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Rethinking Talent Strategy in the AI Era: the Strategic Role of Expert-led Gig Models in the Services Industry

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Introduction

Enterprise talent models have historically been built for predictability. Stable volumes, repeatable workflows, and standardized roles supported hiring at scale. That foundation is now being reshaped. Evolving business expectations, rising operational complexity, and increasing automation are shifting work away from steady, repeatable tasks toward judgment-intensive activities. Human effort is now concentrated in situations that require contextual understanding, accountability, critical thinking, and empathy, such as complex scenarios, regulatory interpretation, and AI supervision. As a result, demand for human expertise is no longer continuous; it is uneven, time-bound, and unpredictable.

This shift fundamentally changes the objective of enterprise talent models. The primary question is no longer workforce size, but the ability to access the right expertise at the right moment. Traditional Full-time Equivalent (FTE) models, built on assumptions of predictable demand, stable skills, and long planning cycles, struggle to respond to these talent challenges, often leading to capacity mismatches and higher delivery risk. Enterprises increasingly require talent models that enable rapid, on-demand access to experienced, capable professionals without introducing rigid capacity commitments.

In this context, the expert-led gig talent model is emerging as a structural evolution in enterprise talent strategy. Instead of scaling headcount in

anticipation of demand, enterprises engage an expert gig workforce for clearly defined, outcome-oriented work. This segment extends beyond conventional gig work to include specialized, expert-led talent such as Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) and industry experts deployed in high-impact roles.

Enterprises are deploying expert-led gig models for higher-value use cases in which speed, judgment, and specialized expertise are vital, such as product launches, market expansion, and regulatory transitions. Enterprises typically adopt these models through a maturity-based progression, starting with narrowly scoped use cases and gradually expanding into more complex, judgment-intensive work as governance frameworks, trust, and delivery confidence strengthen.

This viewpoint examines how AI is reshaping enterprise talent strategy across the services industry and accelerating expert-led gig models' adoption.

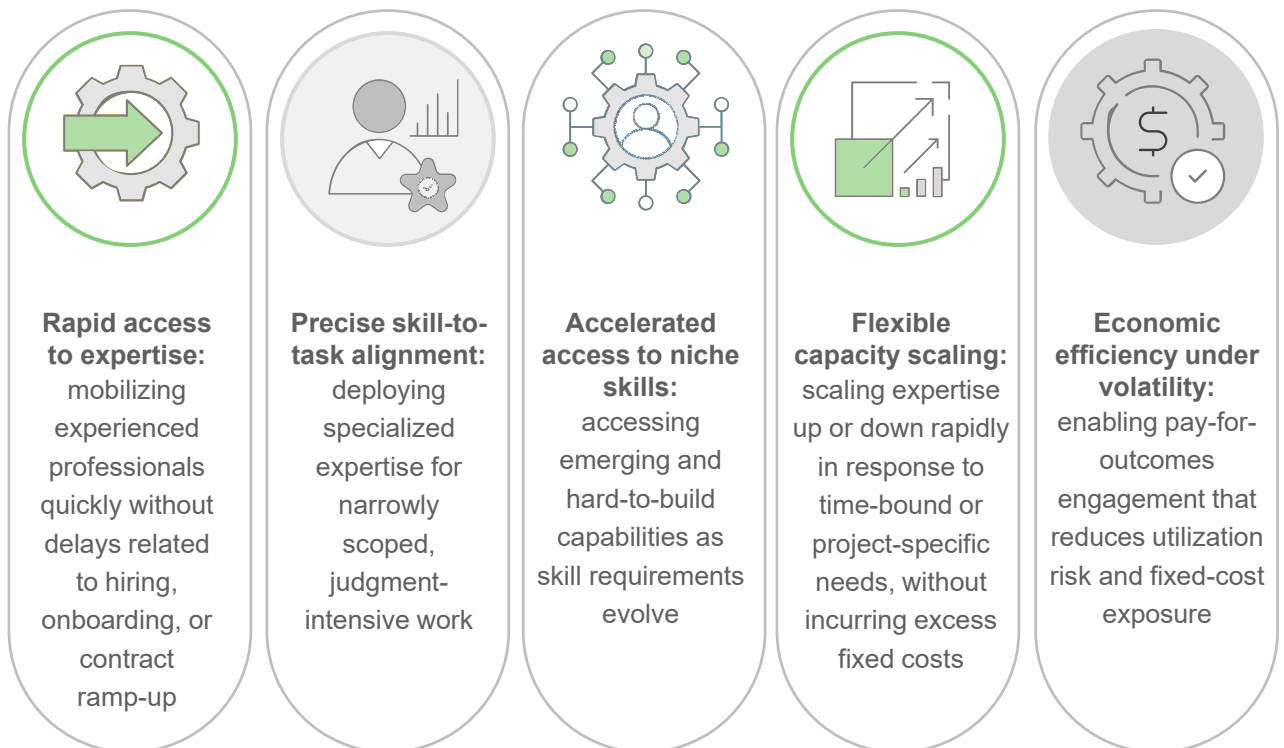
Specifically, it covers:

- The key drivers behind the shift toward expert-led gig models
- How enterprises are deploying expert gig workforces at scale across high-impact use cases
- Impact sourcing's role in sustaining expert-led gig work delivery at scale
- The challenges that enterprises face in scaling expert-led gig models independently, and how providers help address governance, accountability, and sustainability gaps

Expert-led gig models as the preferred AI-era talent layer

AI's growing role in enterprise delivery is elevating the expert-led gig model as a distinct and essential talent layer. As AI automates standardized tasks and absorbs work volumes, the remaining human effort is concentrated in high-impact moments. In this context, expert-led gig work does not replace in-house teams or managed providers; rather, it complements them by enabling on-demand access to expertise when volatility, complexity, or risk exceeds traditional talent and delivery models' capabilities.

As adoption increases, the expert-led gig workforce delivers a distinct set of advantages for enterprises operating in volatile environments, including:



Over 40% of the current skills will change in the next five years, yet only half of the organizations have a clear rethinking strategy.¹

¹ World Economic Forum

An important enabler of expert-led gig models is the borderless nature of Customer Experience (CX) delivery. It allows enterprises to access specialized talent across geographies rather than being constrained by the location of physical teams or delivery centers. This access enables geographic diversification of expertise, reduces concentration risk, and allows enterprises to draw on cultural and contextual understanding that aligns more closely with the customer base.

In regulated industries such as BFSI and healthcare, expert-led gig work enables controlled flexibility without compromising compliance. Enterprises are deploying expert gig workers as domain specialists for tightly scoped work. Controls such as role-based data access, restricted data exposure, and auditable workflows enable flexibility without compromising compliance.

Reflecting these benefits, gig talent adoption is accelerating across enterprises. While gig workers still represent less than 5% of total headcount on average, a growing number of enterprises have increased their gig workforce share by more than 30% over the past two years. Furthermore, over two-fifths of enterprises plan to increase their use of gig workers.²

Case in point

PGA of America's technology team used on-demand independent developers to rapidly prototype and validate new ideas without diverting core employees from higher-value work. By tapping into external specialists for proof-of-concept builds (for example, niche skills such as AWS and React), the team was able to initiate projects within days instead of weeks, complete work approximately three times faster, and achieve nearly 50% cost savings. This approach also enabled internal teams to remain focused on strategic roadmap delivery.

Compared with the traditional workforce, the expert gig workforce represents a structural shift in how enterprises balance flexibility, efficiency, and risk under volatile conditions. Exhibit 1 highlights the key differences between traditional workforce models and expert-led gig models across flexibility, scalability, speed, and economic efficiency under volatility.

One-third of gig talent users report improved resource flexibility and more agile, dynamic team structures.³

² nasscom
³ nasscom

Exhibit 1: Key differences between traditional FTE models and expert-led gig models

Source: Everest Group (2026)

Traditional workforce models (fixed FTEs, capacity- or volume committed services)	Dimensions	Expert-led gig models (core FTEs complemented by expert gig workers)
Limited flexibility; capacity largely fixed to planned headcount or contractual volumes making rapid adjustment difficult	Flexibility under demand volatility 	Higher flexibility to activate an expert gig workforce on demand while retaining a stable core workforce
Scaling constrained by hiring cycles, advance ramp-up planning, and contractual change mechanisms	Scalability 	Scales through a combination of stable FTE capacity and curated expert pools, without relying solely on permanent hiring
Slower time-to-productivity due to hiring, onboarding, training, and knowledge transfer requirements	Speed to proficiency 	Faster deployment for complex work, as expert gig workers bring prior domain experience and require only limited contextual and client-specific onboarding
Cost-effective under stable demand but inefficient during troughs due to idle capacity	Economic efficiency under volatility 	More efficient under fluctuating demand by balancing fixed capacity with outcome-aligned expert talent
Limited ability to sustain rare or emerging skills without overstaffing, with capability upgrades dependent on continuous reskilling programs	Access to niche skills 	On-demand access to curated niche skill pools across domains and geographies, well suited for rare expertise, language needs, and independent audits

Expert-led gig models span open marketplaces, curated expert networks, and provider-led ecosystems, differing in vetting standards, governance mechanisms, accountability structures, and integration with enterprise risk frameworks. While open platforms offer broad access and flexibility, governed models are generally more reliable for complex, regulated, and judgment-intensive CX environments.

While not always the lowest-cost option on a unit basis, expert-led gig models often prove more economically efficient under volatile demand conditions. By shifting from fixed capacity to outcome-based engagement, enterprises can reduce idle capacity, lower the cost of experimentation, and optimize cost-to-serve when demand is uneven or uncertain.

AI is further accelerating expert-led gig work's scalability by lowering historical barriers to external talent engagement. Generative AI adoption is more than twice as high among freelancers, with 20% reporting regular use compared with 9% of the non-freelance workforce⁴. Task-level security controls, real-time monitoring, role-based access, and AI-enabled quality assurance and coaching extend governance, visibility, and performance management across distributed gig worker ecosystems. Together, these developments position expert-led gig models as the core layer in enterprise talent strategies for AI-enabled delivery environments.

How enterprises can leverage expert-led gig models at scale

As expert-led gig work expands, the core challenge shifts from access to orchestration. Scaling this model requires deliberate workforce design that aligns talent types with the nature of the work. Enterprises are moving away from isolated or reactive use of the expert-led gig workforce toward hybrid workforce models that combine in-house teams, managed providers, and expert-led gig workers. This orchestration enables enterprises to align the right delivery model with the nature of the work – balancing speed, control, and scalability across increasingly diverse and operational demands.

Within these hybrid models, the expert-led gig workforce is being deployed most actively for higher-value, judgment-intensive use cases in which speed and specialized expertise are vital to business outcomes. Exhibit 2 lists high-value use cases for which enterprises can leverage an expert-led gig workforce.

Exhibit 2: High-value enterprise use cases for expert-led gig workforce

Source: Everest Group (2026)

Use case	Example
New product and service launches Provides short-term access to specialists for early escalations, interpreting ambiguous scenarios, and developing decision frameworks during launch phases, without requiring permanent skill build-out	A major health company engaged external medical technology experts to evaluate biometric technologies and guide integration into a digital exercise platform, enabling new product capabilities without building specialized expertise in-house
Market and language expansion Enables rapid access to native language and cultural expertise to support market entry, align CX with local expectations, and reduce misinterpretation or bias	Airbnb leveraged a network of over 1,200 qualified linguists, supported by language leads and copywriters, to maintain tone-of-voice and quality standards for rapid expansion into new markets with strong CX outcomes
AI supervision and human-in-the-loop operations Enables on-demand human judgment for AI exception handling, output validation, and model oversight during periods of elevated risk or change	Cohere deployed trained contributors to deliver human feedback for model fine-tuning, completing over 2,400 expert hours in 12 weeks across safety, tone, and instruction-adherence evaluations
Policy, compliance, and regulatory changes Supports regulatory transitions through tightly scoped advisory, review, and exception analysis roles, while enterprises retain decision authority and compliance accountability	A Fortune 200 pharmaceutical company engaged external regulatory specialists to lead a commercial quality workstream, including dashboards, measurement systems, and capability building for compliance teams, supporting regulatory change without expanding permanent headcount

Scaling expert-led gig work across such use cases requires mature operating models, not just access to talent. Key elements of these operating models include:

- **Work and risk segmentation:** explicit classification of work by risk, judgment intensity, and regulatory impact, with clear rules on which tasks can be routed to the expert gig workforce and under what controls
- **Skills definition and role clarity:** clearly defined skill profiles spanning domain expertise (for example, BFSI regulations and healthcare policy), CX and behavioral skills (for example, complex complaint handling and empathy in sensitive interactions), AI-related skills (for example, prompt interpretation and bias or hallucination detection), and analytical and decision-making skills (for example, risk assessment and root-cause analysis) to enable precise skill-to-task alignment
- **Certification and compliance readiness:** formal certification mechanisms, such as data privacy and security certifications (for example, ISO 27001 awareness), and industry-specific compliance training (for example, Anti-Money Laundering (AML)/Know Your Customer (KYC) for BFSI), to validate that expert gig workers meet regulatory and compliance requirements before deployment
- **Training, coaching, and continuous calibration:** ongoing enablement support, including structured onboarding, AI-enabled coaching and decision-support tools, scenario-based refresher training as policies evolve, and continuous Quality Assurance (QA) calibration through peer reviews and expert benchmarking to detect performance drift and update guidance over time
- **Career progression and expert retention:** deliberate retention mechanisms for high-performing expert gig workers, such as defined progression paths, preferential access to higher-complexity work, and repeat engagement based on performance, to preserve institutional knowledge and reduce re-onboarding friction
- **Escalation and accountability:** clear escalation paths and accountability structures to govern expert decision-making, including defined decision rights, auditable workflows, and documented rationales for high-impact decisions, to ensure that the expert-led gig workforce operates within enterprise governance frameworks

Enterprises should follow a maturity-based adoption path as they scale expert-led gig models rather than moving directly from limited use to full-scale reliance on the expert gig workforce. Exhibit 3 highlights how adoption should progress in stages.

Exhibit 3: Enterprise maturity path for adopting expert-led gig models

Source: Everest Group (2026)

Level 1 Targeted pilots	Level 2 Structured expansion	Level 3 Integrated delivery	Level 4 Sustained ownership
Scope of work and use cases			
Small, time-bound pilots in narrowly scoped workflows (e.g., limited launch support for a single product/market, pilot AI output reviews on a controlled dataset), with tight oversight and minimal decision rights	Repeatable launch support, multi-language or market expansion, recurring policy review windows, and defined regulatory support for non-discretionary tasks (e.g., checklist-based QA) with limited recurring ownership	Sustained and ongoing AI supervision, persistent expert queues for complex cases, and embedded expert roles within workflows (e.g., escalation review, exception management, QA calibration)	End-to-end ownership of high-impact workstreams (e.g., critical escalation resolution, compliance interpretation support, AI oversight operations) with sustained accountability
Operating model characteristics			
Manual vetting of experts, ad hoc onboarding, and close human oversight	Formal skills validation, standardized onboarding, and defined QA and escalation mechanisms	Curated expert pools, repeat engagement, AI-enabled coaching, and continuous QA calibration	Mature governance, clear ownership structures, auditable workflows, and integrated performance management
Enterprise mindset			
Cautious and validation-oriented, focused on proving quality, speed, and reliability	Risk-aware and process-focused, with growing confidence in repeatability	Trust-based and performance-driven, emphasizing consistency and optimization	Strategic reliance on expert-led talent as a core component of workforce design
Examples			
eCommerce firm piloting expert-led gig workers to handle a narrow set of peak-season escalation types (e.g., payment failures + delivery disputes) under close supervision	Travel enterprise expanding expert-led gig workforce coverage to new languages for customer support during regional launches, with standardized playbooks	Healthcare payer running an expert queue for claims exceptions and AI-suggested decision review as part of day-to-day operations	BFSI enterprise standing up a dedicated external expert community that supports ongoing policy interpretation, regulatory-change readiness, and AI oversight with defined audits
← Current market maturity between level 2-3 →			

However, expert-led gig models are not universally applicable. They are not well suited to highly standardized, steady-state, low-judgment work or to environments with predictable demand. They are also ineffective in enterprises that lack the governance maturity, role clarity, and quality controls required to manage distributed expert talent. In these contexts, traditional delivery models remain more appropriate.

Impact sourcing's role in institutionalizing expert-led gig models at scale

As enterprises scale expert-led gig models, a central challenge emerges: ensuring that expertise, judgment quality, and delivery confidence accumulate over time rather than reset with each engagement. While the expert gig workforce provides flexibility and speed, its long-term effectiveness depends on whether organizations can sustain skills, retain high-performing experts, and preserve knowledge across demand cycles.

In traditional gig models, this often manifests as high churn, transactional engagement, and limited continuity. Impact sourcing plays an important role in addressing this challenge. It refers to the intentional talent engagement from marginalized communities and underserved regions through structured workforce models built on capability building, engagement continuity, and long-term workforce sustainability.

Rather than serving as a social overlay, impact sourcing functions as a performance multiplier. It creates a loyalty loop in which engagements are viewed as career-defining opportunities, reducing transactional behavior and increasing retention, even without traditional employment structures.

In AI-driven CX environments, where human work increasingly centers on judgment, nuance, and empathy, traditional models struggle to deliver cultural alignment at scale. Impact sourcing delivers both a cognitive and supply-side advantage. By tapping into diverse lived experiences and high-aptitude talent in underserved communities and overlooked geographies, it helps strengthen conflict resolution and customer trust while expanding the addressable talent pool in a skill-constrained market. This creates a differentiated and defensible talent pipeline rather than compelling enterprises to compete in saturated hiring markets.

In practice, impact sourcing demonstrates delivery advantages. Enterprises observe higher repeat engagement among skilled experts, greater willingness to upskill, and smoother transitions across programs and workloads. These programs report 15-40% lower attrition than traditional outsourcing in comparable roles, driven by stronger

community attachment, progression opportunities, and repeat engagement models.⁵ Over time, these effects translate into reduced onboarding effort and improved system-level stability, even as individual experts may rotate across assignments.

Importantly, impact sourcing does not seek to convert gig workers into permanent employees. Instead, it focuses on creating expertise durability at the system level, ensuring that knowledge, skills, and performance continuity are preserved across engagements. In this way, impact sourcing serves as a foundational mechanism for institutionalizing expert-led gig models.

“Impact sourcing creates a workforce that does not just work, it learns faster, stays longer, and takes greater pride in what it does, translating purpose into performance.”

– Country head of a global technology firm using impact workers in tier-2 Indian cities

Scaling expert-led gig models: enterprise challenges and the role of providers

While enterprises increasingly recognize the value of expert-led gig work, scaling these models independently remains difficult. Challenges emerge in areas such as inconsistent onboarding and QA, limited AI enablement, data security and regulatory complexity, workforce classification risk, and ethical considerations. These challenges compound at scale, particularly when the expert-led gig workforce is deployed across high-risk, judgment-intensive use cases. Exhibit 4 outlines the key barriers enterprises face when attempting to scale expert-led gig models independently.

Exhibit 4: Key enterprise challenges in scaling expert-led gig models independently

Source: Everest Group (2026)

	Fragmented onboarding, capability validation, and repeatability Inconsistent onboarding and skills verification, limited readiness checks before deployment, and a lack of standardized, repeatable frameworks across engagements
	Limited AI enablement and oversight Inability to consistently deploy AI-enabled coaching, decision support, monitoring, and drift detection across experts, making it difficult to standardize outcomes
	Data security and regulatory complexity Challenges in enforcing role-based access, auditability, data localization requirements, and compliance obligations across jurisdictions and short-term engagements
	Operational coordination and speed-to-mobilization at scale Manual coordination of experts, inconsistent escalation paths, unclear accountability, limited repeatability of workflows, and slow identification and activation of qualified resources as programs scale
	Workforce classification and legal exposure Ambiguity around contractor classification and differing labor regulations across markets, which becomes harder to manage as expert engagement grows in volume and duration

How providers support expert-led gig models at scale

Providers play a key role in enabling scaled adoption of expert-led gig models. At scale, providers function as ecosystem orchestrators, building and managing curated expert communities, embedding impact sourcing principles into engagement models, and enabling AI-driven workforce management and QA. Crucially, they retain end-to-end accountability for outcomes across hybrid workforce models, coordinating in-house teams, managed services, and expert gig workers within a unified governance and delivery framework.

Case study: McGraw Hill redesigns its talent model to manage demand volatility

Context and business objective

McGraw Hill, a global education company, operates large-scale student support for its digital platforms. Higher education is a core focus area, with sharp seasonal spikes in support volumes at the start of each semester as students access course materials and platforms. To address this, the company sought a more flexible talent model to manage demand variability, reduce reliance on repeated hiring cycles, enhance the student experience during high-demand periods, and optimize cost and workforce utilization.

Key challenges in the traditional FTE-led talent model

McGraw Hill's traditional model relied on an outsourced workforce of approximately 120 agents, supplemented by seasonal hiring during semester starts, when volumes increased three to four times and workforce requirements scaled to over 300 agents within weeks. This created structural inefficiencies and limited agility:

- Repeated hiring, onboarding, and releasing of agents within three to five weeks during peak periods, creating high operational overhead inefficiencies
- A high share of new agents during back-to-school peaks, impacting service quality and student experience
- Rigid full-time scheduling (40 hours per week) and the need to maintain excess base capacity, resulting in underutilization and a higher cost-to-serve

Talent model transformation

McGraw Hill transitioned to a flexible expert-led gig model, enabling dynamic capacity scaling based on demand and reducing reliance on repeated hiring cycles. The model was designed to manage seasonal variability while improving workforce

continuity and student experience.

This included:

- **Flexible scaling of trained agents:** leveraging a gig workforce and increasing existing agents' hours during peak periods
- **Demand-aligned staffing:** dynamically matching staffing to time of day, day of week, and seasonal demand patterns
- **Reduced dependence on new hires:** leveraging a consistent pool to improve service quality during peak periods
- **Training and AI-enabled support:** a three-week onboarding program supported by training, knowledge tools, and AI capabilities to enable faster ramp-up and more consistent resolution
- **Governance and security controls:** secure access, compliance validation, and controlled system access to meet internal data privacy and risk standards

Outcomes and impact

The shift improved cost-to-serve, service quality, and responsiveness:

- **Cost optimization:** reduced cost-to-serve driven by improved workforce utilization, lower hiring costs, and reduced training overhead
- **Workforce flexibility and responsiveness:** improved ability to scale capacity in line with demand fluctuations by adjusting agent hours
- **Operational effectiveness:** enhanced real-time workforce management and resource allocation, improving utilization and overall delivery efficiency
- **Improved CX:** higher service quality and customer satisfaction driven by reduced reliance on new agents during peak periods

Enterprise best practices to operationalize expert-led gig models at scale

McGraw Hill's experience demonstrates how expert-led gig models can address demand volatility while improving efficiency and experience. However, as adoption scales, the focus shifts from proving value to ensuring consistent execution across teams, use cases, and geographies.

Scaling these models requires more than access to talent. Enterprises must establish structured operating models that align governance, security, and AI enablement across internal teams and provider ecosystems.

With these considerations in mind, Everest Group proposes the IMPACT framework, which outlines the best practices enterprises can adopt while collaborating with providers to scale expert-led gig models. Exhibit 5 illustrates this framework.

Exhibit 5: The IMPACT framework

Source: Everest Group (2026)

 Identify the right orchestration partner	 Measure outcomes, not headcount	 Partition ownership and accountability	 Apply governance by design	 Connect to impact and overall ESG priorities	 Transition knowledge and expertise
Prioritize governance, AI enablement, and compliance depth	Track quality, speed-to-proficiency, retention, and cost-to-serve	Define ownership across HR, CX/business, sourcing, and digital/IT functions	Enforce role-based access and audit trails	Align expert-led gig work with internal ESG (including scope 2/3 emissions), DEI, and inclusive growth objectives	Mandate playbooks, documentation, and peer reviews
Evaluate platform maturity, security, and impact sourcing capabilities	Align contracts to shared accountability for outcomes	Document accountability for regulatory and talent risks	Institutionalize escalation paths and AI oversight	Track skill progression, repeat engagement, and workforce diversity through standardized mechanisms	Build mechanisms for expertise reuse and progression

Conclusion

As enterprise work becomes more dynamic, judgment-intensive, and volatile, expert-led gig talent is becoming a core component of workforce strategy. The ability to rapidly access specialized expertise, reconfigure capacity in real time, scale capacity up or down with demand, and respond decisively to unforeseen shifts will be vital to delivering consistent outcomes in AI-enabled environments – whether in healthcare, HR, data and AI, CX, IT services, or other knowledge-intensive operations.

The future of workforce design will not be defined by a binary choice between FTEs and gig workers. Instead, it will be shaped by how effectively enterprises orchestrate diverse talent pools based on work complexity, risk, and demand variability.

In the AI era, competitive advantage will depend less on access to technology alone and more on how effectively enterprises orchestrate human expertise, as measured by deployment speed, proficiency depth, outcome quality, capacity elasticity, expertise continuity, and sustained social impact.

Enterprises that design for agility, accountability, and long-term capability building today will be better positioned to navigate ambiguity, strengthen stakeholder trust, and build service models fit for the next phase of digital and human-centric transformation.

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