

AI Is the First Time a Single Technology Has Impacted Every Aspect of a Director's Role

With **Ryan McManus**, Founder of Techtonic.io

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Ryan McManus, Founder of Techtonic.io, shared timely insights with Adam Bryant and David Reimer. Key themes include why AI is the first technology to touch every dimension of a director's fiduciary duty, how boards can calibrate pacing to avoid moving too fast or too slow, and why anchoring strategy in dated assumptions blinds companies to AI's rapidly evolving capabilities.

Reimer: What are the smart questions that boards need to be asking themselves about AI in this moment?

McManus: In boardrooms, there are varying levels of understanding, expertise, and experience on any technology topic, with AI being the most impactful today. The goal at the board level is to create cohesiveness and a shared understanding of what actually is happening, given the speed, the noise in the system, the complexity, and the unprecedented levels of economic activity and development around AI.

It's not necessary for directors to keep up with every single nuance. But the first thing that's important for directors to understand is that AI is not one thing. It's arguably the first time that there's been a single technology that impacts every aspect of our fiduciary duty as directors: governance, strategy, risk, talent, share price, and investment. So it does require a more extensive conversation than just understanding what the technology is and what it can do.

To help make sense of this across that scale of responsibility, it's useful to position AI in the context of the 60 years of technology cycles that we've already been through. We've had a series of effectively 10-year cycles, and they always play out in more or less the same way. That allows us to take a breath and establish some frameworks based on economic pattern recognition, so that we can make sense of where we are in the cycle.

The risk is that we move too fast or too slow. I work with dozens of boards. In certain cases, management is trying to move faster than the board wants them to. In other cases, the board wants to move faster than management does. So everyone needs to make sure they are all on the same page regarding the right cadence and pacing.

Bryant: And what do those historical patterns tell us?

McManus: We can identify that we're in about year three of what's going to be a multi-year cycle. Generally speaking, the disruption and economic change have only happened in the technology industry so far. It has not really moved into the other sectors of the economy, but that is going to come.

The infrastructure and new compute are not yet fully in place to create the new business applications that are going to drive change across the broader economy. That helps ground the conversations in boardrooms in not only an understanding of where we are today, but also leads to an active exploration of where things are going to go.

If companies are only focusing on automation and cost efficiency, they will miss opportunities for new value creation and business model transformation, which always determine winners and losers. AI will become the platform for the economy moving forward.

If you can anchor the AI conversation in those strategic frameworks, then everybody can understand how we need to be looking at AI, for now and for what's next. And then you want to dive in with more specific questions. What's happening in your sector? What are the real capabilities of AI today? What is forecast?

What is the very broad portfolio of risks? What does a sensible cadence and roadmap look like? What does responsible AI deployment look like? How are we cutting through the noise?

Reimer: Where are you seeing governance being strained, and how should it adapt?

McManus: Historically, technology has been largely the sole responsibility of the office of the CTO and a largely operational consideration. This is the first time that boards are aggressively looking to understand what's really happening with a particular technology, from an opportunity, risk, and ROI perspective.

There has also been a surge of science, technology, and innovation committees on boards. Their purpose is to provide direct, dedicated, focused attention to technology-driven change, including new business models and product development. It's also perfectly fine if the full board carves out time on a regular basis for these discussions.

Bryant: What do you find that conventional wisdom often misses about AI?

McManus: The big one is the risk of a particular point of view being anchored in where we are today, as opposed to where we're going to get very quickly. That's just a function of the speed of development of the sector. As we've seen, the power of AI models and available compute has exploded at the same time that resource requirements to power these AI capabilities have exponentially declined and continue to decline.

However, many points of view are still anchored in things that were happening 12 to 18 months ago in terms of resource intensity. But that has changed. So when we have these legitimate concerns, it's important to understand how they have evolved and are continuing to evolve, rather than anchoring an assumption in something that is already dated.

Some leaders believe that AI is already so significantly developed that a full portfolio of ROI should be observable and attainable. But again, we're at an early stage of the technology. There's also noise in the system that AI doesn't create value, and people sometimes grab onto big headlines as a reason not to do something.

Reimer: What do you consider to be the hardest part of leadership?

McManus: The hardest part of leadership is engaging a broader group of people to join you in building something new. Many people are most comfortable operating under existing assumptions about their industry and in the way things are. It's not native for many people to think about what's next, and so there are levels of complexity and skill that are required to get this done.

You have to be able to identify the vision, articulate it, engage people, address their worries and fears, create a compelling strategy, roadmap, and investment plan. But there's a lot of both personal and enterprise risk in doing that because any time you try to build or create something new, by definition there's not a roadmap, especially when things are changing so rapidly. Getting the trust and engagement from a broader organisation of people is the most challenging part of leadership.

In this conversation



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Adam Bryant is a respected and noted expert on executive leadership who has interviewed more than 1,000 leaders for the “Corner Office” series he created at The New York Times and for his four current leadership series on LinkedIn. He is the author of four books on leadership, including “[The Leap to Leader](#)” and “[The CEO Test](#),” both published by Harvard Business Review Press.



David Reimer
CEO



David Reimer is a recognised expert in the leadership development of the C-suite. A former operator himself, David brings hands-on knowledge of leadership, strategy, operations, and mentoring to the subject of accelerating top executives’ impact. He is consulted by boards, operators, and senior HR leaders on developing leaders for an era of disruption.

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