The Strategy Brief

AI Is Making Answers Cheap. Good Questions Are Becoming More Valuable.

Emerging Themes Across Enterprise Strategy Teams in 2026

The Strategy Brief | Strategy Circle
Insights Report

Executive Summary

This month's Strategy Circle took a different format. Rather than discussing a broad strategic theme, senior strategy and transformation leaders were presented with a live strategic growth challenge and asked to work through it in small groups.

Participants represented more than 15 industries, bringing perspectives from areas including technology, utilities, financial services, government, education, construction and other sectors. Each group was encouraged to use AI alongside its own experience to explore the challenge and develop an approach.

The specifics of the case remain confidential. However, the exercise surfaced a number of broader observations about how strategy teams are beginning to use AI. Perhaps the most interesting was how differently groups approached the same problem.

Access to AI was not the differentiator and all groups could generate plausible ideas quickly. The greater variation came from how participants framed the problem, what context they provided, which constraints they introduced, how they interrogated the outputs, and where they applied their own judgement.

Participants found that relatively small changes in prompts could move AI from producing broad ideas to developing structured approaches covering implementation and governance. Adding greater contextual specificity also materially improved the relevance of the outputs.

At the same time, members consistently identified limitations. AI could accelerate research, generate possibilities and structure thinking, but participants still needed to determine whether the ideas were commercially relevant, contextually appropriate and strategically valuable.

Several groups returned to first principles to test what AI produced rather than accepting the output at face value.

Across the discussion, five broader themes emerged:

- the quality of the question increasingly determines the quality of the answer;
- context and constraints materially improve AI output;
- human judgement remains essential;
- diagnosis should precede ideation;
- and combining AI with diverse human perspectives can produce richer strategic thinking.

The exercise suggested that as AI makes information, analysis and idea generation increasingly accessible, the strategist's value may increasingly lie in knowing what to ask, what matters and what to do with the answer.

The Quality of the Question Determines the Quality of the Answer

One of the clearest observations from the session was the degree to which AI outputs varied according to how the strategic problem was framed.

Participants were working from the same underlying challenge, but took markedly different approaches to prompting AI.

Some used relatively broad prompts to generate potential opportunities, whilst others introduced strategic objectives, market conditions and constraints.

Some asked AI to develop ideas, while others asked it to construct more structured approaches covering governance, implementation and sequencing.

Participants observed that iterative prompting was particularly important. Rather than treating the first response as the answer, groups progressively added information, challenged assumptions and narrowed the question.

This moved the output from relatively broad idea generation toward more actionable strategic thinking.

This became one of the more interesting findings from the exercise. As one group refined the problem, the AI response evolved into a structured multi-week innovation process incorporating parallel workstreams and governance. Other approaches generated a much broader range of potential opportunities.

Neither approach was necessarily right or wrong. But the exercise demonstrated that the way the strategist interrogates AI materially shapes what AI is capable of giving back.

Participants therefore spent considerable time discussing prompts themselves; what information should be included, what assumptions should be challenged and whether constraints should be introduced before or after initial ideation.

The implication emerging from the discussion was that effective use of AI in strategy may depend less on simply knowing how to use an AI tool and more on knowing how to frame a strategic problem clearly enough for the tool to be useful.

Context May Become More Important, Not Less

A second recurring theme was the importance of context.

Participants found that generic questions tended to produce relatively generic responses.

Outputs became more useful as groups introduced additional information around the external environment, strategic objectives, organisational realities and constraints surrounding the challenge.

Several groups deliberately added guardrails before asking AI to generate ideas. Others debated whether doing so too early risked constraining potentially useful thinking.

How much context should AI receive before it begins exploring the problem? Too little context and the output may be generic but too many constraints and potentially valuable possibilities may be eliminated before they are considered.

Members experimented with both approaches during the session. Some allowed AI to explore broadly before introducing constraints. Others incorporated those constraints into the problem from the beginning.

What participants consistently found was that contextual specificity improved relevance. Adding geographic, regulatory and strategic considerations materially changed the quality of the responses generated.

Participants also noted that much of the most valuable context does not necessarily exist in public data. It sits inside organisations. It includes knowledge about customers, capabilities, previous strategic decisions, organisational appetite, internal constraints and why previous initiatives succeeded or failed.

This led some members to discuss the potential value of internal AI models that capture organisational knowledge rather than relying solely on publicly available information. Participants suggested this could allow strategy teams to accelerate learning while grounding outputs more closely in the realities of their organisation.

The discussion therefore challenged an assumption that AI reduces the importance of organisational knowledge. Participants' experience during the exercise suggested the opposite.

The more capable AI becomes, the quality of the context provided to it may become increasingly important.

AI Can Generate Possibilities. Humans Still Have to Decide What Matters.

Participants were broadly positive about AI's ability to accelerate the exercise.

Groups used it to explore opportunities, structure ideas, consider different approaches and rapidly investigate areas that would otherwise have taken significantly longer.

The recap from the session was clear: without AI, participants believed the exercise would have been considerably slower.

But speed did not remove the need for judgement. In several instances, participants found that AI-generated suggestions appeared plausible but required further validation against market realities.

Different tools also produced different styles of response. Some outputs were more conceptual, while others were more pragmatic. Members discussed combining outputs from multiple AI systems to create a broader view rather than relying on a single response.

One participant suggested explicitly asking AI to state its confidence in particular claims as another way of interrogating reliability. But ultimately, groups repeatedly returned to human judgement.

Participants had to decide:
which ideas were genuinely relevant;
which assumptions needed testing;
which opportunities justified further investigation;
and which outputs simply sounded convincing.

Members also identified areas where AI responses were relatively weak.

In particular, participants noted that some outputs gave insufficient consideration to governance, operationalisation and the risk of disrupting elements of the existing business that were already working successfully.

The broad view emerging from the discussion was therefore not that AI replaces strategic thinking. It was that AI accelerates parts of the strategic thinking process while increasing the importance of judgement around what comes back.

Before Asking What Could Work, Understand Why the Current Strategy Isn't

One of the most useful interventions during the session came when participants questioned the premise of moving immediately into idea generation.

Before asking AI to identify new growth opportunities, one group stepped back and asked a more fundamental question:

Why is the existing strategy not producing the desired result?

Rather than treating innovation itself as the objective, participants discussed first understanding the gap between current performance and strategic ambition.

That meant examining existing initiatives, identifying where growth had stalled and understanding what was preventing the current strategy from delivering.

Only then could new opportunities be assessed against the actual problem.

The discussion highlighted the risk of using AI to accelerate ideation before sufficiently diagnosing what needs to change.

AI can make it extremely easy to generate more possibilities.

But participants observed that more possibilities are not necessarily useful if the underlying strategic problem has been incorrectly framed.

Several groups therefore focused on defining the value gap clearly before determining where resources should be directed. The intention was to avoid pursuing attractive ideas that ultimately had little relationship to the underlying performance challenge.

This distinction became particularly important during the exercise.

The question shifted from:

"What new things could we do?"

toward:

"What is preventing us from achieving the outcome we want, and what intervention is most likely to close that gap?"

For participants, AI became more useful once that distinction had been made.

AI Became More Useful When Combined With Collective Intelligence

The final theme was less about AI itself and more about what happened around it. Participants in the session represented more than 15 industries. When groups were given the same strategic problem, people naturally approached it through the lens of their own experience.

Different participants identified different risks, opportunities, assumptions and parallels with their own sectors. The session recap noted that this cross-industry participation broadened the innovation lens and surfaced considerations that may otherwise have been missed.

Groups then combined these perspectives with AI-generated information.

This created an iterative process:

AI introduced possibilities.
Participants challenged them.
Different industry perspectives introduced new context.
Prompts were refined.

The resulting ideas were then challenged again. The collective discussion allowed groups to evaluate opportunities rapidly and consider the problem through multiple strategic lenses. Participants observed that diverse thinking helped accelerate both opportunity identification and validation.

This was particularly notable because the participants did not need to be experts in the organisation or industry behind the challenge to contribute.

Their value often came precisely from bringing a different frame of reference.
The exercise therefore suggested that one of the more powerful applications of AI in strategy may not be an individual strategist working alone with a model.

It may be AI combined with groups of experienced people bringing different contexts, assumptions and mental models to the same problem.

Key Takeaways

Several recurring themes emerged consistently throughout the session:

- 1. Better questions produced better strategic outputs
- 2. Context materially improved AI's usefulness
- 3. Human judgement remained essential
- 4. Diagnosis should precede ideation
- 5.Diverse perspectives strengthened AI-assisted problem solving

What This May Signal

The session was designed as an experiment in collaborative problem solving. But the discussion surfaced a broader question about how AI may change the work of strategy teams. AI is rapidly reducing the time required to gather information, structure analysis and generate potential strategic options. Activities that once required days of research can increasingly be accelerated into hours or minutes. Yet the experience of participants during the session did not suggest that this removed the need for strategists. Instead, it appeared to shift where their contribution was most valuable. The difficult parts remained: framing the right problem, providing the right context, challenging assumptions, distinguishing plausible answers from valuable ones, and deciding what should actually be pursued.

Participants' experience also suggested that AI outputs improved through iteration rather than one-off prompting. The strategist remained involved throughout the process: refining, challenging, contextualising and evaluating what was produced.

As AI tools become increasingly available across organisations, access itself becomes less differentiated. The greater advantage may come from how effectively strategy teams combine AI with organisational context, strategic judgement and collective experience.

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Thank you!

Thank you for taking the time to read this Strategy Circle insights report.

The Strategy Circle is a private peer community for senior strategy and transformation leaders, bringing together executives navigating the realities of modern enterprise strategy roles through:

- monthly virtual discussions,
- and quarterly in-person dinners.

If you are interested in joining future conversations and connecting with other senior leaders across the strategy community, please reach out to:

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