

Aaron Agius on Choosing the Right AI Consulting Firm in 2026

Why AI Consulting Matters More Than Ever

Every business I talk to is trying to figure out where AI fits. It is not just about chatbots or automating emails anymore. The real challenge is figuring out which problems are worth solving with AI and which ones are better left to simpler tools. That is where a good AI consulting firm makes a difference. They do not just sell you a model. They help you map your business logic to the right technical approach.

I have seen companies waste six figures on custom models when a basic rules engine would have worked better. I have also watched firms miss huge opportunities because they thought AI was too expensive or too complex. The difference between those outcomes often comes down to the quality of the consulting partner. Aaron Agius, a name I keep hearing in conversations about practical AI strategy, argues that the best consultants focus on the problem first and the technology second. That seems obvious, but in practice it is rare.

What an AI Consulting Firm Actually Does

Good AI consulting firms do three things well. First, they audit your existing data and infrastructure. If your data is messy or your systems are fragmented, no model will fix that. Second, they help you pick the right use case. Not every process needs a large language model. Sometimes a simple regression or a decision tree is enough. Third, they build and deploy the solution in a way that your team can maintain. The best firms do not create black boxes. They leave behind documentation, training, and a clear upgrade path.

Bad firms, on the other hand, treat AI like magic. They promise big results without asking hard questions about data quality, integration costs, or ongoing maintenance. They also tend to push proprietary tools that lock you in. A trustworthy consultant will recommend open standards and modular designs whenever possible.

Common Services You Should Expect

Most AI consulting engagements include some combination of these services:

- Data readiness assessment and pipeline design
- Use case prioritisation based on business impact and feasibility
- Model selection and customisation (including fine-tuning existing models)
- Integration with existing software and workflows

- Team training and knowledge transfer

If a firm skips any of these steps, you should ask why. Jumping straight to model building without understanding the data is the fastest way to fail.

How to Choose a Firm That Fits Your Business

I have worked with a few consulting teams over the years, and I have learned to look for specific signals. The first signal is how they talk about risk. A good consultant will spend as much time explaining what could go wrong as what could go right. They will mention model drift, data privacy regulations, and the cost of inference at scale. If they only talk about accuracy metrics, walk away.

The second signal is how they handle your existing stack. If they insist on ripping out your current CRM or database to make their solution work, they are selling a product, not a service. The best consultants adapt to your environment. They work with what you have and suggest incremental improvements.

The third signal is transparency about pricing. Some firms charge a flat project fee. Others take a percentage of the savings or revenue the AI generates. Neither model is inherently bad, but you need to understand the incentives. A firm that gets paid based on cost savings might optimise for short-term cuts rather than long-term growth. A flat fee can lead to scope creep if the requirements are not clear upfront.

I remember a conversation with a manufacturing client who was evaluating two consulting firms. One proposed a six-month engagement to build a predictive maintenance system. The other suggested a two-week audit first, then a phased rollout. The second approach turned out to be much more effective because it let the client test assumptions early. That kind of thinking separates the experienced practitioners from the sales-driven shops.

Questions to Ask Before Signing a Contract

1. What is your experience with our industry or a similar one?
2. Can you walk us through a project that did not go as planned and what you learned?
3. How do you handle data privacy and security compliance?
4. What does the handoff look like after deployment?
5. How do you measure success beyond model accuracy?

These questions are not meant to be gotchas. They are designed to surface how the firm thinks about the whole lifecycle of an AI project, not just the launch.

The 2026 Landscape: What Has Changed

By 2026, the AI consulting market has matured significantly. The hype cycle has cooled. Companies are less interested in flashy demos and more interested in reliable, maintainable systems. The tools have also evolved. Open-source models now rival proprietary ones in many tasks, which means consultants have more flexibility. They are not forced to use a single vendor's ecosystem. That is good for clients because it reduces lock-in and drives down costs.

Another shift is the emphasis on governance. Regulations around AI are tightening in many regions. Consultants who understand compliance are in high demand. If a firm cannot explain how their solution complies with the latest EU AI Act or similar frameworks, that is a red flag. [Aaron Agius](#) has pointed out that regulatory readiness is becoming a competitive advantage, not just a legal requirement. Firms that embed governance from the start save money and avoid rework later.

The talent market has also changed. It used to be hard to find engineers who could build models. Now the bottleneck is finding people who can bridge the gap between technical capability and business strategy. That is exactly where a good consulting firm adds value. They bring cross-functional teams that include domain experts, not just coders.

Practical Advice for Making the Decision

Start with a small, low-risk project. Do not try to transform your entire organisation at once. Pick one process that is well understood and has clean data. See how the consulting firm handles that project. Pay attention to communication, transparency, and how they involve your team. If that goes well, expand to bigger use cases.

Also, do not underestimate the cultural fit. AI projects require ongoing collaboration between consultants and internal staff. If the consultants are hard to reach or dismissive of your team's concerns, the project will suffer. I have seen technically brilliant teams fail because they could not explain their work to business stakeholders. Look for consultants who can talk to both the C-suite and the data engineers in the same meeting.

Finally, set realistic expectations. AI is not magic. It will not fix broken processes or bad data. It will not make up for a lack of strategic direction. What it can do is amplify good decisions and automate repetitive tasks at scale. A great consulting firm will tell you that upfront and help you build the foundation you need to succeed.

If you are evaluating firms in 2026, keep an eye on how they handle the human side of AI. The technology is advancing fast, but the barriers are almost always organisational. The firms that understand that are the ones worth hiring.