AI Spend Archetypes

Five Usage Patterns for Microsoft AI

Microsoft



softwareone

Contents

1. Introduction 3
2. Exploratory Adoption 4
3. Distributed Usage 5
4. Concentrated Deployment 6
5. Governed Usage 7
6. Delegated Execution 8
7. Recognizing Your Own Pattern 9
8. Where to Go From Here 10



Introduction

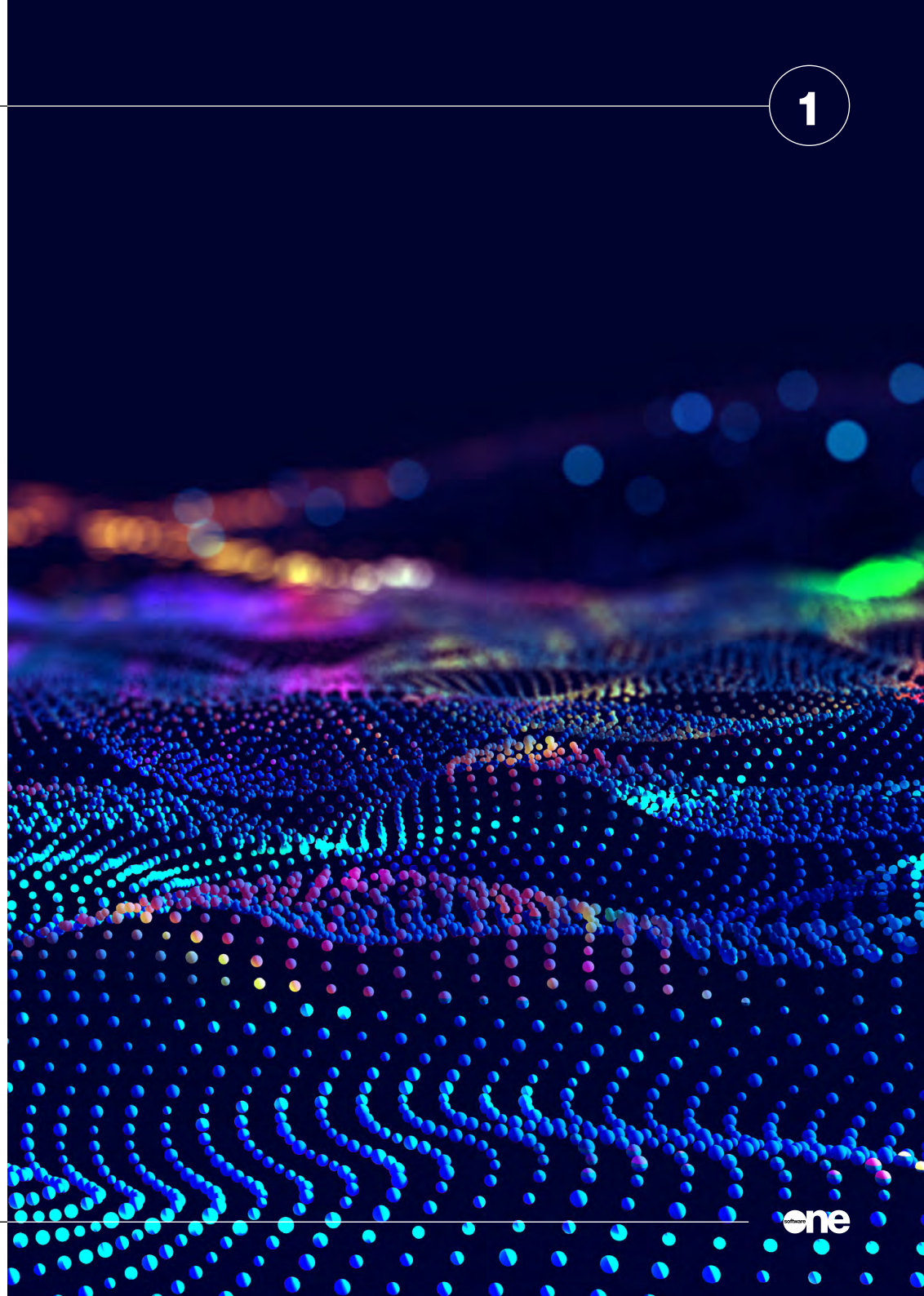
1

Every organization finds its own path into AI adoption. One company rolls out Microsoft 365 Copilot to thousands of employees in a single quarter. Another starts small, with one team building custom solutions on Foundry Models or testing Copilot Cowork across a few workflows. Each is a reasonable starting point that will shape how the company's AI engagement evolves over time.

Today, organizations use Microsoft AI tools in a variety of ways. The goal of this guide is to describe the five common patterns of AI spend and provide a meaningful frame of reference, along with some reassurance that, whatever the approach, plenty of other teams and companies are working through similar questions in much the same way.

Most organizations exhibit a synthesis of traits from multiple archetypes at once. Operations might be all in on Copilot at the same time IT is experimenting with Foundry Models in a sandbox, for example. That mix is completely normal. Each choice is a way for organizations to work with their own strengths and spending patterns.

These archetypes are lenses through which to better see what's happening in an organization.



Exploratory Adoption

2

Adoption often begins when a self-selected group, even just one or two employees, starts testing Copilot Chat or Foundry Models on their own. Usage stays light and informal: a researcher trying Copilot for a first draft, perhaps, or an analyst testing Foundry on a side project, with neither one reporting the work to anyone else. A small team using Copilot while the rest of the organization remains unaware of the usage is arguably exploratory adoption in its purest form.

Typical tooling here is Copilot Chat and Foundry's pay-as-you-go tier, both chosen because they run on accounts already established by the organization. Exploratory adoption carries little risk and is an easy way to get started. Cost and value are not always measured with this approach, however, so the organization misses the chance to fully understand any returns the experiments might produce.

Spend within exploratory adoption tends to be small and scattered. Copilot Chat comes with many Microsoft 365 subscriptions, so early experiments often cost nothing extra. Foundry's pay-as-you-go charges do usually appear on a team's existing Azure subscription, but in small amounts that rarely raise eyebrows. The more useful signal is who is experimenting, since early users often shape adoption behaviors later.



Distributed Usage

3

Even without central coordination, AI usage can spread across an organization. All it takes is two different departments independently picking up Copilot seat licenses. When AI usage is distributed, its value often does become clearer; more people using the tool often leads to results worth a second look. But wider usage also leads to inquiries about associated costs.

If the operations team and customer support were each to adopt Microsoft 365 Copilot of their own accord, they might only discover each other's usage months later, perhaps during a larger, unrelated budget conversation. Unfortunately, rollout spreading from one department to another in this manner often means nobody has tracked the combined costs.

Spend under the distributed usage approach grows in stages, one block of Copilot seats at a time, and is usually approved at the department level and paid from separate budgets. Each purchase makes sense on its own, but the total becomes visible only when someone adds the line items together. By then, licensing decisions have been made in several areas of the organization, usually with differing assumptions about who needs a seat, which means seat utilization is probably the first number worth a closer look.



Concentrated Deployment

4

Sometimes an employee or team goes deep with a particular AI function, while adoption elsewhere remains light. Foundry Models and function-specific Copilot Studio agents are built with clear purpose and structure, usually inside whichever team has both the clearest use case and the internal skill to see it through.

Such depth can produce clear, demonstrable use cases and strong internal proof points. It can also leave the rest of the organization on its own. A finance team building structured Foundry workflows well ahead of the rest of the company is one example, with an approach other teams have yet to replicate.

Because costs are traced back to a single team's Foundry projects and Copilot Studio agents, they are relatively easy to attribute. Of course, consumption climbs quickly once a workflow moves from testing into daily use. A finance workflow that processes twice as many invoices in a busy month, for example, costs roughly twice as much to run that month.

With concentrated deployment, a team can connect cost directly to output, which creates a template for measuring value that later benefits the entire organization.



Governed Usage

5

Governed usage depends primarily on intention, which is good news for mid-market organizations. A lean team can do this as readily as a large one, because what matters is the decision to actively manage spend. Headcount and a dedicated governance function are optional. A growing team that sets its first budget alert after noticing usage trending upward, on its own initiative and with no formal FinOps role, is an example of this archetype in practice.

Budgets set expectations and attempt to create predictable spend. Foundry per-project token budgets are established at the outset and reviewed on a regular schedule, and Copilot's usage-based billing controls are configured deliberately and adjusted as needs change. Should anything meaningfully change along the way, managed alerts provide early notice. Spend and usage still increase, but that growth arrives as a controlled and known quantity.

Conversations about AI budget begin to shift from reconciling surprises to deciding where the next dollar should go.



Delegated Execution

6

This is the newest and least understood of the five archetypes, where AI completes multi-step, outcome-based work directly through Copilot Cowork, moving past one-prompt-at-a-time assistance into Copilot doing the work itself.

Most organizations in this pattern are still learning what normal usage looks, since the category is new enough that baselines are still forming. An understaffed team delegating to agents the competitive scan across a dozen vendor websites delivered as a comparison summary the next morning, or a first-pass RFP response drafted against the source document and marked for review, are clear examples of this pattern at work.

Because Copilot Cowork bills by usage, cost rises with the volume and complexity of the tasks handed over to agents. A week of meeting prep might cost relatively little, while a month of multi-step research would cost considerably more. Many organizations find it helpful to compare that spend against the hours the work might otherwise take, since completed tasks are easier to price than individual prompts.

Knowing which pattern describes an organization's AI usage today is the first step toward managing that usage with intent.



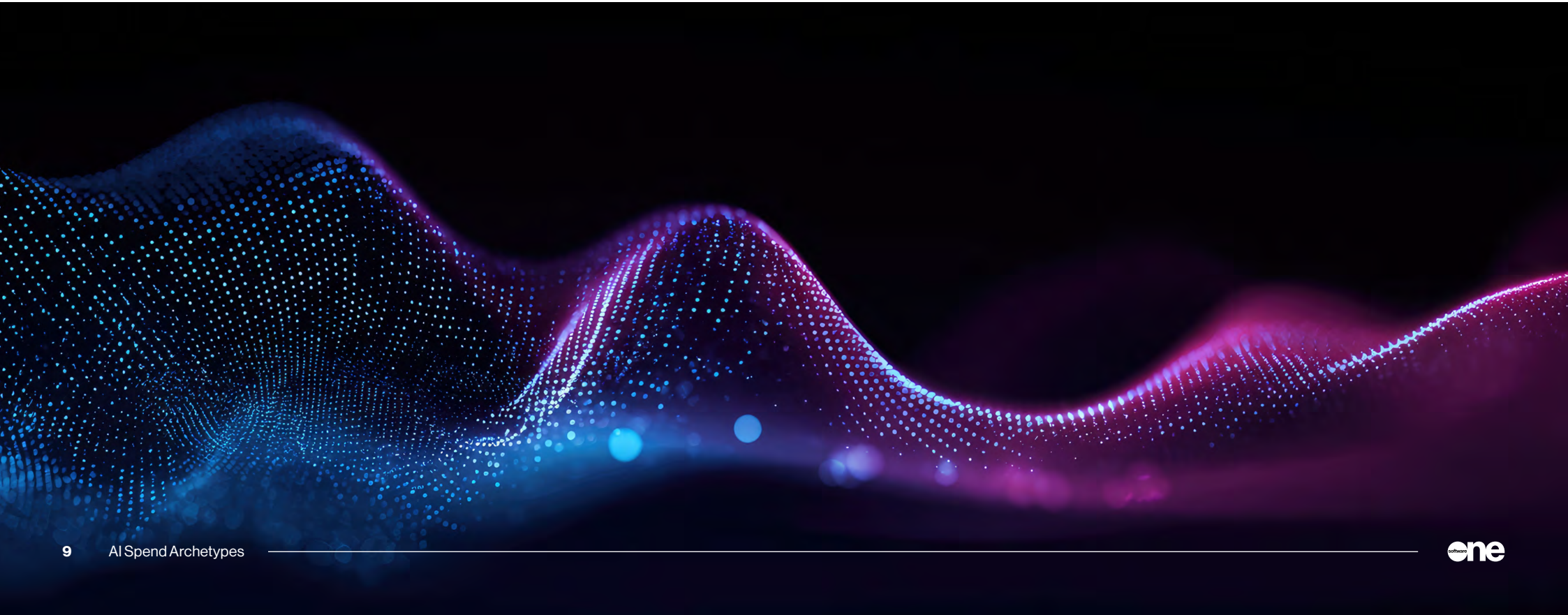
Recognizing Your Own Pattern

7

Each of the five patterns is a complete, workable way to use Microsoft AI, and any of them can be the right fit for a given team. An organization might run exploratory adoption in one department while another team operates with governed usage, and both can be suited to their circumstances. These patterns often coexist, shift as needs change, or hold steady for years. Naming them makes what's already happening easier to see and discuss.

A few simple questions help organizations recognize which archetypes apply right now. Is AI usage tracked, or is it informal and unmeasured? Is it primarily confined to one team, or is AI usage uncoordinated across several teams? Are budgets and alerts configured and in use? Is AI assisting with individual tasks, or has some of the work been off-loaded to Copilot Cowork?

Every answer is valid, but a clear view of AI usage patterns at work now can help an organization make the most of that usage going forward.



Where to Go From Here

Clarity about current patterns makes the next decisions more deliberate, whether that means holding steady and tightening governance or expanding into a new kind of usage by design.

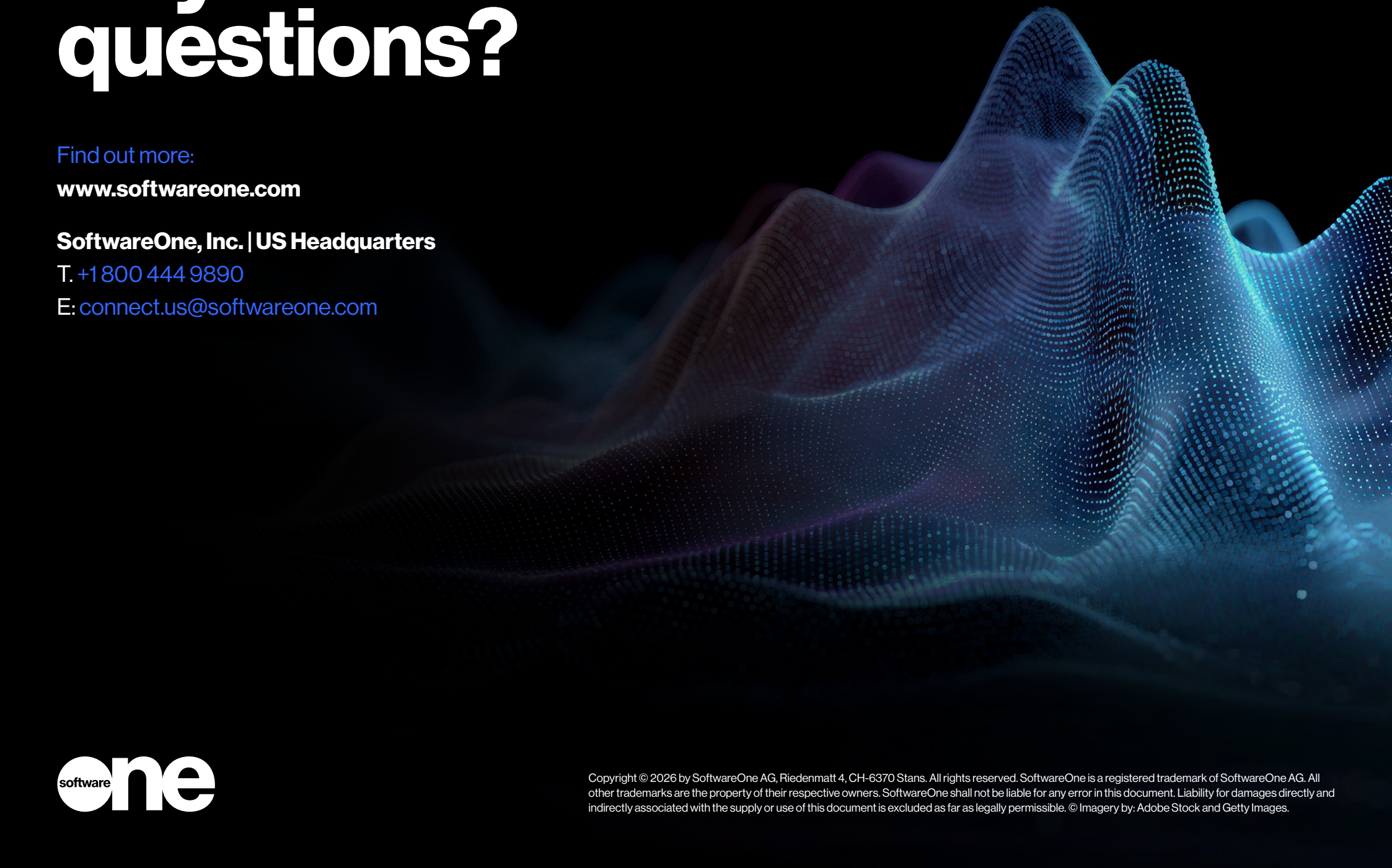
- **Exploratory adoption** suits teams that want to learn before committing to a budget.
- **Distributed usage** works for organizations where multiple functions have real use cases and the tolerance to let each one develop at its own pace.
- **Concentrated deployment** fits teams with a strong internal champion and a workflow worth building around.
- **Governed usage** matches organizations ready to treat AI spend as a managed line item.
- **Delegated execution** suits teams looking to expand what they can produce without expanding headcount.

A SoftwareOne advisory conversation, sized for mid-market organizations, brings in someone outside the day-to-day to identify which patterns describe AI spend today and what managing them more deliberately would take. That conversation can also extend to Microsoft spend across the full contract lifecycle, so the organization realizes more value at every stage.



Any questions?

Let's talk



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