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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

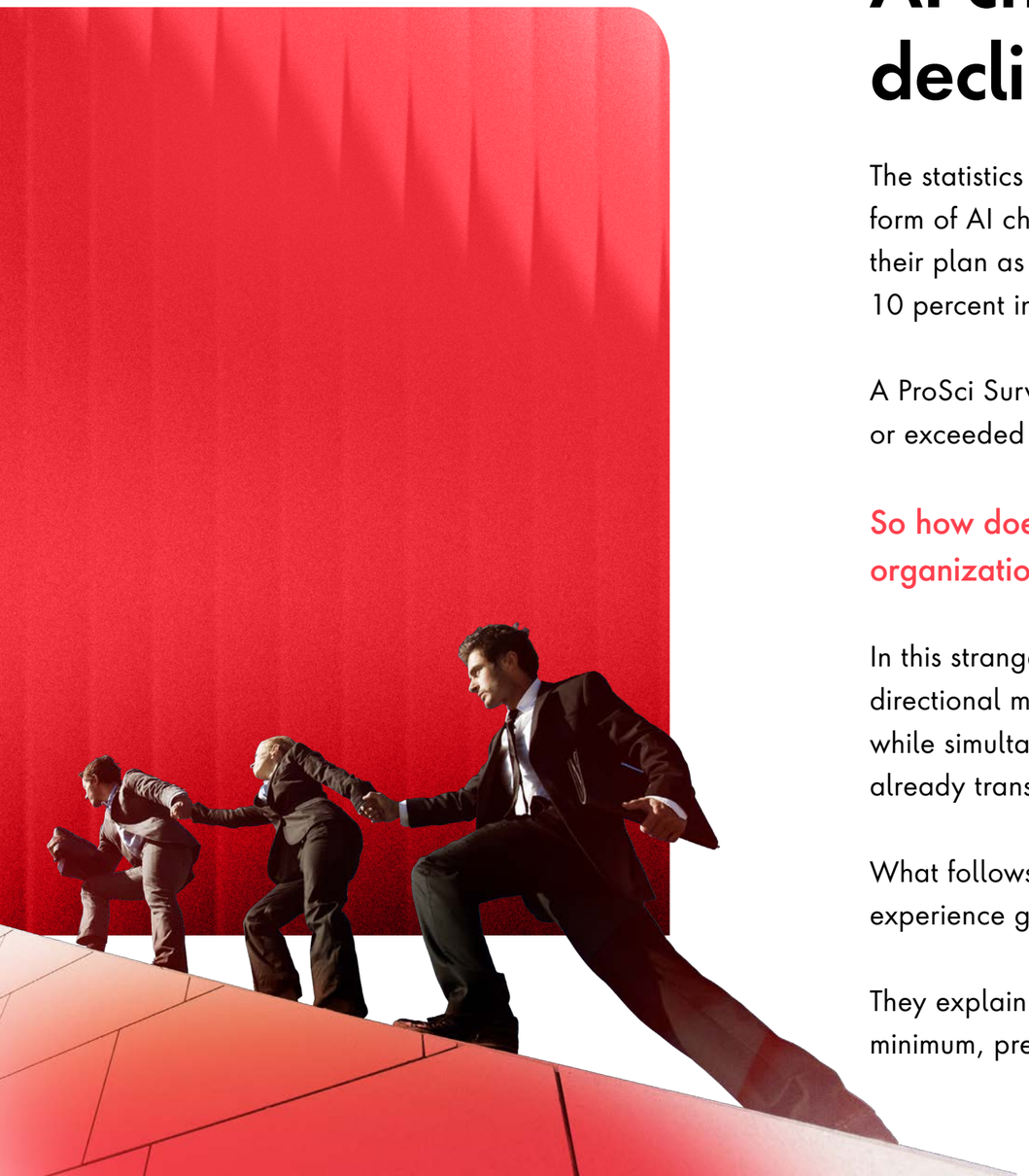
The “Shadow AI” phenomenon

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.

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.

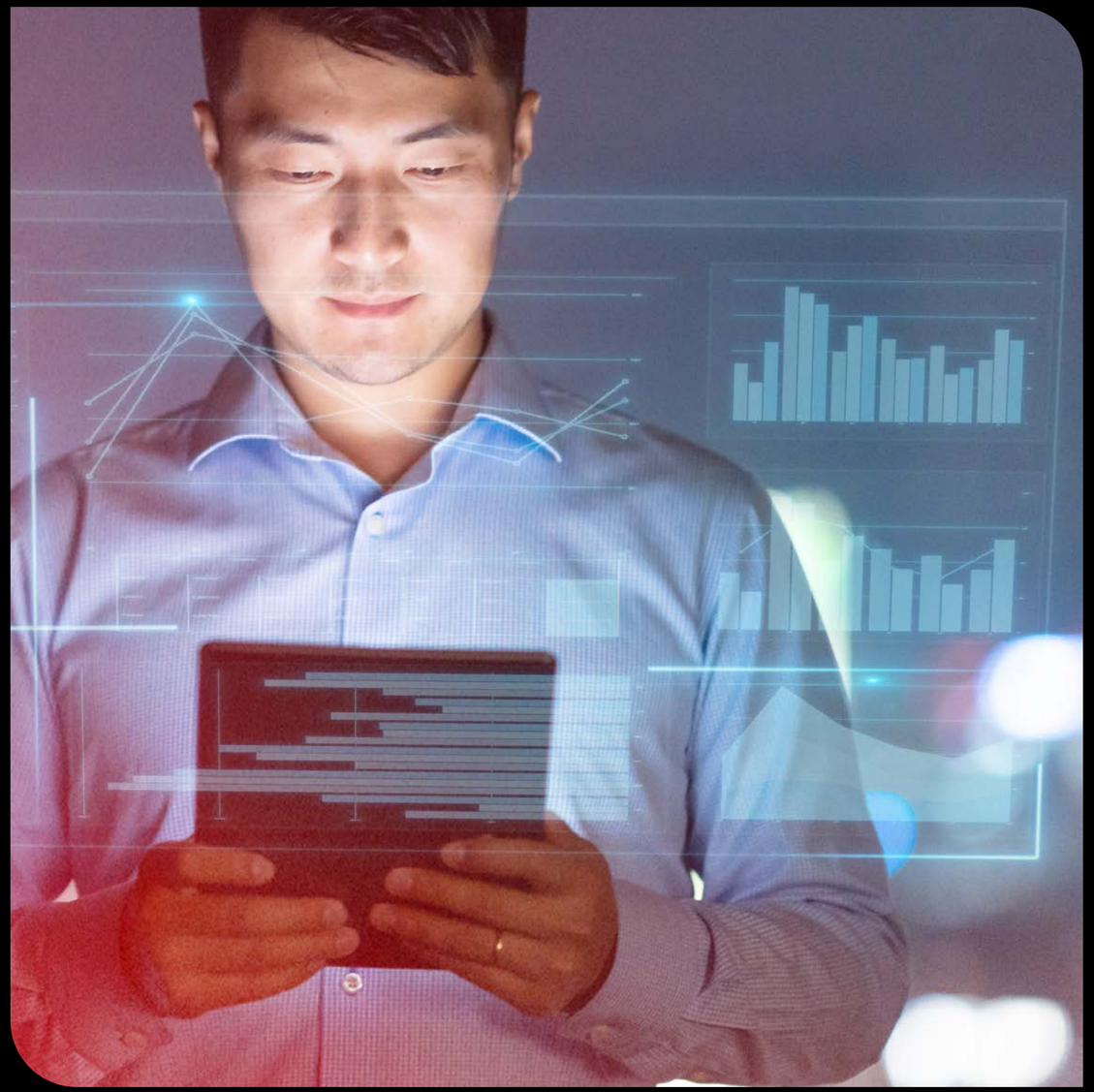
Chief Technical Officers (CTOs) need to stop measuring productivity by lines of code. AI is changing how dev teams work–and what they're even for.

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 CIO: digital archaeologist

When you look at your organization's data systems, it's like exploring layers of history. You'll find old mainframe computers running COBOL, middle-aged client-server systems and newer cloud systems. Each layer represents a different time period in your company's technology history. These different layers contain both valuable information and difficult challenges.

While you've been building official security systems and rules, your employees may have started their own unofficial AI revolution. Your security team might be using free AI tools to detect threats. Your help desk might solve problems using AI assistants that aren't officially approved. This isn't just people bringing their own devices to work—it's people bringing their own AI. This creates much bigger risks than just connecting personal phones to the company network.

“Many organizations face a digital archaeology challenge, with valuable data fragmented across generations of systems, from mainframes to cloud platforms.”

Sheldon Montiero

EVP and Chief Product Officer at Publicis Sapient

Change management imperative 1:

Make governance enable, not just control

Traditional data governance with strict rules and perfect data requirements doesn't work well in the AI era. Smart CIOs know that waiting for "perfect data" before starting with AI is like refusing to build a house until there's no dust at the construction site.

Instead of creating rules that mainly restrict, build frameworks that help people use data properly. Create different quality levels for different types of data with clear guidelines, use automated systems to find problems early and form teams where risk managers and innovators work together instead of against each other.

Change management imperative 2:

Use AI to bridge old and new systems

When a retail company put AI interfaces on top of their old inventory systems, they weren't just fixing old technology. They were extending the life of their existing systems while preparing for future replacements. AI can serve both as a temporary solution and as the final goal.

The most valuable AI projects aren't always the exciting ones that get media attention. Often, they're the ones that make old systems work better when they can't be replaced immediately. Find where data moves between old and new systems, then use AI to help these different systems communicate better.

Change management imperative 3:

Change IT teams from fixers to AI trainers

The help desk worker who used to reset passwords now designs conversations for AI chatbots that handle these tasks automatically. This isn't just adding technology to existing jobs—it's transforming roles. Technical teams move from doing repetitive tasks to recognizing patterns and handling special cases.

This change requires looking at current service tasks not just for efficiency but for automation possibilities. Identify which patterns AI can handle reliably and retrain technical teams to supervise rather than do the work directly. This creates both faster solutions and more interesting human work focused on complex judgments.

Change management imperative 4:

Use AI to bridge old and new systems

"Legacy IT infrastructure is so massive and so embedded in large organizations over decades... you cannot just uproot it and throw it away. This has huge change management ramifications because you're essentially changing everything about how the organization functions under the hood." -Bilal Zaidi, Senior Director at Publicis Sapient

One global manufacturing company successfully created a balanced AI model. They combined central platforms for company-wide capabilities with team-specific resources. They discovered that innovation works best not with complete freedom or strict control, but with a balance between these extremes.

This balanced approach means creating shared platforms for common needs (like document processing or conversational interfaces), setting up safe testing environments with appropriate rules for team-specific needs and maintaining just enough consistency to enable teamwork without stopping experimentation.

Change management imperative 5:

Change from controller to orchestrator

The biggest change for CIOs may be in their mindset—moving from controlling infrastructure to orchestrating experiences across many different AI capabilities. Instead of approving every tool, you establish safe boundaries within which teams can experiment. Instead of managing each deployment, you monitor usage patterns to identify potential risks or opportunities.

This transition means creating self-service AI resource catalogs with easy-to-use portals, simplifying approval processes to remove unnecessary barriers and implementing monitoring systems that can detect risks without creating restrictions that push innovation underground.

Bottom line: Your biggest job isn't just adding AI to your current systems but rebuilding your technology to support both the AI tools you approve and the AI tools your employees are already using without permission.

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.