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Your 2025 AI roadmap: Mastering adoption, budget trends and barriers across industries

Artificial intelligence (AI) adoption is moving forward rapidly. However, from the perspective of technology leaders, where do the priorities really lie?

To provide clarity, Windstream Enterprise surveyed over 300 technology leaders across diverse sectors, including retail, healthcare, manufacturing, finance, restaurants and hospitality. In this report, we present the key findings to support decision-makers as they identify the most relevant AI opportunities for their business.

Executive takeaways

Here's what you'll learn from this survey report:

1 Confidence and competition in the race to AI adoption.

2 AI budget trends and critical motivators for investment.

3 The top three barriers to successful AI adoption.

4 How training and integration can give you a competitive edge in AI.

Decisively focused on AI

The majority (87%) of our respondents represent technology executives or senior leadership roles—those most in tune with the opportunities and challenges surrounding AI.

Collectively, the sentiment is clear: AI is essential for future innovation and competitiveness, not just a passing trend. 89% of respondents strongly agree or agree that AI will be critical to the success of their business objectives in the next 1-3 years.

The results reveal that leaders across industries aren't just interested in AI; they are laser-focused on its application. Rather than facing trepidation, they feel excited and optimistic about its potential.

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Optimism or caution?
Sentiments vary across industries

When asked, "Which of the options best describes the feelings towards AI in your company?" most respondents noted they were either excited about the potential (84%) or optimistic about future developments (70%).

However, optimism levels vary across industries—with Education (84%) and Manufacturing (80%) respondents being the most optimistic. In Education, this optimism may stem from AI's potential to enhance personalized learning and streamline administrative processes. The industry sees AI as a powerful tool for driving innovation and improving operational efficiency. Manufacturing's optimism is likely grounded in its long-standing experience with AI, particularly in predictive analytics and automation, where AI has proven to boost precision and efficiency over time.

Meanwhile, Retail (68%) and Healthcare (60%) were the least optimistic. Healthcare's lower optimism may be linked to concerns about regulatory compliance, data privacy and the need for human oversight in patient care. Ethical considerations weigh heavily in this sector, with 37% of respondents citing it as their top concern and 29% expressing nervousness about AI implementation challenges.

Retail faces its own hurdles, especially in scaling AI across complex supply chains and dealing with unpredictable consumer behavior. Ethical concerns were also significant, with 28% of Retail respondents highlighting these as crucial issues.

Finance (70%) and Restaurant/Hospitality (74%) sit somewhere in the middle in terms of optimism. While AI presents clear benefits in automating tasks and enhancing customer experiences, concerns about data security, job displacement and integration challenges seem to moderate enthusiasm. Interestingly, Finance respondents, despite their optimism, were the most likely to view AI as overhyped, with 20% expressing this sentiment.

Overall, respondents describe their feelings about AI in their company as:

Excited about the potential

83%

Optimistic about future developments

73%

Concerned about ethical implications

28%

Nervous about implementation

17%

Believe AI is overhyped

11%

Industry optimism from high to low

Education	Manufacturing	Restaurant/Hospitality	Finance	Retail	Healthcare
84%	80%	74%	70%	68%	60%

Confidence backed by healthy budgets

Tech leaders are nearly unanimous in making AI a top priority for the year ahead—and they're backing up this belief with healthy investments. Almost all companies expect to increase their spending on AI initiatives, with 95% of respondents anticipating budget growth.

Confidence in their AI progress is also high. A striking 77% of respondents believe they are ahead of the competition, either significantly or slightly. This confidence may result from underestimating their competitors' capabilities—only 5% think they're behind.

However, there's no universal playbook for AI adoption. Each company is navigating its own path, with no clear consensus on the "right" approach to success. In many ways, the AI landscape is still being defined, and the best practices have yet to emerge. Nevertheless, the pressure to stay competitive is undeniable. No one wants to fall behind in the race to adopt AI successfully.

This raises an important question: How can companies truly know where they stand? The answer may lie in improved analytics to better measure AI's impact and ROI. The ability to collect data and route it back into the proper systems to deliver insights will be an important factor in enabling and measuring success.

Which best describes your company's primary motivations to explore or adopt AI?

Improving operational efficiency

78%

Staying competitive in the market

47%
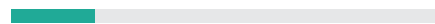
Enhancing customer experiences

54%

Reducing costs

41%

Driving innovation and new products

52%

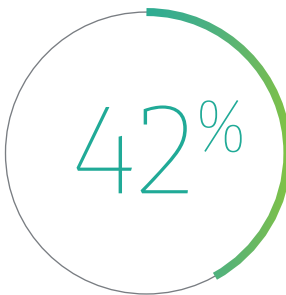Responding to regulatory requirements

11%

What would be most helpful for your company's AI adoption?

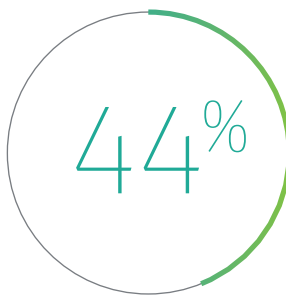*"Access to AI consultants and experts who can guide the implementation process."*

Survey response

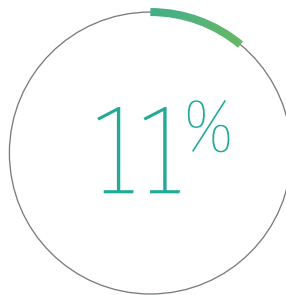**Considering the year ahead, AI initiatives within my organization are:**

The highest importance

42%

Extremely or very important

44%

Moderately important

11%

Only 3% of respondents said that AI is "less important" than other initiatives in their company.

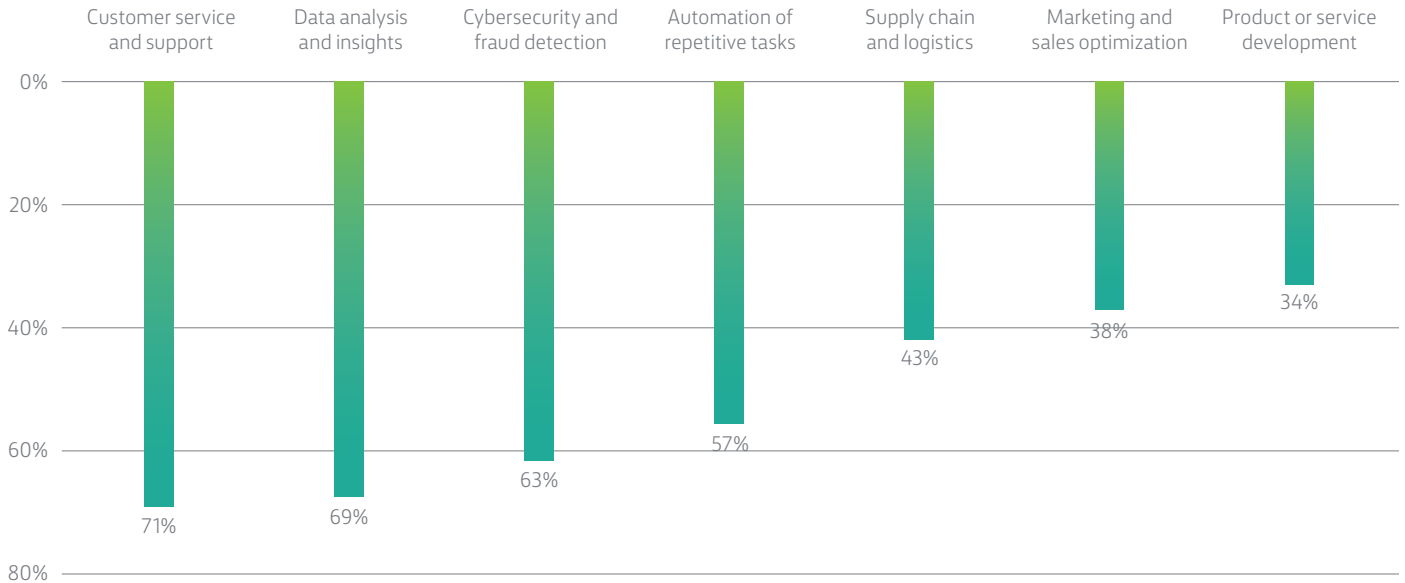# AI in action: Current applications and future potential

Across industries, AI is widely used in areas like customer service, data analysis and cybersecurity. However, its impact on marketing, sales optimization and core product development has been more limited.

Predictive analytics could help companies unlock potential in these areas (ranked second overall among AI technologies with the most potential). Companies could see benefits in optimizing marketing, improving sales strategies and enhancing product development through data-driven insights and forecasts.
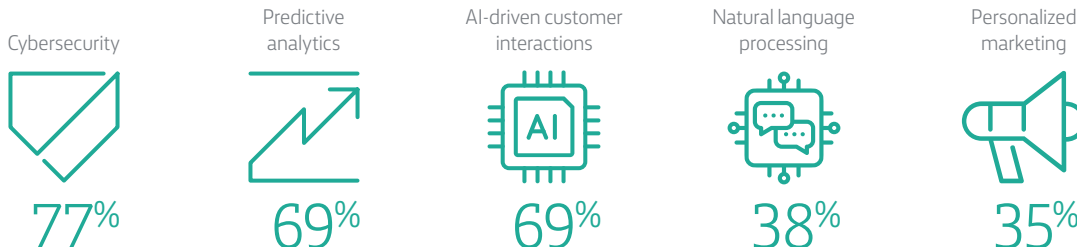
Manufacturers appear to be leading the way in applying AI in cybersecurity and product or service development. For example, 52% of manufacturers use AI for product or service development, compared to 37% overall. Furthermore, 88% of manufacturers apply AI in cybersecurity, well above the 63% overall rate.

Notably, only 3% of respondents reported not considering or using AI in their operations—a clear indication of AI's growing significance.

In what capacity is your company currently using AI?

Customer service and support	Data analysis and insights	Cybersecurity and fraud detection	Automation of repetitive tasks	Supply chain and logistics	Marketing and sales optimization	Product or service development
71%	69%	63%	57%	43%	38%	34%

Which AI technologies do you feel hold the most opportunity?

Cybersecurity	Predictive analytics	AI-driven customer interactions	Natural language processing	Personalized marketing
77%	69%	69%	38%	35%

Key takeaway #1:
Adoption barriers include integration and security concerns

It's clear that tech leaders see AI as the way forward—some respondents even went so far as to say "No barriers" when asked what might stand in the way. However, for most, there are three primary concerns to address:

+ Integration with existing or legacy systems (48%)

+ Concerns over security and privacy (45%)

+ High cost of implementation (42%)

We observed some variation across industries regarding barriers to AI adoption. In sectors like Education (28%) and Finance (24%), a lack of executive leadership support was reported more frequently than in other industries. This could be linked to heightened concerns around security and privacy, as the complexity of data protection often fuels hesitancy in fully supporting AI initiatives.

Education also stood out, with 40% of respondents citing a lack of skills or training as a significant challenge. In addition, respondents from the Restaurant/Hospitality sector (36%) highlighted the challenge of managing too many applications, adding to the complexity of adopting AI technologies.

What would be most helpful for your company's AI adoption?

"One consultant/vendor who is familiar enough with our vertical to lead our efforts. We need someone to provide best practices."

Survey response

Top barrier by industry keeping your company from AI implementation

Concerns over security and privacy

Education
62%

Concerns over security and privacy *and* ethical and regulatory concerns

Finance
52%

Integration with existing and legacy systems

Restaurant/ Hospitality
54%

Healthcare
47%

Retail
46%

Manufacturing
44%

Key takeaway #2:
## Aligning AI with business objectives is a critical first step

As noted in the graph below, the majority of companies feel ready to advance the adoption of AI technology.

However, when evaluating AI use cases and technologies, leaders also want to be sure that their investments align with and enable their business goals and objectives.

Interestingly, immediate ROI is less of a concern, with only 12% of respondents citing it as a barrier to adoption. Instead, companies are primarily motivated by a desire to improve efficiency (78%), enhance the customer experience (54%), and drive innovation and new product development (52%). This makes AI tools that integrate easily with existing technology appealing to decision-makers.

How would you rate your company's readiness to adopt AI on a scale of 1 to 10?
(1 = not at all ready, 10 = extremely ready, 301 responses)

Rating	Percentage
1	1%
2	1%
3	1%
4	1%
5	2%
6	5%
7	11%
8	22%
9	29%
10	27%
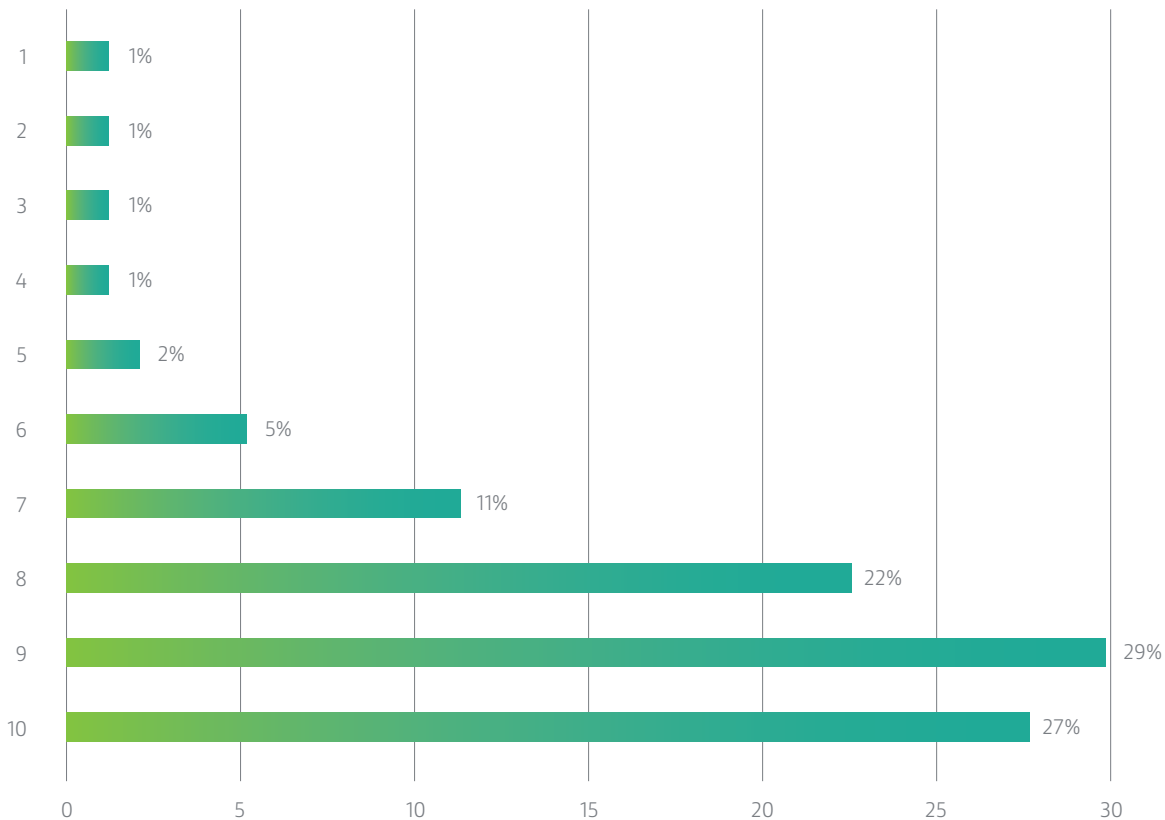
TOP THREE FACTORS IN EVALUATING AI USE CASES OR TECHNOLOGY

1. Enablement of business growth and objectives and goals (47%)
2. Ease of integration with current tech stack (46%)
3. Ease of implementation (42%)

Key takeaway #3:
Training provides a competitive edge

Tech leaders are committed to overcoming barriers to AI adoption, but they need support. Training has emerged as a critical factor for AI success in this environment. The good news? Many companies are ahead of the curve.

For example, 50% of respondents reported offering comprehensive employee training programs, rising to 70% in the Manufacturing sector. Additionally, 38% of companies provide limited training programs for selected teams.

However, there is still room for improvement. When asked what would help their company overcome barriers to AI adoption, 62% of respondents pointed to the need for better training. This data highlights a significant opportunity for AI solution providers to differentiate their offerings and better serve businesses along their AI journeys. Companies seek AI platforms that deliver potent capabilities and offer clear, easy-to-implement pathways for onboarding and integration into their current infrastructure.

Given that many organizations are still in the early stages of AI adoption, they are looking for comprehensive training programs, ongoing resources and hands-on support to help them unlock the full potential of their AI investments—along with AI tools that fit seamlessly into existing technology stacks to minimize disruption to operations.

Most in need of training:

Education

72%

vs 62% overall

Most in need of skilled personnel:

Manufacturing

54%

vs 38% overall

What would be most helpful for your company's AI adoption?

"Providing training and education that makes easy-to-understand resources (like workshops and clear documentation) can equip employees to use and understand AI effectively."

Survey response

Conclusion

Tech leaders are optimistic about AI, viewing it as crucial to future innovation and competitiveness. In an era where customers demand seamless interactions across digital engagement channels, the ability to deliver effortless and meaningful service is more important than ever—and AI will play an increasingly critical role in making that possible.

While confidence is high, there's still a clear need for better support, training and technological advancements, particularly around integration and data security, to streamline AI adoption. Addressing these barriers will be essential as AI becomes more integrated into business operations, especially in customer-facing functions. Strategic support, reliable connectivity and ongoing technology advancements will be key priorities for organizations looking to harness the full potential of AI in the future.

Windstream Enterprise enables your AI journey

Businesses can partner with a trusted provider to stay competitive and ensure successful AI adoption. Windstream Enterprise delivers secure, scalable network solutions that support AI-driven innovations and ensure effective delivery.

Businesses will require a highly reliable network infrastructure to maximize AI's benefits. Windstream Enterprise SD-WAN provides secure, dependable connectivity to collect and disseminate AI data efficiently. By leveraging Windstream Enterprise Cloud Connect service, businesses can ensure seamless integration with cloud computing resources like Amazon Web Services (AWS) and Microsoft Azure. This enables a three-step process: collecting data, routing it to cloud service providers for processing, and delivering insights to users.

Our managed connectivity, communications and security solutions are innovative.

Your business outcomes are imperative.

Windstream Enterprise drives business transformation through the convergence of our proprietary software solutions and cloud-optimized network to unlock our clients' revenue and profitability potential. Our end-to-end IT managed services modernize technology infrastructure, optimize operations, eliminate resource constraints and elevate the experience of our clients and their end users, while securing their critical data and brand reputation. Analysts recognize Windstream Enterprise as a market leader for our product innovation, and clients rely on our best-in-class management portal. Businesses trust Windstream Enterprise as their single-source for a high-performance network and award-winning suite of connectivity, collaboration and security solutions—delivered by a team of technology experts whose success is directly tied to our clients' complete satisfaction.

For more information on how Windstream Enterprise can support your technology needs, visit windstreamenterprise.com

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