Think Ahead – Season 3

Wrap-up – AI, leadership, and the future of work: The ideas reshaping business

Sergei Guriev [00:00:05.720]

Hello and welcome to Think Ahead, the London Business School podcast that brings you sharp analysis, bold ideas and the latest research to help business leaders navigate a rapidly changing world. I'm Sergei Guriev, Professor of Economics and Dean at London Business School. Over 10 episodes, we have spoken with economists, strategy professors, technology professors and practitioners. We have explored how artificial intelligence is reshaping decision-making, what it takes to lead through uncertainty, how businesses must respond to the ESG debate, how the world of work is changing, and how the global financial order itself may be shifting beneath our feet. As we reach the end of Season 3, we will take this chance to revisit some of the questions and topics business leaders are discussing today. Few topics have dominated our conversations this season more than artificial intelligence.

We explored AI from three very different angles. First, who is really in control when AI systems start to act autonomously? Second, can data and algorithms make better people decisions than humans? And three, what are leaders still fundamentally getting wrong about implementation? Here are some of the moments that stayed with me. Ekaterina Abramova studies agentic AI systems - the kind that don't just advise, but act. And she made a striking point about what it really means to deploy one.

Ekaterina Abramova [00:01:31.960]

The same way as we onboard new employees, we can actually onboard an agent, which means I can write instructions for the agent to follow, and it's going to refer to those instructions every time it goes to work with the project. And so instructions have to be good and clear, I have to trust that the instructions have been written well. But if we think about it, the cost of intelligence is actually getting cheap, because as a single person who is potentially interested in coding, you could pay £90 to £200 a month, and you have a very cheap, amazing assistant. I mean, okay, it can hallucinate and do mistakes, but it's still an amazing assistant. So, I think that companies are faced with a possibility now of, well, we need to decide, is this system safe to act? So, this is where the trust component will come in.

Sergei Guriev [00:02:26.480]

Sue Preston works with organisations around the world on AI adoption, and her view on the pace of change was a wake-up call.

Sue Preston [00:02:34.080]

So, I think humans and agentic AI together is absolutely fantastic in the sense that it's going to make me more productive. It's going to make my life a lot easier. Do I see some of… We were talking about some of the roles and some of the organisations and what will be impacted. I mean, IDC state that by 2030, every company will roll out agentic AI. And then I think it was 2026, it's over 2,000 agentic AI agents will be part of that workforce.

Sergei Guriev [00:03:09.200]

Isabel Fernandez-Mateo has studied how organisations make decisions about people. Her observation about where AI-driven hiring is heading was one of the most thought-provoking of the series.

Isabel Fernandez-Mateo [00:03:19.920]

Candidates are also using generative AI. They are using generative AI to write their applications, to write their CVs, to send 100 applications to each job every day, with the result that we have companies inundated with very nice looking CVs. And they are finding it very difficult to distinguish the high quality versus the low quality. I think that one of the consequences of this, that we're starting to see, is that we are going to end up coming back to some "old-fashioned" ways of hiring. So, relying on networks, relying on the status of the school these people went to, because those things are harder to "fake" with generative AI. So, that's a development that we have to keep watching for.

Sergei Guriev [00:04:00.240]

Yes. If I use AI to write a job description and job ad, you can use AI to shape the application exactly custom-tailored for this particular job. And indeed, I'll be inundated with hundreds of thousands of identical applications. Khyati Sundaram built Applied, a platform specifically designed to make hiring fairer and more data-driven. But even she has seen how the rise of AI is complicating the picture.

Khyati Sundaram [00:04:28.560]

Yes, well, I often call Applied a rejection machine, because we've had millions of applications through, and we've rejected, or 90% of the candidates have been unsuccessful. I think that's going to be the bigger challenge now with AI. We're seeing, I call it the sea of sameness, because every application is looking the same, the cover letters are looking the same, the resumes are looking the same, answers start feeling and sounding the same. And so, separating the top 10%, or the top 20%, which are the people you want to take in the actual interview room, is becoming really challenging. And what I see employers doing is some of it is old school. Can you call people into an interview room? But you can't do 5,000 interviews, because nobody has the time, or there's a cost associated. So, there's a layering effect going on, as I might add additional assessments, I might give them a work sample, I might get additional reference checks, I might do a video interview. And there's all these layers being added to actually test for authenticity, which we didn't have three or four years ago. And so, it's created a different problem. And there's lots of different solutions to that problem, which we did not have before.

Sergei Guriev [00:05:37.920]

Keyvan Vakili leads our Data Science and AI Initiative, and his advice on where organisations should actually be investing their energy was a useful corrective to how many leaders are currently thinking about AI. And Riham Satti co-founder of MeVitae, ended our conversation on AI with a reflection that I think is worth sitting with.

Keyvan Vakili [00:05:57.480]

So nowadays, all of my students, their exams look like this. Here's the question I typically ask you. Here's the best answer you can get from ChatGPT, your job is to make it better. And this is, I think, the skill that we need to, and not necessarily just this example, but this is an example of a skill that I think a lot more people need to work on. That in a world where everyone has access to those tools, what separates you from the rest is the ability to take that and make it better.

Sergei Guriev [00:06:25.280]

In your business, in people decisions, what should remain human, Riham?

Riham Satti [00:06:29.800]

Humanity? It's the soft skills. Because technology can help with speed, it can help with automation and a lot of the mundane tasks that we don't want to do day to day, but in the world of HR, authenticity, courage, empathy – these softer skills are harder to quantify but they mean more as technology continues to innovate.

Sergei Guriev [00:06:58.920]

One thread runs through all of these clips. AI is not primarily a technology challenge, it's also a leadership challenge. The organisations that navigated well will not necessarily be those with the most sophisticated systems. They will be those who have thought hardest about trust, accountability and what it means to keep human judgement genuinely in the loop. Leadership has always been at the heart of what we explore on Think Ahead. But this season our guests pushed beyond conventional wisdom to ask harder questions. What does leadership actually require of us psychologically? And what does good strategy look like when the environment keeps shifting? These four clips each offer a different lens on what it means to lead well. Niro Sivanathan is one of the world's leading researchers on the psychology of leadership. His insight into why people turn to leaders in moments of crisis is something every leader should understand about themselves.

Niro Sivanathan [00:08:01.360]

So when there's crises, there's uncertainty, what it does to an individual is you feel like you have a lack of control. And lack of control is an incredibly, incredibly aversive psychological state. And so what do we do? We seek out ways to try and regain that control. And that could come from spiritual sources. But it could also come from other individuals, such as leaders.

Sergei Guriev [00:08:24.640]

Diana Torres brought a strategist's clarity to what leadership really demands when it comes to making choices and why saying yes to everything is in fact saying no to strategy.

Diana Torres [00:08:34.960]

If you tell me that you want to do everything, there is no strategy. A strategy at some point, you have to let go of some things. And it's very difficult for leaders sometimes to accept that yes, I have to not enter into that market. But if you focus, like these are the three key, and I always call it the power of three, because I say to people like, just coming to a maximum of three things is very difficult.

Sergei Guriev [00:09:00.480]

Jessica Spungin has spent her career helping leaders make better strategic decisions. Her description of what strategy is, and what it is not, is one I will not forget quickly. And Suzanne Heywood added something important about the balance between strategic commitment and operational flexibility, a distinction that is especially relevant in the world where conditions can change overnight.

Jessica Spungin [00:09:22.560]

A group of executives who have gone away for an off-site. They've hugged trees together. They've got some flip charts and some post it notes. Some facilitator who doesn't understand their industry has grouped it together in themes, and then they've turned it into a mouse mat, a T-shirt, a mug… To me, strategy has always been around key choices and trade-offs that you make about how you allocate resources, given the nature of how the market's changing, your own internal resources and capabilities, and where you see change and growth coming from. And I think people think doing the vision is enough. And I don't think it is.

Suzanne Heywood [00:09:58.280]

There is a very tricky balancing act that particularly a board needs to do in relation to a company, but also an executive team needs to do in relation to a company, which is keeping the focus on what you've committed to do, unless it's absolutely impossible to achieve whilst being relatively flexible on how you get there. Because the how you get there can change. It may well be that we had committed to some targets and we were going to get there in one way, now we may need to get there unfortunately with a little bit more cost cutting, But let's try and keep focused on what we've committed to trying to achieve.

Sergei Guriev [00:10:33.320]

What strikes me across these four perspectives is that great leadership is not about having all the answers. It is about creating clarity for others when uncertainty is highest, making hard choices with discipline and holding the line on what matters while remaining genuinely open to how you get there. The debate around ESG has perhaps never been more contested. From political backlash in the United States to the growing pressure of regulation in Europe, business leaders are navigating a landscape that is simultaneously more demanding and more polarised, than at any point in recent memory. Our guests didn't shy away from any of this. Ioannis Ioannou studies corporate sustainability and has watched the ESG debate evolve over many years. His perspective on what is really driving the backlash in the United States was bracingly clear.

Ioannis Ioannou [00:11:26.880]

As I often say, even to our students, if you walk down the street in the US and you say to someone, what is ESG and do you believe in it, the backlash in the United States was bracingly clear. they'll have no idea what you're talking about, unless you're walking on Wall Street. So the idea that ESG is sort of a household term that people use and then you post it is just simply not true. I think in the US, it's part of the ideological battle that includes anti-immigration policies, anti-women's rights, anti-LGBTQ rights, and so on and so forth.

Sergei Guriev [00:11:57.760]

Anna Lungley took a longer and more optimistic view. She sees this moment, for all its turbulence, as a genuine turning point.

Anna Lungley [00:12:05.320]

And it's interesting, Ioanni and I were talking earlier, you mentioned John Elkington and his amazing book, 'Green Swans'. And in it, he talks about these moments in time where you see the acceleration in the adoption of technology. You see shifting consumer societal shifts and a changing regulatory environment, as we talked about earlier. And all of this comes together to create this magical moment in time, when we can see those systemic changes to the system that we need.

Sergei Guriev [00:12:33.600]

Katharina Neureiter brought the conversation closer to the operational realities facing business, and the growing power of data to hold companies accountable in ways that simply were not possible before. And Marcel Olbert made the case for something that can get lost in the ESG debate, the evidence that regulation, when well-designed actually works.

Katharina Neureiter [00:12:54.560]

So you have now big satellites in the sky. They can tell whether there's an adult working on a field or a child working on a field. And then you have probably potentially civil society that can use big data to analyse and pinpoint child labour in a supply chain. So as a responsible company, you need to be thinking about this and be one step ahead of these trends to mitigate the negative risk that could come to your business.

Marcel Olbert [00:13:19.160]

Regulation does drive change. So there is, I think, the common perception that sunlight is the best disinfectant. So in particular, transparency regulation has been shown, in different settings, to drive actual change. For example, reductions in environmental emissions, and also more direct regulations like taxes, taxes on carbon, which also includes emission trading systems, do have real effects on corporate behaviour across the globe.

Sergei Guriev [00:13:44.640]

Whatever one's view on ESG as a label, the underlying forces it represents, such as climate risks, supply chain accountability, investor pressure, regulatory change – these are not going away. The question is not whether businesses engage with them, but how rigorously and honestly they do so. Part of Season 3 looked at how the world of work and business is being fundamentally reshaped – by longevity, by technology, by the explosion of digital channels, and by the changing expectations of consumers and employees alike. Lynda Gratton has spent decades studying the future of work, and her research on longevity has never felt more urgent. She asked a question that I think every one of us should be sitting with.

Lynda Gratton [00:14:30.280]

How could we live a great life when we know we are going to live longer, but at the same time, when we know that technology, particularly AI, is going to fundamentally change our lives. And for me right now, one of the most interesting questions is around how do I keep on learning when I know that the jobs I do are going to change all of my life.

Sergei Guriev [00:14:52.720]

Andy Briggs brings a perspective shaped by years at the intersection of insurance, pensions and government policy. His message on what it takes to tackle the big structural challenges of longer working lives was clear.

Andy Briggs [00:15:04.920]

So the government has set up an independent pension commission to look at pension adequacy in the UK. They've introduced a new regime, regulators working with government called Targeted Support to address the fact that only 10% get advice as they journey to and through retirement. But these things only come about with commercial businesses, excellent research capability and government all collaborating and working together. We're so much stronger together if we work collaboratively to common goals. None of us can do it on our own. It does need that collaboration.

Sergei Guriev [00:15:36.480]

Anja Lambrecht studies digital markets and consumer behavior and she made a compelling case for why the explosion of new brands we are seeing is not a coincidence, it is a structural shift in how markets work. And Greg Crawford offered a fascinating window into the science behind how businesses now understand what consumers actually want, using everyday choices to build remarkably precise models of consumer preference.

Anja Lambrecht [00:16:01.400]

So, why is it possible suddenly? Why do we have this launch of so many different brands across sectors actually, that now seem to be thriving versus 20, 30 years ago? There were a few brands. That was a very stable market. But the fact that now to launch a brand, or popularise a brand, you don't just need to run a TV ad, which is hugely expensive, and going to be shown to lots of people who will never be interested in your product. But instead, what you can do is you run a TikTok campaign. You might be running advertising on Search, on Meta, other different platforms, but you can be targeting specific groups. This offers a huge opportunity to grow.

Greg Crawford [00:16:47.240]

We basically try to build, in this assortment space, a very simple model of consumer choice. So, for example, suppose you bought that jacket online. You probably looked at a few others. Yes? And so, we would then build a model of your choice of jackets. And from that model, we can take advantage of the everyday comparisons that consumers like you and others make across jackets. And if that jacket beat two others that you were looking at, it's going to have a higher value to you. If you aggregate that up across many millions of consumers, you can get a ranking of the attractiveness of all the jackets. And that's basically a structural model.

Sergei Guriev [00:17:30.480]

Taken together, these conversations point to a world that is simultaneously more demanding, but more full of opportunity than the one most of us were trained for. The organisations and individuals who will succeed are those who keep learning, who collaborate across boundaries, and who use data not just to understand the past, but to anticipate what is coming. Now, before I close, I want to leave with you one final thought from a unique conversation this season with fellow economist Hélène Rey. We talked about the historical dominance of the dollar, as well as the rise of digital currencies and what comes next.

Hélène Rey [00:18:05.480]

This is a jungle, right? We are currently living in a jungle of cryptos, of different technologies. I think what is very special about this point in time is that because of geopolitical tension, largely, there are lots of players who want to develop independent payment systems. And that becomes a very strategically important point, I think.

Sergei Guriev [00:18:32.040]

When I asked Hélène what the most important long-term trend in global monetary systems is that business leaders should watch and prepare for, her answer was a single word: fragmentation. Living in fragmented and uncertain times is a theme we have explored over this entire season of Think Ahead. However, we've also seen the capacity for innovation, adaptation and renewal. While the future maybe complex, it is also full of possibility for those willing to engage with this. Navigating what comes next will require leaders who are curious, rigorous, and genuinely willing to think ahead. That is all for our Season 3 wrap-up. I want to say genuine thank you to every guest who brought their thinking to this podcast with such openness and depth, and to you for listening and for being part of this conversation. To stay connected with the latest insights from our faculty and global business leaders, visit london.edu/think. And do not forget to follow and subscribe so you never miss an episode. And until next time, keep thinking ahead.