

# HYB26

**Annual Edition**

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Hybrid by Design



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# The Growth Code: Why Human Investment is the Ultimate Advantage in an AI Era

Hybrid hospitality

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*As hotels race to automate, Tanja Stegmüller, co-founder of TRUSTmenti, makes the case that resilience will come from intentional hybridity: blending digital efficiency with human wisdom, global standards with local soul, and automation with empathy. She lays out a ten point playbook for building hybrid leaders, learning ecosystems, and people centred cultures, arguing that technology can handle tasks, but only humans can deliver judgment, emotion, and the moments that define great hospitality.*

In this shiny new era of buzzwords and bots, the most resilient hotels won't be the ones boasting about their latest AI widget or blockchain booking gimmick. No, the winners will be the ones that master hybridity by design: the art of mixing digital with human, global with local, automation with empathy, standardization with personalization, growth with responsibility.

Hospitality is already in a love affair with AI. Algorithms predict demand, robots carry towels, and chatbots have mastered the art of answering "What time is breakfast?" in seventeen languages. Impressive, yes. But here's the plot twist: the more automated we become, the more desperately we need people who can think, care, and lead.

## 1 PEOPLE, NOT PLATFORMS

Let's get real: AI can teach anyone how to check in a guest or upsell a suite. But when the system crashes on a sold-out night, or when the bride's cake collapses and she bursts into tears, no algorithm saves you.

What does? Human experience. Wisdom. And wisdom comes from human transfer of experience - the scars, stories, and survival tricks that no app can download. The tricks that saves your reputation.

AI can scale knowledge. I've seen it. But humans scale wisdom. And wisdom is what keeps hospitality human.

## 2 GLOBAL SYSTEMS, LOCAL SOUL

I've worked in hotels where brand standards came straight from HQ, wrapped up like gospel - same beds, same apps, same coffee beans.

But if you apply Zurich logic to a property in Zanzibar, you're in for a surprise. Culture, context, nuance - they don't come from manuals. They come from people who've been there, done that, and show others how to adapt without losing the brand promise.

That balance of global consistency and local authenticity? That's hybridity in action. Global promise, local delivery.

Without hybridity, "standardization" turns into "sterilization." And no guest checks into a hotel for a sterile experience.

## 3 AUTOMATION HANDLES TASKS. HUMANS HANDLE EMOTIONS.

I'll admit it - I love how AI tidies up data chaos, organizes housekeeping schedules, and spits out revenue forecasts before I've even finished my espresso. Efficiency.

But here's the catch: AI won't notice the guest standing in the lobby with that "help me" look, or the colleague quietly running on fumes. Only humans pick up on those signals - and only humans can respond with empathy.

## 4 PERSONALIZATION WITH A PULSE

AI is brilliant at suggesting what a guest "probably" wants. If a guest booked a spa treatment on their last stay, it will dutifully nudge them toward another massage. Helpful? Sure. Inspired? Not really.

But when that same guest arrives this time juggling two restless kids, no amount of algorithmic "recommendations" will land. A human with experience knows the best "offer" isn't the spa at all - it's getting those kids an early dinner and a corner table where the parents can breathe.

That's the blend: standardization keeps us efficient, but human judgment keeps us personal.

## 5 GROWTH WITH RESPONSIBILITY

Employee turnover has haunted almost every property I've worked in.

What changes the game is when employees feel invested in. When someone further along the path takes the time to guide them, they see a future. They stick. And they don't just become better staff, they become the culture itself.

Hybrid organizations know retention is not a perk. It's survival. And that, to me, is growth with responsibility.

## 6 REVERSE LEARNING: HUMILITY REQUIRED

Now here's where it gets interesting. Reverse learning is when the intern explains TikTok to the CEO, or a Gen Z teaches the executive suite why sustainability is not just a marketing campaign.

It's uncomfortable, yes. But it's also the smartest way to stay relevant. Hybridity is not just blending tech and touch - it's blending generations.

I am not saying the intern should take over the entire organisation - no, but it's a fact that with today's technology the environment gets faster and faster and the moment leadership stops learning, the business stops evolving.

## 7 BUILDING HYBRID LEADERS

Future leaders won't just manage people, they'll manage bots, dashboards, and cultures in flux. They'll need to read an AI forecast while also reading the room.

'Guidance' is the crash course in becoming AI-literate but human-savvy. AI gives the data. Human experience teaches you what it actually means when a guest, a team, or a P&L is on the line.

## 8 FORGET "PROGRAMS", THINK ECOSYSTEMS

The old leadership development program - HR pairing random people once a year and calling it "growth" - is dead. Hybrid organizations are building ecosystems where learning flows everywhere: top-down, bottom-up, sideways, across continents.

Yes, AI can help match people by career goals or leadership style. But the essence is human: conversations that spark growth. Think less bureaucracy, more wisdom on tap.

## 9 HUMAN GUIDANCE AS A CULTURAL BRAND

Hospitality loves to say it's a "people business." But ask any line employee grinding through split shifts if they feel like the business really sees them.

A culture of growth flips the script. It shows that development and belonging matter. And guess what? The younger workforce cares about this more than a staff meal voucher. Companies that make growth and knowledge transfer part of their identity will win the war for talent. The rest will keep wondering why their job ads get ghosted.

## 10 ROI WITHOUT THE SPREADSHEETS

There's no need for a spreadsheet to prove the point. The ROI is obvious: do you want a property full of clock-watchers who can't wait to leave, or a crew that feels invested, capable, and ready to step in when things go sideways?

That's not "soft". That's the bottom line.

## CONCLUSION

Cash or card. Coffee or tea. Fork and knife. Hospitality doesn't thrive on either/or - it thrives on both/and. The same is true for AI. We need automation and empathy, standardization and personalization, global systems and local soul.

If there's one lesson I've learned, it's this: technology may keep the lights on, but people keep the spirit alive. The properties that will win are the ones that design for hybridity on purpose and not as an afterthought, but as a strategy.

So here's the playbook, let AI handle the repetitive tasks, but never outsource judgment. Standardize what works globally, but let local teams add their flavor. Build leaders who are data-literate, but human-savvy. And above all, invest in people - because they are the ultimate differentiator no machine can replicate.

In the end, that's the growth code. Hotels that master this balance will not just survive the AI era - they'll define it.

Hybrid is not the future. Hybrid is the present. And the smartest thing we can do is design for it.

