Kim SEELING SMITH

# THE C-SUITE'S AI PLAYBOOK:

## FROM PILOT TO PERFORMANCE

Proven pathways to integrate AI, unlock talent potential, and lead with confidence

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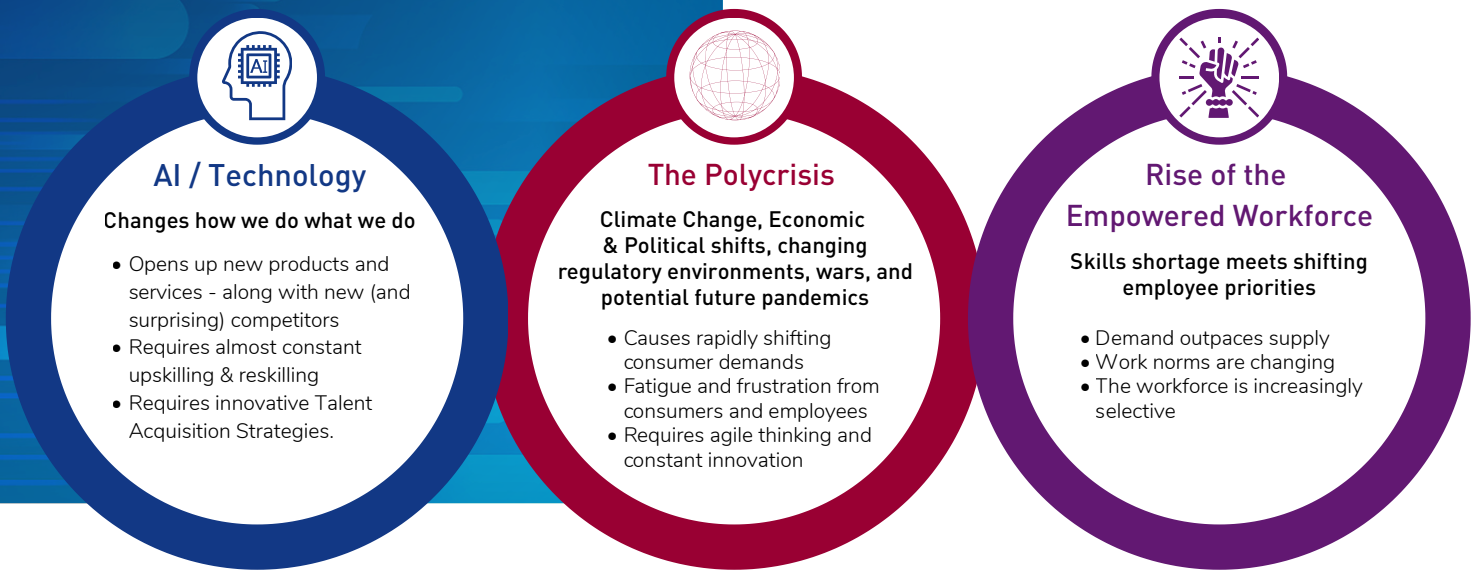


# 3 DISRUPTIONS POWERING THE DECADE OF RADICAL CHANGE

## Introduction

In an era defined by unprecedented disruption, three forces are set to reshape the global business landscape by 2035:

- AI changing how we do what we do and leveling the playing field,
- The Polycrisis of converging global challenges resulting in rapidly shifting consumer demands, and
- The rise of the empowered workforce, where the skills shortage runs headlong into a workforce with shifting priorities

Based on insights from PwC's latest Global CEO Survey and **three decades** advising senior executives, this series explores how leaders can not only survive, but thrive this disruption – starting with the most urgent and fast-moving disruption: AI.

# THE URGENCY: AI AS THE FIRST AND FASTEST DISRUPTION

In the 2025 PwC Global CEO Survey, 42% of leaders said they do not believe their organizations will be viable in the next decade without significant change[1]. This is not the language of steady-as-she-goes corporate management – it is the language of leaders staring at a strategic inflection point.


Of the three disruptors shaping the decade ahead, AI is advancing the fastest. As of this writing, according to AI strategist Dr. Alan Thompson, we are already 94% of the way from basic assistants like Siri and Alexa to Artificial General Intelligence (AGI)[2,] with Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI) not far behind. Other developments reinforce this rapid progress:

- **Text-to-video** creation platforms like OpenAI's Sora can produce photorealistic footage from a simple prompt in seconds.
- **Empathetic AI** in healthcare, AI systems are outperforming human doctors in bedside manner while matching or exceeding diagnostic accuracy[3].
- **Persuasive AI**: Some studies show AI to be more persuasive to humans than other humans[4].
- **Brain–computer interfaces** from companies like Neuralink[5] and Synchron, enabling paralyzed individuals to control devices and communicate with thought alone[6].
- **Domestic humanoid robots**, expected to reach consumer markets within 6–18 months, capable of household chores at a price point comparable to a small car[7].

> ***Artificial General Intelligence (AGI)*** *refers to AI that can match human intelligence across a broad range of tasks, while* ***Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI)*** *describes AI that would surpass the best human minds in every domain.*

The acceleration is exponential – each advance shortening the timeline to the next. For boards and executive teams, the implication is clear: **AI can no longer be treated as a side project. It is a central driver of competitiveness, shaping business models, market structures, and the skills leaders require to succeed.**

# THE RISKS OF REACTIVE ADOPTION

**As CEOs and senior leaders wake up to this new reality, some are responding instinctively – fearing loss of market share or being left behind. But when defensiveness replaces strategy, leaders can undermine future readiness while chasing false security.**

The pace of AI adoption is accelerating – and in many cases, outpacing strategic planning. In recent months:

- Commonwealth Bank in Australia replaced 45 call center roles with a chatbot[8]. The blow back was so fierce they had to reverse that decision within weeks.
- Atlassian eliminated 150 customer service positions, citing AI efficiencies[9]
- A Big Four country manager declared that all Executive Assistants would be replaced within five years

Moves like these create the impression of decisive action. They can reassure investors in the short term and signal that leadership is acting with urgency. But the hidden cost is often far greater: the loss of institutional knowledge, the breakdown of customer relationships, and the erosion of workplace culture. Once those assets are gone, they are difficult – and costly – to rebuild.

The data bears this out.

- IBM research finds that only 25% of AI initiatives deliver their expected ROI, and just 16% achieve enterprise-wide scale[10].
- Even when scaled, enterprise-wide AI delivers an average 5.9% ROI – well below most companies' cost of capital[11].
- MIT finds that "95% of enterprise generative AI projects have failed to deliver meaningful returns, with only 5% of custom AI tools reaching production at scale"[12].

History may not repeat itself, but it does rhyme. The Global Financial Crisis provides a historical precedent for the reactive response to an immediate challenge. Many organizations that implemented broad, indiscriminate layoffs were slower to recover in market share and employee brand reputation than those that made targeted, capability-preserving adjustments.

# THREE PATHWAYS TO AI ADOPTION

Our work with senior leadership teams shows that organizations typically follow one of three primary pathways in adopting AI:

1. **Enterprise AI** – Custom-built, proprietary systems designed to deliver specific competitive advantages. These can yield transformative results but demand specialist talent, significant investment, and – critically – complete, clean, and well-integrated data. Without these prerequisites, projects face high risk of failure. Additionally, there is a risk of building something that could become obsolete or hard to maintain. Think Y2K.

2. **In-App AI** – Capabilities embedded within enterprise tools already in use, such as Microsoft 365 Copilot or Salesforce Einstein. Adoption is faster because employees are already familiar with the underlying platform. Integration is simpler, costs are lower, and value can be demonstrated quickly.

3. **Everyday AI** – Widely accessible tools like **ChatGPT**, **Claude**, **Perplexity**, and **NotebookLM** that can be deployed at the team or individual level with minimal cost. These tools often deliver immediate productivity gains and serve as a proving ground for broader AI adoption.

When many CEOs think about AI adoption they go straight to the Enterprise model – and get stuck. The significant investment in time and resources and the sometimes monumental task of cleaning their data delays the project until it ends up in the 'too hard basket'.

For most organizations, though, the strategic sequence is clear: start with In-App and Everyday AI to establish quick wins, build workforce fluency, and create the conditions for Enterprise AI to succeed – if needed.

### Case Study – Y2K and the Legacy Systems Wake-Up Call

In the late 1990s, the world faced a technology crisis known as Y2K. Many organizations had built mission-critical systems on outdated software that stored years using only two digits. As the year 2000 approached, this short-term coding choice threatened to cause widespread failures in banking, utilities, transportation, and government systems.

The real cost wasn't just in fixing the date bug — it was in uncovering how deeply organizations had locked themselves into **legacy infrastructure.** In many cases, entire systems had to be rewritten or replaced under extreme time pressure. This was expensive, disruptive, and in some industries, risked operational continuity.

**The parallel to embedded AI** is clear: while leveraging AI features inside existing platforms offers quick wins, over-reliance without a strategy for control, portability, and data ownership could create tomorrow's legacy trap. When platforms update, change terms, or retire features, organizations risk scrambling to adapt — just as they did when Y2K exposed the fragility of outdated systems.

# CASE STUDY – THE BARRY HONEY PRINCIPAL

At pitt&sherry, a Melbourne-based engineering consultancy, CIO Barry Honey faced a familiar challenge: his teams had access to AI functionality through their Microsoft suite but were hesitant to use it. Rather than launching an extensive change program, he introduced a simple, memorable directive: "When you see the AI diamond, just click the damn button!"

This direct instruction gave people permission to experiment without fear of making mistakes. Early adopters began using Microsoft Copilot to draft technical reports, summarise engineering documents, and automate repetitive tasks. When one engineer discovered that AI could compare complex project specifications in minutes – a task that had previously taken hours – the example was quickly shared across teams.

Within weeks, AI usage became part of the firm's workflow. The lesson: cultural enablement often matters more than technological sophistication in the early stages of adoption.

Image source: pitt & sherry website

# BUILDING AN AI-READY WORKFORCE

AI is not a substitute for human capability – it is an amplifier of it. The organizations that capture the most value from AI are those where employees have both the skills and the confidence to use it effectively.

**AI fluency** involves:

- Reducing fear
- Understanding where AI adds value – and where it does not
- Interpreting and validating AI-generated outputs
- Knowing which tools to invest time in – and which are distractions
- Integrating AI into workflows without eroding human judgment
- Navigating ethical, legal, and reputational considerations
- Training all employees on using AI effectively and safely

One of the most critical aspects of building AI fluency is addressing the natural fear employees have about AI. Many worry it will cost them their jobs – and with that, their sense of purpose and identity. When people feel threatened in this way, they may not only resist adoption but actively work against it. Leaders must acknowledge these concerns openly, communicate the role AI will play, and demonstrate how it can enhance rather than diminish employees' contributions.

**A key part of this reassurance comes from redeploying existing talent into higher-value tasks and roles as AI takes on more routine work.** This requires providing the requisite upskilling and reskilling to ensure those employees remain engaged, productive, and capable of contributing in new ways. By showing a clear path from current roles to future opportunities, leaders can shift the conversation from fear of redundancy to excitement about growth.

Consider a senior associate using NotebookLM to extract insights from hundreds of pages of reports in minutes. Freed from the mechanics of data gathering, they can focus on higher-value activities: advising clients, designing solutions, and identifying new opportunities. This is the multiplier effect AI delivers when it is embedded into daily work.

Investing in AI fluency – through leadership development, onboarding, targeted redeployment, and ongoing capability programs – is one of the highest-return initiatives executives can make in the next 24 months.

# CASE STUDY – THE CARLYLE GROUP

The Carlyle Group, a global investment firm, approached AI adoption with the discipline of a capital allocation decision. The rollout began with a clear identification of high-value use cases: accelerating investment analysis and streamlining legal invoice reviews.

Rather than building from scratch, Carlyle leveraged tools already in use – Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT – and achieved approximately 90% adoption within months. AI literacy was embedded into onboarding, and an AI champions network was established to drive peer-to-peer capability building.

Only after early results were validated did the firm invest in custom development, creating Project Catalyst to automate critical workflows not addressed by off-the-shelf tools. Underpinning all of this was a commitment to clean, well-structured data – a non-negotiable for sustained AI performance.

The outcome was measurable: faster decision-making, higher productivity, and a workforce that viewed AI as an enabler rather than a threat[13].

# A 6–12 MONTH ROADMAP

Based on our work with executive teams across industries, a disciplined approach to AI adoption includes the following steps:


**SELECT USE CASES**
Identify functions and processes where In-App and Everyday AI can deliver immediate value.

**DEPLOY FOR QUICK WINS**
Create initiatives that demonstrate tangible results within weeks, building credibility and momentum.

**EMBED AI FLUENCY**
Make AI capability a core element of leadership programs and onboarding.

**ESTABLISH GOVERNANCE**
Define clear policies for ethical use, bias reduction, data protection, and compliance.

**MEASURE AND REFINE**
Track adoption rates, ROI, and qualitative impact on employee and customer experience.

**SCALE STRATEGICALLY**
Transition to Enterprise AI for high-priority use cases once organizational capability and data readiness are established.

**REDEPLOY AND RESKILL TALENT**
Identify employees whose roles are evolving due to AI integration and redeploy them into high-value tasks or roles, providing the necessary upskilling or reskilling to ensure long-term contribution and engagement.

# CONCLUSION

AI has moved from possibility to inevitability. The leaders who will thrive are those who view it not as a cost-cutting tool, but as a strategic capability to be integrated deliberately and at scale. By starting with accessible applications, building fluency across the workforce, redeploying talent effectively, and scaling investment in line with proven value, executives can position their organizations to capture the full potential of AI – without sacrificing the human and cultural assets that underpin long-term success.

*Note: This paper is written using American spellings for an international audience.*

## BOOK A STRATEGY SESSION TODAY

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# AI TRAINING OPTIONS

## AI OVERVIEW MASTERCLASS

Curious about AI but unsure where to start? My AI Overview Masterclass is designed specifically for professionals looking to grasp the essentials.

In this practical and approachable session, you'll gain a clear understanding of what AI is, explore everyday business applications, and learn actionable strategies to leverage AI effectively—without getting lost in technical jargon.

It's the perfect first step toward harnessing the power of AI confidently.

Click Here

## AI DEEP DIVE LAB

Ready to move beyond the basics? Join my hands-on AI Deep Dive Lab, where you'll actively build your skills and experiment with real-world AI tools.

This interactive session gives you direct experience with cutting-edge technologies, practical use cases, and problem-solving scenarios relevant to your business.

You'll leave empowered, capable of applying AI immediately to enhance your productivity and drive innovation.

Click Here

## AI IN-HOUSE OR CONFERNECE EXPERIENCE

Want an AI session tailored precisely to your organization's unique challenges and opportunities? My bespoke AI In-House Experience or conference presentation delivers a deep dive designed specifically for your company or department.

We'll collaboratively address your business-specific use cases, implement targeted AI solutions, and create a clear roadmap for your team.

It's not just about understanding AI—it's about making it work seamlessly for your organization's goals.

# ABOUT KIM SEELING SMITH

Kim Seeling Smith is a Business Futurist who helps organizations thrive through the rapidly changing world of AI and the Polycrisis (where multiple crises intersect and affect each other).

Kim has literally held a seat at the table with Sir Richard Branson for her innovative work around the Future of Work. She was named a Top 100 Thought Leader by Thinkers360 and a Top 101 Global Influencer on Employee Engagement. She wrote THE how-to guide on 1:1 employee 1:1s: Mind Reading for Managers, and co-wrote a Career Development Guide with mega author Brian Tracy.

You will frequently see Kim on The Today Show, in Forbes, Fast Company, SmartCompany, CEO Magazine, CNBC Online, the Australian Financial Review, the Sydney Morning Herald and many other print and radio media outlets.

As a former professional accountant with KPMG, Kim is a rare individual who seamlessly blends her commercial acumen with cutting-edge Future of Work practices.

Top 100 Thought Leader HR thinkers 360

Forbes

CNBC

sunrise

CEO MAGAZINE

HRD HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR AUSTRALIA

FINANCIAL REVIEW

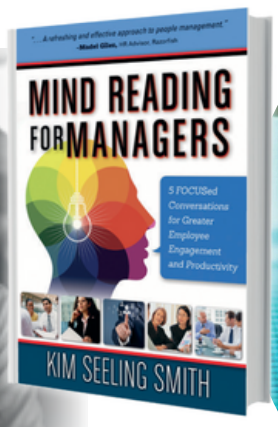
IW INSPIRING WORKPLACES THE ENGAGEMENT 101 INFLUENCER 2020

the BLACK

The Sydney Morning Herald

FAST COMPANY

smartcompany




# FOOTNOTES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