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AI Engineering Capabilities Study

Series: AI-Storytelling

The AI-FIRST CEO/CXO: Why AI Must Be CEO-Led

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Introduction:

According to IBM's 2023 CEO Study, over 60% of global CEOs now view AI as a key driver of their business strategy, yet only a fraction is actively leading the charge. That gap could undermine the value enterprises get from the generative AI (GenAI) and agentic AI efforts.

In an era where AI is rapidly reshaping industries, customer expectations and the competitive landscape, enterprise leadership's role in AI adoption has never been more critical. Yet, many organizations still treat AI as an IT/ digital project or siloed innovation experiments in functional pockets.

That's no longer enough.

To truly harness the transformative power of AI, companies must make a foundational shift from tech-enabled businesses to AI-native enterprises. And that shift must start at the top.

Why Must CEOs Lead AI Programs?

AISWITCH ™ focuses on enterprise AI leverage in every facet of business decision-making and strategic actions. This necessitates direct involvement from the CEO and CXOs. Here's why:

- **AI for Strategic Differentiation:** AI can serve as a primary source of competitive advantage, influencing how companies innovate and grow. Enterprise leaders who set overall company strategy and resource allocation are best positioned to prioritize where AI should be targeted.
- **Enterprise-Wide Impact:** AI@scale should create positive impact across all stakeholders, customers, markets, shareholders and employees, and thus requires cohesive leadership. AI is not a departmental project, it must become part of the core, creating visible wins and impact throughout the company and its value chain.
- **Long-Term Investment:** AI initiatives often have extended ROI timelines, demanding a visionary approach aligned with the company's strategic roadmap.
- **AI Accountability & Risk Management:** CEOs must own, control and manage AI risks, which include bias, data privacy, explainability and more – because these issues directly impact brand trust, regulatory compliance and societal impact. Strategic AI risk dashboards therefore should have CEO-CXO level visibility and hence must be designed in simple visuals, focusing on maximum 3-5 top-priority risk indicators.

The AI-First CEO: A 360° Stakeholder Perspective

The AI-First CEO builds and maintains a holistic view that considers the enterprise AI leverage across the 360-value chain. Brief examples of key considerations are introduced below.

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Markets

AI has emerged as the most transformative tech-stack or tool, to help execute a strategy and achieve key business objectives. To keep AI efforts and opportunities focused, CXO leaders must continually ask: "What unique competitive advantages are we achieving through our AI initiatives?"

Agentic and generative AI use cases, and eventually the robotic/physical AI applications, can lead to

- New competitive positioning,
- New markets and customer segments,
- New channels and revenue streams,
- Major productivity gains and cost efficiencies through consistent delivery and reduced rework
- Improved market share, profitability and operating margins.

CXO leadership must focus on how the enterprise AI applications are contributing to these strategic performance indicators, impacting the company's growth and differentiation vis-à-vis competition.

Customers

For AI to provide strategic differentiation to customers, organizations should explore: "How effectively are we leveraging AI to deliver differentiated experiences to our diverse customer personas?"

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Generative and agentic AI use cases e.g. customer service agents and digital assistants, enable hyper-personalized, intelligent customer interactions on a scale. CEOs across different industries must ensure that these AI use cases are embedded in all customer touchpoints to enhance satisfaction, retention, loyalty, profitability and growth in CLV (Customer Lifetime Value).

Shareholders & Board

The CEO/ CXO leadership must always be ready to answer: "How do our stakeholders perceive our AI maturity relative to competitors?"

Transparent communication about AI strategies, execution and outcomes builds investor confidence and demonstrates the company's commitment to innovation.

Talent & Ecosystem

Perception is often reality, so enterprise leaders need to know: "What is the perception of our AI maturity among employees, partners and potential talent?"

An AI-first culture starts at the top. CEOs must build an internal ecosystem where experimentation is rewarded, talent is continuously upskilled and cross-functional teams collaborate seamlessly with AI systems.

A bold AI vision attracts top talent and fosters organizational resilience, bolstering the employer brand. Providing consistent, visible executive support for AI programs will underscore the organization’s commitment and help attract and retain the necessary talent.

Conclusion:

Being an AI-first CEO transcends technical expertise; it's about visionary leadership, strategic investment and championing a culture of experimentation and cross-functional collaboration. By taking full ownership of the AI agenda, CEOs can position their organizations at the forefront of the next industrial revolution powered by intelligence, speed and trust.

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