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# Smarter work, human first: Inside the AI journey of a traditional industry

In an exclusive interview with ETHRWorld, Manisha Kelkar, CHRO of Nuvoco Vistas Corp Ltd, unpacks how artificial intelligence and digital adoption are reshaping even the most traditional sectors — from factory floors to HR functions — while ensuring that people remain at the heart of transformation.

Yasmin Taj · ETHRWorld
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For decades, the cement industry has been perceived as a bastion of tradition, slow to embrace the disruptive potential of digital technologies. Heavy machinery, manual processes, and conventional systems dominated the narrative. But today, a quiet revolution is underway. Technologies once thought futuristic — automation, IoT-enabled smart factories, and artificial intelligence — are steadily reshaping how organisations in the sector operate, innovate, and manage talent.

At the centre of this shift are leaders like **Manisha Kelkar, CHRO of Nuvoco Vistas Corp Ltd**, who view digital adoption not as a threat to legacy practices but as a partner in progress. In an exclusive conversation with ETHRWorld, Kelkar shares how AI is being used to transform operations, hiring, learning, and performance management, while also touching on inclusion, leadership, and the evolving role of HR.

**AI at the core of transformation**

The cement industry may once have been viewed as a late adopter of digital disruption, but that perception is rapidly changing. Kelkar points out that automation and IoT are already integral to meeting the demands of rapid urbanisation and infrastructure growth.

On the manufacturing side, AI is being deployed to **predict heat loss in kilns, improve quality control, and ensure consistency across batches.**

Logistics too has been redefined through Robotic Process Automation (RPA), which speeds up tasks such as freight bill settlements, drastically reducing manual work and turnaround times. "Automation is no longer a futuristic concept," Kelkar explains. "It is already embedded in how we operate. The real question is how we integrate it thoughtfully, so efficiency does not come at the cost of people or culture."






**Rethinking talent acquisition with AI**

Nowhere is the impact of AI more visible than in recruitment. Kelkar highlighted how tools like **SpeechX** are transforming high-volume and entry-level hiring. The platform automates initial screening, conducts voice-based assessments to evaluate communication skills, and processes thousands of applications with speed and consistency. The benefits are tangible: **shorter hiring cycles, better-quality hires, and a smoother candidate experience.** By freeing HR teams from repetitive screening, the function can focus on engaging with candidates more meaningfully during later stages.

But for Kelkar, the true promise of AI in recruitment lies in its ability to **reduce bias and bring transparency**. Structured evaluations and data-backed decision-making can ensure that candidates are assessed fairly, regardless of background.

**Learning without boundaries**

Beyond hiring, digital transformation is redefining how employees learn, upskill, and prepare for the future. Kelkar speaks passionately about the need to create **a culture of continuous, self-driven learning.** Through integrated learning platforms, employees today can access curated pathways specific to their roles, while also exploring cross-functional areas. "Whether you're in HR and want to understand manufacturing, or in operations and curious about AI, the opportunity is there," she says.

The blend of **digital classrooms, gamification, simulations, and action learning projects** ensures that learning is not just accessible but engaging. Importantly, it also levels the playing field. Employees in remote plant locations can now access the same content and leadership development programmes as their counterparts in corporate offices — a critical step in democratising opportunity.

**The human side of digital adoption**

Yet, as Kelkar emphasises, digital adoption is not without challenges. A

telling example came from feedback during onboarding. While automation helped speed up processes, new hires expressed a desire for a more personal, human connection. "We realised that while candidates value efficiency, what stays with them is the warmth of being welcomed," Kelkar notes. This led to a **hybrid approach:** leveraging AI for scale and consistency, but supplementing it with one-on-one conversations, personal check-ins, and cultural immersion.

It is this balance — **technology for efficiency, humans for empathy** — that, according to Kelkar, defines a truly successful HR strategy in the digital age.

**AI as an amplifier, not a threat**

The question of AI replacing jobs is one that looms over every conversation on digital transformation. Kelkar addresses it head-on: "Our philosophy is simple — AI is here to **amplify human potential, not displace it.** By taking away routine work, it gives HR the bandwidth to focus on what really matters — workforce planning, leadership development, and building capabilities for the future."

This philosophy is reflected in structured initiatives around **internal mobility, targeted skill enhancement, and leadership programmes**, ensuring employees see technology not as a threat but as a pathway to growth.

**Aligning people strategy to business goals**

For Kelkar, the alignment between people strategy and business priorities is non-negotiable. She explains how digital learning hours are increasingly focused on AI and automation, directly linking workforce readiness to organisational transformation.

Leadership development, too, has been reframed through **mentorship opportunities, cross-functional exposure, and structured career pathways.** The aim is to empower employees with both the technical and behavioural skills needed for the future. This approach, she emphasises, ensures that the people agenda is not an isolated HR initiative but a **strategic enabler of business outcomes.**

**Technology as a catalyst for inclusion**

As one of the few women CHROs in India's cement sector, Kelkar has a unique perspective on the intersection of technology and inclusion. She believes that digital tools can **break down barriers of geography, gender, and background** by ensuring equal access to learning and career opportunities.

Platforms that offer AI-enabled assessments and leadership pathways make talent visible based on merit, not proximity to headquarters. Yet, she is quick to point out that technology alone is not enough:

"Technology can open the door, but inclusion is about giving people the confidence to walk through it. Leaders must combine digital tools with intent and empathy to create truly diverse and equitable workplaces."

**Advice to HR leaders: Start with clarity, not tools**

When asked what advice she would give to CHROs in traditional industries beginning their AI journey, Kelkar's answer is pragmatic: "Start with clarity, not tools. First, define the problem you are trying to solve. Bring stakeholders on board early, and invest in training so adoption feels natural, not forced. Prioritise trust, data security, and privacy from the start — because trust is non-negotiable."

She also stresses the importance of **starting small, piloting, gathering feedback, and refining** before scaling any digital tool. "Adoption takes time. Systems must be efficient and user-friendly, but most importantly, aligned with organisational goals," she adds.

**Rapid-fire round**

- **What is that one legacy mindset HR leaders must unlearn in the age of AI?**

"That we can simply copy from the best. Every organisation's AI journey will be unique, and trying to replicate another model won't work."

- **What is your advice to CHROs just starting with AI?**

"Clarity first, technology second. Start small, pilot, refine, and scale gradually. Always link adoption to employee experience and measurable business impact."

**The bigger picture**

Kelkar's perspective illustrates a powerful truth: digital adoption in traditional industries is not about choosing between people and technology. It is about weaving them together. AI can screen faster, predict better, and process quicker. But it is human intent — empathy, inclusion, and leadership — that gives transformation its true meaning.

As she concludes, *"Technology and people are not in competition. They are partners in progress."*


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