The State of Business Automation in the Enterprise

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ability of companies to gather, manage and analyze data is essential to their ability to make informed and timely business decisions. Increasingly, companies are embracing cloud-based platforms that use artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) to automate a wide range of their business processes.

When AI and ML are used to automate business processes, companies are able to more quickly and cost-effectively make data-informed decisions, better serve their customers, and reduce operating costs. For instance, AI- and ML-powered automation can speed up many types of business processes, from facilitating requests and approvals to resolving customer disputes to handling payments.

But IT leaders also understand that automating business processes presents myriad challenges, especially in managing data and improving workflows. And when it comes to using AI and ML to automate decision-making, IT leaders have concerns, especially in correctly interpreting automated predictions.

This survey of **406** technology influencers and decision-makers in the U.S., U.K., Australia and New Zealand by BizTechInsights, on behalf of IBM, reveals the top benefits and use cases of business automation, what they consider to be the leading challenges and concerns, and more.

Note: Percentage values have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

SURVEY RESULTS

Organizations Find Two Main Benefits in Using Business Automation

Organizations turn to automation with a variety of business goals in mind—and report a variety of benefits. Nonetheless, nearly half of respondents (47%) were split between the two main business objectives from their automation solution: delivering a personalized customer experience (24%) and reducing operating costs (23%).

The remaining respondents reported a variety of other benefits, particularly driving revenue growth (17%) and supporting sales and marketing (16%). Performing field service or predictive maintenance, on the other hand, trailed behind, with fewer than one in 10 respondents identifying it as the main business objective for their automation solution.

Fig. 1: How does your current business automation solution enable your organization's business objectives?
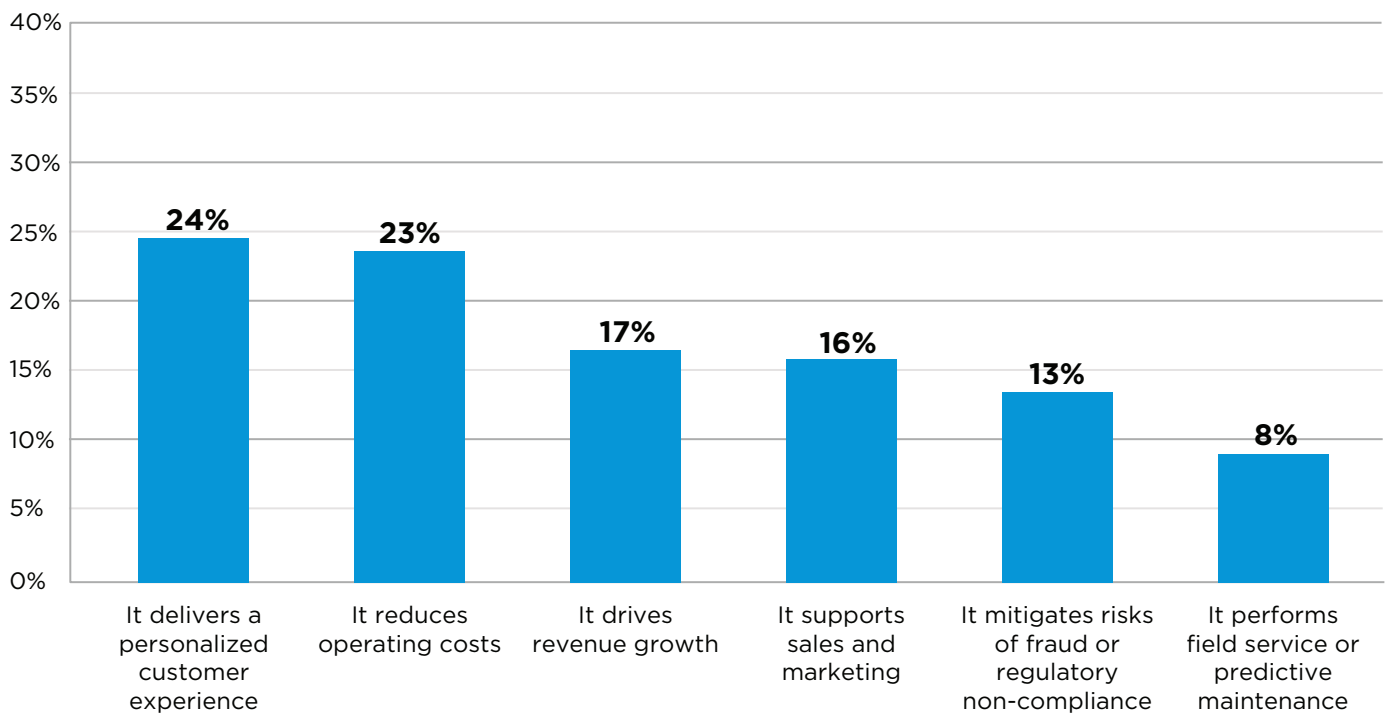
AI and ML Present Many Potential Use Cases

Our respondents were somewhat divided about the most beneficial use for AI and ML in their current business automation. Nonetheless, a clear theme emerged: the importance of speed. More than half of respondents (53%) chose an option that explicitly used the words "faster," "quicker" or "accelerate" in regard to facilitating requests (24%), resolving issues or customer disputes (19%), and processing payments (10%).

Of the responses that didn't mention speed, improved data accuracy was the major benefit: Two in 10 respondents (20%) want to use AI and ML to update data while reducing potential errors.

Fig. 2: Which of the following use cases would be most beneficial for using AI and ML to enhance your current business automation?
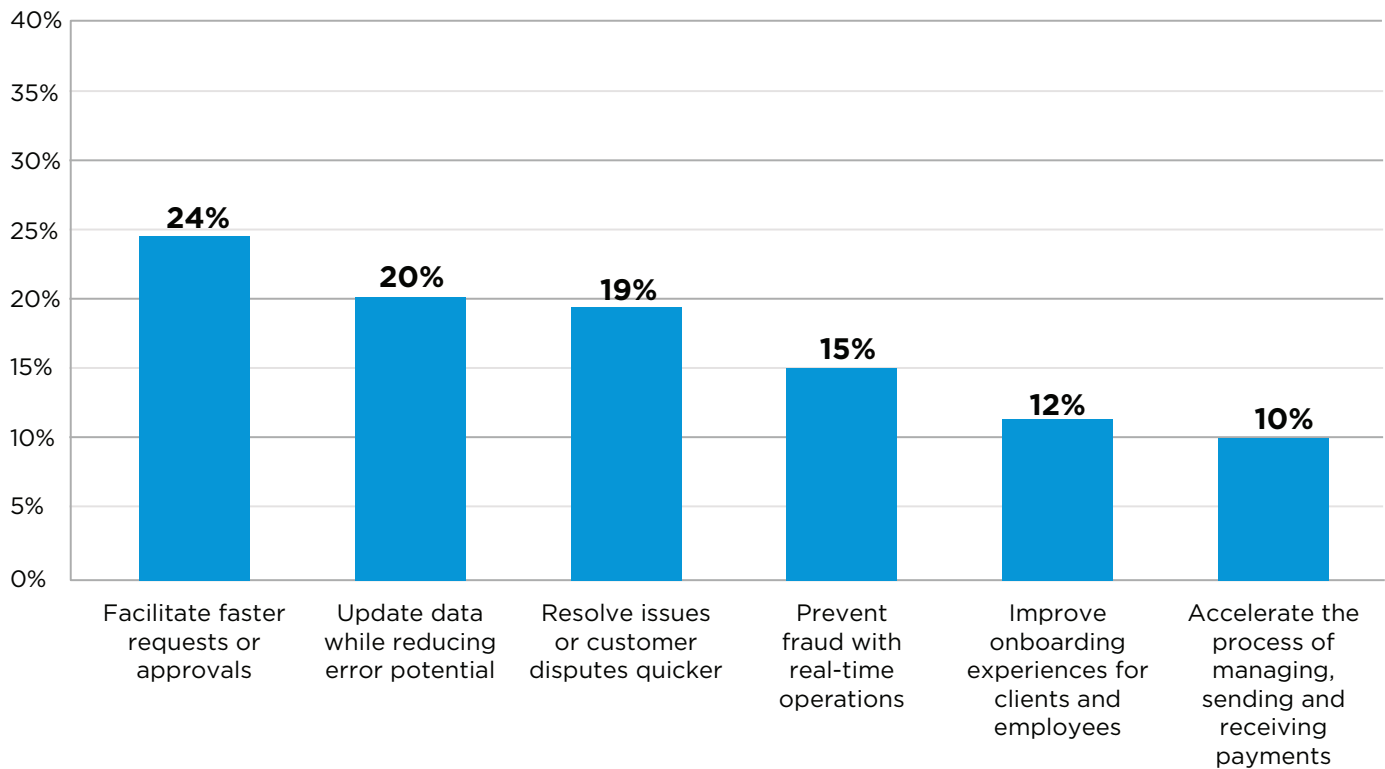
Data and Workflows Are Major Barriers

In reflecting on their biggest business automation challenge, nearly seven in 10 respondents (68%) were evenly divided between the two top answers: A little more than a third (35%) said they want to better collect, organize and classify data, while slightly less (33%) said they want to continuously improve workflows. And 25% said they wanted to pinpoint where automation could improve business performance.

Somewhat surprisingly, only 6% of respondents said that wanting to improve employee decision-making and outcomes was the biggest challenge on their business automation journey.

Fig. 3: What is your biggest challenge on your business automation journey?

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35%	We want to better collect, organize and classify data
33%	We want to continuously improve workflows
25%	We want to identify where automation can improve business performance
6%	We want to improve employee decision-making and outcomes
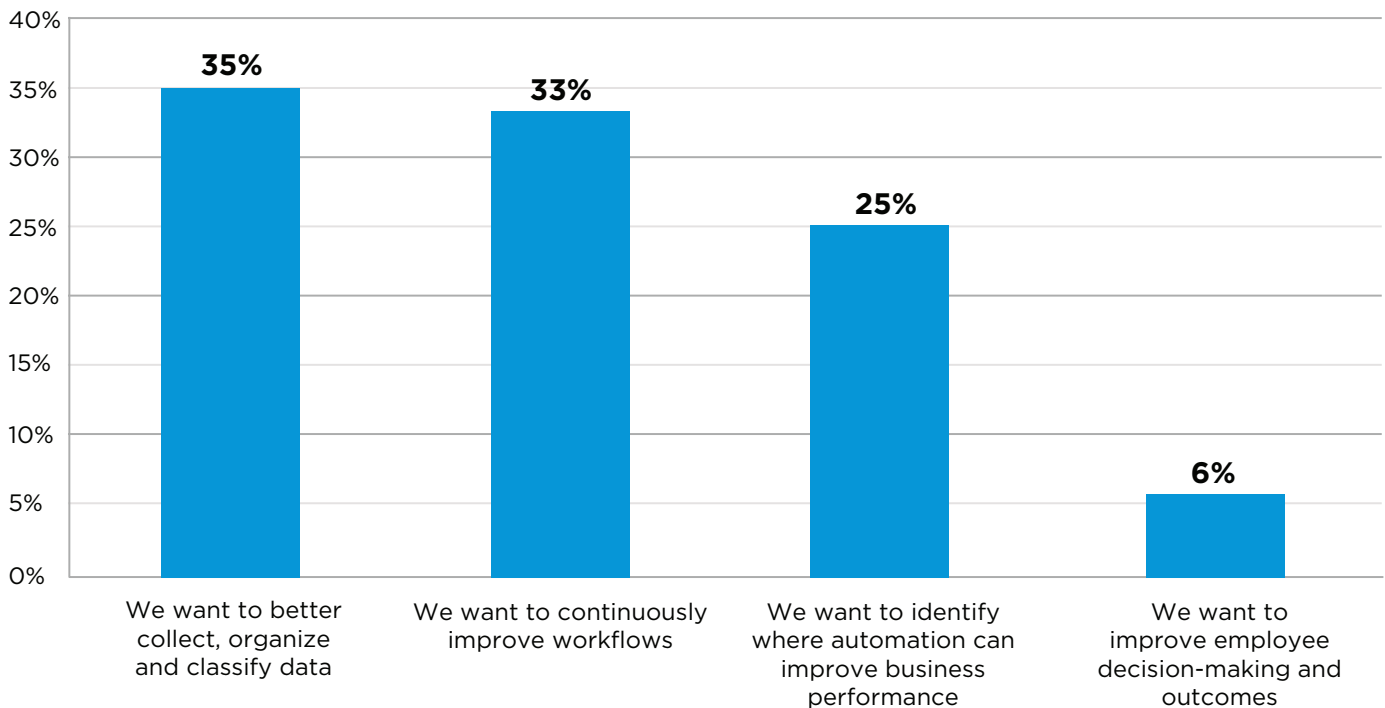
Using AI and ML to Automate Decision-Making Holds Significant Challenges

Whether or not respondents saw a role in AI and ML for automating business decision-making, they certainly saw challenges. By a wide margin, our respondents said correctly interpreting the predictions of AI and ML decision-making is their top issue, with 44% of them identifying it as their biggest challenge. One third (34%) pointed to a skills gap within their teams as their biggest challenge in using AI and ML to automate business decision-making.

Much less challenging to the respondents were identifying, validating and using AI and ML models (15%), or maintaining data quality and consistency across different environments (8%).

Fig. 4: Which of the following is your biggest challenge when it comes to using AI and ML to automate business decision-making?
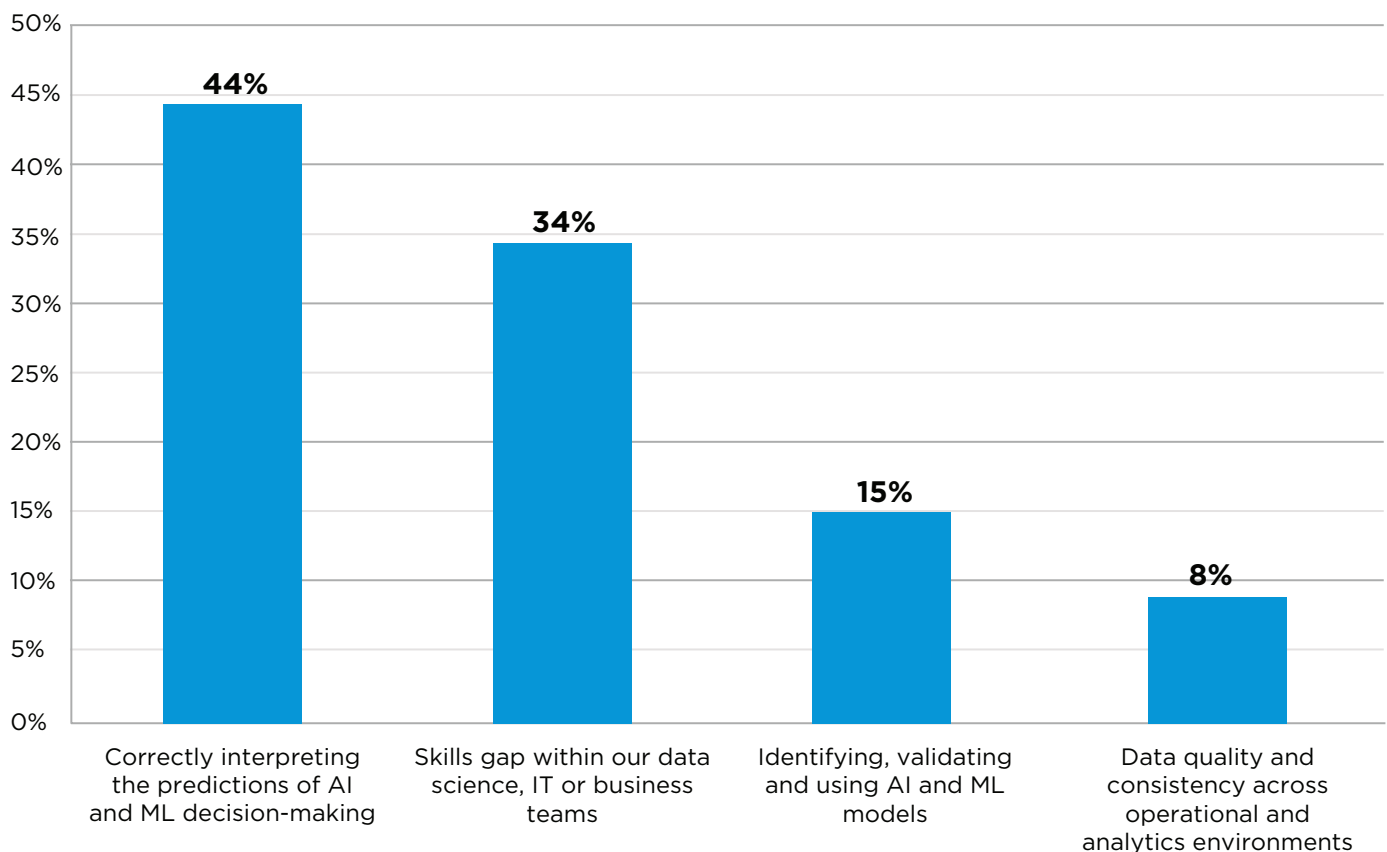
Regulatory Compliance Is the Major Concern with AI and ML for Decision Support

Although respondents differed on their biggest concern about using AI and ML to support decision-making, one concern emerged as the clear frontrunner overall: 43% said their top concern was unintentionally running afoul of regulations. That's more than double the number of respondents who picked any of the other three concerns. For example, the second most common choice—the concern that stakeholders would feel a loss of control—garnered just 21% of the responses.

Similarly, less than one in five said their biggest concern was either an unknown bias in the algorithms (19%) or the loss of public trust (18%).

Fig. 5: What is your biggest concern about using AI and ML to support decision-making?
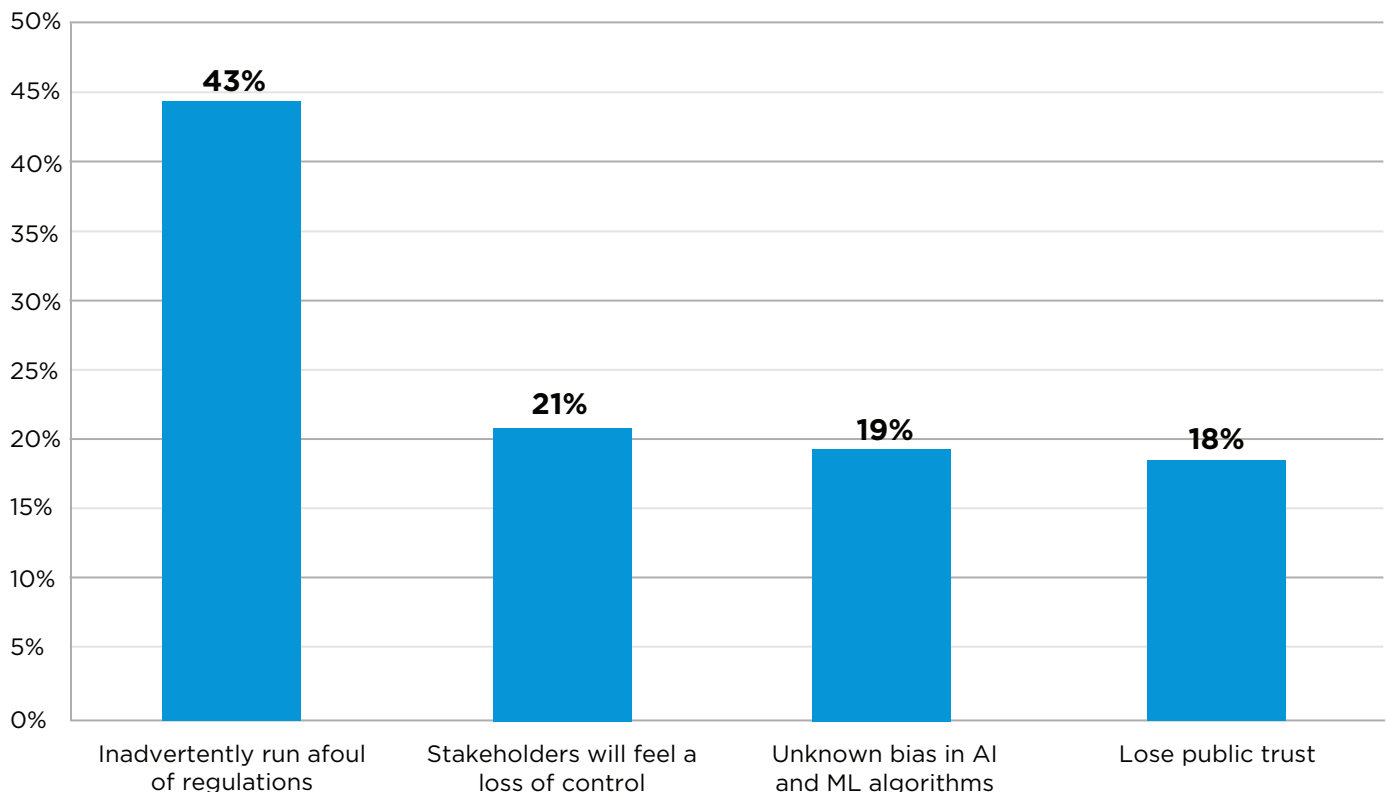
For Many Organizations, Digital Decisioning Platforms Need to Model Operations

An AI-driven digital decisioning platform can have a variety of capabilities, and respondents differed on which ones they valued most for their organization. One third (33%) said the ability to model operations was the single most important capability of an AI-driven digital decisioning platform while 28% said the ability to automate across on-premises, cloud and SaaS was most vital.

Simplified data integration was somewhat less important overall. Only 20% of respondents said that capability was the most important. Similarly, only 18% said that rapid iteration with no-code or low-code deployment was the most important capability of an AI-driven digital decisioning platform to their organization.

Fig. 6: What are the most important capabilities of an AI-driven digital decisioning platform to your organization?
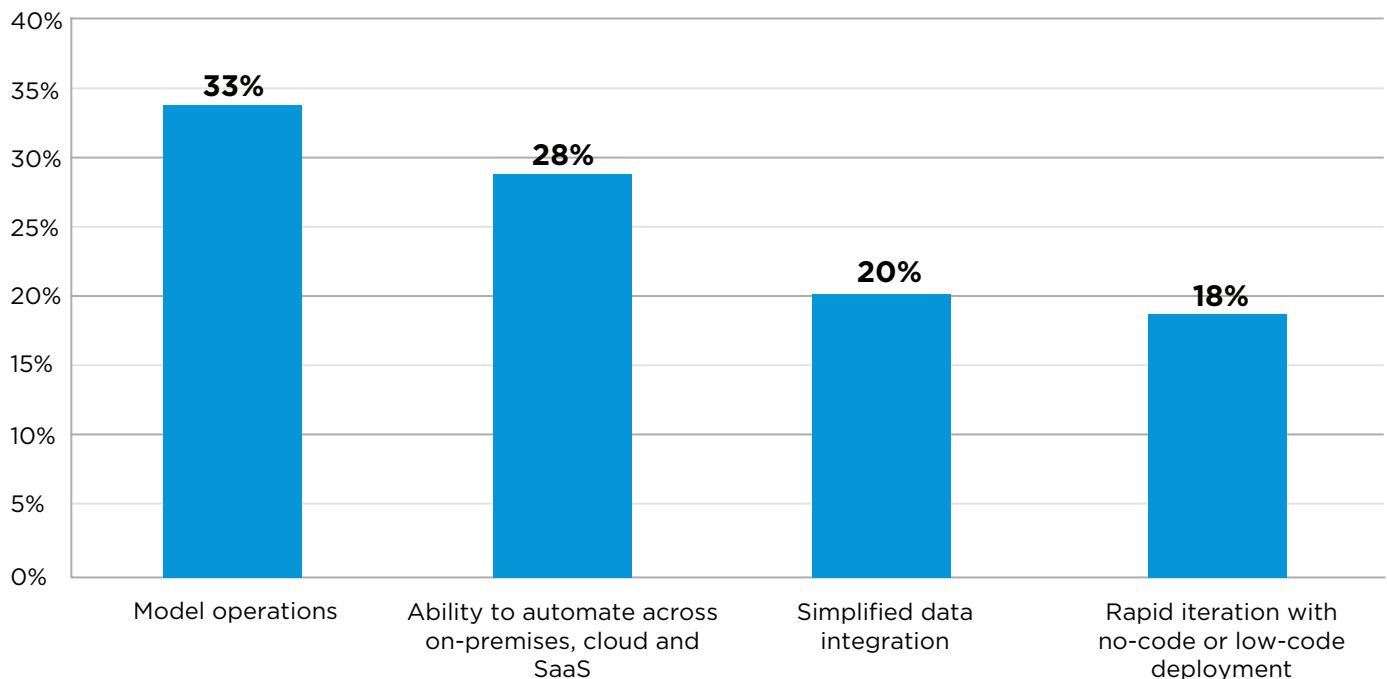
Conclusion

In pursuit of more personalized customer experiences and lower operating costs, business enterprises are increasingly turning to automation, particularly with the aid of AI and ML. These new technologies promise to support decision-making and to speed up and otherwise improve many essential business processes.

Our survey of 406 technology decision-makers and influencers found a broad realization of these benefits of AI- and ML-powered automation. Respondents recognized that such tools have the potential to speed up requests and approvals, payment handling, and even customer dispute resolution. Other leading use cases include preventing fraud with real-time operations and improving onboarding experiences for clients and employees. Many IT leaders also realize automation's ability to reduce data errors.

But respondents also foresaw challenges in using AI and ML to automate decision-making, chief among them correctly interpreting the predictions of these tools. IT leaders also expressed concern about inadvertent problems with regulatory compliance. As for what IT leaders want from an AI-driven digital decisioning platform, their most-desired capabilities are the ability to model operations, following by process automation across on-premises, cloud and SaaS environments for a seamless data experience. ■

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