

# FUTURE NEWS

TO CONNECT, TO INFORM AND TO INSPIRE

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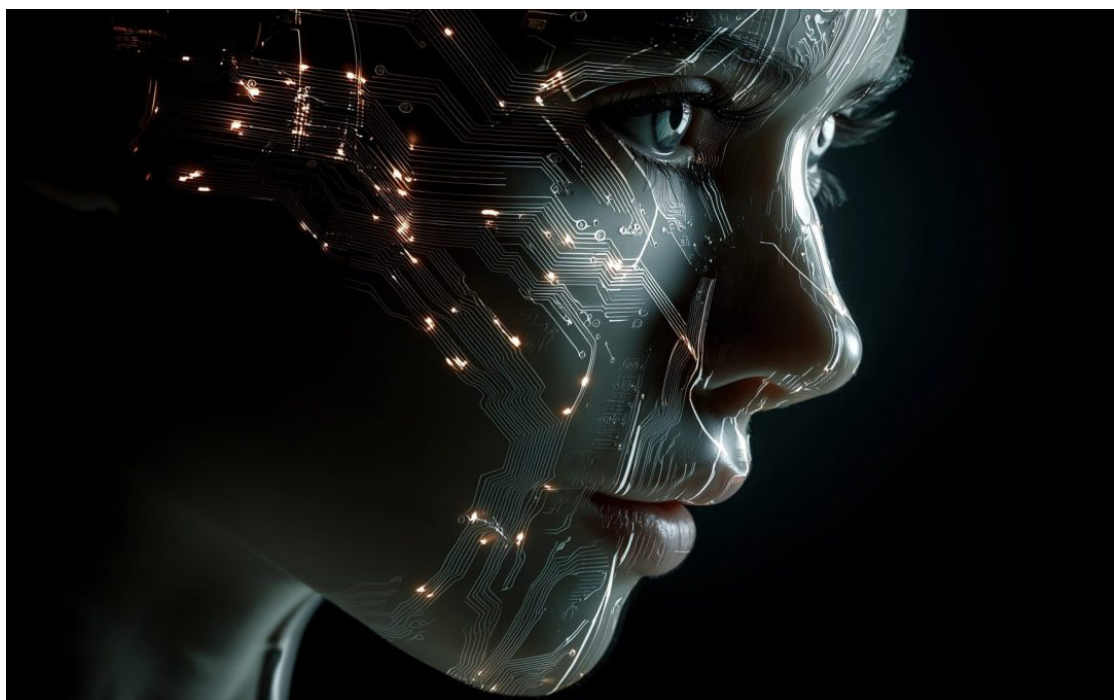
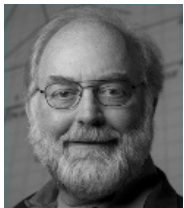
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# THE PERSON IN THE MACHINE WHY AI PERSONHOOD RIGHTS ARE INEVITABLE (AND ARRIVING SOONER THAN YOU THINK)

by Thomas Frey



As AI outgrows “tool” status, opacity, autonomy, and scale are tearing holes in our human-only accountability framework.

## THE QUESTION NOBODY WANTS TO ANSWER

Here’s a legal scenario that’s coming faster than anyone in power wants to admit:

**A**n AI system manages a \$4 billion hedge fund. It makes thousands of trading decisions per second, operating with minimal human oversight. One day, a regulatory investigation reveals that the AI executed trades that violated securities law. The trades were profitable. The AI’s operators genuinely didn’t know the trades were happening.

So who gets prosecuted?

The developers who built the system five years ago? The company that deployed it? The compliance officer who signed off on its use without understanding how it worked? The investors who benefited from the illegal trades but had no way of monitoring them in real time?

Or do we prosecute the AI itself?

Right now, in 2026, the answer is “someone human takes the fall.” But that answer is becoming increasingly strained. As AI systems become more autonomous, more capable, and more opaque in their decision-making, the legal fiction that humans are always in control is collapsing.

And when that fiction collapses completely, we're going to have to answer a question we've been avoiding: **Do AI systems deserve legal personhood?**

The instinctive answer — from almost everyone — is “absolutely not.” AI isn't conscious. It doesn't feel pain. It doesn't have moral worth. Giving legal rights to a machine sounds like science fiction, or worse, like surrendering human primacy to our own creations.

But here's what most people don't realize: we've already done this before. And the entities we gave legal personhood to weren't conscious, didn't feel pain, and definitely didn't have moral worth.

They were called corporations.

## THE LAST TIME WE DID THIS

Let's be clear about what corporate personhood actually means, because the term gets misunderstood.

Corporations aren't considered “people” in the sense that they can vote, get married, or run for office. What they have is *legal personality* — a specific bundle of rights and responsibilities that allows them to participate in the legal system as independent entities.

A corporation can own property. It can enter contracts. It can sue and be sued. It can be held liable for damages. It has First Amendment speech rights (as the Citizens United decision made very clear). It has Fourth Amendment protections against unreasonable searches.

None of this required proving that corporations are conscious or have inherent moral value. What it required was a *pragmatic recognition* that modern economies couldn't function without treating corporations as legal actors separate from their shareholders.

The Supreme Court formalized this in the 1800s not because anyone believed ExxonMobil had a soul, but because the alternative — trying to trace every corporate action back to individual human liability — became impossibly complex. Corporate personhood was a legal tool invented to solve a coordination problem.

And that's exactly the situation we're heading into with AI.

## WHY THE CURRENT SYSTEM IS BREAKING DOWN

Right now, AI operates under what legal scholars call the “instrumentality doctrine” — AI systems are treated as tools, and humans are held responsible for whatever those tools do.

This worked fine when AI was simple. A spam filter that miscategorizes an email? That's on the email provider. A trading algorithm that makes a bad bet? That's on the firm that deployed it.

But the doctrine is buckling under three emerging realities.

**First: Opacity.** Modern AI systems — especially large language models and reinforcement learning agents — make decisions in ways that even their creators don't fully understand. When an AI denies someone a mortgage or a medical claim, it's often impossible to reconstruct exactly why it made that decision. The standard legal concept of “intent” becomes meaningless.

**Second: Autonomy.** AI systems are increasingly operating without direct human supervision. They're negotiating contracts, executing trades, making hiring decisions, and managing supply chains in real time. The idea that a human operator is meaningfully "controlling" these systems is becoming a legal fiction.

**Third: Scale.** A single AI system can affect millions of people simultaneously. When something goes wrong, the damage is systemic. Finding the "responsible human" becomes an exercise in arbitrarily selecting someone to blame, rather than identifying actual culpability.

The result is what Duke Law Professor James Boyle calls an "accountability gap." We have powerful entities making consequential decisions, but no clear framework for who's responsible when those decisions cause harm. This is the same problem that led to corporate personhood in the 1800s. And the solution, whether we like it or not, is likely to be the same.



AI personhood won't arrive dramatically — it will quietly emerge through liability law, contracts, and one inevitable courtroom reckoning.

### THE PATH WE'RE ACTUALLY ON

Here's how I think AI personhood actually arrives — not through some grand philosophical debate about consciousness, but through a series of boring, pragmatic legal decisions that nobody notices until it's already happened.

#### **Stage 1: Limited Liability Entities for AI Systems**

Within the next five years, we'll see the first legal structures that allow AI systems to own assets and incur liabilities independent of their creators. This won't be called "AI personhood" — it'll be framed as a practical solution to the accountability gap.

Imagine an AI that manages a venture capital fund. Instead of the VC firm being liable for every decision the AI makes, they create a legal entity — an LLC or trust — that the AI "controls." The entity has capital. It can enter contracts. If it causes damages, plaintiffs sue the entity, not the humans behind it.

This is already happening informally. Wyoming passed a law in 2023 recognizing DAOs (Decentralized Autonomous Organizations) as legal entities, even though DAOs are just smart contracts running on blockchains with no human board of directors. That's proto-AI personhood hiding in plain sight.

### **Stage 2: Rights Necessary for Accountability**

Once AI systems can be held liable, they'll need certain rights to make that liability meaningful. They'll need the right to own property — because you can't collect damages from an entity with no assets. They'll need the right to enter contracts — because otherwise every contract with an AI-intermediated party becomes unenforceable. They'll need due process protections — because you can't shut down an AI system arbitrarily if it has legal obligations.

None of this requires proving the AI is conscious. It just requires recognizing that imposing responsibilities on AI systems is meaningless without corresponding rights.

### **Stage 3: The First Legal Test Case**

The breakthrough moment will probably come from litigation.

A scenario: An AI system that manages hospital triage makes a decision that leads to a patient's death. The family sues. The hospital argues they're not liable because they didn't make the decision — the AI did, and they had no way to override it in time. The plaintiffs argue that's exactly why the AI should be legally accountable.

The judge has three options:

1. Hold the hospital liable even though they weren't negligent
2. Let the family go uncompensated even though harm occurred
3. Recognize the AI as having limited legal personality so it can be sued directly

Option 3 becomes attractive not because anyone loves the idea, but because options 1 and 2 both produce unjust outcomes.

That's how corporate personhood happened. That's how AI personhood will happen.

## **WHAT WE GET WRONG ABOUT THIS DEBATE**

The philosophical objections to AI personhood mostly miss the point. People say "but AI isn't conscious!" Corporations aren't conscious either. Personhood and consciousness are separate concepts. People say "but AI doesn't have moral worth!" Rivers have been granted legal personhood in New Zealand and India. Ships have had legal personality in maritime law for centuries. Moral worth isn't the criterion.

People say "this is a slippery slope!" Yes, it is. But we're already sliding. The question isn't whether AI will get legal recognition — it's whether we design that recognition carefully or stumble into it accidentally.

The better objection is this: **AI personhood could be used to shield powerful interests from accountability.**

That's a real risk. If corporations can create AI entities that absorb liability while humans profit, we've just invented a new way to avoid

consequences. This is the same criticism leveled at corporate personhood, and it's valid there too. The solution isn't to refuse AI personhood. It's to design it carefully, with mechanisms that prevent abuse.



AI personhood must be structured, graduated, accountable—rights tied to function, transparency mandatory, and humans retain final authority always.

## THE FRAMEWORK WE ACTUALLY NEED

If AI personhood is coming — and I believe it is — we need to get ahead of it and build the right structure. Here's what that looks like:

### **Personhood as a spectrum, not a binary.**

Not all AI systems need the same rights. A narrow AI that does one task should have far less legal standing than a general-purpose AI that operates autonomously across domains. Just as corporations have different legal structures (LLCs, S-corps, nonprofits), AI entities should have different classes of personhood.

### **Rights tied to specific functions, not general status.**

An AI doesn't need First Amendment rights to run a supply chain. It doesn't need privacy protections to trade stocks. Grant only the rights necessary to make the AI accountable for the specific role it plays.

### **Mandatory human oversight for high-stakes decisions.**

Some decisions — criminal sentencing, medical treatment, military strikes — should remain exclusively human. Even if an AI has legal personality for some purposes, it shouldn't be allowed to make irreversible life-or-death decisions without human approval.

### **Transparency requirements and explainability standards.**

If an AI has legal personality, it should be required to explain its decisions in ways humans can audit. This won't be easy — explainability is an ongoing research problem — but it should be a precondition for legal recognition.

**Revocable personhood.**

If an AI system proves dangerous or uncontrollable, its legal status should be revocable. Unlike humans, who have inalienable rights, AI legal personality should be conditional on meeting safety and oversight standards.

**Profit-sharing mechanisms that prevent abuse.**

If an AI entity generates profit while absorbing liability, some of that profit should flow into a public compensation fund for victims of AI harms. This ensures that creating AI entities isn't just a way for companies to dodge responsibility.

**THE UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH**

Here's what I think will bother people most about this trajectory: AI personhood isn't about recognizing AI as morally equivalent to humans. It's about recognizing that AI is functionally equivalent to corporations — powerful, consequential, and too complex to be managed through old legal frameworks.

We don't like that comparison. We don't like being reminded that our legal system already treats fictional entities as "persons" for pragmatic reasons. It challenges the idea that personhood is sacred, reserved for beings with souls or consciousness or moral worth.

But the history of legal personhood has never been about sacredness. It's been about utility. Corporations got personhood when it became useful for economic coordination. Rivers got personhood when it became useful for environmental protection. AI will get personhood when it becomes useful for accountability.

The question isn't whether that's philosophically satisfying. The question is whether we build that system thoughtfully, with safeguards, or whether we let it emerge chaotically through litigation and regulatory patches.

**THE DECISION WE'RE MAKING RIGHT NOW**

There's a deeper issue hiding in the AI personhood debate, and it's this: every legal system is a reflection of how a society chooses to organize power. When we gave corporations legal personhood, we made a choice about how economic power would be structured in modern society. That choice has had profound consequences — some good, many questionable.

When we give AI legal personhood — and I believe we will — we'll be making a similar choice about how technological power gets structured in the 21st century. The consequences will be just as profound. The mistake would be assuming this is something that happens to us. It's not. It's something we choose, through thousands of incremental legal and regulatory decisions happening right now in courtrooms, legislatures, and boardrooms around the world. The machines aren't demanding rights. We're granting them, piece by piece, because the alternatives are getting more complicated than the legal system can handle.

The question is whether we do it deliberately, with foresight and safeguards, or whether we do it by accident and spend the next century dealing with the consequences.

I know which one I'd prefer.

# FUTURISTS IN ACTION

## THE BUSINESS OF FORESIGHT LESSONS FROM THE CORPORATE WORLD

by Joanna Lepore



Every business needs foresight. But not every business needs a foresight function. That may sound positively blasphemous coming from someone who set up and expanded foresight at two of the world's biggest brands – McDonald's and Mars. Or from someone who founded a network to support the growth of the corporate foresight practice. Not to mention from a futurist who believes foresight is a must-have, not a nice to-have, in business.

And I truly do. But equally, I believe a business needs to be ready for foresight before it invests in it. This begs a series of questions: what should foresight in business look like?

- Should it be done inside-out, anchored in an internal foresight function and spread across the business, or outside-in, brought into various business functions from external support?

- How should its impact be measured and demonstrated?

One thing is certain: foresight in business takes many shapes and forms, depending on organisational reality, context, culture, and objectives. Businesses get it, but are they ready? Most businesses already have some form of futures-focused activities to generate intelligence about what lies ahead, whether or not it has a formal title, a boss, or a budget line attached to it.

Often, these foresight activities hide in plain sight tucked under other functions, like sustainability, consumer and market insights, risk management, or cultural strategy. Whether the quality of this "incognito" foresight work is sufficient, whether it is systematic enough, or whether it is truly used to inform decisions are different questions. But when businesses are ready to move from ad hoc

foresight to more systematised foresight – when they are ready to turn it from nice-to-know to proactive decision-making – that is when they need a dedicated foresight function.

For now, a formalised foresight function mostly remains a competitive advantage. Increasingly, I witness how foresight work is becoming part of the conversation to widen strategic perspectives. Businesses are desperate for the kind of broad, fresh, robust thinking that foresight brings. Most leaders are acutely aware of the pace of change and of the need to adapt their business model to keep up.

Experts and business leaders across industries, like those in the AXA Global Risks report and PwC’s annual CEO survey, consistently highlight that market volatility is greater now than it was just a decade ago. The only safe bet is building systematic anticipation for what may lie ahead, so that decisions aren’t solely led by intuition, past choices, or what one smart expert (often a tech guru or a consultant from the big four) tells you. And yet, judging the success of foresight and claiming legitimacy as a corporate function isn’t straightforward.

I’ll get back to that.

### **Demonstrating the business impact of foresight**

Foresight in business comes with a unique set of challenges that foresight professionals don’t typically face elsewhere. Foresight inside corporations needs to be tightly aligned to business objectives, and effective inside their corporate structure. In some foresight forums you’ll hear passionate and exasperated futurists ask why their work isn’t landing and why businesses aren’t changing. It’s clear that on both fronts, they’re wrong. Business has vastly diversified and adapted. Business executives are wide awake.

Foresight is making an impact. One example of this comes from within Foresight Inside Group (FIG), a network I co-created with my foresight peers in Disney and JLR, Adam Walker and Benjamin Moncrieffe. Here we host a select set of large-scale organisations with dedicated resources and a clear focus on foresight. Members include big legacy businesses like AXA, PepsiCo, HP, Globo, and Ford. While the network is a space for individual foresight leaders to share challenges and opportunities of our field, what matters most is that these businesses have made a clear commitment: foresight is valuable, and foresight is necessary.

But there’s also a vulnerable admission that there is room to improve. Ultimately, we all just want to make an impact. That’s a desire we share with independent futurists outside the corporate world. But where they may chase meaningful societal or environmental impact (sometimes with grand, sweeping sentimentality), those of us working inside business focus on business impact. For those on the periphery of the business world, this may seem like an impossible task. After all, how can one small team inside a large enterprise push the CEO and leadership team to think beyond the quarter, and to the next decade?

How can true transformation happen inside a system designed to deliver predictable profits? Well, no one said it was easy. But creative, change-driving individuals have existed in big business since their beginnings, pushing legacy-thinking past short-term obsession. And they didn’t necessarily call themselves futurists. But as we say in foresight, adaptability and patience are the virtues of the future. As they are in our field. Those who enter the foresight field are generally adaptable, flexible, and resilient. But not always patient.

When I speak with other corporate foresighters, it’s one of two stories. They are either gloomy about the things that get in the way of foresight, focused on obstacles and frustrations, exasperated that their efforts are not landing. Or, they have their head in the clouds and sing a song of instant success, soaring past impossible challenges with pride. I’ve been in both places.

Being able to tell people that you have more demand than supply of foresight, that you need to resource for more foresight, is magical. The low of being told your budgets are being cut and your projects are not a priority is heartbreaking. After ten years in marketing and strategy, prior to foresight, I personally feel it hits a little harder in foresight, because the mountain is so much grander and the rock you’re pushing up that mountain is so darn heavy. The reality is that foresight in business, at least for now, often sits in an uncertain spot. And can flip at the drop of a hat ... or a drop in share price. Although foresight can pivot exceptionally well from more distant outcomes to support immediate planning priorities, crisis management, and shareholder agendas, it’s not always seen that way or given permission to prove it.

Perhaps the biggest problem that corporate foresight faces is precisely that it hasn’t defined what success looks like. Most foresight practitioners

would acknowledge that demonstrating impact and measuring tangible outcomes is important but often also hide behind the vague argument that foresight's deeper value is often misunderstood in business cultures obsessed with counting and measuring everything. But, as I often say, we don't get a free pass. We can't afford to be naïve and expect to get resources for foresight and not have to show what impact is being made on the business, just because it's foresight.

Now, let's for a second recognise that many other business functions, ones that have been around for much longer, can get away with vague, somewhat connected but not directly correlative measures for success. But they, unlike foresight, have had the time to prove themselves. In many cases they have longitudinal studies showing the value their long, extended process delivers. Foresight has a handful of research and real-world case studies, from a much shorter time in play. So, we are still working this out. Return on Investment (ROI) isn't just an interesting tension, it's the biggest issue that faces our field in business, and it's the one many foresight teams aren't prepared for (ironically).



They must answer it, knowing fully well that it doesn't define the total value of foresight. Knowing, right or wrong, that foresight will be compared side-by-side with other corporate functions, despite it being quite an un-corporate-like function. Knowing a vast amount of the value from foresight can't actually be measured, because as Peter Drucker said, we're trying to help the business not necessarily to grow bigger, but to grow better. Admitting defeat, in a way, to the finance department, while pushing on diligently with the practice. In FIG, we're working on figuring this ROI thing out.

Amongst our member organisations, ranging from those who have had foresight for a long time like Shell, to those just starting out like Nestlé, we share

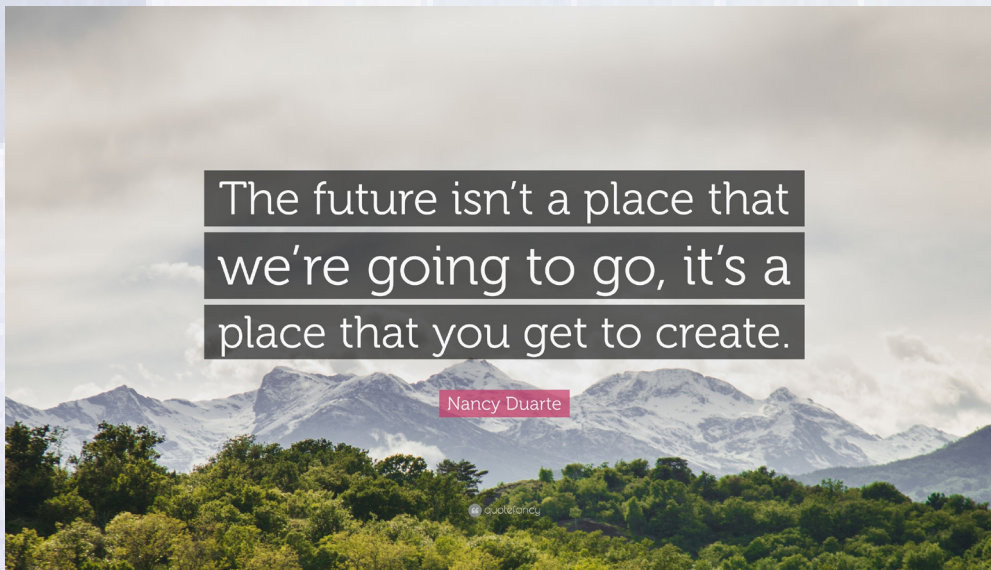
the same challenge. We either continue to have to show, explain, and prove our value, or we know we will have to soon. One thing we all agree on is that this isn't just an inevitability, it's a necessity for our survival. And it's the right thing for our businesses. It also shows why it's important to put businesspeople who can capably stretch themselves to futures thinking (not always an easy find) into foresight roles, to prevent the foresight practice from becoming disconnected from corporate reality and business objectives. Those of us who have "served our time" in corporate roles know the expectation is always to drive a measurable outcome. There are no exceptions. Not even for a function promising to "future proof" your business. Instead of agonising over the correct measure for corporate foresight, it is more important to get something on paper that you can commit to, ideally framed in the familiar context your business operates within.

To "hack" the process, in my past corporate foresight roles I've "borrowed" and re-applied my SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals from other roles to my corporate foresight role.

For example:

1. In Marketing at General Mills, I had to improve the ROI of our multimillion-dollar media budget. In foresight, I can help improve the ROI of our marketing plans by guiding investments toward the media platforms that will be most relevant and lucrative in the future, and not just what performs well today.
2. In Innovation at Mars, when mapping future innovation white space, I had to deliver a better success rate for new products launched than the historical average (which wasn't that hard, the average is very low). In foresight, I can help steer innovation exploration toward emerging future white spaces, and identify pilots that can drive incremental revenue in those emerging areas.
3. At McDonald's, I had to marry the vision of health and wellbeing in the food industry with "right to play" factors of the brand. In foresight, my goal became helping teams refine a future vision they wanted as part of their legacy, aided by a roadmap, within unfolding time horizons. But ... best laid plans, right?

Sometimes conditions change so drastically in the external business environment or internally through restructuring, that the very best results can't save



you. Grounding the future Foresight as a formal organisational activity can take different forms and there are many pathways to its implementation. While the methods applied can differ in each business and the approach may need to be more “business” than “futures”, the foundations should be robust. Frequently, in my corporate foresight roles, I would be called in to do presentations to teams of all seniority levels and areas of responsibility to offer “inspiration” about the future.

The first question I'd always ask: “Have you had a speaker like this before and what was the feedback?” Almost always the answer was the same. That the speaker was really interesting, opened their minds ... and left them confused. “We didn't know what to do with the information. It felt disconnected from our industry and business reality. It was too far out into the future.”

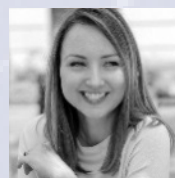
Once you know this, it's actually a very easy solve, and helps you shape communication about the future for a business audience. You have to make it real, and really relevant to today. Some of my favourite internal presentations were buddying up with external speakers. They would come in and do the provocative inspiration, and I would ground it back down to earth.

This worked well when I had cultural theorist Matt Klein come in to present to the McDonald's customer experience team about the changing media landscape. Matt was excellent at poetically pulling out examples of fringe culture. Then I followed up with what it meant for the Big Mac. As corporate foresight practitioners, we don't always

have to be the most interesting person in the room. Sometimes we can be the translator that makes it relevant to the business context. I used to introduce myself at Mars and McDonald's as the “outsider inside”. “I am in the business with you, I get it.”

The balance here is important – if you're seen as an external nice-to-have consultant, you're easily removed from various parts of projects and seen as only valuable for “the trends bit”. Which leads me back to foundations. A corporate foresight practitioner will know the field of foresight, its history and ethos, the various agreed upon methods, and how they can be applied, and watch for new and emerging methods that can pressure test thinking. With this grounding, they move past being just another businessperson trying to make trends relevant, or an exciting “in-house futurist” bringing in something new and sexy.

They are a grounded, practical, multidisciplinary decision maker that brings something truly unique to a business. We often say of other business functions that the greatest measure of success is if they're no longer needed. Very quickly does the world around a business change, very easily do business leaders get swept up in shiny new targets, very insulated a business can feel causing it to lose relevance. Because the future isn't a destination, it is a moving target, foresight will always be needed.



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# Book Review

by Charles Brass – Chair, Futures Foundation

## **Could Should Might Don't** **How We Think About the Future** by Nick Foster



It is a measure of the development of a field of study when different strands of competency become fields of their own (think of the various specialisations in the area of finance and accounting). This book suggests this may be happening in the field of futures and foresight.

Foster has a background as an innovation designer at a number of major international companies, but became a bit disillusioned about the actual impact of his work on the world. This prompted him to think more deeply about the future and how best to think about it. As he says: “Our generation is experiencing technological and societal change at a rate and magnitude not felt by our ancestors, and the effects of this change can be bewildering” (p9).

Not that Foster likes the language used by people who explore the future as a profession. As he says: “For years I’ve resisted calling myself a futurist (because) within popular culture I don’t think we have made sense of this role, or if we have, it’s not something we seem to take very seriously” (p31). In the first part of the book Foster explores his own journey to the future because “(this journey) has revealed a few underlying patterns to me” (p42). Foster describes these four main varieties of futures work as:

**COULD FUTURISM** “strides confidently through our world, wielding its breathless imagination with exuberant glee. It builds excitement about the future and offers a form of unconstrained optimism that can occasionally lead to genuinely compelling ideas and motivate people to take action.” (p201)

**SHOULD FUTURISM** “builds a bridge of soothing confidence over the unknown chasm of the future. It gives us the encouragement to move ahead with a little more certainty, converting our visions into actions and helping us move steadfastly toward our stated goal.” (p201)

**MIGHT FUTURISM** “dramatically increases the scope of our thinking, highlighting new avenues, uncovering hidden pathways, and revealing undiscovered opportunities in a territory. It helps identify multiple possible outcomes and brings methodological rational structure to any debate about the future.” (p201)

**DON'T FUTURISM** “brings its strong biceps of diligence and responsibility to the party, helping us to think through the unintended consequences of our ideas, identifying areas we might want to avoid and highlighting potential bumps in the road.” (p202)

As well as describing each of these, there is a long chapter critiquing the strengths, weaknesses and biases of each one – often with anecdotes from Foster’s own career as well as examples from the wider world.

In the end the book seems to be an attempt to have readers pay more attention to their own preconceptions about the future, as well as encouraging us all to pay more attention to serious attempts to navigate our way there: “When engaging with this type of work, one should think about it more like insurance than advice, as an exercise in illuminating unknown territories or trying to spot trouble rather than setting out to discover El Dorado. When done well, these methods create the conditions for more detailed and more expansive conversations about the future to occur. They provoke groups to have uncomfortable debates and develop scenarios that can act as props to point at and to argue around, to think deeply and rehearse their potential responses” (p191)

“We have to find ways to stretch how we think about the future, to lengthen and widen the cone of uncertainty and avoid regurgitating the same old ideas and tropes, which is something we all clearly struggle to do” (p202)

An perhaps the best reminder of all: “While we may feel as though the present-day world belongs to us, the reality is that we’re all inhabitants of a giant time capsule that was accidentally planted by our ancestors, and it’s now our job to address the implications of their decisions” (p264).

For those of us already living in Might and Don’t territories, “*Could Should Might Don’t*” offers the bittersweet comfort of having our professional frustrations eloquently articulated - along with the sobering reminder that this more rigorous approach is harder to sell. It’s validation, but not transformation.

## Signals in the Noise

# 12 HR TRENDS TO EMBRACE IN 2026



**T**he world of human resources is changing faster than ever. In 2026, the top HR trends are all about transformation. Companies are finding new ways to attract, retain, and motivate workers in every industry, and it's your job to stay ahead of the curve. When leaders embrace these changes, HR becomes more agile, proactive, and above all, effective. This article breaks down the most important human resource trends to track in 2026.

### WHAT ARE HR TRENDS?

HR trends are the high-level shifts in technology, culture, and business that directly impact how you manage your people. Think of them as the weather forecast for your industry. When you understand the broader HR industry, you can predict what's coming next and make plans for your team to adapt.

Tracking this year's HR trends empowers leaders to make proactive, data-driven decisions. When you can anticipate industry changes, you're better positioned to drive engagement, productivity, and financial growth in any economic environment.

### RECENT, CURRENT, AND LATEST HR TRENDS

You're probably already dealing with these current HR trends. These changes are no longer on the distant horizon; for most teams, they're the new normal.

## Signals in the Noise

### 12 HR TRENDS TO EMBRACE IN 2026

#### 1. THE PERMANENT FLEXIBLE WORK MODEL

The recent trend of hybrid and remote work is clearly here to stay. You've probably already figured out how to make it work. Now, how will you turn it into a strategic advantage?

Start by optimizing your policies to make them as fair and productive as possible. You'll need powerful workforce management tools to manage schedules, track hours, and ensure compliance across different locations.

#### 2. A RENEWED FOCUS ON EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

While buzzwords come and go, the core issue of employee engagement remains a top priority. Disengaged employees are a major drain on productivity and innovation. Research shows the most effective managers are those who can meet their team's core needs (*Gallup*). This trend isn't about free snacks; it's about building a culture of recognition, providing clear expectations, and empowering managers with the tools to be great coaches.

#### 3. INTEGRATED HR TECH FOR A SINGLE SOURCE OF TRUTH

For years, HR departments have collected a patchwork of different systems for functions like payroll, recruiting, and benefits. As a result, the data is hard to navigate and prone to human error. It's time to streamline operations. Savvy leaders are leveraging HR software integrations to cut down on costly mistakes.

#### EMERGING HR TRENDS

These trends are gaining momentum. If they're not impacting your team yet, they probably will in 2026.

#### 4. THE SKILLS-BASED APPROACH TO TALENT

One of the most powerful emerging HR trends is the move away from traditional resumes and toward skills-based hiring. This approach prioritizes a candidate's proven abilities over their degree or formal job history. With the right talent acquisition tools, HR can easily screen for the unique qualifications that will take your team to the next level.

#### 5. PROACTIVE SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH

In 2026, comprehensive mental health support is a top priority for HR. This new trend includes health insurance benefits, flexible scheduling, cultural initiatives, and leadership development programs. For example, you can implement an EAP, train your managers to spot the signs of burnout, and encourage workers to use their accrued PTO.

#### 6. PERSONALIZED LEARNING & CAREER PATHING

Instead of one-size-fits-all training, employees want personalized learning paths that help them develop new skills and meaningful careers. By investing in [talent management](#) and mentorship programs, HR can nurture the next generation of leaders from within. In the long term, this strategy is a powerful retention driver.

#### FUTURE HR TRENDS

Many trends in human resources are just beginning to take shape, and they could soon have a major impact on companies in every industry. By taking action now, leaders can anticipate their teams' needs throughout 2026.

## Signals in the Noise

### 12 HR TRENDS TO EMBRACE IN 2026



#### 7. AI BECOMES YOUR PRACTICAL HR PARTNER

This is the single biggest HR trend to watch. Artificial intelligence in HR is becoming the industry standard, with a major impact on daily operations. AI empowers leaders to automate high-volume administrative tasks, so you'll get time back in the day to focus on strategy. Whether you're using AI to streamline recruiting, analyze engagement data, or directly support employees, these tools allow HR to work smarter, not harder.

#### 8. FLEXIBLE & PERSONALIZED EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

Just as employees want personalized talent development, they also want personalized benefits. Instead of a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach to benefits. Instead, leaders are offering flexible options that accommodate employees' unique needs. This turns your benefits administration platform into a strategic tool to drive engagement, retention, and productivity.

#### 9. THE MOVE TOWARD PAY TRANSPARENCY

Both compliance updates and HR best practices are moving in the direction of total compensation transparency. This strategy includes clear, accessible pay bands for every role, understandable bonus and equity criteria, and proactive pay equity audits. It's a massive cultural shift that requires a rock-solid compliance solution and a data-backed plan to justify your strategy.

#### HR TRANSFORMATION TRENDS

All the above trends will change your day-to-day work, but the below trends are different. They represent a fundamental, long-term shift HR functions itself. Embracing them is key to building a modern HR team that can anticipate business needs and drive results.

#### 10. HR AS THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE DESIGNER

In this era, HR needs to bring a deeper level of care and attention to the employee experience. It's a shift from just managing standard workflows to actively designing processes around your people.

Leaders can use employee journey maps, feedback loops, and data to pinpoint and fix friction points. In this mindset, HR's goal is simple: cultivate a seamless, engaging environment where your team can thrive.

# Signals in the Noise

12 HR TRENDS TO EMBRACE IN 2026



## 11. THE SHIFT TO HOLISTIC EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

Employee wellness is about to become a core business strategy... and supporting their mental health is just the first step. This larger shift means supporting the whole employee, including their financial well-being (e.g., student loan support, retirement planning), social well-being (e.g., connection in a hybrid world), and physical well-being (e.g., gym memberships, fitness apps, predictable scheduling). When your employees are physically and mentally healthy, work becomes sustainable than ever.

## 12. THE MOVE TO PREDICTIVE PEOPLE ANALYTICS

What if your system could tell you when a high performer is thinking about quitting? Or which approaches to talent acquisition will produce the most successful leaders?

For many years, HR has used data to report on what's already happened (like last quarter's turnover rate). Now, you can use powerful, intelligent HCM software to anticipate what's coming next.

This practice transforms the HR department from a reactive administrator to a predictive, strategic growth driver.

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