

**HELIUM42 RESEARCH**

# 2026 Benchmark Report

**April 2026**

**65+ Data Points**

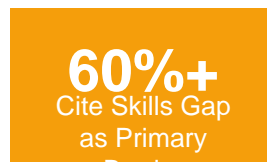
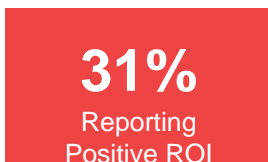
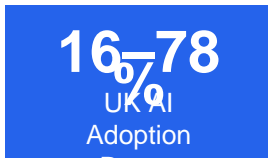
**9 Sectors Analysed**

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# Executive Summary



The United Kingdom stands at a critical inflection point in its adoption of artificial intelligence. Whilst leading sectors such as ICT and Financial Services have embraced AI-driven transformation, adoption remains fragmented across organisation sizes and industries. Our 2026 benchmark reveals that UK businesses are investing significantly in AI capabilities yet remain uncertain about measuring success. The skills gap emerges as the primary constraint, with 60% of organisations citing insufficient expertise. Those who succeed combine strategic governance, targeted investment, and deliberate capability building.

# Adoption by Organisation Size

Organisation Size	Adoption Rate	Key Finding
Enterprise (250+)	36–44%	Capital and expertise enable strategic deployment
Mid-size (50–249)	23–37%	Growing but fragmented implementation
Small (10–49)	14–20%	Off-the-shelf tools, limited customisation
Micro (1–9)	9–14%	Minimal, mostly generative AI experimentation

## The £78 Billion Opportunity

SMEs could generate £78 billion in added economic value through AI adoption, yet fewer than one in five have begun. Small and mid-sized organisations remain constrained by capital availability, technical expertise, and governance uncertainty. (Microsoft/WPI Strategy)

# Adoption by Industry Sector

Sector	Adoption Rate	Status
ICT	43–51%	Leading
Legal Services	29–32%	Growing
Financial Services	21–31%	Advanced
Manufacturing	29%	Growing
Professional Services	20–28%	Growing
Healthcare	19–22%	Moderate
Retail	11–17%	Lagging
Hospitality	11–17%	Lagging
Construction	6%	Lagging

# Adoption by Business Function

Business Function	Adoption Among AI Users	Primary Use Cases
Administration	72%	Document processing, scheduling, data entry
Marketing & Advertising	44–72%	Content creation, analytics, personalisation
Analytics & Reporting	46%	Pattern detection, automated reports
Customer Service	45%	Chatbots, ticket routing, response automation
IT Operations	41–64%	Code generation, testing, cybersecurity
Sales & Lead Generation	39%	Lead scoring, outreach, forecasting
Finance	29%	Transaction processing, compliance
HR & Recruitment	26–37%	Screening, scheduling, analytics
Legal	16%	Research, contract analysis

## The 97% Edit Rule

97% of UK marketing teams edit AI-generated content before publication. AI accelerates creation; human judgement ensures quality. This finding underscores the reality that AI remains a tool for augmentation, not replacement.

# ROI and Business Impact

**56%**  
Report  
Productivity  
Gains (up to

**31%**  
Achieved  
Positive ROI

**2-4  
yrs**  
Average  
Payback  
Period

**70%**  
Unsure if AI  
Delivers Full  
Potential

**Current Performance:** UK businesses average 17% returns on AI investments, with projected growth to 32% by 2027. However, uncertainty around measurement and impact assessment remains endemic. Only 41% of AI users have a clear definition of success, creating a gap between anticipated and realised value.

**"Only 41% of AI users have a clear idea of what "success" looks like when implementing AI solutions." — Studio Graphene, March 2026**

# Investment Landscape

Metric	Value
Average annual AI spend (UK)	£15.94 million
Organisations increasing budgets	85–91%
Piecemeal investment approach	42%
Lacking specific AI budget	47%
Enterprise-wide AI strategy	7%
UK AI startup ecosystem value	£45.7 billion

## The 7% Problem

Only 7% of UK businesses pursue AI through a strategic, enterprise-wide plan. The remaining 93% operate tactically, investing in point solutions without integrated governance. This fragmentation limits both innovation velocity and risk management.

# The Skills Challenge

The shortage of AI expertise represents the primary constraint to adoption. Three distinct capability gaps emerge:

## 1. Technical Specialists

Salaries for machine learning engineers and AI researchers range from £80,000 to £130,000+, reflecting acute supply constraints. UK universities produce circa 1,500 AI-capable graduates annually, whilst demand exceeds 15,000 roles.

## 2. Business AI Literacy

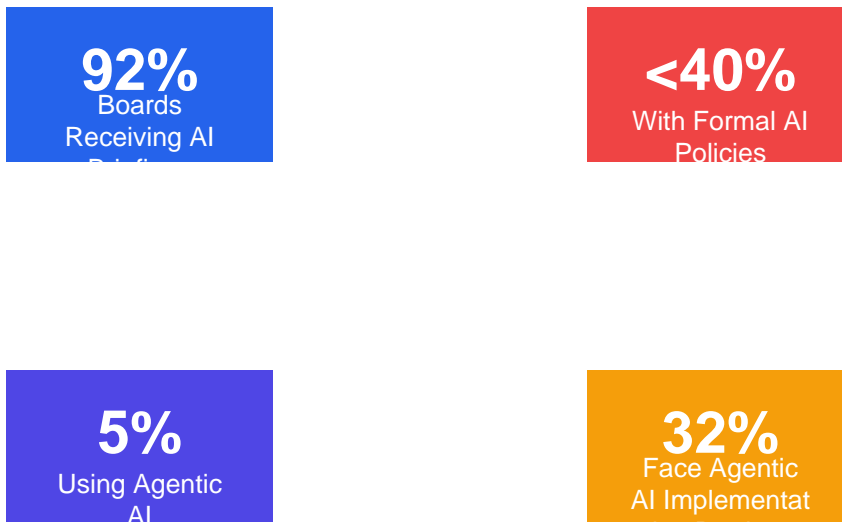
The World Economic Forum estimates 39% of core skills will change by 2030. Existing workforces lack foundational understanding of AI's strategic implications, limiting effective deployment.

## 3. Implementation Gap

60% of SMEs cite insufficient AI understanding as a barrier to adoption. This reflects not only technical skills shortage but also inadequate training and change management support.

**"71% of UK companies have begun to reskill or upskill staff, yet progress remains inconsistent." — Forrester, 2026**

# Governance and Regulation



## The UK Regulatory Approach

The UK has adopted a principles-based, sector-specific approach to AI regulation, contrasting with the EU's prescriptive AI Act. The Online Safety Bill and Financial Conduct Authority guidance on fair use establish baseline expectations, whilst sector regulators (DCMS, ICO, Bank of England) develop tailored frameworks. Agentic AI—autonomous systems that act without human intermediation—remains nascent, with adoption constrained by governance uncertainty and liability concerns.

# Future Outlook

Three key predictions emerge from the data:

## 1. Adoption Acceleration

Adoption rates are forecast to reach 22–35% across UK businesses by late 2026, up from current 16–78% variance. This represents a plateau in leading sectors with significant growth in lagging industries such as construction and hospitality.

## 2. Agentic AI Emergence

Gartner forecasts that 40% of enterprise applications will incorporate AI agents by the end of 2026. Autonomous workflows managing customer service, business process automation, and supply chain optimisation will accelerate, contingent on governance maturation.

## 3. Macroeconomic Impact

The UK stands to realise £400 billion in potential GDP impact by 2030 through AI-driven productivity gains. This assumes scaling adoption, skills development, and supportive regulatory frameworks. Failure to address the skills gap risks constraining this potential to £150–200 billion.

# Strategic Recommendations

## 1. Start with Education, Not Technology

Before deploying AI systems, establish a foundational AI literacy programme for board, leadership, and operational teams. Too many organisations invest in sophisticated infrastructure without appropriate change management. Success begins with understanding, not tooling.

## 2. Build Internal Capability

Whilst recruitment constraints are acute, develop internal talent through apprenticeships, partnerships with universities, and structured upskilling. Hybrid teams combining external advisory with internal capability building outperform those reliant solely on external expertise.

## 3. Governance First, Not Governance Later

Establish clear AI governance frameworks—including risk assessment, ethical review, and audit mechanisms—before deploying agentic systems. The cost of remediating governance failures exceeds the cost of building it in from inception.

## 4. Measure What Matters

Define clear success metrics aligned with business outcomes—not vanity metrics such as 'AI systems deployed.' Quantify productivity gains, cost reduction, and revenue impact with rigour equivalent to any major capital investment.

# About Helium42

Helium42 is a boutique AI advisory firm specialising in enterprise AI adoption, governance, and transformation. We work with boards, executives, and operational teams to navigate the complexity of AI implementation at scale.

**500+**  
Companies  
Served

**2,000+**  
Professionals  
Trained

**40%**  
Average  
Efficiency  
Gain

**95% client satisfaction • UK & Germany headquarters**

For further information or to discuss AI adoption strategy specific to your sector and organisation, contact us at [helium42.com/ai-consultancy](https://helium42.com/ai-consultancy) or visit [helium42.com](https://helium42.com)

## Ready to Unlock AI Potential?

Book a complimentary consultation with our AI strategy team to assess your organisation's AI readiness, identify high-impact use cases, and develop a tailored adoption roadmap. Visit [helium42.com/ai-consultancy](https://helium42.com/ai-consultancy) to schedule.

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