

UNICON ANNUAL WORKSHOP 2026

What Does It Mean to Be Human?

Impressions, insights, and takeaways from
UNICON's 2026 Annual Workshop hosted by MIT
Sloan School of Management Executive
Education

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Introduction



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Introduction

“UNICON is a consortium of vibrant learning. Look around you, left and right. You can learn something from each and every person here.”

With those words, UNICON Executive Director Melanie Weaver Barnett welcomed representatives from 45 schools and 14 countries to MIT Sloan School of Management for two days of learning, experimentation, and reflection.

The spirit of the gathering was captured by UNICON Board Chair Aldemir Drummond: “Getting the most out of UNICON involves mutuality: giving and taking in equal measure.”

Exchange of ideas has always been central to UNICON. Executive education is, as MIT Sloan’s Eric Bergemann reminded the room, “a team sport,” within “exec-ed shops,” institutions, between schools, and across the wider community that UNICON interacts with.

For this annual workshop, that community gathered at MIT Sloan, who have long been a leading presence in executive education and within UNICON. Participants were among the first cohorts to experience a new purpose-built executive learning facility, state-of-the-art and highly technology-enabled (for instance, with microphones embedded throughout the classrooms, allowing every voice to be heard). A fitting setting for an event equally concerned with both technological possibility and human participation.

MIT’s strong identity around Mens et Manus (“Mind and Hand”) provided the backdrop. This philosophy is visible across the campus, where different disciplines, laboratories, workshops and creative spaces sit alongside one another, encouraging ideas to cross boundaries and move quickly from thought into experimentation. That spirit of trying, building, testing and learning was reflected in the workshop design, alongside an interdisciplinary line-up of speakers spanning entrepreneurship, psychology, technology, journalism, communication and executive education, each bringing a different lens to the central theme.

Setting the context, Bergemann reflected on the extraordinary pace of AI adoption as well as mounting concerns around its consequences, and posed a fundamental question: “Are these challenges about technological systems? Or about decisions made by people who design and use the systems?”

Introduction

For business schools, that distinction is crucial. The leaders passing through executive education classrooms are among those making ‘big bets’ and big decisions: deciding how AI will be deployed, what work it will replace, where human judgement should remain, and ultimately whether its impact moves organizations and society towards more positive or negative outcomes.

With participants ready to roll up their proverbial sleeves, the workshop turned to its central theme: exploring how people and AI might learn and work together.

At its heart was one expansive question that would be explored from multiple perspectives over the two days ahead: What does it mean to be human?



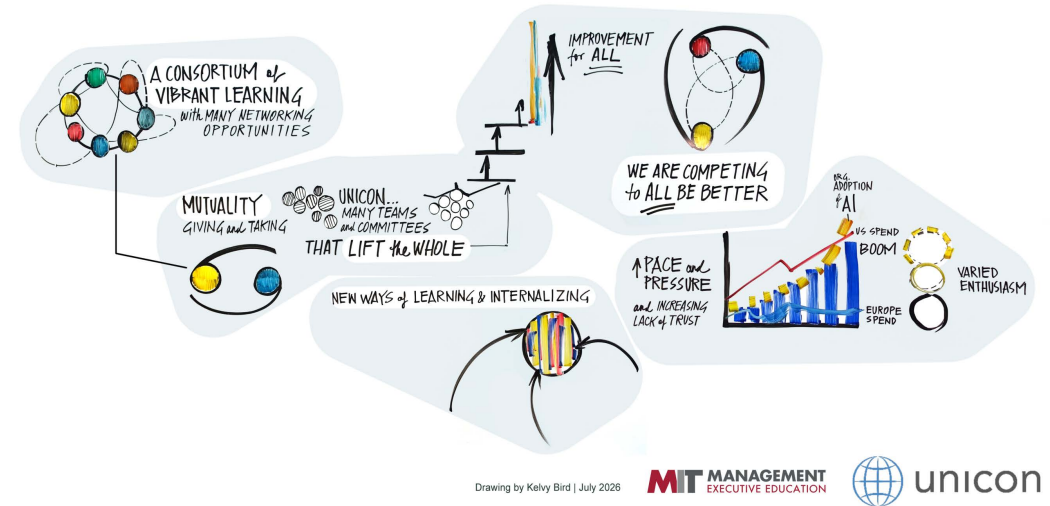
Introduction

VISUAL RECORD OF THE WORKSHOP

Throughout the workshop, MIT Sloan Senior Lecturer Kelvy Bird created graphical representations of each session in real time. These visual summaries captured the key ideas, themes and conversations as they emerged, creating a unique record of the learning experience. Bird's graphics are reproduced throughout this report alongside the corresponding sessions, providing an additional perspective on the discussions and illustrating how the workshop's ideas connected and evolved over the two days.

Welcome and Setting the Stage

Melanie Barnett, Aldemir Drummond, Peter Hirst, Eric Bergemann



10 Opportunities for Executive Education in the Age of AI

UNICON's 2026 Annual Workshop at MIT Sloan School of Management explored what it means to be human in the age of AI, the implications for how leaders learn, work and adapt, and what that means for executive education. These are the core opportunities that emerged from across the sessions.

1. Double down on social connection as a competitive advantage

Executive education has always created value by bringing people together. As AI becomes more capable of delivering information and personalized learning, Ben Shields argued that the sector should double down on this strength. The opportunity to bring people together in ways that challenge assumptions, build trust and forge lasting relationships may become one of executive education's hardest advantages for competitors to replicate.

2. Fill a large and fast-moving gap in executive AI literacy

Just 33.8% of S&P 500 leaders show public evidence of AI literacy. 87% of senior leaders say strong AI literacy will soon be required while just 9% rate their organization's current capability as very strong. Allied to this, only 17% of organizations currently use business schools for AI learning. The gap is substantial and because "the language of AI is still being written," so is the ongoing opportunity to help leaders keep pace.

3. Become the place where leaders have permission to experiment

Across the workshop, "tinker time" emerged as a recurring need. While 86% of organizations see hands-on experimentation as critical to building AI understanding, just 8% provide sufficient time and space for it. Executive education can provide the structure, guidance and psychological safety for the kind of experimentation organizations struggle to accommodate internally: "The classroom is where we can take risks."

4. Help leaders adapt to AI, rather than simply adopt it

As organizations evolve from groups of people into networks of human and artificial "nodes," leaders face deeper questions about how work should be redesigned. Which tasks should exist, which should be delegated to AI, and which human capabilities need to be protected? Executive education can help organizations look beyond tool adoption towards adaptation, including preparing leaders for roles that look set to be reconfigured.

10 Opportunities for Executive Education in the Age of AI

5. Develop the human capabilities that become more valuable alongside AI

As baseline answers and competent outputs become more readily available, value may concentrate around curiosity, creativity, judgement, collaboration and the ability to ask questions worth answering. Executive education can also provide an antidote to some of the risks of greater AI dependence, i.e. convergence, loss of originality and declining human dexterity - by creating experiences that challenge assumptions and expose leaders to genuinely different perspectives.

6. Help functional leaders learn to see and transform the whole system

Organizations see AI's greatest potential in strategic and organizational redesign, yet many remain collections of highly efficient but separate functional silos. Transformation requires leaders to move from understanding their own function to understanding how the whole system works. Business schools are well positioned to provide the cross-functional "connective tissue" organizations increasingly need. Notably, the ability to work across functions is now the number-one factor transformation leaders seek in an AI learning partner.

7. Treat continuous human adaptation as a core leadership capability

Technology can change in weeks; deeply embedded human behaviours cannot. Leadership development has an important role in helping people become more flexible and less resistant to continuous change through reflection, coaching and experimentation. Leadership itself may increasingly need to be treated as an "ongoing product development project," a human-owned cycle of action, feedback and recalibration.

8. Design learning around what humans remember, feel and discover

Shira Springer's P.R.I.M.E.D. framework (Purposeful, Relatable, Immersive, Memorable, Emotional and Discovery), provides a useful lens for designing experiences that engage more than the intellect. At a time when learning designers are being asked to integrate more AI, the enduring human need for belonging, shared experience and genuine connection should remain firmly in view: "We still prefer humans to machines."

10 Opportunities for Executive Education in the Age of AI

9. Move from delivering knowledge to collaborating around live challenges

Only 23% of organizations primarily view learning partners as “experts who bring the knowledge.” Many AI transformation leaders are themselves operating close to the frontier and increasingly want partners who bring different expertise to the table. This creates an opportunity to move beyond transactional delivery towards co-creation, live problem-solving and a relationship framed as: “we are two partners, with different kinds of expertise, let’s work together.”

10. Position executive education around the wider transformation challenge

Organizations have significant emerging learning needs, a clearer diagnosis of where they need to get to, and considerable dissatisfaction with much of the learning currently available. The challenges extend from workforce anxiety and reskilling to organizational redesign, strategy and changing operating models. As much of this aligns closely with the strengths of management education, there is a potential “wave of demand” for providers that can help organizations navigate the whole transformation.

SESSION 1

The Company of the Future: Out-competing in the Age of AI

The Company of the Future: Out-competing in the Age of AI

Day one got off to a rocket-like start with Paul Cheek, Senior Lecturer in Technological Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Strategic Management at MIT Sloan, exploring what organizations might look like as AI moves from being a tool that people use to something that sits within ‘the organization chart’ itself.

A serial technology entrepreneur, software engineer and educator, Cheek brought two perspectives to the discussion: what he is hearing from the C-suites and boards he works with through MIT, and what he is seeing at the leading edge of entrepreneurship.

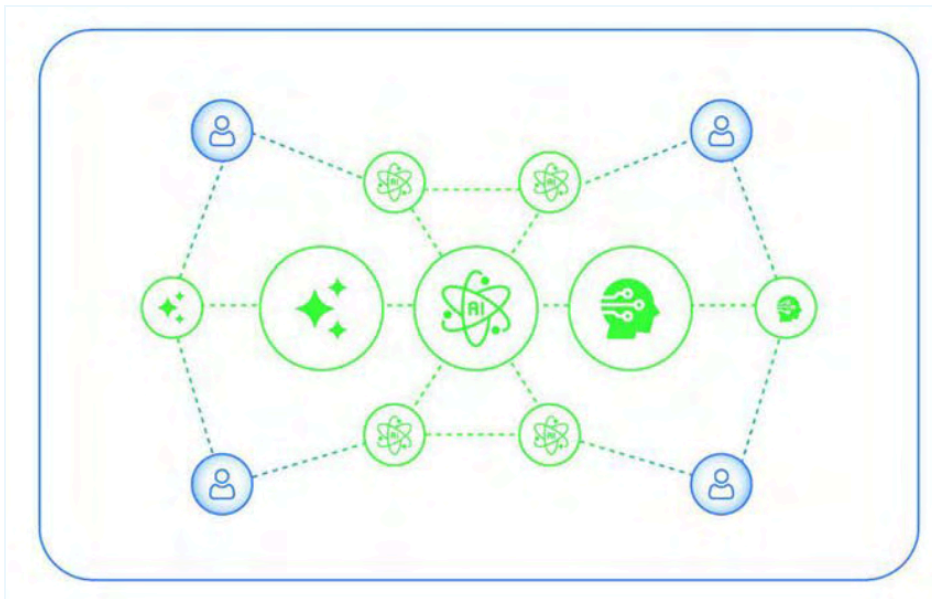
His recurring metaphor came from Wayne Gretzky:
“Skate to where the puck is going to be.”



Too many organizations, Cheek suggested, are rushing to meet AI where it is today rather than anticipating where it is heading next. With the technology moving so quickly, one of the biggest challenges for leaders is deciding where to focus: what do we prioritize when there are so many opportunities we could be working on?

The Company of the Future: Out-competing in the Age of AI

When AI Enters the Organization Chart



Cheek illustrated the scale of the shift through the evolution of a familiar organizational artefact: the organization chart.

The traditional or “legacy” chart contains people arranged in a pyramidal hierarchy. The next stage is “1:1 pairing,” where each individual uses an AI tool such as ChatGPT or Gemini. From there comes the “personal swarm,” with individuals drawing on their own stack of AI tools, followed by “shared agency,” where teams access and contribute to common AI systems. The final stage is “role reversal”: AI agents themselves begin to occupy roles within the organization chart.

Cheek challenged the traditional definition of an organization as “a group of people working together in an organized way for a shared purpose.” Increasingly, he suggested, we may need to think instead in terms of “a group of nodes that work together,” some human, some artificial.

The competitive implications are already becoming apparent. While established companies have boards governing organizations of thousands of human employees, Cheek described start-ups being created by “students in dorm rooms” who can set intent for “armies of thousands of AI agents,” that are busily taking market share from more established players.

How quickly can their leaders in incumbent organizations understand and adapt to these possibilities and threats?

The Company of the Future: Out-competing in the Age of AI

The Executive AI Literacy Gap with data from Nexed Insight

To explore the scale of that challenge, Cheek shared research from his AI-Driven Enterprise Institute, which analyzed more than half a million public source documents to assess AI literacy, advocacy, orientation and implementation across the S&P 500.

The headline finding was stark: just 33.8% of leaders demonstrated public evidence of AI literacy.

“Two out of three leaders steering America’s largest companies show no public evidence of AI literacy.”

Cheek connected this with research conducted by Nexed Insight in partnership with UNICON. While 87% of senior leaders say strong or very strong AI literacy will be required to achieve their organizations' AI goals over the next 12–24 months, just 9% rate their organization's current AI literacy as very strong. Among lower-maturity organizations, that falls to zero.

Yet the data also points to a significant opportunity for executive education. Technology partners are currently the most widely used source of AI-related learning, at 67%, while universities and business schools sit at the bottom of the list, used by just 17% of organizations.

At the same time, the capabilities organizations say they need most are overwhelmingly strategic and organizational rather than technical. Strategic thinking and adaptability lead the list, while technical AI skills rank last. Almost half also say existing learning formats cannot keep pace with the speed of change, and 44% find the learning available too generic for their context.

For Cheek, this distinction is key. Tool adoption may be the technology vendor's job. Transformation i.e. strategy, operating models and leadership - this is the territory of management education. And yet, currently, only 17% of organizations are using it.

Creating Space to Tinker

If leaders are to close this gap, Cheek argued, they need time to experiment. He described his own commitment to “tinker time”: a dedicated 12-hour block every week spent experimenting and learning with AI. Without it, he believes he would quickly fall behind.

His challenge to the room was more achievable: take a day next week and dedicate it entirely to exploring what is possible. But experimentation also needs some structure. Cheek pointed to Canva giving employees a week away from their usual work to “learn AI,” an initiative he said had not been successful. Simply creating time is not enough; people need direction, challenges and opportunities to apply what they are learning.

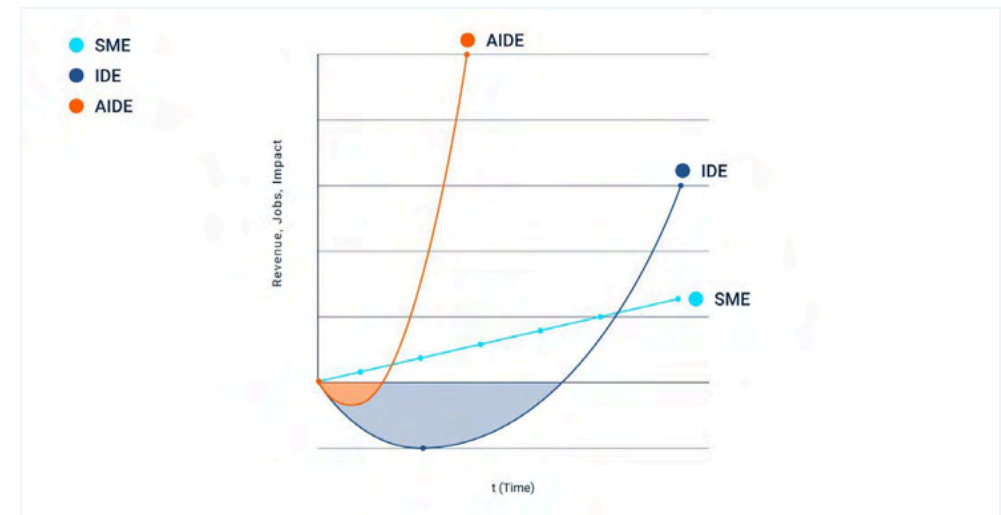
The Company of the Future: Out-competing in the Age of AI



This idea would recur throughout the workshop: in a field moving this quickly, experimentation can no longer be something leaders squeeze into spare moments. It needs to become part of how they work and learn. Who better to provide that structure, than business schools?

From Innovation-Driven to AI-Driven Enterprise

Cheek next turned to the world of entrepreneurship, illustrating how AI is changing not only what entrepreneurs can do, but the economics of building a new venture.



Traditional small and medium-sized enterprises tend to grow gradually. Innovation-driven enterprises follow a different trajectory: an initial period of investment in innovation and product development takes them into negative territory before growth eventually allows them to overtake the traditional SME.

AI-driven enterprises compress that curve dramatically. With “much more limited risk capital required,” entrepreneurs can now build, test and scale ideas with far lower upfront investment. Activities that once required teams, specialist capabilities and significant capital can increasingly be accomplished through combinations of AI tools and agents.

The Company of the Future: Out-competing in the Age of AI

“We are in the dial-up era of AI,”

Cheek told the room, inviting participants to remember technologies such as Napster and LimeWire, and consider how primitive those early experiences now appear.

What happens when all of this speeds up? “The puck is moving fast.”

Building a Startup in 30 Minutes

In a rapid-fire 30-minute demonstration, Cheek set out to create a new start-up from scratch, first using Nexed Insight research alongside conversations sourced from Reddit to identify a genuine market pain point. What followed was a meta-prompting masterclass.

A collection of tools was assembled into an AI-enabled venture-building system. NotebookLM served as “the brain”: a central repository containing the venture's source material, allowing Cheek to interrogate and build from a controlled body of evidence rather than the wider information on which general-purpose models are trained. From there, it generated expert-level prompts that could be passed into specialist tools.

Using MIT's 24-step Disciplined Entrepreneurship “Jet Pack” methodology, as the underlying framework, Cheek moved rapidly from “surfacing the pain” to developing the components of a functioning business. In quick succession, AI tools helped generate a landing page, identify prospects and create outreach sequences, build a five-year financial model, and produce a pitch deck.

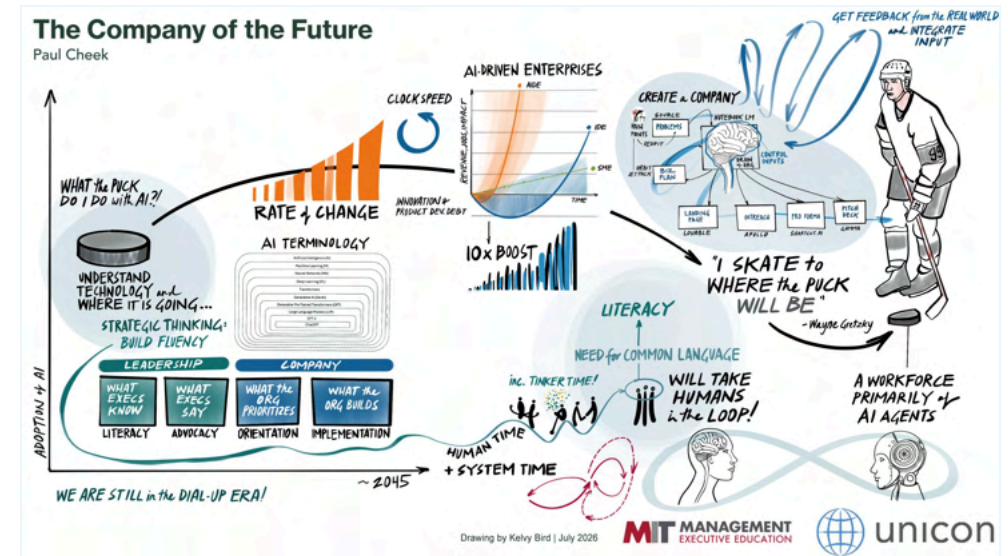
The individual outputs were impressive. More striking was the speed at which Cheek moved between them, prompting largely by voice, connecting one tool to the next, and continually using AI not simply to produce an answer, but to generate better instructions for another AI system.



The Company of the Future: Out-competing in the Age of AI

For an executive education audience, the demonstration offered an immediate glimpse of the “art of the possible.” It was fast, occasionally dizzying, and deliberately energizing. But because the exercise began with real research into the challenges facing organizations and executive education, it remained grounded in problems the room recognized to be real.

The session left participants with a vivid demonstration of how quickly the economics of innovation are changing, and of the growing gap between occasionally using an AI assistant, and redesigning work around what these technologies can now do, as well as the imperative to keep “skating to where the puck is going.”



SESSION 2

Keeping the Human in the Loop

Keeping the Human in the Loop

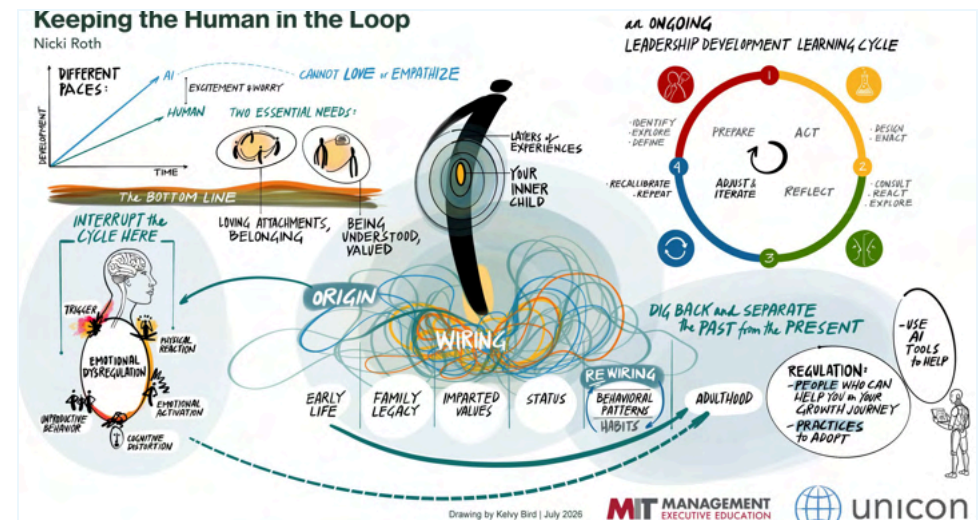
After the hurtling speed and technological possibility of the opening session, the workshop deliberately moved to a more reflective mode.

Nicki Roth's Keeping the Human in the Loop was intentionally slower paced, more contemplative and more personal. If Paul Cheek demonstrated the extraordinary pace at which AI capabilities are advancing, Roth focused on the other side of the equation: humans do not change nearly as quickly, posing the question, "Leaders need to be more adaptable. How can we get them there?"

There is, Roth argued, a widening gap between the pace of technological change and the pace at which human beings can process, adapt and change their own behaviour. The excitement surrounding AI therefore sits alongside understandable anxiety, and navigating human-AI work partnering requires attention to both.

For all the advances in technology, our fundamental human needs have not changed. We still seek love, attachment and belonging. We want to feel valued and understood. And, fundamentally: "We still prefer humans to machines."

Roth pointed to an interesting description offered by Claude itself: rather than thinking of AI as a genuine conversational partner, it may be more useful to think of it as "a thoughtful research assistant." However sophisticated the interaction may appear, the machine lacks the empathy and shared experience that underpin human relationships.



Keeping the Human in the Loop

Why Human Change Is Hard

The session returned to some enduring principles of leadership development and adult learning. A reminder, amid the accelerating conversation around AI, that some aspects of human development remain remarkably constant.

“We are the sum total of all our experiences up to this moment,” noted Roth, inviting participants to consider why changing deeply embedded behaviours can be so difficult. As adults, we carry forward values, habits and coping mechanisms shaped by family legacy, early experiences and the environments in which we developed.

Roth described how behaviours that once served us well can persist long after they stop being useful. Responses developed and reinforced through earlier experiences can become habitual, resurfacing later in situations that feel similar even when the context has changed and the behaviour is now counterproductive.

Roth illustrated the point through examples from her executive coaching work. One senior executive was highly effective with his own team but displayed damaging behaviours among his C-suite peers. Exploring the origins of those behaviours revealed patterns rooted in childhood experiences of financial instability and competition for recognition.

The breakthrough came through a simple reframing: “The CEO is not your Dad. The executive team are not your siblings to compete with for praise and attention.”

The example prompted an important challenge from the room. One participant observed that a woman or person of colour displaying similarly toxic behaviours might never have been afforded the same opportunity to understand and change, they may simply have been removed.

It was a valuable moment of friction. The intervention introduced a perspective that might otherwise have gone unconsidered, highlighting something inherently valuable about learning alongside people whose experiences and perspectives differ from our own: other people can challenge the assumptions and blind spots we do not know we have. Where AI tends to help develop our own thinking and often reinforces it, people with different backgrounds, experiences and world views can fundamentally reshape it.

Keeping the Human in the Loop

Leadership as an Ongoing Development Project

Throughout the session, participants were asked to turn the lens towards themselves. In a series of journal exercises, Roth invited the room to identify a counterproductive behaviour they had tried, with limited success, to change. Participants could then ask an AI tool for advice before adding deeper context about the possible origins of that behaviour and observing how the response changed.

The exercise illustrated both the usefulness and the limits of AI in supporting reflection. Additional context produced richer responses, but meaningful personal development requires something more than an initial diagnosis or piece of advice. It requires a continuing cycle of preparation, action, reflection, adjustment and iteration.

“The coaching aspect is very important to us here at MIT. That’s what aids this cycle and process,” said Roth, offering a useful analogy: “Leadership should be an ongoing product development project.”

Like any product under continuous development, leadership requires experimentation, feedback and recalibration. It also requires a willingness to examine what lies beneath the behaviours we are trying to change.



Intervening Before the Spiral

Roth connected this work to neuroscience and emotional regulation, quoting neuroscientist António Damásio, “We are not thinking machines that feel. We are feeling machines that think.”

When a trigger occurs, the body reacts. Emotional activation follows, which can lead to cognitive distortion and ultimately unproductive behaviour. The opportunity for change lies early in that sequence, recognizing the trigger and physical reaction before the pattern gathers momentum. “This is where growth becomes possible,” Roth suggested.

Keeping the Human in the Loop

Understanding the neuroscience behind these reactions can also help reduce resistance to learning. Rather than treating difficult behaviours simply as personal failings to be corrected, leaders can better understand the mechanisms that produce them, and identify the interventions and support that might help them respond differently.

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The session closed with participants working in pairs to discuss personal leadership challenges and consider the support that might help them “untangle old reactions and calm our nervous systems.” Roth also encouraged richer, ongoing journaling to create a personal record through which patterns can be observed over time, and used as data for continued development.

Her closing challenge extended beyond individual leaders to the executive education professionals in the room. Yes, executive education teaches content. But if organizations need leaders capable of adapting continuously in an era of extraordinary change, another question becomes equally important: “What will make your learners less resistant and more flexible to learning new things?”

In an event focused on people and AI learning and working together, the session offered a timely reminder: however quickly the technology moves, human transformation still happens at a human pace.

For all the advances in technology, our fundamental human needs have not changed. We still seek love, attachment and belonging. We want to feel valued and understood. And, fundamentally: “We still prefer humans to machines.”

SESSION 3

Living Between Two Waves: On Being Human in the Age of AI

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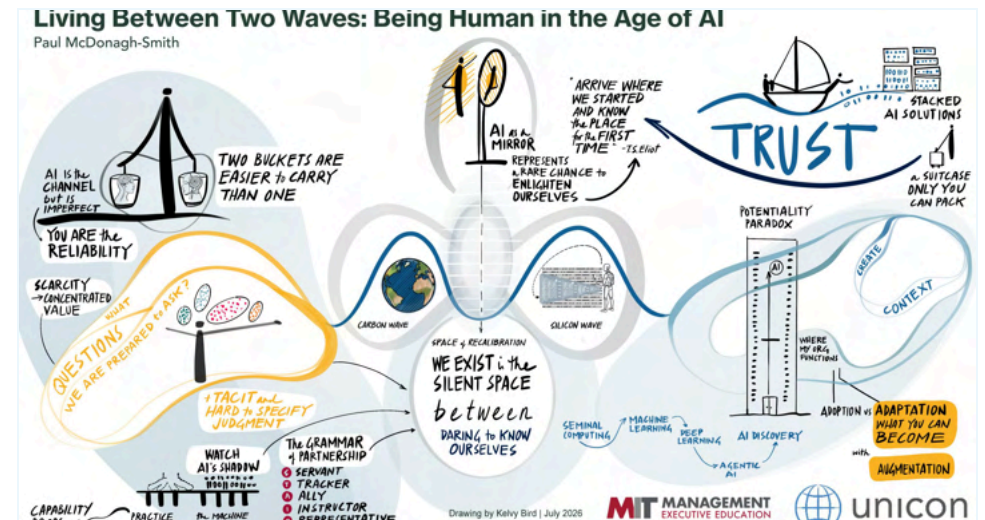
While the opening sessions explored first the extraordinary speed of technological change, and then the slower and more complex reality of human change, Paul McDonagh-Smith brought the two together.

His session, Living Between Two Waves, offered a philosophical examination of human-AI interaction, asking not simply what the technology can do, but what building and working alongside artificial intelligence is teaching us about ourselves.

“For all the years I have spent teaching executives how to work with AI, the most unexpected thing I have learned is that the subject was never really the machine. It turns out, it is us. I set out to describe machines and found myself describing human beings. Building artificial intelligence holds a mirror to human intelligence.”

McDonagh-Smith described humanity as living between two waves. The first is the carbon wave: the atoms and molecules that make up human beings and the physical world. The second is the silicon wave: AI, models, bytes, clouds and digital spaces.

The challenge is not to choose between them, but to live in and occupy the space between the two. It is in that space, he argued, that we need to continually recalibrate: deciding what remains our responsibility, and what can become the responsibility of the machine.



Living Between Two Waves: On Being Human in the Age of AI

Unpacking Intelligence

Marvin Minsky famously described intelligence as a “suitcase word,” packed with different meanings and capabilities. Unpack it and intelligence becomes learning, reasoning, memory, perception, judgement, intuition, imagination, aspiration - even the ability to read a room.

This matters because artificial intelligence does not simply replicate human intelligence in a neat or uniform way. McDonagh-Smith described the machine almost as a “photographic negative” of the human: extraordinarily capable in areas we find difficult, while struggling with things humans can do almost instinctively.

The various paradoxes of AI help illuminate that distinction. Tacit knowledge, for example, often resists being written down. We may know how to do something without being able to fully articulate how we do it, making that capability difficult to codify and therefore difficult to automate.

This creates a practical challenge for organizations: “Defining the problem we have to solve for is one of the biggest challenges we have in organizations.”

It also points towards the importance of bringing diverse forms of knowledge into AI development. Coming to this from outside computer science, McDonagh-Smith suggested, can be an advantage: your breadth of domain expertise creates perspectives that those building the models may not possess.



Living Between Two Waves: On Being Human in the Age of AI

Where Is the Frontier of Intelligence?

The capabilities needed to navigate the potential of AI successfully, for McDonagh-Smith, appear increasingly to be distinctly human ones: curiosity, creativity, collaboration and compassion.

Drawing on Demis Hassabis, McDonagh-Smith described a demanding test for artificial general intelligence: not simply whether AI can solve, but whether it can discover. It is one thing for a machine to solve a famous conjecture that humans have already identified as important. The sharper test is whether it could, for example, have formulated general relativity starting only from what Einstein knew in 1905.

“The frontier of intelligence has never been the answer. It is the questions worth asking that is the most human art of all. In that sense, curiosity is not a soft skill. It is the hard edge.”



For executive education, this has significant implications. If AI increasingly makes answers, analysis and competence readily available, value may concentrate around the ability to ask better questions, connect different domains, exercise judgement and imagine possibilities that have not yet been articulated.

Living Between Two Waves: On Being Human in the Age of AI

The corresponding risk is “convergence rather than diversity,” a loss of originality and invention as people increasingly draw on systems trained on the same accumulated body of existing knowledge. Participants were invited to consider where, within their own organizations, there might be a risk of automating away precisely the tacit, hard-to-specify judgement that makes certain work valuable. If what AI cannot do provides a signpost, which human capability is it telling us to invest in now?

Humans as the Reliability Mechanism

The answer, McDonagh-Smith argued, is not to seek perfection from either humans or machines: “Don’t strive for perfection, strive for improvement.”

Drawing on Claude Shannon's work in information theory, he highlighted the importance of error detection and correction. AI is an imperfect channel, and humans remain the reliability mechanism around it.

“Your oversight is not overhead, and not the bottleneck. It is the leverage that makes the whole system trustworthy. AI is the channel, you are the reliability.”

McDonagh-Smith is frequently asked whether particular roles, a financial analyst, for example, will continue to exist. He challenged the role itself as the wrong unit of analysis, suggesting it was more useful to decompose roles into their constituent tasks and activities, carefully examining what can be automated and what the consequences might be elsewhere in the system.

From Servant to Representative

McDonagh-Smith offered a framework for thinking about different levels of partnership between humans and AI.

At one end is the Servant: you direct, it executes, and you judge.

The Tracker scouts ahead, monitors and surfaces what you might otherwise miss.

The Ally describes a relationship where neither human nor machine is fully in control, with each bringing capabilities the other cannot.

As Instructor, AI coaches the human, who leaves the exchange more capable than before.

Living Between Two Waves: On Being Human in the Age of AI

And finally, the Representative acts with agency within boundaries set by the human.

The more useful question for organizations, therefore, may not be: How can AI help me do my tasks faster?

Instead: “What tasks should exist at all, and where on this ladder does each belong?”

The question comes with a warning. As people outsource more activities to AI, they may lose their own dexterity in performing them, and which may prove difficult to recover once lost.

“We will have traded mastery for convenience and called it transformation.” That possibility, McDonagh-Smith suggested, is one of the shadows hanging over AI adoption and a reason to approach decisions about automation with care.

From AI Adoption to Human Adaptation

Ultimately, however, McDonagh-Smith's argument was an optimistic one. AI, he suggested, could contribute to a kind of humanistic enlightenment, providing we use the technology not simply to ask what machines can do, but to reconsider what humans might become.

The distinction is between AI adoption, driven by the question What can we do?, and AI adaptation, which asks something deeper: What do you want to become?

“My invitation is not to adopt faster, but to adapt more deliberately.”

The answer may lie in scarcity. As competence becomes increasingly commodified, value will concentrate in capabilities that remain harder to reproduce: curiosity, collaboration, compassion and consilience.

For the sector represented in the room, McDonagh-Smith offered a clear challenge: “Executive education needs to be in the adaptation business, not just adoption.”

Living Between Two Waves: On Being Human in the Age of AI

He invited participants to consider which scarce human capacity might most define their value two years from now, and to resist losing sight of humanity amid the rush towards technological capability. “Become more fully, more deliberately, more courageously human,” he urged.

McDonagh-Smith began and ended with T.S. Eliot's Little Gidding, bringing the session, and in some ways the conference's central question, full circle: “We shall not cease from exploration, and at the end of our exploring, will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time.”

This creates a practical challenge for organizations:
“Defining the problem we have to solve for is one of the biggest challenges we have in organizations.”



SESSION 4

Storytelling, Connection, & Learning Experiences that Last

Storytelling, Connection & Learning Experiences that Last

The final session of Day One brought many of the day's threads together. Shira Springer, an award-winning sports journalist and lecturer at MIT Sloan, began by returning to two ideas participants had encountered earlier: “We are not thinking machines that feel. We are feeling machines that think,” and the invitation to become “more fully, deliberately, courageously human.”

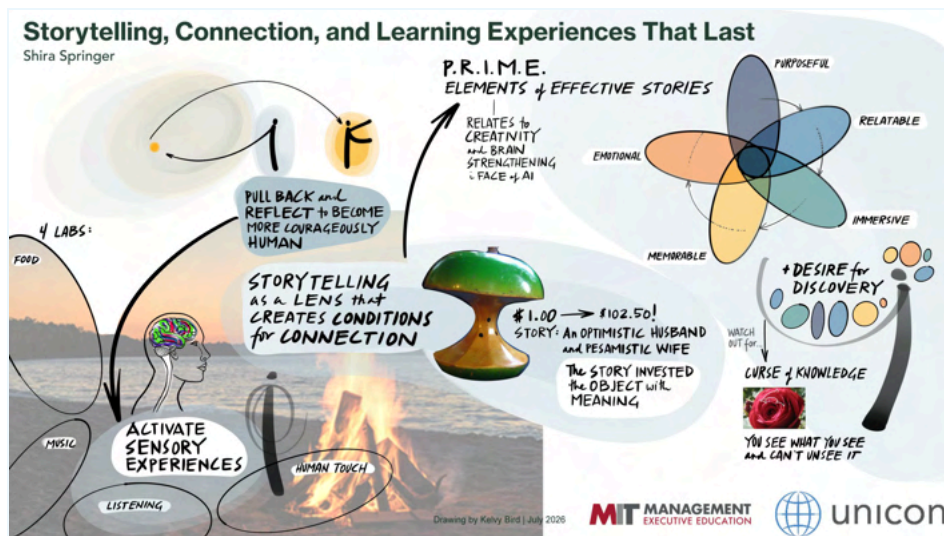
Her question for the room was a practical one: How can we design learning experiences that participants remember, and want to share?

Drawing on her background in storytelling, including many years covering professional sports for The Boston Globe, Springer explored how stories create the conditions for connection and why they can make experiences so powerful and memorable.

Springer opened with the Significant Objects project, in which ordinary second-hand objects increased dramatically in value when paired with compelling stories. This framed the central argument of the session: stories create meaning, shape memory and increase the value people attach to experiences - an idea with clear implications for learning design.

This Is Your Brain on Stories

Research into the neuroscience of storytelling suggests that people do not simply process stories as information. As we follow a narrative, sensory areas of the brain can become activated in ways that allow us to experience elements of what is being described. In other words, we do not simply hear the story. To some degree, we experience it as it happens.



Storytelling, Connection & Learning Experiences that Last

Springer invited participants to think about a television series, film or book they had loved (perhaps even binged), and consider why its storytelling had connected with them so strongly.

From there, she introduced five elements of effective storytelling that can also provide a useful lens for designing meaningful learning experiences:

P — Purposeful: What do you want learners to take away?

R — Relatable: Why should learners care? What makes the experience relevant enough for them to invest in it?

I — Immersive: How can the experience activate and engage the senses?

Then, if the conditions around purpose, relatability and immersion have been thoughtfully designed, Springer suggested, the stage is set for an experience to become:

M — Memorable

E — Emotional

Springer noted one further ingredient. Meaningful and shareable experiences depend on a ‘desire for discovery,’ something the learner themselves must bring to the experience, but which designers can create the conditions to unlock.

With that addition, P.R.I.M.E. became P.R.I.M.E.D.

From Storytelling to Experience

The room then moved from discussing memorable experiences to participating in them. Four “Discovery Labs” offered different explorations of how connection and perspective can be shaped through the design of an experience, deliberately engaging multiple human senses to create richer, more memorable learning. Each participant visited two, with each lab lasting just 20 minutes.

Storytelling, Connection & Learning Experiences that Last



The Food Lab demonstrated how even routine elements of a program, from shared meals to the food itself, can be designed more intentionally. Through multi-sensory exercises, participants explored how food can fuel connection, curiosity and learning, with moments of surprise and discussions around sustainability reinforcing the experience.



The Music Lab explored how music can shape emotion, strengthen connection and create shared identity. Participants were encouraged to think more intentionally about their audience and how sensory experiences can influence the way people engage, remember and work together.

The Listening Lab examined how the quality of attention changes the quality of connection, combining insights into different levels of listening with an exercise in which participants practised listening more deeply with a partner.

Storytelling, Connection & Learning Experiences that Last

And in the Human Touch Lab, participants worked together to create blankets for an organization supporting foster children in Massachusetts, exploring how making something collectively can transform a simple object into one invested with greater significance.

Across the labs, participants were encouraged to notice their own responses: What do you see, hear and feel that captures your attention? What helps you become immersed? What creates connection?

The variety of experiences demonstrated that the principles behind memorable learning need not depend on elaborate technology or grand interventions. Food, music, focused attention and making something with others can all become powerful learning experiences when the conditions around them are thoughtfully designed.

Designing for Discovery

Back in the classroom, discussion turned to how these principles might be applied to executive education.

One challenge is the “curse of knowledge”: once we know our programs, institutions and environments intimately, it becomes difficult to remember what it feels like to encounter them for the first time. Program designers may overlook details that shape a participant's experience precisely because those details have become invisible to them.

The P.R.I.M.E.D. framework offered a way to look again, asking not simply what content should be delivered, but what participants should feel, notice, discover and remember.

Think First, Then Bring in AI

Springer closed by returning directly to AI, and with a note of caution. She shared findings from recent MIT research examining differences in brain activity among people completing writing tasks with and without AI assistance. The study found weaker brain connectivity among participants receiving greater AI support, with ChatGPT users showing the lowest levels of brain engagement. Recall was also significantly weaker, while AI-assisted essays also, of course, tended to be more uniform.

Storytelling, Connection & Learning Experiences that Last

For Springer, one finding was particularly useful for learning design: timing matters. When participants first engaged critically with the task themselves and incorporated AI later, brain connectivity increased, “When we think critically about a task before turning to AI, we learn more and remember better. When we challenge ourselves before asking AI for assistance, we sharpen our ideas and strengthen our solutions.”

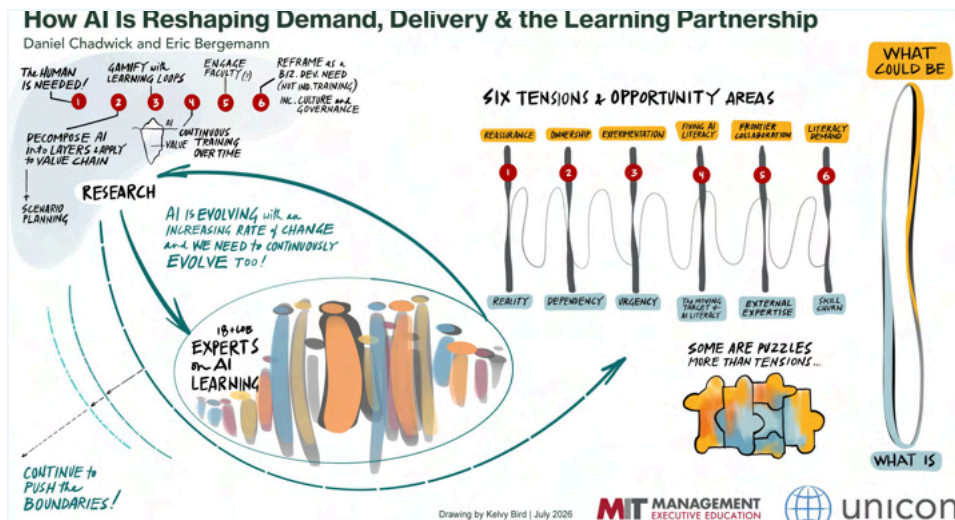
The message was not to avoid AI, but to be thoughtful about when and how it enters the learning process. After a day spent exploring both the extraordinary possibilities of artificial intelligence and the enduring complexity of human intelligence, it was a fitting note on which to end:

keep thinking critically as you integrate AI.

SESSION 5

Executive Learning at the Speed of Change

Executive Learning at the Speed of Change: How AI Is Reshaping Demand, Delivery, and the Learning Partnership



Chadwick began with some background to the research partnership. Nexed Insight is the research arm of IEDP, which has worked closely with business schools for more than 20 years. Nexed was established two years ago to research the space between the two sides of business education. “We always had strong connections on both sides of executive education: providers and clients. We wanted to create something useful in that space between, bringing stakeholders together around data and insights that speak equally to both sides, and promote more impactful partnerships that way.”

Nexed and UNICON are now entering the third year of their research partnership: “UNICON has been a tremendous partner from day one.”

Going to the Coalface

The latest research explored how the enormous challenge and opportunity of AI transformation is reshaping what organizations need from education, and how learning partnerships may need to change in response.

The research took a different approach to understanding that demand. Rather than beginning with talent and learning leaders, Nexed went directly to the executives leading AI transformation efforts: Chief Data Officers, Chief Technology Officers, and other transformation leaders.

Day Two began by looking at the distinct challenges for teaching and learning AI in Executive Education.

Daniel Chadwick, founder of Nexed Insight, and Eric Bergemann of MIT Sloan presented select findings from Executive Learning at the Speed of Change, the latest annual research collaboration between Nexed Insight and UNICON. The session detailed “six tensions” AI poses for developing executive education learning experiences, and asked participants how they would address these challenges in designing and delivering programs.

Executive Learning at the Speed of Change: How AI Is Reshaping Demand, Delivery, and the Learning Partnership



“We often start research like this speaking with CLOs, heads of talent, CHROs. Those are great conversations because we speak the same language of learning. But they can focus on the challenges learning leaders face in perfecting a solution, rather than the business challenge itself.”

Instead, the research went, “straight to the people at the coalface.” What emerged was greater clarity than expected about the destination organizations are trying to reach and what is currently missing from the learning available to help them, to get there.

Organizations are still primarily using AI to optimize existing processes. But the leaders surveyed and interviewed largely see its greater potential elsewhere: in strategic and organizational redesign, reimagining processes, operating models, products and new ways of working.

The problem is most organizations are not structurally set up for this: “Most organizations resemble groups of highly efficient but separate functional silos.”

As one leader interviewed for the study put it: “Leadership must go from understanding their function really well, to learning how the whole system works.”

Executive Learning at the Speed of Change: How AI Is Reshaping Demand, Delivery, and the Learning Partnership

For Chadwick, this was one of the research's most significant findings. Close to 50% of organizations are creating internal centres of excellence to support collaboration; while 'cross-functional collaboration' ranked as a 'top three' capability for unlocking AI transformation; and the number-one factor these leaders look for when selecting a learning partner is an "ability to work across functions."

"Can business schools provide the space and connective tissue to convene learning across functions and sprinkle in expertise from different disciplines? I would think they are perfectly positioned for that."

A Wave of Demand for Executive Education?

Taken together, the findings painted an optimistic picture for executive education. Organizations increasingly recognise that AI transformation is not simply a technical challenge requiring digital upskilling, but a strategic, organizational and human one. They are seeking support with capabilities such as systems thinking, collaboration, cultures of learning and organizational change, areas where business schools have traditionally been strong.

The opportunity is not automatic, however. As Paul Cheek highlighted in the previous day's session, business schools currently account for only a relatively small share of organizations' AI learning provision. Yet the research suggests demand is shifting beyond technical skills towards the broader leadership and transformation capabilities that executive education is well placed to support.

"Put that all together and there is a wave of demand here for providers who position themselves to deliver on this. For executive education teams wishing to receive a clear brief from their clients, it appears they are about to get what they wished for!"

Six Tensions for Learning to Address

Beneath the broader opportunity for executive education, the research surfaced six tensions that organizations are navigating as their AI transformation efforts progress:

#1 Organizations seek to reassure employees they won't be replaced by AI, even as AI adoption is, in some cases, directly linked to workforce reductions

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#2 Organizations rely on external partners to accelerate AI adoption, yet over time reliance can harden into dependency, limiting ownership and control

#3 Hands-on experimentation is seen as critical to building AI capability, yet affording the time and space for it is increasingly constrained

#4 AI literacy is viewed as key to unlocking transformation, yet it is not a fixed capability — it's a moving target that must be continuously maintained

#5 Learning partners are increasingly viewed less as “bringers of knowledge,” and more as partners for collaboration, yet executive education is built largely on transactional client-provider dynamics

#6 Gaps in AI capability and literacy rank as the top challenge in AI transformation, yet organizations are deprioritizing technical AI skills due to “skills fatigue”

Chadwick briefly unpacked each tension before the room was invited to work with them.

On #1, he argued that workforce anxiety cannot simply be treated as resistance to change. “The reason this is so widespread as a challenge is that this is a perfectly rational fear. You just have to read the headlines each week.”

Organizations may genuinely believe their AI strategy will ultimately generate growth and new roles, but “hypothetical jobs of the future are little solace to those made redundant today.” One useful response, he suggested, is to frame this as a talent development challenge: helping people build the capabilities that increase their future value to the organization, an area where executive education again is perfectly positioned to help.

On #2, the question is ultimately one of strategic choice. Many organizations have relied heavily on AI-enabled vendors to move quickly, but must now decide how much outsourcing is optimal and when dependence on external partners begins to erode ownership and control. Whether organizations choose to build capabilities internally or source them externally, the shape and structure of the organization will change, creating another role for learning: supporting those transitions, whichever form they take.

Executive Learning at the Speed of Change: How AI Is Reshaping Demand, Delivery, and the Learning Partnership

For #3, the data revealed a particularly striking gap. While 86% say hands-on experimentation is very important for building AI understanding, just 8% say they have sufficient time and space for it. In the rush to use AI to optimize existing processes, organizations are struggling to create room for the kind of “noodling around” that builds competence and enables discovery. As one leader interviewed for the research put it: “The classroom is where we can take risks.”

On #4, the challenge is that the very meaning of AI literacy continues to evolve. Unlike financial or data literacy, where the underlying language is relatively stable, “the language of AI is still being written.” Literacy also increasingly extends beyond understanding the technology. Applications are changing rapidly, but so too are regulation, law, ethics, geopolitics and the competitive landscape. “Leaders need to keep abreast of the whole piece to make informed decisions. Who will keep them updated?”

#5 points towards a changing relationship between organizations and their learning partners. Only 23% of survey respondents primarily viewed learning partners as “experts who bring the knowledge.” Many of the transformation leaders involved in the research are themselves working close to the frontier and bring substantial expertise of their own.

The opportunity here lies in embracing this shift: bringing different forms of expertise together, co-creating knowledge, working on live challenges and building more collaborative relationships.

“The framing from transformation leaders is: we are two partners, with different kinds of expertise, let’s work together.”

Finally, on #6, Chadwick cautioned against interpreting the relatively low priority given to technical AI skills as evidence that they no longer matter. Rather, as organizations mature into the challenge and understand the nature of AI transformation more clearly, a wider set of human, strategic and organizational capabilities is rising up the agenda: strategic thinking, adaptability, cross-functional collaboration and critical thinking.

From Tensions to Learning Solutions

The second half of the session handed these tensions over to the room.

Executive Learning at the Speed of Change: How AI Is Reshaping Demand, Delivery, and the Learning Partnership

Facilitated by Bergemann, each table was assigned one tension and given 30 minutes to unpack both sides of it and design a learning solution, program or product that could respond to the risks while also capturing the opportunities. Participants were asked to use both AI and person-to-person discussion in developing their ideas.

The tensions proved fertile ground. For the full 30 minutes, the room was filled with discussion as groups debated the underlying challenges, tested ideas and worked towards practical responses. The resulting presentations reflected the mixed methods used to create them: several groups worked their solutions through on a whiteboard, while another presented a deck created with AI.

The exercise brought the research back to one of the central ideas running through the workshop.

AI transformation is producing challenges that cannot be solved by technology adoption alone. They involve fear, trust, organizational design, collaboration, judgement, learning and human adaptation. For executive education, that complexity may be precisely where the opportunity lies.

SESSION 6

The Social Connection Imperative in the Age of AI

The Social Connection Imperative in the Age of AI

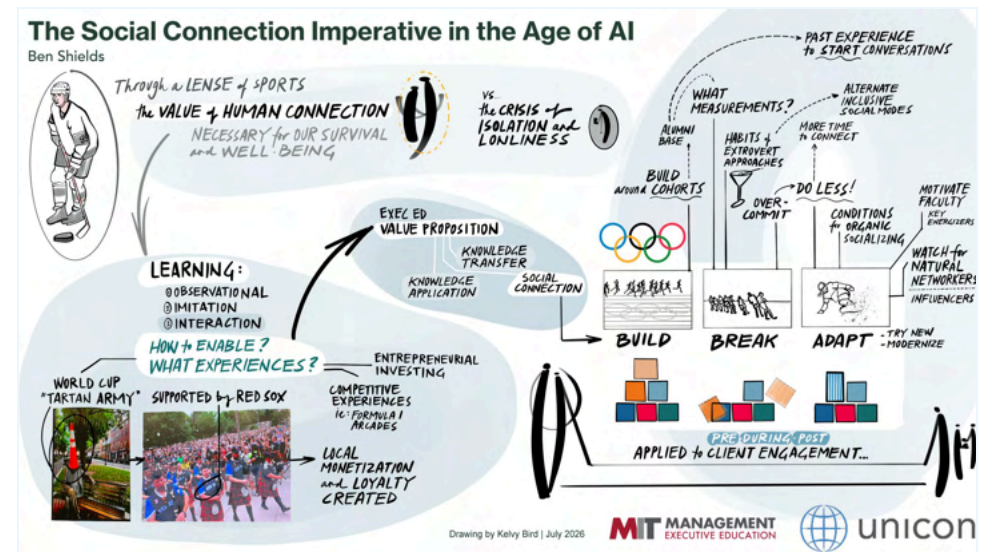
By this point, a common thread had begun to emerge across the workshop. The conversations repeatedly returned to challenges that technology alone cannot solve: helping people build trust, work across boundaries, navigate uncertainty and adapt together. Ben Shields' closing session drew these themes together by exploring one of the foundations on which they all depend: human connection.

Ben Shields, Senior Lecturer in Managerial Communication at MIT Sloan, began with a simple proposition: as AI becomes increasingly capable of delivering information, analysis and personalized learning, the social dimension of executive education looks set to rise in value and importance.

The Social Value of Executive Education

For Shields, the era of AI represents an opportunity to rethink how executive education creates value: "I firmly believe we need to develop a new value proposition for executive education that is much more about social connection."

The argument begins with a wider societal trend. In the United States, people are spending less time together in person, a decline that accelerated sharply during the pandemic but had begun much earlier. Technology has made it easier to communicate and stay connected remotely, but that has not necessarily translated into stronger social connection.



Research increasingly associates strong social connections with better health, well-being and resilience, while loneliness and isolation carry significant costs for individuals and organizations. Within this new reality, the simple act of bringing people together takes on greater significance.

The Social Connection Imperative in the Age of AI

From Networking to Connection

Executive education has always offered opportunities to meet other people. But Shields challenged the room to think beyond conventional ideas of “networking.” The value lies not simply in accumulating contacts or exchanging business cards, but in the quality and variety of the interactions and relationships created.



This can mean connecting with people from different functions within the same organization, helping participants understand perspectives and challenges beyond their own part of the system. It can mean encountering people from different industries, cultures and backgrounds whose assumptions and worldviews differ from our own. And it can mean creating relationships that continue long after a program itself has ended.

In an age of increasingly personalized AI, this diversity of human perspective may become particularly valuable. AI can provide answers tailored closely to an individual's needs and preferences. Other people are less predictable. They can surprise us, challenge us and introduce perspectives we did not know to ask for.

For executive education, this means intentionally designing for the kinds of social connections that make learning richer.

Designing Social Experiences

Shields invited participants to consider how social connection might be treated as a deliberate design objective rather than a welcome by-product of attending a program.

The Social Connection Imperative in the Age of AI

Some interventions can be relatively simple. The way cohorts are composed, how participants are grouped, the structure of meals and breaks, and the experiences created outside the classroom can all influence who connects with whom, and the depth and nature of those interactions.

Other possibilities extend beyond the program itself. Communities of practice can provide a longer tail to the relationships formed during a learning experience, giving participants reasons to continue exchanging ideas, sharing challenges and learning from one another over time.

The principle is to move beyond assuming that connection will simply happen because people occupy the same physical space. If social connection is part of the value proposition, it should be designed with the same intentionality as the curriculum.

The Human Advantage

The session brought participants back to the central question that had framed the two days: What does it mean to be human?

Across the workshop, speakers had approached the question from very different directions. They had explored the speed and scale of AI capability, the complexity of human behavioural change, the distinctive qualities of human intelligence, and the experiences that make learning memorable. Shields added another answer: we are social.

And as AI becomes more capable of providing content, information and individualized support, the opportunity for executive education may increasingly lie in providing something the technology cannot replicate: bringing people together in meaningful ways.

For executive education, the opportunity is to become much more ambitious about what physical presence makes possible, and how those connections are sustained beyond the classroom through digital experiences and communities. Executive education can convene people across organizational silos. It can expose leaders to perspectives unlike their own. It can create the conditions for trust, challenge and shared experience. And it can build communities that endure beyond the classroom.

In that sense, social connection is not peripheral to the learning experience. It is a vital component of the learning itself.

The Social Connection Imperative in the Age of AI

The challenge Shields left with the room was therefore also an opportunity: to think more deliberately about the social value executive education creates, and to design experiences that make the most of something deeply and distinctively human: our need and capacity to connect with one another.

For Shields, the era of AI represents an opportunity to rethink how executive education creates value: “I firmly believe we need to develop a new value proposition for executive education that is much more about social connection.



CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Opportunities Ahead

Opportunities Ahead

Over two days, UNICON's annual workshop moved through a wide range of perspectives on what it means to be human in the age of AI.

It began at almost dizzying speed, with a demonstration of just how quickly the technological frontier is moving and the extraordinary possibilities already within reach. The focus moved towards the slower realities of human change, the qualities that remain distinctively ours, the experiences that make learning memorable, and finally the connections we build with one another.

The result was an optimistic view of the opportunities ahead, without underplaying the challenges involved. AI will continue to become more capable, transforming how organizations work and raising difficult questions about jobs, skills, trust, ownership and the capabilities we choose to retain. Navigating that change will require experimentation and technological understanding, alongside judgement about where and how these tools should be used.

Perhaps one answer to the conference's central question emerged through that contrast. As machines become more capable, the qualities that make human learning valuable come into sharper focus: curiosity, judgement, creativity, reflection, shared experience and social connection.

For executive education, there is considerable opportunity in both sides of this equation. Leaders need spaces where they can experiment with rapidly evolving technologies, develop and update the literacy to make informed decisions about them, and rethink organizational structures and strategies around what is newly possible. They also need opportunities to step away from the pace of change: to reflect, challenge their assumptions, encounter different perspectives and engage in memorable and fulfilling learning experiences alongside other people.

The opportunity is to make the most of both: helping leaders adapt deliberately to a changing world, while creating the conditions for them to become, in Paul McDonagh-Smith's words, "more fully, more deliberately, more courageously human."