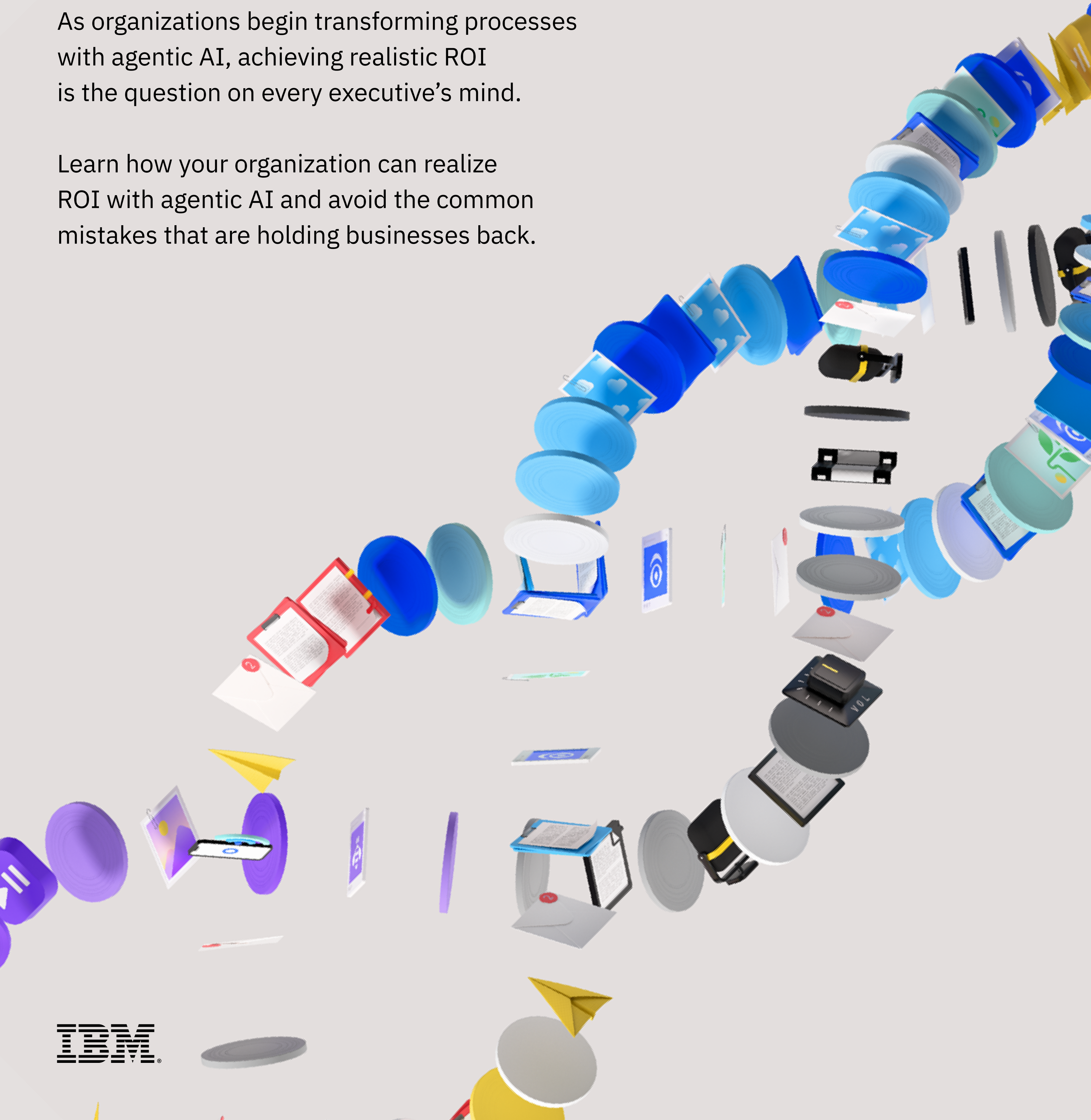
Start realizing ROI: A practical guide to agentic AI for tech leaders

As organizations begin transforming processes with agentic AI, achieving realistic ROI is the question on every executive's mind.

Learn how your organization can realize ROI with agentic AI and avoid the common mistakes that are holding businesses back.



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Introduction: Agentic AI today

Agentic AI is maturing from concept to competitive advantage at the speed of light. While the technology has only recently come to market, business leaders are already mobilizing to capture its transformative potential. In an IBM Institute for Business Value survey, 76% of responding executives reported their organizations are developing, executing or scaling proofs of concept for autonomous AI agents.[1]

Businesses are thinking past the experimentation phase and seeking real ROI with these agents—61% of CEOs surveyed say their organization is actively adopting AI agents and preparing to implement them at scale.[2] Autonomous systems are no longer experimental novelties; they've become a business reality.

Despite the eagerness to adopt agentic AI, only 25% of the AI initiatives have delivered the expected ROI, and only 16% have been scaled enterprise-wide.[2] It's no longer enough to pilot a few programs and adopt individual agents. Enterprises must set achievable targets across parameters such as productivity, revenue gains, cost savings, employee and customer satisfaction. And to do so, organizations need to use agentic AI that's integrated and orchestrated, provides robust governance and enables seamless interoperability. They will also need to apply agentic AI to areas that will give them the greatest returns.

Common barriers to ROI on agentic AI

When AI is deployed strategically, it has the power to deliver extraordinary opportunities for growth. However, many organizations struggle to realize its full potential. Here are three common barriers preventing business leaders from achieving the ROI they expect from agentic AI.

Unstructured data

You can't use AI to its full potential without leveraging your own proprietary business data. But if your data isn't well structured or if it's scattered across silos, your AI initiatives are likely to fail. Agentic AI systems, much like the human workforce, require context to perform effectively. This comes from high-quality, relevant and well-structured data. Without contextual knowledge rooted in business logic, agents lack the necessary framework to make informed decisions. This approach can lead to errors, inefficiencies and missed opportunities for process optimization and compliance adherence. Organizations must evaluate whether their data infrastructure is mature enough to support autonomous decision-making.

Poor governance

Governance isn't just a compliance checkbox; it's the critical foundation of great AI. Many business leaders are under pressure to deploy AI agents quickly, expecting them to execute entire workflows autonomously. However, it is important to prioritize structuring systems to manage and oversee the agents. As businesses scale AI across functions and processes, the absence of clear policies, oversight mechanisms and accountability frameworks can lead to unpredictable agent behavior, especially when exposed to real-world data and complex business environments. As organizations gear up to deploy multiple agents across functions and processes, good governance will prove to be what makes or breaks agentic AI advancement.

> If you don't have proper governance, it will be chaos. Somebody who is in charge of managing risk is going to say stop […] That's going to take away time-to-market speed. So, it's a critical underpinning of what needs to happen to scale.
>
> **Manish Goyal**
> Senior Partner, Enterprise AI Strategy & Governance, Global Offering Leader, IBM Consulting®

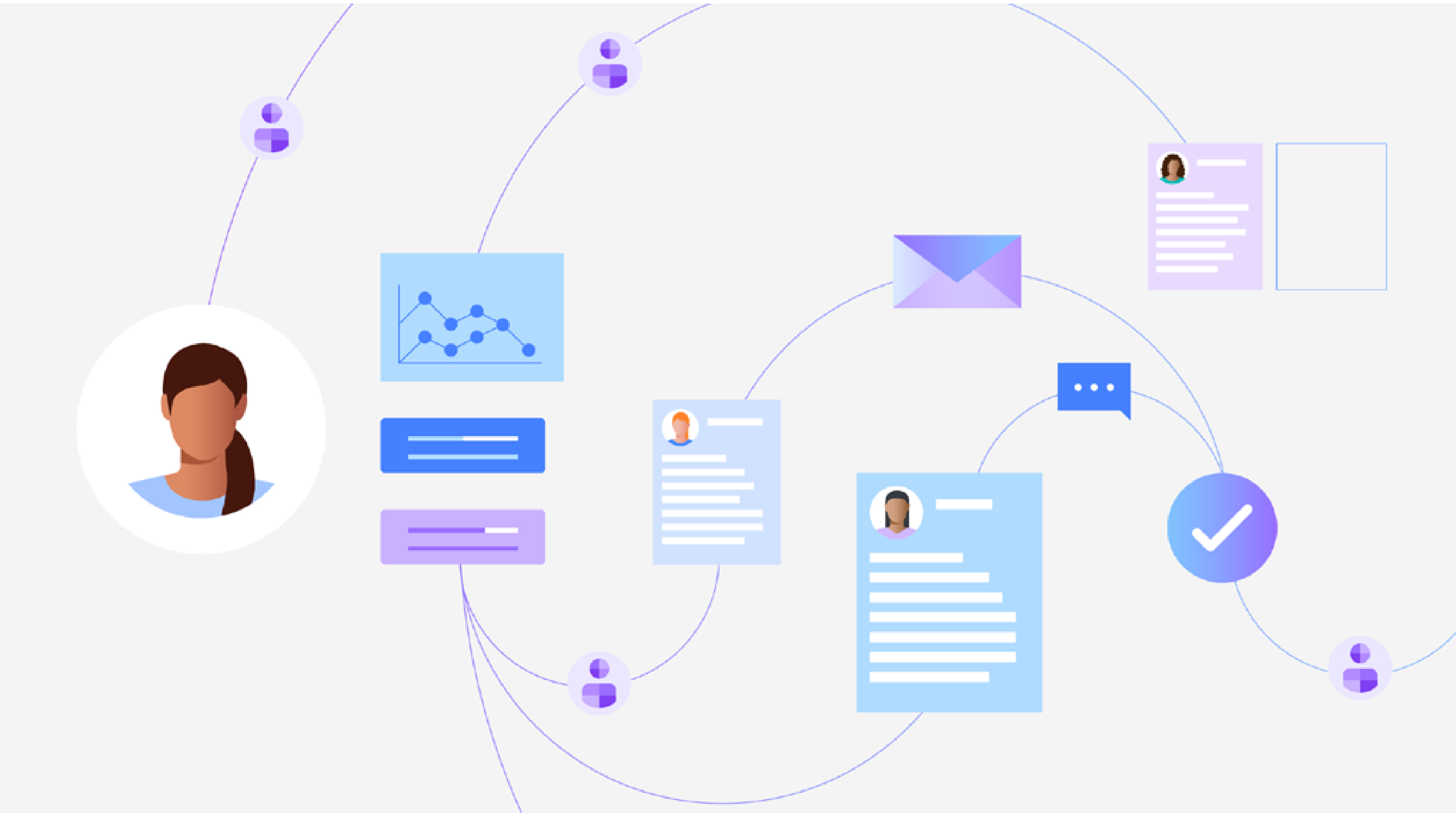
Prioritizing task automation over workflow transformation

One of the most common pitfalls is focusing on task automation instead of end-to-end process transformation. If your organization is too focused on specific tasks, it can lead to many different, disconnected agents that don't all contribute to the same goal and system. A fragmented agent landscape can lead to the opposite of efficiency: agent sprawl across applications, functions and workflows. Companies and executives must set their sight on AI-first enterprise transformation by integrating agentic AI into core workflows and processes.

When backed by a robust AI orchestration strategy that automates complex, multistep processes through coordinated and governed intelligent agents and tools, this approach can deliver unprecedented productivity gains and drive agent-driven business transformation.

Without an end-to-end transformation strategy, you can only reap marginal improvements in revenue and efficiency, completely missing the bigger opportunity.

> When you look at an agentic AI solution, make sure you're going towards the business outcome you are driving. Are you actually hitting the targets that you have defined, or are you just stuck on automating tasks?
>
> **Francesco Brenna**
> VP & Senior Partner, Global Leader AI Integration Services, IBM Consulting



How to maximize ROI from agentic AI

Organizations have experienced increased productivity, process optimization, customer and employee satisfaction by deploying AI agents. Here are four steps to help maximize ROI from agentic AI.

Productivity gains
Organizations are focusing on productivity as a key metric to measure the ROI from agentic AI. It allows them to quantify the value agentic AI adds to business operations. When agents automate tasks and accelerate workflows, they directly impact output and efficiency. For instance, IBM uses productivity gains as a way to measure ROI, and we expect to achieve USD 4.5 billion in productivity gains by the end of 2025.[3] We aim to become the world's most productive company by automating workflows and reducing manual effort. With agentic AI taking care of mundane, time-consuming tasks, employees can spend time on real innovation, leaders can focus on the bigger picture and organizations can unlock unprecedented growth. For example, UFC chose to measure ROI through productivity improvements and implemented systems and processes that helped them gather insights faster. This helps their employees provide content and responses to their customers at a faster rate.[4]

01

Define what ROI means

Defining ROI goals and relevant KPIs is critical to achieving the full potential of agentic AI, whether the goal is cutting costs, improving speed or automating repetitive tasks.

> The KPI and the goals you define are really about the business outcome that you want to drive—process efficiency, cost saving, revenue impact.
>
> **Francesco Brenna**
> VP & Senior Partner, Global Leader AI Integration Services, IBM Consulting

ROI unlocked with agentic AI

40%

UFC reduced their query generation time by 40%, freeing teams from labor-intensive data analysis.[4]

26,000

D&B Ask Procurement, a procurement assistant developed by IBM for Dun & Bradstreet, helped save an estimated 26,000 hours of work annually by reducing the manual drafting and review of briefs.[5]

75%

IBM AskHR, an internal human resources agent, automated over 80 HR tasks and enabled a 75% reduction in support tickets raised since 2016.[6]

Revenue growth
Revenue growth is another way to measure success. According to an IBM Institute for Business Value survey, AI-first enterprises are seeing measurable revenue growth and the top-performing companies saw an 18% ROI, well above the average.[7] More importantly, nearly half of the organizations surveyed report sustained growth in revenue and operating profits attributed to AI since 2022.[7] To achieve measurable revenue growth, enterprises must focus on building an orchestration layer to ensure AI agents, assistants and automations work together across functions, breaking down silos and uniting the business's investment in agentic AI to create greater impact.

Employee and customer satisfaction
Agentic AI can deliver powerful intangible benefits including improved employee experience, enhanced customer satisfaction and agile and self-serviceable IT systems. In a survey, 44% of responding executives cite improved employee experience and 42% cite talent retention as key benefits of using agentic AI.[8] According to another survey, surveyed executives anticipate a 53% increase in AI-powered personalized self-service options and a 47% improvement in AI-enabled self-service call resolution by 2027.[1] With the right execution, agentic AI can support employees and customers better. By automating routine and resource-demanding tasks, employees can focus more on strategic and high-value work.

Cost reduction
One of the top benefits of using agentic AI is cost reduction through automation, according to 67% of surveyed leaders,[7] making it another viable option for measuring ROI. Another study shows that 85% of responding CEOs expect a positive ROI for scaled AI efficiency and cost savings investments by 2027.[2] These savings are realized by automating core workflows and streamlining operations in areas such as supply chain, HR and IT, while improving efficiency and scalability. By driving efficiency, agentic AI can help enterprises increase revenue and cut costs at the same time.

ROI unlocked with agentic AI

83%

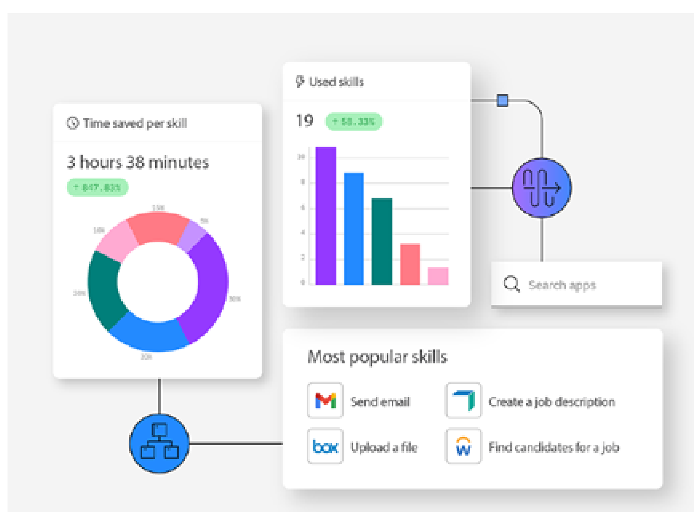
of respondents expect their overall process efficiency and output to improve with AI agents.[7]

40%

cut in HR operational costs over four years with IBM's AskHR agent.[6]

90%

of responding executives believe AI agents will empower operations professionals to go beyond reporting and deliver real-time, actionable insights by 2027.[1]



A representation of an AI workflow dashboard

02

Prioritize governance and security

As agentic AI becomes central to enterprise strategy, clear governance is a key differentiator between hype and value. Research shows that 56% of responding CEOs are delaying major investments in generative AI until they have clarity on governance standards.[9] This hesitation reflects growing awareness that without oversight, AI can introduce risk faster than it can deliver returns.

Agentic AI systems operate autonomously, making decisions and executing tasks independently. Without well-thought-out governance, these systems risk hallucination, bias and non-compliance. A strong AI governance tool introduces agent-specific metrics such as context relevance, trust, compliance and answer quality to monitor agent behavior and detect early signs of drift.

Embedding security directly into the development workflow helps detect issues when they're easiest and least costly to resolve. By catching security issues during code authoring rather than in review or production, vulnerabilities are prevented from progressing through the pipeline. This action reduces remediation costs and improves overall security posture without slowing the speed of development.

68%

of AI-first organizations, those achieving the highest ROI, report having mature governance frameworks, compared to just 32% of other organizations.[7]

Organizations need clear visibility into agent behavior once they're deployed. Agent operations (AgentOps) provides this by applying DevOps and MLOps-style practices to the full lifecycle of autonomous agents. AgentOps platforms help deliver end-to-end observability, evaluation and optimization so teams can monitor performance, behavior and compliance in real time.

With built-in trust, security checks and policy enforcement, AgentOps helps teams quickly detect issues and tune agent behavior to achieve a scalable agent ecosystem that reduces risk and accelerates enterprise adoption.

Having a strategic control layer that ensures autonomous systems operate within defined guardrails enables organizations to scale confidently while minimizing risk and delivering measurable business outcomes. It means creating clear policies for how AI uses data, makes decisions and aligns with your organization's goals. Practical steps include setting measurable success criteria for each AI initiative, using dashboards to track performance against those goals and scheduling regular reviews to catch issues early.

Organizations should also implement approval workflows for high-impact decisions, require documentation for how recommendations are generated and train teams on responsible AI use. Embedding these practices into everyday operations ensures AI improves workflows and decision-making while staying transparent and trustworthy.

03

Orchestrate your agentic AI journey

Agentic AI is pushing enterprises to rethink the way they work. However, without effectively orchestrating AI agents' collaboration and communication, automations and data across the business—aligned to defined and desired objectives—organizations risk fragmented efforts and diluted returns.

Therefore, to go from marginal gains to enterprise-wide impact, organizations must build a strategic orchestration layer to ensure all of their AI tools such as agents, assistants and automation technologies work together smoothly. An orchestration layer serves as a central system that coordinates these tools—so that they don't operate in silos.

AI can only be as powerful as the data behind it, so having high-quality, well-structured data is essential for generating meaningful insights to drive real business value.
The orchestration layer bridges AI-ready data and intelligent workflows, transforming isolated instances of AI use and automation into a cohesive, scalable system that helps organizations realize consistent ROI.

To orchestrate agents effectively, organizations should define clear roles and responsibilities for each agent, ensuring they complement rather than duplicate efforts. Leveraging a centralized orchestration platform or layer is key. It should monitor workflows, prioritize tasks and dynamically allocate resources based on business objectives. Continuous feedback loops and performance metrics can help refine orchestration strategies, ensuring agents adapt to evolving goals and deliver consistent, enterprise-wide value. When done right, orchestration ensures that the right data is sent to the right agents at the right time, with the right context and security models.

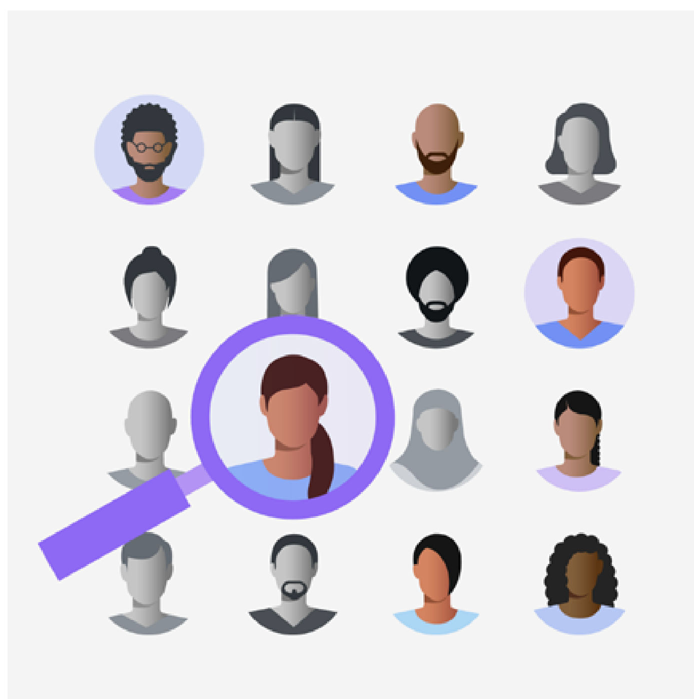
> It's not about measuring agentic AI performance. It's about how well you use these tools in every function within your organization that helps top-line growth and drives productivity.
>
> **Manish Goyal**
> Senior Partner, Enterprise AI Strategy & Governance, Global Offering Leader, IBM Consulting

04

Turn employees into ambassadors

When it comes to AI adoption, particularly agentic AI, an organization is only as successful as its employees. 81% of executives surveyed recognize that to seize competitive advantage, they need the right people in the right positions with the right incentives.[1] Employees, on the other hand, can be skeptical about AI, which can be damaging to any organization's AI ambitions and overall growth. A Forbes survey shows that 31% of employees admit they're actively sabotaging their company's AI strategy.[10]

Executives must rally their employees along with them and turn them into ambassadors, with a top-down as well as a bottom-up approach. One way is to empower employees with AI tools to upskill and augment their work, as IBM did with the IBM watsonx® Challenge, an annual AI challenge for our employees. The challenge encourages employees to suggest AI solutions that can be executed and scaled, with the 2025 IBM watsonx Challenge seeing over 167,000 participants and a total of 15,555 submissions.[11] Organizations can also incentivize employees who embrace the technology, turning skeptics into believers and helping them see that agentic AI is here to augment not replace their capabilities.



Practical use cases for agentic AI

Empower people-first teams with AI agents

HR and customer service teams face mounting pressure: rising expectations, talent shortages, shrinking budgets and disconnected systems. AI agents help overcome these challenges by automating complex workflows across the employee and customer lifecycles. These enterprise-ready agents integrate seamlessly with existing tools to improve recruiting and onboarding, performance and learning, or handling routine inquiries and real-time support. The result? Faster processes, happier customers, engaged employees and more time for strategic priorities that drive growth.

Put the focus back on selling with AI agents that handle the rest

Ambitious targets stall when sales reps are buried in data entry, fragmented tools and manual outreach. AI agents for sales help streamline prospecting, personalize emails, enrich accounts with trusted data and keep customer relationship records current—so sellers spend more time selling. Prebuilt, configurable agents can integrate across leading apps and work together to deliver real-time insights and end-to-end execution. As a result, sales teams can drive faster cycles, higher win rates and a cleaner pipeline without having to build agents from scratch.

Build resilient, cost-efficient supply chains with AI

Manual processes, fragmented systems and supplier risk slows procurement and drives up costs. AI agents can help automate supplier onboarding, compliance checks, purchase order management, invoice processing and sourcing tasks such as request for proposal creation and supplier recommendations. They help accelerate decisions, strengthen compliance management and deliver a more resilient, cost-efficient supply chain.

Boost developer productivity across the software development lifecycle

Modern software development demands speed, precision and governance, yet development teams are often slowed by fragmented tools, legacy code, manual workflows and growing complexity. Agentic AI transforms how developers work by planning, executing and validating multi-step engineering tasks directly in context. By reducing cognitive load and embedding security, compliance and modernization into everyday workflows, this approach enables teams to deliver high-quality software faster while ensuring consistency and control at scale.

Take the next step

Discover how IBM can help you achieve your ROI goals.

IBM watsonx Orchestrate
Transform your agentic AI portfolio with a single solution designed to orchestrate AI agents, assistants and workflows across your business. IBM® watsonx Orchestrate® puts AI to work, helping you to build, deploy and manage powerful AI agents and assistants that automate workflows and processes with gen AI. Experience seamless integration with your existing systems and connect to any AI model. Leverage ready-to-deploy prebuilt agents or build custom agents to suit your needs.

Learn more →

IBM Bob
Meet IBM Bob, a software development partner designed to help teams modernize legacy systems and boost developer productivity throughout the software development lifecycle. Using agentic, context-aware intelligence, Bob handles complex workflows, from accelerating Java and COBOL modernization to automating secure builds and deployments. The result is faster delivery, reduced risk and development teams that feel empowered to innovate at scale and with confidence.

Learn more →

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