



Strategic Workforce Planning for Human and Digital Workers

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Does your workforce plan count only people? It may say you need the same team next year, but AI is already taking on some of that work, and the plan has no line for it.

Strategic workforce planning is meant to keep you ahead of change. Built for an all-human workforce, it can leave you planning for a world that has already moved.

THE SHORT ANSWER

Strategic workforce planning works out the people and skills you need to deliver your strategy. It still works, but its old assumption, that every worker is human, no longer holds. Plan around the work first, then decide what people should do, what digital workers can do, and what knowledge you must keep.

What is strategic workforce planning?

Strategic workforce planning is the process of working out the people and skills an organisation needs to deliver its strategy, and how it will get them. The CIPD describes workforce planning as *“the process of balancing labour supply (skills) against the demand (numbers needed)”*, and says the strategic version should be future-focused, so the organisation can deliver the business strategy.

The CIPD sets out six stages: understand the organisation and its operating environment, analyse the workforce, determine future needs, identify gaps in skills and knowledge, build a flexible action plan, and monitor the results. That is a sound structure. The question is what each stage assumes about who is doing the work.

Why does traditional workforce planning fall short with AI?

It assumes the workforce is human. Bloor Research argues in its *FusionWork™ category* that strategic workforce planning was built on the premise that the workforce is human, and that organisations now run a blended workforce of human and digital workers.

It counts heads, not work. Headcount and full-time-equivalent measures describe how many people you employ. They do not show which tasks are being done, or by whom. If AI takes over part of a role, the headcount line looks the same while the work underneath it has changed.

It forecasts one future. A single forecast is hard to trust when tools, costs and expectations can change within months.

It treats knowledge as a footnote. Plans count skills and numbers. They rarely count tacit knowledge, what experienced people know that is not written down. Bloor's *Hire to Heir* argues that strategic workforce planning has to be rewritten to address the mix of capability and what must stay human.

What does the data say about AI and workforce plans?

A minority of employers expect cuts. In the CIPD's Autumn 2025 Labour Market Outlook, 17% of employers expected AI to shrink their workforce over the next year (survey of 2,019 senior HR professionals and decision-makers in the UK, excluding employers who did not know whether AI tools were used in their organisation).

A global survey shows both reduction and reskilling plans. In the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025, based on over 1,000 leading global employers, 40% of employers surveyed anticipated reducing their workforce where AI can automate tasks, and 85% planned to prioritise upskilling their workforce.

These figures describe expectations and plans, not outcomes. They do show that planning for AI is now part of the job, and that employers are weighing reductions and reskilling together.

How do you plan for a human and digital workforce?

1. Start from the work, not the headcount.

List the outcomes the organisation needs over the next two to three years and the tasks behind them, before you count any people.

2. Decide who or what does each task.

For each task, ask whether it suits a person, a digital worker or both together. Keep judgement, relationships and accountability with people unless you have a clear reason not to.

3. Plan the knowledge and capability you must keep.

Run a skills and knowledge gap analysis, as the CIPD's fourth stage suggests, and note who holds know-how that is not written down.

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4. **Model more than one scenario.** Sketch a cautious, a central and a fast case for how much work AI takes on, and note what you would do in each.
5. **Review it often.** Treat the plan as a living document. Keep workforce data over time, as the CIPD recommends, and revisit the plan whenever strategy or technology changes the work.

Decisions that affect people's jobs carry legal obligations. This post does not cover them, so take specialist employment advice on the process.

Where does Bloor's thinking fit?

OAISM (Original Augmented Intelligence) is Bloor's approach of building intelligence into the human, not the human into the AI. For workforce planning, that suggests treating AI as something that extends what your people can do, and planning around the combined capability. Bloor's analysis also suggests that, where it can be measured, **capability has started to come loose from headcount** (the article describes its own reading as contested), so the planning question may become which capabilities you need and where each should sit.

Bloor Research helps organisations understand where they are now, where they need to be and what is happening inside the business, including through its X-RAY diagnostic. Its **FusionWorkTM** category looks at planning for a workforce of human and digital workers. If you are rewriting a workforce plan for both, **contact Bloor Research** to talk it through.

Frequently asked questions

1. **What is strategic workforce planning?**
Strategic workforce planning is the process of working out the people and skills an organisation needs to deliver its strategy, and how it will get them. The CIPD describes workforce planning as the process of balancing labour supply (skills) against the demand (numbers needed), and says the strategic version should be future-focused.
2. **What is the difference between workforce planning and strategic workforce planning?**
Workforce planning balances the supply of skills against the numbers needed. The CIPD describes the strategic, or "soft", version as defining a strategy or developing a strategic framework. In practice, workforce planning answers "how many, and with what skills?", while strategic workforce planning asks what the business is trying to achieve and what workforce that needs.

3. **What are the stages of strategic workforce planning?** The CIPD sets out six main stages: understand the organisation and the operating environment, analyse the workforce, determine future workforce needs, identify gaps in workforce skills and knowledge, develop an action plan that has functional, numerical and adaptational flexibility, and monitor and evaluate the plan.
4. **How does AI change workforce planning?**
AI changes which tasks people do, so a plan built on headcount alone can miss it. In the CIPD's Autumn 2025 Labour Market Outlook, 17% of employers expected AI to shrink their workforce over the next year. In the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025, 40% of employers surveyed anticipated reducing their workforce where AI can automate tasks, and 85% planned to prioritise upskilling.
5. **How do you plan for a mixed human and digital workforce?** Start from the work rather than the headcount. Map the tasks, decide which suit people and which suit digital workers, plan the knowledge and capability the organisation must keep, model more than one scenario, and review the plan often. Decisions that affect people's jobs carry legal obligations, so take specialist employment advice on the process.
6. **How often should you review a workforce plan?**
The CIPD lists monitoring and evaluating the plan as a stage in its own right, and recommends keeping workforce data over time. A common approach is to review once a year, and again whenever strategy or technology changes the work.

Sources

- **CIPD, Workforce planning factsheet** (definition of workforce planning, the "soft" or strategic approach, and the six main stages).
- **CIPD, One in six employers say AI will shrink headcount: Autumn Labour Market Outlook**, press release 10 November 2025. Total sample 2,019 senior HR professionals and decision-makers in the UK; fieldwork 19 September to 14 October 2025. The 17% figure excludes employers who did not know whether AI tools are used by employees in their organisation (6% of the total sample).
- **World Economic Forum, The Future of Jobs Report 2025, digest**, 7 January 2025. Based on over 1,000 leading global employers, representing more than 14 million workers across 22 industry clusters and 55 economies.