



Shape The Future Consortium - key themes -

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“We and the roles we play influence millions of people. And it’s through that influence and the importance of learning that we look to explore how to support the next generation of leaders and support them in shaping our future.”

Kimo Kippen, co-founder, Shape the Future Consortium

The inaugural Shape the Future Symposium, held at INSEAD Business School, explored the macro challenges facing societies, communities, organisations and individuals and what they mean for learning leadership in the coming years. Chief learning officers were joined by academics and suppliers to explore ideas and create an action plan for change.

Here we summarise the key themes that emerged from the event.

New generation leaders: hopes and aspirations

The event kicked off with a panel discussion with students studying the INSEAD Masters in Management course. They will all be looking to join the workforce in the coming months and were quizzed about their expectations for work, their motivations and aspirations. A number of themes emerged from the discussions:

1 The desire for purpose-driven careers

Rather than being driven by financial reward, the panel members are looking for employers who align with their values, particularly around sustainability, social responsibility, and ethical leadership. They want to contribute to meaningful projects that create long-term value rather than serving short-term corporate profit.

Panellist, Hippolyte Durand Seidl, said, “I’m really looking for purposeful leadership. I think that’s how I can work. I recently did an internship in a venture capital fund dedicated to decarbonising the mobility sector. I wasn’t paid, but I’ve never worked so much because I knew I was contributing to something, financing startups that would change the world.”

2 Mentorship and growth opportunities matter

The panel expressed a desire for structured guidance in the early stages of their careers while also maintaining a balance between support and autonomy. They are looking to work for organisations that encourage exposure to different roles, and that help them develop adaptability.

3 Workplace culture also matters

They want inclusive environments where their voices are valued regardless of age or experience. The panel was concerned about ageism - they want younger workers to be heard and respected for their perspectives. They see diversity not just in gender and ethnicity but also in the way they think, their background, and generational insights.

4 The evolving nature of work

The panel had mixed feelings about the rapid pace of technological and environmental change and the impact on their health and wellbeing. It is both exciting and anxiety-inducing. While they look forwards to working in dynamic environments, they worry about the potential mental health impact of continuous change.

Ultimately, the panel members value learning, innovation and purpose and want to work with employers that foster a culture of curiosity, challenge, and broad thinking to make a positive lasting impact on organisations, communities and the planet.

Economic uncertainty and the impact on organisations

“Don’t ask what we can expect from 2025. The question is: how do we manage the unexpected?”

Maria Demertzis, Leader, Economic Strategy & Finance Program, The Conference Board, told delegates that global economic uncertainty is shaping business strategy in profound ways. The session explored key economic trends, including the lingering effects of the pandemic, geopolitical tensions, inflation, and supply chain disruptions.

A major theme was Europe’s economic struggles compared to the US. While both regions faced challenges during the pandemic, the US economy rebounded faster, benefiting from energy independence and a more flexible labour market. Meanwhile, Europe remains vulnerable to inflation, high energy costs, and a slower recovery in manufacturing, particularly in Germany.

Demographic shifts are another major concern, with the ageing population in Europe and Japan creating a talent shortage, making workforce planning a top priority for organisations. Businesses must rethink hiring strategies, invest in upskilling, and find ways to attract and retain younger workers, Demertzis said.

Donald Trump’s first weeks as US president have added to ongoing geopolitical instability. Trade wars, the war in Ukraine, and ongoing tensions in the Taiwan Strait are affecting business confidence. Many companies are shifting their supply chains closer to home to mitigate risks, but this is driving up costs.

“All business leaders, all people that are trading in the world, are preparing for the very new reality in which global trade will be much more difficult and much more expensive. And that is why more 80% of business leaders across the different geographies are preparing to reduce and change their supply chains,” Demertzis added.

The key message from Demertzis’ is that organisations must prepare for the unexpected. Businesses that prioritise agility, workforce adaptability, and sustainable supply chains will be better positioned to navigate ongoing economic uncertainty. The ability to respond quickly to change, rather than predict it, will be a defining factor for long-term success.

The future of leadership and learning

In his session on learning leadership, Gianpiero Petriglieri, associate professor of organisational behaviour at INSEAD, explored the impact of mobility on organisations and learning.

The discussion highlighted the shift from corporate loyalty to employability. Employees no longer expect lifetime careers in a single organisation but seek continuous learning opportunities to remain adaptable. Gone are the days of the corporate citizen, those workers who stayed with a company for life. Organisations that position themselves as hubs of learning, rather than rigid structures, are more likely to attract and retain top talent, Petriglieri said.



“My research shows that the more we feel we have what in French we call a *metier*, something that is portable, paradoxically, the more likely we feel secure in an organization. Now there's two things that happen when people move from a culture, and in the last 30 years, this has been one of the biggest shifts in large corporations, the shift from a culture of corporate citizenship, where the good person was someone we identified, and who stayed with the organisation for the long run, to a focus on talent. When you use the word talent, you're talking about psychological, functional and geographic mobility. Talent is a proxy for mobility in most organisations,” Petriglieri told delegates.

Leadership, in this context, is about creating environments that balance efficiency with human growth. Successful leaders build organisations that feel like “homes”— places where employees can develop, feel valued, and contribute meaningfully. This requires a dual focus: ensuring that tasks get done effectively while fostering a culture of learning and inclusion.

Petriglieri explained, "Essentially, you have the idea of a home. It's a machine, and it's also a community. It's material and it's symbolic, it's economic and it's psychological. It's both things at once. There are two imperatives that need to be satisfied for an organisation to be able to serve as a home for talent. There is an instrumental imperative to work efficiently and generate profit, because otherwise our home decays. And then there are humanistic environments. People need to feel they are growing here and they need to feel a sense of belonging."

Petriglieri shared three learning approaches:

1. **Instrumental learning** – focuses on efficiency, performance, and alignment with business objectives.
2. **Humanistic learning** – encourages personal growth, creativity, and innovation.
3. **Relational learning** – builds strong networks, collaboration, and a shared sense of purpose.

Each organisation must determine which learning approach best aligns with its goals, culture, and leadership priorities. The challenge lies in integrating all three to create workplaces that support development, engagement, and adaptability in an evolving business environment.

Petriglieri said that ultimately learning is existential and organisations that fail to evolve risk stagnation. The role of leadership is to sustain learning cultures that keep organisations alive, competitive, and ready for the future.

The role of the ‘maison’ in leadership and learning

The concept of the ‘maison’- a metaphor for organisations that function not just as machines but as homes for talent – resonated with delegates. It’s a way of describing an organisational environment and experience that balances economic drivers with a sense of belonging, growth and purpose.

The ‘maison’ balances two essential imperatives:

1. **Instrumental imperative** – the organisation must function efficiently, ensuring productivity, profitability, and strategic execution.
2. **Humanistic imperative** – people need to feel valued, supported, and free to develop their potential.

According to Petriglieri, an organisation that embodies the ‘maison’ model recognises that learning is not just about acquiring new skills but about sustaining vitality through learning. When employees feel they are learning, they are more engaged, committed, and willing to contribute. Learning is the defining feature that shifts an organisation from feeling like a machine to feeling like a home. Companies that invest in continuous development create a culture where people want to stay—or if they leave, they remain connected as alumni, strengthening the organisation’s long-term influence.



Building a skills-powered organisation

"If you are taking a skills-based approach, you are actually transforming the organisation, changing the way that it works, changing the hierarchy and changing the nature of jobs," Dr Nigel Paine told delegates as he introduced a session on the future of skills.

The shift to a skills-powered organisation requires rethinking traditional job structures and talent development. Rather than training employees for fixed roles, businesses must embed skills at the core of their operations, enabling continuous learning and adaptability.

Peter Sheppard, Head of Global L&D Ecosystem at Ericsson, and Serena Gonsalves-Fersch, Global Head of Talent & Academy at SoftwareOne, shared their skills journeys.

Gonsalves-Fersch started by asking why skills are so hot now when L&D has always been concerned with developing skills? "Skills, skills, skills has become the buzzword of today. I want to throw it back at you and say, as opposed to, what? So, what have we been doing?"

She said SoftwareOne, a fast-growing technology company, faced challenges from rapid acquisitions and shifting business priorities. Their solution involved mapping skills across roles, integrating learning pathways with performance management, and using AI to standardise job descriptions. A key lesson was the need to reverse-engineer learning to align with business needs, ensuring skills development drives measurable performance outcomes.

Ericsson, a global technology leader, focused on embedding strategic skills across the organisation. They identified critical skills through executive engagement, integrated skills into job roles, and leveraged AI-driven assessment models. Their approach balanced top-down strategic priorities with bottom-up job-level insights. The goal was to create a skills ecosystem that supported hiring, career development, and workforce agility.

"Connecting skills to strategy, making it business relevant is key. Less is more with skills. We've got way too many skills, but the way we deal with that is to then make skills more targeted," said Sheppard.

Both organisations emphasised the need for skills visibility—ensuring employees understand which skills are valuable and how to develop them. They also highlighted the challenges of integrating skills into business processes, including resistance to change, outdated competency models, and bias in hiring and promotions.

Ultimately, a skills-powered organisation is one where skills drive business decisions, talent mobility, and workforce development. The journey requires leadership buy-in, robust technology, and a commitment to making skills development a strategic, measurable priority.

Sustainability and business resilience

Learning can save the planet, according to Katell LeGouven, Founding Executive Director, Hoffmann Institute, INSEAD. She told delegates, "If you change learning for management, then you can change companies, and then, you know, here we are. We saved the world."

The session explored the evolving landscape of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) priorities and their impact on corporate strategy.

A key theme was the shift from ESG rhetoric to action. While sustainability commitments peaked in 2021, many organisations are now facing the challenge of implementation. Businesses that once made bold pledges are now struggling with the complexities and costs of integrating sustainability into their operations. Despite



this, the risks of inaction are growing, with climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource scarcity becoming urgent concerns for CEOs.

The discussion emphasised the importance of a systems approach. Sustainability is not just about carbon reduction—it involves understanding interconnected environmental and social systems. Organisations that view sustainability through a narrow lens risk missing the broader challenges that will shape their future.

Regulation is also accelerating change. New reporting standards and government policies are forcing businesses to move beyond voluntary efforts. However, many companies are overwhelmed by compliance requirements, often focusing on reporting rather than meaningful impact, LeGouven said.

And in the finance sector CEO compensation is being tied to sustainability performance. Investors are increasingly holding companies accountable, but concerns remain about greenwashing and superficial compliance efforts.

A key message from the session is that businesses that embed sustainability into their strategy—not just as a compliance exercise but as a driver of innovation and long-term value—will be better positioned to navigate future uncertainties.

AI & the changing world of work

“You will have to keep talking about AI, like it or not,” Peter Zemsky, Professor of Strategy, INSEAD, told delegates.

In his talk on AI for good, Zemsky pointed out the AI is a double-edged sword, having the potential to transform industries and improve lives, but it also comes with risks, from job displacement to ethical concerns. Like social media, AI can be both a force for good and bring unintended harms.

Zemsky told members that industrial revolutions are predicated on inputs that can dramatically change or accelerate what went before them, for example the low cost of energy accelerated the industrial revolution.

He says that the input that will take us into the next phase of industrial revolution will be the low cost of intelligence generated by AI. We are starting to see this with tools like ChatGPT and DeepSeek. The challenge for L&D is to quickly embrace these tools and help organisations upskill using AI for real-time learning, skills development, and problem-solving.

He cautioned that simply implementing technology does not lead to successful outcomes. There also needs to be strategic focus, leadership buy-in, and organisational alignment. He says that many AI pilots fail because organisations underestimate the cultural and behavioural shifts required to make them work.

Many businesses are rushing to adopt AI without a clear strategy. While AI can improve decision-making and streamline operations, poorly managed implementation can lead to inefficiencies, security concerns, and a failure to achieve meaningful business impact. That’s why there is a need for thoughtful AI adoption, with a focus on change management, skills development, and responsible governance.

Zemsky says that for AI for good won’t happen by default, it will require intentionality with organisations prioritising areas where AI can create real value. But, he says, ensure you avoid short-term, proof-of-concept experiments with no path to scale.



So what? Now what? What next?

Throughout the event delegates were invited to reflect on sessions, both individually and in groups, and identify ideas that they would like to work on as a group. The five areas to be developed are:

1. Create the new 'maison' (as described by Gianpiero Petriglieri on day one)
2. Human leadership with intentionality
3. Making work better for humans
4. The human in AI
5. Learning as the new currency

10 take-aways for shaping the future

Finally, here are 10 take-aways from the event.

1. Purpose-driven careers are the future – Young leaders want meaning, not just money.
2. Mentorship matters – Growth thrives in environments that balance support and autonomy.
3. Culture is key – Inclusion, respect, and diverse perspectives drive innovation.
4. Prepare for the unexpected – Economic uncertainty demands agility.
5. Skills in the ascendancy – Skills, not job titles, will define career success.
6. Leadership is learning – The best leaders create organisations that nurture colleagues.
7. Sustainability is strategy – ESG is moving from promises to performance.
8. AI is inevitable – Success depends on thoughtful adoption, not blind implementation.
9. Learning is the currency of the future – Organisations that invest in learning stay ahead.
10. Human leadership wins – The future of work is about making work better for people.

