

THE FOUNDER'S GUIDE

The AI Strategy Playbook

How to build a board-ready AI strategy that holds up under pressure — from a team with over 10 years of real AI advisory experience, including Fortune 500 enterprise engagements on RPA and Machine Learning.

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10+

Years of AI advisory experience

F500Enterprise delegates engaged on ML
and RPA**£50M+**

Additional ARR generated for clients

INTRODUCTION

Why most AI strategies fail before the first board meeting

The technology is not the hard part. AI models, tools, and platforms exist for almost every business use case. The hard part is knowing which ones matter for your specific business, how to connect them to commercial outcomes, and how to present a strategy that holds up when the board, your investors, or your competitors push back.

Most founders at Seed through Series B are walking into board meetings with one of two problems. Either they have no AI strategy at all and they know it, or they have a strategy that sounds plausible but would not survive a single probing question from a non-executive director with a technology background.

This playbook gives you the framework to build one that does.

The question your board is asking is not "should we do AI?" They already know the answer is yes. The question is: do you actually know what you are doing with it?

PART ONE

The three gaps that sink AI strategies

Gap 1: The buy-before-think problem

A vendor demo lands well, a purchase order goes through, and six months later the tool is barely used. Nobody mapped it to a real workflow. Nobody defined what success looks like. The spend accumulates and the ROI does not. According to McKinsey's 2024 State of AI report, fewer than 40% of companies that deploy AI tools can demonstrate measurable business impact within 12 months.

The fix:

Every AI initiative must start with a specific business problem, not a technology. Before any tool evaluation, define the problem in commercial terms: what is it costing the business right now, what would a 20% improvement be worth, and how would you measure success.

Gap 2: The impressive-over-useful build

An internal team starts building an AI application scoped for a future state that does not exist yet. The timeline stretches, the budget grows, and by the time it ships it solves a problem the business has already moved past. Gartner estimates that 85% of AI projects fail to deliver the intended business value, most often because the use case was defined by technical possibility rather than business necessity.

The fix:

Scope for where you are now, not where you want to be in three years. The most effective AI applications solve a specific, current problem in the simplest way possible. Validate before you build. A prototype that proves the concept in two weeks is worth more than a six-month build that solves the wrong problem.

Gap 3: The boardroom bridge problem

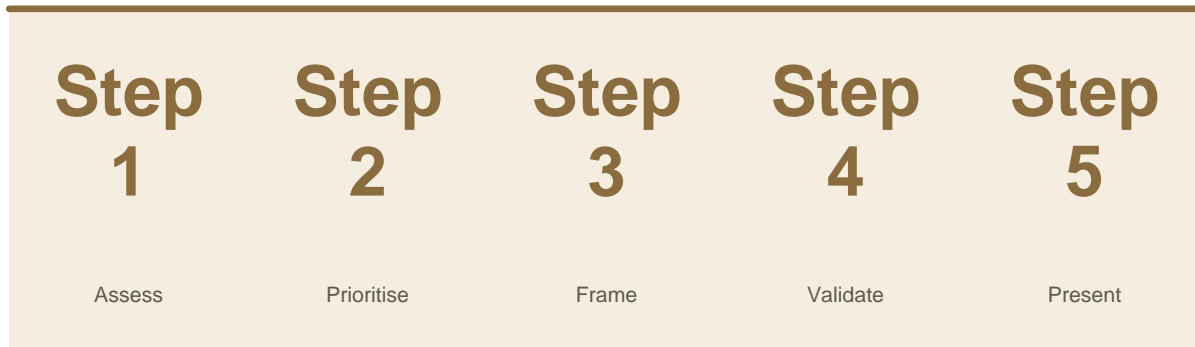
The technical team understands the capability. The commercial team understands the opportunity. But nobody can connect them in a way the board can act on. The AI strategy slide gets built, presented, and then sits in a folder. The question comes back the following quarter.

The fix:

AI strategy must be presented in commercial language, not technical language. Every initiative should be framed around revenue impact, cost reduction, competitive positioning, or risk mitigation. If you cannot make that connection clearly, the initiative is not ready to present.

PART TWO

The five-step framework for a board-ready AI strategy



Step 1: Honest assessment

Before building any strategy, you need a clear view of where you actually are. This means an audit across four dimensions:

Data readiness: What data do you have, how clean is it, and is it in a state where AI can use it? Most companies significantly overestimate their data readiness.

Infrastructure: What systems are already in place and what would AI need to connect to?

Team capability: What AI literacy exists in the business already, and where are the gaps?

Competitive position: What are your direct competitors doing with AI, and where are you ahead or behind?

Step 2: Prioritise ruthlessly

Identify two or three specific use cases where AI can create measurable impact in the next 12 months. Not ten. Not twenty. Two or three that are specific, feasible given your current data and infrastructure, and directly connected to revenue or cost outcomes. Everything else goes on a future roadmap and stays there until the initial use cases are delivered.

Step 3: Frame for the boardroom

For each priority initiative, build the commercial case in this structure:

The problem: What specific business problem does this solve, expressed in commercial terms?

The opportunity: What is the quantified value of solving it?

The approach: Build, buy, or partner, and why?

The investment: What does it cost and over what timeline?

The return: What is the expected ROI and when does it materialise?

The risk: What could go wrong and how is it mitigated?

Step 4: Validate before you scale

No initiative should go to full implementation without a time-boxed proof of concept. Set a 30-day window, define the success criteria upfront, and make a clear decision at the end: proceed, pivot, or stop. This approach dramatically reduces the risk of the expensive-mistake pattern that accounts for the majority of failed AI investments.

Step 5: Present with confidence

A board-ready AI strategy presentation has six components: where you are today, where you are going and why, what you have already done to validate the direction, what you are investing, what you expect in return, and what you need from the board. Keep it to one slide per initiative. If you cannot summarise it on one slide, the thinking is not clear enough yet.

PART THREE

Build vs buy: the decision that derails most strategies

The most expensive AI mistake is building something you could have bought for a fraction of the cost, or buying something that will never fit your actual workflow. Here is a simple framework for making the right call.

Build when:

The use case is unique to your business and no off-the-shelf product addresses it adequately.

The data or workflow it needs to connect to is proprietary and cannot be shared with a third-party vendor.

The competitive advantage comes specifically from doing this differently to the market.

Buy when:

A product exists that solves 80% of the problem and can be configured for the remaining 20%.

Speed to value matters more than perfect fit.

The use case is operational rather than strategic.

The build-vs-buy decision is not a technology decision. It is a strategy decision. Make it based on competitive positioning, not on what your engineering team finds more interesting.

PART FOUR

The questions your board will ask

Based on over 10 years of AI advisory experience, including direct engagement with Fortune 500 leadership teams on RPA and Machine Learning adoption, these are the questions that consistently come up in board discussions. Prepare for all of them.

"How does this compare to what our competitors are doing?"

You need a specific, honest answer. Not "we believe we are ahead" but actual intelligence about what competitors are doing and where you are differentiated. If you do not have this, get it before the meeting.

"What happens if this does not work?"

Every AI initiative needs a clear failure case and a defined exit. What is the point at which you would stop? What is the maximum downside? What is the recovery plan? Boards get nervous when founders cannot answer this.

"How do we know the data is good enough?"

Data quality is the single biggest hidden risk in AI projects. You need a specific answer about your data readiness, including what you have audited and what the gaps are. "We think it should be fine" is not an acceptable answer.

"Who owns this internally?"

Every AI initiative needs a single owner who is accountable for delivery and outcomes. If the answer is a committee or a shared responsibility, the board will know before you do that it is unlikely to succeed.

CLOSING

What to do next

If you have read this playbook and you are not sure where to start, start with the assessment. A clear, honest view of where you are today is the foundation for everything else. Without it, any strategy is built on assumptions that will be exposed later.

If you have an AI initiative that is not going well, do not let it run. Set a 30-day decision point, assess honestly against the original success criteria, and make a call. The cost of a bad AI initiative that runs for 18 months is significantly higher than the cost of stopping it at 6.

If you need to present an AI strategy to your board in the next 90 days and you are not confident in what you have, get external input now. The time it takes to build a credible strategy properly is measured in weeks, not months. The cost of walking into a board meeting underprepared is harder to recover from.

We work directly with Founders and CEOs at Seed through Series B on AI strategy. No juniors, no account managers. If you want a straight conversation about where you are and what it will take, get in touch.

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This playbook is produced by SS Consultancy Group for informational purposes. Statistics referenced from McKinsey State of AI 2024, Gartner AI research, and proprietary client experience spanning over 10 years of AI advisory including Fortune 500 enterprise engagements.