



Closing the AI adoption gap

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the AI adoption gap

In November 2025, McKinsey reported that a whopping 88% of companies use AI.

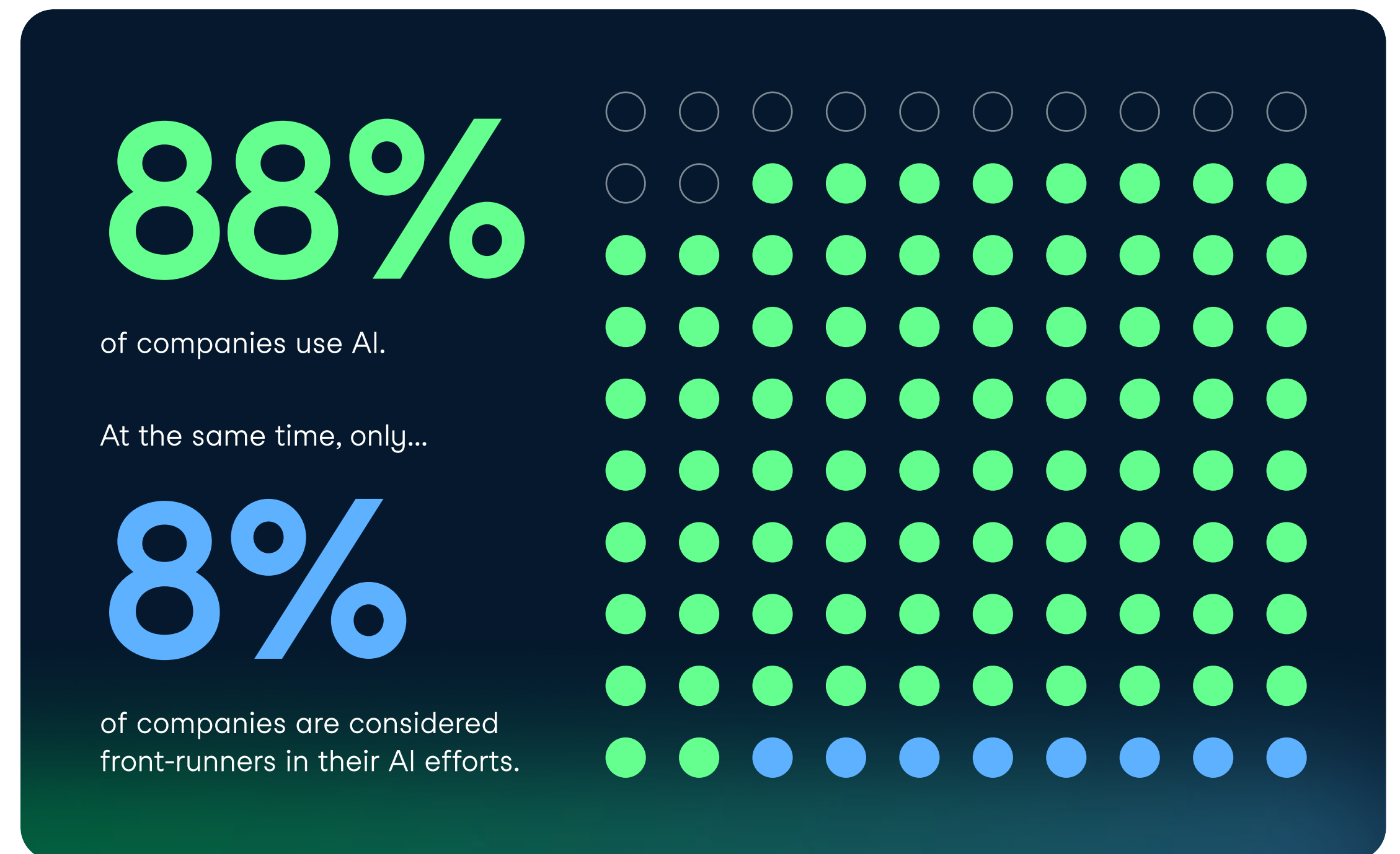
At the same time, only 8% of companies are considered front-runners in their AI efforts. Those who are scaling AI effectively and embedding it into their core strategy.

Organizations are investing. They're rolling out new tools. Launching pilots. Articulating AI strategies at the highest levels. Yet for many, AI still fails to show up consistently in daily work. Usage remains uneven, impact is hard to pinpoint, and momentum fades quietly after the initial push.

This gap between AI ambition and AI reality is increasingly familiar. And, increasingly costly.

The AI adoption gap is not the absence of technology, intent, or interest. Most organizations struggling with adoption already have access to capable tools, clear executive sponsorship, and employees who are curious rather than resistant.

Yet, AI remains peripheral... Why?



What really impacts adoption?

Too often, AI adoption is framed simply as change management: communicate the vision, deploy the tools, provide training, and trust that experimentation will carry the rest. When it stalls, explanations default to mindset, culture, or resistance, despite little evidence that these are the real constraints.

In practice, something else is happening.

For transformation leaders, this means treating ability not as a one-time training initiative, but as infrastructure that supports behavior change over time. The following sections focus on how transformation leaders can close this gap, including:

- Why classic change management approaches break down in AI initiatives
- What “designing for ability” to make AI commonplace in the modern organization actually requires
- Real-world observations from leaders working to make AI part of everyday work today

When using AI feels risky, slow, or exposing—when the cost of trying feels higher than the cost of not trying—people opt out quietly. Not because they oppose AI, but because the conditions required to use it confidently in real work were never put in place.

Designing for ability

Traditional change management assumes that once people understand why something matters and are given basic training, behavior will follow. That assumption breaks down with AI.

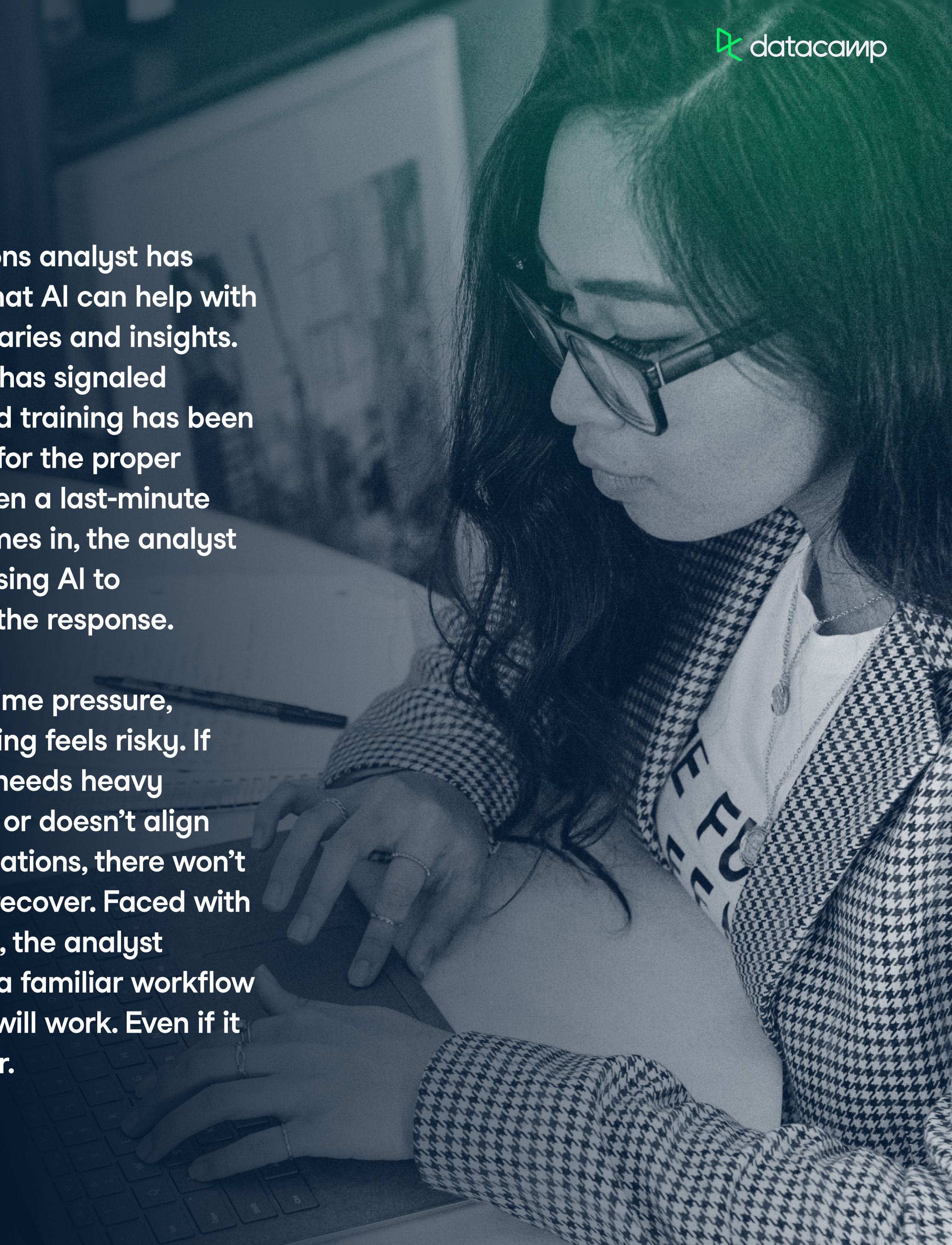
AI use is discretionary, often ambiguous, and highly visible. Perhaps most importantly, it requires people to act without certainty about outcomes. What do we mean by that? Let's take a concrete example:

In this environment, adoption depends less on motivation or having the right tools and more on ability. Ability, in this context, is not awareness or theoretical knowledge. It is the practical confidence to use AI in real work without struggling, slowing down, or feeling exposed.

Treating ability as infrastructure and not as a one-time enablement effort is the key difference between AI initiatives that stall and those that scale. The following sections provide a blueprint for an AI training or upskilling program that is designed for ability.

An operations analyst has been told that AI can help with data summaries and insights. Leadership has signaled support, and training has been completed for the proper tooling. When a last-minute request comes in, the analyst considers using AI to accelerate the response.

But under time pressure, experimenting feels risky. If the output needs heavy adjustment or doesn't align with expectations, there won't be time to recover. Faced with uncertainty, the analyst defaults to a familiar workflow they know will work. Even if it takes longer.



Ability must be role specific

Generic AI literacy (including what models are, what prompts are, what tools exist, etc.) is a useful—if not critical—starting point. But on its own, it rarely changes behavior. People don't adopt AI in the abstract; they adopt it when it clearly applies to the decisions, tasks, and workflows they're already responsible for.

When ability isn't mapped to real roles, AI use stays experimental rather than operational, or people default to safe or trivial use cases.

Designing for role-specific ability means answering practical questions for each audience:

- Where in this role's workflow does AI add value?
- What kinds of tasks should AI support versus replace?
- What does "good" AI-assisted work look like here?
- Until those questions are answered, AI remains optional. And optional behaviors rarely stick.

Ability must be continuous

One of the most common mistakes organizations make is treating ability as something that can be delivered once. A single course, training, or certification creates the appearance of readiness, but AI tools evolve, use cases change, and skills atrophy when they're not reinforced.

When people encounter friction later, whether weeks or months after training, there's rarely support available in the moment.

Designing for ability means assuming that capability needs to be maintained, not just introduced. Continuous access to learning and practice isn't a nice to have; it's what allows AI use to survive beyond the rollout phase.



Ability must be accessible in the flow of work

Even when learning exists, it often sits outside the rhythms of real work for organizations.

If building ability requires stepping away from deadlines, switching tools, or navigating complex resources, it becomes easy to postpone and eventually ignore. Over time, learning is perceived as an interruption rather than an enabler.

In practice, ability needs to be available at the moment of need. That means in at least three critical points:

1. When people are deciding whether to use or try AI at all
2. When people are starting a task or project
3. When people are stuck

When access to ability is immediate and contextual, the cost of trying drops dramatically. And when the cost of trying drops, behavior changes.



Ability must be low-risk to build

AI adoption is unusually sensitive to perceived risk. Using AI often means changing how work is produced or reviewed, as well as trusting in outputs that aren't guaranteed. If people feel that trying AI could make them look careless, slow, or less competent, they will avoid it. Regardless of how strongly leaders encourage experimentation.

This is why many organizations see surface-level adoption but little real impact. People test AI in private, low-stakes contexts. But they avoid using it where it actually matters.

Designing for ability requires creating safe spaces to practice:

- Environments where experimentation is expected
- Clear boundaries around acceptable use
- Learning contexts where mistakes don't carry professional consequences

FEATURE: WHERE ABILITY MEETS EXECUTION

3 lessons from leaders navigating AI adoption

Designing for ability creates the conditions for AI adoption. But ultimately, ability has to support real decisions in real workflows.

The following lessons, drawn from leaders and researchers featured on the DataFramed podcast and across DataCamp webinars, show where AI adoption most often succeeds or fails when theory meets execution.

Lesson 1: Risk determines how AI should be used

AI adoption breaks down when teams don't know how much autonomy is appropriate for a given task. Afroogh et al. identify three common roles for AI:

- **Assistive/collaborative:** AI drafts, summarizes, or recommends. Humans retain decision authority
- **Autonomous:** AI decides and acts independently within defined guardrails
- **Adversarial:** AI challenges decisions made by humans or other AI systems (i.e., second opinions, red teaming)

The critical mistake organizations make is treating these roles as interchangeable or assuming that more autonomy is always better.

In practice, risk sets the ceiling on how AI should be used. If the cost of failure is high, or accountability is unclear, full automation is inappropriate—even if model performance looks strong.

Bottom line: For AI adoption to work, teams need the ability to assess risk and match AI autonomy accordingly.

“I believe in hybrid teams: humans, supercharged with AIs, and agents that work together with humans and agents.”

Karen Ng

Head of Product at HubSpot

“If the cost of getting it wrong is really high, you'd better have a human handholding the system.”

Manasi Vartak

Chief AI Architect at Cloudera

Lesson 2: AI works best for tasks, not jobs

Effective adoption starts by breaking work into tasks and decisions—inputs, processing, outputs—before choosing where AI can add value. Once workflows are decomposed, selecting AI use cases is manageable. It makes AI use concrete and bounded, lowering the cost of trying and reducing fear of bad outcomes.

Bottom line: Adoption depends on people being able to decompose work and see where AI support makes sense. Without that ability, AI remains abstract. And abstract tools don't get used.

“When you draw a workflow diagram of your process before you build the automation, everything is so clear.”

Marrallisa Kreijkes

n8n Ambassador

“You can get 100s of use cases quickly. To prioritize, align the company strategy [and feasibility] to determine value.”

Grace Anderson

Global VP of Generative AI & Digital Adoption at Sodexo

Lesson 3: Adoption sticks when behavior is reinforced, not forced

As we've explored in this guide, people adopt AI when it feels useful, safe, and aligned with their goals—not because it exists. Effective leaders make AI behavior visible and concrete, involve frontline workers early, keep humans clearly accountable, and measure adoption, not just accuracy.

Bottom line: Sustained adoption requires systems that help leaders reinforce the right behaviors over time.

“If adoption is low, leaders reach for incentives or pressure. This is usually the wrong response.”

Stefano Puntoni

Co-Director of Wharton Human-AI Research

Turning “ability as infrastructure” into practice

Treating ability as infrastructure is a design principle. Making it real requires systems that continuously support ability.

Unfortunately, traditional enterprise learning is often delivered as a one-time intervention, disconnected from real workflows and unsupported over time.

DataCamp is different. Our unique learn-by-doing approach is designed to turn both data and AI learning into sustained behavior changes. With DataCamp, thousands of organizations are already operationalizing “ability as infrastructure” in three critical ways:

Lowering the friction to build AI ability

Data and AI skills must be available at the moment of need, not weeks earlier in a classroom or buried in static documentation. DataCamp's hands-on learning environment allows people to practice in realistic scenarios that mirror real work. This reduces the perceived risk of AI and makes experimentation feel practical, not just theoretical.

1

Building confidence through repetition, not completion

AI adoption doesn't hinge on whether someone has completed a course, but rather whether they feel confident enough to use AI repeatedly under real constraints. DataCamp is designed to support continuous practice over time, reinforcing behaviors as tools, use cases, and expectations evolve.

2

Reinforcing the behaviors that drive adoption

Leaders often say AI is important, yet day-to-day work looks the same. DataCamp changes this by making AI experimentation visible and measurable. Ongoing engagement with hands-on learning provides a concrete signal that people are trying new ways of working, not just completing training. Over time, this shows where AI is being explored, where confidence is increasing, and where teams are stalling.

3

Conclusion: Ability as infrastructure, not enablement

AI adoption doesn't fail because organizations lack strategy or technology. It fails because people aren't enabled to use AI confidently in real work. Until ability is treated as infrastructure—continuous, role-specific, and easy to access—AI remains something teams experiment with, not something they rely on.

DataCamp helps close that gap. By making AI ability easy to build, safe to practice, and reinforced over time, DataCamp turns AI learning into sustained behavior change.

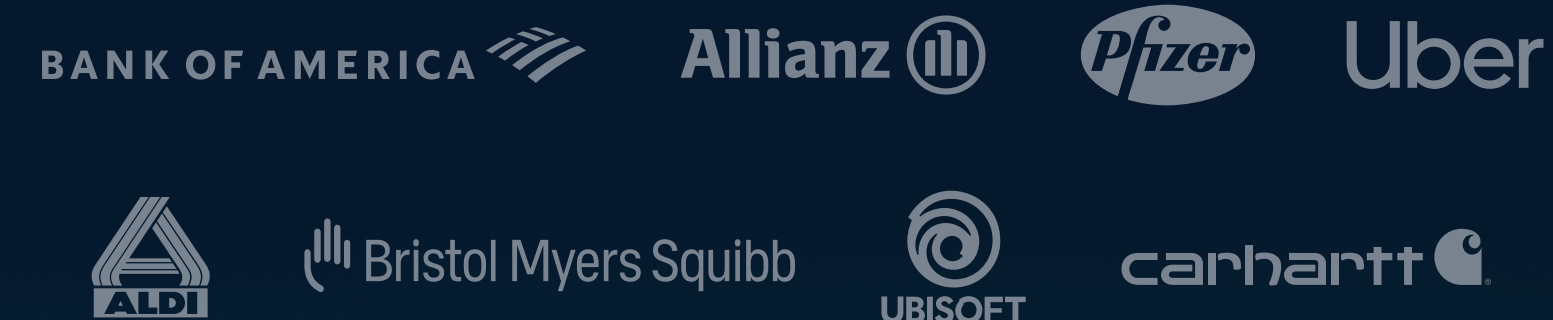
If your organization is ready to move beyond pilots and make AI part of everyday work, let's help you get there.

Prepare your team for the AI age

Let's close your gap together. Power job-ready data and AI skills across your organization with a bespoke learning program.

[Book Your DataCamp for Business Demo](#)

Top global companies, including 80% of the Fortune 1000, use DataCamp:



Building ability across the entire data and AI technology stack

