Data Instead of Hype:
9 Trends That Will Determine the Success of AI Initiatives in 2026

Passau, December 17, 2025 – Looking ahead to 2026, many companies are reaching a strategic turning point in their data and AI initiatives. While topics such as artificial intelligence, multi-cloud, or data mesh remain highly visible, practice paints a different picture: real business value is generated less by new technologies than by robust data foundations, clear governance, and consistent execution.

Dr. Andreas Böhm, founder and CEO of One Data GmbH, therefore takes a closer look at current trends that will shape corporate data strategies in the coming year and provides concrete recommendations.

1. AI-ready data as a decisive competitive advantage

Despite substantial investments in artificial intelligence, many initiatives continue to fail due to fundamental deficiencies in the data foundation. Studies show that only a small proportion of companies consider their data to be truly AI-ready. According to Gartner®, while most organizations view AI as strategically relevant, only a minority have sufficiently high-quality, well-documented, and governance-compliant data to deploy AI productively and at scale. Gartner® points out in several studies that poor data quality, a lack of transparency regarding data lineage, and unclear responsibilities are among the most common causes of failed AI projects.

"When data is fragmented, poorly documented, or not linked to business objectives, AI amplifies existing problems instead of solving them. The key question is therefore not whether companies use AI, but whether their data is actually ready for it," Böhm explains.

A strategic lever for greater data maturity lies in the targeted use of system migrations, for example in the context of SAP modernizations or cloud transformations. Companies that establish data quality, metadata management, and governance at an early stage will achieve significantly higher accuracy and economic efficiency in their AI applications than competitors with an inadequate data foundation.

2. Converged data management platforms instead of tool sprawl

In recent years, many companies have developed a heterogeneous landscape of specialized data tools. According to analyst observations, large organizations today often use more than a dozen tools for integration, data quality, governance, analytics, and operations—frequently with overlapping functionality and limited interoperability. The consequences include increasing integration effort, additional costs, and breaks in governance and compliance processes.

The trend for 2026 clearly points toward converged platforms that bundle data integration, quality management, governance, and usage in a shared environment. Such approaches are intended to help companies reduce the complexity of their data architectures, shorten time to market, and implement regulatory requirements more consistently.

3. Self-service data access with clear guardrails

Self-service data management continues to gain importance as business units are expected to access data more quickly and independently. A key enabler of this development is generative AI: features such as text-to-SQL, semantic search, or conversational data assistants are making data access increasingly possible even for non-technical users. At the same time, experience shows that self-service without clear frameworks entails risks. A lack of governance can lead to inconsistent data quality, shadow IT, and compliance issues.

For 2026, an approach is emerging that combines AI-driven usability with binding guardrails—such as role-based access models, automated quality checks, and transparent definitions of key metrics.

4. Ethical AI and transparency as trust factors

As data-driven and AI-supported decisions become more widespread, regulatory and societal demands for transparency, fairness, and data protection are also increasing. Missing control mechanisms can lead to bias, reputational risks, and legal consequences—especially in sensitive use cases such as pricing, credit decisions, or HR processes. Analyses by McKinsey show that companies with clear governance and control structures for AI achieve significantly higher trust levels among customers and stakeholders than organizations without comparable frameworks.

Ethical AI is therefore evolving from a pure compliance issue into a strategic factor for long-term competitiveness. For 2026, this means that successful companies systematically integrate ethical guidelines and explainable AI approaches throughout the entire data and AI lifecycle. This includes regular bias checks, transparent documentation of decision logic, and continuous monitoring of productive models to identify risks early and sustainably strengthen trust.

5. Real-time data, data fabrics, and data twins

The need for fast, well-founded decisions continues to grow. Real-time data architectures enable companies to analyze information and respond without delay. In practice, however, latencies, data silos, and a lack of integration still prevent real-time data from realizing its full potential.

"Real-time data is not just about speed, but about decision-making capability. What matters is providing the right data to the right teams at the right time so they can act. Promising approaches include data twins and data fabrics, which allow data changes to be tested, validated, and scaled securely," Böhm continues.

For 2026, it is becoming apparent that companies will increasingly combine real-time capabilities with quality assurance and governance mechanisms. Data twins serve as protected environments in which processes and data can be reviewed before going live, while data fabric approaches enable seamless access to consistent data across system boundaries.

6. Data mesh and data products: hybrid models prevail

Purely decentralized data mesh approaches have often led in practice to unclear responsibilities and redundant data assets. At the same time, data products continue to gain importance as a structuring approach. For 2026, a trend toward hybrid models is therefore emerging, combining domain-level ownership with central standards for quality, security, and governance.

A step-by-step approach is recommended for implementation: companies should start with a clearly defined, business-relevant data product and make its value measurable. Data contracts then define binding quality and freshness requirements. Finally, a central metadata or data catalog ensures transparency and enables scaling without losing control.

7. Multi-cloud strategies with a focus on interoperability

Multi-cloud strategies are well established in many companies to reduce dependency on individual providers and optimize costs. In practice, however, they often create new silos, increase management effort, and lead to inconsistencies in security and governance. For 2026, multi-cloud is therefore less an infrastructure issue and more an organizational and architectural one.

A structured approach is crucial for implementation: companies should first systematically inventory their existing cloud workloads and assess which applications are truly tied to a specific provider. Building on this, cloud-agnostic architectures gain importance, for example through containerization and standardized interfaces. In addition, uniform governance rules are required to enforce access rights, encryption, and compliance consistently across clouds.

8. Agentic AI: from analysis to action

AI systems are increasingly evolving from purely supportive applications to so-called agentic systems that autonomously control processes and prepare decisions. The benefit of such approaches lies in greater efficiency and faster response times. At the same time, the risk of automating flawed or biased decisions increases if data quality and governance are not sufficiently secured.

A controlled approach is recommended for implementation: companies should initially deploy agentic AI in clearly defined workflows, such as approval processes or inventory management. In parallel, MLOps structures are necessary to continuously monitor models, ensure decision traceability, and detect deviations at an early stage. Success should be measured using concrete metrics such as time savings, error reduction, or cost effects.

9. Data literacy as a critical key qualification

Data literacy is increasingly becoming a fundamental prerequisite for the successful use of analytics and AI. While many companies recognize its relevance, in practice there is often a lack of confidence in working with data—especially outside specialized teams. This slows down decision-making and reduces the value of data-driven initiatives.

An effective approach for 2026 is the targeted development of data literacy aligned with roles and responsibilities. Companies should systematically assess existing skills and, based on this, establish practical, role-based training programs. In addition, the integration of explanations directly into data and analytics tools is gaining importance, for example regarding data provenance or the calculation of key metrics.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that the success of data and AI strategies in 2026 will depend less on new trend topics than on consistent work on the fundamentals. Companies that systematically develop data quality, governance, architecture, and skills create the basis for sustainable value. Prioritization, clear responsibilities, and measurable goals are decisive success factors.

The trends presented are based on an evaluation of current market studies, analyst reports, and interviews with data and technology experts and are summarized in the One Data Insights "The Future of Data Management – 9 Trends That Will Define Your Strategy in 2026" by One Data GmbH.

About One Data

One Data is a German software company and an European leader in data product management. Founded by Dr. Andreas Böhm in 2013, the company – with its 150+ employees in Passau, Munich, Frankfurt am Main and Berlin – provides the first available Data Product Builder designed specifically for innovative and collaborative data teams. This enables such teams to create and use comprehensive data products, establish a data-driven culture and unlock the full potential of data. Data products built in One Data transform raw data into actionable insights, empowering businesses to make informed decisions, optimize processes, and drive innovation. The Data Product Builder streamlines the development process, reducing time-to-market for data products, ensures scalability and flexibility in handling diverse data sources, and ultimately unlocks the value of data assets more efficiently. With the establishment of a Data Product Marketplace, One Data strategically dismantles data silos, creating a central space for data collaboration and seamless sharing. The company concentrates on bridging the gap between data experts and non-technical business users, enabling them to build, manage, and share data products efficiently while ensuring interoperability and high data quality. The outcomes include more stable supply chains, more accurate forecasts, faster R&D processes, and more efficient data teams. **www.onedata.ai** → | **LinkedIn** →

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