

AI Adoption for Business Leaders: Why Practical Strategy Beats Technology Hype

Steven J Wakefield

Founder, Growth Partners for Business Ltd, United Kingdom

Abstract

Artificial intelligence is reshaping the competitive landscape for businesses of every size, yet adoption among small and medium-sized enterprises remains patchy, poorly planned, and frequently ineffective. This presentation draws on practitioner experience across multiple business sectors, supported by findings from an ongoing AI Readiness Assessment conducted with UK business leaders, to argue that the primary barrier to successful AI adoption is not technological capability but leadership clarity.

Many organisations approach AI as a technology project rather than a strategic business decision. The result is investment without direction, tool adoption without integration, and enthusiasm without measurable return. This paper proposes a practical leadership framework for AI adoption built around four interdependent pillars: strategic intent, organisational readiness, people and culture, and governance. Drawing on real-world case examples and structured responses from business leaders across UK industries, it identifies the most common failure points in AI adoption and offers a replicable model for leaders seeking to embed AI as a sustainable business capability rather than a short-term experiment.

The paper also examines the role of the leader as the critical enabler or inhibitor of AI adoption, and considers how leadership development must evolve to equip executives with the confidence and competence to make informed AI decisions. The central argument is clear: AI is only a threat when your competitors are using it and you are not. The antidote is not more technology, but better leadership thinking.

Keywords: AI adoption, business leadership, SME strategy, digital transformation, organisational readiness