



THE AI MATURITY JOURNEY IN GOVERNMENT

From Anticipation to Fatigue — What 50 Public-Sector Leaders Told Us About How Employee Support for AI Rises and Falls

Evergreen Solutions, LLC - July 2026

A summary of the qualitative interview findings from Evergreen Solutions' study of AI capability maturation in public organizations.

Executive Summary

Public organizations are investing in artificial intelligence (AI) on the assumption that employee support builds steadily as capability grows. Structured interviews with 50 public-sector managers tell a different story. Employee support for the use of AI does not climb in a straight line or mirror the typical change-adoption curve. Instead, perceptions of organizational adoption of AI move through a cycle of anticipation, apprehension, renewed optimism, and eventual fatigue as an organization matures.

To better understand public employee perceptions, Evergreen Solutions conducted interviews with federal, state, and local government leaders to map how AI adoption unfolds inside public organizations. Two conclusions stand out. First, organizations progress through six recognizable phases of AI maturity, each with its own strategy, staffing, data, and ethical and governance profile. Second, employee support is highest not at the end of the journey but in the middle, peaking during the Development phase, then declining once AI becomes fully embedded during Integration.

What leaders should take away

Six phases. Public organizations move through the Traditional, Awareness, Discovery, Development, Integration, and Optimization phases, each reshaping their structure, culture, and workforce.

A cyclical curve, not a ramp. Support dips early, peaks during Development, and falls to its lowest point during Integration, when AI's consequences are most acutely felt.

Two levers matter most. Leaders sustain support by building genuine AI understanding across the workforce and by making safeguards visible and consistently enforced.

This paper summarizes the qualitative interview findings: how the six-phase maturity model was derived, how each phase changes the organization, and why employee support follows an “anticipation-to-fatigue” arc. A subsequent survey of 471 public employees, reported separately, statistically validated the pattern described here.

Why This Research Matters

Public employees widely recognize AI's promise to reduce administrative burden by automating data entry, form completion, report drafting, and routine inquiry response so staff can focus on direct service and complex decisions. Yet that optimism is tempered by real concerns: job security, unclear policy on data privacy and liability, and ethical risks such as bias and weakened accountability in decisions that affect citizens' rights and benefits.

Most prior research treats employee attitudes toward AI as relatively fixed. That assumption breaks down with AI, which does not merely support existing tasks but actively reshapes roles, decision authority, and organizational structure. Evergreen's study was designed to answer two practical questions:

- 1. Question 1.** Does the level of AI capability maturation influence how employees perceive AI's value?
- 2. Question 2.** How can organizations better prepare for and manage AI capability transformation?

Answering these questions began with listening to the people who lead AI transformation day to day.

How We Gathered the Evidence

In early 2025, Evergreen conducted structured virtual interviews with 50 public managers across federal, state, and local government. Interviews explored each organization's current level of AI use; whether a formal AI strategy existed and what it contained; how goals and priorities were set; the major AI tools in each functional area; the history of AI capability development; how organizational structure, data needs, and ethical concerns evolved; and how the perceptions of managers and staff shifted over time.

Two researchers independently coded the transcripts using inductive content analysis, comparing and consolidating codes into thematic clusters. Intercooder agreement exceeded 85 percent, with remaining differences resolved through discussion. Each organization's description was then used to assign a phase of AI maturity, yielding six relatively distinct stages.

Exhibit 1 Characteristics of the 50 interviewed public-sector leaders

Characteristic	Group	Share of 50 leaders
Gender	Male	66%
	Female	34%
Role	Director	46%
	Executive	32%
	Manager	22%
Organization	Municipal	38%
	County	32%
	State	22%
	Federal	8%

FINDING ONE

Public Organizations Move Through Six Phases of AI Maturity

Content analysis of the interviews revealed six progressive phases of AI maturity. The phases differ not simply in whether AI tools are present, but in the depth and coherence of five things: AI strategy, the scope of applications, the organizational structure supporting AI, data capability, and ethical governance. As organizations advance, AI initiatives become more complex and interdependent, requiring greater formalization across these dimensions.

Exhibit 2 The six-phase AI Maturity Model derived from the interviews.

Phase	What Defines It?
Traditional	AI use is minimal and uncoordinated. Some individuals automate basic tasks without strategy, designated leadership, or much management involvement. Training, data resources, and ethical awareness are all largely absent.
Awareness	The organization begins to recognize AI's strategic potential. Discussions emerge within specific departments, localized strategies take shape, early pilots appear, leadership interest grows, and ethical conversations about fairness, bias, and transparency surface for the first time.
Discovery	AI is actively applied in specific IT and operational projects. Informal strategies exist in most service areas, a dedicated role is identified to build capability, employees develop basic AI literacy, data infrastructure improves, and initial bias and fairness audits begin.
Development	The shift to organization-wide integration. A formal AI strategy is aligned with organizational goals, tools are deployed across most major functions, leadership roles mature, comprehensive reskilling programs launch, data governance strengthens, and ethics becomes an institutional priority.
Integration	AI is embedded in culture and daily processes. Governance structures define roles at every level, the AI strategy is fully woven into the strategic plan, multiple tools run across all key departments, and every project is subject to ethical review, monitoring, and impact analysis.
Optimization	The organization is a recognized leader in AI. AI drives strategic planning and performance evaluation, workforce planning is tied to AI evolution, data ecosystems are rich, and ethical governance is proactive and stakeholder-driven.

FINDING TWO

Each Phase Reshapes the Organization and Its Workforce

Identifying an organization's phase is only the starting point. The interviews showed that each phase produces distinct effects on the organization and its people. Leaders described these effects across four recurring dimensions: the strategic focus of AI, the workforce's knowledge, the individual employee experience, and the organization.

Exhibit 3

Organizational and workforce impact by phase

Phase	How it lands on the organization and its people
Traditional	General excitement about improving services. Employees are curious about the possibilities, but few understand how AI applies to their own work.
Awareness	Most groups foresee opportunities to gain new skills, and early implementation experience tends to be positive. The organization realizes some efficiency gains, but gaps begin to open between operational areas.
Discovery	Training and development become the focus. A limited number of higher-level positions are created, staffing stays relatively stable, and the organization sees gains at the service level.
Development	AI is beginning to reduce some staffing needs and will require retraining. Roles realign with new workflows, resource allocation shifts, and turnover starts to change the composition of the workforce even as overall productivity rises.
Integration	The reality of transformation becomes evident. Continuous change, formalized processes, and a leaner staffing model set in, and the organization experiences fatigue as demands mount.
Optimization	New structures and opportunities are largely defined. More professional-level jobs are created, most employees hold strong conceptual and operational AI knowledge, and gains stabilize.

A pattern worth naming: cost savings tend to arrive later than expected, only once systems stabilize and processes are fully restructured, and the workforce shifts toward higher-wage, specialized roles rather than simply shrinking. AI transformation is neither immediately efficient nor universally embraced.

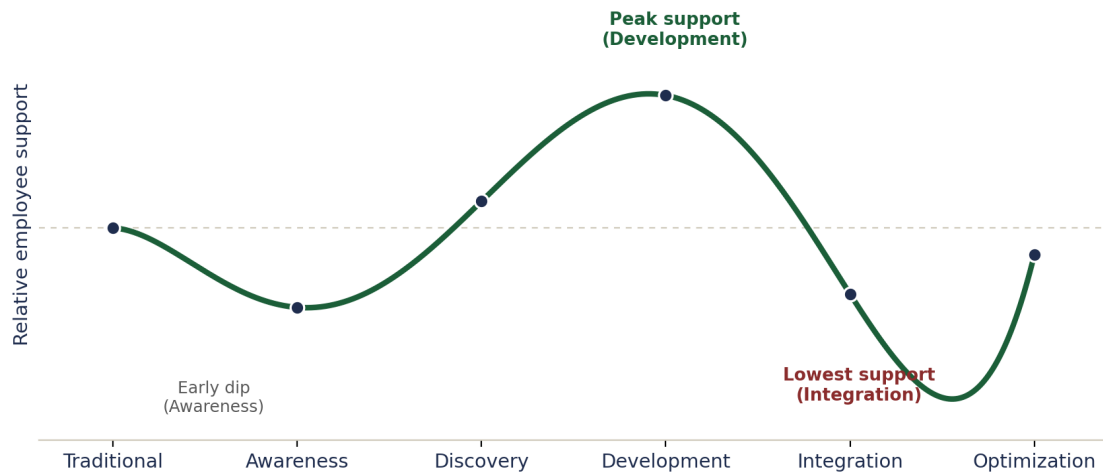
FINDING THREE

Employee Support Rises and Falls in a Predictable Cycle

The most striking interview finding concerns the trajectory of employee support. Leaders consistently described support that does not accumulate steadily but oscillates. Employees begin with a relatively positive view of transformation; that view dips as change becomes real, rises again to a peak in the middle phases, and then declines as AI becomes fully embedded.

Exhibit 4

Illustrative arc of employee support across the six maturity phases



The four movements of the cycle

- **Early optimism.** Employees respond to abstraction, not experience. Optimism reflects anticipated efficiency gains and career opportunities before any real disruption occurs.
- **The dip.** As change becomes tangible, uncertainty grows faster than perceived benefit. Employees recognize impending change but lack clarity about how AI will affect their roles or job security, and skepticism is rising.
- **The peak.** Support rebounds and peaks at Development, when AI moves from concept to practical use. Employees see concrete gains, familiarity improves ease of use, and perceived organizational investment builds confidence.
- **The decline.** Support falls to its lowest point at Integration, not because AI is failing, but because its consequences are most acutely felt. Role redefinition, process standardization, and intensified performance expectations accumulate into fatigue.

The nature of employee concern also changes as maturity increases. Early on, concerns center on transparency and intent. Later, they shift toward governance, accountability, and long-term sustainability; employees move from judging AI on whether it works to judging it on whether it is legitimate and fair.

Three conclusions from the interviews

1. Public organizations move through distinct, progressive phases that reshape structure, culture, and workforce.
2. Employee perceptions and potential support oscillate across those phases rather than climbing steadily.
3. Employees start relatively positive, dip, rise again through the middle phases, and decline at full maturation.

What This Means for Public-Sector Leaders

If support is cyclical, sustaining it requires continuous, phase-aware effort rather than a single launch push. The interviews point to five strategic priorities for public organizations navigating AI transformation.

- 1. Plan across levels.** Coordinate operational and workforce planning across organizational, functional, and team levels. Misalignment produces fragmented implementation, inconsistent adoption, and localized resistance.
- 2. Anticipate disruption.** Treat disruption as an inherent feature of AI transformation, not an exception. Leaders who anticipate and communicate phase-specific disruptions in advance normalize uncertainty and strengthen employees' capacity to adapt.
- 3. Show the human–AI partnership.** Actively demonstrate how human judgment and creativity complement automated capability. Employees support AI more readily when they understand the potential for new opportunities rather than fear being replaced.
- 4. Make safeguards visible.** Communicate and visibly enforce safeguards at every stage. Governance for data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and bias mitigation should be embedded early and revisited as capabilities expand, and when protections are opaque or inconsistent, support erodes regardless of technical performance.
- 5. Evolve the message.** Adapt the employee value proposition by phase. Early phases call for reassurance, education, and participation; later phases demand clarity about career pathways, reskilling, and long-term intent.

The two strongest levers. Of everything leaders can influence, two stand out as the dominant drivers of employee support: building genuine **AI understanding** across the workforce, and establishing **credible, consistently enforced safeguards**. Both are actionable, and both were later confirmed as the top predictors of support in the companion survey.

Conclusion

Listening to 50 public-sector leaders reframes AI transformation as an iterative, human-centered process rather than a one-time deployment. Organizations progress through six recognizable phases, and employee support moves with them: rising on anticipation, peaking on early success, and dipping into fatigue as AI becomes fully embedded. Organizations that plan across levels, anticipate disruption, foster human–AI alignment, enforce safeguards, and adapt their engagement strategy to each phase are best positioned to sustain trust and long-term value through the AI maturity journey.

About Evergreen Solutions

Evergreen Solutions, LLC is a public-sector human resources and management consulting firm headquartered in Tallahassee, Florida, serving local governments, school districts, utilities, and higher-education institutions. This white paper summarizes the qualitative interview findings from the firm's study of AI capability maturation and employee support in public organizations.