



Alliance Roundtable

“How CEOs Are Building an AI Workforce in Brick-and-Mortar Businesses”

Thursday, April 16, 2026, 2:00 pm – 4:00 pm PDT

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Event Overview

- **Featured CEO Speaker:** [Donn Duncan, D&D Distributing / Johnstone Supply](#), CEO
- **Moderator:** [Matthew Swanson, StaffAI](#), CEO; and [Silicon Valley Software Group](#), Managing Partner
- **Host:** [Paul Witkay, Alliance of Chief Executives](#), Founder & CEO

Summary

This 19th Alliance AI Roundtable focused on how AI employees are being deployed in traditional, non-technical industries to automate complex, high-friction operational workflows. Hosted by **Paul Witkay** and moderated by **Matthew Swanson**, the session featured **Donn Duncan**, CEO of D&D Distributing, who shared how his team implemented an AI employee to fully automate a critical claim-back process tied to manufacturer rebates. The discussion highlighted a shift from AI experimentation to practical, ROI-driven execution, demonstrating how CEOs can use AI to improve accuracy, eliminate manual work, and scale operations without increasing headcount.

Key Themes & Insights

1. AI Adoption Is a Strategic Choice, Not a Technical One

Donn framed AI adoption as a leadership decision: either wait and follow competitors or proactively explore opportunities. His approach was driven by anticipating future disruption rather than reacting to industry pressure. This reinforces that AI adoption is less about technical capability and more about executive mindset and willingness to experiment.

2. Start with a Painful, High-Value Workflow

The initial use case focused on automating a complex claim-back process tied to manufacturer rebates, a critical driver of profitability. Previously manual, error-prone, and time-intensive, this workflow required processing emails, applying codes, updating spreadsheets, and submitting claims. By targeting a high-friction process, Donn ensured immediate, tangible value from AI deployment.

3. AI Employees Can Execute End-to-End Workflows

The AI employee (“John”) autonomously manages the entire process: scanning emails, extracting promotional codes, updating reports, and submitting claims through a manufacturer portal. This is a notable shift from AI as an assistive tool to AI as a fully autonomous operator, capable of replacing multi-step human workflows without requiring system integrations.

4. Accuracy and Consistency Are the Primary ROI Drivers

The biggest improvement was not just time savings, but precision. The manual process introduced frequent errors, delays, and missed revenue due to incorrect submissions. The AI system now delivers near-perfect accuracy, eliminating rework and accelerating cash recovery cycles, directly impacting profitability.

5. Training AI Mirrors Training Employees

Donn emphasized that deploying AI is operational, not technical. The process resembled onboarding a new hire: explaining tasks step-by-step, setting expectations, and refining outputs. The key advantage is retention -- AI learns once and executes consistently without degradation.

Donn comments, “Think of this as the smartest person you could bring onto your team. They don’t know your business yet, but if you train them and show them the process, you tell them once, and they won’t forget.”

6. AI Enables Growth Without Increasing Headcount

With the business growing ~20% annually, hiring constraints were a bottleneck. AI provides a path to maintain headcount while scaling output. Donn views AI as a way to expand capacity rather than replace employees -- freeing human teams to focus on higher-value activities.

7. Next Frontier: AI-Driven Sales Expansion

Donn identified a major opportunity in deploying an AI inside sales agent to manage ~1,500 under-served accounts. Unlike human reps, who tend to focus on a small subset, AI can systematically engage the full customer base, ensuring consistent outreach and follow-through.

Suggested Action Items for CEOs & Executive Teams

- **Identify one high-friction, high-value process** where errors or delays directly impact revenue.
- **Treat AI like a new hire**, not a tool -- define workflows clearly and train step-by-step.
- **Prioritize end-to-end automation**, not partial efficiency gains.
- **Measure success through accuracy and outcomes**, not just time saved.
- **Use AI to scale constrained functions** (e.g., sales coverage, operations) without adding headcount.
- **Start with one proven use case**, then expand once value is validated.

Donn comments, “Is the juice worth the squeeze? What are the pros and cons? How would you implement it? Do you have the time?”

Conclusion: This session reinforced that AI’s most immediate impact lies in automating structured, repetitive workflows where accuracy and consistency drive financial outcomes. Donn Duncan’s experience shows that even in traditional industries, AI employees can unlock meaningful efficiency gains and create scalable operational leverage without requiring deep technical investment.