AI-ENABLED OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Resourcing AI in Hotels

A practical guide to leadership, structure and capability

Global luxury and upper-upscale focus. Applicable to hotel groups, multi-property operators and individual hotels.

CLIENT DISCUSSION DRAFT

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Executive View

AI use is spreading faster than most organisations are building the leadership, operating model and workforce capability needed to use it well.

In McKinsey's 2025 global survey, 88% of respondents said their organisation used AI in at least one function. Only around one-third had started to scale it and 39% reported any enterprise-level EBIT impact. Hotel research shows a similar gap. h2c found 78% of surveyed hotel chains using AI, but only around 7–8% had a company-wide strategy led by senior leadership. Skills gaps, unclear strategy and integration were the leading barriers. Forty-two per cent did not track ROI at all. [McKinsey, 2025] [h2c, 2025]

The issue is no longer access to AI. It is the organisation around it.

The strongest evidence does not support one universal job title or a large standalone AI department. It supports a clear accountability system:

- visible sponsorship from the CEO, COO or General Manager;
- one named person responsible for coordinating the work day to day;
- business and property leaders accountable for the workflows, decisions and outcomes within their areas;
- a small central capability that provides common standards, learning, governance and portfolio discipline;
- technology, data, finance, HR and risk involved from the outset; and
- employees given the time, training and confidence to redesign work safely.

For most individual hotels and smaller groups, the first answer is not a Chief AI Officer. It is more likely to be an **AI & Business Improvement Lead** or an existing operational excellence leader with an explicit AI mandate and enough capacity to act.

For regional and global groups, a federated hub becomes more appropriate. A C-level AI role is justified only when the scale, investment, risk and complexity require enterprise-wide authority.

What Is Working

Organisations reporting stronger results are not simply providing more tools. They are changing how work is owned, reviewed and improved.

Practice	What it means in a hotel organisation
Visible executive ownership	The CEO, COO or GM sets the ambition, risk appetite and value expectations. AI is treated as a business priority, not delegated to IT alone.
One accountable lead	A named leader coordinates the portfolio, connects functions and properties, resolves barriers and brings decisions to the executive team.

Practice	What it means in a hotel organisation
Federated capability	Policy, approved access, common learning, data standards and risk are coordinated centrally. Workflow redesign, adoption and service quality remain owned by the relevant functions and properties.
Redesign around the work	Teams examine decisions, hand-offs, controls and service standards rather than adding AI to an unchanged process.
Role-based learning	Employees learn against the work they actually do. Managers receive deeper coaching so they can guide use, quality and escalation.
Early risk partnership	Privacy, security, legal and operational risk are involved early enough to enable safe progress, not only asked to approve a completed solution.
Portfolio discipline	Each initiative has an owner, baseline, value case, risk tier and clear stop, improve or scale decision.
Human quality ownership	A person remains accountable for consequential guest, employee, commercial and regulatory decisions.

McKinsey found that organisations achieving the highest value from AI were nearly three times more likely to redesign workflows and three times more likely to report strong senior-leader ownership. Its research also suggests that risk and data governance work best with greater central control, while talent, adoption and change are more often organised through a hybrid model. [McKinsey, 2025] McKinsey, March 2025

What Is Not Working

Pattern	Why it fails
IT-only ownership	Technology teams can enable access and integration, but they do not own hotel workflows, employee adoption or service outcomes.
A lone AI hero	One enthusiastic person becomes a bottleneck. Knowledge remains personal and the organisation does not build repeatable capability.
Pilot sprawl	Experiments continue without agreed thresholds, baselines or an owner able to stop them. Activity is mistaken for progress.
Tool access without enablement	Employees receive access but little guidance on appropriate use, data boundaries, quality or how their work should change.
Generic AI literacy	Broad awareness creates interest but rarely changes a specific role, process or decision.
Volunteer champions	The network loses momentum when participation is additional unpaid work with no protected time, coaching or recognition.
A detached centre of excellence	The central team becomes an approval layer or an internal consultancy with too little operational ownership.

Pattern	Why it fails
Vendor dependency	Priorities, knowledge and quality control sit outside the organisation. Switching becomes costly and internal learning remains weak.
Headcount-first messaging	If AI is introduced primarily as a cost-reduction exercise, employees are less likely to share ideas, surface problems or participate honestly.

How the Hotel Market Is Organising

Public evidence on hotel AI team size remains limited, but several global groups have made their leadership intent clear.

Organisation	Public structure or signal	What it suggests
Accor	Chief Data & AI Officer, SVP Data Science & AI and an AI Excellence Hub	A global group may combine executive data and AI leadership with a central coordination capability. [Accor, 2026]
IHG	SVP of AI & Architecture reporting within product and technology leadership	AI leadership may be combined with architecture where enterprise platforms, data and technical foundations are a major part of the mandate. [IHG, 2026]
Marriott	AI readiness linked publicly to the multi-year transformation of core property, reservation and loyalty systems	Technology and data foundations need to be sequenced with the AI ambition. [Marriott, 2025 Annual Report]
Hilton	AI framed by the CHRO as a change-leadership challenge requiring proficiency, shared learning and recognised experimentation	People leadership and manager confidence are part of the operating model, not a separate training activity. [Hilton, 2026]

These structures are useful signals, not proof that every hotel company needs the same roles. Public appointments show intent and mandate. They rarely disclose headcount, cost or independently verified results.

Hotels also have structural complexity that many cross-sector models overlook. A brand, owner, management company, regional office and property team may each control different parts of the data, systems, budget, operating standards and training. The operating model must make those control rights explicit.

Four Resourcing Options

The following options are proposed starting points. They are derived from the evidence and the practical requirements of hotel operations. They are not published hotel-sector headcount benchmarks.

Model	Best fit	Leadership and reporting	Illustrative launch capacity	Main risk
1. Property-led coordinator	Individual hotel or very small operator at an early stage	GM-sponsored. An existing ExCom member acts as AI & Operational Improvement Coordinator.	Around 0.2–0.5 FTE central coordination, supported by 4–8 function champions at around 5% of their time. Brand, group or external technical and risk support is shared as needed.	Role overload, informal governance and insufficient technical support.
2. Dedicated AI & Business Improvement Lead	Small or growing multi-property group with a recurring portfolio	CEO or COO-sponsored. Full-time lead with a clear process improvement, adoption and governance mandate.	1–3 core FTE covering leadership, process or product ownership and change support. Data, technology, risk and finance may remain shared functions.	The lead becomes a bottleneck if process owners and executive support are not clear.
3. Federated hub-and-spoke	Regional group, multi-brand operator or management platform across several functions and jurisdictions	COO or Chief Transformation Officer-sponsored, with a formal partnership with the CIO or data leader.	4–8 central enabling FTE across portfolio, process or product, change and learning, data or platform and governance or evaluation. Domain and property leads contribute around 20–50% of their time.	Matrix ambiguity, duplicated work or a central hub that becomes too approval-heavy.
4. Enterprise AI office	Global group with material investment, proprietary capability and higher data or regulatory complexity	CEO, COO or Chief Product & Technology Officer-sponsored. Led by a Chief Data & AI Officer, CAIO or SVP AI & Architecture.	8–20+ central enabling FTE, with delivery teams in functions or business units outside the core.	Title inflation, excessive centralisation or a detached staff function with limited operational ownership.

Recommended Default

The default for most hotel organisations is a **small central enabling spine with distributed business ownership**.

This means centralising what benefits from consistency:

- policy and approved access;
- risk tiers and escalation;
- common data and technology standards;

- organisation-wide learning resources;
- portfolio reporting and evaluation methods; and
- shared contracts and specialist support.

It also means keeping operational ownership where the work happens:

- workflow and decision redesign;
- local employee adoption;
- guest and employee quality;
- benefit realisation;
- workforce implications; and
- ongoing improvement.

When a Chief AI Officer Is Justified

A C-level role becomes proportionate when several of the following conditions apply:

- AI is expected to contribute materially to enterprise transformation and value creation;
- the portfolio spans multiple brands, regions or employer entities;
- investment is significant and requires enterprise prioritisation;
- the organisation is building proprietary systems, data products or evaluation capability;
- risk extends across several jurisdictions and consequential guest, employee or commercial decisions;
- existing executives do not have enough capacity or authority to coordinate the work; or
- operating-model and workforce changes require sustained executive attention.

Without these conditions, a C-level appointment can create title inflation without solving the underlying need for process ownership, change capacity and measurement.

Mandate for the Lead Role or Hub

The role should be accountable for turning AI from scattered experimentation into a governed portfolio of redesigned work that improves guest and employee outcomes, creates measurable value and builds the organisation's ability to keep adapting.

Its mandate should include:

1. **Strategy and portfolio**
   Translate enterprise priorities into a small number of value-backed opportunities. Maintain sequencing, dependencies, owners and stop or scale decisions.

2. **Operating model and workflow redesign**
   Define decision rights and help functions and properties redesign processes, hand-offs, controls and quality checks.

3. **Responsible AI and risk**
   Maintain approved use boundaries, risk tiers, review routes, human oversight and an issue register with legal, privacy, security and operational risk owners.

4. **Adoption and learning**
   Provide role-based learning, manager coaching, champion support and clear communications. Build confidence while remaining honest about uncertainty.

5. **Value and measurement**
   Require baselines, full costs, quality measures and benefit owners. Track service, employee, commercial and risk outcomes, not only time saved.

6. **Data, technology and partners**
   Coordinate architecture, integration, access, data readiness, vendor choices and knowledge transfer with the relevant technical teams.

7. **Market sensing**
   Track material changes in capability, economics and regulation without allowing the organisation to chase every new tool.

The lead needs more than technical enthusiasm. The strongest profile combines hotel operations, process redesign, AI and data literacy, responsible AI, change leadership, portfolio discipline and the ability to translate clearly for executives and frontline teams.

Building Culture, Learning and Confidence

Culture is not a communications campaign added after the technology decision. It determines whether employees experiment safely, surface errors, share useful practices and continue to apply judgement.

A practical approach for hotels should include:

- a clear hospitality-specific reason for using AI, linked to better work, better service and stronger decisions;
- leaders using the approved tools themselves and being open about what they are still learning;
- clear boundaries on guest, employee and commercially sensitive data;
- short, role-based learning supported by live practice and manager coaching;
- at least five hours of coached learning for managers and process owners as a starting point, followed by practice in real workflows;

- champions with paid time, recognition and a clear route to escalate questions;
- employee involvement in redesigning the work that affects them;
- transparent communication on likely role changes, reskilling and how released time is expected to be used; and
- shared evidence on what improved, what failed and what the organisation learned.

BCG found that regular use rose sharply where employees received at least five hours of training together with in-person coaching. It also found a substantial gap between leaders and frontline employees, reinforcing the need for manager support and role-specific learning. [BCG AI at Work, 2025]

This matters particularly in hotels. Many employees work rotating shifts, use shared devices, speak different first languages and make immediate decisions under guest pressure. A corporate webinar and a generic e-learning module will not be enough.

Principal Risks and Controls

Risk	Organisational cause	Minimum control
Guest data, privacy or cybersecurity	Unapproved tools, unclear data boundaries and informal access	Approved environment, clear policy, data rules, vendor due diligence and role-based security.
Loss of human touch	Efficiency targets replace judgement, empathy or service recovery	Define where human accountability is mandatory. Measure guest and employee quality alongside efficiency.
Fragmented strategy and duplicated cost	Functions or properties buy tools independently	Named portfolio owner, approved access and common stop or scale decisions.
Legacy integration and poor data quality	Workflows depend on fragmented systems and manual workarounds	Assess data, process and integration readiness before scaling. Redesign the workflow, not only the interface.
Workforce distrust and capability gaps	Training begins late or messaging focuses on headcount	Involve employees early, communicate honestly, protect learning time and provide coaching.
Vendor dependency	Internal ownership and knowledge are outsourced	Retain ownership of priorities, data, quality and value. Contract for documentation, access, exit rights and knowledge transfer.
False ROI	Hours saved are treated as cash without a decision on how capacity will be used	Name a benefit owner. Track full cost, service, quality, adoption and whether released capacity was actually reinvested or removed.
Governance that slows progress	Controls are detached from the work or introduced too late	Use proportionate risk tiers. Involve risk partners early and define a faster route for low-risk activity.

AI literacy is also becoming a formal responsibility. Article 4 of the EU AI Act requires providers and deployers to take measures to ensure sufficient AI literacy based on employees' knowledge, experience and the context in which systems are used. The guidance does not prescribe one organisational structure, but it reinforces the need for intentional, role-appropriate learning. European Commission, current guidance

Investment: What Can and Cannot Be Said

There is no credible public basis for a universal hotel AI budget or a standard AI team size by number of properties, rooms or revenue.

Available figures provide context only:

- BCG reports that surveyed organisations planned to increase AI investment from around 0.8% of revenue in 2025 to 1.7% in 2026. This is cross-industry planned spend, not a hotel benchmark. [BCG AI Radar, 2026]
- PwC's Middle East tourism and hospitality study found 71% allocating less than 3% of annual budget to AI. Sixty per cent assigned 10–25% of their AI budget to upskilling. The study is regional and covers a broader tourism and hospitality population. [PwC Middle East, 2025]
- McKinsey found that more than one-third of its highest-performing organisations allocated over 20% of their digital budgets to AI. This describes a selected group of cross-industry high performers, not a recommended spend level. [McKinsey, 2025]

A more reliable planning approach is to build the cost around six explicit areas:

1. central leadership and portfolio capability;
2. time contributed by function leaders, property champions and subject-matter experts;
3. technology, data, integration and security;
4. external specialist support and knowledge transfer;
5. paid learning time, coaching and communications; and
6. evaluation, remediation, failed initiatives and exit costs.

A Practical First 12 Months

Timing	Objective	Critical actions
0–30 days	Make current use visible and safe	Name the accountable executive and operational lead. Publish interim rules and approved access. Inventory current tools, vendors, data exposure and employee needs. Agree the hospitality-specific narrative.
30–90 days	Build the operating system	Select 3–4 priority value areas. Assign process, benefit, data and risk owners. Define portfolio gates, baselines, reporting and role-based learning. Establish the champion network with protected time.

Timing	Objective	Critical actions
3–6 months	Prove changed work	Redesign a small number of workflows with employees. Measure quality, adoption, full cost and guest or employee outcomes. Hold monthly stop or scale reviews. Document reusable practices.
6–12 months	Scale what has earned it	Extend proven patterns across properties or functions. Update roles, learning and standards. Address data and integration constraints. Review whether the lead, hub or reporting line needs to expand.
12 months onward	Institutionalise adaptation	Move routine ownership into functions. Retain central governance and advanced expertise. Refresh the portfolio and workforce plan and review the operating model at least annually.

Decisions for the Leadership Team

The appropriate model depends less on property count alone than on ambition, control rights, risk and existing capability. The leadership team should be able to answer:

1. What business outcomes should AI support over the next 12–24 months?
2. Which executive has the authority to coordinate operations, technology, people, finance and risk?
3. Who owns the workflows and decisions expected to change?
4. Which systems, data, standards and budgets are controlled by the brand, owner, management company, regional office or property?
5. Does the organisation mainly intend to buy capability or build proprietary systems and data products?
6. What guest, employee, commercial or regulatory decisions could be consequential?
7. How much paid capacity can be released for leadership, learning, champions and redesign?
8. What evidence would justify moving from part-time ownership to a dedicated lead, a hub or a C-level role?

The strongest starting point is usually the smallest structure that creates clear accountability, protects the organisation and gives employees enough support to change how work is done. It should become more formal as the value, risk and complexity become real.

Selected Evidence Base

- McKinsey & Company, *The State of AI in 2025*
- h2c, *AI & Automation in Hospitality*, 2025
- McKinsey & Company, *How Organizations Are Rewiring to Capture Value*, 2025
- Accor, *Reinventing Hospitality: How Accor Is Leading in the Age of AI*, 2026
- IHG, appointment of SVP AI & Architecture, 2026

- Marriott International, 2025 Annual Report
- Hilton, *The Hospitality Mindset*, 2026
- BCG, *AI at Work 2025*
- European Commission, AI literacy guidance
- BCG, *As AI Investments Surge, CEOs Take the Lead*, 2026
- PwC Middle East, *AI at the Heart of Tourism and Hospitality*, 2025
- Deloitte, *The State of AI in the Enterprise*, 2026
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