

The rise of the chief AI officer, and why “owning” AI is overrated

Tuesday, April 28, 2026

Today's top story, from reporter Aili McConnon:

If you've been scanning corporate org charts lately, you may have spotted a title that barely existed a few years ago and now seems to be everywhere: chief AI officer. Meta has one. HSBC has one. Novo Nordisk has one. And they're in good company.

According to a sneak preview of data that IBM's Institute for Business Value (IBV) will share next week at Think 2026, 76% of companies surveyed now have a chief AI officer—up from just 11% in 2023. And nearly 70% of CEOs believe the role will be in place by 2030.

What's fueling the demand? In short, execution. “Chief AI officers used to be more figureheads—AI evangelists promoting the technology,” said Jacob Dencik, Research Director at IBV. “Now they're driving real transformation, helping organizations move from pilots to production.” Translation: fewer slide decks, more results.

Schneider Electric offers a telling early example. The company created its CAIO role back in 2021—long before generative AI became a boardroom obsession—and focused squarely on operational impact. As Philippe Rambach, the company's Chief AI Officer puts it, AI should “start with a business need, not the technology.” Simple idea. Surprisingly rare in practice.

Still, not every company necessarily needs a standalone CAIO, CIO Strategic Advisor Tim Crawford told IBM Think. He compares this moment to the rise of chief digital officers a decade ago—some wins, plenty of confusion. His point: don't fix AI fragmentation by adding another title. In some organizations, AI leadership can sit with the CIO or even the CEO—so long as accountability and coordination are clear.

That distinction—between coordination and control—is becoming the real story. Many AI leaders don't actually “own” AI at all. They orchestrate it across teams, platforms and processes. At IBM, there's no formal chief AI officer, yet many point to Joanne Wright, SVP of Transformation and Operations, as the functional equivalent. Her remit sits at the intersection of every operational domain at IBM, from procurement to data and analytics to CIO and more. As Wright put it in an interview with IBM Think, “I don't ‘own’ AI. Each leader is accountable for adoption on their own teams, and my role is to accelerate that and remove friction.”

That accountability mindset matters. According to new research, companies that embed continuous visibility and governance into agentic systems from the start—rather than relying on policy documents and crossed fingers—achieve 20% higher ROI, alongside stronger gains in productivity and revenue.

The takeaway? As AI spreads everywhere, AI leadership isn't about grabbing the baton. It's about conducting the orchestra—and making sure everyone stays in tune.