AI Development Cost Checklist (2026 Edition)

Use this checklist to evaluate and manage the main cost drivers of your AI project.

beetroot

1. Strategy & Scoping

- ☐ Defined clear business goals and success metrics
- ☐ Aligned AI use case with measurable ROI potential
- ☐ Validated feasibility through a PoC or MVP before scaling

2. Data Readiness

- ☐ Identified required datasets and assessed quality
- ☐ Planned for data collection and preparation pipelines
- ☐ Established labeling/annotation workflows and tools
- ☐ Addressed data governance, residency, and compliance needs

3. Team & Talent

- ☐ Selected roles: AI/ML engineers, data scientists, MLOps, PM
- ☐ Evaluated in-house vs. outsourcing/nearshoring balance
- ☐ Accounted for premium costs of scarce cross-domain expertise

4. Technology & Infrastructure

- ☐ Chosen cloud/on-prem/hybrid setup based on workloads
- ☐ Planned GPU/TPU requirements and optimized for cost
- ☐ Set up monitoring and retraining pipelines (MLOps)

5. Integration & Deployment

- ☐ Mapped required integrations (ERP, CRM, supply chain, customer apps)
- ☐ Factored in legacy system complexity vs. modern APIs/microservices
- ☐ Scoped UI/UX, security reviews, and compliance testing

6. Ongoing Costs

- ☐ Budgeted for monitoring, retraining, and scaling usage
- ☐ Planned for regulatory updates and ongoing audits
- ☐ Estimated total cost of ownership (TCO) beyond development

7. Cost Optimization Tactics

- ☐ Leveraged pre-trained models and open-source frameworks
- ☐ Prioritized high-value use cases over broad, unfocused projects
- ☐ Optimized data pipelines early to cut downstream waste
- ☐ Matched cloud workloads to the right pricing models
- ☐ Explored nearshoring or outsourcing for cost-effective talent

Final Tip

Treat AI as an ongoing capability, not a one-time project. Clear strategy, smart infrastructure choices, and disciplined cost management will help you capture long-term ROI while keeping budgets sustainable.