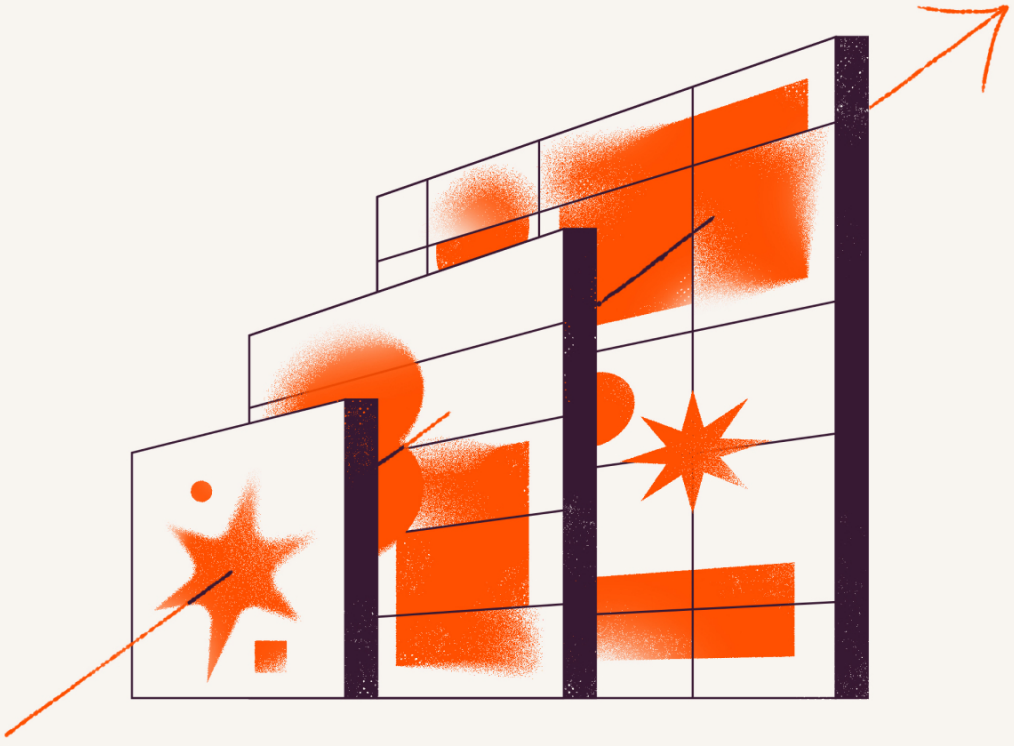
TRENDS REPORT

How to close the AI execution gap

INSIGHTS FROM THE ENTERPRISE FRONTLINES



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How to close the AI execution gap: Insights from the enterprise frontlines

Introduction

AI is no longer an experiment—it's embedded in enterprise systems, workflows, and decision-making. Even with all this investment, a pattern is quickly becoming clear: **enterprises can get started with AI—they just can't scale it fast enough.**

This report examines the growing gap between **AI ambition and AI execution.** It reveals how enterprise leaders and practitioners define success in execution, where projects slow or stall, and what strategies actually work when moving from pilot to production.

Our findings come from enterprise leaders (CIOs, CTOs, VPs, and Directors of IT, Engineering, and Operations) and practitioners (managers, engineers, architects, and automation leads embedding AI into workflows). Together, they provide a dual perspective—**the strategy from the boardroom and the execution reality from the frontlines.**

In this report, we'll cover:

1. How enterprises are defining and proving AI execution success
2. Why some execution strategies accelerate progress—and others stall it
3. Where leadership visibility breaks down—and how it fuels execution fatigue
4. How enterprises are rebuilding for AI capability—not just AI adoption

How enterprises are defining and proving AI execution success

Ambition outpaces orchestration

AI pilots are multiplying across enterprises—but based on our research, that's where their success stalls.

Still, leaders remain confident. 83% of enterprise leaders describe their AI execution goals as realistic or ambitious-but-achievable, and 81% say their organizations can move from AI pilot to scale within 12 months.

Yet, only **26% of leaders report that more than half of their pilots have scaled to production,** while **74% say half or fewer have.**

Enterprise leaders on their AI execution goals:

83%

describe their AI execution goals as **realistic or ambitious-but-achievable**

81%

say their organizations **can move from AI pilot to scale within 12 months**

Practitioners see the same reality: 31% say most of the pilots they worked on scaled; 69% did not. 91% of practitioners encountered at least occasional or frequent pauses after AI pilots.

Even so, 78% of practitioners on the frontlines of AI view leadership timelines as realistic, though 75% believe leaders underestimate how hard AI execution really is.

More than half (56%) of leaders say AI delivery has met or exceeded expectations, while 44% admit it's fallen short. Practitioners echo this pattern: 53% describe AI execution in their organizations as steady and realistic, while 33% call it ambitious but constantly over-promising.

Still, within that unevenness, maturity matters. Among respondents who self-identify as strategic AI users—those who design and optimize AI-driven workflows with measurable business impact—there's a clear confidence gap. Strategic users are 2.1X more likely to say their projects have exceeded expectations, showing that execution confidence scales with maturity. These leaders set higher bars and clear them more often.

Enterprises don't have a vision problem: they have a connection problem. Ambition has outpaced orchestration, and without a shared way to connect models, data, tools, and teams, progress keeps stalling between promise and proof.

91% of practitioners encountered at least **occasional or frequent pauses after launching AI pilots**

Disconnected systems, delayed impact

Execution isn't breaking down at the ideation stage. Instead, it's stalling because of **how systems, workflows, and governance connect.**

Leaders cite **integration complexity and system sprawl (46%)** as the most difficult barrier to overcome, far ahead of *talent shortages, budget constraints, governance and compliance demands,* or *vendor reliability*. Practitioners echo that friction: **28% point to integration backlogs and system complexity**, and **33% cite policy or compliance delays** as their biggest blockers.

This challenge manifests as missing orchestration—the connective tissue that allows AI to move smoothly between teams, systems, and functions. **Integration and workflow skills (32%)** top leaders' lists of workforce gaps, ahead of **technical AI expertise (22%)** and **leadership alignment (16%)**.

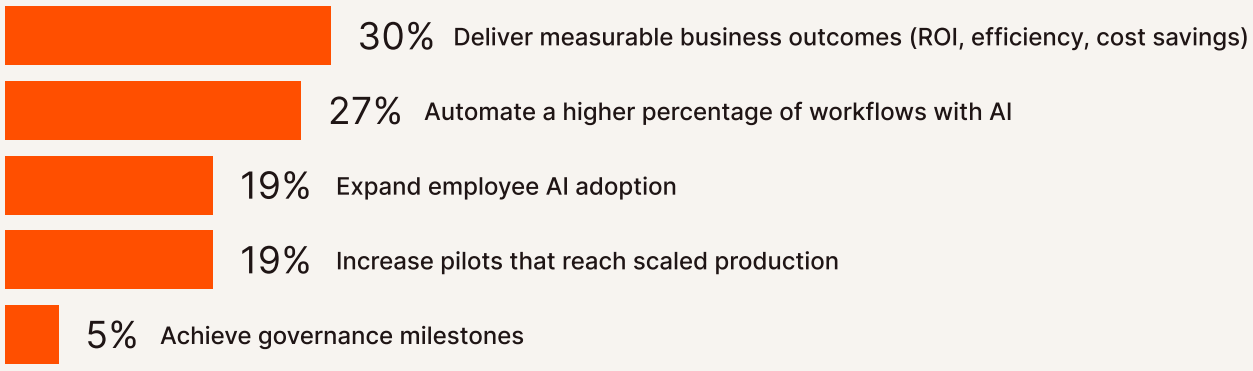
But enterprises don't lack talent—they lack the AI orchestration platforms that make those skills scalable and repeatable. Without connected infrastructure, integration remains manual, governance comes too late, and the business slows down between proof and production.

Projects work in isolation but falter when linked to the broader enterprise. Tools don't talk, data flows unevenly, and compliance checks pile up at the finish line. AI orchestration closes that gap by making integration **accessible, automated, and built into how work happens**—not something bolted on afterward.

From pilot wins to platform orchestration

Closing the execution gap means proving that AI isn't just active—it's adding value. When leaders describe what success looks like next, they point squarely toward measurable outcomes and scale:

Enterprise leaders' preferred AI success metrics



This data signals a turning point: enterprises are moving beyond "pilot completion" as progress and toward **business performance as proof.** AI is no longer judged by experimentation. Now, it's measured by automation reach, workforce participation, and visible ROI.

Why some execution strategies accelerate progress and others stall it

Leaders are navigating an era of constant experimentation

AI execution today is less about structure and more about adaptability. Most leaders acknowledge that they're still operating in an evolving phase of enterprise AI strategy still defined by rapid experimentation, pivots, and course corrections. 14% of leaders admit to being mostly reactive, and only 2% say they not addressing AI execution barriers at all. **62% of enterprise leaders** describe their organizations as *often reactive*, and only **22%** say they're *consistently proactive*. That being said, leaders who self-identify as **strategic AI users** are **3.8X more likely** to describe their organization as consistently proactive.

As technologies, use cases, and guardrails evolve, reactivity is a strategic reflex—a necessary way to test, learn, and adapt at scale. This is where organizations begin, but as they mature and gain ground, they find themselves quickly scaling their AI pilots into programs that create impactful ROI.

How enterprise leaders describe their organizations:

62%

Often reactive

22%

Consistently proactive

Airtable

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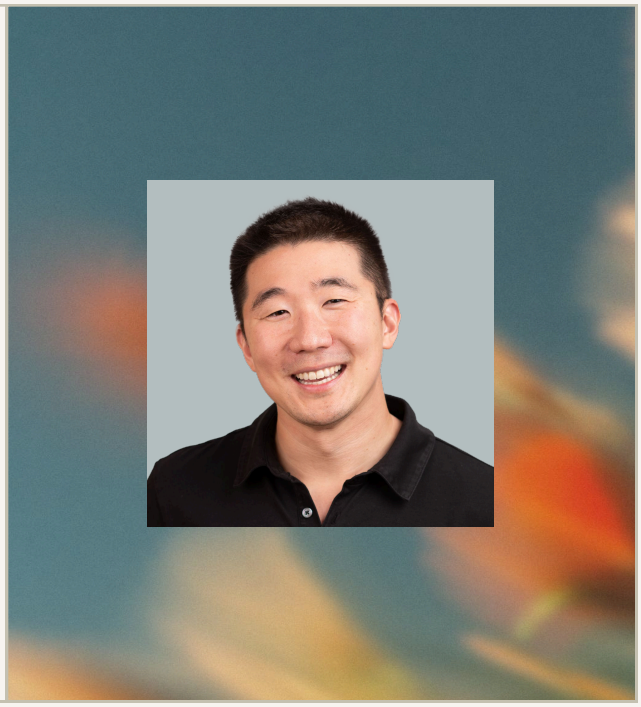
I would say the number one difference that I see is a culture of experimentation and the willingness to tinker and play around with stuff. The companies that are actually seeing the most aggregate value created by AI are those that encourage this experimentation from every part of the business.

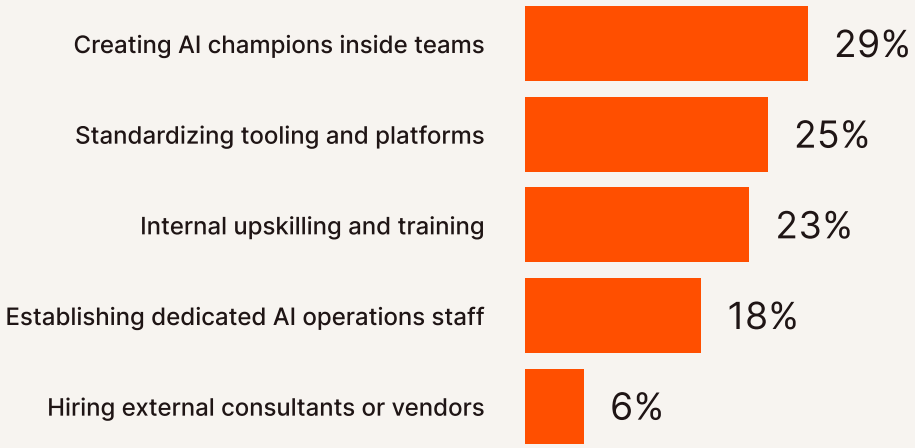
— **Howie Li**
Co-founder and CEO of Airtable



Turning inward before looking outward

The data shows a clear pattern: enterprises are investing in their own people first and seeing the strongest results because of it.

Strategies leaders say improved AI execution:



Leaders overwhelmingly credit creating AI champions and standardized tooling as their most effective approaches—strategies that strengthen internal capability rather than relying on outside help. Practitioners reinforce this pattern: **33% highlight standardization and 27% point to internal upskilling as the leadership actions that most accelerate successful pilot delivery.**

These results matter because they measure the delivery of successful AI pilots—those that make it past experimentation into real, repeatable usage. Leaders aren't just launching pilots; they're looking for what sticks, scales, and sustains measurable outcomes.

By contrast, both audiences agree that consultant-heavy approaches deliver the least impact—**35% of leaders and 33% of practitioners say hiring external consultants or vendors yields the weakest returns.** That's not a rejection of partnership, but a reflection of timing. Enterprises are turning inward before they turn outward, focusing first on empowering teams who already understand their data, systems, and workflows.

→ When enterprises adopt an **AI orchestration platform** that connects systems and democratizes access to AI capabilities beyond technical teams, they create space for impact everywhere—in marketing, operations, support, and product. The result: broader adoption, faster experimentation, and more measurable value.

Governance pressure is reshaping speed and risk

Leaders agree governance isn't the enemy of progress—but the pressure to perform is making it harder to strike the right balance.

73% of enterprise leaders believe governance policies that are too restrictive are more harmful than governance policies that are too loose. That finding reflects a deep tension: everyone knows governance is essential, but AI needs to scale. The majority of practitioners agree: 58% say governance slows execution more than it enables it.

The pressure to accelerate AI outcomes while staying compliant forces enterprises to search for trusted partners and technologies to help them move safely and swiftly. That's where AI orchestration platforms deliver critical leverage: they allow enterprises to embed trusted governance frameworks directly into workflows, so compliance moves with innovation—not behind it.

73%

of enterprise leaders believe **governance policies that are too restrictive are more harmful than governance policies that are too loose**

→ By aligning control and creativity, leaders can keep AI accountable and accelerating.

Five red flags that predict AI pilot failure

AI pilots are everywhere, but scaling use across organizations still lags. Even as 83% of leaders describe their AI goals as realistic or achievable, 74% admit that half or fewer of their pilots have reached production.

From ownership gaps to integration delays and late-stage governance checks, the same patterns appear across industries and maturity levels.

1. Lack of ownership	Leaders across the board credit creating AI champions as the **most effective way to scale AI pilots**—an approach that builds internal capabilities and takes a proactive rather than reactive approach to AI. Additionally, leaders who self-identify as **strategic AI users** are **3.8X more likely** to describe their organization as consistently proactive when it comes to AI execution.
2. Underestimating the importance of integration	**Nearly half of leaders (46%) cite integration complexity and system sprawl** as the single hardest execution barrier. When integration begins only after model validation, rework becomes inevitable—and progress slows to a crawl.
3. Governance is too restrictive	**58% of practitioners say governance slows execution more than it enables it,** while **73% of leaders believe overly restrictive policies do more harm than those that are too loose.** Without flexible and centralized frameworks, governance becomes a drag on innovation.
4. Budgets end at the pilot	Too often, budget cycles end when the pilot does—leaving successful prototypes stranded short of production. Leaders who self-identify as **strategic AI users**—those designing and optimizing AI-driven workflows with measurable business impact—are almost **2X more likely to dedicate 50%+ of their technology budgets to improving AI execution.**
5. Success and failure live in silos	When asked which **upskilling methods move AI pilots into production** most effectively, **peer learning ranked highest across both leaders and practitioners.** Yet in most enterprises, these successes—and the lessons that come with them—remain siloed. Without structured knowledge-sharing, every pilot becomes a reinvention of the wheel instead of a step toward repeatable success.

The case for AI orchestration

An AI orchestration platform closes those gaps by embedding these guardrails into daily delivery—connecting tools, automating governance, and surfacing live telemetry on pilot health. It transforms early warnings into early wins—keeping every pilot on path to production. **Talk with one of our experts** to learn how AI orchestration can revolutionize your organization.

Where leadership visibility breaks down—and how it fuels AI execution fatigue

Confidence without clarity

Enterprises believe they see everything—but their view stops just short of reality. **81% of leaders** say they're confident in their visibility into AI execution challenges, yet **57% of practitioners** believe leadership *doesn't truly see what's happening day to day*.

81%

of leaders

say they're confident in their visibility into AI execution challenges

57%

of practitioners

believe leadership doesn't truly see what's happening day to day

The disconnect begins in the feedback loop. Almost all **(99%) of the leaders we surveyed** admitted they learned about failures only *after the fact*, most often through *manager escalations (49%)* or *informal feedback (32%)*—not through live dashboards or automated visibility. By the time issues surface, projects have already lost momentum or require costly rework.

That lag fuels a cycle of firefighting. 95% of AI practitioners on the frontlines report firefighting execution issues often instead of making forward progress, with 4% saying constantly and only 1% saying never—a rhythm of rework and troubleshooting that drains capacity for forward progress.

For every new AI initiative launched, there's a parallel backlog of debugging and governance follow-through that slows delivery.

Leaders and delivery teams can close this loop by embedding governance inside execution—ensuring alignment happens as work progresses, not after problems appear.

95%

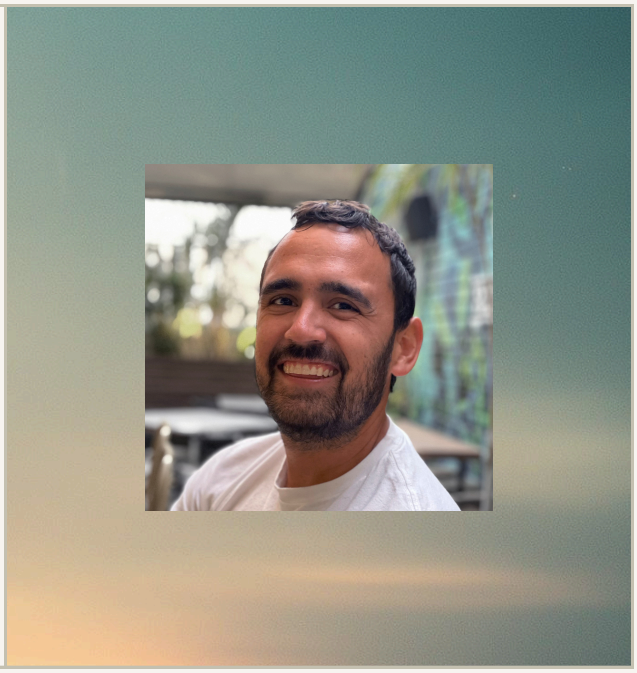
of **AI practitioners** on the frontlines report ***firefighting execution issues*** often ***instead of making forward progress***

GAMMA

“

“We are in the middle of this absolutely transformative platform shift. The best analog I can think of is when mobile took off. And there were companies that sort of dabbled in mobile, and there were companies that bet on it. And the companies that really bet on mobile just saw this decisive new market opening for them...The ones who dabbled kind of didn’t get that far.

— **Jon Noronha**
Co-founder of Gamma



Friction from two perspectives

Leaders and practitioners see the same friction, but from opposite sides of the equation.

Leaders believe practitioners are bogged down in integration complexity (40%) and approval processes (25%), while practitioners confirm integration complexity and tool sprawl is a top time sink (31%), surpassed only by policy or compliance delays (33%).

It’s not just technical drag; it’s organizational volatility. When priorities shift, so does the definition of success. Practitioners describe constant resets—unplanned rebuilds, repeated checks, and lost time recovering context—the hidden costs of misaligned visibility.

→ When asked where leadership expectations most often clash with day-to-day execution, practitioners point first to **budget and resources (30%)**, followed by **timelines (23%)** and **reliability of AI outputs (21%).**

In short, leadership sees progress through outcomes; practitioners experience it through constraints.

Both sides agree on one thing: integration remains the gravitational center of AI friction. When asked which aspects of AI execution leadership most often overlooks, the largest share (34%) pointed to integrating across systems and workflows.

However, where leaders treat it as a technical challenge, practitioners experience it as systemic overload—integration, compliance, and coordination rolled into one continuous firefight.

The AI pilot readiness checklist

AI readiness determines AI success. Most **(81%) leaders** believe their goals are ambitious but realistic, but only **26%** say most pilots scale. Execution maturity—the systems, skills, and governance that sustain AI at scale—is what separates success from pilots stalling.

People and ownership

- ☐ **Executive sponsor and internal AI champion identified.** Every successful pilot needs someone who owns outcomes, not just delivery.
- ☐ **Cross-functional team in place.** Integration and governance challenges are the top causes of delay. A connected team ensures those decisions happen in real time, not at the finish line.
- ☐ **Peer learning or knowledge-sharing mechanism established.** Teams learn AI by doing AI. Peer-to-peer learning ranked as the most effective way to move pilots into production.

Systems and integration

- ☐ **Integration points mapped before the first model build.** Integration complexity and system sprawl are the No. 1 barriers to AI execution. A pre-flight map of data dependencies, APIs, and workflow connections prevents rework later.
- ☐ **Governance and compliance built into delivery tools.** Nearly three-quarters of leaders (73%) say the biggest execution risk comes from policies that are too restrictive. Embedding governance directly into workflows keeps compliance aligned with velocity.
- ☐ **Observability configured before launch.** Establishing dashboards, alerts, and clear escalation paths pre-launch prevents small issues from becoming project resets.

Metrics and measurement

- ☐ **Pilot success criteria tied directly to business outcomes.** Half of leaders now measure employee AI fluency through outcomes such as ROI or efficiency gains.
- ☐ **Budget allocated for scale, not just experimentation.** Set aside dedicated funding for integration, governance, and long-term delivery.
- ☐ **Realistic timeline set for production.** 81% of leaders confidently say their organizations can move from AI pilot to scale within 12 months.

From readiness to AI orchestration

Readiness is the foundation of maturity—but orchestration turns it into a system. An **AI orchestration platform** connects all the elements of this checklist into one operating layer: assigning ownership, embedding governance, automating integrations, and creating shared visibility between leaders and practitioners.

The result: fewer stalled pilots, faster scaling, and measurable progress from proof to production. When readiness is orchestrated, execution becomes inevitable.

Book a call with an **AI orchestration expert** to learn more.

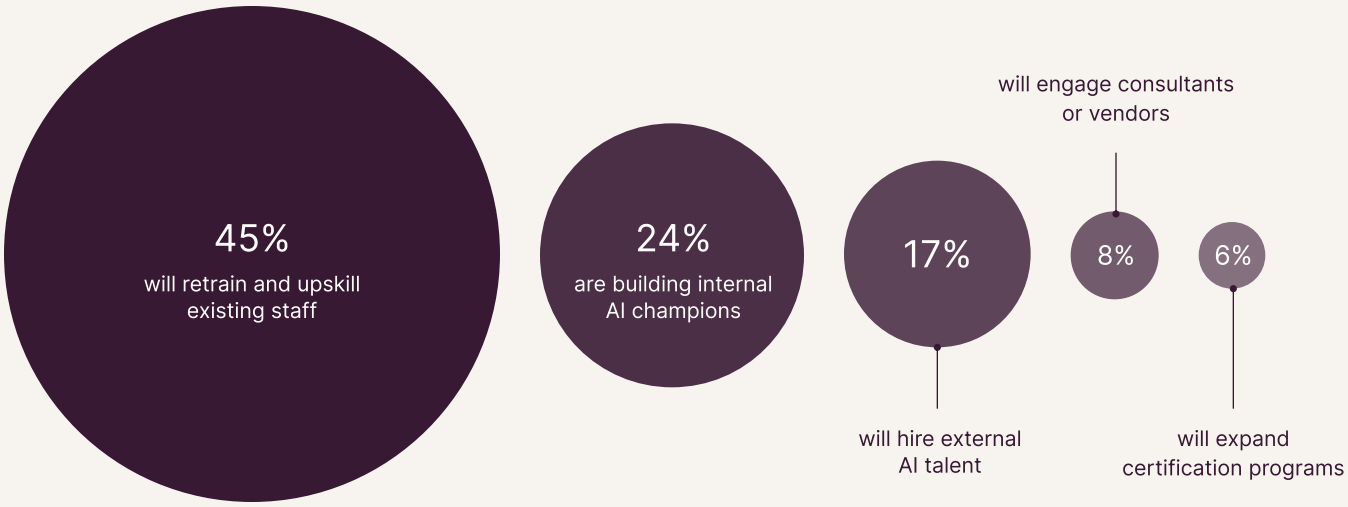
How enterprises are rebuilding for AI capability, not just AI adoption

Tactics to scale AI execution

After years of pilots, proofs of concept, and platform expansion, enterprises are realizing that **AI capability is built, not bought.** Survey data shows a decisive pivot from external dependence to internal enablement.

Over the next year, leaders plan to invest most heavily in **people and process to improve AI execution.**

Where leaders plan to invest to improve AI execution:



Practitioners echo that shift. **48% want their organizations to invest in upskilling existing teams,** and **33% want stronger internal champions**—both pointing to a common goal: to make AI capability a shared skill, not a specialized function.

48% of practitioners want their organizations to invest in upskilling existing teams

33% of practitioners want stronger internal champions

Practitioners list common factors across successful AI projects

When we asked practitioners **what common factors have made AI projects succeed in their organizations**, their responses surfaced key themes:

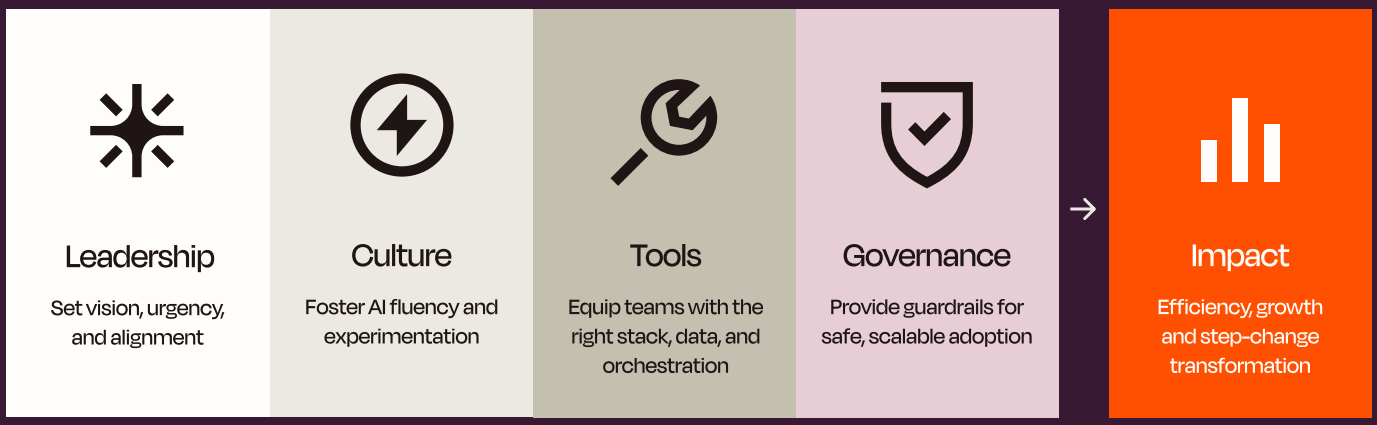
Key themes

- Clarity
- Data
- Skills
- Outcomes
- Collaboration
- Process
- Governance

→ Build the AI transformation team that makes enterprise AI scale. Without the right roles and governance, AI experiments stall or spiral into sprawl. Download our free guide on how to structure and hire an AI transformation team that drives adoption securely and measurably.

The AI transformation equation

AI has become a strategic imperative, but most organizations still struggle to realize business impact. Real success comes from treating it not as a technology problem, but as a challenge of leadership, culture, tools, and governance.



Leadership	x	Culture	x	Tools	x	Governance	=	Impact
—	x	Culture	x	Tools	x	Governance	=	Directionless
Leadership	x	—	x	Tools	x	Governance	=	Superficial
Leadership	x	Culture	x	—	x	Governance	=	Stalled
Leadership	x	Culture	x	Tools	x	—	=	Exposed

Learning programs that drive AI progress

Enterprises are refining how they build and measure AI fluency—shifting from classroom learning to applied experimentation.

Both leaders and practitioners agree that **hands-on experience drives the fastest progress.** When asked which upskilling methods move AI pilots into production most effectively, peer learning ranked highest—followed closely by *hackathons or experimentation events and online courses*.

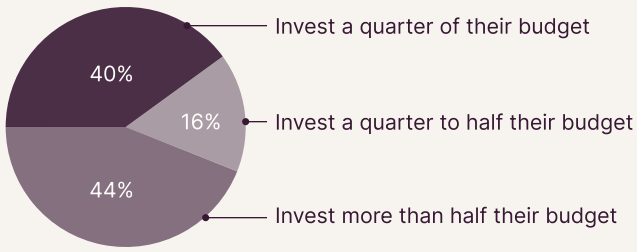
Which upskilling methods move AI pilots into production most effectively?

Upskilling approach	Enterprise leaders	AI practitioners
Internal peer learning programs	30%	31%
Hackathons or experimentation events	28%	20%
Online courses	16%	29%
Consultant-led workshops	20%	14%
Vendor certifications	6%	6%

The message is clear: **teams learn AI by doing AI.** Applied learning inside active projects helps employees translate concepts into real, production-ready systems—accelerating adoption and building confidence in delivery.

Investing in long-term capabilities

Here's the breakdown of **how much technology budget leaders plan to allocate towards AI execution initiatives:**



In addition, leaders who self-identify as strategic AI users—those designing and optimizing AI-driven workflows with measurable business impact—are almost 2X more likely to dedicate 50%+ of their technology budgets to improving AI execution.

This matters because budget allocation is the truest measure of AI maturity. When organizations fund the foundations of scale—the people, systems, and governance that keep AI running smoothly—they move from experimentation to execution.

AI fluency: redefining how capability is measured

Enterprises are becoming far more deliberate about how they define and measure AI fluency—not just as a skill, but as a signal of readiness, adaptability, and business impact.

This marks a turning point: AI fluency is evolving from what employees know to what the business can prove.

Half of leaders (50%) now say they recognize and measure AI fluency through business outcomes—metrics such as ROI, efficiency gains, or productivity improvements that demonstrate how effectively teams apply AI to drive tangible results.

50%

of **leaders** now say they recognize and measure AI fluency through ***business outcomes***

→ Across enterprises, three measurement models have emerged:

Impact-driven AI fluency

where fluency is assessed by measurable outcomes. Fluency equals performance: demonstrated gains in efficiency, output quality, or financial impact tied directly to AI use.

Competence-driven AI fluency

where fluency is measured by observable behaviors and verified proficiency, typically through manager evaluations and formal certifications or assessments that confirm consistent technical application.

Engagement-driven AI fluency

where fluency reflects confidence and participation, tracked through employee self-reporting to understand comfort levels, adoption trends, and cultural traction.

At the same time, the growing focus on business outcomes shows how **fluency is evolving from participation to performance.** By linking capability directly to enterprise results, leaders can pinpoint where AI is delivering value, where adoption is accelerating, and where support or governance is needed. The most advanced organizations are embedding this measurement directly into delivery—tracking automation, decision-making, and output improvements in real time.

Supported by **AI orchestration platforms** that connect these signals across systems, fluency becomes both an operational and strategic indicator of maturity.

The AI execution gap: Insights from the enterprise frontlines

Executive Summary

AI is no longer experimental—it's embedded across enterprise workflows. But for all the investment, most organizations can start AI faster than they can scale it. This report explores where execution breaks down, what separates progress from stall, and how orchestration enables sustainable, repeatable AI success.

- **Execution reality:** Only 26% of leaders say the majority pilots reached production; 74% report half or fewer. Yet 83% still call their goals realistic or ambitious but achievable, and 81% believe pilot-to-scale within a year is feasible. 91% of practitioners encounter occasional or frequent post-pilot pauses—evidence that stalling is the norm, not the exception. 81% of leaders feel confident in their visibility of AI execution challenges, but 57% of practitioners say leaders don't see day-to-day reality.

- **Integration and orchestration:** Leaders rank integration complexity and system sprawl (46%) as the hardest barrier to AI execution. Practitioners agree: 28% cite integration backlogs; 33% cite policy/compliance delays as their biggest blockers. Leaders say their top workforce need is integration and workflow skills (32%), ahead of technical AI expertise (22%)—a shift from building models to making them work everywhere.

- **Governance and oversight:** 58% of practitioners say governance slows execution more than it enables it, while 73% of leaders believe overly restrictive policies do more harm than those that are too loose. Almost all (99%) of the leaders we surveyed admitted they learned about failures only after the fact, most often through manager escalations (49%) or informal feedback (32%)—not through live dashboards or automated visibility.

- **Capability and scope:** 95% of practitioners report often firefighting execution issues instead of making forward progress, with 4% saying constantly and only 1% saying never. 62% of leaders say their orgs are often reactive; only 22% are consistently proactive—consistent with an era of rapid experimentation and pivots.

- **Investment and scale:** 44% of leaders plan to allocate a decent chunk of their technology budgets to improve AI execution (25–50%). Over the next year, leaders plan to invest most heavily in people and processes to improve AI execution: 45% will retrain and upskill existing staff and 24% are building internal AI champions. Practitioners agree: 48% want their organizations to invest in upskilling existing teams.

→ Integration, governance, and enablement determine whether ambition scales into ROI. Organizations that embed AI orchestration—connecting systems, governance, and teams in one operating model—will move from proof to production faster, and more reliably, than the rest.

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

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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.

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

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

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

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

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