# Manuka

# From hype to value: three moves that make AI Agents safe, scalable and worth the investment

## Go beyond the buzz and build AI foundations that establish competitive advantage

AI Agents are everywhere right now. But most organisations are stuck between experimentation and impact – burning time, budget and trust on passing trends that don't scale. Agents can be transformational, but only when they're built on foundations that make them reliable, governed and ready for adoption.

In our recent webinar, **Agents of Change – Are AI Agents Rewriting the Rules of Business**, Tom Nicholls, Chief Commercial Officer at Manuka AI, and Lucile Flamand, Chief Strategic Development Officer at Bibby Financial Services, discussed how to maximise the impact of your AI Agents.

**Here are some of their key insights.**

## Scratching the surface of what's possible

For all the noise, the majority of organisations aren't digging deep enough to unearth greater impact from AI. They're trialling assistants and running isolated pilot projects that have no path to production. In short, they're failing to think strategically.

Too often AI Agents are introduced as one-off solutions – a chat interface solving a specific problem. That undersells their potential and is one of the reasons 95% of AI projects fail to deliver meaningful value.[1]

The transformational approach is to treat them as enterprise systems underpinned by quality data, enabled by robust governance and supported by clear adoption strategies.

[1] https://mlq.ai/media/quarterly_decks/v0.1_State_of_AI_in_Business_2025_Report.pdf

At their best, AI Agents cut through operational friction – triaging work, resolving routine requests, informing decisions and pushing actions through the right tools with the right guardrails.

**They're capable of driving revenue, efficiency and productivity by:**

- Automating decisions that require multiple data sources.
- Scaling productivity across teams without scaling headcount.
- Embedding intelligence into frontline processes.

## Three steps that turn AI ambition into impact

### 1. Start with KPIs, not capabilities

The road to ROI starts with KPIs not technical capabilities. Successful AI projects are anchored in the day-to-day realities of life for senior executives: the P&L line items that matter, the budgets that control investment, and the measurable outcomes that prove value through productivity gains, revenue uplift or risk reduction.

Bibby's approach was deliberately business led. They spoke to teams across functions, built a long list of AI opportunities and then prioritised what was worth doing based on impact, feasibility and data readiness.

Instead of chasing novelty they focused on the "size of the prize" and whether the organisation had the foundations to deliver it. Ensuring every use case was chosen for its real business value, not its technical appeal.

> *"We start with our business strategy, which drives the investments we make across technology, process, people and products. This gives us a clear direction in terms of how AI can really increase revenue, deliver productivity gains and support smarter decisions."*
>
> Lucile Flamand,
> Chief Strategic Development Officer at Bibby Financial Services

# Manuka

## 2. Run through the agent readiness checklist

Before building anything, pressure-test your readiness by asking yourself these eight questions. They're the difference between AI that hits strategic goals and AI that's uncontrolled and disconnected:

**1** Are KPIs defined and linked to business outcomes?

**2** Do we know the location and quality of all our data?

**3** Is there an approved tools policy to avoid shadow AI?

**4** What governance framework ensures compliance and explainability?

**5** Who owns adoption and change management?

**6** How will benefits be measured and reported?

**7** Do we have the technical expertise to build solid data foundations?

**8** How will pilots scale beyond proof-of-concept?

This checklist reframes AI Agents – pinpointing whether you're ready to turn them into strategic assets.

## 3. Go below the tip of the iceberg

Think of AI adoption as an iceberg: the visible quick wins help people build confidence, while strengthening beneath the surface gives you the ability to scale. If you only chase quick wins, you'll never scale. If you only build foundations you'll never get adoption. You need to run both in parallel.

**Tip of the iceberg**

Identifying quick wins and implementing tools gave colleagues a safe way to experiment, build confidence and sharpen prompting skills. This created productivity gains, built momentum and proved the value of AI in everyday work.

**Below the waterline**

Investing in a data lakehouse, master data management, data architecture and governance, and the expertise to build and manage them, did the heavy lifting that made agents dependable, explainable and scalable.

That's how Bibby Financial Services achieved success – they drove adoption while building the foundations to sustain a long-term transformation. This ensures that when larger, enterprise-scale agents are ready to launch, change management doesn't become the barrier.

The real power lies in combining both. Quick wins give people a taste of AI's potential, developing the skills and trust they need to integrate larger AI innovations into their roles. While robust foundations ensure those AI innovations are worth adopting

*"Enabling leaders to build intelligent, autonomous agents that can help their business scale with control and speed only works if you have solid data foundations and quality data underpinning it.*

Tom Nicholls,
Chief Commercial Officer at Manuka AI

## Establishing governance that enables innovation

Every step towards greater AI impact – anchoring projects in KPIs, running readiness checks, and balancing adoption with deep foundations – rests on one critical layer: governance. Without it shadow AI creeps in, exposing organisations to compliance breaches, data leakage and reputational risk.

Bibby Financial Services tackled this head-on with a pragmatic approach. They rolled out Microsoft Copilot enterprise-wide to give colleagues a safe tool. They restricted unapproved external platforms. And they built a governance framework that balances exploration with control – ensuring that wherever AI decisions touch customers, risk or compliance, explainability and accountability are designed in from the start.

The lesson is clear. Governance isn't red tape, it's a stabilising force that enables innovation and scalability. Done right, it transforms AI from a series of unconnected experiments into a strategic growth engine.

# Breaking free of pilot purgatory

AI Agents will only deliver impact when they're set up to succeed.

Building the right foundations puts leaders in a position to scale operations without scaling headcount, accelerate decisions with trusted data, reduce risk through explainable governance and achieve measurable ROI tied directly to P&L outcomes.

Without them pilots will continue to run aground. Costs will creep up, risk will increase and confidence in AI will erode.

For the full story, including how Bibby Financial Services is balancing speed and control to generate value from its AI Agents, watch the on-demand webinar.

## WATCH NOW

At Manuka, we help organisations move from experimentation to impact. By building AI Agents on unified, trustworthy data using the Databricks platform, we make sure your agents are safe and ready to scale.

Want to move from experimentation to production-grade AI Agents? We can help you pick the right use cases, build robust data foundations on Databricks and put governance in place without killing momentum.

## Get in touch

- UK – Manchester – London – Liverpool
- www.linkedin.com/company/manukaai-emea
- ANZ – Sydney – Auckland
- linkedin.com/company/manukaaianz
- www.manuka-ai.com