

AI must be framed as a force multiplier, not as a substitute

A KEY QUESTION



What will it take for organizations to move beyond AI experimentation and build operating models where automation expands human capacity, preserves accountability and earns lasting trust?

KEYWORDS

AI Adoption, Task Automation, Data Management, Fortrea Intelligent Technology, Digital Friction



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As artificial intelligence (AI) continues to move from experimentation to enterprise deployment, organizations are confronting a paradox. The technology itself is increasingly capable, yet adoption remains hesitant, uneven or stalled altogether. The problem is not computational power, data availability or even technical maturity. It is framing.

Managing the perception of AI adoption into organizations is important, avoiding an implicit assumption of substitution: Systems replacing people, automation standing in for judgment and efficiency achieved through redundancy. Such a narrative is not only inaccurate, it's potentially harmful—if AI is to meaningfully transform complex, regulated and knowledge-intensive industries, it must be understood and positioned very differently.

AI must be framed as a force multiplier, not as a substitute.

Automate tasks, not decisions

The most effective applications of AI draw a clear line between tasks and decisions.

Tasks that are repeatable, rules-based and high volume activities are well suited to automation. Data reconciliation, document preparation, data aggregation, monitoring and pattern detection can all be executed faster and more consistently by machines.

Decisions, on the other hand, are a different category altogether. They require judgment, contextual awareness, ethical reasoning and accountability. In highly regulated or risk sensitive environments, decisions cannot and should not be delegated to algorithms.

When this distinction is not clearly drawn, organizations face two reinforcing risks at once: Teams disengage from AI they perceive as over-reaching into judgement and leaders inherit governance challenges as responsibility and accountability starts to blur.

Successful AI adoption depends on restraint as much as ambition. Automating tasks liberates human capacity. Automating decisions undermines confidence.

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Elevating humans up the value chain

Across many industries, work has become increasingly burdened by “digital friction” where highly trained professionals spend disproportionate amounts of time assembling information, validating data, navigating systems and managing exceptions. AI's most immediate value lies in removing this friction, taking over routine tasks, allowing people to focus on higher-value activities such as project orchestration, sense-making and strategic decision-making.

But this elevation is not automatic. Without a deliberate redesign of workflows and roles, AI can simply add another layer of complexity. The key to success here is to rethink how work gets done, not just how tools are introduced.

In drug development, this dynamic has been particularly acute. Over the past decade, the industry has invested heavily in digital platforms across clinical operations, data management, safety and regulatory affairs. Yet many organizations now find highly skilled clinicians, scientists and program leaders spending significant time reconciling data across EDC, CTMS, eTMF and safety systems, manually tracking protocol deviations and amendments or preparing status reports that stitch together information from multiple sources. Rather than accelerating decision-making, these fragmented workflows often slow it down, increasing the risk of error and diverting attention away from scientific judgment and trial oversight where their skills are best deployed.

The result is a paradox familiar to many in the industry: more systems, more data, but less perceived velocity. AI introduced into this environment without structural change can deepen the problem, generating more outputs to validate, more exceptions to manage and more uncertainty about which signals to trust.

The opportunity is not to use AI to generate more activity, but to redesign clinical and operational workflows so routine triage, data reconciliation and monitoring are handled by machines, freeing human expertise to focus on study design decisions, risk-based prioritization and cross-functional alignment. In drug development, where timelines, cost and scientific quality are tightly coupled together, elevating humans up the value chain is not a technology choice; it is an operating model imperative.



Preserving accountability: Keeping humans in the lead

Closely intertwined with the responsible use of artificial intelligence is the need to preserve human accountability. The concept of a “human in the loop” is often framed as a technical safeguard—a final checkpoint before an automated system executes an action. In practice, this framing is insufficient. Human oversight must be understood as an organizational principle, embedded into how decisions are defined, governed and owned, rather than treated as a failsafe bolted onto complex systems.

At the heart of this principle lies the need for a clear distinction between tasks and decisions. AI excels at processing information, identifying patterns and automating well-bounded activities, but it is critical that decisions, especially those with ethical, regulatory, clinical or financial consequences, remain explicitly human responsibilities.

For accountability to be preserved, AI systems must be designed so that responsibility is never diffused across models, platforms or vendors. Outputs need to be explainable and open to audit, allowing individuals to understand not just what a system produced, but why. Decision points must be explicit, with clear hand-offs between automation and human judgement, and escalation paths must be unambiguous so that issues are routed to accountable owners.

Retaining human accountability does not slow progress—it accelerates it. Teams are far more willing to adopt and rely on AI when they understand that the technology supports their judgement rather than replaces it. Confidence grows when individuals know they retain agency, authority and responsibility over outcomes, and that AI exists as an enabling layer rather than an unchallengeable decision-maker.

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This also means that trust is the true constraint on scale. Organizations that invest in clear accountability structures create conditions for sustainable adoption, where AI can be used confidently and consistently across the enterprise. By keeping humans firmly in the loop, organizations protect not only their governance frameworks, but also the credibility and impact of the technology itself.

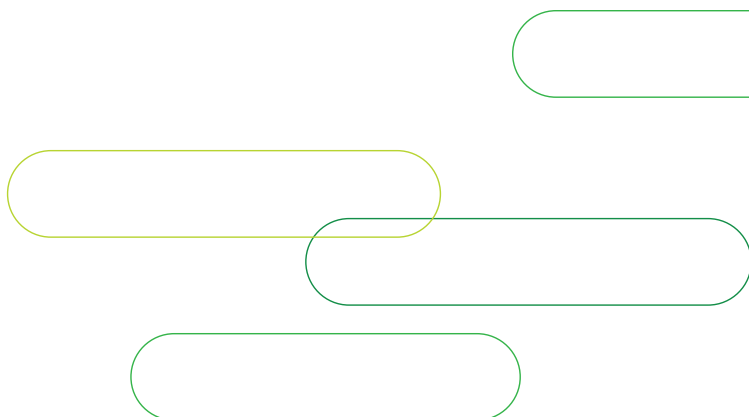
Fear of job loss is the real adoption barrier

Despite growing familiarity with AI, fear remains a powerful undercurrent in many organizations. Our own surveys can show that employees worry about relevance, redundancy and long term security in a world growing in AI adoption. These concerns are rarely addressed directly, yet they profoundly shape adoption and behavior.

Resistance to AI seldom takes the form of open opposition. It appears as cautious engagement, under utilization of tools, stalled pilots or endless requests for validation. The technology works, but momentum falters.

Leaders who successfully drive adoption confront this fear head on. They are explicit about what AI is, what it is not and what it is intended to do. They demonstrate usage themselves. They frame AI as reducing burden, not headcount.

Most importantly, they connect AI adoption to professional growth, not obsolescence.





Conclusion

The greatest challenge in effective AI strategies lies in change management and narrative setting. Without clear leadership, AI initiatives proliferate without coherence, pilots multiply without scale and employees draw their own conclusions, often the most pessimistic ones.

Effective leaders understand that AI adoption is as much a cultural transformation as a technical one. They invest in communication, education and role modeling. They clarify how success will be measured and how work will change. They align incentives with desired behaviors.

In short, they manage AI not as a software deployment, but as an organizational shift.

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