THE AUTOMATION ILLUSION

Why your AI roadmap isn't working

GTM LEADERS' AI ROADMAPS AREN'T DELIVERING RESULTS

On balance, AI simply isn't working for go-to-market functions. While some use cases are proving successful and "cool things" are happening in fringe cases, the economics are bearing out a different story. Just 18% of sales organizations report high levels of ROI from AI investments. That's near the bottom across all business functions. Marketing gets 37%. Customer Operations gets 33%. Meanwhile, 65% of GTM leaders staked their 2026 growth plans on AI productivity gains. Boards are expecting significant productivity gains. At just 18% ROI, those are hard promises to keep.

The gap isn't bad tools. It's prioritization. Most GTM organizations deploy AI to make activities faster without questioning whether those activities matter. In many cases, AI automates already-bad processes, amplifying their cost.
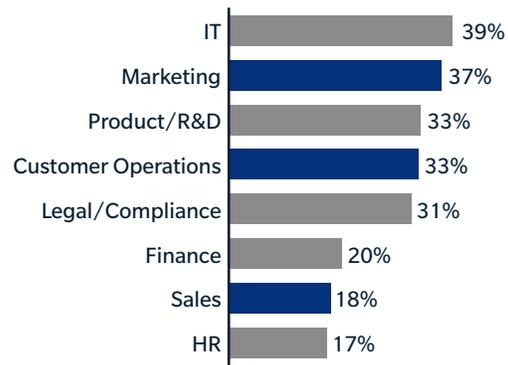
THIS IS "THE AUTOMATION ILLUSION": THE BELIEF THAT PRODUCTIVITY GAINS FROM SPEED INHERENTLY DRIVE COMMERCIAL EFFICIENCY AND GROWTH. THE PROMISED GAINS ARE A MIRAGE UNLESS THE TIME SAVED GETS REDIRECTED TO ACTIVITIES THAT ACTUALLY MOVE RESULTS.

CEOs reporting high/very high ROI from AI by function

Function	%
IT	39%
Marketing	37%
Product/R&D	33%
Customer Operations	33%
Legal/Compliance	31%
Finance	20%
Sales	18%
HR	17%

Percent of CEOs saying customer-facing teams need AI efficiency gains to achieve 2026 goals

Current productivity is sufficient; AI not needed or would be a bonus — 35%
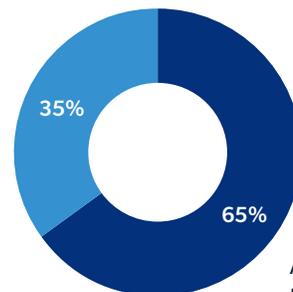
AI efficiency gains needed to achieve 2026 goals — 65%

N = 118
Source: SBI Q4 2025 CEO Survey

THREE CATEGORIES OF AI INVESTMENT

To understand where the illusion takes hold, look at how AI spending in GTM breaks down. It falls into three categories, each with a fundamentally different relationship to commercial outcomes.

Frontline Productivity automates repetitive tasks that consume rep time. Meeting summaries, email generation, chatbots, CRM automation, and content creation. The promise is immediate time savings.

Enablement & Intelligence enhances how teams research accounts and execute. Competitive intelligence, account research, next-best-actioning, and proposal generation aim to make reps more effective, not just efficient.

Analytics & Decision Support predicts outcomes and informs resource allocation. These capabilities have greater leverage, as they support leaders allocating resources. Forecasting, pipeline prediction, churn prediction, market & account segmentation, and deal risk assessment determine which activities teams pursue.

Frontline Productivity	**Enablement & Intelligence**	**Analytics & Decision Support**
Automates repetitive tasks to **save time**	Provides information to **enhance effectiveness**	Identifies hidden patterns to **predict outcomes**
Adoption level: High	Adoption level: Moderate	Adoption level: Low
Separation Level: Low	Separation Level: Moderate	Separation Level: High

Most organizations concentrate investment in the first two categories. Meeting summaries don't change which meetings matter. Email automation doesn't identify which prospects are worth pursuing. Content generation doesn't reveal which messages resonate. These tools create the appearance of efficiency (time saved, tasks automated) without delivering business outcomes (deals closed, revenue retained).
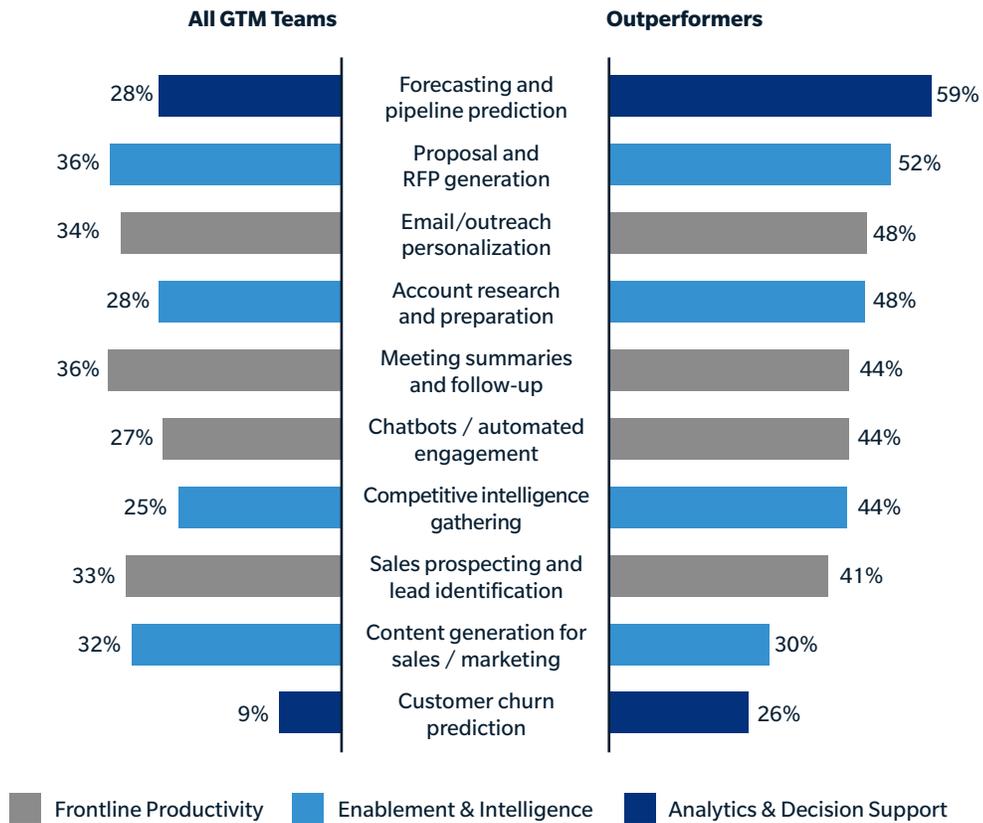
The question is whether outperformers take a different approach.

INSIDE THE AUTOMATION ILLUSION

Analysis of 118 CEO responses – relative to their company growth profile -- shows a sharp pattern. Companies that exceeded their 2025 revenue growth targets don't just spend more on AI. They spend differently. They're not automating faster. They're predicting better. They're not placing broad bets, but rather targeted bets based on where the economic leverage sits.

The separation between outperformers and everyone else widens as you move from productivity tools toward analytics, and it holds across use cases.

AI Use Cases by All GTM Teams and Outperformers

	All GTM Teams	Use Case	Outperformers
	28%	Forecasting and pipeline prediction	59%
	36%	Proposal and RFP generation	52%
	34%	Email/outreach personalization	48%
	28%	Account research and preparation	48%
	36%	Meeting summaries and follow-up	44%
	27%	Chatbots / automated engagement	44%
	25%	Competitive intelligence gathering	44%
	33%	Sales prospecting and lead identification	41%
	32%	Content generation for sales / marketing	30%
	9%	Customer churn prediction	26%

Legend: ■ Frontline Productivity ■ Enablement & Intelligence ■ Analytics & Decision Support

N = 118
Source: SBI Q4 2025 CEO Survey

FRONTLINE PRODUCTIVITY:
HIGH ADOPTION, MINIMAL SEPARATION

- Email/outreach personalization: 34% all CEOs vs 48% outperformers (1.4x)

- Meeting summaries and follow-up: 36% vs 44% (1.2x)

- Chatbots / automated engagement: 27% vs 44% (1.6x)

- Sales prospecting and lead identification: 33% vs 41% (1.2x)

These tools dominate vendor pitches because they demo well and the productivity gains are easy to model. The multipliers: 1.2x to 1.6x across the category. Everyone buys these tools. They create no separation. Time saved feels like progress, but it only improves outcomes when spent on the right activities.

ENABLEMENT & INTELLIGENCE:
MODERATE ADOPTION, MODERATE SEPARATION

- Proposal and RFP generation: 36% vs 52% (1.4x)

- Account research and preparation: 28% vs 48% (1.7x)

- Competitive intelligence gathering: 25% vs 44% (1.8x)

- Content generation for sales / marketing: 32% vs 30% (0.9x, actually LOWER)

The multipliers climb: 1.7x for account research, 1.8x for competitive intelligence. These tools change what sellers know, not just how fast they move. Content generation is the exception. Outperformers use it less. Volume doesn't win deals. Knowing what matters does.

ANALYTICS & DECISION SUPPORT: LOW ADOPTION, HIGH SEPARATION

- Forecasting and pipeline prediction: 28% vs 59% (2.1x)

- Customer churn prediction: 9% vs 26% (2.9x)

This is where differentiation peaks. Forecasting at 2.1x. Churn prediction at 2.9x. Outperformers are also twice as likely (30% vs. 16%) to cite "improving win rates through better insights" as their top AI priority.

AI Investment Landscape: Opportunity & Differentiation
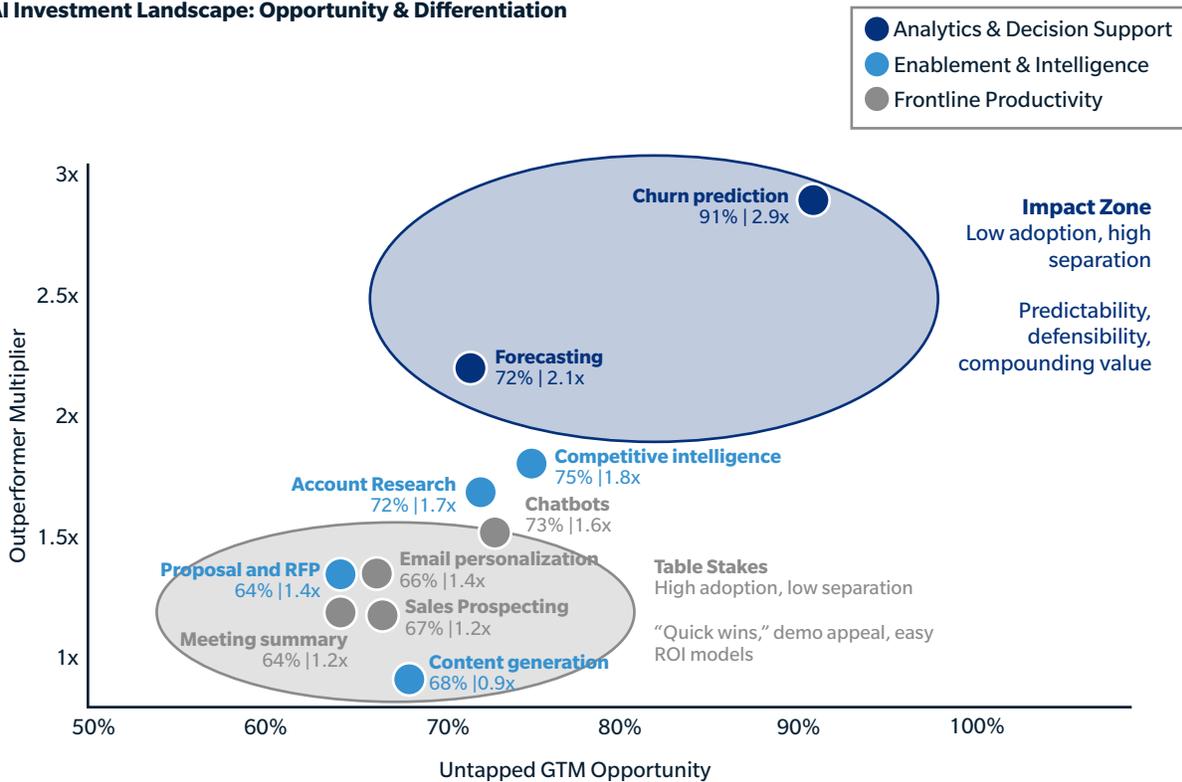
N = 118
Source: SBI Q4 2025 CEO Survey
Note: Untapped GTM Opportunity is equal to 100% - (current usage by all GTM Teams)

The pattern is visible in the investment landscape: as adoption rates drop, outperformer separation rises. The tools fewest companies deploy are the ones that most distinguish the companies winning from everyone else.

The difference isn't speed, it's direction. Automation without precise targeting is just faster failure.

Why the underinvestment by most GTM teams? Analytics tools lack the immediate demo "wow factor" of productivity tools, require clean data infrastructure, take quarters to show value, and surface uncomfortable truths. That's exactly why they work – they identify acute issues, where improvement creates real leverage. When 9% of companies deploy churn prediction and 33% deploy prospecting automation, getting analytics right creates genuine competitive separation.

WHY ANALYTICS DELIVERS SUPERIOR RETURNS

The Automation Illusion persists because productivity tools produce visible activity. Reps send more emails, generate more proposals, attend more meetings with better notes. Dashboards light up with metrics that look like progress.

This is what analytics solves. Forecasting and pipeline prediction expose which segments, products, and motions convert. Churn prediction reveals which customer profiles fail and why. These insights create a targeting layer that determines whether every other GTM investment pays off or gets wasted.

A new generation of analytics platforms is making this operational, not theoretical. These platforms sit above existing GTM systems, unifying commercial data across strategy, operations, and talent, then benchmarking it against growth datasets to surface the signals that matter. Their outputs go beyond traditional dashboards to focus more on direction than reports and identify where growth is real, where it's manufactured, which levers will actually move value creation. When the signals are accurate, every downstream investment gets sharper. When they're absent, your teams optimize in the dark.

The returns compound across functions. When analytics identifies which accounts are salvageable, which segments convert, and which motions win, every team (Sales, CS, Marketing, Product) makes sharper decisions simultaneously. Productivity tools can't do this. They save time without changing where that time gets spent.

The deployment data shows where competitive separation lives. Thirty-three percent of companies have deployed prospecting automation. Nine percent have deployed churn prediction. When everyone has the same productivity tools, they provide no advantage. When almost no one has mature analytics, getting it right is defensible.

Companies with mature prediction capabilities don't just grow faster. Their growth is more predictable, their GTM investments more capital-efficient, and their revenue more defensible under scrutiny. Productivity tools are table stakes. Analytics infrastructure is a durable asset that compounds.

COMMERCIAL OUTCOMES DON'T COME FROM ACTIVITY VOLUME. THEY COME FROM ACTIVITY ACCURACY. THE GAP BETWEEN AVERAGE PERFORMERS AND OUTPERFORMERS ISN'T EFFORT, IT'S AIM.

SEEING THROUGH THE ILLUSION

Breaking the Automation Illusion requires a sequencing discipline most GTM organizations resist.

Start with analytics. Before any new productivity investment, deploy forecasting and churn prediction against your highest-value segments. Expect six months to operationalize and nine months to demonstrate measurable accuracy gains.

What do you tell the board in Q1 and Q2? That you're building the infrastructure that makes every other AI investment work. Report on leading indicators: data coverage, prediction confidence, initial model outputs. Boards understand infrastructure investments when positioned correctly.

Let analytics direct your roadmap. Predictive insights determine where productivity and enablement go next. If churn models show CS response time is the binding constraint, prioritize CS tools. Analytics identifies which problems are worth solving. Other tools solve them faster.

Reframe existing productivity investments. Most GTM organizations have already purchased these tools. This isn't wasted spend. It's an accelerant waiting for a targeting layer. Stop measuring activity metrics and start measuring deployment against analytics-validated priorities.

Scale new productivity last. Additional tools should accelerate execution of validated activities, not just any activities. Deployed in this sequence, productivity amplifies outcomes. Deployed first, it amplifies waste.

GTM leaders will face pressure to reverse this sequence. Vendors will push quick wins. Boards will want visible activity. That pull is the Automation Illusion operating in real time. The outperformer data shows what happens when leaders resist it.

THE OPPORTUNITY

The 18% ROI in Sales AI isn't a failure of AI. It's the predictable result of the Automation Illusion. Most organizations remain captivated by automation demos while outperformers have moved to predicting outcomes. The 2-3x deployment gaps in forecasting and churn prediction won't last forever. As more companies build analytics infrastructure, the window for competitive separation narrows.

Stop making your teams faster. Make them smarter first. The returns follow from better decisions, not busier reps.

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