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THE 2026 HR STRATEGY

The Best (and Hardest)
Thing You Can Do This
Year Is Make Things
Radically Simple

Hello, 2026!



As the year begins, HR advice once again arrives fast and loud, full of promises about what will finally make work easier or more effective. The underlying assumption is familiar: progress comes from adding more. More tools, more programs, more layers.

The truth is, the best thing HR leaders can do this year is also the hardest: **make things radically simple.**

Stripping HR back to what actually holds the system together: clear roles, understandable pay, clean decision-making, and an HR operating model that works under pressure.

But let's be honest: that's easy to say and very hard to do. Especially when every day brings more pressure and more responsibility. And yet, this is exactly the work that matters most right now. As AI reshapes work, skills evolve, and roles blur, it's imperative to have a

solid HR structure in place to manage today's demands and stay ready for what's next.

Here are the areas we are advising our clients to focus their radical simplification efforts on in 2026.

1. Why a clear structure beats a complex skills map



For the last few years, “skills” have been taking over “job titles” as a more valuable currency. Many companies have poured serious investment into skills-mapping technologies. In the process, we’ve become very good at defining what people can do and far less thoughtful about how they do it.

As AI replicates technical skills at scale, the scarcest capabilities in 2026 are judgment, intellectual humility, and ethical courage. A purely skills-based organization without a shared foundation of values turns into a collection of capable freelancers pulling in different directions.

What you can do

- **Strip back the titles:** Untangle the “title bloat” to make work readable again.
- **Fix your job architecture:** make changes to your job architecture, focusing on clear job structure, titles, and career paths
- **Focus on the “High-Integrity Generalist”:** Prioritize people who can navigate ambiguity - qualities that are nearly impossible to quantify but important for resilience.

2. When People Stay, But Stop Growing

In a cooling economy, where not a lot of jobs are available, employees are staying put: on paper, retention looks high, but in reality, employees might be staying in roles they've outgrown - out of caution, not commitment (hello "job hugging").

High retention combined with low innovation is a red flag. It means people don't feel safe enough to stretch or speak up. Layering on more engagement tools won't fix a lack of safety.

To apply the "radical simplification" approach in this scenario, companies need to remove the "weight" that makes internal movement feel risky.

What you can do

- **Simplify Decision Rights:** Reduce the friction in how people move between teams.
- **Clear the Path:** Ensure your HR operating model rewards curiosity and movement rather than penalizing it.



3. Making Employee Rewards Easier to Understand and Use

For years, employee benefits have snowballed as companies competed for top talent by trying to match the creative, high-gloss perks offered by the industry's biggest players or wanted to diversify their benefits to appeal to certain employee populations.

While innovative and personalized benefits have their place, two critical aspects can be lost in the progress: do these benefits actually solve problems in your employees' lives, and is it easy for people to use them?

Complexity in rewards leads to a "black-box" logic where the business spends more, but the employee feels less supported. The truth is, employees want to understand their pay, their equity, and how their needs and life outside of the office are taken care of.

What you can do

- **Audit for Use:** Conduct a rewards preference and utilization audit to see which benefits are valued versus those that are just "noise."
- **Reclaim the Budget:** Use the audit to sunset low-value perks, allowing you to have better control over your budget while potentially reinvesting in base pay or equity — the things people care about.
- **Educate Employees on Equity Compensation:** Ensure your equity is something people can explain without needing a complex spreadsheet.
- **Provide More Flexibility:** The one-size approach obviously does not fit all. But who can afford to simply add more and more benefits? Instead, introduce more flexibility and choice to allow your employees to build the programs that matter to them.

4. AI Fatigue and the Management Gap

Right now, much of the attention is on “agentic” AI - tools designed to act on employees’ behalf and take work off managers’ plates. The technology promises to finally free HR and help leaders to focus on what really matters. We’ve heard versions of that promise with every new platform over the past two decades. Yet many organizations feel more stretched, not less.

What’s often missing from the conversation is the role of the middle manager. Who would navigate conflict between two highly driven engineers, build trust after a tough reorganization, or deliver difficult feedback with care and context. Those moments require judgment, presence, and emotional range.

When organizations over-index on AI to “handle” people issues, they risk weakening the very capabilities that make leadership effective.

The most forward-thinking move in 2026 may not be another tool, but a renewed investment in coaching, feedback, and real managerial skill. Technology can support good management. It can’t replace it.

What you can do

- **Invest in Managers:** Focus on conflict resolution and navigating ambiguity: skills that can't be automated.
- **Simplify the Manager Load:** Remove the administrative weight so managers can lead.
- **Evaluate AI tools:** Analyze whether the tools promising to simplify things and take mundane tasks off people’s plates are delivering, and why/why not.

5. What Matters is How Work Gets Done

For years, many organizations have tried to influence culture through events, initiatives, or designated “culture carriers.” Those efforts aren’t wrong, but they’re rarely decisive. In 2026, culture is shaped far less by what happens at a happy hour or a virtual social and far more by how work gets done.

What matters is operational integrity: the alignment between what an organization says it values and how its systems behave day to day. Do promotion decisions follow the logic of your job architecture, or do they rely on exceptions and workarounds? When inequities are identified, are they addressed, or simply tracked? Employees pay close attention to these moments because they reveal what really matters.

When systems don’t support stated values, culture becomes performative. When they do, culture becomes consistent without needing to be advertised. One of the most important shifts for the year ahead is recognizing that HR operations aren’t separate from culture. They are its clearest expression.

What you can do

- **Fix the plumbing:** Audit your HR data and integrations to ensure your systems produce the results they are supposed to.
- **Align the Operating Model:** Rebuild your processes to acknowledge AI's impact, ensuring that your day-to-day operations match your stated values and that they are built for the scaling company and for the future.



Putting Strategy Ahead of Shiny Objects

Radical simplification is a strategy, not a slogan. It's about creating the conditions where high performers can focus, managers can lead, and HR can drive real business impact without adding more weight to the system.

At Nua Group, we don't arrive with another framework or platform. We help you untangle what's no longer serving the business so you can focus on what truly moves you forward.

Ready to see where complexity has crept in? Get in touch - we are happy to help.



Let's talk

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