



WISCONSIN CENTER FOR  
**MANUFACTURING  
& PRODUCTIVITY**

AI

# Wisconsin Manufacturers: Seize the AI Advantage

Join us at the 2025 WMR Readout Events

September 29 Brookfield | September 30 Green Bay | October 7 UW-Stout Menomonie

<https://www.wicmp.org/2025-wisconsin-manufacturing-report-events/>



## AI brings Wisconsin manufacturing to a turning point

Four years ago, we launched the Wisconsin Manufacturing Report (WMR) to give leaders deeper insights into Wisconsin manufacturing. With over 400 interviews and five regional focus groups each year, the WMR reaches and influences executives, policymakers, and the organizations that shape Wisconsin's manufacturing sector.

Last year, we took it further—translating our data into practical insights manufacturers can use. This year's focus: **Artificial Intelligence**.

When we first asked about AI two years ago, the answers were alarming with 72% of Wisconsin manufacturers saying they had no plans to use AI. That's changing rapidly as AI — and our understanding — evolves. Today, nearly half of respondents intend to adopt AI and only 37% still see no impact for their business —significant change, but still not enough.

**THE RACE IS ON.** To stay competitive in a world of labor shortages and global pressure, Wisconsin must lead—not lag—in AI adoption.

The Wisconsin MEP Network is taking action, alongside partners like Microsoft's AI Co-Innovation Lab for Manufacturing, the Center for Advanced Manufacturing and AI at UW-Stout, Tiletown Tech, Connected Systems Institute and many of our technical colleges.

Together, we're building the tools, training, and on-ramps manufacturers need to integrate AI, boost productivity, address workforce constraints, and gain competitive advantage.

This WMR supplement is your AI playbook with clear steps to get started, smart use cases to build momentum, and advice on designing a roadmap to long-term success.

We believe in Wisconsin manufacturing. We believe in its future with AI. Let's move forward—fast and together!

**Let us know what you think—and we'll see you in September with the fifth annual Wisconsin Manufacturing Report.**

Enthusiastically,



Buckley Brinkman  
Executive Director / CEO

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## AI Today

*AI reshapes how businesses operate, moving rapidly from a novelty to a necessity. Embedded AI makes everyday tools and workflows more accessible and impactful. ChatGPT, CoPilot, and other models make decision making and content creation faster and more accessible, driving a surge in generative AI adoption.*

**MANUFACTURERS MUST ADOPT AI** to gain a competitive edge in growth and efficiency over slower moving operators. Adoption could mean the difference between long-term success and a slow path to irrelevance.

AI holds exceptional promise for manufacturers with an abundance of repetitive processes, a data-rich environment, and clear, measurable outcomes. AI will drive efficiencies and cost savings, address some workforce shortages and make companies more agile and able to react quickly to market changes.

Challenges remain in data quality, workforce readiness, and integration complexity. Yet, companies are moving forward in their adoption of AI because of the real world impact on their bottom line. According to McKinsey\*, 78 percent of respondents say their organizations use AI — a sharp increase that reflects AI's increasing value. Wait and see is not an optimal approach to AI anymore.

\* <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/the-state-of-ai>

## On Wisconsin...with AI!

*Wisconsin's manufacturing sector can lead the nation in AI adoption. Large manufacturers leverage AI for competitive gain. Small- and medium-sized manufacturers (SMMs) can leverage those large manufacturers' experience to become more resilient, act faster, and implement AI more effectively.*

### AI offers the most value in three areas\*

- **Marketing** – Automate outreach and uncover buying signals
- **Customer service** – Speed response times and personalize communication
- **Operations** – Improve forecasting, scheduling, and production efficiency

\* Matt Kirchner, "State of Artificial Intelligence in Wisconsin"

## “How AI can help...

- Simplify HR administration by using chatbots to access complicated documents. (Natural Language Processing)
- Reduce downtime by using data patterns to make decisions to improve predictive maintenance. (Machine Learning)
- Improve quality inspections through visual data analysis. (Computer Vision)
- Improve customer experience by using simulated human decision making to respond to routine requests. (Expert Systems)
- Create new content for marketing campaigns (Generative AI)
- Automate repetitive tasks through enhanced AI to classify emails. (Robotic Process Automation + AI)



# Effective AI Engagement in *Three Steps*

## STEP 1

### Select an Internal AI Champion

*Find a curious leader to lead the charge*

#### The Best Champions Bring These Talents

- **Curious and enthusiastic** – No certifications or AI experience is required. Natural curiosity, attention to detail, and a drive to get things done matter most.
- **Intimate knowledge of the frontline with solid C-Suite Connections** – The right AI leader understands frontline challenges – the real challenges, not the theoretical ones. They are credible and have easy access to top management.
- **Keen focus on data** – Reads, understands, and executes effectively with imperfect data. Perfection is not the goal.
- **Cross-functional communicator** – Able to communicate with every division and translate the benefit of AI into practical uses.
- **Vision for the long-term with an eye to quick wins** – Doesn't let long term plans slow immediate action. AI is a long-term journey, with success built through quick early wins.
- **Action oriented** – Heavy focus on actions with clear results.
- **Avoids Shiny Objects** – Able to differentiate between the real benefits of AI and the hype. Act as an emissary for AI.

*That leader could be you!*

## STEP 2

### “Just Start” once your AI Champion is in place

- **Identify** some of your company's relevant pain points.
- **Decide** which problem(s) you want to solve.
- **Find the data** to solve this problem and make sure it's usable.
- **Solve a problem** that will be recognized as an AI success.
- **Assess your internal AI capability** to execute this project. Be ready to find outside help or choose another project.
- **Select small** and lower risk AI pilots to build trust, demystify AI, and quickly prove value.

#### “Get Started with AI

Balance between a long-term plan and quick wins.

Prove AI's value throughout the organization with immediate quick wins.

Set the tone with a longer-term plan for the organization, demonstrating that AI will have an impact that will affect the entire organization.

#### **Just Start, but take care**

- Secure your data within the tools you use to keep it proprietary and protected.
- Experiment aggressively, but implement cautiously. AI adoption decisions should be reversible, flexible, and iterative.



## “ Implementation

*Of these potential quick wins, the first three can be knocked out in an afternoon, while the bottom three may take longer depending upon internal readiness in systems, data availability and quality, and employee knowledge.*

### STEP 3

## Smaller low risk AI pilots build trust, demystify AI, and prove value

*Select one or two use cases to provide quick wins and prove AI's value.*

### Potential Quick Win Use Cases

- **Customer email handling** – Use built-in AI tools like Microsoft Copilot and Gmail's AI to prioritize emails, draft replies, and summarize threads.  
**Results:** *Frees up staff time, reduces email fatigue and speeds up responses.*
- **Chatbots** – Equip chatbots with HR manuals, repair guides and “tribal” knowledge to provide employees with immediate answers.  
**Results:** *Preserves institutional knowledge, supports onboarding, and improves response consistency.*
- **Workforce Scheduling** – Use AI to predict staffing needs and adjust staffing schedules for absences or surges.  
**Results:** *Ensures consistent coverage, improves productivity, and boosts employee satisfaction.*
- **Inventory** – Improve inventory control with better demand forecasting, supplier evaluation, and automated restocking.  
**Results:** *Reduces costs and risks through better analysis and faster decision making.*
- **CRM Customer Analysis** – Use AI features in your CRM system (i.e., Salesforce Einstein) to predict client behavior and understand risks or unmet needs.  
**Results:** *Improves client retention and identifies upselling opportunities through behavioral insights.*
- **Quote and Cost Management** – Analyze historical data to generate consistent pricing, automate RFP creation, and identify unique order elements for staff review.  
**Results:** *Delivers faster, more accurate quotes with less manual effort.*

EASIEST

TOUGHEST

# Challenges and Wisconsin's AI Network

## Don't let your AI crash and burn

### Common AI Failures

- **Undefined problem** – AI is not magic. Always start with a high-value, clearly defined use case that solves a real business need.
- **Poor Communications** – Employees often fear that AI will replace their jobs. Communicate early and often that AI is a tool to augment and upgrade their roles.
- **Overcomplication** – Skip the buzzwords and avoid the hype. Focus on practical applications that solve real problems.
- **Problematic or missing data** – Inaccurate, siloed, or incomplete data undermines outcomes. Get your data in shape before using it.
- **Undefined AI policy** – Without guardrails, AI efforts can drift off-course. A well defined policy provides clarity, alignment, and accountability while reducing confusion, risk, and mistrust.

### Prep Operations for AI

- **Clean and standardize processes** – AI amplifies what exists. If workflows are chaotic, fix them first.
- **Map your data sources** – Understand where data comes from, confirm its quality, and learn how to access it reliably.
- **Connect your machines (even a little)** – Start simple - basic machine information can unlock valuable insights.

*Avoid pitfalls by choosing an AI advisor who offers honest guidance and keeps you on target.*

## Wisconsin's MEP links you to the AI network that matters

### WMEP Manufacturing Solutions

- **Readiness & Implementation** – Guidance on suitable AI use cases and implementation.
- **Automation Advisor** – Assistance selecting automation solutions to enhance productivity.
- **Cybersecurity** – Support in achieving necessary certifications and safeguarding digital assets.

### UW–Stout's Manufacturing Outreach Center (MOC) & Center for Advanced Manufacturing & Artificial Intelligence (CAM-AI)

- **AI Project Supports** – Faculty and students help solve your real problems.
- **Access to CAM-AI Facilities** – Labs and other advanced facilities for AI development.
- **AI Workforce Development** – Upskill employees in AI and data tools.

*These cost effective services make advanced technologies accessible to smaller manufacturers.*

## “What is the Manufacturing Extension Partnership?”

- **Mission:** Support small- and medium-sized manufacturers (SMMs) in improving competitiveness, innovation, and productivity.
- **Business model:** MEP centers charge for services, but are mission-driven- not profit-driven.
- **Funding:** Comes from a mix of federal, state, and client sources- intended to keep high-impact services affordable.





## Report Summary

AI adoption is no longer optional—manufacturers must act now or risk falling behind. With competitors advancing quickly and workforce challenges growing, leveraging AI is critical to staying competitive. Success starts when you enlist an internal AI champion early, take small, manageable steps, create use cases to solve real business problems, and keep your approach flexible, safe, and reversible. Work with a trusted advisor who gives honest feedback and helps you stay focused on practical, high-impact solutions.

## About the Wisconsin MEP Network

The Wisconsin Center for Manufacturing & Productivity (WCMP) is part of the NIST MEP National Network with centers in every state and Puerto Rico. Together, we've focused for the past 31 years on keeping small- and medium-sized manufacturers (SMMs) competitive. In Wisconsin, the WCMP and our partners – WMEP Manufacturing Solutions and the UW-Stout Manufacturing Outreach Center – make up the Wisconsin MEP Network. Our not-for-profit status frees us to create impact for our clients, delivering resources not usually accessible to SMMs.

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*Thank you sponsors!*

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*Thank you partners!*

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