



IBM as Client Zero:

How IBM built an enterprise AI orchestration model at global scale

Executive Summary

By deploying its own technology and workflow transformation methodology internally first – in a program called “Client Zero” – IBM has been able to capture \$4.5B in annualized productivity savings over three years, more than double its original \$2B target.

Ashley AuBuchon, Partner at IBM Consulting’s Client Zero Center of Competence, served as the program’s operational lead. The challenge she and her team took on was straightforward: transform IBM’s own workflows using the same AI platform and methodology IBM brings to enterprise clients. AuBuchon’s core principle throughout the project was “You have to eliminate and simplify before you automate. If you automate a broken process, you just get a faster broken process.”

The program, led by Joanne Wright, SVP of Transformation and Operations, spanned HR, IT, finance, procurement, supply chain, sales, sustainability, and customer support across IBM’s approximately 270,000 employees (Table 1). Key results include:

- **Employee Productivity:** HR operating costs reduced 40%; AskHR resolved 94% of 16 million annual employee inquiries without human intervention.
- **IT Support:** AskIT reduced IT call and chat volume by 74% year-over-year; 92% of IT service sessions required no human assistance.
- **IT Modernization:** Infrastructure costs reduced 30%, generating more than \$600 million in savings.
- **Customer Support:** AI-powered customer support generated approximately \$191 million in annualized operational savings.

Table 1: IBM’s Client Zero Transformation at a Glance

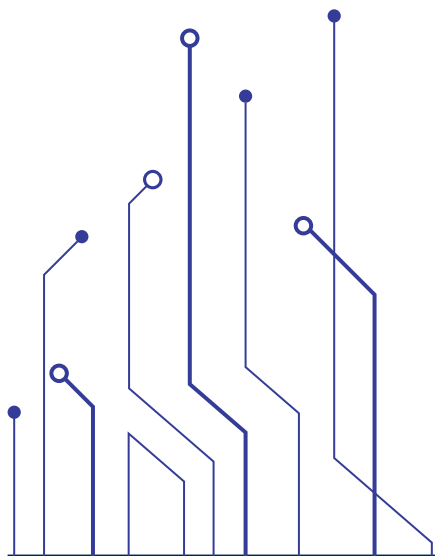
Transformation Area	Primary AI Capabilities	Workflow Focus	Operational Objective
Employee Productivity	AskHR, AskIT, AskSales	HR, IT, employee support	Reduce transactional workload
Finance and Operations	AskQ2C, AskEPM, Touchless Financial Forecasting & Journal Automation	Collections, planning, procurement	Increase automation and throughput
IT Modernization	Concert, Turbonomic, Instana, Apptio and Bob	Infrastructure operations	Reduce infrastructure complexity
Customer Experience	watsonx Orchestrate, Discovery	Customer support	Lower support cost and escalation

About This Case Study

Futurum Research developed this case study based on interviews with IBM stakeholders, executive briefings, and supporting materials provided by IBM. Primary research included interviews with Ashley AuBuchon, Partner, Client Zero Center of Competence at IBM Consulting, who helped lead the Client Zero transformation, as well as members of IBM's transformation leadership and Analyst Relations teams. IBM commissioned the study and provided supporting information. Futurum Research conducted the interviews and analysis independently and retained full editorial control. The findings presented reflect Futurum's independent assessment of the business and operational value generated through IBM's Client Zero transformation.

The Business Economic Value (BEV) framework is Futurum's methodology for evaluating the business and operational value organizations derive from technology investments. Traditional BEV studies emphasize financial outcomes such as costs, benefits, return on investment, and payback periods. Because IBM's Client Zero transformation remains active and continues to expand, many long-term financial outcomes are still evolving. Accordingly, this case study focuses on leading operational indicators of value, together with the measurable business outcomes IBM has already achieved through production deployments.

Futurum Research separately conducted a Business Economic Value study on the [ROI of watsonx Orchestrate](#) for independent customers, excluding IBM-reported data, and found similar themes and examples of productivity gains.



Program Overview

IBM designed Client Zero around a deliberate sequencing principle: eliminate complexity, simplify end-to-end workflows, and then automate. This ensured AI was applied to redesigned processes. IBM's AI transformation methodology reimagines business processes from a blank slate before applying AI. That discipline ran through every domain AuBuchon's team touched. In HR, employee interactions shifted from ticket-driven support to AI-agent resolution at the point of contact. In IT support, IBM redesigned large portions of the resolution path around self-service, reserving human intervention for complex or judgment-intensive issues. Each workflow transformation builds on those that came before it. AskIT moved from concept to production in about 100 days, leveraging lessons learned from AskHR.

Executive oversight was built into the governance structure from the start. IBM CEO Arvind Krishna chaired a biweekly steering committee with IBM's Executive Leadership Team, keeping productivity transformation a standing priority at the highest level of the organization. The program operated under a four-layer governance model and was supported by only 13 staff members across the Transformation Steering Committee, the Transformation Project Office, and the Productivity Discovery Team (Table 2).

Table 2: IBM Client Zero Governance Structure

Governance Layer	Role	Primary Function
Transformation Steering Committee	Executive leadership and oversight	Established enterprise priorities, allocated investment, and governed program direction; chaired by CEO Arvind Krishna on a biweekly basis with ELT members
Transformation Project Office	Program coordination and execution	Coordinated deployments across business functions and managed operational dependencies and timelines
Productivity Discovery Team	Opportunity identification and prioritization	Identified workflow transformation opportunities and evaluated initiatives before execution
Productivity Catalysts	Embedded business-unit transformation leaders	Drove AI adoption, workflow redesign, and operational implementation within individual business functions

AuBuchon and her team recognized that transformation stalls when employees closest to day-to-day workflows are excluded from redesigning those workflows. The Productivity Catalyst model, together with the IBMer watsonx Challenge, is an internal program inviting employees to design and submit AI agents for real operational workflows, distributed ownership and accelerated experimentation across the enterprise.

IBM also pursued a deliberate platform rationalization strategy in parallel, eliminating thousands of third-party applications over several years, consolidating onto strategic platforms such as SAP, Salesforce, and Adobe, and integrating end-to-end workflows with watsonx. The broader technology stack also included IBM Maximo for asset and operations management and Apptio for technology business management. Together, these investments reflected IBM's strategy to consolidate onto strategic enterprise platforms.



Transformation Results

Employee Productivity

AskHR, IBM's AI-powered HR agent built on watsonx, handled roughly 16 million employee interactions annually, fully resolving 94% without routing inquiries to a human. It automated more than 1.1 million transactions annually across more than 80 task types, including payroll, benefits, performance management, employee transfers, and separations. IBM reported a 40% reduction in HR operating costs.

"AskHR is actually automating tasks. I can transfer or promote an employee all within this agent, without ever going into our SAP SuccessFactors platform...[IBM now has fewer] people doing transactional work and more strategic advisors in HR."

Ashley AuBuchon, IBM

AskIT extended the same model to IT support, serving approximately 270,000 employees across more than 40 languages and with 815 trained intents. IT call and chat volume dropped 74% year-over-year. Out of the sessions, 92% required no human assistance, and support ticket volume fell by more than 50%. The resolution model evolved, moving beyond simple call deflection. IBM deployed the same AI-agent framework across additional functions, including AskSales for sales operations, AskQ2C for quote-to-cash workflows, AskEPM for enterprise planning, and AskSustainability for environmental reporting (Table 3).

Table 3: AI Agent Performance at Scale

Agent	Operational Scope	Primary Outcomes
AskHR	HR inquiries and employee transactions across payroll, benefits, performance management, transfers, and separations; 16M annual interactions and 1.1M automated transactions across 80+ task types	94% inquiry resolution without human involvement; 40% reduction in HR operating costs
AskIT	Enterprise IT support across 40+ languages with 815 trained intents; ~270,000 IBM employees	92% of sessions require no human assistance; 74% reduction in IT call/chat volume; 50%+ reduction in support tickets
AskQ2C	Quote-to-Cash workflows, including collections, accounts receivable management, invoice processing, and order tracking	Reduced manual collections and invoice processing; improved AR workflow efficiency
AskEPM	Enterprise planning, forecasting, and financial analysis workflows	Reduced manual data preparation; improved planning and financial analysis efficiency across finance operations

Finance, Operations, and IT Modernization

IBM extended its transformation to finance, procurement, and the supply chain by targeting workflows with high volumes of manual processing. These workflows were redesigned to prioritize automation and standardized execution paths. AskQ2C automated quote-to-cash collections, invoice processing, and order tracking. IBM Planning Analytics with Watson reduced manual data assembly for forecasting and financial analysis.

IBM's IT modernization program delivered more than \$600 million in infrastructure savings and a 30% reduction in infrastructure costs by leveraging Apptio, IBM Concert, Turbonomic, and Instana for observability and automated resource optimization. AuBuchon described the objective as "taking complexity out of the environment" and creating "more visibility and automation across the infrastructure stack." In customer support, IBM deployed watsonx Assistant and related conversational AI, generating approximately \$191 million in annualized operational savings and enabling support volume to grow without proportional increases in staffing.

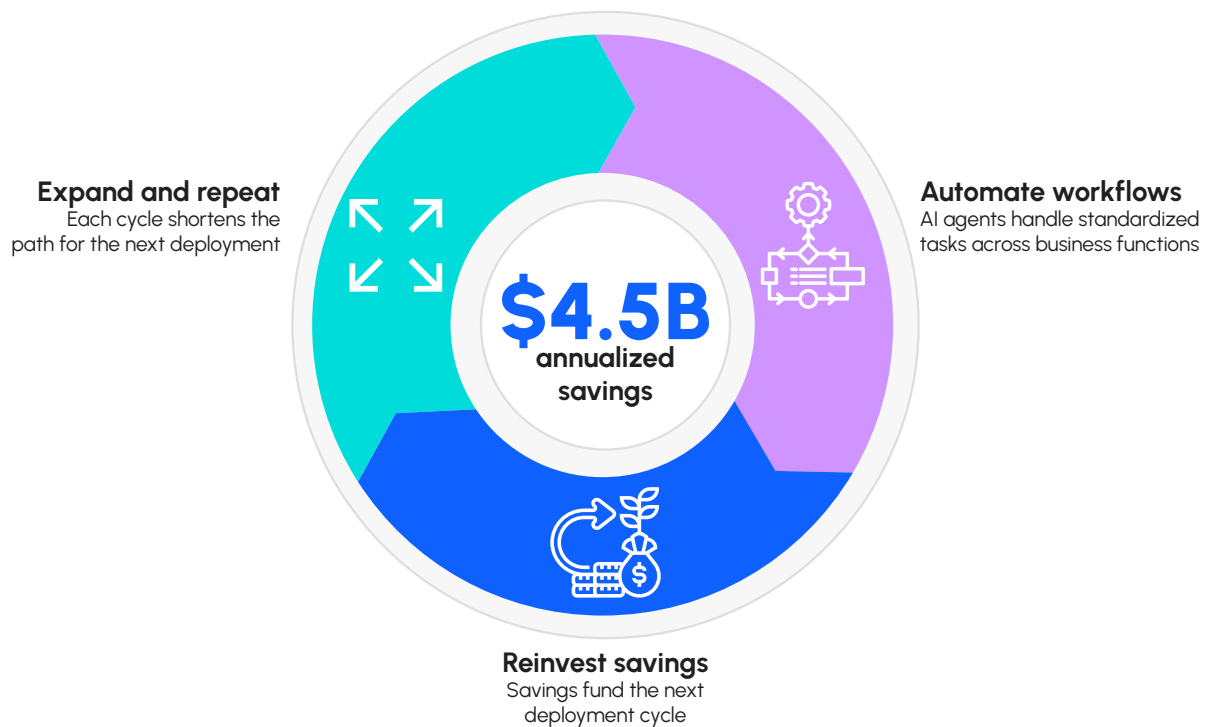
The Productivity Flywheel

The \$4.5 billion outcome stemmed from a series of transformations that reduced costs, freed capacity, and built organizational capabilities that accelerated subsequent deployments, rather than from a single large deployment. AskIT's ability to move from concept to production in about 100 days, using frameworks, governance structures, and lessons learned from AskHR, illustrates how that compounding effect worked in practice.

IBM designed Client Zero as an iterative operating model rather than a static initiative. The flywheel runs in three stages (Figure 1):

- AI-driven workflow automation reduces the cost and complexity of a business function
- IBM reinvests the resulting savings into additional AI deployment and infrastructure modernization
- Each subsequent deployment expands the automation base and increases the organization's capacity to identify and implement the next transformation

Figure 1: The Productivity Flywheel



Proof point: AskIT moved from concept to production in ~100 days, leveraging frameworks built for AskHR

That dynamic explains why the program exceeded its original target by a wide margin. The original \$2 billion goal reflected expectations based on a traditional linear deployment model. Instead, each transformation was built on those that came before it. Each deployment shortened the path for the next, and the Productivity Catalyst network continuously surfaced new opportunities. Together, these factors drove the outcome beyond \$4.5 billion. IBM's leadership also sought to build workforce capability for continuous workflow redesign. The IBMer watsonx Challenge supported that objective by encouraging employees to identify new opportunities for AI across the enterprise.

What This Means for Enterprise Leaders

IBM treats Client Zero as operational evidence rather than a reference story. IBM used the same AI platform, governance structures, transformation, and orchestration approaches internally that it now offers to enterprise clients. IBM Consulting also reports delivering AI-first workflow transformations in less than 90 days, including 2 weeks for discovery, 2 weeks for solutioning, and 4 to 8 weeks for MVP development.

From Futurum's perspective, the more important question is what conditions enabled these results. Several stand out:

- **Executive Commitment Was Structural:** Arvind Krishna's biweekly steering committee kept the transformation on the Executive Leadership Team's agenda throughout the program.
- **Sequencing Discipline Was Enforced:** The eliminate → simplify → automate methodology ensured AI was applied only after workflows had been redesigned.
- **Distributed Ownership Accelerated Adoption:** The Productivity Catalyst model embedded accountability within business units.
- **Platform Rationalization Created the Foundation for AI:** Eliminating thousands of third-party applications and consolidating onto strategic platforms established a consistent enterprise environment for AI deployment.

IBM operates in a unique environment. A few organizations operate at this scale, develop their own AI platform, or possess the internal transformation consulting capabilities that IBM does through IBM Consulting. Even so, the underlying operating model offers useful guidance for enterprise leaders. Visible executive governance, process-first discipline, embedded business-unit ownership, and an iterative deployment model can help organizations scale AI transformation in a structured, sustainable way.

Takeaways

IBM's Client Zero demonstrates that enterprise AI transformation can be coordinated, governed, and scaled across a complex global organization when the organizational architecture supports the technical ambition. The program shows that successful AI transformation depends on more than technology. It requires a methodology that begins with process redesign, governance structures that sustain momentum, and distributed ownership that embeds accountability across the organization.

As an IBM interviewee told Futurum, "Technology is usually not the hardest part. Scaling organizational adoption and governance across the enterprise is where most transformation efforts succeed or fail."

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