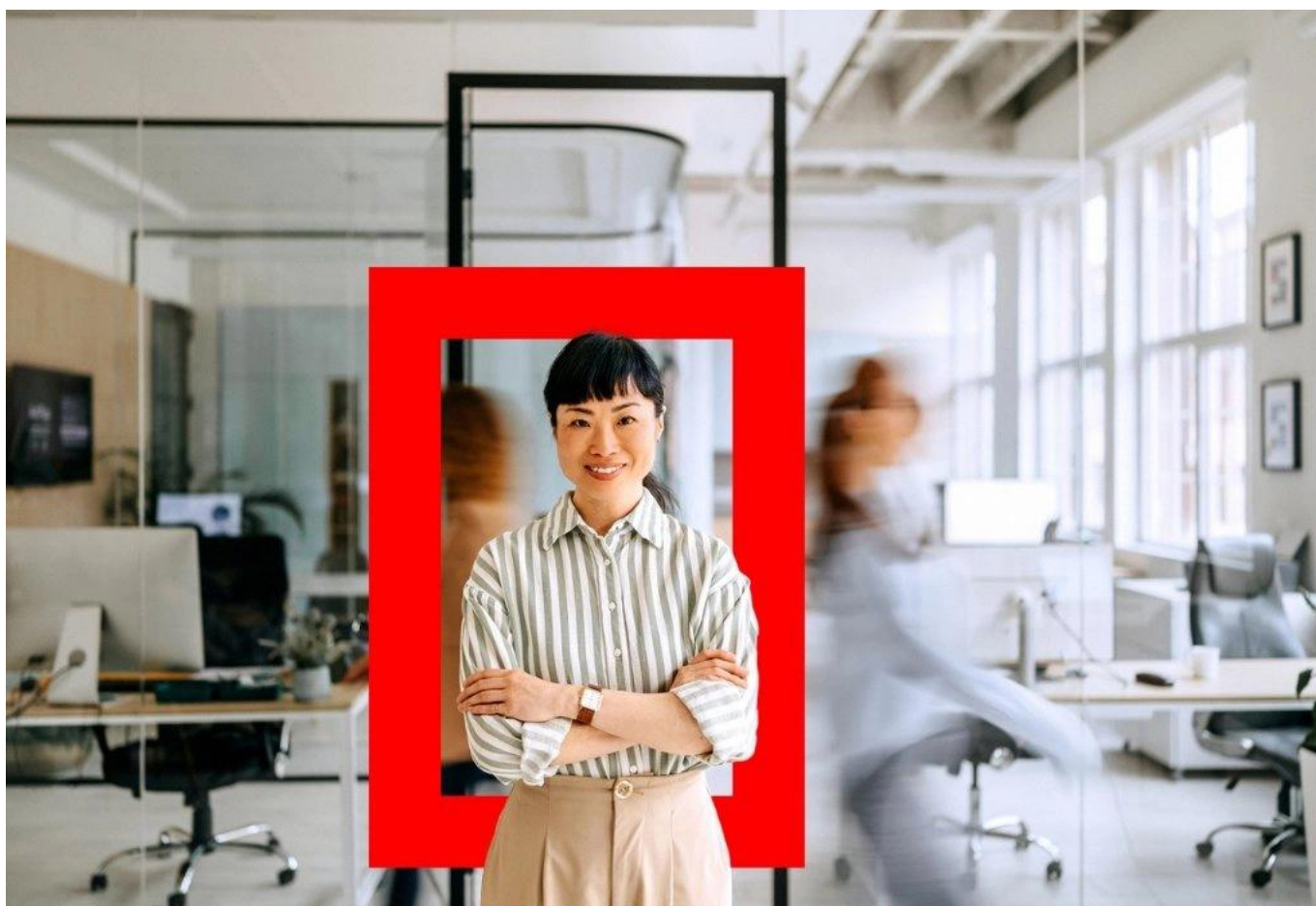


Keeping it human in the age of AI



September 1, 2026

Opening the door to meaning and dignity at work

By [Carlos Rodriguez-Lluesma](#)

From the Americas to Europe to Asia, we see a similar trend emerging: cautious labor markets, shaped by geopolitical uncertainty and, by many accounts, the adoption of AI to augment human work or to do jobs that people once did. Delegating to a machine what it can do better than a person may sometimes make business sense, but the bigger question that responsible business leaders should be asking is: How do we preserve and promote that which is uniquely human in the midst of this changing environment?

This has been the focus of our attention at IESE Business School over the past year, above all at our [Dignity at Work conference](#). We highlight some of the key takeaways in this special report.

Giulio Maspero and Ilaria Vigorelli, experts in relational ontology who spoke at the conference, offered a useful image for how we should approach these changes: as *limen*, a threshold or doorway leading to greater human dignity and worth, rather than as *limes*, a barrier that limits agency and contradicts people's dignity and worth.

Are you, as a leader, opening or closing opportunities for people to express their humanity at work? Do you feel your own dignity and the meaning you derive from your work being amplified or reduced? The report offers practical frameworks for answering both questions and for acting on the answers.

The task for each of us is to orient our organizations toward protecting human capabilities. A *limes* becomes *limen* when we honor the inherent relational character of work and design it so that it may foster human flourishing.

The same obligation reaches beyond the workplace. Arrangements that blur the line between work and home life, as remote work often does, leave people little room to be anything other than workers. Yet "unproductive" time has its own worth — and not just as an investment in later performance. Dignified work presupposes a life that is not simply work, and protecting that life is a task for those who design the work, not only for those who do it.

How the future of work plays out depends, in Pope Leo XIV's framing, on which of two alternative building projects we take up. His encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, on safeguarding the human person in the time of artificial intelligence, which we also discuss in this report, sets the story of the Tower of Babel against the rebuilding of Jerusalem under Nehemiah in the 5th century B.C. On one side, a single language, a single technology and a single-minded endeavor of people building a name for themselves; on the other, a governor who gathered people, assigned them a section to rebuild, listened to their concerns, coordinated their efforts and addressed any opposition. Nehemiah's approach lies at the

heart of our argument. By choosing the “way of Nehemiah,” as the Pope recommends, we are choosing to put “the human person at the center of our choices.”

At IESE, this is our shared desire. Our doorway (*limen*) is open. We commend this report to our readers in the hope that your doorway remains open, too.

A relational test for AI

Most conversations about AI begin with tools: what can be automated, accelerated, predicted or controlled. In practice, however, what we need to focus on is how AI redistributes power, alters expectations and reshapes what people understand their work to mean.

[SEE THE FRAMEWORK](#)

5 leadership actions to boost meaning when rolling out digital technologies:

- 1. Design digital work systems with meaning in mind**
- 2. Provide upskilling to help workers adapt**
- 3. Encourage job crafting**
- 4. Be mindful of how you frame the change**
- 5. Engage with public policymakers**

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The right to be unproductive



People feel guilty when they're not actively doing something, but we need to preserve space for that.

Leisure, rest and the right to be unproductive are essential for human flourishing. And while many companies would agree with this in theory — adopting measures like flextime and teleworking, which are meant to support work-life balance — the reality is far different.

In our always online world, total disconnection may be impossible. But there can be better ways to connect.

Jose Maria Alvarez-Pallete, former CEO and Chair of Telefonica, and philosophy professor R.J. Snell explain *how* in this refreshing conversation with IESE's Santiago Alvarez de Mon.

[RECLAIM YOUR TIME >](#)

33 %

of companies don't calculate the cost of absenteeism

Tackling the problem of absenteeism requires, first, having the data but, even more important, having a granular understanding of what lies behind the data. Only then can you begin to take remedial action. For example, a small percentage of employees accounts for the majority of absences. This should invite a deeper examination of the root causes for that group of people. Is it related to personal wellbeing? Is it a leadership issue? Does work need to be organized differently? Unless you ask and go deeper, you will remain stuck covering absences.

10 WAYS TO TACKLE ABSENTEEISM

Leading with Magnificent Humanity

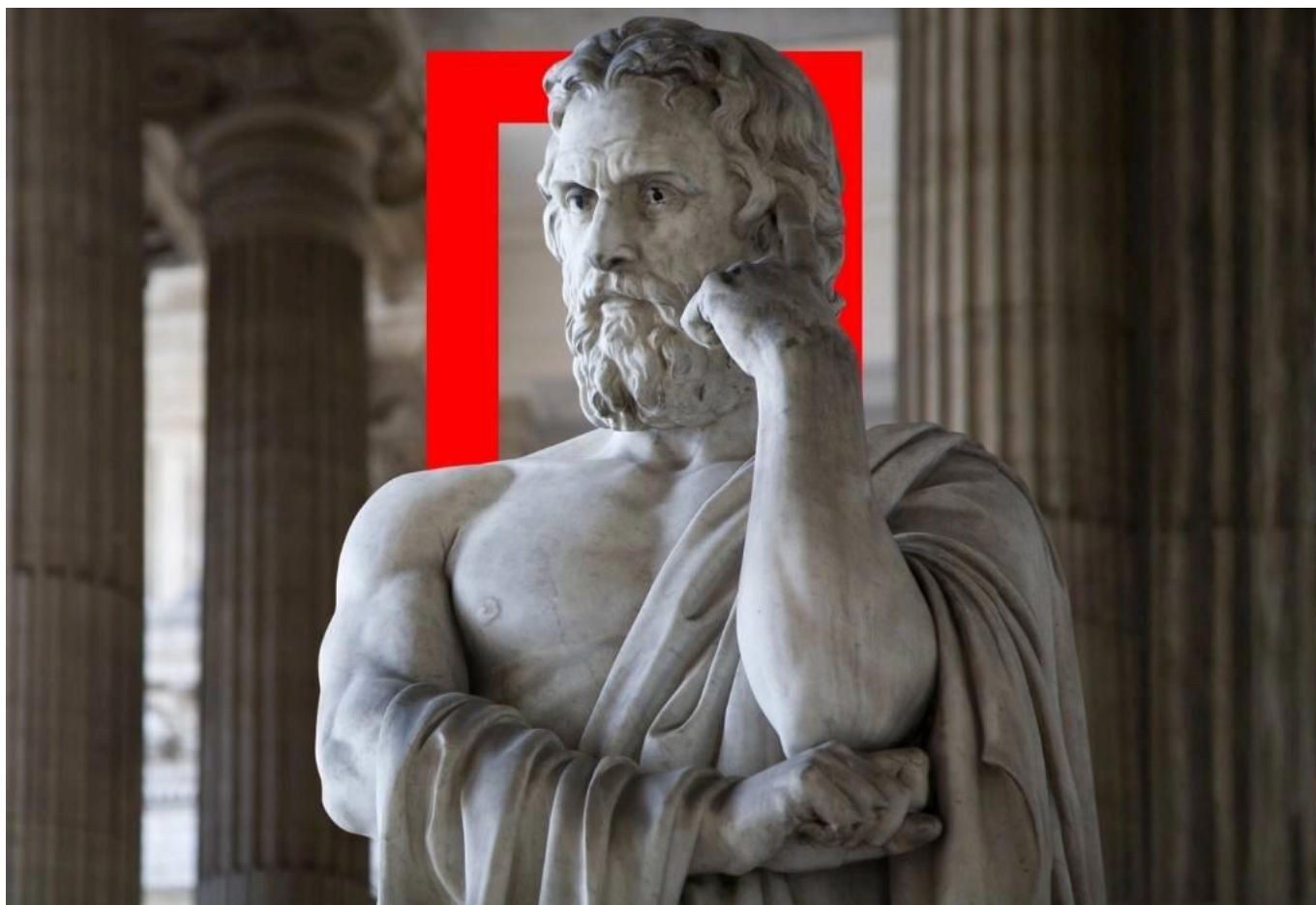
Who said that the growing power of AI forces us to confront:

- our duty to the global poor?
- the need for moral imagination and ambition regarding human flourishing?
- the need for discernment on the nature of AI models?

Hint: It wasn't the Pope, although Pope Leo XIV chose to address "Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence" in his first encyclical.

Here we analyze the headline-making encyclical, highlighting the applicable lessons for business.

[WISE WORDS FOR LEADERS >](#)



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