AI OPPORTUNITY OUTLOOK

Top 15 Industries Set to Gain Most from AI

2026–2036

An entrepreneur, investor and strategist view — with a practical lens on founder access.

Developed by Askia Jones with Grok. Public edition curated and branded for Melanated.ai.

15 industries. One decade. A clearer starting point.

The opportunity is not just adoption. It is access.

Executive perspective

The source report’s strongest entrepreneur thesis is AI-native vertical services: deliver finished work for a specific underserved niche, priced by outcome rather than by software seat. Start with a costly, repeated problem — and earn trust by solving it reliably.

01 / Largest opportunity is not easiest entry

Infrastructure ranks second but scores just 1/5 for access. Services rank first and score 5/5. Founder access is a separate judgment, not part of the ranking total.

02 / Trusted distribution is a real advantage

Community knowledge, relationships and workflow fluency can help Black-owned businesses serve customers generic tools overlook. Access should include affordability, skills, data rights and who benefits.

03 / Productivity and new markets are different

Some industries mainly save costs for incumbents; others create new service categories. Several do both. The distinction matters when choosing a business model.

How to read this edition

Adapted from an AI-assisted report developed by Askia Jones with Grok, dated November 13, 2026. Rankings and founder-access scores are the source author’s judgments, not measured outcomes. Source citations and figures are reproduced or summarized from the supplied report and have not been independently verified. Forecasts are not guarantees. This is educational material, not investment, legal or medical advice.

The 15-industry scorecard

Scores are the source author’s judgments on a 1–5 scale. Total = potential + scale + durability; access is shown separately. Ties retain the source ranking.

Rank	Industry	P	S	D	Total	Access
1	Software & knowledge-work services	5	5	4	14	5/5
2	AI infrastructure & energy	5	4	4	13	1/5
3	Healthcare & life sciences	5	3	5	13	3/5
4	Financial services	4	4	4	12	2/5
5	Manufacturing, logistics & robotics	4	3	4	11	2/5
6	Retail & e-commerce	4	4	3	11	3/5
7	Cybersecurity	3	4	4	11	3/5
8	Defense & aerospace	4	2	4	10	1/5
9	Media, entertainment & advertising	3	4	3	10	4/5
10	Transportation & autonomous mobility	4	2	4	10	1/5
11	Education & workforce training	3	3	4	10	4/5
12	Real estate & construction	3	3	3	9	3/5
13	Travel & hospitality	3	3	3	9	3/5
14	Telecommunications	3	3	3	9	2/5
15	Sports	2	3	4	9	4/5

P = Economic potential S = Scalability D = Durability Highest access: services (5), media (4), education (4), sports (4).

01 / New market

Software & knowledge-work services

Sell finished work, not another software subscription.

Potential 5/5 · Scale 5/5 · Durability 4/5 · Founder access 5/5

AI-native vertical services can turn accounting, claims, compliance and other labor-intensive work into outcome-priced services. The report favors a specific underserved niche over a generic AI tool.

Market signal / Projection

The report cites Gartner’s 2026 forecast of $576B in AI services and $462B in AI software [S1], plus Foundation Capital’s estimated $4.6T labor-and-outsourcing opportunity [S13].

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- Outcome-priced bookkeeping for restaurants, churches or salons.
- Claims and appeals support for small insurers or medical practices.
- Compliance and implementation services for regulated small businesses.

What to watch

Frontier labs are entering applications; generic wrappers face price compression. Trust, workflow integration and reliable outcomes matter more than model access.

Source references: [S1], [S13], [S14], [S25]

02 / New market

AI infrastructure & energy

Serve the build-out without building the data center.

Potential 5/5 · Scale 4/5 · Durability 4/5 · Founder access 1/5

Chips, power, cooling and data centers underpin AI growth. Ownership is capital intensive, but local services and skilled-trades pipelines offer adjacent entry points.

Market signal / Projection

The report cites infrastructure forecasts of $1.48T–$1.56T in 2026 [S1][S2]. IEA’s base case projects data-center electricity demand of about 945 TWh by 2030 [S7].

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- Train and staff electricians and data-center technicians.
- Offer permitting and community-engagement consulting.
- Provide commissioning, cooling maintenance or cost monitoring.

What to watch

Capital requirements, permitting, grid constraints and boom-bust investment cycles limit access to the core market.

Source references: [S1], [S2], [S7], [S9]

03 / Both

Healthcare & life sciences

Start with administration and trusted care navigation.

Potential 5/5 · Scale 3/5 · Durability 5/5 · Founder access 3/5

AI can streamline notes, billing, benefits verification and patient follow-up. Drug discovery offers another opportunity, but administration is the more accessible service layer.

Market signal / Reported estimate / Projection

The report cites Menlo Ventures' estimate of $1.4B in healthcare-specific AI spending in 2025 [S15], and McKinsey's $60B–$110B annual potential in pharma and medical products [S6].

Entrepreneur plays / Source author's view

- Benefits verification and prior-authorization support for one specialty.
- Patient navigation and follow-up for community clinics.
- Clinical-trial recruitment and retention for underrepresented populations.

What to watch

Privacy, clinical safety, regulation and slow purchasing demand human oversight and qualified partners. Avoid presenting administrative AI as medical advice.

Source references: [S6], [S15], [S17], [S19]

04 / Productivity

Financial services

Work with smaller institutions and overlooked businesses.

Potential 4/5 · Scale 4/5 · Durability 4/5 · Founder access 2/5

Fraud detection, compliance, underwriting and customer service improve. Incumbents hold licenses, data and distribution; niche vendors can serve community banks, credit unions and CDFIs.

Market signal / Projection / Reported estimate

McKinsey estimates $200B–$340B in potential annual generative-AI value for banking [S6]. The report cites IDC’s estimate of about $31.3B in banking AI spending in 2024 [S20].

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- Compliance and exam-preparation services for credit unions and CDFIs.
- Cash-flow and lending-readiness services for small businesses.
- Claims intake for regional insurers.

What to watch

Financial regulation, data rights, bias and institutional procurement constrain new entrants. Lending decisions require responsible review.

Source references: [S6], [S20], [S21], [S22]

05 / New market

Manufacturing, logistics & robotics

Integrate practical automation before betting on humanoids.

Potential 4/5 · Scale 3/5 · Durability 4/5 · Founder access 2/5

Vision inspection, predictive maintenance and easier robot programming can open automation to smaller manufacturers. General-purpose robotics remains a longer-horizon opportunity.

Market signal / Projection

The report cites IFR’s forecast of 655,000 industrial robot installations in 2026 and 806,000 in 2029 [S23]. Humanoid forecasts differ sharply in timing and scope [S24].

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- Integrate robotics for food packing or small warehouses.
- Retrofit vision-based quality inspection on existing lines.
- Build a robot maintenance and repair service.

What to watch

Hardware, deployment and maintenance are demanding. Humanoid commercialization timelines are speculative.

Source references: [S3], [S23], [S24]

06 / Productivity

Retail & e-commerce

Help independent merchants become agent-ready.

Potential 4/5 · Scale 4/5 · Durability 3/5 · Founder access 3/5

Demand forecasting, merchandising, customer support and returns become more efficient. Shopping agents may create a new channel, while major platforms retain strong data and logistics advantages.

Market signal / Projection

McKinsey estimates $400B–$660B in annual generative-AI potential across retail and consumer packaged goods [S6].

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- Prepare product catalogs for shopping agents and AI search.
- Operate customer-service and returns desks for independent merchants.
- Offer demand forecasting for independent grocers.

What to watch

Platform dependence and incumbent advantages can compress margins. Demand forecasts and customer messaging need monitoring.

Source references: [S6], [S20]

07 / New market

Cybersecurity

Secure the new attack surface created by AI agents.

Potential 3/5 · Scale 4/5 · Durability 4/5 · Founder access 3/5

Agent identity, permissions, prompt injection and deepfake fraud create needs for testing and monitoring. Smaller organizations can benefit from managed specialist services.

Market signal / Projection

The report cites Gartner’s forecasts of $51B in AI cybersecurity spending in 2026 and $86B in 2027 [S1][S2].

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- Managed AI-security services for schools, nonprofits and small firms.
- Agent red-teaming and permission audits.
- Deepfake and voice-fraud protection training.

What to watch

Credibility, security expertise and liability are critical. Security claims need testing, not just automated reports.

Source references: [S1], [S2], [S14]

08 / Both

Defense & aerospace

Look to dual-use services, not classified core systems.

Potential 4/5 · Scale 2/5 · Durability 4/5 · Founder access 1/5

Autonomy, sensing and decision software reshape procurement. Civilian inspection, supplier compliance and technician training provide more reachable adjacent opportunities.

Market signal / Reported estimate

The source report cites 2025 defense-tech funding estimates of $17.9B–$49.1B, depending on definition [S47].

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- Drone and computer-vision inspection for civilian infrastructure.
- Contract-capture and compliance support for small suppliers.
- Training for drone and advanced-manufacturing technicians.

What to watch

Long procurement cycles, clearances, export controls and security requirements sharply limit access.

Source references: [S47], [S48]

09 / Both

Media, entertainment & advertising

Own distribution and community as production gets cheaper.

Potential 3/5 · Scale 4/5 · Durability 3/5 · Founder access 4/5

AI reduces production and localization costs. The report argues that trusted niche audiences, original work and distribution remain more defensible than high-volume generic content.

Market signal / Projection

The report cites McKinsey’s $80B–$130B annual generative-AI potential in media [S49] and PwC’s projected $1.4T global advertising market in 2030 [S46].

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- Niche publishing with owned newsletter audiences.
- AI-answer visibility services for brands.
- Localization and dubbing for creators, with appropriate rights.

What to watch

Copyright, licensing, platform changes and abundant synthetic content complicate value capture.

Source references: [S46], [S49]

10 / New market

Transportation & autonomous mobility

Build around fleets rather than building the vehicles.

Potential 4/5 · Scale 2/5 · Durability 4/5 · Founder access 1/5

Autonomous driving can become a software-delivered service. The report sees openings in depot operations, dispatch, remote assistance and the support layer around fleets.

Market signal / Source-reported claim

The report cites Waymo reaching 500,000 paid robotaxi rides per week in March 2026 [S50]; this claim has not been independently verified for this edition.

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- Fleet cleaning, charging and sensor-calibration services.
- AI dispatch and routing for regional carriers.
- Remote-assistance staffing with operational safeguards.

What to watch

Safety, local regulation, capital intensity and uncertain deployment timelines constrain core autonomy ventures.

Source references: [S50], [S51]

11 / New market

Education & workforce training

Pair AI learning with human coaching and career relevance.

Potential 3/5 · Scale 3/5 · Durability 4/5 · Founder access 4/5

Personalized tutoring and reskilling are accessible entry points. The report favors employer-funded professional training over slow school procurement and notes mixed evidence on AI tutoring outcomes.

Market signal / Reported estimate / Source-reported claim

The report cites HolonIQ’s estimate of $2.6B in 2025 edtech venture funding [S52] and PwC’s reported 69% growth in jobs requiring AI skills [S25].

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- AI-skills training for nurses, paralegals or small-business owners.
- Tutoring and test preparation with a human coach.
- Credentials for data-center and electrical trades.

What to watch

Learning outcomes, child privacy and equitable access need validation. Low delivery costs do not guarantee effective learning.

Source references: [S25], [S52]

12 / Productivity

Real estate & construction

Make everyday property and construction work more efficient.

Potential 3/5 · Scale 3/5 · Durability 3/5 · Founder access 3/5

Leasing, maintenance triage, estimating and building-energy optimization can become service businesses for small operators. Much of the overall value will accrue to owners.

Market signal / Projection

The report cites Morgan Stanley’s estimate of $34B in efficiency gains by 2030 across commercial real estate and REITs [S53].

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- Leasing and tenant-service desks for small landlords.
- Construction takeoff, estimating and permitting support.
- Energy-optimization services for small commercial buildings.

What to watch

Local codes, safety, accurate estimates and property data require expert oversight.

Source references: [S53]

13 / Both

Travel & hospitality

Help distinctive travel businesses work with AI agents.

Potential 3/5 · Scale 3/5 · Durability 3/5 · Founder access 3/5

Agents may reshape discovery, booking and loyalty. Independent properties can compete through distinctive experiences and better guest communication, rather than generic itinerary generation.

Market signal / Scenario / Projection

The report cites Skift’s scenario: capturing 10% of an estimated $105B in hotel distribution costs would create a $10B+ opportunity [S54].

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- Agent-ready booking and content for independent hotels.
- AI concierge and guest messaging for rental operators.
- Group travel planning for teams, churches and reunions.

What to watch

Booking trust, distribution dependence and guest privacy remain obstacles. Scenario estimates are not realized revenue.

Source references: [S54]

14 / Productivity

Telecommunications

Serve regional operators and the crews keeping networks running.

Potential 3/5 · Scale 3/5 · Durability 3/5 · Founder access 2/5

Customer care, sales and field-service documentation improve. The report expects most near-term value to be cost savings and lower churn for existing carriers.

Market signal / Projection

McKinsey estimates $60B–$100B in annual generative-AI potential in telecom, with about 70% in customer care and sales [S49].

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- Customer-care outsourcing for regional carriers and ISPs.
- Scheduling and documentation for network crews.
- Rural broadband grant and compliance support.

What to watch

Carrier concentration and procurement limit access; network operations require reliable, secure systems.

Source references: [S49]

15 / Both

Sports

Use local identity and live sport as your advantage.

Potential 2/5 · Scale 3/5 · Durability 4/5 · Founder access 4/5

Live, unscripted sport remains scarce as digital content becomes abundant. AI enables affordable coverage, recaps and operations for youth teams, HBCU athletics and underserved audiences.

Market signal / Projection

The report’s AI-in-sports forecasts span $2.6B–$27.6B by 2030 because definitions differ [S30][S31][S32]. These estimates should not be treated as comparable market measures.

Entrepreneur plays / Source author’s view

- Highlight and recap services for high-school and amateur teams.
- Sponsorship measurement for small teams and local events.
- Coverage for HBCU athletics, women’s leagues and niche sports.
- Youth-team scheduling, payments and fundraising support.

What to watch

Rights, official data and betting are concentrated and regulated. Use licensed footage and protect minors’ data and consent.

Source references: [S27], [S30], [S31], [S32], [S41], [S45]

From outlook to a responsible first move

Choose a narrow customer

Pick a customer group you understand. Talk to them about a recurring problem before choosing the AI tool.

Measure a real outcome

Test one service with a small pilot: time saved, dollars recovered, fewer missed appointments or a better customer experience.

Keep people in the loop

Use human review where errors can affect health, finances, safety or opportunity. Respect privacy, consent, licensing and professional boundaries.

Build trust, not just automation

Deep workflow knowledge, reliable delivery and trusted community relationships are harder to copy than model access.

Explore your next move at melanated.ai/pathfinder

This edition condenses the supplied report’s public industry analysis. Private company traffic, internal strategy notes and venture-specific recommendations have been omitted. All 55 source references are retained below for further reading.

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