LUMO INSIGHTS

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AI investments face a harsh ROI reality

Executive Summary

Enterprises are pouring unprecedented funds into AI, but returns remain elusive for most. Over the past two days, new research and executive warnings have highlighted a widening gap between AI spending and business value - and the strategies that may finally bridge it.

The ROI reality check

The corporate AI spending boom shows no sign of slowing - yet the returns remain frustratingly elusive. A new Gartner report projects global AI spend will surge 47% this year to $2.59 /trillion, making it the fastest-growing tech investment category ever. But multiple fresh surveys reveal a harsh truth: despite this spending spree, an estimated 73% of AI deployments are failing to achieve their intended returns (www.aigovernancetoday.com [1]).

In an April survey of 951 global companies, Bain & Company found 37% of executives expected AI to cut costs by 10 - 20%, yet nearly 40% of those measuring outcomes saw improvements of just 0 - 10% (www.bain.com [2]). A mere 4% achieved cost savings above 30% (www.bloomberg.com [3]). Bain's blunt conclusion: "The technology worked. The value didn't arrive" (www.bain.com [4]).

This disconnect between technical success and business impact is glaring. For many companies, even getting AI out of the lab is a hurdle: an estimated 87% of AI pilots never reach production deployment (content-site-lovat.vercel.app [5]) - which means most initiatives never deliver any real business impact. Perhaps most counterintuitive, Bain reports 90% of those disappointed companies are actually increasing their AI budgets again for the next wave - essentially betting on future ROI despite lackluster results so far (www.bain.com [6]).

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CFOs and boards demand results

The patience of CFOs and boards for unproven AI experiments is evaporating. In the early rush to adopt generative AI, many projects were green-lit by technology leaders with minimal financial oversight - a pattern driven by competitive FOMO (fear of missing out). By mid-2026, however, finance chiefs have reasserted control, subjecting AI initiatives to the same hard-nosed cost-benefit tests as any other investment.

Recent data underscore this financial reality check. Forrester research found that enterprises are postponing 25% of planned 2026 AI spending until 2027 as CFOs demand clearer value propositions. Meanwhile, a Gartner survey revealed fewer than one-third of business decision-makers can identify specific financial benefits from their AI deployments. Simply put, many projects that got a free pass in the hype phase are now being re-evaluated, and “real but diffuse” efficiency gains (e.g. slightly faster task completion) aren’t enough to justify a new line item on the CFO’s report.

Investors are likewise growing impatient. In one global CEO and investor study, 53% of investors said they expect to see positive returns from AI initiatives within just six months (www.cio.com [1]) - a timeline most projects today struggle to meet. It’s no surprise, then, that 61% of senior business leaders feel more pressure to prove AI’s value now than they did a year ago (www.cio.com [2]). The message from above is clear: the era of blank-check AI spending is over, and every AI dollar now needs to show tangible business impact or risk being cut.

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The hidden cost of AI

Many organisations have underestimated the true cost of implementing AI at scale. Nearly half of the $2.6 /trillion projected to be spent on AI this year will go towards the pricey infrastructure - from cloud services to specialised AI chips - required to run these advanced models (www.ciodive.com [1]). GPU suppliers like NVIDIA are posting staggering revenue gains (one recent quarter hit $81 /billion) and high-end AI components are in short supply - all paid for by enterprises racing to keep up.

Another unforeseen cost driver is the prevalence of usage-based pricing for AI software. Unlike traditional licensed software with fixed costs, many AI platforms charge by the query or token. If employee usage explodes, so do the expenses. One company learned this the hard way: an unnamed enterprise without spending caps was stunned by a $500 /million AI cloud invoice for just 30 days of use (www.fastcompany.com [2]), after employees leveraged an expensive generative AI model for countless trivial queries (even checking the weather) with no limits. The eye-popping bill - unnoticed until it arrived - has become the industry’s cautionary tale.

This example underscores how easily costs can spiral without governance. Most enterprise AI vendors use consumption-based pricing, meaning costs scale directly with adoption. At high volumes, annual AI service fees can even exceed the entire upfront implementation cost of the system (content-site-lovat.vercel.app [3]). These economics are forcing hard questions about the “build vs. buy” of AI. Developing custom models in-house requires heavy investment in talent and infrastructure, but can pay off for large-scale users. On the other hand, using off-the-shelf AI without right-sizing can be equally expensive - one team that deployed an oversized open-source model for a simple task saw its compute costs run 10× higher than necessary (dev.to [4]). The bottom line: companies must get a handle on AI costs early by setting clear usage policies, choosing cost-effective models, and tracking ROI from day one.

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The AI hype hangover

After a year of feverish AI adoption, a correction is setting in. Some early enterprise adopters are now openly acknowledging that not all their AI projects have lived up to the hype. In a candid example, Uber's Chief Operating Officer revealed that the company burned through its entire 2026 AI budget by April without seeing the expected payoffs. He admitted that ramping up AI usage did not meaningfully improve customer outcomes, confessing "the link is not there" between increased AI use and better service (www.fastcompany.com [1]). Microsoft likewise pulled back on an expensive AI-powered coding tool after costs proved higher than the benefits delivered (www.fastcompany.com [2]).

Even technology giants known for championing AI are tapping the brakes internally. Amazon - after fostering a "use AI everywhere" culture - recently shut down an internal leaderboard that tracked employee AI usage, amid reports that it created "so much pressure to use these tools" for little real gain (www.fastcompany.com [3]). This week, an Amazon senior vice president explicitly instructed staff not to "use AI just for the sake of using AI," urging them to apply it only when it "help[s] you solve customer problems" (www.fastcompany.com [4]).

These public pullbacks signal a broader industry reality check. The underlying lesson: more AI is not automatically better - not unless it delivers concrete results. Companies that once raced to adopt AI tools are now scrutinising them under a value lens, shifting from indiscriminate experimentation to disciplined, purpose-driven use of AI.

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What top performers do differently

If most companies are struggling to see returns, what are the few "AI leaders" doing right? PwC's 2026 AI Performance study of 1,200+ executives found that about 20% of companies capture nearly 74% of all the financial benefits from AI initiatives (www.pwc.com [1]). Their secret isn't spending more on fancy algorithms, but rather approaching AI as a strategic business transformation rather than a technical experiment (www.aiworldmeter.com [2]).

These high performers focus on growth and reinvention, not just cost-cutting. According to PwC, leading firms are two to three times more likely to use AI to identify new revenue opportunities and reinvent their business models, instead of limiting AI to modest productivity improvements (www.pwc.com [3]). They are also twice as likely to redesign core workflows to integrate AI, rather than simply layering tools on existing processes (www.pwc.com [4]). In short, they re-engineer how work gets done so that AI is embedded where it truly moves the needle.

Crucially, successful AI adopters invest as much in organisational change as in technology. Bain's research indicates that data access and integration is the number-one barrier to AI success - and the companies with the best results are those that recognise this challenge even more than those that fell short (www.bain.com [5]). Top performers also dramatically increase automation of decisions (nearly

three times more decisions made without human intervention) while enforcing strong governance to keep AI initiatives on track (www.pwc.com [6]). By aligning AI projects tightly with strategic goals, building robust data foundations, and refusing to chase AI for its own sake, these leaders are finally translating AI into tangible business value.

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Key Statistics

- Global AI spending is projected to reach $2.59 /trillion in 2026 (47% year-over-year growth) ([www.ciodive.com](https://www.ciodive.com/news/global-AI-spend-2026/820656/#:~:text=spending%20on%20AI%20will%20rise,%E2%80%9CWithin%20this%20segment)).
- Only 4% of surveyed large firms achieved >30% cost savings from AI initiatives (Bain) ([www.bloomberg.com](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2026-06-01/bain-survey-ai-delivers-less-cost-reduction-than-many-firms-predicted#:~:text=but%20a%20larger%2040,found%20the%20most%20troubling%3A%2044)).
- 87% of AI pilots never reach production deployment ([content-site-lovat.vercel.app](https://content-site-lovat.vercel.app/articles/ai-roi-statistics-2026.html#:~:text=The%20Adoption%20Gap%3A%20Why%2087,of%20Pilots%20Fail)).
- Nearly 74% of AI’s economic value is captured by 20% of companies (PwC) ([www.pwc.com](https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2026/pwc-2026-ai-performance-study.html#:~:text=technology,The%20research%20shows%20that%20these)).

KEY TAKEAWAY

No more blank cheques for AI. Insist on clear business metrics and ROI milestones for every AI initiative. Treat AI as a strategic transformation tied to revenue or efficiency - and don’t hesitate to pause efforts that aren’t delivering.

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