



Using AI for Change Management

WHITEPAPER



Reframing Artificial Intelligence: Language Matters

If we're going to talk about artificial intelligence, it's worth considering what that phrase really means, and whether the word artificial is helpful. After all, the word artificial is something we associate with fake, something that is not real or credible. Other terms might represent the opportunities and threats posed by AI more accurately. For example, there are a couple of terms worth considering:

Knowledge Engineering - AI at the moment is largely repurposing human knowledge, re-engineering it for its own purposes.

Synthesised Intelligence - AI is synthesising that total level of knowledge that we have. The large language models upon which a lot of generative AI is based are synthesizing, reconfiguring, and making links between intelligence that already exists.

At a recent webinar, one of the participants contributed the phrase "assistive" learning, which I really like, because something that assists us is helpful, creating a positive view of AI.

It's important to consider how you describe and explain AI to yourself and to others, because in that explanation you're already putting your own assumptions and your own boundaries in place. Be thoughtful about what you're describing.

Using neuroscience to appreciate the impact of words

Recent neuroscientific research reveals why our choice of words matters so profoundly. Studies have shown that neurotransmitters in the human brain are released during the processing of the emotional content of language, with words that we feel are positive, negative, or neutral. This association with the word releases neurotransmitters (brain chemicals) in distinct patterns tied to emotional tone and specific brain regions.

Research demonstrates that a single word has the power to influence the expression of genes that regulate physical and emotional stress, with positive words stimulating frontal lobe activity that connects directly to the motor cortex responsible for moving us into action.

When we label something as "artificial," we may unconsciously trigger different neural pathways than when we use terms like "synthesised" or "assistive". Brain imaging studies show that when we attach words to experiences, we see decreased activity in the amygdala (our brain's alarm system) and increased activity in the prefrontal cortex, essentially "hitting the brakes" on our emotional responses. This means that choosing to call AI "artificial intelligence" versus "synthesised intelligence" could literally change how our brains process and respond to AI-related changes by triggering more fear and resistance or promoting curiosity and openness.



Types of AI

Traditional AI

This is the fundamental artificial intelligence we have been using for years, although we might not have appreciated that it is AI. It is used for automating tasks, identifying patterns and trends. For example, this type of AI is used for email spam filters and for predictive text. We can use it to create basic chatbots to provide answers to frequently asked questions about our changes.

Generative AI

Generative AI can create content including text, images, video and code. It relies on the instructions we give it, via prompts using tools like Claude, GROK and ChatGPT. The explosion in these tools since the public launch of ChatGPT in November 2023 has been phenomenal and shows no signs of slowing down. We can use it in change management for creating tailored, personalised content for all our stakeholders, rapidly creating plans and checklists of activities needed to create new ways of working and to design compelling communications using images and graphs.

Agentic AI

This next wave of AI acts more like an assistant or agent. It can set goals, take actions, and manage tasks without needing us to prompt every step. It uses reasoning, planning, and memory to pursue a defined outcome. This means we must be very careful about specifying the outcome, defining clear boundaries about what to do and what not to do.

I am seeing some early work in using Agentic AI to nudge people to take part in change, giving them activities to carry out for each of the change lifecycle. We can also use it to coach people to make changes to how they work, proactively suggesting activities, additional information and ideas for how they can amend their ways of working.

The Evolution of Change Resistance in the AI Era

Traditional Change Fatigue vs AI-Driven Resistance

Change fatigue is growing. People aren't going out of their way to resist change, but it is a feeling that's building up in large part because of the continued volume of change that just does not stop.

There are so many innovations taking place alongside a move to a more agile approach where we do smaller scale changes, but then we build on that smaller scale with the next wave of change and the next one. This volume of change issue has been increasing in recent years.

The New Flavour of Resistance

AI can't be blamed for change fatigue, but it has given it a different flavour. Resistance to change now, particularly for AI initiatives, is born out of fear—a significant fear that AI will take people's jobs. The evidence is starting to back that up.

However, I think the resistance we are seeing with adoption of enterprise-wide AI in our organisations has a deeper emotional background. We might resist adopting a new system because we are already busy with other things, or we do not think it is relevant or helpful to our work or because we do not want to give up the status and confidence we have from our experience of the current ways of working.

With AI, there is a much greater threat than these 3 types of resistance, because AI threatens us at the most basic level – it threatens our jobs, and our ability to earn money to live. Whilst there are reassuring messages from organisations currently about not replacing people with AI but using people for more value-add tasks, the evidence does not support this. Increasingly we are seeing IT firms make thousands of programmers redundant, and organisations reduce their graduate intake, because simpler entry level tasks are now run by AI. In the project world, the PMO roles responsible for analysing project data are not being replaced when people leave the teams.

There's a strong likelihood that we're going through a real rebalancing of what jobs are available, perhaps something we haven't seen since the move to personal computing within the office from the 1970s and 1980s. This represents a massive shift.

The Neuroscience Behind AI Resistance

People detect that there is huge uncertainty, which is driving more resistance to change because our human brains do not vote for chaos and uncertainty—that is risky. Our brains are there to ensure our continued survival, so we don't put ourselves in danger unnecessarily. That is also holding people back. While change professionals are used to dealing with resistance to change and change fatigue in all change initiatives, this feels more deep-seated and therefore harder to address.

AI's Dual Impact on Change Management

The Analysis Paralysis Challenge

The volume of information that AI can produce and process from a much wider range of sources than a human being can possibly cope with can be seen as an advantage. However, there is also a consideration about how this could lead to analysis paralysis because there are so many different scenarios that AI can put forward about the impact of a change. Sifting through the reality of that can be very challenging.

The Sentiment Analysis Opportunity

On the positive side, AI's ability to process huge volumes of sentiment-driven information is incredibly exciting. The experience of creating transcripts in any meeting these days—not needing a recording of watching people on screen but having the transcript to put through copilot or any other tool to analyse the overarching sentiment of meetings is transformative.

This can be done repeatedly to see sentiment changing over time: from fear and confusion when change is first announced, to curiosity, through to a willingness to consider the possibilities, then a willingness to get involved. Perhaps frustration follows as the change becomes more complicated and reality sets in, and then perhaps ultimately some kind of celebration and positive feelings.

Ethical Considerations and AI Principles

The Need for Explicit AI Governance

As someone responsible for writing AI codes of practice and AI principles, there's a crucial question: as part of any change strategy at the start of any change initiative, do we need to explicitly state the AI principles that will be applied to the initiative?

For example, stating that we will be tracking meeting data. These days we can track who's attended, who's been invited, and what proportion of people actually turn up. But now we can also track sentiment data and people's questions.

Psychological Safety in an AI-Monitored World

This leads to another consideration: what does this do for psychological safety? If the sentiment of a meeting is tracked and everyone knows who is at the meeting, would you want to challenge the prevailing views and therefore possibly be seen as introducing negativity to the meeting?

Will this lead to more groupthink? Will people be less willing to challenge or speak up in a meeting because they know that everything being said is being transcribed and will be used later? While we're not anywhere near this point at the moment, we need to be considering how we use this data and being explicit in our strategies about how we use sentiment data.



The Critical Importance of Vision in an AI World

Enhanced Visioning Requirements

Visioning is critical. One thing that's becoming increasingly noticeable in terms of managing change is the need for everyone involved in the change, not just senior leaders, but everybody—to be able to understand where we're trying to get to and what the change is actually trying to create.

This requires questioning and ensuring that's what we mean and that's what we want.

With the use of AI tools, particularly agentic AI, we can set up agents to run certain transactions, process information in specific ways, and achieve much of what we're dreaming of in terms of managing customers, launching new products and services, creating pricing matrices, reporting on finances, and governing repetitive tasks. AI agents will follow the rules we set up for them.

The most important thing is what we're trying to get to. AI will make decisions if we give it the right context, and a lot of that context is the destination we're trying to reach—the vision we're trying to achieve.

Deeper Vision Development

One significant change in change management practice is no longer looking for just a couple of sentences of a vision statement. Instead, we must dig deeper and deeper into what we're trying to get to and why we're trying to get there, adding more and more detail, including:

- The drivers for the change
- The context that's leading us to want to make this change
- Who are all the different people that will be impacted by this change

Our understanding of the end goal must be so much more detailed and comprehensive because it is that context that we can then apply to any communications we want to create, including the personas for stakeholders who are impacted. This gets fed into AI so that it creates communications about the change that are relevant for the people we are talking to.

Context is Everything

AI will make decisions, but if we give it the wrong context or generic context, then the content it produces will be worthless, useless, and has the potential to waste people's time and be ignored because it won't be tailored and personalised to the audience.



The Skills Transformation

The New Hiring Paradigm

AI is going to change what we ask for of people. It rebalances the skills we're hiring for because curiosity tops the chart. Imagination about the future and vision is critical. Understanding where we're trying to get to is essential.

The Lifelong Learning Imperative

We cannot prepare people for individual changes related to AI because there are so many changes coming up. Research, including work from Pearson on identifying human skills that are most in demand, reveals that "employers are now realising that human skills are the power skills that really help people stay relevant and adaptable in a changing world."

Businesses need to act now to help employees upskill, and employees need to adopt a mindset that helps them learn across their lifetime.

Defining Lifelong Learning

The European Higher Education Area defines lifelong learning as having "the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous."

Using the work of M.Hojat on developing lifelong learning for physicians, I often apply the definition of lifelong learning as "an attribute involving a set of self-initiated activities and information seeking skills with sustained motivation to learn, and the ability to recognise one's own learning needs."

My discussions with heads of HR around the world identify a common characteristic that indicates that someone has a strong ability for lifelong learning. This is curiosity, which drives people to ask "what else?" and "what next?" which are essential questions for the successful adoption of AI.

Wider Implications of AI Adoption

Language Dominance

There are broader impacts to consider, such as the dominance of English language, because so much of the large language models at the moment are in English. While working with truly global teams, we often say that English is the business language in use, but AI seems to be feeding that dominance.

Technology and Power Requirements

There are also considerations around the power requirements for AI. Even on a basic laptop, there's a need to restart daily because the amount of processing power being used, even for basic models of generative AI like ChatGPT, is huge. This has a knock-on effect on technology and technology spend, and how we specify the features and functionality for the tools we're giving people at work and at home.

The Irreplaceable Value of Human Change Managers

Why Technical Execution Isn't Everything

Summarising much of what we're seeing with AI: there is technical execution. AI can process information and generate information far faster than a human being, but it doesn't have emotions. It doesn't have the felt side of emotions. It can observe emotions, but it doesn't genuinely feel them, so it will never have true empathy.



Great for information and evidence

- Scoping
- Planning
- Resourcing
- Managing
- Tracking
- Measuring



Great for feelings and emotion:

- Influencing
- Persuading
- Exciting
- Motivating
- Challenging
- Negotiating

Together, neuroscience and AI offer a shift in how we manage change—not just faster, but smarter and more human centric.

The Neuroscience of Human Emotion

When we feel something, it generates chemicals in our brain that lead us to take action. When we feel threatened, our brains generate adrenaline and noradrenaline, which keeps us very focused and vigilant on the situation at hand. When we feel excited or happy, our brains generate endorphins but also dopamine, which is a chemical that creates energy for us to do more and repeat things.

Understanding the distinction between emotions and feelings is crucial: an emotion is the body's internal, often hidden, reaction, while a feeling is the mind's conscious awareness and understanding of that reaction.



The Human Element in Change Management

We won't get rid of human beings, particularly in the change arena where encouragement, feeling heard, feeling supported, feeling respected, and feeling valued are essential. Change management is about creating positive feelings for people.

It takes a human to empathise with how somebody is feeling. While you could analyse this with sentiment analysis through AI, a human can take that further and empathise—truly recognise as another human being how that feels.

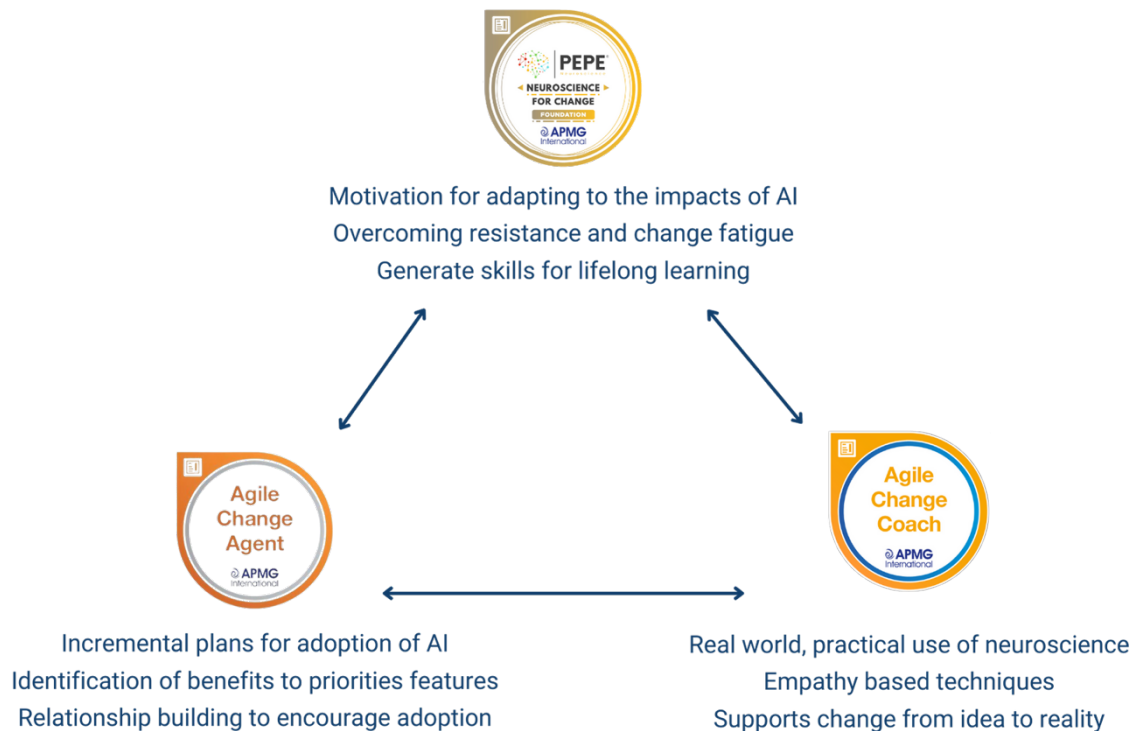
The Amplified Value Proposition

In an AI world, your value as a change professional isn't diminished—it's amplified. While AI handles the technical execution, you become more critical than ever in helping humans navigate, adapt to, and thrive in this new reality.

We can't ignore the fact that if we're going to be using any kind of artificial intelligence to understand its impact, we really need human intelligence. There is an obvious link between any change involving AI and the use of neuroscience—neuroscience is just an understanding of how the brain reacts to things and makes decisions. Understanding how the human brain operates is incredibly useful.

Recommended Learning Path

Three courses that fit together particularly well for AI-related change management:



1. [**Neuroscience for Change Course**](#) - Provides techniques for the motivation for adapting to the impacts of AI and techniques for overcoming resistance and change fatigue. Crucially, it shows how we can create an environment that generates skills for lifelong learning.
2. [**Agile Change Agent Course**](#) - Focuses on planning and benefits identification and the relationship building that encourages adoption of change. This agile approach makes perfect sense for the level of uncertainty that AI brings, as things are moving so fast. Planning changes incrementally and iteratively, delivering something as soon as you can while you have certainty, then building on it and taking into account how things have changed.
3. [**Agile Change Coach Course**](#) - Provides real-world practical application of neuroscience, empathy-based techniques where we take into account how the brain works and how people will be feeling and why they're impacted the way they are. These techniques enable us to support change from idea to reality.

Conclusion

The intersection of AI and change management requires a fundamental shift in how we approach both technology implementation and human adaptation. By focusing on uniquely human skills—curiosity, empathy, vision-setting, and contextual understanding—change professionals can not only survive but thrive in an AI-transformed world.

The key is building the motivation, willingness, and resilience for lifelong learning while maintaining the human intelligence necessary to guide AI implementations successfully.