

The state of AI in corporate travel 2026

The era of Agentic AI
has arrived

White paper



serko

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What to expect from this report

AI adoption in business travel has moved beyond theory, and is well into practice with travel managers across the globe using it daily to transform their corporate travel programs.

To understand the current state of AI we surveyed 302 U.S. business travel managers in February 2026 about what is driving their adoption of AI, their attitudes toward agentic AI, as well as the concerns and opportunities they see ahead.

Here's what you can expect:

Proving AI's value:

How and why travel managers are tracking the ROI of AI investment.

From hesitation to adoption:

Addressing the key concerns holding programs back and how to build confidence in AI tools.

Getting the organisation ready:

What travel managers need to successfully implement AI inside their travel programs.

Bringing the data to life, you'll also hear real life examples from travel leaders who are successfully managing AI optimized programs. Ian Spearing, Director of Travel for Arcadis; Karen Hutchings, Founder of Cobb & Hutch Consulting and Jan Jacobsen, Global Procurement Director - Travel & Mobility for Accenture have all contributed to this paper.



The driving forces behind AI adoption

Travel managers are caught in a perfect storm.

According to GBTA's January 2026 Business Travel Industry Outlook Poll, 74% of travel buyers cite cost control as a top strategic priority, while 70% identify affordability as their primary concern, and 65% are concerned about pricing optimization. Meanwhile, traveler expectations continue to climb, and internal resources remain stretched.

AI is emerging as the answer to these challenges, helping corporate travel program leaders deliver more with less.



A lot of people use AI to go faster. I'm not necessarily keen on 'faster'. I'm just keen on smarter. If you just go for speed you can forget to take the time to sort, digest and analyze. AI frees our time to think.

Jan Jacobsen, Global Procurement Director

Our research reveals a notable shift in how travel managers are approaching AI and agentic AI adoption.

While cost savings topped the priority list of AI goals in our 2025 study, efficiency has now taken the lead.

The majority of respondents ranked operational efficiency above cost reduction, traveler experience, and data analysis. This suggests that doing more with limited existing resources has become a driving force in decision making.

"A travel program is highly transactional," says Karen Hutchings. "There are hundreds of thousands, or millions, of transactions. If you think about mature travel programs, where they may have negotiated the best rates, how do you bring value into your program? It's about influencing behaviour. But to rely on people to do that is actually a big effort."

This shift reflects a maturing understanding of AI's value and increasing focus on transforming how travel programs operate.

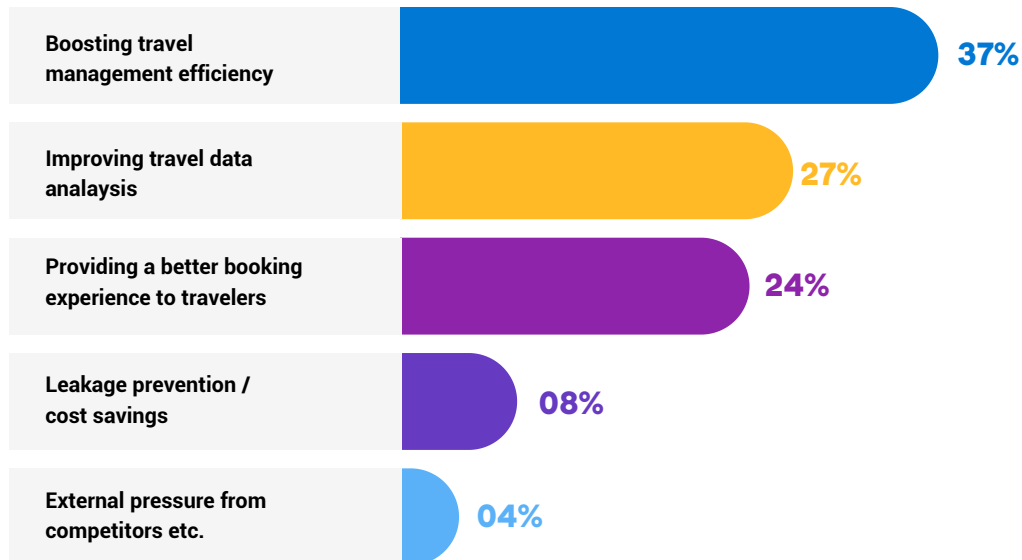


What you want to do doesn't change, but how you use tech to help you alters based on your goal. What does success look like to you? For me, it's that we're the consultative leaders in travel and are seen as a business enabler, rather than just a function.

Ian Spearing, Director of Travel

Goals of AI adoption

Q: Which of the following best describes your organization's primary motivation/goal in adopting AI technology for business travel management?



Beyond internal efficiencies and operational change, travel managers are looking outward for validation.

Peer adoption emerged as a powerful motivator in the qualitative responses, with respondents citing three key factors driving AI investment:

Seeing AI work elsewhere:

Real-world success stories from other travel programs give validation and confidence.

Hands-on testing:

Free trials and proof-of-concept projects that demonstrate value before commitment.

Industry momentum:

Evidence that others are gaining advantages through AI adoption.

These insights suggest that AI adoption in business travel has reached a tipping point, and we are moving beyond early adoption. Now it is about keeping pace with industry standards.

And when it comes to Agentic AI, the immediacy is even more profound with 82% of the travel managers surveyed saying they would consider implementing these tools right now.

“You need to get on the bus. Nothing is going to stop AI. It is only going to get bigger and add more value. Seize the opportunity,” urges Karen Hutchings.

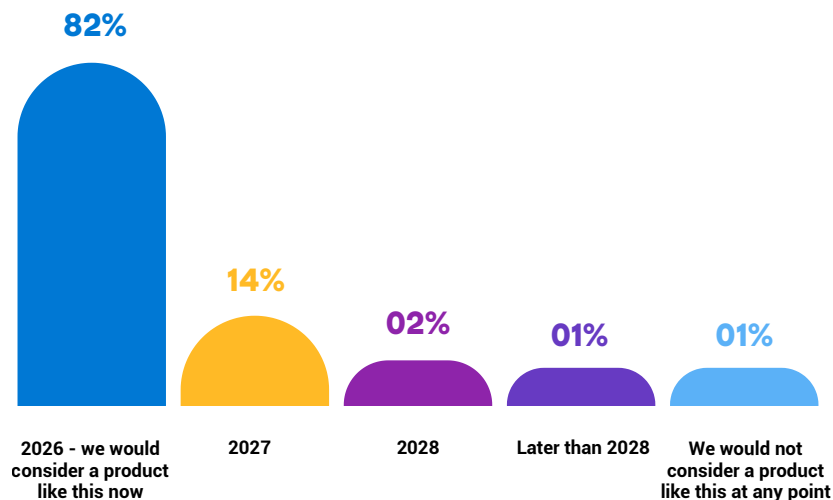
Key takeaway

Opportunity

Peer adoption is accelerating and AI capability is becoming part of the industry standard. Travel managers have a genuine opportunity to elevate their role. With stronger data visibility and automated execution, they can contribute strategic guidance across the organization.

Adoption timeline for agentic AI

At which of the following points do you believe your organisation would consider adopting a product that was offering this kind of agentic AI service?



Proving the value of AI in business travel

When it comes to value, the first thing to quantify is what this means to travel managers and their business. Travel managers are clear: AI must earn its place.

Among those surveyed, 33% said a strong demonstration of ROI would directly increase their likelihood of adopting agentic AI.

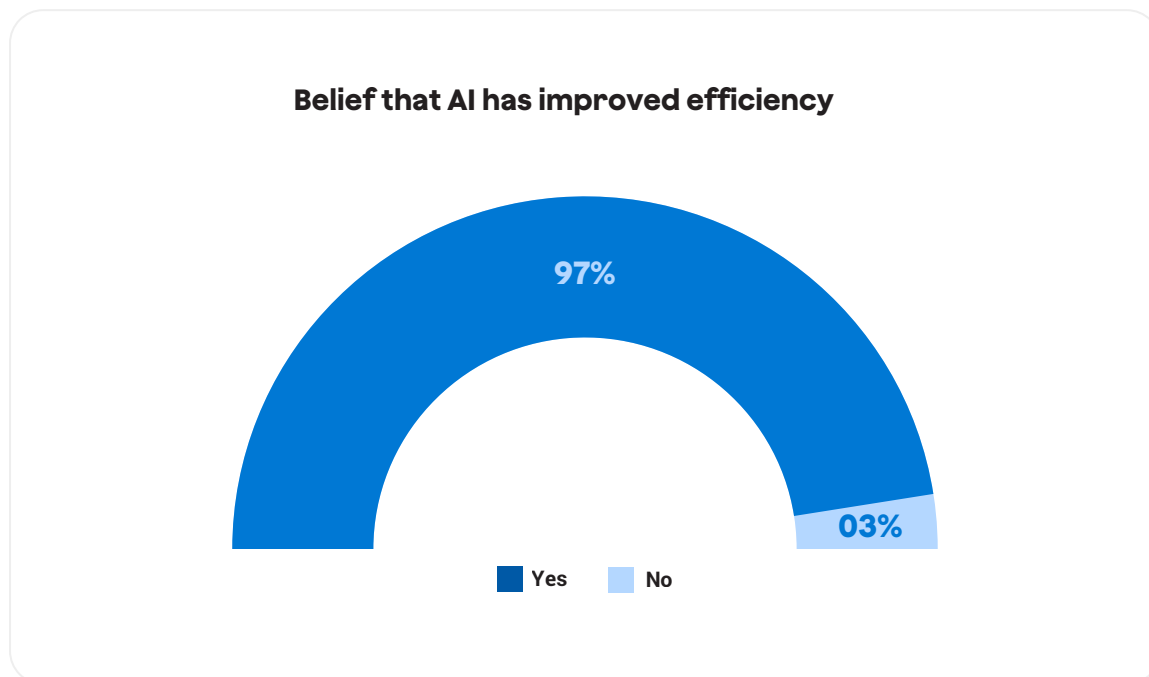
Being able to demonstrate value and ROI moves the business case for AI from 'nice to have' to essential. However, the definition of value varies from business to business, making this a tricky proposition to get right.

For Ian Spearing, value is about measured progression rather than instant transformation.

"Some people in the industry are trying to do everything in one go and expect it to solve everything straight away, but the foundational elements aren't there," he says. "Breaking it down into nice manageable chunks is the value proposition. It's about showing progression, not zero to one hundred."

Jan Jacobsen echoes this incremental approach. "We are building AI on top of the elements where we trust we have a solid 'core'. If you don't have the foundations, it is a slippery slope."

This phased approach pays off. Once the foundations are established, 97% of surveyed travel managers reported measurable efficiency improvements, with 99% planning to increase their AI usage.



The most common efficiency gains? Reduced administrative burden and improved booking service, both of which also enhance traveler experience. As one respondent put it,

“It’s all about the two Es – Efficiency and Experience.”

But if you’re still in need of hard facts to build a business case, there are ways to show tangible efficiency gains using AI technology.

“Take email inbox management for example,” explains Karen Hutchings. “You can do a time and motion study, as to how long it may take you to do something versus not having to do that any longer. When you put the business case together it’s easy – you’ve got the speed that comes in and then you’ve got the volume, so it’s very easy to equate that to a monetary value.”

While 39% of travel managers cite cost as the primary barrier to agentic AI adoption, the ROI potential is compelling. Unlike single-step automation, agentic AI can handle complex, multi-layered workflows, which are particularly valuable in business travel’s omni-channel environment.

Key takeaway

Build sustainably

The value and ROI of AI can be measured and demonstrated, but it requires the right foundations to deliver value and a phased approach. Start small, prove value incrementally, and build the business case that resonates with your stakeholders.



Agentic AI has the biggest benefit for travel. You can do multiple actions, not just one step at a time. It is a multi-layered approach, rather than a single source version. We are not a single source category. We are a complex, omni-channel category. Agentic AI gives us the opportunity to do multiple layers.

Jan Jacobsen, Global Procurement Director

From hesitation to adoption

AI adoption inevitably brings concerns. While 97% of surveyed travel managers list AI as a strategic priority, data security and risk management remain significant barriers to broader implementation.

Currently, 84% of the travel managers surveyed said they use generic AI tools, such as ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini, rather than proprietary AI tools designed for travel management. This preference raises important questions about security awareness, particularly the distinction between open-source and enterprise-grade AI.

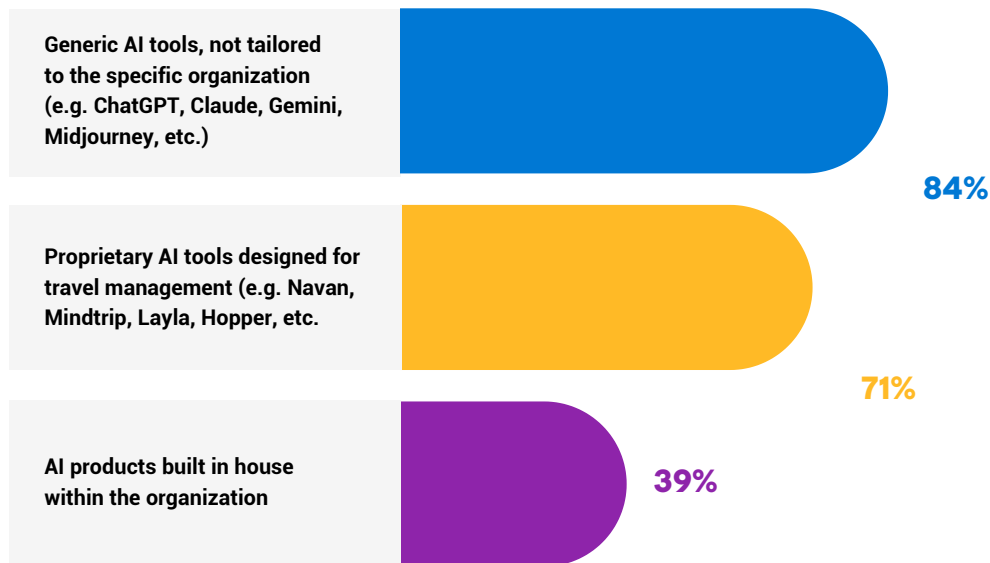
Comfort with AI varies significantly by application. Among travel managers surveyed:

- 92% feel confident using agentic AI for generating and reconciling expense reports
- 88% trust agentic AI to make flight changes

This suggests that lower-risk, administrative tasks are the natural starting point for building organizational confidence. This is echoed in the survey results, with pricing optimizations being listed as one of the highest current uses of AI in travel management currently.

Types of AI tool used

Q: Which of the following types of AI Products is your organization using?

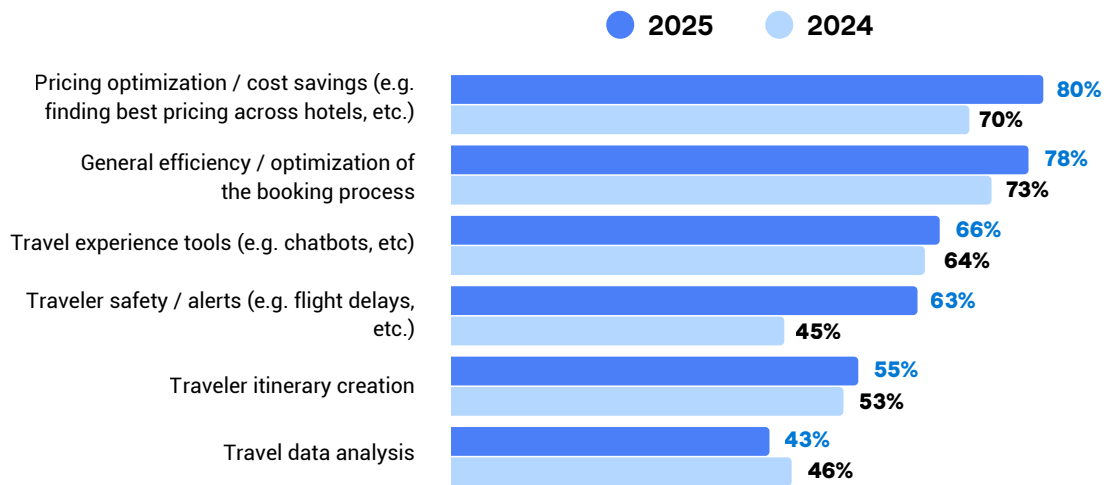




AI is an evolution. It is about access to information. At Accenture we have a closed source AI. All the information is from internally vetted sources. The content goes through controls, which builds confidence. You have to be mindful of the difference between that and open-source AI.

Jan Jacobsen, Global Procurement Director

Current uses for AI in travel management



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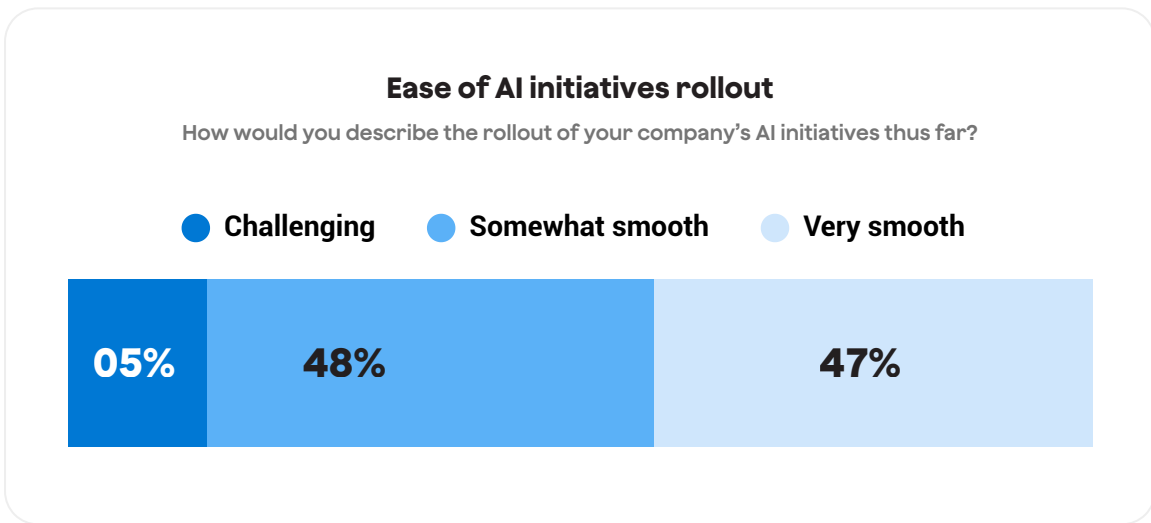
This means that travelers often don't know when AI is working behind the scenes. Travel managers can deploy efficiency tools without triggering end-user concerns about automation.

Concerns about AI accuracy are valid but primarily stem from implementation issues rather than the technology itself.

The survey found that whilst 47% of travel managers found AI initiative rollouts to be very smooth, 48% described them as 'somewhat smooth', suggesting room for improvement.

Trust in AI tools doesn't happen overnight, but travel managers can accelerate adoption by:

- Starting narrow, not wide: Begin with low-risk applications like travel team email management or expense processing
- Choosing the right tools: Understand the security difference between consumer AI and enterprise solutions
- Ensuring data quality: Clean, accurate source data is non-negotiable for reliable outputs
- Testing rigorously: User-facing applications require extensive validation before deployment
- Communicating selectively: Not every implementation needs to be visible to travelers



Key takeaway

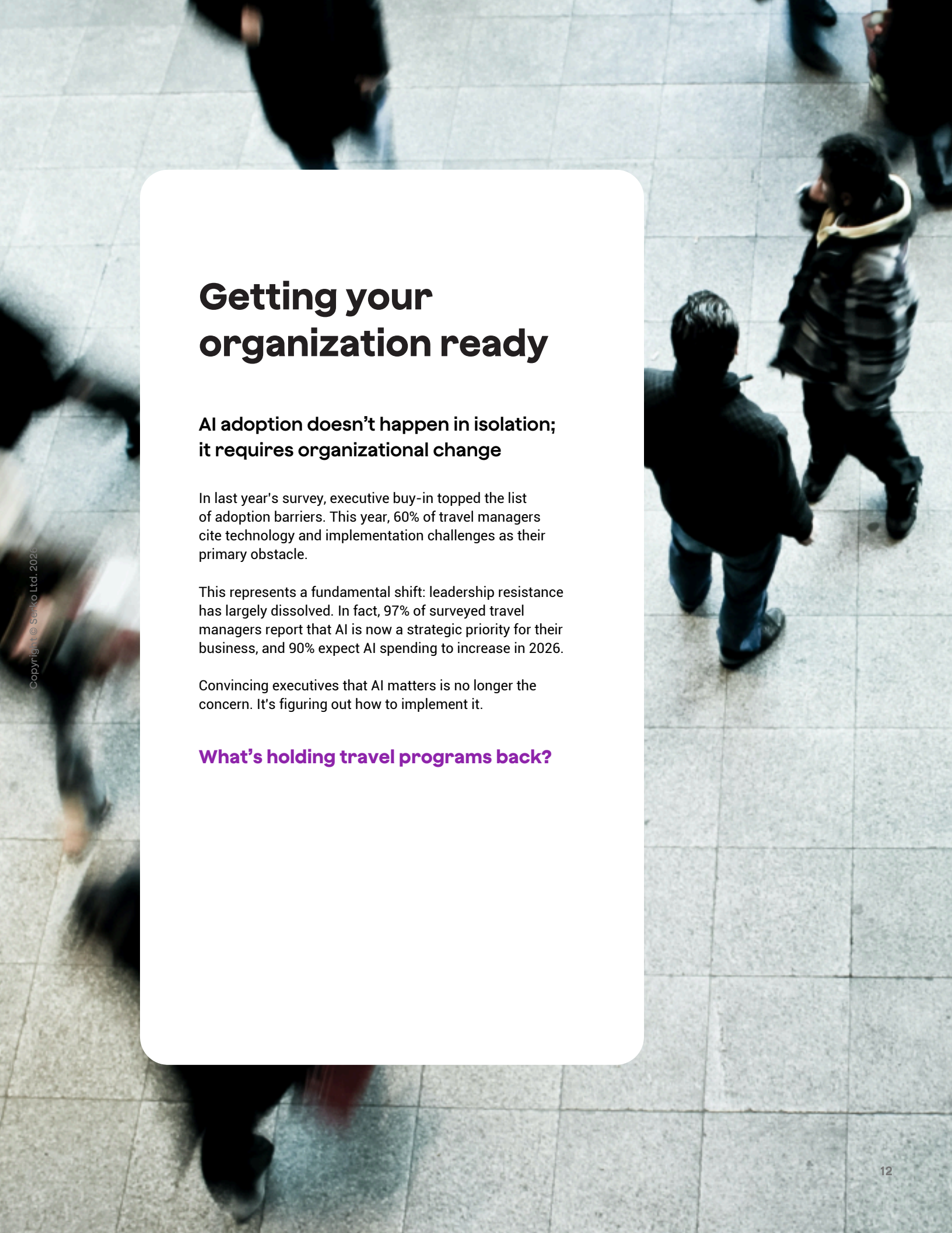
Trust and compliance

Trust and compliance are foundational requirements for successful AI adoption. Start with low-risk, high-impact applications, choose enterprise-grade tools, and build confidence through demonstrated results.



Accurate source data is essential. If you program it the wrong way, or it's used the wrong way, you can then get the wrong answer, which brings about a lack of trust. So, you need to ask, "what does good look like using AI?" and if it's user facing, then you need to do extensive testing.

Ian Spearing, Director of Travel



Getting your organization ready

AI adoption doesn't happen in isolation; it requires organizational change

In last year's survey, executive buy-in topped the list of adoption barriers. This year, 60% of travel managers cite technology and implementation challenges as their primary obstacle.

This represents a fundamental shift: leadership resistance has largely dissolved. In fact, 97% of surveyed travel managers report that AI is now a strategic priority for their business, and 90% expect AI spending to increase in 2026.

Convincing executives that AI matters is no longer the concern. It's figuring out how to implement it.

What's holding travel programs back?

Skills. Resource. Confidence.

What's holding travel programs back?

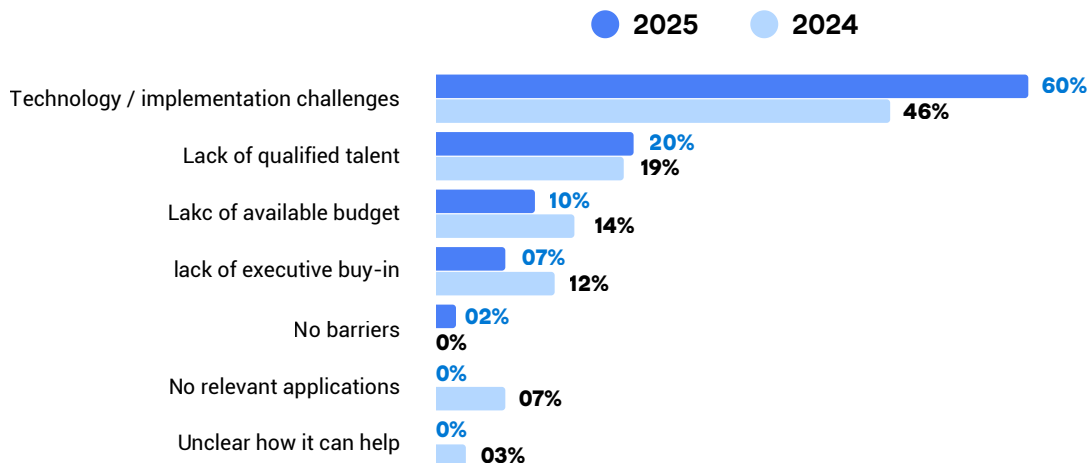
Karen Hutchings sees a clear pattern: "Every company is using AI somehow in their organisation. Anybody in a travel manager position – financial services, banks, pharmaceuticals – they all use robotics and AI within their organization. For whatever reason, the travel programs are playing catchup. But they could go and find resources internally and enable themselves to learn more about it."

Despite increased budgets and executive support, travel managers are still looking to their peers for validation.

One respondent summed up the challenge: "We need leadership approval, trained people, budget and reassurance from other companies in our industry." Many travel managers simply don't know where to start.

"You don't know what you don't know," reflects Jan Jacobsen. "When you don't have access to training and don't see the opportunities, you look at your To-Do list and ask, 'What am I going to do then?' And that, unfortunately is what is holding a lot of my industry colleagues back. They're looking at their To-Do list rather than thinking 'Ah! With AI I can focus on this area nobody is focusing on'."

Which of the following has been the biggest barrier to AI adoption for business travel management in the organization thus far?



This is a mindset shift, not just a technology challenge.

The gap between executive enthusiasm and practical implementation creates an opportunity. Travel managers who invest in education – be it through peer networks, vendor partnerships, internal IT collaboration, or industry resources – can position themselves to lead rather than follow.



I made it my business to learn. People are wary that their jobs will be taken, but it's the same as when the internet came. There will be different jobs. Don't bury your head in the sand. Don't stay in the weeds. If you learn what it can do, you can enhance the whole travel experience.

Karen Hutchings, Founder



Key takeaway

Travel managers as internal champions

The barriers to AI adoption have evolved from political to practical. With executive buy-in secured, success now depends on education, skills development, and a willingness to learn by doing. Travel managers who close their own knowledge gaps can become the internal champions their organizations need.

Where next on the AI journey

The pace of change is unprecedented so it is challenging to predict exactly what's next in the adoption of AI and agentic AI for business travel.

What we do know is that the appetite is there. AI is now a strategic priority for businesses, spend is increasing and confidence is growing. The barriers that previously inhibited adoption are being broken down, and people are watching keenly as the trailblazers set out their stalls.

For travel managers, there is a proven low-risk path: start narrow, prove value, and scale strategically. Begin with high-impact, low-risk applications, such as expense reconciliation, email inbox management and booking optimization.

Baseline existing processes to be able to demonstrate measurable ROI and build organizational confidence.

As these foundations solidify, agentic AI will unlock opportunities that go beyond efficiency. Already moving from concept to reality, agentic AI can autonomously manage complex traveler scenarios - rebooking disrupted itineraries, optimizing routes for cost and preference, delivering personalized recommendations at scale.

Organizational readiness, not technology, is holding AI adoption back.

The travel programs that thrive in the next few years will be those that treat AI adoption as a strategic capability.

That means investing in education, building internal expertise, and creating a culture where efficiency gains free travel managers to focus on what humans do best: strategic thinking, relationship building, and creating experiences that matter.

Key takeaway

AI is moving at pace

AI is no longer in the early-adoption stage. It is live and it is re-shaping the way travelers, travel managers and organizations view business travel. With an ever expanding set of commercial solution, the opportunities for travel managers to deliver clear and tangible program optimization have never been greater.

Final thoughts

We'd like to take this opportunity to thank temoji consulting for their independent insights in producing this report, and Insights Exchange for conducting the research on behalf of Serko. We'd also like to thank the industry experts who gave their time to share their insights and experience with us.

From our industry experts



Karen Hutchings

**Founder,
Cobb & Hutchings Consulting**

"It's about enhancing the whole experience, enhancing what you're doing, making you look better. That's the whole thing here. You don't raise your profile staying in the operational weeds, ticking excel spreadsheets or sending emails of things to be done. You elevate yourself by demonstrating the value you have delivered on the program, by using tech to help you become efficient."



Jan Jacobsen

**Global Procurement Director -
Travel & Mobility for Accenture**

"Booking travel should be simple. This is where AI can help us. I fully believe that every employee intends to do the right thing, but we need to allow them to do the right thing. AI is an enabler. People are not hired to book travel. Travel is the revenue enablement in order to bring the business home. It has to be simple. And for me, that is the proven value of AI."



Ian Spearing

**Director of Travel,
Arcadis**

"You don't need to wait for the big thing. Do something small that changes your program – it might be really big to you, but might be small to the industry, but it doesn't matter. You're on the journey then, and once you've done one thing you start getting confidence that it works and then you go, 'Let me push the boundary a bit more'. Unrealistic expectations are prohibiting deployment, that's the problem."

About us

About Serko

Serko is a travel technology company at the very forefront of the AI evolution in business travel. Building on decades of experience with our products GetThere, Zeno and Booking.com for Business, we are creating AI native solutions that will fundamentally transform the way people travel for work.

Listed on the New Zealand Stock Exchange Main Board (NZX:SKO) and Australian Securities Exchange (ASX:SKO), Serko is headquartered in New Zealand, with offices across the United States, India, China and Australia.

For more information, visit serko.com.

About temoji

temoji is a consulting and marketing specialist in the global corporate travel and meetings industry. We work with travel suppliers who thrive on continually improving how they serve their clients and travelers. temoji is the special ingredient to help travel suppliers connect deeper and deliver better to your clients, prospective customers and wider stakeholders. We're the secret sauce.

And we believe that every challenge faced by our industry is solvable through the creation of better "Social and Intellectual Capital".

For travel's emotive journey, find out more at temoji.co.uk.

Footnotes

1. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2307.03744>
2. <https://roomex.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Full-Report-Reinventing-the-journey.pdf>
3. <https://hai.stanford.edu/ai-index/2025-ai-index-report>

Appendix: Discover the data

Study details

We surveyed 302 US based business travel managers that:

- Were using AI in general, and / or generative AI within their organization
- Had a role which included some degree of direct responsibility for employee business travel management

Business profile

Who we spoke to

Work type

Full-time	98%
Part-time	2%
Other	Screened out

Business gen. AI use

Yes	100%
No	Screened out
Not sure	Screened out

Business revenue

Less than \$50 million	98%
\$50 million to \$100 million	2%
More than \$100 million	Screened out

Travel mgmt. responsibility

I work in this part of the business, and I have decision-making responsibility for some or all of its work	76%
I work in this part of the business, and delivering this function is part of my job	24%
I work in this part of the business, but I'm not involved in delivering this function	Screened out
I work in this part of the business, but have no responsibility for its work	Screened out
Not involved in this part of the business	Screened out

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