

AI and Data Leadership Survey Results 2025–2026

How leaders are turning AI strategy
into business value.



Lucent / Search

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence is no longer a technology discussion, it is a leadership one. Across industries, boards and CEOs are shifting focus from experimentation to execution, from curiosity to competitive advantage. Yet our research with over 100 AI and data leaders shows a persistent gap between ambition and delivery.

AI is now embedded in strategy, but scaling it requires more than capital. It demands clear accountability, cross-functional collaboration, and leadership that understands both human and technical systems. The most successful organisations are not those investing the most in AI, but those aligning people, governance, and culture around it.

This report examines how that alignment is taking shape and where it is still breaking down. The findings are clear: technology will not decide who wins with AI. Leadership will.

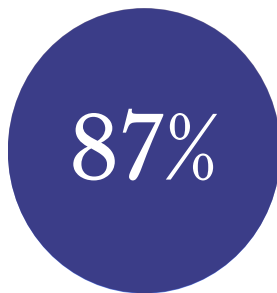
Executive Summary

63% of AI leaders plan to move roles in the next year, signalling an execution risk for every CEO betting on AI transformation. AI has become a core business capability. Leaders are no longer debating if to invest, but how to deliver measurable value at scale. Yet an execution gap is holding organisations back. **Fragmented ownership, scarce talent, and weak cross-functional collaboration remain the biggest barriers to real impact.**

Our survey of over 100 AI and data executives shows a clear pattern. AI leadership is now established across industries, but execution maturity lags. Many firms have appointed Chief AI Officers and Heads of Data, yet progress stalls in pilot phases. High turnover and unfulfilled mandates reveal that success depends less on algorithms and more on leadership clarity, structure, and sponsorship from the top.

The CEO Imperative?

AI execution is now a leadership challenge, not a technical one. CEOs must embed AI as a strategic function, funded, governed, and measured like any other enterprise priority.

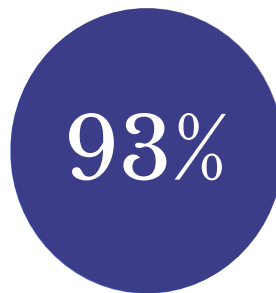


of AI leaders say cross-department collaboration is challenging.



Align

Create cross-functional ownership for AI delivery. Replace isolated pilots with integrated programmes.

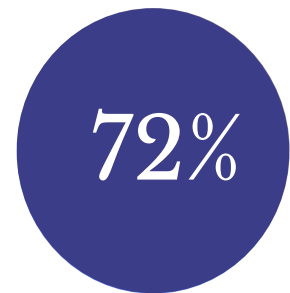


cite high demand for communication and influence skills.



Communicate

Set a clear tone from the top. Make AI a board-level priority with defined business outcomes.



report difficulty securing budgets for AI initiatives.



Invest

Empower experienced AI leaders with budget, headcount, and authority to deliver transformation.

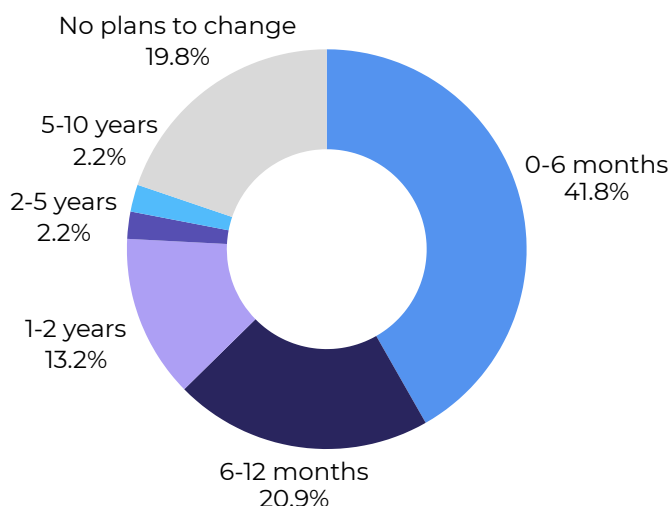
The AI Leader's Mindset and Motivations

AI and data leaders are ambitious change agents, but many are constrained by structure, not vision. They want to drive enterprise transformation, yet lack the sponsorship, influence, and resources to do so. The result is an emerging leadership risk: **63% of AI leaders plan to leave within 12 months.**

Our research shows these leaders are motivated by purpose and impact. They thrive when their work is tied to core business strategy, not sidelined as R&D. However, too many operate without a clear mandate or sufficient backing. High turnover reflects unfulfilled ambition and weak organisational alignment, not just competitive poaching. Leaders who feel disconnected from decision-making or forced to fight for basic resources disengage quickly and often exit.

For CEOs, this is a structural challenge, not a talent one. Retention hinges on empowerment. When AI executives have a seat at the table, ownership of outcomes, and visible sponsorship, they deliver measurable impact. When they don't, they move on, and take your competitive edge with them.

When do you next plan on changing jobs?



Empower

Give your Head of AI/CDO direct visibility at the board level. Make data and AI strategy part of enterprise planning.

Resource

Fund AI teams properly. Align budgets, headcount, and authority to the scale of their mandate.

Enable Impact

Remove organisational friction: streamline governance, set realistic delivery timelines, and back pilots through to production.

Building the Team

Talent and Structure

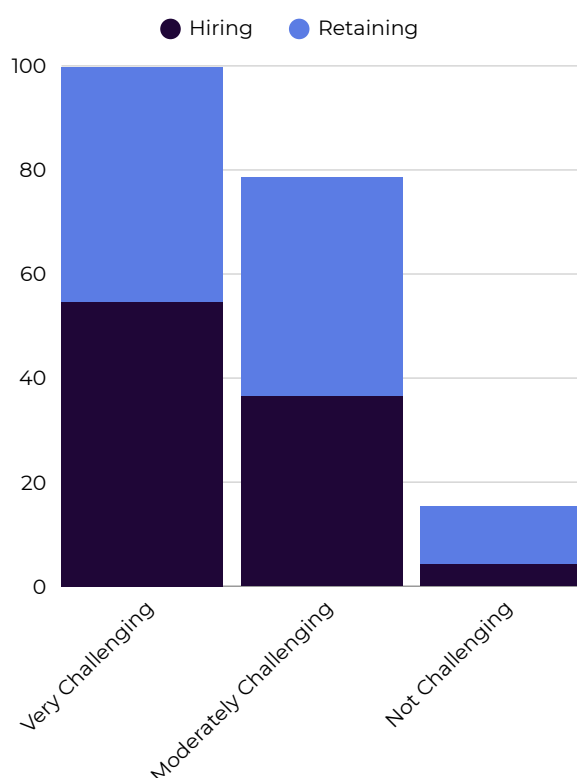
The talent gap is now the biggest brake on AI execution. **Over 90% of AI leaders struggle to hire or retain critical talent**, with 55% calling hiring very challenging. Even once secured, skilled data scientists and machine learning engineers are difficult to keep: **87% report retention challenges**. In short, every link in the AI talent chain, from attraction to retention, is under strain.

AI leadership today demands more than recruiting hard-to-find specialists. Effective execution depends on structure: nearly 40% of leaders now manage distributed, multi-region teams, spanning from start-up-sized units to large enterprise functions. The most successful teams combine global collaboration with local accountability and the autonomy to move fast.

For CEOs, talent is now a strategic variable, not a support function. Compensation alone cannot win this race. Purpose, growth, and visibility matter just as much. Companies that rely on buying external stars while under-rewarding incumbents risk eroding morale and losing institutional knowledge.

Embedding AI capability at scale requires a long-term people strategy: one that treats AI talent as an investment, not a cost. Build internally where possible, compete smartly externally, and design teams that can flex globally.

How Challenging is Hiring and Retaining AI Talent?



Treat AI hiring as strategic

Elevate recruitment of data and AI specialists to a priority. Move fast, use specialist partners, and target global pools.

Make retention deliberate

Offer clear career progression, project variety, and recognition - not just pay. Benchmark internal vs external equity to avoid hidden pay gaps.

Grow talent from within

Upskill engineers and analysts through structured training. Create visible AI career paths to reduce reliance on external hiring.

Overcoming Organisational Barriers

Beyond talent, internal silos and culture are the biggest brakes on AI execution. **51% of AI leaders say cross-department collaboration is “very challenging”** (and another 36% moderately so). **Nearly three-quarters struggle to secure executive buy-in.** Even the best AI models cannot scale without organisational alignment and sponsorship.

AI initiatives sit at the intersection of IT, data, and business functions. Yet few organisations are structured to deliver cross-functionally. Leaders describe turf wars, competing priorities, and fragmented data agendas, leaving pockets of progress that never add up to enterprise value. The issue is rarely technology; it is ownership, incentives, and governance. In many firms, even data accountability is unclear. Does it sit with IT, analytics, or the business? Without clarity, delivery slows and trust erodes.

Executive buy-in remains uneven. While CEOs increasingly signal AI as a priority, **24% of AI leaders still find it very hard to secure leadership support.** The difference between success and stagnation often comes down to culture. Organisations with an innovation mindset and clear AI governance frameworks move faster, build trust, and attract better talent.

What's Working?

Follow-up interviews revealed that the organisations achieving the strongest ROI took a counterintuitive path. While most AI leaders ranked stakeholder management as the top skill in demand and people and organisational design skills as the lead in demand skill, the most successful companies didn't start with individuals - they started with structure.

They designed their strategy and target operating model first, embedding AI within existing workflows and processes rather than bolting it on. AI was not a specialist function. It was a capability woven through operations, strategy, and governance.

These firms also share one cultural trait: active CEO and board involvement. AI is not merely approved; it is owned, sponsored, and measured at the top. The human side of AI - structure, culture, and change management - is treated with the same rigour as data and models.

Redefine accountability

Clarify ownership of data, AI, and outcomes across business, IT, and analytics.

Mandate collaboration

Establish cross-functional AI governance with shared KPIs and decision rights.

Model the culture

Make AI part of strategic planning, not a side initiative. Demonstrate visible CEO sponsorship.

The ROI Pressure Budgets vs Value

AI is under increasing scrutiny to prove its worth. **71% of AI leaders struggle to secure sufficient budgets, and 85% find measuring ROI difficult.** The tension between the demand for quick wins and the reality of long-term payoffs keeps many organisations stuck in pilot purgatory.

Small pilots often attract seed funding, but few reach scale. Only one in four leaders finds it easy to secure ongoing investment. The problem is most acute in smaller firms, yet even large enterprises face internal competition for limited capital. Traditional financial metrics compound the issue: AI's impact often shows up in efficiency, resilience, or customer experience, and these benefits don't translate neatly into quarterly returns.

This short-termism risks leaving value on the table. Companies that persist past the pilot stage typically see compound ROI as AI capabilities mature. Treating AI as strategic infrastructure, not discretionary spend, reframes the conversation from cost to competitiveness.

What's Working?

The highest-performing organisations reframe ROI from financial precision to strategic traction. They define early success through adoption and operational improvement metrics rather than immediate profit.

Finance teams partner with AI leaders to track proxy indicators (such as process efficiency, customer response times, or model accuracy) to demonstrate momentum and sustain investment. By blending early performance signals with long-term financial outcomes, they keep both investors and boards confident.



Fund beyond pilot

Ring-fence scale-up budgets for proven pilots. Avoid endless PoCs that never reach production.



Reset ROI expectations

Align finance and AI teams on 12–24-month payback timelines and new success metrics such as “return on data” or adoption rates.



Show visible wins

Require quarterly reporting of AI impact. Celebrate small gains to maintain confidence and learning across the organisation.

Technology Scalability From Lab to Enterprise

Technology is not the bottleneck; scaling it is. **91% of AI leaders struggle to move pilots into production, and 89% face challenges integrating AI with legacy systems.** The result is that functional prototypes never reach enterprise scale.

The problem is less about innovation and more about infrastructure. Many pilots are built in isolation without the tech stacks, data pipelines, or governance needed for production deployment. Without these foundations, models break under real-world complexity. Legacy systems compound the issue: AI can't create value if it can't connect to the systems where decisions and transactions actually occur.

Top-performing organisations approach AI like product engineering. They invest early in scalable architectures, automate deployment, and embed AI teams directly alongside IT and software engineering. **The critical shift is treating AI as a live system, not a lab experiment.**

What's Working?

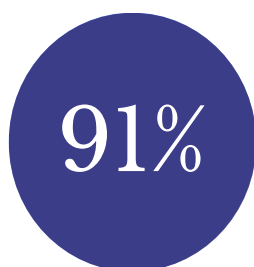
Successful AI teams operate with shared accountability across data, IT, and business functions. They adopt MLOps practices (continuous integration, model monitoring, and automated retraining) to ensure reliability at scale.

Leaders also standardise tech stacks to reduce tool sprawl and integration friction, while enforcing clear ownership over production systems.

The result is faster deployment cycles, lower technical debt, and greater confidence in scaling AI enterprise-wide.



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Invest in infrastructure

Fund the “plumbing” first: MLOps platforms, integration architecture, and scalable data pipelines.

Embed collaboration

Co-locate AI and engineering teams under shared KPIs for uptime, accuracy, and adoption.

Design for scale from day one

Require every pilot to include a production pathway and integration plan before approval.

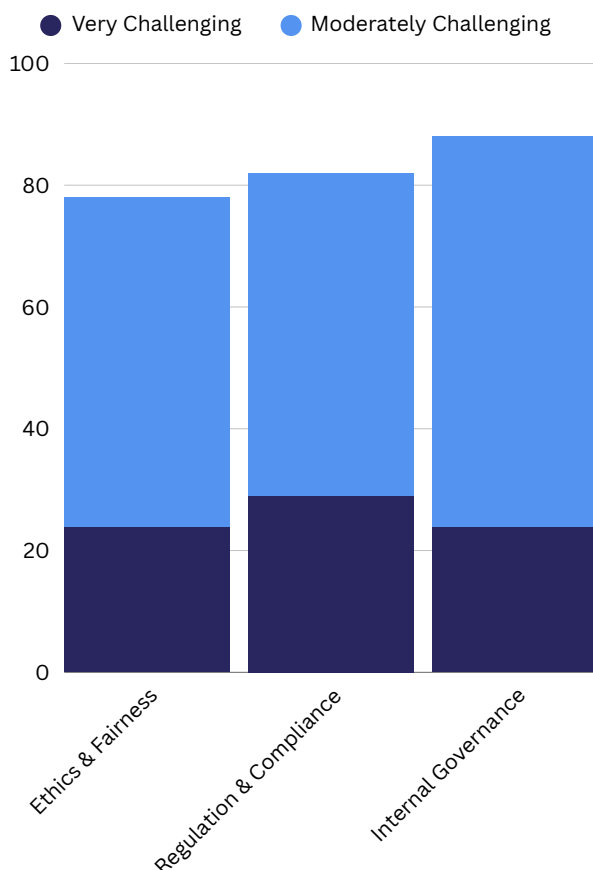
Governance, Ethics and Regulation

Responsible AI has moved from aspiration to obligation. **88% of AI leaders find establishing governance challenging, and 82% struggle to keep pace with emerging regulations.** As the UK, EU, and other markets tighten oversight, governance gaps now represent both a compliance and reputational risk.

Ethics and regulation are converging into a new licence to operate. The EU AI Act, UK's pro-innovation framework, and sector-specific standards in finance and healthcare are forcing companies to prove transparency, fairness, and accountability. Yet many still lack the structures to do so. AI oversight is fragmented, policies exist on paper but not in process, and model documentation is inconsistent.

The opportunity lies in treating governance as an enabler, not a constraint. Firms with clear ethical frameworks, model review boards, and transparent reporting processes are scaling AI faster and earning customer trust more quickly. Responsible AI is now a source of competitive advantage.

AI Governance Challenges



What's Working?

Principles, processes and practice.

Ethics charters, review committees and ongoing audits. Those who operationalise governance early find that it accelerates, not slows, innovation by removing uncertainty and building stakeholder confidence.

Set the tone at the top

Approve a clear AI ethics policy and make compliance part of board reporting.

Build formal oversight

Establish cross-functional governance committees with legal, risk, and technical input.

Operationalise ethics

Train teams, track AI governance KPIs, and require vendors to meet your standards.

Looking Ahead

Generative AI and autonomous AI agents are reshaping how work gets done. **Three-quarters of AI leaders cite Generative AI as the most disruptive technology**, while around 40% highlight AI agents and digital workers as the next major inflexion point. These technologies are shifting AI from analysis to action, automating knowledge work, accelerating product development, and transforming customer interaction.

The implication for leadership is clear: disruption will not be linear. AI will change workflows before it replaces roles, augmenting teams long before automation is complete. The greatest organisational challenge isn't adoption, it's redesigning work, reskilling teams, and managing change at scale. CEOs who move early to adapt job structures, training, and governance will gain both productivity and employee trust.

AI will soon be embedded everywhere. Those who build workforce and operating models ready for this shift will define the next generation of competitive advantage.

What's Working?

Early adopters are focusing on controlled experimentation. They run small, low-risk GenAI pilots in marketing, software engineering, and customer service, capturing learnings before scaling. They're also investing in AI literacy across the organisation, ensuring employees understand both the power and limits of AI tools.

Crucially, these firms see GenAI as a collaborative system where humans define goals, AI executes tasks, and oversight remains human-led. This hybrid approach is already securing measurable productivity gains.

- ① **Set your AI strategy**
Define where GenAI and automation will create the most value and align it with strategic priorities.
- ② **Upskill and adapt your teams**
Launch AI literacy and reskilling programmes. Build new roles in AI oversight, prompt engineering, and model evaluation.
- ③ **Pilot responsibly**
Test GenAI in contained domains, measure productivity impact, and integrate ethics reviews into every deployment.
- ④ **Bring in expert support**
Hire talent, partner with specialist consultants or interim AI leaders to accelerate capability building and ensure early projects are technically and ethically sound.
- ⑤ **Track law as closely as tech**
Assign responsibility for monitoring evolving AI legislation and standards, ensuring compliance and governance mature in parallel with adoption.

Across all findings, one theme is clear: execution depends on leadership alignment, not algorithms. The next 12 months will separate companies experimenting with AI from those embedding it in their DNA.

About the Author



Rebecca Hastings

Rebecca Hastings is a trusted advisor to CEOs, Boards, and investors scaling AI, data, and technology leadership teams. As the Founder of Lucent Search, she brings over 18 years of experience in executive search and strategic talent advisory, enabling high-growth and transformation-led organisations build the capability required to deliver results in the AI era.

Rebecca speaks regularly at industry conferences and hosts The Lucent Perspective podcast, where she interviews leading investors, founders, and technology executives shaping the future of AI and innovation.

Through her work in executive search, talent strategy, and workforce transformation, Rebecca helps ambitious companies turn AI strategy into execution by identifying, assessing, and securing the leaders and experts who make impact happen.

Get in Touch

To access the full dataset, discuss these findings, or explore how other firms are bridging the execution gap, connect with Rebecca Hastings via email at **rebecca@lucent-search.com**.

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