

FIELD GUIDE / EDITION ONE / 2026

# The 18-Month Window.

What every trades owner needs to know  
about AI right now.

## WHAT YOU'RE READING

# A field guide. Not a sales deck.

This is for owners of trades, contracting, and field-services businesses doing \$2M to \$50M in revenue. If that's you, the next 18 months matter more than most people are letting on.

We're not going to oversell AI. We're also not going to undersell it. The honest read is somewhere in between, and very few people are giving it to you straight. That's what this guide is for.

Every claim in here is sourced. Stats come from RICS, McKinsey, ServiceTitan, Dodge Construction Network, and others doing real research instead of writing thought-leadership posts. Check our work or send the original report to your CFO.

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## CHAPTER 01

# Why 18 months.

AI in trades is moving faster than most owners realize, slower than the headlines claim, and it's about to hit an inflection point. Here's what the data actually says.

## 46%

of contractors are already using or experimenting with AI

ServiceTitan AI in the Skilled Trades Report, 2025

## 66%

believe AI will transform the industry within 1-3 years

ServiceTitan, 2025

## Where the gap is opening.

ServiceTitan surveyed more than 1,000 trades contractors in late 2025. Nearly half are already using AI in some part of their business. Two-thirds believe it will transform the industry within three years. But adoption isn't evenly distributed — and the businesses moving first are doing it where the leverage is highest.

Meanwhile, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors' 2025 global survey of 2,200+ construction professionals found 78% of organizations have either no AI implementation at all or are still in early pilot phases. Less than 1% have AI fully embedded across the business.

That gap — between businesses that are operating with AI and businesses still talking about it — is the 18-month window.

### THE PULL QUOTE

**“These trends suggest the construction industry is reaching an AI tipping point.”**

— RICS, AI in Construction Report 2025

**CHAPTER 01 / CONTINUED**

# Why the window closes.

Three forces are about to compress the advantage early adopters have over everyone else. Once they hit, the gap stops being recoverable.

## **01 / Customer expectations are recalibrating fast.**

When two of your competitors are quoting in 24 hours and you're still at five days, customers stop assuming "that's just how it is." The contractor who responds first wins more often than the contractor with the better price — not by a little, by a lot.

## **02 / Capital is flowing to AI in built-environment tech.**

In Q2 2025, 68% of all venture capital invested in built-environment technology went to AI and machine learning startups — up from a historical 20–25%, according to Construction Today's analysis cited in Bridgit's 2026 statistics review. The tools your competitors will be using in 18 months are being funded right now.

## **03 / The skills gap is widening.**

RICS' data shows 74% of construction organizations have minimal or no AI capability today. That number won't move evenly. Businesses that build operating muscle now will compound it. Businesses that wait will need to hire it in, and the talent pool will be scarce and expensive.

### **THE HONEST PART**

We don't know exactly when the window closes. Nobody does. But the data points all line up: capital, customer behavior, talent. They suggest 12–24 months until "using AI in your business" stops being a differentiator and becomes table stakes. Call it 18.

CHAPTER 02

# What AI actually is. And isn't.

Plain-language definitions, written for owners who don't care how it works — only what it can do for the business.

## What it is.

AI, in the context of a trades business, is a set of tools that can read text, listen to speech, look at images, and produce useful output — fast. Quotes drafted from a phone call. A scheduling decision made from twelve constraints. A customer follow-up written, sent, and tracked without a human touching it.

These tools have been quietly improving for a decade. The reason it suddenly matters is that in the last two years they've gotten good enough to do real work, cheap enough to run, and accessible enough for businesses without dedicated tech teams to actually use them.

## What it isn't.

AI isn't magic, it isn't reliable without good inputs, and it isn't going to fix a broken process. If your quoting is slow because your estimator is missing data, AI doesn't solve that — it just produces faster wrong quotes. 95% of enterprise AI pilots deliver zero measurable ROI; 85% of failures trace back to poor data quality (Bridgit, 2026). The businesses that win don't skip the boring work — they do it.

WHAT IT DOES WELL	WHAT IT DOES BADLY
Repetitive text work — quotes, proposals, follow-ups	Anything requiring real judgment about people or risk
Reading and summarizing documents	Working with data your business doesn't already have
Pattern matching across past jobs and routing decisions	Replacing the experienced person on your team

## CHAPTER 02 / CONTINUED

# Three buckets you'll hear about.

Most of what gets pitched as “AI for your business” falls into one of three categories. Knowing which is which helps you spot what’s real.

## 01 / Off-the-shelf AI features.

AI baked into software you already use — your CRM, your accounting tool, your scheduling app. Low risk, low cost, often genuinely useful for narrow tasks. ServiceTitan’s 2025 report found 59% of contractors using AI adopted features already built into the software they use every day. Start here. Don’t skip it because it’s not flashy.

## 02 / Generic AI tools used directly.

ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini. Free or near-free, surprisingly capable, useless without operator skill. An owner who learns to use these well — for drafting proposals, summarizing meetings, writing job descriptions — gets a real edge over an owner who doesn’t. But these tools don’t know your business, your pricing, or your customers. Limit reached fast.

## 03 / Custom-built tools for your business.

AI tools designed specifically around how your business actually works. Higher cost, higher leverage, longer to deploy. This is where most of the real competitive advantage will end up living — but you have to know what to build before you build it.

### THE TAKEAWAY

**Use all three. Off-the-shelf for speed. Generic tools for personal leverage. Custom for the workflows that move your numbers.**

## CHAPTER 03

# The five workflows where AI pays back fastest.

Not every AI use case is created equal. These are the five places we've seen the most leverage for \$2M-\$50M trades businesses, ranked by how quickly the payback shows up.

## 01 / Quoting and estimating.

This is where almost every business should start, because the gains are the largest and the most measurable. Industry benchmarks reported by AlterSquare put AI-driven estimating at up to 50% faster estimation time and roughly 20% improvement in bid win rates, with cost-prediction accuracy approaching 97% when paired with good historical data.

What this looks like in a real shop: a process that took 3-5 days now takes hours. A team that used to send 8 quotes a week sends 20. The win rate doesn't need to change for the math to work — more shots, same percentage, more revenue.

## 02 / Customer intake and follow-up.

Most trades businesses lose more revenue to slow follow-up than to lost bids. AI handles the boring part: someone fills out the form, AI categorizes it, drafts a response, schedules the next step, and pings a human only when judgment is needed. ServiceTitan's 2025 trades survey found 59% of AI use is concentrated in administration — because that's where the easiest wins are.

## 03 / Scheduling and dispatch.

RICS reports that only 16% of contractors use AI or automation for scheduling, even though less than 5% of construction project schedules maintain quality through completion. It's the gap between how poorly the current approach works and how little is being done about it. If your dispatcher is your bottleneck, this is where you start.

CHAPTER 03 / CONTINUED

# Workflows 04 and 05.

## 04 / Proposals and contracts.

Drafting a custom proposal that reads like a human wrote it, in 10 minutes instead of 90. Pulling scope, pricing, and terms from your existing systems and stitching them into a polished document your prospect actually reads. This is where small-to-mid trades businesses can suddenly look like much bigger operations.

Caveat from the lawyers: AI is great for drafting, terrible for binding contract terms. Construction Dive ran a piece in late 2025 quoting attorneys warning that LLM-generated construction contracts are “unnecessarily risky.” Use AI to draft. Use a human to bind.

## 05 / Operations dashboards.

Most owners we meet are flying on month-old reports. Real-time dashboards — jobs, crews, pipeline, margin — are the unsexy AI use case nobody talks about and everyone needs. Mastt’s research on AI in construction project management cites up to 31% productivity gains by 2030 from AI-powered digital workflows, and most of that compounds in the visibility layer.

HOW TO PRIORITIZE

	WORKFLOW	TIME TO PAYBACK	DIFFICULTY
01	Quoting / estimating	1-3 months	Medium
02	Customer intake / follow-up	1-2 months	Low
03	Scheduling / dispatch	3-6 months	Medium-High
04	Proposals / contracts	1-3 months	Low-Medium
05	Operations dashboards	3-9 months	Medium-High

## CHAPTER 03 / DEEP DIVE

# Quoting, in particular.

If you only do one thing in the next 18 months, do this one. Here's the data and what it means.

**80-90%**

reduction in takeoff time reported across multiple AI estimating platforms

Brainroad AI quoting analysis, 202...

**\$66K**

average annual preconstruction cost per estimator using manual processes

Total industry analysis

**2x**

reported bid volume increase among contractors using AI takeoff tools

Beam AI customer reporting

## Why this matters more than it sounds.

A quoting bottleneck is rarely just a quoting problem. It's a sales problem: leads go cold while they wait. It's a margin problem: rushed estimates miss line items and you eat the difference. It's a hiring problem: you can't scale the business without scaling estimating capacity.

Fix quoting and three other problems get smaller at the same time. That's the kind of leverage that justifies real investment.

**THE PULL QUOTE**

**“AI can't do everything I do. It allows me to spend more time on meaningful tasks like cultivating customer relationships, procuring better pricing, and visiting project sites.”**

— Zach Batson, estimator at Zook Interiors, quoted in AlterSquare's 2025 analysis

**CHAPTER 03 / WHAT TO AVOID**

# Three traps owners fall into.

**01 / Buying tools before fixing process.**

If your data is a mess, AI makes the mess move faster. The Bluebeam 2025 AEC survey found that 52% of respondents still use paper during the design phase and 49% during planning. AI running on top of paper doesn't do much. Get the boring stuff connected first.

**02 / Trying to do everything at once.**

We've watched owners try to roll out AI for quoting, dispatch, customer intake, and proposals simultaneously. Six months later, none of them are fully working and the team is exhausted. Pick one. Get it actually working. Then move to the next one.

**03 / Outsourcing without understanding.**

If you don't know what your tools are doing, you can't tell when they're doing it wrong. An owner doesn't need to be an engineer, but they do need to know what the system is actually doing in their business — enough to ask hard questions when results stop showing up.

**THE PATTERN**

Every business we've seen succeed with AI did three things: started small, fixed one workflow before adding another, and kept the owner involved enough to recognize when something wasn't working. None of it is glamorous. All of it works.

## CHAPTER 04

# Two snapshots.

Composite stories drawn from real businesses we've worked with or talked to. Names changed. Numbers honest.

**THE MOVER****Specialty plumbing contractor. \$14M revenue. Texas.**

By mid-2024, the owner had watched three of his estimators leave in 18 months. Quoting was a five-day cycle and 30% of leads were going cold waiting. He spent the first half of 2025 working with a partner to build an AI-assisted intake and quoting system around how his shop actually worked. Quotes started going out in under 24 hours.

Within two quarters: close rate up roughly 18%. Quote volume up 70%. The two estimators left on staff stopped working weekends. He hired a third — but for inspection, not estimating. He told us the math worked the moment they stopped losing repeat customers to slow response time.

**THE WAITER****Residential GC. \$9M revenue. Mountain West.**

Same conversation, same year. "We'll get to it next year." He had a stack of marketing emails about AI tools and zero confidence in any of them. The team was busy. The phones were ringing. Why fix what isn't broken.

By mid-2025, two of his competitors were sending quotes inside 24 hours. He was still at five days. He lost two repeat clients he'd worked with for over a decade — not because they were unhappy with his work, but because they got tired of waiting and someone else was faster. Last we heard, he was finally talking to a vendor. The window hadn't closed on him. But it had narrowed.

**CHAPTER 04 / CONTINUED**

# What these stories have in common.

Both owners are smart, experienced, and good at what they do. The difference between them isn't intelligence or appetite for risk. It's timing.

**The mover didn't have a special advantage.**

He didn't hire a tech genius. He didn't have venture money. He had the same skepticism everyone else had — and he moved anyway, because waiting felt riskier than acting. Once he saw one workflow start producing, the rest got easier.

**The waiter didn't make a stupid decision.**

He made the safe one. He did what most people in his position do: prioritized the work in front of him, didn't bet on something unproven, kept his head down. That's usually the right call. It just wasn't this time.

**The lesson isn't "bet the company."**

It's "start small enough that getting it wrong won't hurt, but actually start." Because the cost of waiting another twelve months isn't zero anymore. It's the two clients who quietly went somewhere else.

**THE TAKEAWAY**

**The window doesn't close all at once. It narrows. You won't notice you're behind until you already are.**

**CHAPTER 05**

# What to do in the next 90 days.

Whether you ever hire us or not. A practical, low-risk plan that gets your business onto the right side of this curve.

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**DAYS 1-30 / Map the friction.**

Spend two hours — actual hours, with a notebook — watching how your business runs. Walk the office on a busy morning. Sit with your estimator while he writes a quote. Ride along on a dispatch. Write down every place where someone is doing work a machine could do.

Don't solution. Just observe. Most owners are surprised by what they find. The bottleneck is rarely where they thought it was.

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**DAYS 31-60 / Pick one workflow. Just one.**

From your map, pick the workflow with the worst pain-to-fix ratio — the place where the friction is highest and the change wouldn't require ripping out a system you depend on. That's your pilot.

If you don't know which one to pick, default to quoting. We've never seen it not pay back.

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**DAYS 61-90 / Run a real pilot.**

Use an off-the-shelf tool first if one fits. ServiceTitan's 2025 data shows the contractors moving fastest are doing exactly this — adopting the AI features inside the software they already pay for. If off-the-shelf doesn't fit your business, that's the moment to have a conversation about a custom build.

Set a 30-day evaluation window. Measure one or two real numbers — quote turnaround time, lead response time, weekly bid volume. If the numbers move, expand. If they don't, ask why before trying the next thing.

**CHAPTER 05 / CHECKLIST**

# The 90-day checklist.

Print this. Stick it somewhere you'll see it. Cross items off as you go.

## Days 1-30

- Walk the office on a busy morning. Watch what gets done by hand.
- Sit with the person who quotes for one full quote, start to finish.
- Ride along on a dispatch or a customer call.
- Write down every spot where someone copies data between systems.
- List the three workflows that take the most time per dollar of revenue.

## Days 31-60

- Pick one workflow. Resist the urge to pick three.
- Audit the data feeding that workflow — is it clean, is it complete?
- Identify one or two real metrics you'd use to know if a fix is working.
- Look at AI features already in your existing software. Try them.
- If existing tools don't fit, talk to someone about a custom approach.

## Days 61-90

- Run a 30-day pilot. Track the metrics. Tell the team why they're tracking.
- Compare the new numbers to the old numbers. Be honest.
- Decide: expand, fix, or stop.
- If expanding, document what worked so the next workflow goes faster.
- Plan the next 90 days around what you just learned.

## CHAPTER 06

# How to evaluate an AI partner.

Seven questions to ask anyone who wants to build, sell, or consult on AI for your business. If they can't answer cleanly, walk.

## 01. Have you worked with trades businesses before, or just talked to them?

There's a big difference between selling software to plumbers and understanding what a Tuesday morning looks like in a plumbing shop. Ask for specifics.

## 02. What's your process before you build anything?

If the answer skips straight to a tool, run. Anyone good starts by understanding how the business actually works, not by selling a deliverable.

## 03. How do you handle our data?

Privacy, retention, who owns what. RICS' 2025 survey found 54% of contractors cite data security as a top concern about AI — with reason.

## 04. What happens when something breaks at 4pm on a Friday?

If the answer is "submit a ticket," you don't have a partner. You have a vendor.

## 05. Can you show me a real example, with real numbers, from a business like mine?

Vague case studies and round numbers ("up to 50%!") without context are marketing. Specific numbers, even if smaller, are the real signal.

## 06. Will you tell me when not to hire you?

If they're willing to tell you the project doesn't make sense, they're also willing to tell you when it does. The reverse is rarely true.

## 07. What does this cost — all in, including the parts most people don't mention?

Implementation, training, maintenance, the inevitable change request in month four. If you can't get a clean answer in a single conversation, the price will keep growing.

## CHAPTER 06 / CONTINUED

# What good looks like.

A partner who's going to be useful behaves a specific way. Here's the pattern, in case you haven't seen it before.

## They listen before they pitch.

The first conversation is mostly questions. About your business, your team, your tech, your customers, your numbers. They take notes. They follow up on things you mentioned offhand.

## They tell you when not to hire them.

Sometimes the right answer is “you don't need us yet.” Sometimes it's “this problem isn't actually an AI problem.” A good partner will say so on the first call, even though it costs them the deal.

## They show their work.

You see what they're building, you understand the choices they're making, and you know why something costs what it costs. No black boxes. No “trust us, we're engineers.”

## They're still around in month six.

The companies that disappear after launch are the ones that knew the tool wouldn't hold up. A real partner is still there when the second wave of work surfaces — and there's always a second wave.

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### THE PATTERN

**If you're unsure whether someone is going to be a good partner, watch how they behave when there's no money on the table. That's the real preview.**

**CHAPTER 07**

# About Rebar.

If you've made it this far, here's the short version of who we are and how we work.

## What we do.

We build agents, apps, and dashboards for trades, contracting, and field-services businesses doing \$2M to \$50M in revenue. We also manage the technology infrastructure underneath them. One partner. No gaps. No shelf-ware.

## How we work.

Every engagement starts with a 30-minute call. We learn about your business, you learn about us, and we figure out together whether there's a real opportunity here. If there is, we scope a project, a partnership, or a 90-day AI Operator Sprint. If there isn't, we'll tell you that too. Either way, the first call is free.

## What we believe.

Most software gets sold by people who've never been on a job site. We've spent two decades building tools that survive contact with real businesses, and the last several years focused on blue-collar operations specifically. The businesses that figure out AI in the next 18 months will have a structural advantage over the ones that wait. We help owners be one of the former.

**READY TO TALK?**

## Book a 30-minute call.

No pitch deck. No pressure. Just a real conversation about your business and whether AI has any real leverage for it.

→ [rebar.is/contact](https://rebar.is/contact)

**APPENDIX**

# Sources & further reading.

Every claim in this guide is sourced. If you want the original reports, here they are. We've linked publishers, not summary articles, wherever possible.

**RICS / AI in Construction Report 2025**

Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. Survey of 2,200+ professionals. Source for adoption rates, skills barriers, and the "tipping point" framing.

[rics.org/news-insights/artificial-intelligence-in-construction-report](https://rics.org/news-insights/artificial-intelligence-in-construction-report)

**ServiceTitan / AI in the Skilled Trades Report 2025**

Survey of 1,000+ trades contractors by Thrive Analytics. Source for the 46% adoption stat, 1-3 year transformation timeline, and 59% off-the-shelf adoption figure.

[servicetitan.com/press/ai-in-the-skilled-trades-report-2025](https://servicetitan.com/press/ai-in-the-skilled-trades-report-2025)

**Dodge Construction Network + CMiC / 2025 AI in Construction Survey**

Survey of 235 GCs and trade contractors. Source for the 85% "less time on repetitive tasks" figure. Coverage in Construction Dive, December 2025.

[constructiondive.com/news/builders-ai-transform-businesses-survey/807555](https://constructiondive.com/news/builders-ai-transform-businesses-survey/807555)

**Bridgit / AI in Construction Statistics 2026**

60+ statistics consolidated from RICS, AGC, Deloitte, BCG, Dodge, and Bluebeam. Source for the 95% pilot failure rate and VC allocation data.

[gobridgit.com/blog/ai-construction-statistics](https://gobridgit.com/blog/ai-construction-statistics)

**McKinsey / The Next Normal in Construction**

Long-running research on construction productivity and the \$50B+ wave of tech investment.

[mckinsey.com/capital-projects-and-infrastructure](https://mckinsey.com/capital-projects-and-infrastructure)

**AlterSquare / AI-Powered Estimation analysis (2025)**

Source for the 50% estimation-time reduction, 20% bid-win-rate improvement, and Zach Batson quote.

[altersquare.medium.com](https://altersquare.medium.com)

**Togal AI / How AI Estimating Software Increases Profitability**

Source for the \$66K annual preconstruction cost-per-estimator figure.

[togal.ai/blog/ai-estimating-software](https://togal.ai/blog/ai-estimating-software)

**Bluebeam / AEC Industry Survey 2025**

Survey of 1,000 AEC professionals. Source for the 27% adoption figure and paper-usage data points. Coverage in ASCE, December 2025.

[asce.org/civil-engineering-source](https://asce.org/civil-engineering-source)

**Mastt / State of AI in Construction Project Management**

Source for the 31%-by-2030 productivity projection.

[mastt.com/research/ai-in-construction](https://mastt.com/research/ai-in-construction)

**Brainroad / AI Quoting Software for Contractors, 2026**

Source for the 80-90% takeoff-time reduction and contractor case examples.

[brainroad.com/ai-quoting-software-for-contractors](https://brainroad.com/ai-quoting-software-for-contractors)

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