



THE C-SUITE

with
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AI has ceased to be a productivity tool in the narrow sense. It is becoming a structural input to how organisations learn and how quickly they onboard talent.

My instinct with any transformative technology has always been adversarial. Healthy scepticism, I have found, is a far cheaper tuition than uncritical enthusiasm. When artificial intelligence began generating serious corporate attention, I applied the same discipline: let it prove its worth before I endorse it.

My introduction to machine-assisted optimisation came not through a Silicon Valley demo, but through the floor of a brewery. A piece of equipment called the illobox was fitted to a mash filter and designed to analyse previous production runs, then recommend parameters for the next one.

The premise was elegant; with enough cycles, the system would converge on optimal settings and, by extension, optimal product quality. The reality was more instructive. When incoming raw materials were inconsistent or process variables drifted, the algorithm had nothing reliable to learn from. Optimising a flawed input only entrenches the flaw. The lesson endured: intelligence, artificial or otherwise, is

bounded by the quality of what feeds it.

That experience proved useful when AI moved from factory floors to boardrooms.

Over the past several years, two camps have defined the executive response to AI. The first treated it as a near-mystical force capable of halving overhead costs and rewriting competitive maps overnight. Many chased deployment with more urgency than understanding, investing in tools before establishing the data foundations or organisational capabilities required to generate returns. The second camp dismissed AI as a sophisticated iteration of prior technological fads, confident that the fundamentals of their industries would outlast the hype cycle. Some are still waiting.

Both postures have proven costly. The accelerationists generated waste; the sceptics ceded ground. And the ground does not come back easily.

AI has ceased to be a productivity tool in the narrow sense. It is becoming a structural input to how organisations learn and how quickly they onboard talent. A new employee who systematically logs early experiences in an AI-assisted environment, connecting observations to institutional knowledge in real time, can generate meaningful output in days rather than weeks. The compounding effect

AI adoption no longer optional

THE FUTURE

The debate over whether to adopt AI is largely settled, at least for organisations competing in information-intensive industries. The live question is one of execution: which capabilities to prioritise, where AI augments rather than replaces human judgment, and how to phase investment in a way that builds durable capability rather than brittle dependency.

is not trivial: faster ramp-up, reduced knowledge silos, and a narrowing of the gap between individual contributor and institutional memory.

The implications for competitive dynamics are significant. Small teams can now access analytical leverage that was previously the province of large organisations. Conversely, large organisations that fail to embed AI into core workflows may find their scale a liability rather than an advantage, slower to adapt and more expensive to run.

This is the nature of general-purpose technologies at inflection points. The printing press did not merely accelerate distribution of existing text; it restructured who could produce and disseminate knowledge. The automobile did not simply move people faster; it redesigned cities, supply chains, and labour markets. Each transition had a moment of irreversibility, a point at which the prior paradigm became not just less efficient, but genuinely obsolete. We are at that point with AI.

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A note of caution earned from experience: AI systems, like the illobox on the mash filter, remain only as useful as the inputs they receive and the judgment of those who interpret their outputs. Organisations that treat AI as a substitute for strategic clarity or institutional knowledge will be disappointed. Those that treat it as a multiplier of existing strengths, a second cognitive layer that extends what their best people can see and do, are the ones positioning for durable advantage.

The executives worth watching are not those making the loudest AI announcements. They are the ones quietly rebuilding their operating models around the assumption that compounding AI fluency will separate competitors as decisively in the next decade as internet adoption did in the last.

The faster horse, to borrow the apocryphal Ford formulation, is no longer on the table. The question now is simply how quickly you learn to drive.

^a Note: Upon writing the draft of this article, I fed it into Claude, and thus, this article has been a collaboration of Ortega and Claude.

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