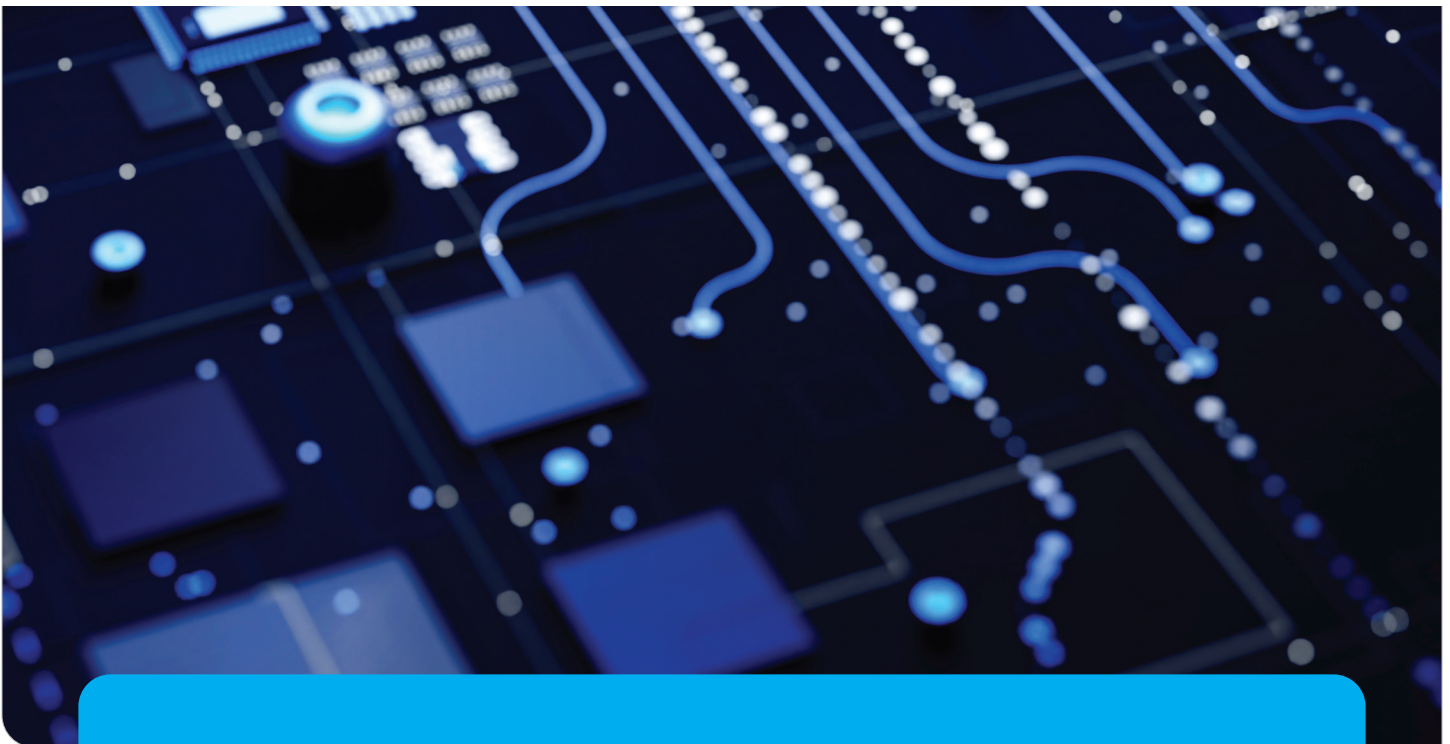


AI Adoption in the Printing Industry:

From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage



Sponsored by Print ePS and
Koenig & Bauer Kyana



WHO WE ARE



Alliance Insights, formerly NAPCO Research, is the premier source of market intelligence, strategic consulting, and business development services for the printing, packaging, publishing, marketing, retail, nonprofit, and promotional products industries. Now operating as part of PRINTING United Alliance, we continue to deliver data-driven insights, actionable research, and expert analysis to help organizations make informed decisions and drive growth. With access to a highly engaged audience of 550,000+ professionals, Alliance Insights provides unparalleled support for companies seeking to strengthen market positioning, amplify thought leadership, and unlock new opportunities.



eProductivity Software (ePS) is a global leader in transformational technology dedicated to the print and packaging industries. The print division, Print ePS, offers integrated, automated, and purpose-built software for MIS/ERP, web-to-print, and other print-industry point solutions. The print division, Print ePS, offers integrated, automated, and purpose-built software for MIS/ERP, web-to-print, and other print-industry point solutions. These solutions are designed to drive revenue growth, reduce the cost of sales and manufacturing, and empower print companies of all sizes to successfully transform through workflow automation.

Learn more at: <https://printepssw.com/>

KOENIG & BAUER

Koenig & Bauer Kyana GmbH is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Koenig & Bauer, spun off from the former Digital Unit. The company acts as a software innovation hub, focusing on the development of digital business models and data- and AI-based solutions for the printing and packaging industry. The goal is to drive digital transformation, enhance customer productivity and efficiency, and provide a holistic, customer-centric solution approach.

Learn more at: <https://digitalisation.koenig-bauer.com/en/>

Staying on top of industry trends is essential to your success.

Throughout the year, PRINTING United Alliance's research team creates top-notch reports for the industry and works with consultancies to conduct commissioned research.

PRINTING United Alliance members get unlimited access to the resulting reports that reflect the scope of the printing industry.

Visit: <https://www.printing.org/library/business-excellence/economics-forecasting/industry-reports>

If you have any questions, please contact researchteam@printing.org.

FOREWORD

The printing industry stands at a pivotal crossroads, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer a distant concept—it is reshaping how we work today. As this report demonstrates, AI is moving swiftly from experimentation to execution, delivering measurable gains in efficiency, responsiveness, and creativity across every segment of our industry.

At PRINTING United Alliance, we believe AI represents not only a powerful set of tools, but a strategic imperative for the future of printing. Our role as the largest and most influential printing association in North America is to ensure that our members and the broader community have access to the insights, resources, and programs they need to thrive in this new era. From research such as this study, to hands-on education through iLEARNING+, to new forums, pavilions, and networking opportunities at PRINTING United Expo, we are committed to equipping the industry with trusted guidance and actionable pathways for AI adoption.

What this research makes clear is that success in AI is not defined by technology alone. It requires leadership, cultural readiness, and transparency with clients. Early adopters are already reaping the rewards, and those who hesitate risk falling behind. As your association, our promise is to be a partner at every stage of this journey—demystifying AI, championing ethical and effective practices, and ensuring that all printers, regardless of size or specialty, have a place in this transformation.

Together, we have an extraordinary opportunity: to harness AI not just to work faster, but to work smarter, build stronger relationships with customers, and create a more resilient, competitive printing industry.

We've led on convergence; we've led with our consolidated “one roof” approach; and now we are leading with PRINTING AI. On behalf of PRINTING United Alliance, I encourage you to explore the findings of this study and join us in shaping the future of print through AI.

Mark Subers

Chief Innovation Officer
PRINTING United Alliance

Nathan Safran

Vice President, Research
PRINTING United Alliance

Lisa Cross

Principal Analyst
PRINTING United Alliance

Table of Contents

- Introduction 6
- The State of AI in Printing.....7
- AI Viewed as Critical to Competitiveness..... 8
- AI Applications 9
- Benefits and ROI in Action.....12
- Barriers to Adoption14
- Leaders vs. Laggards.....16
 - Oversight Defines Success.....16
 - AI Leaders Experience More Benefits.....17
- Workforce and Cultural Implications.....18
 - Transparency With Clients19
- Conclusion & Recommendations.....20
 - A Pivotal Moment for Printing20
 - Key Insights.....20
 - Recommendations for Print Leaders.....20
 - The Strategic Imperative.....21
- Appendix: Interview Summaries21
 - Commercial Printers21
 - 1. Transforming the Front End: Using AI to Streamline Operations21
 - 2. Starting Small, Thinking Big: How a Small Commercial Printer is Making AI Work.....23
 - 3. Exploring AI Opportunities in On-Demand Book Manufacturing.....23
 - 4. AI With Intention: How a Mid-Sized Commercial Printer is Strategically Building an AI-Powered Future24
 - 5. AI Integration in Commercial Printing: A Candid Interview on Early Adoption, Benefits, And Concerns.....24
 - 6. Blueprint For Adoption: How a Commercial Printer Is Using AI To Amplify Productivity And Client Value.....25
 - 7. AI Isn't Going To Bite You: How One Commercial Printer Is Demystifying Artificial Intelligence25
 - 8. A Measured Path to Innovation: How a Commercial Printer Is Exploring AI to Save Time and Spark Efficiency.....26
 - Graphics And Signs27
 - 1. Scaling Smarter: How a Graphic and Sign Printer is Integrating AI for Speed, Strategy, and Growth27
 - 2. Building Trust, Gaining Speed: How A Leading Graphic And Sign Printer is Using AI to Advance Customer Experience and Forecasting27
 - 3. From Design to Data: How a Graphic And Sign Printer Is Embedding AI Across The Business28
 - Apparel Decorators29
 - 1. Put Your Toe In: How an Apparel Decorator is Using AI to Advance Strategy, Hiring, and Marketing29
 - 2. Augment, Don't Replace: A Measured AI Journey in Apparel Decoration30
 - 3. Efficiency First: How a Mid-Sized Apparel Decorator is Using AI to Streamline Operations.....30
 - 4. Start Small, Think Big: How a Boutique Apparel Decorator is Using AI to Boost Efficiency and Transparency....31
 - 5. Exploring AI One Thread At a Time: How a Mid-Sized Apparel Decorator is Finding Value in Artificial Intelligence.....31

INTRODUCTION

The printing industry is at a pivotal moment. For decades, competitive advantage came from faster presses, cheaper inputs, or more efficient workflows. Today, however, technology is reshaping the printing industry in a different way. Artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer just an emerging concept; it is beginning to redefine how printers manage operations, communicate with customers, and plan for the future.

Alliance Insights conducted a major study to understand how print service providers (PSPs) are adopting AI. The research study combines the results of an industry-wide survey of more than 300 companies with in-depth interviews with 16 company executives across print segments including commercial printing, sign and graphics, book manufacturing, and apparel decoration.

Key research findings include:

- 85% of respondents believe AI is critical to future competitiveness, and 83% view it as a source of new opportunities.
- Most adoption remains decentralized, driven by individual champions or departments rather than enterprise-wide strategy.
- Benefits of AI most cited: production efficiency (39%), quality and consistency (33%), and freeing staff from repetitive tasks (30%).
- Key AI barriers include lack of expertise (57%), defining best use cases (56%), and system integration challenges (44%).

The research findings indicate that while most printers are still early in their AI journey, adoption is real, measurable, and accelerating. Importantly, AI is not just hype; it is already producing tangible benefits, from faster estimating and invoicing to more effective marketing and sales outreach. For executives, the message of the study is simple: AI is becoming an operational necessity and a competitive differentiator.

THE STATE OF AI IN PRINTING

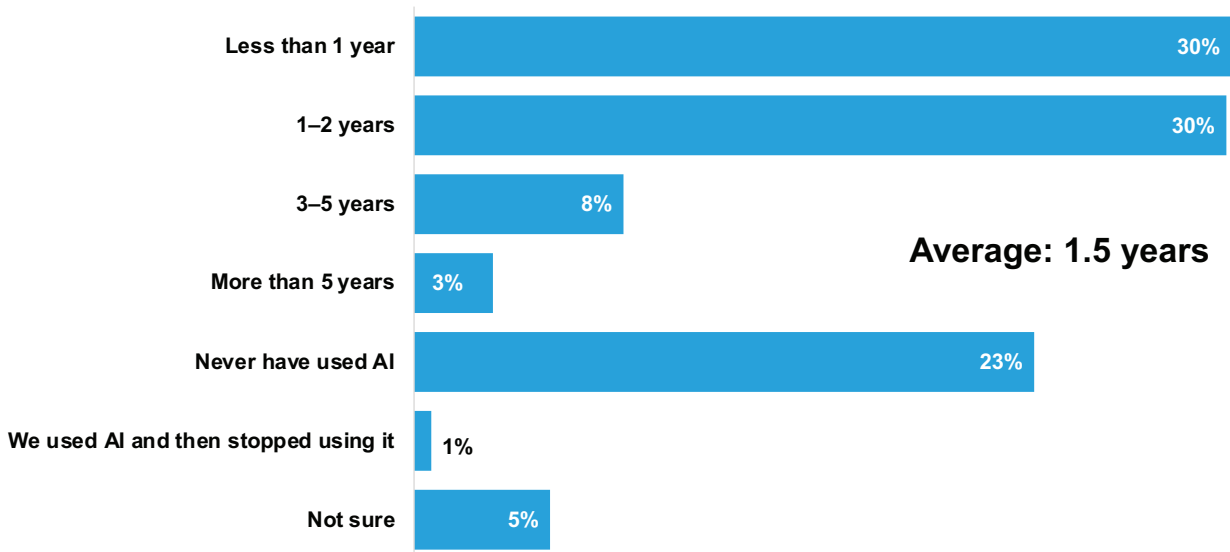
Most companies participating in the study reported moving beyond experimentation. Tools like ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Firefly, and MidJourney are now being deployed in meaningful ways. However, adoption is rarely centralized. Instead, it tends to begin with a curious manager, a tech-savvy employee, or an owner experimenting with new tools and then spreading those practices throughout the organization.

This decentralized approach has produced both successes and challenges. On one hand, companies are seeing immediate wins in efficiency and creativity. On the other hand, most still lack a formal strategy, as only 7% of surveyed firms have a defined AI roadmap.

Most companies have moved beyond the exploratory stage. As shown in **Figure 1**, more than two-thirds of print providers are already using AI in some form, with companies reporting having used AI for a year and a half on average.

Figure 1: AI Use in Printing Operations

Q. How long has your organization been using AI in any aspect of your operation, whether embedded in equipment and software purchased from an OEM or as independent/stand-alone applications? Select one



n=221 Print Providers

Source: AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage, Alliance Insights 2025



AI VIEWED AS CRITICAL TO COMPETITIVENESS

Survey respondents indicated widespread belief in AI's value and potential. As shown in **Figure 2**, 85% agree that AI is critical to maintaining competitiveness, and 83% believe it will open new opportunities for growth. These numbers reflect an industry that understands the stakes: printers that successfully integrate AI will be better positioned to thrive in the future.

The executive interviews underscore this sentiment. One commercial printer put it bluntly: "If you're not doing it [AI], you're either ready to retire or should move on." For this executive, AI adoption was not just a technical choice, but a signal of leadership's commitment to the future.

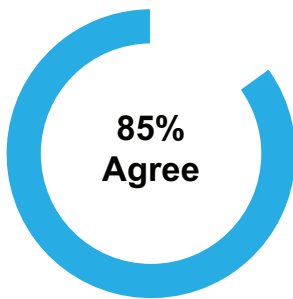
An apparel decorator echoed the same urgency, warning: "In three to five years, if you're not ready, you won't survive in this industry." These perspectives highlight how closely executives are tying AI readiness to long-term viability.

Further, 42% of survey respondents believe companies without AI will fail. This suggests that while the sense of urgency is real, not all firms grasp how quickly competitive gaps can widen. In practice, early adopters are already reporting measurable gains in efficiency and customer responsiveness. That means even if AI doesn't immediately force weaker competitors out of the market, it is quietly shifting the advantage toward those who embrace it.

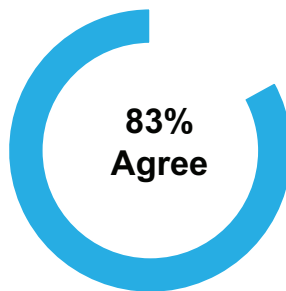
Figure 2: Importance of AI to Competitiveness

Q. What is your level of agreement with the following statements?

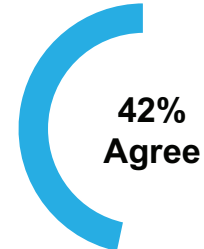
AI is critical to staying competitive in print



AI unlocks new business opportunities for us



Firms without AI will not survive



n=178 Print Providers

Source: AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage, Alliance Insights 2025



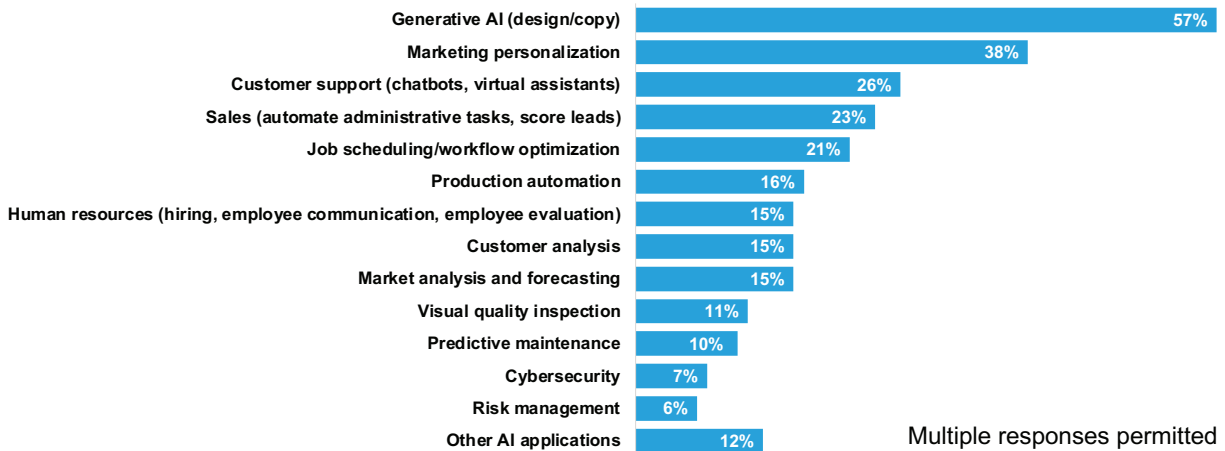
AI APPLICATIONS

Survey results show that printing companies are not waiting for “perfect” AI solutions and are applying AI where it makes the most immediate difference. Early adoption is concentrated on customer-facing and creative functions, but momentum is steadily expanding into estimating, prepress, and even production workflows. In many cases, companies start with low-risk, high-visibility applications that deliver quick wins, then move into more complex integrations as confidence grows.

The most common AI entry point is content generation and design. As shown in **Figure 3**, 57% of respondents are using generative AI for copy and design tasks, while 38% apply it to marketing personalization. These are areas where speed and creativity are paramount, and AI provides an immediate productivity lift. Interviews confirmed this trend. Across commercial, apparel, and graphics firms, executives consistently described AI-driven content creation as their “first big win.” For small to mid-sized companies in particular, AI has become the equivalent of an always-available creative assistant for drafting blogs, producing design variations, or helping brainstorm campaign ideas at a fraction of the time.

Figure 3: AI Applications

Q. Which of the following AI applications are currently used in your organization? Select all that apply



Multiple responses permitted

n=201 Print Providers

Source: AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage, Alliance Insights 2025



While many respondents report first experimenting with AI in creative or customer-facing tasks, some of the most powerful gains are emerging in core operational functions like estimating and prepress. These areas directly affect turnaround time, accuracy, and customer satisfaction, making them prime targets for early AI investment. Here are examples from the interviews conducted:

■ Faster, More Accurate Shipping Estimates

Commercial Printer (\$20 million to \$40 million in annual revenue):

- Deployed AI for shipping estimates, cutting the process from four hours to just two minutes.
- Accuracy was consistently within 5% of manual calculations, allowing staff to deliver faster, more reliable quotes.
- **Benefit:** Improved responsiveness and reduced manual labor, creating a competitive edge in winning jobs.

■ **Cutting Job Setup Time**

Commercial Printer (\$20 million to \$40 million in annual revenue):

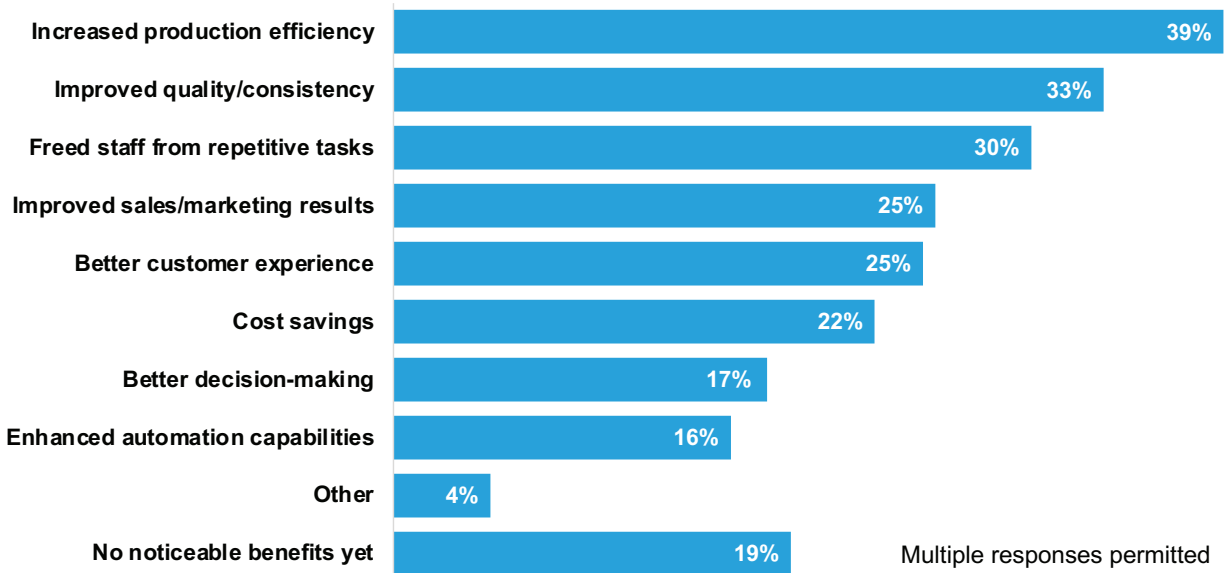
- Implemented AI-driven job quoting to streamline onboarding of new work.
- Reduced hours of setup time, accelerating production start and minimizing administrative bottlenecks.
- **Benefit:** Shortened cycle times from inquiry to production, boosting overall customer satisfaction.

These examples show that AI is no longer confined to “support” tasks like drafting emails or content. Printers are using it to attack operational bottlenecks at the heart of their business. By speeding estimates and automating job setup, AI directly strengthens customer responsiveness and margins.

Workflow automation is also gaining traction. As shown in **Figure 4**, 39% of respondents report production efficiency gains, while 30% credit AI with freeing staff from repetitive tasks. In practice, this can include AI-powered accounts payable systems that automatically match invoices to purchase orders, ERP tools that provide real-time reporting with a single query, and predictive maintenance tools designed to reduce downtime on press. The common theme is that AI takes on the repetitive, error-prone tasks, allowing staff to focus on exceptions, problem-solving, and customer service.

Figure 4: AI Adoption Benefits

Q. What benefits has your organization experienced from AI adoption? Select all that apply



n=178 Print Providers

Source: AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage, Alliance Insights 2025



The executive interviews illustrate how these benefits are coming to life. The following examples highlight how print providers are applying AI to streamline finance, operations, and customer communication:

■ **Streamlining Finance and Operations**

Commercial Printer (\$20 million to \$40 million in annual revenue):

- Implemented AI-powered accounts payable systems that automatically match invoices to purchase orders.
- Deployed ERP-integrated reporting tools that provide real-time insights with a single query.
- Piloted predictive maintenance applications to anticipate equipment failures and reduce press downtime.
- **Benefit:** Removes repetitive, error-prone tasks and frees staff to focus on exceptions, problem-solving, and customer service.

■ **Enhancing Client Communication and Service Quality**

Sign and Graphics Provider (\$150 million to \$200 million in annual revenue):

- Uses AI to rewrite customer emails by tone and role, improving clarity and professionalism in client communications.
- Applies call analysis software to review thousands of weekly interactions, flagging both customer distress and positive customer moments.
- **Benefit:** Provides management with actionable insights for coaching staff and celebrating strong performance, improving both morale and service consistency.

Benefit: Removes repetitive, error-prone tasks and frees staff to focus on exceptions, problem-solving, and customer service.



VERTIGO3D VIA GETTY IMAGES

BENEFITS AND ROI IN ACTION

Interviews conducted for the study highlight the benefits and ROI organizations are beginning to experience. Importantly, return on investment often comes in small, compounding increments rather than dramatic one-time gains. As one executive observed: “Even 10 minutes saved each day adds up.” This mirrors the survey finding that AI is being treated less as a radical disruptor and more as a practical tool for incremental efficiency and quality improvements.

The following examples illustrate how companies across segments are already capturing ROI from AI adoption:

■ **Faster Freight Quoting**

Commercial Printer (\$40 million to \$60 million in annual revenue):

- Built an AI-driven freight quoting tool that eliminated a slow, manual process.
- Sales reps can now ask for shipping costs and receive an instant answer, compared to the previous multi-hour cycle.
- **Benefit:** Improved customer responsiveness while freeing sales staff to focus on closing deals instead of chasing estimates.

■ **Automating Accounts Payable Approvals**

Sign and Graphics Provider (\$150 million to \$200 million in annual revenue):

- Implemented AI to automatically match invoices to purchase orders, routing only exceptions to staff for review.
- **Benefit:** Relieved staff from routine tasks, allowing them to focus on problem-solving and exception handling.

■ **Reducing Administrative Workloads**

Apparel Decorator (\$15 million in annual revenue):

- Described AI as “like a free intern but you still have to check its work.”
- Tasks that once took 20 hours now take 10 to 15, cutting workloads by 25% to 50%.
- **Benefit:** Freed up employee time for higher-value activities while maintaining oversight of quality.

■ **Accelerating Estimates and Customer Satisfaction**

Commercial Printer (\$17 million in annual revenue):

- Applied AI to reduce estimate preparation time, significantly shortening turnaround on quotes.
- **Benefit:** Faster estimates improved customer satisfaction and created a competitive edge in winning jobs.

Importantly, return on investment often comes in small, compounding increments rather than dramatic one-time gains.

■ Boosting Morale Through Recognition

Sign and Graphics Provider (\$150 million to \$200 million in annual revenue):

- Uses AI to analyze customer calls and flag exceptional service moments.
- Managers publicly recognize employees based on these insights.
- **Benefit:** Enhanced accountability, strengthened morale, and improved employee engagement.

While not all research participants report experiencing direct cost savings yet, the directional evidence is strong. Efficiency, quality improvements, and cultural benefits are already apparent. ROI builds gradually, through a series of small wins that accumulate into substantial competitive advantage — faster quotes, smoother approvals, quicker communication, and improved employee morale.



JEAN MEYNTJENS VIA GETTY IMAGES

BARRIERS TO ADOPTION

While momentum is building, the path to effective AI adoption in the printing industry is not without obstacles. Many companies are finding that the biggest challenges are not financial but organizational, such as gaps in skills, uncertainty about use cases, and the difficulty of integrating AI with existing systems. These barriers are slowing progress, but they are also shaping the strategies of companies that have successfully moved forward.

As shown in **Figure 5**, respondents reported the top hurdles in implementing AI are:

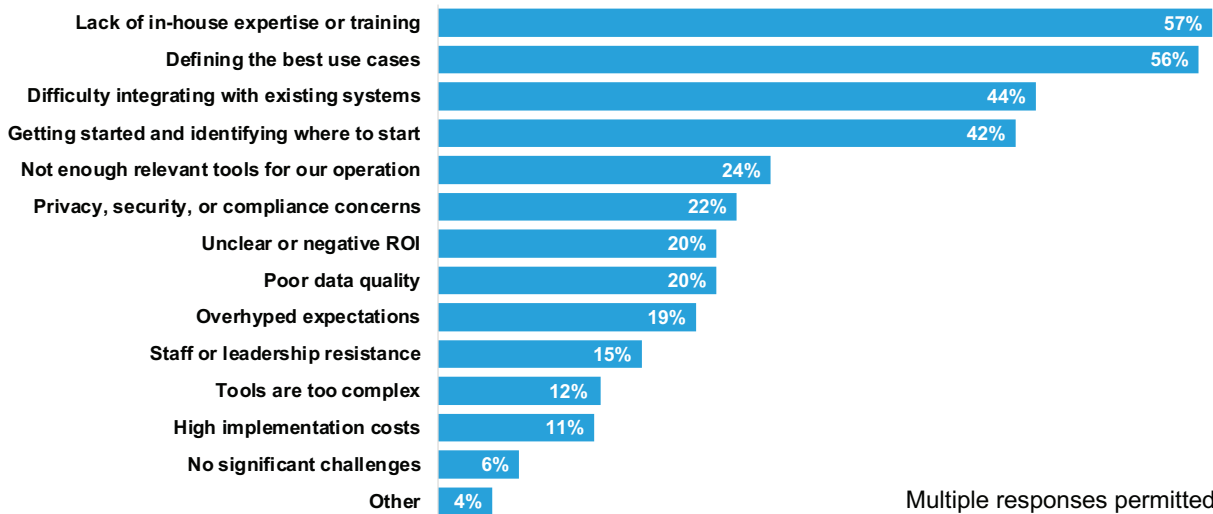
- Lack of in-house expertise or training (57%)
- Difficulty defining the right use cases (56%)
- Integration with existing systems (44%)

Interestingly, cost was not considered a key barrier, with only 11% of respondents citing it as a top challenge, suggesting that AI's relatively low entry cost (many tools are free or bundled into existing platforms) makes financial investment less daunting than the human and operational adjustments required.

Figure 5: Challenges in AI Implementation

Q. What have been the biggest challenges your organization has experienced with implementing AI?

Select all that apply



Multiple responses permitted

n=201 Print Providers

Source: AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage, Alliance Insights 2025



Survey data highlights the biggest challenges to AI adoption are skills gaps, uncertainty around use cases, and system integration difficulties. Executive interviews bring these barriers to life. Many companies described the human and organizational hurdles they faced, and how they overcame them.

The following examples illustrate the most common barriers encountered across the industry segments:

■ **Overcoming Fear of Job Loss**

Commercial Printer (\$17 million in annual revenue):

- Early resistance came from employees who feared AI would replace their roles or who did not understand how to use the tools. Leadership reframed AI as a tool to make people “faster and better,” not redundant.
- **Result:** Once staff saw AI reducing drudgery, curiosity replaced fear, and adoption grew.

■ **Struggling to Find a Starting Point**

Sign and Graphics Provider (\$20 million to \$40 million in annual revenue):

- Echoing survey data showing that 42% of companies struggle to define entry points, this executive warned: “Don’t go in blind — it wastes time. Pick a problem worth solving first.”
- **Result:** Companies that identified one or two high-impact use cases early were able to build confidence and momentum.

■ **Integration Challenges**

Sign and Graphics Provider (\$20 million to \$40 million in annual revenue):

- Tested promising AI tools, but many could not connect to existing MIS and ERP systems. As the executive explained: “It looked great in a demo, but if it doesn’t talk to our platform, it creates more work than it saves.”
- **Result:** The company began working with vendors to embed AI into existing platforms or develop custom connectors, reducing friction.

■ **Creative Team Skepticism**

Apparel Decorator (\$3 million to \$5 million in annual revenue):

- Design staff distrusted AI after early failures, dismissing it as unreliable. Leadership reframed AI as a tool to remove repetitive work and accelerate ideation.
- **Result:** Adoption improved once staff understood AI was an aid, not a replacement.

■ **Shifting Attitudes Through Small Wins**

Apparel Decorator (\$3 million to \$5 million in annual revenue):

- Leaders began celebrating minor time savings and visible productivity gains. One observed: “*When people saw that saving 10 minutes mattered, they started to pay attention.*”
- **Result:** Small successes shifted attitudes from skepticism to curiosity, encouraging broader adoption.

These barriers are real but manageable. Skills gaps, unclear use cases, and integration hurdles are slowing progress, but companies that combine leadership support, staff training, and careful tool selection are removing obstacles. The greatest risks may not be technological but organizational — mindset, skills, and execution.

LEADERS VS. LAGGARDS

One of the clearest insights from the study is the widening gap between companies that are approaching AI strategically and those that are still dabbling without direction. The data, combined with executive interviews, makes it clear: leaders are pulling ahead because they treat AI as a business initiative, not just a technical experiment.

The survey data shows a striking difference between AI leaders and AI laggards. Leaders are defined as those respondents that either have or are developing an AI strategy and are formally evaluating AI tools.

According to the survey:

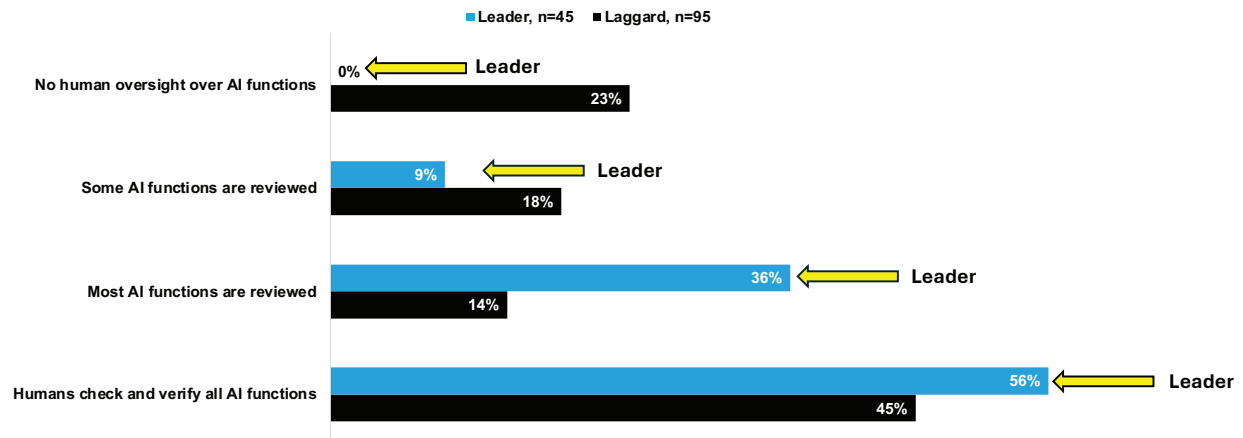
- 46% of AI leaders report having a clear roadmap, compared with only 9% of laggards.
- 91% of leaders assign accountability for AI efforts, while barely half of laggards do the same.
- Leaders consistently report greater benefits, invest more in AI budgets, and are more likely to expect those budgets to grow in the next 12 months.

Oversight Defines Success

Governance is another dividing line. Leaders understand that AI outputs require verification and oversight. The data in **Figure 6** shows that leaders are far more likely to build-in processes to validate results, consult experts, and test multiple solutions.

Figure 6: Leaders Oversee AI Functions

Q. What level of human oversight exists for AI at your company? Select one



Source: AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage, Alliance Insights 2025

Source: AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage, Alliance Insights 2025

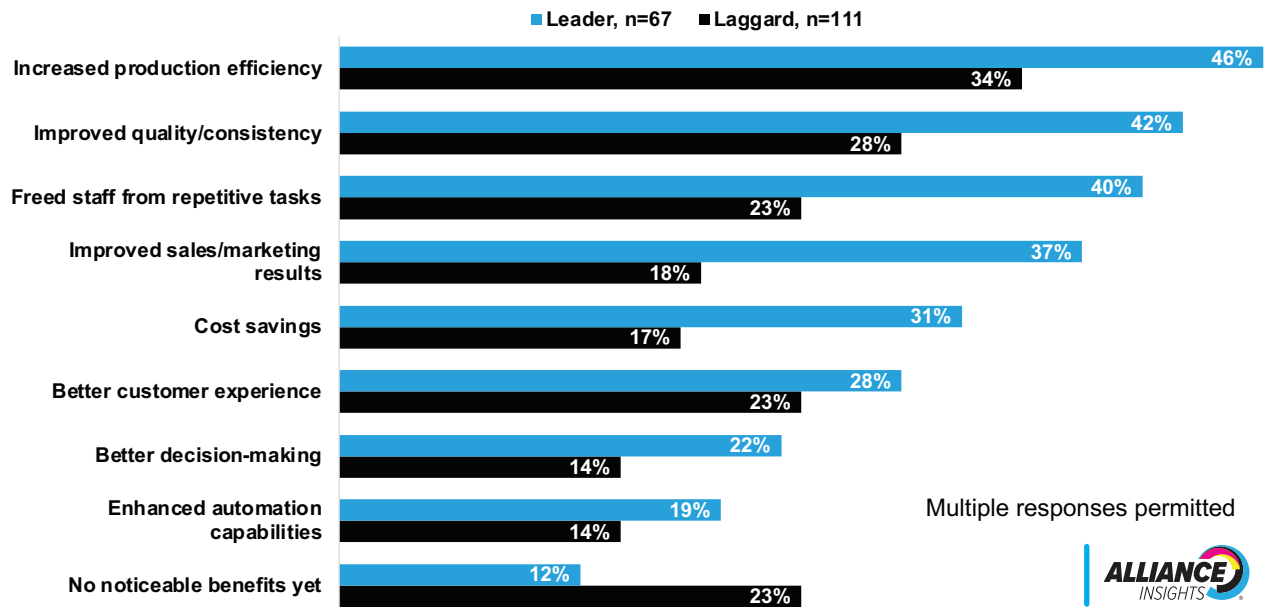


AI Leaders Experience More Benefits

The experience gap between the two groups is already visible. As shown in **Figure 7**, leaders report more positive overall experiences with AI than laggards.

Figure 7: Leaders Experience More Benefits

Q. What benefits has your organization experienced from AI adoption? Select all that apply



Source: AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage, Alliance Insights 2025

The strategic implication is clear: leaders are moving AI from experimentation to execution. They treat it with the same rigor as any other investment — tying projects to ROI, assigning accountability, and setting policies for governance. Laggards, by contrast, risk falling behind as their competitors turn AI into tangible advantages in efficiency, customer experience, healthier profit margins, and speed to market.

The lesson for executives is not that every company must immediately build a full AI department, but that planning matters. Even a basic roadmap, a designated champion, and clear rules for oversight can transform AI from a novelty into a competitive driver. Those who fail to make this leap may find themselves watching from the sidelines as better-prepared peers race ahead.

The takeaway: planning and accountability correlate directly with success. Companies that treat AI as ad hoc experimentation risk falling behind.

The lesson for executives is not that every company must immediately build a full AI department, but that planning matters.

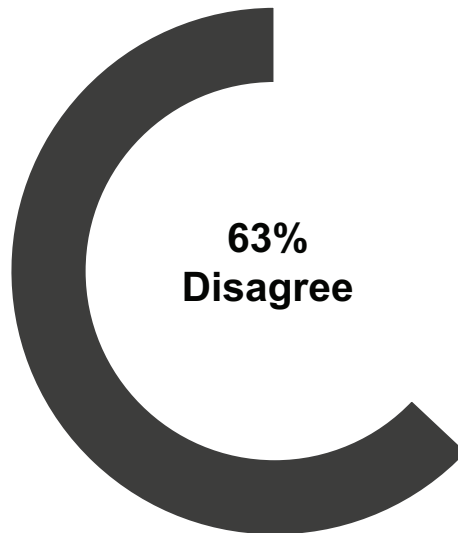
WORKFORCE AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

AI is reshaping roles but not eliminating them. **Figure 8** shows 63% of respondents disagree that AI will reduce staffing, with most viewing it as an augmentation tool.

Figure 8: AI Not Reducing Staffing

Q. What is your level of agreement with the following statement?

AI is going to reduce staffing levels in your organization



n=178 Print Providers

Source: AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage, Alliance Insights 2025



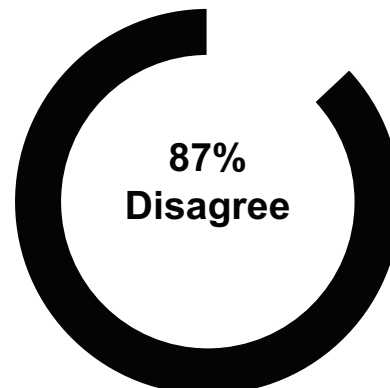
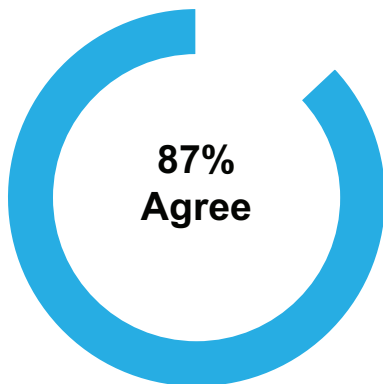
At the same time, **Figure 9** reveals a gap: while 87% agree employees with AI skills are desirable, only 23% are hiring for them. This indicates recognition of need but lag in action.

Figure 9: AI Skills Desirable But Not Being Pursued

Q. What is your level of agreement with the following statement?

Employees with AI skills are highly desirable

We are actively hiring staff with AI skills



n=178 Print Providers

Source: AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage, Alliance Insights 2025



Interviews reinforce this. Many companies rely on self-training, online courses, and vendor-provided tutorials rather than formal programs. Leaders who empower “champions” at the frontline are seeing faster adoption and cultural acceptance.

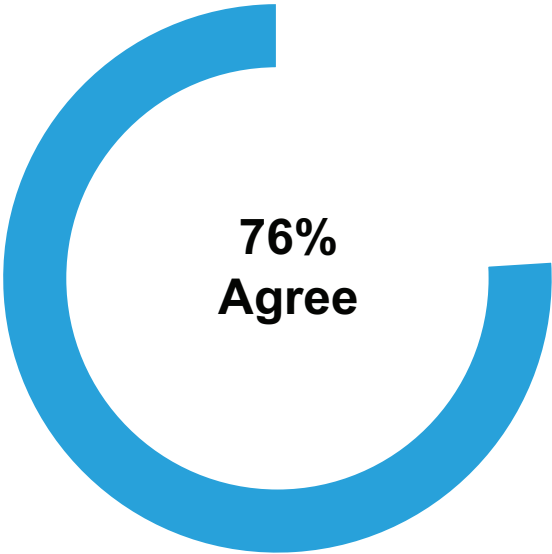
Transparency with Clients

Another key theme is customer trust. 76% of respondents agree that transparency about AI use is important (Figure 10). An apparel decorator with \$10 million in annual revenue noted: “I got an AI-generated thank-you from my doctor and [it] felt a little offensive.” The industry recognizes that credibility is at stake. AI must enhance, not erode, client relationships.

Figure 10: Client Transparency About AI Important

Q. What is your level of agreement with the following statement?

Transparency with Clients about AI Use is Important



n=178 Print Providers
Source: AI Adoption in the Printing Industry: From Curiosity to Competitive Advantage, Alliance Insights 2025



CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

A Pivotal Moment for Printing

The findings from this study are clear: artificial intelligence is moving from hype to reality in the printing industry. Across commercial, graphics, book, and apparel segments, printers are applying AI to cut estimating time, accelerate marketing, automate finance, and improve customer communications. While adoption is still in its early stages, AI is already proving itself as a practical tool that delivers measurable results.

While adoption is still in its early stages, AI is already proving itself as a practical tool that delivers measurable results.

Key Insights

- **AI is critical to competitiveness.** More than eight in 10 print providers believe AI will shape future success, and early adopters are already gaining advantages in efficiency and responsiveness.
- **Adoption is real but fragmented.** Most printers start with champions experimenting in pockets of the business. Only a small minority (7%) have a formal AI roadmap, yet those with structured plans report stronger results.
- **Benefits are incremental but compounding.** Time savings, smoother approvals, and improved accuracy may seem modest at first, but together they create real strategic value.
- **Barriers are more human than technical.** Skills gaps, lack of clear use cases, and cultural resistance are the biggest challenges, not cost. Firms that combine leadership commitment with staff empowerment move faster.
- **Leaders are pulling away.** AI leaders treat adoption like any other business initiative (anchored in strategy, governance, and accountability) while laggards remain stuck in experimentation.

Recommendations for Print Leaders

- 1. Start with a purpose.** Identify one or two high-impact pain points, such as estimating or invoicing and deploy AI there first. Small wins build momentum.
- 2. Lead from the top.** Owners and executives should model adoption by being the first to test tools and share learnings.
- 3. Assign accountability.** Make AI part of roles, not optional experiments. Champions on the front line can drive adoption beyond IT.
- 4. Build guardrails.** Establish oversight for accuracy, security, and ethics. Review outputs and formalize governance as usage expands.
- 5. Invest in people.** Train staff continuously, even with low-cost resources, to ensure AI becomes a confidence-building tool rather than a source of fear.
- 6. Scale deliberately.** Move from creative and customer-facing tasks into estimating, prepress, and workflow automation, where AI delivers deeper operational impact.

- 7. Prioritize AI as a core function.** Give it the same visibility, resources, and leadership attention as sales or customer service.
- 8. Be transparent with clients.** Share when and how AI is used to reinforce trust, credibility, and long-term relationships.

The Strategic Imperative

AI is not a silver bullet, but neither is it optional. The study shows that printers who embrace AI thoughtfully are laying the groundwork for faster, more profitable, and more resilient operations. Those who hesitate may not fail outright, but they risk ceding ground to competitors who move more decisively.

The message for executives is simple: begin now, scale with purpose, and put people at the center of your AI journey.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW SUMMARIES

Commercial Printers

1. Transforming the Front End: Using AI to Streamline Operations

Type of printer: Commercial

Annual revenue: \$17 million

Best advice: Don't wait, start now. Learn fast because AI is not going away. Even if the tools feel imperfect, getting started is the only way to avoid falling behind.

For this commercial printer, AI is being applied with the intention to cut time, enhance marketing, streamline customer service, and eventually transform how jobs move from estimate to invoice. "The production side has become incredibly efficient," the company's president said. "But the front end — estimating, job prep, communication — hasn't kept up. AI is catching up to balance it out."

Marketing, Content, and Podcasting—All Automated

AI's most immediate impact has been on content creation. When a marketing staffer left, the company didn't replace the role. Instead, AI tools were brought in to generate marketing copy, blog posts, and internal messages. "It just dramatically streamlined everything," the company's president and CEO reported. "We even created podcasts automatically from website content or scripted blogs."

The company also uses AI for image generation and recently deployed a novel training video for clients. "We fed AI the specs for how to submit files properly, wrote a script, and used AI to generate a synthetic person who presents it all in a video," he explained. "It's all automated and it helps customers get it right."

Accounting, Estimating, and AI on the Horizon

Internally, the company has adopted Sage Intacct, an accounting platform with embedded AI features that auto-assigns general ledger codes based on invoice details and vendor history. "It learns as it goes," the president and CEO said. "We're training it now so it will eventually handle the bulk of the accounting entries."

He's also anticipating a time when AI will estimate jobs directly from customer emails. "You won't have to plug it into a system. AI will read the email, extract the details, and generate the estimate."

Customer Service AI That Reads Tone

Looking ahead, the company is interested in customer service AI like the beta version of Plan Prophet, which simulates human conversations. “It can understand tone,” the president said. “If a customer emails upset, it can respond empathetically — ‘I see this was supposed to ship yesterday, let me check’ — and carry on the dialogue.”

Sales Prospecting and SEO in the Age of AI

AI is also transforming the company’s approach to customer acquisition. The president recently used ChatGPT to generate a detailed list of solar contractors — including contact names, websites, and phone numbers — for a facility renovation project. He also found state-specific AI training grant programs in minutes. “What would have taken hours of research, I had in five minutes,” he said.

And it’s already influencing how customers find the business. “We had a few leads recently where the contact said, ‘We asked AI to find printers like you.’ That told me we need to show up in AI search,” he noted.

Sales Model Evolution: A Bold Prediction

The president and CEO believes AI and online tools will accelerate the shift away from traditional sales models. “I’ve been saying this for years: there’s no role for outside salespeople anymore,” he said. “Inside reps using AI and digital tools can do what outside reps used to do, but better, faster, and without travel.”

The CEO reported that his son, who runs one of the company’s facilities, uses direct messaging to connect with brands via social media, something he sees as a sign of generational shift. As the CEO explained, “A 50-year-old sales rep isn’t going to DM a brand. But my son will. And that’s how we’ve landed new accounts.”

Workforce Training and Change Management

Initially, employees were resistant. “They blew it off when I first introduced AI,” he admitted. “Now I tell them: if you don’t learn to use it, you’ll be replaced by someone who does.” Designers, marketing staff, and web developers are now actively using AI for content and code generation.

Coding, too, is changing. “You don’t need a super coder anymore,” he said. “You just need someone who knows how to ask the AI to write the code.”

Security, Deepfakes, and Fraud Risks

AI’s potential also comes with serious risks. The president described a fraud case where a bank nearly authorized a wire transfer based on a voice cloned through AI. “It’s terrifying,” he said. His own company now uses a private code word for any financial authorizations.

Despite the threat, the company is well-prepared. “We’re ISO certified, and SOC certified. Our employees undergo regular cybersecurity training,” he explained. “But deepfakes and voice replication are going to be a serious issue.”

Robotics: The Missing Link

The president is also eyeing robotics. “I’m dying to get a robot,” he noted “I just haven’t figured out where to use one.” While he’s seen robotic production lines that unload, bind, and package jobs with minimal human interaction, his current challenge is the variety of work. “Robots work best in repetitive environments. We do too many custom jobs right now,” he explained.

Final Thoughts: Don’t Wait

For other print providers, the president had direct advice: “Get started. Learn fast. AI’s not going away.” He compared the current moment to the rise of the internet in the early 1990s: “People then didn’t see the potential. This time, I do. I don’t want to be behind the curve again.”

2. Starting Small, Thinking Big: How a Small Commercial Printer Is Making AI Work

Type of printer: Commercial

Annual revenue: \$1 million to \$3 million

Best advice: Start small, experiment, and stay curious. Leaders must try AI themselves before asking their teams to adopt it.

For this small commercial printer, AI adoption began with curiosity rather than strategy. “We don’t have bandwidth for a hundred things, but we can dive into one or two,” said the president.

From Curiosity to Capability

The president first used ChatGPT for emails, brainstorming, and marketing copy. “It helped me avoid blank screens and move faster.” That evolved into structured use: “We’re not just saving time, we’re thinking better.”

Operations and Communication

AI drafts customer emails and project updates, while humans add final tone. “It’s important customers know it’s still us,” he emphasized. Marketing content — blogs and newsletters — is drafted by AI, then carefully reviewed.

Affordability and ROI

The company sticks with free versions unless ROI is proven. “We don’t jump into subscriptions unless there’s clear value,” the president said. Savings are measured in hours gained and better customer service.

For this lean company, AI isn’t a revolution but a tool for smarter, faster work that is handled with care and creativity.

3. Exploring AI Opportunities in On-Demand Book Manufacturing

Type of printer: Book manufacturer

Annual revenue: \$10 million to \$20 million

Best advice: AI is inevitable. Learn it and use it to your advantage. Focus on efficiency and cost savings rather than hype.

This specialized book manufacturer produces single-copy runs up to 10,000 books daily, replacing warehouses with digital files and offering two- to three-day turnaround. With 80 to 85 employees, the firm evolved from library binding into a digital, short-run business.

AI Status and Exploration

The company hasn’t formally adopted AI but is testing three solutions. Its custom-built workflow software already performs intake, batching, and job routing with AI-like intelligence. Younger, tech-native programmers are evaluating where AI could help.

Use Cases Under Review

Potential applications include:

- Boosting throughput from 60% to 90% without adding labor
- Reducing costs
- Prepress editing and author support
- Eliminating repetitive tasks in service and order entry

Challenges and Outlook

The challenge is aligning new tools with highly customized systems. Security and monitoring are already embedded, so integration isn't disruptive. The president stressed AI should be practical and cost-focused: "AI is all around you. You're going to be affected by it. You might as well learn to use it to your advantage."

4. AI with Intention: How a Mid-Sized Commercial Printer Is Strategically Building an AI-Powered Future

Type of printer: Commercial

Annual revenue: \$20 million to \$40 million

Best advice: Be cautiously optimistic. Start small, and make sure leadership experiments first so the team follows with confidence.

For this commercial printer, AI is used for efficiency, automation, and ideation, but always human-reviewed. "We're not replacing people," the company's president said. "AI must be verified."

Early Adoption in Marketing

ChatGPT first supported blogs, SEO, and imagery, while AI-generated "Gamma" visuals boosted branding. Even an AI-scripted podcast surprised leadership with its quality.

Governance and Ground Rules

Policies stress privacy and accuracy. "Never use client data or assume AI is correct," the president cautioned, recalling faulty stats on postage.

Process and Estimation Wins

AI cut a four-hour distribution estimate to two minutes, within 5% of manual results. Microsoft Copilot mapped ERP processes, while profitability analysis flagged margin anomalies.

Next Steps

Future projects include lead scoring, campaign reviews, pricing simulations, and inventory optimization. "AI could predict when I'll need 80,000 lbs. of paper in July. Right now, that's spreadsheets," he said.

Cultural Adoption

Experimentation is encouraged but guided. Employees show curiosity rather than fear. "If you're not doing it, you're ready to retire," he said.

Advice: "Be cautiously optimistic. Start small. Write a marketing plan with AI and you'll be amazed. But keep a human at the wheel."

5. AI Integration in Commercial Printing: A Candid Interview on Early Adoption, Benefits, and Concerns

Type of printer: Commercial

Annual revenue: \$2 million to \$2.5 million

Best advice: Stay curious. Test tools, even casually, to build comfort and prepare for inevitable changes.

For this nine-person printer specializing in diecutting and mailing, AI adoption began informally. ChatGPT, Grok, and Adobe Firefly have been tested for rewriting copy, formatting mailing files, and stock images.

Strategy and Benefits

No formal AI strategy exists, but hands-on use shows value: tasks that took 20 minutes now take seconds. Spreadsheets and data formatting are clear wins.

Workforce Divide

AI won't replace shop floor jobs soon but can augment office tasks. Security concerns are accepted as part of modern business, though the president worries about AI "looping only" with itself, reducing human creativity.

Future Outlook

He imagines AI automating mailer design and formatting with minimal input, though hopes creativity remains a human role.

Advice: "Stay curious. Explore tools, even for novelty. Read, attend trade shows, and watch vendor innovations to stay ready."

6. Blueprint for Adoption: How a Commercial Printer Is Using AI to Amplify Productivity and Client Value

Type of printer: Commercial

Annual revenue: \$40 million to \$60 million

Best advice: Start with the customer in mind. Define pain points first, then apply AI to solve them.

This commercial printer built an AI roadmap focused on customer priorities and scalable wins. "If the customer were here, what would matter most?" the company's president said.

Finding Advocates and Early Wins

Technologically curious staff in marketing and service piloted tools. Note-taking with Fireflies.ai became a favorite. Translation bots improved communication on the floor, while an AI freight agent instantly produced shipping quotes.

Scaling with Roadmaps

The company maintains a living AI roadmap organized by complexity and value—now with over 60 tasks and initiatives. "Initially we had it organized based on desirability," the president explained. "But we hit some walls and now, we use a tier system."

For instance, he said that estimating was initially explored but proved too complex. "Rather than trying to create an estimator, we're creating tools that help speed up specific parts of the process," he explained.

By contrast, "service-level reporting" is a tier-one project. In logistics, the company must frequently report to clients on delivery performance. "We send reports on how many orders went out within a 24-hour window. That process was manual," he explained. With AI, the company not only automated reports but added insights. The company's president said, "AI identified near misses, suggested staffing pattern improvements, and spotted trends like low night-shift output. That's value."

Content, Compliance, and Leadership

AI supports content creation but is limited to trained staff. Security is a priority, and paid accounts are a constraint. Leaders use AI for easy wins like contract summarization and version comparison.

Advice: Start with the client, ensure leaders lead, and keep projects small. "Off-the-shelf tools like note takers don't require training, just try them."

7. AI Isn't Going to Bite You: How One Commercial Printer Is Demystifying Artificial Intelligence

Type of printer: Commercial

Annual revenue: \$5 million to \$10 million

Best advice: Just start. Experiment with small tasks, prove value, and build curiosity within your team.

At this commercial printer, AI began with sales. The president, who is also the sales manager, demonstrated to the company's sales team how AI could help with lead generation, prompt writing, and crafting personalized sales strategies. A skeptical rep's success brainstorming product ideas became a breakthrough moment.

Expansion Across the Business

The company now uses ChatGPT for sales, Claude for finance, and Grok for coding. "AI is good at tasks," the president said. "Start broad, then narrow."

Overcoming Resistance

Skeptics on the production floor changed their minds after seeing results. His approach: let them try it and realize the benefits.

Integration and Gains

AI now links customer portals, prepress, and MIS. One of AI's most transformative roles has been in system integration. Previously, the company's customer portals, prepress workflow, and MIS software didn't communicate effectively. Through a combination of AI and outside consultants, bridges were built to link systems seamlessly. "It's like an ATM machine," the company's president explained. "The next time somebody touches something is when it comes out the press."

This automation has yielded significant gains. "We're faster fixing problems, even making us look better to customers," he said. "It gives us an opportunity to add value, make money on it."

Culture of Curiosity

Internal AI groups and peer-led experiments build adoption. "Peers influence more than superiors," he noted. Super users emerged, pushing efficiency.

Next Steps

He envisions predictive maintenance for presses where AI alerts staff before breakdowns.

Advice: "Don't overthink. Put your toe in," he urged. "AI won't bite you. It's just a tool. What do you want to do with it?"

8. A Measured Path to Innovation: How a Commercial Printer Is Exploring AI to Save Time and Spark Efficiency

Type of printer: Commercial

Annual revenue: \$5 million to \$10 million

Best advice: Don't wait for perfect solutions. Experiment, learn, and focus on time savings while keeping security top of mind.

AI adoption started at this printing company with the use of Grammarly. The CEO now uses ChatGPT, Claude, and Perplexity for marketing drafts, sustainability statements, and dataset summaries.

Shop Floor and MIS

A Ryobi Mitsubishi press uses AI for ink optimization and quality. Their MIS, Pace, is beginning to integrate AI, but is still in the early stages.

Adoption and Security

The CEO is the primary user, while staff remain hesitant. "People want someone else to go first," he said. Security is a major concern. "I don't plug anything sensitive into AI tools," the CEO explained. "We're very careful. I'm waiting for a secure, fenced-in model, something like Microsoft Copilot that keeps everything internal."

Future Plans

The CEO hopes to scale AI into sales, finance, and documentation, using it to capture workflows and procedures.

Advice: “Just start. Yes, it’s scary. But if we don’t learn to use it, we’ll be left behind. It’s coming like a waterfall, and we’re all trying to drink from a fire hose.”

Graphics and Signs

1. Scaling Smarter: How a Graphic and Sign Printer Is Integrating AI for Speed, Strategy, and Growth

Type of printer: Graphic and Sign

Annual revenue: \$20 million to \$40 million

Best advice: Don’t go in blind. Do your homework or bring in an expert to help build a framework; it saves time and frustration.

For this graphic and sign printer, AI is a strategic enabler across ideation, workflows, and accounting. “What’s changed in the last year is AI use has become more widespread,” according to the company’s president. “It’s used across the organization, from job descriptions to contract review.”

Toolset Expansion

Starting with ChatGPT and transcription tools like Fathom, the company now uses custom GPTs for contract review, purchase order checks, and meeting summaries.

ERP and Finance

AI is being embedded into their Epicor ERP via Prism to move from pivot tables to direct analysis. Accounting uses DocStar to auto-approve invoices when they match POs. “That allows our accounts payable person to focus on exceptions, not routine work,” said the president.

Next Leap: Front-End Automation

The biggest opportunity is in prepress and order entry. “I can’t make the press run faster,” he said, “but I can shorten the time it takes to get a job into the system.”

Adoption and Culture

Experimentation is open, though confidential data is restricted. Employees use LinkedIn Learning for training, and reactions are mixed: excitement when a task drops from 60 minutes to five, frustration when prompts fail.

Next Steps

Priorities include prepress automation and corporate time studies to measure AI’s value. For now, the VP of IT oversees implementation, with a dedicated AI lead possible in the future.

Advice: “Bring in an expert or do the homework,” the president advised. “Printers don’t need theory. We need to know which tool solves what problem, and fast.”

2. Building Trust, Gaining Speed: How a Leading Graphic and Sign Printer Is Using AI to Advance Customer Experience and Forecasting

Type of printer: Graphic and Sign

Annual revenue: \$150 million to \$200 million

Best advice: Start small, start now. Leadership must champion AI adoption before the organization falls behind.

This sign printer uses AI for layered improvements in service, transparency, and planning. “We’ve approached AI in phases,” the president explained.

Listening at Scale

One of the most impactful applications has been through 8x8 Intelligent Customer Assistant, a platform that uses AI to scan and categorize tens of thousands of customer interactions — phone calls, voicemails, and emails — every week. “It creates a bucket of distress calls and celebration calls,” the president said. “We actually spend more time on the positive ones to reinforce great customer service.”

Meetings and Accountability

Fathom provides objective meeting notes and action tracking. “It captures what’s actually said and who committed to what,” he noted.

Marketing and Content

The team uses ChatGPT and Gemini for catalog copy, social posts, emails, and product names. “It’s a writing partner that never sleeps,” the president said.

Forecasting the Future

The next project is predictive forecasting with Salesforce Einstein and case-based reasoning. “Why should reps have to say, ‘Let me check’? If the system knows, it should answer instantly.”

Security and Adoption

Open tools are used cautiously. A closed model is being considered for sensitive data, even if costly. Staff reactions vary; marketing embraces AI, customer care worries about jobs, while production sees little threat.

Advice: “Start small. Don’t wait for a perfect plan,” the president said. “Try a meeting tool like Fathom. And make sure leadership is learning AI. If you wait for breakthroughs, you’ll be left behind.”

3. From Design to Data: How a Graphic and Sign Printer Is Embedding AI Across the Business

Type of printer: Graphic and Sign

Annual revenue: \$20 million to \$40 million

Best advice: “Don’t wait for AI to be perfect. Identify a pain point (RFPs, accounting, customer service) and test a tool there. Start small, but be strategic.”

This sign and graphics printer views AI as a critical infrastructure layer rather than a passing trend. Since 2022, AI has been applied across proposals, design, documentation, and analytics to save time and drive growth.

Efficiency Gains

The most immediate impact has been on time savings. By uploading years of past RFP responses to a private AI folder, the team now completes submissions in under an hour compared to a week. AI also converts bullet points into polished presentations, cutting hours of formatting and editing.

Creative Acceleration

Designers use Midjourney, DALL-E, and Adobe tools to create variations of hand-drawn sketches in seconds, helping clients visualize options faster. “We still do the final work,” the principal explained. “AI just helps speed things up.”

Documentation and Compliance

AI-generated SOPs now support OSHA safety requirements, covering processes like cord management and machine safety. These documents not only ensure compliance but also reduce the time staff spend on manual documentation.

Data-Driven Strategy

The company is piloting “agentic AI” to chain prompts into multi-step workflows. Accounting is one of the first targets, replacing spreadsheet exports with real-time analysis. AI also redefines revenue categorization, breaking it down by service (fabrication, installation, printing) as well as industry, helping guide hiring and investment decisions.

Cultural Adoption

Trust remains a hurdle. Staff often double-check files even after AI has handled them. To drive adoption, the company assigns AI tasks to specific roles, ensuring accountability and consistent usage.

Looking Ahead

Future plans include deploying customer-facing AI agents for service and support, capable of personalized, tone-aware communication. “AI is really good at context,” the principal noted. “It can offer responses better than a junior customer service rep.”

Advice

“Start with one repetitive task (RFPs, accounting, email) and build from there. Don’t wait for perfect. Test, learn, and scale thoughtfully.”

Apparel Decorators

1. Put Your Toe In: How an Apparel Decorator Is Using AI to Advance Strategy, Hiring, and Marketing

Type of printer: Apparel Decorator

Annual revenue: \$10 million to \$20 million

Best advice: Put your toe in. Start small with tools like ChatGPT and learn step by step, once you see the value, you’ll be off to the races.

The president of this apparel decoration firm isn’t a tech evangelist. “I’m not an early adopter,” he said. “But if I see something clearly making forward movement, like AI, I investigate it.” What began as curiosity soon grew into adoption across HR, marketing, and strategy.

Leader-Led Adoption

Instead of formal training, the president encouraged trial-and-error. “If I’m a believer, they’re believers,” he said. Managers now share discoveries, building comfort organically.

Early Wins

AI transcribes meetings, writes job descriptions, and drafts strategy. For a major apron contract, 80% of the strategy documentation came from AI. “AI can really look at strategy,” he said.

Boundaries

He avoids AI for customer service. “AI doesn’t capture personality,” he cautioned, recalling an off-putting AI thank-you note from his doctor. But blogs and marketing content are “scrubbed through AI,” with humans editing.

Seamless.AI Marketing

The company relies heavily on Seamless.AI for lead generation, pulling direct emails and phone numbers. “It’s our biggest marketing asset,” he said.

Advice: He urges peers to just start. “Owners who say, ‘We don’t have time’ have basically shut down their company.”

2. Augment, Don't Replace: A Measured AI Journey in Apparel Decoration

Type of printer: Apparel Decorator

Annual revenue: \$3 million to \$5 million

Best advice: Don't be afraid of AI; it won't replace you. Practice with it daily, even for 10 minutes, and use it as a tool to save time and sharpen efficiency.

This firm sees AI as a practical tool across design, operations, and customer service. "Every dollar counts. If I have \$1 to spend, I want to use it on development of automation, not manual quality control," the company's president explained.

From Curiosity to Data Strategy

AI started in design but shifted to deeper automation. The firm built its own manufacturing system, Momos, and "Scorecard," tracking jobs, stitches, and setups. Machine learning now forecasts schedules and capacity.

Customer Service and Training

AI also assists staff with language barriers, boosting efficiency. Adoption lagged in design and customer service due to early tool failures, but training via Udemy courses is helping rebuild confidence.

Security and Next Steps

With ransomware a threat, the firm emphasizes cybersecurity. Looking ahead, robotics is the next frontier for repetitive floor tasks.

Advice: "Don't panic, practice," the president urged. "Use it to free up 10 minutes a day, that's time you put back into your business or life."

3. Efficiency First: How a Mid-Sized Apparel Decorator Is Using AI to Streamline Operations

Type of printer: Apparel Decorator

Annual revenue: \$15 million

Best advice: Use a secure large language model and don't wait to experiment. Even 10 minutes saved can be reinvested into your business.

This 45-employee firm embeds AI into daily work, from marketing to production. "We think of AI like a free intern," one leader said.

Microsoft Copilot

The company relies on Microsoft Copilot across departments, including PMS color matching in production. Adoption was aided by built-in training videos and Microsoft's learning portal.

Benefits and Limits

Time savings are the biggest win. Tasks once 20 hours now take 10. Still, the firm warns: "You have to double-check it. It can make mistakes."

Security

They avoid open tools like ChatGPT, opting for secure Copilot tied to SharePoint. Employees also receive cybersecurity training.

Next Frontier

Plans include AI-driven alignment checks in production, automated emails, and better customer support. "In three to five years, if you're not ready, you won't survive," the company's director of operations said.

4. Start Small, Think Big: How a Boutique Apparel Decorator Is Using AI to Boost Efficiency and Transparency

Type of printer: Apparel Decorator

Annual revenue: \$1 million to \$3 million

Best advice: Start small, try a meeting recorder or copywriting tool. This is a “get on the train or get left behind” moment.

This apparel decorator uses AI in four areas: customer interactions, meetings, marketing, and planning.

Customer Insights

The company uses 8x8 Analytics for Contact Center to analyze 20,000 weekly customer interactions, flagging both problems and wins. “We celebrate the positives because it motivates staff,” the company’s founder said.

Meetings and Marketing

Fathom tracks conversations and action items, while ChatGPT and Gemini support copywriting and brainstorming.

Forecasting

Next up: AI for forecasting and case-based knowledge management. Tools like Salesforce Einstein are on the horizon.

Culture and Security

Marketing embraces AI, while customer care is more cautious. Open tools are used carefully with a closed model planned for sensitive forecasting data.

Advice: “Start small. Add a meeting recorder, try a copywriting tool. You don’t need a masterpiece to start,” the company’s founder urged.

5. Exploring AI One Thread at a Time: How a Mid-Sized Apparel Decorator Is Finding Value in Artificial Intelligence

Type of printer: Apparel Decorator

Annual revenue: \$3 million to \$5 million

Best advice: Have AI help you write something. That’s the easiest entry point. Small wins build confidence and momentum.

This company treats AI as a set of experiments easing labor and sparking creativity. “AI’s promise is saving labor,” the company’s president said.

Hiring and Creativity

AI drafts job descriptions and interview questions, easing hiring stress. In design, AI plays a very different role: muse rather than maker. One part-time artist uses AI tools extensively for brainstorming, while another occasionally uses it to generate mood-board-like suggestions. “They don’t ever do a finished design that way,” the president clarified. “It’s not really that different than doing a mood board, just a little faster.”

Content and Tools

AI helps with product descriptions, announcements, and copy. But not all tools deliver. Adoption remains ad hoc, with some artists resistant.

Future Plans

The company is redesigning its website, considering AI-driven FAQs and customer interactions, transparently branded as bots.

Advice: “Have it help you write something,” the president said. “Start small, grow from there.”

