Building AI-Ready M&E Teams – Skills, Roles, and Collaboration

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is often misunderstood as a magical tool that can simply be "plugged into" any system to produce fast, accurate insights. In reality, integrating AI into Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) requires far more than choosing the right algorithm or platform. It demands an organizational shift—one that includes **reskilling people, redefining roles, restructuring teams**, and cultivating a culture that supports **continuous learning, ethical vigilance, and adaptive collaboration**.

Key Takeaways

- **Upskilling is non-negotiable**: Every M&E professional should understand AI basics, risks, and applications.
- **Roles are evolving**: AI adds complexity but also creates new pathways for impact and innovation.
- **Cross-functional collaboration** is essential: Success lies at the intersection of MEL, tech, and ethics.
- **Culture matters**: Empower teams to experiment, question, and learn continuously.
- **People before tools**: AI works best when embedded in adaptive, human-centered teams that prioritize transparency and trust.

Just as a solid Theory of Change requires a thoughtful understanding of context, assumptions, and actors, the successful adoption of AI in M&E requires us to think deeply about our internal capabilities. Who is driving the AI agenda? What skills do our teams need? How do we ensure that technology serves people—not the other way around?

This lesson explores how to **build and manage AI-ready M&E teams**, with a focus on:

- Upskilling and training strategies for current staff
- Evolving roles and responsibilities within AI-powered environments
- Tools, practices, and team structures that foster collaboration and accountability

1. Upskilling M&E Professionals for AI Integration

Why Upskilling Matters

Let's start with a simple truth: **your current team is your best asset**.

M&E professionals bring essential expertise in evaluation design, data interpretation, stakeholder engagement, and contextual analysis—skills that AI cannot replace. However, to ensure that AI tools are used effectively and ethically, M&E teams need to develop a foundational understanding of how AI works, where it adds value, and how to identify its risks and limitations.

This doesn't mean everyone needs to become a data scientist. But it *does* mean everyone—from field officers to senior MEL advisors—should understand:

- What AI can and cannot do
- How algorithms are trained and validated

- Why data quality, diversity, and governance are crucial
- What ethical risks (e.g., bias, privacy violations) look like in practice

Think of this as **"AI literacy for M&E"**—an emerging competency as essential today as Excel once was a decade ago.

Practical Training Approaches

Upskilling doesn't have to mean months of formal schooling. Many organizations use **flexible, blended learning** strategies that make skill-building accessible, engaging, and tailored to development sector needs.

Here are five tried-and-tested methods:

1. Internal Workshops and Peer Learning

Organize regular in-house sessions where team members explore topics like "What is AI?", "How does machine learning work?", or "Ethical risks in AI for evaluation." Encourage staff to present real-world case studies or co-learn with others.

2. Online Courses and Certifications

Numerous high-quality, low-cost (or free) courses are available online. Here are some excellent starting points:

- **Elements of AI** – University of Helsinki's beginner-friendly course
- **AI for Good** – Courses and talks by the UN and partners
- **Responsible AI** – IBM's framework for ethical AI practices
- **Data Science for Everyone** – A podcast and curriculum for non-coders

3. Partnerships with Universities or AI Labs

Many development agencies partner with academic institutions or innovation hubs to co-develop learning pathways or host field-specific bootcamps. These partnerships also bring in fresh perspectives and technical expertise.

4. Cross-Team Learning with IT and Data Science Units

Break down silos by hosting **joint learning sessions** between M&E, IT, and data teams. These exchanges often surface hidden assumptions, clarify language barriers, and build mutual respect across disciplines.

5. AI Bootcamps for Development Practitioners

Some organizations now offer short, intensive AI bootcamps designed specifically for the humanitarian and development sector. These are practical, jargon-free, and focused on real-world applications of AI for evaluation and social impact.

2. Redefining Roles in AI-Powered M&E Teams

Evolving Team Structures

AI integration doesn't just bring new tools—it transforms how we work.

To manage AI effectively, teams need to combine **evaluation expertise, technical know-how, ethical reasoning, and adaptive thinking.** This may require bringing in new roles, but just as importantly, it requires **reshaping existing ones**.

Here's how typical roles in an M&E team may evolve:

Traditional Role	AI-Enhanced Version
M&E Officer	AI-Literate MEL Officer – comfortable using dashboards, understanding AI outputs
Data Analyst	Data Scientist – trained in machine learning, model evaluation, and big data
Evaluation Manager	AI Project Manager – skilled at integrating AI pilots into M&E strategies
Ethics Advisor	Algorithm Ethics Lead – focuses on bias mitigation, fairness, and transparency
Program Manager	AI Product Owner – connects field needs with technical implementation and validation

This doesn't mean starting from scratch. Many roles evolve through **training and experience**, not just recruitment.

Collaboration Best Practices for AI-Ready Teams

In an AI-enhanced environment, no single team can do it all. Success relies on **cross-functional collaboration** and **clear governance**.

Here are practices that help:

1. Form Cross-Disciplinary Project Teams

Bring together M&E specialists, data scientists, IT personnel, and program staff around shared goals. Make sure roles are clearly defined but allow for **open knowledge exchange.**

2. Hold Regular Knowledge-Sharing Sessions

Create space—virtually or in person—for teams to reflect on what's working, what's not, and what they're learning. Share updates from pilots, tools being tested, or external insights.

3. Use Collaborative Tools

Platforms like **Airtable, Notion, Slack**, or **Microsoft Teams** can help teams stay aligned, track shared tasks, and communicate across departments.

4. Rotate Roles and Tasks

Let team members take turns leading AI-related activities (e.g., coordinating a data audit, evaluating a model, organizing an ethics review). This builds **confidence and cross-functional literacy.**

5. Foster a Culture of Safe Experimentation

AI is still new in many M&E settings. Encourage teams to **try small-scale pilots** without fear of failure. Use these moments as learning opportunities—not just performance metrics.

3. Creating a Supportive Culture for AI Adoption

Human-Centered AI

At the heart of any successful AI strategy is **human intelligence and intention**. AI tools do not design evaluations, understand cultural nuance, or interpret impact—they support *people* who do.

This is why building AI-ready teams is not just about skills—it's about **culture**.

- **A culture of curiosity** empowers teams to explore AI without fear or hype.
- **A culture of transparency** encourages open conversations about what AI is doing, how it's making decisions, and when it's wrong.
- **A culture of ethics** reinforces accountability, especially when working with vulnerable populations.

- **A culture of continuous learning** helps teams adapt as AI tools evolve.

Leaders play a key role here. Make it clear that **AI is a tool, not a silver bullet**—and that **human values and judgment remain central** to good evaluation.

Summary

Adopting AI in M&E is not a question of "if," but "how"—and how well.

Success depends not just on technology, but on people. That means:

- Upskilling your current team
- Creating new roles and redefining existing ones
- Building structures for ethical, cross-disciplinary collaboration

You don't need to become an AI expert overnight. But you *do* need to invest in your team's capacity to ask good questions, interpret AI outputs responsibly, and ensure that every technological advancement leads to better outcomes for the people and communities you serve.