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How to Prioritise AI Use Cases Without Killing Innovation

The AI Operating Model Playbook

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January 2026

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Opening context

As AI portfolios grow, prioritisation becomes unavoidable. Leaders are asked to focus investment, reduce duplication, and demonstrate progress. In response, organisations often impose tighter controls and more rigid selection criteria.

While well intentioned, these approaches frequently suppress the very experimentation that makes AI valuable. Innovation slows, learning narrows, and teams become risk-averse.

The problem is not prioritisation itself. It is how prioritisation is designed.

Why this fails in most organisations

Traditional prioritisation frameworks emphasise predictability. Use cases are ranked based on projected financial return, delivery certainty, or strategic alignment. Initiatives that cannot demonstrate immediate value are deprioritised.

AI does not fit neatly into this logic. Early-stage use cases often generate learning rather than revenue. Their value lies in what they teach the organisation, not what they deliver immediately.

When prioritisation focuses solely on short-term outcomes, learning is crowded out. The portfolio becomes efficient in appearance but brittle in practice.

The operating model insight

Effective prioritisation in AI portfolios is about sequencing learning, not eliminating uncertainty.

This requires recognising different types of value. Some initiatives reduce technical risk. Others build reusable assets. Others test adoption or governance assumptions. Financial return matters, but it is not the only signal.

Prioritisation should therefore consider learning velocity, reuse potential, and strategic optionality alongside traditional metrics.

What this looks like in practice

Organisations that prioritise well maintain a mix of exploratory and scaling initiatives. They are explicit about why each use case is funded and what decision it informs.

Review forums focus on what has been learned, not just what has been delivered. Initiatives progress, pivot, or stop based on evidence rather than optimism.

This approach preserves innovation while imposing discipline. It channels experimentation toward outcomes rather than constraining it.

Common mistakes to avoid

Forcing all use cases to meet the same financial thresholds.

Equating focus with reduction in experimentation.

Treating prioritisation as a static ranking exercise.

Assuming that uncertainty is a sign of weakness rather than a feature of learning.

What leaders must do differently

Leaders must redefine what good prioritisation looks like in an AI context.

This means valuing learning explicitly, protecting early-stage experimentation, and ensuring that focus is achieved through sequencing rather than suppression.

Conclusion

Prioritisation does not have to kill innovation.

When designed as an operating discipline, it enables organisations to learn faster, allocate resources more effectively, and build AI capability with intent.

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