

LEADING AT THE EDGE | FRONTIER HOW-TO

# Role redesign

A leader's guide to helping your  
people thrive in the AI era

2026 WORK TREND INDEX ANNUAL REPORT

Frontier Firm transformation occurs at three levels: employees, leadership, and the organization. Impact compounds when individuals at every level understand their own contribution clearly—what the core purpose of their role is, where their human judgment is genuinely irreplaceable, and what they can hand off to AI and agents. Data from our **2026 Work Trend Index Annual Report** shows that most professionals haven't developed that clarity, and most leaders haven't either. Frontier leadership is about creating the conditions in which that examination can happen—and to model that behavior to your employees.

“Every day, you live an onlyness that no algorithm can replicate or replace.”

—Ryan Roslansky and Aneesh Raman,  
*Open to Work: How to Get Ahead in the Age of AI*

# Know the work

Before individuals can redesign their work, they need to see it clearly. Most roles carry accumulated tasks that reflect how the organization grew, not where a person's judgment creates the most value. AI accelerates the need to sort through that accumulation and ask: what does this role produce, and why does it require a person?

Encourage your people to work through the following questions to create genuine inventory of how their time and attention are being used.

## What the role is for

### Get underneath the tasks to determine the reason the role exists:

- 1 In one sentence, what is the core purpose of your role—not what you do, but what would be lost if you weren't in this role?
- 2 What outcomes are you genuinely accountable for, as opposed to the activities that fill your days?
- 3 If your role disappeared tomorrow, what would break first?

## How they spend their time

Ask your people to write down the 10 or so tasks that take up most of their time. Managers should complete this exercise for their own role before doing it with their direct reports.

### In practice

Consider someone who lists “prep for client calls” as a weekly task and then realizes, mid-exercise, that preparation isn’t quite the right word. What she’s actually doing is translation—converting what clients say they want into language the internal team can act on, and converting what the team produces into language clients will accept. Neither group fully sees her doing it. She hadn’t thought of it as a skill. That’s exactly the kind of invisible contribution this exercise is designed to surface.

### Once they have the list, sorting is where the real work begins:

- 1 Which tasks are repeating and predictable—same process, same inputs, same outputs?
- 2 Which tasks vary depending on context, relationships, or judgment?
- 3 Which tasks have their fingerprints on them—where the outcome would genuinely be different if someone else did them?

### Then the evaluation:

- 1 Where does “it depends” show up most?
- 2 Where do they slow down—not because the work is hard, but because the stakes are high?
- 3 Where are they holding onto work that no longer requires them?

Sorting tasks reveals what someone does. The harder question is understanding how they do it—the instincts, relationships, and situational judgment that aren’t visible in any task list. Those can be the most important contributions.

## Where decisions live

This is the step most role analyses skip, and it's the one most worth protecting. These questions aren't about the role in the abstract. They're about the specific person in it:

- 1 **Where does the role require judgment rather than rules?**
- 2 **What decisions does this person make that have real consequences—for quality, for trust, for people?**
- 3 **Where does their experience matter more than speed?**
- 4 **Where does the team genuinely depend on them—and where would it manage fine without them?**

The answers should reveal trade-offs with no clean resolution, early signals others miss, and decisions that shape how people work. That's where individual contribution becomes genuinely difficult to replicate—and where your people need to spend more of their time, not less.

### In practice

Think about what this might look like for a product manager with a strong track record of shipping on time. He might assume his edge is in roadmap judgment or prioritization. What he finds instead is a habit he's never named: he can sense, weeks before a decision reaches leadership, whose objection will resurface at the worst moment if it isn't addressed early—and which cross-functional partner needs a conversation before any public commitment can be made. His plans ship not because they're better designed, but because the people in the room have already said their piece. That's decision-making. It just doesn't look like it.

### The big picture

Hold onto what surfaces here. In the final section of this framework, your people will use it to make concrete shifts: what to remove, what to reinforce, and where to redirect their attention. Those moves are more likely to stick if they connect back to something specific.

# Uncover the edge

According to our Work Trend Index, Frontier Professionals are already redesigning their work at rates roughly **8 points higher** than non-Frontier Professionals.<sup>1</sup> The question for your organization is whether that shift happens on purpose, by accident, or not at all.

Every professional carries a combination of experience, judgment, and perspective that no one else has accumulated in quite the same way. Management thinker Nilofer Merchant calls this “onlyness.” We call it your edge.



### Where your edge comes from

Set a 30-day cadence. If you’re not measuring it, you’re not managing it.

- What parts of their work feel obvious to them but are hard to explain to others?
- Where do they notice signals or issues before others do?
- Which experiences most shaped how they think or decide today?



### How it creates advantage

What you know that others don't, and the experiences that shaped how you work.

- What’s the throughline across their career—the thing they keep bringing to every role?
- Where have they stood at the crossroads of different worlds, industries, or ways of thinking?
- Where does their perspective give them an advantage in what to pursue or prioritize?



### How it connects to AI

Where your judgment matters most as AI takes on more of the predictable work.

- Where does their judgment still outperform the output of a model?
- If AI handled their most routine work, which opportunities in the organization would finally get their full attention?
- Where could AI remove friction for their team, but hasn't yet?

<sup>1</sup> Source: Microsoft 2026 Work Trend Index Annual Report

### **In practice**

Imagine a program manager who has been at the same organization for a decade. He holds knowledge no org chart captures—why a process was structured the way it was, which stakeholder relationships frayed in a previous reorganization, which decisions are still quietly contested years after they were officially made. When a new leader joins and begins redesigning workflows, his value shifts. He's no longer primarily an executor. He's a translator of organizational history—someone who can see which changes will quietly stall because of dynamics the new leader can't yet see.

### **The big picture**

As a leader, the value of this section isn't only in helping individuals locate their edge. It's in understanding, across your organization, where that edge is being underused—and what structural or cultural conditions are keeping it there.

# Determine what's next

As AI reshapes what work requires, people feel parts of their role—and their professional identity—shifting. That tension isn't a problem to manage away; it's usually a signal that something important is changing. You'll see it in recognizable ways: hesitation, over-reliance on familiar processes, uncertainty about where to focus. They need leadership to help them operate inside that tension rather than around it.

## How to lead your team through it

In their book *Open to Work*, Ryan Roslansky and Aneesh Raman identify 5Cs—curiosity, courage, creativity, compassion, and communication—for building a foundation of human edge in an AI-powered economy. Use them as a team conversation to surface where friction is showing up and which capability is most needed to move through it.

<b>Curiosity</b>	Where do we need to stay open to what's changing, rather than defaulting to how we've always worked?
<b>Courage</b>	Where are we waiting for certainty that may not come—and what would it look like to move anyway?
<b>Creativity</b>	Where could we approach this work differently, given what AI can now handle?
<b>Compassion</b>	Where might people on this team be experiencing uncertainty or loss of confidence—and how do we support them?
<b>Communication</b>	Where do we need to create more clarity about what's changing, and what still matters?

## What to do first

Individual redesign produces real results when it leads to a concrete change, not just a clearer self-understanding. Encourage your people to make one deliberate shift this week.

### Remove



one task that AI can do without them

### Reinforce



one area where their judgment matters most

### Redirect



one block of time toward higher-value work

Ask employees to share that shift with their team—and what they learned from making it. That act of articulation is part of how role redesign becomes a shared practice rather than a private exercise.

## When to revisit

The value of this framework is in returning to it as conditions change—when roles shift, when teams restructure, when something that used to require human judgment suddenly doesn't.

What compounds over time is the organizational capacity to examine work at this level: to keep asking what a role is actually for, where judgment lives, and what it means to direct human attention toward the contribution that matters most.



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