

ZACHARY DANIELS

HR COMMUNITY WHITE PAPER

JANUARY 2026

A reflection and forward look from our first
HR Networking Event, 27 November 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: WHY HR NEEDS HUMAN + MACHINE THINKING NOW

The world of work is shifting quickly. AI adoption is accelerating, expectations around neuro-inclusion are rising, and HR teams are navigating this with one foot in the future and one firmly planted in the day-to-day realities of supporting people.

This white paper brings together the themes that stood out most from our HR Networking Event. It explores what HR teams are already doing with AI, what designing work for every brain truly means, and what leaders should be prioritising next.

Why this matters now:

- 65% of UK organisations plan to increase their use of AI in HR by 2026 (CIPD)
- Data quality remains the biggest barrier to meaningful AI adoption
- More than one in ten employees identify as neurodivergent
- Psychological safety continues to be one of the strongest predictors of team performance

HR leadership is no longer about choosing between humans and technology. It is about creating a future where both support each other and elevate what HR can achieve.

This is your guide to that next chapter, shaped by real conversations, real challenges, and real possibilities.

A NOTE FROM STACEY

Our first HR Networking Event in 14 years felt different. It had heart. People were open, honest and willing to share the messy bits as well as the exciting parts. It felt like a moment of collective pause, where we all admitted: the world of work is shifting faster than ever, and HR is right in the middle of it.

Two themes cut through everything.

AI, which is no longer something we prepare for, it is something we are already living with.

And neuro-inclusion, which matters because none of the shiny new tools will work if people don't feel understood, supported or safe.

This paper brings together what we heard, what we learned, and where we think HR leadership is heading. It's not meant to be corporate or clinical – just honest, practical and human. Exactly how the night felt.

STACEY JEPSON,
BUSINESS MANAGER



AI IN HR. WHAT'S REAL, WHAT'S NEXT, AND WHAT STILL FEELS MESSY

AI has quietly moved into HR workflows, not in dramatic, headline-grabbing ways, but in small, incremental shifts that are making work smoother and faster.



Talent Acquisition

CV weighting tools, skills clustering and automated scheduling are reducing hiring cycles and helping managers make better first decisions.



Performance Management

Systems are beginning to summarise feedback, pull themes together and offer draft scripts for check-ins. The human still makes the call, but the heavy lifting is lighter.



Employee Relations

Chatbots are taking on simple queries and helping HR stay focused on the complex, sensitive and human situations.

This isn't about HR being replaced. It's about giving HR space to breathe again. What kept coming up on the night was the frustration around messy data. HR teams are excited about using AI, but without trusted data, the benefits are watered down. Disconnected systems, outdated information and unclear ownership mean HR teams are doing double work, correcting the foundations while trying to innovate.

One attendee put it perfectly:

"If the data is wrong, the outcome is wrong. Every single time."

Over the next year, data confidence will quietly become one of HR's biggest transformation projects.

AI is also reshaping roles in a positive way. Less admin. More coaching. More emotional insight. More time spent on culture and real conversations. We're seeing the first wave of hybrid roles emerge, people who understand both behaviour and technology, both empathy and systems thinking.

Above all, HR will be the voice that helps employees feel steady through this change. People need to understand what AI means for them, not in vague statements but in real, honest terms. Trust and clarity will become HR's superpowers.

DESIGNING WORK FOR EVERY BRAIN

If the AI discussion was thought-provoking, this one was emotional.

Neuro-inclusion is no longer an emerging conversation. It is already here. Teams are filled with different brain types, different processing styles, different ways of communicating and showing up. And most of that difference is invisible.

One in ten people identify as neurodivergent, but the real number is far higher, many people mask, adjust, over-compensate or quietly struggle. The question is not whether neurodivergence exists in our workplaces. It is whether our workplaces are built to support it.

Real neuro-inclusion starts with small, consistent behaviours. Clarity instead of assumptions. Choice instead of a single way of working. Safety instead of judgement. Curiosity instead of performance pressure.

Dan shared his lived experience with dyslexia, dyscalculia and ADHD in a way that left the room silent. His story made something very clear: you can only thrive when you feel seen for who you are, not who the system expects you to be.

His message stayed with many of us:

"If you have 30 managers, you have 30 cultures."

Culture is shaped in micro-moments, not corporate statements.

Some of the most practical actions HR can take include:

- Giving communication choices
- Sharing agendas in advance
- Following up with clarity
- Asking what someone needs to perform at their best
- Reducing pressure in assessments and interviews
- Focusing on genuine capability, not polished presentation

Done consistently, these shifts create workplaces where everyone does better, not just neurodivergent people.



A CLEAR POINT OF VIEW ON HR'S NEXT CHAPTER

HR is standing at a crossroads of people, culture, technology, data and change. It is a powerful and sometimes heavy place to be. But it is also where the most meaningful work happens.

We believe:



Humans remain central

AI can support, enhance and simplify, but it cannot replace connection, empathy or judgement.



AI amplifies HR

Removing admin gives HR time back to do the work only humans can do.



Neuro-inclusion should be standard

Workplaces should fit the people in them, not the other way around.



Data is now infrastructure

Without clean, trusted data, every people decision is harder than it needs to be.

MICRO CASE EXAMPLES

Case One: AI in Talent Acquisition

A retailer adopted automated CV weighting and scheduling, reducing time to hire by 30 percent. Candidate experience improved because managers spent more time building relationships instead of sorting logistics.

Case Two: Neuro-inclusive management

A manager began sharing agendas in advance and sending simple, clear follow-ups. Anxiety reduced, engagement increased and team contribution improved.

Case Three: Process redesign

Removing time-pressured tasks in an assessment centre made the process more accessible for neurodivergent candidates and ultimately improved the quality of hires.



WHAT HR SHOULD FOCUS ON NEXT: A 12-MONTH ROADMAP

Now

- Clean one dataset
- Train managers in neuro-inclusive habits
- Pilot one small automation
- Communicate early and openly about AI

Next

- Create a cross-functional AI steering group
- Redesign interviews to be more flexible
- Map roles against future skills
- Strengthen data ownership and governance

Later

- Explore emerging hybrid HR roles
- Build predictive insight capability
- Embed neuro-inclusion across every people process
- Move towards real-time reporting

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2026 AND 2027

HR will see significant change, including:

-  AI-first workflows
-  Neuro-inclusion becoming a board-level priority
-  Personalised work design becoming normal practice
-  New hybrid roles blending people and technology
-  Faster, more confident decision-making
-  Continuous feedback replacing annual cycles

CLOSING REFLECTION

"I left our event feeling genuinely optimistic. HR is changing, yes, but it is not losing its heart. If anything, this next chapter needs more humanity, more empathy and more curiosity.

AI, neuro-inclusion, data and skills all rely on human connection. None of this works without trust and without people who care.

Thank you to everyone who came along, shared openly and helped shape such an honest conversation. This community is only at the beginning of what it can become."

Stacey Jepson, Business Manager at Zachary Daniels

A CALL TO ACTION FOR OUR HR COMMUNITY

If you'd like to join future HR events, share ideas, explore challenges or get support across People, Talent, ED&I or AI-focused roles, please reach out.

We're building something meaningful together and we'd love you to be part of the next chapter.

As this community grows, we want you to know you don't have to navigate any of this alone. If you ever need support, insight or a partner to walk alongside you, we're here.



WHERE WE SUPPORT HR LEADERS

We work with organisations of all sizes and sectors, offering support across:

-  **Senior HR search** including Business Partners, Talent, Learning, Reward, ED&I and Transformation
-  **Interim HR specialists** for change programmes, projects and cover requirements
-  **Talent mapping and market intelligence** to give clarity on skills, structures and future needs
-  **ED&I and neuro-inclusive hiring expertise** shaped by lived experience and current research
-  **Salary benchmarking and organisational insight** to support confident decision-making
-  **Cross-functional recruitment support** when your people needs extend beyond HR – from Finance and Operations to Commercial, Digital and more

If you ever have a role to fill, a challenge to explore or simply want to sense-check your thinking, we're here for that.

CONNECT WITH US

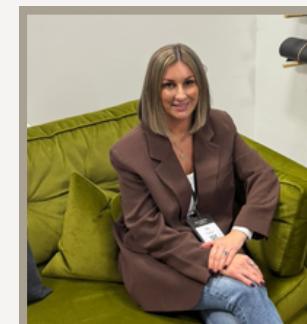
People first. Always.

At Zachary Daniels, our work sits at the intersection of people, culture and growth. We partner with HR leaders who want to build teams, processes and workplaces that feel genuinely human, with the structure, insight and expertise to support that vision.

Whether you're exploring AI in HR, strengthening neuro-inclusive practices, or developing your People function, we're here as an extension of your team. Sometimes that means talent support; sometimes it means insight, benchmarking or simply a trusted conversation when you need a sounding board.

GET IN TOUCH!

If you'd like to talk talent, explore an idea, or join our next HR community event, we'd love to hear from you. Or maybe you are looking for your next move? if so, reach out for a confidential conversation



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