



RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

The AI Maturity Path for PS Leaders

Top 7 Insights from the
2025 SPI Research Study

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Introduction

Professional services are moving past AI experimentation and into operational reality.

The 2025 SPI Research study of 146 firms reveals that while client expectations are rising, AI only creates repeatable value when the foundation is strong: clean data, clear workflows, and a workforce ready for day-to-day delivery.

High performers aren't just more innovative; they build trust through standardization and decision-grade visibility.

The Benchmark Snapshot: A Leadership Test

While AI adoption is rising, operational efficiency is under mounting pressure, creating a significant “performance gap” in the industry.



Utilization Warning

Average billable utilization has slid to **65.7%**—well below the 10-year average of 70.8%.



The ROI Gap

Positive ROI now takes an average of **18.5 months**, a 155% increase over 2024 expectations.



The Proficiency Hurdle

Only **39.9%** of consultants are currently proficient with AI tools.



Client Pressure

45% of clients now expect their partners to use AI in delivery.

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compares to the industry's
high performers

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7 Signals Leaders Should Act On

01 Data quality is the #1 blocker to AI trust.

AI doesn't just need data; it needs operational truth. When departments like professional services (PS) and finance can't agree on a project's margin, AI becomes a liability rather than an asset. High performers succeed because they build trust through standardization and governance first.

Quick check:



Do PS and finance agree on margin, and can your AI outputs be traced back to verified source data?

02 AI value shows up in delivery work, not isolated experiments.

ROI improves when AI influences estimating, planning, risk assessment, and handoffs in live projects. High performers use AI in **38% of their projects**, significantly more than the industry average.

Quick check:



Is AI used in active delivery today, or is it mainly confined to internal analysis and meeting summaries?

03 Workforce readiness determines success.

Access to tools is not the separator; proficiency and role design are. Firms with over **60% AI proficiency** see EBITDA above **23%**, the highest in the 2025 study.

Quick check:



Do your teams know exactly where AI fits in their work, and what still requires human review?

04 Recalibrate the business case for “Operational Lift”.

With 12-month ROI expectations dropping to **9.5%**, the goal must shift toward operational lift that stabilizes margins and delivery consistency over time.

Quick check:



Can you link AI outcomes to margin stability, write-offs, billing lag, or forecast confidence?

05 Standardization is the bedrock of AI scale.

AI cannot scale if project structures, time capture, and health signals vary widely. Standardization of these processes is what allows for measurable performance gains.

Quick check:



Do your leaders still debate metric definitions, or are they consistent across all regions and teams?

06 AI strategy is an operating model strategy.

Results improve when PS, Finance, CS, and Ops share definitions, governance, and decision rights. A connected workflow from “sell to deliver” is essential for AI to provide real lift.

Quick check:



Who owns the action when AI flags a project risk, and do your workflows connect the entire services value chain?

07 Trust is the new competitive advantage.

Leaders are prioritizing explainability, auditability, and governed usage over novelty. In a high-stakes environment, clients need to know they can trust the expert behind the algorithm.

Quick check:



Can you trace AI outputs, govern access, and maintain an audit-ready trail of every change?





Diagnostic: The AI Readiness Self-Check

Before you can leverage the signals above, you must have an operational foundation that can support them. If you cannot answer these four questions cleanly, you are not yet ready to scale AI impact:

1. Do you have **planned vs. actual margin visibility** before an engagement closes?
 2. Can you forecast **capacity 60 to 90 days out** without using spreadsheets?
 3. Is **AI usage** tied directly to margin stability, utilization, or forecast accuracy?
 4. Do you have **clear rules** for where AI usage is allowed vs. not allowed?
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Roadmap: Your First 30 Days

If the self-check revealed gaps, focus the next 30 days on building the “operational truth” required for AI to succeed:

-  **Align Definitions**
Standardize definitions for margin, utilization, backlog, write-downs, and billing lag.
-  **Standardize Delivery**
Implement consistent templates, time-capture rules, and health signals.
-  **Govern AI Usage**
Establish approved use cases, access controls, and mandatory human review.
-  **Measure Outcomes**
Pick 2 to 3 specific KPIs and track AI-driven lift consistently.

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