

Two Workforces. One Operating Model.

People and digital systems increasingly contribute to the same outcomes. Designing their work together requires a clearer view of where human judgement and accountability belong.

By Lara Blackert

Organizations are beginning to manage two workforces: one human and one digital. The digital workforce includes models, agents, automations, and systems that can produce analysis, generate content, execute tasks, and increasingly coordinate sequences of work. It participates in production without experiencing employment.

The more consequential question is no longer where AI can automate a task, but how work should be designed when people and digital teammates both contribute.

Automation is not an operating model

Most organizations encounter AI through use cases. A team identifies a repetitive activity, introduces a tool, and measures time saved.

A collection of useful automations does not amount to a coherent system of work.

When tools are added without redesign, the old operating model remains in place. Decisions still move through the same bottlenecks. Ownership stays ambiguous. Employees inherit the work of checking, correcting, and reconciling outputs across disconnected systems. Productivity may increase locally while complexity increases across the enterprise.

The value of AI will depend less on the number of tools deployed than on whether the organization redesigns the conditions in which those tools operate.

Every contribution needs an owner

Digital work can be fast, scalable, and persuasive. It can also be incomplete, inconsistent, or wrong.

Accountability must therefore be resolved in the design of the work.

The operating model must establish who defines the task, determines what information the system can use, reviews the output, and has authority to accept, change, or reject it. It must also make clear who is responsible when a digital action affects a customer, employee, patient, or financial decision.

Accountability cannot be assigned to the technology. It must remain visible in the human operating model.

The more autonomous the system becomes, the more explicit its boundaries, escalation paths, and human ownership must be.

Roles must be rebuilt around contribution

Job descriptions were built around bundles of tasks that happened to sit together. AI separates those bundles.

Some activities can be delegated to a digital system. Others require human judgement, trust, context, negotiation, or moral responsibility. Many will require a sequence in which human and digital contributions alternate.

Organizations therefore need to redesign roles around the value each form of labor contributes, not simply remove tasks from existing jobs.

That means asking what people should understand, decide, create, and own after routine production changes. It also means protecting the developmental work through which people learn to exercise judgement. Efficiency that eliminates every entry point into expertise eventually weakens the capability the organization still depends on.

Leadership has to span both systems

Human workforces are supported by structures for hiring, development, performance, risk, and governance. Digital workforces require comparable discipline, even if the mechanisms differ.

Leaders need visibility into what digital systems are doing, where they are used, what standards govern them, and how their performance is evaluated. They need ways to retire tools that no longer serve the work and to intervene when local optimization creates enterprise risk.

This responsibility cannot sit with technology leadership alone. The operating model crosses strategy, operations, finance, risk, human resources, and every function where work is changing.

The leadership task is to integrate those choices into one system.

Human work becomes more consequential

As digital systems take on more production, distinctly human work does not disappear. It becomes more important.

Judgement matters when an output is plausible but incomplete. Conversation matters when competing interests must be reconciled. Trust matters when people must act without perfect information. Courage matters when the efficient answer is not the responsible one.

Organizations will not need less leadership in an AI-enabled model. They will need leadership capable of distinguishing what can be delegated from what must remain owned.

One system, deliberately designed

The future of work will not be a contest between people and technology. It will be an operating system in which both contribute under different conditions and with different responsibilities.

Leaders must decide how work enters that system, how it moves, where judgement sits, how quality is protected, and who remains accountable for the result.

Two workforces require one operating model, designed with greater intention than most organizations have previously applied to work.