The Great AI Adoption Debates of 2026

The Defining Tensions Shaping
Enterprise AI Transformation

United Minds | Weber Shandwick

Introduction

The conversation around AI is shifting. While critics point to underwhelming returns, some organizations are moving past the hype and finding what actually works.

According to a 2025 Teneo survey of more than 350 public company CEOs, 68% plan to spend more on AI in 2026. Yet **fewer than half** of current projects have generated returns that exceed their costs.[1] We've heard enough from the cynics. Instead, we're interested in what's behind the 50% that are successful.

We interviewed AI and digital leaders at numerous global enterprises spanning pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, transportation, consumer goods, and packaging. Each company, while applying AI differently, is quickly learning what drives value.

Our conclusion: The challenge is not technology. It's human.

The interviewees' experiences reveal one truth: AI adoption is a people challenge wrapped in a technology package. AI use cases are possible, and in many cases are working, but it's not straightforward. The question is whether organizations can navigate the tensions that determine success or failure.

AI succeeds or fails based on how organizations manage the human tensions that come with change. Navigating these tensions is what separates experimentation from enterprise impact.

Uncovered from the insights of large organizations, this report examines five tensions that Digital leaders are grappling with:

1. Do you need a revolutionary vision or an evolutionary approach?
2. How do you balance quick wins against long-term integration?
3. Should AI act as an assistant or a colleague?
4. Does adoption spread top-down or bottom-up?
5. How do you build trust in AI outputs while protecting jobs?

Organizations that navigate these tensions well see 1.5x revenue growth and 1.6x greater shareholder returns compared to peers.[2] Those that ignore them waste resources and damage employee trust.

Your company culture, risk tolerance, and business model shape the right approach. This report shows how leading organizations are capturing value and offers guidance for your own journey.

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> *"We often fixate on technology: how fast it's advancing, how powerful it's becoming, how much it might change our lives. But the real driver of innovation has always been people. Technology will keep evolving. The question is whether we evolve with it by cultivating the talent, education, and curiosity that ensures innovation serves humanity, and not the other way around."*
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> *— Eric Schmidt, Former CEO & Chairman, Google*
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68%
of CEOs plan to spend more on AI in 2026

Fewer than
50%
of current AI projects have a return that exceeds their costs

1.5x
revenue growth for organizations that manage tensions well

1.6x
greater shareholder returns for successful AI adopters

Determining your AI Vision: Revolution or Evolution?

Overview
Having a clear vision is more important than having a big lofty ambition. In the rush to get started, many organizations haven't taken time to get their AI narrative straight. According to Gartner, organizations with clear AI visions see significantly faster adoption.[3]

One global enterprise admitted they initially struggled without clear direction from leadership. Without a unified vision, their champions network created competing perspectives on priorities and approach.

Visions need not be radical, but they do need to exist. The level of ambition is a choice. Does your narrative promise transformation or continuous improvement? Both approaches carry risk and reward.

In practice: Evolution
A global pharma organization chose evolution. *"For us, AI is not the goal. It's an enabler in the transformation. The goal is our mission."* Employees embraced AI because it served a clear purpose. The approach succeeded by being direct about use cases from day one.

One packaging manufacturer took a more incremental approach. When the board asked about AI risks, the CIO ran a two-hour session where the Board approved modest funding for a pilot. They began with translation services - $2 million yearly across 35 countries - cut by a simple AI tool. Next was invoice processing, where accuracy rose from 50% to 95%. Small wins built confidence. *"Nine times out of ten, a team comes with one problem, then the business leader has a light bulb moment and looks at the process end to end."*

In practice: Revolution
Revolutionary visions can rally employees but need caution. One interviewee framed AI as amplifying purpose, brand, and customer experience to encourage big-picture thinking.

However, bold moves carry risk. Klarna announced job cuts assuming generative AI could rapidly replace workforce roles. The approach outpaced technology, organization, and customer readiness, lowering service quality. Klarna later reversed course, highlighting risks of declaring revolutionary AI visions prematurely.

Loss aversion theory shows people respond more to avoiding losses than achieving gains.[4] Big visions can fail when future gains outweigh protecting what works.

Take Action: 4 Steps to Set Your Vision

1 **Match your vision to your reality** Conservative industries need evolutionary narratives. Fast-moving sectors handle bigger shifts better.

2 **Answer these five questions first:**
- What is your overall business strategy and culture, evolutionary or revolutionary?
- What specific business problem does AI solve?
- Do employees connect AI to their daily work?
- Do leaders have the mindset to experiment, learn, and fail?
- What is the culture like? Do people welcome change or avoid risk?

3 **Workshop your approach with leadership** Run a session with your leadership team to assess AI maturity in your organization and plot the best approach, while determining a powerful 'why'. Start with pilots if answers aren't clear. Build your vision from proven results. Bold proclamations without evidence damage trust.

4 **Frame AI as enhancement** Position AI as enhancing existing work rather than replacing jobs. This reduces resistance.

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"The debate between revolutionary and evolutionary AI is a distraction. What actually determines success is whether you're building a vision your organization can execute or one that simply sounds impressive until reality arrives. Companies don't fail from being too clear; they fail from being too clever. The best AI visions aren't revolutionary or evolutionary. They're honest, grounded in reality, and aligned with what people can deliver with confidence."

- Akshita Gupta, Former Senior Manager AI & Data Science, BT (British Telecom)

$2M
annual savings from one translation AI tool

95%
accuracy achieved (from 50%) in invoice processing with AI

Quick Wins vs. Long-Term Integration

TENSION

02

Overview

With a vision agreed, organizations then need to determine the emphasis on quick wins and incremental change vs long-term, full-scale transformation. As one leader put it, *"The challenge is knowing when to arrange the chairs on the beach and when to look at the waves."* You need to deliver performance now while building for the future.

Most organizations want transformational ROI but settle for productivity gains. The gap creates frustration.

One global enterprise articulates the challenge: *"We haven't found the solution yet for balancing the current state while working on the future state. But we need to go end-state back and design the work from a blank sheet. If you're a field sales engineer in 2030, what will that job look like?"*

Most organizations layer AI onto existing processes even when their vision is for AI to be revolutionary. This explains why a high percentage of AI initiatives fail.[5] They're added on top rather than enabled through culture and skills.

In practice:

A telecommunications firm saves two hours per week per person with productivity tools. Yet people say the tool doesn't save time because they stay busy. The modest gains get diluted. "*You see the most eloquent emails passing your inbox. You see eloquent PowerPoints. It does not sell one more product.*"

Real productivity requires workflow redesign. A packaging company learned this through pilots. *"We could easily take 20 to 30% of cost out. But real transformation requires looking at the process end to end, not adding tools on top."* After delivering value through 10 to 11 single use case pilots, they reached a tipping point where transforming whole processes became possible.

A consumer goods company balances both approaches. They pursue bold marketing innovations while improving operational efficiency, personalizing content at scale while running agent-based experiments.

A pharma organization runs two parallel tracks: one improves productivity, the other reimagines workflows. At the same time, they focus on the culture and mindset needed to succeed, building psychological safety and helping people adopt a growth mindset through gamification, role modeling, and a focus on failing fast.

Take Action: 5 Steps to Balance Short and Long Term

1 **Run parallel tracks** Create separate teams: one delivers productivity improvements, the other redesigns workflows and architecture.

2 **Set different success metrics** The productivity team measures adoption rates and time savings. The transformation team measures workflow changes and role redesign.

3 **Use quick wins as proof points** Let them build confidence and fund transformation, but don't let them distract from the hard work. Identify the tipping point of when to move from pilots to addressing whole workflows.

4 **Apply the building the plane mid-flight approach:**
- Pilot change in real-time with working solutions
- Coach in the moment when people encounter challenges
- Engage key employee groups as partners, not recipients

5 **Foster growth mindset systematically** One global pharma company focused on fostering a growth mindset using immersive learning. Result: 63% increase in engagement.

> " *"We could easily take 20 to 30% of cost out. But real transformation requires looking at the process end to end, not adding tools on top."*

25–30%
time savings from productivity tools

63%
increase in engagement in AI tools by focusing on tools and mindset

Assistant or Colleague?

Overview
The way you frame the role of AI determines the value it can bring and shapes how employees use it. Research shows that framing affects not just adoption but quality of output.[6]

One digital transformation lead observed: *"If you treat AI as a collaborator, as a thinker, you get much better ideas. If you treat it as an assistant, it gives you the basics."*

Employees who see AI as a peer ask better questions, iterate more, and push the technology further. Those who treat AI as a subordinate tool often accept the first response. But viewing it as a thinking partner encourages challenge, refinement, and accountability.

The accountability point is critical:
"We need to teach people to take accountability for getting the AI to the right standard," said one interviewee. Treating AI as a colleague risks cognitive atrophy if humans stop checking outputs. Think of AI as a new hire or junior colleague - experienced or capable, but lacking the nuanced understanding of your organization or unwritten rules. You still need to guide, review, and ensure outputs are correct. This preserves human judgment while leveraging AI's speed and scale. Plus, when people invest effort in teaching AI, they become committed to its success.

In practice:
A life sciences company shifted the conversation. Their champion network frames tools as peers that challenge thinking. Teams started using AI for strategic work, not administrative tasks.

A transportation company takes it even further and runs "co-founder" exercises. *"If you're starting a new business, the co-founder can challenge you. It breaks new ground when you treat it as a peer."* The organization created AI tools with names and personalities. *"Give AI names to personalize them. If you treat it as a collaborator, you get better adoption."*

Another organization took the opposite view, an approach that prevents fear of job losses and protects people's capabilities*: "AI is here to automate mundane tasks. It is an assistant that helps you with your job, like a pressure cooker saves time but does not replace your stove."*

No single framing is universally superior; context determines effectiveness. The assistant framing reduces fear. The colleague framing delivers more value but requires a clear understanding of accountability.

Take Action: 5 Ways to Position AI

1 **Start with the assistant frame in risk-averse organizations** Move to the colleague frame as confidence grows. Match the positioning to the work: repetitive tasks need assistants, strategic work needs colleagues.

2 **Try the junior colleague framework** This creates appropriate expectations while building commitment. People understand they must guide and train AI.

3 **Test both approaches** Measure which generates better results for your specific use cases with small pilot groups.

4 **Leverage social proof** Have respected leaders share stories of treating AI as a thinking partner. Show concrete examples of better outcomes.

5 **Personify your AI tools** Personalization increases engagement through our natural tendency to connect with human-like entities.

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"Telling people to treat AI like a peer increases the quality we get. As opposed to using it as an assistant, it is a collaborator that challenges you."

Top-Down or Bottom-Up?

Overview
The answer is both, but the balance needs careful consideration. AI adoption spreads through formal authority and informal networks. Without top-down commitment, you'll struggle to achieve true value and win over the skeptics. Without bottom-up energy, you'll lack the grassroots adoption that ultimately drives the business outcomes and ROI.

In practice: bottom up
A pharmaceutical company credits its early adopters network for the success of its AI implementation. The network became vital because employees stay closer to local needs. One year after starting, membership tripled organically, reaching close to 100% participation in Gen AI programs.

The network creates psychological safety. *"No one is truly a champion. We are all new on all these things."* This removes the pressure of perfection and frames AI as a journey, not a test. Champions share learnings, not solutions. *"It's not always about what works. Often we do not know. It's about looking at the steps together."* This normalizes not knowing.

Take Action: 5 Steps to Drive Action

1. **Secure executive alignment from the outset** Use pilots and appetite from the organization to align leaders around a clear vision and priorities connecting back to the organizational strategy.

2. **Invest in leadership development** Train leaders on both the technology and the mindset, skills and conditions needed for AI to succeed: psychological safety, growth mindset, managing expertise they don't possess.

3. **Create reverse mentoring forums** Have champions teach leaders. This normalizes learning from frontline employees and builds the muscle for leading in ambiguity.

4. **Give early adopters real authority** Set up champions networks early. Let them experiment and share failures, not simply successes.

5. **Track both metrics** Measure executive engagement and champion activity. If one lags, adjust your approach.

The Leadership Difference

As AI integrates into our organizations, leaders will learn to harness the technology. But the best leaders will also double-down on human leadership. Those that do will make the **Leadership Difference** in the Age of AI

Strategic Leadership
Both able to...

- Harness the best of technology
- Use AI as a thought partner proficiently
- Identify the potential of AI and articulate an AI organizational vision
- Manage AI business risks responsibly

Human Leadership
And able to...

- Maximize our human potential
- Demonstrate human morals, trust, ethics and values
- Show compassion, empathy
- Apply experience, wisdom and intuition

In practice: top-down
Leadership determines the vision and speed, and connects AI solutions to the strategy. They also create the conditions for success.

Yet many organizations train leaders on technical AI skills but don't invest in mindset training or shifting the culture. Leaders need training on fostering psychological safety, managing teams that know more than they do, and embracing openness about what they don't know. Growth mindset becomes key.

A consumer goods company runs immersive experiences for executives. *"We had leaders use Copilot and compete. We gamified it."*

For many managers, this represents the first time they manage people who know more about a topic. *"Managers must get used to learning from their teams."* Organizations that acknowledge this and provide support see faster adoption. One global life sciences company is setting up a reverse mentoring scheme to formalize this learning exchange.

Close to

100%

participation in Gen AI programs within one year (life sciences company)

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"The early adopters network is vital. They are closer to local needs. They are learning as I am. No one is a champion. Everyone is a teacher."

Building Trust While Managing Fear

Overview
Trust in outputs and trust in job security both matter. AI adoption fails when employees don't trust the technology or fear for their jobs.

One global enterprise found this through their works councils. When they brought the AI data academy to European works councils, they expected enthusiasm. Instead, they received a long list of worries. *"It was a reality check on how anxious people are. Particularly if you go to places where people do manual work, it can be emotional."*

In practice: Trust in outputs and AI ethics
A telecommunications firm takes a direct approach. They make clear how important security is and maintain a responsible AI framework with guidelines and approval systems for data usage.

A packaging company communicates that AI outputs aren't 100% accurate. *"You don't use your mobile on the train when signal is bad. No tech is perfect. It is about knowing when and how to use it."* They normalize mistakes. *"The odd hallucination is fine. We do not get it right every time as humans."*

The key is iteration. *"Some people do not realize you have to keep going and prompting to get good work."* Trust builds slowly through consistent experiences but destroys quickly through single negative events.

> **"**
> *"When we brought the AI academy to works councils, we got back a long list of worries. It was a reality check on how anxious people are about AI."*

In practice: Trust in job security
A life sciences company frames AI as augmentation. *"We never thought about replacing people with technology. That was my first statement. We always ask how this can augment ourselves."*

A consumer goods company shifts focus to growth. *"Through previous cycles of tech, a question has been whether you are able to grow as a business with your current capacity? The issue of augmenting vs. replacing is about growth vs. capacity. Can you grow without increasing capacity? This shifts the conversation away from the threat of AI."*

A packaging company runs town halls with consistent messaging: AI isn't replacing people. They involve employees in design through co-creation. This builds ownership.

Take Action: 5 Ways to Build Trust

1 **Address both trust dimensions separately**
- **For output trust:** Focus on education and guardrails.
- **For job security:** Focus on communication and participation.

2 **Create clear governance frameworks** Get approval from works councils. Be explicit about what you will and won't do.

3 **Involve employees early** Show how AI changes work, not eliminates it. Work with leaders on future of work planning.

4 **Normalize mistakes and iteration** Make clear that getting good results requires multiple rounds of prompting and refinement.

5 **Keep an open dialogue** Don't commit to statements you don't know if you can stand by in 10-15 years time as AI adoption accelerates. Instead be transparent that you don't have all the answers and take approaches to manage uncertainty.

Conclusion
No Single Answer Fits Every Organization

The five tensions we examined shape AI adoption success. How you resolve them depends on your culture, industry, and business pressure.

Some organizations need bold visions. Others do better with incremental approaches. The right answer for you will differ from peers.

Three patterns emerged across all successful implementations:

PATTERN 1

Clarity beats ambition

Organizations with clear, modest goals outperform those with big visions. Employees need to connect AI to their daily work. A life sciences company shows this. Framing AI as an enabler for their mission rather than the goal drove close to 100% participation in Gen AI programs within one year.

PATTERN 2

Culture determines approach

Your existing culture shapes which tensions matter most. Risk-averse organizations need strong governance before experimentation. A packaging company recognized this: *"Manufacturing companies have a specific culture. They do not like innovation or defects. They want things to run on time."* Their approach matched this reality through governance first, experimentation second.

PATTERN 3

People problems dominate

The majority of AI implementation failures stem from people issues.[8] Lack of alignment, unclear ownership, and resistance to change block progress more than algorithms. The change approach needs to recognize that AI adoption isn't a project with a defined endpoint. AI adoption is an ongoing adaptation that requires continuous learning, adjustment, and evolution.

Where to Start

Ask yourself these five questions:

1. How can employees connect your AI vision to their daily work?

2. With your vision in mind, how are you spotting the tipping points to shift from quick wins to adapting workflows?

3. Should employees see AI as a tool or a thinking partner?

4. How can leaders model the behaviors you want to scale?

5. How can you build trust in both AI outputs and their job security?

Your answers reveal which tensions need attention first. Organizations rarely address all five at once. Pick the ones blocking progress most.

The organizations we studied are early in their AI journeys. None has solved every tension. All continue learning and adjusting. This creates opportunity for your organization to find the right path.

The organizations capturing real value from AI treat this as a human transformation challenge that happens to involve technology, not a technology implementation challenge that happens to involve humans.

The question is not whether AI will transform work. The technology already has. The question is whether your organization will manage the tensions well enough to capture the value.
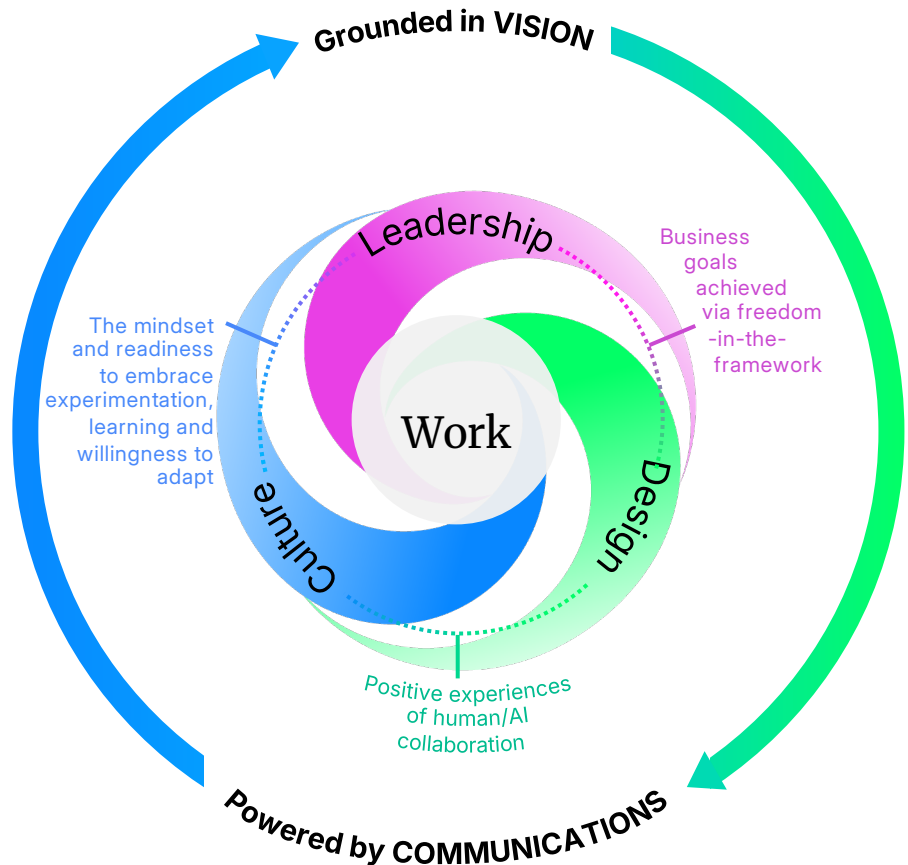
Taking an organization on an AI change journey is very different from traditional change management which relies on a clear destination, linear processes and certainty.

Embedding AI into an organization calls for agility and flexibility in the change approach. It's about supporting an organization to adapt constantly and transform organically.

We see three critical success factors for AI change:

- The **design** of AI tools and processes that provide positive experiences for your people, with workflows reshaped once you reach a tipping point of adoption and application

- A **culture** that supports the mindset and behaviors to encourage experimentation, learning and willingness to adapt

- Buy-in, role modeling and support from **leadership**

Delivering effectively against these critical success factors requires an important blend of expertise, capabilities and skillsets, which our United Minds team brings.

Grounded in VISION

Leadership

The mindset and readiness to embrace experimentation, learning and willingness to adapt

Business goals achieved via freedom-in-the-framework

Culture

Work

Design

Positive experiences of human/AI collaboration

Powered by COMMUNICATIONS

Where United Minds can help

Leadership

- Leadership workshops to align on vision, governance, ethics and guardrails

- Leadership/manager engagement, coaching, skills and enablement workshops

- Transformation narrative and planning, testing, and developing engaging communications

Culture

- AI values, mindset and behaviors identification and engagement

- AI-readiness culture assessments

- AI ethics and trust-building programs

- Establishing and running champions networks

- Specific skills training

Design

- Workflow design sprints to design new ways of working enabled by AI

- Resources, materials and playbooks to support pilots and functional initiatives

- Human/AI organizational design

Contact United Minds for more information: contactus@unitedmindsglobal.com

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