BCG

Weekly Brief September 09, 2026

The Critical Need to Own Your Enterprise Cortex

I’ve been to 62 worldwide partner meetings at BCG, and the one I attended last May was among the most energizing. The conversations and presentations brought to life how fast the world is changing, and the work BCG is doing to help clients navigate the whirlwind of challenges, particularly capturing value from AI.

This all came together at BCG EDGE, our flagship expo, which showcased dozens of cutting-edge innovations. The one I found most fascinating was work we’re doing to help companies avoid cognitive lock-in. This can happen when AI models and agents become so embedded in problem solving that it’s not only difficult to replace them, but the logic behind them sits in a system the company can neither own nor inspect. The result is dependence on a single tech platform—and a single external source of intelligence.

Open-weight models can reduce dependence on a provider, but they do not eliminate this risk. A company’s knowledge and business logic can still become tightly tied to a particular model or the systems built around it.

To avoid losing autonomy, flexibility, and uniqueness, companies need to build an intelligence layer that they control around what BCG calls the “enterprise cortex”: their IP, data, business rules, past experiences, and deep understanding of what makes their strategies and operations unique.

I was so struck by this work that I collaborated with the experts leading it at BCG—Aaron Arnoldsen, Sanjeev Reddy, and Djon Kleine—on a publication that spells out the insights: Do You Own Your Enterprise Cortex? The AI Strategy Risk CEOs May Not See Coming.

An example is a global entertainment company that built an agentic platform enabling central marketing, agencies, and regional creative teams to generate marketing assets at scale with AI. Each region's brand voice, guidelines, personal preferences, and legal and regulatory requirements are mapped and stored in the company's cortex, so any model built on top draws from that same shared layer. Hundreds of agents now work together on insight generation, strategic briefs, content creation, marketing technology, and campaign activation. The result is the ability to scale locally distinct ideas to many brands and millions of customers, while the sensitive material that defines them remains protected.

It's a challenge that's relevant for all large companies. As they integrate AI into their organizations more deeply, they risk diluting their distinctiveness or decreasing their adaptiveness as technology rapidly evolves. Five principles can help leaders safeguard what makes their companies unique:

- **Stay clear on vendor value and ownership.** Own the content, rent the containers, buy or build the components. Assign an owner—a domain expert—who governs the stack as a business asset.
- **Set the parameters.** LLMs handle language and reasoning; your enterprise cortex handles the rules, limits, and consequences. Build the compliance constraints, permissions, and business logic that stay consistent no matter which model sits on top.
- **Keep the model and platform layers modular.** Design so you can swap models, tools, or platforms without rebuilding your stack. Use the smallest model that meets the task, require open standards in contracts, and fall back to a stronger model—or person—when necessary.

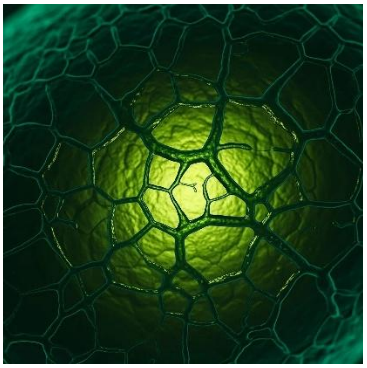
- **Be fast and focused.** Instead of weighing control versus speed, think harder about where to apply both first. Go deep on one high-value workflow end to end, prove the payback, then scale outward.
- **Manage models as a portfolio.** Frontier models earn their cost on open-ended, unpredictable work; fit-for-purpose small language models (SLMs) can offer better value on narrow, high-volume, repetitive tasks, provided they meet the task's quality and risk requirements. The enterprise cortex and its routing logic are what make the portfolio durable as needs and models change.

The article is more than a how-to guide. It aims to establish a critical mindset as technology evolves: the awareness of what makes your organization unique and the importance of owning the intelligence layer where that uniqueness lives. AI can offer all kinds of short-term benefits. But as you invest in it, invest also in protecting your enterprise cortex, enhancing your distinctiveness and competitive advantage for the long term.

Until next time,

Rich Lesser
Global Chair

Further Insights



[Do You Own Your Enterprise Cortex? The AI Strategy Risk CEOs May Not See Coming]

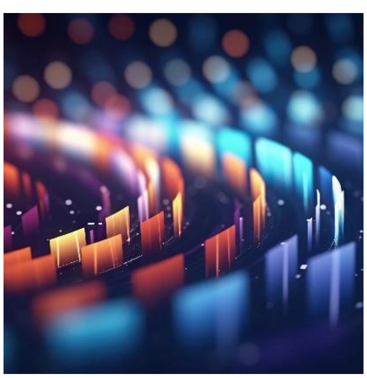
As AI becomes central to enterprise decision making, CEOs face a new challenge: protecting what makes their business unique.

Avoid Cognitive Lock-In

The Agentic Leadership Playbook: A Scaling Strategy for CTOs and CIOs

Most CTOs and CIOs are still asking what agentic AI can do. Leaders are rethinking how the business operates.

Build Your Scaling Strategy



Cybersecurity Budgets Are Growing Fast. AI Threats Are Growing Faster.

AI is simultaneously creating new vulnerabilities, enabling new threats, and powering new cybersecurity tools.

Outpace the Threat

Boston Consulting Group

200 Pier Four Boulevard
Boston, Massachusetts 02210,
USA