



2026 EXL Enterprise AI Study

Data, context, and business reimagination define AI Leaders

US report

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Almost every company in our survey thinks it's ahead of the competition, but only a small percentage—roughly 10%—actually qualify as AI Leaders.

Executive summary

In 2026, AI adoption has become the norm. But true competitive advantage remains rare. After years of experimentation, companies are now under pressure to deliver measurable results from AI.

At the same time, most companies overestimate their AI maturity. Almost every company in our survey thinks it's ahead of the competition, but only a small percentage—roughly 10%—actually qualify as AI Leaders. Leaders are defined by having deployed AI past the pilot stage across almost all of their organizational functions.

AI Leaders excel in two key areas:

Data



Our survey continues to reinforce the fact that data remains the single biggest barrier to scaling AI use across the business. The survey found Leaders are overcoming this obstacle with more mature data management practices, which enable them to ensure high-quality data is accessible enterprise-wide instead of remaining stuck in silos where its impact is limited.

Business reimagination



AI has distinct requirements to be effectively scaled and embedded into workflows. Leaders recognize this. Instead of trying to tack AI onto their traditional enterprise operating models, they're completely reimaging them for AI transformation.

These two differentiators are especially critical to unlocking the full value of agentic AI. While earlier AI initiatives focused on productivity gains, organizations now use agentic AI to fundamentally redesign enterprise workflows, automating complex processes, accelerating decision-making, and driving step-change improvements in efficiency, cost, and performance. Four in 10 companies have already moved agentic AI beyond the pilot stage.

About the research

We surveyed 322 U.S. executives and other decision-makers representing companies across five key industries. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of respondents by their title and the industry in which their company operates.

Figure 1: Respondent industry and title

Industry		Title	
Banking and finance	22%	Chief/head	19%
Insurance	16%	Executive (VP, EVP, SVP)	40%
Retail	16%	Director/senior director	41%
Utilities	16%		
Healthcare (payers)	16%		
Life sciences	16%		

What's also increasingly important is the general acknowledgement that implementing AI takes context—the expertise of how work actually gets done, decisions that need to be made throughout a workflow, regulatory knowledge, and more. It's context that can take organizations from aspiration to execution. Without it, it's impossible to tailor models to your specific needs or transform your workflows to put AI at the center.

In addition, investments have caught up with ambition. For some industries, average AI budgets more than tripled between 2025 and 2026. Across all participating companies, a more than 60% budget increase is planned for next year: a signal that commitment to AI is real.

These moves are translating into materially stronger results. Leaders are far more likely than others to have used both generative AI and agentic AI to achieve a wide range of key business priorities, including greater stability in uncertain or changing markets, better customer engagement, faster data processing, lower operating costs, improved sustainability, and more effective market expansion. They're also attributing AI use to greater financial benefits such as lower costs, higher revenue, and improved margins.

AI advantage is no longer determined by access to models, but by how effectively they are deployed at scale to drive business outcomes. Organizations that rethink their operating models, strengthen their data foundations, and embed AI into the core of how work gets done are already pulling ahead—and widening the gap. Those that don't risk falling further behind as the next wave of AI transformation accelerates.



Leaders, Followers, and Laggards

Our survey found significant enthusiasm for AI from virtually all participating companies, as well as considerable optimism about the technology's impact and potential. Reflecting this optimism, 76% of companies in our survey believe they are ahead of their competitors when it comes to AI.

Yet the reality is, only a small group of participating companies are actually ahead, having made the greatest progress in AI and achieved stronger business outcomes from AI use. The survey examined whether organizations successfully used AI across eight main business functions:

- Customer care/service
- Marketing/business development
- Back-office (billings, payment processing, collections)
- Corporate strategy
- Regulatory compliance
- Finance/accounting
- Product/service development
- Human resources

We defined Leaders (which comprise 10% of our sample) as companies that reported having fully developed AI capabilities in six to eight of the eight functions. These compare with Followers (65%), which have fully developed capabilities in three to five of those functions, and Laggards (25%) with two or fewer functions having fully developed AI capabilities.

From productivity gains to financial outcomes: Where AI is creating real value

Leaders have both deployed AI across far more of their business than others and generated disproportionately greater returns.

Top business outcomes

Leaders are more likely than Laggards—typically by a large margin—to say AI in general has helped them achieve all but one of their business priorities (Figure 2). The biggest gap, 44 percentage points, involves helping the business strengthen its stability in uncertain or changing markets. Other key business outcomes AI has helped Leaders deliver to a great extent are better customer engagement, faster data processing, lower operating costs, improved sustainability, and more effective market expansion.

Figure 2: Percentage saying AI has achieved business priorities to a large extent

	Leader	Follower	Laggard
Strengthening stability in uncertain/changing markets	72%	43%	28%
Improving ways to target, attract new customers	69%	49%	41%
Increasing the speed of processing data/getting real time data	69%	41%	40%
Reducing operating costs	69%	52%	33%
Strengthening customer retention	69%	46%	36%
Ensuring/improving sustainability	66%	40%	29%
Expanding into new markets	65%	46%	26%
Improving existing products/services	63%	44%	38%
Improving margins/profits	63%	46%	29%
Improving operational/process efficiencies	63%	51%	40%
Improving pricing accuracy (i.e., for loans, premiums, etc.)	59%	48%	26%
Increasing agility to adapt to market changes	59%	46%	34%
Creating new products/services	56%	43%	29%
Increasing social responsibility	56%	45%	29%
Redefining customer experience	41%	46%	36%
Mitigating business and regulatory risk	34%	46%	38%





We find a similar situation when it comes to agentic AI (Figure 3). Despite the fact agentic is still emerging, an overwhelming majority of Leaders said the technology has helped them achieve a wide range of business priorities. The most prominent of these are creating new products or services, redefining the customer experience, improving pricing accuracy, increasing enterprise agility, and reducing operating costs. And the gaps here between Leaders and Laggards are just as large, if not larger.

Figure 3: Percentage saying agentic AI has achieved business priorities to a large extent

	Leader	Follower	Laggard
Creating new products/services	78%	50%	27%
Redefining customer experience	78%	43%	38%
Improving pricing accuracy (i.e., for loans, premiums, etc.)	72%	47%	34%
Increasing agility to adapt to market changes	72%	47%	26%
Reducing operating costs	66%	43%	30%
Increasing the speed of processing data/getting real time data	66%	46%	33%
Improving existing products/services	63%	43%	31%
Strengthening stability in uncertain/changing markets	63%	56%	35%
Improving operational/process efficiencies	59%	45%	31%
Ensuring/improving sustainability	59%	48%	35%
Mitigating business and regulatory risk	56%	42%	37%
Strengthening customer retention	53%	49%	23%
Expanding into new markets	53%	46%	36%
Increasing social responsibility	50%	44%	28%
Improving ways to target, attract new customers	48%	52%	35%
Improving margins/profits	47%	36%	35%

Financial returns

Leaders are seeing materially stronger financial returns from AI (Figure 4), which estimate AI in general has reduced costs by 26%, boosted revenue by 27%, and improved margin by 22% in the processes where it's been applied. Laggards trail in all three areas. With agentic AI specifically, Leaders' estimated impact on individual use cases is notably larger than that of Laggards across cost, revenue, and margin.

Figure 4: Financial impact of AI and agentic AI on the use cases where it's been applied

AI	Leader	Follower	Laggard
Reduced costs by:	26%	23%	19%
Increased revenue by:	27%	21%	19%
Improved margins by:	22%	21%	18%

Agentic AI	Leader	Follower	Laggard
Reduced costs by:	26%	24%	21%
Increased revenue by:	27%	22%	20%
Improved margins by:	23%	22%	19%



Case study:

Agentic AI transforms finance and accounting

Challenge

A global energy services firm wanted to improve the efficiency of its order-to-cash billing operations. Each of the company's invoices required the finance team to painstakingly match hundreds of time and expense line items to backup documents such as timesheets and receipts. The manual reconciliation drained resources, delayed billing cycles, and often led to last-minute rejections by operations teams.

Solution

Implementing an agentic AI system enabled the company to autonomously extract invoice line-item details and their supporting documents. Each invoice proposal is generated with a match confidence score and full audit trail, allowing only exceptions or low-confidence matches to be routed for human review, slashing the manual burden while maintaining quality control.

AI-driven quality control agents also flagged anomalies early in the process, enabling rapid resolution and reinforcing ownership and accountability among the team.

To maintain performance visibility, the team implemented dynamic dashboards with real-time tracking of proposal status and rejections.

Results

Using solutions based around powerful agentic capabilities and contextual industry understanding, the company saw an 85%-plus matching rate, which significantly reduced reconciliation workloads. Additionally, they gained a 50% reduction in invoice processing time. The result: faster billing cycles, reduced finance team burden and fewer client disputes; a direct translation of AI capability into business performance.

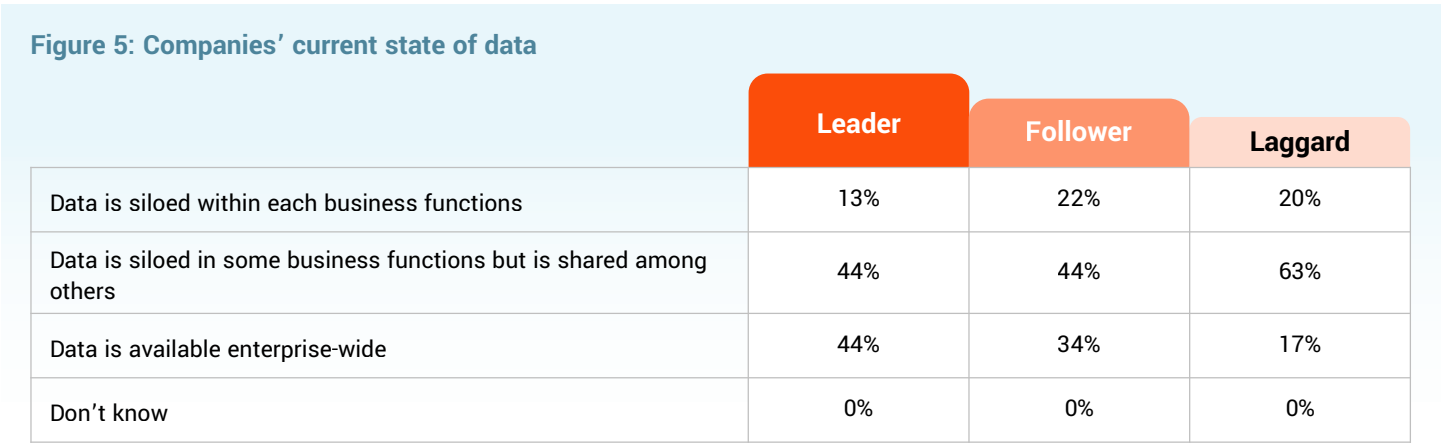
What Leaders do differently

How do Leaders deploy AI more broadly across the enterprise to achieve greater impact and financial returns from AI when others are still struggling? Leaders differentiate themselves in two areas: data maturity and operating model transformation.

Data: The real constraint to creating value

Data remains the biggest barrier to AI value. Seven in 10 respondents overall said data generally is a challenge in using AI effectively, and data-related issues were the top three most frequently mentioned barriers to AI implementation: data privacy and security (34%), inaccessible, siloed data residing in multiple sources (31%), and limited transparency or explainability of AI models (31%). Furthermore, 58% said they don't fully have the skills in place to effectively use AI to capitalize on their data and 61% reported they can't consistently and quickly access data to make timely AI-supported or enabled decisions.

Data still determines AI winners, and it's here that Leaders have made substantial progress by building the stronger data foundation that's critical to effective and expansive AI use (Figure 5). Forty-four percent of Leaders, versus 17% of Laggards, have data that's accessible enterprise-wide. Conversely, 83% of Laggards still struggle with data siloed in business functions, which limits AI use and impact.



Leaders have been able to create this robust data foundation because they have greater data management maturity (Figure 6). Ninety-one percent of Leaders, versus 61% of Laggards, consider themselves best practice or leading edge when it comes to data management practices. Laggards are much more likely to be at par with competitors.

Several factors are key to addressing the data management maturity gap:

- **Robust governance** to strengthen data privacy and security and support ethical, responsible AI use
- **Legacy system modernization** to eliminate the siloes that are constraining enterprise-wide access to data
- **Automation of data management processes** to foster greater data quality, transparency, consistency, accessibility, and efficiency
- **Data management platform adoption** to orchestrate and automate integrated data collection, organization, management, and access

Figure 6: Data management maturity

	Leader	Follower	Laggard
Leading edge	28%	23%	10%
Best practice	63%	61%	51%
About par with most other companies	9%	13%	39%
Somewhat behind most other companies	0%	2%	0%
Far behind most other companies	0%	0%	0%

Determine the right approach to improving data quality

Most companies that are still struggling to get their data in order don't have the luxury of delaying their AI implementations to fix their data or else they'll be left behind. Approaches include: data-first, in which the focus is on improving and preparing data before deploying AI solutions; AI-first, in which AI solutions are implemented and used to help clean, structure, or improve data; or parallel, in which data is improved and AI solutions are deployed simultaneously. Each approach can be the right one in specific situations. Today, many organizations would be best served by a parallel approach of adopting AI solutions they can use to improve their data and make it more accessible.

Operating model: Transformation versus adaptation

AI cannot scale as a bolt-on to traditional operating models. Leaders have recognized this and acted on it. While a majority of Laggards have made significant changes to their operating model to align with AI's requirements, Leaders are more likely to have taken the next step: completely redesigning their enterprise-wide operating model to deploy and benefit from AI with adjustments shaped by the context of their industry and individual processes (Figure 7). This distinction matters. Adapting an existing model preserves legacy constraints such as approval hierarchies, handoff points and role definitions that were designed for human-paced work. Redesigning it means asking a more fundamental question: if AI were embedded from the start, how would this workflow, this team, this decision process look different? Leaders are answering that question. That is why their financial returns on AI are materially higher than those of their peers (Figure 4).

Figure 7: Operating model changes to align with AI requirements

	Leader	Follower	Laggard
We have completely redesigned our enterprise - wide operating model to accommodate AI use	44%	37%	23%
We have made significant changes	50%	54%	65%
We have made minor changes	3%	7%	10%
We made few, if any, changes	3%	2%	2%

Industry findings: Who's leading the way

The general trends around AI use, success, and challenges are broadly similar across all the industries surveyed. However, there were a few standout findings regarding how different sectors performed.

While all companies reported using AI, where they're applying this technology varied across industries. Banking and finance organizations, insurers, and healthcare companies have developed their AI programs the most in their customer service functions, while retail and life sciences have focused their efforts around their back office operations.

Though agentic AI is still relatively nascent, it's having a growing impact in different ways depending on the sector (Figure 8). For instance, nearly three-quarters of respondents in healthcare said agentic is helping them, to a large extent, create new products or services. Similarly, 62% of those in life sciences companies indicated agentic is helping them substantially strengthen their stability in uncertain or changing markets (an outcome that was in the top five for five of the six sectors in our study). And, a majority of respondents in five of the six sectors (except life sciences) strongly agree that agentic has improved the customer experience. Indeed, agentic is making a difference, with more than half of respondents in at least one sector reporting the technology is helping them achieve 10 key business outcomes involving growth, efficiency, margin improvement, and resiliency.

Figure 8: Where agentic AI has achieved business priorities

	Banking & Finance	Insurance	Retail	Healthcare	Life Sciences
Strengthening stability in uncertain/changing markets	52%	53%	42%	52%	62%
Improving ways to target, attract new customers	49%	43%	46%	58%	44%
Creating new products/services	33%	47%	40%	72%	48%
Improving pricing accuracy (i.e., for loans, premiums, etc.)	40%	49%	48%	42%	52%
Ensuring/improving sustainability	53%	35%	42%	32%	56%
Redefining customer experience	46%	33%	44%	46%	46%
Increasing the speed of processing data/getting real-time data	46%	50%	36%	44%	47%
Increasing agility to adapt to market changes	41%	43%	44%	58%	38%
Expanding into new markets	43%	51%	32%	46%	40%
Improving operational/process efficiencies	52%	40%	34%	46%	40%
Strengthening customer retention	45%	49%	30%	48%	43%
Mitigating business and regulatory risk	42%	41%	38%	50%	40%
Reducing operating costs	46%	42%	44%	38%	34%
Improving existing products/services	38%	41%	44%	52%	40%
Increasing social responsibility	34%	47%	34%	38%	50%
Improving margins/profits	34%	35%	46%	32%	36%

Breaking down agentic deployment, we find the technology making its way into a variety of industry-specific use cases. These agentic hotspots include collections in banking and finance; risk management in insurance; supply chain and logistics optimization in retail; customer relationship management in utilities; claims processing and management in healthcare; and clinical trial design and optimization in life sciences.

AI’s achievement of business outcomes is translating into hard financial returns in the processes where it’s been implemented, although to differing degrees by sector. As shown in Figure 9, insurance companies have found AI and agentic AI have generated the biggest improvements in cost reduction, revenue growth, and margin expansion for the use cases it’s been applied, with an average improvement across these financial measures of 27% from AI and 29% from agentic AI. The smallest financial benefits have been seen by retailers, with average returns of 16%.6 and 17.6%, respectively.

Figure 9: Financial impact of AI and agentic AI

AI	Total	Banking & Finance	Insurance	Retail	Utilities	Healthcare	Life Sciences
Reduced costs by:	23%	22%	28%	17%	27%	21%	21%
Increased revenue by:	21%	22%	27%	17%	21%	20%	19%
Improved margins by:	21%	22%	26%	16%	21%	20%	18%

Agentic AI	Total	Banking & Finance	Insurance	Retail	Utilities	Healthcare	Life Sciences
Reduced costs by:	23%	24%	29%	19%	26%	22%	22%
Increased revenue by:	22%	23%	29%	18%	22%	20%	19%
Improved margins by:	21%	22%	29%	16%	21%	20%	19%





The C-suite agenda for 2026

For decision-makers leading companies' efforts to accelerate AI deployment across the enterprise, our survey highlights six imperatives that should command their attention now.

- 1. Measure what matters.** Measure workflow adoption and business outcomes—how pervasively AI is used across the enterprise and the new and different operational and financial impacts AI's generating.
- 2. Treat data like core infrastructure** such as ERP, cloud, and cybersecurity, not as a side initiative. The quality of and access to enterprise data will continue to define AI Leaders, both in terms of AI use and the value AI delivers. Accelerate efforts to address your company's shortcomings in data management while, at the same time, not being paralyzed by the pursuit of perfection.
- 3. Redesign your operating model.** AI transformation needs business reimagination. Unlocking the full power of AI, especially agentic AI, requires workflow redesign, role redesign, and different thinking around talent and change management.
- 4. Build enterprise AI governance.** With AI's rising power and potential impact, it shouldn't be left to functional teams to "figure it out." Scaling up AI, using it responsibly and effectively, and generating significant business results requires the tools, skills, and other resources needed to deploy, embed, and use AI at scale. It also demands executive sponsorship and accountability to ensure what's deployed is tightly aligned with the enterprise's strategy and mission.
- 5. Unlock value with context.** No AI model will provide impactful results out of the box. It takes understanding how an organization's workflows operate today, how they need to change to implement AI, the regulatory environment that organization operates in, and what will need adjustments in the future based on changes in the market. Context makes all these things possible – it's what bridges the gap between the potential of AI as a technology and the real-world impacts businesses need to deliver.
- 6. Accelerate with agentic AI.** Agentic AI is the next competitive frontier and is already fundamentally reshaping how enterprises are organized, work, and win. Companies that move first, like the Leaders in our survey, gain a structural advantage that will be difficult for slower movers to replicate.

One final imperative underlies all the others: honesty about where your AI maturity is. 76% of companies believe they are ahead of their competitors on AI, yet only 10% meet the criteria of Leaders status. That gap is a strategic liability. Organizations that overestimate their AI maturity invest too little, move too slowly and miss the window to close the gap on Leaders who are compounding their advantage every quarter. The six imperatives above are only actionable if they are built on an accurate baseline.

The next AI winners will transform first

AI in the enterprise is now a given. And what began as experimentation has become a test of execution. The companies pulling ahead are those that have transformed how they operate to make AI work at scale. They are fundamentally rethinking how work gets done, who does it and what decisions AI should own. They are redesigning workflows, strengthening their data foundations, and embedding AI into the operating core. This is where advantage is now created and where gaps between Leaders and the rest are compounding fast.

Agentic AI is accelerating this divide. Four in 10 companies have already moved agentic AI beyond the pilot stage; the Leaders among them are already seeing it deliver what earlier AI waves only promised. Where productivity gains were once the headline, the headline now is structural transformation. Agentic AI is reshaping how enterprises operate, and it is happening now—not in some future state.

Moving from AI experimentation to AI execution requires more than technology investment. AI is now an operating model decision. It demands the contextual knowledge of how work actually gets done in your industry, the data infrastructure to act on it and the organizational courage to redesign how your enterprise operates.

The data in this report tells a clear story: the gap between perception of AI maturity and AI performance is itself a risk—because companies that overestimate their standing make slower, smaller bets than the moment demands. The question is whether your organization has the honest self-assessment, the data foundation, and the operating model to scale AI. The Leaders in this report are not waiting to find out. Neither should you.





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