Turning AI intent into value in APAC

Rewiring support functions to be AI-first

September 2026

AI Generated image

BCG

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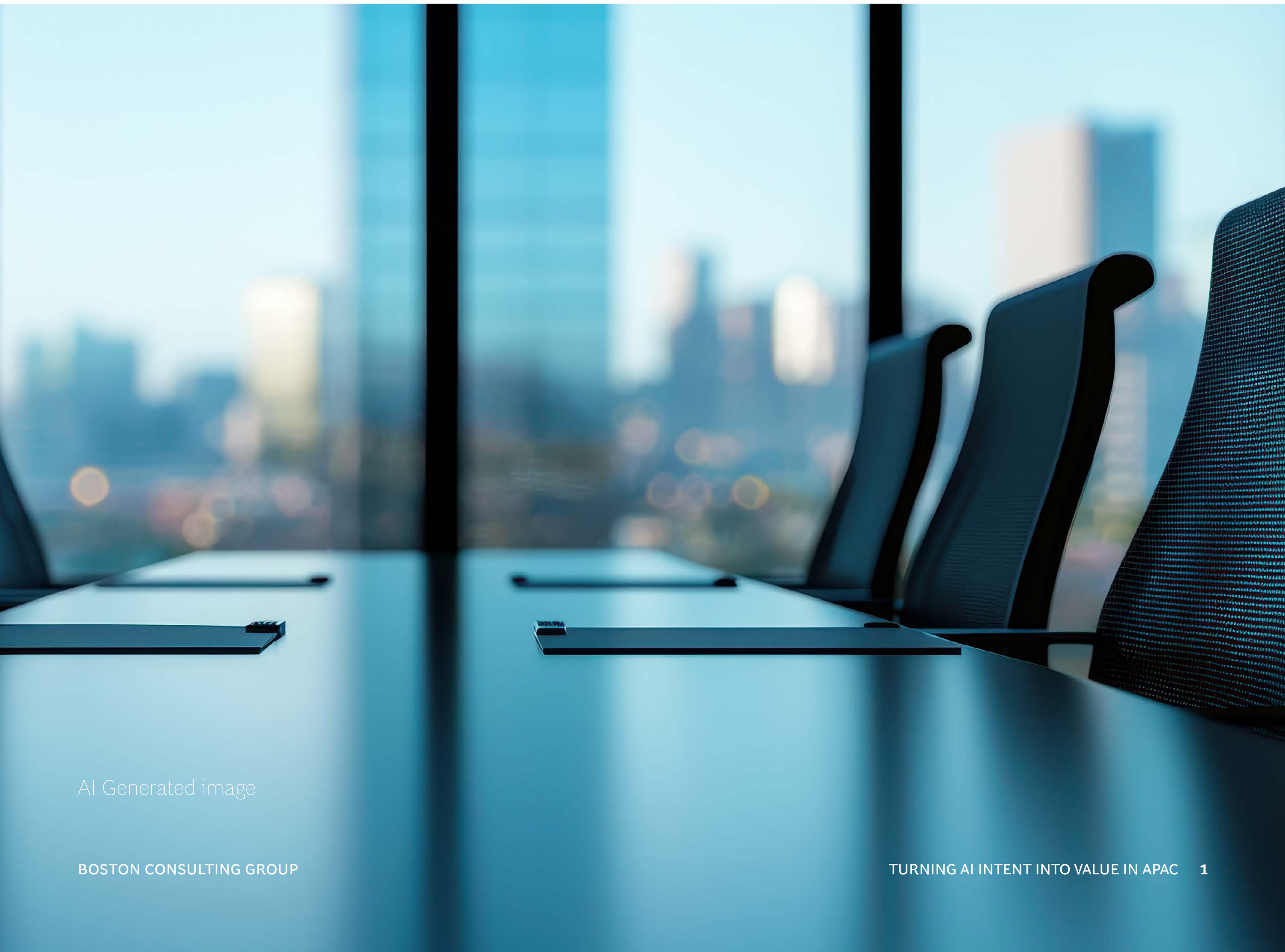
AI has become a defining priority for leadership teams across APAC. It is now firmly embedded in CEO agendas, board discussions and the external narrative of listed companies.

However, while most organisations have experimented with pilots and proofs of concept, only about one in four are seeing significant value. For many, AI is promising but has had limited measurable impact.

Support functions provide one of the most reliable pathways to close the gap between intent and value. A meaningful share of AI-driven value sits in functions such as finance, HR, technology, legal and risk, and customer service, where high-volume workflows and shared service models can make scaling faster and lower risk than core business transformations. But capturing this value requires organisations to redesign these functions as AI-first – structuring teams and processes around AI tools, rather than applying AI to existing structures.

We look at how leading APAC organisations are transforming their support functions to build durable advantage, including structurally lower cost to serve, faster execution, stronger control environments, and higher service quality.



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AI is taking over the leadership agenda in APAC, but outcomes are still lagging

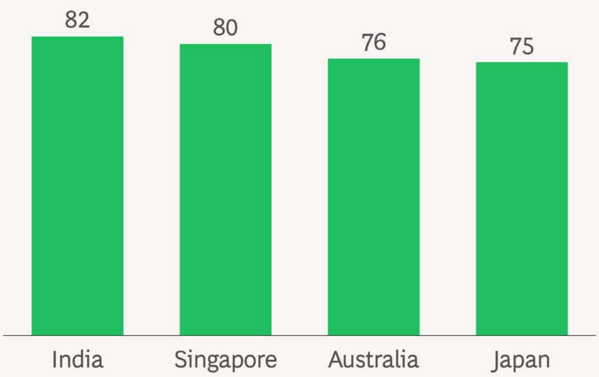
Across APAC, AI has become a standing leadership topic. In 2025, roughly three out of four executives ranked AI among their top three strategic priorities. At the board level, 'digital transformation and AI' now sits at the top of the agenda for many directors in 2026. **(See Exhibit 1)**.

EXHIBIT 1

AI is now a board and CEO agenda item across APAC

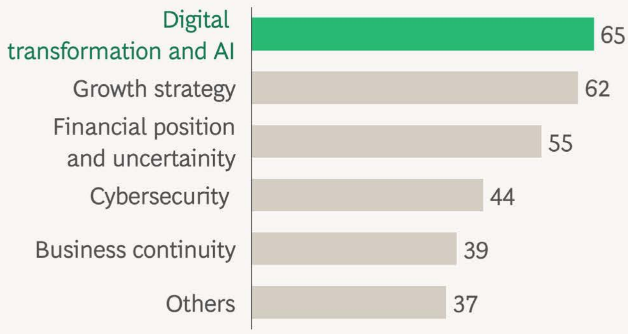
THREE OUT OF FOUR APAC EXECUTIVES RANKED AI IN THEIR TOP THREE STRATEGIC PRIORITIES IN 2025

% of executives ranking AI as a top 3 strategic priority[1]



AI HAS MOVED FROM AN INNOVATION TOPIC TO A STANDING BOARD ITEM IN APAC

% of respondents choosing the top board agenda item for 2026 (multiple responses allowed)[2]



The question is no longer ‘Should we?’ ; it is ‘How do we deliver measurable value at scale?’

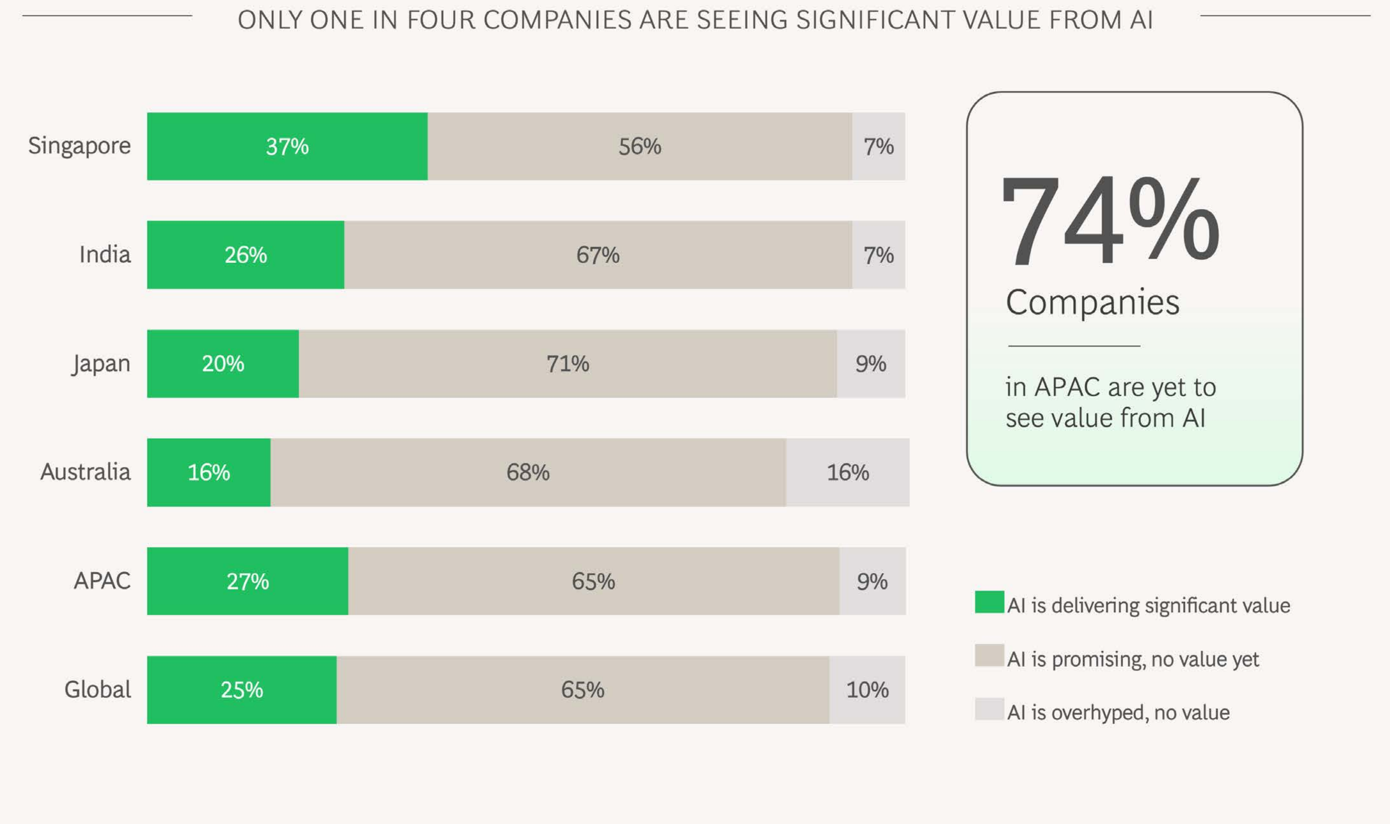
1. Source: BCG AI Radar 2025 (n=1803), India (n=100), Singapore (n=101), Japan (n=82), Australia (n=46)
2. Source: Diligent Institute 2026 Governance Outlook APAC Report survey of board directors (n=200) of companies headquartered across Australia (61%) and Asia (26%)

This shift is also visible in how companies speak to markets. Mentions of AI in earnings calls have increased sharply over recent years, and annual reports now reference AI at a level that would have been unusual even a few cycles ago. AI has moved from a specialist theme to a default narrative.

Markets are increasingly rewarding outcomes. AI messaging and investment are no longer enough. What differentiates leading organisations is their ability to convert investment into repeatable business impact – and this is where many organisations are falling short. BCG's data shows only one in four companies report significant value from AI, with the majority describing AI as promising but not yet delivering. While there are variations by country, this pattern is consistent across markets. (**See Exhibit 2**).

EXHIBIT 2

While AI is becoming mainstream, most organisations haven't converted it into measurable value yet



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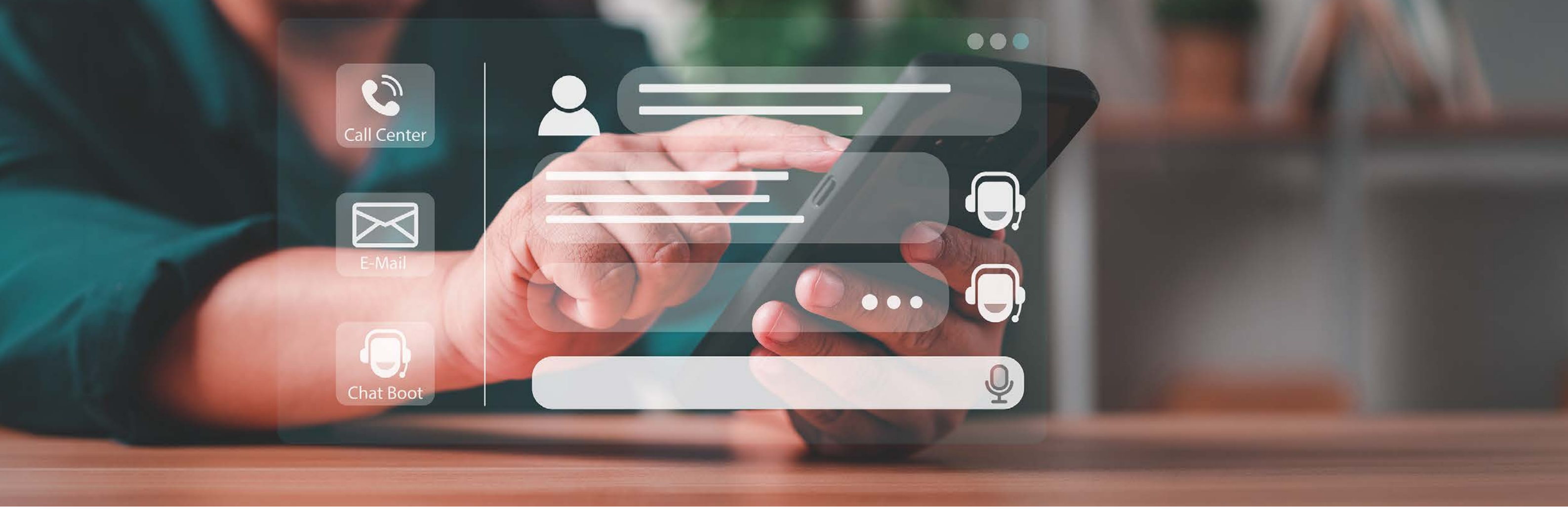


Support functions are a pragmatic route to scaled AI impact

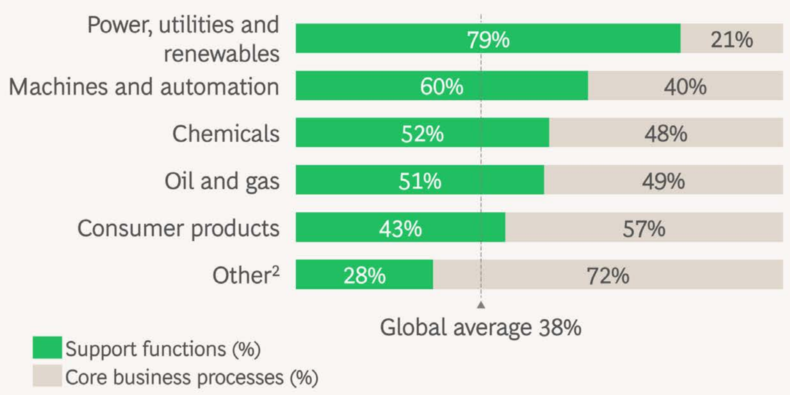
Support functions are often the most reliable place to start scaling the impact of AI. BCG's research indicates that around 40% of AI-driven business value can sit in support functions. Support functions tend to comprise high-volume and repeatable work, with clearer rules and more consistent data patterns than many frontline or product workflows. Many use cases are also reusable across industries, which accelerates both solution design and adoption. Shared services models, where present, create a natural scaling engine by standardising delivery, concentrating expertise and making change easier to roll out across geographies and business units. **(See Exhibit 3)**.

EXHIBIT 3

Given the value gap, executives need a reliable playbook for their AI journey

BCG'S RESEARCH SHOWS THAT ~40% OF BUSINESS VALUE FROM AI LIES IN SUPPORT FUNCTIONS

Where companies are seeing business value[1]



SUPPORT FUNCTIONS MIGHT OFFER THE LOWEST RISK PATH TO UNLOCK VALUE

01 Repeatable nature of work leads to productivity and quality gains
Support functions are rich in high-volume, repeatable workflows that suit AI-driven augmentation and automation

02 Solutions are reusable across industries and verticals
Cross-functional workflows have more reusable playbooks and vendor solutions than many industry-specific core processes

03 Shared services can accelerate enterprise-wide adoption
Standardisation and concentrated capacity make deployment, change and scaling materially easier

1. BCG Build for the future study 2024
2. Simple average of: Medtech (41%), Transport and logistics (39%), Automotive (38%), Retail (37%), Airlines (35%), Banking (32%), Biopharma (30%), Telecommunications (29%), Insurance (23%), Fintech (15%), Media (13%), and Software (6%)
Source: Market Sensing by BCG; Annual reports analysis

In practical terms, support functions combine meaningful value at stake with a lower-risk path to implementation. They offer a way for organisations to build their AI capabilities while delivering results in productivity, service levels, cycle time and control effectiveness.

APAC organisations are starting to produce a growing set of examples where AI is delivering tangible outcomes in support functions.

Leading organisations make four executive choices to rewire support functions for AI impact

To achieve these outcomes, organisations need to rewire their functions around AI, rather than fitting AI into existing structures.

Those capturing value from AI stand out by making **four executive choices.** These choices involve:

1. **Setting a clear ambition**
2. **Sharpening their focus**
3. **Establishing the right operating model**
4. **Carefully sequencing initiatives for impact**

1. Ambition:

Define the value outcome and how it will be measured

Organisations that successfully scale AI begin with a clear top-down ambition, expressed as business outcomes, not technology. They specify what success looks like in hard terms, such as cost reduction, service-level improvement, cycle-time acceleration or risk mitigation. They also define scope, timeline and guardrails, including governance and risk controls, so delivery teams can move quickly without resetting the rules for every use case. **(See Exhibit 4)**.

EXHIBIT 4

Ambitions
Focus
Operating Model
Sequencing

Proving AI works in pilots is not enough to transform a company – a clear top-down ambition is required to deliver value

ALMOST ALL COMPANIES ARE PILOTING AI, BUT VERY FEW ARE ABLE TO EXTRACT FULL SYSTEMATIC VALUE AND EMBED IT WITHIN ORGANISATIONS

98% Of companies **are experimenting with AI** (including pilots and proofs of concept)

26% **Of companies have developed capabilities needed to move beyond** proof of concepts and extract value

4% Of companies have been able to translate pilots and capabilities to **systematically generate substantial value at scale**

THE COMPANIES THAT ARE SYSTEMATICALLY CREATING VALUE HAVE A CLEAR TOP-DOWN AMBITION TO GUIDE THEIR TRANSFORMATIONS

These leaders set their ambition using four key principles:

- **Anchor AI ambition in clear business outcomes**
  (e.g. cost, service levels, cycle time, risk)
- **Clarify the scope of the AI ambition**
  (e.g. functions, services, geographies)
- **Set a clear timeline for the ambition**
  (e.g. 12–18 months for functional reshape, 3–5 years for full operating model evolution)
- **Clarify measurement and guardrails**
  (e.g. controls, readiness, governance)

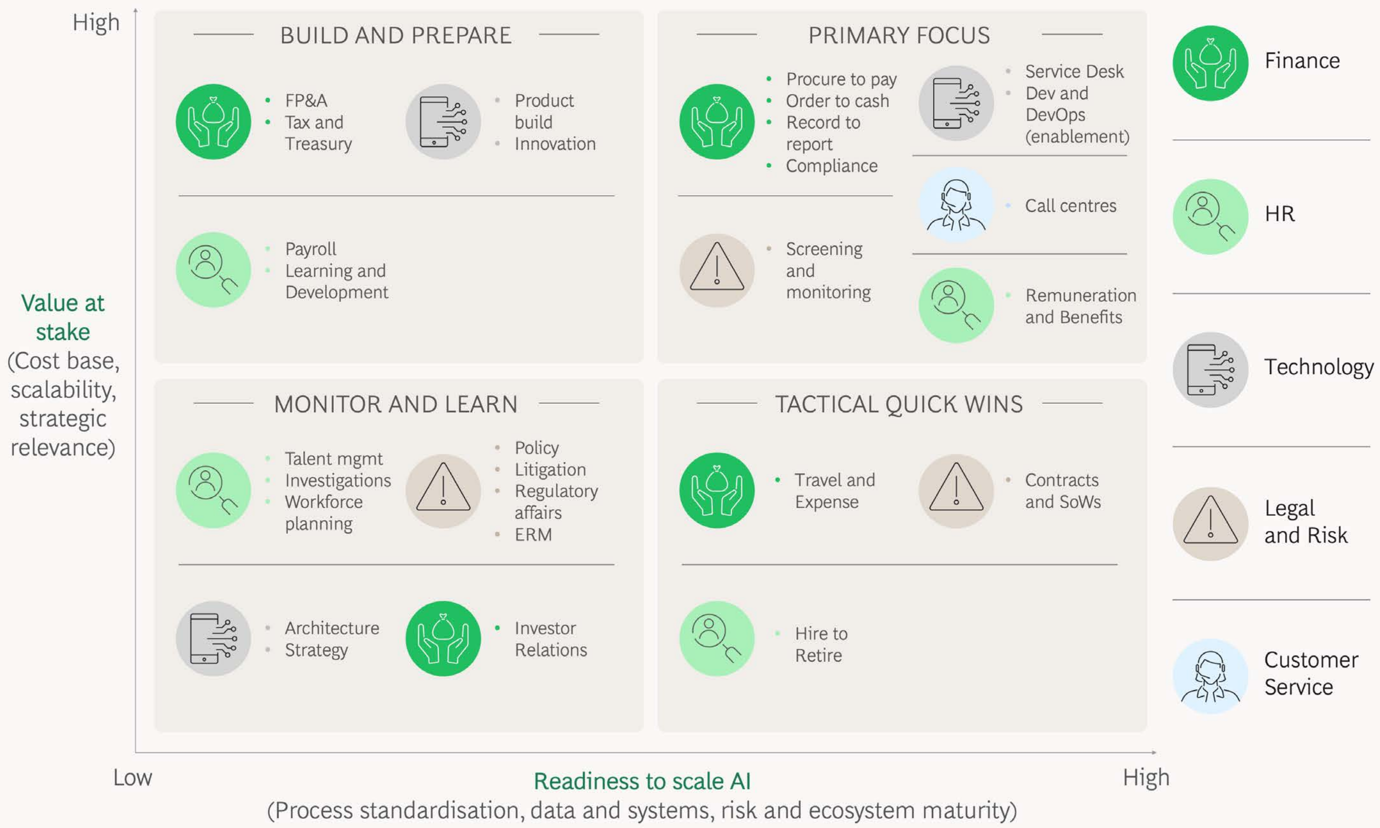
Sources: HBR; 'Where is the Value in AI?', BCG study

2. Focus:
Prioritise functions by value and readiness

Different support functions will vary in the value they can derive from AI and their readiness to scale AI. Rather than spreading their effort across dozens of initiatives, leading organisations concentrate effort on a small number of workflows where value and readiness are both high, then they rewire those workflows end to end. **(See Exhibit 5)**.

EXHIBIT 5

When considering AI adoption and investments, it is crucial to consider that support functions have different degrees of readiness and value at stake



Note: This is an illustrative client example and this will vary from one company to another.

This concentrated effort allows organisations to deeply transform functions and capture clear value. For most, the first wave of transformation includes areas like transactional finance processes (procure-to-pay, order-to-cash, record-to-report), compliance and screening, service desks and call centre operations.

This deep transformation, or end-to-end rewiring, of support functions is key. It means redesigning workflows, embedding AI into decision making, integrating AI into the tools people use, and tracking adoption and impact as part of day-to-day operations. It ensures the work runs differently and value becomes repeatable.

3. Operating model:
Align accountability

Realising value from AI requires coordination across technology, HR, risk and business functions. As a result, operating models must evolve to enable cross-functional ownership and delivery.

Leading organisations are elevating AI leadership closer to the C-suite, often creating dedicated roles to oversee data, digital and AI transformation. Many are adopting hub-and-spoke models, with a central AI hub defining standards and platforms, while business units own delivery and value realisation.

Clear accountability is critical. Without explicit ownership, scaling stalls. Organisations are increasingly distinguishing between ownership of AI platforms and ownership of AI-enabled products and value delivery. They are also integrating people, risk and technology considerations under cross-functional leadership structures. (**See Exhibit 6**).

EXHIBIT 6

Leading organisations are making four operating-model shifts to unlock full value from AI

Ambitions
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Operating Model
Sequencing

ELEVATION OF AI CLOSER TO C-SUITE AND P&L	DRIVE TOWARDS HUB-AND-SPOKE OP MODEL	DUAL OWNERSHIP AND SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES	EXPLICIT SPLIT AND OWNERSHIP OF AI PLATFORM VS PRODUCT
AI is being elevated closer to executive roles (e.g. CAIO, Chief Digital/Data and AI), reflecting a shift in importance of AI enablement	Organisations are moving from fragmented AI efforts to a hub-and-spoke model, with a central hub setting strategy and delivery sitting within the business as capabilities mature	AI is collapsing boundaries across Tech, HR and Risk, so operating models are shifting to integrate these all under singular/fewer cross-functional leaders	Organisations are splitting AI platform engineering and product/value delivery to drive clarity and accelerate scaling
Major AU Bank Created a Chief Data, Digital & AI Officer role, reporting to CEO	**Global Retailer** Established 'analytics factory' to steer AI strategy and ways of working	**AU Grocery Chain** Combined Chief Digital & Tech Officer and a Chief Digital & Analytics Officer/MD eComX, to be accountable for enterprise tech and AI use	**US Retail Giant** Established two exec AI roles: EVP AI Acceleration, Product & Design reporting to the CEO, and EVP AI Platforms reporting to CTO
Global Inv. Bank Appointed a Head of AI, reporting to COO and coordinating with the CTO and broader executive team	**AU Telco Provider** Established a Data & AI CoE under the COO/Tech group to drive AI use across the company	**Enterprise SaaS Firm** CHRO role renamed to Chief People & AI Enablement Officer, centralising AI change management, while AI platforms and products remain under Tech	**US Home Retailer** Operates a platform-versus-solutions model under the SVP for Data, AI & Innovation (platforms deliver reusable capabilities and the CTO drives change enablement)

Source: Expert interviews; BCG analysis

4. Sequencing:

Move from foundational use cases to enterprise scale

Transformation must be sequenced deliberately. When scaling AI, leading organisations often begin by aligning leadership on the AI ambition, establishing a technology and data foundation, and delivering a few quick-win use cases. In the next phase, they fully reshape selected support functions, embed AI into workflows, refresh talent models and build communities of practice.

Over time, proven approaches are extended across additional functions, and productivity gains are reinvested into further AI capability building. The end state is a connected, intelligent organisation in which AI-powered systems amplify human expertise and materially enhance efficiency, quality and support to the core business. **(See Exhibit 7)**.

EXHIBIT 7

Ambitions
Focus
Operating Model
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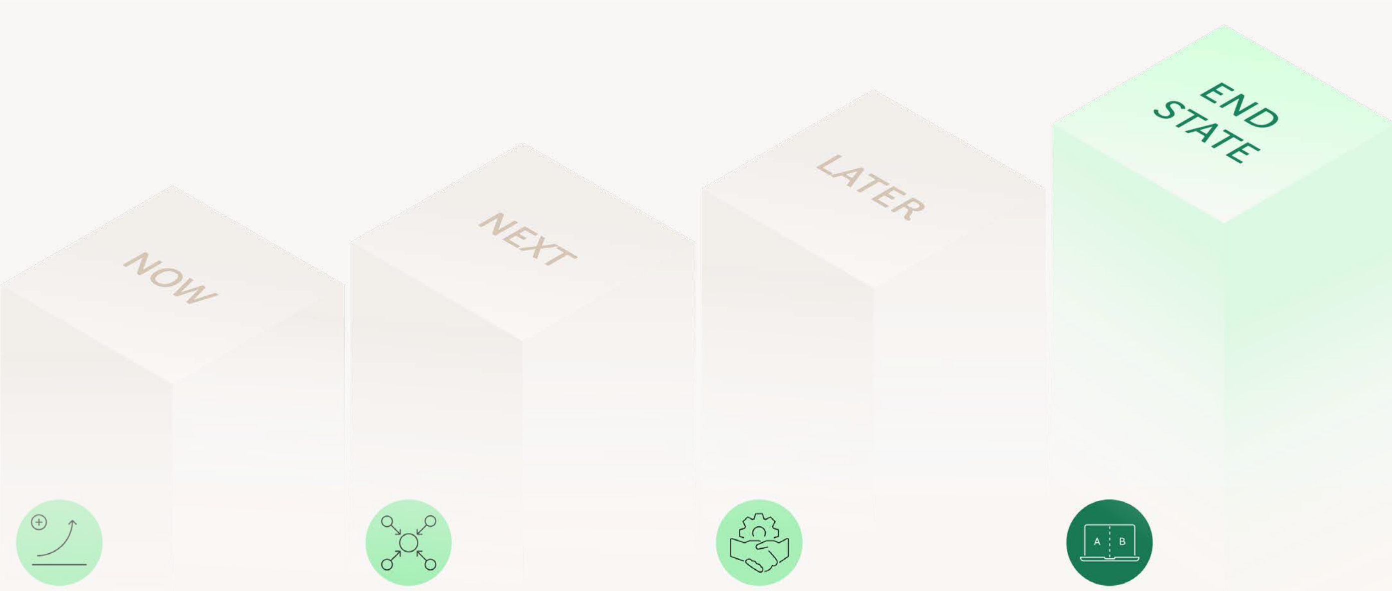
Full transformation depends on deliberately sequencing change, beginning with quick wins and foundational work as springboards for change



BUILD FOUNDATIONS AND QUICK-WIN USE CASES

- Align leaders and teams on AI ambition and priority lighthouse journeys
- Build enterprise literacy and adoption in AI
- Set up the technology and data backbone

RE-SHAPE MULTIPLE FUNCTIONS

- Pick a couple of support functions and fully reshape them including all their workflows
- Refresh talent management, build AI capability and set up communities of practice

SCALE TO A CONNECTED INTELLIGENT ENTERPRISE

- Extend proven AI-first operating models across all support functions
- Begin scaling initial wins into reshaping the core functions
- Recycle productivity gains into further AI investment and capability building

A FULLY AI-POWERED ORGANISATION

- Routine AI adoption and use will become tablestakes for industry leaders as support functions operate on AI-powered systems
- These systems will amplify human expertise, deliver step-change gains in efficiency and service quality, and materially enhance support to the core business

How to start?

Closing the AI value gap requires decisive early action. Leaders can take five steps to kickstart momentum and create the conditions for scaled impact. **(See Exhibit 8)**.

1 Start with a definitive AI ambition.
Define a clear AI ambition anchored in business outcomes and secure both board and senior executive buy-in. Alignment at the top is essential. Visible sponsorship and explicit accountability signal that AI is a strategic transformation priority, not a series of isolated experiments.

2 Set a clear view of the future AI-powered operating model.
Develop an enterprise-wide view of what the organisation should look like in an AI-enabled future – including required capabilities, structures and processes. Clarify how platforms will be built and governed, how value delivery will be owned, and how risk guardrails will support scaling rather than slow it down.

3 Build a culture where AI use becomes second nature.
Sustained value depends on behaviour. Leaders must model AI adoption themselves, teams should openly share wins and lessons, and new rituals should reinforce experimentation, accountability and learning from AI-supported activities. Over time, AI use should feel embedded in everyday work – not exceptional.

4 Launch an organisation-wide training curriculum to improve AI literacy.
Equip the workforce with practical skills and confidence. Structured programs should cover responsible AI use, effective prompting, collaboration with AI systems, critical thinking and leading teams in AI-powered environments. The goal is not just to raise AI awareness, but to embed capability in daily practice.

5 Identify high-value use cases to fund the journey.
Select a focused set of high-impact use cases, particularly in support functions, that can generate near-term value and build credibility. Early results help fund the journey, sustain board endorsement and create momentum for broader transformation.

EXHIBIT 8

Key lessons from leaders who are successfully scaling AI

01

MAKE SPONSORSHIP AND INCENTIVES CONCRETE

Successful programs start with visible executive ownership; targets for AI adoption and realised impact appear in ELT scorecards

02

PRIORITISE FEWER INITIATIVES WITH GREATER IMPACT

Resources concentrate on a limited number of high-value programs rather than dispersing effort across many pilots

03

TREAT VALUE AS A HARD TARGET, NOT A BY PRODUCT

Each intervention starts with a baseline, a quantified value case and a clear time to value, and benefits are tracked regularly with simple transparent metrics

04

BUILD AI FLUENCY ACROSS THE ORGANISATION

Structured learning programs, internal academies and simple playbooks give teams a practical understanding of how AI can help in their work

05

DESIGN GOVERNANCE AND RISK TO ENABLE SCALING

Leaders put a small set of practical guardrails in place for data use, human oversight and model risk; teams are free to experiment and scale within these boundaries

Organisations that follow this path of focusing on support functions tend to move faster than their peer set. Instead of trying to solve everything at once, they are building proof, capability and momentum in the parts of the enterprise where scaling is most practical, then applying those lessons more broadly.

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For further information

If you would like to discuss this report, please contact the authors.

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