AI Research Brief

AI Research Brief — October 2026

Executives doubled the productivity gain they credit to AI, to 0.2% a year, and expect three times that. Census puts US adoption at 24.6%. And an experiment shows AI closes most of an education gap, but only while it's there.

0.2%

Productivity gain from AI, per year

Over the last three years, as executives report it. Six months ago they said 0.1%.

DATE
October 29, 2026

CODE
WB-ARB-2026-10

VERSION
v1.0

EDITION
Public edition

IN BRIEF

1. **The payoff doubled. It's still 0.2% a year.**
   Firm Data on AI was revised in October with a new survey round: nearly 9,000 executives in seven countries, May to July 2026.
2. **Firms expect three times what they've seen**
   The spending is already here, and it's piled up in a few places.
3. **Adoption is 78% or 25%, depending on who answers**
   The Census Bureau's biweekly survey of US businesses keeps climbing, from a much lower base.
4. **AI closes most of the gap. Take it away and part of it comes back.**
   A randomized experiment with 1,174 adults aged 25 to 45 on a paid business problem-solving task, revised in October.

01

The payoff doubled. It's still 0.2% a year.

Firm Data on AI was revised in October with a new survey round: nearly 9,000 executives in seven countries, May to July 2026.

Hours a week executives use AI
2.1
Up from 1.5 at the start of 2026.

Productivity gain from AI, per year
0.2%
Over the last three years, as executives report it. Six months ago they said 0.1%.

See no productivity impact yet
83%
Down from 89% six months earlier.

Report a positive impact
15%
Up from 8%. Almost double in one round.

Executives' own AI use, hours per week



02

Firms expect three times what they've seen

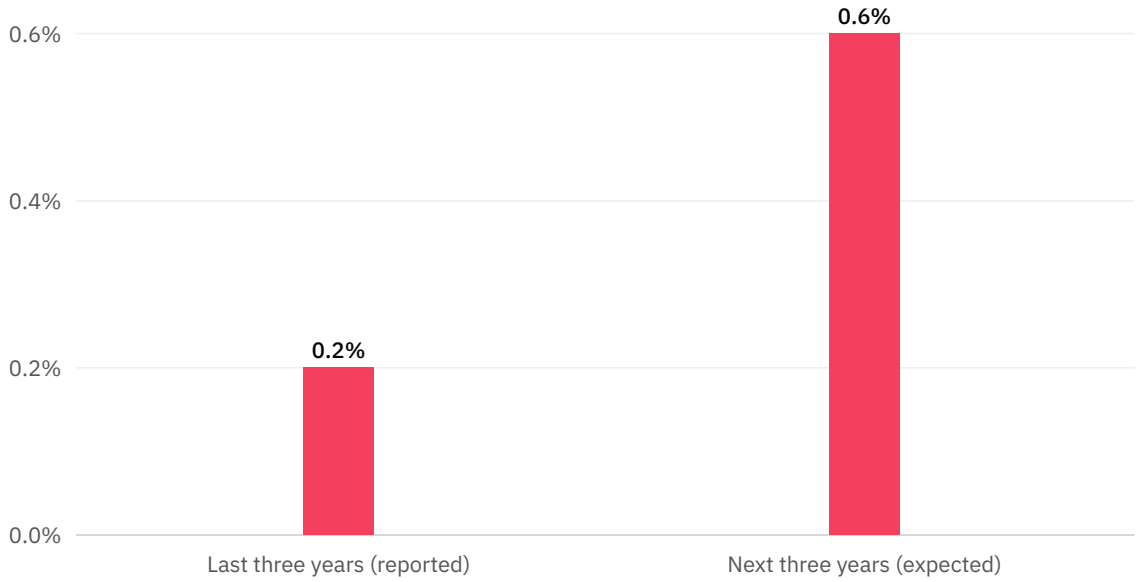
The spending is already here, and it's piled up in a few places.

Firms using some AI
78%
Mid-2026, seven countries. It was 69% at the start of the year.

Expected AI spend per employee, US
$2,000
For 2026, 50% more than in 2025. About $300 billion in total.

Firms behind half the spending
2%
In the US and the UK, the top 2% of firms account for over half of AI spending.

Productivity gain from AI, % per year



Jobs: churn, not a net drop

Over the next three years, executives expect AI to cut employment at their own firms by about 0.4% and raise output by about 1.3%. More than 40% expect AI to move their headcount one way or the other; in the aggregate it nearly cancels out.

03

Adoption is 78% or 25%, depending on who answers

The Census Bureau's biweekly survey of US businesses keeps climbing, from a much lower base.

US businesses that used AI in the last two weeks

24.6%

Census BTOS, collected October 5–18, 2026, published October 22.

Same question, start of 2026

17.7%

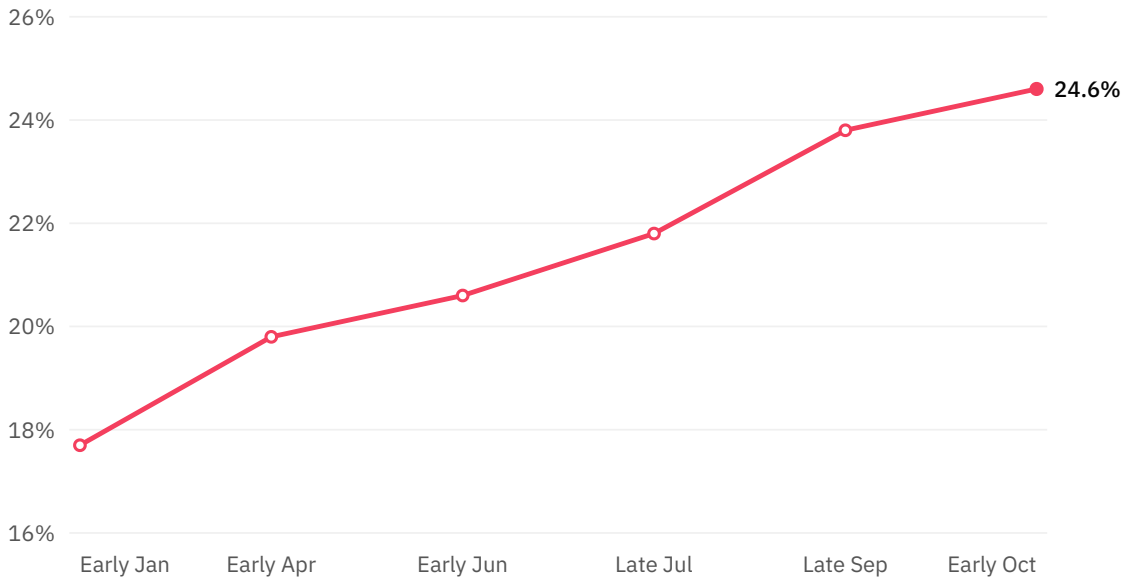
Collected December 29, 2025 to January 11, 2026.

Expect to use it within six months

28.6%

Latest round.

US businesses using AI in the last two weeks (%)



Neither number is wrong. Census counts every business the same, most of them small, and the person answering may not be an executive. The executive survey asks CEOs and CFOs, and its authors flag the gap themselves.

04

AI closes most of the gap. Take it away and part of it comes back.

A randomized experiment with 1,174 adults aged 25 to 45 on a paid business problem-solving task, revised in October.

Education gap without AI

0.55 SD

Higher-education participants over lower-education ones, control group.

Same gap with AI

0.14 SD

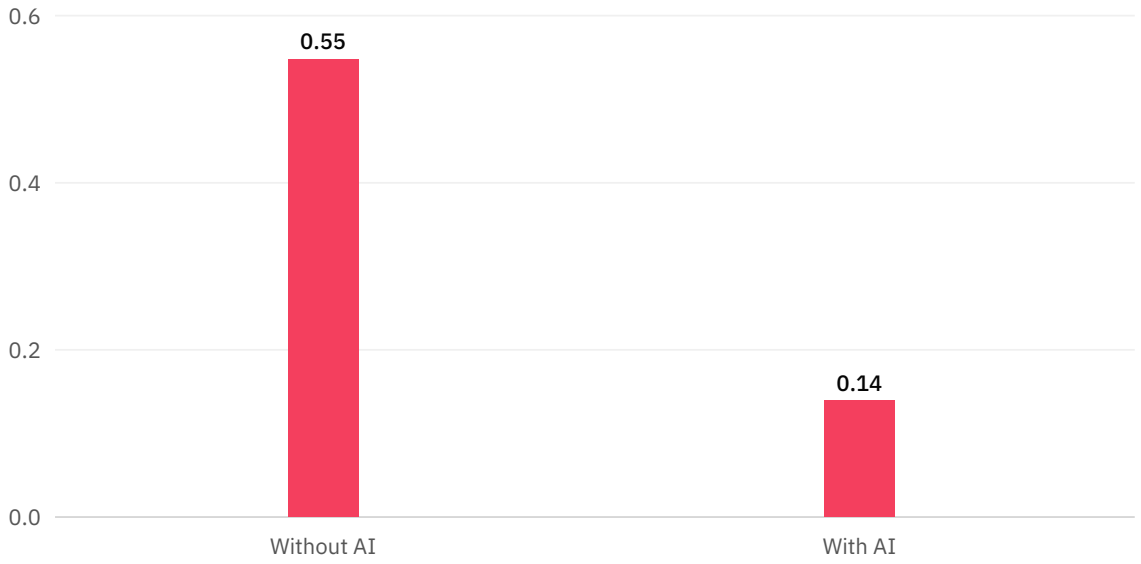
About three-quarters of it closed. Everyone did better; the lower-education group gained most.

Afterward, without AI

Reopens

Nobody did worse than the control group, but a sizable gap reappeared.

Education gap in task performance (standard deviations)



The chat logs explain why the gap doesn't vanish: higher-education participants used the tool more effectively. And the gains that lasted came from heavy AI use combined with real effort on the task, not from delegation.

05

Sources

1. Firm Data on AI (NBER w34836), revised October 2026
   www.nber.org/papers/w34836
2. U.S. Census Bureau, Business Trends and Outlook Survey, national file (cycle 202621)
   www.census.gov/hfp/btos/data
3. Cruces et al., Does Generative AI Narrow Education-Based Productivity Gaps? (NBER w34851), revised October 2026
   www.nber.org/papers/w34851
4. Baslandze et al., Artificial Intelligence, Productivity, and the Workforce (NBER w34984)
   www.nber.org/papers/w34984
5. Brynjolfsson, Rock & Syverson, The Productivity J-Curve (NBER w25148)
   www.nber.org/papers/w25148

This is the public edition. We produce private editions with your data — for your sector, your operation and the rules that apply to you.

workbigly.com