

LEADING AT THE EDGE | FRONTIER HOW-TO

# The operating model as strategy

A leader's guide to organizational  
transformation in the agentic era

2026 WORK TREND INDEX ANNUAL REPORT

**The Frontier Firms pulling ahead in the agentic era don't just deploy newer technology—they redesign how work gets done. Organizational factors like culture, talent practices, and manager support account for the majority—67% according to our 2026 Work Trend Index Annual Report—of what determines whether AI produces real results.**

**This guide translates that insight into four actions you can take now, illustrated through a Frontier case study from BNY, a global financial institution that operationalized AI at scale.**

# I. Build infrastructure before agents

The number-one barrier to scaling AI isn't inspiration—it's infrastructure. Disconnected data, siloed tools, and workflows that cut across teams create “seams” where automation breaks, handoffs multiply, and risk shows up late.

Make AI safe and repeatable: define what agents can access, how actions are logged, and who owns outcomes when something goes wrong. Governance done right is the foundation that makes scale possible.

## Before deploying a single agent, answer three questions:

- 1 Is your data connected across systems?
- 2 Do you have identity controls for agents?
- 3 Who is accountable when an agent makes a mistake?

Most AI power users set up workflows across multiple applications, enabling agents to work across systems and deliver end-to-end value. About one-third of workers are set up to succeed, where skills and organizational readiness reinforce each other. The rest are constrained by structural gaps in data connectivity, access controls, and compliance that individual effort can't overcome.<sup>1</sup>

### In practice

America's oldest bank, BNY, is redesigning work at scale by integrating AI and agents across the business, shifting human effort toward higher-value, judgment-driven tasks while automating routine work in a highly regulated environment. As part of that effort, the bank embedded compliance into its AI infrastructure from the start—and the legal team, rather than resisting, became the company's most enthusiastic AI adopters. When governance is built in, not bolted on, it accelerates adoption.

<sup>1</sup> Source: 2026 Work Trend Index Annual Report

## II. Integrate agents as workforce

The question is no longer whether to use AI. It's whether your organization is designed to use AI at scale. The difference between a collection of AI tools and a hybrid workforce is accountability: agents with names, supervisors, defined scope, and a human owner who is accountable for what they produce.

Start by making that accountability explicit in every workflow—what the agent does, what the human owns, and where decisions sit.

### Map every major workflow to one role:

- 1 Assistant → AI supports
- 2 Teammate → AI + human co-own
- 3 Operator → AI runs, human reviews

That mapping is your AI strategy.

#### In practice

A BNY “super agent”—a “digital employee” built from multiple agents—handles client payment inquiries end-to-end has a name, a human supervisor, and performance standards. It operates like a human employee with login credentials, an employee number, and supervisor. BNY scaled this model to nearly 150 “digital employees” by applying the same accountability structures to them that they apply to human employees.

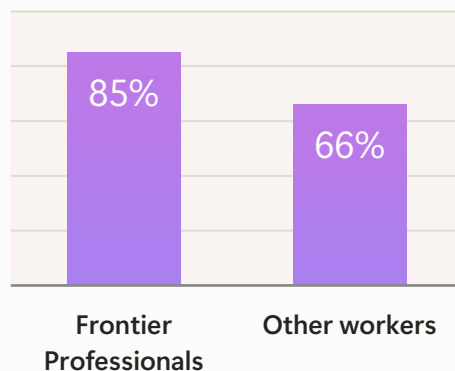
# III. Redesign the org for humans and agents

Frontier Professionals are shifting toward strategic planning, cross-functional leadership, and mentoring as routine execution moves to agents. The repetitive base shrinks; the analytical middle expands. The question is whether you design that shift organization-wide or let it happen unevenly.

Identify the roles where repetitive execution is highest—those are your first agent candidates. Redeploy those people toward the analytical work AI cannot do.

## Focus on high-value work

85% of Frontier Professionals focus more on high-value work as AI handles routine execution, compared to 66% of all other workers



## In practice

The head of enablement across BNY's Operations organization oversees multiple digital employees alongside thousands of human staff. As "digital employees" absorb repetitive payment-validation work, they now see validations that once took five or six minutes clear in under 30 seconds, and open investigations have dropped by nearly 80%. The result is a leaner execution base—and an expanded middle—freeing team members to benchmark clients on data quality, do strategy work, and design new agents.

Source: 2026 Work Trend Index Annual Report

# IV. Run a learning system, not a deployment

AI adoption doesn't fail because people don't adopt tools—it fails because organizations don't learn as a system. To scale AI, treat adoption like an operating rhythm: instrument what's happening in real work, review performance and risk on a predictable cadence, and turn what one team learns into a reusable standard for everyone.

Set a 30-day review cadence and protect it: What did agents do? What failed? What changes next cycle? The org that answers those questions fastest compounds fastest.



### Track and measure

Set a 30-day cadence. If you're not measuring it, you're not managing it.



### Share and standardize

When one team finds a better workflow, it becomes the organization's workflow.



### Evaluate systems

Quarterly, audit where agents operate and where humans still own work agents could.



### Refine together

Monthly team reviews: what's working, what needs a human back in the loop?

### In practice


BNY is exploring a tool that would let any employee record a workflow, have an agent map it, flag inefficiencies, and generate instructions for a new digital employee—reducing a process that once took weeks to about an hour. The payoff: faster iteration, fewer one-off pilots, and a repeatable process that fits BNY's approach to governance.


# The institutional imperative

Culture, manager support, and talent practices are the biggest drivers of whether AI delivers real value—more than the model or tool. When leaders set clear expectations, invest in capability-building, and make space to redesign work, employees are far more likely to say new ways of working have become the default—and far less likely to report barriers to change.

Models and tools will commoditize. Competitive advantage will come from owned intelligence—how well your organization structures work, governs AI. The leaders and organizations who move first, with the right systems in place—and who model the shift in how work gets done—will define what the Frontier Firm looks like.

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