

The background of the cover is a photograph of a modern building with large windows and columns. Overlaid on this are several geometric shapes in shades of orange and white. A large orange triangle points from the top right towards the center. Another orange shape is in the bottom right corner. A white shape with a grid of small dots is in the bottom left corner. The text is overlaid on these shapes and the background image.

2026

THE PEOPLE FACTOR MAGAZINE

October | 2026



COO Reflections: 2026 People Factor Conference

By: Mr Lyle Markham

The 2026 Annual People Conference was hosted in the Durban International Convention Center on September 3rd and 4th, 2026, with the theme "People Strategy for Complex AI-Led Realities: From Hype to Co-Creating Impact." Our goal was to shift the narrative surrounding AI discussions, since many have been high on promise but low on execution.

Mr. Xolani Mawande, CEO of SABPP, opened the conference on the first morning, followed by Grant Kemp of PwC Africa, who spoke on people working with AI and developing a change-ready workforce. It reframed something for me. I had been treating AI as a technology project that operations would eventually inherit. Listening to Kemp, I realised it is the other way around. It is a people and capability challenge, and the people are the operating model. If roles are shifting every few months, reskilling can't sit in an annual training budget. It belongs in how I plan capacity.

Ambassador Tal Edgars then focused our attention on Africa's HR revolution toward 2030, while Dr Mmabatho Mfikwe discussed HR's role in industry and the public sector, and Prof Bongani Dlamini concluded the day with a discussion on academia-industry partnerships. That last conversation hit home. Many of us complain that graduates aren't ready for employment, yet few of us are in the classroom helping shape them. That is on us.

The panel discussion on HR as a strategic enabler, moderated by Lerato Mahlasela, stayed with me the most. The lesson to HR leaders was to cease asking for a seat at the table and instead ask what they do with it. I found myself nodding and then squirming slightly, because the challenge is reciprocal. If I want my people function to be a true collaborator, I must provide it with commercial context and honest questions, rather than just chores.

The gala dinner that evening was a good change of pace. Mark Williams, the former Bafana Bafana icon, spoke about discipline, dreaming, and choosing your future, and it was a pleasure to watch the awards. Seeing academics and student chapters acknowledged alongside senior practitioners reminded me that the profession's future is currently being forged at universities.

On Day 2, ideas met evidence. Dr. Mamello Masia of McDonald's SA spoke about HR analytics and AI, and one line stuck with me: understand the methodology before trusting the prediction. Operations rely on dashboards and predictions. Shemane Masia then presented an actual scenario for applying AI to address real-world HR issues, which served as a good reminder that this is intended to be practical.

Then followed Dr Candice Hartley, Eskom's Group Chief People Officer, to discuss the transition from recovery to reinvention. Her presentation of the people approach that drove Eskom's turnaround was the most compelling evidence of the conference. Operational recovery at that scale requires deliberate focus on leadership, culture, and capability. Acting Judge Galaletsang Connie Phakedi followed with a grim legal perspective: deploy AI without governance, and you inherit both liability and efficiency. Mocketenyane Moleko of uMngeni-uThukela Water presented a realistic case study on building tomorrow's leaders, while Musengeli Ravele and Thabiso Malapela, two young SABPP employees, provided insight into AI that many of us in the room lacked.

If there was one key message for me, it was that the future does not just happen to us. It is our responsibility to develop it, and it should be more trustworthy, inclusive, lawful, and humane, rather than simply more intelligent.



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Manage Your Employees' Work Attendance Proactively

By: Ivan Israelstam, Chief Executive of Labour Law Management Consulting



Absenteeism is the costliest of employee misbehaviours. This is because, if employees are absent, their work is not likely to get done. Also, in certain job types, the absence of an employee can severely hamper the continuity of the workplace function. For example, where the absentee is responsible for moving manufacturing material from a store to a workshop, the work of the employees in the workshop can fall behind. Additionally, employers have to pay employees who are absent for good reason, and making such payments is not cost effective.

It is no wonder then that employers take a dim view of employees who are absent for extended periods of time; especially where the employee succeeds in hiding his absenteeism and in claiming pay as if he has been working. False claims of being present at work and for the commensurate remuneration constitute fraud and can merit punishment if proven to be false.

However, employers that fail to implement foolproof measures for monitoring employee attendance are likely to come off second best. In the case of *Emfuleni Local Municipality vs Munwai* (Lex Info 25 August 2026. High Court case number 2025-158149) the employer allegedly falsified his attendance at work over a three-year period. When he left the company the employer tried to recover from his pension fund payout the remuneration (Over R2.5 million) that he had allegedly falsely claimed for the three-year period

However, the employer was neither able to prove that he had not been at work nor that he had falsified his attendance register. The Court noted that the employer had paid the employee for three years without question which reinforced the employee's claim that he had attended work. The Court therefore refused to make an order requiring the pension fund to deduct the R2.5 million from the termination payout and to pay it over to the employer.

It is possible that the employee had been absent from work for three years or, at least for several periods during that three-year period. However, it appears that, due to insufficient monitoring of employee attendance, there was insufficient proof of the employee's absence.

It is paradoxical that employers need full employee attendance but often fail to implement measures to ensure it. This reinforces the need for employers to train their managers on the requirement to monitor employee attendance at work.

The innovative video series **WALKING THE LABOUR LAW TIGHTROPE** assists employers to provide their managers with very inexpensive training that allows the managers to achieve crucial labour relations knowhow at times suitable to their very busy schedules. Its 48 chapters, averaging 10 minutes in length each, can easily be watched at junctures when the manager has time. This greatly informative yet very engaging and practical video series provides crucial and user-friendly learning through the use of a stimulating, animated case study that runs throughout the 48-chapter series. Each chapter contains clear and important advice needed by workplace management on the basics of labour law over a very wide range of topics.

A further advantage is that the manager can, for a full year, easily go back to any of the 48 videos for purposes of refresher training or in order to access information on how to deal with a current workplace issue. This solves the problem of managers forgetting what they have learned. This video series helps management to walk the shaky labour law tightrope and to run the workplace productively without falling into the labour law abyss.

To access our groundbreaking video series: **WALKING THE NEW LABOUR LAW TIGHTROPE** please go to www.labourlawvideos.co.za or contact Ivan on ivan@labourlawadvice.co.za



Beyond the AI Hype: Reflections from the SABPP People Factor Conference 2026

By Prof Ajay Jivan

When we deliberated on and designed the SABPP Annual People Factor Conference 2026, we aimed to invite the conference delegates to move beyond the hype surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) and confront a more important question: how can we co-create meaningful futures for our organisations, communities, and profession? The conversations made one point unmistakable. The AI-led realities are not simply arriving; they are being shaped through the choices we make now about people, work, leadership, and professional practice.

Across the various discussions (on human-machine collaboration, the strategic role of HR, intentional leadership, public service, Africa's HR revolution, industry-academic partnerships, and the development of future professionals), a shared message emerged: the future will not simply happen to us. It is ours to grasp, design and co-create (if we choose to). For me, this became the central lens through which to understand the day. Not as a series of the 'same old' predictions and PowerPoint presentations about technology, but as a call for deliberate human agency. And recognising that it is not easy and there are no clear-cut answers.

My first key takeaway is that technological advancement without human stewardship is insufficient. As we allow AI to transform how work is organised, performed, and valued, the role of the HR profession becomes more significant. Organisations need trusted professionals who can translate innovation into responsible practice by balancing efficiency with inclusion, business performance with human dignity, and technological possibility with ethical judgment and sound governance.

This creates a special responsibility for people practitioners. The evolving world of work demands more than technical competence. It requires sound judgment, ethical leadership, evidence-based decision-making, and accountability to the organisations and people we serve. As work becomes more digital, data-driven, and interconnected, we need to remind ourselves that professional standards provide the framework and rigour needed. It is worthwhile to repeat that professionalisation is not simply a compliance exercise or merely a designation to be achieved. It is a commitment to ethical and sound practice and the foundation on which our profession earns trust, influences strategy, and shapes sustainable organisational outcomes.

A further takeaway is that readiness for AI-led realities must be built deliberately. Continuous learning cannot be treated as an occasional development activity. It must be continuous and become part of our professional practice. We must strengthen our own capabilities while creating meaningful pathways for the next generation of HR professionals, who will navigate realities we can only begin to imagine today.

Technology (that we shape) will shape the future of work, but it is people that will shape the future of organisations. In turn, the future of people practice will depend on professionals committed to competence, ethics, lifelong learning, and responsible leadership. This is why the conversation about AI cannot belong only to technologists. It must also be led by those entrusted with the human consequences of organisational decisions.

The challenge now is to turn insight into action. We need to build organisations that are not only task and workflow intelligent, but also human-centred; not only innovative, but also ethical; and not only successful, but also sustainable. These are the tensions, quandaries and dilemmas we need to grapple with. Moving from AI hype to co-created futures will require choices grounded in professional standards, responsible leadership, sound management of organisations, and an unwavering commitment to human dignity.

As I noted in my closing remarks at the end of Day 1 of the conference, there is no 'closing of the day' as if we are done and the task is complete. The conference was meant to open spaces for ongoing dialogue and deliberation – that was the intentional design. And along with the opening of spaces was the call to take up the mantle. I left the conference inspired by what is possible, challenged by the responsibility before us, and convinced that the most important question is not what AI will do to the world of work, but what we will choose to do with it and what we will choose to allow it.



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Look Before You Leap

By: Ivan Israelstam, Chief Executive of Labour Law Management Consulting



I have frequently warned employers of the folly of dismissing employees without first implementing a proper investigation. Investigation is an exercise designed to test allegations or suspicions.

Item 4 of the Code of Good Practice: Dismissal provides that “Normally, the employer should conduct an investigation to determine whether there are grounds for dismissal.” However, the need to investigate is not merely based on a statutory provision or a principle of fairness required by labour law to protect the employee.

The far more important purpose of proper investigation is to assist the employer in three ways. That is, firstly, where the employer conducts a thorough and expert investigation it will be able to find out what really happened and to establish whether there are grounds for disciplinary action. If the facts uncovered by the investigation show that the employee did nothing wrong the employer is saved the considerable time, money and inconvenience necessitated by preparing for and implementing unnecessary proceedings. Secondly, where the investigation shows no fault on the part of the employee and the employer then drops the matter, the employer is saved the further considerable time, money, inconvenience and embarrassment resulting from losing a CCMA or court case brought by the innocent employee. Thirdly, if the investigation does produce proof of guilt, the employer can use that evidence to prepare and present an effective case against the employee at a disciplinary hearing.

In short, failure to institute a proper investigation is likely to hurt the employer far more than it hurts the employee.

A case in point is that of Raymond Mokakatla Leso vs Imperial Logistics SA (PTY) LTD (Lex Info 31 July 2026. Labour Appeal Court case no. A2025-076352). In this case the employee was fired for having failed to take corrective action after a driver had reported to him the faulty brakes and battery of a company vehicle; and bringing the employer's name into disrepute by failing on several occasions to make proper alternative arrangements when he was absent from work.

The CCMA commissioner found against the employer on both these charges due to lack of evidence proving that Luso knew of the allegedly faulty vehicle functions, that the vehicle was in fact faulty and that the employee's actions brought the employer's name into disrepute. The arbitrator therefore reinstated the employee with full backpay. The employee, who had not wished to be reinstated, took the matter further. The Labour Court replaced the reinstatement award with a 12-month compensation order, and the Labour Appeal Court upheld that decision.

Costly decisions like this one too often occur because employers either have private agendas for getting rid of undesirable employees or because those in charge of disciplinary matters don't understand the practical importance of proper investigation of alleged or suspected misconduct.

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FACT SHEET OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2026

Written By : *Prof Ajay Jivan Head of Research and Assurance*

This Fact Sheet shares insights on how burnout in the evolving world of work. How the experience of stress is changing, including the effects of blurred boundaries and technology. It then considers how these developments inform the understanding of burnout and its core dimensions. Thereafter, it outlines reactive and proactive measures that HR practitioners can integrate into a more comprehensive organisational wellbeing approach.

[Read more..](#)



My Experience at the SABPP People Factor Conference 2026

By Dr Kgomotso Mopalami

People Strategy for Complex AI-Led Realities: From Hype to Co-creating Impact

Attending the SABPP Annual People Factor Conference 2026 in Durban was an exciting and valuable experience. The conference was held under the theme “People Strategy for Complex AI-Led Realities: From Hype to Co-creating Impact”, bringing together HR leaders, specialists and practitioners to discuss how technology, leadership and people strategy are reshaping the world of work. The programme itself reflected this focus through topics such as human-AI realities, strategic HR, intentional leadership, workforce redesign and evidence-based decision-making.

One of my strongest observations was just how much interest there is around Artificial Intelligence. AI seems to be an interesting and increasingly important subject for many organisations, and this was reflected in the high level of attendance at the conference. HR professionals attended from different provinces, different organisational levels and even from outside South Africa, such as eSwatini.

What stood out was that the conversation was not limited to senior executives. There was interest from senior leaders as well as practitioners at other organisational levels. This demonstrated that AI is no longer viewed as something that belongs only to IT departments or executive boardrooms. It is becoming an important consideration for everyone involved in people management.

For me, one of the highlights of the conference was the quality and diversity of the speakers. The programme brought together professionals from corporate organisations, the public sector, academia, legal practice and other fields, creating a broad range of perspectives.

The speakers were well informed and clearly understood the subjects they were presenting. More importantly, the discussions were practical. The conference moved beyond simply talking about AI as a future concept and explored what it means for organisations, employees, leadership and HR today.

The diversity of the speakers also gave me a broader view of how the HR profession is growing. Technology can assist HR professionals with information, analytics and decision making, but the conference reinforced the importance of combining technology with strategic thinking, leadership, ethics and sound human judgement. Topics dealing with the future of the public service, strategic HR, Africa's HR transformation, leadership development, HR analytics and AI demonstrated just how broad the responsibility of the modern HR professional has become.

Another positive aspect was the practicality of the presentations and panel discussions. They were not based only on theory. Speakers shared experiences, organisational realities, challenges and possible approaches that practitioners could relate to.

The response from attendees was equally encouraging. From the discussions and feedback during the conference, it was clear that participants valued the subjects being addressed and wanted more opportunities for engagements of this nature. HR professionals need platforms where they can exchange ideas, challenge traditional thinking and learn from the experiences of colleagues operating in different sectors and environments.

An additional reflection from the conference relates to work-life fit, or work-life balance, which reflects quality of life. The conference took professionals away from their normal workplaces and routines and brought them together in Durban. I observed that many attendees enjoyed being outside Johannesburg and some extended their stay after the conference to enjoy Durban and its humid coastal weather.

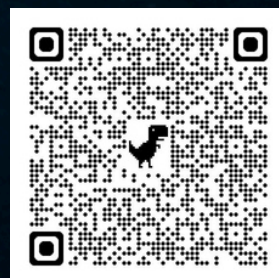
This may appear unrelated to HR strategy, but I believe it illustrates an important aspect of work-life fit. Professional life should not only be about productivity, meetings, targets and deadlines. People also need opportunities to recharge, experience different environments, connect socially and enjoy life outside their normal work responsibilities.

Work-life fit recognises that there is no single perfect balance between work and personal life. Instead, organisations and employees should seek arrangements that allow people to perform professionally while still maintaining their wellbeing, relationships, personal interests and quality of life.

For me, the SABPP People Factor Conference demonstrated that the future of HR is not simply about introducing more technology. It is about finding ways for people, technology and organisational strategy to work together. AI may improve how we analyse information and make decisions, but the human factor remains central.

The conference was therefore more than an opportunity to learn about AI. It was an opportunity to reflect on the changing role of HR, connect with professionals from different backgrounds and consider how we can build organisations that are technologically capable while remaining ethical, people-centred and human.

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You'll Fall of the Tightrope If You Ignore Your Own Regulations

By: Ivam Israelstam, Chief Executive of Labour Law Management Consulting



I have often warned employers that the courts are likely to hold them to their own regulations. That is, the courts normally expect employers to follow their own rules and procedures.

In effect, this means that, even where a particular internal rule is not contained in the body of labour law, common law normally requires the employer to comply with it as if it was a law. This principle applies to the employer's internal regulations and policies as regards, amongst others:

- Employee appointments and promotions
- Performance management
- Discipline and
- retrenchments

However, where the employer can clearly show that the prescript in question is merely a guideline and not a firm rule or regulation, the courts are likely to accept deviations from the guideline.

In practice, this means that all employers need to revisit their employee policies, procedures, rules, regulations and practices. They need to revise these prescripts to ensure, where the employer needs to have flexibility for operational purposes, that the prescripts are very clearly worded to indicate that the prescript is merely a guideline, and to outline the circumstances under which management may deviate therefrom.

Employers who fail to separate guidelines from fixed policies or rules are in danger of being held to them in circumstances where it is operationally inconvenient or even unviable.

In the matter between Mahlatse Maebana vs City Of Cape Town (Lex Info 27 August 2026. Labour Court case number C376/2024) Maebana applied for a senior post and, although he obtained the highest competency score, he was turned down. None of the applicants who had applied at that juncture were appointed. The employer then appointed a Mr Jonkers whose application, as part of an earlier head-hunting exercise, had been unsuccessful. Maebana referred to the bargaining council a case of unfair promotional practice, but the arbitrator dismissed his case because he had failed to prove unfairness on the part of the City of Cape Town.

On review the Labour Court found that:

- The head-hunting process provided for by the city's regulations only allowed head-hunting for critical, scarce skill posts
- The post in question was not one requiring critical, scarce skills
- Maebana's application for the post had been turned down as he was less suited to the post than Jonker, the successful appointee. However, Jonker had been appointed after undergoing an illegal head-hunting process
- The bargaining council arbitrator had wrongly found that the city had not committed an unfair labour practice
- As Maebana had, in the meantime, left the city's employ, the Court ordered the city to pay him a solatium of R319,604.75.

This outcome reminds employers that complying with policies and the law while still achieving operational flexibility is a challenging task. Managers therefore need training in how to achieve a balance between compliance with complex laws and operational effectiveness.

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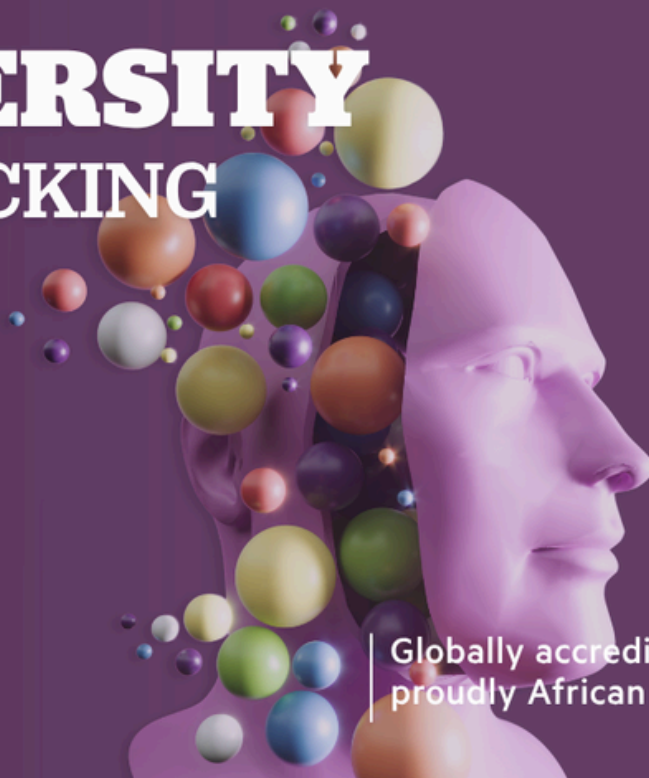
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19th October 2026



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