Implementing AI: What It Takes to Transform an Organization - Charlie Laurie

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Executive Roundtable for Materials Growth
Implementing AI: What It Takes to Transform an Organization
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Summary

Charlie Laurie is Chief Innovation Officer at Palmer Holland, a specialty chemicals and ingredients distributor based in Cleveland, where he covers technology, data, marketing, and delivery. He didn't come from the materials industry. His background is technology leadership and consulting, most recently at a large auto insurer, and he landed at Palmer Holland almost 17 years ago after a conversation in a middle seat next to the company's then-president. He's now roughly two years into a seven-phase data and AI program he expects to deliver in full by August or September 2027.

Most companies in this industry have bought licenses and run a few pilots, with no route yet from there to anything that changes the business. That's a reasonable place to be, since until this year the tools could work in a chat window and not much else. Charlie started from the other end: the business strategy first, then a data foundation built before anything visible shipped. He's now into the harder part, getting experienced people to adopt tools they first saw as a wireframe. This industry moves carefully for good reasons, he said, so excitement doesn't carry adoption. "You have to bring the receipts."

Start with the strategy, then the data

The program began with the question leadership would have to answer anyway: where does the business need to be in five and ten years, and how could new tools bend that growth curve? The answer required centralized data, which in this industry lives in spreadsheets, on SharePoint, in notebooks, and in people's heads.

So the program runs in seven phases, foundation first, rather than a big-bang cutover where you "rip the bandaid off on Friday." Product data came first because the industry already runs on SDSs and TDSs. The information exists, but it's locked in PDFs. Extraction to a live product master data system took four months. Palmer Holland went from about 175,000 product-attribute combinations to about 750,000 at launch, and has more than a million today across roughly 7,000 parent products.

On bolting AI onto existing systems versus building new, his answer was "neither, and both." The foundation is a new data lakehouse. Meanwhile his team uses today's tools and plans for their obsolescence in 12 to 18 months, instead of wiring point solutions into the ERP and CRM and maintaining every connector.

Where the resistance actually showed up

Getting leadership to commit took about a year of wireframes and small wins, plus finding leaders willing to dig in. The product data work is what made the next phases credible.

The resistance came later. "It's easy to say yes until you say go live." Two years earlier, Charlie had described the sales tool as ChatGPT grounded in Palmer Holland's data, meaning ChatGPT as it was then. By launch ChatGPT had moved on, and the sellers remembered his words. His power users said the tool wasn't ready, so he asked what ready looked like and held the rollout until it got there.

That power user group was built on purpose. Alongside the early adopters, he asked managers to nominate late adopters and laggards. "I shouldn't set the pace of change, because I'm not the right personality for it." Late adopters are his real target: willing to change, once they see proof. They also caught what the design missed. A tool that gives a seller twenty years of product experience is a step backward for a seller with thirty.

A tool that knows when to say "I don't know"

Charlie sees turning on every data connector and asking AI about your products as a failure mode. Palmer Holland's AI front end for sales is grounded in the chemicals industry and the company's product data. When it doesn't have the answer it says "I don't know," then asks what an experienced colleague would: what application, what substrate, how is it applied?

Charlie calls this commercial relevance. No chemist would use a coatings defoamer in metalworking, but a general-purpose model asked whether a product works as a defoamer will just say yes. That matters most for the college graduates Palmer Holland trains into the industry each year. Customer, CRM, and ERP data come next, to narrow recommendations to the highest-probability pursuits. The biggest early winners were sellers who'd struggled with the old systems. "Their brain didn't work the way the systems work."

Adoption sets the pace

The guiding principle is that adoption beats elegance. "I've made the mistake of developing really sexy software that no one uses."

Power users decide when there's enough value to release, and review design previews early, while it's still cheap to tell north from northeast. The sales tool took about seven months to reach its first team beyond the power users. A new commercial interface, in effect a CRM built from the ground up, should be live early next year.

What changes behavior is peers. Charlie borrowed from Apollo-era NASA, where astronauts on the ground talked to the astronauts in space: sellers talking to sellers. People resist change when they can't see the value, which is why he keeps showing interactive wireframes and claiming wins out loud.

Efficiency is a milestone

Efficiency gains are table stakes. Charlie measures success by whether the org chart looks different. Palmer Holland is employee-owned and isn't doing this to replace people, so the question he asks is whether someone who supports a seller today could support a principal partner tomorrow.

When Kendall framed the goal as quality over speed, Charlie offered a different word: opportunity. He asked every part of the business what they'd do with 20 to 30% of their team's time back, with "more of what we do today" ruled out. Ask before the time frees up, he said, or "you will quietly reabsorb and keep doing whatever you were doing yesterday."

If he could build one thing for sellers, it would lower the barrier to sharing what they know. The value is in the white space between form fields. Sellers asked for call preparation first, and he expects it to be the gateway to the real goal: press a button and just talk. As for the CRM, a traditional one is gone in five years, he said, certainly in ten, though not by 2027 or 2028.

About Charlie Laurie

Charlie Laurie is Chief Innovation Officer at Palmer Holland, a specialty chemicals and ingredients distributor, where he covers technology, data, marketing, and delivery. He's roughly two years into a seven-phase data and AI program running through 2027. It started with product master data, moved through a lakehouse and analytics, and now puts a fully capable AI agent in front of the commercial teams.

About Growth Arc Advisors LLC

After a 30 year career as an executive in the chemical industry, founder Kendall Justiniano started Growth Arc Advisors to help chemical business leaders implement the new thinking required for changing fundamentals. We're experienced industry operators who know the old playbooks, their gaps, and the new pages required.

The firm delivers customized engagements for Materials Executives in 3 key areas:

Commercial Effectiveness: increasing growth revenue through proven next-level commercial practices, including digital sales & marketing.

Strategy: helping clients navigate threats generated by sustainability, digital, and global demand shifts.

Innovation: accelerating return on innovation through focused investment.