

The AI adoption reset: how Microsoft scaled Copilot across 62K sellers

Based on research by Iavor Bojinov, Raffaella Sadun, and Shunyuan Zhang from Harvard Business School

Why the standard rollout didn't work and what MCAPS built instead.

Harvard Business School researchers studied AI adoption across our sales organization—Microsoft Customer and Partner Solutions (MCAPS)—over a two-year period from 2023 to 2025.

STANDARD PLAYBOOK

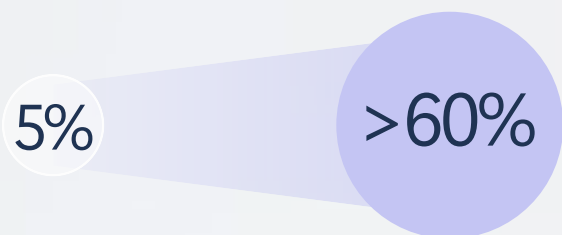
MCAPS originally followed its standard playbook for deploying new technology, watching adoption reach a promising early peak then crash to 5.1% daily active usage in just over a month.

NEW PLAYBOOK

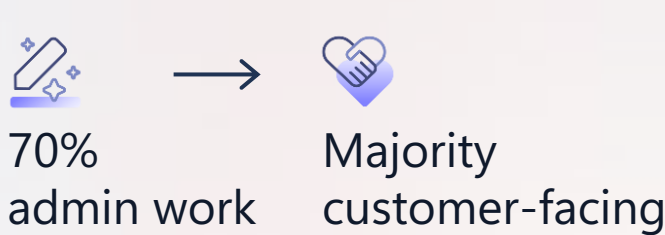
The new playbook focused on rebuilding adoption around behavior change, not tool access.

THE RESULT

Daily active usage shift



Workforce shift



Over 60% daily active usage across 62,000 sellers within two years and a workforce that shifted from spending 70% of its day on admin to letting Copilot and agents handle routine tasks so sellers could focus on higher-value, customer-facing work.

Scale and complexity

DAILY ACTIVE USAGE

5%

Standard tech deployment resulted in stalled AI adoption within 30 days

SELLERS

62K

Large organization had to fundamentally change how it worked

ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

70%

Workforce spending more time on admin than customer selling



The technology is easy—not simple, but not the hardest thing either. People and process are a whole other ballgame.



Pam Maynard
Chief AI Transformation Officer,
Microsoft

The challenge

Microsoft followed its standard playbook for Copilot:

- ✓ Deploy the tool
- ✓ Run training
- ✓ Let employees figure it out

For every other tool, this worked. Not Copilot.

Unlike prior tools, Copilot required sellers to fundamentally change how they worked—and sellers averaging 275 daily interruptions were already stretched thin. Adoption peaked at 22.7% in the early weeks, then collapsed to 5.1% in just over a month. The playbook didn't just underperform. It had to be rebuilt from scratch.

What MCAPS learned: a four-phase approach to AI adoption

01 Level setting and basic skilling

Sellers needed grounding in what Copilot could do and what prompting was. Early sessions reframed AI as freeing sellers for harder, higher-value work.

03 Role-based immersion

New AI capabilities were first tested by insider groups willing to work with incomplete experiences. Once these scenarios reached 70% satisfaction among the insider group, they were packaged into ready-made prompts and released to the broader seller population.

02 Empowering champions

Respected high performers embraced AI and made their success visible so peers would follow. Seeing a colleague succeed mattered far more than any headquarters message.

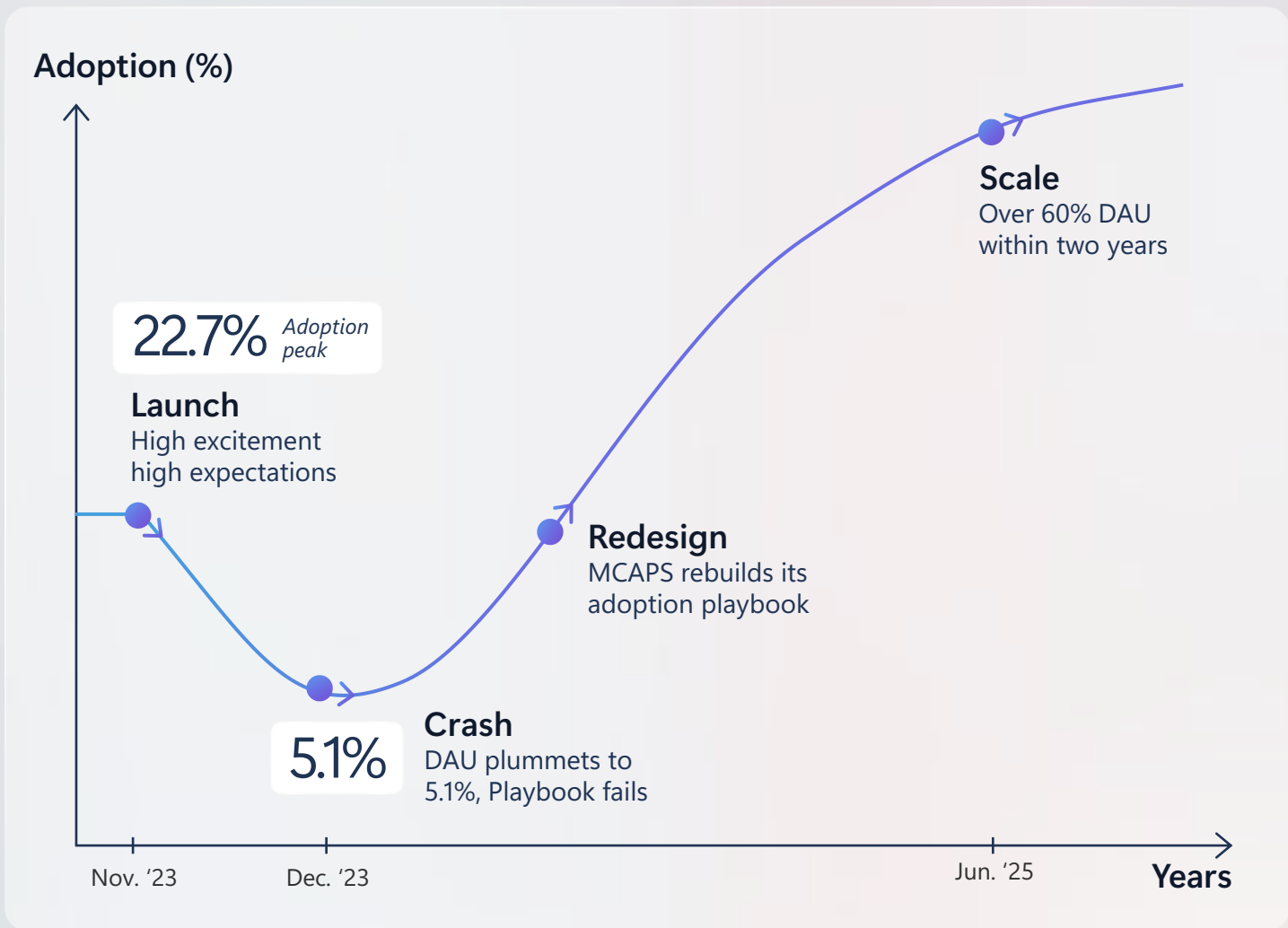
04 Habit building

Daily prompt campaigns, "Copilot Cup" gamification, seller-recorded win videos, and peer tip-sharing turned occasional use into daily habit. The team tracked progress across three tiers: awareness via MAU (monthly active users), adoption via WAU (weekly active users), and transformation via DAU (daily active users).

Early adoption required constant reinforcement—and even as usage climbed, the team learned that when enablement paused, usage slipped. Sustained adoption demanded sustained investment.

The adoption trough

AI transformation is not linear—organizations often see an initial plateau or dip as workflows are redesigned.

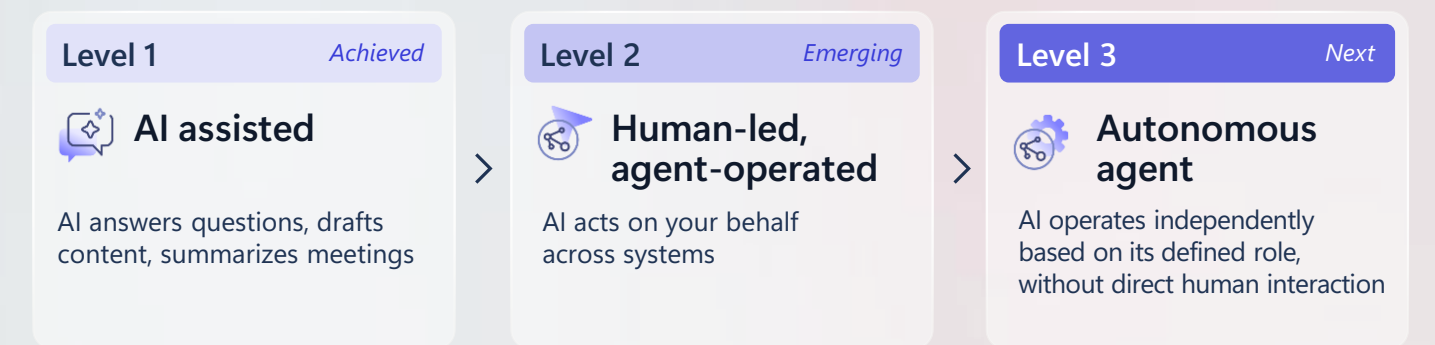


What changed



The next chapter: autonomous agents

MCAPS didn't stop at getting sellers to use AI. From the start, the goal was to move the entire organization up the autonomy spectrum—from AI that assists to AI that acts.



From framework to field

MCAPS deployed a Sales Agent across 20,000 unmanaged small- and medium-sized business (SMB) accounts, automating outreach and relationship management across accounts that previously had no dedicated seller coverage.

Critical design lesson: Autonomous agents must express appropriate uncertainty when the data they hold may be outdated. Rather than stating a contact's role as fact, an agent should ask the contact to confirm it. Customer trust in autonomous agents depends on those agents knowing what they don't know.



You have to trust it to take actions—and that means controllable, auditable workflows.



Owen Van Valkenburg
Principal solution engineer and AI Global Black Belt, Microsoft

Frontier lessons

Redesign work around AI

Deploying Copilot like a SaaS tool didn't work because AI isn't a SaaS tool. Sustainable adoption accelerated when leaders and teams started asking "how should work be re-structured?"

Make trust visible and explicit

Sellers needed to know exactly when to rely on AI and when not to. MCAPS built that trust through repeatable hero scenarios, defined guardrails, and auditable workflows. Trust in AI isn't assumed. It's designed.

Scale expertise, not efficiency

AI freed sellers from transactional execution so they could operate more consultatively, bringing strategic value to every customer interaction. That's a different kind of ROI.