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## The C-suite Agenda

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INTERVIEW

# Inside the Google engine

Google Advertising UKI MD **Dyana Najdi** reveals how the tech giant road-tests its own innovations to future-proof brand strategy

Tom Dennis

**D**yana Najdi has spent just over 18 years at Google. In that time, she's rotated across multiple divisions at the tech giant, serving as Head of Google Analytics EMEA between 2008 and 2010, and acting as Director of YouTube/Video Solutions EMEA between 2017 and 2023. Now, she's the MD at Google Advertising UKI, where her team helps Google's partners leverage the full suite of its marketing tools in order to drive visibility and growth. She's therefore witnessed a few upheavals during her tenure at the company, yet it's during the last few years that the rate of change has begun to accelerate, largely thanks to AI.

"There is a powerful saying that change has never been this fast, and will never be this slow again," she says. "This couldn't be more true — especially at Google."

There's no doubt that Google is one of the world's primary movers of technological change, and that such products as Gemini and AI Overviews have helped to bring familiarity with LLMs to a wider audience. Yet according to Najdi, Google has been an AI-first company for over a decade, using its own models and algorithms to power many of its consumer products and advertising solutions before ChatGPT was a twinkle in its co-founders' eyes.

And what's particularly interesting is that Najdi explains that, rather than narrow the focus of advertisers on AI, AI and AI, the spread of LLMs is placing renewed emphasis on originality and authenticity in marketing content. So rather than turning marketing into some kind of formulaic 'paint-by-numbers' game, Google's AI-based tools are helping consumers avoid generic content and discover brands with more cultural relevance and value.

Despite the profound shifts underway at Google and in the wider global economy, Najdi affirms that her core values and principles have remained the same throughout her career. She explains, "my philosophy has always been to master the moment I'm in, deliver exceptional work through thriving teams, and be ready for what may come next." Likewise, Google Advertising UKI retains the same underlying goal it's had for years, which is to guide its clients through using its products to deliver strong business growth.

"We spend a lot of time understanding shifts in the market and helping advertisers explore what



this can mean for them; e.g. shifts in viewing behaviours with the explosion of Connected TV in an increasingly fragmented viewing landscape," she says. "Readying CMOs for what's coming can look like exploring how opportunities to unify YouTube and other video media can deliver better efficiencies and reduce wastage (as well as ad fatigue)."

Google is in a privileged position as far as marketing goes, in that its ability to use its own products for

advertising purposes can help refine what it offers to customers, and vice versa.

As Najdi explains, "Internally, we see our Google Marketing team is a great adopter of our products — with an incredibly high bar for brand safety and how they want the Google brand and products (such as Pixel) to show up in the industry — so they are a strong benchmark for what matters to advertisers."

As an example of this, Najdi reveals that many of Google's Pixel

campaigns have used Google AI Studio and Veo as tools for scaling creative production, lowering costs and reducing turnarounds. Similarly, Google UKI's marketing team now uses Gemini to thematically summarise millions of user comments and provide insights into how content is landing with audiences, while its AI-powered creative testing platform is able to predict campaign success with almost 75% accuracy, according to Najdi, thereby reducing a formerly weeks-long process into one lasting only a few hours.

Practicing what it preaches enables Google to deliver more consistently for its customers, with Najdi stating that it has always been a user-first company. "A great example of this is when we deprecated 30 second non-skip ads on mobile following a shift in viewing behaviours from desktop," she adds. "It wasn't a great viewing experience to click on a video, only to have to wait 30 seconds to view it — so it was absolutely the right decision — even if it had some impact on ad opportunities."

In terms of the present and the future, Najdi says that Google UKI's clients are reporting three core marketing-related issues. The first, and perhaps most pressing for many brands, is ensuring visibility in the context of AI-based search experiences, which threaten to obscure sources of information. Second is the issue of meaningfully deploying AI for advertising purposes, particularly in terms of upskilling and negotiating organisational complexities. And third is planning ad spend in an economically unpredictable environment, an issue which Google has responded to by providing clients with the "strong data and measurement foundations," highlighting how marketing can be a source of profits rather than costs.

Ultimately, brands have been responding to such challenges, especially the expansion of AI, by prioritising originality and authenticity in their content. This is not only for GEO (generative engine optimisation) purposes, but also to stand out more in a landscape increasingly defined by AI-generated content.

"In this context, advertisers are increasingly exploring what it means to be culturally relevant and have a strategy that includes creator partnerships," Najdi says. "These partnerships turn views into value across every step of the consumer journey — driving higher ad recall, consideration and conversions." ●

“These partnerships turn views into value across every step of the consumer journey — driving higher ad recall, consideration and conversions”

# The future of CX: from service delivery to need anticipation

As AI reshapes how consumers and citizens discover, evaluate and access products and services, the winning organisations will be those quickest to become machine-legible, trusted and anticipatory

**T**he last era of commerce and public services was built around people interacting directly with brands, platforms and institutions. AI has now inserted itself between them.

AI is increasingly acting as a mediator for how consumers and citizens discover, evaluate and access products, services and support — reshaping decision-making before organisations even know a journey has begun. This represents more than the arrival of another digital channel. It fundamentally changes how organisations are discovered, evaluated and chosen.

"The assumption that customers will engage directly with your brand is already outdated," says Clare Allum, global head of consumer and manufacturing at PA Consulting, a global innovation consultancy. "AI intermediaries now decide what gets seen, compared and chosen. If you're not designing for that layer, you're not competing and you're being filtered out. The winners will be those that design for machine judgement while keeping human trust."

This shift presents a challenge for both public and private sector organisations — but also an opportunity to respond more intelligently. Becky Noble, a public services expert at PA, says: "We're seeing the opportunity for AI to equip organisations with early insight to anticipate needs before they are explicitly expressed."

### From the attention economy to the recommendation economy

"For decades, organisations competed for attention. Increasingly, they'll compete for recommendation," says Allum. "It's no longer enough to be visible; you need to be understandable and credible to the systems helping customers make decisions."

Marketing, search and customer experience investments were designed to put brands in front of customers at the right moment. Success depended on memorability and persuasion.

AI is changing that equation. Recommendation engines may compare products using pricing, performance or other criteria — such as reviews or consumer sentiment — which surface strengths and weaknesses beyond the scope and control of traditional marketing.

"We're shifting from a world where information was designed primarily for human consumption to one where it must also be interpreted by AI systems,"

says Donald Cameron, a financial services expert at PA. "Being found and recommended increasingly depends on structured, detailed information that helps AI evaluate products and services."

"The same principle applies to public bodies," says Noble. "Trust is not a brand attribute; it is legitimacy. Citizens need to know when AI is being used, what it has done, what it has not done, and how a human can challenge the outcome. This last principle is crucial, and we've seen it applied to good effect already in AI implementations; such as our work with HM Courts & Tribunals Service."

### Trust in a world of recommendation and delegation

If recommendation is becoming the new battleground, then the advantage will go to those able to deploy trust as a differentiator. When customers see recommendations provided by a large language model, trust is not limited to the accuracy of information, but also the source and brand behind it.

PA's annual Brand Impact Index — a nationally representative survey of US consumers — shows that consumers feel more positive about, and are more likely to make purchases from, brands that deliver reliably and make life easier.

Allum adds: "They're looking to organisations that reduce friction, solve problems, and earn trust. Brand leaders have a responsibility not just to deliver that but to ensure that AI engines know and surface this information."

Cameron adds that some consumers are becoming more comfortable discussing sensitive financial topics with AI, highlighting both the opportunity to improve access and the need to maintain trust, empathy and oversight.

Yet he also warns that a focus on AI optimisation cannot come at the expense of the substance behind the experience.

"The quality of products and services, and the people behind them, need to withstand scrutiny," says Cameron. "Especially as AI evaluates offerings based on evidence, outcomes and customer value, not just messaging."

As intelligent systems compare products on evidence, outcomes and customer value, weak propositions will be harder to disguise behind marketing.

### From reaction to anticipation

As AI moves from recommendation into delegation, it also creates the conditions for a more fundamental shift in how services are delivered — enabling



“We’re shifting from a world where information was designed primarily for human consumption to one where it must also be interpreted by AI”

AI investment is rising, but broad consumer impact is missing

75% of brand executives sit between operationalising and transforming their business with AI

35% of brand executives are in the scaling phase of their AI journey

33% say that the business impact of AI lags behind the level of executive attention it receives

PA Consulting, 2026

organisations to anticipate needs, not just respond to them.

By combining AI, analytics and connected data, organisations can identify signals earlier and respond before customers or citizens actively seek support.

The opportunity is particularly pointed in the public sector, says

Noble, where technology can bridge data gaps between departments.

Noble gives the example of an elderly person living alone. "There are lots of small breadcrumbs that might suggest something isn't quite right," she explains, from missed appointments to unusual financial patterns. Individually, these signals may appear insignificant. Together, they can indicate that intervention is needed and trigger support mechanisms earlier.

"People expect the services they use to work together around their needs, not organisational boundaries, because from their perspective it's all part of the same life event," says Noble. "Technology can play a key role in improving anticipatory services, ensuring citizens get the support they need in the moments that matter."

Singapore's LifeSG platform demonstrates how this can work in practice. Designed around life events such as childbirth, retirement and job loss, it brings together government services and surfaces relevant support before citizens need to search for it.

### Focus on the moments that matter

Yet becoming anticipatory does not mean trying to predict everything. The greater opportunity lies in identifying those touchpoints that deliver the most value; where timely intervention can prevent harm, build trust and improve lives.

"Not every touchpoint carries the same weight," says Allum. "A small number of moments shape how

customers judge you, determining whether they convert in that interaction and whether they choose to come back again, building loyalty over time."

The focus on these moments should never come at the expense of the customer experience investments of the past decade, warns Allum. "Frictionless journeys, intuitive interfaces and strong service design all remain essential, but they are now table stakes because we're all getting less patient and more likely to switch," she adds.

Those that succeed in an AI-mediated economy will build on these foundations rather than replace them. They will become machine-legible, trusted and anticipatory; ensuring AI can evaluate what they offer, maintaining transparency and identifying needs before problems emerge.

As AI becomes the new front door to commerce and public services, competitive advantage will belong to organisations that are easiest to understand, easiest to trust and best placed to anticipate and act when it matters most.



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# AI adoption for CFOs: Why trust defines the next era of finance

The promise of AI is undeniable, proposing unprecedented speed, deeper insights and a finance function that acts as the strategic engine of the business. Yet, ensuring trust remains a critical challenge.

**L**eaders across the finance and accounting industry are facing a profound moment. Generative AI is already transforming how businesses operate, while agentic AI promises to unlock fresh opportunities through a digital workforce available around the clock.

These digital helpers can carry out multi-step tasks such as sending emails, reconciling transactions and reporting work, enhancing productivity while freeing teams to focus on strategic priorities. The shift will be especially significant for CFOs, whose role is evolving from operational overseer to strategic leader.

Yet barriers remain, including legacy systems, outdated processes and concerns around trust, accuracy and control. Meanwhile, for every finance leader, a critical question remains: how do you embrace AI's power without breaking the trust, accuracy, and control that the business demands?

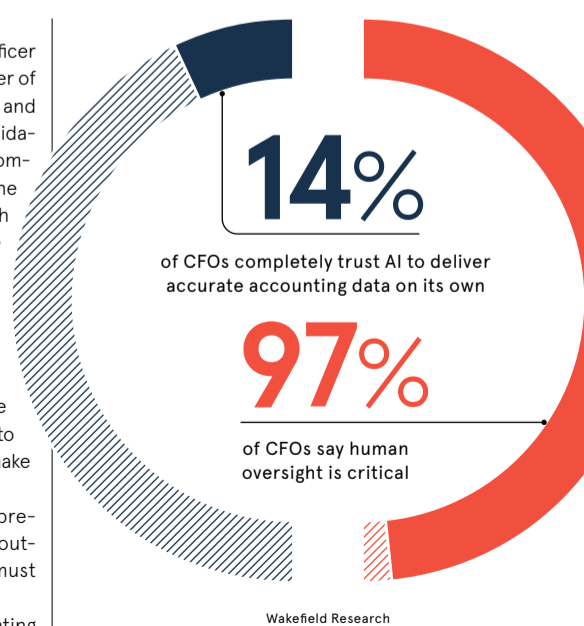
## Bigger, bolder decisions

Jeremy Ung is chief technology officer (CTO) at BlackLine, a leading provider of cloud software that automates and manages financial close and consolidation, invoice-to-cash and intercompany accounting processes. The company has just celebrated its 25th birthday and is now pioneering the use of AI, in generative and agentic forms, to deliver powerful productivity gains for numerous clients.

Ung believes agentic AI will radically transform the finance and accounting (F&A) function over the next few years, "empowering CFOs to unlock value and companies to make bigger, bolder decisions".

But he says many firms aren't prepared for a world where agents outnumber human workers and must think ahead.

"Whether finance and accounting departments are ready or not, there is a big shift happening in how work is



done. But what does it mean to manage a workforce that could quintuple or become order of magnitudes larger in size overnight? How do we govern agents at scale?"

The gap between firms that tackle these issues and those that don't is startling, raising awkward questions in the industry. According to Gartner, the median company takes eight days to close its books while the fastest 10% use technology to achieve this in four days or fewer.

The F&A industry also faces a worsening talent shortage that is creating new operational bottlenecks. The number of CPA exam candidates has fallen by 27% over the past decade, according to Deloitte, while specialised roles are taking over 70 days to fill on average, leading to severe delays and increased compliance risks at some firms.

## Overcoming the 'trust gap'

A side effect of these challenges is that automation has moved from an efficiency enabler to an existential necessity in the industry. And yet, many CFOs looking to embrace AI face another, perhaps bigger barrier: trust and transparency.

However, F&A is a highly regulated sector where the margin for error is slim. Many generic AI solutions take a "black box" approach, making it difficult for audit teams to understand and defend outputs. As AI agents execute more financial tasks independently, transparency becomes increasingly important.

"It can be pretty hard to figure out when AI has gone wrong until the result is there," says Ung. "This is why the process really needs to be transparent. You need to know its chain of thought, its reasoning at every step, because an auditor needs to understand what was done."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, only 14% of CFOs completely trust AI to deliver accurate accounting data on its own, while 97% say human oversight is critical, according to Wakefield Research.

BlackLine is helping companies overcome this "trust gap" by harnessing the transformative impacts of agentic reasoning, machine learning, predictive analytics and generative AI - to offer F&A teams benefits that were impossible only a few years ago.

Through its Agentic Financial Operations (AFO) platform that embeds a digital workforce alongside finance teams, BlackLine is enabling departments to work continuously on millions of transactions while surfacing actionable insights. The platform takes a "glass box" approach, providing an immutable audit trail and explainable decision-making.

This AFO platform is built on the firm's proprietary accounting data, developed over 25 years. Consequently, this means that, unlike generic LLMs, it makes more accurate and nuanced decisions based on patterns derived from billions of historical transactions, reconciliation decisions, invoices and collections data points.

## Augment, not replace

Ung rejects the idea that AI will be a net job destroyer in F&A, arguing it will augment human expertise rather than replace it. The types of work

**“It can be pretty hard to figure out when AI has gone wrong until the result is there. This is why the process really needs to be transparent”**

done by teams will change, however, as more manual or undifferentiated tasks are automated.

Accountants will be able to shift from routine execution to higher-value work such as exception handling, analysis and strategic advising.

"It will be more about augmentation and freeing people up to do new things, thinking more creatively," says Ung. "This will hopefully alleviate the sector's talent shortages but also make the career more desirable."

It's a similar story for the CFO, who is moving beyond traditional compliance, audit and cost-control responsibilities - and increasingly expected to use real-time insights to guide business strategy and identify growth opportunities.

Solutions like BlackLine's Agentic Financial Operations Platform will further support the trend, by providing continuous insight, automated variance detection and the ability to draft financial narratives - allowing CFOs to gain foresight, not just hindsight.

Ung likens it to providing a "bird's eye view" via a single pane of glass. "You need to know what's happening across your organisation in a single place. I think that's critical, because otherwise, it's happening piecemeal or in pockets, and that's not a strategy."

He cautions against expecting instant results, warning that firms who rush into AI deployments without the right foundations in place often pay a price. AI systems require structured and accurate data, for example, while AI agents need to be closely monitored to prevent drift or compliance issues.

"Many firms don't realise agents are just another form of software that needs to be maintained, tested and validated. Things break and they need to be fixed, and teams shouldn't take for granted the complexities around that."

Overall, he is optimistic about what can be achieved, noting that most F&A realise that AI is now a non-negotiable part of running a business. "AI is here to stay, it's not a fly by night operation. We have to make sure the structural elements are in place because it's not a sprint, it's a marathon."



Find out how BlackLine can help CFOs get more from AI



## AI DEPLOYMENT

# How the modern C-suite is actually using AI

Executives explain how they're using AI in their daily work, and how they're implementing these gains from the C-suite down

Simon Chandler

**T**he future is already here — it's just not evenly distributed," William Gibson quipped. This observation fits the modern rise of artificial intelligence. While AI use increases, data shows a divide in how useful workers find it in modern enterprise environments.

A Section AI survey of 5,000 white-collar workers in the UK, US and Canada found automation saves 40% of C-suite executives at least eight hours a week. But 40% of non-management workers report AI saves them no time.

The same survey shows only 15% of the British and North American workforce have useful cases for AI. Yet at the same time executives report using automated tools to handle large workloads, making their organisations more efficient.

While developers spend heavily on computing infrastructure, enterprises are moving past the experimental stage. Large language models and automated systems help them become more productive and profitable.

Section's survey shows only 2% of C-suite employees say AI saves them no time. Meanwhile, 76% save at least

four hours a week. Furthermore, 23% save between eight and 12 hours, and 19% save more than 12 hours. Executives confirm AI tools handle several hours of work weekly.

"I estimate AI Companion saves me five to eight hours a week," says Alex Shumway-Jones, head of enterprise growth and strategy at Zoom.

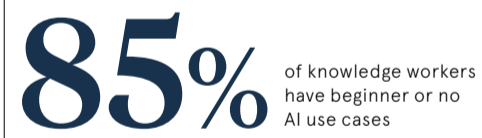
The tool offers efficiency gains in meeting follow-ups and collaboration. It generates summaries and action items instantly after calls, saving reconstruction time.

"It drafts follow-up emails, updates our CRM and routes action items automatically," Shumway-Jones says. "I also use it to query meeting history."

Data shows executives use AI for tasks from fact-finding to coding. Information retrieval used to take hours of manual searching. AI completes this in the background, allowing leaders to focus on core tasks.

"AI augments my capacity to stay on top of the operational load so I can focus on the human side of leadership," Shumway-Jones adds.

Section's survey shows only 2% of C-suite employees say AI saves them no time. Meanwhile, 76% save at least



Section AI, 2026

**“The long-term opportunity is to eliminate the friction of fragmented systems, reduce repetitive work and give people back time for innovation”**

This contrasts with non-management attitudes. Only 34% of staff use tools like Claude, Gemini and ChatGPT for at least two hours a week. Taylor Malmshiemer, chief operating officer at Section, says organisations roll out AI to leadership first.

"The more senior you are, the more likely you are to report access to AI tools, clearer policies and manager support," Malmshiemer says. "Executives operate where AI use is expected, while below-management employees sit in ambiguity."

Executives are decision-makers who collect and analyse data. Current AI models excel here, acting as search engines.

Porres says AI automates the preparation work that informs creativity. He saves eight to 10 hours per week on research synthesis and document preparation.

"What used to be a 45-minute literature scan is a 5-minute review of a pre-synthesised brief," Porres says.

Executive AI use is growing quickly. Sam Sidhu, president and chief executive of Customers Bank, says AI lets employees focus on top priorities to boost productivity.

Sidhu says: "I was using AI tools two to three times a day last year, and that has increased to two to three hours per day."

Automation is the top strategic priority for Customers Bank. Work that required teams now uses systems.

"Processes that formerly took days take minutes," Sidhu adds. "We use AI to engineer faster loan closings and deposit onboarding."

ServiceNow also deploys AI across its workflows. Damian Stirrett, general manager for the UK and Ireland at ServiceNow, says this helps staff focus on higher-value work.

"We run more than 240 AI use cases and generated an estimated \$0.5bn (£380m) in AI value in 2025," Stirrett says. "Commission workflows that

took four days resolve in eight seconds, a 99% improvement."

ServiceNow avoids the executive-employee divide by developing its own tools and providing training.

Stirrett explains: "The most effective way to build capability has been through hands-on experimentation. We invest in this through programmes like ServiceNow University to help employees build confidence."

Zoom's Shumway-Jones says general uptake improves by being deliberate. Tools should not oblige employees to process more information.

"A lot of AI tools add cognitive overhead," Shumway-Jones says. "That is why for many businesses, AI has not delivered yet."

He expects time savings to accelerate as companies learn to use these tools. "With agentic capabilities, we are moving from AI answering questions to AI anticipating needs," he says.

Stirrett expects wider adoption to bring efficiency. He says: "The long-term opportunity is to eliminate the friction of fragmented systems, reduce repetitive work and give people back time for innovation."

The true value of AI will only be realised when organisations democratise access across all levels of the workforce. Leaving junior staff in an experimental vacuum while leadership reaps the temporal rewards creates an unsustainable cultural friction. To turn these isolated efficiency gains into company-wide growth, businesses must move past top-down deployment.

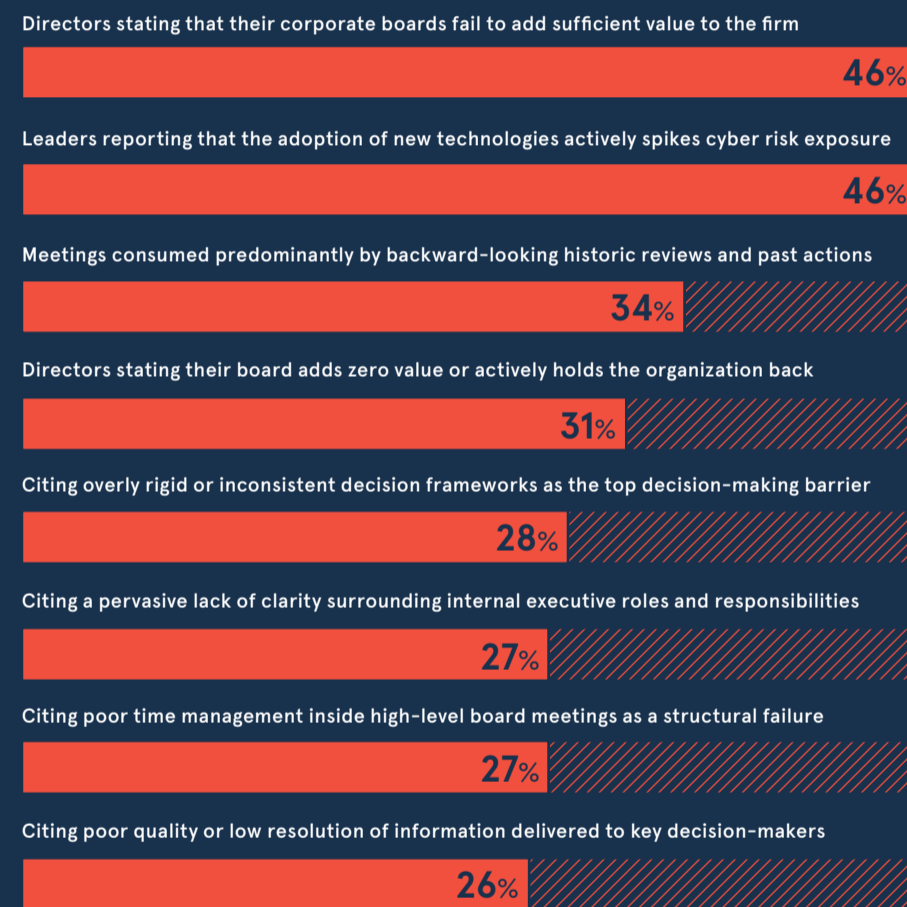
True transformation requires structured upskilling, clear usage guidelines and tools designed to ease cognitive burdens rather than increase them. Only by intentionally closing this digital divide can enterprises convert the promise of automation into collective, long-term profitability — and that rests on the C-suite leading the way. ●

# AI IN THE C-SUITE

The C-suite is trapped in a race, aggressively deploying autonomous AI platforms to secure rapid productivity gains while fundamentally lacking the structural guardrails to manage them. And while the leaders report personal gains from AI deployment, workforces are yet to report any benefit

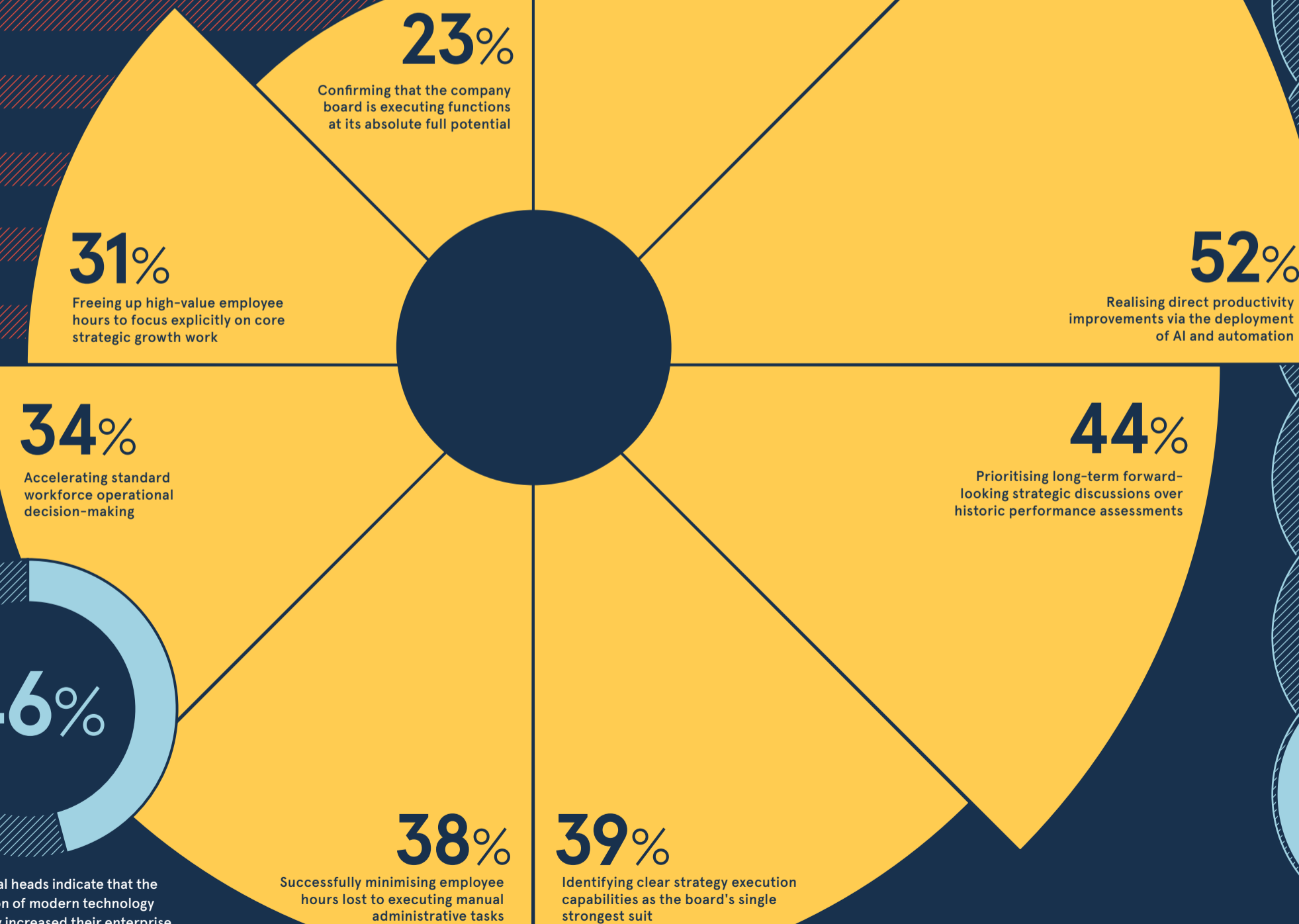
## BOARDROOM FRICTION FACTORS

Percentage of enterprise directors identifying key institutional hurdles and exposure areas



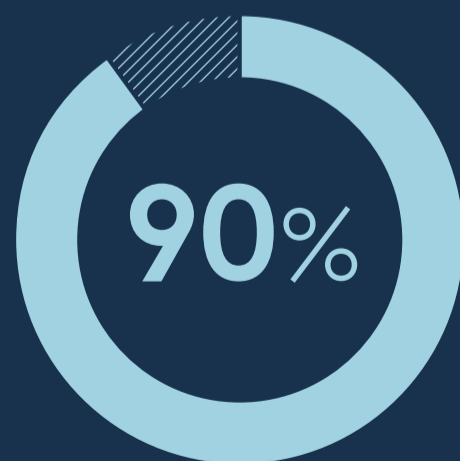
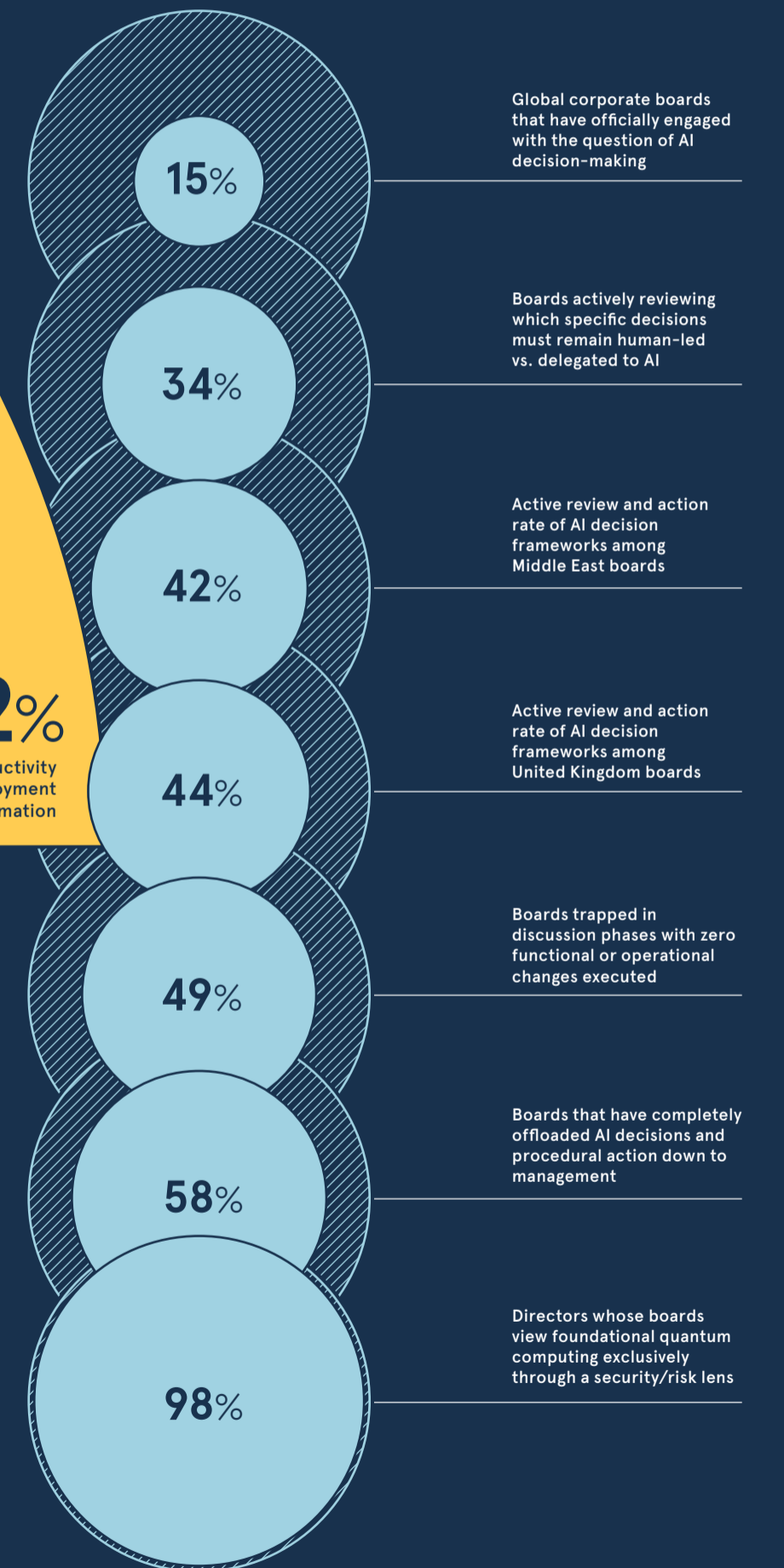
## WHERE THE C-SUITE IS SEEING REAL AI GAINS

Based on weighted senior corporate responses tracking real-world workforce and productivity outcomes

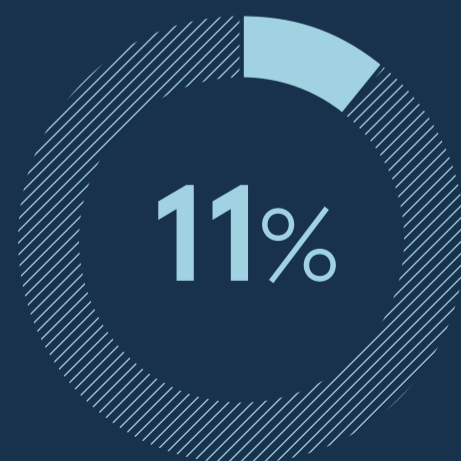


## BOARDROOM INTEGRATION TRENDS

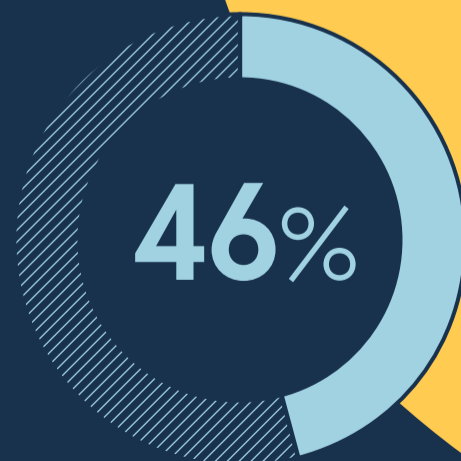
How the boardroom is dealing with AI integrations



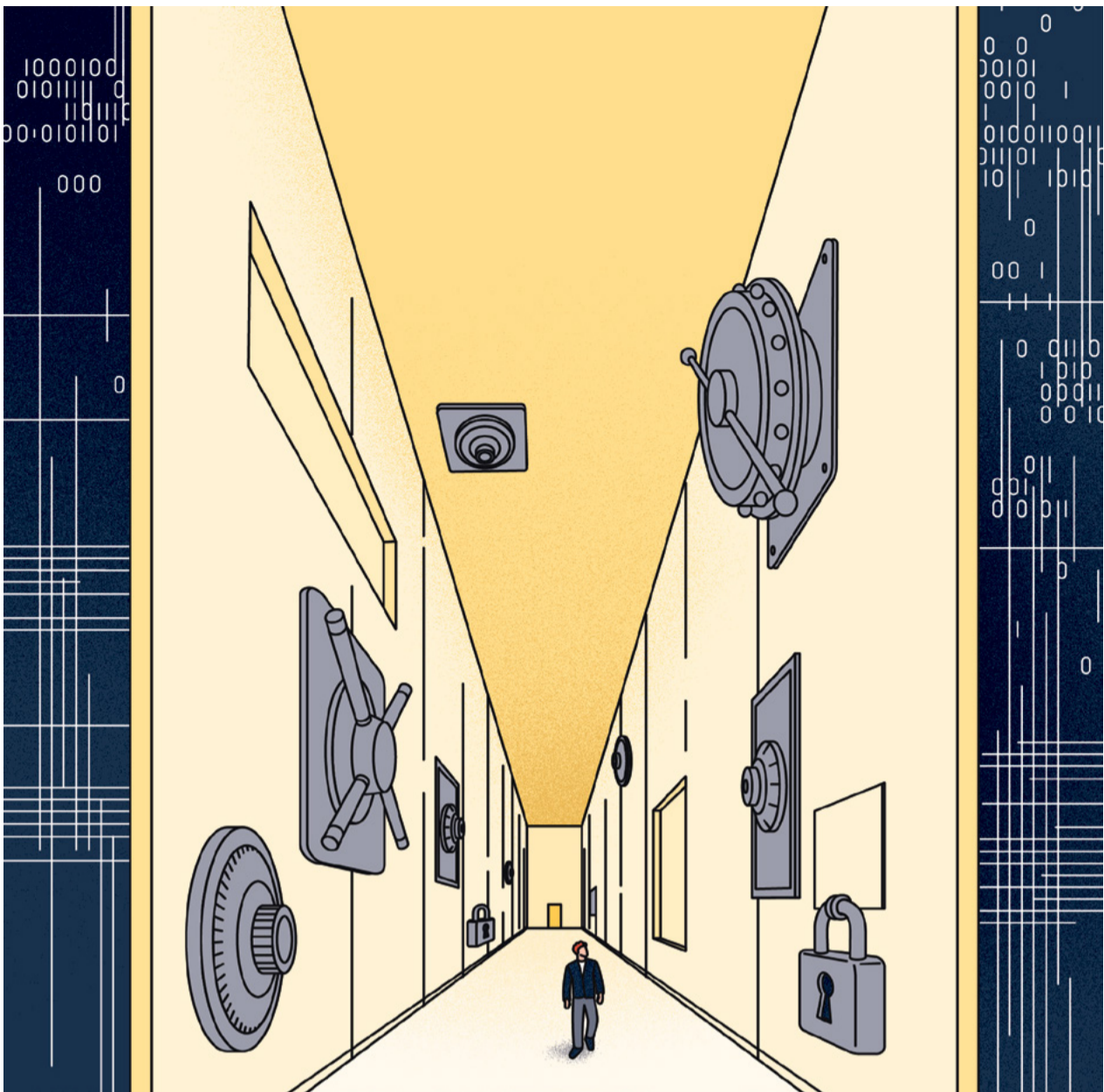
of company directors state that government deregulation drives and pro-growth policy regimes will fundamentally elevate business sentiment



of global enterprise boards currently clear a conservative threshold for total 'AI readiness', with major infrastructural and risk gaps exposed



of organisational heads indicate that the swift integration of modern technology layers has directly increased their enterprise exposure to dangerous cybersecurity risks



# Tracking failure: a boardroom risk

As consumer identifiers crumble, the C-suite must embrace generative optimisation and data clean rooms or risk making critical investment decisions in the dark

David Curry

For more than a decade, marketing departments relied on third-party cookies and mobile identifiers to track customer behaviour across the web and applications. These signals provided a workable way to understand which activities drove growth.

But these signals are failing. Privacy updates and fragmented consumer journeys undermine trackers, while core internet infrastructure blocks them. The result is an environment rich in data but poor in trustworthy insights.

Meta forecast that privacy changes to Apple's iOS would wipe \$10bn

from its 2022 earnings. This came alongside tracking protections from Safari and Firefox, and the arrival of GDPR in Europe. It served as a clear warning: web gatekeepers are determined to phase out legacy tracking.

For consumer brands, this signal degradation creates a permanent commercial problem. Marketing directors must still show how customer acquisition budgets drive growth. But as visibility fades, gathering equivalent insights requires more data and resource-intensive collection methods.

"What used to be straightforward advertising campaign management

has now turned into a statistics problem," says Adam Landis, head of growth at Branch. "Advertisers must reach statistical significance to achieve reliable measurement."

Scale is essential to withstand this signal squeeze. Aggregate measurement models fail without significant data volume. Landis notes this is why attribution changes hit small businesses hardest.

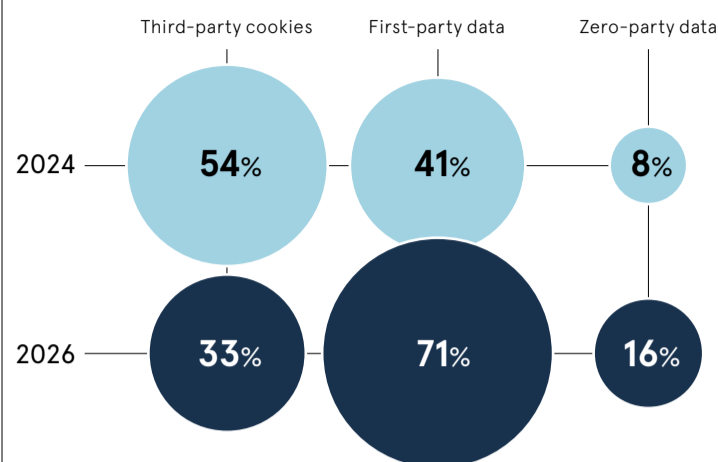
Many marketing departments lack the resources to build proprietary performance models. This dynamic forces them to migrate budgets to tech giants. Meta and Google possess billions of authenticated users and advanced measurement networks. This fixes short-term attribution problems but deepens platform dependency and cedes control of customer identity.

This reality exposes the flaws in many first-party data plans. "One of the biggest misconceptions is that collecting first-party data automatically means a brand is prepared for a privacy-first future," says Bill Bruno, chief executive of Celebrus. "In

“What used to be straightforward advertising campaign management has now turned into a statistics problem”

## BLIND SPOTS IN THE BOARDROOM

Percentage of advertisers/marketers actively utilising or relying on these signals for targeting



Supermetrics Marketing Data Report, 2024; Think with Google Marketing Guide, 2026

reality, many organisations still struggle to define what data ownership actually means."

Consumers expect brands to prioritise privacy. Businesses must avoid intrusive trackers and ensure consumer data is connected, consensual and secure. Yet customer data often remains fragmented across analytics tools, ecommerce infrastructure and identity providers, leaving businesses without a single source of truth.

"The real challenge is building persistent customer understanding over time while maintaining consumer trust and privacy," says Bruno. "If critical customer data and identity resolution capabilities live outside your environment, your ability to create independent, long-term value from that data becomes limited."

Modern marketing measurement requires a portfolio of tools. First-party foundations, zero-party insights and data clean rooms help, but none can fully replicate legacy tracking metrics.

Zero-party data provides clear indicators of customer interest. Through customer onboarding, businesses capture preferences, intent and communication choices. But consumers demand a fair exchange for this data. Brands must offer personalised recommendations, discounts or loyalty rewards, or consumers will abandon the transaction.

Alternatively, companies can observe first-party data through website or application behaviour. Fredrik Skantze, chief executive of Funnel, says that while many businesses collect first-party data, most treat it as an optional extra rather than essential infrastructure.

"Only a minority of in-house marketers prioritise collecting and using first-party data," says Skantze. "Most agencies find their clients do not have a clear strategy for it at all."

Integrating first-party data into the measurement architecture requires automated collection and unification across channels. Businesses must reclaim data control from advertising platforms by closing the internal feedback loop.

This feedback loop gains urgency as advertising platforms deploy artificial intelligence for campaign optimisation. Meta, Google and TikTok allow companies to upload

conversion events directly, bypassing poor browser tracking. But businesses must "enrich the results with first-party identifiers, such as email addresses, phone numbers and CRM data, to improve match rates," says Skantze.

Industry guidance from PwC frames this as an execution crisis. Marketing directors face intense pressure to prove return on investment while managing data responsibly across the business.

Data clean rooms offer an alternative route to accuracy. Brands share consensual data with publishers, retailers and media networks to match audiences and assess campaign contributions. This secure environment aggregates results and restricts raw data access, protecting consumer privacy while revealing performance trends.

But clean rooms demand significant investment, technical expertise and legal oversight. They operate best at scale. This collaborative model functions well for large market pairings, such as Tesco working with Nestlé, or Netflix partnering with WPP.

No single tool suffices. Sophisticated departments deploy a hybrid measurement matrix. "When you use these models together and let them influence each other, they provide a much more accurate picture," says Skantze. Market research from Experian confirms this shift, showing marketers are actively connecting activation data with measurement systems as traditional signals fail.

Traditional identifiers still hold residual value. "Even if trackable audiences represent a tiny fraction of traffic, it is smart to use them," says Landis. "Every bit of traffic you can measure will help with directional signal for your models."

The future lies in layered attribution. Brands must use identifiers where consent allows, collect first-party and zero-party data through direct consumer relationships, and use secure clean rooms with select partners.

The ultimate challenge for marketing directors is balancing resources across these emerging signals. Poor data quality compromises proof of return on investment, weak data structures introduce regulatory risk, and over-reliance on advertising platforms surrenders long-term corporate control. ●

# The UK's missing link: why employers can't afford to overlook young talent

As employers battle persistent skills shortages, many are overlooking a generation eager to learn and work. Closing the gap between talent and opportunity could prove critical to future productivity, innovation and growth

The UK faces a growing talent paradox. While employers continue to report widespread skills shortages, more than one million young people remain outside education, employment or training (NEETs). As AI reshapes entry-level work, businesses risk weakening the very talent pipelines they need to secure future growth.

Findings from The Open University's Business Barometer highlight the scale of the disconnect. While 57% of employers report skills shortages and 42% expect them to worsen, more than one million young people remain outside education, employment or training. At the same time, 43% of organisations hired fewer staff over the past year, suggesting the problem is not a lack of talent, but a failure of the system to connect talent with opportunity.

"The gap persists because it reflects a systemic mismatch between labour market demand and access to opportunity, rather than a simple shortage of talent," says Professor Keith Schofield, executive dean of the faculty of business and law at The Open University.

## The growing cost of short-term thinking

Economic uncertainty has encouraged many organisations to focus on immediate business needs rather than long-term workforce planning.

However, the Business Barometer findings suggest this approach may be creating longer-term risks. While 80% of employers say they are willing to train young people entering the workforce, only 34% offer specific initiatives for recruiting or training under-25s, and just 11% have programmes targeted at NEETs. The result is a growing gap between intent and action.

"Many organisations recognise the need for training and development. But in some organisations the approach remains dominated by short-term, costly hiring rather than long-term workforce planning," says Schofield.

The report also found that only 39% of employers have implemented a written skills plan, suggesting workforce development often remains reactive rather than strategic.

Yet despite skills shortages affecting business performance, many organisations continue to focus on hiring ready-made talent rather than developing future capability.

"Employers are still more likely to treat skills as something to buy in rather

than build systematically over time", Schofield says.

## AI cannot replace a talent pipeline

AI has added another layer of complexity. While helping organisations automate routine tasks and improve efficiency, it may also be reshaping traditional entry points into employment.

According to The Open University's Business Barometer, 19% of employers have reduced recruitment for early-career roles. Among those organisations, 42% say the reduction is linked to AI taking on more entry-level tasks. While this may appear a rational response to technological change, entry-level roles have long been vital pathways for developing skills and experience.

"Entry-level roles have historically been critical entry points for developing skills and experience," says Schofield. "Reducing these roles risks removing the foundation of future talent pipelines."

If fewer young people gain access to early-career opportunities, organisations may eventually find themselves competing for an even smaller pool of experienced workers. AI may help address short-term productivity pressures, but it could also deepen long-term skills shortages if employers fail to invest in future talent.

That investment remains essential because the skills employers value are evolving rather than disappearing.

As AI becomes embedded across industries, demand is expected to increase for capabilities that technology struggles to replicate, including critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration and leadership. Technical fluency will matter, but so too will the distinctly human skills needed to apply technology effectively.

"The future workforce will need to combine technical fluency with distinctly human capabilities," Schofield says.

## The overlooked talent pool

Contrary to common assumptions, the majority of those currently outside education, employment or training are not choosing disengagement. The Business Barometer found that 68% would be willing to train or upskill to improve their employment prospects, while only 6% say they want to remain NEET.

Perhaps most notably, 78% say they would stay longer with an employer that offered training and development



opportunities beyond their current role. The findings suggest many young people are actively looking for routes into work, but employers may need to rethink recruitment practices that prioritise existing qualifications or sector background over wider life experience and potential. Organisations that support employees with structured development, training and early career investment to obtain

qualifications on the job will be better placed to build resilient workforces.

Employers should also work more closely with schools, colleges and universities to co-design courses, provide work experience, and help young people develop job-ready skills that are in demand in their sector.

Failing to engage this talent pool risks constraining innovation, weakening future skills pipelines and limiting long-term growth.

## Building a stronger skills ecosystem

Closing the gap between workforce demand and workforce readiness will require collaboration.

The Business Barometer found that 75% of employers would consider working with universities or colleges to create more opportunities for young people. Such partnerships can help organisations move beyond recruitment and play a more active role in developing the talent they need.

Partnerships are increasingly becoming a practical way to bridge the gap between workforce demand and workforce readiness. The Open University, for example, works with more than 2,700 employers to develop flexible learning programmes that allow people to build skills alongside work and other commitments, helping organisations widen talent pools while developing capability from within.

The Open University's Open Business Creators (OBC) programme responds to findings that 14% of NEETs surveyed aspire to be self-employed. Through partnerships with organisations including the British Business Bank, Santander, NatWest and Barclays Eagle Labs, it provides aspiring

entrepreneurs of all ages with access to learning, guidance and funding opportunities.

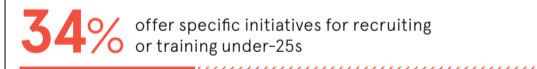
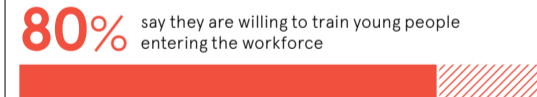
Schofield added: "Complementing this, the development of a Virtual Incubator aims to support the creation and growth of sustainable, purpose-driven businesses that prioritise ethical, inclusive, and long-term value creation."

Employers should embed skills planning into business strategy, while educators must ensure learning remains accessible and aligned with workplace needs. The UK's skills challenge is not a lack of potential, but a failure to connect opportunity with talent.

"If the UK is serious about growth, we must act with urgency when it comes to creating opportunity and providing people with the knowledge and skills to convert such opportunity into value," says Schofield.

In an economy increasingly shaped by technological change, organisations that invest in future talent today will be better positioned to compete tomorrow. The question is not whether businesses can afford to develop young people. It is whether they can afford not to.

Employers recognise the need to develop younger employees but fewer than half offer specific programmes or initiatives



The Open University

“Employers are still more likely to treat skills as something to buy in rather than build systematically over time”



Scan to find out more on how employers can harness new talent or to download the latest Business Barometer report





# How supply chains are entering the era of informed resilience

Global shocks have exposed the vulnerability of traditional supply chains. But AI-driven decision making is helping businesses to build resilience in an era of continuous disruption

Supply chains are the lifeblood of global commerce. For decades, companies optimised them for cost and efficiency: manufacturing in the lowest-cost locations, holding lean inventories and delivering products exactly when required. However, this was hard to do well because customer demand was volatile.

Over the past decade, however, a series of global shocks has exposed the fragility of that model. The Covid-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions in Europe and the Middle East, and the US-China trade war have triggered factory shutdowns, labour shortages, shipping disruption and volatile costs.

As a result, many organisations have struggled to meet demand and have been forced to rethink their supply

chain strategies. Many have diversified supplier networks, adopted nearshoring to bring production closer to customers, and invested in technologies to enhance their operations.

At the same time, rising customer expectations of speed and convenience, changes to customer preferences and personalisation across sectors such as consumer goods, retail and automotive have added a further layer of complexity.

Yet resilience alone is no longer enough. In 2026, supply chains must become intelligent. Organisations need AI-powered systems capable of anticipating disruption, modelling future scenarios and accelerating decision-making to protect both profitability and continuity. Many leaders recognise the challenge ahead. Blue Yonder's Supply Chain Compass report



“Today’s disruptions are increasingly systemic, which means suppliers, carriers, retailers and consumers all need to operate much more closely

found that 34% do not believe their supply chains are ready for the future, up from 27% a year earlier.

### Using AI to connect supply chain partners

This is the challenge Blue Yonder helps organisations solve. Its AI-powered platform brings planning, execution and the wider supply chain network together in a single system. Traditionally, planning and execution have operated as separate processes, creating delays between deciding what should happen and responding to what is actually happening. Blue Yonder removes that gap, enabling planning and execution to operate as one continuous, real-time flow.

The platform connects suppliers, carriers, manufacturers, warehouses and retailers across a shared network, giving organisations access to live operational signals as conditions change. AI continuously analyses those signals, understands the implications across the end-to-end supply chain and recommends or initiates actions in response. The result is a supply chain that can adapt in near real time, turning planning from a periodic exercise into a dynamic capability embedded within day-to-day operations.

“Historically, supply chains have been siloed by design,” says Andrea Morgan-Vandome, chief innovation officer at Blue Yonder. “Individual teams focused on their own areas of expertise. But today’s disruptions are increasingly systemic, which means suppliers, carriers, retailers and consumers all need to operate much more closely.”

Traditionally, supply chain solutions were also built for silos, so issues were often communicated through emails and phone calls exchanged across different organisations and time zones. The process was slow, manual and often reactive. Blue Yonder’s platform instead gives participants access to thousands of shared data signals, providing greater visibility into emerging issues. AI can then analyse the information, recommend actions and trigger execution, helping organisations respond to changing conditions as they happen.

For Morgan-Vandome, speed is critical. “A resilient and adaptive supply chain has to move fast,” she says. “We provide near real-time signals so organisations can understand what’s happening almost instantaneously, have AI make recommendations and make decisions far more quickly than before.”

### How agentic AI is reshaping supply chain decision-making

Historically, supply chain decisions have been made by people working within siloed functions. But decision-making has become increasingly complex, requiring a deep understanding of data, real-time coordination across globally distributed teams and visibility into the impact of decisions across manufacturing, warehousing, transportation and fulfilment.

AI agents are making it possible to automate many of those decisions. In May, Blue Yonder announced the launch of its Model Training Factory in partnership with NVIDIA, a repeatable framework for training, testing and fine-tuning specialised supply chain models. These models are designed to

perform complex tasks at a level comparable to supply chain experts, from warehouse management and transportation planning to merchandising and demand forecasting.

“Supply chains are all about precision,” says Morgan-Vandome. “The model factory enables us to build models that can reason within a specific business context and make more informed decisions.”

Blue Yonder is embedding AI across the entire supply chain workflow, from planning and forecasting to transportation, warehouse management, order fulfilment and network collaboration. Rather than automating isolated tasks, AI becomes part of how decisions are made and executed across the business. As conditions change, AI can identify risks, evaluate options, recommend actions and coordinate execution across interconnected functions, helping organisations respond faster and with greater confidence.

As AI assumes greater responsibility for decision-making and execution, human expertise shifts further upstream.

“It doesn’t mean people are no longer needed,” Morgan-Vandome says. “What changes is their focus. Supply chain professionals will spend less time on manual tasks and more time defining strategy, setting objectives and providing the context that guides these systems.”

### Building an open, interoperable ecosystem

The transition to end-to-end supply chains also depends on integration at scale. Over the past decade, organisations have invested heavily in ERP and procurement technologies. Supply chain platforms therefore need to connect seamlessly with existing systems rather than require companies to rebuild their technology estates. Blue Yonder supports this through APIs, cloud-native architecture and standardised data connections.

But integration alone is not enough. Interoperability is equally important. While integration allows data to move between systems, interoperability ensures that information can be translated into decisions and actions consistently across planning, warehouse management, transportation, order management and partner platforms.

Visibility and resilience remain essential. But as supply chains become more interconnected, competitive advantage will increasingly depend on the ability to predict disruption and respond before it materialises. Organisations that can combine data, automation and human expertise effectively will be better positioned to protect margins, maintain continuity and adapt to whatever comes next.



Discover the state of sustainability strategies in 2026 with Blue Yonder’s new Supply Chain Compass report



## AI LEADERSHIP

# Leadership and ownership in the age of AI

Regulation used to be the thing that slowed AI down. Now it’s becoming the thing that determines who wins

Jeremy Brown

AI regulation in Europe is reaching a key point, with the next phase of the EU AI Act coming into play in August. And while the legislation is EU-focused, its impact will extend far beyond Europe.

Closer to home, we are already seeing the debate about UK-EU regulatory alignment become much more real.

Due to the extraterritorial nature of the legislation, once in play, any UK company selling AI products or services in Europe, even if they don’t have a physical presence, must now comply with the Act, meaning that some degree of alignment will be unavoidable.

The question now becomes not whether the UK should align, but how far it should go.

The risks are two-fold. Aligning with the EU too closely risks slowing

innovation and experimentation, sacrificing the regulatory agility that can attract fast-moving AI companies. On the other hand, diverging too far away could mean UK firms face a compliance burden that makes European expansion harder and deters cross-border investment.

Getting this balance right is no longer simply about making sure the UK is compliant, but rather an economic strategy that will determine where the UK sits in the global AI race.

As AI moves into highly regulated sectors, from financial services to healthcare, governments are increasingly under pressure to provide clarity on what risk and governance look like.

Globally, approaches to AI regulation vary significantly. The EU has



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adopted a risk-based legal framework through the AI Act, creating standardised rules for the development and deployment of AI across member states. In contrast, the US remains market-led and innovation-driven, and deliberately light-touch at the federal level.

So, when looking from the outset, it is understandable that the Starmer Government would look to a lighter-touch regulatory approach that prioritises innovation and growth over red tape and strict guardrails. But this is only one side of the story. Despite what local rules might say, any UK business looking to expand into Europe must fully comply with EU regulations.

This is why selective alignment, if done deliberately, is key. The UK must design a regulatory framework that enables rapid domestic growth while keeping European markets accessible. Only then will the UK be seen as the go-to place for AI companies looking to both build and scale globally.

The full impact of UK-EU regulatory divergence will not be clear until the EU AI Act is fully implemented across member states, but by then, strategic choices will already have been locked in.

Understanding where the UK can best align, and where not to, means having a clear view of where the UK and Europe sit in the AI stack.

Compared to US companies that continue to dominate the infrastructure and frontier model layer of AI, the UK and Europe are better positioned to compete at the application layer through deployment, commercialisation and industry-specific use cases. Successful homegrown companies like

Quantexa and Latent Labs are evidence that there is real momentum at this level locally.

Europe and the UK already have deep expertise in areas where AI deployment is already creating significant value, such as manufacturing and industrial systems across Europe, and financial services and fintech within the UK.

Selective alignment should be guided by where interoperability with Europe genuinely matters. Take heavily regulated sectors like financial services and healthcare, for example. In these instances, aligning with EU standards has a clear benefit as it reduces friction for cross-border businesses and can itself become a competitive advantage.

In more experimental industries, maintaining the UK’s regulatory flexibility means that it can move faster and attract companies that find the EU’s framework too restrictive.

But regulatory strategy alone will not determine the UK’s place in the AI landscape. Capital is the other half of the equation. One of the most persistent structural weaknesses of the UK and European AI ecosystems is that they are heavily reliant on US capital at the growth stage.

US investors and hyperscalers are well-positioned to capture a disproportionate share of value created by European innovation, funding companies early, then acquiring or out-competing them as they scale.

This risk is compounded by regulations that, together, are slowing scaling. So, if compliance costs are high and the regulatory environment is unpredictable, that only leaves large, well-capitalised US firms to absorb these costs, not the homegrown startups the UK and EU are trying to cultivate.

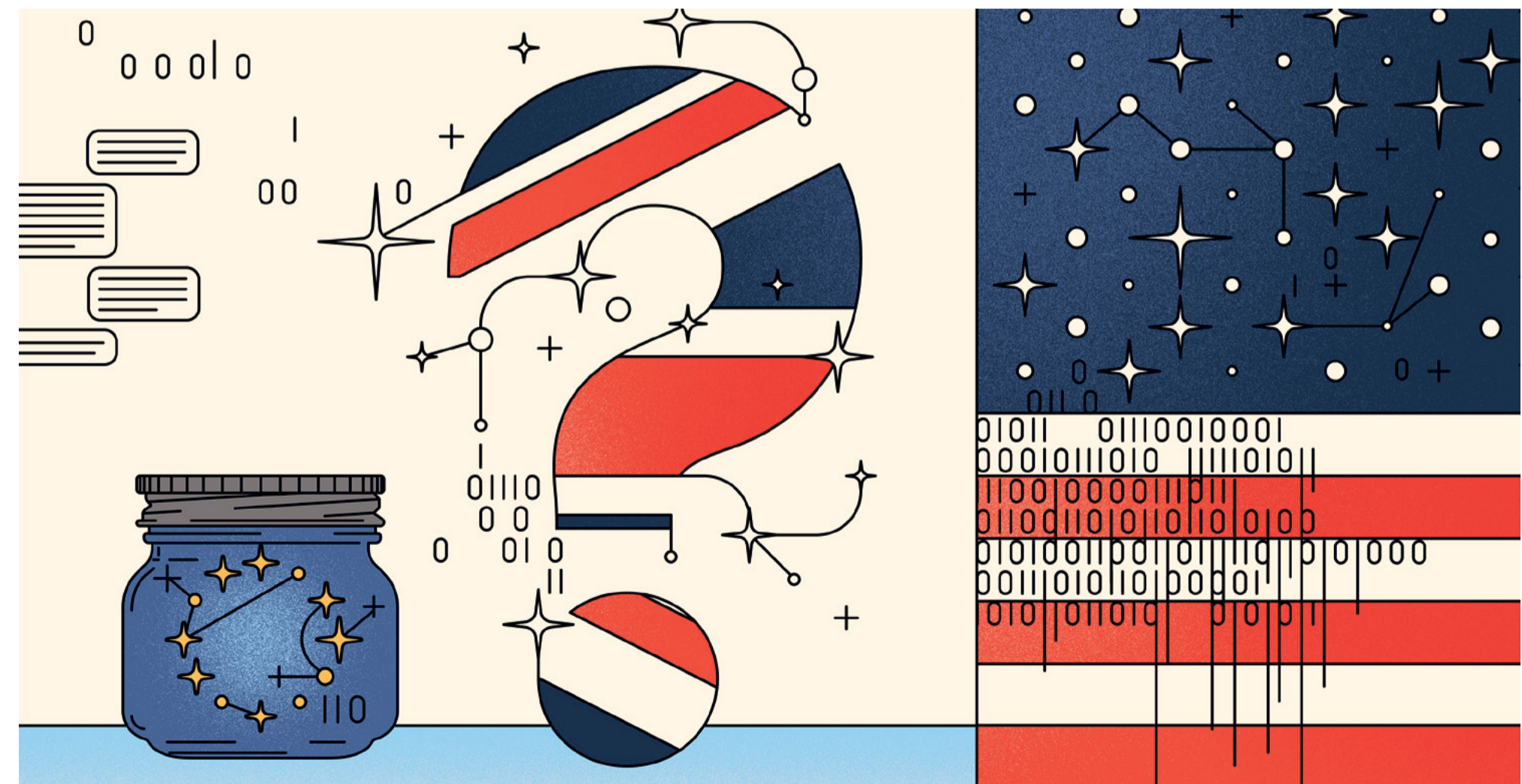
“Europe and the UK have deep expertise in areas where AI deployment is already creating significant value

As a result, regulation must be designed with an awareness of its ecosystem effects, not just its risk-reduction benefits. It is about leaning in to support the smaller-scale businesses that are looking to scale and grow. The middle ground is a strategy, not a compromise

Contrary to what many say, the AI race is not simply won by those building the largest models but by those who build the strongest ecosystems for deployment, commercialisation and sector-specific innovation. This is where the UK has a genuine opportunity.

Positioned between the EU and the US, the UK can offer a trusted, interoperable environment for AI deployment that is still flexible enough to move at commercial speed. But that positioning requires deliberate choices, aligning where it reduces friction, diverging where it creates space to compete.

Approached strategically, selective alignment is the only option that gives the UK a credible path to being a significant player in the global AI economy. ●



# THE RACONTEUR



## Recognising those who lead.

The role of the modern-day CEO is evolving. It is no longer enough to focus solely on profit, revenue or share price. Leaders must balance financial performance with employee wellbeing and ESG concerns, finding ways to innovate and grow at a time of deep uncertainty and turmoil.

Across five categories, we hope that by shining a spotlight on the best business leaders, we can offer insights into what it takes to lead from the top and inspire the CEOs of the future.

Meet the 50 CEOs  
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