



A Contextual Perspective On Trust Over Time

Further reading from the Industry Insights Report 2026
From The Association for Business Psychology¹

Context

The ABP 2026 Industry Insights report addresses the theme: **Trust, Work, and Organisational Systems: A Shifting Landscape.**

This article provides an interpretive and contextual perspective on broader social, organisational, and technological developments that may help explain why trust-related themes are increasingly visible within organisational life and Business Psychology practice.

The discussion below is not intended as a formal historical or causal analysis. Rather, it draws together observations from workforce research, organisational literature, practitioner discourse, and wider societal developments to provide contextual framing for the patterns discussed elsewhere in the report.

Given the complexity and multi-determined nature of trust, the relationships described should be understood as interpretive rather than definitive, and as potential contributing influences rather than singular explanations.



¹ The article has been prepared for The Association for Business Psychology by the ABP Industry Insights Team. For more information about the team's work, visit: <https://community.theabp.org.uk/page/industry-insights>



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Observed Patterns

Early signals of concern

In 2016 a spike was reported; usage of the term post-truth increased by approximately 2,000% over the previous year.

A paper from Science Direct, "Fake news and post-truth pronouncements in general and in early human development"² reflected a broader cultural shift toward thinking about "my truth" as opposed to facts supported by evidence. This was observed alongside distrust of authority, with increasing institutional scepticism.

From a sociological perspective, this weakened institutional legitimacy. This trend was observed significantly in political contexts, it was not born primarily in commercial organisations, but it's relevance to Business Psychology and impact in working environments was inevitable.

Some commentators and organisational researchers observed increasing scepticism toward institutional messaging during this period, including within political, media, and organisational contexts. In workplace settings, this appeared in some studies and practitioner commentary as greater scrutiny of leadership communication, organisational change narratives, and stated organisational values.

Acceleration of decline

The disruption created by the COVID-19 pandemic could be said to have accelerated the issue. From around 2020 to 2022, increased institutional strain could be observed with a sharp rise in uncertainty, alongside very public conflict between many presented in the

² Source: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0378378217304309>



news and online as 'specialists' and 'authority' figures. At the same time, rapid digitalisation was underway which contributed too.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not necessarily create organisational trust fragility, but many workforce studies and practitioner observations suggest it intensified existing pressures within organisational systems and employment relationships.

It could be said, however, in Business Psychology terms the pandemic simultaneously disrupted psychological contracts and authority structures, with technology playing a role too.

Psychological contracts were impacted by rapid redundancies, pay freezes, rhetoric suggesting "we're all in this together" while the evidence revealed that the impact of the strain caused was not evenly distributed. When return-to-office mandates started to appear, despite the level of autonomy offered when necessitated by social distancing, there was a lack of clarity at organisational motives. In some organisational contexts, these developments appeared to contribute to increased uncertainty regarding organisational intent, fairness, and accountability.

Authority structures were weakened at this time while managers needed to do more remote supervision without visibility, the lack of clear and robust performance metrics increased the risk of individuals' contributions being misunderstood or misjudged. The issues with power distance became clear and leaders' credibility dipped. During this period, some organisations increased the use of monitoring technologies and digital productivity analytics in response to remote and hybrid working arrangements. Practitioner commentary and workforce research suggest that, in certain contexts, these practices contributed to employee concerns regarding autonomy, privacy, trust, and fairness.

With new tools being used alongside ascending access to AI, who was making decisions, judgements or taking ownership of outcomes became blurred. We're a little clearer on the issues associated with what some now call algorithmic authority, but a few years ago this was a new and vulnerable frontier which had the potential to damage trust.

Persisting trust fractures

The scale of the change here is noteworthy. We did not simply see trust reduced in any one domain. The erosion of trust has been multi-level, from interpersonal relationships to team relationships, then played out in organisational and across society.

In the post-pandemic years, we can more readily recognise the trust fractures across organisational systems. Now it would be fair to say trust is fragmented. Looked at across various organisational layers, the trend is clear.

Workforce surveys, engagement research, and practitioner observations increasingly report employee scepticism toward leadership authenticity, particularly where organisational messaging is perceived as inconsistent with operational realities or lived experience.



At the same time, some organisational leaders report concerns regarding disengagement, reduced discretionary effort, and productivity visibility within hybrid and distributed work environments.

This also goes beyond employer-employee relationships. Consumers are more suspicious of brands claims, demanding more accountability and transparency. And clients are increasingly scrutinising consultants, sceptical of their frameworks and evidence base, less tolerant of vague thought leadership. (This latter state may be just as well!)

Collectively this leaves individuals feel less psychologically safe, with trust fragile and in many cases declining organisational commitment.

Possible Interpretations

Where we are now

How is this showing up in the day-to-day of Business Psychology practice?

- Debates surrounding hybrid and flexible working arrangements have, in some organisations, highlighted tensions relating to autonomy, accountability, visibility, and managerial trust.
- At the same time, increasing organisational reliance on AI-supported systems has raised questions regarding explainability, oversight, authority calibration, and the extent to which organisations appropriately scrutinise automated decision-support systems.
- Workplaces are seeing challenges around diversity, equity and inclusion where even positive action may be doubted for poor intent and an absence of perceived fairness in results.
- Many environments report negative trends including stress and burnout where efforts feel unrewarded or unreciprocated as trust is absent.

This is far from a comprehensive list, but it is sufficient to demonstrate why it is unsurprising to see reports on the decline in worker psychological safety and organisational commitment.

Where are we headed?

The frame has shifted. The focus has moved from automation to augmentation; from jobs to skills; and from efficiency to sustainability, ethics, and wellbeing.

Implications for Practice

1. Move decisively from wellbeing rhetoric to operational capability

Wellbeing has shifted from “nice to have” to organisational risk management, but practice still hasn’t achieved its potential. What we see instead is that psychological safety, emotional load, and role ambiguity rose sharply post-COVID and have not



returned to baseline. In response many organisational structure interventions but these have tended to remain superficial, unmeasured, or outsourced to wellness vendors with limited evidence.

Implication for the Business Psychology industry

The report suggests that Business Psychologists may increasingly benefit from positioning wellbeing as a systems and organisational design issue rather than solely an individual resilience concern. They can help organisations translate constructs (burnout, safety, recovery) into operational metrics which can be effectively integrated into job design, performance systems, and measured in the interest of ensuring leadership accountability.

If this opportunity is missed, Business Psychologists leave space open to non-psychological vendors to offer potentially uninformed 'solutions'.

2. Re-establish professional authority through standards, not titles

The potential market for Business Psychologists has become crowded with coaches, self-declared psychologists, so-called psychologically informed tools and framework, "people analytics" tools and AI-enabled HR platforms. As a result, we see increasingly in recent years that organisational buyers struggle to distinguish evidence-based practice from persuasive language (if they are even aware of the need to do so). Relatedly, those with credentials find that they carry declining weight if not presented alongside evidence of clear behavioural or outcome standards.

Implication for the Business Psychology industry

The Association for Business Psychology and all similar bodies internationally – with intentional support from their members – will need to support the clear articulation of what competent, effective Business Psychology practice looks like in action. In practice, Business Psychologists collectively will need to transparently differentiate between their roles as advisors, diagnosticians, and evaluators. They will need to demonstrate the value of their professional judgement, over automated outputs.

In this context, industry bodies' credential frameworks become a strategic asset and those holding verified credentials could promote them proudly.

The ABP recognise that professional identity will fragment unless actively stewarded. Multiple adjacent professions are absorbing psychological language without psychological rigour. At this time, without shared and explicit standards, "Business Psychology" risks dilution rather than growth.

3. Expand from individual assessment to capability architecture

As mentioned above, the opportunity is to move away from assessment of people toward design of decision systems that combine humans and AI. So we see that, whilst assessment remains important, the focus is shifting.



What has changed is that organisations are moving from static roles to dynamic skill ecosystems. Relatedly, capability frameworks, learning pathways, and workforce planning now increasingly exist on a wider (system) scale.

Implication for the Business Psychology industry

Business Psychology's comparative advantage lies in applying evidence-based insights to design defensible, coherent capability frameworks which enable organisations to align skills, behaviour, and performance outcomes across the employee lifecycle. In the process, Business Psychologists must advocate for the importance of this activity being undertaken in a rigorous and validated way to avoid poor design (e.g. construct contamination and criterion overlap) from undermining the effectiveness of these tools.

The opportunity is for Business Psychologists to position themselves as architects of capability systems, not just assessors.

4. Embrace uncertainty and foresight as core professional skills

A lesson we can take from the nature of change observed during the pandemic years is that linear forecasting fails under shock conditions. There is now greater demand to build a level of prediction into scenario planning, ensuring optimisation with adaptability and – of relevance to Business Psychologists particularly – creating psychological readiness alongside technical readiness for change.

Implication for the Business Psychology industry

In this context, we propose Business Psychologists apply their expertise and evidence-based insights to develop and apply foresight methodologies grounded in psychology. These can support their clients in establishing decision resilience, not just plans. This can be achieved by the application of psychological insights into ambiguity tolerance, sense-making, and collective judgement, to name a few relevant considerations. This is an under-claimed but defensible professional niche for the profession.

Relatedly, organisations increasingly value those who have the ability to interpret conflicting evidence, explain the applications and limits of models, and translate research into action in a relevant and meaningful way. The opportunity for Business Psychologists to demonstrate the discipline's legacy of going beyond academic production, to applied evidence. This is something Business Psychologists can individually and collectively advocate for and promote in their practice.

This is of particular importance as we see, increasingly, hybrid work, labour markets, and wellbeing norms diverge significantly by region. In context, sensitivity is essential and Business Psychologists must avoid one-size-fits-all models and explicitly address contextual validity.



5. Shift from “human judgement vs technology” to “human–AI partnership design”

Assessment has been a core proposition for many Business Psychologists, but the opportunity now is to move away from assessment of people toward design of decision systems that combine humans and AI.

The evidence tells us that pre-2020 predictions underestimated augmentation and over-focused on replacement. In recent years evidence shows AI is embedded in hiring, performance management, learning, and workforce planning. The issue is that this is often done without psychological design oversight.

Implication for the Business Psychology industry

The profession’s credibility will depend on measurable governance frameworks, not ethical statements alone. This can be brought to life with Business Psychologists advocating for validation of human-AI judgement systems and ensuring safeguards in AI-in-the-loop decision making to address bias, trust, explainability, and authority calibration.

Relatedly, we see increasingly that organisations require support to enable effective, meaningful dialogue between data scientists, HR leaders, management boards and regulators. This requires not expertise but at least fluency in business, technology, and psychology. Business Psychologists who are able to be the translator, facilitator and arbitrator enabling effective outcomes for these disparate teams, can set their clients up for success.

The themes explored within this article should be interpreted as contextual and directional rather than universally applicable across all organisational settings.

Organisational trust remains highly influenced by sector, geography, leadership context, workforce composition, economic conditions, and organisational maturity. The purpose of this discussion is therefore not to propose a single explanatory narrative, but to support broader reflection on the evolving conditions shaping organisational experience and Business Psychology practice.



Sources Which Informed this article

Perspectives Suggesting The Starting Point: What “The Future Of Work” Officially Meant A Decade Ago

Establishing the pre-COVID mental models: automation anxiety, skills displacement, flexible work as marginal rather than mainstream, optimism about reskilling.

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World Economic Forum Informed 2019 visions for 2030	30 visions for a better world in 2030 World Economic Forum	https://www.weforum.org/stories/2019/10/future-predictions-what-if-get-things-right-visions-for-2030/
World Economic Forum Informed future of work to 2030	The Future of Work - How Work Will Look Like by 2030 World Economic Forum	https://www.weforum.org/stories/2020/01/the-future-of-work-look-like-2030/
MIT Sloan Management Review: high editorial standards; shows what senior management thinkers expected before disruption.	Predictions for the Workplace of 2025, Revisited	https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/predictions-for-the-workplace-of-2025-revisited/
Wharton academic business school synthesis, not hype-driven. Expert synthesis to bring it to life.	Predictions for 2030 future timeline Quantumrun	https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/what-will-the-world-look-like-in-2030/
Business & Work predictions were communicated to leaders is seen in Forbes (retrospective).	The Future Of Work 2025: What Predictions Came True?	https://www.forbes.com/sites/niritcohen/2025/01/05/the-future-of-work-we-predicted-for-2025-what-actually-happened/
Forbes looking ahead, with commentary, not evidence	Here's What The Future Of Work In 2030 Might Look Like	https://www.forbes.com/sites/businessreporter/2020/01/27/what-will-the-future-of-work-look-like-a-view-from-2030/
SAP Future of Work predictions useful to show how large technology firms framed the future pre-COVID	The road ahead: Predictions and possibilities for the future of work	https://www.sap.com/research/predictions-for-the-future-of-work

Perspectives Suggesting an Acceleration of Decline

During the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, 'the future' did not arrive linearly but via crisis, unevenly, and faster in some domains (remote work, digitalisation) than others (reskilling, wellbeing systems).

COVID-19 changes in workplace practices (emotion, psychological safety, organisational support)	(PDF) Changes in workplace practices during the COVID-19 pandemic: the roles of emotion, psychological safety and organisation support	https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349292228_Changes_in_workplace_practices_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic_the_roles_of_emoti
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		on psychological safety and organisation support
Frontiers in Psychology (work, wellbeing, organisational change)	Within- and between-person changes in work practice and experiences due to COVID-19: Lessons learned from employees working from home, hybrid working, and working at the office	https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.948516/full
PMC archived studies, impacts on individual experience and mental health	The virus made me lose control: The impact of COVID-related work changes on employees' mental health, aggression, and interpersonal conflict - PMC	https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10126831/
Occupational Medicine (workplace health impacts)	COVID-19-induced changes in the workplace, psychosocial work environment and employee well-being: a longitudinal study Occupational Medicine Oxford Academic	https://academic.oup.com/occmed/article/74/8/571/7766094
Elsevier journal article	Workplace change within the COVID-19 context: The new (next) normal - ScienceDirect	https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S004016252300358X
Springer psychology article (impact on motivation)	The impact of COVID-19 pandemic context on work motivation: a two-wave study Current Psychology Springer Nature Link	https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-024-07263-z
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SciELO South Africa (important for non-Global-North balance)	Influence of COVID-19 on personal work perspective transformation	https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1815-74402022000200001
Government labour market baseline (Used cautiously for geography, but useful for structural change.)	US Bureau of Labor Statistics (psychologists / work trends)	https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/psychologists.htm#:~:text=What%20Psychologists%20Do,Similar%20Occupations
"Did the new world of work really happen?"	The 'new' world of work: Did it happen as predicted in 2020?	https://resources.workable.com/stories-and-insights/the-new-world-of-work-did-it-really-happen-as-predicted-in-2020
Employer-platform insights, not universal truth.	New World of Work: 2022 Survey Report	https://get.workable.com/new-world-of-work-in-2022-workable-survey-report
McKinsey Global Institute re: agents, robots, and skill partnerships.	Agents, robots, and us: Skill partnerships in the age of AI	https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/our-research/agents-robots-and-us-skill-partnerships-in-the-age-of-ai/



Perspectives Suggesting Persisting Trust Fractures

Post-Covid, while flexibility was predicted, sources suggest the scale and permanence of hybrid work exceeded expectations; however, predictions around widespread reskilling and wellbeing infrastructure were not realised at the same pace

MIT Sloan Management Review explicitly revisits earlier predictions	Predictions for the Workplace of 2025, Revisited	https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/predictions-for-the-workplace-of-2025-revisited/
Forbes retrospective analysis (opinion)	The Future Of Work 2025: What Predictions Came True?	https://www.forbes.com/sites/niritcohen/2025/01/05/the-future-of-work-we-predicted-for-2025-what-actually-happened/
Workable retrospective, useful for operational realities vs predictions.	The 'new' world of work: Did it happen as predicted in 2020?	https://resources.workable.com/stories-and-insights/the-new-world-of-work-did-it-really-happen-as-predicted-in-2020

Perspectives Suggesting Where We Are Now

APA (profession-level positioning) – APA future of practice	Presidential Task Force on the Future of Psychology Practice: Final report	https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/future-practice
APA Monitor (professional trends)	Uniting psychology for the future	https://www.apa.org/monitor/2014/01/pc
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APA journal article	COVID-19 and the workplace: Implications, issues, and insights for future research and action.	https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLandin?doi=10.1037%2Famp0000716
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AI, economy, and labour market transformation, narrative synthesis of where we are.	America Isn't Ready for What AI Will Do to Jobs	https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/2026/03/ai-economy-labor-market-transformation/685731/



Perspectives Suggesting Where We Are Headed

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World Economic Forum / scenario-based, but explicitly learning from post-COVID realities.	The Future of Work - How Work Will Look Like by 2030 World Economic Forum	https://www.weforum.org/stories/2020/01/the-future-of-work-look-like-2030/
World Economic Forum / scenario-based, but explicitly learning from post-COVID realities.	5 predictions for what life will be like in 2030 World Economic Forum	https://www.weforum.org/stories/2017/10/tech-life-predictions-for-2030/
Harvard Business Review expert synthesis; for showing expert consensus and disagreement	What 570 Experts Predict the Future of Work Will Look Like	https://hbr.org/2024/09/what-570-experts-predict-the-future-of-work-will-look-like
McKinsey Global Institute; useful for AI-human partnership framing	Agents, robots, and us: Skill partnerships in the age of AI	https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/our-research/agents-robots-and-us-skill-partnerships-in-the-age-of-ai/
APA shows where psychology anticipates ethical and applied challenges	Presidential Task Force on the Future of Psychology Practice: Final report	https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/future-practice
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APA Psycnet	COVID-19 and the workplace: Implications, issues, and insights for future research and action.	https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLandin g?doi=10.1037%2Famp0000716

