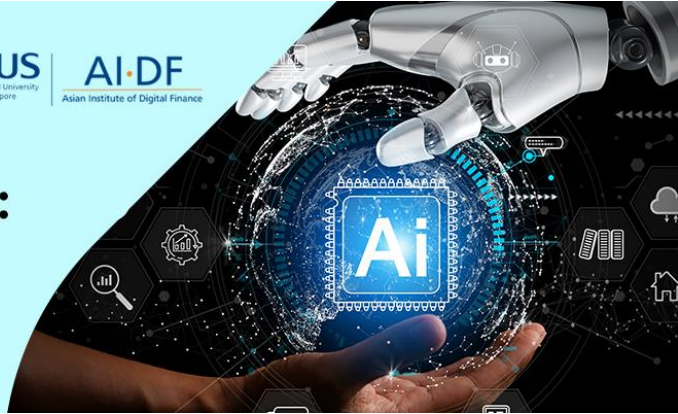# Leading in the AI Era:
Strategies for Innovation, Competition, and Workforce Transformation

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer a futuristic concept—it is actively reshaping industries, redefining business models, and transforming how organizations operate. From automating routine tasks to driving complex decision-making and fostering innovation, AI is revolutionizing the competitive landscape. Companies that successfully integrate AI into their core operations are gaining a significant edge, while those slow to adapt risk being left behind. As AI continues to evolve, leaders must rethink their strategies, ensuring their organizations remain agile, future-ready, and capable of leveraging AI-driven efficiencies. This shift not only impacts business processes but also the workforce, requiring new skills, continuous learning, and a culture of adaptability.

The ADGM Academy Research Centre sat down with Professor Ke-Wei Huang, Executive Director of the Asian Institute of Digital Finance[1] to explore the profound implications of AI on competition, innovation, and leadership. He discusses what differentiates organisations leading in AI adoption from those lagging behind and highlights the critical skills professionals need to thrive in an AI-driven economy. He emphasises how in today's rapidly evolving technology landscape, combining technical expertise with forward-thinking leadership is essential to truly drive innovation. Furthermore, he offers insights into how executive education can bridge leadership gaps, helping organisations cultivate AI-ready talent. With AI becoming a defining force in global business, leaders must embrace change, foster experimentation, and develop forward-looking strategies that align technological advancements with long-term success.

1. How do you see AI reshaping organizations today?

Prof. Huang: AI is transforming how businesses operate by automating routine tasks, enhancing decision-making, and accelerating innovation. We are moving from simple automation to "agentic" workflows capable of managing complex processes rather than isolated tasks. This shift will drive the emergence of new products, services, and roles, especially when AI is integrated with multimedia, analytics, and emerging tech like blockchain or quantum computing. Companies need to realign processes—from back-office operations to R&D and marketing—to tap into AI's efficiencies and remain competitive in a fast-evolving landscape. Concurrently, organizations must address the rising displacement risk for certain white-collar roles. Reevaluating processes is essential to integrate AI-driven improvements and help employees adapt to new responsibilities. Organizations must invest in training to cultivate an AI-ready workforce, ensuring employees can work effectively alongside AI and

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mitigate job displacement concerns. By using AI effectively, companies can boost productivity, enhance decision-making, and secure long-term success in a fast-changing, competitive market.

2. In your view, how does AI influence competition and innovation in today's global marketplace?

Prof. Huang: AI is fundamentally reshaping competition and innovation in today's global marketplace by transforming how businesses operate, deliver value, and differentiate themselves. Its capabilities are influencing competition across industries in unprecedented ways, often leading to unexpected innovations that redefine market dynamics. It pushes companies to constantly innovate, improve products, and offer personalized services. It gives big companies an advantage by providing access to data and powerful technology, making it harder for small companies to compete. However, AI also helps smaller companies by giving them tools to automate tasks and reduce costs. Sector-specific disruptions are also redefining competition as smaller firms can leverage open-source technologies and global markets more effectively. Rapid progress in areas like generative AI speeds up product innovation and development. Regulatory frameworks and ethical considerations introduce both constraints and opportunities, pushing businesses to adopt responsible AI practices. Looking ahead, emerging technologies like quantum computing could increase the gap between companies that have advanced resources and those that do not. This highlights the need for fair access to AI tools. Overall, AI is both an opportunity and a challenge for all businesses.

3. What key factors differentiate organizations leading in AI adoption from those lagging behind?

Prof. Huang: Organizations leading in AI adoption set themselves apart by excelling in key areas that enable them to harness AI's transformative potential. They distinguish themselves by embedding AI into every facet of their operations, rather than viewing it as a mere add-on. Leading organizations move quickly and adapt easily. They understand new technologies and are not afraid to try, fail, and pivot. Strong leadership and a proactive AI strategy set them apart. By contrast, those that lag often remain stuck or see AI as just a tool, rather than a catalyst for real change. Leaders in AI adoption have a clear vision that aligns AI initiatives with strategic goals, ensuring these technologies deliver tangible business value. They prioritize investment in talent and skills, focusing on upskilling and reskilling their workforce while attracting experts in AI, machine learning, and data science. These organizations also maintain robust data governance and demonstrate agility, enabling them to scale AI quickly.

4. How has the rise of AI shifted the expectations and responsibilities of leaders in today's organizations?

Prof. Huang: AI has pushed leaders to rethink how they plan and run their organizations. They must now blend technical knowledge with forward-looking strategies, moving fast to keep pace with changing trends. Leaders are now expected to set a strategic vision for AI while staying nimble enough to respond to rapid technological advances. They must incorporate data-driven decision-making into every level of the organization and create an environment where teams can experiment and innovate. The pace of change has accelerated, leaving little room for a "wait and see" approach. Today's leaders must balance operational excellence with

forward-thinking strategies—essentially serving as translators between emerging AI opportunities and the organization's evolving needs.

5. What qualities or strategies define a successful leader navigating AI-driven digital transformation?

Prof. Huang: Successful leaders in AI-driven digital transformation blend visionary thinking, ethical responsibility, and strong collaboration. They develop a clear plan that ties AI initiatives to core business goals, ensuring each project produces meaningful results. They are continuous learners who stay updated on the latest technological trends and can translate those insights into real business outcomes. They focus on talent development, upskilling employees so they can collaborate effectively with AI tools. Above all, these leaders foster a culture where experimentation is rewarded, and the lessons from failures become lessons for future growth.

6. What strategies should leaders use to upskill and empower their teams to work alongside AI technologies?

Prof. Huang: First, formal training and tailored learning pathways help employees grasp AI fundamentals, including data analytics and relevant software tools. Second, leaders should encourage cross-functional collaboration so domain experts and AI specialists can blend their expertise. This helps teams see how AI complements each role. Third, continuous learning cultures are key. AI-powered platforms that offer personalized feedback and skill tracking can keep employees updated on new developments. Ultimately, strong communication and dedicated resources ensure everyone understands how AI can boost efficiency, spur creativity, and augment decision-making.

7. What are the most critical skills and competencies professionals need to thrive in an AI-driven economy?

Prof. Huang: In an AI-driven economy, professionals must begin by building a solid foundation in AI fundamentals, including data literacy and AI software tools. Equally important is a strong ethical framework to address concerns like fairness, transparency, and privacy. Professionals should also understand how AI automates tasks in their field, so they can identify where it adds value or opens new opportunities. Beyond technical proficiency, creative problem-solving and critical thinking enable professionals to identify innovative use cases for AI and drive meaningful improvements in their fields. Additionally, resilience and adaptability are key to navigating shifting priorities and emerging trends, while basic cybersecurity knowledge helps safeguard against potential threats that arise alongside AI's expansion. Furthermore, professionals should cultivate a lifelong learning mindset, emphasizing domain expertise, entrepreneurial thinking, and data-driven decision-making. These combined skills empower individuals to remain relevant as organizations increasingly integrate AI.

8. How can executive education programs address leadership gaps and prepare leaders for AI-enabled transformations?

Prof. Huang: I believe that the new generation of executive education programs should focus on offering rigorous, hands-on learning, mentorship, and cross-industry collaboration, thus

helping bridge leadership gaps and fostering strategic, ethical, and innovative approaches to AI-driven transformation. From a hands-on learning perspective, they should provide a comprehensive understanding of AI alongside practical applications, ensuring participants develop the skills needed to navigate emerging technologies effectively. Additionally, these programs create valuable mentorship and networking opportunities, enabling professionals to connect with peers, industry experts, and thought leaders. Exposure to global best practices and real-world case studies further enhances participants' ability to drive meaningful change within their organizations and adapt to the rapidly evolving digital landscape.

9. What steps should leaders take to ensure their organizations remain agile and future-ready in a dynamic AI landscape?

Prof. Huang: Leaders need to continuously scout for new AI capabilities that have proven commercial value and align them with strategic use cases. They should invest in upskilling talent—both technical experts who build AI systems and non-technical staff who will use them daily. A culture of experimentation is vital, where cross-functional teams test AI applications and iterate quickly. Regularly revisiting the organization's goals, technical strength, and workforce skills ensures the company can pivot as AI technology rapidly evolves.

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