



21ST ALLIANCE AI ROUNDTABLE

The State of *AI Adoption* for Mid-Market Enterprises

FEATURED CEO SPEAKER

Seema Alexander

Disruptive AI, Founder & CEO

MODERATOR

Matthew Swanson

StaffAI, CEO; and Silicon Valley Software Group, Managing Partner

HOST

Paul Witkay

Alliance of Chief Executives, Founder & CEO

RECAP

Summary

This 21st Alliance AI Roundtable focused on one of the most important questions facing CEOs today: how AI is actually being adopted across industries, departments, and use cases in the mid-market. Moderated by Matthew Swanson and featuring Disruptive AI Founder and CEO Seema Alexander, the discussion explored adoption trends, the fast-changing model landscape, rising cost pressures, and how companies can turn their own data into a competitive advantage.

The central message: AI is no longer a question of whether, but how deeply. Alliance surveys show AI usage among participants has climbed from roughly 50 to 60 percent two and a half years ago to 95 percent today, with 82 percent reporting good to excellent business results. Seema argued that the leaders who pull ahead will treat AI not as a technology upgrade, but as a rewiring of how their companies operate and compete.

Key Themes & Insights

01

Adoption Is Nearly Universal, but Most Companies Are Still in the Co-Pilot Phase

Matthew walked through data from the U.S. Census Bureau's biweekly business survey and several other reports, including research from the Federal Reserve Bank, showing clear differences in adoption across industries. Information and professional services firms lead, driven in part by companies reinventing themselves as "AI native."

Yet when the data is broken down by how employees actually use AI, nearly every use case is some form of co-pilot: a person working back and forth with a tool such as Claude, ChatGPT, or Gemini. Agentic AI, where the system carries an entire role on its own, is emerging but still nascent. Seema added a warning: when companies deploy a tool without real training, individual power users get smarter while the organization as a whole does not.

02

This Is a Business Model Shift, Not a Technology Shift

Seema framed the moment as "the great business rewiring," a change she believes is far larger than the advent of the internet. Her core argument was that many CEOs still treat AI as a technology project, when it is really a shift in operating and business models. She expects AI-native companies to take meaningful market share in nearly every industry within the next three years.

Matthew offered examples of what AI-native operations look like. He cited OpenAI's internal adoption of its own coding tool rising from about 30 percent to 97 percent of employees this year, not only engineers, and described how StaffAI has replaced conventional office software with tools designed for collaboration between people and AI agents.

Seema sees the mid-market as holding the biggest opportunity: these companies have valuable data, less bureaucracy than large enterprises, and years of institutional knowledge that can be turned into assets.

03

Sales and Marketing Lead, Finance Follows, and Pricing Is Changing

Sales and marketing remain the largest driver of AI adoption by department, a trend the roundtable forecast a year ago. Matthew attributed this to measurability: almost every company models its sales funnel, so improvement shows up directly in revenue. He also noted that outcome-based pricing, which can sound novel, is intuitive in sales because sales teams are already paid on outcomes through commissions. AI can now take a seat on the sales org chart and be compensated the same way.

Finance is the second area of demand, with CFOs asking to “speak to their data.” Seema cautioned that finance requires deterministic workflows where the numbers cannot be wrong, and that deeper process mapping often reveals that many fixes have nothing to do with AI at all. She also flagged a customer-side shift: buyers are starting to ask why they should pay the same price for a service that is now AI-enabled, pushing pricing economics toward outcomes.

04

Turn Institutional Knowledge into Intelligence

Seema’s recurring theme was that data will become one of the most important competitive advantages a company has. Large “data lakehouse” initiatives that attempt to centralize everything are sound in concept but often stall or struggle to show return on investment. She advocated starting smaller, with focused data initiatives inside individual divisions.

She described work with a global development organization’s commercial real estate group that makes multimillion-dollar property decisions largely on instinct. The goal is an intelligence layer that can answer questions such

as where space will be needed in five years, where the portfolio is over capacity, and which risks should shape investment. She also previewed a prototype “intelligent operating system” that brings building systems, tenant requests, and sensor data into a single real-time command view.

“Data’s going to become the biggest moat of the future.”

SEEMA ALEXANDER · FOUNDER & CEO, DISRUPTIVE AI

05

Model Selection Is a Portfolio of Business Decisions

The model landscape is shifting week to week. On general capability rankings shown in the session, Anthropic had moved to the top, a change Matthew noted would have been hard to predict a year ago. He attributed this in part to Anthropic’s early focus on coding, which built a foundation for reasoning. He expects the next competitive frontier to be voice, which may favor providers with different underlying data.

Seema urged CEOs to look past capability rankings. The right choice depends on how much intelligence a task actually requires, what it costs at scale, and how sensitive the data is, including whether it should live in the cloud, on premises, or be kept away from frontier models entirely. Bundled platforms such as Microsoft Copilot feel comfortable and simple, she said, but CEOs should consider whether today’s convenient choice becomes tomorrow’s legacy system, and should do real due diligence on vendors now marketing their products as “AI-enabled.”

“For CEOs, model selection is really a portfolio of business decisions.”

SEEMA ALEXANDER · FOUNDER & CEO, DISRUPTIVE AI

06

AI Costs Have Become a C-Suite Concern

Matthew described this as the year CFOs got involved in AI spending. Viewed on capability versus cost, open-source models such as DeepSeek offer strong

value for lower-complexity tasks. A growing practice is model routing: using a frontier model to understand a task, then delegating the work to a cheaper model. Because model providers prefer to keep usage in-house, companies generally need to build routing themselves or use a vendor that offers it.

Seema added that current pricing is heavily subsidized and highly volatile, citing a recent case in which work that had cost her team thousands of dollars dropped to about ten dollars with a newly released model. Her advice for this “messy middle” was to anchor on the outcomes a company is trying to create, rather than on the cost of any single tool.

FOR EXECUTIVE TEAMS

Suggested Action Items for CEOs & Executive Teams

- 01 Treat AI as an operating and business model question, not only a technology project, and assess where AI-native competitors could take share in your market.
- 02 Move beyond basic co-pilot access by investing in training that makes the organization smarter, not only individual power users.
- 03 Start where return on investment is easiest to prove, often sales and marketing, to build internal conviction before expanding.
- 04 Map processes before automating them; many improvements come from process and communication fixes rather than AI itself.
- 05 Identify where your institutional knowledge and unique data live, and begin with focused, division-level data initiatives rather than a single large data project.

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- 06 Evaluate AI models and platforms as a portfolio, weighing task complexity, cost at scale, data sensitivity, and long-term flexibility.
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- 07 Bring finance into AI spending decisions and explore model routing to match each task with the most cost-effective model.
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- 08 Prepare for customers who expect AI-enabled services to be priced differently, and consider where outcome-based pricing could fit.
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IN CLOSING

Conclusion

The session made clear that with near-universal adoption among Alliance members, the differentiator is no longer access to AI but depth of change. Costs, models, and capabilities will keep shifting through what Seema called the messy middle. The companies that stay competitive will be those that understand the technology well enough to redesign how they operate and put their own data to work.

The great business rewiring will reward leaders who turn institutional knowledge into intelligence, and who lead not with AI, but with the outcomes they are able to get from it.