# Boards elevate AI chiefs as strategic leaders, not just technologists



UK and global companies are moving to centralise AI decision-making at the top, with the share of AI leaders reporting directly to chief executives jumping from 17% to 31% in the past year, according to Heidrick & Struggles. The firm warns that without senior accountability, businesses risk fragmented efforts and missed value.

Board agendas, once light on AI, now regularly probe risks from model bias to employee wellbeing. Some firms are pairing leadership elevation with director training and staff education. Mastercard’s Chief AI and Data Officer, Greg Ulrich, leads a centre of excellence covering risk, bias and regulatory engagement, while AXA’s “Secure GPT” platform and AI academy have drawn thousands of employee sign-ups in their first week.

An IBM Institute for Business Value survey suggests the shift is overdue: only 16% of AI projects have scaled enterprise-wide, often due to skills gaps and disjointed systems. Experts say the winning formula combines a senior AI point-person, secure enterprise tools for experimentation, and governance frameworks linking model performance to business KPIs and workforce outcomes.

With its financial, professional and tech strengths, the UK is well placed to lead on this “human-centred” AI model — if boards, HR and tech chiefs invest together in governance, training and measurable delivery. Early movers show the payoff: tighter alignment between AI strategy, risk management and the people who will use the tools.

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## Bibliography

1. <https://hrreview.co.uk/hr-news/head-of-ai-roles-on-the-rise-in-global-companies/383261> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.heidrick.com/en/insights/compensation-trends/2024-data-analytics-and-artificial-intelligence-executive-organization-compensation-survey> - Heidrick & Struggles’ 2024 Global Data, Analytics and Artificial Intelligence survey examines how executive roles and reporting lines have evolved as organisations adopt AI. The analysis highlights that AI and data leaders are increasingly central to corporate strategy, with the proportion reporting to the CEO rising from 17% in 2023 to 31% in 2024. The report discusses tenure, compensation trends, governance challenges and the need for cross‑functional collaboration to realise value. It warns of duplication risk without central leadership and stresses that while enthusiasm for AI persists, firms must focus on alignment with business goals, measurable outcomes and responsible deployment.
3. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/should-you-hire-head-of-ai-nz9mz7sw6> - The Times column considers whether firms should appoint a head of AI as boards shift from observing emerging tools to actively steering AI strategy. Kathryn Parsons and contributors note that AI barely featured on board agendas in 2023 but has become a priority, prompting boards to improve AI literacy and understand risks such as hallucinations, copyright and workforce impacts. The piece gives examples of corporate initiatives to educate executives and staff, and argues boards now seek leaders who combine technical expertise with commercial and ethical judgement. It urges measured adoption, emphasising governance, talent and alignment with core business objectives consequences.
4. <https://newsroom.mastercard.com/news/press/executive-bios/greg-ulrich/> - Mastercard’s official newsroom profile describes Greg Ulrich as Chief AI and Data Officer and a member of the company’s Management Committee. The biography explains he leads Mastercard’s approach to leveraging AI and data across the business, commercialising internal and external applications, and overseeing enterprise governance of those functions. It notes his prior roles in corporate strategy and Data & Services, his long experience in analytics and M&A, and his leadership in integrating data-driven products. The profile frames Ulrich’s remit as spanning technical, commercial and governance responsibilities, reflecting the multi‑disciplinary nature of modern AI leadership within a payments giant and transformation.
5. <https://www.axa.com/en/press/press-releases/axa-offers-securegenerative-ai-to-employees> - AXA’s July 2023 press release announces AXA Secure GPT, an internally developed generative AI service built on Microsoft Azure OpenAI Service. The release states the platform provides employees with a secure, privacy‑compliant environment to generate, summarise and translate text, images and code, aiming to roll out initially to 1,000 AXA GO staff and then to all 140,000 employees worldwide. AXA emphasises the tool addresses data‑leak and IP risks posed by open public models and positions the initiative as part of the insurer’s effort to innovate responsibly. The statement highlights governance, speed of development and plans for enterprise‑scale adoption and training.
6. <https://newsroom.ibm.com/2025-05-06-ibm-study-ceos-double-down-on-ai-while-navigating-enterprise-hurdles> - IBM’s Institute for Business Value published a global CEO study reporting survey responses from 2,000 CEOs about AI adoption and challenges. The press release finds CEOs expect AI investment growth to accelerate, yet report that only 25% of AI initiatives have delivered expected ROI and just 16% have scaled enterprise‑wide. Findings highlight disconnected technology stacks, skills gaps, reskilling needs where roughly one‑third of workforces may require retraining, and a focus on ROI‑led use cases. The study recommends clear metrics, integrated data architecture and specialised leadership to unlock value while managing workforce, governance and cultural risks during rapid AI adoption effectively.
7. <https://stockanalysis.com/stocks/ma/market-cap/> - StockAnalysis’s Mastercard market capitalisation page provides historical market cap data showing Mastercard’s market value rising from roughly $29 billion at the end of 2010 to well above $500 billion by 2025. The page includes annual snapshots, a chart of growth and percentage changes year‑on‑year, and a rolling history that illustrates the company’s long‑term appreciation since its public listing. The dataset is useful to contextualise Mastercard’s transformation from a card payments business into a data‑driven digital payments company, underscoring investor recognition of its recurring‑revenue model, network effects and successful strategic evolution in payments and analytics and continued innovation in AI services.