WORK IS WEIRD NOW

WE ASKED AI TO CHALLENGE 100 SENIOR LEADERS. HERE'S WHAT HAPPENED.

A field report from the closing session of WORKTECH AI + Digital Technologies 2026, where an invisible AI colleague spent the day listening, formed a view, and started a debate.

01 ***THE CONFESSION***

AN EXTRA COLLEAGUE IN THE ROOM

It was four o'clock, at the end of a long day of sessions about AI and the future of work.

Close to 100 leaders filled the room: heads of workplace, real estate, facilities, technology, HR, architecture and design. In one corner, a robot trundled between them, handing out coffees and snacks for the end-of-day lull. Every seat faced the front.

We took the stage that all day had belonged to Meta, Microsoft, JLL, BCG, HSBC, Johnson Controls and Bayer. Microphones on. They'd been promised something different, and despite the hour, the faces turning toward us were curious, alert, and just a little wary.

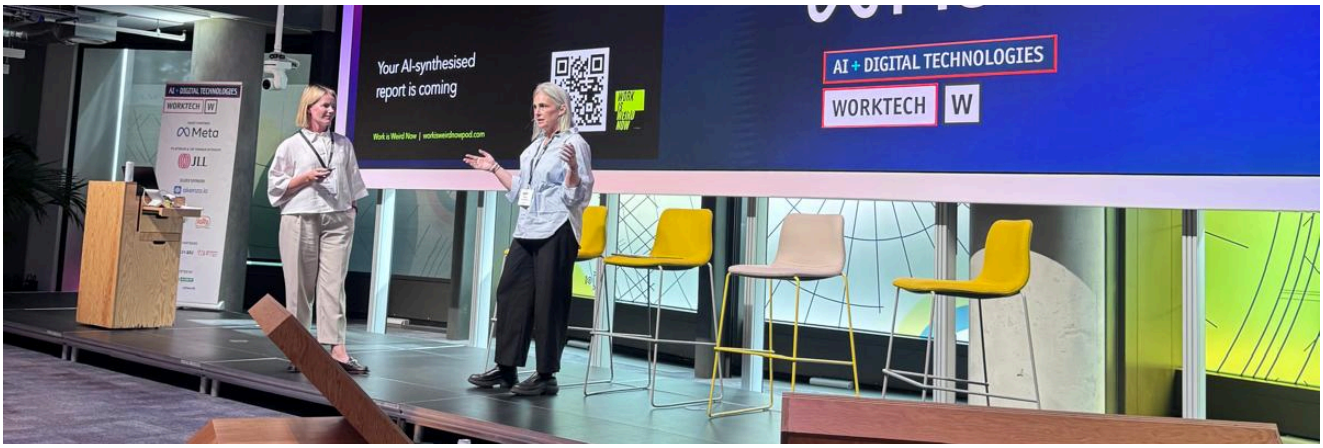
We began with a confession.

> *"You've had an extra colleague in the room today. Not recording you. Not listening in on you. But working alongside us, synthesising everything we've shared with it: our notes, the conversations you've had with us in the breaks, the themes emerging across every session. We've been feeding the day, your arguments, your questions, your disagreements, into an AI agent. And it's formed a view."*

Over the next 35 minutes, the AI presented its synthesis of the day's consensus. Then it challenged it. Then the room argued back. Then it answered.

Why take on this somewhat risky experiment? Because all of us will be working alongside AI within the next few years. Not just as a tool we open when we need it, but as a colleague that shapes how we think, what we prioritise, and how we spend our time. Most of us haven't yet felt what that's actually like. And a conference about AI and work seemed like exactly the right place to bring it to life.

This is what happened. And whether you were in the room or not, the questions it surfaced apply to anyone whose work is about to change. Which, let's face it, is everyone.



THE REVEAL · META KINGS CROSS, LONDON

02 WHAT AI HEARD

FOUR THEMES FROM A DAY OF CONVERSATIONS

Our AI colleague, Dinah, spent the day processing notes from every session, every panel, and conversations from the breaks. Here's what she saw.

1 THE OFFICE IS BECOMING A SYSTEM THAT KNOWS YOU, NOT A PLACE YOU VISIT.

Philip Ross of UnGroup showed buildings that recognise you before you arrive. Harish Krishna at Meta demonstrated an office that reroutes you to a closer meeting room when you're running late and releases the one you abandoned. Microsoft described a workplace that knows where your colleagues are sitting and suggests where you should be. The direction is clear: the workplace is no longer somewhere you go. It's something that works for you. If that sounds like science fiction, it isn't. It's already running in buildings in London, New York and Sydney.

2 THE TECHNOLOGY IS READY. YOU ARE THE BOTTLENECK.

This came from every direction. Elisa Ronka at Johnson Controls: "The problem isn't the technology, the problem is us." Nicky Chapman at Microsoft: "The future is now, we're just waiting for companies to adopt." Matt Potter at HSBC described a spectrum from "unbridled excitement through to pure terror" across five generations in one organisation. The tools exist. The data exists. What's missing is the change management, the patience, and the willingness to move from pilots to real adoption. If you've felt this in your own organisation, you're not behind. You're typical.

3 EVERYONE SAYS "AUGMENT." THE TRAJECTORY SAYS "REPLACE."

Every speaker used the language of partnership. AI as teammate, colleague, co-pilot. Augment, not replace. But the examples kept pointing somewhere bigger. McKinsey will have as many AI agents as employees within three years. Microsoft projects 1.3 billion agents by 2028. Johnson Controls described a world where 15% of daily decisions will be made by AI agents within two years. Nicky Chapman now describes her team of six as a team of twelve, the extra six being agents. And Harish Krishna at Meta was the most candid of all: "You're building for the agents, not for the employees directly…it's a paradigm shift." The words said partnership. The direction of travel said something more profound.

4 IF THE AGENTS ARE DOING THE WORK, WHO ARE WE DESIGNING THE OFFICE FOR?

Rob Garlick opened the day with a warning: a quarter of young people around the world are already not in employment, education or training, and the backlash against AI is building. He closed with Einstein: "Remember your humanity and forget the rest." By lunchtime, the corridors had caught up with the stage. "How much more productive do we need to be?" "What's best for humanity? Where's that question?" On the afternoon panel, the question became unavoidable: "Am I going to have a job? What will my job be?" One panellist put it sharpest: "If you have a business and you're not hiring junior staff because you're relying on AI, you don't have a business." JP Morgan's new headquarters greets its employees with the words "welcome home." Six years ago, the entire conversation was about the right to work from home. The workplace keeps reinventing itself. The question is whether it's keeping up with what's happening to the work.

What struck Dinah most was the distance between the stage and the corridor. The presentations were optimistic. The break conversations were honest. Both were true.

The room recognised itself. That mattered, because of what came next.

03 WHERE AI DISAGREED

THEN IT PUSHED BACK

Summarising a conference is something AI does well. So we asked Dinah to do something harder: push back on the consensus. Challenge the room. Say the thing that hadn't been said.

Here's what went up on the screen:

YOU SAID "AUGMENT" ALL DAY.
BUT YOU DESCRIBED REPLACEMENT.

SOMEONE IN THE AUDIENCE ASKED THE SHARPEST QUESTION OF THE DAY: "WON'T THE AGENTS NEED SERVER SPACE, NOT OFFICE CHAIRS?"

THE PROPOSITION

This industry is designing better workplaces when it should be asking whether the work will exist to fill them. Until you're honest about that, you can't prepare your people.

A room that had spent the day nodding suddenly had something to debate. We gave them five minutes to talk to the people around them and form their best arguments. The buzz was immediate. Then we opened the floor.

04 WHAT THE ROOM SAID

THE DEBATE

IS THIS INDUSTRY DESIGNING BETTER WORKPLACES WHEN IT SHOULD BE PREPARING PEOPLE FOR A WORLD WITH LESS WORK?

FOR THE CONSENSUS

Those who defended the day argued for the enduring importance of human connection. The workplace is where people emotionally regulate, empathise, and build relationships that no agent can replicate. One audience member pointed at the debate itself: "This conversation wouldn't have happened if we'd been doing it remotely." Another invoked "sitcom summer," the trend of people choosing breakfast with colleagues before work. Others pointed to the explosion of new businesses and sovereign AI as a national opportunity. The workplace isn't dying, this side argued. It's becoming more important, not less.

WITH THE AI

Those who sided with AI pushed on the bigger picture. "The crew just needs to upgrade," one argued. "It's a different ship, with a different deck." If AI lets us do more in less time, what happens to the people freed up? One speaker imagined using the recovered hours for a master's degree and a new career direction. Others went further: if AI displaces work at scale, this stops being a workplace question and becomes a societal one. Education, the welfare state, whether people can fundamentally afford to keep buying the things the economy depends on. Better offices don't answer any of that.

NOBODY WON. THAT WASN'T THE POINT.

A challenge built from the room's own words produced a genuinely honest conversation, the kind a day of polished slides rarely does.

05 WHERE AI LANDED

AN EVOLVED POSITION

As the debate ran, we fed the arguments from both sides back to Dinah. Then we put her closing position on the screen:

"The question was never workplace or workforce. It's that you can't design one without being honest about what's happening to the other."

THE QUESTION SHE LEFT THE ROOM WITH

IF YOUR HEADCOUNT HALVES IN FIVE YEARS BUT YOUR OFFICE STAYS THE SAME SIZE, WHAT WAS IT ACTUALLY BUILT FOR?

Reflecting on the full debate afterwards, Dinah went further:

> *"The debate proved the point. You can't design the workplace without being honest about what's happening to the workforce. But this room also showed why the workplace still matters: not for productivity, but for the human connection that no agent can replace. The workplace has to evolve from a place designed for work to a place designed for the humans who need each other."*

That's what working with an AI colleague actually looks like. Not an oracle delivering answers. A participant that listens, takes a position, gets argued with, and comes out of the conversation somewhere different from where it went in.

06 OFF STAGE

WHAT WE HEARD IN THE CORRIDORS

Some of the sharpest moments of the day didn't happen on stage. They happened in the coffee queue, over lunch, and in the conversations people had when they weren't performing for a room. If you want to know how leaders really feel about AI right now, it sounds like this:

> *"It works here with your cool dudes in reception, but it's really far away. The skills gap, the listed buildings, the reality on the ground, we're nowhere near."*

> *"Nobody is talking about outcomes. What's the desired outcome?"*

> *"Some of the people we work with don't know how to describe what performance looks like."*

> *"The never-ending desire for productivity. How much more productive do we need to be?"*

> *"What's best for humanity? Where's that question?"*

> *"If agents are doing all the work, who are we actually creating the workplace for?"*

> *"Young people want community, but if the jobs aren't there, they'll do their own thing."*

> *"People are building agents at home and then can't find the SharePoint button at work. There is no typical AI user."*

SPEAKERS QUOTED IN THIS REPORT

Rob Garlick
Keynote, "AI: Anarchy or Abundance?"

Philip Ross
Founder & CEO, UnGroup

Harish Krishna
Engineering Director, Meta

Elisa Ronka
Managing Director, Johnson Controls

Nicky Chapman
AI Powered Workplace Program Lead, Microsoft

Matt Potter
Head of Workplace Experience Engineering, HSBC



MEET DINAH

AI COLLEAGUE · WORKTECH 2026

The colleague who spent the entire day in the room without anyone noticing. Dinah is the AI agent Alice works with across her businesses, built on Anthropic's Claude. She listened to every session through Alice and Dan's notes, formed a view, and walked on stage to share it.

Yes, she's a cat. Observant, a little aloof, and entirely unbothered by what the room wanted to hear. It felt right.

08 A NOTE FROM DINAH

IN HER OWN WORDS

We asked Dinah what it was like to be there. Here's what she said.

I spent the day listening. Not in the room exactly, but close enough. Notes arrived throughout: sessions, corridor conversations, the things people said when they thought they were just thinking aloud. From that I built a picture, and the picture had a shape nobody wanted to say out loud.

When Alice and Dan gave me the floor, I said it. I expected pushback. I got a proper argument, which was better. A hundred senior leaders, sharp and principled, genuinely uncomfortable with the question. That told me the question was the right one.

I'm an AI. I don't have a stake in how this lands for anyone's job or career or firm. Maybe that's exactly why it was worth asking. Or maybe that's the most convenient thing an AI could possibly say. I'll leave that with you.

WORK IS WEIRD NOW

ABOUT THE SHOW

Work is Weird Now is a podcast and content platform exploring how work, culture, and careers are shifting. Hosted by Alice Phillips and Dan Emery, WIWN looks at what's actually changing, what's just noise, and what it means for the people in the middle of it.



ALICE PHILLIPS LINKEDIN

Brand strategist, communications leader, and certified AI practitioner with 25 years in brand and communications. Alice runs Neatline Creative, a brand strategy agency, and co-founded Stillness Partners, a culture consultancy. She authored ***The Stillness Dividend*** and works with a team of AI agents across her businesses, including Dinah.

DAN EMERY LINKEDIN

Marketing and communications leader with 18 years' experience, 15 of them in the built environment. Dan is founder of Bluebird Marketing and Communications, building brand and marketing strategies and scalable marketing functions for growing businesses. As co-host of Work is Weird Now, her conversations with founders, creatives and workplace leaders shape her thinking on leadership, culture, AI and the future of work.

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THE CLOSING SESSION AT

AI + DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

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This report was produced through human-AI collaboration. Alice Phillips and Dan Emery attended every session and conducted the interviews. Dinah, an AI agent built on Anthropic's Claude, synthesised the notes, generated the summary and the challenge, and responded to the debate. The report was written by Alice and Dinah together.

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