

CompTIA

A group of four business professionals (three men and one woman) are gathered around a laptop in a modern office setting. They are all looking at the screen with focused expressions. The woman on the left is wearing a green shirt, the woman in the center is wearing a blue patterned shirt and glasses, the man on the right is wearing a blue suit jacket, and the man standing behind them is wearing a brown blazer and a blue striped shirt. The background is a blurred office environment with large windows.

IT Industry Outlook 2024

Trends to Watch 2024





AI Hype Fades, but Workflows Continue Evolving

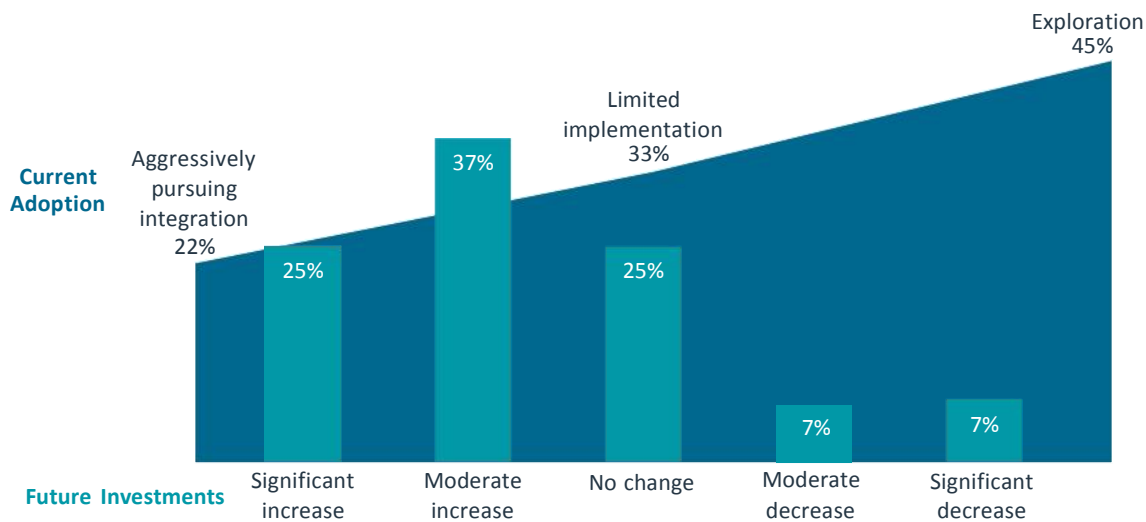
1

It's hard to believe CompTIA's IT Industry Outlook 2023 didn't mention generative AI—that report was released the week before ChatGPT launched. In the time since then, hardly a day has passed without a news story speculating on the changes AI will bring or announcing even more capable products and features. The hype cycle has been as intense as any trend in recent memory, and for good reason; large language model (LLM) algorithms are producing output that would have been in the realm of science fiction just a few years ago and raising questions about the future of work. As with all technology trends, the initial hype around generative AI will likely wane in 2024 for a variety of reasons. The first products, while amazing, are not standalone business solutions outside a few select cases. The data needed to properly train an LLM is in short supply at most organizations. The challenges in dealing with probabilistic output are just beginning

to surface. Most companies will have to take a step back to build the proper prerequisites for modern AI operations, but that doesn't mean that exploration and pilot programs will grind to a halt. Along with new standalone products, a wide range of business applications will begin to incorporate AI as a feature. As this happens, companies will address AI skill gaps among the workers using these applications. The end result will be workflow evolution, using AI to handle routine tasks or accelerate automation while reimagining the roles and responsibilities of employees. This early stage of workflow evolution may not make as many headlines as the introduction of generative AI, but it will likely set the stage for a full workplace revolution in the years and decades to come. History shows that new technology can have far-reaching effects, and the potential of AI layered on top of modern digital operations is likely to drive significant economic disruption.

A view of the current adoption patterns and future investment plans around AI suggests a disconnect between hype and reality. Just over 20% of firms surveyed are aggressively pursuing integration of AI across a wide variety of technology products and business workflows. It is reasonable to assume that those cutting-edge organizations represent the bulk of the group that expects to significantly increase AI investment next year, so while overall investment is scheduled for an increase, that may not dramatically change the adoption curve.

Current AI Efforts and Future Investment



Source: CompTIA IT Industry Outlook 2024 survey | n=513 U.S. tech professionals

Hesitation in adoption may stem from the challenges being encountered by early adopters. The top challenge for AI, whether that challenge comes from early experience or simply expectations around implementation, is around cost. There are two costs to consider—the cost of upgrading applications (cited by 39%) and the cost of building out infrastructure (37%). It may be difficult for those holding the budget to understand the investment needed to produce tools available on websites that are free (for now).

It also may be difficult to fully understand the data needed to properly train AI. Over one third (36%) of firms surveyed say that collecting and preparing the datasets needed for input into AI algorithms is a major challenge. This echoes the experience of companies that aggressively pursued data analytics over the past five years—a solid foundation in data management and data classification is a prerequisite for advanced data activities.

Even with all the challenges, the benefits companies hope to realize will make the AI effort worthwhile in the long run. Many companies expect to unlock a higher degree of automation, whether in IT operations (52% of firms) or business workflow (46%). Reducing the time spent on routine tasks is another top benefit, with 49% of companies expecting AI to improve efficiency in this area. Finally, AI is expected to help accelerate data operations, with 44% of businesses anticipating deeper analysis of data and 33% hoping for novel insights to be suggested by AI tools.



Tech Providers

Use AI to Run Better Businesses

2

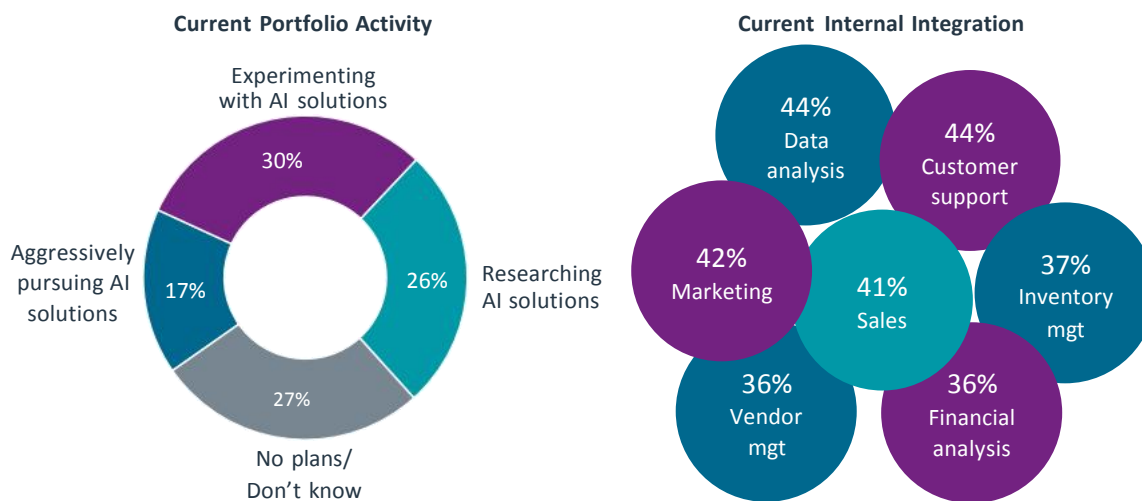
While the AI market is indeed one huge hype-a-palooza today, there is almost certainly going to be ripe revenue opportunity for MSPs and other tech channel providers to cash in. That said, most would agree that, today, the average channel firm is still in the tinkering and discovery phase with generative AI—at least when it comes to actively selling solutions to customers, making vendor selections, assessing skills, etc. While that work is revving up, the more immediate benefits will come from applying new AI capabilities internally to enable a better-run, more efficient business. Automation aims have always been a part of an MSP's quest, to be sure, but today's AI will only accelerate and improve those efforts. Consider some of the use cases: AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants to speed and bolster

customer service; AI algorithms to analyze customer data and predict buying patterns for more effective sales and marketing campaigns; AI tools to automate repetitive tasks and optimize workflows and, as a result, free up human resources to pursue more strategic goals. These are all benefits that companies are starting to see today that hold great potential for the future. Even those channel firms that choose not to sell AI solutions as part of their business can nonetheless boost profitability and reap positives by deploying AI functionality across their internal operations. And lastly, the fear that AI's automation capabilities will replace humans might not be as scary as is projected. In a workforce study this year by CompTIA, two thirds of MSP respondents said that use of AI by their company would either result in no change to their staffing levels or a net gain.

When it comes to the channel's adoption of AI, a predictable behavior pattern has emerged across the channel, one that ranges from ambivalence (19% of respondents) to a full-throated embrace (17%).

Between those two poles lies the majority of channel firms. A net 56% of respondents said they are either experimenting with today's AI solutions in some way (most likely internally) or they have begun researching and evaluating the tools for potential future adoption. This deliberate and iterative pattern mirrors in many ways how channel companies initially handled the cloud computing wave when it hit shore a little more than a decade ago. Many of the same questions channel firms had about cloud at the time are being pondered about AI today: What is it? How can we monetize it? Is it an enabling technology or a product? How can we use it in-house to better our business?

Channel Firms Explore AI Externally and Internally



Source: CompTIA IT Industry Outlook 2024 survey | n=513 U.S. tech industry professionals

For the companies forging ahead with AI internally, the use cases are many. Some of the known sweet spots for AI such as customer support or marketing activities make the top of the list, but close behind are some less obvious applications such as vendor management or financial analysis. One example of the former is using an AI tool to execute a competitive pricing analysis in realtime across multi-vendor product sets. Or in the case of financial analysis, conducting a return on investment (ROI) assessment before launching a new product or service. In both cases, AI technology allows small channel firms to look and act bigger via easier access to such large-company capabilities as analytics.

With these types of internal activities as the main thrust of the channel's initial AI exploration, it's not surprising that the first major benefits are tied to them. Roughly half of channel respondents cited increased efficiencies (53%) and cost savings (48%) as their top returns from AI in the last year. A close third group (45%) report faster/better decision-making. Note that none of these results is about a boost in sales. The early days with AI and the channel are clearly about operational business efficiencies.

As for the challenges? Issues with data quality and acquisition top the list. As has been copiously reported, generative AI outputs are only as good as the data the tool has at its disposal, which holds true in all uses.

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