

Turning AI

into EBITDA:

How to
operationalise AI
for tangible impact

An implementation guide for PE-backed businesses, focused on measurable EBITDA outcomes across portfolio operations.

renovata

Insights from Renovata's November 2025 panel discussion.

● AI has become a fixture of boardroom conversations and investor meetings. It appears in strategy documents, due diligence reports, and operating plans. Yet for most businesses, the gap between AI ambition and actual results remains stubbornly wide.

This is one of the defining challenges facing PE investors and operators today. The technology continues to advance, but the path from experimentation to tangible financial returns is unclear for the majority. What separates the organisations making real progress from those stuck in pilot mode? It is rarely the technology itself. It comes down to leadership: the problems leaders choose to prioritise, the decisions they make about building versus buying, and whether they truly understand what these tools can and cannot do.

About the Event

In November 2025, Renovata convened a panel of industry experts in Central London to cut through the noise. From Hype to EBITDA: Operationalising AI for Value Creation brought together three C-suite AI practitioners to explore what it actually takes to move from AI speculation to measurable returns.

The discussion addressed why differentiated solutions matter more than quick wins, why starting with complex data infrastructure is often the wrong approach, and why organisational adaptability and a clear build-versus-buy framework are the real drivers of sustainable ROI. A consistent theme emerged: successful implementation depends less on technical capability and more on having the right leadership in place, leaders who view AI as an amplifier of human capability and who have the literacy to direct it effectively.

The session opened with a direct question to the room:

“Who here is seeing meaningful value from AI right now?”

The audience included investors, operators, and advisors who back businesses, sit on boards, and field questions about AI in nearly every meeting. Almost no hands went up. That moment confirmed what MIT research shows: only around 5% of businesses are realising meaningful returns from their AI investments. It also set the tone for one of the most candid AI conversations of the year.

This guide offers an actionable framework based on the insights shared, designed to help PE investors, operating partners, and portfolio company executives move from friction to value.



Daniel Hutme
Chief AI Officer, WPP.

With over 25 years in AI, he holds a Masters and Doctorate from UCL, where he is Computer Science Entrepreneur-in-Residence. Recognised as a top ten Chief AI Officer globally.



Marco Iannone
Group Chief AI Officer,
Virgin Active

Marco joined Virgin Active in October 2025. Previously Group Head of AI at Allwyn and VP of Product & AI at Ometria, he founded Retechnica, an AI text-analytics platform used by Rolls-Royce, GSK, and Deloitte.



Polly Barnfield OBE
Founder and CEO, Maybe*

Polly has delivered AI transformation for more than 25,000 businesses, including FTSE companies and UK Government agencies. Named one of the Times “50 Ones to Watch” in 2024.



Moderated by Julia Barber,
Director, Renovata.

The Right Mindset

● It would be easy to look at that 5% success rate and write AI off as another bubble. That would be a mistake. Unlike the misinvestment in data lakes 15 years ago, or the speculative hype around the metaverse, this is different. The panel's view was that AI is best understood as a "mountain full of gold." The value is real and immense, but extracting it requires the right strategy, tools, and experience.

The foundational principle they returned to repeatedly was this: a successful AI strategy does not begin with technology. It begins with business problems. Start by identifying the frictions in your organisation, then work backward to determine which solutions fit. This keeps every initiative grounded in tangible need rather than chasing novelty.



Two primary approaches are emerging:

01

Broad empowerment

enabling large numbers of employees to use AI tools to improve individual productivity.

02

Targeted application

focused investment in solving specific frictions that create genuine differentiation.

Most organisations need both, but the balance depends on where you are starting from.

Successful organisations are realistic about what they can build in-house



What differentiates successful companies

Proprietary data with unique insights

Data is what makes AI useful. Companies with distinctive data sets have an advantage, but successful organisations do not wait for data to be “ready.” They identify a friction first and work backward to leverage what they have.

Access to the right talent Most businesses lack deep internal AI expertise. Successful organisations are realistic about what they can build in-house versus where they need to partner. Technical talent alone is not enough; it must be paired with leadership that can direct it effectively.

Literate, strategic leadership

This is the decisive factor. There is a strong correlation between leadership AI literacy and the ability to realise returns. Leaders who use the tools themselves and understand both the potential and limitations make better decisions about where to invest.

AI projects fail because of organisational factors, not technology. And organisational factors start at the top.



“You will not be able to meaningfully contribute to the conversation if you’re not using AI yourself in a way that you can build those intuitions.”

Marco Iannone, Group Chief AI Officer, Virgin Active

Start with Leadership

Why leadership literacy matters more than technical hires

You can hire excellent technical talent, but it will not deliver results if leadership cannot provide clear direction. Technical teams need leaders who can articulate the business problem, write a clear brief, and distinguish between initiatives that will move the needle and those that will not. At their current stage, AI models behave like an “intoxicated graduate”: brilliant and fast, but prone to confident nonsense. Leaders need firsthand experience to manage this reality.

The talent reality

Only around 1% of organisations can attract “DeepMind-level” AI talent. For everyone else, the realistic path forward is strategic partnership: engaging external expertise while building internal capability over time.

The real leadership question is not whether a company has AI talent, but whether it has leaders with the literacy to know what talent they need, when to hire versus partner, and how to direct resources effectively.

Avoid “artificial AI” projects

Under board pressure, organisations often launch AI initiatives simply to say they have one. These projects typically fail because they start with technology rather than a defined business problem.



Find the Right Problems to Solve

Map your frictions

Conduct a comprehensive audit of business processes and list all frictions across the organisation, from expenses to supply chain. This becomes your master list of potential AI opportunities. Prioritise with a simple model. Rather than complex ROI models, assess each friction against seven criteria:

Data availability

Expected return

Timing

Stakeholder buy-in

Celebration potential

Maintenance requirements

Cost versus return

Resist the pull of quick wins

Quick projects satisfy boards but rarely differentiate. Productivity and back-office gains have value, but third-party providers eventually make them available to everyone. Sustainable advantage usually comes from harder, more complex problems.

“

Quick wins and low-hanging fruit are a distraction. What you really need to be going after are those differentiated solutions.”

Daniel Hulme, Chief AI Officer, WPP

3

Decide: Buy, build, or partner

Approach	When to use	Key considerations
Buy	Default for most cases. Use for commoditised or non-differentiating needs.	Off-the-shelf SaaS solutions. You will not find a perfect fit, but it is the most efficient path for standard processes.
Build	Only for initiatives that truly differentiate your business.	Major commitment requiring capability to build, scale, and maintain. Requires leadership who can direct technical talent effectively.
Partner	When you need specialised talent you cannot hire or retain.	Human fit is critical. Gives access to expertise without the challenge of competing for scarce AI talent. Often the realistic path for most organisations.

Turning cost centres into revenue centres

When a differentiated problem is solved internally, there may be an opportunity to platformise the solution and offer it externally, turning a cost centre into a new revenue stream.

Four red flags that signal failure

AI initiatives commonly fail when they begin with these assumptions:

- “Is the data ready?” It never will be.
- “We need top-tier AI talent.” Most organisations cannot attract it.
- Let’s focus on quick wins.” True advantage takes time.
- “We can build it ourselves.” If you have never scaled software successfully, AI will fail for the same reasons.

Execution works best as a progression that builds organisational capability over time.

Tier 1

Foundational Empowerment

Automate repetitive work to free people for higher-value tasks and build confidence.

Implement in Tiers

Tier 2

Customer experience transformation

Focus on external, high-impact applications that change how value is delivered.

Tier 3

Industry disruption preparation

Consider how AI will reshape the sector over the next three to five years, including adjacent industries.

5

Build an adaptive organisation

The ultimate differentiator is not the AI itself but the organisation's ability to adapt. Solutions built today may be obsolete within months.

Move toward “liquid organisations”

Solving differentiated problems requires cross-functional teams, flatter structures, and empowering the most relevant experts, not just the most senior voices.

AI as amplifier, not replacement

The most successful organisations frame AI as an amplifier of human capability, handling repetitive work so people can focus on creative and strategic thinking.



“This thing’s not stopping. We’ve all got access to it and you have to come up with a plan. You’ve just got to start.”

Polly Barnfield OBE, Founder and CEO, Maybe*

The bottom line

● The goal is not to deploy static systems but to build an organisation that can learn, respond, and evolve. In a rapidly changing environment, adaptability separates leaders from laggards.

While technical talent provides tools, leadership provides direction, judgement, and organisational muscle. The framework outlined here is the workout plan for building that capability.



About Renovata & the Renovata Events Programme



Renovata is a global executive search firm specialising in private equity-backed businesses. We help PE investors and portfolio companies identify and secure the leadership talent that drives value creation.

The Renovata Events Programme exists to build engagement within our network and deepen relationships with our clients, candidates, and partners.

These events provide a forum where senior leaders and experts in our ecosystem can meet, share expertise, and problem-solve together in a range of different formats, from intimate leadership roundtables and functionally oriented meetups to high-touch dinner events focused on peer networking.

If you are interested in learning more about our upcoming events or would like to be involved in our 2026 events programme as a partner, speaker, or guest, please contact Julia Barber, Director, Platform Engagement today.

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