

• SINCE 1994

# Starting *AI adoption.*

A SEQUENCE FOR MID-MARKET ENGINEERING TEAMS · REX BLACK,  
INC.

# "We need to do AI" is not a *plan*.

The board said it. Engineering owns it. Nobody specified the problem.

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The flail response: **task force, procurement binge, pilot that never leaves the notebook.** None produce production AI.

# The order matters more than the *pieces*.

Every step in this sequence is already in the industry's advice.

What's missing is the **order**, and the *refusal to jump steps*.

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Teams skip from "we need AI" to "let's buy a tool"

## SIX STAGES

# One through six. *No skipping.*

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### STAGES 1-3

#### **1. Sponsor + problem.**

One sentence, with a number.

#### **2. Use-case selection.**

Narrow. Baseline. Willing operator.

#### **3. Instrumentation.**

Today's number, measured.

### STAGES 4-6

#### **4. Prototype + evaluation.**

Release gate, golden set.

#### **5. Productionize + rollout.**

Canary. 1%. 10%. 100%.

#### **6. Operate + extend.**

Regression. Drift. Governance.

# Stage one.

## *Sponsor and problem.*

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"We want to use AI" is not a problem.

"Ticket resolution is 47 hours P50. We want it under 20." is a problem.

If the problem does not fit **one sentence with a number**, the sponsorship is nominal.<sup>5</sup>

*Send the leader back to the business before writing code.*

# Stage two.

## *Narrow the use case.*

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Four properties that make use cases **ship**:

### PROPERTIES

**Bounded.** Scope fits on a sticky note.

**Baselined.** Today's number is known.

### PROPERTIES (CONT.)

**Operable.** A named person will use it.

**Reversible.** Failure is recoverable.

*Impressive comes later. After three boring wins.*

# Stage three.

## *Instrument* before you build.

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The most-skipped stage. The one whose absence most reliably *torpedoes the program*.

### **No pilot without a baseline.**

Two weeks of unglamorous measurement is the cheapest engineering in the whole <sup>7</sup> sequence.

Without it, there is no before-and-after story for the sponsor in month six.

# Stage four.

## *Prototype and evaluate.*

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**Architecture choice** belongs here. Most mid-market features should start as *workflows*.

**Evaluation discipline:** 60-150-example golden set. Five dimensions. Release gate.

Two artifacts leave the laptop:

**the evaluation suite** and **the release-gate thresholds**.

# Stage five.

# *Productionize* and roll out.

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Not different from any other risky feature *except* the gate shape.

**Canary. 1%. 10%. 100%.** Each stage has named exit criteria.

*Model choice becomes hot here.* The flagship-for-everything default is where the cost surprise hides. **Cascade routing** is the answer.

# Stage six.

## *Operate and extend.*

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### REGRESSION

**Weekly run.** Known-good harness,  
production config, scored dashboard.

3-point drop = **incident**, not ticket.

### GOVERNANCE

**Policy as code.** Not a Confluence page.

**Audit by sampling** weekly.

**Named incident response.**

# Four anti-patterns that *predict failure*.

## PATTERNS

**The AI task force.** Committee. No dated production commit. Ships nothing.

**Buy before measure.** Tool bought before the workflow is instrumented.

## PATTERNS (CONT.)

**Model-first, not problem-first.** Problems bent to fit a model.

**Successful pilot, unclear path.** The integration was never scoped.

# The first *ninety days.*

## DAYS 1-45

**1-10.** Sponsor, problem, use case.

**11-25.** Baseline measured. Rubric drafted.

**26-45.** Prototype. Golden set. Architecture doc.

## DAYS 46-90

**46-60.** Gates pass. Integration. Cascade design.

**61-75.** Canary. 1% cohort.

**76-90.** 10% cohort. Drift dashboard. Governance signed.

# This week.

**Force the order.** If you are at stage 4 without stages 2 and 3, pause and go do them.

**Make the problem specific and numerical.** One sentence, one number.

**Instrument before you build.** If the team cannot tell you today's baseline, that is non-negotiable.

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beats speed.

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