

CHOOSING AN AI-READY ESM PLATFORM

What IT leaders should look for when evaluating AI-powered service management

"AI doesn't change what organizations need to achieve. It changes how those outcomes are delivered. AI may be the biggest technological shift in service management for decades. But successful platform selection still begins with the same question: ***What business outcomes are we trying to achieve?"***

Preparing for the AI era

Few technologies have generated as much excitement, investment, and speculation as AI. Every major service management vendor now has an AI strategy. New AI-powered capabilities are emerging rapidly. Virtual assistants, intelligent knowledge search, agent copilots, workflow agents, automated content generation, and autonomous service delivery have moved from concept to reality.

However, when evaluating an ESM platform, focusing solely on AI features can be a costly mistake. The most important question isn't whether a platform has AI. The most important question is whether it can help your organization successfully operationalize AI at scale.

AI is fundamentally different from previous waves of service management tech. Self-service portals, workflow automation, and reporting tools could all be implemented independently and deliver immediate value. AI is different. Its effectiveness is heavily dependent on the quality of the environment in which it operates. AI depends on data, knowledge, process maturity, integration, and governance. Weaknesses in any of these areas can significantly reduce the value AI delivers (and introduce new risks).

For example, an AI assistant can only provide accurate answers if it has access to high-quality, well-maintained knowledge and data. An autonomous service agent can only be trusted if appropriate controls, permissions, approvals, and audit mechanisms are in place. In many ways, AI readiness is service management maturity by another name.

Organizations that have invested in structured workflows, knowledge management, service catalogs, integration, automation, and governance are in a much stronger position to get value from AI than those trying to deploy AI on top of fragmented processes and poor-quality data.

This is why platform selection has become increasingly important. The ESM platform is no longer simply a system for managing tickets and requests. It is becoming the operational foundation upon which future AI capabilities will be built. When evaluating vendors, leaders should examine the underlying capabilities that will determine long-term success with AI.

What you should do

Assess your AI readiness before assessing AI functionality.

Ask your organization

1. **Is our data ready for AI?**
2. **Is our knowledge base accurate and maintained?**
3. **Do we have the governance and process maturity required for AI?**

Ask vendors

1. **How does AI access knowledge, workflows, and operational data?**
2. **What prerequisites do customers need before adopting AI?**
3. **How do you help customers improve AI readiness?**

AI should be embedded, not bolted on

Many vendors have responded to market demand by adding AI features to existing products. In some cases, these capabilities are genuinely transformative. In others, they amount to little more than a collection of disconnected features layered on top of an aging architecture.

Organizations should seek to understand how deeply AI is integrated into each platform by asking the right questions:

- Can it access knowledge, workflows, automation, reporting, and operational data through a unified architecture?
- Can it participate in end-to-end service delivery processes?
- Can it orchestrate actions across integrated systems?
- Or does it simply provide isolated assistance within specific screens and workflows?

The platforms most likely to deliver long-term value are those where AI is woven into the fabric of service delivery rather than treated as a standalone add-on.

What you should do

Evaluate how deeply AI is integrated into the platform architecture.

Ask your organization

1. **Where could AI create the greatest operational value?**
2. **Which processes would benefit from AI-driven orchestration?**
3. **How important is future AI extensibility?**

Ask vendors

1. **Can AI participate in workflows and automation?**
2. **Can AI act across integrated systems?**
3. **Is AI embedded within the platform or delivered through separate services?**

AI is changing expectations

AI is not only changing technology. It is changing expectations. Employees are becoming accustomed to conversational interfaces, instant answers, personalized recommendations, and intelligent assistance. They expect workplace services to be as intuitive and responsive as the consumer technologies they use every day.

Service desk analysts are experiencing similar changes. AI can summarize incidents, recommend resolutions, draft communications, generate knowledge articles, identify patterns, and automate repetitive activities. This creates opportunities to improve productivity while allowing skilled employees to focus on higher-value work.

As a result, organizations should evaluate how AI supports both sides of the service experience:

- AI for employees
- AI for service teams

The greatest value is often created when both are improved simultaneously.

An ESM platform selected today may remain in place for years. During that time, AI capabilities will continue to evolve at an extraordinary pace. Organizations therefore need to evaluate not only what vendors offer today, but also how prepared they are for what comes next:

- What is their AI vision?
- What investments are they making?
- How are they approaching governance?
- How will they help customers adopt AI safely and responsibly?
- How will they support the transition from automation to increasing levels of autonomy?

The answers to these questions may prove just as important as the platform's current functionality. Because in the years ahead, organizations are unlikely to differentiate themselves based on whether they use AI. They will differentiate themselves based on how effectively they use it. And that journey begins with selecting a platform that provides the right foundation.

What you should do

Define the future employee and analyst experience you want to create.

Ask your organization

1. **What experience do employees expect today?**
2. **How much analyst effort is spent on routine work?**
3. **Which interactions could be improved through AI?**

Ask vendors

1. **How does AI support employees?**
2. **How does AI support service teams?**
3. **What is your vision for AI-powered service delivery?**

AI governance is no longer optional

As organizations evaluate AI-powered ESM platforms, it's easy to become distracted by demos of virtual assistants, intelligent automation, and autonomous service delivery. Yet one of the most important considerations receives less attention: AI governance. The more capable AI becomes, the more important governance becomes as a buying criterion. This is particularly true in ESM environments, where AI will have access to sensitive employee information, HR records, financial data, operational systems, knowledge repositories, and business-critical workflows. While AI will create significant opportunities for productivity and service improvement, it can also introduce new risks if controls aren't in place.

Many organizations are already asking questions about governance:

- What information can AI access?
- What actions can it perform?
- Who is accountable for AI-generated decisions?
- How are interactions audited?
- When should a human be involved?

These questions are rapidly becoming as important as traditional concerns around security, compliance, and data protection. When evaluating an ESM platform, organizations should look beyond AI functionality and carefully assess the governance framework that surrounds it. Strong AI governance begins with control. Organizations should be able to define what AI can see, what it can do, and where human oversight is required. Access controls should ensure that AI inherits the same permissions and restrictions that apply to users and service teams. Sensitive processes should support approval workflows and human intervention points where appropriate.

Transparency is equally important. AI activity should be visible, traceable, and auditable. Organizations should be able to understand why recommendations were made, what actions were taken, and who approved them. This principle of transparency is often referred to as explainable AI. Without this visibility, trust is difficult to establish.

Governance should support responsible adoption rather than restrict innovation. The goal is not to slow AI deployment but to enable organizations to scale AI safely and confidently across the enterprise. As AI becomes more and more embedded in service delivery, governance has become a differentiator between platforms. The most successful organizations will not necessarily be those that adopt AI first, but those that can deploy it at scale while maintaining control, accountability, and trust.

What you should do

Establish governance requirements before deploying AI.

Ask your organization

1. **What level of autonomy are we comfortable with?**
2. **Which activities require human oversight?**
3. **How will we manage accountability and risk?**

Ask vendors

1. **What can AI access and control?**
2. **How are AI actions audited and monitored?**
3. **How do you enforce governance policies and approval controls?**

Data readiness is the foundation of AI success

For all the excitement surrounding AI, one reality remains constant: AI is only as effective as the data it relies upon. Many organizations begin their AI journey by evaluating virtual assistants, copilots, intelligent automation, and autonomous agents. Yet the success of these capabilities depends heavily on something much less exciting but far more important: the quality, accessibility, and completeness of the underlying data.

Poor-quality data has always created operational challenges. Inaccurate records, duplicate entries, incomplete information, inconsistent classifications, and outdated knowledge can slow processes, frustrate employees, and reduce service quality. AI doesn't eliminate these problems. In many cases, it amplifies them. An AI assistant can only provide accurate answers if it has access to accurate information. An AI-powered workflow can only make effective decisions if the data it consumes is reliable. An autonomous service agent can only act confidently if it understands the context in which it operates.

This is why data readiness has become a critical consideration when evaluating ESM platforms. Organizations should assess not only the quality of their current data, but also the platform's ability to help improve it. It's equally important to recognize that AI readiness extends beyond structured records and databases. Knowledge articles, service catalogs, workflow definitions, configuration data, and historical service interactions all contribute to the quality of AI outcomes.

Organizations that invest in data quality today will be far better positioned to realize value from AI tomorrow. Those that neglect it may find that even the most sophisticated AI capabilities struggle to deliver meaningful results.

Before asking what AI can do, organizations should first ask a simpler question: Can AI trust the data we provide it?

Because in the AI era, data quality is no longer simply an operational concern. It is a strategic capability.

What you should do

Assess the quality, completeness, accessibility, and governance of the data that will underpin your AI initiatives. Identify gaps in data quality, knowledge quality, service catalogs, workflows, and operational records before investing heavily in AI-powered capabilities.

Ask your organization

1. **How much confidence do we have in the quality of our service management data?**
2. **Would our knowledge base provide reliable answers if AI started using it tomorrow?**
3. **Do we understand where our critical service data resides?**

Ask vendors

1. **How does your platform help identify and improve data quality?**
2. **What capabilities exist to assess AI readiness?**
3. **How does AI access, govern, and validate the information it uses?**

Measuring AI value

As AI adoption accelerates, organizations face a challenge that many technology initiatives eventually encounter: proving value.

The first wave of AI investment has largely been driven by curiosity, experimentation, and the promise of future benefits. However, as AI moves from pilot projects into day-to-day operations, executives, budget holders, and business leaders are asking a simple question: how do we know it's working?

When evaluating AI capabilities within an ESM platform, it is important to look beyond demonstrations and usage statistics. Some vendors focus on metrics such as the number of AI interactions, prompts submitted, or conversations completed. While these figures may indicate adoption, they reveal very little about the actual business value being created.

The organizations that achieve the greatest return from AI focus on outcomes rather than activity. Is AI helping employees find answers faster? Is it reducing the number of requests that require human intervention? Are service teams handling more work without increasing headcount? Has service quality improved? Are employees spending less time waiting and more time being productive?

The value of AI will be measured not through cost reduction alone, but through capacity creation. By automating routine interactions and supporting employees with intelligent assistance, AI enables service teams to focus more time on service improvement, transformation initiatives, knowledge development, and higher-value activities. This additional capacity can deliver much greater long-term value than simple efficiency gains. Organizations should therefore establish clear objectives and baseline measures before deploying AI. Understanding current volumes, effort levels, service performance, and employee satisfaction creates a benchmark against which improvement can be measured.

When evaluating prospective ESM platforms, ask how AI value can be monitored and reported. Can the platform demonstrate productivity gains, automation rates, service improvements, and capacity created? Can it help identify which use cases are delivering the greatest return?

Ultimately, organizations do not invest in AI to generate more AI activity. They invest in AI to achieve better business outcomes. The ability to measure and demonstrate those outcomes will become one of the most important indicators of long-term AI success.

What you should do

Define success metrics and baselines before implementation.

Ask your organization

1. **What business outcomes are we trying to improve?**
2. **How will we measure AI success?**
3. **Where do we expect AI to create capacity?**

Ask vendors

1. **How do you measure AI value?**
2. **What reporting is available?**
3. **Can you demonstrate measurable customer outcomes?**

Ready to assess your organization's AI readiness?

Choosing the right AI-powered ESM platform is only part of the journey. Successfully adopting AI also requires strong governance, trusted data, operational maturity, and a clear strategy for long-term success.

Whether you're just beginning to explore AI or planning your next platform investment, Hornbill can help you assess your readiness and make informed decisions with confidence.

- **Flight Check –** Assess the quality and readiness of your service management data and identify opportunities to strengthen the foundations for AI.
- **Advisory services –** Work with experienced consultants to develop your ESM and AI strategy, accelerate adoption, and avoid common transformation pitfalls.
- **AI governance –** Understand how to implement AI responsibly with the controls, oversight, and governance needed to build trust and manage risk.
- **AI readiness assessment –** Evaluate your organization's maturity across data, knowledge, workflows, automation, and governance to identify the capabilities needed for successful AI adoption.

Recommended resources

The modern IT leader's investment playbook
A How IT leaders can build business cases that drive operational transformation and enterprise resilience.

Agentic AI Survival Guide
A practical guide to governance, change management, risk, and scaling AI agents safely across the organization

AI for Agents
Explore how AI-powered agent assistance can increase productivity, reduce workloads, and help teams focus on higher-value work.

What agentic AI means for the future of service management
Find out how agentic AI transforms three key aspects of service management: the end user experience, the agent experience, and infrastructure resilience.

Why Agentic AI Changes Everything for Service Desks
Explore how agentic AI is shifting service management from incremental improvement to transformational productivity gains.

Ready to see what Hornbill can do for you?

Speak to a Hornbill specialist

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