ACCION VENTURE LAB

seedstars INTERNATIONAL VENTURES

2025 REPORT

How inclusive fintechs are using software, systems, and tools

Executive Summary

Early-stage inclusive fintech companies around the world are driving digital innovations that connect low-income and underserved consumers to the financial solutions they need to improve their lives and livelihoods. As these companies grow and scale, how they adopt, apply, and experiment with new technologies can have immense impact on their ability to answer their clients' unique needs.

Recently, Accion Venture Lab and Seedstars administered Business Operations and Developer Tools surveys to ~18 inclusive fintech portfolio companies across Latin America, Africa, MENA, South Asia, and Southeast Asia to explore how early stage fintech startups evolve their tool stacks as they scale and experiment with Artificial Intelligence (AI) to enhance operational efficiency.

As we expected, as startups scale, they use a great variety of tools and increase tool spending. At the earliest stages, teams rely on basic systems to support MVP development, but as they progress toward the Series A and beyond, tools shift from lightweight support to critical infrastructure. Collectively, tool sophistication and investment reflect a company's operational maturity and readiness to scale.

While AI adoption is still in its early phases, we are seeing startups begin integration within data-driven and process-oriented workflows, where teams see immediate value. Given AI's immense potential, startups that experiment early are likely to gain an edge that may compound into a long-term advantage and a greater impact for clients.

Overall, insights into fintechs' tool usage, spend, and AI adoption offer founders, operators, and investors valuable clarity on companies' organizational maturity and scalability potential, and also highlight where startups may be underinvested in future readiness. Ultimately, startups that are making the best use of new technologies are those that make the most difference for their clients.

AI Usage: Experiment Today to Outperform Tomorrow

Across our surveyed companies, AI is gaining adoption while they still experiment with its use cases; teams continue to test and identify where AI creates the most value.

- So far, adoption patterns are less tied to company stage and more influenced by the maturity of available tools and the clarity of the use-case.
- Teams are quicker to adopt AI in functions where workflows are repeatable, outcomes are measurable, and tools are sufficiently developed.
- In contrast, adoption is slower in business functions where AI use cases are newer, less defined, harder to integrate into existing workflows, and/or where the importance of accuracy leaves companies uneasy about supplementing/replacing human-led workflows with AI.
- Ultimately, variation in adoption reflects differences in tool readiness and function-specific applicability, particularly in areas where AI can deliver immediate, visible gains in efficiency or output.

CLEAR ENTRY POINTS FOR AI

We are already seeing momentum in business operations functions, where AI can streamline repetitive tasks and improve workflow efficiency.

- For example, 50 percent of teams use AI in customer relationship management (CRM), primarily to automate notetaking, logging, alerts, and analytics.
- Project management also demonstrates meaningful uptake, with 33 percent of teams using AI for task automation and milestone tracking.

These are early use cases where teams can capture learnings and pave the way for wider adoption over time.

Developer operations show similarly strong adoption, with 50 percent of engineers using AI to assist with coding, which suggests a high level of trust in AI's ability to reduce manual effort and accelerate output. From the Seed to Series A, as system complexity increases and teams grow larger, engineers consistently expand their AI usage to maintain efficiency and sustain development velocity.

Coding, CRM, and project management tend to be the earliest areas of adoption because they involve structured, process-driven tasks where the benefits of automation are immediately visible and easy to capture.

EMERGING USE CASES

- In more specialized functions like finance and legal, AI usage is growing but is still early. About 30 percent of startups report using AI for finance tasks such as expense tracking, treasury operations, and loan management.
- Meanwhile, 22 percent report usage in legal workflows such as document generation and translation.

While interest is evident in these areas, adoption remains slower, which is likely due to domain-specific complexity, the high-stakes nature where accuracy is paramount, and the need for more tailored tools. Even so, early adopters are likely to benefit by identifying integration pain points early, refining internal processes, and accelerating execution as AI tools mature.

NASCENT USE CASES

In contrast, adoption remains limited in HR, cloud hosting, and user testing.

- Just 10 percent of startups report using AI in HR-related tasks such as employee management, likely due to the interpersonal nature of this business function. Still, AI holds potential to ease the administrative burden that HR departments experience (namely, processing large volumes of candidate and employee data in both recruitment through workforce management processes.).
- Similarly, cloud hosting and user testing show minimal AI integration, with just 6 percent of developers reporting usage, likely because these areas already rely on mature, automated systems.

These gaps highlight functions where clearer use cases and better tooling could enable broader adoption over time.

Overall, teams adopt AI where the value is clear, measurable, and aligned with structured, repeatable processes. Lower adoption in other functions reflects both current tooling limitations and whitespace for innovation.

FIGURE 1. BIZOPS AI USAGE BY FUNCTION

Use Case / Benefits	Adoption Amongst our Portofolio
CRM	High Adoption
Project Management	High Adoption
Financial Management	Moderate Adoption
Legal / Contract Management	Moderate Adoption
Employee Management	Low Adoption
Recruiting	NA - No Adoption

Legend:

High Adoption: ≥ 30% Moderate Adoption: ≥ 20% Low Adoption: < 20%

FIGURE 2. DEVOPS AI USAGE BY FUNCTION

Use Case / Benefits	Adoption Amongst our Portofolio
Coding Languages	High Adoption
Continuous Integration / Delivery	Low Adoption
Data Management Software	Low Adoption
Cloud Hosting	Low Adoption
User Testing	Low Adoption

Legend:

High Adoption: ≥ 30% Moderate Adoption: ≥ 20% Low Adoption: < 20%

Tool Prioritization, Usage, and Spend

SEED STAGE: USING WHAT'S NECESSARY FOR PRODUCT-MARKET FIT

Startups at the seed stage are hyper-focused on building an MVP, acquiring their first customers, and surviving long enough to iterate. Spend at this stage remains under $5K monthly for all companies. Given these constraints, startups prioritize functionality and price, using only essential tools, while maintaining cost discipline. Tools at this stage are driven less by long-term scalability and more by immediate usability and speed of deployment.

High adoption is evident in basic communication and collaboration tools like Slack, Google Docs, and CRMs such as HubSpot, reflecting the need to coordinate with small teams and manage early customer interactions. Legal tools like DocuSign and simple analytics platforms are also common, while project management is often handled manually or through basic spreadsheets.

On the DevOps side, startups tend to rely on lightweight, built-in solutions. Usage is moderate for systems like version control, web domain management, and continuous integration/delivery (CI/CD). More advanced systems like deployment orchestration and configuration management remain rare. This is likely because development cycles are less frequent, systems have not yet been built for scale, or teams are using built-in tooling present in version control systems like GitHub.

FIGURE 3. BUSINESS OPERATIONS TOOL USAGE BY COMPANY STAGE

Tool	Seed	Pre-Series A / Series A	Series B
Version Control	Moderate	High	High
Web Domain	Moderate	High	High
User Testing	Low	Low	Moderate
Incident Management	Moderate	High	Moderate
Continuous Integration / Delivery Provider	Moderate	High	High
Deployment Orchestration	Low	Low	Moderate
Configuration Management	Moderate	Low	High
Data Management	High	High	Moderate

Legend:

High Usage: ≥ 75%

Moderate Usage: < 75%

Low Usage: < 50%

FIGURE 4. DEVELOPER TOOL USAGE BY COMPANY STAGE

Tool	Seed	Pre-Series A / Series A	Series B
CRM Software	High	High	High
Chat / Internal Communication	High	High	High
Help Desk Software	Moderate	High	High
Project Management	Low	High	High
Data Analytics	Low	High	High
Recruiting / Applicant Tracking	Low	Low	Moderate
Employee Management	Moderate	Moderate	High
Email Marketing	Moderate	Moderate	High
Legal / Contract Management	High	High	Moderate
Document Collaboration Tool	High	High	High

Legend:

High Usage: ≥ 75% | Moderate Usage: < 75% | Low Usage: < 50%

PRE-SERIES A / SERIES A: WHERE SPEND MEETS STRATEGY

At this stage, startups begin using tools not just as a temporary solution, but rather as the foundational infrastructure to scale. Tooling decisions now aim to support cross-functional execution and process standardization as teams grow, KPIs are defined, and dashboards become central to how progress is tracked.

Most companies have now adopted the key infrastructure needed to scale, such as project management systems, data analytics, CRMs, help desk software, document collaboration, and internal communication platforms. Recruiting tools and employee management software also see a significant jump in adoption (50–66 percent), as startups look for immediate gains in coordination and output.

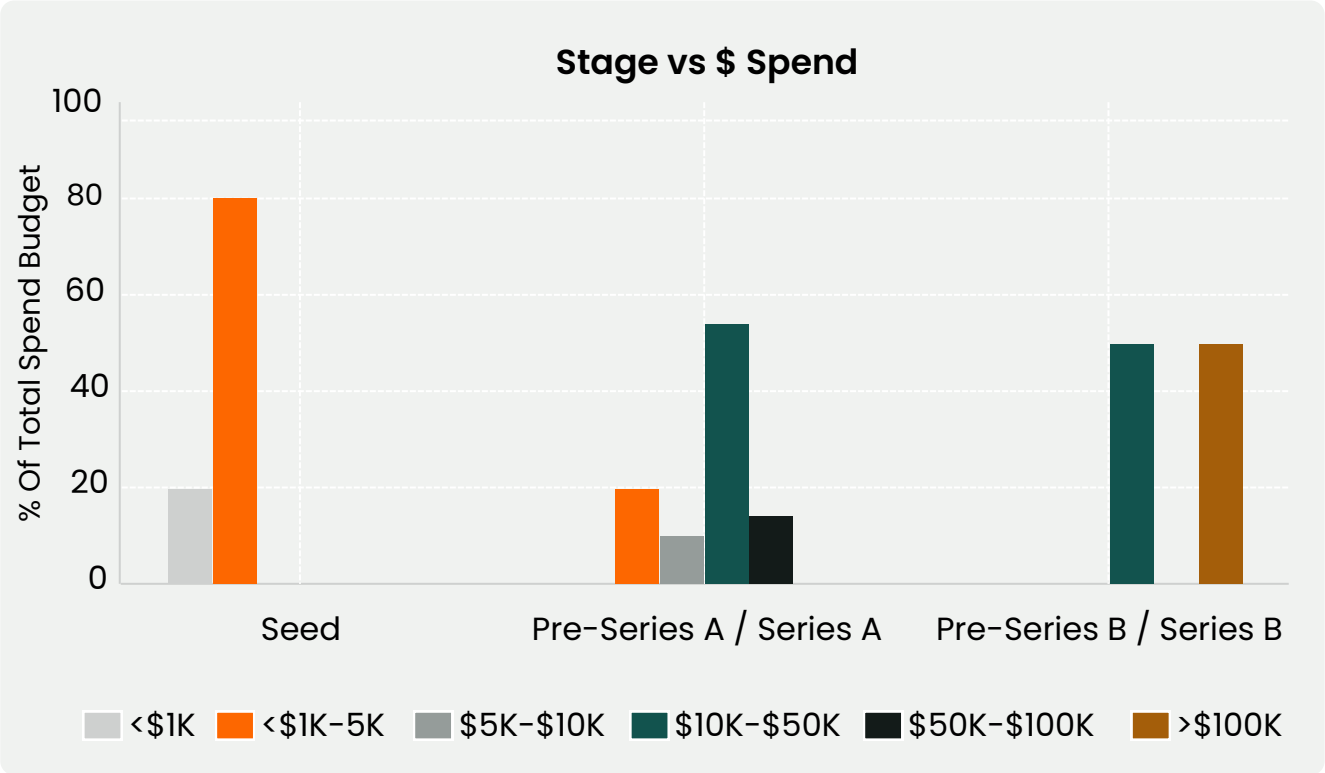
Another noteworthy difference at the Series A vs. the Seed stage is the significant increase in spend. About 60 percent of companies raise their monthly tooling budget to $10K-$50K, and 11 percent increase even higher to $50K-$100K. At this stage, founders consider price, functionality, and scalability when selecting tools, as expansion and operational efficiency become top priorities as startups aim for profitability to attract growth investors.

On the DevOps side, tooling evolves from lightweight support to foundational infrastructure. As teams expand and products gain users, startups face greater pressure to maintain momentum without sacrificing quality. This drives increased adoption of tools for Version Control, External Web Domain Management, and Incident Management, not just to streamline engineering workflows, but also to meet rising expectations around uptime, security, and coordination. Tools for Continuous Integration/Continuous Delivery and Data Management also gain traction as teams aim to accelerate deployment, while minimizing risk. These patterns reflect how DevOps tooling becomes increasingly central to helping startups scale with discipline and stability.

AI experimentation begins to transition from exploratory piloting to targeted implementation, especially in financial operations. At the Series A, startups increasingly deploy AI in areas like underwriting, loan management, and credit scoring, functions where automation can drive both efficiency and mitigate risk. Adoption in these areas rises from 20 percent to 33 percent, signaling that teams become increasingly interested in using AI to streamline finance workflows.

However, adoption in high-stakes processes like underwriting often remains cautious, given the complexity, nascent nature of some tools, and with larger transaction sizes where human oversight is essential and there is less of a need to automate given the low frequency of large transactions. While satisfaction levels vary significantly, increased usage suggests that startups see clear value and are laying the groundwork for deeper integration as data volumes and complexity grow.

FIGURE 5. COMPANY STAGE BY $ SPEND ON TOOLS



PRE-SERIES B / SERIES B: TOOLS BECOME A LINE-ITEM, NOT JUST A NICE-TO-HAVE

By the Series B, tooling is built to sustain scale and support workflows across the entire organization. Internal systems are expected to handle multi-team workflows, higher customer volume, and growing data complexity. Investment in these areas increases accordingly, with 50 percent of companies reporting monthly spending above $100K. At this stage, underinvestment is not a cost-saving tactic but rather a scalability risk. Inefficient and malfunctioning systems can directly impact customer experience, team productivity, and overall performance.

Tool usage is embedded across nearly every business function, from product and engineering to finance, customer success, and operations. The only exception appears to be in areas like recruiting. Usage in legal/contract management appears moderate. In many emerging markets, hiring is often less structured and formalized, and legal workflows tend to be traditional, although startups at the Seed and Series A have begun adopting software solutions as tools increase in reliability and sophistication.

On the DevOps side, tool adoption for user testing, configuration management, and deployment workflows increase significantly. As customer volume grows and engineering teams expand, companies need more advanced tools to maintain reliability and operate at scale. Importantly, tool selection is not only centered around efficiency and scalability, but also reliability— Tool selection becomes critical for maintaining uptime, managing growing system complexity, and enabling faster product development cycles expected of a scaling company.

To summarize across these stages, Figure 6 highlights the major decision-making criteria we see founders using when it comes to optimizing spend on their tooling.

FIGURE 6. PRIMARY TOOL SELECTION CRITERIA BY STAGE

Stage	Functionality	Price	Scalability	Reliability
Seed	✓	✓	✗	✗
Pre-Series A	✓	✗	✓	✗
Series A	✓	✓	✗	✓
Series B	✓	✓	✓	✓

Recommendations

As startups progress through stages, tooling must evolve to maintain momentum and competitive positioning. Below are a few key takeaways for founders, operators, and investors to consider when selecting their tool stack. In general, when incorporating AI into workflows, we suggest starting with high frequency, low-risk, internal-facing applications, and then expand into more complex or external-facing use cases as capabilities and confidence grow.

SEED:

Focus on low-cost tools that support building, launching, and iterating quickly. Prioritize solving immediate problems and driving customer traction; internal optimization can wait. At this stage, AI adoption should target simple, repeatable workflows that deliver quick wins and minimize implementation risk.

SERIES A:

Begin laying the foundation for scale. Invest in tools that improve collaboration, efficiency, and standardization across teams. Start adopting AI in proven, dependable use cases that are central to day-to-day operations to unlock early gains and create capacity for teams to take on higher-value work.

SERIES B:

Prioritize scalable, durable systems that support business continuity and complexity. AI should now enable core workflows. Consider AI experimentation in areas where the respective industry has yet to adopt AI to stay ahead of the curve.

Ultimately, investing in the right tools at the right time drives compounding benefits for fintech startups in speed, quality, and execution for their clients. Tools should not be treated as just overhead – tools are a strategic lever for scale.

ACCION

VENTURE LAB