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# Capturing The AI Dividend In Services

## A Playbook To Supplier Conversations That Unlock AI's Benefits

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# Introduction: The Services AI Opportunity

Amid all the attention to AI, less than 4% of SOWs from the first half of 2026 have any mention of AI whatsoever.

C-suites in 2026 are rightly focused on their internal response to AI: encouraging experimentation, setting worker usage targets, re-designing workflows, and enacting governance policies. While these efforts are necessary, they often overlook the essential truth that companies buy far more innovation than they build.

Along with the question of “How are we using AI at our enterprise?” is an equally important question: **How effectively are we capturing AI innovation from our suppliers?**

Companies spend billions of dollars with external suppliers whose businesses are themselves being transformed by AI. Those suppliers are investing, experimenting, succeeding, failing, and learning at tremendous speed.

- Consulting firms are rebuilding delivery models.
- Technology providers are embedding AI into software development and operations.
- Creative agencies are accelerating content production.
- Staffing companies are using AI to source, screen, and manage talent.

Across nearly every services category, suppliers are learning how to deliver work faster, better, and differently. Is your company reaping the benefits of their advances?

This guide presents a conversation framework to capture AI benefits from suppliers, covering three paths to value:

**Same for Less**

How is AI reducing our cost?

**More for Same**

How can AI help us create more value together?

**Lower Risk**

How can AI help us achieve results with greater certainty?

We call it the **AI Dividend Conversation**: AI is here, and we’re using it. Let’s talk about how to make it more valuable in the specific context of our work together.

> The fastest way to transform your business with AI is to benefit from suppliers who are already transforming theirs.

# Keys To The Conversation

## It's about More than Cost Reduction

The stereotype of procurement is a discipline focused only on expense reduction. Like Oscar Wilde's definition of a cynic, the iconic sourcing leader knows "the cost of everything and the value of nothing." Conversely, procurement's classic lament is that it's given minimal opportunity to be strategic, to have the long-sought "seat at the table."

If ever there was a time to reset the procurement brand, now is that time. AI is technology, and companies buy far more technology than they build. Sourcing is uniquely positioned as the natural gatekeeper and steward of the largest and most impactful innovation wave the world has ever seen.

## AI is Procurement's Killer App

Sourcing leaders must rise to the opportunity with a strategic perspective. No doubt, AI will bring cost reduction; but the greater objective is to systematically learn from the marketplace, identify the suppliers that are transforming fastest, and bring innovation into the enterprise.

As we position to learn, it's useful to distinguish the categories of benefit from Artificial Intelligence.

**Efficiency AI**

Doing the same work faster.

**Opportunity AI**

Doing work that wasn't possible or viable before.

## Exploring Value with Suppliers

There was a time when company executives wondered openly: "what are we going to do about this internet thing?"

We are in the early days of AI adoption amid continued rapid developments in technology and business use. 2026 is a year when an exploratory and humble approach toward AI is both timely and useful.

Your company's suppliers comprise an enormous, distributed laboratory of experimentation. Some are redesigning workflows. Some are changing commercial models. Some are fundamentally rethinking how expertise is delivered, while others are simply giving employees access to AI tools and hoping for  the best. No one has AI figured out, and most business leaders will welcome a conversation.

As you discuss AI's application with your suppliers, you will practice a skill that is essential in this era: assessing AI competence and maturity in the marketplace.

# 01 Value Path 1: Same For Less

The first topic of the AI Dividend conversation is the most obvious: **how are efficiencies lowering cost?**

Some companies are issuing blanket demands on suppliers and internal teams alike: “Send us your plan to reduce cost by 20% using AI.” This type of ultimatum may have its place, but for the early conversations we recommend a softer tone:

> Opener: "Where are you seeing efficiencies from AI? How does that show up on our projects?"

Even a polite ask in this area carries heft. If you are a service provider, it’s already too late to admit your company hasn’t started adopting AI. Meanwhile, AI-native disruptors are offering point solutions with automation, small teams, and short timelines.

It will help to get more specific in the context of your projects with the supplier:

- What tasks are being automated or accelerated?
- Which roles do you need less of?
- How can our current projects together leverage these efficiencies?

## Output

A reasonable homework assignment for the supplier would be to examine current projects and come back with proposals of lower cost. They will implicitly understand that their competitors will be tasked likewise.

The objective of this discussion is not simply to negotiate lower prices, but to understand where AI is changing the economics of delivery. Those efficiencies will likely apply to the supplier in the room, to other vendors, and to your firm’s internal operations.

AI Use → Task Acceleration → Role Compression → Team Composition → Cost

### Widely-Used Areas Of IT Efficiencies

| Categories | Activities |
|---|---|
| Software Development | Scaffolding, Debugging, Documentation, Testing |
| Creative Services | Brainstorming, Content, Visual Assets |
| Research & Analysis | Literature Reviews, Competitive Scans, Document Summarization |
| Customer Support | Triage, Response Drafting, Case Summarization |
| Data Processing | Cleaning, Querying, Pattern Recognition |

# 02 Value Path 2: More For Same

The second value path focuses on benefit rather than cost: **Opportunity AI.**

Opener: How is AI enabling your team to provide more value to our company?

Increasing value is highly contextual: it must reflect your company's goals and the supplier's unique capabilities and expertise. It may take a longer discussion to clarify your objectives and the supplier's strengths, so schedule accordingly. Don't shortchange this opportunity to learn.

The follow-up question is my absolute favorite to ask suppliers: "Tell us about your best customers. How are they working with you? What are they doing now that wasn't practical two years ago?"

Most suppliers will love this invitation to boast about their strengths and successes. The aim is to collaborate on creating value together.

While Value Path 1 is about dividing the pie, here we discuss how to make the pie bigger.

Output

Create a list of potential ideas where your partnership can create more value together and a plan to scope further. The plan may involve scheduling demos or reference calls or bringing in additional internal stakeholders.

Consulting relationships often start with a specific need and capability but then evolve into more general support. A strategic AI discussion is an opportunity to align to your suppliers' unique strengths.

## Increase Value Offered by AI Application

| Value | Description | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Scale | Doing more of what was previously volume-constrained | • Hyper-personalized content across thousands of segments or individuals<br>• 24/7 customer service at volumes not practical for human team<br>• Monitoring across hundreds of contracts or suppliers simultaneously |
| Speed | Acting on information faster than human cycles allow | • Real-time supplier risk signals and market shifts<br>• Predictive alerts before issues surface in reporting<br>• Instant synthesis of inputs that would take days to manually compile |
| Scope | Going broader or deeper than teams could practically reach | • Pattern detection across datasets too large for human review<br>• Spend and behavior analysis across complex multi-vendor portfolios<br>• Surfacing non-obvious connections across disparate data sources |
| Span | Extending capability across people or groups who lacked it before | • Non-engineers building functional tools and automations<br>• Stakeholders running should-cost models independently without procurement<br>• Smaller organizations accessing capabilities previously reserved for enterprise |

# 03 Value Path 3: Lower Outcome Risk

The third value path addresses an AI impact that may develop slowly in the marketplace, but that we believe will be most transformative in services procurement: **a shift of outcome risk to the supplier.**

Opener: How can we better define results up front? How will this change our agreements?

Roughly 80% of company services spend is resource-based. Even SOWs that are technically deliverable-based are usually priced on the underlying resource cost. This practice dominates because of the inherent challenge of defining specific outcomes. Buyers begin by saying "We need A and B"— then realize they may also need C, perhaps D (and maybe E). With fuzzy requirements, the engagement shifts toward time and materials. Scope expands. Projects drift. Waste accumulates.

AI makes scope definition radically more efficient. Buyers have access to orchestration tools and generative AI that allows rapid iteration on objectives, requirements, and milestones. Procurement teams can challenge stakeholders to more effectively project the future, variables, and outcomes.

Suppliers are experiencing similar benefits. They can iterate proposals faster, model alternative approaches, and estimate costs more accurately.

AI doesn't simply make delivery more efficient. It makes definition more efficient.

The improved ability to manage uncertainty combined with AI-fueled efficiency allows focused suppliers to leverage their expertise and assume more risk while increasing their margins.

It's in everyone's interest to better define success. Next layer questions make the definition palpable:

How can we improve the scope of our SOWs? What contracts can we move from time and materials to fixed-fee or milestone-based? Where can we add strong SLAs or KPIs that will make sure we're all aligned for success? What percentage of our work together is outcome-based now? What should it be in a year?

**Output**

A list of specific projects or contracts to move to fixed-fee or where scope, milestones, or KPIs can be strengthened.

Better Definition → Better Scope → Better Execution → Better Outcomes

# Opportunity In Action: Turning Hidden SOW Data Into Measurable Savings

Brightfield's Talent Data Exchange product – TDX – provides instant SOW visibility and cost opportunity. SOW Rate Insights helps procurement leaders answer a simple but critical question: **Are we paying the right price for this work?**

By combining AI with real market data, TDX surfaces pricing opportunities hidden within complex SOWs, helping teams validate supplier proposals, uncover savings, and negotiate from a position of strength. What once required extensive manual analysis can now be done at scale, giving procurement a clearer view of spend and greater confidence in every sourcing decision.

TDX assigns a supplier profile that reflects the risk allocation defined in the SOW clauses and language, then calculates a should-cost based on the resource roles and skills.

Need savings soon? To schedule a demo or try a free business analyzing your contracts for specific negotiation opportunities, contact the author or email sales@brightfield.com

SOW Insights

| Misclassification Risk for this SOW | Resources Above Should Cost | Potential Savings for Reclassifying Resources | Potential Savings for Negotiation |
|---|---|---|---|
| High | 5 of 10 | $275,882 | $71,149 |

| SOW Name | MSA Number | MSA Effective Date |
|---|---|---|
| DLTTQ00012535 | | |

| Supplier | Supplier Profile | Category |
|---|---|---|
| CAPSPIRE INC | Project-Based | IT Services |

Resources

| Actions | Role | Market Job Level | Job Variant | Rate in Contract: Resource Rate | TDX Target: Hourly Should Cost Rate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Principal Technical Consultant | 5 Principal | Implementation Business Systems Analyst | 240.00 | 239.76 |
| | Principal Functional Consultant | 5 Principal | Solutions Architect | 285.00 | 242.31 |

# The Conversation Is The Assessment

Regardless of technology, there is no simple path to achieving extraordinary success with a supplier. A partnership involves your company's strategy, the supplier's capability, cultural fit, timing, mutual priorities, and specific individuals. These factors will all be clearer after your AI Dividend conversation.

Tactical suggestions for the meetings:

- Build a cross-functional team. Include reps from your AI council, IT, HR, and key functional areas.
- Schedule meetings with at least four suppliers, along with an internal regroup and report out.
- Prioritize meeting in person when viable.
- Use an AI note-taker (with permission) to record and summarize, then to create a comparative assessment and suggested follow-up questions and actions.

You might also leverage an LLM tool to assess supplier maturity based on the discussion notes, and validate those assessments with the team. We recommend a five-level framework:

Supplier AI Maturity Curve

Native

Transformer

Pragmatist

Follower

Traditionalist

| | |
|---|---|
| Native | "We've rebuilt our delivery model around AI." |
| Transformer | "We've invested heavily and are changing quickly." |
| Pragmatist | "We're using AI for internal productivity." |
| Follower | "We're experimenting but haven't changed much." |
| Traditionalist | "We're waiting to see where the market goes." |

These are not permanent labels. Like buyers, suppliers are rapidly evolving. The objective is simply to understand where they are today and adjust sourcing strategies accordingly.

Brightfield is collaborating with a global technology firm to build a score that measures not only the supplier's AI capabilities, but the extent to which they transfer the benefits of AI to their customers based on project analysis. To learn more, email the author jquarles@brightfield.com

# 30-Day Action Plan

| Week | Key Tasks | Outcomes |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Week 1:** Plan & Prepare | **Select Scope and Assemble Team**<br>**Category / BU:** Choose one category or business unit to start with.<br>**Incumbents:** Select 3–5 incumbent suppliers; prioritize top spend.<br>**AI challengers:** Identify 1–2 AI-native or AI-leading vendors in the same category.<br>**Interview team:** Recruit cross-functional members: procurement, IT, AI council, key business stakeholders.<br>**Discussion guide:** Adapt the three AI Dividend questions to your category context.<br>**Schedule:** Book meetings; aim for in-person where feasible; enable AI note-taker. | Supplier list<br>Roster of interview team<br>Tailored discussion guide<br>Scheduled meetings with suppliers |
| **Week 2:** Conduct Conversations | **Run the Three AI Dividend Conversations**<br>**Same for Less:** Ask where AI is reducing delivery cost; request a project-level analysis.<br>**More for Same:** Explore how AI expands Scale, Speed, Scope, or Span in this category.<br>**Lower Risk:** Discuss moving relevant SOWs toward fixed-fee, milestone, or outcome-based structures.<br>**Tone:** Lead with curiosity; position as a joint learning exercise, not an audit.<br>**Note-taking:** Use an AI note-taker (with supplier permission) to capture full responses.<br>**AI challengers:** Run abbreviated versions with non-incumbent vendors for market calibration. | Raw meeting notes / AI transcripts<br>Per-supplier response summaries<br>Initial observations on each vendor |
| **Week 3:** Analyze & Score | **Compare responses and assess AI maturity**<br>**Maturity scoring:** Rate each supplier on the five-level framework (Native to Traditionalist).<br>**LLM analysis:** Use an LLM tool to synthesize notes and surface patterns across suppliers.<br>**Gap identification:** Flag where incumbents lag AI challengers on cost, capability, or risk transfer.<br>**Opportunity list:** Document specific projects or SOWs with strongest restructuring potential.<br>**Follow-up Qs:** Generate supplier-specific follow-up questions or demo requests.<br>**Preliminary rec:** Draft an initial tiering and recommended next steps per supplier. | Supplier AI maturity scorecard<br>Ranked opportunity list (by value / feasibility)<br>Follow-up question set<br>Preliminary supplier tier draft |
| **Week 4:** Decide & Act | **Update supplier strategy and activate next steps**<br>**Internal readout:** Present findings to business leaders and AI council; highlight top 2–3 opportunities.<br>**Supplier actions:** Assign specific follow-ups: renegotiation requests, demo scheduling, RFP triggers.<br>**SOW targets:** Identify contracts to move toward fixed-fee or stronger KPI/SLA structures.<br>**Expand Scope:** Determine next category or BU to bring into the AI Dividend conversation cycle.<br>**Track savings:** Establish baseline metrics to measure efficiency gains and value creation.<br>**Document learnings:** Record what worked, what to improve, and AI maturity benchmarks for the category. | Internal readout deck<br>Supplier action log with owners & dates<br>SOW restructuring target list<br>Pilot expansion plan |

# Conclusion

The organizations that benefit most from AI will not necessarily be those investing the most internally — they will be the ones that learn fastest from the marketplace around them.

Timing matters. AI adoption in professional services is uneven, and there is meaningful separation between the leaders and the laggards. Right now is the time to accelerate. Your suppliers can help.

Feel free to share this playbook with colleagues, and please reach out to us with comments and questions.

At Brightfield, we are excited about the future and feel privileged to welcome it and shape it with some of the greatest companies in the world.

## About The Author

Jack Quarles has over two decades of experience in sourcing as a thought leader and practitioner. He wrote the bestselling book Expensive Sentences and co-authored Same Side Selling which has become the standard playbook for building collaborative buyer-seller relationships.

Jack co-founded the expense management firm Xigo and has served as Fortune 100 procurement director and mid-market interim Chief Procurement Officer. In 2018 Jack joined Brightfield where he currently serves as Head of Advisory, Services Procurement. Jack has degrees from Yale and Kellogg Business School. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife and has two daughters in college.

## About Brightfield

Our mission is to empower organizations with the data and intelligence they need to make smarter, more precise workforce decisions—unlocking transparency, accountability, and measurable savings across the extended workforce.

Brightfield leverages proprietary, transaction-level data across contingent and SOW engagements to deliver market-validated benchmarks on rates, markups, and supplier performance.

Learn more at brightfield.com