

THE ADAPTIVE TRAVEL & HOSPITALITY LEADER

Who is leading the change?





Executive Summary

AI WON'T REPLACE TRAVEL & HOSPITALITY LEADERS - BUT IT WILL DIMINISH THOSE WHO FAIL TO ADAPT

Artificial Intelligence has become one of the most discussed topics across the global travel and hospitality sector over the last 12 months. From personalised customer experiences and dynamic pricing to automated servicing and predictive analytics, AI is rapidly changing how travel businesses operate. Yet amidst the excitement, concern and speculation, one question continues to filter through into boardroom and ExCo discussions – how do we adapt our structure and resources accordingly, and what type of leaders do we need for the decade ahead? Will AI ultimately start to replace functional leaders. The short answer is no. The longer answer is far more interesting.

AI is not going to replace CEOs, Managing Directors or senior executives in travel and hospitality. However, it will expose weaknesses in leadership capability more quickly than ever before. Leaders who fail to understand the strategic implications of AI, who resist technological change, or who continue to rely solely on traditional management approaches will find themselves increasingly irrelevant in a sector that is evolving at unprecedented speed.

The travel leaders who thrive over the next decade will not necessarily be technology experts. They will be the leaders who understand how to harness technology to drive growth, improve customer experience, increase productivity and create competitive advantage.

In many respects, AI is not creating a new leadership challenge. It is simply accelerating an existing one.

Savannah is currently working with several global B2C businesses to diagnose AI leadership requirements and match them with the talent to deliver.



Key Themes

THE END OF THE TRADITIONAL OPERATOR

Historically, many travel organisations promoted leaders primarily based on operational or commercial expertise. The strongest leaders were often those who had spent years mastering the mechanics of the business. They understood service delivery, supplier relationships, pricing and margin optimisation, operational processes and customer management better than anyone else. While operational and commercial excellence obviously remains important, it is no longer sufficient.

Today's Managing Director must be able to answer a different set of questions:

- How can AI improve profitability?
- Which parts of our customer journey should be automated?
- How do we deploy technology without damaging customer experience?
- What skills will our workforce need in 3-5 years' time?
- How do we maintain culture during rapid transformation?
- How do we remain competitive against digitally native competitors?

The leadership profile is changing. Boards are increasingly seeking executives who combine commercial acumen, strategic thinking and digital literacy. The modern travel leader must be comfortable operating at the intersection of technology, people and performance, and making key strategic calls over investment and strategic direction. Those who remain purely operational/commercial leaders risk becoming increasingly disconnected from the future needs of their organisations.

WHY AI MAKES LEADERSHIP MORE VALUABLE, NOT LESS

There is a misconception that advances in AI reduce the importance of leadership. The opposite is true. The more technology evolves, the greater the requirement for judgement, vision and decision-making. AI can process vast amounts of data. It can identify patterns and generate recommendations. However, it cannot determine organisational purpose. It cannot inspire teams. It cannot build trust with clients, investors or employees. Leadership remains fundamentally human.

In fact, the rise of AI is increasing demand for capabilities that technology cannot replicate:

- Strategic judgement.
- Emotional intelligence.
- Influence.
- Stakeholder management.
- Change leadership.
- Creativity.
- Vision.
- Resilience.

These qualities have always differentiated exceptional leaders. They are now becoming even more valuable. As AI handles more technical and administrative tasks, the human elements of leadership become the primary source of competitive advantage.



THE EMERGING DIVIDE BETWEEN ADAPTIVE AND NON-ADAPTIVE LEADERS

Across the travel and hospitality sector, a clear divide is beginning to emerge. On one side are leaders who view AI as an opportunity. They are experimenting with new technologies, encouraging innovation and educating themselves about future trends. They may not have all the answers, but they are actively engaging with the questions.

On the other side are leaders who see AI as a threat or simply dismiss it as another passing trend. The gap between these groups is widening rapidly.

Adaptive leaders understand that transformation is not a technology project; it is a leadership responsibility. They recognise that their role is not to become technical experts but to create environments where innovation can flourish.

- They ask better questions.
- They challenge existing assumptions.
- They encourage learning.
- They invest in capability development.
- Most importantly, they move before change becomes unavoidable.

History consistently rewards organisations that adapt early rather than those forced into reactive transformation.

THE NEW LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES BOARDS ARE SEEKING

Executive search mandates across the travel and hospitality sector are already reflecting changing expectations. Increasingly, boards are prioritising leaders who demonstrate:

- Commercial agility.
- Digital curiosity.
- Change management capability.
- Customer-centric innovation.
- Data-informed decision making.
- Cross-functional leadership.
- Learning agility.

The most sought-after executives are no longer those with the deepest functional expertise alone. They are leaders capable of navigating ambiguity and leading organisations through continuous transformation. Experience remains important. Adaptability has become essential.

This shift is particularly evident in CEO and Managing Director appointments, where leadership potential is increasingly assessed through the lens of future capability rather than solely past performance.

“Boards are asking a simple question – Can this individual lead our organisation through the next decade, not just the next twelve months?”



THE TALENT CHALLENGE AI CREATES

One of the most overlooked consequences of AI is its impact on talent. Many traditional career pathways within travel and hospitality are likely to change significantly. Roles involving repetitive administration, manual processing and transactional customer interactions may become increasingly automated.

This creates a challenge for leadership teams.

How do organisations develop future leaders if many traditional entry-level development roles evolve or disappear? The answer lies in creating new pathways focused on analytical capability, customer engagement, problem-solving and strategic thinking. Future leaders will require different experiences and different skills. Organisations that proactively redesign talent development programmes will create stronger leadership pipelines. Those that fail to adapt may face significant succession challenges in the years ahead.

CULTURE WILL DETERMINE SUCCESS

Technology implementation is rarely the greatest obstacle to transformation. Culture is. Many AI initiatives fail not because the technology is inadequate but because employees are uncertain, resistant or disengaged. This places leadership at the centre of successful adoption. Employees do not need leaders who have all the technical answers. They need leaders who can communicate a compelling vision, explain why change matters and create confidence in the future.

The organisations that successfully integrate AI will be those where leadership teams build cultures of curiosity, experimentation and continuous learning. Bravery is needed. Technology can be purchased. Culture must be created and live and breathe as a meaningful differentiator.

THE FUTURE TRAVEL LEADER

The next generation of travel and hospitality leaders will look different from those of the past. They will still require commercial expertise. They will still need operational understanding. They will still need industry knowledge. But they will also possess a growth mindset, digital awareness and a willingness to challenge established ways of working. The most successful leaders will not compete against AI. They will partner with it. They will use technology to enhance decision-making, improve customer outcomes and unlock greater organisational performance.

Most importantly, they will recognise that leadership is becoming more human, not less. As automation increases, qualities such as empathy, communication, trust, belief and inspiration become increasingly valuable. These are the attributes that technology cannot replicate.

The most successful leaders will not compete against AI. They will partner with it

CONCLUSION

AI will undoubtedly reshape the travel and hospitality sector over the coming decade. Processes will change, customer expectations will evolve and business models will continue to adapt. Yet the organisations that succeed will not necessarily be those with the most advanced technology. They will be those with the most adaptive leaders. AI will not replace Managing Directors, CEOs or senior executives, but it will expose those who are unwilling to evolve. The future belongs not to leaders who fear technology, nor to those who blindly follow it, but to those who understand how to combine human leadership with technological innovation. In the end, AI is not replacing leaders. It is redefining what great leadership looks like.

About Savannah Group

Savannah Group is a global executive search and leadership advisory firm. We help organisations diagnose leadership needs, design tailored talent strategies, and deliver high-impact results through executive search, interim management, and talent intelligence. Our next generation approach combines deep expertise with data, insight and pace, powered by MapX, our proprietary AI-enabled leadership analytics platform.

