

IM_

Re-writing *change*

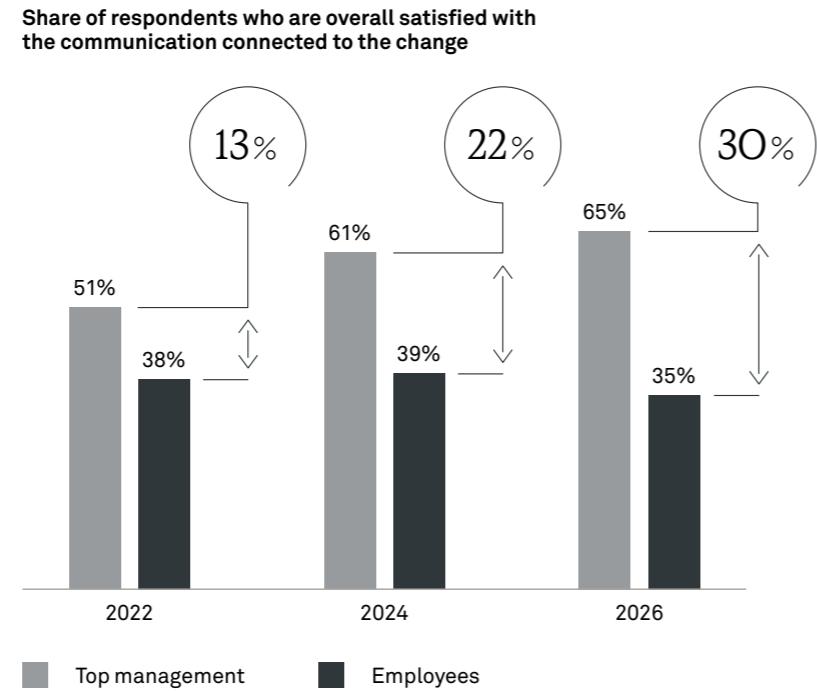
Quick wins, wider gaps: How AI is changing the way we communicate

Introduction

Communication is never just words. It is a system held together by a sender and a receiver, channelling intention, interpretation, and everything in between. The word communication stems from **communicare**: to make meaning together. In its nature, it is what makes us human by letting us understand the world, one another, and ourselves.

This year's Change Communication X-Ray shows that this system is slipping. What leaders believe they are communicating and what employees actually hear are no longer aligned. Something fundamental is shifting beneath the surface. The two realities continue to pull apart – measurably, consistently, and fast.

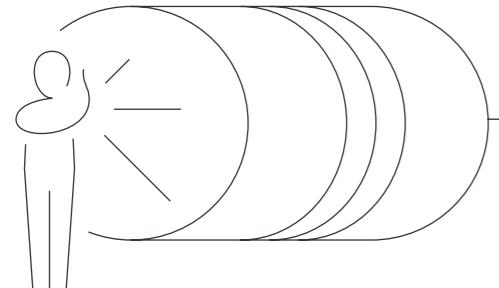
While top managers continue to grow more satisfied with the communication around change in their organisations, employees continue to move in the opposite direction, which means the gap between top management and employees keeps widening.



In 2022, the difference between top managers' and employees' satisfaction levels was already noticeable at 13 percentage points. By 2024, that gap had widened to 22 points. And now, in 2026, it reaches 30 points – the largest gap recorded since the launch of Implement's Change Communication X-Ray. Whereas the widening gap was previously driven mainly by rising satisfaction among top management, the more recent development shows it is now equally fuelled by a drop in employee satisfaction.

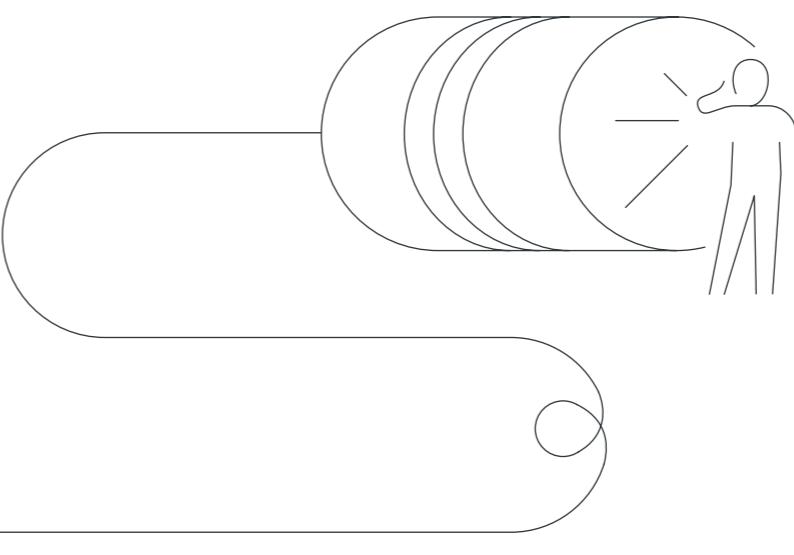
The numbers reveal a steady trend: **the more confident top managers feel in how change is being communicated, the less supported employees feel by those very same efforts.** What began as a misalignment is becoming a structural divide, raising the risk of misunderstanding, resistance, and change fatigue.

But beneath the numbers lies a deeper, more fundamental issue. Organisational communication, especially around change, is still not built with the receiver in mind.



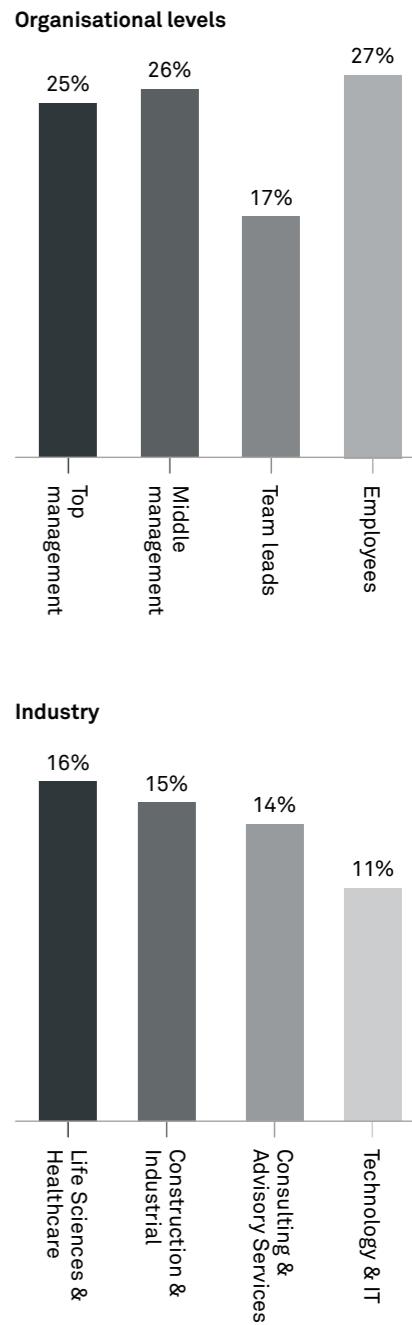
It strictly follows the sender's agenda instead. Messages are shaped by top-down logic, complicated corporate lingo, and internal politics long before they reach the people who are meant to act on them. Leaders craft what they believe is clear, strategic communication, yet employees receive something entirely different: abstract messages, distant intentions, and language that often feels disconnected from their reality. **As long as communication is optimised for alignment at the top rather than understanding at the bottom, the gap will continue to widen.**

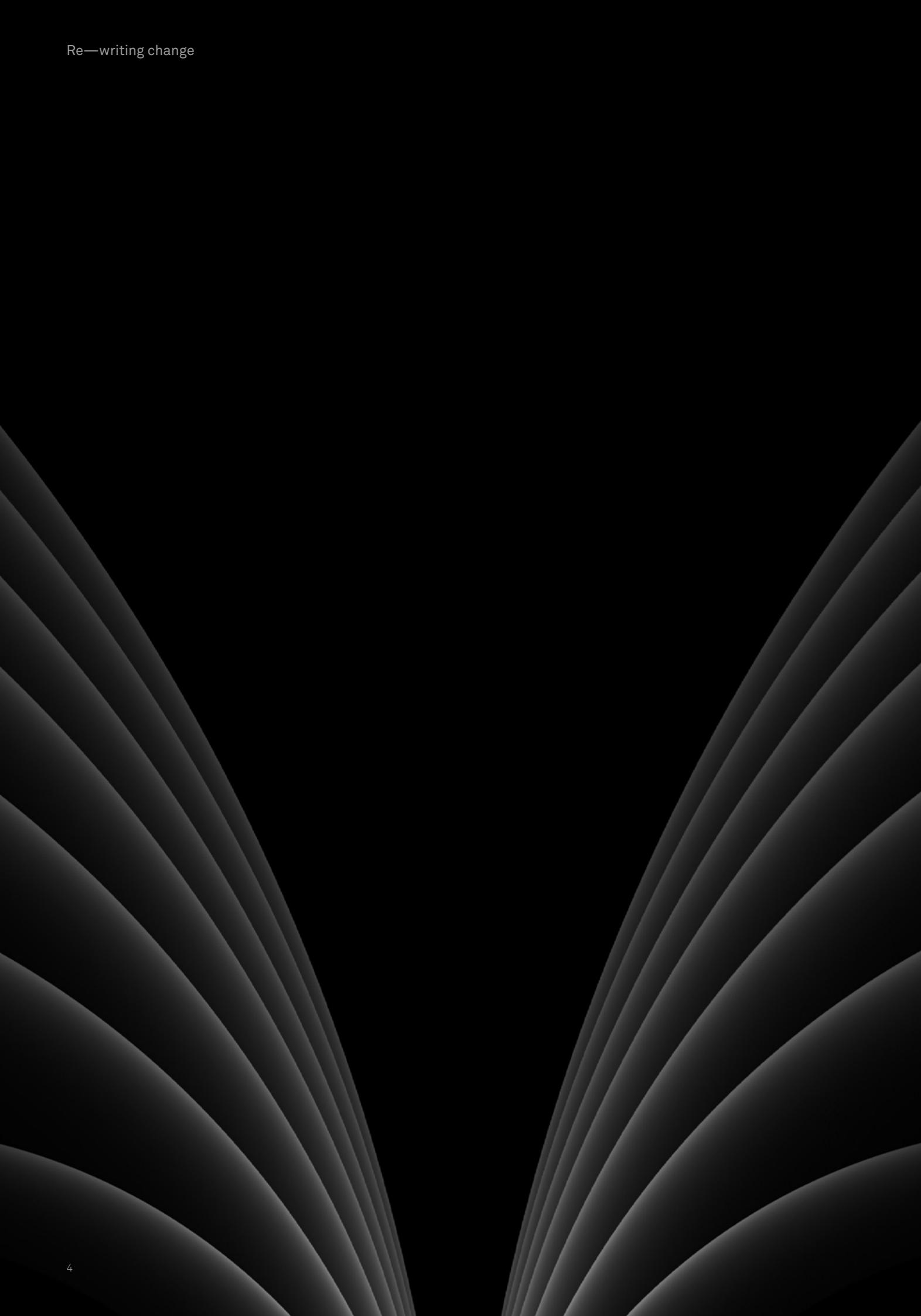
So, the question we are left with is no longer whether a gap exists – the data is very clear on that. The question now is rather why this gap is growing, and what communicators must do differently to rebuild a shared experience of change across the organisation.



About Implement's Change Communication X-Ray 2026

This year's X-Ray marks the fourth edition of Implement's report on Change Communication. The data were collected between 28 October and 17 November 2025 via an online survey distributed to more than 17,000 professionals. In total, 832 respondents across 41 countries completed the survey, with Denmark accounting for the majority of responses at 63%. The sample is broadly balanced across organisational levels, spanning top management (25%), middle management (26%), team leads (17%), and employees (27%) – with a minority stemming from student assistants, freelancers, or others (5%). Industry representation is led by Life Sciences & Healthcare (16%), Construction & Industrial Goods & Services (15%), and Consulting & Advisory Services (14%), with almost 60% of all respondents working at larger organisations with 1,000–10,000+ employees globally.





Re-writing change

As the gap between top management and employees widens, AI has begun to reshape the space between intention and experience. It is not just helping us write; it is rewriting the system of communication itself. One subtle tell is the em dash (—): many AI tools favour it to compress clauses and mimic conversational rhythm. It is not proof of AI authorship, but its rising presence in everyday texts points to a broader shift: machines are no longer just supporting communication but are beginning to rewrite how we communicate, and, ultimately, how change is perceived.

The pattern echoes the early days of 'self-driving' cars. These systems could steer on their own but still needed a human in the driver's seat. Most of the time, the cars drove well, but when the system drifted or misread a situation, accidents happened because the driver did not step in quickly enough. Those moments showed a simple truth: even advanced automation needs timely human judgement. The same applies in organisations today. AI can move fast, but only people can provide the judgement that protects accountability, trust, and meaning. Without that oversight, small errors build up and rare slip-ups can have big consequences.

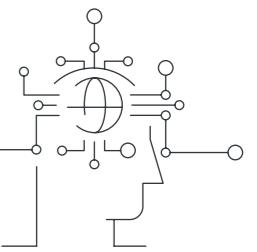
This report examines three themes that AI is rewriting in today's change communication and what to do now:

Accountability: Who owns AI-generated messages, and what are the guiding principles?

Trust: How do people trust messages when authorship and intent blur?

Meaning: How do we preserve sense-making while volume and pace increase?

Each theme is based on insights and findings from this year's X-Ray data and enriched with perspectives from experts in the field. The report concludes with hands-on recommendations to turn information into shared understanding. AI is not the answer to how we improve communication but the condition that raises the stakes for getting it right. The choice is clear: strengthen the bridge between intent and reality now or watch the gap deepen.



Interviewed experts

Monique Zytnik

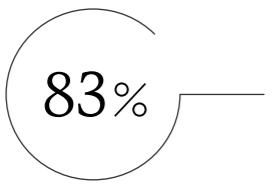
Monique Zytnik is an internationally recognised expert in internal communication and the evolving role of AI in organisational life. She is the author of *Internal Communication in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, a forward-looking guide for business leaders to help them communicate at scale for business success.

Sofie Hvítved

Sofie Hvítved is a futurist at the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies (CIFS). Her work focuses on how media, technology, and AI are reshaping communication, creativity, and decision-making – and how digital shifts are transforming business, work, and society.

Emma Christensen

Emma Christensen is a researcher and Associate Professor at Roskilde University exploring AI through the lenses of communication, sociology, and organisation studies. Her research examines the perception of AI – how people make sense of it and how the technology is shaped within organisational and societal contexts.



Re-writing accountability

Speed feels great, until the crash
Would you ride with an unlicensed driver simply to arrive faster? Most people would not. With AI, the risk is harder to see. The road feels smooth and warning signs are easy to ignore.

AI is becoming the norm in workplace communication: across employees, team leads, middle managers, and top management, four out of five use it weekly, and 43% use it daily. And the pattern remains consistent across organisational levels.

83% of all respondents report that using AI enables them to generate communications more efficiently and at a larger scale, which explains its rapid spread. But its use is largely unsystematic and ad hoc, rather than based on shared practice. **The data reveal that most respondents rely on AI for individual productivity, using it mainly for tasks like ideation (66%) and language improvements (54%).**

However, that is where risk creeps in: first drafts become final, fluent wording replaces critical reasoning, and polished text goes unchecked because it 'sounds right'. As one respondent says, "It has overall made communication decrease in quality due to many users being a bit lazy with the output. Something comes out and they don't question it, review it properly, or engage their own critical thinking."

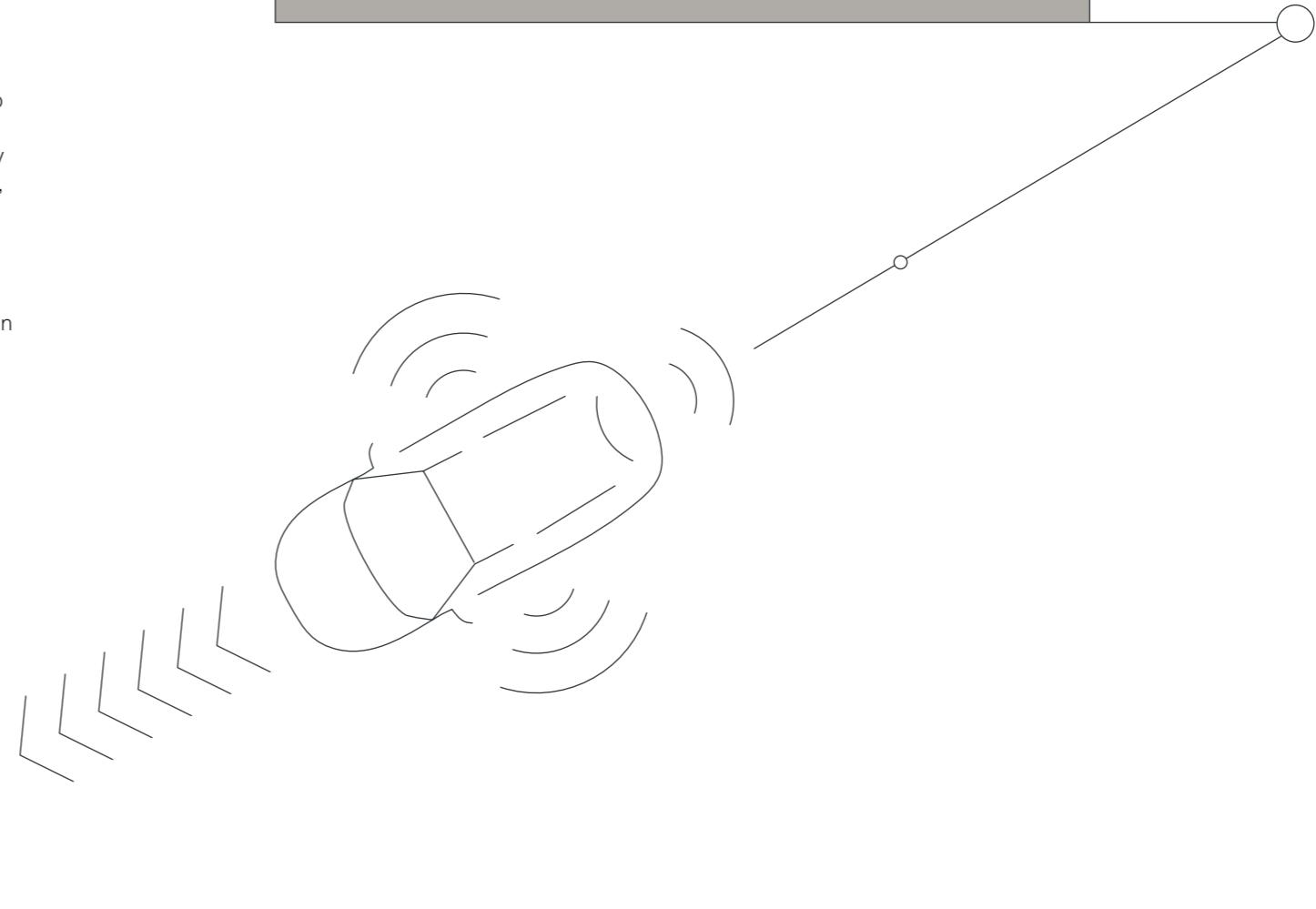
In short, the pattern is clear: **the use of AI in organisations is still shaped more by individual shortcuts than by shared practice.** This pattern follows a clear logic, and as Emma Christensen points out, "We humans are hardwired to take shortcuts. We instinctively look for quicker, easier ways to move through all sorts of tasks in life. And inside our organisations, AI naturally fuels that instinct."

But shortcuts do not just shape how employees use AI; they also shape which tools they choose. This is where the gap between organisational intent and actual behaviour becomes visible. As Sofie Hvítved points out, "A lot of companies offer one approved internal AI tool, but changing habits is hard. People still tend to reach for what they know, even when it's not compliant."

This behaviour is what Sofie Hvítved states drives AI shadowing: AI use that happens outside governance, outside visibility, and outside the organisation's ability to guide or protect it. And the risk of this pattern is concrete: sensitive data can slip into prompts, biased outputs can scale, official-sounding announcements may miss required legal wording. Over time, the gap grows between organisational guidance and individual behaviour. In short, the highway is filling with unlicensed drivers: speed is up, but guardrails are not, and one incident can trigger a chain-reaction crash.

The question is not whether employees use AI; it is how we guide that use safely and openly. Here is how to do that in practice in your organisation:

- **Set boundaries**
 - » Use AI for routine updates, summaries, translations, and FAQs.
 - » Do not use AI for performance feedback, terminations, crisis communication, or CEO messages.
- **Keep humans responsible**
 - » Name a sender and a reviewer on every high-stakes message.
 - » Add a short line on routine comms when AI assisted and a human reviewed it.
- **Protect data**
 - » Define 'safe', 'sanitise first', and 'never share' examples that fit your context.
 - » Allow only approved tools and block copy and paste of sensitive data into public tools.
- **Minimal guardrails**
 - » Require human-in-the-loop review for legal, HR, and external announcements.
 - » Do quarterly spot checks and share organisation-wide learnings.



Re-writing trust

When messages need a driver We have embraced assistance that helps us move faster. For routine updates, FAQs, or speaker notes for presentations, AI performs well, and many say that if the message is useful, authorship matters less. So, the data show: **45% of all respondents state that they trust AI-generated information as much as human-written content, and 61% agree that it would not matter to them whether a human or AI created the message, as long as the content was useful.**

In other words, AI has rapidly become an accepted part of organisational communication. Employees across organisational levels seem surprisingly unbothered by how deeply it already influences our everyday lives at work. As Monique Zytnik clarifies, "You are picking up on a shift here – what you are showing is a shift in perception, understanding, and trust in AI-generated content compared to the results that we would have seen about a year ago."

But this broad acceptance has clear limits. Trust shifts the moment words begin to carry real human consequences. Then content is no longer enough – people look for presence, for someone who stands behind the words. When the human impact rises, the question quietly changes from what is being said to who is actually speaking. In other words, they want to know who is driving communication.

Data reveal that employees strongly resist AI-generated messages when those messages directly affect them. **When asked which types of communication should never be heavily AI-generated,**

the top four selected answers are performance feedback (64%), sensitive or confidential updates such as terminations (58%), crisis communication (42%), and any message coming directly from the CEO (26%).

This shows that it is not the technology per se they reject; it is rather the idea of a machine stepping into moments that carry emotional weight or ethical consequences. In line with that, the data point to a clear relational cost: **more than half of all employees (51%) feel less personally connected to the leaders behind a message when they know AI played a major role in creating it.** Yet only 40% of top and middle management notice this deterioration. If left unchecked, this weakened personal connection compounds over time. What might begin as a harmless efficiency tool can quietly create a leadership distance problem, reinforcing the growing gap between management and employees.

This is not an argument against AI; it is a reminder to use it right. AI is excellent at preparing the ground, drafting explainers, assembling FAQs, translating, and summarising. However, leaders have a different job. They provide context, set the strategic direction, show care, and stay present. They explain the 'why now', what was considered, what is known and unknown, as well as what happens next. They offer a name and a face to accountability.

AI can guide the route that keeps us moving. But people judge the journey by the driver: how leaders handle the bends, explain detours, and make passengers feel safe. Trust still hinges on each leader, with or without AI.

Here is how leaders can keep trust high in times of AI:

- **Show up for consequential moments**
 - » Deliver significant news live or in person where feasible, then share a written recap.
 - » Host a Q&A within 48 to 72 hours to address concerns.
- **Be explicit about ownership and AI's role**
 - » State who owns the decision and outcomes.
 - » Disclose AI assistance on routine comms if it clarifies process; avoid on sensitive messages if it creates distance.
- **Presence over polish**
 - » Accept minor imperfections to maintain timeliness and authenticity.
 - » Prioritise small group dialogues, site visits, and two-way formats for complex change.
- **Close the loop**
 - » Capture unanswered questions, commit to follow-ups, and report back on actions taken.

Re-writing meaning

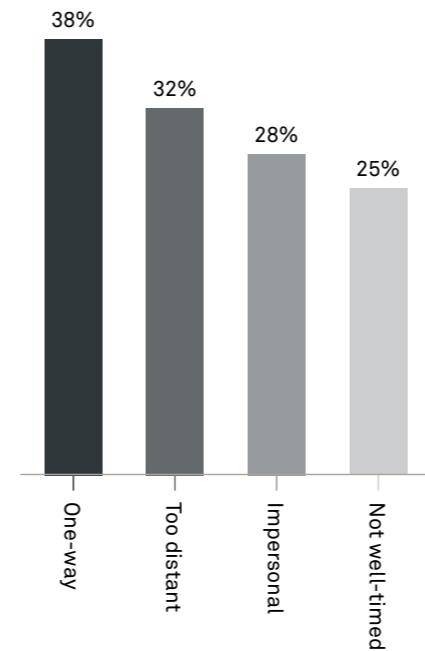
Steering clarity through the noise

If accountability is shaped by who speaks, and trust by who listens, then meaning is what makes communication useful. AI has given organisations new horsepower: drafts can be generated, polished, translated, and distributed with minimal effort. But as volume rises, clarity thins. **People receive more communication than ever, yet 87% of all respondents report that major changes were poorly communicated.**

Messages arrive, but do not guide.

87%

Employees describe the communication connected to their latest change as being:



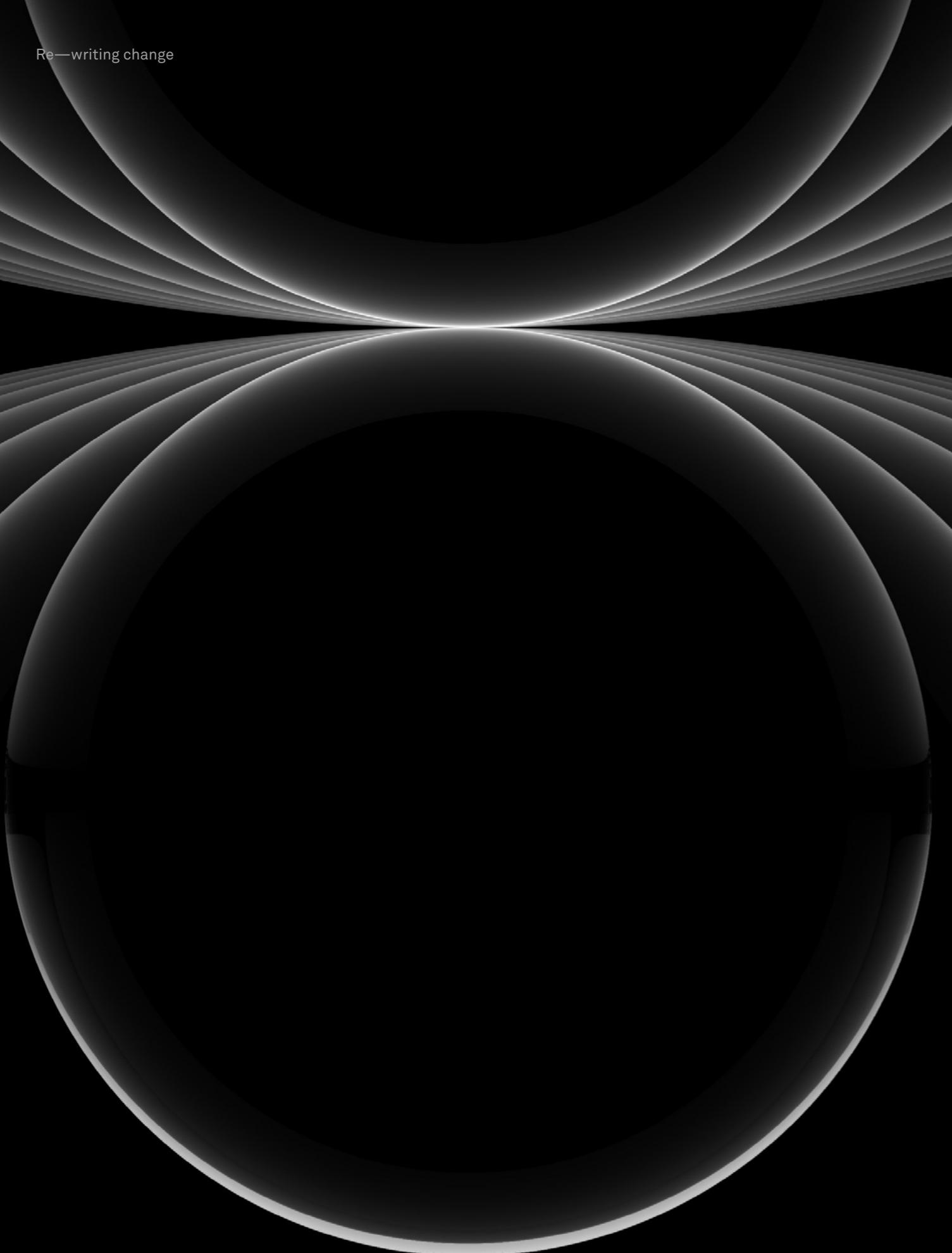
As Emma Christensen explains, "while many respondents perceive AI as increasing efficiency and productivity, there's a notable trend of overcommunication, with longer and more frequent messages leading to information clutter and potential inefficiency."

Messages arrive, but they do not guide. This is a relevance problem, not a problem of reach: nearly one in five cannot connect corporate communication to their actual work. The message travels the distance, then dissolves on arrival. As one respondent says, "I worry that some communications go unread as attention spans shrink and information overload rises, driven by the increasing speed and volume of messages."

Here, AI hits its limit. It multiplies words, not understanding. It accelerates pace but does not instil purpose by default. Restoring meaning requires human judgement: context, interpretation, and decisions about what matters and how to say it. As Monique Zytnik emphasises, "there is a need for communicators to develop critical thinking, data and AI literacy, and to upskill teams (...) as the communicators' role shifts from content creators to sense-makers." The task ahead is not to produce more communication but to protect meaning in a system built for speed.

Here is what each role must do to keep clarity high:

- **Top management: Make direction unmistakable**
 - » State the 'why now' and the top three priorities – no polished ambiguity.
 - » Strip AI-generated drafts down to essentials: decisions, expectations, and trade-offs.
 - » Set boundaries for AI's role in strategic messages and own the final wording publicly.
- **Middle managers: Translate strategy into reality**
 - » Use AI for structuring content, but localise it with real context, risks, and open questions.
 - » Surface what is unclear, sensitive, or undecided.
 - » Create human touchpoints: short check-ins, clarifying conversations, and sense-making moments.
- **Employees: Protect relevance by challenging noise**
 - » Ask for the 'so what' when messages do not guide action.
 - » Escalate unclear or conflicting messages with concrete examples.
 - » Flag when volume increases but clarity does not and become early signals of communication drift.



Conclusion

Short-term gains, long-term consequences

Looking back just three years, the early days of AI felt like riding in a self-driving car with our hands hovering above the wheel: alert, cautious, ready to take over at the slightest wobble. Today, the picture looks different. The insights show that the drivers of AI have begun to lean in by leaning back, letting the tools steer more of the journey and shape more of the communication we bring into the world. But if the landscape can shift this much in three years, where might it leave us when we look ahead?

In the short term, the efficiency gains are undeniable. But our conversation with futurist Sofie Hvítved reminds us that the long-term picture is more nuanced. The biggest challenge is not losing control to AI but losing the *connection* between people. And with that, the risk of losing the relevance of people in this equation.

With agentic AI leaving tools more autonomous and content more fluid, **we are facing potential futures that may move communication from human-to-AI and AI-to-human into AI-to-AI flows, where messages are shaped long before a person reads them.** When the human is lifted out of the loop, the core premise of communication as we know it is challenged, because the engine of communication is, by nature, the

human mind. And that is exactly why we, as changemakers, have to pay attention. Communication has always been the human link in complex transformations as the thing that helps people feel engaged, motivated, and able to act. But what happens when the premise for that link is rewritten?

We may not be able to slow the pace, but we can step in with intention as the road bends into a future we are only beginning to understand. And in that acceleration, a beautiful question takes form: **in a future influenced by AI, what do we wish we could one day say about change communication that we cannot yet say today?**

As the gap between employees and leadership widens, and technology automates more of the mechanics, the human side of change communication becomes the only real differentiator. Our value lies in creating communication that resonates – meaningful, imaginative, and emotionally intelligent. Communication that does not default to the obvious but dares to surprise and engage. Our task is not only to keep the human in the loop but to create communication that reaches them, moves them, and gives them something no machine can: a sense of meaning and human intention in moments of change.

