



Unlocking the value of AI starts with better decisions, not perfect data

The first test should be relevance, not
completeness





The fear of poor data has created a form of paralysis in the face of mounting pressure to adopt AI

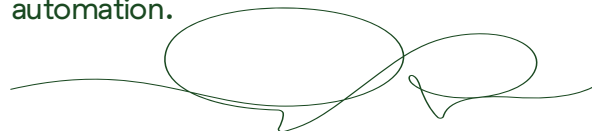
The mantra of “garbage in, garbage out” has long been regarded as an unassailable truism in data circles. The argument goes that poor data can weaken analysis, distort models and lead organisations towards making worse decisions. And for the most part, this aphorism holds a lot of water and serves as a useful warning — one that has gained renewed force as organisations explore the seemingly untold possibilities of artificial intelligence.



The problem is that aphorisms can harden into unhelpful habits: in many organisations, the fear of poor data has created a form of paralysis in the face of mounting pressure to adopt AI. **Leaders know they need to understand where and how the technology could create value, but the conversation quickly returns to the familiar concerns about the underlying data estate.** Is the data available to us clean enough? Is our infrastructure mature enough? Are our governance structures sufficiently robust? Almost inevitably, **there will be lingering doubts, and the conclusion can feel obvious: the organisation is not yet ready to embark on its AI adoption journey.**

Sometimes this caution is justified, as AI certainly can amplify flaws in data, processes and ownership, and any serious organisation needs to understand the risks involved before introducing or scaling its use. But by striving to achieve the impossible ambition of perfect data foundations, organisations can spend years collecting, cleansing and governing information before they have confronted a more fundamental issue: what decision are we actually trying to improve by using AI?

Looking this problem squarely in the eye from the outset changes the shape of the conversation: rather than worrying whether the whole organisation is ready for AI in some abstract sense, the question then becomes whether there is enough relevant, trustworthy information to improve a specific outcome. It allows the organisation to begin with a clear business problem, gather the data needed to understand it, test what can be learned, and decide what is worth improving before making larger investments in platforms, pipelines or automation.



In other words, AI readiness does not always require a perfect data estate; instead, what is needed is a sufficiently clear view of the decision being improved, the information needed to improve it, and the level of confidence required to act.



You can often do more with less than you think

While it is certainly true that better data foundations are generally always desirable, and that governance, ownership and controls grow more important as AI use becomes more embedded in operational decisions, organisations are nevertheless often closer to useful AI adoption than they realise.

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In many cases, enough information already exists to test a specific decision, answer a defined business question or build a limited proof of value. The organisation may not yet be able to run a weekly automated dashboard, for example, but it may still be able to analyse customer behaviour, identify market trends, test assumptions, improve forecasting or model a scenario using a targeted dataset.

Nor does every use case require information to be collected or processed in real time. The right cadence depends on the decision being supported: some decisions need live or near-live data, while others may be improved through periodic analysis, historical comparison or even a carefully designed one-off exercise. In some cases, that one-off dataset may be enough to learn whether the use case is valuable before investing in the infrastructure needed to repeat or scale it.

This also helps organisations judge how much foundational work is actually required.

A major enterprise transformation, such as an ERP or cloud migration, may still demand deep work on data architecture, ownership and controls. In other cases, a more targeted approach will be enough: improve the data needed for the priority use case, prove the value, then extend the foundation as the organisation learns.

In this context, it is also important to remember that despite all the excitement and anxiety surrounding this fast-moving technology, many of the techniques now described under the broad banner of AI have long been used to understand customers, analyse markets, forecast demand and support operational decisions. Its value therefore isn't simply unleashed by attaching it to every available dataset, tempting as this may be, but from applying the right analytical capability to a business question that has been framed with care — a discipline that long predates artificial intelligence.



The cost of collecting everything

This decision-based approach represents a more practical way to think about data readiness, as it keeps the standard high by making the data itself more specific, something that is becoming more urgent because organisations are producing and retaining more information than they can sensibly use.



Connected devices, operational technologies, digital customer channels and AI-enabled systems are creating ever larger and more complex data estates. IoT Analytics, a market research firm focused on connected devices and industrial technology, estimates that the number of connected IoT devices reached 18.5 billion in 2024 and could reach 39 billion by 2030. [1]

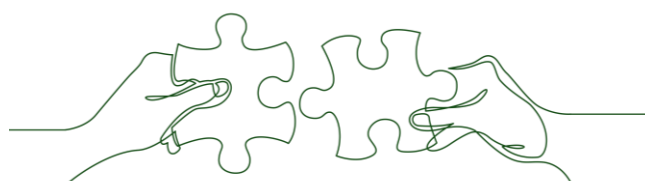
In this context, “more data” can easily become a proxy for progress. It feels safer to collect everything and store everything, especially when future AI use cases still seem so uncertain. But indiscriminate collection creates its own headaches: it increases the cost of storage and management, complicates ownership questions, expands compliance obligations and makes it that much harder for teams to distinguish between the proverbial wheat of genuinely useful information and the chaff of superfluous data.

Recent UK government policy reflects the growing seriousness of this challenge. The Data Asset Management Policy in Government requires central government departments and arm’s-length bodies to identify, record and centrally report data assets, with minimum requirements for quality, discoverability, interoperability and ownership. It also frames better data management as essential to improving public services, boosting economic growth and harnessing the opportunities of AI. [2]

Although this policy is specific to the UK Government, the wider principle it enshrines is relevant to any large organisation. **Data is now too important, and too costly, to be treated as a mere by-product of activity.**

It needs ownership, governance and stewardship — disciplines that are strongest when they are led by business relevance.

Framed in this way, **the most important data assets are the ones that support critical decisions**, and therefore neither ease of collection nor the size of the respective data set should ever be mistaken for usefulness.



Start with the decision, then define the data

With all of the above in mind, **the practical starting point to any AI adoption journey is therefore deceptively simple: identify the decision the organisation wants to improve.** This might relate to customer segmentation, demand planning, asset maintenance, stock levels, workforce allocation, pricing or investment. The important thing is to make the use case specific enough that the data requirement can be judged against a real business purpose, rather than against an abstract ideal of completeness.

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- (1) IoT Analytics — [State of IoT 2024: 18.8 Billion Connected Devices, Edge AI, and the Infrastructure Reality Behind the Growth Numbers](#) – Trusted IoT, April 2026
 - (2) UK Government — [Data Asset Management Policy in Government](#), Published 27 May 2026



Data teams serve as strategic partners in this value-creation process.

From there, business leaders can ask more useful questions.

Who makes this decision today? What information do they currently use? Where are they relying too much on judgement because the evidence is incomplete, delayed or scattered? Which additional variables would materially improve confidence? Which pieces of data would simply add cost or complexity?

Used well, **data teams serve as strategic partners in this process.** They can help leaders understand the potential as well as the limitations of technology, identify where the data can be trusted and where the gaps are genuinely material, and highlight where the work required to improve the data would be disproportionate to the value at stake — in other words, they **translate business priorities into information requirements, and information requirements into data assets that deserve proper investment.**

However, in order to do so, data specialists need to speak the language of the business, be visible and empowered, and help turn data literacy from a training objective into a shared organisational capability. For AI, that business-facing role is especially important: value depends on collaboration between business leaders, operational teams, data specialists and technology experts.

When data specialists are involved early, governance also improves, becoming less of a blanket exercise and more of a focused discipline by concentrating effort on the data assets that support decisions with real operational or commercial consequences.

Good governance gives this priority data the ownership, quality standards and controls it needs, helping the organisation move with confidence rather than treating every piece of data as equally important.

How Oaklin helps businesses start in the right place



We help organisations move from a broad ambition to “use AI” towards a clearer view of the decisions they want to improve, the information they need in order to improve them, and the practical foundations required to act with confidence. Sometimes that will mean strengthening governance, ownership and infrastructure before scaling. In other cases, it will mean **helping the business start with a focused use case, a modest but relevant dataset and a clear route from analysis to action.**

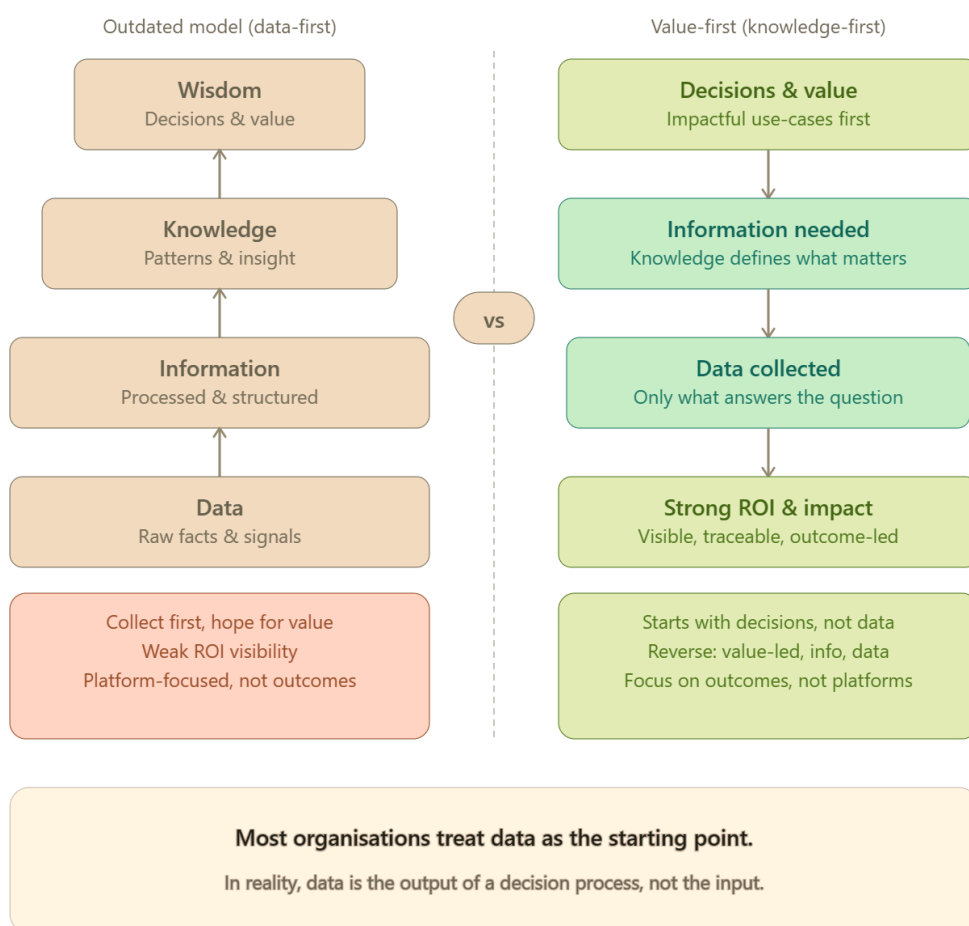
Our role is also to bring the right people into the conversation early. Business leaders understand the operational context, the pressure points and the decisions with the greatest commercial impact. Data teams know the topography and boundaries of the data estate. AI and technology specialists recognise which tools and approaches are suitable for the specific problem being solved. Success comes from joining up these perspectives from the outset, rather than trying to reconcile them after a pilot has already been launched.



For organisations that feel they are not yet ready for AI, that early, decision-led conversation can be a more constructive place to begin. The first step is not always a major transformation programme. Sometimes the right answer will be a targeted piece of analysis using a carefully assembled dataset. Sometimes it will be a pilot that proves enough value to justify investment in stronger governance, automation or infrastructure. Sometimes it will be a decision to stop collecting certain data because it creates effort without improving the outcome. The point is to let the business question and the data capability inform each other from the beginning.

Perfect data may never arrive. But **the route to better decision-making through AI can often be much closer than you think.**

Today, value determines what information is relevant



DIKW critique: Fricke (2009) · knowledge-first thinking: Weinberger (2012), Williamson (2000)

The knowledge pyramid: [a critique of the DIKW hierarchy](#)



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