Beyond the bottom line:

Unlocking AI's top line growth

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Design. Engineering. AI.

The efficiency era is over.
The growth era has begun.

It is the leadership paradox of our time: we've never had more technology, yet never felt less ready for it. AI isn't waiting for us to catch up - it's demanding we rethink how we build, connect and create.

We can't just chase efficiency like it's the ultimate prize. Increasingly, the leaders I speak to know they've reached the edge of optimization through human and classical efficiency gains. The next wave of growth won't come from squeezing another percentage point out of a process. It will come from rebuilding what's under the surface, rewiring how intelligence flows and reimagining what value itself looks like.

As we head into 2026, many businesses are looking to accelerate their AI adoption over the next 12 months. But the challenge isn't adding AI to existing systems; it's building organizations that can think with it. Modernization should make intelligence part of the fabric of how a business works - adaptable, responsive and imaginative at its core.

Our latest research shows more than three-quarters of executives have already shifted their AI focus from efficiency to growth. That shift is the clearest signal yet: the future belongs to those who build businesses that can think for themselves, learn continuously and pivot without hesitation.

Rebuild. Rewire. Reimagine.

That's more than applying a framework - it's about deliberate strategies. Because the organizations I see thriving aren't just implementing AI; they're integrating intelligence into their core, ensuring it works reliably, transparently and with purpose.

Mike Sutcliff
Chief Executive Officer, Thoughtworks
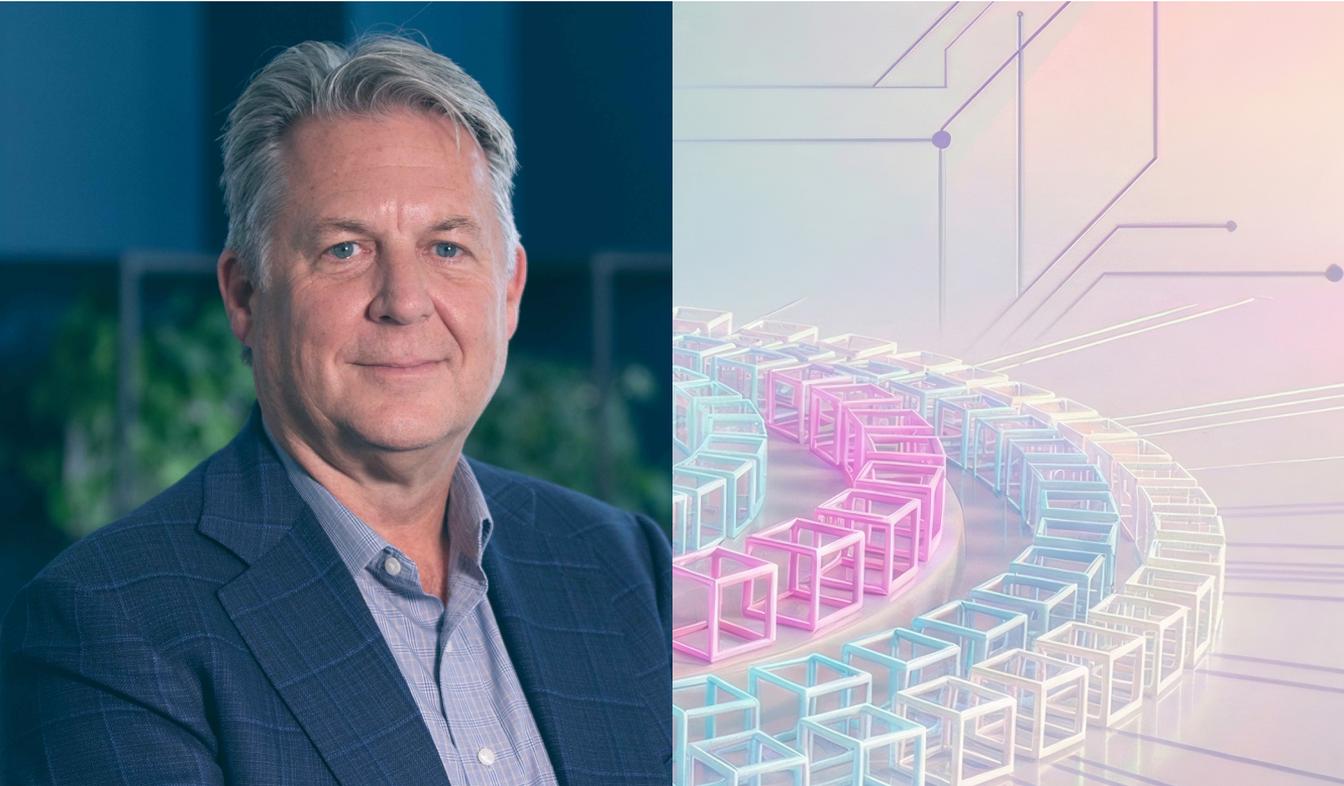
Executive summary

Generative AI didn't just change the business landscape, it gave every enterprise access to potent new technology that was once the preserve of the tech titans.

However, while much of the early efforts have focused on harnessing AI's power in the pursuit of efficiency gains and cost savings, business leaders are quickly realizing that the stakes are much higher than originally thought.

The reason for this is simple. While AI has been used by executives looking to identify efficiency savings in their operations, its true power lies in its ability to supercharge growth by exponentially increasing productivity and innovation.

The rewards on offer are game-changing, but they won't be available to everyone. This is the first creativity revolution of the digital age, separating the brave from the comfortable.

77% of leaders have already shifted their AI focus from efficiency to growth creation and innovation. This marks a structural shift in how growth itself will be built.

And it's not just about being first out the blocks - the winners will be those that move with purpose and rebuild the foundations needed to support AI at scale.

Rapid adoption alone doesn't guarantee success. With consumer wariness rising, ill-thought-out implementations risk causing more harm than good. Only those anchored in trust, transparency and measurable value will endure over time.

Understanding this is critical to successful GenAI adoption in a turbulent and continuously evolving business landscape where ambition is rewarded and hesitation punished.
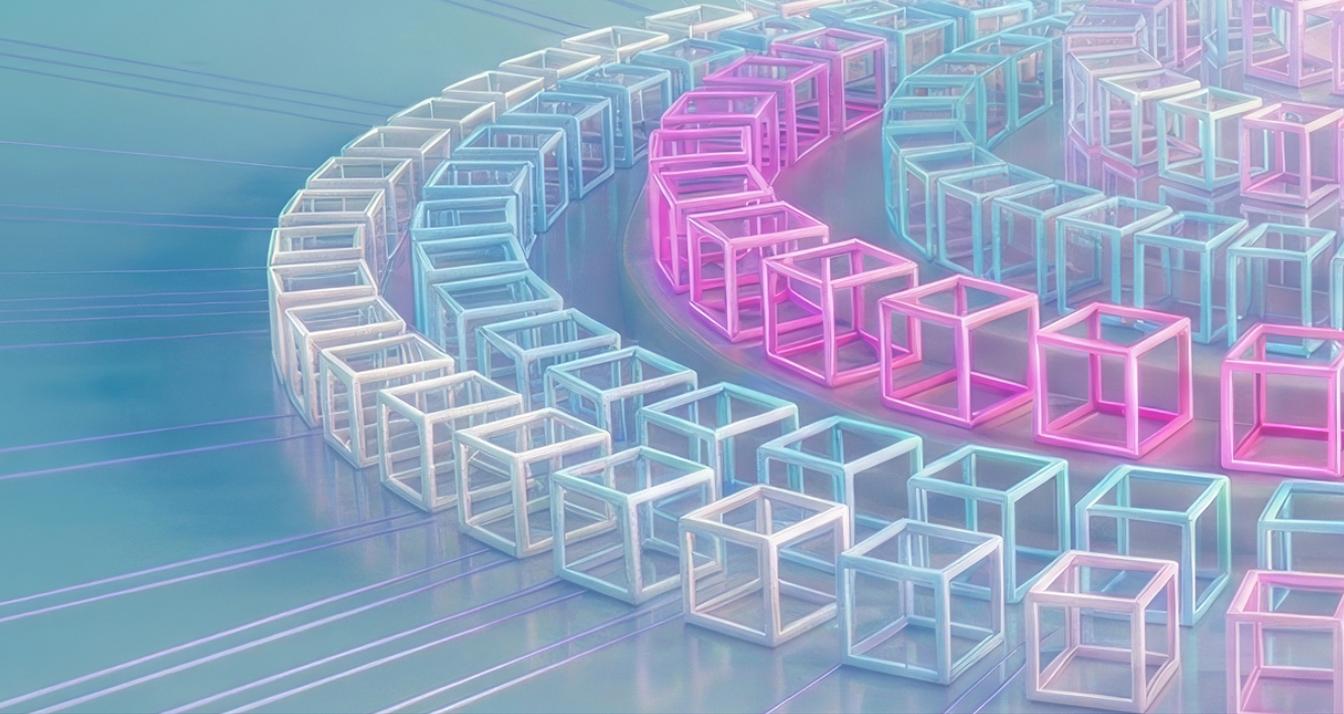
The age of "enough" is over

Generative AI has opened up incredible possibilities for all types of organizations. Almost overnight, the traditional parameters that dictate what businesses and their employees are capable of were removed, making imagination the new productivity metric.

In the initial goldrush, business leaders were quick to focus on AI's ability to save precious time and money by automating manual tasks and laborious analytics processes, leaving employees free to focus on more strategic activities each day.

However, in a relatively short order, this thinking has started to change. While AI certainly excels at efficiency-based tasks, a growing number of business leaders are now realizing that its true power lies in something much more exciting - as a growth enabler.

Indeed, among business leaders questioned by Thoughtworks in a recent study, over three quarters (77%) said they have already shifted the focus of their AI strategies from cost savings to growth creation and innovation, rising to 92% among large enterprises.

Strategic shift: Cost savings to growth creation

All business leaders

Large enterprises

Focus on cost savings

23%

77%

8%

92%

Shifted to growth
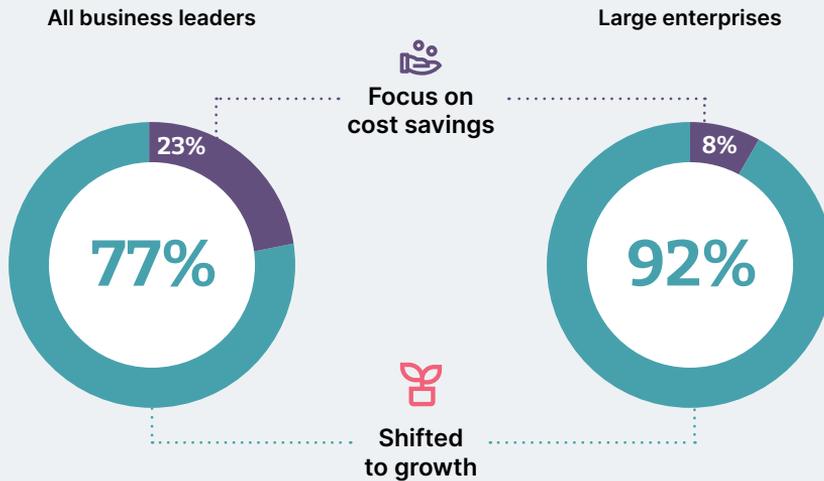
This isn't just a trend, it's a fundamental shift in how leaders are seeing technology's role within the organization.

But such landmark moments don't happen without clear leadership and direction, which is causing a major shakeup of boardroom positions. Over half (52%) of companies now have a Chief AI Officer (CAIO) with 72% holding budget control and ROI accountability.

Boardroom revolution: The rise of the CAIO

52%
of companies have a
Chief AI Officer

CAIOs with budget control
and ROI accountability

**Hold budget
and ROI**

**No direct
control**

28%

72%
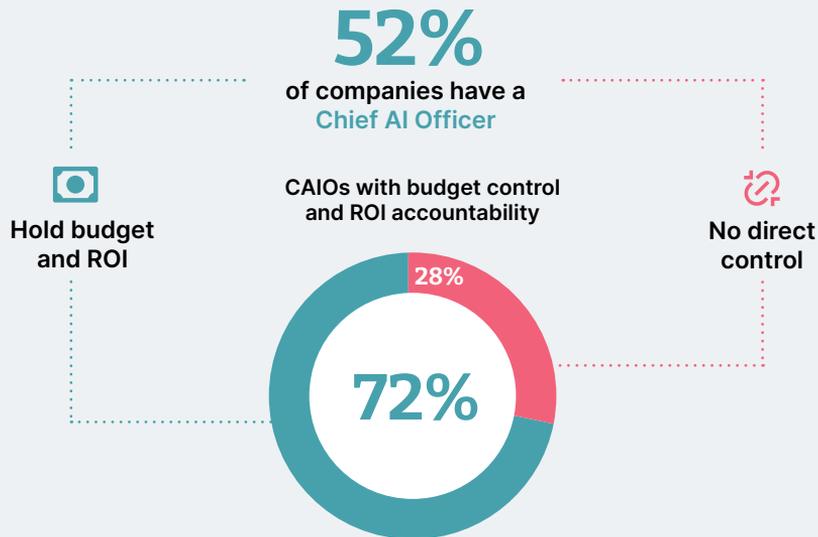
Put simply, a tipping point is being reached, with the primary question no longer being "how efficient can AI make us?", but "how expansive can we become using AI as a key growth enabler?". For years, most businesses have optimized their strategies around long-term survival. But now, they're designing for a new AI-powered future, with CAIOs emerging as critical growth architects within the boardroom.

AI isn't just the next operational upgrade: it's fundamentally reshaping the boardroom.

This isn't just a trend. It's the beginning of a rebuild: a moment where organizations must decide whether they redesign their foundations for an AI-enabled future or continue optimizing the edges of legacy systems.
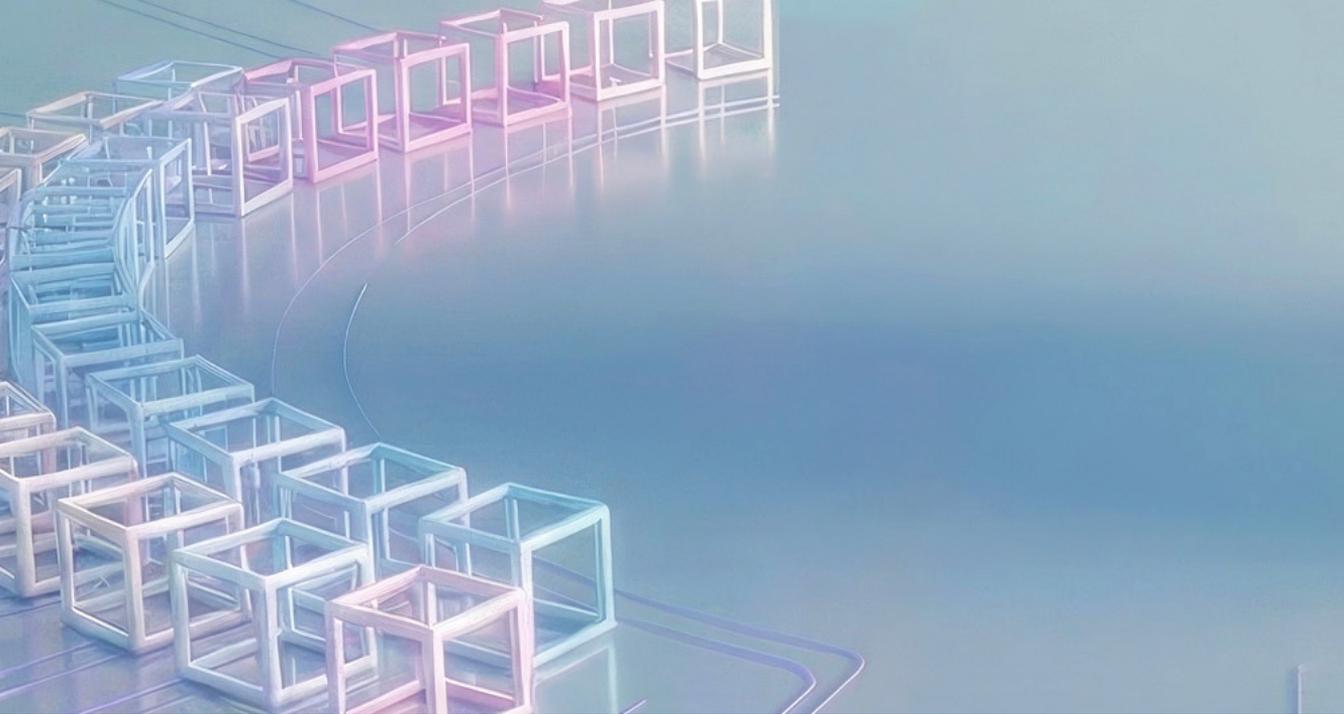
The death of efficiency-based thinking

AI's initial promise was alluringly simple: do more with less. Cut costs. Trim headcount. Compress timelines. But this is an idea whose time has already passed.

As Thoughtworks' research shows, the 77% of businesses that have pivoted their AI strategies towards innovation are seeing significant benefits. Organizations report tangible real-world gains in customer lifetime value (17%) and new customer acquisition (15%). In other words, AI is no longer a tool for saving money; it's a tool for reimagining value.

Real-world gains from innovation-led AI strategies

17%
Customer
lifetime value

AI

15%
New customer
acquisition
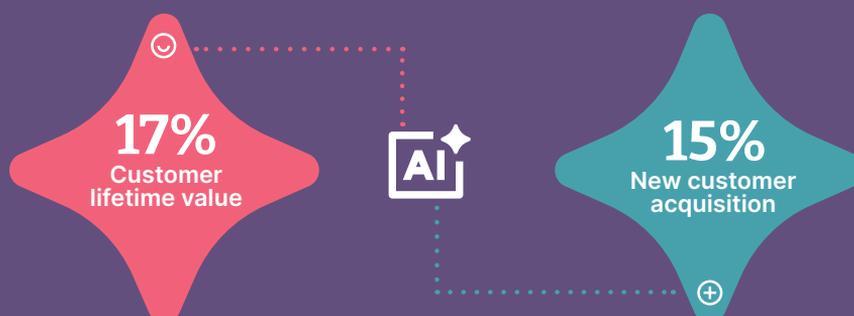
But here's the uncomfortable truth: most of those ambitions will still collapse under their own weight. Not because the technology fails, but because the organizations using it do.

And the data makes that gap unmissable: 28% of organizations cite a lack of clear AI strategy as the biggest barrier to realizing AI's growth potential, and more than half lack a defined strategy, even while 45% recognized that having an AI strategy was critical to success. Talent shortages remain acute, with 17% naming skills gaps as a key barrier to capturing AI value. And perhaps most telling: nearly 40% of organizations rate themselves as only "average" or "behind" their peers in turning AI into measurable value.

In other words, the ambition is there - but the readiness is not.

Our data reveals that what separates success from stagnation isn't access to models or compute; it's clarity, infrastructure and courage. The companies seeing real impact are the ones that treat AI as a core strategic capability, not a lab experiment. They invest in a clear AI strategy (45%), resilient tech foundations (45%), and quality data (31%). They hire and nurture the right talent (30%) and manage the cultural shock of change (15%).

These are not efficiency metrics, they are evidence of businesses rewiring for growth.

Strategic investments

Resilient tech foundations		45%
Clear AI strategy		45%
Quality data		31%
Hire and nurture right talent		30%
Manage cultural shock		15%
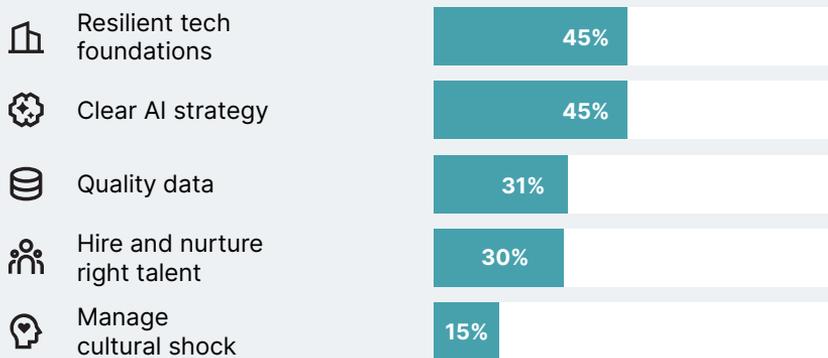
Everyone else? They'll spend 2026 automating the same old problems and wondering why nothing really changes.

AI will never reward the timid. It rewards the imaginative: the ones who build what doesn't yet exist.

# Growth is no longer a side effect. It's the main objective.

Early AI projects were measured in 'hours saved'. The next ones will be measured in opportunities created.

However, to unlock the full power of AI, business leaders must stop viewing it as a corporate safety net and start treating it as a profit engine measured by what it can create, not just what it can save. Only then can it move from promise to performance.

Our research shows this is increasingly the case, with many of the executives we spoke to saying they expect AI to become a key growth driver for their businesses in the near future.

Over a quarter (27%) said they anticipate up to 10% revenue uplift from AI in the next 12 months, with almost half (45%) forecasting an uplift in excess of 15% within the next decade, potentially having a huge impact on bottom lines.

Revenue uplift expectations

27%
expect up to a 10% uplift in the next 12 months

45%
**expect a >15% uplift over the next decade**
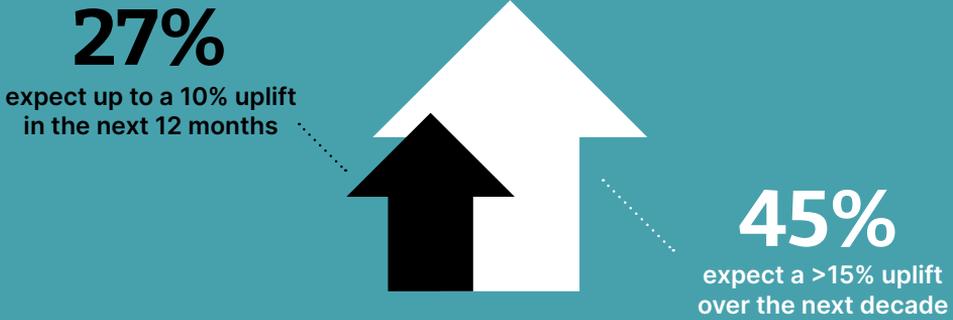
Efficiency remains the top stated AI objective (43%) - and it's easy to make a business case for something that promises to save money. It's measurable, safe and familiar. In many ways, it's a legacy target for a legacy mindset. It belongs in the rebuild phase: strengthening foundations and untangling what's already there. But the real competitive advantage emerges when leaders start to rewire their systems for intelligence and reimagine the value their business can create. This is showing up with (35%) who said agentic AI initiatives were currently their top priority.

Top AI strategic priorities

Operational efficiency	43%
Productivity	37%
Agentic AI	35%
Innovation	31%
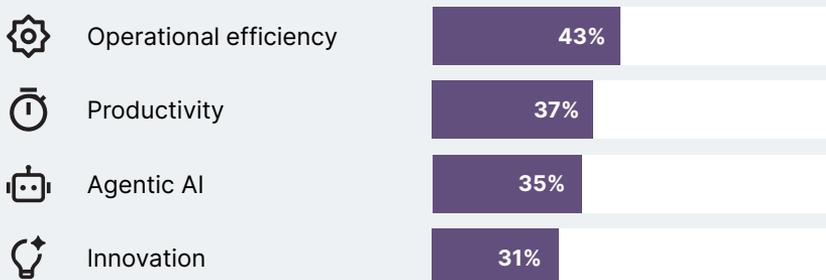
The focus on agentic AI is particularly prominent in India (48%), the UK (40%) and Singapore (36%), compared to just 28% in Australia and Brazil. This suggests a difference of opinion among business leaders around the world with regards to the role of agentic AI in their future plans.

Focus on agentic AI by market

India	UK	Singapore	Australia	Brazil
48%	40%	36%	28%	28%
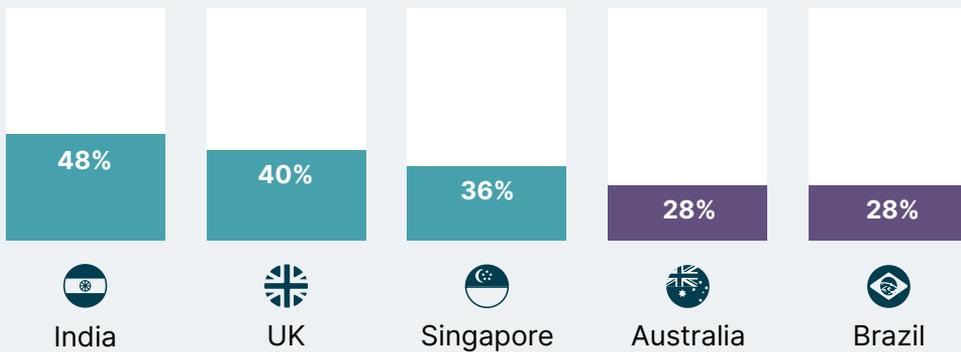
Another key focus for businesses is new product and service innovation, listed by 31% of leaders, which suggests a growing emphasis on using AI to improve customer experiences over time.

However, consumers themselves remain more cynical, with over a fifth (21%) of those questioned saying they don't expect AI to have any impact on them personally over the next five years, rising as high as 38% in the UK and 32% in the US.

Consumers expecting no personal impact from AI (Next 5 years)

UK	US	Global average
38%	32%	21%
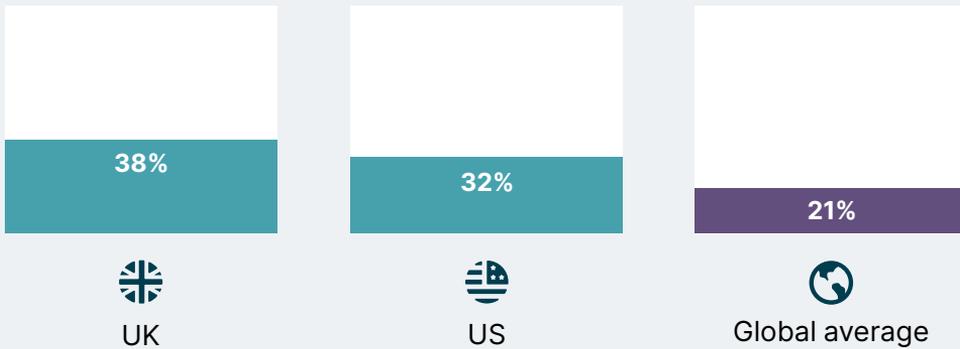
These findings suggest a growing belief among business leaders about AI's potential to deliver meaningful change far beyond simple back-office efficiency and cost savings. They recognize that AI is no longer the undercard: it's the main event. This shift signals a broader evolution: businesses are beginning to reimagine how they create value, not just how they optimize existing processes.

Why AI cynicism is rising and how to reverse it

AI's biggest obstacle isn't bad code or broken data. It's confidence. People have already been burned by muddled AI strategies and initiatives lacking in scope, vision and direction.

Three quarters (74%) of consumers fear misinformation. Two thirds (64%) fear bias. The trust gap is widening, and AI strategies built on hype will fall into it first. Consumers are demanding stronger privacy safeguards (42%) and better oversight (32%). It would pay to listen.

The trust gap: Consumer fears vs. demands

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Fear of misinformation		74%
Fear of bias		64%
Demand stronger privacy		42%
Demand better oversight		32%
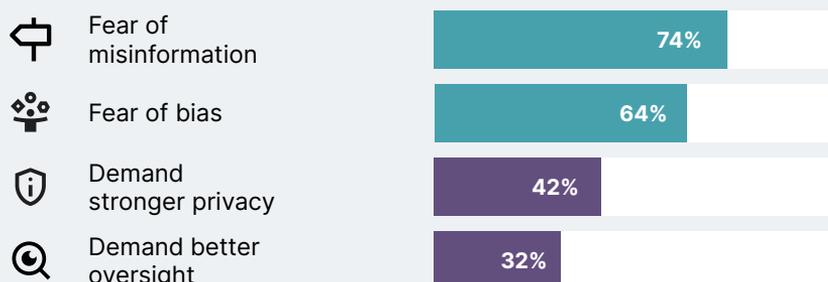
Successful AI implementations don't happen overnight. They take months of careful planning and scaling, from pilot to final release, and there are many barriers to overcome along the way, some of which are out of businesses' control.

For instance, the top barrier to scaling among businesses questioned is lack of skilled talent (24%), which reflects an ongoing long-term issue that's impacting the entire technology landscape. All of these can be resolved by taking a more strategic approach to AI implementations that focus on long-term success over in the pursuit of short-term gains.

Swedish fintech firm Klarna's foray into an AI-fuelled efficiency drive stands as a warning: when efficiency kills empathy, growth dies with it. It replaced many of its customer service staff with GenAI chatbots in 2023, claiming they could perform the work of 700 employees. Declining service quality and customer dissatisfaction, forced a rethink. Less than two years later. Klarna CEO Sebastian Siemiatkowski recently admitted that overemphasis on cost-cutting led to poorer service and acknowledged the importance of human interaction for high levels of customer satisfaction.

While consumer cynicism remains an issue, that doesn't mean consumers are actively shunning the technology. In fact it's quite the opposite. Our research shows a real appetite for it, with almost half (46%) of consumers saying they want to use more AI in their work life/careers, offering a glimpse of what the future almost certainly looks like. But as examples like the one above show, the way it is implemented by businesses will be the critical deciding factor between success and failure. Consumers don't hate AI; they just haven't felt it love them back yet.
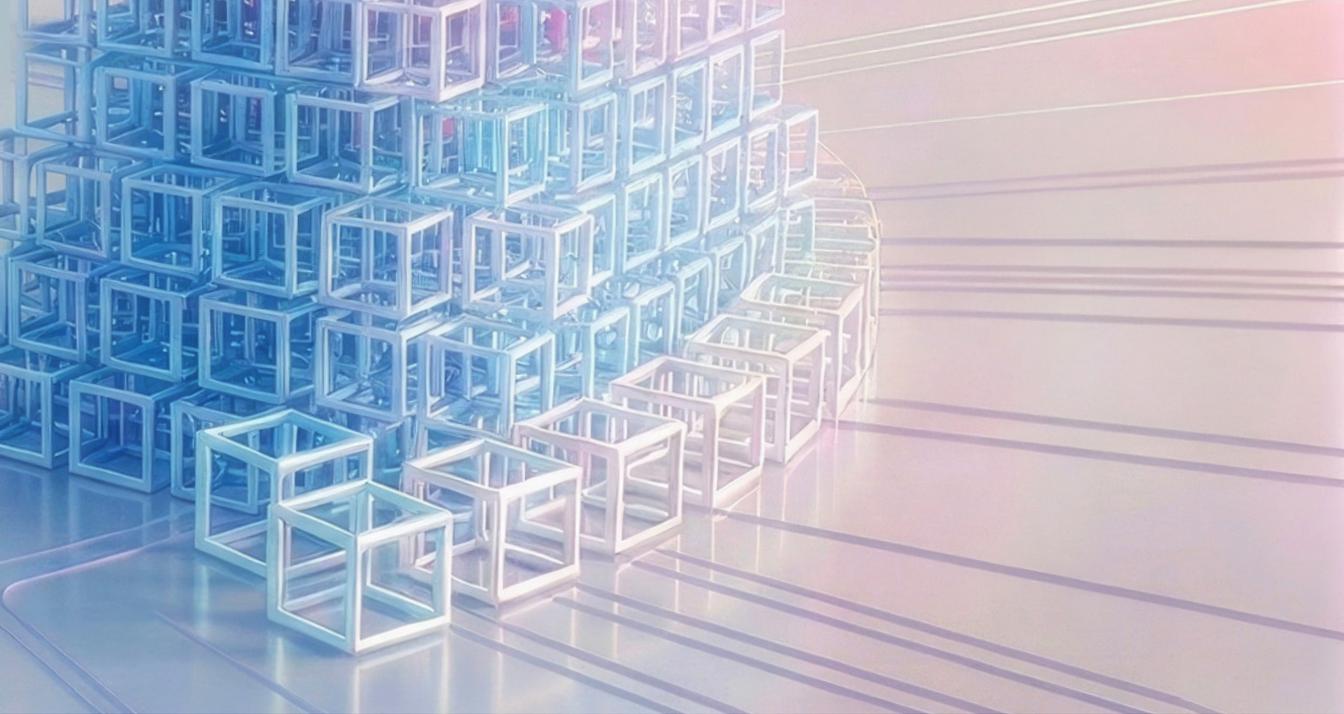
AI isn't coming for jobs.
It's shattering ceilings.

As the popularity and prevalence of AI tools like GenAI continue to grow, the fear of replacement lingers. The organizations benefitting the most from AI aren't replacing their employees with it, they're using it to turn their best people into even better creators.

## Business leaders report AI is augmenting existing talent

84%
Augmenting existing talent

Eighty seven percent of business leaders said their people-centered AI initiatives were the most impactful; 84% report that AI is augmenting their existing talent not replacing it. The ways in which AI is being deployed is also extremely diverse, with the top areas of impact over the next 12 months being decision-making (33%), innovation and creativity (29%), expert enablement (20%).

Top areas of AI impact (Next 12 months)

|	
Decision-making	33%
Innovation and creativity	29%
Expert enablement	20%
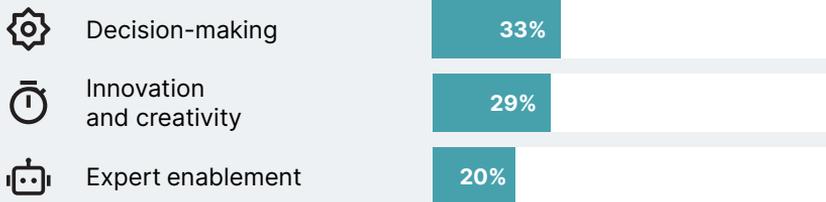
Furthermore, almost half (45%) reported a net increase in jobs as a result of implementing AI, with 22% saying they have created entirely new AI-driven career paths that didn't exist before.

These findings match consumers' experiences of AI to date. While many people are wary at first, once they embrace it, they quickly discover the many ways it can benefit their everyday life. In fact, 72% of consumers we spoke to said AI is adding value to both their work and personal life, 25% have used it to learn a new skill, and 13% have even unlocked new revenue streams.

How consumers value AI

Adds value to life/work		72%
Used to learn new skill		25%
Unlocked new revenue		13%
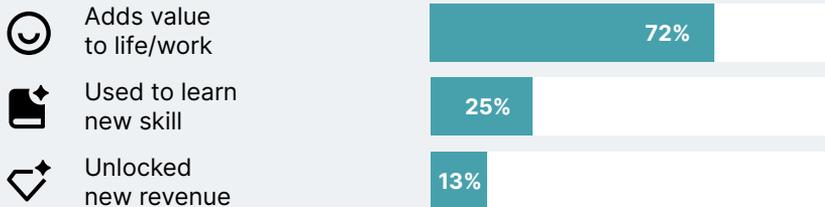
Wariness around new technology is natural, and AI is certainly no exception. However, as the dust settles, it's becoming clear that the true power of AI doesn't lie in replacing humans, but in breaking down the barriers that prevent them from reaching their true potential.
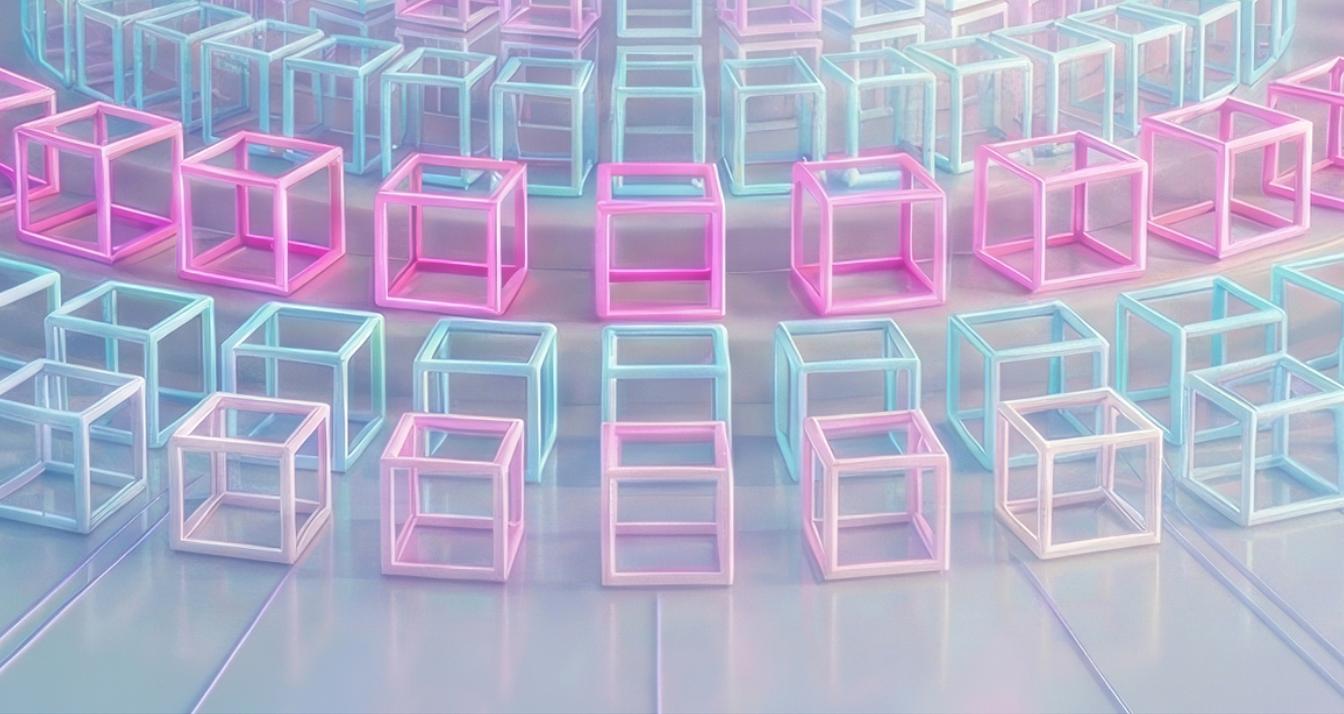
The global AI race is on

The global AI race isn't about speed, it's about definition. Who can define what kind of intelligence and applications are most effective?

This isn't restricted to organizations or industries either, with many countries realizing what's at stake too. Executives see the US and China as the AI frontrunners. Everyone else is still deciding what race they're in.

What's holding enterprises back? Mostly, it's risk concerns and tighter national regulatory hurdles and a lack of strategic direction when it comes to capitalizing on the potential that AI has to offer at an international level.

On an organizational level, over half of the leaders we spoke to (56%) also admitted to experiencing FOMO (fear of missing out) when it comes to AI adoption, and expressed concerns that competitors are getting ahead while their own organizations miss out.

Leaders experiencing AI FOMO

56%
Leaders experiencing FOMO

While such sentiments are often key drivers of new technology adoption, they can also be dangerous if they lead to 'panic buying' of AI tools without a clear implementation strategy in place first. Not only can it end up being a costly mistake, it can also negatively impact operations - just ask Klarna. The winners won't simply be the ones that move quickly: it's about a rapid response with intent.
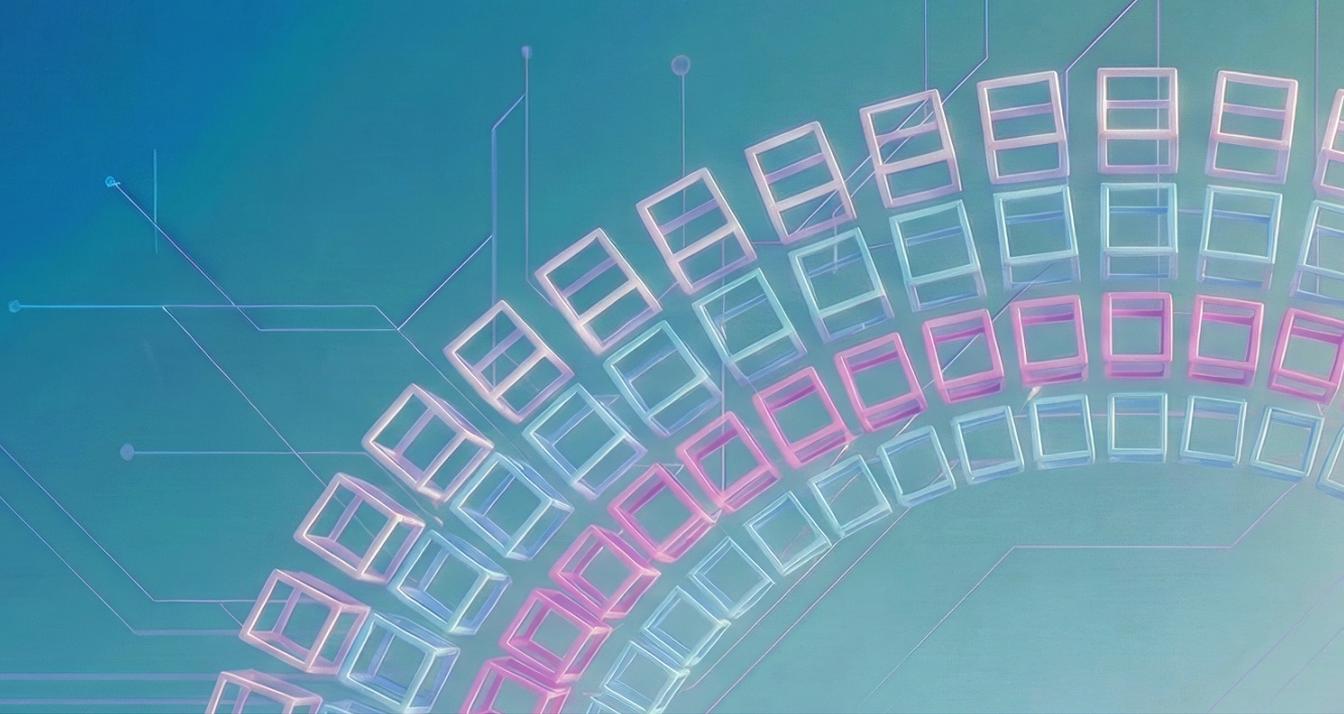
AI transparency is critical to consumer trust

The AI market isn't overheating because of technology - it's because of opacity.

Almost half of consumers in Brazil (48%), India (47%), and Singapore (45%) say 'greater transparency in how AI works' would boost adoption.

But despite this, only 30% of business leaders we spoke to said 'building customer trust and loyalty' was their primary motivation for AI transparency at present. While some of this is down to the early adoption stage many businesses are in, a further 18% of leaders said they are still trying to develop their AI strategy, it highlights a significant gulf between consumer sentiment and the motivations of businesses that needs to be urgently addressed.

The transparency gap:
Consumer demand vs. business motivation

48%	**47%**	**45%**	**30%**

| Consumers in Brazil | Consumers in India | Consumers in Singapore | Business leaders (Build trust) |
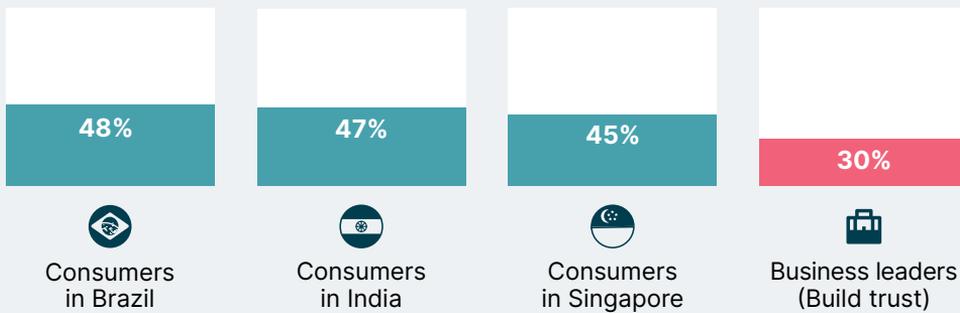
When trust becomes a priority, transparency stops being optional. As the AI market rapidly approaches this key inflection point, those that have built their AI strategies with consumer transparency top of mind will find themselves in a much stronger position than those hiding their AI usage in the shadows.

The impact of AI on the global business landscape in the last three years simply cannot be overstated, as organizations everywhere realized the game changing potential of the technology now at their fingertips. While initial AI strategies were focused on maximizing efficiency and cutting costs, industry leaders are now discovering that AI's true power lies in its ability to supercharge growth by exponentially increasing productivity, creativity and innovation.

However, rapid adoption doesn't guarantee results and as the initial AI goldrush nears its peak, it is consumer trust that will ultimately dictate which organizations thrive and which fall by the wayside. The future isn't about deploying AI faster, it's about deploying it better. Understanding this is a critical first step on the path to success throughout 2026 and beyond.

Methodology

Research Methodology:
Conducted by Censuswide | **October 2025**

Markets surveyed:
UK, USA, Germany, India, Brazil, Singapore, Australia

Business survey	
Respondents	3,500
Target audience	IT decision makers and C-Suite (25+ Employees)
Date collected	02.10.25 – 11.10.25
Consumer survey	
Respondents	3,502
Target audience	General Consumers (Across 7 Markets)
Date collected	30.09.25 – 08.10.25

Business survey methodology:

The research was conducted by Censuswide, among a sample of 3,500 (500 per market) IT decision makers & C-suite respondents (25+) in the following markets: UK, USA, Germany, India, Brazil, Singapore and Australia. The data was collected between October 02, 2025 and October 11, 2025. Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society and follows the MRS code of conduct and ESOMAR principles. Censuswide is also a member of the British Polling Council.

Consumer survey methodology:

The research was conducted by Censuswide, among a sample of 3,502 Consumers across the US, Australia, India, Singapore, Germany, Brazil, and the UK. The data was collected between September 30, 2025 and October 10, 2025. Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society and follows the MRS code of conduct and ESOMAR principles. Censuswide is also a member of the British Polling Council.

About Thoughtworks

Thoughtworks is a global technology consultancy that delivers extraordinary impact by blending design, engineering and AI expertise. We bring together experimentation and a focus on real-world impact. Teams work closely with clients to shape AI that actually ships and performs. The result is dependable, human-centered solutions shaped by craft and curiosity rather than hype, showing what responsible and effective AI looks like in practice.

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