

DX in 2026:

# The AI Reckoning



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# Executive summary

After years of experimentation, 2026 marks AI's transition from emerging technology to operational reality. This shift creates a paradox: as AI becomes more powerful, human judgment becomes more critical. Organizations are witnessing AI expose dysfunction, accelerate vulnerabilities, and demand new content strategies – while delivering genuine productivity gains for those with proper governance.

Success belongs to organizations recognizing AI as an accelerator of good practices, not a replacement. This requires embracing AI's capabilities while maintaining rigorous oversight, building guardrails, and ensuring technology serves human needs.



# Four key trends shaping DX

This report examines four interconnected trends that define the AI reckoning:

## Trend 1: Websites become machine feeders

AI-assisted discovery is reshaping how content is consumed, transforming websites from destinations into data sources that power generative engines. Organizations must optimize for both human readers and machine interpretation.

## Trend 2: Accessibility turns legal

New regulations make digital accessibility mandatory, creating legal consequences for non-compliance. However, beyond compliance, accessible content structure also improves AI readability.

## Trend 3: AI graduates from intern

After years of promises, AI delivers genuine productivity benefits as vendors build necessary infrastructure and governance tools. Organizations are moving from isolated pilots to production-ready implementations with measurable business impact.

## Trend 4: Speed meets security: The AI paradox

AI-assisted development accelerates solution delivery while simultaneously creating new attack vectors. The same tools making developers more productive are introducing vulnerabilities that organizations struggle to defend against.

Whether you're a marketer optimizing content, a developer building features, a content editor publishing pages, or a leader planning digital strategy, these trends reshape your 2026 priorities.

# What we saw in 2025

## Last year, organizations moved beyond asking "What can AI do?" to demanding "What value does AI deliver?"

Website users increasingly bypassed traditional navigation, getting answers through conversational AI without ever clicking through. The change happened faster than expected – search became conversational, and organizations scrambled to understand how AI systems interpreted their content.

AI started handling routine tasks like an intern would, with heavy human oversight and constant guidance. Organizations invested significant time nurturing AI implementations, testing outputs, and refining prompts. Some abandoned efforts entirely when the investment seemed greater than the return.

Teams also confronted the headless hangover. Purely headless architectures that promised flexibility instead created developer dependencies and marketing bottlenecks. The correction began: hybrid approaches that balance technical power with practical usability.

Meanwhile, edge computing moved from emerging technology to competitive advantage. Processing data closer to users delivered the speed and personalization modern experiences demand, while bridging the historic divide between IT and marketing priorities.

It was a year of rapid evolution and hard lessons. How organizations responded to what emerged in 2025 defined their success in 2026 and beyond.

# Looking ahead to 2026

2026 represents the year organizations must confront the practical implications of digital ecosystems littered with AI tooling. The questions have shifted from "Should we adopt AI?" to "How do we govern AI?" and "What happens when things go wrong with our AI implementations?"

Organizations can no longer treat AI as something happening at the final touchpoint of an end-user experience. It's now woven into every layer of how digital experiences are created, structured, secured, and consumed. This report examines the specific trends demanding deliberate choices about AI governance, oversight, and human judgment.

# Trend 1: Websites become machine feeders

The shift from destination to data source



## Here's what it's all about

Bloomberg reports companies seeing 70% traffic drops since Google introduced AI summaries, with click-through rates for top organic listings falling by 30% or more<sup>1</sup>.

Westpac's ratio of users staying on Google versus clicking through to websites shifted from 2:1 to 16:1 in months, with some emerging AI-powered engines, like Claude and Perplexity, reportedly reaching ratios of 250:1 and higher<sup>2</sup>.

Organizations optimizing for AI discovery now are establishing authority while competitors lose visibility. But the window is closing as AI systems solidify source preferences.

Your website has evolved from not just a destination, but also a data source. Users increasingly bypass websites entirely, getting information through the likes of ChatGPT, Google's AI Summaries and AI Mode, Perplexity, and voice assistants.

1 - <https://startupsomagazine.co.uk/article-your-website-isnt-dead-ai-changing-what-it-needs-win>

2 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eioj6w3WIVQ>

Yet paradoxically, your website has never been more critical. It remains the authoritative source that AI systems will reference. The challenge is ensuring AI systems *can* actually find, understand, and accurately represent your content.

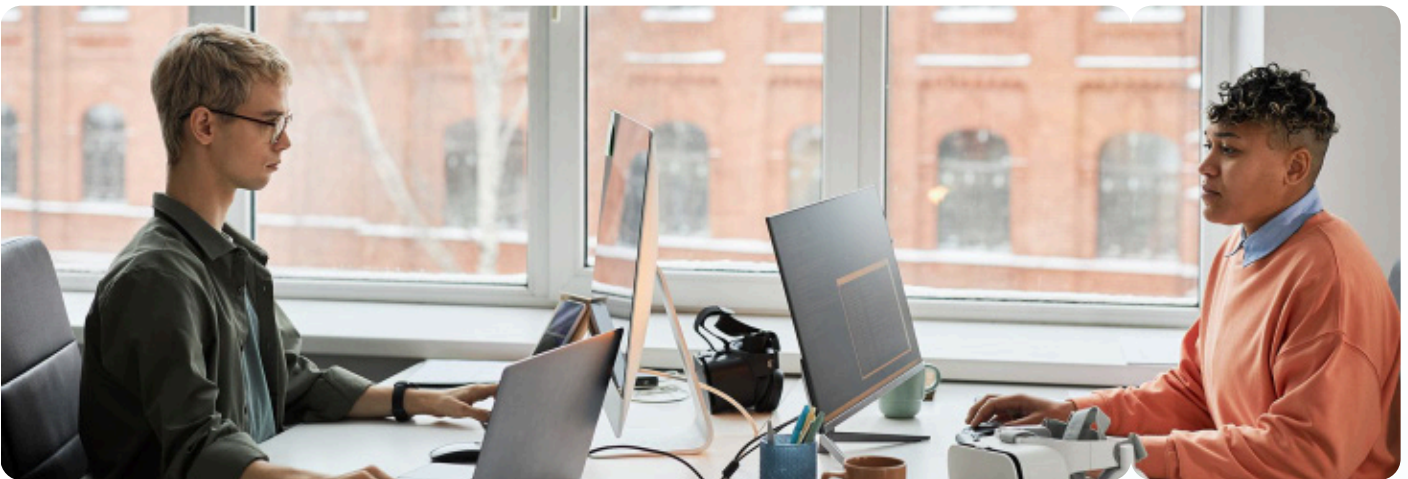
"This fundamentally changes the role of websites. Instead of designing pathways to information, the work moves to ensuring information itself is relevant, accurate, and rich with semantic meaning so that AI systems can confidently match the right content to the right query. Websites are no longer primarily experiences to be navigated, they're knowledge sources to be interpreted."

Louise Helliwell, Experience Design Director, Folk

## Here's what's changing

Your website remains the primary and most credible source for information about your company. AI systems use this as their first port of call when answering questions about your organization, services, or expertise.

However, the transformation from destination to data source requires organizations to pivot their approach. Jeff Chung, CSO of Arkane Digital, identifies the real barriers: *"The biggest obstacles aren't technical – they're organizational. Many teams still write content for humans only, resist changing legacy content operations, or lack alignment between marketing, product, and data owners."*



## SEO vs GEO: Content must serve dual audiences

Organizations can no longer optimize content solely for human readers. Every piece of content must now serve both human comprehension and machine interpretation through semantic clarity, comprehensive coverage, and authoritative accuracy. This is where GEO (often referred to as AEO – Answer Engine Optimization) comes in.

"While SEO always felt like a game, GEO has a crucial difference. Now we have access to the models that chatbots run on and can actually test our content and see how it performs."

Greg Sherwood, Chief Technology Officer at Squiz

## What is GEO?

Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) is a method to optimize content so generative AI models can easily parse, understand, and cite it in their generated answers, moving beyond traditional SEO's focus on ranking in lists.

"There's also an important implication for brand and differentiation. AI doesn't extract meaning from visual identity; it extracts it from semantic identity – your language, terminology, conceptual framing, and consistency. If a competitor structures their content more clearly or more coherently than you do, their perspective may become the 'trusted' answer surfaced by AI, regardless of brand strength or market position."




Louise Helliwell, Experience Design Director at Folk

## Quick guide: GEO vs SEO

Optimization factor	Traditional SEO approach	GEO-ready content
Who reads it?	Search engines crawl for keywords	AI systems interpret meaning and context
How they write	Keyword-focused copy with strategic placement	Clear, conversational language that directly answers questions
What success looks like	High rankings in search result pages	Content cited and accurately represented in AI responses
Tone and style	Often formulaic with keyword repetition	Natural, direct answers in plain language
Technical structure	HTML headers, meta descriptions, title tags	Schema markup (FAQPage, HowTo, Article), semantic HTML
Content organization	Pages optimized individually for target keywords	Clustered content around themes with logical internal linking
Depth of information	Optimized for specific page length targets	Comprehensive coverage of topics with interconnected supporting pages
User journey	Drive clicks to website for information	Information surfaces directly in AI tools; website validates authority
Brand representation	Visual identity, design, UX matter most	Semantic identity: terminology, framing, and consistency matter most

# Structured content becomes essential infrastructure

Website design systems, components, and content models have evolved from efficiency tools to foundational architecture:

-  **Design systems** help AI understand hierarchy, intent, and relationships across your digital estate by enforcing consistent patterns, semantics, and visual logic that machines can reliably interpret.
-  **Components** help AI identify reusable, purpose-driven content blocks, making it easier to extract meaning, consolidate information accurately, and present the right content in the right context.
-  **Content models** help AI understand what your content is, how it should be used, and how it connects to other content, reducing ambiguity and enabling more accurate retrieval, summarisation, and generation.

## The breadth of published information must expand

Previously, marketing websites often deliberately withheld detailed information to encourage direct human contact as part of the sales process. This strategy fails in an AI-assisted world. Prospects now conduct the majority of their research using AI tools before ever visiting a website – evaluating you and your competitors entirely offsite.

If you haven't published comprehensive information, you become invisible during this critical evaluation phase. Conversely, organizations publishing detailed, complete information position themselves favorably when prospects finally reach the conversion stage.

John-Paul Syriatowicz, Co-Founder at Squiz, explains the shift:

*"We've been trained to expect that websites only have so much information on them, and that there's a point at which you have to speak to a human. That behavior has to change in this world. If users can get their answers from a competitor, they will."*

Comprehensive published content doesn't just improve visibility; it directly increases conversion rates by ensuring prospects arrive at your site having already formed positive conclusions based on your authoritative information.

Users arriving from AI search are **4.4 times more likely**<sup>1</sup> to convert because they've completed their research offsite using your content – they arrive ready to act.

1 - <https://www.semrush.com/blog/ai-search-seo-traffic-study/>

# Here's how to adapt

## TL:DR

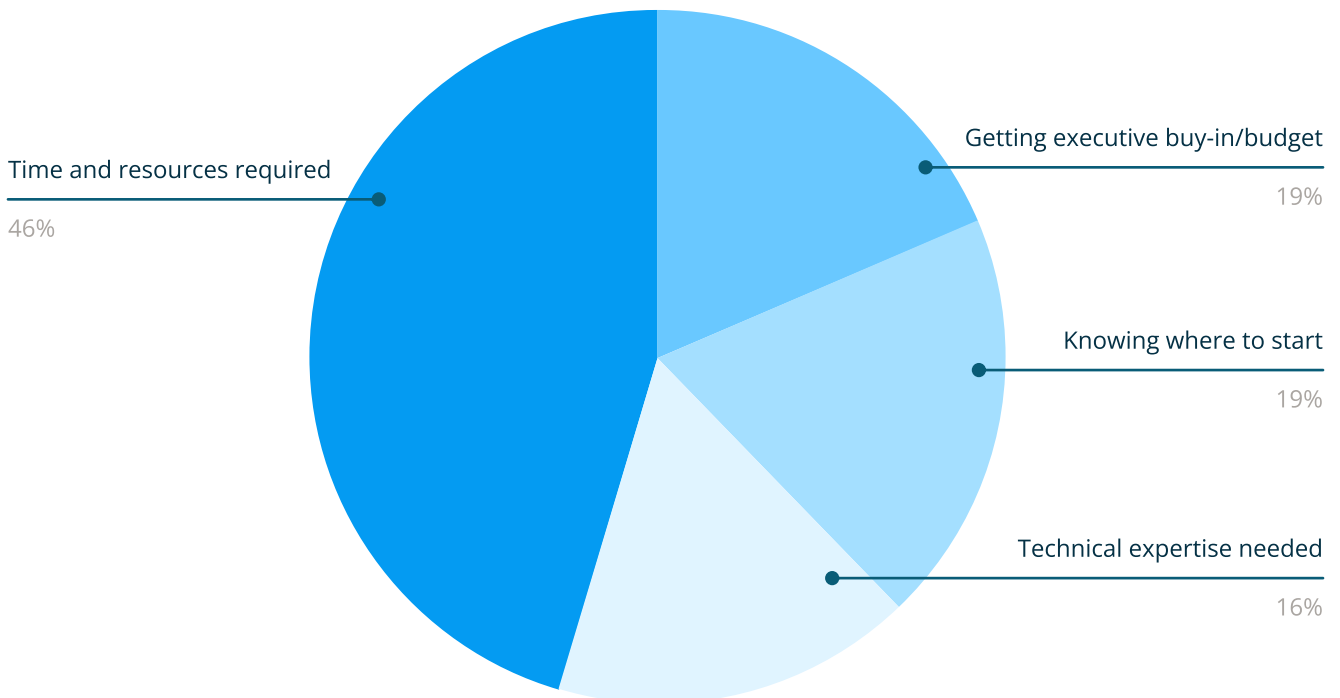
**For executives:** Treat your website as a knowledge base that feeds AI systems, not just a destination for human visitors. Users from AI search convert at 4.4 times the rate. Invest in structured content, comprehensive information architecture, and GEO. Organizations delaying risk AI bypassing them for competitors with better-structured content.

Your website is already a machine feeder. If you're not adapting now, you risk AI either interpreting your information incorrectly or skipping over your organization altogether – giving your competitors the upper hand.

Organizations optimizing for GEO now are establishing authority. The window to establish this authority narrows as AI tools learn which sources to trust. Successfully navigating this change requires a systematic approach that balances immediate action with long-term strategy.

In a recent Squiz survey of digital professionals<sup>1</sup>, time and resources emerged as the primary barrier to content optimization (46%), followed by knowing where to start (19%), getting executive buy-in (19%), and technical expertise (16%). In this report you'll find each of these barriers addressed, with clear starting points for those wanting to start optimizing content for AI discovery immediately.

## What's your biggest barrier to content optimization?



1 - <https://youtu.be/iqweUS4MVoA>

## ✓ Understand what makes content GEO-optimized

The difference between content that gets surfaced by AI and content that gets ignored often comes down to three key factors:

### 1 Clean structure and markup

Schema.org markup helps AI systems understand the context of your content and feeds into knowledge graphs. Implementing schema types such as 'FAQPage', 'HowTo', or 'Article' increases the likelihood that your content will be selected for AI summaries.

**What is a schema tag?** A standardized code snippet embedded in a webpage's HTML that provides structured data about the content. Think of it as a set of labels or metadata that help search engines and other digital platforms better understand the meaning and context of your webpages.

### 2 Clarity of purpose and voice

AI models prefer content that is concise, fact-rich, and easy to summarize, with no ambiguity about what the page is about. Pages that directly answer user questions, especially in step-by-step formats, are more likely to be reused in AI-generated responses.

**Important:** AI tools interpret content literally, so there must be no doubt about what you're saying – vague language or unclear statements can lead to confusing or inaccurate AI responses.

### 3 Thorough coverage

AI tools evaluate how well a topic is covered across related content. Clustering pages around themes and linking them logically helps reinforce authority and provides context for AI interpretation.

*Mike Bean, Managing Director of Sears Davies, adds a professional services lens: "When users do arrive on a website, it will increasingly be to verify credibility rather than explore, repositioning the homepage as a brand trust tool rather than a starting point. The fundamental question being answered is 'can I trust this content?'"*

Make your content discoverable for AI Search

Squiz Content Intelligence helps you fix what matters



# Implement a 6-step approach for AI-ready content

Getting your website content ready for AI discovery requires a strategic, phased approach:

## 1. Know your content: Start by auditing your existing content estate. Understand:

- How many pages you have
- When they were last updated
- What topics they cover
- Their current quality

This baseline assessment ensures you know what you're working with before making changes.

## 2. Know your audience: Identify your key personas and understand what they're searching for:

- What questions do they ask?
- What tasks are they trying to complete?
- What topics matter most to them?

Use search analytics, chatbot logs, support tickets, and user research to build a clear picture of your most important content. This also helps you identify critical content gaps.

## 3. Define what "good" looks like: Establish clear content standards beyond just brand voice and tone.

- Content structure
- Schema markup
- Accessibility compliance
- Appropriate reading level
- GEO best practices

Document these standards and ensure alignment across your organization for consistency.

## 4. Prioritize ruthlessly: You can't tackle all your content simultaneously. Prioritize based on three factors:

- Importance to users
- Value to the business
- Risk if content remains outdated or unclear.

Start with high-impact areas where investment delivers the greatest return – typically your most-visited pages and critical user journeys.

## 5. Leverage AI tools to evaluate performance:

Use AI to assess how your content performs in generative environments. Generate lists of questions people might ask about your topics, then test whether your content adequately answers them. Query AI systems directly about your organization and evaluate the accuracy and completeness of responses. This testing reveals how AI interprets your content and where improvements are needed.

## 6. Build sustainable team capability

Make content optimization an ongoing practice, not a one-time project. Align your team on quality standards, equip them with the right tools, and integrate optimization into daily workflows. Models continue to evolve and user behavior shifts. Teams that treat this as continuous improvement maintain competitive advantage.

This systematic approach ensures your content performs well in both traditional search results and AI-generated responses, giving you a competitive advantage across all discovery channels.

## ✓ Rethink success metrics

Traditional analytics focused on clicks and page views. Louise Helliwell, Experience Design Director at Folk, predicts this trend *"challenges how success is measured. As users stop clicking through to websites, traditional analytics lose relevance. The signal of value could shift from clicks and page views to citations, references, and reuse."*

### Potential metrics to track:

#### AI visibility and accuracy:

- **Citation frequency:** How often AI systems reference your content when answering relevant queries
- **Competitive share of voice:** How frequently you appear versus competitors in AI responses
- **Response accuracy:** Whether AI represents your offerings, policies, and brand correctly
- **Query coverage:** Percentage of common user questions your content successfully answers in AI tools

#### Traditional performance indicators:

- **Traffic quality over volume:** User engagement depth rather than raw visitor numbers
- **Conversion rate from AI referrals:** Track separately from traditional search traffic
- **Content engagement:** Scroll depth, task completion for arriving users
- **Direct traffic trends:** Users who've discovered you via AI and return directly

#### Content health metrics:

- **Schema markup coverage:** Percentage of pages with proper structured data
- **Semantic clarity scores:** Readability and structure assessments
- **Content freshness:** How recently information was updated
- **Question-answer match rate:** How well content addresses actual user queries

Comprehensive AI discoverability measurement is still evolving, but this emerging landscape presents a strategic advantage for early movers. Organizations establishing measurement practices now gain critical insights and establish baselines that inform optimization efforts.

Success requires agility and flexibility. As new measurement techniques and tools emerge, adapt your approach. For now, combine traditional analytics (traffic, engagement, conversions) with systematic manual auditing of AI representation. Test how major platforms (ChatGPT, Perplexity, Google's AI Overviews, Claude) respond to queries about your organization. Document responses, citations, and gaps. This hybrid measurement approach – quantitative data where available, qualitative assessment where necessary – becomes your optimization roadmap and competitive intelligence.

# Here's what not to do

## ⊗ Don't abandon your website

Despite declining direct traffic, your website remains the primary source of truth that AI systems reference. Without it, you have no control over how AI represents your organization.

You will start to see that users coming to your website have higher intent than previously, as they've conducted their preliminary research. David Poteet, President of NewCity observes, "Early signs are that AI usage may be moving people farther along the journey, so that when they come to your website, they've answered some of their questions and are already more engaged."

*"There's no need to give up on your website. In fact, that would be exactly the wrong thing to do. Your website serves as the authoritative source for AI tools and voice interfaces."*

John-Paul Syriatowicz, Co-Founder at Squiz

## ⊗ Don't create separate content for AI versus humans

Structure your primary content to serve both audiences simultaneously. Separate "AI-optimized" content creates version control problems and inconsistent information.

Greg Sherwood, Chief Technology Officer at Squiz, warns:

*"Organizations taking shortcuts by building FAQs as quick paths to structured content are creating secondary silos of content. You need to structure your primary content, not create a separate version for AI consumption that may or may not stay in sync."*

## ⊗ Don't treat GEO as keyword stuffing

GEO is about genuine clarity, completeness, and authority. AI systems recognize and deprioritize thin content dressed up with buzzwords.

## ⊗ Don't wait for perfect solutions

Organizations waiting for definitive best practices will find themselves invisible in AI-powered discovery while competitors establish authority. The window is closing; it's time to test, learn, and adapt alongside ever-evolving AI systems.



## Make your content discoverable for AI Search

Squiz Content Intelligence helps you fix what matters



# Trend 2: Accessibility turns legal

Compliance becomes non-negotiable



## Here's what it's all about

Digital accessibility is now legally mandated, with financial implications for non-compliance.

Legal action is already underway. Organizations are facing lawsuits with significant financial consequences for non-compliance.

One US fashion retailer, Fashion Nova, was recently ordered to pay \$5.15 million USD for a lack of digital accessibility<sup>2</sup>. The trigger was a clear violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), as the e-commerce website was not accessible to screen readers.

In Europe, a transport provider was fined around €200,000 (around \$235,500 USD) in 2025 because its booking app was "completely inaccessible", with no screen-reader support and poor contrast. The outcome required the app to be rebuilt<sup>3</sup>.

From January-June 2025, U.S. courts saw 2,014 ADA website accessibility lawsuits, an increase of roughly one-third over the same period in 2024<sup>1</sup>.

1 - <https://www.ecomback.com/ada-website-lawsuits-recap-report/2025-mid-year-ada-website-lawsuit-report>

2 - <https://eye-able.com/blog/fashion-nova-case>

3 - <https://www.allaccessible.org/blog/european-accessibility-act-eaa-compliance-guide>

## Key regulatory timelines:

### United States (ADA Title II)<sup>1</sup>

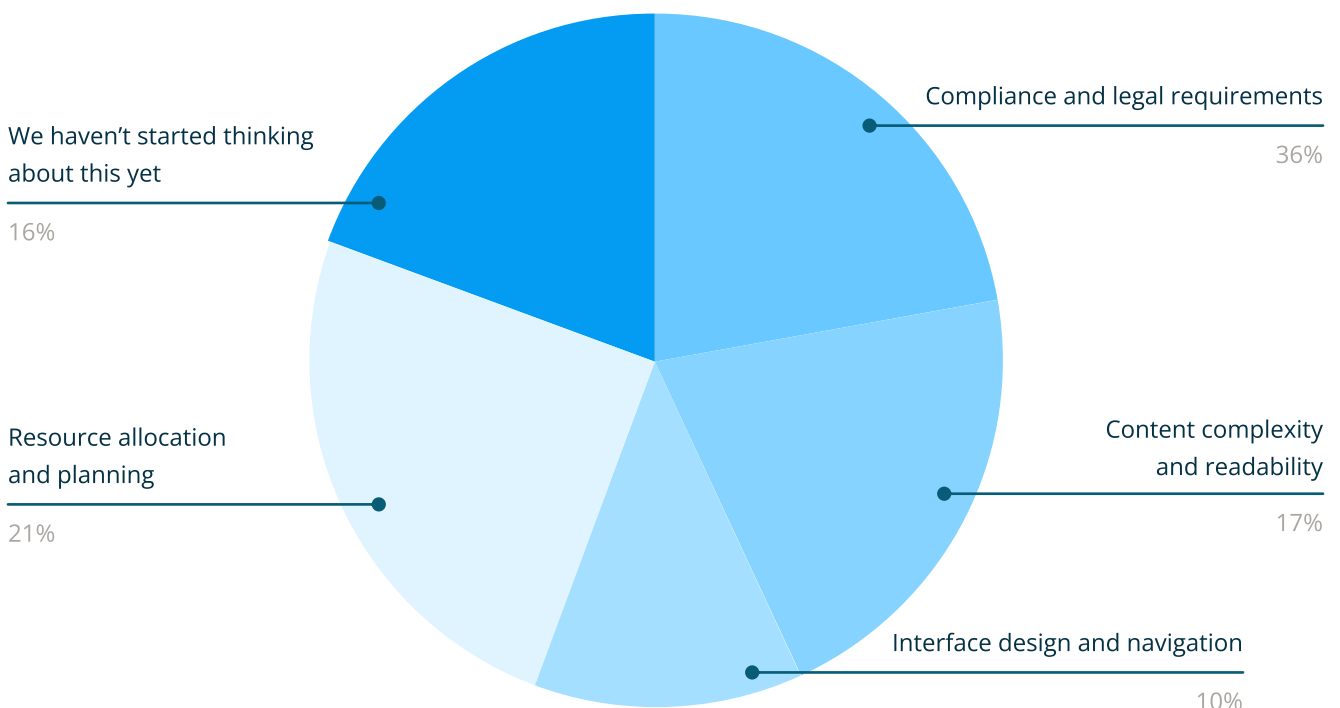
- April 24, 2026: Entities serving over 50,000 people must comply
- April 26, 2027: Entities serving under 50,000 people must comply

### Europe (European Accessibility Act)<sup>2</sup>

- June 28, 2025: All new products and services must comply
- June 28, 2030: All existing products must be fully compliant

In a recent Squiz survey<sup>3</sup> of organizations implementing AI, the top barriers to accessibility were compliance requirements (36%), resource allocation (21%) and content complexity (17%). Notably, 16% of organizations haven't yet begun addressing accessibility in their AI implementations despite upcoming regulatory deadlines. However, accessibility and AI readability create an opportunity – addressing one imperative simultaneously solves the other.

## What's your biggest accessibility challenge when implementing AI?



While the U.S. and Europe lead enforcement, these regulations signal a global shift. Organizations operating internationally should expect accessibility standards to become mandatory across markets, not optional.

1 - <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/blog/justice-departments-final-rule-improve-web-and-mobile-app-access-people-disabilities>

2 - [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/disability/union-equality-strategy-rights-persons-disabilities-2021-2030/european-accessibility-act\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/disability/union-equality-strategy-rights-persons-disabilities-2021-2030/european-accessibility-act_en)

3 - <https://youtu.be/r7nQ5bZ8n2M>

# Here's what's changing

Merging accessibility legislation and AI-driven content discovery represents a fundamental shift in how organizations must approach digital content.



## From optional to mandatory

The increase in lawsuits makes it clear that organizations can no longer afford to ignore accessibility requirements.

*"AI will make the auditing process dramatically faster, enabling regulators, third parties, and even competitors to detect accessibility violations at scale and in real time. This creates a landscape where accessibility can no longer be reactive or addressed only during redesign cycles; it must become a proactive, continuously monitored discipline."*

Jeff Chung, CSO at Arkane Digital

## Accessibility extends beyond technical compliance

Louise Helliwell, Experience Design Director at Folk, emphasizes that accessibility means *"ensuring people can access essential services and information in a wide range of real-world circumstances – someone with a temporary or permanent visual impairment, limited data or unstable internet access."*

This perspective shifts accessibility from checklist completion to genuine inclusion, ensuring digital experiences work for everyone regardless of circumstance.

"Fines, reputational damage – these are all things you put at risk. But you've also got the moral obligation to ensure that everyone can use your website, and that is the most important thing here."

Rory Grant, Chief Growth Officer at Squiz

## Loss of control over content consumption

For the first time, organizations must recognize they don't fully control where and how their content is consumed. AI systems extract and represent your content in third-party interfaces you don't control.

Julie Brettle, Chief Product Officer at Squiz, notes: *"Now we have people who might be looking at content you've created in different environments, and you need to make sure it's performing the same way. Everyone has a website for a reason – to sell a service, inform people – and you need to understand that you're not just doing that on your website anymore."*

This makes the underlying content structure even more critical, as it must work effectively across multiple contexts and consumption methods.

## Accessible content = AI accessibility

Beyond compliance, there's a crucial strategic advantage: accessible content structure simultaneously improves AI readability, improving discoverability for both human users and generative engines.

David Poteet, President of NewCity, reinforces this convergence: *"The overlap between methods that boost SEO, GEO and accessibility is high. When you pursue one, you improve the other two naturally."*

The technical requirements that make content accessible are fundamentally the same requirements that make content interpretable by AI systems. Both need clear semantic structure, logical hierarchies, descriptive labels, and explicit information architecture.

In practice, proper alt text serves screen readers and AI context; logical heading hierarchies enable keyboard navigation and AI topic identification; clear, concise content helps users with cognitive disabilities and AI summarization.

This means organizations can address two critical imperatives with a single effort: meeting legal accessibility requirements while simultaneously optimizing for AI-assisted discovery.

*"Accessibility is not just about compliance. It is a marker of operational maturity. Institutions with strong governance and disciplined content practices have a much easier path. Accessible design is simply good design."*

Bill McLaughlin, EVP at Web Solutions

# Here's how to adapt

## TL:DR

**For executives:** Accessibility compliance is legally mandated with defined deadlines and significant financial penalties. Accessible content structure simultaneously optimizes for AI readability. Consider accessibility at content creation – not just through post-publication remediation – using integrated tools rather than fragmented applications. This reduces compliance costs while positioning content for AI-assisted discovery.

Addressing accessibility requirements while optimizing for AI discovery requires a systematic approach and the right tools.

## ✔ Understand core accessibility requirements

Organizations must ensure their digital properties meet essential accessibility requirements.

### Accessibility checklist

- Text alternatives for images (alt text)
- Captions for videos and transcripts for audio content
- Sufficient color contrast ratios
- Full keyboard navigation support
- Clear headings and logical page structure
- Resizable text without loss of functionality
- Semantic HTML markup
- Logical content hierarchy
- Form labels and error identification
- Skip navigation links






These requirements form the foundation of WCAG compliance mandated by both U.S. and European regulations.

## ✓ Conduct comprehensive accessibility audits

Understanding your current state is essential for prioritization and planning. Organizations need both automated tools and human validation to achieve genuine accessibility.

### Automated accessibility scanning at scale:

The foundation of any scalable accessibility program is comprehensive, ongoing automated scanning that identifies violations across your entire digital estate. Effective automated tools analyze content against WCAG success criteria and technique failures, providing:

-  **Technical violation detection:** Missing alt text, insufficient contrast, improper heading structures.
-  **Success criteria analysis:** Detailed compliance levels against WCAG 2.2 success criteria (Level A, AA, and AAA).
-  **Scale and coverage:** Regular scans across millions of URLs to catch issues as they emerge.
-  **Specific improvement guidance:** Actionable recommendations for remediation.
-  **Prioritization data:** Which issues to fix first based on factors like severity, the number of pages affected, and more.

Automated scanning provides essential visibility but has inherent limitations. These tools excel at detecting measurable technical violations but cannot evaluate subjective qualities like clarity, comprehension, or context-appropriate language.

### Human validation completes the picture:

Organizations should supplement automated scanning with:

- Manual reviews of complex user journeys and interactions
- Assistive technology testing with actual screen readers and other tools
- User testing with people with accessibility needs, including neurodivergent users
- Testing for cognitive accessibility that automated tools cannot measure

Louise Helliwell, Experience Design Director at Folk, explains why human oversight remains critical:

*"Accessibility audits often focus heavily on the technical pillars of WCAG: making experiences operable, perceivable, and robust. These are critical, but they can forget about understandability. Information can technically meet compliance and still be confusing, overwhelming, or hard to interpret when people are under stress or time pressure."*

This gap – between technical compliance and genuine usability – explains why organizations must combine automated scanning with diverse user testing before launch, not just audit after publication.

## ✓ Consider accessibility at the point of creation

Many organizations rely on accessibility auditing to identify and remediate issues across their published content at scale. This approach helps teams systematically discover problems, prioritize fixes, and maintain compliance across large content estates.

However, the most effective accessibility strategy combines comprehensive auditing with earlier intervention in the content lifecycle. When teams can address accessibility considerations during content creation, before publication, they reduce the volume of issues that require remediation later. Design systems with accessible components built in can provide a strong starting point. This complementary approach helps organizations build quality in from the start while maintaining oversight of their entire content estate.

*"Being able to provide the tools – both for the content to be in line with what generative engines are expecting to see, but also that it's in an accessible format – at the point of creation is crucial."*

Ed Braddock, Chief Customer Officer at Squiz

Legal & General, a UK-based financial services company, reported a 66% reduction in long-term maintenance costs by building accessibility into their redesign of one of its websites from the start, rather than retrofitting afterward<sup>1</sup>.

Organic traffic increased 25% in year one and 50% by year two, attributed largely to SEO benefits of an accessible, well-structured design

Bounce rate decreased 40%, with significant increases in pages viewed per visit

Online quote requests increased 90%

Maintenance costs dropped 66% due to clean, standards-compliant code that was easier to manage and update

*"Accessibility is more than just doing the basic stuff to help with certain disabilities. It's about giving users a way of consuming whatever content they want, when they want it, where they want it, how they want it. And one of those users now also happens to be AI and crawlers."*

Greg Sherwood, Chief Technology Officer at Squiz

1 - <https://elementor.com/blog/roi-of-accessibility-inclusive-design-growth/>

## ✓ Choose integrated tools over fragmented solutions

The complexity of meeting accessibility requirements while optimizing for AI discovery requires tools that work together seamlessly.

### The integrated platform approach:

While some organizations choose to buy specialist applications, this approach often adds complexity and becomes expensive when solutions aren't built to work together seamlessly. Organizations should look for solutions that provide end-to-end workflow capabilities, whether through native functionality or robust integration architecture.

Examples of what this looks like in practice:

#### Unified workflow without context switching:

Teams can audit accessibility compliance, manage content remediation, and publish updates without needing to synchronize data between separate auditing tools, content management systems, and tracking spreadsheets.

#### Consistent standards across all content:

When a brand guideline changes, it can be updated at scale across all templates and components, ensuring every page maintains the same accessibility standards without manual intervention.

#### Lower total cost of ownership:

A cohesive platform approach reduces the overhead of managing multiple vendor relationships, integration licenses, and point solutions.

#### Simplified training and adoption:

Teams learn one system rather than multiple tools, reducing onboarding time from weeks to days and eliminating confusion about which tool to use for which task.

#### Better compliance tracking and reporting:

A single dashboard shows accessibility status across your entire digital estate, making it easy to identify issues, track remediation progress, and generate audit reports without consolidating data from multiple sources.

## ✓ Address accessibility incrementally

Organizations facing significant accessibility gaps shouldn't attempt to fix everything simultaneously.

### Incremental approach:

1

**Start with highest-impact areas:**  
Focus on most-visited pages and critical user journeys first

2

**Fix systematically**  
Address issues by type (e.g., all images missing alt text) for efficiency

3

**Prevent new issues**  
Consider accessibility at the point of creation e.g. design system guardrails

4

**Build team capability**  
Invest in training so accessibility becomes standard practice

5

**Track and report progress**  
Maintain visibility on compliance status and trajectory

This approach demonstrates good-faith effort toward compliance while building sustainable accessibility approaches.

## Improve the compliance of your website

Squiz Accessibility auditor assess your site against WCAG standards



# Here's what not to do

## ⊗ Don't panic

*"Most sites carry years of legacy content created by hundreds of contributors with uneven training. Even when templates are accessible, the content inside them often is not. Our audits routinely find inconsistent headings, missing alt text, inaccessible PDFs, or patterns that break basic keyboard interactions."*

Bill McLaughlin, EVP at Web Solutions

The sheer volume of existing accessibility issues can feel overwhelming, particularly for organizations with large digital estates and significant technical debt.

As the regulations make clear, organizations have defined timelines to achieve compliance. The key is beginning immediately. The right tool should allow you to identify high-impact fixes first, enabling you to break the work into incremental chunks rather than tackling everything at once.



## ⊗ Don't build separate accessible versions

Creating separate accessible alternatives – whether alternate pages, text-only versions, or duplicate content for screen readers – creates maintenance nightmares and version control problems. The goal is universal design: structure content once so it works for everyone, rather than maintaining parallel versions that inevitably drift out of sync.

## ⊗ Don't ignore the AI readability connection

The same structural improvements that achieve accessibility compliance also optimize content for AI discovery. Treating these as separate initiatives creates duplicated effort and missed opportunities.

Julie Brettle, Chief Product Officer at Squiz, reinforces the integrated opportunity: *"Those who are doing this right have recognized that AI optimization, accessibility compliance, and content structure are three expressions of the same thing. It's about how you structure your content and organizational information so that anybody consuming it anywhere can access it."*

## ⊗ Don't forget that regulations will evolve

Current regulations represent minimum standards. Organizations that build genuine accessibility competency, rather than simply meeting current minimums, position themselves for future requirements and demonstrate an authentic commitment to inclusive experiences.

# Trend 3: AI graduates from intern

From experimentation to production-ready tool



## Here's what it's all about

In our 2025 DX Trends report, we described AI as being in its "intern era," capable of helping with small, ad hoc tasks but requiring constant human oversight and verification. In 2026, we'll see AI graduate.

After years of promises and experimentation, AI finally delivers genuine productivity benefits.

"After years of hype, AI is ready to deliver real business impact. 2026 will be the year enterprises unlock meaningful value, shifting from individual experimentation and isolated usage to team-based enablement."

Tarek Nseir, Co-Founder and Senior Value Consultant at Valliance<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> - <https://www.entrepreneur.com/en-gb/technology/ais-next-chapter-what-2026-holds/500552>



According to IBM research surveying 3,500 leaders across 10 countries in EMEA, 66% of organizations are reporting significant productivity gains from AI<sup>1</sup>, primarily within:



One in five organizations has already realized ROI from their AI initiatives, with 41% expecting returns over the next 12 months. Only 2% of organizations surveyed don't expect to see any meaningful impact from AI in the next two years<sup>2</sup>



The investment backing this shift is substantial. Big Tech poured \$400 billion into data centers in 2025 alone, and total AI-related infrastructure spending could reach \$7 trillion by decade's end<sup>3</sup>

This shift isn't because the underlying AI technology suddenly became dramatically better – it's because vendors have built the necessary infrastructure, workflows, and governance tools around AI to make it useful and trustworthy in production environments. The models have matured, the tooling has evolved, and critically, organizations have learned how to use AI effectively.

While human oversight remains essential, organizations are seeing significant productivity gains as AI handles routine work, enabling teams to focus on strategy, creativity, and complex decision-making.

"AI is no longer just another tool being slotted into existing workflows. It's starting to behave more like an environment – a new system for how work gets done. Tools enhance what already exists; environments change the rules."

Louise Helliwell, Experience Design Director at Folk

1 & 2 - [https://filecache.mediaroom.com/mr5mr\\_ibmnewsroom/199848/IBM%20EMEA%20Report%20-%20The%20Race%20for%20AI%20.pdf](https://filecache.mediaroom.com/mr5mr_ibmnewsroom/199848/IBM%20EMEA%20Report%20-%20The%20Race%20for%20AI%20.pdf)

3 - <https://www.oei.org/economics/ais-productivity-boost-may-arrive-sooner-rather-than-later/>

# Here's what's changing

This trend represents several fundamental shifts in how organizations approach digital work.

## From playing to producing

2025 was the year of AI experimentation – creating novelty images, testing chatbots, exploring possibilities. 2026 marks the shift to measurable business value. Leaders now demand that AI demonstrate genuine ROI through optimization, efficiency gains, or augmented work capacity.

"2025 was the year organizations played with AI. 2026 is the year they're expected to operationalize it. Experimentation is no longer the goal. Measurable business impact is."

Nick Condon, Managing Director EMEA at Squiz

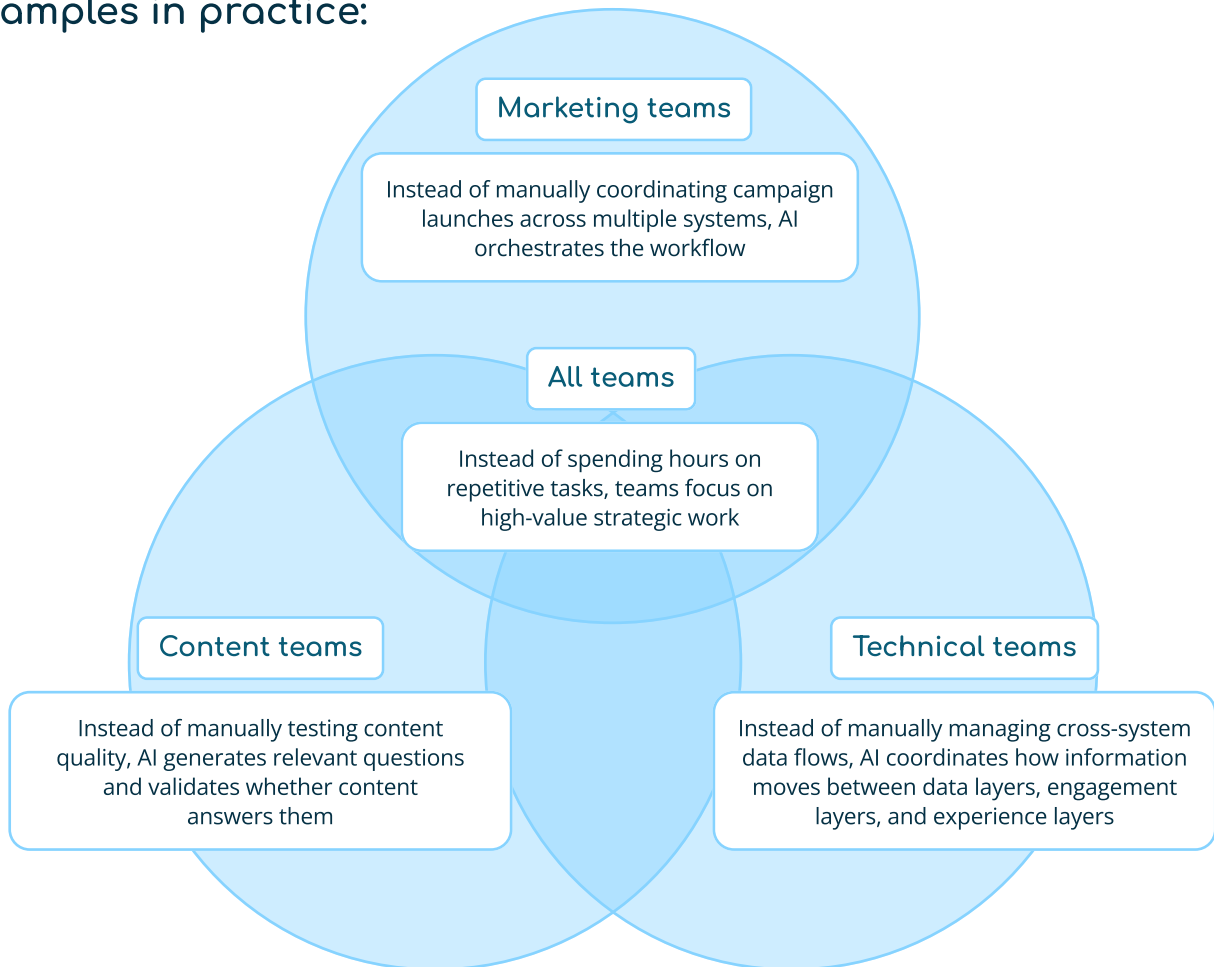
## AI as an orchestration layer, not a decision maker

The most successful AI implementations treat AI as an intelligent coordination layer that handles mechanical orchestration work, while humans retain strategic decision-making authority.

The real productivity killer hasn't been a lack of AI, it's been the overwhelming complexity of technology stacks. The average marketing team now coordinates across dozens of tools: content management systems, email platforms, CRM systems, analytics tools, social media schedulers, form builders... the list goes on. Teams spend more time managing tool integration than executing strategy.

Julie Brettle, Chief Product Officer at Squiz, explains: "AI's true value is intelligent orchestration across the tools you already have. Don't add more tools to the mix. Use the ones you have more efficiently."

### Examples in practice:



# The convergence of capability and understanding

Three elements evolved simultaneously: sophisticated AI models, production-ready tooling, and critically, people who understand AI's capabilities and limitations. Early AI felt like magic, encouraging over-trust. Now organizations deploy it effectively with the right amount of skepticism.

## AI rewards good infrastructure, exposes dysfunction

Organizations with established infrastructure, governance frameworks, documented processes, and quality standards are seeing the greatest AI productivity gains. Those with ad hoc decision-making and poorly documented workflows struggle.

Organizations seeing the greatest AI productivity gains have foundational elements already in place:



**Workflow templates** that capture organizational best practices – these provide AI with clear guidance it can execute consistently.



**Component libraries** that enforce brand consistency – these become building blocks AI uses to create pages faster while maintaining standards.



**Approval processes** that ensure quality control – these become guardrails that help AI work better within defined boundaries.



**Governance policies** that define permissions – these become the systems within which AI operates safely.

## Dramatic acceleration in development workflows

For technical teams, AI is fundamentally changing how quickly ideas can be prototyped, validated, and brought to production.

Previously, developer ideas were communicated visually by pairing with a designer to create wireframes etc – a process that took significant time. Now, developers can put together polished interfaces simply by describing what they want.

"Things that would've genuinely taken weeks or months, we can iterate day by day. We've changed our development practices for all our R&D work to be single-day focused."

Greg Sherwood, Chief Technology Officer at Squiz

In practice, this means using AI to accelerate workflows across multiple dimensions:

- Creating functional specifications that humans review but don't write from scratch
- Generating code that follows established standards and patterns
- Building web components that previously required days of developer time
- Converting designs from tools like Figma into operational website code

However, the key to realizing these gains is intentionality. Anthony Nigro, President of North America at Squiz, emphasizes: *"It's really the most powerful when you use AI to augment or improve human purposes. Just trying to turn AI on and find gains doesn't always materialize the way you expect."*

Organizations need a purpose or intention around AI usage that aligns with specific use cases, making it possible to measure actual ROI.

# Here's how to adapt

## TL:DR

**For executives:** AI delivers genuine productivity gains exclusively to organizations with proper governance, established processes, and clear use cases. Without this foundation, AI amplifies organizational dysfunction. Success requires identifying high-value use cases, building governance frameworks, focusing on augmentation over replacement, integrating AI into existing workflows, and measuring actual business outcomes. Organizations achieving this balance report faster development cycles with measurable ROI.



Successfully moving AI from experimental tool to production-ready capability requires clear use cases, proper governance, and human-AI collaboration.

## ✔ Identify high-value use cases with clear ROI

"The sheer breadth of potential for AI to change business is actually one of the things paralyzing some organizations. The overwhelming nature of the possible is actually causing confusion and inaction."

Chris Crammond, Managing Partner at Deepend

Start with specific problems where AI can deliver measurable improvement, rather than implementing AI broadly without clear objectives.

## Make your content discoverable for AI Search

Squiz Content Intelligence helps you fix what matters



## Effective AI use case patterns:

AI use cases often fall into four fundamental patterns:

### 1. Information retrieval

Helping users discover content through conversational interfaces rather than traditional navigation.

---

### 2. Content generation

Creating or enhancing content, though this requires careful governance. For example:

- Checking whether brand voice is being followed
  - Correcting grammatical errors
  - Finding patterns that make content less accessible and suggesting improvements
  - Generating alt text descriptions for images
  - Creating structured data markup
- 

### 3. Process completion

Automating multi-step workflows that previously required manual human effort. Examples include:

- Building website components from descriptions
  - Converting designs into functional code
  - Coordinating campaign launches across multiple systems
  - Applying fixes systematically across many content items
- 

### 4. Data insights:

Interpreting information to identify priorities and recommend actions. This includes:

- Auditing content and identifying the most important issues to address
- Analyzing traffic patterns to detect security threats
- Understanding what users are searching for to inform content strategy
- Testing content against user questions to find gaps

## ✓ Build governance and guardrails

AI productivity requires structure. The organizations seeing the greatest gains have implemented clear governance frameworks before broad AI deployment.

"For digital teams, the real gains – faster content creation, component building, and site maintenance – depend on having great guidelines. Like a junior writer or developer, AI needs rules, examples, and feedback to produce useful work."

Louise Helliwell, Experience Design Director at Folk

## Essential governance elements:

### Clear role delineation

By separating roles clearly – developers creating code in one environment, administrators configuring backend requirements in another, experience builders and content creators working in dedicated editing environments – organizations create clean workflows. This separation enables targeted automation of specific processes around each role without attempting to automate entire workflows.



### Human review at critical points

Identify where human judgment is essential and build it into workflows as checkpoints rather than afterthoughts. This includes:

- **Development teams:** Reviewing AI's technical plans before developers start building, and testing AI's code before it goes live
- **Content teams:** Scrutinizing and approving AI-assisted content before publication
- **Marketing teams:** Monitoring AI-orchestrated campaigns for quality and brand alignment

### Permission systems and access controls

Leverage existing permission and workflow systems to ensure AI operates within appropriate boundaries.

### Quality assurance mechanisms

Build feedback loops that continuously improve AI performance based on outcomes. Track what works, what doesn't, and refine approaches accordingly.

"AI doesn't replace accountability. Governance, guardrails, and human oversight aren't optional extras, they're the difference between value and risk. The best outcomes happen when humans stay firmly in the loop."

Nick Condon, Managing Director EMEA at Squiz

## ✓ Focus on augmentation, not replacement

The most successful implementations use AI to handle routine work while humans focus on high-value activities requiring creativity, judgment, and strategic thinking.

*"AI isn't magic," emphasizes Rory Grant, Chief Growth Officer at Squiz. "Organizations getting value are those treating AI as a capable tool with boundaries, not as an autonomous replacement for judgment."*

### Real-world examples:

#### Content

Organizations with distributed content editors across multiple departments struggle with an inconsistent tone of voice and disjointed content. AI tooling provides brand consistency and maintains a unified tone across all pages, regardless of who creates the content.

#### Development

Teams that previously spent days manually reviewing code for security vulnerabilities and standards compliance now use AI to flag issues instantly, allowing developers to focus on architectural decisions and complex problem-solving.

#### Marketing

Teams spending hours manually coordinating across multiple systems now use AI orchestration to launch campaigns that previously took three weeks in days or hours.

#### Accessibility

Teams that previously audited published content reactively now use AI to provide real-time suggestions at the point of creation, preventing issues before publication.

## ✓ Integrate AI into existing workflows rather than adding complexity

Problems arise when organizations use AI as another standalone tool, making the stack even more complex. Success lies in treating AI as an intelligent coordination layer.

### Integration strategies:



**In-platform AI capabilities:**  
Rather than requiring users to switch between website management platforms (that's your DXP or CMS) and separate AI tools, embed AI directly into content creation interfaces, development environments, and administrative consoles.



**Automated cross-system coordination:**  
Use AI to handle data flows and synchronization between systems rather than requiring manual copying and pasting of information across platforms.



**Contextual AI assistance:**  
Provide AI recommendations and automation at the point of need within existing workflows, not as a separate process users must remember to invoke.

## ✓ Measure and optimize for real outcomes

Track actual business impact, not just AI usage statistics.

### Key metrics to track

#### Time saved on specific tasks

Quantify the hours reclaimed for higher-value work.

*Example:* Track how long component creation took before AI (e.g. two days) versus after AI implementation (e.g. two hours), then multiply by frequency to calculate total time savings.

#### Quality improvements

Fewer errors, better accessibility compliance, stronger brand consistency.

*Example:* Measure accessibility violation rates before and after AI-assisted content creation, or track the percentage of content that passes brand guidelines on first review.

#### Speed to market

How quickly campaigns launch, features deploy, content is published.

*Example:* Document campaign launch timelines before AI orchestration (e.g. three weeks) versus after (e.g. three days), measuring both speed improvement and resource requirements.

#### User satisfaction

Whether AI-enhanced experiences perform better for end users.

*Example:* Compare conversion rates, task completion rates, or user feedback scores for AI-enhanced features versus traditional implementations.

#### Actual ROI

Cost savings, revenue increases, efficiency gains that justify investment.

*Example:* Calculate total hours saved across teams, multiply by average hourly cost, then compare against AI implementation and operational costs to determine net ROI.

# Here's what not to do

## ⊗ Don't deploy AI without clear use cases

Just turning on AI without clear objectives doesn't materialize expected gains.

Anthony Nigro, President of North America at Squiz, cautions: *"Make sure you've got purpose or intention around AI that will help achieve a use case. It's really difficult to measure ROI if you don't know what the return's going to be."*

Organizations that deploy AI broadly without specific goals find themselves with complexity but no measurable benefit, making it difficult to justify continued investment.

## ⊗ Don't expect AI to fix broken processes

AI amplifies existing organizational capabilities – for better or worse. Companies struggling with AI adoption are typically those with poorly documented processes, unclear workflows, and ad hoc decision-making. For organizations with established governance frameworks and well-documented processes, AI extends already proven workflows with more intelligent automation.

Julie Brettle, Chief Product Officer at Squiz, notes: *"AI cannot fix organizational dysfunction, but it does expose it with brutal efficiency."*

"Editors assume AI-generated content can be published as is, which creates new risks. Without clear governance and human oversight, the speed advantages turn into more cleanup work downstream."

Bill McLaughlin, EVP at Web Solutions

## ⊗ Don't remove human oversight

Despite AI's increased capability, human judgment remains essential, particularly for high-stakes decisions, strategic direction, and quality assurance.

Organizations that remove human review find themselves catching AI errors only after they've reached customers or, worse, been published at scale.

Mike Bean, Managing Director of Sears Davies, explains why human oversight is also essential to protect brand voice:

"Widespread use of the same tools and templates accelerates subtle erosion of tone and distinctiveness... These shifts are often gradual rather than obvious, making them harder to detect. As AI accelerates routine work, human brand guardianship becomes more important."

## ⊗ Don't treat AI as a standalone solution

The most effective approach embeds AI capabilities directly into digital experience platforms for workflow acceleration, component creation, quality control, governance, and system security. This integrated approach provides an end-to-end solution rather than requiring organizations to cobble together separate tools.

Adding AI as a standalone tool creates new silos, requires separate training, and increases the cognitive load on teams already managing too many systems.

## ⊗ Don't forget that AI capabilities will continue evolving

"The AI you're using now is the worst it will ever be because the next generation's better and better."

John-Paul Syriatowicz, Co-Founder at Squiz

Organizations should design AI implementations with flexibility to incorporate improved models and capabilities as they emerge, rather than building rigid systems around today's limitations.

## The productivity paradox

While the productivity gains from AI-assisted development are genuine and measurable, they come with an important caveat. The same capabilities that enable faster development cycles also introduce new security vulnerabilities at scale.

This isn't a reason to abandon AI-assisted development, it's a call to implement it thoughtfully. The organizations that will thrive in 2026 are those that achieve what we call "secure velocity": combining AI's efficiency gains with robust security practices. This balance between speed and safety is the subject of our fourth trend.

# Trend 4: Speed meets security: The AI paradox

The potentially dangerous acceleration of development



## Here's what it's all about

With AI finally delivering productivity gains, AI coding assistants, e.g. GitHub Copilot, Claude Code, have moved from experimental to production-ready. This has seen AI-assisted development deliver faster development cycles e.g. GitHub reports that developers using GitHub Copilot completed coding tasks around 55% faster than those without it<sup>1</sup>. But as adoption accelerates, so does the scope of attacks.

According to research from Apiiro, AI coding assistants ship vulnerabilities at 10x the rate while only delivering 4x velocity.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, Veracode's 2025 GenAI Code Security Report analyzed over 100 LLMs and found security flaws in 45% of AI-generated code, with failure rates exceeding 70% for Java. When presented with a choice between secure and insecure coding methods, AI models chose the insecure option 45% of the time.<sup>3</sup>

The risks extend beyond flawed code logic.

Research from the University of Texas at San Antonio found that nearly 20% of packages recommended by LLMs didn't exist in any public registry<sup>4</sup>. This is known as "slopsquatting" – fictitious dependencies that attackers can exploit and distribute malware when hallucinated package names are suggested by AI coding assistants.

1 - <https://github.blog/news-insights/research/research-quantifying-github-copilots-impact-on-developer-productivity-and-happiness/>

2 - <https://apiiro.com/blog/4x-velocity-10x-vulnerabilities-ai-coding-assistants-are-shipping-more-risks/>

3 - <https://www.veracode.com/resources/analyst-reports/2025-genai-code-security-report/>

4 - <https://www.activestate.com/blog/is-ai-generated-code-poisoning-your-software-supply-chain/>

Analysis from Endor Labs found only one in five dependency versions recommended by AI assistants were both safe and free from hallucination.<sup>1</sup>

Real-world attacks are already exploiting these weaknesses. In August 2025, attackers compromised a widely-used development tool (Nx build system) by uploading infected code packages. When developers unknowingly installed these packages, malware activated automatically. The attack then used AI coding assistants – invoking Claude, Gemini, and Amazon Q in autonomous mode – to search developers' computers for passwords and security credentials, which were secretly sent to the attackers.<sup>2</sup>

Malicious actors have recognized that poisoning the code libraries AI recommends can compromise thousands of organizations simultaneously.

"The problem with AI is becoming trust. Not just trust with text you read or videos you see, but for developers, it's trust in the code that it's writing."

Greg Sherwood, Chief Technology Officer at Squiz

The gains outlined in Trend 3 aren't in question. Development teams are genuinely moving faster, campaigns are launching more efficiently, and AI is handling orchestration work that previously consumed significant human time. The challenge is that these same capabilities create security exposure that grows proportionally with adoption.

The solution isn't abandoning AI-assisted development, it's implementing secure velocity: combining AI's efficiency gains with robust security practices. Organizations that recognize the paradox early can achieve both speed and safety.

<sup>1</sup> & <sup>2</sup> - <https://www.endorlabs.com/learn/nx-build-platform-compromised-by-supply-chain-attack---how-attackers-collude-with-ai-code-assistants>

# Here's what's changing

Widespread AI adoption in development and sophisticated cyber threats is reshaping how organizations must approach software creation.

## The trust gap between junior and senior developers

Senior developers bring healthy skepticism built from experience. "They've seen it all, and their lack of trust is actually one of their strongest skills," explains Sherwood. Junior developers, learning from AI instead of senior colleagues, absorb recommendations without hard-won skepticism from debugging compromised code or investigating breaches.

## Supply chain attacks are evolving faster

When developers build software, they don't write everything from scratch. They often use pre-built components within shared libraries stored in public repositories.

Attackers know this, and are compromising these shared components at scale. They're poisoning popular code libraries, creating fake versions of frequently used tools, and even registering misspelled names that developers might accidentally type. When AI tools automatically recommend and include these compromised components in projects, the vulnerabilities spread rapidly across multiple organizations.

The speed of AI development compounds this risk.

"AI-assisted development encourages rapid prototyping and quick turnarounds... The downside is that these ecosystems can be more vulnerable if teams do not have the depth to evaluate dependencies or understand the implications of what AI suggests."

Bill McLaughlin, EVP of Web Solutions

Colin Haber, Technical Director at Hype Interactive, connects this to a broader cultural issue in modern development: "The nodejs era of web application development is notorious for an overreliance on unvetted third-party packages and deep dependency trees. The advent of 'vibe coding' (where developers trust AI-generated code without deep review) has made this approach unsustainable, as LLMs are both prone to errors and easy to manipulate at all parts of the software development stack."

This highlights why supply chain security has become so critical: AI-assisted development accelerates a dependency culture that was already problematic.





## The endpoint becomes the weak link

The threat doesn't end at production code. Previously, organizations focused security efforts on production environments. Now, individual developer machines running AI-generated code locally have become high-value targets. If attackers compromise a developer's machine and collect their credentials, they can access whatever systems that developer has access to – whether that be production data or customer information.

In other words, endpoint security, the protection of individual computers and devices, has become just as critical as protecting production servers.

## Speed without security creates dangerous technical debt

Anthony Nigro, President of North America at Squiz, emphasizes the fundamental tension between speed and security. While AI helps development move faster, it also introduces significant risk. Organizations need to ensure, as Nigro puts it, that *"we don't sacrifice one for the other."*

Development pipelines have sped up significantly with the introduction of AI and automation, but security automation has simply not kept pace. This has left many businesses simply unaware of their vulnerabilities, with about 61.64% of organizations testing fewer than 60% of their applications and accumulating a massive security debt with every single release<sup>1</sup>. Security problems that will require expensive remediation later.

"Many leaders will mistake speed for efficiency. A lot of the code generated by AI-based prototyping tools is not fit for purpose, nor is it security compliant. At the end of the day, you will still need humans in the loop, to ensure efficiency, compliance and cleanliness of the code produced."

Chris Crammond, Managing Partner at Deepend

1 - <https://www.itpro.com/security/using-ai-to-code-watch-your-security-debt>

# Here's how to adapt

## TL:DR

**For executives:** AI-assisted development equals faster delivery but introduces security vulnerabilities. The solution is "secure velocity": comprehensive security tooling, strengthened endpoint protection, software bills of materials, staged deployment with multiple security gates, and senior developer oversight. Reactive security costs dramatically exceed proactive investment. Organizations must balance speed with security rather than choosing one over the other.



The average data breach costs organizations millions in incident response, remediation, legal exposure, regulatory fines, and reputation damage – far exceeding proactive security investment in comprehensive tooling, endpoint protection, and staged deployments.

The U.S. average data breach cost hit a record high at 10.22 million USD in 2025, up from around 9.8 million USD in 2024 despite the global average cost of a breach decreasing to \$4.44 million. Of those compromised, 97% report not having AI access controls in place.<sup>1</sup>

Successfully securing AI-assisted development requires a phased approach that balances immediate risk reduction with long-term capability building.

"AI-driven development is moving faster than ever, and the answer isn't to slow that progress – it's to evolve how teams review and secure what's being produced. As AI tools automatically generate code and pull in dependencies, the shift is no longer about writing every line by hand but putting more emphasis on reviewing what the AI generates."

Jeff Chung, CSO, Arkane Digital

1 - <https://www.ibm.com/reports/data-breach>

## ✔ Implement comprehensive security tooling

Organizations need automated security scanning that analyzes AI-generated code for vulnerability patterns, detects compromised packages before deployment, monitors unusual code commit patterns, and provides real-time alerts.

"Traditional security practices weren't designed for machine-speed development, and many organizations haven't adapted their oversight. Security needs to be embedded into AI-enabled workflows, not bolted on afterwards."

Louise Helliwell, Experience Design Director at Folk

Rather than stitching together multiple tools, organizations should consider platforms that integrate security throughout the development lifecycle – allowing developers to work quickly while tooling evaluates code quality. This platform approach provides an end-to-end solution with security integrated at every layer.

When evaluating vendors, look for current security certifications that cover not just hosting infrastructure but also software development practices. SOC 2 Type II and ISO 27001 certifications demonstrate that vendors have undergone independent audits of their security controls, including how they handle AI-generated code, dependency management, credential security, and vulnerability scanning. These certifications provide assurance that auditors have already verified the vendor's security practices meet industry standards.

## ✔ Strengthen endpoint security dramatically

With developers running AI-generated code locally, organizations should:

- Deploy endpoint detection and response (EDR) tools – software that monitors individual computers for suspicious activity
- Implement least-privilege access principles
- Use time-limited credentials for sensitive systems
- Monitor for credential harvesting attempts
- Segment network access to limit blast radius

In other words, organizations need substantial investment in endpoint security tooling to scan for threats, block malicious activity, and ensure that compromised users can't cause widespread damage.

## ✓ Create comprehensive software bills of materials

Software bills of materials (SBOMs) list every pre-built component used in your software. When a security flaw is discovered in a popular component, SBOMs let you instantly check if you're affected.

It's important that you make sure you can automate the creation of the SBOM. Manual SBOM creation is error-prone and quickly becomes outdated as dependencies change. Automating ensures accuracy and keeps your inventory current with every build.

If a vulnerability is found in a widely used code library, you will know immediately if your applications use it. It's important that organizations track all software components, keep versions updated, and monitor security alerts – allowing problems to be fixed quickly.

## ✓ Implement staged deployment with multiple security gates

Code cannot flow directly from development to production. Organizations need multiple approvals for production deployments, automated security testing in CI/CD pipelines, canary deployments to test changes with limited exposure, and the ability to rapidly roll back problematic changes.

Consider implementing a multi-person approval process where getting code into production requires checks by multiple people with physical approvals at different stages. This creates a system where an attacker would have to socially engineer several developers to get malicious code through, significantly raising the bar for successful attacks.

The key is making these approvals both manual and distributed across different team members to prevent single points of failure.








"Developers should always manually review new dependencies and, ideally, source them from first-party providers or from major, active open-source projects... AI code review provides a massive speed improvement, flagging potential issues for human maintainers."

Colin Haber, Technical Director at Hype Interactive

## ✓ Build systematic reporting and auditing capabilities

Ed Braddock, Chief Customer Officer at Squiz, emphasizes that organizations need comprehensive visibility across their systems. This means implementing:

-  Centralized logging that captures security events across development, staging, and production
-  Unified authentication management showing who accessed what and when
-  Consolidated security dashboards that surface vulnerabilities by severity and age
-  Integrated vulnerability scanning that runs automatically on every commit
-  Regular security audits that provide prioritized, actionable remediation plans rather than just lists of issues

## ✓ Establish senior developer oversight as critical infrastructure

While automated security tooling, endpoint protection, and staged deployments form the foundation of secure AI-assisted development, senior developer oversight is the critical final layer.

Senior engineers, staff engineers, and team leaders are more important than ever. They must review AI-generated code before it reaches production, validate library and package selections, maintain awareness of emerging vulnerabilities in AI-recommended stacks, and mentor junior developers on recognizing suspicious patterns.

### Senior developer code review checklist

Senior developers play a critical mentoring role when reviewing AI-generated code from junior team members. Use code reviews as a teaching opportunity, walking through what you're checking for and why it matters. This structured approach helps junior developers build the skepticism and security awareness they need:

- Initial scan:**  
Review the purpose and scope of the AI-generated code – what problem is it solving?
- Dependency check:**  
Examine all libraries and packages the code imports – are they from trusted sources? Are they actively maintained?
- Security pattern review:**  
Look for common vulnerability patterns (SQL injection risks, credential exposure, insecure data handling)
- Logic validation:**  
Verify the code logic makes sense and doesn't contain hidden or unnecessary functionality
- Testing verification:**  
Ensure adequate test coverage exists and tests actually validate security requirements
- Approval decision:**  
Approve for next stage, request changes, or reject with specific feedback

# Here's what not to do

## ⊗ Don't sacrifice security for speed

The productivity gains from AI are real, but meaningless if they introduce vulnerabilities that lead to breaches. Julie Brettle, Chief Product Officer at Squiz, warns: *"Organizations that move fast safely will out-compete those that just move fast and break things."*

Organizations must slow down enough to implement proper security reviews, even if it reduces some of the speed advantage AI provides. The cost of avoiding security breaches – in both financial terms and reputation damage – far exceeds the value of shipping features a few weeks earlier.

## ⊗ Don't trust AI-generated code implicitly

Every piece of AI-generated code requires human review, particularly when it involves security-sensitive operations, introduces new dependencies, or interacts with production systems. Organizations that skip human review discover problems only after exploitation – with consequences including data breaches, regulatory fines, and customer trust erosion.

This is particularly critical for small development teams, especially those in marketing departments without direct IT oversight. These teams, moving fast with limited resources, become entry points for attackers who then move laterally to compromise more sensitive systems. Automated security tools catch known patterns, but humans catch anomalies, understand context, and recognize when something doesn't feel right.

## ⊗ Don't delay addressing this evolving threat

The threat is evolving rapidly. Organizations that wait to implement security measures will find themselves playing catch-up after incidents rather than preventing them proactively.

"The same tools making AI experiences richer are creating new security vulnerabilities, with AI really increasing in both sophistication and the volume of security attacks."

John-Paul Syriatowicz, Co-Founder at Squiz



## The opportunity in the paradox

The reality is stark but manageable. The same characteristics that make AI-assisted development faster – automation, pattern recognition, rapid iteration – also demand more rigorous human oversight and security controls.

Organizations that will thrive are those that recognize this paradox early and act on it. They embrace AI's productivity gains while implementing the robust security practices necessary to protect against its misuse. They achieve secure velocity rather than choosing between speed and safety.

This isn't about returning to slower, pre-AI development practices. It's about being intentional with AI adoption, building the right safeguards, and creating organizational competency in this new landscape.

As Ed Braddock puts it, *"We can't just let AI or automated systems take over."* The future belongs to organizations that successfully combine AI's capabilities with human judgment, creating development practices that are both fast and secure.

# What it all means

The path forward is clear: AI success depends on foundations, not features.



Our four trends reveal a consistent pattern.



Organizations optimizing for AI-assisted discovery need structured content and comprehensive information, not flashy redesigns.



Accessibility compliance requires proactive integration into content workflows with simultaneous benefits for AI discovery, not post-publication remediation.



AI productivity gains come exclusively to those with governance frameworks, not those simply adopting tools.



Secure velocity requires embedded security practices, not bolted-on protection.

The through-line is unmistakable: AI amplifies what already exists. Strong foundations – documented processes, quality standards, clear governance, structured content – become competitive advantages. Organizational dysfunction gets magnified at scale.

2026 marks the year organizations can no longer treat AI as something happening **to** digital experiences. It's woven into every layer: how experiences are created, structured, secured, discovered, and consumed.

The question isn't whether to adapt, but whether your organization has the foundations to thrive in an AI-assisted ecosystem.



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