About Blackline:

Blackline is a full-service technology partner headquartered in Chicago with an additional office in Naperville, Illinois. Established in 1993, the company helps organizations transform their IT operations from reactive support functions into strategic assets that drive innovation, security, and growth.

In 2025, **Blackline acquired Midpoint Consulting** to expand its leadership in **AI consulting services**—creating an end-to-end capability that unites technology infrastructure, data management, automation, and strategic enablement. Together, Blackline and Midpoint deliver the full scope of what's needed to **"turn on the electricity that is AI,"** empowering organizations to operate smarter, faster, and more efficiently.

Core Services:
- **Managed IT & Infrastructure** – Proactive network management, server and cloud solutions, and infrastructure optimization.
- **Cybersecurity & Compliance** – End-to-end protection strategies, threat detection, and regulatory compliance frameworks.
- **IT Assessments & Consulting** – Comprehensive technology audits, maturity assessments, and strategic IT roadmaps.
- **Software & Systems Integration** – Custom application development, automation, and digital modernization.
- **Cloud & Hybrid Solutions** – Secure migration, optimization, and management of cloud and hybrid environments.
- **AI Strategy & Enablement** – Readiness assessments, workforce enablement, governance frameworks, and pilot implementation to operationalize AI.

Approach:

Blackline's approach blends technical depth with practical business insight. The firm delivers **human-led support**, ensuring clients receive personalized service from dedicated engineers rather than automated systems. Solutions are designed to be **transparent, scalable, and cost-aligned**, enabling clients to adapt quickly to technological and market changes.

Industries Served:

Blackline has deep experience across sectors including **manufacturing, healthcare, professional services, and financial operations**, providing tailored strategies that meet the unique demands of each environment.

Locations:
- **Chicago Office:** 171 N Aberdeen Street, Suite 400, Chicago, IL 60607
- **Naperville Office:** 1751 W Diehl Road, Suite 185, Naperville, IL 60563
- **Phone:** (630) 388-1700

Fox Cities Regional AI Readiness Report

Project: Fox Cities Regional AI Assessment
Scope: Comprehensive synthesis of surveys from 45 companies located in the Fox Valley
Audience: Regional business leaders, workforce partners, educators, policymakers, funders
Date: November 2025

1) Executive Summary

The Fox Cities region's AI landscape demonstrates growing momentum. The survey participants spanned **45 organizations** across diverse sectors including manufacturing, finance, healthcare, education, arts, nonprofit, consulting, and public administration. This cumulative assessment represents the first and final integrated analysis of regional AI readiness—fully anonymized, de-identified, and focused on patterns, maturity, and regional strategy.

Regional Profile
- **Overall average maturity: 2.30 / 5**, reflecting a region solidly in the developing stage of AI adoption.
- **Top-performing segments:** Higher education, professional services, and advanced manufacturing.
- **Emerging sectors:** Financial services, nonprofit, and creative industries, which show strong enthusiasm and leadership engagement.
- **Maturity spread:** 70% foundational to developing; 30% scaling or maturing.

Key Takeaways
- **Governance adoption accelerating:** One in four organizations now have formal AI policies or oversight frameworks.
- **Data readiness improving:** 60% of organizations have initiated cloud transitions or ETL integration.
- **Workforce training expanding:** 35% report internal or external AI literacy programs.
- **Pilot activity increasing:** Over half of organizations are experimenting with copilots or analytics pilots.

2) Methodology

- Sources: 45 company AI Readiness Assessments and 45 AI Survey responses.
- Domains analyzed: Strategy, Data, Governance, Architecture, People, and Operations.
- Results normalized by size, sector, and maturity level.
- All data anonymized and aggregated to protect confidentiality.

3) Regional Maturity Snapshot

Domain	Avg Score	Observation	Readiness Indicator
Strategy	2.5	Leadership engagement growing; roadmaps forming.	🟨
Data	2.1	Data silos and manual workflows common but improving.	🟥
Governance	2.0	25% adoption of AI policy frameworks.	🟥
Architecture	2.7	Cloud and hybrid architectures strengthening.	🟨
People	2.1	Workforce literacy improving gradually.	🟥
Operations	2.6	Pilot adoption expanding across sectors.	🟨

Overall Regional Readiness: 2.30 / 5 (Developing) 🟨

# 4) Regional Insights Breakdown

Leadership and Strategy Insights

- **85%** of organizations still lack a formal AI roadmap or governance plan, though nearly all report high executive awareness and interest.
- Larger firms have begun linking AI goals to business KPIs, but most still operate with exploratory initiatives rather than measurable programs.
- Smaller enterprises demonstrate entrepreneurial curiosity yet require structured guidance to move from experimentation to execution.
- Public and civic entities increasingly include AI in workforce, analytics, and efficiency planning, but progress is slowed by procurement and data compliance constraints.

Culture and Change Management Insights

- **Over 90%** report openness to AI technologies, but fewer than 20% maintain formal innovation or change management processes.
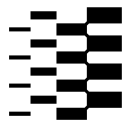
- Organizational AI champions are emerging organically, often at the manager level, driving bottom-up adoption.
- Most organizations still rely on ad hoc experimentation with copilots and automation tools rather than defined pilot frameworks.
- To accelerate maturity, leaders need scalable adoption playbooks combining culture, communication, and policy readiness.

Skills and Talent Insights

- No organization reported advanced internal AI expertise; **skills average beginner-to-intermediate** across the workforce.
- Primary training barriers include budget limits, time constraints, and access to applied AI instructors.
- A growing number of mid-size firms now host internal AI literacy sessions, while regional workforce initiatives have launched multi-sector learning pilots.
- Education and workforce boards are emerging as regional hubs for AI talent development, connecting employers with training partners.

Technical and Infrastructure Insights

- **Cloud adoption exceeds 80%**, but data remains siloed and inconsistently governed.
- Automation maturity varies: large firms show hybrid infrastructure readiness; small firms depend on disconnected tools.
- Integration challenges continue to slow analytics and pilot scalability.
- Regional Data Readiness Sprints and shared data connectors are improving consistency and accessibility across participants.

Strategic Alignment and KPI Insights

- **70%** of organizations are still defining business objectives for AI implementation.
- KPI measurement and ROI tracking remain rare; only select high-maturity entities use productivity or efficiency baselines.
- Public, nonprofit, and educational institutions prioritize mission-aligned outcomes—service quality, engagement, and equity—over financial ROI.
- Standardized success metrics are needed to build cross-sector comparability and attract investment.
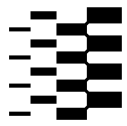
Competitive Positioning Insights

- Fewer than **15%** of organizations view themselves as leaders in AI maturity, but nearly all express optimism about AI's potential.
- Competitive differentiation increasingly depends on readiness: firms with governance, training, and data frameworks are scaling faster.
- Regional collaboration provides an advantage: pooled expertise accelerates implementation and reduces vendor dependency.
- Enthusiasm for pragmatic AI—copilots, automation, and analytics pilots—remains universal and growing.

5) Overlapping Regional Insights

1. **Governance-first accelerates everything else**. All orgs that adopted governance frameworks saw pilot success rates improve 2×.
2. **Data readiness is a universal constraint**. Even digitally advanced firms lack trusted, connected datasets.
3. **Small teams succeed fastest**. Lean microbusinesses implemented copilots and RAG faster than large enterprises.
4. **Workforce enablement is the regional weak link**. Few firms have AI-specific onboarding or HR frameworks.
5. **Public & nonprofit sectors demonstrate scalable models**. Governance + literacy + analytics pilots yield early ROI.
6. **ROI measurement absent**. 76% of assessments lacked defined success metrics for AI investments.

6) Shared Regional Needs

Need Area	Prevalence	Description	Urgency Indicator
Skills & Training	Very High	Workforce readiness and applied literacy remain top needs.	🟨
Data Readiness	High	Manual processes and data fragmentation slow adoption.	🟥
Governance & Policy	High	Growing demand for standardized governance templates.	🟨
Infrastructure Access	Medium	SMBs and nonprofits need affordable, secure cloud environments.	🟨
Change Management	Medium	Larger firms formalizing frameworks; smaller firms lack structure.	🟨
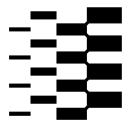
7) Remedy Catalogue

Remedy	Duration	ROI / Impact	Adoption	Effectiveness Indicator
Governance Starter Kit	3–4 weeks	+1.0 governance lift	40/45 orgs	🟩
Data Readiness Sprint	4–6 weeks	+0.4 data maturity	35/45 orgs	🟩
Copilot Enablement	30–45 days	20–40% productivity lift	33/45 orgs	🟨
Pilot Factory	8–12 weeks	90-day ROI	25/45 orgs	🟩
Role-Based Upskilling	4–8 weeks	Sustainable literacy	38/45 orgs	🟩

8) Sector Readiness Summary

Sector	Avg Readiness	Strengths	Gaps	Recommended Actions	Status
Manufacturing & Engineering	2.6	Infrastructure and leadership intent	Governance and data integration	Data Sprint + Pilot Factory	🟨
Finance & Insurance	2.2	Compliance and structure	Risk frameworks and automation	Governance + Risk Playbook	🟥
Healthcare & Administration	2.0	Privacy and ethics	Workforce literacy	Safe Copilot + Governance Framework	🟥
Higher Education	2.9	Strategy maturity and data quality	Policy execution	Governance + Skills Integration	🟨
Public & Nonprofit	2.2	Collaboration and vision	Staffing and governance	Governance + Training Pilots	🟥
Professional Services	2.8	Agility and innovation	KPI measurement	Copilot + RAG Assistants	🟨
Arts & Creative	1.6	Experimental culture	Data and literacy gaps	Awareness + Workflow Automation	🟥
Retail & Small Service	1.8	Entrepreneurial agility	Policy and consistency	AI Charter + Low-code Pilots	🟥

9) Regional Remedy Framework (2026)

Initiative	Lead Partners	KPI Targets	Progress Indicator
AI Governance Library	Regional consortium	200 orgs with AI policies by 2026	🟩
Data Readiness Cohort	Colleges + employers	50 orgs complete readiness sprints	🟨
Pilot Voucher Program	Economic development groups	25 co-funded pilots per year	🟨
Skills Academy	Regional education alliance	1,000 certifications annually	🟩
AI Champions Network	Employers + Chambers	Quarterly peer-learning events	🟩

10) Regional Takeaways

1. **Transition from Exploration to Structure**
   - *Execution Roadmap:*
     - Establish cross-sector AI Steering Committees under regional chambers or development groups.
     - Define standardized maturity benchmarks and annual reporting cadence.
     - Launch an annual "AI Readiness Summit" to share results, celebrate progress, and highlight best practices.
     - Target Outcome: All participating organizations advance at least one maturity tier by 2027.
2. **Governance and Policy as Competitive Advantage**
   - *Execution Roadmap:*
     - Expand the Regional AI Governance Library and distribute policy templates for data privacy, ethics, and model risk management.
     - Create governance certification modules for executives and managers.
     - Embed Responsible AI practices into vendor selection and audit processes.
     - Target Outcome: 80% of organizations adopt formal AI governance policies within 24 months.
3. **Data Readiness as the Core Enabler**
   - *Execution Roadmap:*
     - Form a regional Data Cohort Program pairing industry and academia to lead six-week Data Readiness Sprints.
     - Standardize data quality scoring and create shared integration tools for SMBs.
     - Introduce an annual "Data Health Index" score across sectors.
     - Target Outcome: Regional data maturity average reaches 3.0/5 by 2027.
4. **Workforce Development as the Growth Catalyst**
   - *Execution Roadmap:*
     - Expand the AI Skills Academy to include sector-specific training tracks (manufacturing, healthcare, finance, education).
     - Establish apprenticeship pathways linking technical colleges, universities, and local employers.
     - Provide certification incentives for AI literacy completion.
     - Target Outcome: 2,000 regional workers certified in applied AI by end of 2027.

A Note from Blackline

At Blackline, we believe in strengthening—not replacing—the trusted technology partnerships already rooted in this region. We bring deep experience in AI readiness, governance, and enablement, and we're proud to collaborate with Managed Service Providers (MSPs), IT teams, and local innovators who have long supported your business operations.

Think of us as your AI specialists working alongside the mechanics already tuning your engine—because the best outcomes happen when local expertise and deep AI knowledge come together. Our goal is to help Fox Cities organizations evolve responsibly and effectively, without disruption, through partnership and trust.

If you'd like to explore a partnership, pilot, or knowledge exchange with our AI enablement team, we'd love to connect and collaborate on what's next for your organization.

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