RESPONSIVE
EXCHANGE

21 October 2026

AI is rewriting how businesses compete

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



RESPONSIVE

About Responsive Exchange

On 21 October 2026, Responsive hosted the first Responsive Exchange. The morning seminar brought together Matas Group's AI and Store Operations leadership and a room of senior marketing, technology and operations leaders from Denmark and the rest of the Nordics.

The format was simple. Three short talks from people who work with AI transformation every day, followed by an open Q&A. The aim was to look at what AI in business really involves once the hype settles and the real work begins.

This summary captures the key insights and recommendations from the morning.

This summary reflects the insights and recommendations shared on the day. In keeping with the closed-room spirit of the session, it does not include confidential project detail.

PROGRAMME

Peter Schlegel Responsive	AI from a leadership perspective
Staffan Backman Matas Group	Matas Group's AI transformation journey
Nina Borgström KICKS (part of Matas Group) **Niels Iversen** Matas Group	Store Information Assistant: AI at the front line
All speakers	Open Q&A



AI from a leadership perspective

Peter set the scene with what Responsive sees across its client base and the conversations that matter most to leaders right now.



PETER SCHLEGEL

Managing Partner, Responsive Consulting Group

Peter is Managing Partner at Responsive Consulting Group. For nearly two decades, he's worked at the intersection of business strategy and digital technology, advising executive teams and boards on large transformation initiatives across sectors like financial services, retail and hospitality. He's especially skilled at building the business case for growth and turning it into real impact.

Where businesses really are with AI

Peter opened by sharing three patterns Responsive sees repeatedly, across very different clients and industries.

From experimenting to scaling. This includes two sub-trends: the first one is that most businesses are going from pilots to taking projects into production-scale deployment. This demands far more from both the business and IT than most organisations expected. In terms of time, resources, and cost. Some are early in this transition, others are further along. The second is individuals going from chatting with AI to developing AI agents that perform work semi-autonomously. This presents new challenges, new risks, and the same demands for more robust design and development patterns.

A sobering cost reality. The early promise that AI would transform organisations at a fraction of the cost hasn't held up. As with earlier waves of digital transformation, the cost of making a solution work in a real organisation still dwarfs the cost of the software itself – and token costs are becoming a real line item in their own right.

Talent shortage is the constraint. Demand for AI talent dramatically outweighs supply. As leaders try to navigate this dilemma, they are forced into one of two suboptimal paths: either they slow down and calibrate ambition to talent capacity, or they move forward with sub-par talent and/or outside help from consultancies.

Three AI conversations we are having with leadership teams

A central part of consulting is helping navigate complex situations and challenges. These are three conversations Responsive are repeatedly having with leadership in our clients' organisations.

The business responsibility

AI cannot be delegated to IT. The business has to lean into the technology and take real ownership of the transformation.

Organising for AI

Getting the operating model right matters more than most leaders expect, and it requires a far wider set of capabilities than simply data science or engineering. It spans data and technology as well as business strategy and change management.

Portfolio management

No organisation can do everything at once. Ideas are rarely the problem. The hard part is building the discipline to evaluate them honestly, prioritise ruthlessly and stop initiatives that aren't working.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

You should think about AI as a leadership priority rather than a technical endeavour. What you choose to focus on, and how you organise around it, will determine your success.



Matas Group's AI transformation journey

How the Nordics' leading beauty and wellness retailer went from early experimentation to a shared, organisation-wide approach to AI.



STAFFAN BACKMAN

SVP, Group AI & Analytics, Matas Group

Staffan is SVP, Group AI & Analytics at Matas Group, based in Stockholm. He leads the group's strategic work on AI, data analytics and digital transformation. Since Matas' 2023 acquisition of KICKS Group, he has driven the integration of AI solutions across the Nordic markets. He's especially excited about ensuring that Matas Group has an AI-ready data foundation that will allow the organisation to work on optimising both the customer journey and internal processes.

From strategy to scale

Staffan walked through Matas Group's AI journey since the group set a shared direction in 2024. The ambition was to become a leader in AI-driven retail in the Nordics by using AI to elevate the customer experience and the way the organisation works. The strategy rested on three pillars: stronger foundations for AI to run on, higher organisational productivity and a better customer experience.

To drive it, Matas Group built a cross-functional AI Centre of Excellence in early 2025. Responsive helped design the operating model for the Centre. The set-up deliberately avoided two extremes. Fully centralised ownership tends to struggle with adoption in the business. Fully decentralised efforts tend to lack coordination and duplicate work.

The Centre combined central expertise in the form of AI project managers and GenAI engineers with a network of champions across the business. A dedicated AI academy, clear governance and a managed process for rolling out new tools supported the work.

In Staffan's words, the result was AI moving from a handful of front-running teams to everyday use across the organisation. He was also open about the fact that not everything worked as planned. Several initiatives were stopped or substantially reworked along the way. Staffan sees that as part of the approach. The only way to learn what actually delivers value is to try things that sometimes don't work.

RESPONSIVE'S ROLE

Responsive designed the operating model for Matas Group's AI Centre of Excellence and has had consultants deployed within the Centre to help build capabilities and ensure capacity.

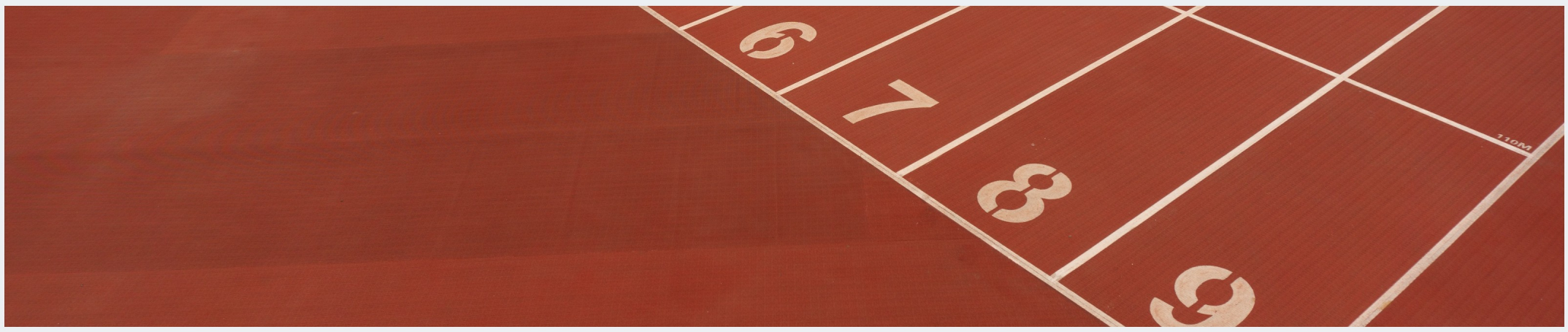
A new phase: ownership moves into the business

Staffan was clear that the model that got Matas Group this far will not be the one that takes it further. AI now arrives from every direction at once, with new tools, new use cases and new expectations from every function. A single central team can no longer absorb it all.

The shift underway moves AI ownership into every business unit, anchored by executive leadership. One cross-functional AI team provides coordination and mandate and no longer does all the work itself.



FOUR LESSONS FROM THE JOURNEY SO FAR



1

Ownership and mandate have to be unambiguous.

2

AI will become part of everyday tools and processes instead of sitting apart from them.

3

Investing in coding capability pays off because it helps more people build, beyond a small technical group.

4

An organisation's capacity to transform matters more than the technology itself. Leadership, prioritisation, operating models and adoption decide the outcome.

Safe access to real data unlocks new value

The last part of Staffan's talk made a simple but important distinction. On its own, AI is useful for drafts, summaries and personal productivity, but it is limited to what you can copy and paste into it. The real leverage comes from connecting AI safely to an organisation's own data. Then it can run workflows that touch the real business and grow in value over time.

That is harder than it sounds. Enterprise data is scattered across many systems, and finding the right data is often harder than using the AI itself. Matas Group's answer has been to build a secure data and release platform. It works as a governed gateway that gives AI tools safe access to enterprise data with central oversight, so each team does not have to solve the connection problem on its own. A number of internal tools already run on it, covering sales reporting, visibility of AI adoption and AI-generated marketing assets. More data sources are still to be connected.

AI ON ITS OWN

Drafts, summaries and personal productivity. Limited to what you copy and paste into it.

AI CONNECTED SAFELY TO YOUR DATA

Workflows that touch the real business and grow in value over time.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

When the pace of change within AI is almost unfathomably fast, the need for a clear direction increases. We recommend that you begin by establishing a dedicated team with a wide capability set to drive the AI agenda, working closely with the teams in the business.

Store Information Assistant: AI at the front line

The most concrete case of the morning: how an AI assistant is changing the working day for store employees across the Nordics.



NINA BORGSTRÖM

SVP, Sales & Store Operations, KICKS (Matas Group)

Nina is Senior Vice President of Sales and Store Operations at KICKS, part of Matas Group, leading stores across Sweden, Norway and Finland. With deep retail expertise and a genuine passion for people, she focuses on creating great customer experiences. She's especially interested in how tech and AI can make each interaction more personal, relevant, and efficient in stores.



NIELS IVERSEN

AI Project Manager, Matas Group

Niels is AI Project Manager at Matas Group, educated at Copenhagen Business School. What drives him is understanding people and purpose before reaching for a solution, so the implementation truly serves the user. Outside of work, he rides his bike, enjoys a good coffee, and follows Superligaen closely.



A very human problem

Nina and Niels presented the Store Information Assistant, or SIA. The problem it solves is familiar to any large retailer with many stores. Store employees spend a good part of their day searching for information spread across the intranet, news updates, the e-commerce site and product systems. That is time they could be spending with customers.

SIA started as a simple pilot, a chatbot answering operational questions from the intranet. It has since become the stores' first line of support. It draws on the intranet, company news, the e-commerce site and the product information system and gives employees fast, reliable answers. Instead of searching for information, they can now simply ask. Responsive drove the project and advised on the technical architecture and implementation.

Transformation requires much more than an AI product

Nina and Niels made it clear that the technology was the easy part of SIA. The hard part was everything around it. Getting the data clean, current and consistent turned out to matter more than almost anything else, because an assistant is only as good as what it draws on. Getting buy-in from store and area managers mattered just as much. As they put it, adoption is not the same thing as installation. A tool only creates value once people change how they work with it.

That is why responsibility for SIA was deliberately split three ways. The AI team keeps improving the tool and acts on feedback. Matas Group's headquarters keeps the underlying content accurate and current. The stores drive usage, onboard colleagues and flag what is missing. None of the three can make SIA succeed on their own.

HOW RESPONSIBILITY FOR SIA IS SPLIT

THE AI TEAM

Keeps improving the tool and acting on feedback.

HEADQUARTERS

Keeps the underlying content accurate and current.

THE STORES

Drive usage, onboard colleagues and flag what's missing.

THE BUSINESS CASE

100,000

hours freed up every year

60

FTEs' worth of time

No roles have been cut. The time freed up goes back into the stores, giving staff more time to advise and serve customers.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

While the technical aspects of an AI project are new, the transformational ones are not. Success when developing AI solutions for front-line staff hinges on navigating all four steps: development, installation, adoption and transformation.

Let’s continue the conversation

Responsive Exchange was an experiment. We wanted to see if a small, closed-room format could spark useful conversations about AI in business. Judging by the questions and discussion on the day, it did, and we are already looking forward to the next one.

A big thank you to Staffan Backman and Niels Iversen from Matas Group and Nina Borgström from KICKS for sharing their time and experience so generously, and for being open about what worked and what didn’t.

If anything in this summary raises a question, or you’d like to talk through how it applies to your own organisation, don’t hesitate to reach out.

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READ MORE

AI content scaling doesn’t fail where you think it does

Multi-market AI content scaling is usually approved as a technology project. So when quality, speed or backlog problems appear, the tools get the blame. In reality, the gaps are business decisions nobody has made yet, and that decision layer has to be in place before you scale.

By Sandra Kristensen, Engagement Manager

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