



WILTON & BAIN

Perspectives on Talent: True Value from AI Transformation

April 2026

The AI Era

Moving from curiosity to accountability: Navigating the executive leadership landscape of 2026.

In the new world, incumbent firms' operating models and customer relationships are under constant threat from technological acceleration. With the ever rising currency of AI and a genuine need for enterprise-wide efficiency, finding exceptional talent that straddles true value creation through operational and commercial transformation is key.

The most critical AI transitions are currently happening in private benchmarking phases well before a search ever goes live. As the "AI generalist" becomes a relic, CEOs and Chairs are prioritising confidential intelligence to map and meet the market of leaders who can drive agentic systems that impact the P&L.

Decorative vs. Functional Leadership

The risk of appointing an executive whose AI expertise is more decorative than functional is the highest liability a Board faces today. In a market saturated with inflated claims, the most successful searches now start with deep market intelligence and live conversations in line with how a business intends to drive value through AI Transformation.

The Pilot Trap

Many leaders have overseen AI "pilots" but have never successfully scaled AI-driven transformation to impact the bottom line

Volume over Value

Often the number of POCs implemented rather than the overall cost or commercial value is used as a vanity metric

Inconsistent Taxonomy

AI Transformation responsibilities sit under a wide range of titles (CTO, CDAO, CDO, COO), creating significant role-profile mismatches

Scarcity of A-Players

The most effective AI executives are rarely on the market, and understanding what has truly been delivered requires conversation and referencing



Strategic Benchmarking, Market Intelligence & Precision Search

High-end search has evolved into a competitive intelligence function designed to surface hidden talent across global markets. At Wilton & Bain, we provide a "blind look" at the talent landscape to identify who has actually scaled AI-driven transformation.

THE INTELLIGENCE FIRST APPROACH

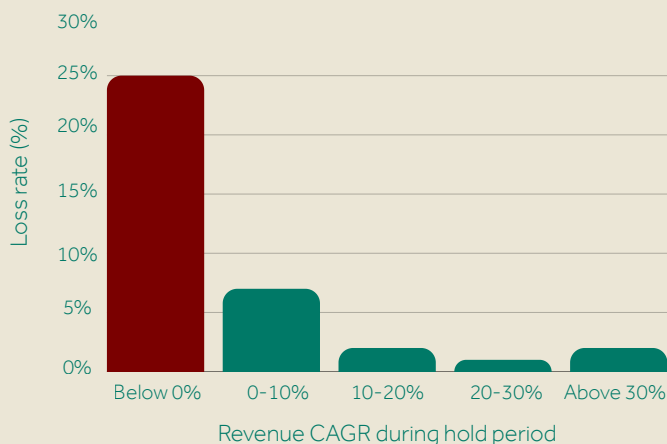
Utilising confidential mapping prevents market speculation during sensitive pivots and ensures you see A-players who are currently off-market. This approach provides real-time data on how your competitors are structuring their AI oversight.

MEASURING EFFECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

To measure AI transformation effectively, organisations must shift focus from "technological experiments" to a strategic engine. Success is defined by four core pillars:

WHEN DELIVERY SLIPS

Loss rate by revenue growth during hold period (MOIC <1x)



Gain.pro (2025), 10,000+ PE investments globally

Operational Efficiency:

Reduction in cycle times and automation of high-volume manual tasks.

Business Impact:

Financial ROI relative to Total Cost of Ownership (TCO) and revenue uplift from AI-enabled products.

Adoption & Fluency:

Percentage of active users and the measurable upskilling of the workforce.

Responsible Governance:

Adherence to global regulations (e.g., the EU AI Act) and mitigation of bias.

The UK Landscape

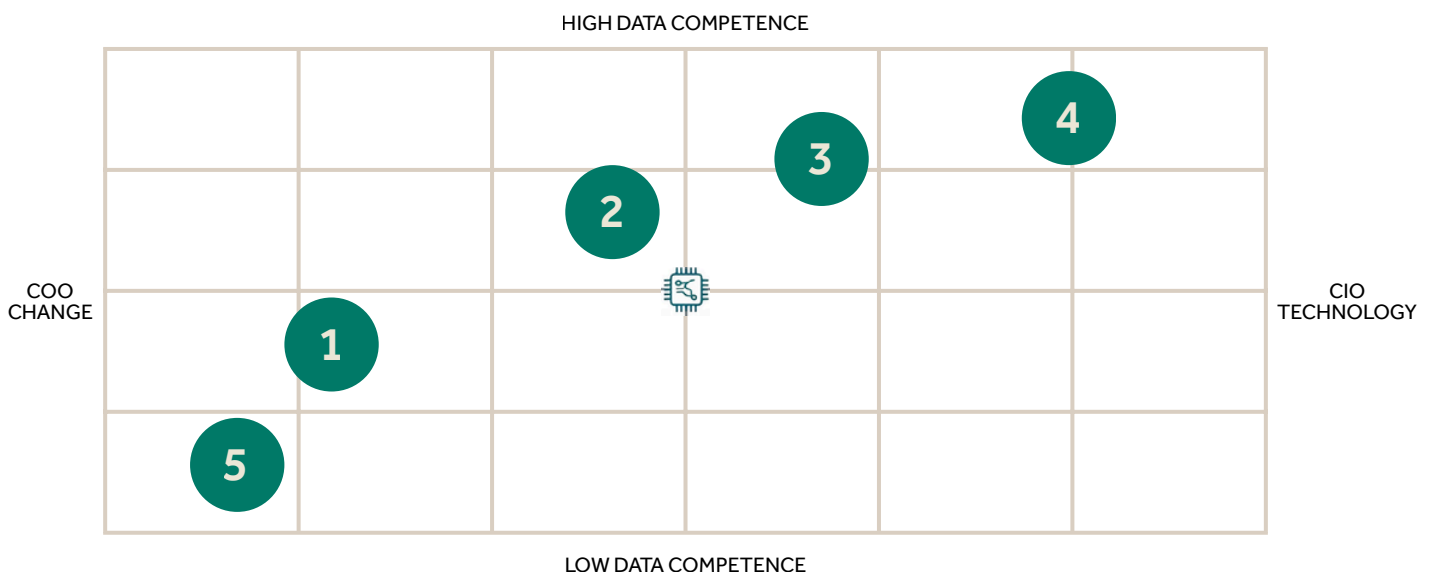
Our market research reveals critical insights into talent maturity

Financial Services Lead the Way: Banks and Insurers show the highest concentration of mature transformation titles whilst there are exceptional AI Transformation experts across Tech, Pharma, Media and Consulting.

The Strategy-Delivery Gap: Many identified roles skew either too technical (engineering-driven) or too strategic (innovation-focused without delivery depth).

The Sector Maturity Gap: Telco and Utilities show uneven maturity, often lacking a clear senior transformation owner.

CANDIDATE ARCHETYPES



1 Enterprise Transformation Leader

- Orientation: Strong COO
- Primary Value Lens: Commercial outcomes, risk, value realisation.
- Transformation Focus: Enterprise roadmap, portfolio governance, benefits delivery.
- Signature Strengths: Stops low-value change; possesses strong ExCo and Board authority.
- Key Watch-outs: Dependent on others for AI depth; risk of conservative AI ambition.
- Best Fit: Large, regulated, legacy-heavy organisations where delivery confidence is the issue.

2

Business-Led Transformation Integrator

- Orientation: COO ↔ CIO Bridge
- Primary Value Lens: Business value through joined-up execution.
- Transformation Focus: Cross-functional orchestration; strategy-to-execution.
- Signature Strengths: Aligns business & technology; scales AI beyond pilots.
- Key Watch-outs: Can over-index on consensus; needs a clear mandate to enforce trade-offs.
- Best Fit: Organisations moving from ambition to execution; PE-backed value creation.

3

AI-Enabled Operating Model Transformer

- Orientation: Mid-spectrum
- Primary Value Lens: Productivity, efficiency, decision quality.
- Transformation Focus: Operating model redesign via AI and Automation.
- Signature Strengths: Turns AI into P&L impact; scales automation at pace.
- Key Watch-outs: Can feel "efficiency-only"; may underweight the necessity of cultural change.
- Best Fit: Cost pressure combined with service quality tension; need for rapid AI leverage.

4

Digital & AI Transformation Architect

- Orientation: CIO-leaning
- Primary Value Lens: Capability, scalability, innovation.
- Transformation Focus: Platforms, tooling, architecture, and AI foundations.
- Signature Strengths: Builds scalable AI platforms; high credibility with technical teams.
- Key Watch-outs: High risk regarding adoption and behaviour change; tech-first sequencing.
- Best Fit: Digital-first organisations or where AI capability is the primary constraint.

5

Change, Capability & Adoption Leader

- Orientation: COO-leaning
- Primary Value Lens: Adoption, behaviour, sustainability.
- Transformation Focus: Ways of working, leadership, skills, and culture.
- Signature Strengths: Makes transformation "stick"; builds enterprise-wide AI literacy.
- Key Watch-outs: Insufficient alone for heavy structural change; relies on others for execution.
- Best Fit: Late-stage or post-implementation transformations where adoption is the blocker.

The Chief AI Transformation Officer

Historically, AI has been nested under the CIO or COO. Treating AI as "just another IT project" is becoming a competitive liability.

From Departmental to Strategic:

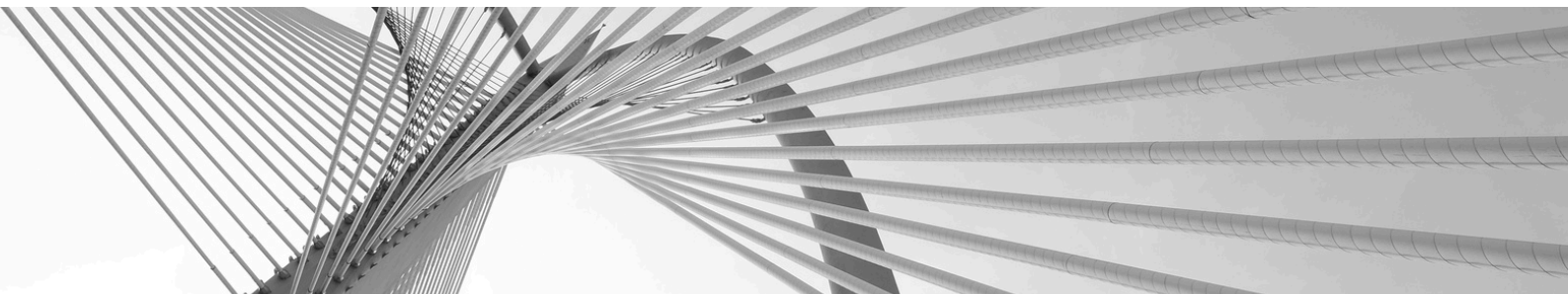
AI leadership is moving out of middle management and onto the Executive Committee (ExCo).

Direct CEO Sponsorship:

To break through fragmented infrastructure and data silos, which inhibit 82% of enterprises, AI transformation requires a mandate that only direct CEO sponsorship can provide.

The "Hub" Role:

The emerging Chief AI Transformation Officer acts as a hub, aligning strategy, analytics, and execution across all business units.



QUESTIONS FROM THE BOARD

- Can they define a multi-year "AI-first" roadmap that moves beyond isolated pilots?
- How will they translate AI initiatives into measurable financial returns, such as nine-figure cost savings?
- What proven methods do they have to drive >70% AI adoption both enterprise wide and to customers?

The most successful AI transformations are built on a foundation of rigorous leadership selection. Whether you are looking to appoint a permanent pioneer through a full executive search or validate your internal high-potential talent against the broader market, Wilton & Bain provides the deep intelligence necessary to ensure your leadership is functional, not decorative.

Beyond permanent appointments, we offer bespoke market mapping to benchmark your current leadership's AI fluency against the global landscape. Where immediate stability is required, we deploy executive interim leaders to secure governance and drive strategy while your long-term transition matures.

Contact Wilton & Bain today to begin a private conversation and calibrate your market position.



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Wilton & Bain works with investors and portfolio leadership teams at the moments that determine whether value gets created or lost. We combine retained executive search with a market-leading interim capability - built over 25 years - to place leaders who can perform under sponsor ownership, not just in it.

More than 50% of our work is with PE-backed businesses. As a boutique business of 80+ consultants, we deliver 300+ executive appointments a year across four offices in Europe, North America and the Middle East, supporting 170+ unique clients annually. Our Interim practice is ranked a Top 5 provider by the Institute of Interim Management for five consecutive years, with 56% of assignments at C-suite level.

We're trusted when the brief in portfolio businesses isn't business-as-usual: complex change, transformation, value creation, integration, turnaround, exit readiness - and the appointment of operating partners/portfolio operations leadership within investment firms themselves.

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