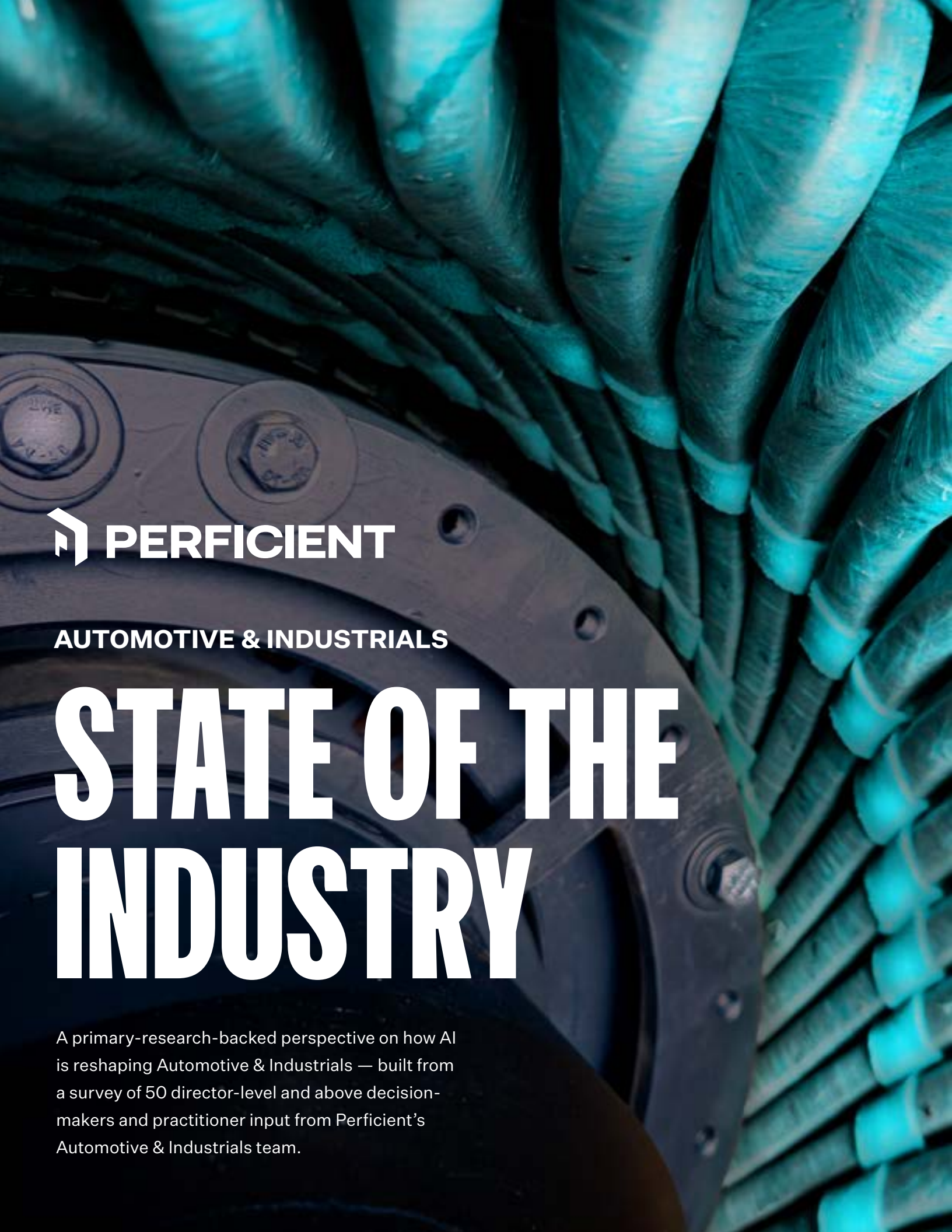

PERFICIENT

AUTOMOTIVE & INDUSTRIALS

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

A primary-research-backed perspective on how AI is reshaping Automotive & Industrials — built from a survey of 50 director-level and above decision-makers and practitioner input from Perficient's Automotive & Industrials team.

01

THE MOMENT

WHERE AUTOMOTIVE & INDUSTRIALS STANDS RIGHT NOW

After two decades of flat consumption, U.S. electricity demand has turned sharply upward. The U.S. Energy Information Administration now projects the country will use record amounts of electricity in 2026 and 2027, driven by data center development and a rebound in domestic manufacturing. Electrification is reshaping the economy, and industries that once operated in separate lanes are converging and becoming increasingly interdependent.

That convergence is creating a rare strategic moment. Automotive companies are expanding into energy and charging infrastructure. Manufacturers are modernizing operations to support advanced production, semiconductor investment, and connected products. Utilities are preparing for an energy landscape that is changing faster than the infrastructure built to support it. At the same time, AI is fundamentally transforming how organizations work. One thing is clear: Organizations are no longer managing isolated transformation initiatives; they are managing multiple structural shifts simultaneously.

What makes this moment different from prior industry inflection points is the speed at which assumptions are changing. Global competition, geopolitical uncertainty, tariff volatility, policy shifts, and AI adoption are reshaping investment and operating decisions faster than traditional planning cycles can absorb. This is not a series of separate transformations, but a convergence that must be managed as a connected system.

Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, Short-Term Energy Outlook, September 2026

AUTOMOTIVE

OEMs are running three transformation programs simultaneously: electrification, software-defined vehicles, and connected services. The vehicle is being reconceived, evolving from a mode of transportation into a connected platform for energy, software, and services, with subscription models extending value and revenue well beyond the point of sale. Meanwhile, Chinese and Indian manufacturers have closed the technology and experience gap, emerging as competitive threats.

MANUFACTURING

Plant-floor operational technology was never designed to integrate with modern IT, yet AI requires both to function as a connected system. Reshoring investments are creating new capacity, but not necessarily modernizing people, processes, and technologies that support it. Across many facilities, next-generation production goals still depend on infrastructure built for a previous era.

ENERGY & UTILITIES

Utilities face a historic capital challenge: modernizing aging infrastructure while building new generation and distribution at unprecedented scale. Massive investment plans collide with equipment shortages, multi-year procurement delays, and interconnection backlogs. At the same time, AI-driven power demand, national security priorities, and rising customer expectations are forcing utilities to rethink how they plan, build, and operate.

OIL & GAS

Oil and gas organizations are operating with elevated geopolitical significance: domestic supply mandates, strategic pricing constraints, and national energy security considerations are reshaping where and how the majors invest and trade. The sector's workforce succession challenge compounds the pressure — a significant share of experienced technical staff across most large operators is nearing retirement, creating irreversible institutional knowledge risk.

02

THE AI INFLECTION

AI IS REAL. SCALING IT ISN'T.

AI is active across automotive and industrials, but it remains at the leading edge of what most organizations can operationalize. OEMs are using AI to compress product launch timelines and accelerate content creation. Manufacturers are applying AI to quality inspection, predictive maintenance, and operational decision-making where data foundations are strong. Utilities are beginning to identify likely outages before customers call in by combining asset, field, and customer data. Yet in most organizations, these capabilities remain isolated use cases rather than operationalized at scale.

Investment signals are clear: industrial organizations increasingly treat AI as a competitive necessity, not an experimental initiative. According to the Manufacturing Leadership Council, **68%** of manufacturers say AI will be foundational to future competitiveness, yet only **35%** have a formalized AI governance strategy at the enterprise level and just **18%** report having an AI strategy in place for manufacturing operations specifically. Organizations largely agree on the destination. Far fewer have built the roadmap to get there.

The barriers are increasingly organizational and operational rather than purely technical. Data remains fragmented across operational and enterprise systems that were never designed to work together. Operating models often evolve more slowly than the tools themselves. And many AI programs are still managed as technology deployments instead of business transformations.

Source: Manufacturing Leadership Council, Shaping the AI-Powered Factory of the Future, 2025

"High ambition with a lot of friction — that is the phrase that captures this industry right now. Where AI creates real economic impact is in repeatable decisions, high-volume workflows, situations where the output actually matters and someone is accountable. Everywhere else, it is just AI on top of bad data.

MICHELLE BLAKELEY
Vice President, Automotive

PERFICIENT'S VIEW

The differentiator is not which AI model an organization deploys. It is whether the data infrastructure, operating model, and governance around it are ready to turn deployment into measurable value.

03

THE TENSION

WHAT AUTOMOTIVE & INDUSTRIALS LEADERS TOLD US

The biggest obstacles to AI success in automotive and industrials may no longer be technical. As AI capabilities continue to advance rapidly, leaders in Perficient's research were more likely to emphasize organizational alignment, workforce development, and execution challenges than the technology itself. The findings point to a shift in focus from adopting AI to operationalizing it, and from accessing technology to creating value with it.

METHODOLOGY

Perficient surveyed 50 director-level and above automotive and industrials decision-makers in August 2026 through 1Q, a mobile research platform. Findings were supplemented by insights from Perficient's automotive and industrials practitioners.

36%

OF LEADERS SAY BETTER INTEGRATION BETWEEN BUSINESS AND TECHNOLOGY TEAMS WOULD CREATE THE GREATEST INCREASE IN AI-DRIVEN VALUE

01 THE BOTTLENECK IS THE ORG CHART

The challenge of maximizing AI-driven value is not solely technical. While better AI tools and higher-quality data remain important, leaders were more likely to identify organizational barriers as the bigger opportunity. When business and technology teams operate from different priorities, timelines, and definitions of success, even well-funded AI initiatives struggle to scale. The next wave of AI value creation may depend less on acquiring new technology and more on aligning the organization around it.

48%

OF RESPONDENTS SAY UPSKILLING THEIR WORKFORCE WOULD CREATE MORE LONG-TERM ENTERPRISE VALUE THAN ANY OTHER INVESTMENT, YET 42% SAY AI HAS NOT MATERIALLY CHANGED THEIR WORKFORCE STRATEGY

02 THE WORKFORCE CONTRADICTION

The workforce is increasingly viewed as the key to unlocking AI value creation, but organizations are navigating a transition that remains uneven. Many leaders report that AI has already begun shifting talent toward higher-value work and increasing demand for specialized skills. Yet a substantial share say AI has not materially changed workforce strategy. At the same time, workforce upskilling stands out as the investment leaders believe would create the greatest long-term enterprise value. The findings suggest that while AI's workforce impact is already taking shape, many organizations are still determining how to translate those changes into a deliberate talent strategy.

Source: Perficient / 1Q survey, 2026

40%

OF RESPONDENTS EXPECT AI-DRIVEN PRODUCTIVITY IMPROVEMENTS TO GENERATE THE GREATEST SHARE OF NEW ENTERPRISE VALUE OVER THE NEXT THREE YEARS, WHILE JUST 8% SELECTED NEW PRODUCTS OR SERVICES

16%

OF LEADERS SAY DATA QUALITY IS THE BIGGEST BARRIER TO AI EXECUTION — TIED WITH BOTH LEGACY INFRASTRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION READINESS

03 ORGANIZATIONS ARE OPTIMIZING FOR PRODUCTIVITY

Productivity improvements dominate leaders' expectations for AI-driven value creation. Customer experience also remains a clear priority, an area Perficient's experts view as critical to long-term success. Where perspectives begin to diverge is around the next frontier of value creation. Our practitioners believe one of the sector's biggest opportunities may be receiving less attention: the creation of entirely new sources of value through connected products, service-based offerings, and data-driven revenue streams. The gap is not one of disagreement, but of emphasis. Leaders are focused on improving existing operations and experiences, while experts see emerging growth opportunities that many organizations may still be undervaluing.

04 EVERY ORGANIZATION HAS A DIFFERENT PROBLEM

When asked about the biggest gap between AI expectations and execution, leaders were remarkably divided. Responses were spread across data quality, legacy infrastructure, talent, governance, change management, budget priorities, and organizational readiness, with no single challenge emerging as a front-runner. The findings suggest organizations are navigating AI transformations from different starting points and with different constraints. Rather than converging around one dominant obstacle, leaders appear to be confronting a wide range of challenges simultaneously. The result is a question of prioritization: where will organizations choose to focus their investments to close the gap between AI ambition and execution?

Source: Perficient / 1Q survey, 2026

04

THE SIGNAL

WHAT LEADERS GETTING IT RIGHT ARE DOING DIFFERENTLY

The organizations making real progress are not moving faster — they are moving differently. Across Perficient's work with automotive and industrials clients, several patterns distinguish leaders from the field.

SIGNAL 1

They Build Data Infrastructure Before AI Applications

Data must be treated as infrastructure: organized, governed, and accessible before AI is deployed on top of it. Organizations then build what practitioners call data products: curated, quality-guaranteed data assets aligned to specific business outcomes rather than raw system exports.

"

In most organizations, the data exists, but it almost never reaches the systems and teams that would actually use it. The data is a mess. Start there, because everything else depends on it.

SEAN MCGRATH
Associate Vice President, Energy & Utilities

SIGNAL 2

They Treat AI as a Business Transformation, Not a Technology Initiative

Leaders generating real value are not running AI as an IT initiative with business stakeholders on the side. They are running it as a business transformation where technology is one workstream — and people, processes, and incentive structures are changing alongside it, not waiting for deployment to start the organizational work. For these organizations, workforce strategy is part of the program from the start, not a change management track that follows it.

"

The companies pulling ahead treat the digital initiative and the business transformation as one program. It is not a technology transformation. It is a business transformation — and it impacts structures, cultures, incentives, and operating models.

TONY MAURO
Senior Solutions Architect, Manufacturing

SIGNAL 3

They Govern AI Before Scaling It

Organizations moving ahead apply to AI systems the same operational discipline they apply to any mission-critical application: monitoring, telemetry, financial governance, and accountability frameworks in place before scaling, not built reactively when problems emerge. Production discipline applied early is what separates organizations that scale confidently from those that are surprised by what scale reveals.

“

We see it consistently — organizations that have gone wide with AI and built tools that nobody uses. Sometimes it is the wrong problem. Sometimes it was never operationalized properly.

JOHN LATHAM
Associate Vice President, Energy & Utilities

AI LEADERS ARE TREATING AI AS AN OPERATING DISCIPLINE, NOT A TECHNOLOGY INITIATIVE.

SIGNAL 4

They Let Value Define Scope, Not Ambition

The organizations making consistent progress are running the most disciplined programs, not the largest ones — starting where data is ready, outcomes are measurable, and the business case is clear, then using each proof point to expand. The difference between building organizational momentum and burning credibility is scope discipline applied from the start.

“

Right tool, right challenge. The organizations making progress are jettisoning the distractions and focusing on the things that bring the most value or take out cost — those are the two levers that actually grow a business.

NICK RODGERS
Associate Vice President, Automotive

05

THE QUESTION

When technology is no longer the differentiator, where will your competitive advantage come from?

The organizations that move ahead will not be defined by how much they invested or how fast they moved. They will be defined by whether they built the operational foundation — data, operating model, governance, and people — that makes investment compound rather than expire.

Perficient is the global AI and technology consulting firm disrupting the traditional consulting model. Powered by our 7,000+ advisors, engineers, and designers, Perficient implements AI-first solutions that break conventions and deliver outcomes that matter. Proudly serving clients that represent the world's most innovative brands, and in collaboration with our powerful technology partner ecosystem, we bring deep industry expertise and data-driven design to redefine how businesses run and succeed.

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