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AI ISN'T FAILING. YOUR PROCESSES ARE.

Most organisations are adding AI to the way they already work and wondering where the savings went. **The return belongs to those who redesign the work first and price the risks nobody has costed yet.**

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01 THE VERDICT

AI didn't stall your programme. Your process did.

> *"We've started again, with AI as part of the process rather than taking the process and sticking AI into it."*
>
> Jonathan Elgott, CFO Business & Client Services, Marsh

The most honest story of the evening was not a success. A global firm launched a major, publicly announced programme to take costs out with AI. One workstream asked teams across the business for ideas to speed up their processes. The ideas came in and the business cases added up to millions.

What arrived was 100k.

The tools worked. The problem was what they were pointed at. A faster version of the same process mostly gave people time for another cup of tea, and nobody banked the difference.

Within nine months, the firm had funded a Plan B: choose the processes that matter, then rebuild them with AI designed in rather than bolted on.

TAKEAWAY

AI rewards redesign and punishes decoration. If the process stays the same, so does the P&L.

BY THE NUMBERS

Millions to 100k
What one AI cost-saving workstream was expected to deliver, against what it did.

9 months
From programme launch to a funded Plan B. In a large organisation, that counts as quick.

Days to hours
The drop in manual processing time where AI was aimed at a strategic pillar.

IN THE ROOM

Everybody's OKRs have an AI objective attached. So heads of department come to me and say, the answer is AI.

I say, hold on a second. Walk me through what you're trying to achieve.

Sandeep Pankhania, Director of Global Data and AI Strategy, Visa

02 WHERE IT BREAKS DOWN

Five places AI stalls between pilot and payback

1 The AI target with no goal

When every department carries an AI objective, requests arrive as solutions looking for problems. Most are really automation, or a broken process AI won't fix. Say no, and the request often goes over your head and lands back on your desk.

2 The pilot that can't leave the lab

Hackathons produce proofs of concept built in small, friendly environments. No cyber review, potentially sensitive data and no thought for governance. They look robust right up until someone tries to roll them out.

3 The pot of money nobody wants to touch

A central fund invites departments to bid. But putting your hand up means promising a saving you can't prove until you've run the process. Fifteen months down to six looks great on paper. One participant admitted the maths is part guesswork.

4 The company within the company

Early adopters build a parallel AI organisation to move quickly. Claire from Cisco watched the same thing happen with connected cars at Porsche a decade ago: speed now, then years spent bridging the new silo back into the legacy estate.

5 Ownership that stops at 'the board'

Everyone agreed the board is accountable, and in financial services there's a named senior manager. But who is the board's proxy, actually making the calls? Nobody had a clean answer. As one leader put it: you find someone to own it, then there's a reorg.

THE PATTERN

Not one of these is an AI problem. Data quality, governance, ownership and process design were unfinished business long before anyone said agentic.

What AI changed is the cost of leaving them unfinished.

The questions haven't changed. The price of the wrong answer has.

Redesign the work. Then add the AI.

Nobody in the room argued for slowing down. The argument was about where to start. The organisations seeing a return began with the outcome, built the foundations once and only then reached for a model.



WHAT CHANGES

Same ambition, different starting point. The process, the data and the owner become the load-bearing parts. The model is the last decision, not the first.

Start from the pillar, not the tool. Visa's filter is simple. If a request doesn't move revenue, cost or another strategic pillar, it waits. Then go upwards, asking for support, not permission. The result: a bigger sales pipeline and manual work cut from days to hours.

Rebuild, don't accelerate. A quicker version of a bad process just buys a longer tea break. Build the Plan B in from day one, so admitting a workstream isn't working is a monitoring decision, not a career event. Marsh made that call without anyone being fired.

Secure by design, before scale. Threat-model every layer and pen-test before launch. One FSI pointed early AI at scanning its own code for vulnerabilities before criminals find them. At Visa, every new proposal goes to the cyber team first.

Let the deterministic work go first. Another senior FSI executive was "amazed and disappointed in equal proportions." Machine learning in fraud and complaints is paying back. Agentic speech analytics has struggled to industrialise.

Make every user part of the control. When one government department switched on Copilot, a user found he could open SharePoint folders he shouldn't. He reported it and records management closed the gap. Training and a clear way to report turn an exposure into a fix.

> *"Technology doesn't drive the business. It's the business that drives the technology"*
>
> Sandeep Pankhania, Director of Global Data and AI Strategy, Visa

04 THE COST NOBODY HAS PRICED

Count the savings. Then count what they cost you.

Most AI scorecards measure activity. The sharpest warnings of the night were about what those scorecards leave out: the people who will check the work in five years and the bill that arrives once the vendors change their pricing.

EASY TO MEASURE - TODAY	VALUABLE TO MEASURE - INSTEAD
AI objectives met	**Value delivered against a named strategic pillar**
Pilots launched	**Pilots industrialised, with security, data and an owner in place**
Licenses and seats removed	**Total cost of usage as pricing moves to consumption**
Hours saved per task	**Capacity redeployed and banked in the P&L**
Adoption and log-ins	**People coming through who can still check the AI's work**

On people. One senior executive has watched AI built around experts with fifteen years in a role, making them faster. Ask a newer analyst to find an exceptional item in a target's accounts and they can't. The risk is a slim technocratic class: expensive, irreplaceable and the only people left who can check the models.

On price. Financial services software has been bought per seat. When one person running 25 agents does the work of 25 seats, the vendors will notice. Expect consumption pricing that could wipe out the savings, plus a new concentration risk to manage.

The open question

'The board' is the right answer and an incomplete one. Who is the board's proxy deciding when AI is cheaper than people, once token prices rise? If you can't name them, you've found your first gap.

On supervision. As one leader highlighted, AI outputs can't be left unsupervised. That only holds if someone can still do the supervising.

On regulation. Prabha Vijayakumar highlighted the valuable progress of the first AI commission findings in healthcare, helping to shape clearer regulatory frameworks. Aligning regulation with rollout will be key to responsible adoption at scale.

Final thought. AI hasn't made transformation harder. It has made it more honest. The organisations that come through will be able to say which pillar a use case serves, who owns it, what it really costs and who will check it in five years.

> *"AI is becoming table stakes. If you're not using it, you're behind because the criminals already are"*
>
> Senior FSI Executive

CHANGE MAKERS CLUB

Change Makers is a global community of senior executives driving long-lasting change within large, complex organisations. Members bench-test their thinking, share peer review, and discuss the opportunities and challenges of leading through transformation.

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The insights in this report were drawn from a private roundtable of senior technology, data and transformation executives, held under the Chatham House Rule and facilitated by James Harris, Founder of Change Makers.

HOSTED & FACILITATED BY

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