IN-DEPTH GUIDE

INVESTMENT AND ESTABLISHMENT

How much does a business artificial intelligence project cost?

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GXN

Senior expertise · Digital governance

Direct response

Limits, risks and decisions

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Updated

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE · INVESTMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

How much does a business artificial intelligence project cost?

COMPREHENSIVE STUDY · GXN

TL;DR

The answer in one minute

- Four cost items, and two are systematically forgotten: implantation, recurrent use, maintenance, and adoption.
- The monthly usage cost varies greatly depending on the design. Two seemingly identical systems can have bills ten times different.
- An internal research assistant costs less than an integrated three-system automation. The difference comes from integration, not AI.
- Always ask for an estimate of the usage cost over twelve months before signing. A supplier unable to produce it does not control what he is selling.

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Why prices vary so much

This is not necessarily dishonesty. It is often that the three suppliers have included three different projects.

The first included a prototype. The second included a system in production, integrated, with training. The third included a complete platform with several use cases.

This guide gives you something to compare apples to apples.

Item 1. Implementation

Development, integration, testing, commissioning. This is the only position that all quotes present.

Which really makes this amount vary, in order of importance.

- **The number of systems to integrate.** This is the number one factor, by far. An assistant that reads documents from a shared folder costs a fraction of the price of a system that reads your ERP, writes to your CRM, and triggers emails. AI is the easy part. Plumbing is the real job.
- **The requirement for reliability.** An internal tool tolerated at 90% accuracy costs far less than a system that must reach 99% with automatic verification and logging.
- **Data sensitivity.** Controlled architecture adds real work.
- **The quality of your initial data.** Clean, structured documents speed everything up. Scanned PDFs of varying quality add a whole step.
- **The extent of change management.** A user or forty is not the same project.

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Item 2. Recurrent use

The position most often missing from quotes, and the one that surprises in year two.

Every document processed, every question asked costs something. Individually, fractions of a hundred. Multiplied by your actual volume over twelve months, it becomes a figure worth budgeting for.

What makes this position explode is almost never the number of requests. This is the amount of context sent each time. A system that sends thirty pages to each question will cost dozens of times the price of a well-designed system that sends the relevant two paragraphs. To you, the two look the same. For the bill, no.

What to demand, word for word: at the monthly volume that I gave you, what will be the estimated usage cost, and on what assumption of average context. Have the answer written down.

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Item 3. Maintenance

Models evolve, your systems change, quality must be monitored. An AI system is not software that you install and forget.

Concretely: monitor that the quality of responses does not drift, adjust when a supplier changes a version, adapt when your documents or processes evolve, correct problematic cases reported by users.

It's modest compared to the implementation, but it's not zero. A supplier who leads you to believe that zero is realistic is preparing a nasty surprise for you or intends to bill for fixes per piece.

Item 4. Training and adoption

The most forgotten position and the one that decides success.

It's not just vendor hours. This is your people's time: participating in the design, testing with real cases, learning the tool, adjusting their ways of doing things. This time exists whether it is budgeted or not.

I've seen technically flawless systems abandoned in three months because no one planned for that time. This is the most frustrating waste ever, because it was entirely avoidable.

FULL COST

Four posts, one budget

01 **Implementation**	02 **Use**
03 **Maintenance**	04 **Adoption**

Realistic ranges, by project type

These amounts come from real projects in Quebec SMEs. These are orders of magnitude to situate you, not fixed prices, and your situation can legitimately fall outside of these ranges.

An internal research assistant. Your procedures and documents become questionable in natural language. Low monthly user cost. This is often the best first project: visible gain, low risk, complexity contained.

Automated processing of incoming documents. Extraction, validation, routing. Mid-range, ascending according to the number of formats and systems affected. Usage cost proportional to the volume processed. This is the project with the best measurable return in the majority of cases.

Sorting and routing requests. Often at the bottom of the range if integration remains simple. Fast cost-effectiveness when someone at your home manually sorts each day.

An agent who acts in your systems. Top of the range and often beyond, because each connected tool adds development, testing and safeguards. The higher risk also requires more validation and logging.

It's no longer an AI project, it's a software project with an AI component. Budget it as such.

This is what turns all the previous ranges into a defensible figure for your case.

WHAT MOVES A PROJECT INTO THE RANGE

Type of project	Normal position	Determining factor
Internal research	Bottom of range	Quality of documents
Document processing	Mid-range	Formats and integrations
Integrated agent	High or beyond	Tools, risks and safeguards

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What we forget to budget for

A list of actual projects, all positions.

- Data preparation. Cleaning, scanning, putting in order documents that have never been stored.
- Your employees' time during design and testing.
- The period of parallel operation, when the old and new processes run at the same time.
- Internal documentation.
- Adjustments for the first three months, when actual usage reveals unanticipated cases.
- Reviewing your internal policies, if the project affects personal information.

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How to read an AI quote

Six checks that will avoid most bad surprises.

- **The usage cost is calculated, over twelve months, at your actual volume.** If absent, the quote is incomplete.

- **The number of integrations is specified by name.** "Integration with existing systems" is not a staff, it is a blank cheque.
- **A target accuracy rate is stated, along with the measurement method.** Otherwise, what will you judge the delivery?
- **Are the human validation points defined?** Their absence signals a demonstration design, not production.
- **Training and adoption appear.** Otherwise, this cost will land at your house, not budgeted.
- **Is maintenance planned, and at what pace?** Zero is not a credible answer.

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The profitability calculation, in three lines

No need for a complicated spreadsheet. Take the task.

Hours per week spent on this task, times the busy hourly cost, times 50 weeks. This gives you the current annual cost.

Next, estimate the portion that automation actually absorbs. Not 100%. In real life, between half and three quarters for a good use case, because there remains validation and exceptions.

Compare the annual savings to the cost of implementation plus one year of use and maintenance. If the project does not pay off within a reasonable time frame, it is not the right first project, and I will tell you that.

What I see on the ground

Two price differences explain almost all the differences between bids.

The first is the definition of “finished”. Some suppliers deliver a prototype that works as a demonstration. Others deliver a system into production, with edge case management, logging, training and documentation. The price difference between the two is normal. The value gap too.

The second is integration. A quote that seems twice as expensive often includes two more systems. Compare scopes before comparing prices.

And one piece of advice worth its weight in gold: be wary of the cheapest quote that doesn't mention an accuracy rate, running costs or maintenance. These are not oversights. These are deferred invoices.

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When the project is not justified

Let us be clear on cases where money is better placed elsewhere.

- Low volume. Twelve documents per month do not justify automation.
- Unstable process. Wait till he stabilizes.
- Messy starting data. Clean up first, the project will cost less later.
- No person responsible for adoption. The best system in the world will die.
- Image objective rather than profit. It never pays off.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Frequently asked questions

01 **What is the realistic minimum budget.**

Enough for a real, measured use case, with adoption support. The diagnosis will give you an honest threshold for your specific situation.

02 **Why is one quote three times more expensive than another?**

Almost always because of the number of integrations and the definition of "finished". Compare litters, not totals.

03

Will the cost of use increase over time?

The unit price of models drops almost every year. Your volume generally increases. The two trends partly offset each other. A well-designed architecture also makes it possible to change models when better value for money appears.

04

Is diagnosis really necessary?

Not always. If your use case is simple and clear, go directly to the implant. Diagnosis is justified when multiple leads exist, when data are sensitive, or when management needs a solid record before committing a budget.

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We can start small.

Not only can we, but I almost always recommend it. A process, a team, measurable gains in weeks. Most AI-driven transformation programs end up in a drawer.

EDITORIAL METHOD

Background guide prepared by GXN (Digital Governance), a division of MD79. Revision planned according to the rhythm documented for this cluster.

OFFICIAL SOURCES

References to be checked according to your situation

These references support the external rules and frameworks cited in this guide. They are not a substitute for legal or professional advice tailored to your organization.

NIST

Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework ↗

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ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

GXN

A directly accessible senior expertise, with more than twenty years of experience in technology implantation and a master's degree in artificial intelligence within the company.

Discover GXN ↗

AI OPPORTUNITY ASSESSMENT

You want a defensible figure for your situation.

The AI diagnosis transforms these ranges into a real amount, with the estimated usage cost over twelve months and a roadmap.

No call required. No sales sequence.