



Executive
Perspectives

AI-First Companies Win the Future

Payments

April 2026

Introduction

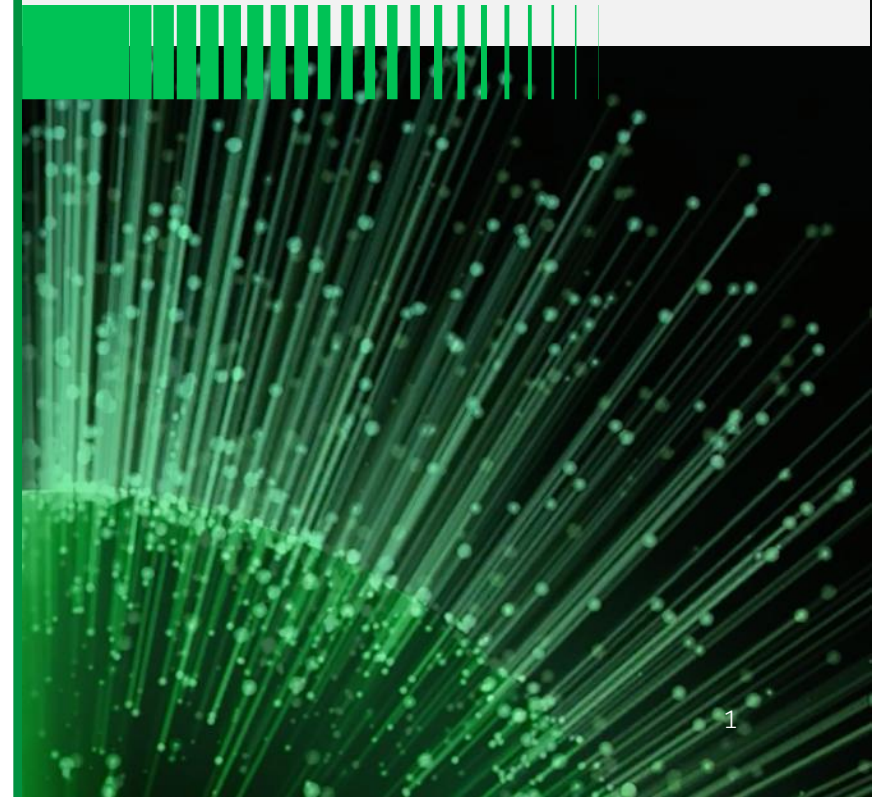
We meet often with CEOs to discuss AI – a topic that is both captivating *and* rapidly changing. After working with over 2,000 clients for more than two years, we are **sharing our most recent insights in a new series designed to help CEOs navigate AI**. With most sectors going through major shifts, the focus in 2026 is on how to leverage AI to **fully transform organizations** and create **new sources of competitive advantage**.

In this edition, we discuss the future of payments and the role AI can play in turbocharging growth. We address key questions on the minds of payments executives:

- Why now is the right time to act
- What leading payments companies are doing to create value by leveraging AI
- How to start the journey and become an AI-first enterprise

This document is a guide for payments executives to cut through the hype around AI and understand what creates value now and in the future.

In this BCG Executive Perspective, we articulate the vision and value of the future of payments with AI



Executive summary | Unlocking the value of AI in payments

WHY

now is the right time to act

- Payments is inherently technology-led, and AI is already transforming the entire industry
- The adoption curve is steepening with each new technology release, and the gap between leaders and laggards is widening
- Most firms are moving on this; some are moving very quickly, but few have the execution discipline needed to convert to material P&L impact
- Those who execute an end-to-end AI transformation can unlock faster revenue growth, structurally lower costs, and have greater capacity to reinvest and return capital

WHAT

leading payments companies are doing to create value by leveraging AI

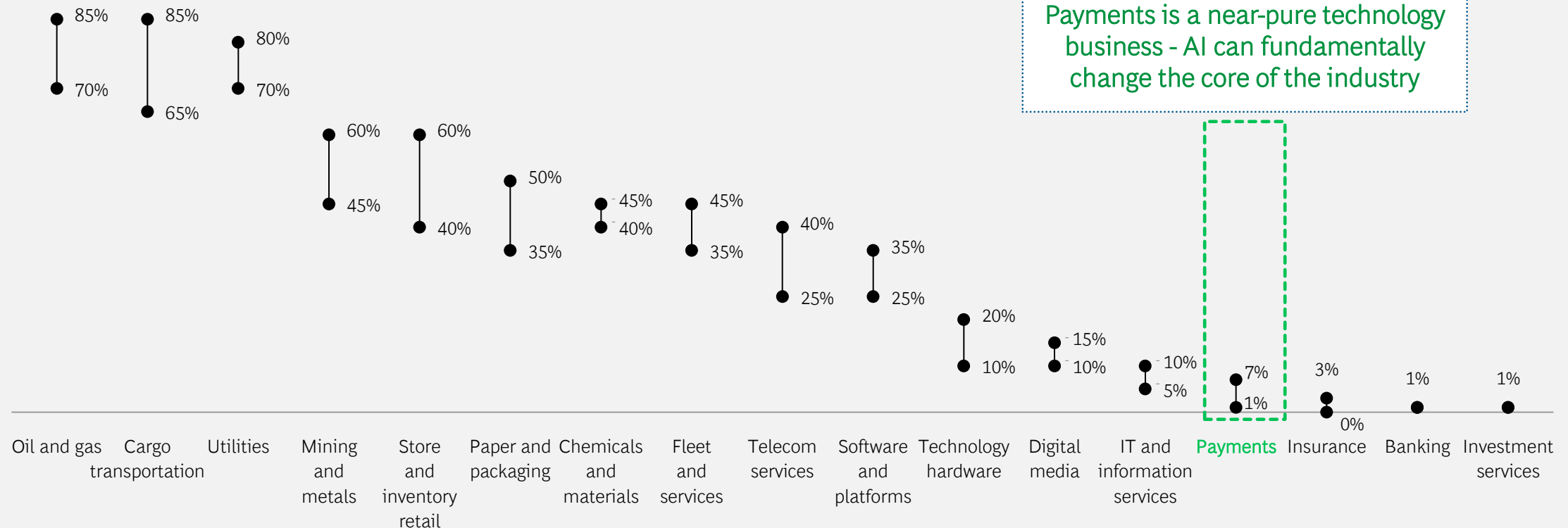
- Today, GenAI is reshaping payments companies' value chains, product portfolios, and core functions – with the potential for long-term disruption of core payments business models:
 - AI agents may intermediate purchase decisions and tender choice, pressuring card-centric interaction models
 - Agentic commerce is redefining user journeys and customer-business interactions (e.g., with AI shopping assistants, merchant preference, and tender selection)
 - AI is driving differentiated products and experiences (e.g., optimized processing, fraud detection, and marketing precision)
 - Leaders are reimagining core functions, rather than layering AI onto legacy processes (e.g., servicing, GTM, and software development)
- Tomorrow, we expect emerging AI capabilities to fundamentally redefine how payments operate, becoming fully autonomous and commerce driven by agent-initiated microtransactions

HOW to start the journey and become an AI-first enterprise

- AI is an operating model shift sitting atop new capabilities; AI-first organizations redesign around outcomes, embedding AI into core processes vs. siloed use cases (e.g., compressing product launch timelines vs. just equipping engineers with LLMs)
- Payments stacks must expose dynamically linked, secure, and governable interfaces so autonomous agents can discover, negotiate, and execute transactions without human mediation
- Payments leaders win by focusing on 3-5 big bets, funding and staffing them properly, and pursuing transformative organization plans with aggressive KPIs to capture P&L impact (e.g., higher approvals and authorizations and reduced payment-fail rate)
- The world is changing today; leaders should move quickly or they risk being left behind

Payments industry has little physical capital, and AI is disrupting its core asset – technology

PP&E as a percentage of total assets by industry



Note: PP&E = property, plant, and equipment. Payments industry is proxied using a representative sample of publicly listed companies across the payments value chain, including networks, acquiring platforms, merchant payment platforms, checkout and digital wallet, and embedded payment platform. Source: Aswath Damodaran, New York University Stern School of Business, January 2026.

Pace of change is accelerating, increasing urgency versus even a year ago

Consumers are embedding GenAI into discovery and purchase decisions

GenAI search usage is **up ~20pp** since 2023 (up from 43% to 62%)

GenAI-supported shopping is **up ~35%** in 2025

>60% of consumers report high trust in GenAI purchase recommendations

Payments leaders are scaling AI into core P&L levers

AI leaders in payments deliver **~2x** revenue growth, **~3x** ROIC, and **~1.4x** EBIT margins

~80% of AI value is concentrated in core decisioning and service (e.g., fraud detection, authorizations, pricing, disputes, and servicing)

New technologies are driving increasing pace of disruption



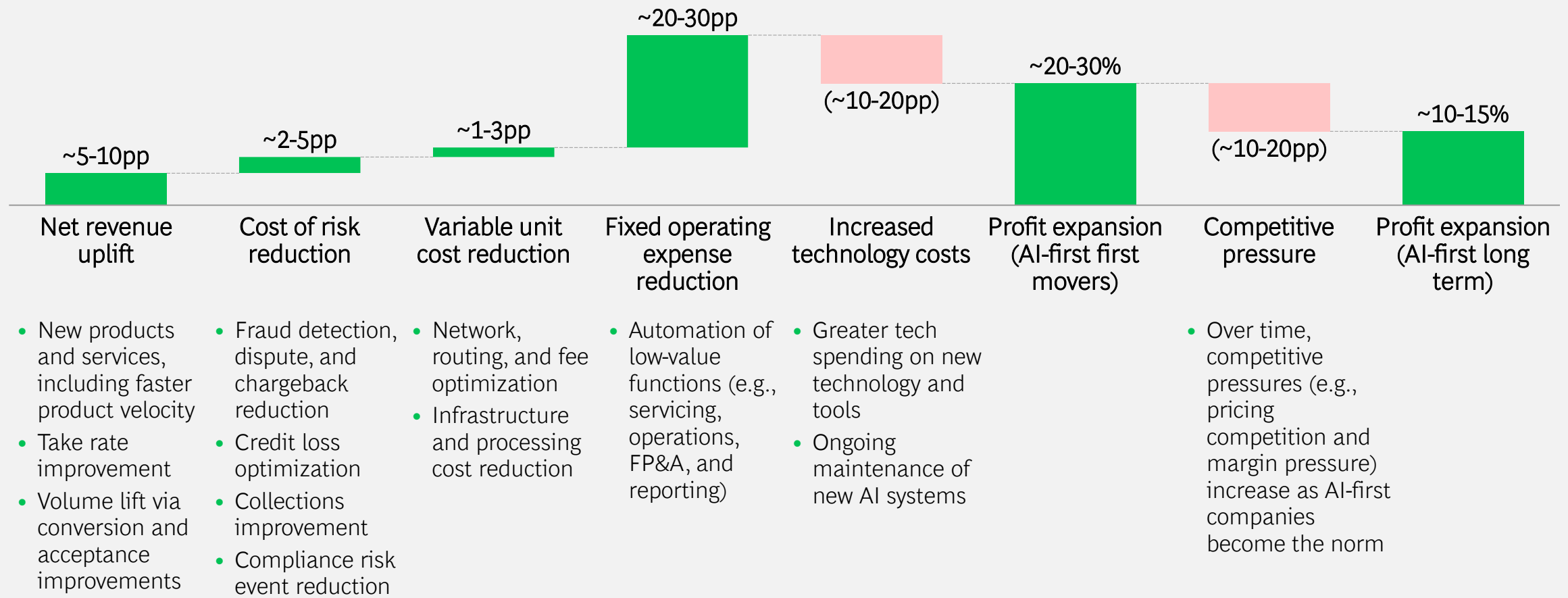
New capabilities enable agent-to-agent commerce, AI-native risk orchestration, and autonomous negotiation across tender choice

Note: pp = percentage point; ROIC = return on invested capital.

Sources: BCG, "Consumers Know More About AI Than Business Leaders Think," 2024; BCG, "Consumer Trust AI to Buy Better. Brands Need to Move Quickly," 2026; BCG, "Build for the Future x AI 2025 Global Study - Boosting value with AI, digital, and tech"

First movers have the potential to unlock about 10% to 15% in operating profit uplift

Illustrative impacts based on industry case studies



Note: FP&A = financial planning and analysis. Economics reflect a representative, scaled acquiring-led payments platform; magnitude of impact varies by business model; issuers and credit-led platforms may see different sensitivity, particularly across collections. Sources: Company 10-K reports; BCG, "(Gen)AI in Payments: The Impact Is Real," 2025; expert interviews.

AI impacts countless use cases and may upend core payments models

AI is already adding disruption risk to core payments business models

(deep dive follows)

Today: simultaneous disruption of a vast number of use cases

①

User journeys and commerce

Agents reshape discovery, checkout, tender selection, and post-purchase support

②

Products and services offered

AI-native decision making improves approval, lowers loss, and enables personalized offers

③

Functions and operating model

Internal agents and tooling automate low-value roles and drive productivity gains across all functions

Tomorrow: redefining payments in the broader economy

- Payment journeys become autonomous, adaptive, and self-optimizing
- Agentic microtransactions hold the possibility of enabling new forms of commerce and business models

Deep dive | AI may change access points, but cards retain a strategic moat

Concentration of AI demand reduces control points and concentrates power

- AI agents aggregate millions of consumers into a small number of demand gateways
- Platforms are more likely to consolidate than proliferate
 - E.g., search evolved from dozens of engines to one or two dominant gateways
- Fewer decision makers reduce many-to-many integration complexity
 - Shifting toward a limited set of high-value bilateral relationships
- Payments rails integrate with a small number of scaled agents rather than fragmented bespoke flows

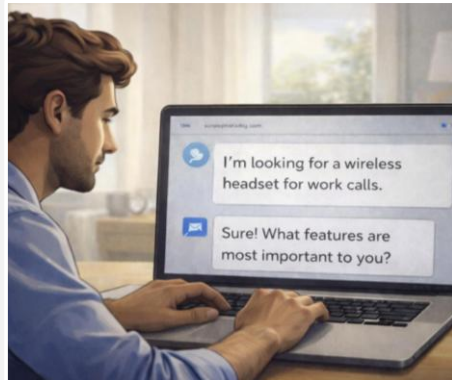
If demand concentrates, coordination becomes easier—not harder

Embedded nature of cards creates a durable moat for a core industry product

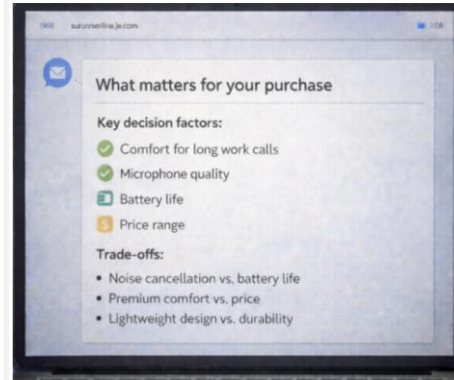
- Agentic commerce enables transaction-level optimization across tenders
 - I.e., customized underwriting and tender choices
- Yet credit and debit cards remain defensible due to:
 - Rewards ecosystems and revolving credit flexibility
 - Strong fraud, liability, and dispute protections
 - Ubiquity, trust, and global acceptance
 - Lower merchant acceptance costs (e.g., debit)
- In the near term, structural advantages of the card-centric model may limit displacement

Even if demand shifts upstream, cards remain the default execution layer in the near term

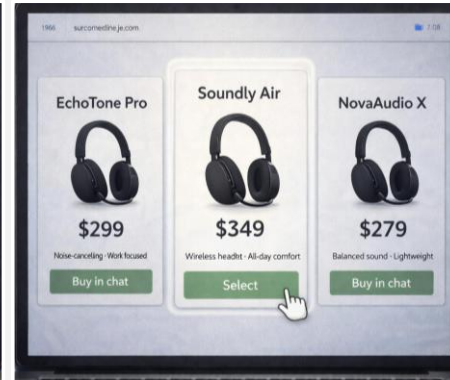
User journeys and commerce | Consumers are now guided by agentic AI at each stage of the commerce journey



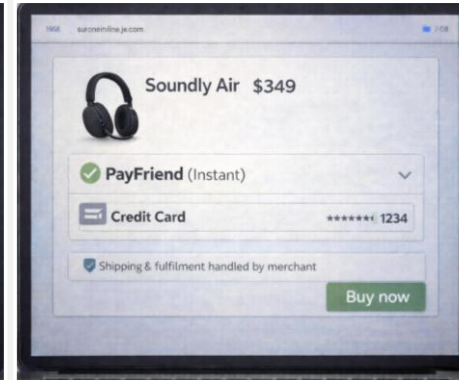
1 Agent captures consumer's intent and constraints



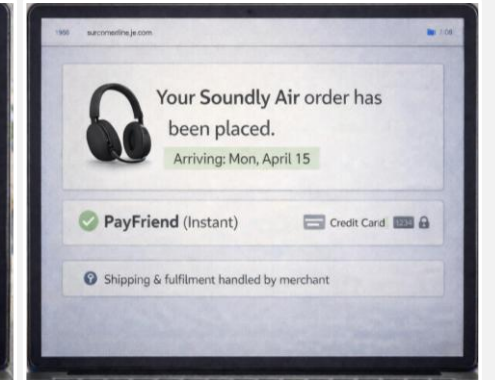
2 AI structures tradeoffs across products



3 Agent optimizes merchant choices, considering basket, shipping, and incentives



4 Agent presents tender options with negotiated terms (e.g., card, wallet, or BNPL)



5 Agent executes payment with tokenized credentials and real-time risk controls

The evolution of agentic commerce is inseparable from the trajectory of search and advertising:

- Paid media becomes the primary entry point for discovery
- Seamless, embedded payments activate once discovery occurs



Implications for payments:

- Tender choice and routing become programmable
- Offers move from static to real time, per intent
- Trust, identity, and risk controls become key differentiators

User journeys and commerce | Agents are rapidly becoming the norm for merchants, consumers, and AI firms



Merchants

43%

of retailers are already piloting autonomous AI agents for merchandising and marketing

75%

say AI agents will be essential to competing by 2026



Consumers

38%

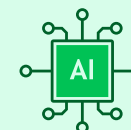
of US consumers have used GenAI for online shopping

52% plan to use GenAI

Among GenAI users,

~40%–50%

use it for research, recommendations, and deal discovery



AI model developers

1MM+

Shopify merchants that are addressable for agentic checkout *(through partnership with OpenAI)*

430MM+

PayPal active accounts that are now addressable for in-chat agentic purchases *(through partnership with Perplexity)*

User journeys and commerce | Parties are staking their claim within agentic commerce infrastructure

Illustrative exemplars

Merchants and aggregators

Target launched **AI-driven conversational search**

Amazon rolled out a **Buy for Me AI shopping agent**

Walmart introduced Sparky, a **GenAI assistant for product discovery and purchase support**

Technology companies

Meta is building **AI agents to power discovery and shopping**

Microsoft showcased **retail-ready agentic AI**

Google launched shopping with AI Mode with **price tracking, agentic checkout, and virtual try on**

Payments players

Stripe uses **AI to optimize checkout, approvals, and fraud screening**

Visa intelligent commerce enables **AI agents to shop and pay**

Mastercard Agent Pay enables **tokenized credentials for autonomous transactions**

AI-specific companies

OpenAI launched Operator to **browse, shop, and order autonomously**

Perplexity launched Buy with Pro for **in-chat discovery and purchase**

Anthropic is enabling AI agents to **browse, reason, and take actions across digital workflows**

Commerce platforms

Shopify is **developing agentic commerce infrastructure**, enabling discovery and transaction initiation

BigCommerce is building **agent-friendly infrastructure and optimized data**

Products and services | AI is driving new product revenue and margin expansion

Industry case studies

Risk and decision making

Real-time fraud scoring

~20%–40% reduction¹

Network and issuer auth optimization

~2pp acceptance uplift¹

Intelligent recurring payment recovery

~60% recovery¹

KYC and AML acceleration

~30%–40% productivity gains¹

Real-time underwriting automation

~50%+ faster approvals; ~35% cost efficiency

Commerce and conversion

Next-best-action customer acquisition

~3x content throughput

Dynamic checkout and tender optimization

~5%–10% uplift¹

Real-time personalized loyalty incentives

~5%–10% uplift from personalized promotions

Augmented and autonomous sales agents

~20%–40% cross-sell and upsell uplift

Service-to-sales offer orchestration

~30%–40% productivity improvement

Intelligence and automation

Automated dispute evidence and resolution

~35%–45% productivity uplift in customer claims

Revenue leakage and pricing gap detection

~3%–5% gross margin uplift

End-to-end data lineage and governance

~2x–3x faster and lower cost vs. manual

Collections segmentation and orchestration

~5%–10% lower NCOs; ~15% lower cost to collect

Customer onboarding and support assistant

~20% increase in fully automated onboarding



GenAI has not only augmented payments offer suite, but it is compressing launch timelines for new products and services

Note: Some capabilities are delivered as internal functions, while others are offered as products or services to ecosystem partners (e.g., co-brand partners). KYC = know your customer; AML = anti-money laundering; NCO = net charge-off.

1.Stripe (Optimized Checkout Suite, Smart Retries, Radar, Authorization Boost), stripe.com/payments/ai, accessed February 2026. Source: Expert interviews

Products and services | AI leaders in payments win through exceptional product velocity

Industry case studies

+20%

year-over-year increase in feature rollout

Leading payments platform increased **product and feature rollouts from >50 in 2024 to >60 in 2025**

~50%

shorter release cycles

Leading payments platform **reduced the average time between product launches from ~5 to ~2.5 months from 2024 to 2026**

~23%

CAGR in capability updates

Leading commerce platform increased **capability updates from >100 in 2023 to >150 in 2025**

Pace of change has quickened—and it is only accelerating further



Winning leaders in payments



High product velocity is enabled by AI-native architecture and decision engines

Sources: Stripe, "Our top product updates from Sessions 2025," Stripe Sessions 2025, 2024, and 2023, accessed February 2026; Shopify, Summer '25 Edition, Summer '23 Edition, Shopify Editions hub, accessed February 2026; Adyen press releases (September 2024–February 2026) covering Uplift, tokenization, Capital, and Personalize, adyen.com/press-and-media and related PR distributions, accessed Feb 2026.

Functions and operating model | GenAI is reshaping how payments companies operate

Core payments business is being redefined by GenAI

Marketing

Result: 3x throughput; 20%–40% lower costs; 60% fewer FTEs

Sales

Result: ~20%–30% higher conversion¹

Pricing and commercial

Result: 30%–40% uplift from cross-sell and upsell; 40% churn reduction

Onboarding and underwriting

Result: 30%–40% higher KYC productivity

Authorization and routing

Result: +2.2pp approval; ~57% recovery of failed recurring payments²

Fraud, AML, and disputes

Result: 40% reduced false positives

Servicing and operations

Result: >30% cost savings with 75%–85% volume containment

Collections (where relevant)

Result: 10%–20% lower collection costs; 5%–10% reduced charge-offs

Enterprise-wide productivity is being unlocked

Product management and engineering: Accelerated development through AI-assisted coding (>20% annual acceleration in product release)

Finance: Automated reporting and predictive financial planning (overall productivity in finance increases 20%–30%)

Legal and compliance: Automated contract review and regulatory monitoring (~50% reduction in third-party contract reviewing time)

Talent management: AI-powered recruiting and personalized learning (25% rise in retention and ~3x growth in employee engagement)

Note: FTE = full-time equivalent.

1. Articsledge, “What Is AI Lead Scoring and How Is It Revolutionizing Sales Conversion Today?” articsledge.com/post/ai-lead-scoring, accessed February 2026. 2. Stripe, “AI at Stripe” (Smart Retries, Authorization Boost), stripe.com/payments/ai, accessed February 2026; Source: Expert interviews.

Redefining payments | Agent-to-agent transactions may unlock new commerce models

Emerging use cases of high-frequency, low-value payments initiated by agents



Pay per website or API call



Automotive fees
(tolls, curb time, and congestion fees)



Trusted agent verification



Agent compute time



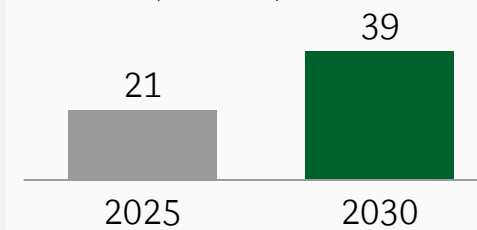
Device bandwidth and energy



Microtask completion

Trends indicate the growth of an agentic microtransaction economy

Globally connected IoT devices (billions)



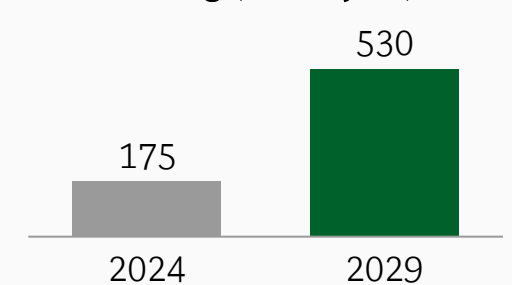
Automated digital interactions now exceed human activity

51% of global web traffic is automated
~17% YoY growth in global internet traffic

Usage-based pricing is now mainstream in SaaS

~85% of SaaS companies use some form of UBP
77% of large software companies incorporate consumption models

Global data creation is accelerating (zettabytes)



Note: API = application programming interface; IoT = Internet of Things; UBP = usage-based pricing; YoY = year over year.
 Sources: IoT Analytics, global IoT device forecast (H1 2025 update), 2025; Metronome, "State of usage-based pricing," 2025; IDC Global DataSphere Forecast, published by Statista, Nov 2025; Cloudflare Radar, Year in Review 2024; Anura, "How Much Internet Traffic Is Bots?," Oct 2025; expert interviews.

Becoming an AI-first enterprise is not just about upgrading tools, it requires rethinking the organization's processes

In a digitally enhanced model, people are the core drivers, and they use AI tools to boost efficiency



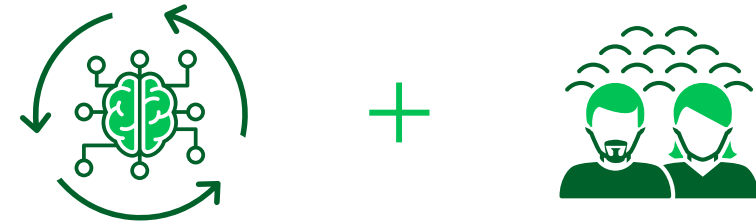
Core processes are built around **people...**

...and supplemented by **digital tools, including AI**

Humans drive decisions, and AI assists

- Manual dispute workflows with AI drafting
- Analysts monitor fraud; rules are updated periodically

In an AI-first model, AI agents are the core drivers and humans close the gap



Core processes are built around **AI agents...**

...and supplemented by **people**

Agents drive decisions with human oversight

- Agentic dispute intake, evidence, and resolution
- Real-time fraud orchestration and adaptive controls
- Dynamic routing and pricing within guardrails

Payments leaders should focus, fund, and transform to capture value



Focus bets on P&L impact



- Choose three to five enterprise bets tied to P&L; must-haves:
 - New products and services (e.g., fraud tools and processing optimization)
 - Accelerate the product development life cycle
 - Develop an agentic commerce strategy (e.g., stake in purchase journey)
 - Deploy internal agents to automate and evolve key functions



Fund and govern for maximum impact



- Back each bet with real capital and top talent
 - Fund end-to-end ownership (data → models → decision making → operations)
- Govern with a value and risk PMO to drive cadence, adoption, and accountability



Transform culture and operating model to become an AI-first organization



- Hardwire KPIs to outcomes and change how work gets done
 - Set stretch targets and hold teams accountable to realize outcomes
 - Explicitly link AI investment to enterprise value (e.g., earnings and TSR) to ensure employees and owners understand the impact of AI spending
- Drive change across tech, talent, culture, and ways of working
- Redesign the organization and controls so AI is embedded in core decision making

Focus | Select three to five big bets to maximize the impact of an end-to-end AI transformation

Discipline matters

Three to five scaled bets outperform 25 fragmented pilots

Must-haves

Build new

Create AI-enabled products and services across the value chain

Ship faster

Accelerate the software and product development life cycle

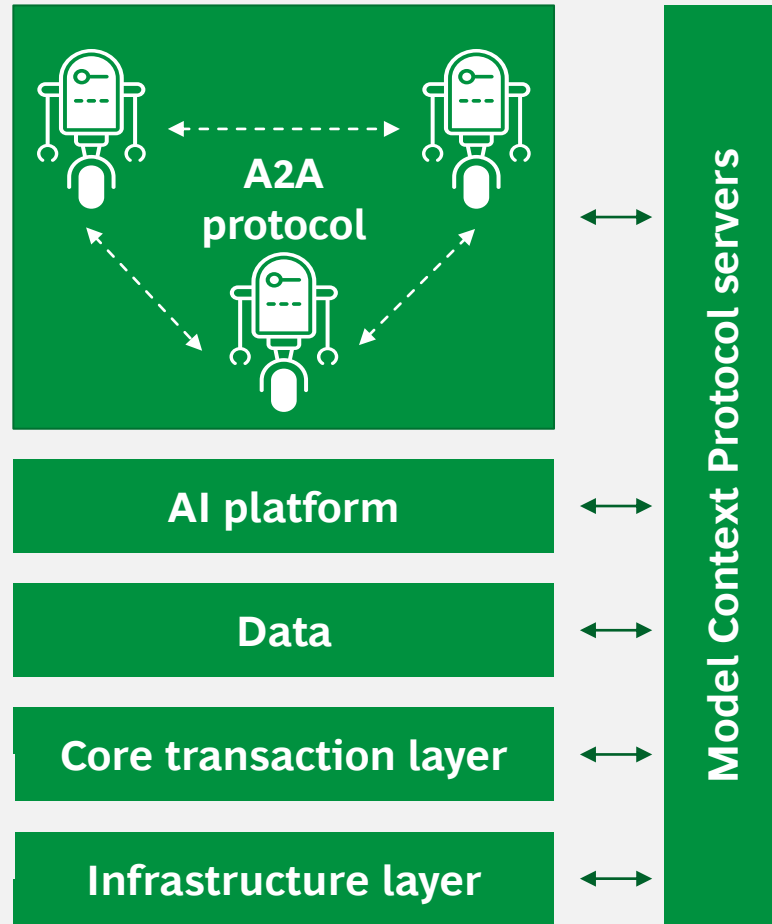
Orchestrate agents

Build an enterprise agent strategy across data, decision making, and workflows

Automate at scale

Deploy internal agents in servicing, risk operations, onboarding, and back office

Deep Dive | Agent-to-agent protocols and Model Context Protocol win with structure



Payments firms need interoperable protocols to operate in AI-native ecosystems

- **A2A protocols: agent-to-agent interaction**
 - Ensure interoperability across agents running on different LLMs and within diverse commerce ecosystems
- **MCP: discovery, coordination, and tool access**
 - Maintain a robust capability catalog to surface the right agent in context
 - Dynamically connect systems to deliver real-time, accurate, and synchronized data
- **Trust orchestration layer**
 - Govern fraud, scams, identity verification, and risk controls end-to-end

Fund | When building the platform and talent foundation, companies should not underinvest in either

Fully fund the technology backbone...

- Agent orchestration with auditability and model risk controls
- Enterprise data foundation (sourcing, tagging, cleansing, and maintaining)
- Tech debt remediation—leveraging GenAI—to secure the foundation
- Event streaming and feature store for transaction-level models

...and overinvest in talent and centralized execution

- Name a senior AI leader with a mandate across product, risk, and operations
- Embed AI product owners in each bet
- Acquire top applied-AI and platform-engineering talent
- Fund a centralized, empowered PMO to drive delivery cadence and value realization

The scarcest resource is not capital – it is elite AI talent paired with disciplined execution

Transform | Becoming AI-first is an organizational transformation

We define AI-first payments organizations using four key attributes



Agentic execution on the transaction path

AI drives approval, fraud protection, routing, servicing, and dispute workflows



Real-time adaptive decision making

Models continuously optimize risk, pricing, and customer experience



Closed-loop learning at scale

Every transaction and interaction improves model performance

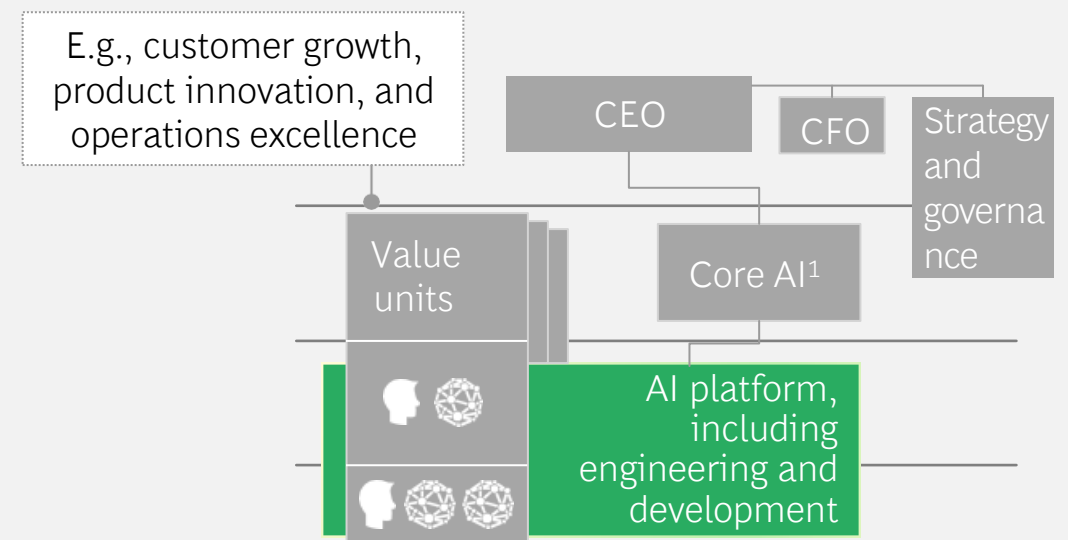


Embedded governance and model risk controls

Capabilities to explain and audit are built into the stack, as well as human oversight

1. Including strategy and governance.

AI-first organizations have a fundamentally novel and different organizational structure



Organizational change is not incremental; it is redefining the organization to have **AI agents** executing and humans orchestrating, with an **embedded platform**

BCG experts | Key contacts for payments AI transformations



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Lauren Wiener

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Jeanne Bickford

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Helen Han

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Julie Bedard

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Vikram Sivakumar

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