



Brandon Hall Group™

Unlocking the Real ROI of AI in the Workplace



2026

Executive Interview



About BTS



BTS is a global management consulting and professional services firm that helps organizations execute strategy through people. Founded in 1986 and publicly listed on the Nasdaq Stockholm exchange, BTS specializes in experiential learning, business simulations, leadership development and digital transformation. The firm works with Fortune 500 companies across industries including retail, consumer goods, electronics, financial services, healthcare and technology to build organizational capabilities, align leadership teams and drive measurable business results. BTS has offices worldwide and has spent four decades designing consequence-rich, hands-on learning experiences that accelerate strategy execution and organizational change.

About Peter Mulford

Peter Mulford is the Chief AI Officer and Executive Vice President at BTS, where he leads the firm's Artificial Intelligence and Innovation practice. He helps Fortune 500 clients get real impact by working with teams and organizations to transform their business using AI, innovation, future-back thinking and digital technology. Peter joined BTS in 1998 and has worked in its offices in San Francisco, Tokyo, Johannesburg, London and New York. From 2005 to 2010, he was Managing Director of BTS's East Coast region, leading the firm's largest global office through a period in which it more than tripled in size.



His writing and research have been featured in CLO and Training magazines and he is a frequent guest lecturer on innovation and strategy for the MBA program at Columbia Business School. Peter holds an MBA in Finance from Columbia Business School and a Master's in International Affairs with a focus on Asia Pacific Studies from Columbia University.

About Michael Rochelle

Chief Strategy Officer and Principal Analyst, Brandon Hall Group™

Today's conversation is moderated by **Michael Rochelle** is Chief Strategy Officer and Principal HCM Analyst at Brandon Hall Group™, bringing his expertise in Human Capital Management. Michael has more than 30 years' experience in HR, IT, sales, marketing, business development and strategic and financial planning in Fortune 500 and venture-backed start-up organizations.



Q Michael

Where do you see AI and HR today?

A Peter

HR and talent professionals are in a really interesting position, whether they realize it or not. If you wonder what sits between the capabilities of these models and the ROI that CEOs everywhere want from them, it actually is people.

The easiest way to think about AI is in layers, like a multi-layer cake. You have the model layer, the domain of the Anthropics and OpenAIs and Microsofts of the world. That has become somewhat commoditized. Then you have the application layer, which has to do with how you interact with the models, whether through Claude from Anthropic or a Copilot or Azure Studio. Then above that is what I call the execution layer, which is how people interact with these models, what they do or do not do when using them.

Most of the attention is on the model and application layers, but not enough people are thinking about the execution layer. That is where HR and talent professionals and leaders everywhere, have the highest-leverage opportunity.

Q Michael

Are people starting to see the value they expected from AI? What are you hearing as the breakthroughs right now?

A Peter

There are really two questions there. Are they seeing benefits and are they seeing the benefits they expected? It depends on the company. We are working with one client in the medical devices space where the HR team is actually way ahead of the rest of the company in their use of AI. They are humbly wondering how to stay ahead of the curve and I want to tell them they already are. Then there are other companies where that is not the case.

Part of the problem is that many companies do not have the right expectations. An analogy I like to draw: for much of our lives, we have been reading books in the dark by candlelight. Fire is amazing and we can see quite a lot with it. But now we have electricity. And what are people doing? They are still reading books in the dark, just with a lamp. Electricity is good for a whole lot more than that, including discovering the fundamental physics of electrons. Yet a lot of organizations are still using this amazing technology to summarize emails or synthesize documents and missing what I would call huge frontier use cases.

Sometimes firms are quite happy with what they are getting because their expectations are too low. In other cases, HR teams are way out ahead and just do not realize it.

Q Michael

Are organizations setting up AI-specific KPIs like they do for other business objectives?

A Peter

Not consistently, but the frontier firms are starting to do it. Partly because CFOs are getting impatient. Rolling into 2026, a lot of executives are done with the experimentation phase and want to see results.

Among the firms getting it right, we notice a difference in how goals are set. I call it type one and type two. Type one is command and control: dictating who gets to experiment, what tools they use, what approaches to take. It is well intended but tends to kill the authorship, ownership and innovation energy that gets you to real breakthroughs.

Type two is what I call criteria clarity. Leaders define really clearly what the goals are, which KPIs matter and which solution areas to focus on. But then they create space for people to experiment, iterate and discover solutions. Both approaches have KPIs attached. Otherwise you end up reimagining workflows that produce marginal benefits. You do want to aim the collective creativity of your

team at problems that matter. But it is that second group, the criteria clarity group, that is doing remarkable things.

Q Michael

What about the maturity curve? Where are most organizations and how does that affect their ambition?

A Peter

It varies by company, not so much by industry. It really depends where they are on the AI maturity curve. At the first stage, where you have just put AI systems in people's hands and maybe sent them to a generic class on prompt engineering, the measure you want to track is adoption. And there are things to be discovered at the other side of adoption measures. You will notice surprising ways people react to and interact with AI.

As soon as organizations get past the thousand-flowers-blooming phase and move beyond personal produc-

tivity, that is where bigger KPIs come in. We are seeing an almost perfect one-to-one relationship between where firms are on the maturity curve and the level of ambition they are going after. You want to figure out at what point you have gotten adoption down and can start aiming higher. And when you do, are you providing criteria clarity or swooping in with top-down involvement that kills the energy?

Q Michael

How should someone evaluate whether to bring in an AI-enabled provider versus building their own internal AI capabilities?

A Peter

The good news is that while AI itself is always changing, the way you figure out which vendor to use is largely the same as it has ever been. Go back to the layer cake. You have the problem you are trying to solve at the top. Then you look at the model a vendor

uses, the application layer and finally whether it will reduce a pain point for your people or augment their capabilities. Then compare the vendors.

The thing that makes AI a little different is that you really ought to know how the technology works. With something like SAP for CRM, you do not necessarily need to understand the mechanics to make a decision. But with AI, you want intellectual self-defense so that when a vendor comes in and promises what their solution can do, you can ask thoughtful questions about how the model was trained, how it integrates with your existing data, what evaluations they use. There is a lot of energy around AI right now and a lot of promises being made that are not entirely technically accurate. If you know how the models work, you will immediately be able to distinguish accurate descriptions of capability from things that are a little bit fabulous.

Q Michael

Does AI make platform rollouts easier or more complicated?

A Peter

What we are seeing at BTS, looking through our specific keyhole, is that you can quickly move people from skepticism to adoption to excitement if you do it experientially. And the irony is that AI helps you use AI.

In a typical engagement, we start by helping people understand what the technology can and cannot do. We want them to be impressed by what is possible but not mystified by it. That matters because if people think AI is cool but do not understand what they saw, you get one of two problems. Either you get champions who run out and potentially put the business at risk because they do not know what is happening under the hood. Or you get people who think it is really cool and are now freaked out.

Then we get them working immediately, not on prompting exercises but on real business problems with AI as a partner. What surprised me most is what happens to people's sense of identity when the technology actually works. They have a moment where they see the ROI potential. But underneath that, their sense of identity starts to shift. The leader realizes they are the person who knows what AI output to trust and which to interrogate. That kind of judgment is rarer and harder to build than the AI models themselves.

We are starting to understand the conditions that produce that shift and they are learnable and designable. It is not about personality type or digital fluency scores. It is about creating the right kind of consequence-rich practice environment where people can work through these changes experientially and arrive at that moment themselves.

Q Michael

Do teams need significant upskilling and reskilling to get there, or can they learn along the way?

A Peter

One of my favorites is an FMCG company that, after workshops with BTS, discovered how to use AI to create synthetic customers. They built an entire focus group of synthetic customers and used them for rapid prototyping of new product launch ideas and new market launch ideas. They were able to figure out fast and cheaply what was wrong with their initial approach, things they could not see because they had been working together for a long time and were in a bubble. They came up with a reimagination of their core solution that started winning in the market and driving revenues and their dependency on outside ad agencies went down because the AI replaced that work. It was not only cheaper and faster, it was better.

As a category, I would call that using AI to quickly and cheaply test ideas that in the past were neither quick nor cheap to test. That is where we are seeing some of the highest ROI.

Q Michael

Any closing thoughts for our audience?

A Peter

It is an exciting time to be alive. Nerve-racking for sure and I am not going to pretend everything is great. But these next few months, maybe years, are going to be exciting ones. I would encourage everyone to lean into them and more specifically, to keep learning faster than the rate of change. It is okay not to know the answer. In fact, it is probably better if you do not, because that means you are more susceptible to error correction. What is not acceptable is to throw your hands up and stop learning.



Here are some ways to listen to the interview on Brandon Hall Group's Excellence at Work Podcast:





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