

# The C-suite Agenda

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## The C-suite Agenda

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### RISK

# Why your company needs a geopolitics team

Rising geopolitical turbulence is forcing companies to rethink how they navigate global risks, and how to profit from them

#### Sam Birchall

**G**eopolitics has become a powerful driver of corporate strategy. Western efforts to reduce economic dependence on China and curb its technological rise have unleashed waves of subsidies, tariffs and export controls, forcing multinationals to rethink where and how they operate. A survey by the EU Chamber of Commerce in China found that 26% of multinationals are planning fully or partially separate supply chains for their China business.

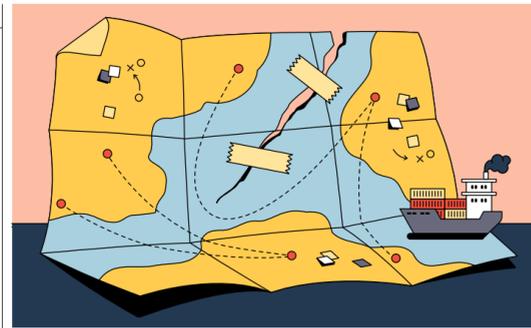
Meanwhile, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has accelerated the push for supply-chain resilience, encouraging firms to move production closer to home or into allied markets. And the Trump Administration has pressed foreign multinationals to increase US investment while imposing and expanding sweeping tariffs across industries.

In 2025, the Economic Policy Uncertainty Index reached a 20-year peak, surpassing historic highs during the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. Senior executives now cite geo-economic confrontation as the most urgent threat to business operations, according to the World Economic Forum's *Global Risks Report 2026*.

For decades, globalisation allowed companies to optimise for efficiency, scale and cost. Today, those advantages risk being steadily eroded by political risk, regulatory barriers and security-driven intervention that shape where companies invest and whom they can sell to. Navigating this new, volatile reality will require a fresh approach from the C-suite.

For many companies, this level of global upheaval is still new, says Simon J. Evenett, professor of geopolitics and strategy at IMD Business School. "Many spent 2025 trying to make sense of the dynamics which had been unleashed. I expect that in 2026, many corporate boards and senior executives will begin revising their companies' global footprint."

While sectors such as mining and energy have long monitored government decisions, geopolitics presents a more complex challenge. "National politics is not the same as geopolitics," Evenett says. "The intensity and unpredictability of state-to-state relations over the past decade have forced many companies to question whether their internal expertise is sufficient."



Traditionally, companies have relied solely on the C-suite and board members' experience and networks to assess national rivalries. Today, many are moving toward a more systemic approach: tracking trade risks, evaluating exposure and opportunities, and briefing executives and boards regularly as cross-border and operational decisions are limited, and in many firms, assessment is fragmented across legal, compliance, government affairs, and strategy teams rather than integrated into core planning.

"Some organisations have deliberately avoided creating standalone geopolitics units, fearing they would become detached from commercial reality," says Evenett, who co-authored the report. The challenge, he continues, lies in combining deep political insight with practical commercial integration. "A period of experimentation is underway, as companies try to find the best organisational configuration to advance their

industries and regions, found that while leadership awareness of geopolitical risk is high, most companies continue to treat such risks as one-off challenges rather than an ongoing strategic priority. Processes linking geopolitical developments to business metrics and operational decisions are limited, and in many firms, assessment is fragmented across legal, compliance, government affairs, and strategy teams rather than integrated into core planning.

"Many companies have sought to create informal mechanisms and networks of talent within their organisations that are developing a stronger sense of geopolitical dynamics," says Evenett.

Still, formal structures remain rare. According to a new white paper by IMD Business School, the World Economic Forum, and Boston Consulting Group's Center for Geopolitics, fewer than one in five firms (20%) have a dedicated geopolitics department.

The report, drawing on interviews with 56 senior executives across

commercial interests in an era of security-driven policymaking."

A dedicated geopolitical function has its advantages. But for companies to sustain investment in these units, they must avoid creating the impression that they are merely cost centres. "They must go beyond risk management," Evenett stresses. "No one gets much credit for bullets which are correctly anticipated and dodged. Instead, looking at global upheaval and spotting opportunities which can then be captured successfully by companies is a much better way for a geopolitical department to demonstrate its value."

Many companies choose not to appoint former public officials to lead their geopolitical functions, Evenett adds. Instead, they rely on a long-standing executive who understands how different business units within a group create value, how a strategy comes together and how to communicate and network effectively across the organisation.

Internal credibility, he continues, is as critical as external expertise in ensuring geopolitical insight informs real business decisions.

Geopolitical pressures are here to stay, Evenett warns. "The battle for primacy between the United States and the Soviet Union lasted over 40 years. It took the Americans 15 years to overcome the challenge from a rising Japan in the 1980 and 1990s. I expect that the rivalry between the United States and China will go on for decades."

For corporate leaders, that means geopolitical analysis can no longer sit at the margins of strategy. Decisions about plant location, supplier choice, customer exposure and technology architecture increasingly carry political as well as financial consequences.

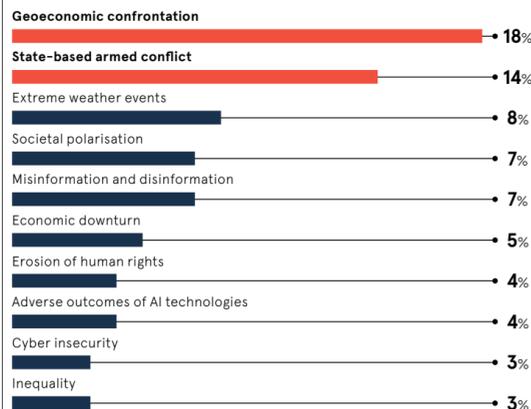
"That holiday from history is over and now we return to an era where security concerns will dominate public policymaking towards business and trade," Evenett says. "Those executives and analysts like myself, who came of age in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, will need to reset our assumptions and learn to accommodate a wider range of considerations that will reshape global business."

As security-driven policymaking becomes a permanent feature of the global business landscape, boards and executives must integrate geopolitical insight into core strategy or risk being caught unprepared in an increasingly fragmented and uncertain world. ●

### RISKY BUSINESS

World Economic Forum, 2026

The risks most likely to present a material crisis on a global scale in 2026



### INTERVIEW

# Bops and bots: Spotify's CHRO talks chatbots, company culture and live music

Spotify built its success on personalised algorithms and carefully curated playlists. According to new HR chief **Anna Lundström**, that same philosophy is being applied to how the company supports, develops and connects its people

#### Sam Birchall

**A**s Spotify reaches its 20th anniversary, attention is shifting inward, away from consumer-facing algorithms and towards the technology shaping the experience of its own employees.

Leading this internal transformation is Anna Lundström, the chief HR officer, who took the role in April 2025, having previously served as vice-president of HR. Having joined the company in 2016, she is now responsible for people strategy for Spotify's global workforce of around 7,500. Lundström stepped into the role at a pivotal moment for Spotify, as the firm is evolving into a more mature organisation, having recently achieved its first full year of profitability.

"It has been a period of significant change for both Spotify and the wider business world – one that demands a culture reset," Lundström says. The rapid rise of AI, coupled with the challenges of managing a dispersed workforce, has presented HR teams with a new challenge: to win the battle for genuine human connection.

“It has been a period of significant change for both Spotify and the wider business world – one that demands a culture reset

AI is central to Lundström's strategy for supporting employee experience. She spearheaded a company-wide hack week, where staff were invited to experiment with AI tools and develop uses relevant to their roles. Successful projects were collected in a shared prompt library, a store of practical examples employees can refer to and build on.

Spotify's HR team was an early adopter of AI, implementing an internal chatbot that provides answers to employee questions about policies and processes, from holiday allowances to parental leave. Importantly, the system is designed to recognise sensitive questions, such as those concerning pay or wellbeing, and automatically refer them to the relevant HR partner to ensure human judgment and care are applied where it matters most.

Lundström says the system has enabled her team to focus on higher-value work, such as coaching managers and driving strategic initiatives across the business.

Spotify also developed Echo, an AI-powered internal talent marketplace where employees create profiles and the platform uses AI to match them with open roles. The impact has been substantial. The internal fill rate for positions has risen from 22% to nearly 40%, improving both retention and mobility.

Recognising that passion drives the product, Spotify is doubling down on initiatives that directly enhance staff mental health and work/life balance.

A benefit introduced in November, the 'Live Mix' benefit, provides employees with a stipend to spend on live performances or wellness activities, Lundström explains. "Live music and events foster community and shared experiences. The aim of this policy is to go back to our roots



and help staff feel part of something larger while highlighting the value of the work Spotify does for creators."

Spotify remains staunchly protective of its work-from-anywhere policy, introduced in 2021. Lundström was one of the two architects of this initiative and says it's among her proudest achievements. At a time when many companies are urging employees back to the office, Spotify believes flexibility and trust deliver stronger, more committed teams in the long term. Attrition rates dropped by 15% following the firm's decision.

Despite its commitment to remote working, the company's leadership recognised the challenges in sustaining culture and collaboration for certain employees. "Early-career hires, including fresh graduates and interns, were struggling to fully absorb Spotify's culture and build connections," Lundström says. To address this, the firm's leadership now requires these employees to attend the office full time in their first year, ensuring they benefit from proximity to seasoned colleagues and a richer cultural immersion.

She adds that while the company is evolving, Spotify remains committed to transparency. "We're very clear about where we're going, what's changing and what's not. That openness is who we are and it's something we'll continue."

Spotify's rise has also turned its co-founder and former chief executive, Daniel Ek, into one of Europe's wealthiest tech entrepreneurs, with an estimated fortune of around \$10bn (£7.4bn). Ek has reinvested some of

employees and provide meaningful experiences."

Spotify's evolution has not been without controversy. When the Swedish startup was founded in 2006, it presented itself as an antidote to the music industry's rampant piracy problem, promising an alternative that would funnel revenue from advertising and subscriptions back to rights holders. As the company has grown to dominate the audio streaming market, however, tensions have arisen over how artists are compensated.

The firm's leadership team acknowledges the controversy, but Lundström explains that as the business grows, the principles on which it was founded must evolve to support that growth. "We're not the underdog anymore," she says. "Our business and product has changed. We have to lead the industry now and that requires different muscles."

That doesn't change depending on the topic," Lundström says, whether the issue is brand sentiment, organisational change or reductions in force. "Our responsibility is to share the company's perspective and provide clarity. Even when the answers are hard, people deserve honesty." ●

that wealth into European venture capital, including backing the German defence technology company Helsing, which develops AI-powered weapons systems. His role there as executive chairman triggered backlash from parts of the artistic community, prompting artists including Deerhoof and Massive Attack to call for a boycott of Spotify earlier this year.

Ek has since stepped back from day-to-day leadership, a move that the company says was planned before the controversy. The transition elevated co-presidents Gustav Söderström and Alex Norström to co-CEOs.

Internally, Lundström says these leadership changes and external criticisms are handled through a culture of open dialogue. "Spotify runs a series of regular forums designed to give employees direct access to senior leaders and space to ask difficult questions, she explains. These initiatives include 'Unplugged with Daniel' and 'Soundchecks with Gustav and Alex', as well as company-wide town halls featuring the entire senior leadership team.

"That doesn't change depending on the topic," Lundström says, whether the issue is brand sentiment, organisational change or reductions in force. "Our responsibility is to share the company's perspective and provide clarity. Even when the answers are hard, people deserve honesty." ●

# What will anchor the world of work in the age of AI?

As organisations struggle to scale AI beyond experimentation, a shift toward intelligent orchestration and unified platforms is needed to turn technological promise into end-to-end performance

Many organisations are moving decisively to shift AI from experimental mode to a core enterprise capability. In OneAdvanced's 2026 Trends Report, almost 54% of senior leaders identified AI adoption and integration as their top investment priority, a clear signal that AI is no longer viewed as an optional innovation but as critical infrastructure for competitiveness. Yet despite the ambition many leadership teams are struggling to successfully embed AI across end-to-end processes, highlighting the widening gap between aspiration and execution. Even companies that consider themselves ahead of the curve are encountering problems when they try to scale AI. The Trends Report highlights this gap clearly: while 59% of leaders believe they are aligned with or outperforming their closest peers on AI maturity, nearly half, 49%, also acknowledge that AI currently supports less than a quarter of their operational activity. This contrast underscores a growing reality for the C-suite: confidence in AI strategy is high, but meaningful enterprise-wide adoption remains limited, and the

distance between ambition and execution is widening. This failure to scale AI and truly transform work is not a result of problems with models or lacklustre tools. It's because of disjointed workflows, poor platform integration, and limited visibility, all of which make it almost impossible to orchestrate AI properly. Layering more AI tools on top of fragmented IT estates only adds to this complexity. "Some people think AI is a magic bullet that they can just apply across the organisation and everything will miraculously become better," says Marko Perisic, chief product officer at OneAdvanced. "But when you apply AI across these legacy, disconnected systems – which don't have good data hygiene, don't have permissions and security controls – you end up with a mess, which is why it's so essential to take a structured, platform-driven approach." Essentially, organisations need to shift from siloed software systems to a suite of solutions, all operating on a unified platform. They also need to look beyond using AI for specific tasks like summarisation and explore how it can truly

generate value across entire processes. To address this, they must stop thinking about individual tools as isolated islands and layer them into an intelligent system that understands the full context of key business processes and workflows, and can also handle all the complexities of a fully integrated software environment.

**Unified data, personalised insights**  
In April, OneAdvanced is introducing IQ, which exemplifies this shift from the delivery of software portfolios to an intelligent system of work. It is

**“Because OneAdvanced’s platform is built around a shared data layer, AI agents can easily access the information they need to operate across workflows, teams and departments**

designed as an interconnected, scalable architecture for all industries, combining a delivery platform, composable workflows, services and seamless user experiences.

Unified data is effectively the foundation that supports all these capabilities. "With AI, you're going to value integration over point-to-point functionality – and to realise that, you need to unlock data via a common fabric, with common access and common security controls," says Andrew Henderson, chief technology officer at OneAdvanced.

Because OneAdvanced's platform is built around a shared data layer, AI agents can easily access the information they need to operate across workflows, teams and departments. A robust API and integration management layer also supports pre-built connections for both OneAdvanced applications and third-party tools. The result is a system that delivers a single version of the truth, which in turn provides the trust and compliance that is essential for scaling AI.

The platform's interconnected, scalable architecture is also designed around

the requirements of each user. "If you're a CFO, what do you deeply care about? The answer is not, 'I care about my general ledger posting,'" says Perisic. "What you care about is your entire lead-to-cash process, so a solution that addresses that owns their attention."

The same logic applies across the C-suite: a CHRO needs visibility of the full hire-to-retire journey; a COO requires real-time operational insight across every function; and a CIO needs to see the integration layer holding it all together. To address all these needs, IQ by OneAdvanced provides a persona-based experience – i.e. role-aware insights that don't require the user to navigate between different systems. In other words, it's essentially about making software invisible so that leaders can focus on the big strategic decisions.

AI embedded into an intelligent system of work also supports better access to insights that can generate real business value. Indeed, while AI is often presented in terms of its automation benefits, some of the most significant improvements may come from the democratisation of expertise.

By transforming what were once static interfaces into context-aware, intelligent agents, complex tasks that previously required specialist training or tools can be performed by a wider range of employees, for example. "It enables different functions to do things they could never do before," says Perisic. He backs up this point with a personal example: "I'm literate on financial P&L, but I'm not a financial expert. Now, when faced with a complicated Excel sheet, I can actually get an opinion about it without having to engage anybody in finance."

**Modelling success**

OneAdvanced's approach to AI does not rely on generic large language models (LLMs) alone. Alongside standard LLMs, the platform features sector-specific small language models (SLMs) purpose-built for the particular language, regulation and workflows of industries such as healthcare, legal and education. Pre-built, deployable agents, designed for immediate use without specialist configuration, are also available through OneAdvanced's AI agents marketplace, enabling organisations to scale and orchestrate AI based on their specific circumstances, goals and governance requirements.

In February 2026, OneAdvanced also became one of fewer than 100 organisations globally to receive ISO 42001 certification, the international standard for AI management systems. For customers operating in regulated sectors, the certification provides external validation that OneAdvanced meets a recognised standard for AI governance – particularly significant at a time when many organisations face growing regulatory, contractual and ethical pressure to provide evidence of how AI is used. All data is also processed and stored within the

UK, providing full compliance with data sovereignty requirements.

Ultimately, good governance is not simply about having "guard rails around what the AI is doing, but also what the humans are doing," says Henderson. "Access controls, compliance objectives, and more needs to be built into the context as well. You need to control exactly who is doing what, when and how, at quite a fine-grained level of fidelity – down to the micro-process, and all the way up to an end-to-end workflow."

Despite the speed and efficiency benefits of AI running on an integrated platform, the ultimate responsibility for business outcomes will remain in the hands of human employees. "AI will do a lot of things for us," says Perisic. "But we will maintain ownership of the results, because AI will not be held responsible for the outcome of a failed process."

Ultimately, the capabilities of IQ by OneAdvanced will help to shift organisations toward truly valuable agentic workflows, which are very different to traditional automation. "Traditional automation is a very mechanical, rigid process – brittle, because it's contextually unaware," says Perisic. "It will just keep doing the same mechanical thing regardless of whatever else happens around it." AI-driven orchestrated workflows are different because AI understands context. "They can adapt to a situation, understand different data, and adjust along the way. That's what makes them so magical."

As such, organisations that manage to overcome the integration challenges of AI through intelligent orchestration won't just end up automating rote tasks. Instead, they'll be able to elevate entire workflows to a new level of performance and purpose. "People today both overestimate and underestimate the power of AI," Perisic concludes. "They think it's going to solve everything. But at the same time, they underestimate how much orchestrated workflows can actually change things."

The real breakthrough will not come from deploying more AI tools, but from orchestrating them within a unified system of work. Organisations that integrate platforms, data and workflows into a coherent whole will move beyond fragmented experimentation – embedding intelligence into everyday operations and unlocking the transformational value AI promises.



For more information please visit [oneadvanced.com](https://oneadvanced.com)



## Q&A Navigating the future architecture of work



As AI reshapes how work is done, **Marko Perisic** (left), chief product officer, and **Andrew Henderson**, chief technology officer at OneAdvanced, discuss how intelligent platforms will underpin the next generation of enterprise operations

**Q What is your long-term vision for IQ by OneAdvanced and the future architecture of work?**

**AH** Looking ahead, the vision is that we are the intelligent backbone for our customers to run their businesses, whether through our own native services or through the ability to integrate other services into the platform. We should be enabling the operating models of our customers to really scale. Our vision is for customers to trust and rely on us to deliver that with resilient security, and with ease, so they're not having to worry about long-running upgrades of products. Because the evolution of their own business model is going to be quite profound. They don't want to be worrying about which LLMs they're using or which cloud hosting services they rely on.

**Q How do you see the relationship between people, data and intelligence evolving over the next five years?**

**AH** We have to give people intelligent signals early and proactively, so that they can make the best decisions they can make. If our technology is doing that, then it's going to enable them to be successful in their own role and to contribute something greater to their own business, and ultimately to what is being delivered to their customers.

**Q What early customer signals give you confidence that the intelligent system of work model is the right direction?**

**AH** The digital transformation age wasn't as impactful as everyone thought it was going to be. But the step to this AI-driven world is much more intuitive for humans than what came before. With natural language interfaces, people can get comfortable enough and confident enough to deploy things at scale within their business. So it's adding a much more human factor. But we've got to really help our customers learn, understand and trust this technology. We also have to recognise that human workers are not going to go away, so how do we make the transition more seamless for them?

**Q How will embedded AI reshape decision-making and operational performance across industries?**

**MP** You can accelerate the speed at which you produce content, analyse things, build a piece of code – to the point where it's near-instantaneous compared to what it used to take. So all the typical behaviours around design thinking, where you'd spend weeks or months thinking about something with a large group of people because you didn't want to waste that time – that changes. Now you can just give something a go, see what it tells you, and get something back.

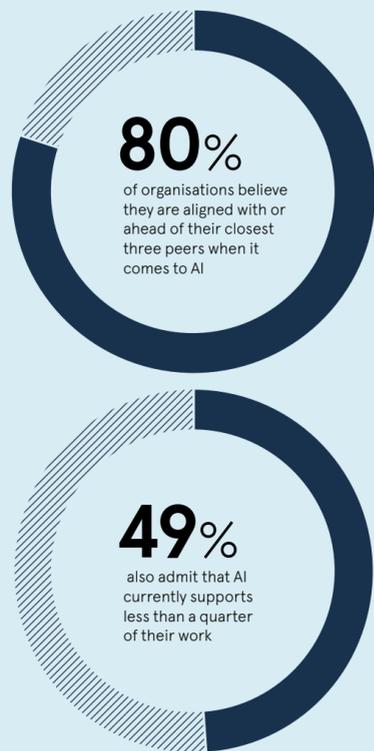
So we're going to move more into the space of safe experimentation: try things out, learn from high-quality signals, and rapidly adjust, rather than the big design-thinking approach. And our platform supports that: you can just try something, see how it works, and adjust.

**Q What does success look like for organisations that fully embrace intelligent orchestration?**

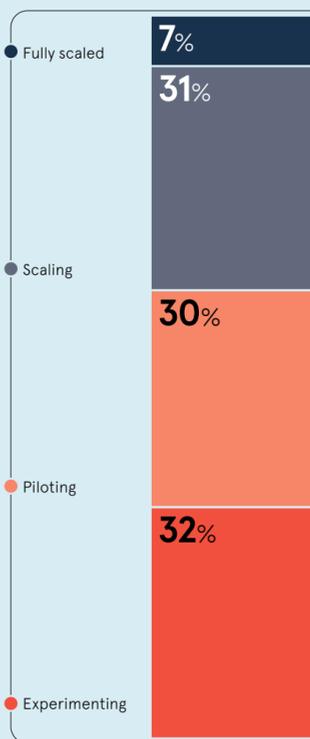
**MP** It really changes the way we work: we can actually complement each other and develop a deeper understanding of each other's roles rather than just throwing things over the wall. So it enables different functions to do things they could never have done before. For example, even if I'm not an engineer, I don't need engineering to build something for me. I can just quickly prompt and build what I need with AI.

**“The digital transformation age wasn't as impactful as everyone thought it was going to be**

**Are organisations overestimating their progress with AI?**



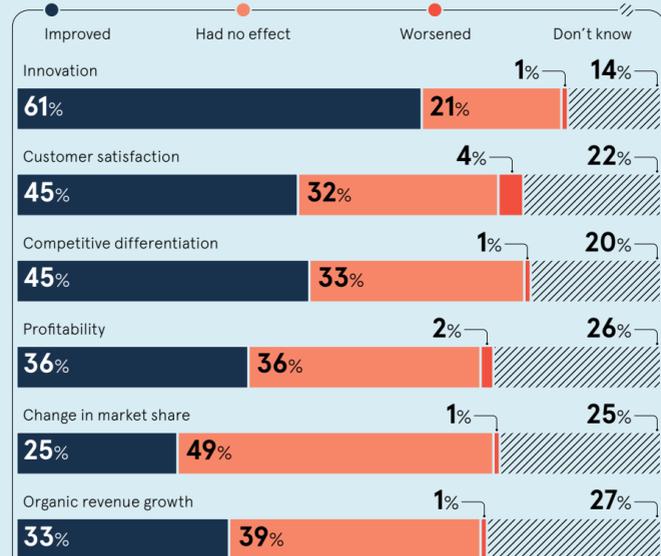
**How far have organisations actually progressed with AI?**



**Why are organisations struggling to scale AI?**

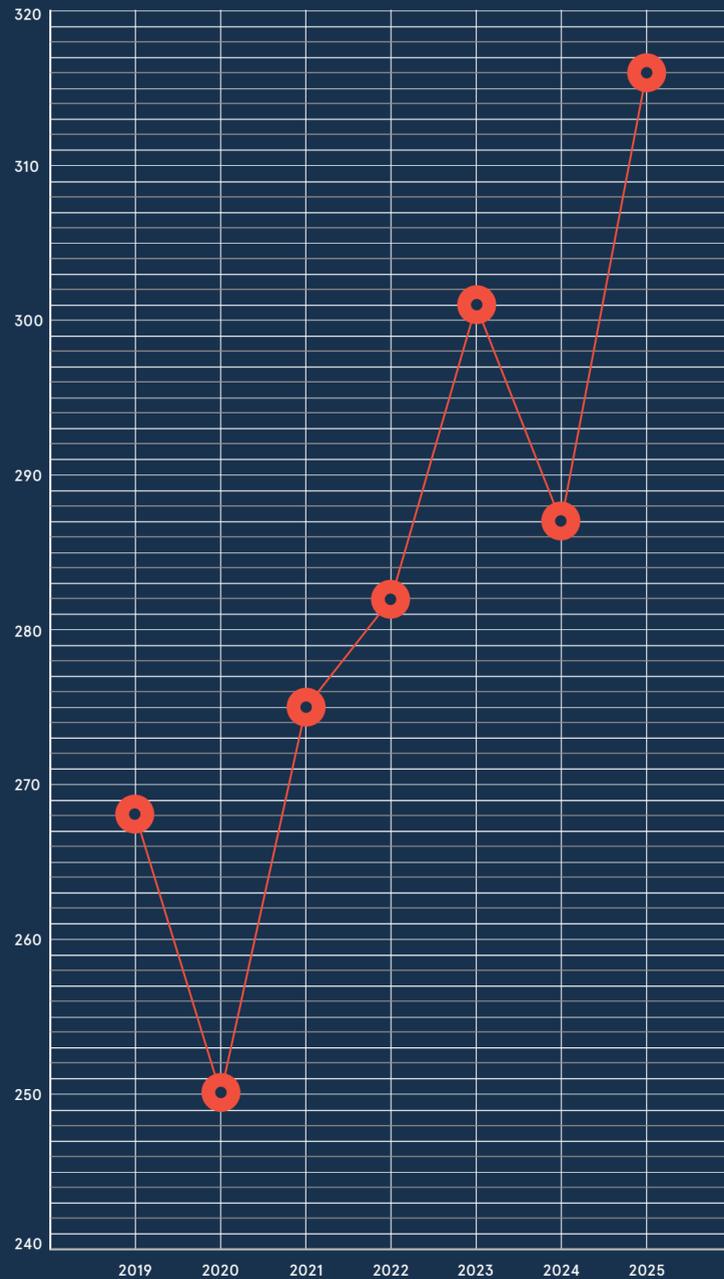


**Where is AI delivering the most value?**



### CFO TURNOVER AT SEVEN-YEAR HIGH

New CFO appointments across major global indices over the past seven years



### DEMAND FOR EXPERIENCED CFOs IS GROWING

The number of incoming CFOs who are first-time in the role versus experienced



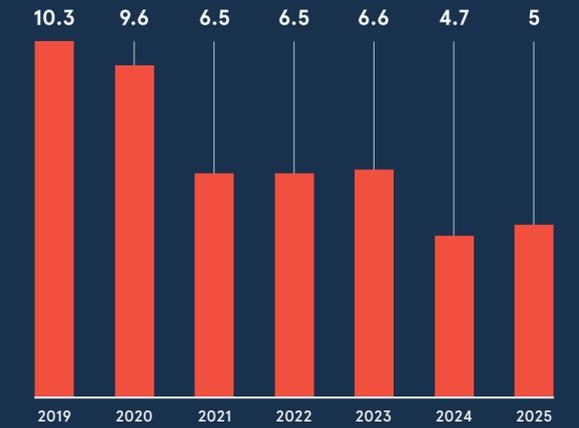
### CFO EXIT TRENDS WORLDWIDE

The share of finance chiefs leaving for a new role versus retirement or board transitions



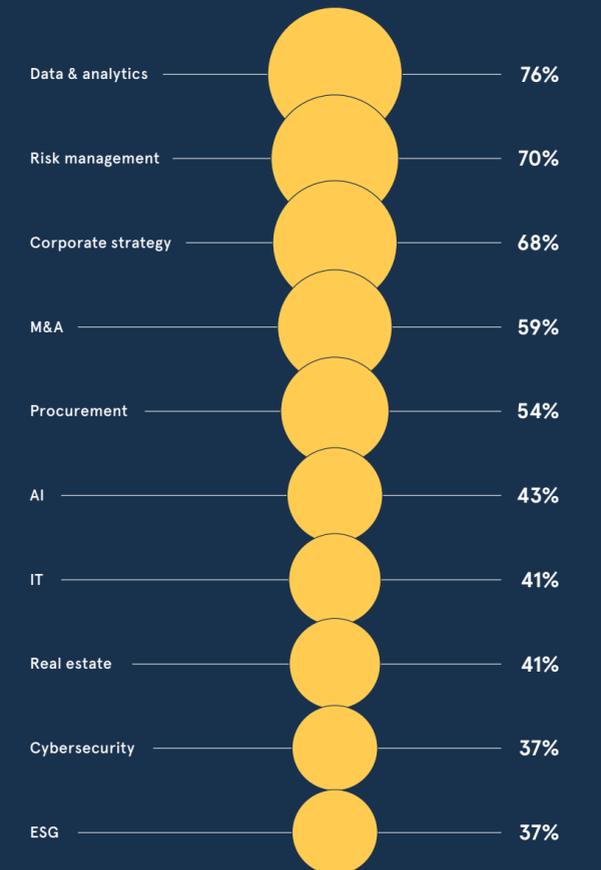
### UK CFOs ARE SPENDING SIGNIFICANTLY LESS TIME IN THE ROLE

The average tenure of FTSE 100 CFOs in the past seven years



### THE CFO ROLE IS EXPANDING BEYOND FINANCE

Share of finance chiefs listing the following as key strategic and operational priorities beyond traditional finance.



# THE CFO OUTLOOK

CFOs face unprecedented pressure from geopolitical shifts, rapid tech advancements, and intense investor scrutiny, demanding high credibility in high-stakes forums. Expectations and pressures have never been greater, leading to persistently elevated CFO turnover

LEADERSHIP

# Will the CEO role become obsolete?

Once regarded as the ultimate symbol of corporate power, the CEO position is facing existential risks: rising executive turnover, the spread of distributed leadership models and a workforce increasingly indifferent to the corner office

Sam Birchall

For decades, the conventional wisdom held that companies need a single, strong leader at the helm. But as executive responsibilities balloon, risks multiply and external expectations grow, the idea that one individual should carry the full weight of leadership is being questioned.

Amy Speake, CEO of Holmes Noble, a talent advisory firm, says her clients are beginning to ask whether the CEO role will exist in the future. "People are divided. Some argue a clear leader is essential for organisational visibility and managing the

market; others see the role as potentially redundant one day."

In part, the job is exponentially harder now, says Speake. While chief executives have been highly public figures for decades, today's CEOs are expected to have an opinion on political, social and environmental matters. Businesses must contend with rapid technological changes, strident societal demands – from climate accountability to diversity, equity and inclusion – and scrutiny from consumers and shareholders.

At the same time, boards and shareholders are less tolerant of

mismanagement, misconduct or lack of transparency. As of October 2025, 25 CEOs had been forced out following an activist campaign, according to Barclays' quarterly review of global shareholder activism. The record for CEO resignations in a year is 27 – set in 2024.

Is it time to rethink the long-held assumption that a single visionary should lead an entire enterprise? And if so, what alternatives exist?

Chief executives are stretched thin. They are expected to mobilise large workforces, think strategically amid constant uncertainty and possess deep functional knowledge. The intensity of the job appears to be taking a toll. In 2024, 16 FTSE 100 bosses were in the role for less than a year.

In response, some companies are experimenting with co-leadership models and distributed governance structures, where responsibilities are shared across multiple executives or autonomous teams. The co-CEO model is being adopted by several prominent firms, including Netflix, Oracle and soon Spotify.

As organisations attempt to keep pace with developments in emerging tech, geopolitical upheaval, digital transformation and increasingly exacting regulation, traditional hierarchies are starting to feel outdated, argues Sara Daw, CEO of Liberti Group, an executive-recruitment firm. "The modern C-suite has barely evolved since the 1980s. It's time to reconsider how leadership is structured," she says. "Expecting one person to carry the full weight is unrealistic and risky."

Daw says a co-CEO approach can help companies stay agile in volatile markets and during periods of economic uncertainty. But success depends on clearly defined roles,

“Every year, there are two or three pivotal calls – on investment, people, markets or risk – which materially influence whether a company succeeds or fails

– one capable of enabling decentralised decision-making while still providing strategic coherence. "When that capability is present, the role is indispensable. When it's absent, no amount of structural redesign will compensate," he says. "Every year, there are two or three pivotal calls – on investment, people, markets or risk – which materially influence whether a company succeeds or fails. These decisions are difficult precisely because they require judgement across competing interests, incomplete information and long-term consequences. In a fully decentralised model, they become harder, slower and potentially even impossible."

According to Sherman, good corporate leaders must master the tricky, creative and increasingly collaborative game of allocating intangible capital – data, talent and IP. The CEO's job is to decide where these resources sit, how they're shared and how they're protected or exploited.

While some see the CEO role fragmenting, others argue its importance is greater than ever. In today's AI-driven landscape, "CEOs are needed now more than at any other time in business," says Steve Garnett, former chairman, EMEA at Salesforce. "The AI revolution represents both the greatest opportunity and the greatest threat most companies will face in a generation. In moments like this, you cannot lead from the sidelines. The CEO has to be out in front, setting direction and owning the trade-offs."

AI is unlike other enterprise technologies in that, when fully utilised, it will sit at the heart of how companies sell, serve customers, price products, allocate talent and even decide which work humans do next. "AI touches strategy, culture, risk and brand simultaneously," Garnett notes. "This cannot be managed purely by committee. Someone must decide. Which sacred processes are you willing to kill? How fast do you move? Where do you accept short-term disruption to avoid irrelevance?"

The CEO role today is less about oversight and more about courageous leadership, strategic judgment and organisational stewardship amid unprecedented complexity. The paradigm of the singular, visionary CEO is evolving, but it is far from over. ●

shared accountability, complementary skills and aligned values. Without these foundations, Daw warns, co-leadership can quickly unravel.

The shift is also being driven by changing attitudes towards leadership itself. Speake argues that organisations are moving away from rigid titles, favouring capability-driven models that emphasise collaboration and functional expertise instead.

"The idea of the CEO as a dominant, ego-driven figure from 20 years ago has clearly evolved," Speake says. "People coming through the leadership pipeline may no longer see the same appeal or purpose in the role as it has traditionally been defined."

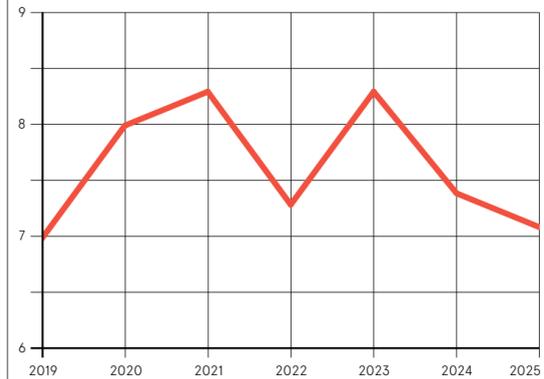
That sentiment is reflected in survey data. According to Deloitte's 2025 Gen Z and Millennial Survey, just 6% of gen-Z workers say their primary career goal is to reach a leadership position. Younger employees are prioritising skill development, personal growth and purpose. This generation is less motivated by corner offices and 80-hour weeks and more driven by work that aligns with their values and long-term growth, Speake explains.

But rather than remove the role, it might be more useful to rethink what the CEO is meant to do. Boards should view the CEO as a coach or guide, says Mark Sherman, CEO at Praeva Partners, an executive search firm. "A great CEO creates value, but a poor one destroys it. All companies need strong direction from a skilled individual, but not all are fortunate enough to have the right person in place."

The real issue is not whether companies need CEOs, Sherman argues, but whether they have the right CEO

## CEO TENURES ARE SHORTENING

Global average tenure of outgoing CEOs, years



Russel Reynolds, 2025

# As AI rewrites business, it's time to rewrite your strategy

AI experimentation has shifted from boardroom curiosity to competitive advantage. So how can leaders create impact? Success lies in strategic decisions that protect and leverage enterprise value

So profound is the transformation being brought about by AI, that the ultimate impact of the changes we're living through will only become clear once the dust has settled.

For now, with AI shifting from concept to commodity, organisations across all sectors and industries are scrambling to adapt.

"Boards feel pressured to move fast on AI," says Alwin Magimay, global AI leader at PA Consulting, a global innovation consultancy. "It's no longer just the case that AI-driven disruptors will impact your margins. The risk now is that AI is redesigning the entire foundations of your industry."

It's this very imperative for change that also brings danger, says Magimay. "While bold leaders are taking action, speed without strategy risks taking you in the wrong direction."

In Magimay's view, the organisations making progress are those who take strategic steps to protect their enterprise knowledge: the proprietary knowledge, data and intellectual property accumulated over the years. He adds: "Now that AI is becoming commoditised, advantage comes not from the technology itself but from the strategies you use to gain and preserve enterprise knowledge."

For Magimay, enterprise knowledge is a core step in the journey to becoming an intelligent enterprise. This is "where every process, workflow, service and even employee can be supercharged by digital, data and AI." These organisations stand out because they have clarity in their strategy, governance, data and decision-making structures.

"Many organisations have bought the tools but skipped the thinking," Magimay notes.

### Data as critical capital

At the heart of an intelligent enterprise lies data. Not as a passive by-product of activity, but as a core asset that needs ownership and protection. Some organisations launch AI initiatives without clear ownership of data quality, lineage or governance.

Turning data into well-structured enterprise knowledge calls for integration, as siloed datasets limit insight and blunt AI's impact. Intelligent enterprises break down these silos by designing architectures that connect systems.

A further risk is that organisations, in their rush to deploy tools, inadvertently gift highly valuable proprietary data to AI platforms.

"If you don't have the right governance and protection, you risk giving

away your organisational differentiation. So when you think about AI, you also need to think about what makes you special – and how you protect that," Magimay warns.

This requires clear accountability at the top. Who owns enterprise data? How are standards enforced? How is access balanced with security? These are board-level questions, not technical afterthoughts.

### A perpetual beta mindset

Traditional digital and AI systems are largely deterministic. Once built, they behave the same way until someone changes the code. AI-enabled services are different. Performance shifts as data and context change; models are updated; and workflows evolve.

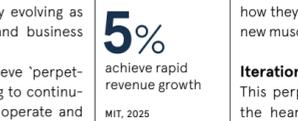
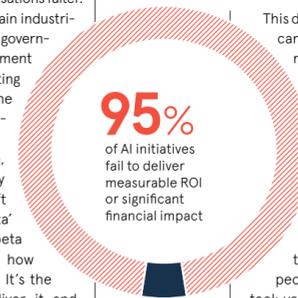
This is where many organisations falter. They adopt AI tools but retain industrial-era planning cycles and governance models. They experiment at the edges, while protecting legacy assumptions at the core. The result is fragmentation and value leakage.

For Derreck van Gelderen, global head of AI strategy at PA Consulting, this shift calls for a 'perpetual beta' mindset. "Perpetual beta is a fundamental shift in how you design organisations. It's the difference between 'deliver it and move on' and continually evolving as the data, environment and business changes," he says.

Organisations who achieve 'perpetual beta' are those willing to continuously reinvent how they operate and ask uncomfortable questions: if we were starting today, how would we design this organisation?

"They've mapped their most important decisions into clear categories. For example, which decisions should be AI-first, where speed and pattern recognition matter more than nuance? Which must remain human-first, where judgement, ethics, or stakeholder trust are non-negotiable? And which sit in that contested middle ground?"

This type of thinking, says van Gelderen, means more than just optimising processes from 20 steps to 10. "We're not looking to create faster horses. The organisations treating AI as a way to do the same things slightly quicker are missing the point entirely," he says. "Agentic AI gives us the opportunity to fundamentally rethink how a business operates, how work flows, how decisions are made, how teams are structured, and where value is actually created."



### Iteration, not perfection

This perpetual beta approach lies at the heart of a larger cultural shift, says Magimay. "The mindset of leaders today is that every investment needs to be successful," he says. "They give you investment for a project and expect it to succeed. 'Failure' is perceived to be negative."

Magimay, however, recommends purposely breaking AI investment into small, stage-gated experiments to work out what will scale. "Test quickly,

“In an intelligent enterprise, strategy must become a living framework that evolves as data accumulates and insight grows

This demands courage. Reinvention can disrupt established revenue streams, unsettle power structures or require new capabilities. In an intelligent enterprise, strategy must become a living framework that evolves as data accumulates and insight grows.

"The difference compared to digital transformation is that you're not teaching people how to simply use an AI tool; you're teaching them to rethink how they do their job with AI in it. It's a new muscle you need to train," he adds.

### Mobilise the masses

All of the above will rely on highly engaged evangelists: the enthusiasts who champion new tools and push boundaries. But how do you mobilise the wider workforce?

"Neutralists" are key here. They're neither early adopters nor active resisters. They're the pragmatic majority, waiting to see whether change is credible, supported and worthwhile. Winning them over requires more than inspiration. It requires structure, and that comes from the top.

Much advice in this area fails to recognise how deep workforce change is at this point in time. Now, AI engines can take on routine, repetitive heavy lifting. This means that rules, and roles, get redefined.

In practice, this means a shift in required skills: where human talent works alongside AI agents to identify,

learn quickly, move on quickly. That's how you derisk AI and spot the use cases that genuinely create value."

"In the venture capital world, they plan for up to eight out of ten investments to fail," Magimay comments. "But the two that succeed pay for the rest. That early, focused experimentation is what will give your future AI roll-out clarity and direction."

This model also reframes accountability. Instead of asking whether a project was delivered on time and on budget, leaders ask whether each sprint generated insight, reduced risk or created measurable value.

"If you don't make this leap in thinking, AI investment will be a series of pilots that gather virtual dust. You will see your bottom line go up but without the benefits," van Gelderen adds.

prioritise and protect enterprise value. This requires a new learning attitude: not just adopting new methods, but letting go of old habits that no longer serve the business.

Senior leadership behaviour will set the tone here. When senior executives visibly engage with AI tools, ask data-driven questions and participate in sprint reviews, they signal that intelligence is an enterprise priority.

### The intelligent advantage

An intelligent enterprise is not defined by the number of algorithms deployed. It's defined by how leadership sets direction, treats data as enterprise capital and energises the AI neutralists.

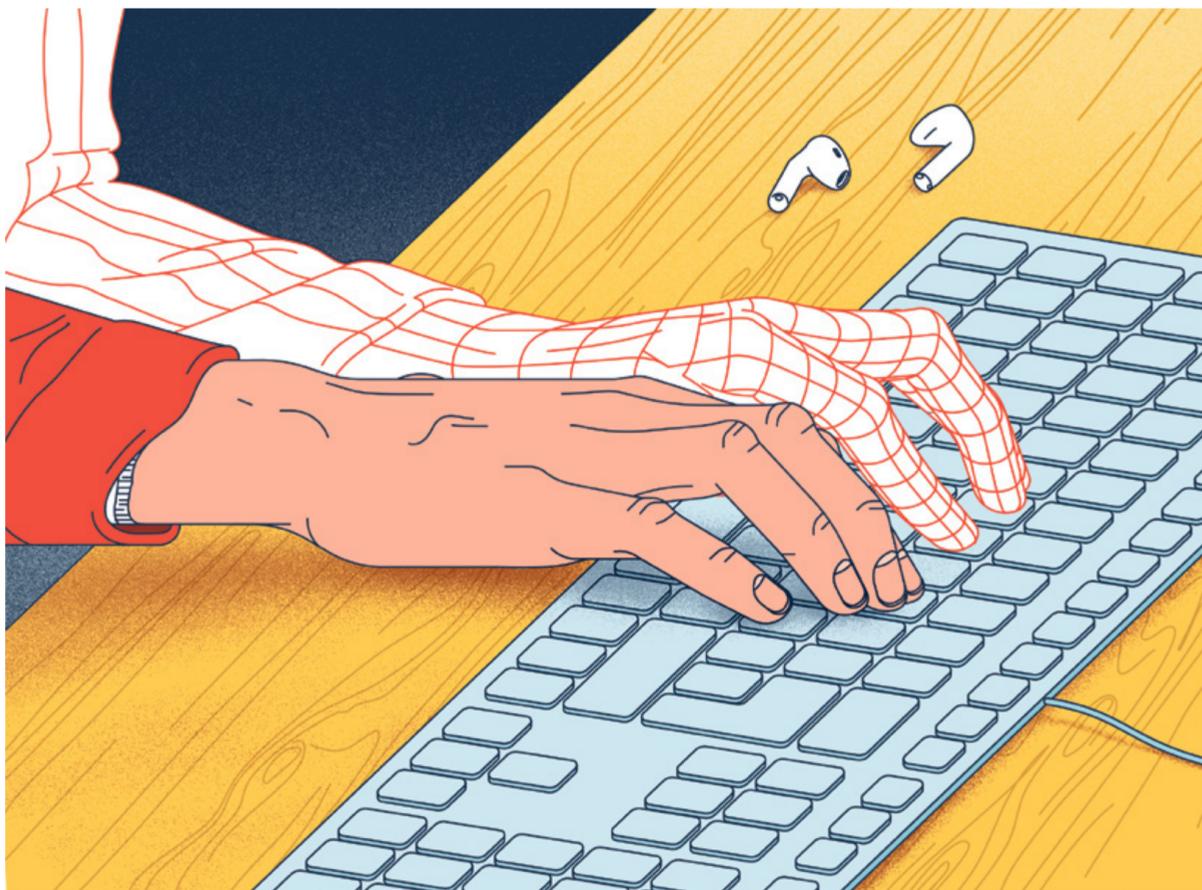
It protects data while unlocking insight. It thinks in sprints but acts with long-term ambition. It tolerates failure but demands learning. And it mobilises the masses, rather than leaving the techies to tinker.

In a business landscape being reshaped by AI, that combination of clarity, iteration and continual reinvention is no longer optional. It's what converts AI ambition into commercial returns – and keeps that value growing over time.



Scan here to explore the Intelligent Enterprise





TRANSFORMATION

# Evolution not revolution: don't fall into the digital transformation trap

Digital transformation doesn't have to mean ripping everything up and starting again. The smartest businesses are taking a slower, steadier path – one upgrade at a time



Ritam Gandhi is the founder and director of Studio Graphene, a global digital product studio

Ritam Gandhi

**D**igital transformation". There aren't many phrases that have become as commonly used in boardrooms around the world over the past two decades. Businesses across all sectors have poured vast sums into modernising legacy systems, automating workflows, moving to the cloud, visualising data and embracing artificial intelligence. The goal? Typically, a combination of higher productivity, greater agility and better customer experiences.

Yet, paradoxically, many of these ambitious programmes have had the opposite effect. Instead of freeing teams up to work smarter and

faster, digital transformation efforts often introduce new friction points, create layers of complexity and erode morale. The result: productivity takes a hit just when businesses need to be more efficient than ever. The problem isn't with the idea of digital transformation itself. Of course, adopting new technologies to improve operations, products, services and outputs is entirely the right thing to do in most instances. The problem, however, is in the way many companies approach it.

Too many organisations still view digital transformation as a single, sweeping initiative. For mid- and enterprise-sized businesses, this

can mean investing in a multimillion-pound project to replace old systems with new ones, all in one go.

This "big bang" approach – something I saw frequently in my 15 years working as a consultant – is often fuelled by good intentions but hampered by flawed execution.

In practice, it tends to produce long, expensive projects that are slow to deliver value. And the bigger issue is that, by the time a system finally launches, the business's needs have evolved, leaving disgruntled employees, leadership teams and board members. In some cases, these projects are quietly abandoned halfway through, leaving behind little more than technical debt and scepticism toward future innovation.

Late last year, Gartner's annual global survey of more than 3,100 CIOs and technology executives produced some stark findings about "digital initiatives". It found that less than half (48%) of projects involving the implementation of

new technologies meet or exceed their targets. A study by McKinsey back in 2022 created similar headlines – it had surveyed 600 firms that had recently undergone a digital transformation project, finding that only 20% achieved more than three-quarters of the revenue gains they had anticipated before embarking on their projects.

Amid the explosion of AI technologies and the rush to integrate them into workflows, strategic planning and customer-facing platforms, there are important lessons to learn from the digital transformation failings of the past.

The pattern I see time and time again is this: a company sets out to shift its customer-facing tech onto a new platform, unify its data or roll out a new ERP system. The project balloons in scope, with endless committees, vendors and sign-offs. The technology itself may be sound, but the transformation effort overwhelms the organisation. Teams have to learn new tools and processes all at once, often without the right training or buy-in. Productivity dips sharply and the promised efficiency gains never materialise – the Gartner and McKinsey studies shine a very bright light on that.

The irony is that digital transformation is supposed to make work simpler. But too often, it ends up making it harder. From experience, this tends to stem from several key reasons: a lack of careful consideration about the people using the tech (the UX is over-looked in favour of technical capabilities); a lack of buy-in from all levels of an organisation (fatigue sets in quickly and productivity suffers); and a disconnect between the end goal and the practical delivery (there are not simple, actionable steps to get from A to B).

This is why there is always a case for taking a more iterative approach to digital transformation – one that favours steady progress over sweeping change. Instead of tearing everything down and starting again, organisations should focus on identifying and addressing the most painful friction points first.

Take the example of renovating a house. As owners, you can let the house get so tired and worn that, after 20 years, you need to completely gut and refurbish the entire property. That is going to be expensive and difficult to coordinate (you need to align different tradespeople and buy lots of materials). As well as increasing the chances of the project exceeding the original budget and timelines, the house itself might, at times, be in such a state as to be uninhabitable.

The alternative is, every year, pick just one room or part of the house and spruce it up. It is focused, minimises disruption and means the house is in a constant state of improvement or modernisation.

All the same applies in the creation, adoption or implementation of new digital solutions. An agile, iterative approach will often lower risk and cost – smaller projects are easier to control, test and refine. It is typically quicker to create value as the project ought to be completed in weeks or months, not years. And, crucially, it means that organisations are best

**“The coming years will only amplify the pressure; AI offers immense potential, but only if it is implemented thoughtfully and ethically**

placed to capitalise on the best and most exciting new technologies; something they can easily miss out on if they treat digital transformation as a major, once-in-a-decade project.

Many of these challenges apply most pertinently to mid-size and large organisations – those that are often hamstrung by legacy IT. To return to the analogy above; for these firms, digital transformation projects can feel more like modernising a Tudor mansion than a 1960s bungalow.

As such, for mid-to-large firms, a smarter strategy of modernisation is required and modularity could be the answer. Gradually replacing or upgrading parts of a system as needed, while maintaining core functionality. For instance, integrating new APIs, digitising specific workflows, streamlining the customer journey or introducing cloud-based microservices can all yield significant gains without the disruption of a total rebuild.

Crucially, this approach allows for clear measurement of outcomes. Each iteration should deliver tangible improvements in performance, usability or customer satisfaction. That data can then inform the next step, ensuring resources are spent where they make the biggest impact.

As noted at the start, when asked what the desired outcomes of a digital transformation project are, "boosting productivity" is a common answer. Set against the backdrop of the UK's purported "productivity crisis", not to mention the red-hot debate about how effective AI can be in enhancing productivity, this is a fitting point to end on.

Right now, the relationship between tech and productivity is not about piling huge amounts of time and money into revitalising entire IT systems. It's about seamlessly integrating the most relevant technology

**“Successful businesses don't transform overnight; they evolve thoughtfully, continuously, and with people at the absolute centre**

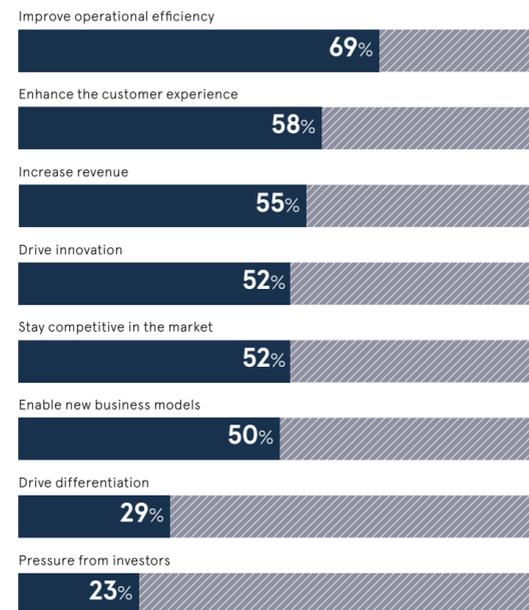
into people's daily work. The most successful transformations are those where the tools almost disappear into the background, enabling creativity and collaboration rather than constraining it.

The coming years will likely only amplify this pressure. AI and, by extension, automated, data-driven decision-making, offer immense potential, but only if they're implemented thoughtfully. Businesses that continue to equate digital progress with large-scale investment will risk falling behind those that embrace agility and experimentation.

The phrase "digital transformation" has come to be misunderstood, often seen as a singular, once-in-a-decade action. In reality, progress is rarely delivered in one grand gesture. The organisations that view change as ongoing adaptation, rather than one-off transformations, are better positioned to respond to whatever comes next. Change doesn't have to be dramatic to be meaningful. The real challenge for businesses now isn't transforming overnight, but learning how to keep evolving – thoughtfully, continuously and with people at the centre. ●

## DECISION-MAKERS' MOTIVATIONS FOR DRIVING AI INITIATIVES

Tech leaders share their top priority for AI initiatives



Crusoe, 2026

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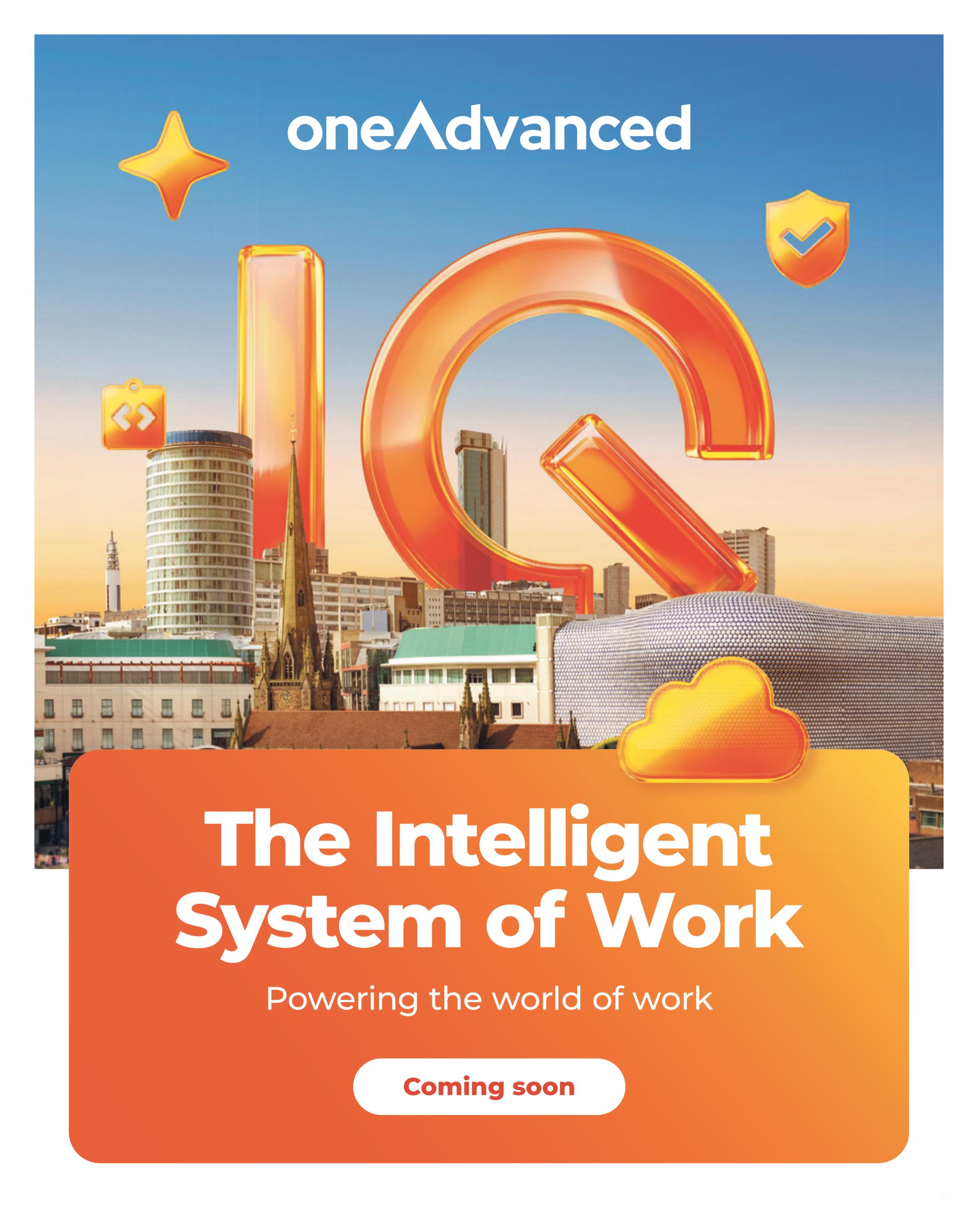
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