



From Pilot to Practice: The Normalization of Artificial Intelligence Adoption in Human Resource Management

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Abstract – Artificial intelligence (AI) has moved from experimental pilot programs to a routine component of human resource (HR) operations. Drawing on 2026 industry survey evidence — principally the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) State of AI in HR 2026 report and complementary talent-acquisition industry data — this perspective article examines the scale, distribution, and implications of AI adoption across HR functions, with particular attention to recruiting and talent acquisition. Evidence indicates that adoption has become mainstream rather than exceptional: roughly two in five HR teams report formal AI use in at least one function, with a comparable share planning adoption within the year, and recruiting continues to lead all HR use cases. At the same time, adoption estimates vary considerably across data sources depending on sample composition, definitions of "use," and survey timing, and a persistent gap remains between AI deployment and demonstrated business value. This article synthesizes the available evidence, discusses implications for HR strategy and governance, and outlines directions for future empirical research, including the need for longitudinal, function-specific, and outcome-based studies of AI in HR.

Keywords - Artificial Intelligence, Human Resource Management (HRM), AI Adoption, HR Technology, Digital Transformation, Employee Analytics, Recruitment Automation, AI-Driven Decision Making, Workforce Management, Organizational Change, Technology Acceptance, HR Analytics, Automation, Human–AI Collaboration, Ethical AI, Responsible AI, Strategic HRM, Digital HR, AI Normalization, Future of Work.

I. INTRODUCTION

For much of the past decade, artificial intelligence in human resource management (HRM) was discussed primarily as a future possibility — a technology piloted by early-adopter organizations and treated with a mixture of enthusiasm and caution (Tambe, Cappelli, & Yakubovich, 2019). By 2026, that framing has largely given way to a more mundane reality: AI is simply part of how many HR functions operate. Industry survey data suggest that AI adoption within HR is no longer confined to isolated experiments but has become a formally adopted, budgeted, and governed capability in a substantial share of organizations (SHRM, 2026a).

This shift matters for both practice and scholarship. As AI tools move from pilot to production, questions that were once speculative — about fairness, accountability, workforce trust, and measurable value — become empirical and urgent (Charlwood & Guenole, 2022). This article synthesizes recent industry evidence on the scope and pace of AI adoption in HR, with a particular focus on talent acquisition, where adoption appears most advanced. It then considers what this evidence implies for HR practice and identifies gaps that warrant further academic research.

II. BACKGROUND AND RELATED LITERATURE

1. AI in HRM: From Automation to Augmentation

Scholarly interest in AI-enabled HRM has grown alongside the proliferation of algorithmic tools for

sourcing, screening, and workforce analytics (Tambe et al., 2019). Early research emphasized efficiency gains — reduced time-to-hire, expanded candidate reach, and automation of high-volume administrative tasks (Black & van Esch, 2020). More recent work has shifted toward augmentation framings, in which AI systems support rather than replace human judgment in consequential decisions such as hiring and performance evaluation (Cheng & Hackett, 2021). This distinction is consequential: augmentation-oriented deployments tend to retain human decision authority as a safeguard against algorithmic bias, while fuller automation raises sharper questions of accountability and legal exposure (Raghavan, Barocas, Kleinberg, & Levy, 2020).

2. Adoption Unevenness Across HR Functions

A consistent theme across recent industry data is that AI adoption in HR is uneven across functions. Recruiting and talent acquisition consistently rank as the leading use case, followed by HR technology management and learning and development, while functions such as inclusion and diversity, compliance, and total rewards report markedly lower adoption (SHRM, 2026a). This pattern is broadly consistent with a value-and-risk logic: functions with high transaction volume and comparatively lower perceived regulatory risk — such as resume screening or interview scheduling — are adopted first, while functions with direct legal or ethical exposure move more cautiously (Bogen & Rieke, 2018).

3. The Adoption–Value Gap

A second recurrent theme is the gap between AI deployment and demonstrated organizational value. Survey



evidence from Gartner indicates that a large majority of HR leaders have not yet

observed significant business value from AI tools despite growing deployment (cited in Pin, 2026), while broader enterprise data show AI use expanding far faster than governance frameworks or value-measurement practices (SHRM, 2026a). This gap is consistent with prior technology-adoption research suggesting that early-stage deployment often precedes, rather than follows, organizational capability to measure and capture value (Brynjolfsson & McElheran, 2016).

III. CURRENT LANDSCAPE: 2026 ADOPTION EVIDENCE

Table 1 summarizes the principal adoption figures reported across 2026 industry sources. These figures are not directly comparable: they draw on different samples, different definitions of "AI use," and different reference periods, and readers should treat them as an evidentiary range rather than a single consensus estimate.

Table 1. Selected AI adoption metrics in HR and talent acquisition, 2026 industry sources.

Metric	Value	Source	Notes
HR teams using AI in at least one talent-acquisition function	39%	SHRM, State of AI in HR 2026 (n = 1,908)	A further 46% of respondents planned adoption by year-end 2026
Organizations using AI anywhere in the business	62%	SHRM, State of AI in HR 2026	Enterprise-wide figure, not HR-specific
Recruiting as the leading HR AI use case	27%	SHRM, State of AI in HR 2026	Ahead of HR technology management (21%) and L&D (17%)
Talent leaders planning AI use in recruiting (2026)	84%	Korn Ferry, 12th Annual Talent Acquisition Trends (n ≈ 1,670)	Global talent-leader sample; intention rather than current use
AI adoption in recruiting by firm size	~33% (small) – 60% (large)	Korn Ferry / Recruiterflow synthesis, 2026	Illustrates the enterprise-scale adoption gradient
Companies using AI somewhere in talent acquisition	69%	Aptitude Research & iCIMS, Definitive Guide to AI Adoption in TA (2026)	Broader definition than SHRM's 27% figure; only 18% deploy AI at scale

Several patterns emerge from this evidence. First, formal AI adoption within HR functions has moved from a minority to a near-majority behavior: SHRM's (2026a) figures indicate that roughly 39% of HR teams had adopted AI in at least one function by early 2026, with an additional 46% planning adoption within the year — implying that, if intentions materialize, a substantial majority of HR functions will have some form of formal AI adoption by the end of 2026. Second, recruiting remains the clear leading use case, whether measured narrowly (SHRM's 27% function-specific figure) or broadly (Aptitude Research and iCIMS' 69% figure for any AI use somewhere in talent acquisition). Third, adoption scales with organizational size: large enterprises report meaningfully higher adoption than small firms, consistent with resource-based explanations of technology adoption in which capital, data infrastructure, and specialized talent favor larger organizations (Korn Ferry, 2026).

It is worth noting explicitly that adoption figures vary by roughly a factor of two to three depending on definition and source — from SHRM's 27% function-specific recruiting figure to Aptitude Research and iCIMS' 69% "any use" figure for talent acquisition broadly. This divergence is itself an empirical finding: it suggests that "AI adoption" is not yet a standardized construct in HR technology research, and that comparisons across studies should be made cautiously.

IV. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR HR PRACTICE

1. From Reactive to Proactive HR Involvement

A striking finding across recent SHRM data is that a majority of organizations do not involve HR directly, or through cross-functional collaboration, in developing enterprise-wide AI strategy (SHRM, 2026b). This



positions HR as a reactor to AI decisions made elsewhere in the organization rather than a driver of them, despite HR's custodianship of the workforce data and policy frameworks most directly implicated by AI deployment. As AI adoption normalizes, the strategic case for earlier and more structural HR involvement in enterprise AI governance strengthens correspondingly.

2. Governance and Policy Maturity Lag Adoption

Industry evidence suggests that HR AI governance frameworks have not kept pace with deployment. A substantial share of HR professionals describe existing AI policies as either too restrictive and tool-specific, or conversely too broad to guide day-to-day practice (cited in HIAI Institute, 2026). This bifurcation — overly narrow rules that quickly become outdated, versus vague principles that provide little practical guidance — is a familiar pattern in the diffusion of workplace technologies that outpace formal policy development (Kellogg, Valentine, & Christin, 2020), and it has particular salience in HR given the direct implications of hiring and employment-related AI use for anti-discrimination and data-privacy law (Raghavan et al., 2020).

3. Trust and the Human-in-the-Loop Imperative

Even where AI adoption in recruiting is advanced, industry data indicate that recruiters and candidates alike remain cautious about ceding decision authority to algorithmic systems. A large majority of recruiters report wanting to retain final decision authority over AI-generated recommendations, and candidate trust in algorithmic evaluation remains comparatively low (limelightdigital, 2026; MSH Talent, 2026). This suggests that, at least in the current period, the most durable deployment model in HR is one of human-AI augmentation rather than full automation — consistent with theoretical predictions that human oversight functions as both an ethical safeguard and a legitimacy mechanism for algorithmic decision-making in high-stakes domains (Cheng & Hackett, 2021).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This article has several limitations that also point toward productive avenues for future empirical work. First, the evidence synthesized here is drawn predominantly from industry survey research rather than peer-reviewed empirical studies; while such data offer valuable real-time visibility into practice, they are typically cross-sectional, vendor-adjacent, and not always methodologically transparent. Peer-reviewed, longitudinal research tracking specific organizations' AI adoption trajectories and outcomes would substantially strengthen the evidence base.

Second, as noted in Section 3, adoption figures vary considerably depending on definition, making cross-study comparison difficult. Future research would benefit from a standardized taxonomy of AI adoption levels in HR (e.g., pilot, function-specific, enterprise-scale, and

agentic/autonomous deployment) to enable more precise measurement and comparison.

Third, the relationship between AI adoption and organizational outcomes — hiring quality, time-to-fill, employee experience, legal exposure, and workforce trust — remains underexplored relative to adoption rates themselves. Given the persistent “adoption–value gap” identified in Section 2.3, outcome-focused research is arguably a higher priority for the field than further adoption-tracking studies alone.

V. CONCLUSION

AI adoption in HR has transitioned from a topic of speculative interest to a routine feature of organizational practice. Available 2026 evidence suggests that a substantial and growing share of HR functions — led by recruiting and talent acquisition — have formally adopted AI tools, even as governance, strategic involvement, and demonstrated business value lag behind deployment. For HR scholars and practitioners alike, the central challenge is no longer whether AI will be adopted, but how organizations can govern, evaluate, and integrate it responsibly. Closing the gap between adoption and demonstrated value, and between technological capability and organizational readiness, is likely to define the HR-AI research and practice agenda through the remainder of the decade.

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