

To Gen AI or not to Gen AI

Wharton vs MIT studies on use and promise of Gen AI

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Is generative AI finally delivering on its promise, or are we all still stuck in endless pilot experiments that never make it into production? A new study from the Wharton School offers a refreshing and more nuanced answer. For anyone who has followed the debate around AI ROI (Artificial Intelligence, Return on Investment), this study adds important context and a dose of optimism.

For much of this year, the conversation was dominated by an MIT statistic that claimed 95 percent of businesses had not yet seen ROI from generative AI. This number spread fast because it matched what many practitioners felt. Generative AI

felt powerful but unreliable. It broke workflows, created new bottlenecks and introduced risks that slowed adoption. The consensus seemed to be that the technology was not ready for prime time.

The Wharton study complicates this narrative. It found that 74 percent of companies that measure the ROI of generative AI are already seeing a positive return. Even more expect ROI within two or three years. This is a huge contrast and worth unpacking.

Wharton's broader definition of ROI explains much of the difference. While MIT focused on profit from fully deployed production systems, Wharton included improvements in personal productivity, employee retention and operational efficiency. This broader set of benefits reflects how companies are actually using the technology. Many of the wins today are small, distributed and workflow based rather than enterprise wide.

The study also highlights strong differences across industries. Tech, telecom, banking and finance are seeing the most ROI today. Retail is still in an early stage and reports lower returns. This aligns with the maturity of digital infrastructure in each sector. Industries with clean data pipelines and established automation practices adapt faster.

There is also a clear divide by role. Senior leaders are far more bullish than middle managers. This is not surprising. Executives often see the strategic potential and have a broader view of benefits. Middle managers, on the other hand, often deal with the operational friction of deploying generative AI tools. They also handle the messy parts like workflow redesign, team re skilling and tool integration. Their hesitation reveals where real bottlenecks lie.

Company size matters too. Smaller firms report higher ROI. Larger enterprises struggle due to rigid processes and legacy systems. Box CEO Aaron Levie captured it perfectly when he said that AI output is correlated with how much an organization can change its workflow. Smaller companies can redesign processes in days. Large enterprises often need quarters.

Despite the positive results, the study does come with caveats. It is self reported and includes responses from around 800 people in companies with more than 1,000 employees and at least 50 million dollars in revenue. Still, even with these

caveats, the results indicate that generative AI is not following a simple hype curve. It is unfolding in uneven and industry specific ways.

Future steps for companies exploring generative AI include standardizing data quality, redesigning workflows around AI agents rather than bolting AI onto old processes, investing in middle manager training and conducting structured ROI measurements that include productivity and operational efficiency.

The big picture is becoming clearer. Generative AI is not magic and it is not a disaster. It is a tool that works well when paired with workflow changes, data readiness and human adoption. ROI is real but uneven.

The real question now is not whether generative AI works, but whether companies are willing to change enough to let it work.

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