

Changing Leadership Archetypes for the AI Era:

The Six Executive Profiles That Will Matter Most by 2030

10 minute read

AI is changing more than how organisations work. It is changing what the market values in the executives who lead them.

The question, then, is not simply which leaders understand AI. It is which leadership capabilities will become most market-relevant as AI reshapes growth, operating models, work, investment and governance.

To explore that question, Rialto surveyed senior professionals across organisations ranging from under 500 to more than 10,000 employees. Respondents included Board Directors, C-suite executives, HR and Talent leaders, and senior functional leaders.

We asked a deliberately forward-looking question:

By 2030, how will the most market-relevant executives be best described?

Rialto analysed the responses and identified six distinct leadership archetypes.

None were defined primarily by technical AI expertise. Instead, the profiles combine AI fluency with something more consequential at executive level: the ability to create value, build organisational adaptability, redesign how humans and technology work together, translate technology into business value, deliver transformation at scale and ensure adoption happens responsibly.

The strongest signal was commercial. The AI-enabled Growth Strategist emerged as the leading archetype, accounting for 25% of responses. But the next two profiles, the Builder of Adaptive Learning Organisations at 20%; and the Human–AI Collaboration Leader at 19% suggest that AI leadership is not simply about identifying opportunities or funding technology. It is about building organisations capable of learning, redesigning work and making better decisions as the technology evolves.

The remaining three profiles the Commercial Translator of Technology into Value (14%), Enterprise Transformation Architect (13%) and Ethical Steward of AI Adoption (9%) provide the mechanisms through which those ambitions become real, scalable and trusted.

These are not six new job titles. They are six forms of executive value that are becoming increasingly important as AI changes the basis on which organisations compete. Most leaders will have a natural centre of gravity in one or two. However, you must now consider whether the profile that has made you successful to date is the profile that will remain most relevant as the decade progresses.

THE SIX LEADERSHIP ARCHETYPES FOR THE AI ERA

1. AI-ENABLED GROWTH STRATEGIST - 25%

The question answered by the AI-enabled Growth Strategist: Where can AI create meaningful competitive advantage?

You're probably here if your year is judged on a number and you ask what a capability is for before you ask how it works.

P&L owners, divisional managing directors, chief commercial officers and strategy leaders are natural territory for this archetype but it is not confined to commercial roles. What defines it is the ability to see where AI can change the economics of a business, creating revenue, improving margin, changing the customer proposition or opening an advantage competitors will struggle to replicate.

Spotting an opportunity however, is not the same as having an AI strategy. The real test is whether a leader can distinguish a genuinely differentiated commercial opportunity from an attractive technology story. Generic AI growth narratives are unlikely to survive much scrutiny. Boards need leaders who can connect the technology to the economics of their particular market.

For executives moving towards this profile, the development challenge is to move from operating value to designing it. That means understanding the economics of AI in your own market: what it costs to run, what it can displace, where it can open new revenue and where it might change the basis of competition. It also means developing enough fluency to interrogate what technology teams and vendors tell you without needing to become a technologist yourself.

Capacity comes from doing, not observing. Sponsor an AI-enabled commercial initiative. Stay close to the technology leaders and vendors who can tell you what is genuinely possible now. Develop a point of view on where AI could change your sector and be prepared to defend it.

The growth strategist's advantage is knowing where the technology matters commercially and being able to articulate why, not simply presenting a case for AI.

2. BUILDER OF ADAPTIVE, LEARNING ORGANISATIONS - 20%

The question answered by the Builder of Adaptive, Learning Organisations: How do we build an organisation that can continually adapt?

You're probably here if you think about AI in terms of what it can do and what it requires the organisation to become.

People and HR leaders, operations executives and those who have led significant capability or organisational change are natural candidates for this profile. But again, the archetype is defined by capability rather than title.

These leaders build the organisational capacity to keep learning while the technology keeps moving. That means more than training. It encompasses workforce planning, capability development, experimentation, feedback loops, operating rhythms and the ability to change course when evidence shows that something is not working.

Training volume is an easy thing to measure, but organisational learning is harder. The honest test is whether the intervention changed how people work, how decisions get made or how quickly the organisation can respond to new information.

AI will continually alter the relationship between roles, tasks and skills. Leaders in this archetype therefore think about workforce design at the level of work rather than simply job titles. They ask which tasks should be automated, which should be augmented, which require deeper human expertise and what new capabilities will be needed as a result.

The shift for people and operations leaders is from controlling work to orchestrating it, creating environments where people, technology and teams can adapt together.

Start small, but realise the value. Map the roles and skills most exposed to change in your organisation. Run a reskilling or redesign initiative end to end. Build feedback into it, then measure whether the intervention actually changed capability or decisions.

The builder's advantage is creating an organisation that can keep learning before the next change arrives.

3. HUMAN-AI COLLABORATION LEADER - 19%

The question answered by the Human-AI Collaboration Leader: How should humans and AI work together?

This is perhaps the clearest expression of the fact that AI is changing work itself, not simply automating individual tasks.

You're probably here if your instinct is to ask not just what AI can replace, but what humans and AI could accomplish together that neither could achieve alone. The Human-AI Collaboration Leader redesigns work around tasks, decisions and outcomes rather than assuming that existing roles will simply acquire a new technology layer.

That requires difficult choices. What should AI do? What should it never do? Where should humans remain firmly in the loop? Which decisions can be delegated to a system, and which require human judgement? Where does automation increase capacity, and where does it simply transfer risk somewhere less visible?

These are operating questions as much as technology questions. The organisations that make the most effective use of AI will increasingly need leaders who can design human-machine teams, rethink decision rights and create the conditions for people to trust and appropriately challenge AI-generated recommendations.

This profile also sits at the intersection of productivity and employee experience. Poorly designed AI adoption can make work more fragmented, surveillance-heavy or confusing. Well-designed collaboration can remove low-value activity and give people more capacity for judgement, creativity, relationships and complex problem-solving.

The development challenge is therefore broader than digital fluency. Leaders need to understand task decomposition, workflow redesign, human oversight, decision-making and the behavioural conditions that make people willing to adopt new ways of working. Take one team or process and redesign it deliberately around human-AI collaboration. Make the decision rights explicit. Define where the human remains accountable. Measure the outcome.

The goal is not to make humans more like machines but to work out what humans should be uniquely good at when machines become much better at some of the work around them.

4. COMMERCIAL TRANSLATOR OF TECHNOLOGY INTO VALUE - 14%

The question answered by the Commercial Translator of Technology into Value: Can this technology be translated into measurable business value?

You're probably here if you're the person who asks what an investment will actually deliver - and are willing to challenge a weak business case before it reaches the board.

Finance directors, commercial leaders and general managers who have developed strong technology fluency can sit naturally in this profile, as can technology leaders who have learned to speak credibly in the language of business value. While the Growth Strategist identifies where AI could create competitive advantage, the Commercial Translator works out whether a particular technology, investment or initiative can credibly turn that opportunity into value. That means being able to connect technology decisions to cost, revenue, margin, productivity, risk and longer-term strategic outcomes - while being prepared to challenge assumptions buried inside the numbers. Without this capability, organisations can end up making significant technology decisions on enthusiasm alone.

The translator is the executive who can sit between technology and the investment committee and ask the questions that matter: What problem are we solving? What changes operationally? What does it cost once the pilot ends? What assumptions does the business case depend on? How will we know whether the investment worked?

The development challenge for finance and commercial leaders is to move from intuition-led judgement towards evidence-augmented judgement, while recognising that the evidence may come from systems and models they did not build.

For technology leaders, the reverse shift is equally important: becoming comfortable being accountable for business outcomes rather than simply technical delivery.

Build the capability by getting close to actual investment decisions. Ask for the workings behind projections. Understand what your organisation's existing AI capabilities cost and what they return. Follow the initiative beyond the pilot and into operational reality.

The translator's value lies in making technology legible in the language of business.

5. ENTERPRISE TRANSFORMATION ARCHITECT - 13 %

The question answered by the Enterprise Transformation Architect : Can the organisation actually execute this at scale?

You're probably here if you're the one who has to make a pilot work in the real organisation, not just in a demonstration.

Chief operating officers, transformation leaders and senior programme executives are natural candidates for this archetype. Their challenge is turning promising ideas into operating reality.

Pilots need somewhere to land. That means the workflows, data, decision rights, governance, technology infrastructure and talent required to take an initiative beyond experimentation. Without that architecture, even a compelling AI use case can become another isolated pilot that never changes the organisation.

The Enterprise Transformation Architect therefore sees the connections between functions. They understand that changing one workflow can alter another, that new technology can create new capability requirements and that transformation only succeed when the different parts of the system move together. It is systems thinking, not simply programme management at a larger scale.

For leaders developing towards this profile, the challenge is often moving beyond deep expertise in one domain and becoming fluent across several. Understand the use cases and capability gaps in the functions next to yours. Learn how technology, data, people and operating models interact. Build relationships that allow you to see the whole value chain rather than only your section of it.

Crucially, hold the boundaries and agree the scope up front. Transformation leaders who cannot define what is and is not part of the mandate can quickly become associated with cost and complexity rather than outcomes.

The architect's job is to make transformation repeatable, scalable and executable.

WHAT THE LEADERSHIP RANKING TELLS US

Understandably, the ranking starts at the clear rationale for AI investment and walks away towards the housekeeping end – the creation and oversight of the conditions that make it sustainable.

The strongest signal, therefore, is the most obviously commercial one: AI-enabled Growth Strategist, accounting for a quarter of responses. That reflects the continuing importance of leaders who can connect AI to growth, competitive advantage and the economics of the organisation.

The next two profiles - the Builder of Adaptive, Learning Organisations (20%) and Human–AI Collaboration Leader (19%) suggest that the future of executive leadership is not just about finding attractive AI opportunities. It is about changing the organisation so that people can work effectively with the technology and continue adapting as it develops.

The next two, Commercial Translator of Technology into Value (14%) and Enterprise Transformation Architect (13%), are the connective capabilities. One translates technology into a credible value case; the other creates the conditions for that value to be delivered at scale.

And then there is the Ethical Steward of AI Adoption at 9%. Its position should not be interpreted as a judgement about the importance of responsible AI Governance is a prerequisite for sustainable adoption. But the research suggests that, when asked how the most market-relevant executives will be described by 2030, respondents were more likely to associate that relevance with creating value, building adaptability and redesigning work than with stewardship alone.

That represents perhaps what boards are asking for now, rather than looking to the gaps approaching on the horizon and it creates an interesting tension. The capability an organisation needs most is not always the one it finds easiest to recognise as executive value. Leaders for the future understand that the market is unlikely to reward a collection of AI credentials in isolation. Increasingly, it will look for evidence of what a leader can do with AI: create value, redesign work, build capability, execute change and make difficult decisions responsibly.

WHEN AI TAKES THE WORK, LEADERSHIP MOVES UP A LEVEL

One of the most important implications of AI for executives is that some of the work that traditionally demonstrated seniority is becoming easier to automate. Analysis, synthesis, reporting and information processing have long been part of the executive toolkit. As AI becomes increasingly capable in these areas, doing those things well will become less distinctive. It is making judgement more visible.

Thus, the executive advantage shifts towards knowing which question to ask, which evidence to trust, what to do with conflicting signals, when to stop an initiative, how to bring people with you and where accountability ultimately sits. That is the common thread across all six archetypes. None depends on being the person who knows the most about the technology. The leadership archetype that will become increasingly critical as we approach the end of the decade is the one who makes better decisions because the technology exists.

WHICH ONE ARE YOU AND WHICH DOES YOUR NEXT ROLE NEED?

Nobody is only one of these archetypes. Most senior leaders will have a natural centre of gravity in one profile and meaningful capability in another. Instead of asking Which one am I?, leaders should be able to answer which profiles best describe the values they possess today, which profile their next role might require them to strengthen, and how they will continue to evolve in alignment with developing demand.

A board that has never met you will form its view from evidence. That means executives need to make their emerging capability visible through what they have actually done:

- A Growth Strategist can demonstrate a commercial thesis for how AI could change their sector.
- A Builder of Adaptive, Learning Organisations can show how they redesigned capability, workforce or operating rhythms and what changed as a result.
- A Human–AI Collaboration Leader can demonstrate how they redesigned work, teams or decision rights around human–AI collaboration.
- A Commercial Translator can show a business case they challenged or validated and the assumptions behind the decision.
- An Enterprise Transformation Architect can show an operating model they redesigned and what they deliberately chose not to change.
- An Ethical Steward can demonstrate a governance position they established and defended when the easier answer would have been to proceed without it.

WHAT ORGANISATIONS CAN DO TO BUILD THESE LEADERS

Individual effort will only take an executive so far. Many of these capabilities depend on opportunities and mandates that organisations have to create. That means giving leaders genuine cross-functional problems to solve with real decision rights and measurable outcomes. Commercial leaders need opportunities to work closely with technology and data. Technology leaders need exposure to the P&L and investment decisions. People leaders need to be involved in workforce redesign rather than brought in after the technology decision has already been made. Transformation leaders need mandates that cross organisational boundaries. Governance leaders need a seat at the table early enough to shape adoption rather than simply review it afterwards.

Rotations can help. So can funded experiments, provided organisations are willing to learn from failure rather than treating every unsuccessful pilot as wasted money. The support that matters most is permission to be measured. An executive who sponsors an AI-enabled initiative should be able to say what changed, what did not, what was learned and whether the original thesis held up. A documented failure with a clear account of what it taught the organisation can be more valuable than an unexamined list of successful pilots.

Boards also have a role. AI is not simply a technology agenda. It is increasingly a leadership, workforce, operating model, investment and governance agenda. Treating it only as the responsibility of technology specialists risks creating pockets of expertise that cannot translate into enterprise-wide action.

The organisations that develop these archetypes effectively will be the ones that make them part of how leadership itself is developed, deployed and assessed.

MAKING YOUR ARCHETYPE VISIBLE WHEN GOING THROUGH AN EXECUTIVE TRANSITION

For executives looking at transitioning or developing their leadership the challenge is slightly different. You need to make your value legible quickly. A CV can tell a hiring board where you have been but it is less effective at showing what you can now do differently because AI has changed the context. That is why evidence matters. Show the commercial decision you made, the operating model you changed, the work you redesigned around humans and AI, not simply the technology you introduced. Show the capability you built and what changed because of it. Show the governance decision you shaped and the risk it allowed the organisation to manage.

The strongest executive proposition is no longer 'I understand AI'. It is 'I know how to use AI to produce an outcome that matters'.

A DISCREET NEXT STEP

The archetype question is a useful place to start for any senior leader considering a move, planning for the next stage of your career, or simply testing how the market would read your leadership today. Which of the six profiles best describes the value you create now? Which one will matter most in the role you want next? And, perhaps most importantly, what evidence would convince someone who does not know you?

The above are questions worth answering before the market asks them for you.

For an independent perspective of your leadership readiness for an AI era, Rialto is happy to have a discreet conversation about where your leadership profile is strongest, where it may need to evolve, and how to make that value visible.

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The Executive Summer List: What to
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