

AI Without the Hype

A Practical, People-First Guide for
Broadband Providers

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26 years at NISC



Leading Product AI adoption across NISC's Enterprise Applications



NISC serves 900+ communications providers and energy cooperatives across the US and Canada



Focused on practical AI that helps real teams get more done



"Do you have enough **time, people,
and resources** to get everything
done?"

If you are like most of the organizations I talk to, the answer is no.

What AI Actually Is (And Isn't)



AI Is

- Pattern recognition at scale
- A tool that learns from data
- A way to automate repetitive tasks
- A workforce multiplier for small teams
- Available and affordable today



AI Isn't

- Magic that replaces your team
- A solution looking for a problem
- Only for large companies with big budgets
- Something you need a data science team for
- A reason to skip policy and governance

The AI Spectrum

"AI Solves Everything"

"AI can solve all our problems today"

Reality:

- Human oversight is still critical
- Not ideal for every use case
- Implementation takes time

"AI is Too Risky"

"It's a giant security risk. Avoid it."

Reality:

- Risks can be managed
- Low-risk starting points exist
- Learning now prepares you for the future

The Truth Is in the Middle

Where AI Delivers Real Value for Small Teams



Customer Self-Service

Answer common questions without adding headcount



Internal Knowledge Access

Find policies, procedures, and meeting history instantly



Operational Consistency

Standardize how your team handles routine tasks



Data Analysis

Get insights from your own data without an analyst on staff



Field Workforce Support

Voice-driven documentation, smarter scheduling, faster closeouts



Decision Support

Better preparation for board meetings and rate reviews

AI as a Workforce Multiplier

In tight labor markets, AI does not replace people. It makes the people you have more effective.

1

Fewer People, More Coverage

Self-service AI handles routine inquiries, so your staff focuses on complex issues.

2

Faster Knowledge Access

New employees get up to speed faster when AI can surface institutional knowledge on demand. No more "ask Sharon, she knows where that file is."

3

Reduced Manual Work

Scheduling, forms, reports, documentation. The tasks that drain your team's time every single day. AI handles the repetitive parts.

4

Better Decisions, Faster

AI synthesizes information across documents, meetings, and data so your team walks into every conversation more prepared and more confident.

Getting Ready for AI

What to have in place before you purchase or deploy

Start with Policy



Data Guardrails

- What data can be used?
- Where can it go?
- Who has access?



Acceptable Use

- Which tools are approved?
- What use cases are allowed?
- What requires approval?



Governance

- Who makes decisions?
- How do we monitor usage?
- What's the review process?

Policy before technology. Always.

Your Most Important Decision

What happens with your data?

On-Premises Only

Data never leaves your environment

- Highest control
- Higher costs
- Limits some AI capabilities

Trusted Cloud Partners

Approved vendors with strong guarantees

- Balanced approach
- Verify data handling
- Read the fine print

Public AI Services

General-purpose AI tools

- Lowest cost
- Limited control
- Assume training use

Building Your Team's Skills



Prompt Engineering

The Most Critical Skill

Learning to communicate effectively with AI is like learning a new language. The better you ask, the better the results.

This does not require technical expertise. It requires clear thinking and good questions. Your team already has both.

Also Important:

- Understanding context and when to use AI
- Organizing your documentation and knowledge
- Iterative refinement of results
- Critical evaluation of AI output
- Knowing when AI is not the right tool

What NOT to Do First

Common mistakes I see organizations make with AI



Buying before you have a policy

If you don't know what data can go where, you're not ready to buy an AI product. Get your guardrails in place first.



Trying to boil the ocean

Pick one problem. Solve it. Learn from it. Then expand. The organizations that start small and learn are the ones that succeed.



Chasing the demo instead of the use case

Demos are designed to impress you. Start with the problem your team actually has, then evaluate whether AI solves it.



Skipping your people

If your team doesn't understand why AI matters or how it helps them, adoption dies on the vine. Bring them along early.



Questions for AI Vendors

A great demo does not make a production-ready product

About the Data & Technology



Data Questions

- What data does it need?
- What format does it need?
- Where does the data go?
- Who else can see it?
- Is it used for training?
- Do you already have access, or do I need to give it?



Technology Questions

- What AI technologies are under the hood?
- Which third-party vendors power this?
- How does AI access the underlying data? Are the APIs built for AI workloads or retrofitted from legacy integrations?
- Can I drive the demo myself?

About Production Readiness

A great demo does not make a production-ready product.

Who's Using This?

- Who have you tested with?
- How many production users?
- What results are they seeing?
- Can I talk to references?

How Specific Is It?

- What exactly does it solve?
- Consistent results?
- Is it resilient?
- What's your accuracy rate?

Can I Try It?

- Can I drive the demo myself?
- What's the pilot process?
- How long until production?
- How long to onboard?

About Long-Term Costs

AI costs are unpredictable and vendor-dependent

Understand Your Costs

- What are the costs for core AI services?
- Do costs scale with usage?
- Are there third-party fees?
- What about data storage and processing?

Ask Tough Questions

- What cost protections can you provide?
- Are there usage caps?
- What happens if AI provider prices increase?
- Can you commit to multi-year pricing?

What We're Learning in Practice

Real examples from NISC's AI journey



What NISC Is Seeing with AI

329

Developers
Using AI Coding Tools

130+

Member Organizations
Using AI Assistant

~6K

Member Queries
Every Month

Developer velocity trending upward across two independent data sources. AI Assistant adoption growing every quarter.

The progress is real. The direction is clear.

AI Where Your Team Already Works

The best AI doesn't ask your team to learn a new tool. It shows up inside the tools they already use.



Internal Knowledge

Connect AI to your SharePoint, CallToOrder, and internal docs. Your team asks questions in plain English and gets sourced answers.



Customer Self-Service

AI-powered conversations that let your members get answers without calling your office. Available around the clock.



Data Access

Query your operational data in plain English. No IT ticket. No waiting. The people closest to the work get the data they need.



Operational Efficiency

Smarter scheduling, voice-driven forms, intelligent service recommendations. Less manual work, more productive hours.

The People Side of AI Adoption



Bring Them Along Early

Don't announce AI adoption after the purchase. Involve your team in identifying the problems worth solving. People support what they help build.



Find Your AI Champions

Identify the people on your team who are curious and excited about AI. Give them room to explore, experiment, and find wins. Their enthusiasm is contagious.



Make It Safe to Experiment

Low-risk use cases first. Let people try, fail, and learn without consequences. The goal is comfort, not perfection.



Celebrate Small Wins

When someone saves an hour, tell that story. When a member gets an answer at 9pm on a Saturday, share that win. Small wins build momentum.

Principles That Matter

Whether you build, buy, or partner, hold your AI to these standards.



Human in the Loop

AI recommends. You decide. Every critical action requires human approval. Always.



Data Sovereignty

Your data should never be used to train external AI models. Verify this with every vendor. In writing.



Transparency

AI should cite its sources and explain its reasoning. No black boxes. No hidden logic.



Member Governance

As a cooperative, our Members should have a voice in how AI is used. We build with them, not just for them.

Your Next 90 Days

Pragmatic next steps. No big budgets required.

First 30 Days

Foundation

- Draft your AI use policy
- Decide your data boundaries
- Identify one high-impact, low-risk use case
- Start a conversation with your team about AI

Days 30-60

First Steps

- Pilot one AI tool in a real workflow
- Invest in prompt engineering training
- Find your AI champions
- Document what you learn

Days 60-90

Evaluate & Expand

- Measure results honestly
- Share wins with your team and board
- Formalize your governance process
- Plan your next AI investment

Key Takeaways

1

Start with policy before technology

2

Make intentional decisions about your data

3

Invest in prompt engineering skills across your team

4

Ask tough questions of every AI vendor

5

Start small, learn, and scale what works

6

Bring your people along. AI adoption is a team effort.

Questions?

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