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A path for private companies
to approach GenAI

Introduction

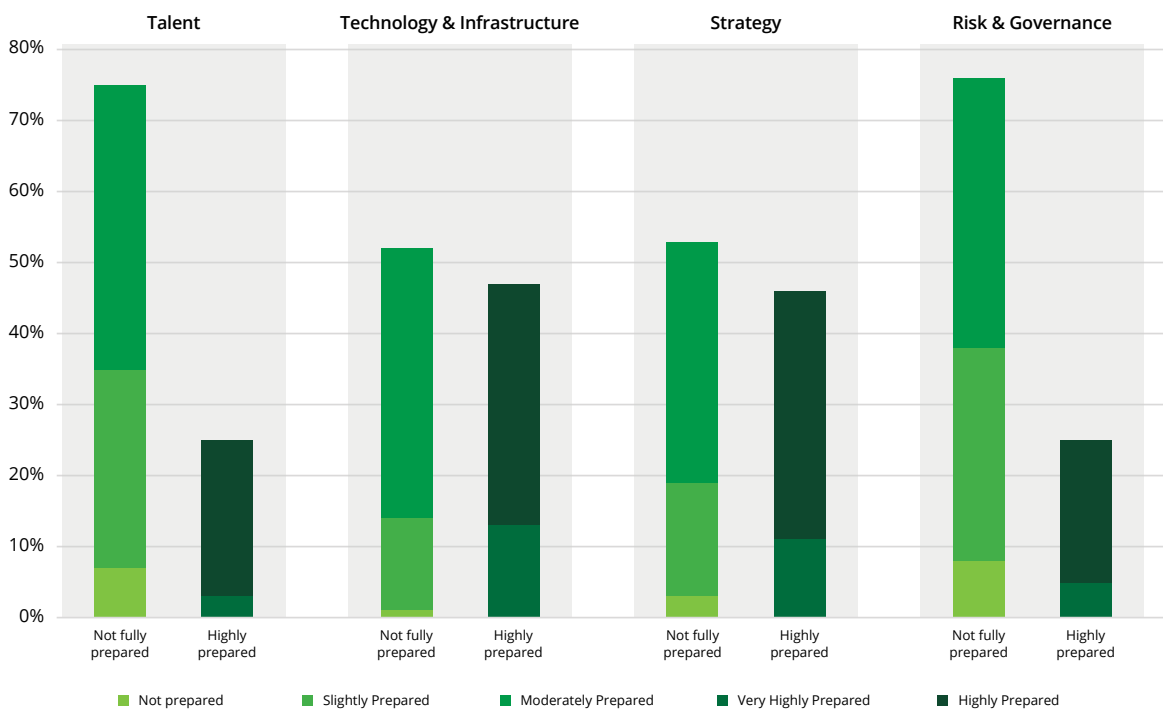
If you need more evidence that private companies are waking up to the potential of Generative AI to transform their businesses, look no further than the wine industry. At a recent forum of finance chiefs from across the industry, the discussion wasn't focused on grape yields, new blends, or the weather. Rather, it was AI that stole the show.

"A year ago, I brought up AI and the conversation kind of fizzled out," said Michael Juergens, a Deloitte & Touche LLP principal who hosts the periodic get-together as leader of the Winery Solutions and Services practice. "This year, it's all they wanted to talk about."

That's probably because it's producing for them. Juergens said one winery reported a tenfold increase in wedding bookings when they added an AI chatbot on their website. Another AI-infused application is encouraging users to place an order or become a wine club member after they scan a QR code to leave a review. Some see a future in which AI is broadly leveraged to predict grape quality and optimize wine blends. "There are real opportunities emerging on the sales and marketing side, and that's just for starters," Juergens said.

Around the world, private company leaders are increasingly convinced that AI will likely disrupt their business—and soon. While just 5% say it's already transforming their industry, another two-thirds expect it will within the next three years, according to the private company findings from [the latest Deloitte AI Institute survey](#) of business leaders across 15 countries. A full fifth of them believe generative AI tools and applications represent an "extreme threat" to their businesses and operating models.

There's just one problem: as much as private leaders think AI will transform or disrupt their industries, the majority don't feel organizationally prepared to deploy it (see related chart below). "That gap reveals how AI is becoming the biggest risk and the biggest opportunity for the private sector," said Nihar Dalmia, AI & Data Partner, Deloitte Canada.





Barriers to adoption

There's little doubt that private companies are feeling pressure to adopt AI. In the same survey, more than three-quarters say they are feeling internal pressure to find appropriate uses for AI, and even more say external competitive pressures are pushing them to act.

But key challenges remain that are keeping private companies from realizing broad adoption. The biggest organizational barriers cited in the survey include concerns over complying with regulations, difficulty managing risks, implementation challenges, lack of technical talent or governance models, and difficulty identifying use cases.

Some of these concerns likely stem from some companies' historic piecemeal approach to technology investments. In these cases, while each new solution met an immediate need, they also added to the organization's 'data debt', the growing mountain of information that is often inaccessible due to legacy systems that can't talk to each other.

"The thing is, when you look at the technology maturity curve, a lot of private companies think they're somewhere in the middle," said Robert Lohmann, director, Deloitte France, who works in Deloitte's Technology Consulting practice and leads large transformation projects. "In reality, they're in the early stages, with much of their business still paper based. They need to walk before they can run."





Building a strong foundation

Private company leaders who don't know where to start, or who may have taken a wrong turn, can learn from those who have successfully navigated technology transformations with Generative AI at the heart of their efforts. Their insights are grouped by each of the four enabling factors supporting such programs.

Governance

When it comes to major technology investments or programs, organizations should create a framework that allows for efficient decision-making, resource allocation, and prioritization to keep everyone on task and aligned. It's particularly important that AI investments are driven and overseen by the top of the organization, since [trust is so vital](#) to acceptance and adoption.

One example in the market involved a private global engineering construction company for which Deloitte Consulting LLP has supported extensive deployments in technologies such as robotic process automation (RPA) and digital twins. Even so, they had been concerned about AI until late 2024, when the CEO and COO challenged their business leaders to "figure this out and not get left behind." The leadership created a pool of funding for each of their business units to use, pitching ideas while creating a central governance body to evaluate and approve concepts for investment. The two executives were ultimately responsible, taking accountability and demanding results from the units.


This kind of 'founder's mentality' is important to succeeding in the era of AI, says Jas Jaaj, Deloitte Global AI Markets, Ecosystem & Alliances leader. "When you bring that mindset, that appetite for taking risk and breaking barriers between functions, this can be a truly defining moment," he said.

In addition, organizations should consider creating a central governance body, such as a center of excellence, to evaluate and pitch ideas. It can also be tasked with staying on top of regulatory developments in different markets, either with internal resources or in coordination with an outside provider. And be sure that your board has independent voices—especially from tech-savvy leaders—to bring outside perspective to technology discussions.

Strategy

Organizations are [making big bets](#) on Generative AI but there's not a single tried-and-true path for everyone to follow. One of the benefits of being private is not having to satisfy Wall Street by rushing to invest in AI solutions. Private leaders may have the freedom to invest without being held to account every quarter. The trick is to not let that flexibility slow you down.

"Don't hurry just to hurry," Dalmia says. "Adopt a sense of urgency to build momentum and not get left behind but be methodical about it."



Focus on use cases that can deliver positive returns and drive tangible benefits in the near term but that also align with your organization's technology maturity. For some, that might mean deploying AI to do something as simple as check for inconsistencies or mistakes in requests for proposal and invoices, or to handle digitization of paper records and their migration to digital systems. For others, it might mean investing in AI agents that support line workers to make better, faster decisions.

As you undertake these early forays, prioritize solutions that can be scaled across the business if they prove successful.

That's the approach Multi-Health Systems (MHS) is taking. A leader in behavioral science and technology, the organization expanded on an early pilot program equipping employees with an AI-powered assistant, which generated US\$10 in value for every US\$1 spent on it. Today, every employee has a license for this platform, and the company is actively embedding the capability into core workflows across product development, technology, sales, and marketing.

"Rather than treating AI as a standalone, cost-cutting tool, we chose an alternative: to augment our existing processes with a resource that would allow our teams to move faster with confidence," said MHS CEO John Clarke.

Companies may overlook AI as a tool for creating new products or services, reducing opportunities to be bold and launch new business lines. Don't follow suit, Deloitte's Jaaj said, "AI can be a disruptor, but it can also be a leveler. It can give you the ability to get into ancillary spaces and try to grow or capture share."

Technology infrastructure

The [Deloitte AI Institute survey report](#) indicated that most private companies have implemented a number of AI tools in their organizations, leading with chatbots (77%) but also incorporating tools for intelligent automation, cybersecurity, and prediction and optimization. Looking forward, the private company leaders polled said they're most interested in generative AI for automation.

Lohmann believes the next wave of AI will be agentic, moving beyond information retrieval to true autonomy. These emerging AI agents can plan, generate content, solve problems, and perform actions on their own to achieve complex goals—much like a digital collaborator rather than a simple assistant. "It's when you start combining those agents when things start to get really interesting," he said.

Dalmia sees an opportunity for organizations to leverage Agentic AI to reimagine functions—like finance or marketing—from the bottom up. "That could be a big leap forward from a productivity and efficiency standpoint," he said.

To harness these capabilities, an AI agent needs access to your data and it can work across multiple systems, handling tasks like processing sales orders, reconciling financials, answering customer questions, and generating reports. You can train it on structured or unstructured data and keep the results ring-fenced for privacy and confidentiality.

Foundational IT infrastructure is required, and at the very least, you'll likely need to [pick a hyperscaler](#) or enterprise resource planning (ERP) service provider to take advantage of their AI tools as a starting point. Remember not to limit yourself to what's included off the shelf, and don't waste resources building a new AI capability if you can buy one. There may be ready-made solutions in the market that can enable Agentic AI for specific processes in your organization while also helping to ensure compliance with applicable regulations.



Talent

As you consider which tech investments to make, work to [strengthen AI fluency](#) inside your organization. Participate in AI workshops and retreats and encourage the leaders of your individual business units and functions to do the same.

When communicating with employees about AI initiatives, explain not only what AI can bring to the business but also to their careers. In the Deloitte AI Institute survey, most private company leaders who are engaged in AI training throughout their organization said they are doing so to help reskill their workers because of the impact that GenAI is likely to have on their roles.

“Organizations that have higher degrees of education and fluency around AI, where they have invested in awareness at all talent levels, have much less fear about it than organizations that have not done that,” Jaaj said.

It’s also important not to overpromise, and for leadership to be clear about its’ intentions regarding AI investments. Some companies have promised that AI investments won’t lead to job losses, only to announce major related reductions in short order.

For plenty of private enterprises, GenAI investments will likely augment roles instead of replacing them. Deloitte’s [Trustworthy AI](#) principles mandate human oversight whenever AI is involved, and many other companies have similar policies.

MHS is one of them. It sees employees as a valuable check on its AI solutions. It maintains a guiding principle called ‘Human in the Loop,’ in which its people review, guide, and remain accountable for the outcomes of AI outputs. In addition to achieving scale without impacting quality or trust, MHS CEO Clarke says striking the right balance between AI and humans helps the company stay competitive, efficient, and focused on innovation.

“To sustain that advantage, organizations need a skills strategy that retrains employees to stay ahead of competitors and fully leverage the AI revolution,” he said.

With such an approach, AI investments can become a ‘force multiplier,’ even creating new jobs. In fact, in the [Deloitte AI Institute survey report](#), 29% of the respondents expect that their organization’s GenAI strategy will increase their headcount.

The important piece is to be transparent and honest. If you don’t know how AI is likely to impact your workforce, it’s best to acknowledge that.

“The pace of change is happening so fast in this area and organizations are likely to be transformed by it in ways they can’t possibly understand today,” Jaaj said.



It's time to get up to speed

In other words, it's time to get comfortable with uncertainty, at least when it comes to exploring Generative AI. Still, staying disciplined across the four areas highlighted above can help reduce missteps and other unintended consequences along the way, and help to ensure that your organization is getting the biggest bang from its buck when investing in AI. As you think about your next AI initiative or program, keep the following takeaways in mind:



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