

Brainwave September 2026

The Pilot Trap:

When AI Exploration Gets in the Way of Adoption

By [Brandi Pack](#), Director of Innovation, [UpLevel Ops](#)

The first year of generative AI was, for lack of a better description, a geek-fest.

When ChatGPT arrived, people quickly realized this was something very different, and the technologists inside organizations went to work. They experimented with prompts, APIs, custom GPTs, bots, agents, and workflows. Every week brought another idea for something to build. For those of us who love technology, it was hard not to get caught up.

There was good reason for the excitement: Generative AI made things possible that only months earlier would have required significant development resources. Experimentation was exactly what organizations needed, and nobody knew what the technology would become. We learned by building.

But somewhere along the way, we confused experimentation with strategy.

The question was often, *“What can we build with AI?”* when perhaps the better question should have been, *“What do our people actually need AI to do?”*

That distinction mattered particularly in legal. Many of the earliest experiments came from technologists, innovation teams, consultants, and vendors. The lawyers and legal professionals expected to use those tools were often further downstream. By the time broader groups of legal users began seriously engaging with generative AI, some organizations had already invested considerable time and money in sophisticated solutions.

Then came an uncomfortable discovery: Some of those very cool AI tools solved problems nobody particularly wanted solved. Others were difficult for nontechnical legal professionals to use, required access to data organizations were reluctant to provide, or struggled to clear IT, InfoSec, procurement, and governance reviews.

Technical success did not necessarily translate into adoption.

The early experimentation was not a mistake. We needed it to understand what generative AI could do. But we are no longer in that period. The first era of enterprise AI rewarded experimentation. The next one will reward restraint, judgment, and infrastructure.

The Technology Caught Up Faster Than We Did

A few years ago, building a sophisticated AI agent required real technical expertise. Today, many of those same capabilities are available through increasingly simple tools built directly into the major AI platforms. What once required a development team, significant investment, and months of work can sometimes be replicated by a reasonably capable user in an afternoon.

That creates an unusual problem for organizations that spent the past several years focused on building.

I recently spoke with an extremely talented legal technology professional who had developed genuinely impressive AI agents. These were not demos pretending to be useful. They could do meaningful work that reflected considerable thought and technical skill.

But building them was only part of the challenge. Getting people to use them was much harder.

Considerable mistrust still surrounds AI solutions that sit outside established enterprise environments. Legal teams are cautious about what information they provide to an AI agent. IT and InfoSec teams need to understand how data is handled. New solutions may have to pass security reviews, governance committees, procurement, and other internal approvals before they ever reach those they were designed to help.

Meanwhile, the underlying technology is not waiting.

Major AI platforms continue to add agent capabilities, integrations, memory, document handling, research tools, and simpler ways for ordinary users to build their own solutions. The gap between specialized development and do-it-yourself capability keeps narrowing.

That changes the economics of AI innovation. If a capability that once required significant time and money can soon be reproduced inside a trusted enterprise platform with a few instructions, the technology itself becomes a difficult place to build a lasting advantage.

AI capability is becoming abundant. Organizational readiness is not.

Stop Shopping and Start Building

Many organizations are still approaching AI the same way they did two or three years ago. They schedule vendor demos, launch pilots, compare features, test another tool, and then start over when something newer appears.

There is always another tool to evaluate. That is precisely the problem.

Early on, extensive exploration made sense. Organizations needed to understand the market and what these tools could actually do. But perpetual exploration can become its own form of paralysis.

If your organization is on its tenth AI pilot but still cannot answer basic questions about what data employees can provide to an AI system, which platforms are approved, how an agent gets through security review, or who can approve a new use case, the problem probably is not that you have not found the right tool yet.

You have not built the foundation.

That foundation is less exciting than another agent demo. It means establishing practical governance, defining security and data standards with IT and InfoSec, deciding what information AI systems can access, and creating a clear path from experimentation to production.

It also means accepting that no single AI tool or level of autonomy will suit everyone. Some employees will want advanced agents. Others will benefit more from simple assistance inside the applications they already use. Some will need more training, clearer guardrails, or more time.

The goal is not to push everyone to the same point on the adoption curve. It is to create enough flexibility for people to move forward safely and usefully from wherever they are.

The specific tools will change. Some vendors will disappear. Capabilities that justify buying a separate product today may become standard features of the major AI platforms tomorrow.

A good AI foundation should survive all of that.

The goal is no longer to find the perfect AI tool. It is to build an organization capable of using whatever comes next.

From Exploration to Strategy

Exploration still matters. There will always be new models, tools, and capabilities worth testing. But exploration should happen within a strategy, not in place of one.

The organizations that succeed with AI will not necessarily be the ones that ran the most pilots or built the most sophisticated agents. They will be the ones that created an environment where useful AI can actually get through the door and into people's work.

That is where the investment needs to shift: governance, data access, IT and InfoSec alignment, training, and a flexible foundation that can absorb new capabilities as they arrive.

The geek-fest era served its purpose. We learned by building, experimenting, and occasionally getting it wrong.

Now we have to grow up a little.

Brandi Pack is the Director of Innovation at [UpLevel Ops](#), where bold ideas become practical tools that transform legal departments. She leads the firm's [AI Strategy & Enablement](#) programs, delivering AI-powered solutions that are accessible, secure, and built for teams ready to work smarter, not harder. With a background spanning Legal Ops, tech, and project management, Brandi is passionate about turning what's next into what's Next Level. She is also a frequent advisor and speaker on AI adoption in legal, known for translating emerging tech into practical wins for in-house teams.

Did someone forward this **Brainwave** feature article to you? [Subscribe here](#) and receive the monthly **Brainwave by UpLevel Ops** newsletter directly to your inbox, along with industry insights and news your legal team can use to make practical, strategic decisions about the future of your business.

Ready to learn more? [Talk to UpLevel Ops today!](#)