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Pulse of Change | October 2026

AI enters its operating era

AI adoption is accelerating. The focus now is turning widespread use into sustained value.

Highlighting key findings from

3,000 C-suite leaders

3,000 Employees

19 Industries

21 Countries

Growth expectations moderate as employee confidence rises

Amid broader uncertainty, leaders are recalibrating their outlook for growth and hiring. At the same time, employees are feeling more secure about what comes next.

71%
of C-suite leaders expect domestic revenue growth over the next 12 months
↓ from 90% in January

61%
of leaders expect hiring to increase
↓ from 74% in January

66%
of employees feel secure in their role
↑ from 48% in January

THE SIGNAL
Despite a more measured business outlook, employee confidence remains high.

AI investment is holding as the focus shifts to operating economics

Leaders remain committed to AI, with growing focus on the economics of scaling

75%
plan to increase AI investment over the next 12 months

49%
would continue increasing their AI investment even if a bubble were to burst

69%
are managing AI operating costs more closely than a year ago

AI tokenomics enters the C-suite agenda

41%
actively manage AI token economics

51%
are beginning to track it

Yet the discipline hasn't fully reached employees

80%
understand that how they use AI can affect costs

32%
have received clear guidance on cost-effective use

THE SIGNAL
AI is moving from adoption economics to operating economics.

Use is scaling faster than operating models are changing

Daily use is rising rapidly across leaders and employees

41%
of leaders use generative AI daily
↑ from 27% in July

43%
of employees use it daily
↑ from 30% in July

But true reinvention remains rare

15%
of leaders are redesigning end-to-end processes with AI at the core

20%
are actively deploying AI agents across multiple functions

Expectations are high while widespread value realization remains limited

53%
expect measurable ROI from AI investments within 12 months

20%
even expect it within six months

25%
report widespread and sustained business value today

THE SIGNAL
Rapidly growing AI use has yet to fully translate into widespread and sustained business value.

Cyber resilience is both an AI value case and a stress test

48%
of leaders rank cyber defenses and business resilience among the areas where AI has delivered the greatest value to date

At the same time, AI is reshaping the threat landscape

55%
cite AI-generated phishing and social engineering as a top cyber threat

53%
cite AI-assisted malware development

56%
of employees feel confident detecting AI-powered threats

THE SIGNAL
AI is already delivering value in cybersecurity, but preparedness needs to keep pace.

Work is becoming more productive, and more demanding

Employees are increasingly turning to AI as a colleague

64%
try AI tools before asking a colleague for help

50%
regularly work with AI agents

And employees are seeing tangible benefits

82%
say AI has increased productivity

75%
say it has increased job satisfaction

But the productivity dividend comes with new demands

50%
say the expected speed of work has increased

50%
say the need to review and verify outputs has increased

48%
struggle to keep current as AI tools rapidly change

THE SIGNAL
AI is delivering tangible benefits for employees, but also changing the demands of work.

From adoption to advantage

Four priorities for AI's operating era:

1. Connect AI to value
Move beyond widespread use to target high-value work, end-to-end processes and measurable outcomes.

2. Manage the economics
Match the right models to the right work, and put the governance and controls in place to scale efficiently.

3. Build in resilience
Embed cyber governance, detection, training and accountability as AI expands.

4. Redesign work
Create connected workflows and effective human–AI collaboration, with the skills and guidance employees need.

Adoption brought AI into the enterprise. Operating discipline is needed to turn it into sustained value.

For more findings, visit **Pulse of Change: October 2026**

We use generative AI in our research production process. Our research experts review and validate the generative AI outputs with traditional research methods where possible, applying Accenture's Responsible AI standards.

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