



The Messy Middle of AI

Where Companies Are in 2026

Contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Executive Summary
- 3 Where Companies Are Today
- 4 What Success With AI Looks Like
- 5 Where and Why Progress Breaks Down
- 6 Where Companies Are Going
- 7 Next Steps

Introduction

Just four years ago, using AI at work was a nebulous concept. Now, it's at the center of corporate growth plans. The release of ChatGPT in 2022, and successive release of other LLMs, was a ground-shaking event, and the business world is still riding the waves of the innovation.

Across industries, many organizations are moving from experimentation toward developing real AI deployments, new workflows, and new ways of working—or at least they're trying. At the same time, most organizations are learning that adoption is not the hard part of their AI journey. Operationalizing it across the company is.

We wanted to add some clarity to the AI conversation, so we surveyed 501 business decision makers—96% who said they're the sole decision maker on AI initiatives—to discover where they believe they are in the AI journey, where they are getting stuck, and how they are measuring success.

At the heart our survey findings is this: Businesses are adjusting to the change of a sonic boom of technological innovation. Time is needed there. Challenges run the gamut, and “success” means something different to every company. But nearly every company is trying something. And discovering the challenges that come with the move from experimentation to production and implementation.

Only 5% of companies we surveyed haven't identified a primary AI objective, and just 17% of companies reported still being in an “exploring or learning” phase. But as companies start to buy AI products and solutions or build their own—and roll them out in their organizations—challenges and roadblocks come in many forms.

Many call where we are now “the messy middle” because so much is unclear. But it's also where most companies are, so take heart that most everyone is figuring this out. So, let's shine a light on the murkiness to where companies stand in The State of Enterprise AI Adoption in 2026.



Executive Summary

1. Most companies are beyond exploring and are trying to build AI use cases—but the waters are still muddy.

Just 17% of leaders said their companies were “exploring or learning” about AI. The remaining 83% were beyond that, ranging from adopting basic tools to scaling AI across teams.

However, that doesn’t mean that the 83% are well ahead. The challenges—and how companies measure success—differ in each situation.

2. Stalling somewhere along the journey is the norm—no one is ahead.

89% of leaders reported an AI initiative stalling at their company—opposed to 11% reporting that they haven’t had one stall.

An AI use case not working is normal. The reason why, though, varies, and how to fix it isn’t always easy.

3. Success means something different to everyone

We asked leaders how they deem implementing AI a success, offering seven general business measures of success. We let leaders select multiple measures.

“Time saved or productivity gains” and “quality improvement” were the most frequently selected measures at just 37%. “Cost savings” was the least selected measure at 27%.

Everybody wants their investment to pay off. How they’re measuring that payoff is different.



WHY IT MATTERS

How specifically AI will impact the U.S. economy at large remains to be seen. Many companies are still figuring out how it will impact their people and business, too.

Companies that will be able to successfully leverage AI will be the ones that:

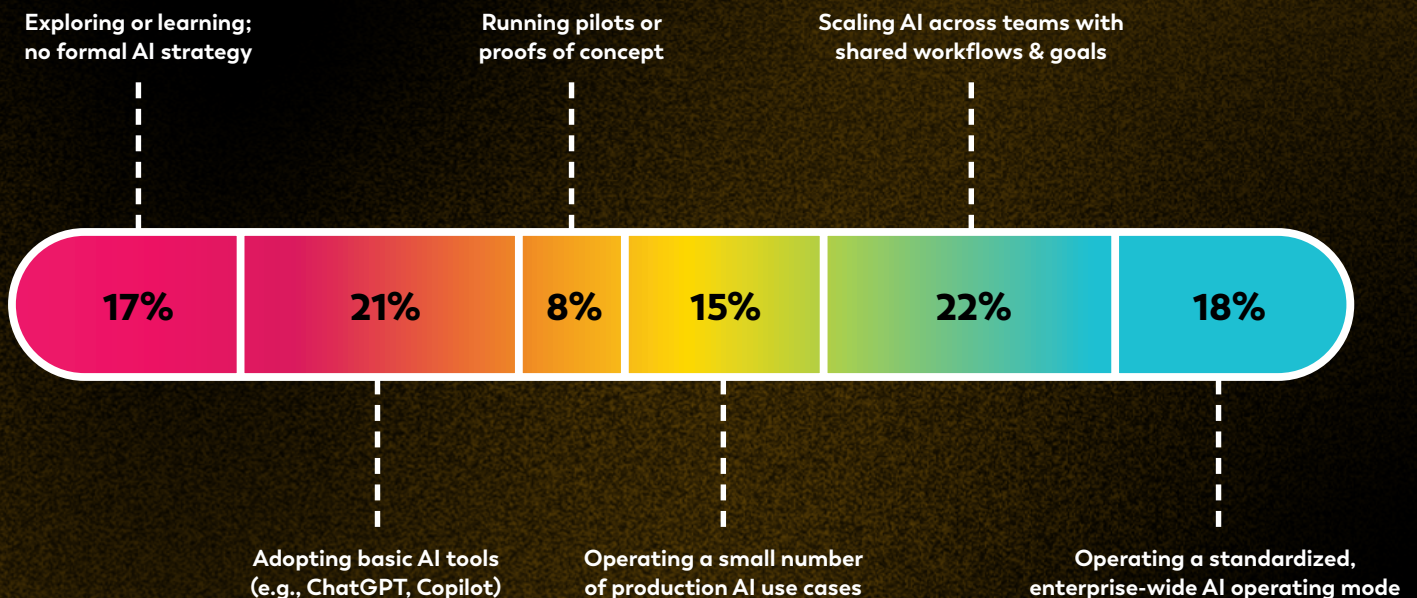
- Define what success looks like
- Identify what can be agentified and improved by AI
- Spot common road blockers and challenges—and address them

Where Companies are Today

When given choices to identify where their company is at today in their AI journey, respondents showed a landscape that reports a broadly active AI ecosystem, but there's no clear common marker for where most companies are today.

 **Only about 17 percent are still “exploring or learning” with no formal AI strategy.**

A meaningful share (21%) are adopting basic tools like ChatGPT, Copilot, and others, while other respondents report running pilots, operating production use cases, attempting to scale AI across teams, or developing an enterprise AI operating model.



What Success with AI Looks Like

The companies developing the most common AI tools need to monetize their product. Many companies building or buying their AI use cases also need to find value in what they're investing in.

So, we asked how companies are currently measuring success in their AI initiatives. Respondents could select multiple measures of success or add their own.

Here's what they chose:

Time saved / productivity gains



Quality improvement



Improved customer experience



Cycle-time reduction



Risk reduction



Revenue impact



Cost reduction



NO SINGLE METRIC LEADS

Surprisingly, revenue impact and cost reduction were the two least-selected measures of success. This could signal that decision makers are okay with the time it takes to bring an AI strategy to life, and that revenue and costs aren't the most important at this moment. The spread of responses was interesting, too, showcasing that businesses want AI to accomplish a host of business problems—and they want it now.

We also asked what the respondent's primary objective was over the next 12 months. The answer selected the most was "increase efficiency and productivity across teams" (21%).

This general sentiment could change, however, as more companies invest in AI and find out how valuable it is in their ecosystem. Speed, accuracy, and consistency seem to matter the most to them now. The cost savings will very likely matter soon after.

Where and Why Progress Breaks Down

What are the biggest challenges that are *slowing or preventing* AI implementation at your organization?

Data quality or availability



Security concerns



Integration challenges



Change management challenges



Low trust in AI across the organization



Skills or talent gaps



Lack of governance



Unclear strategy or ROI



Lack of executive or board alignment



Many respondents said their primary objective over the next 12 months included operationalizing AI into day-to-day workflows (19%) and scale proven workflows across multiple teams (17%).

But reaching the point in an AI journey where the technology is used, scaled, and valued across a company has had bumps in the road.

We've worked with companies big and small—all trying to implement AI across their business—so we have identified multiple areas where companies run into challenges.

In this research survey, we asked which challenges are primarily slowing down AI implementation.

We also asked where these initiatives *stall*.

Deploying into systems / workflows



Compliance or accuracy risk



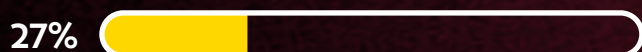
Measuring impact



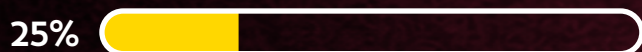
Building / engineering the solution



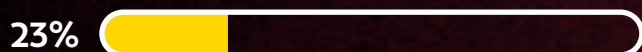
Organizational adoption



Identifying use cases



Data readiness



89%

of respondents reported
an initiative stalling

Where Companies are Going

(AGENT DEPLOYMENTS AND HOW THEY BUILD)

Most organizations, especially large ones, are finding AI use cases that make sense in certain parts of the organization more than other parts.

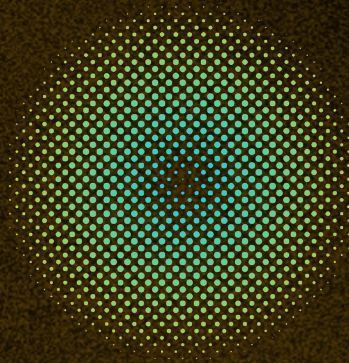
We asked respondents where in their organization:

- 1 **General AI uses cases were being deployed**
- 2 **Where agentic use cases were being deployed**

There was some commonality here.

Where AI lands first

- Software development or IT
- Call centers
- Cybersecurity



Where it still lags

- Finance
- Legal

Four Clear Next Steps

1



DEFINE YOUR SUCCESS

The data showed success with AI means something different to each company. But what matters is that it's defined.

Start by choosing two to three outcomes you can baseline, such as cycle time, quality defects, customer experience, or risk reduction, then align on what “better” looks like at 30, 60, and 90 days.

Then each metric to the workflow you are changing, not the tool you are deploying. Enterprise-level impact typically comes from workflow redesign and operating-model changes.

2



IT'S ALL ABOUT THE FOUNDATION

AI use cases work when data quality and availability, security, governance, and cloud strategy all play parts of the strong foundation for success.

3



UNDERSTAND WHERE YOU'RE STUCK

(OR WHERE YOU MAY GET STUCK)

There will be bumps in the road implementing most AI initiatives. Nearly 9-in-10 companies reported having an AI initiative stall out, and they usually occur once they meet real-world requirements, like adoption, production, or risk review. (The foundation may be one of those areas.)

You get proactive here with assessing how ready your organization really is for AI. Is the data quality and availability strong? Have you discussed company-wide governance policies? Do your people know what success looks like, and have they played a part in what tasks and workflows could lend themselves to AI use cases?

A good assessment and readiness process will proactively reveal some potential stall areas.

4



PLAN FOR AN EVERCHANGING HYBRID ENVIRONMENT

In reality, most businesses will likely adopt a hybrid environment of AI tools—some bought off the shelf and some built in-house.

As organizations adopt a mix of vendors and custom solutions, success hinges on operational alignment. Establishing clear roles for managing, tuning, and deploying AI, and ensuring those efforts connect through shared workflows and platforms, helps AI initiatives scale enterprise-wide rather than in silos.

Methodology

Insight Global commissioned Atomik Research to conduct an online survey of 501 executive level business leaders from VP level, President/Business Principal, and C-Suite roles who have decision making influence on their organizations AI implementation efforts. The margin of error is approximately +/-4 percentage points with a confidence level of 95 percent. Fieldwork took place between March 27 and March 30, 2026.

About Insight Global

Insight Global is a talent, consulting and AI company that delivers business outcomes in an ever-changing world. We obsess over solving problems and building solutions that move our customers further, faster.

With access to top talent in 50+ countries, our tech-enabled recruiters build teams quickly—and our experts across Cloud, AI, Data, Enterprise Operations, and Applied Engineering deliver solutions tailored to each customer.

Our purpose stays constant: to develop people personally, professionally, and financially so they can be the light to the world around them.