



**Setting up an AI  
Centre of Excellence**



The application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the enterprise is set to define the 2020s. Adoption is accelerating but, as with any transformative technology, instant success is by no means guaranteed. At a strategic level the answer involves aligning strategy, people and technology to create a culture of AI adoption.

Businesses have become more accustomed to an agile ‘fail fast and iterate’ approach, but steps can—and should—be taken to maximise the chances of success. Establishing an AI Centre of Excellence (CoE) to implement and guide AI in the enterprise is an essential first step to reaping the promised rewards.

While every organisation will need to tailor its CoE to its specific priorities and culture, the experiences of businesses that are already on the journey underline that there are certain principles that apply across the board.

# Checklist for CoE success

## 1 Secure executive sponsorship

An AI Centre of Excellence must have unequivocal executive sponsorship that confirms the strategic approach the business is taking to AI adoption.

- ✓ Set the tone from the top by articulating its commitment to AI transformation and communicating this to stakeholders to build enterprise-wide engagement.
- ✓ Communicate updates on progress and achievement of AI-focused projects in Board communications to sustain momentum.

Arjun Sethi, partner at AT Kearney, believes organisations should go further than basic board sponsorship of AI initiatives, by setting up a board-level advisory council to explore the opportunities and risks associated with AI. This council, he says, should “maintain a holistic and forward-looking view of AI, encompassing long-term as well as near-term considerations. Its overarching goal is to ensure that shareholders, customers, employees, and society overall benefit as fully as possible from the company’s expanding embrace of AI.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Arjun Sethi. “Why your board needs an AI council.” VentureBeat. April 2019. Accessed at <http://bit.ly/371vNai>

# Checklist for CoE success

## 2 Set a clear vision & scope

Linked to the positioning of AI in corporate strategy is the importance of establishing a clear vision for the CoE that is closely aligned to business objectives. This entails a clear understanding of what AI is and what it has the potential to achieve in the context of the organisation and market sector it operates in.

- ✓ Focus on economic value and resist the temptation or pressure to simply pursue AI for AI's sake.
- ✓ Identify specific use cases and applications and calculate their business value in terms of financial benefits, productivity improvements and competitive advantages.

Potential AI projects should be analysed against achievability—is a project a low-cost quick win or longer-term investment—to determine a realistic roadmap for activity over time. Once this is established, it will inform what data, skills and investment is needed to furnish the CoE for success.

# Checklist for CoE success

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## Establish a governance framework for responsible AI

Once the vision and scope of the CoE has been established a governance framework should be implemented around it.

- ✓ Provide oversight, monitor impact and ensure the mission stays on target.
- ✓ Consider ethical and compliance issues that could arise around the use of data analytics and AI to make decisions, such as bias and privacy.

Ethical use of AI has become increasingly high profile as businesses recognise that responsibility for the effects—intended or otherwise—of technology use on customers lies firmly at their door. One company that has recognised this is Salesforce, which has appointed Paula Goldman as Chief Ethical and Humane Use Officer at the start of 2019, with a remit to develop a strategic framework for the ethical and humane use of technology across Salesforce.



We know that technology is not inherently good or bad; it's what we do with it that matters. And that's why we're making the ethical and humane use of technology a strategic focus at Salesforce.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> "Ethical and Humane Use." Salesforce website. Accessed on February 4, 2020 at: <https://sforce.co/2v2VH03>

**Marc Benioff**  
Chairman and Co-CEO, Salesforce

# Checklist for CoE success

## 4 Be creative about team building

The shortage of technical talent is one of the primary reasons businesses need to go down the Centre of Excellence route, rather than attempting to provision lines of business with their own teams.

- ✓ Create attractive employment packages, not only in terms of compensation but also by highlighting a clear vision and progression plan for AI roles. Businesses must be prepared to create compelling career paths for AI specialists.
- ✓ Complement recruitment with a 'grow-your-own' approach. Look for in-house data analysts interested in re-skilling in AI to leverage their existing company knowledge in new ways.

The CoE team must also be cross-functional, including line of business experts and representatives of departments from financial and legal to HR and marketing. This helps ensure that the real-world drivers for AI stay front of mind in the CoE. Operating this way from the start pays dividends, as Barbara Cosgrove, Chief Privacy Officer of Workday, notes, "Bringing these diverse sets of skills and views together to discuss future and existing uses of ML in our products has been really powerful, and has enabled us to identify potential issues early on in the product lifecycle."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cosgrove, Barbara. "8 ways to ensure your company's AI is ethical." World Economic Forum Annual Meeting. January 16, 2020. Accessed at: <http://bit.ly/31pfEdC>



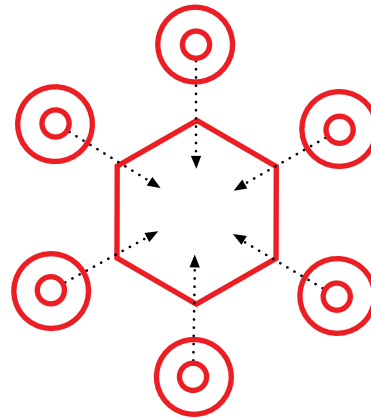
# Checklist for CoE success

## 5 Set up clear structures and relationships

The AI CoE needs a sense of identity and mission, with close relationships within the team, but it also needs solid links to the wider business. Davenport and Dasgupta recommend adopting “a central structure with deployed or embedded staff, reporting to an enterprise-wide business function.”<sup>4</sup>

- ✓ Establish and clearly communicate the purpose of the AI CoE across the organisation.
- ✓ Plug into business units and departments needs so you can prioritise activity based on delivering maximum value across the business.

This allows for a critical mass of expertise at the centre while drawing intelligence out of distributed departments.



<sup>4</sup> Davenport, T.H. & Dasgupta, S. “How to set up an AI Center of Excellence.” *Harvard Business Review*, January 2019. Accessed at <http://bit.ly/385pjJ2>

# Checklist for CoE success

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## Transfer data architecture design to the CoE

Data is the fuel that powers AI, but businesses starting out with AI projects frequently discover a tangle of poor quality, incomplete data. To ensure future success, the CoE needs a mandate to specify and drive progress towards its ideal data architecture.

- ✓ Develop a data strategy and the culture to support it.
- ✓ Identify and integrate external data sources to complement internal sources and provide broader context and intelligence.

Linked to this is the CoE's responsibility for managing and integrating external innovation as the primary liaison point between the business and AI expertise. Connecting with start-ups, academic institutions and specialist data providers can help organisations accelerate AI implementations and unlock measurable value from predictive analytics, machine learning and other AI endeavors.



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## Maintain a high profile and communicate success

The role of communications in promoting the CoE should be established at the start. An effective communication programme will drive energy around the activities of the CoE.

- ✓ Recruit AI champions across the business who will share the successes coming out of the CoE.
- ✓ Regularly communicate progress on AI-powered projects at both executive level and between business units.

The wider business should also be encouraged to understand how the data it generates and manages contributes to AI effectiveness.



The potential of AI to transform enterprise fortunes means committing resources and support to maximising its chances of success. An AI centre of excellence needs to have a clear vision, the right governance, technical skills and relationships, together with a mandate to shape corporate data strategy and the ability to communicate its achievements. This helps businesses analyse the opportunity offered by AI more effectively, place it into a relevant context within the organisation and ensure that success is effectively measured against business objectives. The most successful companies will be the ones that deploy AI as a tool to drive progress towards positive business outcomes.

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