

From busywork to better work: Amplify manager results with agentic AI

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the organizational tension between CEO-driven mandates to reduce middle management headcount through AI productivity gains and the operational reality that managers are already overwhelmed by expanding responsibilities. The author, drawing on Gartner research, argues that CHROs must leverage agentic AI not primarily to eliminate manager roles but to augment them — first by automating low-value administrative tasks ('busywork') and second by investing in emerging AI capabilities that enhance people management effectiveness ('better work'). Key evidence includes a July 2025 Gartner survey of 900 HR leaders finding 80% agree managers are overwhelmed, a May 2025 Gartner survey of 3,000 employees finding 26% of managers would prefer not to hold the role, and a Gartner prediction that 75% of organizations cutting middle management due to AI will rehire at least half those roles by 2028. The article concludes that organizations premature in reducing manager headcount risk significant performance losses, and that CHROs who pilot agentic AI tools now will be better positioned for a hybrid human-machine management model.

Key Insights

1. CEOs anticipate AI will widen manager spans of control by nearly 20%, but Gartner predicts 75% of organizations that cut middle management headcount due to AI will rehire at least half those roles by 2028.
2. 80% of HR leaders surveyed agree that managers are already overwhelmed by expanding responsibilities, making premature delayering a performance risk rather than an efficiency gain.
3. 26% of managers, if given the choice, would prefer not to be managers — citing low-value administrative burden, increasing responsibilities, and inadequate support as primary drivers.

Practical Takeaways

- Organizations can use agentic AI to automate routine manager tasks — such as time off approval, onboarding, calendar management, and shift management — to free capacity for higher-value people leadership.
- CHROs who pilot emerging agentic capabilities now, including AI coaching agents and dynamic performance management tools, are positioning their organizations for a hybrid human-machine management model before it becomes operationally necessary.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article draws on two distinct Gartner surveys with reasonably large sample sizes (900 HR leaders; 3,000 employees) and a forward-looking prediction claim, lending quantitative grounding to its argument. The distinction between 'busywork automation' and 'better work augmentation' provides a useful conceptual framing. **Limitations:** The article is authored from within or closely aligned with Gartner's advisory ecosystem, which creates a potential bias toward framing AI adoption as inevitable and desirable. The 2028 rehiring prediction is presented without methodology or confidence intervals. The risk that reduced routine manager-employee interactions could erode trust and engagement is acknowledged only briefly and without supporting evidence. The article provides no counterarguments to agentic AI adoption, does not address implementation failures, cost barriers, or workforce resistance, and frames all three recommended actions prescriptively. The 'better work' technologies described — AI coaching, conversation simulators, dynamic performance management — are presented as emerging capabilities without empirical validation of their effectiveness.

Organizational Practice

The article describes organizations using agentic AI to automate manager administrative workflows including time off approval, onboarding, calendar management, and shift management. It also describes emerging organizational practices involving AI coaching agents, conversation simulators, and performance management agents that surface engagement and performance data to assist managers proactively.

Strategic Implications

The article points to a divergence between executive expectations of AI-driven organizational flattening and operational evidence that manager capacity is already under strain. This suggests that PMS trends may increasingly bifurcate between efficiency-oriented automation of managerial administration and investment in AI tools designed to enhance the quality of people management interactions. The framing of the future manager role as a human-machine workflow orchestrator rather than a technical expert signals a potential shift in how managerial competency frameworks and performance criteria are defined within PMS design.

Validation Status: passed
