

AI STRATEGY SERIES · PART 1 OF 5

# The state of AI adoption in 2026.

What the latest research from McKinsey, BCG, Anthropic and Google actually says about where AI stands – and what it means for SMBs.



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## Executive summary

AI has moved from boardroom buzzword to operational reality. But for every company shipping real results, dozens more are stuck in pilot purgatory. This article cuts through the noise and looks at what the 2026 research from McKinsey, BCG, Anthropic, Google and others actually tells us about where AI stands today.

The picture is both more promising and more sobering than the headlines suggest. Early movers are pulling ahead fast. The majority of businesses haven't started. And the gap is compounding.

### Key takeaways

- 88% of leaders say their organisations are deploying AI, but only 13.5% of EU enterprises had operationalised it by 2024.
- Companies plan to spend ~1.7% of revenues on AI in 2026 – more than double the planned increase for 2025.
- 80% of organisations using AI agents report measurable economic returns already.
- The gap between early movers and the rest is structural and widening.

## The headline numbers

Every major consulting firm published AI adoption research in early 2026, and a pattern emerges when you read them together rather than in isolation.

McKinsey's State of Organizations 2026, based on a survey of 10,000 senior leaders across 15 countries, found that 88% report their organisations are deploying AI. BCG's AI Radar 2026 shows companies plan to spend roughly 1.7% of revenues on AI this year – more than twice what they planned for 2025. Deloitte reports that worker access to AI rose 50% in 2025 alone.

# 88%

of leaders report their organisations are deploying AI. (McKinsey State of Organizations 2026, 10,000+ senior leaders / 15 countries)

These are big numbers. They're also misleading if you read them without context. The OECD's 2025 progress report tells a different story: only 13.5% of EU enterprises had actually operationalised AI technology by 2024. That means 86.5% of European businesses hadn't moved past talking about it.

“We’re not in an era of broad AI adoption. We’re in an era where early movers are pulling ahead while everyone else watches.”

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## Where the money is going

According to Menlo Ventures, companies spent \$37 billion on generative AI in 2025 – a 3.2× increase from \$11.5 billion in 2024. That breaks down to \$18 billion on infrastructure and \$19 billion on applications.

# \$37B

spent on generative AI in 2025 – a 3.2× year-on-year increase. (\$18B infrastructure + \$19B applications.)

The enterprise LLM market has shifted dramatically. Anthropic now earns 40% of enterprise LLM spend, up from 12% in 2023. OpenAI sits at 27%, Google at 21%. The competition for enterprise AI dollars is real, and it’s reshaping the vendor landscape quarter by quarter.

Microsoft Copilot reached 15 million paid seats as of Q2 FY2026. Google reports 52% of executives in AI-using organisations have agents in production. The infrastructure buildout is accelerating – demand for data centre capacity is projected to triple by 2030.



HANDS AT KEYBOARD · OPERATIONAL REALITY

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## The agentic shift

Something changed in the 2025–2026 research cycle. Agentic AI – systems that take sequences of actions, use tools, and produce outcomes rather than just answers – moved from forecast to present-tense reality.

Anthropic's 2026 State of AI Agents Report found that 57% of organisations now use agents to handle multi-stage workflows. 16% have progressed to cross-functional or end-to-end processes. The highest-impact use cases: data analysis and report generation (60%), and internal process automation (48%).

For SMBs, the agentic shift matters because it changes what a small team can accomplish. A five-person company with the right AI agents can now operate with the throughput of a team three times its size – if the business fundamentals are in place to support it.

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## What this means for SMBs

If you're running a small or mid-sized business, the macro numbers can feel overwhelming. Billions in spend, enterprise-scale deployments, infrastructure gaps – none of it sounds like your problem to solve.

But here's what the data actually points to: the organisations seeing the best results aren't the biggest. They're the most disciplined. They picked a specific problem, measured the baseline, deployed AI against it, and measured again. That's a pattern any business can follow.

The advantage SMBs have is speed. No governance committees. No 18-month procurement cycles. No legacy architecture blocking integration. When a five-person team decides to use AI to cut customer response times by 40%, they can ship it in a week.


“AI amplifies what you already have. Good business plus AI equals results. Broken business plus AI equals faster failure.”



# Let's talk.

Ready to cut through the noise and find your AI starting point?  
Let's talk.

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# Change by Design

AI strategy & automation for growing businesses.

Change by Design helps SMBs and enterprise teams turn AI from a buzzword into a business advantage. We don't sell software. We build the strategy, governance, and implementation discipline that makes AI work in the real world.



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