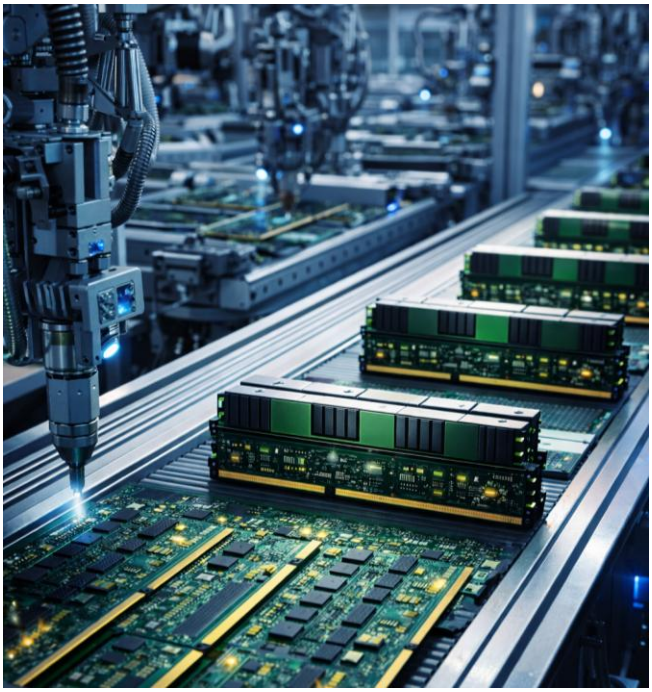
The Real Cost of AI

Why IT hardware prices are rising and how to prepare for the road ahead in 2026

Universal Systems Inc.

The Real Cost of AI in 2026: Why IT Hardware Prices Are Rising and How to Prepare



When people talk about the “cost of AI,” they often jump straight to headlines about lost jobs or existential risks. But there’s a far more immediate, tangible cost most organizations are feeling right now: hardware.

AI’s hunger for compute is reshaping the hardware market. Training and running modern AI models demands massive amounts of compute, RAM, and storage.

Hyperscalers and leading AI companies have placed enormous orders for GPUs and memory, pulling supply into data centers and away from the broader PC and device market. OpenAI itself has publicly acknowledged GPU shortages and staggered rollouts due to limited capacity, while analyses point to extraordinary multi-year infrastructure commitments that keep demand elevated.

What’s changing in the market (and why it hits your budget)

- RAM (DRAM) is the most impacted component. Contract and retail prices surged through late 2025, with industry tracking showing year-over-year increases above 170%, and consumer kits frequently costing 2–3× more than mid-2025 levels. TrendForce expects continued quarter-over-quarter increases driven by server DDR5 and HBM priorities.
- SSDs and HDDs are rising too. NAND wafer prices jumped 20–60% in November, pointing to higher SSD costs for 2026. HDD vendors have raised prices amid nearline drive lead times stretching beyond 52 weeks—a ripple effect from AI storage build-outs. [pcgamer.com], [tomshardware.com]
- OEM price actions are already here. Dell began commercial price hikes on December 17, 2025, citing DRAM/NAND shortages; Lenovo has notified customers of new pricing from early 2026; HP has warned of further increases tied to memory costs. Public reporting indicates 15–20% uplifts for certain configurations, with the steepest jumps where RAM and SSD capacities are higher.

What This Means for USI Customers

Prices will trend up in 2026
The era of year over year price declines for RAM and storage is over for now; forecasts point to persistent constraints into 2026 (and potentially beyond) as capacity is prioritized for AI servers.

Rapid Sourcing and Building
While we can't shield the market-wide increases, USI is having good success sourcing parts and building custom machines without long wait times. Our procurement team is working daily to diversify supply and lock allocations where possible.

Expect gradual adjustments
As component costs rise, customers will see gradual price increases flow through, especially on configurations with higher RAM and SSD capacities.

How to plan

(and avoid delays or sticker shock)

1. Budget for increases. Assume higher RAM/SSD costs and plan for overall system price uplifts through 2026.
2. Start early on big projects. For larger rollouts or refreshes, begin scoping now to avoid shortages and secure allocations. Engage with USI early to help lock in price and availability.
3. Tighten quoting windows. Because pricing is volatile, aim to get quotes within 7 days of planned purchases to ensure accuracy at the time of ordering.
4. Right-size specs. Consider true needs for RAM / SSD or potentially staging RAM / SSD upgrades on bigger upgrade projects.
5. Leverage USI sourcing. Ask us to explore alternative configurations to optimize total cost and lead times.

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