



Joe Atkinson (left), Global Chief AI Officer for PwC, and Sundara Raj, Chief Digital Officer for PwC Malaysia and Vietnam

# AI Leadership Conference

Navigating complexity and building trust in an AI-driven world



## Charting a path for leaders in the age of artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) has profoundly reconfigured industries in recent years. Its capacity to optimise workflows and empower businesses has had an unmatched impact, from customer interaction and content creation to supply chain innovation.

Yet, despite AI's broad spectrum of applications, the responsibility for its successful integration has largely been placed on IT departments. This has to change, with business leaders charting a pathway, providing direction and being accountable for using new technologies in an organisation, said Sundara Raj, Chief Digital Officer for PwC Malaysia and Vietnam.

"Despite the clear excitement surrounding AI, many Malaysian companies remain cautious when it comes to adoption. This paradox is reflected in various studies, including PwC Malaysia's Corporate Directors Survey, which highlights a significant confidence gap — while 75% of board members express enthusiasm about AI's potential, only 4% feel confident in their ability to govern and manage it effectively," said Raj.

This raises a critical question, given today's technological advances and the potential value proposition of AI; Shouldn't business leaders be at the forefront of AI integration?

Raj emphasised that PwC's aspiration to support leaders in their change journey and create a platform for collective dialogue on AI spurred the firm to launch its inaugural AI Leadership Conference.

The firm believes that leadership must evolve at the same pace as AI and that building AI confidence is not about having all the answers, but about nurturing a mindset that's ready to ask the right questions.

Through its partnership with TED, PwC is highlighting forward-

thinking and stimulating conversations, aiming to assist business leaders in understanding both the potential and the responsibilities that come with this groundbreaking technology.

"The strong participation and energy we saw at the conference gave us confidence that Malaysian boards of directors are ready to lead — not just follow — in the age of AI," said Raj.

The PwC AI Leadership Conference took place on May 13 at The Majestic Hotel Kuala Lumpur, bringing together distinguished groups of senior leaders from the public and private sectors to explore innovative perspectives on leadership in the AI era. Minister of Digital Malaysia Yang Berhormat Tuan Gobind Singh Deo presented the opening remarks at the conference.

A milestone initiative for PwC, the conference is the first flagship event featuring the firm's new brand positioning. It reflects the firm's commitment to empowering

businesses to ignite, accelerate and sustain meaningful change, mobilising experience and technology to meet the varied needs of clients in this fast-evolving landscape.

### Building the foundations for AI leadership

A strong starting point in elevating leadership readiness in AI is to adopt a structured approach to assessing leadership maturity in AI. PwC's AI Leadership Maturity Assessment is one such tool that supports leaders in understanding where they are today and where they need to go. It evaluates leadership readiness across five core pillars (refer to visual).

Effective leadership in the age of AI means understanding and integrating AI into the core strategic planning and decision-making processes of the organisation.

"Boards play a pivotal role in setting direction, establishing ethical boundaries and ensuring that AI

amplifies the wisest voices, not just the loudest algorithms," said Raj, who echoed a similar sentiment during his welcome address at the PwC AI Leadership Conference.

He emphasised that a clear and bold AI vision is essential to guide board-level decision-making, particularly when it comes to reinventing business models and prioritising initiatives with long-term impact.

"To support this change journey, companies should establish cross-functional AI teams or working groups comprising board representatives, business leaders, GenAI experts, cybersecurity leads and change specialists. These groups create safe spaces for open dialogue on risks, ideas and scale strategies, as well as foster a shared responsibility for moving forward."

### Empowering the workforce

AI is no longer a futuristic concept, it is fast becoming a business necessity. Joe Atkinson, Global Chief AI Officer for PwC, highlighted that integrating AI into the workforce goes beyond hiring tech talent. It is about building an adaptive, empowered workforce that is ready to work with AI, not compete against it.

"AI is freeing up employees from repetitive, manual tasks and opening doors to more meaningful, strategic, high-value work. But this shift won't happen automatically. People need to trust and understand the tools at their fingertips, and be equipped to use them effectively," he added.

This includes fostering a baseline of AI fluency across the organisation, where employees not only know what AI can do, but how to think critically and responsibly about its applications, limitations and ethical implications.

Atkinson noted that the ability to imagine innovative AI use cases, assess risks and implement solutions that serve real business goals is becoming a core leadership skill.

Effective AI integration hinges on balancing technical proficiency with uniquely human capabilities like systems thinking, collaboration, storytelling and empathy, which AI cannot replicate.

"At PwC, we have invested in this mindset shift through our new global intelligent learning platform. It delivers personalised, AI-powered learning journeys that align with both individual goals and organisational needs. These interventions are designed to not only teach new skills, but also to rewire how people learn, adapt and lead in a world increasingly shaped by AI," he said.

### Leading with accountability

Beyond this, a crucial element in implementing AI is ensuring that it is ethically developed and deployed.

Ethical AI cultivates a positive workplace culture, enhances the organisation's reputation and promotes responsible, sustainable innovation by considering the long-term human impact and avoiding unintended negative consequences.

"Earning and building trust in AI is key. This requires a focus on innovation, growth and empowerment of your people as much as a focus on the

technology roadmap. It means leading with empathy and equipping your people with the skills they need to change how they work to allow AI to amplify their talents, not replace them," said Atkinson.

Raj emphasised that responsibility cannot be an afterthought — a central theme shared at the AI Leadership Conference.

"Balancing the urgency of AI adoption with ethical responsibility is one of the most pressing leadership challenges of our time. The promise of GenAI lies in its speed and versatility — it can write code, address complex business problems and generate insights across multiple functions using a single pattern of deployment," he said.

The rise of agentic AI brings with it a new phase of intelligent operations for PwC, elevating its capacity for value creation, said Atkinson. The firm recently launched agent OS, which was showcased at the AI Leadership Conference — a new enterprise AI orchestration platform and an innovative reflection of PwC's refreshed global brand.

Designed to orchestrate and scale AI across complex environments, agent OS offers a consistent, secure and adaptable framework that allows organisations to integrate and operate multiple AI agents — regardless of platform, tool or cloud provider. This transforms fragmented AI deployments into unified workflows and cohesive, high-performing ecosystems — unlocking the scale that creates true, sustainable enterprise value.

As AI capabilities grow, the stakes for business leaders grow with them. When people trust the technology, they're more willing to adopt, adapt and lead with it.

"The most progressive organisations are those that bake responsible AI practices into the very design of their solutions, not just as a compliance step before go-live, but as a foundational pillar of AI development and deployment," said Raj.

PwC's 2024 US Responsible AI Survey reinforces this urgency, revealing that nearly half (46%) of executives rank differentiating their organisation and offerings through Responsible AI as a top-three objective. AI that undermines trust — through bias, hallucinations or lack of transparency — can ultimately stall transformation efforts, delay adoption and damage brand equity.

Raj suggested that to get ahead, organisations must embrace an incremental, learn-as-you-scale approach to AI governance.

"This means starting with manageable pilot projects while simultaneously developing ethical guidelines that evolve alongside experience. As highlighted at the conference, this journey is not about having perfect governance from day one, it's about committing to progress with integrity."

### PwC's AI Leadership Maturity Assessment: Demonstrating capabilities across 5 key areas



Scan QR to gauge your AI readiness with PwC's AI Leadership Maturity Assessment.