

From Experimentation to Value

How Firms Are Redefining AI Success



HOW FIRMS ARE REDEFINING AI SUCCESS

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly become part of everyday life in professional services firms. Whether drafting communications, analysing information, summarising documents or supporting research, teams across the profession are already integrating AI into their daily workflows. Adoption is happening in different ways and at different speeds, but its presence is increasingly woven into how work gets done. As the technology becomes more familiar, attention is shifting towards a deeper question: where is it creating meaningful value?

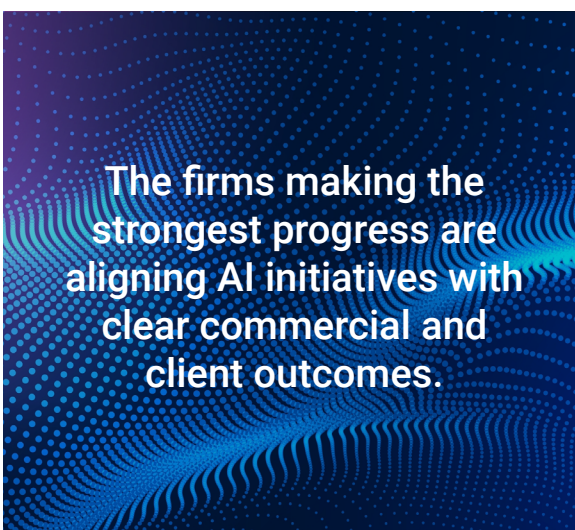
Leadership teams are looking beyond experiments and pilot projects, focusing instead on how AI supports firm strategy, client service and long-term growth. Success is becoming less closely tied to access to technology and more closely linked to how effectively firms incorporate it into the way they operate. Existing systems, data quality, workflow design and organisational culture all play a role in determining the outcomes firms achieve.

Conversations with member firms within the Alliance reveal a growing sense of realism and confidence. Initial discussions centred on capabilities and possibilities. Today's conversations are rooted in experience. Firms are evaluating where AI delivers measurable impact, where additional work is required to support its use, and where human expertise continues to provide the greatest value.

A particularly interesting development is the way firms are beginning to think about value creation itself. While much of the discussion around AI has focused on efficiency and automation, many firms are starting to explore how it can strengthen client relationships, support new services and contribute to growth.

Beyond Efficiency

This evolution reaches well beyond technology. It influences how firms develop talent, structure teams, deliver services and build relationships with clients. It raises questions about trust, governance and accountability, while creating opportunities to deepen insight and enhance the quality of advice.



Viewed across the Alliance, common patterns are beginning to emerge. Firms are learning from one another's experiences, sharing practical lessons and navigating similar challenges from different starting points. Together, these experiences provide valuable insight into how AI adoption is maturing and how mid-sized firms can translate growing capability into lasting advantage.

WHERE PROGRESS STARTS TO BREAK DOWN

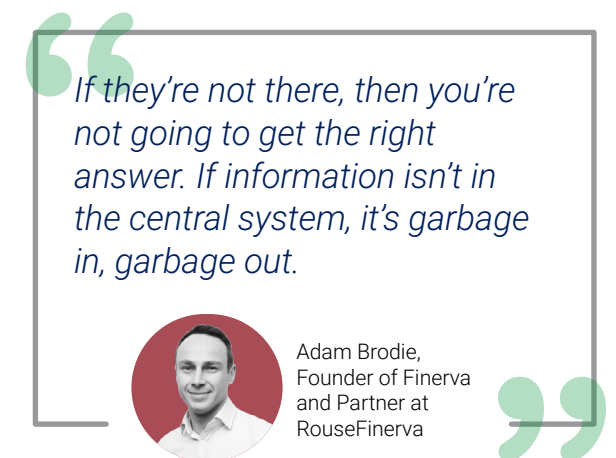
If progress depends less on access to technology, and more on how firms are set up to use it, then the limiting factors sit elsewhere. And in many cases, those factors are already embedded in how firms operate today.

That shift in focus brings a different set of challenges.

Once firms move beyond the tools themselves, it becomes harder to ignore where the real constraints sit. Access to AI is no longer the issue. Most firms have already experimented, and many are using it in some form. Yet progress is uneven, and in some cases slower than expected.

The reasons tend to be consistent. Across many firms, AI is often being introduced into environments that were not designed with this kind of technology in mind. Information often sits across disconnected systems. Processes have evolved over time rather than being intentionally designed. Manual intervention remains embedded in many areas of delivery. The integration of AI into these environments is exposing preexisting weaknesses.

Outputs are inconsistent. Effort shifts rather than reduces. In some cases, risk increases because the underlying data cannot support



the level of automation being introduced. The issue is not what the tools are capable of, but what they are being asked to work with.

This is particularly visible in mid-sized firms, where systems have often evolved in response to growth rather than being designed for scale.

Core processes may still depend on spreadsheets, workarounds or team-specific approaches.

Knowledge sits with individuals rather than being embedded in systems, which makes consistency harder to maintain. Systems that should provide insight are used primarily for record-keeping. Decisions depend on experience rather than being supported by accessible, structured data.



AI also brings into focus a broader challenge around how work is structured. In many firms, roles and responsibilities were shaped around a different model of delivery. Introducing AI into that model without changing the workflow tends to create friction rather than value. Tasks may be faster, but the overall flow of work remains the same.

That is why the conversation often turns to talent. What appears to be a skills gap is often a reflection of how roles are defined and how work moves through the firm. Adjusting that is more complex than introducing a new tool.

These challenges are ultimately cultural as much as technical. Where leaders use the tools and follow the processes themselves, that behaviour tends to filter through the firm. It also helps to take a broader view of AI's potential, treating it as an accelerator of whatever is already in place.

It is worth separating technology investment from organisational readiness. Firms do not need perfect systems before they begin experimenting with AI. Progress tends to come from addressing foundational issues while identifying practical opportunities to apply new tools. The challenge is less about reaching an ideal future state and more about ensuring that information, workflows and behaviours support the outcomes firms are seeking to achieve.

That reflects what many firms are seeing in practice. Where processes are clearly defined and data is well managed, AI tends to slot in more naturally. Where they are not, it amplifies inefficiency rather than reducing it.

This draws on established operational disciplines. The emphasis is on reducing unnecessary steps, creating consistency in how work is delivered, and ensuring that systems support the way information flows through the firm.

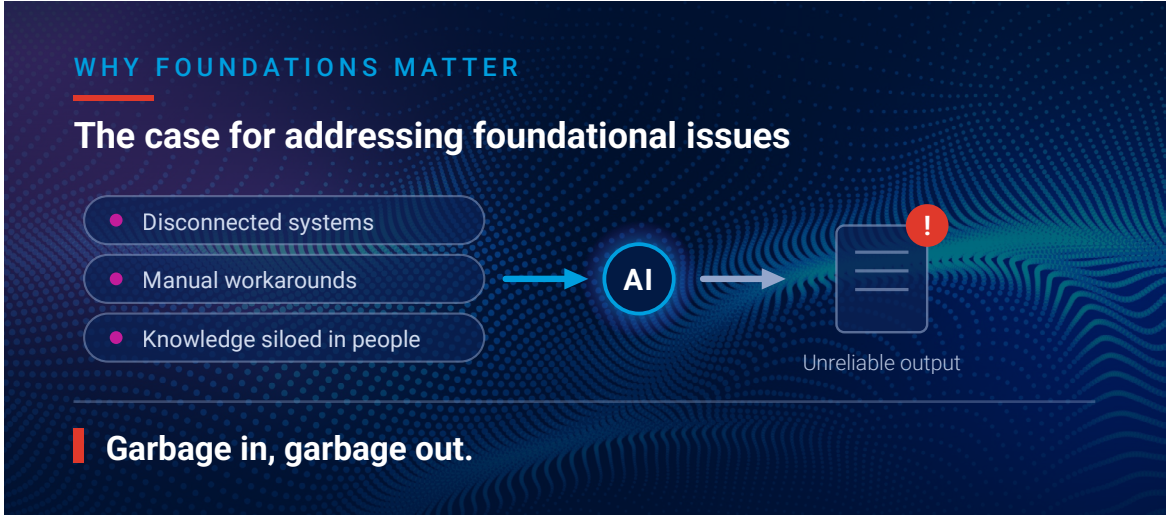
Without that, even the most capable tools struggle to deliver reliable outcomes.

"If you're sifting through Dropbox folders in search of ACCOUNTS_2026-FINAL3-USETHIS-v2.xlsx... the cloud probably hasn't made your practice any more lean than it was in the paper-based days."

Adam Brodie, Founder of Finerva and Partner at RouseFinerva

It is a familiar scenario, and a useful reminder that technology on its own does not simplify complexity.

This is also why some of the early gains from automation tend to be concentrated in more predictable areas of work. Tasks that follow clear rules, rely on structured data and repeat regularly are easier to improve.



In Practice

Automation tends to deliver the most consistent results when applied to routine, well-defined tasks such as invoice processing, reconciliations and standard reporting. Processes involving client interaction, timing or sensitivity are often more complex. In some cases, applying automation too quickly can create friction rather than remove it. Deciding where not to automate can be just as important as identifying where it will add value.

As firms move into areas that require professional discretion, client relationships or context-specific decision-making, the role of people becomes more important, not less.

Where firms are finding traction

Once firms start to address some of the underlying constraints, the conversation can become more practical. That rarely means large-scale transformation. More often, it involves rethinking how work is approached day to day.

Across the Alliance, those early areas of traction are similar across firms. They are typically functions where work is structured, repeatable, and already under some degree of control. Finance and compliance processes come up most often. Not because they are the most exciting, but because they are the most defined.

Invoice processing, reconciliations, reporting, document handling. These are not new areas of focus, but they are often where inefficiencies are most visible. Introducing automation or AI into these processes tends to deliver clearer outcomes, provided the underlying data is reliable.

This aligns closely with what our member firms are experiencing. AI is being applied most effectively in areas where it can reduce time spent on routine tasks and create space for more analytical work. The focus is on removing friction from processes that are already well understood.

That in turn starts to change how teams use their time. Rather than working through information, they are spending more time interpreting it. Outputs that would previously have taken hours to compile are now available more quickly but still require interpretation and validation. While it is a subtle shift in workflow, it is where a lot of the value begins to show.

There is also a pattern in how firms are approaching

this. Few are attempting to roll out AI in a uniform way across the business. Instead, they are starting with specific problems. Areas where volume is high, variation is low, and the cost of inefficiency is clear. In some cases, that means revisiting processes that were assumed to be "good enough", and testing whether they hold up under a more automated approach.

This tends to surface further issues. Gaps in data. Steps that rely on manual intervention. Differences in how teams approach the same task. In that sense, even successful use cases often point back to the same underlying theme. Some initiatives move quickly and demonstrate value. Others stall or require further work before they can be scaled. What matters is the ability to learn from what is working and apply it elsewhere.

From that evidence, confidence starts to build. This will often look like a series of smaller, more reliable improvements that begin to change how work is delivered.

While every firm's journey looks different, conversations across the Alliance suggest that these developments tend to follow a broadly similar pattern. That emerging progression provides a useful framework for understanding how AI adoption evolves over time.

FINDING TRACTION

Where AI gains traction first

✓ Invoice processing
High volume, clear rules

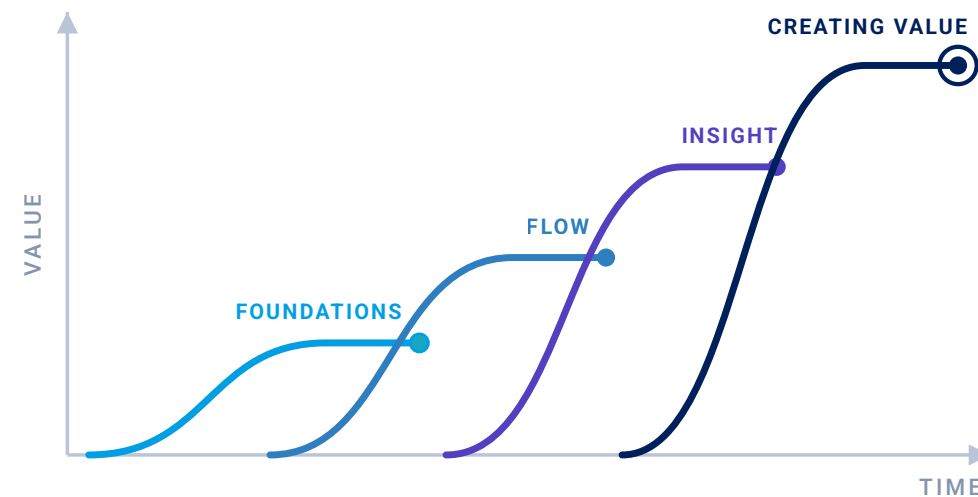
✓ Reconciliations
Repeatable and defined

✓ Reporting
Structured, recurring data

✓ Document handling
Consistent, rules-based

The four-step journey

How AI adoption builds toward lasting value



1 Establishing foundations

- Can we trust the information our teams and tools work from?
- One agreed source of truth, or data in several places?
- Who owns our data, and how is AI use governed?

2 Improving flow

- How easily does work move through the firm?
- How consistent is the same task across teams and offices?
- Where do manual steps and handovers slow things down?

3 Building insight

- Are people interpreting information more than assembling it?
- How quickly can teams reach insight, not raw data?
- Is AI improving the quality of client conversations?

4 Creating value

- Is AI helping us grow, not just work faster?
- Where can AI support a new service or deepen a relationship?
- What value now comes from human judgement alone?

Firms approach AI from different starting points, yet conversations across the Alliance suggest a broadly recognisable pattern. Progress is rarely linear. Some firms move quickly, others revisit earlier stages. Even so, a common progression is beginning to emerge.

Stage 1: Establishing foundations

The first stage centres on confidence in information.

Many firms discover that AI shines a light on issues that have existed for years. Data may sit across several systems, processes may have evolved differently between teams, and information is not always captured in a consistent way. These challenges are usually manageable when work is largely manual. As automation increases, they become far more visible.

At this stage, firms are often tackling questions that extend beyond technology. What constitutes a single source of truth? Who owns the data? How should AI be used and monitored across the organisation?

The fundamental question is straightforward: can the firm trust the information it is using i.e. the underlying data used. ?

Stage 2: Improving flow

Once information becomes more reliable, attention turns to how work moves through the business.

This is often where firms begin to see tangible gains. Routine tasks can be streamlined, handovers reduced and repetitive activities automated. Yet the process frequently reveals a new set of challenges. Workflows that appear standard on paper often vary between teams and offices. Manual interventions that had become invisible suddenly stand out.

The goal is not simply to work faster. It is to create a more consistent and predictable flow of work across the firm.

At this stage firms are asking: how easily does work move through the organisation?

Stage 3: Building insight

As operational friction reduces, the conversation starts to change.

The benefits are no longer measured solely in hours saved or tasks completed. Information becomes easier to access, reports can be produced more quickly and teams spend less time gathering data. The opportunity shifts towards interpretation and decision-making.

Many firms describe this as an important turning point. Professionals begin to spend more time discussing implications with clients and colleagues, and less time assembling information from multiple sources. The value starts to move higher up the chain.

The key question becomes: are teams spending more time interpreting information than assembling it?

Stage 4: Creating value

The most mature discussions focus on how AI contributes to growth.

By this point, firms have moved beyond viewing AI as an operational initiative. The focus is no longer limited to efficiency or cost reduction. Attention shifts towards client engagement, service innovation and commercial opportunity.

This marks an important change in mindset. Earlier stages are concerned with creating the conditions for successful adoption: improving data quality, streamlining workflows and building confidence in outputs. Once those foundations are in place, firms are in a stronger position to explore how AI can help create value for clients and support business growth.

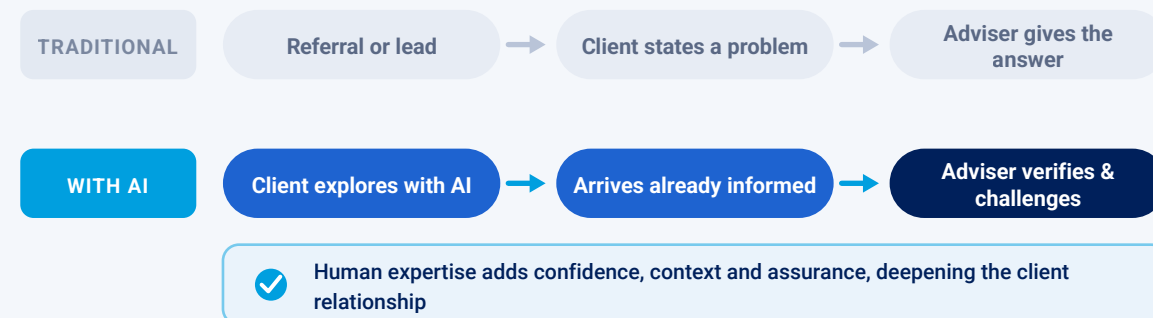
This is where much of the profession's attention is turning. While automation remains important, there is growing emphasis on the opportunities AI creates to strengthen relationships, develop new services and generate revenue.

“For every dollar of cost saving, I want firms to be thinking about four dollars of revenue-generating opportunities.”

Adam Brodie, Founder of Finerva and Partner at RouseFinerva

Evidence of that shift is already beginning to emerge. Brodie describes growing numbers of prospects arriving through recommendations generated by large language models. Potential clients are increasingly using AI tools to explore tax, accounting and advisory issues before they ever speak to an adviser.

HOW CLIENT INTERACTION IS CHANGING



“We probably get almost as many recommendations coming from Claude and Gemini as we do from traditional referrals.”

The opportunity extends beyond lead generation. Firms are also seeing the emergence of a new type of client interaction. Rather than arriving with a problem and seeking an answer, clients increasingly arrive with AI-generated information they want interpreted, verified or challenged. In many cases, this reinforces rather than diminishes the role of the adviser. Professional expertise becomes the layer that provides confidence, context and assurance.

In this environment, the firms creating the most value are not simply adopting new tools. They are combining AI capabilities with human insight to deepen client relationships, identify opportunities and deliver more strategic advice.

The defining question at this stage becomes: how is AI helping the firm create value for clients and grow the business?

Learning through shared experience

One of the challenges facing firms is that many are working through similar questions at the same time. Decisions around governance, technology investments, client expectations and talent development rarely exist in isolation.

This is where the Alliance environment creates a distinct advantage. While AI adoption remains at different stages across member firms, knowledge-sharing is already helping firms learn from one another’s experiences. AI has become a recurring topic across several Praxity communities, including discussions within the Assurance

and Outsourcing working groups, while a dedicated AI and Digital Innovation Working Group has recently been established to provide a forum for firms to exchange ideas and practical experiences. Praxity conferences have also created opportunities for firms to showcase emerging technologies and use cases, including technology demonstration sessions at Assurance events and AI-focused discussions at global tax and assurance gatherings. These conversations are often informal and candid, but they provide valuable insight into how firms are approaching governance, client service, operational efficiency and risk management in practice.

That exchange of knowledge shortens learning curves. Rather than navigating AI adoption in isolation, firms benefit from exposure to real-world experiences, lessons learned and practical examples from peers facing similar challenges. Shared insight does not remove uncertainty, but it helps firms move forward with greater confidence and a clearer understanding of what is delivering value across the profession.



Building Trust

While usage is increasing, the degree of confidence is not keeping pace.

Across many firms, AI is already part of day-to-day activity. Firms are also seeing changes in client behaviour. Increasingly, clients arrive with AI-generated answers, summaries or recommendations already in hand. This creates a different type of advisory relationship. Rather than simply providing information, advisers are helping clients interpret, validate and apply it within a real-world context. For many firms, this reinforces the value of professional expertise at a time when access to information is becoming easier. Teams are using it to support drafting, summarising and analysis. That use is often informal, sometimes invisible, and not always captured in a structured way.

At the same time, there is still hesitation. In a profession where accuracy, accountability and professional expertise sit at the core of the service, that hesitation is understandable.

Trust, in this context, is built through repeated experience.

Where outputs are consistent, where assumptions are visible, and where there is clarity on how results are produced, confidence begins to increase. Where those conditions are not met, usage may continue, but reliance does not.

Creating a robust layer of governance begins to matter in a more practical sense. That means clear boundaries around where AI can be used, how outputs are reviewed, and where accountability sits help to remove uncertainty.

Across firms in the Alliance, those that are making progress are not eliminating risk. They are making it more visible and more manageable.

This is particularly important in areas involving complex decision-making or regulatory exposure. AI can support analysis, but it cannot replace responsibility. Outputs still need to be challenged, interpreted and validated in context.

In that sense, trust becomes less about the tool itself, and more about how it is used. Firms that build confidence in that process tend to expand their use of AI more confidently and consistently. Those that do not tend to limit its role, regardless of the capability available.

Where the risks concentrate

As firms extend their use of AI, the risks become more concrete. They fall into two groups: risks to the integrity of the work itself, and risks that reach beyond the firm.

The most immediate is the confident error. Generative tools produce output that is fluent and plausible, which can make a mistake harder to notice rather than easier. Known as, hallucinations, the consequences are no longer hypothetical.

In 2025 a major US newspaper published a summer reading list in which most of the recommended books did not exist. The titles were credited to real, well-known authors but had been produced by a generative AI tool, and the freelance writer who prepared the list had not checked any of it before publication. The paper removed the section, apologised to readers and did not charge subscribers for that edition. The list was a light seasonal feature, yet the damage to credibility did not depend on that.

The episode, albeit within publishing, points to a discipline that matters more as AI use grows: confidence in source documents. An output is only as trustworthy as the material that feeds into it, and a claim that cannot be traced to a real source cannot be relied upon, however well expressed. This is the same principle behind the earlier observation that information sitting outside the firm’s central systems produces unreliable answers. It applies with equal force at the point of output, where every figure and reference a tool generates needs to resolve to something real.

Alongside it sits professional scepticism, a discipline the profession already understands well.

Used well, AI is an early-warning system rather than a source of answers. It can flag something worth examining, but the moment a model looks most confident is often the moment to test it hardest. Responsibility for what we put our name to stays with us, and no algorithm changes that.



Garth O'Connor-Price,
Partner,
William Buck

The point is reinforced from outside the profession. In 2025 the English High Court warned that practitioners who put forward AI-generated case citations that turned out to be fictitious could face serious professional consequences, and it made clear that verifying what is submitted remains the professional's own responsibility and cannot be passed to a tool or a client. Read across to audit, tax and advisory work, the principle remains the same: AI can inform an assessment, but ownership of the result stays with the person who signs it.

This is why governance becomes practical rather than abstract. Where AI contributes to a piece of work, the firm needs to be able to explain how the output was produced and to defend that reliance later. Where it cannot, the output is difficult to stand behind. For a client, that discipline is what distinguishes professional advice from an answer generated without oversight.

The risks do not end at the firm's own work. Two in particular are becoming difficult for a responsible adviser to set aside.

The first is environmental. The infrastructure behind AI is physical, and its demands on resources are substantial. By some estimates, AI-related data centres consumed close to a trillion litres of water in 2025, largely for cooling, and projections from the World Resources Institute suggest AI infrastructure could require several trillion litres a year by the end of the decade, with demand concentrated in particular regions rather than spread evenly. The water cost of a single query is very small. The aggregate, running continuously and clustered geographically, is considerable. For firms that advise on sustainability reporting and increasingly measure their own footprint, this sits closer to core business than it might first appear.

The second concerns the shape of the workforce. The World Economic Forum's 2025 Future of Jobs report placed accounting, bookkeeping and payroll clerks among the roles it expected to decline fastest over the following five years, citing AI as a primary driver. Research from Stanford in the same year found that employment in entry-level roles most exposed to AI had fallen by around 13 per cent since 2022. The broader outlook for qualified accountants remains one of growth. What is shifting is the composition of the work, as routine tasks at the entry level contract while judgement-led work rises in value. The risk is a thinning of the bottom rung, which is where the profession has always built its experience.

None of this argues against AI. It argues for adopting it with the same rigour the profession applies elsewhere, which is what turns a capable tool into dependable advice.



Redefining the delivery model

As AI becomes more embedded, the impact on how work is delivered becomes more visible.

The immediate effect is often efficiency. Tasks take less time. Information is easier to process. But over time, the more significant change is how that time is used.

Across the Alliance, there is a gradual shift away from production-heavy work towards interpretation and decision-making.

Routine tasks are increasingly handled through a combination of automation and AI. That changes the role of the professional. Less time is spent assembling outputs, and more time is spent understanding them. In some cases, work that once defined junior roles is no longer the starting point. This has implications for how teams are structured.

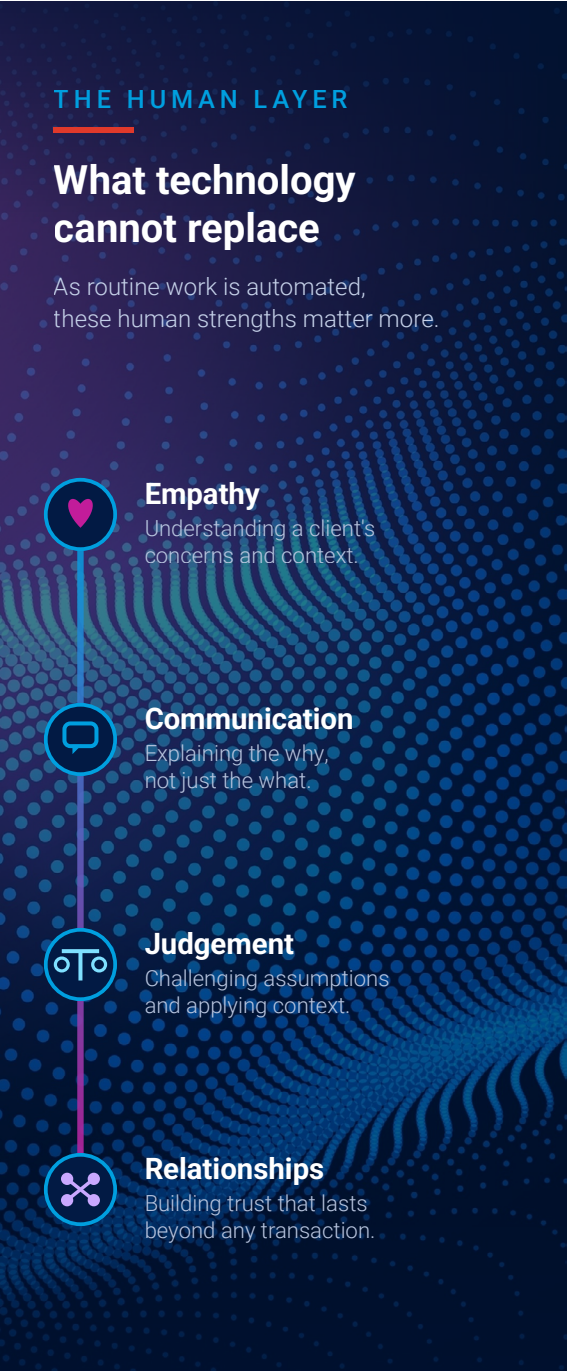
The profession's response is already visible in how it trains. The ICAEW introduced its Next Generation ACA in September 2025, the most significant change to the qualification in over a decade, built around three themes: technology, sustainability and ethics. The direction of travel is towards earlier exposure to judgement and interpretation, and away from the repetition that once shaped the opening years of a career.

Experience now becomes more important, not less. AI does not replace expertise, but places greater weight on it. The ability to interpret outputs, challenge assumptions and apply context becomes central to the value delivered. At the same time, the pathway into the profession is changing. Junior roles have traditionally built experience through repetition. As parts of that work are automated, the way capability is developed needs to adapt. Greater emphasis is placed on supervision, explanation and exposure to decision-making earlier in a career.

Brodie describes this shift as a movement from artificial intelligence towards emotional intelligence.

As technology becomes more capable, the value of empathy, communication, judgement and relationship-building becomes more visible. Many of the routine elements of delivery can be supported through technology. Understanding a client's concerns, challenging assumptions and building trust remain firmly human responsibilities.

This approach is not a defined model yet. Firms are still working through what this looks like in practice. What is clear is that delivery is no longer shaped only by process efficiency. It is increasingly shaped by how effectively firms can combine technology with professional judgement.



Taking a more considered approach to AI

Across the profession, AI adoption is entering a more mature phase. Early experimentation is giving way to more deliberate decisions about where technology can support better outcomes for firms and clients.

The experiences emerging across the Alliance suggest that successful adoption depends on much more than selecting the right tools. Progress reflects leadership, culture, workflow design and a willingness to adapt established ways of working. It is shaped by the ability to learn from experience, both within the firm and across a wider professional community.

At the same time, the conversation is becoming more optimistic. Opportunities around client engagement, advisory services and business development are beginning to sit alongside discussions about efficiency. Firms are exploring how AI can support growth as well as productivity

The enduring strengths of the profession remain unchanged. Clients continue to seek judgement, context and trusted advice. Technology can enhance those capabilities, but it does not replace them. The future may depend as much on emotional intelligence as artificial intelligence. The firms that thrive will be those that combine both, using technology to strengthen the human expertise at the heart of professional services.

For member firms, the opportunity extends beyond individual adoption. The ability to learn from one another, compare experiences and share practical insight creates an environment where progress can happen more quickly and with greater confidence. In a period of significant change, that collective perspective may prove to be one of the Alliance’s greatest advantages.

As technology becomes more capable, competitive advantage may depend less on access to AI and more on how effectively firms combine it with human expertise, judgement and relationships.

THE SHIFT IN DELIVERY

FROM

Assembling & producing

gathering data, compiling outputs, routine tasks

TO

Interpreting & advising

judgement, insight and the value only people provide

THE PRAXITY ADVANTAGE

STAY INDEPENDENT, GROW GLOBALLY

The pre-eminent global alliance of independent firms.

\$11.2bn	89,000+	110+	19 years
combined turnover	expert people	countries worldwide	of shared expertise

Local expertise and client commitment, with the reach of a global Alliance.

Praxity is the pre-eminent global alliance of independent accountancy, tax, audit and advisory firms, with a combined turnover of US\$11.2 billion and more than 89,000 people across over 110 countries. Unlike a network, the Alliance offers independence and choice in every market. Members keep the local expertise and client commitment that define them, while drawing on global reach whenever a client’s needs cross borders.

advisers who understand their market and stay close to their business, and who can coordinate international support when opportunities or pressures require it. They want judgement combined with agility, and relationship depth with international reach. This also means using the Alliance intentionally, as a living resource that strengthens capability and accelerates delivery rather than a channel for occasional referrals.

The world is moving toward greater unpredictability. It is becoming more multi-directional and more varied, and clients increasingly depend on advisers who can help them navigate uncertainty with calm and clarity. In this environment, the alliance model provides an unusually strong foundation. That independence is only half of the picture. Members also draw on the Alliance for shared learning and deep experience, and for the ability to coordinate across borders without the bureaucracy that often accompanies centralised structures. This combination of independence and connectedness is becoming essential. Clients want

The next 24 months will reward organisations that can provide certainty amidst an unpredictable professional landscape. Praxity firms are well placed to do exactly that.

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ICAEW guidelines on AI adoption for chartered accountants

Gartner Hype Cycle (Trough of Disillusionment)

Praxity Global Alliance
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* International Accounting Bulletin World Survey 2025

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