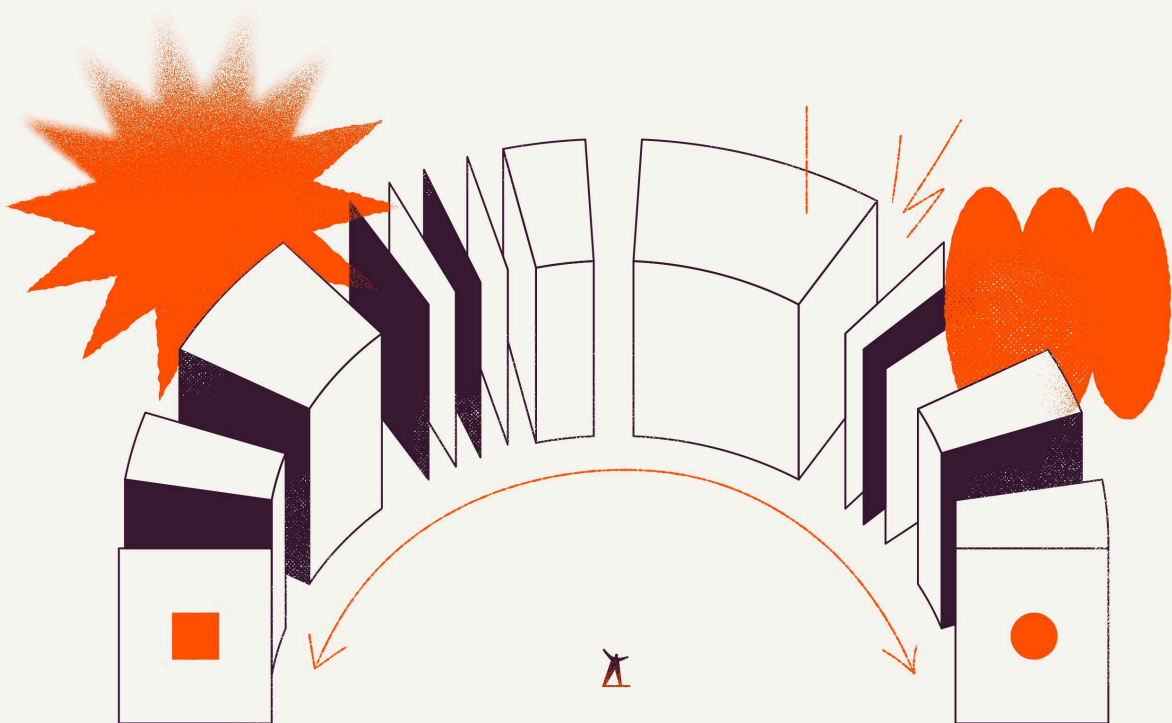


HOW TO DEMOCRATIZE AI AT SCALE

# Is your AI strategy built for everyone or just engineers?



**zapier**

# The innovation ceiling in enterprise AI

## Introduction

AI is everywhere—but orchestration is still stuck in the queue.

According to McKinsey's 2025 State of AI report, 78% of organizations say they use AI **in at least one business function**—including orgs with more than \$500 million in annual revenues. But despite this early traction, scaling remains a top challenge. 46% of AI projects are scrapped between proof of concept and adoptions, based on a study by S&P. Most orchestration platforms are built for developers, not for the business. The result: **valuable automation opportunities are delayed, deprioritized, or never built at all.**

This creates a quiet but costly constraint: an innovation ceiling.

When orchestration requires technical lift at every step, time-to-value slows, backlogs grow, and engineering resources are diverted from strategic priorities. And perhaps most critically, **the employees closest to the problem—the ones who understand the nuances—are left waiting.**

But data shows that when you give those users access, they build.

### ZAPIER AUTOMATION INSIGHTS

In enterprise accounts, more than 75% have an account owner who is *not* the top automation contributor. In fact, the most active builders are often added after initial implementation—frequently from RevOps, Marketing, and Operations.

*This suggests that orchestration momentum doesn't start with ownership—it starts with access. To scale automation across the business, platforms must empower the people closest to the workflows—not just those who procured the tool.*

The real unlock? **Empowering business users to build and adapt AI-powered workflows independently—within guardrails, not behind gates.** That's how orchestration becomes a growth engine.

### In this guide, you'll learn:

1. The real cost of developer-only automation
2. Why AI orchestration for all scales innovation
3. Patterns of successful org-wide AI orchestration at scale

# The real cost of developer-only automation

Developer-led orchestration strategies often promise flexibility and control—but in practice, they introduce layers of operational drag, scalability limits, and hidden overhead that most enterprises can't afford.

Here's where the cost really shows up:

## 1. Slower time-to-value

In developer-only models, building and deploying automation workflows typically involves:

API authentication setup → Manual integration development → Internal security reviews → QA testing and sign-off

**The friction is not just about technical steps, but about translation.**

Every request from a business team has to be handed off, scoped, documented, prioritized, and interpreted by someone who isn't inside the workflow day to day. That "game of telephone" slows things down and introduces errors. By the time a workflow is deployed, the business often needs something slightly different, forcing the cycle to repeat.

For fast-moving teams like Sales, Marketing, or Support, these delays compound.

⚠ Developer-led orchestration is slower. And more critically, it's out of sync with business velocity.

"Every layer between the person who knows the process and the person building it costs accuracy and speed. Developer-led automation is always a step behind. But when process owners build and maintain their own automations, they can adapt instantly—closing the loop and maximizing ROI."

— Jenica Blechschmidt, Director, Product Management at Zapier

## 2. High maintenance overhead

Automation isn't "set and forget." In developer-built AI orchestration systems, the team that writes the workflow is also responsible for:

- Handling system downtime and job failures
- Debugging after third-party API schema changes
- Updating webhooks and retry logic when endpoints shift
- Maintaining custom logic and environment-specific dependencies

**The more complex the automation, the heavier the maintenance burden becomes.**

This burden only becomes more complex if you're opting to self-host and run your AI models locally. On top of the added expense and responsibility, you lose out on access to the latest models.

Every update requires technical intervention, which means new requests must compete with roadmap priorities. Processes shift constantly, and workflows quickly fall out of sync. In self-hosted environments, infrastructure management adds another layer of ongoing cost and risk.

## 3. Bottlenecked innovation

Centralized orchestration inevitably means limited build capacity.

Technical teams are incentivized to focus on deterministic, highly repeatable workflows that can be precisely defined and maintained. But the reality of most business processes is that they contain elements of inference—steps that require judgment, context, or adaptation.

When orchestration is restricted to engineering, these types of workflows are rarely automated, because developers lack the domain expertise to decide what "good" looks like in marketing campaigns, hiring decisions, or customer support interactions.

**This creates a ceiling on innovation where the most context-rich and efficiency-driving automations—especially those in Finance, HR, or Operations, often never get built.**

"In this agentic world, business context isn't optional—it's the difference between automation that works and automation that fails."

— Jenica Blechschmidt, Director, Product Management at Zapier



## 4. Disproportionate engineering spend

Dev time is expensive—and every hour spent building or maintaining internal workflows is an hour not spent improving the product, resolving tech debt, or driving customer value.

This contributes to a significantly higher total cost of orchestration, even if licensing or usage-based platform costs appear lower on the surface.

Beyond cost, the bigger risk is strategic: in high-velocity markets, internal process automation shouldn't compete with customer-facing innovation for engineering bandwidth.



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When engineers are the only ones building, you're effectively holding the company back. They'll only automate 10–20% of what's possible because they'll focus on deep, deterministic use cases that justify their time. But the real opportunity is in empowering everyone else in the business to automate the processes they understand best.

— Jenica Blechschmidt

Director, Product Management at Zapier

## 5. Missed automation surface area

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# AI orchestration for everyone

The most effective orchestration platforms support developers and empower the whole organization to build safely and scale confidently.

Democratized AI orchestration removes dependency on technical gatekeepers by giving domain experts direct access to automation tools—with built-in controls that preserve visibility, governance, and operational integrity.

Here's what that looks like in practice:

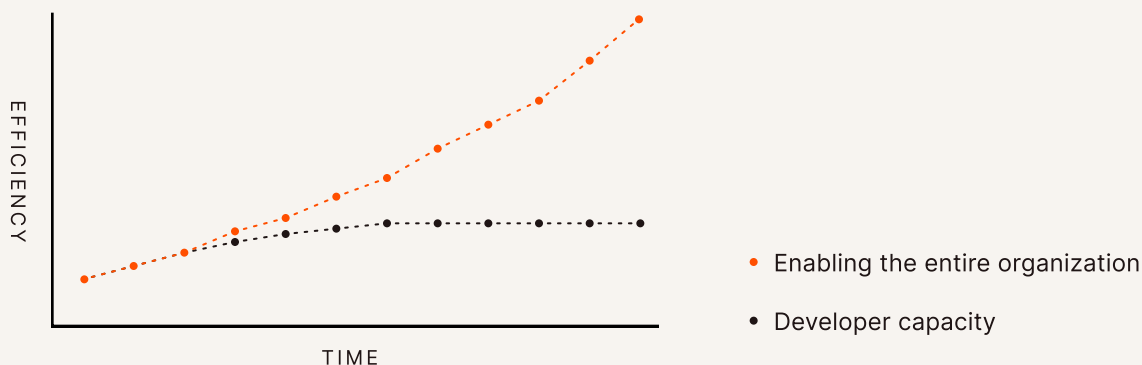
## 1. Orchestration at the edge of the org

When automation is accessible to the people closest to business problems, workflows don't just scale faster—they scale more *widely*.

True orchestration at scale doesn't come from adding more developer capacity. That's linear growth. It comes from enabling the entire organization (like leaders in RevOps and HR) to automate, eliminating unnecessary dependencies and unlocking exponential growth.



**Accessible platforms shift AI orchestration from a centralized function to an organizational capability—without compromising governance.**



## 2. Out-of-the-box connectivity

Modern orchestration platforms should offer **prebuilt connections** to the core systems that power the business.

With these integrations available out of the box—complete with built-in authentication—teams can avoid filing IT tickets or building custom API code. **The result: faster deployment, fewer bottlenecks, and a stronger foundation for automation at scale.**

**Result: faster deployment, fewer dependencies, and a broader surface area for automation.**



## 3. UX designed for the 99%

Visual workflow builders, reusable logic blocks, and drag-and-drop interfaces allow teams outside of engineering to create sophisticated automations on their own.

When paired with AI-assisted building—such as natural language prompts or auto-suggested steps—workflow creation becomes even more accessible for first-time builders.



**Accessible UX enables more teams to experiment, automate, and scale without added technical overhead.**



“

Democratized AI orchestration gives marketers direct access to capabilities that once required technical support or specialists. It reduces time and cost across the campaign process, making high-volume execution more efficient and scalable. For example, with AI-driven image and video creation now costing pennies, we can move faster, optimize more frequently, and drive stronger ROI across the funnel.

— **Blake Cohlan**

VP Integrated Campaigns and Demand Generation at UpGuard

## 4. Governance by design

True democratization isn't about removing control—it's about embedding it so adoption can scale safely.

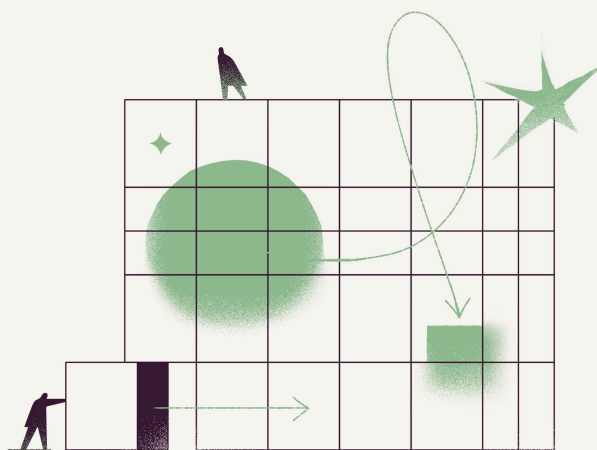
Enterprises that succeed with orchestration treat guardrails as enablers, not blockers. Role-based access ensures employees only have the privileges they need. Audit logs and version history provide visibility as the surface area of automation expands. Real-time alerting shifts governance from passive to proactive, detecting anomalies before they become risks. In practice, governance by design looks like this:

- **Progressive enablement.** Employees can start with limited permissions and gain more as they demonstrate capability—scaling skills without scaling risk.
- **Agile security.** The ability to update security posture immediately is critical in an AI-driven environment where vulnerabilities surface constantly. On-prem solutions fall short here, because every patch must be applied manually by the customer—introducing lag, inconsistency, and significant exposure in systems that often hold sensitive credentials.
- **Confidence to open access.** Without guardrails, enterprises restrict automation to technical leaders. With them, they can safely unlock the long tail of automation for every team.
- **Centralized visibility.** Technical leaders need an overhead view into what is being built, where things are failing, or how data is being used. A built-in admin center solves this gap by giving leaders real-time visibility across the entire organization, making it possible to expand access confidently without losing oversight.

With these controls in place, governance stops being a brake on automation and becomes the foundation for scale—unlocking enterprise-wide participation without sacrificing visibility or trust.

### Core governance capabilities checklist

- ☐ Role-based access controls (RBAC)
- ☐ Single sign-on (SSO) + SCIM
- ☐ Audit logs + version history
- ☐ Real-time alerting and monitoring
- ☐ Human-in-the-loop approval flows



## Debunking the myths of democratized AI orchestration

I talk to a lot of platform owners, heads of IT, and automation leaders. And if there's one thing I've learned, it's this: most of the friction in orchestration doesn't come from tools—it comes from assumptions. Outdated mental models about who should build, how it should be governed, and what “enterprise-ready” really means. So let's unpack a few.

“If we open automation/AI to the company, it'll be the Wild West.”	Duplication and chaos come from lack of structure, not from access. Hybrid governance models—where everyone learns the basics, but only some have elevated build permissions—create safety without stifling adoption.
“AI transformation and enterprise control are in direct conflict.”	They actually reinforce each other. Broad literacy makes the company safer, because people recognize outdated processes, while centralized controls (SSO, RBAC, approvals) ensure that only trusted builders execute at scale.
“Democratization means compromising on enterprise requirements.”	If the platform isn't built on SSO, SCIM, and access controls by default, it's not democratized—it's underbuilt.
“If we open this up, we'll just create more support tickets.”	The opposite is true when platforms have good UX, reusable logic blocks, and self-diagnosing workflows. Support demand goes down, not up.
“Centralization prevents duplication and waste.”	Pure lockdown slows discovery. The best programs balance central oversight with distributed experimentation—where IT enables reuse, visibility, and standards, instead of acting as a bottleneck.
“If everyone can build workflows, there's no control.”	The best programs embed control, not gatekeeping. RBAC, audit logs, and approvals scale safely across teams without blocking momentum.
“Only developers can build reliable workflows.”	We dug into our own data at Zapier: in large accounts, >75% of top builders aren't account owners. The people driving orchestration success often aren't in IT.
“Business users will break things.”	Breakage happens when there's no structure. Versioning, scoped permissions, and review flows make it safe to open access.
“Everyone learning automation means everyone building automation.”	In my experience, teams work best when every employee knows how to optimize their work with AI and automation. A smaller subset—citizen developers—need the keys to build, while the rest serve as “smoke detectors,” surfacing risks and opportunities before they spread.
“We'll lose visibility if we let non-technical teams automate.”	Actually, you get more. Logs, change history, and workflow-level analytics make it easier to monitor usage than when everything lives in dev queues.

# Patterns of successful org-wide AI orchestration at scale

Enterprise automation scales on behavior. Specifically, the early behaviors and configuration patterns that lay the foundation for distributed automation to stick, spread, and mature across teams.

These are the signals we've observed inside high-performing orchestration programs—the ones that don't stall after onboarding but evolve into sustained, cross-functional motion.

## 1. Early AI adoption unlocks faster engagement

Teams that experiment with AI-assisted workflow creation early on (for example, through Copilot or natural language prompts) are more likely to stick with the platform, diversify use cases, and build more workflows overall.

### ZAPIER AUTOMATION INSIGHTS

Accounts that adopted AI functionality early in their lifecycle showed significantly **higher long-term engagement**, **broader app usage**, and **increased workflow volume**.

## 2. Feature breadth signals automation maturity

Early adoption of diverse features correlates with higher task volumes and stickier engagement over time. These features show up most often in accounts that scale orchestration cross-functionally.

### ZAPIER AUTOMATION INSIGHTS

Accounts using three or more product features early on showed **stronger long-term engagement** and **deeper task growth**.

### 3. The first week is critical to creating automation habits

We found Zapier users that returned to the platform within the first seven days after activating their first workflow are more likely to build more workflows, use more apps, and become multi-feature users.

#### ZAPIER AUTOMATION INSIGHTS

80%

80% of second workflows are built within the first 7 days.

1.6x

Users who return during days 1–7 are 1.6× more likely to scale into broader use cases across apps and departments.

“It’s an outdated—and frankly ancient—view to think only certain people in a company can automate with AI. There’s this misconception that empowering non-technical builders will create chaos, but the opposite is true. Technical teams shift from being the sole builder to a coach and monitor, moving from control to enablement. And when the people with the most context also have the power to automate, teams become unstoppable.”

— **Jenica Blechschmidt**, Director, Product Management at Zapier



# Checklist: Is your AI orchestration strategy built for everyone—or just engineers?


You can’t scale orchestration by centralizing control. You scale it by structuring it so more teams can build safely, visibly, and independently.

Use this diagnostic to assess whether your current orchestration model is built for organization-wide scale—or still reliant on developer bottlenecks.

## How to use this:

For each statement, mark  if it’s fully true in your organization today.

- 8–10 You’re operating at the edge of modern orchestration. Keep scaling.
- 5–7 You’re close—but strategic blockers might still limit org-wide adoption.
- 0–4 It’s likely time to re-architect around access, governance, and scale.

	Readiness check
	Can business teams independently build and ship workflows—without filing a ticket with IT?
	Is governance embedded in the platform—not bolted on? (for example, RBAC, approvals, audit logs, SSO, SCIM)
	Are workflows traceable by team, user, and app—with audit history and versioning?
	Is there centralized observability into automation errors, retries, and failures?
	Are you seeing AI-assisted workflow building outside of technical roles?
	Do teams adopt multiple automation features (like paths, filters, and approvals) in the first 30 days?
	Do workflows involve four or more unique apps within the first month?
	Do teams like Finance, HR, and Legal use approval flows?
	Does your platform reduce support burden for internal automation—not create more Ops overhead?
	Can automation scale across teams without needing to scale engineering headcount proportionally?






# Ready to join the AI Leaders Lab?

AI transformation takes more than handing out ChatGPT licenses—it requires rethinking how people, processes, and technology work together. That’s why we created a monthly AI Leaders Lab: an invite-only session designed for leaders like you who are shaping the future of work.

This 60-minute conversation is small by design. We hand-picked a select group of AI leaders so every participant can contribute, exchange ideas, and walk away with new perspectives. If you can’t make it, let us know—we’ll open your seat to another leader.

What you’ll experience:

- A roundtable discussion tailored to the group’s top priorities
- Peer-to-peer connection through interactive breakouts
- Fresh insights, data, and real-world patterns from Zapier’s AI team
- Practical takeaways you can apply immediately to accelerate AI adoption

Spark viral AI adoption in your org, build habits and infrastructure that endure beyond the hype, and shift AI from a “project” into a company-wide culture. Seats are limited—reserve yours now to be part of this exclusive conversation.

**Reserve your seat**

# Scale your AI ROI without scaling your risk

Ready to turn AI into a powerful competitive advantage at scale? Zapier's AI orchestration platform gives you everything you need to maximize your AI adoption by connecting tools, deploying agents, and scaling intelligent systems across your business.

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**Connect every app, AI model, and workflow.** Securely integrate with thousands of tools using advanced authentication and data handling.

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**Automate complex workflows easily.** Build, test, and scale AI-driven systems using no-code, low-code, or full-code—whatever your teams need.

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**Deploy intelligent systems across the org.** Connect AI to the workflows your teams rely on—Sales, Support, IT, Ops, Marketing, and more.

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**Control AI at scale with IT-grade governance.** Prevent shadow AI, enforce permissions, and keep AI use auditable, visible, and compliant.

**Identify your AI talent gaps to move forward with company-wide transformation.**  
**Learn why the world's leading businesses trust Zapier.**



[Talk to an expert](#) today to assess your AI maturity and start your AI staffing journey.