# PERCEPTION & IMPACT OF AI IN PARKS & RECREATION

## 2025


NEXT PRACTICE PARTNERS
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# 1. FOREWORD

If you're unsure what AI is, either you've been hibernating for years (nothing wrong with that) or you're time-traveling from 1985 - Back to the Future style.

Our ethos to understand and shape what's next led to the 2023 launch of this "Perception & Impact of AI in Parks & Recreation Survey" so we could hear from YOU, the real humans, before the robots wrote the rules.

Now in its third year, the ONLY national survey on AI in parks and recreation shares what's really happening: adoption, hesitation, and opportunity - straight from professionals, not platforms.

Ultimately, algorithms don't run parks, people do.

Neelay Bhatt
Founder & CEO
Next Practice Partners, LLC.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was made possible by the real intelligence of parks and recreation professionals across the country. Over three years, thousands of practitioners contributed their time, insight, and judgment to help us understand how AI is actually showing up in day-to-day public service.

In a field built on trust, stewardship, and community impact, you reminded us that algorithms may assist the work, but humans still run the system.

Our appreciation goes to our lead contributor on this report, Ms. Sarah Sawhney, a terrific human (or atleast we think she's human) who exhibits superhuman intelligence, tenacity and next practice mindset. Kudos also to our Founder & CEO, Mr. Neelay Bhatt, to have the wisdom to get out of her way.

Most of all, we thank the parks and recreation community for proving one thing loud and clear: the future of AI in our field isn't artificial at all.

It's thoughtful, intentional, and powered by people.

**Sarah Sawhney**
Project Consultant
Next Practice Partners

**Neelay Bhatt**
Founder & CEO
Next Practice Partners

# 2. INTRODUCTION

Every park and recreation agency is having a version of the same conversation.

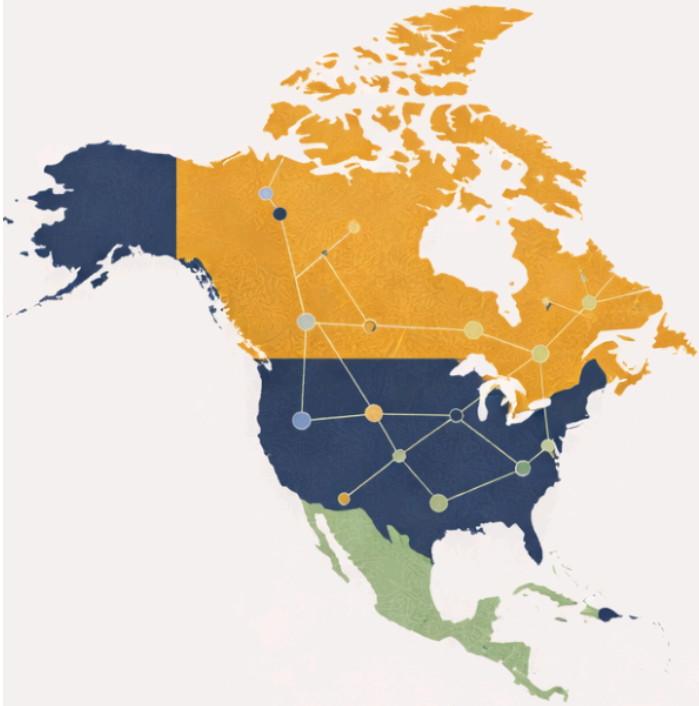
Some are already testing AI.
Some are watching closely.
Some are still deciding where and if it fits (even as their staff is already using it).

This report captures that moment across the field, drawing on responses from professionals nationwide.

What follows shows where agencies are landing, how perspectives differ, and what that means as the conversation continues.

We want to help you move from curiosity to confidence and from awareness to action so that you can be a part of helping to shape #WhatsNext

# A.I. TODAY



The North American AI market is worth approximately **$51.58 billion**

(Source: Exploding Topics / Fortune Business Insights)

## AI use in public sector organizations

**57%**

of leaders say their organization has adopted AI

**28%**

say they are still thinking about it

(Source: Diligent survey of public leaders, September 2025)

# 2025 SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The 2025 Perception & Impact of AI in Parks & Recreation survey was conducted to **assess awareness**, **adoption**, **sentiment**, and **perceived potential of AI** among parks and recreation professionals across the United States.

**Survey Format**

- Distributed digitally (*SurveyMonkey*)
- Total questions: 12 (multiple choice, scaled ratings, and open-ended prompts)

## Response Summary

- Total responses: **686**
- Geographic spread: **40+ U.S. states represented**
- Respondent roles: Directors, managers, coordinators, program staff, consultants
- Age distribution: Ranges from early-career **(24-30)** to late-career **(65+)**

## Analysis Approach

- Basic statistical analysis for trends and year-over-year comparisons
- NLP models used to analyze sentiment and surface key themes from open-text responses
- Segmented insights by role, age, and region

## Data Types

- Quantitative data: Familiarity levels, sentiment ratings, use cases, tool adoption, etc.
- Qualitative data: Open-text responses to key questions:
  a. **Q10**: What would you like AI to solve in your agency today?
  b. **Q11**: "AI is ____." (One-word prompt)
  c. **Q12**: Any final comments or reflections?

## New in 2025

- Segmented analysis by **state, role, and generation**
- A companion interactive dashboard built for data exploration

# REPORT GOALS

## Educate

Turn AI from a buzzword into something every park and recreation professional can understand and use.

## Engage

Spark conversations across agencies and communities about where AI fits and how it can help.

## Energize

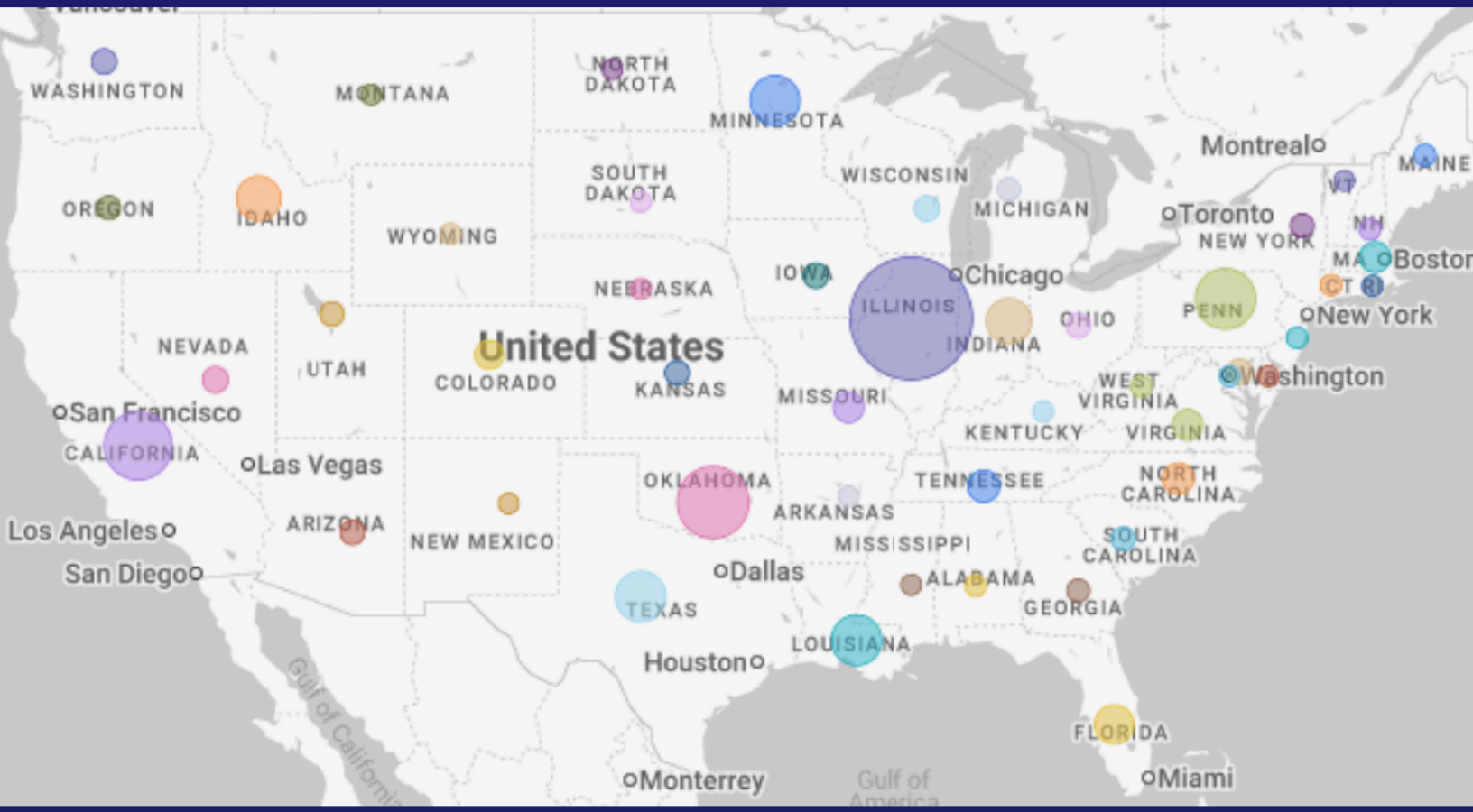
Highlight progress, pilots, and early wins that make innovation and next practices feel possible.

## Embed

Help agencies integrate AI seamlessly into everyday workflows, enhancing efficiency, creativity, and community connection.

# 3.
# THE NATIONAL LANDSCAPE

## Source of Responses Nationwide



# QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

AI isn't new but it's pace of evolution is rapid.

Here we discuss the learning curves, early signals, and practical first steps nationwide.

## LEARNING

Roughly **1 in 5** professionals report strong familiarity with AI, while most hover in the "somewhat" range.

## FEELING

Across responses, **optimism was twice as common as fear.**
About half of respondents describe AI as exciting, and only 1 in 5 say they're primarily anxious about it.

## DOING

**More than half** of agencies report some level of adoption, mostly described as "very limited."

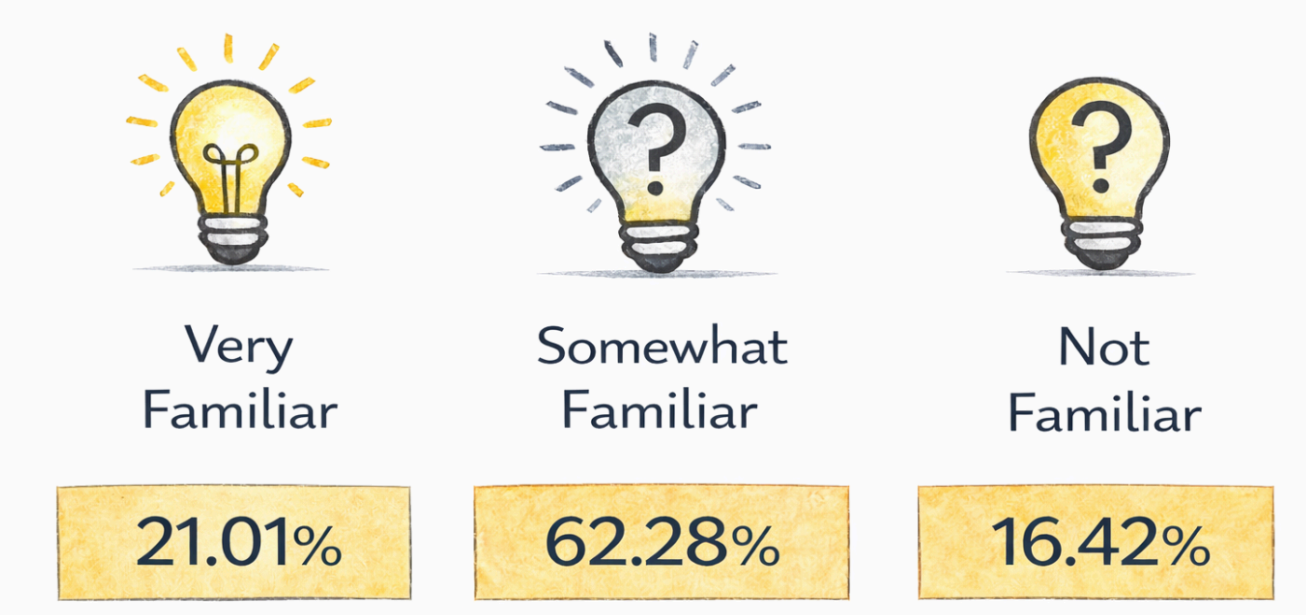
# FAMILIARITY

*AI familiarity among parks and recreation professionals is broad, but not deep.*

People use what they are familiar with.

If parks and recreation professionals don't feel a sense of familiarity, they (and, thus, their agencies) are less inclined to use AI.

## NATIONAL FAMILIARITY BASELINE

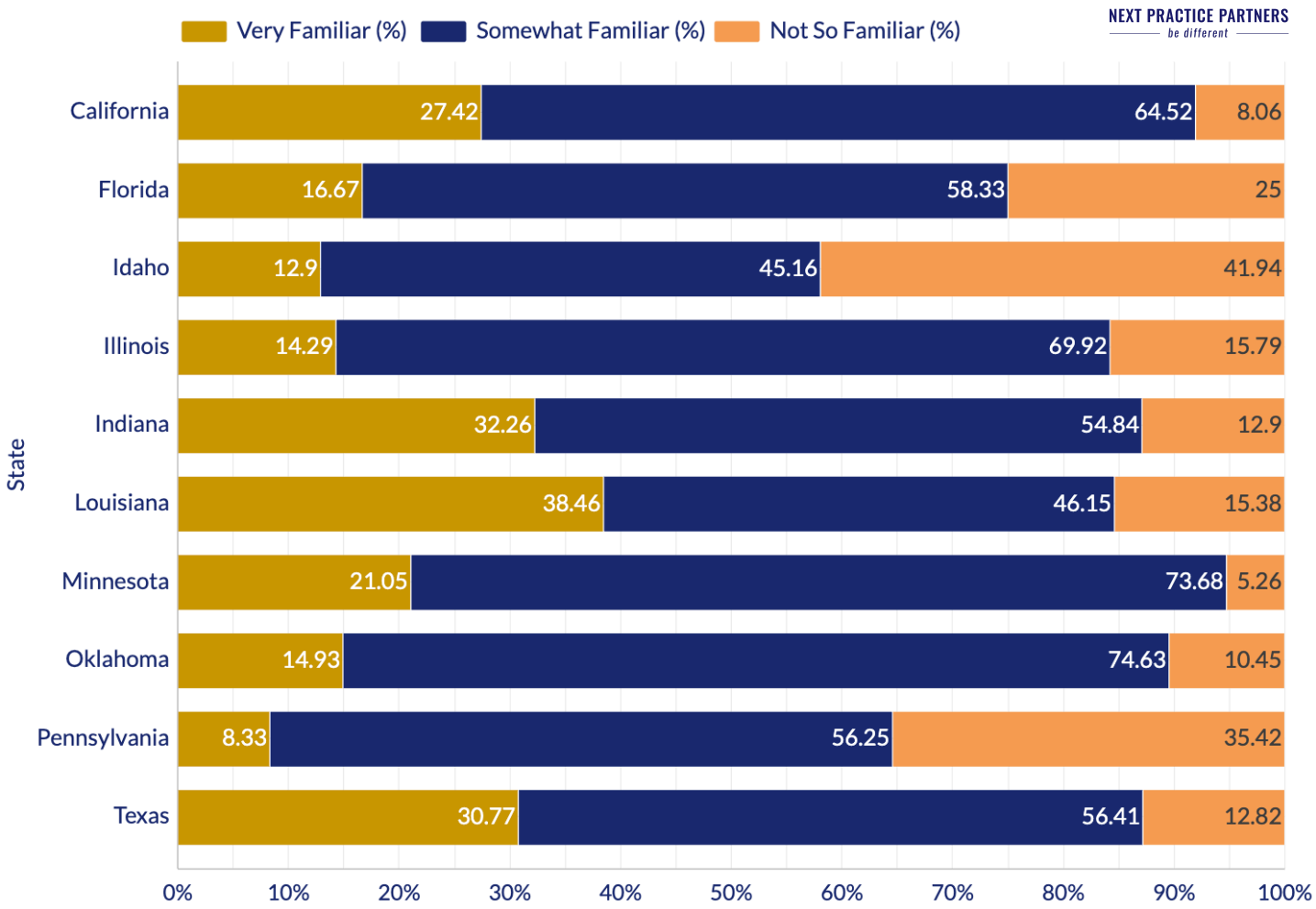



While most respondents report some exposure to AI, only **one in five report high familiarity.**

Without familiarity, AI initiatives create hesitation and risk. With familiarity, agencies can make informed decisions about whether, when, and how to engage.

# STATE-LEVEL PATTERNS - SAME STORY, DIFFERENT GAPS

Across every high-response state, **most people sit in the middle.** They've heard of AI. They've seen it and might have tried certain tools. **However, deep familiarity will only come from successfully testing new ideas.**




| WHERE STATES DIFFER | | |
|---|---|---|
| States with higher familiarity | States with wider gaps | Most states land in the middle |
| California, Minnesota, Oklahoma | Florida, Idaho, Pennsylvania | Texas, Louisiana, Indiana, Illinois |

## KEY TAKEAWAY

AI familiarity does not significantly vary across states.

# SENTIMENT

*Sentiment leaning positive but one in four still terrified of AI*

Familiarity told us who's seen AI. Sentiment reveals how comfortable they are engaging with it.

For parks and recreation agencies, sentiment influences direction: how cautiously leaders move, how staff respond to change, and how much support is needed to translate interest into action.

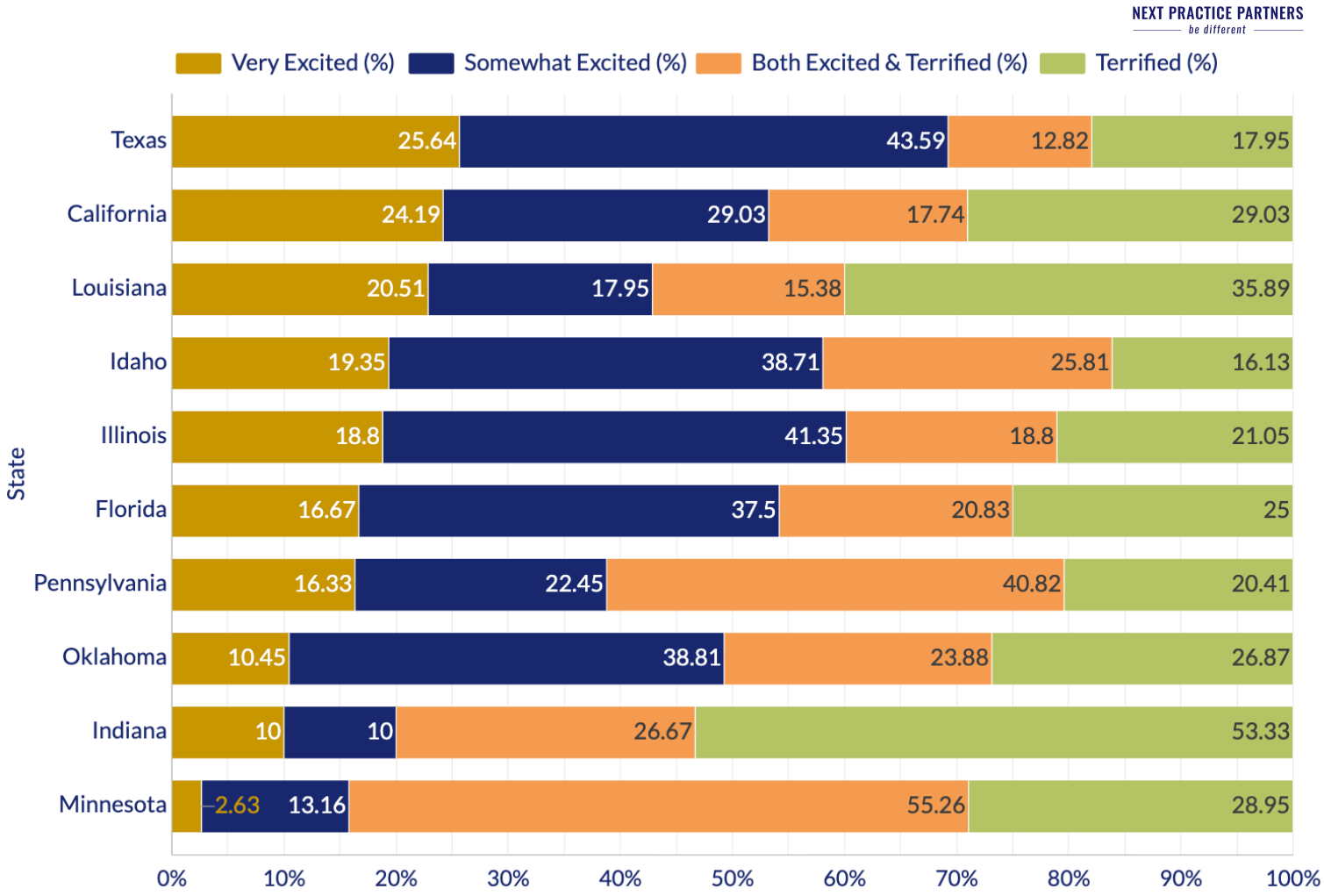
## NATIONAL SENTIMENT BASELINE


Just over half the respondents are excited to varying degrees, while one in four are both excited and terrified or plain terrified respectively.

Overall, excitement exists and at the same time, fear remains a meaningful factor for a portion of the field (including us).

# STATE-LEVEL PATTERNS

## INTEREST IS WIDESPREAD, CONFIDENCE IS NOT




| WHERE STATES DIFFER | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Higher Excitement** | **Higher Fear and Uncertainty** | **States that land in the middle** |
| Texas, California | Indiana, Minnesota and Pennsylvania | Illinois, Florida |

## KEY TAKEAWAY

- Adoption will advance where risk is clearly defined.
- Initial AI use will focus on internal operations.
- Guidance will influence behavior more than new tools.

# AI USE & SENTIMENT

*Understanding how professionals feel about AI beyond what they know.*

## HOW WE ANALYZED IT?

We analyzed **2 open-ended questions** that captured how respondents described AI in their own words:

Q10: **"If you could ask an AI-powered assistant to solve one challenge in your agency today, what would it be?"**
Q11: **"Complete this sentence in one word: AI is _____."**

To identify patterns across responses, we applied a natural language processing (NLP) to assign a sentiment score to each comment based on language and tone.

Scores ranged from negative to positive and were grouped into three categories: **positive, neutral, and negative sentiment.**

## WHAT WE FOUND?

Across **Q10 and Q11** responses revealed **consistent sentiment patterns in how parks and recreation professionals are thinking and feeling about AI.**

While wording varied by individual and question, the underlying emotional signals aligned across all three prompts, offering a clear view into how opportunity, concern, and uncertainty coexist within the field.

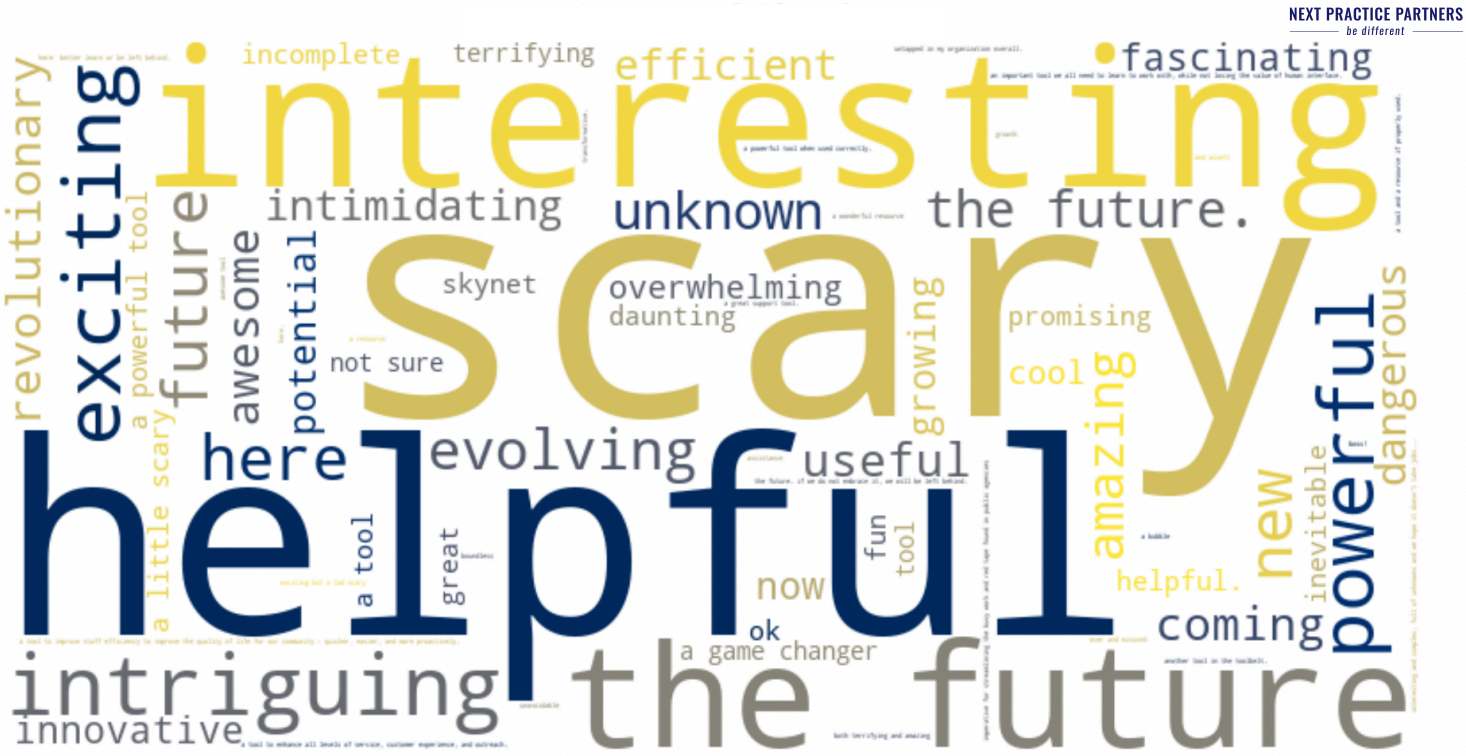
# Q10 – "IF YOU COULD ASK AN AI-POWERED ASSISTANT TO SOLVE ONE CHALLENGE…"

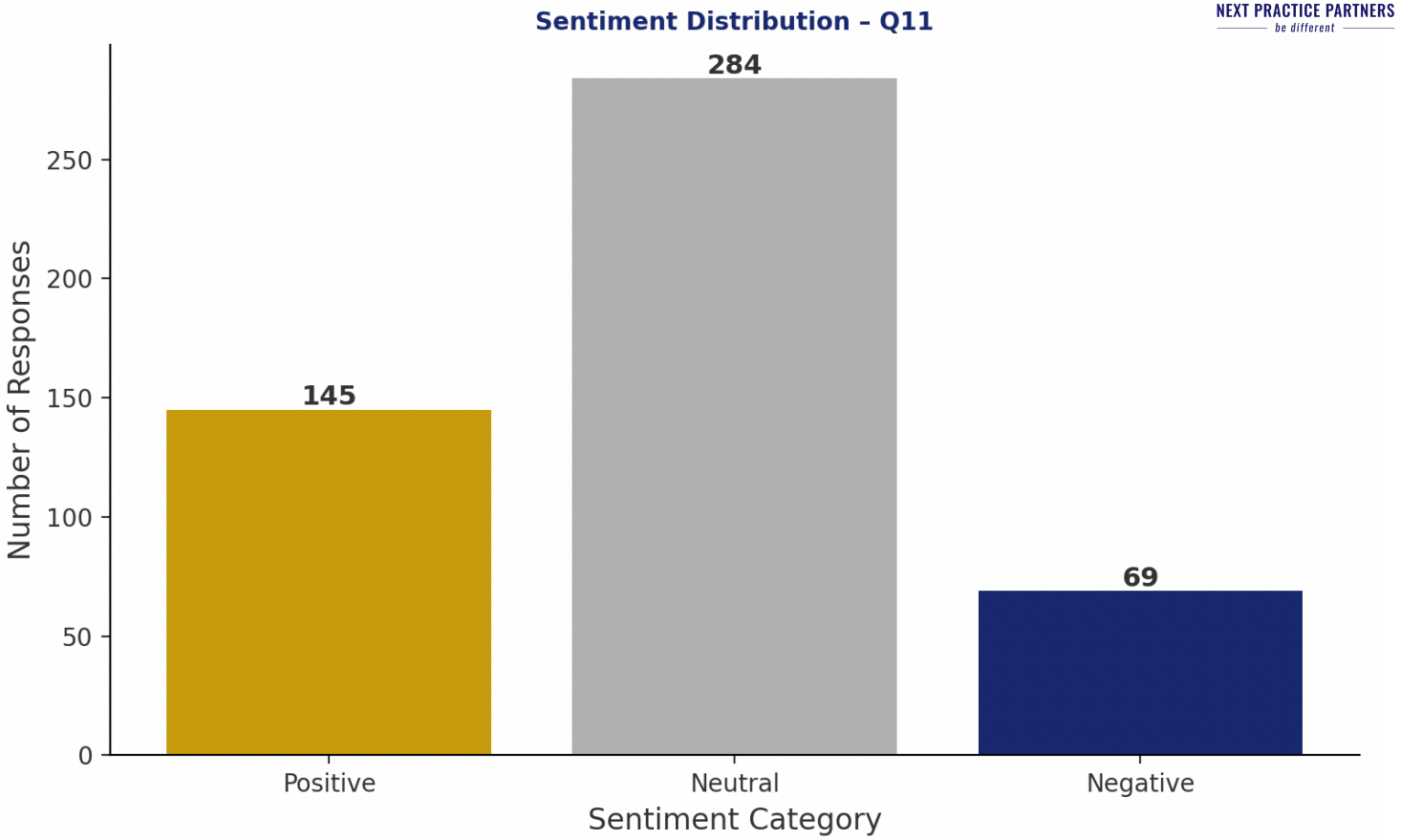

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The result reflects how early-stage demand actually sounds.
- Respondents want operational support to be more efficient.
- Respondents also need help with funding issues to be more sustainable.
- The overarching theme is many cases is uncertainty since respondents may be unclear of what they want or have just a single priority .

## Q11 – "AI IS …"

This question measures first-reaction sentiment. The result shows how AI is perceived before training, policy, or implementation shape opinions.

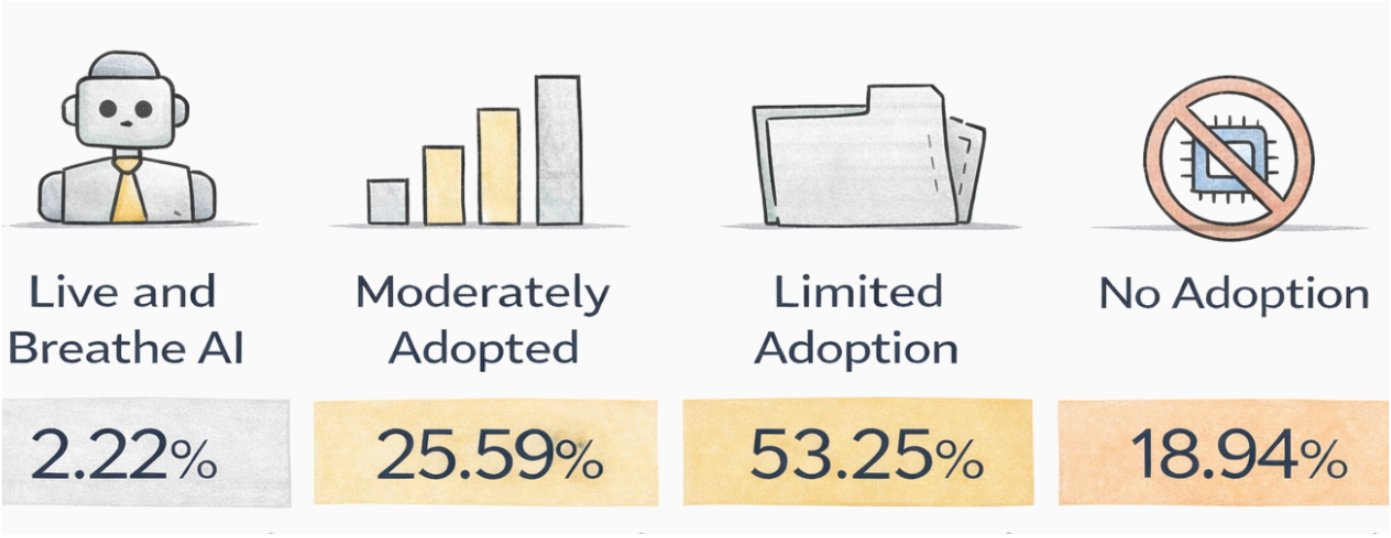


# AI ADOPTION

*Limited to no adoption in nearly 3 out of 4 agencies*

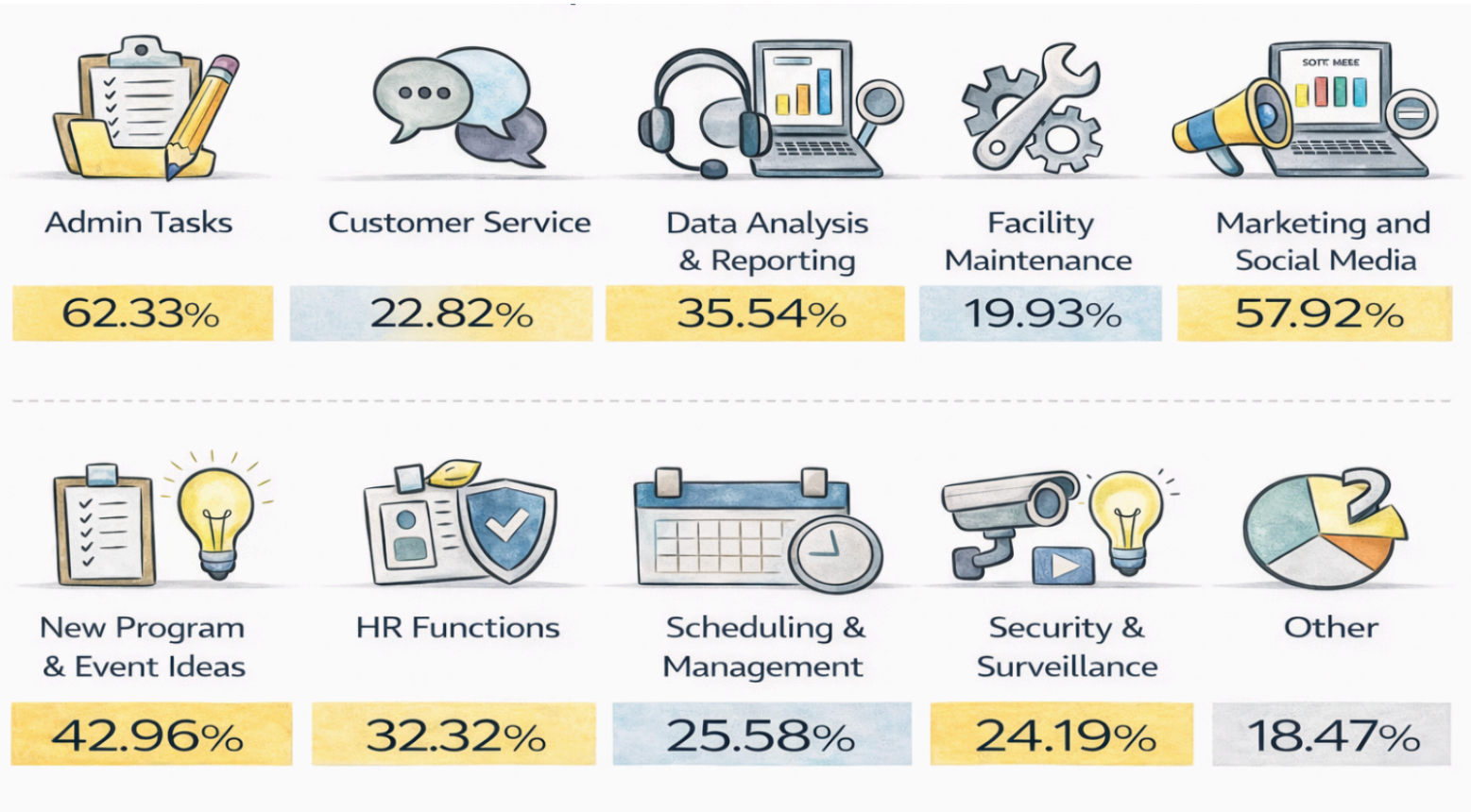
## NATIONAL ADOPTION SNAPSHOT




## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Limited adoption (53%): Small pilots, single tools, or individual experimentation in most agencies.
- Moderate adoption (26%): A few repeatable use cases and early internal alignment in some agencies.
- Deep adoption (2%): Organization-wide use is still rare.
- No adoption (19%): A notable share hasn't started yet.

# CURRENT AI USE BY AREAS



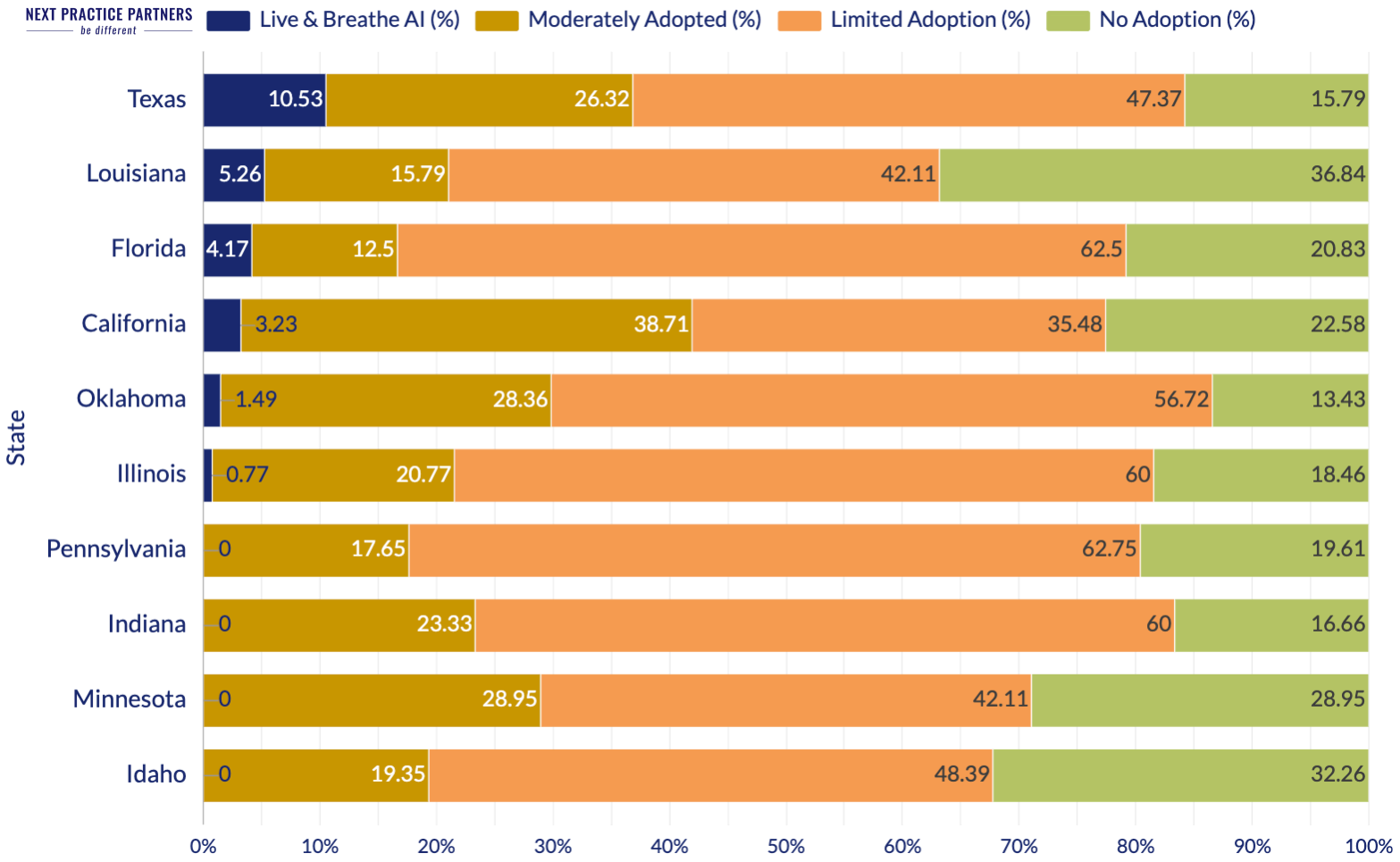

## WHERE AI IS BEING USED TODAY

AI use clusters around internal, low-risk functions. Adoption drops as work becomes more public-facing, regulated, or safety-critical.

**National pattern:** AI is most active where risk is low and efficiency gains are immediate.

- **Highest use:** Admin tasks (62%) and Marketing & communications (58%).
- **Growing use:** Program ideation (43%) and Data analysis (36%).
- **Limited use:** Customer service, facilities, and security.

# STATE-LEVEL ADOPTION PATTERNS
# ADOPTION IS ACTIVE, BUT SCALING SLOWLY




| Adoption Pattern | States |
|---|---|
| Moderate adoption present | Texas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, California |
| Deep, organization-wide use | None consistently |
| Higher no-adoption share | Idaho, Louisiana, Minnesota |

## WHY THIS MATTERS

- Experimentation is no longer a constraint.
- It is coordination: aligning policies, workflows, and ownership so AI can move beyond individual use and operate at scale.

# CURRENT AI USE BY AREAS (TOP 10 STATES BY RESPONSES)

| State | Admin Tasks (%) | Customer Service current(%) | Data Analysis & Reporting (%) | Marketing and Social Media (%) | New Program and Event Ideas (%) | HR Functions (%) | Scheduling & Management (%) | Security and Surveillance (%) | Facility Maintenance and Monitoring (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| California | 74.14 | 31.03 | 45.45 | 60.71 | 36.54 | 34 | 31.48 | 7.84 | 16.98 |
| Florida | 76.19 | 47.83 | 52.38 | 50 | 28.57 | 38.1 | 27.27 | 13.64 | 22.73 |
| Idaho | 55.56 | 18.52 | 39.29 | 67.86 | 50 | 34.62 | 28.57 | 22.22 | 18.52 |
| Illinois | 65.08 | 19.84 | 24.6 | 53.97 | 38.71 | 30.4 | 14.52 | 8.8 | 9.84 |
| Indiana | 53.57 | 17.86 | 23.08 | 29.63 | 25.93 | 7.41 | 11.11 | 14.29 | 7.41 |
| Louisiana | 57.89 | 27.03 | 44.74 | 47.37 | 40.54 | 27.78 | 31.58 | 38.89 | 27.78 |
| Minnesota | 50 | 6.45 | 19.35 | 32.35 | 38.24 | 16.13 | 13.33 | 6.25 | 6.67 |
| Oklahoma | 76.92 | 12.5 | 48.44 | 65.08 | 45.16 | 31.75 | 31.25 | 30.65 | 15.63 |
| Pennsylvania | 48.94 | 10.64 | 21.28 | 46.81 | 35.56 | 31.91 | 10.87 | 8.7 | 6.52 |
| Texas | 69.44 | 41.18 | 41.18 | 48.57 | 47.22 | 42.86 | 26.47 | 17.65 | 14.71 |

## KEY TAKEAWAY

- Across the top-response states, AI use concentrates in low-risk, internal functions like administrative tasks, marketing, and data analysis.
- Public-facing, regulated, or safety-critical areas such as security, facilities, and customer service show consistently lower use.
- Differences between states reflect execution capacity and risk tolerance.

# CURRENT USE VS. IDENTIFIED POTENTIAL

| Area | Currently Used | Identified Potential |
|---|---|---|
| Administrative Functions | Moderate | High |
| Marketing & Communications | Moderate | High |
| Program Development & Ideation | Moderate | High |
| Data Analysis & Research | Low | High |
| Hiring & HR | Low | Medium |
| Customer Service | Low | High |
| Facility / Environmental Operations | Very Low | Medium |
| Financial Transactions | Very Low | Medium |
| Security & Surveillance | Negligible | Medium |

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- AI is already applied in administrative, marketing, and program ideation work.
- Strongest future potential is in areas that require more governance, integration, or trust such as data analysis, customer service, and HR.

**This gap highlights where agencies are most likely to expand next through structured, low-risk use cases.**

# BARRIERS TO AI ADOPTION

*Early adoption reflects interest. Barriers show where the system slows.*

## WHAT WE ASKED

Respondents identified barriers that limit AI progress in their organization.
The goal was to separate lack of interest from lack of readiness.
This distinction matters because "not adopting" can mean very different things:

- Not a current priority.
- Interest without confidence.
- Willingness constrained by internal conditions.

Each requires a different response to address it.

## HOW TO READ THE CHARTS

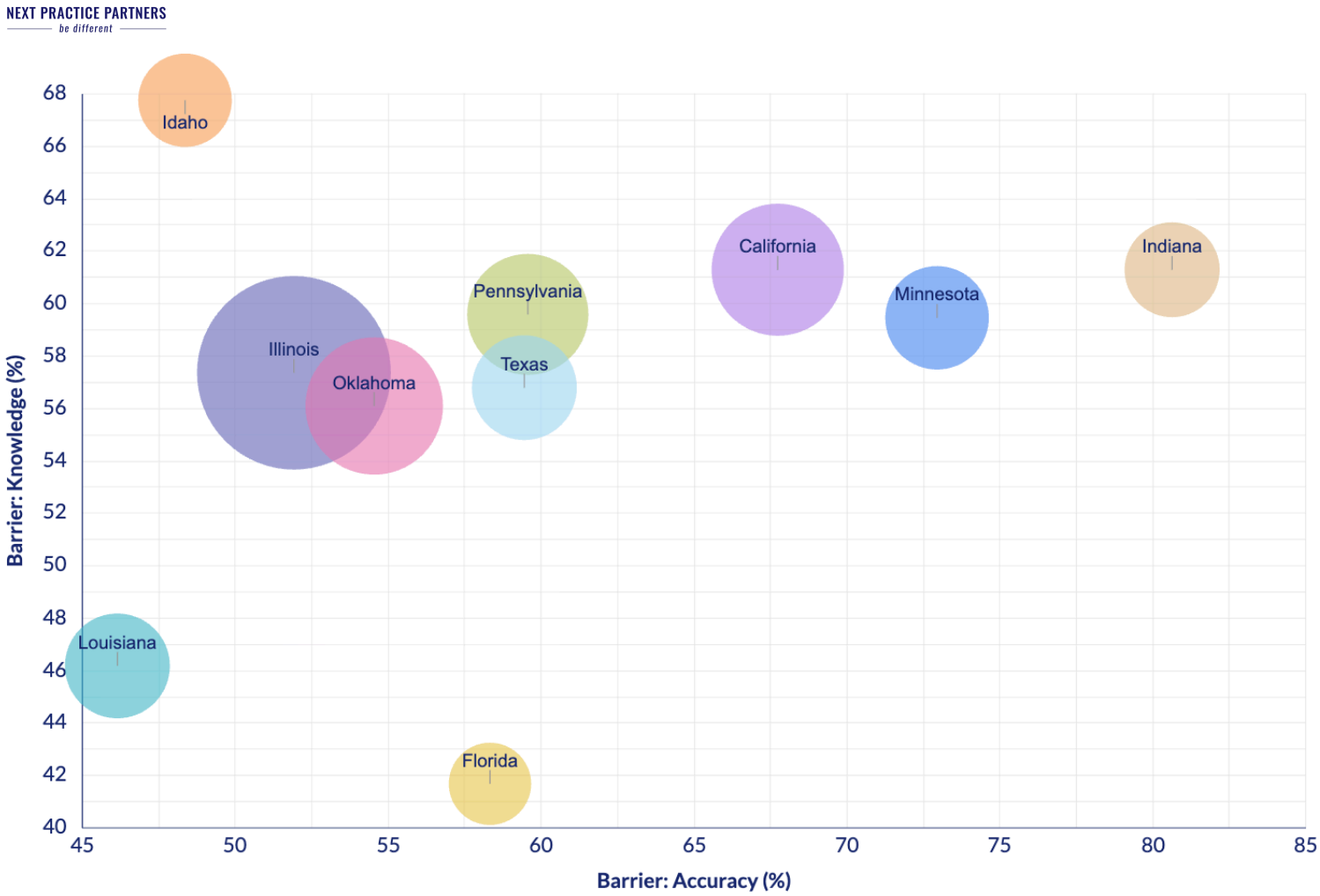
Each chart in this section pairs two barriers to isolate which constraint is binding in a given state context:

- **Accuracy vs Knowledge** tells us whether the bottleneck is trust (quality skepticism) or understanding (skills and literacy).
- **Not sure where to start vs Knowledge** separates agencies that lack confidence from those that lack a launch plan.
- **Fear vs Internal resistance** distinguishes individual concern from organizational inertia.
- **Budget vs Technical difficulties** shows whether constraints are primarily financial or implementation capacity.

This structure turns barriers into adoption and provides a clearer picture.

# TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING ARE "HIGH " CONSTRAINTS

- In the Accuracy vs Knowledge comparison, **most states sit in a tight band of mid-to-high concern.**
- **This clustering is the key insight** since it shows that the barriers are not isolated to a few agencies.



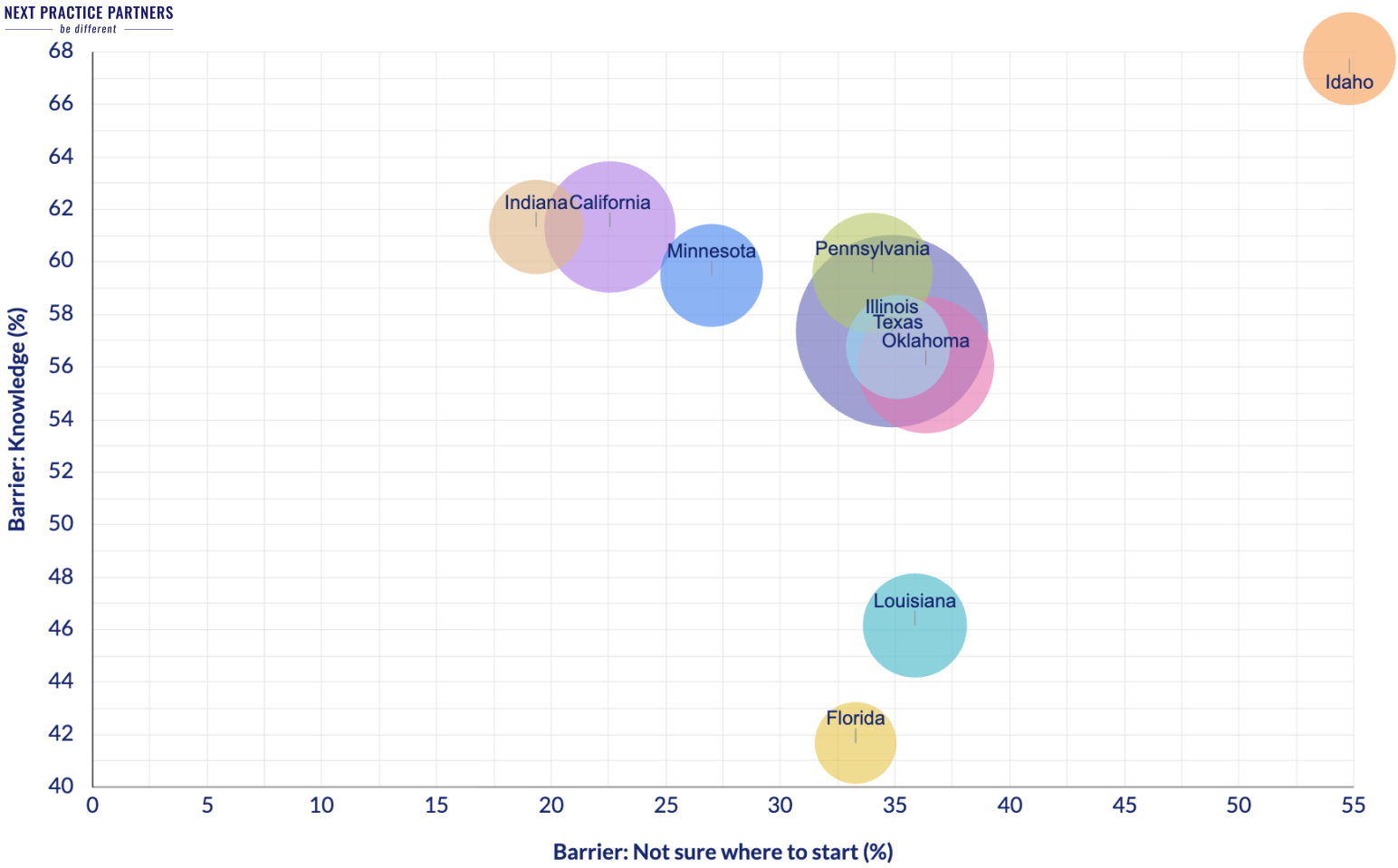

## NOTABLE STATE SIGNALS

- **Indiana** is the clearest "trust-constrained" outlier: ~81% accuracy concern with ~61% knowledge gap.
- **Idaho** is the clearest "understanding-constrained" outlier: ~68% knowledge gap even though accuracy concern is lower (~48%).
- **Florida** stands out as "lower trust barrier": ~42% knowledge gap and ~58% accuracy concern, but the knowledge number is materially lower than peers.

# NOT SURE WHERE TO START VS KNOWLEDGE GAP

*The pattern shifts from skepticism to execution*

- There is a distinct cluster around ~34% to ~37% “Not sure where to start” with ~56% to ~60% “Knowledge gaps” (PA, IL, TX, OK).
- Idaho is the outlier: ~55% “Not sure where to start” paired with the highest “Knowledge gap” (~68%). That is a double-bind: limited confidence plus limited clarity. That **cluster signals** that many agencies are **missing a repeatable playbook: governance, use-case selection, training, and success metrics.**

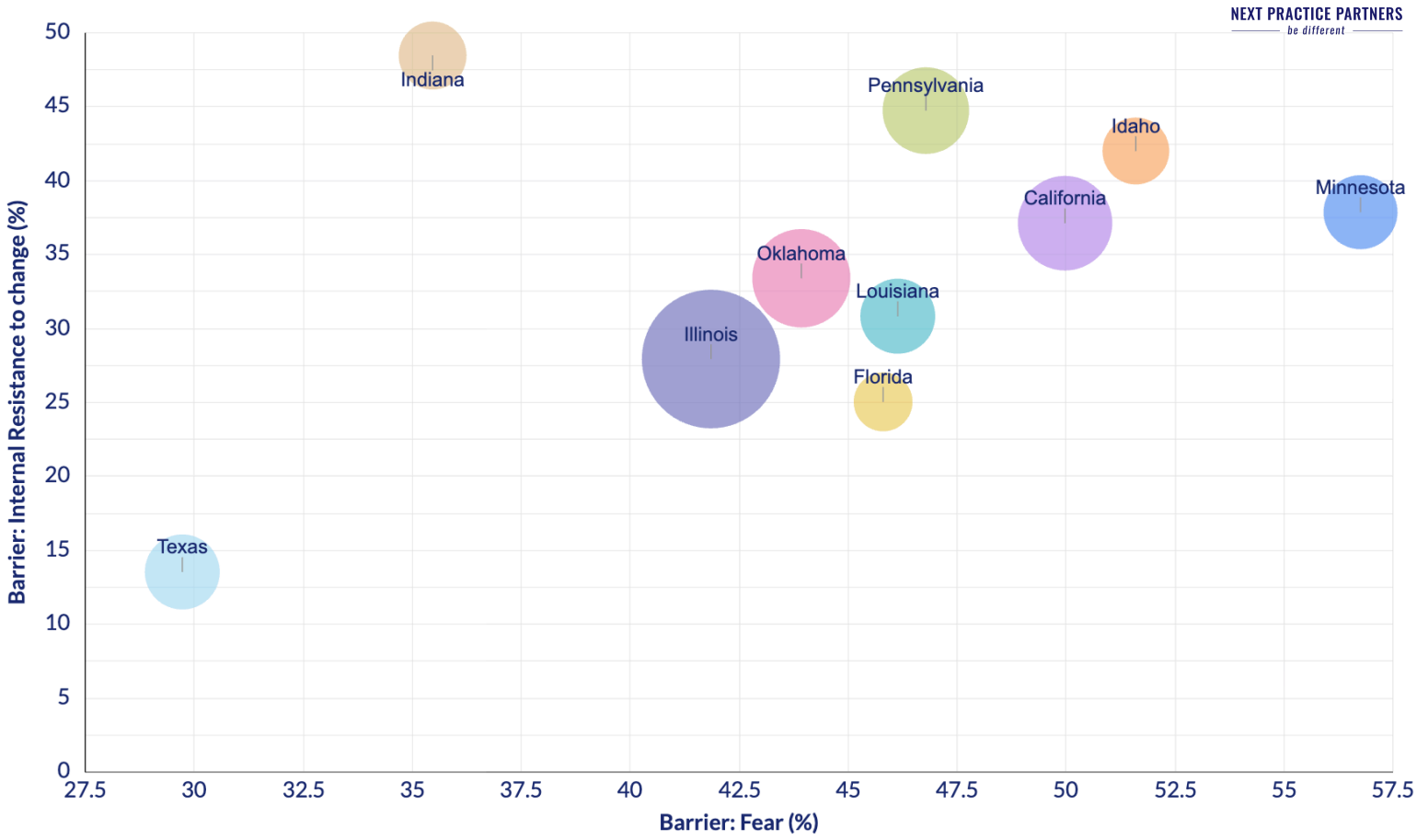



## NOTABLE SIGNALS

- Adoption can accelerate here not with “more tools” but with starter frameworks that reduce ambiguity: where to begin, what is safe, and how to measure success.
- This matters because “start” is an operational question: **ownership, policies, safe first use cases, and success criteria.**

# ORGANIZATIONAL FRICTION IS UNEVEN AND BEHAVES DIFFERENTLY THAN TRUST BARRIERS

In Fear vs Internal resistance, we see a separation between personal concern and organizational barriers.




## NOTABLE STATE SIGNALS

- **Texas** is the "low-friction" anchor: ~30% fear and ~14% resistance. Even if trust barriers exist, change adoption may be easier.
- **Indiana** is the "internal change" outlier: ~35% fear but ~48% resistance. This is a classic signal of structural inertia, not individual anxiety.
- **Minnesota** shows the highest fear (~58%) but moderate resistance (~38%). That points toward reassurance and policy clarity more than culture overhaul.

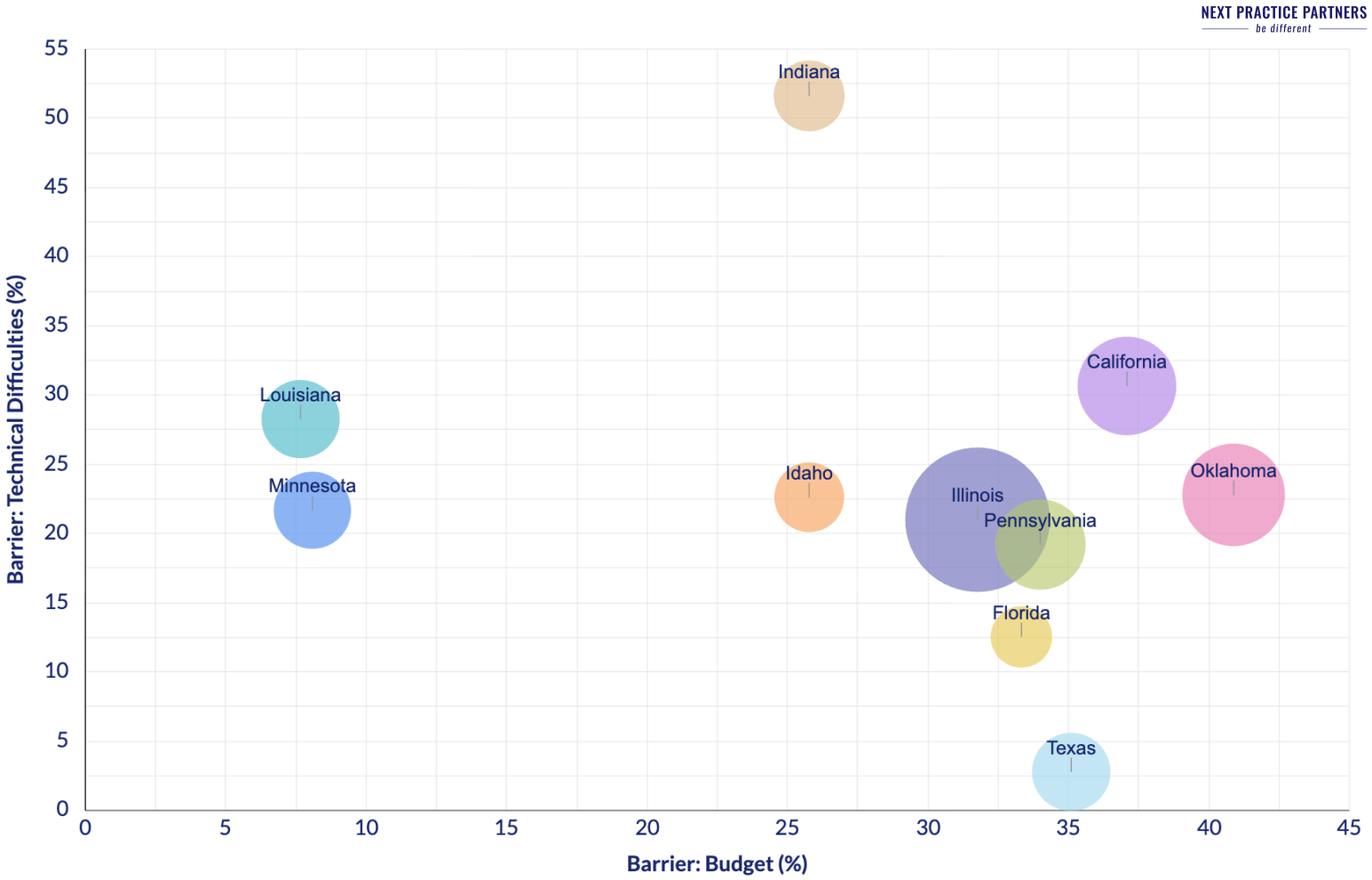
**What this implies: we cannot treat "fear" and "resistance" as the same barrier.**

- Fear responds to clarity, training, validation.
- Resistance responds to leadership alignment, workflow redesign, and incentives.

# BUDGET NOT THE DOMINANT CONCERN

## *Implementation capacity can be a challenge*

- **Indiana** stands out with high technical difficulty despite mid budget concern, pointing to **implementation complexity and internal capacity as limiting factors.**
- **Texas** shows very low technical difficulty even with moderate budget concern, consistent with **stronger internal capability.** This is a critical nuance: when agencies say "budget," it can be shorthand for **"we do not have staff time, infrastructure, or someone to lead implementation."**




- A number of agencies likely do not prioritize AI yet, either because they don't yet see the value in the near term or because AI doesn't feel critical to help support core service delivery.
- Among agencies that are looking to engage in AI, the key constraints are trust, knowledge and starting structure, not availabilities of tools.

# GEN AI TOOLS

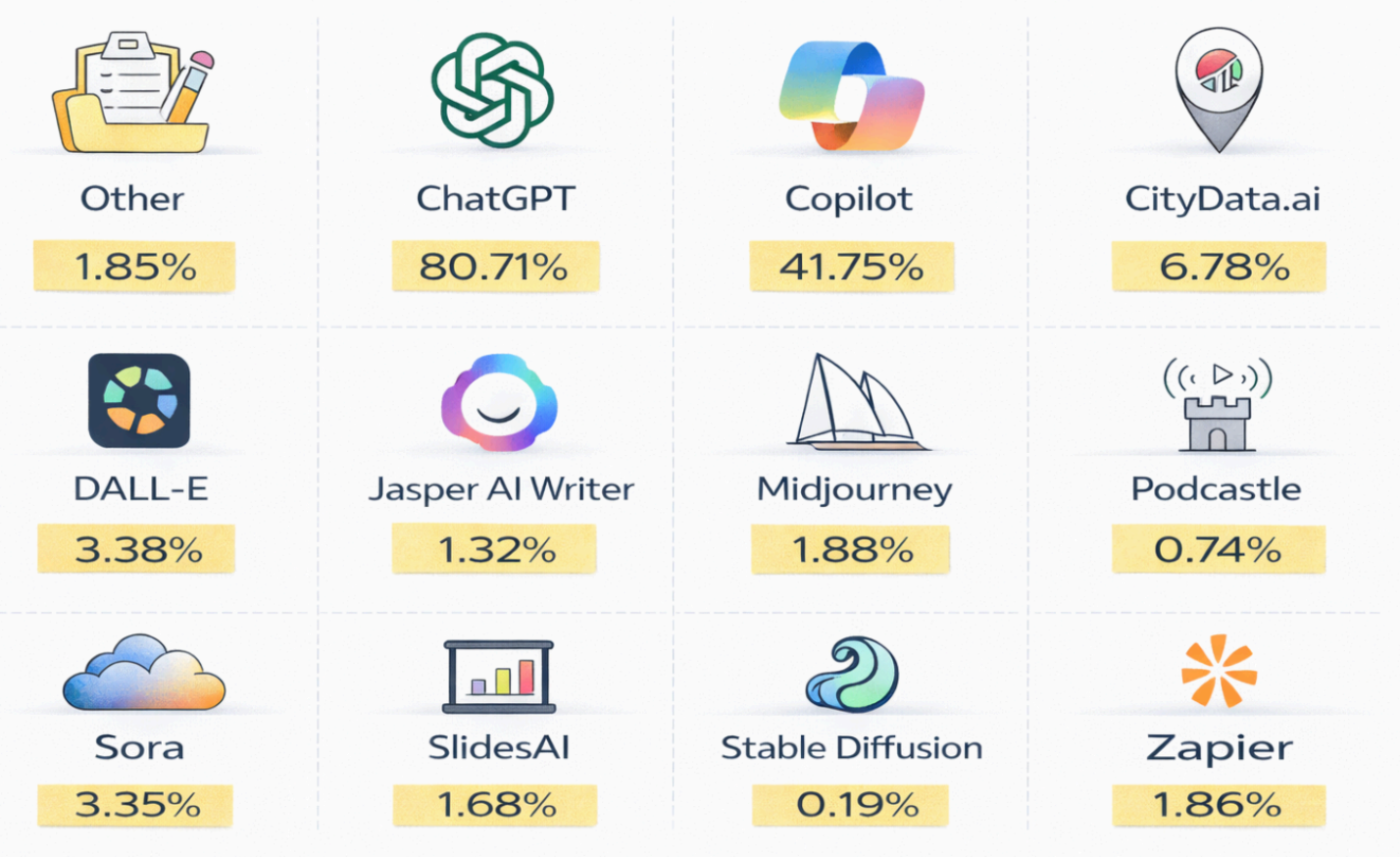
## WHAT WE ASKED

Respondents selected all AI tools they have used. The question was designed to capture any use and not gauge sophistication or institutional deployment.

**As a result, these percentages should be interpreted as:**

- Breadth of tool awareness and hands-on use.
- A snapshot of what feels accessible enough to try.
- An indicator of where agencies are starting, not where they are fully integrated.

## NATIONAL SNAPSHOT: WHAT'S IN USE NOW




Tool usage is heavily concentrated around a small number of general-purpose platforms: **ChatGPT** is used by 80.71% of respondents, making it the dominant entry point into GenAI. **Microsoft Copilot** follows at 41.75%, reflecting growing exposure through the Microsoft ecosystem.

# MOST COMMON GENERATIVE AI TOOLS AND EARLY USE

| Tool | Core Function | Early Applications in Parks & Recreation |
|---|---|---|
| ChatGPT | Conversational writing and idea generation | Drafting reports, FAQs, and grant narratives |
| Microsoft Copilot | Embedded AI in Office products | Summarizing emails, automating documentation |
| Copy.ai / Jasper | Marketing copy generators | Campaign messages, newsletters, social posts |
| DALL·E / Midjourney | Visual content generation | Concept imagery for parks, programs, signage |
| SlidesAI / Podcastle | Presentation and media automation | Staff training, outreach storytelling |

## WHAT THE DATA TELLS US

Agencies are choosing the tools that make their everyday work easier, not necessarily the ones that sound most advanced. That's why writing tools top the list while advanced data tools lag behind.

**For now, GenAI is helping teams communicate faster, create better (though not always accurate), and stay visible online, especially for agencies without a large communications staff.**

# 4.
# THE SHIFT

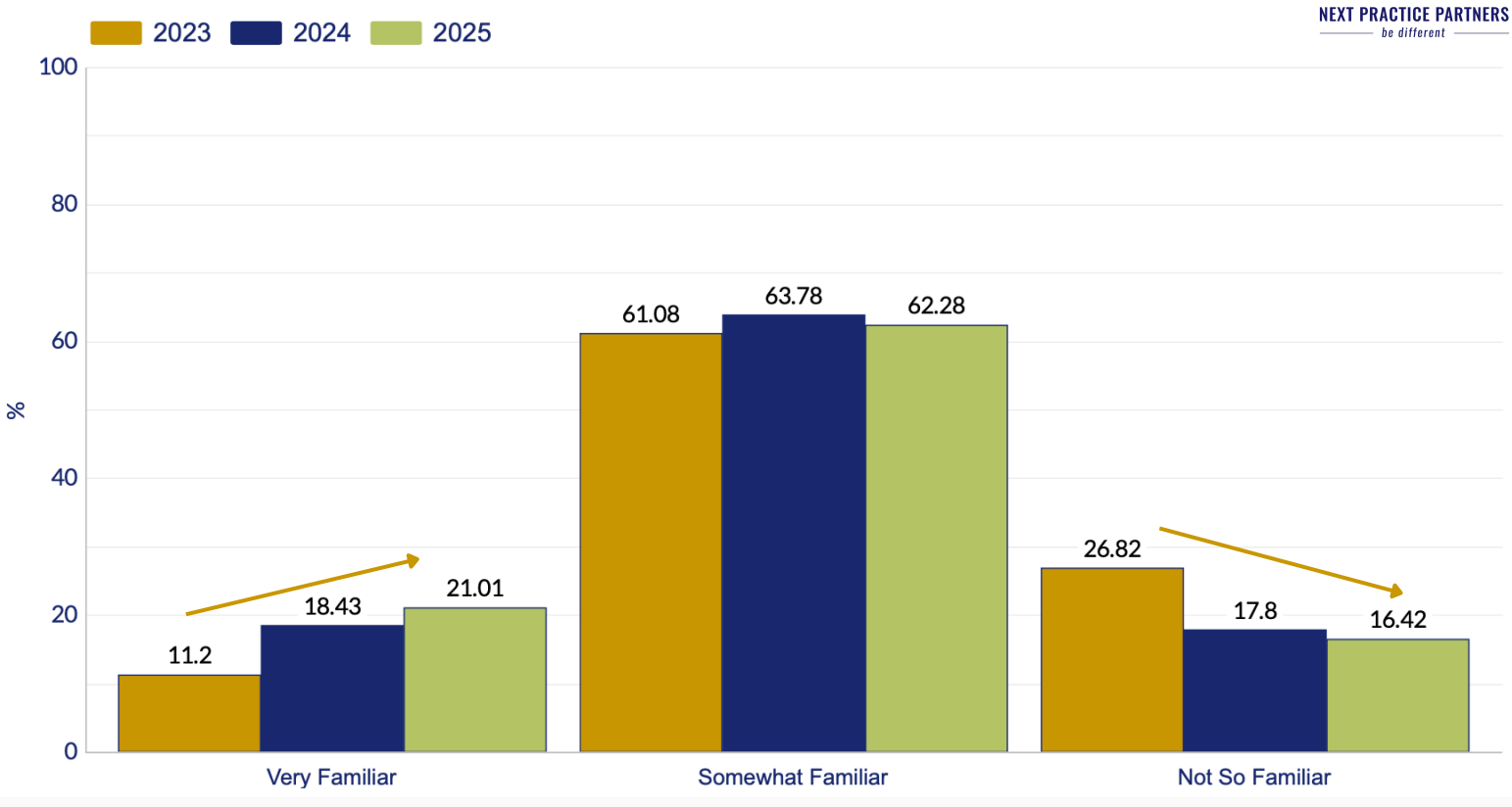
## 2023 → 2024 → 2025

This section tracks how parks and recreation agencies' understanding and use of AI has evolved over time.

Trends from 2023 to 2025 indicate: AI in parks and recreation is gaining traction and use of AI has gone from "Should we use it?" to "How do we use it?"

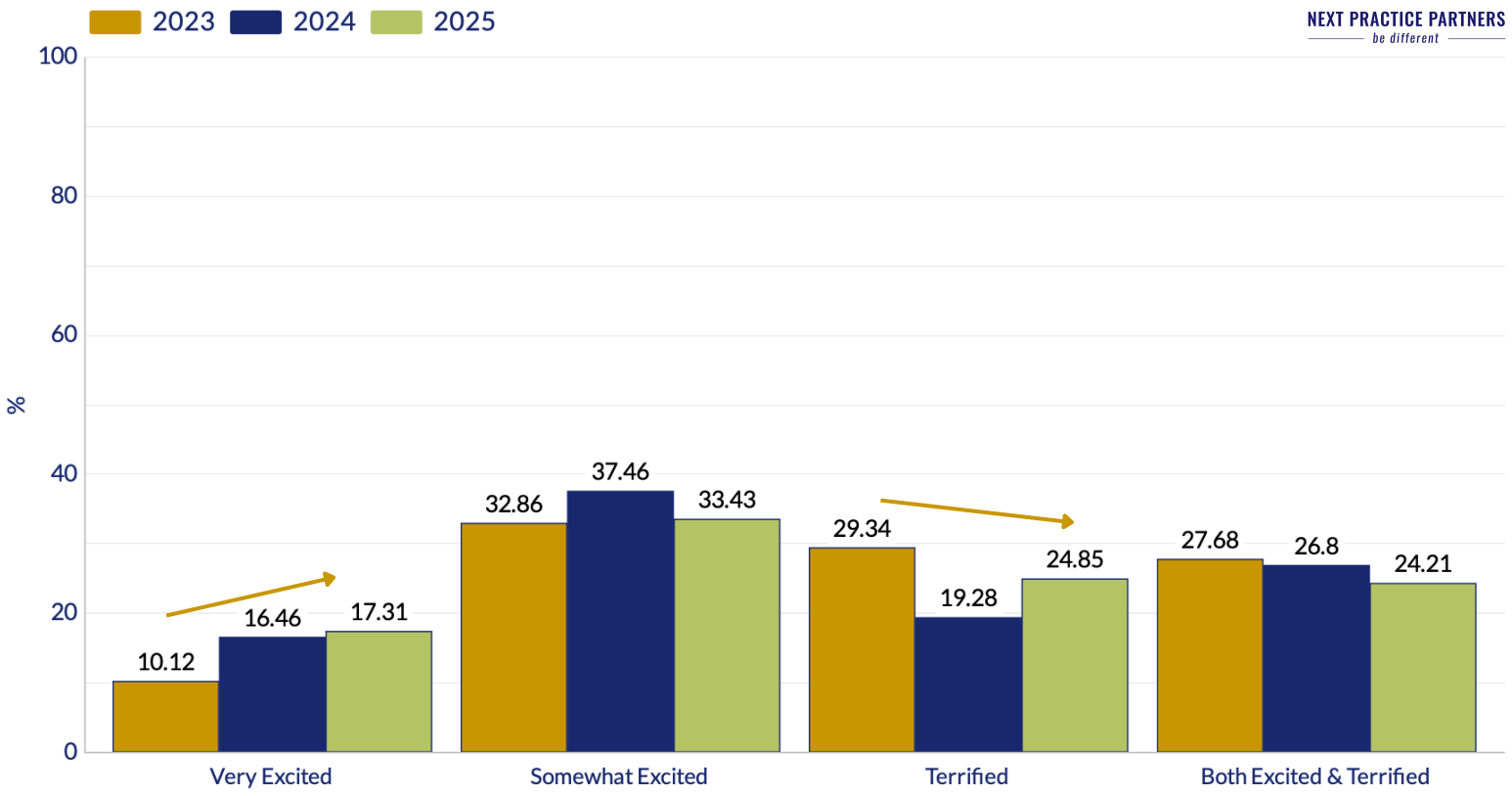
The key moving forward is to ensure human judgment can continue to anchor how AI is adopted in parks and recreation.

# HOW FAMILIARITY WITH AI HAS EVOLVED



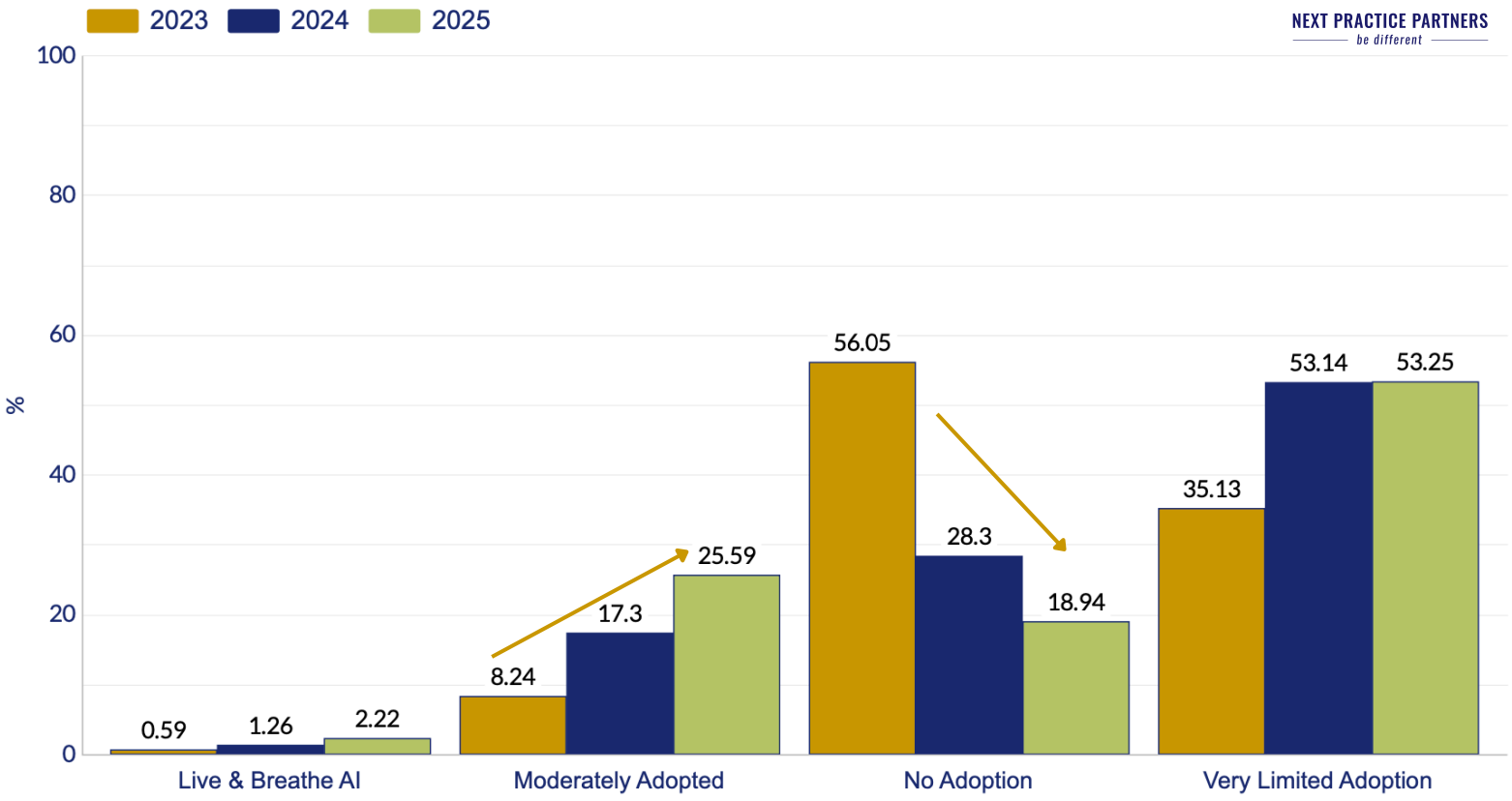

- Between 2023 and 2025, **familiarity with AI increased across the field, driven primarily by a decline in respondents reporting low familiarity.**
- However, the concentration of responses in the “somewhat familiar” category **indicates that most agencies have gained exposure without developing consistent, organization-level proficiency.**
- This pattern suggests informal learning rather than structured adoption.

# HOW SENTIMENT ABOUT AI HAS EVOLVED



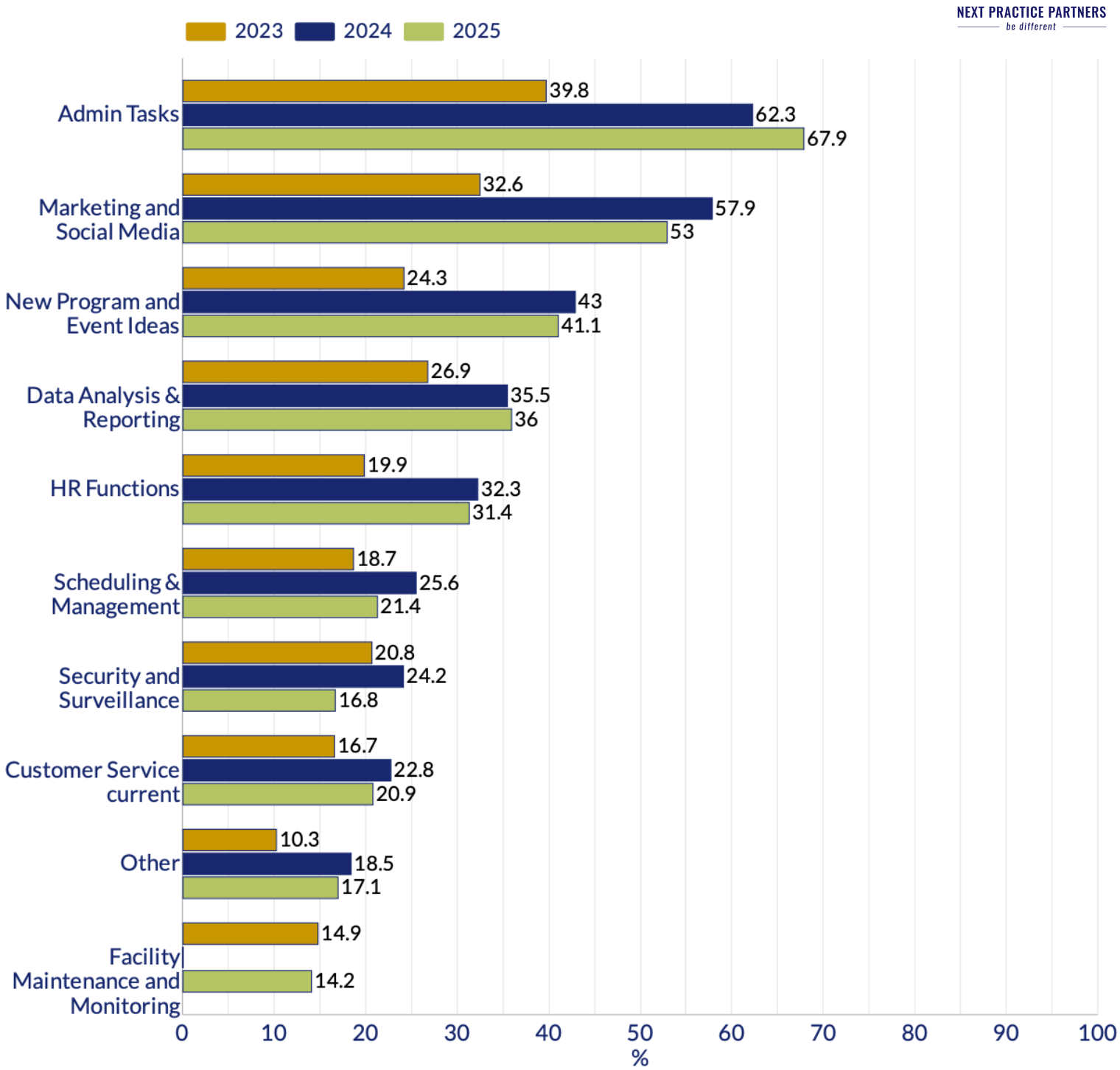

- Over the same period,  fear has declined and excitement has increased modestly, while there is still a sentiment of being cautious.
- This general trend and stabilization indicates that AI is becoming more normalized within agency operations, though **not yet perceived as an entirely positive addition or a key driver of change.**

# HOW ADOPTION OF AI HAS EVOLVED




- In just two years, the share of agencies reporting **no adoption has dropped sharply (56% → 19%)**, and this shift is absorbed almost entirely by **very limited adoption**, which now exceeds 50%.
- This indicates that adoption is most agencies are overcoming their initial resistance and starting to deploy AI though it may still be at a fairly preliminary level.
- In the coming years, it will be interesting to see if this trend plateaus at very limited adoption or if agencies continue to get deeper in AI adoption.

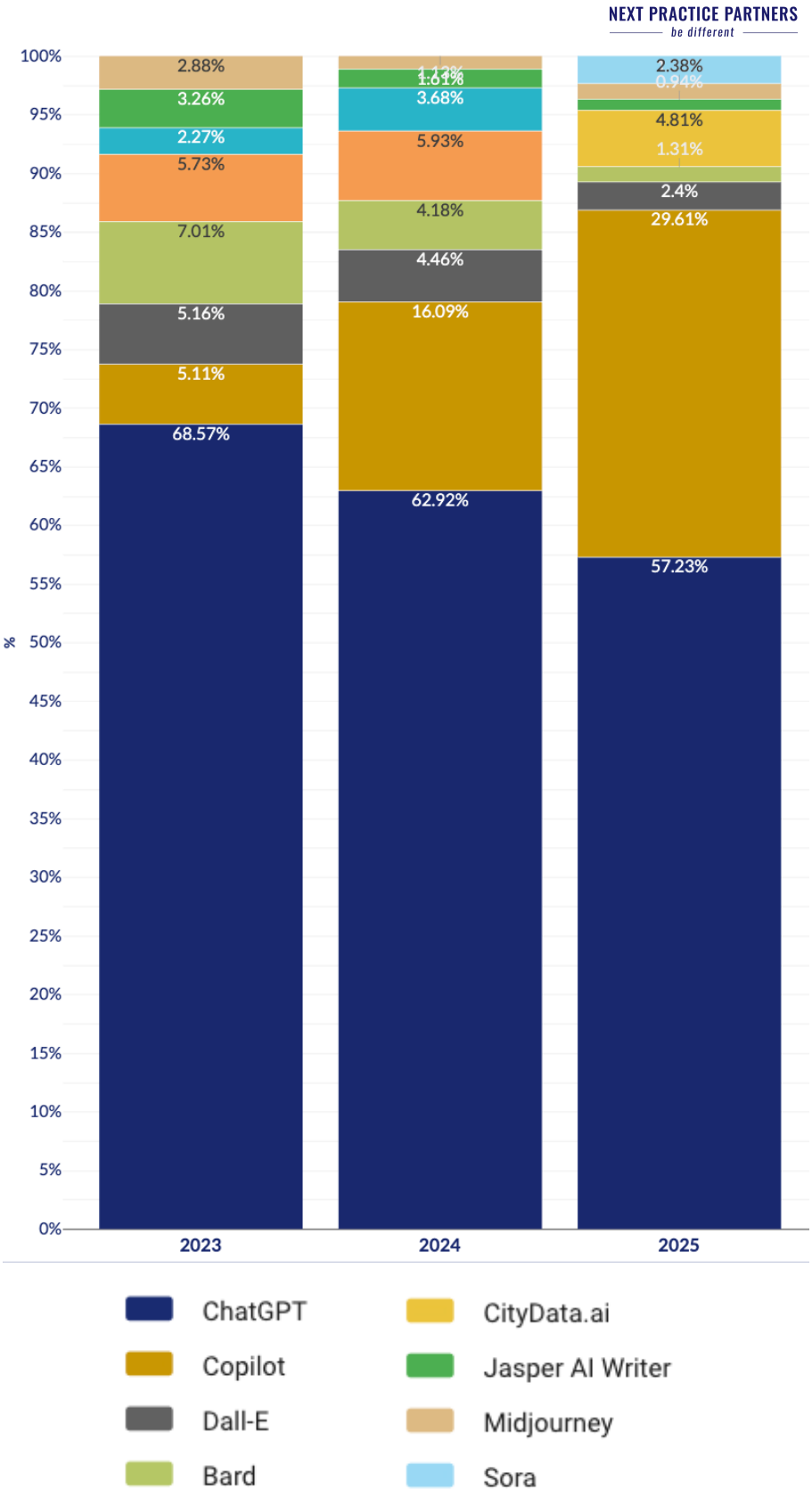
# % AI USE BY AREA TREND




Growth is **mainly in administrative, communications, and idea-generation**, while operational areas such as facility maintenance, scheduling, and security remain mostly flat indicating that **agencies are prioritizing low-intensity uses over system-level or complex operations.** A slight decrease from 2024 to 2025 may also be a sign that some respondents may have tried and were not satisfied with the results.

# GEN AI TOOLS USAGE TREND

## *Tool Usage has Diversified and Consolidated*

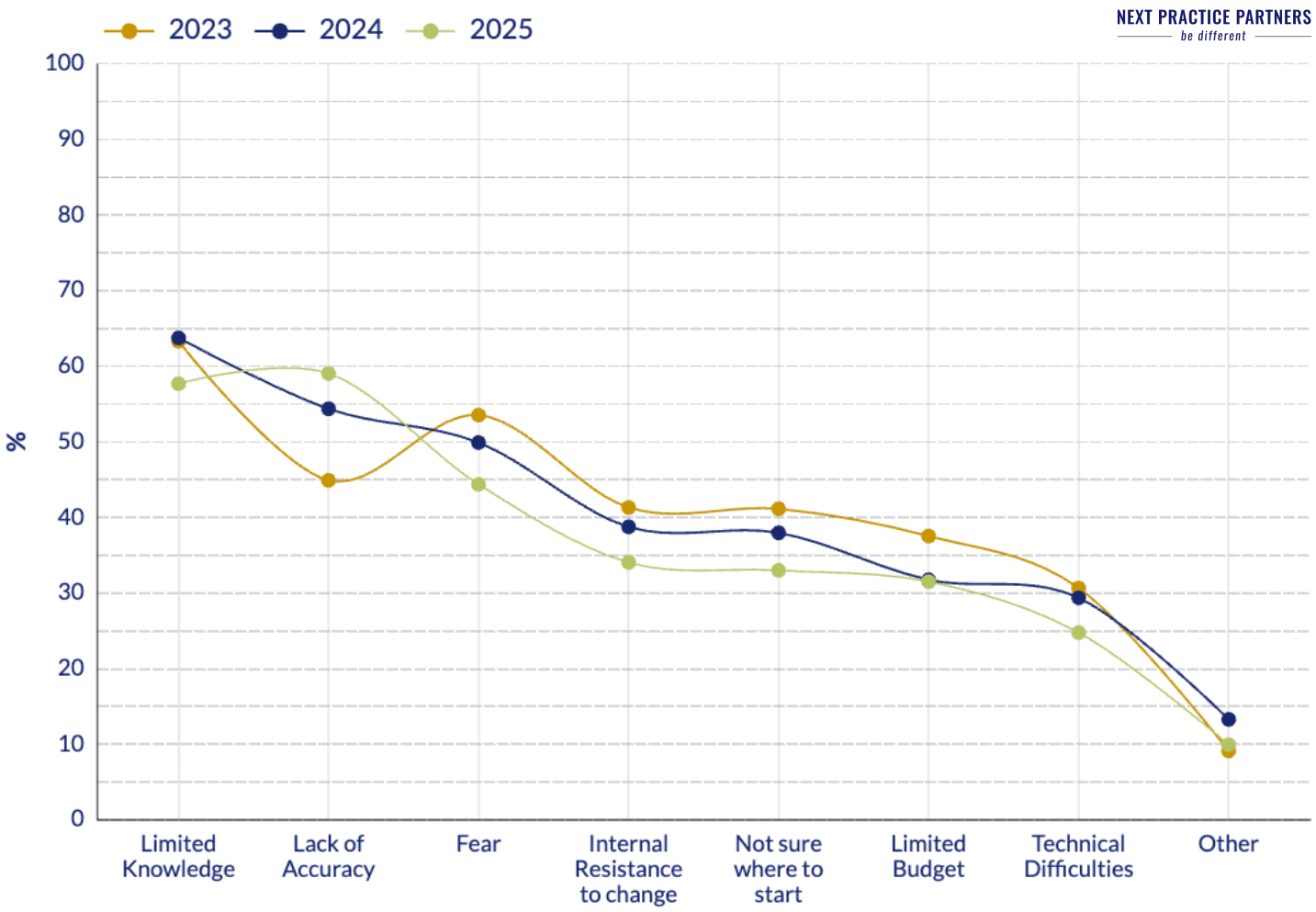



- In 2023, ChatGPT dominated adoption, accounting for about 69% of use.
- In 2024, usage diversified as ChatGPT dropped to 63% as agencies explored options.
- By 2025, consolidation emerged with ChatGPT use at 57% while Microsoft Copilot expanded from 5% in 2023 to nearly 30%. This is likely due its position being embedded in the Microsoft Office ecosystem that most agencies have.
    - All other tools together made up just 13%.

## Key Takeaway

ChatGPT had the first mover advantage in 2023 but over time newer tools including Copilot (and Gemini and Perplexity) are starting to capture user share.

# BARRIERS TO ADOPTION TREND

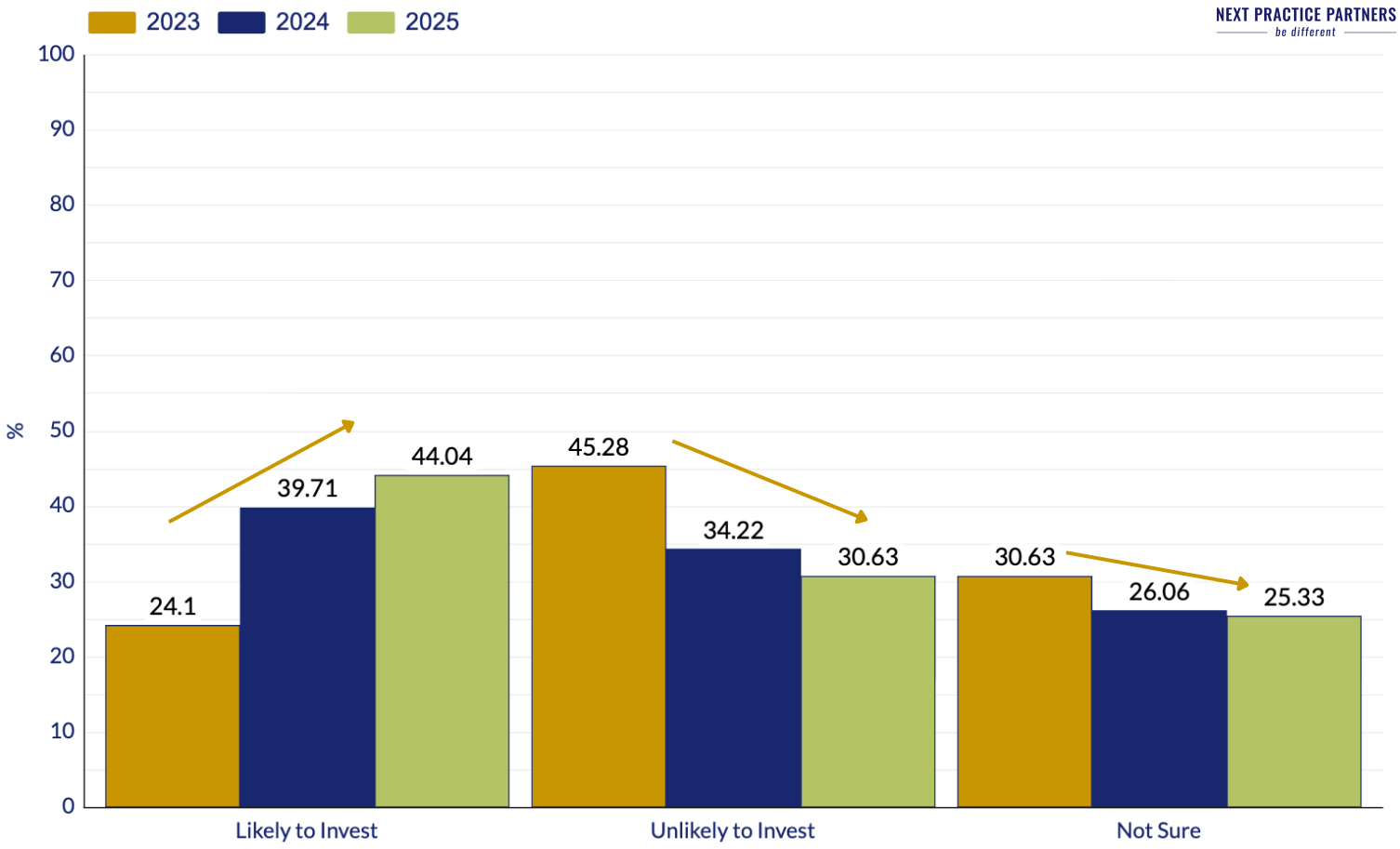



- Over three years, all barriers are trending downwards.
- From 2023 to 2025, **limited knowledge** declined from the low-60% range to the high-50s. **Fear** dropped from the mid-50s to the mid-40s.
- **Budget constraints** and **technical challenges** remain largely unchanged through 2024 but started showing meaningful declines in 2025.
- **Uncertainty about where to start** closely mirrors **internal resistance** across all years. While it declines gradually, it still remains in the mid-30% in 2025.

## KEY TAKEAWAY

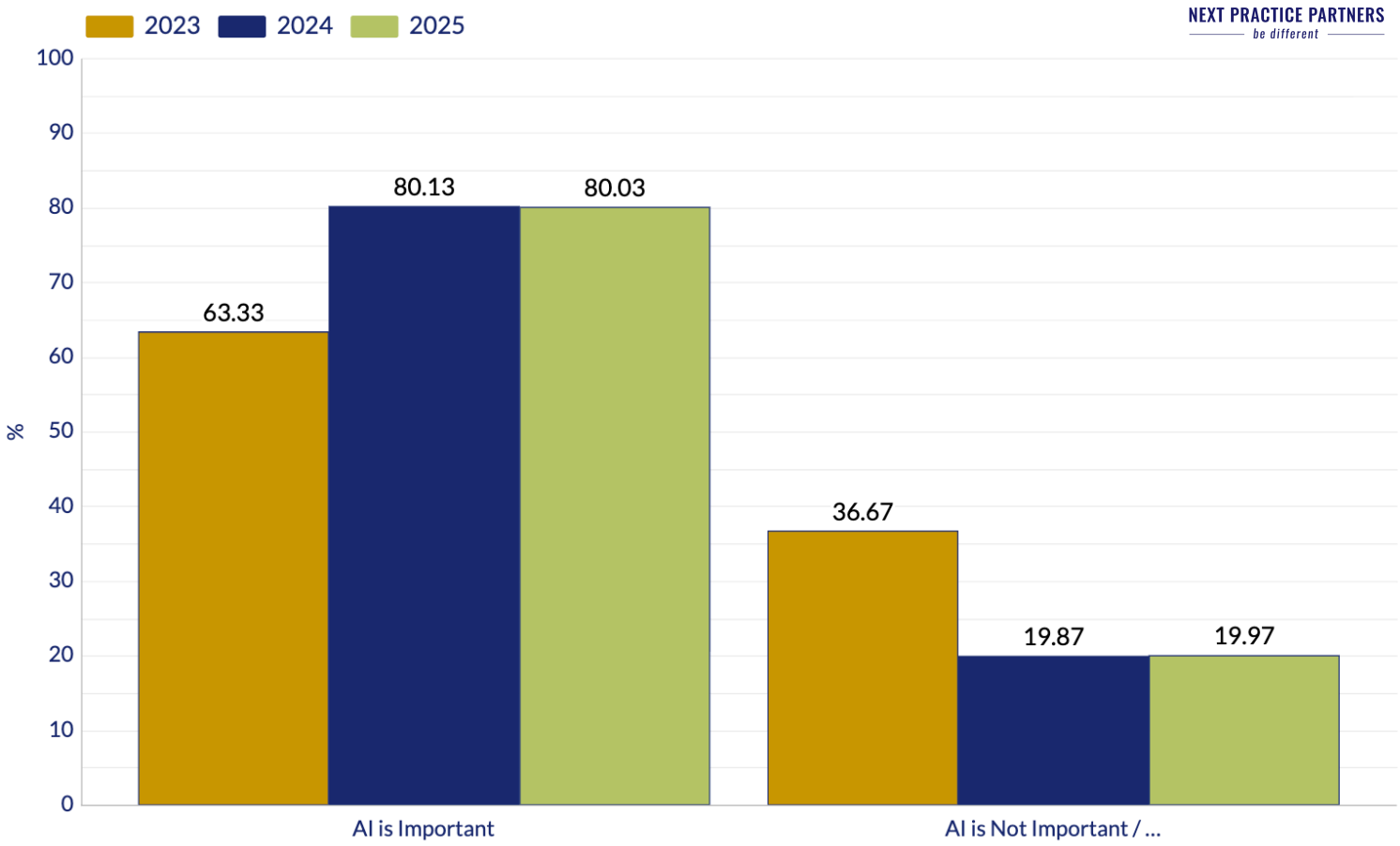
Perceptual barriers are easing faster than practical ones. By 2025, the question was less about whether AI is appropriate or not and more and where to begin implementation within existing systems and resources.

# LIKELIHOOD TO INVEST TREND




- **A growing number of agencies express a likelihood to invest in AI**.
- The **likelihood of investing in AI** has shifted from outright resistance (45% in 2023 down to 31% in 2025) to increased likelihood of investing (24% in 2023 to 44% in 2025).
- Momentum is positive, but the slower positive rate of change between 2024 to 2025 may indicate that future gains will depend less on awareness and more on demonstrated value, accuracy and clarity of use cases, and peer validation.

# PERCEPTION OF IMPORTANCE TREND




- In just a year, AI transitioned from a moderately debated topic in 2023 to being considered important nationally with over 80% agreement by 2024.
- The absence of further growth in 2025 indicates that perceived importance is no longer a limiting factor; rather, differences in adoption and investment are now driven by execution readiness rather than a belief in relevance.

# 5.
# LOOKING AHEAD

**The last three years have shown that AI is not a fad (unlike NFTs of Bored Apes).**

**It is poised to fundamentally shift how we do things, similar to the shift after the introduction of the internet, email and smart phones.**

**This section looks at what's next and how two key factors will shape real decisions for the future of AI in parks and recreation.**

# THE TRUST GAP

## Trust > Technology

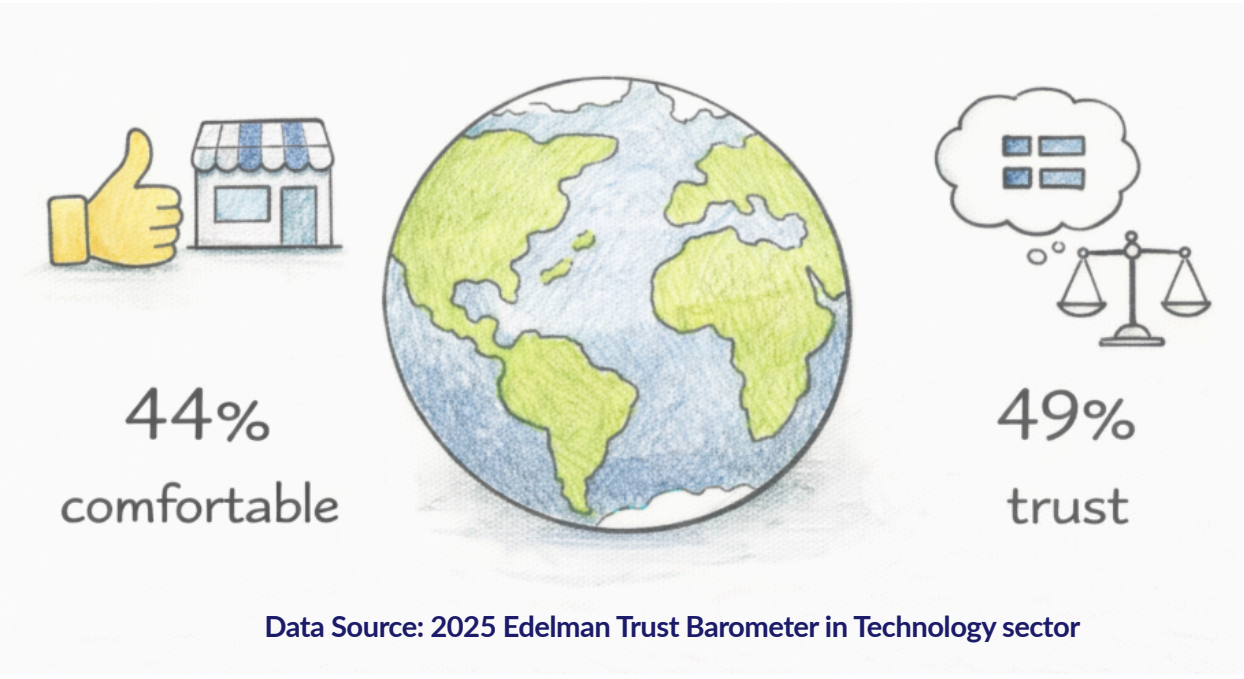
## It is shaping how AI shows up in parks and recreation

Seeing the last three years of survey data it is clear that **Familiarity with AI continues to rise** and **Perceived Importance remains high**.

Yet usage is concentrated in low-risk areas like administrative work, marketing, and content creation while higher-impact functions such as budgeting, staffing, and operational decision-making, remain limited.

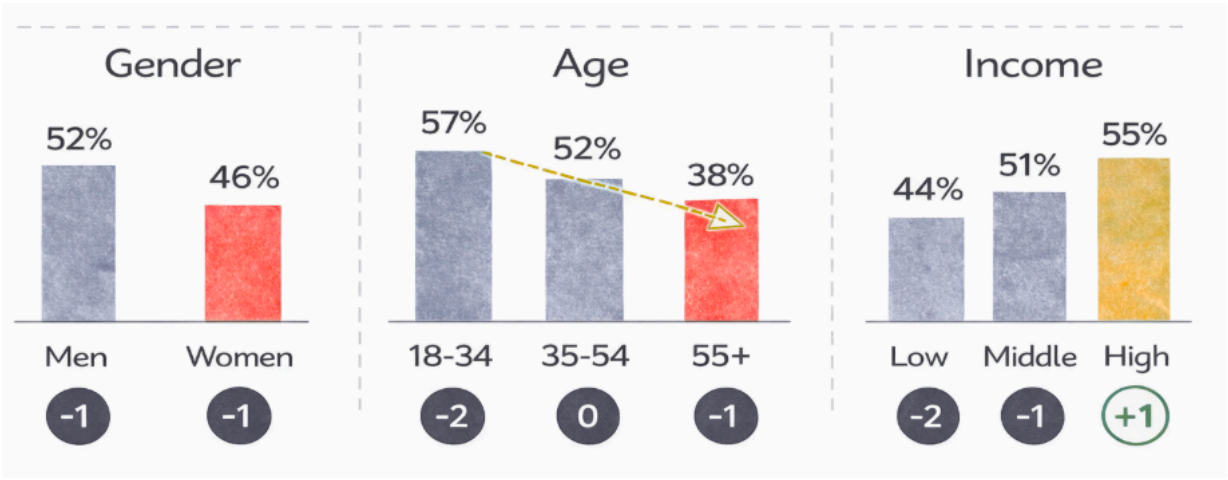
**The 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer in Technology sector helps explain why this tension exists.**

- Globally, only 44% of people say they are comfortable with businesses using AI and overall trust in AI is less than 50%.



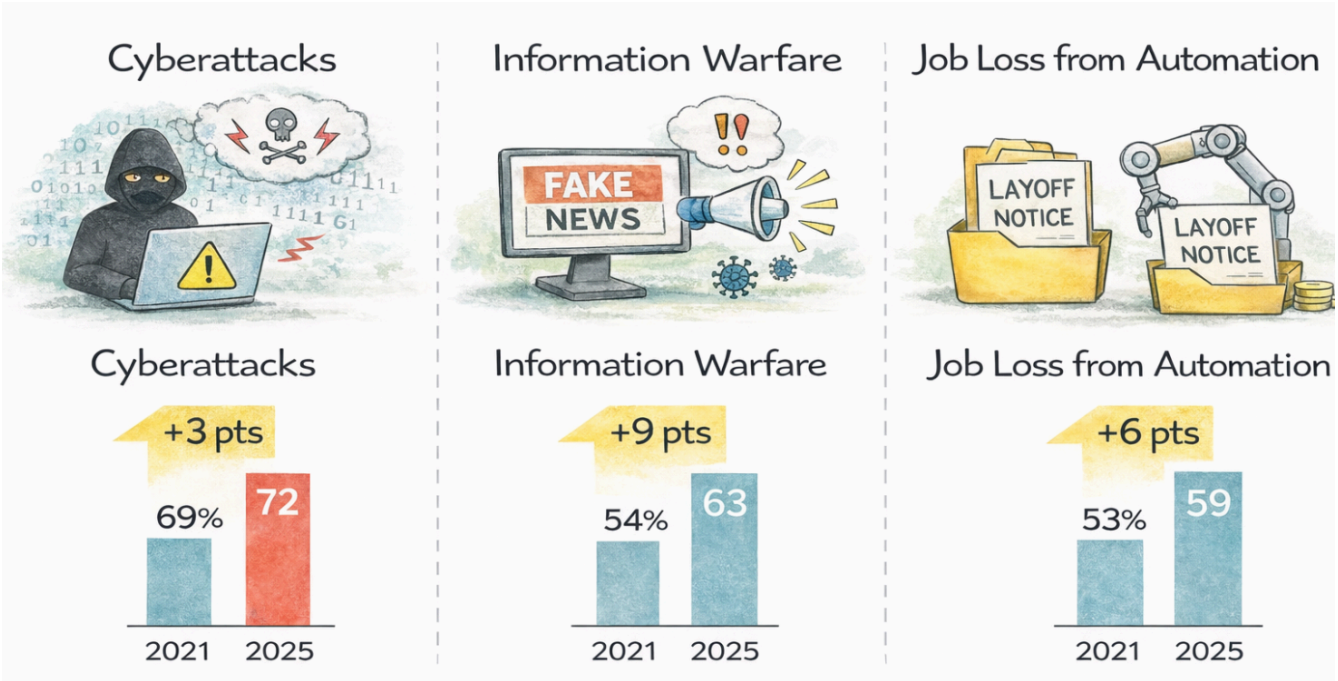

Data Source: 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer in Technology sector

- Trust varies sharply by age and income, with younger and higher-income groups more trusting than older and lower-income groups.




Data Source: 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer in Technology sector

- Since 2021, **Concern about cyberattacks** has climbed above 70%, **Worries around information warfare** have increased by nearly 10 points, and **Concern about job loss due to automation** has grown among employees, reinforcing why trust, governance, and clarity matter as AI moves into public-serving environments.




Data Source: 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer in Technology sector

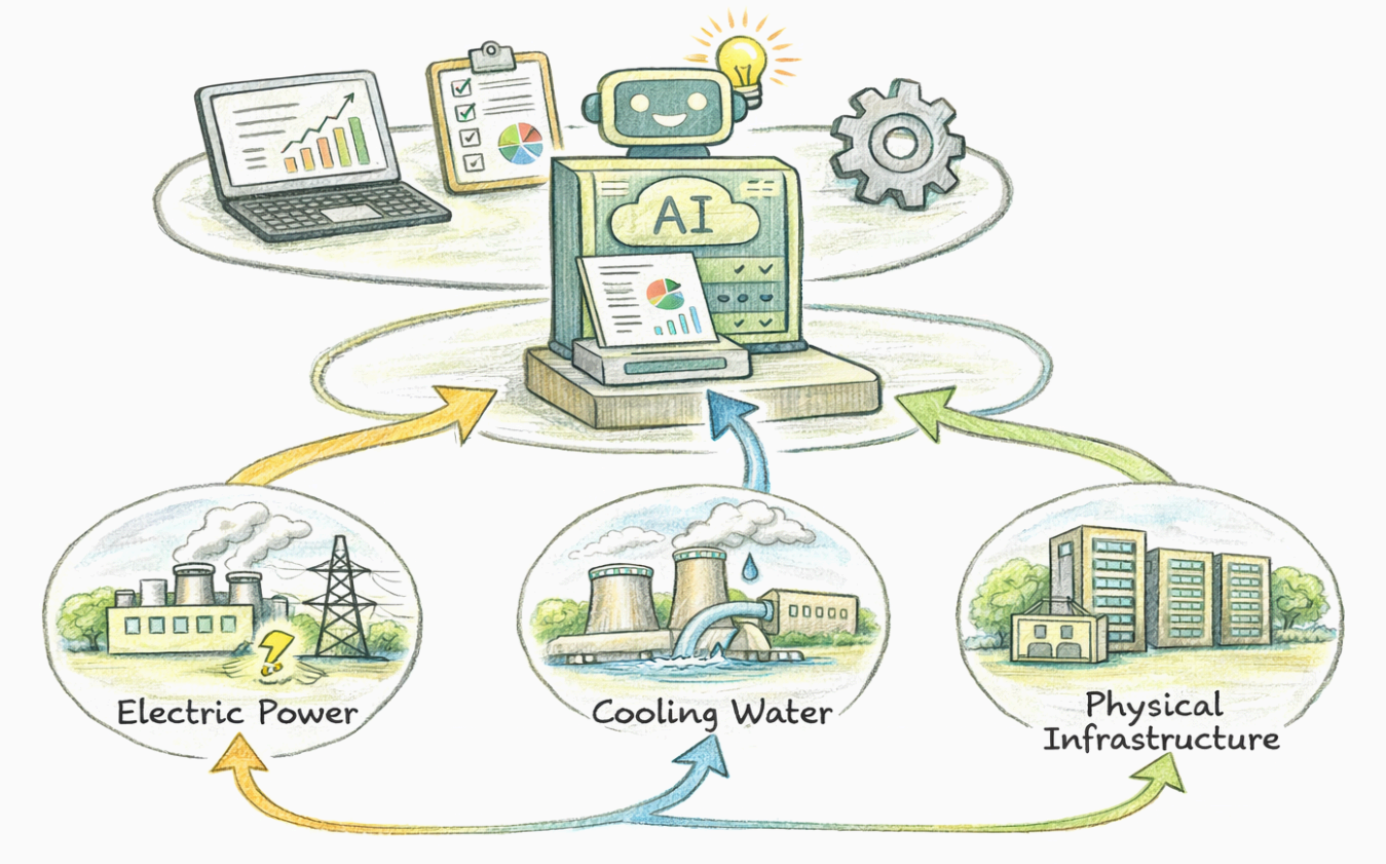
**Note: These are all in addition to the obvious concern with AI - information accuracy.**

# ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

For parks and recreation agencies, skepticism toward AI is not only about trust, accuracy, or governance but also about conservation and environmental stewardship in the physical and, now, the digital, space.

AI systems are powered by data centers consuming an estimated 1–2% of global electricity, with U.S. demand projected to double or triple by 2030. These facilities require significant water for cooling using hundreds of thousands to millions of gallons daily. A single AI query can require 10–100x more energy than a traditional web search.

Collectively, all of these are contributing significantly to AI's enormous (and growing) environmental footprint.  Responsible AI adoption in parks and recreation is not about avoidance, it is about intentional, efficient use aligned with sustainability values.



# HOW CAN YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE

*(Based on UNESCO guidance on resource-efficient generative AI)*

UNESCO's analysis does not call for eliminating AI use, rather using it intentionally.

The recommendations focus on design and governance choices that public agencies already know how to make and should intentionally make.

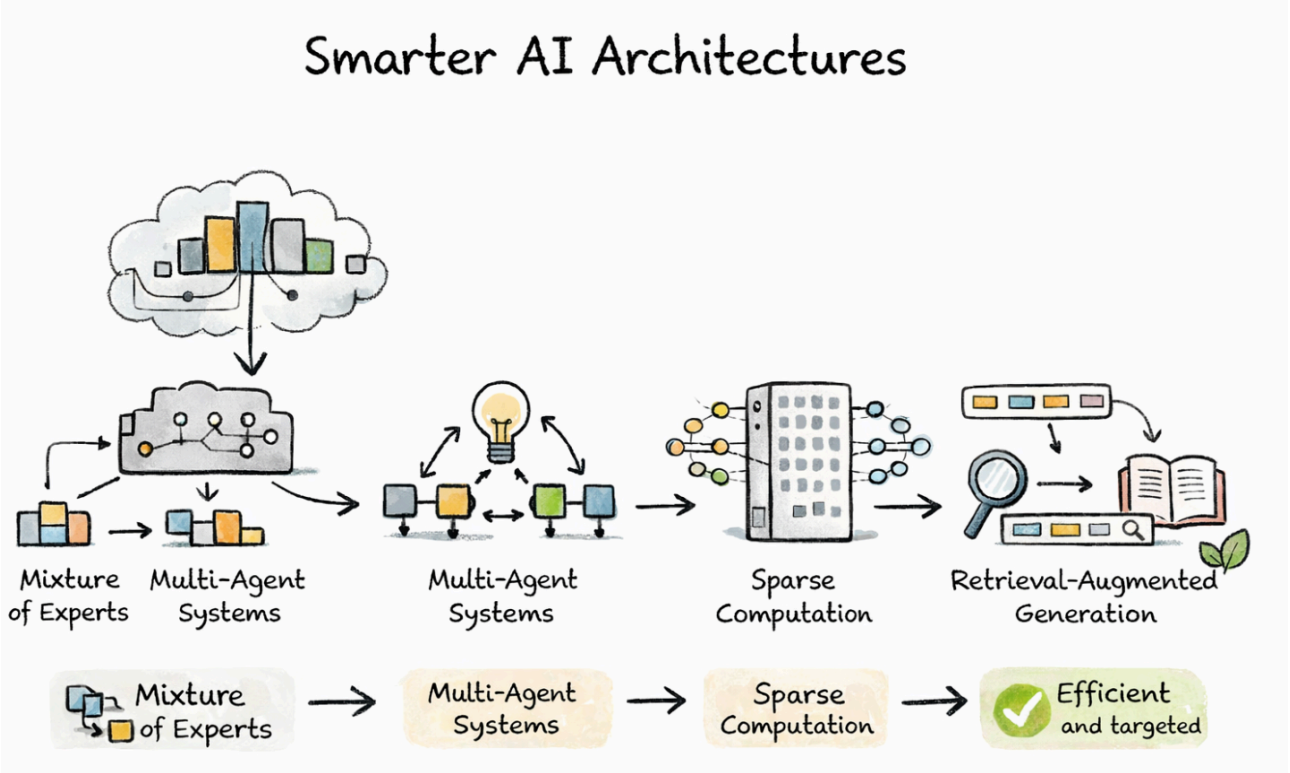
| Agency decision | What the research shows | What to do in practice |
|---|---|---|
| **What AI is used for** | Energy stayed low when AI handled summarizing, drafting, and Q&A tasks | Use AI for board packets, program drafts, staff summaries |
| **Response length** | Cutting responses in half reduced energy use by ~54% | Default to short summaries and key takeaways |
| **AI Model size** | Smaller, task-specific AI models used 15–50× less | Use specialized tools for routine workflows |
| **AI Model optimization** | Optimized models reduced energy use by 22–44% | Select tools built for efficient everyday use |
| **Repeated use** | Re-running similar prompts increased energy demand | Save and reuse outputs like templates |
| **Combined choices** | Together, energy use dropped 75–90% | Small decisions scale across the agency |

**Interpreted from Source: UNESCO, Smarter, Smaller, Stronger: Resource-Efficient Generative AI (pp. 14–28)**

# NEXT PHASE OF GENERATIVE AI

It is being shaped by smarter system design in ways such as this:

1. **Mixture of Experts (MoE)** route each request to a small set of specialized models, applying compute only where it adds value.
2. **Multi-agent systems** extend this idea by allowing multiple smaller models, each with defined capabilities, to collaborate on complex tasks.
3. **Sparse and conditional computation** further improves efficiency by activating only the components required for a given input.
4. **Retrieval-augmented generation (RAG)** shifts knowledge storage out of the model itself and into targeted search and memory layers, enabling accurate responses with lighter models.

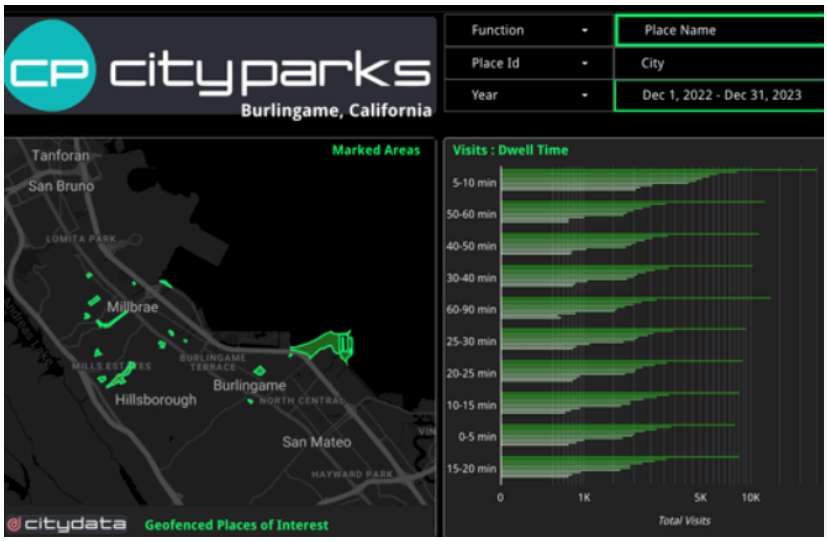


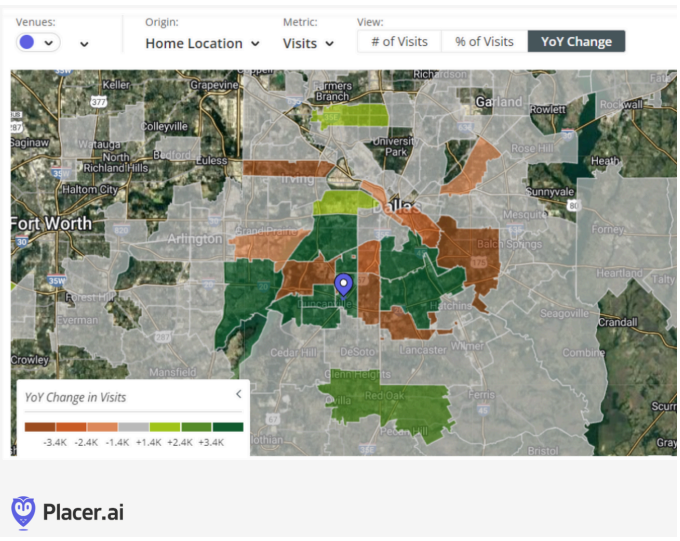

Together, these point to AI that supports work with less energy, lower operating costs, and better alignment with sustainability goals. Environmental responsibility then can become a part of system design, not a constraint on innovation.

# WHAT'S NEXT:  FROM WRITING TO THINKING

AI tools like Placer.ai and CityData.ai can turn visitation data into storytelling insights, or recommend new programs based on participation trends.

Combined with Looker Studio and Google Gemini, AI can help visualize performance, forecast demand, and tailor outreach strategies for parks and recreation agencies.




# THE FUTURE: AI AGENTS IN THE FIELD

The next horizon is AI Agents that act as digital teammates and can work across systems.

They could:

- Pull visitor and weather data to reschedule maintenance.
- Draft personalized reminders for program participants in their preferred language.
- Analyze comments from surveys and summarize community sentiment for upcoming public meetings.

# WHAT'S NEXT

In conclusion, this report reflects **insights from three years of survey data** capturing how parks and recreation professionals across the country perceive, use, and evaluate AI in their day-to-day work.

**Together, the findings point to a clear pattern: adoption is moving forward and prioritizes alignment with responsibility, transparency, and public purpose.**

Parks and recreation agencies don't have the luxury to move fast and break things like Silicon Valley. We operate in a values-driven environment where decisions impact public land, environmental stewardship, and community trust.

It is expected that agencies approach AI with caution, particularly given concerns around accuracy, environmental impact, and systems that feel disconnected from human judgment (case in point, the Jan 31st 2026 launch of a social media network for AI Agents only - Moltbook!)

The **Next** phase of AI in parks and recreation will be defined by trust. Agencies that **Practice** intentionality, prioritize transparency, and center human judgment as **Partners** with technology, will move from awareness to incremental impact.

Ultimately, the future belongs to those who build for trust, not performance and for people, not algorithms.

In solidiarity with humanity,

**Next Practice Partners (real humans)**

# WHO WE ARE

## NEXT PRACTICE PARTNERS, LLC.

is a team committed to building a more inclusive and innovative future for all through our planning, training, and technology services.

We are headquarted in Central Indiana and have an iimpact globally.

Our team's 100+ years of interacting with humans on this planet includes time with Fortune 100 Companies including Disney and Target, the Summer Olympics and Paralympics Games, The Super Bowl, NBA All-Star, TED and national gold medal parks and recreation agencies.

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For questions and comments on the report, please reach out to Next Practice Partners at www.benextpractice.com/connect.html

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# PERCEPTION & IMPACT OF AI IN PARKS & RECREATION

2025

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