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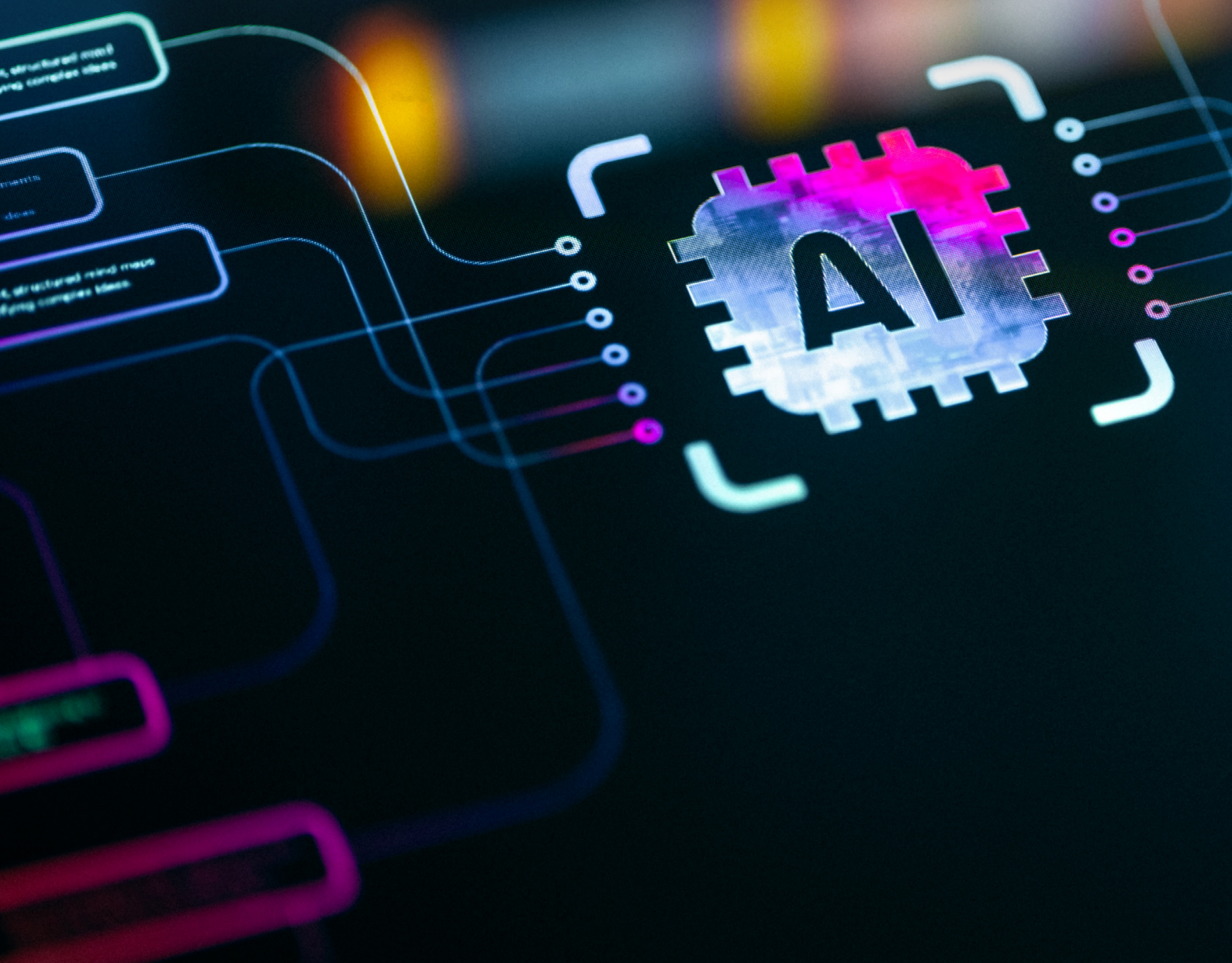
Industries in the Intelligent Age

Unlocking AI Value at Scale: Workforce Adoption

A Practical Guide for Consumer Industries

BRIEFING PAPER

APRIL 2026



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Executive summary

AI delivers durable value when workforce adoption takes hold in everyday work. Leaders must shape this shift and sustain continuous change.

As companies shift from experimenting with artificial intelligence (AI) tools to enterprise-wide reinvention, returns remain uneven despite technological progress. As of January 2026, fewer than four in 10 companies in consumer industries report achieving meaningful business impact from AI.¹

What are leading companies doing that others are not? They are prioritizing their people. Effective adoption is the gateway to value creation. As AI technology transforms roles, tasks and decision-making, most organizations face cultural resistance and workforce readiness gaps that hinder progress at scale.

This World Economic Forum briefing paper, written for and informed by leaders across consumer industries, explores this challenge. Its objective is to share leading practices that help organizations deliver meaningful value to both business and workforce, and to spark productive discussions on responsible, human-centred AI reinvention that advances consumer industries as a whole.

Key findings show that the responsibility for workforce adoption and change cannot be delegated to the tech function, human resources, or any other function. Instead, it represents a significant opportunity for leaders, starting with the CEO, to foster and advance a values-based culture in which people can, and want to, leverage this advancing technology continuously, enterprise-wide. Nowhere is this more evident than in consumer industries, where complex operating models, global-local structures, and large frontline workforces make scaling AI with impact uniquely challenging.

Turning intent into organizational impact is guided by three interconnected tenets:

1. **Leadership vision, behaviour and communication.** At organizations that are advancing faster than others, leaders actively use AI, talk openly about how it changes their own work, and share real examples of impact. Equally important, leading CEOs frame AI as a driver of growth and creativity – through improved decision-making and resource allocation – rather than solely a productivity or cost lever, and communicate this consistently internally and externally.
2. **Practical framework and steps to support effective adoption.** Many organizations remain stuck in early-stage AI adoption, unable to move from isolated pilots to reimaged workflows and scaled impact across the enterprise. Leaders progressing most rapidly have a clear roadmap for how to test and scale AI across the enterprise. They are effectively deploying a two-step model: multi-pronged capability building followed by decisive removal of optionality to scale, and supported by reinforcements that build confidence in the tools and sustain adoption.
3. **Capabilities to enable continuous change.** Organizations often underestimate the level of support needed after AI deployment. While AI tools may be relatively straightforward to learn, integrating them into day-to-day workflows and decision-making requires sustained training and reinforcement to avoid regression, fatigue and skepticism. Furthermore, AI transformation is continuous. As technologies evolve rapidly, leaders must invest in ongoing learning and build an “always-on” change muscle across the enterprise.

Leaders have an opportunity to set the standard for human-centered, responsible AI at scale. In consumer industries, organizations that master AI adoption across the workforce will strengthen their competitive edge and define the next era of value creation.

1

Introduction

Realizing value from AI transformation hinges on enabling people to adopt at scale—latest Consumer Industries research and insights highlight leading practices for effective workforce enablement.

Companies across industries are advancing in their AI journeys, with leading companies (around 10-15% in consumer industries) reaching cross-enterprise AI reinvention: connecting AI initiatives across multiple functions throughout the organization.² Despite clear technological progress, however, many are not generating expected returns.

In consumer industries, fewer than four in 10 companies are experiencing material business impact from AI.³ What are leading companies doing that others are not? They are prioritizing their people. Recent research findings, coupled with insights from a series of interviews with community executives representing consumer goods, retail and agribusiness (conducted under the Chatham House Rule), are revealing. As AI technology transforms roles, tasks and decision making, many organizations face cultural resistance and workforce readiness gaps that hinder transformation at scale.

Those pulling ahead are successfully enabling people to adapt and change apace, at scale.

This is an intrinsically difficult challenge for companies in any industry. But it is particularly complex in consumer industries, where consumer goods' operations often span global, regional and local arenas, and retailers have large front-line workforces.

Turning workforce adoption and change intent into impact rests on three interconnected tenets: leadership vision, behaviour and communication; an organizing framework and practical approaches for effective adoption and enterprise-level value; and capabilities to enable continuous change. This briefing paper explores each one in turn, highlighting what is working well in practice and distilling lessons learned from experience, to support effective scaling of AI in consumer industries.



Enabling effective AI workforce adoption and operationalization

Approaches will vary by organization, but the three key tenets consistently underpin successful value realization from AI – at scale.

Each tenet translates into concrete actions that help organizations sustain adoption and value. First and foremost, however, community members emphasized that the responsibility for successful AI adoption rests with the C-suite, led by the CEO. Leading change when the technology evolves this fast – and reshapes business models and ways of working – cannot be “outsourced” to human resources, technology, or any single function.

Tenet 1: Leadership vision, behaviour and communication

At most organizations, there is a clear disconnect between leaders’ and workers’ views of the implications of AI transformation, as interviews and research attest. For example, the higher the seniority, the more optimistic an individual is about AI impact. Research from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania finds that individuals at the vice-president level or higher are far more optimistic about AI returns than mid-managers, who are twice as likely to say outcomes are “too early to tell.” The same pattern holds for optimism regarding adoption speed.⁴ This disconnect causes friction, eroding trust as well as willingness to fully engage.

Successful leaders bridge this gap in several ways:

Create a shared vision for change by anchoring AI transformation in the company’s core strategy. The CEO – working in close alignment with the chief strategy officer, chief technology officer, chief human resources officer and other C-suite leaders – must establish and sustain a clear connection between the organization’s vision, ambition and strategy and its execution on the ground.⁵ The CEO must also communicate that vision continuously and align employees around shared goals. One online retailer does this through monthly town hall meetings, where the CEO consistently emphasizes how AI transformation can support enhanced operations and drive strategic

advantage. At these meetings, nothing is off the table; people are encouraged to ask anything and expect a direct answer.

Take initiative to actively use AI themselves, and express optimism about their experiences, talking openly about their progress and what they have learned. In this way, by engaging visibly in their own AI learning journey, they encourage upskilling throughout the workforce. As AI scales, the importance of enduring human skills, such as judgment, empathy and connection, increases. Leaders who model this in their own use of AI help employees understand that AI augments human decision-making; it should never replace it. Teams with leaders who do this are about 1.4x more likely to adopt a similarly positive mindset.⁶

Frame AI as a creativity and growth catalyst.

It is key to establish AI adoption as an enabler of growth and transformation for the organization and the employee, resulting in the ultimate win-win. This is especially important at the employee level, where AI should be positioned as a tool that supports continuous skill building and development. Conversely, framing AI as an efficiency tool can signal risks to identity or job loss and may undermine employees’ sense of self-worth. This could result in outcomes such as a potential win for the organization, but a loss of value for the employees. Employees are 20% more likely to engage fully when AI is positioned as a win-win.⁷ Ultimately, success depends on whether employees can clearly see their personal upside: “what is in it for them.”⁸ As one executive noted, framing their AI journey in such a manner significantly reduced job-loss anxiety and unlocked participation.

Consistent messaging is also critical. There are myriad examples in the market of leaders emphasizing savings and efficiency in earning calls, but focusing on growth and creativity in internal communications. When internal and external messaging emphasize different priorities, employees know, and trust erodes.⁹

Tenet 2: Practical framework and steps to support effective adoption

As referenced earlier, many organizations remain stuck in early-stage AI adoption – investing heavily in training and experimentation, yet struggling to translate pilots into scaled impact. Progress often stalls when AI is layered onto individual legacy processes rather than used to reinvent end-to-end workflows, or when adoption

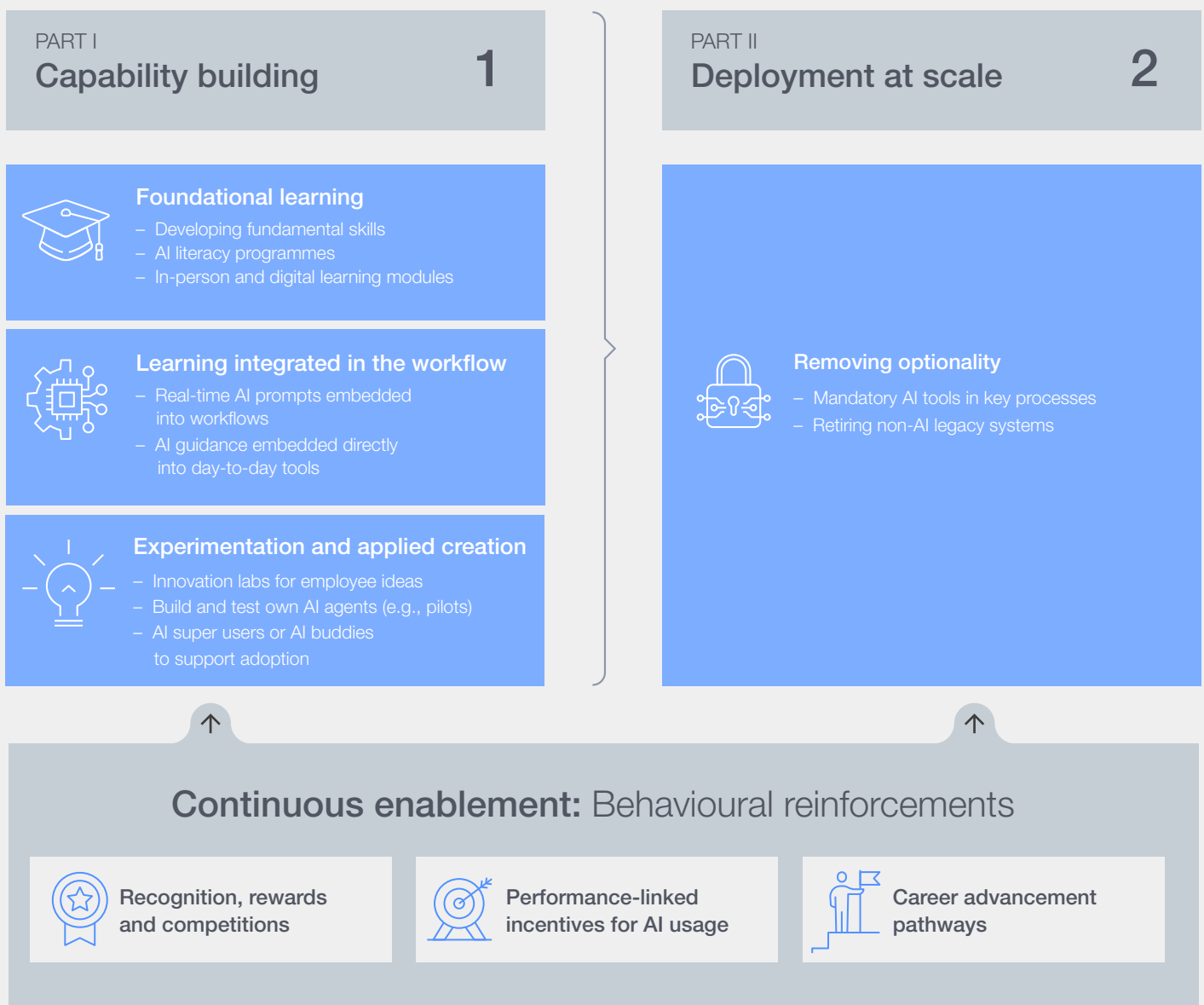
remains optional instead of being embedded into core ways of working.

By contrast, research for this briefing paper suggests a consistent pattern among organizations advancing most rapidly and effectively, underpinned by leadership confidence in the tools and the transformation itself: a two-part approach that begins with multi-pronged capability building and is followed by the deliberate removal of optionality once the right AI tools are in place, supported by clear reinforcement to cement new behaviours (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Framework: A two-part approach to support AI workforce adoption and operationalization

Framework: Workforce adoption and operationalization



Source: World Economic Forum

The first part, *capability building*, focuses on establishing an environment in which people can embed AI into their work with confidence, and, equally important, see AI-powered tools as a means by which they can develop new and better ways to work. The second, *deployment at scale*, focuses on institutionalizing AI. *Behavioural reinforcements* support both parts, strengthening an organization's culture by demonstrating corporate values that put people first.

Capability building

AI adoption requires a fundamental shift in how organizations approach learning. Formal training structures (such as classroom training and eLearning) ensure *foundational learning*. But in the ever-changing environment of AI reinvention, *learning in the flow of work* is vital.¹⁰ On-the-job learning quite literally turns theory into practice; new knowledge is immediately relevant. In addition, learning in the context of work helps motivate people to learn more; it gives them confidence in their ability to create value using AI. For example, AI-enabled “in the moment” prompts in sales calls or real-time guides enable practical application of learnings, minimizing the need for formal training and fostering a mindset shift from “time out for training” to “training as part of day-to-day workflow.”¹¹

As one executive from consumer industries noted, a combination of classroom and on-the-job training is necessary, but for their organization, coaching people inside live workflows has made the greatest difference. Others emphasized the importance of involving those most interested in the design and development of the tools. Doing this reduced the need for “evangelization” later on, as people could see their own contribution.

One organization offered specific insights into driving engagement in culturally relevant ways. Before trying to bring AI tools to scale in any area, this company introduced safe spaces for *experimentation* and also offered a variety of gamified journeys to make AI adoption *fun* for leaders and employees, rewarding progress with an “AI driver's license” and badges reflecting new training milestones. Coupled with leaders modeling desired behaviours, the approach has lowered skepticism and fear while encouraging curiosity. As an executive explained, the company wanted to invite the workforce to advance rather than start by mandating change: “Psychological safety is your most powerful lever as an organization. When you create safe spaces to experiment, people make mistakes and adapt, and they innovate and learn faster.”

Several executives highlighted the importance of peer support on the job. Working with AI can be isolating; having employees who stand out as especially AI fluent make themselves available to peers for guidance in day-to-day workflows encourages engagement. Some organizations formalize this approach by identifying fluent employees as “AI master users” or “AI buddies,” then embedding them within teams and functions

to actively support and accelerate AI adoption.

One company accelerated capability building by developing tailored AI personas. Following an initial broad wave of foundational training, the organization introduced role-specific personas aligned to employees' functions, responsibilities and levels of AI maturity. By anchoring learning in real workflows and current familiarity with AI tools, the training became more practical, relevant and immediately actionable.

Importantly, linking AI fluency and adoption to performance metrics and advancement makes progress real for employees through mechanisms such as career advancements, pay incentives, or other tangible benefits.¹² One organization even converted AI-powered productivity gains into formal time off for their employees on Friday afternoons. Many interviewees also cautioned that simply tracking adoption in a quantitative sense – how many times an individual or a team opens an AI tool, for example – does not reveal the quality of their use.

Deployment at scale

For any approach to work well, both leaders and employees must have confidence that the technology will deliver. If new tools do not support new ways of working, employees will resort to shadow processes, and where available, legacy tools. This insight was shared across all community members. Beyond that alignment, however, companies are reporting success with a wide range of practical approaches and reporting success.

Some, for example, are focusing on compliance. One organization found that *removing optionality* was the best way to drive AI transformation; the organization simply disabled many of the tools people had used heavily in legacy processes when introducing new, AI-powered ways to augment work. In this case, that approach worked well, resulting in rapid 100% adoption in some departments, with a floor of 50% in others. A small number of people, about 5%, did not adapt to the new ways of working, but the organization was prepared for that reality and, importantly, had prepared the workforce as well.

As a senior executive explained, being up front with people is critical, and in fact, a key success factor for change. “Transparency is appreciated. It is not [always] pleasant, but it demonstrates authenticity and makes the importance of the shift clear. Not everyone will make it, but we give everyone the opportunity to make it.”

Conversely, another organization found that when it did not remove optionality while introducing AI-powered support, adoption faltered. Even when it was clear that the new tools were effective, the learning curve required to use them efficiently discouraged many employees. As a result, individuals often reverted to older, familiar methods, complicating and slowing the overall transition.

Within behavioural reinforcements, research findings and interviews alike emphasize the need to align incentives with cultural dynamics; what matters most to people, given their roles.¹³ This is particularly important when reinventing workflows end-to-end, versus augmenting existing processes (where the value of adoption is easier for the individual to see). For example, one consumer packaged goods company focused on compensation incentives for people in sales, but found that other KPIs were more effective for people in supply chain and other functions.

Putting both parts together: a case in point

Executives at organizations leading in AI adoption also called out the link between experimentation and innovation; many valuable ideas bubble up when people have a chance to work with the technology without pressure. Some organizations use small “test teams” to rapidly assess early-stage ideas. These teams offer feedback on how to optimize solutions for scaling. Concurrently, executives can prioritize end-to-end, high-impact use cases. This combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches to AI adoption has served them well.

One company’s two-phase approach captures this tenet in its entirety. In the first phase, the organization concentrated on decentralized experimentation to build familiarity, momentum, and enthusiasm among employees. To motivate engagement, leaders also launched focused initiatives. One involved asking each employee to develop their own AI agent. The process accelerated learning, while surfacing ideas and insights from across the workforce. There were no “losers” in this endeavour; executives made sure workers knew that it was important to spend time experimenting. Ultimately, executives found that 10% of the projects stood out from the rest by demonstrating clear impact to warrant scaling.

To further support experimentation, the company also organized competitions tied to adopting and using newly introduced AI tools. Adoption and use were tracked transparently through monthly leaderboards, and winning teams earned trips to the organization’s global AI hub and

the global competition finals in China. Beyond motivating participation, these competitions fostered collective learning. The organization also tracked individual metrics to inform performance evaluations and bonus decisions, effectively tying adoption to individual impact.

In the second phase, the company scaled the most effective initiatives through top-down prioritization and structured directives, yielding strong results as teams came together to analyse individual tasks and automate whole processes. As an executive explained, the guiding philosophy was: “Let’s push culture first and then decide what projects we should scale in the second phase.”

Tenet 3: Capabilities to enable continuous change

A key lesson echoed across recent community interviews is how easy it is to underestimate the need for sustained support after launching AI deployment initiatives. For example, at one global company, learning the AI tools was relatively straightforward, but embedding AI-driven decision-making into day-to-day operations proved far more complex. Despite initially planning a single round of intensified post-launch support (“hyper care”) for AI-driven workflows, the organization required a second round of training to prevent regression in adoption and keep teams on track. This aligns with recent academic research confirming that without ongoing training and reinforcement, fatigue and skepticism can quickly emerge.¹⁴

AI transformation is continuous. As technologies evolve rapidly, industry leaders must proactively prepare their organizations for a future of work defined by continuous change, allocating the time and resources needed for ongoing learning and adaptation, and building an “always-on” change muscle across the enterprise. As Tim Good, Accenture’s Global Talent and Organization Lead for Consumer Industries, notes: “Change is no longer about reaching a destination. Companies need to build the infrastructure and muscles needed to continuously sense, adapt and evolve.”

Conclusion

Enable and accelerate enterprise-wide AI impact by enabling new ways of working and supporting the people of the organization.

The complex nature of organizations in consumer industries makes effective AI scaling a particularly difficult challenge. Experiences shared by community members highlight a common lesson to guide others on their adoption journeys, reflecting what they would do differently: begin AI transformation early, democratize the right tools and prioritize a few high-impact use cases to accelerate value, while rapidly progressing toward scaled adoption and compliance.

Consumer industry leaders have an opportunity to help shape norms for human-centred, responsible AI transformation at scale. This includes fostering psychological safety, investing in enduring human skills, and ensuring that growth and productivity gains are translated into tangible benefits for people.

In that spirit, business leaders can consider these five actions as priorities to enable the next stage of AI maturity:

1. Ensure CEO-led alignment on a vision that clearly articulates how AI is a true win-win for business and people growth, in a measurable way.

2. Communicate the vision consistently to support the psychological safety workers need to embrace change.
3. Invest in workforce capability by embedding AI training into core workflows—then decisively removing optionality to scale adoption with the right tools.
4. Align incentives and accountability to connect AI adoption outcomes to tangible, individual impact.
5. Build continuous change as a core organizational capability, not a one-time transformation effort.

Feedback from the interview process underscored the importance of the World Economic Forum continuing to support the industry's transformation by convening leaders and sharing leading practices – what is working and what is not – to accelerate AI adoption and scaling across the workforce.

Leaders who master this transition will define the next era of growth and value creation for consumer industries.



Reading Guide

The World Economic Forum's AI Transformation of Industries initiative seeks to catalyse responsible industry transformation across industries and society. It advances understanding of AI's impact on business and society while actively accelerating practical implementation through leadership convening, ecosystem collaboration and the scaling of real-world solutions.

Through a range of workshops alongside thought leadership content such as white papers, briefing papers and blogs, the Forum examines the transformative role of AI across industries, combining cross-industry analysis with in-depth sectoral and regional perspectives. Each piece of

thought leadership offers a practical, executive-level view of what transformation looks like on the ground, drawing on real-world case studies, leading practices, emerging data from across industries and figures of impact achievable in selected contexts.

While each paper is standalone, common themes emerge: new operating models, evolving roles of leadership, human-AI collaboration and the growing importance of AI governance and orchestration.

As AI adoption accelerates, the Forum aims to equip leaders with the insight, capabilities and decision frameworks required to build competitive, responsible and future-ready AI-enabled organizations.



Cross-industry

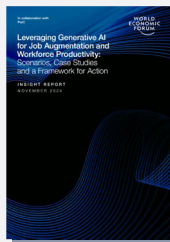
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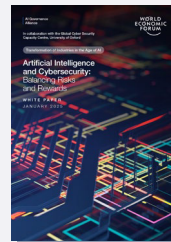
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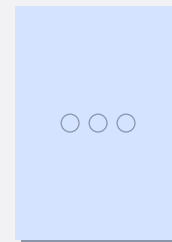


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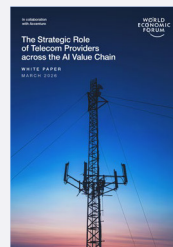
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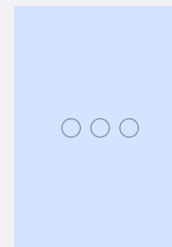
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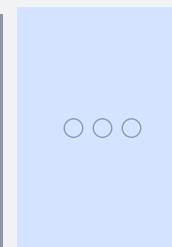
The Strategic Role of Telecom Providers across the AI Value Chain

Advanced manufacturing and supply chains



Upcoming

Financial services



Upcoming

Consumer goods, retail and agribusiness



Unlocking AI Value at Scale: Workforce Adoption A Practical Guide for Consumer Industries

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Production

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Endnotes

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