

salesforce

From Data Chaos to AI Clarity

7 Executive Insights on
the Agentic AI Journey



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aws

IBM

Executive summary

Fueled by the richness of unstructured data, agentic AI marks a pivotal moment toward an AI-empowered future. To find out how executives are navigating the new terrain of agentic AI, whether their unstructured data is ready, and what obstacles they face, we turned to Accenture.

Together, we surveyed 314 senior leaders from companies over 500+ employees around the globe to get the answers. Our respondents came from the U.S., Canada, U.K., France, Germany, Ireland, India, and Australia in these industries: financial services and insurance (33%), technology (22%), retail and consumer goods (18%), manufacturing and energy (13%), healthcare (9%), travel and hospitality (3%), media (1%), and communications (1%).

Here is what we found:



Successful agentic AI deployment hinges on unstructured data.

Up to 75% of the data collected and stored is unstructured; this includes emails, PDFs, videos, images, audio files, and social media posts. The majority (89%) of executives recognize that data forms the bedrock for AI, and they are keen to use it to personalize customer experiences (48%), improve operational efficiency (20%), and make better decisions (12%).



Unstructured data forms the foundation for AI, but for many, the foundation isn't firm. Even though 79% of respondents consider using unstructured data to train AI a high or top priority, the majority (64%) say they actively use less than half to drive AI or inform business decisions. Our study spotlights a big gap between AI aspiration and data readiness.



Data challenges extend to compliance and privacy. We found that regulatory compliance, data privacy laws, ethical considerations about AI, high costs, and the difficulty of analyzing unstructured data are foundational issues executives must address before they get to AI.

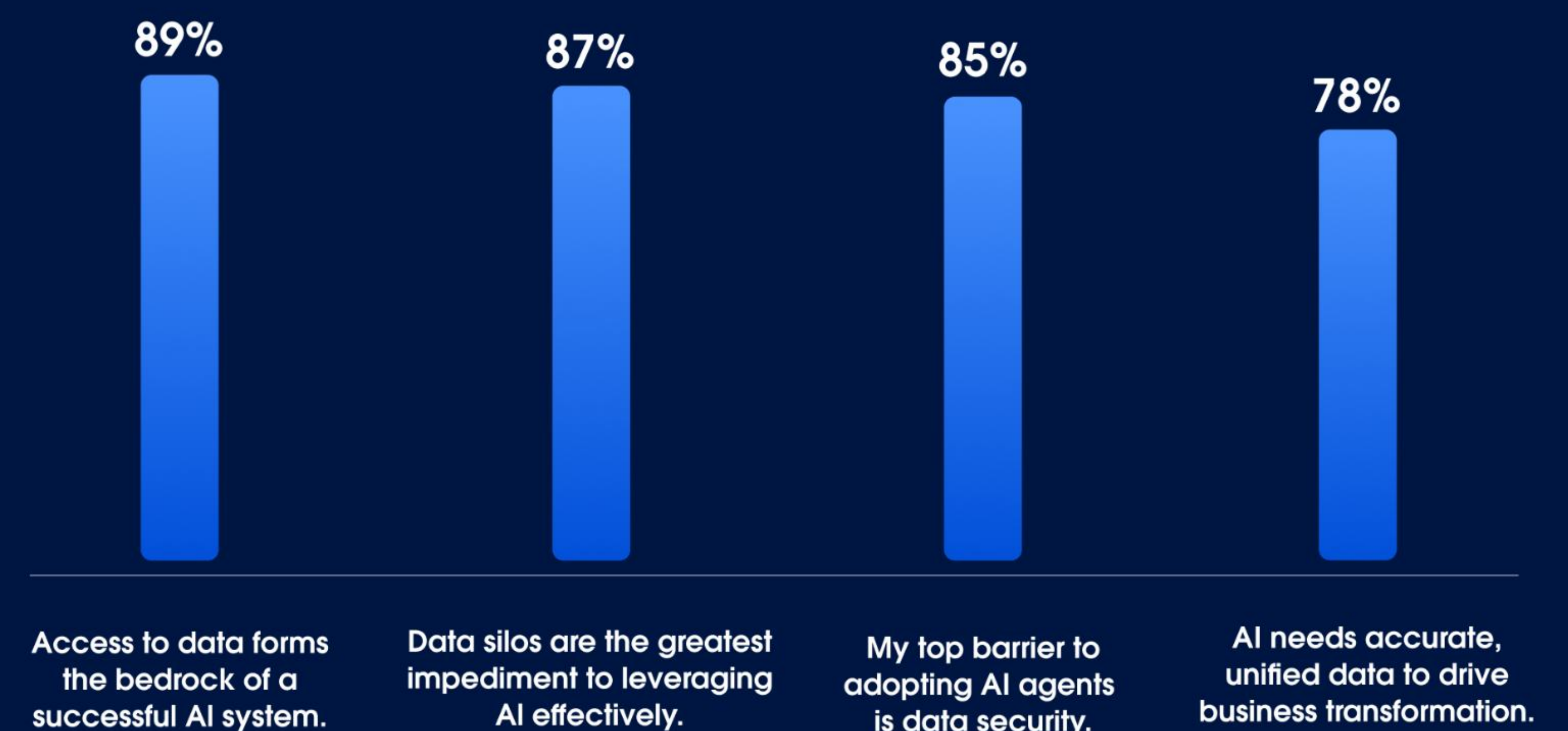


Buying AI is cheaper than building. Most companies (61%) prefer buying AI solutions, and only 39% choose to build their own. It's no surprise, given how long it can take to hire the experts, train AI models, and retrain them when the parameters or data changes. An AI vendor is the safer bet if you'd rather focus on your core competencies and prefer shorter deployments.



Quick facts at a glance

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



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Chapter 1

Agentic AI Has Entered the Mainstream



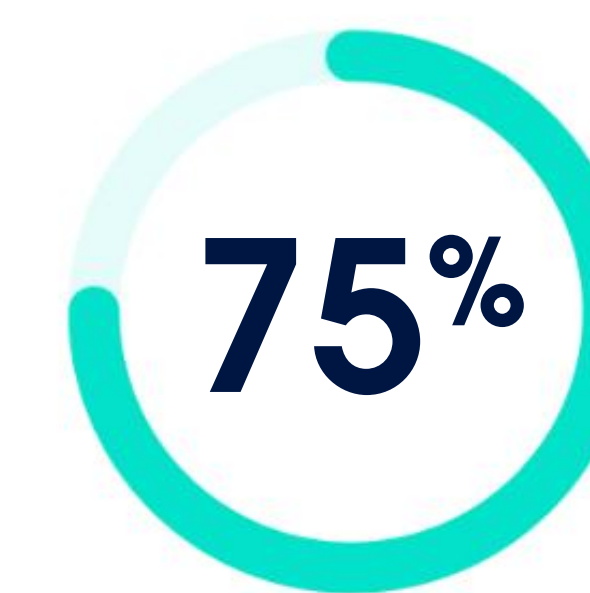
Insight 1 | AI agents: They're here, and the majority of executives want them.

AI agents aren't simply more efficient or faster than humans – they're always on, acting autonomously to book appointments, optimize marketing campaigns, and improve your team's productivity while you're on vacation.

What sets agentic AI apart from its predecessors, **generative** and **predictive AI**, is that autonomous agents can make predictions based on not only large amounts of data but also their perception of the environment, which leads them to take autonomous actions – **acting as digital labor**.

Let's take commerce as an example. AI agents, acting on unified customer data, don't just handle basic inventory tasks; they can monitor stock levels proactively, predict seasonal demands, and flag opportunities or unusual patterns that can lead to personalized experiences for customers.

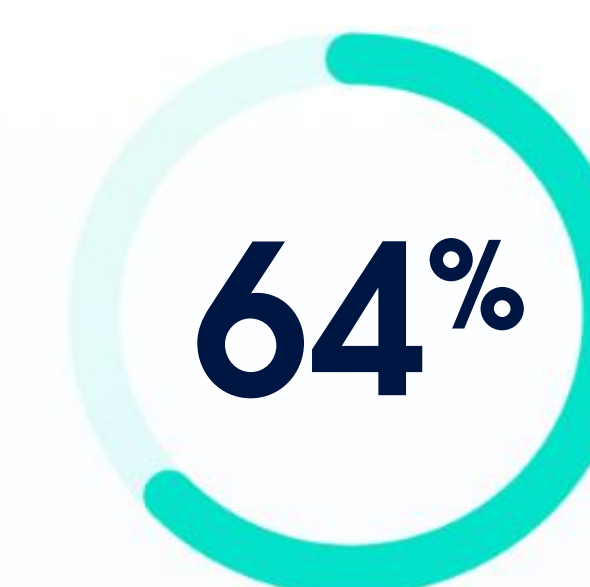
 **Quick facts: AI and agentic AI are at the top of most executives' agendas.**



of IT and data executives say using AI solutions is a top priority.



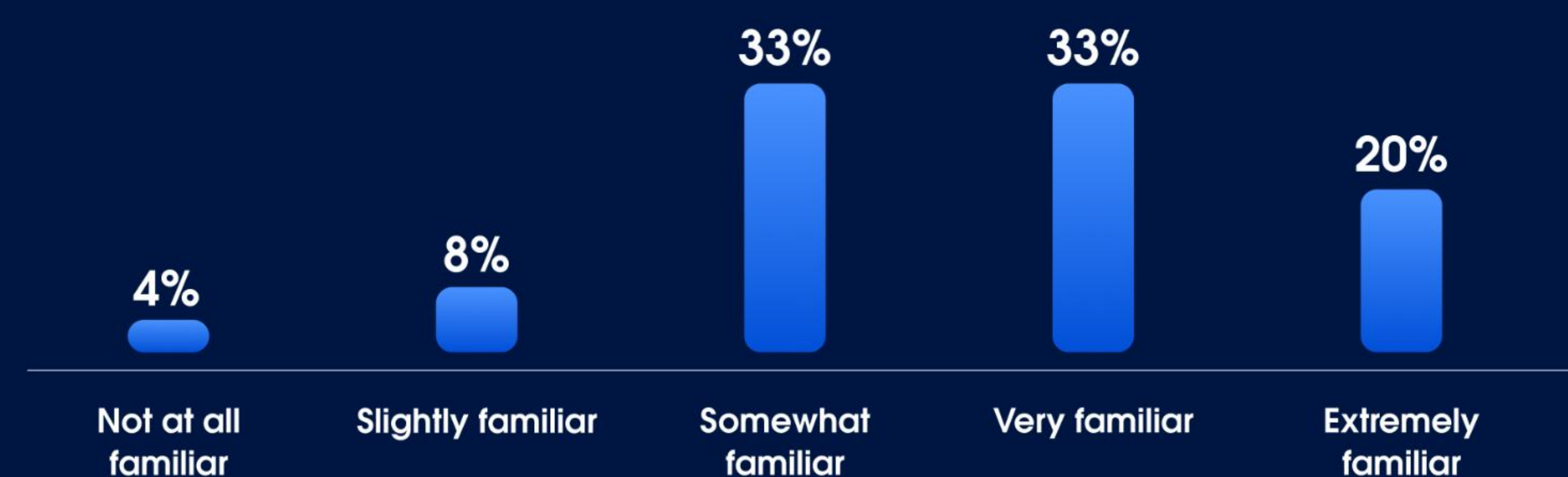
are extremely familiar, very familiar, or somewhat familiar with agentic AI and AI agents.



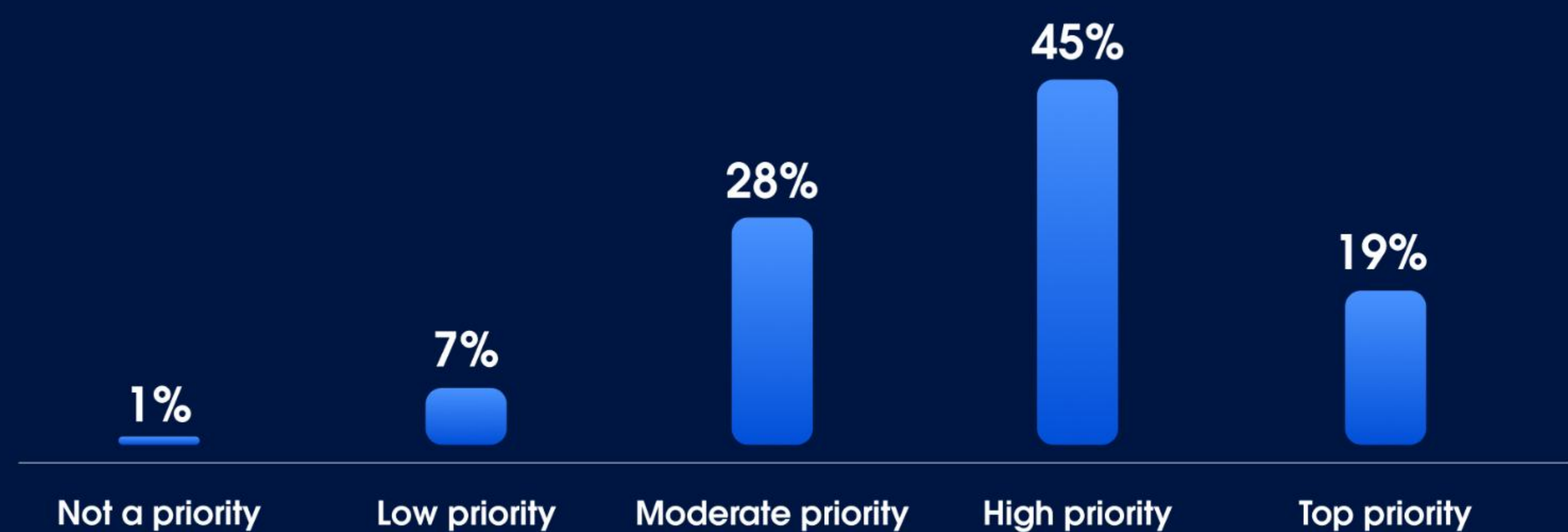
consider implementing AI agents a high or top priority.



How familiar are you with the terms “agentic AI” or “AI agents”?



Rate the priority of implementing agentic AI in your organization.



Will AI agents replace human workers?

“

From talent recruitment to supercharged healthcare, we'll now see AI work with humans across sectors to fill a variety of needs at scale — faster and, in many cases, more accurately than humans alone ever could. Agentic AI will take some getting used to but will improve many aspects of our work: **productivity, efficiency, strategic decision-making, and — in my firm belief — overall job satisfaction.**



Silvio Savarese,
EVP & Chief Scientist,
Salesforce AI Research

Insight 2 | Executives prioritize productivity, sales, marketing, and service use cases for AI agents.

The top use cases for Agentic AI



Industry spotlight

Retail

Surprisingly, only 12% of retailers prioritize personalizing online shopping for AI agents. Improving marketing campaigns (18%), sales processes (18%), and productivity (18%) are higher priorities.



Technology

Execs expect productivity and workflow gains (24%), followed by customer support (16%) and sales (16%).



Banking, Finance, Insurance

Improving productivity came out on top here, too (20%), with customer support (18%) and sales (18%) close behind.



The case for agentic AI

“

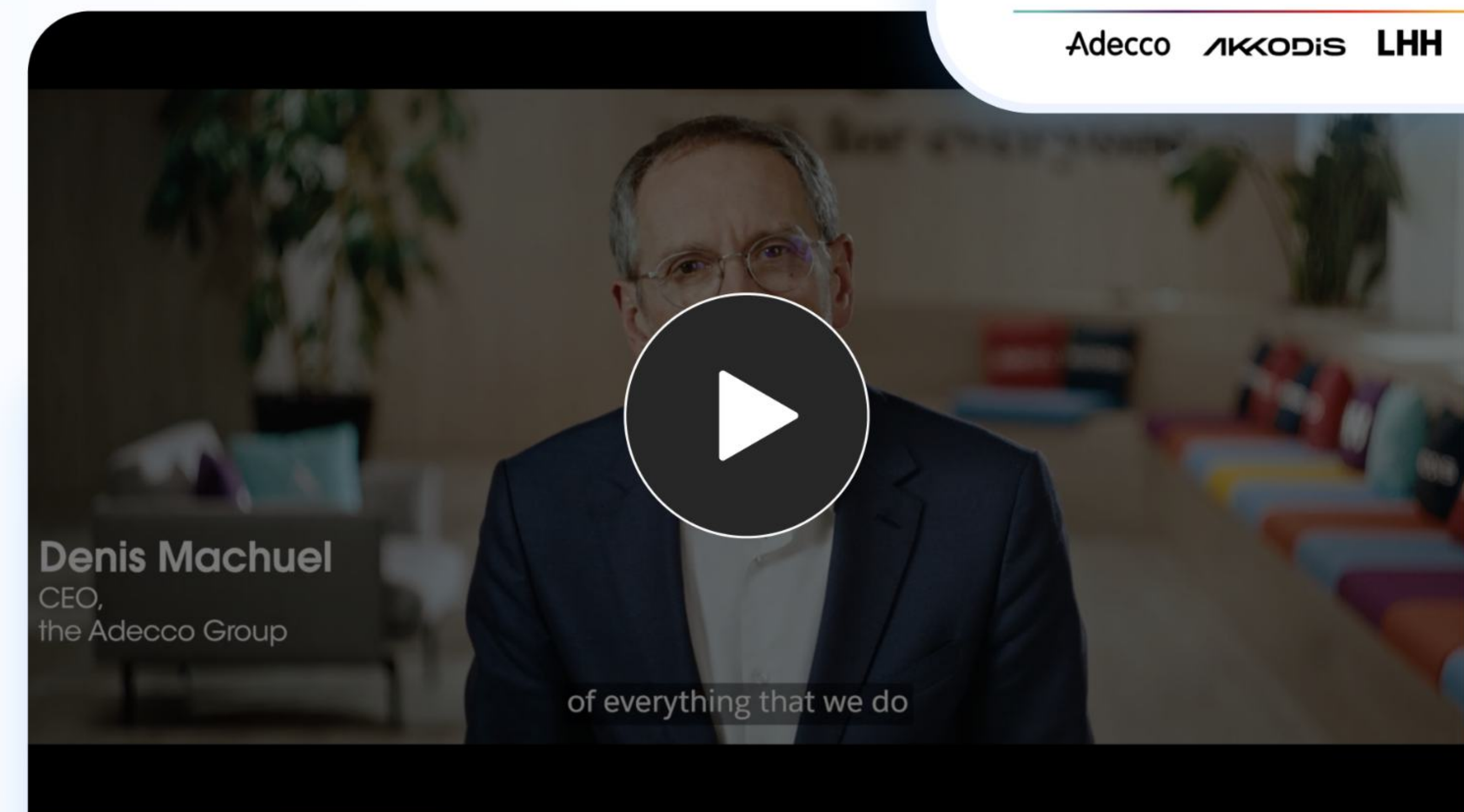
Due to the volume of data, it is impossible for human analysis to evaluate the efficacy of the available information. By using AI to provide a perfunctory analysis and group the information together, **we can further refine the results and put the information into a practical solution.**

Director,
Retail and Consumer Goods

Executive perspective

THE ADECCO GROUP

Adecco AKKODIS LHH

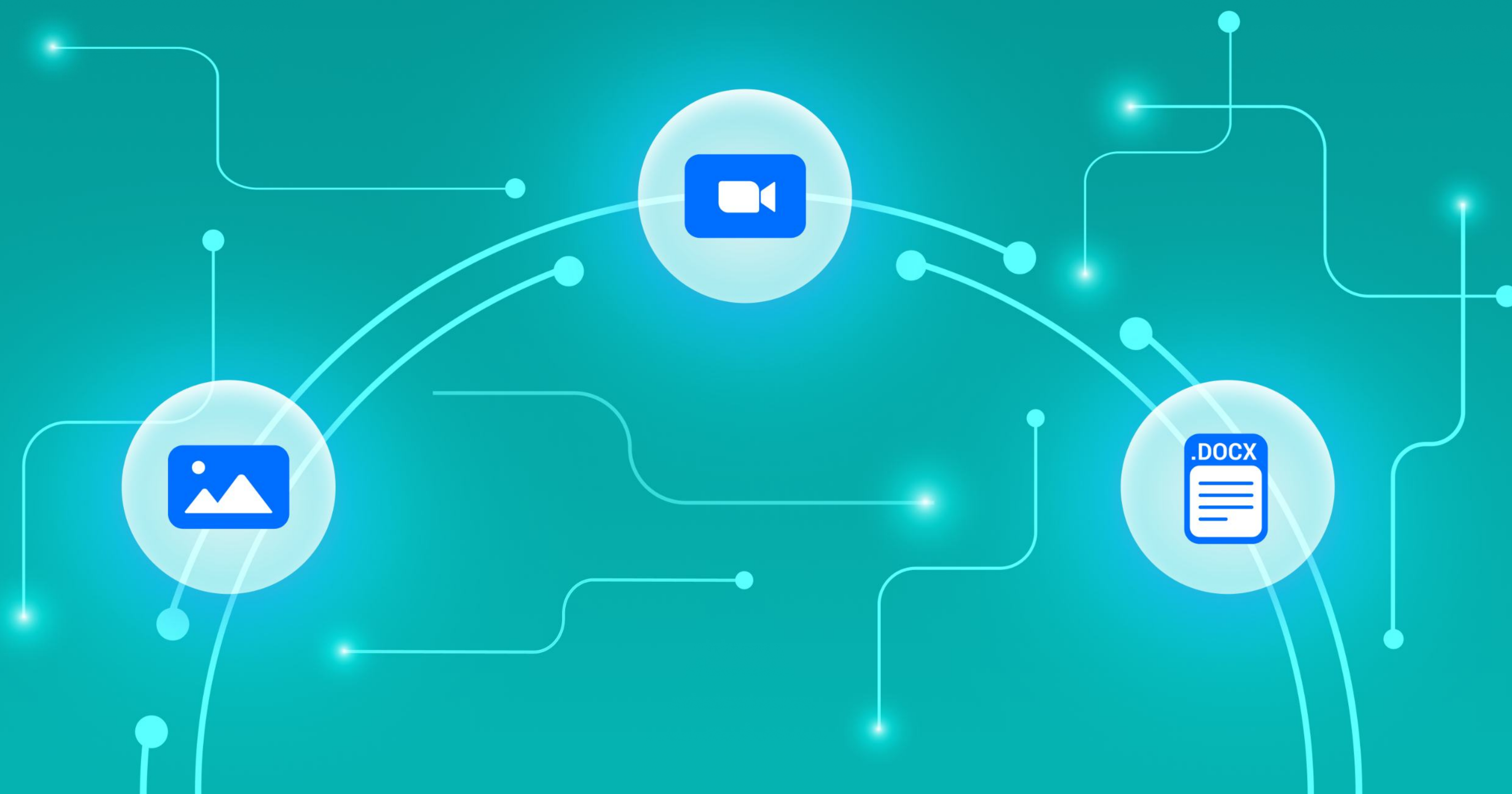


Watch how the Adecco Group uses an agent-first approach to connect with job seekers and recruit faster.

[Watch now](#)

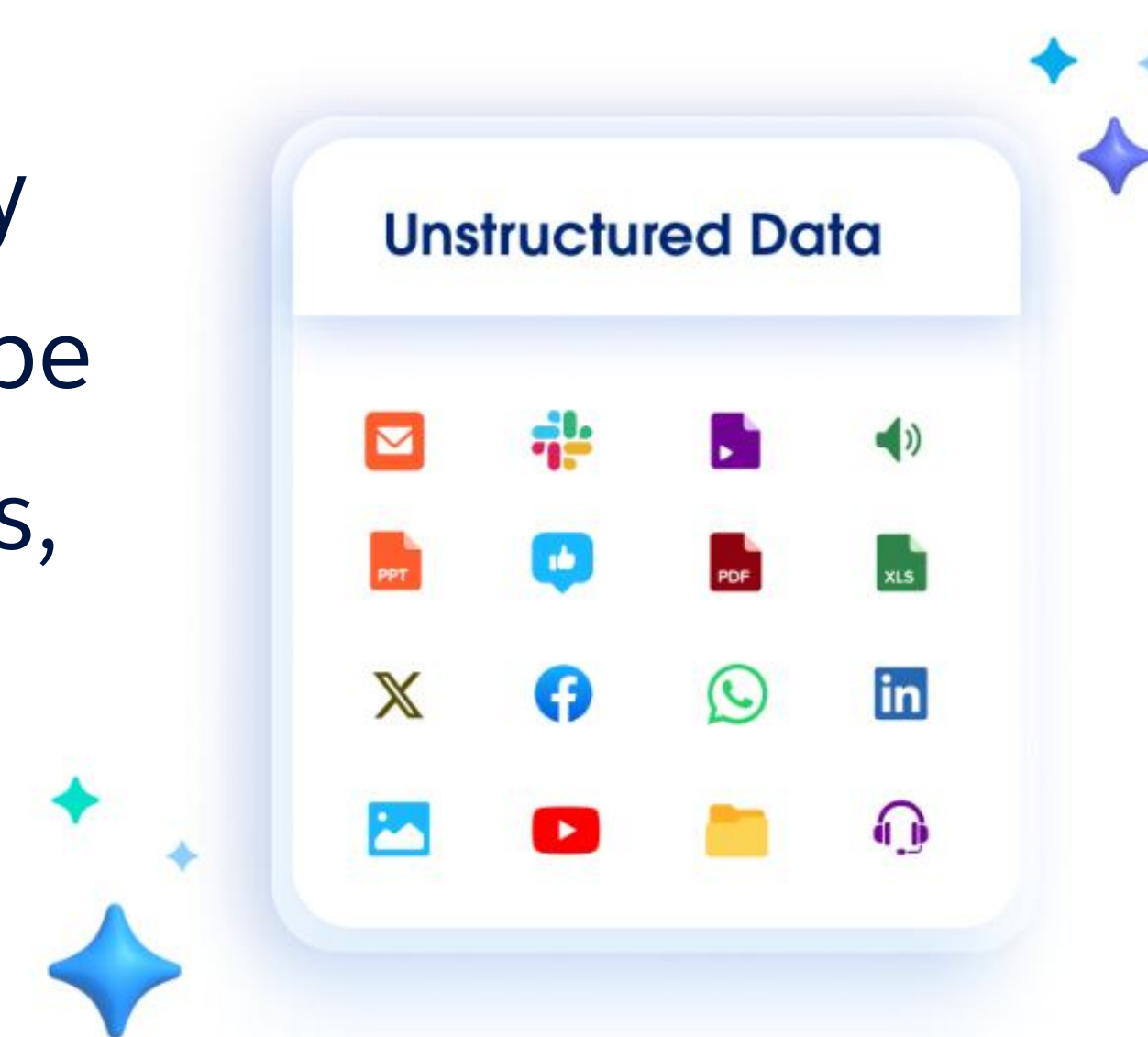
Chapter 2

AI Success Hinges on Unstructured Data



Insight 3 | Executives train AI models on unstructured data to improve customer experiences and operations.

For many of our respondents, [unstructured data](#) – emails, PDFs, video, audio, and social media posts, among others – makes up the majority of what they collect. Because this data lacks structure and can't be stored easily in spreadsheets or relational databases, it's more difficult to analyze than structured data (e.g., dates, addresses, product prices).



Executives see the value in unstructured data and use it to create the knowledge base for [Large Language Models \(LLMs\)](#) and AI applications. Ultimately, they expect better customer experiences, streamlined operations, and data-driven decisions.

 **Quick facts: Unstructured data fuels AI models for business improvements.**

63%

use unstructured data to train LLMs or create a knowledge base for AI applications.

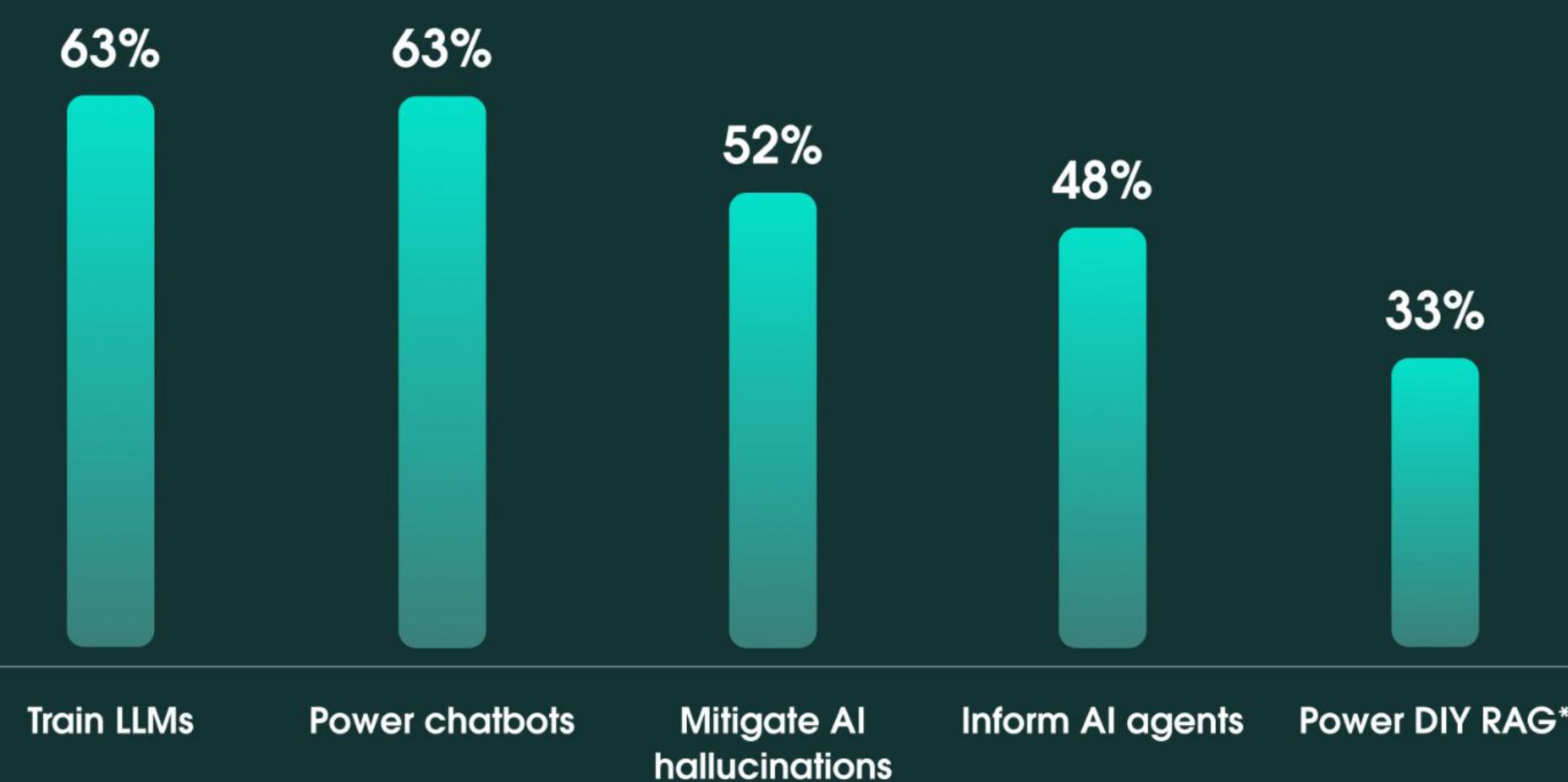
48%

say customer personalization and experience are the most desired outcomes from unstructured data.

51%

say text documents and customer feedback are the most useful types of unstructured data.

How do you use unstructured data for AI?



Top use cases for unstructured data



*RAG = retrieval augmented generation

5 strategies to activate unstructured data.

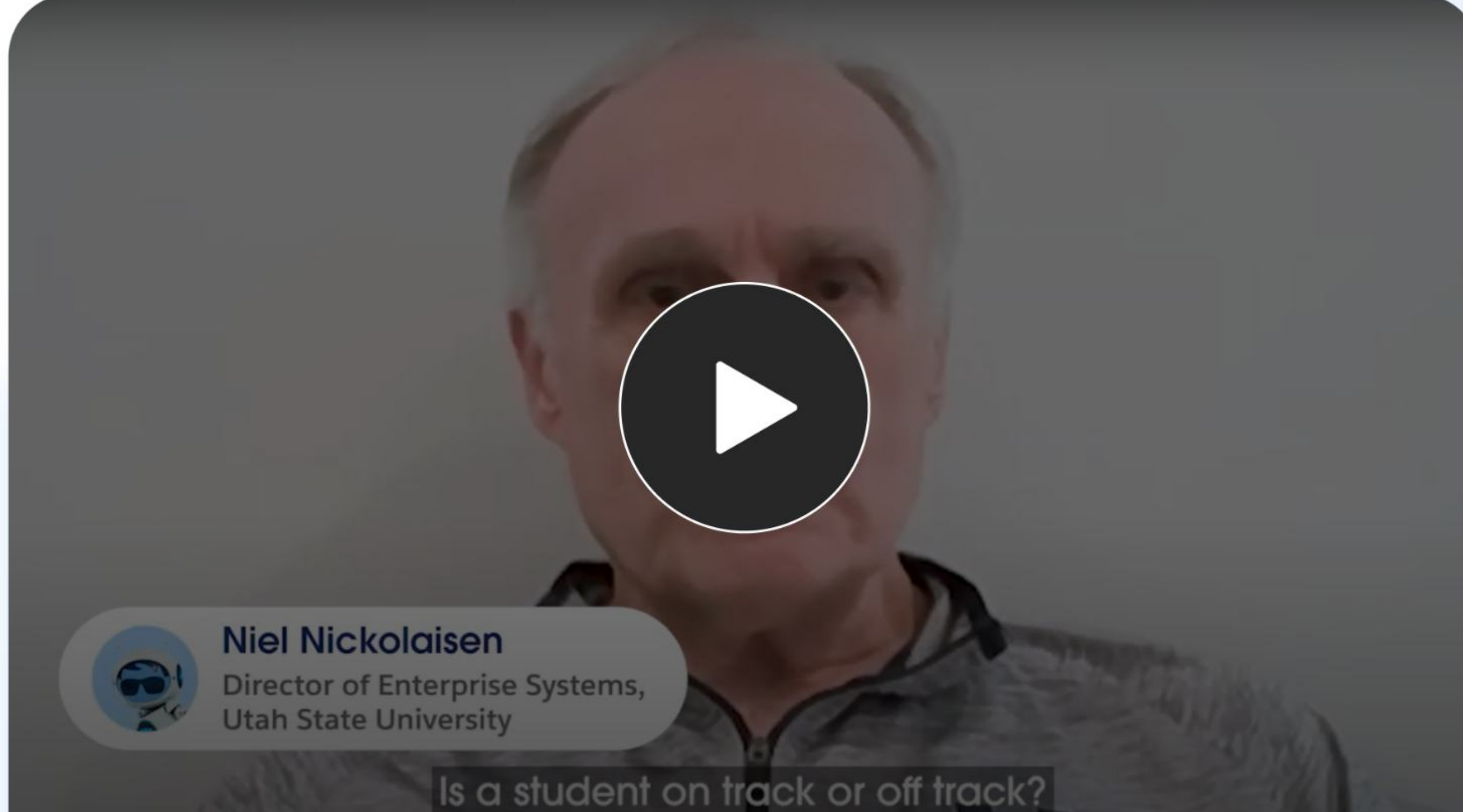


The graphic features a blue background with a white rounded rectangle in the center. Inside the rectangle, the text "5 Strategies to Activate Unstructured Data" is displayed. Above the text is a "Data Cloud" logo with a person icon. Below the text is a grid of various application icons. The background is decorated with small white stars and a cluster of orange dots at the bottom left.

Learn how to turn unstructured data into unforgettable customer experiences.

[Learn more](#)

What is possible with unstructured data?



The video player shows a man, Niel Nickolaisen, speaking. A large play button is centered over the video. Below the video, a caption reads "Is a student on track or off track?". A name tag identifies him as "Niel Nickolaisen, Director of Enterprise Systems, Utah State University".

What's possible with unstructured data? IT execs discuss their dream use cases in this video from Salesforce's executive interview series.

[Watch now](#)

Insight 4 | Unstructured data forms the foundation for agentic AI, but for many, the foundation is not firm.

The IT and data executives we surveyed recognize the power of unstructured data – the majority consider it a high priority. However, not enough unstructured data is put to use. This gap between aspirations and implementation for unstructured data was one of the biggest revelations in our study. As you'll see below, we dug into the reasons why.

 **Quick facts:** There is a gap between aspirations and implementation for unstructured data.

79%

say turning unstructured data into business value is a high priority.



However
64%

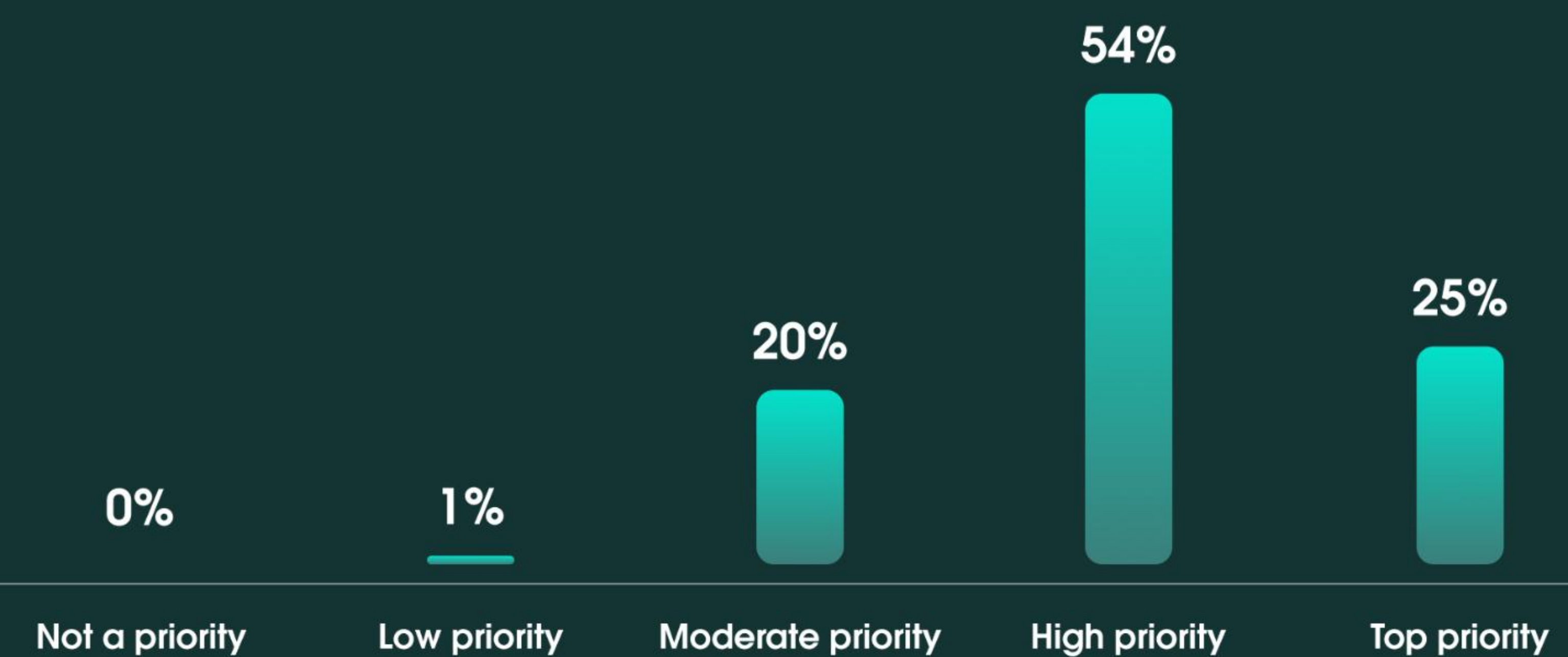
use less than half of their unstructured data to actively inform business decisions.



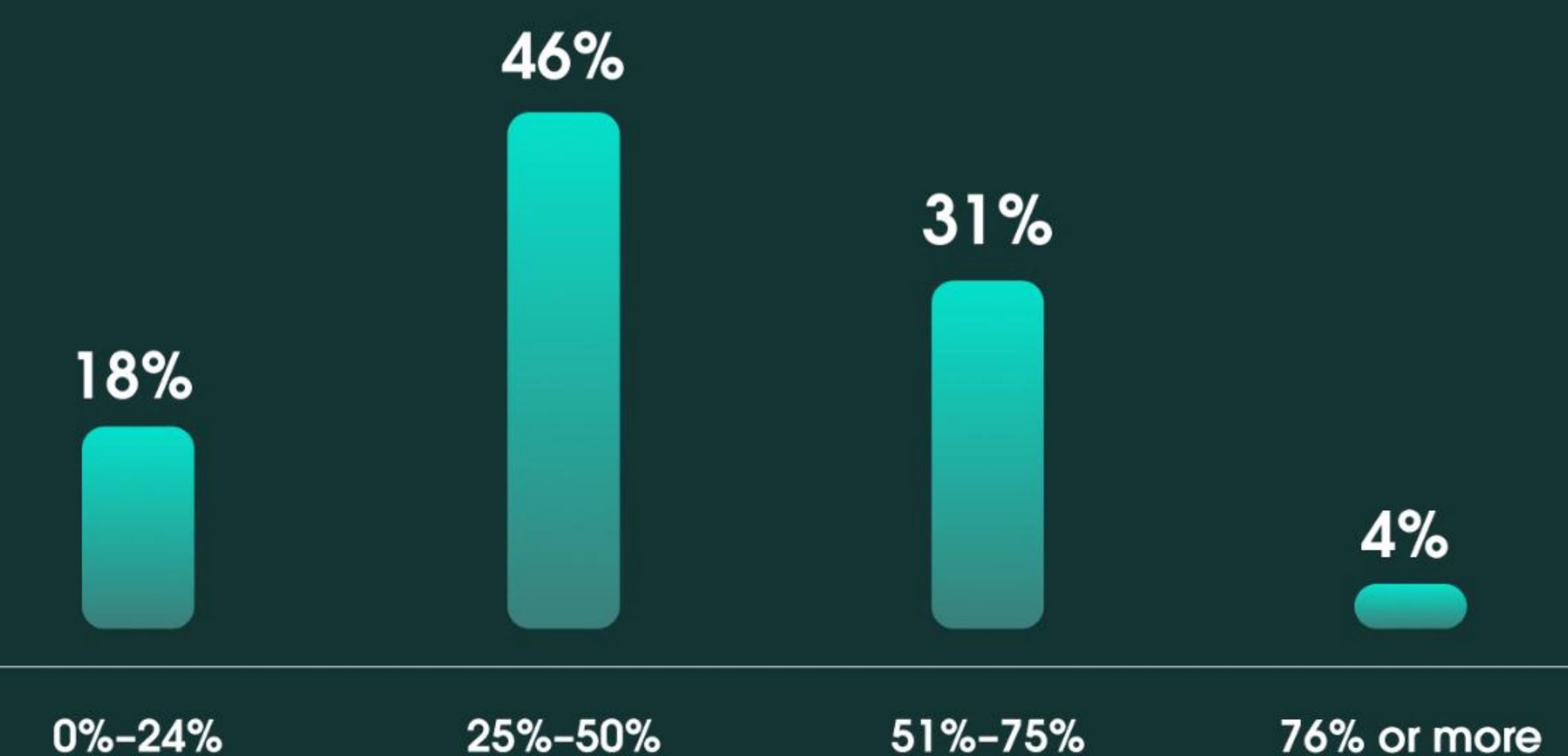
50%

use less than 50% of their unstructured data.

How high is the priority to turn unstructured data into business value?



What percentage of unstructured data informs your business or customer decisions?



Unstructured data woes

When asked what's preventing CIOs and data execs from mining unstructured data, regulatory compliance for sensitive data, high costs to store and manage the data, and difficulty analyzing it rose to the top.

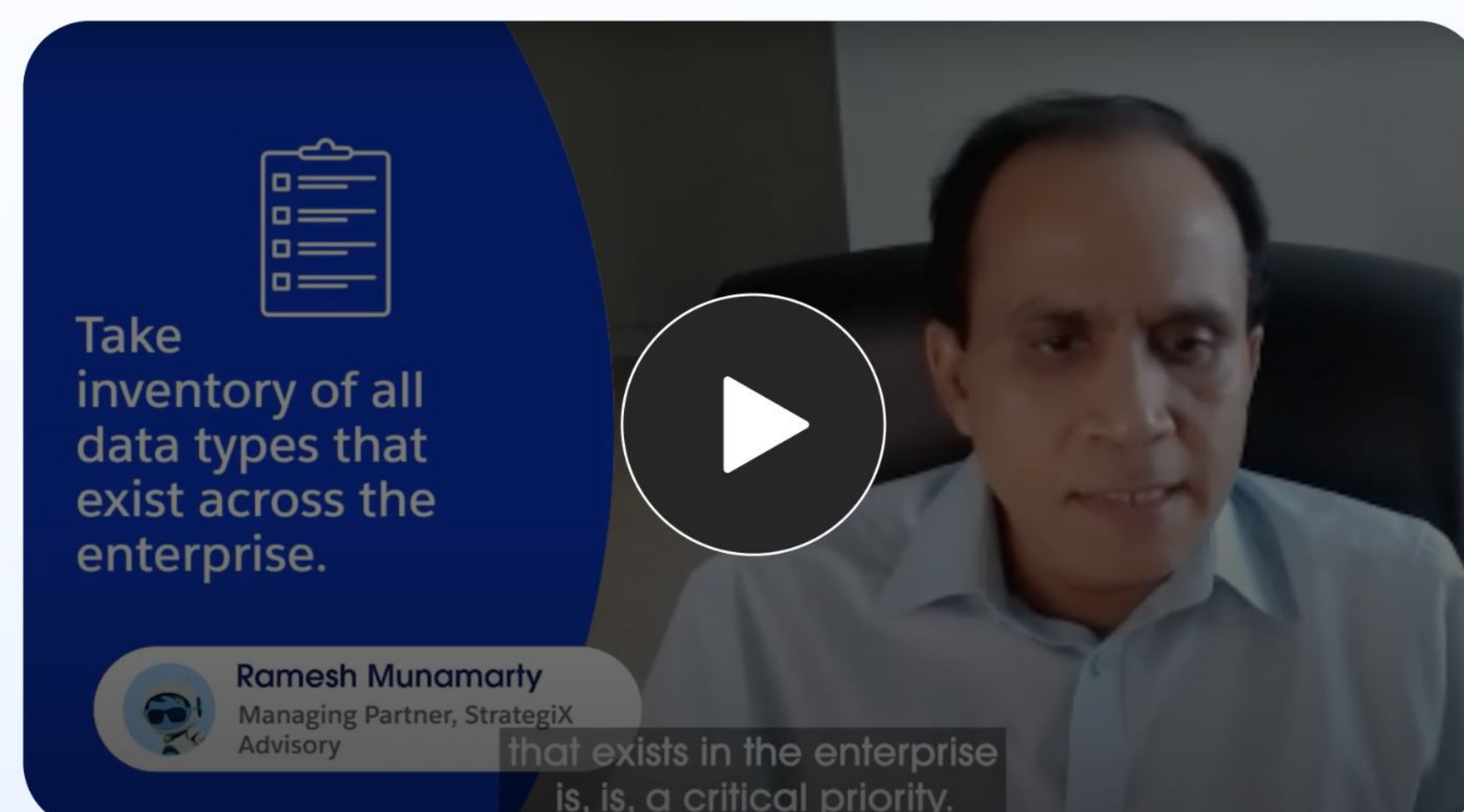


We are reeling on the right way to allow for analysis, as this data is complicated with applicable laws relating to healthcare data protection.

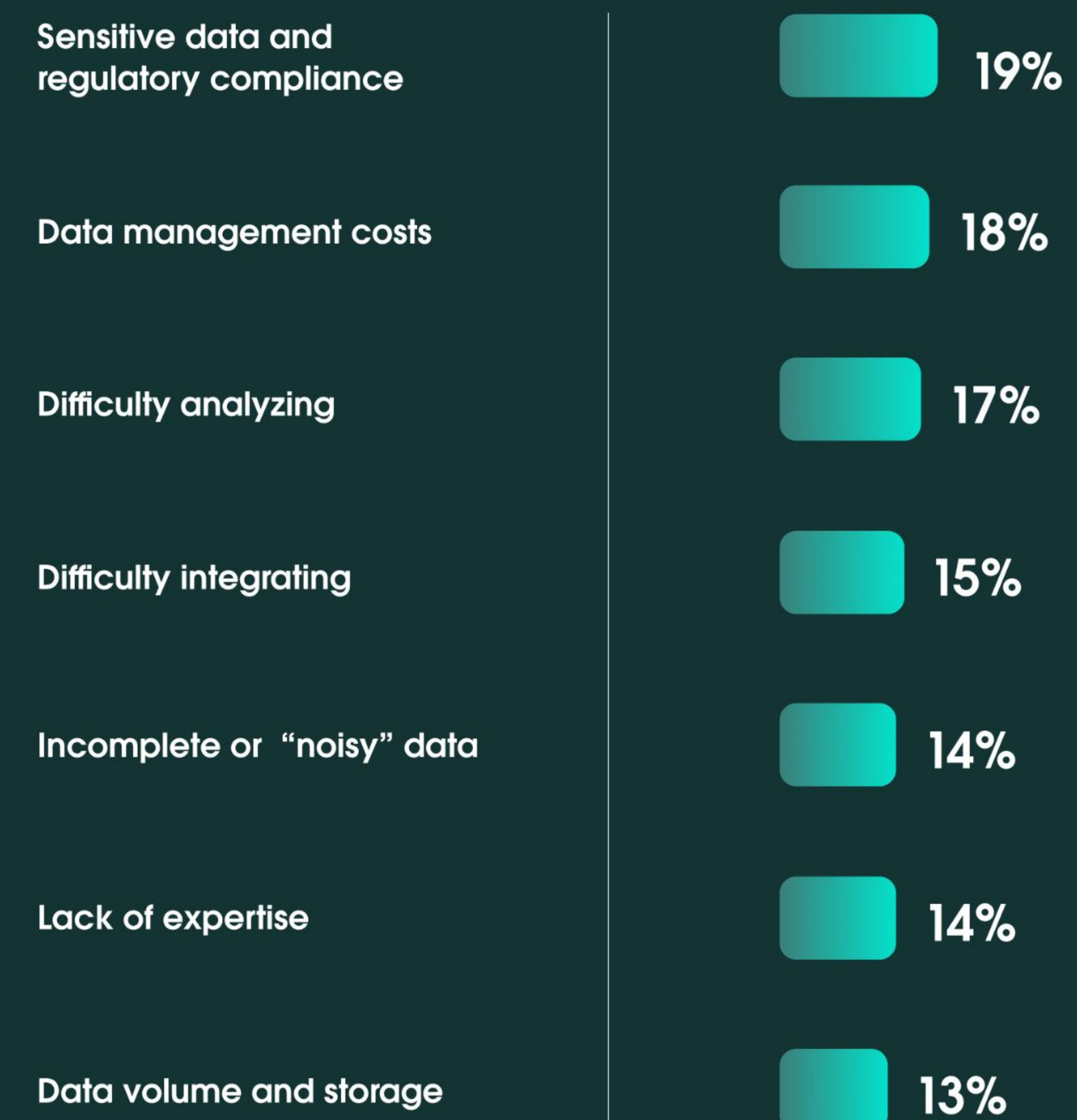
Director,
Healthcare

Executive perspective

How do you overcome the challenges that come with unstructured data? Learn from your peers in this video from Salesforce's executive interview series.



The top barriers to extracting business value from unstructured data



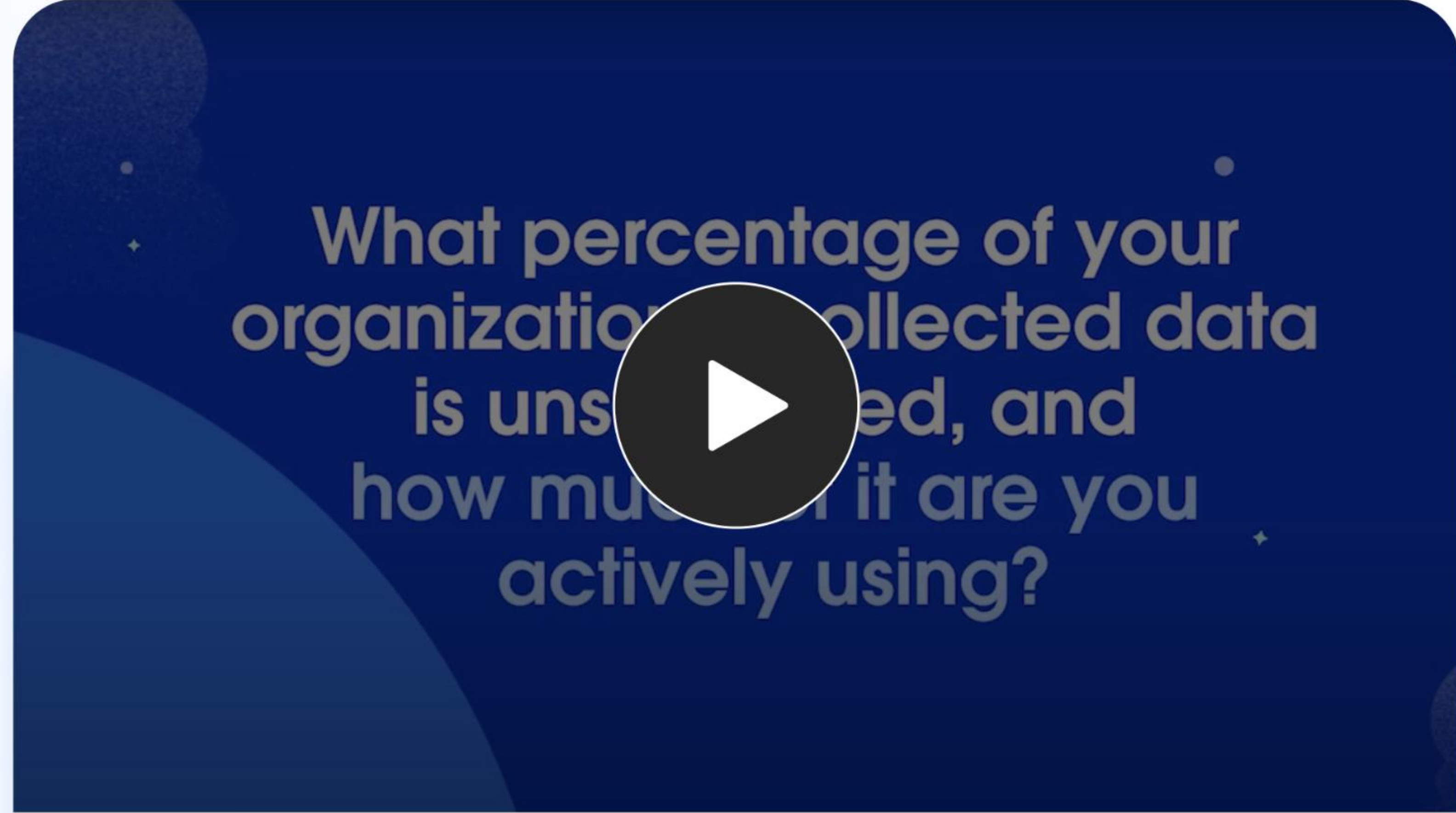
Unstructured data brings a unique set of challenges.



CIOs Reveal Top 3 Strategies for Unlocking AI's Potential with Unstructured Data

[Learn more](#)

How much unstructured data do execs use?



What percentage of your organization's collected data is unstructured, and how much of it are you actively using?

IT executives discuss how much unstructured data they collect versus how much they use in this video from Salesforce's executive interview series.

[Watch now](#)

Insight 5 | Regulatory compliance, ethics, costs, and lack of expertise prevent companies from adopting AI agents.

The majority (77%) of executives we surveyed are very or extremely prepared to embrace agentic AI. However, data [privacy](#), [ethics](#), regulatory [compliance](#), and investment costs remain the top barriers to agentic AI adoption.

The top 3 barriers to adopting agentic AI

36%

of respondents cite concerns with regulatory compliance, data privacy, and ethical considerations.

36%

have reservations about the investment and ongoing maintenance costs.

34%

are concerned with the lack of skilled professionals, such as data scientists and AI engineers.

The top barriers to adopting AI agents

Compliance, privacy, and ethics concerns

36%

Investment and maintenance costs

36%

Lack of skilled professionals

34%

Integrating legacy systems and workflows

32%

Lack of clean, structured data

32%

Poor data quality or data silos

29%

Lack of data standardization

28%

Employee resistance or fear of job loss

27%

Lack of leadership buy-in

24%

Chapter 3

Building AI Is Not for Everyone



Insight 6 | Most executives want to buy, not build, AI.

Twenty-something years ago, the transition from on-premises applications to the cloud was filled with technical or cultural obstacles – choosing a new provider, giving up some control over data, and overcoming security concerns.

The transition to AI is similar in some respects – IT executives are asked to drive new business models and adapt their data strategies and infrastructure. Except with AI, the transition is happening at breakneck speed.

Would you rather buy or build your own AI solutions? The answer depends on many variables, including the health of your data, data management practices, budget, and the organization's preparedness.

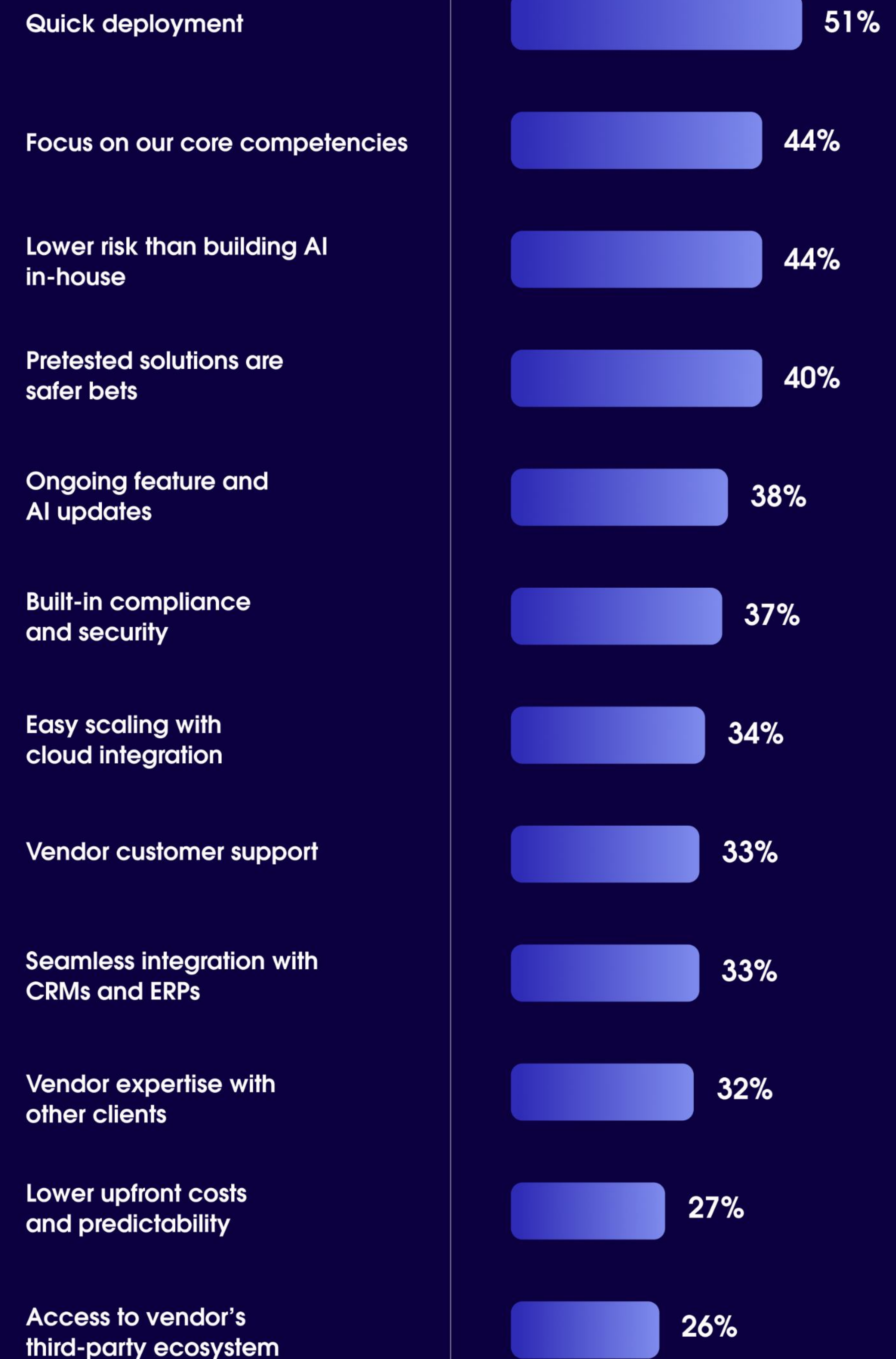
Quick facts: Top 3 reasons to buy AI solutions.

51% of respondents cite ease of deployment and shorter times to implement AI solutions.

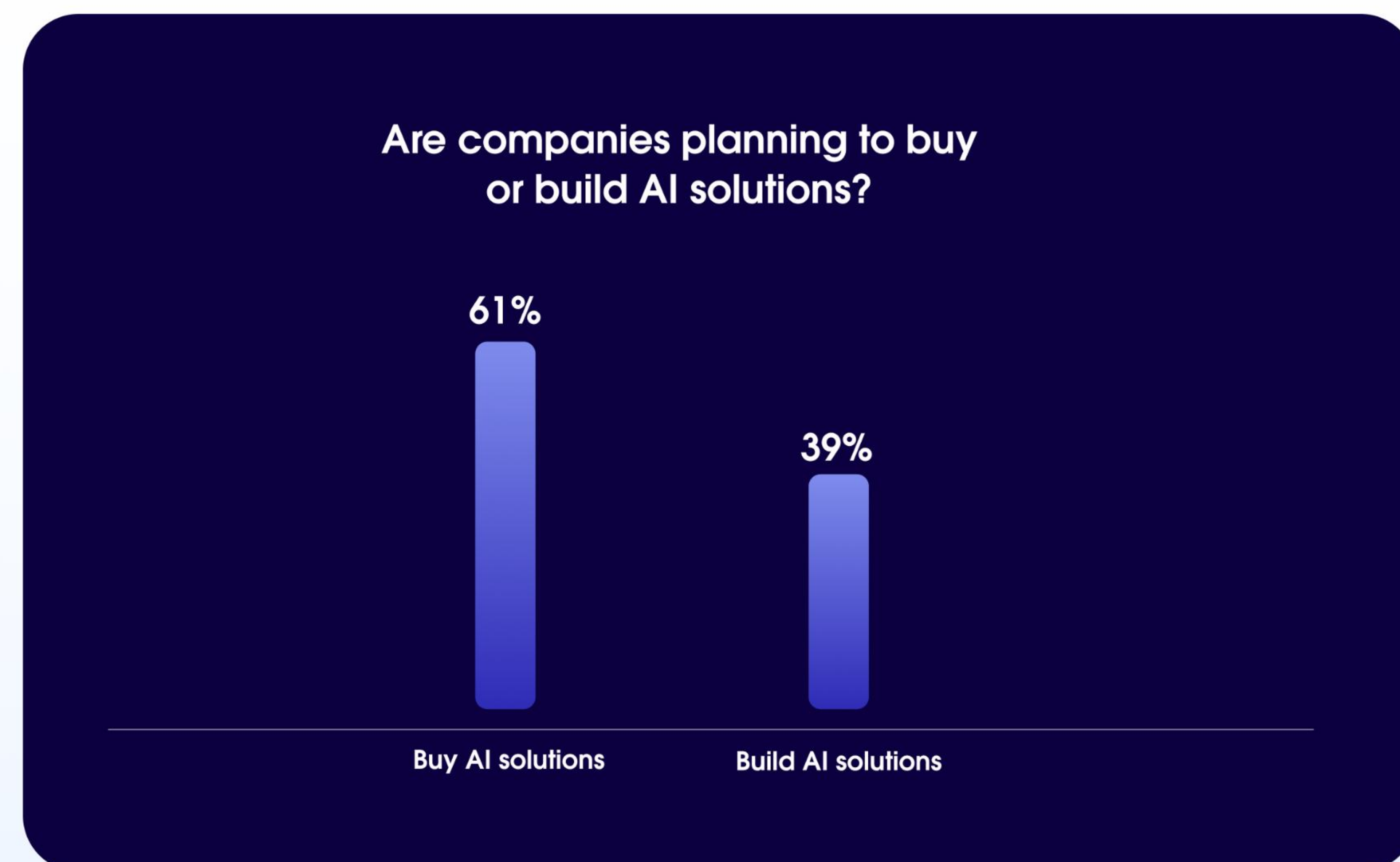
44% say text documents and customer feedback are the most useful types of unstructured data.

44% report they prefer solutions that have undergone rigorous testing in various environments.

The top advantages of buying AI solutions



Most executives want to buy, not build, AI. (continued)



Initially, we used readily available solutions but found the complexity of the retail dynamics involved prevented us from fully seeing to fruition the results required. In response, we developed an AI and extended technology department to address these issues by modifying existing AI and LLMs and ultimately developed our own in-house solutions. This has not been without huge risks and trials that caused a steep learning curve. The ability to hire and retain adequate talent to provide the necessary skills has been daunting, and the result has been taking longer than anticipated to put into a viable and successful practice.

Director,
Retail and Consumer Goods

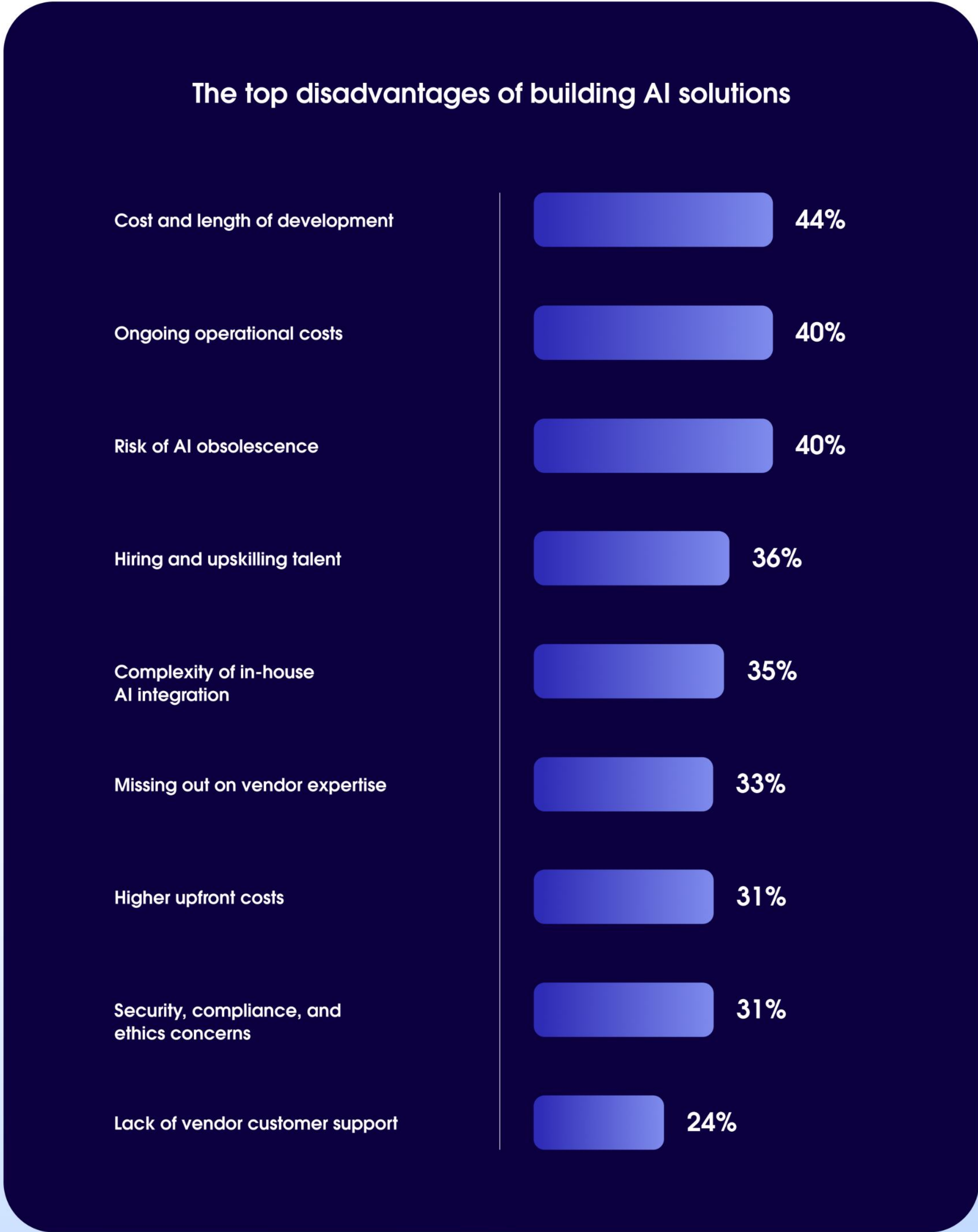
Insight 7 | Slower deployment and higher costs are the top disadvantages of building AI.

Only 10% of survey respondents explicitly mentioned an active and working custom-built AI solution. Development costs, long deployment timelines, and the risk of technical obsolescence were the top reasons for opting to buy versus build.



We use internal business and customer data for AI solutions to improve decision-making, personalize customer experiences, and optimize operations. Factors influencing this include data accuracy, privacy compliance, and the potential to drive measurable business outcomes.

Survey respondent



Buying AI isn't entirely risk-free.

Buying AI solutions isn't completely risk-free for some of our respondents. Many cite concerns with data privacy, ownership, costs, and upskilling on new systems.

The top 3 disadvantages of buying AI solutions



Customer spotlight

Saks



See how Agentforce will boost service agent productivity to deliver luxury shopping experiences.

Watch now

Chapter 4

Data Management and Agentic AI in the Salesforce Ecosystem



Data Management and Agentic AI in the Salesforce Ecosystem.

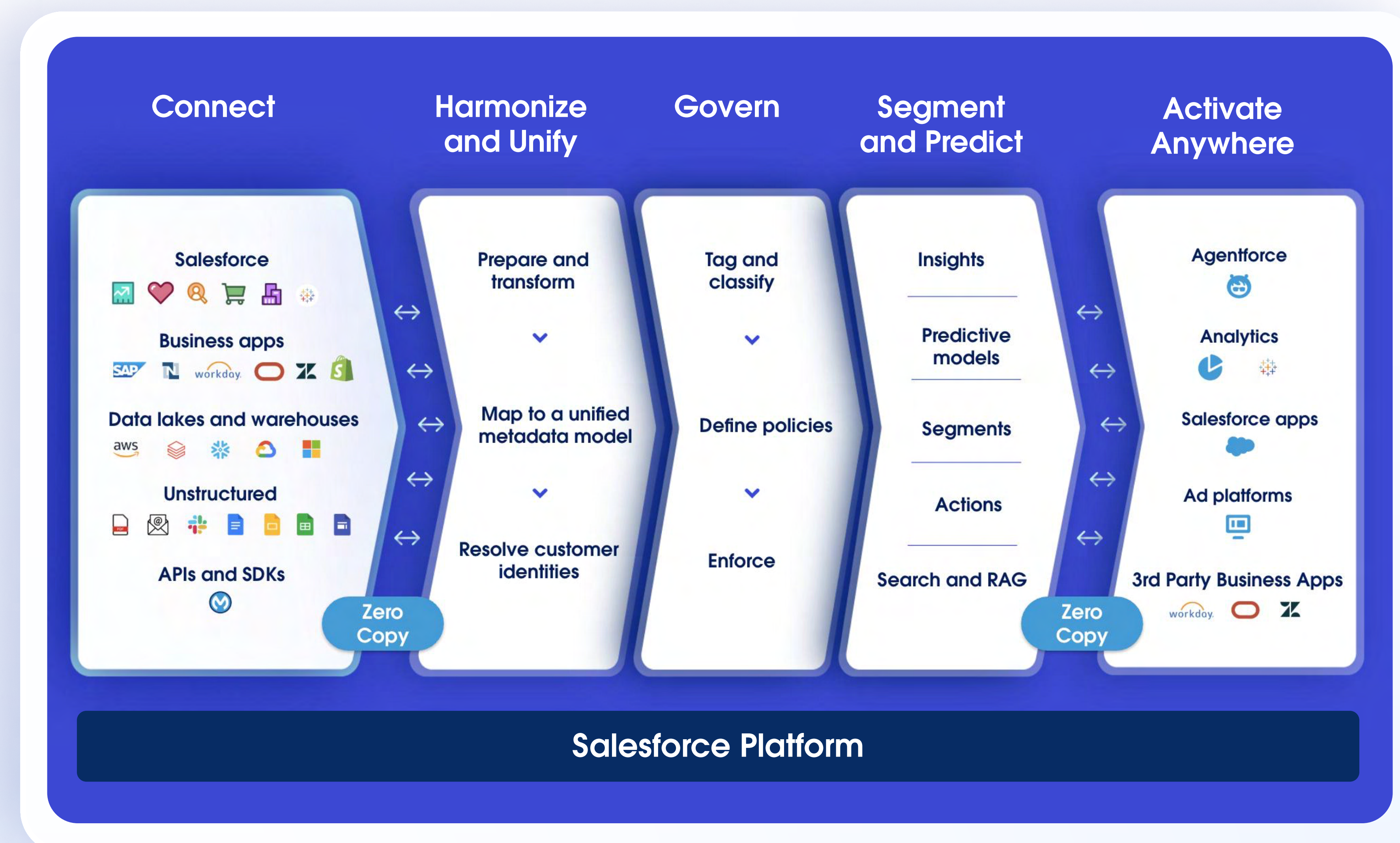
In the Salesforce ecosystem, data forms the foundation of agentic AI.

[Agentforce](#), the agentic layer of the Salesforce Platform that lets you create role-specific autonomous agents, is built on top of [Data Cloud](#) – an open, flexible data engine native to Salesforce.



Get to know Data Cloud.

[Data Cloud](#) unlocks the full value of all your enterprise data – structured and unstructured. It unifies your data into a native Customer 360 view, delivers trusted and contextual data to Agentforce, and amplifies existing data lakes and warehouses with zero copy.



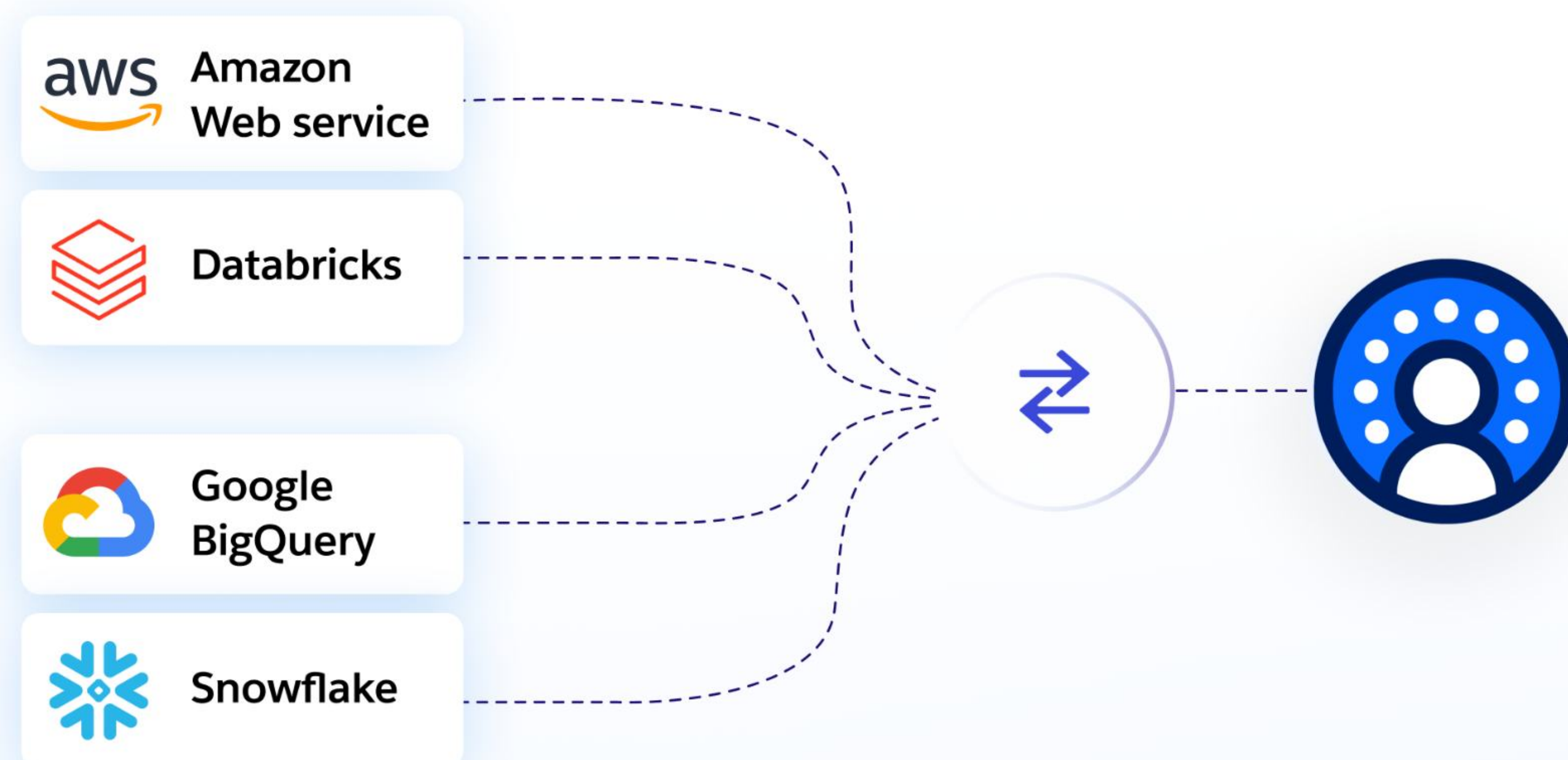
Learn how Data Cloud works.

- **Connect:** Bring your siloed and disparate data no matter where it lives. You can combine data such as customer and order information from different Salesforce organizations or systems (SAP, NetSuite, and Workday), and other data lakes or warehouses (Snowflake, Databricks, Google BigQuery, AWS) with [zero copy](#).
- **Harmonize:** Create a single, unified view of the customer that every app in Customer 360 and Agentforce can access.
- **Secure:** Use Salesforce's built-in governance and security tools to keep your data and metadata secure.
- **Activate:** Act on a unified profile across any Salesforce app, workflow, or AI application. With sub-second real-time performance, your teams can take action faster than ever.
- **Power agentic AI with the right data foundation:** Take advantage of Data Cloud's architecture for better agentic AI outcomes, regardless of the size or complexity of your data. Use RAG and Data Cloud's no-code retrievers to bring any data directly into prompt templates and flow automations, or enable features such as Zero Copy and Bring Your Own Large Language Model (BYO-LLM) for data and models built on platforms outside of Salesforce.

Leverage the power of agentic AI, grounded in unified data through zero copy.

Underpinning Data Cloud's ability to drive AI transformation is its use of zero copy – a shift from traditional extract-transform-load. Zero copy is a data federation technology that allows you to access and query data without actually moving it.

With over 200 pre-built connectors, Data Cloud integrates data across your business or other sources such as SAP, Shopify, Zendesk, and Workday. Through our leading [Zero Copy Partner Network](#), you can access data directly in its source system.



Build agentic AI on a solid foundation.

Zero copy offers significant advantages, especially in the context of AI.

- It lets you query data across multiple systems to drive real-time insights and data synchronization.
- It helps power AI experiences with all your data and governance parameters.

The most data-driven companies use Data Cloud.

Heathrow

[See how Heathrow personalizes the traveler experience and grows revenue](#)

FedEx

[Discover how FedEx grows shipping revenue with unified data](#)

Kawasaki

[Learn how Kawasaki unifies data and boosts CSAT scores](#)

Engine

[Find out how Engine personalizes service for 900,000 travelers with Data Cloud and Agentforce](#)

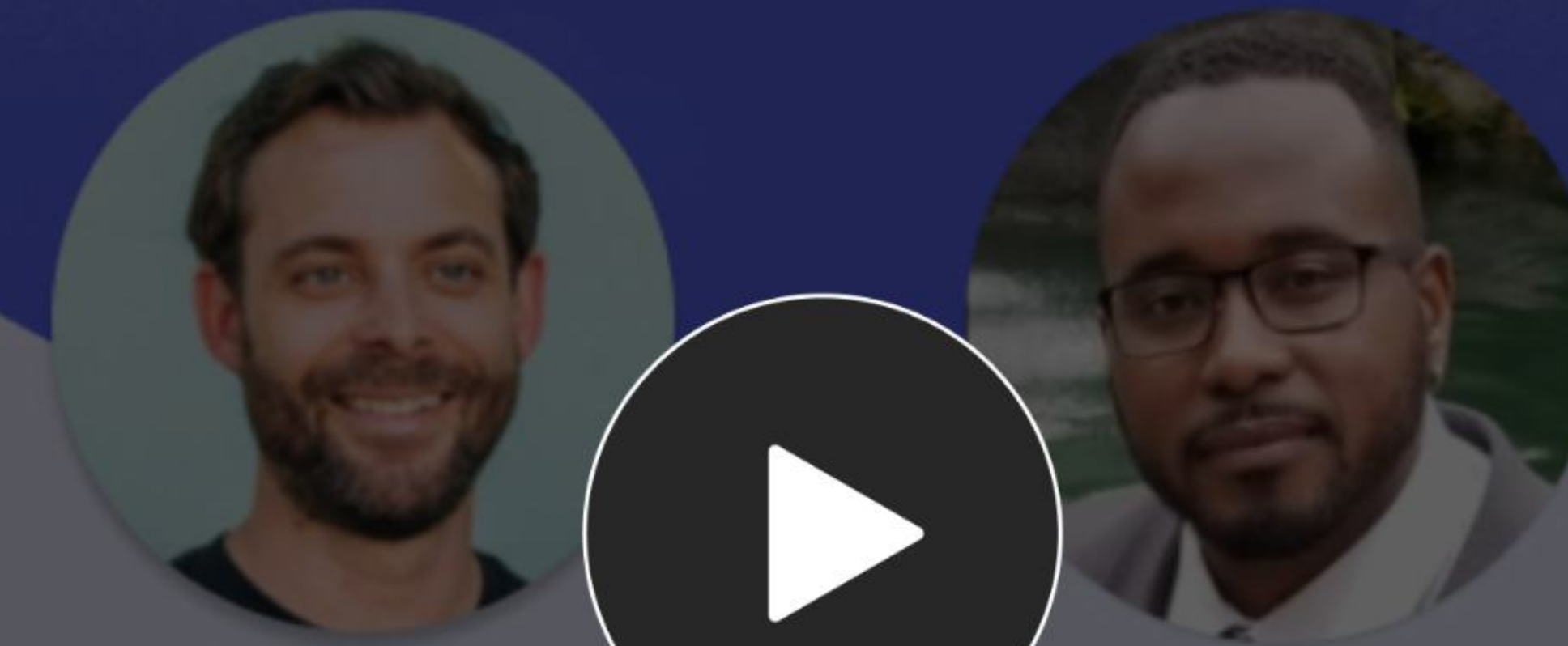
indeed

[Learn how Indeed speeds up hiring with Data Cloud and Agentforce](#)

Dig deeper.

Unstructured Data with Data Cloud

Watch how agentic AI, acting on unstructured data in financial reports and PDFs, boosts sales reps' confidence as they prepare for client meetings.

[Watch now](#)

salesforce

Pick up tips from our experts that can kickstart your own journey to better data and agentic AI. Watch our on-demand webinar.

[Watch the webinar](#)

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[See all ways to contact us.](#)



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