

Sh*ft Happens

Spring/Summer 2026



Welcome to the
era of intelligence

axon

Welcome to the
Spring/Summer 2026 edition of

Sh*ft Happens

Welcome to the era of intelligence

There's never been more technology available to an SME, and there's never been more noise about what to do with it. Every week brings a new tool, a new acronym, and a new promise that this will be the thing that changes everything. For the people actually running these businesses, that pace can feel less like opportunity and more like pressure.

This issue is our attempt to cut through that. We wanted to write something honest about where intelligent technology actually is right now, what it can genuinely do for an organisation like yours, and where the hype is running ahead of reality. You won't find breathless predictions here. You'll find plain explanations, real examples, and a point of view shaped by years of sitting alongside business owners who simply want their technology to work.

We've also used these pages to talk about something close to our own story. Axon is changing. After spending years as a managed service provider, keeping systems running and problems at bay – we're now evolving: to a managed intelligence provider – helping you not just maintain your technology but get more out of it. The features ahead explain what that shift means and why we think it matters for you.

Read this new issue in order or dip into the bits that speak to you. Either way, we hope you come away feeling clearer and a little more confident about the year ahead.



Tim Mears
Managing Director

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The era of intelligence has arrived, and it's quieter than you think

When people imagine artificial intelligence arriving in their business, they tend to picture something dramatic.

A sudden transformation with robots at a desk and jobs reshaped overnight. But the reality unfolding across British businesses right now is far less cinematic and far more useful. Intelligence is arriving quietly, settling into the everyday tasks that used to eat up time, and it's doing so in ways that most people barely notice until they look back and realise how much has changed.

This matters because the silent nature of the shift is exactly what makes it all too easy to miss. The businesses getting ahead aren't the ones making grand announcements about their AI strategy. They're the ones who have let intelligent tools take the friction out of ordinary work, one process at a time, until the cumulative effect is a noticeably calmer and faster organisation



Automating work without losing control

The word intelligence gets stretched to cover almost anything these days, so it's worth being precise. When we talk about intelligence in your business, we mean technology that can interpret information, make a judgement within clear limits, and act on it without someone holding its hand at every step. That's very different from the automation many businesses already use, where a system follows a fixed rule and stops the moment something unexpected happens.

The newer generation of tools can read an email and understand what it's asking. It can look at a stack of invoices and spot the one that doesn't add up. It can draft a sensible first reply to a customer query and route it to the right person for review. None of this replaces human judgement – but it does clear the path so that human judgement gets spent on the things that actually need it.

The reason this is happening now, rather than five years ago, comes down to a shift in how these tools are built. They've moved from needing precise instructions for every situation to being able to handle ambiguity. Industry analysts at Gartner have predicted that by 2028, around 40 percent of business software will include autonomous, agentic capabilities, up from almost none at the start of the decade. That is a stunning change in a short window, and it tells us the direction of travel is very much set.



Why the quiet version is the one that lasts

There's a strong temptation, when something powerful arrives, to go too big too quickly – but we would always advise against this pull. The businesses that try to transform everything at once tend to create more disruption than value, and they often abandon the effort when the early results look messy.

The quieter approach works better for a simple reason. It lets you learn. When you introduce intelligence into one well-chosen process, you get to see how it behaves, where it helps, and where it needs a closer eye. You build confidence and competence at the same time, and you do it without betting the business on a single leap. By the time you're ready to expand, you're doing so from a position of understanding rather than hope.

This is also where the relationship with a partner like Axon earns its keep. We're not here to sell you the most dramatic version of the future. We're here to help you find the handful of places where intelligence will make a real difference to your week, get those working properly, and then move on to the next. Steady, deliberate, and grounded in what your business actually needs.

The era of intelligence isn't coming. It's already here, quietly, in the businesses that chose to start. The question is no longer whether to engage with it, but where to begin and who to walk alongside while you do.

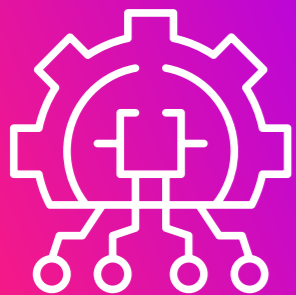
AI in action:

What intelligent technology is really doing for businesses today

It's one thing to talk about intelligence in theory. It's totally different to see what it does on an ordinary Tuesday in an ordinary business. So let's put the theory to one side and look at where these tools are genuinely earning their place, not in the headline grabbing examples from the largest companies, but in the day-to-day reality of organisations much like yours.

The honest picture is encouraging without being magical.

Intelligent technology isn't running businesses. It's taking on the slices of work that are repetitive, time consuming, and easy to get wrong when you're tired or busy. That turns out to be a surprisingly large slice and clearing it has knock on effects that reach much further than the task itself.



The work it's quietly absorbing

Start with the inbox, because almost every business drowns in one. Intelligent tools can now triage incoming messages, recognise which ones are urgent, draft considered replies for the routine ones, and flag the handful that genuinely need a human to think hard. The person who used to spend the first ninety minutes of every day just sorting and responding gets most of that time back.

Then there's the quieter machinery of any organisation. Reconciling figures. Chasing missing information. Pulling together a report from three different systems that were never designed to talk to each other. These are the tasks that rarely appear in a job description yet consume a startling amount of the working week. Intelligent tools handle them well precisely because they're patterned and rule bound, even when the rules have a few exceptions.

Customer service is another area where the change is visible. A well configured system can answer the common questions instantly and accurately, at any hour, while handing anything sensitive or unusual straight to a person. Customers get faster help. Staff get to focus on the conversations that actually require empathy and care.

The scale of opportunity here is significant. Research from McKinsey has estimated that current generative AI tools could automate activities that absorb between 60 and 70 percent of employees' time across the economy. That figure isn't a prediction that most jobs vanish. It's a measure of how much routine effort is sitting inside roles, waiting to be lifted out so people can spend their hours on higher value work.

What changes when the routine work lifts

The interesting part is what happens after the obvious time saving. When you take repetitive work off a team, you don't just get the hours back. You get a different quality of attention. People stop operating in a permanent state of catching up and start having the space to notice things. A pattern in customer complaints. An opportunity that was always there but never had room to be seen. A process that could be redesigned rather than just endured.

There's a wellbeing dimension to this that often goes unmentioned. A lot of workplace stress comes not from difficult work but from relentless, low value work that never ends. Lifting that load tends to lift mood along with it. Teams that were stretched thin start to feel on top of things again, and that shift in confidence shows up in the standard of everything they do.

None of this happens automatically, and that is the part worth being clear about. Dropping a tool into a business and hoping for the best is how good intentions turn into expensive disappointment. The value comes from choosing the right tasks, setting sensible boundaries, and keeping a human in the loop where judgement matters. That is the work we do alongside you, and it's the difference between technology that genuinely helps and technology that simply adds to the noise.

Intelligence in action, then, is rarely spectacular. It's the steady removal of friction from the work you already do, freeing your people to do the work only they can. That isn't a future promise. It's available now, and already making ordinary Tuesdays a good deal easier in businesses that decided to begin.



Automating work without losing control

For every business owner excited by what intelligent automation can do, there's a perfectly reasonable worry sitting right behind the excitement. If I hand work over to a system, am I giving up control of it? What happens when it gets something wrong? How do I know it's doing what I think it's doing? These are not signs of resistance to progress. They're the questions of someone who takes responsibility for their business seriously, and they deserve a proper answer.

The good news is that control and automation are not opposites. Done well, automation can actually give you more visibility and more consistency than manual work ever did. The trick lies entirely in how you set it up, where you place the boundaries, and how you keep a human presence in the parts that matter.

Boundaries are a feature, not a limitation

The most important idea in safe automation is the boundary. A well-designed automated process isn't given free rein. It's given a clearly defined job, a set of limits it can't cross, and a rule for what to do when it meets something outside its remit. Within those limits it can work quickly and tirelessly. At the edges, it knows to stop and ask.

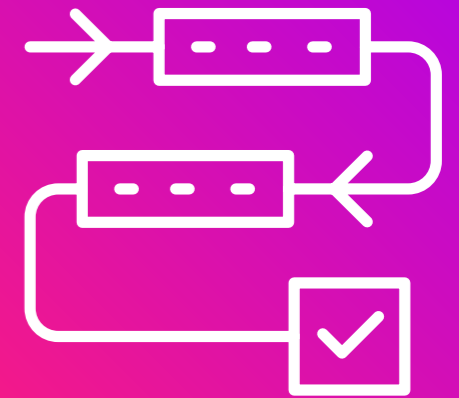
Think of it like a capable new member of staff in their first month. You wouldn't hand them the keys to everything on day one. But you would give them a defined area, clear guidance on what they can decide alone and what they must escalate, and a way to flag anything unusual. Automation works best under exactly the same arrangement. The system handles the routine with confidence and passes the exceptions to a person who can apply judgement.

This is why the businesses that automate well rarely feel like they have lost control. If anything, they gain it. Every action the system takes can be logged. Every exception it raises is visible. You end up with a clearer record of what is happening in your processes than you ever had when the same work lived in someone's head or in a tangle of email threads.

Keeping humans where humans belong

The phrase you will hear us use often is "keeping human in the loop". It's not a slogan - it's a design principle. There are some decisions that should never be made by a system alone, not because the system could not technically make them, but because they carry consequences that demand human accountability. Anything involving significant money, sensitive customer situations, legal or regulatory matters, or a departure from the norm should always have a person reviewing and approving.

The art is in drawing that line in the right place. Draw it too cautiously and you smother the benefit, forcing people to sign off on trivial actions until the automation becomes more hassle than help. Draw it too loosely and you expose the business to mistakes that no one catches until it's too late. Getting it right is a judgement call, and it's one we make with you based on your appetite for risk, your industry, and the specific process in question.



Data, the fuel behind intelligent business

Every conversation about intelligent technology eventually arrives at the same unglamorous truth.

None of it works without good data. The cleverest tools in the world are only as useful as the information you feed them, and for many businesses the information is exactly where the trouble starts. It's scattered across systems, entered inconsistently, duplicated in places, and missing in others. Before intelligence can do anything impressive, the data underneath it has to be in reasonable order.

This isn't the most exciting topic in technology, and we will not pretend otherwise. But it's the one that most often decides whether an intelligence project succeeds or quietly fails. Get the data right and everything built on top of it has a chance. Get it wrong and you're constructing on sand, no matter how good the tools look in the demonstration.

Poor data quality costs organisations an average of around

£12.9m

Why data is so often in a mess

It helps to understand how businesses end up with disorderly data, because it's almost never the result of carelessness. It's the natural consequence of growth. You start with one system, then add another to solve a particular problem, then a third because a department needed something specific. Each one made sense at the time. None of them were designed to share neatly with the others. Over the years, the same customer ends up recorded three different ways, the same figure lives in two places that disagree, and nobody is entirely sure which version to trust.

On top of that, data degrades simply through use. People leave fields blank when they're in a hurry. They spell things differently and use the notes field for things it was never meant to hold. None of these are failings – it's just what happens when real people use real systems under real time pressure. The result, though, is a body of information that needs attention before it can power anything intelligent.

The cost of ignoring this is well documented. Gartner has estimated that poor data quality costs organisations an average of around 12.9 million dollars every year through bad decisions, wasted effort, and missed opportunities. For a smaller business the absolute figure is lower, but the proportional drag is just as real. Decisions made on unreliable numbers are expensive whatever the size of the organisation making them.

Getting your data ready without boiling the ocean

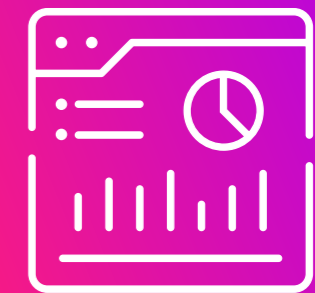
The mistake many businesses make at this point is to imagine a vast, year long data cleansing project that grinds everything to a halt. That is rarely necessary and almost never wise. The better approach is targeted and practical. You start with the data that matters for the specific outcome you want, get that into good shape, and use it. You expand from there only as new needs arise.

If you want intelligent tools to help with customer service, you focus on getting your customer records clean and consistent. You do not need your entire historical archive to be pristine first. If you want help with finance processes, you sort out the financial data that feeds them. This focused method delivers value quickly and avoids the paralysis that swallows over ambitious data projects whole.

There's also a forward looking side to this. Once your data is in order, the goal is to keep it that way, and that is more about good habits than heroic clean ups. Sensible rules at the point of entry. A clear owner for each important dataset. Regular, light touch checks rather than occasional massive overhauls. Build these into how the business runs and your data stays healthy as a matter of course, ready to fuel whatever intelligent tools you choose to adopt next.



We spend a good deal of our time with clients on exactly this work, because we have seen too many promising projects stumble over data that was not ready. It isn't the part that gets the headlines. It's the part that quietly determines whether everything else delivers. Treat your data as the asset it is – look after it with a bit of discipline, and you give every intelligent ambition you have a solid foundation to stand on.



From MSP to MIP, a conversation with Axon

We've spent a lot of these pages talking about intelligence in business generally. It feels only fair to turn the lens on ourselves for a moment, because Axon is going through its own version of the shift we keep describing. We sat down with our leadership team to talk honestly about what is changing, why, and what it means for the businesses we look after.

Why change what was already working?

For years Axon has been a managed service provider. Why move away from a model that clearly worked?

We're not moving away from it so much as building on top of it. The managed service foundation isn't going anywhere. Keeping systems running, secure, and dependable is still essential, and we will always do it. What has changed is what businesses need on top of that foundation. A few years ago, keeping the lights on reliably was enough to be a genuinely valuable partner. Today our clients are looking at intelligent tools and asking how to use them well, and that is a different kind of help than traditional managed services were built to give.

So what exactly is a managed intelligence provider?

The simplest way to put it is that a managed service provider keeps your technology working, while a managed intelligence provider helps you get more out of it. We're extending from maintenance into outcomes. It isn't enough now to make sure your systems are up. The real question our clients have is whether their technology is actively helping them work better, serve customers better, and make sounder decisions. Answering that question is what managed intelligence means.

What it means for clients

Does this mean prices go up and things get more complicated?

That's the worry we hear most, and the answer is no. The whole point is to make intelligent technology less complicated for our clients, not more. We sit between the business and the bewildering array of tools out there, and we do the hard work of figuring out what is worth using and how to use it safely. Our clients should feel that complications are being taken off their plate, not added to it. The shift is about giving more value, not charging more for confusion.

How does a typical client experience this change day to day?

For most of them it begins with a conversation rather than a piece of technology. We look at where time is being lost, where work is frustrating, where decisions are being made on poor information. Then we find the places where intelligent tools could genuinely help and we get those working properly, with the right boundaries and a human in the loop where it counts. The day to day experience is that things gradually get easier and clearer. There's no dramatic switch over. There's just steady, practical improvement that the team actually feels.

What would you say to a business owner who is nervous about all of this?

We would say their caution is healthy and we share it. We're not interested in pushing anyone toward technology they do not need or are not ready for. Our job is to be the calm, honest voice in a noisy market. We will tell you when something is genuinely useful and we will tell you just as plainly when it isn't worth your time yet. The relationship matters more to us than any individual sale, because we're in this for the long run with the businesses we serve.

The move from managed services to managed intelligence is really a reflection of how the needs of British businesses have shifted. They no longer just need their technology kept alive. They need a partner who can help them turn it into an advantage, safely and without the hype. That is the role we're stepping into, and it's one we're genuinely excited to play.

Intelligence in practice: a **real world** story

It's easy to talk about intelligent technology in general terms. It's more useful to see how it actually plays out in a single business over time, with all the ordinary messiness that real life involves.

The following account is a composite, drawn from the kinds of journeys we see again and again rather than from one named client, but every part of it reflects genuine experience. We've written it this way deliberately, so we can be candid about the bumps as well as the wins.



Where it started

Picture a mid sized professional services firm, somewhere between forty and sixty staff, doing solid work for a loyal base of clients. From the outside it looked healthy, and it was. From the inside, the people running it could feel the strain of growth. The systems that had served them well at twenty staff were creaking at fifty. Information lived in too many places. The same questions came round again and again. The leadership team spent more time firefighting and chasing than they wanted to admit, and the talented people they had hired were spending too many hours on work well below their capability.

The trigger, as it often is, was a near miss. An important deadline was almost missed because a key piece of information was sitting in someone's inbox while they were on leave, and nobody else could find it. Nothing went wrong in the end, but it was close enough to prompt a hard look at how the business actually ran.

What changed, and what didn't

The temptation at that point is to reach for a big, sweeping solution. We steered them away from that. Instead we started with the single process causing the most pain, which turned out to be the way information moved around the business when someone was away or stretched. We put intelligent tools in place that could surface the right document or detail when it was needed, draft routine correspondence for review, and make sure nothing important sat unseen because one person was out of the office.

The early weeks were not perfectly smooth, and it would be dishonest to suggest otherwise. The tools needed tuning. Some of the boundaries we set were initially too tight, so people felt they were approving trivial things, and we loosened them. A couple were too loose, and we pulled them back. This is normal. Getting automation right is an iterative business, not a single configuration you set and forget. What mattered was that the team stayed involved and the adjustments happened quickly.

Within a few months the change was clear. The firefighting eased. The near misses stopped. The senior people found themselves with genuine room to think, and they used it to take on more interesting work rather than simply to do more of the same. Notably, the headcount did not shrink. Nobody was replaced by a machine. The same people simply spent their days on work that actually used their skills, and the business grew into its next stage without the strain that had been building before.

The honest lessons

Two things stand out from this kind of journey. The first is that the technology was the smaller part of the story. The larger part was the thinking that went into choosing the right place to start, setting sensible limits, and adjusting as reality revealed itself. A tool dropped in without that thought would have helped far less, if at all.

The second is that the benefit compounded. The first success built the confidence to tackle the next process, and the one after that. The business did not transform overnight. It improved steadily, each step making the following one easier, until people looked back after a year and realised how far they had come almost without noticing the distance.

That, in the end, is what intelligence in practice tends to look like

Not a revolution, but a series of sensible improvements, made carefully, that add up to a calmer, sharper, more capable business. The drama is conspicuously absent. The results are not.

The human edge in the era of intelligence

Amid all the talk of what intelligent technology can do, a quieter and more important question often gets lost.

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What is it that only people can do, and how do we ensure that as machines take on more tasks, human contribution becomes even more valuable?

This isn't a sentimental question. It's a strategic one, and the businesses that answer it well will pull ahead of those that treat their people as merely something to be optimised away.

The era of intelligence does not diminish the human role. It changes its shape. The parts of work that were always most distinctly human were rarely the routine, repetitive parts in the first place. As technology absorbs those, what remains is the work that actually needed a person all along, and that work tends to be more rewarding to do and more valuable to the business.

What machines still can't do

For all their capability, intelligent tools have clear limits, and the limits are exactly where human value concentrates. A machine can process information at remarkable speed, but it does not truly understand context the way a person does. It doesn't read the room in a difficult client meeting. It doesn't sense that a long standing customer is unusually quiet and pick up the phone to check in. It doesn't feel the weight of a decision that affects people's livelihoods and temper its judgement accordingly.

Creativity is another frontier that remains stubbornly human. Intelligent tools can recombine what exists in clever ways, and that has real uses. But the genuine creative leap, the idea that comes from understanding people and problems deeply and seeing a connection nobody else saw, still belongs to us. So does the kind of trust that gets built between people over years, the relationships that hold a business together when things get hard. No tool builds that. People do.

Then there's judgement under uncertainty, the daily reality of running a business. The situations where the data is incomplete, the rules do not quite fit, and someone simply has to decide based on experience and instinct. These are the moments that define an organisation, and they're precisely the moments where intelligent tools step back and hand the decision to a person. Far from making human judgement redundant, the era of intelligence concentrates it on the decisions that matter most.

Designing work that plays to human strengths

If the human edge is real, the practical task is to design work that makes the most of it. That means being deliberate about which work you hand to machines and which you protect for people. The aim isn't to automate as much as possible for its own sake. The aim is to free your people from the work that wastes them so they can pour themselves into the work that uses them fully.

This has real implications for how you think about roles and skills. As routine work lifts away, the abilities that become most valuable are the human ones. Communication. Empathy. Creative problem solving. The capacity to build relationships and to exercise sound judgement. These have always mattered, but in a world where the routine is increasingly handled by technology, they become the core of what your people contribute rather than something squeezed in around the edges.

There's a leadership dimension here too. The businesses that get this right tend to be open with their teams about what is changing and why. They frame intelligent tools as something that takes the drudgery away, not something that threatens jobs, and they back that up by actually redirecting people toward better work rather than simply expecting more output. Where that trust exists, people embrace the tools rather than fearing them, and the whole transition goes far more smoothly.

The deepest point is this: technology is most powerful when it amplifies human capability rather than attempting to replace it. The businesses that will thrive in the era of intelligence are not the ones that treat their people as a cost to be engineered away. They're the ones that use intelligent tools to make their people more capable, more focused, and more able to do the things that only people can do. The human edge isn't something the new era erodes. Handled well, it's something the new era sharpens.



What to watch next: intelligence trends for the year ahead

Predicting technology is a humbling business, and anyone who tells you they know exactly where it's heading is overselling

That said, some currents are strong enough and clear enough that it's worth paying attention to them, not so you can chase every development, but so you can make sensible decisions about where to focus. Here's our honest read on the trends most likely to matter to a business like yours over the coming year, stripped of the hype that usually surrounds them.



From assistants to agents

The most significant shift underway is the move from tools that assist to tools that act. Until recently, most intelligent technology waited to be asked. You prompted it, it responded, and that was the exchange. The newer generation is increasingly capable of being given a goal and then carrying out the steps to reach it, checking in with a person at the points that matter. This is the difference between a tool that drafts an email when you ask and a tool that monitors a process, notices something needs doing, does the routine part, and brings you the exceptions.

For businesses, this is genuinely meaningful, because it widens the range of work that technology can help with

It also raises the stakes around getting the boundaries right, which is why everything we have said in this issue about control and keeping a human in the loop becomes more important, not less, as these tools grow more capable. The opportunity is real. So is the need for care. The two go together.





Intelligence becoming part of the tools you already use

The second trend is quieter but arguably more important for most businesses. Intelligence is increasingly being built directly into the everyday software you already rely on, rather than arriving as separate, specialist products. The applications you use for email, documents, finance, and customer management are steadily gaining intelligent features as a matter of course.

This is good news, because it lowers the barrier considerably. You don't necessarily need to buy and bolt on exotic new systems to benefit from intelligence. A great deal of value will come from using the intelligent capabilities of tools you already own, which most businesses have barely begun to explore. The practical task shifts from acquiring new technology to understanding and properly using what is already within reach. That is far less daunting, and far less expensive, than the headlines often suggest.



A sharper focus on trust, safety, and rules

The third current worth watching is the growing attention to doing all of this responsibly. As intelligent tools take on more, questions of trust, safety, and accountability are moving up the agenda for businesses, customers, and regulators alike. There's rising interest in being able to explain what an intelligent system did and why, in keeping data handled properly, and in making sure decisions that affect people are made fairly and with appropriate human oversight.

For a smaller business this might sound like someone else's problem, but it's worth getting ahead of. Customers increasingly care about how their information is used. Rules in this area are developing and will continue to. The businesses that build good habits now, being thoughtful about where and how they use intelligent tools, will find themselves comfortably placed as expectations tighten, rather than scrambling to catch up later.

What to actually do about all this

Faced with a list of trends, the natural temptation is either to chase everything or to freeze and do nothing. We suggest a calmer middle path. You don't need to act on every development. You need to stay aware of the direction, keep your data and foundations in good order so you're ready to move when something genuinely useful arrives, and focus your energy on the handful of changes that map to a real need in your business.

The year ahead will bring more capability, more built in intelligence, and more emphasis on doing things responsibly. None of it requires panic. All of it rewards a steady, thoughtful approach, the kind that picks the right moments to act and ignores the noise in between. That is the approach we take with the businesses we look after, and it's the one we would encourage you to take too.





Closing thoughts

We began this issue by saying that the era of intelligence is arriving more quietly than most people expect, and everything in between has, we hope, made the case for why that quietness is a strength rather than a disappointment. The businesses getting real value from intelligent technology are not the ones making the most noise. They're the ones making the most considered choices, one sensible step at a time.

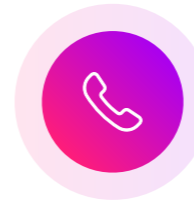
If there's a single thread running through these pages, it's that intelligence is a tool in service of people, not a replacement for them. The point of all this technology is to take the friction, the drudgery, and the relentless low value work off our team so they can do the things only people can do. Used that way, intelligent tools do not make your business less human. They give it room to be more so.

We also hope you have a clearer sense of where Axon is heading and why. Moving beyond simply keeping technology running and focusing on the value it delivers is a direct response to what businesses need most right now. You do not need another supplier selling you the future. You need a steady partner who will help you make good decisions in a confusing market, tell you the truth about what is worth your time, and walk alongside you as you find your own pace with all of this.

The era of intelligence is here. It does not demand that you transform overnight or bet your business on a leap of faith. It simply invites you to begin, thoughtfully, in the place that will make the most difference, with people you trust beside you. Whenever you're ready to take that first step, we would be glad to take it with you.

Thank you for reading

To carry on the conversation,
talk to the Axon team.



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