Social Influence: The Hidden Catalyst of AI Adoption

Why Old Change Models Fall Short

Organisations moving through AI-enabled transformation are discovering a simple truth: traditional change approaches are no longer enough on their own. AI reshapes work at a pace that outstrips structured rollouts and linear training plans. In this environment, what people observe in their peers often matters more than what they are formally told.

The Power of Peers

When uncertainty rises, individuals look to those they trust. Not necessarily the loudest voices, but the colleagues whose judgement they rely on day to day. They notice what these peers try, how they respond when things go wrong, and whether new tools feel genuinely useful in the reality of their work. A single comment or quiet demonstration from a respected colleague can shift behaviour faster than pages of guidance. Social influence becomes a powerful catalyst, an often underestimated engine that turns organisational intention into lived change.

Formal change programmes still matter. They create direction, set expectations, and help organisations align around a common vision. But they often underestimate the social dynamics that help people make sense of change.

Most people do not shift behaviour because they are told to; they shift because they see someone like them experimenting, adapting, and making progress. With AI, where tools evolve quickly and implications can feel ambiguous, people look sideways, not upwards, for cues that help them navigate what is next.

From Top-Down to Networked

For decades, organisations relied on communication, clarity, and leadership visibility as their primary levers for behaviour change. These still matter, but they no longer carry the weight they once did. Formal communication sets the tone; peer behaviour sets the reality.

How Influence Really Spreads

Influence now flows through relationships rather than reporting lines. People gravitate toward colleagues who translate complexity into workable steps, who acknowledge challenges without judgement, and who help others navigate the practical realities of new workflows. These individuals rarely hold formal change roles. Their influence comes from credibility, consistency, and the quiet behaviours that build trust.

They become informal interpreters of change. They spot friction early, model progress before mastery, and share honest reflections about what is and is not working. When these individuals lean into new systems, momentum builds. When they hesitate, adoption stalls, regardless of how well-designed the programme may be.

The opportunity for organisations is to support these influencers without scripting them. Authenticity is their currency. Giving them early access to emerging tools, inviting their insights, and creating space for them to share what they are learning allows their influence to ripple through the system. These networks create a pace of change that formal cascades alone cannot match.

Using Everyday Tech for Peer-Led Adoption

Most organisations already have the technology required to unlock peer-to-peer learning, but it is often hidden in plain sight. When used intentionally, everyday platforms can turn informal knowledge-sharing into one of the most powerful accelerators of AI adoption.

Collaboration environments are usually the easiest place to begin. Features such as short screen recordings, annotated screenshots, or quick walkthroughs make invisible problem-solving visible. Colleagues already trade tips in team channels; they mainly need encouragement, light curation, and permission to share work in progress rather than polished, perfected outputs. This shifts learning from a formal event to an everyday behaviour.

Knowledge platforms can add another layer by revealing what actually resonates. A three-minute clip from a colleague that becomes the most viewed item in a workspace often shapes behaviour more quickly than formal training. These signals show where real adoption energy sits, and where to amplify it.

Data can guide where peer examples are needed most. Many organisations already track workflow analytics or adoption dashboards. Those same insights can highlight teams struggling with new processes, giving leaders a clear indication of where to elevate stories from colleagues who have already cracked the challenge. This transforms analytics from performance reporting into behaviour-shaping intelligence.

Even subtle in-tool nudges can help new habits take root. Prompts like: "others in similar roles used this feature to speed up review" blend instruction with social reassurance. They lower the perceived risk of trying something new and normalise experimentation without heavy-handed messaging.

This reflects what we learnt in our Beyond Faster Horses article, namely that AI transformation is rarely solved through more process alone. Organisations must design for real, lived behaviour, not theoretical adoption curves.

Embedding Peer Influence in Daily Work

Authenticity matters more than sophistication. Short, unedited updates shared from the flow of work are trusted in ways centrally crafted messages rarely are. A one-minute clip from a respected team member demonstrating how they use a new AI feature often reduces hesitation faster than top-down communication.

Continuous feedback loops can also surface where peer influence is emerging, and where it needs support. When sentiment data, usage patterns, and behavioural signals converge, leaders can intervene with precision: amplifying helpful examples, addressing pockets of uncertainty, and celebrating early adopters in the spaces where teams already spend their time.

The pattern is consistent. Organisations do not need additional platforms to build peer-led learning. They need to repurpose the technology they already have, shifting it from information distribution to shared sense-making, and from top-down direction to collective learning in real time. Peer influence becomes part of the operating fabric, not an add-on.

AI is not only reshaping tasks; it is reshaping how people learn. Traditional models assume that knowledge is best transferred through structured steps, training sessions, and linear instruction. AI systems evolve, adapt, and reward exploration.

People often need support at the moment of uncertainty, not weeks earlier. Contextual prompts, automated suggestions, and examples tailored to the situation help build confidence to take the next step. When guidance is delivered in the flow of work, people become less dependent on experts and more willing to explore.

From Knowledge to Meaning

As AI takes on more procedural elements of work, the role of humans shifts toward interpretation. Conversations become about what new tools mean for workflow, how priorities are shifting, which tasks now matter more, and how teams should organise around emerging capabilities. As AI reduces cognitive load, it frees people to spend more time on these sense-making conversations, even as it introduces new questions and uncertainties to navigate.

Here, social influence becomes even more important. While AI helps with the how, peers help with the so what. They share what has changed in practice, where the real value is, and how to navigate the grey areas. These exchanges, short demonstrations, candid reflections, and shared discoveries, become the learning architecture of AI-enabled transformation.

Designing the Conditions for AI Adoption

If peer-led momentum is the engine of AI adoption, organisations must intentionally design the conditions that allow it to thrive. These conditions are not accidental. They are shaped by choices that signal what the organisation expects and values during change. These four conditions are necessary to let AI adoption flourish:

- **Visibility of progress matters**. Seeing colleagues experiment with AI-enhanced workflows or share demonstrations normalises exploration. Imperfect examples often build more confidence than polished ones.

- **Access shapes momentum.** When influential peers gain early access to tools, understand the rationale behind decisions, and have space to influence how new capabilities show up in practice, adoption accelerates across the system.

- **Conversation is the connector.** Creating forums, formal or informal, where peers can exchange insights, troubleshoot, and share what they are learning turns individual experimentation into collective progress.

- **Psychological permission is essential**. People are far more willing to try, fail, and try again when mistakes are treated as learning signals rather than judgement points.

The last point mirrors what we learnt in our Psychological Safety research, which identified when people feel permitted to learn in the open, new behaviours take root far more easily.

The Catalyst Behind AI Adoption

In the age of AI, transformation does not spread through instruction; it spreads through example. People rarely move because a leader says "go"; they move because someone they trust has already taken a step.

The organisations that succeed in AI-enabled transformation recognise this dynamic and design for it. They cultivate environments where peer influence is visible, supported, and woven into the fabric of how change happens.

In a world where tools evolve rapidly and certainty is scarce, social influence becomes one of the most reliable accelerators of sustainable behaviour change. When organisations make space for it, rather than treating it as incidental, they turn complexity into momentum and intention into reality.

About the Author

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He has held senior roles at PW, PWC and IBM Consulting and is known for his ability to navigate ambiguity, align stakeholders and work alongside the C-suite in immersive, design-led environments, shaping and guiding multi-stakeholder transformations in areas such as strategy alignment, operating model redesign and change delivery, particularly in the energy and infrastructure sectors.

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