The People Strategy for AI Adoption

One-page summary of the working paper · HRSF AI Collaboratory · October 2026

AI doesn't stall because the tools are weak. It stalls because people don't trust it, don't own it, or haven't changed how they work. AI maturity isn't how much AI you use. It's how well you've redesigned work, decisions, skills, leadership, motivation, structure, and value so people and AI get lasting results together.

THE FRAMEWORK: FOUR STAGES, SEVEN HUMAN SYSTEMS

Start here: decide what AI is for. Optimizer (same output, lower cost), Expander (same people, new capacity), or both? Say it out loud. It shapes everything that follows.

	1 Experimenting	2 Operationalizing	3 Integrating	4 Reinventing
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?*
WHAT IT DELIVERS	**Isolated productivity**	**Functional efficiency**	**Cross-enterprise impact**	**New value creation**

The seven human systems are how work is designed, how people build skills, who decides, how leaders lead, why people commit, how the organization is set up, and how value is counted. **Progress is a cycle, not a line:** teams move at different speeds, so look at one team at a time.

WHAT WE LEARNED, AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

What we learned

- **The bottleneck is people.** About three-quarters of the difficulty in Ai Adoption sits in hidden costs.
- **Look at one team, not the company.** Teams mature at different speeds, so a profile beats a single score.
- **Stage 2 to 3 is the hardest step.** Adding AI to a task is easy. Changing how work flows across teams is not.
- **Trust decides everything.** If people think AI is about cutting jobs, they hide the time they save.
- **Good guardrails speed things up.** The gap is usually missing owners, not missing policy.
- **Count value honestly.** Rework and extra review can wipe out the savings.

Seven steps to start

1. **Pick one team** or workflow.
2. **Say what AI is for,** in plain words.
3. **Note what limits you:** rules, data, contracts.
4. **Rate the seven systems** with evidence, not intent.
5. **Find the one** holding the others back.
6. **Choose two or three moves** for the next 90 days.
7. **Measure and recheck** every 6 to 12 months.

HOW IT WAS BUILT

Built from five 2026 sessions with 247 practitioners from 79 organizations, about 220,000 words of discussion. AI helped us find themes in the transcripts and draft the papers, guided by the authors. **Scan or visit aicollab.hrstrategyforum.org/content for the full paper.**

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.