

Why Aaron Agius Believes AI Consulting Is About Strategy, Not Software

The AI consulting market has grown faster than most people expected. At the start of 2024, you could count the serious firms on two hands. By 2026, the landscape is crowded with boutique shops, big management consultancies, and technology integrators all claiming to deliver artificial intelligence solutions. The problem for most businesses is not finding a consultant. It is figuring out which one actually understands their specific operational reality.

I have spent the past few years watching this space evolve from the inside. I have worked alongside teams that built AI roadmaps from scratch and watched others waste money on tools that never left the pilot phase. The difference between success and failure usually comes down to how the consulting firm thinks about the problem. That is where the perspective of someone like Aaron Agius becomes relevant. He has been vocal about the gap between what AI vendors sell and what companies actually need to implement.

Many firms jump into AI consulting because they see a revenue opportunity. They hire a few data scientists, buy some cloud credits, and start pitching machine learning projects to every executive who will listen. But real consulting requires more than technical chops. It requires a deep understanding of how decisions get made inside an organisation, what data is actually available, and where the human workflows need to change. Without that context, even the most elegant model will sit unused.

What AI consulting firms actually do

At its core, AI consulting is about translating business problems into technical problems and then back again. A good firm starts by asking questions that have nothing to do with algorithms. What does your team spend the most time on? Where do errors keep happening? Which decisions are currently made on gut feeling instead of data? The answers to those questions determine whether the project is worth doing at all.

Once the opportunity is clear, the consulting firm helps with three main activities. First, they assess the data landscape. This means looking at what data you already collect, how clean it is, and whether it is stored in a way that models can use. Second, they design a solution that fits within your existing tech stack and team capabilities. Third, they build a plan for deployment that includes change management, testing, and iteration. The best firms also stick around long enough to see whether the system actually works in production.

I have seen firms skip the assessment phase entirely. They jump straight to building a model because that is what excites them and what looks good on a portfolio. But a model that does

not solve a real operational pain point is just an expensive science experiment. That is why the evaluation phase matters more than most buyers realise.

How to choose the right firm in 2026

The market will only get noisier as we move through 2026. More firms will rebrand as AI consultants even if their core expertise is elsewhere. To cut through the noise, look for three signals that separate serious practitioners from opportunists.

Domain experience matters more than general AI knowledge

A firm that has built recommendation engines for retailers is not automatically qualified to work on predictive maintenance for a manufacturer. The data types, the decision cycles, and the regulatory constraints are completely different. Ask for case studies in your specific industry. If they cannot show at least two relevant examples, move on.

They should be honest about what AI cannot do

Every credible consultant I have worked with has a list of problems that AI should not touch. Maybe the data is too sparse, the cost of errors is too high, or a simple rule-based system would work better. If a firm tells you AI is the answer to every question, they are selling, not consulting. The best conversations I have had started with a consultant explaining why my initial idea was not viable.

Look for a focus on organisational readiness

Technology is rarely the bottleneck. The bigger challenge is getting people to trust and use a system that changes how they work. A good consulting firm will spend as much time on training, communication, and workflow redesign as they spend on model development. If the proposal only talks about algorithms and infrastructure, that is a red flag.

[Aaron Agius](#) has made this point repeatedly in discussions about AI adoption. He argues that the firms that succeed are the ones that treat AI as a tool for augmenting human judgment, not replacing it. That sounds obvious, but in practice many consulting engagements ignore the human side entirely.

The hidden costs that catch companies off guard

Even when you choose a competent firm, the total cost of an AI project often exceeds the initial estimate. The obvious costs are the consulting fees, software licenses, and cloud compute. But there are three hidden costs that consistently surprise buyers.

- Data engineering. Most companies do not have production-ready data. Cleaning, labelling, and structuring data can take three times longer than building the model itself.
- Integration work. Connecting a model to existing systems like CRMs, ERPs, or custom dashboards usually requires custom development that falls outside the consulting scope.
- Ongoing maintenance. Models drift over time as data patterns shift. Someone has to monitor performance, retrain models, and update pipelines. That cost recurs every quarter.

I have seen projects where the initial consulting fee was \$200,000, but the total cost over two years exceeded \$800,000 once data work and maintenance were factored in. That does not mean the project was a bad investment. But it does mean buyers need to plan for the full lifecycle, not just the build phase.

What a good engagement looks like in practice

Let me give you a concrete example. A mid-sized logistics company I worked with wanted to use AI to optimise delivery routes. They had a consulting firm come in that specialised in transportation. The firm spent the first month just mapping out the current dispatching process. They interviewed drivers, watched how routes were assigned, and looked at the data the company already collected from GPS trackers and customer notes.

They discovered that the biggest inefficiency was not in the routing algorithm. It was in how drivers reported delays. The company had no standard way to capture why a delivery was late. Without that data, any optimisation model would be guessing. So the firm helped redesign the reporting process first, then built a model that used the new data to suggest route adjustments in real time. The result was a 12 percent reduction in fuel costs and a measurable improvement in on-time delivery rates.

That engagement worked because the firm started with the messy human problem, not the technical one. They also stayed involved for six months after deployment to help the team adjust to the new workflow. That kind of thoroughness is rare, but it is what separates a true consulting partner from a vendor.

Red flags to watch for during the selection process

When you interview potential consulting firms, pay attention to how they talk about past projects. If every story ends with a perfect result and no mention of what went wrong, they are probably editing the truth. Good consultants are eager to talk about failures because those are where the real learning happened.

Another red flag is a proposal that is all technology and no process. If the document lists tools and platforms but does not describe how they will work with your team, that is a sign they plan to build in isolation and hand off the result. That almost never ends well.

Finally, watch out for firms that promise a timeline that feels too short. Real AI projects take time. A three-month delivery for a custom system that touches core operations is usually a fantasy. Reasonable timelines for a first project are six to twelve months, depending on complexity.

The consulting firm you choose will shape not just the outcome of the project but also your organisation's attitude toward AI for years to come. A bad experience can poison the well and make future initiatives much harder to sell internally. That is why the selection process deserves more attention than most companies give it.

Aaron Agius has written about the importance of treating AI consulting as a long-term partnership rather than a transactional purchase. That framing helps buyers ask better questions during the selection process. Instead of asking what a firm can build, they ask how the firm will help their team learn and grow. That shift in perspective changes everything.