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2026 AI Industry Trends Report

Why operational discipline, not innovation theater, will decide AI winners in 2026

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Introduction



AI is no longer a future bet. It is now a core operating consideration.

By 2026, most organizations will not be asking whether to invest in AI, but where AI will create real leverage and where it will quietly fail. Leaders are pushing back on AI investments made 'just because' and demanding investments that deliver measurable results.

This report outlines three trends shaping how AI will be deployed, funded, and evaluated in 2026. These trends reflect where AI investments are actually delivering value and where they continue to fall short.

2026 Trends



Trend 1: AI as an Operational Requirement



Trend 2: Efficiency Takes the Gold



Trend 3: Data Quality Remains the Core Constraint

Trend 1: AI as an Operational Requirement

In 2026, competitive advantage will not come purely from the models. It will come from how well the business understands its workflows, its data, and its operational gaps, well before the tech is even a thought. Companies that attempt to deploy AI on top of fragmented processes and fragile infrastructure will continue to stall.

- AI adoption across large enterprises is now widespread, but depth of adoption remains uneven. McKinsey's 2025 State of AI report¹ shows that 88% of organizations are using AI within at least one business function, an increase of ten percentage points from the prior year.
- At the same time, nearly two-thirds of organizations have not yet begun scaling AI across the enterprise, indicating that adoption may be high, but operational maturity still lags¹.
- Investment signals reinforce the shift. KMPG's 2025 Global CEO Outlook² reports that nearly 69% of CEOs are planning to invest between 10% and 20% of their budgets to AI, with 71% saying that AI is their top investment priority.
- The organizations that succeed will focus first on understanding their current-state operations, prioritizing high-value use cases, and incorporating frontline pain points before building solutions. AI is becoming an operational requirement, not an innovation exercise.

Trend 2: Efficiency Takes the Gold

In 2026, organizations will stop funding AI initiatives that look impressive but don't meaningfully change how work gets done. Instead, investment will shift toward behind-the-scenes processes that underpin core operations, such as back-office operations, scheduling, and predictive analytics.

- As economic pressure persists, AI investments are being judged less on novelty and more on the measurable return. McKinsey State of AI¹ reports that 80% of respondents say their companies set efficiency as an objective of their AI investments. This marks a clear shift away from using AI as the flashy proof of concept.
- KMPG's AI Quarterly Pulse Survey³ from 2025 shows that productivity has reached the top ROI metric (79%), with investment pressure to demonstrate ROI on GenAI investments becoming extremely important.
- As a result, historically overlooked operational processes are becoming central to AI strategy because they offer direct leverage in a business landscape defined by challenges and uncertainty. Efficiency is no longer a secondary benefit. It is the business case. AI strategies that do not translate into operational efficiency will increasingly struggle to survive budget scrutiny.

Trend 3: Data Quality Remains the Core Constraint

In 2026, data challenges will continue to persist, even as model capabilities improve. The limiting factor is no longer access to the tech, but whether organizations can reliably supply AI systems with consistent, integrated, and trustworthy data. Many AI initiatives fail to move beyond pilots, not because the tech failed, but because the data did.

- As AI adoption expands, data foundations continue to emerge as the limiting factor. The hype cycle is giving way to a reality check. As highlighted in Gartner's Data & Analytics Summit⁴, poor data quality will continue to be one of the most frequently mentioned challenges.
- KMPG's AI Quarterly Pulse Survey³ reinforces this finding, with 85% of respondents identifying data quality as their biggest anticipated challenge.
- Looking ahead, 2026 will bring heightened focus on the foundational data work. Organizations will increasingly prioritize foundational data work: integration, quality controls, documentation, governance, access, and ownership.
- While often viewed as unglamorous, these efforts are becoming prerequisites for AI ROI. As the old saying goes: garbage in, garbage out. You can't expect a robust AI solution if the data that feeds it leaves a lot to be desired.

What Leaders Should Do Differently in 2026

In 2026, AI success will be determined by robust strategy and execution. Now more than ever, it is imperative to:

- Treat AI initiatives as operating programs, not innovation pilots
- Prioritize efficiency and productivity over unfocused experimentation
- Tie AI success metrics to operational outcomes, not adoption
- Invest in data foundations as a prerequisite, not a follow-on

The organizations that win will be those that slow down long enough to build the right foundations, align AI to real work, and measure success in operational outcomes. The next phase of AI is not about doing more. It is about doing what matters.

Sources



1. [McKinsey & Company - The State of AI 2025](#)
2. [KPMG - Global CEO Outlook 2025](#)
3. [KPMG - AI Quarterly Pulse Survey 2025](#)
4. [Gartner - Identifies Three Areas to Help Data & Analytics Leaders Scale AI](#)