

BRIEFING · 2026 · SECOND EDITION

Forward Deployed Engineers turn AI pilots into working products

What the role is, where it creates value, what
has to change around it, and a pilot to start

October 2026

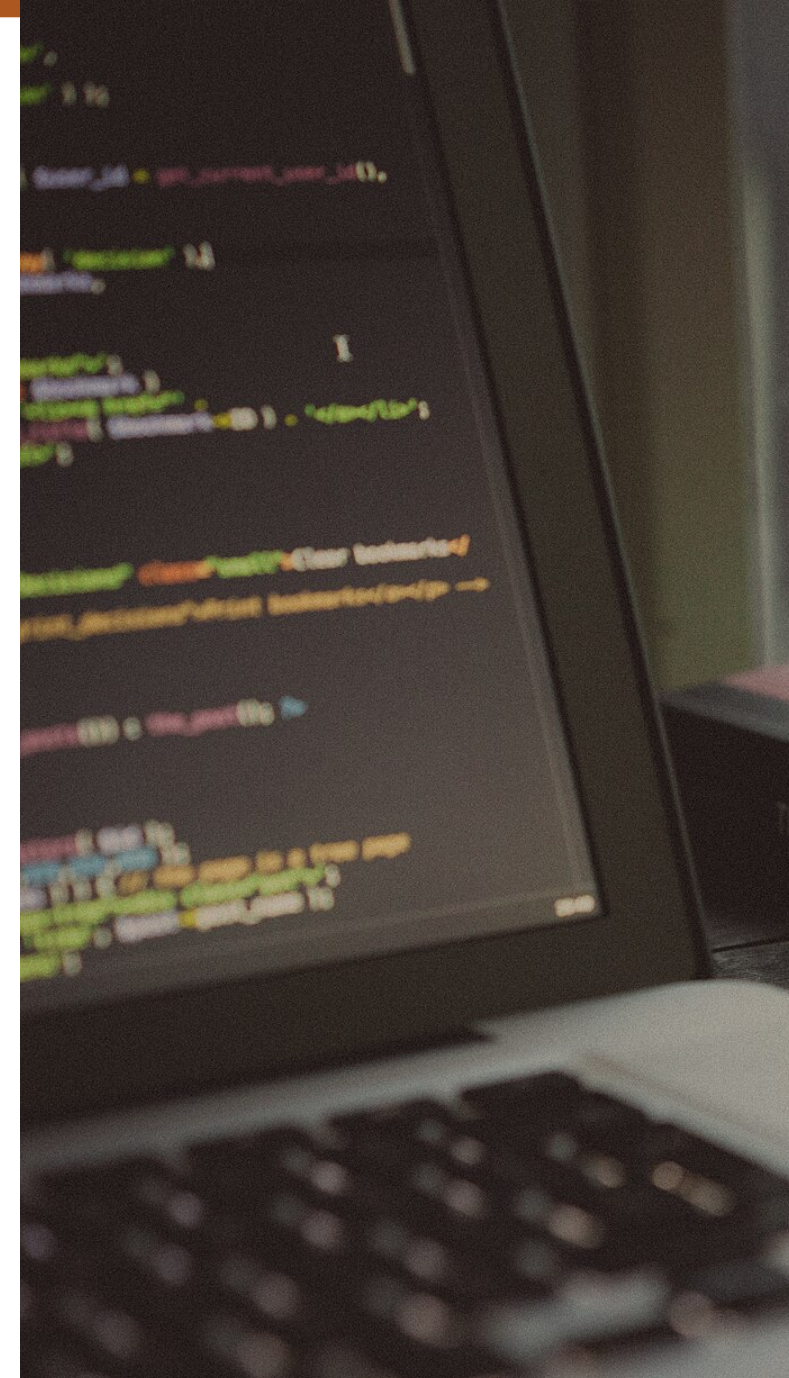


Photo: Ehud Neuhaus paramir / Wikimedia Commons, CC0

AI companies hire FDEs because most AI pilots stall before production

800%+

Growth in FDE job postings

▲ Jan–Sep 2025

Financial Times data reported by Fast Company

~95%

Generative AI pilots with no measurable P&L impact

— 2025 study

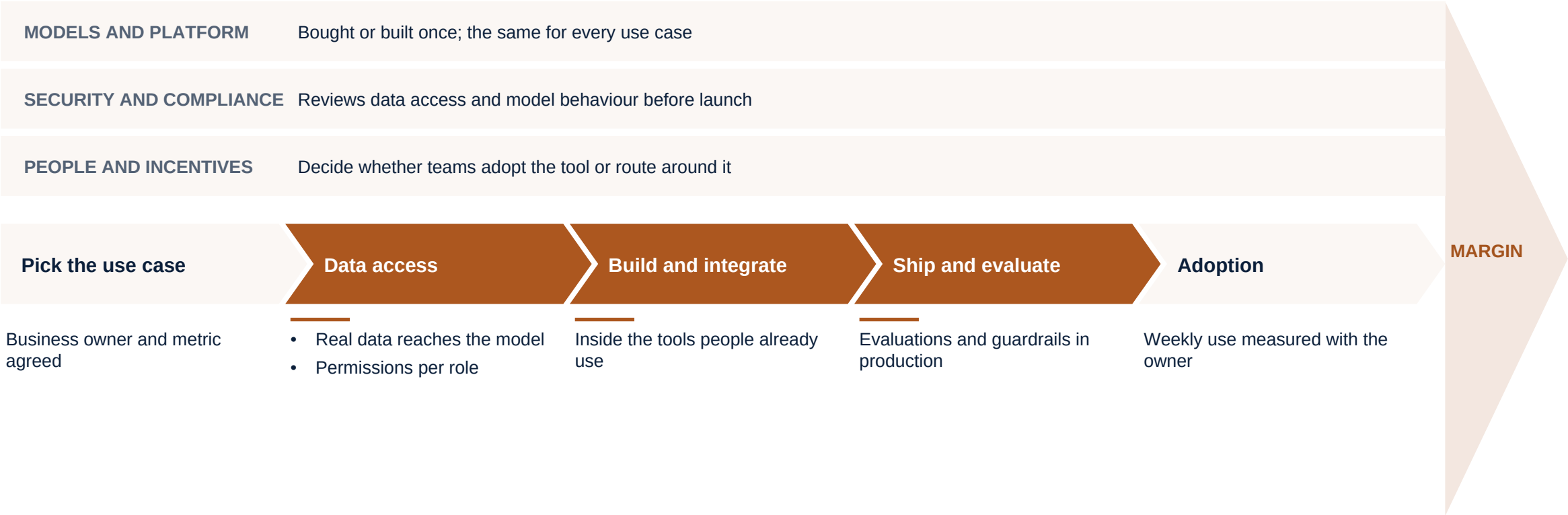
MIT NANDA, The GenAI Divide

2010s

Decade the role was created at Palantir

Engineers placed with government and enterprise customers

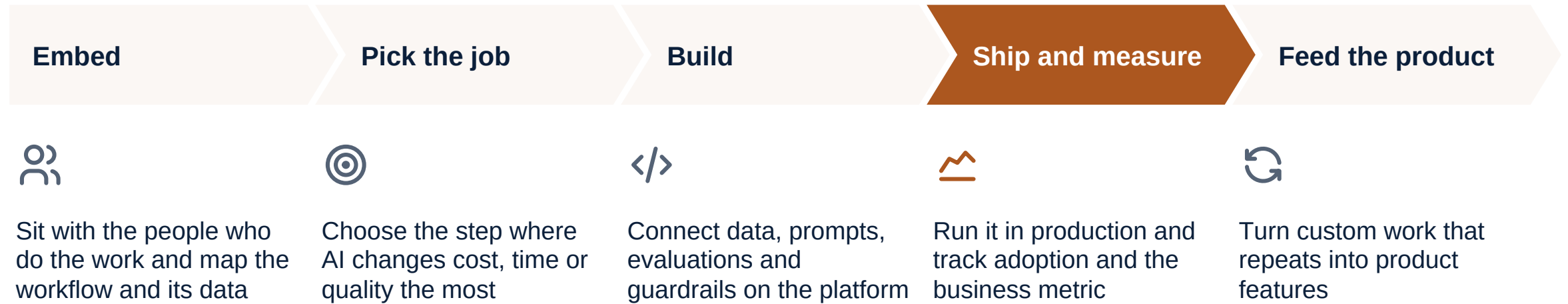
The FDE owns the middle of the AI value chain, where most pilots stall



Pilots stall in data access, integration and evaluation — the FDE's job

Source: What is a Forward Deployed AI Engineer? (2026) ; The GenAI Divide: State of AI in Business 2025 (Aug 2025)

The FDE cycle runs from the user's desk to the core product



The profile combines production engineering, applied AI and customer judgement



Production engineering

Full-stack and data skills; integrates with legacy systems and owns reliability after go-live



Applied AI

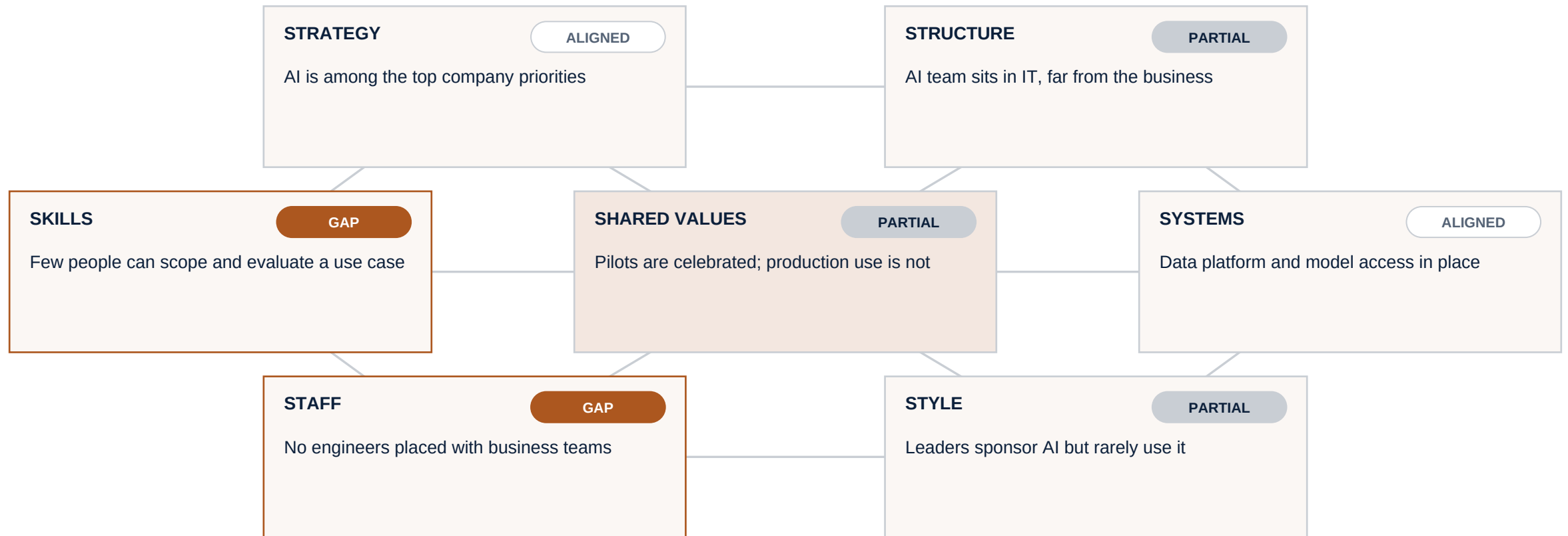
Works with model APIs, retrieval, evaluations and guardrails — and knows when not to use a model



Customer judgement

Scopes problems with domain experts, explains trade-offs and says no to low-value requests

Strategy and platform are usually ready; staff placement and skills are not

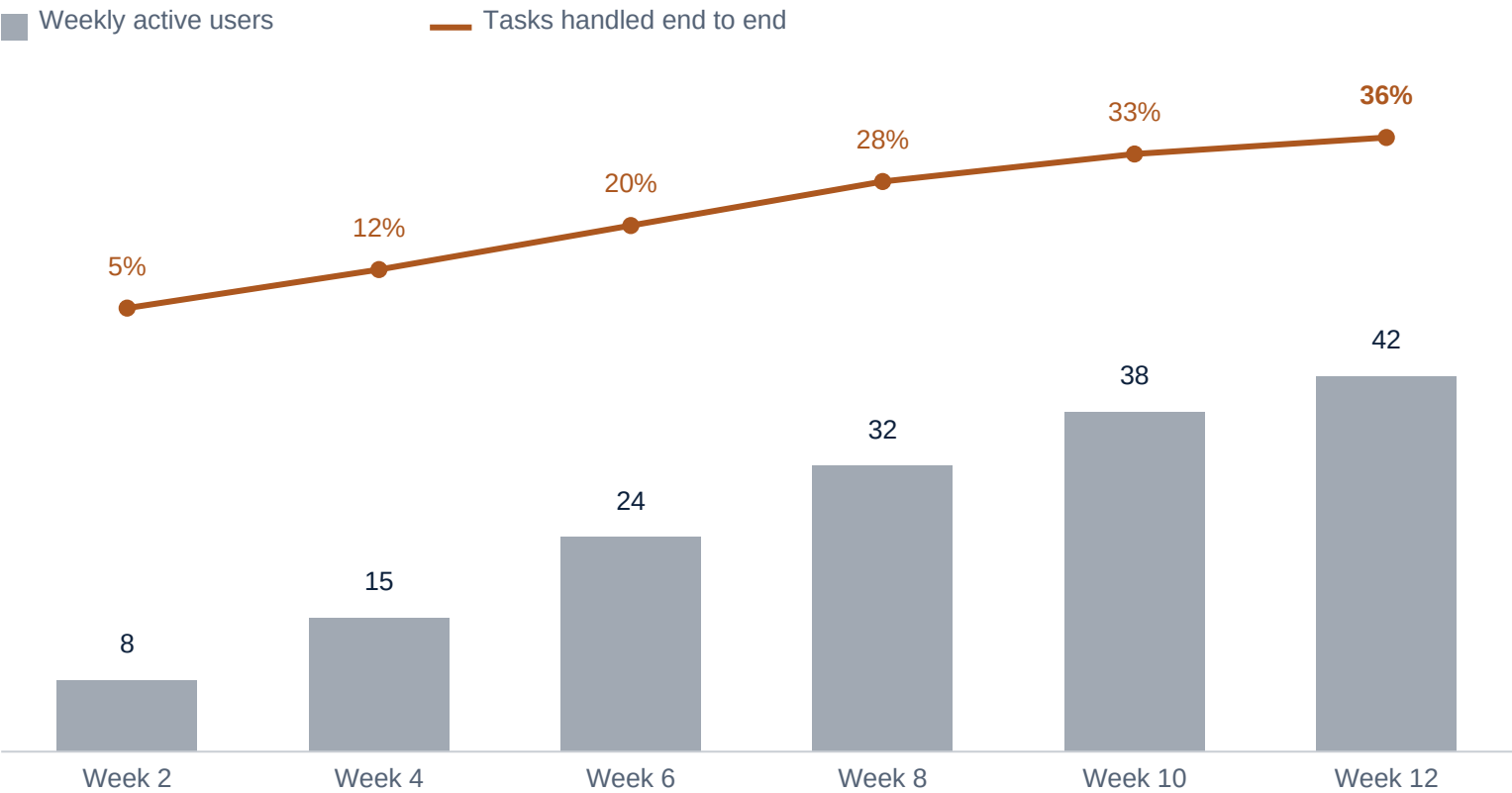


Fix staff and skills first — that is exactly what an FDE pilot tests

Illustrative data. Source: Pilot planning assumptions for a typical enterprise

The pilot targets 40 weekly users and a third of tasks automated by week 12

Weekly active users, and share of tasks handled end to end, %



Illustrative data. Source: Pilot planning assumptions for a typical enterprise

Two numbers decide whether to scale

- Users show adoption; automation shows value
- Review both with the business owner every week

A one-quarter pilot costs about \$206k, two-thirds of it the engineer

Item	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Total
Forward Deployed Engineer	\$45k	\$45k	\$45k	\$135k
Model and platform usage	\$8k	\$12k	\$15k	\$35k
Business owner time	\$6k	\$6k	\$6k	\$18k
Evaluation and security review	\$10k	\$4k	\$4k	\$18k
Total	\$69k	\$67k	\$70k	\$206k

Illustrative data. Source: Pilot planning assumptions for a typical enterprise

Approve one FDE on your highest-value AI workflow for one quarter

DECISION REQUESTED

Approve a one-quarter pilot, about \$206k, with one Forward Deployed Engineer on one production workflow

- 1 Pick one workflow with a measurable business metric**
Head of AI · Month 1
- 2 Assign or hire one engineer with production and AI experience**
CTO · Month 1
- 3 Embed the engineer with the team that owns the workflow**
Business owner · Month 1–2
- 4 Ship to production and review users and automation weekly**
FDE · Month 2–3
- 5 Decide: scale, turn into product, or stop**
Leadership team · End of quarter