Which rung is your organization on?

AN ASSESSMENT FOR EXECUTIVES

Eleven questions about your AI investment and what it is currently returning. The first three take ninety seconds.

Most organizations have now spent real money on AI and cannot clearly identify the financial return. That is not a failure of effort. Acquiring the licences was the part that could be done quickly, and it got done.

What has not happened is redesigning the work around what was acquired. The tools made individual steps faster and everything around those steps stayed where it was. Somebody drafts in twenty minutes what used to take two hours, and the draft then waits six days on the same three sign-offs. The person feels the gain. The business never sees it.

The deeper change is to the roles themselves. When the first draft, the first analysis and the first pass are produced in minutes, the job is no longer producing them. It is judging the output, directing the next step and deciding what happens with it. Organizations that have not redesigned roles around that split are paying people to do work the tools now do, and paying for the tools as well.

In *So Now What? Recognizing Four Organizational States in an AI-Driven World*, I place organizations on one of four rungs. On the second, the licences are bought, access is broad, and the work itself is unchanged. On the fourth, the work and the roles inside it have been redesigned around what the tools now make possible. About three in four organizations sit on the second rung. Roughly one in twenty are on the fourth.

What follows is a way to work out where your organization currently sits. Three questions you can answer right now from what you already know, then eight that go further, a few of which need a figure you may have to look up.

Part one: the acid test

Answer these from memory. Do not look anything up. About ninety seconds.

1. Which of the primary strategic objectives driving your company does your AI spending serve?

Not one of the hundreds of goals written down somewhere. One of the few the business is genuinely being driven by, set before this technology was on the agenda.

2. Who is accountable for the result it produces?

A name, and a result that was written down at the time. Not the outcome that was hoped for.

3. Name one process that runs materially differently today than it did two years ago, as a direct result of that spending.

Not faster. Differently. A step removed, a handoff eliminated, a decision made at a different level, work that used to be sequential now running in parallel.

What your three answers say

If you could not name an objective, the spending was not aimed at where the business is trying to go. It will not move it any closer, however well the tools themselves perform. There was a rationale, almost certainly. It was just not one of the few that matter.

If you could not name a person and a written result, then no outcome available to you can prove the investment worked or failed, in either direction. That cuts both ways, and it means the next approval gets made on exactly the same basis as the last one.

If you could not name a process, the honest answer is usually that individuals are doing the same work more quickly. That is a real gain and it is worth having. It is not an organizational return and it will not appear in your results. That is the second rung.

And if you could name one, ask whether anyone's role changed with it. A process that runs differently while every job description stays as it was is halfway there, and that is where most organizations that have started tend to stop. The return arrives when the people in that process are doing something different, not when they are doing the same thing with better tools.

Missing all three is the common case rather than the embarrassing one. Redesigning the work around what was acquired is the step almost nobody has taken.

Why the distinction is worth making. Capability that was acquired and never redesigned around does not sit still, it sits unused. The organizations that redesigned the work, and the roles inside it, are capturing a return the rest are not, and that difference compounds. Cutting headcount once execution gets faster is real money, and it is the smaller half of what is available, because it takes a one-time saving out of a process nobody redesigned.

If you answered all three cleanly, you are in a very small group and there is probably nothing here for you. Part two is for everyone else.

Part two: the harder half

No scoring. Some need a figure you may not carry in your head, and the rest need nothing but an honest answer. They are the ones worth working through before the next approval.

ON THE SPEND

4. Over the last two years, roughly what has the organization committed to AI, counting licences, tooling, integration work and the internal time spent standing it up?

5. Was that one decision, or a series of smaller ones that nobody has ever added together?

6. What was the largest single item, and what was it bought to do, in the words used at the time?

ON WHAT SURVIVES

7. Run the first two questions of the acid test across the whole portfolio, item by item. How much of it survives?

Renewal is the practical test. Anything that cannot answer both should not be renewed. Executives who apply it tend to find the spending goes down rather than up.

ON WHERE THE TIME GOES

8. Take one piece of work that is now demonstrably faster to produce. How long does it take to get from produced to done, and where in that chain does nearly all the time now sit?

For most organizations the answer is the approval chain. It was built for work that arrived slowly and it did not change when the work started arriving quickly.

9. Which steps in that process exist only because a person originally had to do them?

ON WHO MOVES IT

10. Who owns the redesign of the work itself, as distinct from tooling, adoption and enablement?

11. Have you reduced headcount as execution got faster, and if so, was the process it came out of redesigned first or left as it was?

One last thing

These questions will tell you which rung you are on. What they cannot tell you is which part of the work to redesign first, because that depends on the business, what it actually runs, and where the time is currently going.

That is worth settling before the next approval rather than after it. An organization that has chosen one process and redesigned it has learned how to do the next one, which is the only route off the second rung. One that has not will keep buying capability it never converts, and the gap between what the investment returns and what it could return will stay exactly where it is.

If you would rather not work that out on your own, there is time set aside for these conversations at calendly.com/tom-mawhinney/executive-discussions

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More on this, including the books, is on my LinkedIn profile: linkedin.com/in/tommawhinney

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