



Why Most Agencies Are Stuck in the AI Sandbox

Plenty of agencies have a Slack channel full of AI experiments and a few enthusiasts doing clever things alone. Almost none have turned that into a business-wide capability. Three reasons, and none of them is the tooling.

By **Mike Walker** · Founder, SL8 Agency

Every agency has an AI channel now. Someone found a clever prompt. Someone else automated a research task over the weekend. It looks like momentum.

It isn't. A handful of enthusiasts doing good work in isolation is not the same thing as an agency that runs on AI. Most agencies never cross that line, and it's rarely the tools holding them back.

Leadership has to use it, not just fund it

If AI adoption gets handed to a junior team or filed under "IT initiative," it stays there. People take their cue from what leadership actually does, not what leadership approves a budget for. A leader who has never opened an LLM to prep for a client meeting is signalling something, whether they mean to or not: this is optional, this is for other people. The agencies where AI actually spreads are the ones where the senior team is visibly using it, questioning it, and building it into their own work first.

Time has to be protected, not implied

Ask any agency principal and AI integration sits in their top three priorities. Look at the team's calendar and you won't find it anywhere.

That's not hypocrisy, it's arithmetic. A client deadline is urgent and has a name attached. "Rethink how we work" is important and has no deadline. Urgent beats important every time unless someone deliberately protects space for the important thing.

That means carved-out, non-billable hours for AI work, defended against being the first thing that gets cancelled when a client fire drill turns up. Without that protection, integration stays a good intention.

Training has to be structured, not assumed

Handing someone a login and a "figure it out" is how you get a capability gap, not a capable team. The handful of natural enthusiasts race ahead. Everyone else either falls behind or uses the tools badly, and starts to feel like they're behind by default.

A single webinar on prompt writing doesn't fix this. What works is role-specific and ongoing: showing a strategist how to use AI for audience research, showing a copywriter how to use it for early-stage ideation, revisited as the tools change, not delivered once and left.

This is a management problem

None of the three is a software gap. Leadership that models the behaviour, calendars that protect the time, training that's built for the actual roles in the building. Skip any one of those and an agency stays exactly where it started: a few people experimenting, and a business that hasn't moved.

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Ready to stop experimenting and start building?

One conversation. A straight read on where you actually stand.

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