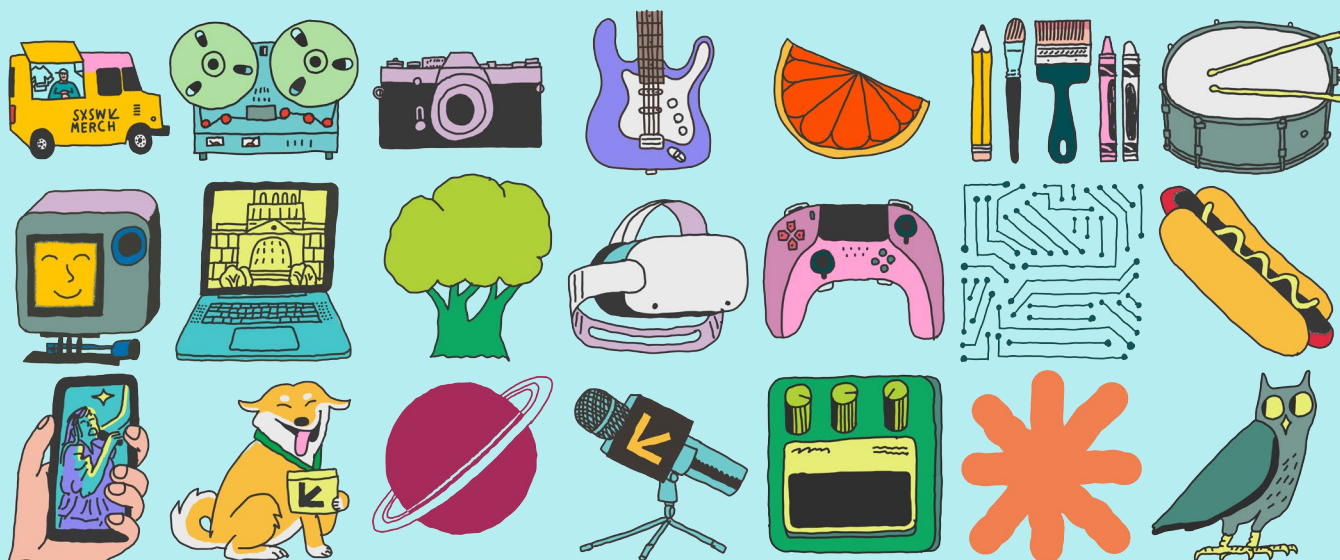


SXSW 2026

KEY INSIGHTS



What business and tech leaders should know now to inspire, compete, and win

April 8, 2026



EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

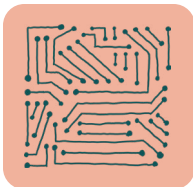
The Future Belongs to the Deeply Human

The theme of last year's SXSW Insights report was **Unlocking the Power of Human Ingenuity**—an optimistic view of the significant benefits that AI and other technology create. In 2026, the pace of innovation changed the conversation to one focused on the choices, benefits, and consequences of the reality we face today—and could face tomorrow if humanity isn't careful.

Sessions touched on a host of issues like living an AI-powered life, facing the dawn of the augmented human, reimagining entertainment, and debating the role friction plays in fostering rich societies and healthy human beings. SXSW brought together some of the greatest minds, from artists to executives, to explore the key shifts shaping what's now and what's next.

This year's theme is **The Future Belongs to the Deeply Human**. To bring this central theme to life, we've captured six key insights.

KEY INSIGHTS



INSIGHT 1 **Technology is moving faster than society is prepared to absorb it.**

We're entering a stage where technology outpaces regulation and society's ability to recognize the costs before living with the consequences.



INSIGHT 2 **Brands should embrace creators, culture, and the algorithm to stay ahead.**

When algorithmic homogenization erodes brand distinctiveness, the brands that stand out from the noise are those that embrace culture, creators, and authenticity—and know how to work the algorithm.

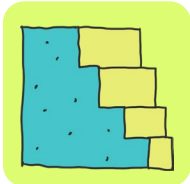
WHAT MAKES SXSW UNIQUE

SXSW amplifies Austin into a living hub of innovation and connection. The conferences harness a singular energy as industries converge, ideas become reality, and brands create experiences that are an integral part of the culture, marrying business and creativity. That energy goes beyond the conferences as attendees return to their lives, work, and communities recharged with new ideas and a broader perspective on what's next for business, the world, and humankind.



INSIGHT 3 Be uniquely human. Skills and capabilities to protect when an agent wants your job.

As people use AI as a productivity partner, early signals suggest core skills may erode. Leaders and employees need to actively build and safeguard the human capabilities that will keep them relevant, including strategic vision, inspiration, and judgment.



INSIGHT 4 Your workforce isn't resistant to change. They just need greater trust in your leadership.

AI is fundamentally reshaping the nature of work, from daily tasks to collaboration, and it's exposing a significant gap between leadership's strategic assumptions and the evolving realities of employee experience.



INSIGHT 5 You can't automate mattering. IRL delivers the real ROI.

As we strive for advancements that could make our lives easier, we shouldn't lose sight of the intrinsic value of being human. Community and lived, human experiences are essential for our health and growth.



INSIGHT 6 The augmented human is accelerating. Equitable access is not.

Advancements in brain-computer interactions and neuroscience are starting to pave the way for the dawn of the augmented human. As a new divide emerges between those who can enhance their performance and those who can't, human discernment becomes an even more critical competitive advantage.

Think of this insights report as a strategic download from SXSW 2026 to help you pressure-test your business priorities, challenge assumptions, and identify where to lean in (or pull back) as AI reshapes how your organization operates and competes. We've also shared links to some of the most memorable SXSW 2026 sessions on page [17](#) and included information on how to register for SXSW 2027.

With 12 tracks and hundreds of sessions, SXSW ignites curiosity, sparks unexpected connections, and turns ideas into action. It's where industries intersect, ambitious ideas are welcomed, artists and tech titans share the same block, and progress feels not just possible—but inevitable.

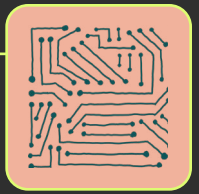
PWC'S ROLE

We brought a PwC team of industry specialists to SXSW in 2026 to watch for key trends and identify the most impactful insights for business and technology leaders.

PwC attended 100+ sessions, engaged with industry thought leaders, and connected with attendees and members of the press to distill the most critical themes.

Leveraging AI to help transcribe session notes and scan media coverage, the PwC team combined technology with human expertise and judgment to identify and prioritize the SXSW 2026 insights that matter most—helping businesses and people stay ahead in an era of rapid transformation.





KEY INSIGHT #1

Technology Is Moving Faster Than Society Is Prepared To Absorb It.

“We’ve traded connection for convenience without even knowing what we were signing up for.”

—Jennifer B. Wallace, bestselling author, *The Mattering Institute*



Photo by Chris Saucedo

THE IDEA

Technology no longer advances in linear steps that organizations and society can absorb. As AI, algorithms, robotics, and ambient computing converge, new capabilities are emerging faster than governance, operating models, and people can adapt.

The New Organizational Blueprint

How work gets done—and where humans and AI should and should not work together—needs to be reimagined. AI is making deep, function-specific expertise readily available on demand, accelerating decision-making and reshaping what organizations value in their people. The organizational model itself has to evolve to match. But adopting AI without equal investment in employee experience and trust can undermine the very transformation leaders are trying to drive.

The Algorithm Is Rewriting the Rules of Shared Social Consciousness

Algorithms now determine what breaks through, regardless of the quality of the reporting behind it. “I can work on a story for hours, but if I can’t hit share and get the right splashy comment to go with it, it doesn’t matter. The algorithm decides if people see it or don’t,” said Tara Palmeri, journalist and speaker in the *Who Owns the Truth?* session.

Complex stories underperform, while reactive, emotionally charged content thrives—and bad actors reverse-engineer those dynamics to move from the margins to the mainstream. Compounding the problem, under-resourced newsrooms are losing experienced journalists needed to maintain editorial standards, leaving the information vacuum to be filled by algorithmically optimized noise.

The Urgent Need for Guardrails and Accountability

Multiple speakers called for greater transparency and accountability around how algorithmic systems shape visibility and public discourse. AI development continues to outpace the creation of responsible frameworks, inclusive safeguards, and robust protections, with very few guardrails built into current models. Policy decisions around AI too often depend on elite incentives rather than broader public input. Yet the appetite for action was clear across sessions. The consensus was that without transparency into algorithms, AI training data, and how AI-generated content reaches consumers, trust will continue to erode.

Progress Can Be Expensive: Environmental and Community Impact

Another gap between the speed of technological advances and society’s ability to keep pace shows up in infrastructure. Cloud’s power demands are surging. Data centers are projected to consume 9% to 17% of total US electricity by 2030, said Briana Kobor, Google’s Head of Energy Market Innovation, during *The Energy Evolution of Data Centers* session.

This structural shift in demand is straining utility planning models and increasing electricity cost for nearby communities because data center operators, largely indifferent to price, can outbid local residents and businesses for shared grid resources. The urgency is reshaping infrastructure in real time. Some operators are offering to build transmission infrastructure themselves, while others are vertically integrating—owning storage, renegotiating utility contracts, and accelerating timelines that historically moved at the pace of regulation, not innovation.

WHAT LEADERS NEED TO KNOW NOW

- 1. If leaders and policymakers don’t proactively define the future, technology will:** As AI increasingly mediates discovery, evaluation, and execution, authority is shifting away from people and into models, platforms, and algorithms. The loss of institutional judgment, often without leaders realizing it’s happening, is a real risk modern executives need to understand and mitigate.
- 2. Cloud’s power bill is your problem too:** Leaders across industries should understand how AI-driven energy demand is reshaping utility planning, electricity pricing, and community dynamics in the regions where they operate. Organizations that proactively engage with local energy stakeholders, invest in clean energy partnerships, flexible demand models, and plan for rising infrastructure costs can be better positioned.
- 3. Treat information integrity as a business risk:** Leaders should invest in transparency around how AI is used in communications and decision-making, support credible information sources, and recognize that misinformation needs to be monitored continuously.



KEY INSIGHT #2

Brands Should Embrace Creators, Culture, and the Algorithm To Stay Ahead.

“The algorithm is downstream from culture—not upstream.”

—Mariana O’Kelly, Executive Creative Director, LEO Chicago



Photo by Zachary Salas

THE IDEA

When discovery shifts into systems that summarize, infer, and rank before a person reaches the original source, brands should evolve. The old playbook—broadcast a message, buy attention, measure impressions—assumes a linear path from awareness to purchase. That path is fracturing. AI-powered search, social algorithms, and creator-driven discovery now mediate what consumers see, when they see it, and whether they trust it.

The New Consumer: Sophisticated, Bored, and Done With Average

“We have let algorithms be the judge. It has made all of us sound the same,” O’Kelly said. Consumers are bored with polished, corporate messaging and actively seek content that feels realistic, raw, and rooted in genuine brand identity. They can spot inauthenticity instantly—and they respond accordingly, rewarding creators who safeguard their trust and walking away from brands and influencers that don’t.

Meanwhile, decision journeys are compressing and evolving as AI agents handle discovery and evaluation on behalf of consumers. The middle of the funnel is collapsing, making brand identity, community, and purpose the

primary drivers of consideration. The brands that will be found are the ones that stand for something specific enough for humans and algorithms to recognize. Across several sessions, brand identity and trust were flagged as among the last remaining durable competitive moats.

Creator Leverage: Co-Authors of Culture

Creators hold a unique grip on the cultural zeitgeist because it's literally their job to know what feels fresh—and audiences trust that instinct enough to actively seek out their branded content.

Creator trust is protected fiercely. Brands that want access to it are learning that creators are not a means to an end. Lauren Schleyer, President and Partner at Oust, and speaker in the *Collab Culture: Turning One-Off Brand Deals into Lasting Partnerships* session, noted, “We are moving from transactional relationships with brands to long-term partnerships.”

Creators want more say in the products they endorse and how they show up—and that kind of relationship takes more than a one-off campaign.

Worldbuilding As the New Operating Model

The job of a brand is to understand the rituals, values, and currency of the communities it wants to join.

“You don’t build anything. You expand the worlds of the brand by participating in worlds that exist.” —Leandro Barreto, CMO, Unilever Beauty and Wellbeing

Barreto illustrated this with Unilever’s own portfolio. Dove has sustained its Self-Esteem Project for over 20 years, orienting the entire brand around body confidence. Vaseline embedded itself in social, certifying influencer hacks with its own scientists.

None of this happens without operational commitment. Worldbuilding requires infrastructure and long-term commitment that survives leadership changes, including key ingredients like community managers in every market, multi-year creator partnerships, and paid media deployed only after organic traction is established.

WHAT BRANDS NEED TO KNOW NOW

1. **Stewardship over control:** Shift from transactional advertising to deep, long-term partnerships that genuinely integrate with creator communities. Earn your way in by stewarding conversations, not controlling them. Invest in the social infrastructure—people, partnerships, and discipline—to stay there.
2. **Be bold, stay rooted:** Audiences reward conviction anchored in identity. Know who you are, know what to say no to, and know how to show up with something of value. Authenticity is the currency for entry into communities, but it’s more than a brand voice. It’s your brand’s behavior. How you define its authenticity is up to you.
3. **Design for belonging:** Content is the entry point. Build from there into community, participation, and shared experiences—digital and in third spaces. Social capital and genuine community networks can drive growth faster than traditional spend. It’s community building versus trend chasing.
4. **Stay accountable:** Algorithms still control visibility. Echo chambers are always a risk. Build strategies that work within algorithmic systems without being captured by them, and advocate for the transparency and accountability the broader media landscape and regulatory systems still lack.



KEY INSIGHT #3

Be Uniquely Human. Skills and Capabilities To Safeguard When an Agent Wants Your Job.

“Today it finishes your prompt. Tomorrow it will finish your thought.”

—Nataliya Kosmyna, Research Scientist, MIT Media Lab



Photo by Sabrina Macias

THE IDEA

AI is making organizations faster, leaner, and more capable—but it’s also raising the baseline for what’s expected of every employee and every team. Employees who resist AI use are being screened out of jobs and viewed as lower contributors. Those who embrace it in the wrong ways risk eroding their own skills and future relevance.

As AI takes on more of the execution, what sets an organization apart is how deliberately it builds and safeguards human capability. It’s about how you apply judgment, think creatively, and focus on the problems that matter most. These skills are quickly becoming central to driving sustained outcomes in an AI-enabled workplace.

To realize AI’s long-term potential, organizations should fundamentally rethink the skills they build and how work gets done.

When AI is used to STRENGTHEN human capability...	When AI is used in ways that ERODE human capability...
Judgment improves as humans focus on higher-order decisions.	Judgment weakens as decisions are deferred to AI outputs.
Creativity expands through rapid iteration and exploration.	Creativity narrows as outputs converge toward patterns and averages.
Critical thinking sharpens by evaluating and refining AI-generated ideas.	Critical thinking declines when outputs are accepted at face value.
Learning accelerates through guided augmentation and feedback.	Learning plateaus as hands-on experience and depth are bypassed.
Expertise deepens by combining domain knowledge with AI leverage.	Expertise becomes superficial, creating the illusion of mastery.
Communication evolves toward clarity, synthesis, and insight.	Communication becomes over-reliant on polished but generic outputs.
Ownership increases as humans direct and shape outcomes.	Ownership diffuses as humans become passive editors of AI work.
Non-value-add work is automated or eliminated, enabling human talent to focus on high-value, rewarding, differentiating work that drives personal and professional meaning.	The strategy on what work AI enables vs. what humans drive is opaque. Work becomes something that for many human workers feels overly measured, and human worker meaning and purpose are diluted.

Automation and Capability Erosion

Automating routine tasks with AI can inadvertently prevent people from developing the judgment and expertise that come from knowing the task in depth. Educational systems are already deprioritizing metacognition, or thinking about thinking, even though these skills are crucial for student performance, creativity, problem-solving, and the ability to calibrate knowledge essential to future relevance and success.

“Research actually has been showing that junior developers using AI tend to score 17% or more lower on comprehension of their coding tasks.”

—Tessa Forshaw, Co-Founder & Researcher, Next Level Lab, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Human Craft and Irreplaceable Qualities

In contrast to the risks of erosion, SXSW highlighted that uniquely human skills such as storytelling, judgment, and critical thinking are becoming the ultimate differentiators. During the *Missionary Misfits: Why Not Belonging Makes You a Better Builder* session, Framer founder and CEO Jorn Van Dijk described what he referred to as the Walkie Talkie Problem: AI can quickly deliver an 80% viable product, but as of right now it offers very little control over the output. The iteration required to address the last 20% often results in things getting worse, not better. That last mile is also the most interesting part—it’s where human creativity, judgment, experimentation, and taste come into play. That’s where new ideas are shaped, tested, and improved into something that actually works.

Essential human capabilities like communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking remain irreplaceable, as AI can simulate emotional understanding but lacks genuine emotion or lived experience. AI should continue to serve as an augmentation of human potential, allowing humans to focus on the more meaningful elements of their work.

The Designer's Evolving Canvas: From User Experience (UX) to Agent Experience (AX)

The evolution of design offers a useful case study in what it means to stay uniquely human as the tools and terrain shift. John Maeda, VP of Engineering with Microsoft, charted a fundamental transition at SXSW in his session, *Design in Tech Report 2026: UX to AX*. He argued that designers are designing for AI, not humans. AI agents run in loops and have different informational needs than human users. A human browsing a hotel site wants a story, whereas an agent needs structured labels and extractable data to act on a user's behalf. In the AX era, what once made a digital experience compelling may get in the way.

This is reshaping the designer's role. In the *Design Trends That Matter* panel, Uwe Cremering, CEO of iF International Forum Design GmbH, described the shift from "makers" to "purpose-givers" and "moderators of processes." During the same session, Doreen Lorenzo, Assistant Dean of the School of Design and Creative Technology at the University of Texas at Austin, emphasized that even with AI, designers still need to understand users, clarify purpose, and ask, "Is this worth doing?"

WHAT EMPLOYEES AND LEADERS NEED TO KNOW NOW

1. **Invest in foundational human skills.** Recognize and reward human attributes like intuition, taste, and original creative thought by designing workflows where AI augments execution, allowing people to focus on strategic oversight, innovation, and responsible discernment.
2. **Design for loops, not just screens.** Make sure your digital experiences are structured and labeled for both human audiences and the agents acting on their behalf.
3. **Build a continuous community learning model.** Employees should consistently scan, prioritize, and implement new ways of working. Invest in authentic connections and relationships along the way. Resilience isn't built in isolation, and better learning happens in community





KEY INSIGHT #4:

Your Workforce Isn't Resistant To Change. They Just Need Greater Trust in Your Leadership.

“Work isn't broken because people are broken. The system is.”

—Wesley Faulkner, Founder, Work Evolution Framework, LLC | *Why Work Sucks (And How We Can Make It Joyful Again)*



Photo by JD Lewis

THE IDEA

AI is exposing a significant gap between leadership's assumptions and the realities of the day-to-day employee experience. The most trusted leaders listen to learn and develop clear approaches to using AI that motivate and inspire employees to help shape how it's applied in their work.

Top-down AI mandates that are disconnected from the realities of deep functional expertise fail. Organizations that combine great leadership, recognize and reward employee ideas, and create a positive mental health environment for experimenting with AI in day-to-day work will be better positioned to thrive. Leaders who push without context or trust are more likely to see employees resist and reject AI use.

Accelerated Adaptation and Trust Erosion

AI adoption is putting pressure on the workplace, often eroding trust, undermining positive employee experiences, and depleting mental health. In the *It's a Whole Thing: Gen Z Work Relationships* session, Angela Ju, Senior Lead of Culture & Engagement at Upwork, noted that, “Without clear goals and expectations for AI use from their employers, many employees feel implicit pressure to use AI every day or risk losing their jobs.”

When leaders make AI decisions without firsthand experience, they create a gap between strategy and employee reality. Some leaders have a blind spot about what enables the AI-augmented human to do their best work. That blind spot—compounded by an implicit cultural message that humans should adopt AI or risk their jobs—erodes mental health, reduces productivity, and encourages the very behaviors organizations want to eliminate: micromanagement, information hoarding, and self-preservation over collaboration.

What leaders think they're driving...	What employees are actually experiencing...
AI is accelerating productivity and enabling new ways of working.	AI is increasing pressure to perform faster, with less clarity on expectations.
AI adoption signals innovation and competitive advantage.	AI adoption feels like a moving target employees have to chase to stay relevant.
Mandating AI use drives efficiency across the organization.	Mandates without context erode autonomy and create quiet resistance. Employees worry that adopting AI might risk their jobs and ability to provide for themselves and their family.
New tools empower employees to do higher-value work.	Employees feel their expertise is undervalued or replaced.
Leaders are guiding transformation strategically.	Leaders appear disconnected from day-to-day realities of the work.
Experimentation is encouraged.	Experimentation feels risky, and the rewards are unclear at the individual level.

Leadership for Trust and Human-AI Orchestration

Multiple sessions emphasized that leaders should personally experiment with AI tools to drive a cohesive and strategic AI vision, stay relevant and signal a culture of learning, rather than making adoption decisions from a distance. This means shifting from command-and-control to orchestration—redesigning roles so humans serve as reviewers, decision-makers, and directors of AI agents.

Vanessa Tanicien, Global Director of Learning and Development, Peloton, summed up the imperative during the session *What AI Can't Replace: People Skills in a Changing World*: “Managers and leaders have to be explicit about behaviors they do want and don't want.”

WHAT LEADERS NEED TO KNOW NOW

- 1. Prioritize mental health and trust.** Actively design work environments where candor and transparency are foundational, consistent behaviors. Don't hide the reality of, or potential challenges with, transformation, ambiguity, or changing expectations of success as a human at work. Listen to employees as domain specialists to understand what excites them about AI, what concerns them, and where they believe it can add the most value.
- 2. Role model AI use.** Personally engage with AI tools to foster a culture of learning and adaptation, bridging the gap between strategic assumptions and the practical realities of an AI-augmented workforce. Celebrate and reward employee experimentation, encourage community learning, and share where AI improves employees and the organization. Clearly signal the mindset employees should take to balance AI speed against business outcomes and risks.
- 3. Reimagine job design and orchestration.** Rethink job roles to empower employees as reviewers and orchestrators of AI, and to safeguard the core capabilities and human skills needed for long-term success.



KEY INSIGHT #5:

You Can't Automate Mattering. IRL Delivers the Real ROI.

“Our resilience is not found in isolation ... it rests on relationships—deep, nourishing relationships that remind us that we are significant, appreciated, invested in, and depended on.”

—Jennifer B. Wallace, bestselling author, *The Mattering Institute*



Photo by Jordan Heffler

THE IDEA

Communities shape how we identify, what we trust, the relationships we build, the tools and experiences we embrace, and what we believe. Right now, they're under strain—pressured by the convergence of AI and accelerating technological capabilities, shifting social infrastructure, and a growing crisis of institutional credibility.

The Problem of Eroding Communities

As technology increasingly isolates us from one another, a central question emerges: How do we reap the benefits of technology while staying human?

People are simultaneously turning toward AI for advice and companionship while longing for the relationships it can't replace.

During the *Social Health Trends & Predictions* session, Kasley Killam, author of *The Art and Science of Connection*, shared that 49% of Gen Z has already formed what they describe as a meaningful relationship with AI, and 37% can imagine falling in love with an AI companion.

At the same time, people want to be together and connect. Killam also noted that Google searches for “how to make friends” and “social clubs” are at record highs.

Across industries, people are retreating instinctively toward the analog, the handmade, and the human. The All-American Rejects noted in their SXSW set that they’re touring in backyards (yes, real, actual backyards), drawing crowds hungry for something that can’t be optimized or served up by an algorithm. The feeling of being unmoored, and for some a resurgence of nostalgia, spanned industries, countries, and experiences.

Fast Food vs. Vegetables: What We’re Really Hungry For

Deep down, we need the productive friction of uncomfortable human conversation, the mentor who challenges us, and the community that supports and pushes back. But many people keep reaching for what’s easy instead. Tanner Ray, writer and director at Wicked Stew, made a point during *The Patient Frame: Cinematic Creators in a Clickbait World* session when contrasting short-form with long-form storytelling: “Short-form content is like fast food. It’s convenient, it tastes alright, but it’s not good for you. Long-form narrative is vegetables.” The same applies to how we use AI. When we default to uncritical use, we’re choosing convenience over the friction that actually nourishes us.

Mattering: The Need No Algorithm Can Fill

If community is the operating system, mattering is the reason people log in. During her keynote, Jennifer Wallace argued that resilience is not built in isolation. It “rests on relationships, deep, nourishing relationships that remind us that we are significant, appreciated, invested in, and depended on.”

The consequences of its absence are measurable. Wallace noted that “we’ve traded connection for convenience.” When people feel undervalued at work, that feeling follows them home. Conversely, when mattering is present, the data is striking. People who receive meaningful feedback are 48% less likely to be job hunting and five times more engaged in their work.

This is the dimension of community that no algorithm can replicate. AI can simulate companionship, but it can’t make you feel needed or depended on. It can generate praise, but it can’t appreciate the doer behind the deed. In an era of eroding community and accelerating convenience, mattering is the irreducibly human ingredient—and the one most at risk of being optimized away.

WHAT LEADERS NEED TO KNOW NOW

- 1. Invest in community as a competitive asset.** Genuine community is becoming a durable differentiator. Treat in-person gatherings and interpersonal skill-building as strategic investments. Done well, the effort is worth it.
- 2. Prepare for the analog revival to move into your category.** The retreat toward handmade and human experiences is a broad cultural signal. Organizations that create irreducibly human moments can benefit as the trend expands across industries.
- 3. Authenticity costs something. Spend it deliberately.** What you choose not to do with AI signals as much as what you do. Make those choices visible and consistent.
- 4. Make people’s impact visible and build a culture of mattering.** People need to know their work makes a difference. Build systems and habits that connect effort to outcome, whether that means sharing customer stories with your team, circulating internal recognition, or simply telling someone how their contribution changed an outcome.



KEY INSIGHT #6:

The Augmented Human Is Accelerating. Equitable Access Is Not.

“Your body is now a platform. Your mind has a reader, an interpreter, and a controller. And pretty soon, opting out will mean falling behind.”

—Amy Webb, CEO, Future Today Strategy Group



Photo by Mike Jordan

THE IDEA

Advances in neuroscience, wearable and embedded devices, and AI-powered products—from coaching agents to smart beds—are actively reshaping human creativity and performance. As we look to the future, where things go from here isn't yet clear.

Putting potential positive or negative impacts of the augmented human aside, SXSW pointed toward a more pressing reality—that augmentation is already shaping how people work, perform, and make decisions.

The Body Is Now a Platform

The augmented human is no longer a niche concept tied to implants, elite performance, or frontier labs. It's emerging as a mainstream condition of modern life. Across SXSW, augmentation appeared in many forms: AI systems that shape how people write, decide, and learn; wearables that translate stress and recovery into continuous signals; neurotechnology that promises earlier intervention; adaptive products that increasingly coach attention, mood, and behavior; and workplace systems that steadily shift effort from people to machines. The cumulative effect of living in environments where performance is increasingly measurable, coachable, and expected.

The bright future thinkers see...	Those worried about how the technology could work against us see...
AI-powered smart devices help the human of the future better understand and manage their body and their mind. Health outcomes are predictable, and negative health outcomes are increasingly avoidable and more treatable for optimal health and life span.	Many can't afford augmentation or smart devices, and they've fallen behind. They depend on government support and handouts for food. They can't get a regular job. They struggle to connect and don't see a society or world that cares about them.
The augmented human knows how to anticipate and manage their moods. They focus on the things that align to their goals and know how to feel great most of the time. "Bad days" at work because of bad sleep become rare.	They protest. Eventually, the world has stark lines between those who have everything and those who have nothing.
Headaches are avoidable. Bodies become finely tuned performance machines. The augmented human is more in touch with their mental and physical needs and can function optimally almost all of the time.	Those with less outnumber those who are augmented humans and get the first and best jobs, life opportunities, and partner options. Things reach a tipping point where violence becomes the answer for the disenfranchised and society as we know it collapses.
During the <i>Operating Systems of the 3rd Millennium: AI + XR + Neuro</i> session, Antonio Forenza, CEO and founder of Awear, observed that, "Mental health today is reactive, episodic, and subjective." With real-time monitoring, you can bring "objectivity to your awareness, so you recognize stress as it happens and act in the moment before it escalates." Framed this way, augmentation points to a future where people may be better equipped to understand their own signals and respond earlier.	While augmentation could improve performance, it could also become a condition of access to work, opportunity, and social mobility. During her featured session, Amy Webb, CEO of the Future Today Strategy Group, imagined how that divide could harden over time: "The economic logic that pulled billions of people in the developing world into the global economy is about to push them back out again. Not by policy. Not by protectionism. By physics."

Brain Privacy and Organizational Responsibility

Cognitive sovereignty and brain privacy are becoming business issues, not abstract ethics debates. Once neural, behavioral, and emotional data can be inferred, captured, or acted upon, companies are no longer dealing only with productivity tools or wellness products. They're operating closer to identity, agency, and mental autonomy. The risk isn't limited to surveillance. It includes conformity. Systems designed around probabilistic averages already tend to flatten edge cases, normalize standard behavior, and place the burden of adaptation on the user. The result is not just a divide between augmented and unaugmented people, but a divide between those whose needs are designed for and those who are expected to adapt.

The organizations that lead responsibly will use augmentation to expand capability without turning humanity into another performance metric. Augmentation is not simply a technology agenda. It's a governance decision about whether the future of work will be built to empower people, or one where people are expected to continuously adapt to keep pace.

WHAT LEADERS NEED TO KNOW NOW

- 1. The next talent gap will likely be shaped less by access to AI and more by who can still think, decide, and create without leaning on AI too much.** Competitive advantage will come from safeguarding judgment, not just accelerating output.
- 2. Performance systems are becoming people systems.** Decisions about wearables, AI assistants, coaching tools, and monitoring can help shape culture, inclusion, and trust as much as they shape productivity, which means augmentation choices will likely carry workforce consequences.
- 3. The strongest position is to define non-negotiables before the tools do it for you.** Organizations that move first on boundaries around privacy, autonomy, and acceptable optimization can be better positioned than those that discover their standards only after employees and customers start pushing back.
- 4. Leaders should treat cognitive liberty, data boundaries, inclusion, and human variation as design requirements,** not downstream risk controls.

Replay VS. Breakout Hit

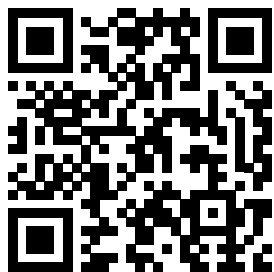
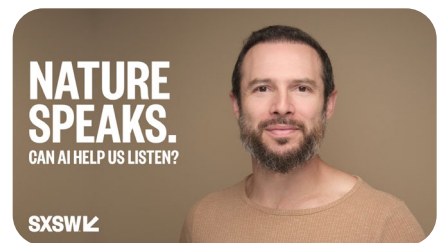


The 2025 SXSW Insights Report Summarized Eight Key Insights. Here's how they showed up this year on repeat.

2025 Insight...	How it showed up in 2026...
<p>Insight 1: Amplifying ingenuity—AI's creative renaissance: AI is transforming industries today and is poised to amplify human intelligence, creativity, and problem-solving. Democratization of AI tools and strong upskilling programs will usher in a new world of AI and humans building together.</p>	<p>The real benefits and consequences of AI adoption once again took center stage. Futurists talked about human augmentation from AI, robotics, and smart devices reshaping winners and losers in life and work. Real questions about whether the new world we're facing will be better or worse showed up on almost every stage.</p>
<p>Insight 2: Take the quantum leap—computing's next revolution is here: Quantum computing is out of the lab and in the real world. Early adopters will lead the next wave of industrial and scientific breakthroughs, while those who hesitate risk being left behind.</p>	<p>The conversation shifted. The pace of innovation and the immediate impacts of AI replaced some of the focus on the longer-term horizon and quantum's capabilities. Broader economic pressures and the need to unlock investment capacity to fund AI innovation and knock-on AI effects were also front and center.</p>
<p>Insight 3: Companies that master policy shifts will shape the future: Economic policy, geopolitical tensions, and national investments in AI and quantum computing are redefining global power dynamics and are poised to impact long-term competitiveness and growth.</p>	<p>The role and drivers of power on the global stage were once again in focus at SXSW. Questions about whether policies were keeping pace with the level of integration and change affecting society also showed up in a new way. Also, the growing need for leaders to engage employees in the right way to unleash AI's positive potential.</p>
<p>Insight 4: Digital safety is about minds, not machines: With AI, quantum, and immersive tech reshaping human experiences and driving more and more of our lives into the digital world, responsible innovation is imperative to a positive human future.</p>	<p>This insight was even more important in 2026, as time in the digital world continues to shape the lived human experience and technology continues to impact society, work, and entertainment. Speakers across panels also discussed how, in 2026 and beyond, agency and self-directed accountability in shaping the use of technology in a way that's right for each individual are more critical than ever.</p>
<p>Insight 5: The power of experiential brands: For modern marketers, the mandate isn't just to inform or entertain—it's to tell stories that people can feel, shape, and share. The best brands don't just capture attention, they use emerging tools to create immersive, emotional, and interactive experiences that foster deep audience connection.</p>	<p>The role of brands had a fresh spin in 2026. A few speakers shared their view that brands are one of the final competitive moats as more business models than ever before are embracing and transforming through AI. Some also showcased brands as a way to foster trust at a time when people are looking more than ever for reliable, credible sources. Creators also emerged, driving collaborations and impact with brands in more meaningful ways, as catalysts and deeper partners rather than brand representatives alone).</p>
<p>Insight 6: AI isn't replacing doctors—it's accelerating cures: Technological advancements in precision medicine, AI-driven diagnostics, and longevity research are driving healthcare into a new era of progress at warp speed, moving from lifespan to healthspan. Technology enables curative treatments and preventative approaches that offer good health for a lifetime.</p>	<p>The definition of cures and the scope of how technology can support better human lifespan and health span expanded. Brain-computer interaction, wearable and embedded devices paired with neuroscience to support better mental health outcomes, and tech-powered prevention took center stage.</p>
<p>Insight 7: Space is open for business: Space is the new testing ground for health research, AI, and next-gen materials that have the potential to transform life on Earth.</p>	<p>While space remains a frontier for experimentation, 2026 made clear that the human body is a critical testing ground. Advances in neuroscience, wearables, and AI are enabling continuous measurement, intervention, and optimization of human health and performance—bringing what was once experimental into everyday life.</p>
<p>Insight 8: Immersive tech is redefining fandom: Fans are no longer simply consumers. They're critical stakeholders in entertainment. Entertainment is expanding into immersive, co-created experiences driven by AI, VR, and decentralized content ownership.</p>	<p>From fandom to worldbuilding, 2026 focused on connecting fans, communities, and experiences in new realities, environments, and modern influencer platforms. Robotics and embedded devices, along with the continued convergence between physical and digital channels, are also replatforming how we live and understand our lives.</p>

SXSW

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ON THE GROUND SHOUT-OUTS

The team building this year's report had the chance to also attend music and film events. Many incredibly talented creators showed up big at SXSW, and having time to experience these artists helped make

the SXSW experience even better for our insights team (and all the attendees). Here are some of our group's favorite moments—beyond the conference sessions themselves:

- **CJ Bangah:** Film premiere of *Mike & Nick & Nick & Alice* and Noah Kahan's show
- **George Korizis:** Premiere of Apple TV+ *Margo's Got Money Troubles*
- **Kate Kennard:** Alanis Morissette and St. Vincent performing "You Oughta Know," *Sender* premiere
- **Nathan Kolmodin:** Jack Johnson show and taking requests live
- **Ryan Pennock:** Alanis Morissette and Lumineers, and learning about how humans are building out an understanding of whale language
- **Kevin Joyce:** Noah Kahan, Lumineers, Five for Fighting, and (acoustic) Passion Pit shows back-to-back in the same evening, a sad-folksy, stomp-clap bonanza
- **Emily Folsom:** Film premieres of *Seekers of Infinite Love*, *Mike & Nick & Nick & Alice*, and *Chasing Summer*, and seeing the Lumineers show
- **Lauren McKinney:** Noah Kahan show, a lawn set with The Lumineers, and the screening of *Over My Dead Body*
- **Cissy Shao:** *Erupcja* with Charli XCX and Christina Aguilera
- **Meg Carroll:** Premiere of HBO's *The Dark Wizard* and UCB's *ASSSSCAT: Improv*
- **Lauren Steady:** Seeing Chris Fleming and Eric André, Loud Luxury's DJ Set, and screening *Saviors* and *Capturing Bigfoot*

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