LUMO INSIGHTS

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AI ROI gap: big spending, hard truths for Leaders

Executive Summary

New research and industry data highlight a widening disconnect between soaring enterprise AI investments and the actual business returns being achieved. Companies are pouring unprecedented funds into artificial intelligence - an estimated $2.59 trillion globally in 2026 - yet surveys indicate most firms still struggle to see meaningful financial gains from these projects (www.pwc.com [1]). This mounting "AI ROI gap" is spurring a wave of C-suite and investor scrutiny, forcing business leaders to rethink their strategies and focus on approaches that convert AI experiments into tangible results.

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Record spending, elusive ROI

Global enterprise spending on AI is reaching unprecedented heights. Gartner projects organisations worldwide will invest roughly $2.59 /trillion in AI in 2026 - a 47% jump from the previous year, making it the fastest-growing category of IT expenditure ever. Tech vendors are certainly seeing a windfall (Nvidia’s revenues have surged thanks to AI chip demand), but for the companies opening their wallets, the returns are proving far more elusive - leaving a growing "accountability gap" between money spent on AI and measurable value delivered.

Multiple new studies underscore the extent of this ROI shortfall. A recent Gartner survey of IT operations leaders found that only 28% of AI use cases in infrastructure and operations achieved their expected return on investment, while 20% failed completely (www.gartner.com [1]). Likewise, in PwC’s 2026 Global CEO Survey, 56% of chief executives admitted their AI initiatives have produced no significant cost savings or revenue improvements to date (www.pwc.com [2]). Perhaps most striking, MIT researchers reported a staggering 95% failure rate for enterprise generative AI projects - meaning almost all such pilots showed zero measurable ROI in their first six months of deployment (www.cio.com [3]). In short, despite fervent spending, the vast majority of organisations have yet to realise the rapid financial benefits promised by AI proponents.

In fact, the spoils of AI are concentrated in the hands of a few. Across various analyst reports, a consistent pattern emerges: a narrow "AI elite" - roughly 5% to 12% of companies - are capturing most of the gains from AI, while others struggle to move beyond experiments (1businessworld.com [4]). Many firms find themselves mired in what Gartner dubs the 'trough of disillusionment' as initial enthusiasm gives way to disappointment when returns don’t materialise. This disparity is prompting hard questions in boardrooms about what the leaders are doing differently - and whether the rest are at risk of overinvesting in AI without a clear business case.

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CFOs and boards demand ROI accountability

The torrent of spending without obvious payback has put AI in the financial hot seat. In one dramatic example that surfaced this week, an Axios investigation found a large enterprise was billed $500 /million for a single month of AI cloud usage after it failed to implement basic cost controls. This eye-popping incident has quickly become a cautionary tale in CFO circles - a stark reminder that unchecked AI experimentation can carry an equally massive price tag.

Facing such surprises, CFOs are now pumping the brakes on AI investments. The era of green-lighting AI projects on hype alone is ending. Forrester research reports that enterprises have postponed roughly 25% of their planned 2026 AI spending until 2027 amid greater budget scrutiny. Finance chiefs are increasingly insisting on clear ROI projections and cost controls before signing off on new AI deals. Notably, a recent Gartner survey revealed fewer than one-third of senior technology decision-makers could identify specific financial benefits resulting from their AI initiatives - a sobering statistic that is fuelling finance leaders' resolve to demand better justification.

Board directors and investors are likewise losing patience. According to one new poll, 61% of senior business leaders say the pressure to prove AI ROI has increased compared to last year (www.cio.com [1]). Many investors are no longer willing to wait for long-term promises either - 53% expect to see tangible returns from AI projects in six months or less (www.cio.com [2]). This accelerated timeframe for results is putting CEOs and CIOs on notice. In fact, 60% of executives in one recent survey even predicted that their boards are likely to intervene due to a "botched" AI strategy that isn't delivering value fast enough (writer.com [3]). The message from the top is clear: AI initiatives must show real, near-term business impact, or funding will be scaled back.

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Why many AI initiatives underperform

If AI technology is so powerful, why are returns so often underwhelming? Analysts point out that the problem usually isn't the algorithms - it's the execution. A key culprit is unrealistic expectations. Too often, organisations assume AI will instantly automate complex tasks, slash costs, or fix long-standing problems, only to be disappointed (www.gartner.com [1]). When those dramatic results don't appear overnight, confidence plummets and projects may be prematurely deemed failures.

Another common pitfall is the lack of clearly defined success metrics. Companies frequently kick off AI projects without concrete Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) tied to business outcomes. Teams might build capable models, but if no one agrees on what "success" looks like - say, reducing customer churn by 15% or cutting supply chain error rates - then even a technically impressive system can be

judged as having "no ROI" (www.practicallogix.com [2]). Vague goals and fuzzy metrics all but guarantee confusion about whether an AI initiative is working, often leading to frustration and loss of support from stakeholders.

Moreover, many enterprises discover belatedly that they were unprepared for the less glamorous essentials of AI deployment. Data issues are a prime example: a significant share of projects stumble when teams realise their data is incomplete, low-quality, or siloed across the organisation (www.practicallogix.com [3]). Integrating an AI into business processes often demands extensive data cleaning, infrastructure upgrades, and training for staff - investments in time and money that are frequently underestimated (www.practicallogix.com [4]). Indeed, in Gartner's study of IT operations teams, 38% of leaders who hit roadblocks cited persistent skill gaps, and an equal 38% blamed poor data quality as a direct cause of AI project failures (www.gartner.com [5]). Skimping on such preparations virtually guarantees that an AI pilot, no matter how advanced the algorithms, will fail to scale or deliver reliable results.

Short-term thinking can compound these issues. Under pressure to show quick wins, some organisations impose impractically short timelines - expecting meaningful ROI in a few weeks rather than the months or longer truly needed to build, refine, and integrate AI solutions (www.practicallogix.com [6]). This impatience has led to a proliferation of "pilot projects" that never graduate to full production use. In fact, most corporate AI pilots never progress beyond the proof-of-concept stage to become deployed, value-producing solutions (blueflame.ai [7]). The result is a vicious cycle: companies trumpet many AI experiments, but with no plan to operationalise them, they see little impact - feeding scepticism about AI's business value.

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Closing the ROI gap: what works

Amid the widespread struggles, a small group of companies is bucking the trend and proving that AI can deliver real returns. Their key differentiator isn't simply more advanced technology or bigger budgets - it's their approach. These organisations treat AI as a strategic business transformation, not a standalone tech initiative (1businessworld.com [1]). That means strong executive ownership and governance from the top, and a willingness to rethink processes and roles to fully leverage AI's capabilities. In these firms - the ~5 - 12% of enterprises pulling ahead - AI is tightly aligned with the company's broader strategy and has C-suite support to drive changes across the organisation (1businessworld.com [2]).

Successful AI adopters also choose their battles wisely. Rather than chasing hundreds of experiments, they focus on a few high-value use cases where AI can clearly move the needle. By zeroing in on well-defined, strategic problems (often specific to their industry or function) and setting

concrete success criteria, they dramatically improve the odds of payoff. Research shows that roughly two-thirds of vertical-specific AI pilots succeed when targeted at a defined business problem, far outperforming generic “AI for everything” experiments (blueflame.ai [3]). This disciplined focus prevents wasteful "pilot sprawl" and ensures that resources go to projects with a viable path to ROI.

Top performers also invest heavily in the less flashy work of integration and change management. They redesign workflows and upskill employees so that AI solutions are actually adopted and scaled, instead of remaining side experiments. In fact, industry analyses find that high-impact organisations allocate the majority of their AI budgets to reengineering processes and training, rather than just buying technology tools. They also enforce rigorous measurement practices - establishing baseline performance metrics before deploying AI and tracking improvements in operational and financial terms. As one benchmarking report bluntly put it, without a solid baseline, there is 'no trustworthy ROI claim'. By quantifying results (in dollars saved, revenue generated, or productivity gained), leaders can demonstrate value to stakeholders and course-correct quickly if the numbers disappoint.

Finally, “do we build or buy?” has become a pivotal question for realising AI value. A growing number of enterprises are concluding that partnering with external AI experts or using proven platforms beats trying to develop everything in-house. The MIT study revealed that externally partnered AI projects reach successful deployment about twice as often (approximately 67% success) as those built solely with internal teams (around 33%) (www.forbes.com [4]). This doesn’t mean abandoning internal innovation, but it underscores the benefit of tapping specialised expertise and ready-made solutions to accelerate time-to-value. In addition, savvy leaders are optimising their use of AI models to control costs - for example, ensuring that expensive “frontier” models are reserved for complex tasks and not overused for simple ones. A CNBC analysis noted that about 95% of enterprise AI workloads still run on the priciest large models, even when cheaper, less powerful alternatives would do (www.cnbc.com [5]). By matching the tool’s capability to the problem and keeping an eye on consumption-based cloud costs, companies can prevent AI’s expenses from eroding its profits. In sum, the playbook for AI ROI is becoming clearer: focus on strategic use cases, get fundamentals right (data, process, people), measure value meticulously, and be open to external help and smarter resource allocation. These are the moves turning a buzzword into bottom-line results.

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Key Statistics

- Only 28% of AI use cases in IT infrastructure and operations fully meet ROI expectations, while 20% fail outright ([www.gartner.com](https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2026-04-07-gartner-says-artificial-intelligence-projects-in-infrastructure-and-operations-stall-ahead-of-meaningful-roi-returns#:~:text=Melanie%20Freeze%20Director%20Research%2C%20Gartner,I%26O%20leaders%20should%20connect%20AI)).
- 56% of CEOs report no significant cost or revenue benefits from their companies’ AI investments in the past 12 months ([www.pwc.com](https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2026/pwc-2026-global-ceo-survey.html#:~:text=ahead%20of%20worries%20about%20inno

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- MIT found 95% of enterprise generative AI projects failed to show any measurable ROI within six months of deployment ([www.cio.com](https://www.cio.com/article/4114010/2026-the-year-ai-roi-gets-real.html#:~:text=Shutterstock%20AI%20initiatives%20by%20and,now%20versus%20a%20year%20ago)).

KEY TAKEAWAY

Stop assuming AI will magically deliver returns. Reassess every project for real business value. Insist on clear ROI metrics and accountability from day one, prioritise a few high-impact use cases, invest in data and process readiness, and don’t hesitate to pause efforts that aren’t paying off.

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