

Digital product alchemy

5 lessons in driving revenue through customer obsession

How IBM can help

Transformative digital products can unlock new lines of revenue, drive loyalty with expanded services, and enhance employee productivity. With the deep product engineering expertise of Dialexa, an IBM Company, and IBM's hybrid cloud and business transformation capabilities, we help clients turn ideas into differentiated product portfolios that accelerate growth.

Our teams focus on business process and outcomes optimization. We provide high quality digital product engineering services to help at any step of the product journey: optimizing product engineering teams, development cycles, scalability, and accelerating time to market. Our maturity in strategy, design, technology advancements, and software development helps you build the right product, the right way, for the right market opportunity to make your digital product a success.



*Our findings are dramatic:
New digital products deliver
an average ROI of 46%;
for product enhancements,
it's 75%.*

The five lessons

1 **Prioritize customer loyalty—it's the biggest differentiating factor driving ROI.**

What differentiator contributes the most to ROI in digital products? In 2022, the answer varied across industries. But by 2023, 13 of 14 industries had coalesced around customer loyalty as the biggest differentiating factor.

2 **Empower the product with a portfolio perspective.**

Top companies lead digital products with what their business wants to achieve as opposed to what it wants to build. A focus on outcomes helps these companies leapfrog competition that falls into the trap of focusing on features.

3 **Embed a product-centric culture.**

Differentiated products require an alignment in leadership and teams to truly embed an outcome-driven culture. The best product teams require a focus on measuring value, rather than simply building technology.

4 **Don't just ideate, create something.**

Ideation without validation can truly be detrimental. A heavy focus on execution and expansion activities is associated with 20% greater ROI on new products and 18% greater ROI on existing product enhancements, when compared to the same amount of effort spent in ideation activities.

5 **Embrace generative AI and create dynamic digital products.**

Generative AI is already fueling dynamically personalized experiences, accelerating speed to market, and enhancing the overall user experience of digital products. Our respondents cited generative AI as one of the top three technology disruptors.



Introduction

A powerful partnership—How digital products that increase customer loyalty can amplify ROI

Increasingly, organizations are focused on digital products, services, and experiences that provide a competitive edge and drive topline growth. Researchers expect that, by 2026, 40% of total revenue for the largest 2,000 organizations globally will be generated by these income streams.¹

To better understand this rising phenomenon, the IBM Institute for Business Value (IBM IBV) conducted a global survey of 1,500 business leaders across 28 countries and 14 industries. All respondents were familiar with their organization's use of digital products as part of their digital transformation strategy. The financial results are dramatic. Companies across industries are seeing an average ROI of 46% on new digital products and 75% on digital product enhancements. (See "Appendix" on page 25 for industry-specific views.)

We wanted to dig deeper. What factors matter most when it comes to achieving competitive differentiation with digital products? What habits and efforts separate the most differentiated companies from the rest?

Our research found that organizations are achieving many types of competitive differentiation with their digital products in multiple ways, *but they're seeing varying degrees of success*. We categorized our respondents into four groups based on the extent of their competitive differentiation from peers (see "Research and Methodology" on page 24 for more details). In this report, we focus on the extremes of the four groups: 29% fall into the Least Differentiated cohort. And 20% have the greatest competitive differentiation, a group we call the Most Differentiated.

Customer loyalty is now the key differentiator driving ROI.

All groups are *spending* roughly the same amount on digital products—about 20% of their IT budget. But the Most Differentiated organizations are seeing the biggest return on that investment: 52% ROI on new digital product creation and 83% on existing digital product enhancements (see Figure 1).

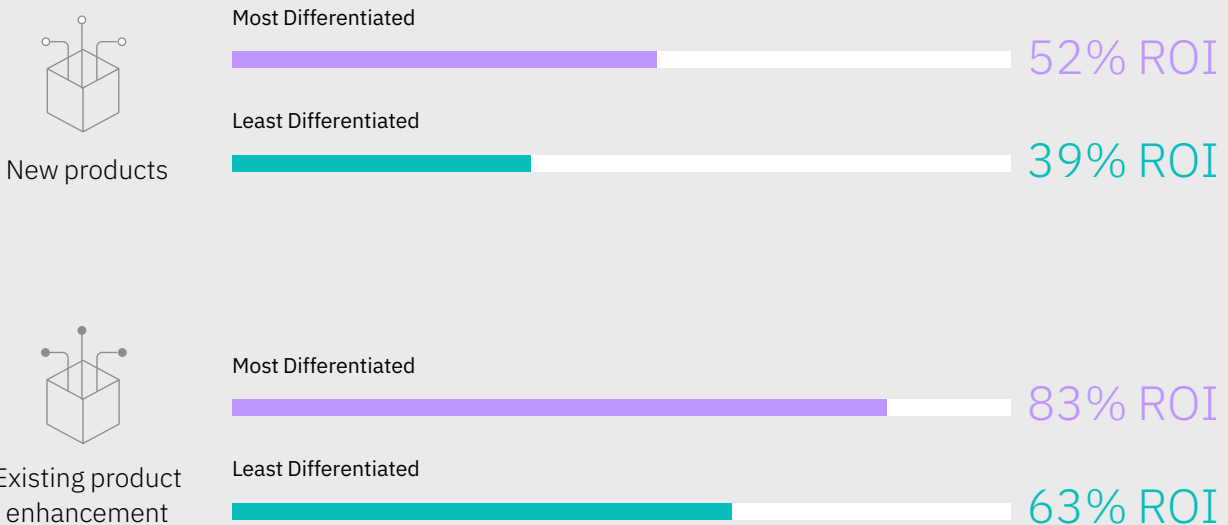
So, what accounts for that differentiation—and what factors overall drive success in digital products? In this report, we explore five key lessons that emerged from our survey.

For starters, customer loyalty is now the key differentiator driving ROI. Other lessons revolve around taking a portfolio approach to products, creating a product-centric organization, prioritizing execution over ideation, and harnessing the dynamic power of generative AI. At the end, we present an action guide on how to apply these lessons at different stages of the digital product journey.

FIGURE 1

The Most Differentiated organizations saw significant ROI on both new and existing digital products in 2023.

The Most Differentiated companies outperform in ROI



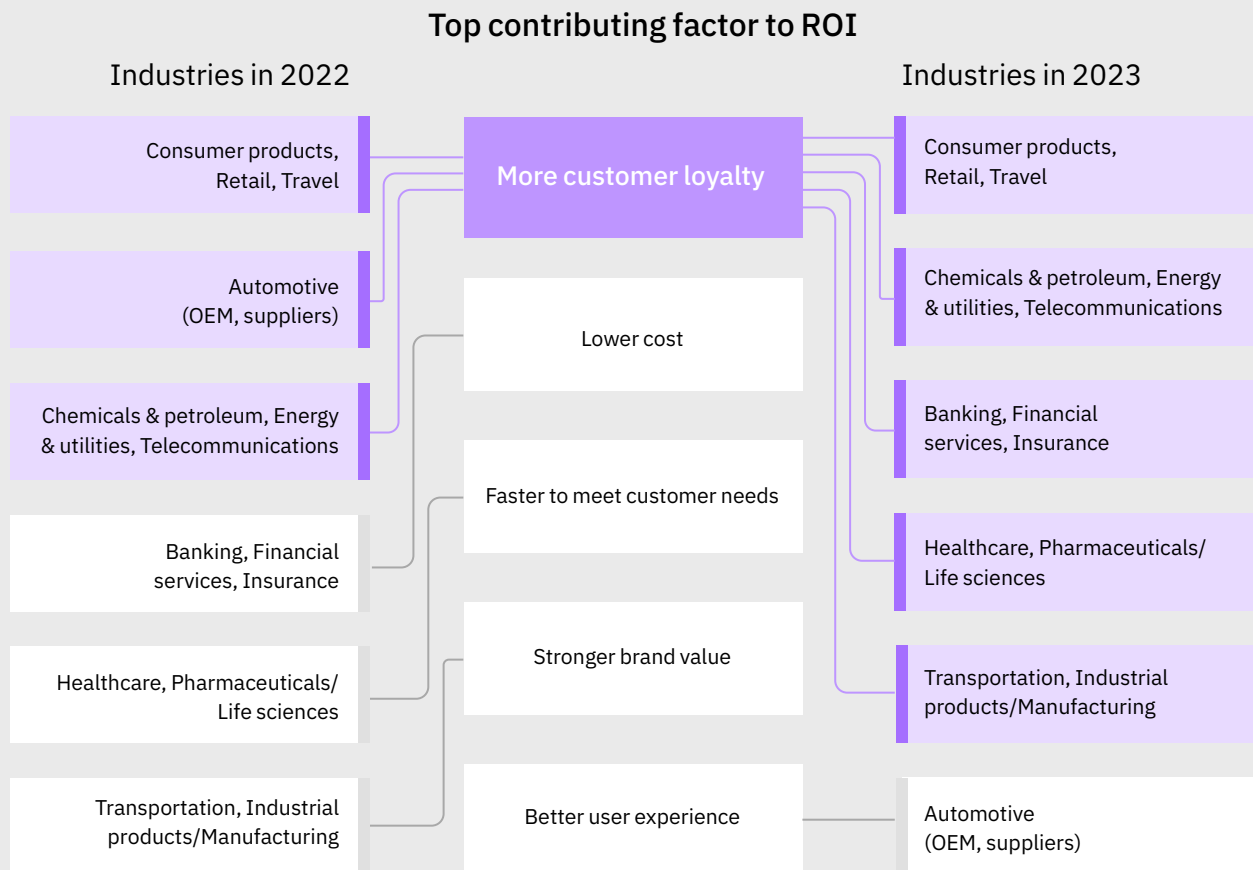
Lesson #1

Prioritize customer loyalty— it's the biggest differentiating factor driving ROI.

What differentiator contributes the most to ROI in digital products? In 2022, the answer varied across industries. Customer loyalty was in the mix, but so was lower cost, speed in meeting customer needs, and stronger brand value. *But by 2023, 13 of 14 industries had coalesced around customer loyalty as the biggest differentiating factor* (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Customer loyalty is now a key differentiator to ROI across industries.



The shift is not occurring in a vacuum: People are increasingly embracing digital products as partners in all areas of their lives.² We're talking, in effect, about relationships that inspire loyalty.

And, in our analysis, successful differentiation with customer loyalty was also associated with outperformance in revenue growth, profitability, product success, organizational resiliency, and innovation.

These findings lead us to a potent proposition: *What if organizations strategically use digital products to drive customer loyalty?* Could merging these two amplifiers have a profound impact on ROI?

By 2023, 13 of 14 industries had coalesced around customer loyalty as the biggest differentiating factor.



Case study

Part 1

How IBM Software prioritizes user adoption

Until 2023, IBM Software’s leading success metric for products was revenue. Revenue, of course, is important, but how can product teams directly influence or control that? Truthfully, they can’t. By the end of that year, leadership realized this was putting the cart before the horse. It wasn’t enough to just make one sale.

Driving *recurring* revenue and continuous value to customers was the real prize. IBM knew they had to hold product teams accountable to a different metric that *complemented* revenue—a “sibling” metric of sorts, and a way to repeatedly drive and measure customer value and impact.

This realization was transformational. *User adoption as a success metric became the missing piece* to keep the product driving revenue in both the short- and long-term.

The result: a shift to prioritizing and increasing adoption and engagement as a way to achieve revenue targets. IBM Software now leads with user adoption metrics as a primary indicator of product success—creating a foothold for continuous renewal and expansion.



Lesson #2

Empower the product with a portfolio perspective.

The portfolio management mindset is a game-changer for creating or improving digital products. Think of it this way, a portfolio of multiple products requires each asset to contribute *intentional value* to the product, business, or customer. A single digital product benefits from the same approach—each aspect of it should serve a clearly designated value and purpose. *It's a subtle but important shift in perspective: leading digital products with what a business wants to achieve as opposed to what it wants to build.*

Don't all organizations already do this? It might seem unusual to create a product without at least considering its impact on business value. Unfortunately, our survey results show that many companies fall into the trap of jumping straight from high-level business goals to a feature list, without first defining measurable product outcomes in between (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Distinguishing business goals from outcomes

How business goals evolve into product outcomes

Business goal		Product outcome
Net result to the organization that moves the business forward	▶	A change to a customer behavior that drives toward the business goal
Lagging indicator	▶	Leading indicator
Driven by the business	▶	Driven by user research and analytics

Examples

Business goal		Product outcome
Increase customer loyalty	▶	Increase user value and engagement
Drive revenue	▶	Grow subscriptions, increase in cart value
Lower costs	▶	Increase number of issues resolved using self-service support
Increase market share	▶	Increase number of referrals

Product outcomes are critical to homing in on the customer behaviors the product needs to influence in order to drive the business goal. Without them, teams risk wasting time, money, and energy on a product that just doesn't drive results. The Most Differentiated organizations in our survey intentionally address this risk—93% spend a fair-to-significant amount of effort mapping their digital product strategy to KPIs. In other words, they take the time to define specifically how product outcomes will achieve business goals. This leads to an iterative process revolving around the customer: perhaps entailing further discovery, a new or updated feature, or even removal of an existing feature.

In short, *product outcomes spur customer and end user obsession*, which can only thrive if digital products are viewed as a driver of business—rather than a piece of software packed with features. It's no easy feat, but with dedication, it can be done.

In fact, the Most Differentiated organizations take their commitment a step further: They don't just define product outcomes, *they make sure product outcomes drive everything they do*. These organizations are 32% more likely than other respondents in our survey to prioritize product outcomes as the *primary driver* to their releases.

Without a decidedly outcome-driven product culture, it's easy to fall into feature-focused bad habits. We found twice as many Least Differentiated companies regard number of features as the *primary driver* to their product releases, when compared to their Most Differentiated peers—essentially treating their product as a feature-packed project.

Compared to top companies, these feature-focused organizations significantly struggle with product success, with only 28% outperforming in that metric compared to 73% of Most Differentiated organizations. Only 30% of the Least Differentiated excel in customer loyalty, compared to 71% of the Most Differentiated. Other areas in which Least Differentiated organizations report far less success than their More Differentiated counterparts include customer satisfaction (29% versus 71%), balancing customer and business demands (27% versus 72%), and innovation (24% versus 71%)

The Most Differentiated organizations are 32% more likely than other respondents to prioritize product outcomes as the primary driver to their releases.

Centers of Excellence: Creating a disciplined culture around product

Digital products punch above their weight. But doing so requires rigor in leadership, best practices, research, support, and training—and Centers of Excellence can provide that discipline.³ By focusing dedicated resources on excellence in a particular realm, organizations can help ensure they have the skills and knowledge to deliver the best possible products.

Overall, organizations rigorously pursuing Center of Excellence initiatives for their digital products jumped from 28% in 2021 to 50% in 2023—a 79% increase. The Most Differentiated organizations have embraced the Center of Excellence movement with even greater enthusiasm, jumping from 33% to 65% in those two years—a 97% increase.

Perspective

Achieving customer loyalty through an outcome-based portfolio

As we've discussed, customer loyalty is the biggest opportunity area right now in digital product. An outcome-focused portfolio approach helps companies define all the ways customer loyalty could be influenced through product outcomes. Examples could include reducing subscriber attrition by 10% or increasing product engagement by 20%. Features could be removed, added, and changed. But without the pressure to just “finish features” and “get work done,” organizations can genuinely focus on how best to fill customer needs and inspire loyalty.

Case study

Part 2

How IBM Software implements outcome-based roadmaps

IBM Software has implemented a core practice of outcome-based roadmaps—a significant shift away from its previously feature-based roadmaps. An outcome-based roadmap requires teams to take a portfolio approach, prioritizing based on value and customer behaviors, not mere features. It also requires the work that product teams deliver to not just be validated by the business, but, more importantly, validated by customers.

This required a fundamental shift in how IBM framed and measured priorities—and as a result, the necessary education, new leadership structures, checks and balances, and engagement methods. IBM created three education programs on this outcome-focused shift in priorities: one for product managers, one for teams, and one for executives. It established a new cadence for how products get reviewed and approved for funding. The new structure requires product work to be assessed against various customer-centric criteria. In short, it's a paradigm around what customers find essential ... not merely delivering an ad hoc inventory of features.



Lesson #3

Embed a product-centric culture.

Structure matters. Differentiated products require an organization to align its leadership to enable the necessary outcome-driven culture. The best product teams work differently from how IT or business teams traditionally operate. Digital products require a focus on measuring value, rather than simply building technology. The process is iterative, with different funding cycles, expectations, and success metrics.

For that reason, digital-product ownership ideally resides outside of the IT and business realms. That doesn't mean the groups aren't closely aligned: Product teams would oversee development and delivery of products that drive revenue and growth, while IT would be responsible for managing the technology infrastructure that supports those products. The best product organizations blend tech and business skills within teams, so that both technical and business stakeholders are in sync and working toward the same goals.

However, if structural change is not possible, the IT organization is responsible for cultivating a product-centric culture, enabling the product to scale and thrive.

The Most Differentiated organizations in our survey are all-in on establishing a product organization, with 64% planning to hire a Chief Product Officer (CPO) by 2025—and 73% of them placing a rigorous focus on building multidisciplinary teams that blend tech and business.

Conversely, the Least Differentiated organizations in our study say they are embracing IT-centric initiatives such as reskilling developers and training IT teams. The point here is not to underemphasize IT and elevate the product perspective. But to succeed, organizations need to synchronize technology with business goals—and *establish leadership roles that can bridge the gap between these two areas.*

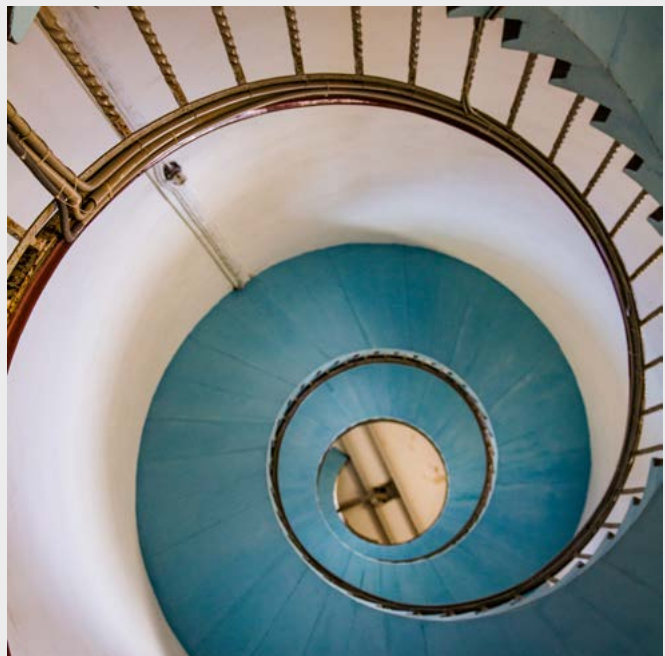
64% of Most Differentiated organizations plan to hire a CPO by 2025.

Perspective

Achieving customer loyalty through a product-based organization

Achieving any business result with digital products (including customer loyalty) requires leadership structures and support. Executive leadership needs to drive systems of measurement, funding, and setting expectations with the business and empower product teams to actually deliver outcomes. Often the business can take an overly simplistic project approach to product, parsing out dollars for features. And IT tends to take an overly technical approach, focusing on delivering “done” over driving results. Instead, executives need to drive holistic support to focus on iterative outcomes that will help the product scale.

And remember, while there are many metrics for product success, there is no better leading indicator than product usage. It is the most accurate measure of client value and impact.⁴



Case study

Part 3

How IBM Software has created a Product Excellence Office

IBM Software has created a Product Excellence Office to catalyze transformation and operationalize modern ways of working. The focus is on establishing strong career paths across roles (product management, UX design and research, engineering, and so forth), activating education and transforming management systems. The Product Excellence Office team created education modules and is also aligning the organization to leading products with “North Star” behaviors and customer goals, as well as associated metrics.

The Product Excellence Office also helps with accountability. Often, new processes and education are simply introduced and then left to drift. In this scenario, the Product Excellence Office stays embedded with research teams and product teams, both establishing accountability and providing ongoing support.

On the leadership side, three senior executives demonstrate cross-functional executive leadership, specializing in product management, engineering, and design respectively. The three are partners and peers, and their roles are deeply enmeshed—a unique structure that gives software products a highly cross-functional point of view.

Lesson #4

Don't just ideate, create something.

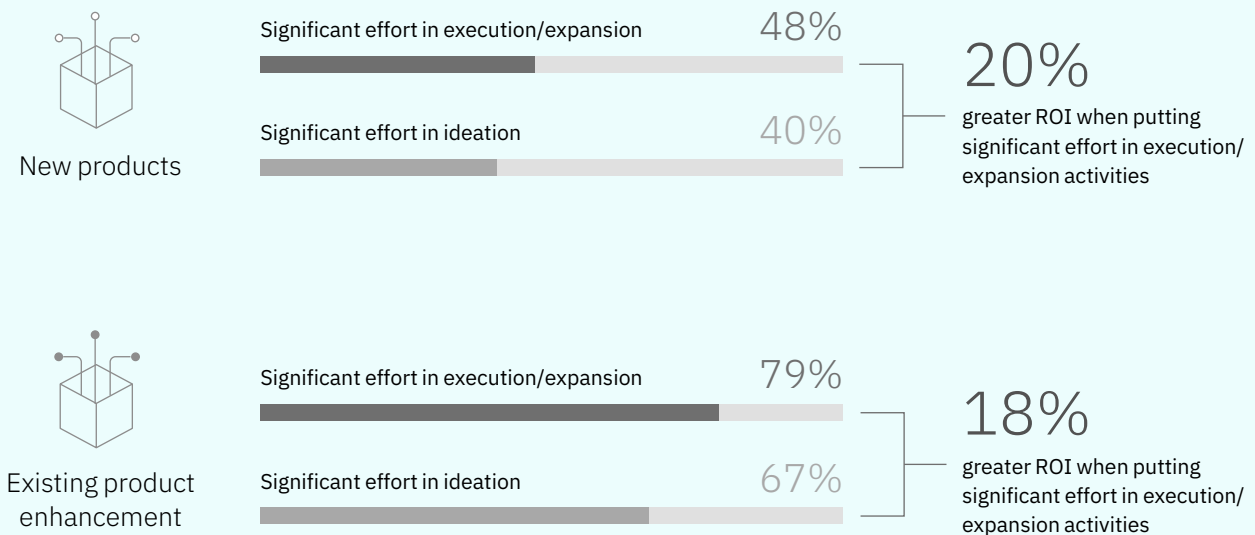
There's a reason why creative fields are considered so glamorous: Brainstorming new ideas is exciting. But for every 1% inspiration, you need the 99% perspiration.⁵ Most original ideas fall flat without swift execution and a continuous dedication to outcomes. So often, organizations fall prey to too many ideas, too little accountability. *The ability to execute on ideas is what truly sets organizations apart.*

Our analysis shows that languishing in ideation has a diminishing impact. Conversely, a heavy focus on execution and expansion activities is associated with 20% greater ROI on new products and 18% greater ROI on existing product enhancements, when compared to the same amount of effort spent in ideation activities. Emphasizing execution and expansion can pay off in a big way (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Execution/expansion outperforms ideation

A focus on execution/expansion can result in greater ROI



Organizations focused on execution and expansion efforts are also 59% more likely to focus on outcomes than companies that prioritize ideation efforts. And they are half as likely to let quantity of features and feasibility take priority, compared to their ideation-focused counterparts. This means they are less concerned with simply spinning off new ideas and more focused on delivering tangible results.

To enhance customer loyalty, a focus on product execution and expansion efforts must be supplemented with a strong dedication to continuous discovery. In fact, 60% of the Most Differentiated organizations in our survey report researching customer or end user needs as their greatest strength.

Ideation should not be neglected—sometimes it is necessary to expand teams' perspectives and encourage out-of-the-box thinking. However, it should be an action-oriented, timeboxed process that is actively guided by outcomes and customer value. By understanding customer needs and prioritizing outcomes, organizations can transform ideas into digital products that drive customer loyalty—and meet business goals.

Perspective

Achieving customer loyalty by transcending ideation

Customer loyalty comes from a continuous dedication to providing value for the user. Getting mired in ideation can delay product teams from digging deeper into the discovery of real customer value—studying how customers (or end users) are reacting to the latest product iteration and adjusting as necessary. Discovery efforts build customer relationships, and the learnings from those discovery efforts, when reflected in the product, will drive even more customer loyalty. Increasingly, the product serves as an indispensable partner or assistant.

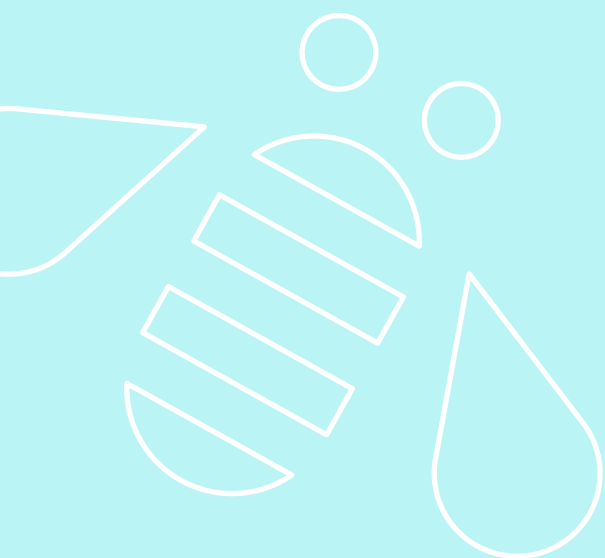
Case study

Part 4

How IBM Software balances ideation with validation

IBM Software believes that ideation without validation can truly be detrimental. To achieve that validation, and iterate accordingly, the organization has introduced a best practices and management process around public and private previews, a way of validating and building confidence before fully launching a product. Public previews may involve a beta version available for download on their website.

In the case of private previews, IBM will identify sets of customers that serve, in a sense, as sponsor users. They adopt the product, learn from it, and report those learnings back to IBM in a structured, efficient cycle. It's an informative process that benefits everyone involved—and ultimately, helps deliver a superior product. And the business avoids scaling things that don't matter.



Lesson #5

Embrace generative AI and create dynamic digital products.

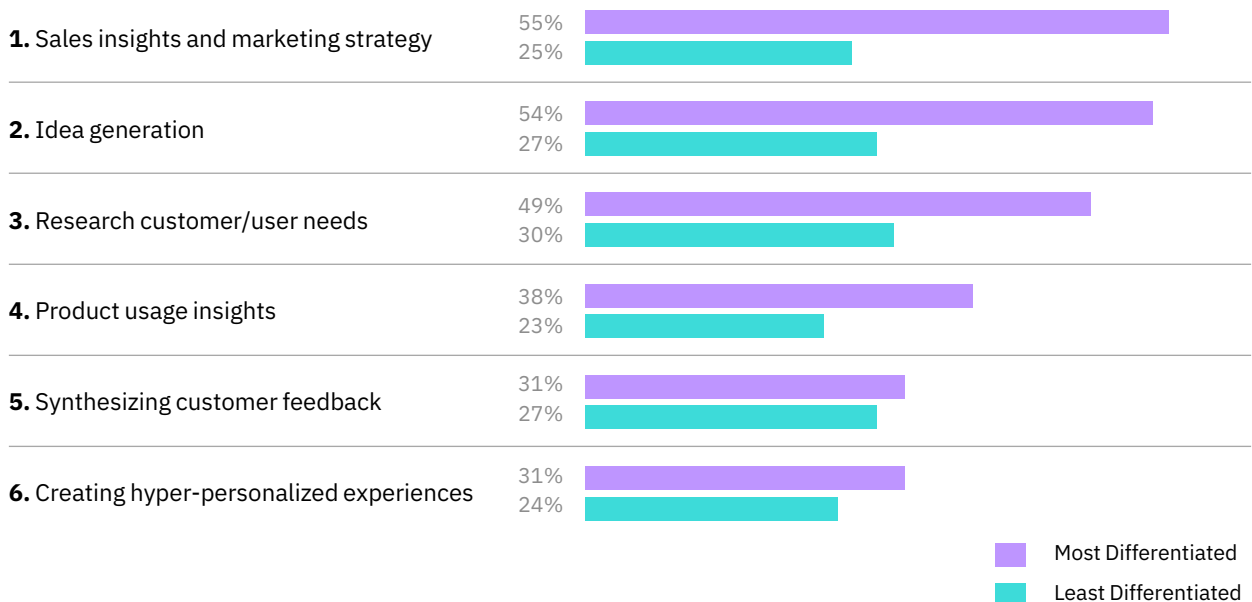
Generative AI is already revolutionizing digital product engineering, fueling dynamically personalized experiences, accelerating speed to market, and enhancing the overall user experience—and as a result, customer loyalty. Our respondents cited generative AI as one of the top three technology disruptors, along with AI in general and interconnected physical devices. In fact, 86% of executives believe that generative AI will be critical for digital product design and development over the next three years. 68% say generative AI will have a positive impact on user experience.

Our research also shows top consumer demands shifting toward personalization, customization, more choice, and innovation. Already, 54% of the Most Differentiated organizations are using generative AI for product idea generation. 49% use generative AI to research customer and user needs, 38% for product usage insights, and 31% for synthesizing customer feedback. As well, 55% are already using it for sales insights and marketing strategy, demonstrating these organizations are deploying AI in a holistic approach to customer loyalty (see Figure 5). Yet too many businesses are slow to embrace generative AI as a critical enabler—among our Least Differentiated respondents, adoption is far lower.

FIGURE 5

The Most Differentiated organizations are already embracing generative AI for product idea generation and much more.

Top 6 use cases for generative AI

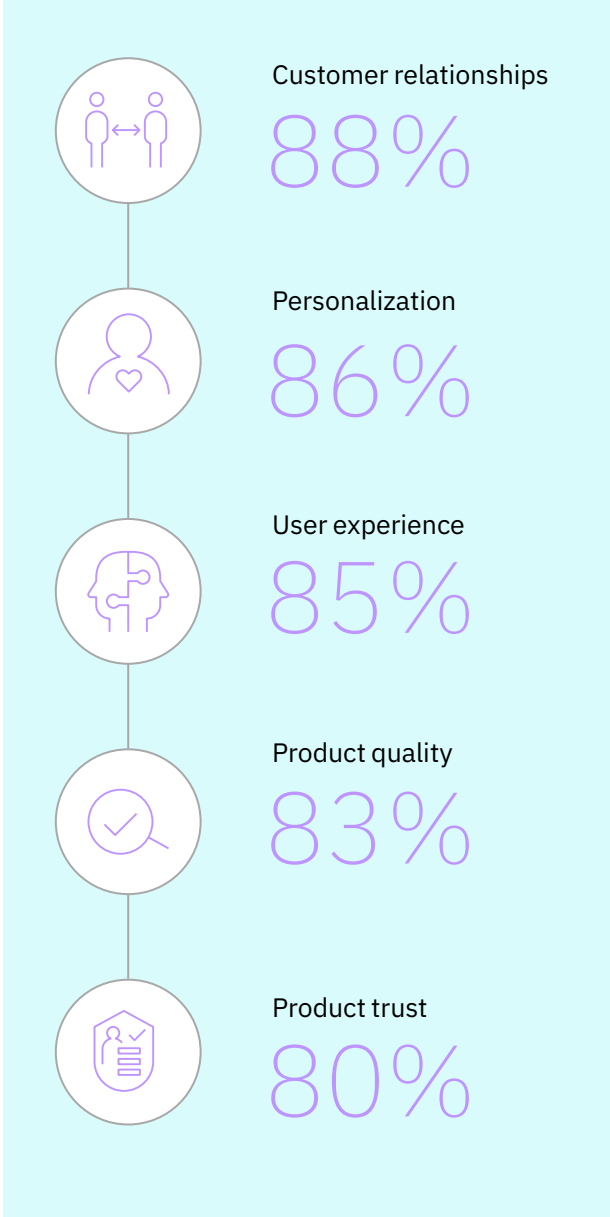


And, as we have been emphasizing throughout this report, tactics and features mean nothing without outcomes. More than eight in ten of our Most Differentiated respondents emphasize generative AI outcomes: specifically, that generative AI will positively impact personalization, customer relationships, product trust, user experience, and product quality (see Figure 6). In other words, they are using it as a powerful tool to obtain lasting results around the very dimensions that create the ultimate competitive differentiator: loyal customers.

Tactics and features mean nothing without outcomes.

FIGURE 6

How the Most Differentiated organizations expect generative AI to positively impact their digital product's customer experience.



Perspective

Achieving customer loyalty with the help of generative AI

Generative AI can help free up teams to focus on high value customer loyalty activities—and even expedite activities that, as we’ve discussed earlier, can consume time and generate little value, such as ideation. The technology can enhance customer loyalty by creating personalized, adaptive, and dynamic product experiences that resonate with each customer or end user, creating a sense of ownership and loyalty.

Additionally, generative AI can continuously iterate and improve product designs based on user feedback, helping ensure that an “evergreen” product remains relevant and engaging over time. By leveraging AI in product engineering, businesses can create products that *partner* with customers, building strong emotional connections and retention.



Case study

Part 5

How IBM Software embraces generative AI

IBM Software has determined an initiative around identifying the “top 10” set of workflows in which it is actively embedding generative AI. The organization is incorporating generative AI into products and processes, automating workflows, improving output, and accelerating design.

IBM Software is also training 100% of their designers in AI. In general, the designers find it invigorating to learn new skills and keep current with cutting-edge AI technology—and they love the prospect of spending more time on the creative aspects of their job that they’re passionate about.

In terms of synthesizing insights and crafting compelling content, IBM Design has seen a 12% average daily time savings for content designers. In addition to content design, the organization is investigating how to incorporate generative AI across product management, UX design, content design, and research.



Action guide

The lessons we've outlined throughout the paper apply to organizations at any stage of their journey, yet how they're applied may be slightly different. Whether improving or modernizing an existing digital product or creating a net new product, we wanted to provide actions that leaders can take today to start driving customer loyalty and competitive differentiation through digital products. And note: Modernization can sometimes require actions from both sections.

Improving or modernizing an existing digital product

- 1. Map apps and features to value.** Define what's moving the needle on value and what's not—and invest resources accordingly. Ask yourself the important questions: How does this product drive the most value for the business? For the customer? What needs to be reimagined versus improved or consolidated?
- 2. To create a product organization, embrace that it's different from a traditional IT organization.** Hire product leadership and dedicate their role to defining an outcome-based product development lifecycle (PDLC). In the meantime, create a culture in which business and IT can talk the talk and walk the walk—in other words, work as partners. In the context of product outcomes—not features—define where, when, and how business and IT can collaborate.
- 3. Identify how competitors could exploit your inaction.** Ironically, it can be safer to create something new than to tinker with an existing product. Yet a product that doesn't evolve is a product that ultimately fails. If your organization doesn't progress, a competitor may hijack the opportunity. Inaction has its consequences—know what they are.
- 4. Don't get stuck in ideation—also known as avoiding the risk of deciding.** Assess levels and types of risk: risk of failure, risk of inaction, risk of action, and so forth, to determine where to drive customer value next. Even the most “perfect” idea is not risk-free. So, be bold. Take action, iterate, validate, course correct—that's how you make viable progress.
- 5. Use generative AI to decimate roadblocks.** Even if you think something is costly and time-intensive, revisit the power of generative AI and its relevance to various workflows. Consider how generative AI can transform processes and outcomes.

Action guide

Creating a new digital product

- 1. Keep new product design simple.** Start with this: Does it solve a real customer problem? Dedicate your organization to an outcome-centric, iterative culture. Evaluate the ecosystem of what's out there and assess user needs. What will build customer loyalty over the long haul?
- 2. Beware of PowerPoint theorizing.** Organizations often take an “all or nothing” approach to research. Instead, do just enough to get your bearings and be sure your information is based on market research with real people who will use your product. Stay away from PowerPoint proselytizing.

91% of the Most Differentiated organizations spend a fair-to-significant amount of effort validating ideas with end users. Companies that spend a significant amount of effort validating features with end users earned an average 7% greater ROI in 2023 than those that do not.
- 3. Establish a Center of Excellence.** Dedicate resources to cultivating the skills and knowledge needed to create thriving digital product(s). It requires cultivating rigor and discipline, but competitive organizations have almost doubled their adoption of this practice from 2021 to 2023.
- 4. Take the pressure off—fully baked ideas don't always generate the best results.** Your first pass isn't the final pass. Analysis paralysis is one extreme; starting a frenzy of poorly planned work is another. Establish contingencies to course-correct suboptimal decisions and move quickly on low-risk options.
- 5. Reinvent your development teams.** Identify obvious time and money drains in build and test cycles and highlight areas in which generative AI can help. Steer product team efforts to designing better UX/UI experiences and experimenting with innovative technologies. And continually work toward the optimal team mix. Astute product teams are more than just developers and product managers; developers, designers, and even data scientists all play crucial roles.

Research and methodology

The IBM Institute for Business Value (IIBV) conducted a global survey of 1,500 business leaders across 28 countries and 14 industries. All respondents are familiar with their organization's use of digital products as part of their digital transformation strategy.

Organizations were asked to rate the extent of their digital product's competitive differentiation across 12 categories:

- Greater market share
- Stronger brand value
- Stronger revenue streams
- Better collaboration between technology and business teams
- More efficient and productive teams
- More customer loyalty
- Faster response to customer needs
- Better user experience
- More streamlined internal processes
- Faster response to new opportunities
- Lower cost
- More innovative solutions

The Most Differentiated companies discussed in this report represent the top quartile of differentiation, and the Least Differentiated companies represent the bottom quartile. While this paper only discusses the two extremes, organizations in between the two extreme quartiles reflected the same trends discussed in this paper. While differentiation was self-reported, organizations within the highest quartile of differentiation also reported the greatest ROI, a quantitative metric.

Primary user of their digital products

B2C customer	567
B2B customer	363
Partners/suppliers	161
Employees	409

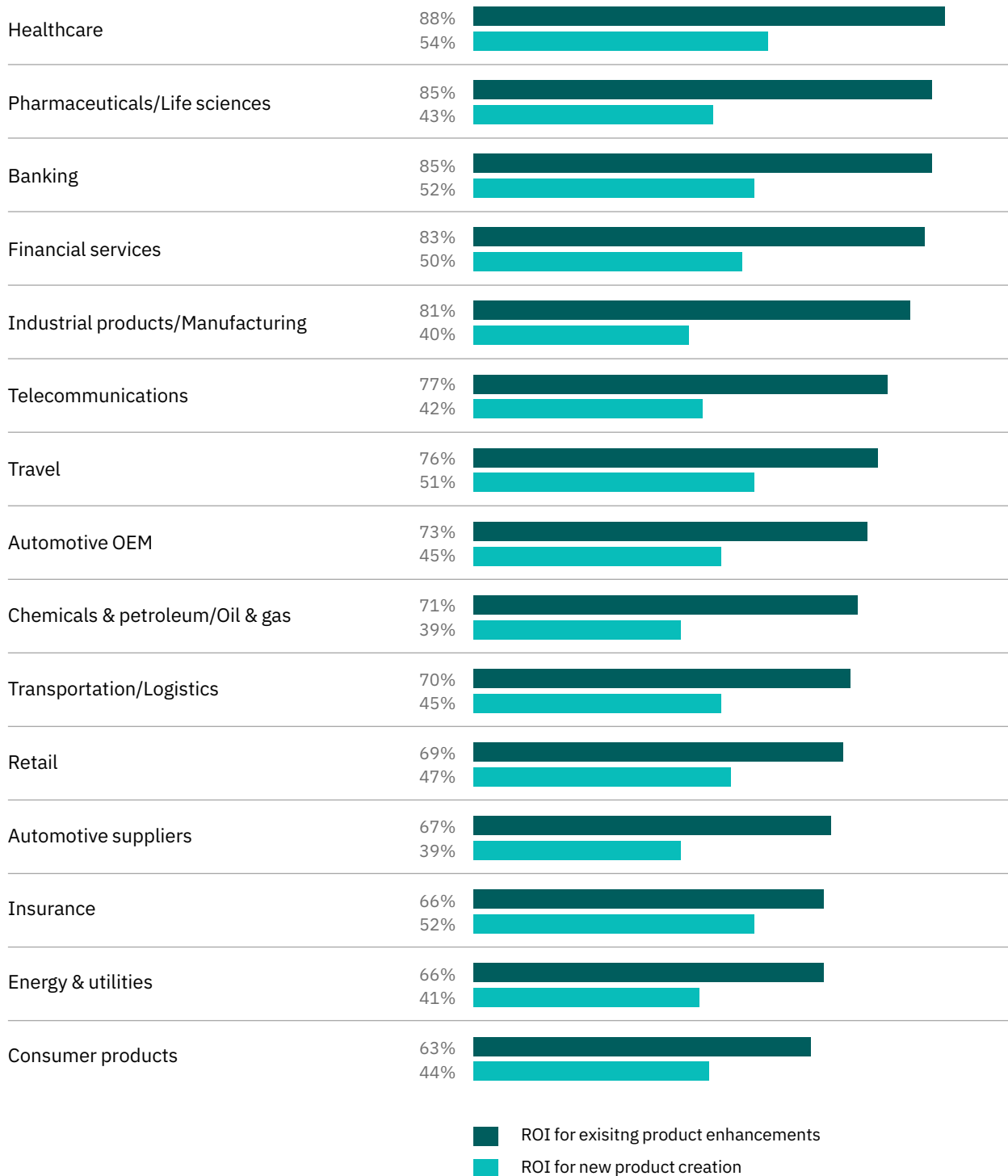
Digital product classifications

Drives an independent line of revenue	281
Contributes to an existing line of revenue	865
Improves employee productivity	354

Country		Industry	
Australia	38	Automotive	120
Belgium	15	Banking	105
Brazil	75	Consumer products	105
Canada	75	Chemicals & petroleum	105
China	75	Energy & utilities	105
Denmark/NL	30	Financial services	105
France	75	Healthcare	105
Germany	75	Insurance	105
India	75	Pharmaceuticals/ Life sciences	120
Indonesia	40	Retail	105
Ireland	4	Travel	105
Israel	4	Transportation/ Logistics	105
Japan	120	Telecom	105
Mexico	120	Industrial products/ Manufacturing	105
New Zealand	7		
Nordics	45		
Philippines	40		
Saudi Arabia/UAE	87		
South Africa	30		
South Korea	75		
Spain	75		
United Kingdom	75		
United States	225		

Appendix

Companies across industries are seeing massive returns on digital product investment



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5 trends for 2024

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Pursuing transformation like digital natives

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Produced in the United States of America | May 2024

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