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POINT OF VIEW

Legacy modernization is a competitiveness issue, and CIOs must own the fix

Services-as-Software™ solutions like Wipro Intelligence™ show how to turn AI ambition into enterprise-scale change

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Executive summary

CIOs are not short on AI ambition, but legacy technology is quietly capping their AI agenda and influence. On one hand, the imperative to embrace AI is forcing CIOs to rearchitect for scale, and on the other, it is powering the tools that enable this shift. Generative and agentic AI are doing more than raising expectations. They're unlocking new ways to compress discovery, automate refactoring, and accelerate delivery across the software life cycle. AI is enabling the pivot away from modernization projects to platforms, allowing CIOs to adopt a Services-as-Software (SaS) approach, transforming modernization from an effort into an asset.

Our survey of 505 Global 2000 (G2000) organizations revealed that 80% remain stuck in pilot mode because legacy systems, brittle architectures, and siloed operating models are silently dragging them down. Another study of 608 G2000 organizations showed that, despite decades of "modernization," approximately 74% of IT budgets are spent keeping legacy systems alive rather than building what's next. This is the moment to break the cycle of effort-heavy change, but you can't do so without first paying off decades of accumulated technological and operational debt.

When your systems can't support autonomous decision making, rapid experimentation, or integrated data flows, no amount of algorithmic magic will get you to scale. Competitiveness depends on how fast and continuously you can evolve the core. However, organizations often approach modernization as a one-off, multi-year program that ends just as the next wave of change arrives. Most are still modernizing with isolated AI tools and pilots, not rethinking the model of how applications are built and run.

This is where Services-as-Software flips the script. It codifies modernization into platforms with reusable components, APIs, workflows, and guardrails, creating durable internal assets rather than transient project outputs. These platforms embed generative AI (GenAI) throughout the software development life cycle (SDLC), enable industrial-scale automation of the SDLC, and connect modernization directly to business outcomes. They redesign how change flows through your tech estate, with AI built in, not bolted on. Wipro Intelligence and its constituent AI-infused platforms, WEGA and WINGS, illustrate the shift to a platformized modernization approach.

AI won't deliver exponential value if it's layered on top of legacy. CIOs must accelerate modernization using platforms or risk becoming irrelevant in the AI conversation. Now is the time to pivot to a Services-as-Software approach, rewire operating models, redirect spend, and make platformized change your competitive advantage.

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Modernization is stuck on repeat, quietly killing your AI agenda

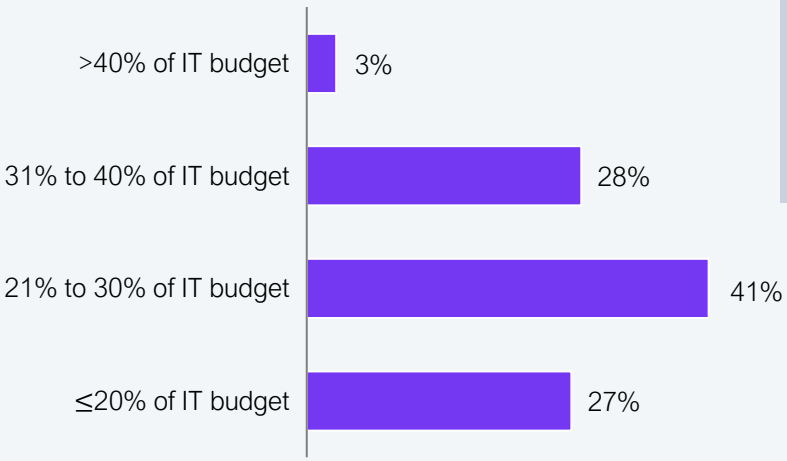
Every CIO has lived this story: millions spent on modernizing, sunsetting systems, migrating workloads, and rationalizing apps, but keeping the lights on still eats up three-quarters of the IT budget. Modernization fatigue is real. You can feel it in the way every new program starts to resemble the last one, with core systems running on tech long past its shelf life, integration layers that look like archaeological digs, and backlogs that never shrink. Boards ask, “Didn’t we already spend a fortune fixing this?” CIOs are then left explaining why change costs more each time, even as the payoff shrinks.

An HFS survey of 608 G2000 enterprise leaders shows that despite years of effort, nearly 74% of enterprise IT budgets remain tied to maintaining legacy systems. That leaves just a quarter to actually move the needle on innovation forward, and it shows. A separate survey of 505 Global 2000 enterprise decision makers reveals that only 20% have managed to scale AI, and fewer than 6% are embedding it deeply into operations. Everyone else is stuck running experiments on top of infrastructure that was never built for it (see Exhibits 1 and 2).

Exhibit 1: Enterprise IT is caught between dealing with technical debt and fulfilling transformation dreams

What percentage of your IT budget is currently allocated to modernization and transformation efforts?

Percentage of respondents



Overall, about 26%* of IT budget is allocated to modernization and transformation, while 74%* still goes to “run” efforts.

* Midpoint averages weighted by the % of respondents in each band
Sample: Decision makers from 608 Global 2000 enterprises
Source: HFS Research, 2026

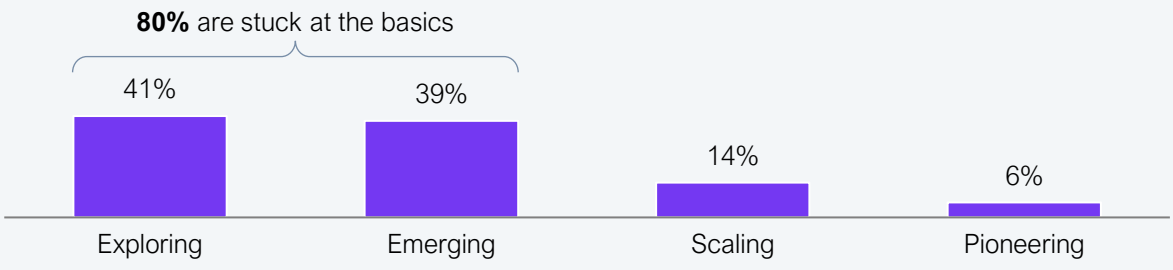
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The source of the problem is that most modernization programs are treated as a sequence of one-off projects. Even successful efforts leave behind inconsistent standards and more systems to wrangle. There's no flywheel or compounding benefit. Most enterprises have been modernizing for years without actually becoming modern, leaving their processes episodic, the platforms incomplete, and the estate opaque.

This might have been okay until now, but failed attempts at scaling AI just make the gap harder to ignore. You can't layer intelligence onto fragile foundations and expect scale. Discovery, refactoring, and testing are still effort-heavy and risky for most organizations, which means that timelines stretch, costs spike, and expectations outpace outcomes.

It's time to get off the modernization hamster wheel, pivot from viewing modernization as a set of heroic efforts, and transform it into a repeatable capability. AI gives CIOs a shot at doing just that, compressing what used to take months into weeks. However, that only works when AI is embedded into a platform that can carry the load. Don't fix the tech; fix how your organization approaches change.

Exhibit 2: AI remains stuck in experimentation mode, hindered by legacy processes, cultural resistance, and a lack of clear ROI



Typical characteristics

- Scattered pilots and tools not integrated into workflows
- Manual data environments and limited interoperability
- Lack of governance, security, or change readiness
- Ownership unclear or siloed in one function
- Deep discomfort or lack of trust in AI systems

Typical characteristics

- Use of agents in isolated tasks or limited production workflows
- Some foundational tools (e.g., task and conversational agents)
- Basic policies exist, but governance is reactive
- Partial automation of data and workflows
- Accountability is shared but misaligned across departments
- Cautious or selective trust in agentic systems

Typical characteristics

- Multiple agent types deployed in production
- Coordinated across functions or workflows
- Most data and APIs are automated and accessible
- Governance and cybersecurity are being proactively adapted
- Clear functional accountability (e.g., shared between IT and business)
- Trust mechanisms in place, with conditional autonomy

Typical characteristics

- Agents are being embedded across the enterprise, including orchestration and decision-making layers
- End-to-end workflow redesign, not just tool layering
- High data readiness, observability, and agent governance
- Security and change frameworks that anticipate autonomous operations
- High confidence and comfort with autonomous decision-making

Sample: Decision makers from 505 Global 2000 enterprises
Source: HFS Research, 2026

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Accelerate your modernization agenda before it breaks your AI ambition

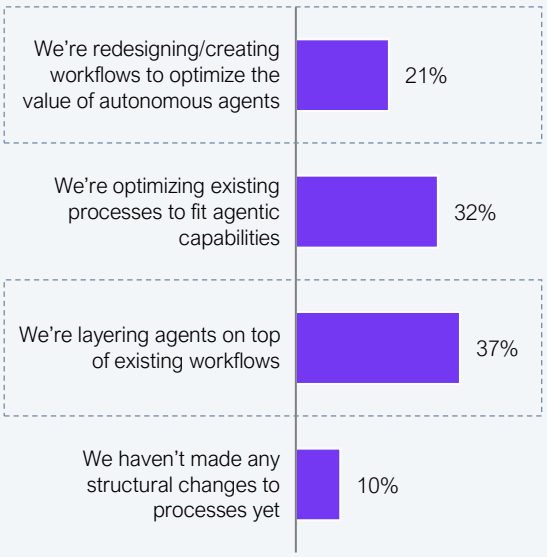
Modernization fatigue is bad enough on its own, but it now collides head-on with the AI agenda, compounding the problem. CIOs are being asked to scale GenAI and autonomous decisioning on infrastructure that wasn't built for it. The result is that promising use cases get stuck, security concerns rise, and pilot programs drag without payoff.

The dominant approach to agentic AI today is additive, not transformative. While 37% are layering agents onto legacy processes, only 21% are redesigning workflows to optimize for agentic capabilities. The top barriers to scaling agentic AI are data and infrastructure that are not ready for autonomy (44%), cybersecurity concerns (39%), and skills gaps or talent shortages (32%). Legacy processes (30%) and leadership misalignment (29%) further complicate adoption. This suggests that many enterprises are attempting to extract value from agents without reevaluating the structure of how work is done (see Exhibit 3).

Simply put, most organizations are trying to build an AI-driven enterprise on foundations that are still firmly legacy. Enterprises are not held back by vision but by foundational weaknesses. So, even when boards approve ambitious AI programs, legacy systems quietly cap the ceiling, and even compelling use cases can't reach enterprise scale.

Exhibit 3: Agentic AI retrofits will not deliver reinvention

How would you describe your organization's current approach to process transformation with agentic AI?



What are the biggest barriers your organization faces in scaling agentic AI?



Sample: Decision makers from 505 Global 2000 enterprises
Source: HFS Research, 2026

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Only about 20% of organizations have cracked the AI maturity code. These leaders scale and pioneer AI, grow revenue faster, and exceed expectations on AI initiatives far more often than their less-mature peers. Under the hood, these leaders share some common traits:

- They treat AI as a business strategy, not an IT side project, with joint IT-business leadership and board-level sponsorship.
- They invested in data integration and wide data accessibility across departments, not just pockets of analytics.
- They are more likely to run centralized AI investment and governance. In practice, this includes coherent platform and architecture decisions, not just model choices.
- They proactively manage talent strategies and training using the right set of tools to enhance productivity and effectiveness.

None of this is possible if the enterprise application estate is still a black box. Achieving AI maturity implies that a significant part of the core has already been standardized, instrumented, and exposed as services. In other words, mature adopters of AI have quietly made more progress on modernizing legacy estates, even if they don't badge it that way. CIOs must fix the foundation AI is built on and treat modernization as the enabler of AI, not its sidekick.

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If legacy is a debt, then AI must be part of the repayment plan

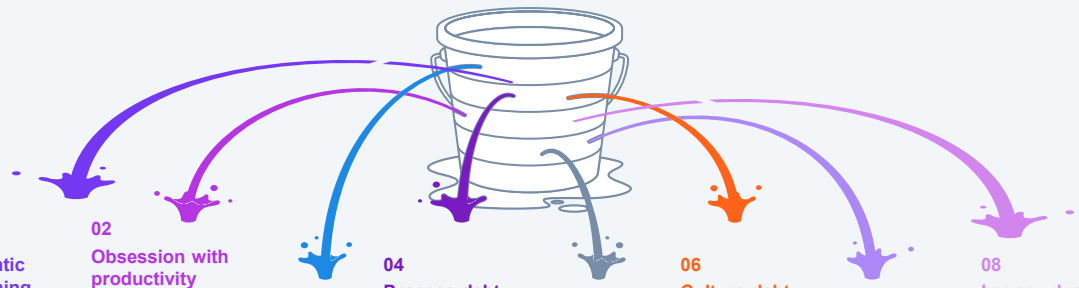
Despite all the hype and investments in AI, enterprises remain stuck in proof-of-concept purgatory. It's not the algorithms and platforms holding them back, but rather the outdated technology, entrenched organizational structures, and broken data foundations. The lack of a well-defined strategy for end-to-end orchestration of internal and partner agents further exacerbates the ability to enable autonomous and context-aware decision making. These ambitions will remain unfulfilled until enterprises confront the structural blockers they created for themselves (see Exhibit 4).

AI is rapidly changing the economics of modernization by compressing discovery, refactoring, and testing cycles that previously took months into days, delivering higher-quality output. It's transforming how we analyze codebases, data flows, and dependencies, and using that knowledge to generate, test, refactor, integrate, and maintain code.

An AI-infused modernization platform does four things that traditional programs don't:

- **Keeps a living map of the estate.** Automated discovery and code-intelligence engines continuously ingest application, database, integration, and usage metadata to maintain a current view of the estate, its dependencies, and its risk profile.

Exhibit 4: Legacy debt will continue to drain enterprise AI ambitions



01 Agentic washing
Everyone is AI-first. No one wants to be AI-second.

02 Obsession with productivity
Narrow business cases fixated on headcount.

03 Data debt
The AI gold rush is here, but it won't reward the data-rich. It will reward the data-ready.

04 Process debt
You can't automate chaos. AI is not a band-aid.

05 Tech debt
Introducing AI into a spaghetti of legacy systems doesn't create efficiency; it creates a butterfly effect of failures.

06 Culture debt
People aren't excited about AI when it's sold as a job killer.

07 Ecosystem challenges
You can't bolt AI onto yesterday's ecosystem and expect tomorrow's outcomes.

08 Legacy deal structures
Buying and selling AI-led solutions in "FTE equivalents" is like measuring streaming bandwidth in "DVDs shipped."

Source: HFS Research, 2026

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- **Codifies modernization patterns as reusable assets.** Common modernization journeys are converted into reusable reference architectures and automation templates. This, when combined with AI, enables cross-pollination of best practices and acceleration of transformation roadmaps.
- **Embeds AI across the SDLC.** AI interventions support the discovery of underlying business rules and logic, requirement summarization, architecture recommendation, code analysis and generation, test case and data generation, dynamic test prioritization, automated code review, deployment optimization, and observability (including self-healing). In most cases, human productivity improves by 10% to 35% across the SDLC phases, resulting in 30% to 35% faster deployments.
- **Embeds governance and economics.** A robust AI-infused platform embeds policy-as-code, security baselines, FinOps support, and compliance automation, enabling continuous risk profiling and control-gap assessment across cloud and application portfolios.

Used well, AI doesn't just accelerate individual tasks; it resets the trajectory of modernization itself. For CIOs and enterprise application leaders, AI represents the first real opportunity to scale transformation across the entire software life cycle, predict risk, and automate operations at speed. But to get there, CIOs must be deliberate. AI will remain stuck in pilots and hackathons if it's not integrated into a modernization platform that supports long-term enterprise change.

The growing presence of GenAI and AI agents makes it possible to continuously scan fragmented IT estates, automate low-level tasks, and keep the application landscape visible. But that value only compounds when AI capabilities are embedded in a platform, not scattered across tools and teams. When paired with cloud-native infrastructure and API-first design, it enables a shift away from "every change is a mini-project" toward something more industrialized.

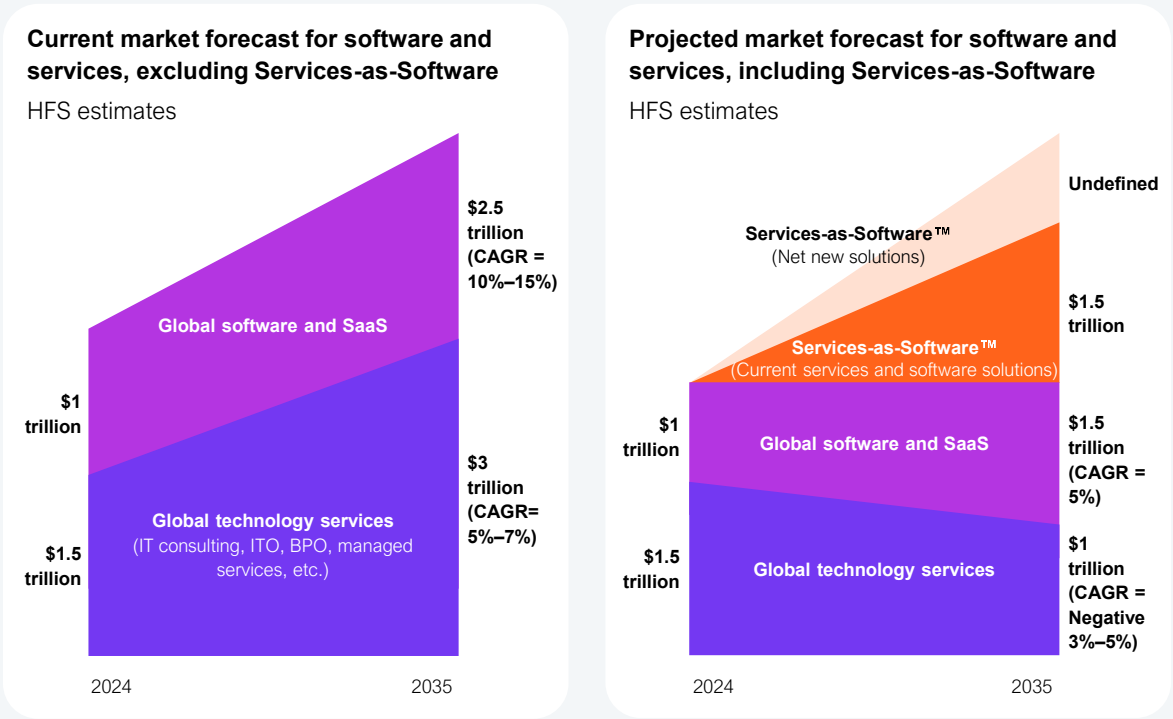
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Industrializing modernization with AI demands a SaS approach

Most modernization programs still run as one-off efforts: analyze some code, lift and shift, and patch over complexity. Even when they are successful, they leave behind more inconsistencies and work for the next team. That's what SaS is trying to solve. SaS turns change into a platform capability that gets smarter with every use. Besides streamlining delivery, the model reshapes the economics of IT services (see Exhibit 5).

Rather than expanding the overall spend envelope, SaS redirects value by compressing labor-heavy services; disrupting legacy application development and maintenance (ADM), infrastructure, and business process outsourcing models; and capturing growth that would otherwise accrue to standalone software platforms.

Exhibit 5: SaS will redirect value from traditional IT services and SaaS



Source: HFS Research, 2026

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HFS analysis shows that by 2035, roughly 75% of legacy ADM services and 25% of digital ADM services will be disrupted. The cause: AI, low-code, and platform delivery models that replace labor-centric execution. Traditional ADM growth slows to 4%, while SaS introduces 40% structural cost compression across disrupted work and unlocks 10% growth through reuse, automation, and ongoing optimization (see Exhibit 6).

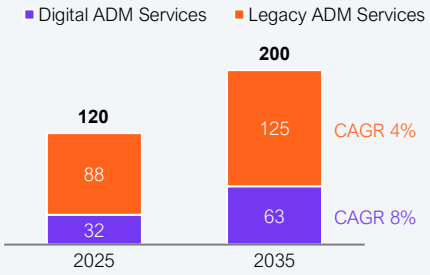
Activities like manual coding, ticket-driven support, and document-heavy governance will be replaced by AI-generated code, autonomous testing, self-healing systems, and embedded compliance. ADM will no longer be consumed as headcount and effort, but via subscriptions, platforms, and outcomes in a true SaS model.

Moreover, the SaS approach surfaces information that once resided in consulting artifacts, assessment frameworks, decomposition patterns, and regression suites, and encodes it into software capabilities. Every engagement doesn't just complete a project; it adds new rules, blueprints, and automations that the next team can reuse.

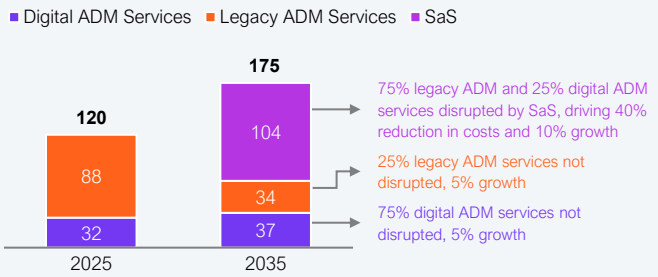
Over time, SaS shifts the model from buying hours to consuming software-delivered services that improve with each use. AI-infused, end-to-end platforms augmented by human-in-the-loop governance turn modernization into a compounding capability. This approach enables faster value realization for AI investments, where platforms, not projects, become the primary vehicle for delivering change.

Exhibit 6: SaS will convert people-intensive services into a software-delivered capability

Market forecast for ADM services (excluding Services-as-Software)
HFS estimates (US$B)



Market forecast for ADM services (including impact of Services-as-Software)
HFS estimates (US$B)



Legacy ADM services include

- Custom legacy application development (COBOL, .NET, Java-based monoliths)
- Application maintenance: Manual incident, problem, and change management
- Ticket-driven helpdesk and Level 1–3 support.
- Testing services (manual QA)
- Enhancements and upgrades: Manual patching, release management, and functional upgrades, ERP upgrades (SAP, Oracle) heavily reliant on people
- Siloed governance and documentation: Manual tracking of SLAs, performance, and compliance

Digital and technology-infused ADM services include

- Cloud-native development and modernization
- AI-infused development and operations (AIOps, MLOps)
- Agile and DevSecOps
- Low-code and no-code development
- RPA and intelligent maintenance
- Data and API-driven services

ADM Services-as-Software features

- Assemble, don't build: AI and low-code replace manual coding
- Testing disappears: Quality embedded through autonomous engines
- Apps heal themselves: Maintenance delivered as software, not tickets
- Govern by software: Policy and compliance enforced by code
- Pay like software: Outcomes delivered via subscriptions, not projects

Sample: HFS estimates
Source: HFS Research, 2026

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But not every AI-infused solution can do this. AI-infused modernization platforms are not point solutions. They are the backbone of how change flows through the application estate. A useful way to view this is through the lens of the modernization value chain, from assessment and strategy through execution to post-modernization optimization (see Exhibit 7).

Viewed this way, a robust, AI-infused modernization platform doesn't just fix legacy; it rewires the entire enterprise app life cycle so that future changes are cheaper, safer, and more AI-ready by design. It reimagines who does what in the process and turns the human-heavy delivery model into a human+AI augmented dream team.

This shift improves delivery and changes how enterprises build, secure, and scale AI. Modernization becomes the precondition for AI value, not the price of admission.

Exhibit 7: Platform-driven transformation requires rethinking the enterprise modernization life cycle

1. Assessment and strategy

- Automated portfolio assessment.
- Dependency maps and criticality scoring for applications, data stores, and integrations.
- Business-case modelling that links modernization options (rehost, refactor, re-architect, retire) to cost, risk, and value outcomes.

2. Planning and target architecture

- Target architectures that are API-first, event-driven, and microservices-based, defined using industry reference patterns and AI-assisted design tools.
- Cloud migration strategies that align R-lanes (rehost, replatform, refactor, etc.) with AI readiness and operating-model needs, not just infrastructure refresh.

3. Application transformation and modernization

- Automated refactoring and language conversion using GenAI-integrated tools to transform legacy applications into cloud-ready or cloud-native services.
- Pattern-based decomposition into microservices, backed by persona-based knowledge artefacts and blueprints that capture what was learned.

4. DevSecOps, testing, and deployment

- CI/CD with embedded security and compliance to orchestrate toolchains and enforce standard pipelines.
- AI-driven testing via platforms for automated test-case generation, self-healing scripts, predictive defect analytics, and real-time dashboards.

5. Post-modernization run and optimization

- Continuous observability and AIOps to monitor performance, anomalies, and user experience.
- Cost and optimization to adjust cloud spend, scale, and configuration.
- Feedback loops that feed back into the portfolio engine, ensuring the estate does not drift back into unmanaged sprawl.



Source: HFS Research, 2026

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To scale AI, CIOs must shift operating models, not just tools

Embracing a platformized approach to modernization requires more than better tooling. CIOs must rethink how change flows through their organization. Emphasis must be given to redefining roles, governance, and delivery economics in a world where AI accelerates everything but also demands tighter control. Done right, this approach doesn't replace engineers but reshapes what they do and how they do it.

An AI-infused platform can encode architectural decision-making by recognizing patterns in legacy code, proposing target-state architectures, generating optimized cloud configs, and enforcing compliance by design. But it can only deliver that value if CIOs make a set of deliberate operating model choices:

- **Decide your platform role.** Will you be a platform owner (building and running your own internal platform), a platform consumer (leveraging a partner or hyperscaler platform), or an ecosystem participant (plugging specialized capabilities into others' platforms)? The answer could likely be a blend of all three. The key is to make that mix deliberate, not accidental.
- **Choose your axis of focus.** Horizontal platforms are ideal for addressing common concerns such as DevSecOps, observability, and integration. These can be fully automated. In contrast, domain-specific platforms such as lending, claims, supply chain, or manufacturing execution, are where human+AI teams can deliver optimal value to the business. Choosing the right platform is critical.
- **Establish a platform operating model.** Treat the platform as a product, with roadmaps, backlogs, and funding distinct from project budgets. Define clear interfaces between platform work and project work so that change flows predictably through the platform. Stand up long-lived, cross-functional platform engineering teams that work closely with domain teams. This isn't optional.
- **Rewire metrics and incentives.** Move beyond project-level service-level agreements and key performance indicators that are box-ticking exercises toward measuring business impact, such as time-to-change, cost per change, resilience, regulatory response time, and experience quality. Blend provider and internal performance incentives with these metrics, rather than focusing solely on on-time delivery and budget adherence.
- **Clarify risk, intellectual property (IP), and economics.** Understand what IP you expect to own versus what you will access under license. Explore outcome-based models and shared savings constructs for modernization at scale, particularly where partners bring in mature platforms.
- **Industrialize patterns that work.** Turn successful approaches into reusable accelerators, templates, and governance rules. Make them the "default way" for subsequent modernization waves. Apply the collaboration patterns, controls, and talent practices developed here to other high-value workflows beyond IT, creating a path from AI-infused legacy renewal to human+AI at enterprise scale.

Without these foundations, an AI-infused platform risks becoming "yet another tool" rather than the backbone of a human+AI enterprise.

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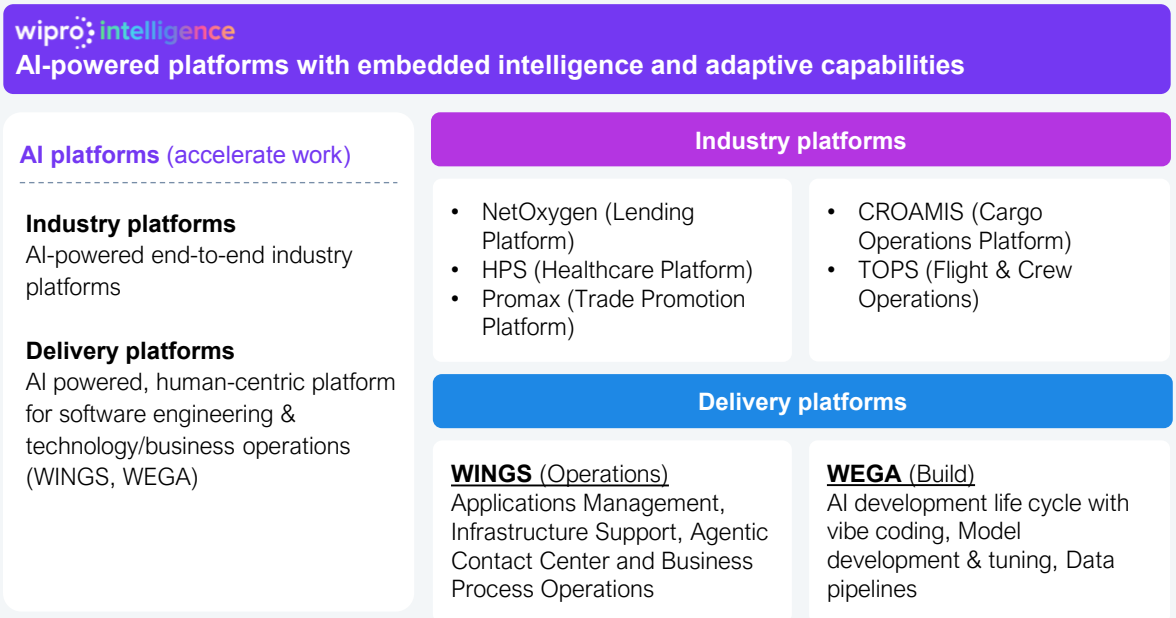
What this looks like in practice: platformized modernization at scale

Some providers are bringing SaS to life. Wipro Intelligence is one example that packages GenAI-powered software development and AI-led operations into a single, reusable platform (see Exhibit 8).

At the core are WEGA and WINGS:

- WEGA is an agent native delivery platform that unifies Wipro's AI agents, intelligent assistants, and partner tools to accelerate delivery, enhance quality, and scale innovation across software and product engineering, cloud, data/AI, and enterprise applications.
- WINGS is an AI-powered delivery platform that transforms service delivery from reactive to proactive, ensuring operational excellence and reliability."

Exhibit 8: Wipro Intelligence brings SaS to life



The above-mentioned list is not exhaustive.

Source: HFS Research, 2026

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Wipro Intelligence platforms aren't only running in sandboxes. A large US bank has deployed the platform across retail banking, commercial lending, and compliance. The program used GenAI across the SDLC, automated onboarding, flagged fraud patterns, and accelerated loan approvals using document intelligence. The results show what's possible when modernization becomes a capability (see Exhibit 9). That's what SaS looks like when it works. CIOs must scale change by shifting how modernization is delivered and governed, not by scaling scope.

Exhibit 9: SaS-powered modernization in action

Client example: Large bank in the US

Starting point

The bank needed to modernize operations across retail banking, commercial lending, and digital transformation initiatives. Key pain points included manual customer onboarding, fraud detection, compliance automation, and operational inefficiencies.

Approach

The bank took a platform-led approach to modernize customer journeys, including the underlying technology systems. It leveraged the WEGA platform in four key areas:

- AI-powered SDLC: Infused AI across the software development life cycle, from requirements generation to automated testing and deployment.
- Predictive analytics for financial crime compliance: AI identified fraud anomalies and automated regulatory reporting.
- GenAI for customer support: Agent assist tools reduced onboarding time and improved ticket resolution.
- Document intelligence: Automated extraction and classification of financial documents to streamline loan processing.

Business outcomes

25% increase in customer satisfaction scores through personalized AI interactions.

30% reduction in manual processing time; faster loan approvals and improved customer experience.

40% improvement in decision accuracy leveraging advanced data insights.

Source: Wipro and HFS, 2026

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How to keep your modernization platform relevant, not just running

As AI capabilities, business expectations, and regulations evolve, ongoing discipline is needed to ensure sustained competitiveness. CIOs must establish ongoing discipline along with delivery velocity. To achieve this, there are three non-negotiables:

1. Establish a platform council with representation from IT, business, risk, and compliance to create a rulebook for how new tools, services, and partners plug into the platform. The first order of business must be to clamp down on ad hoc tool sprawl and shadow platforms that fragment data and workloads.
2. The beauty of AI is in its ability to learn and evolve continuously. The platform must be able to capture usage metrics, success and failure patterns, and AI performance metrics, and evolve based on real-world behavior.
3. Continuously scan and adapt to new AI capabilities, industry reference architectures, and regulatory changes, and decide what to absorb and when. Maintain stable, supported release pipelines while providing sandboxes where teams can trial new capabilities without risking the core.

Building the platform is the start. Keeping it relevant is what defines your long-term impact. CIOs who do this well won't just keep up with AI innovation; they'll shape it. Their platforms will become the primary mechanism for deploying new AI capabilities into production safely, and for turning human+AI collaboration into the default way work gets done.

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The Bottom Line: Institutionalize change, not projects.

CIOs must break the project mindset and adopt platforms that make modernization sustainable and AI at scale a reality. This shift is about more than just accelerating delivery. It requires fundamentally altering how change flows through the enterprise.

AI won't deliver exponential returns if it's layered on top of a fragmented core. When modernization becomes a platform capability, delivered as SaS, enterprises can then steadily pay down legacy debt, ensure AI-readiness, and move beyond pilot theater to AI, genuinely reshaping how the business runs.

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