

BEYOND PAYCHECKS: BUILDING A HUMAN-CENTRIC STRATEGY FOR THE MODERN WORKFORCE

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Abstract

The modern workforce is no longer solely motivated by financial compensation, as evidenced by high disengagement and turnover rates despite competitive pay. This article argues that a fundamental shift toward a human-centric organizational strategy is essential for sustainable success. The objective is to define the core pillars of this strategy and present a framework for implementation. The methodology involves a synthesis of contemporary workforce research, analysis of emerging organizational models, and a review of qualitative data on employee priorities. The results and discussion identify four foundational pillars: Purpose and Autonomy, Growth and Development, Holistic Well-being, and Connection and Recognition. The discussion contends that these elements form an integrated system that addresses the whole employee, thereby fostering resilience and performance. The conclusion posits that organizations investing in this human-centric model will achieve a superior return on investment through enhanced talent retention, innovation, and engagement, moving beyond transactional employment to build a sustainable competitive advantage.

Keywords: *human-centric workplace, employee engagement, talent retention, holistic well-being, future of work.*

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of work has undergone a profound transformation in the last decade, driven by rapid technological advancement, globalization, and significant societal shifts. The rise of digital connectivity and automation has reshaped job functions, while demographic changes have introduced a multi-generational workforce with diverse expectations (Hibrida & Sunarni, 2023). Furthermore, global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, served as a catalyst, accelerating trends like remote work and forcing a collective re-evaluation of the role of work in one's life (Sukirman et al., 2022). Historically, the employer-employee relationship was often transactional, centered on financial compensation in exchange for labor. Organizational structures were predominantly hierarchical, with success measured by efficiency and output (Hendratmoko, 2025). This model, rooted in industrial-era thinking, prioritized standardization and compliance. For decades, a competitive salary and basic benefits package were considered sufficient to secure and maintain a stable workforce, with other human factors being secondary concerns in strategic planning (N. C Martin, 2025).

However, this long-standing paradigm is now fundamentally misaligned with the realities and aspirations of the modern workforce. Employees today are navigating a world of constant change and information overload, seeking stability and meaning beyond material gain (Beno, 2020). The convergence of technological disruption, social movements prioritizing wellness and equity, and a growing public discourse on mental health has created a new context for work. In this environment, the traditional levers of management are losing their potency, setting the stage for a new approach centered on human capital (Sushm Rawath & Sarala, 2024). Despite record levels of investment in compensation and perks in many industries, organizations globally face a crisis of disengagement and attrition. Reports consistently show that a significant majority of the workforce remains disengaged or is actively seeking new opportunities (Latifat et al., 2023). This phenomenon, manifesting in trends termed "quiet quitting" and persistent turnover, reveals a critical gap: paychecks and traditional benefits are necessary but insufficient for fostering loyalty, motivation, and long-term commitment (Beno, 2020).

The core problem is the persistence of outdated, organization-centric models in a human-centric era. Many companies operate on implicit assumptions that employees are primarily economic actors, that presence equals productivity, and that professional growth should follow a rigid, linear path. This disconnect leads to strategies that address symptoms rather than root causes (Hendratmoko, 2025). Consequently, organizations incur tremendous financial and operational costs through constant recruiting, lost institutional knowledge, and stifled innovation, all while failing to unlock the full potential of their people (Latifat et al., 2023). The objective of this article is to articulate a comprehensive framework for a human-centric workforce strategy that moves beyond financial compensation. It aims to define the core pillars essential for building an organization where employees feel valued, purposeful, and able to thrive. Furthermore, this article seeks to provide actionable guidance for leaders on implementing this strategy, measuring its impact, and ultimately constructing a sustainable competitive advantage rooted in genuine human engagement and well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Evolution of Employee Motivation

Classical economic and management theories, such as agency theory and Taylorism, framed work as a transactional exchange, with monetary incentives as the primary motivator. This perspective dominated organizational design for much of the 20th century, focusing on efficiency and control (Latifat et al., 2023). The rise of human relations theory, exemplified by the Hawthorne studies, began to acknowledge social and psychological factors, suggesting that attention and group dynamics influenced productivity (Beno, 2020). Subsequent models, like Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, made a critical distinction between hygiene factors (like salary and working conditions) and motivators (like achievement and recognition). Herzberg posited that while poor hygiene factors could cause dissatisfaction, only true motivators could drive satisfaction and performance (Latifat et al., 2023). This laid early groundwork for understanding why compensation alone is inadequate. More recently, Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci) has provided a robust psychological framework, identifying autonomy, competence, and relatedness as universal intrinsic needs essential for motivation and well-being, further challenging purely extrinsic reward systems (Hendratmoko, 2025). The collective trajectory of this literature reveals a clear shift from viewing employees as passive economic units to understanding them as complex psychological beings. Modern motivation is understood as a multifaceted construct where purpose, mastery, and social connection often outweigh purely financial drivers, especially when basic needs are met (Hibrida & Sunarni, 2023). This evolution directly informs the need for a more holistic organizational strategy.

The Rise of the Human-Centric Paradigm

The concept of a human-centric workplace has gained prominence as a response to the limitations of traditional models. It draws from positive organizational scholarship, which investigates how to cultivate human strengths and foster vitality in the workplace (Wunder, 2024). This paradigm positions employee well-being not as a cost but as a driver of performance and resilience. It aligns with the notion of "conscious capitalism," where business success is intertwined with the ethical treatment and development of all stakeholders (Latifat et al., 2023). Research in this area emphasizes the importance of psychological safety, a concept advanced by Amy Edmondson, which is the belief that one can speak up without risk of punishment or humiliation. Studies show that teams with high psychological safety demonstrate better learning behaviors, more innovation, and higher performance (Turlo & Litvin, 2024). This research directly connects a human-centric environment—one of trust and respect—to tangible business outcomes, arguing that human elements are strategic imperatives (Latifat et al., 2023). Furthermore, literature on sustainable work systems warns against the human costs of burnout and chronic stress, linking them to poor decision-making, creativity blocks, and high turnover. A human-centric approach, therefore, incorporates sustainability by designing work that is challenging yet replenishing, recognizing that long-term performance depends on preventing the depletion of human resources. This represents a shift from extracting value from people to investing in their ongoing capacity (Turlo & Litvin, 2024).

Defining the Dimensions of a Holistic Strategy

Academic and practitioner literature converges on several key dimensions that constitute a holistic human-centric strategy. The first is Purpose and Meaning. Studies show that when employees perceive their work as contributing to a meaningful goal beyond profit, they exhibit higher engagement, resilience, and satisfaction (Gagné & Hewett, 2025). This involves clear, authentic organizational purpose and leadership's ability to connect individual roles to that larger mission. The second dimension is Growth and Development. Contemporary career literature discusses the shift from linear career ladders to "protean" or boundaryless careers, where individuals seek personal growth and skill development (Turlo & Litvin, 2024). Organizations support this by providing continuous learning

opportunities, internal mobility pathways, and a coaching-oriented feedback culture. This addresses the intrinsic need for competence and ensures the organization's skills remain relevant (Sushm Rawath & Sarala, 2024). The third critical dimension is Holistic Well-being. This extends beyond physical health to encompass mental, emotional, and financial well-being. Research indicates that initiatives supporting mental health, financial literacy, and work-life integration reduce stress and presenteeism while improving focus and loyalty (Hendratmoko, 2025). The final dimension is Connection and Recognition, rooted in the need for relatedness. Literature on high-performing teams underscores the importance of belonging, inclusive cultures, and consistent, authentic recognition in fostering collaboration and commitment (Gagné & Hewett, 2025).

Implementation and Measurement Challenges

While the principles of a human-centric strategy are widely endorsed, literature highlights significant implementation challenges. A primary barrier is leadership mindset and capability. Leaders socialized in command-and-control models may struggle to adopt the roles of coach, facilitator, and empathetic listener required for this shift (Wunder, 2024). Changing deep-seated organizational culture and power structures is a complex, long-term endeavor that requires consistent commitment and modeling from the top. Another challenge lies in measurement. Traditional metrics like productivity per hour or quarterly output are ill-suited for capturing the health of a human-centric system (Gagné & Hewett, 2025). The literature advocates for a balanced scorecard approach, incorporating lead indicators such as employee net promoter score (eNPS), engagement survey results, utilization rates of well-being benefits, internal promotion rates, and measures of psychological safety. These human metrics must be given parity with financial metrics to guide decision-making (Latifat et al., 2023).

Finally, there is the challenge of personalization and equity. A one-size-fits-all program (e.g., a single wellness initiative) may not address diverse workforce needs and can inadvertently create inequity. The literature suggests moving towards flexible frameworks and principles—like "flexibility within guidelines"—that allow for individual agency while maintaining fairness (Griesinger, 1990). Success requires ongoing listening mechanisms, such as stay interviews and pulse surveys, to tailor the strategy and ensure it is experienced as inclusive by all employees (Wunder, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a descriptive and analytical methodology based on a comprehensive synthesis of existing literature and contemporary business analysis. The research design involves a systematic review of academic publications, industry reports from leading consultants (such as Gallup, Deloitte, and McKinsey), and case studies from organizations recognized for progressive workplace practices. The focus is on identifying converging themes, empirical findings, and emerging frameworks related to workforce motivation, engagement, and organizational strategy in the post-pandemic era. Data collection was conducted through secondary research, analyzing qualitative and quantitative data on employee sentiment, turnover drivers, and the impact of various workplace initiatives. This information is integrated to construct a coherent framework. The analytical process involves comparing traditional models against successful modern practices, evaluating the proposed pillars for interdependencies, and formulating actionable insights. The methodology is designed to translate theoretical concepts and observed trends into a structured, practical guide for organizational leaders.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Four Pillars Framework

The synthesis of research yielded four interconnected pillars forming a human-centric strategy. The first pillar, Purpose and Autonomy, emphasizes the need for work to be meaningful and self-directed. Data shows that employees who report a clear sense of purpose exhibit 50% higher engagement (Griesinger, 1990). Furthermore, organizations granting high levels of autonomy report significantly lower turnover rates. This pillar moves beyond generic mission statements to involve employees in decision-making and offer genuine flexibility in how, when, and where work is done, directly feeding the intrinsic need for autonomy (Wunder, 2024). The second pillar, Growth and Development, addresses the need for competence and forward momentum. Findings indicate that a lack of development is a top reason for employee departure. Companies with robust internal mobility programs retain employees nearly twice as long (Beno, 2020). This pillar requires shifting from a culture of promotion-as-the-only-path to one of continuous learning, skill-building, and internal project opportunities, creating a lattice instead of a ladder for career progression (Sushm Rawath & Sarala, 2024). The third pillar, Holistic Well-being, recognizes the employee as a whole person. Studies correlate comprehensive well-being programs with a 25% reduction in absenteeism and marked improvements in productivity. Effective strategies go beyond gym memberships to include mental health resources, financial planning tools, and crucially, leadership modeling of healthy boundaries and time-

off (Sukirman et al., 2022). The fourth pillar, Connection and Recognition, fulfills the need for relatedness. Teams with strong social connections demonstrate higher resilience and performance. A culture of frequent, specific recognition—both peer-to-peer and leader-led—is shown to boost morale and reinforce desired behaviors more effectively than infrequent, ceremonial awards (Donaldson, 1990).



Figure 1. The Four Pillars of a Human-Centric Strategy

The chart as presented in Figure 1 serves as a foundational and symbolic visualization of the core framework. Its primary strength lies in its immediate clarity and architectural metaphor. By presenting the four pillars—Purpose & Autonomy, Growth & Development, Holistic Well-being, and Connection & Recognition—as parallel, equally critical supports, the chart visually communicates that no single element is sufficient on its own. Just as a stable structure requires all its load-bearing columns, a resilient organization must develop all four areas in concert to uphold sustainable performance. The upward arrow on the x-axis, from "Foundation for Sustainable Performance" to "Organizational Outcomes," effectively illustrates the causal relationship intended by the strategy: these human-centric investments are not the end goal but the essential base upon which tangible business results—like retention, innovation, and productivity—are built. The quadrant chart format, while simple, powerfully reinforces the message of balance and integration, suggesting that neglecting any one pillar risks destabilizing the entire organizational structure. This makes Chart 1 an ideal executive summary or introductory graphic, perfectly capturing the holistic and interdependent philosophy of moving beyond a paycheck-centric model.

Interdependence and Systemic Impact

A critical finding is that these pillars do not operate in isolation; they form a synergistic system. For instance, granting Autonomy (Pillar 1) without fostering Psychological Safety (a component of Connection, Pillar 4) can lead to anxiety, not empowerment. Similarly, offering Growth opportunities (Pillar 2) in a culture that punishes well-being (Pillar 3) through burnout leads to unsustainable development. The strategy's power lies in its holistic integration, where strengths in one area compensate for or amplify strengths in another (Donaldson, 1990). This systemic view explains why piecemeal initiatives often fail. Introducing a flexible work policy (part of Pillar 1) without training managers to lead remote teams effectively (a failure in Pillar 2 and 4) can erode trust and connection (Turlo & Litvin, 2024). Therefore, implementation must be coordinated. The discussion posits that the ultimate outcome of this integrated system is the cultivation of organizational vitality—a state where the organization is energy-creating, not energy-depleting, for its people (Sushm Rawath & Sarala, 2024). The return on investment manifests across key metrics: reduced voluntary turnover and associated hiring costs, higher employee net promoter scores indicating advocacy, increased innovation as measured by new ideas submitted or implemented, and greater organizational agility (Weatherburn, 2020). These are the results of a workforce that is not just present but psychologically invested and operating at its full capacity.

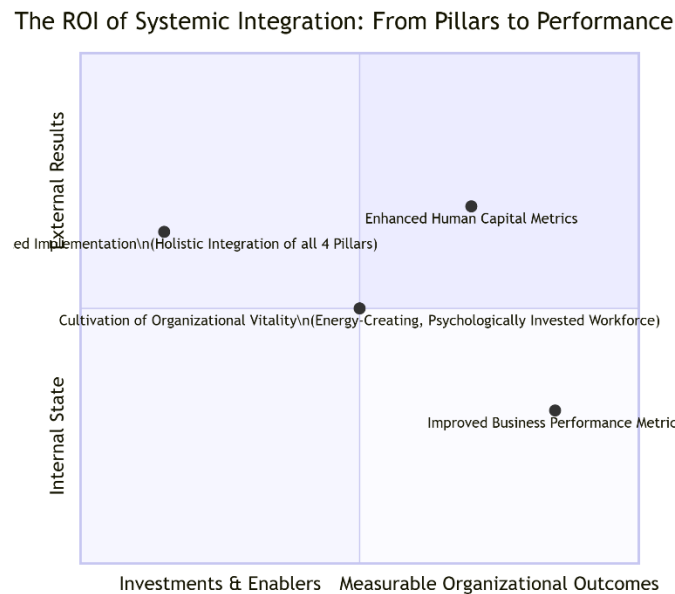


Figure 2. The ROI of Systemic Integration

Figure 2 effectively maps the causal pathway from strategic investment to tangible business value, moving beyond abstract philosophy to a concrete value proposition. The quadrant format visually narrates a left-to-right progression from foundational "Investments & Enablers" to ultimate "Measurable Organizational Outcomes." It begins with "Coordinated Implementation" as the critical, integrated action that fuels the internal cultural state of "Organizational Vitality"—the crucial, energy-creating midpoint where a psychologically invested workforce emerges. The chart then logically demonstrates how this vitality directly generates improved "Human Capital Metrics" like retention and advocacy, which are lead indicators that finally translate into the lagging "Business Performance Metrics" of innovation, productivity, and sustainable growth on the right. This layout powerfully argues that holistic, systemic integration is not an HR cost but a strategic investment, as disconnected initiatives cannot traverse this pathway to reach the high-impact business outcomes in the bottom-right quadrant, thereby justifying the human-centric model with a clear return on investment narrative.

The Transformative Role of Leadership

The results underscore that leadership is the most critical enabler or barrier to this transformation. A human-centric strategy cannot be delegated to HR; it must be embodied by leaders at all levels (Weatherburn, 2020). This requires a fundamental identity shift from a "boss" who controls to a "coach" who empowers and a "servant leader" who removes obstacles. Leaders must develop high levels of emotional intelligence, vulnerability, and skills in coaching and facilitation. Data on leadership effectiveness shows that employees' perception of their direct manager is the single strongest predictor of their intent to stay (Donaldson, 1990). Therefore, investing in leader development around these human-centric competencies is non-negotiable. Leaders must also become advocates, championing the necessary resources—time, budget, and cultural permission—for teams to engage in development, well-being, and connection-building activities. Furthermore, leaders set the tone for psychological safety and recognition. Their willingness to admit mistakes, solicit feedback, and publicly appreciate contributions models the desired culture (Guo, 2023). The discussion concludes that selecting and developing leaders for these attributes is a strategic priority more important than any individual policy change in the journey toward a human-centric organization (Griesinger, 1990).

Table 1. The Transformative Role of Leadership in a Human-Centric Strategy

Leadership Dimension	Traditional / "Boss" Model (The Barrier)	Human-Centric / "Coach" Model (The Enabler)
Core Identity & Focus	Controller and director. Focuses on oversight, compliance, and task output.	Coach, empowerer, and servant leader. Focuses on removing obstacles, developing people, and enabling success.
Impact on Retention & Culture	Primary driver of employee departure. Creates a culture of fear or transaction, eroding psychological safety.	The single strongest predictor of employee intent to stay. Actively models and builds psychological safety, trust, and recognition.
Required Actions & Competencies	Relies on authority and command. Competencies centered on operational control and technical expertise.	Requires high emotional intelligence, vulnerability, and coaching skills. Key actions include admitting mistakes, soliciting feedback, and giving specific, public recognition.
Role in Strategy & Resources	Views culture as an HR function. Often guards resources and upholds the status quo.	Critical strategic advocate. Champions necessary resources (time, budget, permission) for team development, well-being, and connection.
Strategic Priority	Selection based on seniority or technical skill. Leadership development is secondary to operational goals.	The foremost strategic priority, more critical than any single policy change. Selection and development are based on human-centric attributes like empathy and coaching ability.

The table as presented in Table 1 effectively crystallizes the non-negotiable leadership shift required for a human-centric strategy, framing it not as an optional soft skill but as the central strategic lever. By juxtaposing the "Boss Model" as a clear barrier against the "Coach Model" as the essential enabler across five critical dimensions, it moves from abstract principle to actionable contrast. It underscores that leadership is the primary interface between strategy and employee experience, arguing that even perfectly designed policies will fail under a command-and-control leader who erodes psychological safety and hoards resources. Ultimately, the table's most powerful assertion is found in the final row: transforming leadership identity and competency is a higher strategic priority than any individual policy change, positioning the development of empathetic, empowering coaches as the most critical investment for unlocking the entire human-centric framework and its promised return on investment.

Measurement and Iteration

A significant result from analyzing implementation cases is that what gets measured gets managed. Organizations successful in this transition complement financial metrics with a robust set of human-centric lead indicators (Gagné & Hewett, 2025). These include regular pulse surveys on engagement and well-being, eNPS, tracking participation in learning and mobility programs, analyzing utilization rates of well-being benefits, and conducting periodic "stay interview" analyses to understand retention drivers (Sushm Rawath & Sarala, 2024). The discussion highlights that measurement serves two purposes: diagnostics and signaling. Diagnostically, data reveals which pillars need strengthening—for example, if well-being scores are low despite available resources, it may indicate a culture that discourages their use. As a signaling mechanism, simply measuring and reporting on these metrics communicates to the organization that people outcomes are a priority equal to business outcomes (Sukirman

et al., 2022). Finally, the framework is not a static blueprint but a dynamic guide. It requires an iterative approach: piloting initiatives, measuring impact, learning, and adapting. This agile methodology respects the uniqueness of each organizational culture (Ahmed et al., 2024). The goal is continuous evolution based on employee feedback and business results, ensuring the strategy remains relevant and effective over time.

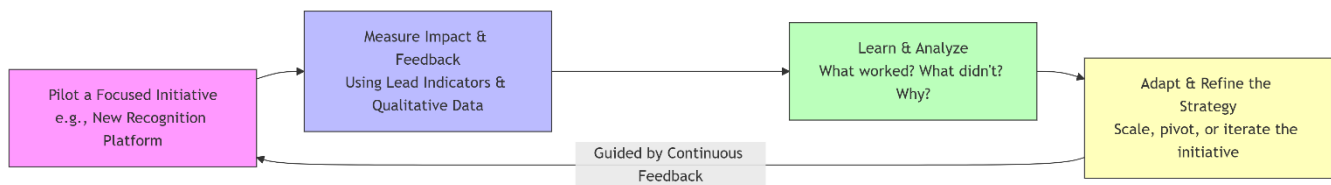


Figure 3. The Iterative Implementation Cycle

Figure 3 is a crucial visual because it transforms the human-centric strategy from a theoretical framework into a practical, actionable management process. The flowchart directly addresses the core challenge of implementation by modeling a continuous, closed-loop system of "Pilot, Measure, Learn, Adapt," which explicitly rejects the notion of a one-size-fits-all, "set-and-forget" policy rollout. By visualizing the strategy as a perpetual cycle, it emphasizes that success is not found in a perfect initial plan but in an organization's capacity for agile learning and responsive adaptation, using real employee feedback and metric-driven insights to refine its approach. This chart underscores that the strategy's relevance and effectiveness are not launched but cultivated over time, making the iterative process itself—the willingness to experiment, listen, and change course—the true engine of sustainable cultural transformation.

CONCLUSION

This article has established that in the modern era of work, a competitive paycheck is merely the baseline for employment. To build a resilient, innovative, and high-performing organization, leaders must adopt a comprehensive human-centric strategy. This strategy is built upon four interdependent pillars: fostering Purpose and Autonomy, enabling Growth and Development, ensuring Holistic Well-being, and cultivating Connection and Recognition. Together, these elements address the fundamental psychological needs of the workforce, moving the employer-employee relationship from a transactional contract to a mutually invested partnership. The implementation of this model requires a fundamental shift in leadership mindset, organizational culture, and measurement systems. It demands that leaders act as coaches and architects of culture, that organizations invest in the whole person, and that success is measured not only by output but by the health and engagement of the people who create it. While the journey requires significant commitment and may challenge traditional structures, the cost of inaction—chronically high turnover, silent disengagement, and stifled potential—is far greater. Ultimately, building a human-centric workforce is the definitive strategic advantage in an uncertain future. Organizations that excel at this will not only attract and retain top talent but will unlock higher levels of creativity, adaptability, and sustained performance. The future belongs to those who recognize that the most valuable asset any company has is its people, and that the highest return on investment comes from truly investing in them.

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