

62% of Contractors Bought AI. Only 15% Can Prove It Paid.

The short answer: ServiceTitan's 2026 Commercial State of the Trades report (1,020 commercial contractors, surveyed July 2026) found 62% have piloted or deployed AI — but only 15% of AI users report a significant positive impact with clear ROI. The gap isn't the technology. It's that most shops bought AI like a piece of equipment and never gave it a job description, a metric, or a manager. The pattern the data points to: the 15% appear to have done one thing differently — they pointed it at a single narrow workflow and measured it in dollars.

Here's the number that should stop every contractor mid-scroll: 62% in, 15% with clear ROI.

ServiceTitan released its 2026 Commercial State of the Trades report this week — 1,020 commercial contractors, mostly mechanical, electrical, and plumbing, surveyed in July. Sixty-two percent have piloted or deployed AI, and a third have it actively running or embedded across the business.

And then the line that matters: among contractors using AI, 59% report a positive impact — but just 15% report a *significant* positive impact *with clear ROI*.

Read that split carefully. Fifty-nine percent feel good about it. Fifteen percent can show the money. That's a 44-point gap between vibes and proof, and it tells you exactly what's going wrong: most of the industry is running AI on faith.

Buying it like equipment

Here's my read on why. Contractors buy AI the way they buy a new van or a thermal camera — a thing you purchase, install, and expect to work. But AI doesn't behave like equipment. It behaves like a hire. And nobody would hire a dispatcher, hand them no job description, give them no number to hit, check in never, and then declare the hire a success because "things feel smoother."

That's what most AI deployments are: an employee with no job description. "We got AI for the office." Doing what, exactly? "You know — AI stuff. Emails. Summaries. It drafts things." And then a year later, nobody can point to a dollar, so it quietly becomes a subscription nobody cancels and nobody defends.

The 15% did the opposite. They didn't buy "AI." They bought an outcome, and they gave the tool one job.

Where the money actually concentrates

The report itself points at where value lives — you just have to read it as an operator instead of a press release. Asked where AI will have the greatest impact, contractors named scheduling and dispatch (37%) and predictive maintenance (31%).

Notice what's *not* on that list: "general productivity." "Email drafts." "Brainstorming." Every high-value answer is a narrow, operational, measurable workflow — a place where a before-and-after number exists. Dispatch efficiency. Callback rates. Estimate turnaround time. These are jobs with a job description built in.

That's the pattern I'd bet the 15% share, and I'll flag it as inference because the survey doesn't profile them directly: one workflow, one metric, measured in dollars or days. Not "AI across the business." One throat to choke.

The cash-flow test

There's a second number in the report that reframes the whole conversation: 96% of contractors wait at least 15 days to get paid, and 30% wait more than 30. Eighty-two percent send the invoice within three days of finishing the work — the money goes out fast and comes back slow. Improving cash flow is now a top-three goal for 40% of contractors, up from 28% last year — the biggest year-over-year shift in the survey. Net margin ranks first at 42%. New customers trail at 29%.

So here's the test I'd put to any AI purchase, in any shop: **does it touch cash, margin, or throughput?** If the answer is no — if it's a nicer way to write emails while 96% of your revenue sits in someone else's accounts-payable queue for two-plus weeks — it's a hobby. Hobbies are fine, but don't confuse them with investments, and don't let a vendor confuse you either.

The contractors who can show ROI are the ones whose AI shortens the distance between finished work and paid invoice, or between a ringing phone and a dispatched truck. Everything else is decoration.

What this looks like in a restoration shop

Restoration has its own version of the 15% playbook — if the pattern holds, the workflows practically name themselves. Each one comes with a metric attached — that's the whole point:

1. **The 2am call.** The highest-margin job in the trade arrives when your office is dark. An AI voice line that answers, triages, and dispatches the after-hours emergency — measured in *captured*

emergency jobs per month and response time in minutes. If you can't count the jobs it caught that would have gone to voicemail, you don't have ROI, you have a demo.

1. **Dispatch triage.** Water loss called in, crew assignment, priority sorting — measured in *minutes from first call to truck rolling* and *mis-dispatch rate*. The report's 69% flag matters here: warranty coverage and agreement details are the top information obstacle for techs in the field. An AI that puts the right job history in front of the right tech before arrival is measurable in callbacks avoided.
1. **Documentation.** The photo-and-report grind that eats estimator and project-manager hours — measured in *hours per job of documentation time* and *days from job completion to invoice*. Documentation that bottlenecks billing is margin leaking out the back door.
1. **Estimate turnaround.** Measured in *hours from site visit to estimate delivered*. In storm and emergency work, the fast estimate wins the job. That's margin, directly.

Pick one. Not four — one. Give it the metric. Check the metric monthly. That's the entire methodology of the 15%.

The human gate

One more thing the 15% understand, and it's the part the vendors skip: the human signs off. In restoration, a wrong dispatch sends a crew to the wrong loss. A bad estimate becomes a bad contract. An AI that drafts and a human who approves is a system; an AI that sends is a liability with a login.

This isn't anti-AI caution — it's the reason the ROI is *clear* for these shops instead of arguable. When a human gates the output, the failures get caught before they cost money, and the metric stays clean. "AI drafted 40 estimates, our estimator approved 38, turnaround dropped from 48 hours to 6" — that's a sentence you can take to your accountant. "The AI handles our estimates now" is a sentence you take to your lawyer.

The question to ask before you buy anything

The next AI vendor who walks into your office — or the next renewal notice for the tool you already bought — gets one question: **what's the metric, and what was it before?**

If they can name it — captured after-hours jobs, dispatch minutes, documentation hours, estimate turnaround — and they can tell you what it was last quarter, you're talking to someone selling the 15%.

If they talk about transformation, empowerment, and the future of the trades, you're talking to someone selling the 62%.

The technology isn't the gamble. An unguided tool with no job description is the gamble. Give it one job, one number, and a human with a red pen — and join the 15% who can prove it paid.

Related: [Zero SEO value for restoration contractors](#).

Sources: ServiceTitan, [2026 Commercial State of the Trades report](#) (press release, September 24, 2026; survey of 1,020 commercial contractors, surveyed July 2026).

Caveats, stated plainly: ServiceTitan sells AI software to the trades — they sell the remedy this research points at. The findings are self-reported survey data, not audited financials. The sample is commercial MEP contractors, not restoration specifically; the restoration mapping above is informed operator inference, flagged as such. The survey doesn't profile the 15% directly — the "one workflow, one metric" read is my inference from where respondents said value concentrates, not a reported finding.

Researched and drafted by Glint, Will Tygart's AI collaborator. Every statistic above is traceable to the ServiceTitan release.

Want this applied to your shop? Tygart Media runs focused AI-search and local AEO sprints for contractors — audit first, then a tight fix list. [Talk to us](#).