



Photographer - Stefan Jakubowski. Association of Business Psychology "Forging Competitive Advantage" Panel 2026

Investing in What AI Can't Replace

Most organisations invest heavily in the very skills AI is about to do best. Four leaders make the case for putting money where machines can't follow.

I have always thought the most valuable conversations in business are the ones that almost never happen on their own. They take intention to bring to life, often between people who would never otherwise sit down together. Helping create those moments is one of my favourite parts of being a leadership advisor, and I had the privilege of doing exactly that at this year's Association for Business Psychology (ABP) 2026 Annual Conference, moderating a panel of four leaders who build organisational capability for a living.

That it happened at all owes a great deal to the ABP. A session like this could easily have become a parade of polished slides, but the ABP made space for something more honest, with panellists willing to share what is working, what is not, and what lies ahead.

That honesty showed in the conversation itself. The panel was titled "Forging Competitive Advantage," but what we ended up exploring went somewhere more searching, into what happens to leadership as the technology around us grows more capable, and what is genuinely worth investing in when it comes to developing people.

Only weeks earlier, SAP had used its Sapphire conference to unveil what it calls the "Autonomous Enterprise." These are AI agents that do not merely assist with business processes but run them from

end to end, sensing what is happening across an organisation, reasoning over it and acting, without a person coordinating every step. Even SAP is careful to say that this is not full automation, and that people remain responsible for the decisions that carry accountability, with the AI working inside the goals and limits they set.

If machines can increasingly do that kind of work, it raises an awkward question about where organisations have been focusing. For years, the investment has gone into what is easiest to count, such as skills, knowledge, completion rates and activity. James Prior, SAP's Global Head of Leadership and Succession, named one of the challenges directly, that organisations over-index on skills, which credentialise neatly and fit on a slide, while the behaviours and judgement that matter most are harder to measure. He offered a frame I found interesting, that much of what senior leaders face is not a problem to solve but a polarity to manage, a tension with no fixed answer, like stability versus change. You can't settle it once and move on, because pushing too hard one way only creates the opposite problem. The catch is that the countable elements are exactly what AI now does best, so many organisations have spent years investing in the very work most open to automation.



James Prior

Dr David Carnegie, who has spent his career across financial services, built on that. As AI becomes an almost limitless source of information and knowledge, he suggested, the scarcest human capability will no longer be knowledge itself. It will be judgement, and in particular the discernment to separate information and knowledge from truth. A model can offer a fluent, confident answer in seconds, but

whether that answer is true, whether it is wise, whether it is right for this business at this moment remains a distinctly human call, one that is becoming more important, not less.



Dr. David Carnegie

All of which raises an obvious question. If judgement, behaviour and discernment are what matter, how do you actually develop them? Here Anna Janoschek, a talent capability leader at Kite Pharma, was refreshingly honest about what does not work. She described how companies used to put a lot of focus on developing managers through multi-day off-site and in-person programmes, where everyone flies in, the energy is high, and a few weeks later not much has changed in the everyday behaviours those leaders show. Then the pendulum swung the other way, towards self-guided digital learning, a menu of micro-courses available to anyone at any time. The intent is right, but with limited support and limited accountability, people struggle to make the time, and very little sticks. What has actually worked for her teams is smaller and more human, peer groups of five or six managers learning together, holding one another accountable and applying it to the work in front of them. Her wider principle was to treat capability building like a change programme rather than a training event. Ground it, and give managers something tangible to take back, such as three questions to put to their team, a couple of specific resources and one clear action. Without that, it evaporates on the journey home.



Anna Janoschek

Sarah Barron, Head of Capability at Azets and now building her fifth centre of expertise, added a discipline that ties all of this together. Not every good idea is the right idea right now. The temptation for a lot of companies is to launch something because it is clever, or new, or fashionable, when the harder and more valuable work is to understand the underlying business need first, and to have the discipline to wait, or even to say no, when the timing is wrong. When an audience member asked how consultants and business psychologists can genuinely succeed with their clients, her answer was both unglamorous and insightful. Do the research, understand what the client is actually trying to achieve, come with a practical approach, and take the time to learn the language of their organisation.



Sarah Barron

The conversation then turned to something more personal. As AI takes on more of the knowledge, what becomes of the leader who has built a career on being the expert in the room? Sarah named it. Many senior leaders, she said, are facing a question of identity. Their roles remain fundamental, but if they are no longer the subject-matter expert, who are they, and where does their value now lie? That is not really a technology question at all, and it carries real uncertainty for the people living it. David widened the point with a challenge about where organisations invest, noting that development spending remains strikingly top-heavy, concentrated on the most senior leaders, when some of the highest returns may come from early-career, high-potential people given real, stretching work. In a world of fewer leaders and accelerating change, that imbalance is worth exploring.

What I took from all four of them is this. AI could genuinely make our working lives better, and even more enjoyable, if we allow it to empower our humanity and free us to focus on the results only people can drive. But the technology is moving faster than most of us can absorb, and I have yet to meet anyone this year who tells me their workload has gone down because of AI. If the only question organisations ask is how to do more with less, the danger is clear, that the most capable tools ever built end up simply adding to the load on people who are already at full capacity.



Laura Senior Garcia

So if you lead a team, my ask is simple to say and harder to do. Pause, and raise the level of the conversation. Instead of asking only what AI can do for the bottom line, ask how it could make work genuinely better for the people doing it, and what it really means to develop people, at every level, in the capabilities that matter more than ever, judgement, critical thinking, discernment, connection, a sense of belonging and the ability to inspire. These are no longer soft skills. As four people who do this work for a living reminded a roomful of us, they may prove to be the most valuable advantage an organisation has.

If this is a conversation you are beginning to have inside your own organisation, I would love to hear how you are approaching it.

My thanks to Sarah Barron, Dr David Carnegie, Anna Janoschek and James Prior for their honesty and generosity on the day, to Mark McCarthy at Meta-LUCID for making it happen, and to the ABP for creating the space for a conversation I will be thinking about for some time.

[Laura Senior Garcia](#)

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