

A Year of Perspective: Evolving Views on AI Among The American Public, Investors, and Corporate Leaders

Fall 2026 survey includes small business leaders for the first time



Key Findings

The belief that AI will rapidly eliminate jobs is waning among the people closest to deployment, but not among the public.

- Just over half (55%) of corporate leaders believe AI will result in more unemployment, down from 71% in Summer 2026. Investor sentiment similarly fell – 65% expect AI will have a negative impact on unemployment, compared to 82% last quarter. Unemployment expectations for both groups had been gradually waning since our initial wave of research, but have fallen sharply this quarter.
- Similarly, only 12% of corporate leaders and 16% of investors expect “large-scale job losses” in the next 2–3 years. However, roughly 30% of the public has consistently expressed fears of big layoffs in every wave since Spring 2026.
- Among businesses with between 2–20 employees, 50% forecast no staffing changes at all from AI, compared to just 21% of corporate leaders at large companies. That gap shrinks once a small business crosses the 20-employee mark: hiring for AI-related roles (19% to 37%) and role redefinition (19% to 36%) both nearly double.
- Investors and corporate leaders still see fewer entry-level positions with higher skill requirements as the single most likely outcome of AI adoption in the next few years, though conviction is softening slightly since Spring 2026 (investors: 68% to 58%; corporate leaders: 55% to 52%).

AI safety continues to be a top concern. This survey reveals company leaders are focused on internal governance, while holding AI developers responsible for broader societal risks.

- Concerns about “outside” threats to companies have fallen sharply among investors and corporate leaders since the Fall 2025 inaugural wave of research. 34% of corporate leaders and 45% of investors are concerned about malicious use by bad actors, compared to 49% and 64% this time last year, respectively. Concerns about misinformation have also dropped precipitously (investors 66% to 38%, corporate leaders 65% to 35%).
- But “inside” operational risks are holding steady or climbing: inaccurate output is now corporate leaders' single highest-ranked risk to their own company, at 42% (up from 34% in Spring 2026).
- Responsibility for managing these risks is seen as a shared burden across the AI value chain. Corporate leaders are notably willing to claim ownership of the risks inside their own walls, assigning themselves far more responsibility than the companies developing AI for poor data governance (77% AI users vs. 51% AI developers) and erosion of human oversight (71% AI users vs. 45% AI developers). When we ask the public, they assign roughly equal responsibility to the companies that build AI and the companies that use it (77% and 75% on average across seven risk categories) and meaningfully less, though still substantial, to government and regulators (68%).

Corporate leaders are reporting better results from AI than they were last quarter, even as their appetite to keep spending cools.

- Measurable results improved from Summer to Fall 2026 on key metrics such as productivity (56% to 71%), profitability growth (32% to 46%), and time savings (71% to 81%).
- Despite better results, corporate leaders' commitment to sustained AI investment fell sharply, from 56% (Spring 2026) to 41% (Summer 2026) to just 27% (Fall 2026) – a pattern that lines up with [reporting](#) this summer on corporate America tightening scrutiny of AI budgets.
- However, safety is one area where corporate leaders are not reducing investment: 65% report that they are currently putting up to 5% of their non-infrastructure AI spend toward AI safety, a trend that has remained consistent quarter over quarter..
- A modest but real shift in how leaders think about AI-driven gains: the share who would direct profits toward lower prices for customers has grown every wave (29% in Spring 2026 to 40% Summer 2026 to 49% Fall 2026), while delivering returns to shareholders has slipped from its Spring 2026 high in 71% to 57% in Fall 2026.

Small business owners share corporate leaders' optimism about AI.

- 84% of small business owners expect AI to be a net positive for society – level with corporate leaders (88%) and investors (88%), and 18 points ahead of the general public (66%).

AI governance practices appear to be inconsistent among large company leaders, small businesses not able to follow established practice.

- As of Fall 2026, 41% of corporate leaders say they have a formal oversight process for AI, 46% an informal one with a formal plan coming, and 13% of companies have a named individual leading.
- Small business is far more uneven: roughly equal percentages (~25%) have either a formal written policy or work off informal guidelines, 28% are still building out their governance. Meantime 1 in 5 (21%) have no governance standards underway.
- After basic AI proficiency, small businesses are looking for support in making sure outputs are accurate (36%) and knowing what data is safe to share (33%). Among small firms that have or are building an AI policy, rules on what data can be entered (52%) and procedures for verifying outputs (46%) are the two most commonly covered provisions.

Introduction

Nearly a year after Just Capital began tracking how the American public, institutional investors, and corporate leaders view critical AI development and deployment issues, the picture looks considerably different. Companies have reported some AI-generated layoffs, but not to the degree that was initially predicted in the first wave of research. Other issues have grown in scope and coverage: community opposition to new data centers has become one of the only durable, bipartisan issues, with more than 800 opposition groups [now active](#) across 49 states. And on Wall Street, corporate finance teams that spent the last two years racing to deploy AI are now, per [Bloomberg reporting in late July](#), concerned about rising costs of frontier models. Meanwhile, AI safety persists as a central concern to all audiences.

This report presents findings from the Fall 2026 wave of Just Capital's quarterly polling of the American public, investors, and corporate leaders on responsible AI deployment. By measuring how perceptions and priorities shift across these groups over time, Just Capital aims to help business leaders make fully informed decisions as the AI landscape evolves. The inaugural wave was conducted in Fall 2025, the Spring wave was released in April 2026, and the summer wave was released June 2026.

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 128 institutional investors in collaboration with NewtonX, 104 corporate executives in collaboration with Gerson Lehrman Group (66 C-suite executives and 38 board members or senior level executives), and 1,000 US adults aligned to population benchmarks in collaboration with The Harris Poll. Data were collected July 20–27, 2026.

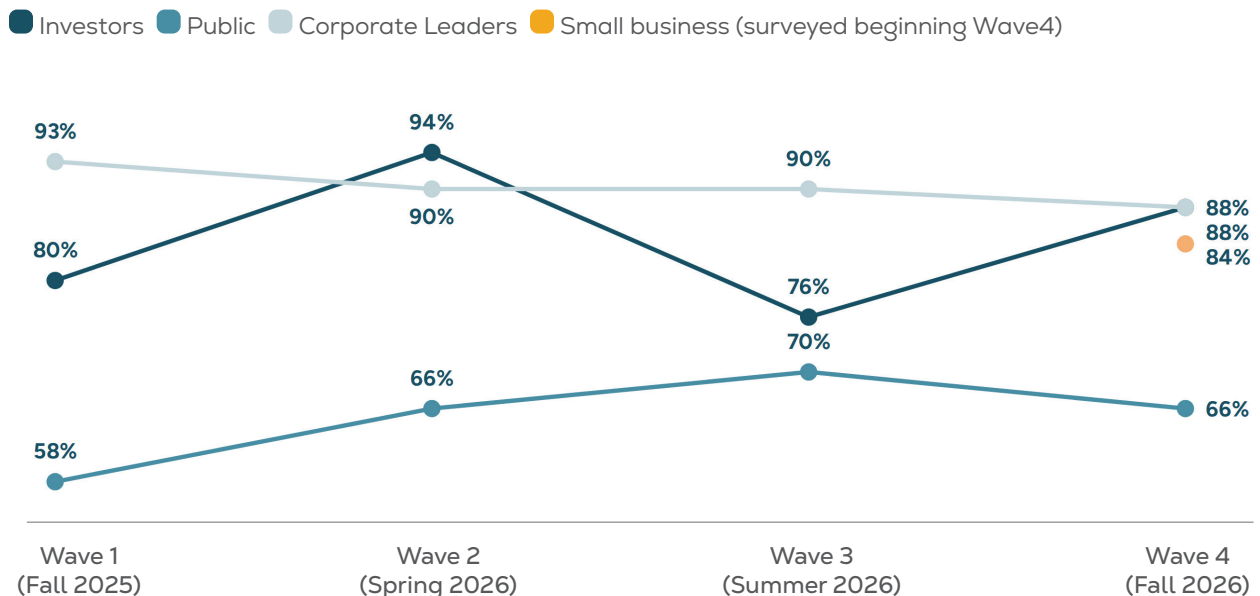
In a few areas of this report, we will be citing results from a survey fielded among small business leaders in the US (company size: Sole Proprietorships to 499 employees) between August 19–24, 2026. The Small Business survey yielded 824 completed interviews, and all respondents are current AI users at some stage in using the technology.

The full methodology can be found [here](#).

The Net Impact of AI on Society: Optimism Holds, But “Overnight Transformation” Is Losing Ground

Nearly a year since commencing research, majorities of all three audiences continue to foresee AI as a net positive for society within five years – but there is a notable variance in the proportions wave over wave. The steady growth of the public’s optimism has leveled off a bit: a peak of 70% in Summer 2026 has cooled to 66%. Corporate leaders are still the most bullish group by a wide margin, but incrementally less so each quarter, easing from 93% to 88% over the four waves. Investors’ opinions are the most volatile of the three, a pattern that could be tied to market mood more so than any steady accumulation of evidence.

Percentage who foresee AI as a net positive for society within 5 years



Small business owners’ optimism (84%) sits much closer to institutional investors and corporate leaders (88–89%) than to the general public (66%), which signals that proximity to running an actual business, more than institutional size, seems to predict optimism.

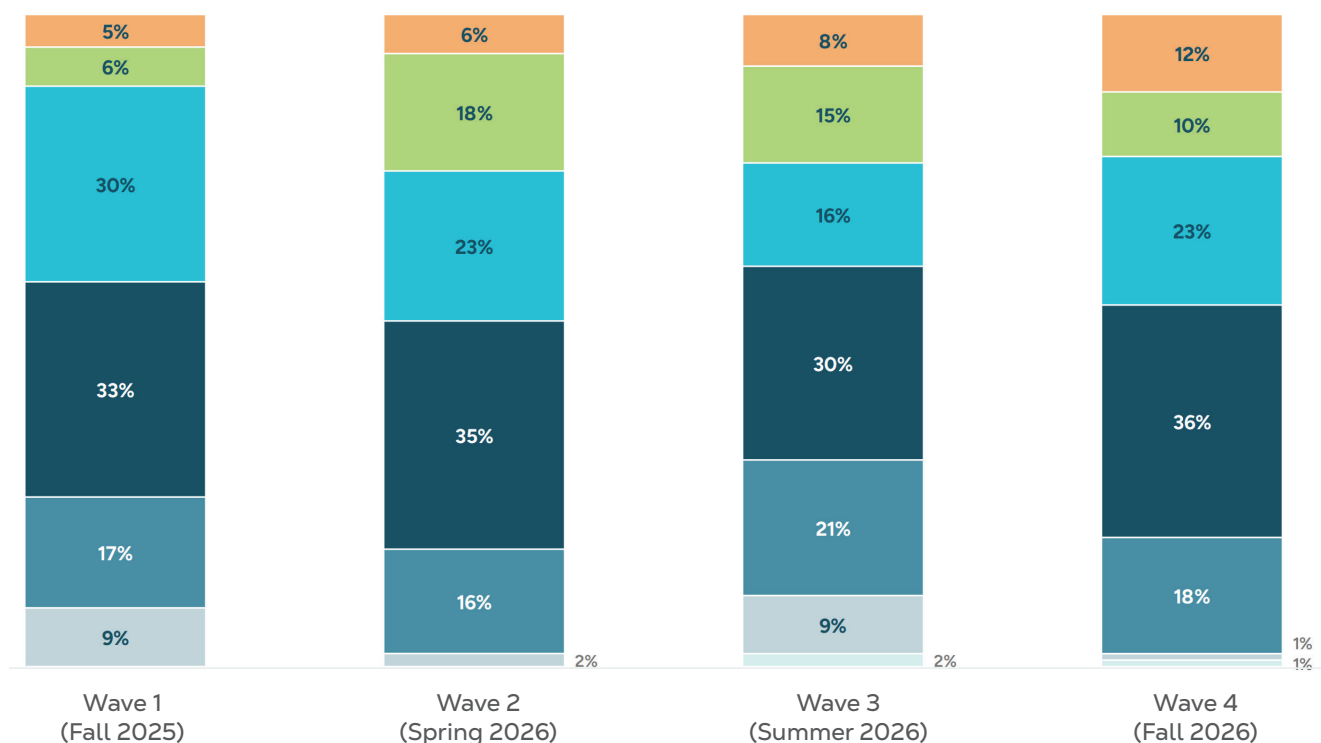
Corporate leaders remain nearly unanimous that AI is good for their own company specifically – 97% in September 2026, essentially unchanged all year – underscoring a gap our research has tracked since Fall 2025: **leaders are far more certain AI benefits their own organization than they are that it benefits society at large.**

Regarding AI maturation stage, not all companies are following the same pattern. A plurality of corporate leaders (36%) responding to this survey describe their organization as being in the “early adoption” phase – where employees have access to specific tools, but AI is not yet embedded in core operations – and that share is higher than it was in Summer 2026 (30%). On the other hand, the most

advanced stage, “transformation,” has grown steadily since we started surveying (5% Fall 2025 to 12% in Fall 2026), but still represents relatively few companies. The results suggest that AI maturation may be happening at two speeds, depending on the needs of the company: a small group of leaders pulling further ahead, and a much larger group still getting started.

Corporate leaders – stage of AI integration in the organization

● Transformation
 ● Optimization
 ● Integration
 ● Early adoption
 ● Experimentation
 ● Awareness
 ● Not Initiated



That gap between where companies expected to be and where they actually are might be a rare moment of alignment between reality and public opinion: the public [wants AI to move slower](#), and on the maturity curve, that’s roughly what’s happening. Asked for the first time in our fourth wave of research whether **companies are moving too fast, too slow, or at the right pace in adopting AI**, 49% of the public said too fast, compared to just 5% who said too slow and 46% who said the pace is about right. Gen Z (58%) and Boomers+ (59%) are more likely to say companies are moving too fast than Gen X and Millennial cohorts. Read alongside the optimism numbers above, this suggests the public’s unease is less about whether AI will be realized as a net good, and more about how quickly it is being pushed into the world.

Pace at which companies are adopting AI (among public)

	Total	Gen Z	Millennials	Gen X	Boomers
Too Fast	49%	58%	39%	44%	59%
Too Slow	5%	6%	5%	4%	4%
About Right	46%	36%	56%	52%	37%

The Mass-Displacement Story Is Losing Believers – Except With the Public

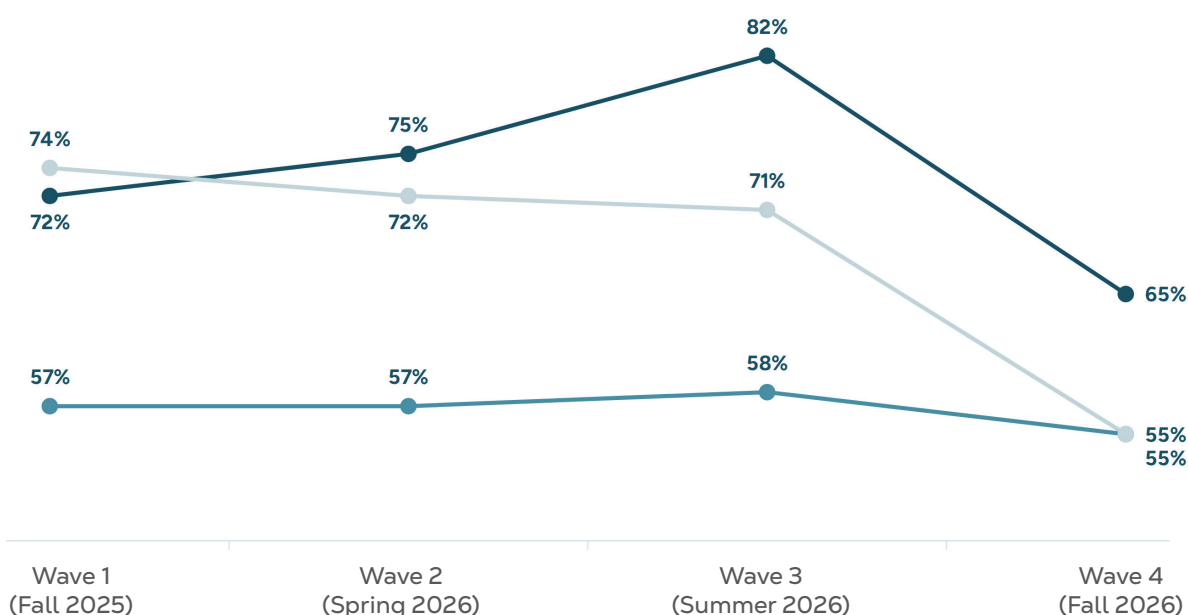
The single most important story to come out of the Fall 2026 survey is a recalibration of expectations around job loss. A year ago, both investors and corporate leaders were bracing for AI to be a serious threat to employment levels broadly. That fear is now fading quickly among exactly the people who would see it coming first, while the predictions of the public have not moved at all. Several other of the metrics we track on AI's effect on staffing point to a similar conclusion.

The unemployment fear is unwinding

Investors and corporate leaders have consistently been the most pessimistic audiences on AI and jobs, and both softened sharply this wave. The share of corporate leaders expecting a negative impact – meaning fewer jobs, not more – fell from 71% in Summer 2026 to 55% in Fall 2026; investors dropped from 82% to 65%, a 16- and 17-point swing in a single quarter. The public hasn't moved at all, holding between 55% and 58% across all four waves. The convergence is real, but it's a convergence toward continued and shared concern, not optimism: majorities of all three audiences still expect AI to worsen unemployment rather than improve it.

Percentage who foresee AI as a net negative for unemployment within 5 years

Investors Public Corporate Leaders



Concerns around large-scale job losses are a fading expectation for insiders; but entry-level hiring is still expected to cool

Asked what outcome is most likely over the next 2–3 years as companies adopt AI, corporate leaders' expectation of large-scale job losses across many industries fell by nearly half in a single quarter – from 22% in Summer 2026 to 12% in Fall 2026. Investors eased from 20% to 16% over the same period. The public's expectation of large-scale job losses, meanwhile, has sat essentially flat at 30–31% every wave since Spring 2026.

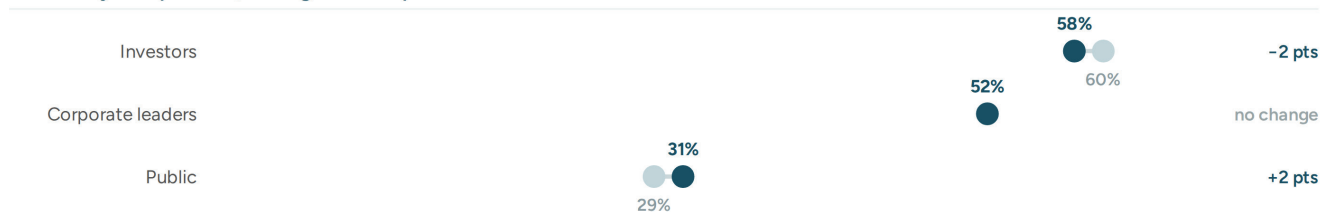
The one workforce concern that has not faded is the expectation of fewer entry-level roles with higher skill bars for the positions that remain. Investors and corporate leaders both still rank this as the single most likely 2–3 year outcome of AI adoption. About 30% of the public continues to be equally concerned about entry level roles drying up as they are about large-scale job loss.

Expected job impact from AI: Change from Summer to Fall 2026

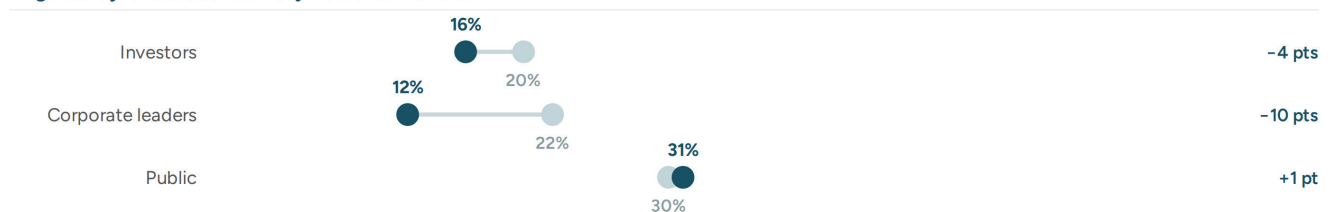
Percentage saying each outcome is likely over the next 2–3 years

● Summer 2026 ● Fall 2026

Fewer entry-level positions, with higher skill requirements



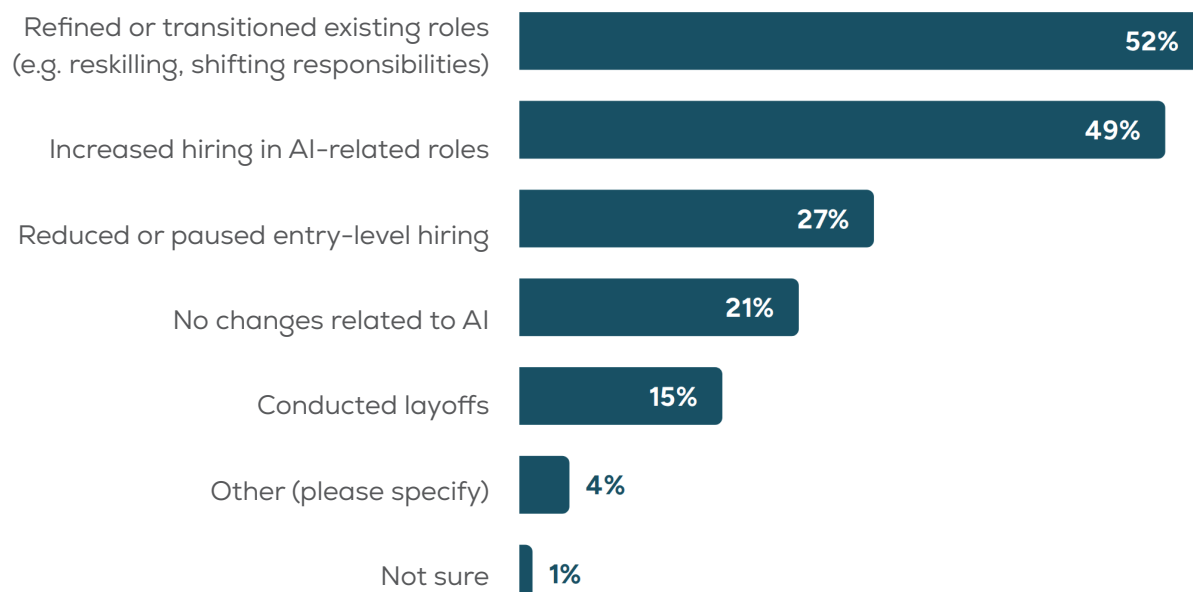
Large-scale job losses across many industries and roles



What's actually happening in companies backs up the recalibration

For the first time in Wave 4 (Fall 2026), corporate leaders were asked directly what staffing changes their organization has made in the past 12 months as a result of AI adoption. A substantially larger share report restructuring (52%) rather than cutting (15%), and almost half (49%) report increased hiring specifically for AI-related roles. This looks much more like a skills reshuffle than the previously-feared mass layoffs.

Corporate Leaders: Staffing changes made over past 12 months as a result of AI adoption



Small businesses expect less staffing disruption than has already shown up among large corporate employers (especially among the smallest firms). Among businesses with 2–20 employees, 50% forecast no staffing changes at all from AI, compared to just 21% of corporate leaders at large companies. That gap closes materially once a small business crosses the 20-employee mark: hiring for AI-related roles (19% to 37%) and role redefinition (19% to 36%) both nearly double. The more employees in a small business, the more likely the business resembles a scaled-down version of their larger counterparts with regards to how they handle staffing.

Planned staffing changes as a result of AI adoption

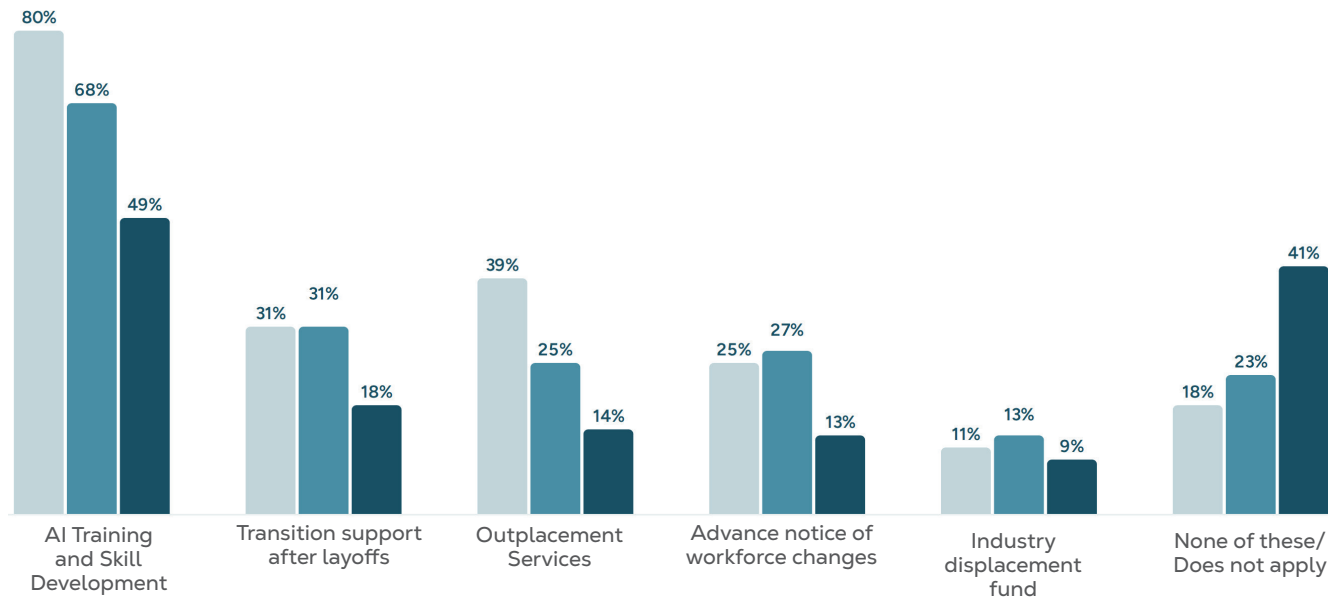
	Small businesses, 2–20 employees	Small businesses, 21+ employees	Corporate leaders in Lg. Co. (Fall 2026)
Reducing staff / conducted layoffs	7%	9%	15%
Pausing hiring / reduced entry-level hiring	7%	12%	27%
Hiring for AI-related roles	19%	37%	49%
Redefining or reskilling existing roles	19%	36%	52%
No changes forecasted / made	50%	31%	21%

Workforce support shrinks, but the public still demands a strong safety net

On the ground, there is more restructuring than displacement – and corporate leaders are pulling back on workforce-transition support as a result. In the following chart, every measure of worker support we track has declined since the spring, with AI training and outplacement services falling furthest. Most telling, the share of leaders saying none of these supports apply to their organization has more than doubled over three waves, reaching 41% in September.

Percentage of corporate leaders currently implementing each action

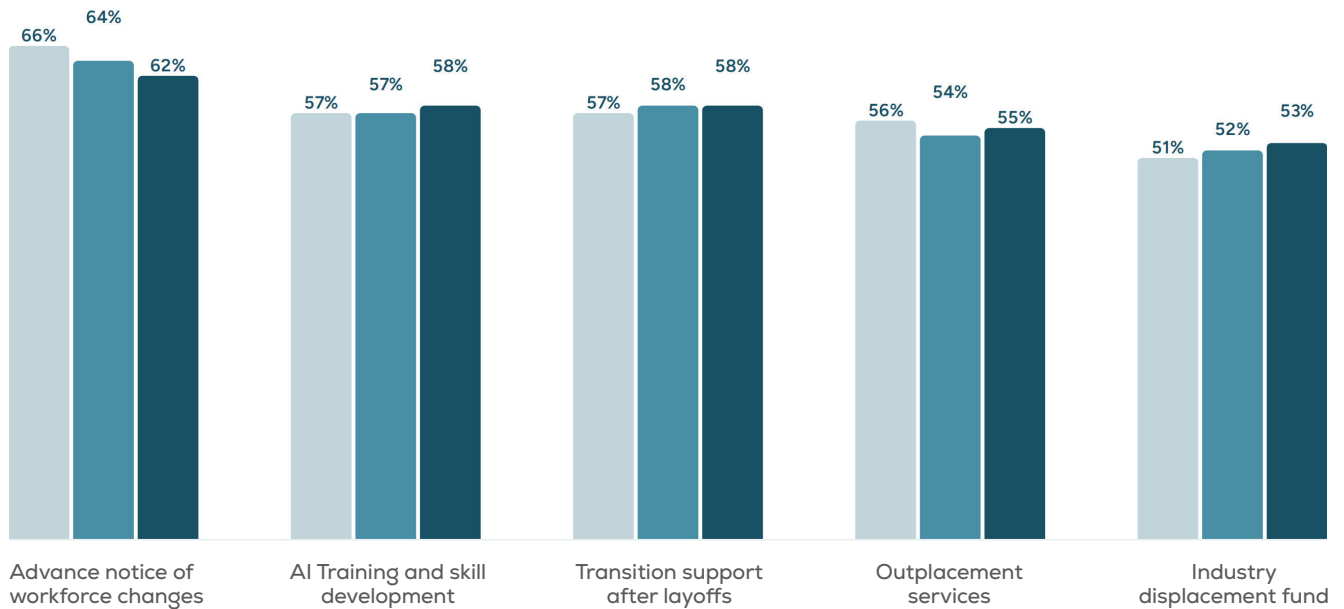
Spring 2026 Summer 2026 Fall 2026



Given that a majority of the public (55%) predicts AI will cause unemployment to rise, and two-thirds of the public still see large-scale job losses and fewer entry-level positions as equally likely, it is no surprise that their support for concrete worker protections has been similarly durable. Advance notice of AI-driven layoffs, increased severance requirements, and company-funded retraining have all held in the 65–80% support range among the public in every wave measured.

Percentage of the public rating each worker-support measure as critical

Spring 2026 Summer 2026 Fall 2026

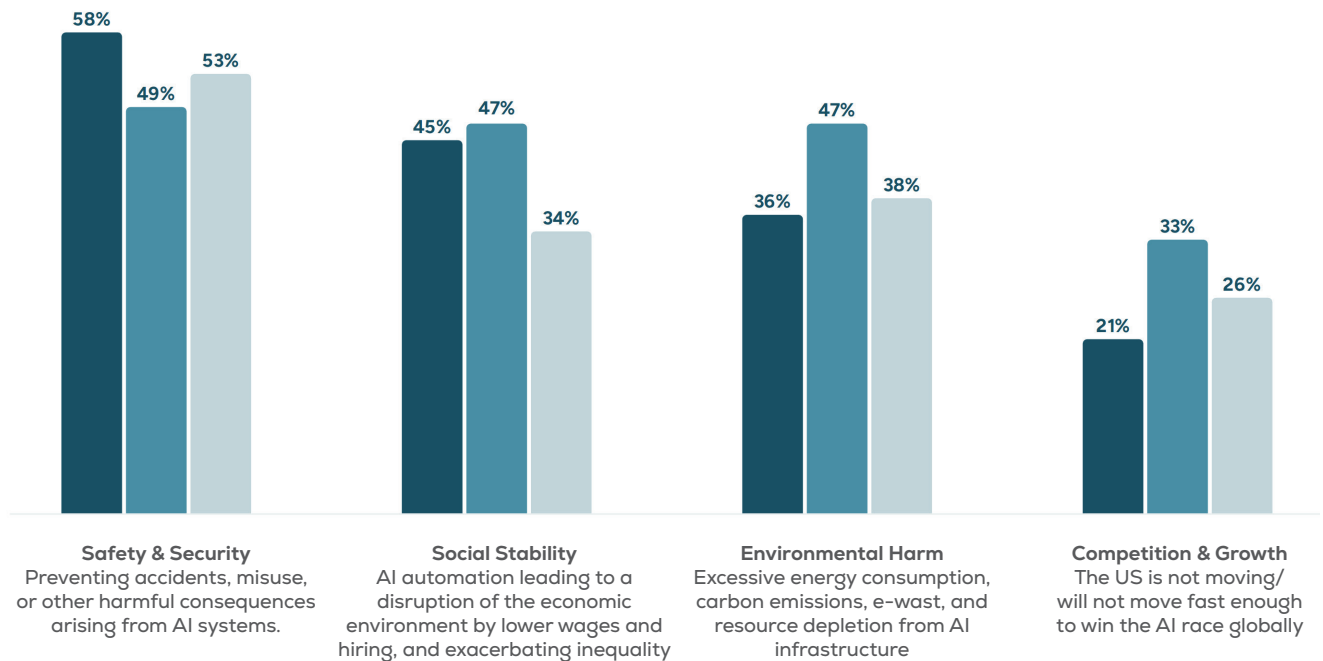


Safety Concerns Move From External to Internal

Safety and security has ranked as the top AI concern across every wave and every audience since this research began, and our latest wave is no exception (investors 58%, corporate leaders 53%, public 49% rate it a top concern in Fall 2026). What **has** changed over the past year is not *whether* people are worried, but *what* specifically they are *worried about*.

Concern about AI issues, Fall 2026

Investors Public Corporate Leaders

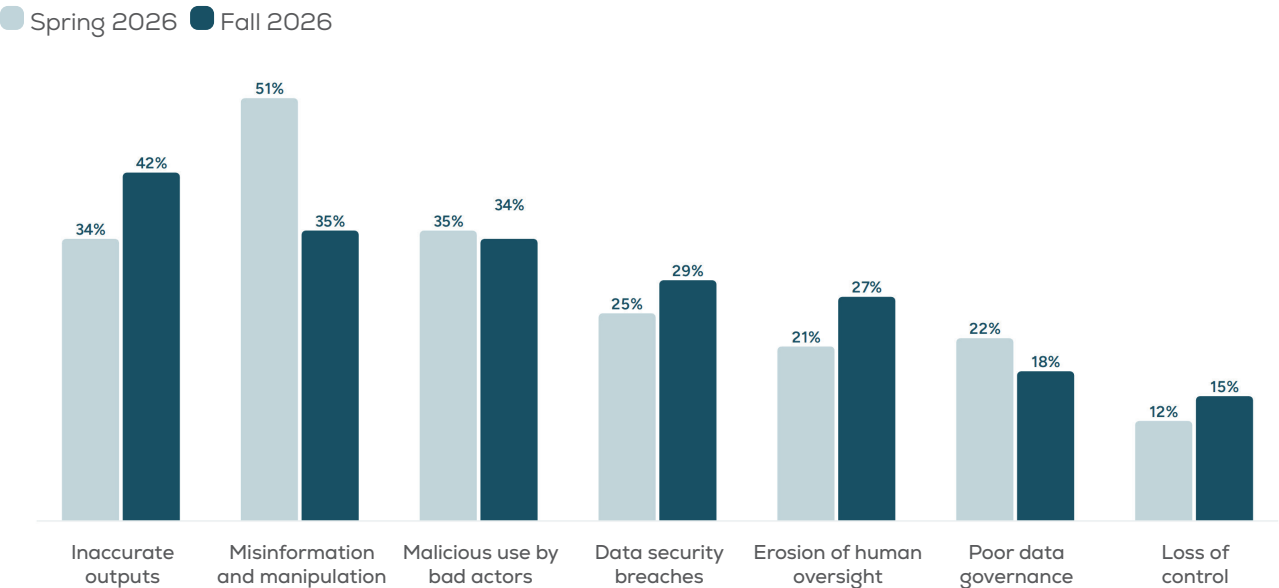


Concern is turning from outside threats to inside controls

Corporate leaders are notably less worried than they were a year ago about threats that originate outside the company. Concern about misinformation and manipulation has fallen substantially, down from 51% Spring 2026 to just 25% in Fall 2026, and concern about malicious use by bad actors has been roughly level for the past two quarters.

However, concerns about “inside” operational risks are holding steady or climbing. Inaccurate outputs are now corporate leaders’ single highest-ranked risk, at 42% – up from 34% in Spring 2026 and higher than either malicious use or misinformation. Concern about data security breaches has ticked up as well, from 25% to 29% among corporate leaders over the same period, suggesting that corporate leaders no longer see the AI risk to their business as coming primarily from bad actors outside the firm, but more so a result of lack of quality control and internal governance.

Corporate leaders: top safety concerns
Percentage ranking risk #1 or #2 most threatening



Small business owners are notably more worried than leaders of large companies about the possibility of a data breach or losing control of AI systems at their own company plausibly because they have far fewer dedicated security or IT resources to manage those risks than a large enterprise does. Inaccurate outputs is the one place corporate leaders are more concerned, placing it as their single highest-ranked company risk.

AI Safety Risk	Small businesses (Total) Top 3 Box Concern	Corporate leaders – Top 1, 2 Risk (Fall 2026)
A data breach at my company	44%	29%
Inaccurate outputs / hallucinations	35%	42%
Loss of control over AI systems	33%	15%

Caveat: Different question formats: small businesses rate concern on a 1–10 scale per item; AI Quarterly report asks corporate leaders to rank their top 1–2 threats out of a longer list. Magnitudes aren’t directly comparable, but the relative pattern is informative.

Starting this wave, we split the safety-risk question into two more granular asks – which risks are most threatening to a respondent’s own company, versus to society at large – rather than the single combined ranking used in prior waves. What follows is a deeper cut into this wave’s data, not a trend measured over time.

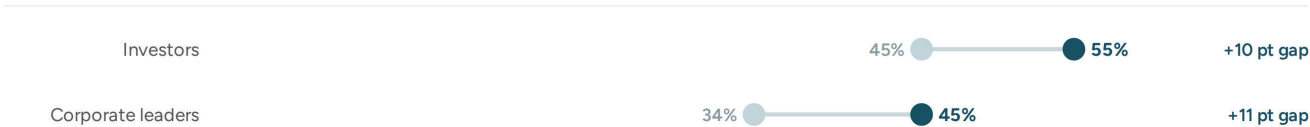
Risks to society flip the pattern

Asked which risks are **most threatening to society** rather than to their own company, all three audiences flip the pattern described above. Malicious use and misinformation, the risks insiders have grown less worried about inside their own walls, rank meaningfully higher as threats to society at large. One likely reason: leaders trust the guardrails they can see and control – their own governance, review processes, and accountable staff – far more than the uneven, largely unaccountable ones surrounding AI’s use everywhere else.

Malicious use and misinformation risks are seen as bigger threats to society than to the company
Percentage ranking each risk #1 or #2 most threatening

● Threat to the company ● Threat to society

Malicious use by bad actors



Misinformation and manipulation

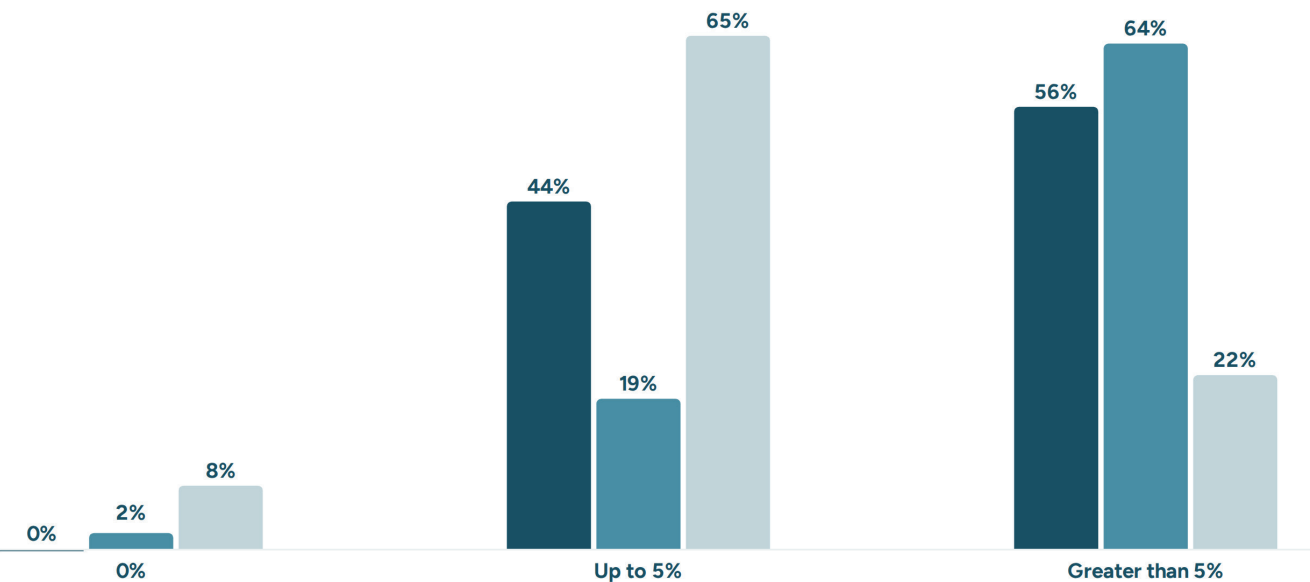


With regard to actual spend, expectations and practice do not line up. Nearly two-thirds of the public (64%) and a majority of investors (56%) say companies should devote more than 5% of their AI investment to safety – but only 22% of corporate leaders report their own company actually does. Two-thirds of corporate leaders (65%) put current safety spend at 5% or less, and 8% report spending nothing at all on it. Where the public and investors see a floor, most companies are treating 5% as a ceiling.

AI safety spend: what corporate leaders do, what others expect

Share of total AI investment (excluding infrastructure) devoted to AI safety, Fall 2026. Investors and the public were what companies should spend; corporate leaders were asked what their own company currently spends.

● Investors ● Public ● Corporate Leaders



Responsibility is shared across the value chain – and corporate leaders own their part

Asked for the first time how much responsibility different actors should bear for managing AI risk, investors put roughly equal weight on “companies that build AI” and “companies that use AI” across nearly every risk category (for example, misinformation: 73% vs. 75%). Government and regulators trail behind builders and users in most categories but still draw a meaningful share of responsibility – generally 33% to 66%, depending on the risk.

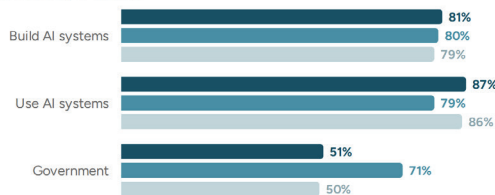
The public, however, consistently assigns government the highest share of responsibility of any audience, in the 62–71% range across every risk category tested – a structurally higher trust-the-regulator instinct than either investors or corporate leaders show. Corporate leaders break from the roughly even split specifically on the risks that are squarely inside their own operations: they assign “companies that use AI” – that is, themselves – far more responsibility than AI builders for poor data governance (77% vs. 51%, a 26-point gap) and erosion of human oversight (71% vs. 45%, also a 26-point gap). On other risks, like data security breaches, corporate leaders assign themselves a smaller but still higher share than builders (86% vs. 79%).

Who should be responsible for managing each AI risk

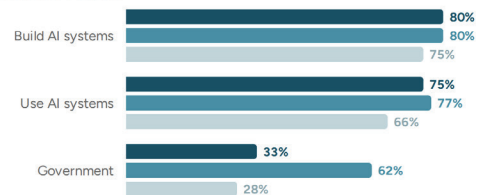
Percentage assigning complete or a great deal of responsibility (top 2 box, 5-point scale)

Investors Public Corporate Leaders

Data security breaches



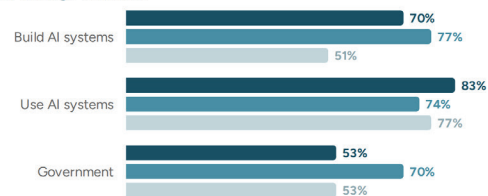
Inaccurate outputs



Misinformation and manipulation



Poor data governance



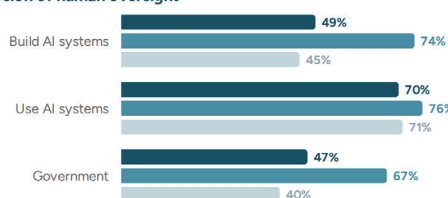
Loss of control



Malicious use by bad actors



Erosion of human oversight

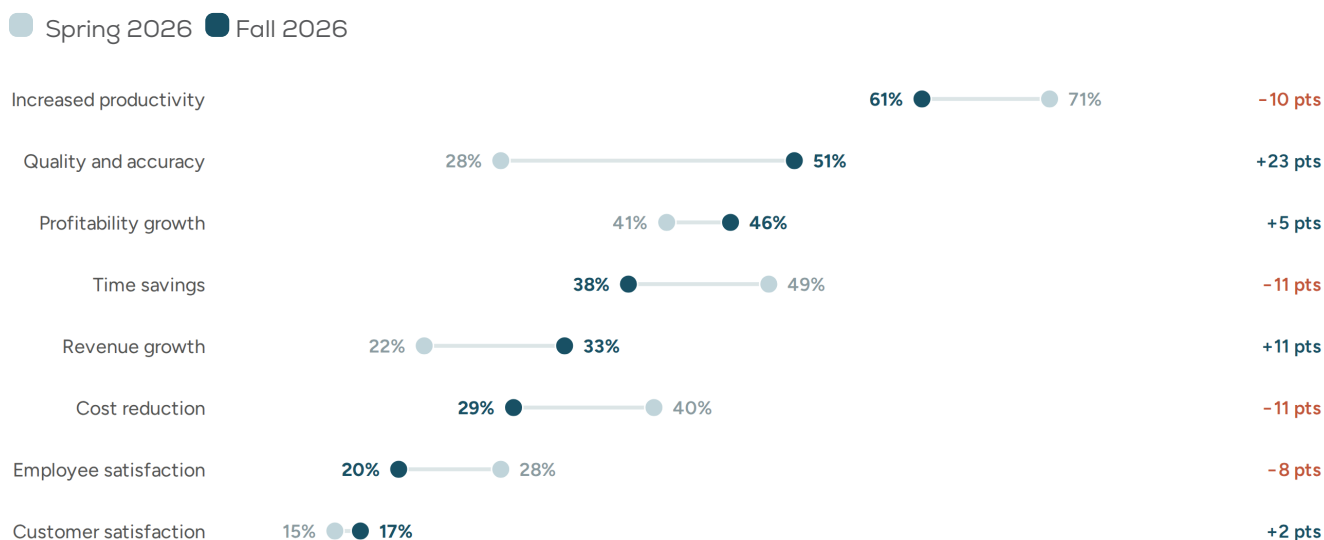


Better Results, but Cooler Appetite for Spend

Investors have consistently pointed to productivity, cost reduction, and profitability growth as the indicators that would prove AI is working. All three are down from their peaks between Spring and Fall 2026. Taking their place: quality and accuracy, which has climbed steadily and is now investors' second-highest expectation, just behind productivity.

Investors: indicators that would show AI is having a positive impact on operations

Percentage of investors selecting each indicator



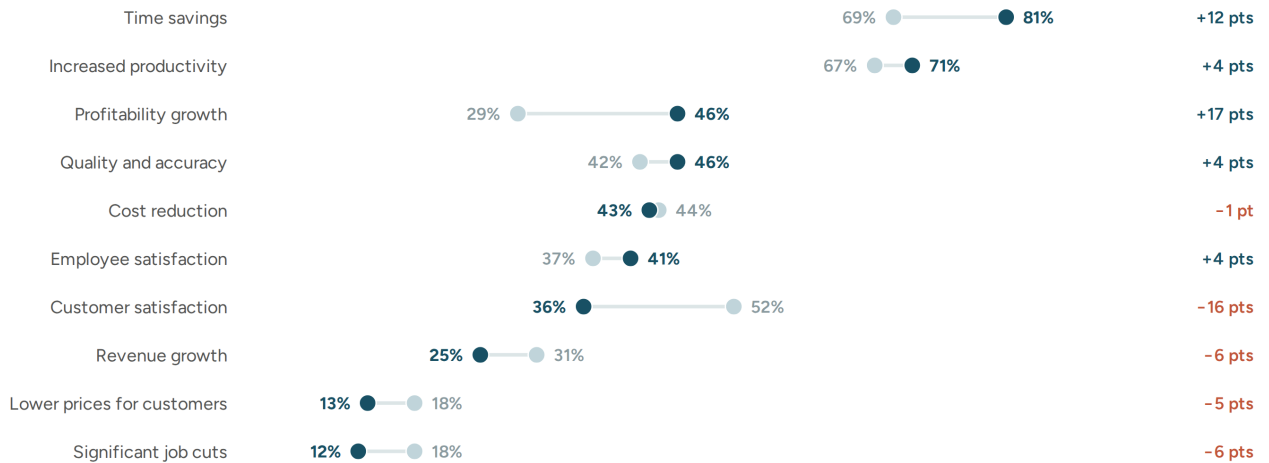
The above chart suggests that investors have swapped what they'd accept as proof from "did it do the same work cheaper," to "did it do better work" and "did it grow the bottom line."

Corporate leaders report real operational gains compared with Spring 2026 for some of these measures. Profitability growth has climbed 17 points, and time savings 12 points. Productivity, quality and accuracy, and employee satisfaction each added four points. But the gains are concentrated in efficiency and margin: customer satisfaction has fallen 16 points to 36%, and revenue growth is down to 25%.

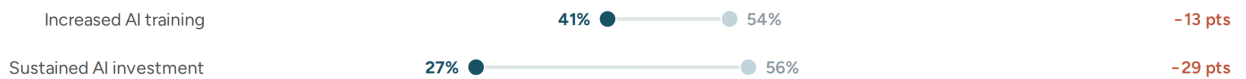
Percentage of corporate leaders reporting each measurable result

● Spring 2026 ● Fall 2026

Performance results



Continued commitment to AI



One area worth highlighting is sustained AI investment: the share of corporate leaders committed to continuing or increasing AI spend fell from 56% in Spring 2026 to 41% in Summer and just 27% in Fall 2026, with AI training down 13 points alongside it. That pullback lines up with what's being reported more broadly this summer: [Bloomberg reported in late July](#) that corporate America is cracking down on AI spending after two years of rushing to adopt the technology, with finance teams imposing usage limits and pushing for better returns per dollar spent. Separately, [Gartner data cited this year](#) found that roughly 80% of AI projects still fail to deliver measurable business value – a reminder that better headline results at some companies can coexist with widespread disappointment at others.

Looking at small businesses comparatively, leaders of large companies report meaningfully higher measurable results than small businesses across nearly every category – often by 15–20 points. And within the small business data, there's a clear resource/scale gradient: solo and micro businesses see real but modest returns, larger small businesses see more, likely a function of budget, dedicated staff, and more sophisticated use cases, not a difference in the usefulness of AI per se.

Measurable result	Small businesses, 2-20 employees	Small businesses, 21+ employees	Corporate leaders (Fall 2026)
Time savings	56%	58%	81%
Increased productivity	38%	45%	71%
Improved quality / accuracy	42%	44%	46%
Improved profitability	23%	29%	46%
Reduced costs	28%	28%	43%
Improved employee satisfaction	21%	33%	41%
Improved customer satisfaction	23%	28%	36%
Revenue growth	21%	26%	25%

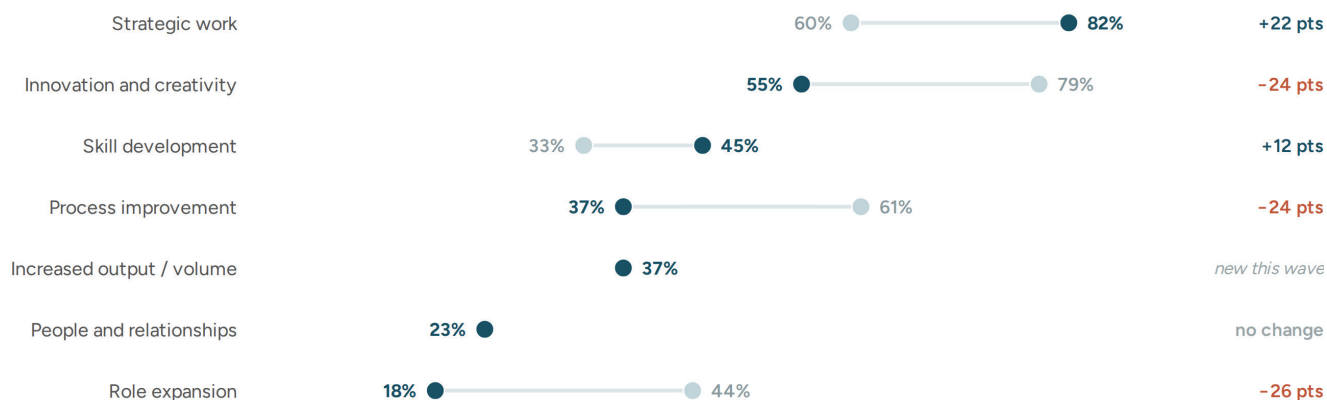
The clearest shift: what freed-up time gets used for

Asked what employees would do with time freed up by AI, corporate leaders' expectations have essentially inverted from where they started one year ago. The share expecting that time to shift toward strategic work – planning, analysis, decision-making – jumped from 60% in Fall 2025 to 82% in Fall 2026. Nearly every other category lost ground in that trade-off. Read together, leaders have moved from expecting freed-up time to produce new things toward expecting it to produce better thinking – and with “increased output/volume” entering at 37%, a meaningful share now expect it to produce simply more of the same work.

Where corporate leaders expect employees to spend time freed up by AI

Percentage ranking each in their top three

● Fall 2025 ● Fall 2026

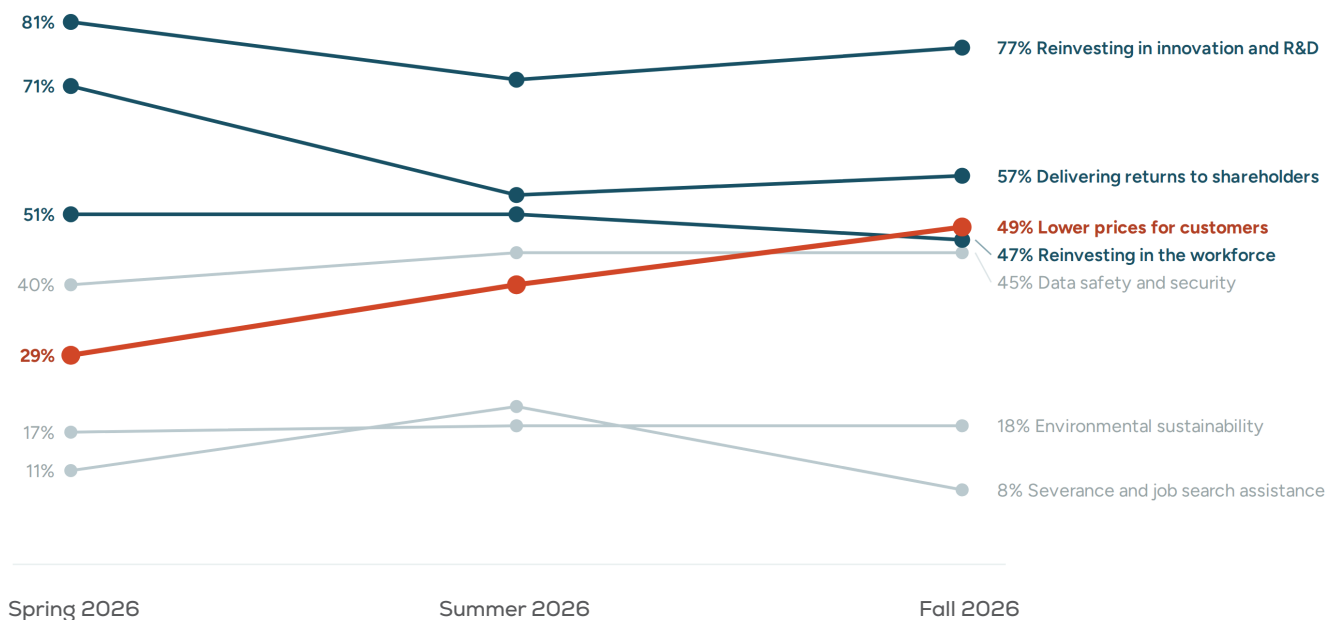


Corporate leaders show a modest rebalancing in how gains get distributed

Corporate leaders' plans for AI-driven profit gains show a small but consistent shift toward consumers. The share who would direct gains toward lower prices for customers has grown every wave – from 29% in Spring 2026 to 40% in Summer and 49% in Fall 2026 (perhaps as a response to lower performance in customer service), while reinvestment in the workforce has slipped slightly to 47% from its Spring 2026 high of 51%. Reinvestment in innovation and R&D and delivering returns to shareholders remain corporate leaders' top two priorities overall, but the growing weight on consumer pricing is worth watching, particularly if it reflects leaders' own read on affordability pressure facing their customers.

Corporate leaders are shifting AI gains towards consumers

Percentage of corporate leaders ranking each as a top-3 priority for distributing AI-driven gains



Rounding Out: Governance, Maturity, and the Environmental Impact

AI governance is concentrated in the executive suite

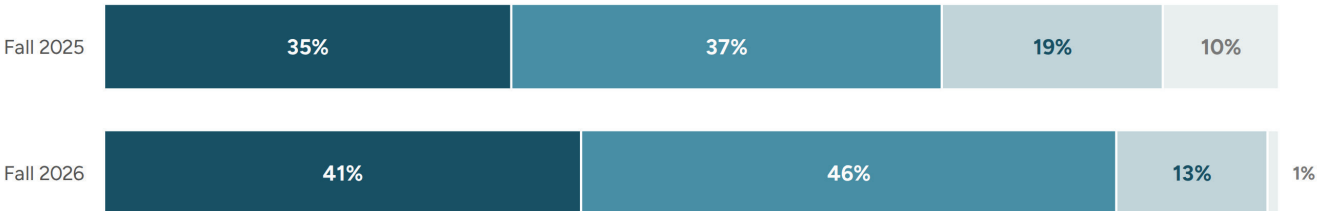
A year into broad AI deployment, oversight remains a leadership-team function more than an institutionalized one. Asked for the first time who is ultimately responsible for AI governance at their company, corporate leaders point overwhelmingly to the C-suite: 43% say the executive team collectively, and another 22% say the CEO alone. Only 18% say governance sits under the CTO, just 9% have a dedicated AI officer, and a mere 4% place ultimate responsibility with the board or a board committee.

That said, the process around AI oversight is becoming more formal even where overall AI maturity has stalled. Nearly nine in ten leaders now report a structured process of some kind. But the growth is concentrated in the middle of the ladder: informal processes with a formal plan still in progress rose nine points to 46%, while fully formal oversight – clearly defined goals, documented process – grew

more modestly, from 35% to 41%. Governance has become universal in intent well ahead of becoming formal in practice, and the gap between the two is where the risk now sits.

Percentage of corporate leaders at each stage of oversight planning

Formal process with clearly defined goals
 Informal process, formal plan in progress
 Someone leading the effort, but no plan
 No plan and no one leading



Small businesses, on the other hand, lag well behind large corporate leaders on formalizing AI governance – one in five have no guidelines at all and aren’t even working on it, versus essentially none of the corp leaders surveyed. But the gap closes substantially with size: among businesses with 20+ employees, having zero AI policy drops to 8%, approaching corporate leaders’ near-zero rate. AI governance at small businesses is still mostly a founder’s personal responsibility (47% overall) rather than an institutionalized function – the small-business equivalent of corp leaders’ heavy reliance on the C-suite.

Oversight status	Small businesses (Total)	Corporate leaders (Fall 2026)
Formal written policy / formal process with clear goals	27%	41%
Informal guidelines / formal process, formal plan in progress	25%	46%
In process of creating guidelines / someone leading, no formal plan	28%	13%
No guidelines at all, not in process / no plan, no one leading	21%	1%
Who's accountable	Small businesses (Total)	Corporate leaders
One specific person / the owner themselves	47%	22% (CEO alone)
Someone else on the team / distributed leadership	22%	43% (C-suite collectively)
A whole team oversees it	17%	9% (dedicated AI officer)
No one is accountable	15%	1.3% (no formal plan, no one leading)

Caveat: Different question formats. Magnitudes aren't directly comparable, but the relative patter is informative.

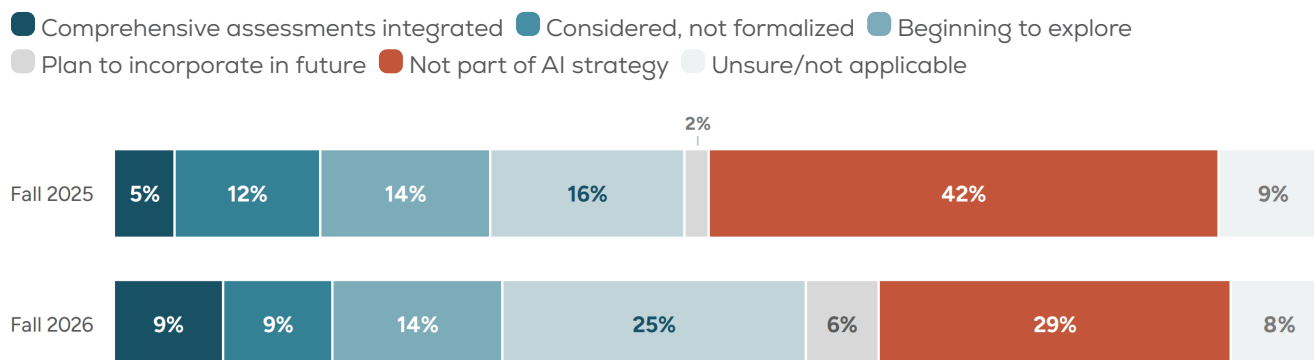
The two things small businesses most want help with after basic AI proficiency – making sure outputs are accurate (36%) and knowing what data is safe to share (33%) – are precisely what an AI policy exists to answer. Among firms that have or are building one, rules on what data can be entered (52%) and procedures for verifying outputs (46%) are the two most commonly covered provisions.

Environmental accountability is improving slowly, against a noisier backdrop

Outside this survey, opposition to AI infrastructure has become one of the most visible flashpoints of the past year. Our own polling shows that pluralities (~47%) of Americans oppose construction of a data center either “in their area” or “at least 10 miles away” from their residence. Roughly \$130 billion of data center projects were stalled or blocked in just the first three months of 2026 – matching the total for all of 2025.

Inside companies, environmental due diligence is improving, but is still a lower priority than other considerations. The share of corporate leaders saying environmental impact is “not currently part of our AI deployment strategy” has fallen from 42% in Fall 2025 to 29% in Fall 2026, but comprehensive environmental impact assessments remain rare, reported by just 9% of corporate leaders.

How corporate leaders factor environmental impact into AI strategy

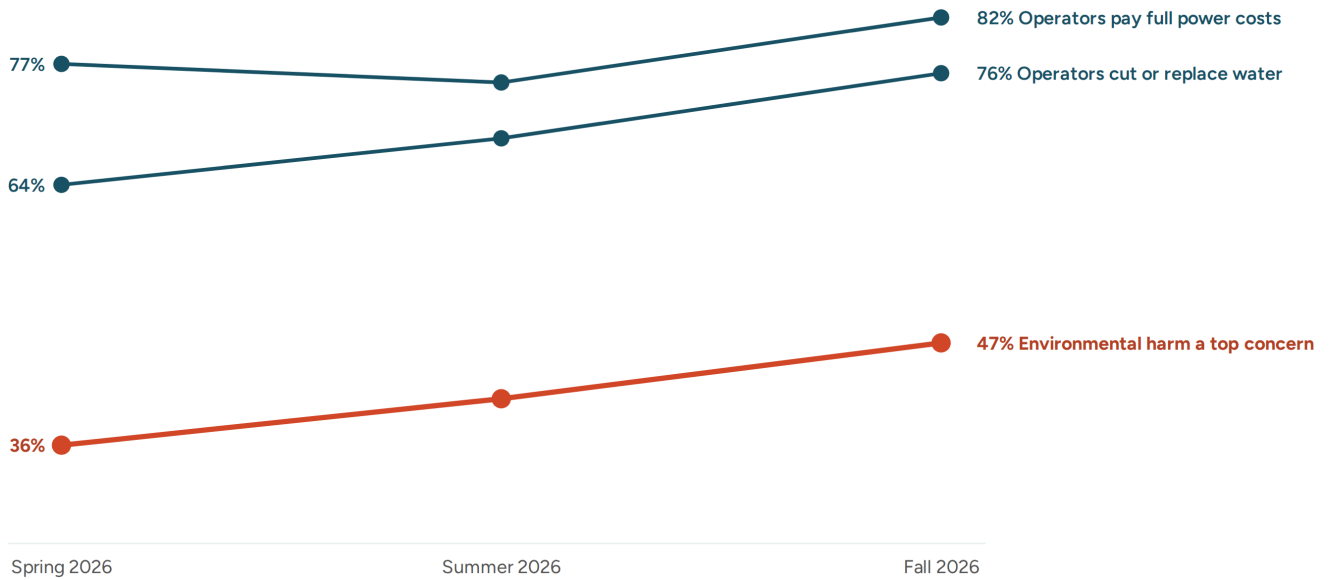


Concern about AI’s environmental and community impact continues to build among the public, and it is the only audience where that is true. The share of Americans ranking environmental harm among their top AI concerns has risen in every wave, from 36% in Spring 2026 to 47% Fall 2026, while investor and corporate leader concern has held flat.

Expectations of data center operators have hardened alongside it. Eighty-two percent of the public say operators should pay the full electricity costs of new infrastructure and ongoing operations, up from 75% in the summer, and 76% say they should use less water or replace more than they consume, up from 69%. Four in five want operators paying local taxes without special breaks and compensating nearby households for higher energy bills. Asked where AI’s financial gains should go, 45% of the public name environmental sustainability, compared with 18% of corporate leaders, a gap that has not narrowed in three waves.

Public concern about AI and the environment keeps climbing

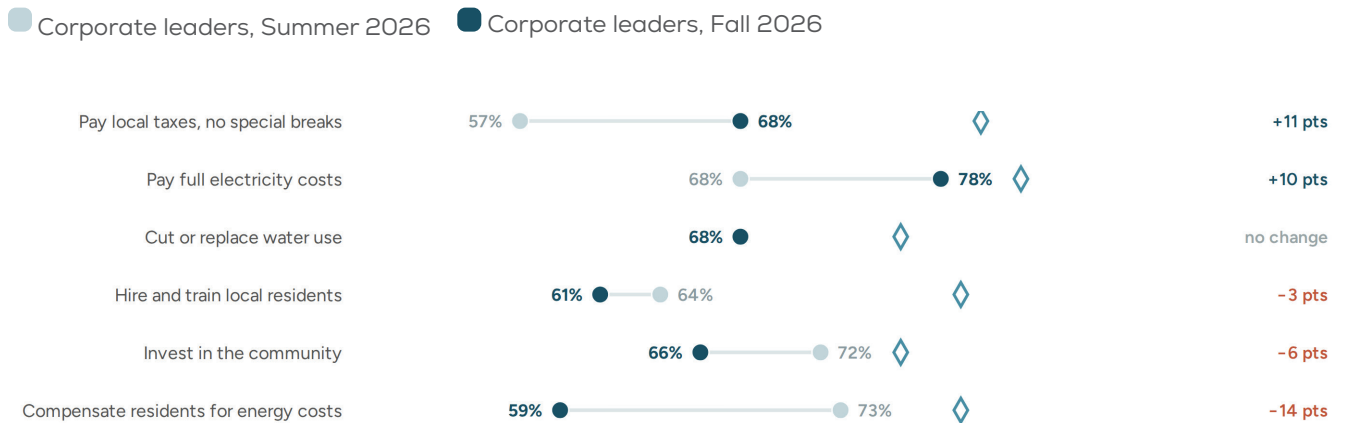
General public only. The two upper lines show agreement that data center operators should take each action; the lower line shows the share ranking environmental harm among their top AI concerns



Corporate leaders are not ignoring the issue, but they are showing limited follow-through with the public's demands. Their support for operators covering full electricity costs has actually grown, from 68% to 78%. But support for compensating local consumers directly has fallen from 73% to 59%.

Which data center obligations corporate leaders will accept

Top-2-box agree. Diamond marks the general public, Fall 2026



For most companies, compute runs on someone else's infrastructure, in someone else's community. As local opposition grows, that distance may prove harder to maintain than the numbers currently suggest.

Summary

A year of quarterly tracking now points to a clear throughline: AI is proving to be a slower, more incremental force than either the hype or the fear predicted when this research began. Fears about AI-induced mass unemployment are fading among the people with the most direct, first-hand information: corporate leaders and investors. What's replacing that fear is a more grounded expectation of restructuring, skill-shifting, and a narrower squeeze on entry-level roles. Among corporate leaders, perhaps because these layoff fears have subsided, support for displaced workers is retreating even as real staffing changes show up in the data for the first time.

Environmental due diligence and formal AI governance are improving, but slowly, against a backdrop of community opposition and investor scrutiny that is intensifying faster than the internal processes built to manage it. And even where corporate leaders are seeing genuinely better results from AI, their own appetite to keep investing is cooling – a signal that the case for AI's value, while stronger than it was a quarter ago, is still not settled inside the C-suite.

For corporate leaders, there is an opportunity to share clear examples of how AI is adding positive value to both business and society as a pathway to build trust with the public that is still apprehensive about the technology.

About this Report

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 July 20 and 23, 2026. Just Capital received a total of 128 responses of which 54% 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 July 21 and 23, 2026. Just Capital received a total of 104 responses of which 66 were C-suite executives and the remainder 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 July 20 and 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 81%. 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 +/- 3 percentage points using a 95% confidence level.

Small businesses: The survey was designed and fielded by Just Capital using the Qualtrics online survey platform. The sample was provided by RepData, a leading AI-driven B2B market research company that provides fast, high-quality insights from verified samples. Data collection took place between August 19 and 24, 2026. Just Capital received a total of 824 responses in small businesses of 499 or fewer employees.

Previous waves of Just Capital's AI research were fielded September 27–November 14, 2025 (Wave 1), January 20–27, 2026 (Wave 2), and April 20–27, 2026 (Wave 3).

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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