



# 2026 Predictions





# 5 Predictions for 2026



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The new year brings bold new challenges so we present a list of our predictions (and thinly disguised hopes) for 2026.

**1. Employers clarify the deal:** In 2024, Dell Technology made transparent what other executives spoke about only behind closed doors. Dell said that, as part of a move to in-office work, remote workers were now not eligible for promotion unless they received special permission from three top executives.<sup>1</sup>

That statement clarified that there were different “deals” to be a high performer or high potential at Dell. Part of the deal to be a high potential was contributing your whole self by being in the office. You could still have a good job being remote or hybrid, but your career there would be in your current job.

We loved this clarity from Dell because we’ve written and taught extensively about organizations




needing to clarify the “deal” for their employees (See [“A Prize in Every Box”](#)); in the science, read up on psychological contracts).

We think that, with the landscape of hybrid/remote vs. in-office stabilizing, 2026 will be the year that employers clarify the employment deal. Clarifying the employment deal means clearly stating the contribution that defines each of the categories below and the benefits received in them:

- **Core Employee:** About 70% of your population. They deliver on most or all goals, behave consistent with your behavior or leadership standards and are good team members. What do they get in return?
- **High Performer:** About 20% of your population. They consistently over-deliver on challenging goals and behave consistent with or above your behavior standards. What added benefits and experiences do they get for their additional contribution?
- **High Potential:** About 10% of your population. They are high performers with the additional drive, intellectual capacity, and functional and leadership capability to succeed a level or two above their current role. What will you do to grow (and keep) them as the future of your company?

More than ever, high performers and high potentials realize their value in a world where some workers are dialing back their work intensity. They’ll be demanding more clarity about the deal that you’re offering them. If your deal isn’t clear, they’ll find an employer where it is.

**2. HR architects itself and the organization:** The layoffs we saw due to AI in 2025<sup>2</sup> (and CEOs promising future layoffs<sup>3</sup>) portend

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, smiling and looking slightly to the side. She is wearing a light-colored top. Overlaid on the image is white text that reads: "We think that, with the landscape of hybrid/remote vs. in-office stabilizing, 2026 will be the year that employers clarify the employment deal. Clarifying the employment deal means clearly stating the contribution that defines each of the categories below and the benefits received in them..."

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meaningful structural changes in how work is done and delivered. The best in HR will respond in two specific ways to this challenge:

- **Lead Rearchitecting HR:** AI won’t revolutionize the value-added advisory work of HR but it should obliterate anything transactional. 2026 will be the year when CHROs fundamentally reassess their HR operating and service model, setting a 2-year plan to transfer all Tier 1 & 2 work to self-service, automated, agented, bottled or other non-human service providers.

These are efficiencies that your CEO and CFO will be demanding, so it’s best to get ahead of this curve and model for the organization how to do this well. This has implications for HRBPs as well, as we describe below in Prediction #5.

- **Be “lead consultant” on job and organization redesign for AI:** We in HR aren’t, but should be, experts in organization and job redesign. 2026 must be the year when

senior HR teams are taught how to do this and apply their skills to help their organization support transforming for AI. If we can't do this, you'll be forced to do what McKinsey, BCG or one of the other big consulting firms tells you to do after your CEO hires them. It's your choice: control this process or be controlled.

### **3. The preeminence of high performers:**

Organizations will better identify and manage their high performers in 2026 to reap even higher performance and retention. Consistent with Prediction #1, there will not only be a clearer "deal" for non-high potential high performers, but also better practices to identify them.

This means that organizations will set more challenging goals to better tease out the high end of performance. It will also require improved quality and transparency of calibration conversations to ensure functional and organizational agreement about who high performers are.

High performers will understand their status, the reason for it, the temporary but renewable nature of it and the benefits of it. They will have a high quality development plan co-created with their people manager and either the HRBP or senior talent advisor.

Managers will be held accountable for retaining and engaging their highest performing talent through metrics that flow to their evaluation.

**4. Skills hysteria subsides:** Already on a sharply downward trend, the painful snap-back to reality of L&D leaders, technology vendors and consultants on this topic will continue. We'll see more skills projects can-

celled, abandoned or sharply constrained when their diffuse, future benefits aren't compelling enough to secure continued funding in today's cost-constrained environment.

Not a complete waste of time, skills will still be used in a focused way at lower levels of organizations where this granular-level discussion of capabilities is appropriate. Mid- and senior-level jobs will continue to be described in terms of capabilities, behaviors and experiences.

It will be a moment-of-truth year for those using skills as the underlying currency in job marketplaces. Many of those marketplaces have been in place for at least 18 months – long enough to measure their success. The question is whether success metrics were established for the marketplaces before their installation, or whether there will only be post hoc reasoning to assess their investment return.



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## 5. Growth of the strategically pure HRBP:

Continuing a shift we've seen accelerating in the past 5 years, more organizations will elevate the HRBP role to one of "strategic purity." We'll see HRBP ratios shift to 1:1,000 – 1:2,500 as all transactional work is shifted to service centers (AI'ed or not), and COEs. Junior HRBP roles will be largely eliminated in that work shift.

Those ratios force the HRBP to focus on nothing other than supporting their top team in strategy development and execution. They will broker all the services and support they need from the HR operations and COE teams. They will ensure there is great talent at the top two levels of the organization. They will ensure that corporate HR processes are executed flawlessly in their area THROUGH others.

They will likely not have staff beyond an assistant or project leader. They will not hand-hold executives through HR process execution. They will not build shadow HR functions.

They will ruthlessly prioritize what they do and don't do, and not feel bad about their choices. They will build warm and trusting relationships with the executives they support, relied upon by those executives to advise them on their most critical decisions. They will be courageous advocates for the people practices that drive optimal business outcomes.

Getting "strategically pure HRBP's" will mean radical upskilling of current high performing HR leaders and importing smart talent from other functions and developing this skill set in them.

These five shifts will further elevate the quality and impact of our function, while pruning the weaker activities and mindsets. We still must run faster than the organization to catch up to their expectations. A focus on a clear deal, high performers, architectural capabilities and strategic influencing is the best chance we have to gain more ground in 2026.

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