



AI Leadership Event Summary | September 2026

Bring Back the Humans!

Why human-led leadership is your real competitive advantage in an AI-hyped (and fatigued..) world.

Presented by:



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Why we ran this event?

We're living through a pace of change the working world has never experienced before. There's a lot of noise about AI right now, hype on one side, fatigue on the other and everything in between.

That's why we started the '**Bring Back the Humans**' event series. Not to argue against AI, but to open up an important conversation about the dots organisations need to join when they're planning how AI fits into their workplace. How you choose to *use the technology* matters more than how *fast* you adopt it.

We opened the evening with two paths.

One where AI leads and humans follow; or one where humans lead and AI becomes the most powerful tool we've ever had to amplify what people already do well. This report summarises the key discussion points, the data we shared, and the questions the room asked us.

Path one: From chimpanzees to humans to... robots!?

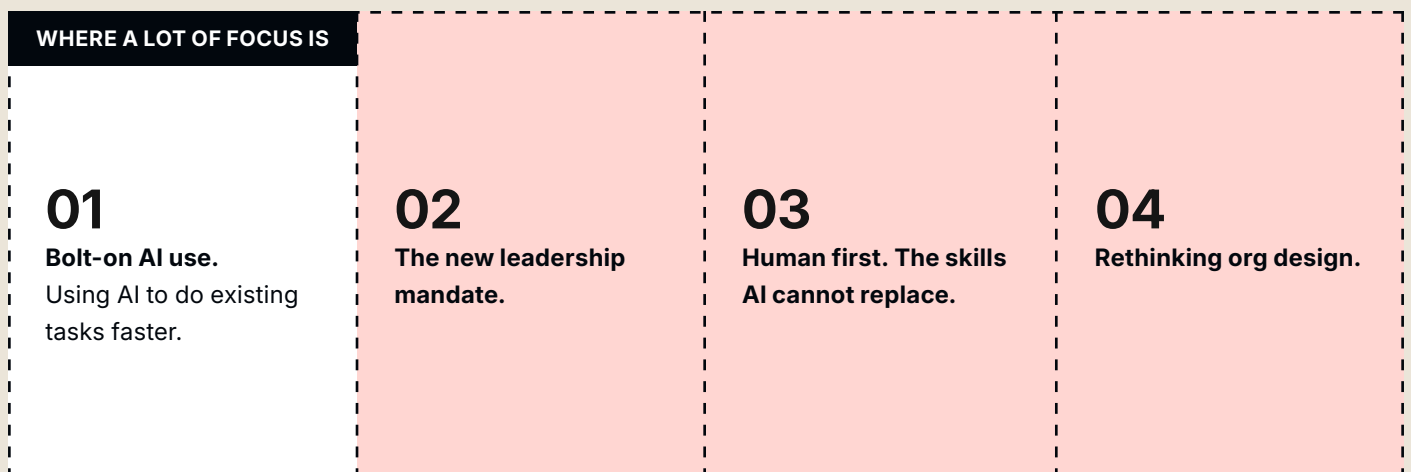


Path two: Smart, informed, ethical AI use to enhance human impact.



Joining the dots that aren't joined enough.

Across the organisations we work with, AI effort concentrates almost entirely in one place.



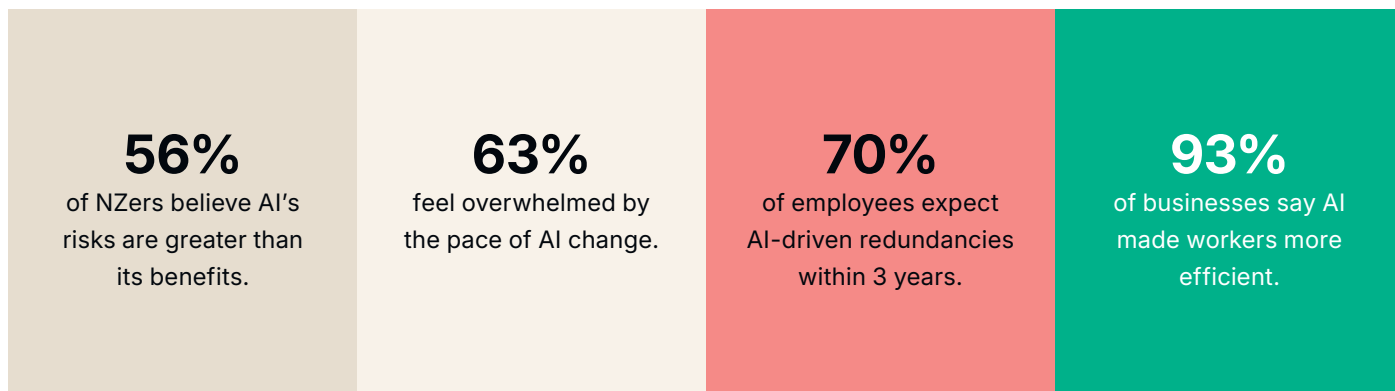
Most businesses focus on just one of four pieces that need to work together in thinking through how to use AI as a tool to supercharge your people and your business:

- 1. Bolt-on AI use.** Using AI to do existing tasks faster (where most business use currently sits).
- 2. The new leadership mandate.**
- 3. Human first.** Building the skills AI cannot replace.
- 4. Rethinking org and role design as AI becomes more the operating norm.**

Where New Zealand stands today.

AI adoption in NZ has moved from a minority activity to the default. But adoption and sentiment are not the same thing, and the gap between how leaders and employees feel about AI is one of the more striking findings in the current data.

How NZ workers feel about AI.

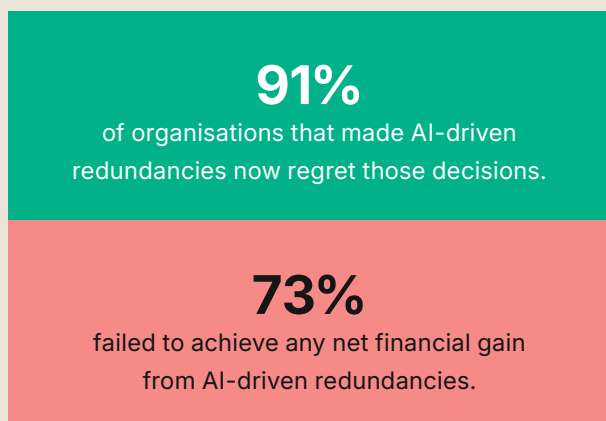


Sources: NZ AI Trust Report (2025) - KPMG, What the Buck? Report (2026) - Consult Recruitment, AI-Driven Productivity Gains in New Zealand (2025) - Kinetics Group

These aren't contradictory findings, they are how most of us are feeling, that AI is both useful and unsettling.

AI redundancies don't always pay back.

Globally, many organisations have restructured their businesses and reduced headcount without having the complete AI solution.



Source: Survey of 600 HR professionals (2026) - Careerinds UK

We modelled this directly: replacing an \$80,000 analyst role with a fully AI-driven approach using accessible off the shelf tools cost a NZ company an estimated \$60,000–\$70,000 a year once tokens, tooling, human review, and refinement were properly accounted for.





The new leadership mandate.

AI hasn't changed what good leadership looks like at its core. It has changed what leaders now need to build alongside it.

What remains true?

- Visionary, results-driven, clarity
- Self-awareness (EQ), challenge with care
- Trust, adaptability

What has fundamentally changed?

- Constant upskilling
- Learning & development, succession planning
- Leading teams that are human, hybrid, and non-human (AI or digital employees)

The second column is the genuinely new demand on leaders: managing a workforce that is no longer only human, while still building the judgement and succession pipeline that keeps the organisation resilient.

Two questions worth sitting with:

- What capability are you accidentally removing in the pursuit of AI productivity?
- If AI does more of the work, how are you developing your next generation of leaders?

The skills AI cannot solely replace.

Across every organisation we've helped with role or org design, we see the same default: the question people ask first is "where could we use AI?" - usually answered through one lens: productivity, efficiency, headcount. The risk of only looking at this lens misses the full reality of what creates value in a role. We shared an example of the skills that AI cannot replace, and as AI becomes more the norm across all our roles and workplaces it is even more important we put intentional learning and development plans around these key skills which will become even more important in the future AI enabled world.

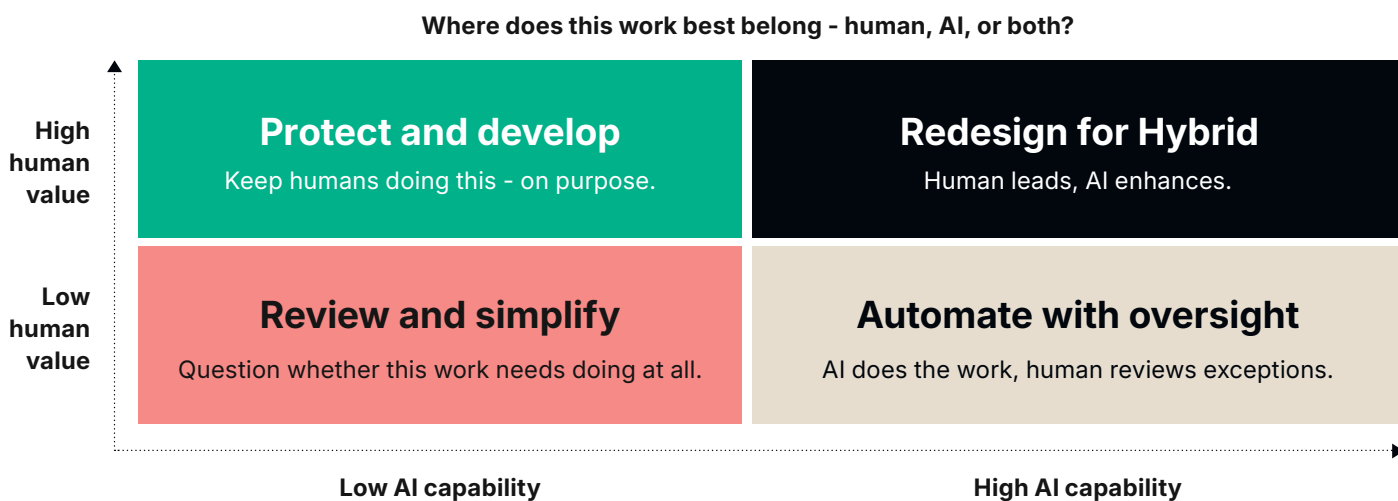
Judgement & decision-making	Leadership, relationships & influence	Moral courage - making the unpopular call
Communication	Change & culture	Creativity & synthesis
Body language	Sensing something is off	Multi-dimensional thinking

These aren't soft skills in the old sense of the word - they're the parts of a role an AI system cannot be accountable for, even when it can produce a plausible draft of them.



Our customised AI role design framework.

At Consult, we work with a customised role design framework that helps clients with defining where tasks best fit within a role or team - Human, AI or Hybrid. The vertical axis maps all tasks within a role or team and the value the human element of doing those tasks has on a business. The horizontal axis maps current AI capability to perform those tasks.



How to approach intentional AI org design.

01

Your business superpower.

Why does the business exist, what's your point of difference, what will set you apart in an age of AI?

02

How could AI better deliver that superpower.

What's distinctly human in your business, where will you use AI, and just as importantly, where won't you?

03

Embed.

AI policy and leadership alignment, intentional role design, a plan for constant upskilling, and "hybrid" learning & development covering both critical human and AI skills.



Questions from the audience:

A lot of great questions came through before the event and also on the night.

Are there any areas where, economically, it will still make sense to have people vs AI? e.g. if token costs increase?

If companies exist (mostly) to return profits, which is arguably in the best interests of the company (and their shareholders)... why would AI not replace humans where it would be more efficient (and profitable) to do so?

Organisation culture or pay level - which would a candidate see as more important?

The last time we went through such a degree of change, it required re-training of our existing workforce. Do we have enough time to do it again? Also, has the education system adapted at all to these changes?

What do you see is the next evolution in AI and the risk for those that do not adopt or adapt quick enough? How do you stay ahead of the ever changing AI landscape?

Is AI adoption the goal or is AI adoption the enabler to realising purpose/value? How is leadership managing stake/shareholder expectations with regards to AI adoption or any new shiny thing that emerges?

Our view when thinking about AI is simple: think of AI as a **human enhancer**, not a human replacer.

The organisations that get this right aren't the ones adopting AI the fastest; they're the ones asking, deliberately, where AI can genuinely help, and just as importantly, what parts of the business should remain human, or retain human input.

When thinking about role design, fully map the role and its tasks, and assess where AI can free up time or improve accuracy; so humans can spend more of their time on the parts of the business that should stay distinctive.

Where to from here? 4 things to put into practice.

1. Leadership roles have changed.

Good leadership fundamentals remain, but the environment leaders now operate in (constant upskilling, hybrid teams, AI-driven ambiguity) has fundamentally shifted.

2. This pace of change is permanent.

Build regular learning into your week, not a once-or-twice-a-year course. Upskilling is now continuous, not periodic.

3. Succession planning needs to account for this shift.

If AI is doing more of the work junior people used to learn from, businesses need to be intentional about how the next generation of leaders builds resilience and judgement.

4. Build the skills AI can't replace.

Be decisive about where you use AI, and equally decisive about where you don't. Protect and develop the human skills that make your business distinct.

How we can help.

AI isn't a human replacer. Used well, it's a human enhancer. That's the argument this whole event was built around, and it's the one we'll keep making.

If you'd like to talk through what any of this means for your organisation specifically, whether that's role design, leadership development, or where your team sits on the framework shared in this report, get in touch with our team.

As AI becomes the operating norm across more NZ businesses, we have a dedicated specialist team who can help with;

- Business & AI strategy
- Org & role design
- Succession planning
- AI & technology implementation
- Data & AI leadership
- Technical build & infrastructure



Karly Boast

Group CEO
Consult & LEAD

Karly is Group CEO of Consult & LEAD, with over 20 years' experience in leadership, culture and people strategy. Recognised as one of the country's leading voices in commercial people strategy, Karly was named NZ HR Director of the Year in 2025 and has featured on the HRD Hot List in 2023 and 2024. Karly helps businesses and leadership teams adopt and integrate AI in ways that strengthen rather than replace their human capability.



Amy Laing

Business & Growth Advisor
Consult & LEAD

Amy is business strategist, board advisor, and founder of Opportunity Co, with over 20 years' experience advising NZ businesses on strategic growth and turnaround. Amy helps organisations think about the role AI plays in their business and people strategy - where it fits, and where it doesn't - without losing what makes a business distinctive.



Alex Ashton

AI & Business Optimisation Lead
Consult & LEAD

Alex helps businesses work smarter using AI, data science, and process improvement. Alex brings together data and emerging technology to solve everyday operational challenges in business. Alex works with clients on everything from operations strategy, efficiency, profitability improvement, wastage reduction and how to use data and process design to deliver growth, efficiency and business optimisation.



Sarah Quintal

Head of Tech, Enterprise & Transformation
Consult, LEAD & Transform

Sarah specialises in helping organisations achieve their transformation goals, with a strong track record of building high-performing transformation teams and delivering some of New Zealand's most complex programmes. Her experience spans mergers and acquisitions, regulatory response, technology, data and cyber uplift, and large-scale modernisation. She also works with a trusted network of highly experienced consultants to provide AI Advisory and Transformation services, from developing AI strategy through to practical execution.



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