

The Transformation Is Not a Technology Project.

THE DESIGN PRINCIPLE

Why redesigning how work gets done fails when you treat it as an install.

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The transformation is not a technology project, and the talent market just proved it.

An organization invests heavily in AI to capture a productivity gain. It buys the platform, runs the pilot, and the productivity does not arrive. Or worse: day-to-day performance dips while everyone wrestles with a new way of working that was supposed to make them faster. The technology worked exactly as specified. What failed was the assumption that installing a tool is the same thing as redesigning the work around it.

This is one of the most expensive misunderstandings in operations right now, and there is a striking new place to see it: not in the technology data, but in the talent data. When you look at what capabilities organizations are paying to bring in from outside, you are looking at a map of the work they could not redesign fast enough on their own.

"Technology is the trigger, but people are deciding outcomes. The hard yards in transformation are being done in the people processes: change management, communication, and upskilling."

Consider what the market is actually saying. Demand for interim leaders and outside experts has risen 151% since 2021, according to proprietary client data from executive search firm Heidrick & Struggles. That is not a hiring footnote. It is organizations acknowledging, with their budgets, that they do not have the capacity inside to execute the changes they have committed to. And in the firm's ranking of demand by industry, healthcare and life sciences sits at the top, ahead of consumer markets and technology. This is not somebody else's trend. It is our sector, saying out loud that it cannot execute transformation with the bench it currently has.

Sources: Heidrick & Struggles, "2026 High-End Independent Talent Report" (Jun. 2026); Heidrick & Struggles, "How Interim Talent Is Delivering Transformation" (May 2026)

The skills map, read as a diagnosis

A skills map is not a list of open roles. It is a portrait of where the work changed faster than organizations could redesign the capabilities to hold it. Read that way, the 2026 data tells a coherent story, and it is not the story the headline numbers suggest.

Start with which functions get pulled in from outside. Finance leads by a wide margin, accounting for 51% of all interim leadership requests, and the most requested fundamental skills cluster tightly around coordination: financial control and audit, project management, financial planning and modeling, program management, and process optimization. Look at that list closely. Almost none of it is the technical task at the center of a transformation. Nearly all of it is the work of holding a change together across functions, the coordination, the discipline, the connective tissue. What organizations cannot do alone, it turns out, is not the technical piece. It is the orchestration.

Then look at where the momentum is. Year over year, the fastest-rising project categories are human capital, up 129%, PMO and transformation, up 37%, and strategy and internal consulting, up 23%. The single fastest-growing skill in the entire report is advanced analytics, up 350%, followed by brand strategy at 333% and digital marketing at 180%. These are not established roles a company simply forgot to fill. Several of them barely existed as defined functions five years ago. The work was redesigned faster than the internal capability to sustain it could be built. The skills gap is not a shortage of people. It is a design lag.

THE TALENT SIGNAL

An analyst reviewing the same report drew the conclusion the numbers point to: AI transformations are a data and operations problem, harder to hire and budget for than simply rolling out a new tool. The pressure is to modernize the underlying systems, unify the data, retire legacy infrastructure, and clarify ownership, all while the business keeps running. The skill organizations are chasing hardest, advanced analytics, is not about the software. It is about having people who can make sense of the data underneath it. The tool was never the hard part.

Source: Inc., "Demand for One Leadership Skill Just Spiked 350% in a Year" (Sep. 2026); HR Executive (Sep. 2026)

Why the redesign fails when you treat it as an install

If the talent market is a map of work that got redesigned without the capability to sustain it, the next question is why that gap opens in the first place. When I work with a leadership team in the middle of a transformation, the first thing I map is not the technology. It is where the work was redesigned without redesigning three things around it, and each omission is a place the transformation quietly breaks.

First, the workflow gets redesigned on paper without redesigning the decision rights. The new process assumes people can act at a point the old authority structure still requires them to escalate. The tool is

live, the process diagram is updated, and the work still stalls at the same approval bottleneck it always did, because nobody moved the authority to match the new flow.

Second, the task gets automated without capturing the judgment that made it work. This is the failure I have written about before from the leader's side: you cannot delegate, or automate, what was never documented. Hand a process to an AI tool while the reasoning behind it still lives in one person's head, and you have not distributed the capability. You have hidden the dependency behind a system that looks automated until the moment it needs judgment it was never given.

Third, the organization measures tool adoption instead of work outcomes. It tracks logins, license utilization, and how many people completed the training, and it reports those numbers up as progress. But adoption of a tool is a vanity metric if the underlying work did not get better. The dashboard goes green while the productivity the whole exercise was supposed to deliver never actually shows up.

The design question underneath the talent surge

Put those three together and the 151% surge in outside demand stops looking like a talent story and starts looking like a design story. Organizations are not short of people. They are short of the connective capability that a transformation requires and that most operating models were never built to hold: authority that matches the new workflow, judgment captured before it is automated, outcomes measured instead of activity. When that capability is missing internally, the market's answer is to rent it. Which works, until the expert leaves and takes the capability with them.

This is the distinction that separates transformations that hold from the ones that quietly revert. The organizations getting it right do bring in outside capacity, but they use it to design the system and leave the capability installed, not to become the capability the organization keeps having to re-hire. An expert who documents the new decision rules, captures the judgment, and builds the measure into the operating model has made themselves unnecessary on purpose. An expert who simply runs the transformation has become one more dependency, the human version of the tool that looks automated until it needs a person who is no longer there.

If this describes a transformation your team is living through right now, it is exactly the kind of design problem I work on: redesigning how the work gets done so the capability stays after the project ends.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY THIS WEEK:

Think about your last AI or transformation initiative. Did it redesign how the work gets done, or did it install a tool on top of how the work was already being done? The difference is the one between the productivity that was promised and the productivity that actually shows up.

Renting a capability fills the gap for now. Designing to capture it closes the gap for good. Only one of them is a transformation.



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