



The friction tax:

Hidden work is AI's
enterprise opportunity

A dual survey of 500 C-Suite and senior enterprise
leaders and 1,000 employees at US enterprises

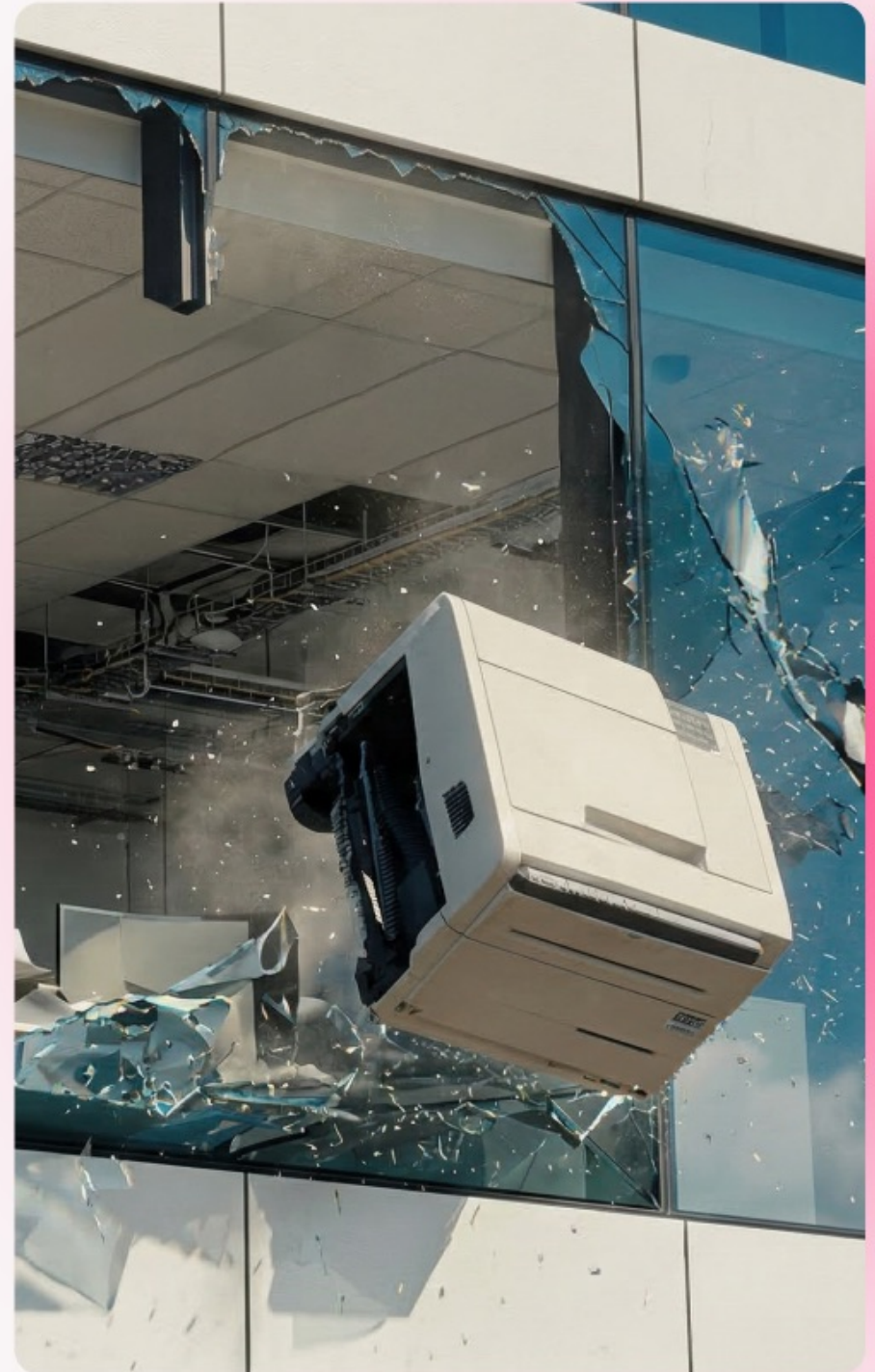


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AI adoption is accelerating across the enterprise. But this report, commissioned as part of Atera's 'Let People Work' mission and based on two parallel surveys of 1,500 respondents at large US organizations, reveals that AI's biggest barrier isn't resistance or capability. It's the invisible workflow and infrastructure friction that AI is being deployed on top of.

Employees are losing hours every week to stalled systems, broken workflows, and meta-work. Leaders feel the friction too, but they also acknowledge a critical blind spot: most believe their IT teams see fewer than three-quarters of the problems employees actually experience. Despite these challenges, the data reveals a clear and actionable path forward.

The findings point to five key themes:

- **The friction tax is massive and universal.** Eighty-eight percent of employees lose some time daily to stalled systems. Sixty-one percent have delayed or avoided a key work action because the process was too broken. Leaders are not immune: 46 percent lose three or more hours per week.
- **Much of that friction is invisible to leadership.** Thirty-seven percent of employees chose not to file a support ticket for a recent issue. And 91 percent of employees say leadership overestimates their capacity because inefficient processes are not being taken into account.

- **A readiness gap separates leaders from employees.** Ninety-two percent of leaders are comfortable with AI in judgment-based work. Only 57 percent of employees are even comfortable with AI handling basic background tasks, and 30 percent say nothing currently increases their trust in AI at work. Trust is there to be earned; for some, it seems it has not yet been.
- **Both sides agree on what they want AI to achieve.** Employees want AI that improves work quality (47 percent) and reduces friction (43 percent). Leaders want ROI (68 percent) and reduced interruptions (60 percent). The language is different, but the destination is the same: less friction, better outcomes, more time for the work that matters.
- **Both sides agree on why AI pilots fail.** Unready workflows, poor integration, and insufficient training top the list for both groups. On training, the two surveys returned an identical result: 32 percent. The diagnosis is shared; what's needed now is correct action.

The organizations that will capture AI's full value are not necessarily the ones moving the fastest. They are the ones starting in the right place: deploying AI where friction is highest and trust barriers are lowest, and earning trust through execution rather than announcements.

Introduction

AI is no longer a pilot program or a boardroom talking point. For most large enterprises, the question has shifted from "should we adopt AI?" to "why isn't it delivering what we expected?"

This report offers an answer, drawn from two parallel surveys conducted in early 2026. The first surveyed 500 C-Suite and senior enterprise leaders at US companies with 1,000 or more employees. The second surveyed 1,000 full-time employees across non-IT departments at companies of the same scale.

The result is a rare side-by-side view of AI readiness from the people deploying it and the people living with it. What emerges is not a story of opposition. Leaders and employees broadly want the same thing: less friction, more focus, better outcomes. But they experience work differently, trust AI at different levels, and define success in different terms.

Where they agree most may be the most important finding of all. Both groups can identify exactly where work breaks down and exactly why AI pilots fail. That shared diagnosis is not just a data point; it is a deployment roadmap for any organization serious about making AI work.

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01

The friction tax:

What work
actually
costs today

Before examining what AI can do, it's worth understanding the scale of what it needs to solve.

Across both surveys, the data paints a consistent picture: employees at every level are losing significant time and productivity to friction that has nothing to do with the complexity of their actual work.

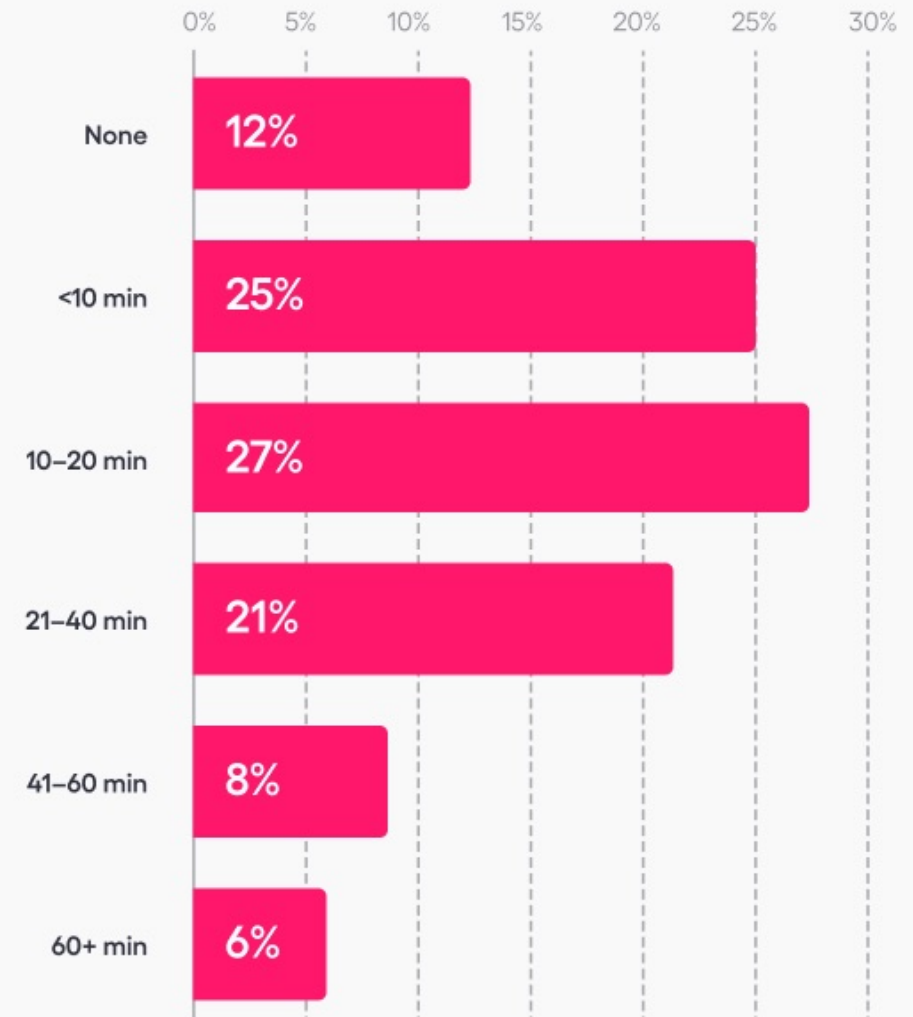
The employee experience

For the 1,000 employees surveyed, friction is not an occasional inconvenience. It is a daily constant. **Eighty-eight percent** report losing some time every day to stalled systems: waiting on access, waiting for fixes, or working with slow and non-responsive tools. More than a third (**35 percent**) lose 21 minutes or more per day, and **six percent** lose more than an hour.

The costs compound quickly. Among employees who experience time loss, **70 percent** estimate that stalled systems alone cost their company \$100 or more per week in lost productivity. Thirty-six percent put the figure above \$200. Across a workforce of thousands, these individual losses add up to a significant drag on organizational performance.

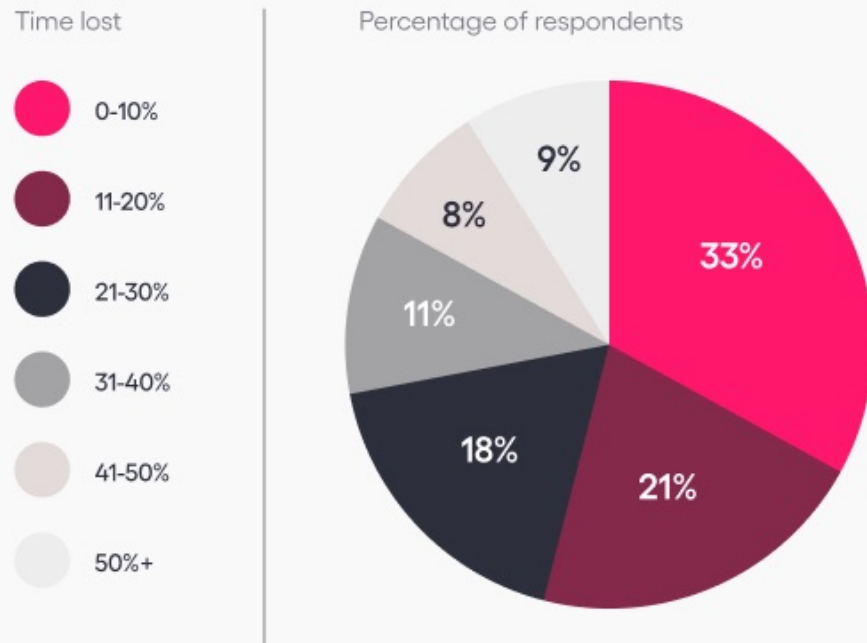
Time lost daily to stalled systems (employees)

Percentage of respondents



But stalled systems are only part of the picture. When asked about meta-work (chasing approvals, logging issues, formatting documents, providing status updates, switching between tools), **68 percent of employees** say it consumes more than **10 percent of their workday**. More than one in four (**29 percent**) say it consumes **more than 30 percent**.

Percentage of workday spent on meta-work (employees)



Perhaps the most striking finding: **61 percent of employees** say they have delayed or avoided taking a key action at work because the workflow or process was too complicated, unclear, or broken. **Sixteen percent** say this happens frequently. This is not just wasted time. It's work that never gets done, decisions that are never made, and value that never gets created, all because the systems surrounding the work are too cumbersome to navigate.



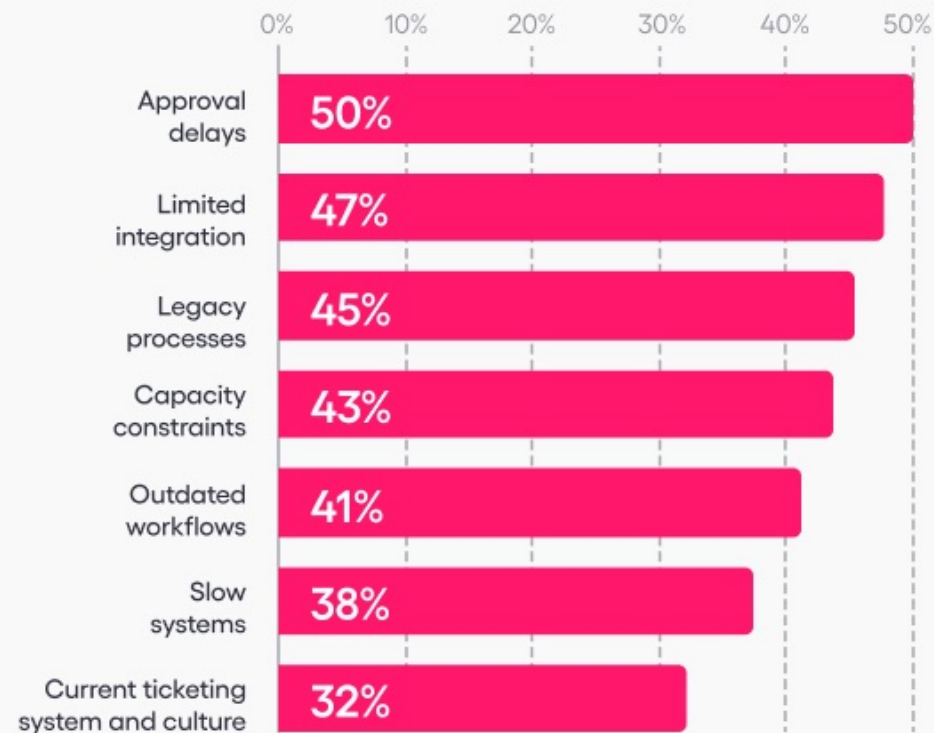
Leaders feel it too

Leaders are not immune to the friction they oversee. **Ninety-seven percent** report losing at least some time weekly. **Seventy-three percent** lose one hour or more. And **47 percent** lose three or more hours, with **15 percent** exceeding four hours per week.

When asked what slows down workflow streamlining in their organizations, leaders point to a web of interconnected blockers.

Q

What slows down streamlining workflows in your organization?



The real cost

The friction tax is not a minor operational nuisance. It is a compounding drag on productivity, decision-making, and organizational capacity. Hours lost to meta-work are hours not spent on strategy, customer engagement, or innovation. Actions avoided because of broken workflows are opportunities forfeited. And when friction is this pervasive, it becomes the baseline: **people stop noticing it, stop reporting it, and start working around it.**

That last point (working around it rather than resolving it) turns out to be one of the most consequential dynamics the data reveals.

02 The invisible problem:

What leadership can't see, and why that's AI's biggest opportunity

If the friction tax is the problem's scale, the visibility gap is its shape. The data shows that a significant portion of workplace friction never reaches the people responsible for fixing it, creating a distorted picture of organizational health that undermines both traditional operations and AI deployment.

Employees are absorbing friction silently

Thirty-seven percent of employees say they encountered a work-related system or technology issue in the past three months and chose not to file a support ticket. That is more than **one in three** employees opting out of the system designed to help them.

Their reasons reveal a support process that has, for many, lost credibility as a path to resolution. Half (**50 percent**) found a workaround on their own. **Thirty percent** said the process is too slow. **Twenty-four percent** said it is too complex. And **22 percent** did not believe the issue would be resolved at all.

Why employees didn't file a ticket (answers from among those who chose not to file)



The workaround culture is particularly significant. When half of employees who experience an issue simply route around it, the issue does not disappear. It becomes invisible to IT, invisible to leadership, and invisible to any AI system that relies on ticket data to learn and improve.

The ticket experience itself helps explain why so many opt out. **Fifty-two percent of employees say IT support takes more than 15 minutes to resolve their ticket.** Self-fixes aren't quick either: **39 percent** say resolving an issue on their own takes more than 10 minutes. But when doing it yourself is no slower than the official channel (and comes without the friction of filing, waiting, and following up) it is easy to understand why so many bypass IT support entirely.

Leaders know they are not seeing the full picture

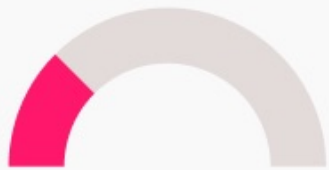
The employee data would be pointed enough on its own. But the leaders' survey reveals something equally important: leadership already suspects this is happening.

When asked what percentage of IT-related problems their team is actually aware of, **74 percent** of leaders say **75 percent** or under. Nearly a quarter (**22 percent**) believe IT sees less than half. Only **26 percent** believe their teams see the majority of issues employees encounter.

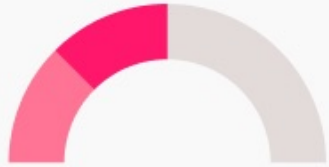
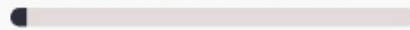


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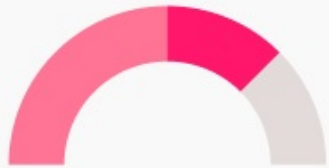
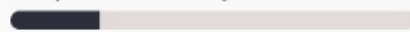
What percentage of IT problems do you believe IT is aware of? (Leaders)

**0-25%**

Say 4% of respondents

**26-50%**

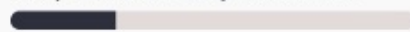
Say 22% of respondents

**51-75%**

Say 48% of respondents

**76-100%**

Say 26% of respondents



And **73 percent** of leaders agree (**29 percent strongly**) with the statement: "AI's return on investment in our organization is limited because we lack visibility into employees' everyday friction and workflow bottlenecks." This is not a fringe position, but rather the majority view among the people responsible for AI strategy.

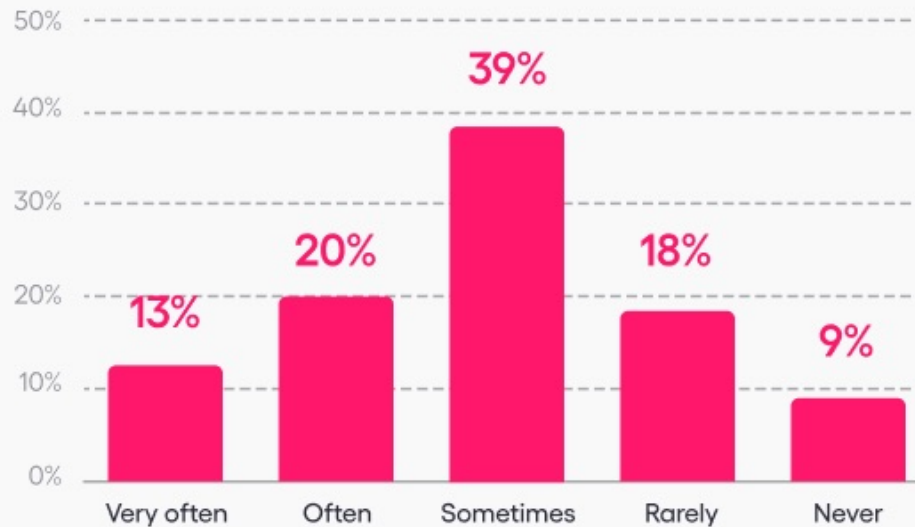
The perception gap

This creates a notable tension in the leadership data. Eighty-seven percent of leaders rate their organization's overall operational efficiency as "very" or "mostly" efficient. Yet **77 percent** believe employees are productive **75 percent or less** of the time. **Twenty-eight percent** say half or less.

Employees confirm this disconnect from the other side. **Seventy-two percent** say leadership overestimates their capacity sometimes, often, or very often because inefficient processes are not being taken into account. **One in three (33 percent)** say this happens often or very often.



How often does leadership overestimate your capacity?
(Employees)



Leaders are rating their organizations as efficient while simultaneously acknowledging that a quarter or more of employee time is lost to friction they cannot fully see. These two beliefs coexist because the friction is largely invisible; it lives in workarounds, in unfiled tickets, in tasks that were avoided rather than completed.

Why this is AI's biggest opportunity

The visibility gap is not just a problem, but also the single clearest signal of where AI can deliver outsized value.

Traditional IT support is reactive; it waits for a ticket, then resolves it. But when **37 percent** of issues never generate a ticket, reactive support is working from an incomplete picture. AI that can proactively detect issues, resolve routine problems before they require human intervention, and surface patterns that would otherwise remain hidden does not just reduce workload. It closes the visibility gap entirely.

This is the difference between AI that waits for someone to report a problem and AI that eliminates the need to report it in the first place. For the 50 percent of employees who are currently finding workarounds rather than filing tickets, that distinction is the difference between friction that compounds invisibly and friction that simply disappears.

03 The readiness gap:

Two very different starting points for AI

The friction is real. The visibility gap is documented. Both groups want AI to help. But the data reveals that leaders and employees are approaching AI from very different positions of comfort and trust, and understanding that gap is essential to deploying AI in a way that actually creates ROI.

Leaders are ready to move fast

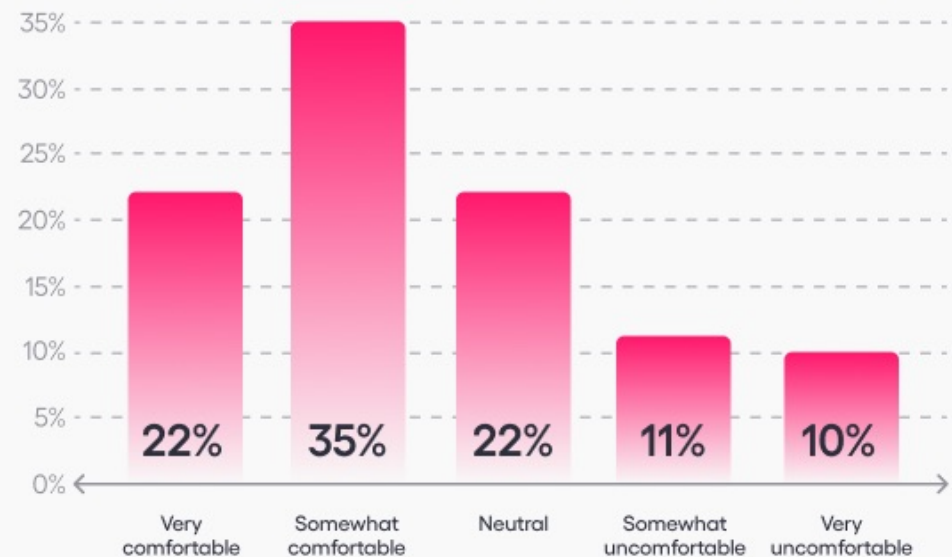
The leaders express strong confidence in AI's potential and a broad willingness to apply it. **Ninety-one percent say they are comfortable with AI being involved in judgment-based or identity-defining work, including performance evaluations, hiring decisions, and culture-shaping tasks.** Sixty-four percent say they are very comfortable.

When asked what they want from AI initiatives, the priorities are business-outcome oriented: ROI leads at **68 percent**, followed by reduced interruptions (**60 percent**), greater control (**59 percent**), scale (**54 percent**), and leverage (**51 percent**).

Employees are open, but need to be met where they are

The employee perspective is more measured. When asked about AI handling basic, routine tasks (password resets, data lookups, status updates), **58 percent** say they are comfortable. **Twenty-two percent** are neutral. And **21 percent** are actively uncomfortable.

Employee comfort with AI on Tier-1 tasks



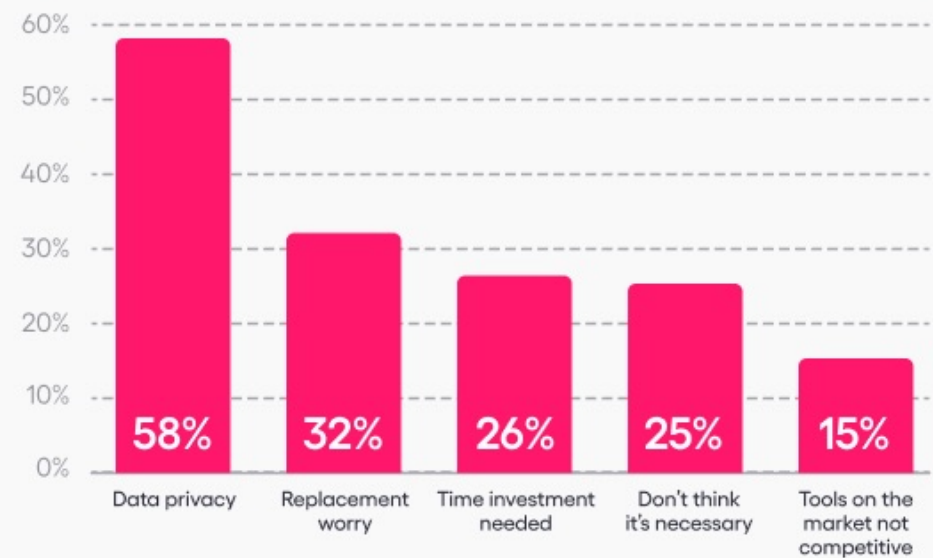


Thirty percent of employees say nothing currently increases their trust in AI at work. This is not a permanent verdict; it is a signal that trust has not yet been earned. Among those whose trust can be influenced, the pattern is clear: **33 percent** say trust grows when AI reduces friction, while only **11 percent** say it grows when AI makes decisions on their behalf.

The top factors making employees hesitant about AI are data privacy (**58 percent**), fear of being replaced (**32 percent**), the time investment required to bring AI on (**26 percent**), and not thinking it is necessary (**25 percent**). These are not irrational objections. They are practical concerns that reflect how employees experience change in the workplace: through the lens of "what does this mean for my role, my data, and my day?"

Q

What makes you hesitant to implement AI? (Employees)



The gap in concrete terms

The distance between these two groups is significant. Leaders are comfortable with AI making decisions about people's careers. A meaningful segment of employees is not yet comfortable with AI even resetting their password. This is not a reason to slow AI adoption, but it is a reason to approach it with care.

The organizations that earn trust on Tier-1 background tasks (the invisible, routine work that employees already want off their plate) build the foundation for expanding AI's role over time. Those that skip straight to high-stakes, judgment-based applications risk confirming exactly the fears that drive employee hesitancy.



Accounting for real resistance

The data also surfaces a smaller but vocal group of employees who are fundamentally opposed to AI in the workplace. In open-ended responses, some describe AI in stark terms: Unnecessary, unethical, environmentally harmful, or simply unwanted.

This is not the majority position. But it is a real one, and it represents the kind of sentiment that any change management effort will encounter. Dismissing it does not make it disappear. In fact, given that **37 percent of employees** are already choosing silence over reporting, there is every reason to believe that unaddressed resistance will follow the same pattern: Going underground rather than being resolved.

The more effective approach is to acknowledge these concerns directly, demonstrate value through early and visible wins on low-stakes tasks, and build trust through transparency about how AI is being used, what data it accesses, and what guardrails are in place.

→ Did you know?

The readiness gap has a generational dimension. Younger employees report significantly more daily friction and are also the most open to AI as a solution. **Seventy-three percent of Gen Z and Millennial employees** say they have delayed or avoided a key action due to broken processes, compared to **46 percent of Baby Boomers**. Gen Z workers are also the most likely to be comfortable with AI on Tier-1 tasks (**60 percent very or somewhat comfortable among 18 to 24-year-olds, versus 17 percent among those 65 and older**).

But experience cuts both ways: Younger employees are also more likely to have lived through AI pilots that failed to meet expectations, with higher rates citing rushed implementations and resource pressure.

The takeaway? The employees who need friction relief most are already the most receptive to AI. Meeting them where they are (with tools that work, not just tools that are new) is the fastest path to building organizational momentum.



04 The common ground:

What both sides want AI to achieve

The readiness gap is real. But underneath the different comfort levels and priorities, the data reveals a striking point of alignment: Leaders and employees are not actually in conflict about what they want AI to achieve. They are describing the same destination in different languages.

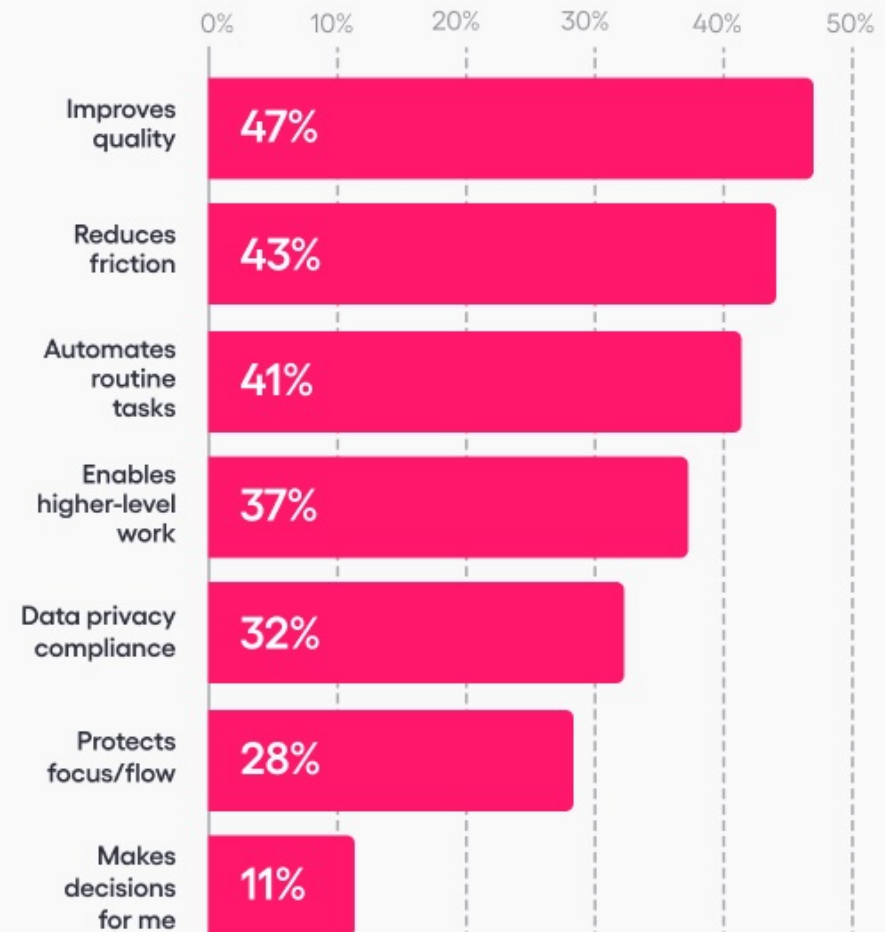
What employees want from AI

When asked to define "good AI" in their day-to-day work, employees responded with remarkable consistency. The priorities are clear: Improve quality, reduce friction, automate the routine. **Decision-making sits firmly at the bottom.**

Forty-seven percent say good AI improves the quality of their work. **Forty-three percent** say it reduces friction. **Forty-one percent** say it automates routine tasks. **Thirty-seven percent** say it enables them to focus on higher-level work by reducing menial labor. And just **11 percent** say good AI makes decisions for them.



What does "good AI" mean to you?
(Employees, select all)



That **11 percent** reveals a clear and consistent boundary employees draw around AI's role. They want AI to make their work better, not to do their work for them. They want less noise, not less agency. They want the friction removed so meaningful work becomes possible.

This is not resistance to AI. It is a precise signal of where AI earns trust fastest: on the friction, not on the decisions.



What leaders want from AI

Leaders express their AI priorities in business-outcome terms: **ROI (68 percent)**, **reduced interruptions (60 percent)**, **greater control (59 percent)**, **scale (54 percent)**, and **leverage (51 percent)**. On the surface, this looks like a different list than the employee priorities. But the underlying logic aligns more closely than it appears.

Reduced interruptions (the second-highest leader priority) is the leadership expression of what employees call "protecting focus and flow." ROI is what happens when the friction tax documented in Chapter 1 gets reduced across an entire workforce. Scale is what becomes possible when routine tasks are handled autonomously and employees can redirect their time to higher-value work.

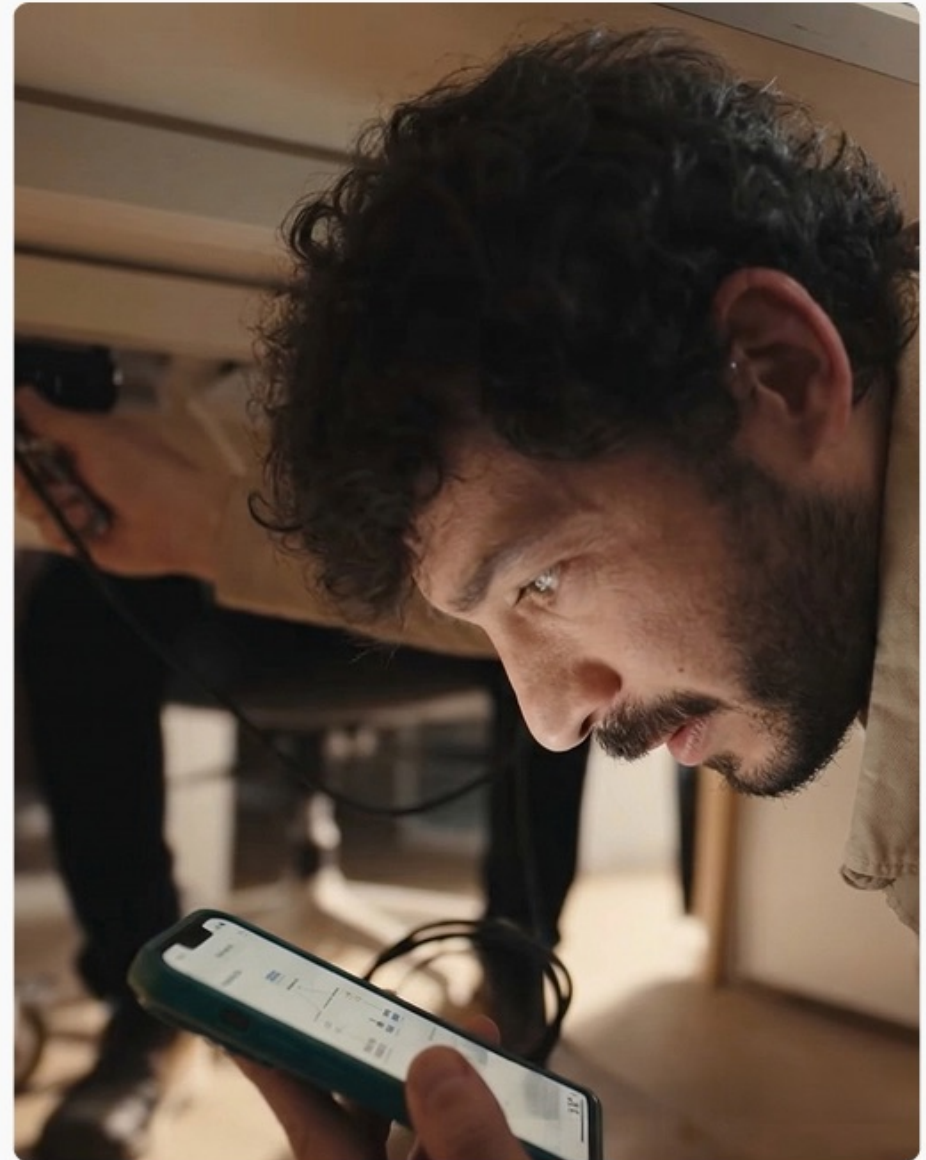
Leaders want AI to deliver measurable efficiency gains. Employees want AI to remove the friction that prevents them from being efficient. These are not competing goals; they are the same goal, just viewed from different perspectives.

The solution

The alignment between these two perspectives points to a clear deployment strategy: Start AI where both the business need and employee openness are highest.

That place is friction. The routine, repetitive, invisible background work that drains time, breaks flow, and generates the meta-work that both groups are already frustrated by. Deploying AI on these tasks does not require employees to trust AI with their judgment, their creativity, or their decision-making. It only requires them to trust it with their password reset. **And as the data shows, 57 percent are already there.**

When AI proves itself in the background (resolving issues faster, reducing interruptions, eliminating the friction that employees currently absorb in silence) the trust foundation for broader deployment builds naturally, letting people work.



05 Why AI pilots fail

And what both sides already know about fixing it

If the previous chapters documented the problem and pointed toward the opportunity, this chapter addresses the execution question: Why do so many AI initiatives stall, and what can be done differently?

The answer turns out to be one of the strongest points of consensus in the entire dataset.

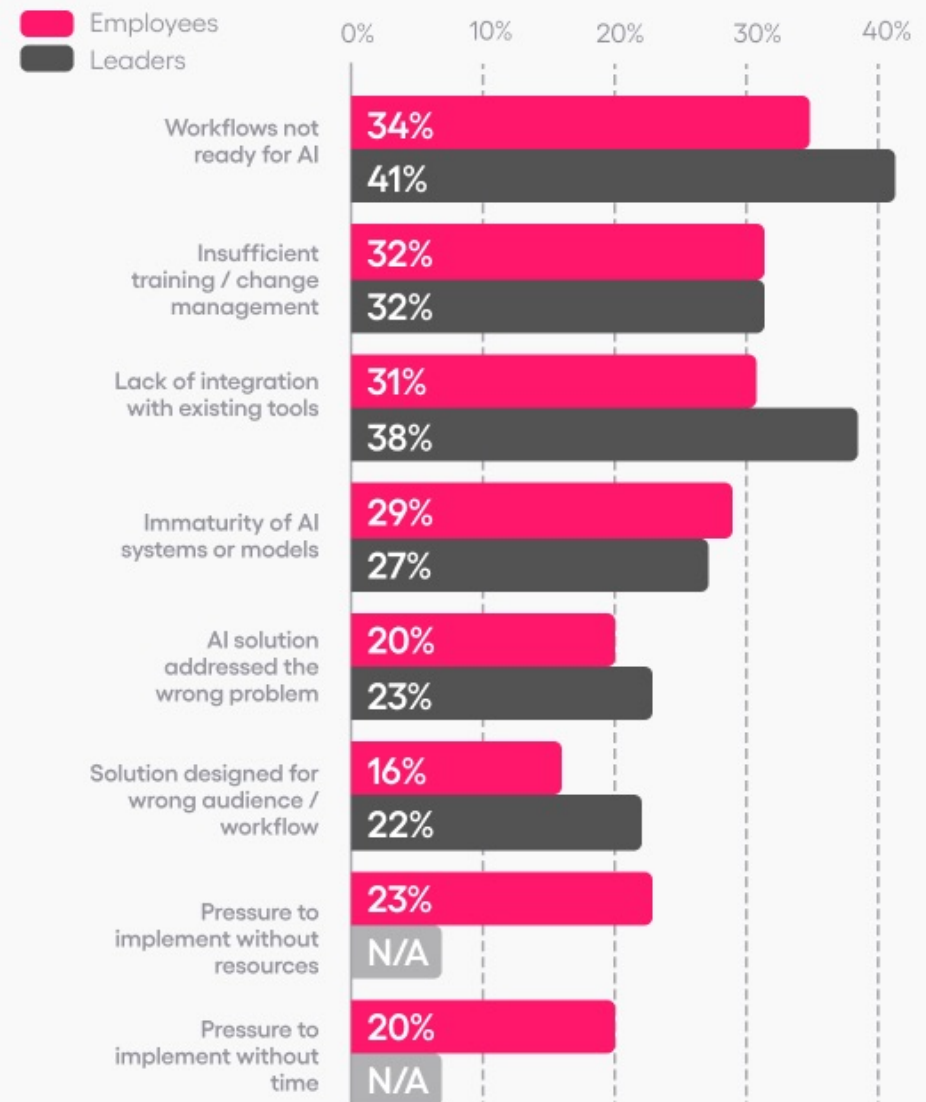
A shared diagnosis

Both surveys asked respondents about the factors that contributed most to past AI pilots not meeting expectations. And both groups point to the same root causes.

Unready workflows top the list for both (**34 percent of employees, 41 percent of leaders**). Insufficient training and change management support ranks identically at **32 percent** for both groups. And lack of integration with existing tools comes in at **31 percent** for employees and **38 percent** for leaders.

Neither group blames AI itself as the primary issue. Only **29 percent of employees and 27 percent of leaders** cite the immaturity of AI systems as a top factor. The technology is not the bottleneck. **The environment it is being placed into is.**

Why AI pilots failed (employees vs. leaders, side by side)

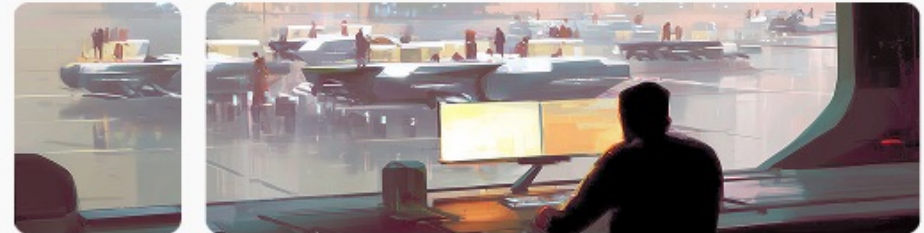


What employees add to the picture

Employees surface two factors that were not included in the leaders survey but are worth noting: **23 percent** say there was pressure to implement AI without the resources to do it properly, and **20 percent** say there was pressure to implement without adequate time.

This connects directly to the trust dynamics explored in Chapter 3. When employees experience AI as something pushed onto them under time and resource pressure, without proper training or workflow preparation, it does not build confidence. It confirms the suspicion that AI is being deployed for leadership's benefit rather than theirs.

The inverse is also true. When AI is rolled out with adequate preparation, clear communication, and visible results on the tasks employees actually struggle with, it builds exactly the kind of trust that expands adoption organically.



A blueprint, not just a diagnosis

The consensus on failure factors is valuable precisely because it doubles as a blueprint for success. If both leaders and employees agree that unready workflows, poor integration, and insufficient training are the top reasons AI falls short, then the path forward is clear.

Prepare workflows before or alongside AI deployment. Invest in integration with the tools employees already use, rather than adding yet another system to context-switch between. And treat change management not as an afterthought, but as a core component of the AI initiative.

Organizations that do this are not slowing down their AI strategy, but removing the obstacles that cause AI initiatives to stall.



06 Starting in the right place:

How AI goes from
promise to performance

The data across both surveys tells a coherent story. The friction tax is massive and universal, and much of it is invisible to leadership. Leaders and employees approach AI from different levels of readiness but share a common vision of what good AI looks like. And both groups can identify exactly why AI initiatives fail.

What remains is the question of priority and action: Given all of this, where should organizations focus?

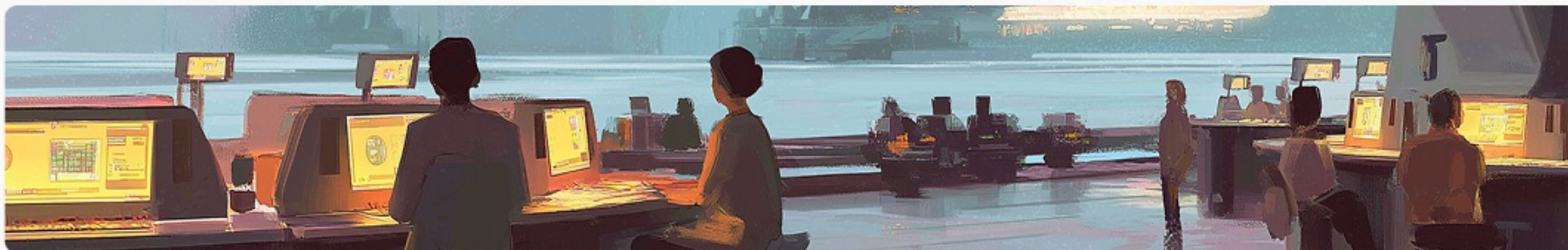
Five principles for AI that earns trust and delivers results

1

Close the visibility gap

If 37 percent of employee issues never generate a ticket, and 74 percent of leaders believe their IT teams see less than three-quarters of problems, then any AI strategy built on existing data is working from an incomplete picture. The first priority is not automating the visible workload; it is surfacing the invisible one.

AI that proactively detects and resolves issues (before an employee has to decide whether filing a ticket is worth the effort) does not just reduce resolution time. It closes the gap between what leadership thinks is happening and what employees actually experience. It turns invisible friction into actionable intelligence.



2

Start where trust already exists

The readiness gap does not mean AI has to wait. It means AI should start in the territory where employee openness is already highest and resistance is lowest: Tier-1 background tasks, routine troubleshooting, repetitive processes that no one identifies with or wants to protect.

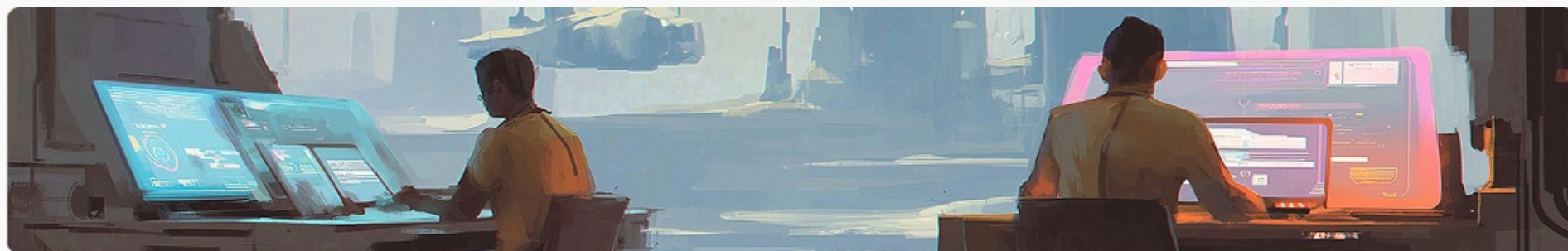
Fifty-seven percent of employees are already comfortable with AI in this space. That's not a ceiling; it's a starting line. Trust earned through consistent, quiet, background performance compounds over time and creates the foundation for expanding AI into more complex territory.

3

Fix workflows alongside AI, not after

Both leaders (41 percent) and employees (34 percent) name unready workflows as the top reason AI pilots fail. Deploying AI on top of a broken process does not fix the process; it accelerates the breakage.

The most effective AI tools are ones that do not just automate existing workflows but help identify which workflows need restructuring in the first place. When AI reveals that a recurring issue has a pattern that can be preempted, it's not just resolving tickets; it's improving the operational architecture.



4

Treat employee friction as strategic data

The 61 percent who have avoided a key action due to broken processes; the 67 percent spending more than 10 percent of their day on meta-work; the 52 percent waiting more than 15 minutes for ticket resolution. These are not just employee experience statistics. They are signals pointing directly to where AI investment will pay off fastest.

Organizations that capture and analyze friction data (not just ticket data, but the full spectrum of where time is lost and work is blocked) gain a strategic advantage: they can direct AI resources to the highest-impact areas rather than the most visible ones.

5

Account for resistance; don't ignore it

The voices that push back on AI (whether from data privacy concerns, fear of displacement, or fundamental opposition) represent real sentiment. In a workforce where 37 percent of people already choose silence over reporting, it is reasonable to assume that unaddressed concerns about AI follow the same pattern: going underground rather than being resolved.

Organizations that build transparency into their AI strategy (clear communication about what AI does and does not do, visible guardrails around data privacy, and a demonstrated commitment to AI as a tool for employees rather than a replacement for them) build more durable adoption than those that treat resistance as an obstacle to overcome rather than a signal to address.

LET PEOPLE WORK

AI's biggest promise at work is not replacing what people do. It's removing what prevents them from doing it well.

The data in this report shows that both leaders and employees already understand this. They agree on the real problems surrounding work: friction, meta-work, broken processes, and invisible bottlenecks. They agree on what good AI looks like: an invisible force that reduces noise and protects focus, not a decision-maker that displaces human judgment. And they agree on why AI initiatives fail: rushed deployment onto unready foundations.

The organizations that act on this shared understanding (starting with the friction, earning trust through execution, and expanding from a foundation of demonstrated value) will not just get better AI adoption. They will unlock the productivity, focus, and higher-value work that friction has been holding back all along.

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Methodology

This report is based on two quantitative surveys commissioned by Atera and conducted by Atomik Research, a creative market research agency and part of the 4media group.

- **Leaders survey:** 500 leaders in the United States, all at VP level or above, working at organizations with 1,000 or more employees. Seventy-eight percent hold C-suite titles (CEO, CISO, COO, CTO, or equivalent), and 20 percent hold VP titles. All respondents work within IT or Technology departments. Fieldwork took place between February 27 and March 16, 2026.
- **Employee survey:** 1,000 full-time employees in the United States, working at organizations with 1,000 or more employees across a range of non-IT departments including operations, customer service, finance, human resources, sales, and production. Fieldwork took place between February 27 and March 3, 2026.

Both surveys were conducted online. The margin of error for each sample is plus or minus 2 percentage points at a 95 percent confidence level. All responses were anonymized and aggregated to ensure confidentiality. Results were rounded to the nearest whole number, and percentages may not always total 100 due to rounding or multi-response questions.