SUTHERLAND®

Outlook 2026:
The Agentic Travel and Hospitality Enterprise

Introduction

Change has always been a constant in the travel industry, and 2026 will be no exception. Success this year will depend on how effectively travel brands absorb heightened volatility without eroding margins, while simultaneously responding to evolving customer expectations. This will be especially critical as AI continues to reshape how travel experiences are discovered, managed, and delivered across the end-to-end journey.

This volatility is coming from multiple directions. Utilities, maintenance, and input costs remain high. Sustained wage pressure and skills gaps are putting added strain on a sector that's dependent on labor-intensive service models. And, at the same time, inflation and economic uncertainty are impacting consumer behavior. Demand is still there, but spending patterns are becoming more selective with both consumers and corporate buyers more focused on value and flexibility.

In this increasingly complex operating environment, three priorities have emerged: protect margins, grow distribution resilience – especially with 30% of bookings expected to be handled autonomously by AI agents come the end of the decade[1] – and reduce operational dependency on manual effort. In other words, travel brands that succeed in 2026 will be those that set the stage for increased agility without also increasing costs.

Yet this is far from straightforward. Airlines, hotels, and all other travel players operate with intricate mid- and back-office ecosystems spanning booking management, fulfilment, logistics, accounting, compliance, revenue management, and partner coordination. These systems are often fragmented and prone to bottlenecks, absorbing already stretched resources and limiting responsiveness.

AI is widely deployed and being used to streamline forecasting, pricing, customer service, and several other core business functions. Yet, in most cases, AI remains assistive rather than autonomous. It's accelerating human decision-making but rarely executing multi-step actions independently across systems.

The Sutherland View

Agentic AI is an operating model shift rather than a technology upgrade. The next generation of travel will be driven by intelligence that's embedded into day-to-day operations, and where human and AI work together to enhance the customer experience, drive new revenue opportunities, and create an environment designed to weather constant disruption.

1 https://www.idc.com/resource-center/blog/agentic-ai-will-redefine-travel-and-hospitality-in-2026/

In 2026, however, this is starting to shift. More than 60% of travel businesses are now experimenting with agentic AI capabilities, moving an important step closer to embedded operational deployments.[2]

Agentic AI represents the next phase of operational evolution. By enabling AI agents to act autonomously, coordinate across systems, and anticipate needs in real time, it offers a pathway to structural efficiency gains while supporting the hyper-personalized, seamless experiences travelers expect. And it's those travel brands that treat agentic AI as an embedded operational capability, setting the foundations for broader agentic adoption in the years to come, that will be well positioned to protect margins, strengthen distribution, and absorb volatility in a travel economy that's entering a new phase of change.

With this in mind, let's explore three areas where agentic AI can deliver measurable impact across the travel and hospitality industry in 2026, along with practical steps leaders can take to align investment and operating models with the direction the industry is moving.

2 https://www.phocuswright.com/Travel-Research/Research-Updates/2026/61-of-travel-business-surveyed-experimenting-with-or-scaling-agentic-ai

Three Opportunities for Travel and Hospitality

Opportunity 1:
## Agentic Travel Companion as a Differentiator

The Challenge

Consumers now want more than just "a stay". They prioritize meaningful experiences and deeper personalization, and are increasingly looking for responsible travel that mitigates the risk of overtourism and environmental impact.

Yet, above all, travelers are seeking maximum value and minimal friction. In 2026, as personal budgets continue to be squeezed, a defining travel motivation is the desire to "rest and recharge" cited by 56% of travelers as their number one priority.[3] And reducing stress is not just about the trip itself, but how it's planned.

Trip planning is already being enabled by AI. With 61% of travelers finding AI tools valuable for trip planning, discovery is changing to involve new search opportunities and intermediaries.[4]

The challenge is no longer just to design compelling experiences, but to make them more effortlessly discoverable, adaptable, and frictionless as AI continues to shape traveler journeys and expectations.
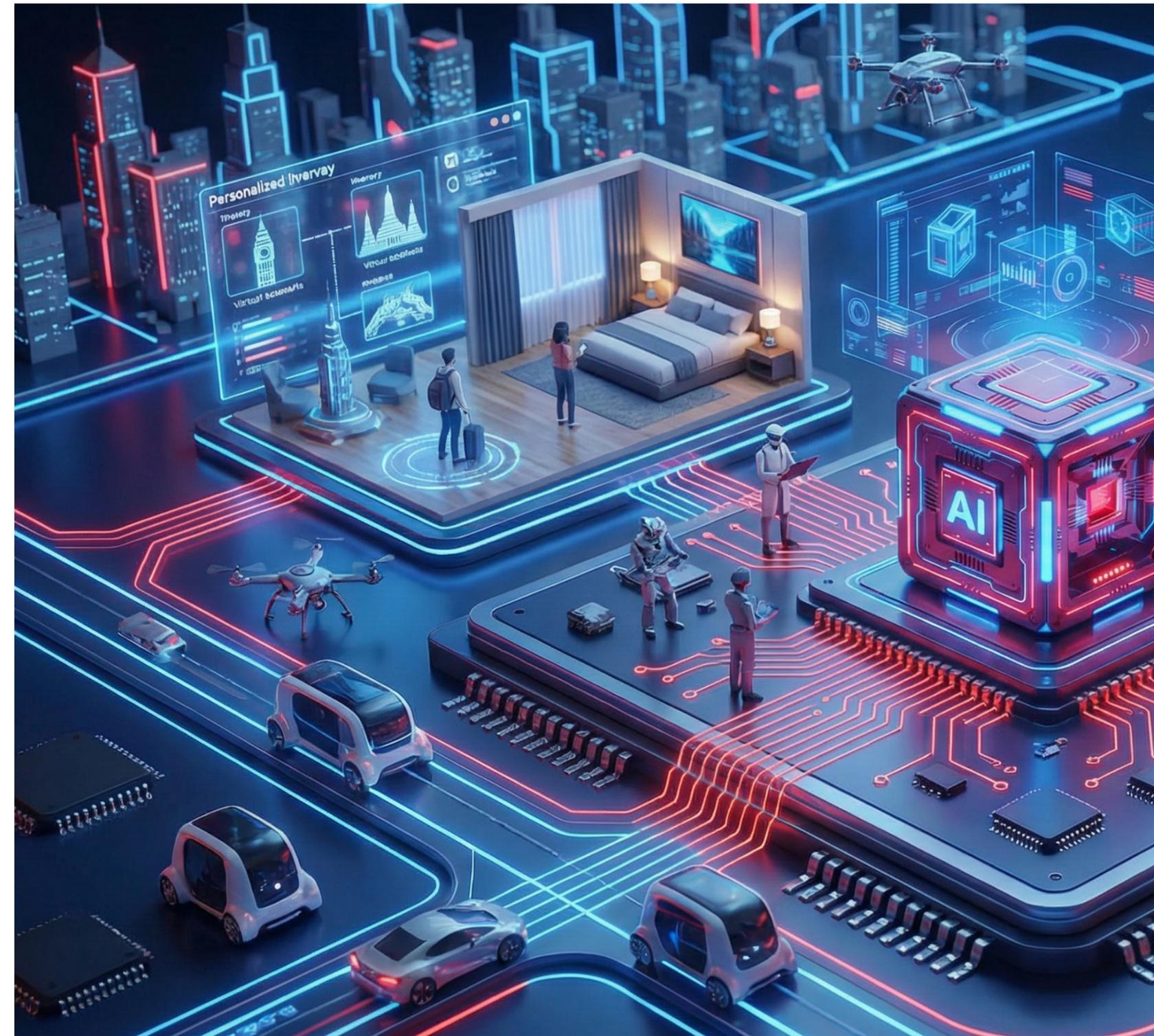
The Agentic AI Opportunity

With discovery increasingly being shaped by AI and consumer expectations rising, travel brands must shift from experience visibility to experience execution. And agentic AI enables this transition.
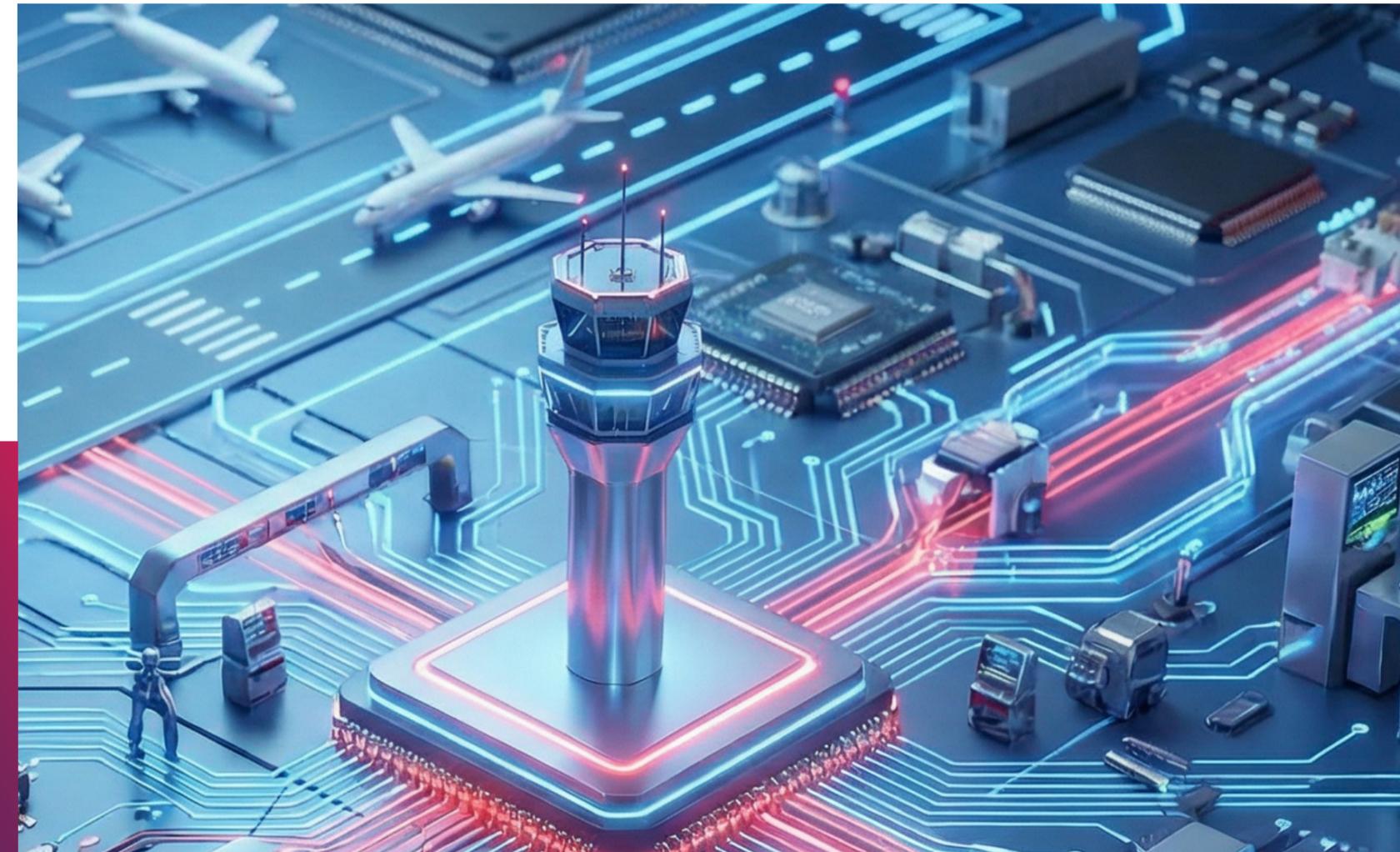
Unlike traditional AI tools that support isolated interactions, agentic systems can coordinate across booking, service, and disruption management in real time. Rather than layering additional digital touchpoints onto already complex journeys, brands can orchestrate end-to-end experiences that better anticipate customer needs and resolve friction before it escalates.

Agentic AI stands apart from previous AI solutions with its ability to contextualize and remember information and act on it. This allows guest-facing tools and platforms to be ultra-personalized, tailoring recommendations and customizing plans based on past behavior, preferences, and real-time context. It means chatbots can be elevated, and self-service platforms can act autonomously to support complaint and dispute resolution.

Additionally, given the right data and context, it can be used to address demand for more ethical travel with ways to reduce overtourism. Travel and hospitality providers can leverage agentic AI tools to plan personalized itineraries and recommend lesser-known or niche offerings, not only catering to a growing customer priority.

Doing so becomes an execution layer that connects personalization, operational excellence, and distribution into a unified, adaptive strategy.

Partnering with a global hospitality leader to overhaul their digital CX operations, Sutherland helped boost NPS 40 points and cut costs 42% through experience-led transformation that incorporated intelligent automation and AI-powered tools.[5]

5 https://www.sutherlandglobal.com/uk/insights/case-study/improved-business-process-for-hospitality-company

Practical Actions for Travel and Hospitality Leaders

Map the best approach for agentic AI guest experiences. Dependent on where an enterprise sits within the travel and hospitality ecosystem, how agentic AI can be used to enhance guest experiences changes. Begin with a **digital assessment** that looks strategically at which approach will deliver the greatest value-add for customers. Map the customer journey, uncover friction points, and tailor solutions accordingly to enhance both user experience and operational efficiency.

Enable the secure flow of all customer data. The capabilities of AI agents are inherently linked to the quality of data they can access. Agentic AI relies on context to make **intelligent, automated decisions** and therefore putting in place infrastructure to ensure guest data, past vacations, preferences, buying patterns etc. can be utilized by AI to deliver ultra personalized service.
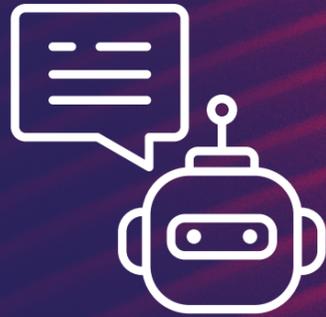
Transform assistive chatbots into autonomous service agents. This is an area of AI that has already been explored by many in the industry, but agentic AI gives an opportunity to extend the capabilities of chatbot solutions. With the ability to better deliver booking support, **real-time customer service**, queries, reservation modifications and recommendations, agentic AI can greatly elevate the service these tools deliver.

Leverage AI for ultra-personalization. With data flows and agents in place, utilize these solutions to offer a highly personalized experience with customized offers, dynamic pricing, and tailored insights that speak to individual customer preferences to differentiate and capture value.

Opportunity 2:
AI-Powered Operations to Handle Changing Workloads

The Challenge

Travel and hospitality businesses have always been people centric. But in 2026, with staff shortages, demand fluctuations, and increasing operational complexity becoming persistent conditions rather than isolated events, this is forcing a rethink of how value gets delivered at scale.

Yet many organizations still rely on manual coordination across fragmented mid- and back-office systems spanning booking management, finance, procurement, and beyond. The result is an operating model that struggles to absorb the added complexity that's become the status quo without incurring extra cost. Teams are stretched thin not only by volume, but the need to reconcile across disconnected systems.

Introducing agentic capabilities and advanced agents that can work autonomously is the way to meaningfully improve operations as a result.

The Agentic AI Opportunity

Realizing the full value of agentic AI means embedding intelligence across operations, revenue management, and customer service rather than layering standard automation tools onto existing workflows. This allows travel brands to design workflows that can better anticipate disruption, and agentic systems that can manage that disruption as if it's a predictable operating condition.

For hotels, this could mean dynamically adjusting housekeeping schedules based on occupancy shifts and guest preferences. For airlines, it may involve autonomously handling maintenance updates and logging, and crew allocation in response to schedule changes. Many of these tasks can not only be streamlined with AI, but automated using AI agents to reduce workloads, labor costs, and human error.

Since these decisions will no longer operate in isolation, there is huge potential for agentic AI to support revenue maximization too. With the right contextual data, AI agents can support demand forecasting to improve revenue management and dynamic pricing.

When it comes to yield management, because rooms/seats/perishables are time-sensitive and highly variable in demand, AI-driven dynamic pricing and forecasting using real-time data can add significant value. This is ideal to help hotels, airlines, and travel providers optimize pricing and fill occupancy, and thereby maximize margins.
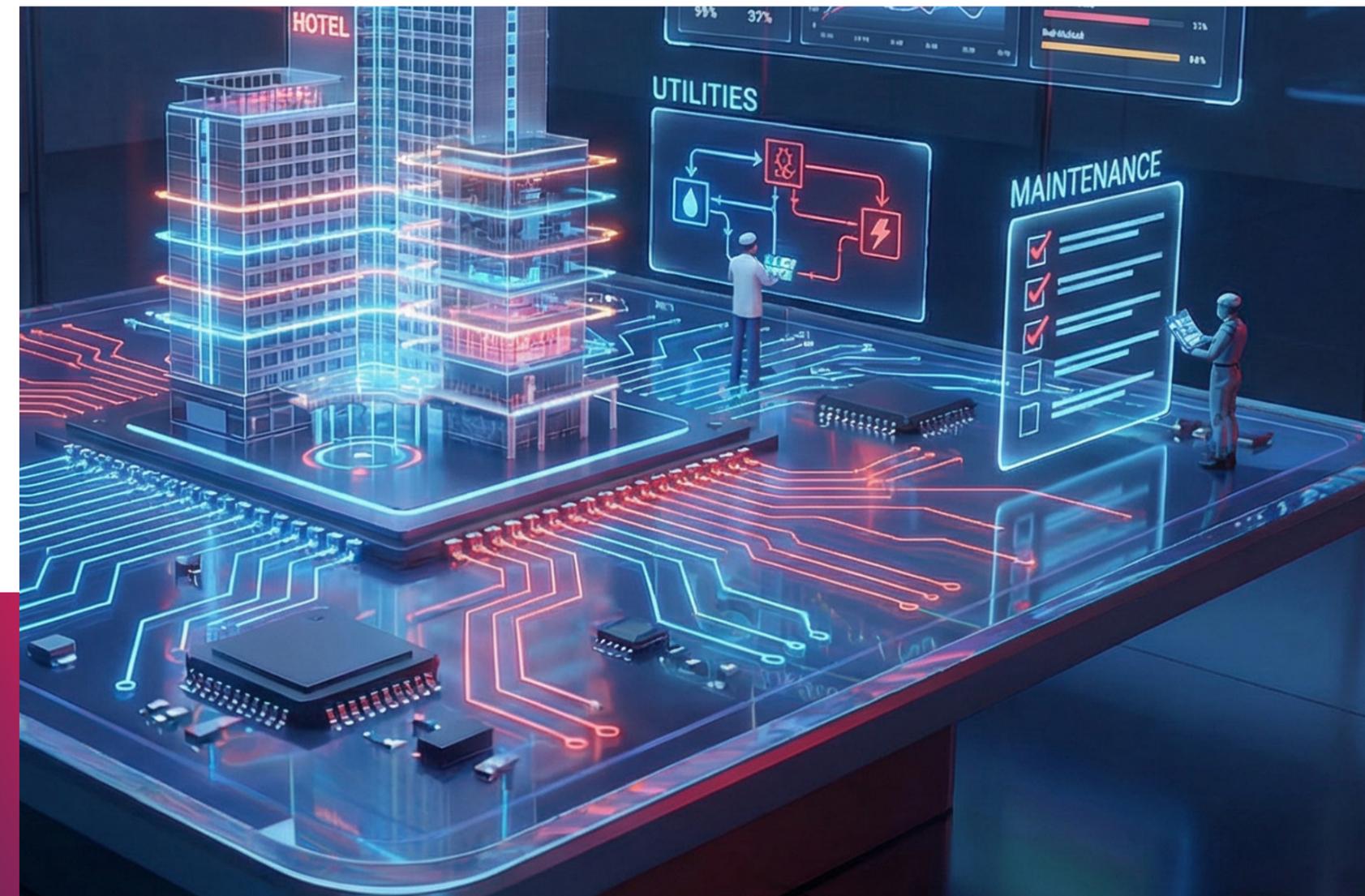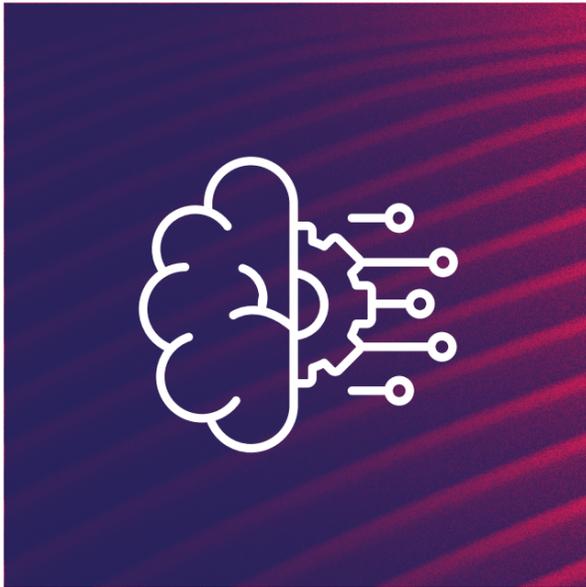

> Sutherland Robility, paired with advanced AI and intelligent automation, enabled India's leading airline to transform refund operations with 80% faster processing and a 70% reduction in manual processes.[6]
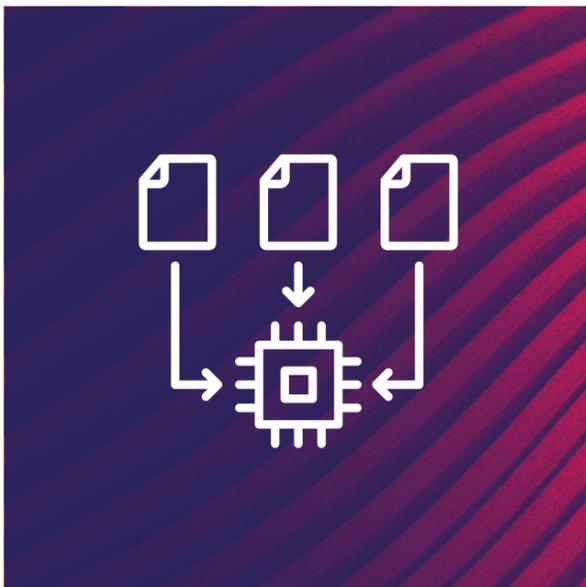
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Practical Actions for Travel and Hospitality Leaders

Conduct an AI-readiness assessment. Bring together all mid-and back-office functions-operations, risk, finance, IT leaders to conduct a **structured assessment** of businesses processes. This will help to refine and prioritize the applications most suited to agentic automation, delivering the greatest ROI.

Audit and unify operational data for context-aware action. Agentic solutions only work effectively when there is **complete, real-time access to all relevant data**. Depending on the subsector of the industry in which a business operates, this could be everything from ticket information, inventory & procurement, and maintenance logs to pricing data and compliance data. The key is identifying the relevant data signals for the proposed agentic solutions and ensuring access to all key data signals.

Automate repetitive, time sensitive back-office decisions with intelligent agents. With the data layer in place, enterprises can start to offload the tasks identified as part of the assessment to automated agents. This means defining where agents should act autonomously and where high impact of sensitive tasks should be routed to humans to ensure optimum results. Apply **digital assurance** practices to ensure autonomous actions remain aligned with operational, financial, and compliance requirements.

Benchmark operational performance. Part of a successful agentic AI initiative is a full understanding of how it impacts operations. This allows underperforming solutions to be redesigned, and for successful tools to be scaled. Benchmarking at regular intervals is key to long-term data-driven success.

Opportunity 3:
## Smart Facilities for Sustainability and Cost Saving

The Challenge

Smart facilities that incorporate IoT are increasingly seen as a necessary investment in sustainability to move the needle on ESG metrics. This is key to meeting regulatory imperatives, which is why travel and hospitality firms face greater pressure to adopt eco-friendly practices, reduce waste, manage resource consumption, and be more environmentally responsible.

But stainability is a growing priority for customers, too. In 2025, traveling more sustainably was important for an overwhelming majority (84%) of consumers[7] pointing to a broader imperative for environmentally conscious operations.

From one perspective this could be seen as resulting in potentially higher costs from investing in greener operations. However, in 2026, sustainability and margin discipline are converging more than they ever have before. Addressing challenges around waste management and resource efficient offerings can deliver on both sustainability and cost saving metrics simultaneously as a result of smarter resource management driven by agentic AI.

Among the 25% of hotels with the lowest emissions, water use and waste costs per room per night were, on average, 38% cheaper than the 25% of hotels with the highest environmental impact.[8]
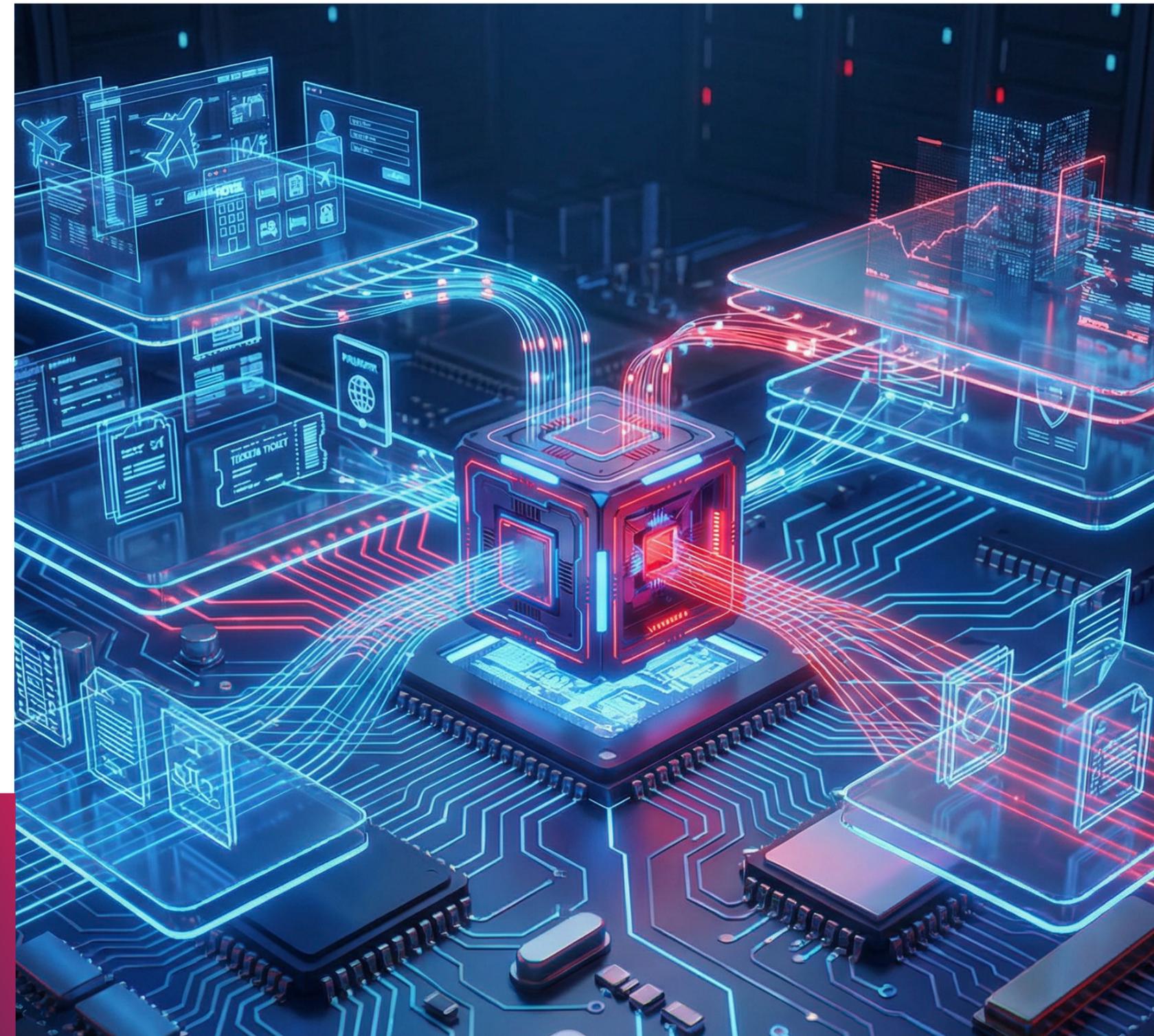
The Agentic AI Opportunity

Agentic AI provides the mechanism to operationalize sustainability rather than merely report on it. In 2026, by embedding ESG objectives directly into decision logic, agentic AI systems can help optimize resource use and reduce waste in real time, preventing inefficiencies before they occur while supporting more environmentally conscious travel and hospitality.

For example, by using AI in conjunction with IoT, hotels can optimize energy, lighting/AC, room occupancy, and things like housekeeping schedules to introduce dynamic cleaning when guests check out or on demand. This not only reduces labor and cuts costs but improves efficiency and supports sustainability.

If IoT components are not practical for some travel and hospitality businesses, they can still derive similar benefits by using agents for resource optimization to minimize waste and again drive for cost savings while aligning with growing guest expectations for responsible travel.

A further benefit of tackling smarter resource management using agentic AI solutions is that it gives organizations measurable data that is crucial to supporting ESG reporting and compliance documentation.
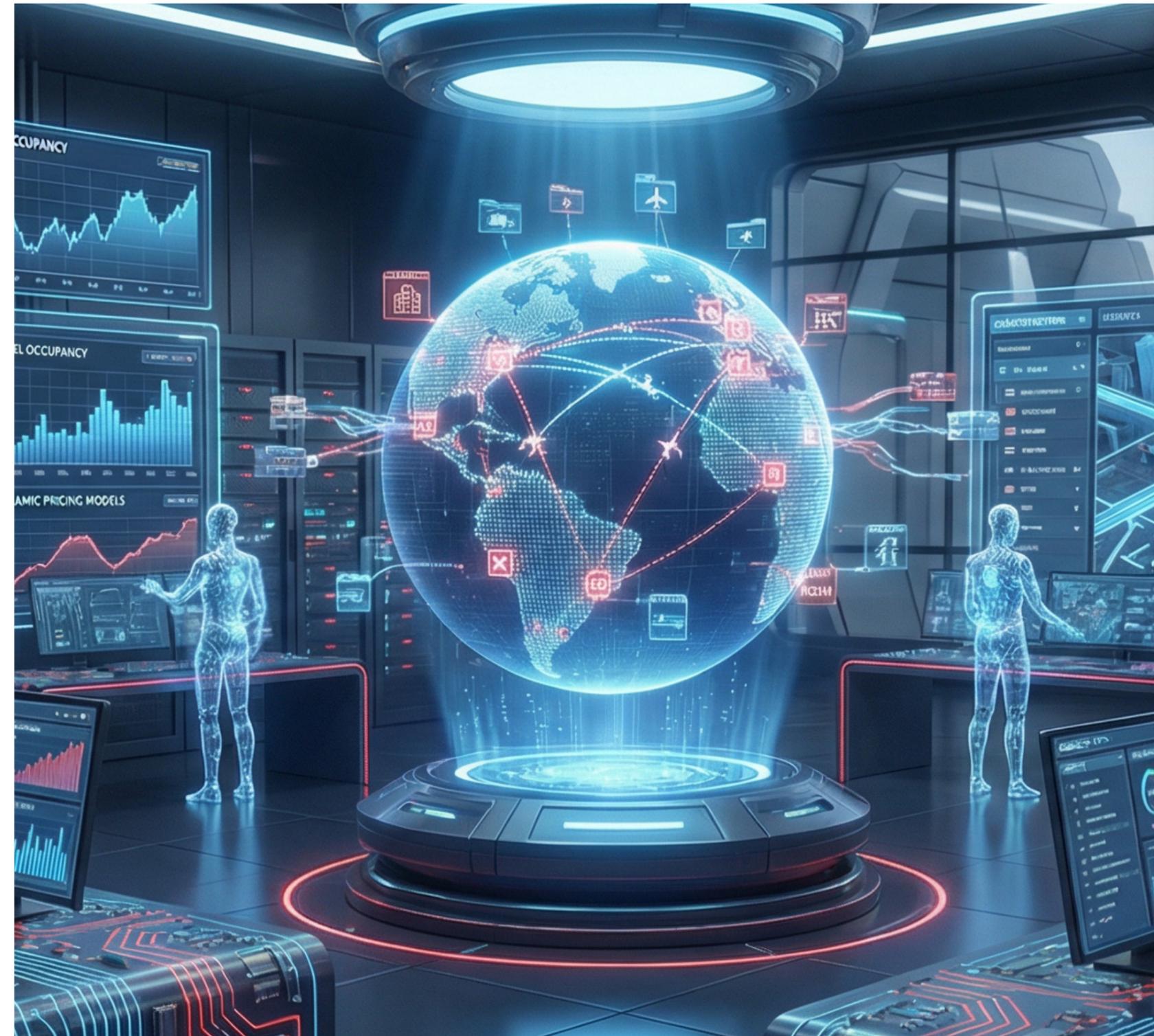
Practical Actions for Travel and Hospitality Leaders
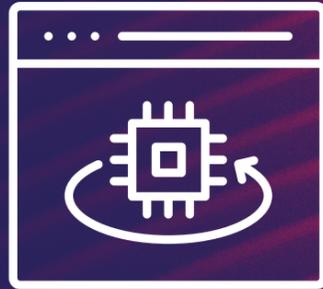
Create a unified, real-time operational data foundation for facilities and resources. Integrate all data signals from building management systems, energy meters, IoT sensors, maintenance logs, procurement systems, and ESG reporting into a **single data layer** so agentic AI systems can reason across resource usage before taking action.
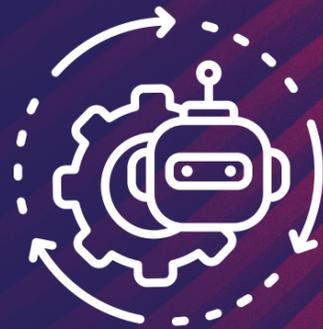
Target high-impact processes that support both cost saving and sustainability targets. Prioritize processes including preventative maintenance scheduling, HVAC optimization, water usage monitoring, waste tracking, and asset lifecycle management. Identify where **AI and autonomous agents** can act to drive efficiency and minimize waste and where manual intervention is needed to ensure no impact on customer facing services.

Embed ESG objectives into operation decision logic. Equipping agents with data around ESG targets like emissions reduction targets and water conservation metrics, for example, will allow them to autonomously execute actions that support these goals with an auditable data trail.

Create a roadmap to support future smart facility management: As additional ESG regulation requires further investment in green infrastructure over a number of years, create a roadmap that not only underpins near-term goals, but can support future initiatives. This starts with conducting a focused **operational assessment** to identify challenges and gaps and then developing a practical action plan to follow. Ensure the roadmap accounts for technology interoperability, regulatory evolution, and scalability to protect sustainability investments.

The Road to the Agentic Travel and Hospitality Enterprise

The travel and hospitality industry is ideally placed to see significant value if it takes the leap and makes agentic AI central to operations. From streamlining and elevating the performance of mid- and back- office functions to delivering services that meet evolving customer demands, the industry is stacked with agentic AI potential.

In every era of travel and hospitality transformation, the organizations that reimagined how value is created and delivered across the traveler journey gained a lasting advantage. It is no different now. The distinction is that innovation isn't a new route, package, or pricing model. It's a new mode of operating, where intelligence becomes operational and adaptive across every stage of the travel experience.

While the opportunities for agentic AI are apparent, and there's a clear roadmap to implementation, first mover advantage is still on the table: 90% of travel execs say their organization is using Gen AI in some capacity, yet only 2% report agentic AI as having widespread adoption.[9]

For 2026 and beyond, the priority is clear: put the data, systems, and governance in place to enable agentic AI that can execute tasks intelligently. This will enable the shift from an AI implementation that works to support business functions, to one that's truly automated and able to act intelligently to deliver enhanced business results.

9 https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/travel/our-insights/remapping-travel-with-agentic-ai

Agentic capability relies on the right foundational elements. Explore Outlook 2026: The Road to the Agentic Enterprise **for the fundamentals every organization needs.**

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