October 2026 · Application-ready, research-grounded

THE PEOPLE STRATEGY FOR AI ADOPTION

A practitioner-built maturity guide for leaders redesigning work, decisions and culture

AI adoption maturity is the demonstrated ability to redesign work, decide, develop people, and govern AI for sustainable value.

START HERE
STRATEGIC INTENT

OPTIMIZER
Same output, lower cost. A margin play. Expect higher employee anxiety and plan the conversation for it.

AND/OR

EXPANDER
Same people, new capacity for work previously out of reach. A growth play. Shapes every metric and leadership message downstream.

MATURITY PROGRESSION
From experimentation to systemic intelligence

STAGE 1 **EXPERIMENTING** → STAGE 2 **OPERATIONALIZING** → STAGE 3 **INTEGRATING** → STAGE 4 **REINVENTING**

A cycle, not a line: Progress is uneven and iterative. Functions, workflows, and human systems can develop at different rates.

	STAGE 1 EXPERIMENTING	STAGE 2 OPERATIONALIZING	STAGE 3 INTEGRATING	STAGE 4 REINVENTING
DEFINITIONS	Teams innovate, test bounded uses, learn where AI adds value, and set basic safeguards.	Teams use AI reliably in defined processes, with trained users, accountable owners, and measured results.	Organizations redesign workflows, roles, and decision rights for measurable outcomes across functions.	Organizations continuously learn and use AI to enable new offerings and ways of operating.
CORE QUESTION	What can AI do?	How do we use AI reliably?	How does AI change how we run the business?	How does AI redefine our business model?
VALUE REALIZATION	Isolated productivity	Functional efficiency	Cross-enterprise impact	New value creation
WHAT TO MEASURE	Active use, learning, and early value	Task time, quality and rework	Workflow outcomes and cost-per-outcome	New capacity, revenue and business value

CONTEXT MODIFIERS
Factors that determine the pace of adoption

- **Regulatory intensity** (e.g., Health, insurance, legal, pharma)
- **Data sensitivity** (e.g., PII, HIPAA, IP exposure)
- **Organization scale** (e.g., Small firms lack large data sets)
- **External contracts** (e.g., Customer and vendor data terms)

THE 7 HUMAN SYSTEMS (WHAT EVOLVES AT EACH MATURITY LEVEL)

		STAGE 1 EXPERIMENTING	STAGE 2 OPERATIONALIZING	STAGE 3 INTEGRATING	STAGE 4 REINVENTING
1	**WORK DESIGN** How do we redesign work so people's roles, skills, and workload improve alongside AI?	Roles unchanged; skills self-taught; workload steady **AI as tool**	Roles add AI use cases; prompting and review skills; routine tasks offloaded **AI as assistant**	Roles redesigned around workflows; orchestration and judgment skills; workload rebalanced **AI as contributor**	Fluid, team-based roles; continuous reskilling; workload shifts to higher-value work **AI as catalyst**
2	**WORKFORCE CAPABILITY** Do people have the skills and judgment to use AI well and to question its output?	AI literacy and prompting; self-found use cases; safe space to play, fail and share. **Curious, self-taught tool users**	Role-based hands-on upskilling; prompting, review, and evaluation skills; adapting to tool changes. **Role-specific fluency with trained users**	Validating AI output with domain expertise and systems thinking; reskilling at scale before automation. **Judgment as the core skill**	Accountable oversight of AI agents; cross-functional collaboration skills valued; new learning paths for early-career staff. **Humans lead oversight and innovation**
3	**DECISION & GOVERNANCE** Who decides and who is accountable, with people able to intervene and recover?	Baseline guardrails: data use, vendor terms, human-in-the-loop; approved tools, basic rules, acceptable risk levels. **Safe to try**	Formal policies, incl. customer and vendor data agreements; an accountable owner per use case; principles-based policy. **Clear rules, clear owners**	Workflow owners are accountable; guardrails built into tools; decision-impact review and bias testing for people decisions; continuous monitoring for drift. **Governance in the flow of work**	Risk-based human oversight; kill switches and rollback tested; every human and agent decision has an owner; employees can challenge AI. **Oversight matched to risk**
4	**LEADERSHIP & CULTURE** How do leaders build trust, invite challenge, and own workforce effects?	Leaders demonstrate AI use and its limits, invite bounded experiments, and share learning without stigma. **Leaders go first**	Leaders role model AI use, set the roadmap, and explain what is changing and uncertain. **Leaders clarify direction, capitalize on trust and reward initiative**	Leaders align functions on shared outcomes, reinforce employee voice, and hold teams accountable. **Leaders set shared outcomes and accountability**	AI-forward mindset: leaders continuously redesign work, support challenge and learning, and own outcomes. **Leaders redesign and own outcomes**
5	**MOTIVATIONAL DRIVERS** What makes people want to use AI, and how are they rewarded for using it well?	Curiosity, play, and psychological safety; legacy reviews and pay unchanged. **Curiosity first, pay unchanged**	Job-specific clarity and protected time; rewards tied to effective AI use and critical validation. **Reward effective use**	Goals, recognition, and employee voice; multi-stakeholder review of AI-driven impact; pay anchored to skill agility. **Recognize cross-enterprise impact**	Purpose, mastery, and collective learning; fluid roles with pay anchored to value creation and agility. **Pay follows value and agility**
6	**OPERATING MODEL** How do we organize so ownership is clear, teams coordinate, and people keep a voice?	Siloed experimentation; each function's risk posture sets its pace; no shared ownership of AI. **Local and uneven**	Hybrid (central + function-led); tools rationalized; cross-functional AI teams (IT, legal, HR) form; workflows still follow the org chart. **Central standards, local ownership**	Platform + product model; cross-functional pods; clear ownership and coordination across boundaries. **Redesign how work flows across functions**	Fluid pods from a clean sheet; hybrid roles; agents in the org chart. **Build the organization around humans + AI**
7	**ECONOMICS & VALUE** What value does AI create, and how do we count workforce impact as part of it? Co-owned by HR + Finance	AI costs hide inside IT budgets; people may hide time saved; experimenting is unbudgeted. **Cost is hidden**	Token and usage costs tracked per team; capacity gains logged but not redeployed; savings tested. **Spend visible, savings tested**	Economics shifts to total cost of work: the best human–AI mix per workflow, at real price. **Total cost of work**	AI reshapes pricing, go-to-market and the human–AI labor mix while protecting talent capital. **Price value, not effort**

Developed through the 2026 HRSF AI Collaboratory, drawing on the lived experience of HR, talent, and business practitioners navigating AI adoption, and grounded in research.

Scan to read the full paper and framework.

For the full model, refer to: Sarkar-Barney, S., Arjannikova, S., Grantham, C., Rogowski, R., Pui, S. Y., & Baill, B. (2026, October). *The people strategy for AI adoption: An explainer and action guide to the seven human systems* [Working paper]. HR Strategy Forum, AI Collaboratory.