
The AI Advantage

Why most enterprise AI initiatives struggle to produce measurable financial return, and the five-pillar leadership framework that changes it

95%

of enterprise GenAI pilots deliver no measurable P&L impact, per MIT research

42%

of companies abandoned most of their AI initiatives in 2025, up from 17% a year earlier

6%

of organizations qualify as AI high performers with meaningful bottom-line impact

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The most expensive experiment in business history is producing almost no return.

Organizations have never adopted a technology faster, and never converted one into financial results slower. The gap between AI investment and AI impact is now the defining leadership problem of this decade.

The numbers are stark. MIT research covering hundreds of enterprise deployments found that **95 percent of generative AI pilots deliver no measurable P&L impact**, despite an estimated 30 to 40 billion dollars in enterprise spend.¹ McKinsey's latest global survey shows 88 percent of organizations now use AI in at least one function, yet only 39 percent report any bottom-line impact at all, and just 6 percent qualify as high performers.² S&P Global found the share of companies abandoning most of their AI initiatives jumped from 17 percent to 42 percent in a single year.³

The research converges on a consistent theme about the cause, and it is not primarily the models. MIT names a "learning gap" in how organizations integrate AI into real work.¹ RAND finds the most frequent causes are leadership-driven, led by leaders misunderstanding the problem AI is meant to solve, alongside data and infrastructure gaps.⁴ BCG's long-standing formula estimates roughly 70 percent of the challenge is people and process, not algorithms.⁵ The pattern is clear: most organizations are not led in a way that converts capable technology into money.

This paper presents The AI Advantage, a five-pillar leadership framework for closing the gap between AI spend and financial gain: **Ownership in the AI Era, From User to Leader, Monetization Over Experimentation, Decision Superiority, and Value Creation at Scale**. The thesis is simple and demanding. AI is not the advantage. How you lead it is.

The failure is organizational

MIT, RAND, and BCG independently locate the dominant causes in leadership and integration rather than model quality.

Pilots are where value dies

Nearly two thirds of organizations remain stuck in experimentation. Almost half of proofs of concept never ship.

Winners think in P&L terms

High performers tie every initiative to revenue, margin, or cost before approval, then redesign workflows to capture it.

Amplification outperforms replacement

Firms using AI to amplify people report the strongest gains. Workforce cuts show no correlation with better returns.

Speed is a choice, not a size

Mid-market firms reach production in about 90 days. Large enterprises average nine months, and momentum dies in the gap.

The divide is compounding

The 6 percent capturing value are reinvesting and accelerating. The gap widens every quarter it goes unaddressed.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The dividing line between AI spend and AI return is not budget, talent, or model access. It is leadership. Organizations that lead AI as a financial discipline join the 6 percent. Those that run it as an experiment fund everyone else's learning curve.

THE VALUE GAP, BY THE NUMBERS

Record adoption. Rare returns. The data is unambiguous.

95%

of enterprise GenAI pilots show no measurable P&L impact despite \$30–40B in spend

MIT NANDA, GENAI DIVIDE REPORT, 2025

39%

of organizations report any bottom-line impact from AI, even as 88% now use it

MCKINSEY STATE OF AI, NOV 2025

42%

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

S&P GLOBAL MARKET INTELLIGENCE, 2025

2x

AI projects fail at roughly twice the rate of comparable non-AI technology projects

RAND CORPORATION, 2024

The enterprise AI funnel: where investment goes to stall



Share of organizations at each stage of enterprise AI deployment. Source: MIT NANDA, The GenAI Divide: State of AI in Business 2025.

Behind the funnel, a discipline problem

The average organization now scraps 46 percent of its AI proofs of concept before production.³ IBM's global CEO research puts the share of AI initiatives delivering their expected ROI at roughly one in four.⁶ And McKinsey finds nearly two thirds of organizations remain stuck in experimentation or pilot mode, generating scattered local wins that never compound into enterprise value.² The pattern across every dataset is identical: adoption is a solved problem, and conversion is not. What separates the 6 percent is not what they bought. It is how they lead.

WHAT THE DATA MEANS

The question in every boardroom has changed. It is no longer "are we using AI?" It is "is the AI making us money?" For most organizations, the honest answer is not yet, and the reason is leadership, not technology.

SECTION 01 THE VALUE GAP

The reckoning has arrived: boards are now asking where the money went.

For two years, the operating faith of corporate AI was simple: spend more, get more. In 2026, that faith met a budget review, and in most companies the math did not hold.

The spending was real and enormous. Enterprises poured tens of billions into generative AI pilots, licenses, and platforms, and adoption set records: 88 percent of organizations now use AI in at least one business function, up from 78 percent a year earlier.² By any historical standard, few enterprise technologies have ever been embraced this quickly.

The returns did not follow. Only 39 percent of organizations can attribute any bottom-line impact to AI at all, and most of those put it below 5 percent of earnings.² MIT's analysis of hundreds of deployments found 95 percent of pilots producing no measurable P&L change.¹ The response is now visible in the data: the share of companies abandoning most of their AI initiatives has more than doubled in a year, and organizations are scrapping nearly half of their proofs of concept before they ever reach production.³

This is not an AI winter. It is a repricing of expectations: the end of "spend first, measure later," and the start of a harder question. Not "are we using AI?" but "is the AI working?"

What makes this moment dangerous is that the value is not disappearing. It is polarizing. While the majority stalls, a small cohort is compounding. McKinsey's high performers, roughly 6 percent of organizations, attribute more than 5 percent of earnings to AI and are scaling faster, redesigning workflows, and investing more aggressively than everyone else.² The gap between the two groups widens every quarter, because the winners are reinvesting gains the laggards never captured.

This is why the value gap is a leadership emergency rather than a technology disappointment. The same models, the same tools, and often the same budgets are producing radically different financial outcomes in different hands. When identical inputs produce opposite results, the variable is not the input. It is the leadership converting it.

KEY TAKEAWAY

AI value is not scarce. It is polarized. The same technology is making a small group of organizations materially more profitable while the majority funds pilots that never pay. The difference is not what they bought.

SECTION 02 DIAGNOSIS

The cause is not the technology. Every major study points to leadership.

When 95 percent of pilots fail against the same technical backdrop where 5 percent succeed spectacularly, the explanation cannot be the technology. The research is unusually unified on what it actually is.

MIT calls it the learning gap. Failed deployments share a pattern: tools that do not retain feedback or adapt to context, bolted onto organizations that never redesigned the work around them. Executives blamed regulation and model quality; the evidence pointed to flawed integration.¹ Tellingly, MIT also documented a thriving shadow AI economy inside more than 90 percent of firms, where employees use personal AI tools that outperform the official pilots. The demand is real. The leadership architecture around it is not.

RAND finds the most frequent causes are leadership-driven. Its root-cause analysis of why AI projects fail at roughly twice the rate of conventional technology projects puts leaders misunderstanding or miscommunicating the problem AI should solve at the top of the list, followed by inadequate data, technology chasing, infrastructure gaps, and problems AI simply cannot yet handle.⁴ Data and infrastructure matter, but the causes leaders control head the list, and they are the ones that determine whether the rest get fixed.

McKinsey and BCG point the same direction. McKinsey's high performers distinguish themselves through transformative ambition, workflow redesign, and sustained executive commitment, not superior tooling.² BCG's long-standing formula puts it plainly: capturing AI value is roughly 10 percent algorithms, 20 percent technology and data, and 70 percent people and process.⁵ The human layer is also where trust research lands: global studies show most employees conceal their AI use and use it without standards, the predictable behavior of a workforce operating without leadership clarity.⁸

Strip away the vendor noise and the pattern is almost embarrassing in its consistency. Most AI initiatives do not fail in the model. They fail in the operating model.

This diagnosis should be liberating: leadership is the one variable every executive team fully controls. You cannot buy your way across the value gap, but you can lead your way across it. The pattern for doing so is the framework this paper turns to next.

KEY TAKEAWAY

The dominant constraint is not model quality, budget, or talent supply. It is organizational conversion, and conversion is a leadership discipline. That is bad news for companies waiting on better technology, and very good news for leaders willing to act.

THE FRAMEWORK

The AI Advantage: Five Pillars of AI-Driven Leadership

The organizations converting AI into financial results share five leadership disciplines. Together they form a sequence: own it, lead it, monetize it, decide with it, and scale it.

01**Ownership in the AI Era**

Leaders take personal ownership of AI outcomes instead of delegating them to IT or waiting for clarity. Awareness is not a strategy. The most frequent failure causes in the research are leadership-driven, and sustained executive commitment is the strongest marker of the organizations that win.

02**From User to Leader**

The tools are not the advantage. Thinking and leading alongside AI is. Usage is now universal and worth nothing by itself; the edge belongs to leaders who work with AI daily, model it publicly, and build their organization's capability to do the same.

03**Monetization Over Experimentation**

Every AI initiative carries an explicit financial thesis before approval: the revenue it will grow, the margin it will expand, or the cost it will remove. Experimentation is a phase, not a strategy. Initiatives without a P&L thesis are hobbies with invoices.

04**Decision Superiority**

AI makes decisions faster. It does not make them better. That is still on leaders. The durable advantage goes to organizations that redesign how decisions are made: clear decision rights, AI-informed judgment, and speed multiplied by quality.

05**Value Creation at Scale**

Scale value, not headcount. The evidence now shows firms using AI to amplify their people capture the strongest gains, while replacement shows no correlation with better returns. Scaling means compounding wins across the enterprise, not shrinking it.

THE ANCHOR

AI is an accelerant. It multiplies the quality of the leadership it is given. Weak leadership scaled by AI is weakness at scale. Strong leadership scaled by AI is the advantage.

PILLAR 01 OWNERSHIP IN THE AI ERA

Ownership over awareness: the era of waiting for clarity is over.

Every executive is now aware of AI. Almost none of that awareness converts into results, because awareness asks nothing of a leader. Ownership asks everything.

The most common posture in the C-suite today is informed spectating: reading the reports, approving the budgets, delegating the execution to IT, and waiting for the picture to clarify before committing personally. The research is blunt about where that leads. RAND's root-cause work finds the most frequent driver of AI failure is leadership itself, beginning with leaders who misunderstand or miscommunicate the problem AI is meant to solve.⁴ And S&P Global's abandonment data shows what commitment decay looks like at scale: 42 percent of companies walking away from most of their initiatives in a single year.³

Ownership inverts the posture. It means a named executive is personally accountable for the financial outcomes of AI, not for the activity. It means AI sits on the C-suite and board agenda as an enterprise priority with the same review discipline as any major capital allocation. And it means leaders develop genuine personal fluency, because you cannot own an outcome you do not understand well enough to interrogate.

The deeper truth this pillar confronts is that waiting for clarity is itself a decision, and it is the wrong one. Clarity in a fast-moving domain is created through committed action, not received through observation. The high performers in McKinsey's data, marked by sustained senior-leadership commitment, did not have better visibility into the future.² They had leaders willing to own outcomes before the outcomes were guaranteed, which is the only time ownership is worth anything.

A practical test: ask who in your organization loses sleep if AI produces no financial return this year. If the honest answer is nobody, or everybody, you do not have ownership. You have awareness with a budget attached.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Awareness is not a strategy and sponsorship is not a signature. AI outcomes need a named owner at the top, personal fluency behind the ownership, and board-level review discipline. Everything else in this framework depends on it.

PILLAR 02 FROM USER TO LEADER

The tools are not the advantage. Thinking alongside AI is.

When 88 percent of organizations use AI, usage is table stakes. The question that separates the 6 percent is no longer whether your people use AI, but whether your leaders lead with it.

MIT's data explains why universal usage produces so little enterprise value: general-purpose tools lift individual productivity, and individual productivity gains evaporate before they reach the P&L.¹ An employee drafting emails faster is a user. An organization whose leaders think, plan, decide, and coach alongside AI is something different, and that difference is where the financial results live.

Moving from user to leader operates on three levels. **Personally**, leaders make AI a daily thinking partner in strategy, analysis, preparation, and decision-making, developing the judgment to know where it is brilliant and where it is confidently wrong. **Visibly**, they model that practice in the open, because organizations mirror what leadership actually does, not what it mandates. The trust research is unambiguous that supported hands-on experience is the fastest path from skepticism to capable use, and leaders showing their own use is the most powerful permission structure a workforce can receive.⁸ **Organizationally**, they build capability as a strategic investment: role-based readiness that teaches each function what to use AI for, what never to use it for, and how to verify outputs in context.

You cannot lead a transformation you have not lived. Leaders who delegate their own AI fluency are asking their organizations to go somewhere they have never been.

This pillar is also the honest answer to the shadow AI problem. When more than 90 percent of firms have employees using personal AI tools outside official channels,¹ the workforce is not resisting the transformation. It is ahead of it, waiting for leadership to catch up. Leaders who make the shift from user to leader convert that hidden energy into visible, governed, compounding capability.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Universal usage has made AI proficiency worthless as a differentiator. The advantage now belongs to leaders who think alongside AI daily, model it publicly, and build role-based capability across the organization. Fluency at the top is the permission structure for transformation below.

PILLAR 03 **MONETIZATION OVER EXPERIMENTATION**

Every initiative earns its place with a financial thesis, or it does not ship.

This is the pillar where the 95 percent and the 6 percent part ways. The majority runs AI as an experimentation program. The winners run it as a monetization discipline: growing revenue, expanding margin, and maximizing financial gain with AI.

The experimentation trap is visible across the datasets. Nearly two thirds of organizations remain stuck in pilot mode.² The average company scraps 46 percent of its proofs of concept before production.³ Only about one in four initiatives delivers its expected ROI.⁶ Experimentation feels like progress because it produces activity, learning, and demos. But experimentation without a monetization thesis is not learning. It is cost, deferred indefinitely.

Monetization discipline means no AI initiative is approved without three things: **a quantified P&L thesis** naming the revenue it will grow, the margin it will expand, or the cost it will remove, and by how much; **a named owner** accountable for that number; and **a kill date** by which the initiative reaches production or releases its resources. MIT's research puts hard numbers on the urgency behind the third: mid-market organizations move from pilot to production in roughly 90 days, while large enterprises average nine months.¹ Scale explains some of that gap. It does not excuse it, because focus is the variable leaders control at any size.

The same discipline governs where the money goes. MIT found enterprises concentrating GenAI budgets on high-visibility sales and marketing use cases while the strongest measured returns sat in less glamorous back-office and operational work.¹ Monetization-first leaders allocate by expected financial yield, not by demo appeal. And they measure what they claimed: every initiative reports against its original thesis, so the portfolio compounds proof instead of accumulating pilots.

One reframe matters for every leader reading this. Monetization does not mean selling AI products. For nearly every organization, it means something closer to home: using AI to win more customers, serve them more profitably, price and forecast more intelligently, and remove cost that funds growth. The output is not an AI business. It is a better business.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Experimentation is a phase, not a strategy. Every AI initiative needs a quantified financial thesis, a named owner, and a kill date. If it cannot state the money, it cannot spend the money.

PILLAR 04 DECISION SUPERIORITY

AI makes decisions faster. It does not make them better. That is still on you.

Strip every business down far enough and it is a portfolio of decisions. The organizations winning with AI are not the ones automating the most tasks. They are the ones making measurably better decisions, faster, at every level.

This is where McKinsey's most important finding lives. The single practice that most distinguishes AI high performers is not tool selection or spend. It is **workflow redesign**: fundamentally rethinking how work flows and where decisions get made, rather than bolting AI onto processes designed for a world without it.² Bolted-on AI accelerates the old decision process, errors included. Redesigned workflows change what information reaches a decision, when, and with what quality.

Decision superiority is built from three components. **Decision rights**: explicit clarity about which decisions AI can inform, which it can make within guardrails, and which remain human, sorted by stakes rather than by convenience. **Calibrated judgment**: the trust research shows ungoverned organizations drift toward the two failure modes of blind acceptance and blanket refusal, and large shares of employees admit relying on AI outputs without verifying them.⁸ Superior deciders train appropriate reliance: when to trust, when to verify, when to override. **Compounding speed**: once quality is protected, velocity becomes the multiplier, because an organization that makes decisions of equal quality twice as fast learns twice as much per quarter as its competitors.

Your competitors have access to the same models you do. They do not have access to your judgment. Decision superiority is the advantage that cannot be procured.

The leadership work here is unglamorous and decisive: map the twenty decisions that most drive enterprise value, redesign how each is made with AI in the loop, assign clear rights and escalation paths, and measure decision quality alongside decision speed. Organizations do not compete on models. They compete on decisions, and decisions are a leadership product.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Speed without judgment is just faster mistakes. Redesign the workflows around your highest-value decisions, set explicit decision rights, and train calibrated reliance. Better decisions, made faster, compound into an advantage no competitor can buy.

PILLAR 05 **VALUE CREATION AT SCALE**

Scale value, not headcount. The evidence has already settled this debate.

The loudest promise of the AI era was doing the same with fewer people. The data arriving in 2026 tells a different story: the financial winners are the organizations using AI to make their people more valuable, not more optional.

Gartner survey research published in 2026 found no correlation between AI-driven workforce reductions and better returns, while organizations deploying AI to amplify their people reported the strongest gains.⁷ Correlation is not causation, but the mechanism behind the association is not hard to see. Replacement strategies harvest a one-time cost saving and pay for it with degraded capability, collapsed trust, and the quiet exit of the exact judgment AI depends on. Amplification strategies compound: the same workforce produces more revenue, serves customers better, and generates the reinvestable gains that fund the next wave.

Scaling value is also the answer to the fragmentation problem McKinsey identifies as the mainstream condition: many local wins, little systemic reinforcement.² Pockets of AI productivity scattered across functions never reach the P&L. High performers connect them: they take what worked in one workflow, industrialize it across the enterprise, reinvest the captured gains, and hold transformative ambition rather than incremental targets. That is why the 6 percent attribute meaningful earnings to AI while the majority attributes anecdotes.

This pillar closes the loop on the previous four. Ownership creates the mandate. Fluency creates the capability. Monetization creates the proof. Decision superiority creates the operating quality. Scaling turns all of it into an enterprise trajectory: value that compounds because the organization, not a pilot team, has learned to create it. The endgame is not a company with impressive AI projects. It is a company where AI-amplified people create more value per person, per decision, and per dollar than any competitor's.

And this is where the human message and the financial message become the same message. Telling your people AI exists to amplify them is not just the culture play. On the current evidence, it is the profit play.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Replacement harvests a one-time saving. Amplification compounds. Scale the wins, reinvest the gains, and build the organization where AI-amplified people are the advantage, because the data now shows that is where the money is.

EXHIBIT 1

The AI Advantage Diagnostic: Value Creators vs. Value Stallers

Ten observable behaviors separate the organizations converting AI into financial results from those funding pilots. Audit your organization honestly against each row.

VALUE CREATORS	VALUE STALLERS
✓ A named executive owns AI financial outcomes, with board-level review.	✗ AI is delegated to IT as a technology program with diffuse accountability.
✓ Leaders use AI daily, visibly, and build fluency across the executive team.	✗ Leaders mandate adoption they do not personally practice or understand.
✓ Every initiative carries a quantified P&L thesis: revenue, margin, or cost.	✗ Initiatives are approved on strategic vibes and demo appeal.
✓ Pilots have owners, kill dates, and a 90-day bias toward production.	✗ Pilots run indefinitely; experimentation is mistaken for progress.
✓ Budgets follow measured financial yield, including unglamorous operations work.	✗ Budgets follow visibility, chasing high-profile use cases with weak returns.
✓ Workflows are redesigned around AI-informed decisions.	✗ AI is bolted onto processes designed for a world without it.
✓ Decision rights are explicit: what AI informs, what it makes, what stays human.	✗ Reliance is ungoverned, drifting between blind trust and blanket refusal.
✓ Role-based readiness scales capability alongside deployment.	✗ Generic training is offered once; usage is expected to follow access.
✓ AI amplifies people; gains are reinvested into growth and capability.	✗ AI is framed as headcount reduction, collapsing trust and hiding usage.
✓ Wins are industrialized across the enterprise and measured against thesis.	✗ Wins stay local, celebrated in decks, invisible in the P&L.

EXHIBIT 2

The First 90 Days: From AI Spend to AI Return

The value gap closes through sequenced execution, not bigger budgets. This roadmap converts the five pillars into a disciplined first quarter.

DAYS 1-30

Own It

- **Name the executive owner** of AI financial outcomes, with board-level reporting. Not a committee. A name.
- **Audit the portfolio against money:** every current initiative states its P&L thesis or is flagged for the kill list.
- **Map real usage,** including shadow AI. The demand already inside your walls is your cheapest intelligence.
- **Set the leadership standard:** the executive team commits to personal, visible AI fluency.

DAYS 31-60

Focus It

- **Concentrate on two or three initiatives** with the strongest quantified theses. Kill or pause the rest.
- **Redesign the workflows** around your highest-value decisions, with explicit decision rights and escalation paths.
- **Launch role-based readiness** for the functions those initiatives touch, verification training included.
- **Frame the change as amplification,** directly and honestly, including its implications for roles.

DAYS 61-90

Prove It

- **Drive to production** with a 90-day bias. If an initiative cannot ship, it releases its resources.
- **Measure against thesis:** actual financial impact versus the number each initiative claimed.
- **Industrialize the winner:** take the strongest result and scale it to a second function or market.
- **Set the operating cadence:** a standing executive review of AI financial impact, adoption quality, and portfolio discipline.

THE STANDARD

By day 90, every AI initiative in your organization should have a quantified financial thesis, a named owner, and a production date. Anything missing one of the three is not a strategy. It is a subscription.

CONCLUSION

The Leadership Imperative

The AI era will not be won by the organizations with the most advanced models. Everyone has the models. It will be won by the organizations whose leaders convert them into financial results, and the conversion playbook is now visible.

The evidence in this paper resolves to one sentence: AI is not the advantage; how you lead it is. The 95 percent and the 6 percent are working with the same technology. What separates them is ownership at the top, fluency in the leadership team, monetization discipline in the portfolio, superiority in how decisions get made, and the will to scale value through people rather than around them. None of that can be purchased. All of it can be built, starting now.

Five Moves for AI-Driven Leaders

1

Put a name on it

Assign executive ownership of AI financial outcomes with board-level review. The research puts leadership-driven causes at the top of every failure analysis, and commitment that decays shows up as abandonment.

2

Lead it before you mandate it

Build personal and executive-team fluency, practiced daily and modeled publicly. You cannot lead a transformation you have not lived.

3

Demand a financial thesis from every initiative

Revenue grown, margin expanded, or cost removed, quantified before approval, with a named owner and a kill date. No thesis, no funding.

4

Redesign decisions, not just tasks

Map your highest-value decisions, rebuild the workflows around them with explicit decision rights, and measure quality alongside speed.

5

Scale value through your people

Amplify rather than replace, industrialize the wins, and reinvest the gains. The evidence now shows amplification is where the returns are.

THE CHOICE

The value gap will close for every organization eventually, in one of two ways: leaders will close it, or competitors will. The 6 percent are already compounding. The only question left is which side of the divide your next twelve months put you on.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Matt Mayberry is a global keynote speaker and 2x Wall Street Journal and USA Today bestselling author who works with executive teams on leadership effectiveness, culture, and high-performance execution. He advises organizations navigating complex transformation, including AI adoption, where leadership, culture, and accountability determine financial results. His client work spans Fortune 500 enterprises across financial services, technology, healthcare, energy, and manufacturing, and his flagship keynote, *The AI Advantage*, has been delivered to executive audiences nationwide.

A former NFL linebacker for the Chicago Bears, Matt draws on firsthand experience navigating high-stakes adversity and reinvention to help leaders build organizations that perform under pressure, adapt through disruption, and sustain excellence as the world changes around them. He is the author of *Culture Is the Way*, selected by Malcolm Gladwell's Next Big Idea Club, and *The Transformational Leader*.

NEXT STEP

The value gap closes through leadership, and it closes faster with the right partner. To assess where your organization stands across the five pillars, **schedule an AI Advantage executive briefing or leadership-team diagnostic at mattmayberryonline.com**. Keynotes, workshops, and advisory engagements are built from the same framework presented in this paper.

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