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STARTUP 2026 AI AGENTS MEAN BUSINESS

What venture capitalists are looking for in the era of agentic AI

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AI Continues to Evolve Across the Enterprise

AI hype is alive and well. 2025 was named by many in tech as the “the year of the agents” as companies across industries and around the globe raced to infuse AI throughout their business functions. Business leaders felt the pressure from their peers to implement AI at every point in their workflows for fear of being left behind.

It’s still too early to broadly measure the ROI of agentic AI. It has yet to achieve the level of autonomy and complexity at the core of its promise, but we’ve seen some key and proven workloads start to move into production, such as agentic coding. Agentic AI remains an area of tremendous excitement for businesses, venture capitalists and AI-focused startups — with the potential to significantly impact innovation, business strategy, revenue and more.

Last year, we sat down with investors at eight leading venture capital firms to gain their perspectives on the state of AI in the startup space. This year, we did it again, with new and familiar faces. For this version of the report, we focused on how investors’ approach to AI startups is evolving and where they think AI in general, and agents in particular, are headed in 2026. We started off the conversations with how AI adoption has changed over the past year.

Eight VCs share their perspectives on how AI will evolve in 2026

ROHINI CHAKRAVARTHY
Managing Partner, NewBuild Venture Capital

BRYAN HALE
Investor, Anthos Capital

SUNIL CHHAYA
Co-Founder and General Partner, Kearny Jackson

SHRAVAN NARAYEN
Partner, IVP

GUY FIGHEL
Partner, Hetz Ventures

TIM TULLY
Partner, Menlo Ventures

CARL FRITJOFSSON
General Partner, Creandum

SUMANGAL VINJAMURI
Co-Lead B2B AI Investments, Blume Ventures

“At the beginning of 2025, we had this idea that you could take enterprise workflows and AI would make that agentic — you would have either a copilot model alongside human users, or a fully no-human-in-the-loop model,” says Rohini Chakravarthy, managing partner at NewBuild Venture Capital. “Where that is happening has become a lot clearer throughout the year. For example, in logistics, there is a category forming around gen AI agent capabilities.”

AI adoption in 2025 was by no means limited to the most tech-savvy companies. “Even historical tech-laggard industries are now allocating budget and aggressively adopting AI across all core operations,” says Sunil Chhaya, co-founder and general partner at Kearny Jackson. “Industries like insurance and logistics, which were once considered more conservative, are now using AI for things like claims processing, underwriting and risk modeling, which is driving meaningful margin improvements.”

He adds that four years ago, the talk was around “10x engineers” — engineers made 10 times more productive by assistive technologies.“But today, AI tools are turning basically anyone in an organization into a 10 to 100x contributor, not only in engineering, but across other functions such as product, sales, finance and operations.”

Hetz Ventures Partner Guy Fighel says, “Anyone that has not changed or evolved with the market and with this new AI-focused reality is not performing very well.”

Throughout this report, we share insights from the eight conversations we had with leading venture capitalists, covering the impacts of AI on the business landscape, how AI is influencing investment decisions, predictions for 2026 and beyond, what makes a winning pitch for startup founders and more.

Snowflake for Startups

Snowflake for Startups provides the next-generation of startups with enterprise-grade scalability, strong native-AI capabilities and access to a global network of customers, investors and partners. Through the program, eligible startups gain access to technical expertise, go-to-market guidance and business development support from leading experts across the Snowflake ecosystem.

Investment Strategies Shift in the AI Era — Sort Of

AI-native startups are a driving force behind the wave of generative and agentic AI hitting every market. But not every AI-enhanced idea is backed by a solid business model. It's easy to get caught up in the excitement, but investors say they're maintaining cool heads. Some have shifted their investment strategies, while others are sticking to the fundamentals that have always defined the potential of an early-stage startup.

BRYAN HALE: "Fundamentally, our thesis has always been to set aside AI and look at everything else that a company is doing. Is this a strong team? Do they have a great insight? Do customers love them? Are they more and more essential? Because most of these AI companies, certainly at the application layer, start off like almost all startups have always started off, with no real defensibility. It's something they earn over time as they grow, and so I don't think we've really swayed too much from that."

GUY FIGHEL: "You see either investors that just care about growth or the ones that also care about how the business will perform. Now with roughly five or six big model companies, the thought process is moving from trying to find the next new model to what are the startups that, if those big models advance, can become larger and more successful, versus competing with the model companies. It's either trying to find new frontier-type startups that are not competing with the existing model companies, or trying to anticipate startups that are building big businesses."

TIM TULLY: “I’ve opened the aperture looking from primarily AI infrastructure into AI application. Seeing how much productivity gain the application layer is getting from agentic backends is exciting. Seeing how much efficiency gain people who use that software are getting is also exciting, so I broadened my purview more.”

SHRAVAN NARAYEN: “We’re still predominantly focused on application companies but now have started to spend more time on infrastructure across two dimensions: developer tooling associated with building great agents and the intersection of AI and security.”

SUNIL CHHAYA: “We keep our eyes on the pace of foundational model innovation, which is getting cheaper and faster. This has allowed the range of tasks that can be automated to increase, in both size and complexity, thanks to the bigger models, longer context windows, smarter memory, multimodal reasoning and far more efficient compute.”

Slower-moving industries rush toward AI

SUMANGAL VINJAMURI
Co-Lead B2B AI Investments, Blume Ventures

Sumangal Vinjamuri is a co-lead of B2B AI investments at Blume Ventures, an early-stage fund started in 2011. The firm started as a micro-VC with about $20 million, with their most recent fund being $300 million. He says that vertical AI, specific to industries, is an important evolution of the AI space.

“In 2025, we saw a lot more vertical solutions that are industry-specific — there’s a bunch in healthcare, some in construction and real estate,” Vinjamuri says. “There are so many traditional industries that are typically not fast early adopters of modern technology, but with AI and agents, it’s different. We’ve seen a definite uptick in terms of the quality of startups and founding teams, and in the pull from the market in terms of vertical solutions.”

Vinjamuri says that while 2025 was definitely the year that agents emerged, the biggest impact is yet to come. “I don’t think we’re at the point yet where they’re super mature, or they can deliver us the promised land, but we’re getting there. 2023 and 2024 were more about the picks and shovels, 2025 was about getting to agents, and I think 2026 will be more about getting to outcomes.”

Capital Concentration: Risk or Opportunity?

Venture investment has shifted in the past year, with a large concentration of investment capital being concentrated in a relatively small group of companies. This shift presents some risks and also some unique opportunities. We asked VC leaders what this means for the startup market. Should we be worried, or is this driving the industry forward?

TIM TULLY: "I don't think it's a risk. If anything, it's sensible. Frontier lab model companies are getting large investment dollars. It's because talent, training and inference is expensive. So it makes sense that the dollars tend to be going there. There's a risk that there's a lot of hype, and people are investing quickly, moving a lot of dollars prematurely into deals before companies show strength. But no investor wants to be left behind and miss the next great company. That's why you're seeing this velocity."

SUMANGAL VINJAMURI: "For B2B application software or agents to mature and deliver outcomes, a lot of upfront investment is necessary. The bullishness and availability of capital for investing into the model labs and the inference companies or the data providers shows confidence in the capital market that outcomes will come, and it's more of a matter of time."

SHRAVAN NARAYEN: "There's still a crazy amount of white space where these larger, well-capitalized companies are going to be economically disincentivized from going after 'small markets.' That's where startups have the advantage."

CARL FRITJOFSSON: "As an early-stage tech investor, we're not seeing the concentration of capital going into large foundational models as a limiting factor for us. It's actually the opposite. It is an enabler of many products and services that sit on top of these models and provide immense value to its customers.

Many seeds, slower growth

SUNIL CHHAYA
Co-Founder and General Partner, Kearny Jackson

Sunil Chhaya, co-founder and general partner at Kearny Jackson, brought a degree from the London School of Economics to early-stage venture funding, with a focus on backing SaaS, infrastructure, cybersecurity and fintech founders. He says that competition is making it harder for early startups to get off the ground.

“We’re seeing that the graduation rate from seed to Series A is not only taking longer, but the percentage of companies that actually reach that Series A milestone is at an all-time low.”

He notes that VC firms now have much more choice in terms of who they back.

“Often they have a dozen players in a specific category that they can choose from, and they’re being more disciplined and deliberate with the bets that they’re making,” he says. “We’ve been more worried about companies that may have high exposure or may be sensitive to different upstream models or infrastructure shifts.”

These challenges do not daunt him.

“The beauty of being an early-stage investor, despite what’s happening at the macro level, is that humans will never stop innovating. Cycles come and go, but builders keep building,” he says. “And we often arm our founders with all these insights to ensure that they’re disciplined, especially at that formation stage of the company building, whether it’s pre-seed or seed.”

‘Year of the Agents’ Part Two: Setting Up Real Progress

In 2025, agentic AI seemed poised to transform the business world. In retrospect, our panel said, the year was not quite the turning point it was hyped to be. That’s not to say agents are a failure. Rather than the instant revolution promised by the most breathless commentator, agents are a still-building success story.

SUNIL CHHAYA: “2025 wasn’t quite the agentic breakthrough we had all been hoping for. Agents are useful tools, but not quite fully autonomous actors. What we’ve seen agents actually struggle the most with is unstructured, cross-system, or even high-stakes tasks that often require longer periods of memory, strong implementation of governance and pinpoint positioning of context. We’ve seen agents’ ROI be the highest when it’s scoped, instrumented and governed — where a human ensures that the intended task or series of tasks performed are actually being done without error.”

TIM TULLY: “‘What is an agent anyway?’ That’s my favorite question to ask a company who says they have a major agentic backend. I start to poke around and ask, ‘What do you think an agent is?’ Usually you get them to distill it down to an LLM. What they’re doing is calling an LLM over and over again to reduce it down to a great output. At the end of the day, agents aren’t that smart on their own. They’re only as smart as what the LLM can do for them.”

SUMANGAL VINJAMURI: “There’s this tendency for errors to compound within agents, and that’s a risk. For example, if it’s a five-minute call it can perform the task perfectly, but if it has to have a one-hour conversation, I’m not sure at this point because of that compounding error challenge. We’ve not seen agents be fully proficient at workflows; a high level of determinism is required.”

GUY FIGHEL: "Fifty percent of the time, at least, when people are speaking about agents, they just mean automation and workflows. With agents, the main differentiation is that it's a nondeterministic, dynamic approach. From all of the enterprises that I've been speaking with, I'd say at least 95% are not really ready. When it comes to the agentic flow, there are risks that they're not willing to take because of accuracy, security and governance concerns, and technical challenges. With the companies I see using agents, I see value when it comes to a specific, human-in-the-loop approach."

SHRAVAN NARAYEN: "What we're seeing is that agentic adoption tends to lag in areas where the cost of being wrong is high. At the same time, there's a significant rate of improvement from a model standpoint, with new techniques or core models improvements. So, in industries where the cost of something being wrong is higher, you're still seeing examples where agents resonate and are successful."

CARL FRITJOFSSON: "I'm tech-optimistic and AI capabilities are improving fast. Some agents may have been clueless a short while ago, and many are now becoming more capable. A lot of the issues that we see today, it's only a matter of time until they're solved."

Real value vs. the 'AI bubble'

ROHINI CHAKRAVARTHY
Managing Partner, NewBuild Venture Capital

Rohini Chakravarthy is a managing partner at NewBuild Venture Capital, an early-stage enterprise and supply chain-focused venture firm. With 20+ years of investing experience, she has supported companies through growth stages, acquisitions and IPOs. In her area of focus, AI is making a big difference by tapping large swaths of previously underused data.

"AI in the supply chain world for the longest time has been algorithmic, focused on predictive analytics," she says. "Agents are really good at reading unstructured data from across the supply chain, making sense of them with reasoning models and driving decisions. Analytics, insights and decisions are all AI territory now."

She weighs such examples of progress against reasonable fears that the market around generative and agentic AI has gotten out of control while evaluating investments.

"'Are we in a bubble?', 'Or is this a durable trend?' It's sort of both," she says. "The valuations may be frothy in some cases, but there's no question that there are some fundamental capabilities getting built and new value delivered across the enterprise."

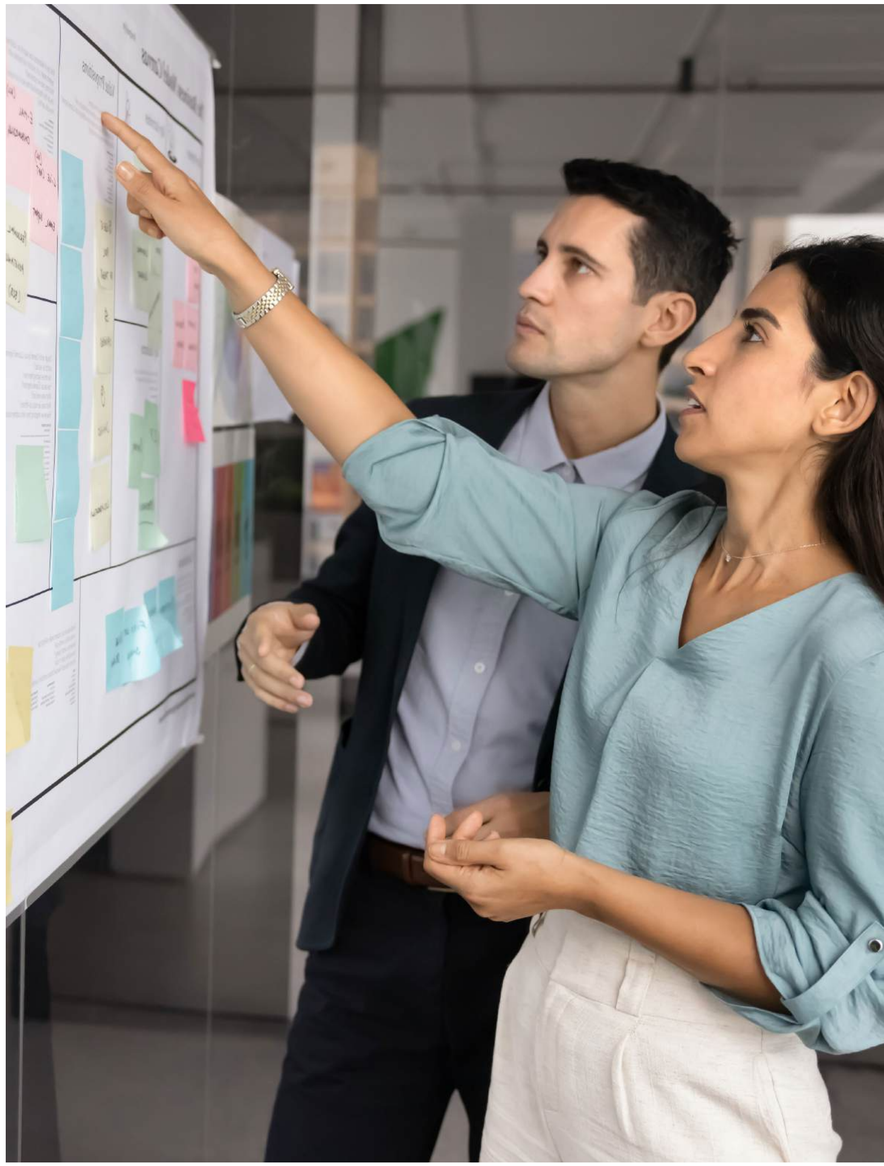
Defensible Barriers Protect Competitive Advantage

The AI market is evolving rapidly, especially around agents. That means venture investors are more interested than ever in making sure an agentic startup has a defensible moat. Such protective barriers — such as proprietary data or deep workflow integration — can insulate a startup against market disruption.

ROHINI CHAKRAVARTHY: "There are technology moats, and then there are business model moats, and you have to look for both. Technology moats come down to knowing data, understanding context and being able to analyze larger-scale data to do things your competitors can't. Business model moats develop when you deliver a product or service in a way your competitors won't."

SUNIL CHHAYA: "The strongest moats come from access to proprietary data, deep integrations into the workflows, and teams that have strong domain expertise. Because at the end of the day, models and infrastructure will keep evolving, but the companies will have their own unique data loops, and hopefully they'll be embedded in multiple workflows. Over time, all those efforts will compound, giving them the resilience to endure."

GUY FIGHEL: "You can't build an entire company that's dependent on access through a third-party provider because the first question is what happens if they block or start to charge you? Your entire business model will die. If that's the case, it's not viable. Every time there's a new boom in a specific innovation or technical capability, people will figure it out, and the platform will say, 'Hey, you're eating our lunch, so we're not going to let you do that.'"



SUMANGAL VINJAMURI: “You have to have a path to replacing or going deeper, closer to the system of record. If you’re just building a layer of workflow on top of an existing system of record, honestly, the incumbent has all the data. The only advantage a startup would have there is probably taste and speed of execution.”

SHRAVAN NARAYEN: “You start to see these incumbent companies use defensive moves as opposed to offensive moves. Offensive would be defined as product innovation, building magical product experiences, and defensive would be cutting folks off from data access. It’ll cause a lot of thrash in the short term for these companies, but there’s going be a groundswell of people who say, ‘Enough’s enough, it’s time to build a next-gen version of this experience, because we can’t trust the incumbents, and we can’t trust that the data that in theory was ours is actually ours.’”

Quality may come in second to speed

TIM TULLY
Partner, Menlo Ventures

Tim Tully is a partner at Menlo Ventures, a venture capitalist firm that invests in companies at every stage and in every sector with expertise in consumer, enterprise and healthcare. Prior to his role at Menlo Ventures, Tully served as CTO and SVP of product engineering at Splunk. He currently serves on the board and as a technical advisor for numerous companies.

“As an investor, you have to be careful about what you’re investing in,” he says. “I’m very technical. I like to pick apart people’s architectures and really understand the product and how it’s built and try to find if there’s differentiation and a moat.”

For startups, he says, time to market is essential. “Just beating your competition and getting momentum behind your product, that matters a ton. Being first to market absolutely matters. There was a time where the opposite was in vogue, where you didn’t necessarily have to be first, but you had to be best.”

Early annual recurring revenue and especially the momentum of initial success are more important than ever. “Developers these days have a lot more power than they did 10 years ago. They have a lot more buying power, so they’re buying tools and swiping credit cards. You want to be the tool that the cool kids look favorably upon, and that often requires you to be there first.”

Early Adopters Are in Production, Finding Value

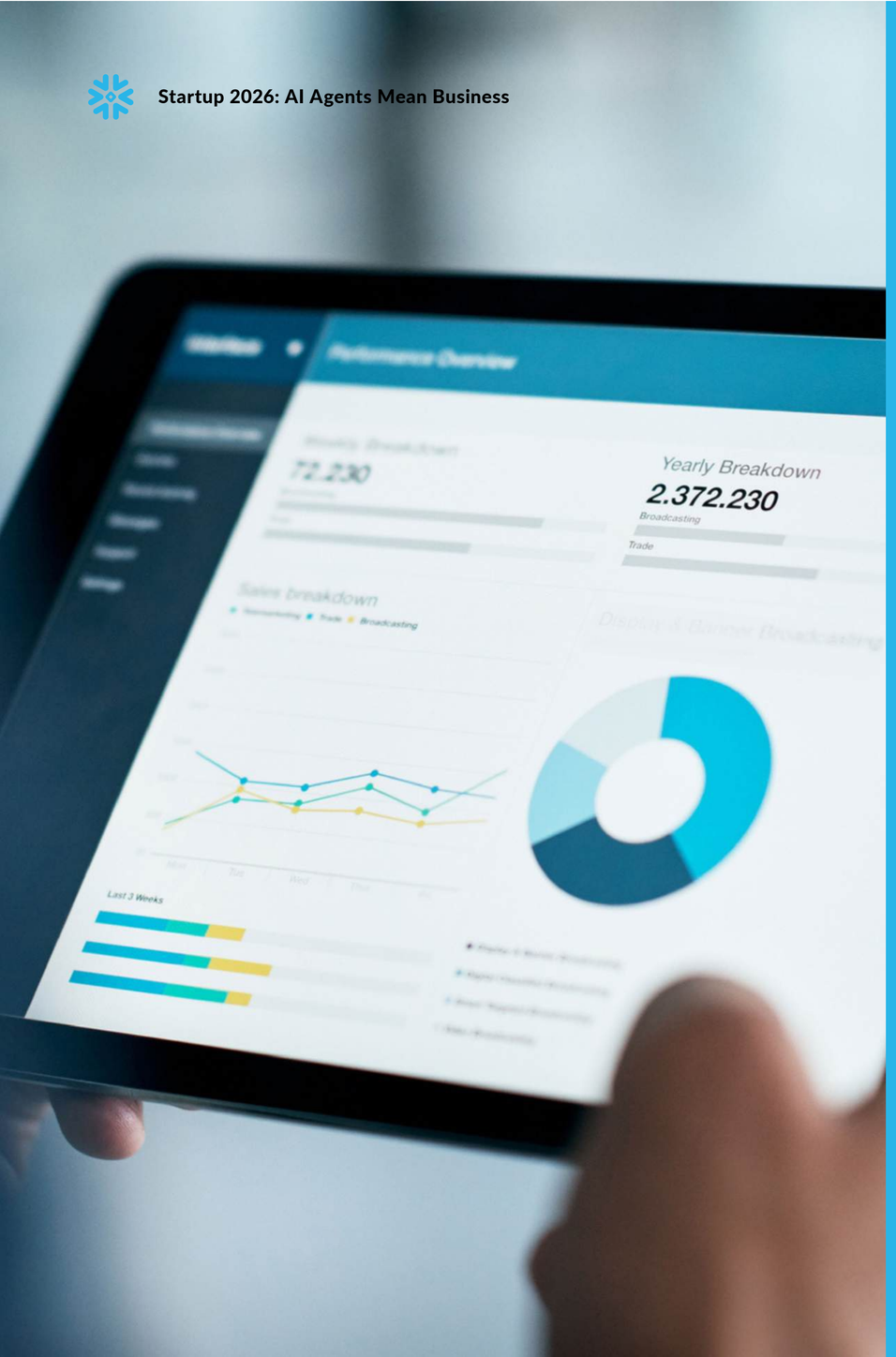
The initial AI experimentation we saw in 2024 turned, in 2025, into AI operationalization and the measuring of outcomes. In our conversations with VC leaders, they told us enterprise customers are less interested in experimentation right now, but are still very, very enthusiastic about investing in and progressing their AI initiatives.

SUNIL CHHAYA: "Most large enterprises, including Fortune 2000, have moved past that experimentation phase, and now are rolling out AI into real workflows. We've seen that, especially on the engineering side, customer support, sales enablement, marketing."

TIM TULLY: "I'm invested in a legal tech software company. I would've thought that the legal buying center would be the slowest to adopt AI. It turns out they're actually among the fastest. That's shocking to me. When I see the legal folks buying software at a breathtaking rate, that's an indicator that this is totally real."

SUMANGAL VINJAMURI: "There are three buckets where there has been real enterprise use of AI and all three are obviously large chunks of enterprise spend, thus really good low-hanging fruit. First is certainly programming and coding. The second is support, which extends to external customer-facing support and also internal support. Support is just a use case that's built for LLMs, the sweetest spot. The third is sales and marketing. The different workflows within the sales team, and within marketing, there's a lot of enterprise adoption."

CARL FRITJOFSSON: "As an investor who covers the U.S. and Europe, we see that AI adoption in the enterprise is much slower in Europe. In the U.S., the same companies move faster and try more things, putting AI into production. Topics around security and access control are therefore becoming more prevalent for those companies. We're also starting to hear more conversations around whether there's a measurable productivity increase from these implementations, but we're still in the early innings."



Budget lines may blur as investment remains mandatory

GUY FIGHEL
Partner, Hetz Ventures

Guy Fighel is a partner and head of AI and Data at Hetz Ventures, a global-facing VC investing in highly talented and ambitious Israeli founders who operate at the cutting edge of deep technology. Fighel says that as important as the evolution of AI itself is, we must also keep an eye on how enterprises learn to budget for it, and who controls that spending.

"I'm predicting — and I wouldn't say that I'm the only one — that the allocation of budget through cybersecurity and the allocation of budget in data, and the CTO, CIO, will blend.

"More of the cyber solutions are becoming either agentic or require capabilities of models, and some AI and data capabilities, so there will be some shifts in how you define that budget allocation and where it's coming from," Fighel continued. "Anything in R&D, engineering, finance, business operations, sales, the use cases are already there, and there are specific budgets for that."

What to Watch in 2026

The pace of change with AI and the innovations that are happening are moving at lightning speed. VCs discuss their excitement for the new advancements in AI and the impacts these breakthroughs will have in 2026.

SUNIL CHHAYA: “I’m really excited about robotics and anything that can be done in the physical world right now. The reason for that is because physical AI is benefiting from the AI inflection, where models are getting so good at perception, planning and control that physical automation is no longer limited to fixed, pre-programmed motions.”

GUY FIGHEL: “I’ve seen companies that have dedicated models for price prediction for fuel, for airplanes, for example. If you think about the scale of impact that’s huge. It’s billions and trillions of dollars of optimizations.”

CARL FRITJOFSSON: “I believe soon the world will stop its random open exploration with AI and rather look at where real ROI from AI is created. Instead of trying the latest tech, more attention will be focused on results and bottom line. This is also the moment when AI implementations will start to be optimized for efficiency, and this could be where smaller and cheaper models start making more sense for enterprises.”

SUMANGAL VINJAMURI: “The memory and context today are super early in maturity. There’s a lot of work to be done around better enterprise memory, better context engines for enterprise workflows and, honestly, the same for consumers. The kind of intelligence that these models have today has the potential to truly be individually personalized, and it’s very rough around the edges at this point.”

Wild experimentation won’t last forever

SHRAVAN NARAYEN
Partner, IVP

Shravan Narayen is a partner at IVP, a firm that has 40+ years of experience helping breakout companies grow into enduring market leaders. Narayen holds an MBA from Harvard, a bachelor’s degree from Stanford and has served as a product leader with several companies. Looking ahead, he sees the need to balance experimentation with AI’s possibilities against the immutable requirements of enterprise IT.

“We’re on the verge of a personalization of product experiences, and that means if you are an AI-native startup, you can bake that into your pipelines much more effectively than an incumbent product that’s not moving well.”

But the search for the right form factor and product experience has to leave room for error, and he says customers won’t be comfortable with that for long.

“At some point, enterprises want to centralize on a certain set of products, on data that’s approved, systems that pass security hurdles,” he says. “All the standard enterprise requirements have gone out the door, or been put on pause, but they’ll come back.”

Secrets of an Irresistible Pitch

Every year, VCs are pitched by tons of startup leaders who are enthusiastic about their product or service, team and vision. Some win and some lose. We wanted to know what these investors look for in a startup pitch and what really hooks them.

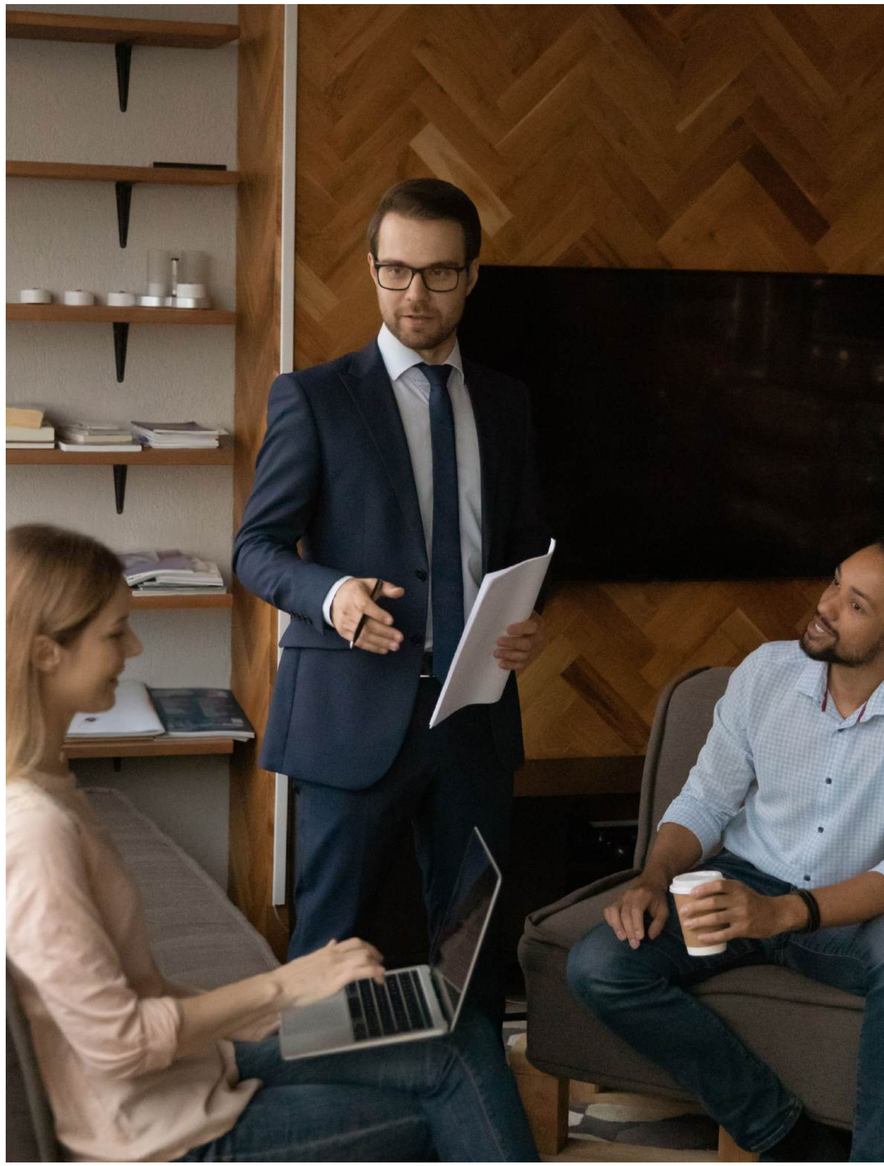
SHRAVAN NARAYEN: “We all come in with our preconceived notions and biases about a certain market, about a certain product, and anytime those preconceived notions and biases are proved wrong within a few minutes of a meeting, that’s always exciting.”

ROHINI CHAKRAVARTHY: “We look for key insight, the ‘why now’ of what has happened recently that makes something completely new possible.”

SUNIL CHHAYA: “The founders who impress me most pair technical depth with commercial empathy. They know the tech cold but can actually speak the customer’s language fluently. That’s the definition of a truly high-caliber founder.”

GUY FIGHEL: “A founder pitched me a few months ago, and I told her, ‘You’re the best conversation I’ve had in 2025.’ When she talked about the product, it started from the problem they’re trying to solve, and she took me into exactly how they’re doing it, and why the way they’re doing it is very different. Really core, deep tech is differentiated, protected. It’s all of that, plus understanding what they’re bringing that’s new, why it’s different, what’s the moat — that excites me.”

TIM TULLY: “Articulating what the vision of the product is and where they want to go with it over time is great. I look for deep product thinkers who not only can articulate the vision simply, but who clearly wake up every morning, and come hell or high water, they’re going to make this happen. You can feel it through a Zoom screen. That and technical expertise matter to me a lot.”



Pitch advice: Talk like a real person

BRYAN HALE
Investor, Anthos Capital

Bryan Hale is an investor at Anthos Capital, a firm that was founded in 2007 that invests in emerging consumer and technology companies. Hale has served as an investor or technology leader at various companies over the past 15 years. Like Sunil Chhaya, he notes that an abundance of new startups is making it harder to identify winners and get them past the seed stage.

"It's so easy to build compelling demos these days that there are now more pre-startups than I've ever seen," he says. "That means there's a whole bunch of pre-seed and seed startups. We'll figure this out when the dust settles, but I suspect the conversion rate from seed to A and beyond will shrink a bit in a year or two."

When evaluating startup founders, he expects them to keep it real. "If you hear a bunch of jargon and buzzwords, or if an entrepreneur doesn't have a way to describe what they're doing and why in language that is authentic and plain-spoken, that's a red flag," he says. "But it's positive if they consciously or subconsciously show they really want to and need to build their company. It's not just necessarily the backstory, but it's the depth of knowledge, how quickly they answer questions, how deep they dive, and their innate enthusiasm for what they're doing."

Riding the Next Wave of AI Innovation

Throughout our conversations with these leading investors, it was clear there's a lot of optimism about the future and the opportunities AI — more specifically agentic AI — will bring in the year ahead. Large portions of investment in AI are sitting with a small number of companies, but there is also an influx of innovative startups working to get off the ground. Innovation with AI is surprising VC leaders too: rather than seeing AI adoption concentrated among technology companies, they note a growth in adoption across industries.

"What's unique about this innovation wave is that it's happening very broadly. It's not exclusive to startups in Silicon Valley," says Carl Fritjofsson. "Every company more or less has some AI agenda and strategy and are thinking about this. Large and small. Young and old. Some, of course, move faster than others, but future AI capabilities are being built and worked everywhere."

"There's a tremendous amount of money going into models and AI clouds," says Bryan Hale. "On the applied side of it, a handful of use cases have really hit big, and by and large, we haven't figured out how to wield AI elsewhere yet. There are a million well-documented reasons why software development has been the first killer use case for LLMs. But then the interesting question becomes, 'What other areas will it hit next?'"

Innovation and preparing for the future doesn't start with AI

CARL FRITJOFSSON
General Partner, Creandum

Carl Fritjofsson is a general partner at Creandum, a leading early-stage venture capital firm backing Europe and United States' most ambitious founders. A big change he's seen lately is what you might call a democratization of innovation.

"Historically, innovation has come from startups. Now, the fight for innovation is happening everywhere, from large incumbent enterprises to young startups," he says. "My fear as an early-stage investor backing young companies is that some of these larger enterprises, even though they may not have the same speed of execution, have distribution advantages and brand trust. That's real power, so even if a slower incumbent builds 80% of an AI solution that a startup builds, that incumbent may still win because of their distribution advantages and market presence."

He also notes that much of the marketplace may not be ready for as much innovation as the AI industry is serving up. "There's still a big part of the world outside of Silicon Valley that can only move so fast, because they're still on Day 2 of their cloud journey. The world operates at different speeds.

"In the next few years, human-in-the-loop workflows will dominate," he says. "Full automation through AI is actually pretty far out in most instances. There are real productivity gains to be captured from these implementations, since you need fewer humans, but I do think humans will be a part of the equation for a good foreseeable time, in more or less all core workflows."

Next Steps

Snowflake Startup Accelerator

A six-month program that provides strategic early-stage startups with access to Snowflake technical experts, free usage and dedicated go-to-market support. The Startup Accelerator is a primary path for startups looking to build on Snowflake, whether it's a data application, an AI application or workload built with Snowflake Cortex AI.

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Learn more

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