



# Executive Interview



## From Launch to Product: How Grant Thornton Is Rebuilding HR's Foundation for AI

2026



**Jeanna Shapiro**

*Chief People & Culture*

*Officer*

*Grant Thornton*



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## About Grant Thornton

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**Grant Thornton Advisors LLC** is a leading U.S. provider of audit, tax and advisory services and the U.S. member firm of Grant Thornton International Ltd. Grant Thornton operates as the seventh-largest U.S. audit, tax and advisory platform by revenue, with 46 offices across the country serving clients from the middle market to the enterprise. The firm traces its roots to 1924.

## About Jeanna Shapiro

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**Jeanna Shapiro** is Grant Thornton's Chief People & Culture Officer and a member of the firm's Executive Committee at Grant Thornton Advisors LLC. She has nearly 25 years of experience leading talent, human capital, administration and operations functions within professional services firms.

Before joining Grant Thornton, Shapiro spent many years at Oliver Wyman, most recently as Chief Operating Officer of the Americas, where she oversaw 1,600 employees and more than 250 partners. Earlier in her career she held HR leadership roles at Booz Allen Hamilton covering resource deployment, learning and development, talent acquisition, employee relations, performance management and compensation. She holds a bachelor's degree in political science from the University at Buffalo and a human resources certification from George Mason University.

## About Michael Rochelle

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This interview was moderated by **Michael Rochelle**. He is Chief Strategy Officer and Principal Analyst at Brandon Hall Group™. Michael has more than 40 years' experience in HR, IT, sales, marketing, business development and strategic and financial planning working with Fortune 500 and venture-backed start-up organizations.

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#### From Launch to Product

**Q Michael**

Your team's new research on the AI-enabled HR operating model argues that HR needs to move away from launching programs and initiatives and start operating more like a product team. What was your reaction to that idea?

**A Jeanna**

I liked it a lot. I always come at things as a business owner, a partner in a firm or someone serving a client, and HR is there in support of that. It was fascinating, because HR is so good at launching things. We roll out a new onboarding process, a new leadership program, a new succession process constantly. I recently designed a new performance management approach at Grant Thornton. But if I'm a business leader, I don't really care about the launch. I care about whether it's actually working, whether it's getting me the value I was promised.

## The Wiring System Problem

Most HR people intend to have that impact, but we get lost in the launch and in setting up the process. We build things and then create what I call a wiring system, because we keep plugging things in and trying new things without any real wire management. All of a sudden we have all these processes and we can't always prove their impact.

That's why I like this idea of moving from launch to product. A product requires constant improvement. You have to babysit it, own it, nurture it like a child growing over time.

You can't just launch it and leave it, because within minutes these days it stops working. It can only survive if you keep feeding it the business needs and processes it has to support. Programs get launched, but products get improved, and that continuous-improvement mindset, whether it's a process or something else, is a good way for HR to shift how we think.

**Q** Michael

That also ties into the idea of talent pods replacing the traditional HR business partner model. How did you feel about that piece?

## Talent Pods vs. the HRBP Model

*What I like about the pod concept is that it brings the expertise together into one team.*

**A** Jeanna

I liked that piece too, even though I think a lot of people in the HR business partner world might feel a little threatened or concerned about it. I came through the ranks in a talent manager and HR business partner type role, representing a particular business group, with centers of excellence around me that I'd have to pull in for anything I couldn't be the expert on myself. That can be lonely, because if you can't get the right response you're stuck, and it can slow things down because you're relying on people who work differently than you do.

## **A Faster Swat Team**

What I like about the pod concept is that it brings the expertise together into one team. We can debate whether that's the most efficient or cost-effective model, but I think the business would experience a pod as a much faster SWAT team that's responsive to whatever comes up. It acknowledges that no one person can be the expert who brings everything to bear for a business leader.

If I'm dealing with a recruiting issue that also touches onboarding and some compliance paperwork, in the pod concept I'd have one team, expert in that business's processes, instead of having to draw resources from four different places where I don't have much influence. It's almost like an agent with all the capabilities to solve multidisciplinary problems quickly, with the expert knowledge of that team. I really like that concept.

### **Q Michael**

If you had to rate HR organizations today on a one-to-five scale for how ready they are for this kind of change, where would you put them, and why?

### **A Jeanna**

I'll be honest. When you asked me in the green room for my initial reaction, I said it was such an exciting write-up and point of view, but I was almost overwhelmed thinking about how I would actually operationalize the whole thing. I consider myself pretty innovative and I jump at a good challenge, but the thought of doing everything the research lays out was overwhelming.

## **The Readiness Reality Check**

*Once you start pulling one wire the whole system needs to be looked at.*

It's not that we don't want to improve and innovate. It's that, going back to my wiring analogy, once you start pulling one wire the whole system needs to be looked at, which is the appropriate thing to do but also genuinely hard. HR and talent programs are built on a lot of historic, traditional ways of thinking about talent progression, talent attraction and performance management, and we're constantly flying the plane at the same time.

## **Pause and Re-Examine Your Wiring**

It's very difficult to pause and say we know some foundational elements need to be re-examined. That's exactly what this research asks you to do: pause and re-examine your wiring. It's hard because once you pull one wire, everything else was built on top of it. Then you have to ask whether this is even the right foundation to begin with, and how you'd go about redesigning it.

That, to me, is the real challenge: first, knowing where to start, and second, having the capacity to carve out time for it. A lot of people in our organizations are great at managing and executing day-to-day talent and people programs, but not necessarily at innovation or business process reengineering. That's where I got excited about the whole idea and then had to stop and ask myself how I would actually start.

### **Q Michael**

That sounds a lot like renovating a house and finding more problems once you open the walls. Does getting AI adoption right in HR really come down to fixing that shaky foundation first?

### **A Jeanna**

Absolutely. It requires you to really re-look at the architecture the thing is built on and standardize a bunch of things. We've acquired a number of different companies, and the plan is for everybody to come onto our HRIS system and the same performance management system. For that to happen, we first need to clean the data so everyone has the same data, and align the mapping of titles and job architectures.

The business will ask why we can't just bring the performance management system we already built to all these other companies, and the answer is that it takes about eighteen months. That surprises

## **Fix the Foundation First**

*We first need to clean the data so everyone has the same data.*

## **Change Management, Not Just Systems**

people, but when you break it down, we first have to understand what everyone is doing today, how it maps to the new system and how to create consistency across all the workflows.

On top of that, people usually won't love the new process, because it's different from what they had, so there's a lot of stakeholder engagement and change management involved, not just system and process work.

We're also building AI into a lot of how we do things. The hypothesis is that it will take far less time to write reports or performance reviews, because the system is designed to take our defined skills and capabilities and, based on how you rate someone, produce a report within seconds.

But for that to work, everyone has to agree on the levels, competencies, skills and capabilities, and those have to be consistent across multiple countries, languages and local jurisdictional requirements. I'm excited to roll it out globally, but the level of effort required to standardize, clean up the data and build common language and buy-in takes real time.

I think the return on investment will be fantastic for our people, because they'll have a much more consistent way of being assessed and a well-written performance review that covers both their strengths and their development opportunities, something not everyone is equally good at writing on their own. But you have to make that upfront investment, or I'm not sure AI gets you where you want to go.

## **The Upfront Investment**

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where you want to go.*

**Q Michael**

How do you build a governance model that enables AI rather than just clamping down on it?

## **Governance That Enables**

### **A Jeanna**

I think it's very possible. I talk to our risk and compliance people quite a bit, and we've formed an AI committee. It may start as a slow conversation, and to their credit the risk team brings up a lot of important questions, because that's their job.

I think most HR leaders carry some scar tissue around risk, compliance and governance, but people adopt technology when they trust it, so we have to be able to trust it. Governance and compliance go hand in hand, especially in a highly regulated company like mine, and that trust comes from having the difficult conversations.

Our risk people push the business to move carefully, and the business pushes the risk people to advance, and without that tension you'd have no guardrails, which we absolutely need.

I think it's possible if you keep it clear: define the parameters, define the ultimate objective and goal, and answer some very clean questions. Who's accountable? What data are we going to use?

What will require human review, to make sure biases are removed? How are we going to monitor and test the outcomes to make sure the AI or the process doesn't do something we don't want it to do? Once the risk, legal and HR folks lay all of that out for the business, the business understands those questions need to be answered. Then it becomes a question of what risk quotient you're willing to apply, and that can vary by company. For us it would probably be pretty high. Once you have that clarity, everyone starts rowing in the same direction.

We've had active conversations with our AI and governance committee, and we move things forward. Is it taking longer than I'd like? Absolutely. But that doesn't mean the conversations aren't the right ones to have.

## **Trust Drives Adoption**

*People adopt technology when they trust it, so we have to be able to trust it.*

## **Moving Fast Where Risk Is Low**

I was on a call with our lawyers recently about turning on certain AI capabilities in our HRIS system, and some of them will require bias testing first, to assess whether the outcomes are biased. Other things, like some capability testing, we were able to turn on almost immediately, because there's no bias risk when everyone is taking the same capability assessment.

Those are the kinds of conversations we're having. Some things move quickly and some need more work, fairly so. Would I like it to move faster? Yes. Do I understand the need to be intentional and smart about it? Yes.

### **Q Michael**

As people start thinking about AI adoption in HR, what's the one thing you'd want every HR leader to keep in mind?

### **A Jeanna**

Think about the outcomes you actually want. Everybody gets excited about AI, but the real question is what it's getting you. If you want the kind of outcomes AI can support, then go full speed ahead, but you need to think about the whole ecosystem around it.

It's not just about the technology, and it's not just about turning on AI features or adding a chatbot. It's about what outcomes you want, and how you build the operating model around it: do you have the data to support those outcomes, the process flows to support the right outcomes, clarity on who's accountable, and a way to measure all of it?

## **An Operating Model Problem**

*There's no efficiency gain from AI without doing the hard work of cleaning up your systems first.*

It really becomes an operating model problem to solve, rather than a question of turning on more AI or more technology to become more efficient. There's no efficiency gain from AI without doing the hard work of cleaning up your systems first, to build the right foun-

## Where to Invest Your Time

dition for AI to thrive on and do what you actually want it to do. That assessment has to happen. It's not as quick as just turning AI on. That's my big takeaway, and that's where I'd recommend people invest their time.



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