Columbus®

DATA & AI REPORT

Beyond adoptation:

What it takes to create value from AI

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Preface

When ChatGPT launched in November 2022, it triggered the fastest wave of technology adoption most organisations have experienced. Four years on, AI use is close to universal: 88% of organisations now use it in at least one business function. But value has not kept pace. Only 39% report any impact on EBIT, with most reporting an impact of less than 5%, and just 6% attribute a significant share of earnings to AI.
(McKinsey, The state of AI in 2025)

That gap is changing the question leaders ask. **"What can AI do?"** is giving way to **"Where is the value?"** This pattern is familiar: Gartner's Hype Cycle describes how early excitement can turn into disillusionment as organisations search for returns. But waiting for the market to mature carries its own risk. Technology reaches meaningful, sustained use because organisations learn how to apply it, not simply because time passes. Much of the first wave of AI was, reasonably, technology-led: experiments designed to discover what was possible. Delivering value requires a different starting point. Not **"what can we do?"** but **"what should we do?"** This means identifying where value can be created or friction removed, defining the business problem, and designing the solution around it. That is the difference between a pilot that impresses and a capability that scales.

None of this is new. Organisations that have delivered digital transformation will recognise the requirements. Technology is only part of the equation, alongside strategy, process redesign, operating models, change management and cross-functional ownership. What differs is the approach. With the technology moving this fast, big-bang programmes risk being obsolete before they've delivered. The organisations making progress take an iterative approach: prove one valuable use case in production, learn from it, then move to the next. This allows value to compound while the plan adapts as AI evolves.

This report sets out that path in four stages: defining the opportunity, validating the concept, building the foundations and scaling with confidence. Drawing on Columbus specialists across data, AI, automation and commercial roles, it examines why adoption stalls, why pilots fail to reach production, the foundations that value depends on, and the governance and accountability that make scale possible.

This report sets out that path in four stages:

	STAGE	EXAMINING
1	**Defining the opportunity**	Why adoption stalls
2	**Validating the concept**	Why pilots fail to reach production
3	**Building the foundations**	The foundations that value depends on
4	**Scaling with confidence**	The governance and accountability that make scale possible

Drawing on Columbus specialists across data, AI, automation and commercial roles

Data · AI · Automation · Commercial

Meet the experts



CJ Combs

CJ Combs is Senior Sales Director, Data & AI at Columbus. With more than 25 years' experience in AI, machine learning and automation, he helps enterprise leaders identify high-value use cases and turn AI strategy into measurable outcomes.



Tristan Gwinnell

Tristan Gwinnell leads the UK Data & AI practice at Columbus. With extensive experience scaling data and AI businesses, including growth leadership roles at BJSS and 101 Ways, he helps organisations turn AI ambition into lasting business value.



Claes Reinholdt Kongsdam

Claes Reinholdt Kongsdam is Business Line Executive of Data & AI at Columbus and a member of its Group Management. He brings more than 25 years' experience in the IT industry, including senior sales leadership at Capgemini, and previously led Columbus Denmark.



Nicholas Lea-Trengrouse

With more than 15 years' experience in data, Nicholas Lea-Trengrouse leads Business Intelligence at Columbus UK. He focuses on large-scale analytics initiatives, helping organisations move from reactive reporting to process-driven, product-minded data platforms built on Microsoft Power BI and Fabric.



Andrew Kraus

Andrew Kraus is an Account Executive at Columbus, focused on Infor M3 and Data & AI. Based in Ohio, he brings extensive experience in enterprise software sales and is a hands-on advocate for using AI in everyday work.



Frederik Ahlers

Based in Denmark, Frederik Ahlers is Director, Automation & AI at Columbus. Working across Microsoft 365 Copilot, Copilot Studio and low-code solutions, he helps organisations embed AI agents into everyday work and translate new technology into practical transformation.



Jack Binnall

Jack Binnall is Principal Power Platform Consultant at Columbus, specialising in AI adoption, Azure, Dynamics 365 and the Power Platform. With more than a decade's experience in digital transformation, he helps organisations move from AI awareness to practical implementation.

CHAPTER 1

Barriers to AI adoption

Despite growing investment and enthusiasm, many organisations still struggle to identify where AI can deliver meaningful business value. Cost concerns, data readiness and uncertainty about where to start are often cited as reasons for holding back. But these barriers aren't always what they seem.

For many organisations, the bigger challenge is knowing which problems are worth solving and how to build a credible business case around them. Progress doesn't necessarily require the largest budget, perfect data or the most advanced technology. It starts with identifying the right opportunities, understanding the outcomes they could deliver and building the confidence to act.

This chapter examines what's holding organisations back and why a clearer focus on business value can change the conversation.

CJ Combs
Senior Sales Director, Data & AI



Tristan Gwinnell
Director, UK Data & AI



Andrew Kraus
Account Executive



CHAPTER 1

The barriers holding AI back – and why most of them aren't what they seem

Despite the momentum surrounding AI, many organisations remain hesitant. Budget constraints, data quality concerns and uncertainty about where to start are some of the most common reasons for delaying adoption – yet while these challenges are real, they're rarely the root cause of inaction.

Across industries, the organisations creating value from AI are not necessarily those with the largest budgets, the cleanest data or the most advanced technology stacks. The barriers preventing AI adoption are often less about technology and more about clarity, confidence and execution.



The budget hurdle: Why "AI is too expensive" is the wrong diagnosis

One of the most common objections from mid-market executives about the adoption of AI is a version of **"we'd love to, but it's too expensive".** But according to CJ Combs, Senior Sales Director, Data & AI, it's almost never about the cost.

"AI is one of the few technology investments where organisations often debate the price before they've defined the outcome,"

Combs explains.

In practice, many businesses struggle to assess the cost of AI because they haven't yet established what success would look like. The result is that conversations about AI often become conversations about budget – but the budget itself is rarely the real obstacle.



"Most companies don't have an AI problem," Combs argues. "They have a use case problem dressed up as a budget problem."

CHAPTER 1

The use case problem: Where should we start?

In 2025, MIT's Project NANDA published a report finding that, despite $30 to $40 billion in enterprise generative AI investment, 95% of pilots produced no measurable P&L impact. Only 5% of integrated AI deployments delivered meaningful value.

Companies aren't failing with AI because they can't afford it; they're struggling because they can't operationalise it. According to Combs, a clear pattern emerges when leaders are asked where they would allocate AI budget if they had it.

"The answer is usually a vague gesture towards automation, efficiency, or staying competitive," he says. **"Rarely does anyone cite three specific workflows, the people running them, the hours those workflows consume, and what would change if AI did, say, 40% of the work."**

The cost objection is comfortable because it avoids a harder admission: that the organisation has not yet identified where AI could create value.

The organisations generating measurable returns from AI tend to begin in a different place. Rather than asking where AI can be applied, they start by identifying specific workflows that are slow, expensive, repetitive or difficult to scale. Once those processes are understood, the potential value of AI becomes far easier to calculate.

What leaders rarely cite

01 Three specific workflows

02 The people running them

03 The hours those workflows consume

04 What would change if AI did the work

40%

of the work done by AI – what would change?

MIT Project NANDA, 2025

$30 to $40 billion

in enterprise generative AI investment

95%

of pilots produced no measurable P&L impact

5%

Only 5% of integrated AI deployments delivered meaningful value.



CHAPTER 1

Data readiness: Progress doesn't require perfect data

Data is often cited as one of the biggest obstacles to AI adoption. Tristan Gwinnell, Director of Data & AI at Columbus, finds that organisations frequently assume they need to fix their entire data estate before they can begin. In practice, this approach risks repeating the issues that plagued data lake adoption.

"The data modernisation efforts of the 2010s often focused on moving all data into a data lake, on the promise that value would come from having it in a central location. That value often failed to materialise, because it was a technology-first approach. What's required is to identify the business question first, then find the data that answers it. Approaching it this way builds buy-in, delivers value to users early, and delivers transformation iteratively," he explains.

Data quality still matters – trusted data for the question being answered is a prerequisite for successful use of AI. But the lens should always be: **"What business question is the organisation trying to answer?"** A focus on that outcome lets companies size the foundations to the value they're seeking to deliver, which makes the business case far easier to justify.

While data modernisation is ideal, it's not a prerequisite. It's possible to work in parallel: isolate the data needed for the targeted use case, deliver iteratively and continue modernising the wider data estate alongside it.

Data readiness is a constraint to work around intelligently, not a reason to stand still. And for many organisations, standing still has become the biggest risk of all.



Why waiting is the most expensive option

According to Combs, the temptation for organisations without a clear use case is to wait for the market to mature, the price to drop or someone else to take the risk first.

But every quarter a company waits, two things happen. Competitors running AI experiments learn what works and what doesn't in their specific context. Meanwhile, the organisational muscle for adopting AI atrophies further, because no one is building the change management, governance, or workflow redesign skills that production AI requires. By the time a hesitant company moves forward, the cost of catching up is significantly higher.



What was once viewed as an emerging capability is now becoming a competitive necessity, adds Andrew Kraus, Account Executive. **"Before Columbus, I rarely used AI in any meaningful way,"** he says. **"Copilot existed within Teams, but it wasn't really being used. It's only in the last year that companies started taking it seriously. Now, if you're not using it, you're already behind."**

Most organisations don't need convincing that AI matters – employees like Kraus are already familiar with AI tools, leaders are discussing AI strategy, and customers expect smarter digital experiences. The challenge has moved beyond awareness and into execution.

The companies that treated 2024 and 2025 as their experimentation years entered 2026 with operational AI muscle. The companies still waiting for clarity entered 2026 further behind than they were eighteen months ago.

"Now, if you're not using it, you're already behind."

	2024–2025	2026
Companies that experimented	Experimentation years	Entered with operational AI muscle
Companies still waiting	Waiting for clarity	Further behind than eighteen months ago

CHAPTER 1

Breaking down the barriers

For Combs, the companies moving beyond these barriers – whether real or perceived – are those who ask the right questions, replacing broad concerns with specific opportunities.

Once the right opportunities are identified, use cases stop being abstract, ROI becomes calculable, and the cost conversation is reframed. It moves from **"AI is too expensive"** to **"this specific workflow is worth $X to fix, what's our budget?"**

From
"AI is too expensive"

→

To
"this specific workflow is worth $X to fix, what's our budget?"

"That's not a budgeting exercise," Combs argues. "That's a strategy."



Barrier	What organisations say	What successful organisations do
Cost	"AI is too expensive"	Start with a measurable use case
Data readiness	"Our data isn't ready"	Isolate the data needed and iterate
Timing	"We'll wait until the market matures"	Learn through controlled experimentation



What's next?

The organisations succeeding with AI are not waiting for perfect conditions – they've already identified opportunities and begun experimenting. The next challenge is designing pilots that not only succeed, but can scale into sustainable AI initiatives that deliver long-term value.

CHAPTER 2

Why AI pilots stall

AI experimentation is widespread, but successful pilots don't always translate into lasting business value. A solution might perform well in a controlled environment, yet struggle when introduced into everyday operations, where business processes, user expectations and technical requirements are more complex.

The challenge isn't simply proving that AI works. It's understanding what makes a pilot valuable, who is responsible for its success and what needs to happen for it to become part of the business.

This chapter explains why promising AI initiatives stall before reaching production and what organisations need to do differently to achieve measurable outcomes and long-term success.

CJ Combs
Senior Sales Director, Data & AI



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CHAPTER 2

The gap between adoption and value – and why a failed pilot isn't the end

McKinsey's 2025 State of AI report found that 88% of organisations now use AI in at least one business function, yet only 39% report any measurable EBIT impact from those investments. Most of those organisations attribute less than 5% of EBIT to AI, and nearly two-thirds have yet to scale AI across the enterprise.

AI adoption is accelerating, but value creation is not. The problem isn't a lack of experimentation – organisations are experimenting with AI at unprecedented levels. The challenge is turning those pilots into capabilities that can survive the realities of production.



McKinsey's 2025 State of AI report

88%

of organisations now use AI in at least one business function

39%

only 39% report any measurable EBIT impact from those investments

<5%

Most of those organisations attribute less than 5% of EBIT to AI

⅔

Nearly two-thirds have yet to scale AI across the enterprise

CHAPTER 2

Pilot success doesn't equal business success

Success in a controlled pilot environment says little about whether a solution can deliver value at scale. According to S&P Global, the average organisation scrapped its proof-of-concepts before they reached production, and 42% of companies abandoned most AI initiatives in 2025 – up from 17% the year before.

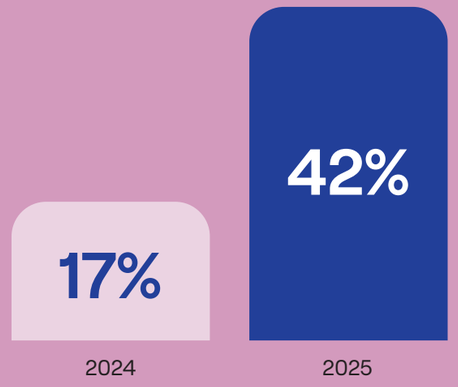
Pilots running in bounded environments, with the team watching closely, often meet their success criteria. But success at the pilot stage doesn't always translate into business value in production. Once an AI initiative moves into everyday use, data quality issues, process inconsistency, governance and security challenges, and user adoption all present problems.

The key is identifying these potential issues early and considering them as part of the design and validation process for the pilot.

S&P Global

42%

of companies abandoned most AI initiatives in 2025 – up from 17% the year before





AI initiatives require active ownership

For Tristan Gwinnell, Director of Data & AI, the initiatives that survive contact with production are the ones that were never treated as experiments in the first place.



"It's not just a technical question," Gwinnell explains. **"A successful pilot needs to be treated like the launch of any product, with the ongoing support, ownership and lifecycle management that implies."**

Treating AI as a product changes what success means. A product is judged not on whether it works in a demo, but on the measurable value it delivers to the people using it over time. That shift matters most for AI, because the underlying models are constantly changing. Governance, in this context, is not a one-time approval gate. It needs to be built into the roadmap – reviewed, versioned and adjusted as the system scales. A solution that performed well at pilot stage needs active stewardship to stay aligned with the use case as the organisation, technology and processes change.

Who is involved is critical. A product only delivers value if people use it, which means the people whose work it changes must be part of building it – not handed a finished tool and asked to adapt. That extends to what gets built in the first place. Too often, the decision about which use cases to prioritise is made by the technical team alone. The initiatives that earn adoption are the ones where the users were in the room when the priorities were set.

"A successful pilot needs to be treated like the launch of any product, with the ongoing support, ownership and lifecycle management that implies."

Tristan Gwinnell

CHAPTER 2

Defining measures of success: What good looks like

Many organisations begin scaling AI before agreeing on what success looks like. A proof of concept may demonstrate that the technology works, but unless organisations establish clear measures of success from the outset, it becomes difficult to assess whether the initiative is creating meaningful value.

For Andrew Kraus, Account Executive, this is one of the most common differences between pilots that stall and pilots that progress into production. **"Many organisations want a quick win from AI,"** he explains. **"But the end goal is not always easy to define at the start. That's why it's important to align on priorities and establish what success should look like from the beginning."**

Before a pilot moves beyond experimentation, organisations should be able to answer three questions:

Question	Why it matters
01 What workflow are we trying to improve?	Success should be tied to a specific business process rather than a broad AI ambition.
02 Who owns the outcome?	Every initiative needs a named owner responsible for adoption, performance and business results.
03 How will success be measured within 90 days?	Organisations need a baseline and measurable target, whether that's reduced processing time, improved accuracy, increased revenue or lower operating costs.

Baseline — 90 Days / Measurable Target

Without these foundations, pilots often generate activity without accountability.
Teams can demonstrate technical progress while remaining unable to prove business impact.

From pilot to production

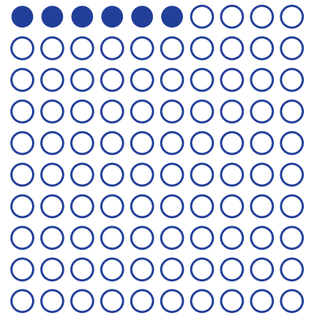
The challenge facing organisations today is no longer proving that AI works. Most enterprises already have pilots, proofs of concept and isolated successes. The challenge is creating the foundations that allow those successes to scale.

As Combs points out, McKinsey identified just 6% of their survey respondents as AI high performers – organisations seeing 5% or more EBIT impact thanks to AI. Those high performers are nearly three times more likely than the rest to fundamentally redesign workflows, and five times more likely to invest more than 20% of their digital budgets in AI. They understand that transformation doesn't come from automating existing work; it comes from redesigning work around better outcomes.

AI High Performers

6%

of survey respondents – organisations seeing 5% or more EBIT impact thanks to AI



Those high performers are...

3x nearly three times more likely than the rest to fundamentally redesign workflows

5x five times more likely to invest more than 20% of their digital budgets in AI

What's next?

If pilots fail because organisations are attempting to scale before building the right foundations, the next question becomes: What do those foundations look like in practice?

CHAPTER 3

Building the foundations for AI value

Identifying the right opportunity and validating a pilot are important first steps, but neither guarantees lasting value. For AI to become part of everyday operations, organisations need to consider the wider foundations that support its success.

That means looking beyond the technology itself. Business processes may need to be redesigned, data and knowledge made more accessible and delivery approaches adapted to support continuous improvement. Organisations also need to decide where existing AI solutions are sufficient and where a more tailored approach could create greater value.

This chapter looks at the practical foundations of successful AI initiatives and how organisations can build on early progress without introducing unnecessary complexity.

Most organisations now understand AI's potential. The challenge is no longer awareness; it's how to turn that potential into measurable business value.

This is where many AI initiatives begin to struggle. Organisations often focus on the technology itself while overlooking the foundations that determine whether AI succeeds in practice: the process it supports, the data and knowledge it depends upon, and the way the technology is introduced into business operations.

These foundations ultimately determine whether AI becomes a source of competitive advantage or another pilot that never progresses beyond experimentation.

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Nicholas Lea-Trengrouse
Head of Business Intelligence

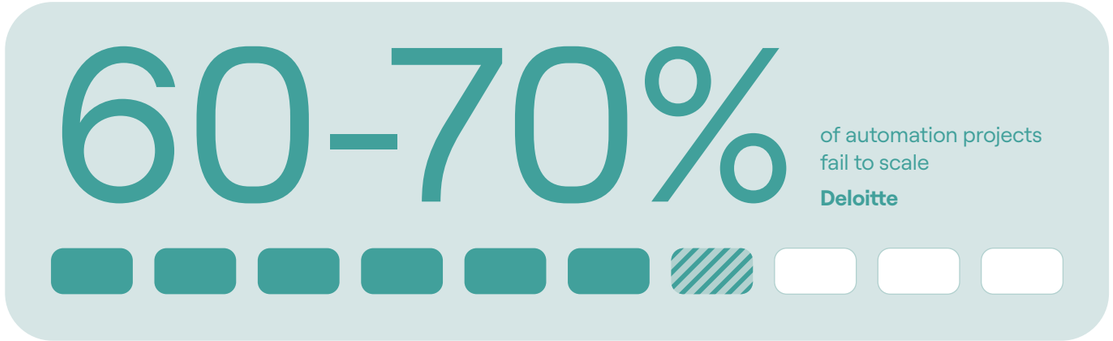


CHAPTER 3

Process: Redesign workflows before you automate them

According to Deloitte, 60–70% of automation projects fail to scale, most often due to poor process standardisation and weak data handling before deployment.

The organisations creating value are not necessarily the ones investing the most. They're the ones willing to rethink how work is done before they automate it.





AI doesn't fix bad processes – it amplifies them

"Solely focusing on making existing processes cheaper and faster misses much of the potential value of AI,"

Gwinnell says. **"Many processes were designed over time based on the capabilities that existed and outcomes being sought at the time. To get real value from AI the question should be: With the capabilities that exist today and for our current objectives, what should this process look like?"**

For Gwinnell, the real potential of AI isn't speed. It's the chance to step back, examine what the process needs to achieve, and reengineer it around that outcome. This is a lesson organisations have already learned more than once. Value from cloud adoption didn't come from lifting and shifting existing systems, it came from reimagining what those systems could do with new cloud capabilities. Robotic process automation (RPA) delivered little when it simply automated an existing process, but offered significant value when the process was redesigned.

AI follows the same pattern at a larger scale. Encouragingly, most organisations already have this muscle. They have reengineered around new technology before and know how to do it.

The challenge is that most enterprise processes are far less consistent than leaders assume. What appears to be a single workflow often exists in several variations across teams, systems and departments – executed differently depending on who is handling it, where it was initiated, and which department is involved.

"Automating that process doesn't resolve the inconsistency," Gwinnell adds. **"It embeds it."** If the variations still exist, errors are reproduced at scale and potentially without a human there to pick them up. Gartner's framework is explicit on the correct sequence: define the problem, standardise the process, establish governance, and deploy technology last. Organisations that invert this sequence consistently produce the same result: a faster version of a broken workflow.

Gartner's framework

01	02	03	04
Define the problem	**Standardise the process**	**Establish governance**	**Deploy technology last**

CHAPTER 3

Creating AI value starts with redesigning work

Combs adds that the companies generating real EBIT impact are not the ones spending the most. They're rebuilding their work around AI, instead of layering AI on top of broken processes.

"Strategy isn't a slide deck about AI's potential," he explains. **"It's a ranked list of three to five workflows, each with a named owner, a measurable baseline, a clear hypothesis of where AI compresses cost or unlocks revenue, and a 90-day path to validating that hypothesis."**

When that list exists, organisations stop trying to sell a generic AI initiative and start trying to fix three specific problems with measurable upside.

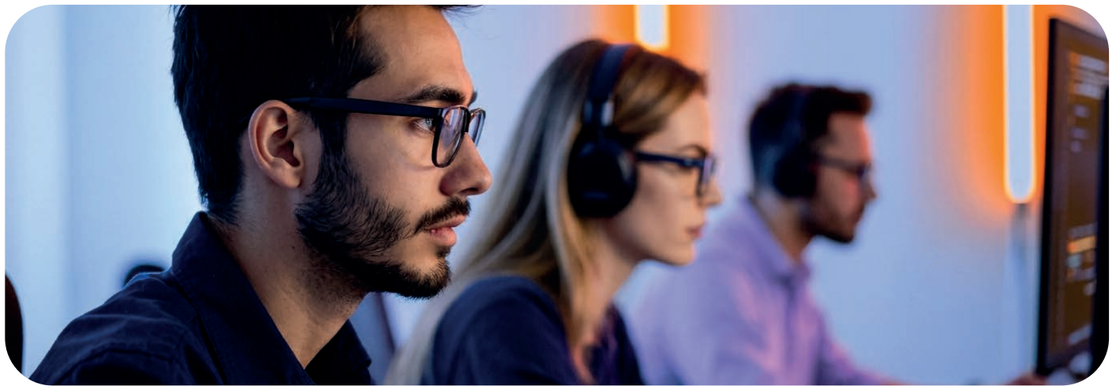
The invisible cost of validation

One of the least visible costs of automation without transformation is the validation workload it creates

When automated systems operate on inconsistent data – without a governed mapping layer, consistency checks or traceability – a disproportionate amount of human effort goes into keeping outputs synchronised across systems.

"Here's what that looks like on the ground," Combs explains. **"One person checks that what System A produced is what System B actually expects. Someone else chases the mismatch when it isn't. A third person writes up what changed and why so it holds up at the next audit. None of that work was in the business case. That's the invisible cost."**

In a well-governed environment, this work is minimal. However, in a typical enterprise automation deployment, it consumes the majority of the time the automation was supposed to save.



Six principles for getting AI right

1. **Start with real business problems**
   Focus on measurable pain points rather than technology-first use cases
2. **Redesign before automating**
   Challenge existing workflows before accelerating them
3. **Build for scale from the outset**
   Consider governance, support and ownership before deployment
4. **Work pragmatically around data constraints**
   Improve data continuously without waiting for perfection
5. **Embed governance from the beginning**
   Establish accountability, controls and guardrails early
6. **Treat AI as an evolving capability**
   Continuously refine, support and improve solutions after launch

CHAPTER 3

Data and knowledge: The foundations AI can't work without

According to Gartner, 85% of AI project failures are caused by poor data quality or insufficient data – yet many organisations continue launching new pilots without addressing the underlying cause.

85%

of AI project failures are caused by poor data quality or insufficient data

In many cases, it's not the model or algorithm that's the problem – it's the data underneath it.

Why legacy data struggles with AI

One of the biggest challenges organisations face is that most data environments were not designed for how AI operates today.

Most enterprise data was built to support reporting, structured to answer yesterday's questions. Traditional reporting systems were designed to provide visibility into what has already happened. AI requires data that is accurate, complete, consistently formatted, timely, and contextually connected across multiple business systems.



The integration problem

Organisations frequently say they have plenty of data. The problem is that it lives in silos – finance, HR, ERP, CRM, supply chain – each with its own standards and no shared taxonomy.

MuleSoft's 2026 benchmark found that the average enterprise manages 957 applications, yet only 27% of them are connected, down from 29% the previous year. **"This highlights one of the biggest challenges for enterprises,"** Gwinnell points out. **"Much of the data organisations possess is inaccessible for AI use."** In other words, the challenge is rarely volume. It's visibility. AI can only create value from the information it can access, understand and connect.

MuleSoft's 2026 benchmark

957

applications managed by the average enterprise

27%

connected, down from 29% the previous year

AI reproduces data errors at scale

A key factor that many organisations fail to recognise is that AI learns patterns, not truth.

"If the training data reflects errors, outdated entries or embedded bias, the model reproduces those patterns at scale," Gwinnell explains. A human analyst can recognise an anomaly and adjust, whereas AI systems assume the data represents reality. **"The automated system produces the wrong results and no one is certain why."**

According to Alteryx, the highest value applications for automation are forecasting and planning – but only 27% of enterprise leaders trust AI to support in these areas, and the primary reason is unreliable data feeding the outputs.

This erosion of trust compounds quickly. Users start double-checking every AI output manually while the automation continues to run, eroding the productivity gains it was intended to create. McKinsey is direct on this: untrusted AI becomes more expensive than no AI at all.

CHAPTER 3

Data explains what happened. Context shows what it means

Even organisations that solve data quality and integration challenges often discover another limitation.

Data tells AI what happened, but it doesn't always explain how decisions should be made going forward.

Business rules, approval paths, exception handling and operational knowledge often live in documents, emails and the heads of experienced employees. Without that context, AI can access information but still lack understanding.

Knowledge architecture as a competitive advantage

For Frederik Ahlers, Director of Automation & AI at Columbus, there's an important insight that organisations often miss:

the quality of their agents is a direct reflection of the quality of their institutional knowledge.

"An agent built on your business rules, decision logic, approval flows, and process documentation knows how your organisation works," Ahlers says. **"It produces output that is consistent, traceable, and trustworthy."**

The opposite is also true. An agent built on generic prompts produces generic results and creates the same governance vacuum as an ungoverned Excel sheet.

This reframes governance entirely, shifting it from a compliance burden to a competitive advantage. Organisations with documented business rules, standardised conventions, and machine-readable processes can build agents more quickly, with each new agent inheriting that context automatically. The result is consistent quality at scale, across every deployment.

For Ahlers, the organisations that treat their documentation as strategic infrastructure today are the ones that will move fastest tomorrow. A solid knowledge base isn't just overhead; it's the foundation that agents run on.

The diagnostic question

Before launching another pilot, organisations should ask a simpler question: is the data and knowledge the system depends on truly AI-ready? Having data and information stored somewhere isn't enough. AI-ready foundations are accurate, governed and supported by clearly documented business rules and processes.

The organisations creating value with AI today didn't begin with a better model or a more sophisticated algorithm. They began by building the essential foundations that allow AI to scale: trusted data, connected systems, and institutional knowledge that machines can understand.

The business impact of poor data

80%

More than 80% of AI projects are estimated to fail, twice the failure rate of other IT projects.

RAND CORPORATION

Poor data quality costs organisations

$12.9 million

per year

GARTNER

8 in 10

companies say data limitations are the primary roadblock to scaling agentic AI

MCKINSEY



CHAPTER 3

Delivery: Start small, scale intelligently

The organisations creating measurable value from AI are rarely the ones pursuing the biggest transformations. More often, they are solving a specific business problem, proving value quickly, and using that success to build momentum.

If AI initiatives fail because of weak processes, poor data and unclear ownership, the solution is not to launch larger programmes – it's to start with a focused use case, learn from it, and create a repeatable model for success.

Start small and improve over time

For Claes Reinholdt Kongsdam, Business Line Executive of Data & AI at Columbus, sustainable AI adoption is built through disciplined execution rather than ambition alone.

"Rather than betting on a single large transformation, businesses are focusing on iterative AI systems that solve a defined problem, fit into an existing workflow, and improve over time," Reinholdt Kongsdam explains. This smaller, smarter approach reduces risk, builds organisational confidence, and creates a credible foundation for scaling what works. It also helps businesses achieve value sooner and adapt as AI evolves, rather than waiting years for change.

The most successful examples, adds Andrew Kraus, Account Executive, often begin with targeted use cases rather than enterprise-wide transformation, such as the adoption of AI tools in day-to-day work.

"When I joined Columbus, I was given access to a lot of tools," Kraus says. **"I chose Copilot, and I built agents around it. One checks my emails every morning and tells me what's high priority and what can wait. Another finds prospects for me. My confidence and efficiency went up at the same time."**

The significance of examples like these is not their scale but their impact. Small, practical wins help employees build confidence, demonstrate value quickly and create the foundation for broader adoption. In many cases, these incremental improvements become the catalyst for larger business transformation.

The four dimensions that determine success

This is why successful adoption depends on more than technology. **"It requires equal attention to planning, process, people and platforms,"** Reinholdt Kongsdam explains. These four dimensions will shape value creation far more than the choice of any single product:

01 **Planning**
means identifying the business problem first, defining success measures, and establishing how outcomes will be tracked.

02 **Process**
means understanding where AI fits into the operating model, which steps it should support, and what controls are required.

03 **People**
means equipping teams to use AI with confidence, clarifying accountability, and building trust through transparency and training.

04 **Platform**
means selecting tools that integrate with existing systems, support governance, and scale without adding unnecessary complexity.

Getting the first step right

For that reason, organisations should resist the urge to start with procurement. Before selecting a platform, they need clarity on the problem they are trying to solve, the people involved, the data required, and how success will be measured.

"The right first step is usually to map a narrow, high-value workflow where the inputs are known, the output can be assessed and the impact is visible," Reinholdt Kongsdam says. **"From there, teams can test, learn, refine and expand."**

Progress here is deliberate rather than fast. By starting with a defined problem, proving value quickly, and scaling incrementally, organisations build the confidence, capability and governance needed for long-term success.

The result is not a single breakthrough project. It's a repeatable approach that turns AI from a promising experiment into an operational capability.

CHAPTER 3

Technology: Does your business need custom AI?

The opportunity has been identified, the process reviewed and the data cleaned. Now comes the technology itself. This is where organisations face a major decision: should they build their own custom AI, or buy ready-made software?

Understanding this build-vs-buy decision is vital for successfully embedding artificial intelligence as a normal, helpful part of how your team works.

Quick wins with off-the-shelf AI

Buying off-the-shelf AI software is the fastest way to see results. **"Much like buying standard office software, this route means you do not need a team of highly technical developers or expensive computer systems to get started,"** Nicholas Lea-Trengrouse, Head of Business Intelligence, explains. **"Your team can immediately begin using AI to help with everyday tasks like drafting emails, summarising documents, or organising information."**

Crucially, the software provider handles all the complicated maintenance, security, and regular updates in the background. This keeps management simple and prevents your IT department from being overwhelmed.

The benefits of this approach aren't just financial. The application of AI in daily tasks not only streamlines work and enables teams to focus on higher-value tasks, but it also increases confidence to scale AI in other areas of the business.

Gain ultimate control with custom AI

On the other hand, building your own custom AI gives organisations absolute control. For the highly specific processes that make your business unique, a generic, off-the-shelf tool might not be smart or tailored enough. Building a custom system ensures the AI works exactly how you want it to.

This approach, however, is much more complex. **"It requires having your internal data perfectly organised, hiring specialised technical staff, and committing to looking after the system for the long term,"** Lea-Trengrouse emphasises.

Custom AI requires more significant time and financial investment, but the result is a tailored model that aligns with your specific workflows, provides sharper insights, enables stronger compliance and data security, and seamlessly integrates into your existing systems. Scaling operations becomes frictionless, without the need to replatform.

The smart approach

In practice, the smartest approach is usually a mix of both off-the-shelf and custom. A mature strategy looks at each business task individually:

Everyday tasks:

Standard, routine work is perfect for ready-made, purchased AI software, giving you a quick efficiency boost with little hassle.

Business-specific processes:

The highly specialised processes that set your business apart from competitors are the ones worth the time and investment of building a custom AI.

Ultimately, the goal is to get work done better and faster. By balancing the speed of buying with the precision of building, organisations can ensure their AI investments solve the right problems without adding unnecessary complexity.



What's next?

Strong processes, trusted data, disciplined execution and the right technology create the conditions for AI success. But scaling AI introduces another challenge: ensuring those systems remain transparent, accountable and trusted over time.

CHAPTER 4

Responsible AI, governance and accountability

As AI becomes more embedded in business operations, its influence extends beyond individual tasks to decisions that affect customers, employees and organisational performance. With that influence comes greater responsibility for how AI systems are designed, deployed and managed.

Scaling AI successfully requires more than technical capability. Organisations need clear governance, appropriate safeguards and confidence in how decisions are made. They also need to define where human judgement remains essential and who is accountable for the outcomes.

This chapter shows how responsible AI practices, leadership and human oversight can help organisations build trust, manage risk and create the conditions for AI to deliver sustainable value.

Jack Binnall
Principal Power Platform Consultant



CJ Combs
Senior Sales Director, Data & AI



Tristan Gwinnell
Director, UK Data & AI



Frederik Ahlers
Director of Automation & AI



Claes Reinholdt Kongsdam
Business Line Executive of Data & AI



CHAPTER 4

AI ethics: A leadership priority, not a technical footnote

AI is no longer an experiment running quietly in the background. It's becoming a core part of how organisations make decisions that affect customers, employees and business performance – what gets approved, who gets shortlisted, what gets prioritised and what gets flagged.

The real challenge is whether an organisation can stand behind the decisions these systems make when they come under scrutiny.

Trust is becoming a competitive advantage

Fairness and ethics aren't a compliance nicety or a problem for one team to solve. "They're a direct line to reputation, regulatory exposure and the trust your customers place in you," explains Jack Binnall, Principal Power Platform Consultant at Columbus. "Get them wrong and the cost doesn't stay in the engine room. It lands squarely at board level."

Customers, partners and regulators are increasingly asking how automated decisions get made – and a clear, confident answer is fast becoming a competitive advantage.

"If you can't articulate why a model declined a customer, approved a purchase, offered a discount, incorrectly responded to a customer query, ranked a candidate lower or rejected a claim, you shouldn't be using it for that purpose in the first place," says Binnall.

Explainability isn't a technical luxury or a nice-to-have buried in the documentation. It's a governance requirement, and increasingly a regulatory one.

The reputational and legal risk grows as AI becomes more central to how organisations operate. Regulation, meanwhile, is catching up faster than expected. The EU AI Act and similar frameworks are moving from principle to enforcement, and organisations that design for fairness now will adapt far more cheaply than those forced to retrofit it later under pressure.

Governance enables speed, not just control

Trust depends on more than ethical principles. Organisations also need a clear framework for security, access, sensitivity and oversight.

According to Tristan Gwinnell, Director of Data & AI, when that structure is missing, one of two things happens. Either the organisation moves too cautiously and progress stalls, or it moves recklessly and creates unnecessary risk. Both kill momentum.

"Governance doesn't put the brake on AI adoption. Done well, it allows organisations to move fast with confidence because people trust that the right guardrails are in place," he says. Embedded from the start, governance accelerates adoption rather than slowing it.

"Governance failures are invisible in pilots, and catastrophic in production," CJ Combs agrees.

As AI scales, data must be continuously refreshed, validated, versioned and governed, which requires clear ownership, defined standards and enforced quality controls. In many cases, organisations are attempting to scale AI before establishing the ownership, controls and accountability frameworks required to trust its outputs.



"Governance failures are invisible in pilots, and catastrophic in production."

CJ Combs

The shadow AI problem

The need for deliberate governance is becoming more urgent as AI tools become increasingly accessible.

Frederik Ahlers, Director of Automation & AI, refers to Excel as an example: when Excel arrived, organisations didn't govern it. People built their own spreadsheets, workarounds and logic, and businesses lost visibility of how decisions were being made. Today, ChatGPT and Copilot are following a similar pattern: easy to access, easy to use, and often invisible to the organisation.

For Ahlers, the stakes are much higher. AI isn't just storing information; it's making recommendations, generating content and increasingly taking action. Shadow AI isn't a future risk – it's already here. So how can organisations break that pattern?

The question is no longer whether AI belongs in the enterprise – it already does. It's whether organisations will govern it deliberately or allow it to evolve unchecked. Unlike when Excel first arrived, organisations now understand the risks of allowing powerful tools to spread without clear governance. This time, there is no excuse to repeat the pattern.

THEN

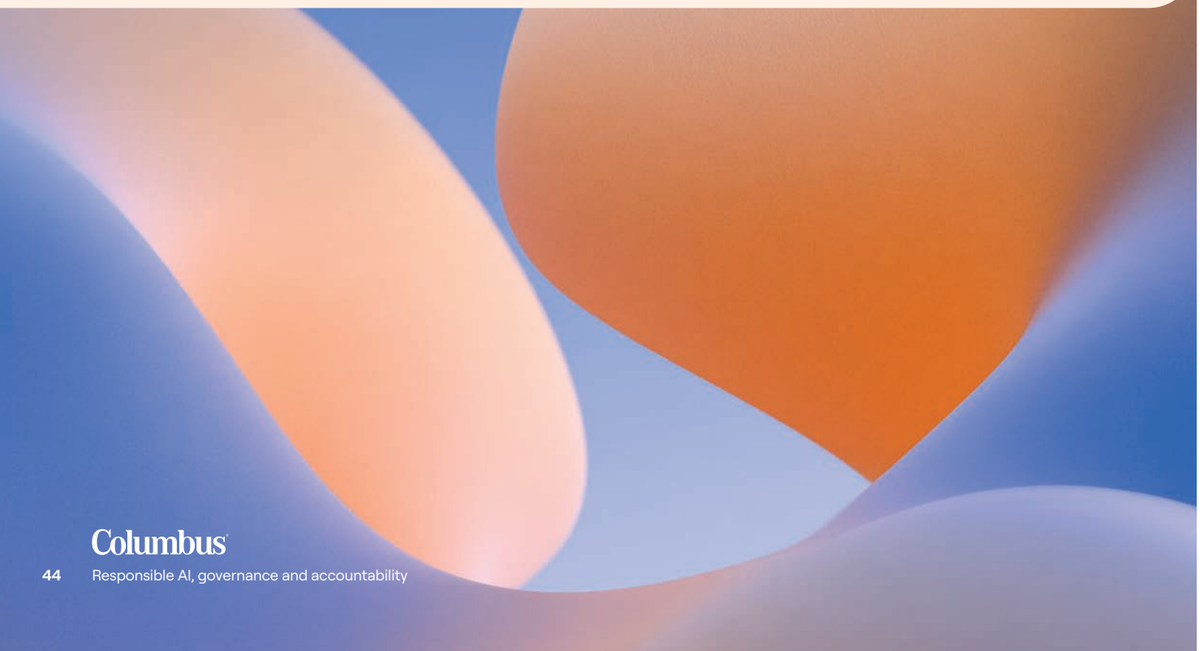
Excel

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TODAY

ChatGPT and Copilot

- Easy to access, easy to use
- Often invisible to the organisation
- Making recommendations, generating content and increasingly taking action



Embedding ethics in AI foundations

Ethics is the hardest element of an AI initiative to retrofit; for Binnall, it's essential that ethics is designed in, rather than bolted on.

"The cheapest and most effective time to get this right is at the design stage, when you're still choosing the data, defining what success looks like and deciding which edge cases matter," he says.

Once a model is in production, those assumptions are embedded. The data choices, success metrics and groups who were underrepresented in the training set are locked in, which means unpicking them later can be slow, expensive, and rarely complete.

The organisations approaching this responsibly are asking difficult questions early:

01
Where did this data come from and who is missing from it?

02
How do we monitor this to make sure the data remains unbiased?

03
Who gets harmed if we get this wrong?

04
Can a human step in and overrule the system when it matters?

These steps are not barriers to innovation. They help ensure that any AI an organisation builds or deploys is trustworthy, responsible and worthy of its name.

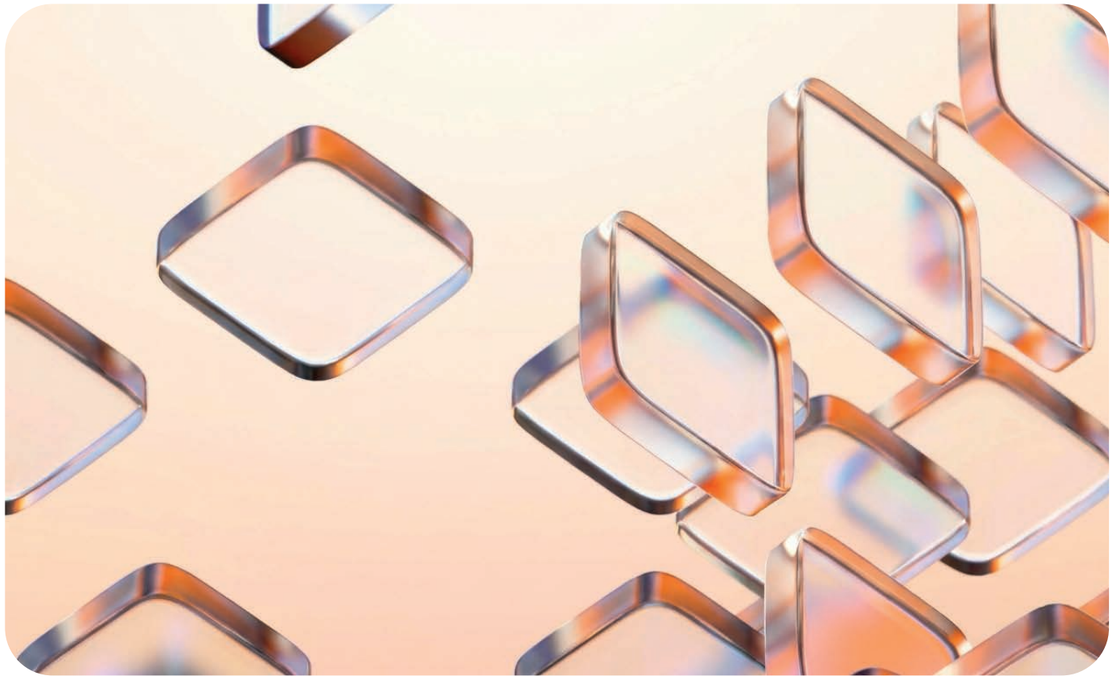
CHAPTER 4

Governance is what makes scaling AI possible

Responsible AI is not the cautious choice that holds organisations back – it's the foundation that lets businesses scale with confidence. The organisations that succeed with AI over the next five years will not simply be those that move fastest. They will be the ones whose customers, regulators and people can continue to trust how their AI systems are used.

"Fairness, transparency and accountability are what make that trust durable, and durable trust is what turns a promising pilot into a genuine competitive advantage," says Binnall.

As AI becomes more embedded in business operations, governance stops being a compliance exercise and becomes an operational capability. The organisations that build ethics, accountability and oversight into their foundations today will be the ones able to scale AI safely tomorrow.





CHAPTER 4

Humans in the loop: Why AI still needs people

Much of the conversation around AI focuses on models, platforms and technology. Yet the organisations creating lasting value are discovering that AI success is ultimately a people challenge.

AI can automate tasks, generate insights and increasingly take action, but it cannot own outcomes, drive organisational change or take accountability for business decisions. As AI becomes embedded into day-to-day operations, the role of people doesn't disappear. It evolves.

The organisations that succeed with AI are those that deliberately redesign how people, processes and technology work together.

Redesigning the operating model

For Frederik Ahlers, Director, Automation & AI, embedding intelligence does not remove humans from the loop. It repositions them – but only if the operating model is deliberately redesigned to support that shift.

"Agents handle execution continuously, while humans review output, resolve ambiguity, refine guardrails, and make the calls that require accountability," Ahlers explains.

That redesign doesn't happen automatically, and this is where ownership is critical. A designated owner must take responsibility for output quality and decide what the agent is trusted to do.

"It's not about adding more AI, it's about embedding AI as a participant in the work itself," Ahlers explains. **"It carries context, acts with intent, and operates continuously alongside your people. It's not a tool you invoke, but a colleague you design work around."**

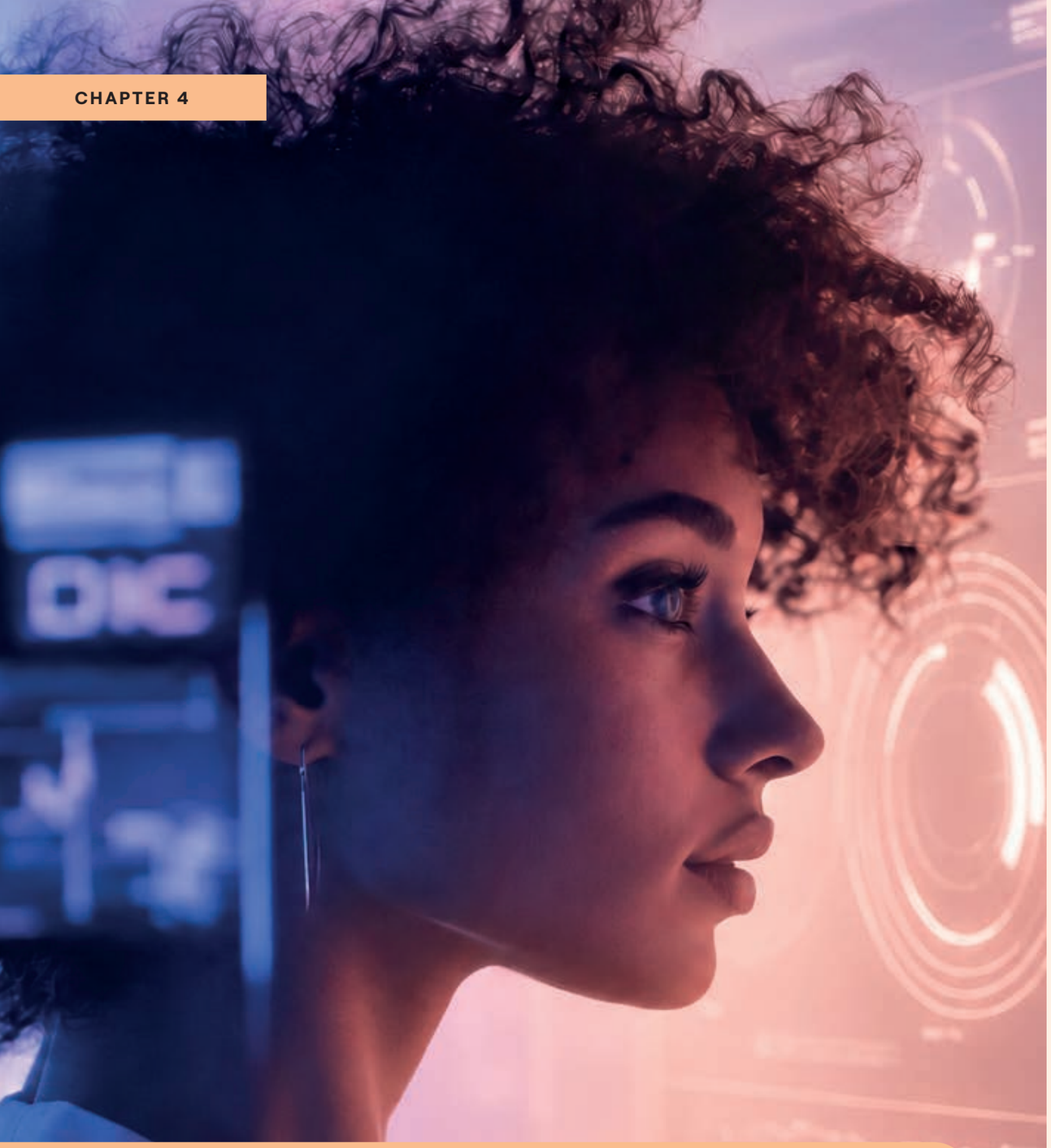
That transition requires a different question from the one most leaders are currently asking. **"What can we automate?"** becomes **"What can we hand off, and where do our people still need to be involved?"**



Making accountability explicit

Responsible AI cannot be fully delegated to technical teams. Leadership must define who is accountable for each system, which decisions it can influence and where human judgement must remain. This is fundamentally a question of ownership, not just engineering.

"When a system makes a poor call, 'the algorithm decided' isn't a defensible position," Binnall emphasises. **"Someone chose to build it, train it on data, interact with the system at that level of privilege, and deploy it against a particular set of decisions."** Ownership must therefore be explicit before deployment, not scrambled together after an incident.



CHAPTER 4

“When a system makes a poor call, ‘the algorithm decided’ isn’t a defensible position.”

Jack Binnall

Build AI around controlled workflows

According to Reinholdt Kongsdam, AI performs best within controlled workflows and with clearly defined inputs, supported by an appropriate governance framework. In theory, AI can handle ambiguity. But in practice, sustainable business value comes from reducing ambiguity where possible.

“Leaders should be explicit about the information the system receives, the decision or output it is expected to produce, and where human judgement remains essential,” Reinholdt Kongsdam adds.

Leaders should be explicit about

- The information the system receives
- The decision or output it is expected to produce
- Where human judgement remains essential



Why executive sponsorship matters

Successful adoption also depends on trust at the employee level. People need to understand what AI is doing, how it supports their work, and where responsibility still sits. Without that clarity, even well-designed systems can face resistance, workarounds and inconsistent adoption.

For Andrew Kraus, Account Executive at Columbus, organisational alignment is key to defining the direction of travel: **"It all comes back to people,"** he emphasises. **"Leadership teams are under enormous pressure to show AI progress, and when they aim too high too early, they stall. If leadership can't articulate what success looks like, how can anyone deliver it?"**

This pressure can create a cycle of overpromising and underdelivering. When expectations are misaligned, progress slows, teams struggle to prioritise initiatives, and confidence erodes.

"Leaders define a vision, fund a pilot, take the photo and move on," Tristan Gwinnell, Director of Data & AI, adds. **"The moment the project hits the hard, unglamorous work of change management and adoption, the air goes out of the room."** What works is a sponsor who stays in the room: removing roadblocks, communicating the why, and driving adoption when momentum slows. Technology doesn't transform organisations – people do, and they need to be guided through change, not simply informed of it.

Kraus agrees: **"Successful AI programmes start with shared objectives, clear ownership and realistic definitions of success."**

Successful AI programmes start with

01 Shared objectives

02 Clear ownership

03 Realistic definitions of success

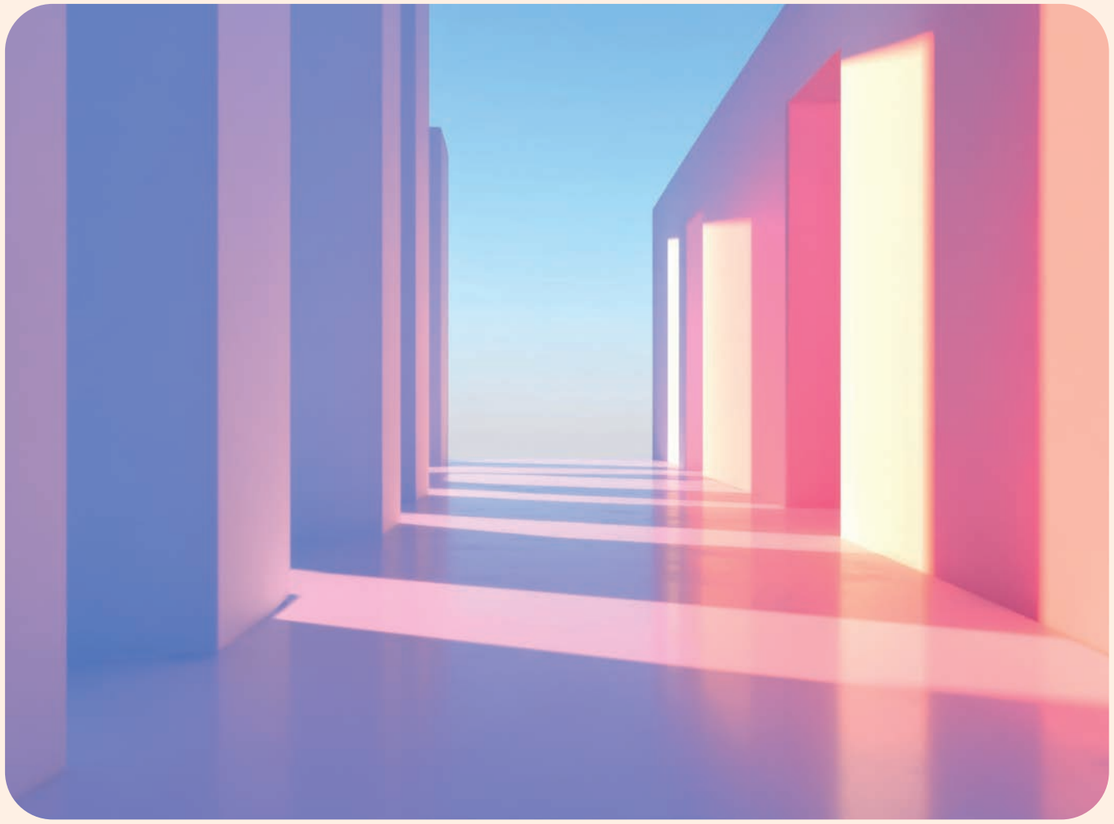
> "Leadership teams are under enormous pressure to show AI progress, and when they aim too high too early, they stall."
>
> **Andrew Kraus**

AI doesn't replace accountability

The organisations succeeding with AI are not replacing people. They are redesigning work so that people and AI can both do what they do best.

As AI becomes more capable, the need for human accountability becomes more important, not less. Someone must define objectives, manage exceptions, own outcomes and build trust in how AI is used. The competitive advantage will belong to organisations that learn how to combine human judgement with machine execution at scale.

Human judgement + Machine execution



Conclusion: From adoption to value

The key question facing organisations today is not whether they should use AI, but how they can get value from it.

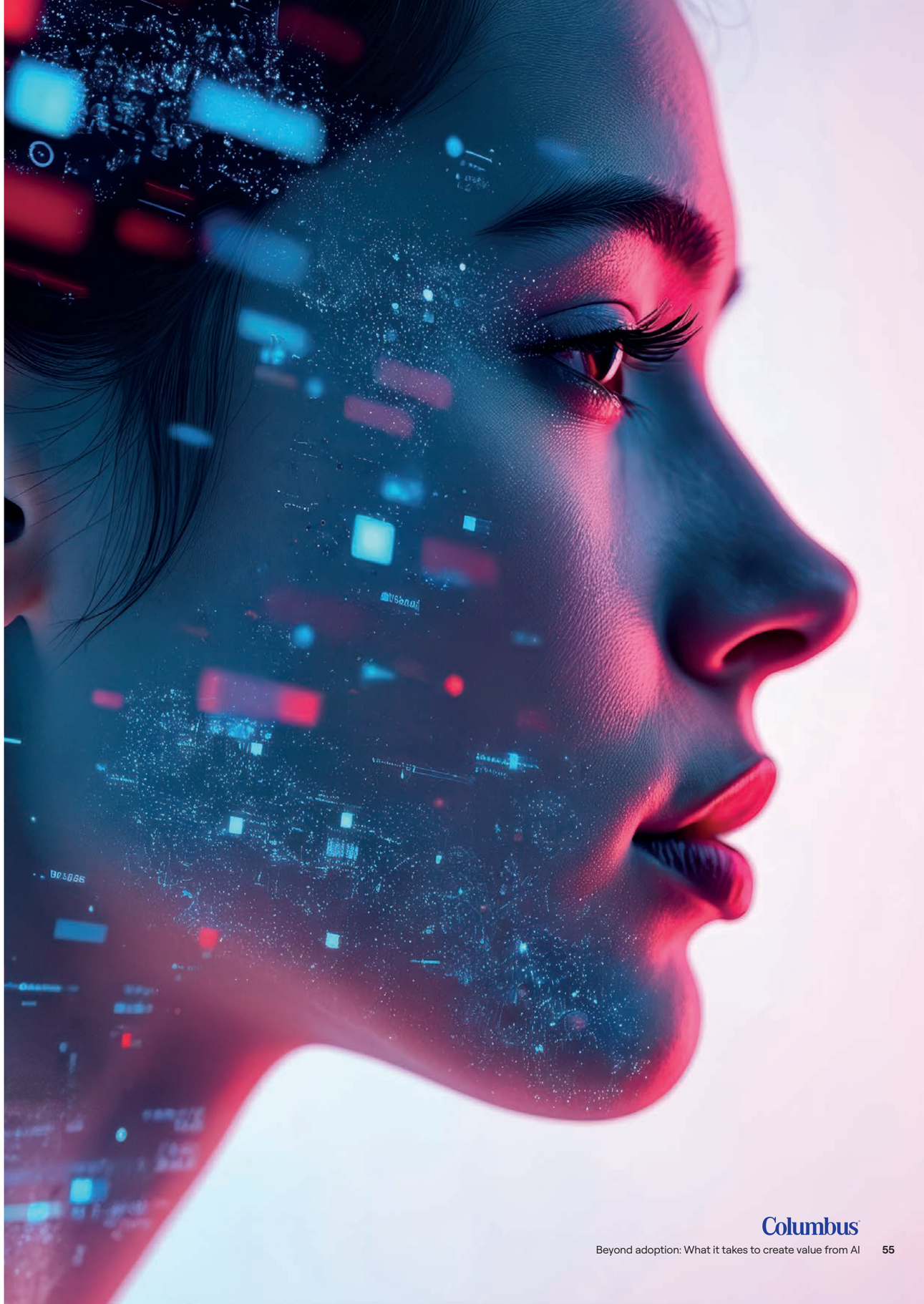
The starting point isn't the biggest budget or perfectly clean data. It's a specific business problem, rather than a technology. From there, organisations need to validate the opportunity with clear ownership and measurable outcomes, build the process, data and knowledge foundations needed to support it and establish governance from the outset rather than adding it later.

But with the right approach, AI can become part of a broader transformation, helping organisations rethink how work gets done and where value can be created.

Success requires clarity on where the friction sits today and what the organisation is trying to achieve. It also requires an iterative approach, building capabilities that deliver greater value as organisations develop their AI maturity.

Getting there doesn't require a multi-year transformation programme.





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