

Leading in the Age of AI: The Opportunity Is Bigger Than Efficiency

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A few years ago, the question facing many business leaders was fairly simple: should we be using AI?

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That question has moved on quickly. AI is already built into many of the tools we use, employees are using it, and businesses across every sector are thinking about where it fits within their future.

The leadership question is changing too. It is becoming less about whether we adopt AI, or which tasks we can automate, and more about what organisation we could become because of it.

If we think about AI purely as an efficiency tool, we risk limiting its potential to doing what we already do, only faster. The bigger opportunity is how AI might help us make better decisions, innovate, understand our customers differently and create new opportunities.

For leaders, that means looking at the bigger picture.

From experimentation to real business value

AI adoption has moved quickly, but there is a difference between using AI and getting real business value from it.

According to McKinsey & Company's The State of AI in 2025: Agents, Innovation, and Transformation, published in November 2025, 88% of

respondents said their organisations were regularly using AI in at least one business function. Yet nearly two-thirds said their organisations had not begun scaling AI across the business.

Many organisations are experimenting with AI. Employees are using it to research, analyse, create and solve problems. But using AI for individual tasks is different from considering how it could improve the wider business.

The same McKinsey research found that, while efficiency remains a major focus, the organisations getting the most value from AI are more likely to be looking at growth and innovation alongside efficiency.

Saving an employee an hour is valuable. But what could they do with that hour? Spend more time with customers? Develop an idea? Solve a problem? Could AI help the business offer something it couldn't before or reach customers it previously couldn't?

The conversation is moving beyond "What can AI automate?" towards "What could AI enable?"

Access to AI isn't the competitive advantage

AI capabilities that once required specialist teams and significant investment are increasingly available to businesses of all sizes.

For smaller businesses, that creates a huge opportunity. But simply having access to AI isn't going to give a business a lasting advantage. Your competitors can probably access the same technology.

The difference will be what you do with it.

A business can combine technology with the things unique to it: its people, knowledge, customer relationships, data, experience, culture and ideas.

This is why AI is increasingly a leadership conversation, not just a technology conversation.

Leaders don't have to understand every technical development, but having enough understanding to ask the right questions is important. Where could this add value? What could change our business? What might our customers expect in three years? What skills will our people need? What should remain

human? And what risks are we prepared to take?

These are business questions, not technology questions.

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The next shift is already happening

AI itself is changing too.

Most of our experience of generative AI has involved asking it to do something and receiving an answer. We are now hearing much more about agentic AI: systems that can plan and carry out more complex, multi-step activities.

McKinsey's 2025 State of AI research found that 62% of organisations surveyed were experimenting with AI agents.

We are early in this development, but leaders should be aware of it. As AI moves from helping with individual tasks towards potentially completing larger pieces of work, businesses may have to think differently about roles, responsibility and oversight. Security, governance, accuracy and trust will become even more important.

Waiting until all the uncertainty disappears isn't realistic. But neither is moving quickly without thinking about the risks.

For leaders, it is about finding the balance between making the most of the opportunity and making sure it is done responsibly.

Your people may be more ready than you think

Employees are also starting to use AI themselves, sometimes faster than the organisations they work for.

AI tools are available and people are experimenting with them inside and outside work. The challenge for leaders isn't simply getting people to use AI. It is about giving them the skills, confidence and guidance to use it well.

Without that, businesses can face issues around confidential information, accuracy, intellectual property and decision-making.

The answer isn't to stop people experimenting. Businesses can create an environment where people are able to try new things, learn and share what

works, but do so responsibly.

The skills we need are changing

When we talk about preparing people for an AI-enabled workplace, it is easy to focus on technical AI skills. Those matter, but the skills that will help us work effectively with AI are much broader.

People need to question an AI-generated answer rather than automatically accept it. They need judgement to recognise when something doesn't look right, curiosity to explore ideas and confidence to know when a person needs to step in.

As AI becomes better at generating information and recommendations, critical thinking becomes more important, not less.

The same applies to leadership.

AI can analyse huge amounts of information and identify patterns far quicker than us. But leadership has never just been about having the information.

It is about judgement, context, empathy, communication and making decisions when there isn't a perfect answer. It is also about bringing people with you when things are changing.

The Jersey Business Productivity Survey 2026 shows that businesses increasingly recognise AI as a productivity opportunity, with adoption reaching 60%. However, technology alone is not the answer. Culture remains the most frequently identified driver of productivity, reinforcing the important role leadership plays in creating the right environment for AI to support wider business goals.

As AI takes on transactional and analytical work, I think those human leadership skills will become more important, not less.

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Leadership is the differentiator

Leaders don't have to become AI experts overnight. But engaging with it is increasingly important.

There is a risk at both ends. We can dismiss AI as hype and wait for everything to settle down, or chase every development because we are worried about being left behind.

The answer is somewhere in between. Leaders can be curious enough to try things, informed enough to understand the opportunities and risks, and focused on whether what they are doing adds value.

We don't know exactly what an AI-enabled organisation will look like in five or ten years. Roles will change, new ones will appear and some activities will disappear. Being able to adapt will become important for businesses and their people.

Think bigger than efficiency

AI presents a huge productivity opportunity, but productivity shouldn't be the limit of our ambition.

If technology gives our people more time, how do we use it? If it gives us better information, what decisions could we make differently? If it makes something possible that was previously too expensive or difficult, what could we now create?

For Jersey businesses, our size can sometimes be seen as a limitation, but it can also be an advantage. Smaller organisations can often make decisions faster, test ideas more quickly and bring people together around change.

AI also gives smaller businesses access to capabilities that might previously have been out of reach. The opportunity isn't simply to become more efficient. It is to become better businesses.

The organisations that succeed won't necessarily be those with the most technology. They will be those with leaders who make good decisions about where technology adds value, where people add value, and how the two can work together.

Ultimately, that isn't just an AI challenge.

It's a leadership one.

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