

Executive Brief

The Decision Chain

A practical brief for executives who know their numbers and want to know what moves them



By
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Reading time
About 10 minutes

In two parts
The chain · From decisions to a roadmap

Ask an owner how the business makes money and you'll get a good answer in under a minute. Win customers for less than they're worth. Keep them, and earn more from them over time.

Now ask who decided, last week, which new leads got a call back first, and on what.

The first answer is about outcomes. The second is about the decisions that produce them, and that's where this brief starts. What a customer costs to win and what one is worth are results. They move because named people make calls, many times a week, on whatever information they can see when they make them.

AI is now in most of those people's hands. Very little of it has changed how those calls get made.

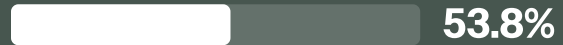
Most businesses using AI changed nothing to use it.

The US Census Bureau asked businesses that use AI what they had changed to use it in the last six months. 64.3 percent said nothing: no new workflows, no training, no change to how they manage their data. Among firms with 100 to 249 employees, 53.8 percent.

All businesses using AI



100 to 249 employees



made no changes in order to use AI

The tools are on the desks. The decisions underneath them run the way they did before. This brief is about finding those decisions, deciding which one to build the intelligence into first, and letting that choice tell you what foundation you need.

It's also, written down, what the first conversation with me covers.

Part one The chain

1 The easy part

Every business wins the same way. Customers that cost less to win, and are worth more over the time they stay.

You know your version of those two numbers, or close enough. So does every competitor about theirs. Knowing them doesn't tell you what to do on Monday, because neither number is something anyone does. They're the sum of hundreds of smaller calls.

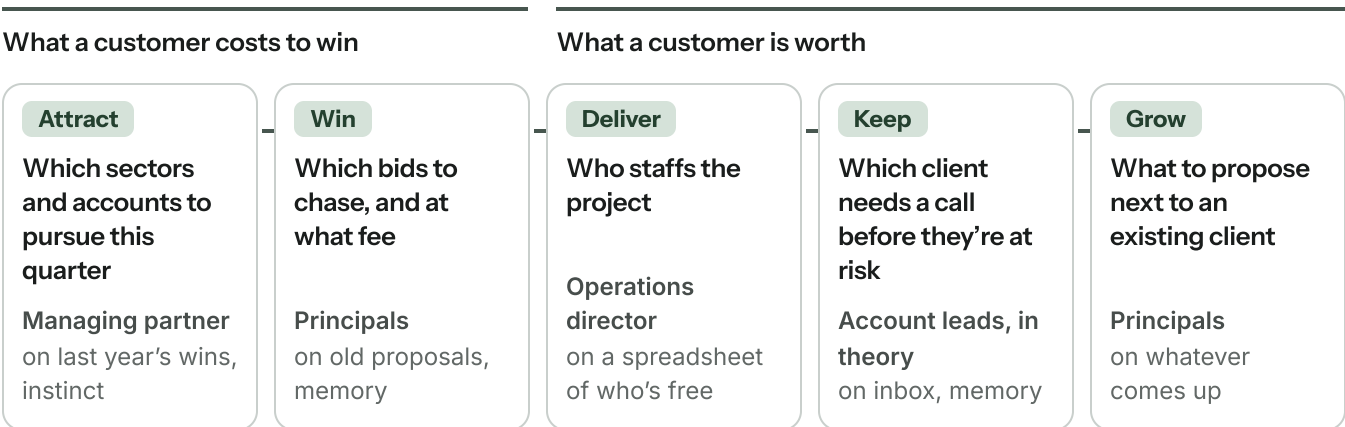
That's why a strategy built only on the two numbers stalls. "Lower acquisition cost" and "raise lifetime value" are goals. Nobody can act on a goal. People act on the decision in front of them.

Every company knows its two numbers. Few can name the decisions that move them.

2 The chain

Follow a customer through the business and you pass through five links. At each one, somebody makes a call that pushes one of the two numbers.

Here's the chain for an illustrative 150-person engineering services firm, one call per link. A real one has more, but each link usually has one call that matters more than the rest.



Illustrative. Attract and Win set what a customer costs to win; Deliver, Keep and Grow set what one is worth.

Notice what the chain isn't. It isn't an org chart, and it isn't a process map. It doesn't say how a proposal gets written or how a project gets scheduled. It says where the calls are made that decide whether the business wins.

That's the right altitude for an executive. You don't need to know how every process runs. You need to know where the calls get made, and you almost certainly already do.

3

Who decides

For each link, three things are worth writing down: who makes the call, what they make it on, and what it moves downstream.

Who makes it. A person, not a department. “Sales decides which bids to chase” hides the fact that it’s whichever principal saw the RFP first.

What they make it on. The information they actually look at, which is rarely what the system was designed to give them. Old proposals. A spreadsheet. Memory. A phone call to whoever was there last time.

What it moves. A fee set too low at Win doesn’t show up at Win. It shows up months later at Deliver, as a project that loses money, and at Keep, as a client relationship strained by the scramble to rescue it.

A decision’s cost usually lands in a different part of the business than the one that made it.

4

Where it breaks

Once the chain is written down, the weak links are usually obvious. They tend to break in one of three ways.



A handoff

The fee is set at Win without seeing what similar projects actually cost to deliver. That number exists, in timesheets and accounting. It just lives in Deliver.

● **Half the picture**

Staffing at Deliver is decided on who's free, without what the principal promised the client at Win.

● **Nobody decides**

At Keep, "which client needs a call" is everyone's job, so in practice it happens when a client complains.

The most common is the first. The information one call needs is produced by another link, by other people, in another system. Each team does its own job well and the chain still fails between them.

This is also why AI added at one desk so often fails to move the business. A Federal Reserve Board staff note put it plainly in July: "A 10% improvement on a task does not necessarily lead to proportional gains for a firm if adjustment costs or other bottlenecks lie elsewhere in the production process."

Speeding up one link doesn't move the numbers when the bottleneck is the next one.

You can't pick where AI goes until you know where the calls are made.

5

Building it in

Building the intelligence into a decision means giving the person who makes it what they couldn't see before, at the moment they decide.

It doesn't mean taking the decision away from them. For the engineering firm, the call worth building into first is the fee at Win. Every past project's actual hours and margin already exist in timesheets and accounting. The principal setting the fee can't see them. Put that history in front of the principal when they price the bid: what similar projects actually took, where they overran, which clients pushed scope. The fee is still the principal's call. It's just no longer a guess.

Pick the first link with two tests:

Does better information change the outcome? Some calls are made well already. Some go wrong for reasons information won't fix. Look for the call where people would decide differently if they could see more.

Does that information already exist somewhere in the business? If it does, the work is connecting it. If it doesn't, the first job is to start capturing it, and that's a slower project.

The best first link is rarely the most visible one. It's the one where the payoff is clear and the information is already sitting in another part of the business.

AI doesn't improve outcomes. It improves decisions, and decisions move outcomes.

6

The foundation

Once you know which decision comes first, you know what it needs to see. That tells you what the foundation has to be.

For the fee decision, the list is short and specific. **The data:** project hours, margins, and the proposal archive, where they already live. **The connections:** accounting, timesheets and the shared drive, linked to one AI setup the principals already use. **Written down:** how the firm decides which bids to chase, so the AI knows the firm's rules and not just its numbers. **An owner:** the principal accountable for how bids get priced.

The next decision reuses most of it. Staffing at Deliver needs the same project history plus what was promised at Win. Then Keep needs both. Each link you build into makes the next one cheaper. That's why the foundation comes first when you build, even though it's the last thing you can work out.

Foundation first is the order you build in. It's the last thing you can scope.

This is also where the question of AI tools gets a useful answer. The useful question isn't how many AI accounts the company has. It's which of them touches a decision on the chain. The ones that do are worth bringing into one setup. The ones that don't are spend to question.

7

The ninety minutes

Everything above is what the first call covers. Ninety minutes, at the level you run the business, drawing your chain together.

No prep and no deck. We won't go through how each process runs; that comes later, from the people who own each one. These are the questions:

- 1 Where do you want the business to be in three years, and what has to be true about winning and keeping customers to get there?
- 2 Which five or six calls most move what a customer costs to win, or what one is worth?
- 3 Who makes each one, and what do they look at when they do?
- 4 Where does one call depend on information another part of the business holds?
- 5 Which call do you wish someone were making that nobody is?

The second call is an hour, a week or so later. I walk you through a written roadmap: which decisions to build into first and in what order, what each one needs to see, what you already have to build on, and the foundation underneath. You keep the roadmap whether or not we go further.

If you'd like to see where you stand first, sketch your own chain below. It's optional. Half a chain is a perfectly good place to start, and the blanks are often the most useful part.

Your chain

One call per link: the one that matters most. Tick the links where it breaks.

The call		
Attract	Who makes it	☐ It breaks here
The call		
Win	Who makes it	☐ It breaks here
The call		
Deliver	Who makes it	☐ It breaks here
The call		
Keep	Who makes it	☐ It breaks here
The call		
Grow	Who makes it	☐ It breaks here

Sources, verified October 11, 2026. US Census Bureau, Business Trends and Outlook Survey AI Supplement (released April 23, 2026; reference period November 2025 to January 2026; about 117,000 responses), question 7, asked of businesses that use AI, about changes made in the last six months: 64.3 percent made no changes; 53.8 percent of firms with 100 to 249 employees. Federal Reserve Board: Paul E. Soto, Mason Thieu and Jeffrey S. Allen, “The AI Buildout and the Economy: Publicly Available Data to Assess AI’s Impact,” FEDS Notes, July 17, 2026.

The engineering services firm, its chain, its breaks and its foundation are illustrative, not a client.



About this brief

Scott Jennings · Claude Certified Architect

I build AI systems for organizations end to end, and I'm a Claude Certified Architect. The work starts where this brief does: with the decisions that run the business, before any tool.

The aim is to put intelligence where it changes a call, build the foundation that call needs, and leave your people able to do the next one themselves.

Send me your chain, even half of it, and I'll tell you which link I'd look at first. Reply to the email that brought you this, or grab 20 minutes. The brief is yours to keep whether or not we talk.

The AI Assessment

Two calls, at the level you run the business. You tell me where it's going and which decisions get it there; I come back with a written roadmap: where to build AI in first, and the foundation it needs.

\$1,000

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