A Study By:

COO Forum® in partnership with AIL
EMPOWERING OPERATIONS EXECUTIVES

2025
STATE OF AI
IN OPERATIONS

AI won't replace the COO — but it will redefine the ones who lead with it.

Top findings:

- 1 in 5 feel ready
- 6 in 10 COOs lead AI
- 88% focus on efficiency

Learn how to:

- use the CRIT™ Framework
- deploy ready-to-use prompts
- prepare for your role as the AI strategic integrator

Benchmark where you stand. Close the gap. Take the reins.

Methodology

▶ **Audience**

The survey was distributed to a targeted group of operations executives across a wide range of industries and company sizes, including both COO Forum members as well as other executives in operations roles.

Top Industries represented:

- Manufacturing
- Service providers
- Nonprofit
- IT/SAAS
- Fintech

▶ **Sample Size**

73 operations executives completed the survey.

▶ **Survey Topics**

The survey included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions covering the following areas:

- Organizational readiness for AI
- Strategic priorities and perceived ROI
- Common barriers to AI adoption
- Leadership roles and ownership
- Resource needs and learning preferences

▶ **Purpose**

The AI Needs Assessment Survey was developed to better understand how operations executives are engaging with artificial intelligence—not just at a strategic level, but also in the practical realities of adoption and execution.

Executive Summary

AI isn't something you can delegate to IT or consultants. It's your job as COO. But here's the good news: you don't have to be an AI expert — you just have to be an AI-driven leader. That means casting vision, defining strategy, and leading change before you feel "ready."

Key takeaways:

- **Ownership is rising:** 6 in 10 COOs lead/co-lead AI.

- **Readiness is low:** Only 1 in 5 feel prepared.

- **Priorities are narrow:** 88% focus on efficiency, not innovation.

The COOs who thrive won't wait for a perfect roadmap. They'll take the reins now — and compound advantage while others stall.

To move from interest to execution, executives must align AI with business goals, strengthen infrastructure, and approach AI as a leadership priority. This report concludes with practical steps to help leaders benchmark progress and chart a clear course forward.

Partners in this Report

This report is a collaboration between COO Forum and AI Leadership (AIL), two organizations committed to helping operations executives lead with confidence in a rapidly evolving AI landscape.

- COO Forum is a world-wide peer community for Chief Operating Officers and operations executives. For over two decades, it has fostered meaningful connection among peers, creating a space for shared learning, candid conversations and practical insight. Through curated peer groups, strategic resources, and expert-led sessions, COO Forum empowers members to drive operational excellence and lead through complexity with focus and resilience.

- AI Leadership is building the category-defining AI-Driven Leadership Collective™—where members gain a compounding strategic advantage, powered by the real-world experience of top leaders and an AI Thought Partner™ that aligns strategy and execution, making their business stronger every day.

Together, COO Forum and AI Leadership developed this needs assessment survey to better understand how operations leaders are approaching AI today—and to offer practical insights that help them move from exploration to execution.

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Introduction

AI is no longer a future concern — it's today's COO mandate. This report benchmarks where COOs stand, highlights the competitive gaps, and lays out the moves that turn curiosity into confident execution.

Yet even with growing momentum, many leaders are still facing uncertainty. AI resources are abundant, but they often miss the practical realities of leading operations. The result: a strong desire to lead on AI, but limited clarity on where to begin or how to scale effectively.

What we found is clear: COOs and operations executives are ready to move forward, but many lack the structure or support to move from exploration to execution.

This report summarizes the aggregated findings and offers a benchmark for comparison. Whether your company is piloting AI or still laying the groundwork, the goal is to help you:

- See how your organization compares
- Understand common barriers and success factors
- Identify where to focus next
- Move from curiosity to confident execution

As strategic integrators, COOs and operations executives are well-positioned to drive AI adoption. We hope this report gives you a clearer path to do just that.

How to Navigate This Report

1. **Benchmark Gaps** - See where you stand (pages 7-14).

2. **Competitive Stakes** - Understand what's at risk (pages 21-22).

3. **Take Action** - Review the Action Playbook (page 15) for three moves to take the reins.

4. **Make It Real** - Read about a real use case on (pages 17-20) with prompts to replicate.

5. **How We Help** - Earn a Certificate + join The Collective to support your journey (pages 25-26).

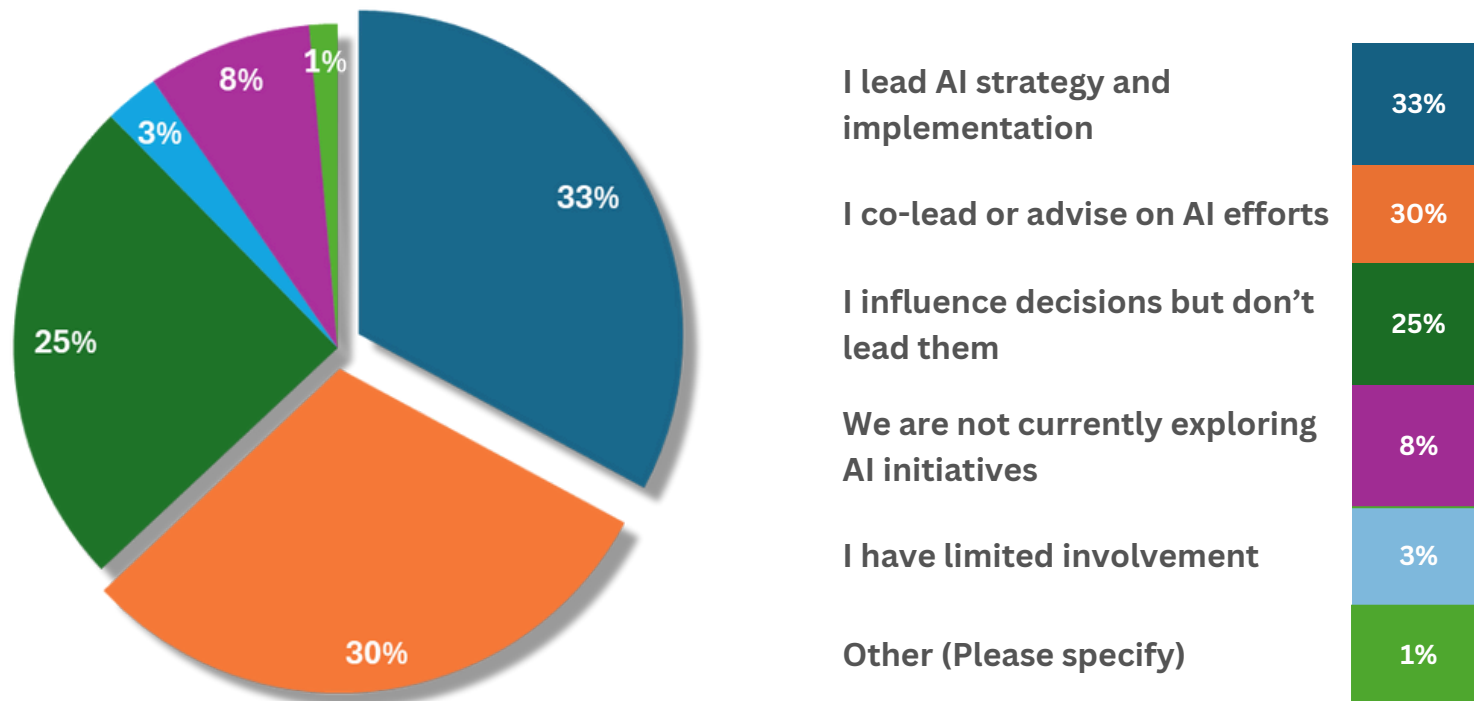**WANT TO SUPERCHARGE YOUR AI EFFORTS NOW? LEARN MORE HERE:**

https://www.cooforum.net/strategic-ai-coo

Benchmark Gaps

Where COOs stand vs. where they need to be

Each chart shows how your peers are approaching AI. Compare your position, then use the "What this means for COOs" boxes to identify your next moves.

AI isn't IT's turf anymore - 6 in 10 COOs now own AI strategy. Are you in or out?
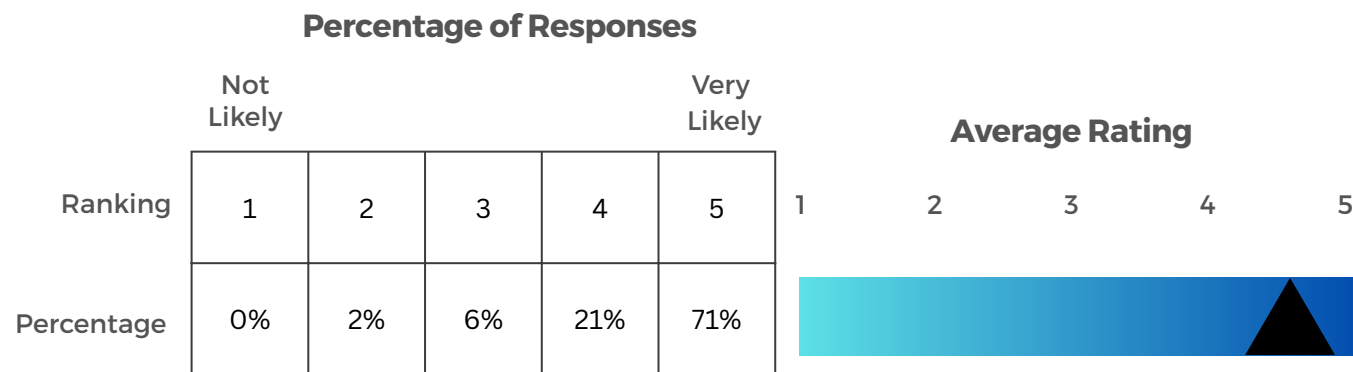
WHAT BEST DESCRIBES YOUR ROLE IN AI-RELATED DECISIONS AT YOUR COMPANY?

Pie chart values: 33%, 30%, 25%, 8%, 3%, 1%

Role	%
I lead AI strategy and implementation	33%
I co-lead or advise on AI efforts	30%
I influence decisions but don't lead them	25%
We are not currently exploring AI initiatives	8%
I have limited involvement	3%
Other (Please specify)	1%

▶ **What this means**: If you're not at the table, you're behind.

The AI skill gap is closing fast — 9 in 10 COOs are preparing. Where does your team stand?
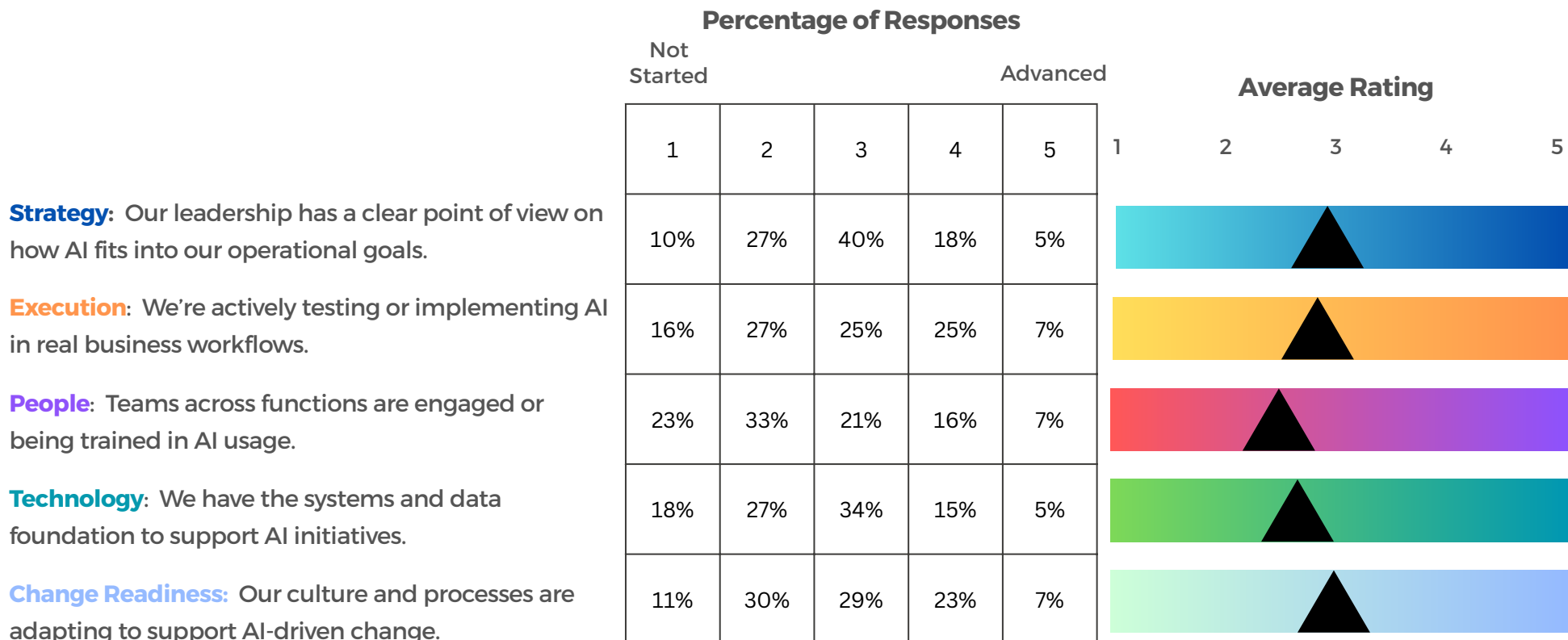
DO YOU THINK AI SKILLS WILL BE AN IMPORTANT PART OF YOUR ROLE IN THE FUTURE?

Percentage of Responses

	Not Likely				Very Likely
Ranking	1	2	3	4	5
Percentage	0%	2%	6%	21%	71%

Average Rating

1	2	3	4	5

▶ **What this means**: Boards expect fluency; upskill yourself and managers now.

Most COOs admit: AI maturity is stuck in beginner mode. Only 1 in 5 feel ready.

HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOUR ORGANIZATION'S AI MATURITY IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS?

Percentage of Responses

	Not Started 1	2	3	4	Advanced 5
Strategy: Our leadership has a clear point of view on how AI fits into our operational goals.	10%	27%	40%	18%	5%
Execution: We're actively testing or implementing AI in real business workflows.	16%	27%	25%	25%	7%
People: Teams across functions are engaged or being trained in AI usage.	23%	33%	21%	16%	7%
Technology: We have the systems and data foundation to support AI initiatives.	18%	27%	34%	15%	5%
Change Readiness: Our culture and processes are adapting to support AI-driven change.	11%	30%	29%	23%	7%

Average Rating

▶ **What this means**: Execution is the gap; fix enablement and training first.

The biggest roadblock isn't AI — it's your systems and talent.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST BARRIERS PREVENTING AI ADOPTION AT YOUR ORGANIZATION?

Biggest Barriers	Response Percent
Integration with existing systems	59%
Talent gaps	44%
Unclear ROI/use cases	42%
Budget constraints	38%
Resistance to change	34%
Lack of leadership understanding	33%
Poor data quality/infrastructure	26%
Fear of job displacement	12%

▶**What this means**: These are COO levers. Integrate AI into workflows and close gaps fast.

88% of COOs chase efficiency — but the real edge comes from innovation.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIC GOALS ARE YOU EXPLORING AI TO SUPPORT?

Strategic Goals	Response Percent
Operational efficiency	88%
Employee productivity	81%
Data and analytics modernization	60%
Customer experience	51%
Cost reduction	48%
Innovation and product development	42%
Risk and compliance	29%
Supply chain resilience	18%

▶ **What this means**: Efficiency = base. Competitive leaders shift into innovation early.

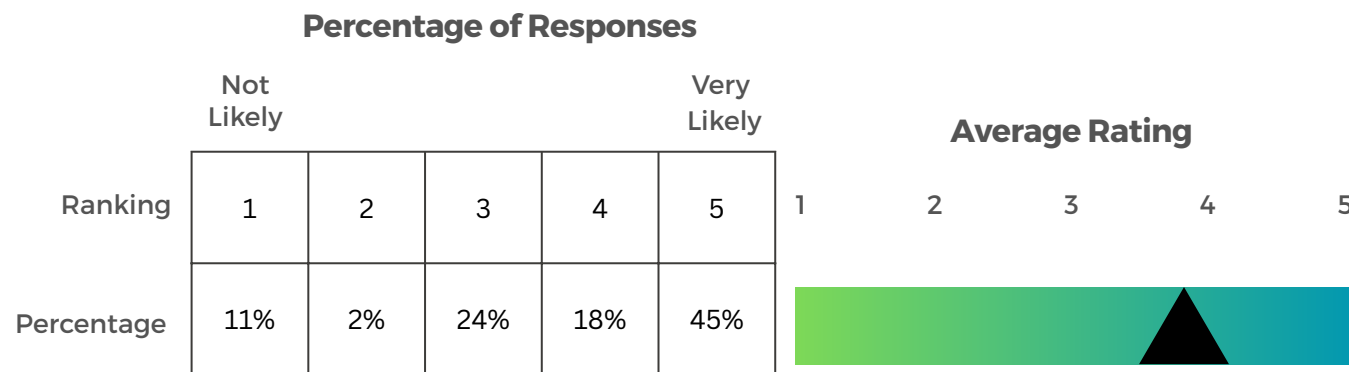# Most COOs still use Google for answers. Advantage goes to real playbooks.

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR AI INFORMATION, RESOURCES, TOOLS AND TRAINING?

Source	Response Percent
Web searches	66%
From COO Forum	33%
Podcasts	31%
Attended AI workshops outside of COO Forum	31%
AI specific training courses	30%
AI newsletters	23%
Consultants	21%
In-house experts	14%
Trade Organizations	11%

▶ **What this means**: Replace scattered searching with structured, peer-tested learning.

6 in 10 want formal AI training. The winners will get there first.

WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN A COO AI CERTIFICATION?

Percentage of Responses

	Not Likely				Very Likely
Ranking	1	2	3	4	5
Percentage	11%	2%	24%	18%	45%

Average Rating

1   2   3   4   5

▶ **What this means**: Certification signals readiness to boards and teams; first-mover matters.

Action Playbook

3 moves to take the reins with confidence

Turn benchmarks into momentum. These moves show how COOs align strategy, equip teams, and embed AI into operations to lead with confidence.

ALIGN STRATEGY

Use CRIT™ to align AI with your operational goals — turning intent into action.

The Ai-Driven Leader

Harnessing AI to Make Faster, Smarter Decisions
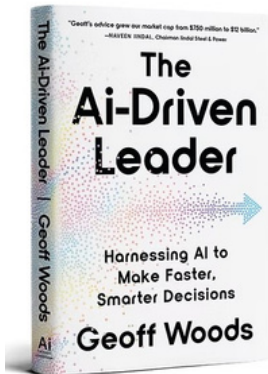
Geoff Woods

Author Geoff Woods, Founder of AI Leadership and the AI-Driven Leadership Collective™

AI is not just for IT. It's now a strategic weapon in the hands of operations executives who know how to wield it. **The most forward-thinking COOs are not asking "What tool should we use?" but instead, "How should we think?"**

That's where the CRIT™ Framework comes in—a simple but powerful method to turn your strategic intent into AI-powered execution.

The CRIT™ Framework:

C CONTEXT – Define the strategic challenge in detail.

R ROLE – Assign AI the role of an expert who understands your industry.

I INTERVIEW – Have AI interview you with smart questions to gain deeper context about the challenge.

T TASK – Ask AI to perform a useful action with precision.

"By leveraging AI as your Thought Partner, you can make more informed, data-driven decisions in a fraction of the time. This frees you up to focus on higher-level strategic thinking and leadership."

-Geoff Woods

EQUIP TEAMS

Enable your managers to experiment with AI directly. Pilot one workflow this week.
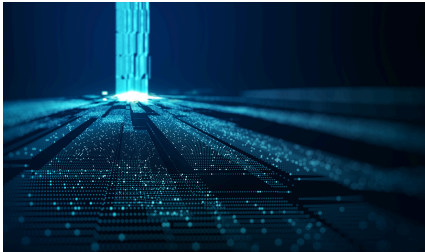
According to IDC, the total amount of data created and consumed globally is projected to soar to 175 zettabytes in 2025. That amount of data stored on DVDs would be a stack over 23 million miles high!

AI ✦ **Process improvement:**

CONTEXT: [Describe the current process, why it's necessary, and what specific outputs are required.]

ROLE: Act as a workflow optimization expert who understands both the technical capabilities of AI and the human elements of team productivity.

INTERVIEW: Ask me 3-4 questions about our quality standards, integration needs, and team capabilities to help design the most effective solution.

TASK: Create a step-by-step process that:
1. Reduces time spent on administrative tasks
2. Maintains or improves quality standards
3. Can be easily replicated by team members
4. Includes specific prompts and instructions for implementation

AI ✦ **AI use case generator:**

CONTEXT: [Describe a specific process or task in your organization that's repetitive, time-consuming, or inefficient.]

ROLE: Please assume the role of a process improvement specialist who helps organizations identify ideal AI use cases.

INTERVIEW: Please interview me by asking one question at a time, up to 5 questions, to understand the current process, its challenges, and what would make it more efficient.

TASK: After our discussion, please:
1. Identify 3 specific ways AI could assist with this process
2. For each suggestion, outline what implementation would entail
3. Propose metrics to measure the success of each approach

Embed AI ↓

EMBED AI

Infuse AI into leadership routines. Run monthly board sims; do weekly micro-drills.

The New Learning Loop:
When gen AI is diffused through an organization, every employee has the full power of their organization behind them, which expands the autonomy of both people and AI over time.

According to Accenture's Technology Trends 2025

Board preparation:

CONTEXT: [Describe your business situation and the materials you're sharing.]

ROLE: I want you to act as an AI Board composed of the following members: [list stakeholders with their roles and details].

INTERVIEW: Please have each board member ask me 1-2 questions to gain additional context they would need to provide meaningful feedback.

TASK: After our discussion, please:
1. Provide individual feedback from each board member's perspective
2. Highlight areas of consensus and disagreement among the board
3. Identify potential blind spots in the current approach
4. Offer specific recommendations based on the board's collective wisdom

Personal development:

CONTEXT: I want to assess my current leadership capabilities across the 10 skills that become more valuable in an AI-driven world: mindset, strategic thinking, communication, change leadership, talent development, financial acumen, execution, stakeholder engagement, innovation management, and governance.

ROLE: Act as an executive leadership coach who specializes in AI-driven leadership development and can provide honest, actionable assessments.

INTERVIEW: For each of the 10 skills, ask me specific questions about how I currently operate, then assess my maturity level (1-5) and explain why.
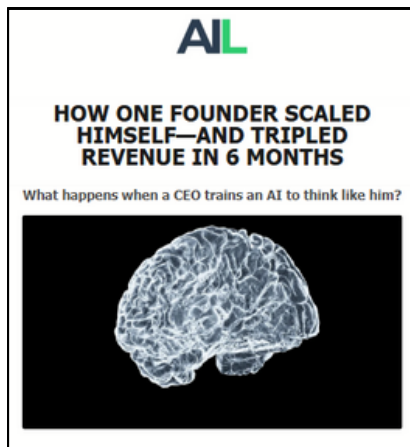
TASK: Create a personalized development plan that identifies:
1. My top 3 strengths to leverage further
2. My biggest development opportunity
3. Specific actions I can take in the next 30 days to advance
4. How I can use AI to accelerate my growth in each area

Use Case ↓

REAL USE CASE

One COO-led team unlocked $4.6M in same day savings.

HOW ONE FOUNDER SCALED HIMSELF—AND TRIPLED REVENUE IN 6 MONTHS

What happens when a CEO trains an AI to think like him?

Join thousands of executives who rely on AIL's weekly AI briefing to make confident decisions in an AI-driven world.

Subscribe here:
https://www.aileadership.com/newsletter

A manufacturing company's executive team used AI to crowdsource strategic insights across all leadership roles.

Rather than having AI analyze their business directly:

- They used AI to interview each functional leader individually,
- Leaders shared detailed insights about inefficiencies, missed opportunities, and strategic barriers they encountered daily.
- The team fed AI two years' worth of spending data.
- The responses were aggregated through an AI framework.

Within hours of analyzing the results, **the executive team identified $4.6 million in wasteful spending** that could be eliminated without impacting production. This wasn't money hidden in obvious places—traditional financial analysis had repeatedly reviewed these expenditures.

The breakthrough came from AI's ability to identify subtle patterns across massive datasets and flag spending that didn't align with strategic outcomes.

METHOD: (Replicate this with the prompts on the next page.)

Interview Leaders → Aggregate Patterns → Validate Spend

REAL USE CASE

Here's a starter prompt for your executive team's interviews from the real use case:

The AI-Driven Leader can be viewed as both a Composer of strategy and a Conductor of teams and technology.

Excerpt from Geoff Wood's book, The AI-Driven Leader

Starter prompt:

CONTEXT: You're interviewing [LEADER'S NAME], who serves as [TITLE] at [COMPANY]. Our goal is to identify the highest-impact opportunities for improvement.

ROLE: You are an expert strategy consultant with deep experience in operational excellence and business optimization.

INTERVIEW: Please conduct a comprehensive interview focusing on:

- 80% of questions about bottlenecks, inefficiencies, and missed opportunities specific to their role
- 20% of questions about company-wide challenges they observe from their position

Ask one question at a time and dig deeper based on their responses.

TASK: After the interview, provide:
1. A prioritized list of improvement opportunities
2. Specific AI use cases that could address these challenges
3. A 30-60-90 day implementation roadmap
4. Expected impact and resources required for each initiative

Competitive Stakes

Winners compound fast; laggards widen the gap

Every AI win compounds. Every delay compounds your gap. See how urgency and execution are separating leaders from laggards.

COMPETITIVE STAKES

92%

of survey respondents said they are actively exploring or implementing AI initiatives in their businesses.

"AI isn't just a new tool—it's a new test of leadership."
— The AI-Driven Leader by Geoff Woods

For today's COOs, the AI era demands more than cost cuts and marginal efficiencies. It requires rethinking how you operate, how your teams make decisions, and how fast you can adapt to change.

AI is no longer a future capability—it's the playing field right now.

What we've learned from working with executives across industries is this:

1. The biggest risk isn't getting AI wrong—it's waiting too long to act.
2. The winners aren't the most technical teams—they're the ones who ask better questions and move faster.
3. Every AI win compounds. Every delay creates a strategic gap.

What Standing Still Looks Like:

- Endless vendor demos with no traction
- "Innovation" teams disconnected from core operations
- Fear-based inaction disguised as caution
- Compounding knowledge gaps at the leadership level

"In 2024, COO Forum members were still exploring what AI meant. Fast forward to 2025, and they are actively using it to deliver results."

-Chuck Orzechowski, CEO @ COO Forum

Action Playbook - Next Steps

Your path from curiosity to confident execution

Close the loop: Align AI to strategy, Equip teams with fluency, and Embed AI into workflows. Use the 30/60/90 roadmap on the next page to start now.

NEXT STEPS

You don't need every tool — you need to lead the transformation.

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Since 2004, COO Forum has led the way in providing operations executives with the best peer-based learning experience in the market.
Supercharge your career at COO Forum.

More information here:
https://www.cooforum.net

What Action Looks Like:

Lay out 3 moves (Align, Equip, Embed) as a 30/60/90 roadmap.

☑ Build "AI Boards" that simulate stakeholder reactions and reduce executive friction.

☑ Reimagine cost-saving negotiations through culturally-attuned AI personas.

☑ Reskill leadership layers using AI-powered coaching agents.

☑ Generate 40% more customer innovations through better prompting.

☑ Replace performance reviews with AI-led 360˚ feedback that actually accelerates growth.

These aren't moonshots—they're happening now. And they're not being led by technical founders, but by operations executives who know how to align people, systems, and strategy at speed.

Each day, ask yourself:

How can AI help me do this?

Programs ↓

How We Help COOs Lead with Confidence

You don't need another tool — you need a path.

From formal training to peer networks, we've built programs that give COOs the frameworks, confidence, and support to lead AI adoption at speed.

PROGRAMS: Find your path with formal upskilling and peer networks.

▶ COO Forum | **AI COO Certificate Program**
Lead the Transformation — From Vision to Value

Program design: Six training pillars built specifically for COOs, in partnership with AIL.

Strategy	+	People & Change Leadership	+	AI Maturity Framework	+	Operations & Execution Framework	+	Governance & Risk	+	AI Innovation Lab

What will you learn?

☑ The mindset strategic leaders need for developing a clear AI framework.

☑ A step-by-step approach to building a high-performing, AI-fluent workforce by leveraging human + AI collaboration.

☑ A practical path for developing a Data and Technology progression framework with HITL guardrails.

☑ The essentials of Governance & Risk practices that deploy Responsible AI while protecting the enterprise.

☑ An operating framework that connects OKRs, goals, and objectives to real value.

☑ Opportunities to work with peers, dive into your AI initiatives, and uncover new insights through innovation.

More information: www.cooforum.net/strategic-ai-coo

▶ AIL | **The AI-Driven Leadership Collective™**
Where AI Meets Leadership™

The Collective™ is a high-caliber group of forward-thinking leaders using AI to drive growth and cultivate a competitive advantage. AI is evolving too fast for any leader to go it alone. In The AI-Driven Leadership Collective™, we share and centralize the collective knowledge of our members—turning real-world insights into proprietary roadmaps, playbooks, and shared learnings that will help you move faster and drive the growth of your business.

More information here: https://www.aileadership.com/collective

Thank You! ↓

Thank You!

We want to thank all of the wonderful operations executives from both the COO Forum community and those outside it for participating in the 2025 AI Operations Report.

We also want to thank:
Geoff Woods & his
AIL Leadership Team,
the COO Forum Team, and
COO Forum's AI Advisory Team

"It's time to start thinking differently. Because the future doesn't wait, and neither should you."

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