

2026



THE EVOLUTION OF WORK MODELS

Designing Work That Works for People in 2026

Meet Our Team



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Trish Steed is the CEO and Chief Strategist for [H3 HR Advisors](#), and co-host of the [At Work in America](#) podcast on the HR Happy Hour Network alongside [Steve Boese](#). She is also the creator of the H3 LIVE! vlog.

A former HR executive and HCM product leader with over 20 years of experience in Big 4 public accounting, PR, healthcare, manufacturing, and IT, Trish brings that knowledge to her clients as an analyst and advisor.



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Since 2013, Steve has been the Program Chair and host of the [HR Technology Conference](#), the world's largest gathering of the global HR Technology community, and authors a monthly HR Technology Column for [Human Resource Executive magazine](#). He is a frequent speaker and author on topics in Human Resources, HR technology, and the world of work.



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Karen Steed is the Client Experience Director & Learning Analyst for H3 HR Advisors. She works with client teams to promote their organizational needs seamlessly and effectively, through strategy and planning. She is also responsible for the HR Happy Hour Network media production and promotion. Previously, Karen served 15 years as an elementary educator and early childhood administrator. Her focus is on learning solutions that are engaging and practical.



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Carleigh is a PR and Marketing Associate and Producer at H3 HR Advisors, where she drives strategic brand growth through research-backed content and high-quality podcast production. A graduate of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln with a degree in Journalism and Mass Communications, Carleigh leverages a deep background in data journalism and strategic storytelling. Her experience includes reporting on emerging technologies at international conferences and producing multi-platform content that resonates with global audiences.

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Introduction

From Flexibility to Intentional Design

Over the past five years, work has undergone a transformation that goes far beyond friction. What started as a rapid response to disruption has evolved into a deliberate effort to intentionally design new ways of working. The central argument is that organizations must move from simply enabling flexibility to a more purposeful approach—intentionally designing work to fit both organizational needs and people's lives.

The pivotal question is how organizations can structure work to maximize both human experience and organizational performance. Traditional, rigid models designed for stability and control no longer align with a workforce shaped by constant change, AI integration, and evolving expectations. As a result, organizations are shifting toward more fluid and responsive systems.

In 2025, organizations were trying to make hybrid work. In 2026, they are being asked to make work work.

This new work model is a composition of approaches that blend full-time employees, contract talent, and AI-augmented workflows. It is designed around adaptability, and most importantly, it reflects a shift in philosophy. Now, organizations are being asked to design work in ways that better fit into people's lives.

In 2026, intentional design is no longer limited to in-person, remote, or hybrid work. It now shapes how all work is structured across people, technology, and time.

From Static Models to Fluid Systems

The traditional constructs of work, remote versus in-office, flexible versus structured, are no longer sufficient to describe how organizations operate. Today, there is a more dynamic and intentionally designed way of working.

“This is the new design of work. This is the new model.
How do we make the most of it?”

-Steve Boese

Hybrid work was a temporary solution to a problem that has led to a new, strategic way of thinking. Organizations are embracing asynchronous collaboration and team structures that shift based on need rather than hierarchy. These changes represent a deeper look into how value is created and measured in the workplace.

Advances in collaboration technology are reducing the need for physical proximity. Work happens across time zones, environments, and between human and AI employees. This shift is redefining work. Workplaces are now asked to design work to fit into people's lives, including when work happens, how teams collaborate, and how individuals use their strengths and circumstances to contribute.

For employees, this shift has raised expectations. People are prioritizing flexibility, autonomy, purpose, and adaptability, all while choosing roles that reflect these values.

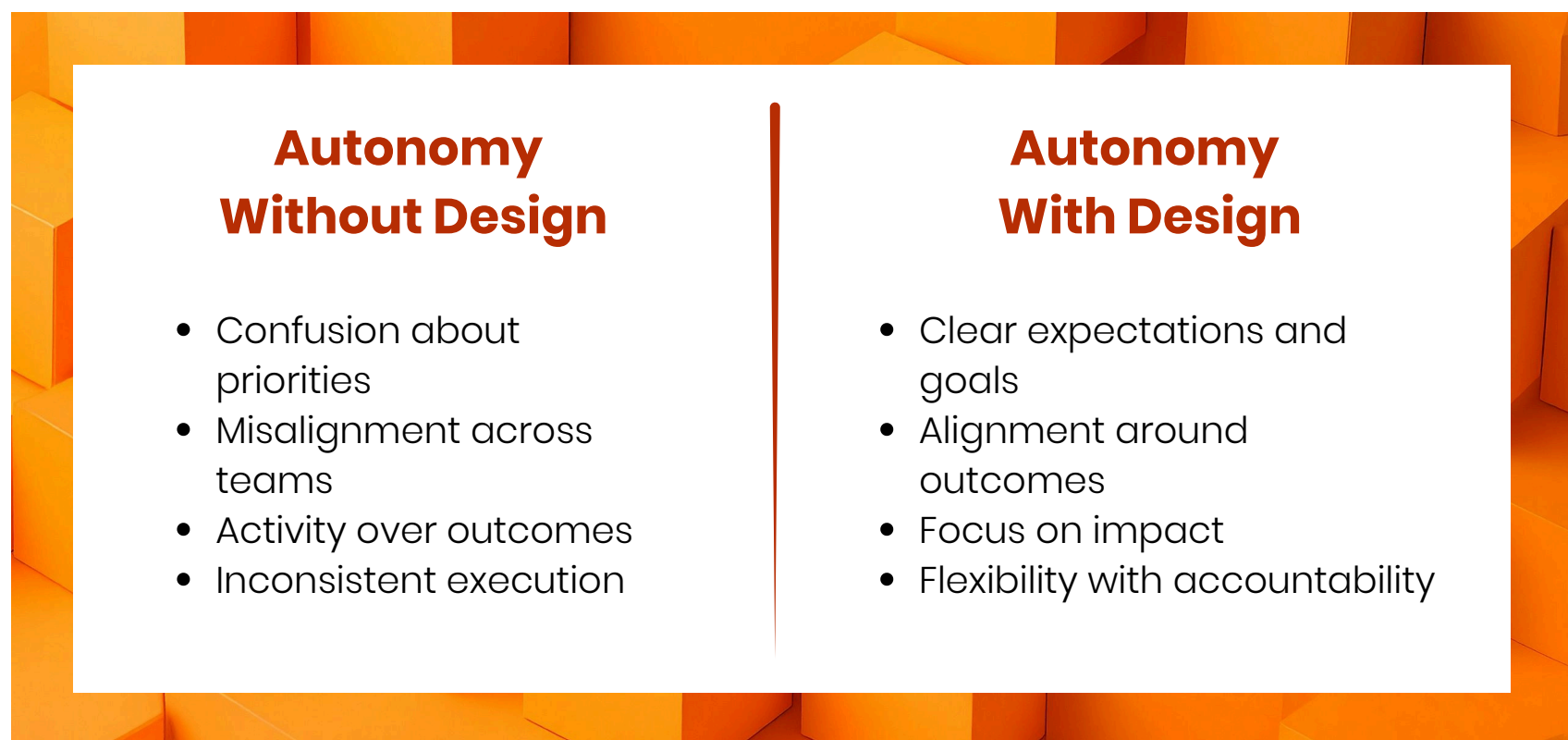
For organizations, this creates both opportunity and complexity. The ability to design work intentionally can unlock higher levels of engagement and productivity. But without a clear structure, flexibility can just as easily lead to fragmentation and disconnection.

The organizations that are succeeding recognize that this is not a policy decision. They are building work models that are fluid, flexible, and human-centered, without losing alignment with business outcomes.

The Foundations of Modern Work Design

At the center of this shift is a deeper realization that work is no longer defined solely by structure. It is defined by how effectively that structure supports people, performance, and progress simultaneously. What once operated as a set of policies is now becoming a system of design decisions, each one shaping how work is experienced and sustained.

Modern work design is built on core ideas that can turn flexibility into either a strength or a weakness. These ideas are not new, but they are being used with more intention and higher standards.

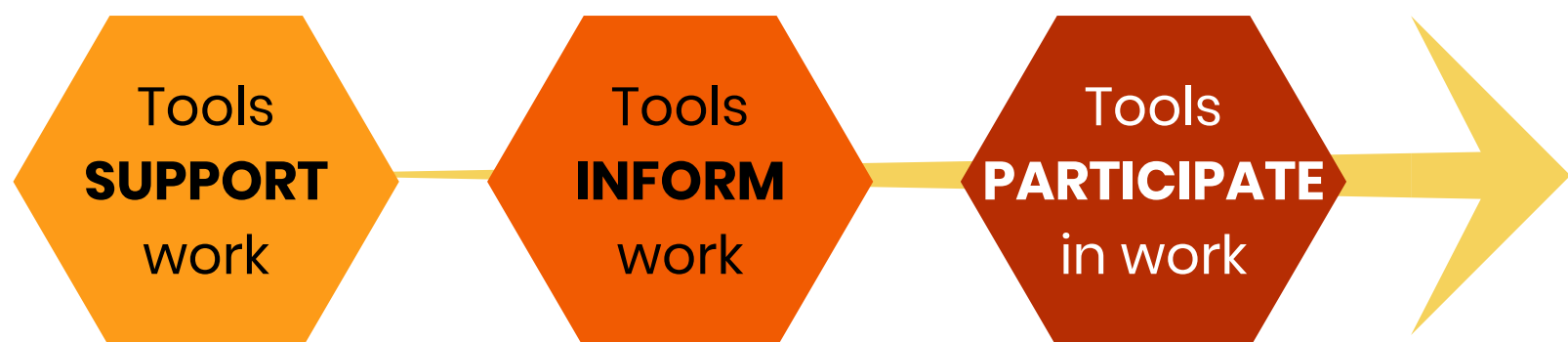


Autonomy is key to engagement and retention. Simply offering flexibility is not enough. What matters is how it is structured and implemented at work. Without clarity, autonomy leads to confusion.

Successful organizations clearly define outcomes, align work with shared goals, and let people decide how to get things done. Focusing less on activity and more on impact is a key part of modern work design.

Cultural connectivity is now both weaker and more important in spread-out workplaces. In the past, culture relied on being together and visible leadership. Now, culture must be more intentional.

This means moving beyond the idea of culture as something experienced passively toward one that is actively designed. It shows up in communication norms and how recognition happens. This also occurs in how decisions are made and whether employees feel seen and heard. The strongest organizations are redefining culture to operate across environments and are grounded in clarity and shared meaning.



The integration of AI and technology into the natural flow of work makes this moment different from previous waves of workplace technology. The role AI is playing is increasingly deep, shaping how work is executed and how decisions are informed.

This introduces both opportunity and discomfort. On one hand, organizations can unlock new levels of efficiency and insight. On the other hand, they must navigate questions of trust and job security. This requires a shift from tool adoption to workflow design, where technology is embedded to enhance human capability.

Finally, modern work design is grounded in intentionality. Across all of the shifts in autonomy, culture, and technology, the differentiator is not what organizations adopt, but how they apply it. The shift from static models to fluid systems introduces greater choice and flexibility for employees.

Intentional design means deciding what matters, how work flows, and what success looks like for each role and team. Leaders must go past old models and make clear decisions about work's structure and experience. In the end, designing work becomes a leadership skill, not just an operational task.



Navigating Tensions of the New Work Model

As organizations adopt more fluid, flexible models, they are encountering new leadership challenges that cannot be addressed with traditional approaches.

The manager's dilemma is a key issue. Middle managers now lead teams they see less often, and work is more complex. Switching from tracking presence to tracking impact needs new skills, new tools, and more trust. Without these changes, organizations may revert to old habits that limit flexibility.

Another challenge is the growing equity gap between different segments of the workforce. While knowledge workers may benefit from increased flexibility, frontline and desk-based employees often have fewer options. This disparity can create divisions within the organization if not addressed through thoughtful design and inclusive policies.

Debates about returning to the office show these tensions. Demands without a clear reason or that do not align with employee needs do not work anymore. Now the focus is on why in-person work matters and its impact on performance and experience.



The question is no longer 'Should we return to office?' but 'What is the purpose of being together?'

Building an Intentional Work Model

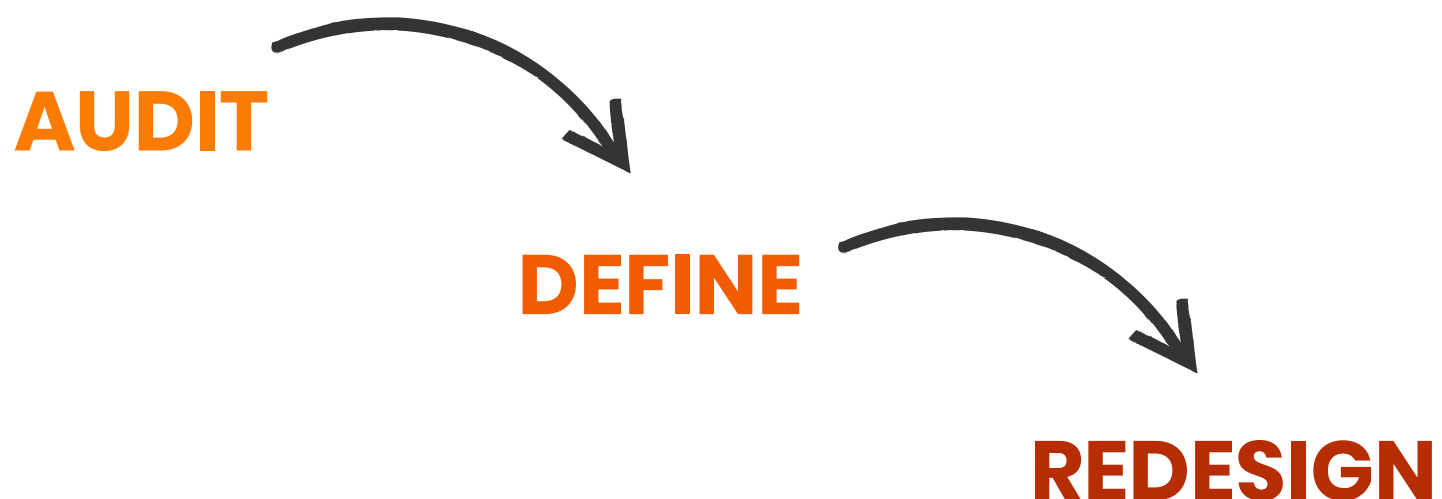
Looking forward, organizations must shift from testing ideas to executing them. Building a strong work model requires a step-by-step approach that balances flexibility and structure.

First, review how work happens now. Find gaps between rules and real behavior. Also, look for pain points in teamwork, communication, and performance.

Next, set clear rules and expectations for how work is done. These might include communication, availability, and accountability. These rules support independence and keep everyone aligned.

Last, rethink the role of physical and digital spaces. Offices are changing to support teamwork, while most work now happens in digital environments.

Throughout, leaders should keep asking key questions: Is work designed for people or just systems? Do we measure impact, not just presence? Can our systems adapt as we grow?



The Competitive Advantage of Intentional Work

The future of work is defined not by flexible options alone, but by the ability of organizations to design work intentionally so it aligns with both business goals and people's lives. This is the primary differentiator and main argument.

Organizations that succeed in 2026 will do more than just offer flexibility. They will align flexibility with purpose, use AI wisely, and build systems that support both people and business goals.

This shift is a leadership challenge, not just an operations issue. It needs clarity, discipline, and the courage to rethink how work should function.

Ultimately, what distinguishes successful organizations is not the presence of flexibility, but the quality of intentional work design. That is the crucial argument driving the transformation of work.

“You’re designing culture and you have to be mindful about it.”

-Trish Steed







Partner with us in 2026



H3 HR Advisors is a full-service Human Capital Management consulting, research, and advisory firm. Additional packages or retainer options available.

Launched in 2009, The HR Happy Hour Media Network features the longest continuously running internet radio show and podcast on all things HR and HCM.

Succeed by building relationships that drive your ambitious business results forward with experience and insights you can trust

-  HR and learning leaders bringing our combined 70+ years of experience to your project
-  Providing an objective look at your solution and marketing needs
-  Helping you reach your product and customer goals
-  Utilizing our company research to support your business imperatives
-  Thought leadership to understand the evolving workplace
-  Projects tailored specifically to your needs

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