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THINKING · AI & TRANSFORMATION

Alberta Wrote a $2-Billion AI Playbook. The Lessons Are Cheaper Than You Think.

The Government of Alberta published 235 pages on its AI rebuild. The lessons that matter aren't the technical ones — and they're easier for a small company than a government.

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The most interesting AI operating model I've read this year didn't come from a tech company. It came from a government.

The Government of Alberta just published 235 pages on how it is using AI to modernize the technology it runs on — a rebuild it estimates will cost more than $2 billion. Most people will read the headline — five months of development rebuilt in four days, up to 25 times faster — and stop there.

That's the wrong thing to take away.

The number is real. It's also the least useful part of the report. You can't copy a number. You can copy a system. The one Alberta describes is something almost any company can borrow — including yours, and you don't need a government-sized budget to do it.

Here's what any normal-sized business can take from it.

The bottleneck isn't the technology. It's your org chart.

Alberta's own conclusion is blunt: the work won't move twenty times faster while the hierarchy stays the same. Speed up the work itself and a month-long process barely moves, because the delays don't live in the work. They live between the steps — in the handoffs, the approvals, the waiting for someone to sign off. At human speed.

If your AI results have stalled, this is almost always why. The tools are working. The organization around them isn't. Before you buy another licence, map how a decision actually moves through your company and count the places it sits still.

Centralize the guardrails, not the keyboard.

Alberta's plan holds security, identity and data in the centre, then opens the actual building to the people closest to the work — the ones in finance, in wildfire, in agriculture. Problems that used to be out of reach, for cost or priority or capacity, become buildable by the people who own them.

Most small companies do the opposite. They lock the tools behind one "AI person" or one team, and everyone else waits in line. Flip it. Set clear rules on the few things that can hurt you — privacy, security, brand — and let the people who understand the problem build the solution. That's where the speed comes from.

Chase capability, not just cost savings.

This is the shift I most want leaders to sit with. Alberta shipped its first major public app — a classroom portal for every principal and teacher, with full privacy and security controls — in 11 weeks for about $108,000. The old way was quoted at up to 18 months and well over a million dollars.

The easy story there is "look how much they saved." The important story is what they gained: a thing that didn't exist before, in the hands of people who needed it. Cost reduction is table stakes now. New capability is the prize. If your only AI goal is doing the same work with fewer people, you'll bank a one-time saving and miss the actual opportunity.

There's one more lesson, and it's the uncomfortable one.

Before AI, only 40% of Alberta's first releases met every standard. That's a pass rate no car plant would survive. It was never a people problem, though. You can't expect eight thousand people to hold a standard that was never written down, or that kept shifting under them.

Here's the part that should worry every smaller company more than it does.

AI doesn't fix ambiguity. It scales it.

If how you work only lives in a few people's heads, AI won't tidy that up. It will reproduce the mess faster and more confidently. The work of writing down how you actually make decisions

isn't bureaucracy. It's the thing that makes everything downstream of it possible.

Now the part I keep coming back to.

Alberta's hardest problem was its own size. Eight thousand people. Decades of accumulated drift. A backlog measured in decades. It had to fight through all of that to move at all.

You don't have that mass.

A 30-person company, or a 100-person one, carries almost none of the weight that made this hard for a government. Fewer handoffs to untangle. Less history to unwind. A shorter distance between the person with the problem and the person who can build the fix. Everything Alberta had to overcome by brute force, you can design around from the start.

That's the quiet advantage in this whole report. The playbook is easier for you than it was for them — but only if you move before you harden into the same shape they had to dig out of.

Everyone will have access to the same intelligence. The models are rented, and they're getting cheaper and better for your competitors at exactly the same rate they are for you. The durable advantage was never the AI. It's the system you build around it.

That's yours to build. Start now, while you're still small enough to make it easy.

Full credit to the team at Alberta's Ministry of Technology and Innovation for publishing this so openly. You can explore The Velocity White Papers directly, and I pulled the lessons I think matter most into a 10-slide breakdown on LinkedIn.

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