

The State of the Human-AI Workforce in Service and Support

Contrary to popular belief, service and support agents aren't going anywhere.

Customer service leaders are under a lot of pressure to invest in AI, reduce headcount and reap the cost-saving benefits. The idea of an “agentless” customer service organization (or at least, one with substantially fewer agents) is pervasive. But this hyperfocus on headcount reduction is a recipe for failure. Maximizing ROI requires workforce reshaping, not replacement.

At the end of the day, organizations that win the AI transformation race are those that build a strategy around improving the value their human employees provide instead of building a strategy around replacing them.



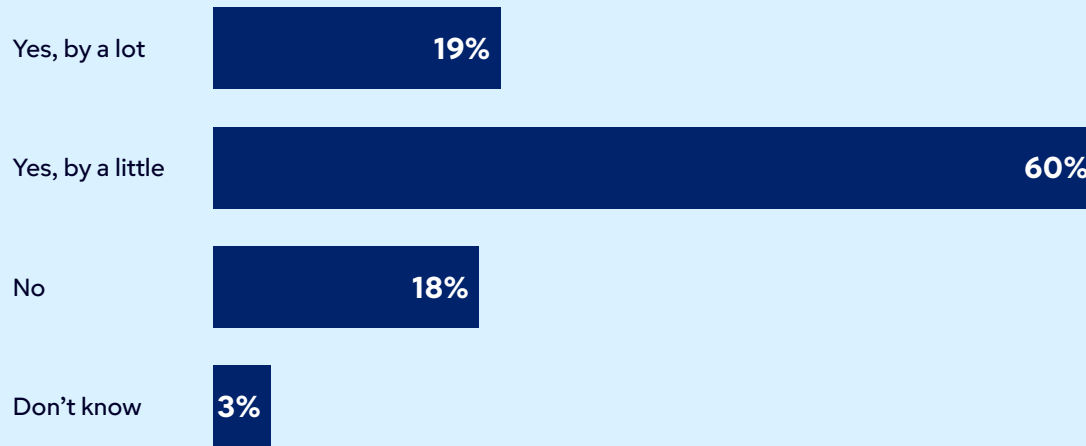
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AI is having an impact on the workforce — largely in the long term.

The promise of AI-driven automation continues to dominate the service and support landscape, yet measurable outcomes often fall short of expectations. Nearly 80% of service and support leaders anticipate some reduction in agent headcount over the next 18 months, the reality is more complex. The main benefit is scaling existing resources: Fifty-five percent of leaders report maintaining steady headcount while supporting more customers, and 25% have paused backfilling roles.

Despite the optimism around AI, only 20% have actually reduced agent headcount, highlighting the ongoing gap between automation hype and tangible business results.

Forecast of smaller proportion of agents in service and support workforce in the next 18 months



n = 321, all respondents

Q: Do you envision that in the next 18 months, agents will make up a smaller percentage of your service and support workforce than they do now?

Source: Customer Service and Support Priorities for 2026

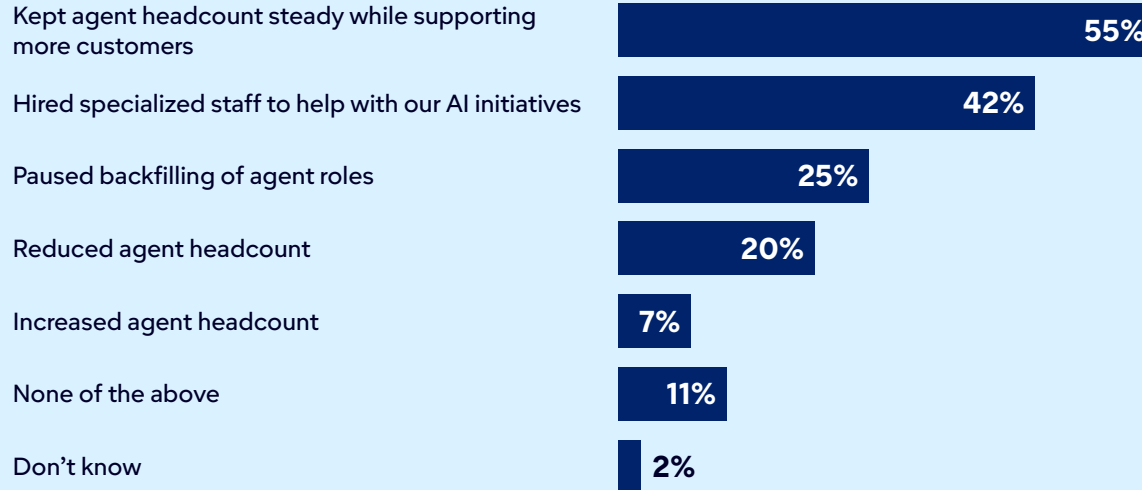
Organizations that reduce headcount too quickly will be financially worse off than organizations that move more judiciously.

The pitfalls of reacting too quickly to AI trends are evident in cases where companies replaced employees with automation, only to reverse those decisions and rehire staff. This approach has slowed progress and negatively affected brand image.

The true impact remains to be seen, but these strategies can lead to operational challenges, weakened organizational expertise and lower morale, ultimately risking higher costs and poorer outcomes if workforce reductions prove unsustainable.

Impact of organization's AI investments on headcount

Multiple responses



n = 310, respondents piloting/deploying at least one or more AI use cases

Q: We would like to know how your organization's AI investments have impacted headcount up to now.

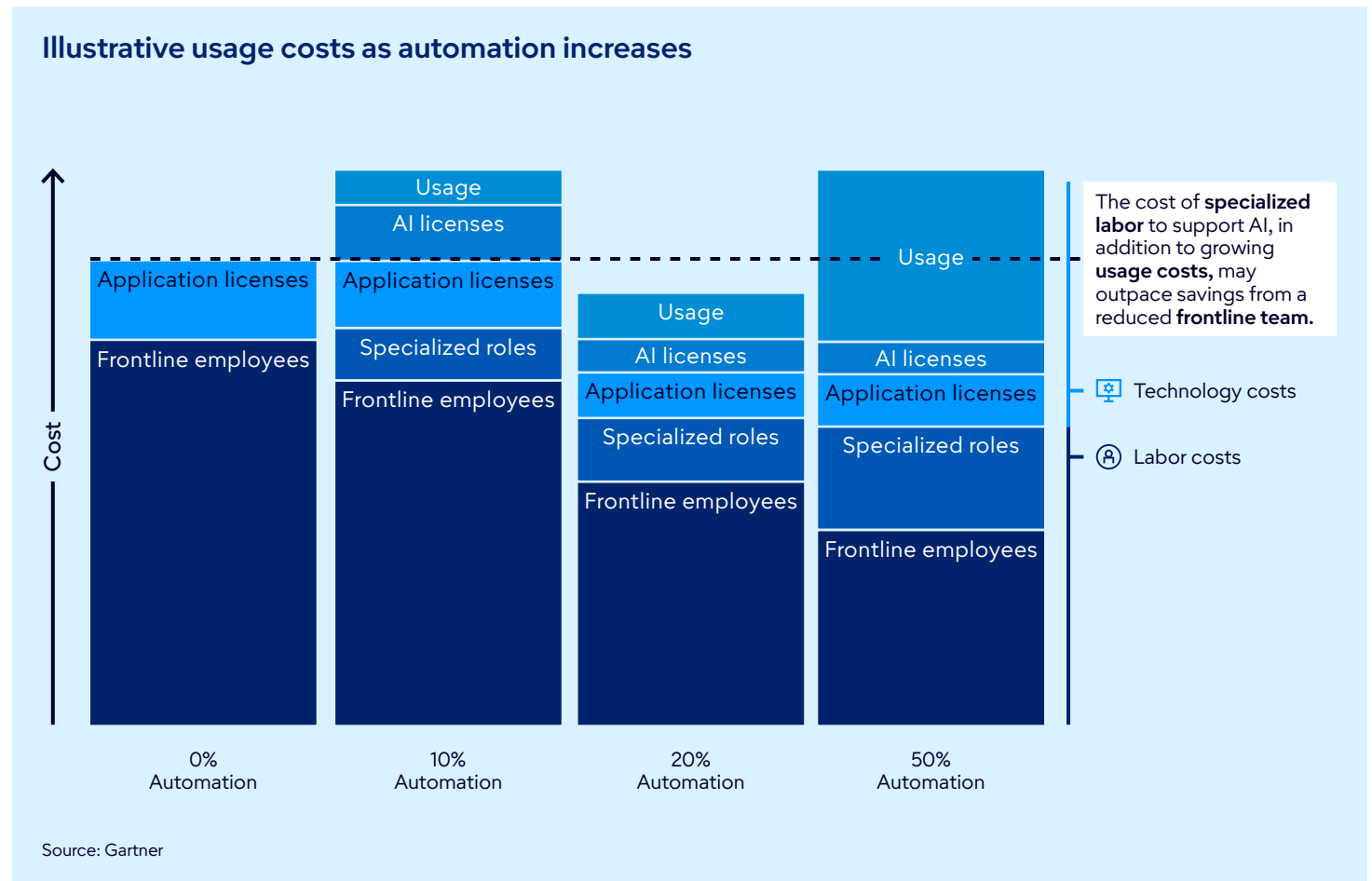
Source: Customer Service and Support Priorities for 2026

Keeping human talent may be more cost-effective than replacing it with AI.

As service leaders look to AI to optimize costs, it's critical to recognize that reducing headcount does not guarantee lower overall spend. Organizations must take a holistic approach to AI transformation, understanding that real value comes from strategic investments beyond labor cuts. To successfully navigate this shift, companies should:

- Invest in new roles to realize the benefits of AI solutions
- Modernize knowledge management systems and upgrade data architecture
- Increase spending on technology, including training, integration and licensing

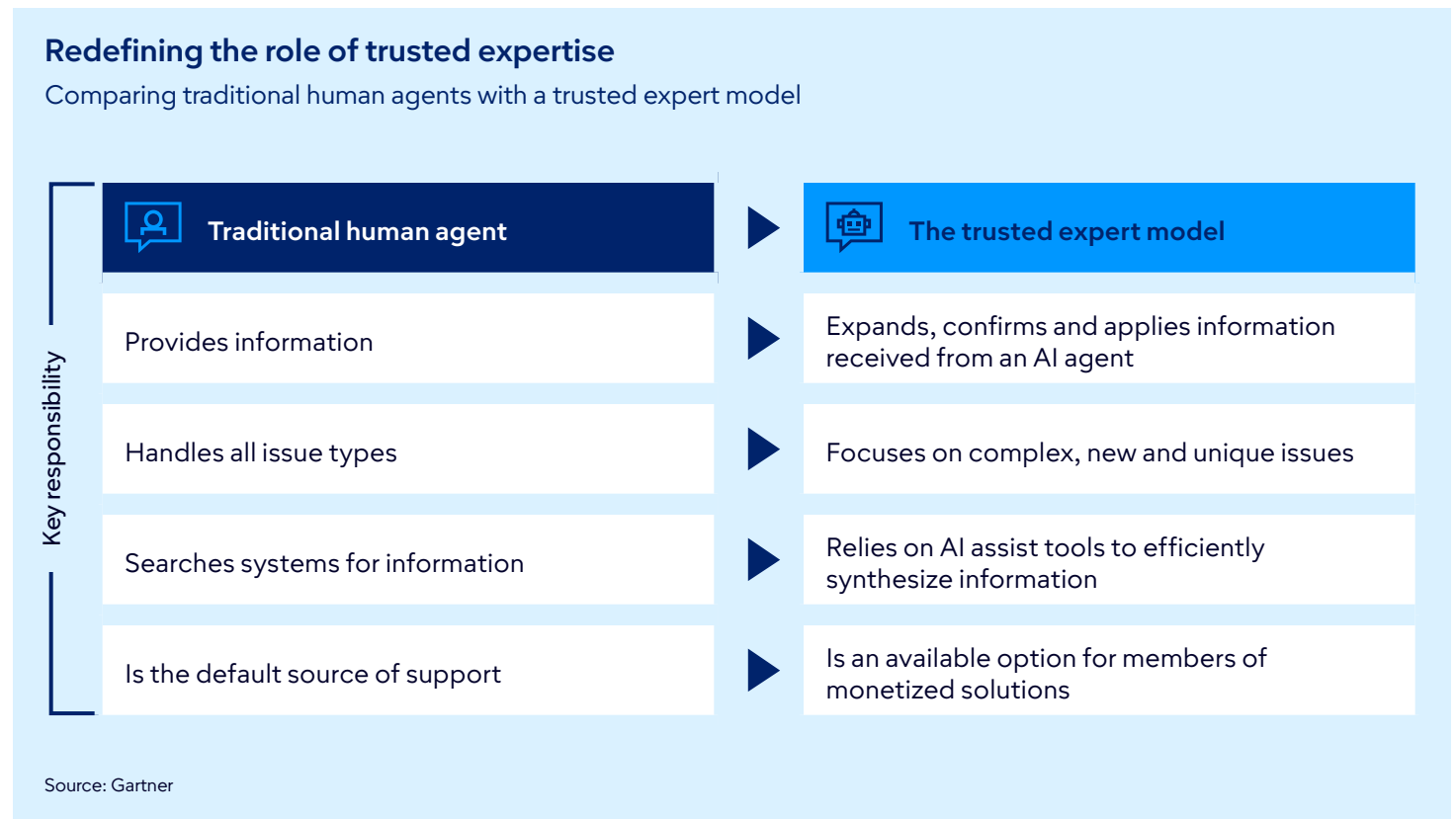
By proactively addressing these areas, organizations can position themselves to unlock the true benefits of AI, rather than falling short of anticipated savings.



AI investments should be to help the human workforce deliver value-added service experiences, not to replace it.

As service and support organizations pursue cost reduction, it's essential to recognize that labor savings alone won't deliver lasting value. Investments in AI should be viewed as a means to free up resources, allowing the remaining workforce to focus on activities that drive growth and enhance customer experience.

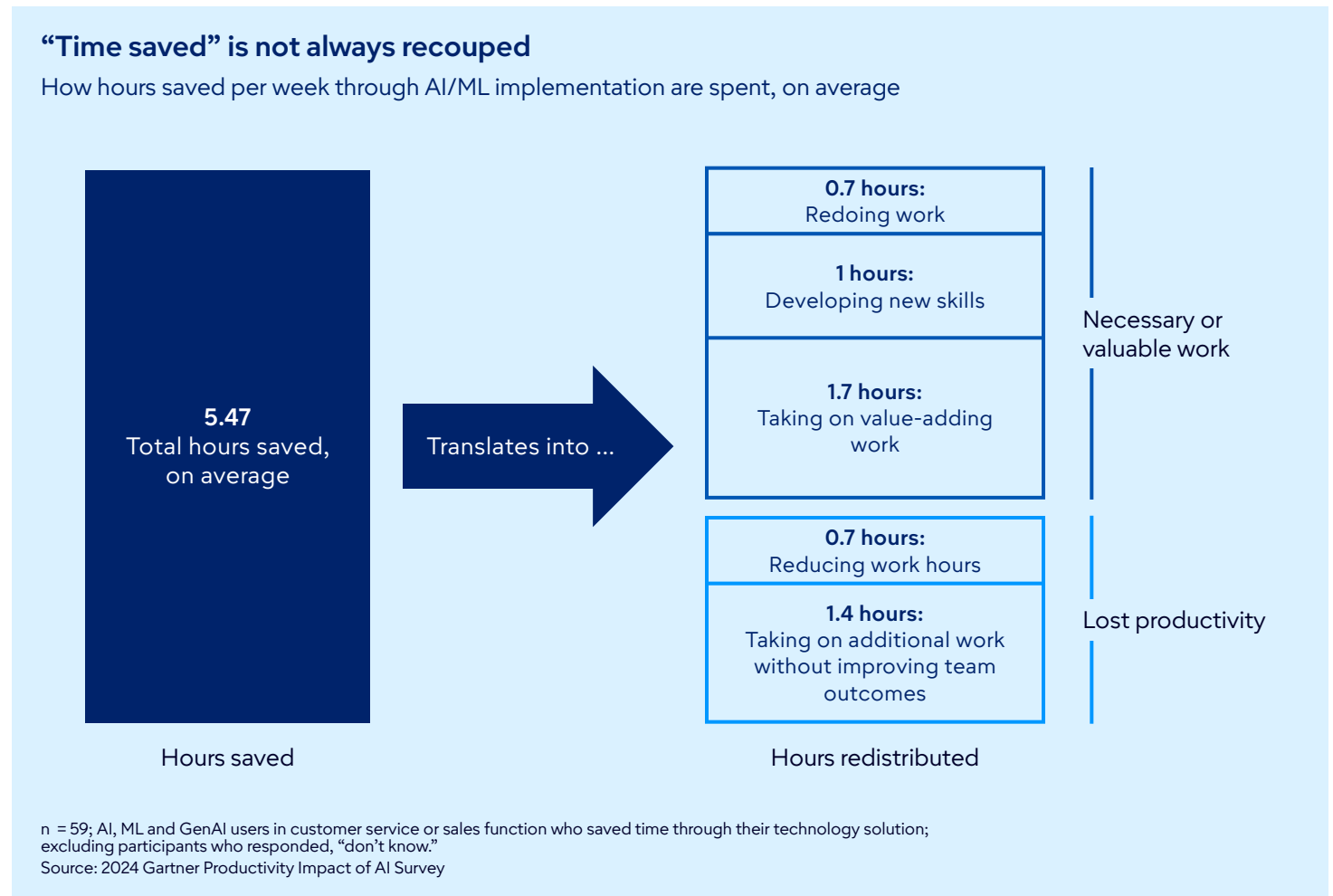
By reinvesting efficiency gains into technology, infrastructure and talent enablement, organizations can achieve a more agile, effective workforce that delivers superior service, not simply fewer agents but more impactful ones.



Reimagine business operations by embedding AI-driven practices to maximize investment value over time.





Achieving ROI from AI remains a significant challenge, with 74% of CIOs stating that their organizations are either losing money or just breaking even on AI investments. Leaders must move beyond simply deploying technology and instead develop realistic strategies for workforce reduction and redeployment.

True value comes from translating productivity and efficiency gains into tangible cost savings or reallocating talent to growth initiatives. Without a clear plan, organizations risk maintaining the same cost base with only marginal improvements in efficiency.



Actionable, objective insights

Position your customer service and support function for success. Explore these additional complimentary resources and tools for customer service and support leaders:

 <p>Webinar Redesign the Frontline Role for AI's Impact</p> <p>Learn how customer service leaders are redefining roles and preparing agents for an AI-enabled future.</p> <p>Watch Now</p>	 <p>Insights Customer Service AI</p> <p>Equip your organization with the most important use cases and benefits of generative AI for customer service and support leaders.</p> <p>Download Now</p>	 <p>Conference Gartner Customer Service & Support Conference</p> <p>Uncover the latest customer service and support insights and solutions with experts, peers and solution providers to shape your organization.</p> <p>Register Now</p>	 <p>How We Help Gartner for Customer Service</p> <p>Get insights, guidance and tools to enable faster, smarter decisions and stronger performance on your mission-critical priorities.</p> <p>Explore Now</p>
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