

NOT NOW, MAYBE LATER

*“I’ve lived through 25 years of technology shift in the nonprofit sector,
and here is what I think it means for AI adoption.”*

Graham — Founder, Engaging Networks & Escalator · August 2026



The sector doesn't adopt when technology is proven.

It adopts when mass consumer behavior makes **non-adoption untenable**.



Amazon

not fundraising conferences,
legitimized online giving



Gmail

not vendor whitepapers, dissolved
cloud objections

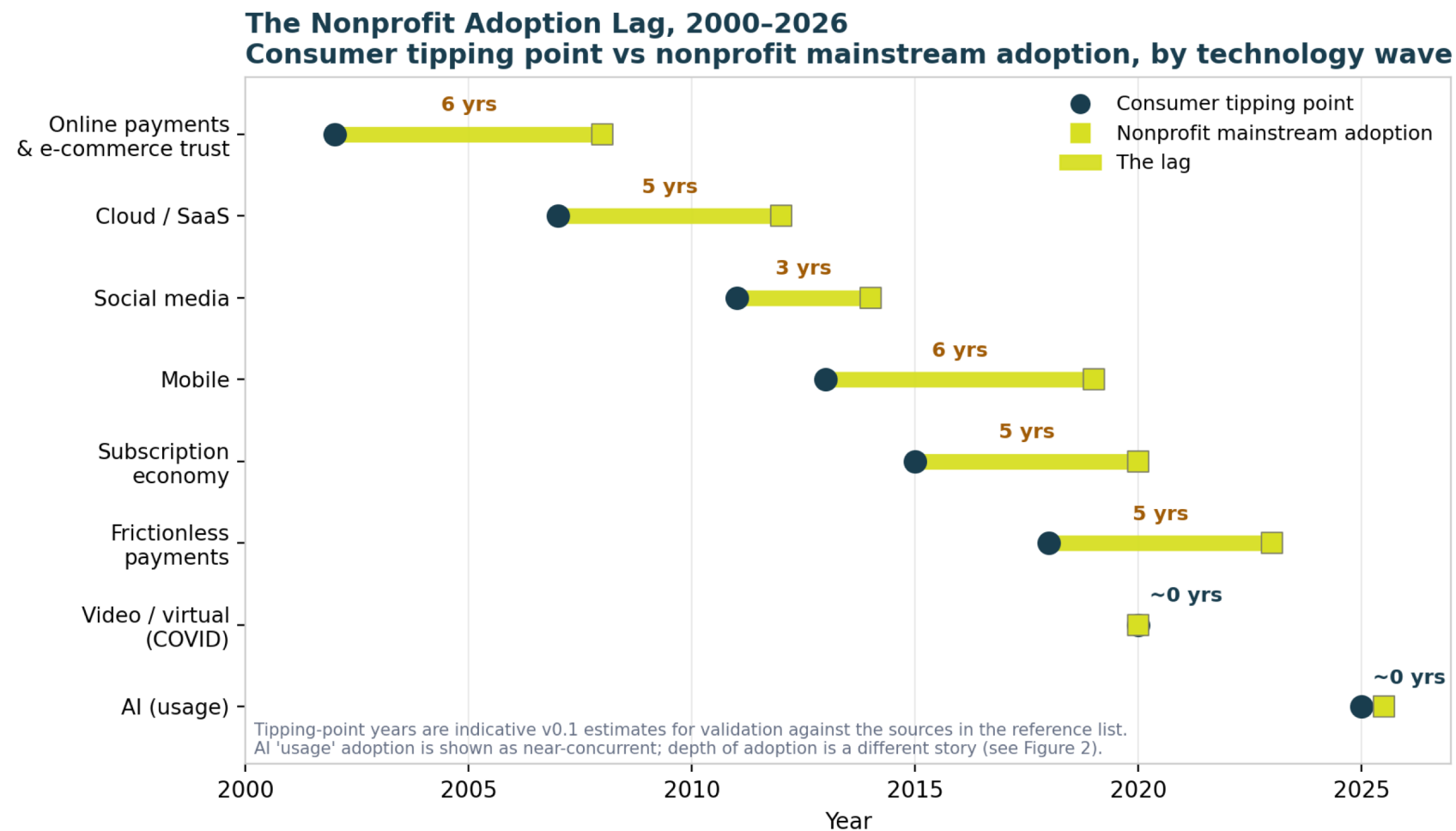


The iPhone

not sector advocacy, forced mobile-first
donation pages

We call the interval between consumer normalization and sector adoption the Adoption Lag.

Eight waves. The same lag, every time.



3-6

years behind the
consumer tipping point

2020: the lag went to zero.

When COVID removed the option to wait, the sector adopted virtual operations in weeks — not years.

The lag was never about capability, budgets, or donors. **It is cultural — a shared agreement that waiting is safe.**

AI is removing the safety of waiting — without a pandemic.

The objections never change.

Five archetypes, every wave since 2000 — all measurable in today's AI data.

- 1 Security & trust** **59%** name data privacy as their top AI concern — up from 47%
- 2 Donor & staff readiness** **77%** cite lack of AI knowledge and skills as their main barrier
- 3 Mission distraction** **43%** hold ethical concerns about AI — nearly double a year earlier
- 4 Cost & capacity** **69%** of UK charities name squeezed finances as their biggest digital barrier
- 5 Loss of control** **~50%** have no formal AI policy, particularly around donor data

The 2008 script and the 2025 script are the same script — only the noun has changed.

Objections don't get argued away. They dissolve.



Consumer normalization

The objection becomes socially untenable: you trust Gmail with your life, but not us with a donation form?



The undeniable use case

One application with ROI too visible to dispute. Haiti 2010: \$32M by text, 95% new donors.



Peer proof

A respected organization goes first and publishes results. The sector adopts by imitation.



Vendor embedding

The technology arrives inside platforms already in use — and adoption stops being a decision.

AI broke the pattern — usage is instant.

92%

of nonprofits are using AI
(Dec 2025)

65%

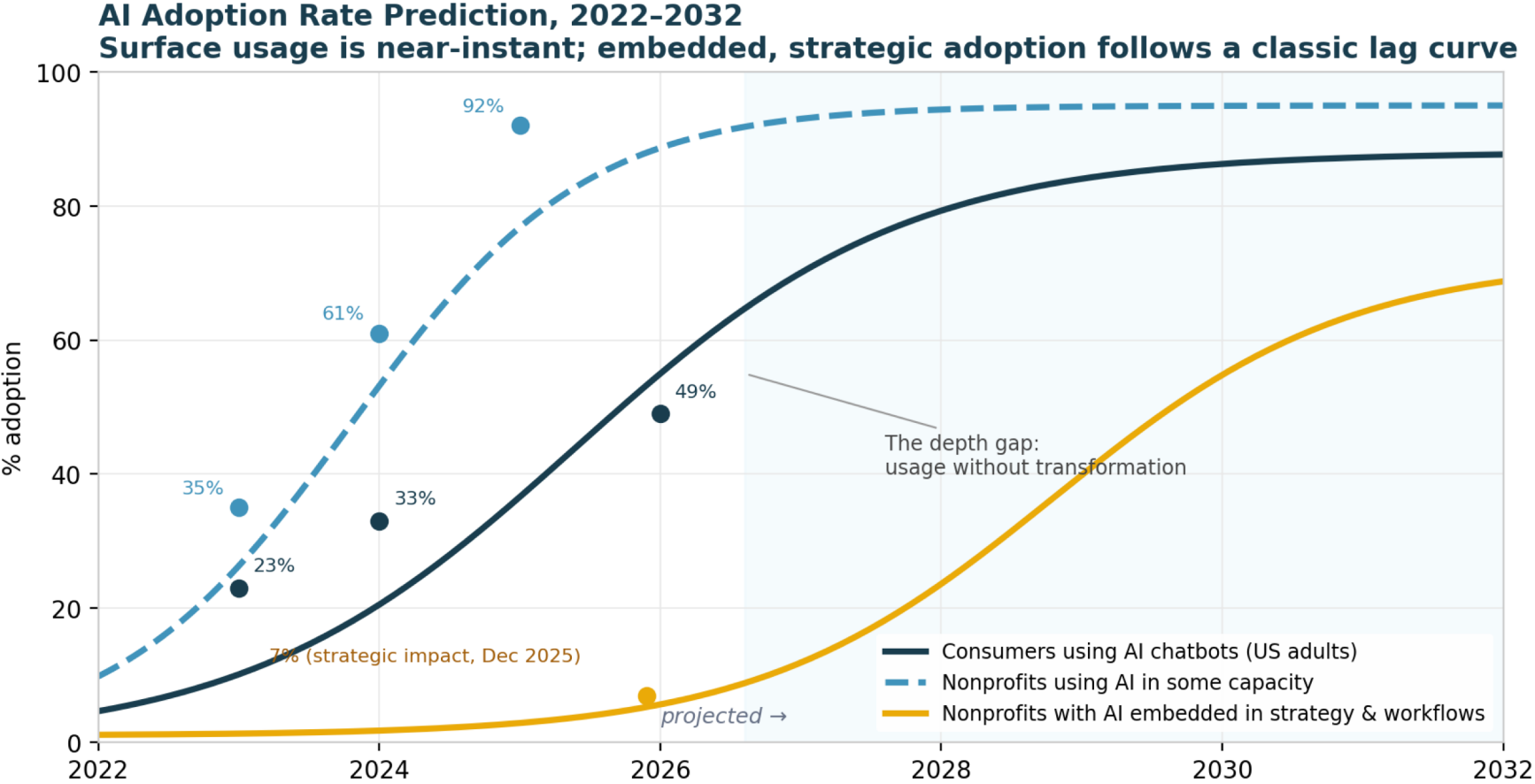
describe their use as
reactive and individual

7%

report major
strategic impact

The lag has not closed.
It has moved inside the organization.

The forecast: adoption to 2032



Embedded, strategic adoption crosses

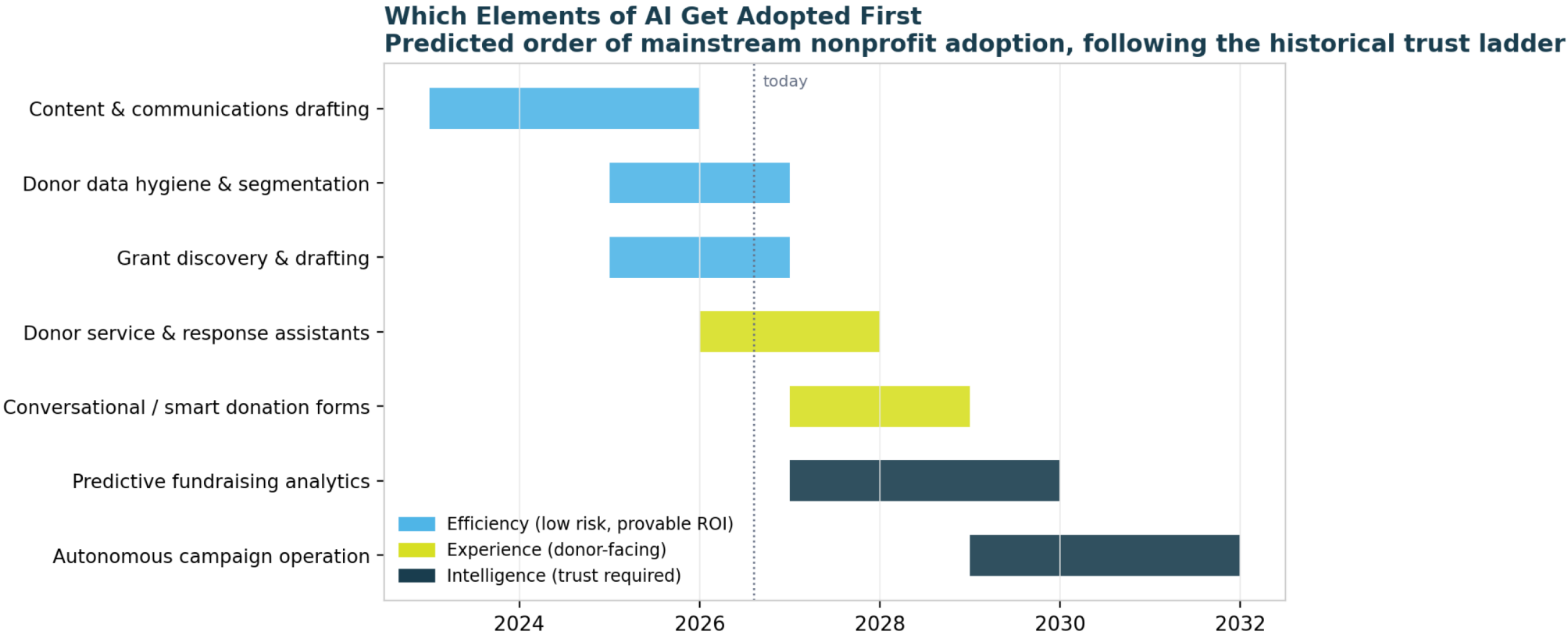
25% in 2028

50% by 2029–30

2/3 of the sector by 2032

Solid data points: Pew Research (consumer chatbot use); Charity Digital Skills Report (UK charities, 2023–25); Virtuous/Fundraising.AI (92% usage, 7% strategic impact, Dec 2025). Curves are the authors' logistic projections fitted to these anchors; to be revised as new survey waves publish.

What gets adopted first: the trust ladder



Windows are the authors' predictions. Anchors: current baselines of 4.5% AI smart-donation-form use and 2.3% predictive-AI use (Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2025) vs 53% using AI for content drafting (M+R Benchmarks, 2025).

Efficiency first → Experience second → Intelligence last

The exception: platforms climb the ladder for you.

The trust ladder describes organization-led adoption. Embedding is its exception:

- 1 An embedded platform climbs the ladder once, on behalf of every organization it serves.
- 2 The platform carries the data foundations, governance, and certification each rung requires.
- 3 Organizations on AI-native platforms — smaller ones especially — reach Rung 3 outcomes without building each rung themselves.

Figure 3 predicts the sector average. **Embedded adopters will run ahead of it.**

The waiting room has been removed.

Organizations budgeting for a 2030 AI decision are, on the historical pattern,

making a 2027 decision without knowing it.



Read the full whitepaper: "Not Now, Maybe Later — The Adoption Lag"