

HUMANSPARK AI ADOPTION SERIES · 2027 EDITION

Opportunity and AI Adoption

Finding real-world value beyond the hype - what AI
actually does for SMEs

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Executive Summary

AI opens opportunities to extend core capabilities, make smarter data-driven decisions, accelerate learning, and boost productivity. For ambitious businesses seeking practical results, the time to act is now.

This whitepaper cuts through the hype, showing how you can seize AI's potential today. It focuses on **four pillars of AI opportunity**:

1. Productivity - streamline workflows, reduce costs, free employee time for higher-value work.

2. Capabilities - develop new products and services, deliver personalised experiences, expand into new markets.

3. Decision-Making - get usable intelligence from your existing data, make smarter strategic choices, build resilience.

4. Accelerated Learning - speed up onboarding and skill development, build a more knowledgeable, adaptable workforce.

Executive Summary

■ Pillars vs Four Ps - how they relate

This is the **what** paper. The companion **AI Adoption Roadmap** is the **how** paper, organised around four parallel tracks: **People, Process, Position, Policy** (the Four Ps).

The Four Pillars (Productivity, Capabilities, Decision-Making, Accelerated Learning) describe what AI does for the business. The Four Ps describe how to organise the programme that delivers those benefits. The two work together.

In rough mapping:

- Productivity wins come mostly from the Process track.
- Capabilities and Decision-Making come mostly from the Position track.
- Accelerated Learning is the People track's payoff at scale.
- Policy underpins all four, keeping the work safe to do.

If you're new to the toolkit, read the **AI Adoption Roadmap** first for the structure, then return here for the value-creation depth.

Executive Summary

| How this paper can help you

With real-world case studies and practical strategies, this whitepaper offers a pragmatic roadmap for business leaders to navigate AI adoption and capitalise on its advantages. It will help you:

- **Identify and prioritise** AI opportunities aligned with strategic goals.
- **Develop a phased, practical implementation plan** for measurable ROI.
- **Cultivate expertise** and build a framework for ongoing AI-driven improvement.

Organisations that proactively embrace AI will be best positioned to thrive. This guide will equip you to move beyond incremental improvements and achieve strategic transformation through AI-driven capabilities and smarter decision-making, alongside significant efficiency gains and measurable ROI.

Who Should Read This and Why Now

| Who should read this paper

Business leaders making strategic decisions about AI adoption, including:

- **Business owners and leaders** looking to drive growth and profitability with AI rather than chase efficiency alone.
- **CTOs and Innovation Managers** integrating AI into new products and operations.
- **Operations leaders** applying AI for efficiency gains.

This paper is especially valuable if you are:

- Exploring practical AI applications beyond the hype.
- Looking to build competitive advantage with AI.
- Seeking actionable steps to implement AI effectively.

Who Should Read This and Why Now

It will help you:

- Identify and prioritise key AI opportunities for your business.
- Develop a practical, phased implementation plan.
- Build a foundation for long-term AI-driven growth.

If you run a micro-business, the strategies still apply. Notes throughout show how to scale them down without losing substance.

[SHADOW AI]

People running free ChatGPT or Gemini on their own phones with company data. Most businesses have it, and most leaders don't know how much of it there is.

Why now

AI talk has been dominated by hype for years. For business leaders running mid-sized operations, it's tempting to treat it as something for multinationals and tech giants - not for day-to-day business.

That's no longer true. AI now delivers tangible value for SMEs. Three things have shifted since March 2025:

The tools are now good

The 2024 caveats - "AI is too wrong, verification eats the saving, failure modes are unclear" - have closed. Capable models now do what small teams did in 2024. Microsoft 365 Copilot now ships Claude alongside OpenAI's models. Agents work autonomously for hours in real businesses.

Who Should Read This and Why Now

| Your staff are already using AI

Every business now has shadow AI. Staff run free ChatGPT or Gemini on personal devices with company data. Some build unauthorised custom assistants. The question "should we use AI?" is already answered - by your staff. Your choice is to channel that adoption or leave it as risk.

| What works is now better understood

Two years of business experimentation shows what works, what delivers returns, and how to avoid pitfalls. There's now a playbook for AI success.

This paper is your guide to that playbook: the four pillars where AI delivers tangible results, the data you already have, the trends to watch, and the strategy to execute.

Who Should Read This and Why Now

The pillars in order:

1. **Productivity** - the most immediate, accessible gains.
2. **Capabilities** - new things your business couldn't do before.
3. **Decision-Making** - sharper, faster, more confident choices.
4. **Accelerated Learning** - the force multiplier on your people.

Forget the hype. Let's get down to practicalities.

03

Industry Examples: Proven Success Stories



Industry Examples: Proven Success Stories

Six examples of organisations achieving meaningful results with AI, plus two case studies that go deeper. The point is to show the pattern of what real wins look like - so when you score your own opportunities you have a calibration set.

Six examples across sectors

Radfield Home Care: Staff capability and operational efficiency

A family-owned care provider integrated AI to streamline operations and boost care staff capability. They built AI-driven performance feedback, a searchable database for operational manuals, and automated HR processes.

Result: Less administrative burden, better staff training outcomes, more efficient and responsive care.

Key opportunities: More capable workforce, better knowledge management, streamlined operations.

Industry Examples: Proven Success Stories

| EXL: AI-powered email response automation

A leading healthcare provider managed 50+ Finance & Accounting inboxes handling 150,000+ inbound emails annually. Manual classification and assignment was time-consuming.

EXL deployed a modular system using AI, integrated with Office 365. Within four months they achieved 85%+ classification accuracy, processing 3,500+ emails.

Result: Eliminated most manual processing, freeing staff for higher-value work.

Key opportunities: Email automation, operational visibility, resource optimisation.

| Headway: Marketing transformation and ROI boost

Edtech startup Headway used AI tools to transform marketing and advertising. Implementing AI-powered content generation and campaign optimisation tools, they achieved a 40% increase in video ad ROI and generated 3.3 billion ad impressions.

Industry Examples: Proven Success Stories

Result: Reduced content production costs, expanded marketing reach, substantial growth.

Key opportunities: Improved marketing effectiveness, lower production costs, broader reach.

| Nakie: Data-driven inventory and customer insights

Online retailer Nakie (recycled hammocks) used AI to optimise inventory management and analyse customer feedback. AI-driven stock tracking and review analysis improved inventory prediction accuracy, reduced unsold stock to 1%, and pulled insights from customer reviews.

Result: Better operational efficiency, higher customer satisfaction, more repeat business.

Key opportunities: Improved inventory management, enhanced customer insights, data-driven operations.

Industry Examples: Proven Success Stories

| **Grind Coffee: Systematic rollout across 350 people**

The coffee retailer deployed AI across all 350 staff. They started with report generation and marketing automation, then expanded to customer service and analytics. They achieved estimated productivity gains of 20% across the workforce.

Key opportunities: Partner-led systematic AI rollout, quick measurable wins through report automation, organisation-wide AI capability through phased implementation.

| **CMY Cubes: Content automation and creative focus**

The sensory toy manufacturer integrated AI into marketing operations. They automated social media content, then expanded to customer engagement and campaign analytics. AI boosted efficiency, freeing the team for strategy and product innovation.

Key opportunities: Automate routine content, keep brand voice, use AI analytics for engagement, free teams for strategy work.

| **Case study: Scalable AI for clinical and legal breakthroughs (Moderna)**

Moderna is a biotechnology firm specialising in mRNA therapeutics.

Industry Examples: Proven Success Stories

They faced complexity in clinical trials, legal workflows, and communicating science. They adopted a business-wide AI strategy, building custom assistants for specific departments.



Note: Moderna has around 5,000 employees. Their approach works for any size business. Their tools are built on accessible AI platforms; any business can adapt the principles.

The flagship application, "Dose ID," speeds clinical data analysis and validates dose selection during trials. Other custom assistants streamline legal compliance, provide policy access, and improve communications.

This widespread adoption - 100% in the legal team alone - serves as a model for enterprise-wide AI. It shows how accessible AI delivers significant benefits for any organisation.



"It lets us focus our time and attention on those matters that are truly driving an impact for patients." - Shannon Klinger, Chief Legal Officer, Moderna

Industry Examples: Proven Success Stories

| Key take-aways

- Custom AI tools handle specialised tasks like clinical trial analysis, showing AI's potential in regulated industries.
- Simple, targeted AI tools drive adoption by addressing specific pain points.
- AI bridges communication gaps by translating complex technical information for diverse audiences.

| Case study: Blood Testing Laboratory

Unlike the broader industry examples above, this case is one of our own at HumanSpark. It demonstrates how proper risk management and strategic planning lead to successful AI adoption with significant business benefits.

A medical testing laboratory performing blood testing faced a common challenge: highly skilled scientists were spending excessive time on manual data entry and administrative tasks rather than analytical work. Working closely with the laboratory team, we developed a managed approach to building AI tools while carefully considering risk mitigation.

Industry Examples: Proven Success Stories

| Risk-managed implementation

We deployed three AI solutions using a risk-controlled approach:

1. **Smart Data Entry System**
2. **Test Processing Automation**
3. **Sample Location Tracking**

For all three:

- Started with synthetic test data.
- Designed a phased rollout.
- Built in validation checks and error detection.
- Established human oversight for high-risk cases.
- Used off-the-shelf commercial AI models.
- Verified accuracy regularly.

| Results

- **90% reduction in data-entry time**, no compromise in accuracy.
- **92% faster test processing**, quality maintained.
- **Over €250,000 a year in staff time saved**, from a budget of €2,500.
- **12X increase in sample-processing capacity**.

Industry Examples: Proven Success Stories

Note: client confidentiality prevents naming the lab. We can demonstrate equivalent solutions for interested organisations.

This is the canonical Process-track win in Four Ps terms - a single well-scored candidate, a low-risk pilot pattern, a clear scale decision based on measured outcomes. The ROI (€2,500 in / €250k saved) is what good Process work delivers.

04

The Four Pillars of AI Opportunity



The Four Pillars of AI Opportunity

Now that we've seen real-world examples, let's look at the practical "how-to" of realising these benefits in your own organisation.

The four pillars are:

Productivity. Immediate, accessible efficiency gains.	Capabilities. New products, services, and customer experiences.	Decision-Making. Smarter, faster, data-informed choices.	Accelerated Learning. Faster skill development across the workforce.
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We'll cover each pillar with strategies, applications by department, and quick wins.

[VERIFICATION TAX]
The time spent checking the AI's work. Measure it during every pilot, because if checking takes longer than doing the job yourself, the use case isn't ready to scale.

Pillar 1: Productivity

For most organisations, the most immediate and accessible gains from AI are in boosting productivity. AI provides tools to automate routine tasks, optimise workflows, and deliver efficiency across the business.

Applying AI to daily processes makes operations smarter, faster, and more cost-effective, freeing your team to focus on higher-value work.

STAGE 1 Productivity	STAGE 2 Capabilities	STAGE 3 Decision-Making	STAGE 4 Accelerated Learning
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The Four Pillars of AI Opportunity

| Quick wins

I think of this as "quick wins" - immediate benefits without spending a huge amount of time or money. This lets you experiment, react to new developments quickly, and prove ROI.

| Key strategies to boost productivity

- **Automate repetitive tasks.** Target time-consuming administrative, customer service, and operational processes. Begin with high-volume, rules-based tasks for quick wins and clear ROI.
- **Implement AI document processing.** Automate intake, extraction, classification, and routing. Streamline invoices, contract management, and onboarding.
- **Adopt AI communication tools.** Meeting transcription, smart email management, project management. Improve communication, enhance meetings, streamline workflows.
- **Enhance customer service with AI agents and chatbots.** Routine queries, FAQs, basic support. Reduce wait times, improve consistency, free agents for complex issues.

The Four Pillars of AI Opportunity



Start with transcription. *Meeting transcription tools are easy to implement, affordable, and save time immediately. Record your meetings and let AI handle notes and action points - everyone focuses on the discussion.*

One concept underwrites all the strategies:



Verification tax: *the time spent checking the AI's work. Every AI use case carries one. If checking takes longer than doing the task manually, the use case isn't ready - no matter how impressive the output. Always measure it explicitly during pilots.*

- **Pilot multi-step agent workflows.** Agents that complete a small, well-bounded multi-step task before handing back to a human. Higher verification tax than other categories; pilot carefully.
- **Prioritise ROI and quick wins.** Focus on AI projects with measurable ROI in 30-90 days; track time saved, cost reductions, and speed gains.

→ → RATES SCORING

Productivity work runs through the Roadmap's Process track. We find candidates with the Friday Frustration question and score them with RATES.

Productivity in Four Ps terms

Pillar 1 maps to the **Process** track. The discovery question is "Friday Frustration" - what's draining you on a Friday afternoon, week after week? The scoring framework is RATES.

The Four Pillars of AI Opportunity

The pilot pattern is small group, fixed kill-date, scale-or-archive decision.



Sector callout: *professional services lead with proposal automation, research synthesis, document review. Industrial with Finance and Operations. Retail with Customer Service wins.*

→ → POSITION TRACK

Capability work lives in the Roadmap's Position track. It starts small, often with one person experimenting, and it compounds over three to five years.

Pillar 2: Capabilities

Beyond efficiency, AI lets you do entirely new things: grow your business in ways you might not have thought possible.

This pillar focuses on what was previously impossible: breakthrough products, extraordinary customer experiences, and new market entry. You're moving beyond optimisation to create new growth.

The Four Pillars of AI Opportunity

| Strategies, with examples

- **Boost team skills with AI assistants.** Like Moderna's clinical teams, who gained the ability to visualise and interpret complex trial data through "Dose ID" - work previously impossible without specialist tools.
- **Pioneer AI-driven innovation.** Integrate AI to enhance functionality and create solutions that anticipate market demands. CMY Cubes used AI to develop sensory products with adaptive features, expanding beyond their traditional static toy offerings.
- **Craft AI-powered personalisation.** Deploy AI to tailor content and marketing for better customer experiences. EXL helped their healthcare client move beyond standard email responses to tailored, context-aware communications.
- **Uncover market intelligence.** Use AI analytics to identify trends and generate customer and competitor insights. Radfield Home Care discovered untapped service opportunities by using AI to analyse operational data in ways their previous systems couldn't.
- **Reshape content strategy.** Use generative AI to create compelling content and optimise campaigns. Headway transformed their capabilities by producing entirely new formats of video content that weren't feasible before AI.

The Four Pillars of AI Opportunity

| Capabilities in Four Ps terms

Pillar 2 maps mostly to the **Position** track. Position work tends to start small (one person experimenting on a strategic question) and grows. It's the track that compounds slowest but pays off most over three to five years.

| Applications by department

Sales. AI enhances lead scoring and conversation analysis, tailors proposals to boost performance. Identifies successful selling patterns and offers data-driven coaching. *Quick win: AI meeting intelligence for actionable insights during sales calls.*

Product Development. AI accelerates design iterations and prioritises features based on customer feedback and market trends. Tests design variations and reveals hidden product opportunities. *Quick win: AI feedback analysis to find product enhancements.*

Marketing. AI automates creative content generation and personalises customer interactions across channels. Refines campaign performance by adapting messaging. *Quick win: optimise email subject lines with AI to improve open rates.*

The Four Pillars of AI Opportunity

Customer Success. AI predicts potential issues and monitors usage patterns for proactive outreach. Tracks customer health scores and churn risks. *Quick win: AI dashboard to flag at-risk customer accounts.*



Sector callout: *retail leads with Marketing and Customer Success. Professional services with Sales (proposals).*

SIMPLE FIRST STEP

Next time you face a big decision, give ChatGPT, Claude or Gemini the full context and ask for the pros, the cons and what you might be missing.

Pillar 3: Decision-Making

The third pillar focuses on how your organisation makes decisions.

Beyond efficiency and new capabilities, AI extracts actionable intelligence from your data, informing smarter choices across your business. Understanding your data is key - the next section covers assessment. For now, let's focus on how AI supports data-informed decisions.

With AI-powered analytics, you move from gut-feel to precision, identifying patterns invisible to traditional analysis.

The Four Pillars of AI Opportunity

| Quick wins



Pose your next strategic decision to a frontier model with full business context. Ask for "pros, cons, and what you might be missing." Use the model as a brainstorming partner before any board meeting.

Replace one weekly gut-feel report with an AI-summarised data view. Pick the report that's most often guessed at; let AI prepare the underlying view weekly.

Try a structured decision-helper tool - a free one is available in the resources section. It guides you through systematic evaluation of options.

| A simple first step

Want an easy first step into AI-powered decision support? For your next key business decision, use a tool like ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini as your AI brainstorming partner.

Provide detailed background information about the decision - the more context, the more relevant the insights. Ask the AI to generate "Pros and Cons" or "What questions should I be asking?" or "What's the case against this?"

This simple approach helps you structure thinking, explore different angles, and make more informed choices, faster.

The Four Pillars of AI Opportunity

| Decision-Making in Four Ps terms

Pillar 3 sits across **Position** (using AI to do something the business couldn't do before - integrate richer data into decisions) and **People** (the baseline literacy training that makes everyone capable of using AI as a thinking partner).

| Ask yourself

- **Decision bottlenecks?** Which decisions take too long or lack reliable data?
- **Hidden patterns?** What insights might be lurking in your existing data?
- **Risk assessment?** Where could AI help identify and mitigate potential problems?
- **Competitive intelligence?** What does AI let you see about your market that you couldn't see before?



Sector callout: *industrial leads with Operations and Workforce applications. Executive-level decision support is universal.*

The Four Pillars of AI Opportunity

| Pillar 4: Accelerated Learning

The fourth pillar is Accelerated Learning. In a fast-moving environment, rapid skill acquisition is a critical advantage.

This pillar focuses on how AI accelerates learning for individuals and organisations, building expertise faster.

| Quick wins



Start with AI-powered transcription tools for training sessions. Immediately create searchable, reusable training materials and accelerate knowledge sharing within teams.

| Key strategies for accelerated learning

- **Implement personalised AI learning platforms.** Use AI to tailor learning paths, content, and pace to individual needs and skill gaps.
- **Use AI-driven tutoring and mentorship.** AI tutors and virtual mentors provide on-demand support, personalised feedback, and guidance for faster skill development.
- **Create AI-powered simulated learning environments.** Realistic simulations for hands-on learning and accelerated expertise acquisition in a safe space.

The Four Pillars of AI Opportunity

- **Use AI for knowledge gap analysis and curriculum optimisation.** Analyse skills gaps, identify learning needs, optimise training programmes for effectiveness and efficiency.
- **Create a culture of data-driven learning and feedback.** AI analytics to track progress, identify improvement areas, create continuous feedback loops.

| Accelerated Learning in Four Ps terms

Pillar 4 maps to the **People** track. Workforce skill-building is People's core job; AI makes it scalable.

| Ask yourself

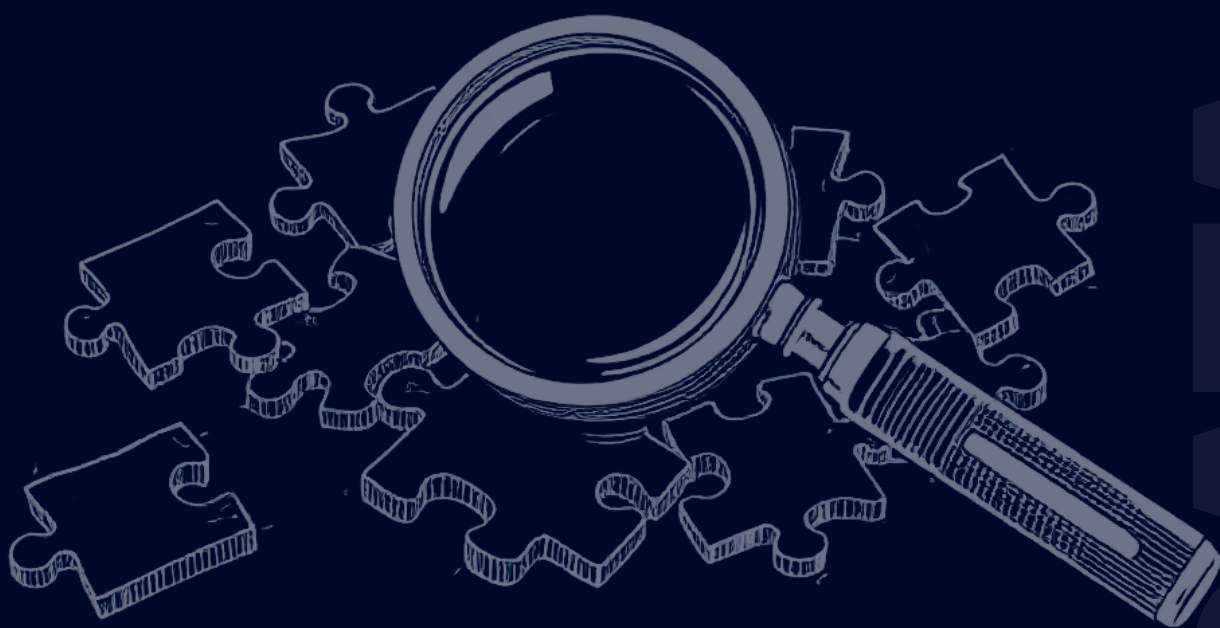
- How can we use AI to accelerate employee onboarding and time to competency?
- What are the key skill gaps in our organisation that AI-assisted learning could address?
- How can we personalise learning paths?
- What metrics will we use to measure AI-accelerated learning initiatives?



Accelerated Learning is a "force multiplier" for human potential and applies universally across sectors. Industrial SMEs typically see the largest single uplift from accelerating onboarding for engineering and quality roles; professional services from accelerating partner-track development.

05

Making Sense of Data: A Practical Guide



Making Sense of Data: A Practical Guide

| What is data?

You've heard that "data is valuable" - but what does that mean in practice? The word "data" is generic and abstract. Talk to engineers and you'll think it's all analytics, numbers, and spreadsheets.

| More than just numbers

Data is numbers, but also much more. Quantitative (structured numbers) and qualitative (less structured information) both work for AI.



"Data" sounds generic and abstract, making it difficult to grasp.

| You already know your data

You're already collecting and using data. Here are five categories you almost certainly have.

| 1. Customer Information

- Who buys from you and how often
- What products or services are most popular
- How customers find your business
- What feedback they provide

Making Sense of Data: A Practical Guide

Think: "How well do we know our customers?" AI uses this to deliver better experiences and right-fit products.

This includes hard numbers (sales figures) and soft information (reviews, call transcripts).

| 2. Financial Insights

- Which products have the best profit margins
- When your busy and slow periods occur
- Where you're spending too much
- What investments are paying off

Think: "How healthy are we?" AI predicts cash flow, cuts costs, and sharpens financial decisions.

This is mostly quantitative data, but AI also uses qualitative forecasts and expert analysis.

| 3. Employee Performance

- Who your top performers are
- What training produces the best results
- When turnover happens and why
- How satisfaction affects productivity

Making Sense of Data: A Practical Guide

Think: "How do we develop and keep great people?" AI trains staff, identifies talent, and improves HR decisions.

Includes performance scores and feedback insights.

| 4. Market Position

- Where you stand compared to competitors
- What trends are affecting your industry
- Which new opportunities are emerging
- How economic factors impact your business

Think: "How do we stay ahead?" AI tracks trends, understands your market, and spots new moves.

Mix of hard numbers (market size) and expert opinion.

| 5. Business Operations

- How efficiently your team works
- Where bottlenecks happen
- What quality issues keep recurring
- Which processes waste time or resources

Making Sense of Data: A Practical Guide

Think: "How efficient are we?" AI smooths workflows, cuts waste, and boosts speed.

Mostly quantitative (production metrics), but also qualitative insights from process reviews and staff observations.

| Don't overthink it

Data isn't expert-only. It's just information about your business.



Action: take 30 minutes this week to think about your business data. Walk through the five categories. Make notes on: what data do you already have in each area? Where is it stored? Who in your team 'owns' it? Even this initial, simple data inventory is a valuable first step.

| How this connects to the Four Ps

Data is what makes Position track work possible. The Position track in the Four Ps is about doing what your business couldn't do before - and almost all of that depends on having access to your own data in ways AI can use.

Making Sense of Data: A Practical Guide

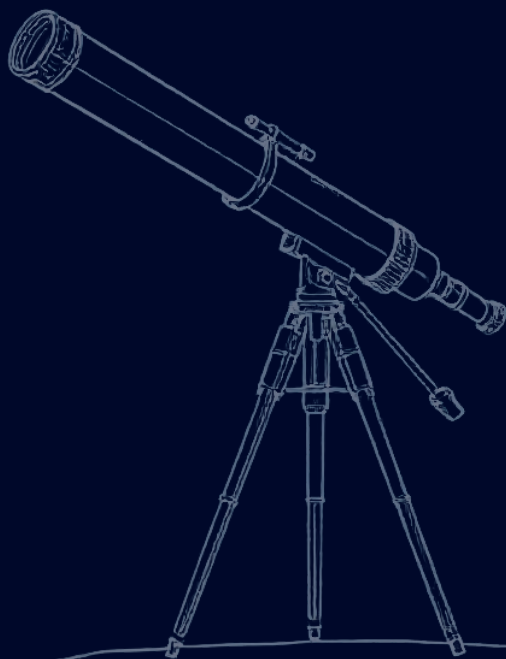
A practical sequence:

1. **Take the 30-minute data inventory** above.
2. **Pick the one data category** with the highest value-per-effort for your business. For most professional services firms, it's Customer Information. For most industrial SMEs, it's Business Operations. For most retail, it's Customer Information.
3. **Assess access.** Is the data accessible to AI tools? In a usable format? Within Policy boundaries?
4. **Pick one Position experiment** that uses that data. One person, one quarter.
5. **Iterate.** Within a year, you have a useful data + AI capability. Within three, it's a competitive advantage.

The data primer is the bridge between knowing AI is valuable and making it deliver value in your business.

06

Looking Ahead: AI Trends to Watch



Looking Ahead: AI Trends to Watch

We've explored the immediate opportunities AI offers today: productivity, capabilities, decisions, learning. But AI shifts constantly, with breakthroughs arriving at unprecedented pace.

What happened to the five trends from 2025

In the first edition of this paper (March 2025), we listed five trends to watch: Generative AI, Vertical AI, Multimodal AI, No-Code AI and Responsible AI. All five have now happened.

- **Generative AI** in text, image, video, code, and voice moved from "draft material" to "trusted first-pass output" in many domains.
- **Vertical AI** is standard: healthcare, legal, finance, manufacturing, and retail each have multiple industry-specific tools.
- **Multimodal AI** is unremarked-upon default behaviour for frontier models. Voice-mode interaction and real-time vision are mainstream.
- **No-code AI** is no longer the barrier - the barrier shifted to judgement and verification. Custom GPTs, Claude Projects, Gemini Gems, and agent platforms (Salesforce Agentforce, Microsoft Copilot Studio and others) let non-developers configure workflows.

Looking Ahead: AI Trends to Watch

- **Responsible AI** has become operational, not strategic. EU AI Act commencement dates have arrived. Multiple US states have enacted laws. The Air Canada chatbot ruling became the canonical case in vendor procurement reviews.

So what should you watch *now* for the next two to three years?

Five trends worth watching

1. The AI talent and pipeline question

The trend that should keep business leaders up at night is what AI is doing to entry-level knowledge work, and what that does to the pipeline of future senior managers.

If you hire graduates or juniors to do work AI now does well, your training pyramid is changing whether you notice. The tedious work that teaches pattern recognition, judgement, and professional identity is the work AI excels at. The question is not "can we afford fewer juniors?" It's "*where do future seniors come from?*"

Looking Ahead: AI Trends to Watch

This change is structural. AI is unlikely to settle back into a normal hiring pattern, and how knowledge professions develop people may need a serious rethink.

Implication: flag this in strategic planning. Discuss it with your senior team and HR now. Those who solve this in the next two years own a hiring advantage by 2030.

| 2. Agentic workflows at scale

Agents are moving from single-task demos to multi-step workflows that run for hours or days with minimal human intervention.

The strategic question isn't "can agents do this work?" They often can. It's *"how do we supervise them?"* and *"what's the verification tax?"*

Verification tax is the most under-discussed cost of agents.

Implication: pilot agents carefully. Bound scope tightly. Set hard limits on autonomous spending, customer communication, and data deletion. Log everything. The Process track of the Four Ps is the right home for early agent pilots.

Looking Ahead: AI Trends to Watch

| 3. On-device and small-model AI

A new class of capable AI runs on your laptop or phone, not in someone else's data centre. Apple, Microsoft, Google, and open-source projects ship sub-10B-parameter models that handle real work locally. This reshapes how organisations handle sensitive data.

The pitch: capable AI on data that stays on-premise. For industrial SMEs with IP-sensitive R&D, healthcare with patient data, or anywhere data residency matters, this changes what is possible.

Implication: the data-sensitivity/capability tradeoff is no longer binary. There's a third option now that didn't exist in 2024.

| 4. Model Context Protocol (MCP) and the interop layer

The Model Context Protocol (MCP), started by Anthropic and now an open standard under the Linux Foundation, and adjacent standards are becoming the interconnect between AI models and enterprise data and tools. The strategic implication: data plumbing and integration matter more than model choice.

Implication: when you evaluate AI vendors and platforms, ask about their MCP support and similar interop standards. The cost of switching models drops substantially when the integration layer is standardised.

Looking Ahead: AI Trends to Watch

| 5. Multimodal robotics and physical AI

Figure, 1X, Apptronik, and others moved humanoid robots from demos to limited deployment in 2025/2026. Industrial early-adopters are experimenting in warehouse, manufacturing, and logistics contexts. Home robots are on pre-order but not yet in everyday use.

Implication: for industrial SMEs, this is not yet a buying decision but a watching brief for the next two years. For other sectors, mostly read and ignore for now.

Looking Ahead: AI Trends to Watch

| Future-proofing strategies

Whatever specific trends play out, four practices help you stay positioned:

| Cultivate continuous AI learning

Make AI learning ongoing. Encourage teams to stay informed about new tools, experiment with relevant applications, and embrace change. This is the People track running indefinitely.

| Invest in AI fluency training across the workforce

Don't focus only on technical skills. Equip everyone with AI concepts, capabilities, and ethical considerations. Let staff identify opportunities, work effectively with AI, and build AI literacy organisation-wide.

| Build strategic partnerships with AI providers and peers

Don't go it alone. Partnerships with vendors, specialists, and research institutions provide expertise, solutions, and collaboration.

Looking Ahead: AI Trends to Watch

| Prioritise adaptability and agility

Your AI strategy is a living document, not a static plan. Build flexibility into your roadmap. Embrace iteration, testing, and the willingness to pivot.

The Four Ps approach is built for this: quarterly cadence, parallel tracks, and a Policy track that matures alongside the others. The model itself absorbs change.

| The future of AI opportunity

The future of AI opportunity is bright and arriving fast. Understand emerging trends, embrace learning, and build a proactive strategy so your business acts on AI instead of reacting to it.

The next section covers the practical strategy: how to translate this into a concrete plan for your organisation.

07

Your Strategy: Where to Start and How to Sequence



Your Strategy: Where to Start and How to Sequence

You understand the four pillars and emerging trends. The question now: how do you translate this into concrete strategy?

This section gives you a practical, step-by-step framework using the Four Ps spine (People, Process, Position, Policy) plus opportunity-specific tools: a Maturity Model for self-assessment, a Brainstorming Workshop for discovery, and the First-90-Days operating cadence.

[MATURITY
MODEL]

Five levels, from Awareness through Experimentation, Adoption and Transformation to Innovation Leader. Most SMEs today are at Level 2 or early Level 3.

Where are you with AI?

The HumanSpark AI Maturity Model assesses your current capability and charts a path. Use as a self-diagnostic, not a target list.

LEVEL	NAME	DESCRIPTION
1	Awareness	Recognise AI's potential, no implementation yet
2	Experimentation	Pilot projects and proofs of concept underway
3	Adoption	AI standardised across multiple departments
4	Transformation	AI drives strategy and enables transformation
5	Innovation Leader	Industry standard-setting in AI innovation

Most SMEs today are at Level 2 or early Level 3. The goal: compound through the levels each quarterly cycle of the Four Ps.

Your Strategy: Where to Start and How to Sequence

| Self-assessment checklist

Tick the items you've fully put in place. The level where you have the most unticked boxes is likely your current stage.

MOVING FROM LEVEL 1 (AWARENESS) TO LEVEL 2 (EXPERIMENTATION)

Data & Setup:

- ☐ People can access the data they need in at least one department.
- ☐ Basic technology in place that could support AI.
- ☐ Initial rules set for how data should be handled.

Getting Started:

- ☐ At least one AI test project underway.
- ☐ Clear goals for what your first AI projects should achieve.
- ☐ Some thought given to how you'll measure if AI is worth the investment.

People & Skills:

- ☐ Key team members learned the basics of AI.
- ☐ Outside AI expertise consulted.
- ☐ IT team understands what AI needs to work.

Your Strategy: Where to Start and How to Sequence

MOVING FROM LEVEL 2 (EXPERIMENTATION) TO LEVEL 3 (ADOPTION)

Data & Setup:

- ☐ Data well-organised and accessible across departments.
- ☐ Dedicated resources for AI development.
- ☐ Standards in place to ensure data quality.

Making Progress:

- ☐ Three or more AI test projects completed and documented.
- ☐ At least two AI applications used regularly in the business.
- ☐ Standard way to evaluate AI projects.

People & Skills:

- ☐ AI Champions in multiple departments.
- ☐ Training created for teams that work with AI.
- ☐ Small internal AI team or reliable external partners.

MOVING FROM LEVEL 3 (ADOPTION) TO LEVEL 4 (TRANSFORMATION)

Strategy & Culture:

- ☐ AI specifically mentioned in business strategy.
- ☐ Leadership team regularly reviews AI projects.

Your Strategy: Where to Start and How to Sequence

- ☐ Same AI tools used across different departments.
- ☐ Regularly measure how AI affects business results.

Customer & Market Impact:

- ☐ Multiple AI applications noticeably improving customer experience.
- ☐ AI features added to existing products or services.
- ☐ AI capabilities highlighted in marketing.

Rules & Oversight:

- ☐ Formal policy for using AI ethically.
- ☐ Regular checks for AI security risks.

MOVING FROM LEVEL 4 (TRANSFORMATION) TO LEVEL 5 (INNOVATION LEADER)

Strategy & Culture:

- ☐ AI driving business strategy as well as supporting it.
- ☐ Leadership actively champions AI initiatives.
- ☐ Data-driven decision-making standard practice throughout.
- ☐ AI embedded in organisational culture.

Your Strategy: Where to Start and How to Sequence

Innovation & Market Position:

- ☐ Created your own unique AI solutions.
- ☐ Launched new offerings where AI is a key component.
- ☐ Participate in AI research or standards development.
- ☐ AI capabilities created significant competitive advantage.

Broader Impact:

- ☐ Share AI knowledge with industry partners.
- ☐ Contribute to the broader AI community.
- ☐ Established programme to develop AI talent.



How to use this checklist: Complete unticked items in your current level to move to the next. Don't skip levels; solid foundations compound.

The AI Opportunity Brainstorming Workshop

Start with a focused brainstorming workshop. Bring together leaders from operations, marketing, sales, customer service, IT, finance, HR, and senior management to identify AI opportunities for your business.

Your Strategy: Where to Start and How to Sequence

| Actionable guidance

- Encourage "blue-sky thinking" but keep focus on real problems and AI solutions.
- Include a sceptic deliberately. They catch what enthusiasts miss.
- Capture everything; prioritise later.

| Structured agenda

Total time: 2 hours 10 minutes.

1

AI overview (15 min).

What current AI does well and where it fails.

2

Pillar brainstorm (60 min).

Find opportunities in each **Four Pillar**: Productivity, Capabilities, Decision-Making, Accelerated Learning. 15 min per pillar forces prioritisation.

3

Friday Frustration (15 min).

What task drains your Friday afternoon? The richest source of Process pilot candidates.

4

Score and shortlist (30 min).

Apply RATES (Repetitive, Annoying, Time-consuming, Error-prone, Scalable). Pick three to develop further.

5

Action items (10 min).

Who owns what, by when.

Your Strategy: Where to Start and How to Sequence

| The First 90 Days

The First-90-Days pattern from the AI Adoption Roadmap applies cleanly to opportunity work too:

| Days 1-30: Lay the runway

- Run the brainstorming workshop.
- Score candidates with RATES.
- Draft a one-page Policy v0.1 (detailed in the Risk paper).
- Deploy AI tools to the workforce.
- Identify Champions.

| Days 31-60: Run your first opportunity pilot

- Pick your strongest Green Zone candidate (low risk, internal).
- Pilot group of five to eight people, including a sceptic.
- Set a fixed kill-date.
- Measure verification tax (checking vs. doing manually).
- Start one Position experiment in parallel: one person on a recurring strategic question with AI assistance.

Your Strategy: Where to Start and How to Sequence

| Days 61-90: Decision point

- Pilot reaches kill-date: scale or archive. No "continue piloting."
- Position experiment produces its first useful output.
- Policy matures based on what came up.
- Start the next opportunity pilot.

| Then repeat quarterly

By the end of year one you'll have run three or four opportunity pilots, have daily AI use in the roles where it fits the work and weekly use everywhere else, your first Position experiment in motion, and a Policy that has matured from a one-pager into something proper.

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Next Steps



NEXT STEPS

Next Steps

| Take the next step

You've now seen the four pillars, data primer, trends, and strategy framework. Putting it into practice turns this into a result. A few concrete next moves.

| Within your organisation this week

- **Run the Friday Frustration question** at your next leadership meeting (five minutes). You'll spot two Process opportunities.
- **Take the 30-minute data inventory** from the Data Primer. Note what data you have, where it lives, and who owns it.
- **Pick one strategic question** your leadership faces quarterly. Frame it as a structured prompt to a frontier model with full context. Compare what the model produces to what your team does. This is your first Position experiment.

| Within the next 30 days

- **Run an AI Brainstorming Workshop** with stakeholders (use the Strategy section agenda).
- **Score your top three candidates with RATES.**

Next Steps

- **Pick the strongest Green Zone opportunity** as your first pilot.
- **Deploy AI tools to your whole workforce.**
- **Draft a one-page Policy v0.1** (detailed in the Risk paper).
- **Identify two or three Champions.**

| Build knowledge

- Connect with local tech communities and AI practitioner groups. Peer learning beats vendor pitches.
- Follow practitioners on LinkedIn who share implementation experience. Find me at [@AlastairMcDermott](#) for guidance and curated insights.
- Read the AI Adoption Roadmap if you haven't - it's the practical playbook this paper assumes.

| Why work with HumanSpark?

I'm Alastair McDermott, author of this whitepaper and founder of HumanSpark. My focus is Human-First AI: using deep technology expertise and practical business strategy to make AI adoption work for the people doing the work, not just for the spreadsheet.

My background runs from mainframe assembler programming through to modern AI systems - twenty years of business advisory work as a consultant, trainer, and author of several books in the Human-First AI Series.

Next Steps

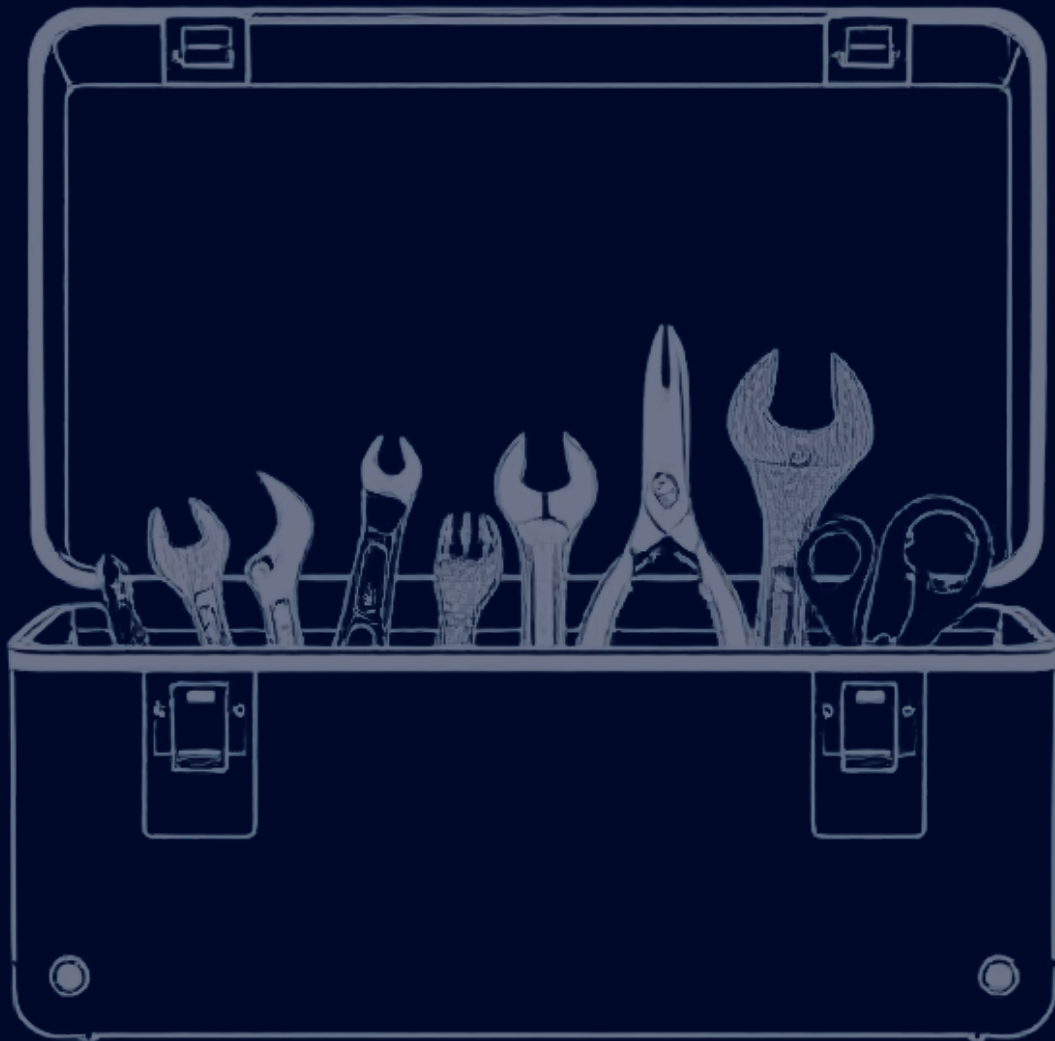
What you can expect from working with HumanSpark:

- Real-world implementation experience across multiple sectors.
- A focus on rapid, demonstrable returns rather than transformation theatre.
- Plain English communication that builds confident, capable teams.
- A track record of AI projects that ship and stay shipped.

If you're ready, start with a Focus Call at **cal.humanspark.ai/alastair/focus-call**. If not, use the toolkit to get there.

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Resources



Resources

| Your Complete AI Toolkit

This is part of a three-resource set covering AI adoption today: strategy, value, and safety.

You're reading **Opportunity and AI Adoption**, which answers:



"Where does AI actually create value, and how do I capture it?"

For the complete picture, read:

- **AI Adoption Roadmap** - the practical playbook. The Four Ps spine (People, Process, Position, Policy) and First-90-Days pattern.
- **Risk and AI Adoption** - safety, governance, compliance. EU AI Act, risk taxonomy, operational practices that keep Policy honest.

Download all three at
humanspark.ai/toolkit.

All three share the Four Ps spine with complementary perspectives:

- **People** - workforce capability

Resources

- **Process** - systematic automation (this paper on Pillar 1 Productivity)
- **Position** - new capabilities and advantage (this paper, Pillars 2-4)
- **Policy** - governance thread

Companion templates and guides

- **RATES Scoring Worksheet** - score your candidates with the five-factor framework. humanspark.ai/rates
- **UVP Case Study** - a real example of using AI to create a Unique Value Proposition: prompts, voice-dictation, platform variations. humanspark.ai/case-study-create-uvp-with-ai
- **SparkOS Guide** - the seven-component custom-assistant system for building AI that knows your business. humanspark.ai/sparkos
- **Voice Profile Template** - the Core Voice Profile framework for teaching AI to write in your authentic voice. humanspark.ai/voice-profile
- **AI Tools Comparison** - a platform comparison covering ChatGPT, Claude, Microsoft Copilot, and Gemini. humanspark.ai/tools

Resources

| Talk to me directly

If you'd like to work through where Opportunity sits for your business, book a 25-minute Focus Call.

cal.humanspark.ai/alastair/focus-call