

Designing the Digital Habitat

Shifting from procuring technology platforms to architecting ecosystems where human capability thrives.

Based on Nexus Institute & Unily/Gallup 2026 Workplace Research

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The Illusion of Enablement

The Status Quo

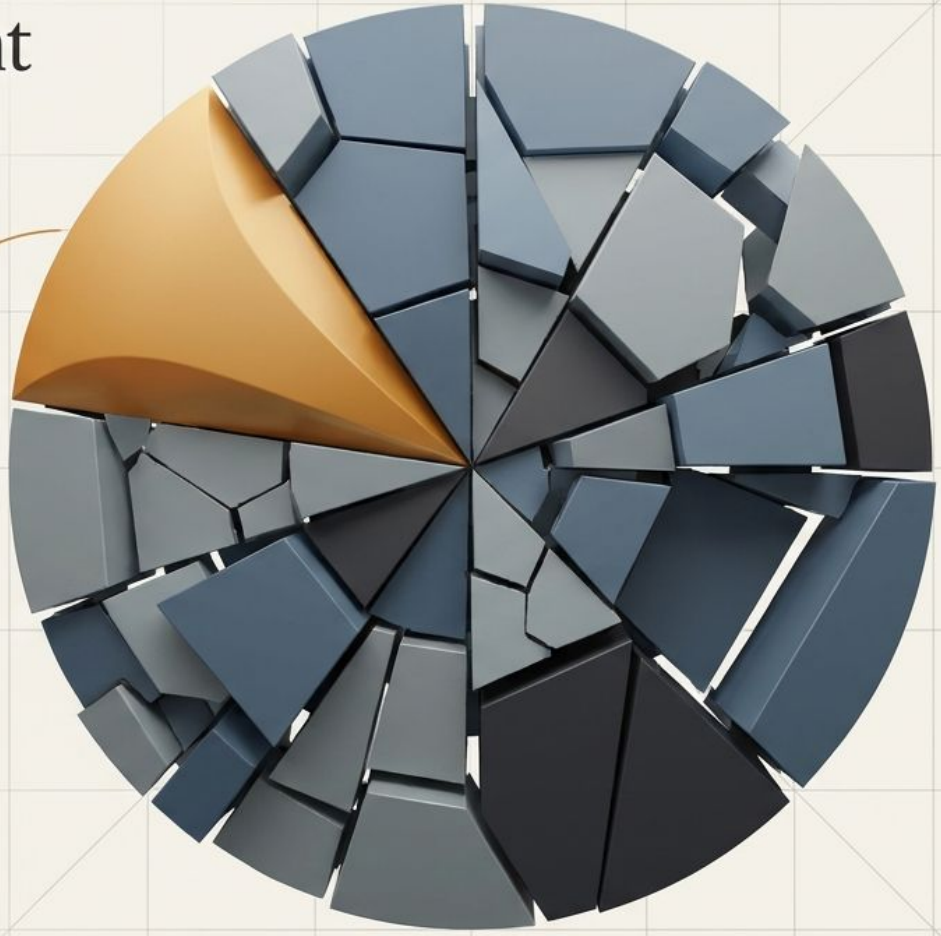
Organizations have spent heavily on collaboration platforms, intranets, and generative AI over the past five years.

The Reality

Only 1 in 5 U.S. employees experiences both strong digital enablement and a strong digital culture.

The Consequence

More than one-third of the workforce lacks both, operating in a digital environment that fails to help them get work done or feel part of the organization.



Data: Unily & Gallup, 2026

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The P&L of Poor Digital Experience

Time & Capacity Deficits

9%

Annual working time lost entirely to reorienting after app switches.

1,200

Daily app toggles per average desk worker.

47%

Share of digital workers who actively struggle to find the information needed to do their jobs.

Human Capital Liabilities

38% vs 11%

Burnout rate for employees with a poor digital experience vs. a good one.

Output Illusion

Employees work faster to compensate for interruptions, maintaining output but paying the cost in chronic frustration and work exhaustion.

Citations: Murty et al. (HBR, 2022); Gartner (2023); Mark et al. (2008).

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The Exponential Cost of Fragmentation

The Rule: As information spreads, chaotic effort multiplies. Tool switching is a direct symptom of poor digital architecture.

Information Findability Gradient

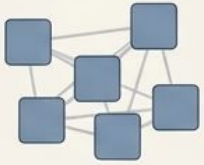
Single Location



33%

Employees frequently switch tools.

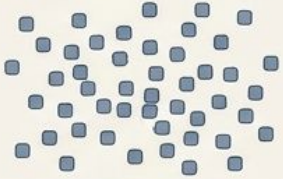
Few Locations



62%

Employees frequently switch tools.

Many Locations



78%

Employees frequently switch tools.

The Trust Deficit

57% say information is easy to access, but only 26% say it is very accurate.
When systems lose trust, employees route around them, adding to message volume.

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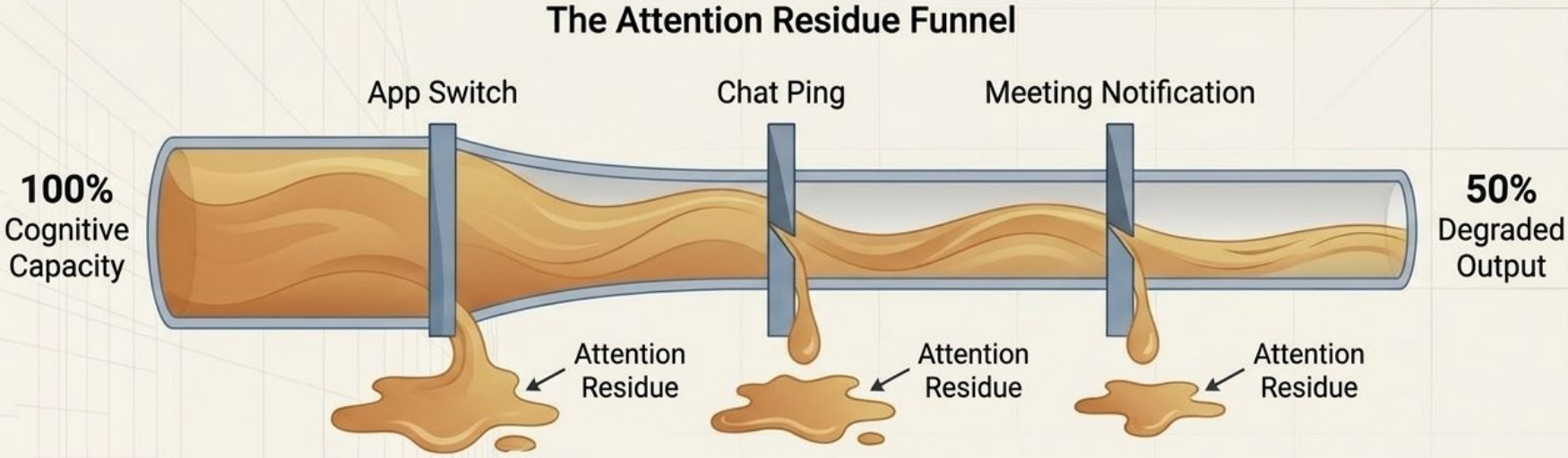
The Physics of Cognitive Drain



The Mechanism

Attention Residue (Leroy, 2009). The human brain cannot instantly clear its cache.

The Effect

Lingering cognitive focus on an unfinished, interrupted task actively impairs performance and quality on the subsequent task.

The Reality

The switching itself is the hazard. Every channel hop and notification ping degrades the baseline quality of the organization's knowledge work.

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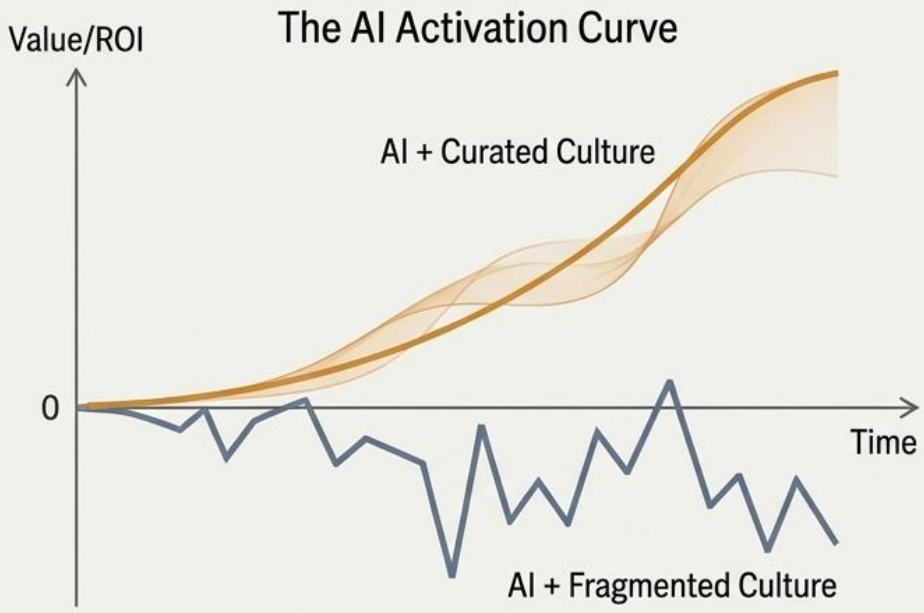
The AI Amplifier Effect



The Promise (Curated Integration)

- +15% issues resolved (Customer Support).
- +12.2% more tasks completed, with a 40% quality increase (Consulting within AI frontier).

The Peril (Unguided Deployment)

- Consultants using AI outside its capability frontier were 19 percentage points less likely to produce correct solutions.
- 72% of employees report receiving zero employer-provided AI training in the last 6 months.

The Insight: Deploying generative AI into a poorly governed information environment bets on the upside while maximizing exposure to catastrophic hallucination and error.

Citations: Dell'Acqua et al. (BCG, 2023); Brynjolfsson et al. (2025); Unily (2026).

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The Missing Dimension of Digital Work

The DWX Diagnostic Matrix



Core Thesis: A well-equipped digital workplace that leaves people feeling isolated or overwhelmed is fundamentally failing

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Upgrading the Organizational Reflex

	Tech-Centric Reflex	Evidence-Based Response
The Problem	Buy a new platform to drive productivity	Subtract redundant tools and audit the current cognitive load first
Information Strategy	Deploy enterprise search across all systems	Designate single-source-of-truth architectures with named human owners
AI Deployment	Distribute licenses and track login metrics	Ground AI in curated content and build peer-led champion networks
Success Metric	Software adoption and active daily usage	Reduced task exhaustion and increased digital findability

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Playbook 1: Subtract Before Adding

The Strategy: Reduce the volume of tools, alerts, and recurring meetings to clear cognitive space. Treat accumulated burden as a design flaw.

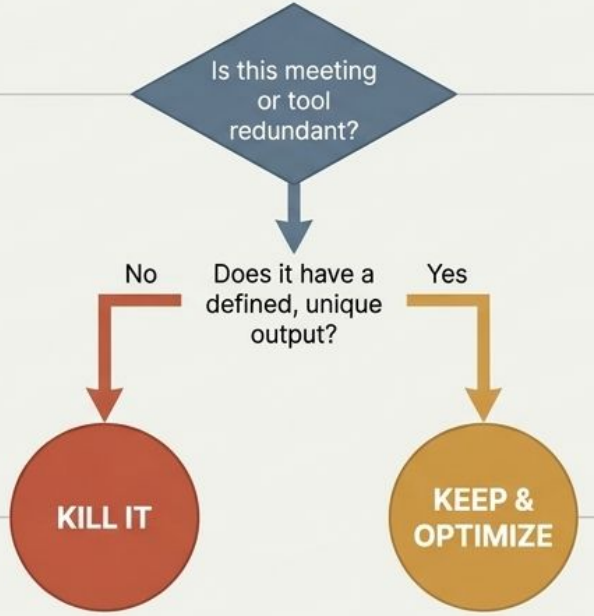
Crowdsource the Clutter

Invite frontline staff to nominate "stupid stuff" (e.g., Hawaii Pacific Health eliminated 1,700 nursing hours/month by removing redundant EHR clicks).

Reset the Defaults

Purge recurring calendars. Shopify used a bot to delete recurring meetings, clearing 322,000 hours, requiring employees to actively justify restoring them.

The Subtraction Algorithm



The Replacement Rule

Mandate that any new tool deployment must explicitly name the legacy tool it replaces.

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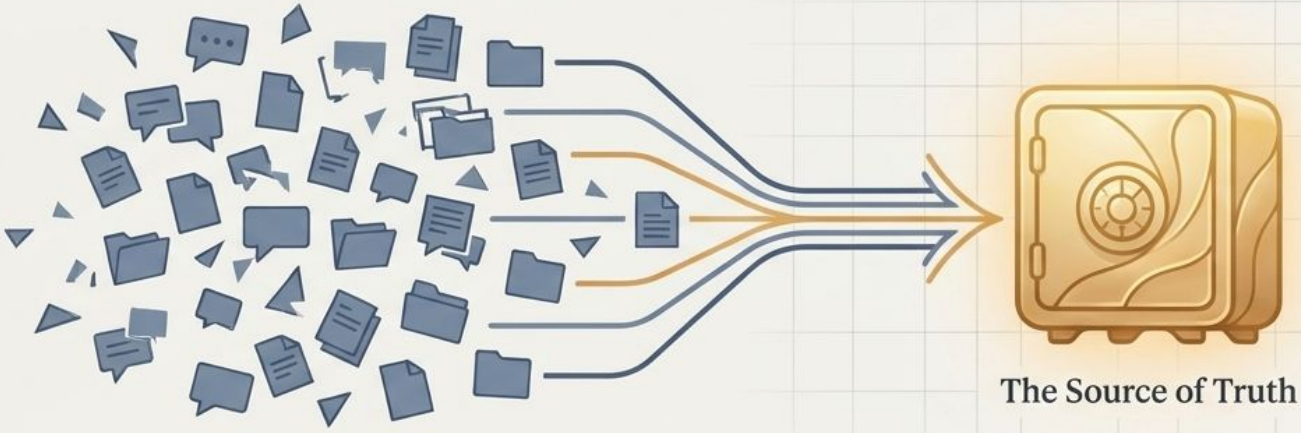
Playbook 2: Architecting Trust and Findability

The Strategy: Information only has value if it is trusted. When employees doubt system accuracy, they interrupt colleagues instead.



Single Source of Truth

Mandate one authoritative home for policies and project decisions (e.g., GitLab's handbook-first approach where changes are written before being announced).

Named Ownership

Every critical asset must display a named human owner and a "last reviewed" date to guarantee reliability.

Move Out of Ephemeral Channels

Shift decisions out of chat (which is excellent for coordination but catastrophic as a record) into structured knowledge bases.

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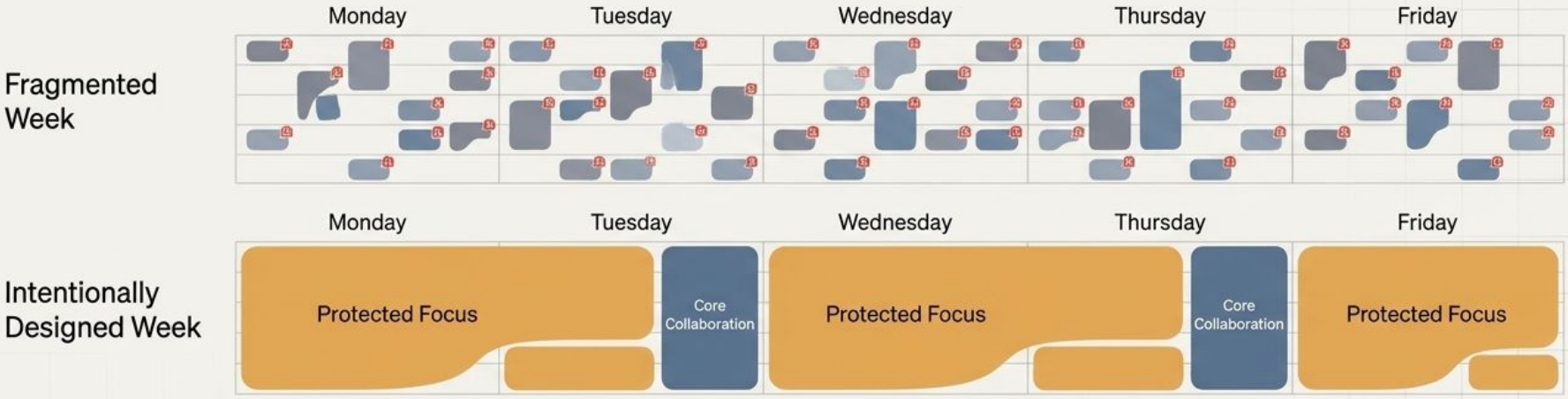
Playbook 3: Setting Norms for Shared Attention

The Strategy: Attention is a shared organizational resource that requires shared rules.

The Asynchronous Blueprint



Channel Charters

Establish explicit team agreements on what goes in chat vs. email, and what the acceptable response times are.

Core Collaboration Hours

Define specific, narrow windows for real-time meetings, protecting the rest of the day for concentrated work (e.g., Dropbox's Virtual First model).

Default to Asynchronous

Use written updates for status sharing, reserving live meetings exclusively for complex problem-solving and social connection.

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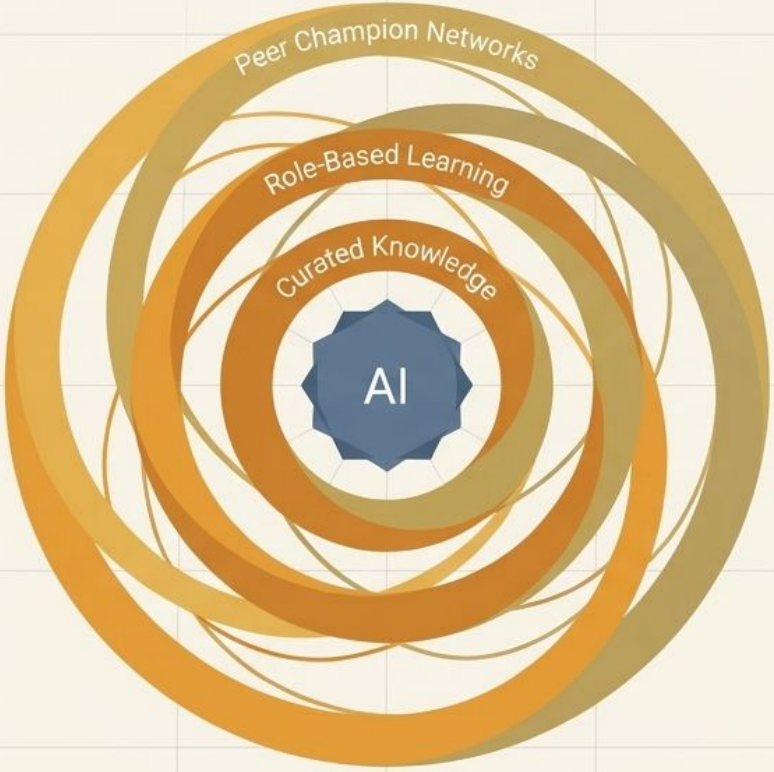
Playbook 4: Grounded AI Enablement

The Strategy: AI accelerates whatever foundation it is built upon. It must be paired with continuous digital fluency, not just licenses.



1 Teach the Frontier

Train employees on where AI is reliable for their specific role, and where it hallucinates.

2 Build Champion Networks

Empower early power users to coach peers and share custom prompt libraries (e.g., Moderna's 100 generative AI champions driving 750 custom assistants).

3 Redefine the Goal

Focus AI metrics on reducing task exhaustion and cognitive burden, rather than exclusively measuring output speed (e.g., Stanford Health Care's AI pilot significantly reduced clinician burnout without changing reply speed).

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Playbook 5: Frontline Access and Equity

The Strategy: The digital experience fails when deskless, shop-floor, or bedside workers are excluded from the culture and information loop.



Mobile-First Parity

Consolidate schedules, pay, time off, and internal communications into a unified mobile experience (e.g., Walmart's Me@Walmart app for 740,000 associates).

Provide the Hardware

Supply company devices to frontline staff to ensure access does not depend on personal financial means.

Measure Experience, Not Just Adoption

Add specific questions regarding findability, tool switching, and digital connection to annual employee engagement surveys.

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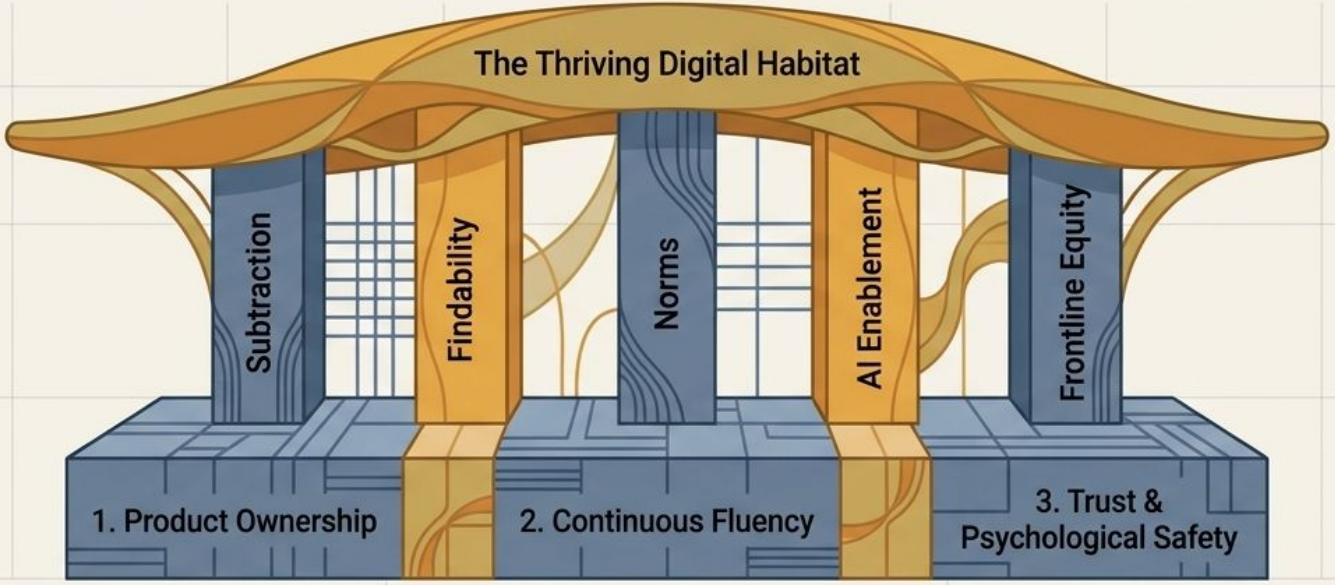
The Capability Architecture



1. Treat the Workplace as a Product

Assign cross-functional ownership (HR + IT IT + Comms) over the end-to-end digital experience, complete with an ongoing roadmap for both addition and retirement.

2. Continuous Fluency

Shift from one-off software launches to sustained, role-based capability building.

3. Systemic Trust

Foster psychological safety so employees feel empowered to question AI outputs, suggest removing obsolete processes, and rely on internal knowledge bases.

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The Strategic Mandate

True digital transformation is not an IT procurement exercise; it is an HR, Operations, and Leadership mandate to deliberately design how humans connect and work.

Organizations that master both Digital Enablement and Digital Culture unlock a workforce that is **3.1x more likely to be engaged** and experiences burnout at a fraction of the standard rate (11% vs 38%).

Stop buying platforms to fix cultural problems. Build the habitat, curate the knowledge, and write the rules of attention.

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