DOCUMENT 01 · AMBITION LEVELS

Ambition levels

Optimise, Augment and Transform: three types of bet with different cost, risk, timescale and resistance, and how to tell them apart with evidence

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3	5	1	3
ambition levels	classification questions	level per use case	different progression criteria

IN THIS DOCUMENT

01 Purpose

02 What an ambition level is

03 Optimise

04 Augment

05 Transform

06 Comparison of the three levels

07 Not a ladder

08 How to classify a use case

09 Borderline cases

10 The ambition of a sphere and portfolio balance

11 Common mistakes

12 Related documents

13 Version control

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01

Purpose

This document explains the **three ambition levels** of SPHERES: what each one means, what changes in the organisation, where its value lies, what risks it carries, how it is decided and how it is recognised with evidence. It also explains how to classify a use case and what the most common mistakes are.

The levels apply to spheres **01 to 07**. Spheres 08 and 09 are assessed with their own grades (document 04).

02

What an ambition level is

An ambition level describes **what an AI use case changes in the business**. It does not describe the technology it uses, what it costs or how novel it appears.

Three ambition levels

Three types of bet, not a ladder: investment, uncertainty and organisational resistance increase from left to right

	Optimise Do the same faster, cheaper or with fewer errors	**Augment** People do what they could not do before	**Transform** Changes what is offered, how it competes or how it is organised
Main value	Avoided cost	Cost and performance	New revenue and operating model
Investment	● ○ ○	● ● ○	● ● ●
Uncertainty	● ○ ○	● ● ○	● ● ●
Organisational resistance	● ○ ○	● ● ○	● ● ●
Who decides	Business area management	Management, with the AI committee	Board or senior management

Source: SPHERES

The same technology can serve different levels. A generative AI agent that drafts responses for the customer service team is **Optimise**: the service and the job are the same. A classical statistical model that makes it possible to launch pay-per-kilometre insurance is **Transform**: the customer receives an offering that did not exist before.

> **Why it matters.** If the level were assigned according to the technology, any programme with generative AI would be presented as a transformation and the portfolio would look much more ambitious than it is. Defining the level by its effect on the business is what enables the board to know whether the company is transforming or only becoming more efficient.

03

Optimise

Definition. Doing what is already done, faster, more cheaply or with fewer errors. What is done and who does it do not change.

Aspect	Description
What changes	The efficiency of a task or a process.
Where the value lies	Mainly in avoided cost, cycle time and error reduction.
Uncertainty	Low: the starting situation is known and the effect can be compared.
Organisational resistance	Low or localised in the teams affected.
How it is decided	Area management, within the approved portfolio framework.
Criterion for proceeding	Positive annual net benefit within the horizon set by management.
If it is retired	The company goes back to doing the same thing with the previous cost and time.

Illustrative examples

Sphere	Example	Why it is Optimise
01 · Customer	Automatic classification and routing of the enquiries that arrive by email.	The customer receives the same service; the assignment time is reduced.
02 · Product and service	Automated testing that detects defects before launch.	The product is the same; it is produced at lower cost and with fewer failures.

Sphere	Example	Why it is Optimise
03 · People	Automatic generation of periodic reports that used to be produced by hand.	The job is the same; low-value work disappears.
04 · Operations	Automatic reading of invoices and reconciliation with orders.	The process is the same; the unit cost and the error rate fall.
05 · Data	Detection and removal of duplicate customer records.	Existing data is managed better and with less effort.

Risks specific to Optimise

- **Counting released hours as savings.** If the released time is not converted into actual lower cost or an explicit reassignment, the savings do not exist in the income statement.
- **Shifting the bottleneck.** Automating an isolated step speeds up the queue for the next step without improving the process as a whole.
- **Accumulating invisible dependencies.** Many small automations end up supporting critical processes without anyone having decided so.

> **Why it matters.** Optimise is the natural entry point to AI and usually funds everything else. But a portfolio made up only of Optimise produces a more efficient company with the same business model, exposed to a competitor using AI to change the rules of the market.

04

Augment

Definition. People do what they could not do before. Human work does not disappear: it is extended and the role changes.

Aspect	Description
What changes	The role, the capabilities and sometimes the design of a complete process. The business model does not change.
Where the value lies	Combined: cost and performance (productivity, quality, conversion, decision quality).
Uncertainty	Medium: the value depends on people genuinely adopting the new way of working.

Aspect	Description
Organisational resistance	Medium: it requires changes in habits, training and sometimes the job description.
How it is decided	Management, with visibility for the AI committee.
Criterion for proceeding	Actual adoption and performance improvement measured against the starting situation.
If it is retired	People lose a capability that is already part of their work.

Illustrative examples

Sphere	Example	Why it is Augment
01 · Customer	Before each visit, account managers receive an analysis of each customer's likely needs and churn risk.	They hold a sales conversation that they could not prepare before.
03 · People	A copilot enables risk analysts to review complex transactions that they previously referred to specialists.	The content of the job changes; the business is the same.
04 · Operations	Planners simulate demand and supply scenarios before deciding.	They decide with an analytical capability they did not have.
06 · Knowledge	An internal legal assistant gives business teams access to criteria that only the experts knew.	People access expert knowledge they did not have before.
07 · Decision	The system presents options with their risk and probability, and a person chooses and keeps a record.	How decisions are made changes, without delegating the decision.

Risks specific to Augment

- **Measuring licences instead of usage.** Rolling out a copilot to the whole workforce does not augment anyone if it is not used or is used for the same things as before.
- **Neglecting training and change management.** Without them, adoption stalls and the investment remains a cost.
- **Not updating the role.** If the job is still described, assessed and remunerated as before, people go back to the previous way of working.

> **Why it matters.** Augment is the level at which most value is lost silently. The technology works, but the value depends on people, and that value does not materialise if actual adoption is not measured and work is not redesigned. It is also the level that best protects the culture, because it treats people as beneficiaries and not only as a cost.

05

Transform

Definition. What the company offers, how it competes or how it is organised changes fundamentally. It has the greatest potential and the greatest risk.

Aspect	Description
What changes	The value proposition, the revenue model or the operating model.
Where the value lies	Mainly in new revenue, new markets and changes to the operating model.
Uncertainty	High: it depends on the market, the customer or the organisation itself.
Organisational resistance	High: it affects structures, incentives and decision-making power.
How it is decided	Explicit decision of the board or senior management.
Criterion for proceeding	Learning milestones, investment limit per stage and market evidence.
If it is retired	An offering, a channel or a way of organising is lost.

Illustrative examples

Sphere	Example	Why it is Transform
01 · Customer	An AI agent becomes the main point of contact with the customer, with handover to people in defined cases.	How the company relates to its customers changes.
02 · Product and service	A machinery manufacturer stops selling only equipment and sells guaranteed operating hours thanks to predictive maintenance.	What is sold and how it is charged for changes.

Sphere	Example	Why it is Transform
03 · People	The planning function is reorganised: a system allocates resources under oversight and planners manage exceptions.	The structure and the division of work in a complete unit change.
05 · Data	Aggregated and anonymised operational data is offered as an information service to third parties.	Data generates a revenue line that did not exist.
07 · Decision	The pricing function is reorganised: prices across the whole catalogue are set autonomously within approved limits and the pricing team moves on to designing and overseeing the rules.	The process and roles of an entire unit change: who decides and how decision-making is organised.

Risks specific to Transform

- **Calling an automation with a good narrative a transformation.** This is the most expensive mistake: transformation budgets and timescales are approved for something that does not change the business.
- **Demanding a return too soon.** Measuring a Transform bet against the payback period of an automation stops it before it can provide market evidence.
- **Underestimating the enablers.** Transforming Customer or Product without sufficient data, knowledge and decision rules is a sign of risk, not of boldness.
- **Ignoring the effect on people.** Transformations change roles and structures; deciding them without an explicit position from management generates rejection and reputational risk.

> **Why it matters.** Transform is the only level that changes the company's competitive position. That is why it must be decided by whoever is accountable for the strategy, with stage-based progression criteria and with explicit acceptance that some bets will fail. Without that differentiated treatment, Transform bets are either never approved or approved without control.

06

Comparison of the three levels

Aspect	Optimise	Augment	Transform
Key question	Do we do it better?	Can we do more?	Do we do something different?

Aspect	Optimise	Augment	Transform
What changes	Efficiency of a task or process	Role and capabilities of people	Value proposition, revenue or organisation
Value	Avoided cost	Cost and performance	New revenue and operating model
Relative investment	Lower	Medium	Higher and in stages
Uncertainty	Low	Medium	High
Organisational resistance	Low or localised	Medium	High
Time to evidence	Short	Medium: depends on adoption	Long: depends on the market
Who decides	Area management	Management, with the AI committee	Board or senior management
What measures progress	Net benefit	Adoption and performance	Learning milestones and market evidence
Common mistake	Counting released capacity as savings	Measuring licences instead of usage	Calling an automation a transformation

07

Not a ladder

Ambition levels **do not describe the maturity** of the company or a mandatory path.

Misconception	Reality
"You have to optimise first and transform afterwards."	A company can start with a Transform bet in Product while optimising Operations. What matters is that it has sufficient enabling capability.
"Transform is better than Optimise."	They are different bets. In a non-priority sphere, Optimise may be exactly the right ambition.
"A mature company has everything in Transform."	A healthy portfolio combines the three levels according to the strategy. Maturity is measured with other criteria (SEVEN-G document 11).
"If the project is large, it is Transform."	The amount of investment does not determine the level. A large automation is still Optimise.

> **Why it matters.** If the levels were understood as a ladder, each area would try to move up a level to appear more advanced and the classification would lose all its value as information for the board. Treating the levels as types of bet makes it possible to decide the right combination for each sphere.

7.1 Addition: McKinsey's view and how it differs from SPHERES

This section **does not change the ambition levels**. It adds an outside view, McKinsey's, and explains where it resembles SPHERES and where it does not. SPHERES keeps using Optimise, Augment and Transform.

What McKinsey proposes. In "From adoption to impact: Three horizons of AI transformation" (mckinsey.com, 8 July 2026), McKinsey groups organisations into three horizons by how deeply AI is embedded in daily work:

1. **Enablement**: each employee has general-purpose AI tools that help with parts of their current job.
2. **Automation**: the company automates and improves, with AI at scale, workflows that already exist and that cross several functions.
3. **Reinvention**: the company redesigns roles, workflows and the operating model from scratch.

Two different questions. The SPHERES levels and the McKinsey horizons do not compete, because they do not answer the same thing:

	SPHERES: ambition levels	McKinsey: horizons
Question	What do we want to achieve with this bet?	How much has our way of working already changed?
What it is	A decision: the company chooses.	A diagnosis: the company describes itself.
What it applies to	Each use case and each sphere. It is strategy and portfolio.	The whole organisation.
What it covers	The business change: efficiency, people's role, value proposition.	The change in work: from the person to the workflow, and from the workflow to the operating model.
Order	It is not a ladder (section 7).	It is a ladder: each horizon builds on the previous one.
Where it comes from	Five questions answered with evidence (section 8).	A survey: each leader says where they see their organisation.

In short: **SPHERES says where the company wants to go. The horizons say how much the organisation has already changed.**

There is no equivalence between a horizon and a level. They are two axes that cross. Two illustrative examples:

- A company in **enablement** approves a new service for its customers, built with AI. It is a **Transform** bet, although almost all staff only use an assistant.
- A company in **reinvention** has redesigned its internal operations from end to end. The customer receives the same as before. Its portfolio is **Optimise** and **Augment**.

How they relate. The horizons help to answer a question that SPHERES raises and does not measure: can the organisation deliver the bet it has approved?

- An **Augment** or **Transform** bet requires roles, workflows and decision rights to change.
- If the organisation is still in the first horizon, the bet is approved but does not materialise: there are tools and there is no change.
- This is why the horizon the organisation is in is useful information **before setting the ambition of a sphere** (section 10), together with the enabling spheres.

Where the horizons fit in SEVEN-G. They do not fit next to ambition. They fit next to maturity: they resemble impact reach (task, process, people and organisation, business model), which SEVEN-G derives from what has really changed. See SEVEN-G 11 · Maturity model, section 7.6, and SEVEN-G 12 · Transformation index, section 3.7. The horizons are not a complete maturity model: they measure only how much work has been redesigned. They do not measure governance, risk, data or value.

What the article contributes to SPHERES. Three facts that support rules SPHERES already has:

- Individual use does not create value by itself. Where workflows are redesigned, leaders report value for the company far more often than where they do not change (32% versus 6% in the first horizon). This is the mistake "measuring licences instead of use" in section 11.
- Automating what already exists is not reinventing. The article separates the horizon that starts from the current process from the one that starts from scratch. This is the mistake "calling an automation a transformation".
- Few organisations reach the third horizon: 11% of the leaders surveyed place theirs there.

Caution. The data come from a survey of 750 employees and leaders, who answer about their own organisation. They do not measure verified results. The article is from a consultancy with a commercial interest.

> **Why it matters.** If the board confuses the two readings, it may believe that "being in reinvention" equals "having Transform bets", or that it cannot approve a Transform bet until the whole organisation has climbed the three horizons. Both ideas are false. Ambition levels are the decision; horizons are a signal of whether the organisation is ready to deliver it.

08

How to classify a use case

Classification is carried out with **five questions** answered yes or no, always with evidence. A yes without evidence counts as no.

#	Question	Points to
1	Does the value proposition received by the customer or end user change?	Transform
2	Is the process redesigned end to end, and not just a task within the process?	Augment or Transform
3	Do roles, the organisational structure or who takes which decisions change?	Augment or Transform
4	Does it generate revenue, services or markets that did not exist?	Transform
5	Could it be retired without affecting the business model, simply returning to the previous cost?	Optimise

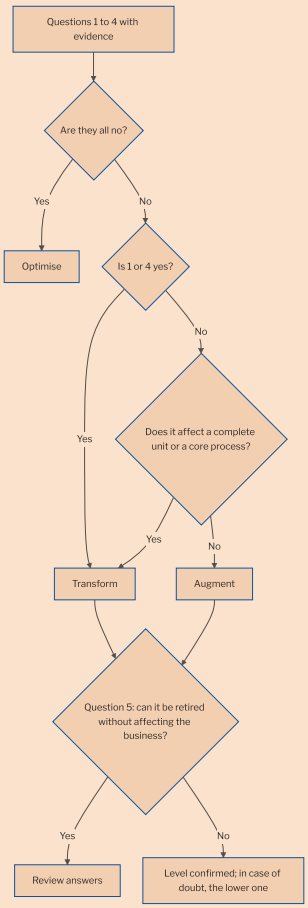
Basic reading rules:

- If questions 1 to 4 are **no**, the use case is **Optimise**, however it has been presented.
- If question 1 or 4 is **yes**, the use case is **Transform**.
- If question 2 or 3 is **yes**, the use case is **Augment**, unless the change affects a complete organisational unit or a core business process, in which case it is **Transform**.

- Question 5 serves as a **cross-check**: if a use case classified as Augment or Transform could be retired with no consequence other than returning to the previous cost, the answers must be reviewed.
- **In case of reasonable doubt, the lower level is assigned**, and whoever proposes the higher level provides the evidence.

Quick classification

The questions are answered with evidence and the result is cross-checked with question 5



Source: SPHERES

The full rules, the cross-check cases and who classifies, confirms and reviews the level are in SEVEN-G 12 · Transformation index, section 3. In SEVEN-G the level is proposed when the use case is registered, confirmed before investing in building it and checked with evidence once the use case is producing results.

> **Why it matters.** Five questions with evidence replace opinion. Two areas that present similar use cases obtain the same level, and the board can trust that the map describes reality and not the enthusiasm of each sponsor.

09

Borderline cases

Generic and illustrative examples.

Case	Level	Reasoning
Licences for an AI assistant for the whole workforce, without an adoption plan.	**Optimise**	No role or process changes demonstrably (questions 2 and 3: no).
The same assistant, with a redesign of the functions of an analysis team that takes on reviews it previously outsourced.	**Augment**	The content of the jobs changes (question 3: yes).
Agent-based automation of a complete back-office process, with fewer people doing the same thing.	**Optimise**	Reducing the number of people doing the same thing is not a change of role. If the process is redesigned but the roles do not change, it would be Augment.
AI-driven dynamic pricing within current tariffs.	**Augment**	The decision passes to a system under oversight (question 3: yes), but the customer receives the same offering.
Personalised usage-based pricing that the customer chooses as a new option.	**Transform**	The customer receives a new form of pricing (question 1: yes).
Common data platform for several use cases.	**Optimise** by default	It is classified by its own effect; it does not inherit the ambition of the use cases it enables.
Exploratory pilot of a new service.	According to what would change at scale	It is classified by its hypothesis; the actual level is checked with evidence.
Use case with an Optimise component and a Transform component.	**It is split** or classified by the component that accounts for more than half of the investment	Levels are not averaged.

10

The ambition of a sphere and portfolio balance

In addition to classifying use cases, management sets a **target ambition for each sphere** from 01 to 07. That ambition is not assigned by opinion: it is expressed through the use cases that deliver it.

Concept	What it is	Illustrative example
Level achieved	The highest level with at least one use case in production and measured value.	In Customer, Optimise: there is an enquiry router with validated savings.
Level in the portfolio	The highest level with any use case approved for building.	In Customer, Augment: an assistant for account managers has been approved.
Target ambition	The level that management wants for the sphere within the horizon of its strategy.	In Customer, Augment.
Gap	The target ambition has no approved use case delivering it.	In Data, an Augment target and no approved use case at that level.

A balanced portfolio does **not** spread investment equally across levels. It reflects the strategy: plenty of efficiency where the company competes on cost, Augment bets where talent is the advantage and some Transform bet, bounded and in stages, where the company wants to change its position. Setting and approving the ambition by sphere is described in SEVEN-G 13 · AI thesis, ambition and risk appetite.

> **Why it matters.** The question "are we transforming?" can only be answered by comparing the declared ambition with what the portfolio actually delivers. That comparison, sphere by sphere, is what makes it possible to detect declared but unevidenced transformation.

11

Common mistakes

Mistake	Consequence	How to avoid it
Classifying by technology ("it uses agents, so it is Transform").	A portfolio that looks ambitious with no real change.	Apply the five questions with evidence.

Mistake	Consequence	How to avoid it
Classifying by the amount or by the visibility of the programme.	Transformation criteria are applied to expensive automations.	Remember that the amount does not determine the level.
Moving up a level to obtain funding.	The board approves expectations that will not be met.	Independent review of the level and subsequent checking with evidence.
Applying the same return criterion to all use cases.	Transform bets are stopped before they learn.	Different progression criteria by level.
Counting released hours as savings in Optimise.	Savings that do not appear in the income statement.	Distinguish released, realised and reassigned capacity.
Measuring the success of Augment by assigned licences.	Investment without any change in the way of working.	Measure active usage and performance improvement.
Setting the ambition of a sphere without looking at the enablers.	Promises that the data or the decision rules cannot sustain.	Read document 03 before setting a high ambition.

12

Related documents

Document	Relationship
document 00 · What SPHERES is and how it helps	Overview of the map and the levels.
document 02 · Spheres where value is created	Examples by level in Customer, Product and service, People and Operations.
document 03 · Enabling spheres	Examples by level in Data, Knowledge and Decision.
document 04 · Regulation and AI governance	Why spheres 08 and 09 do not use ambition levels.
SEVEN-G 10 · Sphere map and ambition levels	Sphere and level rules, indicators and heat map.
SEVEN-G 12 · Transformation index	Full classification rules and the company's transformation profile.

13

Version control

Version	Date	Changes
0.3	19-11-2026	Section 7.1 rewritten and retitled: it makes clear that it is an addition of McKinsey's view and does not change the levels; it separates decision (levels) from diagnosis (horizons), removes the level-by-level correspondence, explains how they relate and places the horizons next to maturity (D195).
0.2	19-11-2026	New section 7.1: the ambition levels compared with McKinsey's three adoption horizons (enablement, automation, reinvention); what each reading measures, approximate correspondence and cautions (D194).
0.1	17-09-2026	First version. Develops the three ambition levels with definition, value, risks, examples by sphere, comparison, classification with five questions, borderline cases, ambition by sphere and common mistakes.