



White Paper

The 90-Day Engagement

Why 18-month transformation roadmaps stall, and what to do instead.

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Abstract

The default model for enterprise AI transformation is an 18-month roadmap with a steering committee, a phased rollout, and a change management workstream that trails the technology by six months. This model is familiar, fundable, and wrong. This paper argues for a fundamentally different approach: 90-day engagement cycles that produce measurable outcomes, compound learning, and build organizational capability at the speed AI actually requires.

The Roadmap That Was Outdated Before the Ink Dried

In January 2025, a global financial services firm completed a six-month planning process for its enterprise AI transformation. The resulting roadmap was comprehensive: 18 months, four phases, twelve workstreams, a dedicated program management office, and a budget that required board approval.

The budget required board approval. That took four months. Procurement reviews. Vendor evaluations. Security assessments. Legal sign-off. Steering committee formation. By the time the budget was approved and the engagement could actually begin, it was May. Ten months after the planning process started. Ten months of organizational energy spent before a single workflow changed.

By then, the roadmap was already stale. A new generation of models had changed what was possible. Two of the pilot use cases had been overtaken by competitors who moved faster. The regulatory landscape had shifted. The vendor the roadmap was built around had pivoted its product strategy.

The program team knew the roadmap was outdated. They updated the slides. They did not change the plan.

This is not an unusual story. It is the default story. And it reveals a fundamental mismatch between the speed at which AI evolves and the speed at which large organizations plan.

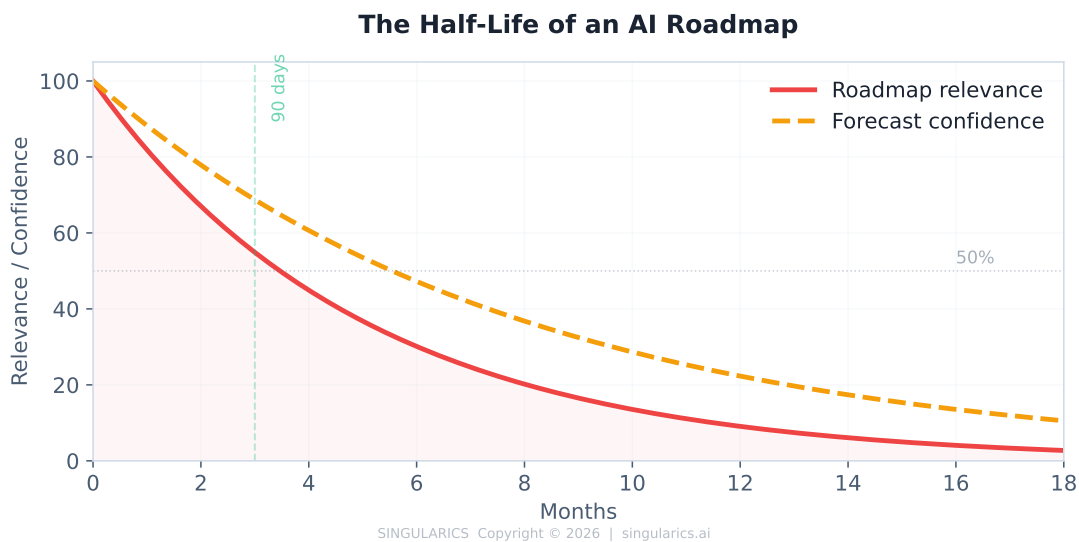


Figure 1: The relevance of an AI roadmap decays exponentially. Within three months, both the roadmap's accuracy and forecast confidence have dropped below 50%. The organizations that plan in 18-month horizons are navigating by a map that stopped being accurate before the first milestone was reached.

An 18-month AI roadmap is not a plan. It is an artifact of a planning process. The plan was outdated the moment the landscape changed. The artifact persists because nobody wants to admit the plan is gone.

The 18-Month Stall

The 18-month roadmap does not fail because the people who built it were incompetent. It fails because it is built on three assumptions that are no longer true.

Assumption 1: The landscape is predictable

Traditional enterprise planning assumes that the technology landscape will remain stable long enough for the plan to execute. This assumption was reasonable for ERP implementations, cloud migrations, and infrastructure projects where the technology was mature and the trajectory was clear.

AI violates this assumption completely. Model capabilities change quarterly. New categories of tools emerge monthly. What was impossible six months ago is now commodity. What was best practice six months ago may now be an antipattern.

Planning as if the landscape is stable produces plans that are immediately in tension with reality. The plan says to do X. Reality says X is no longer the right approach. The organization, committed to the plan, does X anyway.

Assumption 2: Scope can be defined upfront

Long roadmaps require scope to be defined at the beginning. Use cases are identified. Priorities are set. Resources are allocated. This works when the scope is well understood.

With AI, scope is emergent. The most valuable use cases are often discovered during adoption, not during planning. A team that begins using AI for document drafting discovers that AI transforms how they do research. A team that starts with code review discovers that AI changes how they think about architecture.

Defining scope upfront for AI transformation is like writing a travel itinerary for a country you have never visited based on a guidebook that was published last year. The itinerary is comforting. It is also fiction.

Assumption 3: Value is delivered at the end

The 18-month roadmap is structured to deliver value at the end. The first twelve months are preparation. The last six are delivery. Value is a destination, not a trajectory.

This means the organization invests for a year or more before seeing returns. During this period, executive patience erodes. Budget pressure builds. Competing priorities emerge. And the people who are supposed to adopt AI have been waiting so long that their engagement has faded.

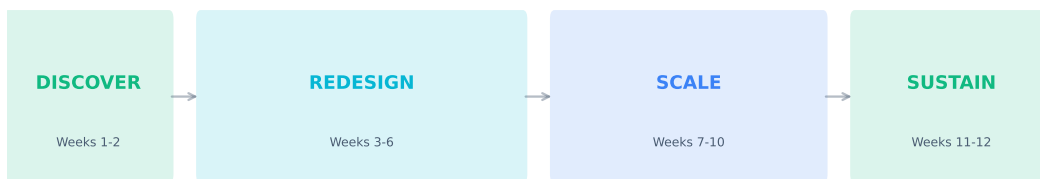
By the time the roadmap reaches its delivery phase, the organizational energy that funded it has often dissipated.

The Alternative: 90-Day Cycles

The alternative is not a shorter roadmap. It is a fundamentally different model of engagement.

Instead of planning for 18 months and delivering at the end, the 90-day engagement delivers outcomes in every cycle. Each cycle is a complete unit: it begins with discovery, moves through redesign, scales to additional teams, and ends with a handoff. Outcomes are measured. Learning is captured. The next cycle is defined based on what was learned, not what was planned twelve months ago.

The Four Phases



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Figure 2: The four phases of a 90-day engagement cycle. Each phase produces specific deliverables. Each cycle is a complete unit of value.

This model has four properties that long roadmaps lack.

Immediacy. Value is delivered in the first cycle. The organization does not wait a year to see results. Outcomes are measurable within 90 days. Executive patience is rewarded early.

Adaptability. Each cycle is planned based on what was learned in the previous one. The approach evolves with the landscape, not against it. What the organization discovers in month two informs what it does in month four.

Compounding. Learning from each cycle builds on the previous one. The second cycle is more effective than the first. The third is more effective than the second. Organizational capability compounds rather than being deferred to a future phase.

Accountability. Each 90-day cycle has specific, measurable outcomes. There is no place to hide behind “we are still in the planning phase.” The work either produced results or it did not. Every quarter.

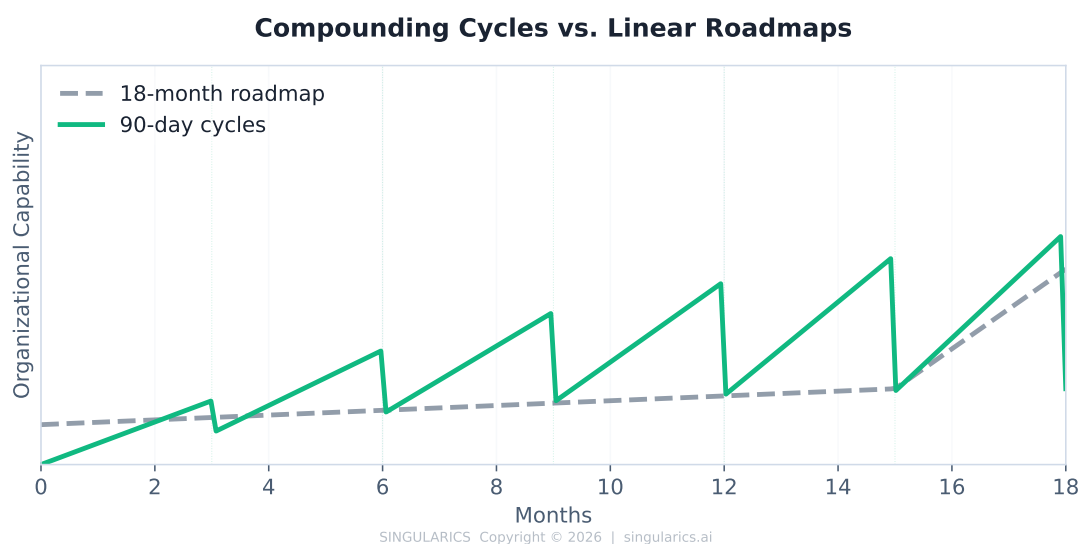


Figure 3: 90-day cycles compound organizational capability exponentially. 18-month roadmaps produce linear progress, assuming they reach delivery at all. By month 12, the cycling organization has built capability that the roadmap organization has not yet begun to develop.

Phase 1: Discover (Weeks 1–2)

Every engagement begins with discovery. Not with a plan. Not with a strategy session. With observation.

The purpose of discovery is to understand what is actually happening inside the organization, not what the organization believes is happening. These are different things, and the gap between them is often the most valuable finding of the entire engagement.

The AI usage audit

The first task is to map AI usage across the organization. Not just formal programs. The shadow layer. Who is using AI? How? On what? With what results? What tools? What workarounds?

This audit consistently reveals surprises. Individuals operating at multiples of their peers' productivity, invisibly. Teams that have developed sophisticated AI workflows without organizational support. And teams that have rejected AI entirely, for reasons that are rational and important to understand.

The workflow map

The second task is to map the workflows that matter most. Not every workflow. The ones where AI has the highest potential to change how work gets done. The ones where the gap between current state and AI-assisted state is largest.

This requires sitting with people. Not asking them to describe their work in a meeting. Watching them work. Understanding the actual sequence of decisions, handoffs, and outputs that constitute their daily reality. The workflow as lived is always different from the workflow as documented.

The intent clarity assessment

The third task is to assess how clearly intent is defined across the organization. Can teams articulate what they are trying to accomplish? Can they connect their work to strategic outcomes? Is the intent defined with enough precision for AI to act on it?

This assessment usually reveals the largest gap. Organizations that believe their intent is clear discover, when tested against the standard AI requires, that it is not. This finding is uncomfortable. It is also the most actionable insight the discovery phase produces.

Phase 2: Redesign (Weeks 3–6)

Discovery produces a map of reality. Redesign changes it.

The redesign phase focuses on two to three high-impact workflows identified during discovery. Not every workflow. The ones where the gap is largest, the stakeholders are willing, and the outcomes are measurable.

Workflow redesign

Each selected workflow is redesigned with AI as a given. Not AI bolted onto the existing process. The process reimagined from first principles: what should this workflow look like if AI is part of how it operates?

Steps disappear. New steps emerge. The sequence changes. The handoffs change. The definition of done changes. The roles of the people involved change.

This is not a theoretical exercise. Teams are involved in the redesign. They build the new workflow. They test it on real work. They iterate based on what they discover.

Expectation setting

Simultaneously, expectations are explicitly updated. If AI reduces a three-day deliverable to a half-day deliverable, what is the new expectation? More depth? Broader scope? Faster iteration? Higher quality?

This conversation is critical and almost always avoided. Without explicit expectation setting, individuals capture the productivity gain privately. The organization never sees it.

Governance design

The redesign phase also establishes governance for AI usage within the workflows being redesigned. Not organization-wide governance, which takes too long and produces policies too generic to be useful. Workflow-specific guardrails that address the actual risks of the actual work.

What data can AI see? What decisions require human review? What quality standards apply? These questions are answered in context, not in abstraction.

Phase 3: Scale (Weeks 7–10)

Redesigned workflows that work for two teams need to work for twenty. The scale phase is where the engagement expands beyond the initial cohort.

Champion activation

The most effective scaling mechanism is not a rollout plan. It is people.

During the redesign phase, individuals emerge who are naturally effective at adopting and communicating new ways of working. These champions are identified, supported, and given explicit permission to help their peers adopt the redesigned workflows.

One champion on a team does more for adoption than any training program. They are credible because they do the same work. They are accessible because they sit next to you. They are convincing because they are demonstrably better at their job than they were three months ago.

Behavior measurement

During the scale phase, behavior change is measured. Not deployment metrics. Behavior metrics. Are people working differently? Is output changing shape? Are workflows actually operating as redesigned, or has the organization reverted to the old way?

This measurement produces the before-and-after data that justifies continued investment. It also reveals where the redesigned workflows need adjustment, which informs the next cycle.

Cross-team learning

As multiple teams adopt redesigned workflows, learning begins to flow between them. Team A discovers something that benefits Team B. A champion in one department develops a practice that works across departments.

Building channels for this cross-pollination is one of the highest-leverage activities in the scale phase. It transforms individual team improvements into organizational capability.

Phase 4: Sustain (Weeks 11–12)

The final phase of each cycle does three things.

First, it delivers outcomes data. Before-and-after metrics for every workflow that was redesigned. Time savings. Quality improvements. Throughput changes. Decision speed changes. This data is the proof that the engagement produced value. It is also the basis for deciding what the next cycle should focus on.

Second, it hands off to internal leaders. The engagement cannot create permanent dependency. Champions are formalized. Internal leaders are equipped. The redesigned workflows and governance structures are documented and owned by people inside the organization.

Third, it defines the next cycle. Based on what was learned, what was measured, and what the organization is now ready for, the next 90-day cycle is scoped. Not from the original roadmap. From the current reality.

What Each Phase Produces

DISCOVER	REDESIGN	SCALE	SUSTAIN
AI usage audit (visible + shadow)	Redesigned workflows (2-3)	Additional teams onboarded	Before/after outcomes data
Workflow maps (current state)	Updated role definitions	Champion network active	Internal capability handoff
Intent clarity assessment	New output expectations	Behavior change measured	Alignment infrastructure live
Quick wins identified	Governance guardrails	Cross-team learning channels	Next cycle defined

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Figure 4: Each phase produces specific, tangible deliverables. The engagement is never in a state where nothing has been delivered. Every phase advances the organization's capability.

Ninety Days, Specifically

The 90-day timeframe is not arbitrary. It reflects three constraints.

The AI landscape constraint. AI capabilities shift materially every three to six months. A cycle shorter than 90 days cannot produce meaningful organizational change. A cycle longer than 90 days risks building on assumptions that have already shifted.

The organizational attention constraint. Executive attention is finite and competitive. An initiative that cannot demonstrate value within a quarter will lose executive sponsorship to initiatives that can. Ninety days is long enough to produce real outcomes and short enough to maintain executive engagement.

The behavior change constraint. Research on habit formation consistently shows that meaningful behavior change requires sustained practice over weeks, not days [1]. Ninety days provides enough time for new workflows to become habitual, but imposes enough urgency that the work cannot drift into the comfortable ambiguity of a long-horizon project.

Ninety days is long enough to change how people work. Short enough that nobody can hide behind “we are still planning.” And aligned with the pace at which AI itself evolves.

The Compounding Effect

The most important property of the 90-day model is not any single cycle. It is the compounding effect across cycles.

The first cycle is exploratory. The organization is learning what works, what does not, and where the real opportunities are. Outcomes are meaningful but modest.

The second cycle builds on the first. The team knows the organization. The organization has learned from the first cycle. Champions are active. The starting point is higher.

The third cycle is where the compounding becomes visible. Organizational capability that took twelve weeks to build in the first cycle takes six in the third.

Patterns that were novel are now familiar. The infrastructure built in earlier cycles supports the work of later ones.

By the fourth cycle, the organization has built more AI capability than most 18-month programs deliver in their entirety. Not because it moved faster. Because it learned faster.

4x By the fourth 90-day cycle, organizations typically achieve four times the capability advancement per cycle compared to the first. Learning compounds. Plans do not.

The 18-month roadmap produces linear progress, at best. It cannot compound because it does not learn. Each phase executes the plan that was written at the beginning, regardless of what was discovered along the way.

The 90-day model produces exponential progress because every cycle informs the next. The plan is rebuilt every quarter based on reality, not forecasts.

Objections

Organizations considering this model raise predictable objections. Each one deserves a direct answer.

“We need a long-term vision.” Yes. A vision is not a roadmap. You need a clear picture of where you are going. You do not need a detailed plan for every step of the journey. The vision persists across cycles. The plan adapts within them.

“Our procurement process requires 18-month contracts.” Structure the contract as a series of 90-day cycles with renewal gates. The procurement framework does not need to change. The engagement structure within it does.

“We cannot show results in 90 days.” If you cannot show results in 90 days, you cannot show results. The 18-month timeline does not solve this problem. It delays the moment when you discover that the approach is not working. Ninety days brings that discovery forward, when it is still cheap to correct.

“This is just Agile.” This is informed by Agile principles. It is not Agile. Agile changed how teams build software. This changes how organizations absorb AI. Agile taught organizations to change process. AI requires them to change cognition and role definition. The 90-day engagement is a vehicle for organizational transformation, not a software development methodology.

Starting

The shift from 18-month roadmaps to 90-day cycles does not require organizational permission to rethink everything. It requires one decision: to start the first cycle.

The first cycle will produce outcomes. It will produce learning. It will produce data. And it will produce the organizational confidence to do it again.

The roadmap can wait. The landscape will not.

Ready to see what 90 days can produce?

30 minutes to talk about whether it fits your organization. No pitch.

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We help large organizations close the intent gap between strategy and execution so that when they accelerate with AI, they accelerate in the right direction.

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