Gi Group HOLDING

Built to Adapt: Designing Workforce Systems for Continuous Change

How organisations are moving beyond hiring to turn disruption into competitive advantage



In collaboration with

FT LONGITUDE



Contents

The Workforce Challenge Has Changed 04

There’s an Adaptability Gap 07

SECTION 1
Workforce Models in Motion 09

SECTION 2
The New Workforce Operating System 14

SECTION 3
AI and the Great Workforce Redesign 20

SECTION 4
Adaptability Starts With People 25

What the Leaders Teach Us 30

About the Research

750 executives

15 countries

7 industries

6 interviews

We surveyed 750 senior executives from 15 countries across the Americas, Asia-Pacific and Europe in April and May 2026. The respondents were from multinational organisations in seven industries:

Construction and infrastructure
Energy and utilities
Fast-moving consumer goods
Financial services and fintech
Life sciences and healthcare
Logistics, transport and supply chain
Manufacturing and industrial transformation

RESPONDENTS WERE A MIX OF C-LEVEL, C-1 AND C-2 EXECUTIVES FROM FIVE BUSINESS FUNCTIONS:

CEO/managing director
Finance
HR and talent acquisition
Operations/production
Procurement and vendor relationships

WE INTERVIEWED SIX INDUSTRY LEADERS:

Mario Ceccon, Executive Vice President, Head of Human Resources at GEODIS
Vicki Hooper, Chief People Officer, Unipart
Dr Cora Koppe-Stahrenberg, Chief People Officer, British American Tobacco
Vicki Potter, Chief Human Resources Officer, Bodycote
Dr Lea Schroeder, Chief People Officer, Raisin
Niki Theophilus, Executive Vice President & Chief Administrative Officer, Wabtec Corporation



The Workforce Challenge Has Changed



Workforce adaptability is now a critical source of competitive advantage. Artificial intelligence (AI) is making change happen faster, but technical transformation isn't going to be enough. The organisations that are outperforming the rest are doing more: they're connecting their workforce strategy, workforce data and workforce capability development to business outcomes.

Success increasingly depends on building workforce systems that can continuously adapt. Hiring is still important, and the leading organisations aren't abandoning recruitment. But they are also integrating their hiring strategies into broader workforce systems that combine external talent, internal mobility, upskilling and reskilling, automation, workforce data and leadership accountability.

These organisations are rising to the new workforce challenge: to design systems that can adapt continuously to disruption.

MEET THE WORKFORCE ADAPTABILITY LEADERS

A small group of organisations (10%) is already combining agile workforce models with rapid decision-making. They say they're highly adaptable in their:

- Use of different workforce models
- Ability to make and implement workforce decisions quickly

These organisations, which come from every industry we surveyed, outperform the rest on every business metric. Their adaptability appears to be giving them a competitive advantage.



"This moment of great global uncertainty offers a unique opportunity to rethink workforce models: to move beyond transactional staffing and embrace an attitude of responsibility by contributing to the labour market as a proactive industry leader supporting sustainable growth."

BARBARA BRUNO
Chief Practice Officer – Staffing
Gi Group Holding



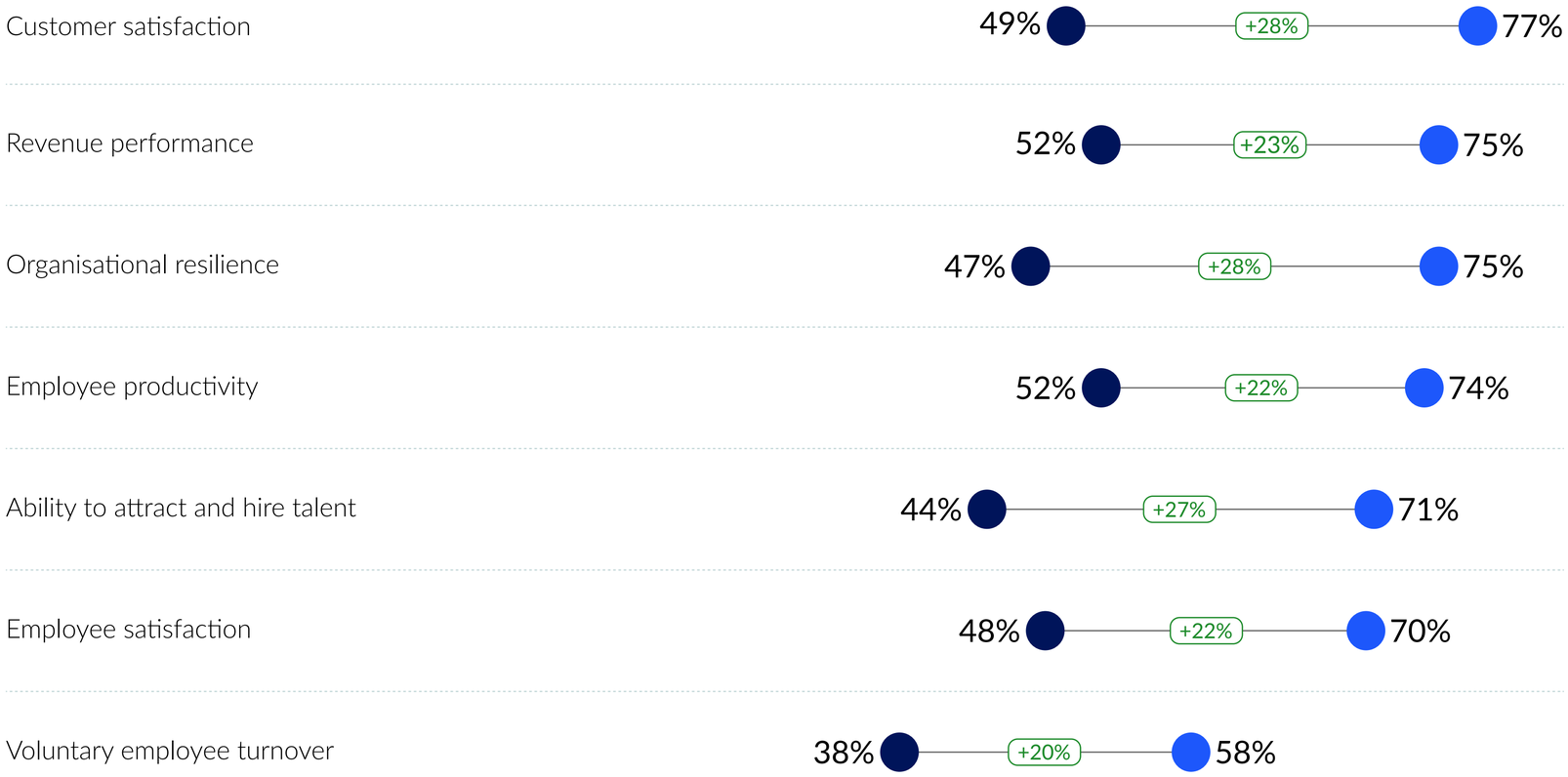
10%
Are already combining agile workforce models with rapid decision-making



The Workforce Adaptability Leaders outperform other organisations on every business measure

Percentages that have performed above expectations in each area

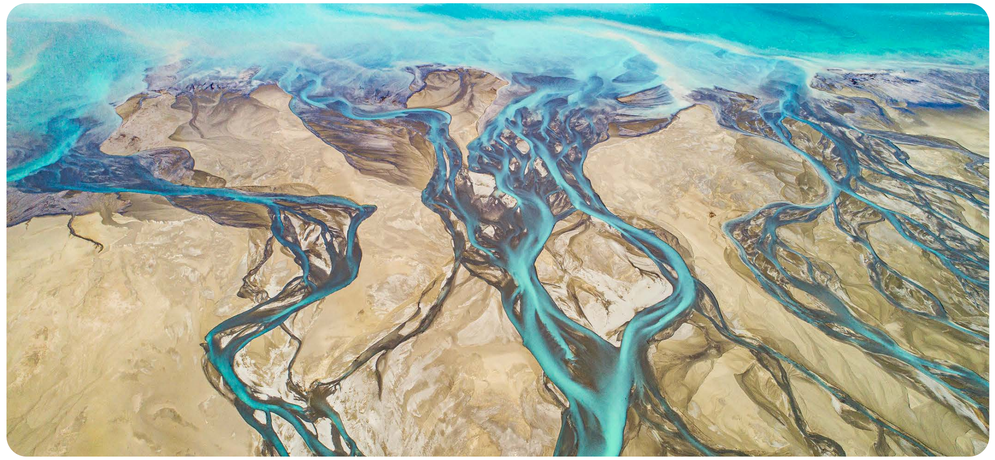
Workforce Adaptability Leaders HIGHER than **Everyone Else**



Why are only 10% of organisations achieving this level of adaptability? What are they doing differently from the rest?

There’s an Adaptability Gap





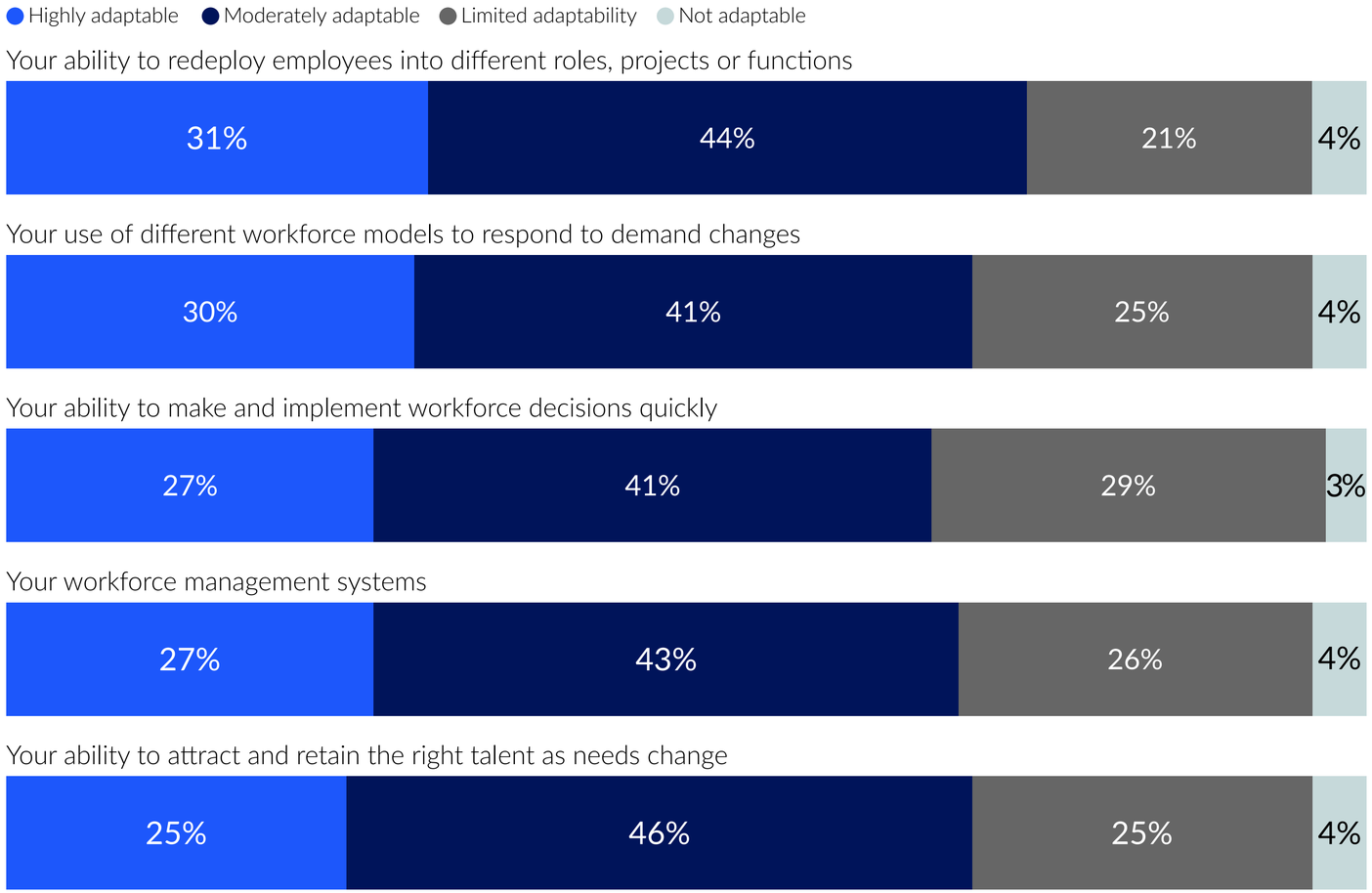
Disruption is now a feature of today's operating environment – not a bug. "In the past five or six years, we've had Covid, we've had a major cyberattack, we've had tariffs, we've had the Ukraine conflict, we've had the Iran conflict," says Niki Theophilus, Executive Vice President & Chief Administrative Officer at US-headquartered rail and freight manufacturer Wabtec Corporation. "It feels like it's just the state of business now."

When we asked them to rank the primary benefits of having an adaptable workforce, executives' top responses were improved productivity and greater resilience to disruption. And 42% ranked fast response to change as one of the top drivers behind changes to workforce structure.

But less than one-third say their organisation is highly adaptable across five important capabilities, so many may struggle to respond quickly to changing business and workforce demands. How can they follow the example of the organisations that are outperforming them?

Less than a third of organisations are highly adaptable across five capabilities

How adaptable is your organisation in each of these areas?



WHAT THE DATA SHOWS:
Organisations are moderately adaptable across most areas, but there is a lot of work to do to get to high adaptability.

1. WORKFORCE MODELS IN MOTION:

Why Adaptability Has Become the New Competitive Advantage



Organisations are moving towards more fluid workforce models. In the past three years, they're most likely to have increased project and freelance talent (62%), automation (59%) and internal mobility (57%). Only 38% have increased their number of permanent employees.

MOVE KNOWLEDGE, NOT JUST PEOPLE

Internal mobility and job redesign mean that workforce adaptability isn't just about having the right number of people with the right skills. Instead, organisations need to make sure they can transfer and scale expertise as people retire, move roles or leave.

A risk for many organisations is the loss of expertise that's held by an individual instead of embedded in systems or shared across the workforce. "We have many long-tenured employees who have built deep knowledge over decades with the company," says Wabtec's Theophilus. "We're spending a lot of time looking at how to capture that expertise and share it more broadly so it can benefit the next generation of our workforce."

When they face skills gaps, two-thirds of executives still prioritise hiring new talent. But it's closely matched by upskilling and reskilling (64%), automation and AI solutions (62%), redeployment (56%) and outsourcing (52%). They're trying to orchestrate talent as well as attract it.

Executives say that upskilling and reskilling at scale is the area where their organisations face the greatest difficulty in executing their workforce strategies. "The most challenging part is redeploying skills across functions, accelerating internal mobility and making rapid workforce decisions at scale while ensuring consistency across geographies," says Mario Ceccon, Executive Vice President, Head of Human Resources at France-headquartered transport and logistics company GEODIS.

Project-based and freelance talent have increased the most in the past three years

Percentage of organisations that have increased each of these in the past three years



WHAT THE DATA SHOWS:
While 38% of organisations have increased the number of permanent employees in the past three years, a greater mix of approaches is needed to stay competitive.



“

It doesn’t have to be perfection. It’s the constant learning, it’s how we deal with failure, it’s our attitude to complexity.”

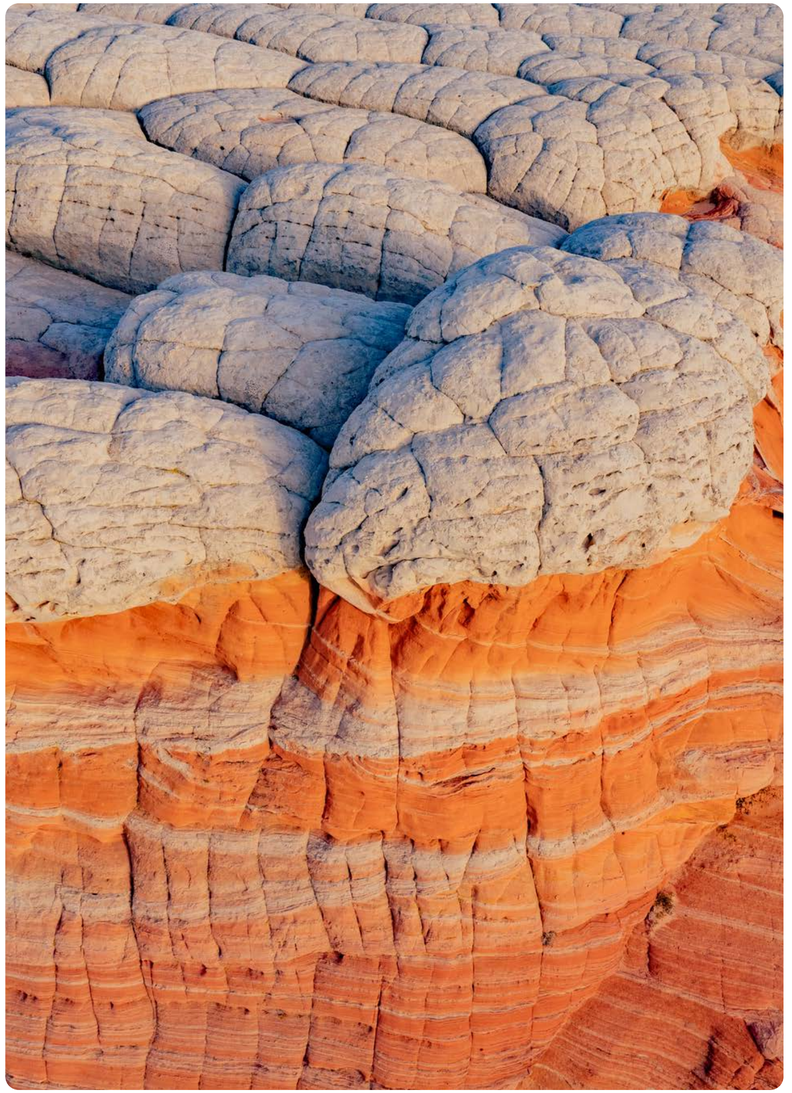
VICKI HOOPER
Chief People Officer
Unipart

BUILD CAPABILITY USING ECOSYSTEMS

Increasingly, organisations can’t build every capability internally, and they’re depending on networks, partnerships and cross-functional collaboration. “We look at what we want to double down on internally and ring-fence as our own,” says Dr Cora Koppe-Stahrenberg, Chief People Officer at tobacco and nicotine products company British American Tobacco. “And where we can actually run faster if we build strategic partnerships.”

For most organisations, the decision to outsource depends on the function. “Within engineering, we have now shifted to working with external vendors, and in customer service, we have part permanent employees, part external vendors,” says Dr Lea Schroeder, Chief People Officer at Germany-headquartered personal finance company Raisin. “On the one hand, we have the reliability and deep domain expertise of permanent employees. But then we also have resources that can be navigated a bit more freely.”

GEODIS, meanwhile, starts with external support when it first identifies a new capability, then aims to build internal expertise. But Mario Ceccon expects the need for more external partnerships to grow. “I think the next evolution will be a more hybrid mode, because we have new competencies and business needs coming all the time, very quickly,” he says. “And we don’t have the capability to have all the skills available, so we’ll have to be more open to external partners.”



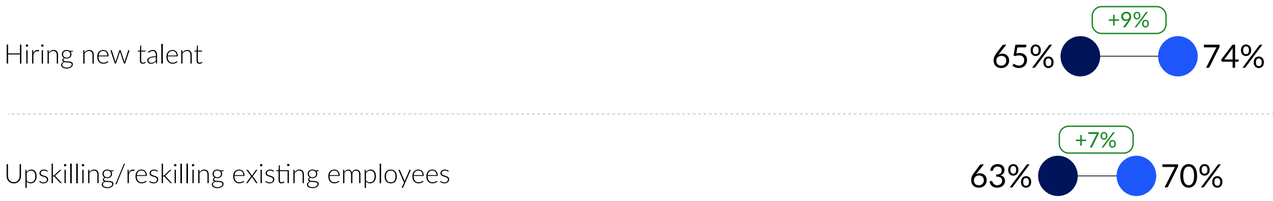
What the Workforce Adaptability Leaders Do Differently

The Workforce Adaptability Leaders are much more likely to respond to skills shortages by hiring and upskilling. They're no more likely than the rest of the organisations in our research to prioritise AI, but they're less likely to rely on redeployment or outsourcing. This doesn't mean they haven't invested in internal mobility where it's appropriate: they're more likely than the rest to have increased talent redeployment in the past three years.

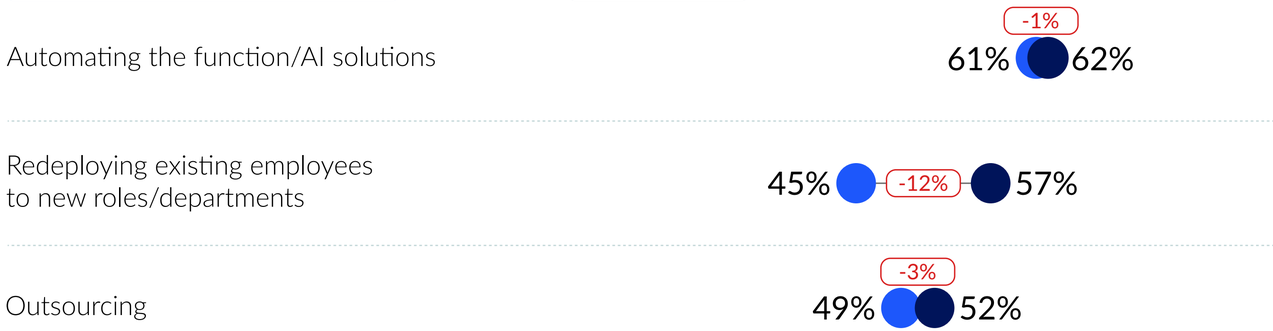
This suggests that they have fewer acute skills shortages because they invest earlier in hiring and capability development. This minimises the need to move people around as a corrective measure. Instead of leaning on automation or temporary fixes, they invest in overall workforce capability and proactively build skills.

How organisations approach a skills gap

Workforce Adaptability Leaders HIGHER than **Everyone Else**



Workforce Adaptability Leaders LOWER than **Everyone Else**



What to Do Now

1

Map where your business demand, technology and skills needs are **changing** the fastest, rather than only tracking current vacancies.

2

Treat hiring, **upskilling,** redeployment, outsourcing and automation as connected workforce levers instead of separate decisions.

3

Build mechanisms to move knowledge as well as people, especially where critical **expertise** sits with long-serving employees.

4

Use external partners to **accelerate** access to new capabilities, but decide early what knowledge you should eventually build internally.

2. THE NEW WORKFORCE OPERATING SYSTEM:

How Organisations Make Adaptability Sustainable





“When staffing insights are connected to business goals, they become a powerful tool for planning, adaptability and long-term performance.”

DOMIZIANO PONTONE
Chief Corporate Sales Officer
Gi Group Holding

Organisations cannot orchestrate talent unless they first understand the capabilities they already have and how they contribute to their overall performance. Productivity is a strategic workforce priority, but that doesn’t mean every organisation is measuring it properly or holding anyone accountable for it. Four in 10 organisations base their workforce decisions on judgement rather than data, and less than half measure their leaders on workforce performance.

Almost half of organisations prioritise short-term performance gains over long-term capability development

Workforce performance is managed consistently across functions	62%	38%	Workforce performance is managed inconsistently
Workforce performance is explicitly linked to business strategy and outcomes	62%	38%	We don’t link our workforce performance closely enough to our business strategy
We have clear metrics to measure workforce productivity	60%	40%	We lack clear or consistent ways to measure workforce productivity
Workforce decisions are driven by performance data and analytics	57%	43%	Workforce decisions are primarily based on judgement rather than data
We balance short-term performance targets with long-term capability building	55%	45%	We prioritise short-term gains over long-term capability development
Leaders are measured and rewarded based on workforce performance	47%	53%	Leaders are not formally measured or rewarded based on workforce performance

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS:
Accountability remains a key gap, and performance expectations are often not reinforced through leadership measures and incentives.

MAKE WORKFORCE DATA WORK HARDER

Organisations recognise that workforce performance increasingly depends on adaptability, skills and long-term capability-building, but many are managing performance with short-term measures and individual judgement. As a result, they aren't developing the systems that could sustain performance over time.

But senior executives know that productivity is ultimately an outcome of stronger workforce systems, not a workforce strategy in itself. When we asked them what changes they're making to create more performance-oriented workforce models, all of them said they're working towards that goal.

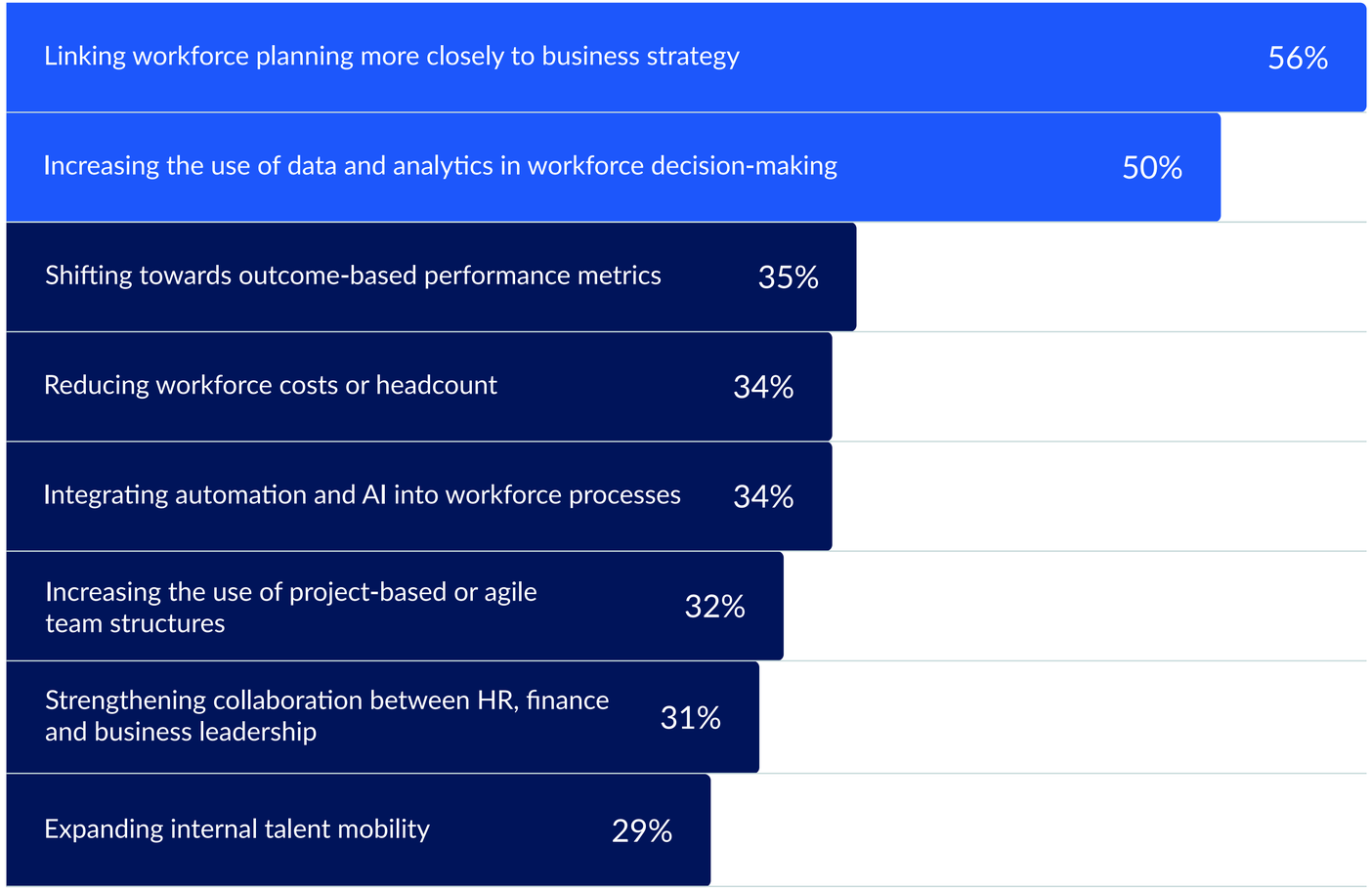
"Over the past few years, our approach has shifted from reactive workforce adjustment to a more structured and anticipatory model," says GEODIS's Ceccon. "We have moved away from managing adaptability mainly through headcount flexibility and started building organisational resilience through skills, leadership capabilities and workforce planning."

Workforce data is becoming a critical enabler of adaptability. Organisations can't redeploy talent, identify skills gaps, evaluate automation opportunities or balance internal and external resources effectively without understanding capabilities in real time.

Vicki Potter, Chief Human Resources Officer at UK-headquartered heat-treatment company Bodycote, says this is an important focus for the leadership team: "One of the things we're doing rapidly across the whole organisation is improving what data we have, how we capture that data and how we use it. We've now got a global data set on our people, and the data is transforming the way we're able to look at the capabilities and the people we have in our organisation today."

Performance transformation is being driven by strategic alignment and data

Changes organisations have made to build more performance-oriented workforce models



WHAT THE DATA SHOWS:
The two stand-out factors are linking workforce planning more closely to business strategy and increasing the use of data and analytics in workforce decision-making, showing the rising prominence of data in building effective workforce models.



"We're very serious about making sure we've got people who know what their roles are, understand how that ladders up to the company goals and how that actually drives performance – that alignment is really important."

NIKI THEOPHILUS
Executive Vice President & Chief Administrative Officer
Wabtec Corporation

HR and people teams are having to increase their data skills. "I'd love to have even more data capabilities in my team," says Raisin's Schroeder. "We've now hired someone to own this topic of infrastructure, and they're also building an analytics team within the people and culture team, for us to not only do those reactive data-based decisions, but also more predictive, proactive decisions."

Better data improves visibility, but organisations need more than just information. The most adaptable ones are embedding workforce adaptability into everything, from planning and leadership development to skills building and talent deployment.

CONNECT INDIVIDUALS TO BUSINESS RESULTS

This means changing reward and evaluation systems to make it clear to employees how their work contributes to the organisation's overall goals and recognising them accordingly. Shifting towards outcome-based performance metrics is executives' third most popular way they have become more performance-oriented.

"You can't have high performance without aligning processes, tools and managers with your strategy," says GEODIS's Ceccon. "We have worked extensively to build a scheme where performance is as much as possible tied to your individual contribution but where you're also shown how your contribution generates results at the global level."

TROUBLE AT THE TOP

Our data shows that leadership can be one of the biggest barriers to workforce adaptability. Almost half of executives (48%) say that leadership alignment and decision-making is a top workforce strategy challenge. And while 60% say they have clear productivity metrics, only 47% say leaders are measured and rewarded based on workforce performance outcomes.

People leadership needs to be treated as a core business responsibility, with leaders expected to develop and support high-performing teams. "Our leaders' performance is linked to financial outcomes, but we also look at their people development skills and make sure that they're managing their workforces effectively," says Wabtec's Theophilus. "We hold them accountable for communicating strategic messages down the organisation and for giving their teams the guidance and tools they need to be able to perform."

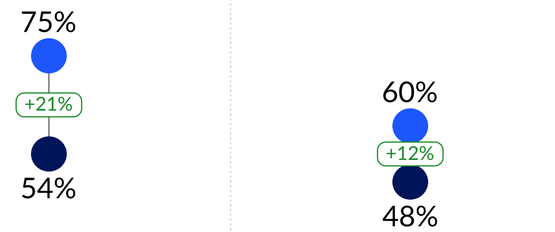
What the Workforce Adaptability Leaders Do Differently

The Workforce Adaptability Leaders are much more likely to have linked workforce planning to business strategy and to have increased their use of data and analytics in workforce decision-making.

They're also more likely to have clear metrics to measure workforce productivity and to use data for workforce decisions. This suggests that the Workforce Adaptability Leaders treat workforce planning as a core business discipline.

Changes organisations have made to build a more performance-oriented workforce model

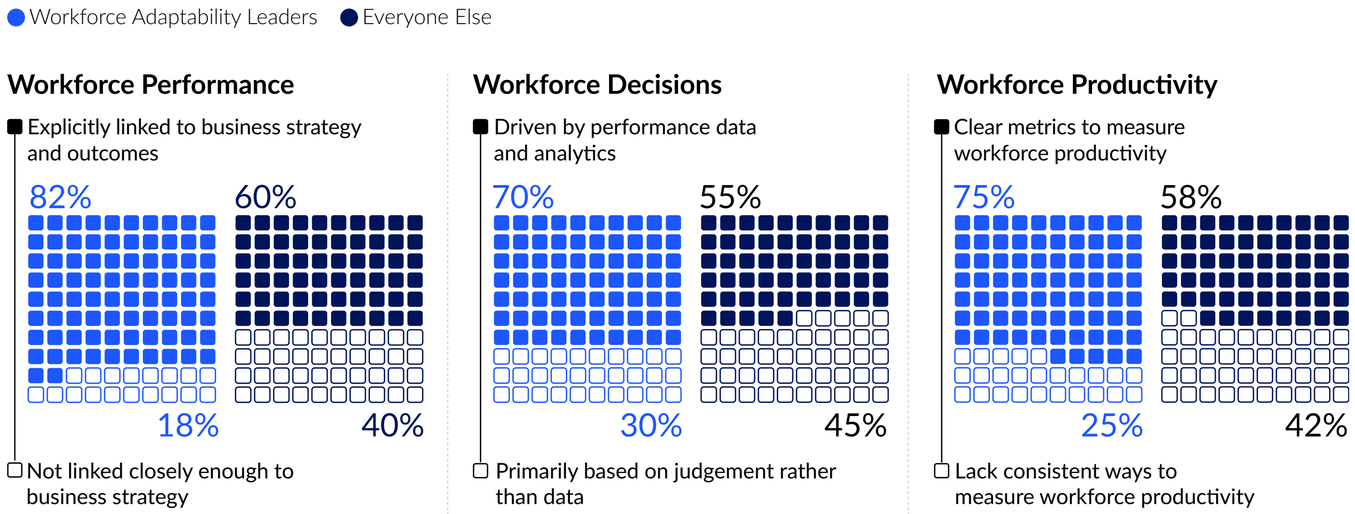
Workforce Adaptability Leaders HIGHER than **Everyone Else**



Linking workforce planning more closely to business strategy

Increasing the use of data and analytics in workforce decision-making

The Workforce Adaptability Leaders are more likely to embed strategy, data and measurement into workforce decisions



What to Do Now

1

Create a **clearer** view of workforce skills, potential, mobility, capacity and capability gaps across your organisation.

2

Link workforce **planning** directly to business strategy so that people decisions are made against future priorities instead of just current needs.

3

Use workforce data to support faster, more **consistent** decisions on reskilling, redeployment, hiring and automation.

4

Make leaders accountable for workforce outcomes, including capability building, **engagement** and team performance.

3. AI AND THE GREAT WORKFORCE REDESIGN:

How AI Is Accelerating Adaptability



Once organisations have stronger workforce systems, the next challenge is ensuring those systems can keep pace with AI, which is changing work faster than many organisations can redesign it. New tools are changing how work itself is organised. Executives rank tech and automation adoption as the second-biggest reason for changing workforce structure: 46% put it in their top three, and 23% put it in first place.

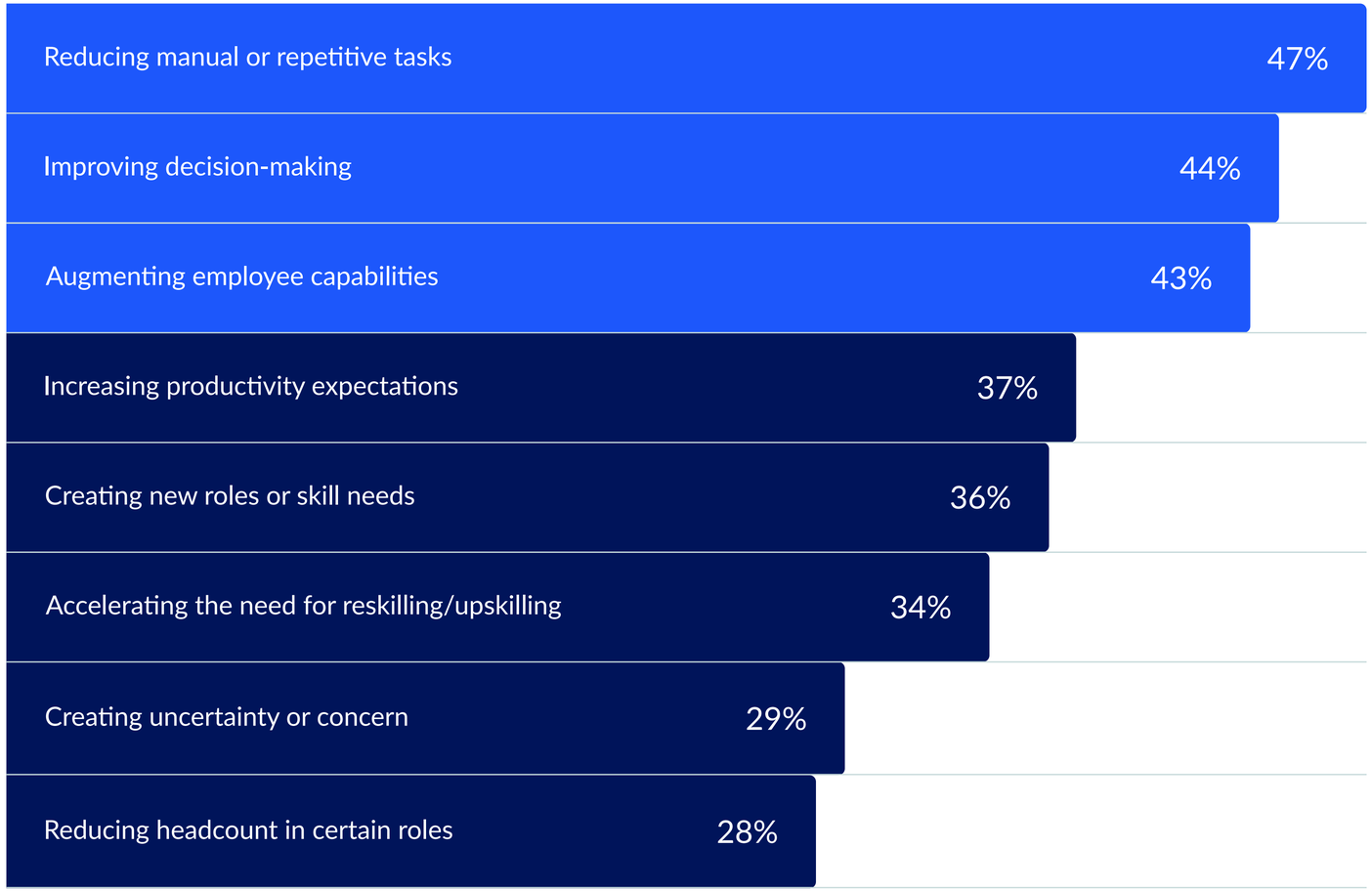
Increasing the use of AI and automation is the change that organisations are most likely to have made in the past 24 months to improve their workforce productivity. And 78% of the ones that have made this change say it has been effective. “It has had a big impact on the admin and the analysis approach for many colleagues,” says GEODIS’s Ceccon. “Translations and PowerPoint decks that used to take hours now take seconds.”

LEARNING HAS TO BE PART OF THE JOB

But tech adoption will not pay off in the long term on its own. “You can have the best processes in the world, but if you don’t have the behaviour change in order to adapt to those processes, you will have problems,” says Ceccon. Our data suggests that technology adoption is outpacing workforce adaptation, which is creating a capability gap as AI changes tasks, roles and decision-making.

AI is more likely to be augmenting worker capabilities than reducing headcount

AI’s most significant impacts on the workforce



WHAT THE DATA SHOWS:
The biggest impacts are all human-centred, but they’re still changing how work is done and are likely to create major changes in your workforce structure.

As their need for AI skills grows rapidly and unpredictably, organisations will have to decide which work is automated and when. They will also have to decide which skills to develop in-house and which ones to seek externally.

Executives rank headcount reduction as the least significant impact of AI so far, but one-third of senior executives say that one of its top three impacts has been the creation of new roles or skills needs at their organisations. This changes the relationship between organisations and employees as continuous learning becomes part of almost every role. Employability is going to be an ongoing process instead of a qualification achieved at the start of a career, and companies will need to give employees opportunities to learn.

The shift also makes adaptability more urgent than ever. Organisations that don't have adaptable workforce models will struggle to convert AI investment into long-term improved performance.

"We have to focus on helping people understand work design differently because roles will have different designs. And I think we have to stand back and consciously think about that, rather than just letting it happen."

VICKI HOOPER
Chief People Officer
Unipart



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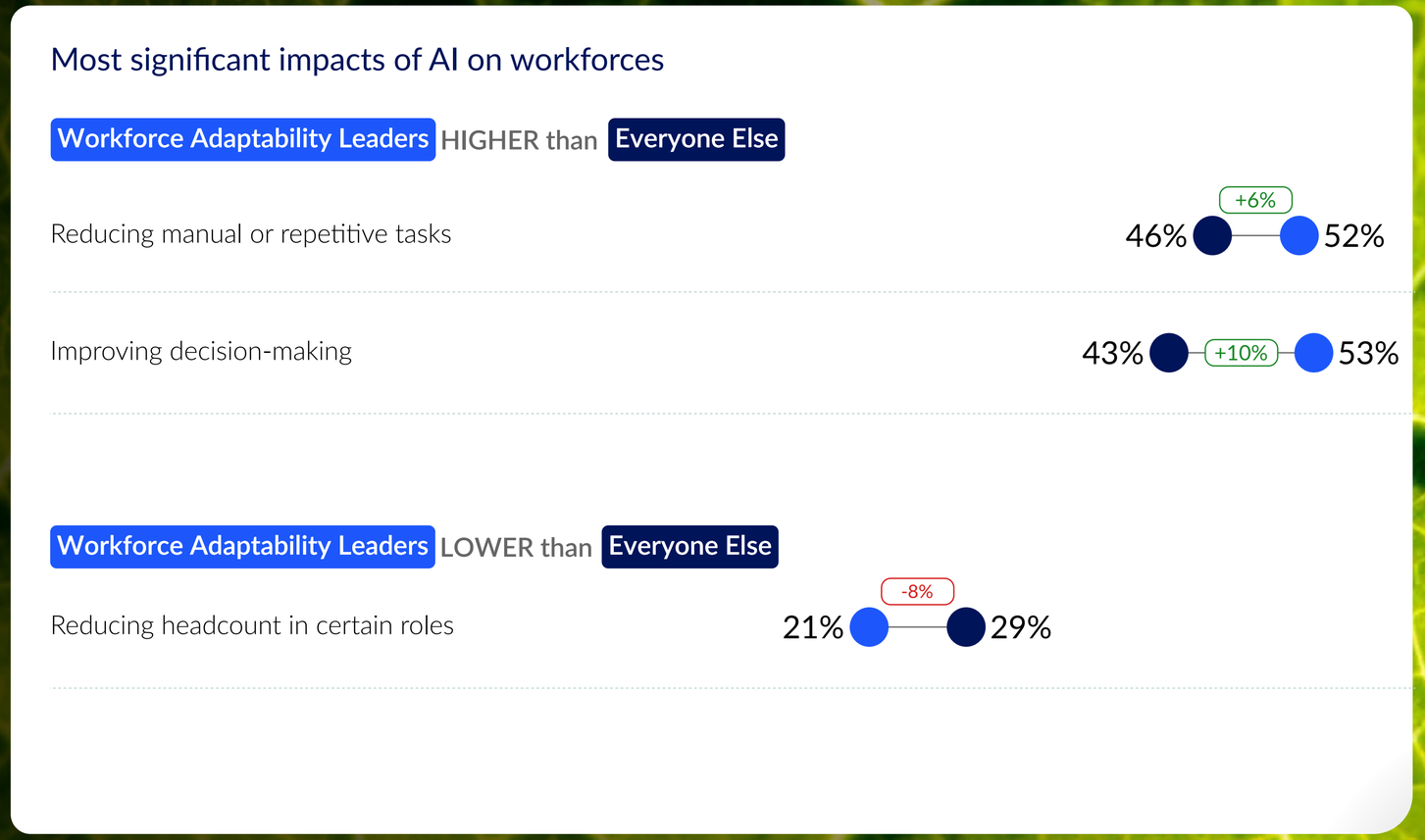
Executives say that reducing manual tasks is AI's number one impact on workforces

What the Workforce Adaptability Leaders Do Differently

The Workforce Adaptability Leaders are more likely than other organisations to be advanced in their AI implementation: 22% report progress ahead of expectations, compared with 14% of the rest.

They're less likely than the rest to say that AI has reduced headcount: only 21% say this has been a top impact, compared with 29% of the rest. And they're more likely to say they're using it to reduce manual or repetitive tasks and to improve decision-making. They're also less likely to say they have increased their use of AI in order to improve productivity in the past 24 months.

This suggests that the Workforce Adaptability Leaders are embedding AI strategically into the way work is designed instead of chasing short-term efficiency gains.



What to Do Now

1

Identify where AI is **changing** tasks, roles and decision-making – not just where it can reduce costs.

2

Redesign workflows around **human** and AI collaboration, instead of adding AI tools to unchanged processes.

3

Pair AI adoption with structured upskilling so that employees understand how their roles are changing and how to use new tools safely.

4

Track whether AI is **improving** decision quality and employee capability.

4. ADAPTABILITY STARTS WITH PEOPLE:

How to Build the Conditions that Make Adaptability Sustainable



Technology alone will never create adaptability. Every AI investment ultimately succeeds or fails through the people expected to work differently.

TRUST MAKES CHANGE POSSIBLE

The rapid changes caused by AI are naturally a source of anxiety for many workers. “Of course, we have people who are feeling vulnerable as a result of all of this,” says Bodycote’s Potter. “And who don’t want to change what they’re doing.”

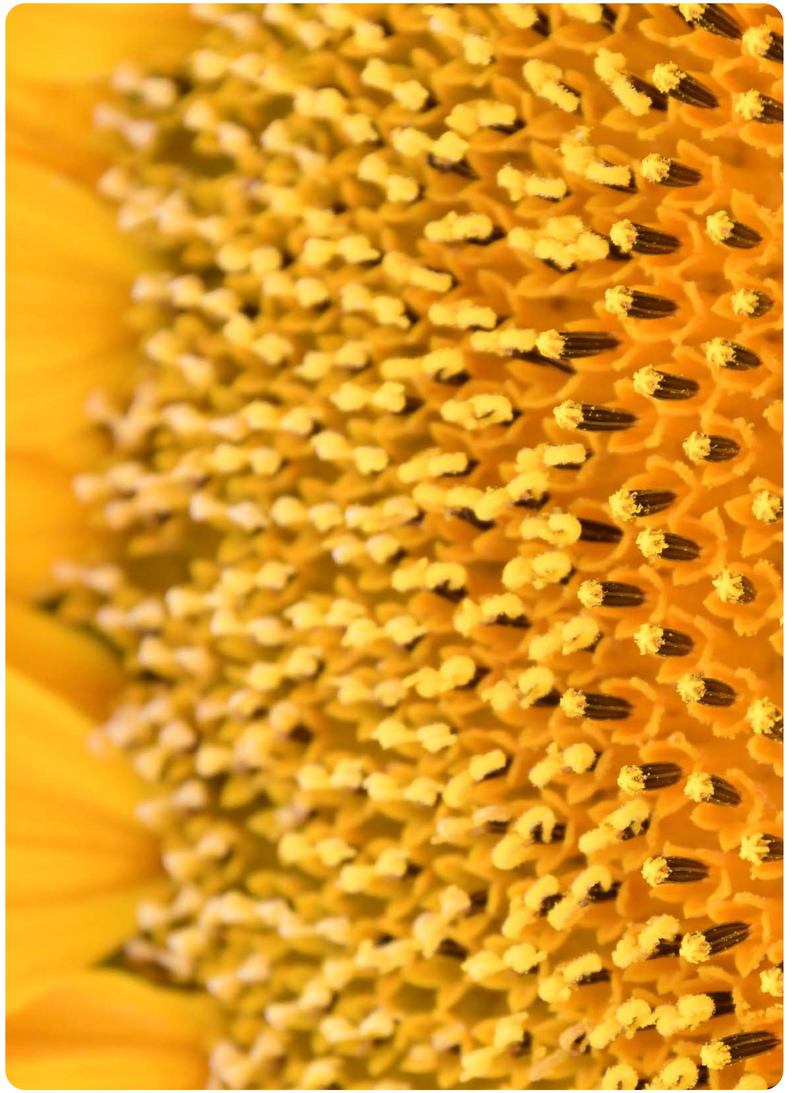
To counteract team members’ fears about potential job losses and uncertainty about how roles are changing, leaders will need to earn their trust by communicating openly. “Having people trust the company has become a very important driver for this adaptation,” says GEODIS’s Ceccon. “People must feel confident in the company – that it will do something to help them learn the new competencies they might need in order to perform their jobs.”

Adaptability in general depends on creating the conditions needed for people to feel confident about developing. Leaders will need to foster a culture of trust, psychological safety and resilience that enables employees to embrace new ways of working instead of resisting them.

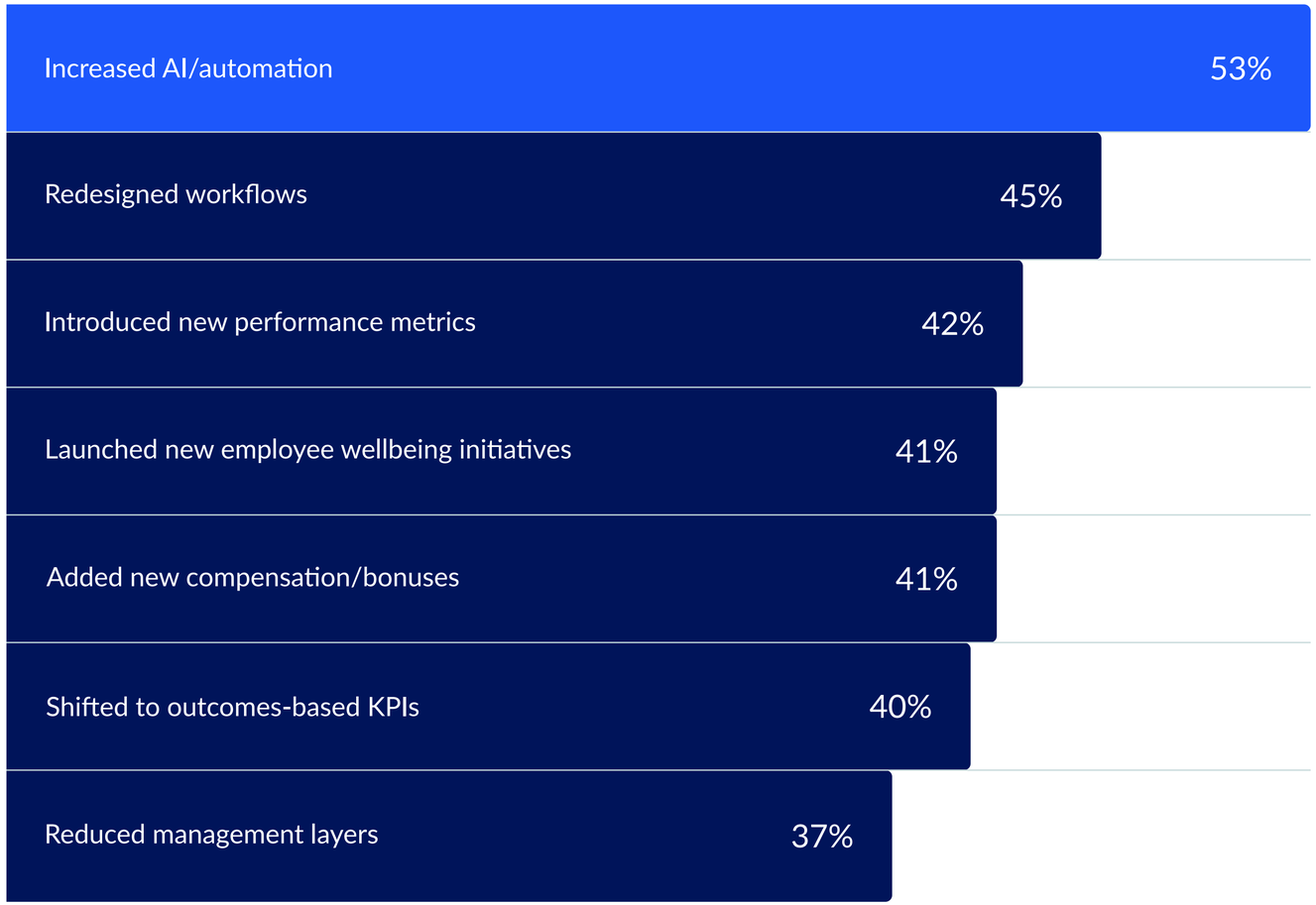
Potter says this has been a priority as Bodycote has carried out significant leadership changes. “We very deliberately made a change at the senior leadership level and brought in people who are behaviourally inclined to be open, transparent and focused on the team goal rather than just focused on their own performance,” she explains.

Ensuring that employees can consistently perform at a high level means going beyond their objectives and professional training to consider their wellbeing and motivation. While four in 10 organisations have introduced new performance metrics in the past two years in order to improve productivity, the same proportion have launched new wellbeing initiatives with the same objective.

“I look at our employees as corporate athletes,” says Wabtec’s Theophilus. “If I owned a professional sporting team, I would be concerned about the physical health of the athletes, and I would be concerned about their mental health and wellbeing and any other aspects which could impact their performance.”



Changes made in the past 24 months to improve productivity



WHAT THE DATA SHOWS:
While increasing AI is the top action that organisations have taken to improve productivity, the rest of the initiatives all receive similar investment levels, suggesting that achieving results requires multiple levers rather than a single solution.



"It's not sufficient to have done the right training or to have the right degree anymore. Being flexible enough to learn constantly is the superpower skill."

DR CORA KOPPE-STAHRENBERG
Chief People Officer
British American Tobacco

RECRUIT FOR AGILITY

As well as investing in an adaptability mindset at the leadership level, HR teams are looking for it in every recruitment process. As employability becomes more valuable than expertise, organisations are valuing flexibility and curiosity more.

"We're now recruiting for what you can become rather than what you have historically done because we just don't know what the future holds," says Vicki Hooper, Chief People Officer at UK-headquartered supply chain improvement company Unipart. "We are recruiting much more for a person's potential, their attitude and their approach to learning and complexity."

Employers are looking for people who are flexible and resilient. "One very important aspect of adaptability is being able to look into problems and not be scared of them but actually embrace them as an interesting challenge," says Raisin's Schroeder. "In the recruiting process, we look for this kind of mindset."

What the Workforce Adaptability Leaders Do Differently

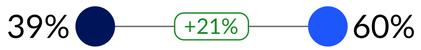
The Workforce Adaptability Leaders focus more on employees' wellbeing and development. They're far more likely to have launched new employee wellbeing initiatives in the past 24 months in order to improve productivity: 60%, compared with only 39% of the rest.

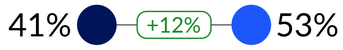
They're also more likely to have introduced new performance metrics for the same reason, which suggests that they're taking a more structured and proactive approach to managing capabilities and linking individual goals to overall strategies.

> "HR must be a proactive rather than a reactive function. We should be asking, 'What do we need to do differently to actually enable business success?'"
>
> **DR CORA KOPPE-STAHRENBERG**
> Chief People Officer
> British American Tobacco

Changes made in the past 24 months to improve workforce productivity

Workforce Adaptability Leaders HIGHER than **Everyone Else**





What to Do Now

1

Recruit and promote for **potential**, learning agility and comfort with complexity, not just past experience or specific skills.

2

Build trust by **communicating** clearly how roles are changing and how the organisation will support people to adapt.

3

Create career **pathways** that support lateral movement, reskilling and internal mobility – not just upward progression.

4

Equip managers to lead through uncertainty, including building psychological safety, **resilience** and confidence in change.

WHAT THE LEADERS TEACH US:

The Workforce Adaptability Operating Model



Organisations are trying to redesign work. But they're likely to fail unless they also redesign the systems, leadership structures and workforce architecture that support it.

"Being able to anticipate change rather than just react to it is becoming one of the defining characteristics of successful organisations," says Tamara Schenk, Global CMO at Gi Group Holding. "There are so many opportunities to be taken at the moment, but they can only be realised when people are at the centre of workforce strategy. Organisations that invest in adaptability today will be far better positioned to respond to whatever comes next."

The Workforce Adaptability Leaders aren't outperforming the others because they use more freelance labour, invest more in AI or hire more aggressively. They're outperforming because they have built workforce systems that can continuously balance all of these levers as their business needs change.



Our research consistently points to a small number of connected capabilities that the Workforce Adaptability Leaders do differently. Our Workforce Adaptability Operating Model is a blueprint for following this example:



See → Build → Orchestrate → Perform

1 SEE CHANGE EARLIER

Connect workforce planning to future business demand, technology shifts and changing skills requirements.

- Anticipate workforce needs
- Use workforce intelligence to inform decisions
- Align workforce planning with business strategy
- Forecast future skill requirements
- Prepare for change driven by AI and technology

2 BUILD CAPABILITY CONTINUOUSLY

Combine hiring, upskilling, internal mobility, knowledge transfer and strategic partnerships to constantly build capability.

- Hire for future capability, not just current vacancies
- Invest in continuous upskilling and reskilling
- Encourage and enable internal mobility
- Capture and transfer knowledge
- Build strategic workforce partnerships

3 ORCHESTRATE THE WORKFORCE

Balance permanent employees, flexible talent, external partners, automation and AI, using workforce intelligence to make better workforce decisions.

- Optimise the workforce mix that suits your organisation
- Invest in external talent where it adds value
- Constantly monitor the right combination of AI, automation and human capability
- Use workforce data to make agile decisions
- Respond quickly to changing priorities

4 TURN ADAPTABILITY INTO PERFORMANCE

Create the leadership, culture and accountability that translate workforce adaptability into sustainable business performance.

- Hold leaders accountable for workforce outcomes
- Measure workforce performance consistently
- Invest in employability and continuous development
- Build trust through empathy and clear communication
- Make clear links between productivity and business outcomes

Workforce adaptability is no longer simply an HR priority. It is becoming a defining capability for business performance and long-term resilience. The future will belong to organisations that don't just respond to change but are intentionally designed to adapt to it.

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