Columbus

The AI Readiness eBook

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Introduction

This eBook will provide insights into how leaders can prepare their organizations for artificial intelligence adoption across all industries. From multinational corporations to small businesses, from healthcare systems to educational institutions, AI is becoming as fundamental to modern operations as electricity or the internet once were.

The harsh reality is that organizational AI readiness exists on three critical levels. While executive enthusiasm and workforce openness represent important cultural foundations, they become meaningless without the supporting organizational structures and data infrastructure required for successful implementation.

Building the Infrastructure, Culture and Strategy for Sustainable Adoption

Welcome to the AI Shift

AI is reshaping how business gets done - from tools that tag thousands of products in seconds to intelligent agents running ecommerce tests behind the scenes, the shift is active and accelerating.

Leaders across industries are beginning to recognize that AI is becoming a basic layer of modern operations. Like electricity or the internet, it's changing the way organizations serve, scale and adapt. According to Cisco's 2024 AI Readiness Index, only 13% of companies are fully prepared to make that shift. The rest are trying to bridge the gap between interest and action.

This ebook is for those leaders. Whether you're rolling out your first AI use case or trying to build structure around a patchwork of pilots, the same readiness elements apply.

The work begins across three core layers:

1. Executive alignment
2. Cultural openness
3. Operational and data infrastructure

Each one is essential. Each one can be developed. And each one creates the conditions for AI to drive real value, not just headlines.

Executive Alignment: From Curiosity to Commitment

At one global logistics firm, the CIO put it plainly: "AI is in every pitch deck but not in our actual workflows." That mismatch is common. Many leadership teams are excited about AI's potential, but struggle to translate that excitement into meaningful outcomes.

According to McKinsey's State of AI Global Survey, 78% of organizations now use AI in at least one business function—a significant rise from 55% the previous year. Despite this, Stanford HAI found that only 12% of enterprise leaders believe their data quality and accessibility are ready for scaled AI.

> *Adopting AI is about more than choosing the right technology; it's about aligning technology with purpose. When teams connect AI to real workplace problems, the tools follow naturally.*
>
> — Michael Simms, Vice President, Digital Advisory Practice at Columbus

12%

Enterprise leaders believe their data quality and accessibility are ready for scaled AI.

Source: Hai Standford Univeristy

78%

Organizations now use AI in at least one business function.

Source: McKinsey

When leadership alignment is in place, the path forward becomes clearer. Many organizations work with digital transformation partners to ground AI in the real work of the business. Instead of chasing trends, their teams work side-by-side with clients to define where AI can ease friction and support growth.

A food and beverage company working with Columbus faced chronic challenges in planning efficiency. Forecasts were inconsistent. Teams were making reactive decisions. The company shifted toward a data-powered planning model by integrating fragmented systems and applying AI to streamline inventory management. The project began with a focus on planning issues that were slowing growth. Once the business questions were defined, AI tools followed naturally.

This kind of alignment isn't flashy, but it works. When leadership prioritizes clarity and purpose, AI becomes a lever for progress.

Culture: Grounding AI in Human Experience

The success of AI adoption often comes down to how people experience it. Teams need to understand what's changing, why it matters and how they'll be supported along the way.

Even as AI use grows, clarity and direction remain scarce. A recent Gallup poll found that in the U.S., the share of employees using AI regularly in their roles has nearly doubled in just two years, from 21% in 2023 to 40% in 2025. Yet only 22% say their organization has shared a clear plan or strategy for integrating those tools.

The gap between enthusiasm and support can create stress. Employees often feel expected to use AI without proper guidance. For middle managers who bridge executive strategy and frontline execution, that gap is particularly challenging.

One effective approach is building culture through participation. For instance, in one public sector finance team, the people responsible for painful monthly reporting were invited to co-design an automation solution. The result worked because it was informed by their daily reality instead of being imposed from above.

When people are included early, they feel trusted and invested. When they have a say in what AI looks like and how it's used, adoption feels more intentional and less disruptive. That collective ownership is often the most powerful driver of sustainable readiness.

22%

Say their organization has shared a clear plan or strategy for integrating those tools.

Source: Gallup

Infrastructure: Building What AI Actually Needs

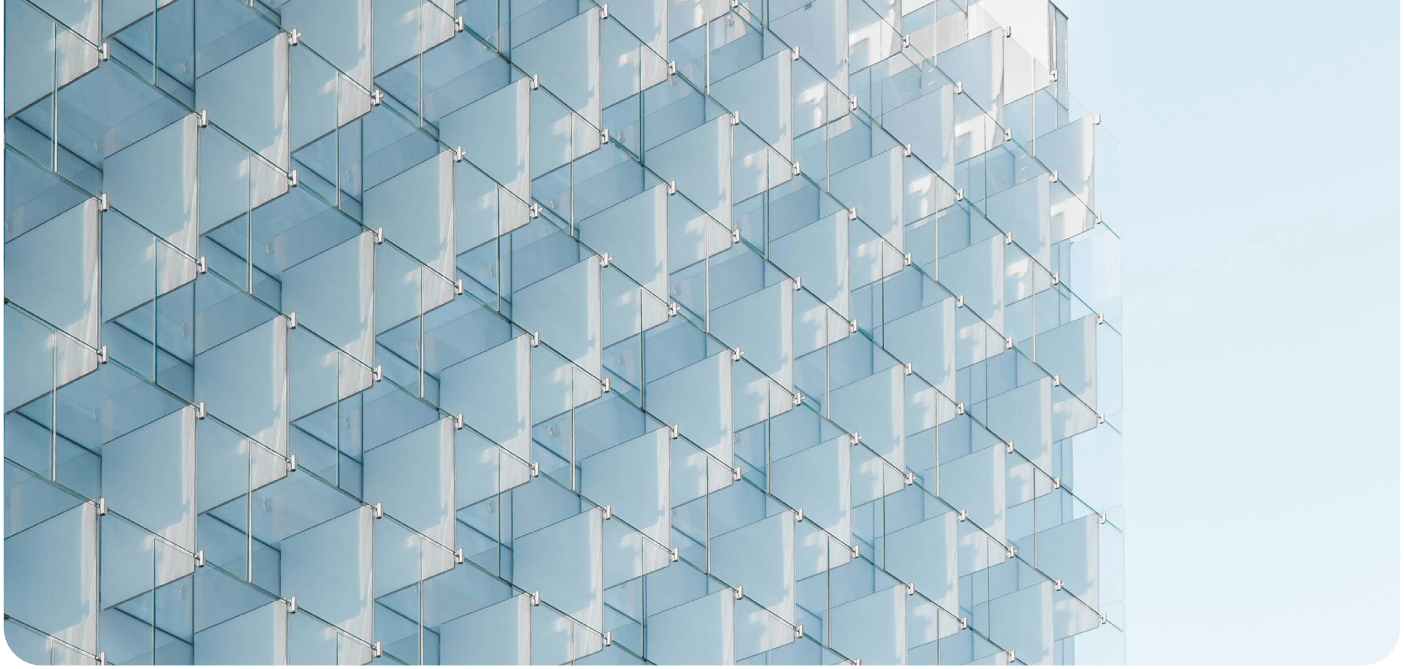
Even with clear vision and a strong culture, AI won't scale without the right foundation. That includes compute capacity, integrated data, scalable systems and strong governance.

According to McKinsey, only 21 percent of companies report that their systems can support AI at scale. Many organizations still lack the capacity to meet rising demand. And data, which is AI's most critical input, remains one of the biggest roadblocks. Most companies still struggle with fragmentation, outdated pipelines and missing data lineage.

21%

Companies report that their systems can support AI at scale

Source: McKinsey



> *AI becomes reliable when infrastructure isn't brittle—when systems are designed to endure, adapt and interconnect.*
>
> — Christopher Combs, Senior Business Consultant, Data and AI at Columbus

Columbus often sees this firsthand. One of their manufacturing clients had invested heavily in AI for demand planning, only to discover that their historical product data was incomplete. Forecasts were off, adoption stalled and trust in the system dropped. The model couldn't perform well because the supporting data foundation wasn't ready.

Fixing it meant going back to the source—mapping where data lived, improving data quality and investing in a more flexible platform. Within a quarter, forecast accuracy rebounded and the business regained confidence in the technology.

Strong infrastructure depends on connecting existing systems, identifying gaps and creating room for scale. AI doesn't need perfection, but it does need consistency.

Real Applications: Where Readiness Shows Results

Organizations that get these three layers right don’t just deploy AI. They change how they operate. They use smart automation to ease friction, speed up workflows and improve outcomes across departments.

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At a Scandinavian retail brand, Columbus helped scale a recommendation engine that started as a simple pilot. With the right support and stakeholder buy-in, that one tool became the anchor for a broader AI transformation, spanning online shopping, supply chain forecasting and in-store digital experiences.

In the food and beverage industry, Columbus worked with planners who relied on disconnected spreadsheets and instinct. By connecting those processes to an AI-driven planning tool, the team shortened planning cycles and reduced waste without replacing a single job.

AI tools now routinely handle product tagging and copywriting at scale. In customer service, intelligent agents are screening issues before escalation. In operations, predictive maintenance is reducing downtime. These tools are most effective when embedded in larger systems with aligned goals and clear data flow.

When readiness is in place, AI tools become multipliers. They create space for teams to do higher-value work and respond faster to change.

Assessing Readiness: Five Simple Lenses

To help leaders focus their efforts, here's a straightforward framework drawn from Columbus' transformation playbook:

Executive	Culture	Infrastructure
• Are business goals guiding your AI investments? • Is funding linked to clear timelines and metrics?	• Are your teams involved in the planning and rollout? • Are skills, roles and outcomes being communicated early?	• Can your systems support current and future AI workloads? • Are internal tools integrated or siloed?
Data	**Governance and Talent**	
• Is your data consistent, accessible and usable for AI? • Are you using platforms that enable real-time visibility?	• Are accountability and risk management built into your AI plans? • Do you have the right mix of internal expertise and external support?	

These questions provide a starting point for reflection and conversation across teams.

The Ongoing Shift: Readiness Is a Practice

AI readiness is an ongoing discipline that helps organizations remain aligned, flexible and focused as their needs and tools evolve. It's what allows teams to explore new tools without losing sight of what matters. It's what turns early wins into lasting impact.

Columbus describes this work as a cycle: define, execute, evolve. That mindset applies at every stage of AI maturity. Organizations that continue to learn and adapt as they build tend to gain the most lasting value from AI.

What It Really Means to Be Ready

Readiness grows from clear priorities, aligned systems and leadership that supports people through change. It's reflected in everyday decisions across teams and departments, where tools and platforms support broader strategic goals.

Successful AI adopters are improving how work gets done by equipping people with better tools, clearer information and greater focus.

That's the real shift. And it's already happening.

About Columbus

Columbus is a global consulting company that creates lasting value for enterprise customers through digital transformation. We are highly specialized in the manufacturing, life science, retail & distribution, and food & process industries. We advise, implement, and manage business critical solutions with high security levels, delivering cloud ERP, digital commerce, and CRM to optimize entire value chains and business processes and of equal importance, to create excellent customer experiences and increased revenue.

Through strategic digital advisory, innovative use of AI, ML and data driven insights, we create new, sustainable business opportunities for our customers. With more than 1600 digital industry experts Columbus delivers locally on a global scale.

Find out more: www.columbusglobal.com