum. To stay on the front foot, organisations will need to guarantee workplaces where everyone feels seen, heard and valued - moving beyond simply having diverse voices in the room to ensuring those voices are welcomed, respected and able to contribute meaningfully.



# Beyond change management: adapt to thrive in the transformation era



Dave Hanney, Senior Consultant

In 2026 “change management” will feel like a relic of a steadier time. The pace, scale, and complexity of disruption can’t be managed in phases or controlled through static plans. What’s unfolding is the rise of agile, adaptive organisations that treat transformation as their operating environment, not an intervention.

Culture is the key to successful transformation. As disruption intensifies, culture becomes critical infrastructure: it’s what enables faster, decentralised decision-making, shared accountability, and the psychological safety people need to stay resilient amid constant change. Shared ownership demands new capabilities - designing and embedding transformations are no longer just for HR or People teams. Responsibility is now distributed: every manager must become an enabler, every employee a participant.

AI and real-time analytics will continue to improve how organisations track, measure, and course-correct transformation efforts. Smart dashboards will replace static plans, giving leaders both foresight and responsiveness: spotting resistance early, targeting support, and evolving communications and engagement in real time.

With more disruption comes greater cognitive load, emotional strain and risk of burnout. Businesses that invest in supporting their people, helping them sustain energy and recover through waves of change will see sharper focus, stronger resilience and better performance.

2026 will bring peak disruption. Businesses will be grappling with accelerated AI adoption, industry convergence, shifting customer needs, and mounting regulatory and workforce pressures. They will face simultaneous transformations at unprecedented speed, making legacy approaches too slow and too rigid to keep pace and stay competitive.

## Going into 2026, there are 5 actions businesses can be thinking about:

1

**Build adaptive cultures that prioritise trust, openness, and continuous learning**

2

**Embed shared accountability, ensuring transformation ownership is distributed, not centralised**

3

**Equip managers as enablers with stronger communication, empathy, and coaching capabilities**

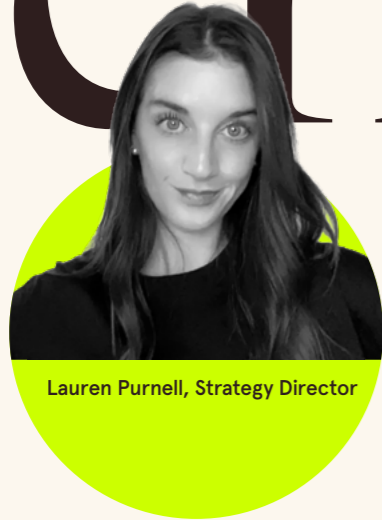
4

**Use AI and real-time intelligence to guide transformation journeys and adapt plans quickly**

5

**Invest in the human experience with mental-health support, flexible working, and rapid-response development**

# Performance



Lauren Purnell, Strategy Director

## The Rise of the High-Performance EVP

As we look ahead to 2026, one of the most significant shifts in the talent landscape is how organisations are rethinking the role of their EVP.

For years, EVP has been anchored in invitation – a promise of support, belonging, and reassurance. It was right for its time, especially through turbulence when people needed stability more than stretch.

But that moment has passed. Businesses are under renewed pressure to perform, and employees aren't just asking, "Will I fit in?" They're asking, "What will it take to thrive here?"

**This is the shift from invitation to challenge.**

Organisations are evolving their EVP from a warm welcome to a clear, performance-focused contract: Here's what we offer, here's what it takes and what we expect in return.

This isn't about being harder or less human, it's about being honest. Today's employees want transparency about the behaviours, standards, and stretch required to deliver impact. They want to understand the "give" as much as the "get." And organisations want EVPs that don't just attract talent but equip people to contribute at the level the business truly needs.

This expectation-led approach is fast becoming one of the defining trends of the coming year.

Because when expectations are clear, the challenge is understood, and the contract is mutual, people are better positioned to grow, perform, and make meaningful impact. And in a year where pace, pressure, and priorities will continue to shift, that kind of clarity becomes one of the most powerful levers organisations have – not just for attraction, but for retention, performance, and long-term success.

# The end of one-size-fits-all work



Shohada Akthar, Senior Consultant

The global workforce has never been more multi-generational. By 2030, a quarter of G7 workforces will be aged over 55, while Gen Z will make up around 30% - each group bringing distinct needs and motivations. Flexibility is now a baseline expectation, with 85% of workers globally placing work-life balance above salary when choosing jobs.

Yet flexibility means different things. While some seek more ownership and adaptability over their schedules, particularly as they move through different life stages, others are flexing to operate at higher intensity with blurred boundaries, particularly in tech and consulting. This duality reflects a wider shift in how success is defined.

Meanwhile, physical and mental health, financial security, social connection and psychological safety are seen by many not just as a nice-to-have, but as a means to protect performance. Recent data reveals worrying patterns: burnout rates remain high, financial anxiety is widespread, and 'insecure overachievement' driven by a competitive talent market is on the rise. In this environment, defining what good looks like for individuals and tailoring support becomes crucial.

Going forwards into 2026, organisations must design for the diversity of the people in their workforce. Not just demographics, but of energy, values and pace. Systems that allow people to work and thrive in ways that fit their life stage and personal definition of success gets the best from people for the organisation. And as performance pressures grow, the organisations that succeed will be those that humanise productivity. Embedding wellbeing into systems, not just offering it as a perk, ensures energy, creativity, engagement and retention all remain high.





Jenny Lodge,  
Head of Client Services

# Tech moves fast. Trust moves people.

As we head into 2026, it seems that organisations are still divided when it comes to AI. Some, especially big tech and global players, are fully committed, embedding agentic AI into daily workflows and even KPIs. Others are taking a more cautious “wait and see” approach, adopting AI tactically while remaining sceptical about how far or fast it will go.

One emerging truth is that AI is amplifying the need for authentic employee advocacy. As candidates navigate AI-driven processes and generic, machine-generated content, employee voices are becoming more influential than corporate messaging. But advocacy only works when employees feel valued and trusted to represent the brand, as well as see the benefit to their own career development.

At the same time, the employee experience is becoming a critical differentiator. The rapid rise of AI has created excitement but also anxiety about job security and psychological safety. People need the freedom to experiment without fear, and businesses need to prioritise connection, stability and retention of in-demand skills.




And, across all levels, people are feeling increasing pressure to show tangible impact. AI can free teams from repetitive work, but proving ROI while the technology is still in its “messy middle” remains challenging. Ultimately, the question for 2026 is no longer just how we use AI, but **what new value we can create with it.**

Meanwhile, the speed of business continues to intensify. As one leader put it, “We need to make sure we’re thinking

ahead as well as about what needs doing now”. Mastering both the **fix** and **flex** will be key to an organisation’s future success: holding tight to a stable north star while navigating employees through constant changes and building talent processes designed for real-time responsiveness.

So, wherever you sit on the AI spectrum, it’s clear that the winners will be those who stay flexible, move fast and lead with human trust at the centre.



# What happens when the AI bubble goes pop?



Alice Ellis, Senior Consultant

**2025 was the year of Artificial Intelligence. AI isn't new, but it wasn't particularly mainstream or arguably particularly good until recently, and whether you love it, loathe it, or are frankly indifferent – you and your business most likely now use AI.**

Business adoption has been rapid; AI strategy and integration became key priorities for many organisations in 2025. There was a collective sprint to the AI bandwagon, nobody wanted to be left behind or fail to capitalise fast enough. Fuelled perhaps by the opportunity AI presents, but perhaps also by a good deal of hype.

AI feels inescapable, but is it untouchable? Every bubble bursts eventually, and particularly those blown up to such a stratospheric size in such a short space of time. Are the AI companies overvalued? Is the market oversaturated? It certainly seems so right now. But even if those things are true, does it matter?

The factor that interests me most as we move into 2026 is whether businesses will start to find their return on investment lacking. What happens when investment has failed to reap the expected financial uptick? Or when the benefit to employees, customers or workflows aren't felt as anticipated? Or, when organisations realise there are areas where AI adds no value at all? Perhaps, the bubble bursts.

So, what to do? Assess the impact AI implementation has had on your business and plan your Human Intelligence strategy for 2026 with the same gusto you planned your Artificial Intelligence strategy in 2025. AI isn't going anywhere anytime soon, but 2026 could be about finding the right role for it without making it the whole story.

It seemed only fair to give AI a say, and when asked about its own fate, it sat on the fence: there's a real risk of an AI bubble bursting in 2026, but opinions are divided.

# Connection



Alastair Webb, Senior Consultant

## Beyond eNPS: why 2026 will see the fall of simplistic metrics and the rise of real insight



2026 will be the year that organisations start moving away from treating eNPS as a definitive measure of employee experience, and toward richer, more contextual insight where they can create targeted plans for improvement. For years, eNPS has been a go-to shorthand for performance because it's simple, scalable, and easy to communicate.

However, as workplaces become more complex and employee expectations more nuanced, eNPS's simplicity as a single high-level score can no longer keep pace with the reality it's meant to represent.

An overreliance on single-score metrics can create blind spots. They reveal what people feel but not why. Meanwhile, we are entering new territory as five generations are all in the workforce simultaneously (for the first time), AI is disrupting work patterns across all industries and levels, and working patterns are continuously evolving, increasing the need for a more nuanced understanding of people and culture.

In this environment, eNPS becomes less of an evaluative tool, and more of a directional cue – a prompt to identify the micro-moments in the employee experience worth probing further. The gap between the “score” and the “story” is widening, and leaders are beginning to feel it; especially as employee expectations become more complex.

Going into 2026, this isn't about abandoning eNPS altogether; it's about going beyond it. The teams that are set to succeed and drive real, impactful change won't be those who can quote the number, but those who can **explain it**.

This means exploring the context through lived experience, behaviours, and the emotions that sit beneath the score, with the real value coming from the insight that surrounds the metric, rather than the number itself.

It starts by pairing the metric with deeper methods: qualitative insight, behavioural observation and real employee stories. The priority should be to understand your people and what motivates them, embracing the messiness, rather than leaning on the neatness of a single silver-bullet metric.

The organisations that will create meaningful changes in employee experience won't be chasing the score, but learning what the story behind it is.

# Creating moments of intentional friction



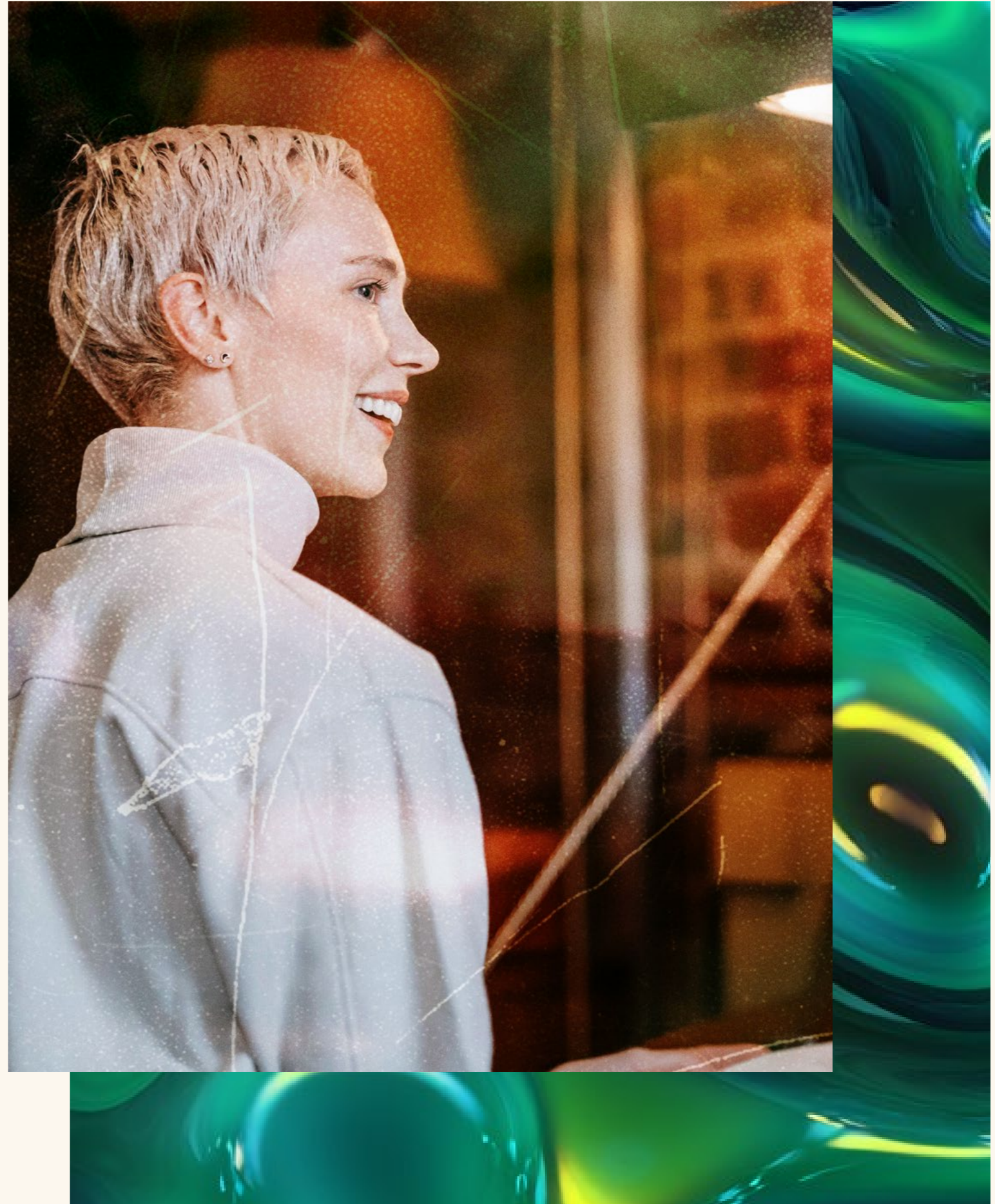
Amity Fisher,  
Associate Strategy Director

As we've seen in the brand world, friction – those small moments of inconvenience when people have to work a little harder to understand and engage – is important for forming meaning and memory. But as technology develops and makes our lives more seamless, it can unintentionally strip moments of positive friction that give experiences a sense of texture and realness. And the workplace is no exception. As AI continues to automate communications and streamline processes, businesses risk losing those important moments of friction that create connection and engagement with employees.

So, in 2026, I predict we will see more organisations intentionally injecting moments of meaningful friction throughout the employee experience, by elevating the human, imperfect, authentic moments that create a sense of realness in a world dominated by AI's perfect prose and automated content. One place we are already seeing this is

in leader communications. Earlier this year, we hosted a lunch with senior HR and brand leaders to discuss AI, where one attendee shared that their CEO sent a company-wide email prefaced with, "This email has been written on the go, apologies for any typos," which garnered an overwhelmingly positive response from employees. Similarly, we've seen other companies experiment with simple voice notes from leaders, using these small, unpolished acts of candour to help employees feel less disconnected from leadership, and so far, it's landing well.

Alongside this, we're also likely to see more research focused on understanding where to add friction along the employee experience. In practice, this looks like setting up continuous listening channels and employee research communities to test what works, spot what sticks, and understand what different audiences connect with, ensuring any friction creates meaning and value, not fatigue.





Benjamin Gallagher,  
Design Director

## The enduring value in human connection

History has taught us that stories are engrained into who we are as a species. From cave paintings to Neolithic carvings, to Mesopotamian tablets, all of these took skill and time to craft - into and onto clay and stone - to preserve them in time for future generations. Visual forms and cues alongside the written word have captivated humans for centuries, to connect people, parent to child, tribe to tribe.

Now, much like the advent of the printing press in 1440, AI has presented another technological leap that offers speed, accessibility and lower costs of production. Theoretically, now it's never been easier to tell a story: you can input some notes, or a series of bullet points into a generation tool, and out comes a story...of sorts.

But with that comes a natural drawback - if 'anyone can write a story' where is the role of human connection in storytelling, where does the value come from?

The challenge is that an AI prompt cannot capture:

Empathy

Observation

Listening

Visual & verbal acuity

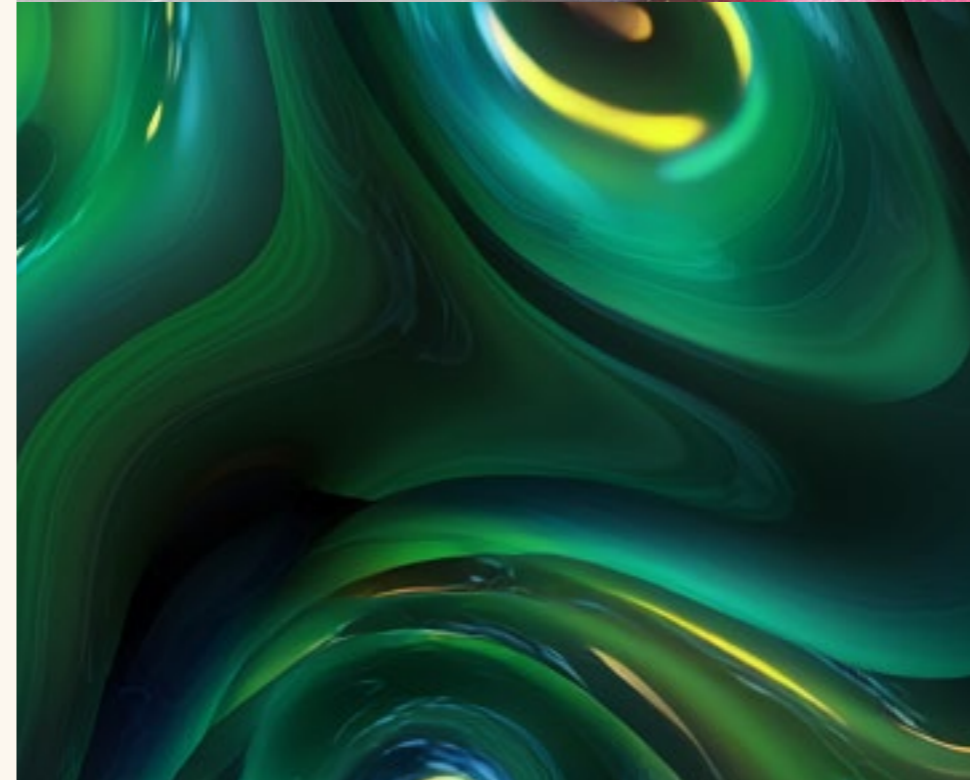
Objectivity

Distinction



As with all human innovation it ramps up in pace - there is a rush for speed - to make and deliver as fast as possible. Often this pace cuts out real connection, and we forget that well-crafted stories create connection between people. And that connected people help tell a more coherent story.

So, for those looking to AI for creative engagement, remember that we are empathetic creatures, and as such, we respond to stories because they cultivate emotion and a sense of togetherness. Looking ahead to next year, the opportunity will be to assess where AI enhances creativity and where it hinders, to balance machine with human, and build connection that lasts.





Maël Le Pouésard,  
Senior Consultant

## The rise of internal storytelling

Internal storytelling is on the rise. For years, storytelling has been brands' go-to tool for connecting with customers. But now, that same narrative power is being turned inward. Businesses are increasingly branding their own initiatives, giving key projects, strategies, and transformations the kind of narrative treatment once reserved for marketing campaigns.

Work is more complex than ever: new tech, new structures, new strategies. People need stories to make sense of it all. At the same time, employees are searching for meaning. Since the pandemic, over half the workforce has re-evaluated the purpose behind their work. Internal storytelling connects business activity to purpose, helping employees see that meaning.

Going into next year, businesses should start to ask themselves where stories might be needed. If employees can't easily answer "why we exist," "what we're trying to achieve," or "how we're getting there," there's a good chance there's a storytelling gap and it might be the place to start. Beyond that, businesses may reflect on their wider internal communications - only about half of employees find their company comms clear or helpful. There's a huge opportunity to apply the same storytelling principles marketers use externally, internally. Think of your business initiatives as stories that should create clarity, emotion, relevance, and creativity.

In 2026, expect storytelling to become a critical leadership skill. As work gets faster and more complex, the businesses that thrive will be those able to turn strategy into story, helping people not just understand the plan, but believe in it.





Kat Norman, Business Director

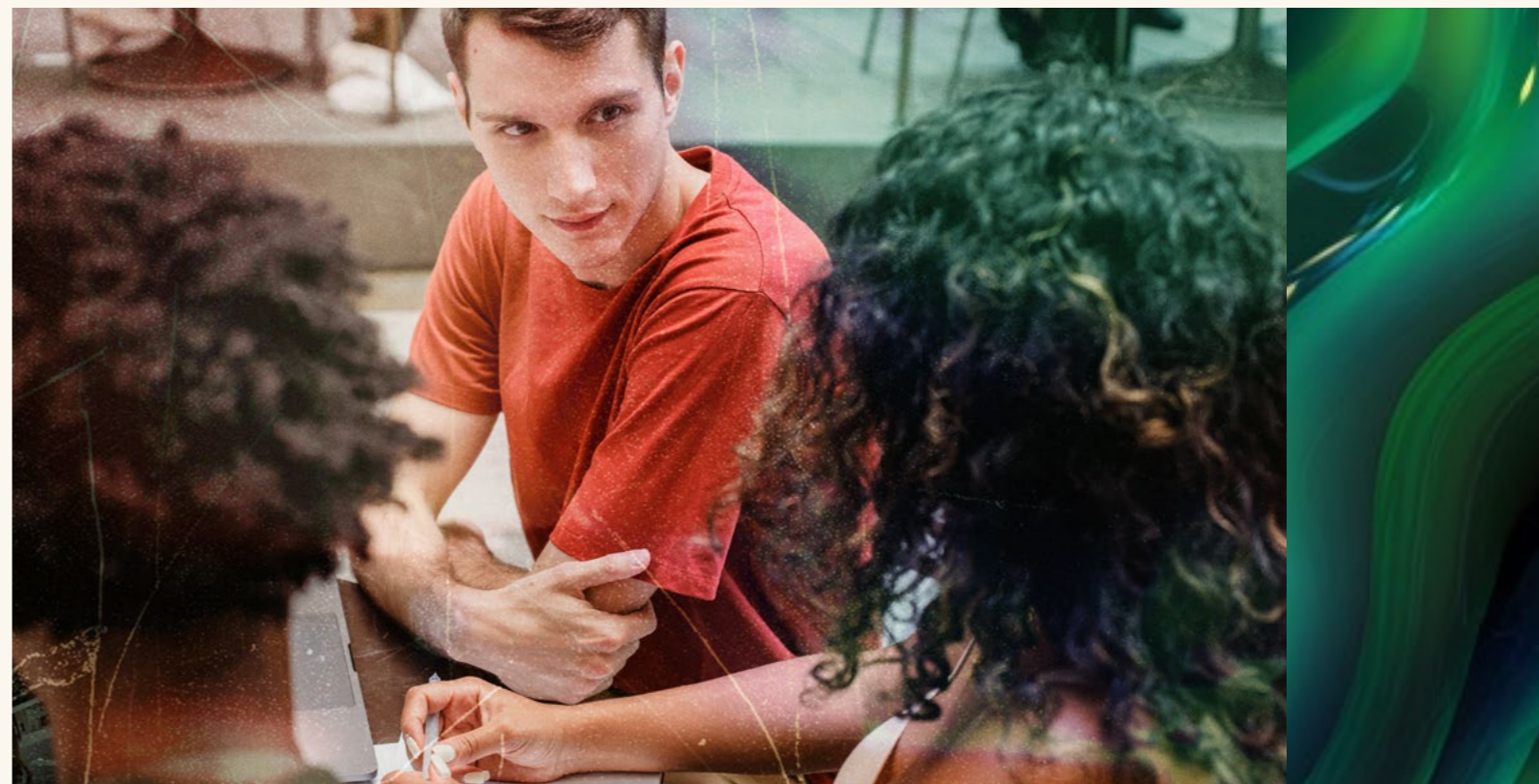
# Strengthening engagement to rebuild commitment

2025 has been a year of new conversations that have really highlighted a change of needs and challenges, and lifted the lid on what leaders have on their minds. Businesses are moving away from siloed strategies towards joined-up, integrated approaches that connect HR, Culture, Comms, and Brand to deliver consistent narratives and engagement. This shift is driven by the need to combat change fatigue, information overload, and disengagement among employees. Campaigns and activations will have to work harder, to dial up the benefit for employees, putting the customer at the heart of the strategy and reigniting commitment from their people through more L&D.

With an increase in cross-functional teams and highly integrated projects, this shows us how businesses are moving from siloed approaches to ramping up engagement across projects (and therefore expanding their reach and cut-through with their employees). From launching a new business strategy, communicating key business changes which require a shift in mindset, or supercharging cultures to deliver on high performance – they're all supported by inter-disciplinary leaders as

key sponsors. Because internal audiences are exhausted and only a joined-up strategy will combat this. They're being drip-fed so many messages and new thinking that both change-fatigue and saturation of information is palpable.

The businesses winning are really interrogating how the many different strands of strategy can come together in a more consistent story, and importantly engages cross-departmental stakeholders, and their people, along the way.



“According to Gallup’s 2025 global study, 79% of employees are disengaged (which is at a 5 year high...)”

**Why is this different to previous years, and how will this change next year?** Without taking a lengthy detour, AI has of course impacted and accelerated this change. It's made human moments of listening to your people, understanding how the strategy will impact them and asking the important question of 'why should they care, how will this help or benefit them' even more important. Many of our success stories from launching change programmes this year have begun from a

place of 'how does this help the customer' – it's an infallible unifier that means teams work more closely together, your people can relate to why you're doing something, and it forces reflective action to change a tangible outcome. Plus, research shows that customer-obsessed companies are more than three times as likely to lead their industries in revenue growth, and also achieve profitability premiums of around 23% over their peers.

**So why is engagement at an all-time low?** The Gallup stat reveals a global median, and we're lucky enough to be talking with businesses that are bucking this trend and continuing to invest in their people – but this isn't a blip. In a tightening job market, and with businesses cutting costs, meaningfully engaging employees in key moments of change has been one of the first things to be deprioritised. It seems like a nice-to-have, rather than business critical, but it is also painfully clear that



without it change programmes fail. Lack of investment fuels lack of engagement, and then you're at risk of being in a perpetual loop of employees feeling part of a very transactional relationship, disengaged, and uncommitted.

Possibly enhanced by Gen Z entering the workplace with inherently different expectations, they bring with them a level of discernment that shakes up traditional relationships with the employer. It's reported that

57% of Gen Z employees have at least one side hustle, many of which produce a secondary income stream. This is not just limited to Gen Z though, as the job market becomes more volatile and people search for more meaning from their work, a range of generations see the benefits of a side hustle. It can also be called 'side-stacking', and it shows a preference of wanting layered expertise, diversifying their skillsets and enhancing job security by not following a single career path. It's not any surprise that this

is having a direct impact on commitment and engagement at work, as there's less pressure on employees to be indebted or under the traditional psychological contract that's existed for decades.

## Going into 2026, businesses can take the following steps:

### Create a Unified Narrative

Audit strategies to ensure they connect into one coherent story.  
**Use this as a litmus test:** if priorities can't align, refine them. You'll avoid the confusion or disorientation of your people, making your messaging and engagement tactics work even harder.

### Reignite Engagement Through Customer-centricity

Anchor change initiatives in the customer benefit - this resonates across teams and drives collaboration.  
 Build moments for recognition, enrichment, and dialogue to strengthen commitment in teams.  
**Ask:** Why should employees care? How does this help them and the customer?

### Invest in Continuous Learning and Career Pathways

Offer opportunities for skill diversification to counter the appeal of side hustles.  
 Enable adjacent career exploration within the organisation.

# A bit about People Made



**We connect business and people to shape cultures that perform, employer brands that inspire, and experiences that stand apart.**

People Made was founded in London in 2012 with a simple belief: real impact happens when purpose, people, and experience move in the same direction.

In a world that never stands still, we help leaders and their teams shape and navigate change with clarity and confidence. Because lasting change doesn't happen to people, it happens through them.

For over a decade, we've partnered with global brands to unite their business ambition with the beliefs and behaviours that bring it to life.

From shaping cultures that perform, to crafting employer brands that inspire and experiences that stand apart, we make change feel human and impactful.

**Authentic, connected, and built to last.**



If you'd like to talk about any culture, employer brand, employee or customer experience challenges you're facing, please reach out to us at [hello@people-made.com](mailto:hello@people-made.com)

## GET IN TOUCH:

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