

Defensibility in the Age of AI

What founders, business leaders, investors, and other practitioners think about sustaining competitive advantage in an age of rapidly advancing artificial intelligence

Sompo Digital Laboratory EMEA

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Contents

	Foreword	3
	Executive Summary	4
01	What if familiar sources of advantage become easier to reproduce?	8
	Five terms used in this report	11
02	Where respondents see their strongest competitive advantage today	12
03	<i>Pure feature differentiation</i> and <i>access to AI</i> were most often selected as sources of advantage that have become less reliable	14
04	How quickly respondents think a competitor could copy the core of what customers buy	17
05	What competitors need beyond a copyable product or service	20
06	Why adapting faster is not, by itself, a complete answer to competition	24
07	Dependencies can weaken a business even when its offering remains attractive	26
08	Four tensions to consider in the next strategy discussion	29
09	Questions the findings raise for leaders	30
10	A snapshot of competition during rapid technological change	32
11	Questions this research leaves open	33
	How we designed and analyzed our survey	34
	Selected external context and references	38
	About the research and publication	39

Foreword

FOREWORD BY KAUSHIK SUBRAMANIAN

Every investor asks a version of the same question in diligence: why will this company still be winning in five years? For a long time the answers were familiar. Proprietary technology, hard-won data, a distribution edge, a brand customers trust. Generative AI hasn't made those answers wrong. It has shortened how long any of them can be taken for granted.

That's why I welcome this report from Sompo Digital Laboratory EMEA. It asks the right question while the ground is still moving, and it is honest about what 64 practitioners can and cannot tell us.

Two findings stood out. First, 70% of founders and startup operators said pure feature differentiation has become less reliable, against 18% of other respondents. Founders feel this first because they live it. Investors and incumbents should treat that as an early signal, not noise.

Second, the report draws a line I wish more pitch decks drew: replication is not displacement. Copying a product is getting cheaper. Reaching the right buyer, proving ROI and earning trust over years are not. The strongest AI companies I meet treat their technical lead as a window, and use it to compound what is hard to copy: data from real deployments, workflow depth and customer relationships.

I'd push back on framing deep specialization and faster adaptation as a choice. When the barriers to building are this low, what matters is the combination of execution speed and taste. Speed without taste ships more of what anyone could build. Taste without speed misses the window. Taste is knowing which problem is worth solving, what to leave out and what makes a product feel obvious to the customer. That answers the report's sharpest question, "What is our speed for?": to get good judgment in front of customers before anyone else does.

Finally, single-provider dependency deserves more attention than it gets. Building on frontier models is an advantage until it becomes a single point of failure.

Durable advantage in the age of AI will rarely come from what you build. It will come from how fast you learn, how well you choose, and what you keep.

Kaushik Subramanian

Partner at EQT Ventures

Executive Summary

What our survey found

“Can it be built?” and “Can it be kept?” are becoming inseparable strategic questions. The first concerns whether an organization can create, maintain, or improve an offering; the second concerns whether it can sustain an advantage once competitors can build something comparable. Here, *building* includes both launching something new and refining what already exists. For knowledge-intensive organizations — businesses whose value depends on expertise, technology, data, intellectual property, workflows, judgment, or customer relationships — faster development makes the second question more pressing, not less.

This inquiry began in summer 2025 by asking whether increasingly capable and accessible artificial intelligence (AI) might make established advantages easier to imitate. Here, AI means general-purpose large language models and related generative systems used for activities such as analysis, coding, content generation, and tool use.

The technological context continued to shift during the inquiry, with new model releases and public developments in scientific applications, cybersecurity, and access governance. Those developments provide context for the question; they are not evidence that a particular business advantage has weakened.

Existing strategy and productivity research provides useful context, but it cannot directly answer how practitioners currently judge defensibility under rapidly changing AI capabilities. We therefore chose an exploratory practitioner survey to capture those judgments while the technology itself was still moving.

Our exploratory practitioner survey received 64 completed submissions between 05 June 2026 and 23 August 2026. It records the judgments of a self-selected group of practitioners, rather than a representative estimate of founders, leaders, or investors. The answers concern perceptions and competitive scenarios, rather than observed copying, customer switching, or business performance.

64

completed submissions between
5 June and 23 August 2026

42%

pure feature differentiation

38%

access to AI models or tooling

70%

founders and senior startup operators, compared with 18% of other respondents

58%

estimated two years or less, including 30% who estimated twelve months or less

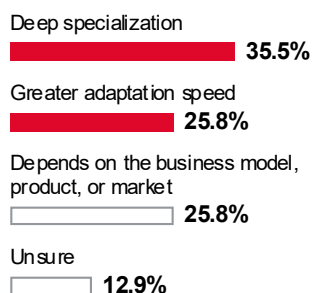
The clearest perceived pressure fell on two familiar sources of differentiation. Asked which sources of advantage had become less reliable over the previous two to three years, 42% selected *pure feature differentiation* and 38% selected *access to AI models or tooling*. Respondents had to select one to three options, with no “none” choice. The result ranks the offered sources by selection frequency; it does not measure how many believed advantage had weakened overall or establish that AI caused the weakening.

The contrast was especially pronounced among founders and senior startup operators: 70% selected weakening *pure feature differentiation*, compared with 18% of other respondents. The gap narrowed but remained large when selection counts were made comparable. This is an exploratory difference within the response set; role and company stage are intertwined.

Asked how quickly a well-funded competitor could replicate the core of their own offering, or that of their best portfolio company, 58% estimated two years or less, including 30% who estimated twelve months or less. All answers remain in the denominator, including “not sure / not applicable” responses. Concern about market-wide replication also coexisted with longer estimates for a particular offering; the questions did not ask for directly comparable market and own-business timelines.

Replication is not displacement. Reproducing a core product or service does not itself win customers, deliver it successfully, or displace the provider. Defensibility means sustaining a meaningful competitive advantage for a period relevant to the business’s strategy despite competitive pressure and market change — not permanent immunity from competition. Copying is one possible challenge; bypassing an incumbent’s advantages through a different route to the customer is another possibility to test.

Source: Practitioner survey, Questions 6, 8, and 9; 64 valid responses each. Questions 6 and 8 allowed multiple unranked choices; Question 9 was single choice. Counts and rounded percentages describe this response set.



31%

reliance on a single AI model, cloud, or infrastructure provider

28%

technology dependency

39

free-text comments

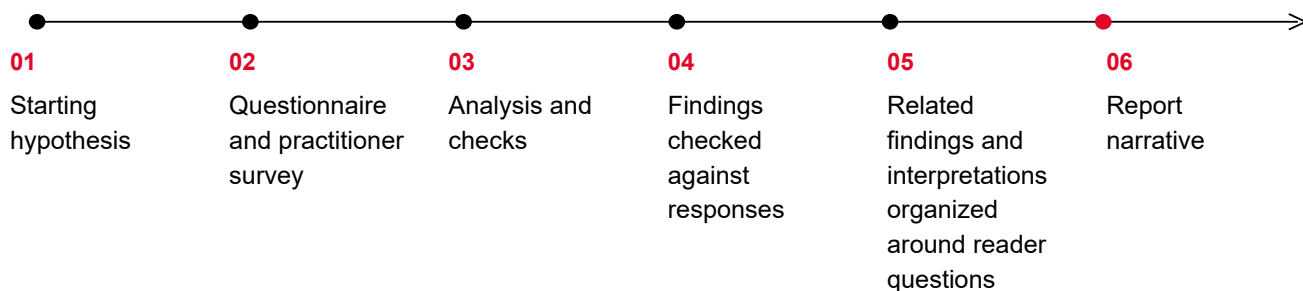
What leaders can do with these findings

There was no consensus that faster adaptation is the answer. 35% favored strong existing advantage based on *deep specialization*; 26% favored a less established advantage with *greater adaptation speed*; another 26% said the answer depended on the business model, product, or market; and 13% were unsure. These were judgments of likely defensibility over three years, not observed performance or a test of an optimal specialization–speed combination.

Dependence on a particular technology was prominent in two distinct measures. When asked about underappreciated risks, 31% selected *reliance on a single AI model, cloud, or infrastructure provider*. Separately, 28% selected *technology dependency* as the greatest resilience gap in their own business or portfolio. *Funding or capital-market shock* and *customer or revenue concentration* also featured. These differently framed questions broaden the inquiry beyond an attractive offering and the ability to adapt.

The 39 free-text comments raise a different set of practical questions: how to reach the right buyer, demonstrate value, establish viable economics, help customers understand and implement an offering, and build relationships that endure beyond a single transaction. Technical depth and commercial work need not be competing concerns: a respondent can value *intellectual property* while finding that *reaching and serving customers* is the harder lesson. Counterpoints include the difficulty of creating an intuitive product and the constraints imposed by incumbent trust and scale.

For leaders, the useful question is what a temporary technical or timing lead can be converted into before competitors catch up. Customer work might leave reusable evidence, implementation know-how, data, or relationships; speed might help build those assets rather than merely produce more releases. Those possibilities should be tested in the business rather than assumed from our survey. A further hypothesis is that a rival could use AI to serve customers through a different channel, business model, or cost structure, bypassing rather than copying an existing advantage.

EXHIBIT 1**From starting hypothesis to report narrative**

Findings were checked against question wording, answer bases, and source responses. Selected subgroup comparisons were re-expressed using the same mix of respondents selecting one, two, or three-or-more options, because ticking more boxes gives individual options more opportunities to appear. All 39 comments were read for recurring and dissenting views, and quote permissions were checked. Fragile differences were not promoted merely because their arithmetic was correct.

AI can affect a business twice: directly, by changing what the business itself can build, automate, and learn; and indirectly, by changing what customers expect, what competitors can do, what suppliers provide, and which dependencies become strategic. That double exposure makes defensibility a moving question rather than a one-time strategy exercise.

Leaders are not without options. The practical task is to keep asking what customers truly value, what competitors can copy or bypass, which capabilities or relationships need time to compound, and where concentration creates fragility. The goal is not to predict one permanent moat, but to use the window available to build advantages that remain difficult to reproduce or displace.

Strategy judgments (Question 11), 62 valid responses; general risks (Question 10), 64; own-business or portfolio resilience gap (Question 12), 61. The report presents the complete answer distributions and their different selection rules.

What if familiar sources of advantage become easier to reproduce?

For decades, businesses have relied on combinations of expertise, proprietary data, distribution, regulation, trust, relationships, switching costs, and scale to make competitive positions harder to reproduce. None of these advantages was ever permanent, but many demanded time, access, capital, or accumulated organizational learning. Rapidly advancing generative AI raises a sharper question: which of these advantages remain difficult to reproduce, and which can be challenged more quickly?

“Can it be built?” asks whether a business can create an offering. “Can it be kept?” asks whether it can sustain the resulting advantage for a strategically relevant period. Here, “building” also includes maintaining, refining, and extending an existing offering. The question therefore applies as much to an established organization improving what it already sells as to a startup launching something new. Building a comparable product, delivering it, winning customers, and displacing the provider remain different competitive problems.

We began the inquiry in June 2025 with a hypothesis that increasingly capable and accessible AI might put pressure on some established sources of advantage, especially visible product features and mere access to technology. This question sits alongside a long tradition of strategy research. The resource-based view emphasizes resources that are valuable, scarce, and difficult to imitate or substitute.¹ Dynamic-capabilities research examines how firms reconfigure assets and processes as conditions change.² Our narrower question was whether rapidly diffusing generative AI could alter the replicability, scarcity, or relative importance of particular advantages.

¹ Barney, J. B. (1991). “Firm Resources and Sustained Competitive Advantage.” *Journal of Management*, 17(1), 99–120. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014920639101700108>

² Teece, D. J., Pisano, G., & Shuen, A. (1997). “Dynamic Capabilities and Strategic Management.” *Strategic Management Journal*, 18(7), 509–533. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1097-0266\(199708\)18:7%3C509::AID-SMJ882%3E3.0.CO;2-Z](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-0266(199708)18:7%3C509::AID-SMJ882%3E3.0.CO;2-Z)

Recent empirical work provides a different kind of context. Noy and Zhang studied generative AI on professional writing tasks and reported productivity gains in that setting.³ Brynjolfsson, Li, and Raymond examined an AI assistant in customer support and also reported productivity benefits.⁴ Task performance is not the same outcome as enduring competitive advantage: faster or better work may change competitive conditions without determining which firm captures the value.

How far the AI frontier moved while our inquiry was underway

Around June 2025, prominent public offerings included OpenAI's GPT-4.1, Anthropic's Claude 4 family, and Google's Gemini 2.5 family.⁵ By 2026, another generation of frontier models had arrived, including GPT-5.6 and Claude Opus 5.5.⁶ The point is not model genealogy. It is that the technical baseline moved materially during the life of the inquiry.

Other developments reinforced the same point from different directions. In September 2026, OpenAI announced an AI-assisted result on the Navier–Stokes Millennium Prize Problem.⁷ In August, it reported a cybersecurity incident arising from July internal evaluations conducted with reduced safeguards.⁸ In June, Anthropic reported suspending access to Fable 5 and Mythos 5 after a U.S. government directive and later restoring access after the controls were lifted.⁹ Capability, containment, and access governance were all moving over the life of the inquiry; none of these events, by itself, demonstrates erosion of a particular business advantage.

This is why we sought the judgment of practitioners: people directly involved in building, operating, backing, or evaluating businesses and technologies. Their views can identify perceived pressures, disagreements, and questions worth investigating. They complement — rather than replace — evidence from observed company, customer, and competitor behavior over time.

³ Noy, S., & Zhang, W. (2023). "Experimental Evidence on the Productivity Effects of Generative Artificial Intelligence." *Science*, 381(6654), 187–192. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adh2586>

⁴ Brynjolfsson, E., Li, D., & Raymond, L. (2025). "Generative AI at Work." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 140(2), 889–942. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjae044>

⁵ 2025 release context: OpenAI (14 April 2025), "Introducing GPT-4.1 in the API," <https://openai.com/index/gpt-4-1/>; Anthropic (22 May 2025), "Introducing Claude 4," <https://www.anthropic.com/news/claude-4>; Google (17 June 2025), "We're expanding our Gemini 2.5 family of models," <https://blog.google/products-and-platforms/products/gemini/gemini-2-5-model-family-expands/>

⁶ 2026 release examples: OpenAI (9 July 2026), "GPT-5.6: Frontier intelligence that scales with your ambition," <https://openai.com/index/gpt-5-6/>; Anthropic (22 September 2026), "Claude Opus 5.5," <https://www.anthropic.com/claude-opus-5-5>

⁷ OpenAI (8 September 2026; updated 10 September 2026), "On the Navier–Stokes Millennium Prize Problem," <https://openai.com/index/navier-stokes-solution/>. Cited as the provider's announcement, not independent validation of the result.

⁸ OpenAI (26 August 2026), "The Hugging Face incident and the road ahead," <https://openai.com/index/hugging-face-incident-and-the-road-ahead/>. The reported evaluations took place in July 2026 under reduced safeguards.

⁹ Anthropic (12 June 2026), "Statement on the US government directive to suspend access to Fable 5 and Mythos 5," <https://www.anthropic.com/news/fable-mythos-access>; Anthropic (30 June 2026; updated 1 July 2026), "Redeploying Fable 5," <https://www.anthropic.com/news/redeploying-fable-5>

64	5 June–23 August 2026	Exploratory
Completed submissions	Completed-response period	Self-selected practitioner perspectives

Our 64 completed submissions were received from 5 June to 23 August 2026. This is the period represented by the responses, rather than the later administrative closure date. Our survey was self-selected and was not designed to be statistically representative. Detailed information on recruitment, identity verification, denominators, anonymity, and evidence handling appears in the methodology section.

Respondents were deliberately asked to answer at a general level and not to disclose confidential, proprietary, commercially or competitively sensitive, or third-party information. Our study therefore sought broad practitioner judgment rather than detailed proprietary company case studies.

Responses are reported anonymously, and only comments for which explicit permission was given are eligible to appear as quotations. The methodology section explains how optional contact information, identifiers, and quotation permissions were handled.

The report moves from current sources of advantage to perceived weakening, estimated copying times, the commercial work beyond a product, and the limits of a speed-only response. It then brings the main tensions together, poses questions for leaders, and closes with questions the research leaves open. The methodology explains how the responses were analyzed and checked.



Five terms used in this report

Artificial intelligence (AI) means increasingly capable general-purpose large language models and related generative-AI systems that organizations can relatively easily and affordably access and apply. The relevant phenomenon includes reasoning, coding, analysis, content generation, and tool use. The report does not cover every form of artificial intelligence.

Defensibility is the ability of a business to sustain a meaningful competitive advantage for a period relevant to its strategy despite competitive pressure and market change.

Moat means a particular source of defensibility: something that makes a business, offering, or market position harder for competitors to reproduce, bypass, or displace. A moat can weaken as technology, customer behavior, regulation, or competitor capabilities change.

Offering means the product, service, solution, or proposition an organization provides to customers. It is the umbrella term used in the report; it is not synonymous with the entire business.

Practitioners are people directly involved in building, operating, backing, or evaluating businesses and technologies, including founders, business leaders, investors, and other relevant ecosystem participants.

Where respondents see their strongest competitive advantage today

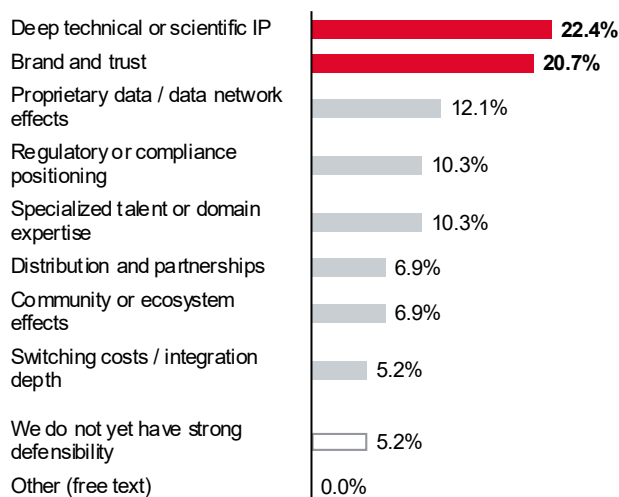
Before examining pressure on competitive advantage, it helps to understand where respondents currently locate it. Our survey asked for the single strongest source in their own organization and, separately, the strongest source in their market.

For their own organization, the most frequent choices were *deep technical or scientific intellectual property* (22%) and *brand and trust* (21%). At market level, *distribution and partnerships* led at 20%. The complete distributions follow so that the leading choices can be read alongside the alternatives.

EXHIBIT 2

Current strongest source of competitive advantage in the respondent's organization

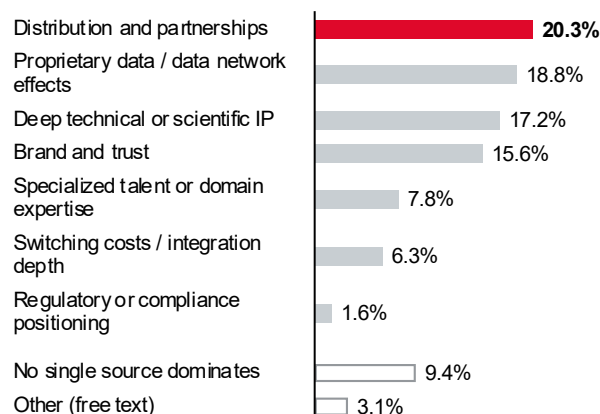
Question asked: "In your business or organization today, what is the single strongest source of defensibility — your main 'moat', meaning what makes your business hardest for others to copy?"



Source: Practitioner survey, Question 5. Single choice; 58 valid responses. Shares describe the single strongest source selected, not every advantage an organization possesses. Rounding may affect totals.

Current strongest source of competitive advantage in the respondent's market

Question asked: "In your market, what do you believe is the strongest source of defensibility today?"



Source: Practitioner survey, Question 7. Single choice; 64 valid responses. The perspective, wording, answer choices, and number of valid responses differ from the organization question. Rounding may affect totals.

These two results answer different questions. The organization question asks respondents to choose the single source that most distinguishes their own organization; the market question asks which source is strongest in the market more generally. The answer lists and valid response counts also differ. The results therefore should not be read as evidence that advantage has shifted from one source to another, or that organizations are “underinvesting” in a category simply because it is selected more often at market level.

Choosing a single strongest source does not mean that the organization lacks the others. The answer choices also do not map exactly across the two questions: the organization question includes community or ecosystem effects and an option for not yet having strong defensibility, while the market question includes “No single source dominates.” A category that was not offered in one question must not be treated as though respondents selected it zero times.

A respondent can identify an advantage as the strongest source in an organization today and still believe that it has become less reliable over the previous two to three years. Relative strength today and perceived change in reliability are different judgments, not two ends of a single scale.

Pure feature differentiation and access to AI were most often selected as sources of advantage that have become less reliable

*Pure feature differentiation and access to AI models or tooling were the most frequently selected sources of advantage becoming less reliable. Asked about the previous two to three years in their business or organization, 42% selected *pure feature differentiation* and 38% selected *access to AI models or tooling*.*

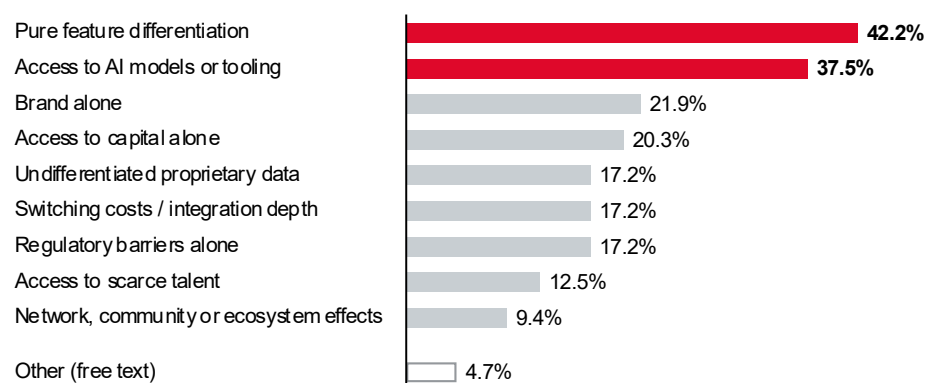
Access to an AI model is not the same as the ability to apply it effectively, and visible product features are not the same as deep technical or scientific intellectual property. These answers describe perceived reliability rather than changes in revenue, profit, or market position. The finding is therefore narrow but useful: respondents expressed concern about two particular sources of advantage, not about technology-based differentiation as a whole.

EXHIBIT 3

Question asked: "In your business or organization, which sources of defensibility have become less reliable over the past 2–3 years?"

Source: Practitioner survey, Question 6. Required unranked multi-select, one to three choices; 64 valid responses. Percentages show the share of respondents selecting each option and can exceed 100% in total.

Sources of competitive advantage selected as becoming less reliable over the past two to three years



Question 6 required respondents to select between one and three sources and did not offer a "none" option. It therefore shows which sources were most often identified as becoming less reliable; it does not tell us what proportion of respondents believed defensibility had weakened overall.

A source selected less often is not thereby proven durable: a respondent may not possess it, may not rely on it, or may have used the available selections for other concerns.

The founder and startup-operator contrast remains large after a response-pattern check

Pure feature differentiation was selected by 70% of founders and senior startup operators, compared with 18% of respondents in other roles. This is a large descriptive difference in the response set; the comparison group includes several different roles, not investors alone.

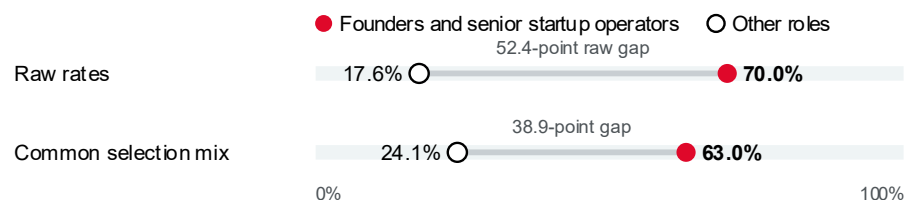
Founders and startup operators also tended to select more options on this question. When both groups were re-expressed using the same mix of one-, two-, and three-option respondents, the gap fell from about 52 to 39 percentage points. Selection behavior therefore affects the size of the contrast but does not erase it. The founder/operator group was also much more concentrated in pre-seed and seed businesses, so role and company stage remain intertwined.

Within this sample, founders and startup operators were substantially more likely to report weakening feature differentiation. Because role and company stage are entangled, this is a pattern to test again rather than an estimate of the wider founder population.

EXHIBIT 4

Question 6 by recorded role: founders/startup operators 21/30 (70.0%); other roles 6/34 (17.6%); raw gap 52.4 percentage points. Founders/operators selected an average of 2.20 options versus 1.82 among other roles. To test whether the gap merely reflected one group choosing more boxes, both groups were re-expressed using the same proportions of one-, two-, and three-option respondents. Under that common selection mix, the rates were 63.0% versus 24.1%, leaving a 38.9-point gap. This is a descriptive sensitivity check; it does not adjust for other differences between the groups or establish causation.

Pure feature differentiation selected as becoming less reliable, by recorded role



The respondents' free-text comments, when provided, also push against the idea that all technology-related differentiation is becoming interchangeable.

One respondent focused on the difficult work of designing and refining a product so that it is genuinely intuitive and satisfying to use:

“A clean, intuitive user interface is still a moat and really hard to replicate.”

Survey response, quoted anonymously with permission; lightly edited for readability.

This judgment qualifies, rather than contradicts, the concern about weakening feature differentiation. A source of advantage can come under pressure without every instance becoming easy to reproduce or losing all value.

Other free-text comments described AI as something that could strengthen capabilities rather than merely commoditize them. Two respondents put that possibility directly:

“AI should be used to collect and share employees’ experiences and skills.”

Survey response, quoted anonymously with permission; edited for readability.

“There is no alternative to deep domain expertise and technical capabilities. AI combined with both of these factors is the game changer.”

Survey response, quoted anonymously with permission; lightly edited for grammar and readability.

These comments separate access to a tool from the organizational ability to combine it with experience, domain expertise, and technical capability. Our survey does not measure the performance effect of those combinations; it does show that respondents did not treat simple access and effective application as the same thing.

Taken together, the structured answers and contrasting comments support a precise conclusion: feature differentiation and mere access to AI are perceived pressure points in this response set, while technology-related differentiation can still arise from how capabilities are designed, combined, and applied.

How quickly respondents think a competitor could copy the core of what customers buy

Our survey asked how quickly a well-funded competitor could replicate the core product or service proposition that respondents offer, or that their best portfolio company offers. In that hypothetical scenario, respondents estimated the time required to reproduce the core of an offering. The question did not ask them to forecast a competitor's actual plans or estimate how long it would take to reproduce the entire business.

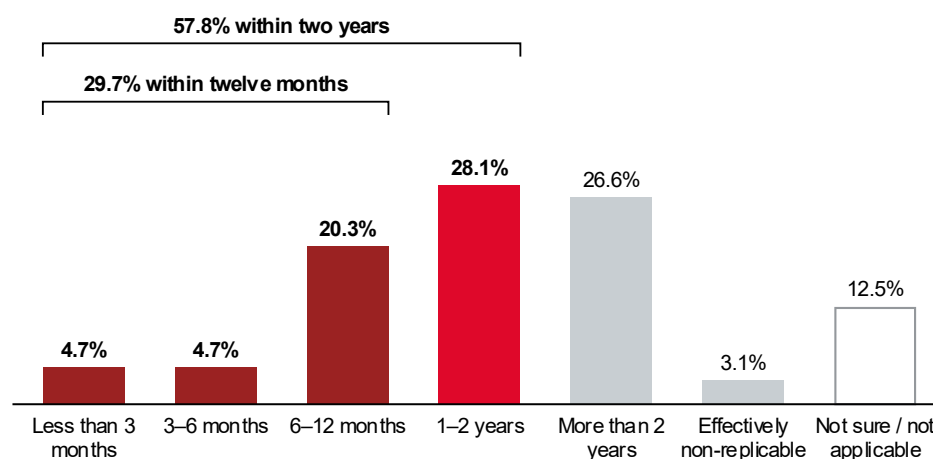
58% estimated that replication could occur within two years, including 30% who placed the horizon at twelve months or less.

EXHIBIT 5

Question asked: "How quickly could a well-funded competitor replicate the core of what you offer, or what your best portfolio company offers?"

Source: Practitioner survey, Question 9. Single choice; 64 valid responses, including "not sure / not applicable." These are estimates within a hypothetical competitor scenario, not observed copying times. The 29.7% within twelve months is included within the 57.8% within two years. Rounding may affect category totals.

Estimated time for a well-funded competitor to replicate the core of what is offered



The remaining responses temper the headline: 27% estimated more than two years, 3% selected effectively non-replicable, and 13% were unsure or considered the question inapplicable. Those uncertain answers remain in the denominator for the primary result. The finding therefore describes a

distribution of expectations, not a consensus that every offering can be copied quickly.

A separate question asked about the greatest threats to durable competitive advantage in respondents' markets over the next three years. Faster replication by competitors was selected by 58%. The identical percentage arises from two different measures: selecting a market threat is not the same as estimating the replication time of a particular offering, and the respondent groups only partly overlap.

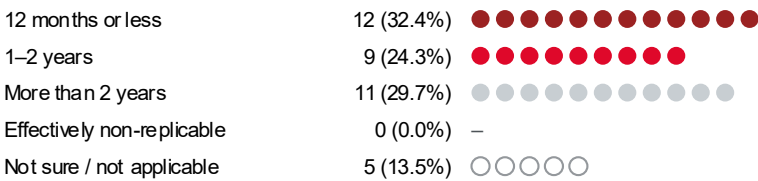
Respondents can see faster replication as a market threat and still expect time to respond

Among the 37 respondents selecting faster replication as a market threat, nine (24%) estimated that their own or best portfolio company's core offering would take one to two years to replicate, and 11 (30%) estimated more than two years. Together, that is 20 of 37 (54%). Another 12 (32%) estimated twelve months or less, while five (14%) were unsure or considered the question inapplicable.

EXHIBIT 6

Within-submission reading of Questions 8 and 9. Subset analyzed: all 37 respondents selecting faster replication in Question 8. Horizon counts: ≤12 months, 12 (32.4%); 1–2 years, 9 (24.3%); >2 years, 11 (29.7%); effectively non-replicable, 0 (0.0%); not sure / not applicable, 5 (13.5%). The 1–2-year band is not equivalent to strictly more than one year.

Estimated replication horizon among the 37 respondents selecting faster replication as a market threat



There is no contradiction between these answers. A respondent may see replication as a significant market threat while believing that a particular offering still gives the business some time to respond. Our survey did not ask for a market-wide replication horizon against which to compare the own-offering estimate, so the useful follow-up is practical: what makes the estimated window credible, and how will the business use it?

Being able to replicate an offering is not the same as being able to displace the business that provides it.

A COMPETITOR THAT CAN BUILD SOMETHING SIMILAR STILL HAS TO

Reach buyers	Persuade them to switch	Integrate or implement the offering	Deliver reliably	Support the customer
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The estimated replication horizon can be useful in a planning discussion, but it leaves major competitive questions unanswered. A competitor that can build something similar still has to reach buyers, persuade them to switch, integrate or implement the offering, deliver reliably, and support the customer. Our survey did not measure how long it would take to reproduce trust, relationships, distribution, implementation capability, or accumulated knowledge — nor whether those advantages would be enough to protect an incumbent if the core offering itself could be reproduced.

If replicability is only one part of defensibility, what else should leaders examine?

What competitors need beyond a copyable product or service

The optional lessons question asked for the most important insight about building or sustaining competitive advantage that respondents wished they had known earlier. It invited reflection rather than an explanation of the structured answers. We therefore read the free-text comments as lessons, counterpoints, and possible explanations to investigate — not as causes of the percentages.

The comments point to several distinct commercial problems: reaching a buyer with the authority and budget to purchase; demonstrating enough value to justify that purchase; showing that customer need can support a viable business model; understanding the customer's problem and helping the customer understand the offering; adapting implementation, integration, or onboarding to the customer's environment; building relationships with customers and partners; and retaining evidence and know-how from work already completed.

These themes are neither a ranking nor a validated sequence of success factors. They identify commercial work beyond a comparable product without establishing which conditions prevent displacement.

• **Technical depth and commercial work can matter to the same business**

Founders and senior startup operators often located their strongest current advantage in technical depth: 38% selected deep technical or scientific intellectual property. That is compatible with the commercial lessons in their comments. What currently distinguishes an organization is a different question from what someone wishes they had understood earlier about building it.

Within-submission reading of technical-IP selections and lessons comments brings these perspectives together: respondents could value technical depth while emphasizing market education, the work surrounding pilots, or the difficulty of competing with established trust and scale. Those comments do not show that their intellectual property failed. They suggest asking what must surround technical strength for customers to adopt it and for the business to retain value.

- **Reaching a buyer and establishing a viable business**

One respondent, writing in the context of the insurance industry, argued that speed to market is useful only if the company has identified the right buyer and the right market. Another emphasized clear use cases, a credible return-on-investment argument, and the continued nurturing of relationships. These are distinct commercial tasks: reaching someone able to buy is different from demonstrating that a purchase is worthwhile, and a persuasive return-on-investment case is different from evidence that those returns have actually been realized.

A particularly concise response separated customer need from business viability:

“The fact that there is a need does not mean there is a business.”

Survey response, quoted anonymously with permission; capitalization and punctuation edited for readability.

That observation sharpens a specific commercial question: what would make this particular offering economically viable, rather than merely useful or desirable? Our survey did not examine the economics of respondents' businesses, so the comment cannot tell us which business models will work. It does, however, expose a distinction that product-focused discussions can easily blur.

Several free-text comments focused on the work required for customers to understand and adopt an offering. One respondent described market education as often a bigger challenge than product development; another emphasized understanding customer problems and integration requirements. Those comments suggest asking what the customer must understand, and what may need to change in implementation, integration, onboarding, or delivery, before a technically capable offering can be used successfully.

- **Designing customer work to leave reusable value behind**

One practitioner offered a specific proposition about pilot design:

“We wish we had understood earlier that every pilot should be designed not only to demonstrate technical performance, but also to generate reusable data, measurable evidence, implementation know-how, and deeper customer relationships.”

Survey response, quoted anonymously with permission; excerpt.

The respondent is describing a desired pilot outcome rather than reporting a demonstrated causal mechanism. That makes the comment useful as a design

question: how can a technical lead be converted into reusable evidence, implementation know-how, data, or relationships before competitors catch up?

Customer work might, subject to applicable contractual, confidentiality, intellectual property, data protection and other legal requirements, generate reusable evidence, implementation know-how or data, as well as deeper customer relationships. Evidence from one engagement might help another buyer assess a claim; knowledge from a deployment might make later implementation easier; repeated delivery might build trust. The strategic proposition is to use a technical lead to build something valuable beyond the immediate output. Whether those benefits arise, can be reused, or become difficult for competitors to match remains untested here. Our survey did not observe sales conversion, delivery costs, retention, or the performance of businesses that accumulated more of them.

Trust and scale can still make customer acquisition harder for an entrant

A respondent writing about the insurance industry complicates the idea that an attractive technical offering is enough to win:

“Especially for insurance buyers, brand trust and sheer size are very hard to compete with as a startup”

Survey response, quoted anonymously with permission; excerpt.

Insurance is highly regulated and capital-intensive, while a major part of the product's value is experienced when a customer suffers a loss and needs the insurer to perform. Brand, trust, financial strength, and scale can therefore carry particular weight. This remains one respondent's view of the difficulty a startup may face against established providers, not a result about every market. Together with the earlier comment about the difficult work of producing an intuitive user experience, it is a reminder that technical and non-technical advantages can matter at the same time.

Our survey did not compare how long it takes to reproduce these different sources of advantage. Trust, knowledge, and relationships may matter without guaranteeing that a customer will stay.

The insurance context may be particularly relevant given the regulatory and capital requirements applicable to insurers and the importance customers may attach to an insurer's ability to meet claims. These factors may contribute to the importance of brand, trust and financial strength, although the survey did not test that proposition.

A competitor may bypass rather than copy an incumbent advantage

A competitor may not need to reproduce every advantage an incumbent has built. AI could change the economics of activities such as analysis,

customization, experimentation, software development, and service delivery enough to make a different route to the customer viable — for example, through a different operating model, channel, degree of customization, or cost structure. The logic resembles technological leapfrogging: adopting mobile phones does not require first reproducing a mature fixed-line telephone network. A competitor may similarly make an incumbent advantage less relevant rather than rebuild it.

Bypass is a hypothesis prompted by the research, not a survey result. Our survey did not measure changes in those costs, the viability of alternative routes to market, customer switching, or displacement. It invites a broader question: must a rival reproduce the incumbent's assets and processes, or could it make some of them less relevant by serving customers differently?

COPY

Reproduce the incumbent's assets and processes

BYPASS

Make some of them less relevant by serving customers differently

For example, through a different operating model, channel, degree of customization, or cost structure

The resulting inquiry is broader than whether a competitor can build something similar. What must it actually do to win and serve customers, and which incumbent advantages would it need to reproduce, neutralize, or bypass? That framing leaves room for both enduring constraints and genuinely different ways of competing without assuming either outcome in advance.

Why adapting faster is not, by itself, a complete answer to competition

If established advantages are under pressure and offerings may be replicated, faster adaptation is an understandable response. Our survey does not support reducing the strategy question to that single prescription.

The strategy question deliberately contrasted a company with a strong existing moat built on deep specialization with one whose moat was less established but whose speed of adaptation was greater. Respondents were asked which was more likely to remain defensible over the next three years. This is a specific trade-off: it does not compare two otherwise identical companies, and it does not test a third strategy of deliberately combining maximum specialization with maximum speed.

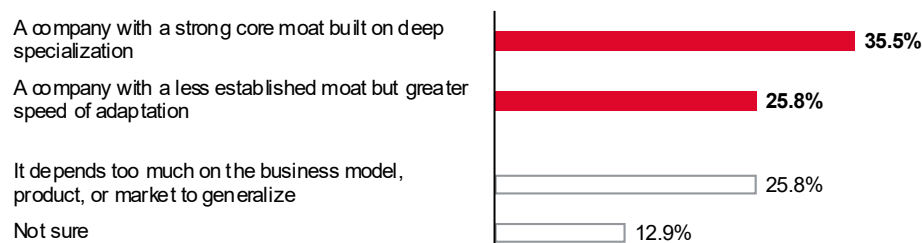
35% selected *deep specialization*, 26% selected *greater adaptation speed*, another 26% said the answer depended too much on the business model, product, or market to generalize, and 13% were unsure. Deep specialization received the largest share, but no answer commanded a majority. The finding is disagreement and context dependence rather than a consensus around speed.

EXHIBIT 7

Question asked: "Which type of company is more likely to remain defensible over the next three years?"

Source: Practitioner survey, Question 11. Optional single choice; 62 valid responses; answer order randomized. The question asked for judgments of likely defensibility over the next three years, not comparative performance, and contrasted a strong established moat with a less established one accompanied by greater adaptation speed.

Views on deep specialization and faster adaptation as sources of sustained advantage over three years



The free-text comments add perspectives rather than explanations for those percentages. Some respondents favor agility or continuing reinvention; one explicitly values both speed and domain expertise; another worries that short-

term focus can displace long-term commitment and investment. Read together, the comments reinforce the absence of a simple one-variable answer.

One comment adds a useful reminder that some forms of advantage accumulate on a different timeline:

“Building trust within teams and with customers takes time. It is not a straight line; there are ups and downs.”

Survey response, quoted anonymously with permission; edited for readability.

“What is our speed for?”

The comment brings a different timeline into the discussion. Trust and relationships may depend on repeated interaction rather than a release schedule. That makes “what is our speed for?” a useful leadership question: what should faster learning or delivery help the business understand, improve, or retain? Our survey did not compare these accumulation times or test whether trust protects a business from displacement.

The implication for leaders is a resource-allocation question: which assumptions need to be tested quickly, and which forms of expertise or customer knowledge deserve sustained investment? Faster activity should have a stated purpose — something the business intends to understand, improve, or build — rather than being treated as an end in itself.

What the data do — and do not — say

DO SHOW

The data do show divided practitioner judgments: no single answer commanded a majority, deep specialization received the largest share, and a substantial group said the answer depends on the business model, product, or market.

DO NOT ESTABLISH

What the data do not establish is that faster adaptation is superior, that combining specialization and speed necessarily produces better outcomes, or that learning speed can overcome every financial, technological, operational, or market vulnerability.

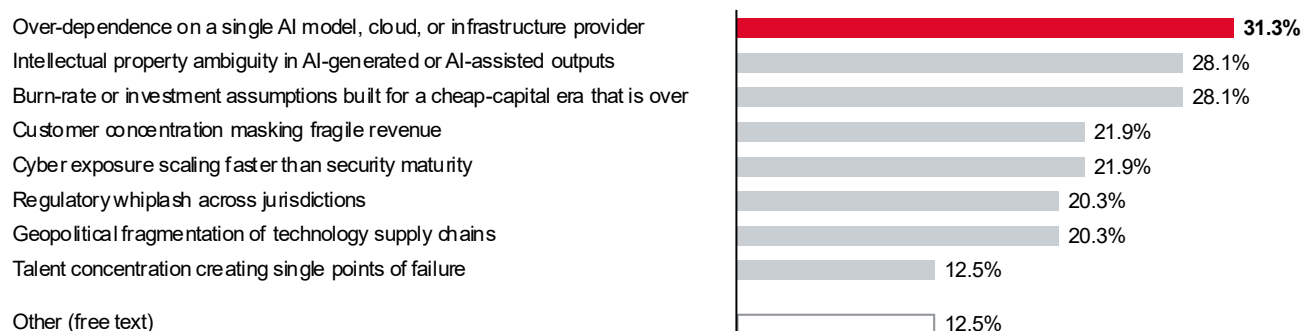
Dependencies can weaken a business even when its offering remains attractive

Two different risk questions broaden the discussion. The first asked respondents to select underappreciated risks facing businesses building for the future; the second asked for the single greatest resilience gap in their own business or portfolio over the next three years. Here, a resilience gap means a vulnerability that could reduce the business's ability to withstand disruption. Because the questions ask different things and allow different numbers of selections, their percentages should not be treated as one combined measure.

For underappreciated risks, *over-dependence on a single AI model, cloud, or infrastructure provider* led at 31%. *Intellectual property ambiguity in AI-generated or AI-assisted outputs* and *burn-rate or investment assumptions built for a cheap-capital era that is over* each received 28%. These percentages indicate how often the offered risk descriptions were selected; they are not estimates of exposure, probability, severity, or loss.

EXHIBIT 8

Underappreciated risks selected for businesses building for the future



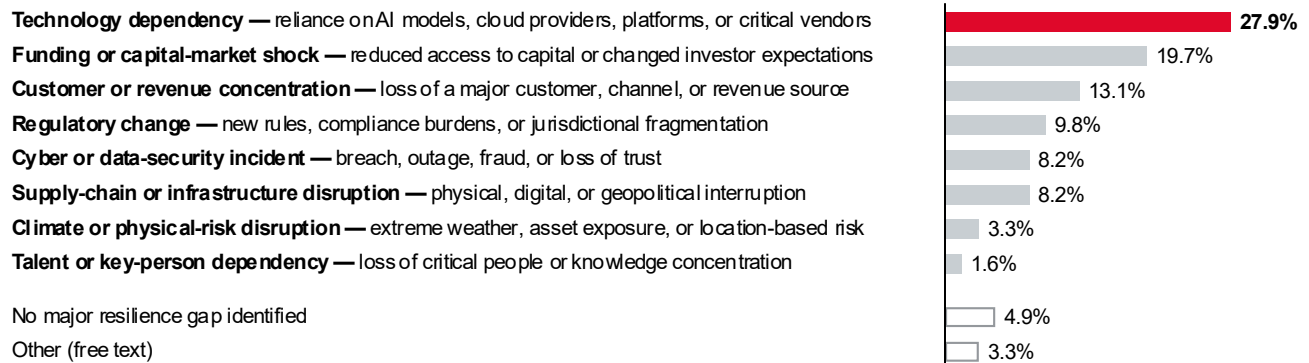
Question asked: "What are the most underappreciated risks facing businesses building for the future?"

Source: Practitioner survey, Question 10. Unranked multi-select; 64 valid responses. Instructions requested one to three choices, but the form did not enforce a maximum; one four-choice response was retained. Percentages are the share selecting each concern, not measures of exposure, probability, severity, or loss; totals exceed 100%.

For the greatest own-business or portfolio resilience gap, *technology dependency* led at 28%, followed by *funding or capital-market shock* at 20% and *customer or revenue concentration* at 13%. The complete answer space also includes regulatory, cyber, talent, infrastructure, and physical-risk concerns, as well as no major gap and Other.

EXHIBIT 9

Greatest resilience gap selected for the respondent's business or portfolio over three years



Question asked: "Where do you see the greatest resilience gap for your business, or portfolio, over the next three years?"

Source: Practitioner survey, Question 12. Optional single choice; 61 valid responses. The question asked for the greatest perceived resilience gap in the respondent's business or portfolio over the next three years. Its wording, answer options, selection rule, and number of valid responses differ from Question 10. Rounding may affect totals.

The technology-dependency options differ. The own-business or portfolio question includes platforms and critical vendors, permits only one choice, and specifies a three-year horizon. The general-risk question allows several concerns. Their percentages should not be pooled, subtracted as a change measure, or read as probabilities of loss.

Widely available capability and provider reliance can coexist

A direct pairing makes the tension concrete. Of the 24 respondents who selected access to AI models or tooling as a weakening source of advantage, nine (38%) also selected reliance on a single AI model, cloud, or infrastructure provider as an underappreciated risk. Among the other 40 respondents, 11 (28%) selected that risk. Some respondents therefore saw both limited differentiation from access and a risk in dependence on a provider.

This pairing shows coexistence, not a strong relationship: the questions do not identify whether respondents had the same technology or provider in mind. Strategically, the useful point is that a capability can be widely available and still be operationally important. Azoulay, Krieger, and Nagaraj separately argue that control of complementary assets may shape entry and concentration in

generative AI.¹⁰ That external argument provides context; it does not verify a mechanism in these answers.

Within-submission reading of Questions 6 and 10. Single-provider risk: 9/24 (37.5%) among AI-access-erosion selectors versus 11/40 (27.5%) among others. Different question frames; descriptive pairing, not a causal estimate.

What does the business rely on, not just what makes it distinctive?

Together, these responses suggest a broader management question: what does the business rely on, not just what makes it distinctive? A company can adapt quickly and still be vulnerable to a funding shock, concentration in a major customer, dependence on one technology provider, or a regulatory or cybersecurity event. Our survey does not establish causal relationships among those vulnerabilities, but it makes clear that defensibility and resilience extend beyond learning speed.

No single risk commanded a majority, and our survey did not test which mitigations work. The value of these questions is to surface vulnerabilities that leaders may want to examine alongside the sources of advantage.

17.9

percentage points: raw difference

2.3

percentage points after re-expressing with the same mix of response patterns

Why an interesting comparison did not become a headline

Some apparently interesting subgroup differences became much smaller when we checked whether one group simply tended to select more options. This can happen mechanically: if Group A usually ticks three boxes in a multi-select question while Group B usually ticks only one, almost any individual option has more opportunities to appear in Group A. In one exploratory comparison concerning the faster-replication threat, the raw difference between two groups was 17.9 percentage points. After re-expressing the comparison so that both groups had the same mix of respondents selecting one, two, or three-or-more options, the difference fell to 2.3 percentage points. Because the contrast largely disappeared under that check, we did not promote it as a headline finding.

In plain language, we asked whether the gap still looked roughly the same once both groups were given the same mix of response patterns. In this example, it did not. That does not prove response behavior caused the original difference or remove every other difference between the groups; it does show why an arithmetically correct contrast may still be too fragile to build a public story around.

¹⁰ Azoulay, P., Krieger, J., & Nagaraj, A. (2025). "Old Moats for New Models: Openness, Control, and Competition in Generative Artificial Intelligence." *Entrepreneurship and Innovation Policy and the Economy*, 4, 7–46. <https://doi.org/10.1086/732852>

Four tensions to consider in the next strategy discussion

These tensions do not resolve into a single formula. They are useful because each can be made specific enough to test in a particular business.

Replication can be a threat without being immediate

Of the 37 respondents concerned about faster replication in their market, 20 gave their own or best portfolio company's offering a one-to-two-year or longer horizon. The questions do not compare own-offering and market-wide replication timelines. They make the estimated window a strategic question: what supports it, and what should the business do with it?

Speed matters, but its purpose and context matter too

The strategy judgments were divided, with specialization the largest category and no majority for any answer. Comments about reinvention sit alongside comments about trust and sustained investment. The resulting leadership question is what faster adaptation should help the business build or retain, not whether speed always wins.

Technical strength still needs a route to the customer

Technical intellectual property was the most frequent own-organization choice overall, while the free-text comments repeatedly returned to buyers, value, implementation, and relationships. These concerns can be complementary, including within the same submission. The question for leaders is what needs to surround technical strength if customers are to adopt it and the business is to retain value.

A capability can be widely available while the business depends on a provider

Nine respondents selected both AI access becoming less reliable as a source of advantage and single-provider dependency as an underappreciated risk. This modest overlap shows that the concerns can coexist; it does not establish a common cause. Leaders need to distinguish what makes an offering different from what the business cannot readily do without.

Questions the findings raise for leaders

The following questions translate the evidence into an inquiry for the business, not a prescribed strategy. Buyer access, customer value, economics, implementation, and dependencies are familiar disciplines. Their relevance here is to reconsider what each contributes when the core offering may be easier to reproduce and competitors may find different routes to the customer.

1

If competitors can replicate our offering, what else would they need to win customers — and which of our existing advantages could they bypass rather than reproduce?

The replication estimates make this the first question to ask. Winning requires more than building something similar, and a rival may not need to reproduce every incumbent advantage if it can reach or serve customers differently. Our survey does not establish the conditions for displacement or show that AI has already made an alternative route viable; it makes those possibilities important to test in the specific business.

2

What has to be true for customers to buy and keep using our offering — in terms of access, demonstrated value, understanding, viable economics, and implementation?

The comments raise the right buyer, evidence of value, market education, the difference between need and business viability, and what customer work can leave behind. Ask what an engagement teaches, what evidence it produces, and what can responsibly be reused. Those are propositions to test in the business, not universal success factors established by this survey.

3

Which parts of our advantage depend on deep specialization, which must adapt quickly — and what is our speed for?

The divided judgments make “specialization or speed” too coarse a company-wide choice. Identify where expertise, accumulated knowledge, trust, or technical depth creates value and where routines, products, or assumptions need to change. Then ask what faster work should build: better customer understanding, stronger evidence, more effective integration, or capabilities the business can retain. The aim is purposeful adaptation; our survey does not establish an optimal mix or prove that speed produces compounding advantage.

4

Which dependencies — on technology providers, funding, major customers, cyber resilience, regulation, talent, or infrastructure — could weaken the business even if customers still value our offering?

The two risk questions show why an attractive offering is not enough. A business can retain customer value and still be weakened by concentration, dependency, or external shocks. The relevant task is to identify which dependencies are material in the specific business and how they would be detected, tested, and mitigated.

A snapshot of competition during rapid technological change

The responses capture judgments made from 5 June to 23 August 2026. They are a record of that period, not a permanent account of how competitive advantage works. One respondent noted that newer AI versions had already made earlier assessments of possible applications feel inadequate. That comment does not establish an objective rate of change, but it captures why a time stamp is useful in research on fast-moving technology.

When interpreting the snapshot, it helps to separate three things: changes in AI capability; changes in the cost and practicality of applying those capabilities; and the business consequences that may follow. A capability becoming technically possible is not the same as its becoming economical or reliable in a particular setting, and neither automatically determines how customers, products, business models, competitive structures, or company performance will change.

Those business consequences may also be indirect. A company may encounter them through different choices made by a customer, supplier, or competitor rather than through its own adoption of AI. Some consequences may appear quickly; others may take years to work through products, customer behavior, business models, and company performance.

Our survey does not provide a fixed timetable for those effects or a forecast of when displacement will occur. Its value as a time-stamped snapshot is different: it creates a record that can be revisited to see which practitioner judgments remained useful, which assumptions proved durable, and which were overtaken by events.

Questions this research leaves open

Further research could make several distinctions sharper. First, matched questions could compare the replication horizon of a respondent's own offering with comparable offerings in the market, using the same scenario and time bands. That would permit a comparison the present questionnaire cannot make.

Second, future work could revisit these judgments prospectively and distinguish estimated replication from observed copying, entry, customer acquisition, switching, and displacement. A broader response set, including more investors and later-stage businesses, could test whether the strongest founder/operator contrast recurs and whether it survives comparable selection-count checks.

Third, the bypass hypothesis could be tested directly: can a competitor serve the same customer need through a different business model, channel, or cost structure without reproducing the incumbent's assets? Further research could also distinguish capabilities an organization can acquire from those it develops through experience, and examine whether customer work actually produces reusable evidence, data, integration knowledge, or relationships. Acquired and accumulated advantages are useful concepts to investigate, not a taxonomy validated by this survey.

These are open questions suggested by the findings, not a commitment to a future study or a forecast of its results.



How we designed and analyzed our survey

The purpose and the questions

The inquiry began in June 2025 with a hypothesis that increasingly capable and accessible AI might put pressure on some established sources of competitive advantage. We chose an exploratory practitioner survey because the question concerned current judgments in a rapidly changing environment. The questionnaire covered current sources of defensibility, perceived weakening, future threats, estimated replication time in a hypothetical competitor scenario, strategy judgments, resilience gaps, and lessons from building or sustaining advantage. It also collected broad profile information for exploratory comparisons. Selected external references provide context; this is not a systematic literature review.

The research sought people directly involved in building, operating, backing, or evaluating businesses and technologies. It did not observe competitors attempting to copy offerings, track customer switching, or compare business performance over time. Those distinctions define what the evidence can contribute.

Recruitment and the period represented

Our survey was distributed through LinkedIn and personal and professional ecosystem outreach, including sharing via our partners. Participation was self-selected: people who encountered an invitation could choose whether to complete our survey, and there was no probability sampling frame from which participants were randomly drawn. Because the total number of unique eligible people exposed to the invitation cannot be defined consistently across channels, a conventional response rate is not calculated. The analysis does not attribute responses to particular recruitment channels.

All 64 completed submissions were retained. The first was submitted on 5 June 2026 and the last on 23 August 2026, using UTC submission dates. These are completed-response dates, not a proven first-invitation date or last date on which the form could be accessed. Our survey was administratively closed on 11 September 2026, after the last completed response.

The final response set came from broad outreach rather than a standing panel. A recorded LinkedIn post generated more than 60,000 impressions. Impressions are displays of a post, not a count of unique eligible people invited to our survey, and cannot be used as a denominator for the 64 submissions. Unique respondent identities were not independently verified.

General perspectives and anonymous reporting

The welcome screen instructed participants to respond at a general level and not disclose confidential, proprietary, commercially or competitively sensitive, or third-party information. Shorter reminders appeared on the questions about weakening sources, the market's strongest source, future threats, general risks, resilience gaps, and open-text lessons. The full warning was not repeated on every question.

This design sought broad practitioner judgment without requesting proprietary company case studies. Responses were analyzed and reported anonymously, with optional

report-delivery contact details kept separate from analytical and public material. Anonymous reporting does not mean that no contact information or administrative identifiers were collected, or that the raw dataset is public.

What the percentages mean

A percentage is the share of usable answers to that question selecting an option. The denominator is the number of usable answers included for that question; it is stated beside each exhibit because some questions were optional. A percentage is not an option's share of all selections made across the questionnaire.

Single-choice questions normally total approximately 100%, allowing for rounding. In unranked multi-select questions, respondents can choose several options, so the percentages can add up to more than 100%. A selection does not rank that option above other options selected by the same respondent. Nonselection is not necessarily disagreement, and an omitted answer is not equivalent to an explicit answer of uncertainty or no gap.

Valid bases vary because some questions were optional: the organization's strongest-source question (Question 5) has 58 answers; Questions 6–10 each have 64; the strategy question (Question 11) has 62; and the resilience-gap question (Question 12) has 61. The lessons question (Question 13) received 39 comments. Valid "Other" answers are retained. Main prose generally uses rounded percentages; counts are retained where they materially aid interpretation, especially for subsets. Charts, tables, and formal source notes retain one decimal place. Rounding can prevent totals from equaling exactly 100%.

Question design and answer treatment

The way a question is designed affects what its answers can tell us. The weakening-sources question (Question 6) required between one and three choices and offered no dedicated "none" option. The market-threat question (Question 8) also permitted one to three choices. For general risks (Question 10), the displayed instruction requested one to three selections but the form did not technically enforce the maximum. One respondent selected four options; that response was retained rather than edited after the fact.

The strategy question (Question 11) was optional and single choice, with randomized answer order. Its wording contrasted a strong existing moat based on specialization with a less established moat accompanied by greater adaptation speed. It did not offer "do both" as a tested strategy and did not compare the performance of otherwise identical companies.

For the replication-time question (Question 9), the primary result keeps "not sure / not applicable" answers in the denominator. "Effectively non-replicable" is treated as a substantive answer rather than missing data. Excluding the eight uncertain or inapplicable answers changes the overall within-two-years estimate from 37/64 (57.8%) to 37/56 (66.1%); only the denominator changes. In the preserved matched comparisons linking Question 6 selections to Question 9, the relevant percentage-point gaps all narrow when uncertain answers are excluded, but none reverses direction. The sensitivity check therefore affects magnitude rather than the directional interpretation, and the primary analysis retains all 64 answers.

Comparing groups and linking answers within a submission

A subgroup comparison contrasts answers from defined groups, such as respondents in different roles, company stages, or selected sectors. We examined such comparisons as exploratory questions rather than as definitive claims about those populations. With small groups, overlapping profiles, and many possible comparisons, it is easy to find

numerical differences that look more meaningful than they are. Arithmetic correctness alone was therefore not enough to turn a role, stage, or sector contrast into a public narrative.

A within-submission comparison links answers from the same submission to see which views occur together. For example, among the 37 respondents selecting weakening feature differentiation or AI access, 26 (70.3%) estimated replication within two years, compared with 11 of the other 27 (40.7%). The same grouping selected AI commoditization as a market threat in 17 of 37 cases (45.9%), compared with five of 27 (18.5%). These descriptive associations show how related judgments occur together; they do not establish causation.

That relationship does not extend meaningfully to the other replication measure: faster replication as a market threat was selected by 22 of 37 (59.5%) in the feature-or-AI-erosion group and 15 of 27 (55.6%) outside it — a difference of only 3.9 percentage points. A shorter estimated horizon for a particular offering and concern about faster replication in a market must remain distinct.

The additional market-threat/horizon comparison keeps all 37 faster-replication selectors in its primary base, including five uncertain or inapplicable horizon answers. The AI-access/provider comparison links two specific selections, not a composite index of “capability leveling” or “dependency.” Neither comparison supplies causal evidence or predicts actual displacement.

Checking whether patterns were sensitive to analytical choices

The analysis tested whether selected patterns changed under reasonable alternative treatments. For Question 9, excluding “not sure / not applicable” answers raised the overall within-two-years estimate from 57.8% to 66.1%. In the matched Question 6 comparisons, the gaps narrowed but did not reverse. We also examined whether subgroup differences in multi-select questions could partly reflect how many options respondents in each group tended to select, rather than a stronger preference for any particular option.

For three priority comparisons — founders and startup operators versus other roles, pre-seed or seed companies versus later stages, and respondents selecting the fintech-related category versus those not selecting it — we compared the mean, median, and broad distribution of selection counts on Questions 6, 8, and 10. Some groups selected more options overall, which can increase incidence for an individual option. These were exploratory priorities, not preregistered hypotheses.

Selected contrasts were then re-expressed using the same proportions of respondents selecting one, two, or three-or-more options in both groups. Several gaps shrank, including the 17.9-to-2.3-percentage-point example shown earlier. The founder/operator feature-differentiation contrast is considered separately because its large gap persists under this check. These are descriptive sensitivity analyses, not causal adjustments. The detailed distributions, group definitions, and calculations remain in the internal evidence record.

Reading the comments on their own terms

All 39 free-text answers to the optional lessons question were read inductively — that is, the themes were developed from what respondents actually wrote rather than imposed in advance from the quantitative results. A single comment could address several themes. The reading looked for recurring ideas, important minority and dissenting perspectives, qualifications, possible explanations, and ideas not captured by the structured choices. It did not use sentiment scoring.

The themes covered customer and market relationships, technical and domain judgment, commercial validation, adaptation, AI as both an enabler and a source of

pressure, and external constraints. These themes organize the free text; they are not estimates of how prevalent those views would be in a wider population. The comments were coded by one analyst; no second independent coder was used. Substantive “Other” comments were considered separately for context rather than silently merged into the lessons responses.

The comments were also reviewed again against the report’s emerging structure while preserving the earlier coding. Particular attention was paid to views that complicated a simple narrative: the difficulty of creating an intuitive and well-refined product, incumbent trust and scale, long-term commitment, and the role of external institutions. A memorable sentence was not given greater evidential weight simply because it made a good quotation.

A comment may reinforce the relevance of an issue, suggest an explanation to investigate, qualify an interpretation, or introduce a new question. It cannot prove a percentage or establish why a subgroup differs. The comparison of technical-IP selections and commercial lessons therefore uses the comments for their substance, not an unvalidated prevalence ranking of new themes.

Quotation permission and evidence checks

Only responses with explicit permission for anonymous quotation entered the publication quote pool. Refusal or a blank permission field meant exclusion. Every selected quotation was checked against the original response; shortened excerpts and readability edits were recorded. No quotation combines different respondents, and no identifying profile details accompany the excerpts.

The analytical checks traced claims back to source answers, question wording, denominators — the number of usable answers for each question — group definitions, and the original free-text comments. Checking statements against individual source responses led us to narrow claims that went beyond what the comments supported. This establishes traceability between a statement and its evidence; it does not make the sample representative or establish that a respondent’s assertion is objectively true.

What the study cannot establish

The main limitations are self-selection, the modest response set, the absence of independent verification of unique identities, the use of perceptions and estimates made in hypothetical scenarios rather than observed outcomes, and the constraints created by the questions themselves. Different answer bases and question frames need to remain visible. Exploratory comparisons can be sensitive to group definitions and response behavior, while optional comments provide depth without supporting population-level prevalence claims.

Our survey did not observe actual replication, business displacement, or comparative performance. It therefore cannot identify causal effects of AI, establish a best strategy, prove that accumulated advantages protect an incumbent, or measure the probability and severity of business risks. Selected literature and external AI developments are used for context, but this report is not a systematic literature review or a causal study. Its contribution is a traceable account of these practitioner responses, bounded interpretations, and specific questions that leaders can examine in their own context.

Selected external context and references

Our survey is the primary evidence for the findings in this report. The references below provide selected strategy, empirical, and technological context and correspond to the footnotes in the main text; they are not presented as a systematic review of the literature.

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2025 release context: OpenAI (14 April), "Introducing GPT-4.1 in the API," <https://openai.com/index/gpt-4-1/>; Anthropic (22 May), "Introducing Claude 4," <https://www.anthropic.com/news/claude-4>; Google (17 June), "We're expanding our Gemini 2.5 family of models," <https://blog.google/products-and-platforms/products/gemini/gemini-2-5-model-family-expands/>

2026 release examples: OpenAI (9 July), "GPT-5.6: Frontier intelligence that scales with your ambition," <https://openai.com/index/gpt-5-6/>; Anthropic (22 September), "Claude Opus 5.5," <https://www.anthropic.com/claude-opus-5-5>. These examples are not an exhaustive inventory of models available as of 06 October 2026.

Scientific context: OpenAI (8 September 2026, updated 10 September), "On the Navier–Stokes Millennium Prize Problem," <https://openai.com/index/navier-stokes-solution/>. Cited as the provider's announcement, not independent validation of the result.

Cybersecurity context: OpenAI (26 August 2026), "The Hugging Face incident and the road ahead," <https://openai.com/index/hugging-face-incident-and-the-road-ahead/>. The reported evaluations took place in July 2026 under reduced safeguards.

Access-governance context: Anthropic (12 June 2026), "Statement on the US government directive to suspend access to Fable 5 and Mythos 5," <https://www.anthropic.com/news/fable-mythos-access>; Anthropic (30 June, updated 1 July 2026), "Redeploying Fable 5," <https://www.anthropic.com/news/redeploying-fable-5>.



About the research and publication

The research was carried out by Sompo Digital Laboratory EMEA.

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His work involves identifying external signals, exploring new business models, and working with startups, investors, researchers, and business teams to understand what may become relevant next. He is particularly interested in the AI-powered knowledge firm — how organizations create, share, apply, and compound expertise as AI becomes part of everyday work.

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