Good afternoon and welcome to the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Yes, you heard me. The Revolution didn't start without you: you're here - right in the middle of it.

Revolutions are not about what you make of them. It's what they make of you is generally the problem. Writer Ken Liu said "In every revolution, there are winners and losers. Every dystopia is a utopia for somebody else. It just depends where you are. Are you in the class that benefits, or are you not?'

Well, I know which side of the barricades I want us all to be on.

And what are the rules of the game? Hard to say for sure, because since the doors here opened the rules have probably changed again already.

But what we can say for sure are two things:

Festival of Work is people-centred – reflecting our chosen profession.

Festival of Work is about employee engagement.

In HR terms, we're here to think about and discuss the merging of the physical, digital, and biological worlds in ways that wouldn't look out of place in Ridley Scott's movie, "Blade Runner". And no, I'm not going to tell you "a new life awaits you in the Off-World Colonies." This is it. Right here, and now.

That new life for the HR community remains people-centred, has technology and Artificial Intelligence playing support roles, is happening now. And we're leading it.

So as leaders, we must harness this new force, not cower before it.

In this new era, we have to accept that administrative tasks will be replaced by artificial intelligence, and even encourage technical HR roles to adjust. We must embrace it.

But the goals of this HR revolution align perfectly with AI: automation, efficiency, and data-driven decision-making. As we embrace automation and artificial intelligence, and decide what it should do and how, we witness a transformation across the employee lifecycle: recruitment; onboarding; performance management; engagement. A transformation that can and must be according to our wishes and needs.

Machine learning algorithms can now analyse vast amounts of employee data, identifying patterns and predicting future workforce needs. With these powerful and valuable insights, we can make informed decisions and shape our organisations accordingly.

For employees, chatbots and virtual assistants will revolutionise the experience: instant, personalised support and assistance, demonstrating enhanced engagement, and ensuring effective communication.

And as the tools are transformed, the very fabric of the work environment is changing unrecognisably. New forms of work, such as remote and distributed teams, create unprecedented challenges for managers and HR departments alike.

And that's OK. Because this is where we step in. This is what we've all been preparing for.

We are the critical link that manages and leverages these advancements to drive organisational success.

Digital platforms and advanced analytics have streamlined traditional manual HR tasks like employee data management, recruitment, and performance evaluations. The result? Greater efficiency and accuracy in our operations, allowing us all to focus on the bigger picture, the longer game: strategic initiatives that drive employee engagement, talent development, and overall organisational growth.

But remember, our role extends far beyond technology, which is itself only an enabler – a powerful one, I grant you.

We are responsible for designing the employee experience, cultivating a strong organisational culture, and championing human connection. It is within this context that we face six practical challenges, which ultimately come down to 'people challenges' that require 'people answers and responses'.

Firstly, there's resource scarcity, mainly in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). HR departments often need more resources.

With technology comes automation. Is it a threat, or an ally? Is it a curse, or can it be the magic elixir? Remote working. Is that term something you use a lot but secretly despise? It's Ok. You can tell me. Challenges in managing accountability, maintaining effective communication and making sure collaboration isn't a casualty. All familiar client issues.

If we use technology properly, and we must, HR can enable all of this: efficient communication, seamless collaboration, and performance management across distributed work environment.

Online learning is mainstream. The Pandemic saw to that. If you're not offering this to employees, someone else will.

Lastly, employee wellness has become a vital aspect of a company's overall business strategy. If your HR ethos is not aware of this and facilitating it, it can look like your default position is 'unwellness.'

This is what's 'being put up to us.' These challenges express the evolving nature of HR and present us with incredible opportunities to make a significant impact. By addressing these

challenges head-on, we demonstrate our value, drive organisational success, and ensure the long-term relevance of HR in SMEs.

What are some of the ways HR managers can effectively address these challenges?

Let's deal with the scarcity first. Picture a scenario where we create positive employee engagement by leveraging technology to enhance communication, collaboration, and recognition within our organisations. This proves and fosters a sense of belonging and purpose, leading to a thriving work environment. And in this scenario, what are we doing? We're out in front. We've leveraged technology to allow us to operate solely on the value-added, areas that include strategic initiatives, talent development and culture building.

This is our Tour de France, so let's earn the Yellow Jersey and not be Tail End Charlie.

Stop resisting Remote Working as an option. And Zoom?

Your CEO doesn't need to choose the Kitten Filter Option in error for remote meetings to fall apart. Be the best you can be at Remote. Tool up and train for it. Own it.

In this world, HR managers act as trusted advisers…

        …providing timely and accurate data to managers and guiding them through the complexities of the modern workplace. By doing so, become like architects, showing our managers how to build the organisation and building their confidence in making informed decisions.

Let's harness the power of AI to multiply the impact of self-service. Implementing AI-powered self-service systems empowers employees and saves valuable time for HR professionals, enabling them to focus on more critical aspects of their work. AI is another tool – it's not a

shareholder, director or office influencer. You won't meet it at the coffee station or water cooler.

In this scenario, compliance and consistency of approach are streamlined through digital solutions. Automation helps us ensure adherence to regulations and company policies, minimising the risks associated with non-compliance. It can make HR 'more', allowing you to work across the entire organisation. In many areas of process and compliance, it can allow you to be the best version of your HR self. Consistently.

And Wellness? This is a relatively new phenomenon and it's certainly a new discipline. Shape, express and support it in ways that resonate with who you say and believe you are as an employer. AI and automation will assist here. Let it. And remember: technology can not outdo the professional line-manager or experienced HR practitioner. Wellness is reserved for how people feel, how they feel appreciated and how they perceive they are appreciated. It's not about the temperature in your server room.

Lastly, imagine HR managers delivering meaningful advances in productivity. Isn't that what we all want? By optimising resource allocation, identifying bottlenecks, and introducing continuous improvement initiatives through process automation, data-driven insights, and streamlined workflows, we create a highly productive and efficient organisation.

As HR managers, we, too, must evolve. It's evolve or dissolve. We can't simply spectate. There are no armchairs, grandstands, no terraces away from the sand of the arena. We're right in the game.

And our role in the workplace evolves with us.

By leveraging automation, self-service portals, outsourcing, collaboration, and data analytics, we can reclaim our time from administrative tasks and focus on fostering a thriving and

people-centric work environment. And in doing this, we become the authors and owners of engagement.

As technology continues to streamline and improve processes, regardless of which AI platform introduces the latest plug-in or feature that influences the HR space, it is just that. The HR space. That's us. Because it's our space. We will stand astride the new landscape. We will be seen as the ultimate revolutionaries. And guess what? The AI developers will become the conservatives. Hannah Arendt said 'The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution.' But we can be the real revolutionaries, the eternal improvers, the ones who don't give up, who don't give in, who own the change and drive it. So, let's seize that flag and fly it high.

Never forget, while 80% of HR can be, and arguably should be, done without human intervention, the truly important 20% lies in the human-to-human interactions that machines will never be able to replicate.

When an employer is facing a legal issue, or a valued employee has a problem at home, no chatbot's going to cut it.

The great Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, in his poem 'The Circus Animal's Desertion' – wrote, when he was growing older and the world more complex…

Now that my ladder's gone

I must lie down where all the ladders start

In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

He was saying he needed to seek new inspiration for his art, to seek new drive, finding it in the ordinary, the everyday, within the real world of people, within himself.

HR leaders know that the real wisdom and beauty lies with the personal, the person-centric, this wellspring of emotions and lived lives.

Not in algorithms and code. These are merely footnotes.

We do engagement. We also have that ladder. Let's use it wisely.

Thank you.