Retail Edition

State of Agentic AI in the Enterprise

How retail organizations are preparing for the next generation of AI agents.



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About this report

This report extracts retail findings from our larger State of Agentic AI in Enterprise research, which surveyed AI decision makers across industries. Here, we examine responses from 294 retail leaders to better understand how organizations are preparing for, deploying, and scaling AI agents.

Throughout the report, retail responses are compared with the broader cross-industry sample to highlight where the industry aligns with or differs from the overall market.

This report explores:

- Retail organizations' confidence in their data readiness
- Factors influencing AI agent deployment decisions
- Barriers to scaling agentic AI
- Governance, ownership, and operating practices
- Emerging opportunities for autonomous and multi-agent systems

Methodology

Data in this report comes from a double-anonymous survey conducted between May 14 and May 28, 2026. Respondents represent retail organizations across 20 countries and influence AI agent purchasing decisions. C-suite respondents also influence implementation and governance strategy. Due to rounding, percentages may not total 100%.



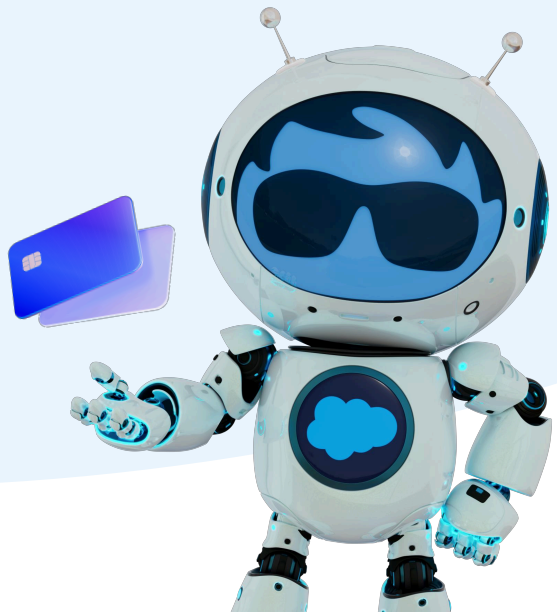
A note from Salesforce

Retail enters the agentic AI era with more confidence than most. Compared to the total sample of 2,025 global agentic AI decision-makers, retail respondents rate their data readiness above benchmark on nearly every dimension measured and report fewer barriers to scaling, with 16% saying no significant barriers exist at all, nearly 2.5 times the cross-industry rate (6%).

However, the infrastructure running beneath that confidence lags.

Retail is more likely than the total sample to operate without a clear owner for AI architecture decisions, without governance structures in place, and without success metrics to track whether agentic investments are working. The industry gives its agents more autonomy than any other sector measured: 44% of deployed agents are fully autonomous, compared to 36% overall, while simultaneously setting the least-defined timeline to ROI.

The pattern that emerges across the data is one of bold, fast movement: retail is deploying agents, granting them independence, and expressing few concerns about what it will take to scale. The opportunity for the industry is to match that ambition with the measurement, governance, and ownership structures needed to sustain it before scale makes them harder to retrofit. This report examines where those gaps are widest, and closes with a practical framework for retailers who recognize the profile – high confidence, fast deployment, governance still catching up – and want a clear path forward.



Executive summary

Retail approaches agentic AI with a high degree of confidence. Compared with the broader market, retail organizations express stronger confidence in their data, report fewer barriers to expansion, and among organizations with deployed AI agents, report higher levels of fully autonomous operation.

The research also shows an industry continuing to develop the organizational structures that support long-term adoption. Governance practices, ownership models, and approaches to measuring success vary more widely than confidence in the underlying technology.

Together, these findings describe an industry that has embraced AI agents early while continuing to refine the operating model around them.

1 Retail's agentic era begins with strong data confidence

Retail exceeds the all-industry benchmark across nearly every data readiness dimension measured, including accessibility, quality, coverage, and legacy connectivity.

2 A clear path to scale emerges, but the road ahead is still evolving

One in six retail organizations reports no significant barriers to expanding AI agents, while technology, data, and workforce concerns all fall below cross-industry averages.

3 AI agents within retail operate with less governance than the broader market

Among organizations with deployed AI agents, retail reports higher levels of fully autonomous operation than the broader market while governance adoption remains below average.

4 AI autonomy expands while ownership models continue to evolve

Retail organizations are more likely to report undefined ownership for AI architecture decisions and longer or unspecified timelines for realizing return on investment.

01

Retail's agentic era begins with strong data confidence

Retail organizations report stronger confidence in their data foundation than the broader market, suggesting they may be better positioned to accelerate AI adoption.



01

Retail outpaces the broader market in key data readiness measures

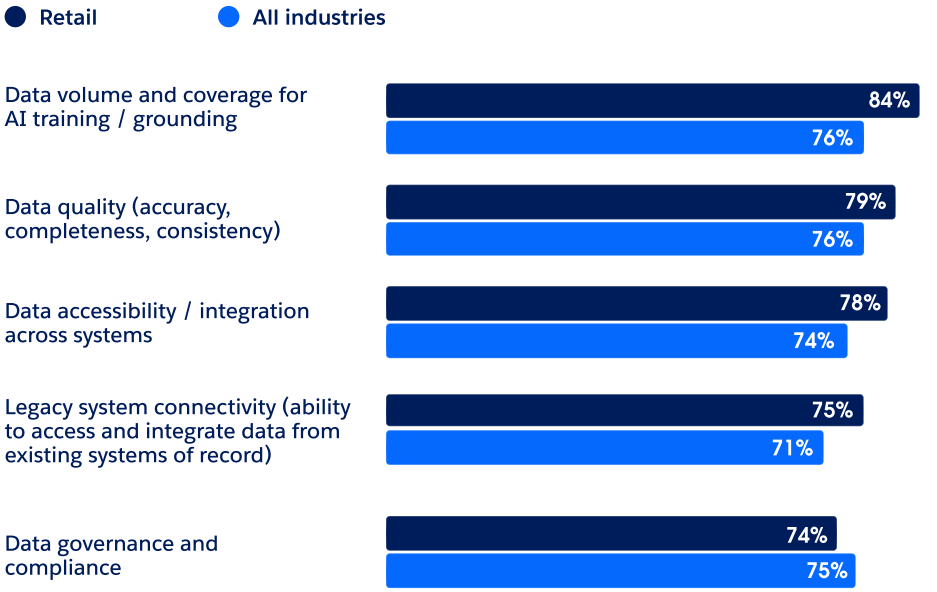
Retail rates its data foundation relatively well. Roughly three-quarters or more describe every dimension as strong, with data volume and coverage highest at 84% – the one area where retail meaningfully outpaces the cross-industry benchmark.

That result reflects the vast amount of data retail generates through everyday operations, from transactions to returns to loyalty activity and inventory movement. Few industries have as much customer and operational history to draw from.

Where confidence dips slightly is in connecting that data. Integration across systems and legacy connectivity rate somewhat lower, suggesting more room to strengthen how data moves across the systems that hold it.

Retail reports higher data readiness across nearly all dimensions

Data readiness scorecard (top 2 box: % who said strong + adequate)



Salesforce's take

Don't mistake data volume for data advantage. Retail feels confident, yet across commerce only 27% of organizations have fully unified customer data and 59% say their current stack can't support real-time personalization at scale[1]. Retailers do hold something rare: years of loyalty, purchase, and preference history. The advantage is real only when that history is connected to live inventory and transaction signals, giving agents the context to act with relevance and precision.

[1] State of Commerce, 2026

01

Retail and the market set the same bar for data readiness

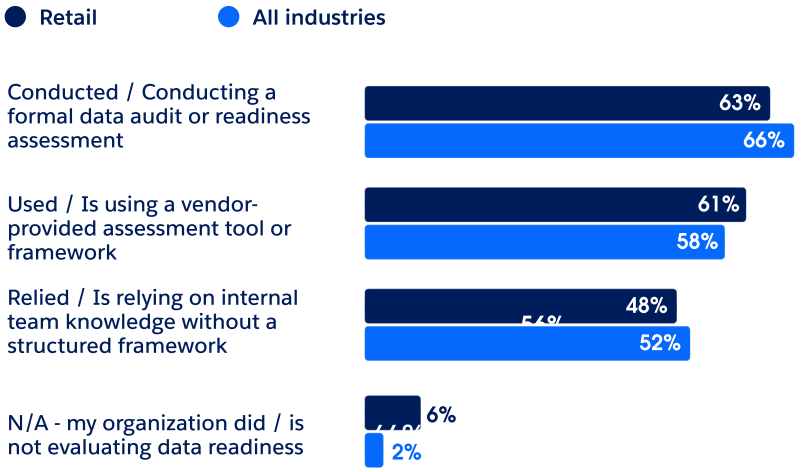
Most retailers checked their data before deploying agents, and many checked it more than one way – though not by much. Organizations named 1.67 methods on average. Nearly two-thirds ran a formal audit, six in ten used a vendor-provided assessment tool, and about half relied on internal team knowledge without a structured framework.

That average suggests a second look rather than a layered process. A formal audit can establish the condition of the data, but not necessarily whether it's sufficient for a particular agent doing particular work. Internal judgment appears to be filling that gap in about half of retail organizations, suggesting on-the-ground knowledge often plays a role alongside formal assessments.

Six percent moved ahead without a formal assessment of any kind – three times the cross-industry rate, and the one point where retail's approach diverges meaningfully from the market.

Retail organizations evaluate data readiness in a standard way

Data readiness assessment



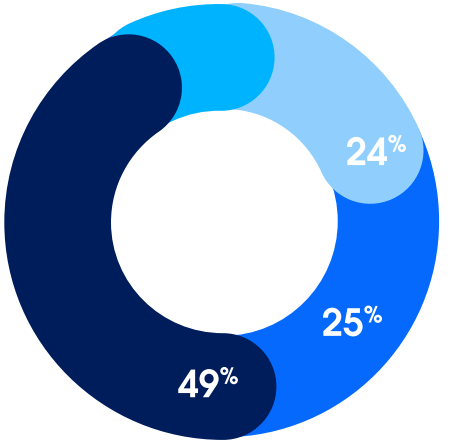
01

Data readiness is one of several factors shaping deployment

Retail organizations report strong confidence in their data, but that confidence does not always dictate which AI agents are deployed first. Among organizations with fully deployed AI agents, 25% say data readiness findings directly influenced deployment sequencing. Nearly half say readiness was one of several factors considered, while 24% report it played only a minimal role.

For most retailers, data readiness was one input but not the deciding one

Data readiness influence on AI agent deployment*



- **Directly** – we sequenced agents based on data readiness
- **Somewhat** – data readiness was one of several factors
- **Minimally** – other factors (ROI, stakeholder demand, etc.) drove prioritization
- **Not at all** – agent prioritization was independent of data readiness

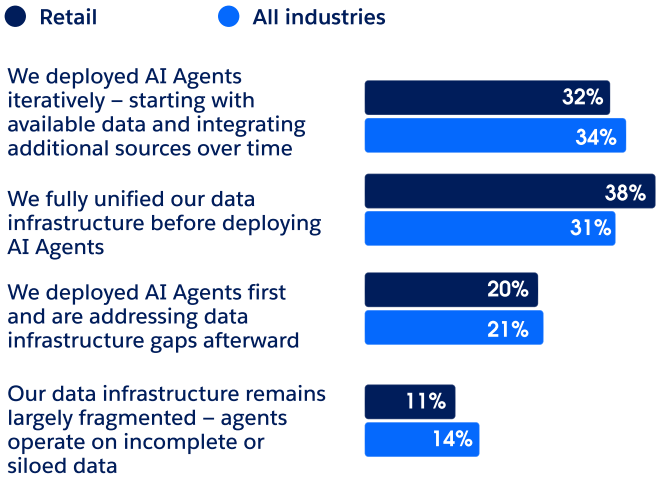
01

Retail organizations are more likely than the broader market to fully unify their data before deploying AI agents, with 38% completing data unification before launch.

These findings suggest retailers often establish a strong data foundation before deployment while balancing data readiness with other business priorities when determining where AI agents can deliver the greatest value.

Retail more often unifies data before deployment

Deployed iteratively vs. waited for full unification*





Salesforce's take

Confidence in data is a starting point, not a finish line. Nearly half of retailers that stalled an AI initiative traced it back to data or integration issues, so pressure-test perceived readiness against what agents actually need: unified, real-time, permissioned access to customer and operational data. Before you scale, validate readiness at the use-case level, not across the organization.

02

A clear path to scale emerges, but the road ahead is still evolving

Retail reports fewer obstacles to scaling AI agents than the broader market while continuing to define how more advanced AI capabilities fit into its business.



02

Retail reports fewer barriers to scaling AI agents

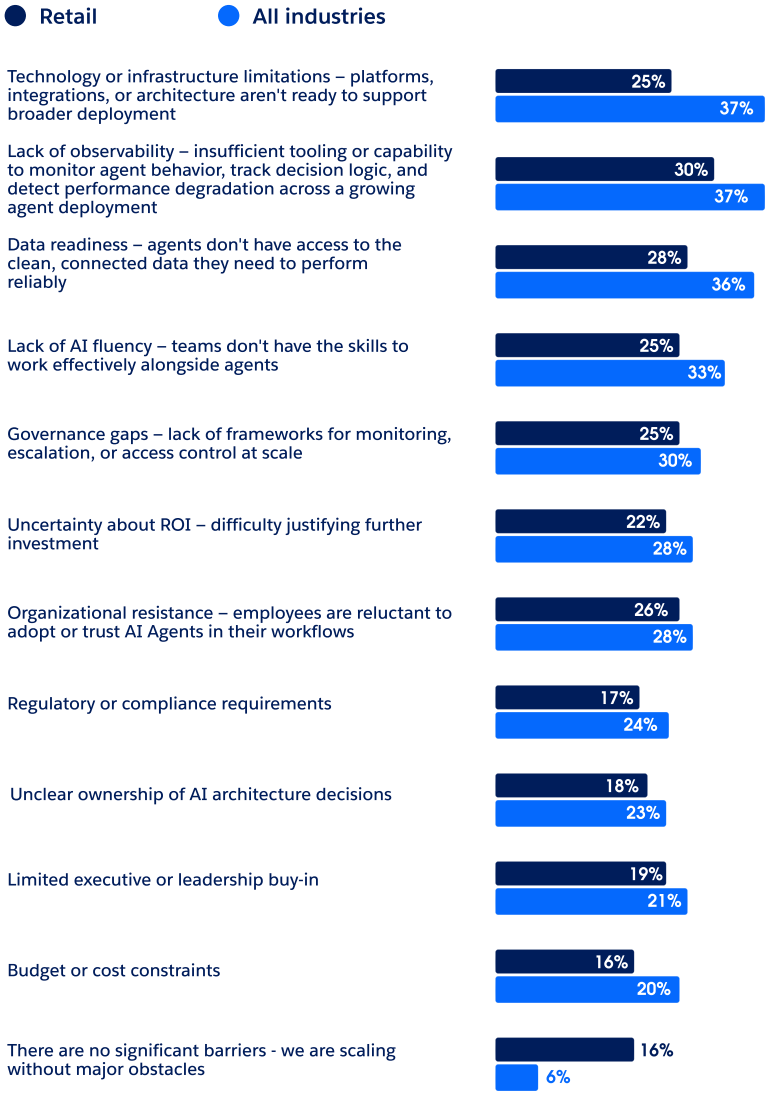
Retail organizations report fewer barriers to scaling AI agents than the broader market, including technology limitations (25% versus 37%) and data readiness (28% versus 36%). But where stronger barriers remain, they tend to be more operational: observability and data readiness rank higher, while executive buy-in and unclear ownership sit lower on the list.

16% of retail organizations reporting having no significant barriers to scaling AI.

Taken together, the findings suggest that retail's constraints may be shifting from authority to capability. The challenge may have moved from getting agents off the ground to operating them effectively at scale.

Perceived barriers to scaling AI agents

Barriers to scaling
Ordered by total sample



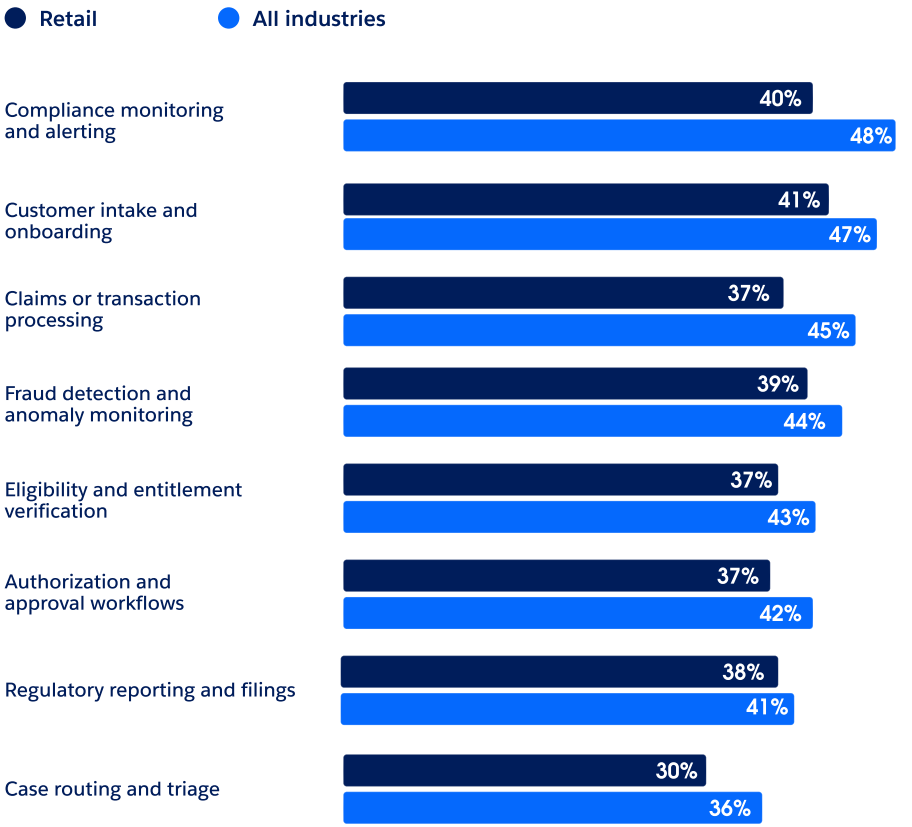
02

Retail is still defining where multi-agent systems fit

Compared with the broader market, retail identifies fewer use cases for multi-agent systems, with lower interest across every application measured. Compliance monitoring and alerting (40% versus 48%) and claims and transaction processing (37% versus 45%) illustrate the broader pattern, while retail respondents select fewer use cases overall (3.1 versus 3.5).

Retail identifies fewer opportunities for multi-agent systems

Use cases best suited to operate together in a multi-agent system capacity ordered by total sample



02

The findings suggest retail is still determining where coordinated AI agents can deliver the greatest value. Retail respondents are also more likely to say it's too early to judge where multi-agent systems fit their operations (5% versus 2%), reinforcing that many organizations are still defining the role these more advanced AI deployments will play.



Salesforce's take

Seeing no barriers is not the same as having none. With 71% of commerce leaders saying cross-channel scale isn't viable without AI[1], the next question is where agents can work together, not simply where they can be deployed. Pick two or three high-volume, high-friction workflows – such as service, returns, inventory, or marketing orchestration – and design for multi-agent from the start.

[1] State of Commerce, 2026



03

AI agents within retail operate with less governance than the broader market

As AI adoption grows, governance practices aren't keeping pace in retail.



03

Retail builds less governance into AI deployments

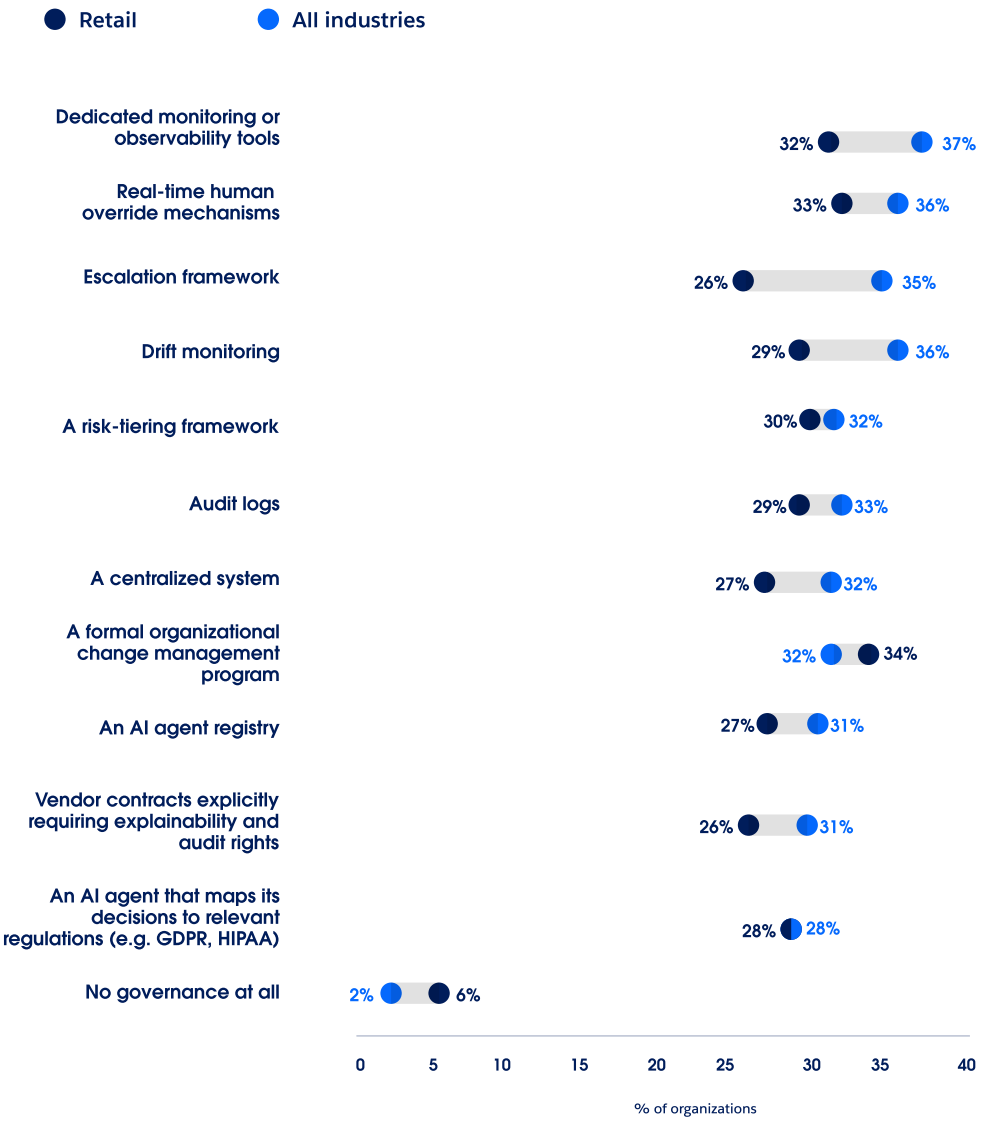
Retail organizations report fewer AI governance structures than the broader market, averaging 3.2 governance practices per organization compared with 3.7 across industries. Adoption trails the benchmark across nearly every governance structure measured, suggesting that governance may not be developing at the same pace as AI deployment.

6% of retail organizations report having no AI governance structure in place.

The largest gaps appear in formally defined escalation frameworks (26% versus 35%), drift monitoring (29% versus 36%), and centralized agent management (27% versus 32%). Retailers are also two and a half times more likely to report having no governance structures in place at all (6% versus 2%)

Retail reports lower adoption across AI governance practices

AI governance structures currently in place



03

The data points to a governance gap. As AI deployments expand, fewer safeguards for escalation and oversight could increase retailers exposure when systems behave unexpectedly or require intervention.

37%



Salesforce's take

Retail blames technology first, but the underlying challenge may run deeper. When 59% of commerce organizations say their stack can't deliver real-time personalization and only 27% have unified customer data[1], technology "failures" may reflect gaps in integration. Before replacing tools, connect the data underneath them. The fix is usually the foundation, not the front end.

[1] State of Commerce, 2026



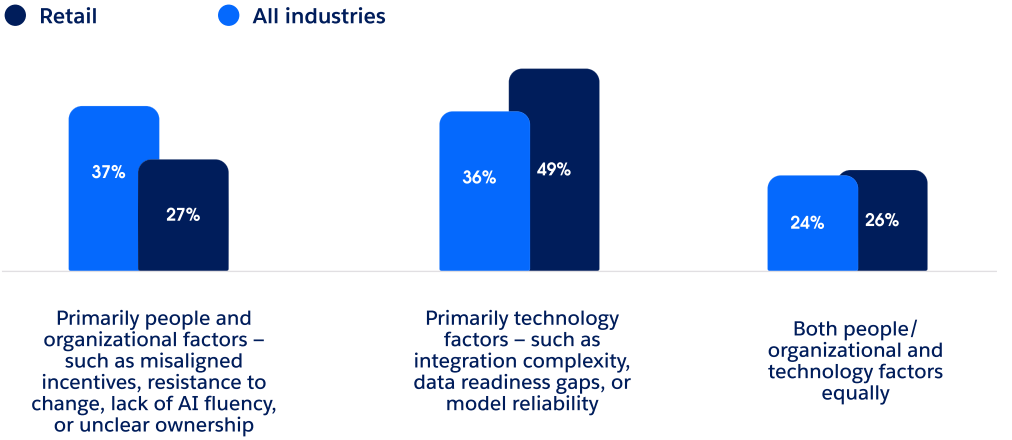
03

Retail more often attributes AI setbacks to technology

Nearly half (49%) of retail organizations identify issues such as integration complexity, data readiness, or model performance as the primary reason AI initiatives were scaled back, slowed, or discontinued. Meanwhile, fewer retailers point to workforce readiness, ownership, or change management as the primary challenge (27% versus 37%).

Access remains relatively contained: more than one-third of retailers say AI agents are available to only specific roles or teams. That may limit the immediate scope of risk, but it also raises questions for what comes next, whether the governance foundation is prepared to support broader access as the adoption grows.

Where retailers say AI initiatives fall short





Salesforce's take

Governance is cheapest to build before scale, not after. Retail's thinnest controls – escalation paths, drift monitoring, and centralized management – are exactly the ones autonomy demands, and only 32% of organizations have even defined what AI success looks like[1]. You can't govern what you can't measure. A single control plane to monitor, audit, and manage every agent turns governance from a brake into an accelerator, letting you grant more autonomy with confidence.

[1] State of Commerce, 2026



04

AI autonomy expands while ownership models continue to evolve

Retail is giving AI agents more independence while at the same time figuring out who should own and manage them.



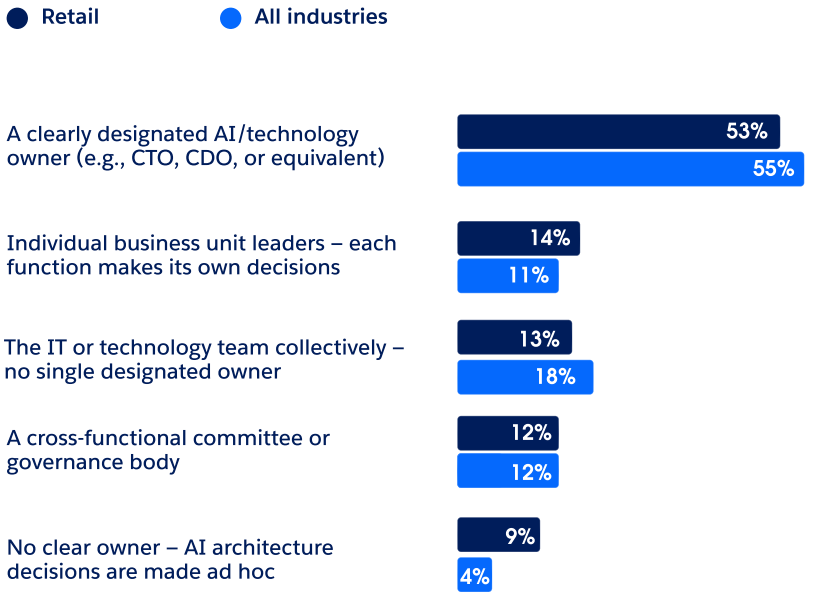
04

Retail is more open to flexible AI ownership models

Retail organizations are more willing than the broader market to deploy AI agents without a clearly defined owner. As agents take on greater responsibility, this points to a potential disconnect between agent roles and organizational accountability.

Retail is more willing to deploy AI agents without a dedicated owner

Ownership of AI decisions
Ordered by total sample



04

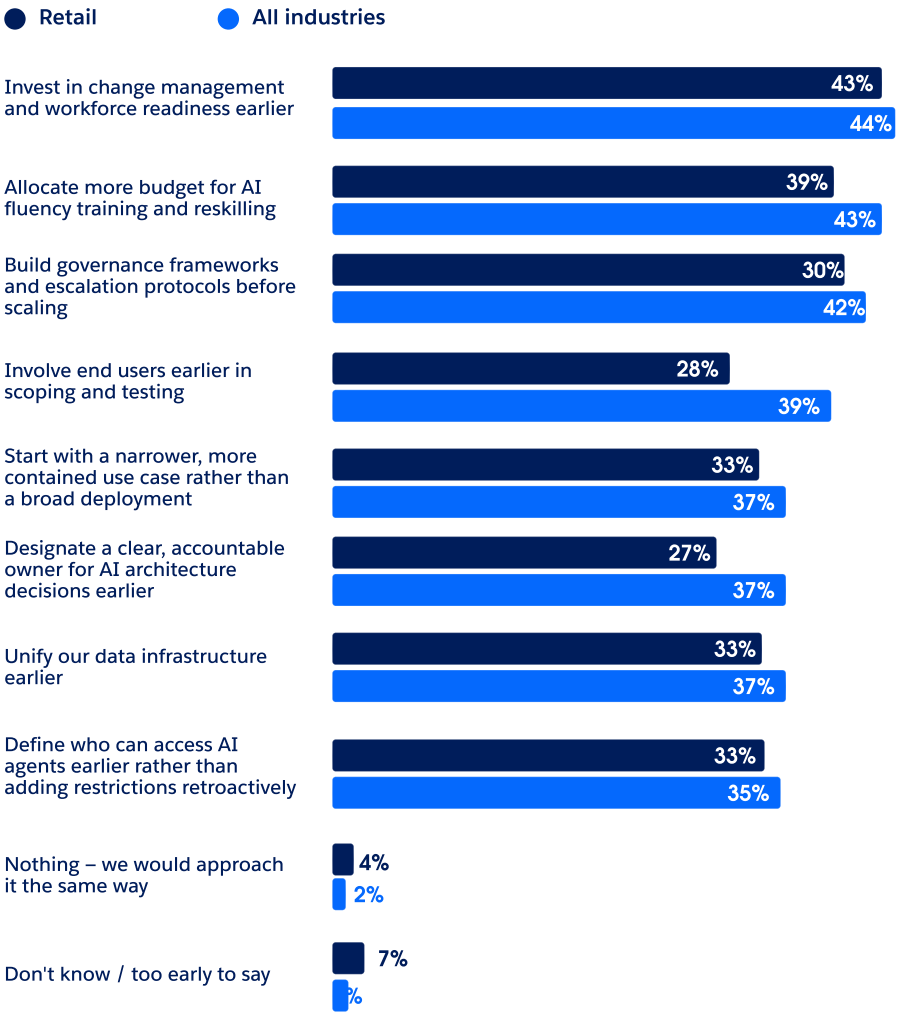
Retail is more open to flexible AI ownership models

That perspective is reflected in how retailers look back on their AI implementations. Compared to the broader market, they are less likely to say they would have designated a clear owner earlier, built governance frameworks before scaling, or involved end users earlier in the process.

The findings suggest that formalizing ownership and oversight may be a less established part of retail's approach, even as AI agents become more embedded in the business.

Retail reports different priorities when reflecting on AI deployments

Would have done differently
Ordered by total sample



04

Retail gives AI agents greater independence

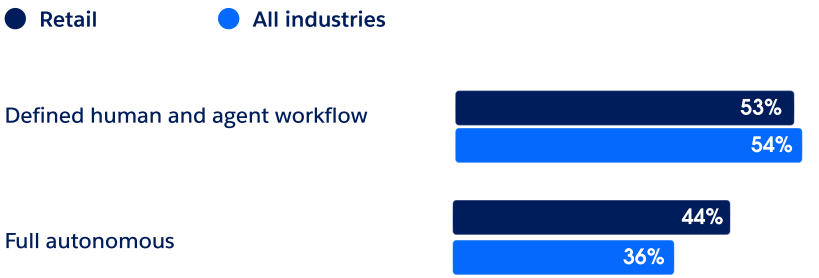
Retail deployments split close to evenly on how much room agents get. Fifty-three percent run defined human-and-agent workflows with predetermined handoffs, while 44% operate fully autonomously, with no set point for human intervention.

The difference is not only how much oversight each configuration involves, but what kind. In a defined workflow, review happens whether or not anything has gone wrong. Under full autonomy, nothing brings a person in unless something surfaces one – which makes detection, rather than review, the capability that matters.

That distinction carries weight in retail, where small decisions repeat at scale. A single misjudged return or pricing call may have limited impact. Repeated thousands of times before detection becomes a much larger risk – making effective monitoring critical as autonomy expands.

Retail extends the amount of work AI agents can perform independently

Defined workflows vs. fully autonomous





Salesforce's take

High autonomy without clear ownership creates real risk. As agents move from back-office automation to front-line purchase advisor, and up to 20% of holiday ecommerce traffic comes from AI agents[2], someone still has to own the outcome. Establish accountability while deployments are contained, before a costly independent decision repeats at scale. Autonomy and accountability should scale together.

[2] 2026 Holiday Predictions: A Unified Yet Fractured Journey



04

Retail takes a more measured view of AI ROI

Retail organizations generally expect AI investments to deliver value over time rather than immediately. More than half (53%) expect AI initiatives to achieve return on investment within seven to 12 months, closely aligning with the broader market. At the same time, retailers are less likely to expect returns within the first six months (16%+2% versus 27%+1%) and more likely to say it's too early to define an ROI timeline (12% versus 5%).

These findings suggest retailers are approaching AI as a long-term business capability rather than a quick technology investment. As organizations continue to expand AI use cases, many appear focused on building sustainable value instead of measuring success against immediate returns.

Retail is less focused on immediate AI returns

Expected time to ROI





Salesforce's take

A measured view of ROI is healthy, as long as it isn't an excuse to wait. The business case is already in the numbers: branded shopper agents delivered 59% higher holiday sales growth, and we predict that 1 in 3 ecommerce sites will run a site-specific agent by Cyber Week 2026[2]. The retailers seeing returns aren't the ones with the longest business cases. They're the ones who defined success metrics up front, something only 32% of organizations have done.

[2] 2026 Holiday Predictions: A Unified Yet Fractured Journey

Spotlight: Retail is bringing AI into the development process



Retail organizations are incorporating AI-assisted agent creation into their development workflows at rates similar to the broader market. Rather than relying exclusively on manual development, many organizations are using AI-assisted tools to accelerate prototyping, simplify configuration, and make it easier to bring new agents into production.

Nearly one-third of retail organizations already use AI-assisted agent creation as part of their standard development process, while nearly half are actively piloting the approach. Together, these findings suggest AI-assisted development is quickly becoming a mainstream capability rather than an emerging experiment.

Retail is rapidly adopting AI-assisted agent creation

AI-assisted agent creation



Salesforce's take:
Turn early momentum into lasting advantage

Retail enters the agentic era from a position of strength. Compared with the broader market, retail organizations report greater confidence in their data foundation, fewer barriers to scaling AI agents, and greater comfort with autonomous AI operations. These findings suggest the industry is well positioned to continue expanding AI across the enterprise.

The research also highlights the next opportunity. As AI adoption accelerates, governance practices, ownership models, and approaches to measuring success have not yet matured at the same pace. Retail organizations report lower adoption of governance structures and greater flexibility around AI ownership than the broader market, creating an opportunity to establish the operating practices that will support AI at scale.

How retail closes that gap may shape what's next. As AI agents take on more autonomous and business-critical work, strong governance, clear accountability, and consistent performance measurement can become competitive advantages, giving retailers the confidence to move faster, scale further, and unlock greater value from agentic AI.

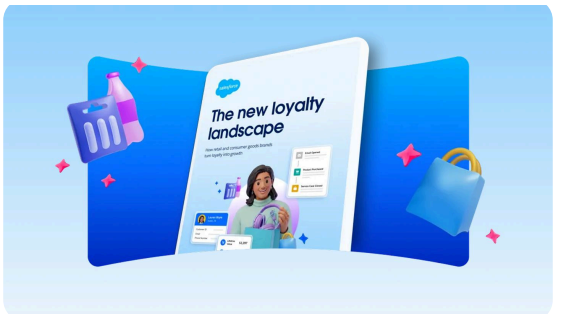


Explore more resources



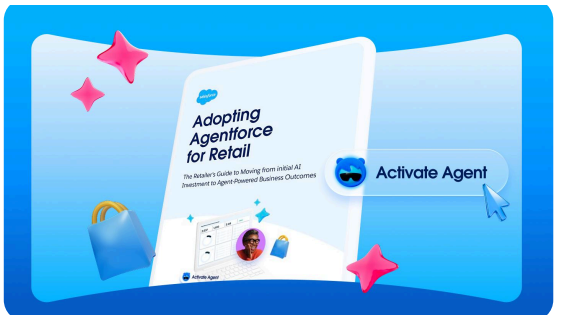
Global State of Agentic Enterprise Report

Read the report



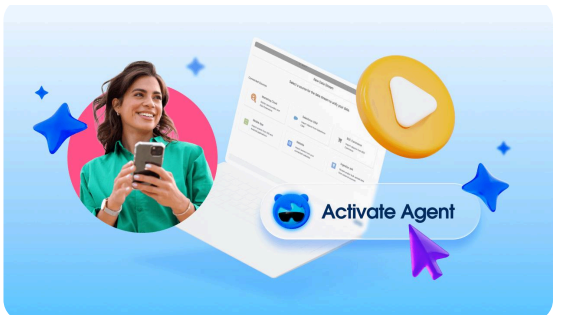
Customer Loyalty Guide for Retail

Read the guide



Adopting Agentforce for Retail Report

Read the report



Salesforce for Retail

Watch the demo



Agentforce Commerce

Watch the demo



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