CISCO

Cisco's 2025 AI Briefing: CEO Edition

Essential insights on CEOs' fears, ambitions, and action on AI and secure networks.

The leadership blueprint turning fear and ambition into **strategic action.**

AI is rewriting the rules of business, but outdated infrastructure and gaps in CEOs' understanding of AI risk disrupting the boardroom and stifling growth. Without the right mix of skills and knowledge, a secure and modern foundation, and trusted partners by your side, even the best AI won't deliver. For CEOs, the time to act is now: upgrade, secure, and embrace AI – or risk falling behind.

Highlights

97%
plan to **adopt and incorporate AI** (or more AI) into their business. But only 2% feel ready for AI

73%
are concerned about falling behind competitors because of **gaps in IT knowledge or network infrastructure**

96%
believe **choosing a trusted partner** to implement networking solutions in the AI era is important. 66% say it's "very important"

74%
believe their **understanding of AI poses a barrier** to their ability to ask critical questions in the boardroom

74%
feel their **business loses opportunities** because of outdated infrastructure

Fear comes
from the unknown.
But the
greatest risk
is inaction.

CEOs fear falling behind competitors and missing out on opportunities because of outdated infrastructure and knowledge gaps. They know if they don't act decisively, the risk cutting themselves off to new opportunities, growth, and market share.
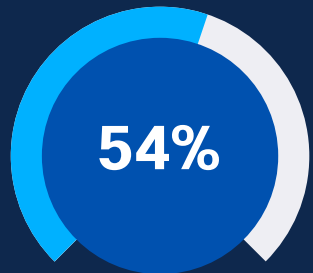
The Risk of Falling Behind:
CEO Fears

CEOs' fears are more about the consequences – falling behind, missed opportunities and failing to compete. They feel compelled to act – or risk losing out.
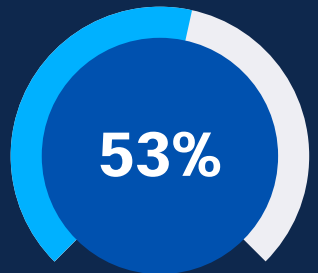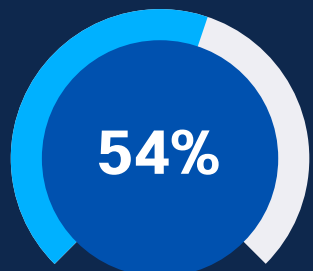
53% fearful that their business is missing out on opportunities because of a lack of investment in new technology
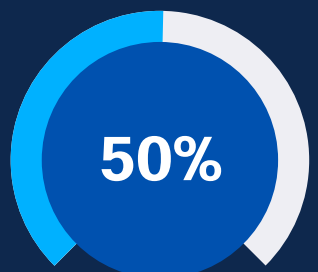
54% fear of missing out is driving their business investment decisions
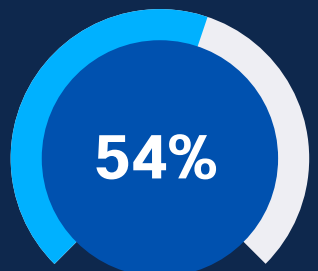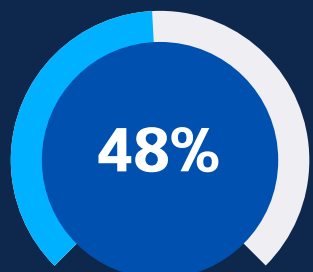
54% fear their business will fall behind because of gaps in IT knowledge

54% fear their business will fall behind because of gaps in AI understanding

50% fear their business will fall behind because of gaps in infrastructure
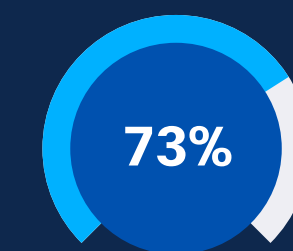
48% fear the risks of AI are holding their business back

Navigating Barriers to Progress: CEOs' Concerns

CEOs' concerns are often about barriers to progress - security, budgets, and infrastructure. They're weighing the risks and obstacles without distress or paralysis.

73% are concerned about falling behind competitors because of gaps in IT knowledge or network infrastructure
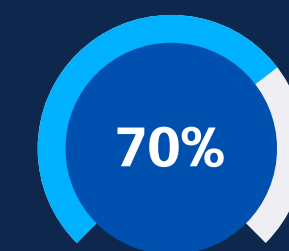
70% are more concerned about the security of their network in the AI era. **36%** are 'much more concerned'
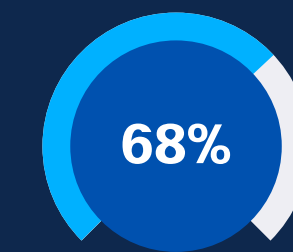
68% are concerned about the current state of their secure network. **40%** are very concerned

63% are concerned about the opportunity cost of not investing more in technology

The cost of inaction

The big risks CEOs see if they lag behind the competition on upgrading their networks.

CEOs know that if their network infrastructure can't set the pace for growth, they are limiting their future prospects - not just through mi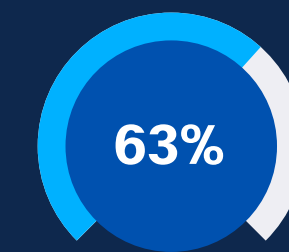ssed opportunities, but by disrupting the experiences for staff and customers alike. The network is a strategic asset for those CEOs who can see beyond an operational tool and use it to evolve their competitive edge in an AI-driven future.

35%
see increased operating costs

33%
see productivity loss

31%
see reduced profits

32%
see missed opportunities

28%
see loss of market share

25%
see poor client or customer retention

21%
see poor staff retention

10%
see no big risks in particular in lagging behind the competition on upgrading their network infrastructure
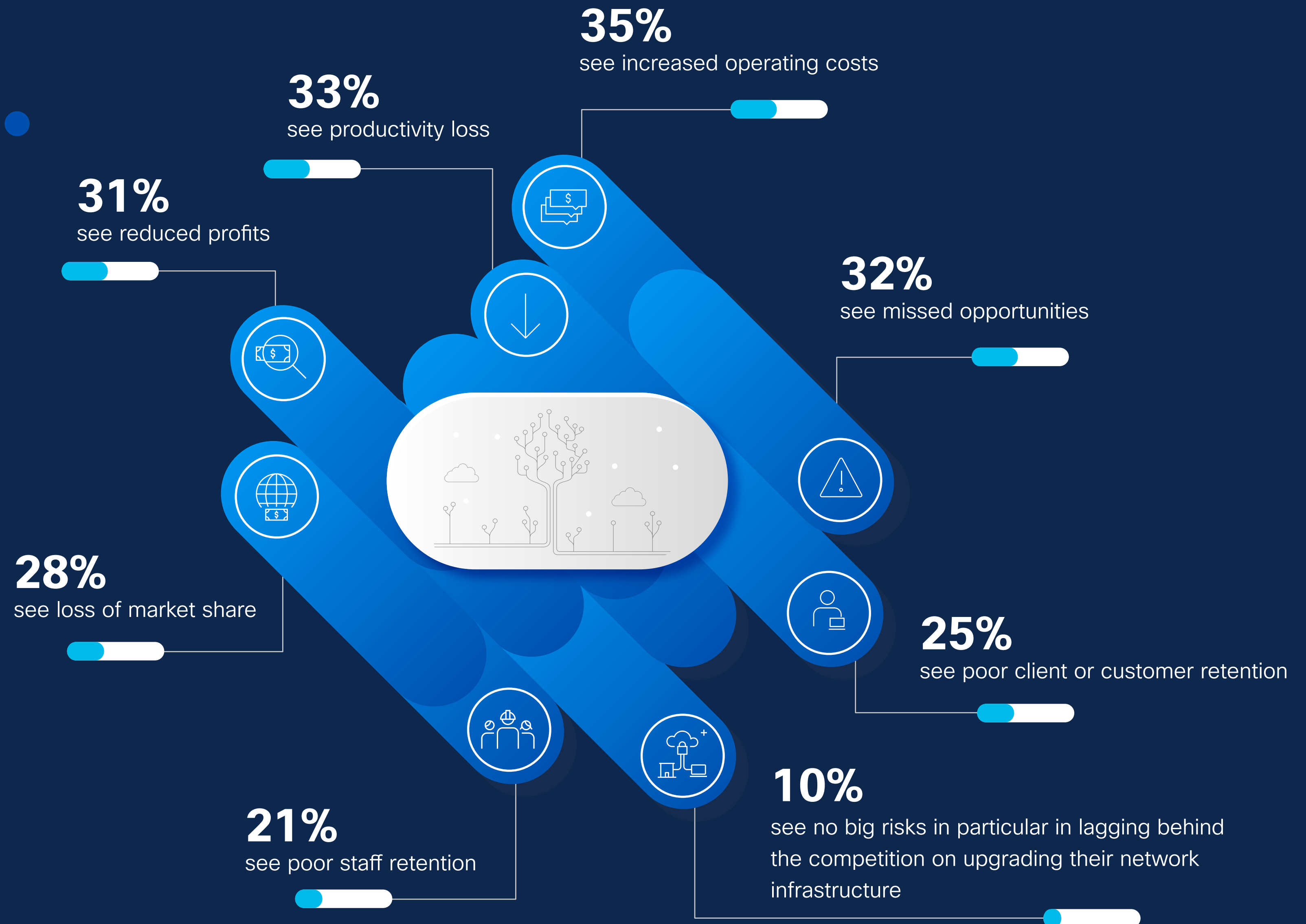
AI: Your business's sharpest edge – or its weakest link.

Nearly all CEOs tell us they understand AI's benefits, yet many admit their knowledge gaps hinder critical decisions and slow business growth. The opportunity is clear – but so are the stakes.

82% of CEOs tell us they have a high level of understanding of AI's potential benefits for their business.

The CEO Paradox

Most recognize AI's potential and plan to integrate it into their operations. But many fear gaps in their knowledge will hinder decisions in the boardroom and stifle growth – risking missed opportunities and falling behind competitors

74% believe their understanding of AI poses a barrier to their ability to ask critical questions in the boardroom.
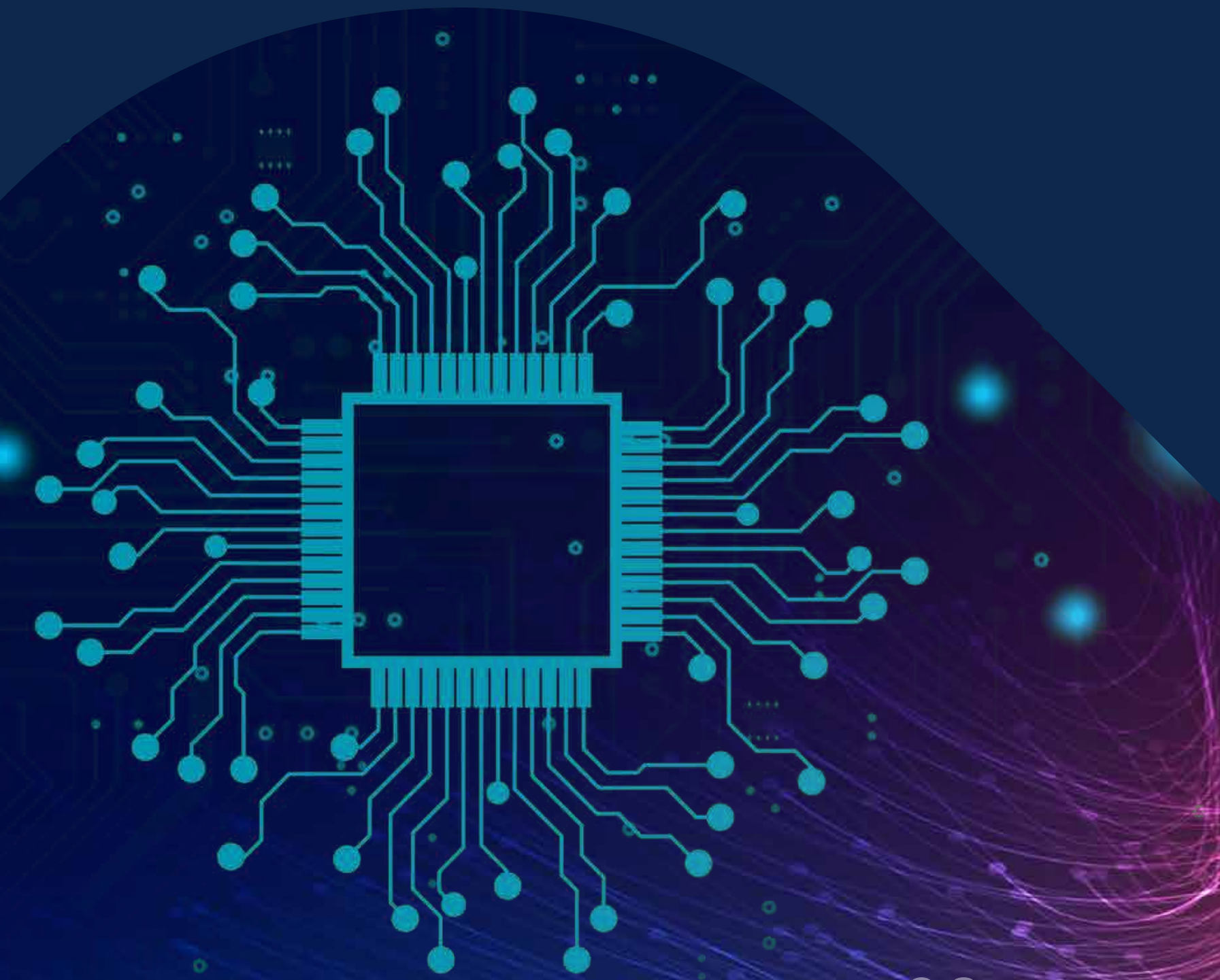
But...

74% believe their understanding of AI poses a barrier to their ability to make informed decisions.

58% believe their understanding of AI will have a negative impact on the growth of their business over the next 5 years

20% say it'll have a very significant impact.
42% say it'll have no negative impact at all.

CEOs recognize AI's transformative potential

For the leaders who confront their fears, the rewards will transcend simply "keeping up". CEOs are turning to AI to drive efficiency, spur innovation, and outpace competitors. But what's holding CEOs back from fulfilling that ambition and realizing AI's potential?

97% plan to adopt and incorporate AI (or more AI) into their business.

to improve operational efficiency and reduce costs
69%

to innovate, creating new products and/or services
68%

But why?

to stay ahead of competitors
54%

to monetize or generate revenue
52%
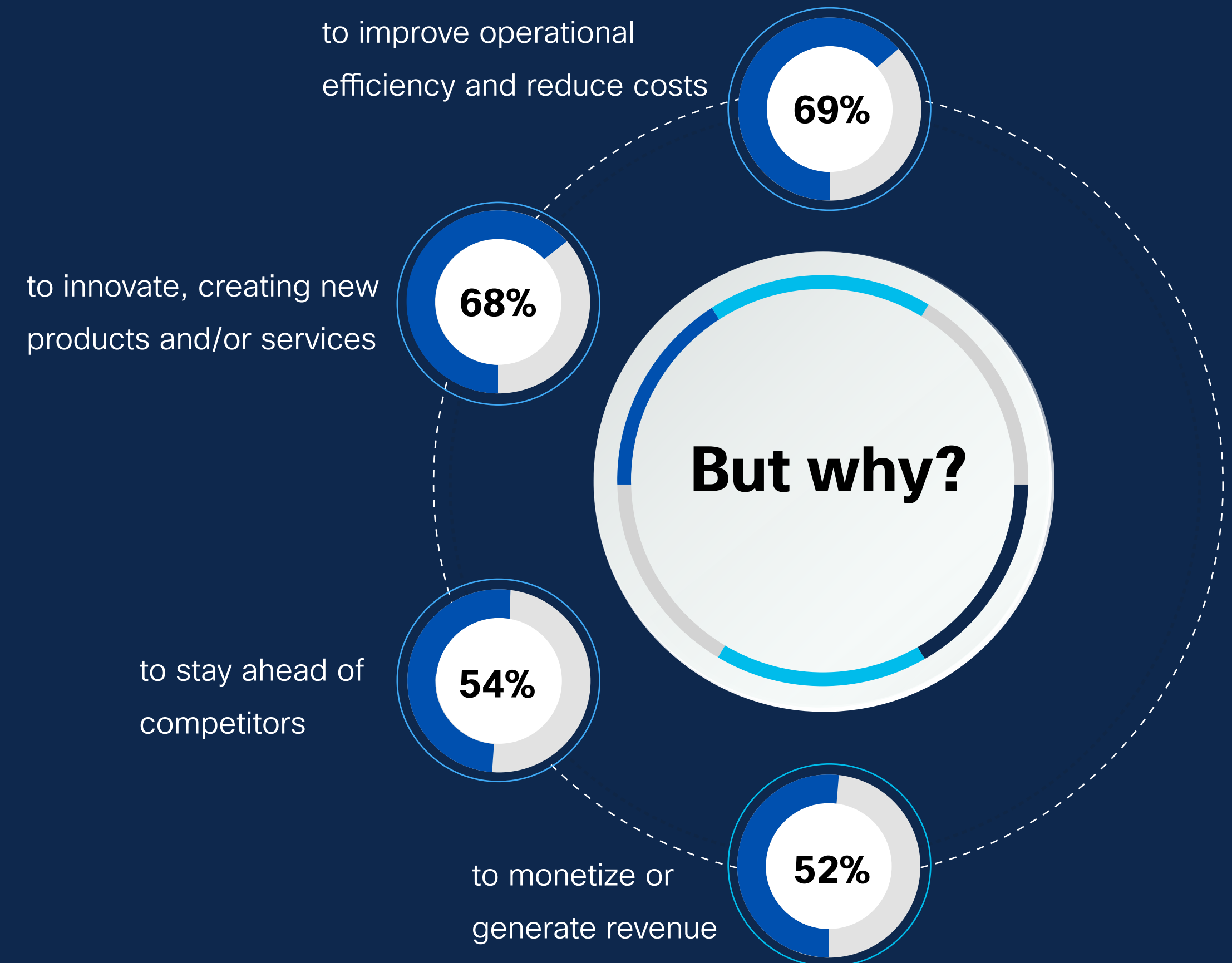
What's holding CEOs back from adopting and incorporating AI (or more AI) into their business?

35% are concerned about infrastructure limitations

33% are concerned about budget constraints

28% are concerned the potential benefits have been exaggerated

10% have no barriers or concerns.

40% are concerned about skills and knowledge gaps in their business

34% are concerned about security

30% are concerned about the lack of compelling business cases

26% are concerned about their personal lack of knowledge
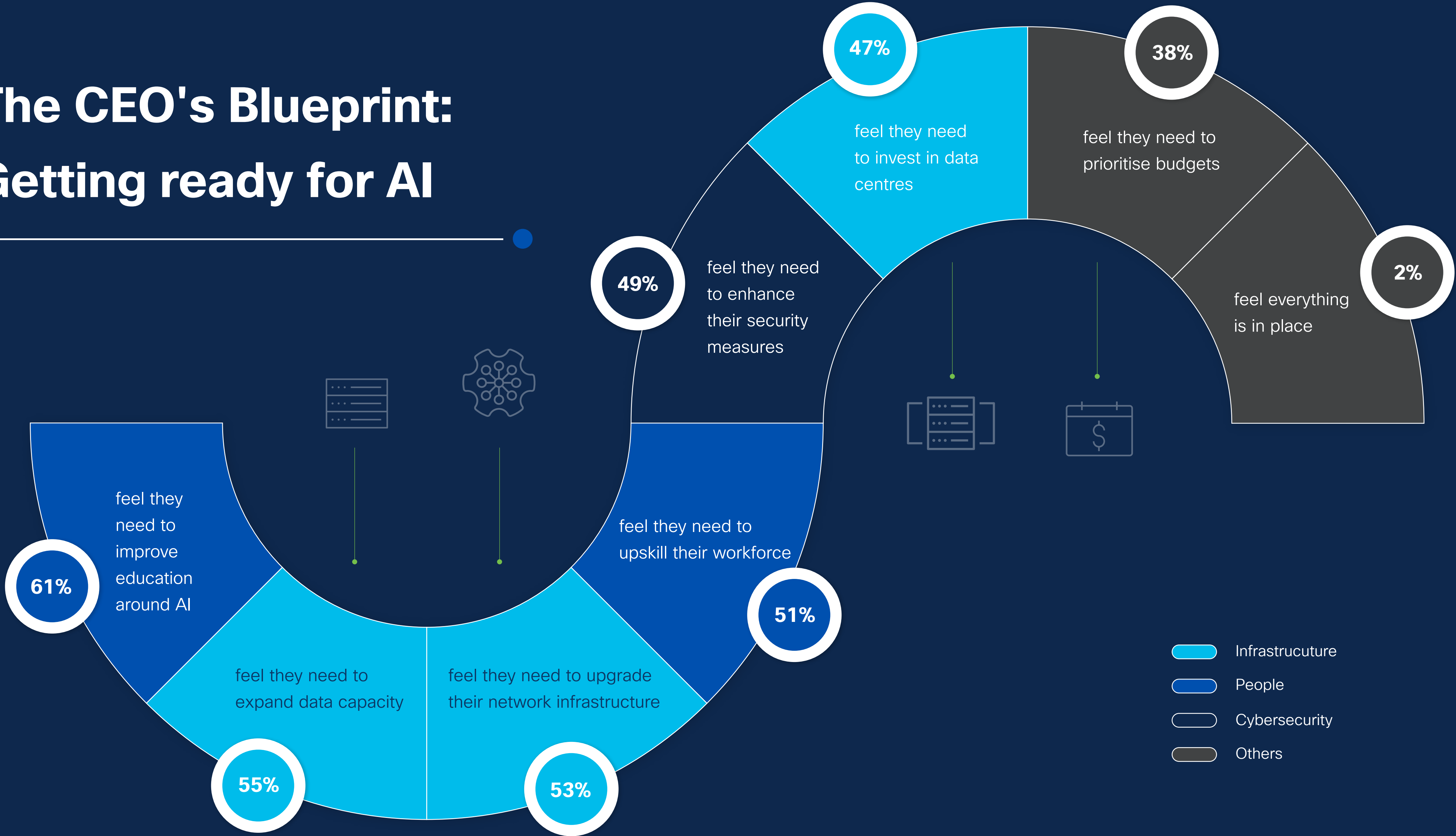
The CEO's Blueprint:

Turning fear into progress.

People, infrastructure, and cybersecurity make up the CEO transformation blueprint for an AI-driven future. But will fear or a lack of investment hold them back?

The CEO's Blueprint: Getting ready for AI

47% feel they need to invest in data centres

38% feel they need to prioritise budgets

49% feel they need to enhance their security measures

2% feel everything is in place

61% feel they need to improve education around AI

51% feel they need to upskill their workforce

55% feel they need to expand data capacity

53% feel they need to upgrade their network infrastructure

Legend:
- Infrastrucuture
- People
- Cybersecurity
- Others

# Technology leadership is business leadership – and the future demands it.

Success in the AI era will depend on expert collaboration, bold investments, and decisive leadership. The future will belong to those who can lead modern networks and technology to drive growth, resilience, and innovation.
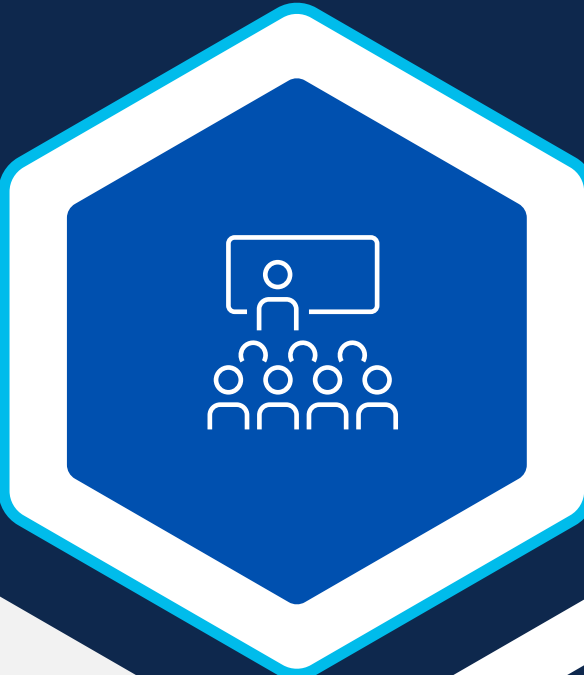
Leadership and partners in the AI era

82%
feel they have the level of knowledge required **to keep pace with new technologies**
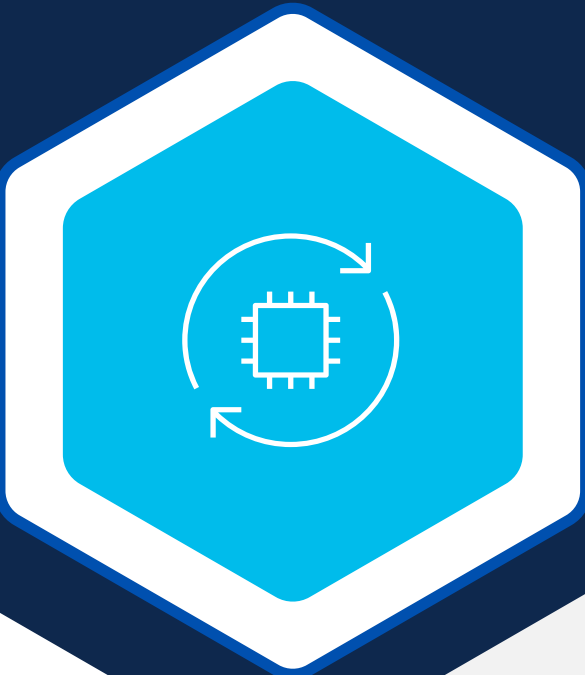
78%
increasingly **rely on their CTO or CIO** for guidance regarding investing in new technologies

84%
agree CEOs will require an **increased knowledge and awareness** of new technologies in the coming years

83%
agree the role of **CTO is becoming increasingly important** in business

82%
expect to see more **CTOs become CEOs in the future** because of the growing importance of technology

96%
believe choosing a **trusted partner** to implement networking solutions in the AI era is important. 65.6% say it's "very important". <5% say it's not important (3.72%).

Methodology

About the research

Conducted by Opinion Matters between December 24, 2024, and January 2, 2025, this research explores how CEOs are approaching AI adoption, the fears and concerns shaping their strategies, and the blueprint they're using to navigate the AI era.

Who we surveyed

- **2,503** CEOs aged **25+**
- Companies with **250+ employees**
- Global representation, with **500** responses from each of the following regions

  - Europe
  - North America
  - South America
  - Africa
  - APAC (Asia & Australia)

How to interpret the data

Where CEOs were given multiple response options, percentages will not total 100%.

A companion study to follow

Cisco will follow up this research with insight into the views of IT leaders responsible for their organizations' networking infrastructure.