



Executive Interview



**From the CHRO Seat
AI Implementation Is a
People Challenge First
2026**



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About Lisa Cannell



Lisa Cannell is the Senior Managing Director of Business Development for UVA Darden Executive Education and Lifelong Learning, where she works closely with organizations and their learning and development teams to address talent and leadership development needs through custom solutions and programming. She has been with Darden since 2014, initially serving as the School's Chief HR Officer for four years before transitioning into her current role. Prior to Darden, Lisa spent more than 20 years in HR leadership roles across banking, information services and insurance, including positions at State Farm Insurance Companies, SNL Financial (now part of S&P Global), StellarOne and Virginia Financial Group. She holds a B.A. in Psychology (Phi Beta Kappa) from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and earned her MBA from the University of Virginia Darden Graduate School of Business.

About University of Virginia Darden Executive Education & Lifelong Learning



UVA Darden Executive Education & Lifelong Learning is a top ranked, global provider of executive development. Delivered by the University of Virginia Darden School Foundation and taught by the Darden School of Business' highly acclaimed faculty, Darden Executive Education prepares and inspires leaders to succeed in a global marketplace. Offering more than 35 open programs and partnering with leading organizations worldwide to develop custom business solutions, we provide personalized, transformational learning experiences on Grounds in Charlottesville, Virginia, and in the Washington D.C., area, as well as online. Darden shapes the way the world does business through our research and draws upon our collective knowledge and experience to cultivate responsible, innovative leaders.

Host Rachel Cooke



Today's conversation is moderated by **Rachel Cooke**, she is the Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst at Brandon Hall Group™. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 20+ years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research and Performance Improvement industries.

Recognition



HCM Excellence Awards®



Learning and Development	1 Gold	2 Silver	1 Bronze
Leadership Development	1 Gold	3 Silver	

**AI
Implementation
is
Ultimately a
People
Challenge**

"AI can act as an employee itself; it can help your employees and it is something we have never seen before where HR input is essential."

Lisa Cannell

Q Rachel

AI implementation is ultimately a people challenge. What do you see as the biggest opportunity for HR leaders right now and where does AI fit in?

A Lisa

We are on the cusp of a real opportunity for all HR leaders to have a seat at the table because of the changes AI is bringing. There are significant opportunities and real risks and because AI is so deeply related to people, HR definitely needs to have a leadership voice in this.

AI can act as an employee itself; it can help your employees and it is something we have never seen before where HR input is essential. Without it, the organization faces risk and won't benefit as fully as it could. I have the opportunity to speak with a lot of HR leaders as I consult with them and I hear about challenges and opportunities that vary based on the organization's AI maturity, how employees are embracing it and the HR leader's own comfort and confidence in stepping into that leadership role.

Q Rachel

When you look at what organizations are getting wrong in their AI implementation, what patterns do you see?

**Topic: AI & HR
Leadership****A Lisa**

What I see is a tendency to focus on getting people skilled up at the individual level, to the exclusion of thinking more strategically. Organizations may be addressing the C-suite level and the frontline simultaneously, but they are not bringing middle leaders into those conversations.

So, there is a continuation of the thinking: Let's focus on getting the masses comfortable using generative AI tools, whether through top-down mandates or grassroots encouragement. But the biggest mistake is not bringing together top-level strategic thinking with leaders who represent the workforce to discuss what AI can actually do for the organization.

"Individual productivity gains are valuable ... but that alone does not move the organization forward."

Lisa Cannell

Individual productivity gains are valuable and I use these tools myself every day. But that alone does not move the organization forward. If people are not giving input on system-wide processes across departments that can benefit from more sophisticated tools, agents and enterprise-wide AI solutions, you are missing the opportunity. That is where you can truly change what talent you need, how work gets done, what processes become more efficient and where you capture more value in the business.

Beating Human Barriers

Q Rachel

What are the biggest human barriers to successful AI adoption?

A Lisa

"Fear is the primary barrier."

Lisa Cannell

Fear is the primary barrier. In any organization you will have a spectrum of people, from enthusiastic change adopters to those who are strongly resistant and AI adoption follows that same curve. A top-down "you will use this" mandate is rarely the most effective approach. What works is helping people see the use cases that are relevant to them individually and building genuine curiosity.

"Crowdsourcing experiences among peers is powerful."

Lisa Cannell

This is actually the first time I have seen any technology be implemented in organizations where non-IT people can put their hands on it, play around with it and be curious without waiting for a CTO-led rollout. That is a real advantage. Crowdsourcing experiences among peers is powerful, because when people see colleagues using it in ways that spark curiosity, adoption follows. The fears that most need to be addressed are fear of job loss, fear of looking incompetent and simply not knowing where to start.

Experiential Learning**Leader Preparation****The Case Method**

A Socratic teaching approach where participants analyze real business decisions, defend their reasoning, and debate outcomes with peers, building critical thinking that AI cannot replicate.

"You cannot rely on AI to form your responses in that room. You have to think."

Lisa Cannell

Q Rachel

How does the case method and experiential learning at Darden help leaders prepare for the ambiguity that comes with AI adoption?

A Lisa

Darden is known for the case method, where faculty teach in the Socratic tradition. It is a flipped classroom: participants come prepared having read a case about an organization wrestling with a real decision and when they arrive in class, they are immediately put on the spot. They have to defend their reasoning and there is genuine debate among participants about how and why decisions get made.

I have experienced this firsthand as a Darden alumna and we use this method in our executive education programs as well. One of the concerns about generative AI is that heavy reliance on it without advancing your underlying knowledge can erode critical thinking. People, including some of my own Gen Z daughters, talk about it making them less sharp if they use it as a crutch. The case method directly counteracts that.

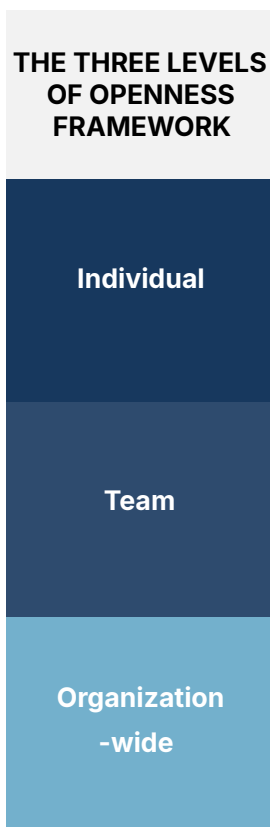
You cannot rely on AI to form your responses in that room. You have to think. Critical thinking is going to become even more important as AI

becomes more prevalent and the case method is one of the most effective ways to exercise that muscle.

Q Rachel

How should CHROs and business leaders think about the talent and skills development needed to succeed in an AI-enabled environment?

A Lisa



The talent profile that organizations need to develop centers on openness and curiosity at three levels: openness to using AI individually, openness to working alongside AI in a team context and openness to suggesting how AI can benefit the organization more broadly. The people doing the work every day are the ones who know where AI can add the most value. If they are not actively lifting those insights up, organizations will not get the benefit.

Development for this starts with mindset: cultivating curiosity, building business acumen and developing what I call an enterprise perspective. Leadership does not happen in a vacuum. It happens within a business and organizational context and leaders who understand how the business works, what its goals are and how the different parts connect will be far better equipped to contribute to AI decisions. That is exactly what we focus on at Darden.

We teach leadership within an integrated model of business understanding and that enterprise perspective helps leaders at every level, whether they are thinking about their own productivity, working with AI agents on a team, or providing input into organization-wide AI implementations.

Pilot Phase



Meaningful AI Implementation

Q Rachel

Many organizations are still stuck in the pilot phase. How can companies get beyond testing and move to meaningful AI implementation?

A Lisa

Ground in what AI actually is vs. the hype

Identify where AI adds value in specific context

Build internal capability to move forward independently

That is exactly where we are helping organizations right now. We have Darden faculty who are experts across the full range of business disciplines, including data science and analytics, which is foundational to AI, as well as supply chain, marketing, finance and more. I am working with organizations to bring together cross-functional leadership teams for workshops designed to move past the hype and into concrete strategy.

We start with a grounding in what is actually happening with AI across industries, what the hype is and what it is not and then we move into the real work: identifying where AI can genuinely add value in their specific context, whether in supply chain,

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Sometimes you
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marketing, product development, or finance. Our faculty are clear that AI is not always the right tool. Sometimes you can achieve your goals without it.

But having a cross-functional group of leaders work through use cases with expert guidance helps focus the investment where it will matter most. What distinguishes our approach is that we are not selling an implementation. Our goal is to help organizations learn to do this themselves. We frame the right questions, build the internal capability to evaluate and act and leave the organization better equipped to move forward on their own.

ACTION LIST

Use your OD skills

Bring employees +
execs together

Step in and lead

Q Rachel

What is the one piece of advice you would leave HR leaders with?

A Lisa

Use the organizational development skills you have spent your career building. Bring together the employees who are already using AI on their own with the executives who are thinking about it strategically, because at the end of the day, AI is going to change organizations dramatically.

“Do not stand by and wait for it to happen and do not wait for IT to lead it.”

Lisa Cannell

Much of the work that needs to happen involves examining the work itself: what needs to be done, how it is structured and how that changes when AI takes on parts of it. HR leaders are the experts in that kind of work redesign and organizational change. Do not stand by and wait for it to happen and do not wait for IT to lead it. Use those skills, step in and ask how you can help. We are here to support that work.



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