

The Mid-Market AI Adoption Journey

From First Use Case to Operational Scale

A research report on why
mid-market companies get
stuck — and a structured
blueprint for moving forward



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Five takeaways from this report

Most companies use AI. Very few have operationalized it.	88% of organizations use AI in at least one business function — yet most remain in experimentation rather than workflow-level value.
The bottleneck is structural, not technological	The gap between individual AI use and workflow-level value comes down to ownership, governance, and ROI logic — not missing tools.
Mid-sized companies are uniquely positioned — but underserved.	Complex enough for AI to matter at scale, agile enough to move faster than large enterprises. Most thought leadership and practical guidance is built for the enterprise and misses this segment entirely.
Agentic ambition is running well ahead of agentic readiness.	Only 19% currently use multi-agent systems. 85% of businesses aim to become 'agentic enterprises' within three years, and need intentional process design support for agentic AI tooling to be adopted.
Two frameworks help you find your position and your path	The AI Adoption Profile diagnoses your starting point. The AI Operational Scaling Model gives you a structured blueprint for what to build toward.

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AI adoption is no longer a question of awareness or access. Most organizations now use AI in some form, and leaders increasingly see it as central to productivity, competitiveness, and future growth.

But most AI adoption research describes similar things: how many companies say they use AI, which tools are popular, and why adoption is "lagging behind expectations" - almost always in large enterprise settings. We wanted to understand something more specific: what happens inside companies after the first useful AI use case appears. Who owns it? Who decides what comes next? What makes some organizations scale quickly while others stay stuck in disconnected experiments? Can the companies turn high AI use into repeatable, visible, owned, governed workflow value?

These questions are uniquely relevant for larger mid-sized companies, roughly in the 250—1,000 employee range. These companies are complex enough to have multiple functions, recurring workflows, governance needs, and meaningful productivity upside, but they

may not have the transformation infrastructure, specialist teams, budgets, or formal operating models of large enterprises. They are also agile enough to move faster than large enterprises, if the starting point, ownership structure, and path forward are clear.

This report draws on five evidence layers: Analysis of major public AI adoption studies published in 2025 and 2026 (McKinsey, Deloitte, Stanford AI Index, Celonis, UiPath, Eurostat, and others), the Business Agility Index, a Make-commissioned study of 540 respondents across 16 industries by Prof. Dr. Theresa Treffers, Technical University of Munich ; own customer-facing insights; Make AI Playbook assessment data; and one-to-one qualitative interviews with AI transformation leads, business-function owners, founders, and automation practitioners.



Three themes run through the evidence

Company size and even the industry explain less than AI proximity

A mid-sized SaaS company and a mid-sized manufacturer may share headcount, but they start from a very different place. We introduce the AI Adoption Profile diagnostic to capture these differences, across AI proximity, leadership orientation, talent and culture, process and data readiness, and ownership and governance.

The main bottleneck in mid-market AI adoption is structural

crossing from disconnected local experiments to clear ownership, grouped process logic, and maturing ROI logic. We introduce a proprietary AI Operational Scaling Model to guide our readers through the AI adoption journey.

The agentic ambition is significantly ahead of agentic readiness

The gap between "experimenting with agents" and, "running agents in production with governance, monitoring, and escalation logic" is larger than most organizations recognize. Organizations need intentional process design support for any agentic AI tooling to be adopted.



This report also reflects a deliberate effort to make AI adoption learning more accessible. Much of the existing evidence on mid-sized AI adoption is fragmented, vendor-specific, or not freely available. Make sees a broad range of real workflow patterns across customers, functions, industries, and regions — it gives us a practical vantage point: to help companies learn from emerging patterns, compare against lookalike companies, and understand what it takes to move from first use cases to operational value.

Five signals shaping AI adoption

1. AI use is broad, but operational maturity is uneven

AI adoption numbers are now high enough that the question is no longer whether companies are trying AI. The more useful question is what kind of adoption those numbers represent. "AI use" can mean anything from individual ChatGPT prompts and copilots to AI-assisted coding, first pilots, repeatable departmental workflows, cross-functional automation, or early agentic systems. This makes headline adoption figures directionally important, but insufficient for understanding maturity.

McKinsey reports that 88% of organizations use AI in at least one business function, yet most remain in experimentation or piloting rather than enterprise-wide scale.¹ The implication is simple: broad use is not the same as mature adoption. The market has moved beyond awareness, but it has not moved uniformly into workflow-level value. A company with widespread assistant use is not in the same place as a company that has embedded AI into shared processes, governance, and measurable business outcomes.

2. Most AI use still helps individuals work faster; it does not yet redesign workflows

The first wave of workplace AI adoption is still largely about helping individuals complete tasks faster. This includes chat, copilots, assistants, summarization, drafting, research, analysis, coding support, and other forms of productivity support. These uses are valuable, but they do not necessarily change how work flows across teams, systems, approvals, or business outcomes.

This maturity slope is clear: use of GenAI tools and chatbots or copilots is much higher than the use of specialist AI assistants or sophisticated AI agents. Access and AI fluency are expanding, but most organizations have not redesigned jobs or the nature of work itself around AI.²

Deloitte also shows that transformation depth remains uneven: many companies still report little or no change to existing processes, while others are beginning to redesign key processes or pursue deeper transformation.³

Current approach to transformation with AI

Which best describes your organization's current approach to process transformation during AI implementation?

37%

Little or no change to existing processes

34%

Deep transformation of products, processes, and business models

30%

Redesigning key processes around AI

Source: Deloitte, State of AI in the Enterprise 2026.

Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding. • N = 3,325.

1. McKinsey, The State of AI in 2025
2. Celonis, 2026 Process Optimization Report
3. Deloitte, State of AI in the Enterprise

40% of workers use AI multiple times a day

Yet personal AI automation averages only 26% and organizational AI automation around 25%. Only 45% of organizations report having a formal AI strategy.

Make Business Agility Index (540 respondents, 16 industries, 35+ countries).

AI is already present in work, but it is still used more as augmentation than as structured workflow automation. Crucially, AI use is not evenly distributed across roles: seniority, technical exposure and functional context shape how close people feel to AI and how confidently they use it.

Access does not mean adoption

This matters because leaders and technical users may experience AI as a productivity or strategic tool, while other groups may encounter mostly general-purpose chat tools, unclear workflow value or job-security anxiety. Access alone does not create adoption. Employees need visible, role-specific examples of how AI improves their work and how it connects to real workflows, not only abstract messages about productivity or automation.



Source: Business Agility Index — 540 respondents across 16 industries and 35+ countries.

A practitioner framing from AI automation educator Alexandre Kantjas captures this shift as a ladder with three capability levels: AI literacy, AI cowork, and AI automation. Kantjas suggests that by the end of 2026, around 50% of the workforce should reach the Cowork layer, with 5% of the workforce reaching the more specialized AI automation capability.⁴

4. Alexandre Kantjas, AI skills ladder / AI literacy, AI Cowork and AI automation framing

Companies will not move through this ladder at the same speed — some companies may move faster or skip visible intermediate steps, while more traditional organizations may need a more gradual path from chat literacy to assisted work, repeatable workflows, and only later automation or agentic systems.

The AI capability ladder

A practitioner framing from AI automation educator Alexandre Kantjas — targets by the end of 2026



3. The scaling gap sits between repeatable workflows and cross-functional operating models

Many organizations can already create useful local or repeatable AI-enabled workflows inside one team or function, the harder step is organizing multiple local workflows into a scalable business process, shared process logic, governance model, and cross-functional operating system.

Repeatable AI use tends to appear first where work is structured, frequent, measurable, and bounded enough for review. This helps explain why early practical use often appears in marketing and content, customer support and CX, sales or RevOps workflows, IT support, analytics and reporting, and some finance or administrative processes.⁵

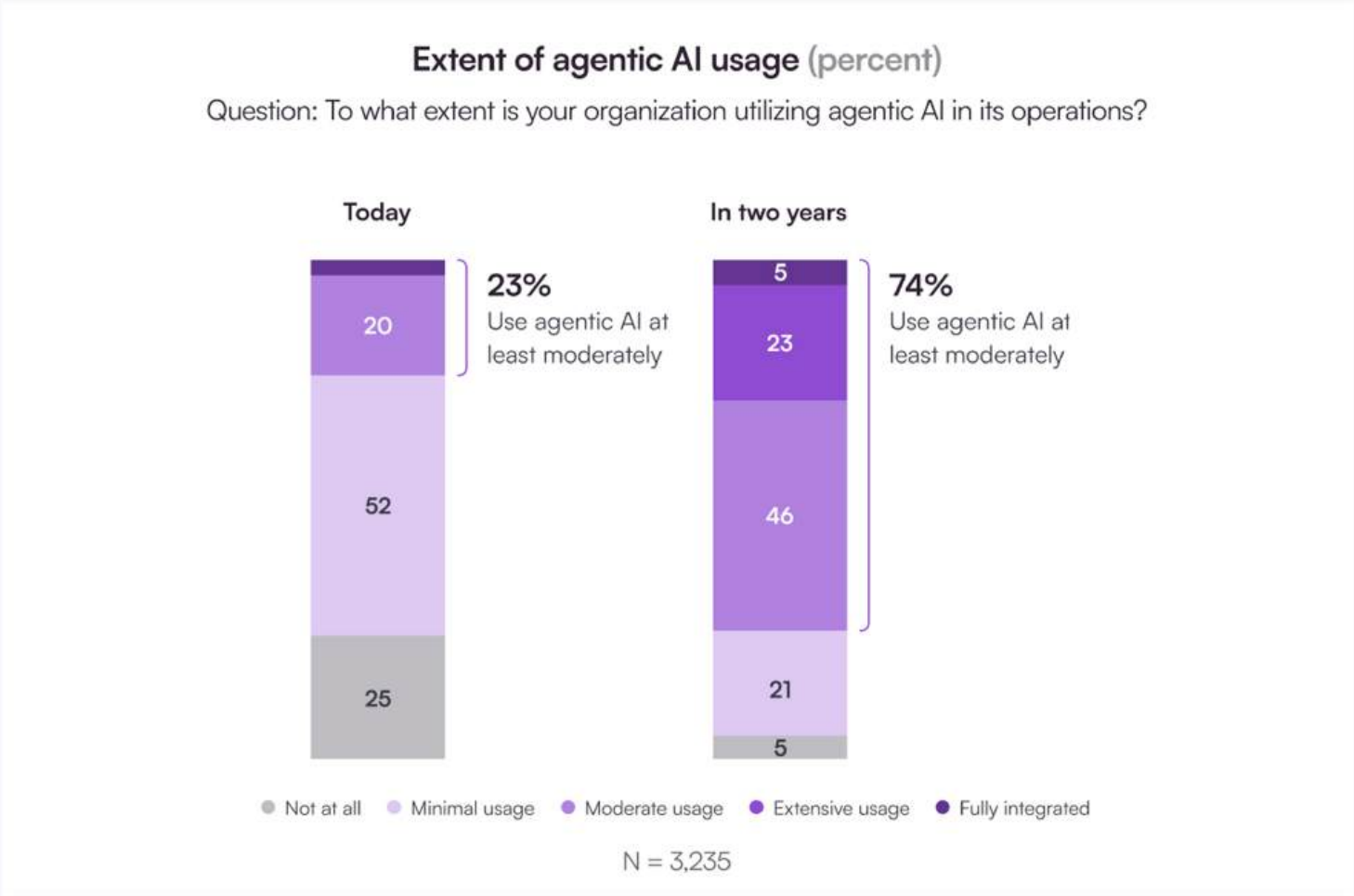
Deloitte & MIT studies show the wide production gap: an overwhelming number of AI experiments still do not move into production. But the broader adoption challenge goes one step further. Even when use cases become repeatable, companies still need to organize them into end-to-end processes, ownership structures, governance, and cross-functional operating logic.⁶ The next phase is a movement from isolated trials toward connected, governed systems.⁷

5. Stanford University, AI Index Report 2026

6. Deloitte, State of AI in the Enterprise; MIT Nanda, State of AI In Business 2025

7. UiPath, 2026 AI and Agentic Automation Trends Report

4. Agentic ambition is ahead of agentic readiness



Source: Deloitte, State of AI in the Enterprise 2026.

Agentic AI is becoming the ambition layer of the market, but it is not yet the everyday operating reality for most companies. Many leaders expect agents to play a major role in the next phase of AI adoption. Yet current deployment remains much more limited than the ambition suggests.

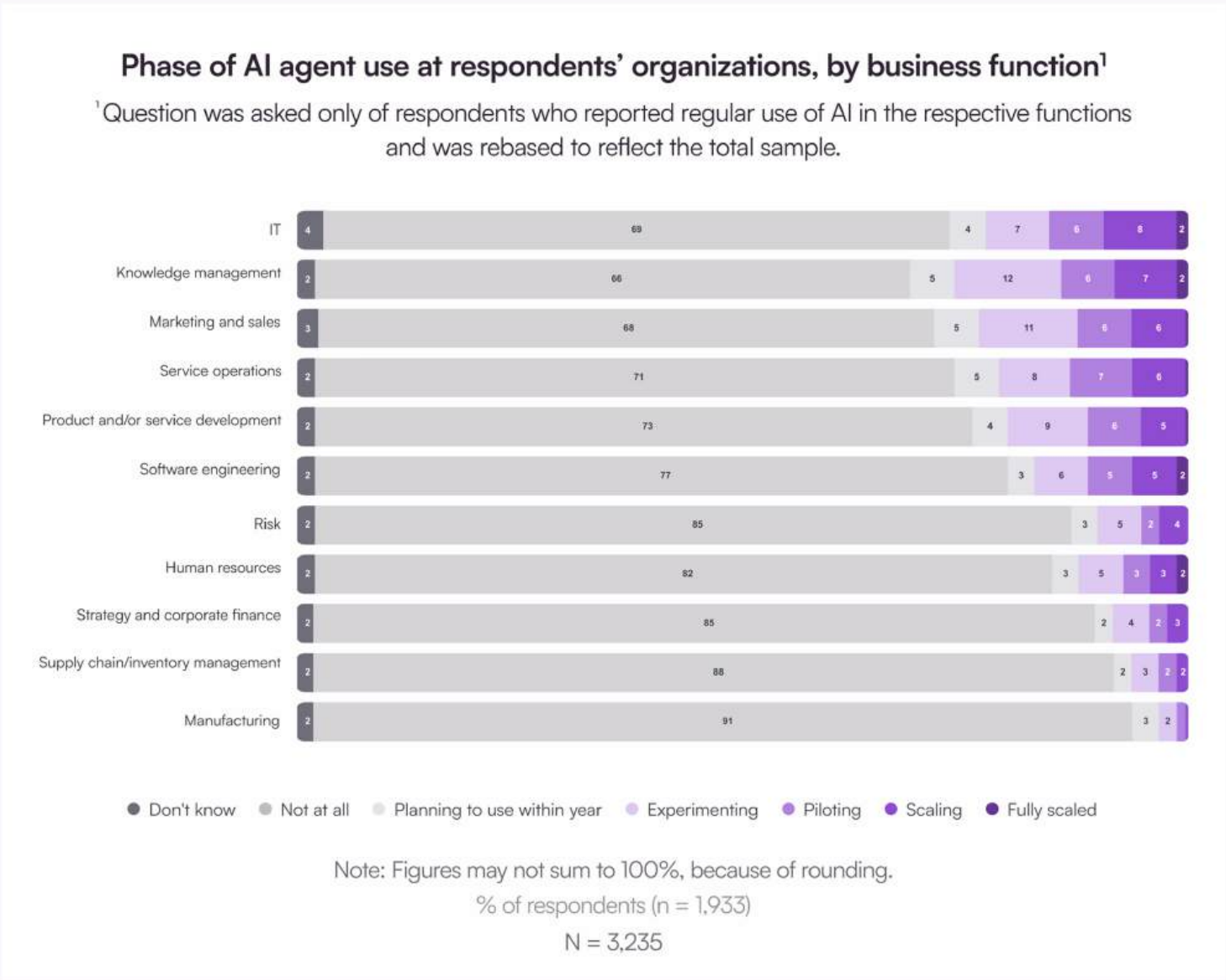
85% of businesses aim to become “agentic enterprises” within two to three years, while only 19% currently use multi-agent systems.⁸ Many organizations are at least experimenting with agents, but no more than 10% report scaling agents in any individual function.⁹ A similar gap between reality and expectation is shown in the report that 23% use agentic AI at least moderately today, while 74% expect to do so within two years.¹⁰ Experimentation and ambition are much higher than mature, governed deployment, especially in the agentic space.

8. Celonis, 2026 Process Optimization Report

9. McKinsey, The State of AI in 2025

10. Deloitte, State of AI in the Enterprise

The chart shown below shows how far agentic systems have progressed within individual business functions. IT and knowledge management are the “winners” in scaling agents because of the amount of data and knowledge accumulated in their operations and relatively straightforward ways to define scope of action for the agent. HR or strategy can benefit from the actions of agents in the most limited way due to requiring high contextual awareness.



Source: McKinsey Global Survey on the state of AI, 1,993 participants at all levels of the organization, June 25—July 29, 2025.

The places where agent scaling has genuinely taken hold are three functions inside the technology industry: software engineering, IT, and service operations (customer support), each with roughly one in five to one in four organizations having moved agents into production at scale. These share a specific profile — organizations where AI is already embedded in the product, hiring runs toward AI-fluent people, and the underlying work is digital, measurable, and structured enough to redesign around autonomous systems. Strip away those conditions and agent deployment numbers collapse across every other industry and function.

Market baseline

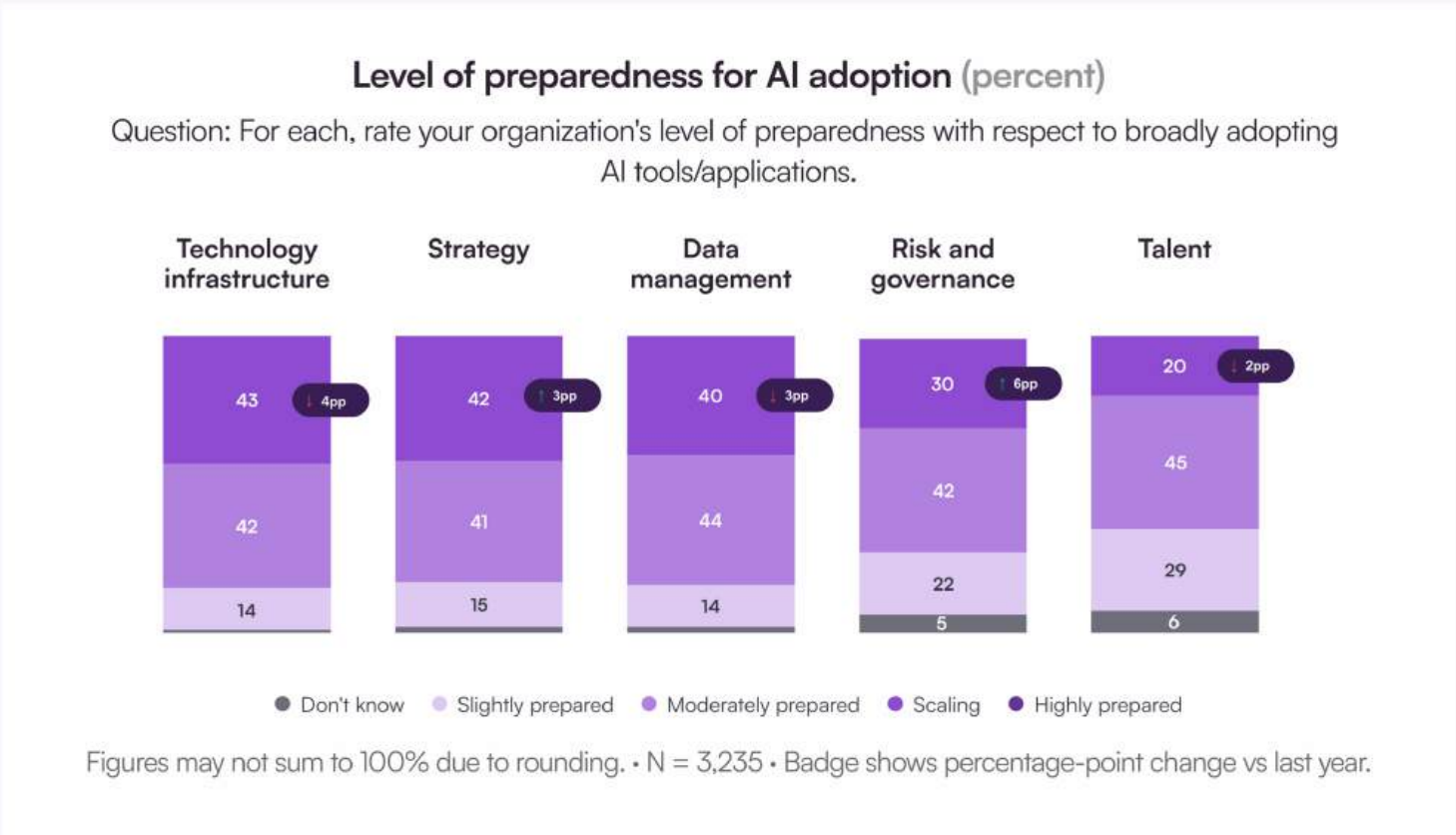
Even in those leading functions, the agentic scaling varies sharply by industry. The outliers that appear outside technology are narrow, high-stakes functions where the cost of a wrong autonomous decision is high enough to justify the governance investment that production agents actually require.

The functions where agents are scaling are precisely the ones that require the deepest AI proximity, the clearest process documentation, and the most mature ownership structures — which is exactly what most mid-sized companies are still building toward.

5. Scaling AI is becoming an operating-model question

As AI moves from individual tools and local workflows into broader business processes, the challenge becomes less about technology alone and more about the operating model around it. Who owns AI once it matters beyond one team? Which workflows stay local, and which become shared? Who prioritizes use cases? Who funds them? When does IT enter? How is governance introduced without stopping progress? How is ROI calculated once value is no longer just time saved?

This is where ownership, governance, ROI, budget, leadership direction, and trust start to converge. Companies often feel more strategically ready than operationally ready, especially around infrastructure, data, and talent.



Source: Deloitte, State of AI in the Enterprise 2026.

Market baseline

The main challenge is to change the mindset and ROI calculation **from cost reduction to revenue acceleration**.

Many organizations still calculate AI value too narrowly. Early ROI is often framed as time saved, productivity gained, or headcount avoided. But as AI moves into workflows, ROI also includes:

- Process quality
- Fewer handoffs
- Faster decisions
- Better customer outcomes
- Increased competitiveness
- Better knowledge reuse
- Employee capability
- Governance
- Employee satisfaction and retention
- Learning how to redesign work

The underlying challenge is not just one of metrics, but of leadership and organizational design.

Trust also broadens as AI becomes more operational. This impacts employee confidence, customer-facing risk, data control, auditability, explainability, provider location, regulatory fit, and sovereign AI considerations. Governance is not a late-stage compliance add-on; it is part of the operating model that determines whether AI can scale safely.

The bottom line

AI is widely used, but operational adoption depends on the ability to move from individual productivity and local workflows into ownership, governance, ROI understanding, and cross-functional scale.

The question that most research leaves unanswered is how this plays out specifically in larger mid-sized companies.



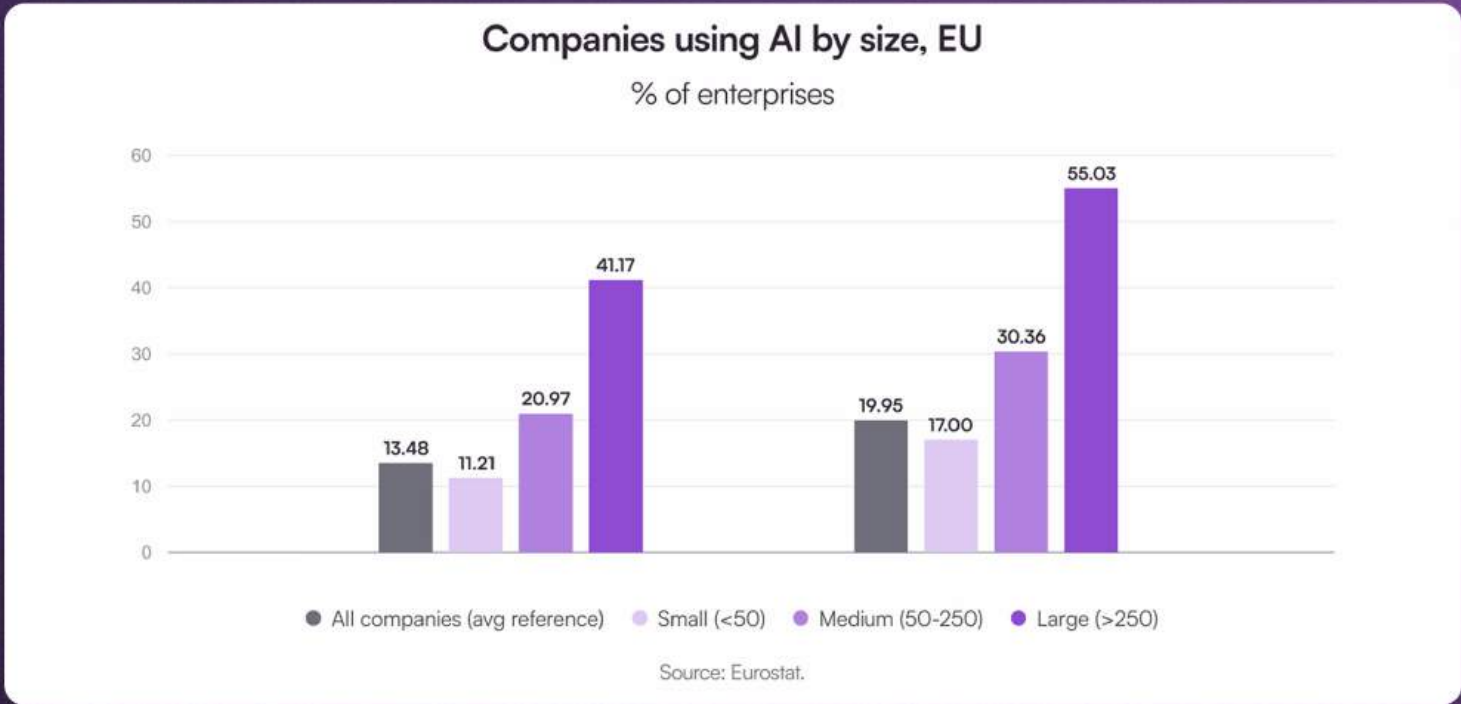
Why mid-sized companies need their own AI adoption lens

The challenge with mid-sized companies is not that they are invisible - but blurred. Public evidence often shows that AI adoption increases with company size, but it rarely isolates the mid-market segments clearly. The 250 to 1,000 employee segment is frequently blended into enterprise statistics, and revenue-defined “mid-market” categories that do not map neatly onto organizational reality.

Mid-sized-company evidence does exist, but it is more fragmented: often vendor-biased, market-specific, or designed around a particular product category or commercial use case. This report aims to change that.

Adoption rises with size, but exact benchmarks remain imperfect

The strongest directional evidence is that AI adoption rises with company size. Eurostat reports that in 2025, 17% of small EU enterprises, 30.36% of medium enterprises, and 55.03% of large enterprises used AI technologies.¹¹ But because the “large” category means 250+ employees, this shows the size effect without isolating larger mid-sized companies from bigger enterprises.



The practical interpretation is that scale helps adoption, but it does not explain adoption depth. The sources closest to the upper mid-market suggest that these companies are more active than smaller firms, but not necessarily as structurally mature as the most advanced large enterprises. Their adoption may include broad use of tools, copilots, and local workflows, while the path into cross-functional governed value remains less clear.

11. Eurostat, Use of artificial intelligence in enterprises

Tech and AI proximity — not just headcount — divides mid-sized companies

Headcount alone is not enough to understand mid-sized AI adoption. A 700-person, AI-enabled SaaS company and a 700-person, traditional manufacturer may sit in the same size band, but they are not starting from the same place. The speed and depth of adoption depends heavily on tech proximity: how big a role does technology (and specifically AI) play in the company’s product, service model, leadership mindset, talent base, and customer value proposition.

AI-enabled SaaS companies, cybersecurity or AI-security providers, digital marketing agencies, and AI and consultancies often begin from a different baseline. Even their non-technical functions work inside a more tech-aware culture. Customers expect AI capability, employees are exposed to AI through the product or service model, and leadership often understands the technology well enough to make faster decisions.

Traditional companies, such as manufacturers, logistics operators, retailers, and public-sector environments, often face a translation problem first. They may know that AI matters, but not where to start, which workflow is safe, which person should own it, or how to move beyond general-purpose chat tools.

In one organization, the adoption push was explicitly framed as moving “AI beyond chat” - a signal that the company had recognized the gap between giving employees access to LLMs and helping them use AI inside actual workflows.

Being “AI-close” does not automatically mean mature. One tech-oriented case showed fragmented internal adoption: tool access was bottom-up, governance was weak, and there was no unified leadership direction. Being close to AI creates a head start, but it does not remove the need for ownership, governance and operational structure.

In another case we saw the contrast is not only between tech and non-tech companies. Two relatively similar product-led organizations had very different adoption realities. In one company, adoption was more bottom-up and dependent on early adopters in specific teams. In another, AI was embedded across departments, supported by a dedicated AI automation role, shared tooling, technical leadership and a stronger “let’s try it” culture. Sector and product context matter, but so does the internal operating model around AI.

The mid-market opportunity

These companies are large enough for repeated workflows and productivity gains to matter, but often small enough for decisions, pilots, and workflow changes to move faster than in large enterprises.

They also face strong pressure to do more with less — which makes practical AI value especially relevant. AI may need to be framed less as a standalone priority and more as a route to the priorities mid-sized companies already have: workforce productivity, improved customer experience, cost optimization, and competitive positioning.

A diagnostic for your starting point

A more useful lens for mid-market companies is the **AI Adoption Profile**. This profile helps explain why two companies with similar headcount may require different proof, support, and next steps on their AI adoption journey.

AI Adoption Profile

Size tells us where to look. The adoption profile explains how companies start, what support they need, and how fast they can move — across four dimensions.

1

Business context

Company size and complexity

Business model / operating category

Operating pressure / transformation need

2

Technology and AI context

AI proximity / product-service type

Data and systems readiness

AI maturity stage

3

Leadership, ownership and governance

Leadership mindset

AI adoption push: top-down, bottom-up, or hybrid

Ownership model

Governance readiness

4

Function and people readiness

Function or department

People readiness / AI-native mindset

Discoverability and sharing

Cross-functional dependency

Similar size does not mean similar AI readiness. AI proximity, leadership, ownership, governance, people readiness, discoverability, and data readiness shape how adoption starts — and how fast it can scale.

The key dimensions that constitute an AI Adoption Profile diagnostic:

Dimension	What to assess	Signals of higher readiness	Signals of lower readiness
Business context	What is the company's operating model and transformation pressure?	The business model involves recurring, structured work; clear operating pressure (growth, efficiency, cost, competitive position) that creates a concrete reason to prioritize AI.	Digital skills are not a part of a company's core business and culture; no clear business driver for AI beyond general awareness; operating model is highly variable and project-based, making workflow patterns hard to identify.
Technology and AI context	How close is AI to the product, service model, and customer value proposition? Is the underlying work digital, documented, and structured enough to redesign?	AI is in the product or core service; customers expect AI capability; employees encounter AI through daily work Recurring workflows are documented; data is accessible and reasonably clean; handoffs between teams are defined	AI feels like an add-on; no AI in the product; the team has not discussed what AI means for the business model Workflows exist only in people's heads; data is in disconnected systems; the first AI problem is actually a process documentation problem
Leadership, ownership and governance	Does leadership create permission, pressure, or priority? Is there a clear owner for AI beyond one enthusiast?	Leaders connect AI to specific business opportunities: capacity, cost, competitive position; they create space to experiment and share A named person or team owns best practices, enablement of other teams, and support in any required policies and procedures	Leaders issue vague instructions to "do AI" without prioritization logic; or AI is not on the leadership agenda at all Ownership defaults to whoever built the tool; no one is responsible for what happens when the builder leaves
Function and people readiness	Are people hired and socialized toward experimentation with AI? Is the existing workforce being actively upskilled?	New hires skew toward AI-fluent profiles: sharing, demos, and internal examples are normal; failure is not penalized The organization runs structured AI literacy programs for staff beyond basic legislative minimum; AI is incorporated into performance management; managers can articulate what AI changes in their team's work	Adoption depends on one or two early adopters; there is no culture of sharing what works; people wait for permission Upskilling is informal or optional; AI education is passive (listening, not trying hands-on); AI education is not continuous (e.g. "we already had an AI training").

The AI adoption profile

An organization's position across these dimensions can predict the likely AI adoption path. An AI-proximate company with strong leadership orientation and an existing culture of sharing may be able to move from first experiments to scaling across departments in months. A traditional company with weak process documentation and no clear ownership may need to solve several of these dimensions before a successful

AI use case implementation is even possible.

This also means that the support a company needs differs by profile, not by maturity stage alone. One may need ownership structure. Another may need process documentation. A third may need leadership to connect AI to a concrete business opportunity or constraint before anyone will prioritize it.

How AI adoption actually takes hold

Companies do not move through AI adoption in predictable steps. They start from different places, move at different speeds, and get stuck for different reasons. What the evidence shows is a consistent set of factors that determine whether AI stays as experimentation or scales into an organizational capability.

Leadership sets the climate for AI adoption

The signal leadership sends — permission, pressure, or priority — decides whether AI stays a private experiment or becomes a governed workflow.

Mode 01
Permission

What it sounds like

"Feel free to explore AI tools — just let us know if you find something useful."

Likely outcome

Individual experimentation. Isolated pockets of use, no shared infrastructure or repeatable value. Adoption stays personal — and invisible to the organisation.

Mode 02
Pressure

What it sounds like

"Everyone should be using AI by now. I don't understand why this isn't happening faster."

Likely outcome

Anxiety without direction. Teams perform adoption rather than practise it — surface-level compliance, fragmented tools, no clear ownership.

Mode 03
Priority

What it sounds like

"We've identified three processes where AI can reduce manual work. These are our focus for Q3 — here's who owns them."

Likely outcome

Adoption with direction. Clear scope, named owners, defined outcomes. AI moves from experiment to workflow — the foundation for governance and scale.

The AI adoption profile

Leadership sets the climate for AI adoption

Leadership was one of the strongest patterns across qualitative research. It is not just sponsorship. It shapes whether AI becomes experimentation, vague pressure or a strategic priority linked to growth, capacity, efficiency and competitiveness.

In faster-moving cases, leadership creates permission. People are allowed to try, fail, share and copy what works. In more advanced tech-enabled cases, founders and C-level leaders often come from product, engineering or digital backgrounds. AI is not experienced as an external transformation program; it is treated as a new operating condition and becomes part of their culture.

Leadership can also create pressure without structure. Several organizations described where the instruction is

Several organizations described where the instruction is to, "do AI," but teams do not know how to prioritize, calculate value, move to production or decide who owns the next step. In those cases, AI activity can increase without becoming a coherent business capability.

A third approach is where AI is linked to business constraints or opportunities — through budget pressure, headcount limits, backlog reduction, faster customer service, product relevance, or growth without proportional cost. In growth-stage companies, this framing is especially important. Leaders often prioritize sales, product expansion and delivery over internal efficiency unless AI is connected to capacity, competitiveness or scale.

Pattern to watch

Delegation is not a substitute for leadership priority.

Where AI adoption depends entirely on a single internal champion — however skilled — it tends to stall when that person leaves, changes role, or loses organizational support.

The most durable pattern is a credible internal translator (a product leader, automation lead, or transformation owner) who operates with real authority, business context, and a leadership mandate behind them.



Variant — Delegated leadership

When senior leadership lacks AI fluency but names a credible internal translator — a Head of AI, an automation lead, a trusted practitioner — and genuinely backs them, the effect mirrors **Priority**. The climate shifts because the organisation can see that someone with authority is taking this seriously. Delegation only works when the translator has real mandate, not just a title.

Functions matter, but people and process shape the pace

Some functions are more visible early adopters, but the pattern is more nuanced than “marketing first” or “IT first.” Function gives the first opportunity surface. People, process clarity, company context and leadership determine whether that opportunity turns into adoption.

Marketing and content teams often move early because they have creative production, summarization, campaign support and asset-generation use cases — capabilities that AI is particularly well suited for. Customer support and service operations also move early: the work is language-heavy, repetitive, high-volume and easier to measure through ticket handling, response time, resolution rate or customer satisfaction.

Sales and RevOps examples show that AI value depends heavily on workflow fit. In advanced cases, AI was used to check Ideal Customer Profile (ICP) fit, review CRM history, identify overlaps between direct and partner relationships, or compose outreach. But one cautionary case showed an expensive sales automation tool failing because it assumed a simpler buying journey than the company actually needed.

Finance, HR, legal and risk functions showed up as early movers in several cases, not laggards. The reason is structural: their work tends to be recurring, rule-bound and well-documented. Operations has large AI potential, but it depends heavily on digitalization, process documentation, data access, and access to legacy systems.

For digital-first companies, the opportunity is immediate: structured, recurring operational workflows are strong candidates for automation and agentic redesign. For more traditional businesses, the first AI problem may not be the model – it may be that the underlying workflow is not yet digital, standardized, or even understood well enough to redesign.

The human unlock

Adoption often happens through hands-on 'aha' moments.

One example captures this well: a finance department employee experienced a mindset shift after using no-code tools to build a simple computer game with her child. The relevance wasn't the game itself — it was the shift in confidence.

Someone outside a technical role suddenly saw that they could create with AI, and started thinking about how it could apply to their work.

Adoption is not only about which function is ready; it's about whether people experience a concrete moment where AI becomes tangible to them.

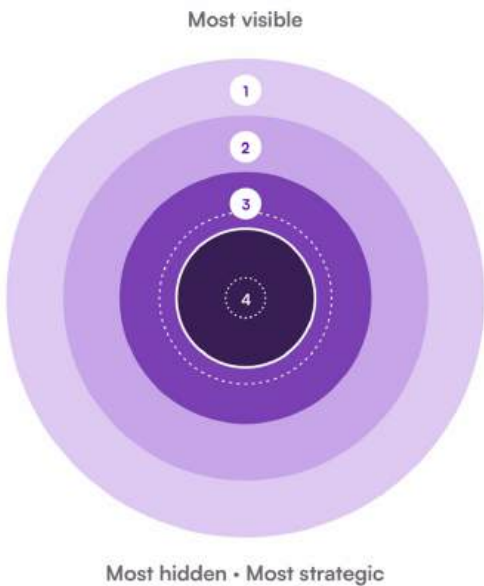
AI readiness is built through both hiring and training

AI proximity is not only a property of the product, industry, or function. Over time, it can also become embedded in the talent base and working culture. Companies closer to AI often hire, promote, or attract people who are more comfortable with automation, experimentation, ambiguity, and AI-assisted work. This means that when a transformation push arrives, adoption can feel less like a sudden change program and more like an extension of how people already think and work.

One interviewee described how the company had adjusted its hiring approach two years earlier toward more AI-native profiles. Leadership expected AI automation to reshape large parts of the organization, so the response was not only to add tools or train existing teams, but to build a workforce more capable of working with AI. When the transformation push came, adoption moved more smoothly because the people were already closer to the required mindset.

In another example, a company that had been operating in hypergrowth, budget pressure triggered a decision to reframe the organization through AI rather than simply continue adding support capacity. The team began pitching AI use cases, leadership reconsidered which roles were strategically needed, and product deprioritized much of the existing backlog to create space for AI-first work. This was not just a cost-cutting move — it showed how an AI-adjacent, high-growth organization can mobilize quickly when people are already used to experimentation and when leadership creates permission to rethink work.

AI adoption investment is more than tools & licenses



- 1 Tools and infrastructure**
Paying for AI tools, platforms, automation infrastructure, integrations and data access.
- 2 Training and capability building**
Helping teams learn how to use AI, build workflows, evaluate outputs and work with automation.
- 3 Hiring and talent base**
Hiring, promoting or developing people more comfortable with AI-native work, experimentation and automation.
- 4 Opportunity cost / making room**
Deprioritizing existing backlog, delaying planned work, or redesigning roles and processes to create space for AI-first transformation

AI adoption spreads when use becomes visible

Training matters, but the qualitative research suggests that adoption often spreads through visibility. People need to see what others are doing, understand that it worked, and know whom to ask. Without discoverability, AI use remains isolated to personal productivity.

In companies or teams where AI feels more external to the business, visible examples create safety and translation. People may be afraid to fail, reluctant to be first, or unsure what good use looks like in their own function. They wait until someone else creates a useful example, then copy or adapt it. Internal examples, demos and relatable use cases are more powerful than abstract AI education because they reduce the distance between “AI as a concept” and “AI as something I can use in my workflow.”

In more AI-native teams, visibility creates acceleration. People are already willing to experiment, but sharing avoids duplication and turns isolated experiments into organizational learning.

Examples include:

- Shared experiment logs
- Tool workspaces
- AI wins channels
- Recurring demo meetings
- Hackathons
- Informal knowledge maps of previously solved problems

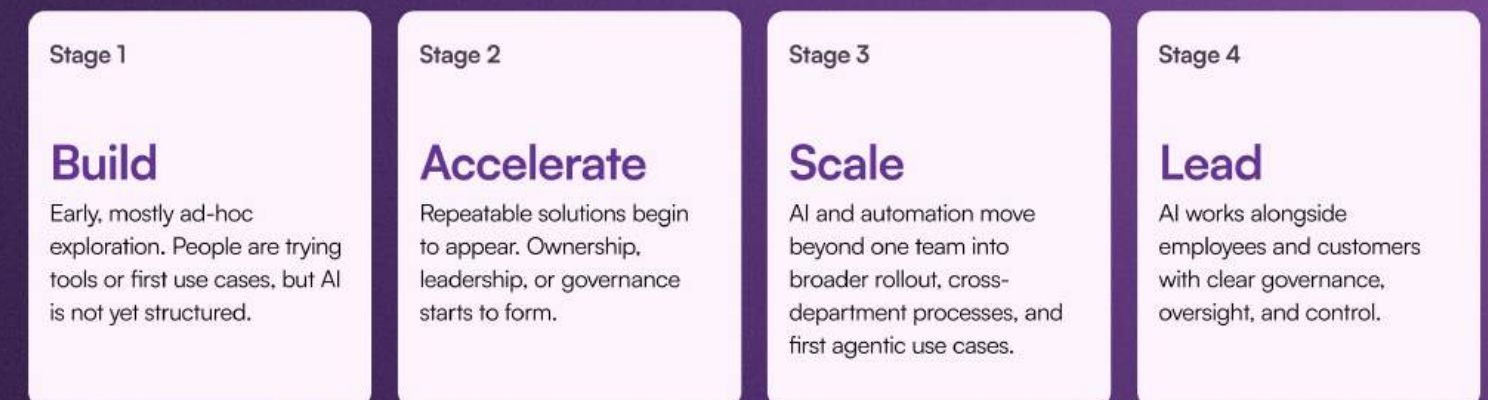


The real scale gap is the leap from working use cases to an operating model

The strongest structural finding is that the hard step is not always starting AI. It is not even always making one use case work. The harder step is turning multiple working use cases into an operating model: grouped workflows, process dependencies, ownership, governance, ROI and cross-functional logic.

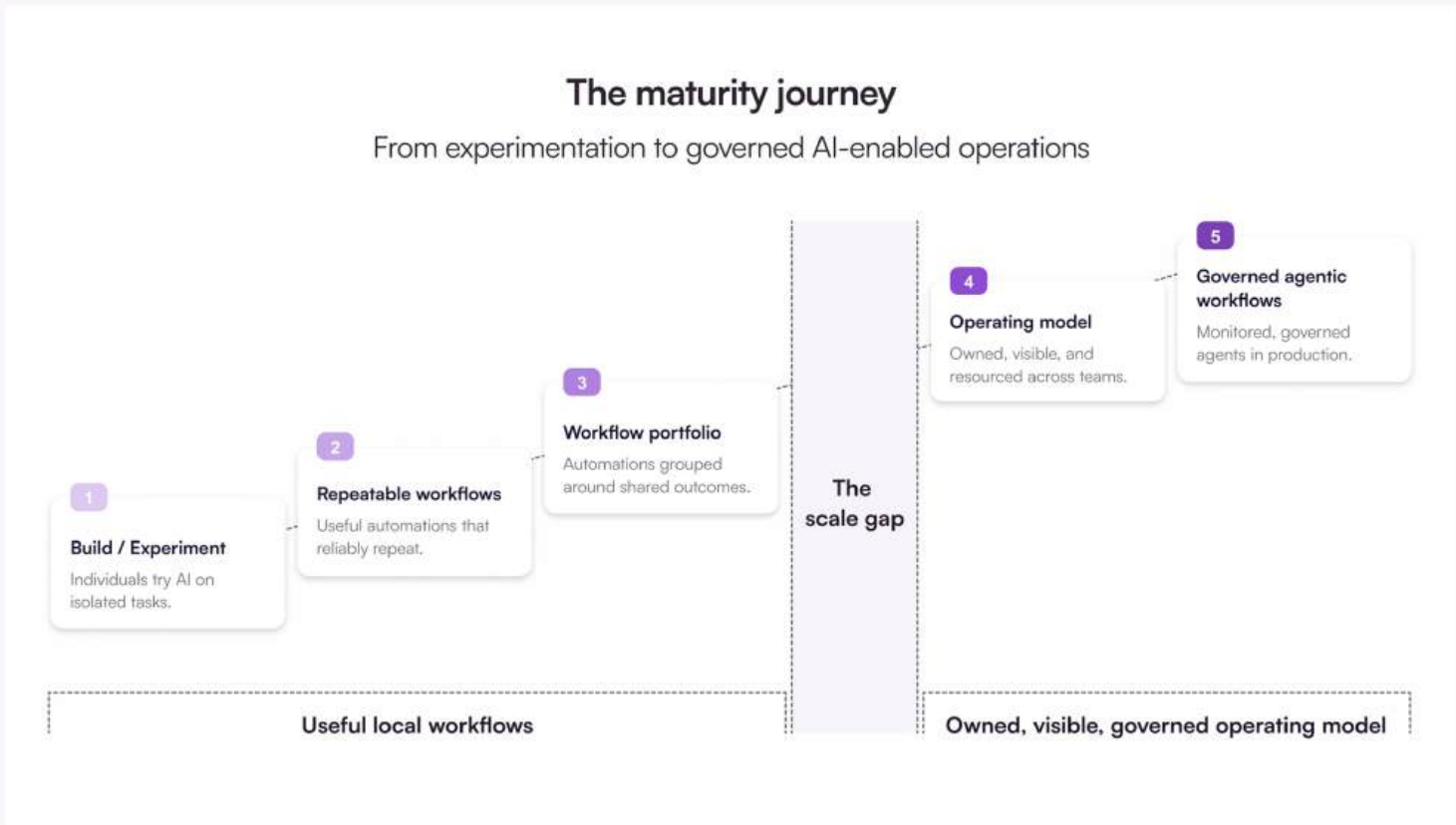
Many companies are not blocked because they have no ideas. They are blocked because they have too many disconnected ideas, too many local experiments and not enough end-to-end view of the value chain. Several organizations described the problem as jumping between departments and use cases instead of asking how work should flow across a process area.

The Make AI Playbook: decoding your maturity stage



Individual use cases need to be organized around recurring business outcomes, not listed as a collection of disconnected wins. A sales team that has separately automated prospect research, CRM history review, and outreach drafting does not yet have an AI-powered business process. It has three tools. The transition happens when someone steps back and asks: what is the end-to-end value chain here, what dependencies exist between these workflows, and what outcome are we collectively trying to produce?

Grouping is also a prioritization decision. Some experiments should stay local or be retired. A useful filter is whether the workflow is recurring (it runs more than once and produces the same kind of output), whether it is owned (a named person is responsible for it when something breaks), and whether its output is visible to someone other than the person who built it. Workflows that fail all three tests are personal productivity, not organizational capability. They belong in an experiment log or on a single person's desktop.



The rise of the business engineer

One pattern worth naming is the emergence of the “business engineer”, “AI & automation specialist” or “business automation and AI lead” roles inside the functions. This role sits between business owner, process analyst and technical builder - exactly the kind of capability companies need when local workflows start becoming a portfolio.

Make itself has a Head of AI and Automation with a decentralized team of AI & Automation Leads embedded in each department. At Make customer, FINN, teams of Business Automation and AI Managers created a culture of experimentation where people fluent in both business and technology drive AI innovation.¹²

How this works in reality

A finance team we interviewed had a business automation engineer sitting inside the accounts receivable unit — with enough domain knowledge to understand collections and disputes, and enough technical skill to build the workflows.

As more teams built isolated tools, this person naturally became a connection point for scaling and restructuring AI automations at the departmental, then company level.

12. Make, How Make helps FINN’s Automation and AI Lead empower teams to innovate at speed

Ownership must evolve as AI moves from local use to shared workflows

AI ownership is not one role. It changes by adoption path and maturity stage. Bottom-up, top-down and hybrid paths each create different benefits and risks.

In bottom-up adoption, employees or teams discover useful use cases themselves. This creates energy and relevance, but can also create shadow AI, duplicated tools, weak documentation and fragile workflows that disappear when someone leaves.

In top-down adoption, leadership, an AI lead or a transformation team defines priorities and pushes use cases. This creates direction and governance but may produce artificial projects if there is not enough employee pull or workflow fit.

The most mature pattern is a hybrid approach: ideas can come from teams, and are grounded in a common Center of Excellence (CoE), while still allowing for local prioritization and experimentation within guardrails. One regulated financial-infrastructure organization moved AI ownership away from IT and into strategy where the strategy team owned prioritization, funding and business value, while IT assessed delivery feasibility.

Another organization used a hub-and-spoke model across AI managers, legal, security, compliance, IT and country teams.

A product-led AI company showed another model: the CPO owned internal AI adoption because the product itself was AI. That role treated the company almost like a product, asking which personas use AI, which workflows matter, which tools should be standardized, and which learnings should feed back into the roadmap.

The practical trigger for an ownership transition is when a workflow failure affects someone who did not build it. A broken personal automation is an inconvenience. A broken workflow that a sales team depends on for daily outreach, or a finance process that feeds a weekly report, is an organizational problem. At that point, the original builder’s informal ownership is no longer sufficient. The workflow needs a named owner (and backup) with enough authority to prioritize maintenance, enough context to make decisions about changes, and enough organizational visibility to communicate status when something goes wrong.



ROI must mature from cost reduction to revenue acceleration

Early AI ROI is usually calculated in familiar terms: time saved, tasks completed faster, tool costs offset by productivity, or fewer manual steps. This is useful at the beginning, but insufficient once AI becomes workflow-level.

As AI moves into shared workflows, ROI becomes harder and more strategic. It may include process quality, faster handoffs, fewer errors, customer retention, ability to scale after acquisitions without adding resources, faster product feedback, reduced

cognitive load, better knowledge reuse and improved business agility.

While traditional approaches fixate on defensive metrics like basic time saved, error reduction, or headcount decrease, true success in the AI era demands a shift toward overarching process acceleration, enhanced creativity, skill amplification, and employee satisfaction. By evolving past these legacy benchmarks, an organization's ROI matures.

Misaligned Metrics

Bringing clarity to AI transformation success

Dimension	Traditional Approach	Success in AI Era	Long-term Value
Efficiency	Time saved	Overarching process acceleration	Increasing competitiveness
Quality	Error reduction	Enhanced creativity, improved customer experiences	Higher customer retention rates
Capability	New revenue	Fewer handoffs between people, skill amplification, decision velocity	Strategic agility
Human	Headcount reduction	Employee satisfaction	Cultural empowerment

Framework by Darin Patterson — VP of Product Advocacy and Market Strategy, Make.

Agentic adoption is process redesign, not just adding agents

The qualitative research does not support a story that every company is ready for broad autonomous agents. Advanced companies are experimenting with agents, but usually in bounded, specialized areas first. The more important shift is not adding agents to old workflows; it is rethinking how work should flow when AI can act, reason, retrieve context, trigger tools and escalate to humans.

One SaaS organization distinguished simple automation from agentic work: simple automation was enough for deterministic tasks such as categorizing costs from bank statements, while agents were used where judgment was required.

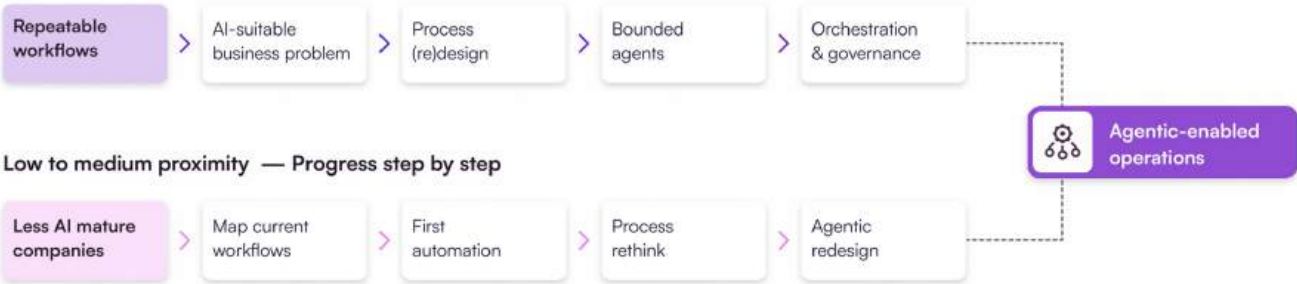
A sales agent, for example, analyzed a potential customer's website, evaluated ICP fit, checked CRM history and composed outreach. The point is not that every sales process should be automated this way, but that agentic workflows become more relevant when a task requires context, decision-making and multiple information sources rather than a single fixed rule.

Less mature or non-tech companies may need a different path. They may first need to map current workflows, automate something familiar, experience a first "aha" moment, and then gradually learn what could be redesigned.

AI & Agentic Automation Adoption pathways

AI-ready companies may design for agents from the start; others may need to progress from familiar workflows into agentic logic, step by step.

High tech/AI proximity — Intentional design from the start



AI Operational Scaling Model

Our research suggests that AI adoption becomes operational when several conditions connect: starting point, leadership, function and process readiness, workflow maturity, ownership, discoverability, and ROI understanding. None of these elements is enough alone. Together, they explain why two companies with similar size, tools or ambitions can move at very different speeds.

Based on our research, we are introducing the AI Operational Scaling Model — a practical framework to help companies evaluate and accelerate their ability to scale AI. The model includes nine dimensions, each with practical guidance on why it is important and what excellence looks like.



Dimension	What good looks like
Leadership	Shapes whether AI becomes scattered activity or a strategic business priority. Requires a specific mandate, budget, and willingness to resolve prioritization conflicts. Includes both direct support (funding, resourcing) and indirect support (deprioritizing existing backlog to create space for AI-first work). Leading AI adoption is often more of a cultural change and organizational transformation than a project or initiative.
Ownership	Scaling AI use internally requires visibility into what gets retired, and what happens when it breaks. Formalized but distributed ownership is the best approach. The trigger: when a workflow failure affects someone who did not build it, informal ownership is no longer sufficient.
Outcome-focused process maps	Connect isolated use cases around a recurring outcome. Rather than managing individual steps, group AI and automations around a shared result — everything that moves a sales lead through qualification, everything involved in resolving a support ticket, everything from invoice to payment. This makes workflows easier to govern, hand off, and improve as a whole.
ROI	A defined method for measuring value before building, not after. Early ROI is often measured through hours saved. However, more mature approaches to ROI calculations include process quality, faster decisions, improved customer experiences, capacity and revenue gained, competitiveness improvement, avoided costs, and organizational learning.
Governance	Data access rules, decision authority, human override conditions, regulatory classification, and incident response. Starts small and scales in proportion to workflow criticality. A robust model is one with a working group with visibility across functions - sometimes called a Center of Excellence (COE) - that collects what teams are actually doing, analyzes its scalability and reliability, then turns those patterns into shared standards that can be adapted for individual teams.
IT/business alignment	Shared logic and language between the business and technical stakeholders, as well as teams building and using AI workflows. The starting point for success is not technology choice, but a business problem that both sides agree is worth solving. That shared starting point is what makes the rest work: business teams with the context and autonomy to build, IT with the visibility to connect it to the broader stack.
Discoverability	A shared space or mechanism to help people understand where AI has been implemented in their organization so far, what components can be reused, and whose work is impacted. People do not want to be first, they want to see what others did, understand how it worked, and adapt it. Without discoverability, AI stays in the realm of personal productivity.
Skills and culture	Structured development for existing staff covering the full ladder from chat fluency to AI-assisted work to building and governing automations. Beyond formal programs, regular touchpoints include updated learning resources, internal showcases of how people are using AI, and space for teams to share what works and what does not. Organizations that treat AI skills as a baseline competency rather than a specialty track are the ones where adoption will compound over time.
Monitoring	Once your goals are set, and your AI & agentic workflows go live, tracking output quality, errors, adoption rates, and whether the business outcomes are materializing becomes the focus of the work. Technical monitoring catches failure or flags a need for adjustments. Adoption monitoring surfaces whether people are actually using what was built, and the cost implications of adoption. Both feed back into ownership and governance.

AI Operational Scaling Model

by Make



A nine-point action plan for mid-market leaders

Don't start with the tool or technology. Start with a detailed understanding of where your organization actually is on the adoption journey, and work towards a clear definition of what successful AI adoption looks like for you.

- 1 Diagnose your AI Adoption profile.**
Use the four dimensions in this report to give you a grounded understanding of your starting point. Beware of the leadership bias and make sure to include different layers of your organization in the evaluation.
- 2 Map function and process readiness.**
Look for work that is frequent, structured, measurable or painful enough to justify redesign.
- 3 Make AI use visible.**
Create “AI wins” communications, demos, examples, office hours and internal sharing rituals so adoption does not stay at the personal level.
- 4 Choose ownership before workflows become critical.**
A local champion can start adoption, but shared workflows need a process owner and eventually governance or IT involvement.
- 5 Move beyond chat deliberately.**
If most AI use in the company is still chat-based, treat it as the baseline, not as failure. The next question is whether people can embed AI into repeatable workflows, decisions and processes.
- 6 Move from use cases to AI-powered business processes.**
Do not collect disconnected AI examples forever. Group workflows around recurring outcomes and value chains.
- 7 Redefine ROI by maturity.**
Early ROI may be hours saved. Later ROI should include capacity, quality, avoided costs, faster decisions, competitiveness, customer value and agility.
- 8 Treat governance as an enabler, not a brake.**
Governance should clarify what can be tried, what can be scaled and what needs human review — not create bureaucratic overhead that kills momentum.
- 9 Consider whether to build toward agentic work gradually, or right away.**
AI-ready companies can create agentic from the start. Others may need to begin with familiar workflows and move toward agentic processes step by step. Both paths are valid — the key is being deliberate about which one fits your AI Adoption Profile.

Ready to take the next step?

Use the [Make AI Playbook](#) to self-diagnose your organization's AI maturity or [Talk to Sales](#) to see how Make can be part of your AI transformation



Make AI Playbook



Talk to Sales

How this report was built

This report is evidence-based, combining market research with primary data, Make-specific maturity data and one-to-one qualitative interviews with industry leaders.

- Avanade, Trendlines AI Value Report 2025.
- Celonis, 2026 Process Optimization Report.
- Deloitte, State of AI in the Enterprise 2026.
- Deloitte, AI Adoption in Czech Companies 2026.
- Eurostat, Use of artificial intelligence in enterprises.
- McKinsey, The State of AI in 2025: Agents, Innovation, and Transformation.
- Node4, Mid-Market Report 2025.
- Stanford University, AI Index Report 2026, Chapter 4: Economy.
- UiPath, 2026 AI and Agentic Automation Trends Report.
- Selected mid-market / upper-mid-market synthesis sources.

Business Agility Index primary data:

A Make-commissioned, primary quantitative study of 540 respondents across 16 industries and 35+ countries: Used as directional evidence rather than a globally representative benchmark.

Make AI Playbook data: Self-reported, first-party data based on a practical maturity lens for interpreting how organizations move from early experimentation to repeatable workflows, cross-functional scale, and more governed AI-enabled work. It also provides directional signals on ownership, blockers, skills, governance, and where companies report friction across the adoption journey.

Qualitative Interviews: One-to-one interviews with industry leaders, AI transformation leads, founders, business-function leaders, consultants, and automation practitioners across different company sizes, sectors, functions, and maturity levels. Sample intentionally included AI-native and tech-enabled companies and traditional and regulated businesses for a range of perspectives.



The Mid-Market AI Adoption Journey



Make AI Playbook



Talk to Sales