

THE EXECUTIVE'S AI RECKONING: WHY YOUR NEXT CAREER MOVE DEPENDS ON AI MASTERY

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The Executive's AI Reckoning: Why Your Next Career Move Depends on AI Mastery

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This month, I have been in more boardrooms talking about artificial intelligence strategy than I have in ten years taken all together. What really grabs me is not the enthusiasm; that has been developing since ChatGPT first emerged; it's when seasoned executives realise they are being assessed not only on their usual skills but also on their AI readiness, I can see the obvious worry in their eyes. These talks reveal the unpleasant reality: **mastery of artificial intelligence has evolved into the new executive survival skill.**

Just last week, I watched a 20-year CTO lose a boardroom in under 10 minutes. He didn't know his company's AI plan. The board did. The questions were not about the importance of AI; that is a given already. They were interested in implementation schedules, structures for governance, and strategies for competing. In an environment where board members were presenting real-world data regarding enterprise AI adoption rates and posing direct queries regarding agentic AI capabilities, the executive's evasive answers regarding "exploring potential" and "keeping current with trends" were ineffective.

This scene is playing out in boardrooms across the globe, and it represents a fundamental shift in executive expectations. NVIDIA CEO Jensen Huang captured this reality perfectly when he said, **"You're not going to lose your job to an AI, but you're going to lose your job to someone who uses AI."** Executives must drive organisational transformation in a time when AI capabilities are developing at an exponential rate that most leaders still do not fully understand. This goes beyond personal productivity.

The data presents a clear picture. Recent analysis indicates that we are seeing the convergence of three exponential curves: the expansion of raw compute resources, the scaling of chip performance, and the improvement of algorithms three to four times every year. Together, these elements could result in a 1,000,000x boost in AI capability in a matter of years [David Sacks, USA AI Czar, May 2025]. However, most CEOs continue to view AI in a linear fashion, viewing it as merely another technological advancement rather than the profound economic shift it signifies.

The stakes couldn't be higher. Organizations led by AI-savvy executives are already pulling ahead, with AI leaders achieving 1.5 times higher revenue growth than their peers [Forbes Business Council, 2025]. Meanwhile, companies that fail to scale AI beyond pilot projects (and that's 74% of them) are finding themselves increasingly disadvantaged in markets where AI-driven efficiency and innovation are becoming table stakes [McKinsey Global Institute, 2025].

The New Reality: AI as Executive Survival Skill

In 2025, the discussion around the use of AI has undergone a significant change. The "AI is non-negotiable" rhetoric that dominated conversations in 2024 has been abandoned. These days, the question is not if your company will embrace AI, but rather if you, as a CEO, are capable of successfully spearheading that adoption. This move signifies a significant evolution in the way stakeholders, investors, and boards assess executive performance.

This shift is evident from the statistics. According to Stanford's 2025 AI Index report, 83% of businesses now give AI programs top priority, which is a significant increase over earlier years. The fact that businesses are supporting this prioritisation with budget allocation is more telling; in 2025 alone, they increased the percentage of their entire technology budgets allocated to AI from 14% to 18%. *[Nasscom and Avasant, 2025]* This is a fundamental reallocation of resources that marks AI's shift from experimental technology to essential business infrastructure, not incremental growth.

Although 58% of executives report revenue increases from AI, just 26% of businesses have built the skills to scale AI beyond pilots, revealing a CEO competency gap (McKinsey, 2025). This discrepancy highlights a serious leadership issue. Approving AI expenditures and assigning technical teams to handle AI strategies is insufficient. Executives that are sufficiently knowledgeable about the technology to make wise strategic choices, handle challenging implementation issues, and propel organisational change at the rate required by AI development are essential for a successful AI transformation.

The divide between AI leaders and AI laggards is becoming increasingly pronounced at the executive level. AI-savvy executives are demonstrating measurably different approaches to strategic planning, operational efficiency, and competitive positioning. They're asking different questions in board meetings, making different investment decisions, and building different organisational capabilities. Above all, they are seeing AI as a platform for developing whole new business models and competitive advantages as well as a tool to optimise current processes.

In a future where AI is king, this is about strategic thinking, not simply technical expertise. The leaders who can predict how AI will change their sectors, recognise the organisational skills required to compete in AI-driven marketplaces, and carry out transformation projects that set their businesses up for long-term success will excel in the coming ten years. They know that becoming an expert in AI is about more than simply keeping up with the latest developments in technology; it is about building the leadership skills necessary to lead companies through the biggest technological shift since the internet.

May 2025: The Month That Changed Everything

May 2025 will be recognised as a watershed event in the AI landscape—a month in which multiple converging developments dramatically changed the strategic formula for enterprise AI adoption. The announcements and trends that developed during this time were more than just incremental improvements; they were paradigm shifts that every executive must grasp and respond to strategically.

The Hardware Revolution: OpenAI's Bold Bet on AI-Native Devices

The most surprising development came from OpenAI's announcement of a \$6.5 billion acquisition of IO, coupled with a strategic partnership with former Apple design lead Jony Ive.

For executives, this development has profound strategic implications. We're moving toward a world where AI capabilities won't be constrained by traditional computing interfaces. Ive's involvement suggests we're heading toward AI-native devices that could fundamentally change how employees interact with information, how customers engage with services, and how businesses operate, that is, if the hype is to be believed. Look no further than Elon Musk's Optimus robot and new Robotaxi services as industry gamechangers.

This hardware advancement also points to a broader trend, which industry analysts refer to as "physical AI"—the integration of AI capabilities into the physical environment via purpose-built devices and interfaces. For enterprise executives, this entails looking beyond chatbots and automation tools to AI systems that can interact with the physical environment, grasp spatial linkages, and provide contextual support in real-world scenarios.

The Agentic AI Breakthrough: From Generative to Autonomous

Perhaps more important than the hardware announcements was the acceleration of agentic AI development. Unlike generative AI, which responds to commands, agentic AI systems may plan, execute complicated tasks, and function autonomously within predefined boundaries.

The spending trajectory is especially significant to executives. Organisations are expanding their investment in AI agents in 2025, frequently transferring money from traditional projects. This is more than just a technological revolution; it is a fundamental rethinking of how work is done. Agentic AI systems can handle complicated workflows that formerly required human intervention, such as processing client requests or managing supply chain activities.

Google's launch of Jules, an asynchronous coding agent that can communicate directly with GitHub repositories alongside the likes of Anthropic's Claude, shows the trend. But the ramifications go far beyond software development. We are seeing agentic AI systems used for financial analysis, customer service, content production, and strategic planning.

The key insight for leaders is that agentic AI represents a shift from AI as a tool to AI as a colleague or executive assistant. This requires new management frameworks, different performance metrics, and evolved organizational structures. The most successful implementations involve executives who can envision how autonomous AI agents will work alongside human teams, what new capabilities this enables, and how to measure success in human-AI collaborative environments.

The Governance Maturation: From Compliance to Competitive Advantage

May 2025 also saw a dramatic shift in AI governance frameworks. The EU AI Act, which went into effect in August 2024, has begun its staggered implementation, with limitations on unacceptable-risk AI entering effect in February 2025 *[Forbes, 2025]*.

According to the International Association of Privacy Professionals (IAPP), organizations with effective AI governance frameworks are significantly better positioned to scale AI initiatives compared to those with ad hoc approaches *[IAPP, 2024]*. Far from stifling innovation, as some industry leaders assume, well-designed governance frameworks accelerate AI adoption by establishing clear guidelines, reducing risks, and building stakeholder trust. Companies that prioritize structured governance can expand AI use cases efficiently, while those hindered by overly complex or absent frameworks risk falling behind.

For leaders, this governance change poses both a challenge and an opportunity. Those who proactively develop strong (efficient!) governance frameworks will be better positioned to scale AI initiatives, attract investment, and gain consumer trust. In contrast, executives who handle governance as an afterthought may find themselves bound by legal constraints and stakeholder concerns that should have been addressed strategically from the start.

The Enterprise Transformation Acceleration: From Digital-First to AI-First

Perhaps the most significant development seen in May 2025 was the acceleration of enterprise transition from digital-first to AI-first operational paradigms. This is more than just adding AI capabilities to current digital infrastructure; it is about reinventing corporate operations using AI-native architectures and procedures.

The shift to AI-first organisations necessitates a huge financial investment, with CEOs seeing AI as critical infrastructure for all corporate functions. According to a Nasscom-Avasant survey, 48% of global organisations are going to devote more than half of their technology budgets on digital initiatives by 2030, with AI, particularly generative and multimodal systems, driving the majority of this investment *[Nasscom & Avasant, 2025]*. This AI-first strategy is changing organisational structures and decision-making as businesses use real-time, cross-functional AI systems like Google's Gemini 2.5 Flash and OpenAI's agentic tools to improve integration and efficiency *[Reznikov, 2025]*.

This necessitates executives who can think systemically about how AI capabilities will flow across their organisations and create systems that maximise the potential of human-AI collaboration.

The most effective transitions are managed by leaders who recognise that becoming AI-first needs more than just technology deployment. It necessitates cultural transformation, new performance indicators, improved consumer experiences, and fundamentally different approaches to competitive strategy. Organisations that effectively navigate this transformation will benefit from long-term gains in efficiency, innovation, and market responsiveness.

The Four Pillars of Executive AI Mastery

Executive AI mastery is built on four core components. These are not technical competencies alone—they are strategic leadership behaviours that distinguish executives who drive enterprise-wide AI adoption from those who fail due to complexity and scale.

Pillar 1: Strategic Vision Beyond Technology

The first distinguishing feature of AI-savvy leadership is the capacity to position AI as a driver for business transformation rather than just a technological update. This shift in perspective significantly changes how leaders build strategy, allocate resources, and manage change.

Leading businesses subscribe to the 10-20-70 rule: 10% of AI expenditure is allocated to algorithms, 20% to infrastructure, and 70% to people and processes [BCG, 2024]. This ratio emphasises a fundamental truth: technological innovation alone is insufficient. Rewiring the organisation around AI capabilities provides a long-term competitive advantage.

Salesforce illustrates this through its Trailhead AI literacy initiative, led by CEO Marc Benioff. By implementing AI education throughout the organisation and using solutions such as Agentforce, they were able to accelerate quotation cycles by 75% and increase user engagement by 22%.

Strategic vision entails thinking beyond current capabilities. Leaders must plan for what does not yet exist, such as agentic AI, multimodal systems, and AI-native devices, due to the rapid growth of AI. The most forward-thinking CEOs ask: what new business models will this unlock? How can we compete when AI is embedded in every interaction? Equally important is increasing enterprise-wide AI literacy. Effective executives communicate AI strategy to boards, functional teams, and front-line employees alike, creating alignment and decreasing fear.

Pillar 2: Scaling Excellence—Overcoming the 26% Trap

Only 26% of organisations have successfully expanded AI beyond experimental initiatives [Forbes, 2025]. This is not a technical failure; it is a leadership challenge. Scaling necessitates CEOs who can translate isolated successes into enterprise-wide capabilities.

Infrastructure serves as the foundation for readiness. In 2024, 57% of AI budgets were spent on basic investments such as cloud platforms, data pipelines, and computational horsepower [Nasscom & Avasant, 2025]. These are not quick wins; they take persistent and visionary leadership.

Modular AI architecture is a critical enabler. Forward-thinking executives build systems as interchangeable components that can adapt to quick changes in models and methodologies. As I mentioned in my previous piece on AI abstraction, modularity ensures continuity without lock-in.

The greatest leaders take a systematic approach to scaling—aligning AI with fundamental business operations, setting clear success indicators, and maintaining pace despite organisational complexity. Scaling is more than just reproducing success; it's about integrating AI into the firm's operational DNA.

Pillar 3: Governance as Competitive Advantage

Contrary to popular belief, governance promotes rather than stifles artificial intelligence innovation. Executives that view governance as a strategic enabler rather than a compliance checkbox achieve greater speed, trust, and scalability. Structured frameworks boost corporate confidence. The IAPP discovered that businesses with mature AI governance outperform those with ad hoc frameworks, especially in regulated areas [IAPP, 2024]. The EU AI Act, which intersects with over 60 legal instruments, is driving the formation of cross-functional governance teams that combine legal, privacy, technological, and operational skills [Spehar, 2025]. This transition is reflected in the creation of new C-suite positions, such as Chief AI Officer and Head of Digital Governance. Boards expect CEOs to navigate changing regulatory frameworks while generating innovation.

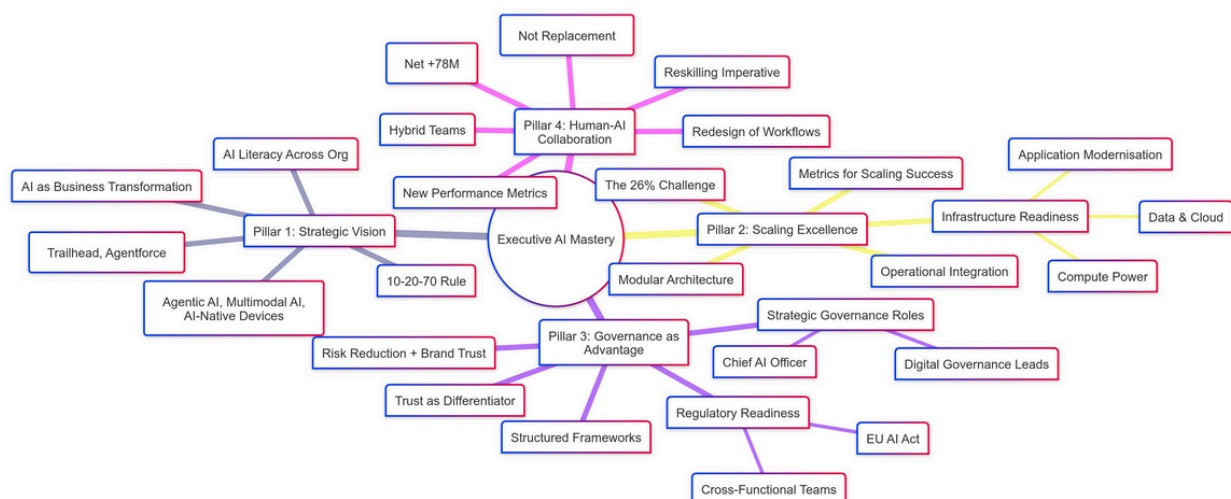
At its essence, governance is about establishing trust. In a market where AI capabilities are converging, trust becomes the deciding factor. Executives who invest in transparent, responsible artificial intelligence not only reduce corporate risk, but also improve brand equity, investor trust, and consumer loyalty.

Pillar 4: Human-AI Collaboration by Design

The last pillar reframes AI as a productivity partner rather than a labour replacement. Leading CEOs don't merely automate; they rethink work for hybrid human-AI teams. The World Economic Forum (2025) predicts that AI would create 170 million jobs while displacing 92 million by 2030, for a net gain of 78 million positions. Realising that potential requires leadership that can re-skill workforces and create new collaborative models.

Human-AI teams thrive when each performs what it does best: humans bring judgement, creativity, and empathy, while AI provides speed, scalability, and analysis. Leaders must choose which jobs are suitable for automation, which require supervision, and which benefit from augmentation.

This shift necessitates cultural transformation. Performance measurements must change to reflect team outcomes rather than just individual contributions. Organisational systems must incentivise collaboration rather than competition between humans and algorithms. The most sophisticated firms regard AI as a coworker rather than a tool, and they create cultures that foster collaboration.



Industry-Specific Strategic Imperatives

While the fundamental principles of AI mastery apply across industries, the specific applications and competitive dynamics vary significantly by sector. Understanding these industry-specific imperatives is crucial for executives who want to develop targeted AI strategies that address their sector specific challenges and opportunities.

Healthcare: Precision AI for Life-Critical Applications

Healthcare is one of the most interesting areas in terms of AI governance and deployment, owing to the essential importance of medical choices and tight regulatory standards. Google's release of MedGemma, an open model specifically intended for multimodal medical text and image understanding, demonstrates the trend of specialised AI models that answer industry-specific requirements.

Healthcare leaders face the strategic challenge of balancing innovation, safety, and compliance in AI-driven healthcare. Google DeepMind's AI model for breast cancer screening, which matches or exceeds radiologist accuracy, highlights AI's potential to improve early detection and patient outcomes [Google Health, 2023]. However, adopting such systems necessitates executives who understand how to incorporate AI capabilities into existing clinical procedures, regulatory regulations, and professional standards.

Healthcare CEOs are pioneering AI governance, offering lessons for other industries. The complex network of healthcare laws, regulations, norms, and standards, including HIPAA and GDPR, provides a robust starting point for managing AI in highly regulated environments [Spehar, 2025]. Executives that can handle this complexity while remaining focused on patient outcomes and operational efficiency will be successful in healthcare AI.

Finance: AI-Driven Risk Management and Fraud Detection

The financial services industry leads in demonstrating measurable returns on AI investments, with JPMorgan's AI-driven fraud detection technology contributing to nearly \$1.5 billion in savings. This showcases AI's significant financial value in risk management applications [Anand, 2025].

For financial services leaders, the strategic aim is to use AI to gain a competitive edge while retaining regulatory compliance and consumer confidence.

The introduction of AI-powered trading systems, personalised financial advice platforms, and automated compliance monitoring marks only the beginning of the AI transformation in finance. Executives who understand AI in this area may forecast how it will transform customer interactions, operational procedures, and competitive dynamics in financial markets.

Technology: The Developer Productivity Revolution

AI solutions such as Google's Stitch and Figma's AI for UI design and frontend code creation, and Google Jules for asynchronous GitHub repository interaction, are revolutionising developer productivity. The release of OpenAI's Codex, which is optimised for software engineering activities, accelerates this trend.

For IT executives, the strategic imperative is to redesign software development processes around AI capabilities. This is more than just increasing individual developer productivity; it is about radically transforming how technology organisations approach product development, quality assurance, and system maintenance.

OpenAI's \$3 billion acquisition of Windsurf highlights major technology companies' strategic importance in AI-powered development tools. Technology executives who understand this trend are preparing their organisations to benefit from drastically increased development pace and quality.

Manufacturing and Operations: Agentic AI for Complex Workflows

Manufacturing and operations represent significant opportunities for agentic AI applications, where autonomous systems can manage complex workflows, optimize supply chains, and coordinate multi-step processes. The ability of AI agents to plan and execute tasks independently makes them particularly valuable in operational environments where efficiency and reliability are critical.

The strategic imperative for manufacturing executives is to identify processes that can benefit from autonomous AI management while maintaining human oversight for critical decisions. This requires understanding how to design human-AI collaboration models that leverage the strengths of both autonomous systems and human judgment.

Professional Services: Knowledge Work Transformation

AI applications in knowledge work are resulting in extraordinary productivity benefits for professional service firms. Lancom Technology's RFP Assistant has reduced the time required to respond to requests for proposals by more than half, while a global medical ISV has reduced user acceptance testing time by 75% using automated UAT agents.

For professional services leaders, the strategic goal is to reinvent how knowledge work is done while preserving the quality and client relationships that differentiate professional services organisations. This necessitates understanding how to combine AI capabilities with human experience to provide improved client outcomes.

The transformation of professional services through AI is part of a larger trend towards enhanced knowledge work, in which AI systems handle routine analysis and information processing while humans focus on strategic thinking, relationship management, and creative problem solving.

Executives who manage this transformation are those who can envisage new service delivery models that use AI capabilities while retaining the human qualities that clients value the most.

The Competitive Reality Check: What Your Competition Is Already Doing

While many leaders are still considering whether to invest meaningfully in AI, their competitors have begun implementing extensive AI strategies that will be difficult to match should they gain traction. Understanding what leading organisations are doing adds critical context to strategic decision-making and emphasises the need of AI adoption.

The AI talent war is escalating at an unprecedented rate. Organisations are vying not only for traditional technical talent, but also for leaders who can drive AI transformation, professionals who can bridge technical and business domains, and experts who can understand the complex intersection of AI capabilities and industry requirements. LinkedIn's 2025 Jobs on the Rise report highlights surging demand for AI-related roles, with significant growth in positions such as AI specialists, data scientists, and AI ethicists, reflecting the increasing need for expertise in innovation, analytics, and responsible AI governance [Open Data Science, 2025].

What's especially worrying for CEOs who haven't yet prioritised AI is that this talent battle has spread to the C-suite. According to executive search agencies, AI literacy is quickly becoming a necessity for senior leadership jobs in many industries, not just technology companies. Boards are asking specific questions about applicants' experience with AI strategy, knowledge of AI governance frameworks, and track record of leading technology-driven transformation projects.

Board-level AI conversations have become routine in major organisations. These are not high-level debates about AI's importance; rather, they are comprehensive strategic discussions on AI investment objectives, competitive positioning, risk management, and performance indicators. Board members are learning about AI capabilities and asking increasingly complex questions regarding AI strategy and implementation status.

The complex nature of these board-level discussions reflects a broader trend of viewing AI as basic business infrastructure rather than an experimental technology. Organisations that are ahead of the curve incorporate AI concerns into all important strategic decisions, including product creation and market expansion, operational efficiency, and competitive positioning.

Investors' expectations for AI strategy have shifted drastically. Venture capitalists and private equity investors are increasingly evaluating portfolio companies based on their AI readiness and deployment status. During earnings calls and investor meetings, public business investors probe deeply into AI investments, competitive positioning, and strategic roadmaps.

This shift in investor expectations puts executives under pressure while also creating opportunities. Organisations that can demonstrate defined AI strategy, demonstrable progress, and competitive advantages attract investment and increase their valuations. Organisations that lack credible AI initiatives, on the other hand, face a competitive disadvantage in capital markets and strategic collaborations.

The organisations that are moving the fastest on AI adoption are establishing long-term competitive advantages that will be difficult to replicate. They're developing AI capabilities that improve over time, organisational competencies that allow for rapid AI innovation, and consumer experiences that set new market standards.

Perhaps most crucially, these elite organisations are adopting what experts refer to as "AI-first thinking"—the capacity to see business possibilities and solutions through the lens of AI capabilities rather than traditional methods. This mentality shift helps them to recognise possibilities that competitors overlook and devise solutions that provide new sources of competitive advantage.

The window for AI leadership is closing quickly. Early use of AI capabilities by organisations and executives will result in considerable advantages in talent acquisition, customer interactions, operational efficiency, and strategic positioning.

Waiting is no longer a feasible option for leaders seeking to maintain competitive relevance. The question isn't whether AI will revolutionise your industry; it's whether you'll lead the way or be transformed by competitors who moved faster and more forcefully.

Executives who master AI will not only survive but also determine the coming decade. They will pioneer new industries, establish new competitive paradigms, and build organisations that will set the bar for AI-driven greatness. The question isn't whether you have the skills to be an AI leader; it's whether you're willing to start that change today.

A Time for Leadership

Your AI legacy begins now. The decisions you make in the next few months regarding AI strategy, organisational capabilities, and personal competency development will determine whether you lead the AI transformation or serve as a cautionary story about the repercussions of strategic inaction. The choice is yours, but the window to make it is swiftly closing.

The executives who take bold action on AI today will be the ones who define competitive advantage tomorrow. The time for AI leadership is now.

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