



Why AI Investments in Commercial Organizations Don't Translate into Economic Impact

What It Takes To Close The Gap



Executive Summary

- **Investments in Commercial AI hold the greatest potential to drive enterprise value – more than investments in any other functional unit of a company.**
- **Expectations far exceed results.** Leaders expect Commercial AI to deliver **30-100% more impact** than other functions, yet **only 13% of companies report meaningful P&L gains.**
- **The constraint is execution, not investment or technology.** Value is captured only by companies willing to confront and fix the structural barriers that have always made commercial improvements difficult.
- **The value is real, but not automatic.** Commercial AI tends to make simple, structured work easier, but it makes complex, judgement-heavy work harder by exposing what was previously hidden.

Commercial performance has long been treated as the ultimate value lever – what one former Fortune 100 CEO famously summarized as “sales fixes everything.” That belief continues to fuel investment, with Commercial AI spending up 11% this year and another 10% increase expected next year, despite limited and inconsistent impact to date.¹

This limited and inconsistent impact isn't because Commercial AI lacks promise. It's because companies are applying AI to the most impactful growth lever in the business without addressing the very structural obstacles that have always made commercial work difficult to systematize.

¹ According to Blue Ridge Partners' client work and survey of 300 commercial leaders completed in early 2026.

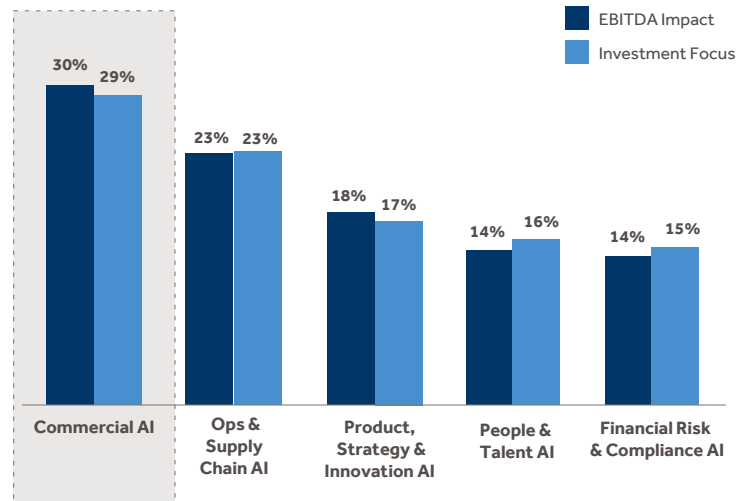
What's Holding Companies Back?

If Commercial AI holds so much potential, the obvious question is why more companies aren't seeing results. Based on Blue Ridge Partners' Commercial AI client work and its most recent survey of commercial leaders, the answer is not a lack of belief in AI's promise or a lack of willingness to invest. In fact, expectations for Commercial AI impact over the next 12-24 months are 30-100% higher than for all other functional areas, and planned investment levels closely reflect that optimism.

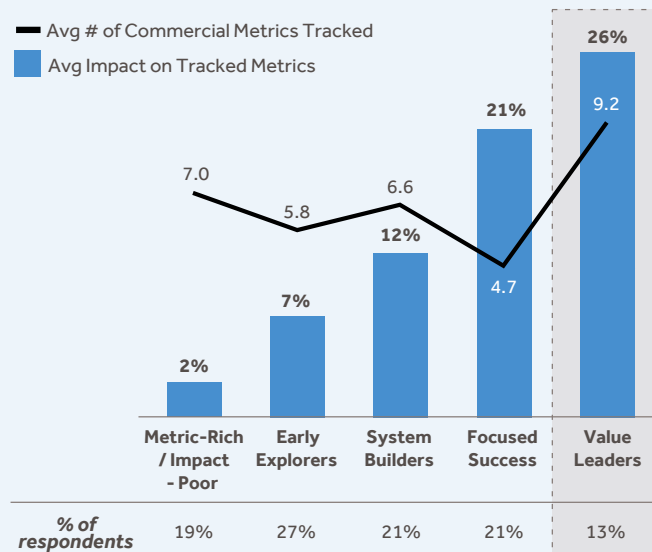
Yet realized impact in the Commercial organization remains sporadic and limited. In another recent Blue Ridge survey, only 13% of companies, the Value Leaders, reported capturing meaningful P&L impact from Commercial AI, despite widespread experimentation and deployment.² In other words, Commercial AI attracts the highest expectations and the greatest urgency to invest, but is still driving limited and highly inconsistent economic results.

Expected AI EBITDA Impact & Investment Focus Across Functional Areas Over the Next 12-24 Months

(Respondents completed a constant-sum allocation, distributing 100 points across categories to indicate relative importance)



Realized Impact and Metric Usage Across Performance Groups



Definition of Performance Groups

Metric-Rich/Impact Poor

Measurement outpaces decision clarity, AI amplifies noise rather than impact.

Early Explorers

Experimenting with Commercial AI and seeing early signals, but efforts remain fragmented and hard to scale.

System Builders

Building the data, workflows, and discipline AI depends on with improving but limited impact.

Focused Success

Focusing on a small set of high-impact metrics to drive meaningful gains before scaling.

Value Leaders

Combining focus and scale to use AI as a repeatable, enterprise-level value lever.

This disconnect between the optimistic aspirations and the current reality makes the underlying issue clear. The problem isn't ambition or funding. It's focus on the commercial metrics that matter, thoughtful planning on how specific commercial functions can be transformed using AI, and execution.

² According to Blue Ridge Partners' client work and survey of 150 commercial leaders completed in late 2025.

There are five friction points that prevent the successful application of AI in commercial organizations:

1. Commercial Cultures Resist Standardization

Many commercial organizations are built around individual judgment and “hero performance.” Top reps are given wide latitude. Processes evolve informally. Success is celebrated without always being fully understood. Introducing AI into this environment feels threatening to many commercial teams.

That cultural resistance slows adoption long before budget ever becomes the constraint.

2. Messy Data Creates Fear of Failure

Leaders know their commercial data isn't in great shape. CRM usage is uneven. Definitions of activities, roles, processes, and commercial metrics vary. Inputs, in terms of opportunities and selling efforts, often don't match financial outcomes. As a result, many assume AI won't work, or worse, that it will produce misleading insights built on partial or inaccurate data.

Rather than viewing AI as a way to improve data discipline over time, companies delay investment until data is “clean enough,” a threshold that rarely arrives on its own.

3. The Work Feels Too Nuanced for AI

Commercial decisions (who to target, what to offer, how to price, what to say, when to intervene) are often seen as too contextual or relationship-driven to be systematized. This creates a false binary choice: either AI replaces judgment, or it has no role to play.

In reality, AI creates value by improving consistency and decision quality, not by eliminating nuance. But without a clear framework for determining where and how exactly Commercial AI should be applied, that distinction is easy to miss.

4. Pressure for Quick Wins Discourages Foundational Work

Many organizations want AI to be a “magic button” that delivers immediate, visible results. Foundational investments, such as clarifying ideal customer profiles (ICPs), documenting and standardizing brittle workflows, structuring data, tightening KPIs, and addressing talent issues feel slow and unglamorous when compared to the mythical “killer app.”

Yet without those foundations, Commercial AI initiatives struggle to gain traction. The desire for speed often ends up diluting and delaying impact.

5. Fear of Disrupting Top Performers

A common concern surfaced in our work with clients and the 2026 survey is that Commercial AI might “average out” performance or interfere with the instincts of the best reps. In practice, the opposite is true. AI is most powerful when it captures what top performers do differently and makes those behaviors repeatable.

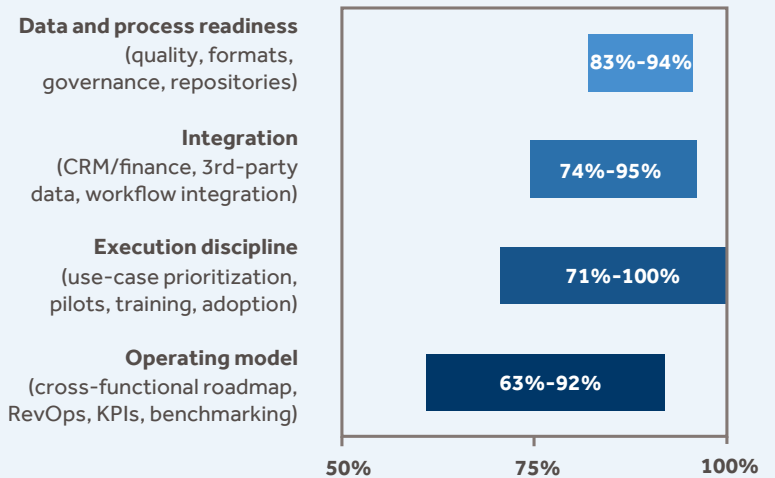
Still, this fear causes many leaders to proceed cautiously, or not at all.

Why the Promise Is Still Real

Given these friction points, it's reasonable to ask whether Commercial AI is simply overhyped and expectations have outrun what technology can realistically deliver.

The data suggest otherwise. What's striking in both our client work and our late 2025 survey is not just how few companies report meaningful impact, it's that the companies who are seeing impact tend to share a common set of enabling practices. Across 50+ best practice areas spanning data and process readiness, integration, execution discipline and operating model, we see a strong relationship between adoption of these practices and realized impact from Commercial AI investments. More specifically, of these four groups of 50+ best practices, data/process readiness and execution discipline stood out as the most highly correlated with P&L impact.

Range of Correlations Between Best Practice Adoption and Average Realized Impact by Group



Commercial AI isn't failing because the value isn't there. It's failing because most organizations are trying to capture step-change value without building the operating conditions that allow it to show up. The reason the upside remains so large is structural. Commercial AI targets the part of the business where revenue is created, variability is highest, and decisions remain largely intuitive. For example, it's not uncommon for 80% of revenue growth to come from 10-20% of commercial reps.

AI thrives in exactly these environments. By identifying patterns in high performance and reducing downside variance, Commercial AI raises the floor before it raises the ceiling, improving predictability before driving growth. Small improvements in consistency, targeting, and execution can materially change growth trajectories and predictability, making Commercial AI one of the most powerful, and underexploited, value levers available today.

The Gap and the Opportunity

Commercial AI's promise is real. But it is not magic or automatic. Companies are drawn to Commercial AI because sales and growth often matter most. Yet AI only delivers value when organizations are willing to confront the sources of variability, intuition, and inconsistency that have always made commercial improvements difficult to engineer.

That's why so many companies believe in Commercial AI, yet so few capture meaningful impact from it. In practice, the promise is realized only by those willing to rethink how commercial value is actually created. If your organization is working to translate Commercial AI investment into measurable impact, Blue Ridge Partners can help identify where to start, how to sequence initiatives, and which structural barriers to address first.

This article sets the foundation for a broader series from Blue Ridge Partners that will be published throughout 2026. The next articles explore why AI behaves differently from past commercial technologies, why value accrues unevenly and often too late, and how Private Equity firms, operating teams, portfolio companies, and non-PE backed companies can redesign their approach to turn Commercial AI into a repeatable value creation lever.

Why Blue Ridge Partners?

At Blue Ridge Partners, we focus exclusively on helping companies accelerate profitable revenue growth – the #1 driver of value creation. We've earned high marks from private equity firms by delivering material, rapid, and cost-effective results for their portfolio companies.

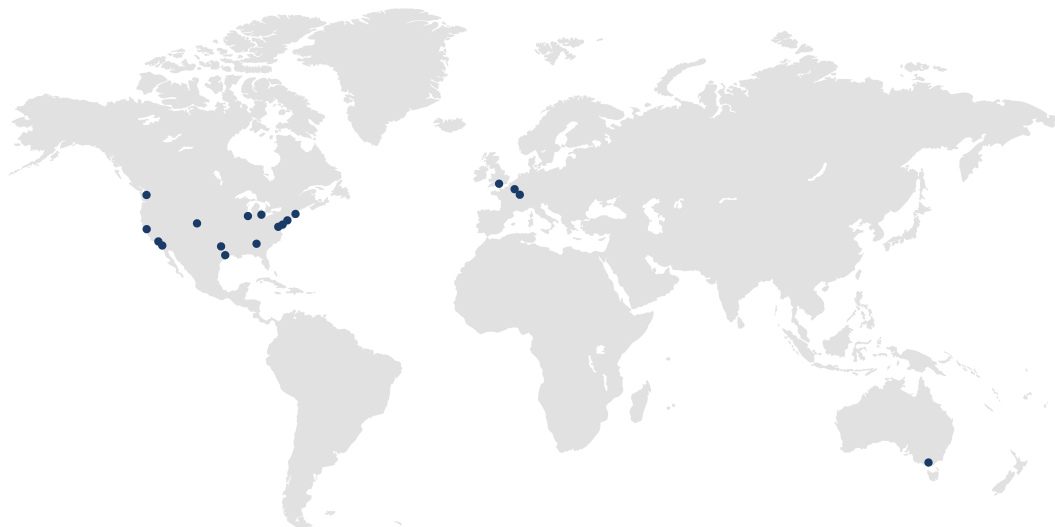
Our work spans value creation planning, commercial model transitions, strategic pricing, sales effectiveness, and commercial due diligence. Our Managing Directors combine top-tier strategy consulting and operating experience, and we're known for rolling up our sleeves, taking a pragmatic, hands-on approach, and focusing on the "how" of execution to drive measurable P&L impact.

Increasingly, we help clients leverage Commercial AI to accelerate growth. Through our Commercial AI Center of Excellence (CoE), we guide AI investments toward real business problems and commercial metrics – not just tools – to ensure tangible results.

Since 2002, we've partnered with over 130 top-tier PE firms and 1,300 companies worldwide to create lasting value across the investment lifecycle.

For further information please contact us at info@blueridgepartners.com or visit us at www.blueridgepartners.com.

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