



The Business Guide to AI Solutions

Making sense of **assistants**,
agents, and **custom AI**



Contents

Generative AI can take many forms. This guide will help you make sense of your options and choose the approach that works for you. Choose where you want to start:

Learn about the AI approach that sets businesses apart and explore the key trends shaping the industry right now.

[➤ Get an overview](#)

Discover AI-powered assistants and how they help individuals work smarter and faster.

[➤ Learn about assistants](#)

Unpack the role of AI agents and learn how they work alongside people to drive business outcomes.

[➤ Learn about agents](#)

Consider extensible AI solutions and how you can adapt prebuilt solutions to your needs.

[➤ Learn about extensible AI](#)

Explore custom-built AI and how custom development can create a competitive advantage.

[➤ Learn about custom AI](#)

Introduction

Choosing the right generative AI approach for your business

Generative AI is no longer a curiosity—it's a business imperative. In an economy where efficiency and adaptability matter more than ever, generative AI offers a strategic edge. What once felt like an experiment has become a powerful lever for transformation that helps ambitious companies challenge the status quo and outpace competitors.

In just a short time, generative AI has moved beyond experimentation. Early tools like chatbots, text generation, and image creation tools laid the foundation, and they're still part of the picture. But now, generative AI is being embedded directly into business workflows, driving deeper impact across teams and operations.

Make an impact your way



Get started quickly.

Use out-of-the-box tools when you need speed and simplicity—and extend them as your needs grow.

 [Learn more](#)



Empower everyone.

Use low-code tools to democratize AI while enabling developers to build at scale.

 [Learn more](#)



Build to differentiate.

Create custom AI agents, assistants, and apps to deliver capabilities no one else can.

 [Learn more](#)



Prioritize security.

Make responsibility, compliance, and trust a part of every layer of your AI stack.

 [Learn more](#)

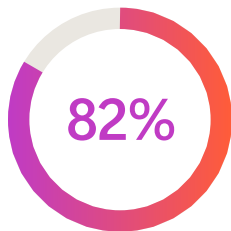
AI transformation isn't a one-time event—it's an ongoing journey of adaptation, experimentation, and growth. With a clear strategy and the right partners, you can move fast without losing focus.

There's no single way to "do" generative AI—and that's where its strength lies. You might need something simple and fast, like an assistant built into your productivity tools. Or something more custom, like a customer support chatbot trained on your company's knowledge base and integrated with your ticketing system.

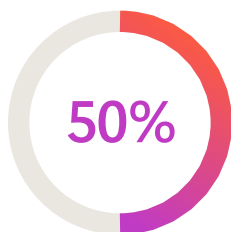
Whatever you need, there's a tool for you in the generative AI toolbox. The key is having a strategy to determine which options make sense for you right now.

Microsoft offers solutions to help every organization accelerate their AI transformation while ensuring safety and responsibility are embedded throughout their AI journey.

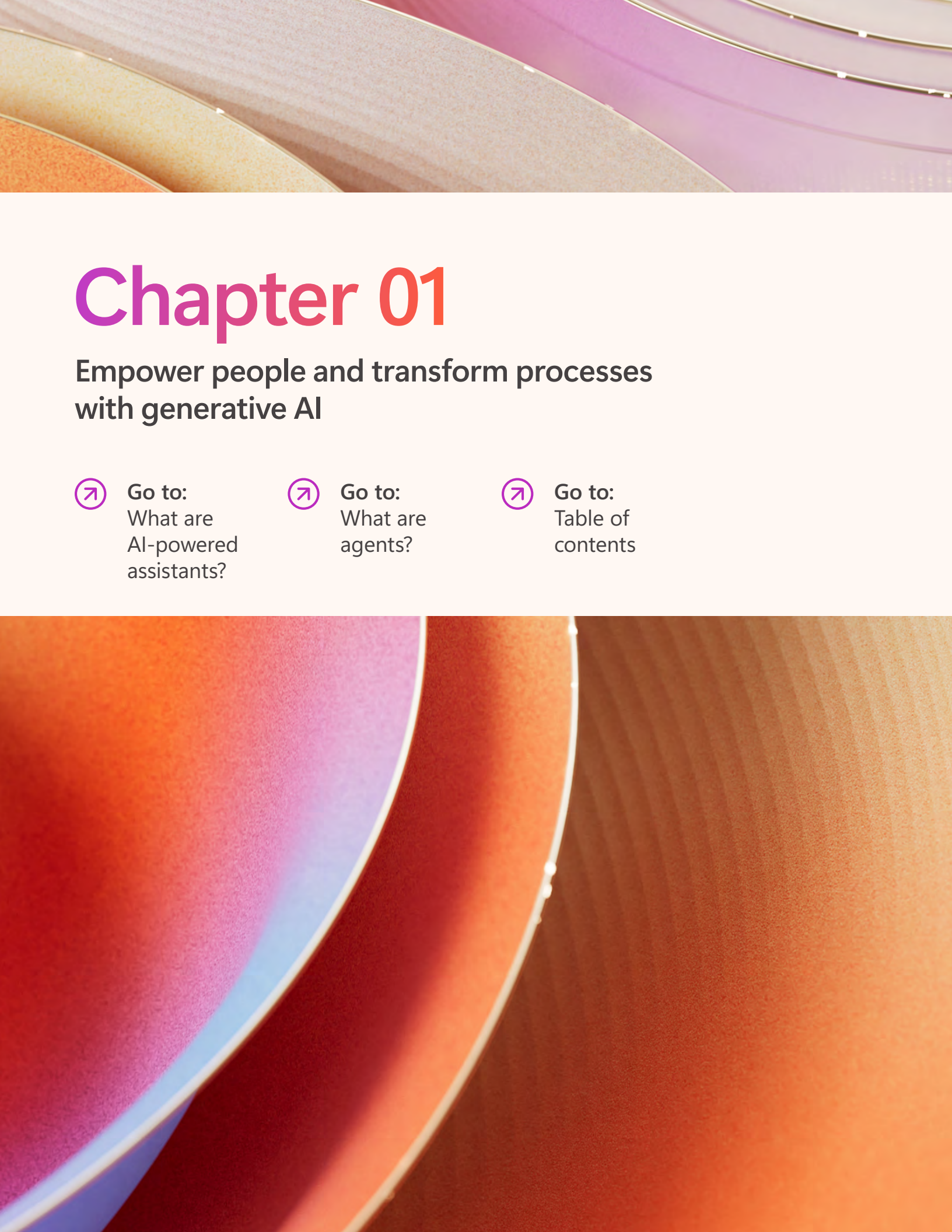
Key trends shaping generative AI adoption



The rise of agents—According to the 2025 Work Trend Index, 82% of business decision makers say they're confident they will use AI agents to expand workforce capacity.¹



Push for customization—A recent MIT Technology Review Insights study found that half of business leaders prioritize custom AI for efficiency (50%), competitive edge (49%), and better user experiences (47%).²



Chapter 01

Empower people and transform processes
with generative AI



Go to:
What are
AI-powered
assistants?

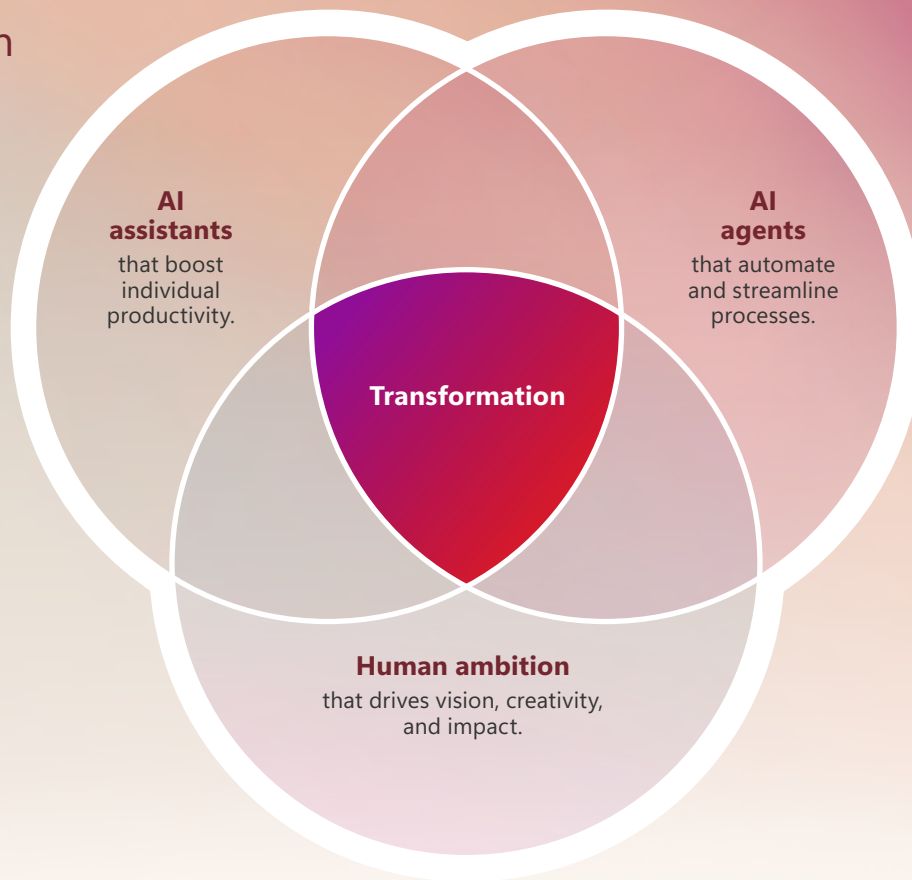


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What are
agents?



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A powerful
combination



Empower people and transform processes with generative AI

Generative AI is not just a productivity tool. It's a flexible set of capabilities that can help you completely reimagine how your business works. By combining tools like agents, AI-powered assistants, and even custom-built solutions, you can move beyond casual experimentation to achieving practical, wide-ranging impact.

As you bring AI into your organization, it helps to understand two generative AI core capabilities: assistants that help individuals work smarter and faster, and agents that handle complex tasks and can transform entire processes. Let's take a closer look at both.

What are AI-powered assistants?

Generative AI assistants, like [Microsoft 365 Copilot](#), are designed to help individuals work faster, smarter, and more effectively. They act as personalized support systems, built right into the tools people use every day.

By helping people make better decisions, stay focused, and reduce busy work, generative AI carves out time and energy for more strategic, creative work across your organization.

Example: A salesperson can use Copilot to summarize recent communications, draft follow-up emails, and prep for meetings—in minutes, not hours.

A closer look at Copilot



Generates text, image, audio, and video.



Embedded in familiar apps like Outlook, Word, and Microsoft Teams.



Surfaces insights, drafts content, summarizes conversations, and automates repetitive tasks.



Grounded in internal work data (not just public web content).



Can be tailored to your unique needs with custom prompts, business logic, and workflows.

IDC predicts that by 2025

50%

of organizations will use enterprise agents

configured for specific business functions—which seems to indicate a clear shift from personal productivity tools to AI-enabled business processes.³



What are agents?

Think of AI agents like a team of digital coworkers. Agents use generative AI to automate and carry out business processes, working alongside people or independently to drive business outcomes. Agents:

- Complete tasks (instead of just generating content).
- Coordinate tasks across apps, systems, and data.
- Range in complexity and can be developed with low-code or pro-code tools.

Today, these tools are completely reshaping how work gets done—offering cost savings, efficiencies, and revenue generation. From simple automations to complex workflows, any process can be reimaged with agents.

Example: In an agent-based workflow, multiple specialized agents could work together to streamline support ticket management. One agent might triage and prioritize incoming tickets, another could route them to the right team, and a third could draft initial responses—each optimized for a specific task within the process.

Why you need both

Many business decision makers are still unsure how assistants and agents differ—or which is preferred. Here's the answer: to take advantage of the full promise of generative AI, you'll need both.

Agents handle complex, multistep work across systems. Assistants help individuals work smarter and faster. And when you pair them with human ambition, you open the door to real transformation.

AI glossary at a glance

➔ [Learn more about Microsoft 365 Copilot](#)

➔ [Learn more about agents from Microsoft](#)

AI agent

Automates business processes and can be fully autonomous.

AI assistant

Helps users complete tasks using generative AI.

AI-native app

Designed with AI as a core feature.

Extensible AI

Prebuilt AI that can be extended to meet specific needs.

Custom AI

Tailored AI solutions developed for a specific purpose.

Generative AI

Creates text, images, or code from prompts.

Chapter 02

Grow at your own pace
with extensibility



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What it means
to extend
generative AI



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The benefits
of extensibility



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Grow at your own pace with extensibility

You don't have to build from scratch to get the most out of generative AI. Extensibility enables you to tailor prebuilt solutions—like Microsoft 365 Copilot—using your data, systems, and workflows.

Whether you're using tools out of the box, configuring them to fit your needs, or building something custom, generative AI delivers value at every level. Extensibility simply gives you the flexibility to go further when and where it matters.

What it means to extend generative AI

Extending generative AI means taking a ready-made solution, like Copilot, and enhancing it to reflect the way your organization works.

By extending existing tools, you're building on top of a powerful foundation to accelerate results without building from the ground up.



Add your data.

Ground generative AI in your company's content, knowledge base, or business rules.



Customize the experience. Modify prompts, actions, or the user interface (UI) to match how your teams work.



Integrate with your systems. Connect to CRM systems, ERP platforms, and other tools so AI can take action and deliver insights within your existing workflows.

Extend out-of-the-box tools using low-code/no-code platforms that enable you to pursue tailored solutions without starting from scratch.

Benefits of extending off-the-shelf solutions



Move faster.

Deploy working tools quickly, then iterate and adapt as you go.



Empower more people.

Business users and domain experts can help design solutions using low-code tools.



Stay secure and compliant.

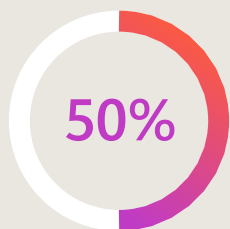
Enterprise-grade guardrails and governance are built in from the start.

The benefits of extensibility

Extensibility is about meeting your business where it is. With extensibility tools like Microsoft Copilot Studio, you can move quickly, tailor AI to your unique needs, and involve more people in building the solutions that matter.

Example: A healthcare organization might extend Copilot to help case managers draft care plans by connecting it to their electronic medical record system and customizing responses to align with clinical protocols.

With extensibility, you gain the flexibility to grow at your own pace without starting from zero. Build on the tools you already have, expand on frameworks that are already working, or innovate in a new direction. You have options.



50%

50% of organizations say customization is key to driving greater efficiency. With extensibility, you can start fast, then fine-tune AI to fit your workflows, processes, and priorities.⁴

Buy or extend with Microsoft:

-  [Microsoft 365 Copilot \(Buy\)](#)
-  [Microsoft Copilot Studio \(Extend\)](#)

Chapter 03

Differentiate with custom AI solutions



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Build your own
advantage with
custom AI



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Build powerful
AI-native apps



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Differentiate with custom AI solutions

Off-the-shelf tools are a great starting point—but when your needs go beyond the basics, custom AI can give you a true strategic edge. If you're tackling complex processes, working with specialized data, or aiming to deliver proprietary experiences, custom solutions let you shape AI around what makes your business different.

Custom development goes beyond extending existing tools. It gives you full control over the models, data, and logic driving your solution.

With the [AI solutions](#) Microsoft provides, you have the flexibility and support to build what doesn't exist yet—and turn innovation into impact.



Solve challenges unique to your business.



Deliver personalized, differentiated customer experiences.



Innovate faster and create new sources of value at scale.

Build your own advantage with custom AI

When you build your own generative AI applications, you get to access a whole new level of creativity and control. Custom solutions help you go beyond general-purpose tools to solve specific challenges, shape unique customer experiences, and scale innovation on your own terms.

But to get there, you need the right tools, services, and infrastructure for a strong foundation. That's where Microsoft's AI development stack comes in—purpose-built to help teams build with speed, security, and sophistication.

What you can achieve with developer support



Create multimodal AI experiences. Combine text, image, video, and voice for a unique customer experience



Launch domain-specific agents. Use these for specialized tasks, such as inventory optimization, financial forecasting, or risk monitoring.



Power intelligent digital products. Adapt in real time to customer behavior and other inputs.

The Microsoft AI development stack



Developer tools

Build with low-code (Copilot Studio) or pro-code (Visual Studio, GitHub).



AI application server

Run, customize, and manage AI apps with Azure AI Foundry.



Data foundation

Unify and govern data at scale with Microsoft Fabric.



Build powerful AI-native apps

When building custom, AI-native apps, it is not enough to simply add intelligence on top. To get it right, you need a strong foundation built for scale, adaptability, and performance. These three key elements work together to support modern AI development from concept to deployment:

1. Developer tools: Equip developers with the right tools.

Give your developers access to the tools they already use and love—with the flexibility to go from low-code prototypes to full-scale pro-code solutions.

2. The orchestration layer: Connect models, manage APIs, and power dynamic AI experiences.

To build intelligent applications, you need more than models. You need a way to manage, deploy, and coordinate across your stack.

3. Data management: Ensure clean, organized, governed data as your AI foundation.

AI is only as good as the data behind it. To build truly useful and responsible AI, you need structured, governed, and accessible data.

Explore the full Microsoft AI development stack



[Microsoft Copilot Studio](#) (Low-code)



[Microsoft Visual Studio](#) (Pro-code)



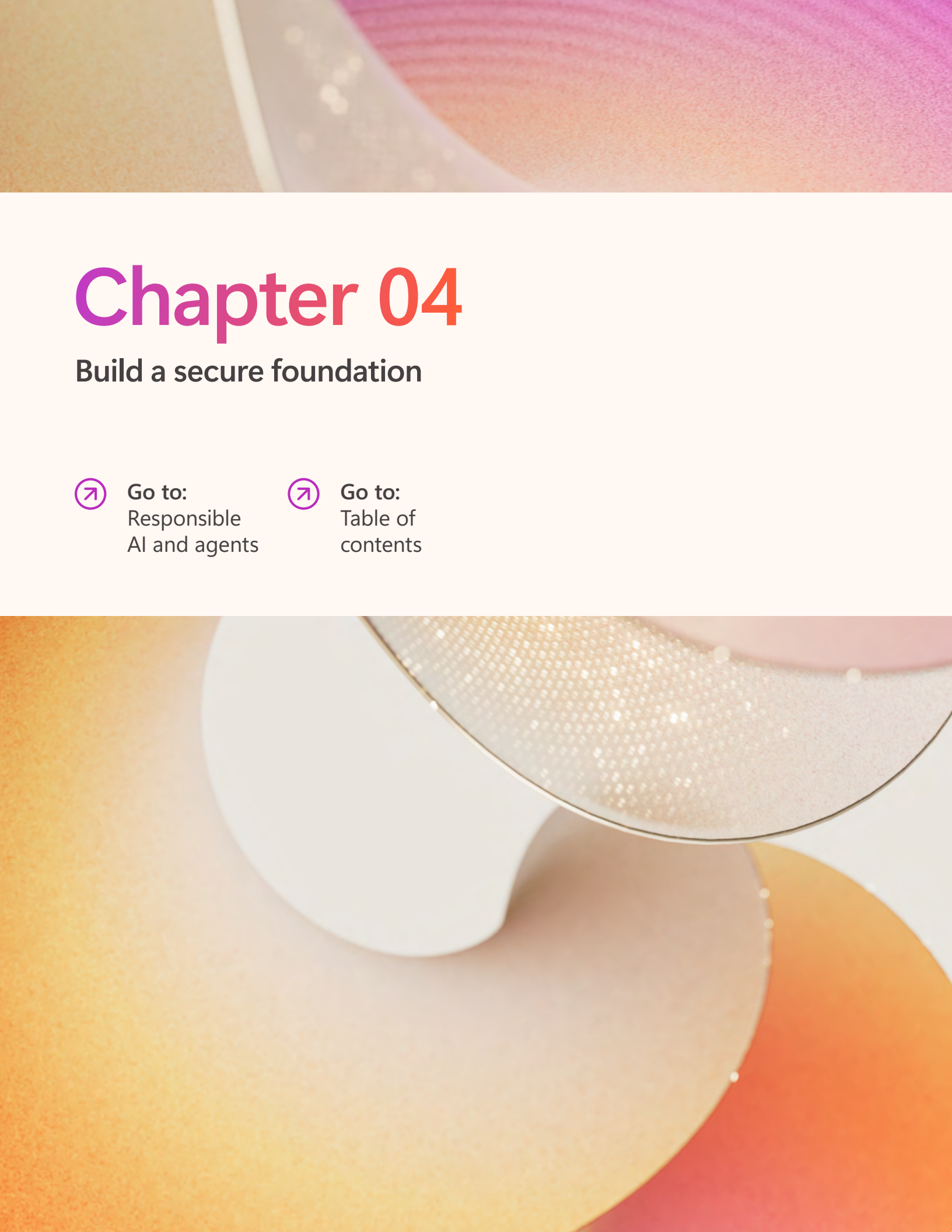
[GitHub](#) (Pro-code)



[Azure AI Foundry](#) (Apps)



[Microsoft Fabric](#) (Data)



Chapter 04

Build a secure foundation



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Responsible
AI and agents



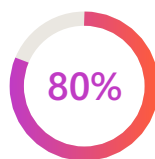
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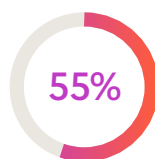
Build a secure foundation

AI brings unprecedented opportunity and equally serious responsibility. If your AI strategy isn't grounded in security and trust, it can open your organization up to risks that are very difficult to mitigate.

Today's business and technology leaders are asking the right questions—and sounding the alarm on new forms of risk. According to recent studies:



worry about sensitive data leakage.⁵



want clearer guidance on AI regulation.⁵

These aren't theoretical risks—they're practical, immediate concerns that can impact everything from reputation to compliance to customer trust.

Securing AI isn't just about locking down models, it's about protecting your people, processes, and data across every layer of your digital estate.

Responsible AI and agents

Building AI agents responsibly is crucial to ensure that these technologies are ethical and trustworthy. It's essential to follow best practices, such as using diverse and representative training data, defining clear roles and responsibilities for employees, and ensuring constant oversight of AI-powered products.



Learn how to secure and strengthen your AI transformation in this infographic



Explore Microsoft's commitment to responsible AI

Our commitment to responsible AI



Protect sensitive data in every interaction with AI systems.



Detect and respond to emerging threats in real time.



Enforce access control and governance policies at every level.



Comply with evolving regulations while maintaining agility.



Build user trust by being transparent, responsible, and accountable.

Conclusion

Designing your AI transformation strategy

Success with generative AI depends as much on your strategy as it does on your tools—one that evolves with your goals and delivers value over time.

No matter your priorities, there's a generative AI approach that fits your business. And Microsoft offers a flexible foundation and a complete solutions ecosystem to support your organization's entire AI journey.



Learn about [Microsoft AI](#)



Explore [Microsoft Copilot](#) and [Copilot Studio](#)



Discover [Azure AI Foundry](#) and [Microsoft Fabric](#)

Citations:

¹ 2025: [The Year the Frontier Firm Is Born](#), WorkLab, April 16, 2024

² MIT Technology Review Insights and Microsoft. [The AI Customization Imperative: Shaping the Future of Enterprise Intelligence](#). Microsoft SharePoint, 2024

³ Mulholland, Craig. [Enterprise Intelligence: The Coming Wave of Enterprise Intelligent Agents](#). IDC, Jan. 2024

⁴ MIT Technology Review Insights and Microsoft. [The AI Customization Imperative: Shaping the Future of Enterprise Intelligence](#). Microsoft SharePoint, 2024

⁵ First Annual Generative AI study: Business Rewards vs. Security Risks, Q3 2023, ISMG, N=400