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Suggested URL slug: why-trust-and-safety-must-be-built-in Meta description: Agentic AI projects are failing at a high rate, and the reasons are almost never the model itself. Here's why trust and safety needs to be part of the architecture from day one.

Why Trust and Safety Must Be Built In, Not Bolted On

Artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer confined to pilots and demos. It is moving into the operating core of enterprises, governments, financial systems, and critical infrastructure. That shift creates enormous opportunity. It also creates a legitimacy problem the field has not yet solved.

The Failure Data Is Already In

Gartner predicts that more than 40 percent of agentic AI projects will be canceled by the end of 2027, citing escalating costs, unclear business value, and inadequate risk controls (Gartner, June 2025). Notably, model capability is not on that list. Gartner's own analysts point to governance and management discipline, not the underlying technology, as the deciding factor between projects that scale and projects that get shut down.

McKinsey's 2025 State of AI survey supports the same conclusion from the other direction. Among the small group of "high performers" reporting real financial impact from AI, 65 percent have defined processes for when a model's output requires human validation, compared with just 23 percent of other organizations (McKinsey, 2025). Governance is not a brake on value. It is one of the clearest predictors of it.

Agents Change the Risk Calculus

A chatbot that gives a wrong answer is a contained failure. An agent that can access internal systems, move money, negotiate with other agents, or trigger a workflow is a different category of risk. Systems like this require verifiable identity, defined authority, data provenance, privacy protection, interoperability standards, runtime monitoring, and a clear path to human escalation. None of this is optional once a system can act, not just answer.

Why Retrofitting Doesn't Work

Trust and safety cannot be added after deployment the way a compliance checklist gets attached to a finished product. Once an organization has built automation-first workflows, opaque agent chains, and ungoverned data flows, changing course becomes expensive and politically difficult internally. The practices harden and the incentives resist change. That is the case for building trust and safety into the architecture from day one, rather than treating it as a patch applied after something goes wrong.

What "Built In" Actually Means in Practice

The U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) AI Risk Management Framework (AI RMF), one of the most widely referenced trust frameworks in the field, already defines what "trustworthy" means in practice: valid and reliable, safe, secure and resilient, accountable and transparent, explainable and interpretable, privacy-enhanced, and fair with harmful bias managed (NIST AI RMF). Building trust and safety in from the start means applying that standard, and its equivalents for autonomous, multi-agent systems, before deployment rather than after.

In practice, that means answering a small set of questions early: Who or what is authorized to act, and within what scope? Can sensitive data be used without being unnecessarily exposed? Can an independent reviewer reconstruct what happened and why? Has the system been tested against edge cases and adversarial conditions before it reaches production? These are not abstract ethics exercises. They are the practical difference between an AI program that scales and one that becomes one of Gartner's canceled projects.

TSI's Role

TrustandSafety.Institute (TSI) exists to help organizations answer these questions using a shared framework instead of starting from scratch each time. TSI convenes technical leaders, executives, researchers, and policymakers to build reference architectures, standards, and assessment tools for trust and safety in the agentic era. The goal is not to slow AI down. It is to make sure the systems being built now are ones people can still rely on later.