

The AI Performance Gap: What 325 CX Leaders Reveal About Who's Winning and Who's Stuck

A new Aberdeen survey conducted in July 2025 surveyed 325 CX and front-office leaders across all industries and company sizes to identify the key trends, use cases, and business impact of AI adoption. The findings reveal a striking performance divide, not between companies using AI versus those that don't, but between firms making practical use of AI to generate measurable outcomes and those still struggling to translate investment into results.

The gap is wider than many expected. And the barriers holding companies back aren't what you might think.

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The Adoption Roadblocks Holding Firms Back

When asked about barriers to AI adoption, the most common challenge wasn't budget or technology; it was clarity. Twenty-three percent of respondents cited a lack of understanding of how AI can be used in their activities as the top obstacle. This was followed closely by lack of resources for investment (20%), employee concerns about AI replacing jobs (19%), and lack of internal human know-how to incorporate AI within existing activities (19%).

What stands out is that only 7% said they don't see AI's business value, and just 11% reported corporate mandates prohibiting AI use. Translation: most organizations recognize AI's potential, but they're paralyzed by uncertainty about how to deploy it effectively.

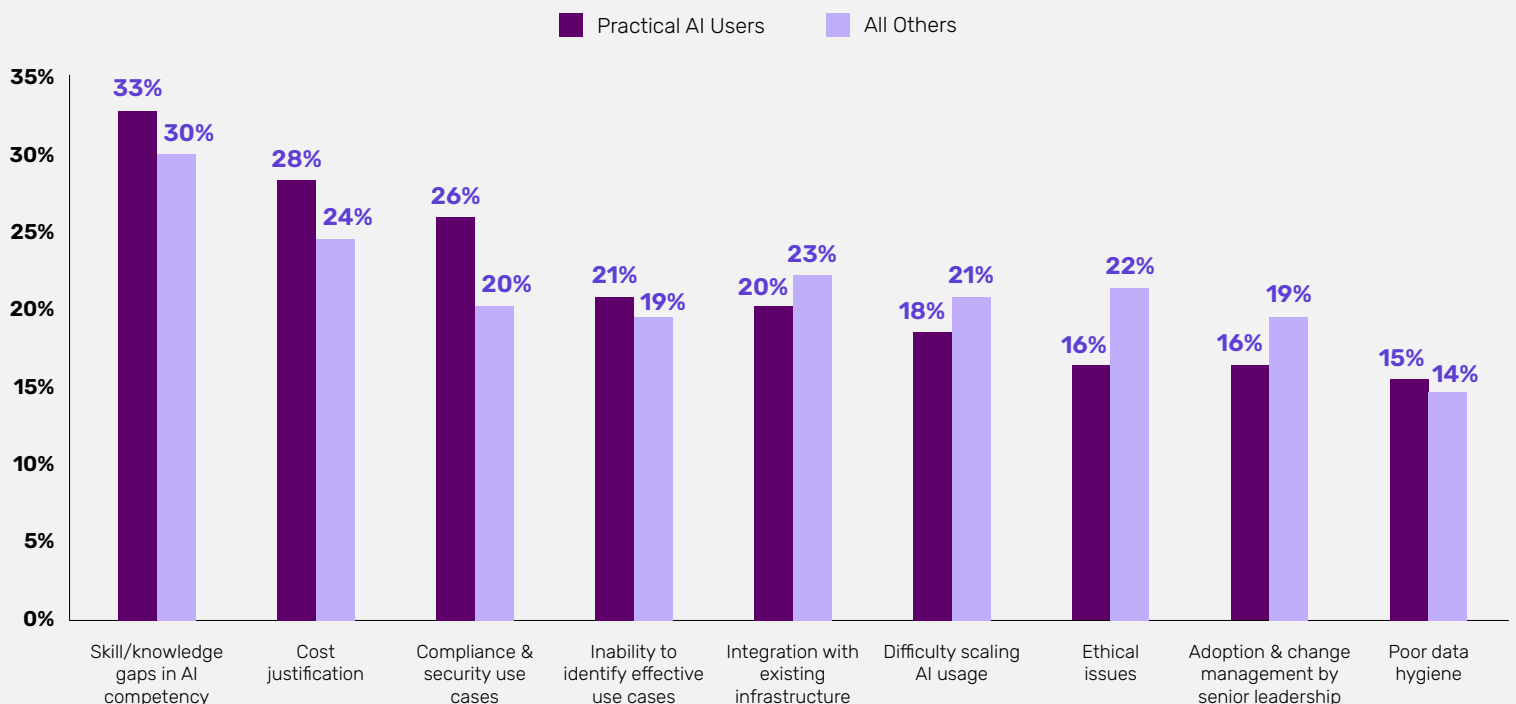


Where Practical AI Users Diverge

The data gets more interesting when you compare firms that lead in practical AI deployment - those generating measurable business outcomes - against all others.

For this research, Aberdeen defined Practical AI as companies using any AI capability (e.g., machine learning, Gen AI, Agentic AI, automation) strategically and embedded in their business. These firms report year-over-year improvement in key overarching business outcomes: operations costs, employee efficiency (productivity), time to decision, and employee engagement and satisfaction.

The AI Maturity Divide: How Deployment Barriers Differ by Performance Level



Percent of respondents, n=325 | Source: Aberdeen, August 2025

Practical AI users face different barriers. For them, the top challenge is skill and knowledge gaps in AI competency (33%), followed by cost justification (28%) and compliance and security use cases (26%). Meanwhile, firms lagging struggle more with integration challenges (23% versus 20% for Practical AI users), difficulty scaling AI usage (21% versus 18%), and especially senior leadership adoption and change management (19% versus 16%).

This tells us that **leading firms have moved past the "what" and "why" of AI and are now wrestling with the "how" at scale.** Their concerns center on talent, ROI validation, and governance – all signs of operational maturity. Lagging firms, by contrast, are still stuck at the integration and leadership commitment stage.



The Performance Premium of Practical AI Deployment

The business impact of bridging this gap is substantial.

Practical AI users achieve 59% greater year-over-year improvement in annual company revenue compared to all others. They also report 17% greater improvement in customer profit margins and 29% greater improvement in service costs.

The advantages are even more pronounced for marketing and CX leaders specifically. Practical AI users achieve 49% greater improvement in return on marketing investment and a remarkable 81% greater increase in employee engagement rates. They also see 39% greater growth in marketing's contribution to company revenue, 14% better improvement in lead conversion rates, and 42% greater improvement in customer acquisition cost.



What This Means for Your AI Strategy

The research delivers three clear messages:

First, **the education gap is real and widespread.** Nearly a quarter of organizations don't know where to start with AI in their operations. This isn't a technology problem. It's a knowledge and change management challenge. Firms need to invest in AI literacy across the organization, not just within IT.

Second, **practical AI deployment isn't about experimentation but execution.** The leaders aren't running more pilots or testing more tools. They solve real problems, measure outcomes, and build institutional capabilities around AI competency and governance.

Third, **the financial upside of getting AI right compounds quickly.** When you measure year-over-year performance across revenue, margins, engagement, and conversion metrics, practical AI users aren't just slightly ahead; they're pulling away at an accelerating rate.

The firms that bridge the knowledge gap and move from AI experimentation to practical deployment won't just improve efficiency. They'll fundamentally outpace competitors on the metrics that matter: revenue growth, profitability, customer value, and employee engagement.

The question isn't whether to adopt AI. It's whether you're building the capabilities to deploy it practically or are stuck watching others pull ahead.