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Programme:	**Master of Business Administration**		
Module:	**Human Capital Management**		
Module code:	**LCMB7023**	**Contribution to Overall Module Assessment (%):**	**50%**
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Assignment Title:	**Assessment component 1:** **Individual report – HR strategy**	**Word count (or equivalent):**	**2423**
Submission deadline:	**20th March 2026 by 2 PM**	**Return date of provisional marks & written feedback:**	**17th April 2026**

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1 Introduction

Aether Innovations is a high-growth 300-person technology company that has addressed a convergent set of strategic issues: declining growth, increasing turnover, and dissatisfaction among customers. These are not usually the results of individual operation failures; they are indicators of fundamental disconnects between organisational culture, structural architecture, and people management strategy. This report is a proposal to implement a theoretically sound, evidence-based HR approach in the Strategy, Option 2: Building a Culture of Innovation and Future Work Practices, as an appointed Human Capital Consultant.

The report relies on classic and modern literature in the field of HRM, organisational behaviour, and the future of work. Part 1 critically analyses cultural and structural practices within the technology industry, suggests specific interventions to embed innovation, advocates a future-of-work model, and shows how integrated changes promote the best employee performance. Part 2 uses the Experiential Learning Cycle by Kolb (1984) to reflect on the HCM of the author on the learning experience and deals with the problem of professional relevance in the era of growing artificial intelligence. Collectively, the two components make up a human capital blueprint to be integral to the strategic renewal imperative of Aether.

2 Part 1: Building a Culture of Innovation and Future Work Practices

2.1 Critical Analysis: Current Culture and Work Practices in the Tech Sector

Driskill (2018) contrasts between the espoused values and enacted values-in-use and holds that culture is best authentically conveyed through visible artefacts and behavioural standards, not mission statements. In most technology companies, the established culture has continued to be performance-intensive, with a heroic conception of individual technical mastery, and structural disregard of psychological safety, the unanimous opinion that it is safe to engage in interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 2018).

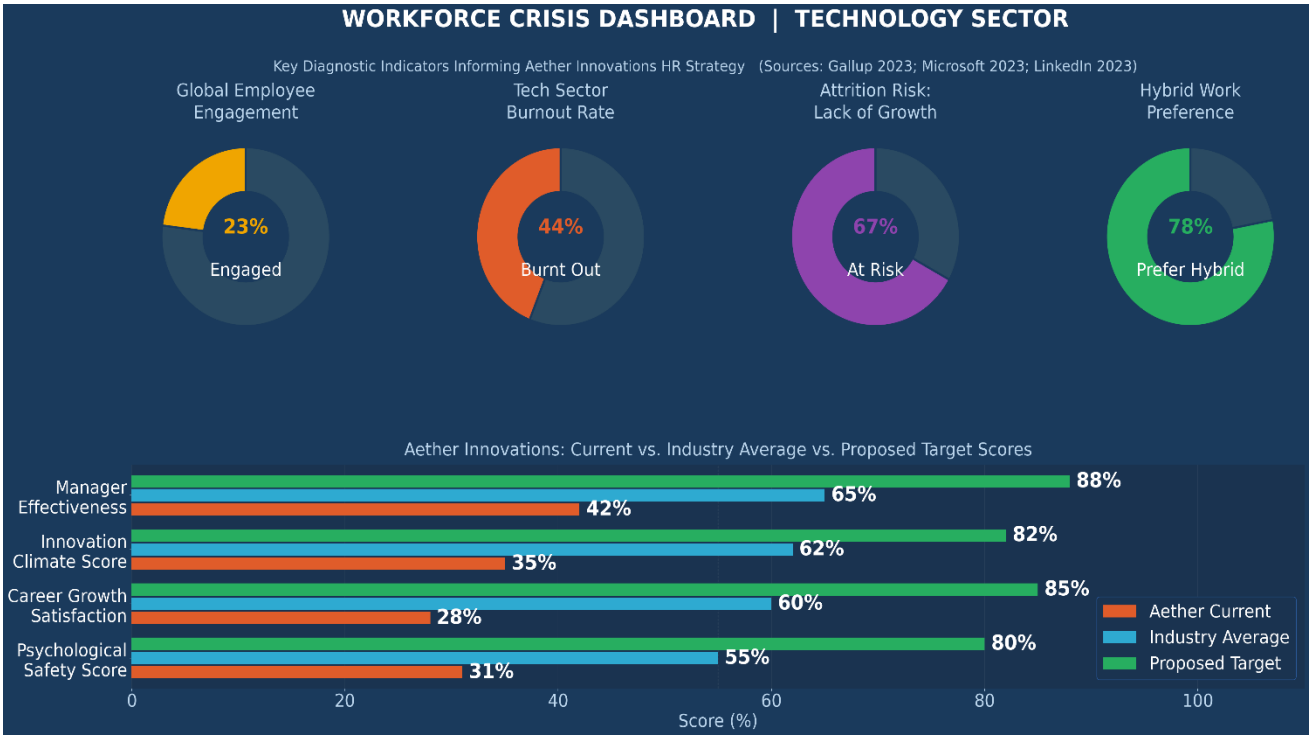

Figure 1 Workforce Crisis Dashboard- Diagnostic Indicators for Aether Innovations HR Strategy (Brandt, 2024)

According to Figure 1, 23% of the world population is engaged (Gallup, 2023), and 44% of the employees in the technology industry complain about the symptoms of burnout, which is a side effect of indecency, workload, and lack of appreciation. More importantly, 67% use the lack of career development as the main force of attraction (Brandt, 2024), and 78% want to work in flexible hybrid settings (Microsoft, 2023). The comparative bar chart also indicates that the score of Aether on the dimensions of psychological safety, career growth satisfaction, the climate of innovation, and manager effectiveness are significantly lower than the industry average, and the suggested target scores are consistent with the symptoms of turnover and declining performance presented by the organisation.

The Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) is a theory that intrinsic motivation is maintained by three universal psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The existing system of Aether is a multidimensional systemic frustration. Reversals to strict office presence policies in various technology firms after the pandemic resulted in significant turnover of employees who performed in high metrics and valued independence (Microsoft, 2023), an example of how expensive misalignment between management preference and employee

psychological need can be strategically. Aether has a strategic necessity, then, not of incremental modification, but of structural redesign of the circumstances under which employees can and do apply the full extent of their capability to work.

2.2 Cultural and Structural Initiatives to Embed Innovation

2.2.1 Psychological Safety as a Cultural Foundation

Psychological safety must be developed as a foundation of any plausible innovative strategy. Edmondson (2018) recommends a three-phase model of leader behaviour: establishing the stage (presenting work as a complex and collective inquiry), soliciting involvement (asking sincerely curious questions), and acting in a constructive way (using failure information to learn). In the case of Aether, it would be a planned leader development programme that includes executive coaching, 360, and peer-learning cohort groups. Cultural reinforcement by being blameless in post-mortem reviews, anonymous sources of feedback, and public recognition of calculated risk-taking operationalises the cultural message that experimentation is strategically important (Syed, 2019).

***Figure 2** Job Characteristics Model- Current vs. Proposed State at Aether Innovations (Pinder, 2014)*

Figure 2 compares the location of Aether to the Hackman and Oldham (1976) Job Characteristics Model to show that there is a substantial difference between the present (red) and suggested (blue) status across all five fundamental dimensions: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback. Each of the five dimensions is below 3.0 on a 5-point scale, proving the structural motivational deficit, which supports the disengagement problem of Aether. Each of the dimensions is directly covered by the proposed cross-functional squad model, and autonomy and task identity increase close to the maximum scores in the redesigned model (Battelle, 2011).

2.2.2 Innovation Sprints, Intrapreneurship, and Squad Architecture

Aether would introduce quarterly innovation sprints; four-to-five-day design-oriented (Brown, 2009) sprints that have cross-functional teams, whereby they are given specific business problems and have complete freedom in how they design the solution. To supplement sprints, an intrapreneurship programme (Pinchot, 1985) - including internal seed funding, a lean investment committee, and a stage-gate review process - directs the employee entrepreneurial spirit through the company lines. In structure, Hamel and Zanini (2020) contend that hierarchical silos cannot be able to sustain innovations at the rate that is demanded in technology markets. Based on the Spotify squad, tribe, chapter, and guild model (Kniberg and Ivarsson, 2012), the proposed cross-functional squad architecture by Aether will give the company direct end-to-end project ownership, increased skill deployment, and authority to make decisions on the squad level, which directly solves the four lowest JCM scores that were highlighted in Figure 2.

2.3 A Future of Work Model for Aether Innovations

2.3.1 The Structured Hybrid Collaboration Spine Model

Basing the discussion on the two-dimensional hybrid work framework developed by Gratton (2022) that places and times Aether should adopt is a fixed-flexible hybrid: visit the office on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday (the collaboration spine), with Monday and Friday workdays being dispersed.

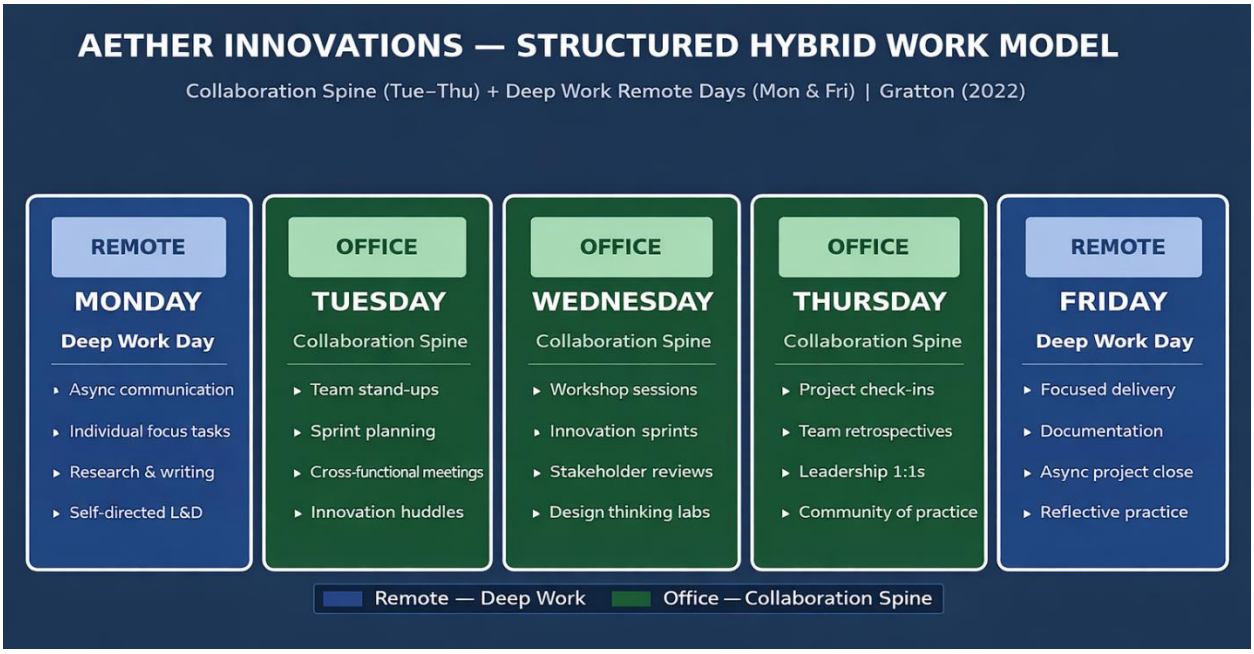

Figure 3: Aether Innovations, Proposed Structured Hybrid Work Model (Gratton, 2022)

Figure 3 visualises the model as a week-wise architectural purpose. In the spine days (Tuesday-Thursday, green), the time of the synchronous teamwork is determined: sprint planning, innovation workshops, cross-functional, and perspective. The distant deep-work days (Monday and Friday, blue) are set aside to asynchronous individual contribution: focused delivery, research, documentation, and self-directed learning. This difference is neuroscientifically supported: creative thinking enjoys the advantages of individual cognition that is distraction-minimised, and iteration and execution are strengthened by being together in a social context (Newport, 2016). At the same time, the office should be restructured as a common collaboration, i.e., modular spaces, war rooms, social areas, and quiet pods, which indicate that attendance is connection, not surveillance (Myerson and Ross, 2006).

The hybrid model consists of an asynchronous-first communication norm. The high-bandwidth activities should be left to synchronous meetings; the information sharing and non-urgency decisions must be left to asynchronous and documented methods. The model is practically maintained via investment in digital infrastructure (Notion, Loom, Miro) and the creation of a Ways of Working guide, which must be co-created.

2.3.2 Motivating and Enabling Staff to Perform Optimally

The Two-Factor Theory of Herzberg (1965) is further differentiated between hygiene factors (the lack of which leads to discontent) and motivators (factors that lead to involvement). Aether needs to invest in competitive compensation as its hygiene base; the strategic investment should aim at the motivational upper register, which includes achievement, recognition, meaningful work, responsibility, and growth. As demonstrated in Figure 2, the cross-functional squad model enhances all five JCM dimensions in some meaningful manner, resulting in the three critical psychological states: experienced meaningfulness, experienced responsibility, and knowledge of results between job design and intrinsic motivation.

The Workplace Learning Report by Brandt (2024) refers to the absence of career advancement as the leading cause of attrition rates in the technology sector. Aether needs to implement an apparent, multi-pathway career framework- technical specialist, people leader, and innovation entrepreneur paths with clear competency models. The digital platform-supported and values-based peer recognition, which reinforces the social norms and further extends the motivational signal beyond the manager-employee dyad, is supported by the organisational values (Kouzes and Posner, 2006).

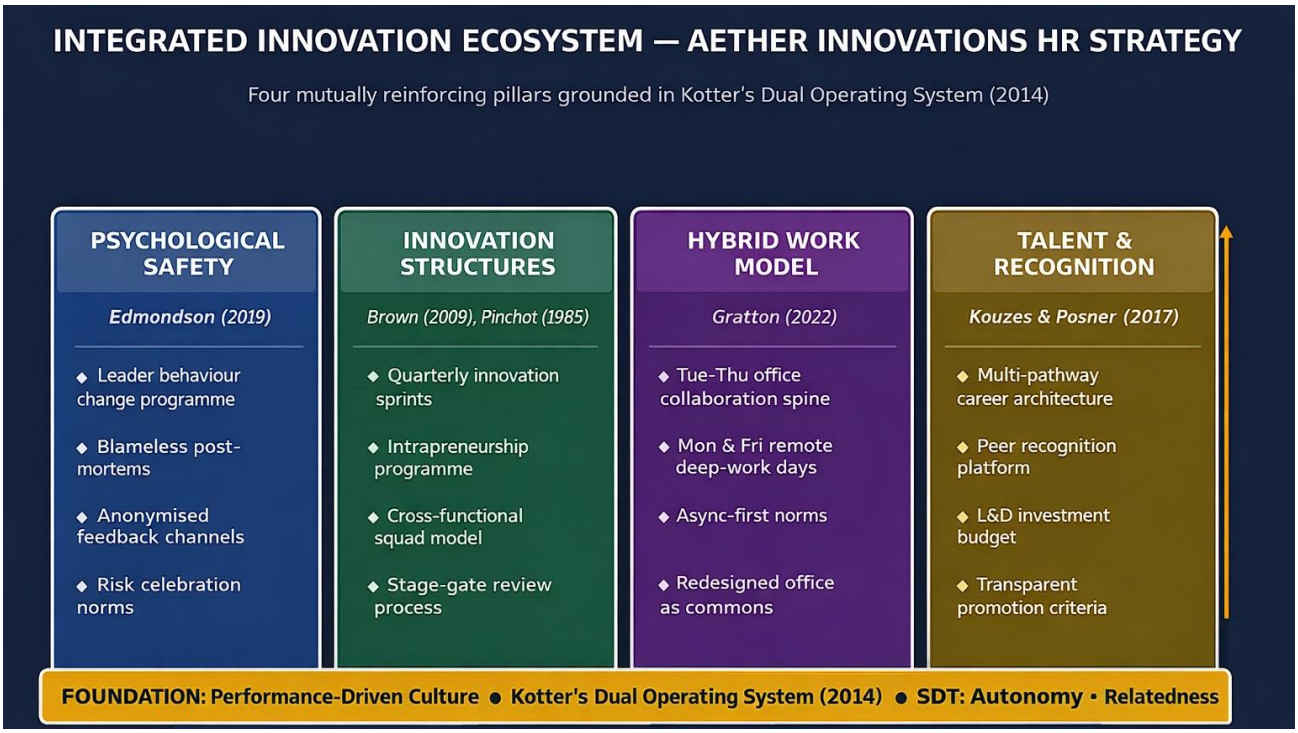

Figure 4: Integrated Innovation Ecosystem, Aether Innovations HR Strategy Framework (Author, 2026)

Figure 4 integrates the entire strategy into a refreshed innovation ecosystem. The four pillars, which include innovation structures, psychological safety, hybrid work model, and talent and recognition, are interdependent in that the performance of one pillar relies on the performance of others and is enhanced by them. The gold foundation layer realizes the Dual Operating System (2014) of Kotter: a steady hierarchical system that can handle the core operations of the business effectively, and that, overlaid by an agile, networked system of innovation that creates the adaptive capacity of sustainable competitive advantage. The result arrow indicates the strategic objectives: long-term innovation, a high level of engagement, and organisational development. It is this integration that causes a coherent strategy to become a disjointed set of HR initiatives.

3 Part 2: Personal Reflection

3.1 Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle: HCM Learning Journey

The Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) by Kolb supposes that the process of learning can be divided into four repeated steps, which include Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation, and Active Experimentation. It is based on the pragmatist philosophy of learning-by-doing proposed by Dewey and is especially applicable to HCM, where the module design is a direct linkage of theoretical frameworks and real organisational issues.

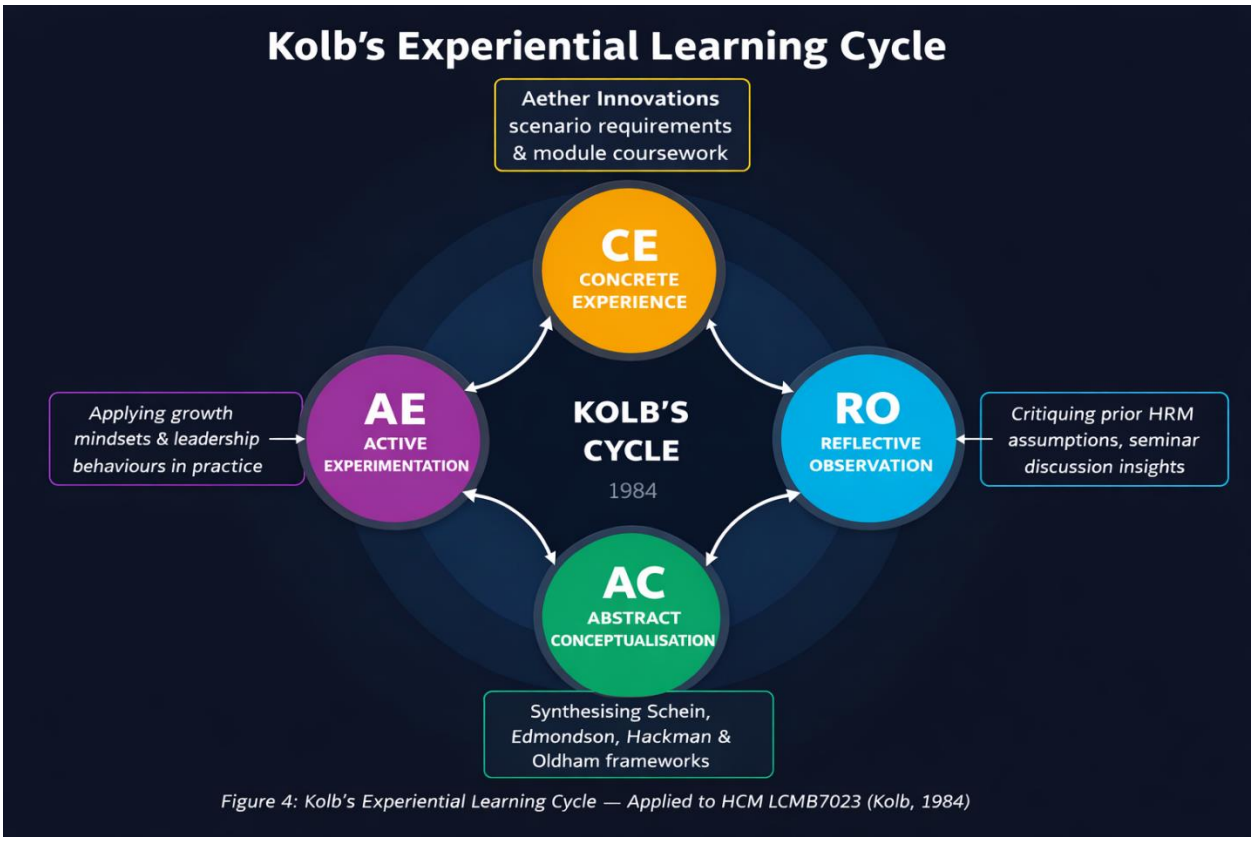

Figure 5: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, Applied to the HCM LCMB7023 Module (Kolb, 1984)

3.2 Concrete Experience

Before reading this module, my previous conception of HRM was mostly instrumental and transactional, heavily influenced by a business management environment where people management was often structured in terms of a cost centre and to be optimised as opposed to a source of strategic value. As Figure 5 demonstrates, the Aether Innovations scenario became the real-life point of contact: a complex multi-dimensional organisation issue that required not the utilisation of separate HR practices but the creation of a multi-layered people approach. This participation triggered the learning cycle at its initial stage.

3.3 Reflective Observation

The reading of the module material caused major reconsiderations of previous assumptions. My mental model of engagement with the employees was mainly extrinsic; I assumed that remuneration based on competition and job description would be enough. My experience with the Self-Determination Theory by Deci and Ryan (2000) and the psychological safety studies

conducted by Edmondson (2018) fundamentally challenged how I had thought previously, as I realized the extent to which my previous thought process had confused hygienic factors with real motivating factors. Another observation I had was how people management issues are systemic: when people see high turnover or low innovativeness as a symptom and treat such issues, they miss the structural and cultural processes that give rise to the issue.

3.4 Abstract Conceptualisation

Building Part 1 had involved integrating dissimilar frameworks: Schein's cultural model, JCM, dual operating system, and hybrid work matrix by Kotter, Gratton, etc., into a consistent integrated suggestion. I realised that the most effective HCM interventions are those that work concurrently at various levels of individual motivation, team dynamics, organisational structure, and cultural narrative. This multi-level systems thinking signifies a qualitatively different order of management reasoning as opposed to the transactional approaches that I began with. Evidence-based people management, integration of behavioural science, and long-term involvement in peer-reviewed HRM scholarship have taken over in my personal Learning and Development plan.

3.5 Active Experimentation

Active experimentation deals with the behavioural learning of concepts. I will take three specific steps, namely, promoting psychological safety within teams I am a part of, applying the leader behaviour model outlined by Edmondson in my interactions with subordinates; proactively trying to secure cross-functional collaboration opportunities to develop lateral relational capital; and trying to develop what Dweck (2006) calls the growth mindset as a personal operating principle an operating principle I would like to develop in the organisations that I work with.

Table 1: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

Kolb's Stage	Module Activity	Key Insight Gained	Action / Outcome
Concrete Experience (CE)	Engaging with Aether Innovations scenario; module readings on HRM challenges	Prior assumption: HRM = transactional (pay & job descriptions sufficient)	Recognised systematic disengagement cannot be solved by compensation alone
Reflective Observation (RO)	Seminar discussions; critical reading	Observed: extrinsic motivation model was insufficient;	Shifted from problem-solving to root-cause analytical orientation

	of Edmondson (2019) and Deci & Ryan (2000)	systemic root causes ignored	
Abstract Conceptualisation (AC)	Synthesising Schein, Hackman & Oldham, Kotter, Gratton into Part 1 strategy	Understood multi-level intervention: individual, team, structure, culture simultaneously	L&D plan: systems thinking, behavioural science, evidence-based people practice
Active Experimentation (AE)	Committing to applying Edmondson leader behaviours; seeking cross-functional roles	Adopted Dweck (2006) growth mindset as personal operating principle	AI augmentation strategy: leverage AI for transactional tasks; deepen human skills

3.6 Staying Relevant in an Era of Artificial Intelligence

The increasing speed of artificial intelligence poses an immense threat to the traditional notions of professional value. Both big language models and big data are gradually meeting the tasks that were previously considered the prerogative of knowledgeable human decision-making: writing policies, processing data, and generating strategic suggestions. The displacement thesis, however, confounds the concept of task automation and role elimination. The groundbreaking framework provided by Autor, Levy, and Murnane (2003) identifies routine cognitive tasks as the most vulnerable to automation and non-routine cognitive tasks that involve contextual judgement, ethical reasoning, relational intelligence, and creative synthesis.

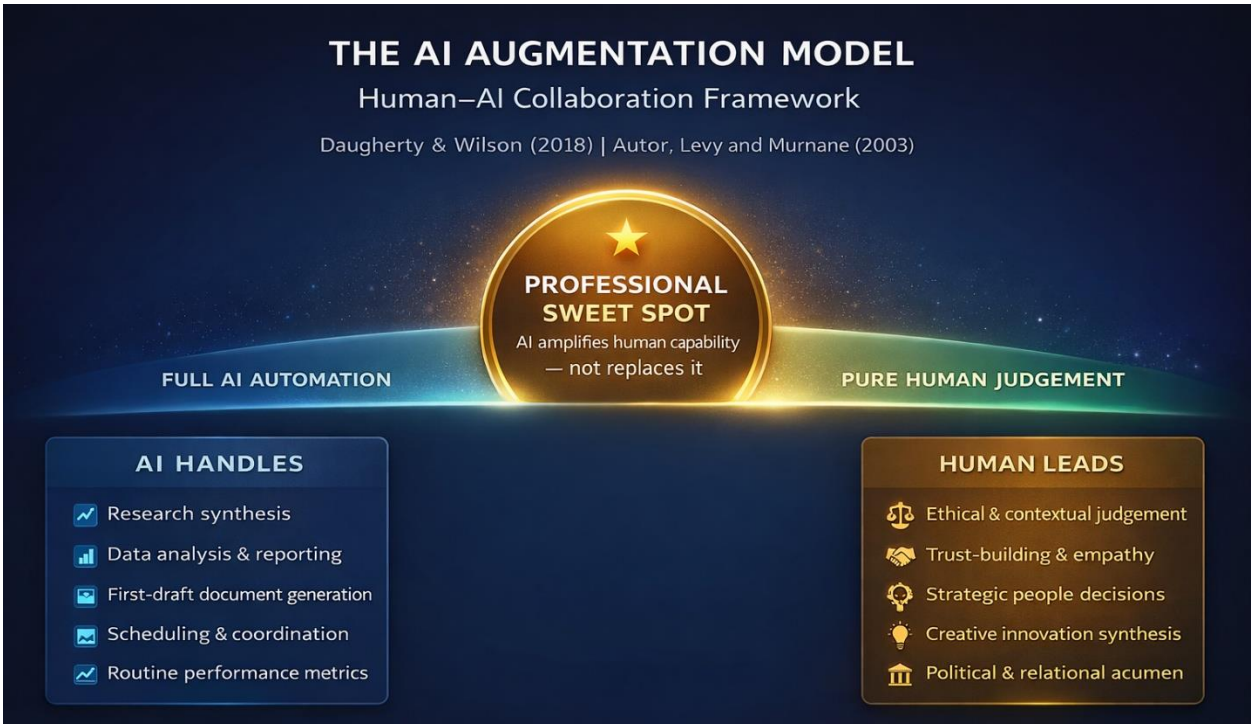

Figure 6: The AI Augmentation Model, Professional Relevance in an Era of AI Capability (Daugherty and Wilson, 2018)

The spectrum of the augmentation model is shown in Figure 6. On the left: The tasks that AI can and should engage in are routine (cognitive: synthesizing research, analyzing data, writing documents, creating a schedule). On the right: human skills (moral and situational judgment, people judgment through trust, strategic decisions, relationship judgment) that cannot be replaced by algorithms. The professional sweet spot, which is represented by the gold star, is the augmentation zone: the human professional using AI as a cognitive amplifier and allocating personal development resources to the capabilities that can be plausibly simulated by AI.

My professional relevance strategy, in turn, is straightforward: use AI tools to achieve transactional cognitive workload, i.e., research synthesis, first-draft writing, data processing, etc., and enhance the highly human skills that make-or-break organisational interventions (Daugherty and Wilson, 2018). The practical implementation of this strategy is the ongoing upskilling in digital literacy, as well as the enhancement of the knowledge of evidence-based practice. The Human Capital professional is not substituted in this augmentation model, but rather the ceiling defining the scope of his or her success is raised by AI.

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