

A WORKING TOOL FOR HEADS OF AI · 2027 PLANNING

The AI Budget Worksheet for 2027

A fillable worksheet to help you build your 2027 AI budget — turn our benchmarks into your own numbers, and prep the case you'll bring to your CFO.

How to use this worksheet

- 1 Start with your org stats**
 Enter your headcount and payroll below — every benchmark on the following pages scales from a 1,000-person organization.
- 2 Fill in each line item**
 We walk through the five essential budget lines. Reference the benchmark, then enter your own planned number.
- 3 Prep your CFO conversation**
 We turn the three things your CFO wants to hear into a fillable script: your ROI timeline, your inference guardrails, and your savings plan.
- 4 Build the ramp**
 We lay out a quarterly funding request instead of one lump sum — fill in your own gates and percentages.

SECTION 1 OF 4

Your Organization, at a Glance

Total employee headcount

e.g. 1,000
Total annual payroll (\$)

e.g. \$110,000,000
Fiscal year start

e.g. Jan 2027
Avg. knowledge-worker salary (\$)

used later in this worksheet
Avg. technical/engineering salary (\$)

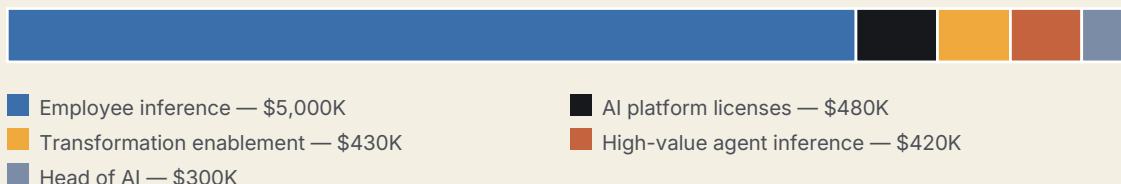
used later in this worksheet

Build Your Line Items — Part 1



CASE STUDY

Here's a reference point, not a rule: a 1,000-person organization typically budgets roughly \$6.6M a year for AI transformation — about 6% of total salary cost. The chart below shows how that splits across the five line items. Use it to sanity-check your own numbers on the next few pages — your org's mix may look different.



1 AI platform licenses

Standardize on one enterprise AI platform before budgeting anything else for every knowledge worker in your organization — the cost here is the most predictable line in the budget.

YOUR NUMBERS

Cost / employee / yr (\$)

Total headcount licensed

Total license cost (\$)

$$\boxed{} \times \boxed{} = \boxed{}$$

benchmark: \$480

Notes / assumptions

2 Employee inference costs

The line most orgs underestimate. Budget 2–5% of salary for knowledge workers, 5–7% for engineers/technical roles (incl. Head of AI + champions).

YOUR NUMBERS
KW inference \$/hd
(2–5% of salary)

Tech inference \$/hd
(5–7% of salary)

Total employee inference (\$)

$$\boxed{} + \boxed{} = \boxed{}$$

e.g. \$2,000–\$5,000

e.g. \$10,000–\$14,000

benchmark: \$5M

Notes / assumptions

3 Inference for high-value agents

Centralized, cross-org agents (outreach, client intel, scheduled workflows) priced per business process, not per person. Expect ~20 agents in production by year one at \$1,500–\$2,000/mo each (\$360K–\$480K/yr).

YOUR NUMBERS
of centralized agents

Avg. cost / agent / mo (\$)

Total agent inference (\$/yr)

$$\boxed{} \times \boxed{} = \boxed{}$$

benchmark: ~20

\$1,500–\$2,000

benchmark: \$360–\$480K

Notes / assumptions

Build Your Line Items — Part 2

4 Head of AI

A senior hire with authority to drive transformation org-wide and credibility to push back on stalled teams. This is the single highest-leverage line item in the whole budget — you need this role to coordinate all the other elements of your AI plan.

YOUR NUMBERS

Budgeted fully-loaded comp (\$)

benchmark: \$200K–\$400K

Role status

open / filled / planned

Notes / assumptions

5 Transformation enablement

Coaching platform + 2x/yr activation workshops (~\$200K). Change management — consultant or internal hire (\$125K) plus ~\$5K/1,000 people for events. Champions program: 5–10% of your workforce formalized as catalysts at ~\$2,000/champion/yr.

YOUR NUMBERS

Coaching platform + workshops (\$)

\$200K+

Change management (\$)

\$125K + events

Champions program (\$)

\$2K × # champions

Notes / assumptions

Your total AI transformation budget

1. AI platform licenses	
2. Employee inference	
3. High-value agent inference	
4. Head of AI	
5. Transformation enablement	
Total annual AI budget	

Prep the CFO Conversation — Part 1

Your CFO won't debate whether AI works — they'll ask how you'll track ROI and what funds it. Don't promise fast ROI. Instead, come prepared with a 2-year plan for proving value and a clear plan for keeping inference spend under control.

1. Your 2-year ROI timeline

For each window, write the one or two things you'll actually point to — a metric, a workflow change, a headcount decision. Vague windows are what make CFOs nervous.

0–6 months

Don't look for ROI yet — name what you're watching instead.

6–12 months

Concrete workflow changes you expect (e.g. higher opportunity rate from AI-assisted follow-up).

12–24 months

Team-level efficiency: lower headcount need or scope expansion without new hires.

2. Your inference spend-management plan

This is where you show your CFO the guardrails, not just the ask. Set a per-person spending target so no one can blow through budget unnoticed, decide in advance who signs off when someone needs more, and build in a cushion for the growth you're actively trying to create — a 25–30% contingency on inference lines is a reasonable starting point, since usage you're trying to grow is genuinely hard to forecast.

Target \$ / knowledge worker / yr

pulls from Section 2, Part 1

Target \$ / technical worker / yr

pulls from Section 2, Part 1

Contingency built in (%)

we suggest 25–30%

Who approves overages, and how will employees request them?

Prep the CFO Conversation — Part 2

3. Where the savings come from first

Showing where the budget gets offset does more to justify the ask than anything else in this conversation. Most leaders end up pulling more than one of these levers at once — check every one you're planning to act on, note when you expect to start, and estimate what it's worth. The total should get you close to funding the request on the previous pages.

☐ **Hold a quarter of backfills**

A 1,000-person org with 12% attrition churns ~120 roles a year (~\$13M in payroll). Hold 25% of those backfills for twelve months and you've potentially funded ~\$3.25M — no layoffs required. Pick roles where an agent is already handling a meaningful chunk of the work.

Est. annual savings (\$)

Target start (e.g. Q2)

☐ **Cut vendor / agency / BPO spend**

Indirect spend often runs 10–18% of revenue. A meaningful slice of that is outsourced content, research, design, and offshore support — exactly the work agents absorb first. A 15–25% cut to that slice covers most of a typical AI budget. Frame this as substitution, not new spend.

Est. annual savings (\$)

Target start (e.g. Q2)

☐ **Consolidate software**

Organizations often leave a third or more of their SaaS licenses unused. AI also absorbs whole categories — transcription, research subscriptions, point solutions. 10–20% of software spend is typically recoverable between dead seats and tools you no longer need.

Est. annual savings (\$)

Target start (e.g. Q2)

☐ **Reallocate discretionary L&D**

Most orgs carry \$1,000–\$2,000 per employee in learning and development. Leave mandatory compliance spend alone, but trade a stale course library for the training you can actually measure the output of.

Est. annual savings (\$)

Target start (e.g. Q2)

Total planned annual savings

sum of the estimates above

Where this lands relative to your total ask (Section 2) tells you how much of the conversation is about new investment versus reallocated spend — the closer the two numbers, the easier this conversation tends to be.

Build the Ramp — and Sign Off

Don't ask for the full amount on January 1 — a step function is a harder yes than a ramp. Request a percentage of run rate each quarter, with each increase gated on a specific adoption or proficiency threshold you agree on in advance. A common shape is 40% of run rate in Q1, ramping to full run rate by Q3, but set your own gates based on what you can realistically prove by then.

Quarterly funding ramp

For each quarter: what share of the full run-rate budget are you requesting, and what has to be true — an adoption number, a proficiency score, a completed pilot — before it unlocks?

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
% of run rate 40%	% of run rate	% of run rate 100%	% of run rate
Gate / adoption threshold	Gate / adoption threshold	Gate / adoption threshold	Gate / adoption threshold

Sign-off

Head of AI	CEO	CEO / sponsor	Date
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Open questions or follow-ups before you present this budget: