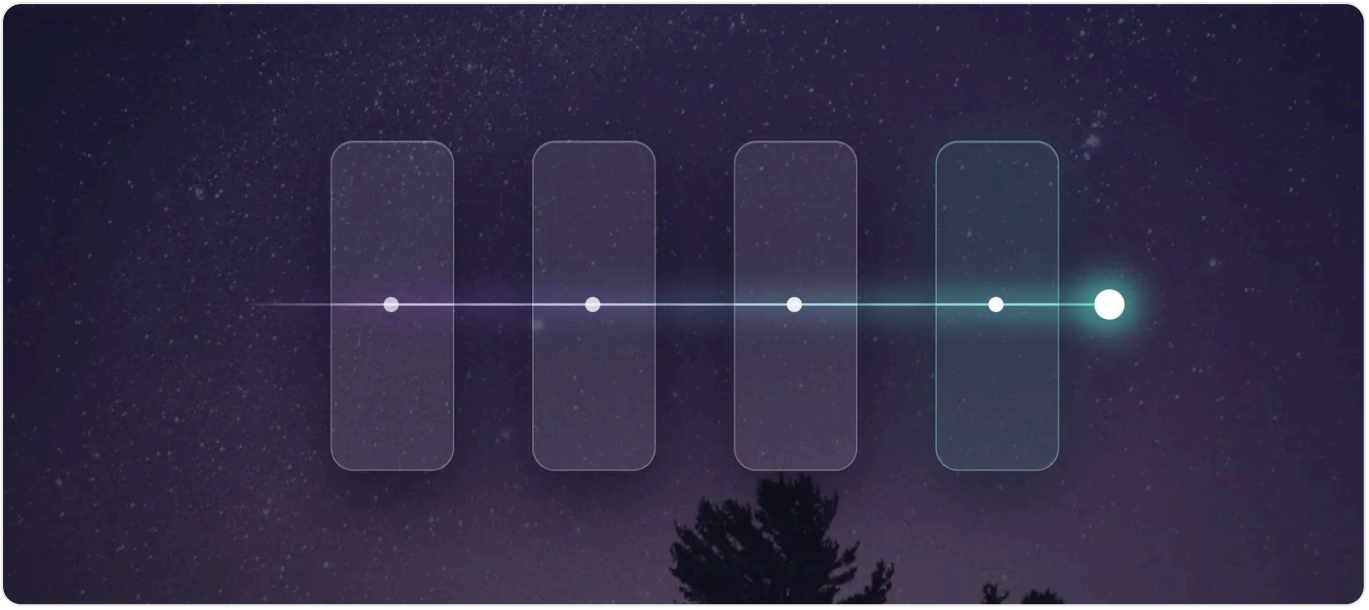
THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

You Have 40 AI Pilots. Which Ones Deserve the Next Investment?

At GPMF in Riyadh last month, AI came up in almost every session I went to. What I heard much less about was how organizations decide which pilots actually get funded once twenty or thirty of them are competing for the same budget.

Vassily Yasmine October 15, 2026



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GPMF 2026

The question behind the agenda

I spent two days at the Global Project Management Forum, and AI was part of nearly every talk I sat in and most of the conversations in the hallways.

The question I kept thinking about was a practical one. Of all the AI pilots an organization is running, which ones get funded to scale next year, and who decides?

In most of the organizations I work with in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, there isn't a clear answer to that yet.

THE NUMBERS

Forty pilots, one budget line

Picture a large enterprise in Saudi Arabia with 30 to 40 AI pilots running. A few started because a vendor offered a free proof of concept. Others came from a business unit that moved quickly, or from the board or a ministry wanting to see progress on AI.

Once you count internal time, each pilot costs around SAR 1.5 million, so the total comes to SAR 45 to 60 million a year.

EXHIBIT 1

What the outcome data says

48%

of digital initiatives meet or exceed their business outcome targets.

GARTNER, 2024 CIO SURVEY (N>3,100)

71%

hit their targets when business executives co-own delivery with the CIO.

GARTNER, 2024 CIO SURVEY

Gartner surveyed more than 3,100 CIOs in 2024 and found that only 48% of digital initiatives meet or exceed their business outcome targets.[1] I don't see a reason to expect AI pilots to do better. At that rate, roughly half of a pilot budget that size doesn't deliver the outcome it was meant to.

We call this the *Wrong Work Funded* gap, and across the portfolios we see it's worth about 3.5% of EBITDA.[2] AI is making it bigger, mostly because pilots are cheap to start and hard to stop.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Why the portfolio never forms

In my experience there are three reasons a list of pilots never turns into a portfolio.

Too many ways in. Use cases come in through IT, innovation teams, business units and vendors, each with its own template. They're never compared side by side for the same money, so the sponsor with the best connections usually gets funded.

Reporting on activity. Pilots get reported by what the team did, like models trained, users onboarded and demos run. That shows the team was busy, but it doesn't tell you whether costs, cycle times or revenue actually changed.

Nobody owns it after sign-off. In the same Gartner survey, organizations where business executives co-own delivery with the CIO hit their outcome targets 71% of the time.[1] In most pilot programs I see, the business sponsor signs the request and then steps back. When the pilot ends, nobody on the business side is responsible for getting people to use it or for checking whether the benefits showed up.

> Agree the stop criteria at intake, before anyone gets attached to the pilot.
>
> **Vassily Yasmine**
> Senior Account Manager, Sensei Labs

TYPES OF AI WORK

Three kinds of AI work, three kinds of evidence

"AI initiative" covers a lot of very different things. Before anything gets funded, we find it helps to sort them into three groups.

EXHIBIT 2

Three kinds of AI work

01 Productivity	02 Process	03 Service or revenue
Copilots, drafting and search. Scale it when the hours saved go into higher-value work. Owner: the functional head.	AI inside a workflow, like claims triage. Scale it when cycle time, error rate or unit cost improves. Owner: the process owner.	A new customer-facing capability. Scale it on adoption, revenue and customer outcomes. Owner: the P&L owner.

Each group needs its own business case, owner and test. If they all sit on one list, you end up comparing a copilot rollout with a new revenue product on the same slide, and that comparison doesn't help anyone decide.

FUNDING STAGES

Release money against evidence

The organizations I see doing this well fund AI the same way they fund everything else. The money comes in stages, and a pilot only moves to the next stage when it has the evidence for it.

EXHIBIT 3

Release money in four stages

1. INTAKE	A named objective, a named business owner and a check that nothing similar already exists. Unlocks the discovery budget.
2. PROVE	It works on our own data at real volume, with an agreed risk tier. Unlocks the pilot budget.
3. ADOPT	People are using it, and the target metric has moved from its baseline. Unlocks the scale budget.
4. SCALE	It is still paying back against the business case, reviewed every quarter. Unlocks the run budget.

Two things make this work in practice. First, agree the stop criteria at intake, before anyone gets attached to the pilot. Second, review all the AI work together every quarter, so each use case is compared with the others and with the rest of the investment portfolio.

CONDUCTOR

How we handle this in Conductor

In Conductor, every initiative, AI or not, comes in through the same intake, is linked to a strategic objective and moves through stages tied to funding. Harmony AI flags duplicates and new risks while the portfolio runs, and outcome tracking starts the day a use case is approved.

At EtihadWE, bringing more than 50 initiatives into one orchestrated portfolio gave leadership 100% real-time visibility into what was funded, why, and how it was performing.[3] A major utility in France has built schedule deviation tracking and delay classification into its stage gates in Conductor, so each slip is classified when it happens and leadership can see which projects are drifting and why.

NEXT STEP

Try this with your own portfolio

If your board asked tomorrow which AI pilots will scale next quarter and why, how long would it take you to answer?

If it would help, we can sit down with your team and run two or three of your live use cases through the three groups and the four stages.

Your strategy deserves a platform that can keep up

See how Conductor connects your strategic plan to the people, projects, and KPIs that make it real.

Book a Demo

Sources

[1] Gartner, "Only 48% of Digital Initiatives Meet or Exceed Their Business Outcome Targets," October 2024.

[2] Sensei Labs, Four Gaps analysis of client portfolios.

[3] Sensei Labs client data, EtihadWE. Pilot count and cost are illustrative.

Frequently asked questions

How should organizations decide which AI pilots to fund?

Fund AI in stages, the same way as other investments. A pilot only gets the next level of budget (discovery, pilot, scale, run) when it shows the evidence for that stage, and stop criteria are agreed at intake.

What are the main types of AI initiatives in a portfolio?

Productivity AI such as copilots and search, process AI built into a workflow such as claims triage, and service or revenue AI that adds a customer-facing capability. Each needs its own business case, owner and test.

What share of digital initiatives meet their business outcome targets?

Gartner's 2024 survey of more than 3,100 CIOs found that 48% meet or exceed their targets. That rises to 71% when business executives co-own delivery with the CIO.

READ ONLINE

Read this article on our website

getconductor.com/resources/ai-pilots-which-ones-deserve-the-next-riyal

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Walk through an example with our team and see Conductor on your own programs.

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