



THE PERFORMANCE PARADOX

People, AI, and the Future
of Learning at Work

A 2026 Learning & Workforce Trends Report

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Meet our Contributors



Heidi Kirby

Founder of **Useful Stuff**, Heidi supports L&D teams with instructional design and learning strategy—helping build high-impact teams, programs, and products. She also advises ed-tech vendors on product direction and go-to-market fit, and leads a thriving community of L&D professionals shaping the future of workplace learning.



Adam Weber

Founder of **Emplify** (acquired by **15Five**), Adam now works closely with C-suite leaders as a consultant and executive coach. He brings a practical, data-informed perspective on leadership, culture, and engagement—helping organizations build trust, accountability, and sustainable performance through better managers.



Lori Niles-Hofmann

A leading authority on learning measurement and ed-tech transformation, Lori advises organizations on modernizing their learning technology ecosystems and tying learning strategy to real business outcomes. She is the author of **The Eight Levers of EdTech Transformation**, a practical field guide for future-focused L&D leaders, and is widely trusted by executives for helping L&D teams prove ROI, build credibility, and drive measurable impact.



David Kelly

Former CEO of **The Learning Guild**, David brings decades of experience at the intersection of learning, leadership, and technology. He offers a pragmatic, real-world perspective on what actually works in leadership development—and how organizations should evaluate the effectiveness of their learning investments.

Taken together, their perspectives point to a shared conclusion: AI is not simply digitizing work, it is redesigning it. And as work changes, learning must evolve from content delivery to performance enablement.

This is not a report about learning trends. It is a performance operating model for the AI era—one that prioritizes judgment, clarity, practice, and trust.

That belief is foundational to BizLibrary's approach. Our platform and solutions like [BizReady](#), designed to build real-world leadership readiness—exist to help organizations translate learning into confident action, not just completed courses.

The Performance Paradox is a real challenge – but for organizations willing to redesign learning around how work actually happens, it is resolvable.

Executive Summary

Why the Performance Paradox Exists



AI is changing how work gets done faster than most organizations can adapt. New tools promise efficiency, scale, and automation at unprecedented levels. Yet for many leaders, performance feels harder to sustain than ever. Managers are stretched thin. Employees are overwhelmed. Learning investments are under greater scrutiny, even as skill gaps widen.

This tension is what BizLibrary calls the Performance Paradox: the very tools meant to increase productivity are exposing cracks in how organizations enable people to perform.

Across industries, we see the same pattern. AI accelerates execution, but it also amplifies every weakness in clarity, decision-making, and trust. When roles are unclear, priorities shift constantly, and learning remains disconnected from real work, speed does not lead to better outcomes.

- it leads to burnout, rework, and disengagement.

As David Kelly explains:

The risk is not that AI replaces people, but that organizations fail to equip people to work effectively alongside it.

This report was created to explore that gap. Not through abstract predictions or trend lists, but through the lived experience of leaders helping organizations navigate learning, leadership, and performance in an AI-enabled world.

BizLibrary partnered with four respected voices across learning, leadership, and workforce strategy—Heidi Kirby, Adam Weber, Lori Niles-Hofmann, and David Kelly—to examine what is actually changing beneath the surface. Each contributor responded to the same core questions about skills, performance, leadership, AI, and business impact. Their insights were synthesized into a single narrative - not to force consensus, but to surface the patterns defining the future of performance.

“

The risk is not that AI replaces people, but that organizations fail to equip people to work effectively alongside it.

”

The New Rules of Performance

Why Productivity Is Harder in an AI-Enabled World

For decades, performance was synonymous with efficiency: doing more, faster, with fewer errors. That definition assumes stable work, predictable roles, and linear processes.

AI has broken those assumptions.

As intelligent systems absorb more executional and analytical tasks, human contribution is shifting. People are spending less time “doing the work” and more time deciding **what work should be done**, interpreting outputs, and navigating ambiguity.

“Human contribution is moving upstream and downstream—deciding what matters, interpreting outcomes, and applying judgment in context.”

Yet many organizations are layering AI onto workflows without redesigning how work is coordinated. The result is speed without alignment.

Adam Weber sees this play out repeatedly:

“Most organizations still approach AI like an IT rollout, when in reality it represents a fundamental shift in how people think, work, and make decisions.”

This mismatch creates the Performance Paradox. Execution accelerates, but alignment lags. Managers chase moving targets. Teams move faster, but with less confidence.

High-performing organizations are responding by redefining performance itself. Rather than measuring activity, they prioritize **clarity**: clear goals, explicit decision rights, and rapid course correction.

As Weber puts it:

“”

When roles are shifting, clarity becomes the work.

In unstable environments, clarity is no longer a soft leadership skill: it is infrastructure. Without it, AI magnifies confusion. With it, AI amplifies performance.

This is where learning plays a pivotal role. When learning remains detached from real work, it cannot support performance. But when learning reinforces decision-making, prioritization, and execution in context, it becomes a stabilizing force.

At BizLibrary, we see this shift reflected in client behavior.

Chief Marketing Officer, Paul Eschen, says:

Demand is moving away from broad, generic training and toward learning experiences that help people apply judgment in real moments—especially leaders navigating constant change.

Performance in the AI era is not about doing more. **It is about aligning faster.**



Skills That Matter in 2026

Human Judgment + AI Fluency



As AI absorbs more analytical and executional work, the value of human skills does not decline—it concentrates.

Across contributors, there is strong agreement: **the most critical skills in 2026 are adaptive, not technical.**

Critical thinking, problem framing, decision-making, collaboration, and ethical reasoning are no longer “soft skills” or leadership-only competencies. They are foundational.

Kelly explains why:

When AI can generate outputs at scale, the differentiator becomes how well humans guide, interpret, and challenge those outputs.

Heidi Kirby adds a critical human dimension often missing from skills conversations. Teams are leaner. Engagement is fragile. Employees are being asked to adapt continuously.



It will be a while before companies are ready to have the conversation about emotional intelligence—but it’s a needed conversation as engagement hits historic lows.



AI literacy is also evolving. Literacy does not mean building agents or mastering prompts. It means understanding when to trust AI, when to question it, and how to use it responsibly.

As Kirby notes:

AI literacy isn’t about making cute videos or writing prompts. It’s about knowing when to trust the tool—and when not to.



Lori Niles-Hofmann brings a systems perspective to this skill shift. As workflows become interconnected and increasingly automated, employees must understand how tools, data, and decisions interact across the organization.



The most valuable skills in 2026 sit at the intersection of human judgment and AI fluency. Organizations that treat these capabilities as secondary—or assume they will emerge organically—will struggle to convert AI adoption into performance.

BizLibrary’s data reinforces this shift.

During 2025, leadership, communication, critical thinking, and change management ranked among the most viewed content topic areas across our client base—signals that organizations are feeling the pressure to **build judgment, not just knowledge.**

Upskilling and Reskilling

From Programs to a Skills Supply Chain



6x higher learning retention with interactive online courses.*

*A Carnegie Mellon study found that learners who participated in interactive activities during online courses demonstrated 6x higher learning retention than those who only watched instructional videos.

For years, organizations responded to change by increasing learning volume. New programs. New courses. New platforms.

But more learning does not automatically mean better performance, especially if you're working with an outdated model.

Kelly reinforces this by pointing out that traditional, role-based upskilling models no longer reflect how work evolves. Preparing someone for a predefined future role assumes a level of stability that no longer exists.

Learning consumes time, attention, and cognitive energy. When it is unfocused or misaligned, it becomes a burden rather than an enabler.

Niles-Hofmann challenges a deeply ingrained assumption:

“Learning is a tax on employees and should be used deliberately and sparingly.”

The alternative is **precision**.

Niles-Hofmann reframes skills development as a **supply-chain decision**:

for every capability an organization needs, leaders must decide whether to **build, buy, borrow, or bot**. Not every skill should be developed internally. Not every gap requires training.

Kirby's critique of “everything-as-a-course” fits squarely here. In many cases, a well-placed job aid, practice scenario, or in-the-flow resource delivers far more value than a 30-minute course no one asked for.

“A well-placed job aid can be ten times more useful than a compliance-style training that no one asked for.”

Upskilling in 2026 is not about producing more learning.

It is about building the right capabilities, deliberately, and supporting them where work actually happens.

This philosophy underpins BizLibrary's approach to performance readiness

especially through solutions like **BizReady**,

which emphasize **practice, application, and confidence** in real leadership moments.

The future of upskilling is continuous, contextual, and performance-driven.

Managers at the Center

Burnout, Uncertainty, and the New Job of Clarity



Managers sit at the epicenter of the Performance Paradox. They are expected to lead people and AI tools simultaneously, absorb pressure from senior leadership, support employee well-being, and deliver results in environments where priorities shift constantly. At the same time, many organizations are flattening management layers and expanding spans of control—asking fewer managers to do more with less.

Kirby describes the reality bluntly:

The role of manager now includes not only managing a team of real human beings but also AI agents, tools, and initiatives—while absorbing pressure from senior leaders and delivering outcomes with fewer resources than before.

This expansion of responsibility, without a corresponding redesign of support systems, is a recipe for burnout. And the risk is not theoretical.



If this isn't done carefully and with respect for managers, we're going to see fewer employees willing to stay in these roles.

— Heidi Kirby



Weber reframes the managerial challenge through a different but complementary lens. As roles and workflows become less stable, the manager's job shifts from supervision to sense-making.

In AI-enabled environments, clarity is no longer an output of planning cycles. It must be created continuously. Managers who can consistently define priorities, expectations, and boundaries become a competitive advantage. Those who cannot are left reacting to noise.

Kelly adds another layer of tension:

Managers are often asked to provide certainty for others while receiving very little themselves.

Managers are being asked to create certainty for others while feeling uncertain themselves.

Without intentional intervention, this tension erodes both performance and trust. Organizations that are navigating this well are redesigning the manager role intentionally. They reduce low-value work, eliminate unnecessary reporting and meetings, and provide managers with practical tools for prioritization, coaching, and decision-making.

This is where learning must evolve. Managers do not need more theory. They need [support for the moments that matter](#): setting expectations, navigating ambiguity, giving feedback, and leading through change.

At BizLibrary, we see this reflected in rising demand for manager and frontline leadership development—especially programs focused on real-world application, not abstract leadership models. Performance improves when managers are treated as critical infrastructure, not expendable overhead.

Leadership Development Rebuilt

Transparency, Practice, and Scalable Coaching

Leadership development has long struggled with a credibility gap. Too often, programs rely on aspirational frameworks and polished narratives that do not reflect how leadership actually works today.

Kirby is clear about the consequences:



Leadership development has been stuck in outdated models and aspirational TED Talks that don't equate to performance.



In reality, leaders are operating amid burnout, layoffs, global uncertainty, and AI-driven disruption. They are navigating power dynamics, inequity, and ambiguity—often without a playbook.

Weber highlights a defining behavior for leaders in this environment: transparency.



Leaders who openly share what's working and what's not - especially with AI - build far more trust than those who pretend to have it all figured out.

Transparency creates psychological safety. It signals that learning is expected, experimentation is allowed, and adaptation is part of the job, not a failure.

Kelly emphasizes that leadership development must move away from episodic programs and toward **systems of practice.**

Leadership capability develops through practice, feedback, and reinforcement in the flow of work—not insight gained in workshops.



This is where AI introduces a meaningful opportunity. Simulations, and [guided practice](#) are among the most effective leadership development methods but historically difficult to scale. Used responsibly, AI can extend access to practice and feedback while maintaining human accountability. It's important to note that an AI tool is only as reliable as its source material. An AI coaching companion that guides learners through practice scenarios needs to have a rubric to determine what 'good' looks like – or its feedback is not reliable. The relationship between human accountability and AI-enabled scale is cemented in what is identified as 'good' - and who decided that, and why? This places authority back in the hands of people and not in a murky training algorithm.

When employees can trust their AI tools, implementation increases, and leadership development methodology becomes accessible at scale.

Leadership development in 2026 must be:



Applied, not abstract



Continuous, not episodic



Transparent, not performative

BizLibrary's approach—particularly through BizReady—is built around this philosophy. BizReady focuses on leadership readiness through practice, enabling leaders to rehearse and refine skills like coaching, decision-making, and difficult conversations before they need them in real moments.

High-Performance Culture

Burnout, Uncertainty, and the New Job of Clarity

People perform best with:



Clear
Priorities



Real
Autonomy



Timely &
Candid Feedback

Despite the pace of change, the foundations of high performance remain familiar.

Weber describes modern high performance as the ability to align and adjust quickly.



High performance today is less about grinding harder and more about aligning faster.



In these cultures, teams are expected to speak up, name what is broken, and change course without blame or drama. Psychological safety is not a perk—it is an operating requirement.

Kirby reinforces that performance does not emerge from control.



High performance isn't something you do—it's what happens naturally when smart people are set up to succeed.

Kelly adds that technology can strengthen these conditions when used intentionally. As AI absorbs routine tasks, human effort can shift toward decision-making, feedback, and adaptation: in other words the work that most benefits from human judgment.

The organizations that outperform are not mistake-free. They are fast learners. They surface issues early, course-correct often, and treat learning as part of execution—not something separate from it.

Learning plays a central role here. When learning reinforces autonomy, judgment, and feedback loops, culture strengthens. When it becomes performative or disconnected, trust erodes.

“
High performance isn't something you do—it's what happens naturally when smart people are set up to succeed.
”

The Human-AI Handoff

What to Automate vs. What Must Stay Human

The competitive advantage in the AI era lies in designing the relationship between human judgment and machine capability.

Weber frames this as the **human-AI handoff**

“ AI should accelerate preparation and insight. Humans must own judgment, trust, and accountability. ”

AI excels at speed, scale, and pattern recognition. It can curate content, surface insights, and personalize recommendations. But moments that require nuance—coaching, feedback, ethical decisions, performance evaluations—must remain human-led.

Kirby warns of the consequences when organizations automate the wrong things:

“ If we lose the human touch, we lose credibility, connection, and trust. ”

Kelly reinforces the importance of oversight. Automation without clear ownership introduces hidden risk. AI should support people in critical moments, not remove them from the loop.

Niles-Hofmann adds that some of the most meaningful AI applications are “invisible”—structuring data, connecting performance signals, and enabling better decision-making across systems.

The organizations that win do not ask, “What can we automate?” They ask,

Where does human judgment matter most?

Designing that handoff intentionally allows AI to amplify performance without undermining trust.



The Modern Learning Ecosystem

Prompt-First, Embedded, and Data-Connected

As work becomes more dynamic and AI-enabled, learning is moving out of centralized destinations and into the flow of work itself. Employees no longer want to “go find learning.” They expect support to surface when and where it is needed—embedded in the tools and moments that matter most.

Niles-Hofmann describes this shift succinctly:

From a learner perspective, learning will be accessed almost entirely through the prompt bar. Learning won't be a destination—it will be embedded in how work gets done.

This does not mean foundational systems like the LMS disappear. Instead, [they evolve](#). The LMS becomes strategic infrastructure—managing content, compliance, data, and integrations while enabling more flexible, contextual learning experiences across the ecosystem.

Kelly emphasizes that there is no universal blueprint:

The right learning ecosystem is the one that aligns with an organization's strategy, workforce, and operating environment—not a generic tech stack.

The most effective ecosystems share common characteristics:



Learning support is contextual, not scheduled



Content is modular, not monolithic



Data flows across systems to inform decisions



Static courses increasingly serve as **source material**, not the learning experience itself. They are dismantled, reused, and recombined into job aids, practice scenarios, coaching moments, and performance support.

This evolution aligns closely with what BizLibrary sees across its client base. Organizations are investing less in one-time programs and more in ecosystems that support continuous capability building—especially in leadership, communication, and compliance-critical roles.

With BizReady, learning happens in orchestration – directly in the flow of work, in safe practice environments with expert-approved source material. Its goal is performance improvement through upskilling rather than course completions or excellent quiz scores.

ROI and Business Impact

From Learning Metrics to Performance Narratives



As scrutiny increases, learning credibility depends on alignment with business outcomes.

For years, L&D teams relied on completion rates, satisfaction scores, and engagement metrics to demonstrate value. While useful for operational insight, these measures rarely resonate with executive leaders.

Kirby reframes the conversation:

There's one metric that matters more than any other—does the learning do what you intended it to do?

ROI begins with intent. What problem is learning meant to solve? What behavior needs to change? What outcome should improve if learning is effective?

Kelly reinforces that executives do not require perfect attribution:

“The question isn't whether learning has perfect causality—it's whether L&D can tell a coherent story that connects learning to outcomes the business actually cares about.”

That story often includes metrics closer to causation, demonstrated behavior change, improved decision-making, reduced errors—paired with business indicators like productivity, retention, risk reduction, or revenue performance.

Weber adds that visibility matters:

Progress should be shared early and often. When leaders see learning supporting execution in real time, credibility increases.

At BizLibrary, we see organizations shifting toward:

Performance narratives

Stories grounded in data reinforced by manager feedback tied directly to business priorities

Learning earns a seat at the table when it speaks the language of outcomes, not activity.

ROI in learning needs to emphasize proving credible contribution with actual data, supported by qualitative feedback and narrative interpretation. If these three aren't present – its worth asking the question, is your learning actually working?

HR & L&D Teams of Tomorrow

From Content Shops to Performance Architects

The future HR and L&D function is not defined by how much content it produces.

It is defined by its ability to diagnose performance problems, redesign workflows, orchestrate learning triggers, and govern AI responsibly.




Niles-Hofmann points to a fundamental shift:

“L&D remains overly focused on content creation. The future of learning is orchestrated around real work—not courses.”

Kelly emphasizes that new job titles are less important than new capabilities:

“Roles tend to follow capability. The real shift is developing the skills to analyze data, interpret outcomes, and engage in accountability conversations with the business.”

These teams act as performance architects:

-  Diagnosing root causes, not reacting to requests
-  Aligning learning to strategy, not popularity
-  Using data to inform decisions, not justify activity

Kirby cautions against conflating training output with problem-solving:

“When we default to content without asking whether we’re solving the right problem, trust erodes.”

AI accelerates this shift. As “invisible AI” improves – data structure, skills intelligence, and insight generation – HR and L&D teams will be held more accountable for outcomes.

Insulation from business metrics will fade. The teams that thrive will embrace this accountability—and use it to drive influence.



Trust, Data, and Change

The Cultural Contract of the AI Workplace

Trust is the limiting reagent of AI adoption.

Employees are increasingly aware of how their data is collected, analyzed, and used. They want transparency—not just in policy, but in practice.

Niles-Hofmann is clear:

“Organizations need to explain what data is tracked, how it’s used, who has access, and what employees gain in return.”

Kelly highlights the damage caused by inconsistent narratives:

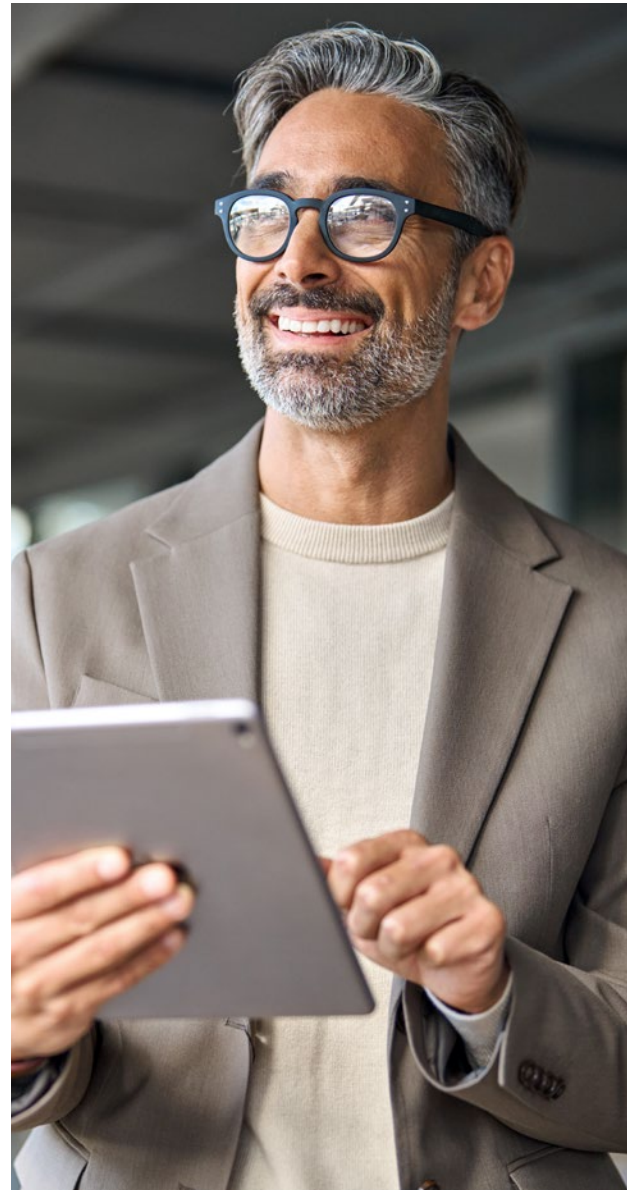
“When organizations say one thing internally and signal another externally, trust erodes quickly.”

Kirby notes the growing backlash against impersonal, AI-generated experiences:

“If people think human-created learning is boring, imagine what they’ll think of AI-generated slop.”

Trust must be designed intentionally. Employees need clarity around expectations, permission to experiment, and reassurance that efficiency gains will not automatically translate into disposability.

The future of work should be built through consistency, transparency, and respect.



What Happens Next

Predictions and the Uneven Future



Change is not going to come all at once. This is one of the most consistent themes across contributors—and one of the most important realities for leaders to internalize. While AI narratives often imply sweeping, immediate transformation, the actual pace of change will vary widely by organization, industry, and leadership readiness.

Kelly offers a pragmatic view:

The next two to three years will be defined by meaningful but incremental change rather than wholesale reinvention.

Organizations with clear strategy, leadership alignment, and appetite for experimentation will move quickly.

The organizations that win over the next several years will not be the ones chasing every new tool. They will be the ones investing early in:



Clarity of roles, priorities, and expectations



Capability in judgment, communication, and leadership



Trust in how AI, data, and decisions are governed

The future belongs not to the fastest adopters—but to the most intentional **designers of performance.**

Others will remain anchored to familiar structures, layering new tools onto old systems and seeing diminishing returns.

This creates a widening gap.

Niles-Hofmann points out that the most underestimated drivers of long-term impact are not the most visible AI applications:

“The real transformation will come from invisible AI—how data is structured, how skills are inferred, and how decision-making is supported across systems.”

These capabilities do not announce themselves. They quietly enable better personalization, clearer insight, and more informed decisions. Organizations investing in this foundation will compound advantage over time—even if the change feels subtle in the moment.

Kirby offers an important counterweight to speed-driven narratives:

“Just because something is fast doesn’t mean it’s useful.”

Progress without purpose leads back to the Performance Paradox—more activity, less confidence, and rising burnout.

Closing Thoughts

Solving the Performance Paradox

The Performance Paradox is evidence of broken workplace systems accelerated by technology.

AI is already changing how work gets done. What will determine performance in 2026 and beyond is whether organizations redesign learning, leadership, and work itself to match that reality. As execution accelerates, human value concentrates in judgment, clarity, trust, and the ability to apply skill in real moments—not in consuming more content or adopting more tools.

Organizations that fail to adapt will experience faster activity with weaker outcomes:



rising
burnout



declining
engagement



skepticism about
learning's impact.

Solving the Performance Paradox requires a shift in mindset.

Learning must move out of abstraction and into application. It must evolve from content delivery to performance enablement—supporting people in the moments that matter most.

That means:



Moving from role-based training to skills-based capability building



Replacing one-time programs with continuous, practice-driven development



Supporting managers and leaders with tools that help them navigate uncertainty, not avoid it.

This philosophy is foundational to BizLibrary.

BizLibrary exists to help organizations turn learning into a performance system—one that supports people where work actually happens, reinforces clarity, and delivers measurable impact. Solutions like BizReady reflect what this report makes clear is now essential: scalable, practical leadership readiness.

BizReady focuses on preparing leaders and managers for real-world moments: coaching conversations, decision-making under pressure, leading through change—so performance improves not just in theory, but in execution.

Change is already here, and there's no going back

The success of our employees – and our organizations as a whole – is going to hinge on how we structure our systems to support real people, doing real work – empowered by tools, rather than directed by them.

go to [BizLibrary.com](https://bizlibrary.com) to learn more