

Building a digital culture that makes tech projects work

A qualitative guide for industry, based on original interviews with 80+ UK companies – each employing between 10 and 10,000 people

STRATEGIC PARTNER

**east midlands
chamber**

Derbyshire | Leicestershire | Nottinghamshire



How to use this guide

This original research is for business leaders who are preparing to invest in digital tools and AI - and who are concerned about not getting the results they expect.

The technology is often not the problem, it is the culture that drives adoption that is. It's based on our original research of 80+ real UK businesses and it's designed so you can read it in less than 10 minutes.

Former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (now becoming a leading commentator on the opportunity of AI) recently described how he had been struck in conversations with British businesses about how often AI projects stall for reasons that have nothing to do with the technology itself.

Mr Sunak drew attention to a new playbook from the [Stanford Digital Economy Lab](#). It looks at 51 companies that have deployed AI and shows why outcomes vary so much.

Two companies can try to do the same thing with AI and end up in completely different places. Businesses making most progress are not necessarily the ones with access to better tech, but are prepared to adapt how they operate around it.

That thinking informs this guide:

- descriptions of cultural barriers that stop AI and digital tools from delivering
- evidence-based patterns from our own interviews with company leaders
- simple, practical moves to close the culture gap and accelerate AI.

77%

of the hardest challenges were invisible costs (change management etc). Only 23% were technical.

1

fintech migrated millions of lines of legacy code in weeks. A major bank said such projects take multiple years.

43%

said executive sponsorship was the biggest accelerator: weekly check-ins, active blocker removal, AI tied to company KPIs etc.

35%

said staff functions were the most frequent source of resistance - ahead of end users (23%), external stakeholders (23%), and C-level (15%).

8

cases where co-sponsorship between business and technical leaders was the deciding factor in success.

2

cases reported of frontline resistance based on fear of job loss - far less than expected.

61%

of successes included a prior failed attempt. There was a pattern: teams did not treat it as a process and change project.

73%

started small deliberately - with 63% framing pilot tech projects explicitly as experiments.

The story behind delivery

The Enterprise AI Playbook is a 2026 report from the Stanford Digital Economy Lab that distils lessons from 51 successful enterprise AI deployments across 41 organisations in seven countries.

Written by Elisa Pereira, Alvin Wang Graylin and Erik Brynjolfsson, it provides a practitioner-focused guide to what is actually working inside companies - moving beyond hype and predictions to documented use cases delivering measurable value.

The findings are compelling, with some headlines presented to the left. The authors argue that the main determinants of AI success are organisational factors: leadership, incentives, processes, human oversight and change readiness - not choices of tech.

About our research

This business-led White Paper draws on qualitative research from more than 80 semi-structured interviews with leaders and practitioners across sectors including manufacturing, professional services, IT, legal, healthcare, and creative industries.

Participants ranged from CEOs and operations directors to HR leads, team managers, and frontline staff in organisations from 10 people to 10,000+.

The interviews explored real-world experience of AI and digital transformation programmes: where they created value, where they failed to land, and why some SMEs build organisations that genuinely use technology better every year while others cycle through the same adoption problems repeatedly.

What we heard was consistent. Most leaders could describe exactly what their AI investment was supposed to do. Very few could describe what they had done to ensure their people were ready to make it work.

Our findings are validated by the largest academic study of enterprise AI to date Stanford University's Digital Economy Lab recently published

We are here to look at that too.



‘Tech is an enabler that needs to be embraced in organisations or you're going to get left behind’

Director

Workplace health specialist
Scotland



The core problem

Most SMEs now have access to more AI and digital capability than they have ever had - and more of it is affordable than ever before.

Yet across our interviews, the same pattern emerged: tools deployed but ignored, AI pilots that never scaled, and capable people reverting to spreadsheets and workarounds within weeks of systems going live.

The problem is not the technology. In almost all cases where digital investment failed to deliver, the root cause was cultural: an unprepared workforce,

a leadership team that did not role-model new ways of working, or a middle management layer that actively or passively resisted change because they had not been brought along.

The result is a culture gap - a disconnect between the digital capability an organisation has paid for and the digital behaviours it actually practises every day.

This gap is especially costly for SMEs which cannot absorb years of failed adoption. They need AI and digital tools to deliver quickly. Closing the culture gap is how that happens.

Why this matters now

Three forces make digitisation urgent rather than optional for employers:

- The AI capability gap is accelerating. Early adopters are now using AI to compress tasks that took hours into seconds, automate compliance, and allocate resources in real time. SMEs that have the tools but not the culture to use them are not standing still - they are falling behind competitors who are reinvesting their efficiency gains into further advantage.
- Most AI projects fail before they start. Across our interviews, operations directors and business owners returned to the same conclusion: "Unless you've got your culture in place and your people ready, AI is hopeless." They had seen it in their own organisations. Expensive tools, low adoption, frustrated teams, and no measurable return.
- The compound cost of inaction. Research by the British Chambers of Commerce found that 43% of SMEs have no plans to introduce AI. For many, this is not a strategic decision. It is a confidence gap driven by not knowing where to start - and a culture that has not yet made digital change feel safe to try.

Leaders who close this gap now create organisations that become progressively more capable. Those who do not face a compound disadvantage that grows harder to reverse every year.



Three common challenges

1. The AI capability gap is accelerating

Our research identified a consistent failure pattern in SMEs where AI adoption stalled: leaders who endorsed digital change in strategy meetings but did not visibly change their own behaviour. They continued to manage by email chains, request reports in formats that bypassed new systems, and make decisions without reference to the data the new tools were designed to surface.

Their teams noticed. When leadership behaviour does not change, the signal to the rest of the organisation is clear: the new tools are optional. Adoption becomes a compliance exercise rather than a genuine shift in how work gets done. The gap between strategy and reality compounds month by month.

2. Middle management becomes a silent barrier

Across our interviews, middle managers emerged as the single most important and most under-supported group in any digital culture programme. Caught between leadership expectations and the pressure to hit immediate output targets, many make a rational short-term decision: let the new system run in parallel, keep the old process as a safety net, and manage both.

Several leaders described a scenario that will be familiar. A new AI tool is deployed. Data gets entered into it, but decisions continue to be made from the spreadsheet people trust. Months later, the tool shows low engagement and the conclusion is drawn that AI is not right for this business. The tool was not the problem. Middle management was never given the reason, the time, or the support to change.

3. The anxiety that AI invokes

AI provokes a specific kind of anxiety in workforces that most leaders underestimate. When productivity language dominates the introduction of new tools – doing more with less, removing manual steps, automating tasks – frontline teams translate this quickly: some of us will no longer be needed.

The result is a workforce that goes through the motions of adoption while privately hoping the tool fails. Passive resistance, minimal engagement, and a return to familiar workarounds are the predictable outcomes. Our interviews showed this across sectors – from professional services to manufacturing – wherever AI was introduced through a cost reduction narrative rather than a capability one.

What successful implementers are doing differently

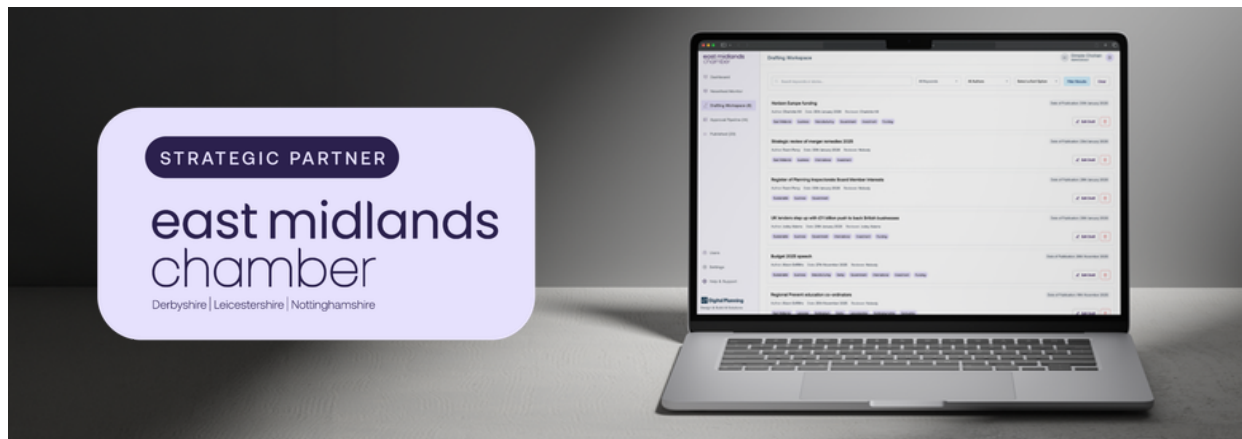
From the research and Digital Planning's AI transformation work, the SMEs that successfully close the culture gap share several behaviours:

- They build the case for people, not just for the business. They introduce AI by showing what it removes from people's working day - the repetitive, frustrating, low-value tasks - rather than leading with efficiency savings. The conversation starts with "here is what this frees you to do" rather than "here is what this replaces."
- They involve people before they deploy tools. They identify the specific frustrations and friction points that AI could address by talking to the people doing the work - not just the people managing it. The result is tools that solve real problems rather than tools built around assumptions.
- They make AI literacy a continuous habit, not a training event. They create regular, informal spaces where people share what they have tried, what worked, and what surprised them. Capability builds incrementally and the organisation develops its own language and confidence around AI.
- They close silos deliberately. They use digital and AI projects as an opportunity to break down functional boundaries - placing people from different teams on the same problems. Digital knowledge spreads through the organisation rather than concentrating in a technical team that others cannot access or trust.
- They recruit for diversity of thinking, not just digital skills. The most digitally capable organisations in our research were not the ones with the most technologists. They were the ones whose leaders had deliberately assembled teams with varied backgrounds, experiences, and problem-solving styles - and then created the conditions for those teams to learn together.

‘AI note-taking reduced governance activity time by at least 75%’

Director

Manufacturing consultancy
Scotland



Example: Productivity gains at East Midlands Chamber

Digital Planning partnered with East Midlands Chamber, the UK's largest chamber of commerce, to help deliver AI News Editor - a proprietary public affairs content productivity platform that now underpins EMC's emerging AI strategy.

EMC's manual process for reacting to government announcements required comms officers to monitor news, interpret relevance, draft from scratch and secure director sign-off, a manual process often taking several hours and with in-built risk of missing fast-moving news cycles.

Following research and concept development, Digital Planning was commissioned as technology partner to scope and build an AI-powered editorial content management system capable of autonomously reading, prioritising, drafting and funnelling media statements for officer approval - all within a single gated platform.

The system now monitors Government newsfeeds, prioritises policy-relevant stories using proprietary algorithms, generates draft releases, routes them to comms officers for editing, manages director approvals, archives final copy and reshapes content for social channels.

In testing from November 2025, AI News Editor cut response times to government announcements by around 58% and reduced reaction times to reports and bills by 70%. It removed a significant administrative burden from comms officers and directors meaning time could be redeployed to member-focussed activities.

The system has improved policy communication to more than 4,000 members, strengthened EMC's regional media presence, and opened up future licensing opportunities. It has also won the Best Use of AI prize at the CIPR Midlands PR Awards 2026.

Change playbook



Step 1. Map where culture drives / blocks digital performance

Identify the 5–10 recurring decisions where digital tools should be making a difference but are not. For each decision ask:

- What information do we actually use today?
- What systems do we ignore – and why?
- Who is making workarounds, and what does that tell us?

Step 2. Involve the team before you commit

Before going ahead with a new tool:

- Speak to the people doing the work, not just those managing it
- Identify specific frustrations the tool could address
- Design human oversight levels that match task stakes

Step 3. Leaders must use the tools visibly

Executive sponsorship accelerated 43% of Stanford's successful projects. Make it visible:

- Leadership should demonstrate using the tools in relevant meetings
- Decision should highlight the use of the new tools
- Leaders should share increased productivity from tools.

Step 4. Support middle management to lead change

Once you can trust your data for a specific area, you can introduce optimisation and decision intelligence safely. For example:

- Using AI-driven planning to cut scheduling time from hours to seconds for a single line or product family
- Testing alternative scenarios – such as adding a shift, changing batch sizes, or resequencing orders – before you commit to a plan

This kind of pilot lets you prove value, build trust, and refine the model before rolling out more widely.

Step 5. Embed and scale

Finally, move from “project” to “operating model”:

- Make optimised planning and live visibility a standard part of daily and weekly routines, not an optional extra
- Capture feedback from planners, supervisors, and operators and adjust rules accordingly
- Extend the approach to adjacent areas (e.g. from one line to another, from one site to the network)





Quick wins in 90 days

For time-poor SME leaders, here are concrete actions that typically deliver early value:

- Create a single operational performance view for one area (e.g. finishing or packaging) that replaces multiple reports and ad-hoc spreadsheets.
- Standardise promise dates by basing them on a simple, shared model of capacity rather than individual judgement, even if it is imperfect to start with.
- Automate one report that currently takes hours of manual collation each week, using integration between existing systems.

- Run a planning “health check” with a specialist to identify where decisions rely on stale or incomplete data.
- Define a no-surprises customer communication rule, such as always informing key customers by a specific time if their order is at risk.

Each of these can be scoped, delivered, and evaluated within 90 days in most SME environments, often without capital expenditure on new machinery.

Common pitfalls to avoid

The research highlights patterns that repeatedly derail digital change initiatives:

- Leading with efficiency language. When the teams hear “do more with less” they assume “some of us aren’t needed”. Frame AI as capability expansion, not cost reduction.
- Training once, then expecting adoption. Only 1 in 5 SMEs provide AI training. Even fewer make it continuous. Digital capability builds through repeated exposure, not one-off events.
- Ignoring middle management. They are where strategy meets reality. Unsupported middle managers become the silent barrier to every digital initiative.
- Assuming the tool will fix the broken process. Most failed projects believe AI will fix the process instead of requiring a process redesign. Fix the process, then apply AI.



‘Unless you've got your digital code in place - and you've got a rock solid data set - AI is hopeless.’

Director

Manufacturing Consultancy
North West



How Digital Planning helps

Digital Planning engineers connected systems that power effective organisations. Working across automation, integration, AI and optimisation, our software platforms as a single coherent operating system.

For small firms, that typically looks like:

- Automation and integration that replaces manual, spreadsheet-driven workflows with connected systems that reflect how your factory really runs.
- AI, optimisation & decision intelligence that embeds optimisation at the decision layer, so planning and scheduling reflect real constraints and trade-offs while keeping humans in control.

- Diagnostics & modelling that use short, focused engagements to map your current decisions and data, identify the highest-value opportunities, and de-risking the roadmap before you commit to investment in new systems.

- Software and platforms that build and run long-lived assets (such as dashboards, planning tools, integrations) that your team can rely on every day - rather than a series of disjointed short-term projects.

Our approach has delivered our clients results such as large reductions in planning time, faster communication cycles, and material improvements in operational efficiency. It targets specific decision points rather than trying to “digitise everything” in one go.

Checklist for leaders

You can use this page as a quick self-assessment of whether your organisation would benefit from a tech project. Simply answer yes/no to the following statements.

If you answer 'no' to three or more, there is likely to be material value in a focused review of your digital operating model. Digital Planning will start with the specific decisions and pain points in one area - rather than the entire business.

	Yes	No
We can see, in one place, what is running, what is late, and why.		
Our planning decisions are based on live data (not end-of-day spreadsheets).		
We know the 5-10 decisions that most affect our margins and lead times.		
We have a single agreed view of capacity when we promise dates to customers.		
Our operators and planners were directly involved in designing our systems.		
We have at least one example of automation that removed repetitive work from skilled people in the last 12 months.		
We can explain, in plain language, how any AI or optimisation we use actually improves a decision we make.		
We have a named owner for digital operations who is accountable for outcomes, not just projects.		

Next steps

If our research reflects what you are seeing in your own company, the next step does not need to be a large project. Typical next moves for small businesses with Digital Planning include:

- A short, structured diagnostic and modelling session to map your current decisions, data and constraints and identify the top one or two opportunities worth pursuing.
- A tightly scoped pilot on planning and visibility for a single line or product family, designed to prove value within 90 days using your real data and constraints.
- A conversation about how to embed optimisation at the decision layer of your organisation - where strategy turns into repeated choices - without losing the human judgement that makes your business competitive.

You can find out more, and arrange an obligation-free conversation with our team, at www.digitalplanning.tech.



This guide was published by Digital Planning Ltd (company number 13095073).

Visit us at Advanced Technology Innovation Centre, 5 Oakwood Drive, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3QF or call 01509 974885.