ESSAY · STRATEGIC MOBILIZATION

Transformation Is Not Change at Scale

Transformation does not simply alter what an organization does. It changes what the organization is capable of: turning its strategy into business outcomes and financial results, and becoming what its next strategy will need.

Waheeda Görlitz · Senior Strategic Mobilization Adviser · 22 August 2026

THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

01 Organizations still need clear targets, but no future state stays adequate for long.

02 Technology enters a living system of roles, relationships and power, not an object redesigned from above.

03 AI redistributes what people and machines decide and do, and design, not the model alone, decides how.

04 As more is delegated to machines, human judgment becomes more consequential.

05 AI reshapes visibility, authority and consequences. Its transformation must be negotiated.

06 The object of management shifts from the program to the organization's capacity to transform.

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An Overused Word.

Transformation is among the most overused words in management. It is applied to restructurings, technology implementations, cost programs, operating-model changes and cultural initiatives. The breadth of usage creates a dangerous ambiguity: almost any significant change can be presented as transformation.

Most programs deliver what they promise: a new system, a new structure, a new process. What they often fail to leave behind is an organization better able to turn its next strategy into results. AI makes that gap consequential.

A Working Definition.

A working definition helps. Change alters something an organization does. Transformation alters what the organization as a whole is capable of: turning its strategy into business outcomes and financial results, and doing it again when the strategy changes. Any change can improve a capability. A change becomes a transformation when it reaches across the system: how the organization knows, decides, coordinates and acts.

AI reaches exactly there. It changes which activities require human effort, whose expertise counts, how performance becomes visible, where authority sits and how quickly assumptions expire. And “AI” is not one thing: predictive models, generative AI, decision support and automation each have different effects, depending on the task and the design.

The object of management therefore shifts from the individual transformation program to the organization’s capacity to transform.

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That capacity is a collective human achievement. It depends on will, the commitment to make the choices and carry their consequences, and on the authority, resources, time, energy and experience to act on them. At its core is collective judgment: the organization’s ability to see what is happening from different positions, make sense of incomplete and contested evidence, commit, and act coherently while remaining able to revise. Partners and outside expertise can strengthen that capacity. Ownership of it cannot be handed to anyone outside the organization.

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Transformation Used To Have An Ending.

The conventional transformation program rests on a familiar assumption about time. An organization is normally stable. A disruption creates the need for change. A temporary program moves the organization from a current state to a defined future state. Once implementation is complete, the program closes and the organization returns to normal operations.

That logic remains useful for bounded changes. Organizations still need clear destinations and periods of stability. What no longer holds is the assumption that a target, once reached, will stay adequate for long. AI reaches into knowledge work, judgment and action themselves. Competition shifts value pools, weakens industry boundaries and lets new entrants reshape business models faster than planning cycles can absorb.

Organizations must therefore repeatedly judge what business they need to become, and reconfigure themselves while continuing to perform.

An Organization Is Not An Object.

Many transformation methods treat the organization as an object that can be redesigned from above: change the structure, install the technology, redefine the process and communicate the new model.

Two companies install the same supply chain planning system. In one, planners trust its forecasts, sales and operations settle their conflicts against a shared plan, and inventory falls. In the other, every region keeps its own spreadsheet alongside the system, overrides become routine, and nothing changes but the cost of the license. Same technology, different performance.

This is not an exception. It holds for every technology a company introduces. Stephen Barley showed it decades ago, when two hospitals installed the same CT scanners and ended up with different ways of organizing the work around them. Technology does not determine the outcome by itself. The roles, relationships and decisions it enters do.

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AI likewise enters arrangements of expertise, status, trust, accountability and power. Its effects emerge from how people interpret it, how tasks are redesigned, which outputs are accepted, who can contest them and who remains accountable. In AI transformation, the technical and the organizational design depend on each other.

AI Changes The Distribution Of Agency.

Earlier automation often replaced or standardized specified activities. Today's AI can generate options, make predictions, recommend decisions and produce language. It takes part in activities that were previously treated as signs of professional judgment.

This does not mean machines simply replace human agency. Sebastian Raisch and Sebastian Krakowski show that automation and augmentation are intertwined: the same technology may substitute for human work in one configuration and expand human capability in another. Daron Acemoglu and Pascual Restrepo similarly distinguish the displacement of existing tasks from the creation of new ones.

Which outcome occurs is not determined by the model alone. Its capabilities and limits constrain the choices; within them, design decides: which decisions are delegated, where human review remains meaningful, how errors are detected, who owns consequences, and whether productivity gains are reinvested in greater capability or taken out as reduced labor.

AI transformation redesigns the relationship between human and machine agency. Many leadership teams assume that keeping a human in the loop keeps them in control. By itself, it does not. A person who must approve hundreds of recommendations a day, under time targets, without seeing why the system decided as it did, is in the loop but not in control. Control is a matter of design: which decisions are delegated, where review remains meaningful, and who answers for the result.

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AI Changes Knowledge And Expertise.

Generative AI can make expert-like performance available to people with less experience. In a study of 5,172 customer-support agents, Erik Brynjolfsson, Danielle Li and Lindsey Raymond found that AI assistance raised productivity, measured as issues resolved per hour, by about 15 percent on average, with the strongest benefits among less experienced workers. The finding is significant, but its boundary matters as much: one field study does not establish a universal law.

The deeper implication is organizational. When systems can retrieve, synthesize and generate plausible answers, expertise is redistributed. Novices may perform more capably; experts may shift from producing answers to framing problems, evaluating outputs and handling exceptions. At the same time, plausible error can travel faster and become harder to detect.

Research by Fabrizio Dell'Acqua and colleagues shows that AI performs unevenly across tasks, sometimes excelling at apparently difficult work while failing at adjacent tasks that seem simple. Our reading of that finding is this: as organizations delegate more to such systems, at greater scale, and as their errors become harder to see, human judgment becomes more consequential, not less.

AI Transformation Is Political.

AI systems do not only perform tasks. They classify, rank, recommend, monitor and allocate attention. They influence what becomes visible, whose knowledge is recognized and which actions appear legitimate. Where they schedule work, evaluate performance or distribute opportunities, they can improve consistency, but they can also reduce autonomy and hide contestable judgments inside apparently neutral procedures.

The people closest to the work hold knowledge that system designers and executives often lack. Excluding it is not merely an engagement mistake; it weakens the design. AI transformation must therefore be negotiated, not because every interest can be reconciled, but because consequences, dependencies and disagreements must become visible before a commitment can be credible.

Negotiation is not consensus. It brings the trade-offs into the open. Where agreement is impossible, leadership decides, and owns the decision.

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AI Makes Transformation Continuous.

AI capabilities evolve, regulations change, use cases migrate and competitors learn. Systems meet new data and produce effects that cannot be fully specified when they are introduced. The organization cannot design once, deploy once and hand the result back as finished.

This does not justify permanent mobilization. Agnieszka Piasna's research on algorithmic management shows how such systems can fragment working time and create pressure to be constantly available. When initiatives pile up on top of that, fatigue limits what the organization can carry. Continuous transformation must not become continuous disruption.

What it needs instead is a recurring capacity: to notice what is changing, make sense of its consequences, revise decisions and reshape the work. You can see that capacity in practice: in whether someone can change or stop an AI-supported process when it goes wrong, and in whether what one implementation teaches changes the next.

What Transformation Is For.

The purpose of AI transformation is not adoption, use-case volume or productivity alone. Time saved becomes value only when leadership decides what it is for, and when the cost of checking, integration and rework has been counted. Stronger capability often shows before its financial effect can be isolated; both must be read, and the financial result must eventually reach the books.

Transformation is not the moment the fragments disappear. It is the capacity to form a more capable whole without denying that the fragments, and the tensions between them, remain.

For you as CEO, that changes the question you ask of every program. Not only what it will deliver by the time it closes, but what your organization will be able to do, and to become, long after it has.

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WHERE THIS LEADS

Strategic Mobilization

The conditions your transformation depends on, improved by your leaders, the value followed into the books, and the capacity built to transform again.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT MANREAU

A transformation program is not yet a transformation.

MANREAU, The Strategic Mobilization Advisory, works with CEOs and leadership teams on the conditions a transformation depends on: the priorities, commitments, resources and decision rights that decide whether the business case reaches the books.

What Do You Need Now?

Start with a confidential conversation with Waheeda Görlitz about the decision ahead of you. You'll leave with a clearer view of what that decision depends on, and which engagement fits, if any.

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