How Leaders Can Break Through The Employee Productivity Paradox With AI Agents

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Executive Summary

AI agents — that is, AI systems that can take action for enterprises or individuals — are set to transform how employees interact with technology. Instead of bouncing from tool to tool and manually stringing together the information needed to do their job, agents offer a unique opportunity: they can centrally deliver what employees need, when they need it. Building this future is imperative to not only improve employee productivity but also to gain competitive advantage in the market.[1] However, in the race to adopt this new way of working, many organisations have failed to ask themselves the most important question: are we ready? For most organisations, they're discovering too late that the answer is "No".

Although 62% of decision-makers want to have AI agents in their tools, 42% also said they had not been able to fully achieve their expected outcomes with generative AI (genAI)-enabled productivity tools alone. This has resulted in 78% of decision-makers struggling to see a real return on investment from their genAI-enabled employee productivity tools.

In April 2025, Slack commissioned Forrester Consulting to evaluate how organisations are currently driving employee productivity with AI agents and identify the barriers preventing their full adoption. Forrester conducted an online survey with 611 IT and technology decision-makers with responsibility for their organisation's strategy, selection and management of communication and collaboration tools.
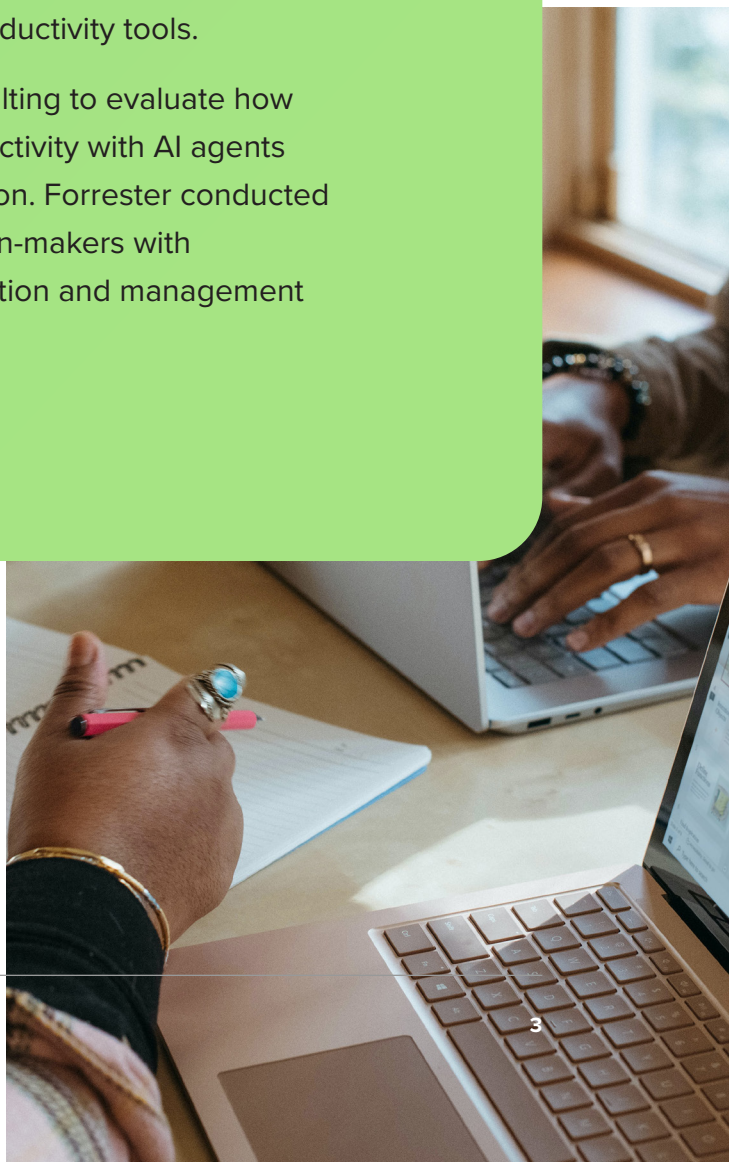
Key Findings

Employee productivity tools aren't productive. The average employee uses eight different tools to do their job. The result: 74% of decision-makers struggle with decentralised data; 63% report inconsistent processes; 54% describe repetitive work and 50% say the tools are too complex. In short, disconnected technology is slowing down productivity.

The current approach to AI reinforces disconnects. Individual genAI-enabled employee productivity solutions were poised to solve this paradox, but 78% of decision-makers report struggling to see any ROI. Forty-nine per cent say employees are unable to incorporate genAI into their work, and 45% find the outputs inaccurate. So far, genAI is unable to unify data to create actionable insights for employees and decrease the friction employees face.

AI agents can increase employee productivity. AI agents are able to provide a tool for employees to bridge the resources they need in a centralised way. As a result, most organisations (72%) believe employee productivity tools incorporating AI agents would be valuable or extremely valuable because they can make employees more efficient (66%) and allow them to make faster decisions (62%).

Organisations need to re-evaluate their approach to genAI solutions to boost employee productivity. To make AI agents impactful, firms must rethink their approach and find a solution — such as a work operating system — that can integrate genAI and AI agents with their employees' work.

Too Many Tools, Not Enough Productivity

Organisations are trying to gain an edge by equipping their employees with an extensive array of productivity tools, such as software applications and/ or platforms designed to facilitate work, assuming that is the way to increase their employees' productivity. Based on our study, they are actually making productivity *worse*. With a plethora of productivity tools at their disposal, employees are overwhelmed by them and are now faced with unnecessary complexity in their everyday job. After surveying 611 decision-makers, we found that:

- **Eight out of 10 employee productivity tools are used on a daily basis.** Decision-makers thought that if they provided their employees with many different productivity tools, their employees would become more efficient. On average, organisations offer 10 discrete employee productivity tools today, with eight of those being used daily.

- **But these tools are not improving employees' overall productivity.** Instead of enhancing their employees' productivity, the tools are actually doing the opposite. Most respondents agree or strongly agree that their employees still have to use different platforms to find information they need (74%) and that they still have to spend a significant amount of time doing repetitive tasks (54%). Adding to these challenges, the tools themselves are too complex and require extensive training to use them (50%) (see Figure 1).
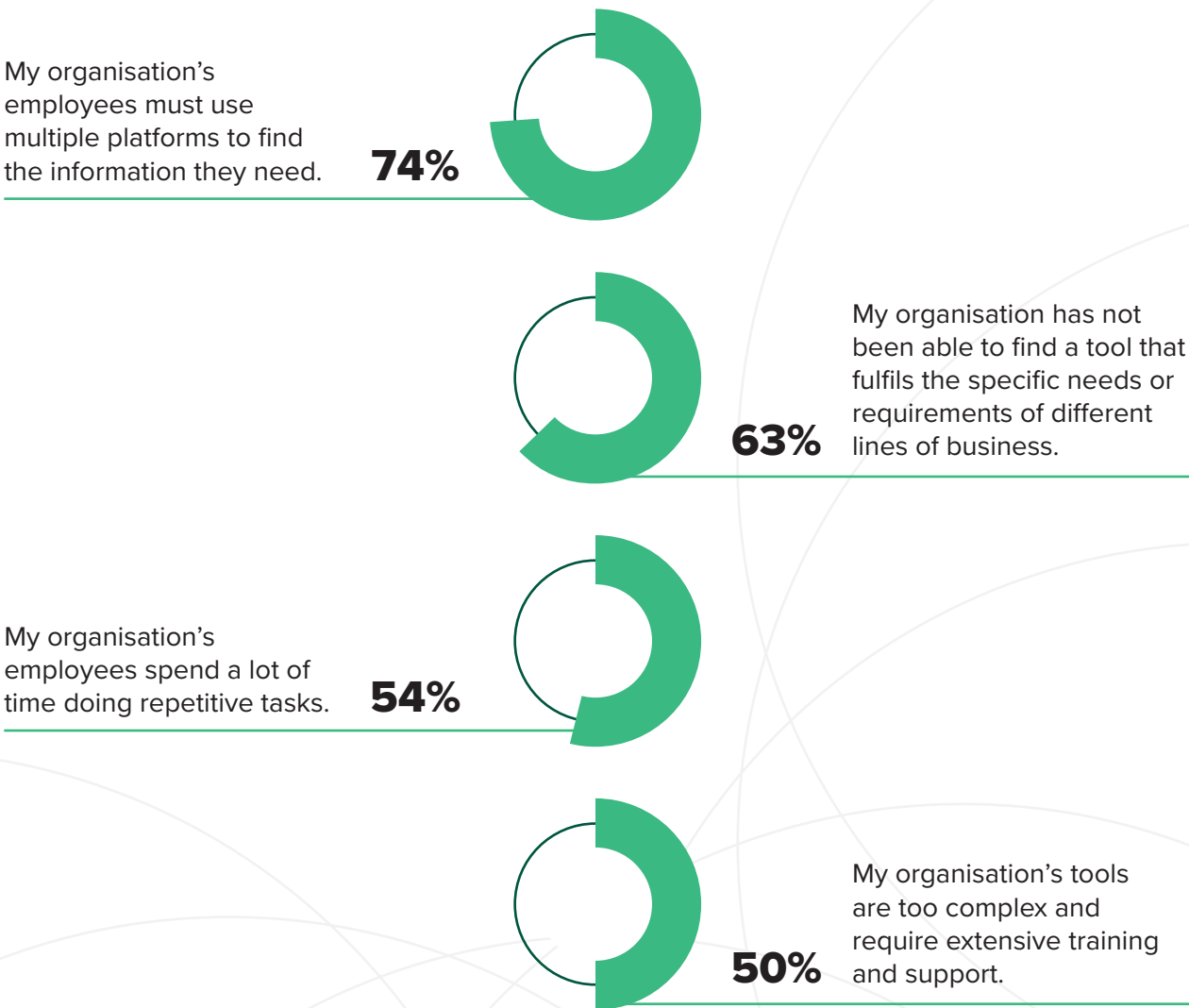
74%

of respondents agree or strongly agree that their employees must use multiple platforms to find the information they need.

FIGURE 1

Current Employee Productivity Tools Hinder Productivity

(Showing "Agree" and "Strongly Agree")

My organisation's employees must use multiple platforms to find the information they need. **74%**

My organisation has not been able to find a tool that fulfils the specific needs or requirements of different lines of business. **63%**

My organisation's employees spend a lot of time doing repetitive tasks. **54%**

My organisation's tools are too complex and require extensive training and support. **50%**

Base: Variable IT and tech decision-makers with responsibility over their organisation's strategy, selection and management of communication and collaboration tools
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Slack, March 2025

Organisations Embrace GenAI For Boosting Productivity, But They Struggle To See Real Returns

Because the current productivity tools are not improving employee productivity, decision-makers are turning to genAI (a set of technologies and techniques that generate new content) with the assumption that genAI would help their employees become more productive and would therefore yield positive business outcomes. However, the reality was not what they had expected. We found that:

- **Most firms are turning to genAI to help.** Faced with employee productivity issues, decision-makers turned to genAI in hopes of finding a solution to the productivity challenge. At least 50% say they are ramping up their employees' knowledge and skills on genAI and have started to leverage genAI at their organisation to automate and streamline operations. And most firms (70%) are using existing vendor-embedded genAI productivity capabilities to help them implement genAI.

- **They are expecting their genAI-enabled productivity tools to make their employees more productive.** Organisations are trying to fix the productivity issue by adding genAI-enabled productivity tools (that is, collaboration tools with genAI capabilities) to their already large technology stack to boost productivity, with 50% expecting their employees to use genAI-enabled employee productivity tools by next year. And they have high expectations for these tools: both SMB and enterprise firms are also expecting their employees to be 40% more productive next year (vs 34% today). These are the expectations for (see Figure 2).

- **But they are still trying to get the fundamentals of genAI right.** While organisations strive to equip their employees with genAI-enabled employee productivity tools, a more pressing issue looms. Most firms (69%) are still trying to get genAI "right", and 65% are struggling to turn genAI insights into automated actions. Consequently, most organisations (78%) are struggling to see a real return on investment from their genAI-

enabled employee productivity tools. The decisions made by leaders have also had a direct impact on employees on an individual level.
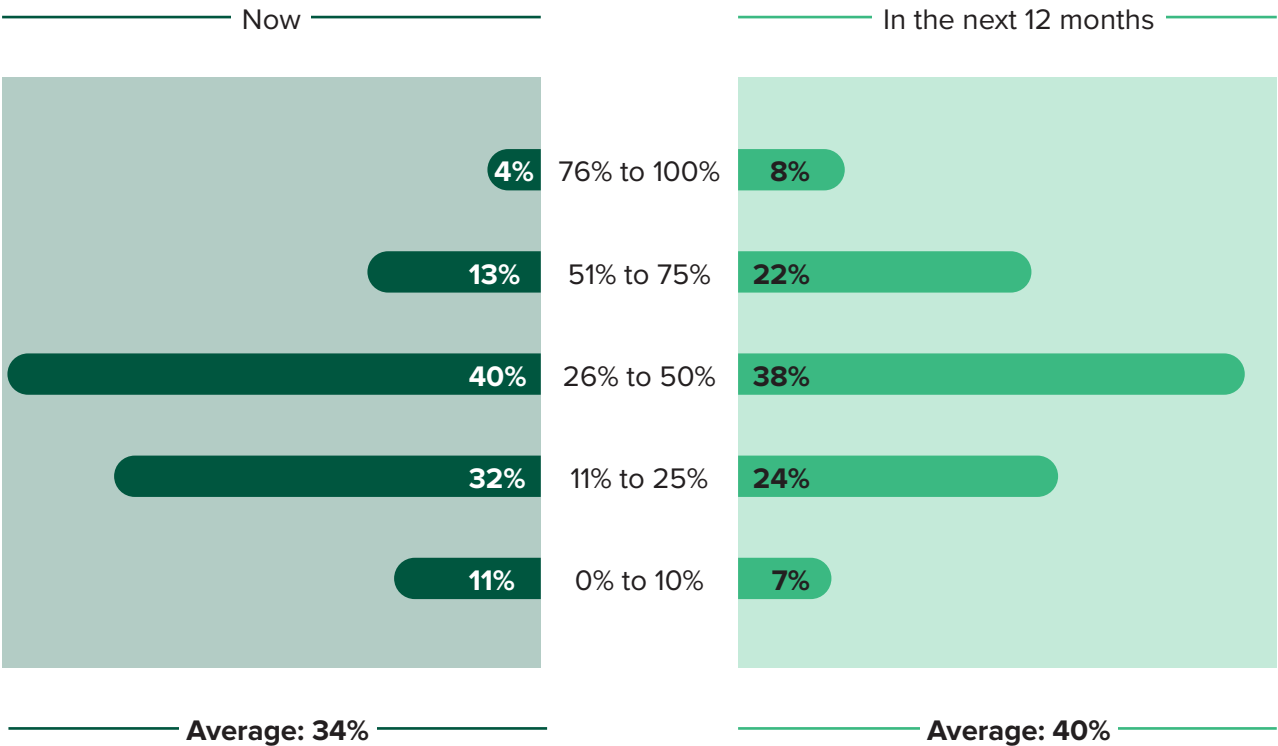
78%

of respondents are struggling to see a real return on investment from their genAI-enabled employee productivity tools.

FIGURE 2

How Organisations Expect GenAI-Enabled Productivity Tools To Increase Employee Productivity

Now		In the next 12 months
4%	76% to 100%	8%
13%	51% to 75%	22%
40%	26% to 50%	38%
32%	11% to 25%	24%
11%	0% to 10%	7%
Average: 34%		**Average: 40%**

Base: 611 IT and tech decision-makers with responsibility over their organisation's strategy, selection and management of communication and collaboration tools
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Slack, March 2025

GenAI Alone Will Not Boost Employee Productivity

Not only do organisations lack an adequate genAI strategy in place, their employees are also not fully equipped to use the genAI-enabled productivity tools offered. This leads to a struggle to meet critical key performance indicators. We found that:

- **Too many employees are not yet proficient with genAI.** It's no surprise that organisations struggle to see a real return on their investment from genAI-enabled productivity tools when nearly half of decision-makers say they do not have enough skilled workers to optimise or build genAI (45%); moreover, their employees lack the necessary genAI skills (37%).

- **Lack of genAI skills prevents employees from using the genAI-enabled employee productivity tools to their fullest potential.** Since employees lack the genAI skills needed to operate genAI-enabled productivity tools, most are unable to effectively leverage genAI in their daily work (49%), and say that genAI tools do not integrate well into their everyday work (39%). As a result, 42% of decision-makers say the genAI-enabled employee productivity tools have not been able to achieve their expected outcomes. This disconnect makes it harder for employees to efficiently accomplish tasks and make faster decisions.

> Almost half **(49%)** of respondents are unable to effectively leverage genAI in their daily work.

- **The challenges lead to a struggle to meet critical key performance indicators (KPI's).** The genAI issues that employees encounter lead to firms struggling to meet critical KPI's such as customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction and most importantly, ROI (see Figure 3). Organisations must realise that simply adding point-in-time genAI solutions will not help them achieve their business outcomes. Instead, decision-makers must re-evaluate their current approach to employee productivity if they want to see their expected results. Technology investments like genAI

play a significant enabling role, but humans significantly influence the success or failure of these investments as well.[2]

FIGURE 3

Top KPI's Organisations Struggle To Meet

(Showing top six results)

30%
Customer satisfaction/
user satisfaction

30%
ROI

25%
Employee satisfaction

17%
Task accuracy/error rate

15%
Domain cost reduction

14%
Time to market

Base: 611 IT and tech decision-makers with responsibility over their organisation's strategy, selection and management of communication and collaboration tools
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Slack, March 2025

It is now apparent that the current genAI approach creates a significant disconnect between employees and their genAI-enabled employee productivity tools. To close the gap and increase the impact of AI agents for employees, decision-makers must rethink their genAI approach and find a solution (such as a work operating system) that can unify different data sources to help employees work better and find what they need faster. We found that:

- **Productivity tools with AI agents can lead to increased productivity and faster decision-making.** As genAI moves from simply an AI technology that interacts with humans through natural language to agentic AI, its evolution will play a significant role in improving employee productivity.[3] Firms are hoping that genAI-enabled employee productivity tools with AI agents will increase employee efficiency (66%), enable faster decision-making (62%) and improve cross-team automation (52%) (see Figure 4).

72%

of respondents state that they would find tools that had AI agents to be **valuable to extremely valuable**.

FIGURE 4

Top Benefits Organisations Expect To See From GenAI-Enabled Productivity Tools With AI Agents

(Showing top six results)

Increased employee efficiency/productivity
66%

Faster decision-making
62%

Improved cross-team automation
52%

Decreased number of platforms employees need to use to find information
51%

Improved data integration with other tools
45%

Increased focus time for employees to do strategic and/or creative work
43%

- **Enhancing employee productivity requires organisations to re-evaluate their approach to genAI solutions.** Most decision-makers are eager to embrace AI agents and are keenly interested in seeing how they can enhance employee productivity. Most want AI agents that can make decisions autonomously when required (62%) and would find their tools that had AI agents to be valuable or extremely valuable (72%) (see Figure 5). But for AI agents to pave the way for more advanced general-purpose AI-based applications and unlock their key business value, organisations must be strategic with their current genAI approach and find a solution that can effectively integrate data, genAI and AI agents so employees can work more productively. Without a clear strategy, organisations will run into security risk and inefficiency.

FIGURE 5

"How valuable would your organisation's genAI-enabled employee productivity tools be if they also had AI agents?"

- Extremely valuable
- Valuable
- Somewhat valuable
- Not valuable
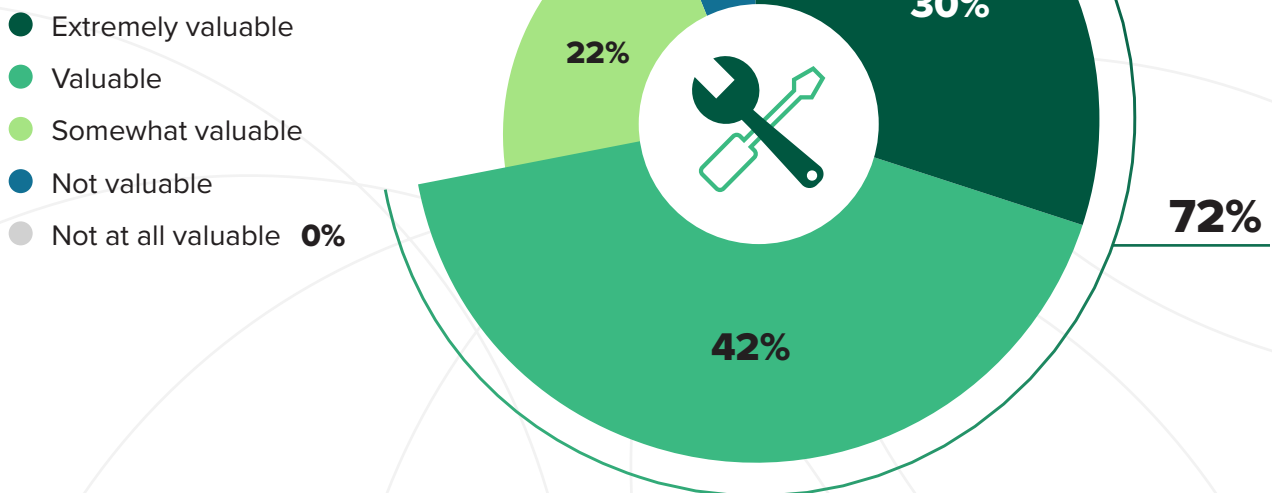- Not at all valuable **0%**

6%

30%

22%

42%

72%

Base: 569 IT and tech decision-makers with responsibility over their organisation's strategy, selection and management of communication and collaboration tools
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Slack, March 2025

Key Recommendations

Forrester's in-depth survey of technology decision-makers about genAI-enabled employee productivity tools yielded several important recommendations:

Start small with agents. Initial adoption of genAI-enabled employee productivity tools like agents lags because employees can't use them effectively. Often, they're just unclear about how it could improve their day-to-day work. Limiting your scope to repetitive employee tasks not only brings immediate value but also allows for more time to integrate data sources and upskill employees on genAI. Picking 10 tasks in a given domain or department should be the extent of your preliminary implementation — then, you can iteratively scale from there.

Centralise your data. Decentralised data silos make it impossible for any genAI system — including agents — to succeed. Simply put, silos prevent agents from understanding the business context around data. To ensure your agents have the visibility they need, embrace a solution that can serve as a significant repository of data as well as centralise access to different data sources. Knowledge, workflows, records and even decisioning logic must be unified to ground your agent. Vendors who can serve as this trusted partner and assist with ongoing integration must be prioritised.

Prioritise prebuilt and no-code agent builders. Integration into workflows and data connections is critical for user success. Rather than building, maintaining and carefully integrating your own AI agent pipeline, prebuilt solutions allow you to focus instead on operationalising business logic, cleaning data, optimising performance and refining the user experience.

Plan for citizen development and upskilling. Most adopters plan to train employees how to better leverage genAI — this is an excellent first step. The next should be preparing for citizen development of agents. As you centralise data and select a low-code solution, allow employees to experiment. Let them build simple agents to understand how they function. This approach will prepare a broader builder base while also enabling reallocation of your technical resources to build reusable patterns, implement guardrails against agent use in high-risk functions (such as tasks involving financial or healthcare decision-making), and ultimately enable your organisation to achieve the promise of agents — to free employees from drudgery, empower organisations to scale their capacity and ultimately delight customers.

Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester conducted an online survey of 611 respondents at the senior management level and above who are responsible for their organisation's strategy, selection and management of communication and collaboration tools. Respondents were offered a small incentive as a thank-you for the time spent on the survey. The study began in March 2025 and was completed in April 2025.

Appendix B: Demographics

COUNTRY	
United States	**17%**
France	**17%**
Japan	**17%**
Germany	**17%**
United Kingdom	**16%**
Australia	**16%**

COMPANY SIZE	
1 to 200 employees	**5%**
201 to 1,000 employees	**39%**
1,001 to 4,500 employees	**56%**

DEPARTMENT	
IT/technology	**100%**

CURRENT POSITION	
Executive management	**35%**
Senior management	**65%**

GEN-AI ADOPTION	
Enterprisewide: Operationalising genAI across the entire enterprise	**30%**
Scaling: Finding new use cases to apply existing genAI programs	**45%**
Piloting: Using genAI for a few discrete use cases for a limited number of users	**25%**

INDUSTRY (SHOWING TOP 6)	
Financial services and/or insurance	**9%**
Consumer product goods and/ or manufacturing	**7%**
Manufacturing and materials	**6%**
Retail	**6%**
Construction	**6%**
Healthcare	**5%**

PLANS TO INVEST IN GENAI-ENABLED EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY TOOLS	
Invested and currently expanding	**26%**
Invested but no immediate plans to expand	**31%**
Currently investing	**43%**

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Appendix C: Endnotes

[1] Source: [Agentic AI Is Rising And Will Reforge Businesses That Embrace It](#), Forrester Research Inc., March 7, 2025.

[2] Source: [How To Drive Employee Productivity With Generative AI](#), Forrester Research Inc., 11 March, 2024.

[3] Source: [With Agentic AI, Generative AI Is Evolving From Words To Actions](#), Forrester Research Inc., August 8, 2024.

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