AI readiness checklist: 18 things to have in place before an AI project

An AI readiness checklist for founders, owners and CEOs: 18 items across strategy, risk, data, tools, people and real use, how to score it, and a PDF.

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In brief

An AI readiness checklist lists what a business should have in place before it funds an AI project. Armstrat's has eighteen items across strategy, risk, data, tools, people and real use. Fifteen or more yes answers means ready for a first project; fewer than nine means not yet, and the area with the most no answers is what to fix first. The full checklist and a worksheet are in a free booklet.

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An AI readiness checklist lists what a business should have in place before it funds an AI project. Ours has eighteen items across six areas: strategy, risk, data, tools, people, and real use and value. Tick what is true today. Fifteen or more yes answers means you are ready for a first project; fewer than nine means not yet, and the area with the most no answers is what to fix first.

The checklist comes from the Armstrat AI Readiness Model, the model behind our AI Readiness Assessment. For a five-minute version, see our ten-question check. The full checklist, a worked example and a worksheet are in the booklet below.

01

Strategy and ambition

1. **One business number AI should move this year, written down.** Cost to serve, cycle time, margin, capacity. Projects that start from a tool rarely survive their first budget review; projects that start from a number have a reason to exist.
2. **One senior person who owns that result, by name.** When a pilot needs data, time or a process change, someone has to make the call.
3. **A budget and a date for judging whether it worked.** Without a date, pilots drift. Without a budget, they borrow attention from everything else.

02

Risk and sign-off

1. **A review step before AI output reaches a customer or a contract.** One check before anything ships prevents most of the incidents that end AI programs early.
2. **A list of the AI tools your team already uses, and the data going into them.** Most businesses already use AI through staff using chat tools on their own. Know what goes in.
3. **Someone who can stop an AI tool the same day if it goes wrong.** For agents that act on their own, our Agent Authority Ladder sets out who decides what.

03

Data foundation

1. **Data for the project that people trust without fixing it by hand.** AI built on data that needs monthly manual fixes will be wrong in the same places, faster.
2. **Access to that data in hours, not weeks.** If getting a data extract needs a ticket and a wait, every iteration of the project will too.
3. **A named person who knows where the data comes from.** Usable data does not need to be perfect. It needs someone who can say where it comes from and vouch for it.

04

Tools and platform

1. **The work runs in software other tools can connect to.** An accounting system, CRM or ticketing tool usually has a way in. Spreadsheets passed by email usually do not.

2. **A way to put a new tool in front of users within weeks.** If every new tool takes a quarter to approve and deploy, a pilot will lose momentum before it reaches users.
3. **Fewer tools doing the same job, not more.** Each overlapping tool splits the data and the habits AI depends on.

05

People and ownership

1. **A named owner for each AI project, from the business side.** Not only a technical lead. The owner answers for the number.
2. **Someone who has put software or automation into daily use before.** Rolling out a tool is a change project. Experience shortens it.
3. **Agreement on who decides when two teams disagree.** Most AI projects cross team lines. Decide in advance who breaks ties.

06

Real use and value

1. **The work you want AI to do, written down step by step.** If the steps live in one person's head, AI cannot learn them and nobody can check it. Our guide to writing down operating knowledge shows how.
2. **A target number agreed before any build starts.** It is the only fair way to decide later whether to keep going.
3. **A habit of stopping pilots that do not move their number.** In our work, the businesses that get value from AI fund one or two projects with an owner and a target, and stop the rest.

07

How to score the checklist

Count your yes answers out of eighteen.

Yes answers	What it means	What to do
15 to 18	Ready for a first project	Pick one piece of work, agree its number and run it for a quarter.
9 to 14	Ready in parts	Choose a first project that avoids your weakest area.
0 to 8	Not yet	Fix the foundations first. Most cost time and a decision, not money.

Then count the no answers by area. The area with the most no answers is the one to fix first, whatever the total. A strong strategy cannot carry data nobody trusts. For a score out of 100 in each area, compared with businesses of your sector and size, take the AI Readiness Assessment.

08

Where we say no

We say no to using this checklist to justify a decision already made. Answer for the business as it is today. If the answers are uncomfortable, they are doing their job.

We say no to treating it as an audit. It records what you know about your business. It does not inspect your data, code or models.

And we say not yet when most answers are no. That is not a failure. It tells you where the next dollar should go before any of it goes into AI. Our article on when AI is not the answer sets out the five signals we look for.

09

Frequently asked questions

What should be on an AI readiness checklist?

A useful checklist covers six areas: a strategy with a target number and an owner, a review step for risk, usable data, tools that can connect to the work, people who own the result, and work that is written down with a target agreed in advance. Armstrat's checklist has eighteen items, three in each area.

Is there an AI readiness checklist PDF?

Yes. The Armstrat AI Readiness Model booklet includes the eighteen-item checklist, the scoring rules, a worked example and a worksheet to fill in with your leadership team. It is a free PDF at armstrat.com/downloads, with no email required.

What questions should an AI readiness assessment ask?

Questions about the business, not the technology: which number AI should move, who owns it, how output is checked before it reaches customers, whether the data is trusted, whether the work runs in connectable software, who has shipped software before and whether the work is written down. Good assessments offer concrete answers rather than agree or disagree.

How many items should pass before starting an AI project?

On the Armstrat checklist, fifteen or more of eighteen means you are ready for a first project. Between nine and fourteen, pick a project that avoids your weakest area. Below nine, fix the foundations first. The area with the most no answers matters more than the total.

What is the difference between an AI readiness checklist and an assessment?

A checklist is a list you tick yourself. An assessment scores your answers, usually against a benchmark, and returns a report. Armstrat's checklist and its AI Readiness Assessment cover the same six areas; the assessment adds a score out of 100 per area, a comparison with similar businesses and a twelve-month plan.

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Abdullah leads delivery at Armstrat. He works inside client teams, owns the build, and stays until what Armstrat shipped runs without it in the room. His work spans the operating systems, decision flows and AI integration that turn a plan into something a team can actually run.

About Armstrat

Armstrat is a Business Transformation Office (BTO™). A partner leads every engagement, and forward-deployed engineers (FDEs) work inside your business across five capabilities: business transformation; operations and supply chain; people and organization; growth, marketing and sales; and AI and intelligent automation.

Engagements are a base fee plus a contingency paid on results, not on documents. We use AI only where it earns its place, and we say not yet when a business is not ready for it.

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Talk to a partner about where your business is stuck.

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Not sure where AI fits yet? The free AI Readiness Assessment takes about ten minutes: armstrat.com/ai-readiness-assessment

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