

In Praise of Maintenance

Why keeping things alive is a form of intelligence

THIS WEEK'S THOUGHT

Innovation creates new things. Maintenance keeps the world alive.

THIS WEEK'S BIG IDEA: THE MAINTENANCE TURN

This week's theme is maintenance.

Something quietly remarkable happened in the English countryside this week. Around 2,500 farmers applied for grants to restore mature hedgerows using hedge laying, a craft dating back thousands of years. If approved, they will lay 1,300 kilometres of hedgerow, enough to stretch from Land's End to Hadrian's Wall and back. One Yorkshire farmer described hedge laying as a gateway drug into more conservation.

READ THE HEDGE LAYING STORY IN THE GUARDIAN

What makes this interesting for working life is the underlying principle. Hedge laying does not create anything new. It renews something that already exists, partially cutting stems and laying them so the hedge regrows dense, healthy and alive. The value comes from maintenance rather than invention.

Modern work culture celebrates the opposite. Innovation, disruption, transformation and reinvention dominate strategy documents and conference stages. Historians of technology Lee Vinsel and Andrew Russell call this the innovation delusion: an obsession with the new that devalues the work that actually keeps systems running.

Yet most of what makes a life or an organisation good is maintained rather than invented:

- A skill stays sharp because someone keeps practising it.
- A friendship stays alive because someone keeps showing up.
- Trust survives because someone keeps their word again this week.
- A body remains capable because someone keeps moving it.
- A culture stays healthy because someone keeps having the awkward conversation.
- Knowledge stays current because someone keeps learning.

None of this produces a headline. All of it is doing essential work.

The most sophisticated response to an age of acceleration may be a renewed respect for maintenance.

AN IDEA TO DEVELOP: THE HUMAN MAINTENANCE SCHEDULE

Every serious system has a maintenance schedule. Aircraft, bridges, orchards, software and hedgerows are all inspected and renewed on deliberate cycles, because everyone accepts that neglect compounds quietly until something fails.

Human capability rarely receives the same treatment. We tend to run people until something breaks and call the repair wellbeing. A more intelligent approach would treat five domains as assets with their own renewal cycles.

DOMAIN	MAINTENANCE QUESTION	RENEWAL PRACTICES
Skills	Which capabilities am I still exercising, and which are quietly rusting?	<i>Deliberate practice, teaching others, working occasionally without AI</i>
Relationships	Which connections am I actively tending rather than simply possessing?	<i>Unhurried conversation, repair after friction, showing up in ordinary weeks</i>
Attention	What condition is my capacity for sustained focus actually in?	<i>Protected deep work, reading at length, time without inputs</i>
Energy	Is my way of living restoring capacity or steadily drawing it down?	<i>Sleep, movement, daylight, genuine recovery between demands</i>
Meaning	Does my work still connect to something I recognise as mattering?	<i>Reflection, contribution, revisiting purpose, noticing impact</i>

Nobody expects a hedge to maintain itself. It seems strange that we expect human capability to.

Recent evidence sharpens the picture. The American Psychological Association’s September coverage examines workplace rustout: chronic understimulation and boredom that erode health and productivity from the opposite direction to burnout. A person can be fully occupied while their capabilities quietly corrode from lack of meaningful use. Underuse is a maintenance failure just as surely as overuse.

READ THE APA FEATURE ON RUSTOUT

New research this month adds two further dimensions. A paper on epistemic wellbeing under algorithmic governance asks what happens to people’s confidence in their own knowledge and judgement when systems increasingly decide for them. And a study of the sustainability paradox of AI adoption finds that the same technologies introduced to ease workloads can degrade wellbeing when they intensify pace and monitoring instead. Both point the same way. Human capability needs deliberate upkeep, especially where AI is

present.

CURATED FOR THE WEEK: THE SHELF

BOOK

The Innovation Delusion, Lee Vinsel and Andrew L. Russell

Two historians of technology argue that our obsession with the shiny and new has devalued the work that underpins modern life: maintenance, care and upkeep. Read it as a corrective lens. Then ask what the maintainers in your organisation would say if anyone asked them.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

RESEARCH

Beyond efficiency: Epistemic well-being at work under algorithmic governance

Published 5 September, this paper examines what algorithmic management does to workers' relationship with their own knowledge, judgement and voice. Efficiency metrics capture output. They do not capture whether people still trust their own thinking.

RESEARCH

The sustainability paradox of AI adoption for workers' wellbeing

Published 12 September, this study explores how technologies adopted to reduce workload can simultaneously intensify work and erode the wellbeing they promised to protect. Adoption is a design choice, and the same tool can regenerate or deplete depending on how it lands.

ARTICLE

The hidden cost of workplace rustout

The APA's September feature on chronic workplace boredom and understimulation, with emerging evidence of consequences for mental and physical health. Burnout's quieter sibling deserves a place in every wellbeing strategy.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

RESEARCH

Employee-AI collaboration and career sustainability

Published 21 August, this study of 398 employees examines how working alongside AI relates to the durability of careers over time. Career sustainability is a maintenance concept: the question is what keeps a working life renewable across decades.

PODCAST

The Curiosity Shop, with Brené Brown and Adam Grant

The 17 September episode explores leadership, work and human connection in an age of AI, including employee voice, careers and the parts of working life that technology cannot replace. Listen for the recurring theme: the human infrastructure of organisations needs tending.

VIDEO

The kind of AI we actually need, Van Jones

Jones argues that the real danger is communities left behind rather than the technology itself, and calls for a new deal between big tech and humanity built on what he calls ancestral intelligence. A reminder that flourishing is a social project, maintained together.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

RESOURCE

The Global Flourishing Study

The study's growing library of lectures and research continues to treat flourishing as multidimensional: meaning, relationships, health, character and financial stability alongside happiness. Useful scaffolding for anyone designing work that leaves people more alive.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

NATURE CONNECTION: THE MAINTAINED LANDSCAPE

The English landscape offers a masterclass in maintenance this month.

Hedge laying season begins in October, so across the country farmers are preparing to renew hedgerows using a craft in which cutting is an act of care. A laid hedge regrows denser and more alive than an untouched one. The renewal requires a kind of injury, carried out with skill, at the right season, by someone who understands the plant.

There is something worth sitting with in that. Some kinds of pruning make living systems stronger. The skill lies in knowing what to cut, when, and how much to leave.

The hedgerow larder

Meanwhile the hedgerows being maintained are feeding everyone. The National Allotment Society's September foraging guide lists hazelnuts, hawthorn berries, sloes, elderberries, rosehips and blackberries all available now, with sweet chestnuts and fungi beginning to appear as the month turns.

[EXPLORE SEPTEMBER FORAGING WITH THE NATIONAL ALLOTMENT SOCIETY](#)

A hedgerow that has been maintained for generations produces abundance that nobody planted this year. That is what good maintenance does. It compounds.

One tree, a whole year of wildlife

The RHS has named the apple its Wildlife Wonder plant for September. A single apple tree feeds pollinators in spring and then birds, mammals and late butterflies in autumn, provided the gardener leaves some fruit on the tree and some windfalls on the ground.

Even the harvest carries a maintenance lesson. Taking everything maximises this year. Leaving something maintains the system that produces every year.

[READ WHY THE RHS RECOMMENDS AN APPLE TREE FOR WILDLIFE](#)

THE EMERGING RADAR: IDEAS WORTH WATCHING

Maintenance may become a leadership competency

As AI accelerates production, the differentiating leadership work may shift towards what machines cannot maintain: trust, culture, capability, meaning and institutional memory. The leaders who matter may increasingly be the ones who keep human systems in good repair rather than the ones who launch the most initiatives.

Rustout belongs in the wellbeing conversation

Wellbeing strategies built entirely around reducing overload miss half the problem. If AI removes the stretching parts of jobs and leaves the residue, organisations could create rustout at scale while congratulating themselves on reducing workload. Job design after AI needs to protect challenge as deliberately as it protects rest.

Epistemic wellbeing is a new frontier

Beyond physical and psychological wellbeing sits a third kind: people's confidence in their own knowledge, judgement and voice. Algorithmic management and AI-mediated work can erode it invisibly. Expect this concept to grow, because a workforce that no longer trusts its own thinking is a fragile asset.

Career sustainability is replacing career progression

The question a career now has to answer is shifting from how far can I climb to how long can I remain capable, current and willing. That reframe turns learning, recovery and role redesign from perks into structural requirements.

The maintainers deserve visibility

Every organisation contains people whose work is keeping things running: the system administrators, the note keepers, the relationship tenders, the people who quietly fix what others break. Recognition systems built around innovation systematically undervalue them. Correcting that may be one of the cheapest culture improvements available.

THINK AND CREATE: A PROMPT FOR YOUR OWN WRITING

Begin with something in your life that still works because somebody maintained it.

It might be a friendship, a skill, a garden, a house, an institution, a body or a marriage. Write about the maintenance it received. Who did it? Was the work visible? Was it ever thanked?

Then turn the question around. What in your life is currently running on old maintenance? A capability you have not exercised in years. A relationship living off past deposits. A sense of purpose you have not revisited since circumstances changed.

Finish with: What would it mean to treat maintenance as a form of ambition?

PAUSE AND NOTICE: REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

What am I currently letting rust?

Then ask a kinder second question: what would one small act of maintenance look like this week? A conversation. Twenty minutes of practice. A walk. An apology. A book. An early night.

Maintenance rarely demands heroics. It demands recurrence.

YOUR PRACTICAL EXPERIMENT: THE MAINTENANCE HOUR

Choose one hour this week and dedicate it entirely to upkeep. Nothing new. No new projects, purchases, plans or content. Only renewal of what already exists.

Some options:

- Sharpen a skill you already have with deliberate, unassisted practice.
- Write to or call someone whose relationship you value and have been coasting on.
- Repair something physical: a tool, a garment, a bicycle, a shelf, a bed of soil.
- Tidy one corner of your digital life that quietly drains attention.
- Review a commitment or purpose statement you wrote in a different season and bring it up to date.

At the end of the hour, notice how it felt compared with an hour of novelty. Many people report something unexpected: maintenance is satisfying in a way that novelty rarely is, because it strengthens your relationship with what you already have.

METAPHOR BANK: LINES WORTH KEEPING

The laid hedge. Renewal that requires skilled cutting. Maintenance as craft rather than chore.

Rustout. Capability corrodes from disuse as surely as it burns out from overuse.

The maintenance schedule. Skills, relationships, attention, energy and meaning all have renewal cycles. Neglect compounds quietly.

- Innovation gets the headlines. Maintenance keeps the lights on.
- A hedgerow maintained for generations produces abundance nobody planted this year.
- Leave some fruit on the tree. Taking everything maximises this year at the cost of every year.
- Some kinds of pruning make living systems stronger. The skill is knowing what to cut and what to leave.
- Trust is maintained in ordinary weeks, and spent in difficult ones.
- The most radical thing you can do with something good may be to keep it working.

A FINAL THOUGHT

A sustainable life may depend less upon continually becoming something new and more upon learning what deserves to be kept alive. Human flourishing requires capacity as well as comfort.

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

Vanessa Aradia

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