



# The Leader's Guide to Making AI Stick

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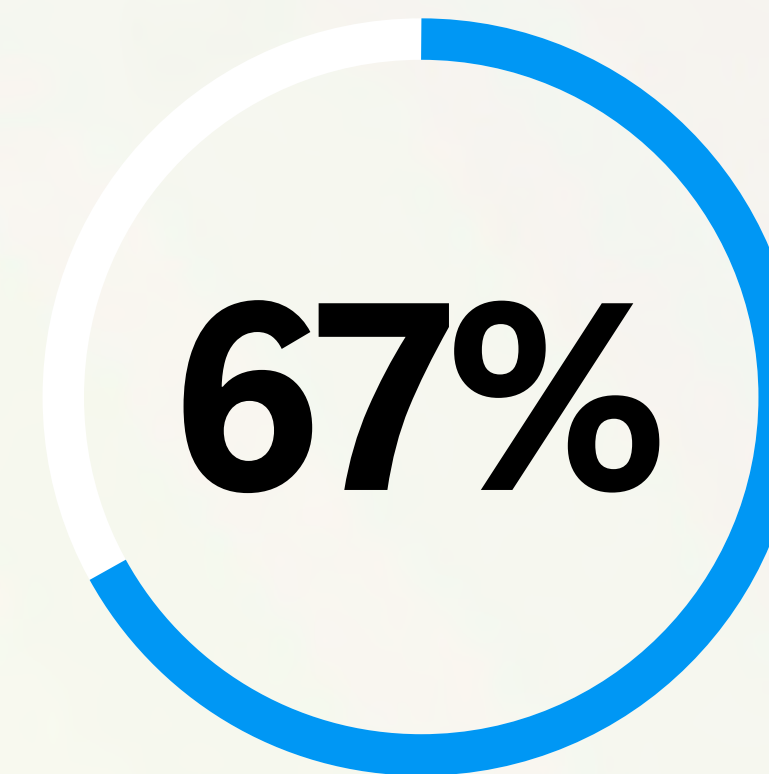
# The factors that make AI investments pay off



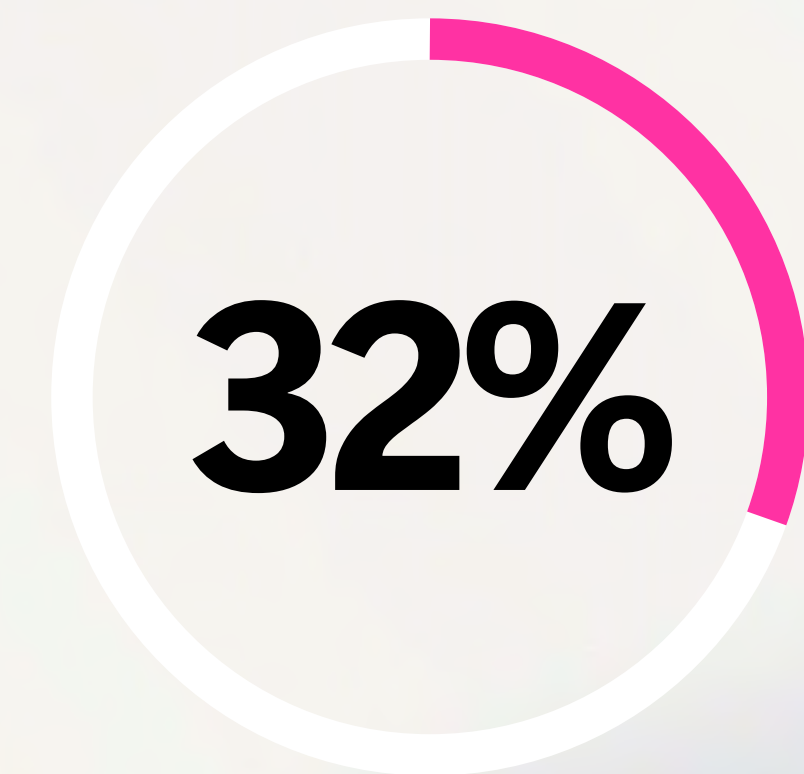
Your most advanced AI users are probably waiting on you.

Companies are paying for AI, and a growing share of employees are already using it in advanced, resourceful ways. The most advanced among them run entire workflows with agents, moving beyond quick assists. What holds most organisations back isn't employee resistance or lack of skill. It's that the systems, structures and signals around people haven't caught up to what those employees can already do. This guide helps leaders close that gap and is grounded in a key finding from Microsoft's [2026 Work Trend Index](#): *organisational factors account for twice the reported AI impact of individual effort alone*.<sup>1</sup>

Where AI's real impact comes from<sup>1</sup>



Organisational factors (culture, manager support, talent practices)



Individual mindset and behaviour

## Where the work begins

That environment is set at the top by key leaders and operationalised through managers. For many organisations, this is the constraint, not employee willingness: only **one in four** AI users say their leadership is clearly and consistently aligned on AI.<sup>1</sup> Without that alignment, even the most capable people experiment in isolation, and what they learn largely stays trapped on their own team.

The shift underway is from AI helping individuals finish tasks to agents running workflows over and over, turning isolated wins into organisational impact. The leaders who are pulling ahead have set different conditions. Here's what those look like.



02

# The three conditions that separate Frontier teams

The 2026 Work Trend Index identifies a group Microsoft calls **Frontier Professionals**: the most advanced AI users in the research. They run multi-step work through agents, build multi-agent systems and routinely rethink workflows to find where agents can augment or take over execution. What sets this small (but disproportionately valuable) group apart is the conditions they work in. Their managers openly model AI use, set a quality bar for it and make it safe to experiment. Talent and tools matter less than the environment.

The difference is delegation. Frontier teams hand execution to agents and spend their attention on the work that's left. Leaders set the direction and managers turn it into daily practice: modelling the behaviour themselves, coaching the judgement and reviewing the work.

Frontier managers do three things differently with AI<sup>1</sup>

## Model it

Managers who use AI openly:

■ Frontier managers  
■ Non-Frontier managers



## Review it

Managers who set quality standards:



## Reinforce it

Managers who make space to experiment:



*Share of Frontier Professionals vs. non-Frontier Professionals who say their manager does each.*

## Model it

When leaders openly use AI in their own work, it signals to every layer below that experimentation is sanctioned and that the standard for the work itself is changing. Leaders set the signal; managers make it observable, day to day. More people use AI as a result, and the gains show up in the numbers.

What employees gain when managers actively model AI use<sup>1</sup>

+17 pts: AI value

+22 pts: Critical thinking

+30 pts: Trust in agentic AI

*Reported lift among employees whose managers actively model AI use, versus those whose managers don't.*

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**Leadership move:** At your next leadership review, share one specific AI action from your own work, then ask your managers to do the same with their teams. Modelling travels downward, but only if it starts somewhere visible.



## Review it

As AI speeds up execution, your quality bar becomes what protects the work. A faster draft only helps if everyone knows what a good one looks like. Setting that bar is a leadership job; managers turn it into a daily habit.

In our research, this looks more like a habit than a policy: a manager walks the team through an AI-assisted draft, naming what needs human judgement and what doesn't. The standard becomes repeatable instead of living in one person's head.

**Leadership move:** Ask a manager to show you one piece of AI-assisted work and explain what 'good' means for that output. The question itself gives managers the language to set the same expectation with their own teams.

### Quality review questions for AI-assisted work

Use these during a team review to make the standard visible and repeatable:

- What was AI asked to do?
- What did the human change, reject or verify?
- What standard did the final output need to meet?
- What should the team repeat next time?



## Reinforce it

Most employees already see how AI is changing their work, and **65%** worry about falling behind if they don't adapt quickly.<sup>1</sup> But reinvention carries personal risk, while doing the job the old way still gets recognised. That's why **45%** say it feels safer to hit their current goals than to redesign how they work with AI.<sup>1</sup>

That instinct is rational: only **13%** of AI users say reinvention is rewarded even if results aren't met.<sup>1</sup> The 2026 Work Trend Index calls this the Transformation Paradox. In Frontier environments, the math is different: Frontier Professionals are **twice as likely** to say reinvention counts regardless of outcome.<sup>1</sup>

If managers are measured only on this quarter's output, they'll protect this quarter's process. Leaders fix this by making reinvention part of how performance is recognised, so good attempts count even when they don't pan out. Managers reinforce it by naming those attempts out loud. Formal incentives are one lever: make workflow redesign a core expectation in manager objectives rather than a stretch goal.

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**Leadership move:** At your next leadership review, ask your managers what their teams tried with AI that didn't work. Managers pass that question downward. It signals that experimentation is part of the job, not a detour from it.



03

# Redesign one workflow, then build a system that repeats

The three conditions create readiness, but that only matters when it changes real work. The goal is better work, not just faster output. As AI takes on execution, the value of a person's work moves upstream – into framing the problem, judging whether the output is any good and owning the call. **86%** of AI users already say they treat AI output as a starting point to be refined, not a final answer and stay responsible for the thinking.<sup>1</sup> Agents are what turn AI from experimentation into real workflow change. They don't just assist – they execute multistep work inside defined boundaries, enabling teams to redesign how work gets done, not just speed up existing tasks.

Frontier managers don't stop at making AI safe to use. They push for ambitious redesign, and it shows in the research (**87%** of Frontier Professionals say their

manager encourages it, versus **61%** of others).<sup>1</sup> The fastest way to act on that isn't an enterprise-wide transformation programme. It's a single workflow, run with one team as a proof point, on a learning loop you can repeat.

Agents are already executing real work, running multistep processes inside set boundaries, not just assisting individuals. As they run, they generate signals about what's working and what isn't. In most organisations, those signals stay local. Frontier organisations turn them into shared practice, and that's where the advantage compounds.

## Frontier story:

At BNY, payment validation time fell from five or six minutes to under 30 seconds after the bank introduced agentic 'digital employees' into tightly scoped, repetitive work. The key wasn't speed alone. Each super agent had a human manager accountable for its performance, the same way a direct report would. That accountability layer made it safe to scale, while human roles moved upstream into analysis and strategy.

[Read the full story](#)

# You don't need a transformation program to get started

The following four moves take a single workflow from idea to repeatable practice. Run them as a loop, not a checklist: each cycle makes the next one faster and more consistent. The organisations pulling ahead capture what teams learn and turn it into something the whole company can use.

01

Pick one workflow that earns the effort

Make it high-impact and recurring, not a one-off. Something like month-end close or quarterly forecasting, where the same steps run every cycle. Before you start, answer the three questions that make scaling safe: Is this a high-impact, recurring workflow, not a one-off? Do you have identity controls for the agents involved? Who is accountable when an agent makes a mistake?

02

Map how the work actually happens

Follow one real example from end to end and watch where it slows or stalls. A workflow on paper rarely matches the workflow in practice, and the gaps are where the redesign starts.

03

Assign decision rights

Label every step: **human-led** for judgement and accountability, **human + AI** where AI accelerates the work (but people own the outcome) or **AI-run** where AI executes inside set boundaries. That map is what makes the workflow repeatable – anyone can see who owns what.

04

Run the loop that turns wins into standards

Hold a 30-day review on three questions: *What did the agents do? What failed? What should change next cycle?* When a team finds a better way, make it the standard and document what humans own and what AI runs so the next team inherits the learning instead of rediscovering it.

# How Microsoft 365 Copilot supports each move

Everything above is the strategy: set the conditions, redesign the work and keep the loop running. Microsoft 365 Copilot is what makes it practical to run: the system that brings agents, your organisation's data and everyday workflows together in one place. Copilot brings AI into the flow of work to transform how knowledge work gets done, while agents take on the business processes that run behind it. Grounded in your own data and governed by the controls your organisation already trusts, it becomes the operating layer for how work gets done.





**Modelling becomes visible when AI lives in the apps teams already use:** Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook, Teams. A manager modelling AI use this way works in plain sight, the way they want the team to work – instead of demonstrating a separate tool people must remember to open.

**Redesign gets a build tool.** Agents carry a workflow across the multistep, multitool processes your 30-day loop is trying to improve. And when a team hits a friction point of its own, Microsoft Copilot Studio lets them build an agent for it in plain language, grounded in their own data, so the team that found the better way can encode it for everyone.

**Review has a shared surface.** The AI-assisted draft sits in the same document or thread the team already works in, so the quality conversation happens on the actual artifact instead of in the abstract.

**Governance scales with adoption instead of chasing it.** Identity controls, audit trails and access policies are part of the ecosystem, not bolted on after the fact. Trust scales with use instead of lagging behind it.

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## Microsoft 365 Copilot clears the way for each move.

*Whether they take hold depends on the conditions you set around them.*

# Get started

Your most advanced AI users will either become a Frontier team or stall in isolation. What decides it is the environment around them, and the organisations building that environment now will compound an advantage their competitors can't easily copy.

Managers are the lever, and you're the one who pulls it.

<sup>1</sup> 'Agents, human agency and the opportunity for every organisation', Microsoft 2026 Work Trend Index Annual Report, May 5, 2026. <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/agents-human-agency-and-the-opportunity-for-every-organization>.

The Work Trend Index survey was conducted by an independent research firm among 20,000 full-time employed or self-employed knowledge workers who use AI at work across 10 markets between February 18, 2026 and April 7, 2026.

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See how Microsoft 365 Copilot helps leaders make AI use repeatable, reviewable and scalable



[Read the full 2026 Work Trend Index Annual Report](#)