

AI STRATEGY SERIES · PART 5 OF 5

# Measuring AI ROI.

Most AI projects don't get killed because they failed. They get killed because nobody could prove they worked.



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## Executive summary

The most common reason AI projects get killed isn't that they didn't work. It's that nobody could prove they did. Without baselines, clear metrics, and realistic timelines, even successful AI deployments struggle to justify continued investment.

This final article lays out a practical approach to measuring AI ROI – designed for SMBs and mid-market companies that need to show value without enterprise-scale analytics teams.

### Key takeaways

- 80% of organisations using AI agents already report measurable economic returns.
- Baseline measurement is the single most skipped step – and the one that matters most.
- Time-to-value varies: customer ops (weeks), knowledge work (1–2 months), forecasting (3–6 months).
- The metrics that matter are business metrics, not AI metrics.

## The proof problem

Anthropic's 2026 State of AI Agents Report found that 80% of organisations report their AI investments are already delivering measurable economic returns. That sounds strong. But look closer at the word "measurable."

Measurable means someone set up the measurement. They knew what to track, established a baseline, and compared before and after. The 80% who report returns are the organisations that invested in measurement alongside deployment.

# 80%

of organisations report measurable economic returns from AI. The other 20% probably got returns too – but couldn't prove it. (Anthropic, 2026)

"The most common reason AI projects get killed isn't that they didn't work. It's that nobody could prove they did."

## What to measure

The metrics that matter are business metrics, not AI metrics. Model accuracy and inference speed are interesting to your technical team. They mean nothing to your board. The metrics that prove AI value are the same ones you'd use to evaluate any business improvement.

### Key takeaways

- Time saved per employee or per task.
- Cost per unit of output before vs. after.
- Cycle time on the targeted process.
- Error rate or quality metric on the work AI now touches.
- Customer-facing outcomes – satisfaction, retention, response time.



OPERATOR VIEW · THE DASHBOARD YOUR AI DEPLOYMENT NEEDS DAY ONE

## How to set baselines

A baseline is just “what does this look like today?” – captured rigorously enough that you can compare against it later. Two to four weeks is the minimum window. Less than that and normal variance swamps the signal.

# 2-4 wks

minimum baseline measurement period before any AI deployment. Less than that and normal weekly variance hides the actual change.

For high-frequency processes (customer enquiries, document review, scheduling), a two-week baseline is usually enough. For lower-frequency ones (monthly reporting, quarterly forecasting), extend to a full cycle plus one. Then deploy and re-measure the same thing the same way.

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## Realistic timelines

Different AI categories pay back on different timelines. Set expectations accordingly:

### Key takeaways

- Customer operations: measurable change in 2-4 weeks. Fastest payback category.
- Knowledge work / document processing: 1-2 months to see sustained gains across a team.
- Forecasting / supply chain: 3-6 months minimum. The models need real history to outperform spreadsheet baselines.
- Code generation: immediate productivity gain, but quality impact takes 1-2 sprints to assess.

“Set expectations based on category, not on headlines. Customer ops shows value in weeks. Forecasting takes a quarter or more.”

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## The ROI conversation

The organisations succeeding with AI in 2026 aren't the ones with the biggest budgets. They're the ones that treated AI as a business discipline: measurable, accountable, and anchored to outcomes that matter.


When the board asks “is this working?” – and they will – the answer that buys you the next round of investment isn't “the team loves it.” It's “here's the baseline, here's the current state, here's the delta, here's what it's worth.”



# Let's talk.

Need a practical framework for proving AI value in your business? Let's talk.

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