The Missing Variable in Every AI Transition

A LinkedIn article for leaders navigating the Fifth Revolution

Matthew Byrne — Building Mutuality, Fifth Revolution Research Programme, July 2026

There's a moment most leaders recognise, even if they struggle to name it.

You've invested in the technology. You've run the pilots. The numbers look promising. And yet something in your organisation feels like it's quietly shifting — not in the direction of enthusiasm, but sideways. People are complying, but they're not engaged. Questions are fewer, not more. The energy that used to fill the room seems to be leaking somewhere you can't quite locate.

This isn't a technology problem. And it probably isn't a change-management problem either — not in the conventional sense.

It's a mattering problem.

The White Whale

At Building Mutuality, we've been studying AI transitions for three years through a research programme we call the Fifth Revolution. One of the clearest patterns we keep encountering is something we've named the White Whale: the gap that opens up between what AI systems can do and what human and organisational systems can absorb.

That gap doesn't announce itself. It starts quietly — in the private judgements of individual workers who begin to wonder whether the organisation still sees them, still values them, still needs what they specifically bring. By the time it becomes visible — as pushback, disengagement, or a loss of social licence — it has already been building for months.

The research literature is unambiguous about what's happening underneath. A 2025 meta-analysis of over 24,000 participants confirmed that feeling actively insignificant is more damaging than feeling significant is protective. Workers worried about AI making their role obsolete are nearly twice as likely to report feeling they don't matter to their employer. Global engagement just hit its lowest level since 2020, costing an estimated US$10 trillion in lost productivity. Trust in employer-provided AI tools fell 31% in a single quarter last year.

These aren't four separate crises. They're one crisis, seen from different angles — and the name of that crisis is a mattering deficit.

What Mattering Actually Means

Mattering isn't motivation. It isn't engagement. It isn't even belonging — though the three are often conflated.

Here's a distinction that I find clarifying: an employee can belong to a team and still feel entirely replaceable. Belonging answers the question "am I part of this?" Mattering answers a different one: would this be incomplete without me?

Psychologist Isaac Prilleltensky defines mattering as two complementary experiences held in balance: feeling valued and adding value. You need both. AI deployments can increase adding value — making someone measurably more productive — while simultaneously decreasing feeling valued, through displacement narratives, surveillance systems, and algorithmic processes that treat people as data points rather than individuals. The imbalance that creates is precisely what organisations are experiencing right now, often without realising it.

What makes this moment unusual is the particular nature of the threat AI poses. Earlier waves of automation displaced physical labour. This wave reaches into cognitive and relational work — the domains through which knowledge workers have historically built their sense of worth. When the tasks that carry your identity are automated, it doesn't feel like efficiency. It feels like a verdict.

The cost of not mattering — in numbers

Before we get to what mattering is, it is worth understanding what its absence costs. Because this isn't philosophical. It is measurable, and the numbers are striking.

Start with the asymmetry finding, because it changes how leaders need to think about this. A 2025 meta-analysis of over 24,000 participants found that feeling actively insignificant is more harmful than feeling significant is protective. Anti-mattering — the active experience of being invisible, unimportant, dispensable — correlates with depression at nearly twice the strength that mattering correlates with its absence. You cannot offset it with an equivalent dose of recognition. The harm of making people feel they don't matter is heavier than the benefit of making them feel they do. That asymmetry has direct design consequences: the priority is not inflicting anti-mattering, not merely adding mattering signals on top.

Then there is the cost of belonging — the closest proxy we have for mattering in monetised research. BetterUp's study of 1,789 US employees and over 3,000 workers found that high workplace belonging was associated with a 56% increase in job performance, a 50% reduction in turnover risk, and 75% fewer sick days — an estimated US$52 million in annual value for a 10,000-person organisation. And a single act of micro-exclusion — one moment of being overlooked or dismissed — produced an immediate 25% decline in individual performance. One moment. Twenty-five per cent. That is the cost of not mattering, expressed as a behavioural fact.

The two defining workforce phenomena of the past five years are, on this account, mattering deficits in behavioural form.

Quiet quitting — doing the minimum, withdrawing discretionary effort — reached roughly 59% of the global workforce in Gallup's 2023 data. Gallup's own diagnosis located the drivers in relational and existential dimensions rather than pay: feeling cared about, having a sense of growth, connection to mission. They concluded bluntly that "work doesn't make people unhappy; the workplace does." The withdrawal of discretionary effort is what anti-mattering looks like when it becomes habitual.

The Great Resignation tells the same story from the exit door. Of workers who quit in 2021, 57% cited feeling disrespected — the third most common reason. An analysis of 34 million profiles found toxic culture to be the single strongest predictor of attrition — 10.4 times more powerful than compensation — with "disrespectful" the most damaging of the Toxic Five attributes. Disrespect is the interpersonal delivery mechanism of anti-mattering. When the felt sense of significance collapses, workers first withdraw effort and then withdraw themselves.

There is one more data point that leaders rarely connect to this picture. Gallup attributed most of the recent decline in global engagement to falling manager engagement — with managers accounting for roughly 70% of the variance in team engagement. Managers are the primary conferrers of mattering. When manager engagement collapses, the organisation's capacity to make people feel they matter collapses with it — at exactly the moment AI transition raises the demand for it. This is not a coincidence. It is a compounding crisis.

The business case, in short, is not that mattering is a nice-to-have. It is that the measurable costs of its absence — in disengagement, turnover, lost performance, and eroded trust — are already landing on balance sheets. The question is whether leaders will name what is driving them.

Value differentiation: the two dimensions of mattering

Psychologist Isaac Prilleltensky gives us the most precise definition: mattering is an ideal state consisting of two complementary psychological experiences — feeling valued and adding value. Both are needed. Either alone produces a deficit.

Dimension	What it means	Domains
Feeling valued	Being seen, recognised, appreciated, respected, treated with dignity	Self, others, work, community
Adding value	Making a contribution; having impact; being relied upon	Self, others, work, community

This bidirectionality is the conceptual key to the AI transition. AI tools that make a worker demonstrably more productive can increase adding value — while an accompanying narrative of dispensability simultaneously decreases feeling valued. The result is a mattering deficit, even when the productivity numbers look good.

The reverse is equally true: deployments that both amplify contribution and affirm the worker's significance keep both dimensions in balance. That balance — not productivity alone — is what the research identifies as the foundation of trust, engagement, and sustained discretionary effort.

Prilleltensky's most consequential finding is the fairness–mattering–wellbeing chain: procedural fairness in AI deployment — voice, transparency, the ability to contest a decision — affects worker wellbeing not independently, but because it affects mattering. Fairness is a mattering intervention. When people have a genuine voice in how AI is deployed around them, they receive the signal that they are significant enough to consult. When they face an opaque, unappealable system, they receive the opposite.

What mattering is not

The analytic power of mattering depends on distinguishing it clearly from the constructs it is routinely conflated with. Four distinctions matter most for leaders navigating AI transitions.

Mattering is not belonging. Belonging is feeling welcomed and accepted in a group. Mattering is feeling significant to individuals within that group. As Mercurio puts it, an employee can belong to a team and still feel entirely replaceable — included but not indispensable. Belonging answers "am I part of this?"; mattering answers "would this be incomplete without me?"

Mattering is not engagement. Engagement is a motivational-behavioural state — energy, involvement, absorption. Mattering is a prior appraisal of one's significance. It is an antecedent of engagement, not a synonym for it. You cannot build engagement in a workforce that doesn't first feel it matters.

Mattering is not meaning. Mercurio's formulation is sharp: it is nearly impossible for anything to matter to someone who does not first believe that they matter. Mattering is a psychological precondition for meaningfulness — not the same thing as it.

Mattering is not recognition. Recognition acknowledges what someone does; mattering concerns whether someone is significant. Recognition can be delivered — even generously — while the recipient still feels unseen. This is precisely why formal recognition programmes so often fail to move mattering: they address the output without addressing the person.

For leaders: the temptation during AI transitions is to reach for recognition programmes, engagement surveys, and meaning-making workshops. These are not wrong — but they will underdeliver until the more fundamental question is answered: do people feel they matter? That is the ground everything else has to stand on.

The Three Practices That Actually Move the Needle

Researcher Zach Mercurio spent eighteen months studying what leaders were doing when people most felt they mattered at work. He distilled it to three behaviours — not programmes, not initiatives, just behaviours.

Noticing. Seeing people as individuals. Remembering what they told you last week. Asking about what matters to them, and following up to confirm you heard. One manager in the research kept a simple weekly note on each team member and opened every Monday with a brief "I remember you mentioned…" Her team's engagement consistently outpaced peers.

Affirming. Not "great job" — that's appreciation. Affirmation shows someone the specific evidence of their unique significance: "the way you handled that client is why we still have the contract." It gives people the evidence of their own importance. Generic praise is forgotten; specific, named impact is not.

Needing. This one is rarest, and arguably most powerful in an AI transition. Directly expressing reliance: "if it wasn't for you, this would have failed." "I missed your thinking when you were away." In a world where AI is automating more and more, being needed by a human being carries a weight it didn't have before.

The reason these practices matter more in the AI era, not less, is that as routine interactions are replaced by digital interfaces, the surviving human touchpoints carry a higher significance load. The interactions that remain become more consequential. A leader who doesn't intensify these moments while automating everything around them will find their team's sense of significance quietly depleting — even as efficiency metrics improve.

The Moral Question Underneath the Business Question

There's a business case for all of this, and it's compelling. Organisations that invest in human capability before the disruption peaks — what we call designed uplift — are significantly more likely to reach Phase 5: the durable advantage that becomes available on the far side of a well-navigated transition. BCG estimates 70% of AI value creation comes from the people component, not the technology. Deloitte finds that human-centric AI approaches are 1.6 times more likely to exceed return expectations.

But there's something else, too.

Whether people feel they matter is largely within a leader's control. It is made or unmade in daily interactions — in whether you notice, in whether your systems are fair and contestable, in whether the culture you've built says you are relied upon before the pressure is on.

To deploy AI in ways that leave people feeling processed, invisible, and dispensable — when the alternative was available — isn't a neutral operational decision. It's a decision about people's significance.

A Few Questions Worth Sitting With

As a leader navigating AI transition, it's worth asking:

→ Do the people in your team feel noticed as individuals — or are they visible mainly as productivity metrics?

→ When you affirm contribution, is it specific enough to be believed, or general enough to be forgotten?

→ Have you told anyone, recently, that you needed them — not their output, but them?

→ Are your AI systems designed to amplify human significance, or to extract human labour?

→ If your workforce were honest, would they say the organisation sees them — or that the organisation is managing them?

There's no perfect score here. These are not a performance review — they're an invitation to look at what the numbers aren't yet capturing, before the whale arrives.

Matthew Byrne leads the Building Mutuality Fifth Revolution Research Programme, exploring human intelligence and AI transition. This article draws on the programme's latest academic paper: "Mattering as the Psychological Core of Human Intelligence Transition Capacity" (July 2026).