

Board Perspectives

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We Can't Create Jobs to Babysit AI: Former IBM CHRO Eyes HR's AI Future

*In this edition of **Board Perspectives**, we welcome Diane Gherson, former CHRO of IBM, where she was responsible for redesigning all aspects of the organisation's people agenda and digitally transforming the HR function. She is a certified executive coach and board member at The Kraft Heinz Company, Centivo, TechWolf and the National Academy of Human Resources (NAHR). Protiviti Managing Director Fran Maxwell, Global CHRO Team, and People & Change Lead, sat down with Gherson to discuss AI's impact and the future of HR. For additional insights from their full conversation, a [video Q&A](#) and a [podcast](#) are available.*

Remember Watson, IBM's question answering computer system that outsmarted Ken Jennings on *Jeopardy!* back in 2011? Turns out Watson played a significant role in the formative years of the AI-HR relationship that is poised to transform the function of HR, the role of the CHRO and the future of work.



Diane Gherson is the former CHRO at IBM, where she pioneered modernisation of the HR profession with AI and digitisation to create consumer-grade inclusive experiences for employees, predictive advice for business leaders and improved productivity for the business. Gherson has been recognised as HR Executive of the Year by *HR Executive* magazine and inducted into the NAHR. Most recently, she has been focused on board governance of human capital issues and is a faculty member at the NACD and NAHR.

With Watson's help, former IBM CHRO Diane Gherson played a pivotal role transforming HR practices and workforce management through AI-driven solutions. "At the time, IBM was undergoing massive amounts of change. We needed to change how we worked; we needed to transform our skills, we needed to reorganise ... and along came Watson to the rescue," Gherson says.

Gherson was able to work with data scientists and designers in new ways to leverage AI to create better employee and manager experiences and kickstart a reorganisation that helped usher IBM into a new digital age. "Watson was a great way to showcase AI to our employees and our clients," according to Gherson.

"There was so much excitement about what we were doing in HR and where we could go."

Watson, in case you were wondering, lives on and is advancing its AI capabilities through IBM's 'watsonx' portfolio, but the AI revolution it helped launch is on the verge of a total transformation of HR, the employee experience and work itself.

As a result, CHROs need a firm grasp of how AI can transform HR processes and positions, an understanding of their team's AI concerns, and a strategy for upskilling HR professionals to thrive in AI-empowered roles. The AI-driven innovations that an organisation produces may generate transformations whose magnitude rivals that of the Industrial Revolution. For that to occur, HR also will need to be strategic and AI-savvy.

A strategic pivot: From process to purpose

As AI accelerates its integration into the workplace, the future of HR itself is being redefined — not as a set of transactional processes, but as a strategic function at the intersection of people, technology and organisational design. This transformation is not optional; it is essential for organisations seeking resilience and competitive advantage.

Gherson says it is imperative that HR not be viewed as a collection of processes increasingly automated by AI. "To articulate our profession as a set of processes is backward-looking," she notes, calling instead for HR to focus on "making work meaningful and productive." This requires a fundamental rethinking of its purpose and structure. Traditional roles, such as the HR business partner, are already starting to disappear in favour of multidisciplinary

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teams organised around solving business problems rather than maintaining silos, she notes.

“HR must look more like a business,” Gherson says. “Speaking as a board member now, that reframing fundamentally changes HR’s purpose.” Rather than stewarding transactions, HR should be focused on designing adaptable systems of work, monitoring organisational health and aligning talent architecture with business strategy. Gherson describes reorganising HR around problems and solutions — not functions — because “managers think they’ve got a low-performer problem, or a restructuring problem, but they really need a team of multidisciplinary people to help them with their problems.”

Protiviti’s Fran Maxwell concurs: “You can’t solve today’s talent problems with yesterday’s thinking.” For boards and the C-suite, that’s a real mindset shift that becomes foundational when AI rewires tasks, workflows and career paths at speed.

Work design: The missing piece

AI adoption without thoughtful work design is a recipe for failure. And, as Gherson points out, it’s a capability sorely lacking in most organisations. Simply “bolting AI onto the organisation” yields minimal productivity gains and risks creating a generation of employees who lack the experiential grounding needed for leadership.

“We can’t create jobs to babysit AI,” Gherson says. “Ten years from now, organisations risk having people who haven’t had the necessary work experiences,” emphasising the need for a dedicated work design capability to ensure employees continue to build situational awareness and social intelligence as technology reshapes tasks.

Maxwell echoes this concern, noting that job redesign will be “unlike anything we’ve seen in the last 30 years.” To avoid a “talent gap that undermines an organisation’s health,” HR professionals must proactively create meaningful roles for early-career professionals whose traditional tasks are being automated.

From a board member’s perspective, Gherson says it’s easier to see how AI changes the very nature of work, so CHROs should be focused on how people gain experience, what skills matter and

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how the organisation measures value. The goal is not to automate HR; it is to re-architect work and talent systems, so employees and AI produce better outcomes together, such as:

- **Creating purpose:** HR's purpose hinges on crafting work that is both productive and developmental, ensuring employees build the human capabilities — context, judgement and social intelligence — that AI cannot replicate.
- **Risk-literate HR:** Boards expect HR to diagnose organisational health through integrated analytics, pinpointing hotspots and demonstrating concrete action plans.
- **Experience-first AI:** Implementing AI without work design erodes leadership pipelines. Designing experiences into AI-enabled workflows preserves and grows the tacit knowledge organisations depend on.

Talking talent: Upskilling and reskilling

As any HR executive will tell you, there's just no substitute for capabilities. "Skills are the lifeblood of any company and the currency of performance," Gherson says. Historically, she continues, organisations had a poor handle on skills — "hand done ... manually approved" — but AI can now infer skills, allow employees to update continuously and validate, providing raw material for large-scale upskilling and reskilling. And data-driven market scanning can distinguish jobs that will be augmented by AI from those that can be fully automated, as well as identify skills that are minimally conducive to automation.

With that insight, the learning and development (L&D) function must shift from compliance to capability-building, partnering closely with talent to identify adjacent skills that move people to higher-value work. "There's going to be a huge shift in skills," Maxwell says. "And the responsible party in making sure you have the right skills is going to be the organisations themselves."

This is a common client ask, he adds — helping organisations inventory current skills, identify needed skills and close the gap through "build, buy, borrow or bot" strategies. Given the pace of innovation, these reviews shouldn't be annual — they might need to occur "every quarter or every six months."

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The board agenda

Boards and CHROs should be in almost constant communication about AI strategies for success. Here are six ways CHROs and boards can stay aligned on priorities:

1. **AI-native operating model.** HR should deliver digital offerings to managers and employees, measure them with NPS-like rigour, and sunset underperforming services.
2. **Unified skills system.** Build an integrated talent-L&D engine that uses AI to infer and validate skills, identifies adjacent skill moves, and funds upskilling pathways at scale.
3. **Organisational health analytics.** Move beyond point-in-time engagement to risk-based views by matching patterns across employee relations investigations, appeals, engagement, performance and turnover.
4. **Work design as a core capability.** Establish a formal process to redesign roles and flows so AI improves business productivity and career development in tandem.
5. **Leader enablement.** Equip managers at every level to use AI tools directly to lead multidisciplinary teams, rather than via an HR partner.
6. **AI governance with human accountability.** Codify standards for fairness, bias mitigation, auditability and transparency. Treat agentic systems as part of the workforce plan — identity, access, performance and security included.

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Protiviti's POV: AI-adoption considerations

Finally, HR's own use of AI tools and external services partners that can assist with AI governance models, resourcing, the deployment of other leading practices and more will give leaders and practitioners more time for the heavier, more human lifts required to support the organisation's overall AI journey. Any HR AI adoption plan should consider the following actions:

- **Develop a strategy and game plan:** HR leaders should craft a clear plan for hiring AI-proficient HR professionals and upskilling their current teams. Since AI skills are in high demand, an effective strategy emphasises upskilling.
- **Recognise the importance of critical thinking:** Many HR professionals need help thinking about their jobs in different ways. As AI takes on a larger share of transactional work, what adjacent skills are needed to collaborate with employees in a more consultative manner?
- **Avoid AI overreliance:** An overreliance on AI — and AI work that lacks human oversight — produces unintended consequences. HR groups must monitor these risks and swiftly mitigate them when they materialise.
- **Consider a centre of excellence (COE):** As protectors of employees' personally identifiable information, HR functions have earned a reputation for ensuring confidentiality as well as data privacy and security. HR leaders should recognise their function's advantages as AI stewards and consider whether creating an AI COE within the function makes sense.

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Meet our team



Fran Maxwell
Managing Director, Protiviti

Fran Maxwell, based in Phoenix, brings to Protiviti more than 21 years of experience in human resources and change management consulting. Before joining Protiviti in 2021, Fran held progressive leadership roles at Willis Towers Watson (previously Towers Watson), most recently as Market Leader and Client Management Leader. Earlier roles at the firm included Director of Business Development and Strategy, Workday Implementation Practice Lead, Director of HR Service Delivery and Workday Sales, and Americas Sales and Marketing Leader.

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