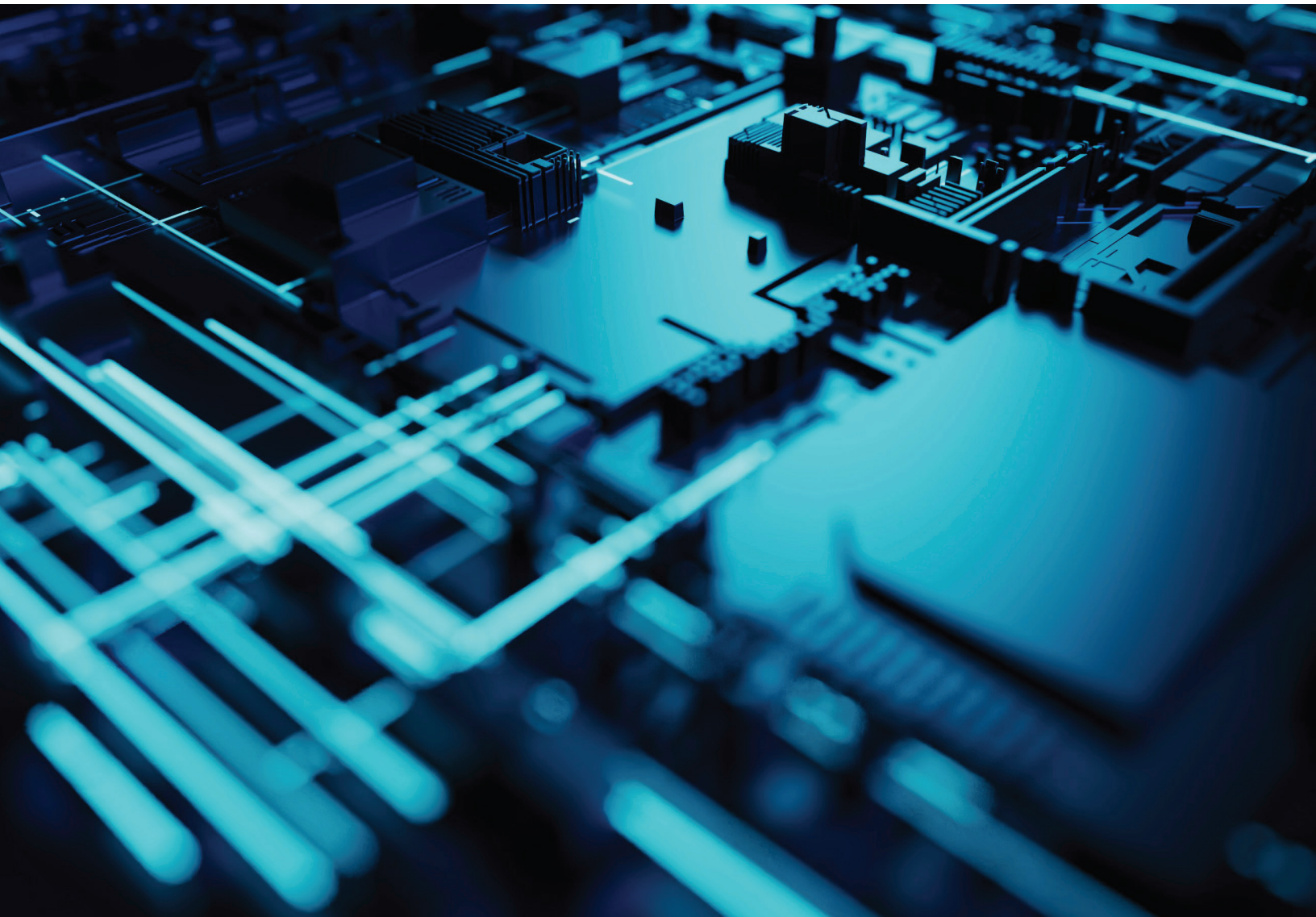
JustCapital

Spring 2026 American Public, Investor, and Corporate Leader Perspectives on Responsible AI Deployment: AI Optimism Rises but Concerns Remain

April 2026



As business leaders continue to transform their companies and strategies around AI, they face a new and largely unmapped set of stakeholder expectations. Calls for responsible development and deployment are intensifying, yet clear guidance on what this looks like in practice remains scarce. Just Capital's AI-focused polling is designed to offer a roadmap for companies looking to build trust in the AI era and a framework to begin to define what responsible business leadership in the age of AI really means.

In January 2026, Just Capital conducted its second quarterly survey of the American public, investors, and corporate leaders to begin to define responsible AI deployment – and what it means for the companies building and deploying these systems. The inaugural wave was conducted in fall 2025.

Key Findings

1. The public shows growing – yet cautious – optimism.	In the most recent wave, a larger percentage of the public[1] (58% in Wave 1 vs. 66% Wave 2) say they foresee AI being a net positive for society within the next five years, versus a net negative. While this is a lower proportion than investors (94%) and corporate leaders (90%) this sentiment is trending in a positive direction since this survey was conducted in Fall 2025. The perception that AI will have a positive impact on workforce issues such as productivity, job satisfaction, and innovation also grew among the public between Fall 2025 and Spring 2026.
2. Workforce displacement remains a central social tension.	Concerns about unemployment are persistent and universal. About a third (30%) of the public worries about significant layoffs due to AI displacing roles, yet far fewer corporate leaders (13%) and investors (10%) foresee large scale job losses as the primary outcome of the increased use of AI over the next 2–3 years. Meanwhile, a greater proportion of corporate leaders (55%) and investors (68%) expect to see a lower degree of hiring for entry-level positions, with higher skill requirements for remaining roles, compared to 30% of the public.

1 Important methodological caveat: The definition of "the public" differs between waves. Wave 1 includes a fully representative general population sample, while Wave 2 excludes individuals who do not use or care about AI (approximately 28% of the original population). This change increases the relative concentration of AI-engaged respondents in Wave 2. Therefore, any wave-over-wave differences for the Americanl Public should be interpreted as directional shifts in sentiment, not precise statistical trends.

3. Investors express an acceleration of enthusiasm.	Roughly 80% of institutional investors responding to the Fall 2025 survey viewed AI as a net positive; in the Spring 2026 survey, that percentage climbed to 94%[2]. This pro-AI sentiment suggests that investors may be increasing their confidence in AI's potential for long-term value creation. Whether driven by continued technological breakthroughs, strong market performance of AI-linked firms, or clearer commercial pathways, investors appear increasingly aligned around AI as a transformative force for business and the economy.
4. Responsible AI must include environmental and community stewardship.	Among corporate leaders, environmental concern jumped +21 pts. There is agreement among all three surveyed groups that companies should address these concerns: 72% of investors, 77% of the public, and 74% of corporate leaders believe companies should pay the full electricity costs that cover new infrastructure and ongoing operation and 65% of investors, 64% of the public, and 74% of corporate leaders think companies should use less water for data centers or replace more water than they use.
5. There is a consensus that AI needs more regulatory oversight than social media received.	The majority of investors (79%) and corporate leaders (78%) believe more oversight is appropriate for AI today compared to social media, which grew with relatively limited regulation. 59% of the public agree. This question was added to the survey in Wave 2 and will continue to be tracked over time.

2 Note: The investor samples vary between waves. Wave 1 included Robin Hood Foundation members and event attendees (investors and analysts) who opted into a pre-event survey, while Wave 2 consisted of institutional investment professionals recruited via NewtonX. Because the samples were sourced differently, wave-over-wave comparisons should be viewed as directional, not statistically equivalent.

Introduction

Since the inaugural wave of research in Fall 2025, AI adoption has steadily accelerated in professional and personal contexts. A March 2026 report from SSRS/Edison Research estimates that a majority (52%) of Americans use AI platforms on a weekly basis. At America's largest companies, leadership teams have prioritized AI integration as a strategic imperative. This is the second report in a series examining how the opinions of the public, institutional investors and analysts, and corporate leaders align and diverge on the risks and benefits of large-scale AI adoption in corporations. This analysis will continue quarterly in 2026 and beyond in order to track sentiment as the technology and use of AI changes over time.

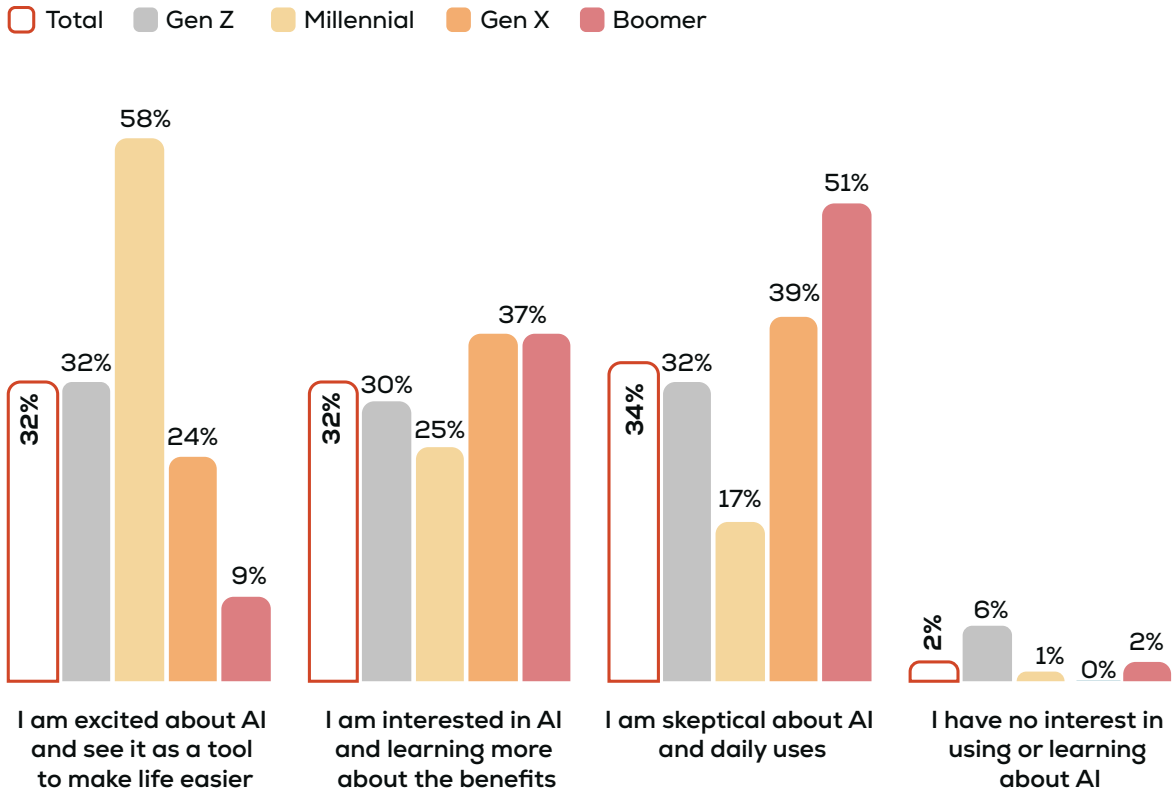
Who was surveyed

This survey was designed by Just Capital as part of its broader polling and public-opinion research program. We received responses from 100 institutional investors in partnership with NewtonX, 103 corporate executives in partnership with Gerson Lehrman Group (84 c-suite executives and 19 board members or senior level executives), and 1,000 US adults aligned to population benchmarks in partnership with The Harris Poll. Data were collected between January 19–26, 2026. The full methodology can be found here.

General population usage and sentiments about AI

In the second wave of research on perceptions of responsible AI, we asked the public about their sentiments around the technology. Americans were equal parts "excited about AI and see it as a tool to make life easier" (32%), "interested in AI and learning more about the benefits" (32%), and "skeptical about AI and daily uses" (34%). Only 2% say they have no interest in using or learning about AI.

Sentiments of AI among the public, by Generation

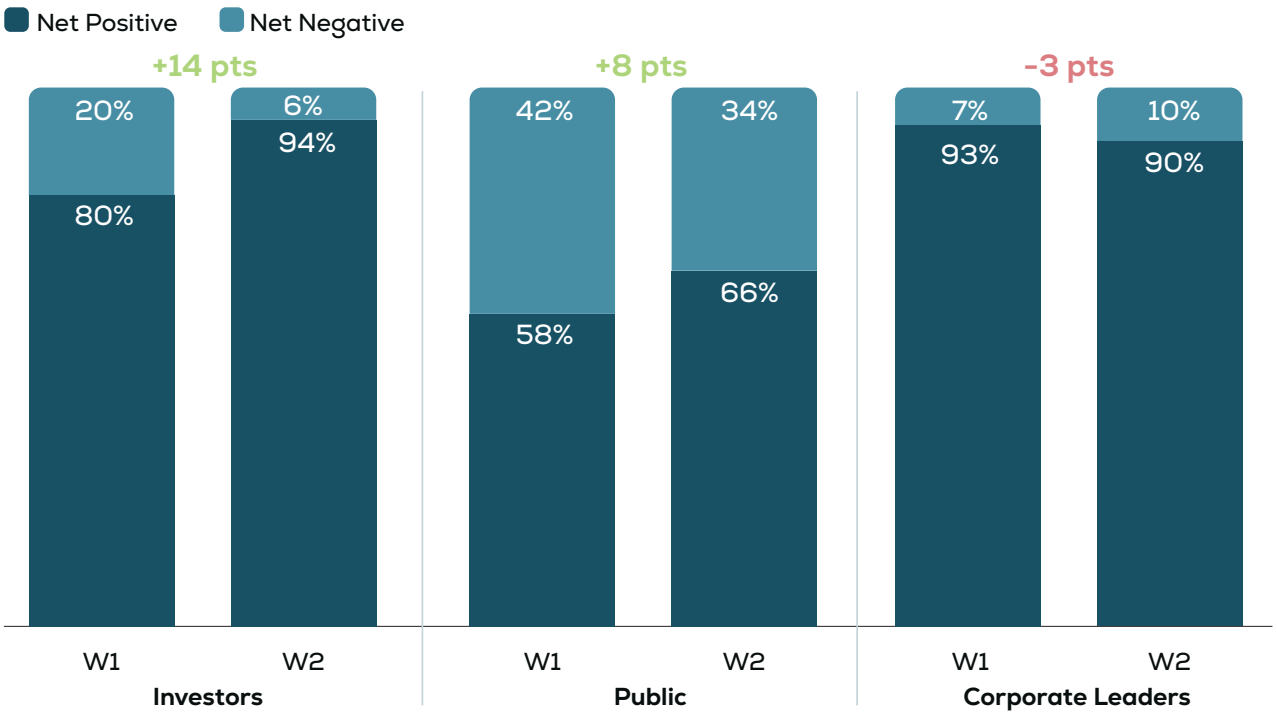


Looking at generational differences, Millennials are the most excited about AI (58% excited), while Boomers are the most skeptical (51% skeptical).

The net impact of AI on society: Optimism strengthens

Wave 2 findings reinforce a persistent confidence gap across stakeholders. However, public opinion has improved since the first wave of research (58% of the public said AI is a "net positive" in Wave 1, vs. 66% in Wave 2), but still lags behind investors and corporate leaders. Investors are now the most bullish (94%), while corporate leaders also remain strongly positive (90%). The trajectory is positive, but public opinion remains conditional and likely sensitive to real-world impacts such as job disruption, misinformation, and data privacy.

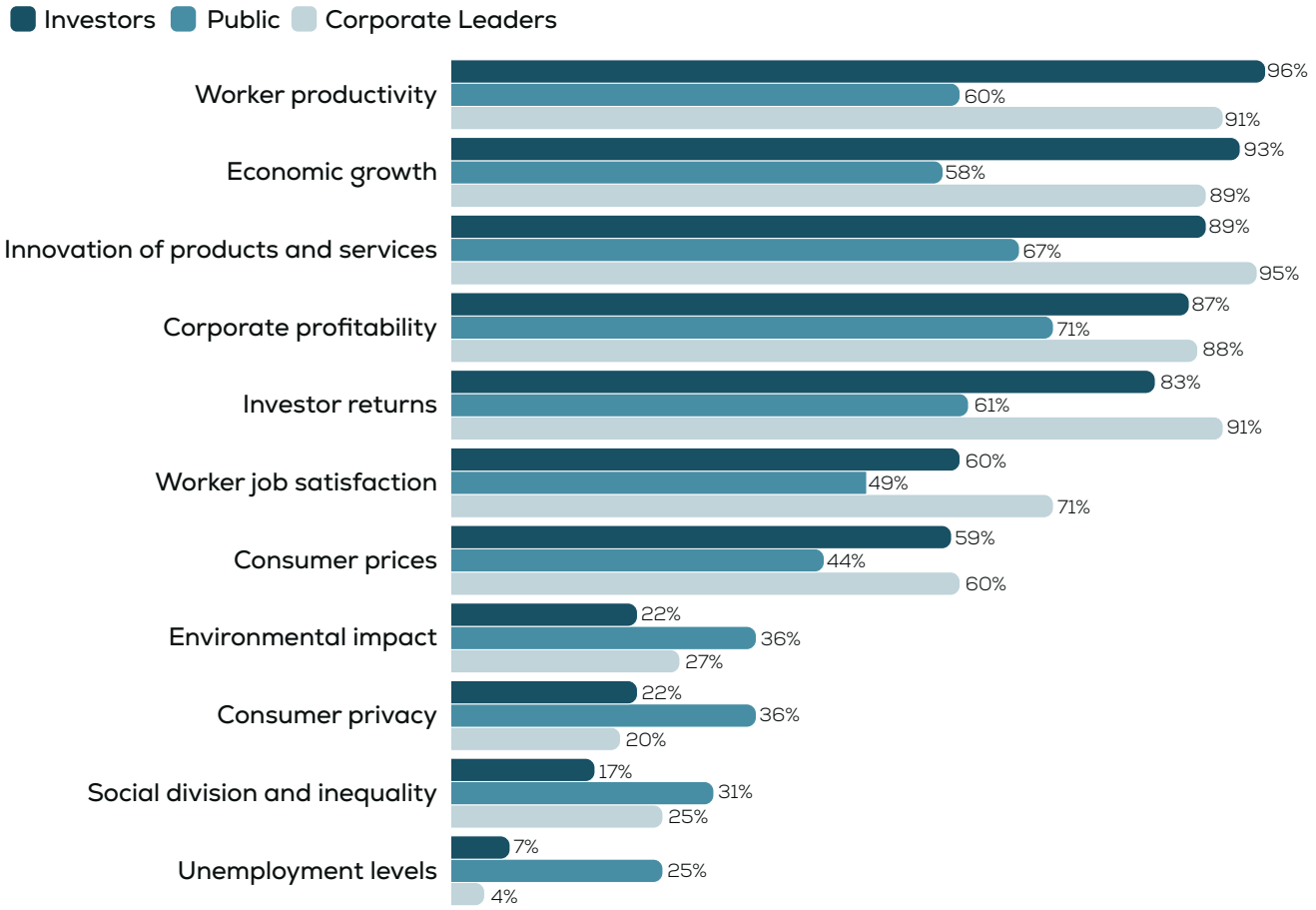
Percentage who foresee AI being a net positive versus a net negative within the next 5 years



The impact of AI by domain

Assessments of whether increased AI adoption by corporations would have a positive or negative impact across a range of dimensions are broadly the same in Wave 2 as in Wave 1. Respondents believe the increased use of AI in business will have a positive impact on economic factors but will be less positive for employees, consumers, and the environment.

Percentage who say increased AI adoption by corporations will have a positive net impact on the following areas



But there are a few areas where there has been substantial sentiment movement toward positive impacts since the initial wave of research. Specifically, skepticism among the public about AI's impact on worker productivity has somewhat dissipated since the initial survey: 96% of Investors, 91% of Corporate Leaders, and 60% of (AI-engaged) public see a positive impact – the last figure up significantly from 47% in Wave 1, suggesting growing personal familiarity with AI tools. The same pattern is seen for all three audiences regarding job satisfaction: Corporate leaders, investors, and the public all show positive shifts in perceptions, suggesting a potential maturation of AI within corporate environments and workers who have access to AI tools, while not experiencing displacement.

Top 2 Box: Positive Impact (Wave 1 → Wave 2)	Investors	Public	Corp Leaders
Worker productivity	94% → 96%	47% → 60%	98% → 91%
Job satisfaction	49% → 60%	36% → 49%	66% → 71%

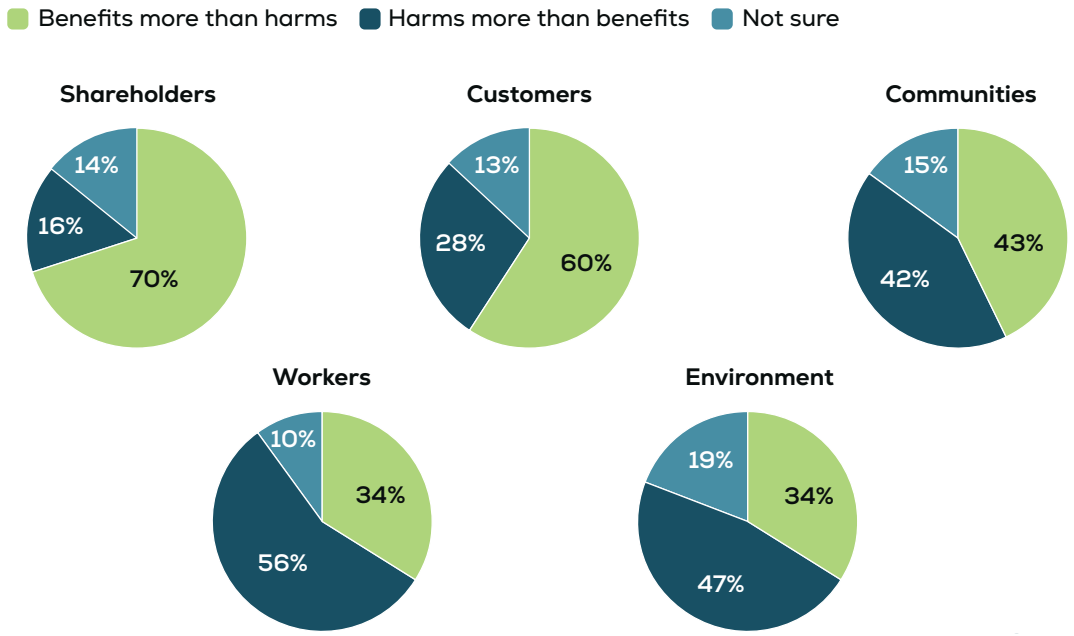
There are also a few areas of persistent concern. Across all audiences, roughly three-quarters see AI as having a negative impact on employment levels – 75% of Investors, 57% of the General Public, and 72% of Corporate Leaders. These numbers are essentially flat from Wave 1, making unemployment the single most stable area of concern in the survey. And among the three groups, corporate leaders show an unusual uptick in negative environmental views by a 21-point swing (investor and general public views are essentially flat). This may signal growing awareness within organizations of the voracious demands of data center energy.

Bottom 2 Box: Negative Impact (Wave 1 → Wave 2)	Investors	Public	Corp Leaders
Unemployment	72% → 75%	57% → 57%	74% → 72%
Environment	56% → 49%	33% → 33%	34% → 55%

Public perceptions: Benefits and harms across stakeholder groups

A new Wave 2 question asked the general public to assess whether AI benefits or harms different groups. The results reveal a clear hierarchy of perceived beneficiaries and a significant concern about workers and the environment.

Perceptions of whether company use of AI harms or benefits stakeholder



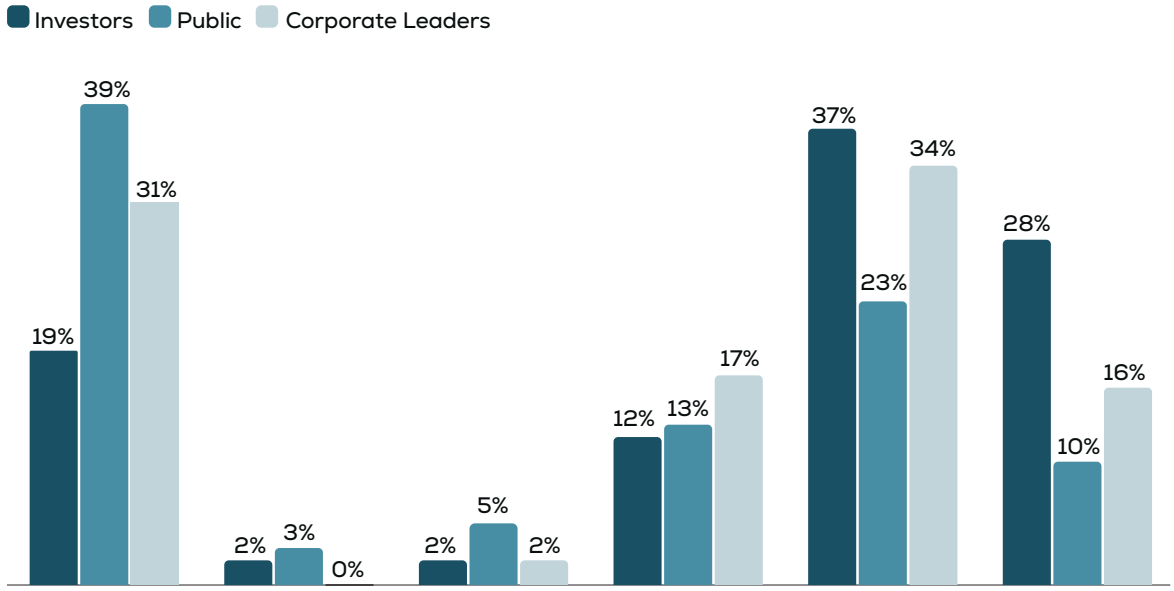
Note: General population sample only

The public's view is that AI disproportionately benefits those at the top of the economic hierarchy – shareholders and corporations – while harming or providing limited benefit to workers and the environment. Communities sit in the middle. This framing reinforces the workforce displacement concerns tracked elsewhere in the survey and provides a useful frame for understanding why there is general appetite for regulatory oversight.

AI is "already here"

In Wave 1, respondents were asked a question about the perceived time horizon for when AI will have a significant impact on society, with response options ranging from "Within 3 months" to "More than 3 years." In Wave 2, it was acknowledged that a share of respondents may believe that AI's significant societal impact has already arrived: Across all three audiences, substantial shares selected "It already has."

Perceived timeframe for when AI will have a significant impact on society



Notably, four in 10 Americans (39%) believe AI is already having a significant impact on society – higher than the share of corporate leaders (31%) and investors (19%) who say the same. Among those who anticipate a longer timeline, pluralities across stakeholder groups expect AI to have a significant impact within the next three years.

Workforce impact: Mass layoffs not (yet) materializing, but worries persist

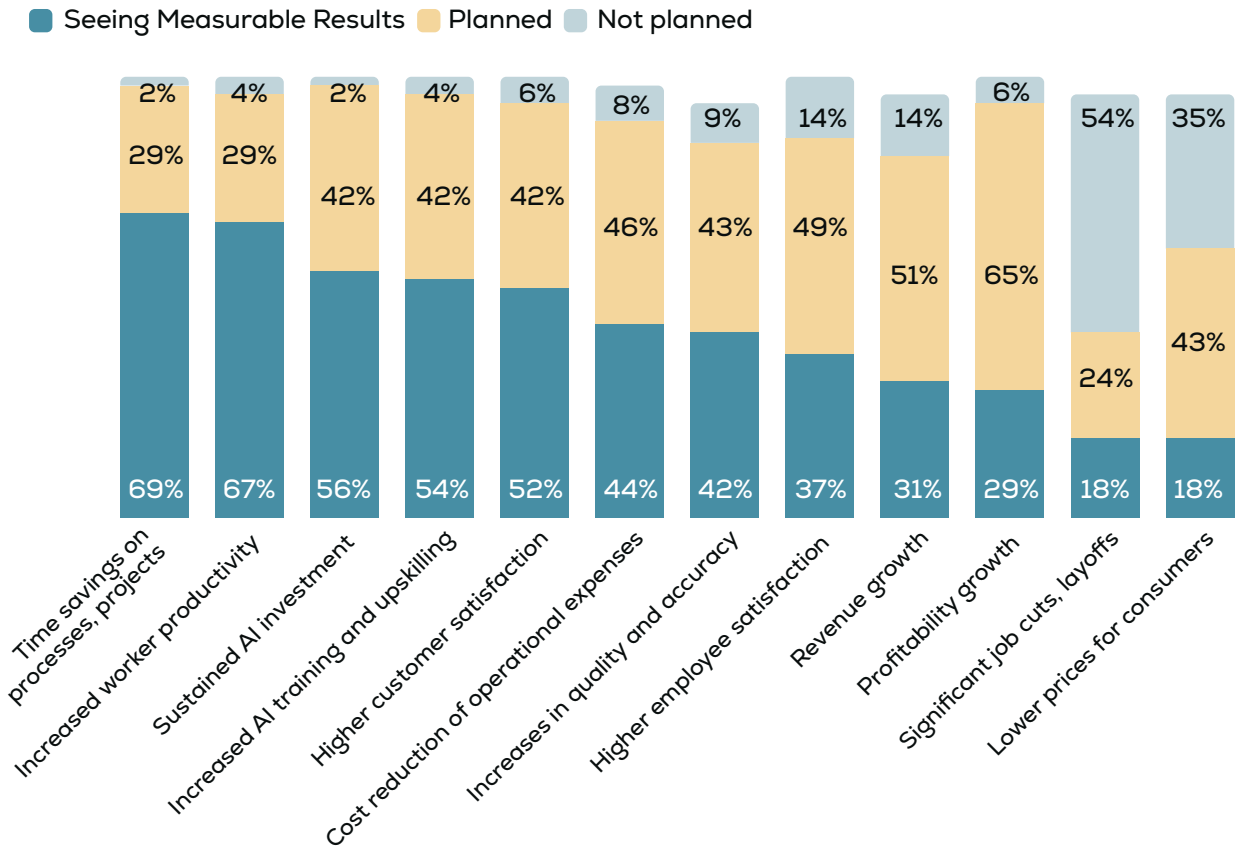
The workforce displacement theme is one of the most layered and revealing areas of Wave 2, illustrating a gap between what stakeholders believe companies should do and what companies are actually doing.

To set the stage, let's look at the maturity of AI deployment among corporations: few corporate leaders report that they are still in the early experimentation phases; those in the "not initiated" or "awareness" stages have dropped from about 9% in Wave 1 to 2% in Wave 2. The share at the "optimization" stage – where AI is driving measurable productivity improvements – has jumped from 6% to 18%, reflecting organizational progress.

AI Maturity Stage (Corporate Leaders)	Wave 1	Wave 2	Change
Awareness/Experimentation	26%	17%	-9 pts
Early Adoption	33%	35%	+2 pts
Integration	30%	23%	-7 pts
Optimization/Transformation	11%	24%	+13 pts

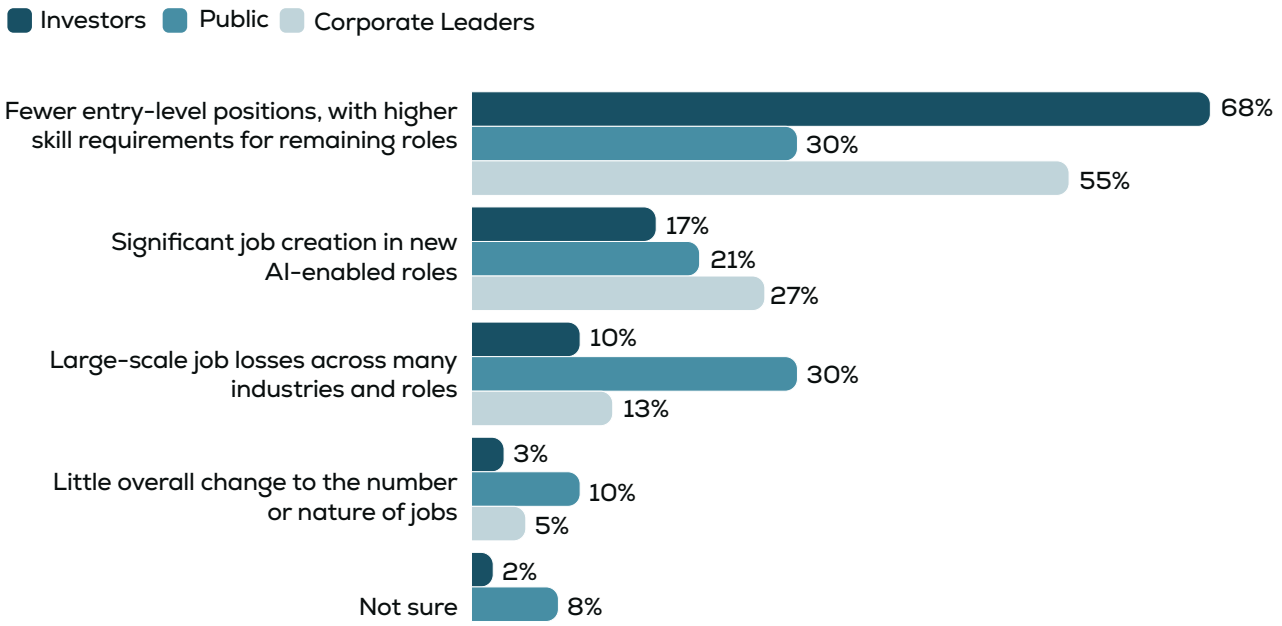
This progress is reflected in the outcomes that corporate leaders report as a result of AI deployment. The top measurable results cited in Wave 2 are time savings on projects (69%) and increased productivity (67%) (*NB: these outcomes align with the expectations of investors at this stage of AI maturity*). By contrast, significant job cuts is the area in which the largest percentage of corporate leaders say that the outcome is "Not planned" (54%).

Corporate Leaders: status of outcomes related to AI implementation



A new question in Wave 2 asked respondents to predict the most likely workforce outcome over the next 2–3 years as AI adoption grows. The results reveal a notable divergence among the points of view of the general public versus that of investors and corporate leaders: the latter groups embrace more of a "structural shift" rather than "mass layoff" narrative, indicating they expect fewer entry-level jobs with higher skill requirements. About one-third of the public can imagine this outcome, but a similar proportion imagines large-scale job losses (30%), reflecting continued anxiety about displacement that the more informed audiences have reframed as skill transformation.

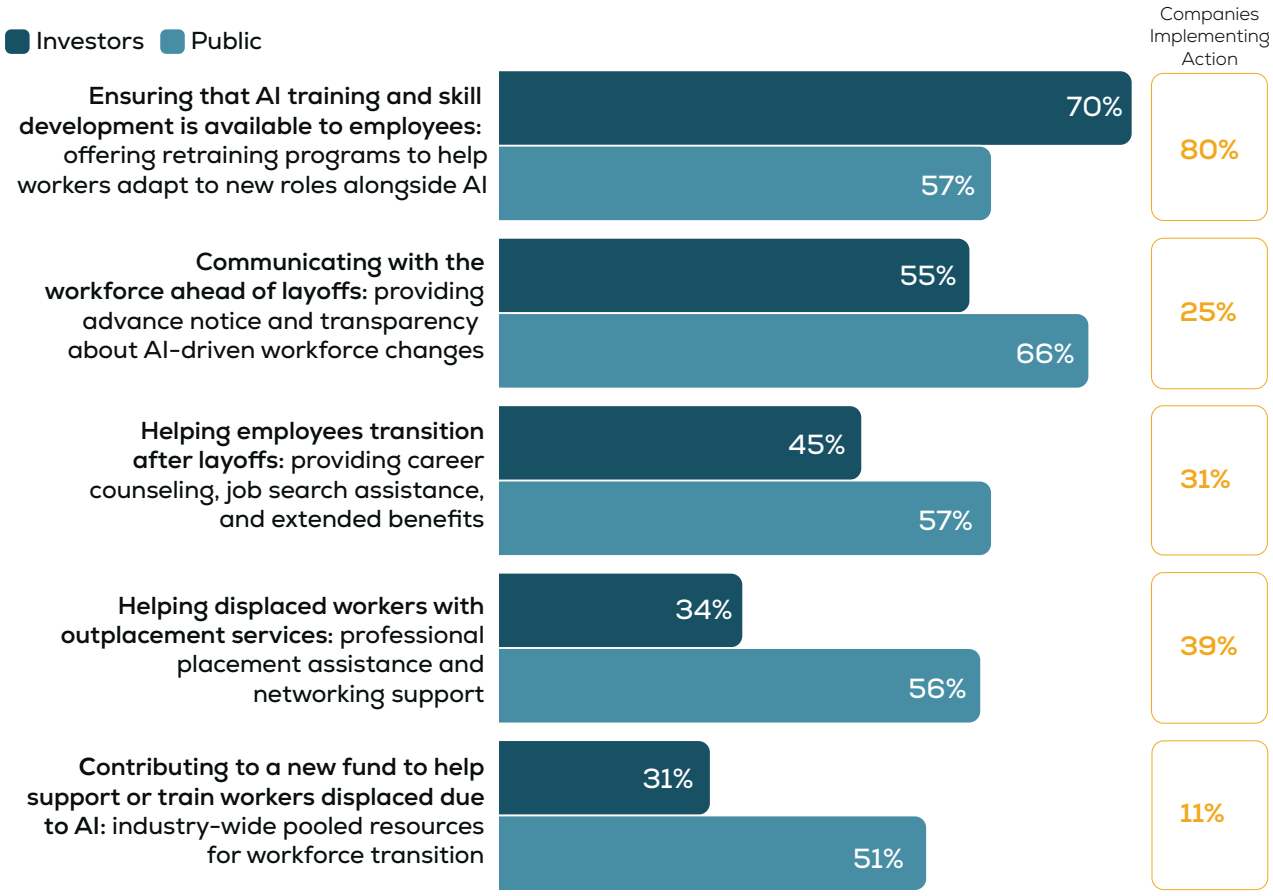
Most likely outcome for the workforce (over the next 2-3 years) as companies adopt AI



Among the public, Millennials and those who are excited about AI are most likely to say job creation in new AI-enabled roles is the most likely outcome (32% and 43%, respectively).

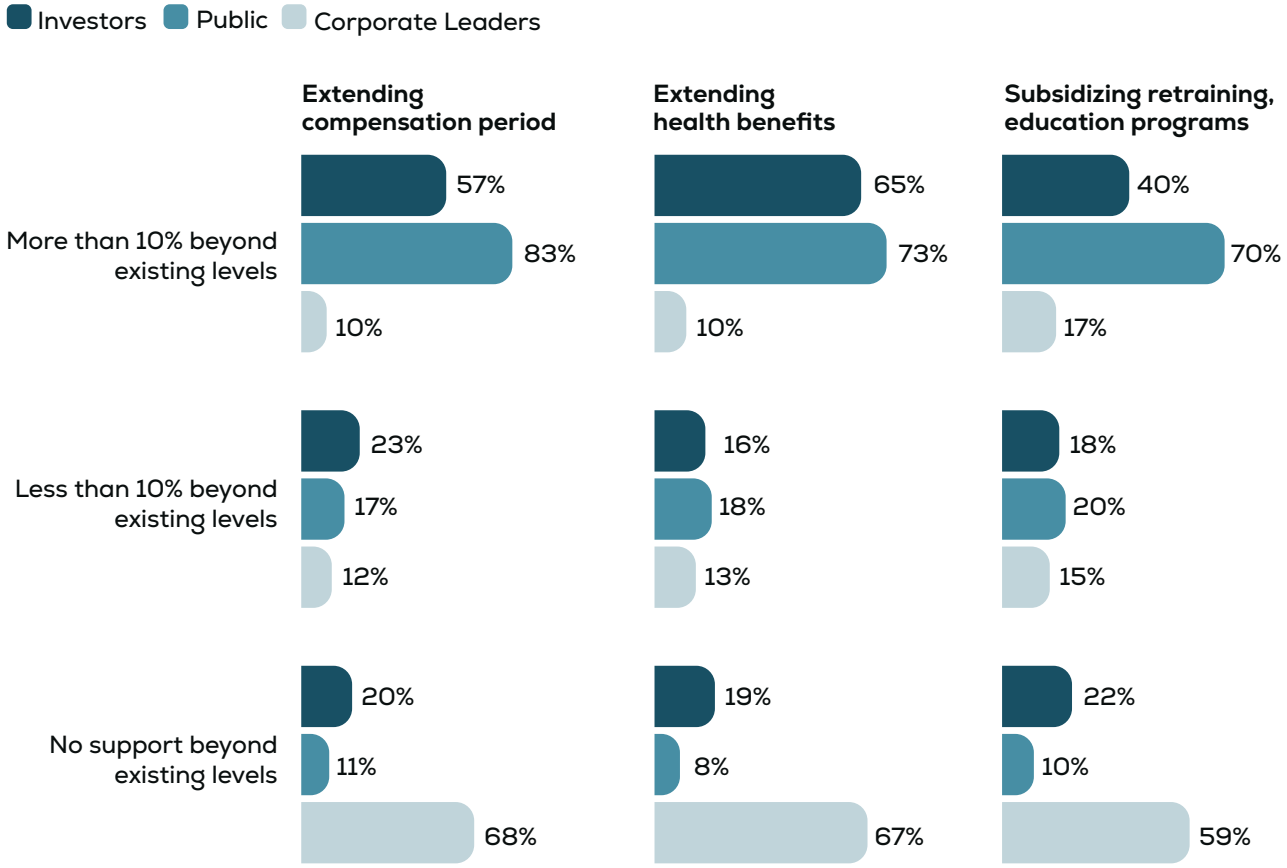
Regardless of whether large layoffs are planned for the immediate future, there continues to be a sizable disconnect between what corporate leaders are doing to support displaced workers versus the expectations of the public and even investors. With the exception of providing training and skill development on AI platforms, few corporate leaders report implementing the various support actions shown in the figure on page 13 for displaced workers.

Percentage who say it is critical for companies implementing AI to take the following actions to support their workforce



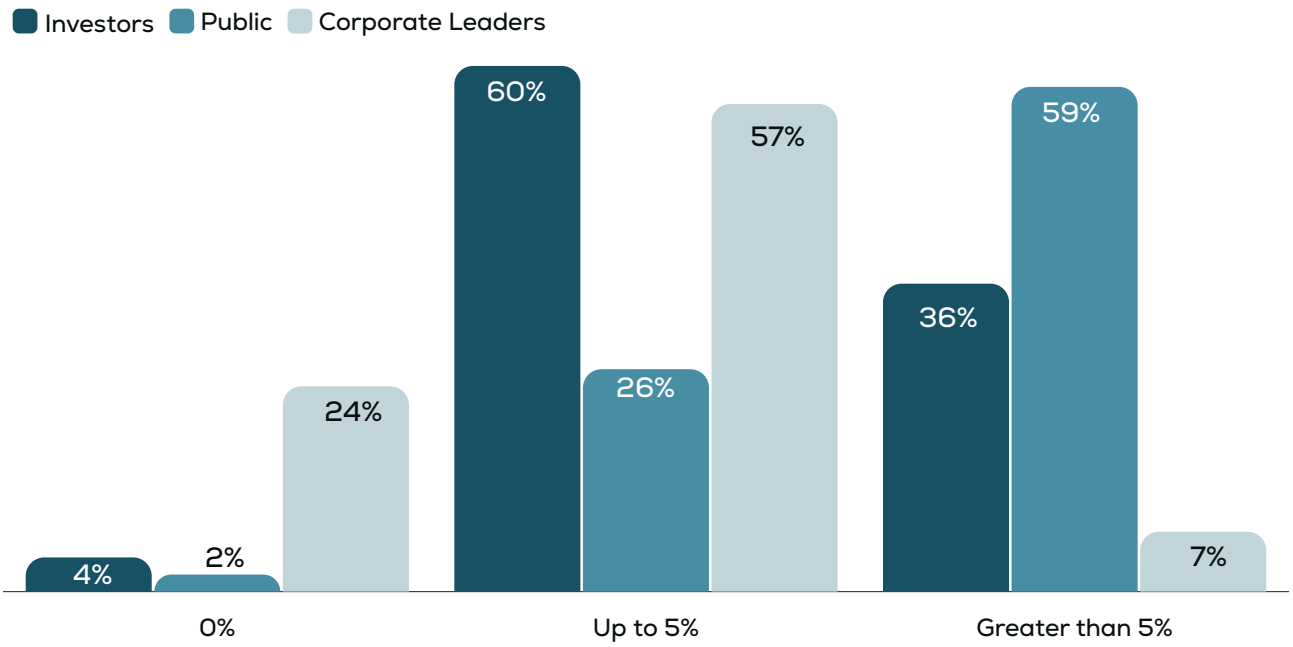
The same pattern of response is seen regarding the provision of support levels should workers be laid off as a result of AI efficiencies: across all three worker support mechanisms (extended compensation, extended health benefits, and retraining subsidies), the proportion of corporate leaders offering "no support beyond existing levels" is notable.

Level of support (beyond existing levels) that companies should provide to workers displaced by AI



Underscoring the above, corporate leaders at this point in time are less likely to devote a substantial percentage of their AI budget toward worker displacement (in the form of retraining, severance or transition assistance). Close to 60% of the public thinks companies should spend more than 5% of their (non-infrastructure) AI investment on displaced workers, but investors and corporate leaders are more measured, at 60% and 57% of respective groups saying up to 5% is appropriate. These proportions are mostly similar to what was seen in Wave 1.

Percentage of total AI investment (excluding infrastructure) that companies should allocate to support workers displaced by AI (e.g., retraining, severance, transition assistance)



The research team's interpretation is straightforward: companies are **not yet** laying off significant numbers of people, so active displacement support programs have not been triggered. The data supports this – only 9% of corporate leaders report seeing significant job cuts at their organization to date.

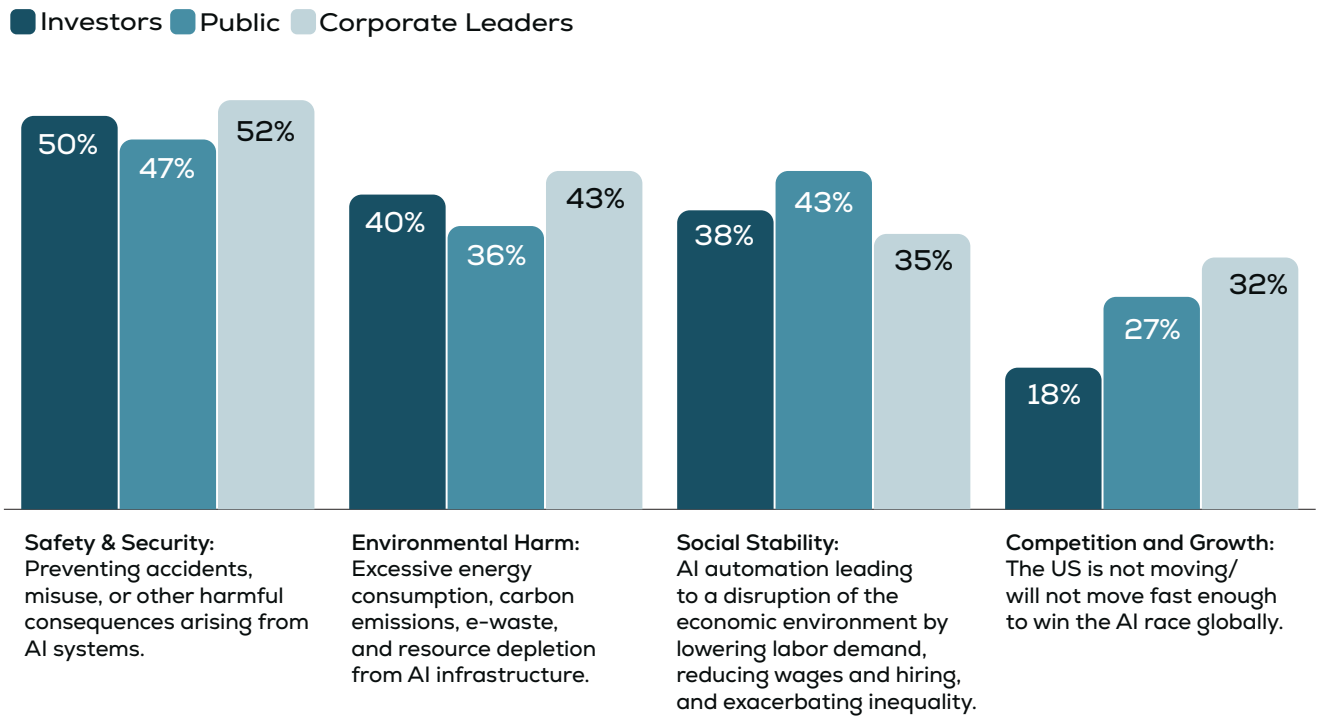
Safety concerns: A differentiated risk landscape

AI safety concerns remain strong but have shifted in character since Wave 1. Overall top three box concern (on a scale of 1–10) levels across the three safety risk categories tracked across both waves have generally softened. Investor concern about social stability dropped 20 points – from 58% to 38%. This is the largest single wave-over-wave shift related to concerns and may reflect growing confidence in AI's economic upside outweighing workforce displacement fears among that audience.

Top 3 Box: Concerned (Wave 1 → Wave 2)	Investors	Public	Corp Leaders
Safety & Security (accidents, misuse, harmful consequences)	62% → 50%	53% → 47%	46% → 52%
Social Stability (automation, labor demand, inequality)	58% → 38%	48% → 43%	41% → 35%
Competition & Growth (US falling behind globally)	32% → 18%	35% → 27%	26% → 32%

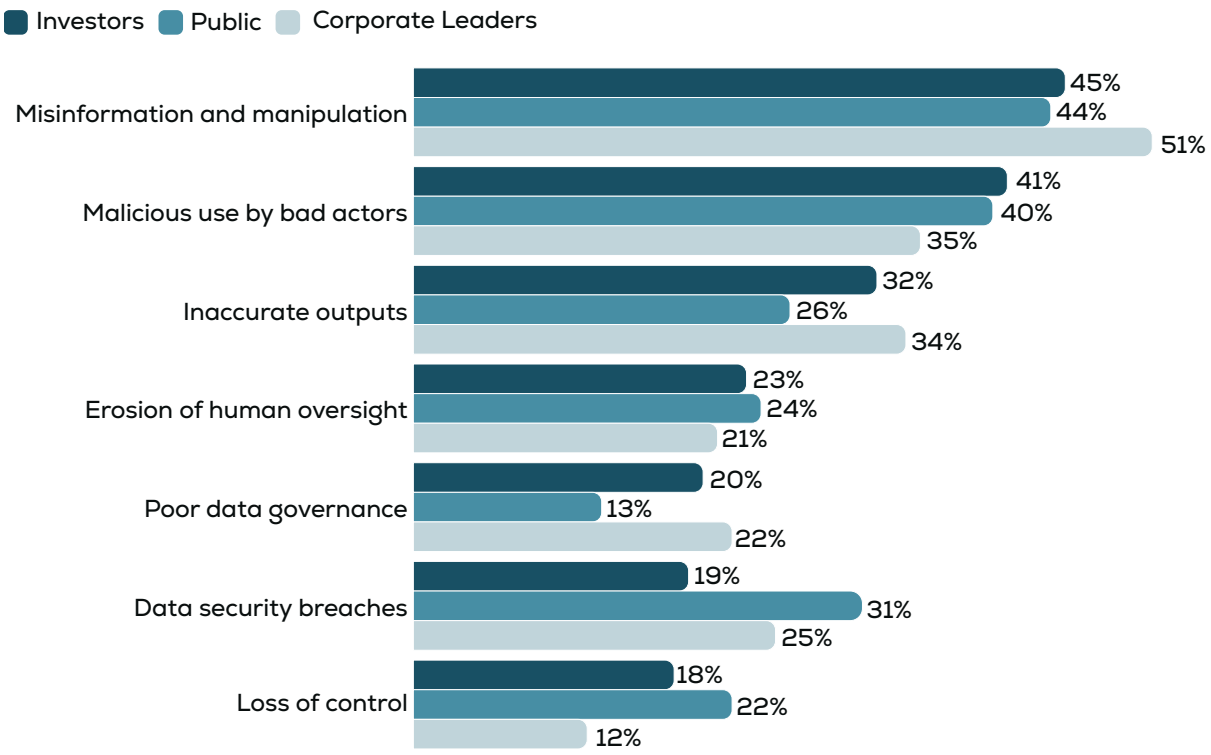
While respondents are primarily concerned about safety and security and social stability over falling behind vis-a-vis competition and growth, Wave 2 also introduced a new risk category that provides a richer picture of what audiences worry about most: environmental harm, which registered concern levels of 40% among Investors, 36% among the general public, and 43% among corporate leaders.

Percentage who are highly concerned about AI-related issues



All three stakeholder groups rank misinformation and malicious use by bad actors the top two safety threats, consistent with Wave 1. New categories of threats were added in Wave 2: inaccurate outputs, data security breaches, erosion of human oversight and poor data governance. Loss of control, which was measured in Wave 1, fell notably in the overall Wave 2 risk ranking – perhaps reflecting greater realism about near-term risks versus more abstract existential concerns.

AI safety risks, ranked from most to least threatening

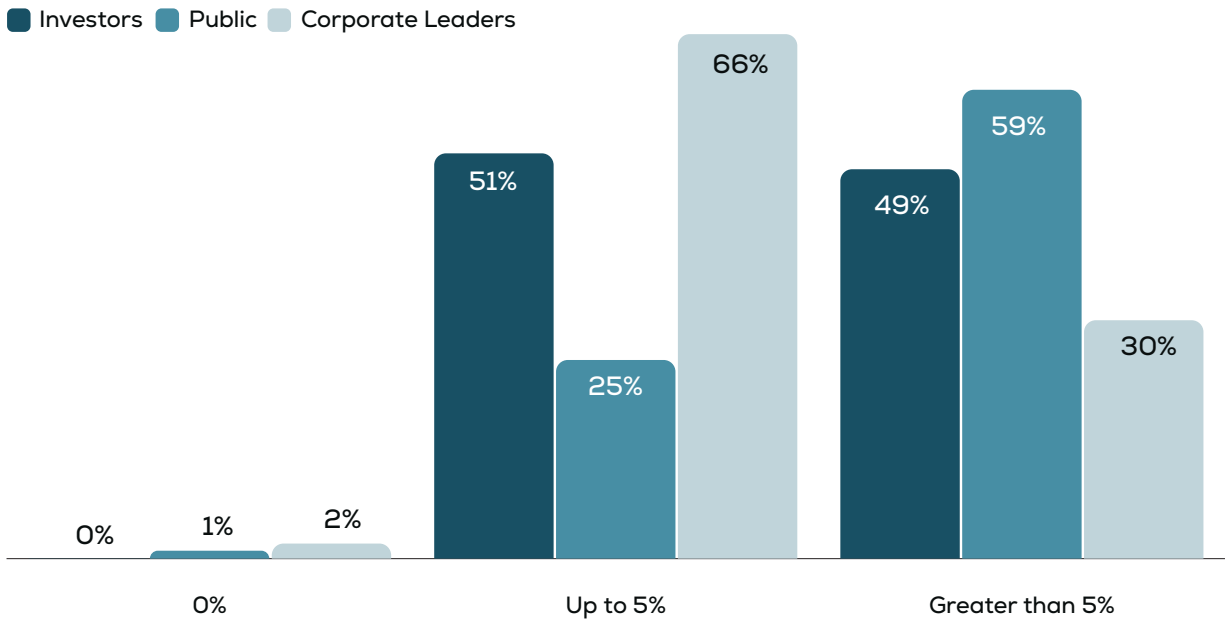


Note: Percentage who rank risk #1 or #2 most threatening

High risk concerns require ample safety spend

Majorities of all three groups believe companies should allocate a portion of their AI budget toward investment in safety. Close to 60% of the public thinks companies should spend more than 5% of their (non-infrastructure) AI investment on safety, but investors and corporate leaders are more measured on safety spend, at 51% and 66% of respective groups saying up to 5% is appropriate.

Percentage of total AI investment that companies should spend on AI safety (excluding infrastructure)

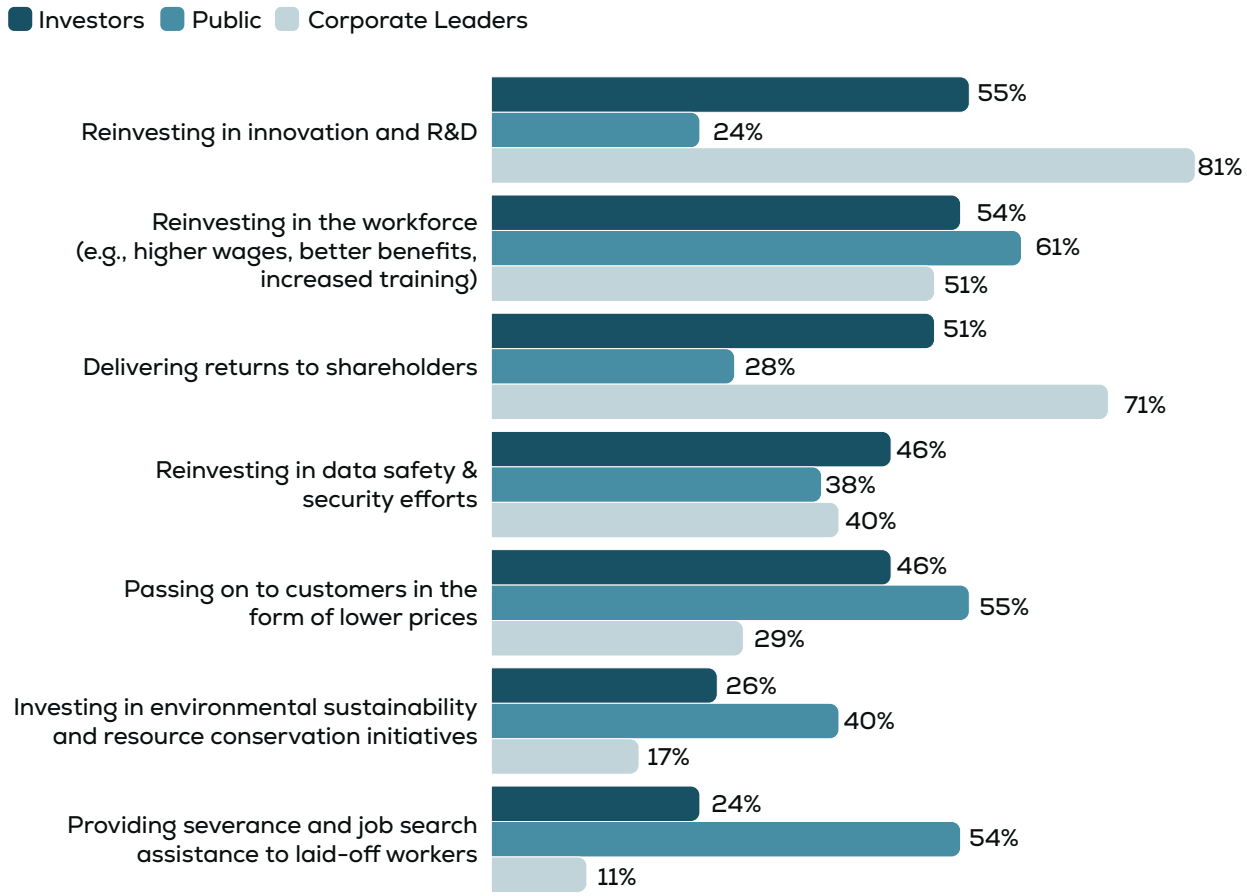


The most pronounced wave-over-wave shift is among investor attitudes on AI safety spend: the share saying companies should spend "up to 5%" on AI safety rose from 41% to 51%, while "greater than 5%" fell from 57% to 49%. This represents a modest but real recalibration. Investors remain committed to safety investment, but the urgency for outsized spending may have moderated since the last wave.

Profit distribution: Different priorities, same tension

Should corporations start to realize AI-driven profit gains, there is little agreement about how those gains should be distributed, reflecting sharply different priorities. Corporate leaders overwhelmingly prioritize R&D reinvestment and shareholder returns – their top two choices by a significant margin. Investors spread their preferences more evenly, with workforce reinvestment almost as high as R&D and shareholder returns. The public, when asked the same question, prioritizes workforce reinvestment most highly (61%), followed by lowering consumer prices (55%).

Preference for how AI-related profitability gains should be distributed



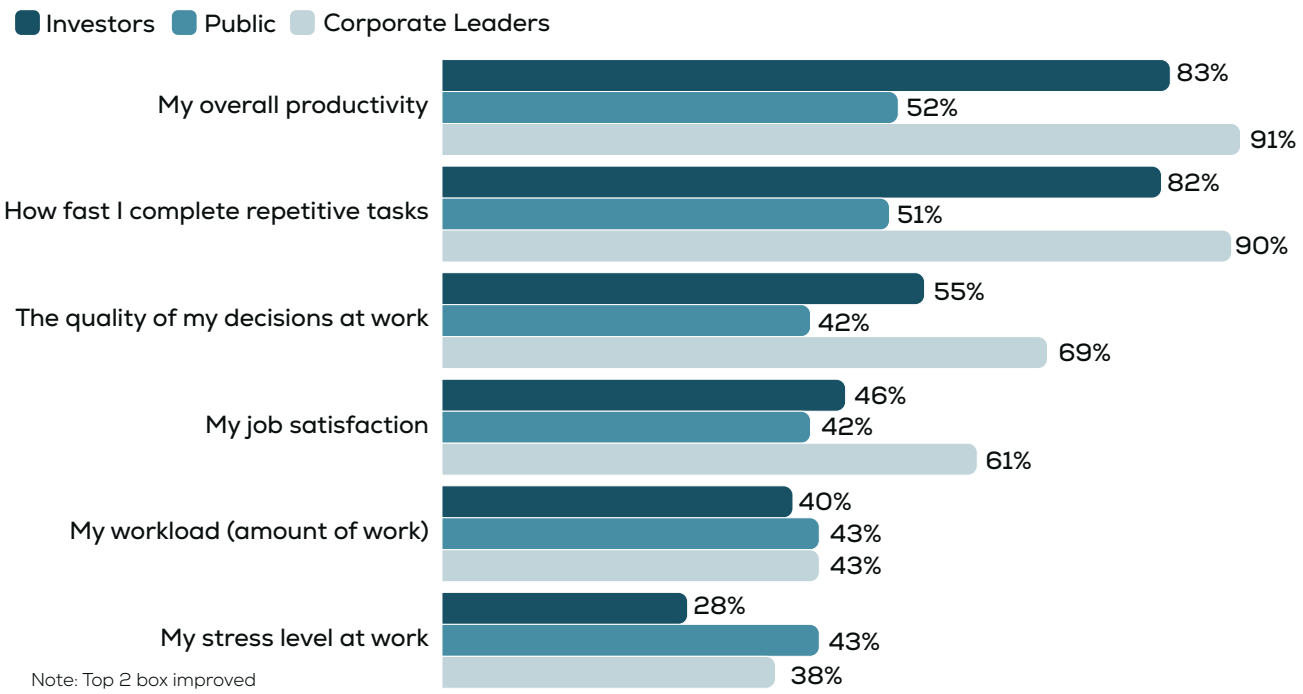
Note: Percentage choosing as a top 3 priority

The research team notes the clear divide between these stakeholder groups: the public wants gains redirected to them (as consumers and workers), while those driving AI deployment are focused on reinvestment and returns, a tension that is likely to intensify as AI productivity gains become more visible.

Impact on work

Among corporate leaders, the personal impact of AI on their own work is strongly positive: about 90% say AI has improved their overall productivity and accelerated repetitive task completion. 61% say it has improved their job satisfaction. These are notably higher than workers' direct experience: productivity improvements (52%) and job satisfaction gains (42%) are comparatively lower reflecting the extent to which AI tools may be embedded in corporate workflows in ways that haven't yet reached broader labor markets.

Percentage who say AI has improved their job in the following ways

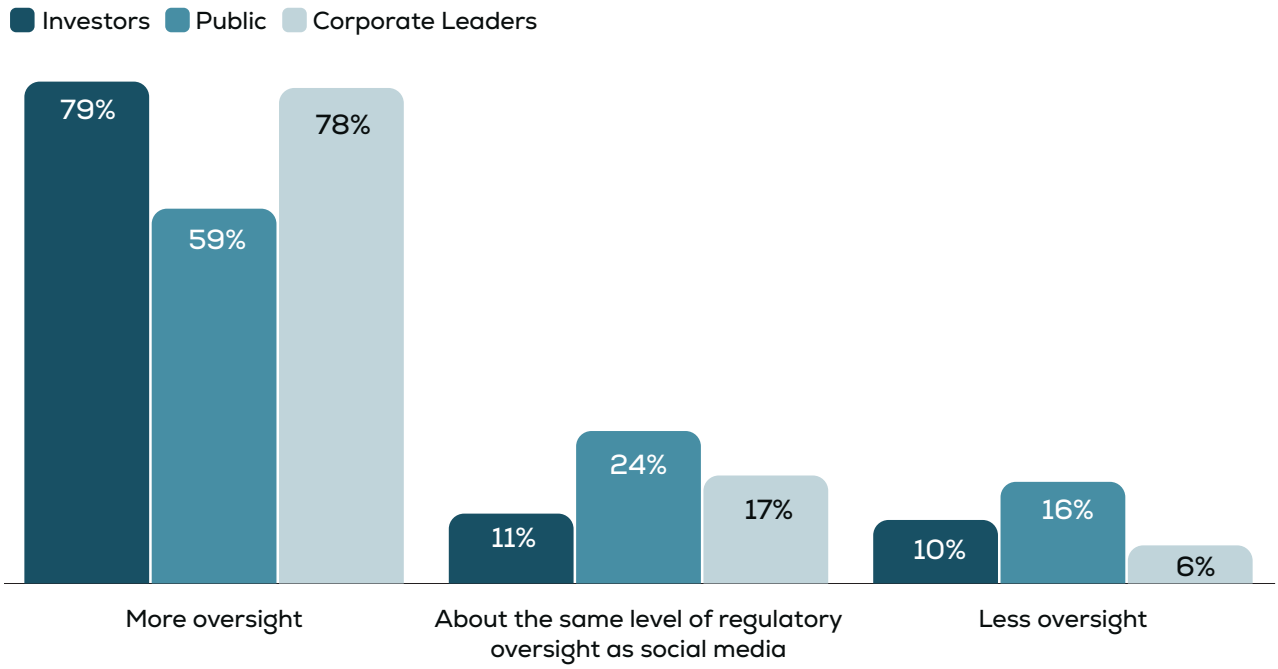


Stress and workload represent the more complicated side of AI's job impact: 38% of corporate leaders say AI has increased their stress, and 43% say it has added to their workload, suggesting that even among AI's biggest organizational champions, integration comes with costs.

Regulatory expectations: A strong appetite for oversight

A new question in Wave 2 asked audiences to compare the appropriate level of regulatory oversight for AI relative to social media. The results reveal a strong cross-audience consensus that AI should face meaningfully more regulation than social media has received.

Views on how much regulation AI should face relative to social media

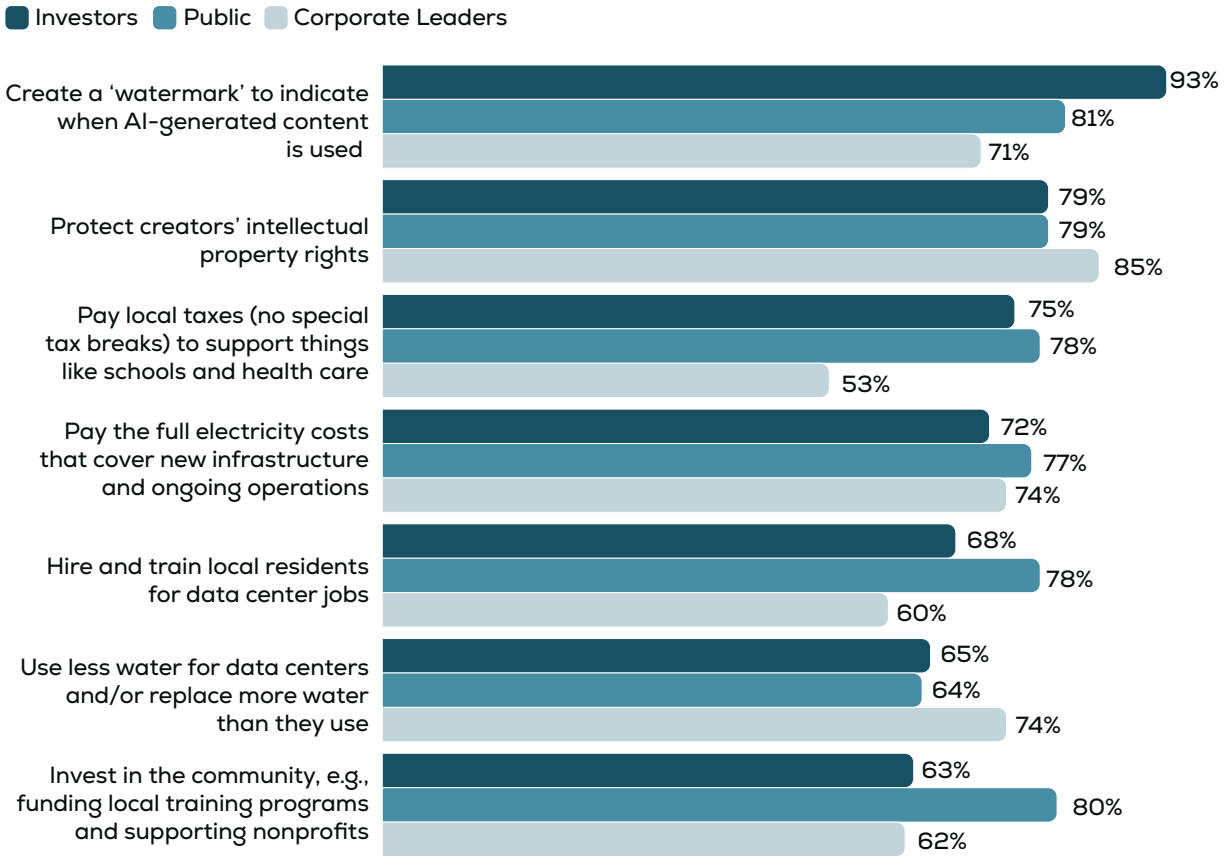


The alignment between investors and corporate leaders – both at roughly 79% favoring more oversight – is striking and somewhat counterintuitive: these are the groups with the most direct economic interest in AI, yet they are the most emphatic about the need for strong regulation. This may reflect a preference for more clarity and a level playing field over the ambiguity that characterized early social media regulatory efforts.

Responsible corporate conduct for AI: What companies should do

Wave 2 explored a broader list of expectations for how companies should behave as they scale AI. It was found that large majorities of all three stakeholders want to see corporations take myriad safeguards for consumers and communities related to AI and AI infrastructure.

Corporate responsibilities in the AI era
Percentage Agree



Commitments to intellectual property and content watermarking both command near-universal agreement across audiences and have held steady from Wave 1. The remaining four obligation statements were introduced in Wave 2 exploring AI's social contract with communities and the environment.

The findings suggest that value extracted from communities should be balanced by proportional local investment. There is broad cross-stakeholder support for mitigating AI's environmental footprint, including paying the full electricity costs of AI infrastructure and being mindful of water use – priorities echoed in recent corporate commitments around data centers. Community-focused measures, such as hiring and training local residents for data center jobs are also widely supported.

Paying local taxes without special incentives receives strong backing from investors (75%) and the public (78%), though support is notably lower among corporate leaders (53%), who may view tax incentives differently from the other cohorts.

Summary

Despite bullish predictions about AI's immediate impact on companies and workforce reduction, the most transformative effects are unfolding gradually. One meaningful reason is the deliberate care corporate leaders are taking to manage safety, governance, and risk.

Findings from the second wave of Just Capital's AI-focused polling suggests we are entering a period of growing confidence, but also one that demands continued focus on transparency, accountability, and broad benefit-sharing.

The public will be more likely to extend trust and social license to operate to companies that demonstrate they are using AI to deliver genuine social benefit while protecting people from the greatest risks. For corporate leaders looking to navigate the AI transition responsibly, these expectations provide a valuable input to drive fully considered decision-making.

About the Research

Just Capital regularly conducts independent, methodologically rigorous surveys to track Americans' priorities, values, and expectations for corporate behavior, which serve as a foundational input into its Just Intelligence tool, rankings, and research products. For this research, Just Capital conducted a survey focusing on the responsible usage of AI in organizations, fielded among three populations of respondents: investors, corporate leaders, and the general public.

Investors: The survey was designed and fielded by Just Capital using the Qualtrics online survey platform. The sample was provided by NewtonX, a leading AI-driven B2B market research company that provides fast, high-quality insights from verified professionals. Data collection took place between January 20 and 26, 2026. Just Capital received a total of 100 responses of which 52 were institutional portfolio managers or directors and the remainder comprised analysts and other related job functions.

Corporate Leaders: The survey was designed and fielded by Just Capital using the Qualtrics online survey platform. The sample was provided by Gerson Lehrman Group, a global information services consulting company that provides clients access to expert consultants seeking advice across a wide range of subjects. Data collection took place between January 19–22, 2026. Just Capital received a total of 103 responses of which 84 were c-suite executives and 19 were board members or senior level executives operating in a strategic business decision making capacity regarding AI implementation in organizations of 500 or more employees.

General Public: The survey was designed by Just Capital and conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll between January 20–27, 2026, and fielded among 1,000 adults ages 18+ and older. Additionally, to qualify respondents must either use AI for personal or work-related tasks or have some interest in using or learning about AI. The incidence rate was 72%. The data were weighted to represent the US population who meet the screening criteria. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within +/- 2.5 percentage points using a 95% confidence level.

Wave 1 of Just Capital's AI research was fielded between September 27 and November 14, 2025.

About Just Capital

Just Capital is the foremost independent organization advancing responsible business leadership. We translate insights from public polling, performance data, and financial analysis into actionable intelligence leaders can use to drive long-term business success and shared prosperity for people across America. Our flagship product Just Intelligence is designed to offer a comprehensive view of public expectations, stakeholder performance, and sector realities in order to drive responsible decision-making. When companies make better decisions, they can create lasting value for shareholders, contribute to stronger communities, and help drive broader economic and societal progress. For more information, visit justcapital.com.

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