Human-centric AI at work: A playbook for powering your organization with AI

THE **WORK INNOVATION** LAB

BY asana

What you'll find in this playbook

Are you prepared to lead your company through the AI era? In this playbook, you'll learn how to help your organization work smarter with AI and drive real results. You'll find:

- **The current state of AI at work:** Understand how AI is transforming the workplace, with insights into its positive impact, expanding use cases, aspirations for more, and the need for safeguards as AI becomes a strategic partner at work.

- **Tips for navigating the AI leadership divide:** Explore the gaps in AI perceptions between executives, managers, and individual contributors—gaps that stifle successful AI adoption. Discover strategies to bridge these divides to harness AI's full potential.

- **Actionable insights for bridging different AI perspectives across functions:** Gain insights into how different departments, including IT, marketing, and operations, are approaching AI. Learn why disconnects lead to failed AI implementations and how to create a unified AI strategy.

- **Strategies for AI vendor selection:** Learn essential considerations for choosing the right AI vendors. See how the right AI vendors can propel your organization forward, while the wrong choices can set you back.

If you don't want to get left behind in the wake of this transformative technology, this playbook is for you.

Contents

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Executive summary

Artificial intelligence is no longer a futuristic concept; it's the heart of today's workplace transformation. While AI's foundations are deeply technical, rooted in algorithms and automation, the human response to AI spans a spectrum of emotions—excitement, uncertainty, and even some fear.

This playbook, backed by a survey of over 4,500 individual contributors, middle and senior managers, and executives in the U.S. and U.K., is filled with insights, strategies, and actionable steps to ensure you're not just keeping up with AI, but leading the charge.

Our research shows that high-performing companies adopt and implement AI in fundamentally different ways:

1. **They navigate the AI leadership divide**
   Gaps in AI perceptions between leaders, managers, and individual contributors thwart successful AI adoption. Leading companies bridge these divides to harness the full potential of AI.

2. **They bridge AI perspectives across functions**
   Disconnects across departments lead to failed AI implementations. Leading companies create a unified AI strategy.

3. **They strategically select AI vendors**
   Leading companies thoughtfully select the right AI vendors, ensuring their investments are both strategic and future-proof.

Keep reading to learn how to power your organization with AI. Discover insights and actionable strategies that you can put into practice today to harness AI's full potential and augment human intelligence in your organization.

The current state of AI at work

AI is transforming the state of work. Our research reveals both strides and stumbling blocks in how organizations are implementing AI:

AI's positive impact on the workplace
- Roughly half (52%) of knowledge workers anticipate that AI will have a positive impact on their work. While some anticipate a neutral (33%) or even negative (15%) impact, the overall sentiment leans toward optimism.

AI's growing role at work
- More than one-third (36%) of knowledge workers are already harnessing AI's capabilities in their roles at least weekly.

- Yet just 4% are using it multiple times a day. This signals an opportunity: As adoption grows, there's potential to unlock even more value from AI.

AI's use cases are widespread, but there are aspirations for more
- 63% aspire to use AI for data analysis, yet only 30% do.
- 57% aspire to use AI for administrative tasks, but just 25% do.
- AI even has a role to play in creative tasks—37% of employees want to use AI for brainstorming.

AI as a partner
- Employees say that, on average, nearly one-third (29%) of their jobs are replaceable by AI. The challenge and opportunity lie in discerning what AI can skillfully automate and what it can enhance, crafting a future where AI amplifies human intelligence rather than competing with it.

AI usage: Aspirations vs. reality

Data analysis

Administrative tasks
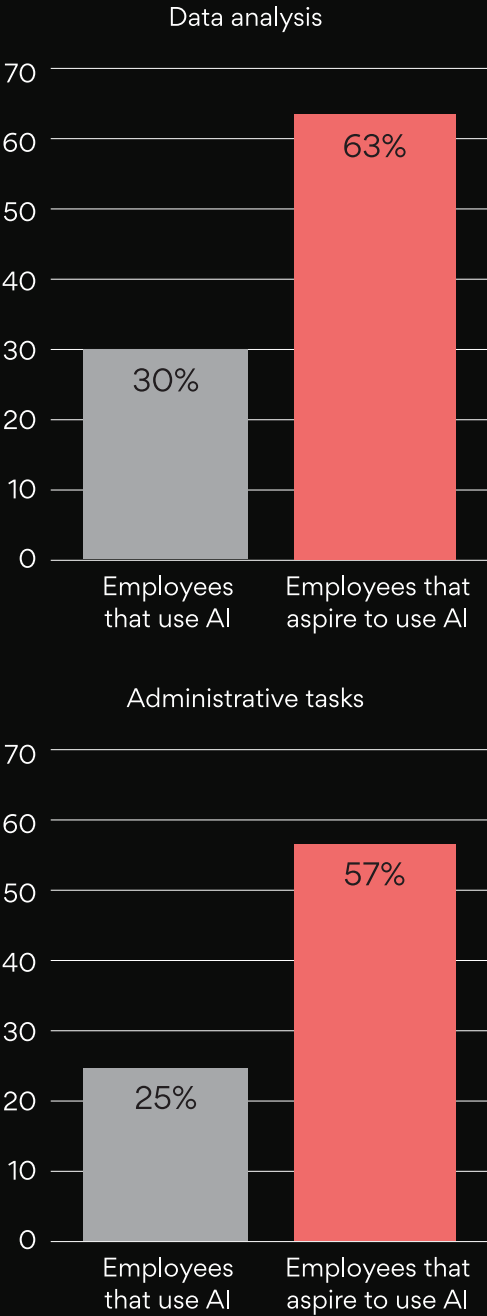
**AI safeguards are needed to protect companies and employees**

Despite the potential of AI, there are challenges that need to be addressed. Ensuring that AI is both secure against potential breaches and powered by robust, accurate data is critical to unlocking its full promise:

- 92% of knowledge workers express concerns regarding potential unethical AI applications.
- 90% are concerned about AI increasing the risk of data breaches containing personal data.
- Executives (93%) stand out in recognizing the importance of data integrity.

89%

say it's important that AI tools are created with accurate underlying data.

How employees anticipate AI will impact their work

Negative
15%

Neutral
33%

Positive
52%
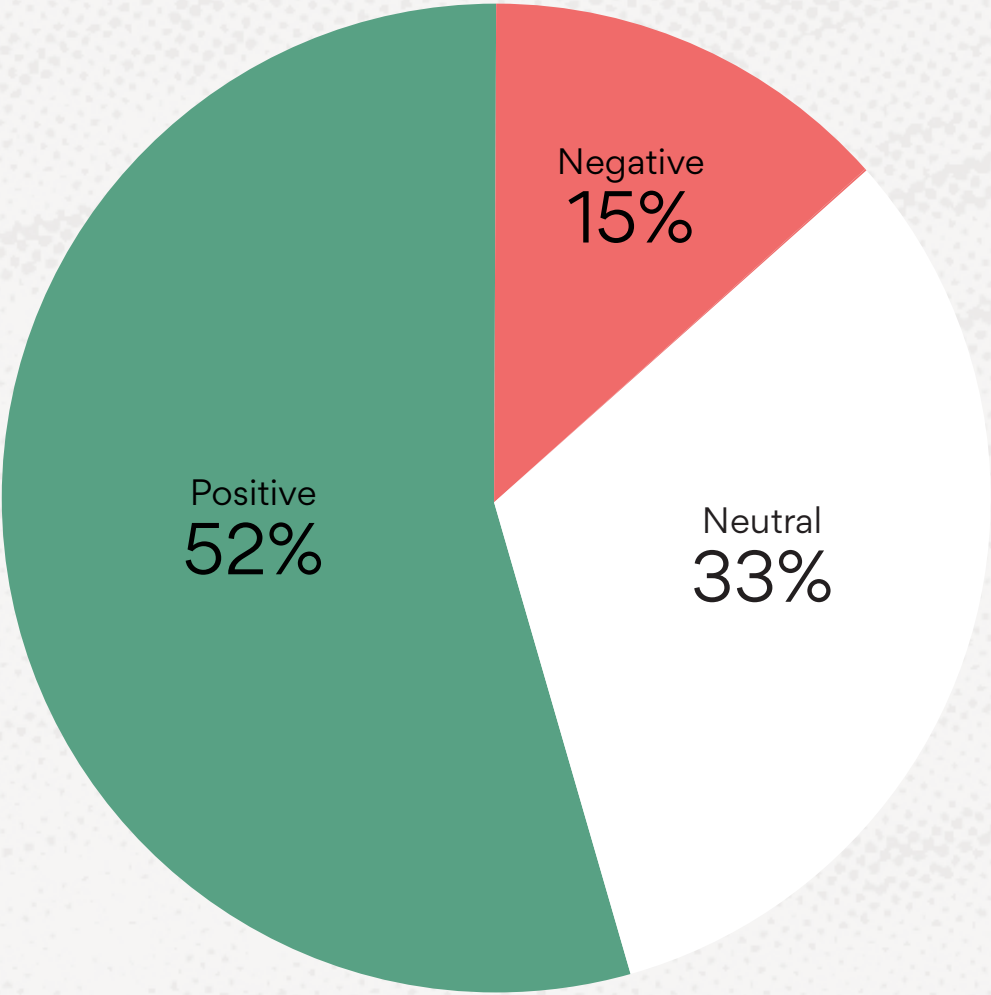
Summary: The current state of AI at work

The adoption of AI in the workplace is a complex landscape marked by both progress and caution. Employees are embracing AI for various tasks and recognize its potential benefits, but they're also expressing concerns about ethical considerations and the need for safeguards. The rest of the playbook will delve deeper into these considerations and how you can address them to maximize AI's full potential in your organization.

Overcoming the AI leadership disconnect

There's a disconnect in how executives, managers, and individual contributors are viewing and responding to AI. These disconnects can stifle successful AI adoption. As a leader, you have two urgent challenges to meet: the widening optimism gap and the concerning transparency gap.
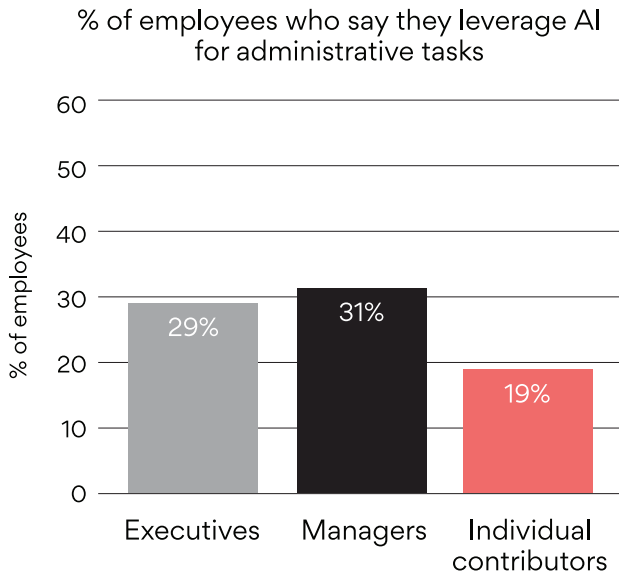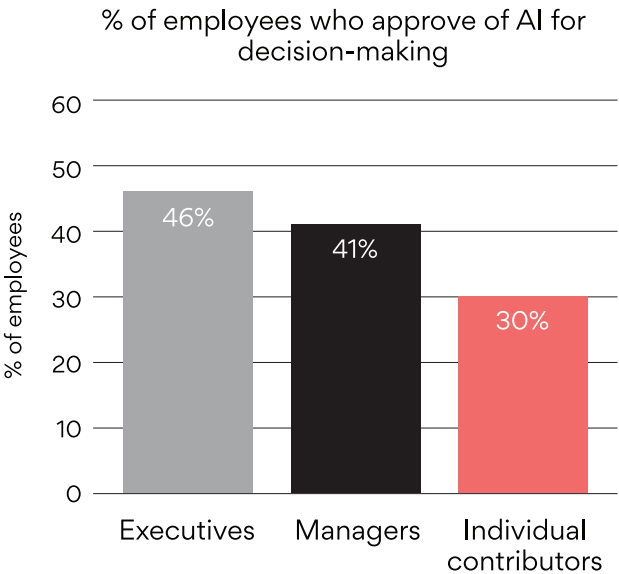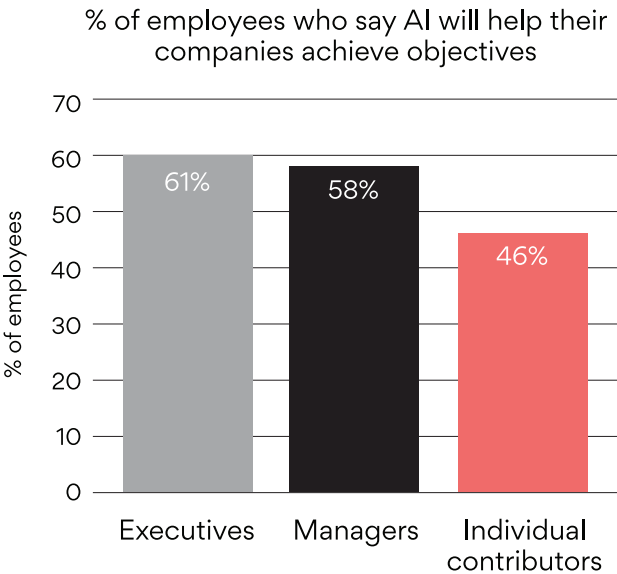
The optimism gap

Executives are leading the charge in AI adoption, realizing its potential to augment human intelligence. Over half (52%) of executives use AI on a weekly basis, compared to just 36% of the broader workforce. For these leaders, AI isn't merely a tool—it's a strategic asset:

- 61% of executives and 58% of managers say that AI will help their companies achieve their objectives but less than half (46%) of individual contributors agree.

- 46% of executives are enthusiastic about AI's role in decision-making compared to 41% of managers and just 30% of individual contributors.

- Even when it comes to using AI for everyday administrative tasks—tasks that executives might just hand off to their direct reports—there's a clear difference in enthusiasm. While 29% of executives use AI for these tasks, only 19% of individual contributors do the same. Yet it's managers who are most likely to use AI for admin tasks (31%). This aligns with their focus on managing the day-to-day operations of their teams and continuous search for efficiency gains.

Executives are bullish on AI compared to individual contributors

% of employees who say AI will help their companies achieve objectives

Executives: 61%
Managers: 58%
Individual contributors: 46%

% of employees who approve of AI for decision-making

Executives: 46%
Managers: 41%
Individual contributors: 30%

% of employees who say they leverage AI for administrative tasks

Executives: 29%
Managers: 31%
Individual contributors: 19%

How to bridge the optimism gap

1

Create feedback channels

Establish channels for employees to provide feedback and voice concerns on AI initiatives, ensuring everyone feels heard and valued.

2

Address concerns head-on

Don't skirt around the big concerns your employees are harboring. Address how AI will impact jobs and what steps your organization is taking to ensure job security or invest in upskilling.

3

Implement role-specific training

Introduce AI training modules designed for specific roles. Encourage and facilitate AI certification paths to elevate employee expertise and confidence.

4

Celebrate AI wins

Champion and spotlight employee stories where AI has driven positive change, fostering a culture of excitement and optimism.

The transparency gap

There's also a transparency disconnect happening in organizations. 44% of executives feel they've been transparent about their organization's plans to use AI, but only 38% of managers and 25% of individual contributors agree.

This transparency gap is fueled by:

- **A lack of AI-related policies and guidelines:** 31% of executives say their company has established policies or guidance around how to use AI compared to just 18% of individual contributors.

- **A shortage of AI training:** 25% of executives say their companies provide AI training for their day-to-day work compared to just 11% of individual contributors.

The transparency disconnect

% of employees who say their organization has been transparent about AI

% of employees who say their organization has established policies around AI

% of employees who say their organization has provided training on AI

How to bridge the transparency gap

1

Host regular AI forums

Organize monthly forums or "lunch and learns" where employees can learn about AI initiatives. Encourage hands-on demos that make AI less of an abstract concept and more of a tangible tool.

2

Provide regular updates

Regularly update your team on your AI roadmap and how you plan to invest in AI.

3

Establish clear AI policies and guidelines

48% of employees want more organizational policies around AI. Create clear policies that outline acceptable uses of AI, as well as guidance on best practices for how employees should use AI at work.

4

Keep AI information accessible

Build a centralized storage space for your AI policies and use cases so that employees can reference them at any time, building trust and holding decision-makers accountable.

Ready to report to a soulless robot? Think again.

Some employees seem to be warming to the idea of AI as a boss, attracted by the potential for more impartial, consistent decision-making, with fewer human biases. In some cases, an AI boss might be preferable to a poor human manager who lacks empathy, fairness, or competence.

- About 1 in 8 managers and 1 in 9 executives say they'd be open to AI being their boss, compared to 1 in 11 individual contributors.

But while AI might be more impartial, it lacks the compassion, understanding, and motivation that define great human leaders. AI will work best when it's a complement to great human leadership, not a replacement.

Ethical AI concerns: A common ground

Despite their differences, executives, managers, and individual contributors agree: they're concerned about AI ethics.

- 81% of individual contributors fear that AI will compromise their human rights, and 73% of leaders share this sentiment.

- Both groups also worry about AI introducing bias and discrimination into the workplace: 80% of individual contributors and 76% of leaders are ringing the caution bell.

Where AI strikes a chord

% of employees open to AI being their boss

13%	12%	9%
Executives	Managers	Individual contributors

% of employees concerned about AI compromising their human rights

75%	78%	81%
Executives	Managers	Individual contributors

% of employees concerned about AI introducing bias or discrimination

76%	81%	80%
Executives	Managers	Individual contributors
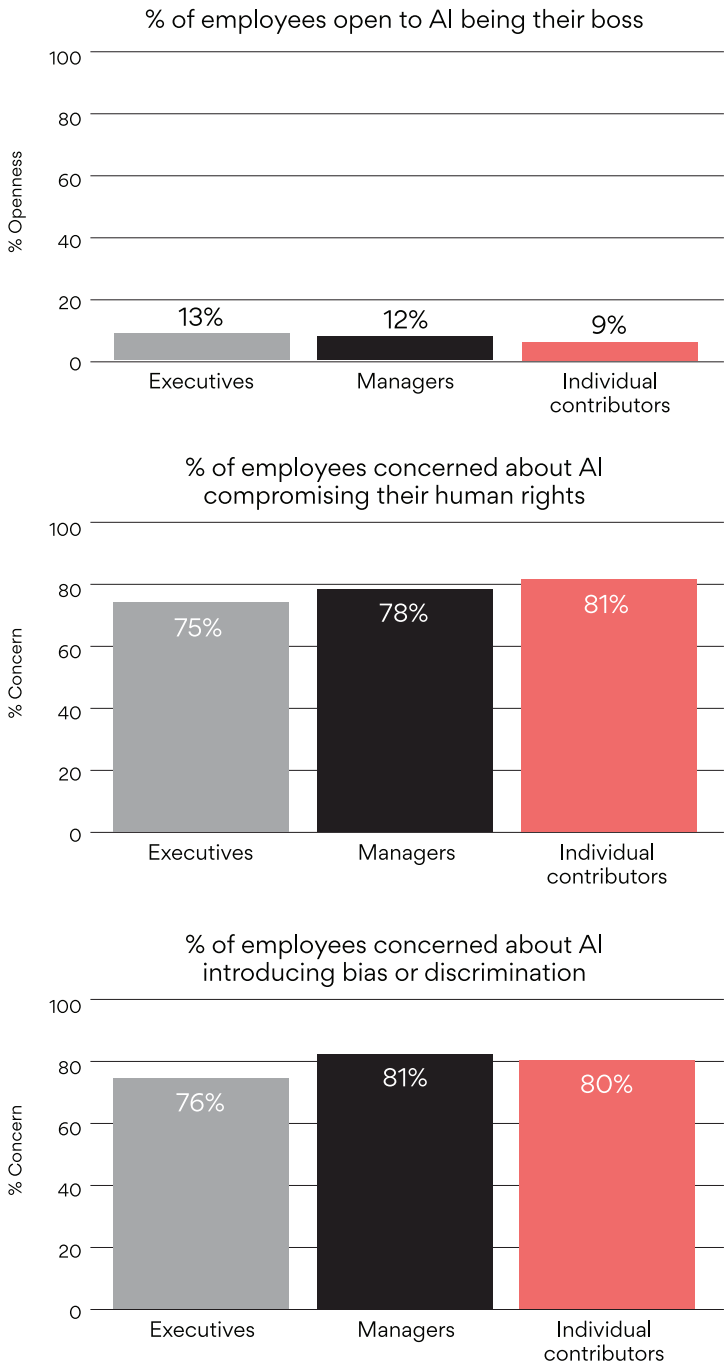
The solution? Human-centered AI

The companies that have seen the greatest success with AI are approaching AI from a human lens. This is human-centered AI.

> Human-centered AI is driven by values and guiding principles that put employees and ethics first. AI is positioned as a partner, augmenting human capabilities and enriching theirwork rather than controlling it.

Only half (46%) of knowledge workers currently understand what human-centered AI is. But those that do are significantly more likely to say AI will have a positive impact on their work. In particular, **44% of knowledge workers say that a human-centered AI approach is a key consideration when joining a new company.**

5 tips to design your organization for human-centered AI:

1. **Champion ethical AI:** Develop a clear set of principles and values around the use of AI in your organization. Establish ethical guardrails and communicate the safeguards you have in place to prevent irresponsible and unethical outcomes due to AI.
2. **Prioritize the human experience:** When implementing AI, prioritize the user experience, ensuring that AI tools fit seamlessly into your employees' day-to-day workflows. Additionally, invest in AI vendors that commit to responsible AI and have their own set of AI principles and values.
3. **Commit to human-centric onboarding:** As you roll out new AI tools, design the implementation process to highlight and reinforce the collaborative roles of humans and AI. Be explicit about how the technology will enable employees to enhance their work.
4. **Create feedback loops:** Establish mechanisms for employees to provide feedback on AI tools, ensuring they serve their needs effectively.
5. **Build a collaborative mindset around AI:** Foster a workplace culture where AI is viewed as a partner, helping employees free up time to do more strategic work.

> "With AI, we can continue to automate the parts of work that are automatable, and spend more time on the parts of work that are uniquely useful for humans to do—work that's collaborative, creative, and complex."
> – Cal Henderson, Co-Founder and CTO, Slack

Summary: Overcoming the AI leadership disconnect

Executives are optimistic about AI, but many employees are wary. To boost AI adoption, you need to tackle these divides with optimism and transparency. A human-centered AI approach, focusing on values and teamwork, can help bridge these gaps and ensure that AI is successfully adopted and integrated into your workplace.

Bridging the AI gap across departments

Every department in your organization views AI through its own unique lens—whether it's the tech-centric sphere of IT, the creative realm of marketing, or the pragmatic world of operations. You need to grasp these varied viewpoints to tailor the implementation and change management process in ways that increase employee adoption.

Let's take a look at how three departments—IT, marketing, and ops—are approaching AI differently.

IT: The (cautiously optimistic) AI enthusiasts

IT professionals, often at the forefront of tech adoption, are the torchbearers for AI integration. They view AI not just as another tool in their company's toolkit, but as a transformative force that will fundamentally reshape the contours of work. While they are enthusiastic about AI, they are also concerned about the security risks associated with AI and the need to prioritize safe and responsible AI.
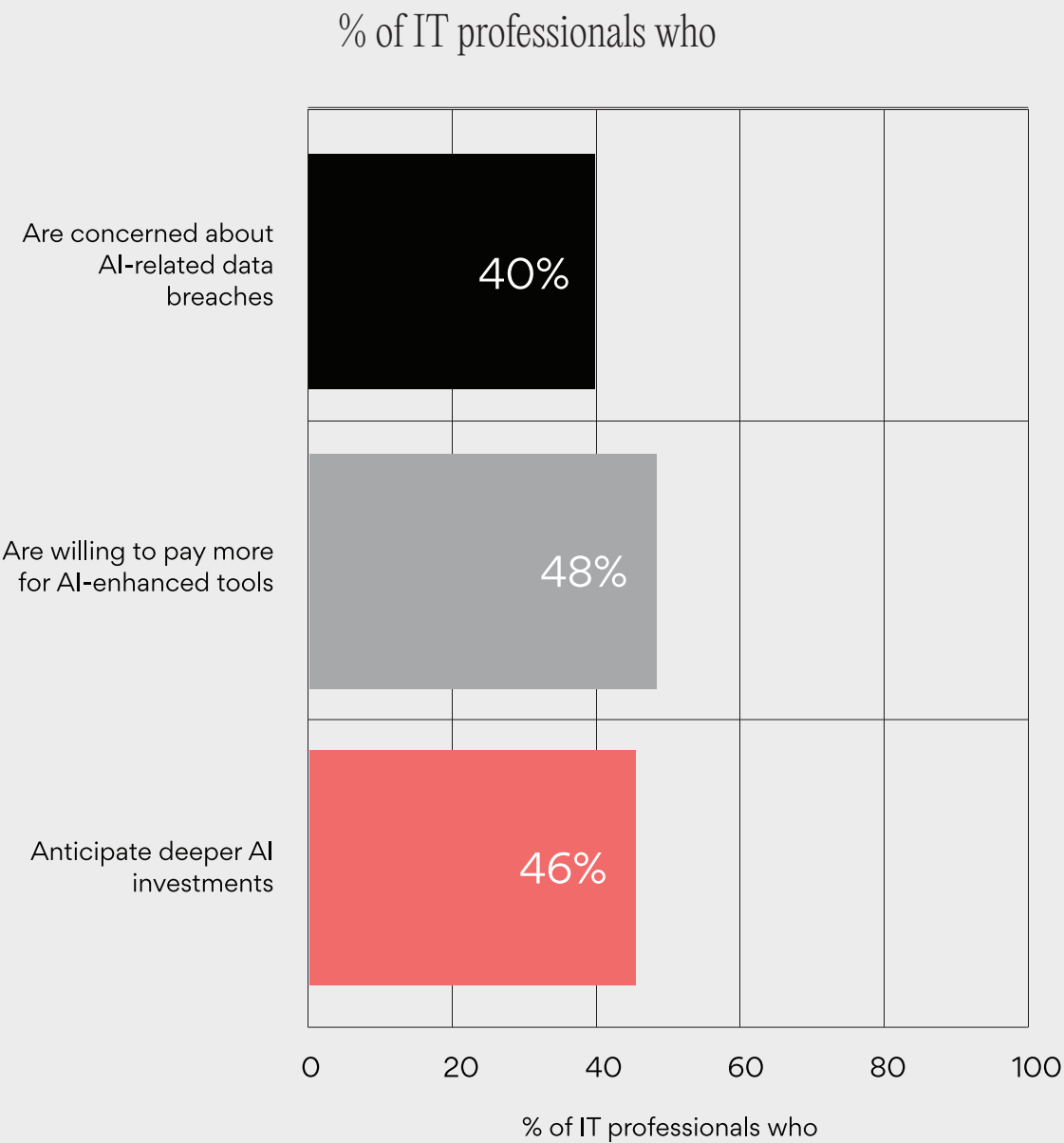
How IT professionals approach AI:

- **Eager to invest in AI:** A notable 46% of IT professionals anticipate their organizations investing in AI in the upcoming quarter, leading the charge compared to other departments.

- **Value AI capabilities:** A significant 48% of IT professionals are willing to pay a premium for their preferred workplace technologies if they come equipped with AI functionalities.

- **Recognize IT guidelines:** IT professionals lead the pack in stating their organizations have clear AI usage policies or guidelines; 38% say their organizations have clear policies compared to just 24% of all knowledge workers.

- **Ready to adopt:** IT leaders outpace their colleagues in AI adoption. While some use cases, like administrative tasks, are predictable, their readiness to employ AI for creative endeavors like brainstorming underscores their optimism.

- **Concerned about security:** Despite their optimism, IT professionals recognize the security risks associated with AI. With 92% of IT professionals voicing concerns over potential AI-related data breaches, it's clear that for IT, cybersecurity isn't just a nice-to-have, it's a strategic imperative.

Key takeaways for IT leaders

IT professionals can help drive maximum benefit from AI in their organizations in several ways:

- **Be AI champions:** IT professionals should be the guiding light for AI within their organizations. By championing its potential and emphasizing the ways AI can free employees' time for more strategic work, IT departments can rally others around a shared vision of progress.

- **Prioritize cybersecurity:** IT leaders must ensure that every AI initiative is backed by stringent cybersecurity measures. Adopt a proactive approach with continuous monitoring, updated threat intelligence, and adherence to data management best practices.

- **Approach AI integration with empathy:** As AI pioneers, IT should prioritize understanding and addressing concerns from non-IT AI users. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, engage in open dialogues, offer role-specific training, and ensure consistent support.

- **Customize AI training:** Develop training sessions tailored to individual departments, ensuring each team grasps how AI can elevate their specific roles.

- **Collaborate through AI implementation**: IT should work hand-in-hand with various departments, understanding their unique needs, and co-designing AI solutions. This ensures AI tools are not only technically proficient but also resonate with users' actual needs.

% of IT professionals who

% of IT professionals who

- Are concerned about AI-related data breaches: **40%**
- Are willing to pay more for AI-enhanced tools: **48%**
- Anticipate deeper AI investments: **46%**

AI at Zscaler

For Praniti Lakhwara, CIO at Zscaler, AI has the potential to drive high-value work and collaboration for employees at the organization. As she explained, the Zscaler team frequently dedicates time to crafting test cases—a manual process that involves specifying the inputs, expected outputs, and various test scenarios. AI presents the opportunity to automate these steps, so employees can shift their focus to identifying what cases need to be addressed and developing the overall testing strategy.

"This isn't about replacing roles. This is about driving our employees toward higher-value work."
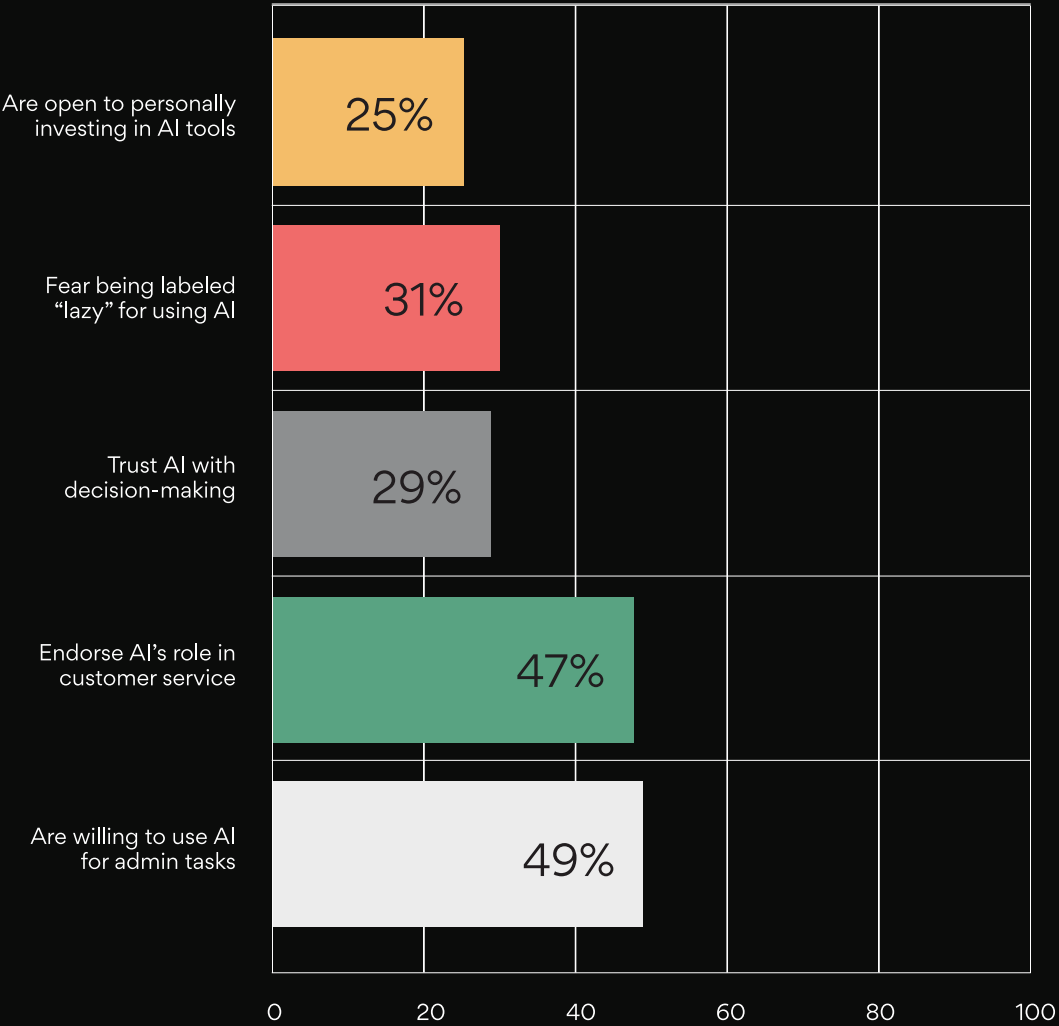
PRANITI LAKHWARA
CIO AT ZSCALER

Marketing: The AI skeptics

Marketing professionals thrive on understanding human emotions, creativity, and cultural subtleties. With AI stepping into the scene, many marketers are wary, guarding the creative core of their field.

How marketing professionals approach AI:

- **Lag in AI adoption:** Marketers trail behind IT and operations in using AI for admin tasks. Only 49% leverage AI for admin tasks, pointing to potential skill gaps or a lack of AI tools tailored to their specific needs.

- **Hesitation with AI in customer service:** Less than half (47%) of marketers endorse AI's role in customer service, underscoring their preference for genuine human touchpoints.

- **Reluctance to let AI decide:** Only 29% of marketers are comfortable letting AI make decisions, highlighting their trust in human insight and discretion.

- **Fear of the "lazy" label:** About 31% of marketers worry about being labeled "lazy" for using AI, a concern more prevalent here than in other departments.

- **Willing to invest personally in AI:** On a brighter note, 25% of marketers are willing to personally fund AI tools, suggesting a gap in the current AI offerings and a demand for more tailored solutions.

% of marketing professionals who

Are open to personally investing in AI tools — 25%

Fear being labeled "lazy" for using AI — 31%

Trust AI with decision-making — 29%

Endorse AI's role in customer service — 47%

Are willing to use AI for admin tasks — 49%

(scale: 0, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100)

Key takeaways for marketing leaders

To fully leverage AI, marketing leaders should dispel AI doubts and spark enthusiasm within their teams:

- **Emphasize AI education:** Only 24% of marketers feel they've had adequate AI training. To mitigate this, host sessions like "AI Essentials for Marketers" that cater to non-technical marketers. The Marketing AI Institute offers great resources aimed at making AI more accessible and approachable for marketers.

- **Position AI as a collaborator:** Reframe AI from a potential rival to a creative sidekick. Emphasize how AI can analyze vast datasets and produce actionable insights for personalized campaigns. Additionally, highlight AI's ability to automate content production and pivot marketers to higher-priority initiatives.

- **Engage with hands-on experimentation and trainings:** Introduce marketers to AI tools through practical workshops using real campaign data. Consider running an "AI Brain Boost" experiment similar to the one that Asana ran with its marketing team.

- **Champion peer-to-peer mentorship:** Pair less tech-savvy marketers with AI-savvy peers for tailored learning. This mentorship can address individual hurdles and accelerate AI adoption.

- **Hold regular AI check-ins:** Organize monthly or quarterly sessions to tackle issues, collect feedback, and update marketers on new AI tools and features.

SPOTLIGHT

AI at Blackbaud

For Catherine LaCour, CMO of Blackbaud, experimentation—with responsible guardrails—can be a powerful tool to explore and reshape perceptions about AI. At Blackbaud, this approach is being taken to heart by engaging employees across the company with the opportunity to experiment—from a hackathon framed as a "festival of innovation" to professional development through a structured innovation cohort.

"When we consider AI as an opportunity to engage in joyful innovation and personal professional development, it not only engages the workforce but also infuses the process with fun and excitement, fostering a positive, inclusive and responsible AI culture."

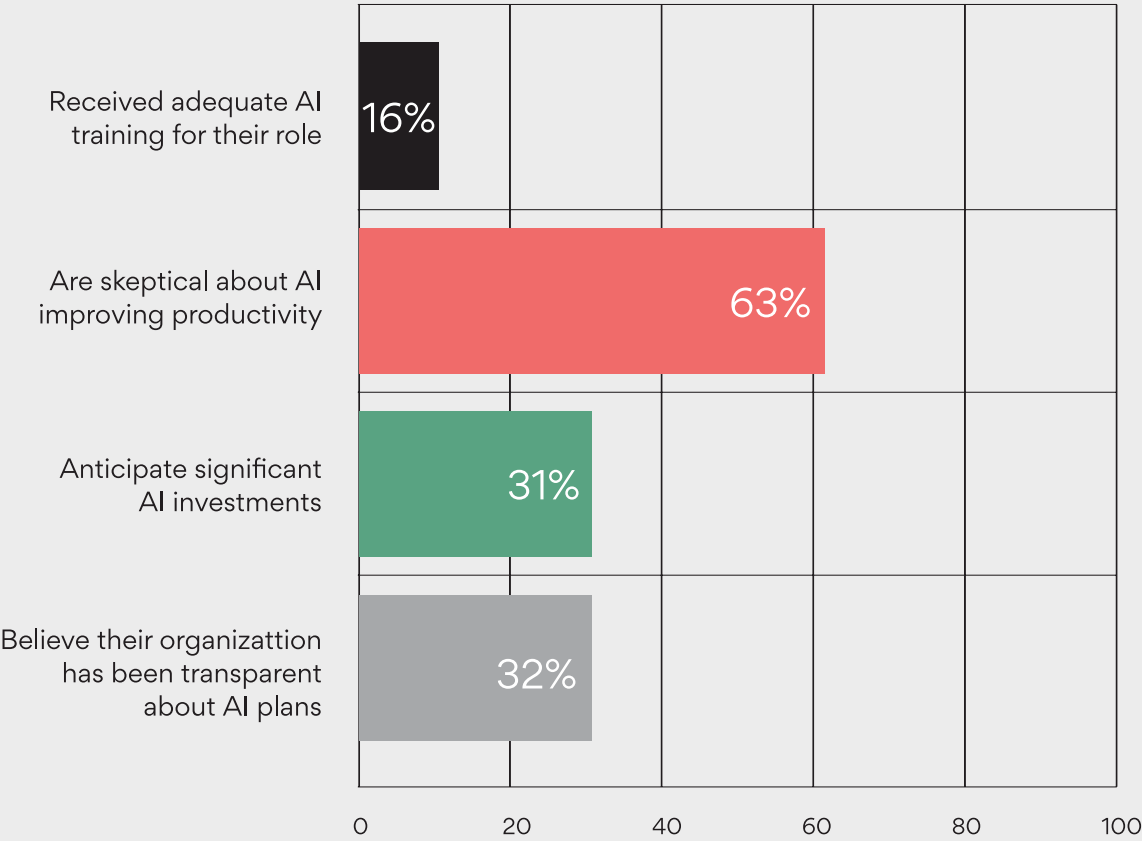**CATHERINE LACOUR**
CMO OF BLACKBAUD

Operations: The AI realists

Operations teams, known for their practical approach to business, see AI's promise and also its complexities.

How operations professionals approach AI:

- **Training deficit:** Only 16% of operations professionals feel they've received role-specific AI training. Yet, they're the most vocal about the need for such training.

- **Doubts about AI's productivity impact:** A significant (63%) of operations professionals doubt AI's ability to boost productivity, fearing it might even reduce it.

- **Adopting AI for goal-setting:** An optimistic 50% foresee AI playing a role in goal-setting. Moreover, 55% believe AI can help achieve objectives more effectively than traditional methods.

- **Adopting AI for project management:** Already, 39% of operations professionals want to use AI for project planning. AI can help provide real-time visibility into project progress and performance, offering significant value for program management offices (PMOs).

- **Conservative outlook on AI investment:** Just 31% anticipate their companies investing in AI in the coming quarter, indicating a more conservative stance than other teams.

- **Lack of transparency:** Only 32% of operations professionals believe there's been transparent communication about AI plans. Past tech rollouts without proper communication might be a reason for this skepticism.

% of operations professionals who

Received adequate AI training for their role — 16%

Are skeptical about AI improving productivity — 63%

Anticipate significant AI investments — 31%

Believe their organizattion has been transparent about AI plans — 32%

Key takeaways for operations leaders

Operations leaders are pivotal in steering AI's success in their organizations. Here's how they can optimize AI's potential:

- **Show commitment through action:** Many in operations doubt that there will be significant AI investments soon. Reassure them with tangible steps like pilot projects or dedicated AI budgets. Identify risks up-front and be ready to pivot if certain AI initiatives don't pan out.

- **Tackle productivity doubts:** Highlight AI applications that offer immediate benefits, like automating strategic work intake. Share success stories where AI has enhanced efficiency and cut down redundancies.

- **Emphasize transparent AI strategy:** Foster trust with open dialogue about AI's role and goals. Engage operations from the start of AI projects, ensuring everyone's on the same page about objectives and success markers.

- **Advocate for tailored AI training:** Address the training void with AI modules designed for operations, including AI's role in goal-setting. As operations is central to AI training, their feedback can also refine training for other departments.

- **Foster IT-operations collaboration:** Prevent operations from feeling overshadowed by IT in AI projects. Promote collaboration from the outset with joint workshops, shared goals, and open communication to position operations as vital AI stakeholders.

AI at Sonder

For Deeksha Hebbar, COO of Sonder, there's an urgency to adopt AI. Leaders need to recognize that rapid adoption brings challenges, especially concerning data privacy and compliance. Recognizing these risks, Hebbar explains Sonder's three-tiered approach.

"Piloting and testing AI solutions is essential for gaining insights into what's effective and what's not. This enables you to quickly scale AI initiatives across your organization. However, it's crucial to balance this with data security and compliance. Leaders must evaluate potential risks, bolster security within workflows, and consider the broader cross-functional impact while also crafting tailored education and guidelines for each department."

DEEKSHA HEBBAR

Summary: Bridging the AI gap across departments

Each department views AI from its own vantage point, influenced by distinct roles and challenges. To successfully weave AI into the fabric of your organization, you must recognize and cater to these diverse perspectives. This ensures a cohesive and impactful AI strategy throughout your organization.

CHAPTER 4

Strategies for AI vendor selection

Good intentions alone won't yield results with AI. You need a strategic approach to investing in AI tools. As a leader, your choices in AI vendors will determine your organization's AI trajectory.

Employees estimate that AI could automate about 29% of their tasks, signaling a substantial potential for ROI. However, many executives remain hesitant to invest. Only 31% of knowledge workers expect their organizations to invest in generative AI tools in the next quarter. Waiting now will likely mean playing catch-up later.

Essential considerations for AI vendor selection

1. **Data integrity:** While only 30% of knowledge workers currently use AI for data analysis, a significant 62% are eager to start. The primary challenge? Data quality. The vast majority (90%) of employees believe AI's success hinges on the caliber of its data. Focus on vendors renowned for their robust datasets and seamless integrations linking diverse data sources.

Using AI for data analysis
% of knowledge workers who...
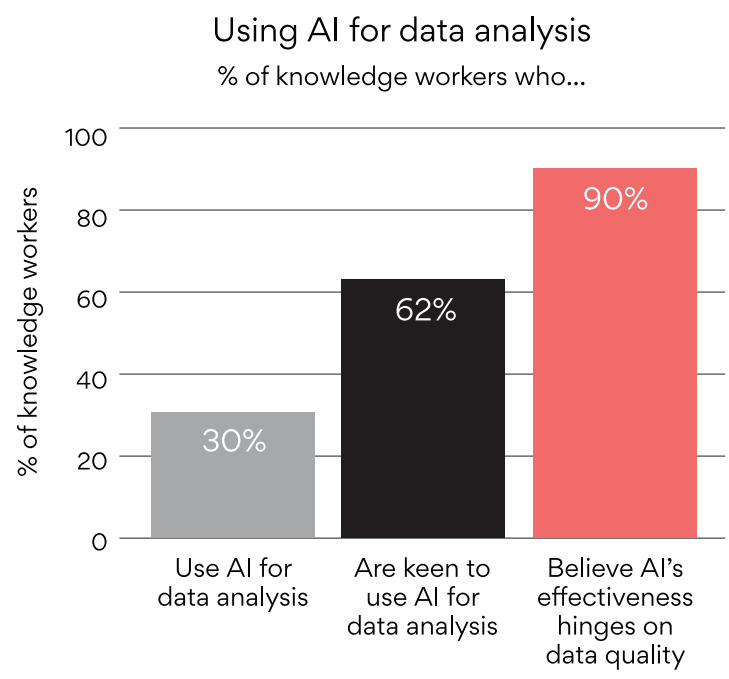
2. **User-friendly experience:** 60% of employees advocate for democratizing AI tools within their organizations, making them accessible to every employee. When assessing vendors, prioritize those offering intuitive, user-centric platforms complemented by comprehensive training resources.

3. **Proactive productivity insights:** Despite the AI hype, a surprising 71% of knowledge workers worry about its potential to decrease productivity. Address this skepticism by choosing vendors that offer tools to detect inefficiencies, blind spots, and potential roadblocks early on, preventing larger issues down the line.

4. **Growth and learning capabilities:** 64% of knowledge workers support using AI for skills training and professional development—more than any other use case. Opt for vendors that provide insights into the work practices and habits of top-performing individuals, facilitating skill enhancement and knowledge sharing across your team.

5. **Future-proof solutions:** The AI realm is ever-evolving. Today's cutting-edge technology might be tomorrow's outdated software. 24% of knowledge workers are ready to pay more for vendors dedicated to sustained AI advancements. As a leader, aligning with visionary vendors ensures your organization stays ahead in the ever-changing AI game.

> # 24%
> of knowledge workers are willing to pay a premium for vendors committed to long-term AI investments

6. **Ethical and transparent practices:** In the age of AI, ethics and transparency are non-negotiables. Opt for vendors with well-defined policies that emphasize user privacy and robust data security.

Summary: Strategically selecting AI vendors

Choosing the right AI vendors can significantly influence your organization's AI trajectory. While the potential of AI is evident, successful implementation hinges on strategically selecting AI vendors.
potential of AI is evident, successful implementation hinges on strategically selecting AI vendors.

The path forward

Organizations are at a pivotal juncture. Fully harnessing AI goes beyond mere tool adoption—it requires that you bridge leadership and departmental gaps within your organization. By making informed vendor decisions, businesses can tap into AI's transformative power and leverage it to unlock new levels of human ingenuity. In this ever-evolving AI landscape, you can't just be a decision-maker; you need to be an architect of change for your organization.

Learn more at: workinnovationlab.com

The Work Innovation Lab is a think tank by Asana that develops human-centric, cutting-edge research to help businesses evolve today to meet the growing changes and challenges of the future of work. To learn more about The Work Innovation Lab and get our other research-backed insights, visit workinnovationlab.com.

Methodology

This research from Asana's Work Innovation Lab surveyed 4,546 knowledge workers in the United States and United Kingdom in July 2023. The survey was administered via Qualtrics and data collection was conducted by Prolific and did not target Asana customers or employees.

THE WORK INNOVATION LAB

BY asana