

FIELD GUIDE 07

A UK field guide
Current to June 2026

THE IGNITE ALMANACK OF **WHY AI PILOTS FAIL**

The real reason projects stall, and the
one page that stops it.

A FIELD GUIDE FOR UK SMES

IGNITEAI SOLUTIONS

THE PROBLEM

The pilot looked great. Three months later it was dead.

You can set your watch by this one. A business runs an AI pilot. The demo lands, everyone nods, budget gets found. Then it quietly dies by month three, and the story hardens into "we tried AI, it did not really work for us."

So the tool gets the blame. Wrong tool, not ready, overhyped. The tool is rarely the problem. In almost every stalled pilot I have seen, the model did its job. The thing that broke sat upstream of it, and it was in the room long before the software arrived.

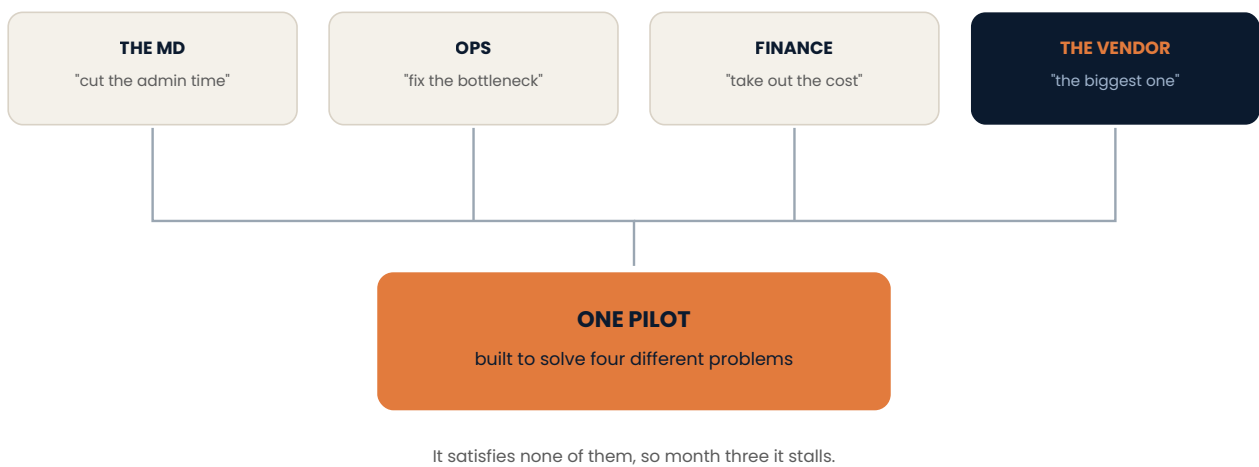
WHY THIS MATTERS

A failed pilot costs more than the money it burned. It teaches the whole company that AI does not work here, and that belief is expensive to shift. The next good idea has to fight last year's ghost before it gets a hearing. Getting the first one right is worth far more than the pilot itself.

THE IDEA

Pilots fail because nobody agreed what the problem was.

Here is what actually happens. Ask four people what problem the pilot solves and you get four answers. The MD sees one problem. Ops sees a different one. Finance sees a third. And the vendor sold to whichever sounded biggest. The pilot gets built to solve a problem nobody quite agreed on, so it lands well with nobody. The model did its job. The weakness was the diagnosis behind it.



Four people, four problems, one pilot. It was aimed at a target nobody agreed on.

How to spot a misdiagnosed pilot.

You can hear it in the way people talk about the project. Each of these lines is the same root cause wearing a different coat.

What you hear	What it actually means
"Great demo, but nobody uses it"	It solved a problem the users did not actually have.
"Everyone's keen, but nobody can say what it's for"	There was enthusiasm, and no agreed problem underneath it.
"It works, we just stopped using it"	It saved time on something that did not matter enough.
"We just need a few more features"	Chasing scope because the core problem was never pinned down.

THE COMMON ROOT

Every one of these traces back to the same thing: a problem that was never written down and agreed before the build started. Fix that upstream and most pilot failures never happen. The technology was ready. The brief was not.

THE SHIFT

Define the problem before you touch the tool.

The fix is almost boringly simple, and almost nobody does it. Before any pilot, write one page that three people would put their name to: the one problem, one number that says what good looks like, and one date to check it. If you cannot write those three lines, the pilot is not ready to build. That single page has killed more bad pilots in my work than any tool ever has, and saved the budget that would have gone down with them.

THE ONE-PAGE TEST

THE PROBLEM one sentence everyone agrees on	GOOD LOOKS LIKE one number that has to move	REVIEW BY one date to keep it or kill it
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If three people cannot sign these three lines, you have found the problem before you spent the money.

Three lines, on one page, agreed before anyone opens a tool. It is the cheapest insurance in the whole project.

HOW TO START

One problem. One pilot. One measurable outcome.

The method that works is small and disciplined. It is the same one we run with clients, and it starts before any software is chosen.

- 1 Get the four people in a room.** The MD, ops, finance, whoever owns the work. Ask each one what problem this should solve, and do not move on until they land on the same answer.
- 2 Write the one-liner.** One sentence for the problem, one number for what good looks like, one date to review. Three lines, signed by the room.
- 3 Build the smallest thing that tests it.** Not a platform, not a transformation. One workflow that proves the number can move.
- 4 Measure against the baseline.** The hours or the cost before, and after. Honest numbers, not a feeling.
- 5 Keep it or kill it on the evidence.** If the number moved, scale it. If it did not, you learned that cheaply. Then pick the next problem.

TRY THIS ON MONDAY

Take the pilot you are closest to and try to write its three lines: **the one problem, the one number, the one date.**

If you cannot write them, you have just found why it will stall, and you found it before you spent the money. That is the whole point.

Three prompts to get the diagnosis right.

Paste these into Claude or ChatGPT. They pressure-test the thinking before you spend a penny on a build. Replace the words in [brackets] with your own.

PROMPT 1: PRESSURE-TEST THE PROBLEM

I am about to run an AI pilot to solve this problem: [describe it]. Act as a sceptical operations director. Ask me the hard questions: who actually has this problem, how we would know it is solved, what it costs us today, and whether AI is even the right fix. Tell me honestly if this problem is too vague to build against yet.

Finds the holes in the brief while they are still cheap to fix.

PROMPT 2: WRITE THE ONE-PAGE BRIEF

Help me write a one-page pilot brief that three people could sign. The problem is [state it]. Draft: one clear problem statement, one measurable number that defines success with a rough baseline, one review date, and the smallest version we could build to test it. Keep it to a single page.

The three lines that stop a pilot drifting into a project nobody can end.

PROMPT 3: DEFINE THE MEASURE

For a pilot solving [the problem], help me pick one honest success metric. Suggest three options, tell me how to baseline each one before we start, and warn me about any that are easy to game or that would look good without the business actually improving.

A number you can trust is what tells you to scale it or stop.

THE NEXT STEP

GET THE DIAGNOSIS RIGHT

The businesses that get real value from AI are the ones that diagnosed the right problem before they built. Get that right and a modest tool wins. Get it wrong and the best tool on the market still gathers dust in month three.

Skills that stay when we go.

A SPARK Discovery gets your people aligned, finds the problem worth solving, and writes the one page before a penny goes on a build. One fixed price, £5,000, and you keep the findings whether you build with us or not.

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