The 2026 Reality Check

AI at Work Report

Table of contents

01 Full throttle is out. Pressure testing is in.

02 The honeymoon phase is over

03 AI needs a human boss

04 The devaluation nobody's talking about

05 Going global for AI

06 Bridging the execution gap

Introductory vision

The business impact of AI has moved from promise to proof

Last year, executives leaned into AI with excitement. Adoption and experimentation were the top strategies. Today, AI has to earn its keep. And although the hype hasn't faded, the market now demands tangible, ethical, and accurate ROI.

From concerns of shadow AI to a people vs. machine trust gap, the future of work is defined by complex – and paradoxical – tensions.

Report overview

The third-annual AI at Work report by G-P dives deep into how AI trust, adoption, and ethics have changed in 2026. It explores the shift from aggressive adoption to cautious pressure testing, a widening trust gap, and the demand for measurable ROI.

The results deliver critical insights for business and HR leaders looking to turn the pushes and pulls of AI into a clear path forward.

Metric	2026 finding
Aggressive innovation	42% of execs are aggressively using AI (down from 60% in 2025)
Underperformance	73% of AI spending fell short of expectations
The "bubble" fear	44% of global leaders expect the AI bubble to burst in 2026
Monitoring tax	69% report a growing human oversight burden
Human value	82% admit AI has lowered the value placed on human employees
Global mobility	82% would hire in countries with no physical presence to secure AI talent

01

Full throttle is out. Pressure testing is in.



01

From experimental adoption to an intentional approach

AI is the most transformative force of our time, but its nature has shifted from a sense of wonder to a high-stakes reckoning.

Adoption and testing were the cornerstone strategies of 2025. In 2026, AI must show results. While **100% of surveyed executives** use AI, many are trading last year's aggressive push for measurable impact.

No more experimental play

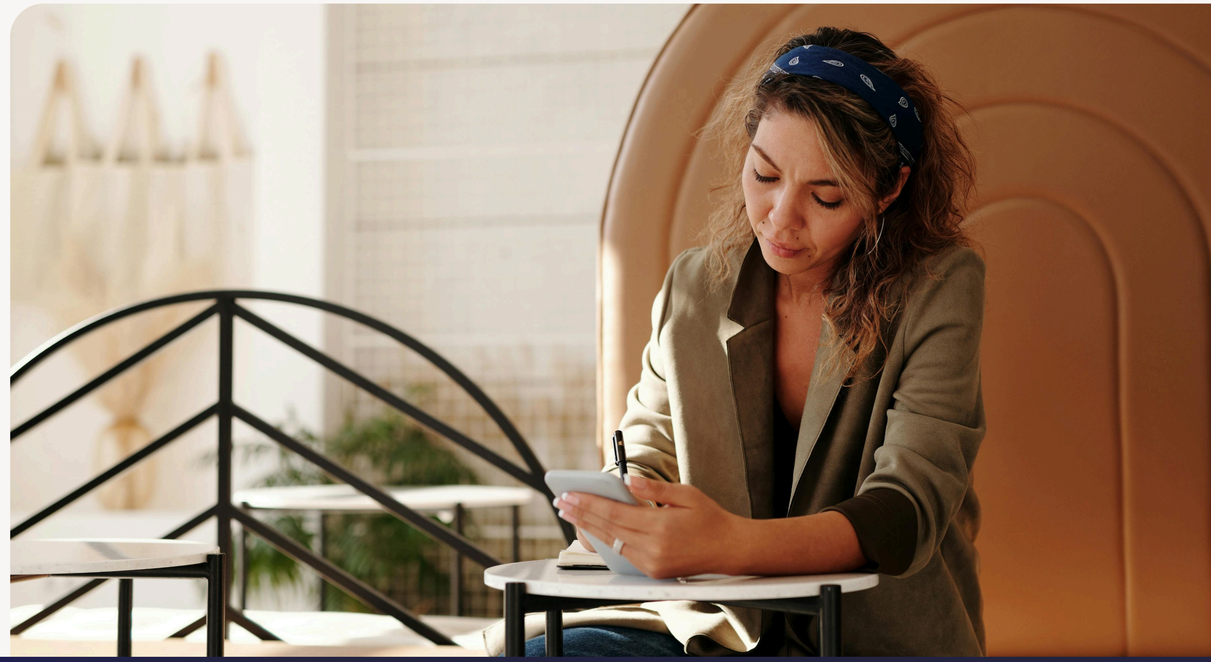
The 20-point drop in aggressive AI approaches shows companies are no longer innovating for the sake of innovation. They want proven ROI blueprints before committing their budgets.

Pressure over purpose

62% of executives admitted to feeling somewhat pressured by their organizations to use AI, while 38% only use AI tools because they're personally beneficial.

Build vs. buy

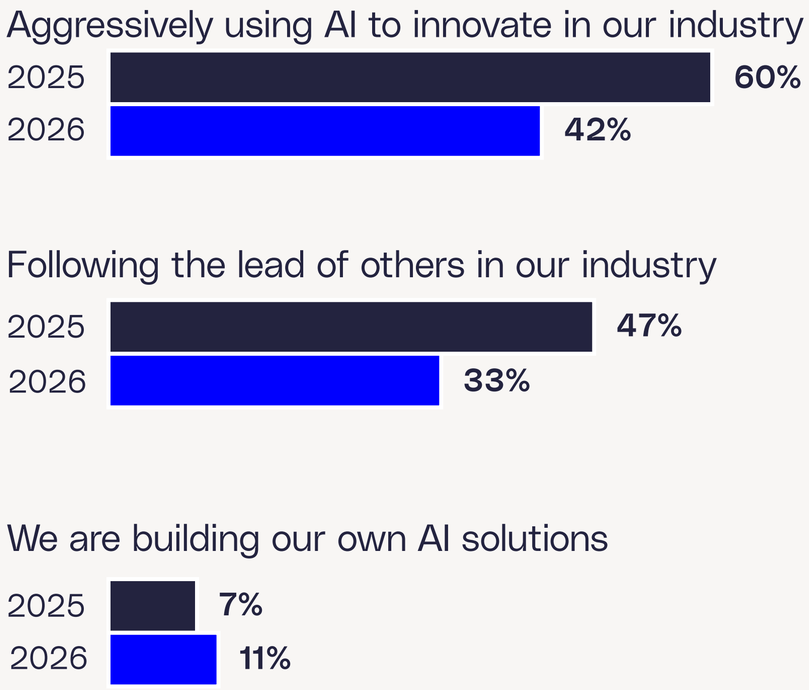
11% of executives are building their own AI solutions, up from 7%. Companies are ditching off-the-shelf solutions for customized tools to meet their unique security and compliance needs.



Innovation vs. imitation

The approach to AI adoption has shifted year-over-year, but it's clear that the investment is primarily motivated by the desire to enhance profit margins.

How global executives characterize their organization's approach to AI adoption



Executive motivation for AI investment

39%
Improve profit margins

24%
Increase talent retention

24%
Close the gap with competition

14%
Investor pressure

Key takeaway

Trade the AI hype for AI utility. Prioritize tools that fix your team's specific challenges over a pilot-everything approach.



AI isn't one-size-fits-all. A sophisticated strategy identifies high-impact AI use cases and builds the necessary organizational foundation before the plan is written. That's the difference between a perpetual proof of concept and a successful, transformative deployment.

Nat Natarajan | COO, G-P

02

The honeymoon phase is over



02

The performance ultimatum

Despite the hype surrounding AI, the payout isn't hitting the balance sheet. Most AI spending has underdelivered, leaving execs feeling like they’re burning cash.

ROI reality check

16% of companies saw a negative ROI from AI investments last year, and 73% of executives revealed the ROI fell short of expectations.

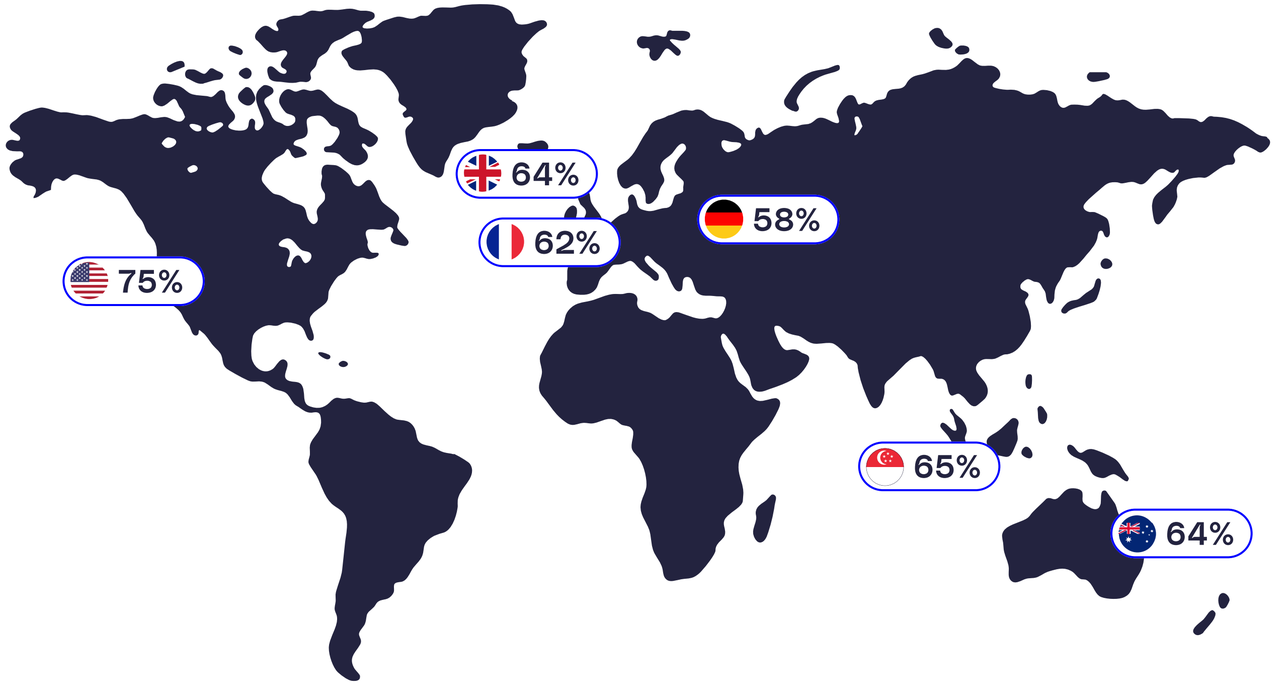
The final warning

Nearly 70% of global executives are prepared to scale back AI budgets if company goals aren’t met this year.

The P&L pressure

No matter the currency, the majority of global executives are ready to scale back AI budget if 2026 profit goals aren't met.

The performance ultimatum



Is 2026 the year the AI bubble bursts?



Globally, executives are divided on whether the bubble will burst this year, but 69% of U.S. HR executives view AI as a long-term structural shift, highlighting that their function sees this as an integral part of the future of work.

Key takeaway

Leaders shouldn’t view budget reallocations as a tech failure, but as a refinement of strategy.

Rigorous pressure testing ensures every investment has visible returns and protects the organization from the volatility of the hype cycle.



AI is increasingly being measured by trust, accountability, and business impact. For global employers, that means focusing AI on navigating complexity, reducing risk, enabling better decisions, and expanding access to talent across borders. The future belongs to companies that pair AI with the right expertise, governance, and operational discipline to turn opportunity into real business outcomes.

Pete A Tiliakos | Principal Analyst, Strategic Advisor, GxT Advisors

03

AI needs a human boss



03

AI speeds up work. But only 23% of global executives have total confidence in the accuracy of AI output. Companies are doubling down on oversight to make sure speed doesn't come at the cost of quality, signaling that 2026 is the year of the human editor.

Human oversight

69% of executives say they spend more time monitoring and acting as high-level editors for unvetted AI.



Shadow AI

90% of leaders fear employees are using unvetted tools.



A crisis of ethics

61% of executives feel moral distress when using AI to draft sensitive documents because they aren't sure if the output is legally accurate.



Trust in AI

51%

would trust AI with risk management

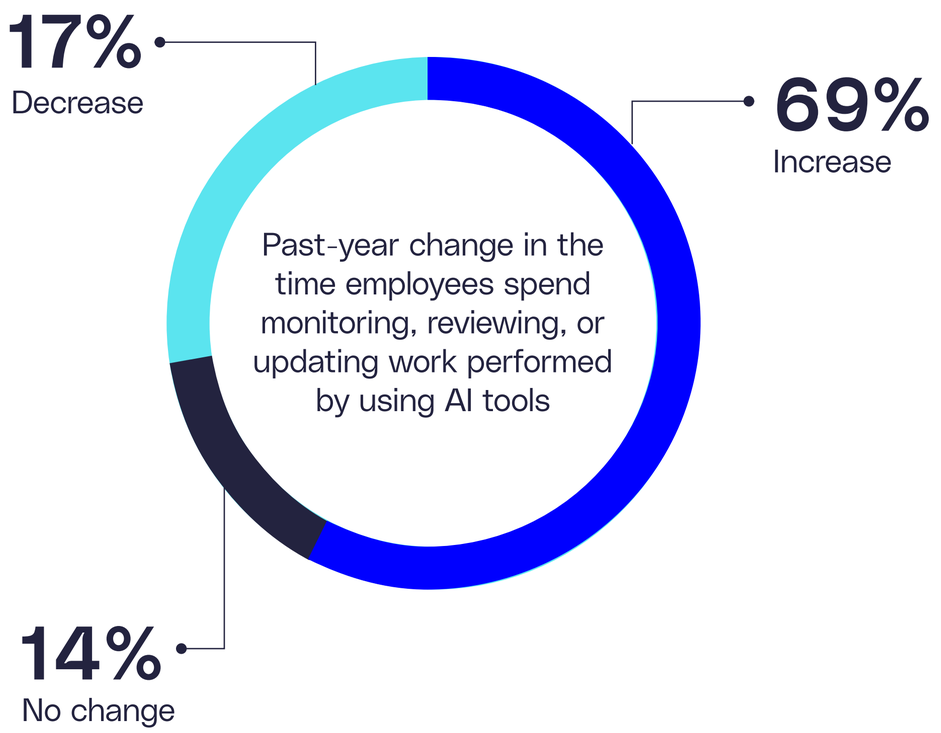
54%

would trust AI with financial budgeting

57%

would trust AI with talent management

The monitoring burden



Key takeaway

Speed is a commodity; accuracy is a competitive advantage. With hidden liabilities, leaders must formalize their human-in-the-loop model.

Build a decision-making firewall where AI accelerates the workflow and humans validate the output.

Boston Dynamics' long-term partnership with G-P allowed the company to find specialized talent, confidently manage risk, and use AI for strategic agility.

> Don't wait. The longer you wait, you're just losing out on the opportunity for you to drive your business goals forward.
>
> **Eduardo Ramos | Head of Total Rewards, Boston Dynamics**

Learn more

04

The devaluation nobody’s talking about



04

The circle of trust

While humans sit firmly in the driver’s seat for high-stakes decisions, 82% of executives admit AI has lowered the value they place on human employees. This startling admission suggests that as algorithms become more capable, the human element is increasingly viewed as a secondary asset.

Productivity paranoia

88% of executives are concerned that employees are using AI to "perform productivity" rather than adding true business value.

Privacy sacrifice

Only 12% of executives strongly agree that sacrificing employee privacy for AI monitoring is worth it to reach business goals.

AI strategies are still human-led

Which best describes your company's relationship with AI?

AI drives core processes

Humans oversee the system and handle exceptions.

17%

Humans lead the work

AI is integrated into most tasks to provide data and speed.

60%

Humans do the work

AI is used selectively as a basic support tool.

23%

Key takeaway

As AI becomes more capable, human-only skills become more valuable. High-stakes roles require empathy, ethics, and strategic nuance that algorithms can’t replicate.

Get ahead of productivity paranoia the right way by reinvesting in human-centric skills.

Rackspace quickly saw the need to get involved and upskill employees. The company created an AI literacy program called Foundry AI by Rackspace.



We had four different training tracks depending on your role in the organization. We wanted to get our employees up to speed on AI and make sure they were equipped with the knowledge and resources before we started solutioning.

Mandy Moore | Director of HR Technology, Rackspace

Learn more

05

Going global for AI



05

AI is simultaneously devaluing the existing workforce while intensifying a cutthroat competition for a specific subset of human talent. The quest for specialized skills like AI experts has triggered a strategic move toward a borderless workforce.

The borderless solution

82% of global executives would hire in a country where they don’t have existing employees to secure top AI talent.

Risk-reward balance

41% of executives say AI makes talent access easier but also creates new risks they aren't prepared for.

The talent barrier

52% of leaders say AI talent shortages and lack of data literacy are top barriers to their AI goals.



Key takeaway

Solve the AI talent shortage by adopting a borderless hiring strategy. Go where the talent lives and tap into global talent pools.



The competition for specialized AI talent is no longer a local battle; it’s a global one. By expanding your reach beyond traditional borders, you don’t just solve local talent shortages – you gain the agility and diverse perspectives required to lead in the AI era.

Laura Maffucci | Head of HR, G-P

06

Bridging the execution gap



06

Leaders must decouple talent acquisition from geographic constraints. The goal is a borderless workforce where the human premium — judgment, ethics, and strategic nuance — is amplified, not replaced. When you remove the friction of borders, you transform your workforce into a global competitive advantage.

While AI can draft code and analyze data in seconds, legacy expansion processes — like entity setup and local tax registrations — take months. This execution gap is where strategic momentum goes to die.

At G-P, we've spent 14+ years perfecting the balance of industry-leading technology and human expertise so you can build global teams at the speed of your strategy.

Hire the world's best talent without the friction of traditional global expansion

If you're part of the **82% ready to hire across borders** to win the AI race, you shouldn't be held back by entity setup or red tape. **G-P's Global Employment Platform** provides the critical foundation you need to operate globally with confidence and compliance.

Learn more

Product feature

G-P Gia™ is built to turn distress into compliance certainty.

Unlike general LLMs, Gia combines over a decade of proprietary expertise, 100,000+ legally vetted articles, and 1,500+ government sources to give you guidance you can trust.

Get instant, vetted answers

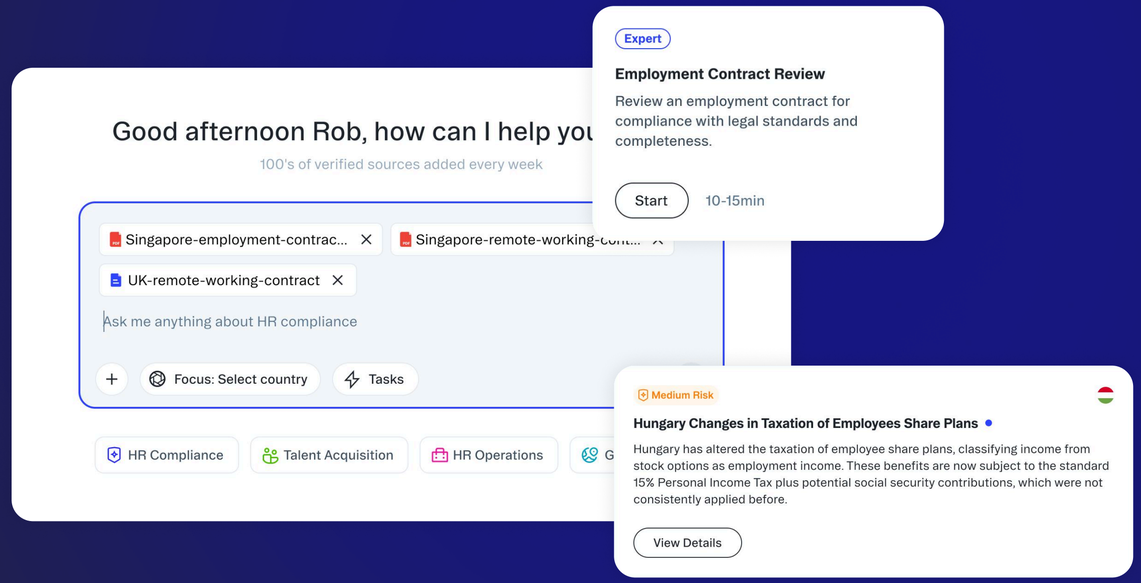
Gia gives you context-specific guidance vetted by experts, eliminating the need for constant human review.

Draft with confidence

Review and generate HR documents across 50 countries and all 50 U.S. states with total legal accuracy.

Bridge the execution gap

From expert-vetted guidance to automated compliance, Gia steps in where you'd normally rely on external counsel, cutting legal spend and admin time by up to 95%.





When you're dealing with 180+ countries, compliance is a moving target. AI allows us to process changes in labor laws at a speed that was previously impossible for a human team alone.

Adrienne Drew | VP, Product Counsel
Head of Legal for Gia, G-P

Transform your borderless strategy today →

Methodology

The 2026 G-P AI at Work survey was conducted by Wakefield Research among 2,850 executives with a minimum seniority of VP, in the U.S., Germany, Singapore, Australia, and France, including a separate audience of 500 U.S. HR professionals. The questionnaire was fielded between March 6 and March 16 2026, using an email invitation and an online survey.

About G-P

G-P (Globalization Partners) is the recognized leader in global employment, ranked No. 1 in every industry analyst report. G-P's Global Employment Platform delivers everything companies of all sizes need to manage the full employee lifecycle with its trusted global HR agent, G-P Gia, and AI-powered employer of record (EOR), and Contractor products.

G-P supports teams in 180+ countries with more than a decade of global employment experience, the largest team of in-country HR, legal, and compliance experts, and its unmatched proprietary knowledge base.