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How to build businesses faster and better with AI

Artificial intelligence is rewriting the rules of creating corporate ventures. Here is a strategic playbook for business leaders ready to seize a defining growth opportunity.

This article is a collaborative effort by Chris Smith, Daniel Aminetzah, Fabian Metzeler, Jason Bello, and Paul Jenkins, with Alexander Ringler and Melanie Krawina, representing views from McKinsey Business Building.

March 2026

Imagine a world in which billion-dollar companies are built by teams of fewer than a dozen people—or even by a single founder. What once seemed like science fiction is now becoming reality as artificial intelligence emerges as the new operating system of venture building.

This is not a marginal improvement or an efficiency gain. It is a fundamental rewiring of how businesses are conceived, built, and scaled. Just as the shift from mainframes to personal computers transformed knowledge work and the internet reshaped commerce and communication, AI is resetting the assumptions that have governed business building for decades. The constraints that once defined business creation—team size, capital requirements, and time to market—are being rapidly rewritten.

AI creates value for venture builders along three dimensions: It improves innovation cycles, enabling teams to generate, test, and validate more—and often better—ideas faster than ever before; it transforms productivity, allowing small teams to achieve what once required entire departments; and it accelerates velocity, shortening the time from concept to minimum viable product and reducing the capital required to reach market. Together, these gains make ventures that once appeared too risky or too costly increasingly viable.

For leaders, the question is no longer whether AI matters for business building but how to apply it in ways that deliver sustained performance. Those who treat AI as an add-on will capture incremental benefits at best. Those who rewire business building around AI as a foundational capability—with human expertise at the center—will pursue more ideas, validate them faster, and scale winners earlier, often with fundamentally different economics.

This article offers a practical playbook for leaders seeking to capture this opportunity. It begins with the evidence for AI's impact on venture economics, explains how AI creates value across the venture life cycle, and then lays out three strategic shifts that distinguish high-performing AI-first ventures. For executives ready to act, it closes with concrete steps to begin rewiring venture building around AI as the new operating system.

The case for AI-first venture building

Even amid economic uncertainty, corporate venture building remains a top strategic priority. In McKinsey's 2025 new-business building survey, 43 percent of leaders reported increasing their focus on venture building over the previous 12 months. At the same time, expectations have sharpened. With capital under greater scrutiny, leaders are under pressure to demonstrate returns more quickly and with greater capital efficiency.

That pressure is reshaping how companies approach business building. Performance expectations are rising, along with the need to improve the underlying economics of venture creation—reducing time to validation, accelerating time to revenue, and increasing output per dollar and per employee.

Recent results suggest significant progress. In 2025, 61 percent of corporate ventures generated more than $10 million in revenue, up from 45 percent in 2023. Our business-building survey found that the time required for new businesses to reach those revenue levels fell from 38 months in 2023 to 31 months in 2025. Among ventures that have already broken even, 61 percent did so within two years.

Artificial intelligence is a core driver of this performance shift. A McKinsey review of hundreds of ventures founded between 2018 and 2024 suggests that ventures launched in the AI era (2023–24) are achieving higher output with faster timelines, on both a per-person and per-dollar basis. While not every recent venture is AI native, the increasingly widespread use of AI appears to be materially compressing venture timelines and raising productivity.

Other researchers have reached similar conclusions. In a recent survey by early-stage venture capital firm Antler, 93 percent of companies reported that AI accelerated execution, with nearly half citing speed increases of up to fivefold.

AI is reshaping venture building not as a peripheral tool but as a practical driver of performance. When embedded in how ventures are designed and operated, AI creates value along three dimensions that matter most for venture economics: the breadth and quality of ideas that can be explored, the speed at which ventures move from concept to market, and the productivity that small teams can achieve.

Below, we explore each of these dimensions in depth.

Innovation and creativity

AI can act as a creative amplifier, expanding both the range and quality of ideas ventures can explore. By enabling rapid generation, testing, and refinement of concepts, AI supports divergent thinking at scale while preserving fast feedback loops critical to early-stage venture building.

McKinsey's Beacon platform, which helps teams generate, test, and launch new ventures, illustrates this dynamic. The platform—which uses agentic AI to develop and refine venture ideas based on proprietary market data, third-party data sets, and client data—has been used by hundreds of teams to develop new ventures. What once required weeks of structured workshops can now be accomplished in hours, allowing teams to surface, refine, and prioritize high-potential venture opportunities much earlier in the process.

For example, rather than relying on sequential interviews, agentic AI can test concepts simultaneously through agent-led calls, synthesize insights, and translate them into synthetic customer personas for continuous testing. These personas—built from interview transcripts, sales call notes, and product usage data—function as an always-available voice of the customer, enabling teams to pressure-test new ideas and messaging without relying solely on individual interviews.

This approach doesn't replace customer research and has its own problems (including a bias toward positivity, but it can serve as a useful companion for real-time input. AI can also help accelerate the validation of value propositions by generating, launching, and evaluating multiple variants through rapid digital marketing experiments—for example, by designing tagline and visual combinations, running them as mini-campaigns across channels, and comparing click-through rates before committing to a larger budget.

The result is not creativity for its own sake but better venture outcomes: more ideas explored, earlier and more reliable signals on customer demand, and a higher likelihood that scarce resources flow toward the most promising opportunities.

Venture velocity

Once an idea has been created and validated, AI materially shortens build and launch cycles by automating knowledge-intensive tasks—design, coding, and go-to-market execution—that once took weeks or months. This allows ventures to move from concept to minimum viable product faster and iterate in near real time as market feedback emerges.

A wealth management venture, for example, doubled delivery velocity for its first minimum viable product by implementing an agentic AI factory—a platform that builds, hosts, and deploys multiple AI agents across each stage of the software development cycle, from requirements and architecture through coding and testing, with human engineers supervising and intervening at critical decision points. The approach streamlined the full development cycle while preserving the engineering judgment that AI alone cannot replicate.

By collapsing build and go-to-market timelines, AI helps accelerate learning cycles and enables ventures to reach market signals earlier, making speed itself a source of competitive advantage.

Productivity transformation

Beyond speed, AI fundamentally changes how much output a small venture team can generate. By shifting from human employees supported by tools to hybrid human–agent teams, ventures can refocus scarce talent on judgment, decision-making, and relationship building rather than manual execution.

In a B2B sales application, a technology venture deployed a sales-collateral agent to augment its account teams. Grounded in solution expertise, customer intelligence, and best practices, the agent generated tailored value propositions, storylines, and run sheets for customer meetings. With final review remaining with human sellers, teams became at least 1.5 times more productive by focusing on refinement and client interaction rather than content creation.

A construction company had a similar experience when it launched a new software venture. The company had long relied on manual outbound lead generation. Sales teams identified prospects, researched accounts, prioritized targets, and drafted personalized outreach messages by hand. This limited the number of leads they could pursue and slowed early traction. Introducing agentic AI to automate these upper-funnel tasks boosted outreach volume by 25-fold; click-through rates more than doubled compared with the previous human-only process.

For venture builders, these productivity gains compound quickly. Higher output per person allows teams to stay small for longer, reduces coordination overhead, and improves capital efficiency without slowing progress.

Taken together, gains in creativity, speed, and productivity reinforce one another. Ventures can explore more ideas, reach market signals earlier, fail faster at lower cost, and scale winners with fewer resources. This compounding effect explains why AI, when applied pragmatically, is becoming central to improved venture economics. But capturing these gains requires more than adopting AI tools or deploying isolated use cases. It requires deliberate changes in how ventures are set up, equipped, and led.

How to shift your ventures to operate with AI

Based on what distinguishes high-performing AI-first ventures in practice, three shifts stand out as essential to translating AI's potential into sustained performance.

Reset performance expectations: From incremental gains to step changes

Leaders can—indeed, should—set materially higher expectations for what venture teams deliver. AI has radically lowered the cost of creating, testing, and refining new businesses. At the same time, lower barriers to entry have intensified competition, making speed and scale decisive sources of advantage.

Incremental productivity improvements are no longer sufficient. In many cases, aspiring to double productivity in venture output is no longer unrealistic. Small teams are increasingly expected to deliver outcomes that once required far larger organizations.

This ambition should apply across the entire venture rather than be isolated to individual functions or use cases. AI delivers its full impact only when embedded end to end—from product development and customer discovery to go-to-market, operations, and finance—and when every role is designed to work alongside agents rather than around them. In practice, this means redesigning everyday workflows so that humans orchestrate, supervise, and intervene while agents execute research, analysis, and coordination. When expectations are raised uniformly, gains compound: faster validation enables quicker iteration, which in turn accelerates the scaling of what works.

Crucially, the goal is not simply to do the same things faster. AI enables a more fundamental shift: It moves critical learning earlier in the venture life cycle, front-loading customer validation, product iteration, and market-signal detection before large capital commitments are made. The ventures that capture the most value from AI are not those that merely automate existing processes; they are those that use AI to ask better questions earlier, fail faster on weak ideas, and concentrate resources on opportunities with genuine product–market fit.

It's also crucial to understand that lower cost per experiment is not an argument for cutting venture budgets. Instead, it is an argument for running more experiments. McKinsey research confirms the payoff: 67 percent of companies that prioritize business building outgrow the market, and each dollar of new-venture revenue creates roughly twice the enterprise value of a dollar generated in the core business. With AI lowering the cost of experimentation, companies can place more small bets, exit weak ideas earlier, and concentrate capital and talent on the few that break out.

Build the AI backbone: A new operating layer for ventures

Ring-fencing has long been a cornerstone of successful venture building—protecting new businesses from corporate bureaucracy, slow decision-making, and risk aversion so they can move at start-up speed. That principle still holds. In an AI-first context, however, ring-fencing alone is no longer sufficient. Ventures today must be both protected and supercharged: They need not only operating autonomy but also a technology foundation that allows human–agent teams to work at full speed from day one.

Providing those capabilities is the responsibility of the corporate venture leader, working in close partnership with the chief technology officer or chief information officer. Speed without structure, after all, creates fragility, and structure without speed creates bureaucracy. This requires tech and business leaders to provide the foundation that enables both.

At the center of this foundation is data—that of both the venture and the enterprise. Ventures generate real-time signals from customer interactions, operations, and product usage, while corporates contribute institutional depth through historical benchmarks, proprietary research, and market knowledge. Together, this data must be structured and governed so it can be reliably used at scale.

In addition to data, the parent plays a critical role in ensuring that core AI capabilities are easily accessible and continuously adaptable. This includes a shared business context so humans and AI systems operate from consistent definitions; strong analytics and model governance so insights are trustworthy and embedded in day-to-day decisions; controlled agentic and workflow layers so AI systems can act in secure, auditable ways; and shared platforms, governance standards, and specialized AI talent that can be deployed across ventures. When this foundation is in place, ventures do not rebuild infrastructure or reconcile conflicting metrics. Teams focus on product, customers, and growth while operating on an enterprise-grade base that preserves quality, security, and regulatory standards.

Done well, this becomes a strategic advantage. A CEO can see in near real time which products, customers, or investments are driving performance. The combination of the venture's own data and the parent's institutional knowledge provides a durable competitive edge. Each additional venture strengthens the shared foundation, lowering the marginal cost of innovation and increasing the speed of subsequent launches.

Design AI-first teams: Encode the expertise of your top performers

AI-first venture building makes it possible for a handful of the right people to achieve what once required entire departments. It also raises the stakes. Because AI amplifies the impact of human decisions, talent choices matter more than ever. Below, we list three ways that leaders can create this new generation of AI-first venture-building teams.

Scale expertise through 'agentification.' The core shift is not simply combining domain experts with AI talent but deliberately scaling expertise by turning it into a hybrid human–agent capability. Through agentic systems, tacit knowledge embedded in documents, processes, and experienced individuals can be extracted, structured, and reused. This agentification of expertise allows ventures to multiply the impact of their best people rather than rely on linear head count growth.

Bridge business and tech. AI-first ventures don't treat agent development solely as a technology initiative. They treat it as a joint effort between business and tech leaders to translate real-world expertise into AI agents. Business leaders bring a deep understanding of where value is created, how decisions are made, and what distinguishes top performers. Technology teams bring the ability to translate that judgment into systems that operate reliably at scale. Neither can do it alone. Companies that get this right create tight collaboration between the two so that the logic behind how work actually gets done is deliberately designed, codified, and embedded into AI-driven workflows. The result is not just automation, but the systematic extension of business expertise.

One way this can happen is by embedding a go-to-market engineer within a venture's sales team, working alongside top sellers to understand how they research accounts, shape value propositions, prioritize leads, and handle objections. Together with engineers, that knowledge is then translated into structured prompts, automated workflows, and AI agents that perform much of the preparation work. Over time, tasks such as account research, first-draft proposals, and pipeline prioritization are handled by AI systems built on the team's own best practices. Salespeople can then shift their focus to judgment, relationship building, and closing, allowing the venture to increase output and consistency without increasing head count.

Create flywheels of amplified expertise. The business impact of this approach can be significant. A global manufacturing company applied this model when launching a new digital marketplace. The company paired a senior executive with an AI engineering team and made it their joint mandate to capture and scale the executive's expertise. Together, they mapped how pricing decisions were made, suppliers were evaluated, and target customers were identified. This logic was then translated into AI/machine learning models and AI-supported workflows embedded directly into the platform. As a result, decisions that once depended on the judgment and availability of a single leader could now be executed consistently and at scale. The venture did not just benefit from the executive's experience; it multiplied it across the business. In the meantime, as the platform scales, usage data and transaction patterns feed back into the models, progressively improving the accuracy of pricing, supplier selection, and customer targeting—creating a flywheel in which the venture becomes smarter with each additional interaction.

The AI-first future demands a call to action for venture builders. The operating system of venture building has changed. Leaders who move decisively on all three fronts—resetting performance expectations to demand step-change results, building the AI backbone that allows hybrid human–agent teams to operate from day one, and designing teams to encode and multiply expertise through AI—will capture disproportionate value. Those who treat AI as an add-on or delay action will find themselves competing against ventures that operate on fundamentally different economics. The time to act is now.

Chris Smith is a partner in McKinsey's Southern California office; **Daniel Aminetzah** is a senior partner in the New York office; **Fabian Metzeler** is a partner in the Düsseldorf office; **Jason Bello** is a senior partner in the Washington, DC, office; **Paul Jenkins** is a senior partner in the Oslo office; **Alexander Ringler** is an associate partner in the Munich office; and **Melanie Krawina** is an associate partner in the Vienna office.

This article was edited by Larry Kanter, a senior editor in the New York office.