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AI is Rewriting Technology Delivery. Who Will Lead It?

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The Leadership Question Behind Every AI Strategy

Almost every technology firm, bank, insurer, healthcare system, manufacturer, and retailer now says it wants an "AI-led" organization. Fewer have asked the harder question: who will lead it?

Over the past several weeks, I had nearly twenty in-depth conversations with senior delivery, portfolio, and transformation executives across telecom, media, technology services, and enterprise software, many running organizations of 1,000 to 2,000+ people or portfolios worth tens to hundreds of millions of dollars. I did not set out to ask about AI; almost every one of them brought it up anyway.

What they shared, candidly, says a great deal about where enterprise AI stands and the kind of leader organizations now need: not executives who describe AI best, but those already entrenched in the work. They exist, but are rarely looking, and are not easy to identify from a résumé.

Four themes came up again and again, and the challenges show up in nearly every industry.

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01 Pilots Are Everywhere. Scale Is Not.

The most consistent message was that AI activity is abundant, but AI at scale is still rare. Leaders who sit closest to delivery see a crowded field of proofs of concept and a much thinner layer of production systems.

> *"There is a lot of AI coming in, but nowhere have I seen, so far at least, AI at scale. It's all in the pilot stage. Scale doesn't give you the freedom to say these corner cases are outside the boundary of my POC. Scale means you have to handle every single case, and that is where most of us are still struggling."*
>
> **— Independent advisor to tier-1 telecom and media companies**

That distinction matters. A pilot can be designed around clean data and friendly use cases. Production has to absorb everything else: exceptions, edge cases, legacy systems, and the volume of a real enterprise. Several leaders described a deliberately staged path, with agents doing the work but humans still approving changes until success rates approach 98 or 99 percent. Others raised the issues that only appear after go-live: models that drift, hallucinate, or degrade on bad data, and the monitoring and guardrails needed to catch it.

There was also healthy pragmatism about where generative AI belongs. Not every problem needs it, and not every deployment earns a return. In some cases traditional automation is the right answer; in others, purpose-built agents or smaller, industry-specific models outperform general-purpose tools.

> **What it means for hiring:** The leaders who understand these trade-offs have learned them by doing the work. That experience does not show up in a job title or a list of certifications. It shows up in the specifics of what they built, what broke, and how they fixed it, which is exactly what a rigorous assessment process needs to uncover.

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02 The Headcount Model Is Breaking

For decades, technology services grew by adding people: larger teams, deeper offshore benches, and more billable hours. Leaders across the industry told me that model is under real pressure, and AI is the reason.

> *"The opportunity of doing the headcount business is diminishing. It's becoming a very simple, outcome-driven business. One of the leading hyperscalers is now telling vendors, 'I won't give you resources. Use an AI tool."*
>
> **— Growth executive, global IT services firm**

The shape of the work is changing with it. Several leaders described large, multi-year transformation programs giving way to smaller, faster engagements built on platforms clients already own. Clients want quick results, and many want AI to absorb the entry-level work that once justified large teams. That puts pressure on overall spend, on offshore delivery centers built for scale, and on the margin assumptions that have underpinned the industry for twenty years.

The commercial conversation is shifting too, from cost arbitrage toward value. Leaders talked about moving clients off time-and-material and price-per-unit contracts and into outcome-based, AI-native delivery. In some firms, AI is no longer a separate offering at all. It is built into every service and factored directly into margin forecasts.

> *"Delivery management, improving the pyramid, gross margin, offshore leverage. All of that is table stakes. That's the hygiene. What you do over and beyond that is where you bring thought leadership to the customer."*
>
> **— Independent advisor to tier-1 telecom and media companies**

> **What it means for hiring:** Running a large delivery organization well is still essential, but it is no longer enough to set a candidate apart. The differentiator is whether a leader has already redesigned how value is delivered and priced, and protected margin while doing it.

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03 The Hardest Part Is Human

The technology is moving fast. The people side is moving more slowly, and leaders are feeling the gap. Organizations are investing heavily in building agents, only to find that the employees meant to use them are reluctant.

> *"Adoption is a key challenge in the AI world, because everybody is afraid the agent will take over their job. Teams put a lot of effort into building agents, with all the CapEx and OpEx spending, but we don't really see adoption."*
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> **— Client executive, global technology and consulting firm**

That fear is not unfounded. Leaders were frank that AI is reshaping workforce decisions, and that cost reductions are often funding the AI infrastructure build-out itself. Several described spending a growing share of their time on difficult people conversations rather than on delivery or growth.

The leaders getting this right are reframing the story. Instead of positioning agents as replacements, they run workshops that show how AI removes transactional work and multiplies what people can do. Some are retraining internal teams and moving them into client-facing, advisory, and customer success roles. The veterans in the group also offered perspective: they have lived through mainframe, client-server, virtualization, and cloud, and each was called a disruptor in its day.

> **What it means for hiring:** AI transformation is a change management program as much as a technology program. The leaders who capture the value are the ones who can bring a workforce with them through uncertainty. That is a leadership capability, and it is assessed through references, track record, and judgment, not technical credentials.

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04 The Delivery Leader Is Becoming a Business Leader

Taken together, these conversations point to a clear shift in what organizations need from senior technology delivery leaders. Running delivery well is now the baseline. The role increasingly combines P&L ownership, client growth, AI solutioning, and enterprise transformation.

> *"It's not simply a larger delivery role. It's essentially a business leadership role: P&L, global delivery, growth, transformation, capability building, and managing the executive client relationship."*
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> **— Global delivery leader, IT services firm**

Another leader noted that in telecom, media, and technology today, you cannot open a client conversation without discussing how agentic AI fits into the core of the business. Agentic delivery models are increasingly built in natively rather than bolted on, and that changes how organizations are structured, not just which tools they use.

This is where the hiring challenge sharpens. Nearly every senior profile in the market now references AI. On paper, many candidates look alike. In practice, the gap between a leader who sponsored a pilot and one who rebuilt a delivery organization around AI is enormous. The signals that separate them include whether a leader has:

- Moved AI from pilot into production, at real volume
- Restructured commercial models from headcount to outcomes
- Put governance, monitoring, and guardrails around deployed AI
- Led workforce adoption and change, not just tool rollout
- Protected margins while the delivery pyramid was being redrawn
- Grown accounts by bringing AI-led ideas to clients proactively

Not Just a Technology Industry Problem

It would be easy to read these themes as a technology services story. They are not. Telecom, media, and tech are simply where the pressure arrived first, because technology is their core business. The same pattern is now unfolding across adjacent industries, where AI is less about building new products and more about transforming how the business operates.

- **Financial services and insurance:** Banks and insurers are running AI pilots across fraud, underwriting, claims, and customer service. Scaling them means meeting regulatory, model-risk, and explainability standards that most pilots were never designed for.
- **Healthcare and life sciences:** Clinical documentation, revenue cycle, and research workflows are prime targets for AI. Adoption depends on clinician and staff trust, and every deployment carries patient-data and compliance risk.
- **Manufacturing, supply chain, and industrial:** Predictive maintenance, planning, and quality use cases are proven in pockets. Taking them across plants and legacy operational systems is where programs stall.
- **Retail and consumer:** Customer service, personalization, and merchandising are being rebuilt with agents, putting large frontline and contact-center workforces through real change.
- **Energy, utilities, and the public sector:** Grid operations, field services, and citizen services face the same pilot-to-production gap, with the added weight of safety, reliability, and public accountability.

The shared services and back-office operations that support all of these industries are also facing the same headcount-to-outcomes shift described above. Finance, HR, procurement, and IT operations functions built on scale are being asked to deliver more with AI and fewer people.

For leadership hiring, this widens both the challenge and the opportunity. The right leader for a bank's AI-led operations transformation may come from telecom. The right leader for a healthcare system's digital delivery organization may have built their playbook at a global IT services firm. The experience that matters (scaling AI, restructuring delivery, and leading people through change) increasingly travels across industries. Finding it means looking beyond the obvious talent pools.

Why Organizations Are Turning to Retained Search

The leaders described in this article share one more trait: almost none of them are actively looking. They are deep inside critical programs, leading large teams, and owning significant client relationships. Most are approached regularly. When they consider a move, they weigh the mandate, the leadership team, and the organization's real commitment to AI far more than the title or compensation.

That is why these searches rarely succeed through job postings or high-volume recruiting. A posting attracts candidates who describe AI well. The leaders who have actually delivered it at scale have to be identified, approached, and assessed directly. That takes time, market knowledge, and trusted relationships, which is the work of a retained search partner.

A retained approach allows organizations to:

- Reach passive leaders who are already entrenched in AI-led delivery and are not in the market
- Go beyond the résumé to validate what a leader has actually taken into production
- Assess commercial, operational, and change leadership alongside technical depth
- Benchmark candidates against competitors and adjacent industries
- Present the opportunity credibly to leaders who are selective about their next move

The conversations behind this article are an example of that work. They are how we learn which leaders are genuinely building the next delivery model, and which are still describing it.

Final Thought

In every industry, AI is not replacing the need for strong technology leadership. It is redefining it. The next generation of delivery leaders will be judged less on how many people they manage and more on how well they turn AI into outcomes clients will pay for and teams will actually adopt.

There is no shortage of executives who can speak credibly about AI. There is a shortage of leaders who are already doing the work. The organizations that find those leaders first will be the ones that move from experimentation to impact.