

SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS CASES AI IMPLEMENTATION BEST PRACTICES

Through the analysis of successful business cases, the article aims to identify key steps and best practices in AI implementation in order to develop a set of principles that can guide managers in business practice. To optimize business operations and transform AI into a driver of innovation and value, specific development steps must be followed: from establishing a solid strategic and organizational foundation, to fostering optimization and continuous innovation, to promoting incremental operational and technological development. Each step is essential to ensure the long-term success and sustainability of AI business initiatives, thereby promoting adaptation to future challenges and overall improvement in business performance.

MANAGEMENT//STRATEGY//INNOVATION//AI//IMPLEMENTATION

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In September 2023, Microsoft Italy launched the AI L.A.B. (Learn – Adopt – Benefit) project, an initiative designed to help companies assess and implement generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) solutions through tailored consulting, training, and skill development to enhance individual productivity and business competitiveness. Including currently over 320 companies and 450 generative AI projects—half already in production—the program has also trained thousands of professionals in AI-related skills. The project involves universities, institutions, and strategic partners to bridge the digital skills gap and promote the responsible adoption of these technologies.

Within such a dynamic and innovative ecosystem, Microsoft and SDA Bocconi (DEVO Lab and Channel & Retail Lab) established a partnership

to evaluate the most successful case studies and acknowledge them as part of the AI Heroes Awards, rewarding the most innovative AI applications, and develop managerial best practices. As part of this partnership, the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with informants from companies across various sectors and sizes, identifying AI implementation processes and key activities within these processes.

The information gathered was rigorously analyzed to identify the critical stages and best practices in AI implementation, with the goal of creating a practical guide for managers. By synthesizing various corporate implementation models, a comprehensive framework has emerged, outlining the key steps, determining factors, and critical variables for success across the different implementation phases.

This article will briefly present the data collection and analysis methods, describe successful case studies – AI Heroes – with their distinctive characteristics, and, based on the analysis results, offer a ten-step guide to essential best practices for effective AI implementation in business.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The methodological approach of this research is based on multiple-case study design. The initial sample, on which surveys were conducted in April-May 2024, included all companies participating in the AI L.A.B. and Microsoft's corporate participants (N=300). A scientific committee, composed of industry experts and academics, conducted evaluations in a multi-phase selection process to narrow the total number of cases, focusing exclusively on the most relevant ones. Drawing from academic literature on the topic, a research protocol was developed to systematically analyze each company's AI implementation process, examining aspects of both practical and theoretical significance.

To gather in-depth information on the key aspects of AI projects, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 companies identified

in previous evaluation phases as being the most structured and innovative in their AI applications. In this stage, the research team gained insight into the general characteristics of these projects, including short- and long-term objectives, drivers of AI adoption, specific application areas, and the overall project scale. Interview questions focused on the implementation process to understand the strategies for project realization, including resources used, project management techniques, and the challenges companies faced in overcoming obstacles encountered along the way.

Additionally, key performance indicators (KPIs) were analyzed to understand how project success would be measured and assessed. Finally, the future development prospects of the projects were explored to evaluate the sustainability and scalability of the initiatives. To ensure accurate selection, supplement information, and verify critical project details, follow-up assessments and more detailed evaluations were conducted as needed.

This research ultimately examines six business case studies, identified through comparative analysis as the most innovative, well-designed, and top performing, i.e., the 6 most virtuous companies in the development of AI projects, which were recognized as part of the AI Heroes Awards born from the collaboration between Microsoft Italia and SDA Bocconi School of Management.

SUCCESSFUL CASE STUDIES

The interviews allowed for an in-depth examination of the AI implementation process in the most successful case studies – AI Heroes – selected based on criteria of innovation, impact, and scalability of AI applications. The following subsections detail the key characteristics of the analyzed cases and their respective AI projects.

Chimica HTS (AI Heroes Award in the Innovation Vision category)

Chimica HTS has been supporting companies involved in the distribution, production, and

development of sustainable products—especially cosmetics and detergents—for over 20 years. The company provides technical, scientific, and regulatory consulting services to help clients create innovative, compliant products and obtain environmental certifications, such as the EU Ecolabel. The corporate project developed by Chimica HTS, in collaboration with Microsoft Italy, has integrated AI to enhance several processes within the non-food industrial sector, with a special emphasis on legal compliance. Microsoft's generative AI aids in regulatory compliance, label verification, and error reduction, accelerating time to market and improving client service quality. By using an incremental approach to change management and setting up specialized teams, Chimica HTS has achieved gradual, targeted adoption of new technologies that enable personnel to focus on higher-value activities. Key goals of this AI project include reducing training times, increasing operational efficiency, and enhancing the company's sustainability efforts, aligning with the broader goals of ecological transition.

Intercos Group (AI Heroes Award in the Marketing of the Future category)

Intercos Group, a global leader in the B2B cosmetics sector, focuses its activities on the ideation, development, production, and commercialization of cosmetics, skincare, and personal and hair care products. Collaborating with major international brands, emerging businesses, and retailers, the company delivers innovative solutions to the beauty market. Its core business is built on research, technological innovation, and sustainability, with a strong emphasis on eco-friendly processes and supply integration.

Intercos Group has incorporated Microsoft's generative AI into operations to revolutionize the creation of marketing fiches, combining the power of technological innovation with heightened attention to market trends. The project's goal is to develop tailored marketing fiches based on a combination of customer, product, and market data to build customized value propositions. AI trained

on historical documentation to generate textual content, refined through continuous iterations, to enhance productivity and operational effectiveness.

Leveraging its data powerhouse, Intercos Group integrates both internal and external information to ensure that its marketing fiches remain relevant and impactful.

illimity Bank (AI Heroes Award in Customer Centricity)

The first of its kind in Italy, illimity Bank is a new paradigm bank that has created a fully digital, modular, and cloud-based IT system. Founded five years ago to serve the Italian business market, illimity has surpassed €100 million in net profit (as of December 31, 2023), now has over 900 illimiters, and is distinguished by its innovative, digital approach to the banking sector. Its core business consists of providing credit to high-potential SMEs, particularly companies in growth phases or in moments of discontinuity that require restructuring or relaunch. Additionally, it offers direct digital banking services through illimitybank.com. The bank has implemented an innovative, AI-based governance model designed to standardize and monitor the use of AI and optimize operational costs. This system ensures security and compliance through an access control system for proprietary and open-source models. Two main use cases are already in production: *Ermes*, a virtual assistant based on Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) technique, which allows retail customers to interact with the bank in real-time, improving customer service efficiency; and *Pixie*, a project that uses AI-generated images to personalize the user experience in the app, making it more engaging. The project, developed leveraging Microsoft's AI and Gen AI technologies, aims to boost operational efficiency and reduce costs while maintaining a high level of customer satisfaction, which is tracked through surveys and feedback.

SACE (AI Heroes Award in Innovation and People Engagement)

SACE, a company controlled directly by the Ministry of Economy and Finance, is the Italian

insurance/financial group specialized in supporting the competitiveness of companies in Italy and around the world. Collaborating with Microsoft Italy, SACE has adopted AI to enhance employee productivity and well-being. In fact, by leveraging AI tools, the organization has optimized its employees' daily work to free them from repetitive tasks and allow them to dedicate quality time to higher-value activities: personal development, well-being, and volunteer initiatives for the benefit of the whole community.

The project, which began with a pilot phase, has had a positive, tangible impact – with a 23% surge in productivity - supported by ongoing monitoring. Based on this outcome, SACE has further extended Microsoft's AI solutions to reach a Copilot utilization rate of 94% among its employees. The adoption of AI has been driven by a progressive approach involving pilot groups and co-design sessions, complemented by creating a community to foster cultural change and corporate literacy. SACE's goal is to have happier, more engaged, better prepared people and to equip them with the most advanced technology – all this to make the company more productive, enabling it to offer innovative solutions to its customers, both in Italy and abroad.

Reale Group (AI Heroes Award in Industry Innovation)

Reale Group is an international enterprise with a strong presence in the insurance, real estate, and banking sectors. Its core business centers on insurance solutions to cover personal and business risks, health, pensions, and savings. In addition to these activities, the Group also manages real estate and offers financial services. Leveraging its collaboration with Microsoft Italy, Reale Group has pioneered the adoption of AI on a large scale in this country to improve cooperation and business efficiency. As part of the Group's broader program to adopt and implement AI solutions, Reale Group first promoted a pilot project open to employees in different roles and countries, focusing on training and raising awareness of AI through dedicated workshops and internal communities. The company also aimed to optimize processes and develop new

skills in key areas of its core business, applying AI to claims management, automatic recognition of documents and images for expert reports, optimization of climate risk analysis, etc. Moreover, Reale Group introduced training and onboarding paths for agents and employees to level up sales capabilities and optimize operational flows. A feedback system integrated into a KPI dashboard also made it possible to monitor the impact of AI adoption, continuously measuring its effectiveness and efficiency. The entire program originated and continues to operate conforming with the guidelines of modern, responsible AI consistent with the Group's principles and values.

MAIRE (AI Heroes Award in AI-Driven Enterprise)

MAIRE is a leading technology and engineering group that develops and implements innovative solutions to enable energy transition. The Group creates value in 50 countries and relies on over 9,000 people. MAIRE has integrated Microsoft's generative AI to improve operational efficiency and foster technological innovation, and AI adoption has involved the entire organization, facilitated by an internal portal that encourages experience sharing and a continuous feedback system.

MAIRE's approach revolves around democratizing AI usage by equipping all employees with the basic functionalities of Microsoft Copilot and emphasizing the automation of document processes and the optimization of individual productivity. Key use cases include automated text generation, office automation, and intelligent processing, resulting in overall time savings of approximately four hours per month on daily activities for each employee.

Additionally, MAIRE has established a dedicated business unit for document management and a new business line focused on interface management systems. Looking ahead, the company plans to extend Microsoft Copilot usage to specific vertical scenarios such as SAP, legal, and service sectors, positioning itself as one of the leaders in AI adoption, with a strong commitment to a low-carbon future.

THE EMERGING FRAMEWORK FOR AI IMPLEMENTATION

From the analysis of the case studies above, we developed a multi-level framework (Figure 1). It outlines the essential steps for effective AI implementation, ranging from the initial strategic planning phase to long-term management and maturation. This framework consists of three distinct levels:

- **Strategic and organizational foundations** are the fundamental pillars that represent the requirements for effectively initiating and developing the AI implementation process.
- **Operational and technological development** is an intermediate level that encompasses the critical elements necessary for success during the transition phase. Once objectives are established and the path is mapped out, this step marks the transition from planning to execution.
- **Continuous optimization and innovation** includes development activities during the maturation phase of corporate AI, the guiding principles being ongoing monitoring and continuous innovation.

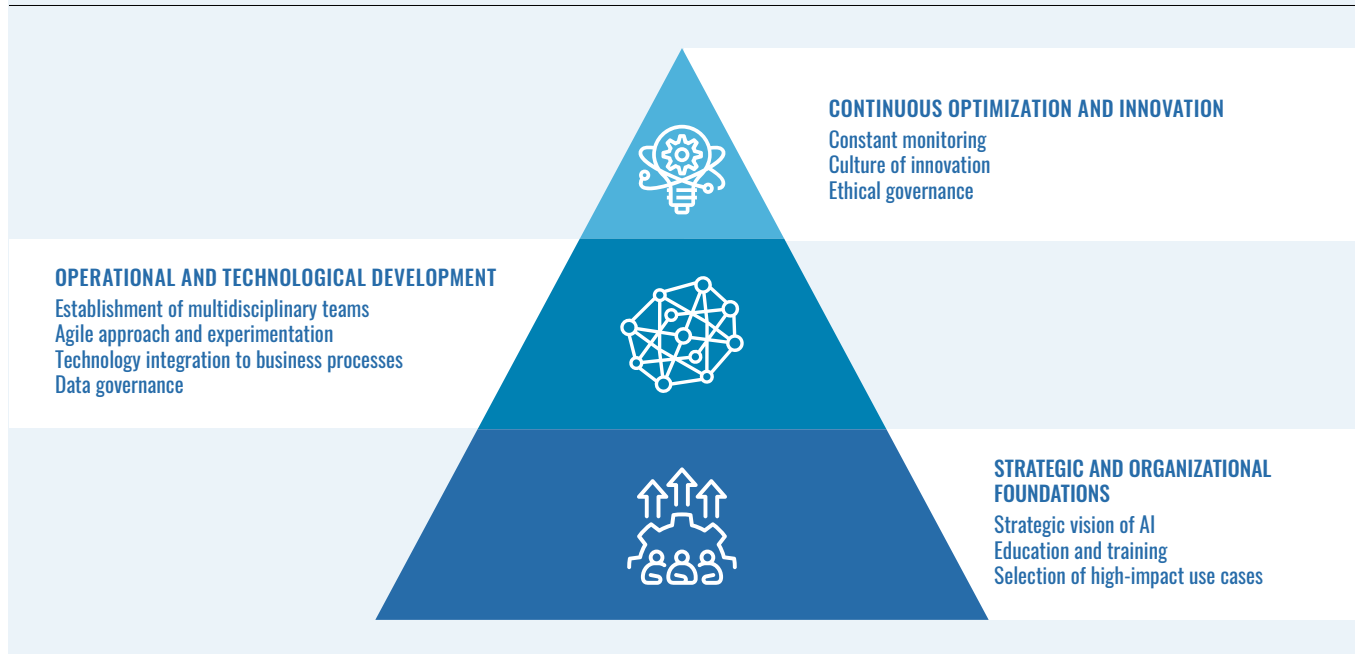
This section describes the three levels of the framework, outlining the key activities and actions to make the AI implementation process effective.

Strategic and organizational foundations

Integrate AI into the corporate strategy with leadership support

An AI initiative has to be fully integrated into the overall strategy of the company to generate a significant impact. This strategic alignment not only amplifies the value of AI but also contributes to making the implementation more coherent and effective in the long term. A fundamental pillar for the strategic success of AI is the commitment and support of corporate leadership, which is crucial for driving cultural change and ensuring that AI is perceived as a strategic priority. As evidenced by various case studies, leadership engagement makes it easier to overcome internal barriers and ensures strategic alignment between the company's objectives and AI tools. Corporate executives, supported by the key coordinating role of middle managers, are fundamental actors in effectively communicating the strategic vision of AI at all organizational levels. Said vision materializes in

FIGURE 1 FRAMEWORK OF THE AI IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS



the definition of an evolving roadmap that includes specific, achievable, and relevant objectives. This long-term horizon is interspersed with specific tasks and short-term goals that break down the AI implementation process into actionable, operational development phases. An effective roadmap not only ensures that AI implementation occurs in an orderly and gradual manner but also allows company leaders to track gradually finetune strategies as needed.

Cultivating AI skills to build the foundations for present and future prospects

Adopting AI requires sizeable investments in continuous training and upskilling for personnel. With regard to internal training programs, the companies in the study sample organize specific courses in data science and machine learning and prompt engineering to equip employees with the necessary skills to create a workforce capable of interacting with new technologies and maximizing their potential. Tailored training is particularly common, focusing on acquiring specific AI knowledge to achieve greater industry specialization based on employees' roles in the company.

The rationale behind this approach is rooted in the wide-ranging applications of generative AI, which can be utilized across various activities in the corporate value chain, necessitating technical knowledge at different organizational levels. Often, the companies engage in partnerships with

universities and research centers to complement the knowledge developed internally that derives from collaboration with suppliers. Teams that are internally trained in AI have an easier time matching technical skill with the specific business dynamics of their organizations to effectively leverage AI in a value creation context. Furthermore, training employees also enhances their awareness of the potential benefits that AI can bring to the organization, making AI algorithms more understandable and transparent to a broader user base.

Focusing efforts on AI use cases that generate tangible results

The most successful case studies in AI implementation are the ones that select projects with a tangible, measurable effect. To generate maximum impact and increase corporate competitiveness, it's necessary to identify use cases based on the application scope of AI and the relative business needs. The selection of use cases must reflect a clear value proposition, which defines the benefits the company intends to achieve.

It is crucial to choose AI projects that offer a tangible return on investment, i.e., concrete and measurable benefits in terms of economic outcomes or operational efficiency. Case studies demonstrate that mapping business processes and selecting those with the biggest potential for transformation is



fundamental to ensuring concrete results. The most effective use of generative AI is found in projects aimed at upgrading efficiency, accelerating business processes, and automating tasks.

In particular, thanks to the support role of AI in repetitive, routine activities, individuals can turn their attention to higher-value tasks, and in doing so, enhance their creative potential. This example illustrates the broad potential of AI as a tool capable of enhancing the human capital of a company by replacing personnel in low-value, mechanical tasks, and allowing for a strategic reskilling of the workforce.

Operational and technological development

Creating mixed teams to maximize AI potential

AI is a technology that requires diverse skill sets, making it essential to build multidisciplinary teams. These teams should include not only technical experts such as data scientists and engineers, but also domain experts who understand the specific dynamics of the industry. This collaborative approach ensures that AI solutions are relevant and applicable to business needs. AI implementation involves strengthening and standardizing skills across the entire business chain to prevent misalignments, maximize the effectiveness of initiatives, and ensure AI's functional use for company requirements. The case studies analyzed here show that different corporate components can be aligned through cross-functional working groups and workshops designed to expedite interdepartmental and inter-unit integration.

Adopting an agile approach to experiment, learn, and adapt

AI implementation is rarely a linear or definitive process. Continuous experimentation and agile methodologies are crucial for iterating, testing, and improving solutions over time. Test and learn approaches allow for quickly experimenting with new ideas, learning from mistakes, and adapting flexibly. Successful AI implementation processes often rely on an agile approach, trialing prototypes before making significant investments. By

experimenting with new AI solutions in controlled contexts through pilot projects, companies can isolate the environment from perturbing variables, preventing negative impacts from cascading across multiple business operations.

An essential element for successful AI implementation is supporting an incremental evolution of AI-driven processes, using continuous feedback loops to progressively upgrade efficiency, refine models, and adapt to the company's evolving needs.

Integrating AI into business processes to scale innovation

Implementing AI requires robust, scalable technological infrastructure. Case studies highlight that using cloud-native platforms and modular architectures enables effective management of large data volumes and facilitates the broad application of AI solutions, ensuring flexibility and reduced IT management costs. A critical factor in this integration is planning for compatibility with existing technological architecture and evaluating scalability and modularity to support seamless AI adoption. Many companies utilize open APIs and microservices to connect new AI solutions with legacy systems, reducing implementation time and enhancing interoperability across business processes. Workflow automation and AI use in areas like supply chain management or customer service have further accelerated innovation, driving faster growth and operational efficiency on a larger scale.

Managing data with rigor for reliable AI and seamless processes

Companies that prioritize data quality and governance achieve smoother AI processes and more reliable outcomes. Domain experts in data management can ensure effective company policies, guaranteeing ongoing accessibility and protection of databases. As AI effectiveness depends on clean, structured data, it is essential to establish rigorous data governance protocols. Several companies have adopted tools for data lineage and cataloging to track data origins and flows, enhancing transparency

and minimizing error risk. In some cases, dedicated data management units are set up, tasked with monitoring regulatory compliance and maintaining optimal data quality throughout the AI project lifecycle. A proactive approach to data security and privacy also proves crucial in building trust both internally and externally.

Continuous optimization and innovation

Consistently measuring AI performance for ongoing optimization

Case studies emphasize the importance of rigorous monitoring that allows for real-time evaluation of AI projects across different development and process stages. This involves identifying specific, measurable KPIs to gauge AI benefits against initial objectives. Commonly used KPIs include efficiency, effectiveness, process quality, system accuracy, error rates, individual productivity improvement, time saved on routine tasks, and metrics related to customer satisfaction and user-level performance. Additionally, accurately defining and measuring ROI is crucial to justify AI implementation costs, demonstrate its value, and inform expansion plans through precise cost-benefit analyses. Integrated dashboards are needed to track AI performance, refine algorithms, and make timely adjustments to operations.

Fostering a corporate culture that embraces continuous innovation

Integrating AI into business processes requires an enduring culture that embraces innovation and continuous transformation by incentivizing experimentation and fostering individual proactivity in adopting new AI solutions. Accepting mistakes as part of a learning process is essential in such environments. For example, by setting up internal programs that reward employees who contribute to innovative AI projects, companies can encourage a mindset geared toward testing out new ideas. Strategic communication highlighting the importance of innovation further reinforces a culture aligned with technological advancement. An effective initiative seen in some companies is establishing AI communities where employees can

explore and innovate AI applications in isolated, risk-free environments. In summary, cultivating an innovation-focused mindset enables AI to serve as a tool for change, expanding its application across processes. Reaching this cultural milestone allows for the progressive integration of AI into core business functions.

Ensuring ethical governance for responsible and transparent AI

Ethical governance has emerged as essential for long-term AI success, especially in preventing bias and automated discrimination. Said governance becomes a critical element to sustaining business success along a path leading to creating lasting, sustainable value. As organizations mature in terms of AI utilization, they must ensure that AI is deployed transparently, fairly, and in compliance with regulations, thereby maintaining stakeholder and customer trust. Companies can establish key ethical principles through specific protocols, i.e., ethical frameworks that regulate the virtuous, transparent, responsible, privacy-respecting, and non-discriminatory use of AI.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, empirical evidence suggests that implementing AI effectively demands a systematic, multi-level approach. From establishing robust strategic foundations to fostering a culture of continuous innovation and progressing through gradual operational and technological advancements, each stage is crucial to ensure the long-term success and sustainability of AI initiatives. AI Heroes case studies illustrate various configurations for effective implementation processes. Although there is no one-size-fits-all solution, results indicate that certain development steps are prerequisites for optimizing business operations and preparing for future challenges, transforming AI into a powerful engine of innovation and value.