Navigating the Intelligent Economy

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Investment Banking Advisory for the Intelligent Economy SM

Introduction

Artificial intelligence has moved from a question of adoption to a question of architecture. For founders and operators in the lower middle market, that distinction carries real strategic weight: companies pulling ahead are not simply using AI more; they have restructured around it in ways that compound over time. This Perspective is designed to help technology and AI-enabled services leaders recognize the inflection points this shift produces, understand what is driving them, and evaluate the strategic options available when those moments arrive. It is rooted in recent market data and sector observation and framed as analytical context throughout.

Key Takeaways

- **From Adoption to Structural Advantage.** AI deployment now spans 78% of enterprises, yet transformation remains concentrated among a narrow cohort. Market research identifies just 5% of firms as "future-built," achieving 1.7x higher revenue growth and 3.6x stronger shareholder returns from AI initiatives. The performance divide is widening, and the gap is less about technology access than about how deeply AI is integrated into competitive architecture and operating model design.
- **The New Moat Is Operational.** In our view, the emerging foundation for durable advantage rests on three compounding factors: proprietary data that improves with use, learning loops that accelerate decision-making, and deployment speed that builds over time. Traditional moats such as scale, distribution, and brand remain relevant, but they are increasingly insufficient on their own. Building these capabilities requires sustained investment and carries execution risk, including the risk of misaligned priorities or underestimating organizational change.
- **Inflection Points Require a Decision.** An AI-driven inflection point signals that the current playbook is losing fit with the market. It prompts a deliberate choice among strategic pathways: capability acquisition through M&A, a capital raise to accelerate investment, or organic development to deepen differentiation. None of these paths is without material risk. And delay, while it preserves optionality in the short term, carries its own opportunity cost in markets where competitive dynamics are compressing.

The New Competitive Landscape

The global economy has entered a structural era shaped by the convergence of artificial intelligence, data infrastructure, and automation. At Viorum, we call this the Intelligent Economy. It is reshaping how value is created, defended, and ultimately transacted across technology and software sectors. Not all sectors are affected equally, and the pace of change varies materially by vertical.

This shift is no longer speculative. Stanford HAI's 2025 AI Index documents that 78% of organizations reported AI use in at least one business function in 2024, up from 55% the prior year.[1] By mid-2025, McKinsey found that figure had climbed to 88%.[3] Private AI investment in the U.S. alone reached $109.1 billion in 2024, part of $252.3 billion in total corporate AI investment globally, reflecting a 44.5% year-over-year increase in private capital and a 12.1% rise in M&A activity.[1] The capital markets have registered a clear directional view.

Adoption data, however, can mislead. Deployment does not equal transformation, and this distinction matters for how companies are valued, how buyers assess targets, and how founders think about timing.

> *We observe a sharp divergence in outcomes. Not between companies that use AI and those that do not, but between those that have embedded it into competitive architecture and those still running pilots.*

BCG's 2025 analysis quantifies this divide. Firms classified as "future-built" report 1.7x higher revenue growth, 2.7x greater ROI on AI investments, and 3.6x stronger shareholder returns than their peers.[2] These figures reflect the performance of a specific cohort under specific conditions and should not be treated as projections for other organizations. Meanwhile, 60% of companies remain stagnating or emerging in AI maturity, capturing minimal revenue or cost benefit from their investments.[2] McKinsey's parallel findings reinforce this picture: while companies are realizing use-case-level gains, only 7% have genuinely scaled AI across functions, and just 39% report enterprise-level EBIT impact.[3]

The implication is not that AI is overhyped. Returns are concentrating. AI is becoming a foundational input, much as cloud computing once did, where access is increasingly

universal but competitive advantage accrues to those who integrate it most deeply into their operating model.[4] Firms that learn and iterate faster tend to sustain market share, particularly where data assets and model improvements build on each other.[5] Whether any individual firm can replicate that trajectory depends on factors including organizational readiness, data quality, talent, and market conditions.

AI as a Structural Variable in Competitive Positioning

For most of the past decade, AI was treated as a tool applied to discrete workflows to improve efficiency or automate routine tasks. That framing is no longer adequate. In the Intelligent Economy, AI functions as a structural variable. It reshapes business models, redefines what constitutes a defensible competitive position, and compresses the timeline on which market dynamics play out. Not every sector is affected at the same pace, and not every organization faces the same exposure.

Consider where value concentrates. BCG's research indicates that 70% of AI's potential economic value is concentrated in core business functions including R&D, manufacturing, sales, and digital marketing.[2] This is not about adding chatbots to customer service. It is about restructuring the functions that generate revenue and margin. "Future-built" firms have already deployed 62% of their AI initiatives, compared to just 12% among those further back in the maturity curve.[2] The gap is widening. That said, deployment at scale introduces its own risks, including integration complexity, data governance exposure, and the organizational strain of sustained change.

McKinsey's research on agentic organizations adds further texture. The length of tasks AI systems can reliably complete has doubled approximately every seven months since 2019 and every four months since 2024.[6] As AI agents move from experimental to operational, companies that have redesigned workflows around AI-first principles may be positioned to capture value at fundamentally different rates than those still operating on traditional models. Execution risk remains material; organizational and cultural factors often determine whether that potential is realized.

For lower middle market companies, the practical implication is pointed. AI-native entrants can reset unit economics in established verticals. DeepSeek's ability to compete with

OpenAI on price while narrowing the performance gap illustrates the broader pattern: in AI-defined markets, cost structures and performance benchmarks can shift in months rather than years.[8] The relevant question for incumbents is whether their competitive architecture, including their data, workflows, and deployment velocity, can compound faster than a new entrant can erode it.

The Valuation Shift: How AI is Reshaping What Markets Reward

The way companies are valued in the Intelligent Economy is changing. Traditional frameworks centered on trailing EBITDA, comparable multiples, and revenue growth rates remain relevant, but they are increasingly incomplete when applied to AI-intensive businesses. The distinction between AI-native and AI-adopting companies is becoming a primary lens through which buyers and investors assess both risk and potential.

Several dynamics are reshaping valuation in these sectors. Product cycles are compressing. What once required eighteen to twenty-four months to develop, test, and deploy can in many cases be achieved on a much shorter timeline. This compression may benefit companies with tight learning loops and rapid deployment capability, while creating headwinds for those whose product cadence assumes traditional development timelines.[10] It also introduces execution risk: speed without discipline can erode quality, reputation, and client retention.

Proprietary data is also beginning to register as a distinct value driver in transactions. Deloitte's 2025 research found that organizations treating data as a formal strategic asset achieve two to three times the return on investment of peers that do not.[11] In lower middle market transactions, we observe that buyers and investors are increasingly scrutinizing data quality, provenance, and strategic optionality alongside traditional financial metrics. A company's data posture may influence both valuation and buyer interest, though the degree varies by sector, buyer type, and the maturity of the underlying data infrastructure.

The M&A market reflects these dynamics. Global deal values rose 40% in 2025 to $4.9 trillion, with scope deals (those structured around capability acquisition rather than cost synergies) accounting for 60% of billion-dollar-plus transactions.[12] Bain's analysis found

that almost half of all technology deals now carry an AI rationale, and one in five strategic acquirers walked away from a deal because of AI's anticipated impact on the target's business.[12] PwC's 2025 CEO Survey found that 42% of chief executives believe their company will not remain viable beyond the next decade without significant transformation.[13] These are directional signals, not predictions.

For founders and operators in the lower middle market, the practical implication is this: the window during which a company's AI capabilities and data infrastructure are treated as incremental upside rather than baseline expectations is narrowing. That said, not every buyer is applying the same framework, and transaction outcomes remain highly dependent on process quality, timing, and competitive dynamics at the time of marketing.

The New Competitive Moat: Three Compounding Factors

In our analysis, the emerging foundation for sustained competitive advantage in the Intelligent Economy rests on three compounding factors. Unlike traditional moats such as scale, distribution, or proprietary technology, these factors tend to strengthen with use. Building them requires time, capital, and organizational commitment, and there is no certainty that any individual firm will achieve the same results as the data-driven composites cited in third-party research.

Proprietary Data

Data that is uniquely generated, curated, or enriched through a company's operations. The value lies not in volume alone, but in exclusivity, context, and the degree to which it enables differentiated insight or product capability. McKinsey's research on agentic organizations identifies proprietary data as a foundational pillar of AI-era business models.[6] Deloitte's 2025 findings add weight to this: data monetization strategy adoption expanded from 16% to 65% of organizations between 2023 and 2025.[11] The risk of treating data as a strategic asset includes the cost of governance, compliance exposure, and the organizational investment required to productize data effectively.

Continuous Learning Loops

The capacity of systems and teams to improve through iterative feedback. Companies with effective learning loops do not just deploy AI; they build environments where each interaction, transaction, or data point informs the next decision.[7] McKinsey found that 55% of high-performing firms fundamentally reworked processes when deploying AI, nearly three times the rate of other organizations.[3] This level of organizational change is itself a source of execution risk, and not every firm is positioned to absorb it at pace.

Deployment Speed

The velocity with which a company translates insight into operational change. In compressed markets, the interval between recognizing a shift and acting on it has material consequences.[5,6] Deployment speed is not simply an engineering capability. It reflects decision-making cadence, organizational agility, and the capacity to move from analysis to execution. Firms that move quickly without adequate governance or change management introduce their own risks, including product quality issues and client relationship strain.

> *In the Intelligent Economy, organizations that build and apply these three capabilities do not merely compete. They compound. Each cycle of data, learning, and deployment may make the next cycle faster and more defensible. Whether that potential is realized depends on execution and organizational readiness.*

The Diagnostic: Identifying Your AI-Driven Inflection Point

An inflection point is not a crisis. It is a signal that the current playbook is losing fit with the market. For leaders in the lower middle market, the challenge is recognizing this signal before competitive dynamics or buyer expectations force a reactive decision.

In our experience advising technology and AI-enabled services companies, most firms navigating the Intelligent Economy face one or more of six recurring triggers. These are not diagnoses or recommendations. They are frames for structuring strategic attention and informing discussion.

1. The Capability Gap

Symptom: Client demand is outpacing your AI or data capabilities. RFPs and renewal conversations increasingly require features, automation, or analytical depth that your team and technology cannot deliver within competitive timelines.

Key Question: What is the time-to-impact versus the time-to-build, and what premium in cost, risk, or dilution are you prepared to accept for speed?

2. The Growth Plateau

Symptom: After a period of steady expansion, growth flattens. Sales cycles lengthen, and the go-to-market tactics that previously generated momentum are producing diminishing returns.

Key Question: Is your market consolidating around platforms? Are you positioned to be one of those platforms, or at risk of becoming a feature within someone else's ecosystem?

3. The Generational Competitor

Symptom: AI-native entrants are resetting unit economics in your market.[1] They undercut incumbents on price while narrowing or surpassing performance benchmarks. DeepSeek's competitive positioning against OpenAI illustrates this dynamic at scale; versions of it are playing out across vertical SaaS and technology-enabled services.[8]

Key Question: Where can your business create durable, differentiated value by leveraging domain expertise and proprietary data in ways a generalist AI model cannot replicate?

4. The "Data-Rich, Insight-Poor" Problem

Symptom: You possess years of valuable proprietary client and operational data, but it remains locked in legacy systems: unmonetized, underutilized, and invisible as a strategic asset.

Key Question: What is the most capital-efficient path to evaluate and productize this data? Deloitte's research suggests organizations that formally treat data as an asset may achieve materially higher returns, though outcomes depend on data quality, governance maturity, and market conditions.[11]

5. The Unsolicited Offer

Symptom: A strategic buyer or PE firm approaches with an offer anchored to trailing EBITDA, discounting the strategic option value of your data assets, AI roadmap, and market position.

Key Question: How are you valuing the strategic option embedded in your data and AI capabilities, and how does that valuation compare to the market's assessment of your trailing performance?

6. The Founder/Team Bandwidth Limit

Symptom: The company's growth trajectory, or the technical demands of AI integration, is outpacing leadership's capacity. Execution quality is showing strain across multiple fronts.

Key Question: Does the next stage of growth require a new leadership structure, specialized AI talent, or an operational partner? And what is the cost of deferring that decision?

These six triggers are not mutually exclusive. A capability gap may compound into a growth plateau; a data-rich, insight-poor problem can suppress the valuation narrative precisely when an unsolicited offer arrives. The diagnostic value lies in recognizing which triggers are active and how they interact within your specific context.

The Navigation Framework: Structuring Strategic Decisions

The triggers outlined above are designed to frame strategic attention and structure leadership discussion. They are not diagnoses, recommendations, or prescriptive guidance. Any decision to pursue a strategy or transaction should be grounded in a company-specific assessment and made in consultation with qualified legal, tax, and financial advisors.

Trigger	Key Evaluative Questions	Trade-Offs and Risks
1. The Capability Gap	What is the most capital-efficient path to acquire this capability: build, buy, or partner? What premium in cost or risk is acceptable for speed?	*If you act:* M&A integration failure, cultural conflict, or overpayment for assets. *If you wait:* Potential loss of client demand or erosion of competitive position.
2. The Growth Plateau	Is your market consolidating around platforms? Are you positioned as a platform, or at risk of becoming a feature in someone else's ecosystem?	*If you act:* Capital deployed at a disadvantageous valuation or into a saturating market. *If you wait:* Marginalization by consolidation; diminished strategic options over time.
3. The Generational Competitor	Where can the business be uniquely indispensable? How can proprietary data and domain expertise create a position a generalist AI model cannot replicate?	*If you act:* Organic investment may not outpace a well-funded new entrant's pricing or capabilities. *If you wait:* Ongoing margin compression and market share erosion.
4. Data-Rich, Insight-Poor	What is the most capital-efficient path to productize data assets? Where does data create defensible revenue or strategic differentiation?	*If you act:* Misallocation of capital to a data initiative with unproven ROI or technical feasibility. *If you wait:* Data assets may depreciate or become less distinctive as market conditions shift.
5. The Unsolicited Offer	Does the offer reflect future potential (data, AI roadmap) or only trailing performance? What is required to articulate a credible, data-forward counter-narrative?	*If you decline:* Risk of rejecting a strong offer and facing a subsequent market or performance downturn. *If you accept:* Risk of undervaluing the strategic position and data assets embedded in the business.
6. Bandwidth Limit	Does the next stage require a new leadership structure, specialized AI talent, or an operational partner?	*If you act:* External partnership may create friction around control, culture, or dilution. *If you wait:* Risk of operational failure, team burnout, and constrained ability to scale.

The Strategic Framework: Three Pathways

No pathway is inherently superior, and the framework below does not constitute a recommendation. Each approach involves material trade-offs, and outcomes depend on execution, timing, market conditions, and organizational readiness. This section is intended to inform discussion, not to direct action.

Pathway 1: The Structural Pathway (M&A)

M&A can serve as a tool for acquiring capabilities, scale, or market access that would take years to develop organically. In the Intelligent Economy, where competitive windows may compress, the structural pathway can in some cases enable faster transformation than internal development. It also introduces significant integration complexity and cultural risk, and those factors should be weighed carefully before pursuing this path.

On the buy-side, companies sometimes acquire niche AI or data-rich targets to close capability gaps or accelerate product development. On the sell-side, founders may choose to align with larger platforms that offer broader reach, deeper capital resources, or complementary technology. Outcomes in either scenario depend heavily on deal structure, post-close execution, and the degree of cultural alignment between parties.

The risks are substantial and well-documented. McKinsey's survey of nearly 1,100 M&A leaders found that 44% cite cultural misalignment as the primary reason integrations fail to meet value creation expectations, nearly twice as often as disruptions to the core business.[9] Acquirers that manage culture with rigor are more than 40% more likely to meet cost synergy targets and up to 70% more likely to surpass revenue targets.[9] These figures are averages across a broad sample and should not be treated as projections for any specific transaction.

Leadership Perspective: In modern M&A, a company's data posture, including the quality, provenance, and strategic optionality of its data assets, is increasingly evaluated alongside financial performance. The relevant question is not merely whether to pursue an acquisition, but whether the target's data and AI capabilities create compounding value that justifies the integration risk and capital deployment.

Pathway 2: The Financial Pathway (Capital Raise)

External capital can serve as a catalyst for transformation when strategic direction is clear but internal resources are constrained. The critical distinction is between commodity capital and strategic capital. Strategic capital may bring distribution channels, data access, sector expertise, or operational capability beyond funding alone. But it also alters governance dynamics and introduces investor performance expectations that affect how decisions get made.

Funding rounds are typically structured around near-term milestones of twelve to twenty-four months. Data readiness and governance are frequently underinvested, which can limit scalability and reduce returns on new capital. Raising capital preserves strategic flexibility in some respects while introducing dilution, oversight, and accountability obligations in others.

Leadership Perspective: Alignment between investors and leadership often matters as much as valuation. Evaluating whether a capital partner's objectives, time horizon, and operating philosophy support long-term strategic objectives, not merely near-term financial targets, is a discipline that distinguishes well-constructed capital raises from costly ones.

Pathway 3: The Organic Pathway (Build and Deepen)

This pathway focuses on optimizing existing resources, including people, data, relationships, and domain expertise, to strengthen the company organically while retaining control. It is the approach that requires the least structural change and preserves founder or owner authority. It also carries a material risk of being outpaced.

Firms pursuing this approach typically concentrate R&D on narrow, high-value use cases where proprietary data provides defensible differentiation. Strategic focus on a defined vertical can deepen specialization and client relevance. Alliances with larger platforms or technology providers can extend capabilities without requiring ownership changes or equity dilution.

The core risk is competitive velocity. A company that builds organically may be out-funded or out-innovated by competitors that use M&A or external capital to acquire capabilities at speed. Organic timelines that would have been acceptable three years ago may now be

insufficient in markets where AI-native entrants can scale rapidly. Outcomes depend heavily on execution quality, competitive response, and how quickly the relevant market is consolidating.

Leadership Perspective: Companies focused on specialized markets or capabilities may find clearer differentiation in the Intelligent Economy than generalists. But organic growth requires an honest assessment of whether current velocity and internal resources are sufficient to maintain competitive position against well-capitalized incumbents and emerging AI-native competitors.

The Role of Judgment in an AI-Saturated Market

One of the less-discussed implications of the Intelligent Economy is what happens when AI distributes analytical capability broadly across the market. When every participant has access to sophisticated models, pattern recognition, and automated analysis, the competitive premium on those tools compresses. What does not compress is the premium on judgment.

AI is well-suited to processing volume, identifying patterns, and generating options. What it does not do, at least not yet, is weigh strategic trade-offs that involve incomplete information, organizational dynamics, and the contextual understanding that comes from years of operating in a specific sector. The decision of whether to pursue an acquisition, when to raise capital, or how to position a company for a transaction involves something beyond analytical output. It requires the capacity to synthesize data with experience, assess risk in ambiguous conditions, and act with conviction when the analysis is inconclusive.

For founders and operators navigating inflection points, this has a practical implication. Senior, experienced advisory is not diminished by AI. In our view, it is amplified. AI may provide better inputs. Judgment provides better decisions. The outcomes that matter most tend to emerge from the disciplined combination of both.

> *In an environment where AI provides analytical capability to every market participant, the differentiator is not who has the most sophisticated model. It is who applies sound judgment to what the model reveals.*

The Strategic Imperative for Leaders

Inflection points emerge from technological acceleration, market consolidation, and shifts in buyer expectations. In the Intelligent Economy, decision cycles can compress and the cost of deferral can rise. For lower middle market leaders, the task is to read these signals clearly and act deliberately within their specific context.

Whether prompted by capability gaps, competitive disruption, or organizational capacity constraints, inflection points sit at the intersection of strategy, capital, and timing. The framework in this Perspective is intended to structure that decision-making, not to replace it. Which pathway, or which combination, fits a given situation depends on factors that are company-specific and that evolve as market conditions change.

Clarity and sequencing provide stability in uncertain markets. The aim is not to predict the future, but to position the organization to adapt as conditions evolve, and to do so from a foundation of strategic strength rather than reactive necessity.

Inflection points are moments of choice. Evidence-based decisions, informed by data, grounded in timing, and executed with discipline, may preserve flexibility and resilience. In our experience, the companies that navigate these moments with care share one characteristic: they treated the inflection point not as an interruption, but as the catalyst for their next phase of value creation.

Endnotes

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About Viorum

Viorum is an investment banking advisory firm focused on the Intelligent Economy, the convergence of AI, data, and connected platforms reshaping how technology businesses scale and create value.

We work with founders, management teams, and investors of emerging growth companies in the lower middle market. Our role is to assist clients in navigating strategic transactions and meaningful inflection points with clarity and discipline.

Viorum provides senior-led advisory across mergers and acquisitions and broader strategic alternatives. We bring a structured process and a considered point of view on market dynamics, buyer priorities, and value drivers, rooted in sector insight and hands-on execution. The same team that develops the thesis works directly with stakeholders, shapes the positioning narrative, prepares materials, and manages outreach and negotiations. Recommendations are anchored in data, operating realities, and the specific strategic objectives of our clients.

Across our engagements, we focus on helping clients articulate where they sit in the Intelligent Economy, how their products, data assets, and ecosystems create durable value, and what that implies for strategic positioning and transaction outcomes.

To learn more about Viorum, our sector focus, and how we work with founders, owners, and investors, please visit viorum.com or contact us at collaborate@viorum.com.

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