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AI’s ROI reality check: why big investments aren’t paying off (and how to fix It)

Executive Summary

A flurry of new research in recent days lays out a stark business reality: despite surging investment in AI, the vast majority of companies still aren’t seeing meaningful financial returns. Boards and CFOs are growing impatient for results, even as a small minority of firms begins to crack the code on turning AI hype into real value.

The ROI Gap Widens

In the past week, multiple fresh surveys have delivered a sobering message: enterprises are pouring money into AI with little to show for it. Global enterprise AI spending is projected to hit $665 billion in 2026, yet roughly three-quarters of AI initiatives aren’t meeting their return-on-investment goals (www.aigovernancetoday.com [1]). One new CEO survey found more than half of chief executives (56%) have seen no boost in revenues or cost savings from AI so far, and only 12% have achieved both (www.pwc.be [2]). These aren’t isolated findings - they echo similar studies by McKinsey and MIT that peg the “success rate” for AI pilots at well under 10% (thehill.com [3]) (www.consultclarity.org [4]).

This emerging "AI ROI gap" is causing leaders to question the business case of unchecked AI spending. For all the enthusiasm around generative AI and automation, most companies are still waiting for tangible business value. Notably, the Bain & Co. data released this week bluntly concluded that many firms made a “circular bet” on AI: in numerous cases, the technology performed as intended, but the anticipated value never materialised (www.bloomberg.com [5]). In other words, it’s not that AI systems aren’t working - it’s that they often aren’t translating into bottom-line impact.

The consistency of these findings across independent surveys is hard for executives to ignore. When 73% of deployments fail to deliver the expected ROI (www.aigovernancetoday.com [6]), it suggests a systemic issue rather than a run of bad luck. This ROI shortfall is prompting a growing sense of urgency in boardrooms. Leaders who championed big AI investments now face tough questions: What went wrong, and how can we course-correct to capture value from AI instead of just cost?

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Investor & board pressure: "show us results"

The honeymoon period for enterprise AI is ending, and accountability is the new mantra. Senior technology executives report that patience for unproven AI experiments is wearing thin. According to Kyndryl's late-2025 Readiness Report, 61% of senior business leaders feel greater pressure to prove AI's ROI than they did a year prior (www.cio.com [1]). In fact, a global CEO and investor survey (Vision 2026 by Teneo) found 53% of investors now expect to see positive returns from AI initiatives in six months or less (www.cio.com [2]) - an extraordinarily short timeframe for any transformative technology.

This high-pressure environment is putting careers on the line. Boston Consulting Group's new AI report notes that fully half of CEOs believe their job security depends on delivering AI results (www.bcg.com [3]). Many Western executives admit they're investing in AI primarily to avoid falling behind competitors, or to appease stakeholders' expectations (www.bcg.com [4]). Yet chasing hype to satisfy investors can be a dangerous game if those investments don't pay off quickly.

The financial guardians of the enterprise are taking a hard line. CFOs, who once green-lit AI projects in the spirit of innovation, are increasingly drawing clear boundaries. A recent Deloitte CFO survey revealed that 68% of CFOs refuse to approve new AI spending without solid proof of ROI, and 42% have already shut down pilots that couldn't quantify their value. This "no ROI, no budget" stance marks a new era: AI projects must clear the same financial hurdles as any other capital investment. For C-suites, the message from boards and financiers is unequivocal - it's time to transition from vague promises to verifiable performance, or face cuts.

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The high cost of AI: budget surprises and 'invisible' expenses

Another theme in this week's intelligence: the mounting cost of AI projects is catching companies off guard and squeezing profitability. Nearly 85% of organisations underestimated the cost of their AI initiatives by more than 10%, and almost one in four overshot their budgets by at least 50% (www.cio.com [1]). Much of this overspend comes from hidden expenditures in data preparation, integration, and cloud compute that weren't fully accounted for in initial business cases (www.cio.com [2]) (www.cio.com [3]). The result? Instead of saving money, over 80% of companies say AI expenses have actually dragged down gross margins, with more than a quarter reporting margin erosion of over 16% (www.cio.com [4]).

The economics of AI are turning out to be far more complex than many CFOs anticipated. Consider the ongoing operating costs: one analysis finds that running a single large-scale generative AI customer service programme - say, 100,000 chatbot interactions a day at ~2,000 tokens each - can rack up $2,000 to $6,000 *per day* in cloud processing fees (www.beri.net [5]). That translates to $0.7 - $2.2 million annually just to handle one use-case's inferencing costs. These eye-watering numbers often get lost in the excitement over AI's potential, until the cloud bill arrives.

Paradoxically, even as the price per AI transaction is falling, total spending is climbing. Major AI vendors have slashed usage prices by 40% - 70% in 2026, and the cost of generating one unit of AI output (like an LLM token) has plummeted by nearly 80% year-on-year (analyticsweek.com [6]). Yet any notion that AI would automatically lead to IT cost savings has been shattered - usage is scaling up so rapidly that it's overwhelming those unit-cost gains. Enterprises moving from small pilot deployments to full production are seeing the "compute burn" explode, with one study noting that 85% of the average enterprise AI budget now goes to inference - the cost of running AI models day-to-day - rather than one-time development (computeforecast.com [7]). For leaders, this is a wake-up call to get a handle on AI economics: without rigorous cost management, the pursuit of AI-driven efficiency can ironically end up eroding profits.

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Why so many AI projects underperform

If AI's technical capabilities have leapt ahead, why aren't the business results following? New research points to root causes that have little to do with model performance - and everything to do with organisational readiness. An analysis of 140 enterprise AI initiatives found that technical issues (like model accuracy or data quality) accounted for just 23% of project failures (www.aigovernancetoday.com [1]). The other 77% boiled down to human and process factors. The most common pitfall (occurring in 41% of underperforming projects) was "AI without a home" - systems built without a clear business owner to integrate and champion them (www.aigovernancetoday.com [2]). In these cases, data scientists delivered a working model, but the business had no plan or capability to adopt it into daily operations, so it languished on the shelf.

The second major failure pattern, cited in 34% of cases, was poor alignment with real business workflows (www.aigovernancetoday.com [3]). In other words, companies built AI solutions that technically worked, but were addressing the wrong problem. Without deep understanding of business processes, AI often optimises something that doesn't move the needle, or it requires changes in how employees work that weren't accounted for. A third common culprit was lack of trust and governance: AI systems that produced recommendations no one was willing or authorised to act on (www.aigovernancetoday.com [4]). If front-line staff or managers don't understand or trust an AI's output, they simply won't use it - negating any potential value.

These findings underscore a counterintuitive truth: the limiting factor on AI ROI usually isn't the technology itself, but the environment around it. As one expert put it this week, enterprise AI is "failing at the implementation layer, not the model level" (retail-insider.com [5]). Companies are adopting powerful AI tools without equally upgrading their human capital and processes to support them. A new global survey by Randstad Digital highlights this mismatch, revealing a pronounced skills gap: 74% of tech professionals say they need to upgrade their skills to keep up with AI advances, and

more than half are seeking training on their own because their employers aren't keeping up (retail-insider.com [6]). If organisations don't invest in "continuous capability infrastructure" - integrating ongoing employee upskilling into tech deployments - they risk a growing productivity paradox where AI investments outpace the workforce's ability to harness them (retail-insider.com [7]).

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What's working: turning hype into value

Despite the grim overall picture, a handful of companies are bucking the trend and demonstrating real, measurable AI-driven gains. These AI leaders provide a blueprint that challenged executives can learn from. First, they treat AI as a strategic business transformation, not a series of tech experiments. According to BCG's research, the top performers concentrate on an average of 3 or 4 carefully chosen AI use cases - compared to 6 or more scattered pilots at the typical company - and dedicate over 80% of their AI budgets to fundamentally reinventing key business processes, rather than just minor productivity tweaks (www.bcg.com [1]). In practice, this means they aggressively scale the few AI initiatives that show promise, and they redesign workflows and roles around those AI capabilities instead of merely layering new tools on old procedures.

Second, successful organisations invest heavily in talent and change management alongside technology. They recognise that AI is mostly about people and processes: experts estimate that around 70% of AI's impact comes from effective adoption, integration into workflows, and cultural alignment, whereas only 10% depends on the algorithms themselves (the remaining 20% is down to data and IT infrastructure) (www.consultclarity.org [2]). This 10-20-70 rule is evident in practice - companies in the ROI-positive 12% cohort are far more likely to have upskilled a significant portion of their workforce and to have clear executive ownership of AI projects. By treating employee expertise and buy-in as mission-critical infrastructure, these firms avoid the talent bottlenecks that plague their peers.

Third, leading companies measure what matters. They move beyond vanity metrics like number of users or lines of code and instead track 'auditable outcomes' directly tied to business results (www.forbes.com [3]). For instance, instead of merely reporting how many employees are using a new AI tool, they measure how much faster critical tasks get done or how error rates have dropped. Some are adopting new frameworks (like Anthropic's "economic primitives") to quantify the complexity and autonomy of tasks being handed to AI, ensuring that higher-value work is the focus (www.forbes.com [4]). This rigour in measurement creates accountability and clarity for both management and front-line teams - everyone knows whether an AI deployment is truly moving the needle.

Finally, these organisations keep a sharp eye on costs and efficiencies as they scale their AI solutions. They apply disciplined FinOps practices - using cost observability tools, setting clear usage dashboards and alerts, and choosing the right-sized models for the task to avoid overkill spending (www.cio.com [5]) (www.cio.com [6]). Importantly, they are not shy about pulling the plug on projects

that don’t show early signs of value. The experience of top performers suggests that by funding process redesign and integration (not just software licenses) (www.forbes.com [7]), and by insisting on real ROI evidence at each stage, even sceptical boards can be convinced that AI is worth the investment. As one CIO put it, “We don’t chase AI for AI’s sake - we target where it moves the needle, fund it from our P&L, and hold it to the same standards as any other business initiative” (www.cio.com [8]) (www.cio.com [9]).

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Key Statistics

- Global enterprise AI spending is projected to reach $665 billion in 2026, yet roughly 73% of AI deployments fail to achieve their expected return on investment ([www.aigovernancetoday.com](https://www.aigovernancetoday.com/news/enterprise-ai-spending-crisis-2026#:~:text=Global%20enterprise%20AI%20spending%20will,of)).
- More than half (56%) of CEOs worldwide report that their AI initiatives have delivered neither higher revenue nor lower costs, and only 12% have achieved both types of financial benefit ([www.pwc.be](https://www.pwc.be/en/news-publications/2026/ceo-survey-2026.html#:~:text=widespread%20experimentation%2C%20only%20one%20in,AI%20and%20those%20deploying%20it)).
- In an April 2026 Bain survey of 951 large-firm executives, 37% expected AI to cut costs by 10 - 20%, but 40% saw cost improvements of 10% or less, and just 4% realised savings above 30% ([www.bloomberg.com](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2026-06-01/bain-survey-ai-delivers-less-cost-reduction-than-many-firms-predicted#:~:text=investments%20in%20artificial%20intelligence%3A%20you%E2%80%99ll,%E2%80%94%20savings%20that%20haven%E2%80%99t%20yet)).
- About 85% of organisations underestimated the cost of AI projects by over 10%, and nearly one-quarter overspent their AI budgets by more than 50% ([www.cio.com](https://www.cio.com/article/4064319/ai-cost-overruns-are-adding-up-with-major-implications-for-cios.html#:~:text=achieve%20ROI%20for%20AI%20projects%2C,authority%20often%20rests%20with%20the)).

KEY TAKEAWAY

It’s time to reset your AI strategy. Insist on real metrics and ROI timelines for every AI project. Narrow your focus to high-impact use cases, invest in talent and process change, and control costs. In short, treat AI as a business transformation - not magic - with accountability at every step.

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