

AI Change Management:

The Inverted Transformation Imperative for the C-Suite

How to lead AI change when you can't keep up with it yourself



For the first time in business history,

we are seeing something completely new: regular employees are using new AI technology faster than the companies they work for. This is not just another technology that needs a quick fix. Instead, it completely changes how companies adopt new technology. In the past, new technology moved from top leaders down to workers. Now, it moves from everyday workers up to leadership. The center of change has shifted from the boardroom to employee chat channels and personal accounts.

“Individuals—human beings both in and outside of business—are adopting AI quicker than can be embraced at the enterprise level. As leaders, we’ve realized we’ve got a vulnerability here.”

Toby Boudreaux
Global Vice President of Data
Engineering at Publicis Sapient

The “Shadow AI” phenomenon

The evidence of this “Shadow AI” phenomenon is both overwhelming and vaguely terrifying. A staggering 73.8 percent of workplace ChatGPT accounts belong not to the corporate domain but to personal email addresses circulating beneath official channels. Between March 2023 and March 2024, the corporate data being fed into these unsanctioned AI tools exploded by 485 percent, a figure that would trigger a heart event in any self-respecting CISO.

AI technology is ahead of AI culture

Meanwhile, the C-suite finds itself in the unfamiliar position of playing catch-up, like parents discovering their teenagers have been throwing parties while they were away at management retreats. Leadership is dutifully developing strategies, allocating budgets and commissioning consultants to develop upskilling roadmaps, yet Cisco’s AI Readiness Index reveals an organizational culture unprepared for the revolution already occurring.

Only 9 percent of companies report being fully prepared culturally for AI integration—a figure that inspires approximately the same confidence as a paper umbrella in a hurricane.



AI change management is... on the decline?

The statistics on AI change management are bleak: while 76 percent of organizations claim to have some form of AI change management plan (down from 79 percent last year), a mere 28 percent would describe their plan as comprehensive. The remainder exist in various states of doneness—62 percent “in progress” and 10 percent in “draft form,” which one suspects might translate to “someone mentioned it in a meeting once.”

A ProSci Survey helpfully reminds us that only 1 in 8 projects with “poor change management programs” met or exceeded goals, a correlation that should surprise exactly no one.

So how does the C-suite lead change management when adoption speeds have already left organizational readiness in the dust?

In this strange new world, change cannot simply flow from the top like holy wisdom. Instead, we need bi-directional movement: leadership providing the guardrails, north star priorities and compliance frameworks, while simultaneously embracing (or at least acknowledging) the employee-driven knowledge and innovation already transforming workflows at the bottom.

What follows are insights from seven Publicis Sapient consulting veterans, who’s collective 150+ years of experience grants them the wisdom to navigate this particular corporate paradox.

They explain how **each member of the C-suite is uniquely positioned to drive AI change management—or at minimum, prevent it from driving them into existential crisis.**

Key takeaways



A Chief Executive Officer (CEO) who's still relying on secondhand decks to grasp AI strategy is already behind—the only way to lead is to actually use the tools.

For Chief Operations Officers (COOs), the priority isn't crafting the perfect rollout plan—it's setting a focused direction so teams can experiment and learn quickly.

Chief Information Officers (CIOs) are driving change in the most fragile part of the org, where legacy systems, data silos, and compliance worries collide—and they still have to deliver early wins before anyone else can move.

Chief Technical Officers (CTOs) need to stop measuring productivity by lines of code. AI is changing how dev teams work—and what they're even for.

A Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) may have unified customer data, but until they align the teams behind it, AI will only reinforce the same old fragmentation.

For Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) the math is changing fast—when AI can deliver outcomes in seconds, traditional billing models stop making sense.

For Chief Experience Officers (CXOs), AI is already shaping every customer touchpoint, but unless you actively connect the dots across teams and channels, the experience will still feel completely disconnected.

And the Chief Digital Officer (CDO)? Your job isn't to evangelize AI—it's to make it usable, safe and scalable for teams who don't have time to wait.



The CFO: cautious commercial innovator

As CFO, your relationship with AI differs fundamentally from your C-suite colleagues. While others rush to embrace the newest AI tools, you find yourself playing a more cautious role—not because you resist innovation, but because the financial data under your care demands thorough protection.

This tension—between embracing transformative technology and protecting sensitive financial information—creates a unique set of challenges that other executives simply don't face.

“The sensitivity of the data we touch when we think about contracts or financial dashboards means that we cannot just use any AI because, by definition, AI stores what they are sent with a view to learn and evolve, and could use the data we share to answer a request from any other random user of the AI engine.”



Eric Celerier

CFO Commercial Success at Publicis Sapient



Change management imperative 1:

Reinvent your commercial DNA

The predictability of hourly billing—that fundamental economic equation where time equals money—is rapidly becoming as outdated as paper ledgers. As Celerier notes, “In the past, we were mostly selling to our clients time and materials... The arrival of the AI tools are changing that world. The usage of AI tools delivers a lot of added value for our clients. The classic financial models have to evolve accordingly. ”

This shift demands creative financial thinking: outcome-based models. As an example, where clients would pay for results rather than hours, subscription access to AI-powered capabilities, or hybrid approaches that combine traditional services with AI enhancements at varying price points based on customization levels and human involvement. The question isn't whether to change your pricing models, but how quickly you can evolve them before market forces make the decision for you.

Change management Imperative 2:

Transform finance teams into AI translators

The finance professional who can't explain how AI creates value is like an accountant who can't explain a balance sheet—technically skilled but strategically limited.

This educational journey requires specialized AI literacy programs for finance teams focused not on technical implementation but on business implications—how these tools affect financial models, risk profiles and regulatory requirements. Creating simulations that demonstrate how AI capabilities translate into customer value enables more accurate pricing and forecasting, turning finance from cost controllers into value interpreters.

"There's a need to understand... what AI tools do we have? What do they do? How do they work? What is our competitive advantage in this field of expertise? To provide adequate support, we need to understand better what we are selling. If you don't understand the nature and the value of the services your company delivers to its clients, you just cannot define a fair and accurate pricing model."

Eric Celerier,
CFO Commercial Success at Publicis Sapient

Change management imperative 3:

Master the mathematical tension

The most delicate financial equation is the following: On the one hand, we are aggressively trying to reap the cost and time savings benefits from AI and transfer those to our clients. But at the same time, we need to fund AI development inside the organization.

Solving this equation requires sophisticated cost-accounting systems that separate AI development investments from client-billable work. Leverage financial models that measure both internal gains and client value creation, as well as reinvestment frameworks that direct some AI-driven profits back into capability development. This ultimately creates a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement rather than a one-and-done efficiency gain.

Change management imperative 4:

Create new commercial frameworks

The shift from services to products demands entirely new commercial structures.

This product mindset requires different commercial models based on usage or capability access, metering systems that track AI utilization for consumption-based pricing and contract templates that address previously unnecessary considerations like data rights, model improvements and ongoing support arrangements. The finance team that can't create these frameworks rapidly will find themselves unable to capitalize on their organization's AI investments.

Bottom Line: The greatest financial challenge isn't calculating AI's return on investment but redesigning your entire financial governance system to protect sensitive data while simultaneously enabling the very AI experiments that could transform your business model.


“We are now starting to have cases when we are selling our AI tools and even sometimes embedding our AI tools into the clients’ ecosystems, allowing the clients to use them. This requires a brand-new financial framework.”



Eric Celerier

CFO Commercial Success at Publicis Sapient

The corporate revolution from below: final thoughts

A person in silhouette stands at the end of a dark, curved tunnel. At the far end of the tunnel is a large, bright blue circular opening, resembling a portal or a sun. The tunnel's walls are composed of many thin, curved lines that create a sense of depth and perspective.

The executive suite now faces a profound choice: attempt to control a revolution already in progress or become its most thoughtful enablers, creating frameworks that channel its energy rather than contain it.

The C-suite's value lies both in a decent understanding of AI capabilities (which will continuously evolve beyond any static comprehension) as well as in creating the organizational conditions where both humans and machines can continuously learn together.

What connects all successful AI transformations is humility—the recognition that no leader, regardless of title, fully comprehends the end state toward which we're collectively evolving. The organizations that thrive won't be those with the most advanced AI strategies on paper, but those that have reconstructed themselves, in difficult ways, to adapt continuously as AI capabilities expand in directions we cannot yet imagine.

The question isn't whether your organization will transform—it's whether that transformation will happen coherently, with intentional guidance from the c-suite, or haphazardly through a thousand unconnected adaptations.

The AI revolution won't wait for your carefully orchestrated change management plan. It's already happening, with or without your permission.