

AI is in every headline. In real businesses, it is *1 in 4.*



Prem Patel
Founder, Nex Automations

What the data says about AI automation and agents, 2026 to 2030. For **freelancers, agency owners and business owners.**

50+ charts

Every number sourced

3 scenarios for 2030

SWIPE →

89
SOURCES
CHECKED



23.8%

of US businesses used AI in the last 2 weeks

23.8%

of US businesses used AI in the last two weeks

21%

of small-firm AI users let it run a process

7%

of 2,145 leaders report established AI ROI

US Census BTOs, 24 Aug to 6 Sep 2026 · Federal Reserve SBCS, 2025 survey · KPMG Global AI Pulse, Q2 2026



83% use AI to write. Only 21% let it *run a process*.

Same tools, very different payoff. Writing saves minutes. A process that runs itself saves **every week**, without anyone touching it.

the open lane ↘

●●●

83 in 100 do this

AI writes the email

Hi Sarah, thanks for your time today. Following up on the quote we discussed: here is a short summary and the next steps.

Then a person copies, checks, sends.

///

Lead to team, every time

21 in 100

New lead

Qualify

Log row

Alert team

Runs today: 39

ILLUSTRATIVE

83%

use AI to write or market

21%

use AI to automate a process

7%

say AI is fully built into the business

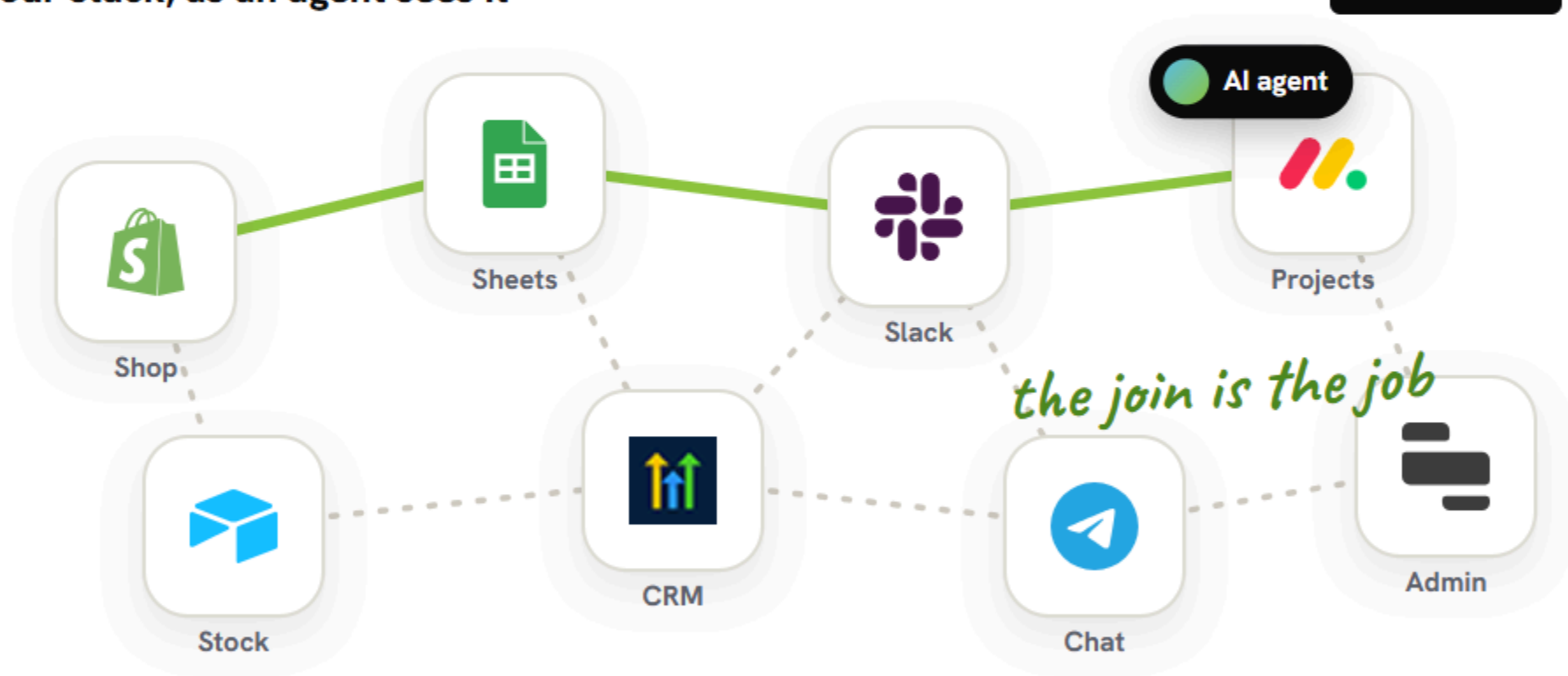
Share of AI-using US small employer firms, Federal Reserve Small Business Credit Survey, 2025 survey (n=2,225)

Agents can attempt a day of work. They *break at the joins.*

The best agent finishes **3.1-hour** software tasks 80% of the time. But big companies connect only **27% of their apps**, and an agent cannot use what is not connected.

Your stack, as an agent sees it

ILLUSTRATIVE



3.1 hr

longest software task the best agent finishes 80% of the time

27%

of a big company's apps are connected

5x+

rise in inference cost per agent workflow by 2028 **PROJECTION**

METR time horizons, Apr 2026 (early preview model) • MuleSoft Connectivity Benchmark 2026 (vendor survey) • Gartner, 17 Aug 2026

Each wave of connecting software came faster. The last took *six months*.

Integration used to move in waves more than a decade apart. The MCP agent plug reached OpenAI, Google and Microsoft in under six months.

Time from one wave to the next

gap lengths are our framing

1997 to 2011

Integration middleware to no-code app connectors

14 yrs

2011 to 2022

No-code connectors to ChatGPT

11 yrs

Nov 2022 to Nov 2024

ChatGPT to MCP, the plug for AI agents

2 yrs

and shrinking ✓

Nov 2024 to 2025

MCP launch to OpenAI, Google and Microsoft

under 6 mo

14 yrs

from integration middleware to no-code connectors

2 yrs

from ChatGPT to the MCP agent plug

5.8 mo

for OpenAI, Google and Microsoft to adopt MCP

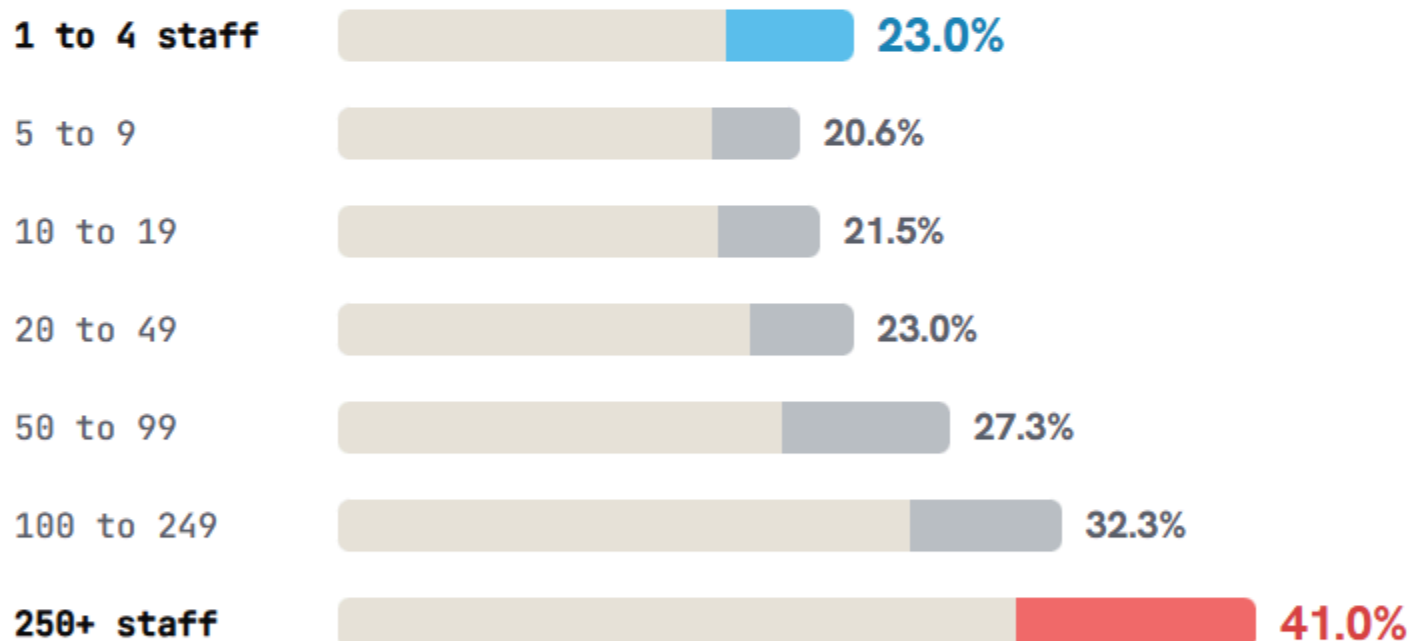
Event dates 1997 to 2025: TIBCO filings, Zapier, OpenAI, Anthropic, TechCrunch, Directions on Microsoft. Gap lengths are our framing.

Every size of firm uses more AI. The biggest are *pulling away*.

Firms with 1 to 4 staff went from 17.3% to 23.0%. Firms with 250+ went from 30.3% to 41.0%. **Big firms added nearly twice the points.**

US businesses using AI, by staff size

■ late 2025 ■ Jul to Sep 2026



twice the points ↓

+5.7 pts

firms with 1 to 4 staff

+10.6 pts

firms with 250+ staff

41.0%

of 250+ staff firms use AI, Jul to Sep 2026

US businesses using AI by firm size, four-cycle averages, late 2025 vs Jul to Sep 2026, US Census Bureau BT0S

You have read "95% of AI pilots fail." It rests on **52 interviews.**

The MIT report drew on 52 interviews, 153 surveys and 300+ public cases.
A bigger survey: 7% of 2,145 leaders report established ROI.

check the sample ↘

The viral number

~~95%~~

MIT NANDA, Jul 2025



52 interviews behind the headline

A bigger sample

2,145 leaders



7% report established ROI from AI

52

interviews behind the viral "95%"

2,145

leaders in the KPMG survey, Q2 2026

7%

of them report established ROI from AI

MIT NANDA, The GenAI Divide, Jul 2025 · Established AI ROI, Q2 2026, KPMG Global AI Pulse, n=2,145

Stand-alone AI agents get about **1 cent** of every AI dollar.

Gartner puts 2026 AI spending at \$2.67 trillion, 56 cents of each dollar on infrastructure. **Agent spend is forecast to more than double in 2027.**

Every 2026 AI dollar, worldwide

PROJECTION

Infrastructure 56%

Services 22%

Software 17%

AI agents and assistants: 1.1%

\$65.5B

Spend on AI agents and assistants

Agent features built into other software count as AI software, not here. Gartner forecast made 16 Sep 2026.

the cent that doubles →

\$16.5B

2025

\$29.2B

2026 fct

2027 fct

1.1%

of 2026 AI spending goes to stand-alone agents

\$29.2B

agent spend in 2026, forecast

\$65.5B

agent spend in 2027

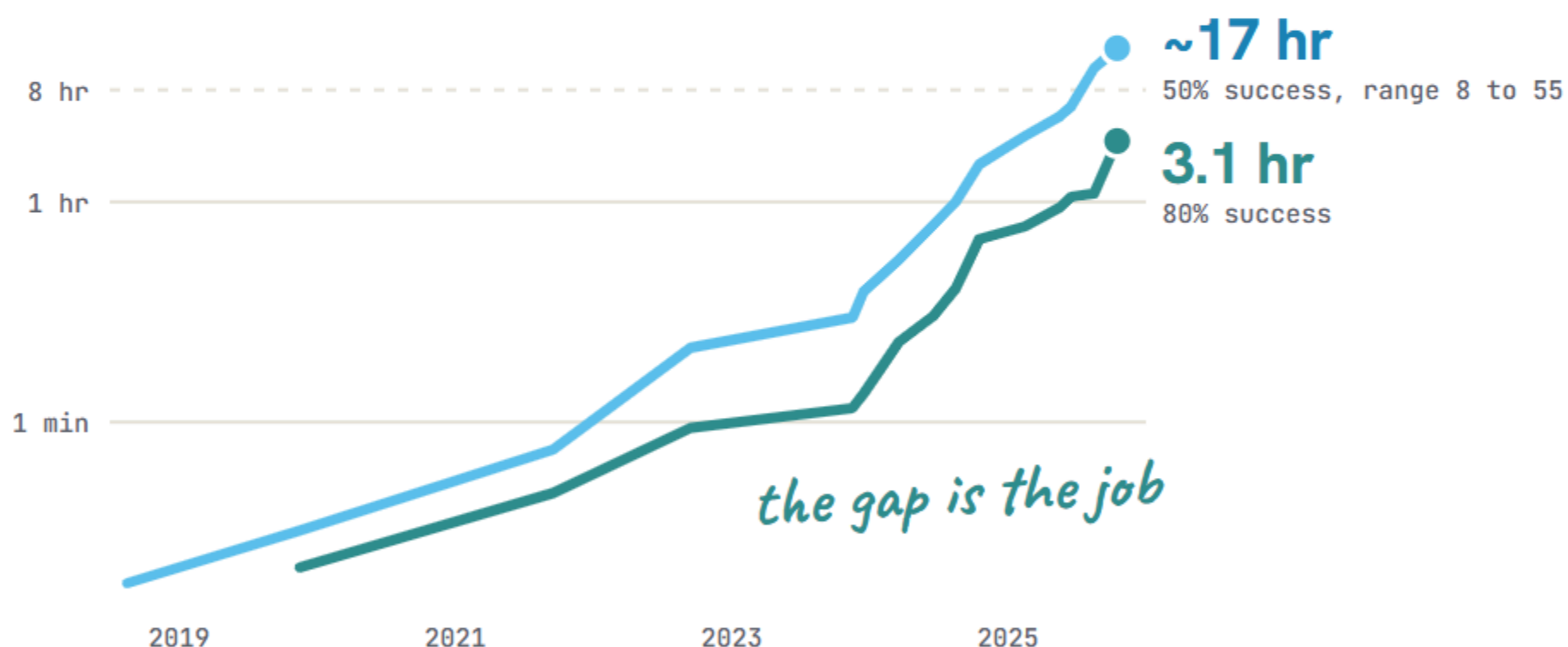
PROJECTION

Worldwide AI spending by segment, 2025 to 2027, Gartner forecast made 16 Sep 2026

In 2019, AI agents managed seconds of work. Now, *a working day.*

Software tasks the best agent finishes half the time: 3 seconds in 2019, about 17 hours in Apr 2026. At 80% success, 3.1 hours.

Length of task an AI agent can finish, log scale



3 sec

GPT-2, 2019, at 50% success

~17 hr

best model, Apr 2026, at 50% success

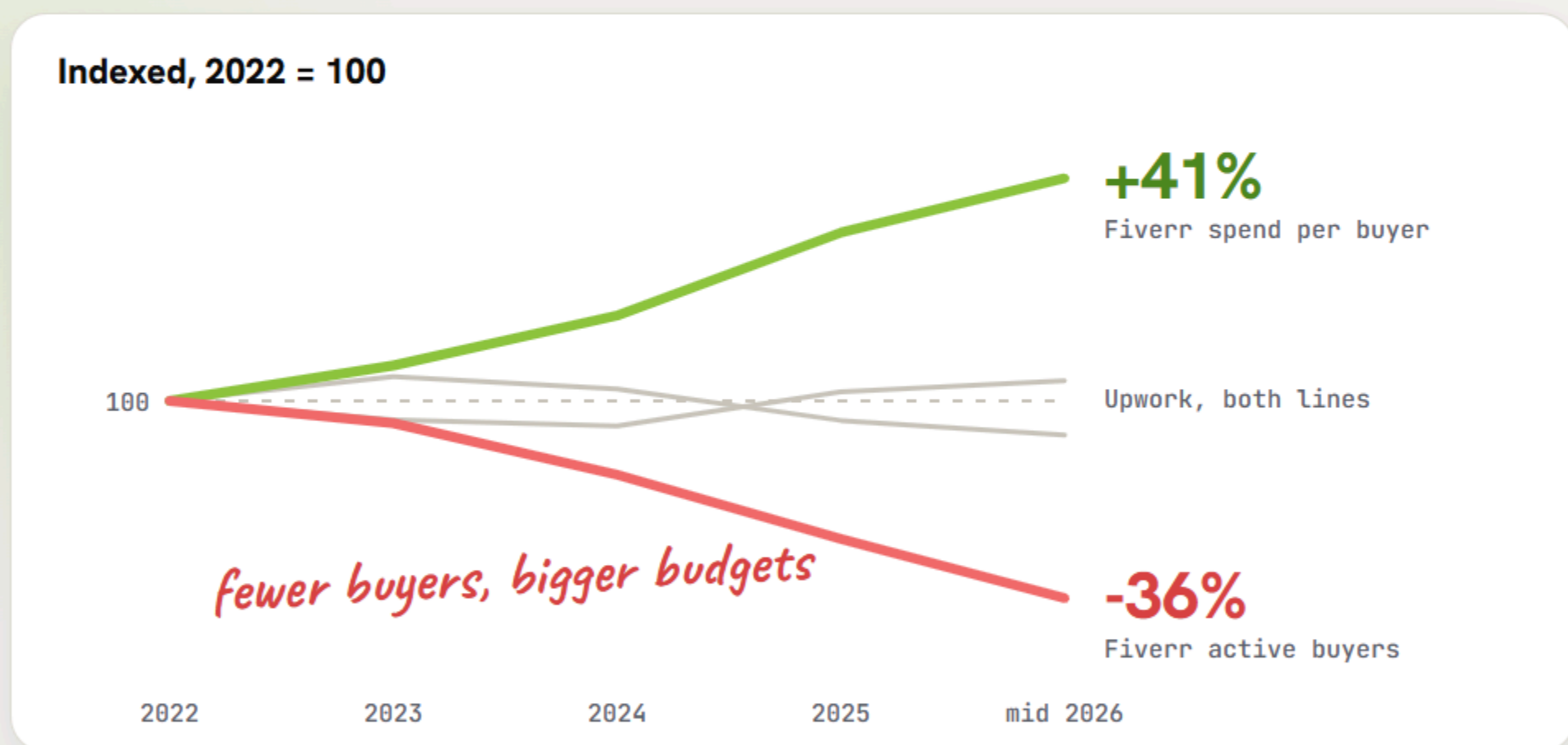
3.1 hr

the same model at 80% success

Software task length at 50% and 80% success, 2019 to Apr 2026, METR time horizons. Latest point is an early preview checkpoint.

Fiverr: 36% fewer buyers, each spending **41% more**.

From 4.2M buyers at \$261 each in 2022 to 2.68M at \$368 by mid-2026. Upwork barely moved. **Fewer clients, bigger budgets.**



-36%

Fiverr active buyers since 2022

+41%

Fiverr spend per buyer since 2022

\$368

spend per Fiverr buyer, 12 months to Jun 2026

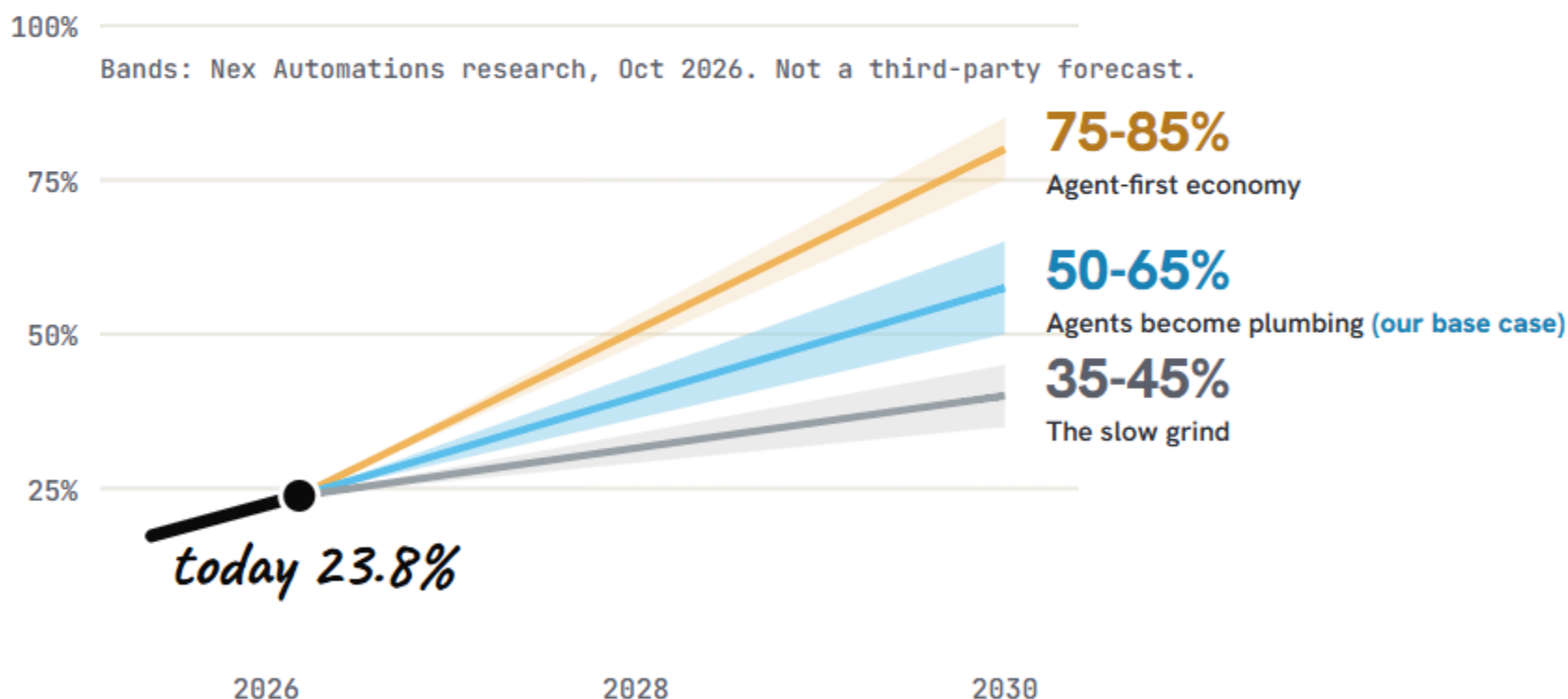
Active buyers and spend per buyer, 2022 to Jun 2026, Fiverr 20-F and Q2 2026 shareholder letter; Upwork 10-K and quarterly releases

By 2030, 35% to 85% of US firms could use AI. Our bet: 50 to 65%.

Three paths from 23.8% today, depending on how fast agents become ordinary plumbing. **Be wary of anyone selling you one number.**

US businesses using AI, three paths

PROJECTION



35-45%

the slow grind

50-65%

agents become plumbing, our
base case

75-85%

the agent-first economy

Share of US firms using AI by 2030, scenario bands by Nex Automations research, Oct 2026; start point US Census BTOS, Sep 2026 **PROJECTION**

Your next move, *by who you are.*

save this ↘

Three moves the numbers point to. Save this for your next planning day.

● FREELANCER

Price above \$1,000.

In our one-day Upwork snapshot, 16 of 28 fixed-price automation posts were under \$100. Do not fight there.



● AGENCY OWNER

Model the run cost before you quote.

Gartner estimates an agent task costs AI providers at least 5x a chatbot reply.



● BUSINESS OWNER

Automate your leads first.

Nearly a third of 10,000 AI workflows on Zapier handle leads.



57%

of fixed-price automation posts under \$100 (snapshot, n=28)

5x+

provider cost of an agent task vs a chatbot reply (estimate)

~30%

of 10,000 AI workflows on Zapier handle leads

Upwork snapshot, 4 Oct 2026, small sample • Gartner estimate, 17 Aug 2026 • Zapier, 11 Mar 2026



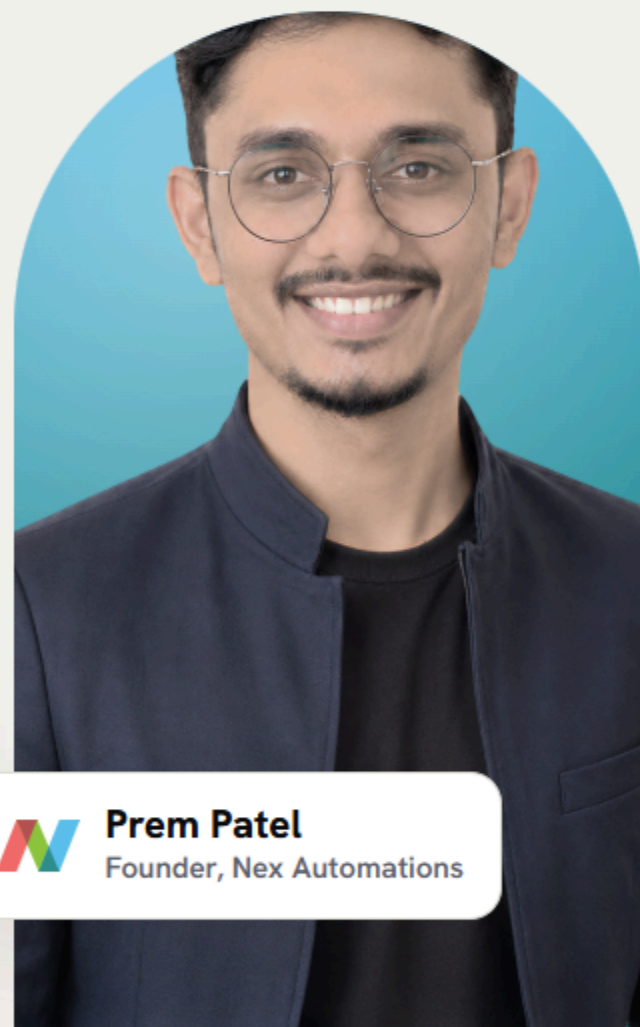
Every number here has a source. *Five calls on the record.*

Graded October 2027, right or wrong. Full report with all 89 sources: nex-automations.com/outlook, link in the pinned comment.

Our five calls

graded Oct 2027

- 1 Census shows 27%+ of US businesses using AI by Apr 2027 [OPEN](#)
- 2 A second major software vendor reports AI agent revenue as its own line [OPEN](#)
- 3 Upwork AI work growth stays below its late-2025 high of about 50% [OPEN](#)
- 4 Fiverr buyers keep falling while spend per buyer keeps rising [OPEN](#)
- 5 Monthly MCP SDK downloads stay above 231.9 million [OPEN](#)



 **Prem Patel**
Founder, Nex Automations

1,200+

automations built

210+

clients served

12+

countries

Nex Automations, 2026 · Outlook research data to 4 Oct 2026, 89 sources