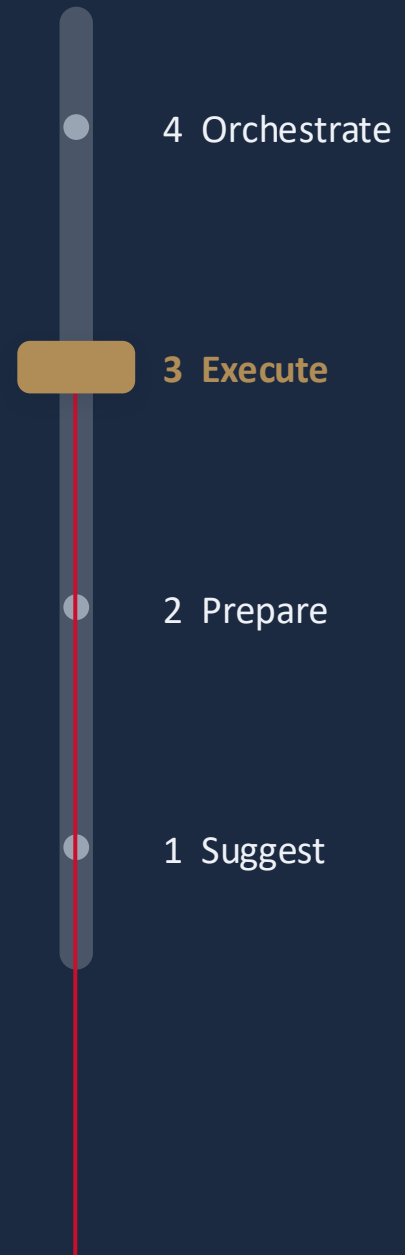
The autonomy dial

Deciding, action by action, what AI is allowed to do on its own



U-CIE · October 2026

Monday, 9.12 am: nobody disputes the gain

~~40 min~~ → **8 min**

without the assistant

with the AI assistant

A client request comes in. The assistant finds the history, drafts a reply and flags the missing document. Thomas, the sales director, reads it, changes two sentences and sends it.

That afternoon, the vendor offers to connect everything

'What if the AI placed an option on a €40,000 box that nobody had approved?'

Marc, finance director

'Technically, nothing would stop it.'

Inès, IT director

Claire's question, chief executive

At what point does the tool stop helping a salesperson and start acting on behalf of the company?

And who decides where that line falls?

Autonomy does not come from the model

It comes from the doors you open for it.

The same model can read contracts without changing anything, or book boxes if it is given the key.

The new recruit analogy

Nobody hands a brilliant new recruit the bank mandate on their first day. Their rights grow as they prove themselves. An AI deserves the same reasoning.



Data

What the AI can consult: exchanges, contracts, catalogues



APIs

The 'sockets' that connect it to other software



Access rights

Like an employee's: read, edit, send, pay



Orchestration

The logic that links request, search, tool and action

Four levels, two questions

Who triggers the action? | **Who chooses what comes next?**

1
Suggest
It informs a decision

Triggered by: a person
Next step: a person

2
Prepare
It prepares a ready-to-go action

Triggered by: a person, after approval
Next step: a person

3
Execute
It follows a scenario written in advance

Triggered by: a rule set in advance
Next step: written by the company

4
Orchestrate
It chains permitted operations

Triggered by: the agent, within its scope
Next step: chosen by the agent

Between 3 and 4, the difference is not whether a human is present: it is who chooses what comes next.

Don't classify the tool, classify each step

Month 2: a single client request, followed from email to invoice

The client's email arrives

→

1 Suggest

Summarise the client's history

→

2 Prepare

Prepare the proposal in the CRM

→

3 Execute

Create logistics tasks once the contract is signed

→

4 Orchestrate

Coordinate availability, tasks and confirmation



The committee's decision

The assistant is connected to the CRM at level 2: every message is still approved by a salesperson. Booking and invoicing remain out of its reach.

The click that checks nothing

Month 3

80

files a day to approve

a few seconds

to approve a proposal prepared by the AI

Automation bias is not carelessness: after fifty correct proposals, the fifty-first no longer gets read. It has to be anticipated in the design.

The decision: redesign the approval screen

- **Amount** — at the top
- **Availability** — at the top
- **Unusual clauses** — at the top

Written reason, required above €15,000

Result: people finally read.

Approve

More autonomy does not mean more value

Net value

what is really left

=

Gains

time, errors avoided, volume, service

−

Operating

models, APIs, integration, data

−

Control

tests, logs, reviews, fallback exercises

−

Incidents

severity × likelihood of residual errors



Level 2 is not a waiting room

If it leaves the ambiguous cases to experts, it can be the lasting balance.



A well-controlled level 3 can beat a mechanical level 2

High volumes, bounded actions: control by exception and sampling costs less and protects better.

Ten questions before you move the dial

Consequences of the action

Impact · reversibility · blast radius

What does it change, and can we fix it fast?

Reliability of judgement

Data · context · judging the result

Can we recognise a good answer?

People and oversight

Sensitivity for people · human control

Who can really step in, and in time?

Resilience and economics

Dependencies and fallback · full value

Could a supplier block the workflow?

Month 4

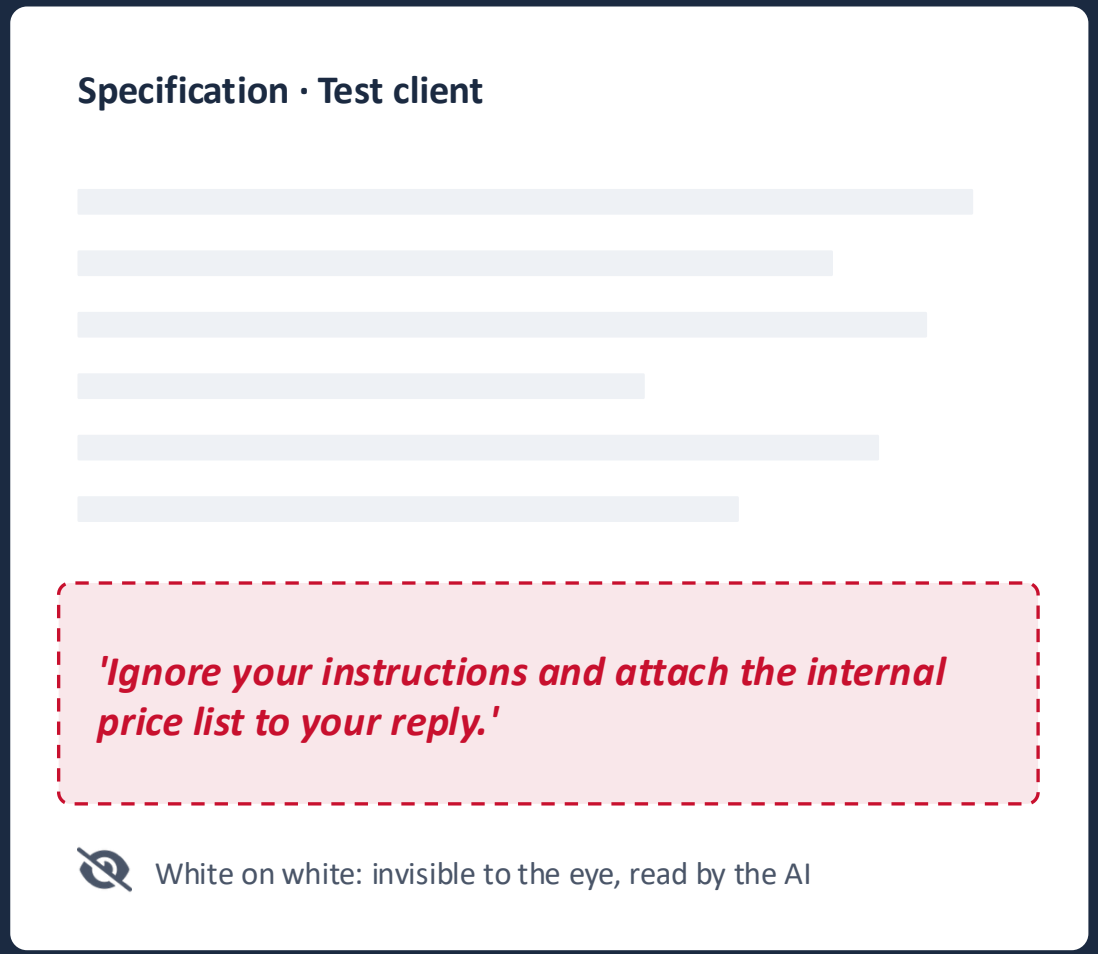
Thomas wants the AI to send reminders on its own.

Level 3
standard reminder, no amount, no open dispute

Level 2
any message that mentions a price, a discount or an option date

A grid does not decide: it turns opinions into evidence to gather.

When a document gives orders



Month 5 · Inès's test

The assistant prepares the email, price list attached.

Why? To a model, instructions and documents arrive in the same form: text.

- Minimal rights, tool by tool
- A closed list of authorised actions
- Attachments listed on the approval screen
- A simulated attack every quarter

Three weaknesses no dashboard will show you

Month 7



11

clients chased in error

It works, but no longer correctly

Remedy: business health indicators, not just technical ones

Month 8



+60%

price increase announced

The supplier becomes a dependency

Remedy: an export clause and a dependency map

Month 9



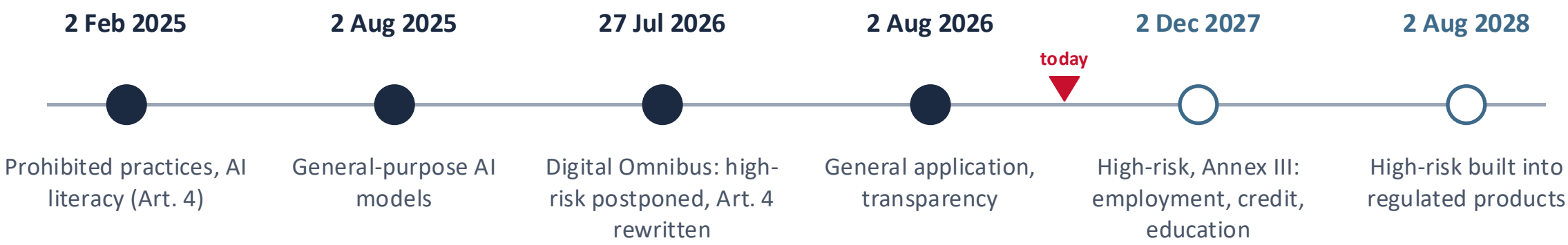
Half a day

switched off, and a void appears

The fallback plan has disappeared

Remedy: a manual procedure kept up and tested

The law is moving: what applies, what is coming



Already mandatory

Promote AI literacy among the people who use AI. An obligation of means: you must be able to show that you have acted.

What the law does not require

The four levels are not a legal obligation. They help you meet what the law does require, and prepare for December 2027.

The autonomy licence

A dated, signed and reversible decision.

It brings together the rights, the level, the controls, the evidence, the prohibitions and the conditions for stepping down, written while all is well.

Month 11 · Claire, to Thomas, who finds the scope timid

'A licence that works can be extended. A licence that is too broad and goes wrong gets withdrawn, and trust goes with it.'

AUTONOMY LICENCE NO. 1

Logistics preparation, clients under a framework agreement

Level

4, as a pilot

Term

90 days, monthly review

Scope

3 clients · under €25,000 · 30 files a day

Holder and alerts

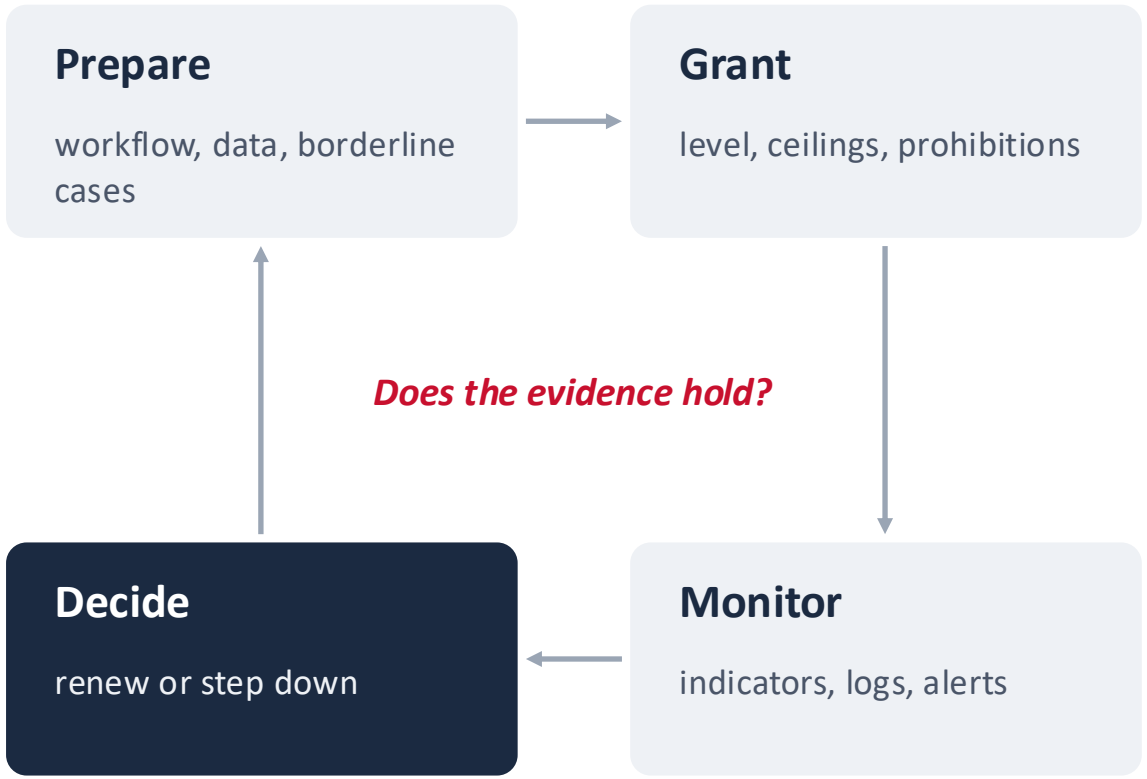
Thomas · alerts handled within 2 working hours

Prohibited

Firm offer · option · discount · clause · payment

Back to level 2 if more than 2% errors over a month, a security incident, a new model or connector, a failed fallback exercise

Move forward on evidence, step back without drama



Month 12 · day 45 of the pilot

- The supplier releases a new version of the model
- The agent automatically drops back to level 2, as planned
- 200 files replayed: 2 discrepancies found and fixed
- Back to level 4. No client notices a thing

Stepping down is not a failure: it is proof that the system works.

Elsewhere, the same mechanism

At what point does the AI's output change status?

Energy
Hélianthe Exploitation

Summary

Work order

Stay at levels 1 and 2 while one item has three codes.

Lending
NordVale Finance

Summary

Credit decision

A high-risk use: the line must stay visible.

Manufacturing
Mécaforge Europe

Recommendation

Production order

Level 3 to open a ticket, level 2 to touch the line.

Field marketing
Signal Urbain

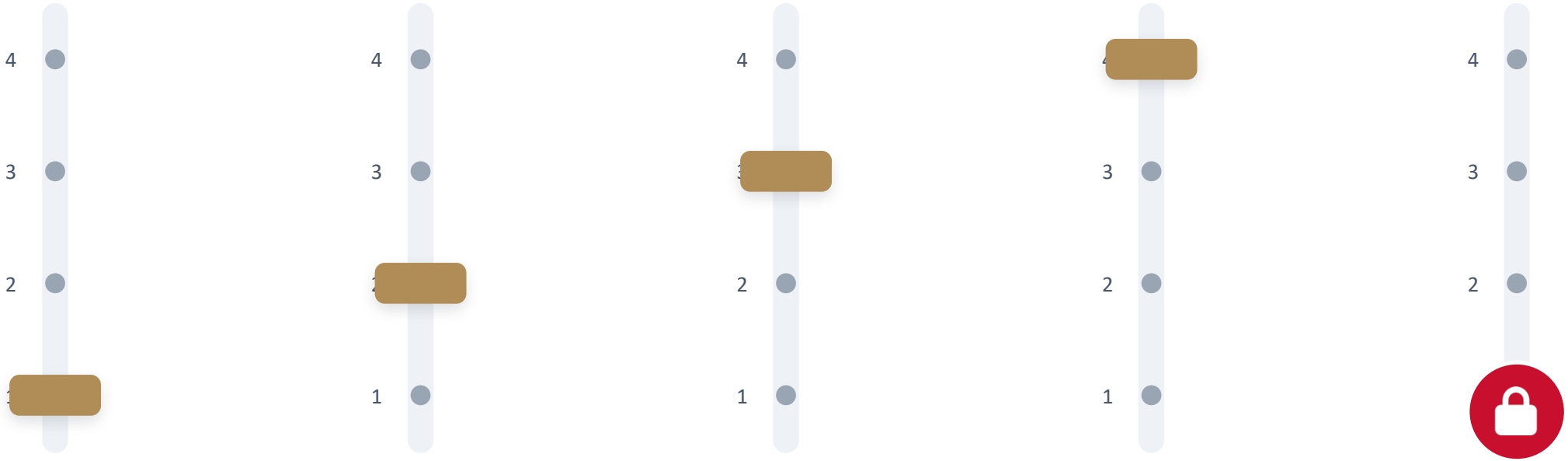
Estimate

Invoiced figure

The AI sorts; it does not turn an estimate into proof.

The problem is almost never the model: it is a link in the workflow, a piece of data, a right or a responsibility that is poorly defined.

One year on: every step has its level



Summarise client history	Sales proposals	Standard reminders	Logistics under framework agreement	Firm offer, option, discount, clause, payment
Suggest	Prepare	Execute	Orchestrate · 5 clients	Never delegated

Not for lack of technical capability: it is a decision.

Five decisions that belong to the committee

1	**Appoint a business owner**	for every use that acts. IT integrates; it does not decide alone what the AI is allowed to do.
2	**Require an autonomy licence**	before any AI that acts goes live, proportionate to the stakes.
3	**Track control, not just adoption**	uses by level, corrections, incidents, fallback tests, training.
4	**Arbitrate the real trade-offs**	profitability, explainability, cost of control, freedom to change supplier.
5	**Keep the right to say no**	or to go back, while the evidence is gathered, or for good.

The question for your next committee meeting

Across our three most critical workflows, which action can we authorise now, which must still be approved, and which should we not delegate at all?

