

The Intelligence of Edges

Why the boundaries around work shape human capability

THIS WEEK'S THOUGHT

The quality of a system may depend as much upon the quality of its boundaries as the capability of its individual parts.

THIS WEEK'S BIG IDEA: THE INTELLIGENCE OF EDGES

A hedgerow looks, at first glance, like a boundary. One field stops. Another begins.

Yet ecologically the hedge is doing considerably more than separating two pieces of land. It provides habitat, food, shelter and movement routes. England has around 390,000 kilometres of hedgerows between one and six metres high, and the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology describes them as important habitats that support biodiversity, store carbon and help connect landscapes.

EXPLORE THE UKCEH HEDGEROW MAP

The boundary is also infrastructure. That makes the hedgerow an interesting metaphor for human systems.

We tend to concentrate on what happens inside clearly defined categories: work or life, human or machine, effort or rest, expert or novice, focus or distraction, organisation or community. Yet much of the important developmental activity occurs between them.

- The moments in which somebody stops working and returns to themselves.
- The point where a learner begins to exercise judgement independently.
- The point at which AI hands a decision back to a human.
- The conversation between two disciplines.
- The walk during which a problem ceases to be a work problem and becomes something seen differently.
- The transition between seasons.

These are edges. And edges require design.

This becomes particularly significant as AI agents move beyond answering occasional prompts and begin taking recurring roles within workflows. A paper published in August argues that organisations now face decisions about delegation, oversight and accountability as these systems begin to resemble ongoing work

relationships. Designs focused heavily on throughput may also create automation bias, skill degradation and cognitive overload.

READ THE AGENTIC AI RESEARCH

A healthy boundary is permeable. Information can cross it. People can move through it. Resources can circulate. The elements on either side retain enough distinction to continue performing their function. Too rigid, and the system becomes fragmented. Too porous, and everything begins to spill into everything else.

That is true of ecosystems. It is also true of working lives. Email enters dinner. Work enters sleep. AI enters thinking before thinking has properly begun. Urgency enters every decision. Meetings occupy the spaces in which ideas would have developed.

The problem is rarely simply that people have too much work. Sometimes the deeper problem is that the edges have disappeared.

AN IDEA TO DEVELOP: THE EDGE EFFECT

The boundaries around work shape human capability. Four edges deserve particular attention, each carrying its own design question.

EDGE	DESIGN QUESTION
Work and recovery	Is there a genuine transition out of work, or does work leak continuously into the rest of life?
Human and AI	Where does technological assistance end and human judgement begin?
Focus and wandering	Does the working environment allow movement between deliberate attention and reflective incubation?
Individual and collective intelligence	What should one person know, and what can safely reside within teams, tools and systems?

The AI boundary deserves particular attention. AI adoption is often discussed through tasks: what can this system automate? A more sophisticated question is: where should the boundary between machine contribution and human contribution sit?

Recent research into agentic AI describes the need to design ongoing role relationships involving delegation, oversight and accountability rather than treating AI simply as another tool.

Another study published in August adds a further dimension. In a preregistered experiment involving 2,172 adults, people evaluated hypothetical jobs involving human safety monitoring, AI monitoring or hybrid AI-human monitoring. Both AI-based arrangements were rated lower for expected job satisfaction, work meaningfulness and social usefulness than human supervision. The technology may therefore change the psychological character of work even where the job itself remains.

READ THE AI MONITORING STUDY

Work design is partly relationship design.

A useful team exercise follows. Map where the important boundaries currently sit, then identify: where they are too rigid, where they have become too porous, where technology has moved the boundary accidentally, and where a deliberate boundary would protect capability, meaning or recovery.

Boundary by design, rather than boundary by accident.

CURATED FOR THE WEEK: THE SHELF

BOOK

The Extended Mind, Annie Murphy Paul

Research showing that cognition is supported by the body, physical environments and other people. Thinking is distributed across a wider system than the isolated brain. If our environments participate in our thinking, what kind of thinking are our workplaces producing?

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

BOOK

How to Do Nothing, Jenny Odell

An argument for reclaiming attention from systems designed to capture it, connecting attention with place, ecology and the ability to notice. Attention is not simply something individuals manage. It is something environments invite, interrupt and shape.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

RESEARCH

Recovery from Work in a Broader Perspective

This 2026 paper introduces the Organisational Climate for Recovery: employees' shared perception of whether recovery is genuinely expected, encouraged and supported. It shifts recovery from personal discipline into organisational culture. What does the organisation quietly teach people about whether they are allowed to stop?

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

RESEARCH

Let Me Check on You

Milena Nikolova's paper examines reactions to AI-based occupational health and safety monitoring. Participants anticipated lower satisfaction, meaning and social usefulness when monitoring involved AI rather than human supervision. What changes when a system stops assisting work and begins observing the worker?

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PODCAST

The Happiness Lab: The Life-Changing Power of a Sabbatical

With DJ DiDonna. Extended breaks can create enough distance for people to reconsider routines, identities and assumptions that remain difficult to see from inside everyday working life. A holiday restores us enough to resume the pattern. Longer periods let us ask whether the pattern still makes sense.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

VIDEO

Designing Consequences: On Living Well with Machines

Laura Forlano asks who lives with the consequences of what gets designed, and with the consequences that follow those consequences. Technologies reshape sleep, attention and relationships even when introduced to improve something. Every intervention creates second and third-order effects.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

VIDEO

A World Without Work, Daniel Susskind

Susskind's Gresham College lecture revisits technological unemployment. Beneath the economics sits a deeper question: if work occupies less of human life, what institutions, communities and practices will help people experience contribution, identity and purpose?

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

VIDEO

Mattering at Work in the Age of AI

Jennifer Breheny Wallace and Ethan Kross explore mattering as feeling valued and having opportunities to add value. A job can remain efficient while becoming psychologically thinner. That makes mattering an important work-design consideration.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

FLOURISHING

The Global Flourishing Study

A growing collection of lectures and research summaries, valuable because flourishing is considered through multiple dimensions rather than reduced to happiness or job satisfaction. The video library now includes the 2026 Pruitt Memorial Symposium on Global Well Being.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

NATURE CONNECTION: SEPTEMBER BELONGS TO THE HEDGEROW

Early September is a threshold. Summer has not vanished, yet autumn is becoming increasingly visible. The hedgerow demonstrates this transition particularly well.

Hazelnuts are ripening. Elderberries are abundant. Blackberries continue fruiting. Sloes are developing towards their autumn season. The Woodland Trust's September foraging guidance describes this as an especially productive period in woods and hedgerows.

[EXPLORE SEPTEMBER FORAGING WITH THE WOODLAND TRUST](#)

The hedge is simultaneously boundary, larder, shelter, nursery, migration corridor, carbon store, windbreak, history and habitat. Its value comes from multifunctionality.

That is worth holding onto. Modern organisations often separate functions very clearly. This hour is productive. That hour is wellbeing. This meeting is learning. That meeting is delivery. This space is work. That space is life.

Living systems often combine functions. A walk can simultaneously provide movement, reflection, sensory restoration, conversation and creative incubation. Gardening can create food, exercise, biodiversity, attention, competence and relationship with place. A meal can nourish a body and maintain a relationship. Perhaps one reason some activities feel deeply satisfying is that they are multifunctional in the same way

living systems are.

Departure and arrival

September migration adds another layer. Swallows begin departing Britain during September. Most Sand Martins leave in early September, while House Martins gather overhead to feed before migration. At the same time, birds such as Lapland Buntings begin arriving from Arctic breeding grounds.

The same landscape contains departure and arrival. One species experiences September as an ending. Another experiences it as the beginning of a new season. The landscape itself is neither beginning nor ending. It is changing.

MEET THE ARRIVING LAPLAND BUNTING AT BTO

That feels like an important metaphor for human transitions. We often judge change from the perspective of what is leaving. A system may also need to be understood through what is arriving.

There is something else worth noticing about hedgerows. Their ecological value depends partly on connectivity. The UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology explicitly describes restoring gaps and linking habitats as important to strengthening the hedgerow network. A magnificent isolated habitat has value. A network allows movement.

Human resilience may have a similar architecture. The individual matters. So do the paths between people.

THE EMERGING RADAR: IDEAS WORTH WATCHING

Agentic AI will make role design more important than task design

The next phase of workplace AI increasingly involves systems carrying out recurring activities rather than responding to isolated prompts. Questions about role boundaries become unavoidable. Who initiates? Who checks? Who decides? Who remains accountable? When should a human re-enter the process? How does a junior employee learn from activity that an agent now performs? The emerging discipline may eventually resemble human-AI organisation design rather than AI implementation.

Recovery culture may become measurable

Rather than asking employees whether they have access to wellbeing provision, organisations could ask: can people disengage? Are response expectations clear? Does leadership model recovery? Does workload make recovery possible? Are periods of intense work followed by periods of reduced demand? Recovery would then become part of organisational resilience rather than an employee benefit.

AI governance needs a work-experience dimension

Current AI governance emphasises safety, privacy, accuracy, transparency and accountability. The emerging evidence on workplace monitoring suggests another question belongs in the conversation: what does this system make work feel like? That includes autonomy, dignity, trust, authorship, mattering and perceived usefulness.

Attention may be distributed across environments

If cognition depends partly upon bodies, spaces, tools and relationships, then focus is also affected by the system surrounding the thinker. An organisation asking employees to focus while creating continuous notifications, meetings and interruptions has created a design contradiction. What in this environment is doing part of the thinking, and what is interfering with it?

Sabbaticals may be identity infrastructure

Time away may serve a developmental purpose distinct from recovery. It creates enough distance for experimentation. The individual temporarily leaves the routines that continually reinforce a particular identity, making possible the question: who am I when the usual structure disappears? Perhaps careers require occasional spaces for identity renewal as well as skills development.

Human flourishing is becoming a technology-design question

An interdisciplinary initiative announced in August explicitly brings psychology, AI and design together around human wellbeing and augmented humanity. For years we have asked: can technology do this? Then: can technology do this safely? The next question may increasingly be: what form of human life does this technology help create?

THINK AND CREATE: A PROMPT FOR YOUR OWN WRITING

Some of the most important parts of life exist at the edges.

Write about the boundaries in an ordinary day. The moment you wake. The point work begins. The movement between concentrated thinking and interruption. The moment AI enters a task. The transition from working to walking. The first few minutes after arriving home. The point at which conversation becomes connection. The moment daylight begins to fade.

Then ask:

- Which boundaries help me change state?
- Which have disappeared?
- Which are imposed upon me?
- Which have I chosen?
- Which boundary would make my life more spacious if I rebuilt it?

Move from the individual into the organisation. What happens when a workplace has no meaningful boundary between urgent and important? Between human judgement and automated recommendation? Between learning and production? Between performance and recovery?

Finish with: Perhaps sustainable work begins with learning where one thing should end so that another has room to begin.

PAUSE AND NOTICE: REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Where in my life have two things that need to remain distinct begun to blur together?

Work and rest? Responsibility and identity? Technology and thinking? Availability and care? Ambition and worth? Helping and carrying?

Then ask: what would a healthy, permeable boundary look like here?

The aim is not separation. A hedgerow connects two landscapes while still marking an edge. That is the model.

YOUR PRACTICAL EXPERIMENT: THE EDGE AUDIT

For five days, choose one transition that already happens naturally in your day. It could be finishing work, starting a piece of deep thinking, bringing AI into a task, going outside, returning home, or moving towards sleep.

Spend one minute noticing what happens around that boundary. What carries across it? What should carry across? What would be better left behind?

Then deliberately redesign one edge. For example:

- Finish work with a five-minute written closure rather than allowing unfinished tasks to occupy the evening.
- Begin creative work with ten minutes of your own thinking before opening AI.
- Walk outside after completing a demanding piece of work and allow the body to mark the transition.
- Create a physical place where work does not happen.

At the end of the week, ask one question: did changing the boundary change the experience on either side of it? That is the experiment. You are testing architecture rather than discipline.

METAPHOR BANK: LINES WORTH KEEPING

The hedgerow deserves to become a recurring Work Smart, Live Well image. It is a boundary that works because it connects. A refuge that also enables movement. A piece of infrastructure that looks like nature. A productive space that nobody would describe as a factory.

- A good boundary separates without disconnecting.
- The edge is where one system learns that another system exists.
- When work has no edge, recovery has nowhere to begin.
- Technology changes more than tasks. It changes the boundaries around agency, attention and responsibility.
- A hedgerow does not choose between being useful and being alive. Its usefulness comes from being alive.
- The most resilient systems contain pathways as well as parts.
- Human flourishing depends partly on what we allow to cross the boundary and what we choose to keep outside it.
- Sometimes the problem is not workload. It is leakage.

- One bird is leaving while another is arriving. The season contains both truths.
- A transition is not empty time between important things. The transition is doing important work.

A FINAL THOUGHT

*We spend enormous energy designing what happens in the centre of work and life.
The next opportunity may be to pay much closer attention to the edges.*

WORK SMART IS THE MEANS. LIVING WELL IS THE POINT.

Vanessa Aradia

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