The Asymmetric Workforce

How Senior Leaders Are Navigating New Complexity and Personal Risk Amid Changing Expectations of Work

An Advisory Board Report by Green Park

winmark

Foreword

RAJ TULSIANI

Chief Executive Officer

As Green Park enters its twentieth year, the question I keep returning to is a simple one: what is it actually like to work for each client — and does the answer change depending on who you ask?

For most organisations of any scale, or leaders of any repute, it does. The person setting the strategy and the person delivering it on the front line do not experience the same organisation, even when they share a logo, a set of values and the same town hall. They live with different rewards, different risks, different visibility and different degrees of voice. That much is normal. What has fundamentally changed since the pandemic is that those perceptions can no longer be forecast or relied on in the same way. Generational change, identity politics, employee dissatisfaction, technological disruption, shifting working patterns and many other ingredients have created a workforce that simply does not behave the way it used to.

We have named this workforce asymmetry. Across sectors and geographies, it is intensifying, sharpened by tighter margins, higher scrutiny, faster technological change and a level of interpersonal complexity that makes old assumptions feel unreliable.

But there is a deeper change underneath it, and it is the one that interests me the most. The patterns leaders relied on — how people would respond to reward, to pressure, to change, to authority — have come loose. This has a profound effect on the people we ask to lead.

Today's leaders are more exposed than any generation before them. Their personal brand is permanently at risk. Many feel they are a resignation and a couple of social media posts away from having a lifetime of good work reduced to a single failure, under a label they do not deserve. This is the price of leadership cutting both ways: the same decisions that shape confidence, momentum and the conditions in which others grow now carry a real and rising personal cost for the leaders who make them.

My concern — and Green Park's reason for this work — is what happens if we do nothing about that. Leadership risks being reduced to the art of not sticking your neck out, at precisely the moment when bold, courageous and effective leadership is what organisations most need. Organisations that respond by sitting in the middle, doing the minimum, and appointing leaders who do the same are trying to solve a new problem in a dead language.

According to research surveying over

14,000

Leaders,

2026 priorities demand principled, handpicked executives to bridge the widening gap between workforce asymmetry and organisational goals.

The 14,000 leaders who informed our C-Suite Priorities 2026 research are, in effect, asking for the opposite: handpicked leaders with the judgement and the principle to execute. The challenges compound, because workforce asymmetry itself widens the gap between leadership and organisational priorities. That is what fascinates me, as someone who has spent a career building bridges between talent, organisation and outcomes.

Therefore, this report has a dual purpose, and it mirrors how we work. We are as interested in helping organisations promote and hire leaders who can genuinely execute in this environment as we are in partnering with the leaders who are finding their own way through these waters. Both matter. Neither is straightforward.

Through seven advisory board sessions, we set out to understand what happens when people inside the same organisation experience materially different realities of reward, risk, visibility and belonging, and what that means for leadership, culture and the decisions boards and executive teams are making under pressure right now.

What emerged was unusually candid. These are leaders who have lived the challenges they describe, and they were honest about what organisations get wrong, about what leadership empathy can and cannot authentically achieve when the lived gap is wide, and about why a leader who claims a solidarity they cannot hold does more damage than one who names the constraint plainly. I would single out that last point, because the instinct to reassure is strong and the discipline to be honest about workforce asymmetry is rarer, and far more valuable.

Bob Marley set an old truth to music — that you can fool some of the people for a while, but not all of the people forever. That has always held. What is new is the speed and the scale of the judgement leaders now face, and how little margin they are given in what can feel like a post-truth environment. If we cannot find better ways to help our leaders deliver in it — to be bold without being reckless, human without being fragile, accountable without being paralysed — then we are lost. Helping them, and helping the organisations that depend on them, is the work this report is offered in service of.

Raj Tulsiani

Executive Summary

Finding the right senior appointment is harder now than at any point in our history. The landscape has changed faster than most organisations have, and the cost of mistakes made early on has ramifications beyond a single annual business cycle. Our work in search, succession, advisory, and measurement – is built to help senior leaders stay, scale, and succeed.

The way people experience work has changed faster than the way most organisations are led. Drawn from advisory board sessions from Chief Executive Officers, Chief People Officers, Non-Executive Directors and Managing Directors, and anchored in the C-Suite Priorities 2026 survey of more than 14,000 leaders. This report examines why traditional behaviours of how people respond to reward, pressure, authority, and change, are unravelling. Taken separately, each of these is a familiar boardroom conversation. Taken together, they describe something organisations have not yet named, let alone learned to manage.

We have named this workforce asymmetry: the growing gap between how different people experience work, opportunity, leadership and belonging inside the same organisation.
This creates uneven trust, uneven performance and uneven risk. In plain terms, it means that leaders are no longer forecasting behaviours well enough to run one organisation with one shared reality. They are leading one enterprise, many realities, all at the same time.

- **A workforce that spans five generations, multiple national cultures, and radically different individual beliefs about the purpose of work.**

Left unmanaged, it resolves into three board-level risks:

- Performance risk, as uneven trust dilutes execution.
- Reputational risk, as opinions on internal leadership choices shape external perception faster than ever.
- Succession risk, as old definitions of merit fail to identify the leaders who can succeed in a more uneven environment.

The organisations that lead it well will measure the gap deliberately, evaluate and treat cultural distance as a structural risk rather than a training problem, and back the leaders they have asked to operate inside it.

Jo Sweetland
Managing Director

AI is reshaping how judgement develops from the bottom-up, automating the foundational work through which judgement and discernment has historically been developed. This is a slow-moving risk. It is also, at times, overshadowed by increasing expectations for senior leaders to execute, faster, under more scrutiny, and with fewer resources, to achieve their digital transformation mandates.

Sound commercial judgement cannot be taught. It must be accrued through years of unglamorous early work. The risk is invisible in this year's results and is precisely why it is so easy to ignore, and why the pressure to deliver digital transformation outcomes now is pulling organisations in the wrong direction when it comes to choosing the right senior appointment.

The leadership skill AI demands is not how to use it, but when and how much. Knowing where human effort is still required for the work that needs the full weight of expertise, care and accountability, is becoming the discernment senior leaders will be hired and fired on. That recognition is changing what organisations look for at the top:

- Digital fluency is now an order qualifying collective board requirement for a balanced, future-facing stewardship.
- The assessment question is moving from whether a candidate can adopt AI to whether they have the judgement to know when to trust it, when to invest in it, and when to override it in each firm's individual reality.
- Senior leaders who can build organisations in which judgement on AI use is cultivated across all levels, rather than eroded or concentrated in certain groups.

A transition of diversity, inclusion and belonging, from compliance to whether a person's presence in the room has real influence on business objectives, decisions and ultimately, revenue growth. For years, headcount ratios and demographic targets have stood in as proxies for what diverse leadership is. Senior leaders are now asking harder questions: what these metrics actually measure, where they fall short, what richer signals — lived experience, socioeconomic background, cognitive diversity, career path — would tell boards that current data cannot.

Diverse teams are, at first, harder to lead; slower to consensus, higher in friction, and most organisations underinvest in the management capability that turns that friction into performance.

The diversity, inclusion, and belonging conversation has matured beyond representation. Organisations should develop the conviction to stay the course when the work gets harder rather than easier.

The leadership profile that organisations now need is not the one that most hiring processes are equipped to find.

Most senior hiring processes still over-index on evidence of past performance in stable conditions and under-index on the adaptive qualities that determine success in unstable ones. Track record tells you what someone did when the context was knowable. It tells you very little about how they will hold up when it isn't, in your environment, with your team's capabilities and attitudes.

Humility, entrepreneurial instinct, learning agility, the capacity for structured reflection, the ability to lead diverse teams through friction rather than around it, building trust across radically different relationships, setting boundaries across cultural registers, giving honest feedback without retreating into platitude, and the resolve to keep learning in the public eye – these are capabilities of character over credential. While they are harder to surface, emerging traits and qualities are assessable, and requires a process designed to reveal behaviour rather than confirm reputation on paper.

The pressures do not run in parallel; they overlap, amplify each other, and end up producing leadership conditions that no playbook has prepared anyone for.

What that means for leaders, boards and the decisions they are making now: its argument can be put in five points.

01 This is new — there is no playbook.

Workforce Asymmetry is not a fixed problem with a known solution. It is an amalgamation of the stories people tell themselves about work, changing faster than any policy can keep up with, and leaders still have to execute under its evolution

02 Left unmanaged, it may be the biggest drain on productivity we face.

In a post-pandemic world, entitlement, technology, social media and attitudes to work have shifted so far, so fast, that the gap between how differently people experience — and talk about — the same organisation has become one of the largest untapped costs most businesses carry and can no longer accurately forecast behaviours for

03 Leadership risk now cuts both ways.

Identity, generational difference and politics — actual identity politics, not just the office kind — are not background noise. They are a daily expense on a leader's time and a real risk to their personal brand. Too many of today's leaders too often feel they are two resignations and a couple of angry tweets away from a label they do not deserve and have spent a career avoiding

04 Doing the minimum is the real risk.

Organisations that sit in the middle, do the minimum and appoint leaders who do the same, are trying to solve a new problem in a dead language. The moment calls for bold, courageous, effective leadership, to directly address the critical needs identified by 14,000 leaders in our research

05 If leadership is a privilege, we should support its rarest exponents.

This means two things at once: helping organisations promote and hire leaders who can execute under heightened exposure and partnering with the leaders finding their own way to protect their personal brand. We do not claim to have solved this, but we are closer to it, on both sides because of our 20 years of experience in Inclusion and external candidate journeys

What follows sets out where senior leaders agree, disagree and are still working it out — across Workforce Asymmetry, generational change, AI, diversity, inclusion and belonging, and the new, emerging leadership profile.

Contents

Introduction

This report is the second in a series of publications produced by Green Park and Winmark, building directly on the quantitative foundations of the C-Suite Priorities 2026 survey. The survey collects datapoints from over 220 respondents, informed by over 14,000 organisations, and reveals what executives are prioritising. The advisory board sessions that make up the evidence base in this report asks a different kind of question: what does it actually feel like to lead through these challenges? What are the unwritten rules and trade-offs that survey data cannot capture?

The themes in this report — around Workforce Asymmetry, generational change, AI readiness, diversity, inclusion and belonging, and reflective learning — were surfaced organically across our sessions, by senior executives responding to one another's experiences in real time. The consistency with which these themes appeared, unprompted, across executives from entirely different sectors and organisational contexts, is itself a finding.

This is a report that shows senior leaders what their peers are experiencing, where they agree, where they disagree, and where honest conversation is taking place.

CATHERINE QI

Head of Research,
Winmark

Methodology

The research was conducted across seven advisory board sessions held between May and June 2026, combining in-person and virtual formats. Twenty-nine senior executives participated, with roles spanning Chief Executive Officer, Chief People Officer, Non-Executive Director, and Board Advisor.

Senior executives brought active experience across the UK, Europe, Asia Pacific, North America, and the Middle East. Industries represented included FTSE-listed, financial services, technology, housing associations, manufacturing, professional services, gaming, consumer goods, healthcare, higher education, transport, and the voluntary sector.

Advisory board sessions bring together likeminded senior leaders in a trusted environment for peer-to-peer exchange. Senior executives respond to one another and agree, disagree, build on each other's examples, and surface tensions they might not raise in a one-to-one interview or an anonymous questionnaire. The result is a form of collective intelligence that is both more candid and more contextually rich than individual responses. Several of the most significant findings in this report materialised from moments when one participant's account resonated with another's experience. The findings therefore naturally highlight both contrast and congruence. Senior leaders reading this report will recognise which observations apply to their own situation, versus which reflect a different operating context, and can make decisions accordingly.

The advisory board findings are complemented throughout by data from our C-Suite Priorities 2026 survey. The survey reached over 14,000 C-Suite executives and Non-Executive Directors from multinational organisations, collecting over 220 detailed responses from organisations with an average turnover of up to US$500 million.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the senior leaders who kindly gave their time to participate in the advisory boards.

20th ANNIVERSARY green park Global Search & Growth Advisory

01

ONE ORGANISATION, MANY REALITIES

Section 1

One Organisation, Many Realities

DEFINING WORKFORCE ASYMMETRY

GREEN PARK DEFINITION

Workforce Asymmetry is the growing gap between how different people experience work, opportunity, leadership and belonging inside the same organisation. This creates uneven trust, uneven performance and uneven risk.

Workforce Asymmetry is meaningful unevenness. It exists when people inside the same organisation are subject to, or perceive, materially different realities at work. These differences affect performance, retention, culture, leadership effectiveness and business outcomes. It is not the same as inequality of pay, though pay is part of it. It is the cumulative divergence in lived reality along several axes at once: reward and risk; visibility and voice; the distance between headquarters and the front line; the gap between functions inside the same operating model; and the differing expectations of a workforce that now spans five generations and multiple national cultures.

In practice it shows up in familiar ways:

- Different generations want very different things from work
- Hybrid and office-based colleagues have unequal visibility and access
- Some groups trust leadership far more than others
- Uneven access to progression, sponsorship and stretch roles
- Teams experience the same culture in completely different ways

To highlight some of these workforce asymmetries, our C-Suite Priorities 2026 survey found that

49%

of senior executives identify the uneven distribution of critical skills across teams as a concern, and

30%

believe that unevenness has a great or severe impact on their ability to execute strategic priorities.

Only **4%**

believe their workforce is fully equipped to deliver on business objectives.

Some workforce asymmetry is unavoidable and even systemic, for example, scale, hierarchy and specialism all create asymmetries by design. The risk is not its existence but its invisibility: when leaders mistake the reality they can see for the only reality there is and govern an organisation that they do not fully experience.

The advisory boards did not treat Workforce Asymmetry as a theoretical framework. They described it through organisations they had led, boards they sat on and cultures they had tried to change. Notably, they were direct about how wide the gap can grow before anyone at the top notices.

Their accounts were candid about what leadership empathy can realistically achieve when the lived gap is wide, and about why leaders who claim a solidarity they cannot authentically hold do more damage than those who honestly acknowledge the constraint.

The voice gap

Governance mechanisms can be specifically designed to address the voice gap created by scale and hierarchy.

— Yetunde Hofmann,
Independent Non-Executive Director, Cranswick Country Foods PLC

Sometimes, least heard is the voice of those on the front line or on the factory floor; and also, the voice of those who may be carers and helpers outside of the workplace. The follow-up question on how to ensure these voices are heard, and how best to design the listening mechanisms that ensure they are not missed, leads to various methods that can be applied — for example, spending time in the factories, town halls and frontlines. This also applies to board directors spending time in the parts of the business that may not easily be heard, taking the time to have conversations with diverse groups of people and ask questions such as “what is good about working here? What isn’t good about working here? And why?” By the time you spend a few hours with the people who matter and whose voices are not readily heard, issues may arise — even the smallest things — that will be important not to lose sight of. Those things represent the voices of those whose contributions need to be received.

That discipline matters because most listening mechanisms inside large organisations are designed, often without anyone meaning to, to confirm what leadership already believes rather than surface what it is missing. The fix requires a deliberate construction of leading indicators — fairness, clarity, psychological safety, sponsorship density — that arrive before attrition metrics and quality scores surface them. It needs to be paired with a regular asymmetry review held with named owners, dates, and published outcomes, and treated with the same seriousness as a cash or safety review.

The cultural distance gap

The discussion consistently surfaced cultural assimilation support as something organisations promise but rarely resource properly. Corporate culture does not travel as well as organisations assume, national culture is more powerful than leadership training can typically overcome, and headquarters are structurally at risk of losing touch with the organisation they nominally lead.

— Daniel Rider,
HR Director Corporate & Technology, BT Group

Employment practice, work-life balance, approach to pace, hierarchies, are all so different across geographies. It is really clear that the cultural assimilation is just as important as the work one.

— Richard Carter,
President at Carter Consulting and Former Senior Executive at BASF

The biggest discrepancy between reality is the distance — physical and cultural distance from headquarters. That is the risk. Anybody coming in at the top into an HQ organisation, my advice is always: get out of the bubble, see the organisation, experience the organisation. A lot of organisations are missing market opportunities because they're in the wrong place. They're in their comfort zone.

Our C-Suite Priorities 2026 survey confirms that organisations expanding internationally are prioritising partnerships (40%) and direct entry (38%) over acquisitions (12%), reflecting a more cautious approach to new market entry. Our advisory board discussions suggest that even within established international operations, the cultural distance between headquarters and operating markets is often underestimated. The distance creates Workforce Asymmetry in how strategy is interpreted, how talent is assessed, and how leadership credibility is perceived.

This has direct consequences for how multinational senior teams are hired. When organisations ask us to build leadership teams in an unfamiliar market, the instinct is to recruit for technical track record and a familiar profile. We would argue the opposite. The decisive capability is the ability to bridge — to read a culture quickly, to earn credibility without imposing the centre's assumptions, and to translate strategy in both directions. The most common senior hiring failure we see internationally is not the wrong CV. It is a strong leader, parachuted into a market, who never left the bubble.

The functional misalignment gap

Another form of Workforce Asymmetry that is less visible but equally consequential is the misalignment that develops between different functions within the same operating model or region.

— Natalie Rogers,
Former COO and Chief People & Sustainability Officer

Misalignment across roles in the operating model can be a source of asymmetry and operational drag. It often comes back to whether structures, roles and accountabilities are clear, and whether the individual is operating in a way that supports where the organisation is trying to get to. Ultimately, it requires a conversation about behaviours, values and what needs to shift to create better alignment.

That kind of internal asymmetry creates operational drag that is rarely picked up by engagement surveys and almost never by financial reporting, yet it sits underneath some of the most expensive leadership failures we see. A practical question follows: if Workforce Asymmetry is structural and cannot be easily eliminated, what mechanisms allow organisations to manage it honestly rather than pretend it does not exist?

Making workforce asymmetry visible

Workforce asymmetry is visible once you stop averaging away the signals and indicators. Across sectors, the same patterns recur.

- Flight-risk hotspots, where voluntary turnover concentrates in one cohort while top-line attrition still looks healthy
- Productivity gradients, where two teams doing similar work deliver very different results, usually explained by manager practice and psychological safety rather than talent quality
- Progression stalls where movement through critical gates slows for specific cohorts and stays hidden in aggregate metrics
- Customer-resonance gaps, where service or conversion metrics diverge by region because teams lack the cultural fluency to read the customer quickly

Left unmanaged, that unevenness resolves into three board-level risks:

Performance risk: uneven trust and engagement reduce execution quality. A strategy that is clear at the top is diluted in delivery

Reputational risk: internal leadership choices quickly shape external perceptions of fairness, values and competence. Regulatory scrutiny and investor expectations amplifying the cost of getting it wrong

Succession risk: old definitions of merit may fail to identify the leaders who can succeed in a more uneven, contested environment

But Workforce Asymmetry is not only an organisational task, and we are wary of any account that treats it as one. The leaders asked to operate in these conditions need backing; honest sponsorship, room to make some wrong calls, and the expectation that they will be human rather than flawless. Helping an organisation see its workforce asymmetry and helping a leader survive it are two halves of the same job. In only doing the first, you set fire to the ground, leaving a good leader exposed.

Managed well or poorly, Workforce Asymmetry turns people strategy from a support function into a core governance and risk issue. The boards that recognise that are already ahead.

Recommendations:

If Workforce Asymmetry cannot be eliminated, the leadership task is to manage it honestly rather than pretend it away. No one has a finished answer to this, ourselves included, because it is genuinely new ground. What we can offer is proximity to the problem and a disciplined way of seeing it.

01 **Measure the gap deliberately.** You cannot manage what you cannot see, and most listening mechanisms are designed to confirm what leadership already believes rather than surface what it is missing. The discipline Yetunde Hofmann describes: spending real time on the factory floor, in the regions, with carers and frontline staff, asking what is good and what is not and why, is not a soft activity. It is risk management.

02 **Treat cultural distance as a structural risk, not a training problem.** As Richard Carter puts it, the greatest discrepancy is the physical and cultural distance from headquarters, and corporate culture travels far less well than most leadership teams assume. National culture will usually outweigh anything a values deck can overcome.

> Managed well or poorly, workforce asymmetry turns people strategy from a support function into a core governance and risk issue.

CASE STUDY

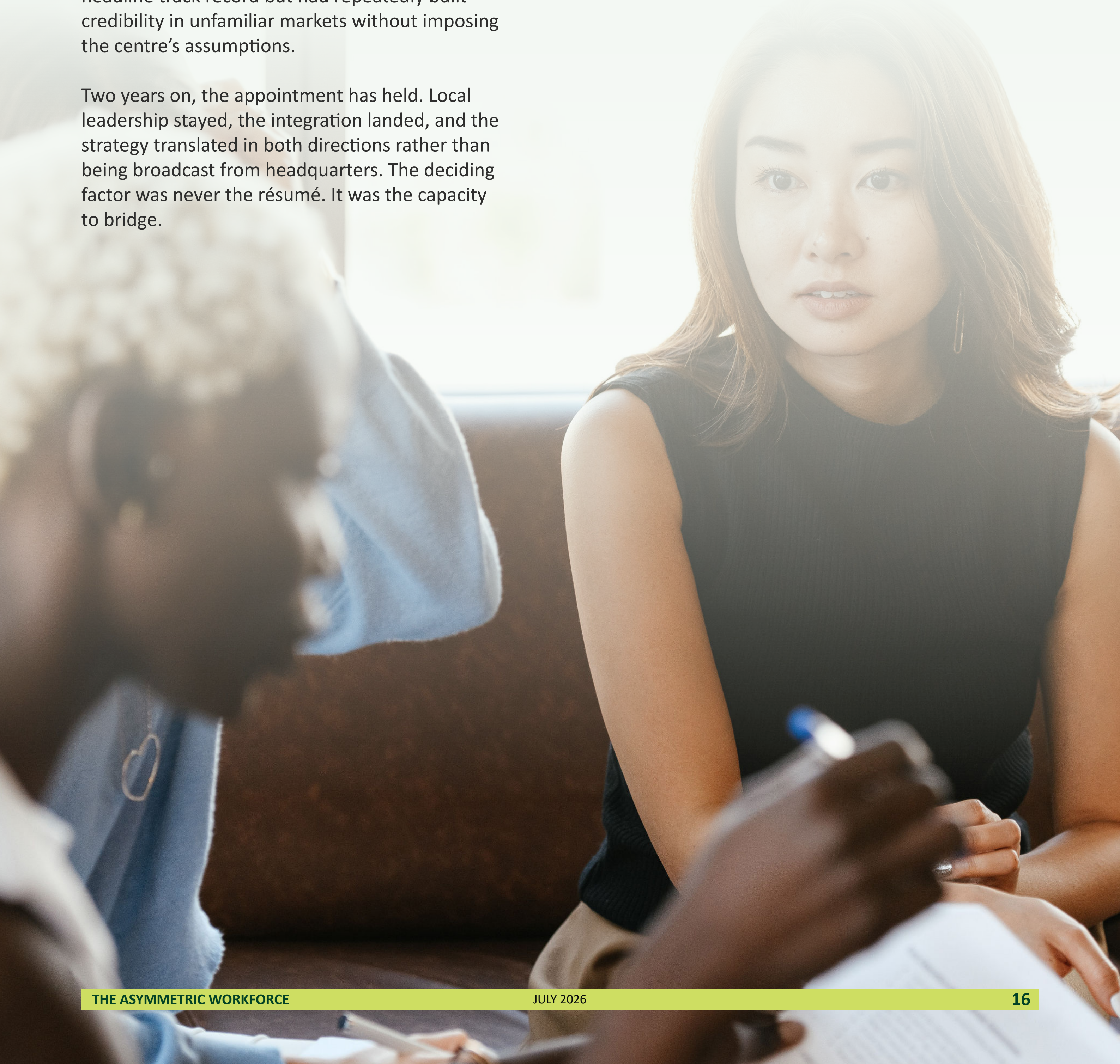
When the obvious choice was the wrong one

A global industrials business asked us to find a managing director for a newly acquired operation in a market it did not know well. The strongest CV in the process belonged to a proven operator with an impeccable record and almost no experience of leading across that cultural distance. The candidate we recommended instead had a lighter headline track record but had repeatedly built credibility in unfamiliar markets without imposing the centre's assumptions.

Two years on, the appointment has held. Local leadership stayed, the integration landed, and the strategy translated in both directions rather than being broadcast from headquarters. The deciding factor was never the résumé. It was the capacity to bridge.

THE LESSON

Cultural-bridging ability is assessable — but only if the process is designed to weigh it against track record, rather than default to the safest CV in the room.



02

GENERATIONAL EXPECTATIONS AND THE PURPOSE OF WORK

Section 2

Generational Expectations and the Purpose of Work

The topic of Workforce Asymmetry highlighted various perspectives around the multi-generational workforce. Some senior executives believe the incoming generation is fundamentally different in ways that require organisational adaptation. There were also those who thought this difference is largely one of context rather than character. At times, what is described as generational adaptation may in part represent a significant loss of the experience-building that produces sound senior-level judgement. Others acknowledge that something truly new may be happening. The qualities that enable leaders to navigate multi-generational teams most effectively were identified as those that are comfortable with articulating purpose, have a tolerance for boundary-setting, are able to give feedback across different cultural registers, and possess intellectual humility.

— Sarah Fairhurst,
Advisory Board Member

Some of the muscle memory is learning by doing. I don't think you'll replicate this by getting the answer out of AI. It won't immediately affect us today, but it's going to affect us in 10 or 15 years' time. When people are senior leaders who have learned everything by getting the answer out of an AI rather than doing it themselves, their experience could be so much narrower.

— Susan Hooper,
Non-Executive Director, Board & Chair, Moonpig, Uber, Naked Wines, and Co-Founder at Chapter Zero

What I've observed among the younger generation is that they work exceptionally hard, but they're not willing to pay the price of poor work-life balance and mental health that comes with it. Working night and day changes you as an individual, and the ground is shifting even faster in business today. The pace is faster, mainly due to today's technology and the speed at which things now move. We need to better understand these dynamics reshaping how this generation engages with the workforce.

— **Daniel Rider,**
HR Director Corporate & Technology, BT Group

Everything is on a continuum. What each generation has is an extreme or a preferred way of operating. Once you hit a certain number of people from a given generation across the workforces, a myriad of human behaviour, age profile and socio-demographic appears, and then you have to start to work out how to learn from each other and work well together. For example, how do we get younger generations to manage someone, not dissimilar in age and with the same frustrations about work, to still get the outputs they need, and deal with conflict in difficult situations?

The generational shift is more fundamental than work-style preferences. The psychological contract between employees and employers has changed at a structural level. The gap between stated values and lived behaviour is detectable, and the exposure of that gap does more damage than having no stated values at all.

— Susan Hooper,
Non-Executive Director, Board & Chair, Moonpig, Uber, Naked Wines, and Co-Founder at Chapter Zero

There is a real value in introducing reverse mentoring, where you have a new starter work with a senior member of the team to talk about the various frustrations that they both feel. This can help surface a wider representation of what different people within the organisation are thinking.

— Richard Carter,
President at Carter Consulting and Former Senior Executive at BASF

Reverse mentoring, life experience and finding that happy mix of technology — that's what we need.

Senior executives broadened the concept beyond formal programmes into the architecture of how boards receive information. The question is whether they have mechanisms that guarantee they hear things that would otherwise filter out.

— Yetunde Hofmann,
Independent Non-Executive Director, Cranswick Country Foods PLC

The opportunity to ask some of the questions that may seem very simple today, but yet cause reflection, may sometimes be missing from the boardroom. For example, when those important strategic execution decisions need to be made, the question "who should be in the room that's not in the room today as part of this decision-making?" may help uncover potential and unintended consequences which will need to be taken into account. It is therefore important to ensure ample time for reflection and to ask those critical questions. It is a good use of time; it's an investment, it saves time, and it saves money.

Reverse mentoring and structured listening mechanisms are essential for making the cultural integration of diverse, multi-generational hires work in practice. However, many organisations fail to follow through and instead, hire for difference without establishing strong mechanisms for hearing new voices.

03

AI AND THE FUTURE LEADERSHIP PIPELINE

Section 3

AI and the Future Leadership Pipeline

The AI discussion across the advisory board sessions was notably different from most board-level conversations about artificial intelligence. Concerns were more precise, centring on whether the removal of foundational developmental work from early careers would produce a generation of senior leaders who have the analytical outputs of deep experience without the embedded judgement that only comes from doing the hard, unglamorous, early work themselves.

This is a slow-moving risk. It will not show up in this year's results or next year's. However, several senior executives believe it is the most consequential leadership question of the next decade, and that organisations are at risk of exacerbating it by treating AI capability as a skill to be trained rather than a shift in how judgement develops.

Our C-Suite Priorities 2026 data illustrate the quantitative backdrop: 35% of organisations report they are not prepared at all to scale new technologies and AI; 45% describe themselves as only moderately prepared; and only 4% feel fully prepared. The top three capability gaps identified by senior executives — applied AI (30%), strategic foresight (23%), and digital fluency (23%) — demonstrate the necessary interaction between AI tools and human judgement. The real skill AI demands is not only how to use it effectively but knowing when, and how much, to use it so that it generates productive results. This was perceived as a far more difficult capability to develop than it sounds.

— Susan Hooper,
Non-Executive Director, Board & Chair, Moonpig, Uber, Naked Wines, and Co-Founder at Chapter Zero

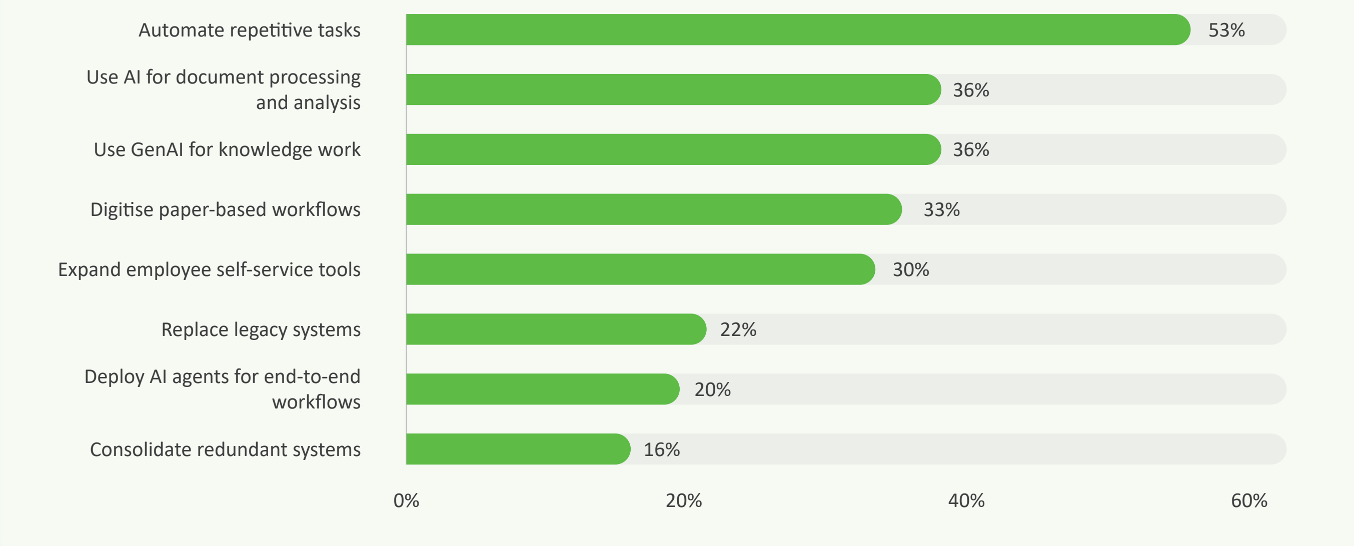
I think we're all concerned. We're in the foothills of change with AI and you've seen what's happened with the internet. We're going to be in a turbulent time. But I'd push back and say it will be different. It may not be as good on certain things. I'm sure this debate was had when we moved from the abacus to a ruler to a calculator. These changes give me a different perspective that I otherwise would never have had.

— François Ortalo-Magné,
Professor of Management Practice, Former Dean and Chief Executive Officer, London Business School

AI makes an old productivity challenge more urgent: knowing where human effort is most needed. People are often good at identifying the small share of work that drives most of the result, but less good at discerning the level of quality appropriate to the issue at hand. That discernment matters enormously. A modest prompt can now enable AI to produce useful work very quickly. The real leadership skill is knowing when that is appropriate, and when the work requires the full weight of human care, expertise, and accountability.

The challenge organisations are currently grappling with is when AI is used as a substitute for the learning process rather than a complement to it. Our survey found that organisations are prioritising foundational AI initiatives such as automating repetitive tasks (53%), using AI for document processing (36%), and applying GenAI to knowledge work (36%) over more sophisticated use cases.

Top priorities for using technology to improve productivity



C-Suite Priorities survey 2026

The implication senior executives brought to light during the advisory boards is that even the foundational applications carry a developmental risk. If the repetitive tasks being automated are the same ones through which junior professionals build judgement, that efficiency gain comes at a long-term cost.

Senior executives connected the AI theme back to the generational debate, noting that senior leaders who cannot demonstrate basic AI fluency will lose credibility with the incoming generation, regardless of their experience or professional track record.

— **Anand Kumar,**
Chair Risk & Audit (India Infrastructure Finance Company (UK) Ltd.

As a board member or C-Suite, you can't say that you don't know about tech. You have to be very aware of what's happening, so that you don't feel very cut off from the different generations coming into the workforce. Their different traits will make you have to rediscover yourself at every first, second or third year of your journey.

AI readiness has moved from aspiration to accountability, materialising as a commercial pressure. This aligns with one of the most striking findings in the C-Suite Priorities 2026 survey: 33% of Chief Technology Officers are reported as not meeting expectations — the highest shortfall across any C-Suite function. Board members increasingly recognise that this is not merely a CTO problem. It is a competence gap that cannot be solved by adding one technically literate senior executive and delegating the entirety of the challenge to them. Digital fluency at senior level is becoming a collective requirement rather than a specialist one.

— **Jeannette Lichner,**
Non-Executive Director, Governance Expert, and Coach/Mentor

Everybody has to stay digitally fluent. The acceleration in technology is fast. As board members, we need to individually and collectively be able to challenge the executives. Some boards are bringing on a tech/AI expert but we can't put the onus on one person. We all have responsibility.

Protecting the pipeline that builds judgement

This was, to us, the most important conversation in the programme and the least discussed across the mandates behind our 164 board placements in 2025. Most AI debate is about adoption and productivity. The leaders here were worried about something slower and harder to reverse: what happens to judgement when the foundational work that builds it is automated away.

The risk is specific. Judgement is not taught; it is accrued, through years of unglamorous early work that AI is now extremely good at removing. Automate the repetitive tasks through which junior professionals once built discernment, and you bank an efficiency gain today against a leadership deficit a decade out. Leaders with the analytical outputs of deep experience but without the embedded judgement that only comes from having done the work. It will not show in this year's results, which is precisely why it is so easy to defer.

There is also a near-term edge to it. Digital fluency is now a collective board requirement, not a specialist's job to be delegated. A senior leader who cannot demonstrate basic AI literacy will quietly lose credibility with the generation coming up, whatever their track record.

Our view is that the real skill — for individuals and institutions — is not how to use AI but when, and how much. François Ortalo-Magné's distinction between work AI can do quickly and work that requires the full weight of human care is the discernment leaders will be hired and fired on. There is an equity dimension too. If the conditions to experiment and to fail safely are not evenly distributed, adoption simply widens the productivity gradients that already exist.

Recommendations:

Protect the developmental pathway by design. Keep the formative, effortful work in human hands deliberately. The organisations that do this will produce better senior leaders than those that optimise it out of junior-level workflows

Embed AI discernment into senior hiring criteria. Move the question from whether a candidate can adopt AI to whether they have the judgement to know its limits and the experience base that makes that judgement credible

Audit AI adoption through an equity lens. If the conditions to experiment and to fail safely are not evenly distributed across the workforce, adoption will widen the productivity gradients that already exist. The focus is not on whether the organisation is adopting AI, but whether it is adopting it in a way that compounds advantage for some and erodes capability for everyone else

Make the long-term risk visible at board level. The leadership deficit that follows from over-automation is invisible inside a single annual cycle. Put it on the risk register early enough to act on it deliberately rather than recover from it

We are not claiming to have the answer here. The honest position is that this is an emerging risk most boards have not yet priced, and our role is to help them see it early enough to choose deliberately rather than discover it too late to recover.

04

FROM COMPLIANCE TO CONVICTION TO COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND BELONGING

Section 4

From Compliance to Conviction to Competitive Advantage in Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging

Our discussions revealed that organisations think more sophisticatedly about diversity, inclusion and belonging than most public discourse suggests. The challenge is helping organisations move from compliance-oriented measurement toward a productivity-framing of what diversity is for and what it costs to do properly. There were questions around whether the metrics currently used have meaningful relationships to the outcomes that actually drive organisational performance.

Our C-Suite Priorities 2026 survey provides the quantitative context: 48% of senior executives state that DEI strategy remains a core and consistent priority, and DEI initiatives are primarily linked to talent attraction and retention, strengthening employer brands, and improving business performance. Yet a quarter of organisations continue to report ethnicity and gender gaps at executive level — gaps that are perceived to create blind spots in risk oversight and limit boards' ability to challenge assumptions or avoid groupthink. The question the advisory boards were wrestling with is what to do about that persistent gap between stated priority and lived reality.

Senior executives seek to build C-Suite teams and boards that bring out the best in organisations, factoring in a wider understanding of contextual metrics than what is currently reported. They distinguished between the contexts where representation measurement is useful and the contexts where it appears performative.

— Jeannette Lichner,
Non-Executive Director, Governance Expert, and Coach/Mentor

We can bring more diversity into the boardroom if we collect additional diversity characteristics such as lived experience, work experience, and socioeconomic diversity. There's a really rich seam of knowledge that we aren't tapping into.

— Asha Musoni,
Chief People & Transformation Officer, Confederation of British Industry

For organisations that operate in sectors with lots of customer interactions, part of that customer trust was having people that looked like them. Organisations can have a really strong mandate for tracking, monitoring and measuring how diverse their workforce is, particularly for frontline roles. You need to qualify data with what it means to the board. It matters in policy because we're touching every part of society. We're never going to see the value of why this data is really important unless we present it with organisational context.

— **Jon Sparkes OBE,**
Chief Executive, Mencap

In my experience, there is a link between the performance of organisations and the sophistication and ability to deal with ambiguity of the top team. That comes from different perspectives in the room.

— **Joe Binnion,**
Chief People & Culture Officer, Keywords Studios

There's a useful framework from Frances Frei at Harvard Business School about trust being built on three things: authenticity, logic, and empathy. If you have a group that feels included and is genuinely diverse, that tends to drive more authenticity and more empathy in leadership behaviours. In turn, that builds greater trust between leaders and the people in the organisation. It comes back to the question: are we operating with inclusive leadership, rather than just focusing on diversity metrics?

Across our discussions, there was a clear move away from the language of compliance and representation targets towards something harder to measure but more consequential: whether people feel like they belong, and whether their presence inside an organisation translates into real influence on decisions, culture, and performance.

— Jon Sparkes OBE,
Chief Executive, Mencap

We added a B to DEI to demonstrate that we manage a culture where it's really clear that people are welcome; they belong, and not just that they're welcome to be here, but their thoughts, ideas and humanity are welcome and included, not just counted.

— Joe Binnion,
Chief People & Culture Officer, Keywords Studios

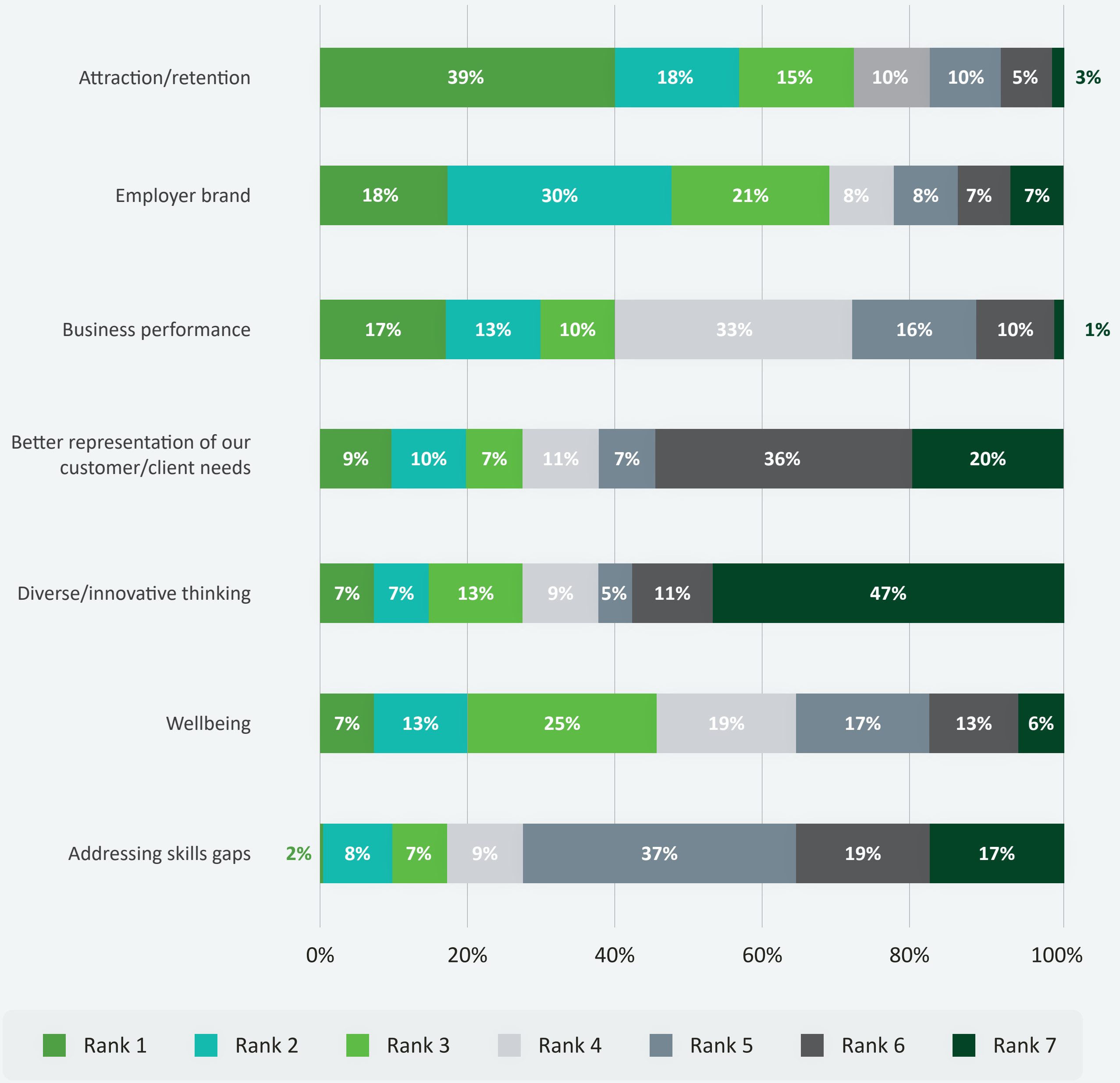
Diversity without inclusion is like tooth extraction without anaesthetic. You have to start with inclusion, because everything unlocks from that. When people feel included in an organisation — when they feel they are listened to, that they belong, and that their voice matters — they are more likely to be attracted to the organisation and to perform at a higher level. That in turn supports both diversity and equity.

— Jeannette Lichner,
Non-Executive Director, Governance Expert, and Coach/Mentor

What I would like to see is more reporting when we talk about collecting data. If you have a lot of lawyers, that creates a certain diversity problem. Or too many accountants in the room. I'd like diversity data around where people spent their careers. Were they from industry or were they from the public sector? What were their backgrounds? Were they wealthy? Were they from the north or the south?

Our C-Suite Priorities 2026 data reinforces the point: among the seven business outcomes linked to diversity, inclusion and belonging initiatives, “diverse/innovative thinking” was ranked last by 47% of respondents, suggesting that while organisations recognise the attraction and retention benefits of diversity, inclusion and belonging, they have not yet found ways to connect diverse composition to the quality of decision-making and innovation that should follow from it.

Impact of DEI initiatives on business outcomes



Methodology:
Respondents were asked to rank the impact of DEI initiatives to their key business outcomes from top – Rank 1 – to bottom – Rank 7.

C-Suite Priorities survey 2026

This identified a key organisational barrier typically misconstrued at first, which is that diverse teams are seemingly harder to manage, take longer to reach consensus, and produce more interpersonal friction than homogeneous ones. The performance benefits of diversity only materialise when that friction is managed well, yet most organisations underinvest in building that management capability. This was reflected strongly in our survey data, which showed that 41% of senior executives believed underperformance is ineffectively managed in their organisations, mostly due to weak or inconsistent managerial capability.

— Asha Musoni,
Chief People & Transformation Officer, Confederation of British Industry

There's an ACAS report which shows that conflict costs UK organisations £28.5 billion a year. That doesn't even include the lost time a leader is unproductive because they're dealing with team dynamics. We want diverse thought, but diverse thought creates conflict. Leaders have to manage that conflict. Managing this ineffectively is costing organisations hugely in terms of who they're progressing, because people tend to take feedback as conflict. It's one of those hidden barriers to progression and growth, and if we don't get ahead of addressing it, it will slowly creep into our processes as well.

There is a lens you need to look at AI adoption and readiness through. How do you make it equitable for all? How do you create a culture around your AI readiness agenda so that everyone feels confident — not in winning, but in failing? Because that's the key to unlocking AI readiness.

— Jeannette Lichner,
Non-Executive Director, Governance Expert, and Coach/Mentor

Whether you're chair of a diverse board or the CEO managing a diverse group, it's challenging. But as a leader it is really interesting, and you know the effort you put in will result in better results.

Within the thread of diversity, inclusion and belonging, a realisation occurred: organisations that do not look at their AI readiness through a diversity lens will reproduce existing inequalities through automation. Our C-Suite Priorities 2026 survey revealed that 36% of organisations report only up to 20% of their workforce has the skills needed to operate effectively using new digital and AI tools. If the conditions for experimentation and failure are not equitably distributed — if some groups feel less psychologically safe to experiment than others — then AI adoption will reproduce existing patterns of advantage and disadvantage rather than disrupting them.

From compliance to conviction to competitive advantage

The shift these leaders describe — from compliance to conviction to competitive advantage — matches what we see across our search and advisory work, and it is overdue. For years, diversity has been measured in the language of representation: counts, ratios, targets – useful as a floor, but a poor proxy for what actually drives performance, and increasingly mistaken for the goal itself.

The order of operations has changed. Leading with headcount targets rather than performance no longer carries the room. That is why the metrics themselves need to evolve. Jeannette Lichner's point about lived experience, socioeconomic background and career path is one we would underline, however, the data that would actually move the needle is the data most organisations do not yet collect.

Joe Binnion's framing, that diversity without inclusion is tooth extraction without anaesthetic, is not quite how we would put it, but it captures the shift well: in the current climate, the order of operations has changed. What matters is whether a person's presence translates into genuine influence over decisions. When it does, culture follows, and the attraction and retention effects — positive or negative — compound from there. When it doesn't, no amount of measurement closes the gap — it simply documents it.

But conviction also requires honesty about cost. The advisory boards were unusually frank that diverse teams are, at first, harder to lead, slower to consensus, higher in friction, and that the performance dividend only arrives when that friction is managed well. Most organisations underinvest in exactly that capability. Asha Musoni's reference to the £28.5bn annual cost of workplace conflict is the part of the diversity business case that rarely gets made honestly: the return is real, but it is conditional on management skill that has to be built, not assumed.

Recommendations:

Start with what actually drives performance — productivity, retention and genuine inclusion — rather than representation for its own sake.

Surface the perception gap, not just the headline number. Representation tells you who is in the room. Perception data tells you whether being in the room changes anything. The gap between the two is usually the better predictor of who stays.

Anchor diversity, inclusion and belonging to the outcomes that matter to the business — productivity, retention, decision quality — rather than to headcount targets. Representation is a floor, not the goal.

Invest in the management capability that turns friction into performance. Diverse teams are, at first, harder to lead. The performance dividend is real, but it is conditional on managers who can hold the friction long enough for it to produce better decisions.

Enrich what you count. Move beyond demographic data alone to capture lived experience, socioeconomic background, and career path. Two boards with identical demographic profiles can hold radically different ranges of perspective, and conventional metrics will not reveal which one is in the room.

Assess senior leaders on influence, not only credentials, for example, on whether their presence will change the quality of the decisions the leadership team takes, and whether they have the management skill to lead through the friction that diverse thinking creates.

Instrument the leading indicators. Track fairness, clarity, psychological safety, and sponsorship density alongside attrition and engagement. These move before the lagging metrics do, and they are the early signals that tell a board whether inclusion is real or reported.

This is the thinking behind our measurement work. For 15 years, our [Business Leaders Index](#) has drawn on analysis of more than 16,000 leadership roles, mapping gender and ethnic distribution, progression velocity, and talent-pool depth by function, seniority and sector across the UK's top roles and pipelines. As a living market map, it gives a unique view beyond headline demographic ratios — showing where the pipeline is thinning, and where representation at the top is being filled from outside rather than built from within.

Ethnic minority representation in FTSE 100 and FTSE 250, by Top 3 roles.

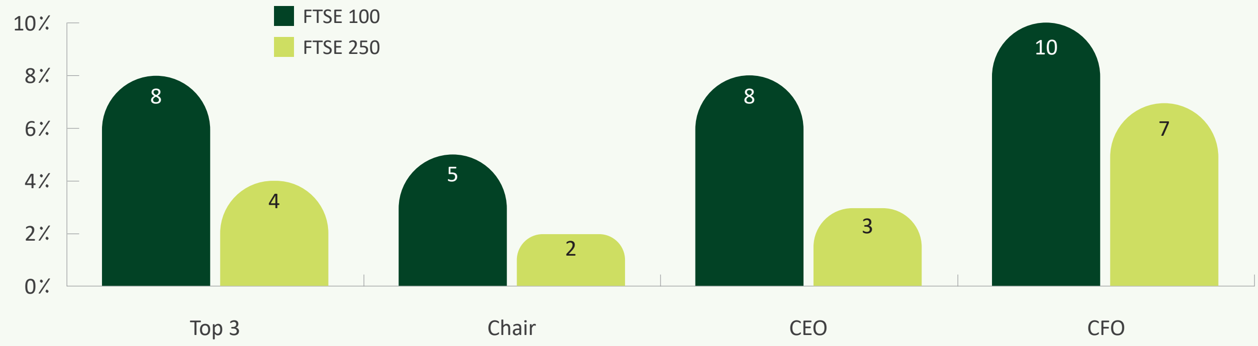
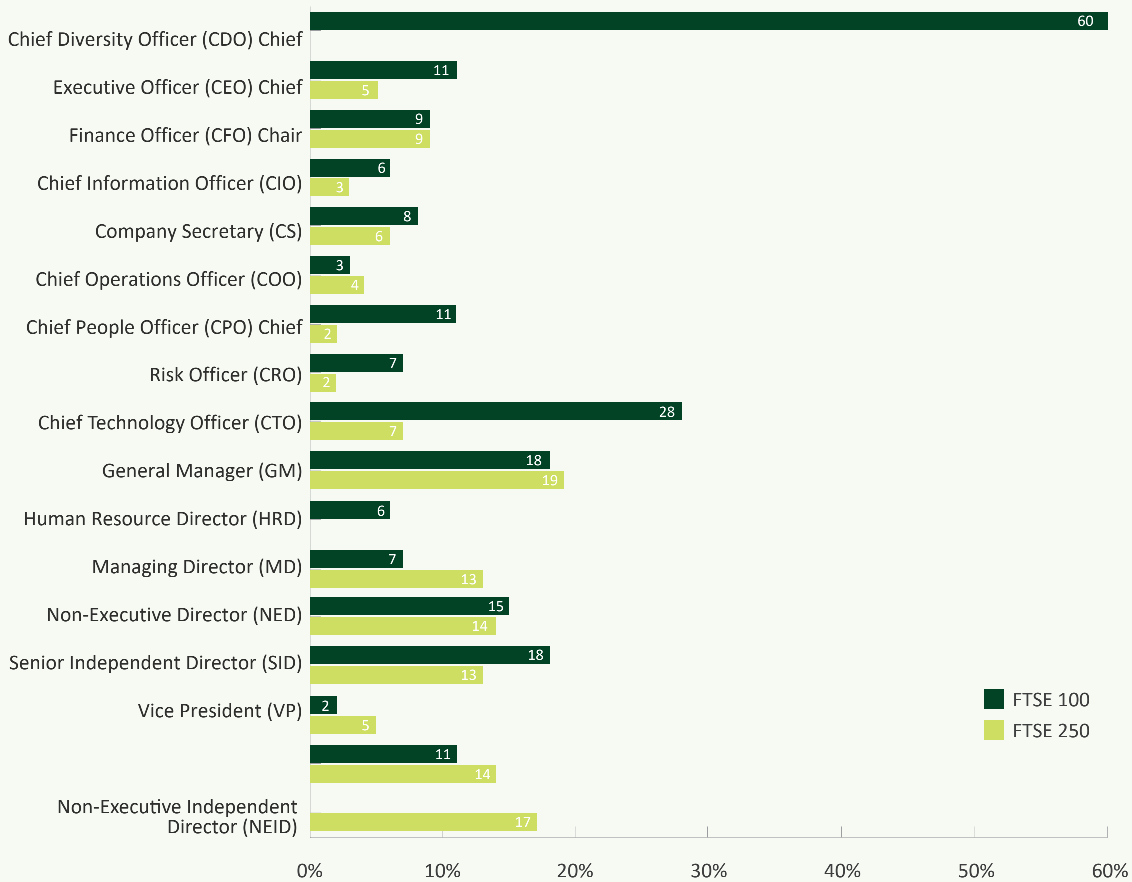


Fig 8. Shows the number of ethnic minority individuals occupying various level roles.

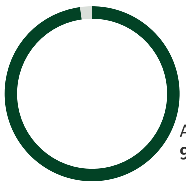


CHRO, CMO and NEID have 0% across all levels.

[The Execution Gap](#) goes a layer deeper — moving the conversation beyond who's in the room to whether being in the room changes anything. It surfaces the fairness scores, voice signals, belonging gaps and flight-risk indicators sitting underneath the headline number. These gaps are almost always invisible to leadership until they surface as retention loss in exactly the cohort the organisation most wanted to keep. Used well, it gives boards leading indicators that move before attrition and quality metrics do — the evidence base to act on workforce asymmetry deliberately, rather than discover it too late to recover.

Figure 2: The leadership team lead by example in creating an open and inclusive workplace culture

Leaders:
97.8% believe they lead by example to create an open and inclusive workplace culture.



White employees:
74.6% feel that their leadership team leads by example in creating an open and inclusive workplace culture.

Minority employees:
Only 44.1% feel that their leadership team leads by example in creating an open and inclusive workplace culture.

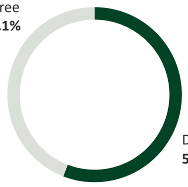
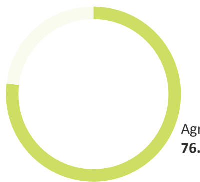


Figure 10: All religious faiths and practices are fully supported in my workplace

Leaders:
71.1% believe everyone's religious beliefs are supported.



White employees:
76.7% feel that their religious beliefs are supported

Minority employees:
Only 64.7% feel that their religious beliefs are supported

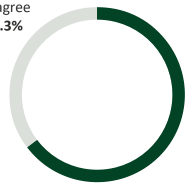
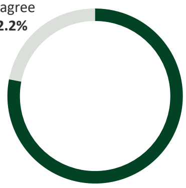


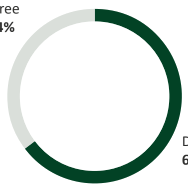
Figure 7: Everyone has the same access and opportunity to progress

Leaders:
77.8% believe everyone has the same career opportunities.



White employees:
67.8% feel they have equal access.

Minority employees:
Only 34% feel they have equal career progression opportunities.



Together they move the conversation from who is in the room to whether their presence changes the decision — and they instrument the leading indicators, such as fairness, clarity, psychological safety and sponsorship density, that shift before attrition and quality metrics do. None of this closes the gap on its own; measurement only earns its keep when it changes a decision. The instruments are there to make the workforce asymmetry visible and arguable — the judgement, and the courage to act on it, still belong to the leadership team.

CASE STUDY

The board that looked diverse on paper

A financial-services group had hit its representation targets at board and executive level and reported them with justified pride. Beneath the headline, a perception-gap survey told a different story: non-managerial colleagues from the very groups the board was counting rated fairness and progression far lower than their leaders assumed, and a flight-risk signal was building in exactly the cohort the firm most wanted to keep.

The numbers in the annual report were real; so was the gap they concealed. Within a year, several of those colleagues had left — not over pay, but over whether their presence translated into any real influence.

THE LESSON

Representation tells you who is in the room. A perception gap — the kind our Racial Inclusion Gap is built to surface — tells you whether being in the room changes anything, and it is usually the better predictor of who stays.

05

REFLECTIVE LEARNING AND THE LEADERSHIP PROFILE THE MOMENT DEMANDS

Section 5

Reflective Learning and the Leadership Profile the Moment Demands

Our advisory board sessions concluded on a single question: what kind of leader can hold all of this and still deliver?

If there is a single thread running through these sessions, it is that the leader organisations now need is not the leader most hiring processes are designed to find. The defining shift is from a model of leadership built around domain expertise and proven track record in stable conditions to one that prizes adaptive judgement, contextual mastery, and the capacity to operate honestly inside contradiction.

Senior executives immediately raised a pattern they had observed repeatedly: when organisations discover something new about themselves or their environment, they react and respond. What they almost never do is ask why they failed to see it before and build that question into how they govern themselves going forward.

— Adrian Blair,
Chief People Officer, Parkinson's UK

I've seen this as a repeating pattern across a number of organisations. When they identify something new and realise that there are different perspectives, there isn't a pause to ask: why didn't we see this before? I think senior executives can fall short on learning. I often say hindsight is a wonderful thing, but how do you turn it into foresight? That reflective learning is missing. There's a lot of delivery happening, but not enough structured reflection. That responsibility sits with both the C-Suite and the board.

— François Ortalo-Magné,
Professor of Management Practice, Former Dean and Chief Executive Officer, London Business School

A risk register should do more than record risk. Used well, it focuses the radar of the leadership team. Each quarter, I would review it with my senior team and ask: which three risks need to be top of mind for all of us right now? That discipline creates shared attention before a crisis and reflective learning after one. It turns risk management from an administrative exercise into a mechanism for organisational leadership.

Emerging trait 1: A leader who is expert at depth but at ease across breadth

— Anand Kumar,
Chair Risk & Audit (India Infrastructure Finance Company (UK) Ltd.

Leaders who are effective are like a T-shape. T-shape means you are at ease with all kinds of people that come from anywhere. Effective leadership should keep rediscovering itself.

— Ian McDermott,
Chief Executive Officer, Peabody

Try and recruit for low ego and high intelligence as a benchmark. Such individuals in my experience have an ability to integrate and become great team players as well as bringing a curiosity to any discussion. Values are fundamentally important to us. Finding people who have a different way of thinking and giving them a voice will also enrich any conversation.

Emerging trait 2: The ability to build trust across multiple, radically different relationships simultaneously — without simplifying any of them

— Jon Sparkes OBE,
Chief Executive, Mencap

For future leaders, we're looking for the ability to manage a whole raft of very different, complex relationships with every type of person from every type of community and role inside and outside the organisation. Then, increasingly, their ability to trust. You can do 100 things at once if you trust 99 people to do some of those things for you. You can only do one thing at once if you only trust yourself.

Emerging trait 3: The right person for the right moment, not every moment

The best leaders are not universally deployable, and searching for one who is, is both unrealistic and counterproductive. Several senior executives highlighted the growing tension between the expectation of authentic, vulnerable leadership and the simultaneous demand for near-perfect performance and reputational hygiene.

— Amanda Line,
Non-Executive Director

Great leadership doesn't rely on sector knowledge alone, indeed in my experience it's not necessarily a prerequisite at all. The brilliant leaders that I have known have always had the right skills for the organisation at that particular time in its evolution. I believe that the right 'fit' in terms of values and culture is more important than pure expertise in the relevant sector.

— Jon Sparkes OBE,
Chief Executive, Mencap

Sometimes we do expect the impossible from leadership. We expect leaders to be authentic, human, and vulnerable, then pile expectations of perfection in terms of delivery and relationships.

Emerging trait 4: The entrepreneurial and humble leader

— C-Suite Executive,
Consumer Goods, FTSE 100

Organisations hire leaders with a lot of experience, big expertise in their area, running large organisations and large teams. They are missing agility and entrepreneurship. These two things are the most critical to run a competitive business. A lot of leaders listen, but they don't have the humility to learn. They have an 'I know it all' mindset. They try to tell people what to do rather than listening and learning. Humility, entrepreneurship, and learning agility are often not assessed during the hiring process.

Hiring for the leader you actually need

Humility, entrepreneurial instinct, learning agility, describes capabilities that are rarely assessed and almost never decisive in a process built around credentials, sector pedigree and track record.

We can say it plainly, because it is our trade: most executive hiring still over-indexes on evidence of past performance in stable conditions, and under-indexes on the adaptive qualities that determine success in unstable ones. Track record tells you what someone did when the context was knowable. It tells you very little about how they will behave when it isn't; when they must build trust across radically different relationships at once, lead through friction, set boundaries across cultural registers, and keep learning in the public eye.

It tells you less still about how they will hold up under heightened exposure. The leaders this report describes operate with their personal brand permanently at risk. The capability that matters most in that environment — the courage to make bold calls while exposed, without tipping into recklessness or retreating into caution — is precisely the one conventional assessment ignores.

This is the question we put at the centre of every search, interim and succession brief: can this person lead an organisation where different people are experiencing fundamentally different realities?

It reframes what merit means. Context mastery, judgement and adaptability now matter as much as technical track record, because the same behaviour that reassures one audience can unsettle another, and a leader has to hold both without flattening either.

These qualities are assessable. They are harder to surface, and they require a process designed to reveal behaviour rather than confirm reputation. We will not overstate it: a good assessment improves the odds; however, it does not guarantee the outcome, and selection is only half the job. A leader appointed into this kind of exposure has to be supported through it — sponsored, briefed and allowed to be human — or the appointment fails for reasons that have nothing to do with the assessment. The cost of getting it wrong is rising, because a misjudged senior appointment is no longer just a vacancy; it is a leadership team that cannot navigate the asymmetry, complexity and pace this report describes. Hiring for the leader you can defend is a different exercise from hiring for the leader you actually need.

If leadership is a privilege, its rarest exponents deserve backing, not just scrutiny.

GP Scope was built to solve a problem most senior appointments quietly fail on: aligning hiring teams on what success looks like, while levelling the playing field for candidates from outside the sector and from cognitively diverse backgrounds. The result is a more thoughtful, data-rich choice for the client — sharper insight into what will retain that candidate in the role, alongside critical knowledge of what drives time-to-value in new hires.

Before a search begins, GP Scope captures the priorities of every stakeholder in the process — CEO, Chair, functional peers, board members — and translates competing weightings into a single, structured picture of the leadership priorities the role requires. It generates a candidate profile that names the trade-offs, surfaces the disagreements, and gives the hiring team a shared reference point for how to assess against them. The result is a search anchored in evidence, where the reasons an appointment succeeds or fails — on speed to productivity and retention — can be traced back to a decision we own together.

It's the single biggest reason behind our unrivalled 84% four-year-plus retention rate in executive search.

Conclusion

Workforce asymmetry is structural. No organisation of any scale can fully close the lived gap between its highest- and lowest-paid people, between headquarters and the front line, between the functions that generate revenue and those that sustain it. That is not a failure to be fixed; it is a condition to be led. The leader's task is not to run one organisation with a single shared reality. It is to lead many realities at once — one organisation, many experiences.

What separates the organisations that lead it well is honesty. They build mechanisms that let voices from across the divide be genuinely heard, rather than listening rituals that confirm what the centre already believes. They resist the temptation to claim a solidarity they cannot authentically hold because, as these leaders made clear, false empathy does more damage than honest distance. They design governance that stops the headquarters bubble from becoming the organisation's only reality.

But the harder, more human story running through these sessions is what workforce asymmetry and unpredictability are doing to leaders themselves. We ask leaders to be authentic, vulnerable and human, and in the same breath we demand near-perfect delivery and spotless reputational hygiene. We expect them to take bold decisions in conditions where a single misstep can be amplified, contextualised and made permanent. The risk is obvious: leadership reduced to the art of not sticking your neck out, exactly when organisations need the opposite.

The leadership profile this moment demands is therefore not the one most hiring processes are built to find. Humility, entrepreneurship, learning agility, the ability to lead diverse teams through friction rather than around it, the judgement to know when AI should do the work and when it must not, and the resilience to act with courage while exposed. These are capabilities of character and behaviour far more than credentials, and they are assessable, if we are willing to design for them.

This is where Green Park's two commitments meet. We help organisations promote and hire the leaders who can execute under this kind of exposure, and we partner with leaders who are finding their own way through it. No single leader is brilliant in every context, and the search for one who is does more harm than good. The price of leadership cuts both ways. The honest task, for boards, executive teams and those of us who advise them, is not to eliminate workforce asymmetry or manufacture the perfect leader, but to see clearly, choose well, and give our leaders the conditions and the courage to deliver.

If leadership is a privilege, then its rarest exponents — the people who can hold all of this and still execute — deserve to be supported. That is the work. We do not claim to have finished it. We are honest that no one has. But it is the work that matters, and we are glad to be close to it.

How Green Park Works on Workforce Asymmetry

Workforce asymmetry isn't a peripheral concern for us — it's the defining challenge our clients bring to us, and it shapes our search, interim and advisory work. When we identify, assess and place leaders, the core question is always the same: can this person navigate an organisation where different people experience fundamentally different realities? That judgement is grounded in evidence, not assertion, and it's why our executive search work delivers an 84% four-year-plus retention rate, well above what the market typically sees.

GP Scope

Aligning hiring teams before the search begins.

CAPABILITIES

- Stakeholder-weighted capability assessment across all decision-makers
- Structured comparison of competing priorities across seven leadership dimensions
- AI-generated candidate requirements profile drawn from stakeholder consensus
- Surfacing of disagreements before they derail the appointment
- A shared reference point the hiring team owns together

Business Leaders Index

Making leadership pipeline visible.

CAPABILITIES

- A census of 16,000+ senior roles across the FTSE 350
- Representation, progression velocity, and pipeline depth by function, seniority, and sector
- Divergence analysis across ethnocultural groups, exec and non-exec routes
- Sector benchmarks for boards testing whether internal progress matches sector movement
- The distinction between representation at a moment and pipeline sustainability over time

The Exclusion Gap

Surfacing what representation cannot, and whether presence changes the decision.

CAPABILITIES

- Surfacing what analogue processes cannot – cultural add, time to productivity and retention levers – that protect execution
- First of its kind process based on the work we did on D&I and flattening processes to create better hiring
- Fairness, voice, belonging and flight risk signals analysed by shortlist for differing individual line manager requirements and organisational need
- The evaluation of execution barriers for each candidate based on actual team, capability and cultural realities
- Leading indicators that move before attrition and quality metrics do
- The evidence base to act on workforce asymmetry deliberately, not reactively

Used together, these tools turn a difficult, often invisible problem into something a board can see, debate and act on. None replaces leadership judgement, and none makes the problem disappear. What they do is make it visible early enough to lead, rather than visible too late to recover. That's where our role as a thought partner, rather than a supplier, begins.

About *Green Park*

Green Park is a specialist executive search and advisory firm trusted by organisations seeking stronger, more future-ready leadership. Since 2006, we have helped clients across 50 countries access exceptional talent, widen leadership choice, and make better decisions about the people who drive performance, culture and growth.

Our work sits at the intersection of leadership, inclusion and commercial impact, with a clear focus on three outcomes: results, retention and reputation. We believe there is no shortage of talent, only opportunity; that well-aligned people create lasting impact; and that better leadership decisions build stronger organisations. By bringing different market insights into the room than our global competitors, we help our clients win — building more inclusive, productive and resilient businesses.

What differentiates Green Park is our focus on how we match talent to real organisational need, leadership context and the personal and professional priorities of the line manager — not simply the role specification. We bring insight into the recruitment process that helps uncover the retention levers, success factors and cultural dynamics that often determine whether a hire truly works for all stakeholders over time.

Above all, we believe everyone deserves a decent boss — one who can champion positive change, unlock leadership potential and leave a legacy of impact.

Kai Adams
Managing Partner

www.green-park.co.uk

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