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Data readiness: The essential ingredient for AI success

Financial institutions must focus on building a strong data foundation to support their AI ambitions and drive meaningful business outcomes.

By American Banker Research

Partner insights from



Contents

Introduction.....03

Research methodology03

Key takeaways04

Despite widespread AI adoption, many financial institutions are struggling to gain traction05

AI is delivering results06

Understanding the data readiness gap.....08

Lack of data readiness affects AI outcomes.....10

Data strategy is a critical piece of the AI puzzle11

About CDW.....12

About American Banker12



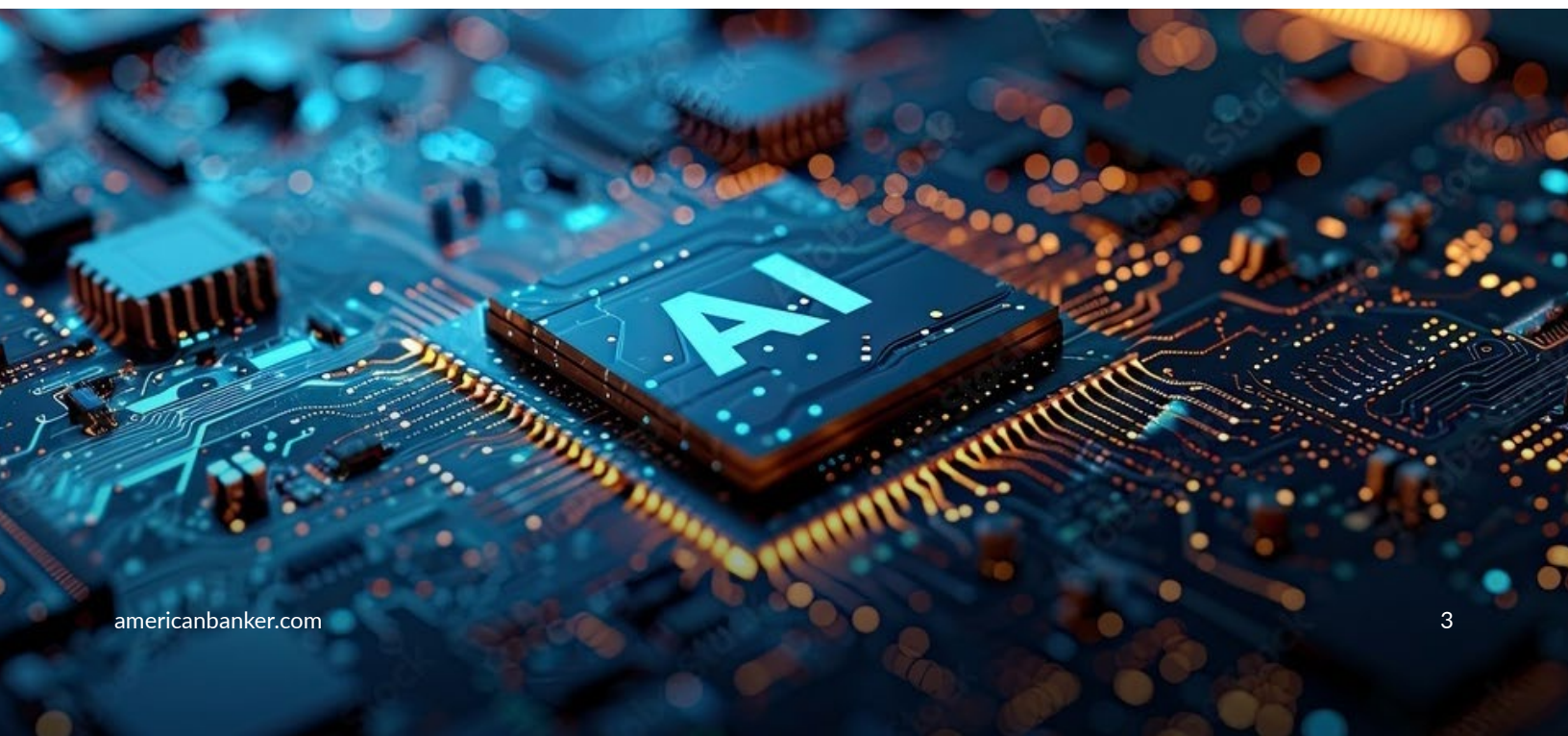
Introduction

Among financial institutions, there's considerable urgency to adopt and integrate AI throughout the organization. This is due in part to a widening gap in the value organizations are seeing from their AI efforts: Those making tangible strides in AI adoption and integration are driving considerable business value from these efforts. Meanwhile, outcomes are more inconsistent — or even nonexistent — for organizations in the earlier stages of their AI journeys.

This research explores the disconnect between AI ambition and the reality of AI data readiness at financial institutions. By evaluating institutions across a series of key pillars, we developed a scale to measure their ability to produce AI outcomes, as well as the maturity of their data infrastructure, governance and availability. The results demonstrate that data readiness is a key differentiator between organizations with successful AI outcomes and those with ongoing issues moving from pilot to production. A more coherent, strategic approach to data readiness could accelerate the deployment of AI and the increased value these efforts deliver.

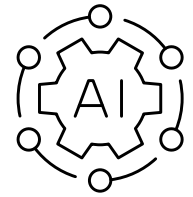
Research methodology

This research was conducted by American Banker, in partnership with CDW, online from April 30 to May 10, 2026, among 123 qualified respondents. To qualify, respondents were required to be decision-makers or influencers in AI, data or analytics strategy within a bank, credit union or other similar financial institution. The research was conducted as a blind survey and CDW was not identified as a sponsor.



Key takeaways

- AI adoption is widespread, but financial institutions have struggled to keep pace with their own expectations for implementation.
- AI is generating results — but the value of these efforts remains inconsistent across organizations.
- Data readiness is a key component of any AI initiative and plays a strong factor in influencing successful outcomes.
- A strategic approach to data readiness can help generate consistent, winning AI outcomes during an organization's implementation journey.



80%

report using
at least
one type of AI.

“

Every board and C-suite wants their enterprise to embrace AI, but most tech teams don't know the best place to start — they all need help, but few are getting it.”

— Kalimuthu Chithambaram, Industry Strategist, Financial Services, CDW

Despite widespread AI adoption, many financial institutions are struggling to gain traction

These days, banks or credit unions that haven't adopted AI in some way are a distinct minority. Traditional AI has been joined more recently by generative and agentic models, broadening the toolkit available for financial institutions. By now, 80% are using at least one type of AI.

Financial institutions have not progressed as quickly or as smoothly along their AI journeys as they would have liked, however. Only 17% of financial institutions report that half or more of their AI initiatives are moving from pilot to production (see Figure 1).

Larger banks, including global/national and regional banks, have generally progressed farther in implementing AI into their organizations. By contrast, smaller banks are more likely to find themselves behind

schedule. Nearly 30% of banks and credit unions with less than \$100 billion in assets report being in the early stages of their AI journey.

For roughly one-third of financial institutions, their AI initiatives are at best experimental — and at worst stalled. Of those organizations, some 71% say that fewer than one-quarter of their AI initiatives make it from the pilot stage to production. These results suggest there's more that organizations could do to accelerate their AI journey.

"Every board and C-suite wants their enterprise to embrace AI, but most tech teams don't know the best place to start — they all need help, but few are getting it," says Kalimuthu Chithambaram, Industry Strategist, Financial Services at CDW. "Before institutions can act effectively, they have to assess the infrastructure and tools they have in place and figure out if that can get them where they want to go."

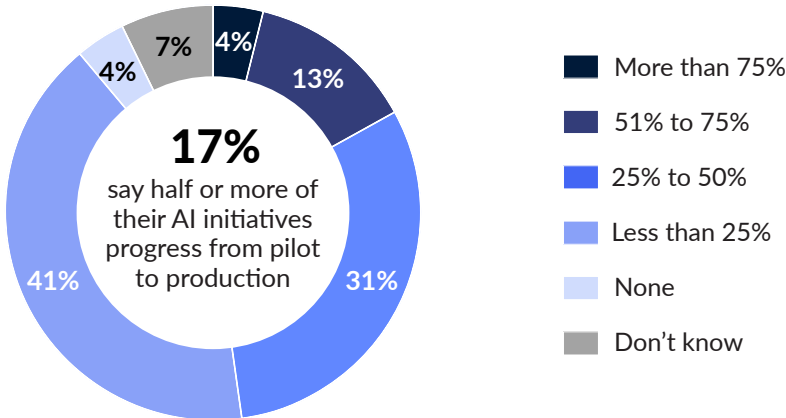


30%

of institutions with less than \$100B are in the early stages of their AI journey.

Figure 1: Many AI initiatives are stuck in the pilot stage

What percentage of your organization's AI initiatives progress from pilot to production?



Source: American Banker, AI Readiness Gap in Banking Report 2026

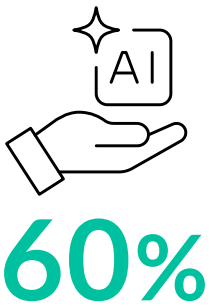
AI is delivering results

Even if their efforts haven't always advanced as far as they might like, more than 60% of institutions report that AI is delivering meaningful value. In fact, 64% say their efforts to scale AI capabilities from pilot to production have been moderately to extremely successful.

The value financial institutions achieve from their efforts is often uneven, however. Just 16% of organizations have reached a point in their AI journey where the majority of the funded AI initiatives they have underway move from pilot to production. That leaves 84% either in the early stages of developing their AI strategy or struggling to push initiatives into production at scale.

The outcomes financial institutions have achieved with their AI efforts reflect that inconsistency. They have achieved a fair amount of success in areas such as cost reductions, process efficiencies and improved employee productivity. They've been less likely to achieve results in growth-oriented areas such as improved customer experiences, better decision-making and revenue growth (see Figure 2).

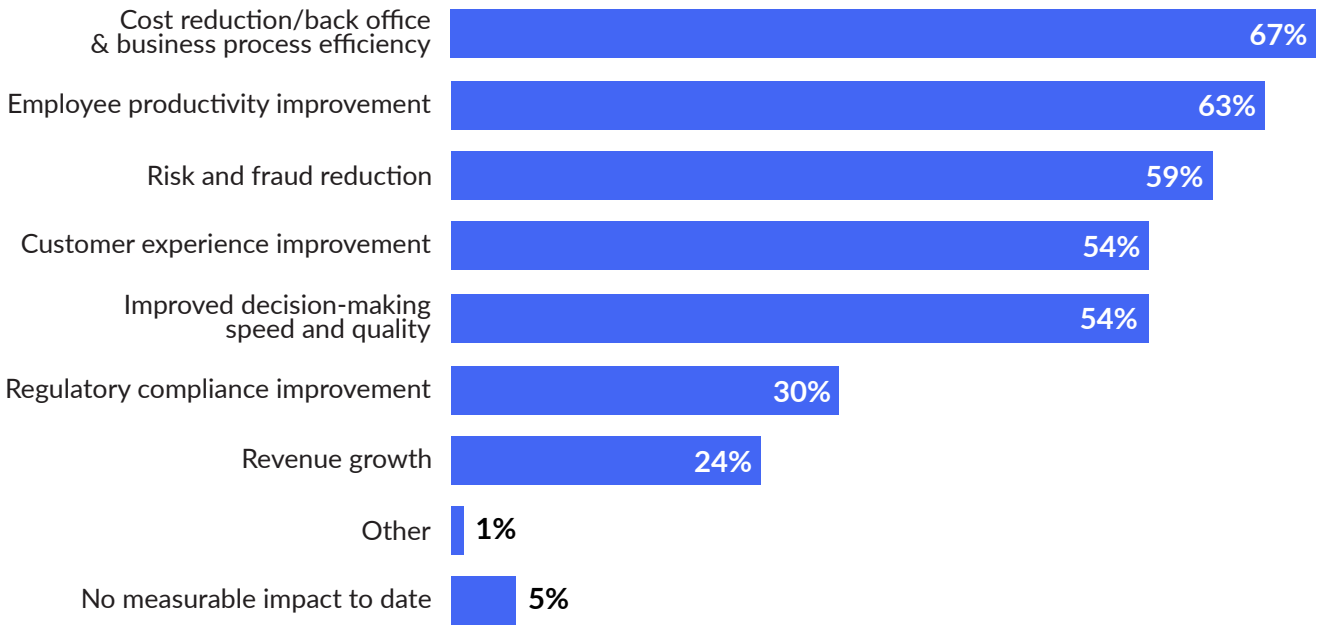
The more mature the organization's AI strategy, the broader the benefits of its AI initiatives tend to be. In general, organizations with very mature AI strategies are using multiple types of AI to support a range of objectives, successfully funding their AI initiatives and moving the majority of their initiatives from pilot to production.



AI is delivering meaningful value.

Figure 2: AI is delivering value across multiple areas

In which of the following areas has AI delivered measurable business value?

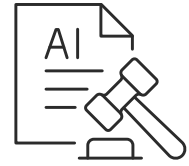


Source: American Banker, AI Readiness Gap in Banking Report 2026

By contrast, those at the other end of the maturity spectrum are still working to define their AI strategy and are less likely to report tangible results from any of the AI efforts they have put in place (see Figure 3).

A well-defined AI strategy, and the infrastructure to support that strategy, clearly can help organizations unlock a broader range of valuable outcomes tied to their AI efforts.

“Institutions need to think bigger as they develop their use cases for AI,” says Doug Derrington, Industry Strategist, Financial Services for CDW. “Efficiency on its own isn’t a use case — but speeding up a painful process so it takes days rather than weeks can produce measurable value across multiple outcomes, from customer experience improvements to employee productivity and cost reduction.”

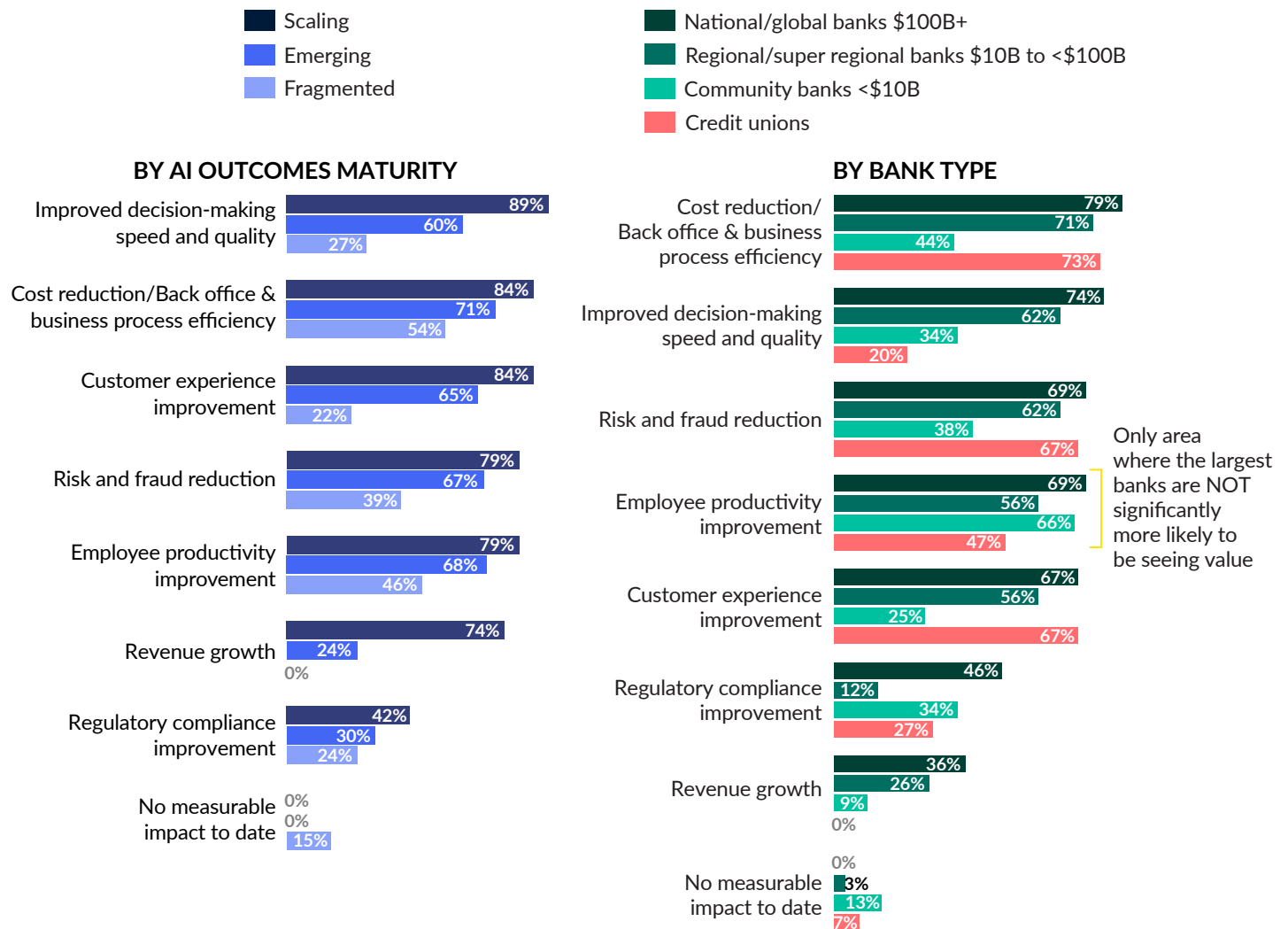


3

the number of data readiness pillars: data infrastructure, governance and data availability.

Figure 3: Mature data readiness drives more value from AI

In which of the following areas has AI delivered measurable business value?



Source: American Banker, AI Readiness Gap in Banking Report 2026

Understanding the data readiness gap

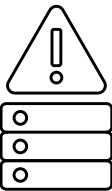
Data readiness is a key piece of the AI infrastructure puzzle. And for many financial institutions, a lack of data readiness is suppressing the potential for valuable returns on AI investments. In fact, 92% of institutions report inconsistencies and challenges across the three main pillars of AI data readiness: data infrastructure, governance and data availability.

Smaller banks and credit unions are the most likely to report fragmented results around data readiness. It might seem fair to assume that size matters, and that larger institutions with more financial and human resources are better positioned to address

these three pillars of data readiness. In reality, just 13% of national/global banks with assets of \$100 billion or more report that their data readiness efforts are fully scaled.

Organizations report that they are making progress on improving data readiness, particularly around data infrastructure and governance. Even with these improvements, however, there's plenty more work to be done. The majority of organizations say that their data infrastructure remains, at best, only partially established (see Figure 4).

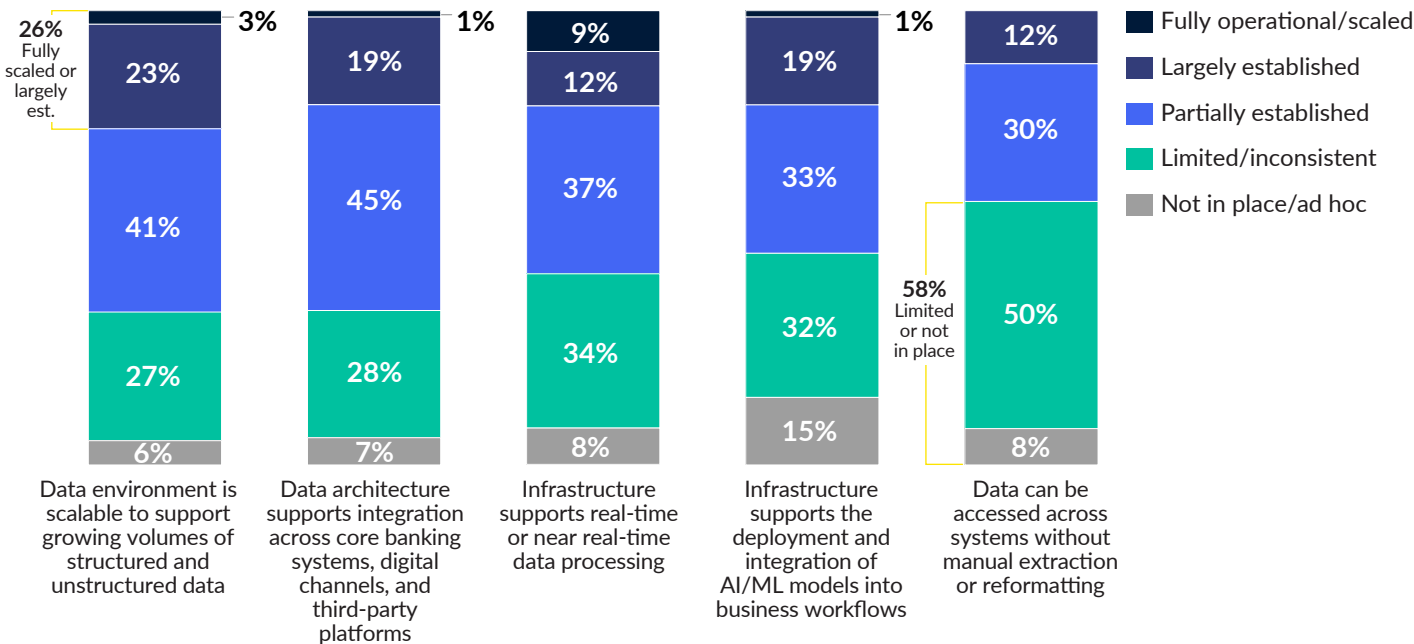
What's behind this data readiness gap? For many institutions, legacy systems are a key constraint limiting AI integration and deployment.



92%

report challenges across the three main pillars of AI data readiness

Figure 4: The data infrastructure challenge is deep in several areas
Data Infrastructure for AI and Analytics



Source: American Banker, AI Readiness Gap in Banking Report 2026

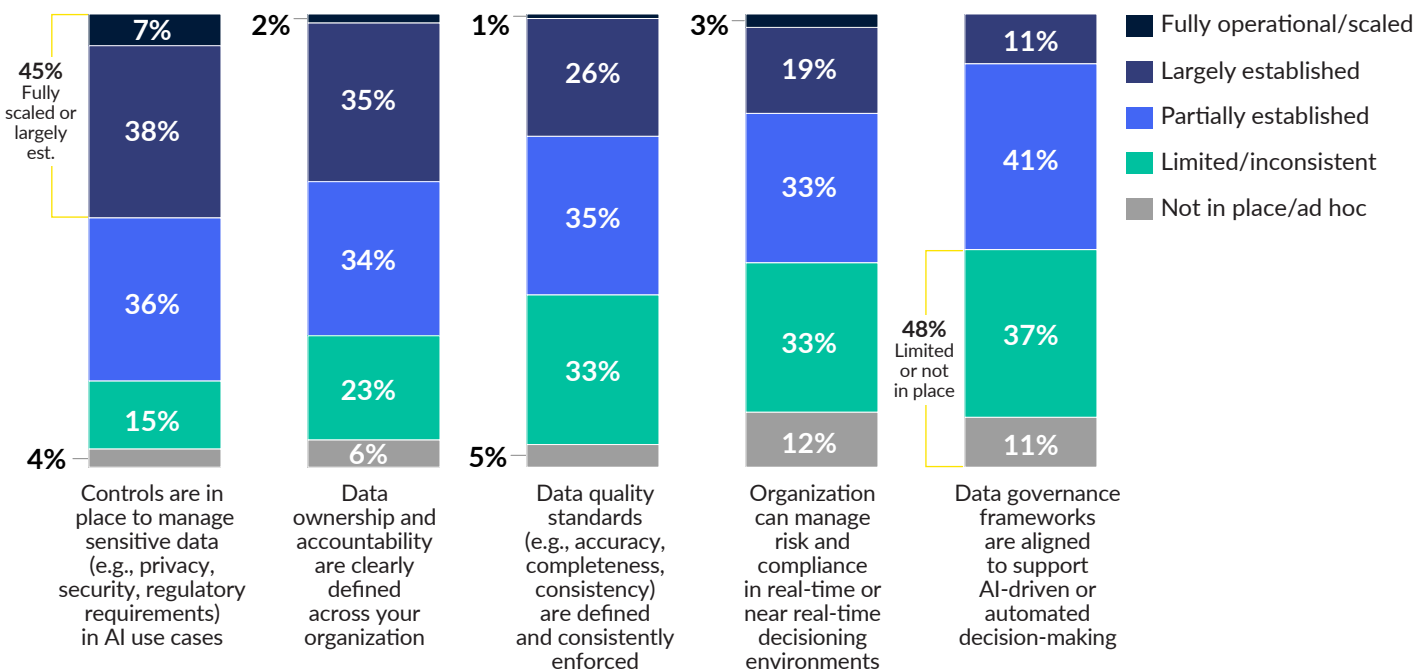
Similarly, the majority of financial institutions report governance and control challenges (see Figure 5).

Within the governance pillar, 45% of institutions have largely or fully established controls in place to manage

sensitive data, and 36% report having partially established controls. In many cases, however, those controls aren't aligned with AI strategy.

Just 11% say their data governance frameworks support AI-driven and automated decision-making.

Figure 5: Building stronger governance and controls is a key to success
Governance and Controls for AI and Analytics



Source: American Banker, AI Readiness Gap in Banking Report 2026

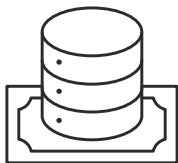
Fast access to high-quality data is a prerequisite for AI success. But financial institutions have run into challenges supporting the third pillar of data readiness: data availability and latency (see Figure 6).

Only a fraction of institutions report having a fully operational process to access data quickly and across the organization. For many, data availability is, at best, only partially established. What's more, 65% of organizations note limited ability to incorporate unstructured data sources such as call notes and chat transcripts into their broader AI efforts. This lack of speed and availability has obvious implications for AI implementation at scale.

Lack of data readiness affects AI outcomes

Financial institutions understand the importance of data readiness. Nearly two-thirds (63%) have funded initiatives to improve data infrastructure, governance and data availability. Large banks are further along in these efforts, with 90% of national/global banks having funded these initiatives compared to less than 60% of all other financial institutions.

However, a lack of strategy around data readiness is leading to inconsistencies and misalignment with AI objectives for institutions of all sizes. Nearly two-thirds (63%) say their AI outcomes are outpacing data readiness — sometimes by a wide

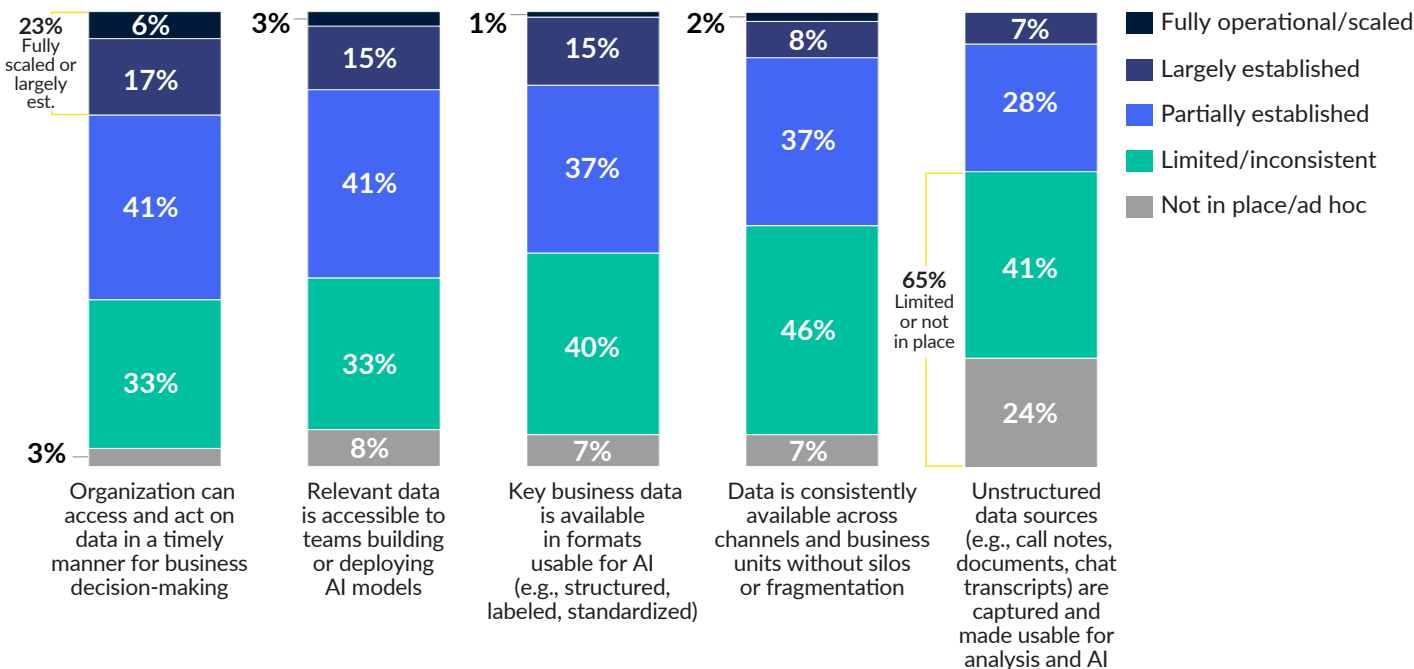


63%

have funded initiatives to improve data infrastructure, governance and availability.

Figure 6: Where's the data?

Data Availability and Latency for AI and Analytics

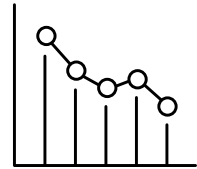


Source: American Banker, AI Readiness Gap in Banking Report 2026



As long as you work strategically, you can build your data readiness in tandem with your AI capabilities to create a trusted digital workforce.”

— Kalimuthu Chithambaram, Industry Strategist, Financial Services, CDW



31%

say that AI outcomes are underperforming their level of data readiness.

margin. A lack of trusted, high quality data is a common challenge for this group. Conversely, 31% report that AI outcomes are underperforming their level of data readiness. For these institutions, the culprit often is a lack of internal expertise or skills to evaluate AI outputs.

Achieving full data readiness across the enterprise isn't necessarily a prerequisite for generating valuable AI outcomes.

It's enough to prepare data to support a specific workflow or objective, especially if organizations can do so with an eye toward advancing data readiness for future integrations as well. Matching data efforts to AI efforts in this way can help institutions prioritize their data readiness efforts to support high-priority objectives.

As financial institutions push forward with strategic AI initiatives, closing the alignment gap between data readiness and AI objectives should be a priority. That work involves building a robust foundation that supports governance and consistent data definitions flexibly, so that they support an institution's current objectives and shorten the path to enabling additional workflows down the road.

For many organizations, building that foundation efficiently can be much easier with an experienced partner that can leverage deep industry and technology expertise to guide them as they develop data readiness aligned with their AI objectives. Investing in these types of partnerships can aid institutions in their quest to understand what AI strategies can make possible today, and how they can best create a strategic approach to bolster data readiness to meet future AI objectives.

Data strategy is a critical piece of the AI puzzle

Research Disclosure

This report is based on original research conducted by American Banker in collaboration with CDW. CDW provided input on the research topic and/or distribution strategy but did not control the research findings, analysis or conclusions unless otherwise noted. Findings reflect survey responses and reported experiences from participants at the time of data collection. The information provided is for informational purposes only and should not be construed as legal, business, investment or financial advice. Results may vary by institution, market conditions, and implementation. All information is provided “as is” without warranty of any kind.



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