When AI Readiness Meets ROI Reckoning

Findings from Yearlong Research on AI Adoption, ROI and Optimization Issues

AI PULSE SURVEY — LESSONS LEARNED

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Global Business Consulting

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Executive summary

Organizations are feeling more pressure to show artificial intelligence (AI) investment returns. Protiviti's analysis of three AI Pulse surveys[1] conducted throughout 2025 shows that organizations that scale AI quickly from pilots and small-scale internal efforts to fully optimized AI systems that drive business transformation see triple the likelihood of expectations on return on investment (ROI).

AI pilot projects offer incremental insights, but they typically are not delivering enterprise-level efficiencies. Without integration into core workflows, organizations miss out on compounding benefits from automation and data feedback loops, cross-functional impact that drives measurable ROI, and strategic transformation that shifts AI from a cost center to a growth engine, our research shows.

Rethinking ROI

AI often doesn't just replace tasks; it reshapes workflows and empowers intelligent decision-making. In many cases, using traditional ROI metrics and key performance indicators (KPIs), such as cost savings, could miss the bigger picture. Measuring AI ROI may require redefining what "return" really means, including considering both tangible and intangible benefits—for instance, linking new AI-transformed work models to business outcomes like growth, resilience and agility, or even employee or user satisfaction — metrics that are hard to measure in dollars and cents.

KPIs may need to be broadened to include dimensions like productivity increases, revenue growth, customer satisfaction and time-to-market, and acceleration of new products or markets, as well as cost-related metrics. Speed of innovation relative to peers and competitors are also potential performance indicators.

Overall, business leaders will need help mapping AI-driven changes, such as the orchestration of tier 1 operations and automated security triage, to revenue or risk metrics. Support will also be necessary to analyze AI's impact on process duration and its contribution to better decision quality. The ultimate goal is to ensure that AI not only automates or enhances existing processes but also modernizes them to be both more efficient and customer-focused.

[1] Protiviti published three AI Pulse surveys in 2025: From Exploration to Transformation: What AI Success Looks Like; From Data Confusion to AI Confidence: Data Is the Foundation of Trustworthy AI; and From Automation to Autonomy: The Capabilities and Complexities of AI Agents

Figure 1: Key trends across five stages of maturity

	Stage 1 (Initial)	Stage 2 (Experimentation)	Stage 3 (Defined)	Stage 4 (Optimization)	Stage 5 (Transformation)
Defining features	Enterprise recognize AI potential but lacks strategic initiatives; KPIs undefined.	Small-scale pilots implemented to assess feasibility.	AI integrated into business processes for operational efficiency.	AI systems optimized for scalability and continuous improvement.	AI drives significant business transformation and industry reshaping.
Investment performance expectations	Mostly below expectations or met expectations.	Mostly met expectations, some slightly exceeded.	Met expectations or slightly exceeded expectations.	Slightly exceeded or significantly exceeded expectations.	Often significantly exceeded expectations.
Common challenges	Lack of understanding of impactful use cases, unclear regulatory guidance, resource gaps.	Integration issues, lack of skilled resources, compliance/security restrictions.	Data availability, unclear use cases.	Integration with existing systems, skilled-resource gaps.	Data availability and access, integration complexity.
Support needed	Training and upskilling, strategic planning assistance, technology infrastructure.	Training/upskilling, data management tools.	Strategic planning assistance, technology infrastructure.	Technology infrastructure, advanced governance frameworks.	Strategic planning, technology infrastructure, advanced AI talent.

Optimization challenges

ROI aside, leaders will need to intensify their focus on key AI optimization challenges across all levels of maturity. Challenges with integrating AI into legacy systems, finding skilled talent and data governance are among the most persistent, according to our surveys. (See common challenges in **Figure 1**.)

Ensuring data confidence (quality, accessibility, governance and literacy), which is the foundation of trustworthy AI, is essential for organizations looking to mature to autonomous AI agents and multi-agent systems. The survey results underscore this point: For example, organizations with clear guidelines on what data can be shared with public large language models (LLMs) are far more likely to report exceeding ROI expectations (40%). In contrast, 36% of organizations lacking clear guidelines report an ROI below expectations. Also, among organizations where AI ROI significantly exceeded expectations, nearly all (97%) report confidence in their data capabilities.

Along with robust data security and governance, there's a need for organizations across maturity levels to balance AI automation with responsible and secure AI use. This becomes especially complex for organizations that operate in multiple jurisdictions and are subject to different regulations.

Regulatory ambiguity offers businesses an opportunity to focus on resilience instead of just capability. For instance, to govern AI agents effectively, organizations may need to set up dedicated teams focused on managing complexity and aligning AI initiatives with overarching business objectives.

To sum up, 2026 is the year AI readiness meets ROI reckoning, when AI will need to be treated as a strategic capability, not a perpetual pilot.

Success will require focusing on security and data governance not just as another compliance effort but as an enabler of trust and scale.

Below, we explore the main findings from our yearlong research on AI trends and demonstrate how organizations can use these insights to evaluate their position in the AI landscape, identify their challenges and find ways to improve their ROI.

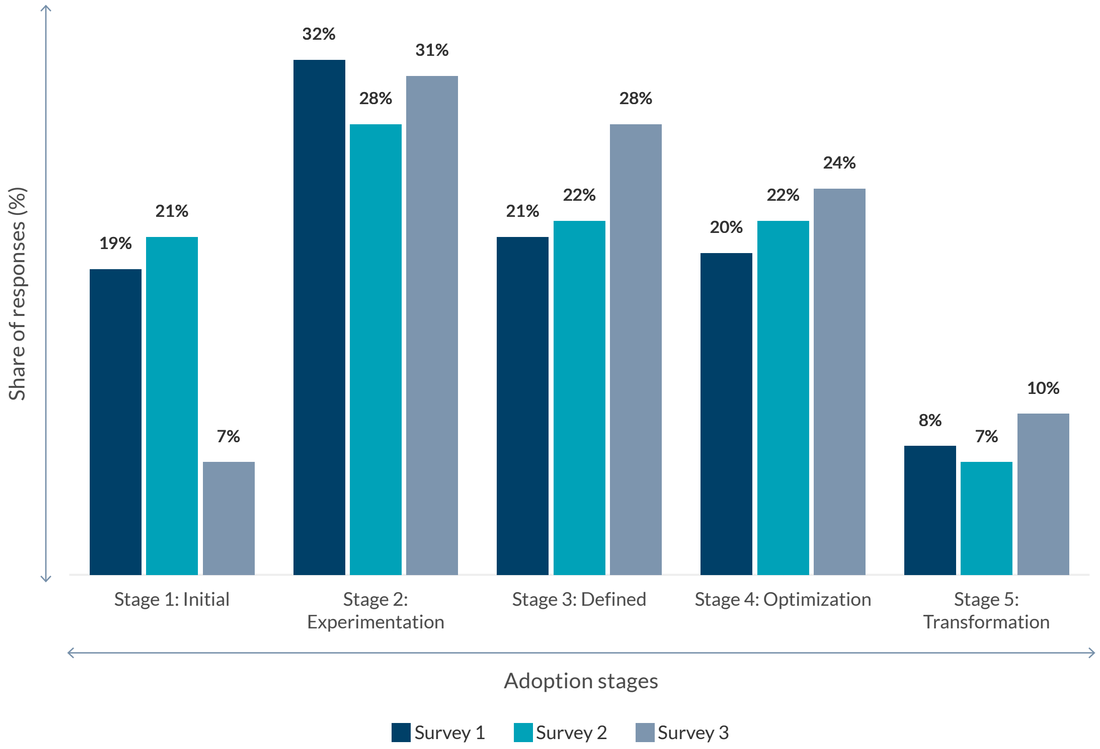
Preventing pilot perpetuity from becoming a drag on returns

Of the several thousand business leaders across the major industries we polled, a large majority stated their organizations are predominantly at Stage 2 (Experimentation) maturity level. See **Figure 2** Experimentation is valuable in this initial phase of understanding AI's capabilities, as it helps organizations comprehend the potential shifts in their business processes. Yet, this is a stage where companies frequently struggle to achieve the best return on their investments.

The survey results also show noticeable differences in performance expectations and support needed between organizations in the experimental phase versus those that have progressed to Stages 4 (Optimization) and 5 (Transformation) where scaling AI efforts is an enterprise priority. Here are other key takeaways:

- Scale beats experimentation for ROI. Getting to Stage 4–5 is strongly associated with exceeded expectations.
- When organizations remain in Stage 2, they are five times more likely to report that their returns are "below expectations" in contrast to scaled organizations, and their likelihood of reporting returns that have "exceeded expectations" is approximately one-third.
- Industries with heavier process automation and data rigor (e.g., technology, telecom, and financial services) show the highest shares in advanced stages, consistent with more mature AI operating models and platform leverage.

Figure 2: Where organizations stand on our five-point AI maturity continuum.



Managing mounting pressure to become AI ROI-positive

Organizations advancing in their maturity are more likely to report ROI above expectations. (See **Figure 3**) This suggests that quicker operationalization is the most effective way to address the pressure to become AI ROI-positive.

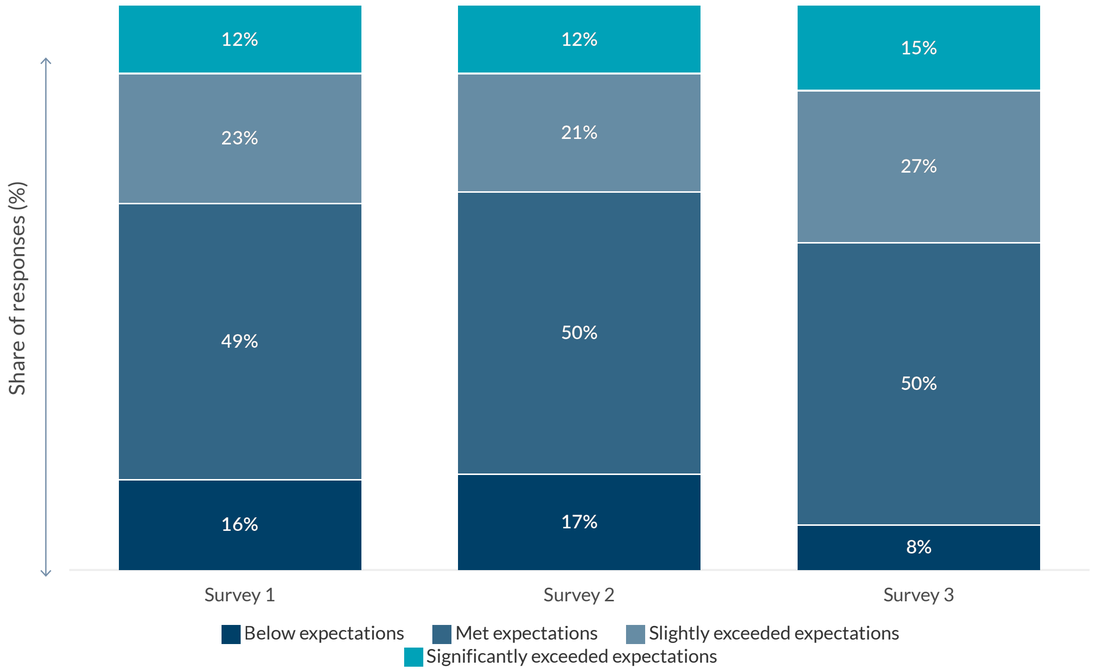
Some organizations, however, may need to initially redefine return and AI success measurement. According to our research, firms achieving positive ROI do not merely focus on cost cutting; they also integrate AI into broader areas such as growth, customer experience and workforce augmentation.

Here are some additional things we learned about ROI expectations:

- Organizations that exceeded investment return expectations overwhelmingly prioritize employee productivity and revenue growth alongside cost savings and customer satisfaction as key success indicators. By contrast, firms reporting ROI below expectations lean heavily on process efficiency and cost savings — traditional automation metrics.

- ROI-positive firms invest in upskilling and talent-cadre development, role redesign and operating model evolution (e.g., AI product management, risk and compliance “in the loop”).

Figure 3: ROI satisfaction trends by survey (share of responses)



Regarding data challenges, start with what you have — don't let the pursuit of perfect data delay your AI journey. Progress means moving forward wisely and confidently, not waiting.

Overcoming challenges to AI optimization

What slows AI optimization? Our research shows that the major hurdles are systems integration and data connectivity issues; lack of clarity of use-cases and value articulation; inadequate talent and skill enablement; security and compliance guardrails; and technology and platform limitations.

However, it's important to note that AI optimization is not linear—each stage of maturity introduces a new class of operational, governance and architectural challenges requiring tailored interventions. Here are further observations on the difficulties organizations across different maturity levels face with AI implementation:

- **Integration challenges:** Not only is it the most dominant bottleneck for scaling from experimentation to optimization; mature organizations feel it most acutely.
- **Data readiness:** Data challenges don't diminish with maturity—they compound. Advanced AI amplifies underlying data problems.
- **Use-case clarity:** This challenge decreases through mid-maturity as organizations gain experience, then resurfaces at Stage 5 (Transformation) as they pivot to transformational AI opportunities.
- **Security and compliance pressures:** As AI becomes embedded in operations, regulatory and compliance requirements grow—not only as risk controls but as integral design constraints.
- **Skills and capability gaps:** Skills gaps remain pervasive at all levels of maturity, but manifest even more for organizations pursuing custom or internally developed agentic AI solutions.

Preparing for continuing agentic AI complexity

Last year, we observed a significant shift in the AI landscape, from the use of single AI agent assistants to orchestrated multiagent teams that manage end-to-end processes, enhancing efficiency and oftentimes improving legacy processes. We expect the rapid advancements in the complexity of agentic AI to continue.

From a timeline perspective, most mature organizations we surveyed indicated that they have already integrated agentic AI or expect to do so within six months; earlier stage organizations, on the other hand, typically target agentic implementation within 12 to 36 months. What else did we learn? Here are some additional insights:

- Agentic AI is moving from POCs to platform strategy. The strongest performers leverage enterprise ecosystems and build modular, reusable agent frameworks to orchestrate multistep work reliably.
- Personnel will also shift to be AI agent managers and to help orchestrate the benefits as organizations continue to prefer human in the loop solutions.

The role of the AI agent governance board (AGB)

To manage the rising complexity of AI agents, leading organizations are establishing AI agent governance boards (AGB). Embedded across enterprise strategy, portfolio value streams, and delivery teams, the AGB ensures:

- Transparency: All agents are registered, cataloged, and understood.
- Collaboration: Architecture, security, UX, compliance and product teams can align on agent purpose and design.
- Dependency management: Agent interconnections are mapped to avoid redundancy and fragile integrations.
- Performance visibility: Leaders track which agents are delivering value — and which should be optimized or retired.
- Prioritization: Agents are vetted like any initiative, not just created ad hoc because they seemed useful.

Just as agile release trains have changed how organizations manage their teams, expect AGBs to revolutionize how large-scale, multiagent ecosystems or functions are coordinated.

Why regulatory clarity and trust engineering matter

Beyond the complexities of integration and the absence of well-defined use cases, the lack of regulatory clarity poses a substantial obstacle to optimizing AI. For businesses seeking to accelerate their AI growth, this point is especially critical. There's a fear among some organizations that they'll be outpaced by competitors operating in jurisdictions with more forward-thinking AI regulations, which would allow those competitors to be more innovative while also bolstering their compliance strategies.

President Trump's executive order from December 2025, which aims to challenge state AI laws legally, might not bring the necessary regulatory clarity soon. As a result, companies should be prepared to manage AI governance and compliance on their own. Here's why AI governance is crucial:

- Compliance/security restrictions are the number one data-side constraint for organizations across all maturity levels.
- As organizations move toward agentic AI, they expect agents to assist with compliance, risk monitoring and workflow control — not just customer service or operations. This points to a governance-by-design orientation: like using agentic systems to embed policy checks, audit trails, and exception handling into day-to-day processes.
- Embedding risk controls (human in the loop, auditability, data boundaries) will help organizations unlock scale without inviting compliance debt, while also ensuring that AI is used ethically, responsibly and for the intended purpose.

Theme	What the surveys say	Why it matters
Regulatory clarity	11% cite unclear and conflicting guidance as their biggest AI blocker (Survey 1).	Ambiguity delays investment, slows approvals and makes it harder to define KPIs and risk tolerances.
Compliance/ security & risk controls	Compliance and security restrictions are the top data challenge (51%). Most organizations have large language model data-sharing guidelines (73%); 18% do not; 9% don't know (Survey 2).	Strong guardrails protect data and reputation—but can bottleneck access and interoperability unless processes are streamlined.
Agentic AI in compliance/risk	Agentic AI is expected to support compliance and risk functions and shows up as a target use area (Survey 3).	Organizations are beginning to implement compliance into workflows with AI agents, accelerating reviews while maintaining control.

About Protiviti's AI capabilities

Protiviti helps organizations prioritize, build and deliver AI solutions that create measurable business value. We focus on delivering AI that is innovative, controlled, and accountable to your business, ensuring every capability is secure, transparent, and aligned to your goals. Our teams build AI solutions that clients can trust, so their reputation and results lead the way, supported by strong governance, responsible design and solutions that scale confidently across the enterprise.

We also help organizations manage change and maximize adoption, empowering people to learn, adapt, and lead with confidence. Through our AI Studio, proprietary accelerators, technology partners and AI Factory, we provide end-to-end strategy, solution development, deployment, and ongoing lifecycle oversight - serving as a trusted managed services partner to keep AI safe, effective, and continually delivering value.

About Protiviti

Protiviti (www.protiviti.com) is a global consulting firm that delivers deep expertise, objective insights, a tailored approach and unparalleled collaboration to help leaders confidently face the future. Protiviti and its independent and locally owned member firms provide clients with consulting and managed solutions in finance, technology, operations, data, digital, legal, HR, risk and internal audit through a network of more than 90 offices in over 25 countries.

Named to the Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For® list for the 11th consecutive year, Protiviti has served more than 80 percent of Fortune 100 and nearly 80 percent of Fortune 500 companies. The firm also works with government agencies and smaller, growing companies, including those looking to go public. Protiviti is a wholly owned subsidiary of Robert Half Inc. (NYSE: RHI).

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