British businesses are buying AI licences and calling it strategy, warns new consultancy

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Boxtree Consulting launches with a warning that firms mistaking AI subscriptions for transformation are leaving six-figure savings unclaimed

A new consultancy launches today with a blunt message for British business: buying AI licences is not an AI strategy, and firms that stop there are leaving savings worth hundreds of thousands of pounds a year unclaimed, it argues.

Boxtree Consulting, founded by operational transformation specialist Max Pardo-Roques, applies Lean, the improvement methodology derived from Toyota's production system, to find the manual business processes AI can now automate, from invoice checking and data entry to scheduling and compliance. The firm guarantees that every engagement is cost-neutral within its first year and targets a five-to-one return on investment.

"Chief executives, finance directors and operations directors all tell me they're implementing AI," said Pardo-Roques, Boxtree's founder and chief executive. "Look closer and they've bought ten or fifteen Copilot licences, a few people are writing better emails and the marketing copy has sharpened up. That's individual productivity, not transformation. Nobody has touched the processes where the money actually sits: the manual invoicing, data entry and repetitive checking. In a typical mid-sized business those processes absorb hundreds of thousands of pounds of staff time a year, and much of that work can now be done by AI agents in the systems the business already runs."

The warning comes amid mounting evidence of a two-speed AI economy. Fewer than three in ten UK businesses with under 50 staff were using AI in 2025, against 44 per cent of firms employing more than 250, according to ONS data analysed by the Bennett School of Public Policy. A June report by the government's AI Champion for Advanced Manufacturing found the same pattern in industry, warning that too many firms are caught in a "pilot trap" of AI experiments that never reach production. And writing in The Sunday Times last month, former prime minister Rishi Sunak cautioned that slower adoption could put smaller firms at a "compounding disadvantage", arguing that AI "can't just be treated as if it is an IT issue".

Boxtree's model is deliberately unglamorous. A Lean diagnostic maps a client's processes and puts a pound value on the waste within them; a business case is then built for each opportunity, with projects proceeding only where first-year returns provably exceed the cost of the work; finally, AI solutions are built and embedded inside the systems the business already uses, rather than bolted on through a new ERP or finance platform.

"Most of the industry has this backwards. It starts with the technology and goes hunting for a use case," Pardo-Roques said. "We start with the process and the value attached to it, and we only automate where the numbers stack up. That's why we can guarantee cost-neutrality in year one: if a project won't pay for itself, we won't recommend it."

Pardo-Roques, previously Commercial Director at the specialist Lean consultancy Develop Consulting, sees a direct parallel with the last great wave of operational change: "Twenty-five years ago, businesses responded to Lean by sending junior staff on training courses, and little changed until specialist implementation firms got involved. AI is at exactly that point. The licences are the training course. Implementation is where the value is."

Boxtree works with organisations across manufacturing, logistics, professional services and other operations-heavy sectors from its base in Birmingham.

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