



Bridging the Capacity Gap

Why 66% of Enterprises Are
Investing in Agentic Digital Workers



Leveraging Digital Workers Can Address Capacity Issues

Workers waste 41% of their time on manual, repetitive tasks, according to two-thirds of survey respondents, underscoring the need to invest in digital workers and autonomous AI.

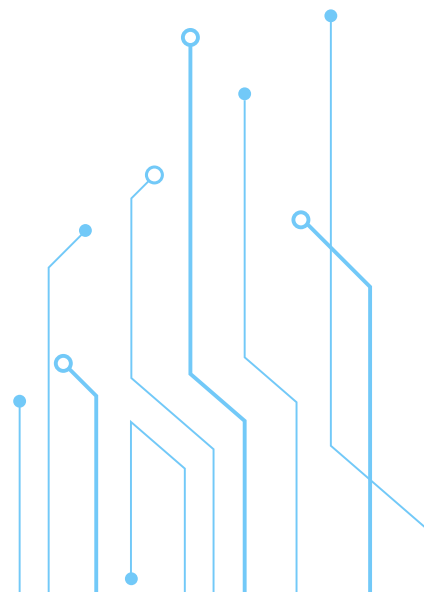
Executive Summary

Enterprise leaders across manufacturing, energy and utilities, aerospace and defense, transportation and logistics, construction, and telecommunications don't lack ambition; they lack hours. The findings in this report are from a recent study by Futurum Research, a quantitative survey of 664 enterprise decision-makers across six core industrial segments in North America and Europe, and in-depth interviews with IT and operations leaders at six IFS customers running digital workers in production. More than three-quarters of decision-makers have delayed or avoided a strategic initiative because their teams lacked the time to pursue it, and roughly two-fifths of employee time goes to manual, repetitive work. That capacity constraint is the opening for digital workers: AI that executes a multi-step operational process end-to-end rather than assisting a person through it one task at a time.

An adoption maturity gap separates ambition from execution: only one enterprise in ten runs mostly autonomous AI today, even though two-thirds plan to invest within 12 months, and only one in twenty currently trusts AI to act fully autonomously. That gap is closing faster than the market average suggests. Six IFS customers interviewed (KLN Family Brands, CDF Corporation, Ependion, AirBoss, Sims Crane, and Kitron Group) are already running purpose-built digital workers in production, reclaiming dozens of hours a week per person and pushing toward zero-touch processing on core procurement and order-to-pay workflows.

Three capabilities separate a pilot that reaches production from one that stalls: native integration with the systems already running the business, governance and auditability built in from the outset, and a human-in-the-loop exception model that routes only genuine exceptions to a person. A manufacturing company's

66%
of enterprises are likely or very likely to invest in digital workers in the next 12 months

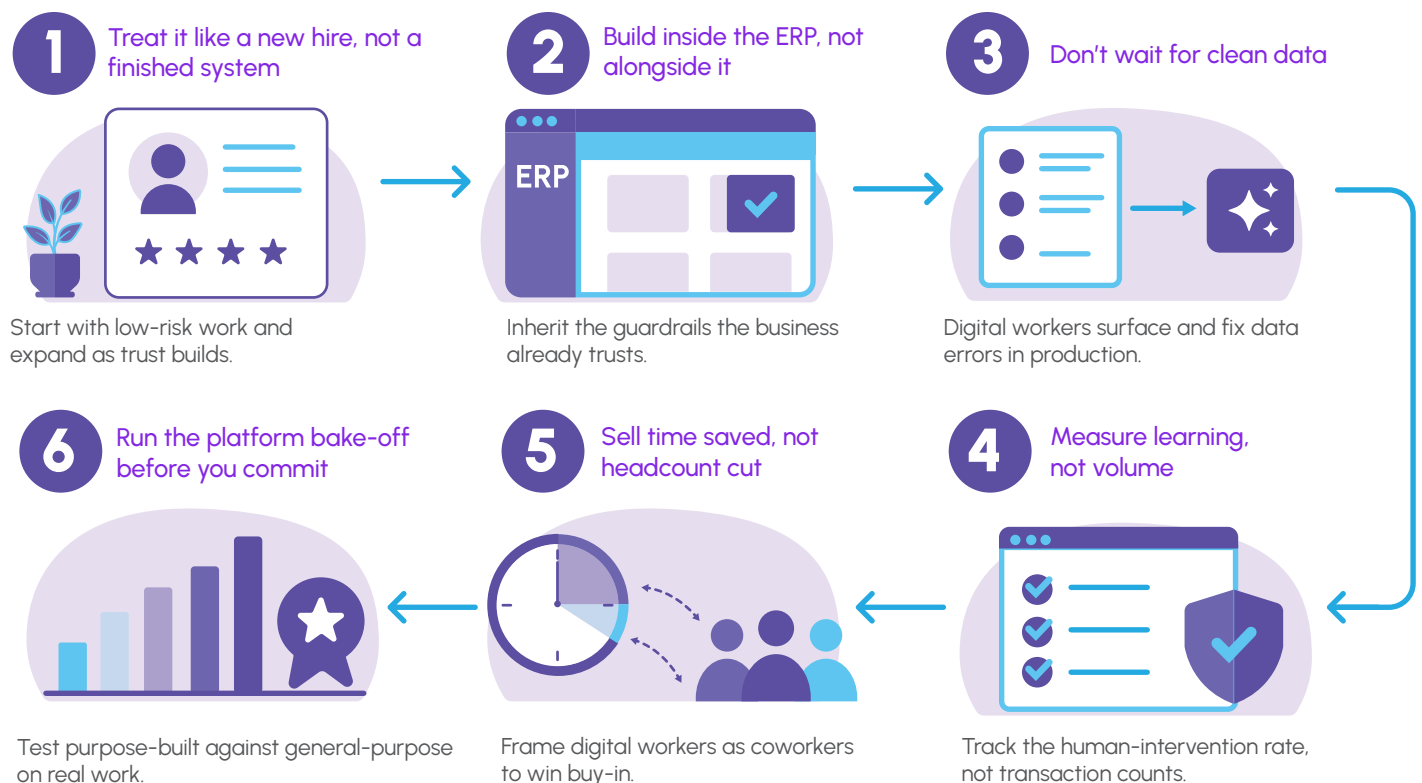


abandonment of robotic process automation in favor of a platform working through its core systems' own APIs illustrates why a parallel automation layer breaks down at scale. Data quality, often assumed to be a precondition for automation, proved instead to be something digital workers can improve from inside a live deployment. The same company's agents surfaced a decade-old, undetected part-number error that a manual process had missed for years. The freed capacity has a clear destination, too: enterprises say they would direct it first toward reducing costs, with growth, faster execution, and long-deferred strategic work close behind. That capacity math also wins employee buy-in, as one CIO found when framing digital workers as coworkers rather than threats, an approach that got its rollout live company-wide in 10 weeks.

Six practices, drawn from all six customer deployments, form a replicable playbook (see Figure 1): treat the digital worker like a new hire, not a finished system; build inside the core systems rather than alongside it; don't wait for clean data; measure learning, not transaction volume; sell time saved rather than headcount cut; and test a specialized platform against the general-purpose alternative before committing, as another packaging manufacturer did when its purpose-built agentic platform outperformed its own general-purpose copilot on operational work. None of these six companies waited for perfect conditions before deploying, and financial commitment is already in place to support that approach: more than half of organizations report spending over \$10 million annually on AI. That is precisely what makes their combined experience a usable template rather than a set of best-case anecdotes.

Figure 1 - The digital worker playbook

Six practices, drawn from AI-six production deployments, separate rollouts that scale from those that stall.



Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026 (n=664)



These data from the survey and the anecdotes from customer interviews reveal the trends and insights for digital worker adoption:

- **The Capacity Crisis Is Real:** Leaders know exactly which initiatives they want to pursue, but their teams can't get out from under the day-to-day work long enough to pursue them.
- **The Adoption Maturity Gap:** The appetite for autonomous AI is running well ahead of enterprises' ability to execute on it.
- **Data Quality Shouldn't Limit Digital Worker Adoption:** Enterprise buyers should treat data readiness as something the platform improves in production, rather than a gate the organization must pass through first.
- **The Capabilities That Ensure Pilots Move to Production:** Three elements are required to ensure that a pilot AI project converts into a production deployment: native integration with the systems already running the business; governance and auditability designed into the platform from the outset; and a human-in-the-loop exception model.
- **Freed Capacity Converts Directly Into Cost, Growth, and Speed:** If half of their team's workload were freed, respondents say they would direct that capacity first toward reducing costs, followed closely by growth or expansion, faster execution and cycle time, and the strategic and analytical work their teams currently don't have time for.
- **The Hidden Value – Digital Workers Can Transfer Institutional Knowledge:** Digital workers can serve as persistent institutional memory rather than just tireless labor.
- **The Real Blocker for Using AI Is the Lack of Predictability:** Agentic digital workers combine native integration, built-in governance, and controlled autonomy so they can consistently execute end-to-end processes while escalating only genuine exceptions.
- **The Digital Worker Playbook Is Replicable:** Each customer story points to six practices that recur regardless of industry, plant count, or which process runs first.
- **Despite Hesitation, AI Is Already a Line Item:** While digital workers remain nascent as a category, the investment behind them is anything but tentative.

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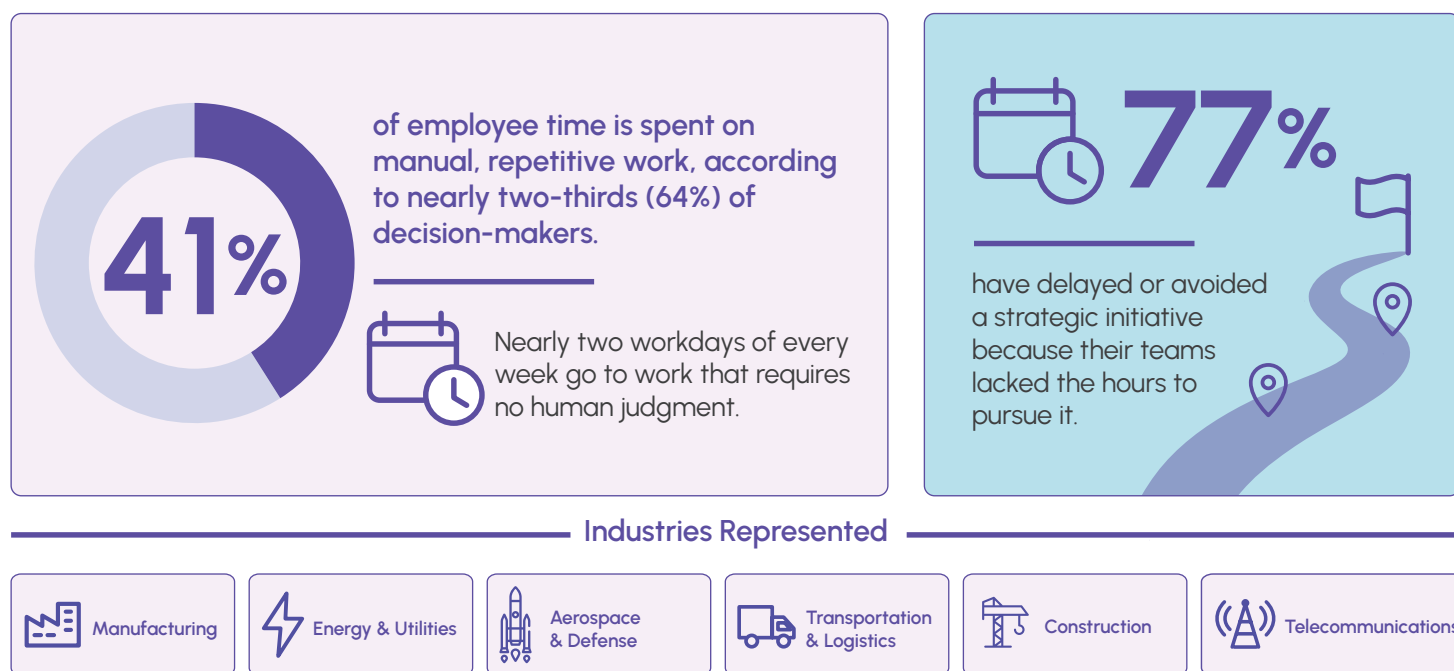


1. The Capacity Crisis Is Real

Across all six core industrial segments surveyed, the most common constraint is a workforce already consumed by the operational grind. Leaders know exactly which initiatives they want to pursue, but their teams can't get out from under the day-The scale of the waste is striking. Nearly two-thirds of the decision-makers surveyed report that manual, repetitive work consumes more than 40% of their employees' time, the equivalent of roughly two full workdays every week spent on tasks that require no human judgment. The downstream cost is just as clear: more than three-quarters have delayed or avoided a strategic initiative because their teams lacked the hours to pursue it (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 - Enterprises face a capacity crisis

Repetitive manual work consumes employee time and forces enterprises to shelve strategic initiatives.



Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026 (n=664)

2. The Adoption Maturity Gap

The appetite for autonomous AI is running well ahead of enterprises' ability to execute on it. Two-thirds of organizations plan to invest in digital workers within the next 12 months, yet only one in ten runs mostly autonomous AI operations today. In Futurum's view, that distance between intent and execution, what we call the adoption maturity gap, reflects less skepticism about the technology than the absence of a dependable bridge between the AI enterprises' trust today and the autonomous outcomes they want.

What the gap looks like on the ground varies meaningfully by industry. Energy and utilities firms feel the capacity squeeze most acutely: 52% frequently delay initiatives due to limited capacity, the highest rate surveyed, which helps explain why knowledge and documentation support tops their use-case list as they contend with regulatory, safety, and workforce complexity. Transportation and logistics is the fastest mover: a quarter expect to adopt agentic AI within 12 months, not a single respondent described their organization as "very unlikely" to invest, and carrier coordination leads their use cases.

The remaining industries each surface their own version of the same constraint. Construction firms prioritize resource and schedule planning because material delays are their primary source of project slippage. Aerospace and defense carry the longest adoption horizon, with roughly one firm in eight expecting to adopt within 12 months, reflecting supplier delays and heightened regulatory data concerns rather than a lack of interest. And telecommunications providers, focused on dispatch and scheduling automation, are the most likely of any industry (35.6%) to view AI that learns from experienced employees as "extremely valuable."

Taken together, these findings show that although the operational priorities differ by industry, each reflects a specific capacity constraint rather than a generic desire to deploy AI (see Table 1).

Table 1 - Industry Friction Snapshot

Repetitive manual work consumes employee time and forces enterprises to shelve strategic initiatives.

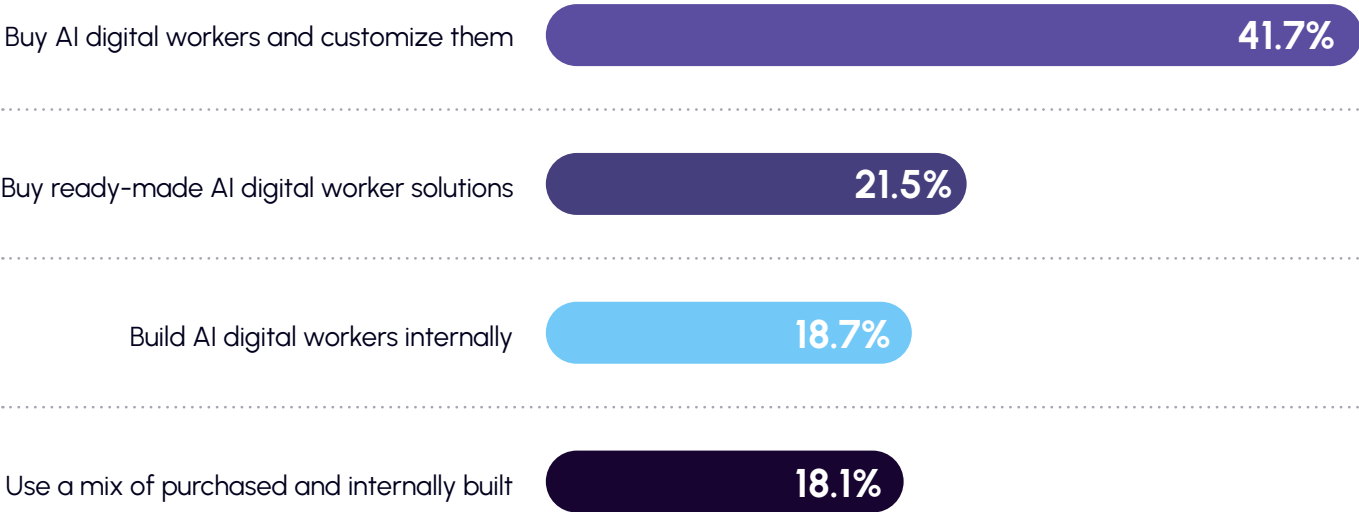
Industry	Top AI Use Case	Binding Constraint Limiting Growth
 Manufacturing	 Materials planning and coordination — Optimize materials, inventory, and production schedules.	 Data reconciliation across disconnected systems — Siloed data and manual reconciliation slow decisions and execution.
 Energy & Utilities	 Knowledge and documentation support — Capture and organize critical knowledge for the workforce.	 Workforce capacity and institutional knowledge loss — Aging workforce and complex requirements limit available capacity.
 Transportation & Logistics	 Carrier coordination and scheduling — Improve coordination across carriers, routes, and shipments.	 Operational coordination across distributed networks — Fragmented information and coordination delay execution.
 Construction	 Resource and schedule planning — Align resources, schedules, and subcontractors in real time.	 Material delays and project coordination — Late materials and manual coordination create project slippage.
 Aerospace & Defense	 Compliance-aware operational support — Streamline compliance and supplier oversight processes.	 Regulatory complexity and supplier delays — Strict compliance demands and late supplier deliveries constrain progress.
 Telecommunications	 Dispatch automation and knowledge capture — Automate dispatch and capture expertise from experienced employees.	 Knowledge transfer from experienced employees — Manual processes and expertise not captured limit scalability.

Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026

As Table 1 illustrates, the use cases vary by industry, but the underlying business challenge does not. The opportunity in all six industries is capacity that already exists in the organization, locked behind manual, disconnected processes that digital workers are purpose-built to execute, rather than a hypothetical productivity gain. That framing changes how the business case is built: leadership frees up capacity that the organization already pays for, rather than funding entirely new capacity.

This preference for buying over building is decisive. Nearly two-thirds of decision-makers prefer to buy digital workers, whether ready-made or customized after purchase, while fewer than one in five prefer to build internally, and a similar share blends purchased and internally built workers (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 - Enterprises prefer to buy digital workers, not build them
How organizations prefer to acquire AI digital workers.



63.2% take a “buy” approach — the fastest route to testing, rolling out, and deriving value

Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026 (n=664)

Taking a pre-built approach enables organizations to more quickly test, roll out, and derive value from AI digital workers. Whether that value materializes and whether the adoption gap actually closes depend on the following three tests:

- 1. **Industry Fit:** How well the digital worker opportunity maps to the highest-friction processes in a given industry.
- 2. **Trust Criteria:** What enterprises need to see from an agentic platform before they will trust it with operational work.
- 3. **Production Evidence:** Whether early deployments hold up once they leave the pilot stage.

Interviews with IFS customers revealed that the adoption gap can close faster than the market average suggests, largely by leveraging pre-built AI digital workers designed to address the tasks and workflows specific to industrial organizations. Key examples include the following:

- KLN Family Brands reclaims 27 hours weekly from supplier order processing.
- CDF Corporation freed 20% of its purchasing staff's time by choosing a purpose-built digital worker over a general AI assistant, because the specialized worker actually executes the job instead of just answering questions.
- Kitron Group, an electronics manufacturing services provider with roughly 3,500 employees across 13 factories in the Nordics, Poland, China, and Malaysia, faces rising purchase order volumes that hiring cannot keep pace with in smaller markets. The company is rolling out purchase-to-order digital workers across all locations in under seven months, tracking a declining human-in-the-loop exception rate as proof of learning.
- Similarly, AirBoss and Sims Crane & Equipment Company use pre-built agents and project that most order and invoice volumes will run with zero human touch by the second half of 2026.
- Ependion, a provider of digital solutions for secure control, visualization, and data communication for industrial applications, rolled out a digital worker to handle supplier orders in about four months, a stark contrast to lengthy, multi-quarter initiatives that impact time-to-value metrics.

All six deployments followed the same approach: start with a well-defined, high-volume process, keep the platform inside the core systems' existing business logic, and expand scope only as accuracy holds. None required a leap of faith on unproven technology, which makes this a replicable playbook.



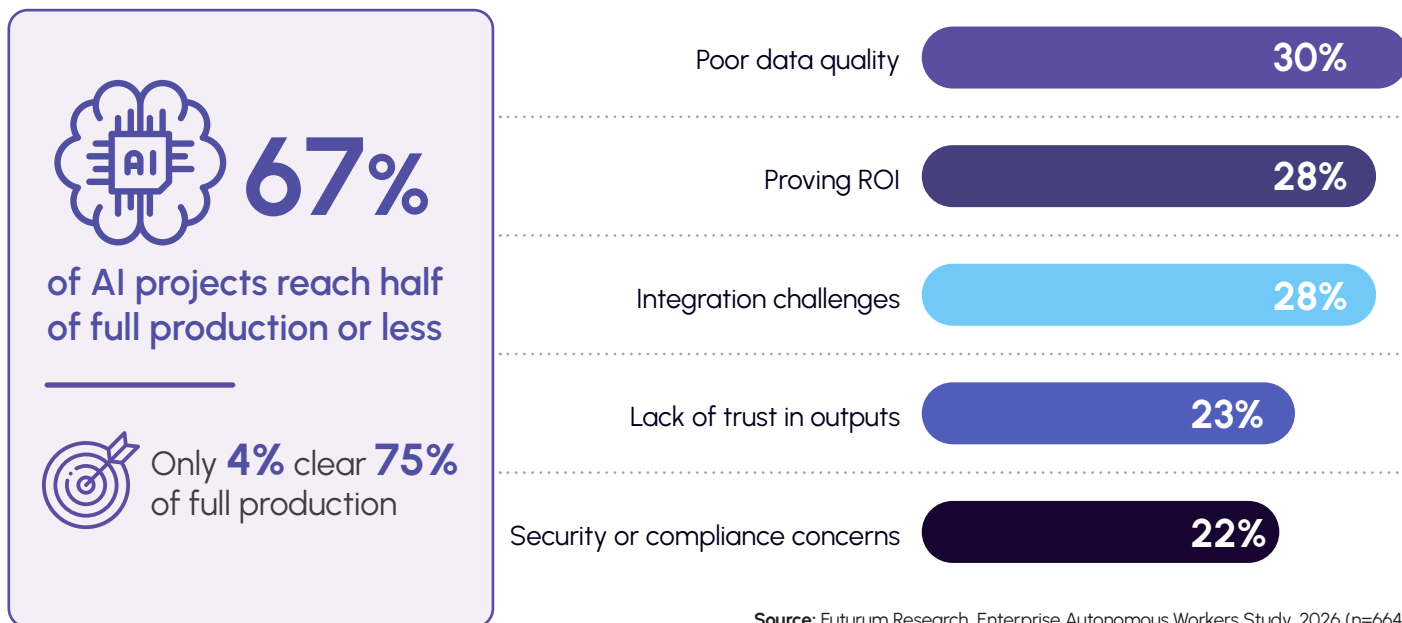


3. Data Quality Shouldn't Limit Digital Worker Adoption

Most AI projects never finish the journey they start. Two-thirds reach half of full production or less, and only a handful ever clear the three-quarters mark. Asked why, respondents point first to their data: poor data quality is the most-cited reason projects stall, ahead of proving ROI, integration challenges, lack of trust in outputs, and security or compliance concerns (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 - Most AI projects stall before full production

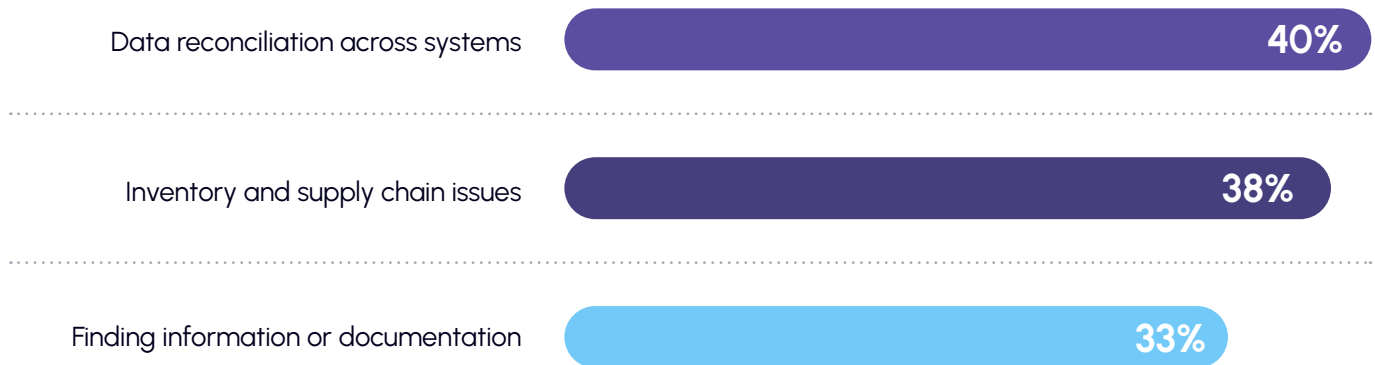
Two-thirds of AI projects reach half of full production or less, and data quality is the most-cited reason they fail to advance.



When it comes to adopting digital workers, data is the friction point respondents name most often. Four in ten cite data reconciliation across systems as their top operational challenge, narrowly ahead of inventory and supply chain issues and finding information or documentation (see Figure 5). For organizations running Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), computerized maintenance management (CMMS), field service management (FSM), and supply chain systems that were never built to talk to each other, that friction is structural rather than a training gap. In Futurum's view, this is why bolted-on automation so often disappoints: the reconciliation work lives between systems, and only a platform that operates across them can take it on.

Figure 5 - Data is the top operational friction point

Share of respondents naming each as their top operational challenge when adopting digital workers.



For systems never built to talk to each other, this friction is structural, not a training gap

Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026 (n=664).

The conventional response to that finding is a lengthy data remediation project before any AI deployment begins. The experience of the six companies profiled in this report argues for the opposite sequence. None waited for a fully remediated data environment before deploying. At Kitron Group, the digital workers themselves surfaced a decade-old, undetected part-number error that a manual data-cleansing process had missed for years.

"Cleaning data for a company that grows and has a long history takes a lot of time," Kitron Group's Gustafsson says, noting that organizations do not need perfect data to get started with digital workers. "Now, we see that the agent is giving us more than speed; it's actually helping us [find errors in our data]."

Meanwhile, both AirBoss and Sims Crane are pushing toward zero-touch production using the same "go-live, and then improve" logic rather than a pre-launch data cleanup, enabling them to reach value more quickly than if they undertook a full data-cleansing operation before launching digital workers.

These examples highlight a key takeaway: In asset-intensive environments where operational data is spread across ERP, CMMS, FSM, and supply chain systems, data quality management has to be part of the platform itself rather than a prerequisite that the customer is expected to solve before deployment. Futurum's guidance to enterprise buyers is to treat data readiness as something the platform improves in production rather than a gate the organization must pass through first. And if imperfect data does not decide which pilots reach production, something else does. The survey results and the six deployments point to the same answer: three specific platform capabilities.

4. The Capabilities That Ensure Pilots Move to Production

Ultimately, three elements are required to ensure that a pilot AI project converts into a production deployment: native integration with the systems already running the business, rather than a separate integration layer to build and maintain; governance and auditability designed into the platform from the outset, rather than added after a compliance review flags a gap; and a human-in-the-loop exception model, where the platform executes the routine volume and routes only genuine exceptions to a person, rather than an all-or-nothing choice between full autonomy and no autonomy at all (see Figure 6).

Figure 6 - The three requirements for moving AI from pilot to production
Enterprises consistently point to three capabilities as essential for trust and scale.



Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026 (n=664).
Note: Percentages reflect directional keyword analysis of open-ended survey responses (n=664)

Native integration ensures digital workers operate within existing systems and rules, making it the top platform selection criterion for enterprises ahead of reliability and governance. Kitron Group's departure from robotic process automation underscores this, as handling unique supplier rules became unsustainable at scale. Platforms that utilize their customer's ERP, EAM (Enterprise Asset Management), and FSM-native APIs and business logic inherit established guardrails, data models, and approval chains rather than creating a disconnected layer.

Governance and control, meaning that a digital worker provides valid, traceable, and repeatable results, along with the ability for humans to quickly step in when needed, is key to driving confidence in production deployments. Respondents consistently described the characteristics they require before trusting digital workers with operational processes, with reliability and transparency emerging ahead of human oversight, accountability, and secure exception handling (see Table 2).

A human-in-the-loop exception model allows digital workers to handle routine workloads independently, routing only non-standard transactions to people rather than forcing an all-or-nothing choice about autonomy. Sims Crane applies this via an 80/20 split, processing most invoices straight through while humans handle the rest. This framework addresses a key survey finding: only 5.7% of enterprises trust AI to act fully autonomously today. Exception-based routing sidesteps this trust issue, extending autonomy only as far as accuracy allows while keeping humans at critical judgment points.

Table 2 - What Enterprises Require Before Trusting Digital Workers in Production

Open-ended survey responses reveal the characteristics enterprises say they need to see before they are willing to move digital workers from pilot to production..

Enterprise requirement	Survey signal (% of mentions)	Why it matters	What enterprises are looking for
 Reliability / proven track record	~13.5%	Organizations want evidence that digital workers perform consistently under real operating conditions before expanding deployment.	Demonstrated accuracy, stability, and repeatability across diverse scenarios and over time.
 Transparency / explainability	~11.1%	Decision-makers need to understand how recommendations and actions are generated to build trust.	Clear explanations of why decisions are made and how outputs are derived from data and rules.
 Human override / keep a person in control	~7.9%	Enterprises expect humans to remain in control of exceptions and high-risk decisions.	Ability for people to review, intervene, and take control when needed with minimal friction.
 Accountability when something goes wrong	~7.7%	Clear ownership and governance remain essential for production deployments.	Defined accountability for outcomes, audit trails, and escalation paths when issues occur.
 Honesty about limitations	~4.9%	Buyers prefer systems that recognize uncertainty rather than overstate confidence.	Confidence scores, uncertainty indicators, and disclosures of known limitations.
 Data security / privacy	~4.3%	Protection of operational and enterprise data remains a baseline requirement.	Strong security controls, data protection, and compliance with privacy requirements.
 Graceful failure / clean handoff to a human	~3.4%	Enterprises value systems that escalate unresolved situations without disrupting operations.	Automated escalation to the right person with full context and without losing process state.

Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026

"Smooth handoffs to humans. When it gets stuck, it should pass the task to a human seamlessly without losing the progress it made."

– IT Manager, mid-size US telecom operator, study respondent

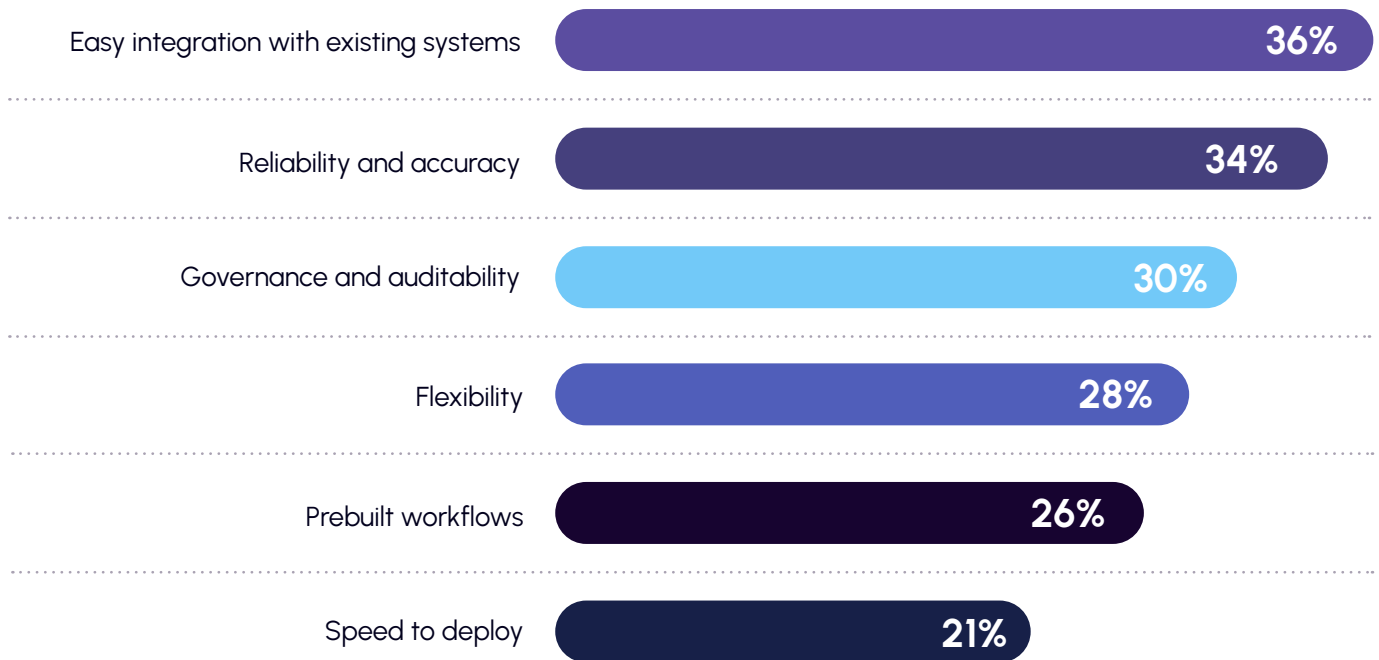
"For a decision like this, reliability would weigh heavily... I would want proof that the system works consistently, makes fewer errors, and can handle tasks without creating unnecessary risks."

– Operations Manager, mid-size Swiss transportation company, study respondent

These qualitative themes closely mirror the survey's quantitative platform-selection criteria (see Figure 7). Enterprises weigh integration with existing systems most heavily, followed by reliability and accuracy, then governance and auditability, with flexibility, prebuilt workflows, and speed to deploy trailing behind. The pattern is telling: the top three criteria are all trust-builders, while speed ranks last. Enterprises would rather deploy slowly on a platform they can govern than quickly on one they cannot.

Figure 7 - Platform selection criteria, ranked

Integration, reliability, and governance top the list of what enterprises weigh when selecting a digital worker platform.

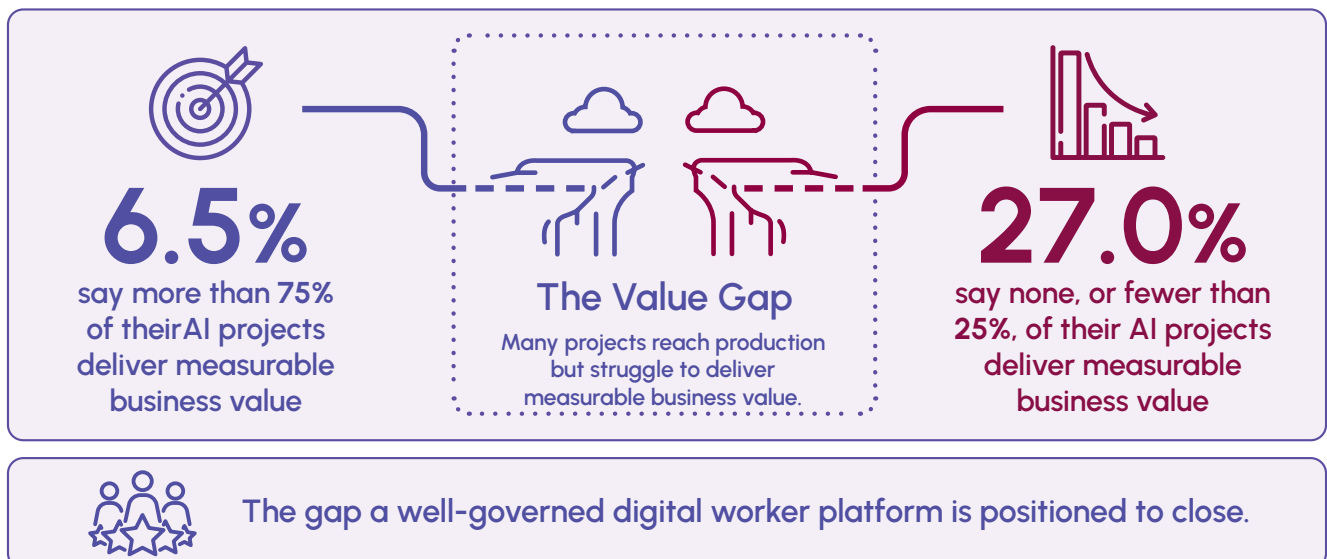


Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026 (n=664).

The stakes of getting that choice right show up in the value data (see Figure 8). Only a small fraction of enterprises say more than three-quarters of their AI projects deliver measurable business value, while more than a quarter say a few or none of them do. This underscores a hidden truth around AI: simply reaching production with digital workers is not the same as proving value, and that is exactly the gap a well-governed digital worker platform is positioned to close.

Figure 8 - Reaching production is not the same as proving value

Share of AI projects delivering measurable business value.



Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026 (n=664).

5. Purpose-Built Digital Workers Beat General-Purpose Copilots

Most enterprise AI still works the way a copilot does: it drafts, summarizes, or suggests, and a person decides what happens next. But a digital worker is a different category of software. It executes a multi-step operational process, such as approving a purchase order, reconciling an invoice, or scheduling a service call, end-to-end, the way an employee would, rather than assisting a person through each step of that process one task at a time.

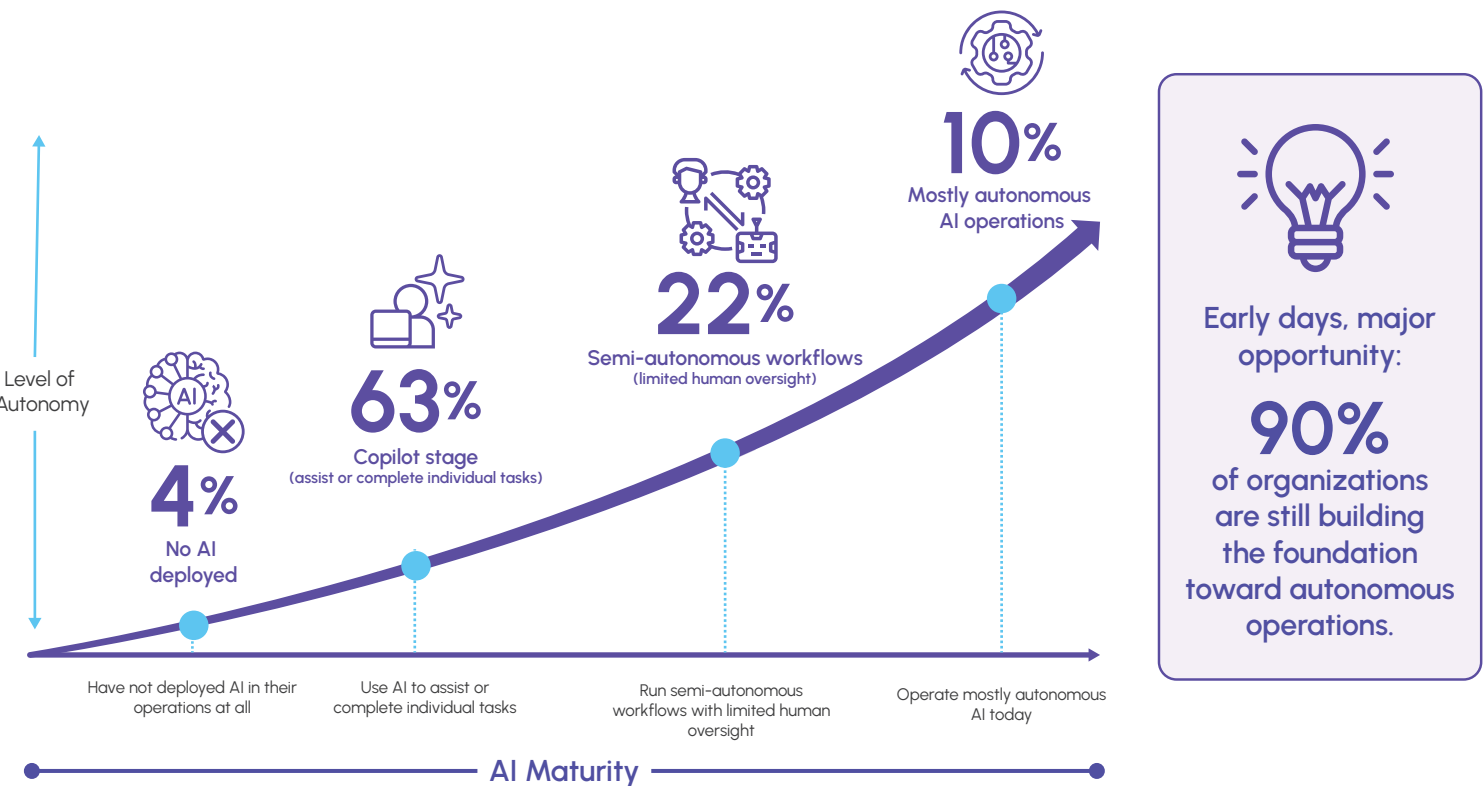
Our general-purpose AI assistant]...hasn't performed as well as the specialized agentic AI in Loops. Domain specificity matters enormously in operational contexts."

– Alex Ivkovic, IT Director, CDF Corporation

The survey's maturity curve shows how early most organizations still are in that nascent copilot phase of utilizing AI, with nearly two-thirds of respondents using AI to assist or complete individual tasks and roughly a fifth running semi-autonomous workflows with limited human oversight. Only one in ten operates mostly autonomous AI today, and a small minority has not deployed AI in their operations at all (see Figure 9). Trusted autonomy tracks the same pattern: nearly four in ten respondents say their organization currently trusts AI only to draft work for a human to approve, and roughly one in twenty trusts AI to act fully autonomously.

Figure 9 - Most enterprises are still in the copilot stage

The survey's maturity curve shows how early most organizations still are in that shift. Indeed, 63% of respondents use AI to assist or complete individual tasks: the copilot stage.



Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026

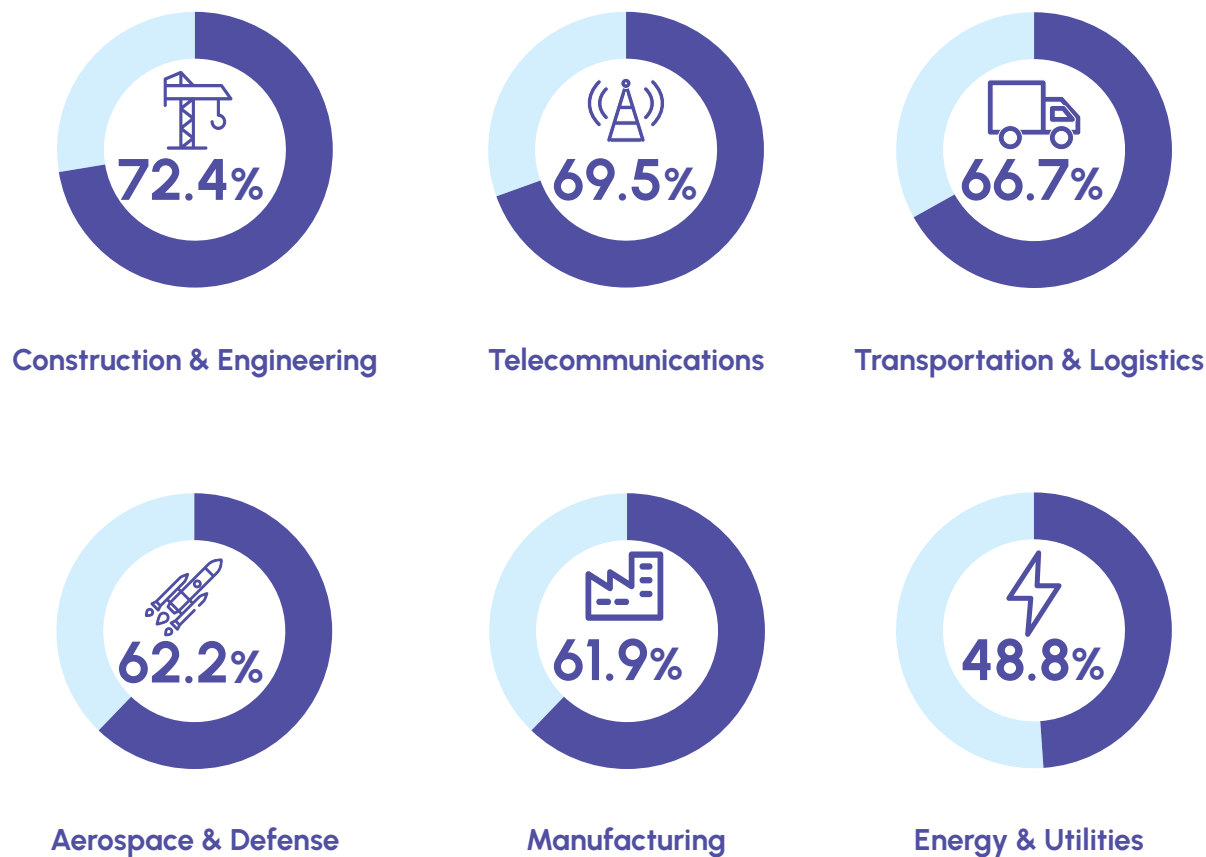
When entire processes can be executed end-to-end through an AI digital worker, rather than focusing on completing isolated tasks, there can be a significant payoff showing up in **productivity**, **accuracy**, and **decision speed** that reverberates across the entire organization.

That shift matters most in physical, asset-intensive operations, where a process interruption has a cost measured in downtime, missed deliveries, or idle equipment rather than a slower email response. Core industrial segments all run on sequenced, data-heavy workflows, including purchase orders, maintenance schedules, dispatch queues, and supplier deliveries, exactly the kind of multi-step process a digital worker is built to execute. These six industries are not incidental case studies; they are where the maturity curve above has the most room, and the most reason, to move.

Industry-specific AI is close to a universal requirement rather than a nice-to-have: nearly two-thirds call it "very important" or "critical" (see Figure 10).

Figure 10 - Demand for industry-specific AI

Share of respondents who rated industry-specific AI solutions as "very important" or "critical" to their organization's success.



Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026 (n=664).

When assessing the core industrial segments, no single use case dominates within any industry (see Table 3). As such, organizations need to focus on orchestrating digital workers via a platform that supports the completion of complex, end-to-end processes, rather than discrete tasks.

Table 3 - Top AI Use Cases by Industry

Industry	Top Use Case	2nd	3rd
 Manufacturing	Materials planning (34.5%)	Customer orders (32.7%)	Inventory/replenishment (32.7%)
 Energy & Utilities	Knowledge/documentation (43.8%)	Asset performance (39.7%)	Work order planning (33.1%)
 Transportation & Logistics	Knowledge/documentation (42.7%)	Service planning (37.8%)	Parts/inventory (35.4%)
 Construction & Engineering	Carrier coordination (36.0%)	Order/shipment (33.3%)	Dispatch/scheduling (33.3%)
 Aerospace & Defense	Resource/schedule planning (39.7%)	Project knowledge mgmt (36.2%)	Sourcing/subcontractor (34.5%)
 Telecommunications	Dispatch/scheduling (39.8%)	Service planning (33.9%)	Incident triage (32.2%)

Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026





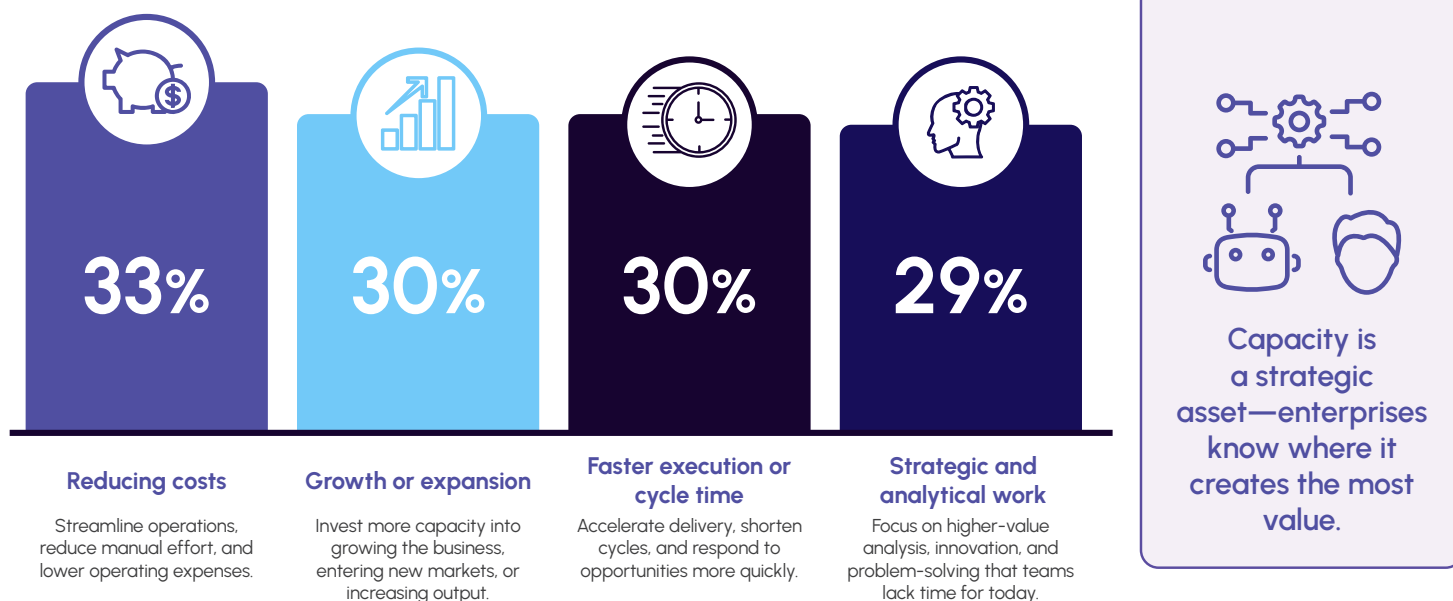
6. Freed Capacity Converts Directly Into Cost, Growth, and Speed

Enterprises are specific about what they would do with the capacity a digital worker frees up, and financially disciplined about what they need to see before they invest. If half of their team's workload were freed, respondents say they would direct that capacity first toward reducing costs, followed closely by growth or expansion, faster execution and cycle time, and the strategic and analytical work their teams currently don't have time for (see Figure 11).

Figure 11 - Where enterprises would put capacity freed up by digital workers

Enterprises are specific about what they would do with the capacity a digital worker frees up. If 50% of their team's workload were freed, respondents say they would direct that capacity first toward reducing costs (33%), then toward growth or expansion (30%) and faster execution or cycle time (30%), with 29% pointing to strategic and analytical work their teams currently don't have time for.

If 50% of our team's workload were freed, we would direct that capacity toward:



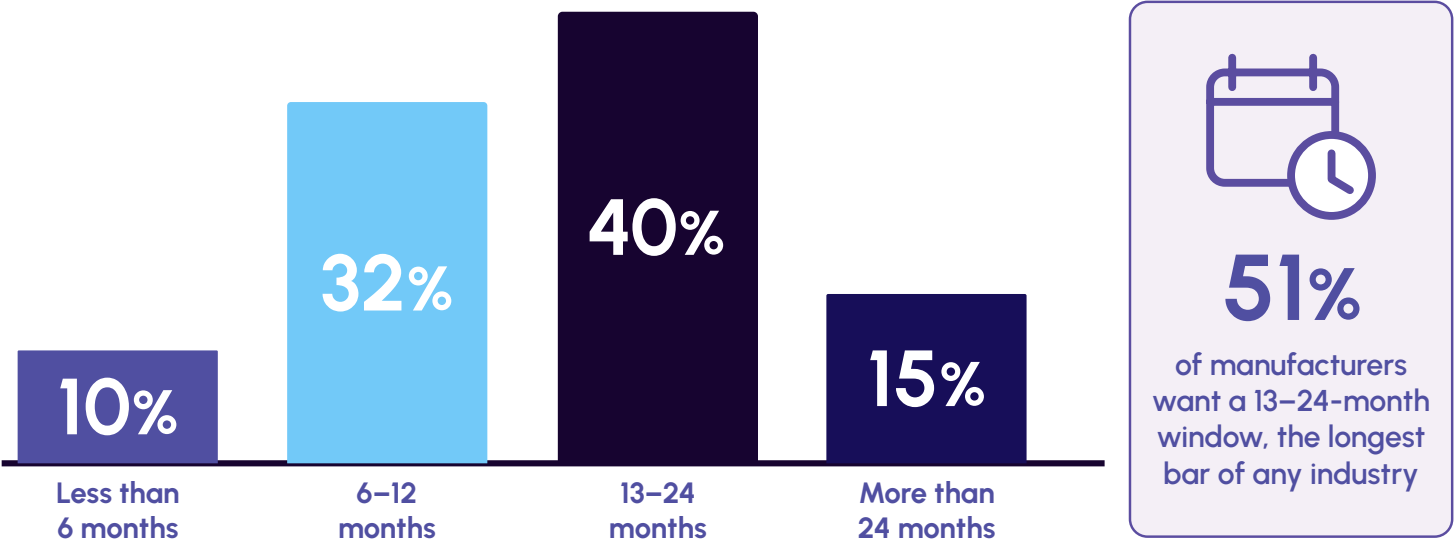
Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026

That appetite comes with realistic expectations around how long it will take to see ROI payback. Four in ten respondents require a return within 13 to 24 months, and roughly a third require one within 6 to 12 months. Notably, only one in ten expects payback in under six months, and a few are willing to wait beyond two years (see Figure 12). Futurum reads this as the sign of a maturing market: buyers are neither demanding overnight miracles nor extending open-ended patience.

Manufacturing sets the longest bar of any industry: just over half want a 13- to 24-month payback window, reflective of a sector where AI deployments touch complex, capital-intensive production systems.

Figure 12 - Enterprises expect payback within two years

Required payback period for digital worker investments.



Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026 (n=664).



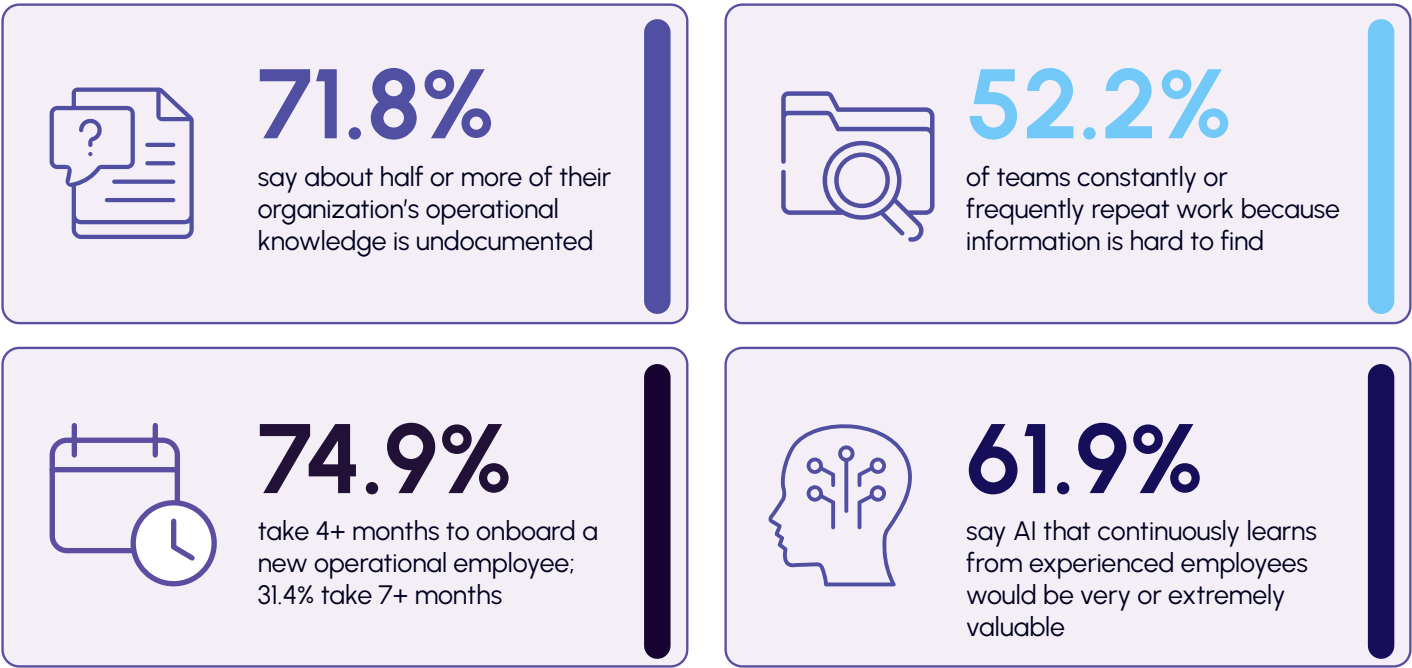
7. The Hidden Value: Digital Workers Can Transfer Institutional Knowledge

Beyond payback periods, digital workers are addressing another core concern: the challenge of transferring institutional knowledge. In Futurum's view, this may be the most underappreciated capability digital workers bring to industrial enterprises. Organizations have long struggled to capture what their most experienced people know, and the survey quantifies just how costly that failure has become (see Figure 13). Nearly three-quarters of organizations say about half or more of their operational knowledge is undocumented, and more than half of teams constantly or frequently repeat work because information is hard to find.

The onboarding math compounds the problem: three-quarters of organizations need four months or longer to bring a new operational employee to full productivity, and nearly a third need seven months or more. It is little wonder that more than 60% say AI systems that continuously learn from experienced employees would be very or extremely valuable.

Figure 13 - Institutional knowledge is walking out the door

Undocumented know-how, repeated work, and slow onboarding make knowledge transfer one of the most valuable jobs a digital worker can do.



Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026 (n=664).

Digital workers can serve as persistent institutional memory rather than just tireless labor. Retaining critical organizational knowledge requires setting clear performance metrics, capturing feedback from all interactions, including explicit corrections and implicit signals such as escalations, and conducting regular human audits to update instructions and knowledge sources.

By keeping underlying data current and routing unhandled edge cases through this same feedback loop, organizations turn operational friction into targeted refinements that continuously improve outcomes.

8. The Real Blocker for Using AI Is the Lack of Predictability

Enterprises remain open to semi-autonomous and autonomous digital workers in principle; what they are waiting for is a platform that proves itself predictable. In Futurum’s assessment, predictability is a solvable problem, and the six deployments in this report are effectively a running log of what it takes to solve it.

Traditional automation approaches either rely on rigid rules that break when conditions change or continue to require a person to make every operational decision. Agentic digital workers combine native integration, built-in governance, and controlled autonomy so they can execute end-to-end processes while escalating only genuine exceptions. Table 4 compares how each generation of automation handles execution, exceptions, maintenance, and enterprise trust.

Table 4 - The Evolution of Enterprise Automation

Agentic digital workers represent a fundamentally different operating model than earlier automation and AI approaches.

Capability	Manual Process	RPA (Robotic Process Automation)	AI Copilot	AI Copilot Agentic Digital Worker
 Execution model	A person executes every step	Scripted, rule-based steps on structured screens/data	Drafts, summarizes, or suggests; a person decides what happens next	Executes a multi-step process end to end, the way an employee would
 Exception handling	Yes, by definition	No — breaks when a new rule or exception appears (Kitron: “every new supplier introduced its own rules and exceptions”)	Yes, but a person still has to act on the suggestion	Learns and adapts within defined guardrails; escalates what it can’t resolve
 Maintenance model	Training and turnover cost	High — breaks on any upstream change; someone has to rewrite the script	Low, but value is capped by how much a person can act on	Designed to improve with use rather than break
 Current trust level (Q8/Q9)	N/A	N/A	37.5% of respondents trust AI only at this level (drafts, human approves)	Only 5.7% trust AI to act fully autonomously today — the gap this report is about

Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026 (n=664).

Every criterion enterprises say they need, including integration, reliability, governance, and a human-in-the-loop model, is now showing up in production at six IFS customers spanning manufacturing, industrial distribution, electronics manufacturing services, and heavy equipment services. As shown in Table 5, those early deployments are already producing measurable operational improvements while establishing a foundation that can extend to field service, asset management, and other enterprise workflows.

At KLN Family Brands, a pet food and snacks manufacturer, CTO Lance Schultz’s team has automated 329 purchase orders a week through IFS’s Supplier Order Manager, reclaiming 27 hours a week previously spent on manual supplier order processing. Schultz credits a specific design choice: plain-text rule sets that let end users adjust the digital worker’s behavior without a developer. “Plain-text rule sets let end-users eventually control the digital workers. That sense of ownership is how we prevent the workforce from feeling overwhelmed by the technology,” Schultz said.

At CDF Corporation, which operates three manufacturing entities, IT Director Alex Ivkovic's team has an inventory replenishment agent live and a Customer Order Manager pending, freeing 20% of purchasing staff's time for higher-value work. CDF also ran a comparison that other enterprises can learn from: the company uses a general-purpose AI assistant for marketing and creative tasks, but chose IFS Loops specifically for operational process work after it outperformed the LLM-based copilot on the same tasks, based on the domain knowledge provided by the IFS digital worker.

CDF's comparison undercuts a common assumption in enterprise AI buying: that one general-purpose model, deployed broadly, beats licensing a purpose-built tool for a specific process. CDF's own data says otherwise for operational workflows, even as its general-purpose tool continues to earn its keep on marketing and creative work.

At Ependion, a roughly 1,000-employee company operating in 20 countries, CIO Joakim Stolt's team brought a Supply Order Manager live company-wide through a 10-week progressive rollout and is now evaluating finance agents next. Stolt frames the KPI in terms that employees recognize: "The primary KPI is time saved for users, not headcount reduction. Employees view digital workers as beneficial coworkers, not threats to their jobs."

At Kitron Group, Business Application Manager Jonatan Gustafsson's team runs three IFS Loops agents together: a Supplier Order Manager, a Supplier Communications Agent, and an Inventory Replenisher. Working in concert, they take a purchase requisition to a confirmed supplier order without a human step when supplier data follows standard rules. The team abandoned robotic process automation first: every new supplier introduced its own rules, an unsustainable burden at the company's 10–15% annual growth in purchase order volume, and many of its suppliers are too small or specialized to ever adopt electronic data interchange.

"You don't give an intern or a junior person joining the team your most critical supplier from the start, so don't do it to the digital worker. Start with the easy tasks, start building trust, and then increase the responsibility."

– Jonatan Gustafsson, Business Application Manager, Kitron Group

Gustafsson's team now tracks one metric above all others: the share of purchase orders still requiring human intervention, a rate it expects to fall as the agents learn, with all 13 sites live by the end of 2026. The deployment has also surfaced value beyond speed: when an agent couldn't match a supplier's part number to an IFS record, it traced the mismatch to a data-entry error transposed a decade earlier and never caught. "Not my experience," Gustafsson said when asked whether clean data is a precondition for automation, as the agent works with, and improves, the data that is already there.

The Hidden Payoff

A digital worker surfaced a part-number error that had gone undetected for a decade,

proof that agents don't just tolerate imperfect data; they actively improve it from inside a live deployment.

AirBoss and Sims Crane are earlier in the same journey. AirBoss VP of Economic Operations, Jesus Aleman, projects 40% of orders will run with zero human touch once its Customer Order Manager reaches production, alongside a Supplier Invoice Manager still in implementation. "Implementing AI is not an 'easy button' on day one," he said. "You're essentially training an intern, but the return on that training is exponential."

Sims Crane is targeting an 80/20 straight-through rate for accounts payable. Chief Business Operations Officer Curtis Taylor draws a sharp line on what counts: "Good AP automation means 80% flows through automatically, and I only manage the 20% exceptions. Every invoice still needing human touch isn't automation, it's assisted data entry."

Taken together, these early procurement and order-to-pay deployments reveal a remarkably consistent pattern (see Table 5). Across all six companies, three decision drivers recur regardless of industry or use case (see Figure 14): native integration with the systems (ERP, EAM, FSM) already running the business, rather than a separate integration layer to build and maintain; no requirement for an internal developer bench to build and maintain custom automation logic, which every interviewee named as a practical reason a purpose-built digital worker beat a build-it-yourself alternative; and vendor accountability, described by one interviewee as wanting "a neck to choke" if something goes wrong.

Table 5 - Customer Outcomes Snapshot for Procurement (Order to Pay)

These early adopters are using Digital Workers across procurement and order-to-pay processes to automate complex work, improve accuracy, and deliver measurable impact.

Company (Industry)	Digital Worker Deployed (Procurement / Order to Pay)	Status	Measured or Projected Result
	Supplier Order Manager	 Live in production	329 purchase orders automated per week Reclaiming 27 hours per week previously spent on manual supplier order processing.
	- Inventory Replenishment Agent (live) - Customer Order Manager (pending)	 Inventory agent live in production; Customer Order Manager pending	20% of purchasing staff time freed For higher-value work. \nLoops outperformed IFS's LLM-based Copilot on the same operational tasks.
	Supply Order Manager	 Live in production across the company	10-week rollout completed Company-wide deployment delivering time savings for users; finance agents next under evaluation.
	- Supplier Order Manager - Supplier Communications Agent - Inventory Replenisher	 Live in production (rolling out to all 13 sites)	Reducing human intervention rate on purchase orders Targeting near-zero human touch by end of 2026. Agents also surfaced and corrected long-standing data errors.
	- Customer Order Manager (in production) - Supplier Invoice Manager (in implementation)	 Customer Order Manager in production	40% of orders projected with zero human touch Once Customer Order Manager reaches full production.
	Invoice Automation (AP Digital Worker)	 In implementation; go-live targeted Aug. 2026	Targeting 80/20 straight-through rate 80% of invoices processed automatically; 20% human-handled exceptions.



Expanding beyond procurement and order-to-pay
New Digital Workers for Field Service launched in Q2.



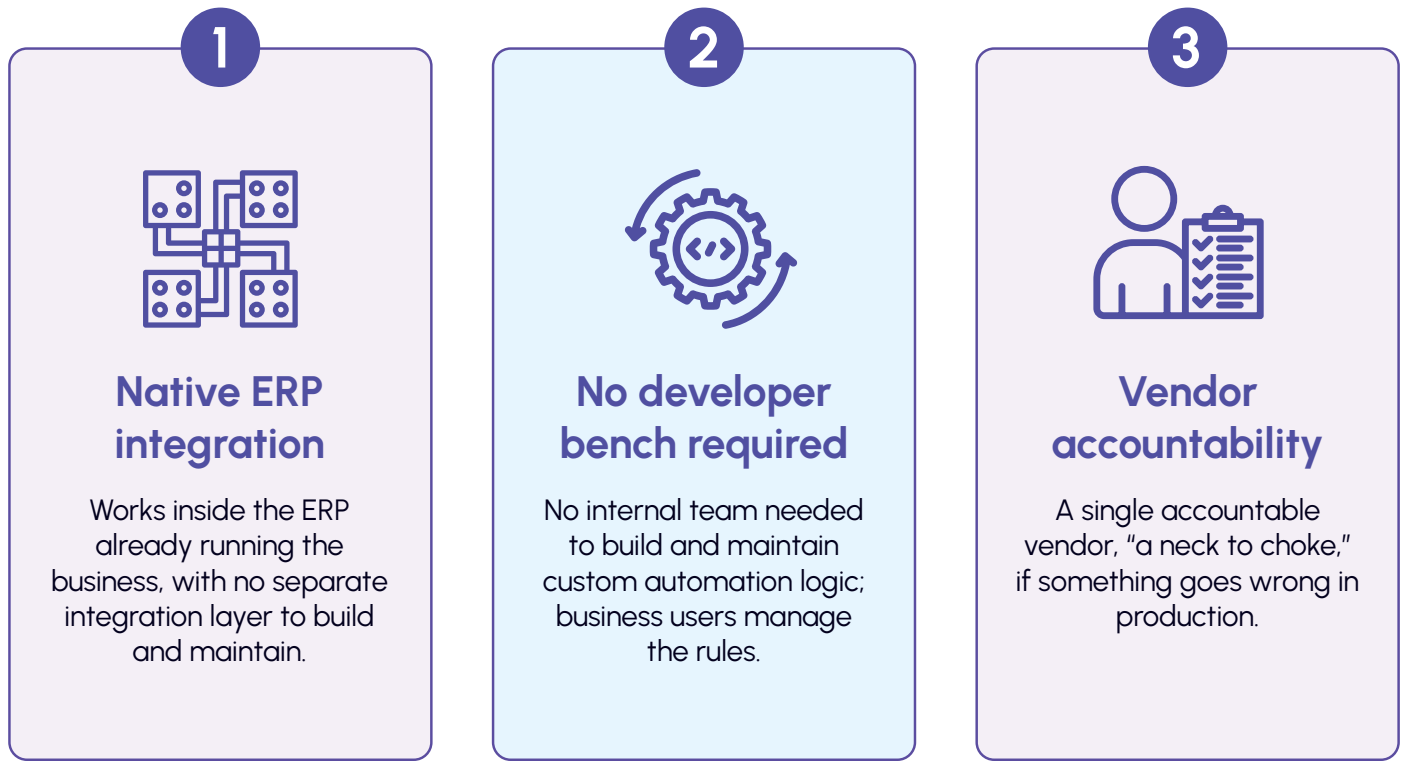
Digital Workers for Asset
Management launching in Q3.

The platform is designed
to scale across business
processes and functions.

Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026

Figure 14 - Three decision drivers recur across all six deployments

Regardless of industry or use case, the same three factors drove the choice of a purpose-built digital worker platform.



Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026 (n=664).

These six conversations converge with the survey findings at scale: a platform's ability to prove itself reliable, integrated, and governed under real operating conditions is what separates autonomy from reluctance. The six companies show proof of accumulating in production rather than in a pilot. A pilot generates a case study; production generates a track record, and that difference is what a peer enterprise's finance committee will actually accept as evidence.

***"Implementing AI is not an 'easy button' on day one...
the return on that training is exponential."***

— Jesus Aleman, VP of Economic Operations, AirBoss



The Digital Worker Playbook Is Replicable

The six companies profiled in this report were not chosen because their rollouts were easy. They were chosen because they're broadly relevant to industrial use cases, where mission-critical systems demand AI that is dependable and predictably reliable. Their combined experience points to six practices that recur regardless of industry, plant count, or which process runs first (see Figure 1), and each one is a corrective to a specific, common mistake in how enterprises approach agentic AI.

1. **Prioritize Integration, Governance, and a Phased Rollout:** Enterprises evaluating digital workers over the next year should prioritize a platform featuring native integration and built-in governance, and model their rollout on the phased deployments of KLN Family Brands, CDF Corporation, Ependion, AirBoss, Sims Crane, and Kitron Group.
2. **Move While the Evidence Window Is Open:** The undecided 22% of enterprises share the same integration, accuracy, and ROI concerns as committed buyers. With 66% of the market leaning toward investment, the next 12 months will separate companies achieving production deployments from those still gathering evidence.
3. **Avoid Single-Point Solutions:** Across all six core industrial segments surveyed, the top AI use case captures less than half of the potential value, with others clustering close behind. Procurement, field service, and asset digital workers should operate against a shared business logic and data model rather than as disconnected tools.
4. **Demand a Shared, Governed Core:** Enterprises must evaluate whether a platform's digital workers share a governed core, much like a headless platform, that lets agents hand off work across end-to-end processes instead of stopping at functional boundaries. This lets leaders replicate the rollout playbook across use cases without reinventing the wheel each time.



Despite Hesitation, AI Is Already a Line Item

While digital workers remain nascent as a category, the investment behind them is anything but tentative. Just 3.6% of respondents spend less than \$1M a year on AI, agentic AI, and automation, while 58.5% of organizations already spend \$10M or more annually. The \$10M–\$25M band is the single largest spending tier in the survey, at 28.0% of respondents. Data like this reflect a common pattern in early adoption phases: new technology unlocks business value and competitive advantage, creating urgency to adopt, often before ownership of the technology is clearly assigned (see Table 6).

Table 6 - Who Owns the Buying Decision Varies Sharply by Industry (Q24)

Decision ownership reflects the primary organizational group with final authority for digital worker investments.

Industry	IT-owned	Business/ops-owned	Shared	Center of excellence
 Manufacturing	37.2%	8.0%	34.5%	17.7%
 Energy & Utilities	24.8%	25.6%	35.5%	12.4%
 Transportation & Logistics	20.7%	26.8%	37.8%	13.4%
 Construction & Engineering	15.8%	22.8%	34.2%	24.6%
 Aerospace & Defense	30.2%	19.0%	37.1%	12.1%
 Telecommunications	22.9%	25.4%	37.3%	13.6%
All respondents	25.5%	21.1%	36.0%	15.7%

Source: Futurum Research, Enterprise Autonomous Workers Study, 2026

The ownership data carry a clear message: who signs off on digital workers depends heavily on the industry, and vendors and internal champions alike should plan for it. Manufacturing is the only sector where IT ownership dwarfs ownership by the business side, making it by a wide margin the most IT-siloed buying process in the survey and arguing for leading with CIO/CTO messaging in that sector. Transportation and logistics sit at the other end of the spectrum, with the highest rate of center-of-excellence ownership of any sector, evidence of a centralized, cross-functional buying committee, and a fundamentally different sales motion than manufacturing's IT-led one.

Six Practices Separate Deployments That Scale From Those That Stall

1 Treat the Digital Worker Like a New Hire, Not a Finished System	Handing an untested agent the highest-risk process on day one leaves no room to course-correct once exception volume becomes unmanageable.	● AirBoss's Jesus Aleman put it plainly: "You're essentially training an intern, but the return on that training is exponential." ● Kitron Group took that literally: its team named its Supplier Order Manager "Kitty," reflecting the way it treated the digital worker like a new hire by initially deploying it on low-risk suppliers before handing over its most critical relationships.
2 Build Inside the Core Systems, Not Alongside Them	A platform operating through core systems' own APIs stays inside guardrails the business already trusts; a parallel automation layer doesn't.	● Kitron Group abandoned robotic process automation because every new supplier introduced its own rules, an unmanageable scenario at scale. ● KLN Family Brands took the inverse approach from day one: plain-text rule sets let end users adjust the digital worker's behavior directly, no developer required. ● Ependion's rollout reinforces the same principle from the deployment side; its Supply Order Manager went live company-wide through a progressive rollout built on the ERP's existing logic rather than a bolted-on layer.
3 Don't Wait for Clean Data – Let the Deployment Find It	Poor data quality is the reason 30% of survey respondents give for AI projects stalling before production, more than any other cause. None of the six companies in this report waited for a fully remediated data environment before deploying	● Kitron Group's agents surfaced a decade-old, undetected part-number error that a manual process had missed for years. ● Meanwhile, both AirBoss and Sims Crane are pushing toward zero-touch production by deploying first and letting the platform improve data quality in live operation, rather than undertaking a full data-cleansing effort before launch, a sequencing choice that is getting both companies to value more quickly.
4 Measure Learning, Not Volume	Raw transaction counts rise with usage, whether or not a system is actually improving. Set the metric before rollout, or there's nothing to hold the deployment honest against.	● Kitron Group tracks the share of purchase orders still requiring human intervention, expecting that rate, rather than the count, to fall as its agents learn. ● Sims Crane applies the same discipline to accounts payable, drawing a hard line between straight-through processing and assisted data entry: "Good AP automation means 80% flows through automatically, and I only manage the 20% exceptions," said Chief Business Operations Officer Curtis Taylor.
5 Sell Time Saved, Not Headcount Cut	A deployment framed as a job threat invites the resistance that stalls adoption; one framed as capacity relief invites participation.	● Ependion frames its digital workers as coworkers, not threats to jobs, and credits that framing with the employee buy-in that got its Supply Order Manager live company-wide. "The primary KPI is time saved for users, not headcount reduction," CIO Joakim Stolt said. ● AirBoss makes the same case in capacity terms rather than job terms, projecting 40% of orders processed with zero human touch once its Customer Order Manager reaches production, framing the result as freed-up time rather than eliminated roles.
6 Run the Platform Bake-off Before You Commit	Enterprises should run that same head-to-head on their own processes rather than assume a horizontal AI tool transfers cleanly into a regulated, multi-step workflow.	● CDF Corporation tested IFS's general-purpose AI assistant against the purpose-built Loops platform on the same operational work, and the general-purpose tool lost, even though it continued to earn its keep on marketing and creative tasks.

Enterprises that implement these six practices before their first rollout are more likely to follow the same successful path these six companies have already walked from pilot to production.



Methodology

Two primary research streams commissioned by IFS underpin this analysis. The first is an online quantitative survey of 664 qualified respondents across manufacturing, energy & utilities, aerospace & defense, transportation & logistics, construction, and telecommunications (the core industrial segments) in North America and Europe, fielded in May and June 2026; each data point notes the filtering applied and the base size for that cut.

The second is a set of in-depth interviews with IT and operations leaders across six IFS customers: KLN Family Brands, CDF Corporation, Ependion, AirBoss, Sims Crane, and Kitron Group.

Both surveys were conducted independently by The Futurum Group, without any restrictions or influence from IFS over question design or reported findings.

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