Article

Dec 2025

Don't Throw AI at IT: A Guide for Leaders

Artificial intelligence has quickly moved from a 'future trend' to an operational reality.



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Tools that can maximise your team's impact by reducing repetitive processes, improve revenue by predicting behaviour and make faster and better decisions by analysing patterns are now accessible to organisations of every size.

And AI is technology, right? So buy a tool, hand it to IT, and hope value follows?...

But that approach rarely works.

The businesses approaching AI as an organisation wide programme, not an IT rollout, are the ones driving real value.

Leaders need to understand what AI is (and isn't), where it can drive real value, and crucially what foundations must be in place around people, data, and trust.

What AI really is

AI is best understood as a set of technologies that perform tasks we traditionally associate with human intelligence - recognising speech, classifying images, generating text, or making predictions. Crucially, AI is not 'thinking'.

AI systems spot patterns in data and estimate likely outcomes - such as the next word in a sentence or whether a transaction looks fraudulent. They're prediction engines that use statistical models trained on large volumes of data, not hand-crafted rules. They improve as they're exposed to more and better information.

Use it on what slows you down, not what makes you special

AI is a powerful amplifier of pattern-based work, but it must be used with appropriate oversight, constraints, and expectations. One of our favourite pieces of advice is to *use it on what slows you down, not what makes you special.* If you're a call centre, don't replace all of your people with chatbots. Instead look at repetitive tasks and processes that can be augmented by technology.

To ensure AI drives value, and not just noise, businesses must have the foundations in place.

At Waterstons we like to distil those foundations into three areas of data, people and trust.

Data: Data is the fuel for AI and it's where you'll find your cutting edge. Treat your data like a core business asset. Without reliable data, AI will surface guesswork; with it, you get dependable decisions and measurable results.

People: AI is a stepchange for the workforce. People are worried about job security. Leaders need to set out a clear and well communicated strategy, and invest in practical training and support to enable people to adopt AI with confidence.

Trust: Good brakes let you go faster. Robust governance, security, and responsible use are what enable speed, not what slow it down. Put the guardrails in place so you can move quickly and safely.

What leaders need to be thinking about

Firstly, discuss AI at board level – particularly the 'people' element where leaders play a key role.

Think about where it fits into your organisational strategy, not just the digital strategy. AI is an organisation wide priority and thought IT are critical enablers they're not the sole owners.

Finally assess your readiness - thinking about your strategy and scope, infrastructure and integration, compliance and governance, use cases and tooling, and culture. Find your gaps and put plans in place to build your maturity.

'Don't throw AI at IT' is a leadership challenge

With senior sponsorship AI becomes more than a buzzword - it becomes a disciplined, strategic capability that helps your organisation serve customers better, empower your workforce, and operate more intelligently in a fast-changing world.

Ready to make AI work harder for your organisation? Drop Stan a line at stan.neal@waterstons.com for practical guidance and next steps. Want the bigger picture of what we offer? Email us at ai@waterstons.com.