

Unlocking Value from GenAI

This article captures the highlights of the discussion from Lee Robertson's presentation to members of SHRM Linkage. Please see the accompanying presentation for more details.

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Lee Robertson:

Lee Robertson is a Managing Director and Partner at BCG. He joined the BCG Dallas office in 2015. His work is focused on Consumer and Digital with specific experience in AI at Scale, Personalization, Digital Marketing, and Growth Strategy. He also sits on BCG's internal AI transformation leadership team.

The number of powerful AI tools continues to grow, with AI agents emerging as the latest vehicle for value. Executive focus is intensifying, and market enthusiasm shows no signs of slowing.

But while individual tools are undeniably powerful, organizations still struggle to extract meaningful business value. The pace of technological progress is outstripping their ability to translate that progress into consistent, scalable returns.

Unlock value

1. Deploy

Deploy existing tools with intention and coordination. Upskill teams, establish a baseline, and track measurable improvements. Without clear metrics, tool deployment risks becoming a sunk cost with little impact.

2. Reshape

Reshape entire functions, not just individual tasks. GenAI's power lies in its ability to redefine how a function operates.

3. Invent

Invent AI-native experiences that create new business opportunities built on the technology's unique capabilities.

All three approaches require a deliberate balance of ambition and practicality to deliver real impact.

A CONVERSATION AMONG:

David Graham
Chief Investments
Officer, American
Family Insurance

Abhi Ingle (former)
Chief Business
Officer, Qualtrics

Amanda Kane
SVP, Product
Operations, J.Crew
Group

Skip Kodak SVP,
Global Commercial
Operations, Lego
Group

Audrey Powers
VP, New Shepard
Mission & Flight
Operations, Blue
Origin

Invest in people

Only 10% of AI's value comes from algorithms and data. Another 20% comes from enabling technology—how infrastructure delivers and supports insights. The remaining 70% depends on people, processes, and organizational change to unlock the potential of the tools.

The disconnect between excitement and impact usually stems from underinvesting in that 70%. Value is lost when companies focus on deployment without redesigning workflows or management practices.

Successful deployments rework how teams operate, how decisions are made, and how processes adapt in real time. Senior leaders model the change themselves, reinforcing it from the top.

Upskilling current employees matters as much as hiring technical talent. The most successful companies empower people already inside the business—those motivated to learn and adapt.

Prioritize

Companies that realize the most value from AI invest more while focusing on fewer initiatives. On average, they spend twice as much as others but across 40% fewer efforts. Success comes from tight prioritization and clear sequencing across markets, brands, and activities

Maintain quality

Insight—not speed—is the real competitive edge. Time and cost gains can be quickly competed away, but insight is harder to replicate.

Avoid blind trust in AI outputs. Generic responses that lack distinctiveness or insight are often more dangerous than outright errors because they slip through unnoticed. Leaders must embed the discipline to know where human input adds value and where automation is enough.



Reduce reliance on agencies

Using AI to reduce agency work is a strong starting point—it creates less emotional resistance than cutting internal roles. It's especially effective when agencies are used for tasks such as brainstorming, content generation, and reporting.

Reducing agency reliance helps reinvigorate teams. When too much creative work is outsourced, internal teams are left managing vendors instead of applying their subject expertise. AI helps bring that work back to the people who are most passionate about it.

Unlock joy

Wide-scale implementation of AI often translates into headcount reductions, creating anxiety and resistance across the workforce. Position AI as a way to reduce toilsome tasks and unlock more meaningful, joyful work.

But recognize that your view of toil and joy may not match your team's. People often take pride in high-pressure, strenuous work that draws on their creativity and commitment. What feels inefficient to you may be what gives them a sense of purpose.

Gather responses from employees and plot tasks that evoke feelings of joy or toil. While it may vary widely by individual, identify whether there are patterns by archetype, profile, or position that can inform your AI strategy.

Manage change

AI is simply the latest wave in ongoing technological change. The challenge is how to involve people in shaping a future that may threaten parts of their role.

Start by reminding teams how much their work has already evolved. Ask: What were you doing five or ten years ago? Roles change, tools change—this isn't new. Leadership's role is to guide people through disruption without fear.



Be wary of cost

Consumer-facing GenAI experiences are especially expensive to scale due to compute intensity. Even when applications perform well, cost remains a major bottleneck.

Some companies are reallocating traditional budgets toward computing capacity to support generative experiences. But doing so effectively requires a targeted approach to identify where spending can shift without undermining performance. The challenge is to balance ambition with affordability, ensuring that what's built can be supported sustainably.

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