Google

The F.O.C.U.S. Playbook



The Unsaid: How mindsets unlock AI transformation for marketing teams

Introduction

The Shift to Value

In recent years, the AI conversation has shifted radically. In 2024, we experienced the "Wow" phase, captivated by the sheer novelty of what generative AI could do. By 2025, during the "How" phase, organisations rushed to adopt new tools and draft usage policies. Coming into 2027, the "Now" phase, businesses are focused on driving tangible value with AI.

For marketing professionals, the central question is no longer whether to adopt AI, but how to integrate it effectively: **How do we drive actual business value while elevating our creative craft, and what is the evolving value of our individual roles in the age of AI?**

The business case is clear: companies in the leading stage of AI transformation report 60% higher revenue growth. Yet, only 1 in 3 professionals feel prepared to leverage it. This gap reveals a critical truth that goes far beyond technology. We are not just navigating software adoption; we are navigating a profound evolution in how we work.

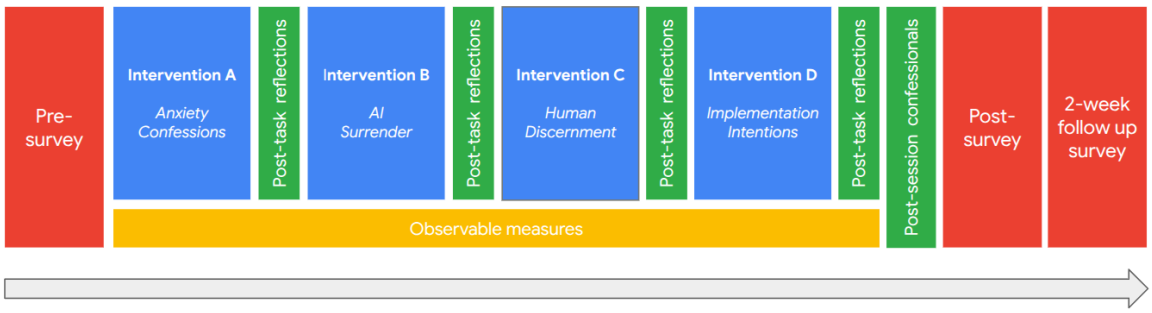
For professionals whose identities and pride are built on creativity, strategy, and human discernment, integrating generative AI represents a significant shift. High-level corporate mandates requiring teams to become "AI-first" can often feel detached from the reality of the marketing floor.

Toolsets, skillsets, and mindsets

To understand how to genuinely support teams through this shift, Google and The Cocktail, part of WPP Enterprise Solutions, looked beneath the surface to study "The Unsaid". These are the hidden human mindsets, beliefs, and assumptions that drive successful AI integration, enabling teams to reimagine the whole marketing process thanks to AI.

AI toolsets and skillsets often receive the majority of attention in AI transformation efforts within businesses today. Those areas are generally more tangible and have clearer owners within traditional organisations, such as Technology or Learning and Development teams. Mindsets have received significantly less attention, and have less clear functional ownership within most businesses, but are equally critical. Our research examines the central role that mindsets play in driving sustained AI adoption and uncovers what works in practice.

In partnership with Ogilvy Consulting's Behavioural Science Capability, we placed marketing professionals and MBA students into a pioneering Behavioural Lab, conducting live 4-hour experiments. We gave participants real-world creative briefs and observed them under shifting experimental conditions to measure exactly how they collaborate with AI in real-time.



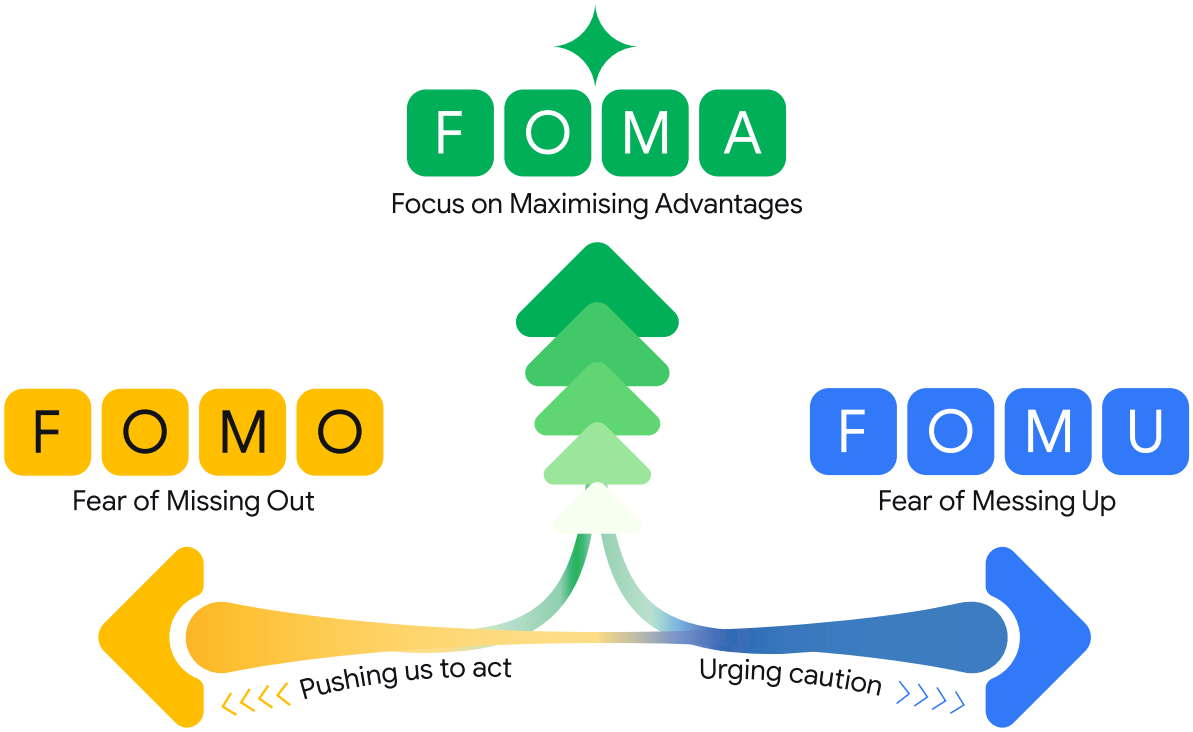
Behavioural experiment design

We discovered that while having the right tech stack is necessary, it is not sufficient for value-driving AI deployment within businesses. It ultimately also requires building new, psychologically supportive habits. The adoption of any new habit begins in our minds.

The Mindset Tug-of-War

Our discourse analysis revealed that many marketing organisations are experiencing a profound sense of "vertigo" — caught in a psychological tug-of-war between two perspectives:

- **FOMO (Fear of Missing Out):** A sense of obligation and duty. Driven by competitive urgency, it pushes teams to act quickly. However, it often leads to tactical replication and running projects without a clear strategy.
- **FOMU (Fear of Messing Up):** A sense of deep uncertainty. Driven by a desire to avoid unintended consequences and minimise risks, it urges caution. Taken to the extreme, it stalls progress, keeping organisations in endless "pilot mode".



When FOMO and FOMU clash, energy disperses. The most effective path forward is a particular kind of focus, represented in a third mindset: **FOMA (Focus on Maximising Advantages).**

F O M O

Fear of Missing Out
Driven by urgency, it pushes teams to act quickly. However, it often leads to tactical replication and running projects without a clear strategy.

F O M U

Fear of Messing Up
Driven by risk, it urges caution. Taken to the extreme, it paralyses organisations, trapping them in endless "pilot mode".

F O M A

Focus on Maximising Advantages
Is a more positive perspective that prioritises the potential gains from AI, and sees AI as an opportunity to get ahead of the competition and create value in innovative ways.

FOMA replaces hesitation with focus. It is a positive, realistic perspective that prioritises the potential gains from AI while honouring the professional journey and addressing the potential risks. **FOMA** shifts the internal vocabulary of a workforce toward empowerment, collaboration, and partnership with AI.

Leading organisations do one thing better than everyone else to cultivate FOMA: they F.O.C.U.S. We have distilled our lab findings and behavioural science insights into five practical interventions to help you support your marketing teams from "Wow" to driving value "Now".

F. Frame the Why

O. Own the Loop

C. Cultivate Capability

U. Uncover the Unsaid

S. Stoke the System

Assessment

Before diving into the interventions, this self-reflection framework can serve as your strategic baseline. It is designed to uncover the "Unsaid" and bring your team's current operational reality into sharp, objective focus. We encourage leaders to take this honestly, and ideally use it as an open, constructive conversation starter with their teams.

Evaluate your team's behaviours and your own leadership approach over the past quarter. Rate each on a scale of 1 to 5 **(1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree):**

F. – Frame the Why

I have personally translated our organisation's AI ambition into what it means for each person on my team — connecting it to their role, their growth, and their evolving professional value. (___)

Every member of my team can articulate not just why our organisation is using AI, but what it means specifically for their own work and career trajectory. (___)

The dominant feeling on my team about AI is one of personal opportunity and agency, rather than a pressure to comply with an external mandate. (___)

Score for F: ___ / 15

O. – Own the Loop

Our workflows are intentionally designed so that human judgement genuinely shapes the final output — people improve, direct, and transform AI-generated work rather than simply reviewing or approving it. (___)

My team members exhibit genuine pride and ownership in their AI-assisted work, treating the final output as a product of their own intellect, direction, and craft. (___)

There is a clear culture on my team where AI is treated as an instrument in service of human thinking. (___)

Score for O: ___ / 15

C. – Cultivate Capability

We build AI capability through real work, not theory. Our people develop skills by tackling actual tasks and challenges, embedded in their day-to-day responsibilities. (___)

I have observed a clear, measurable increase in my team's practical skill and confidence in using AI, including in complex, high-stakes work over the last quarter. (___)

Members of my team regularly produce outcomes that would not have been possible without AI. They are not just using AI more, they are doing fundamentally new things with it. (___)

Score for C: ___ / 15

U. – Uncover the Unsaid

For meaningful decisions, our AI tools are transparent enough that my team can trace, question, and audit the reasoning behind their outputs and not just accept them at face value. (___)

My team openly shares how they use AI in their work. There is no stigma or secrecy attached to discussing AI-assisted processes with peers or leadership. (___)

The trust my team places in AI outputs is earned through understanding. They know how to interrogate a result, identify its limitations, and confidently override it when their judgement demands it. (___)

Score for U: ___ / 15

S. – Stoke the System

We have deliberately redesigned our structures, rituals, and incentives so that the AI-integrated way of working is the default. It requires less effort than reverting to old habits. (___)

Our formal systems — career progression, performance recognition, and team rituals — actively reward and reinforce AI-integrated behaviours, not merely tolerate them. (___)

Our approach to AI is managed as a continuous, evolving organisational system with dedicated roles, budgets, and leadership accountability — not as a series of disconnected, short-term projects. (___)

Score for S: ___ / 15

Scoring and Interpretation

Calculate your total score for each letter.

- **12–15 | Systemic Strength.**
  Your focus here is clear and effective.
- **8–11 | Systemic Blur.**
  This area lacks focus and is a source of inconsistency. It requires strategic attention.
- **3–7 | Systemic Blind Spot.**
  This is a key opportunity for growth. Start your supportive interventions here, leading with focus.

Chapter 01

Frame the Why

Connecting the organisation's 'why' to the individual's 'why'.

F. Frame the Why

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT

Introducing new technologies naturally prompts questions about long-term career evolution. This can trigger loss aversion, leading marketers to instinctively protect familiar workflows to maintain their sense of expertise. High-level corporate mandates are not enough; leaders are most successful when they personally explain how AI enhances rather than replaces individual roles, framing adoption as an empowering opportunity for creative growth and career future-proofing.

The Behavioural Science behind it:

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE | PURPOSE AT ALTITUDE

A vague goal ("let's use AI") is a weak motivator. When the purpose is stated in broad terms and arrives top-down, it is more likely to be interpreted as a potential risk by individuals.

THE ANTIDOTE

Fostering Psychological Ownership (making the AI strategy feel like "theirs").

LOSS AVERSION | THE IDENTITY THREAT

When people can't clearly see what the change means for them, they default to protecting what they already have. The perceived threat to professional identity — who I am, what I'm good at, what makes me valuable — will consistently outweigh the abstract promise of new skills and capabilities.

THE ANTIDOTE

Building Self-Efficacy (the belief in one's ability to succeed with AI).

Insights from the Lab:

In our ethnographic research and strategic interviews, we saw a profound shift when leaders ran "Purpose Audits". When marketers mapped their own workflows and identified specific moments they felt constrained, they found a personal "why". AI became a tool to reclaim time for craft and strategy. True behaviour change occurs when employees are supported in proactively reframing their professional identity around the unique value they bring.

After the Behavioural Lab where we tested these recommendations, participants said they now see AI as a sparring partner for their thinking. Many described it as a sounding board for brainstorming,

helping them to generate ideas, explore different perspectives, and test their strategies. They talked about having a back-and-forth conversation with it rather than just giving it instructions. They also said they value it as much for sparking creativity and curiosity as for saving time.

Quotes from research participants:

> "When working on AI with a team, you need to be clear on what you want to achieve. It's not 'let's use AI' with no idea of why — that's not going to be successful."

> "People need to find their own AI why — their own way of integrating AI into their workflow that makes sense for them. Being able to do that with my boss meant that it all connected for me."

Observed success factors among AI leaders:

ESTABLISHING THE "AI WHY":

Making time for "AI Why Finding" to clearly articulate and formalise why each individual and team is applying AI, working backwards from business outcomes to specific AI use cases. In one-on-ones, exploring individual pain points and aspirations, while connecting AI use cases to what each person already wants to improve about their work.

BETTER, NOT JUST CHEAPER AND FASTER:

At the organisational level, establishing a clear framing for AI: that AI's value is enhancement rather than just efficiency. Backing this with structural commitment, reducing operational drag so marketers can refocus on high-value work; for example, proactively reinvesting saved time and costs into strategic bets and growth areas.

CONNECTING VISION TO REALITY:

Running purpose audits to directly link every AI initiative to the company's mission and the team's priorities. Mapping global AI objectives clearly to team expectations to make the overall vision actionable.

Chapter 02

Own the Loop

Making human judgement visible and more valuable by owning the loop, not just being in it.

Own the Loop

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT

We only value and feel accountable ownership for work into which we actively invest effort. When AI workflows relegate marketers to passive "yes/no" validators, engagement wanes, output quality degrades, and the work loses its distinct human point of view. Establishing active human authorship in AI-enabled workflows is a critical performance requirement.

The Behavioural Science behind it:

THE IKEA EFFECT | EFFORT AS THE SOURCE OF OWNERSHIP:

We disproportionately value things more when we put more effort into them. When we merely approve an output generated by a machine, we value it less. The depth of human involvement therefore determines whether people feel genuinely accountable for outcomes.

AUTOMATION BIAS | OVER-RELIANCE ON TECH BY DEFAULT:

People have a tendency to over-rely on automated systems and stop thinking critically, trusting machine suggestions over their own judgement. Without active effort to overcome this, performance and quality can taper off because complacency sets in. This shows that human authorship is key to high performance.

Insights from the Lab:

During our behavioural labs, we tested this dynamic by dividing participants into two cohorts, differentiated by the mindset in which they completed tasks using AI tools.

"Surrender" task

1. Let the AI lead the thinking. Lean on the **AI's expertise** for final decisions.
2. **Avoid deliberating** over your prompts. Keep them short and simple.
3. Think of the product as an **"output".**

"Discernment" task

1. Think intentionally about when and where your **human judgement** will be crucial, and where AI should lead.
2. Remember to **use your personal expertise and judgement** when in doubt.
3. Think of the product as an **"outcome".**

Instructions given to the experiment participants

First, in the “Surrender” cohort, participants designed a brand campaign. They were instructed to let the AI lead the thinking, keep instructions simple, and accept the AI’s first output. The result was faster task completion, but low psychological attachment and ownership of the outputs. Though more efficient, participants felt disconnected from their work, disengaged with the process, and acted as mere “rubber stamps”.

Conversely, in the “Discernment” cohort, where participants were instructed to actively interrogate the AI and apply their expertise, the results were markedly different. We observed possessive language (“my model”, “our strategy”) and participants actively requested more time to use the AI tools to refine their work. This demonstrated the IKEA Effect, which states that individuals value outputs significantly more when they invest their own effort and craft, to establish a sense of ownership of the process. Maintaining the healthy friction of applying our own discernment and taste drives intrinsic motivation.

“Surrender” task	“Discernment” task
1. Faster, more efficient results.	1. Spontaneously sharing ideas with one another, increased competition.
2. Twiddling thumbs; “when is the coffee break?”	2. Requests for “More time”.
3. Lack of ownership, disinterest, lower quality outputs.	3. “My output”, “my idea”, “my thinking”.

Reactions to the different experimental conditions

Quotes from research participants:

“From” - Surrender task

> “I do not feel attached to the work emotionally as if I had put it through my personal criteria for successful campaigns.”

> “I don’t feel like I did this work. It’s just an output, there is no value in the process.”

“To” - Discernment task

> “Much more satisfied. Worked hard. Got the joy from it. Feels reassuring to get my human view into it.”

> “I feel much more comfortable, because I am in control ... and I am using my brain.”

Observed success factors among AI leaders:

ESTABLISHING OWNERSHIP FROM THE START:

Establishing the principle that ownership begins before AI generates anything. Encouraging leads to tie AI-driven projects directly to tangible business KPIs to drive measurable outcomes, rather than volume of outputs.

PRESERVING MEANINGFUL FRICTION:

Championing the intrinsic value of human judgement to ensure input and output quality when collaborating with AI. Shifting the focus of value from simply “hours saved” to measuring objective asset quality and strategic outcomes.

CO-CREATION BY DEFAULT:

Building co-creation and feedback routines as part of AI design and rollouts; making it clear that marketers genuinely shape decisions and outcomes.

Chapter 03

Cultivate Capability

Building real competence and confidence through safe, practical application.

C. Cultivate Capability

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT

Teams build capability with AI through safe experimentation, progressive challenges, and hands-on experience. By designing small, successful “ah-ha” moments where marketers solve real-world problems, organisations build self-efficacy with AI tools and kickstart a self-sustaining cycle of continuous learning.

The Behavioural Science behind it:



SELF-EFFICACY |
COMPETENCE THROUGH DOING:

Research shows that capability is built most quickly and effectively through doing, through watching peers succeed, and through safe experimentation. The concept of “situated learning” adds that this happens fastest when embedded in real professional and social contexts, rather than abstract training. People build self-belief in their AI abilities by applying AI to solve real problems and succeeding.



HABIT FORMATION |
THE SELF-SUSTAINING FEEDBACK LOOP:

Competence is built through self-contained, successful, and rewarding loops. By engineering immediate “ah-ha” moments where individuals feel themselves becoming more capable, you create a positive feedback cycle that can drive voluntary, self-sustaining skill acquisition. The goal is not to train people once; it is to create the conditions under which they train themselves continuously.

Insights from the Lab:

Our research identified that top-down, theoretical training rarely shifts mindsets. Capability is built when professionals experience those personal “ah-ha” moments, across seniority levels. To bridge the intention-action gap, we concluded our lab sessions with an “Implementation Intentions” exercise where participants wrote specific “if-then” heuristics to apply to their daily bottlenecks, linking a situational cue to a specific AI goal.

Some examples of “if-then” statements from the lab participants:

“If I am in the middle of writing a prompt ... break it down into smaller steps.”

“If I open AI, I will think independently for 5 mins.”

“If I use AI, I will ask it to check its work.”

“If I’ve just written a prompt ... attach files, links, and references.”

Observed success factors among AI leaders:

STAYING HANDS-ON AT EVERY LEVEL:

Always-on, hands-on experimentation at all levels, embodying that no one is too senior to be in the tools, no one is too junior to teach. Examples include running monthly “solve-it” sessions at the leadership level, solving real workflows and bottlenecks together in real time.

REAL PROJECTS OVER THEORY:

Workshopping real campaign briefs with AI product experts. Sharpening foundational skills: problem formulation, goal setting, strategic decomposition. Maintaining curated prompt and skills libraries, workflow templates, and custom agents tailored to team needs helps enable this stage.

STARTING WITH SMALL “AH-HA” MOMENTS:

Investing in usability, not just capability, when starting out. Choosing tools that are easy to use, apply to basic processes, and deliver quick applications to build self-efficacy through “ah-ha” moments early.

Then identifying and showcasing small AI wins — both professional and personal — which drive confidence in individual capability, laddering into more sophisticated tools that enable more ambitious applications.

Chapter 04

Uncover the Unsaid

Making space to say the quiet parts of AI out loud - both technical and cultural.

U. Uncover the Unsaid

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT

Successful AI adoption can be hindered by technical opacity (mistrusting how AI works) and cultural hesitation (the worry that admitting to using AI implies a lack of original thinking). To dismantle this, organisations must foster safety by making AI usage visible, normal, and celebrated, transforming private experimentation into shared, high-status craft.

The Behavioural Science behind it:



AMBIGUITY AVERSION |
THE TECHNICAL BLACK BOX:

When people don't understand how a tool arrived at its output, they either over-trust it blindly or reject it entirely. Neither response leads to genuine, intelligent collaboration.



PLURALISTIC IGNORANCE |
THE CULTURAL BLACK BOX:

What if everyone is thinking "Am I the only one struggling?" but no one speaks up. This can result in a culture of silent uncertainty, or pluralistic ignorance, where everyone is navigating the same questions, but no one knows that everyone else is too. Perceived social pressures like these can lead people to hide both their challenges and successes with AI.

THE ANTIDOTE

Social Proof. Pluralistic Ignorance creates a culture of silence. Social Proof, delivered through vulnerable leadership and peer sharing, shatters it. When leaders and peers share openly, they break the spiral of silence by showing what the real group norm is.

Insights from the Lab:

Through discourse analysis, we found marketers often mask their deep uncertainty. To counter this in our labs, we ran "Anxiety Confessions", allowing participants to anonymously share their challenges. Seeing shared struggles populate on screen normalised the messiness of the learning curve. Naming these challenges out loud broke the spiral of silence, establishing an environment where people felt comfortable enough to be honest and collaborative.

The word cloud that we collected from participants' discussions in the behavioural lab showed a mix of emotions, in line with our observations of the individual deep interviews where we explored the FOMO, FOMU, and FOMA mindsets.



Participants expressed their relief when the conversation felt safe and the unsaid was discussed:

> "I definitely feel the need to hide it. But as the company pushes for it, it makes it much easier to use it and alleviates some of that anxiety and I feel more confident using it."

> "From exchanging with people at my table, I've learned how to use AI in a more effective way and it's given me more confidence in how I show up in my work."

Observed success factors among AI leaders:

MAKING SPACE TO UNCOVER THE UNSAID:

Surfacing the hidden reality of AI usage in your business by encouraging peer-to-peer sharing that reveals the real AI norm, including informal AI coffee chats and formalised AI sharing time built into standing team meetings.

LEADERS LEARNING OUT LOUD:

Senior leaders showcasing their own "AI fails", successes, learning journey, and tips gained along the way. Leaders build psychological safety across their organisations not by approving AI use from a distance, but by staying hands-on, visibly and imperfectly.

CREATING PERMISSION TO FAIL BEFORE YOU SCALE:

Framing AI initiatives as MVPs and experiments from the start. Creating explicitly safe spaces for learning. This can be supported by deliberately highlighting unglamorous yet efficient everyday solutions, rather than solely focusing on complex or large-scale initiatives.

Chapter 05

Stoke the System

Making the new way of working permanent by redesigning the organisation's defaults.

S. Stoke the System

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT

Individual behaviour change is rarely sustainable when the surrounding environment continues to reward existing habits. People will eventually revert to the level of their surrounding systems. To sustain AI momentum, organisations need to formally hardwire new AI-integrated behaviours into their structural defaults, career pathways, rituals, and incentives.

The Behavioural Science behind it:

CHOICE ARCHITECTURE | ENGINEERING THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE:

People's choices are shaped by how the environment presents those choices. Small changes have outsized effects on what people actually do, including what is visible, what is easy, and what the default option is. The most powerful lever for sustained behaviour change is designing the environment so that the desired behaviour becomes the default or easiest option, and the old behaviour becomes the exception.

SOCIAL NORMS | CREATING A SELF-REINFORCING CULTURE:

Two types of social norms ensure the new behaviours become a self-reinforcing culture. Descriptive Norms: Making the new desired behaviour highly visible ("everyone is doing it"). Injunctive Norms: Publicly rewarding and recognising the new desired behaviour ("this is what we value here").

Insights from the Lab:

Our qualitative interviews and ethnographic deep-dives revealed that inspiration fades if the surrounding systems don't adapt. The organisations that successfully cultivated a FOMA mindset applied systems thinking, understanding that motivation and trust must be structurally enabled. They design environments that structurally support and reward continuous adoption.

Quotes from research participants:

"[We have incorporated] the AI perspective and [made] it part of the yearly goal setting and then we have the personal development plans for each employee."

"We gamified it ... in our town halls we had an AI star of the month."

"I didn't want marketers to have all of these applications that they had to go off and use. I wanted it all to be wrapped up into a marketing hub, which just so happens to be the thing that they always use."

Observed success factors among AI leaders:

FOSTERING 50X THINKING:

Push beyond efficiency into strategic reimagination. Apply the 5x50 framework to surface exactly where AI offers outsized impact, by asking: "What would you do differently if you had to repeat this task five times, or lead a team of fifty?"

REDESIGNING TEAM RITUALS AND STRUCTURES:

Collapsing silos by creating "agile pods", multidisciplinary and cross-functional teams with end-to-end ownership of projects or business outcomes, empowered by AI tools. Embedding AI into team rituals, building social norms by making AI usage the default in recurring processes, and normalising talking about how work gets done through regular process-sharing.

BUILDING STRETCH INTO EACH ROLE:

Designing hybrid roles so people develop AI skills alongside their core job functions. Hardwiring this by formally allocating capacity for experimentation as real work, while anchoring these stretch expectations directly to performance reviews.

CHAMPIONING AI LEADERS:

Institutionalising AI champion roles with dedicated time, clear mandates and deliverables, and public showcasing of their work to build social proof for AI adoption. Building peer sharing and learning from advanced team members into regular working rhythms through structured weekly shares, shadowing programmes, and informal problem-solving.

EMPHASISING "M-SHAPED" SKILLSETS:

"M-shaped" individuals are multidisciplinary thinkers with multiple spikes of deep domain expertise, often across functions. Their ability to link processes and spot patterns across domains and functions makes them effective at orchestrating AI workflows and breaking down silos.

Conclusion

The Human at the Heart of the Marketing Machine

The transition into the AI era is a profound cultural, operational, and psychological shift. Through our semiotic analysis, immersive deep-dives, and behavioural science experiments with marketing professionals across Europe, one finding has emerged above all others: **AI integration is most successful when it deeply considers the human being sitting on the other side of the screen.**

Ultimately, toolsets and skillsets are only the starting point for successful AI transformation. It is mindsets which determine whether those investments take hold. When we pair the right technology and training with the right mindset and structured systemic support, we foster environments where people feel engaged, valued, and ready to innovate.

This F.O.C.U.S. Playbook is designed to help you guide your teams toward FOMA (Focus on Maximising Advantages). By **F**raming the Why around their creative growth, allowing them to genuinely **O**wn the Loop, **C**ultivating Capability through experiential learning, **U**ncovering the Unsaid, and **S**toking a supportive System, organisations can achieve much more than efficiency gains.

They build resilient, future-ready marketing teams which demonstrate that human discernment, collaboration, creative craft, and innovative mindsets are not just relevant in the age of AI, they are the true drivers of exceptional work.

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