



# Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a transformative and rapidly evolving technology.

By mid-2025, AI tools can create images and video from text, mimic human speech, write stories and music, generate computer code, perform hyper-specific real-time web searches, analyze data, and automate workflows – all in the fraction of the time it takes a human. For the most part, these functions are available to anyone with a computer and an internet connection. Most AI platforms offer free access; advanced features come for a fee.

AI could revolutionize Pioneer's work, but the tools come with a minefield of risks, including ethics, privacy, accuracy and security.

AI-generated content may be incorrect., PictureIn January, Pioneer formed the AI Strike Force, a volunteer staff committee tasked with identifying and evaluating AI opportunities and risks.

## THE GROUP'S MISSION STATEMENT IS:

To strategically identify and recommend AI-driven solutions that enhance operational efficiency while prioritizing responsible adoption through comprehensive risk assessment and ethical guidelines.

A dozen staff members from across Pioneer, led by NewsData Publisher Matt Davison, met bi-weekly from January to April. The team focused on:

Identifying AI potential benefits and disruptions for Pioneer services  
Conducting a staff survey to measure AI use.  
Developing a policy framework needed for Pioneer to move forward securely.

The team suggests Pioneer become an AI thought leader through sensible, deliberate, and strategic business practices. Failure to adapt risks the co-op losing business and relevancy.

## What is AI?

Artificial Intelligence (AI): Computer systems designed to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as problem-solving, decision-making, language understanding, and pattern recognition.

## FUNCTIONS INCLUDE:

**Generative** (content creation)

**Robotic** (autonomous drones and self-driving cars)

**Predictive** (data analysis/forecasting)

**Computer vision** (facial recognition, object detection)

**Agents** (perform tasks)

**Conversational** (chatbots and virtual assistants)

**Large Language Models (LLMs):** Systems that can be trained on vast amounts of data to perform tasks based on user-provided prompts. Popular LLMs include ChatGPT (Open AI), Claude (Anthropic), Llama (Meta), Gemini (Google), Perplexity and DeepSeek.

**Prompt Engineer:** Specialists hired by companies to optimize AI prompts and, in some cases, train LLMs.

# Findings

## 1. Analysis

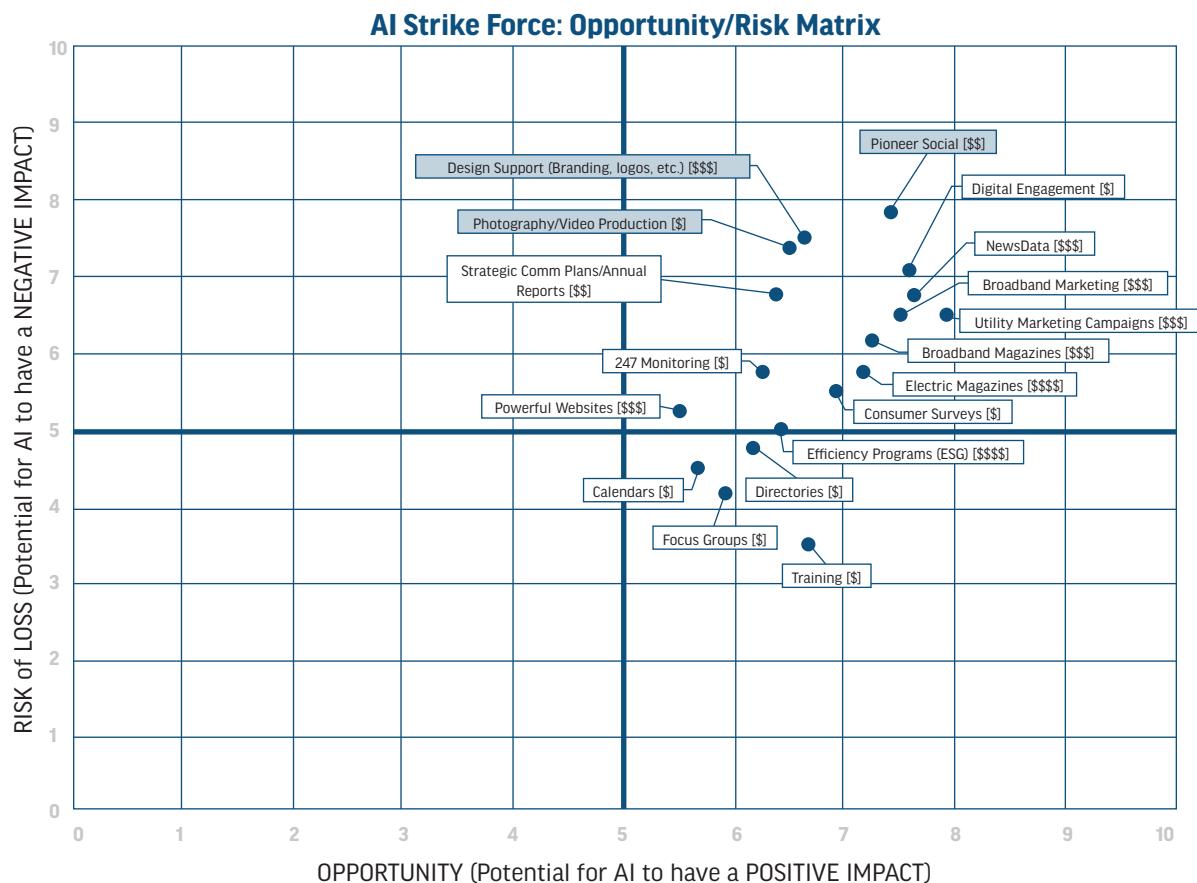
The Strike Force conducted a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) Analysis to quantify the opportunities and risks AI presents to each of the company's core business functions.

Committee members assigned a value from 1-10 (1=minimal impact, 10=major impact) based on the level of opportunity and risk for each service area using the following definitions:

- Opportunity: Potential for AI to have a positive impact (faster operations, less workload, smarter audience outreach, etc.)
- Risk of Loss: Potential for AI to have a negative impact (loss of revenue/clients, threat to future business opportunities, etc.)

Figure 1 shows the results of this exercise as represented by the scoring averages of all 12 members who participated.

**FIGURE 1**



\*Dollar signs indicate relative revenue importance to the business.

AI is a high-risk, high-reward endeavor for nearly all parts of Pioneer. Opportunity scores for all core business categories averaged 6.8. Risk scores across all categories averaged 5.9.

## Pioneer services with the **Highest Net Opportunity** – where opportunity scores most outweighed risk – were as follows:

- Training1 (\$) (Opportunity: 5.9; Risk: 4.2)
- Focus Groups (\$) (Opportunity: 5.9; Risk: 4.2)
- Directories (\$) (Opportunity: 6.2; Risk: 4.8)
- Efficiency Programs (\$\$\$\$) (Opportunity: 6.4; Risk: 5.0)
- Consumer Surveys (\$) (Opportunity: 6.9; Risk: 5.5)

<sup>1</sup>Committee members largely interpreted this category as internal training driven by a human supervisor.

## Pioneer services with the **Highest Opportunity**:

- Utility Marketing Campaigns (\$\$\$) (Opportunity: 7.9; Risk: 6.5)
- NewsData (\$\$\$) (Opportunity: 7.6; Risk: 6.8)
- Digital Engagement (\$) (Opportunity: 7.6; Risk: 7.1)
- Broadband Marketing (\$\$\$) (Opportunity: 7.5; Risk: 6.5)
- Pioneer Social Media Services (\$\$)

## Pioneer services with the **Highest Risks**:

- Pioneer Social Media Services (Opportunity: 7.4; Risk: 7.8)
- Design Support (Branding, logos, etc.) (\$\$\$) (Opportunity: 6.6; Risk: 7.5)
- Photography/Video Production (\$) (Opportunity: 6.5; Risk: 7.4)
- Digital Engagement
- Strategic Comm Plans/Annual Reports (\$\$) (Opportunity: 6.4; Risk: 6.8)

Further discussion on the results is available in the Recommendations section. A complete breakdown of the scoring methodology is available in the Appendix at the end of this report.

## 2. How Does Pioneer Use AI?

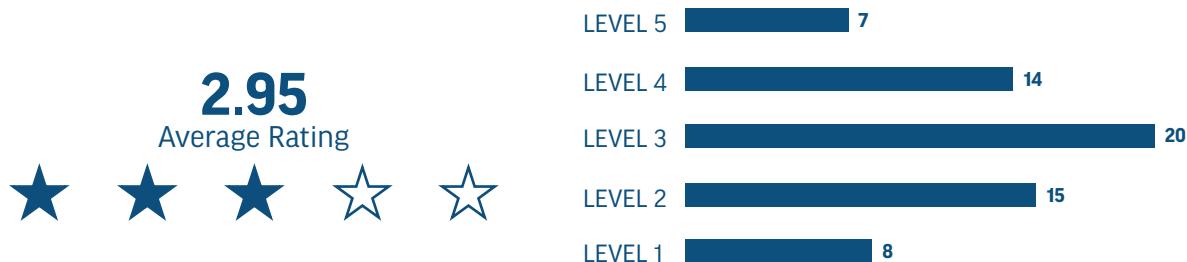
In March, the AI Strike Force distributed an anonymous survey to help the committee better understand how Pioneer employees are currently using AI tools. Staff were asked:

1. What is your overall comfort level using AI tools in general?
2. Which AI platforms are you currently using?
3. What are you currently using AI for?
4. To what extent do you feel AI can improve your work efficiency?
5. How often do you use AI tools in your work?
6. What challenges do you face when using AI tools?
7. What additional AI tools or training would benefit you?
8. Do you have any additional feedback related to AI you'd like to share with the committee?

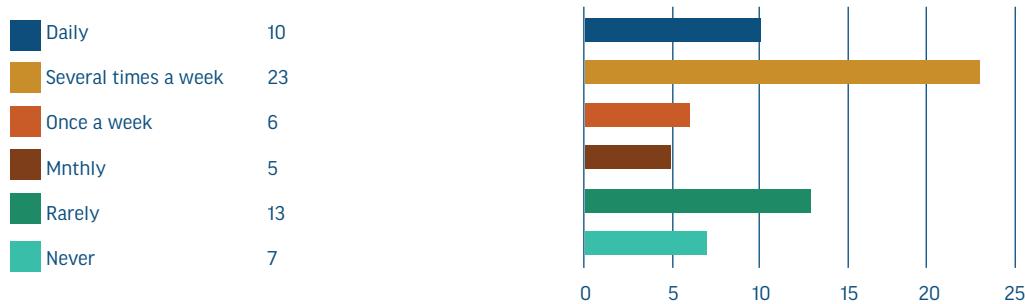
Selections from the survey results are shown in Figure 2.

## FIGURE 2

1. What is your overall comfort level using AI tools in general?



5. How often do you use AI tools in your work?



The survey was distributed to all Pioneer staff members and executives. Sixty-four responses were returned for a 57 percent completion rate.

Of the 64 respondents, 57 (89 percent) said they use AI in their work in some capacity.

That includes 39 (61 percent) who use AI at least once per week. Another 18 respondents (28.1 percent) indicated only occasional use. Seven (10.9 percent) said they never use AI in their work.

Respondents on average graded their comfort level with AI at 2.95 out of 5, with around 77 percent of responses in the range of levels 2-4.

ChatGPT was the most widely used AI tool by survey participants, with 39 responses. The second-highest selection was "Other," with 26 responses. Rounding out the top five were Claude (11), Microsoft Copilot (11) and Google Gemini (9).

### The top three AI use applications were:

- Creative brainstorming and idea generation
- Research and information gathering
- Personal productivity

The least utilized AI use applications were social media management, task automation, and marketing content optimization. Social media was the only option to receive zero responses.

The main concerns among Pioneer staff who participated in the survey were:

- Accuracy (48 responses)
- Quality of outputs (42)
- Privacy concerns (27)

#### THE SURVEY ALSO INCLUDED TWO OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS:

##### **What additional AI tools or training would benefit you?**

**BASIC TRAINING/GUIDELINES:** Respondents referenced the need for a clear AI use policy. Others would like to see training on a range of topics, including prompt construction, content curation, tool tutorials and best practices with using company data.

**USE CASES:** Some staff do not understand how they can use AI in their work. A use case overview would help show AI's benefits/use applications.

Regular updates and training on Pioneer-approved AI platforms, including those with paid subscription services.

##### **Do you have any additional feedback related to AI you'd like to share with the committee?**

Some responses spoke to AI's benefits, including a few that called it a significant "time saver."

Though they might see AI's potential, others expressed cautious optimism. Concerns included content accuracy, ethics, trustworthiness, and worries about negatively impacting Pioneer.

Various responses cited a need for clear AI use and ethical guidelines and disclosure policies. There is also interest in Pioneer devoting resources to keep a pulse on AI developments.

# Recommendations

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There are significant risks to using AI with any of Pioneer's business functions. The adoption of AI – like any innovative technology – requires strict and careful implementation. Mistakes from the use of AI tools could cause serious harm to the company's reputation. While this risk is magnified with any external, public-facing business functions, mistakes within the company could cause confusion and shake employee confidence.

The Strike Force's discussions on best practices centered around two distinct perspectives:

**Internal protocols:** How can Pioneer use AI responsibly and effectively? What safeguards could prevent incorrect or irresponsible AI usage? What types of staff training will ensure responsible use of AI tools?

**External growth:** How can we be thought leaders on AI? Does the company need to expand its service offerings to include some sort of AI division?

While there are nuances to each person's thought process, common-sense practices underscored committee discussions. Most involved risk mitigation; committee members often likened AI to "a toddler wielding a hammer."

Pioneer may not be able to take the hammer away, but the co-op can develop an AI use policy to prevent abuse.

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## AI Policy Framework

The Strike Force recommends creating an Executive AI Steering Committee consisting of Pioneer's IT leadership, department heads, the CFO, and HR leadership to provide executive oversight with Pioneer's AI use practices. This committee would develop and enforce clear and consistent usage policies, while vetting existing and future AI tools prior to staff rollout.

The Strike Force recommends these steps for any Pioneer staff use of AI:

- Establish mandatory human review processes for all AI-generated content.
- Create clear guidelines regulating any AI-created content, including clear definitions of AI-generated versus AI-assisted content.
- Restrict the sharing of critical information with external AI systems.
- Create transparent disclosure policies where appropriate.
- Establish preferred AI tools, as vetted by the Executive Steering Committee.
- Clearly communicate how AI tools enhance, rather than replace, human expertise.
- Create a Teams channel for staff to discuss AI use cases, new tools, and editorial questions.
- Institute internal onboarding practices to promote AI use applications for Pioneer purposes.

Based on the findings of the SWOT analysis, the Strike Force also submits the following suggestions specific to High Opportunity areas:

**DESIGN SERVICES:** Showcase Pioneer's consistent branding and storytelling across channels, backed by strategic, high-touch guidance from the Pioneer team. While AI can help low-cost campaigns stay efficient, it can also highlight the value of local photography/storytelling and design. Make clear what design elements are AI-supported, with pricing tiers reflecting the difference.

**MAGAZINE CONTENT:** Find ways to use AI to generate or repackage standard, evergreen content (with editorial review), then spend more time on human-led storytelling.

**MARKETING CAMPAIGNS:** Consider AI-assisted idea brainstorming for campaign concepts, planning and data analysis but prioritize human review and thought leadership.

**NEWSDATA:** Apply AI tools responsibly to enhance content (interactive graphics, text-to-speech services) and streamline mundane tasks (news aggregation). Develop clear and consistent disclosure guidelines for AI-generated/assisted content. Establish clear AI-use policies specific to news gathering purposes, with training on Pioneer-certified tools, proper research techniques and fact-checking. Maintain human-centered journalistic practices in order to preserve the NewsData brand.

**SOCIAL MEDIA SUPPORT:** Focus on local content/tone, human judgement, and industry expertise. Use AI for routine tasks and repurposing existing content with human review.

## Conclusion

Pioneer can harness AI to strengthen our story, but it will take a continued focus on thought leadership, staff and client education, and strategic applications of AI tools across the cooperative.

The team advises creating an Executive AI Steering Committee to provide oversight, develop and enforce staff policy and vet existing and future AI tools before rolling out to staff. Clear metrics should be implemented for measuring staff adoption, efficiency gains and member/client satisfaction.

# Appendix

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This report represents the work of Pioneer's AI Strike Force. The staff team's mix of editorial, design, marketing, technical, and leadership expertise led to a comprehensive analysis of AI's potential impact on Pioneer Utility Resources and the co-op's family of brands.

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Graphic Designer, Pioneer

PIONEER SERVICE	OPPORTUNITY	RISK OF LOSS	NET
24/7 Monitoring	6.3	5.8	0.5
Broadband Magazines	7.3	6.2	1.1
Broadband Marketing	7.5	6.5	1.0
Calendars	5.7	4.5	1.2
Consumer Surveys	6.9	5.5	1.4
Design Support	6.6	7.5	-0.9
Digital Engagement	7.6	7.1	0.5
Directories	6.2	4.8	1.4
Efficiency Programs	6.4	5.0	1.4
Electric Magazines	7.2	5.8	1.4
Focus Groups	5.9	4.2	1.7
NewsData	7.6	6.8	0.8
Photography/Video Production	6.5	7.4	0.9
Pioneer Social	7.4	7.8	-0.4
Strategic Plans/Annual Reports	6.4	6.8	-0.4
Training	6.7	3.5	3.2
Utility Marketing Campaigns	7.9	6.5	1.4
Websites/Landing Pages	5.5	5.3	0.2