

THE INTEGRATION GAP: AI IS RESHAPING EXECUTIVE SEARCH

Most Firms Are Not Ready

Inside the widening divide between firms that have integrated AI and those still finding their footing.

Hunt Scanlon | Media + recruiterflow
Leadership Intelligence

In partnership with HSIQ | TALENT INTELLIGENCE
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97

Firm leaders in AI adoption survey

140

Firms in annual rankings survey

20%

Have achieved broad adoption

~11%

Industry Americas revenue growth 2026



ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report draws on two proprietary Hunt Scanlon Media datasets collected in Q1 2026. It maps where 97 executive search firms stand on AI adoption, what separates the 20% who have crossed into real integration, and the concrete steps the rest need to take next.

97

AI Adoption Survey

Firm leaders across the Americas and globally. Adoption level, tools in use, barriers, objectives.

140

Annual Rankings Survey

CEOs and CFOs. Americas and global revenue, headcount, offices.

47

Matched Firms

Firms in both datasets, enabling revenue growth vs. adoption comparison.

~11%

Industry Revenue Growth

Americas 2026 (preliminary)

Revenue growth analysis reflects 47 firms appearing in both surveys with usable matched data. Findings are directional. Survey data collected Q1 2026.

Executive Search in 2026: A Market in Motion

Executive search is off to a strong start in 2026. Americas revenue across the industry is tracking up approximately 10 to 11 percent, and the standout performers are posting growth rates that would have been remarkable even in boom years. With growth returning, the defining operational challenge is no longer survival. It is scale.

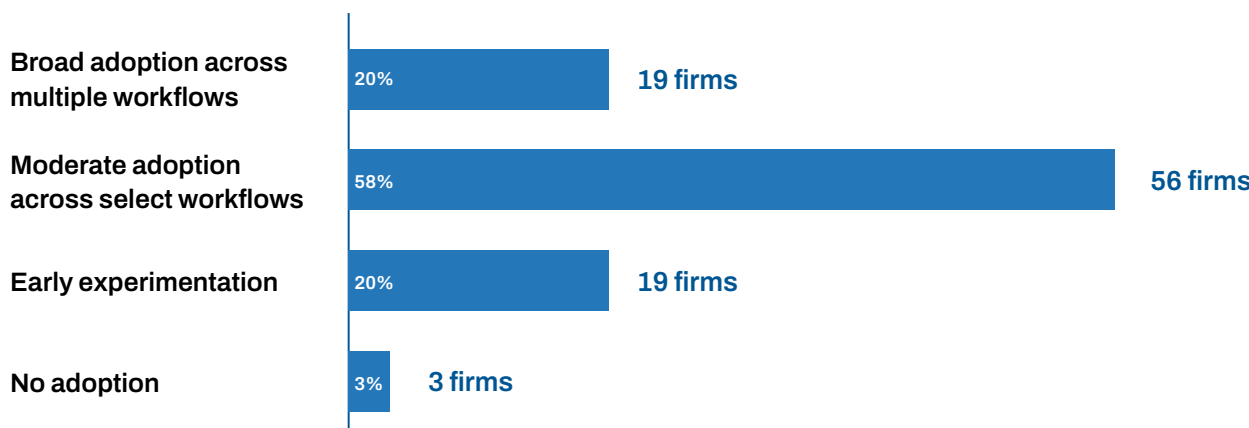
+61%**CenterPeak****+59%****Riviera
Partners****+51%****Landing Point
Search Group****+45%****NU Advisory
Partners****+32%****Sheffield
Haworth**

Other notable performers include Direct Recruiters (+27%), Caldwell (+14%), JM Search (+22%), Beecher Reagan (+24%), and Charles Aris (+23%).



A market growing at 10-11% rewards firms that can deliver more searches, faster, with the same or leaner teams. AI integration is the main lever available to executive search firms to achieve that kind of scalable growth.

Nearly Everyone Has Started. Almost No One Has Fully Integrated.



The 78% in the middle are not laggards. Ninety-one percent of all respondents use general-purpose AI tools like ChatGPT or Claude. The issue is not access. It is what firms decide to do after that first step.

The Integration Gap Defined:

The gap between the 20% who have crossed into broad adoption and the 78% still in moderate or early experimentation is not a tool gap. It is a systems gap, a data gap, and a leadership gap.

66%

All firms say firm leadership is the primary driver

84%

Broad adopters say firm leadership is the primary driver

Only 18% cite individual recruiters as the primary driver, and nearly all of those firms fall in moderate or early-stage categories. Without top-down executive commitment, broad adoption does not stall — it never actually starts.

“

As CEO, I am pushing our team to experiment with leveraging AI tools across every part of our workflow... Candidly, adoption is sporadic and unevenly distributed, as many are quite comfortable with things as they are.

”

“

We started with education regarding what AI was capable of, and the associated risks. Then our focus shifted to speed and quality as force multipliers for people regardless of their role.

”

The Data Is Directional and That Makes It More Credible

The relationship between AI adoption and revenue growth is not a simple linear correlation — and it is far more interesting because of that. Across 47 matched firms, broad adopters beat the industry average on a more consistent basis than their peers.

+10.8%

Broad adopters median
revenue growth

+7.0%

Moderate adopters median
revenue growth

“Broad adopters posted median revenue growth of 10.8% against 7.0% for moderate adopters — a gap that is directionally consistent across the dataset.”



The Size Effect

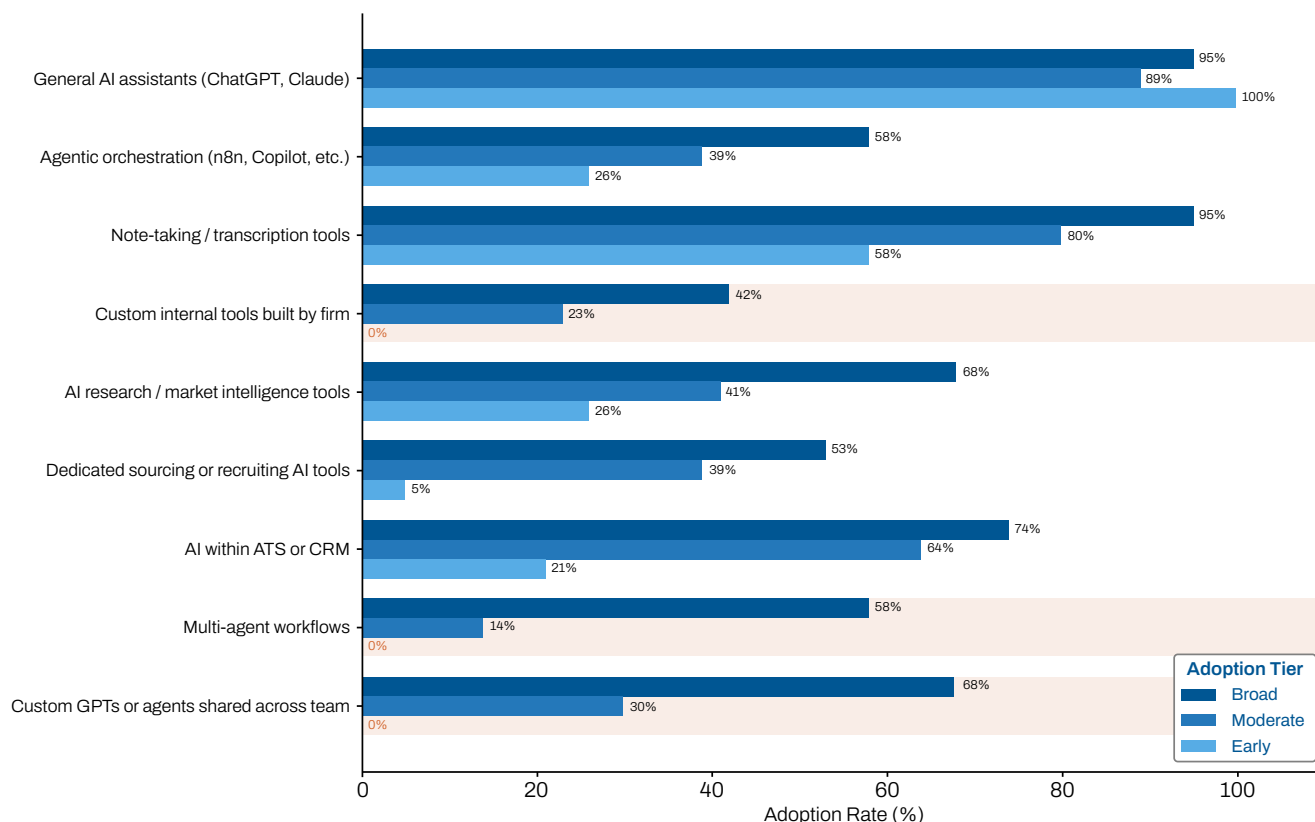
Broad adopters in this matched sample average approximately \$125M in Americas revenue, compared to \$25M for moderate adopters. Large firms grow more slowly in percentage terms by definition. When boutique firms under \$50M are isolated, broad adopters show a higher median growth rate and are more consistently above the industry average than their early-stage peers.

Directional, Not Causal

This analysis is based on 47 matched firms and should be treated as directional evidence rather than a causal claim. The firms currently pulling ahead are not the ones who made the biggest AI bet — but the ones who made the earliest, most consistent one.

It Is Not the Tools. It Is the Operating Model Behind Them.

Every firm in this dataset is using AI. What separates the leaders is not how many tools they have — it is how thoroughly AI is woven into the way the firm operates.



The 0% Cliff:

Custom GPTs shared across teams: 68% of broad adopters, zero among early-stage firms. Multi-agent workflows: 58% versus zero. Custom internal tools: 42% versus zero. This is not a gap in curiosity or effort. It is a gap in commitment.

Buy vs. Build

Only **22%** of all respondents have built custom internal tools. Among broad adopters that rises to **42%**. The majority of even the most advanced firms are buying and configuring rather than building from scratch.



AI is not replacing recruiters — it is turning them into higher-leverage operators. We are eliminating manual work, surfacing stronger candidates faster, and making more data-driven decisions. — Broad adopter

Win more searches and access better candidates faster. — Broad adopter



Efficiency Today vs. Scale Tomorrow: The Dividing Line

The open-ended survey responses tell a clear story. Efficiency shows up across every adoption level — but the framing around it shifts as adoption deepens, and that shift is the most important signal in the qualitative data.



Moderate & Early Adopters

AI as individual productivity

Tools adopted individually are not accretive. Gains stay local and do not compound across the firm.

“Back-end efficiency to create more time for direct client activities and relationship building. Less admin, more client in-person time and energy.

— Moderate adopter



Broad Adopters

AI as firm infrastructure

Tools deployed firmwide with shared standards. Data flows from note-taking into CRM into research into custom agents. Gains compound and accrue to the firm.

“Scale revenues while lowering operating costs and eliminating redundant tasks across the firm.

— Broad adopter

“We are using AI not to replace the human judgment that decades of expertise provide, but to multiply it — turning our firm into one that operates with the analytical firepower of a large consultancy while retaining the cross-border intimacy and relationship depth that no algorithm can replicate.

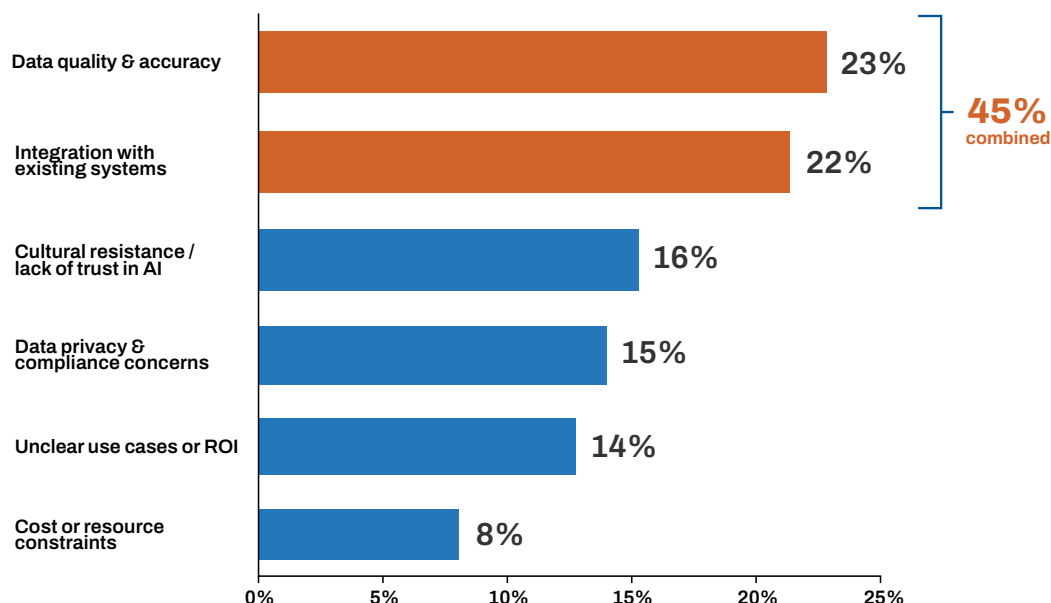
— Broad adopter



The question every firm needs to answer going into 2027 is which framework they want to be operating under — and whether their current level of adoption is consistent with that ambition.

The Infrastructure Problem Is the Adoption Problem

The primary barrier is neither cost nor culture — it is data. Specifically, the quality and connectedness of the search firm's infrastructure underneath the tools themselves.



45%

Data quality and integration combined

8%

Cost ranks last

The firms stuck in moderate or early-stage adoption do not have a budget problem or a culture problem. They share a foundation problem. Dirty data and disconnected systems are the ceiling. More tools won't raise it — but fixing the infrastructure will.

Standardized note-taking is where everything begins. Structured conversation data is what makes CRM integration possible, research automation possible, and eventually custom agents possible. The single biggest tool-level differentiator between broad adopters and early-stage firms is not a sophisticated AI platform — it is whether the firm has standardized how conversations are captured across the team.

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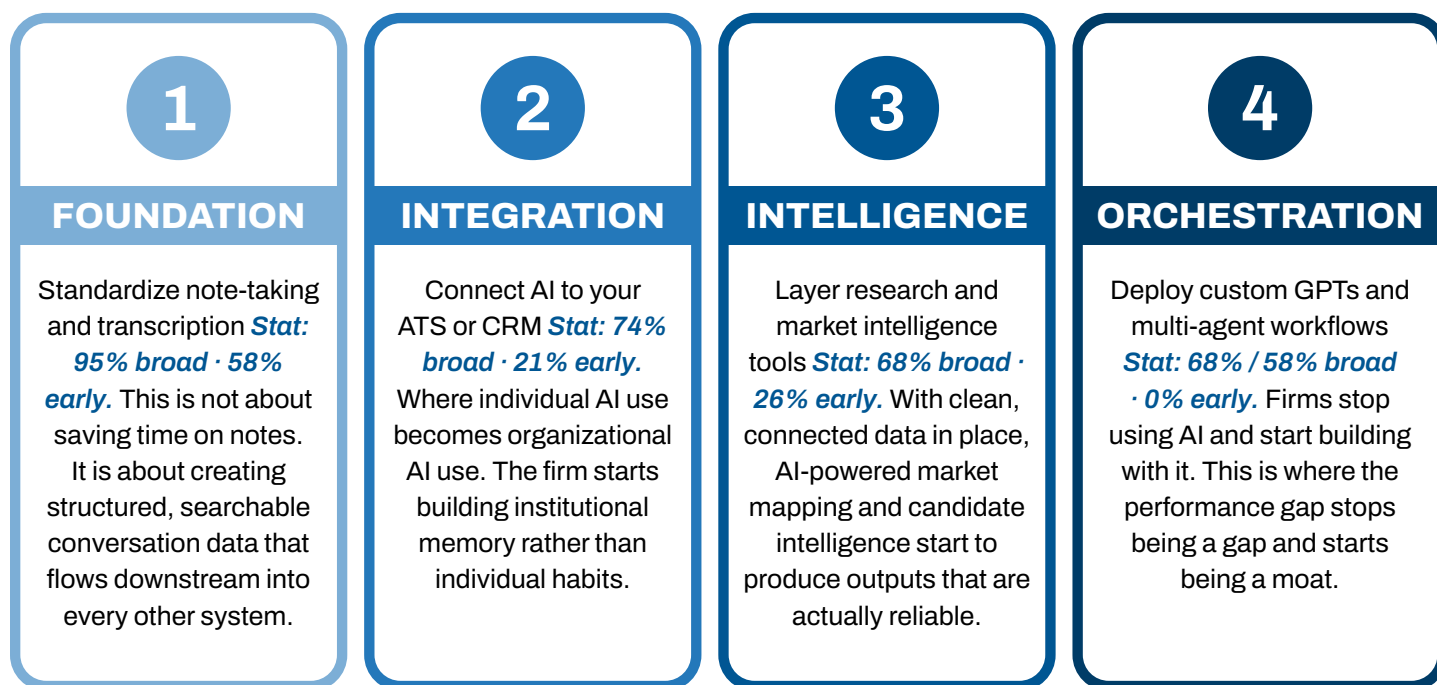
AI can automate or simplify steps in our processes that allow us to reallocate time to provide the highest value and greatest insights to our clients. High touch relationships with our clients and candidates remain central to our work. AI is a tool, not a decision maker.

— Managing Director, executive search firm

”

The Adoption Pathway and What Comes Next

The good news is that the path is replicable. For the 78% of firms still in the middle, what the firms ahead of them have done is the clearest possible roadmap for what comes next.



	ONE MOVE	WATCH FOR
EARLY EXPERIMENTATION	Standardize note-taking and transcription across the entire team before touching anything else.	Cultural resistance is higher at this stage. Make the benefits visible to individual recruiters first, then build the firm-level case.
MODERATE ADOPTION	Audit your data before adding more tools. The dominant barriers are data quality (23%) and system integration (22%) — not cost or culture.	The temptation to buy the next tool rather than fix the underlying infrastructure. Integration is the work that actually closes the gap.
BROAD ADOPTION	Shift from buying and configuring to building and deploying. Shared agents and multi-agent workflows create leverage across the entire organization.	Integration barriers remain even at this stage (cited by 39% of broad adopters). The infrastructure work does not end — it moves further up the stack.

The Window Is Open — But It Is Narrowing

The integration gap is wide but it is not random. The firms that have crossed it made a sequence of deliberate decisions, starting from the top: standardizing how conversation data is captured, connecting it to their systems of record, building shared workflows, and doing all of it with a leader who refused to let it stay optional. That sequence is visible in the data — and it is replicable. The firms that close the gap in the next 12 months will not just be better at search. They will be running a fundamentally different business than the ones that waited.



Hunt Scanlon Media Leadership Intelligence

Hunt Scanlon Media is the leading information and conference company serving the executive search and talent acquisition industry. Its daily Newswire, rankings, reports, and events reach hundreds of thousands of executive search professionals, corporate HR leaders, and private equity talent executives globally. walker@huntscanlon.com · huntscanlon.com

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Recruiterflow combines ATS, CRM, and outreach into a single AI-native platform with notetaker, auto-data updation, and natural language search. It is purpose-built for the complexity of retained search. The AIRA agent suite updates candidate profiles, summarizes interview notes, finds verified contacts, and flags job changes in real time. Firms using the platform report a significant rise in placements, 40% more submissions per recruiter, and reduced time-to-hire. manan@recruiterflow.com · recruiterflow.com

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For a deeper analytical look at these findings, HSiQ Talent Intelligence — the talent intelligence advisory unit of Hunt Scanlon Media — has published a companion report: [The Integration Gap: AI Is Reshaping Executive Search](https://hsiqtalentintelligence.com). Available at hsiqtalentintelligence.com.