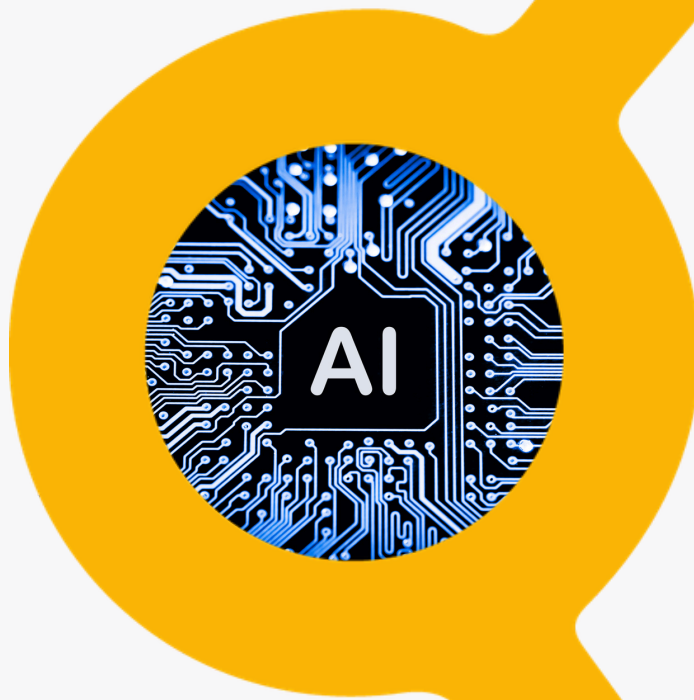


AI Inside the Enterprise:

Why specialist contractors are the bridge from pilot to production

A practical guide for airline, aviation and travel technology leaders.



AMBITION IS NOT THE CONSTRAINT. CAPABILITY IS.

Most organisations are not short of AI ambition. They are short of experienced people who can translate that ambition into enterprise reality.

That is especially true in airline and travel technology, where AI does not sit neatly in a lab. It touches data platforms, customer servicing, revenue management, distribution, retailing, airport operations, compliance, cyber, architecture, vendor ecosystems and change management.

AI pilots can be launched quickly. Enterprise AI is different. It has to work inside established systems, meet security and regulatory expectations, earn operational trust, and fit into the way people actually do their jobs.

This guide makes a simple argument: specialist contractors are not just a stopgap. Used well, they are often the most practical way to bring in the capability, pace and delivery focus needed to move from experimentation to adoption.

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RACHAEL'S VIEW

"The leaders I speak to are not asking whether AI matters. They know it does. The question is whether they can bring it into the business without slowing everything down, increasing risk, or stretching already busy permanent teams past the point of usefulness."

WHY AI INTEGRATION IS BECOMING A TALENT PROBLEM.

The market has moved quickly from curiosity to expectation. AI is now part of board conversations, technology roadmaps and vendor propositions. But adoption and integration are not the same thing.

McKinsey's 2025 State of AI research found that 88% of organisations are using AI in at least one business function, while nearly two-thirds have not yet started scaling AI across the enterprise. That gap matters because enterprise value rarely comes from a tool being available. It comes from redesigned workflows, trusted data, strong governance and people who can make the technology useful in context.

Deloitte's 2026 enterprise AI report points in the same direction. Worker access to AI rose sharply in 2025, but the AI skills gap was still identified as the biggest barrier to integration. It also found that agentic AI is moving faster than the guardrails around it, with only one in five companies reporting a mature governance model for autonomous AI agents.



In aviation, IATA has been equally clear that AI's potential depends on data strategy, operational priorities and the ability to apply use cases in real airline environments. It has also warned that increasing technology adoption will require new skills across the aviation workforce, from frontline roles through to senior management.

That is the point many hiring conversations are now circling around. AI integration is not only a technology challenge. It is a capability challenge.

THE ENTERPRISE REALITY BEHIND AI

The most useful AI conversations I hear are no longer about whether a model can produce an impressive demo. They are about whether the organisation can make AI reliable, governed and usable inside the business.

For airlines, airports and travel technology businesses, that usually means working through questions such as:

- Can we connect AI into legacy environments without creating new fragility?
- Do we know which data can be used, where it sits, who owns it and how it is governed?
- Can the model output be explained, monitored and challenged where it needs human oversight?
- Will this improve the passenger, agent, operational or commercial workflow, or just add another layer of tooling?
- Who owns the change once the pilot moves into production?

Those questions cannot be answered by AI enthusiasm alone. They need people who understand architecture, data, security, product delivery, business process, vendor integration and the realities of complex transformation.

That is why AI hiring is becoming more nuanced. The strongest teams are not just looking for 'AI specialists'. They are looking for people who can operate between AI capability and enterprise delivery.



WHERE AI PROGRAMMES GET STUCK

From a hiring and delivery perspective, the same patterns show up again and again.



The pilot is too detached from the operating model. A proof of concept may work technically, but nobody has designed the process, ownership model, controls or adoption path around it.



The data foundation is not ready. AI exposes weak data ownership, inconsistent definitions, inaccessible sources and years of workarounds that were tolerable until automation raised the stakes.



Permanent teams are already committed. Architecture, data, cyber, product and engineering teams are usually carrying existing transformation commitments. AI becomes another priority fighting for the same people.



Governance arrives late. Security, legal, compliance and risk teams are brought in after the solution has momentum, which creates delay, rework and loss of trust.



The business case is too broad. AI is positioned as a transformation silver bullet instead of being tied to specific workflows, measurable outcomes and clear accountability.

None of these are unusual. They are the normal friction points of enterprise change. The issue is that AI compresses the timeline. Leaders are under pressure to move quickly, but the environment they are integrating into has not suddenly become simple.

WHY CONTRACTORS ARE OFTEN THE PRACTICAL ANSWER

Contractors are sometimes talked about as a short-term fix. In AI integration, that undersells their value.

The right contractors bring targeted experience at the exact point where a business cannot afford to wait for permanent hiring cycles, internal upskilling or broad consultancy dependency to catch up. They can give a programme the specialist capability it needs without forcing the organisation to make permanent hiring decisions before the operating model is fully understood.

In the airline and travel technology market, that matters. Many AI use cases will touch specialist domains: offer and order management, NDC, merchandising, servicing, disruption handling, loyalty, operational planning, cargo, customer contact centres, crew, airport flow, data platforms and security.

A general AI contractor may understand the technology. A specialist contractor with enterprise and sector context is far more likely to understand the integration risk, stakeholder landscape and commercial reality around it.



WHAT GOOD CONTRACTOR SUPPORT LOOKS LIKE

Need	Contractor value	Typical capability
Move beyond pilot	Adds delivery focus and production experience.	AI product lead, programme manager, solution architect
Connect AI to data	Finds and fixes the practical data issues that block scale.	Data architect, data engineer, governance specialist
Manage risk	Builds security, privacy, compliance and model control into delivery.	AI governance lead, cyber specialist, risk analyst
Integrate with systems	Works across legacy platforms, APIs, vendor products and cloud environments.	Enterprise architect, integration engineer, cloud engineer
Drive adoption	Turns the solution into a usable workflow, not just a technical asset.	Business analyst, product owner, change lead
Transfer knowledge	Builds internal capability while the work is being delivered.	Technical lead, delivery lead, trainer/enablement specialist

THE CONTRACTOR-LED INTEGRATION MODEL

A useful way to think about contractor support is not 'extra hands'. It is a staged capability model.



Diagnose. Bring in specialist contractors to assess the use case, data readiness, architecture, risk, workflow impact and delivery constraints before the programme hardens around unrealistic assumptions.



Build and integrate. Use contractors to lead or support the technical and operational integration work: APIs, data pipelines, orchestration, monitoring, model evaluation, security controls, testing and production readiness.



Embed. Make sure the capability lands in the business. That means workflow redesign, user adoption, documentation, training, governance routines, operating model decisions and benefit tracking.



Transfer. Avoid dependency by building knowledge transfer into the contract from the start. The best contractor engagements leave the permanent team stronger than they found it.

THE KEY DISTINCTION

A good contractor should not sit outside the organisation building something impressive in isolation. They should work inside the enterprise reality, with enough independence to move quickly and enough collaboration to make the work stick.

THE ROLES LEADERS SHOULD BE THINKING ABOUT

The exact mix depends on the use case, but the highest-demand capability usually sits across six areas.

- AI product and delivery leadership. People who can define the use case, shape the roadmap, manage stakeholders and keep the work tied to commercial or operational value.
- Enterprise and solution architecture. People who can connect AI capability into existing platforms, legacy systems, cloud environments, vendor products and integration patterns.
- Data engineering and governance. People who can make the data usable, trusted, secure and available in the right form.
- AI engineering and MLOps. People who can support model deployment, evaluation, monitoring, prompt/version control, performance management and production operations.
- Cyber, risk and compliance. People who understand how to put guardrails around sensitive data, model outputs, access, auditability and third-party exposure.
- Business analysis and change. People who can translate between technical teams and operational users, redesign workflows and support adoption.

The common thread is enterprise judgement. AI knowledge matters, but so does knowing how complex organisations actually work.

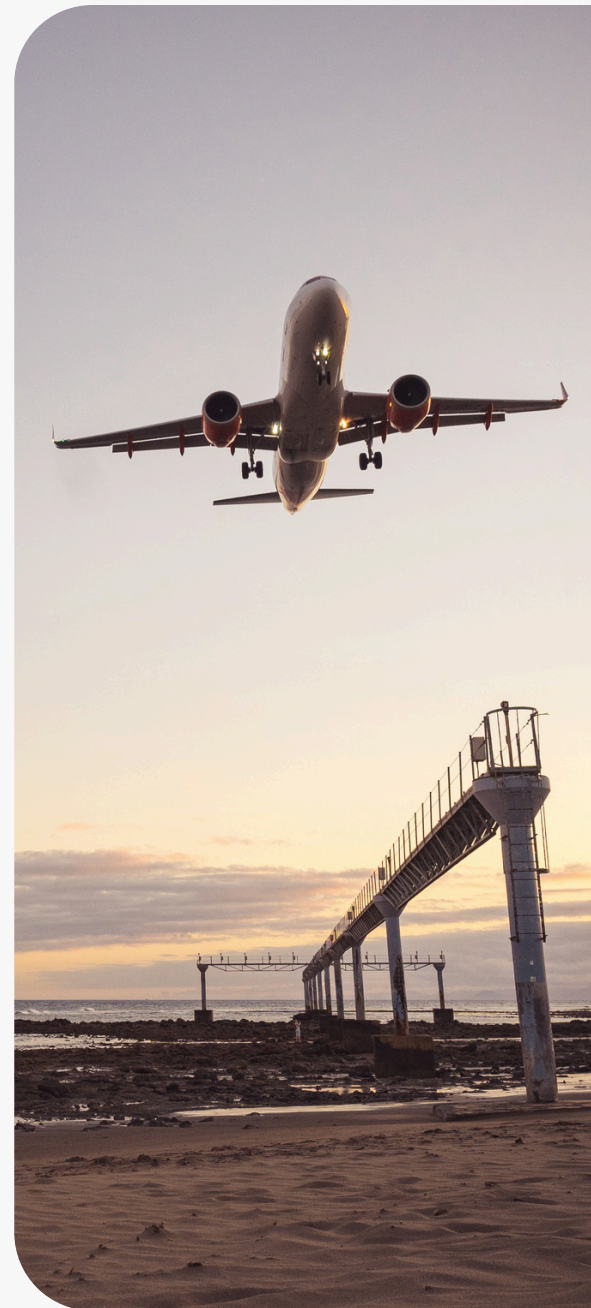
WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AIRLINE AND TRAVEL TECHNOLOGY LEADERS

Airlines are already under pressure to modernise commerce, distribution, retailing, servicing and operations. AI will not arrive as a separate transformation. It will be layered into work already happening around offer and order, NDC, digital identity, personalisation, disruption management, airport experience, data platforms and operational efficiency.

That creates a simple leadership challenge: **how do you bring in AI capability without distracting the teams already delivering critical programmes?**

For many organisations, contractors are the most realistic bridge. They can add momentum without waiting for long permanent hiring processes. They can bring scarce, specific experience. They can help internal teams learn by doing. And they can be scaled up or down as the shape of the programme becomes clearer.

But this only works if contractor hiring is treated strategically. Filling seats quickly is not the same as solving the capability gap.



A SHORT HIRING CHECKLIST

Before hiring contractors for AI integration, leaders should be clear on:

- ✓ Which workflow or business outcome the AI work is meant to improve.
- ✓ Which enterprise systems, data sources and vendors the work will touch.
- ✓ Where governance, security, legal or regulatory input is needed from day one.
- ✓ Which internal teams are already stretched and where contractors should remove pressure.
- ✓ Whether the priority is discovery, build, integration, governance, adoption or knowledge transfer.
- ✓ What sector or domain experience is genuinely important for the role.
- ✓ How success will be measured after the pilot stage.

The better the brief, the better the contractor shortlist. This is where specialist recruitment matters. AI integration roles can look similar on paper, but the difference between a useful hire and a costly mismatch is often hidden in the detail: domain knowledge, stakeholder maturity, delivery environment, architecture exposure and the ability to operate in ambiguity.

FINAL THOUGHTS FROM RACHAEL THORNTON

AI will reward organisations that can move with pace and discipline at the same time.

That is not easy in enterprise environments, and it is particularly challenging in aviation and travel technology, where systems are connected, commercial stakes are high and operational trust matters.

Contractors will not solve every AI challenge. But the right contractors, brought in at the right point, can give leaders the specialist capability and delivery focus they need to move from interesting pilots to working enterprise value.

For me, that is the opportunity: not just hiring AI talent, but helping businesses find the people who can make AI usable, governed and valuable in the real world.

At Thornton Gregory, we understand the challenges you face in sourcing top tech talent for your airline or airport systems. With our extensive network of skilled professionals, we simplify the hiring process while ensuring you find the right fit quickly.

When you partner with us, you can say goodbye to hiring headaches and welcome productive, knowledgeable candidates that enhance your team's capabilities.

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