

APRIL 2026

# The AI Capability Gap

How We Can Build the Bridge

A Beaconly Whitepaper

# The gap between AI adoption and AI results is not a technology problem.

## The Capability Gap

### Why 94% of organizations are falling behind

88% of organizations now use AI in at least one business function. Only six percent are seeing meaningful, scaled financial returns — and they will define competitive advantage in their categories for the foreseeable future.

The other 94% are accumulating risk: sustained skills gaps are projected to cost \$5.5T globally by end of 2026, and the 44% maturity gap between organizations with and without explicit AI accountability is widening.

## Building the Bridge

### What the 6% are doing differently — and a framework to get there

This paper names the capability the 6% have, shows where that is being systematically shed at a time when it is needed most, and introduces **The Human Infrastructure Index™ (HII)** — a diagnostic framework for leaders to assess where their own organization stands.

All research cited is attributed to its original source. Analysis, argumentation, and frameworks are original to Beaconly. McKinsey State of AI (Nov 2025); State of AI Trust 2026 (Mar 2026) · IDC AI Workforce Readiness Report (2025)

THE PROBLEM

# The Capability Gap

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Everyone's adopting. Not all are succeeding.

What the few organizations realizing value and ROI are doing differently.

## Near-universal adoption. Single-digit impact.

If this were any other investment category, we'd call that a crisis.  
But it's AI, so we call it progress.

88%

of organizations now use AI  
in at least one business  
function.

6%

qualify as "AI high  
performers" with scaled  
financial returns.

Data Source: McKinsey, The State of AI (Nov 2025)

## THE PERCEPTION GAP

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# The most expensive gap is the one everyone agrees exists — and no one addresses.

Two numbers. Same companies.  
Every additional AI dollar invested without closing this gap widens it.

# 68%

of leaders and employees believe their organization is keeping pace with AI.

# 93%

of the same respondents report that workforce barriers — underdeveloped skills, inadequate training, legacy systems — are limiting their progress.

Data Source: Slalom, 2026 AI Research Report (Harvard Business Review, Feb 2026)

# Organizations blame training. The data says accountability is the culprit.

# 60%

of organizations cite training gaps as the primary barrier — up from ~50% a year ago. The gap is widening, not closing.

# 44%

**difference in AI maturity metrics when organizations assign accountability.**

Accountability isn't a governance formality. It's the single most reliable predictor of whether AI delivers value — or exposure.

## RESPONSIBLE AI MATURITY

With accountability

**2.6**

Without it

**1.8**

McKinsey, State of AI Trust 2026 (n=500)

# Reluctance isn't resistance. It's quiet fear.

It rarely shows up as refusal. It shows up as hesitation, deflection, and silence.

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01

## Security

*"Will this replace me?"*

The fear that AI is a direct threat to the job itself. It shows up as quiet withdrawal from AI initiatives, skepticism framed as technical concern, and refusal to engage with tools that feel existential. No one says it out loud.

Everyone acts on it.

02

## Performance

*"What if I use it wrong?"*

The fear of being the person who produces the bad AI output. It shows up as over-reliance on safe defaults, avoidance of judgment-heavy use cases, and copy-paste behavior that strips AI of its actual value.

03

## Perception

*"What if I look like I don't know what I'm doing?"*

The fear of being exposed as behind. It shows up as performative AI adoption — public enthusiasm that hides private confusion — and a deep reluctance to ask questions in front of peers or leadership.

# AI adoption is accelerating. We're simultaneously removing the infrastructure required to make it effective.

The people AI depends on most are the first to be removed.

# 20%

of organizations expected to eliminate more than half of middle management by end of 2026. Gartner (2024)

# 37%

of employees at flattened organizations report feeling directionless. Korn Ferry (2025)

## WHAT FLATTENING ACTUALLY REMOVES

### The translation layer

Strategy becomes noise at the ground level.

### The coaching infrastructure

Teams stop developing judgment — only output.

### The institutional memory

Years of context leave with the people.

### The feeder layer for senior leadership

The next generation of leadership isn't being built.

# New jobs will come. But the skills bridge isn't built yet.

## 170M

new jobs projected globally by 2030. Most will require capabilities that don't yet exist at scale inside today's workforce.

WEF

## 92M

existing roles projected to be displaced in the same period. The people in them are not automatically the people who will fill what comes next.

WEF

## \$5.5T

projected cost of sustained skills gaps by end of 2026 — not what AI will take away, but what organizations will fail to capture because the capability isn't there.

IDC

Capability does not transfer automatically. Without deliberate investment, the bridge doesn't get built — and the value on the other side stays out of reach.

THE SOLUTION

# Build the Bridge

Capture AI value — and bring your people along.



## THE FRAMEWORK

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# The Human Infrastructure Index (HII)

The organizations capturing real value aren't just doing more with AI. They're building the human infrastructure that makes it work.

### 01 Leadership Signal

Many senior leaders talk about AI more than they use it.

*Can you name three who consistently showcase AI use to their team?*

### 02 Workflow Design

Most organizations layer AI on top of workflows built before AI existed. The tools compound the problems the workflows already had.

*Have you redesigned end-to-end, or is AI bolted on?*

### 03 Human–AI Boundary

Without an explicit line of where AI ends and human judgment begins, the boundary gets drawn differently by every team — often by accident.

*Is it enforced — or theoretical?*

### 04 Applied Development

Training outside the work rarely transfers into it. People need coaching in context, not curriculum in a classroom.

*Is development continuous and measurable — or episodic and directional?*

*If two or more answers are unclear or inconsistent, your organization is likely operating in the 94%.*

## HOW HII IS ASSESSED

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Capability measured across four pillars

Scoring based on observed execution, not stated strategy

One weak pillar constrains overall performance

Designed to predict outcomes, not activity

Detailed scoring and diagnostic model applied

## THE COST OF GETTING THIS WRONG

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# Output ≠ Outcomes.

AI adoption isn't the risk anymore. How it's operationalized is.

### WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE EARLY

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- Faster output. Lower-quality decisions.
- More tools. Less accountability.
- More data. Less judgment.
- Increased efficiency. Lower headcount.

### WHAT IT COMPOUNDS INTO

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- Critical thinking degrades. Rework increases.
- Senior time shifts to correction. Performance stalls. Costs rise.
- Senior leadership pipeline evaporates. Institutional knowledge is gone.
- Workforce trust erodes. AI adoption stalls from within.

This is already happening — and accelerating.

## Start bridging the gap.

Diagnosis shows where you are. Here are three things senior leaders can do today.

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### 01 Redesign roles to be judgment-forward.

The work AI can do on our behalf may not be worth paying people for anymore. An uncomfortable truth. What remains worth paying for is the discernment, context-reading, trust-building, and judgment no model can replicate. Redesign the role, not just the tooling.

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### 02 Run the human investment parallel to the AI investment.

Every dollar of tooling paired with a dollar of capability building. Organizations with mature upskilling programs are 2x as likely to see significant AI ROI.

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### 03 Before you restructure, prepare the people leaving for what comes next.

Before any RIF, answer honestly: have we offered this person the skills, the exposure, and the development around AI they need to land well elsewhere? If not, how can we do that? Not as severance. As obligation. The future of work is here. Build the bridge.

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# Diagnose. Decide. Act.

Most organizations can't solve this internally — not because they lack intelligence, but because no single function owns the problem.

This is where most organizations get stuck.

This is where Beaconly works.

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01

## Human Infrastructure Index Diagnostic

A facilitated working session to assess your organization against the four dimensions of the HII. Followed by a scoring artifact and prioritized 90-day action plan as separate deliverables.

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02

## AI Readiness Assessment

A two-week diagnostic covering Strategic Foundation, Operational Infrastructure, and AI Execution. Includes stakeholder interviews, scored bands, and a findings brief with a sequenced roadmap for senior leadership.

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03

## Fractional Leadership

Embedded senior leadership for organizations scaling AI in operations and customer experience. Weekly executive presence to drive decisions, unblock teams, and hold the line on execution.

## SOURCES / ABOUT BEACONLY

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### RESEARCH

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McKinsey / QuantumBlack — The State of AI (Nov 2025)

McKinsey — State of AI Trust 2026 (Mar 2026)

Slalom / HBR — 2026 AI Research Report (Feb 2026)

World Economic Forum — Future of Jobs Report 2025

Gartner — Organizational Flattening Forecast (2024)

Korn Ferry — 2025 Workforce Survey

IDC — AI Workforce Readiness Report (2025)

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### ABOUT BEACONLY

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Beaconly helps organizations turn AI adoption into real operational outcomes.

After 20+ years leading teams across enterprise functions — support, service, operations, IT, and frontline execution — Candace Affsa founded Beaconly on the conviction that strategy only works when the people executing it are equipped to do so.

Beaconly partners with organizations to diagnose, design, and deliver the strategy required to make AI investments generate durable enterprise value.

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The Human Infrastructure Index™ and AI Readiness Scoring Framework are original Beaconly IP, drawing on *The Beacon Principle* (Beaconly, 2025; AI-Era Edition forthcoming). The HII is a capability-design framework designed to extend to any context where human judgment and machine capability share operational responsibility.

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