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Closing the AI ambition gap.

From executive priority
to enterprise value

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Executive Summary

AI has won executive attention. But it's yet to win a place in the operating model.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has moved decisively onto the business agenda. Global research from Argon & Co found that 43% of respondents consider AI significantly or very significantly material to their organisation's success, rising to nearly seven in ten among executive functions. Even outside the executive team, 85% see AI as at least partially material. Yet organisational maturity has not kept pace with this confidence.

Almost one-third of respondents are running pilots or proofs of concept with mixed results. A further 26% are creating value through individual use cases but struggling to scale, while a quarter are still exploring tools and ideas without knowing where to focus. Only 9% say AI is embedded into core business processes and delivering measurable value.

The more consequential gap is between ambition and execution. Only 9% of respondents have a clear AI strategy with defined build-versus-buy decisions, while more than half of AI initiatives are led by Data and AI or IT teams rather than the business functions responsible for the outcomes they are intended to improve.

Closing this gap requires organisations to define business outcomes, redesign processes and decisions, establish trustworthy data and governance, and create shared accountability across business and technical teams.

The challenge is to turn AI from a series of promising applications into an enterprise capability that consistently delivers measurable value.

AI moves up the agenda

Nearly 70% of executive respondents say AI is significantly or very significantly material to business success, while around 85% recognise at least some materiality.

Ambition is outpacing adoption

82% of organisations remain in the early stages of AI adoption, with 57% caught between experimentation and scale. Just 9% have embedded AI into core processes with measurable value.



AI has shifted from technology priority to business priority

AI has moved beyond data teams, innovation labs and technology roadmaps to become a broader business priority. Its impact is increasingly felt in how organisations compete, serve customers, manage costs and innovate. For executives, the focus is shifting to where AI can create an advantage and how quickly that value can be realised.

Argon & Co's global research reflects this shift. More than two in five respondents consider AI significantly or very significantly material to organisational success, rising to nearly seven in ten among executives. Across other functions, 85% recognise at least partial materiality.

43% of respondents consider AI significantly or very significantly material to their organisation's success

Executive conviction changes the question

When AI becomes material to business success, activity is no longer an adequate measure of progress. Licences issued, pilots launched or employees trained may indicate momentum, but they do not show whether AI is improving business performance.

Survey respondents identify cost efficiency, faster innovation and higher customer satisfaction as leading opportunities. Each requires different applications, data and operating choices, they are ultimately business outcomes rather than measures of technology adoption.

Outcomes can range from removing avoidable work and improving asset utilisation to accelerating research and product development, improving service and reducing operational failures. What matters is whether AI leads to better decisions, processes and action.

Argon & Co's work on AI at scale reinforces that better signals and recommendations do not automatically lead to better business outcomes.

Organisations need the right operating model to be able to act on insights consistently and effectively.

AI's strategic significance extends beyond generative AI

Much of the current attention is directed towards general-purpose assistants and generative AI. These tools can improve individual productivity by helping employees search, draft, summarise and analyse information, while also building familiarity with AI across the organisation.

However, the opportunity extends well beyond individual productivity. AI can improve how businesses forecast demand, evaluate scenarios, process information, support customer-service triage and manage complex workflows. Argon & Co's global client workshops have identified opportunities across a range of business functions, with scenario simulation, meeting copilots and data harmonisation among the most common.

Turning executive ambition into a clear AI strategy

Executive support provides the sponsorship and investment required for AI transformation. Without clear strategic direction, however, organisations risk pursuing disconnected experiments, with different tools and use cases emerging across functions without clear accountability for value.

Argon & Co argues that strategic understanding cannot be outsourced. Leadership teams must establish a shared view of AI's role in the organisation and enough knowledge to make informed choices as the technology evolves. This includes deciding which capabilities matter, where to differentiate, what to buy or build and which business outcomes warrant sustained investment. The next test of leadership is turning that priority into a coherent enterprise agenda rather than a series of separate technology initiatives.



Organisational maturity has not caught up with executive ambition

The enthusiasm surrounding AI can create an impression of rapid enterprise adoption. Argon & Co's research presents a more measured picture. Most organisations remain somewhere between exploration, experimentation and localised value, while very few have embedded AI into core processes at scale.

Thirty-one per cent of respondents describe pilots or proofs of concept with mixed results. A further 26% are realising value from individual use cases but struggling to scale. Another 25% are exploring tools and ideas but remain unclear about where to focus. Together, 82% are still navigating the earlier stages of adoption and 57% are caught specifically between experimentation and scale. Only 9% report measurable value from AI embedded in core business processes.

The pilot is not the destination

Pilots are useful. They allow organisations to test technical feasibility, user response, risk and potential value within a controlled scope. However, problems emerge when pilots become an end in

themselves or are judged primarily by whether a model produces a plausible output.

A successful pilot should do more than demonstrate that the technology works. It should help the organisation understand what is required to turn that technology into a reliable operational capability, including the data, systems, ownership, governance and economics needed to support it at scale.

Argon & Co's life-sciences work offers a more mature interpretation of pilots. In one engagement, an initial machine-learning forecasting pilot was used to prepare the data platform, architecture and operating conditions required for later industrialisation. Its purpose was not solely to prove an isolated gain, but to build the environment in which value could be scaled.

This changes the question from 'did the model work?' to 'did the organisation learn what it will take to operate this capability reliably?'. A scale-ready pilot should test the workflow, integration, ownership, controls, user behaviour, cost and measurement system as well as technical performance.

More AI activity does not mean clearer direction

One-quarter of respondents say their organisation is exploring AI without clarity about which opportunities to prioritise. This uncertainty is understandable given the breadth of potential AI applications and the pace at which new capabilities are emerging.

Yet a large catalogue of use cases can create the illusion of strategy. If every opportunity receives a pilot, scarce business experts are spread thinly, dependencies are rediscovered repeatedly and leadership attention fragments. Argon & Co's operating-model analysis has observed a similar pattern across wider transformation portfolios, where organisations launch more initiatives than their experienced leaders and specialist teams have the capacity to deliver. This can leave businesses with plenty of activity, but fewer initiatives that are fully implemented and adopted.

Prioritisation therefore needs to consider more than technical feasibility. Strong use cases should deliver meaningful value, improve a specific decision or workflow, draw on accessible and trustworthy data and be practical to implement at an acceptable level of risk. The underlying capabilities should be reused elsewhere in the organisation.

AI strategy requires clear choices

Only 9% of survey respondents say their organisation has a clear AI strategy with defined build-versus-buy decisions. These decisions are becoming more complex as organisations gain access to AI through multiple sources, including enterprise software vendors, general-purpose

platforms, specialist applications, internally developed models and tools selected by employees.

Without an explicit position, organisations risk accumulating overlapping tools, inconsistent data access, fragmented controls and vendor dependency. They may pay multiple times for similar capability or design processes around features whose commercial terms change as usage grows.

Argon & Co has highlighted the hidden economics of "AI-enabled" software. A capability that appears inexpensive during adoption may attract premium pricing once it becomes embedded in an essential workflow. Protecting return on investment requires cost transparency, commercial governance and a scalable sourcing model, not simply a favourable pilot price.

Build-versus-buy is not a single enterprise-wide answer. The decision should reflect differentiation, data sensitivity, integration complexity, speed, skills, total cost and the organisation's capacity to maintain the solution over time.



Closing the gap requires AI to become business-led, not technology-led

More than half of AI initiatives in Argon & Co's research are led by Data and AI or IT teams. These teams supply essential expertise in architecture, integration, data, security, platforms and model performance. But when they carry primary ownership of AI, the organisation can unintentionally frame a business transformation as a technical delivery problem.

The business functions closest to customers, operations and financial performance have the clearest view of where decisions break down, which exceptions matter, how informal workarounds operate and what outcomes are worth changing. Without this insight, technically capable teams may optimise the wrong task, automate a symptom or produce recommendations the workflow cannot absorb.

Shared ownership begins with a clear business outcome

A business-led approach requires clear accountability for the outcome, supported by shared ownership across the business and technical teams responsible for delivering it.

If the goal is better customer service, for example, success must be defined in business terms, such as faster resolution, higher satisfaction or lower cost to serve, rather than the deployment of a chatbot. This means identifying the decisions and processes that influence the outcome, where AI can contribute and who has authority to make the necessary changes.

Cross-functional teams can then bring together business, operational and technical expertise around that outcome. Argon & Co's operating-model work advocates this shift from functional silos to outcome-focused teams, reducing hand-offs, strengthening accountability and making transformation a repeatable capability.

Redesign the decision and workflow, not just the task

AI creates value when it changes what the organisation knows, decides or does, rather than automating one step in an existing process.

In a planning process, for example, AI might reduce days of data reconciliation. But if decision rights remain unclear, exceptions pass through multiple committees or plans can only be updated weekly, the task becomes faster while the decision remains slow.

The wider "decision engine" brings together data, AI, business rules, systems and human judgement to improve decision-making as conditions change.

Effective redesign should answer six questions:

1. **Outcome:** what measurable commercial, operational or customer result must improve?
2. **Decision:** which judgement, trade-off or action most influences that result?
3. **Workflow:** how should information, work and exceptions move across functions and systems?
4. **Role:** what will AI prepare or perform, what will people decide, and who remains accountable?
5. **Control:** what assurance, traceability, approval and override mechanisms are proportionate to the risk?
6. **Feedback:** how will outcomes and human interventions improve the process over time?

Build governance into the business process

A business-led approach brings governance into the process from the beginning, establishing the controls AI needs to operate safely and reliably rather than treating governance as a separate approval stage.

This is particularly important in regulated or high-risk environments, where early governance

can enable scale. Controls should reflect the use case. For example, a meeting copilot and an AI recommendation affecting product quality, credit, safety or regulatory reporting should not follow the same approval model.

For higher-risk decisions, clear accountability and human oversight are essential, including when people must review or override AI recommendations.



Bringing it together: from AI ambition to enterprise value

Closing the ambition gap requires organisations to turn executive priorities into practical action. That starts with identifying the business problems, decisions and outcomes that matter most, then determining where AI can make a meaningful difference.

From there, organisations need a clear pathway for moving from priority to implementation and sustained value.

How to turn AI ambition into value:

1. Set an enterprise value agenda

Translate executive ambition into a small number of measurable business outcomes, such as cost-to-serve, working capital, forecast accuracy, customer resolution, revenue leakage or employee capacity.

Establish the baseline, value at stake and ownership before selecting a solution. This ensures adoption, output or model accuracy do not become substitutes for business performance.

2. Prioritise the opportunities that matter most

Identify the decisions and workflows that have the greatest influence on these outcomes. Assess opportunities against value, feasibility, data readiness, risk, time to impact and potential for reuse.

Some applications may deliver incremental capacity quickly, while others require deeper process redesign but offer greater strategic value. Enabling investments such as data harmonisation and governance can also unlock multiple applications.

3. Make deliberate build, buy and partner decisions

Determine where standard market solutions are sufficient, where configuration and integration create value and where tailored solutions are justified. Consider total lifecycle cost, including data

preparation, integration, usage, controls, monitoring, change and maintenance. Whatever the sourcing model, the organisation should retain ownership of the roadmap.

4. Design the future process and operating model together

Redesign the decision or workflow alongside the technology, removing unnecessary approvals, duplicate work and unclear hand-offs. Define how people, AI, data and systems will work together, including decision rights, model ownership, exceptions, human oversight and benefit ownership.

Cross-functional teams should be organised around outcomes, with governance clarifying authority and risk thresholds rather than slowing decisions.

5. Use pilots to prepare for broader deployment

Use pilots to test business impact as well as technical performance, including data, workflow integration, employee response, responsibilities, costs and controls.

Treat each pilot as the first version of a solution that could scale. Establish ongoing ownership and monitoring, and identify which data, integrations, controls and training can be reused elsewhere.

6. Industrialise value, not just the technology

Scale once the redesigned process demonstrates an impact on the targeted outcome. Measure business value alongside adoption, employee effort, cycle time, human overrides, reliability, cost and risk.

Continue reviewing performance as models, data, workflows and commercial conditions change, and retire tools that no longer justify their cost or complexity.

7. Build enterprise capability through every implementation

Each use case should leave the organisation better equipped for the next. Business leaders should

improve how they define value, operational teams how they redesign decisions, technical teams how they build reusable capabilities, and governance teams how they establish proportionate controls.

Over time, these disciplines create a more consistent approach to selecting, designing, delivering and improving AI initiatives across the enterprise.

The role of external partners is changing

Six in ten survey respondents believe the consulting

support their organisation requires has changed because of AI, while nine in ten believe the type of external partner they need is changing.

Organisations increasingly need partners that combine AI expertise with the ability to understand business problems, redesign processes, shape operating models and support adoption. At the same time, transformation and functional advisers need to incorporate AI into how they diagnose problems and design change.

Conclusion: Turn executive ambition into enterprise capacity

AI is firmly established as a business priority, particularly among executives, but organisational maturity has yet to match this ambition. Many organisations remain focused on exploration, pilots or isolated use cases, while relatively few have embedded AI into core processes or established the ownership and operating disciplines required for scale.

Closing this gap requires more than expanding the number of AI initiatives. Organisations need to connect investment to business value, redesign how decisions and work happen, and build the data, governance and cross-functional accountability that allow successful applications to scale.

Those that advance will treat AI as an enterprise capability rather than a collection of technology projects, combining machine intelligence with operational knowledge and an operating model that turns insight into action.



Acknowledgements



This whitepaper has been developed collaboratively by Argon & Co's Data and AI experts, drawing on experience across technology, operations and business transformation. Our teams combine technical expertise, operational experience and business knowledge to help organisations move from AI ambition to measurable value, with a focus on practical solutions that can be embedded and scaled across the enterprise.

The research findings cited in this whitepaper are drawn from Argon & Co's April 2026 global Task Force survey. The findings have been complemented by insights from Argon & Co's client work, workshops and published thinking on AI, data, operating models and transformation. Percentages may combine response categories where stated and may be subject to rounding.

Talk to us today about closing your organisation's AI ambition gap.

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