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Human Brilliance

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Foreword

Professional services firms have historically sold competence and brilliance as a single element. As AI raises the standard of competent work, this bundling is coming under pressure and the distinction matters commercially in a way that it has not in the past.

In this paper, underpinned by existing research across psychology, neuroscience, and organisational behaviour, you will find:

SECTION 01 — Why brilliance needs defining now, and why its absence is difficult to see

SECTION 02 — An evidence-based definition of human brilliance

SECTION 03 — A formula for human brilliance that includes three modes of capability, the role of agency, and five enabling conditions

SECTION 04 — Where human brilliance adds most value

SECTION 05 — Five actions firms can take now to protect, foster, and optimise the conditions for brilliance

Why brilliance matters

SECTION 01

Why brilliance needs defining now, and why its absence is difficult to see

SECTION 02

An evidence-based definition of human brilliance

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01

Why brilliance needs defining now

Professional services firms sell the work done by their people, and historically the price of that work has been differentiated principally by the seniority of the person doing that work. Every hour a given person records is usually priced identically and is valued in the same way, regardless of the tasks they complete during that hour, and so competence and brilliance are bundled together and sold as a single element. This bundling has happened as a consequence of how work has been priced and billed and is likely not a decision that most firms would recognise themselves as having made deliberately.

KEY TAKEAWAY

What keeps brilliance out of view:

- There is no clear definition, so the word defaults to its everyday meaning of a trait that some have and some don't
- Firms count time, not what happens within it – competence and brilliance are bundled together
- Quality processes catch poor work, but lack visibility over where people are working below their own upper region of potential performance

Why brilliance is difficult to see

Bundling makes it difficult for firms to see when brilliance is present in a piece of work and when it is missing. Three further factors make it harder still:

1 | Brilliance in professional work does not have a clear definition

Firms already act as though brilliance matters. They set rates that carry an implied claim about those who do the work, they promote on it, and they recruit for it. However, without having a clear definition, the meaning of brilliance defaults to the way the word is used in everyday language, which has consequences for behaviour.

Brilliance in lay terms is fixed. In lay use, brilliance most frequently describes a category of person rather than a way of working. It is used and heard as a trait that someone has or does not have, particularly in kinds of work that tend towards field-specific ability beliefs (Bian et al., 2018; Leslie et al., 2015; Porter and Cimpian, 2023). Beliefs of this kind form early in life and can persist beneath a stated commitment to development. These beliefs carry a behavioural cost. Where an environment is perceived to value innate ability, people are frequently less willing to admit what they do not know, less likely to seek help, and more inclined to conceal the effort a piece of work required (Bian et al., 2018; Porter and Cimpian, 2023). Effortless accomplishment is read as a signal of higher performance, so visible effort carries a cost (Tsay, 2016).

When growth language slips back into genius language. Firms across legal, accounting, and consulting now routinely describe ability in developmental terms, speaking of skills that can be practised and honed, of mindsets that can be cultivated, and of organisations built around skills instead of credentials. However, the vocabulary of excellence does not always follow a developmental framing. Alongside developmental terms, firms sometimes continue to describe their people in fixed terms with brilliance framed as an attribute of a person rather than a way of working. Innate-talent and developmental registers can therefore sit alongside one another, sometimes creating tension between the idea that ability is built and the idea that it is inherent. This type of lapse is easy to make, especially because this is the framing which is most recognised in lay discussions of brilliance.

2 | Firms count time, not what happens within it

Measurement of value has not kept pace with the commitment to development. Even when firms have moved to alternative fee arrangements with clients, internal effort and utilisation tracking survives across legal, accounting, and consulting (LexisNexis, 2023; Thomson Reuters, 2025b). Firms have therefore changed what they charge for without changing what they count. What is counted measures assured, reliable and competent delivery at scale, which is both necessary and a different thing from brilliance. Organisations measure what is easy to measure, and then treat it as the proxy for what matters (Goodhart, 1975; Strathern,

1997; Yankelovich, 1971). Part of why this gap persists is because a measure of brilliance cannot be built whilst the term remains undefined, and lack of definition leaves an opening for the lay beliefs described above.

3 | Competent work hides what is missing

Firms have well-developed processes for identifying poor work, including supervision, review, quality checks and client feedback. They are far less able to distinguish between work that is competent and work produced by someone operating at the top of their game. Competent work meets the standard, passes review, and is recorded and billed in the same way as brilliant work, so nothing in these processes signals that more was possible. When brilliance is missing, the work does not fail; it is competent, and the difference goes unrecorded. This leaves the cost of absent brilliance largely invisible to firms.

These three factors explain why the absence of brilliance has been difficult to see. Why brilliance needs to be defined now turns on what AI is doing to the value of competent work.

Why focus on human brilliance?

AI affects competence far more than brilliance. Where competent output for a piece of work can be produced faster and, on the available evidence, to a higher standard (Dell'Acqua et al., 2026), its perceived value falls. The value of human brilliance becomes the part of what firms sell that matters most, but the part that they are least equipped to describe.

Leaving competence and brilliance undistinguished has been sustainable while competent work held its value. It is harder to sustain against macro pressures firms already face, and which AI is intensifying. There are three reasons to focus on human brilliance now: the immediate pressures on fees and people, the existential pressure of human work being defined by what AI has not yet absorbed, and the opportunity AI now offers to relieve these pressures by giving firms visibility over how time is spent.

1 | Immediate pressures on fees and people

Fees: client scrutiny of rates is not new. In legal, billing review has previously moved from "cursory to forensic" with realisation rates falling, rate growth flat for nearly a decade, and firms accustomed to annual increases of 5-6%, settling for 2% (Thomson Reuters, 2026b). However, what is new is that AI has given clients a reason to reopen the question and apply additional pressure. In 2024, eighty percent of Fortune 1000 executives expected to see a reduction in billing from outside counsel, although at that time those requests had not yet materialised (LexisNexis Legal & Professional, 2024).

Accounting firms are also reactively adjusting their pricing messaging as clients query costs in light of AI-driven efficiencies (Gaetano, 2026), and 85% of legal leaders expect AI to change how firms price, with hourly-rate work anticipated to fall by more than a quarter (Deloitte, 2026). Nearly three-quarters (71%) of in-house legal professionals expect professional firms to change their commercial model, and how they charge for services, as AI use increases, yet 62% of law firm professionals say their firm's pricing structure is unchanged in response to AI (Thomson Reuters, 2026a). This gap is a clear indication of pressure: firms indicate that the commercial model will change, but have not yet changed it, and this leaves pricing and value open to questioning by clients.

People: the pipeline of future capability. Junior professionals have historically built capability through the work that AI is now most able to absorb. ADP payroll data indicates a 19% relative decline in employment for early-career workers in AI-exposed fields (Brynjolfsson et al., 2026), and professional, scientific, and technical activities are found to have a high exposure to AI (World Economic Forum, 2026). The risk for firms is therefore not only how many juniors they hire, but whether those they do hire are given work that develops them. If the route by which junior professionals gain the experience needed to succeed in more senior roles is removed without replacement, firms face a shortfall in the people able to manage complex matters, and to exercise oversight over AI output itself, in the years ahead.

INSIGHT

Clients expect change that firms have not yet made

71% of in-house legal professionals expect firms to change how they charge as AI use increases, but 62% of law firm professionals say their firm's pricing is unchanged in response to AI.

Source: Thomson Reuters, 2026a

Both of these pressures exist against a backdrop of existing competition from alternative providers. The market for legal services performed by non-traditional providers reached $28.5bn, having grown at a compound rate of 18% between 2021 and 2023 (Thomson Reuters, 2025a). Corporate legal departments report turning to these providers for lower-cost, high-volume work and a substantial minority of respondents on both sides reported finding providers that lead on generative AI more attractive. In-house teams are moving in the same direction, with 93% of legal departments prioritising efficiency gains through technology (LexisNexis, 2025). Additionally, over half of corporate general counsel expect a higher proportion of work to be held in-house by 2030, and 39% of the same group expect the overall value of work available to law firms to be lower by the same date (Thomson Reuters, 2025c).

2 | Existential pressure: human work may be defined by what AI has not yet absorbed

It is clear that AI is already producing measurable gains in knowledge work (Dell'Acqua et al., 2026), and we are already seeing changes in how professional work is composed in specific applications (Dillon et al., 2025). The division of human and AI labour is therefore already underway, and it is at least partially through a process of subtraction.

In the current environment, AI developers determine what functionality arrives and when, with the frontier market highly concentrated (Government Office for Science, 2026). Firms then decide what to adopt, often under market pressure as much as considered need (Forbes, 2026; Wavestone, 2025), and solutions are frequently rolled out without sufficient direction to users about what the technology is for and how best to use it (Deloitte, 2026; Hays, 2023; McKinsey, 2025). Nearly half of employees report being given no dedicated work time for AI training (Pearson and Cognizant, 2026). At this stage, adoption is highly experimental, with firms establishing where technology can support and streamline existing work. However, questions concerning how work should be divided, and what the human elements of work should be, are frequently not part of this process. Human contribution is then liable to be settled by default, as the residue of what technology has not yet absorbed.

There are three risks to allowing human contribution to be settled in this way:

(i) the residue is likely to be arbitrary, as what resists automation is not necessarily what is most valuable;

(ii) the residue could be unrewarding, since the work most readily absorbed by technology could be the work that draws on hard-won skills;

(iii) the residue is difficult to predict: what technology can do has expanded steadily, and continues to expand, so what it cannot do this year, it may do next.

This leaves the human element of contribution to be defined by a boundary that is known to be moving though not in a predictable direction. Arguably, this has the capacity to leave many decision makers in firms in a reactive mode, and individuals within those firms are making long-term investments in their development against a short-term view of what will remain relevant to the market.

3 | Increasing visibility over how time is spent

What has changed recently is the introduction of AI tools to improve the visibility that firms have over how time is spent. Historically, time-recording and reporting has been visible largely through self-reporting, with individuals reconstructing their own days, often retrospectively, into the categories that a timesheet required. The output is an account of the day shaped by memory and a task taxonomy. AI-assisted capture produces something more useful: an observed record of what was done, and when it was done, usually at a level of granularity that is absent from self-report. Instruments of this kind now exist in practice: passive, OS-level activity capture has been used to build exactly this kind of granular record, without dependence on self-report (Laurel, 2026).

This matters because the ability of individuals to direct their attention and skills can be strengthened with visibility over where they are spending their time. Without this kind of visibility, it is arguably more difficult for individuals to make effective, informed choices about where they direct their time and attention in future, and more difficult for firms to decide what human contribution is worth protecting. This bears directly on the measurement problem set out above, because where the content of an hour becomes observable then the value no longer has to be limited to duration, and it becomes possible to distinguish between hours on the basis of what happened during that time.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Seeing inside the hour

AI can help us see what happens within time, not just how much of it is spent, and this matters for recognising brilliance.

02

An evidence-based definition of human brilliance

Defining human brilliance

We propose the following definition of human brilliance:

Human brilliance is the state of operating at one's best, entered rather than possessed, occurring where an individual's capability, agency, and enabling conditions are present together.

State commits us to a claim about how brilliance behaves over time and is developed below; entered rather than possessed marks the departure from the lay understanding; and present together asserts that the three components are jointly required, none of them is sufficient alone.

> KEY TERM
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> **Brilliance, *noun*:** a state people move in and out of, rather than a fixed quality some people have. It depends on three things being present at once: capability, agency, and the right conditions.

Human brilliance is a state, not a trait

Traits are relatively stable dispositions, whereas states are occupied rather than owned, and an individual may be in a brilliance state at some times and not at others. 'State not trait' refers to how brilliance behaves and is why the same person can produce both exceptional and ordinary work whilst remaining the same person. Fleeson's density distribution approach treats what appears to be a stable trait as an average taken across many momentary states, and finds that within person variability in behaviour is substantial, and often exceeds variability between

individuals (Fleeson, 2001; Fleeson, 2004). In other words, the same person varies more from themselves over time than people typically differ from one another. In the work context, Dalal et al. (2014) review the evidence that job performance is dynamic rather than static, and note that within-person variation is often poorly understood and treated as an error. Through these lenses, the output of human brilliance can be understood as being in the upper region of an individual's own performance distribution, where they are operating at their best. This distribution is not static and, as capability develops, the whole range moves and with it the level at which a person is operating at their best. It follows that brilliance is developable rather than fixed and the question worth considering is not who is or who possesses brilliance, but under what conditions a person reaches that state.

The state is not continuous

A state of brilliance is not one that an individual occupies all of the time, or even for extended periods, and nor does it need to be. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, there is the matter of fit. A great deal of professional work is well served by applying known routes at low effort, and the competence of high-performing knowledge workers provides a more than sufficient level of output. If an individual reaches for brilliance where competence would suffice, that may reasonably be viewed as a misreading of what a task requires rather than an efficient use of resources. The modes of capability discussed below elaborate on this. Secondly, there are costs to consider. Operating in the upper regions of your own performance range is effortful, and the application of effort has a cost. Accounts of the precise mechanisms (resource, motivational, and attentional accounts) of how and why sustained effort becomes harder differ (Inzlicht and Schmeichel, 2012; Baumeister et al., 2024), but the practical implication is common: operating in a state of brilliance is not free, and cannot be maintained indefinitely. When we consider these two reasons together, brilliance is intermittent by nature rather than by failure and it comes in bursts which may persist across working sessions.

Brilliance is located and identified in the manner of engagement and not through a single outcome: a well-made decision can produce a poor result, and a poorly made decision can produce a good result. We propose that instances of brilliance follow this pattern and, therefore, a single piece of work tells us less about decisions, and brilliance, than it might appear to do at first (Baron and Hershey, 1988).

What operating in a state of brilliance does do is raise the probability of exceptional work, assessed both against the individual's own best work and against the standards of their domain. This is why the account anchors to process rather than instances, and across enough instances that raised probability becomes visible in what is produced.

The science of human brilliance

SECTION 03

A formula for human brilliance that includes:
The three modes of capability
The role of agency
The five enabling conditions

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03

A formula for human brilliance

Capability x Agency x Conditions = Human Brilliance

The form of human brilliance is multiplicative rather than additive. An additive model would allow abundance in one component to offset a deficit in another component. For example, exceptional capability could compensate for poor conditions, or strong conditions could compensate for a lack of agency. The multiplicative model requires all three to be present, and where any one component is entirely missing then brilliance is absent rather than reduced.

This has consequences for how firms currently operate because where brilliance fails due to conditions or agency lacking, what remains is competent work, which arguably is not the same as poor work. Where brilliance fails because the capability required is not yet there, the shortfall becomes visible in the work itself. The asymmetry here is key: when measurement systems are focused more on the quantity rather than quality of time, the capability failure is the only one that is currently traceable. The multiplier model, therefore, predicts that the cost of absent conditions and absent agency is systematically invisible to firms.

Capability

Capability is the developable constellation of skills which combine to realise an individual's cognitive potential. It is better understood as a trajectory rather than a fixed endowment: each person can increase the number of skills they hold and improve their proficiency through practice (Hambrick et al., 2014). Operating at one's best means working at the top of one's current range, and routine work does not provide the opportunity to exercise that range. Deliberate practice, as studied in sport and music (Macnamara et al., 2014), is drill-like activity conducted away from performance, and many professionals have neither the time nor the setting for it (Fadde and Klein, 2010). What they propose instead is deliberate performance: making the work itself progressively more demanding so that development happens during performance rather than alongside it. Brilliance is therefore an episode in which capability is exercised in the upper region of a person's range, which is then a condition under which

capability develops. Where the state is not reached, capability is not exercised in that upper region, and one route to development is closed off.

A neural explanation shows us that practice changes what a task demands of the person doing it. Regions under top-down prefrontal control become less activated with repetition, so work that once required effortful control comes to require less of it (Kelly and Garavan, 2005). These effects are not uniform across domains and task, but when we consider a trajectory, we see that the work that is carried out in the upper region of our performance potential today, is achieved more easily the next time we try.

HOW IT WORKS

Capability includes three ways of thinking:

- Exploration: looking beyond what is already known
- Judgement: testing ideas against the evidence
- Expertise: applying a familiar approach quickly

The strongest performers move between all three as the work demands.

Source: Thomson Reuters, 2026a

Three modes of capability

That development plays out across three distinct modes of capability, present in everyone though not drawn on equally, and not equally at every moment. The three modes are exploration, judgement, and expertise and each performs a different kind of cognitive work.

Exploration mode, which may also be described as generative capability, involves engaging with a problem by searching beyond what is already known about it. In professional practice this can look like: proposing more than one framing of a problem, drawing on unfamiliar material (Uzzi et al., 2013), deferring commitment (Kruglanski and Webster, 1996), and recognising that the problem as handed over is not the right problem (Reiter-Palmon et al., 1997; Schön, 1983). Neuroimaging research has found that generation reliably recruited the medial temporal lobe, the brain's associative and memory-based regions (Ellamil et al., 2012). Generation works through association as this brain network has the capacity to connect ideas across contexts that are not obviously related. It is this associative pull that allows exploration modes to call on skills such as imagination, creativity, curiosity, and reframing (Beaty et al., 2016; Benedek and Neubauer, 2013; Mednick, 1962). Imagination does much of its work here. Exploration is broader though: it also happens outside one person's head, through reading, searching, and conversations with colleagues and clients, and its value comes from recombining existing knowledge in unusual ways (Uzzi et al., 2013).

Judgement mode, or evaluative capability, involves testing something against reality: applying criteria properly, actively seeking disconfirming evidence, separating what is known from what is assumed, distinguishing cases that superficially match, and recognising when further search will not improve the answer (Chi et al., 1981; Haran et al., 2013). The same neuroimaging work found that evaluation preferentially recruited executive control networks, while retaining strong connectivity with the associative network throughout the task (Ellamil et al., 2012). Evaluation is therefore not purely deliberate but trained intuition, where it draws on analytic and affective processing together. Executive control and associative networks are capable of an antagonistic relation, but cooperate more often during creative cognition (Beaty et al., 2016). What is difficult to sustain is not the coexistence of the networks but the shift in the balance between them that each mode requires, since generating options and testing them draws on a different balance between the same two systems. Judgement mode also draws on discernment, scepticism, precision and foresight (Baron, 2019; Baron, 2024; Haran et al., 2013).

Expertise mode, involves applying a known route quickly, including skills of domain expertise, pattern recognition and fluency (Chase and Simon, 1973). It rests on earned expert intuition built through repeated exposure, allowing a familiar instance to be recognised and the appropriate response retrieved (Klein, 1993). The mode is also applied at low effort, which is the correct course of action most of the time but is only reliable under specific conditions. The decision environment must present stable regularities, outcomes must be predictable enough to support genuine pattern recognition, and the professional must receive timely feedback (Kahneman and Klein, 2009). Where these are absent, confident intuition is more likely to reflect confidence than skill and subjective certainty is not a reliable guide since experts feel equally sure whether their intuition is good or bad. This suggests that performance is predicted not by role tenure but the quality, variety, and challenge of practice and whether feedback and reflection are present (Rousseau and Stouten, 2025).

Strong performance depends on switching between modes

The three modes should not be treated as sequential stages. Instead, strong performance depends on fluent movement between modes rather than maximising any one; and overcommitting to a single mode measurably worsens performance (Beaty et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2025). What marks high performance and predicts strong outcomes is the capacity to engage, and flexibly switch between, networks that would otherwise compete with each other. Weak performance, by contrast, is specifically linked to over-reliance on previously learned responses; for example, defaulting to expertise mode when a situation needs exploration or judgement engagement (Beaty et al., 2018). The three modes appear to operate continuously

and in parallel, with their relative contribution shifting over the course of engaging with a problem rather than switching on and off (Lloyd-Cox et al., 2022).

Your capability constellation

Within these three modes, everyone has their own constellation, or configuration, of highly developed skills; and the skills that shine brightest within that constellation are where, and when used, a person's brilliance is most likely to surface. This does not imply that any single constellation is unique, since near-identical configurations plausibly exist across a large population, but captures that individuals arrive at their combination through unique developmental and experiential pathways. These constellations may also differ in part because individuals have different cognitive architecture, meaning how their brain is built and organised, and the same working environment will not calibrate the same way for everyone (Doyle, 2020).

Constellations are also shaped over time. What a person develops through practice, opportunity, and exposure is shaped in turn by whatever conditions were available to them. This compounds because skills that are recognised and valued early attract more practice and refinement, further developing their strength, which in turn makes them more likely to be recognised and valued again. Because constellations are built through experience, a non-linear career path is not a deficit in this account; it is plausibly one of the routes by which unusual, and therefore valuable, combinations arise.

> KEY TERM
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> **Capability constellation, *noun*:** the particular combination of skills across exploration, judgement, and expertise that a person has developed most strongly through their own pathway of practice, opportunity, and experience. It is where their brilliance is most likely to surface and it continues to develop throughout their career.

Agency

Agency is the exercise of choice over how to engage with the work: recognising what a task requires and choosing to act on that recognition, including the choice to bring in other people or tools rather than proceeding alone (Bandura, 2001; Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). Motivation and ownership are expressed within this choice.

Agency resolves into two elements: recognition and action. Recognition identifies what the work requires: what type of problem is at hand and what capability mode it calls for, which skill within that mode is needed and whether that skill sits within the person's own constellation.

Action means applying the constellation, mode and skills the work requires, or bringing in additional help from another person or tool where the individual's own constellation is the wrong fit. For example, as discussed above AI can raise the capability available for a piece of work, but it still cannot decide when it is the right tool to bring in or notice when a problem calls for something else. That decision, recognition, and the choice to act remain within the person.

INSIGHT

Agency: seeing what needs to change is not the same as changing it

Under pressure, people can often still recognise that their approach needs to change, but find it harder to act on it.

Source: Thomson Reuters, 2026a

Recognition and action are both necessary, but each can fail independently of the other.

Recognition without action occurs when a person correctly identifies the work calls for another processing mode, but they are unable or unwilling to make the switch. Action without recognition occurs when confident execution proceeds in the wrong mode, reflecting weak metacognitive monitoring or a failed learning loop. People can ordinarily detect their own errors and adjust their confidence to match their accuracy, even without external feedback (Yeung and Summerfield, 2012); where that internal check fails, action can proceed uncorrected.

Metacognitive research provides a useful account of these two elements through the distinction between monitoring and control (Flavell, 1979; Nelson and Narens, 1990). Monitoring is relatively cognitively cheap and provides information about the task, one's performance, and whether an approach is working; control uses that information to regulate subsequent behaviour. However, some evidence suggests control can be more vulnerable than monitoring to divided attention (Peng and Tullis, 2021).

Recognition and action need not deteriorate together under load. A person may retain sufficient awareness to recognise that their approach needs to change while having insufficient cognitive control to make that change. The resulting recognition-action gap is therefore a distinct performance risk: the person can see what needs to happen without being able to execute the necessary switch. This suggests that the effect of load on agency may not simply be a general reduction in the ability to act but a widening gap between recognising the right action and taking it.

Perhaps one of the most challenging elements of agency may be recognising one's own current limits and taking action to involve someone else. In doing so, the individual gives up

some immediate ownership of the work to improve its eventual outcome. In firms organised around individual origination and billable-hour targets, this is a collaborative act and an indication of brilliance in its own right. Over the long term, the same recognition can feed back into capability development: identifying a recurring gap may reveal which skills are worth investing in and where that investment is appropriate.

Agency is developable, as capability is. Recognition and action can both improve through practice and the cultivation of conditions that support them. Recognition draws partly on the same neural switching described under capability, where flexible movement between modes is associated with creative performance more strongly than sustained commitment to any single mode (Chen et al., 2025). Therefore, this mechanism is not a separate cognitive resource unique to agency; agency is the exercise of choice over how that existing capacity is deployed.

Conditions

Conditions are the circumstances that enable capability and agency to develop and be expressed. They are not properties of the person themselves but are the circumstances which support the development and use of both. A capability, therefore, does not automatically translate into performance; it is expressed when task, social, or organisational cues activate them (Tett and Burnett, 2003).

Conditions operate across two timescales. Over time, they shape what gets developed and to what extent; in the moment, they determine what is accessible, since a capability a person holds might not be accessible if today's conditions do not allow it. The conditions required are also not uniform across capability and agency, or individuals; everyone has different requirements to thrive. We identify five conditions through which this occurs: time, capacity, state, learning loops, and latitude. Each constrains or enables capability and agency, each doing so in a different way whilst interacting with each other.

HOW IT WORKS

Five conditions decide whether Capability and Agency can be activated:

1. **Time:** how the day is structured
2. **Capacity:** how much mental resource is left after interruptions
3. **State:** sleep, stress, recovery
4. **Learning loops:** finding out what worked, in time to learn from it
5. **Latitude:** how free people feel to question and experiment

Source: Thomson Reuters, 2026a

The five conditions

1. **Time** concerns the shape of time available, not simply its quantity: periods of uninterrupted duration, the intervals between engagements, and the distance between a task and the answer it requires. Time recovered on paper is not necessarily usable time: attention does not disengage cleanly from a preceding task, reducing the accuracy and depth of engagement that follows (Leroy, 2009). Yet intervals can also enable performance: incubation can improve problem solving, with the quality and nature of the interval mattering more than its mere existence (Sio and Ormerod, 2009). Time is therefore also a connective condition as everything requires time to develop.

2. **Capacity** is the cognitive resource available for the work, and what competes for it; cognitive load, interruption, task-switching, attention residue, and the number of matters held concurrently. The amount of novel information that can be processed at any one time is limited (Sweller, 2011), while constant switching between tools and tasks can erode the very time it appears to save (Thompson, 2026).

3. **State** is performance readiness: the physiological and affective condition in which work begins, including sleep, fatigue, recovery, stress, and mood. It influences which capability modes are accessible before task-related demands are added. Under stress, for example, control can shift away from prefrontal processing towards faster, more reflexive responding, potentially reducing access to the exploration and judgement processes required for more deliberate performance (Arnsten, 2009). Self-regulation is likewise influenced by depletion and situational conditions (Baumeister et al., 2024; Inzlicht and Schmeichel, 2012), while recovery experiences predict subsequent performance.

4. **Learning loops** refers to whether people can discover what worked, what did not, why, and whether they discover soon enough to learn from it. Their value depends on the timeliness, accuracy, and interpretability of feedback: whether outcomes are traced back to the effort that produced them, how long that attribution takes, and how clearly the result can be distinguished from other influences. Expertise develops most reliably where feedback is sufficiently timely and accurate to support learning; however, professional decisions are often made in environments where feedback is slow, partial, or absent, allowing confident intuition to form without reliably improving accuracy (Hogarth et al., 2015; Kahneman and Klein, 2009). Yet more feedback is not necessarily better feedback. Feedback improves performance on average, but a proportion of effects are negative, depending on whether it redirects attention to the task or to the self (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996).

This distinction is important when people are learning to judge when AI is useful. Repeated exposure alone does not necessarily tell someone when AI will perform well; the decision requires feedback that connects the outcome to the decision to use AI. Firms should build learning loops into AI use rather than rely on volume of use or blanket mandates.

5. **Latitude** is the room a person is granted to act set by culture, managers, and the nature of work. It is often felt or intuited rather than stated and can vary within the same organisation. Latitude determines not whether a person can act, but whether they can experiment, question, admit uncertainty, and depart from established ways of working. A firm's culture includes the beliefs it signals about ability. Where exceptional performance is framed as innate, effort and uncertainty become costly to display, and setbacks are more likely to be read as individual limits than as part of development (Murphy and Dweck, 2010). Psychological safety is therefore consequential: teams in which interpersonal risk is safer tend to perform better (Edmondson, 1999).

Who shapes the conditions?

Conditions also do not sit entirely within either the individual or organisation but are shaped jointly by them. Their locus of control varies: capacity and time can be shaped by both; state sits primarily with the individual, but is influenced by organisational demands, latitude is granted largely through managerial and organisational arrangements, and learning loops are jointly produced through the feedback environment organisations provide and attention individuals give to them.

A closer look at how some conditions are created

Not every condition offers the same scope to act. Time, capacity, and state are conditions that individuals and firms can actively shape in the course of everyday work, making them important for influencing whether capability is accessible, and whether agency can be exercised. Latitude and learning loops matter just as much, but their primary intervention points sit at a different level: in culture, management practice, and feedback design.

Time: what reclaimed time is used for

Time is not simply a resource to be increased, but a condition whose structure determines what can be done with it. Defragmenting the working day can increase the cognitive resource available for demanding work by creating longer periods in which attention can be sustained. This matters for agency as greater continuity increases opportunity for insight and reflection which supports better focus and more intentional resource allocation. Where people have

greater visibility and control over how their time is allocated, they have greater scope to choose what to attend to and when to change their approach.

So, more time is not the answer: the value lies in noticing how time is spent and using the time noticing creates. A little time, once created, tends to be absorbed straight back into workload rather than spent well (Jiang et al., 2025). The more useful move is to direct reclaimed time towards the two conditions that follow (i.e. capacity or state) rather than folding it into more of the same work. AI has a role here beyond creating additional capacity: used across the working day, it can create a richer contextual record of how our days are actually spent – where time went, what tasks consumed it, and the conditions surrounding periods of productive work. Such a record cannot reveal a person's thinking, but it can make aspects of their working patterns more visible to them, providing material for reflection on how they allocate their own attention and expertise. An individual with greater agency has greater control over what happens to reclaimed time and therefore a greater scope to direct it towards building capacity or protecting state directly rather than allowing it to be absorbed back into work.

Capacity: fragmented attention costs more than time

Capacity is the cognitive resource available for the work and what competes for it (Franconeri et al., 2013; Norman and Bobrow, 1975). It is where the distinction between hours available and hours that are cognitively usable becomes most visible. Cognitive load places a hard ceiling on the amount of novel material that can be processed at once (Sweller, 2011). Attention residue is driven not simply by interruption but by the difficulty of disengaging from the interrupted task; anticipating time pressure on returning to it can intensify the residue, while a "ready-to-resume" plan mitigates it (Leroy and Glomb, 2018). Task-switching also carries costs associated with activating and inhibiting competing task sets (Kiesel et al., 2010; Koch et al., 2010; Koch et al., 2018). These findings display how fragmented attention does not only reduce available capacity: it can reduce the cognitive control needed to recognise what the work requires and change approach accordingly.

Creating capacity only matters if the capacity created is used differently. It is practical to use some of that reclaimed capacity to build capability within the work itself: practising a difficult skill, experimenting with a different approach or deliberately working on a recurring weakness. Having work visible and knowing what you are doing, and what appears to be working, allows people to have information with which to direct the capacity they have created. As capability is not fixed at deployment, repeated opportunities to practise, combined with clearer information about performance can change what becomes fluent and available. Development during work offers a more direct route to capability building than treating development as something that happens separately, after the "real work" has finished.

State: under pressure, flexibility goes first

State gates which capability modes are accessible and is reached through time and capacity. Acute stress impairs working memory and cognitive flexibility, with mixed effects on inhibitory control (Shields et al., 2016). This uneven effect is consistent with the argument developed under capability: under pressure, the flexibility required to move between modes may be compromised even when the capacity to execute a familiar response remains. Sleep deprivation separately impairs sustained attention, executive function, and long-term memory (Lowe et al., 2017). Across legal, accounting, and consulting, surveyed professionals report sleeping below the recommended range. Among lawyers, 72% reported sleeping fewer than seven hours per night (LawCare, 2021). 36% of chartered accountants reported experiencing regular insomnia or poor sleep (CABA, 2024), while only half of surveyed consultants reported achieving the recommended seven to eight hours of sleep, with 45% averaging just five to six hours per night (Consulting Success, 2016). Importantly, recovery experiences predict subsequent fatigue and vigour (Bennett et al., 2018; Sonnentag et al., 2022). State therefore affects not only how much work a person can do but which forms of capability they can bring to it.

Improving state does not require organisations to manage how people feel, nor large-scale wellbeing interventions. The practical question is whether the working environment leaves enough room for people to recover from the cognitive and physiological demands that work places on them. A short walk, time away from the desk, a few minutes of deliberate breathing, or a protected break may appear trivial, but their value lies in interrupting the accumulation of load. An organisational move is to make recovery possible within the working day and legitimate enough that people can use it. This matters for brilliance as state affects which forms of capability are accessible: someone who is better rested and under a lower cognitive load has more control available to act on what they have already recognised needs to change, since control degrades under load in a way recognition does not.

INSIGHT

Recovery predicts performance, yet professionals surveyed across legal, accounting, and consulting report sleeping fewer hours than recommended

- 72% of lawyers report sleeping fewer than 7 hours per night.
- 36% of chartered accountants experience regular insomnia or poor sleep.
- 45% of consultants average only 5-6 hours of sleep per night.

Source: CABA, 2024; Consulting Success, 2016; LawCare, 2021

Human brilliance in practice

SECTION 04

Where human brilliance adds the most value

SECTION 05

Five actions firms can take now to protect, foster, and optimise the conditions for brilliance

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04

Where human brilliance adds the most value

Defining brilliance as a state rather than a trait changes what can be done about it. If it is entered and occupied for periods of time rather than owned, then we can ask what makes entering it more likely and act upon that information. Action does not automatically manufacture brilliance, but it raises how often and how reliably people reach it. The question that follows is where that action is best directed: in which activities does human brilliance have the greatest impact, and where should attention be focused as a result? The areas set out below are indicative, not exhaustive. They are drawn from supporting literature rather than systematic examination of the activities of knowledge workers, and establishing where brilliance matters most within a given domain is a question for practitioners and experts in that domain.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Brilliance matters most when:

- The problem is not yet defined
- An unusual combination of skills or approach is needed
- The work demands a change of approach
- Key context is missing from the brief
- The wrong answer is expensive or hard to reverse

Where the problem is not yet defined

Brilliance has the most to offer where a problem cannot be fully specified in advance, so execution alone cannot resolve it. Schön's early account of professional practice described this directly: problems do not present themselves to a practitioner as givens but must be constructed from situations that are puzzling and troubling, and the work of naming what is

attended to, and framing the context in which it is attended to, precedes any attempt at solution (Schön, 1983). Where the problem must be constructed, recognising what it requires and choosing to act on that recognition sits with the individual and cannot be deferred.

Where unusual combinations create value

As AI continues to make generic output cheaper and more widely available, what remains scarce and therefore more valuable is an 'unusual' combination of skills. Analysis of 17.9 million scientific papers found that the highest-impact work is grounded in conventional combinations of prior material while also featuring an intrusion of unusual ones, and that work of this kind was twice as likely to be highly cited (Uzzi et al., 2013). The finding is drawn from scientific publication rather than knowledge work, but the underlying logic transfers: value concentrates where combinations are atypical, which is the reason a distinctive constellation is worth developing.

Where work demands a change of mode

A distinctive constellation only produces value where conditions allow movement between modes. Flexible movement between modes is more strongly associated with creative performance than sustained commitment to any single one (Chen et al., 2025), so the same constellation, held by the same person under conditions that prevent switching, will not produce the same result.

Where constraints go unstated

Human brilliance is also of greater value in situations where the answer depends on context which is not explicitly in the brief. This could take the form of institutional knowledge, the history of a relationship, and what a client has said in previous conversations, all of which are important ingredients for producing a high value outcome, and all of which are frequently missing from recorded material (Baumard, 2002; McQueen and Janson, 2016; Reinders, 2010). Recognising that something relevant is missing requires the active process of separating what is known from what is assumed, and the disposition to seek out and evaluate information in an intentionally unbiased way predicts both accuracy and calibration (Haran et al., 2013). The initial presentation of a problem can also shape its representation, and those operating at a high level are more likely to detect the underlying features of a problem, where novices are more likely to rely on its literal features (Chi et al., 1981; Phillips et al., 2004; Sloutsky, 2000). These findings remain central to current accounts of expertise as incorporating domain-specific hierarchical knowledge (Rousseau and Stouten, 2025). An unstated constraint is therefore only visible to someone addressing the problem in the right mode.

Where the costs are asymmetric

The value of brilliance also varies with what is at stake if the solution proposed is wrong. Human brilliance, as established, is effortful and intermittent, so it is a resource to be directed rather than applied in a uniform manner. If a competent but mistaken answer can be corrected at cost which is acceptable, competence is the appropriate level of response, and the additional effort is not warranted. Where the consequences of a wrong answer are unacceptably high or are difficult to reverse, then the calculation of the cost of operating in a brilliance state changes. The cost of operating in a brilliance state remains the same but that cost has a higher value. Work of this kind is therefore worth the 'cost' of operating in a brilliance state. This suggests an additional question about how firms currently allocate the conditions which make brilliance accessible and achievable. Protected time, attention from the correct individuals and the space to consider an approach are finite resources and if they are purely distributed according to the fee value of a matter rather than the cost of a wrong answer, then conditions for brilliance may be focused in the wrong place inadvertently.

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What firms can do now

Firms can take steps now to create the conditions in which brilliance is more likely to occur. The five actions below each address one of the conditions set out in section 3.3 and, for each one, a useful test is to ask what needs protecting, what should be fostered, and what can be optimised.

NEXT STEPS

Five ways to create the conditions for brilliance:

- **Time:** give people an accurate record of their time
- **Capacity:** protect focus time for high-stakes work
- **State:** make recovery legitimate
- **Learning loops:** build feedback into AI use
- **Latitude:** audit talent language

The aim is not for people to operate at their best all the time, but to reach it more often, in the work where it matters the most.

Source: Thomson Reuters, 2026a

1. **Time:** give people an accurate record of their time. An observed, rather than reconstructed, view of how time is spent allows people to see where their attention goes and to direct reclaimed time towards demanding work, development or recovery, rather than allowing it to be absorbed into more of the same.

2. **Capacity:** protect focus time for high-stakes work. Uninterrupted time is finite. Allocating it according to the cost of a wrong answer, and not only the fee value of a matter, places the conditions for brilliance where they matter most.

3. **State:** make recovery legitimate. Short breaks and recovery within the working day interrupt the build-up of cognitive load. The organisational task is not to manage how people feel, but to make recovery possible and visibly acceptable.

4. **Learning loops:** build feedback into AI use. People's sense of when AI will perform well improves with timely feedback that connects the outcome to the decision to use AI, not with volume of use or blanket mandates.

5. **Latitude:** audit talent language. Review how careers, recruitment, and internal materials describe ability. Where innate-talent framing leads, people are less likely to admit uncertainty, seek help, or show effort, all of which development depends on.

By taking these steps, firms can begin the journey to create more opportunities for brilliance and become better able to recognise it when it occurs. The aim is not for people to operate at their best all the time, but for them to reach it more often, in the work where it matters most. In doing so, firms can decide where human contribution lies before automation decides for them.

About this research

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