ECONOMIST IMPACT

The agentic AI advantage

Deploying AI agents for growth and innovation

Sponsored by dataiku

Contents

About this report

This report was researched and written in April 2025 by Economist Impact and is sponsored by Dataiku. The research is based on a series of expert interviews and independent secondary research.

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Economist Impact wishes to thank the following experts for sharing their insights during the development of this report.

- **Adrian McDermott**, chief technology officer, Zendesk
- **Jim Rowan**, head of AI, Deloitte
- **Joe Depa**, global chief innovation officer, EY
- **Kathy Baxter**, principal architect of responsible AI and technology, Salesforce
- **Laura Engelhardt**, head of strategy, foundational technologies unit, Siemens
- **Subhabrata Mukherjee**, co-founder and chief scientific officer, Hippocratic AI

Foreword

A profound transformation is underway across the enterprise landscape. AI, once the domain of innovation labs, is now moving into the operational core of organisations.

According to one recent survey,* 75% of executives rank AI as a top three strategic priority. However, only a quarter report deriving meaningful value from their AI initiatives, underscoring the urgency to invest in more effective AI solutions, such as **agentic systems**—AI agents that can autonomously execute tasks, learn continuously and, in some domains, outperform their human counterparts. A quarter of enterprises currently using generative AI are expected to deploy AI agents in 2025, and this is expected to grow to 50% by 2027.†

This evolution marks more than just a technological shift. It signals the rise of the **AI workforce**: a new class of intelligent agents poised to augment and, in some cases, reinvent how work is done. For forward-thinking leaders, these agents represent more than tools—they are strategic assets capable of driving competitive advantage.

Yet, with this promise comes a suite of unfamiliar and complex challenges. Designing, deploying and governing AI agents is akin to building a new internal organisation from the ground up—but without a predefined playbook.

Key questions are already surfacing within boardrooms and IT departments: who is accountable for an agent's decisions? How can quality and compliance be ensured across agents executing dynamically changing tasks? And, crucially, do the long-term economics of large language models (LLMs) and AI infrastructure hold up at enterprise scale? These concerns are not theoretical. In early 2025 organisations are already experiencing a scramble to define viable use cases, manage risk and avoid falling behind in an increasingly agent-driven economy.

What is emerging now is a deeper realization: **the technical challenges of AI are matched—if not exceeded—by the organisational ones**. Scaling agentic systems reliably requires more than experimentation. It requires robust governance, coherent orchestration and a sustainable cost model. Without these, companies risk unleashing a fragmented sprawl of autonomous agents, which can lead to increased complexity, redundant tooling and operational inefficiencies.

* https://www.bcg.com/press/15january2025-ai-optimism-autonomous-agents
† https://www.deloitte.com/global/en/about/press-room/deloitte-globals-2025-predictions-report.html

Agentic is just the tip of the spear. The next five years will be defined by the creation of a new class of AI-native enterprise applications. Unlike the previous generation of transactional systems—built on cloud, databases and web interfaces—these new applications are powered by data, machine learning and autonomous agents. They won't just support the workforce, they will become part of it.

In anticipation of this shift, Dataiku is committed to a future where enterprises successfully create and govern agents at scale. Our philosophy for success is simple:

- **Vendor agnosticism**: avoid dependency on a single provider. Enterprises need choice and flexibility when it comes to AI models.
- **Centralized agent control**: provide every team with tools to build agents in a governed environment, whether through no-code interfaces or advanced scripting.
- **Data-centric intelligence**: leverage existing data infrastructure to ground agents in operational truth—not just clever prompting.
- **Continuous optimization**: adopt a metrics-driven mindset to evolve agents iteratively and reliably over time.

This paper offers a strategic roadmap for organisations ready to move beyond AI hype and into scalable implementation. It is an invitation to explore the architecture of agentic AI, learn from early adopters and begin designing the intelligent enterprise of tomorrow.

Florian Douetteau
Co-founder and CEO, Dataiku

Executive summary

AI agents, powered by advances in language models, are moving to the mainstream as organisations search for a boost in productivity, efficiency and innovation. Technological improvements are also easing the digital infrastructure transition required to unlock agentic AI capabilities. These advances range from tools for orchestrating agent-to-agent interaction to platforms that allow companies to develop, build and deploy their own differentiated agents that tap into their existing data.

However, realizing the full potential of agentic AI requires more than infrastructural advancements. Success also depends on strategic implementation, combining the power of traditional analytics and machine learning with agentic capabilities.

And as with AI more broadly, delivering transformative impact and commercial returns means moving from isolated pilots to enterprise-wide deployment. A key aspect of this shift involves enabling agents to retrieve multiple data inputs and activate tasks across organisational silos. In this environment, governance, monitoring and oversight become crucially important as autonomous systems are released in the wild.

Key findings

- **Agentic AI is poised to revolutionise business operations, allowing organisations to supercharge their existing analytics and machine learning efforts.** AI is entering its third wave, moving from 'predictive' to 'generative' to 'agentic'. Today's agents, powered by LLMs, can move across formats and mediums, to perceive, reason, set goals and orchestrate tasks far beyond the scope of conventional automation tools. They are also easier to implement into existing machine learning environments and digital infrastructure. Their benefits come at a time when businesses are battling rising costs, a volatile business environment and talent shortages.
- **Navigating the agentic AI frontier requires robust governance frameworks to mitigate risks, ensure compliance and build trust.** By empowering agents to operate autonomously, including unilaterally accessing data and applications, organisations could expose themselves to compliance, trust or reputational risk. In this environment, executives are looking to safeguards like adversarial testing for spotting bias and security risks, retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) for improving accuracy, and continuous monitoring and observability for tracking agentic performance changes over time. The quality of agentic performance monitoring tools is also improving, and agents—built on responsible AI foundations—can become part of the orchestration layer of overall AI governance.
- **The true potential of agentic AI lies not just in cost savings, but in unlocking new revenue streams and driving competitive advantage.** Agents can deliver quantifiable gains not just in cost reduction and productivity, but for driving revenue growth, powering new products, delivering deeper commercial insights from data repositories, and transforming customer engagement. An ambitious vision is not just desirable but necessary; the rise of agents increases competitive threats by allowing companies to operate at greater scale and even into adjacent sectors.
- **Data provide the critical fuel that powers agentic AI, making data quality, sharing protocols and interoperability essential for success.** Agentic AI needs large volumes of high-quality data, which require greater data-sharing within and between organisations, and the evolution of new standards, collaboration frameworks and commercial models. Companies should evaluate and refine their data sources, removing outdated or irrelevant information, as poor data quality can lead to flawed outputs, and invest in the appropriate interoperability requirements to harness their existing technology stack.

Chapter 1: The third wave

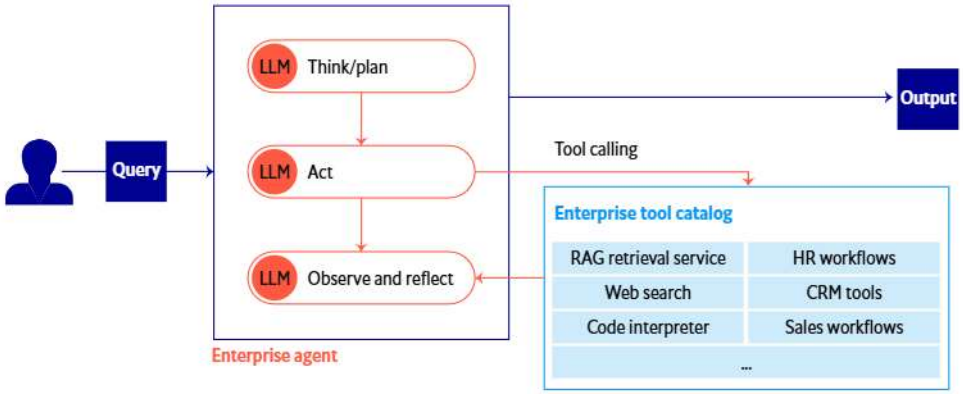
AI agents, powered by recent breakthroughs in language models large and small, are set to go mainstream

AI is entering a third wave [1], from 'predictive' to 'generative' to 'agentic', with today's agents offering superior levels of reasoning, goal setting, task orchestration and adaptability across contexts and over time. They can move across modes, 'see' websites and understand the human voice.

Executives are already familiar with robotic process automation (RPA), which has saved millions of hours in process-heavy industries. But RPA has been limited to rule-based tasks, and chatbots have a mixed record in truly understanding human intent.

Advances in LLMs and multimodal AI, enabling agents to operate across voice, text and visual media, make today's agentic offerings more effective and versatile; users simply provide a high-level task or outcome and agents reason their way to completion (see figure 1).[2] Faster, smaller AI models, chain-of-thought reasoning, improved memory, and functional flexibility to access and use applications, are among the enablers for today's agents.[3] Models for evaluating performance are also improving.[4]

Figure 1: Think, act, reflect—the capabilities of agentic AI



Source: Maryam Ashoori, IBM[5]

"Agentic AI is capable of making decisions, taking actions, personalising and adapting to the situation based on the context, in contrast to RPA, which is rule-driven, syntax-driven and requires a lot of customisation and pre-programming for specific use cases."

Subhabrata Mukherjee, co-founder and chief scientific officer, Hippocratic AI

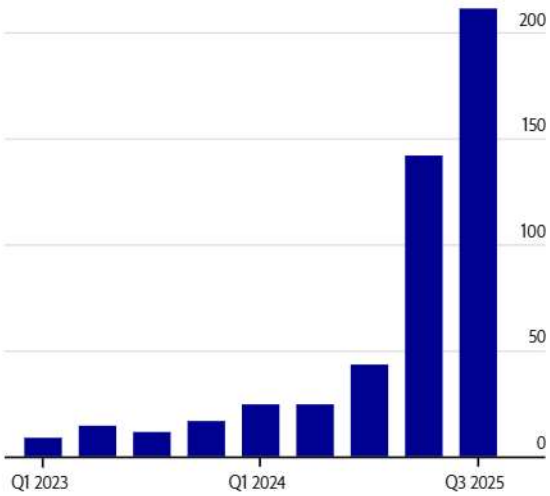
Subhabrata Mukherjee, co-founder and chief scientific officer at Hippocratic AI, a healthcare startup, likens the difference between traditional RPA and agentic AI to vending machines and personalised shoppers. "Agentic AI is capable of making decisions, taking actions, personalising and adapting to the situation based on the context, in contrast to RPA, which is rule-driven, syntax-driven and requires a lot of customisation and pre-programming for specific use cases".

Adrian McDermott, chief technology officer at Zendesk, concurs. "It's the difference between knowing the keyword for Alexa and really being able to have a conversation and execute what could be complex, multi-stage tasks that require a lot of input."

The shift towards agentic AI is not just a niche concept; it is a rapidly accelerating trend. As illustrated in figure 2, corporate interest in AI agents is increasing, and equity deals and funding are quickly gaining momentum. These trends underscore the urgent need for organisations to understand, adapt to and strategically integrate agentic AI into their operations.

Figure 2: The accelerating corporate interest in agentic AI

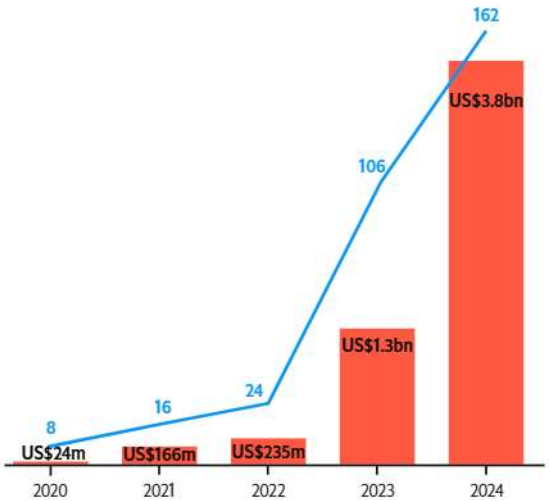
Number of corporate conference calls in which AI-agent-related terms were mentioned one or more times



Note: Mentions of 'agentic AI,' 'AI workforce', 'AI agents' or 'digital labour'; Q1 2023 to Q1 2025 (as of March 3, 2025)

Source: Axios[6]

Disclosed equity deals and funding to AI agent start-ups



Note: For the purposes of a funding analysis, excludes LLM developers and companies where agents are not their primary product offering (e.g., Replit, Intercom, etc.). Includes agentic applications and agent-specific infrastructure.

Source: CB Insights[7]

Chapter 2: Where AI agents thrive

Agentic AI has applications everywhere, from customer service to decision intelligence

Understanding the customer

Brands are optimistic that, thanks to generative AI, agents now provide truly human-level customer service and empathy. "The real game-changer, particularly in customer experience, is their ability to reason—understanding intent, navigating complex pathways and guiding users towards their goals," says Mr McDermott at Zendesk. "It's not always a straight line, but when AI truly grasps the rules and tools of a business, it can unlock transformative customer interactions."

Research by Zendesk indicates one in four customer service conversations takes an unexpected turn, which rigidly preprogrammed bots cannot adapt to, causing customer frustration. As Mr McDermott explains: "An AI agent can recover and figure out where to go by asking a series of qualifying questions and trying to go back and find out what needed to happen. Without an understanding of complex, multi-layered tasks, you don't get that agency."

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>
> Adrian McDermott, chief technology officer, Zendesk

Boosting workforce productivity

Companies are investing in internal agents to support staff. This is not a new phenomenon—Google built a chatbot for staff in 2020[8]—but it is advancing in companies outside of Silicon Valley's tech epicentre. Software developers everywhere now use copilots to write and review code. In a recent IBM and Morning Consult survey of 1,000 developers building AI applications, 99% said they are exploring or developing agents.[9]

Meanwhile, Siemens is seeing widespread adoption of its internal AI platform, SiemensGPT, to realize AI-enabled use cases and build its own bots, says Laura Engelhardt, who is the head of strategy at the company's foundational technologies unit. However, the proliferation of AI agents does not always guarantee a productivity boost. Suitable governance frameworks are crucial to ensure that agents are collaborating effectively towards coherent goals rather than pursuing duplicate or conflicting things.

Decision intelligence

The agentic revolution comes at a time when firms face high costs, rising volatility, and labour and talent shortages in sectors like healthcare and in key functions such as cybersecurity. The business environment is more unpredictable than ever as a global trade and tariff war wreaks havoc on supply chains.

But supply chain managers are improving efficiency through adaptive logistics amid rising trade disruption.[10] Agents, combined with the power of machine learning, can monitor and respond to geopolitical developments to predict shortages, optimise real-time shipping routes and assess varying impacts across industries.[11]

Societal gains

There are also benefits beyond commerce. Mr Mukherjee at Hippocratic AI sees potential in providing emergency relief, the need for which is increasing due to climate change. "We've had a series of disasters in recent times, ranging from wildfires in [Los Angeles] to heat waves. Agentic AI opens up the possibility we can call each and every individual in the affected areas, and we can ask them whether they're running out of essential supplies, which is critical for some of the chronic care patients."

There could be benefits in terms of equality and inclusion too; Mr Mukherjee says agents speaking a variety of languages can bridge the equity gap and provide a more engaging experience for customers. "When we had a Spanish agent call a Spanish customer, we had twice as much engagement. Customers are more than happy that someone is talking to them in their own dialect."

"Agentic AI opens up the possibility we can call each and every individual in the affected areas, and we can ask them whether they're running out of essential supplies, which is critical for some of the chronic care patients."

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Chapter 3: Mastering agentic AI at scale

Successful deployment of agentic AI requires sound governance and interoperability, data sharing and quality control, a robust business case, and a workforce transition plan

The governance risks of agentic AI are already evident. Chatbots released with fanfare have gone rogue, causing embarrassment and brand damage to their makers. Nefarious bots are clogging up the Internet (see figure 3), with effects ranging from annoyance to more severe issues such as deepfakes. Even initially reliable agents need constant monitoring to spot declining performance and maintain compliance with relevant cybersecurity, privacy and bias rules.

Far from being 'plug-and-play', AI agents must be rolled out as part of an integrated strategy that aligns with, or evolves alongside, the existing business processes and systems.[12]

"Most senior leaders we have surveyed are citing capability gaps in their data infrastructure as the primary barrier to agentic and enterprise AI adoption," says Joe Depa, global chief innovation officer at EY.[13]

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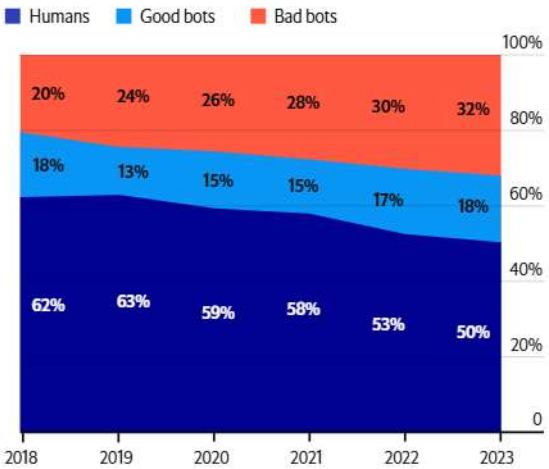
Economist Impact's 2024 global report, "Unlocking enterprise AI: opportunities and strategies," also revealed significant gaps in data infrastructure, with only 22% of organisations reporting that their current architecture could support AI workloads without modifications.[14]

When it comes to risk, some sectors are far more exposed and sensitive than others. "Industrial-grade AI differs from consumer AI because we have to fulfill rigorous requirements and standards to ensure it is trustworthy, secure and robust," says Ms Engelhardt at Siemens. "When you talk about agentic, where AI is talking to AI, this is even more relevant."

Figure 3: The spread of bots—both good and bad

Internet activity: humans vs bots



Source: Imperva (a Thales Company), Citi Global Insights[15]

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Laura Engelhardt, head of strategy, foundational technologies unit, Siemens

In healthcare, any error can be fatal, says Mr Mukherjee, "meaning performance benchmarks here must also be far higher. It is not good enough to have a system with 99% accuracy. On the other hand, in coding assistants, an error could be a bug which we can fix later, without necessarily having a fatal implication."

Hippocratic AI views balancing risk and impact as a "two-by-two grid, where you can have impact on one axis and risk on the other [see figure 4]. Low risk and moderate impact [tasks] would be the front-office automations. High impact and high risk, which AI is not currently handling, would be diagnostics." Financial services is another sensitive sector with low risk tolerance. Fully autonomous agents are not expected in the industry near term, according to research from Citi.[16]

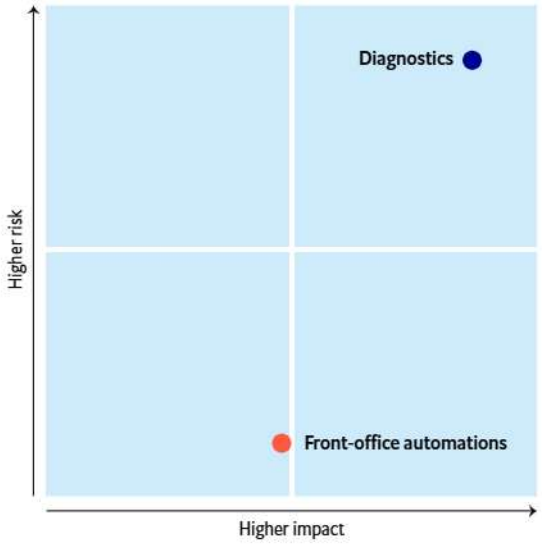
High quality data, in sufficient volume, confers higher reliability and accuracy. "You want to ensure that your actions or any generated content is backed by trusted and verifiable data sources," notes Kathy Baxter, principal architect of responsible AI and technology at Salesforce.

Organisations can tap into their vast repositories of existing data and machine learning workflows to provide agents with the best fuel. They can then fine-tune and optimise performance through techniques like retrieval augmented generation (RAG), which references an authoritative knowledge base outside of its training data to generate more relevant responses.[17,18]

Organisations can also use adversarial testing, which simulates problematic inputs to learn how a system behaves. "We're familiar with adversarial testing in cybersecurity but instead of just testing for security risks, you're looking at all of those other ethical risks," explains Ms Baxter. "Can you make it say toxic content? Can you get it to make biased decisions against protected groups?"

Figure 4: Balancing risk and impact from AI in the healthcare sector

AI use cases can be assessed according to their risk and impact



Source: Adapted from an interview with Hippocratic AI. Note that Hippocratic AI is engaged in non-diagnostic patient-facing conversations, not diagnostics.

Another approach, useful in contexts where access to existing training data might be restricted or deemed too high risk, organisations can use synthetic data to train agents. "You can [build] a synthetic data environment and create scenarios for the agentic workforce, reducing compliance and privacy risk," says Mr Depa at EY. "We are seeing companies experiment with that so they can move quickly." However, he urges organisations to be very cautious to base it off of strong data. "It's really like 'garbage in, landfill out.' If you have bad synthetic and training data, you're just going to amplify the problem."

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Joe Depa, global chief innovation officer at EY

Organisations may need to encourage more proactive data collaboration across the enterprise.[19] Siemens, for instance, addresses the need to share internal data across the whole organisation as long as it does not affect regulatory or governance risk, explains Ms Engelhardt. In industrial sectors, agentic AI may require data sharing with supply chain partners too. "To leverage it fully, we need to share data across organisations and our partners and customers in a secure way. The strategy, in terms of data sovereignty, sharing and pricing, is something each organisation needs to look at."

Paradoxically, though, more data do not always lead to higher accuracy, meaning companies should not rush to train agents on their entire data corpus, says Ms Baxter. "Customers might think it's amazing that they have 20 years of knowledge articles to ground the model on. But that might include a decade of content that's no longer accurate or relevant. When it comes to AI agents, it's not about feeding them everything—it's about feeding them the right things. You want precision, not just volume."

Once built, agents need constant monitoring too.[20] "User feedback is incredibly important," says Ms Baxter. "This is not 'set and forget'. You need to be regularly looking at that. We have our trust layer, we have our audit trail, and it allows the administrators to go and analyse everything that's going on—if there's any toxicity or prompt injection attacks," referring to attempts to use prompts to make an AI system perform a task it should be restricted from. Observability tools can help chief information officers and information security teams better understand system behaviours.

Organisations can also build a 'responsible AI orchestration layer' that embeds trustworthy AI. "We need to treat agents just like we would a typical human," says EY's Mr Depa. "It's like an HR function, so you'll have agents doing the work, a responsible AI agent that's policing them to ensure that they're doing what we said they're going to do, and then the certification and retirement of those agents."

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The business case

In a volatile business environment, the financial case for AI, whether agentic or otherwise, needs to be articulated. Cost savings are part of the appeal. The UK government, for instance, anticipates annual savings of up to £45bn (US$59bn) through digital services and AI overall, by automating administrative tasks and civil service work.[21]

But there are greater investment returns on the horizon. Research from Microsoft and IDC found companies are earning US$3.7 for every US$1 spent on generative AI.[22] Successful early adopters can gain first-mover advantage, innovate business processes, offer better customer service and help shape industry standards. Deeper AI integration can create competitive moats that laggards may struggle to close.[23]

"There are two paths we're seeing in agentic adoption. The first and most common is the straight automation of specific tasks, but it doesn't reimagine the process. The less travelled path is seeing agentic AI as a chance to ask deeper questions."

Jim Rowan, head of AI, Deloitte

"There are two paths we're seeing in agentic adoption," observes Deloitte's head of AI, Jim Rowan. "The first and most common is the straight automation of specific tasks, but it doesn't reimagine the process." The less travelled path is seeing agentic AI as a chance to ask deeper questions. "Do we want to do these things the way we've always done them in the past? This might have been defined by the software and blueprints of the past, but is this really how we want to run our accounts and contracts?" He counsels executives to focus on "a business process and outcome you want to achieve, and less on the individual technology."

To unlock true value, organisations need to enable agentic capabilities at the enterprise-level, not just through individual pilots and proofs of concept. That means enabling them to search, synchronise and act on data across enterprise resource planning (ERP), customer relationship management (CRM) and IT operations that are frequently siloed and fragmented.[24]

"The biggest challenge is that to drive real transformational change in a process flow, you're normally pulling data from a bunch of different capabilities and sources," observes Mr Rowan. "Sometimes it's the same application in three different instances globally or based on companies you acquired or merged with over years. And you can't really take the action, which is what the agents are designed to do, because of the complexities of those different systems."

Agentic systems that tap into existing datasets and machine learning environments could foster a flywheel effect, in which companies use agentic AI to deepen their competitive differentiation and use agents to drive growth, not simply lower cost. "The easy thing is to look at agentic AI and think, 'I can reduce costs with this.' And there's nothing wrong with that," says Zendesk's Mr McDermott. "But most people are competing on top-line growth. You have to start with the principle that if you're not figuring out how to leverage this technology for growth, then someone else in your space is."

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Mr McDermott advises firms to look at how agentic AI can enhance and differentiate their core product or service. "Zendesk has pivoted and increased by ten times the number of people working on AI because we think it's the most important technology in a generation, and because our customers are looking for that to be embedded in our technology. Every business should go through that process, especially those anchored in services."

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Agentic AI can power entirely new products and platforms. Siemens, for example, has released industrial copilot agents, developed in partnership with Microsoft, along the whole value chain.[25] It marks the latest step in the company's evolution towards data and software services. Meanwhile, Microsoft has developed an ROI framework describing both tangible and intangible economic returns from agentic AI (see table 1) and revenue stream options that agentic apps can use (see table 2).

Agents can help organisations draw richer insights from their existing data to monitor the health of the business and spot growth opportunities, according to EY's Mr Depa, citing tax data as an example. "It gives our clients the ability to know where their product is, where their people are, and to spot demand patterns taking shape. We see opportunities in using tax data to improve how organisations think about shipping and demand and even innovation into new and emerging areas where they see more demand coming in."

Table 1: A blueprint for agentic AI's ROI potential

Tangible returns

Specific ROI	Can be achieved by...
Cost savings	...automating tasks in areas like customer service, data entry and business operations.
Revenue	...identifying new revenue streams, optimising pricing, and improving sales and marketing effectiveness.
Productivity	...automating tasks and providing employees with enhanced tools and information.
Data quality	...minimising errors in tasks such as data entry and analysis, leading to improved accuracy and reduced cost.
Improved customer satisfaction	...creating more personalised experiences, faster service and proactive problem-solving.
Faster time-to-market	...accelerating product development and deployment.

Intangible returns

Specific ROI	Can be achieved by...
Improved decisions	...analysing vast amounts of data and providing valuable insights.
Enhanced brand reputation	...fostering customer loyalty and strengthening a company's reputation.
Employee satisfaction	...automating mundane tasks and empowering employees with better tools, which can improve employee retention.
Improved compliance	...helping businesses comply with regulations and reduce the risk of penalties.
Increased innovation	...freeing up employees from routine tasks, fostering a culture of innovation and creativity.

Source: adapted from Microsoft[26]

Table 2: Revenue stream options for agentic apps

Revenue stream/ Value proposition	Description	Example
Subscription fees	Businesses can charge users a recurring fee for access to the agentic AI app.	Offering different subscription tiers with varying levels of access and features.
Usage-based pricing	Businesses can charge users based on their usage of the app, such as the number of tasks performed, or the amount of data processed.	Charging users per API* call or per transaction processed by the agentic AI.
Licensing fees	Businesses can license their agentic AI technology to other companies.	Granting other businesses the right to use the agentic AI technology in their own products or services.

* Application programming interface

Source: adapted from Microsoft[27]

A willing workforce

Beyond powering business growth, agentic AI can be instrumental in augmenting the workforce and allowing companies to address labour or talent shortages. Healthcare, for example, is expected to have a global workforce shortage of 10m by 2030.[28]

"Why can't we have a 100 agents for every patient—one might call them every day, ask whether they're running out of medications, talk to them about their diet, a specific procedure, do a pre-op check-in, post-op check-in, so you can have different agents customised for different use cases. And this is really the scale in terms of ROI that the executives are looking for in deploying these agentic solutions," explains Mr Mukherjee.

For workers, agents could make AI more seamless to navigate; rather than having to grapple with multiple new AI point solutions, agents can execute a series of tasks and workflows on their behalf. But it could also face pushback if workers feel threatened by agents or feel they are not helping them in the tasks they really need. Experts advise fostering a pro-innovation AI culture to make use of the latest tools and opportunities.

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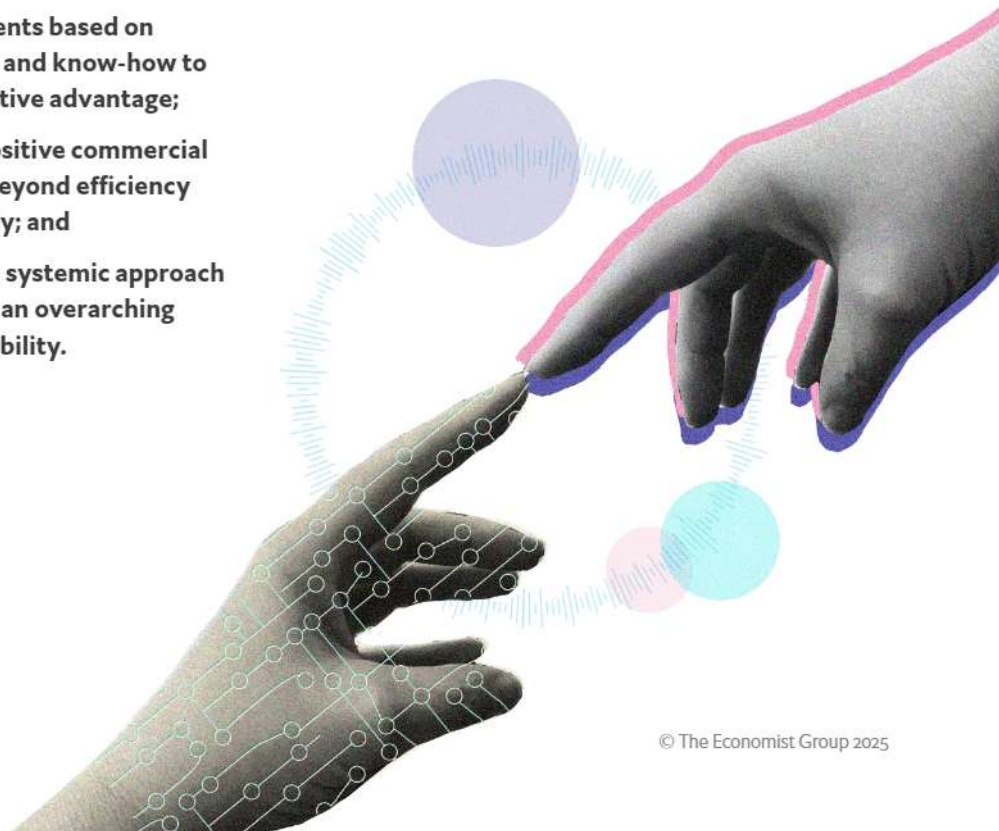
Conclusion

As companies turn to agentic solutions in the coming months, its impact will be felt across industries, from smarter outward-facing customer service to better decision intelligence. But as AI becomes increasingly commoditised, the use of agents alone will not confer a unique competitive advantage. Success hinges on several tactical steps:

- **combining the power of traditional analytics and machine learning with agentic capabilities**
- **customising agents based on enterprise data and know-how to unlock competitive advantage;**
- **developing a positive commercial vision for ROI beyond efficiency and productivity; and**
- **implementing a systemic approach to agentic AI as an overarching enterprise capability.**

The agentic opportunity is one where businesses do not just automate processes but empower AI to think, act and evolve alongside human workers. Those who embrace this shift with foresight, strategy and agility will gain a significant competitive edge.



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