



2026 STATE OF ITSM REPORT

From AI Potential to Real Payoff



Contents

Executive Summary **3**

A New Chapter in AI Maturity **4**

AI Is Now Table Stakes in ITSM **5**

Productivity Wins Are Real..... **7**

High ROI on Paper, Heavy Workload in Practice **9**

High Productivity, Same Workload: What’s Going On? **11**

Why AI Costs More to Operationalize Than Teams Expect **13**

How Top Teams Turn AI Into Real Payoff **14**

Turning AI Potential Into Lasting Payoff **18**

Methodology..... **19**



Executive Summary

AI has already entered the everyday operating model *for IT service management (ITSM) teams.* In the survey population, every respondent reported using some form of AI in their organization, and respondents have been using AI in their ITSM environment for an average of about 16 months. AI has become embedded in IT service operations across nearly every organization we surveyed. The question facing IT leaders is no longer whether to invest; it's whether that investment is translating into business outcomes or merely operational activity.

The gains are real. 84% of respondents say AI has met or exceeded return-on-investment expectations, and they report meaningful improvements across metrics such as employee productivity, incident prevention, cost per ticket, service level agreement compliance, mean time to detect, and mean time to resolve.

But the payoff is uneven. A majority of respondents (71%) say their overall workload has stayed the same or increased since adopting AI, suggesting productivity gains are often offset by maintenance work, governance demands, integration issues, and output review.

The implications extend beyond the service desk. When AI enables earlier detection instead of faster resolution, the business impact shifts from cost mitigation to cost avoidance: fewer revenue-impacting outages, more reliable customer-facing services, and the capacity to scale operations without a proportional increase in headcount. When measurement matures from

tracking ticket activity to tracking outcomes, IT leaders can connect service performance to employee productivity, onboarding speed, and retention—metrics the rest of the business already cares about.

The organizations pulling ahead aren't simply spending more or deploying more tools. They're more disciplined about four areas: where AI is applied first, how success is measured, how strong the data foundation is, and how intentionally people are brought along. That discipline is what turns AI activity into real operational payoff.



AI adoption is no longer the maturity milestone. *Turning AI into **measurable business outcomes** is.*



A New Chapter in AI Maturity

Only a few years ago, the big AI question in IT service management (ITSM) was simple: *should teams adopt it at all?*

That question has changed fast.

Most organizations are no longer debating whether AI belongs in the workflow—they're trying to make it pay off. Many teams are seeing real productivity gains and meeting their expectations for AI. But not every organization is turning those gains into a lighter workload, cleaner operations, or a more strategic service model.

That's the story behind this report. Last year's State of ITSM report looked at how native generative AI in SolarWinds® Service Desk improved efficiency and incident resolution. This year, the lens is broader, drawn from original survey data across more than 800 IT professionals: what distinguishes the teams seeing measurable payoff from those still managing their overhead?

The findings show success **doesn't come from adoption alone.**
It comes from:



How organizations
choose use cases



Prepare their data



Measure results



Support their people
through change

AI Is Now Table Stakes in ITSM

AI has moved from *experiment* to **expectation**.

More than half of respondents (56%) say the primary force behind adoption is their own IT leadership strategy, far ahead of executive mandates or external pressure. IT isn't being told to adopt AI; it's choosing to. That means IT leadership owns both the opportunity and the accountability for making it work. When AI adds to the workload instead of reducing it, there's no executive mandate to blame. The path forward is theirs to define.

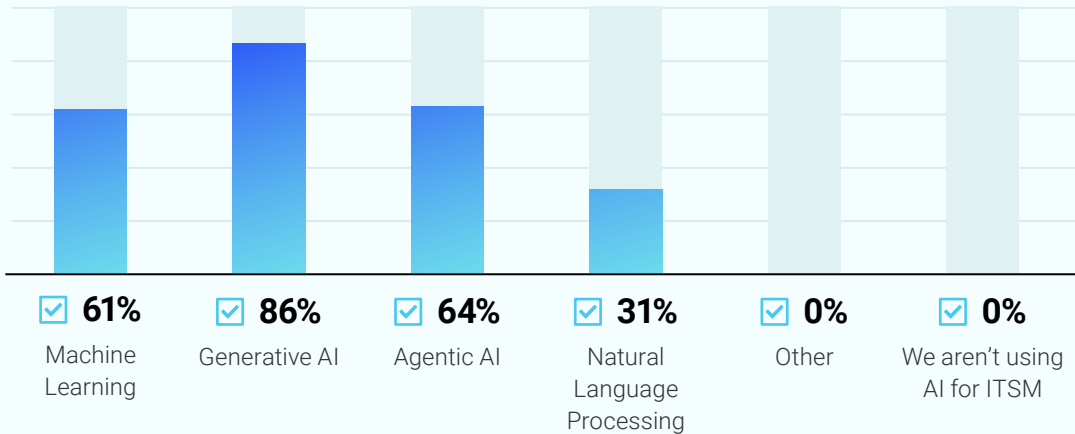
Q: Where is the primary pressure to adopt AI in your ITSM environment coming from?

- ☒ **15%** Executive / C-suite mandates (*top-down directive*)
- ☒ **56%** IT leadership strategy (*internally-driven initiative*)
- ☒ **9%** Business unit demands (*requests from other departments*)
- ☒ **7%** Vendor or platform roadmap (*embedded into existing tools*)
- ☒ **7%** End-user expectations (*demand for AI-powered experiences*)
- ☒ **3%** Industry/peer pressure (*competitors or peers adopting AI*)
- ☒ **3%** We aren't experiencing significant pressure to adopt AI



Nor are teams betting on a single narrow approach: generative AI leads adoption at 86%, with agentic AI (64%) and machine learning (61%) close behind.

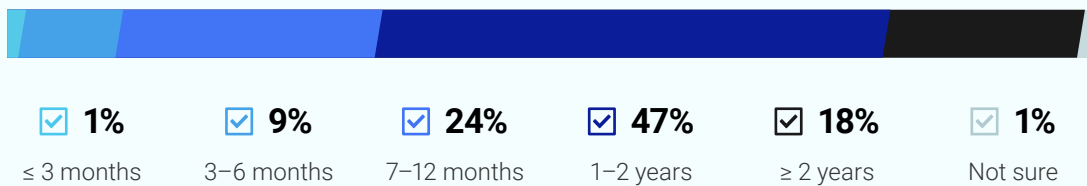
Q: What types of AI are you currently leveraging for ITSM functions?



AI in ITSM is no longer a pilot-stage topic—it's part of how service teams handle tickets, build knowledge, run operations, and support users.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents say their organization has been *leveraging AI for ITSM functions for at least a year*, making it possible to ask tougher questions about ROI, workload, trust, and impact. That's exactly what the rest of this report does.

Q: How long has your organization been leveraging AI for ITSM functions?





Productivity Wins Are Real

The survey data leaves *little doubt* that **AI is creating measurable gains** across core ITSM work.

Respondents report average weekly time savings across all measured task categories, ranging from 2.7 to 3.3 hours per task.

Task	Time AI saves per week
Detecting and flagging issues	3.3 hours
Responding to end-user requests	3.0 hours
Triaging and categorizing tickets	2.9 hours
Creating/uploading knowledge base articles	2.9 hours
Documenting and summarizing incidents	2.8 hours
Resolving and remediating	2.7 hours

Those gains line up with the previous State of ITSM report, which found a significant decrease in average resolution time after organizations enabled generative AI features in SolarWinds Service Desk.



Average resolution time fell from 27.42 hours before generative AI to 22.55 hours after enablement, a **reduction of 17.8%**.



Taken together, the message is straightforward.

AI can help teams move faster in daily service operations, especially when it is built into the work already happening instead of being layered on as a side process.

 Metric	 Somewhat Improved	 Significantly Improved
Employee productivity	39%	47%
Prevented incidents	39%	40%
Cost per ticket	41%	35%
Service Level Agreement (SLA) compliance	41%	35%
Mean Time to Detect (MTTD)	36%	38%
Mean Time to Resolve (MTTR)	40%	34%
Digital Employee Experience / Digital Employee Satisfaction (DEX/DES) score	40%	30%
Customer Satisfaction (C-SAT)	41%	29%
Net Promoter Score (NPS)	37%	31%

Beyond individual tasks, respondents say AI is **improving every major performance metric** they track.



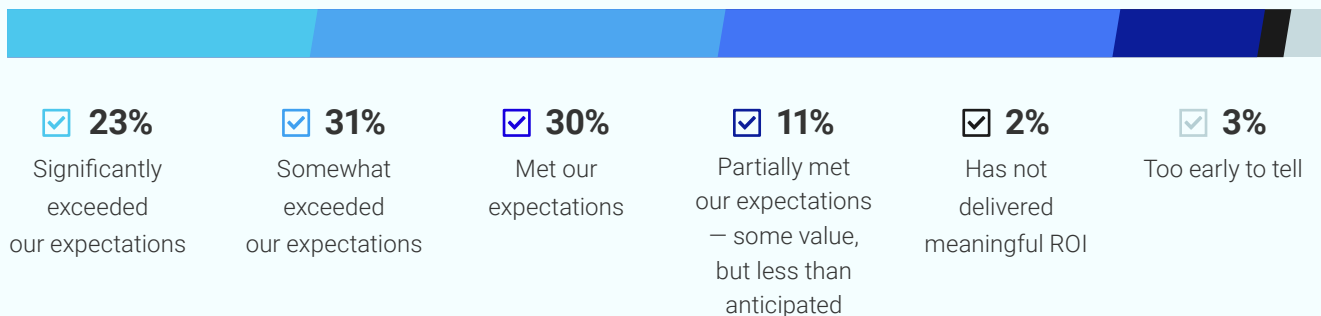
Employee productivity leads the way, with 86% reporting improvement and 47% calling it significant.

Those improvements help explain why trust in AI remains high even as other parts of the report show the payoff still feels uneven for many teams.

High ROI on Paper, Heavy Workload in Practice

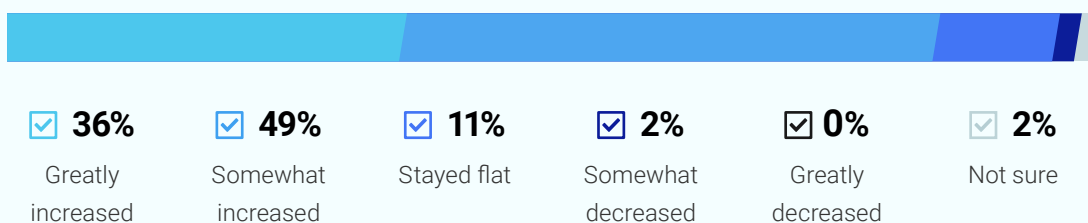
If the story ended with productivity gains, AI maturity would be easy to explain. But our survey points to **a more complex reality**. While 84% of respondents say AI has met or exceeded ROI expectations, only 23% say it has significantly exceeded them.

Q: Overall, has your organization's investment in AI for IT service management delivered the return on investment you expected?



That gap suggests most organizations see enough value to remain committed, but far fewer feel they have turned AI into a clear operational advantage. The momentum is still there: 85% say their AI in ITSM budget has increased year over year, and 36% say it has increased significantly.

Q: How has your overall budget for AI in ITSM changed year-over-year?

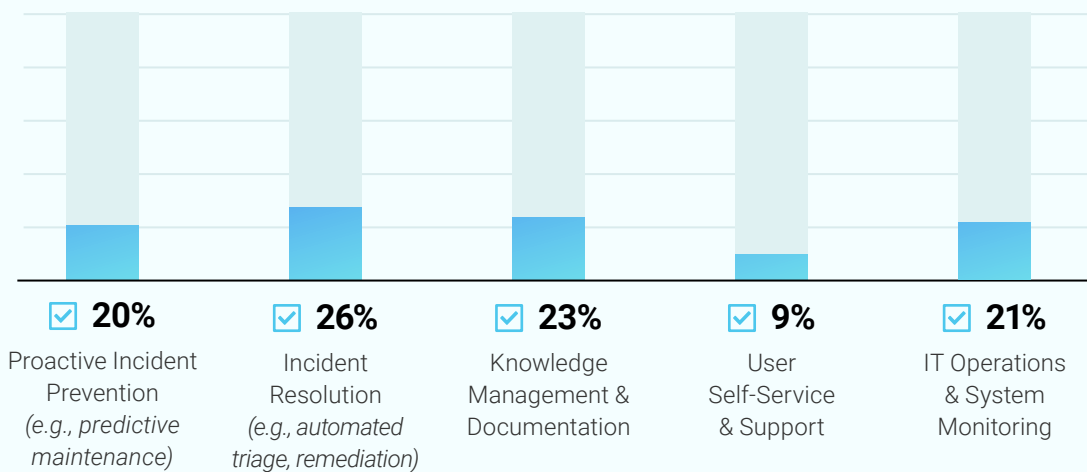




The payoff also isn't evenly distributed across functions.

Incident resolution leads with an ROI of 26%, followed by knowledge management and documentation (23%), IT operations and monitoring (21%), and proactive prevention (20%). User self-service lags well behind at 9%. AI tends to deliver its clearest payoff first where workflows are already structured and measurable.

Q: In what functional area of ITSM are you seeing the highest return on investment from AI?



ITSM teams are **not backing away** from AI, but the work required to manage, maintain, validate, and support it is *still absorbing much of the value it creates*.

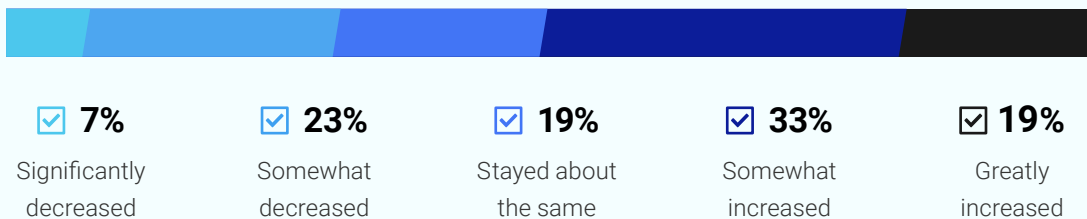
On paper, the results are strong. In practice, more than half say total workload hasn't followed. The benefit is real, but so is the overhead—and until organizations reduce that drag, AI will keep improving performance without fully easing the burden on their teams.

High Productivity, Same Workload: What's Going On?

This is the tension most teams are experiencing now.

On the one hand, most ITSM teams tell us AI delivers measurable improvements in productivity, incident handling, and service performance. On the other hand, total workload hasn't followed. Both are true at once, and understanding *why* is key to reaching the real payoff.

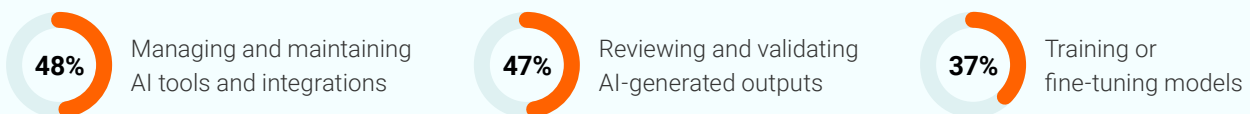
Q: Since adopting AI in your ITSM environment, how has the total workload for your IT service team changed?



AI isn't shrinking the work as much as reshaping it.

The hours saved on triaging tickets, summarizing incidents, or handling routine Tier 1 requests don't automatically become free capacity; they're absorbed by new responsibilities that didn't exist at this scale before AI.

When we asked how AI adds to the workload, the largest share of respondents pointed to:



As AI takes on more frontline work, IT teams take on more oversight to keep it accurate and reliable.



Q: In which of the following ways has AI in your ITSM environment added to your team's workload?

☒ **48%** Managing and maintaining AI tools and integrations

☒ **47%** Reviewing and validating AI-generated outputs

☒ **37%** Training and fine-tuning AI models

☒ **33%** Handling errors or failures from AI automation

☒ **35%** Onboarding and training staff on new AI tools

☒ **27%** Governing and auditing AI decisions and actions

☒ **29%** Managing vendor relationships and contracts

☒ **15%** Addressing end-user distrust or resistance to AI

☒ **11%** Documenting and updating processes to accommodate AI

That overhead isn't minor: nearly three-quarters of respondents (74%) spend three or more hours a week on AI maintenance, and 44% spend more than six —time spent not resolving issues directly but keeping the AI behind them reliable.

Where Adoption Ends, and Maturity Begins

Early adoption shows AI can help your service desk move faster. **Maturity means redesigning the surrounding work**, including tightening data quality, clarifying ownership, consolidating tools, and building internal skills, so gains aren't immediately eaten up by maintenance, rework, and integration overhead.

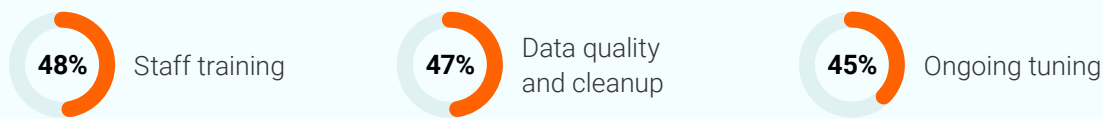
If your dashboards show improvement but your team still feels equally busy, overhead is the next problem to solve.



Why AI Costs More to Operationalize Than Teams Expect

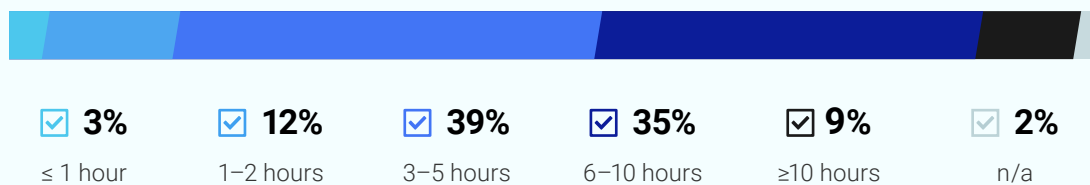
Only 7% of respondents said AI's costs *matched what they expected* going in.

The most common surprises aren't one-time setup costs:



They're recurring parts of the operating model, and they directly affect whether an AI investment scales cleanly or becomes another layer of overhead.

Q: Approximately how much time do you spend on monitoring and AI maintenance (e.g., prompt tuning, reviewing accuracy of output, vendor coordination)?



Insufficient data quality and **integration complexity** are the top reasons respondents say *AI fails to deliver expected value*. A large share of the cost of AI in ITSM isn't the model itself—it's the surrounding work required to make AI usable, reliable, and sustainable in production.

How Top Teams Turn AI Into Real Payoff

Organizations seeing the strongest payoff aren't necessarily the ones with the *biggest budgets or the broadest AI tool stacks*.

They're the ones making **more disciplined decisions** in five areas:



Where AI is applied



How success is measured



How friction is reduced



How intentionally people are brought along



How strong the data foundation is

Those choices show up not merely in ticket metrics but also in business outcomes: fewer incidents that impact customers, reduced cost per ticket and downtime, higher employee productivity, and more room for teams to focus on strategic work instead of reactive firefighting. The highest ROI areas are consistently where *workflows are already well defined* and *feedback loops are tight*, making it possible to see and prove business impact instead of only activity.

01

Start Where the Path to Value Is Clear

High-performing teams begin with a handful of use cases where AI improves work that already happens every day—detecting and flagging issues, responding to end-user requests, triaging tickets, documenting incidents, and resolving issues faster. **These are the same areas shown earlier to deliver the strongest time savings**, making them practical, low-risk starting points for building momentum and confidence.



Equally important, improvements in these high-frequency workflows create business value beyond operational efficiency: they give teams more capacity to scale service delivery without scaling headcount and help extend support coverage closer to 24/7 service without requiring 24/7 staffing.

02

Reduce Friction Around the Work

Pulling ahead also means reducing AI's operational drag. The same sources of added workload noted earlier tend to multiply when AI is spread across disconnected systems.

Maturity isn't only about adding more AI capabilities; it's about **lowering the support burden** around the capabilities you already have.

When organizations reduce that overhead, the payoff is not only smoother operations and more time for strategic work but also a lower total cost of ownership, making the AI business case easier to defend with finance and leadership.

03

Strengthen the Data Foundation

AI maturity depends heavily on the quality of the information feeding the system, which respondents identify as the top reason AI underdelivers. When the underlying knowledge and ticket data are weak, the burden doesn't disappear; it shifts from manual execution to manual correction.

Mature teams treat **data quality** as *part of the AI strategy*, not a separate cleanup project.

That investment does more than reduce rework. It helps preserve institutional knowledge in a form AI can use consistently and reduces operational risk when experienced staff leave or change roles.



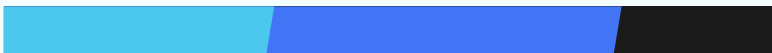
04

Measure Outcomes, Not Just Activity

How organizations measure AI directly affects how the payoff is experienced.

Every respondent measures AI impact in some form, but only 21% describe their approach as outcome- or experience-oriented, while most still default to productivity or activity metrics. That gap matters because outcome-based measurement makes it possible to connect ITSM performance to the business results executives care about most: revenue protection, employee productivity, service quality, and long-term growth. It also makes AI ROI easier to justify beyond the service desk, especially with finance stakeholders who need to see a clear line from ITSM performance to business value.

Q: Which of the following best describes your organization's measurement approach?



- ☒ **34%** Primarily activity-oriented (*Tracks operational metrics like ticket volume and response times*)
- ☒ **45%** Productivity-oriented (*Focuses on efficiency, such as tickets resolved and time to resolution*)
- ☒ **21%** Outcome / experience-oriented (*Measures user satisfaction, service quality, and business impact*)

The distinction in measurement approaches matters because it changes whether AI feels like leverage or overhead.

Organizations using an activity-oriented measurement approach are **2.4 times more likely** to report *increased workload* than those using an outcome-oriented approach.

In other words, the way teams define success not only changes how AI is reported but also how it is experienced day to day.



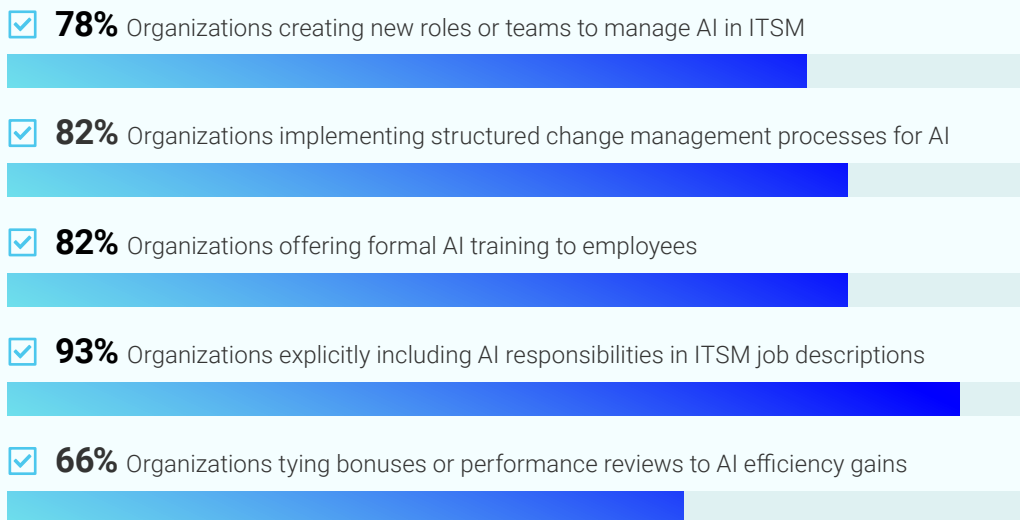
05

Bring People Along Intentionally

The organizations getting more from AI are investing in the human side of adoption. In the survey, 82% say they have structured change management in place for AI, and 82% offer formal AI training. Success in ITSM increasingly depends on skills such as data analysis, automation design, change management, and prompt engineering.

The teams pulling ahead aren't expecting AI to work on its own; they are giving people the **context** and **capabilities** they need to direct and *improve it*.

The workforce data show why these matter. On the one hand, 72% of respondents believe AI will make their role more strategic and rewarding over the next few years, and 86% say the skills they are building and the ITSM toolset they are using are making them more marketable for their next career move. On the other hand, about half (48%) are at least somewhat concerned that AI could replace roles like theirs. Both responses are rational and coexist within the same teams. The organizations where optimism wins are those investing in training, clear role definition, and transparent communication about how AI will augment expertise and not quietly displace it.



AI maturity is an operating model decision, not a technology one. They're giving employees the training, context, and confidence to use AI effectively, govern it responsibly, and improve it over time.



Turning AI Potential Into Lasting Payoff

AI has already moved from an *emerging capability* to an **everyday reality in ITSM**.

The question for most organizations isn't whether AI belongs in the service environment—it's whether they can turn it into a consistent operational payoff. The survey shows real progress: productivity is improving, trust is growing, and the case for investment is strong. However, the payoff remains uneven, and gains are diluted when maintenance, complexity, and weak measurement absorb too much of the value AI creates.

That's the real "State of ITSM" in 2026. The leaders pulling ahead aren't simply moving faster to adopt AI — they're more disciplined about *where it's applied, how success is measured, how strong the data foundation is, and how intentionally people are brought along*. In doing so, they are turning what many

organizations still experience as a technology management challenge into a business performance advantage: connecting faster detection to reduced downtime costs, better measurement to defensible ROI narratives for the board, and workforce investment to lower attrition and faster organizational scaling.

For the CTO or VP of IT evaluating where AI investment is paying off, this report points to a clear pattern. **The organizations achieving durable payoff aren't the ones with the most AI tools or the biggest budgets.** They're the ones that have embedded AI into existing service workflows to minimize maintenance overhead, matured their measurement from activity to outcomes, and built the data and people foundation that turns operational efficiency into business results—fewer service disruptions affecting revenue, faster time-to-productivity for new employees, and the ability to grow service capacity without increasing headcount.



AI adoption is no longer the milestone.
Operational payoff is.

SolarWinds helps IT teams bring AI into service workflows in ways that are easier to manage, measure, and scale. Explore how SolarWinds Service Desk can help turn AI potential into practical results.

[Learn More](#)

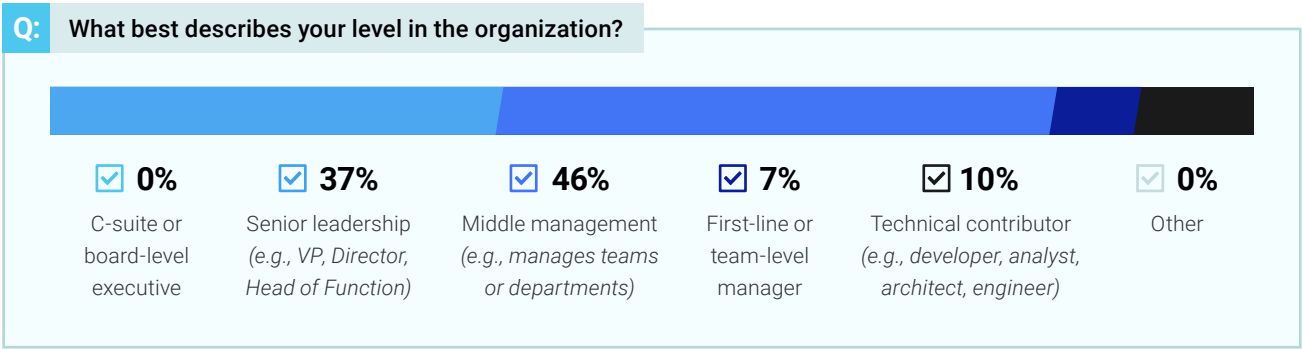
Methodology

This report is based on original research conducted in partnership with UserEvidence, an independent research platform. We conducted an online survey of **844 qualified IT professionals** across North America; Europe, the Middle East, and Africa; and Asia-Pacific to understand how they're deploying AI in IT service management environments, what results they are achieving, and where the challenges remain.

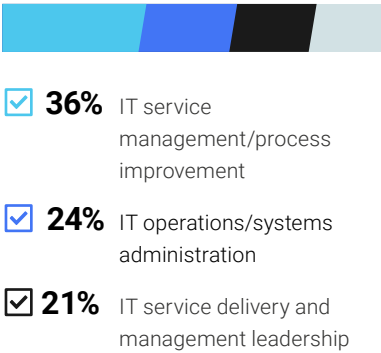
Research conducted
and verified by



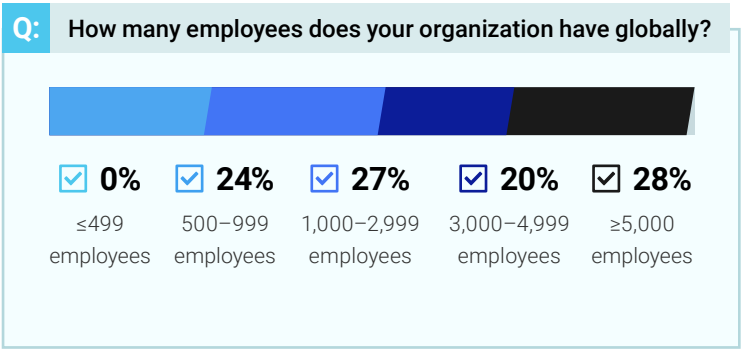
Respondents represent a seasoned cross-section of the ITSM workforce. The majority hold management-level roles: 37% are senior leaders (VP, director, or head of function), while 46% are middle managers. The remaining 17% are first-line or team-level managers (7%) or technical contributors (10%).



Primary functional areas represented include:



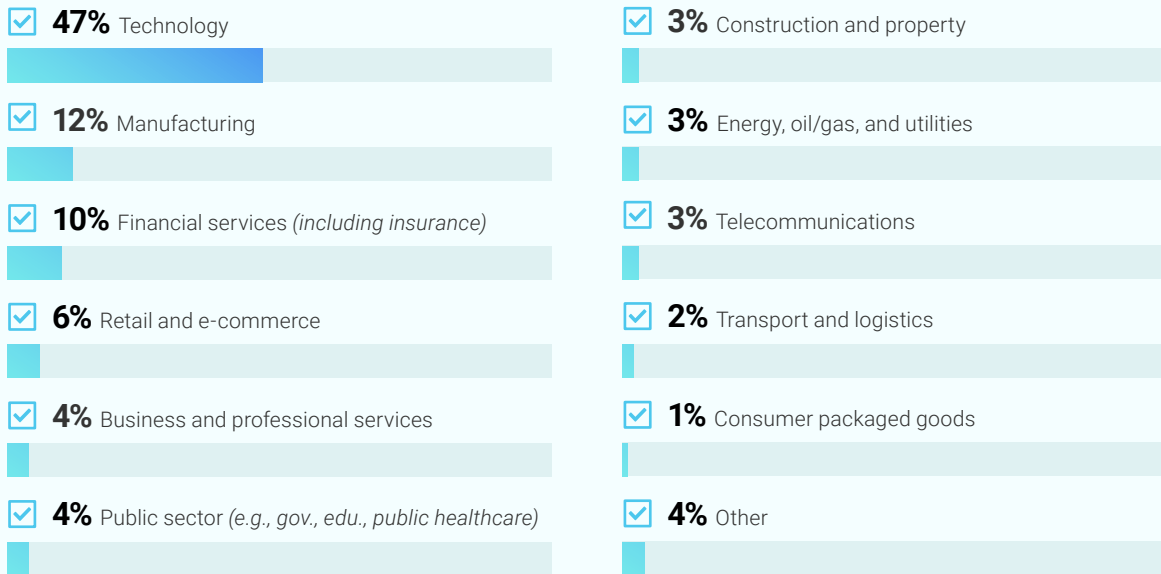
The organizations represented span various sizes, with a deliberate focus on mid-market and enterprise environments. The average respondent's organization employs 2,938 people.





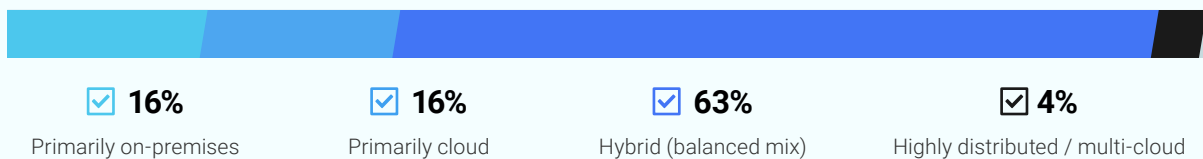
While nearly half (47%) of professionals surveyed work in the technology industry, a significant number also work in manufacturing (12%) and financial services (10%). The remainder are fairly evenly split among other industries.

Q: What best describes your level in the organization?



Network environments are predominantly hybrid: 63% describe their IT environment as a balanced mix of on-premises and cloud, while 16% each operate primarily on-premises or in the cloud.

Q: Which of the following best describes your IT environment?



Participation was open to SolarWinds and UserEvidence customers, but being a customer was not required.

Respondents used nearly 20 different ITSM and enterprise service management (ESM) platforms, including SolarWinds.

This diversity ensures the findings reflect broad industry patterns, not the perspective of a single type of organization, providing a well-rounded view of AI use among ITSM professionals across varying company sizes, industries, and environments.



About UserEvidence

UserEvidence is a software company and independent research partner that helps B2B technology companies produce original research content from practitioners in their industry. All research completed by UserEvidence is verified and authentic according to their research principles: Identity verification, significance and representation, quality and independence, and transparency. All UserEvidence research is based on real user feedback without interference, bias, or spin from our clients.

UserEvidence Research Principles

These principles guide all research efforts at UserEvidence—whether working with a vendor’s users for our Customer Evidence offering, or industry practitioners in a specific field for our Research Content offering. The goal of these principles is to give buyers trust and confidence that you are viewing authentic and verified research based on real user feedback, without interference, bias, and spin from the vendor.

1. Identity verification

In every study we conduct, UserEvidence independently verifies that a participant in our research study is a real user of a vendor (in the case of Customer Evidence) or an industry practitioner (in the case of Research Content). We use a variety of human and algorithmic verification mechanisms, including corporate email domain verification (i.e., so a vendor can’t just create 17 gmail addresses that all give positive reviews).

2. Significance and Representation

UserEvidence believes trust is built by showing an honest and complete representation of the success (or lack thereof) of users. We pursue statistical significance in our research, and substantiate our findings with a large and representative set of user responses to create more confidence in our analysis. We aim to canvas a diverse swatch of users across industries, seniorities, personas - to provide the whole picture of usage, and allow buyers to find relevant data from other users in their segment, not just a handful of vendor-curated happy customers.

3. Quality and Independence

UserEvidence is committed to producing quality and independent research at all times. This starts at the beginning of the research process with survey and questionnaire design to drive accurate and substantive responses. We aim to reduce bias in our study design, and use large sample sizes of respondents where possible. While UserEvidence is compensated by the vendor for conducting the research, trust is our business and our priority, and we do not allow vendors to change, influence, or misrepresent the results (even if they are unfavorable) at any time.

4. Transparency

We believe research should not be done in a black box. For transparency, all UserEvidence research includes the statistical N (number of respondents), and buyers can explore the underlying blinded (de-identified) raw data and responses associated with any statistic, chart, or study. UserEvidence provides clear citation guidelines for clients when leveraging research that includes guidelines on sharing research methodology and sample size.



About SolarWinds

SolarWinds is a leading provider of simple, powerful, secure observability and IT management software built to enable customers to accelerate their digital transformation. Our solutions provide organizations worldwide—regardless of type, size, or complexity—with a comprehensive and unified view of today’s modern, distributed, and hybrid network environments. We continuously engage with IT service and operations professionals, DevOps and SecOps professionals, and database administrators (DBAs) to understand the challenges they face in maintaining high-performing and highly available hybrid IT infrastructures, applications, and environments. The insights we gain from them, in places like our [THWACK®](#) community, allow us to address customers’ needs now and in the future. Our focus on the user and our commitment to excellence in end-to-end hybrid IT management have established SolarWinds as a worldwide leader in solutions for observability, IT service management, application performance, and database management. Learn more today at www.solarwinds.com.



*For additional information, please contact SolarWinds at 866.530.8100 or email sales@solarwinds.com.
To locate an international reseller near you, visit [SolarWinds Partner Page](#).*

The SolarWinds trademarks, service marks, and logos are the exclusive property of SolarWinds Worldwide, LLC or its affiliates. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

This document is provided for informational purposes only. Information and views expressed in this document may change and/or may not be applicable to you. SolarWinds makes no warranty, express or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information contained herein. This document may not be reproduced without the express permission of SolarWinds.