

A WORKING GUIDE

The five questions to answer before your business spends a naira on AI

Most companies start their AI journey by commissioning a strategy document. It gets written, presented once, praised, and filed. The document is not the problem. Starting with a document is.

I have watched this happen with businesses across fuel distribution, transport, media, interiors, and education. What works instead is smaller and harder: sit your leadership team down with five questions and answer them honestly.

None of the five mention technology. That is the point. AI adoption fails on the business side far more often than the technical side, and by the end of the fifth question you will have something better than a strategy: a short list of specific things worth doing, each attached to a queue you can point at and an owner you can name.

Mike Oladapo builds software for how African business actually works, at Epigrams, the Lagos product studio he leads. He writes weekly on AI and African business at mikeoladapo.com.

Question one

What do your people actually do all day?

Not the org chart version, the honest one. Where do the paid hours actually go? In most businesses a surprising share of expensive time is spent reading something so it can be retyped somewhere else, or answering the same question for the fortieth time.

DO THIS

Pick your three most expensive roles. Have each person list their last full working day in 30-minute blocks. Look for repetition, retyping, and waiting.

RED FLAG

If leadership cannot describe the work at this level, no tool can help yet. This question comes first for a reason.

Question two

Where does information sit and wait?

Every business has queues where nothing moves until one specific person reads something. Quotes waiting to be priced. Invoices waiting to be matched. Complaints waiting to be triaged. AI is unusually good at exactly this waiting-room work.

DO THIS

List every place where work waits for a human to read, sort, or summarise. Rank the queues by hours burned per week. The top two are your first real AI use cases.

Question three

If you had the answer instantly, what would change?

This question should kill projects early, and that is its job. A dashboard that predicts demand is worthless if purchasing still happens the way it always has. If the honest answer to "what would we do differently" is nothing, the AI is decoration.

DO THIS

For each use case from question two, name the decision it would change and the person who would act differently. No decision, no project.

Question four

What do your people and customers already trust?

A tool that lives where your staff already work gets used. A tool that asks them to move somewhere new gets abandoned by February. In Nigeria that usually means WhatsApp, bank transfers, Excel, and email, whatever the software brochures wish were true.

DO THIS

For any tool you are considering, ask one question: does it attach to how my people already work, or does it require them to become different people first? Be suspicious of the second kind.

Mike Oladapo.

Question five

Who owns the follow-through?

Not a committee, a person. Every AI adoption I have watched succeed had someone whose name was on it, who used the thing weekly and had the authority to change a process when the tool exposed how broken it was. Every one I have watched fail was owned by everybody, which is to say nobody.

DO THIS

Before spending anything, write one name next to each use case. If you cannot, you are not ready, and that is a useful thing to know for free.

What happens after the five

Worked through honestly, the five questions leave you with a short list: real queues, real decisions, real owners. That is a strategy. It just does not look like a document.

The models are the easy part now. Knowing your own business at this level is the hard part, and it is work no vendor can do for you, though the right person can make it faster.

Somewhere between the board meeting and the document?

That conversation is exactly what I do. Write to hello@mikeoladapo.com, or read the weekly essay on AI and African business at mikeoladapo.com.