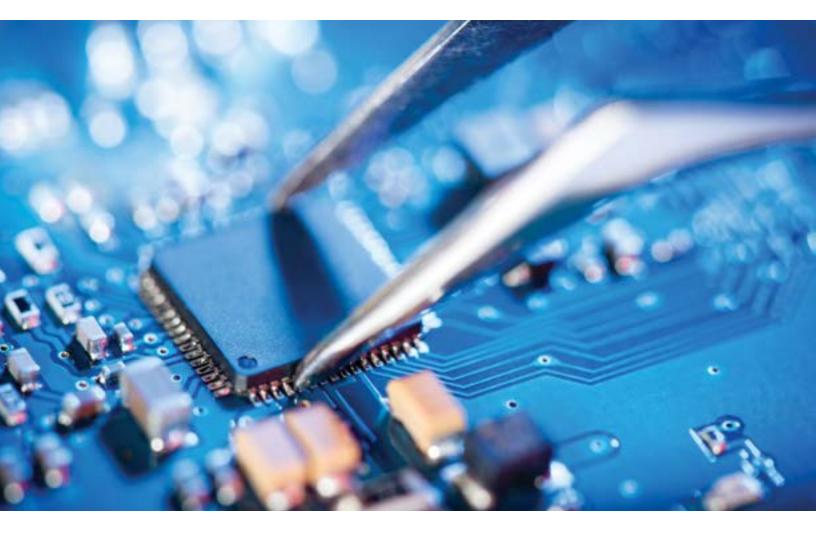
# Artificial-intelligence hardware: New opportunities for semiconductor companies

Artificial intelligence is opening the best opportunities for semiconductor companies in decades. How can they capture this value?

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DECEMBER 2018 • HIGH TECH

# THƯ NGỔ

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Chúc bạn đọc có được những thông tin bổ ích và định hướng nghề nghiệp đúng đắn cho tương lai.

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Software has been the star of high tech over the past few decades, and it's easy to understand why. With PCs and mobile phones, the game-changing innovations that defined this era, the architecture and software layers of the technology stack enabled several important advances. In this environment, semiconductor companies were in a difficult position. Although their innovations in chip design and fabrication enabled next-generation devices, they received only a small share of the value coming from the technology stack-about 20 to 30 percent with PCs and 10 to 20 percent with mobile.

But the story for semiconductor companies could be different with the growth of artificial intelligence (AI)-typically defined as the ability of a machine to perform cognitive functions associated with human minds, such as perceiving, reasoning, and learning. Many AI applications have already gained a wide following, including virtual assistants that manage our homes and facial-recognition programs that track criminals. These diverse solutions, as well as other emerging AI applications, share one common feature: a reliance on hardware as a core enabler of innovation, especially for logic and memory functions.

What will this development mean for semiconductor sales and revenues? And which chips will be most important to future innovations? To answer these questions, we reviewed current AI solutions and the technology that enables them. We also examined opportunities for semiconductor companies across the entire technology stack. Our analysis revealed three important findings about value creation:

- AI could allow semiconductor companies to capture 40 to 50 percent of total value from the technology stack, representing the best opportunity they've had in decades.
- Storage will experience the highest growth, but semiconductor companies will capture most value in compute, memory, and networking.

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 To avoid mistakes that limited value capture in the past, semiconductor companies must undertake a new value-creation strategy that focuses on enabling customized, endto-end solutions for specific industries, or "microverticals."

By keeping these beliefs in mind, semiconductor leaders can create a new road map for winning in AI. This article begins by reviewing the opportunities that they will find across the technology stack, focusing on the impact of AI on hardware demand at data centers and the edge (computing that occurs with devices, such as self-driving cars). It then examines specific opportunities within compute, memory, storage, and networking. The article also discusses new strategies that can help semiconductor companies gain an advantage in the AI market, as well as issues they should consider as they plan their next steps.

### The AI technology stack will open many opportunities for semiconductor companies

AI has made significant advances since its emergence in the 1950s, but some of the most important developments have occurred recently as developers created sophisticated machine-learning (ML) algorithms that can process large data sets, "learn" from experience, and improve over time. The greatest leaps came in the 2010s because of advances in deep learning (DL), a type of ML that can process a wider range of data, requires less data preprocessing by human operators, and often produces more accurate results.

To understand why AI is opening opportunities for semiconductor companies, consider the technology stack (Exhibit 1). It consists of nine discrete layers that enable the two activities that enable AI applications: training and inference (see sidebar "Training and inference"). When developers are trying to improve training and inference, they often encounter roadblocks related to the hardware

### Exhibit 1

The technology stack for artificial intelligence (AI) contains nine layers.

Technology	Stack	Definition	<ul> <li>Memory <ul> <li>Electronic data repository for short-term storage during processing</li> <li>Memory typically consists of DRAM<sup>1</sup></li> </ul> </li> <li>Storage <ul> <li>Electronic repository for long-term storage of large data sets</li> <li>Storage typically consists of NAND<sup>2</sup></li> </ul> </li> <li>Logic <ul> <li>Processor optimized to calculate neural network operations, ie, convolution and matrix multiplication</li> <li>Logic devices are typically CPU, GPU, FPGA, and/or ASIC<sup>3</sup></li> </ul> </li> <li>Networking <ul> <li>Switches, routers, and other equipment used to link servers in the cloud and to connect edge devices</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Services	Solution and use case	Integrated solutions that include training data, models, hardware, and other components (eg, voice-recognition systems)	
Training	Data types	Data presented to AI systems for analysis	
Platform	Methods	Techniques for optimizing weights given to model inputs	
	Architecture	Structured approach to extract features from data (eg, convolutional or recurrent neural networks)	
	Algorithm	A set of rules that gradually modifies the weights given to certain model inputs within the neural network during training to optimize inference	
	Framework	Software packages to define architectures and invoke algorithms on the hardware through the interface	
Interface	Interface systems	Systems within framework that determine and facilitate communication pathways between software and underlying hardware	
Hardware	Head node	Hardware unit that orchestrates and coordinates computations among accelerators	
	Accelerator	Silicon chip designed to perform highly parallel operations required by AI; also enables simultaneous computations	

<sup>1</sup> Dynamic random access memory.

<sup>2</sup> Not AND.

<sup>3</sup> CPU= central processing unit, GPU= graphics-processing unit, FPGA = field programmable gate array, ASIC= application-specific integrated circuit. Source: Expert interviews; literature search

> layer, which includes storage, memory, logic, and networking. By providing next-generation accelerator architectures, semiconductor companies could increase computational efficiency or facilitate the transfer of large data sets through memory and storage. For instance, specialized memory for AI has 4.5 times more bandwidth than traditional memory, making it much better suited to handling the vast stores of big data that AI applications require. This performance improvement is so great that many customers would be more willing to pay the higher price that specialized memory requires (about \$25 per gigabyte, compared with \$8 for standard memory).

### Al will drive a large portion of semiconductor revenues for data centers and the edge

With hardware serving as a differentiator in AI, semiconductor companies will find greater demand for their existing chips, but they could also profit by developing novel technologies, such as workloadspecific AI accelerators (Exhibit 2). We created a model to estimate how these AI opportunities would affect revenues and to determine whether AI-related chips would constitute a significant portion of future demand (see sidebar "How we estimated value" for more information on our methodology).

### Exhibit 2 Companies will find many opportunities in the artificial intelligence (AI) market, with leaders already emerging.

	Opportunities in existing market	Potential new opportunities	
Compute	<ul> <li>Accelerators for parallel processing, such as GPUs<sup>1</sup> and FPGAs<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Workload-specific AI accelerators</li> </ul>	
Memory	<ul> <li>High-bandwidth memory</li> <li>On-chip memory (SRAM<sup>3</sup>)</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Emerging non-volatile memory (NVM) (as memory device)</li> </ul>	
Storage	<ul> <li>Potential growth in demand for existing storage systems as more data is retained</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Al-optimized storage systems</li> <li>Emerging NVM (as storage device)</li> </ul>	
Networking	<ul> <li>Infrastructure for data centers</li> </ul>	<ul><li>Programmable switches</li><li>High-speed interconnect</li></ul>	

<sup>1</sup> Graphics-processing units. <sup>2</sup> Field programmable gate arrays. <sup>3</sup> Static random access memory. Source: McKinsey analysis

Our research revealed that AI-related semiductors will see growth of about 18 percent over the next few years-five times greater rate for semiconductors used in non-AI app (Exhibit 3). By 2025, AI-related semicondu could account for almost 20 percent of all de which would translate into about \$67 billio revenue. Opportunities will emerge at both centers and the edge. If this growth materia as expected, semiconductor companies wil positioned to capture more value from the technology stack than they have obtained previous innovations-about 40 to 50 perce the total.

### AI will drive most growth in storage, but best opportunities for value-creation lie other segments

We then took our analysis a bit further by lo at specific opportunities for semiconductor within compute, memory, storage, and network For each area, we examined how hardware is evolving at both data centers and the edg

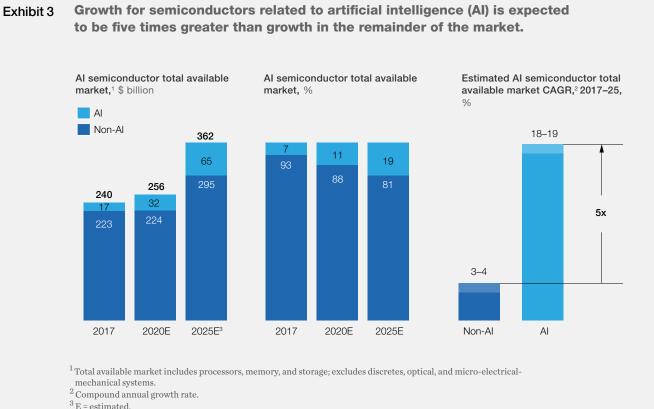
icon-	quantified the growth expected in each category
annually	except networking, where AI-related opportunities
than the	for value capture will be relatively small for
plications	semiconductor companies.
uctors	
demand,	Compute
onin	Compute performance relies on central processing
h data	units (CPUs) and accelerators—graphics-processing
ializes	units (GPUs), field programmable gate arrays
llbe	(FPGAs), and application-specific integrated
AI	circuits (ASICs). Since each use case has different
with	compute requirements, the optimal AI hardware
cent of	architecture will vary. For instance, route-planning
	applications have different needs for processing
	speed, hardware interfaces, and other performance
t the	features  than  applications  for  autonomous  driving  or
e in	financial risk stratification (Exhibit 4).
ooking	Overall, demand  for  compute  hardware  will  increase
orplayers	by about 10 to 15 percent through 2025 (Exhibit 5).
working.	After analyzing more than 150 DL use cases, looking
edemand	at both inference and training requirements, we
ge. We also	were able to identify the architectures most likely to
	gain ground in data centers and the edge (Exhibit 6).

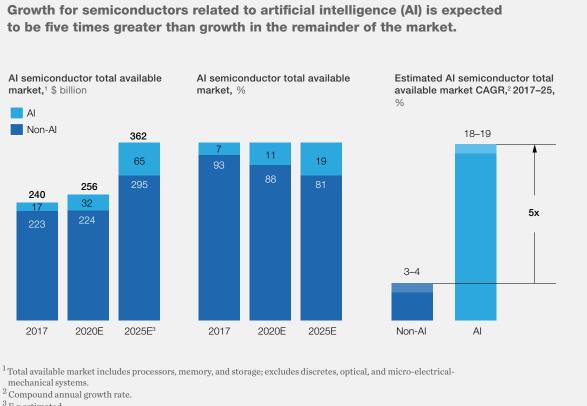
Data-center usage. Most compute growth will stem from higher demand for AI applications at cloudcomputing data centers. At these locations, GPUs are now used for almost all training applications. We expect that they will soon begin to lose market share to ASICs, until the compute market is about evenly divided between these solutions by 2025. As ASICs enter the market, GPUs will likely become more customized to meet the demands of DL. In addition to ASICs and GPUs, FPGAs will have a small role in future AI training, mostly for specialized data-center applications that must reach the market quickly or require customization, such as those for prototyping new DL applications.

For inference, CPUs now account for about 75 percent of the market. They'll lose ground to ASICs as DL applications gain traction. Again, we expect to see an almost equal divide in the compute market, with CPUs accounting for 50 percent of demand in 2025 and ASICs for 40 percent.

*Edge applications*. Most edge training now occurs on laptops and other personal computers, but more devices may begin recording data and playing a role in on-site training. For instance, drills used during oil and gas exploration generate data related to a well's geological characteristics that could be used to train models. For accelerators, the training market is now evenly divided between CPUs and ASICs. In the future, however, we expect that ASICs built into systems on chips will account for 70 percent of demand. FPGAs will represent about 20 percent of demand and will be used for applications that require significant customization.

When it comes to inference, most edge devices now rely on CPUs or ASICs, with a few applications-such as autonomous cars-requiring GPUs. By 2025, we expect that ASICs will account for about 70 percent of the edge inference market and GPUs 20 percent.





Source: Bernstein; Cisco Systems; Gartner; IC Insights; IHS Markit; Machina Research; McKinsey analysis

## Training and inference

All Al applications must be capable of training and inference. To understand the importance of these tasks, consider their role in helping selfdriving cars avoid obstacles. During the training phase, developers present images to the neural net-for instance, those of dogs or pedestriansand perform recognition tests. They then refine network parameters until the neural net displays high accuracy in visual detection. After the network has viewed millions of images and is fully trained, it enables recognition of dogs and pedestrians during the inference phase.

The cloud is an ideal location for training because it provides access to vast stores of data from multiple servers-and the more information an AI application reviews during training, the better its algorithm will become. Further, the cloud can reduce expenses because it allows graphics-processing units (GPUs) and other expensive hardware to train multiple AI models. Since training occurs intermittently on each model, capacity is not an issue.

With inference, Al algorithms handle less data but must generate responses more rapidly. A self-driving car doesn't have time to send images to the cloud for processing once it detects an object in the road, nor do medical applications that evaluate critically ill patients have leeway when interpreting brain scans after a hemorrhage. And that makes the edge, or in-device computing, the best choice for inference.

Memory That said, memory will see the lowest annual growth AI applications have high memory-bandwidth of the three accelerator categories-about 5 to requirements, since computing layers within deep 10 percent-because of efficiencies in algorithm design, such as reduced bit precision, as well as neural networks must pass input data to thousands of cores as quickly as possible. Memory is requiredcapacity constraints in the industry relaxing. typically dynamic random access memory (DRAM)to store input data, weight model parameters, and Most short-term memory growth will result from perform other functions during both inference increased demand at data centers for the highand training. Consider a model being trained to bandwidth DRAM required to run AI, ML, and recognize the image of a cat. All intermediate results DL algorithms. But over time, the demand for AI in the recognition process-for example, colors, memory at the edge will increase-for instance, contours, textures-need to reside on memory as connected cars may need more DRAM. the model fine-tunes its algorithms. Given these requirements, AI will create a strong opportunity for Current memory is typically optimized for CPUs, the memory market, with value expected to increase but developers are now exploring new architectures. from \$6.4 billion in 2017 to \$12.0 billion in 2025. Solutions that are attracting more interest include the following:

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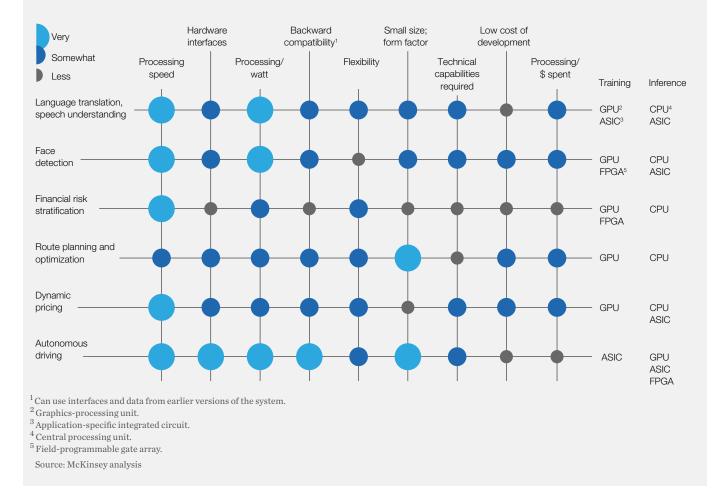
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### Exhibit 4

The optimal compute architecture will vary by use case.

### Example use-case analysis of importance

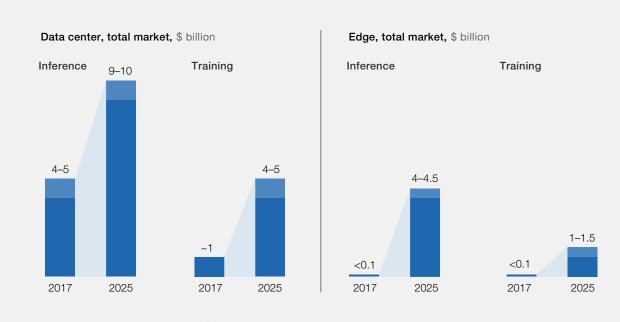


• High-bandwidth memory (HBM). This technology allows AI applications to process large data sets at maximum speed while minimizing power requirements. It allows DL compute processors to access a threedimensional stack of memory through a fast connection called through-silicon via (TSV). AI chip leaders such as Google and Nvidia have adopted HBM as the preferred memory solution, although it costs three times more than traditional DRAM per gigabyte-a move that signals their customers are willing to

pay for expensive AI hardware in return for performance gains.1

• On-chip memory. For a DL compute processor, storing and accessing data in DRAM or other outside memory sources can take 100 times more time than memory on the same chip. When Google designed the tensor-processing unit (TPU), an ASIC specialized for AI, it included enough memory to store an entire model on the chip.<sup>2</sup> Start-ups such as Graphcore are also increasing on-chip memory capacity, taking it to

Exhibit 5 At both data centers and the edge, demand for training and inference hardware is growing.



Source: Expert interviews; McKinsey analysis

a level about 1,000 times more than what is found on a typical GPU, through a novel architecture that maximizes the speed of AI calculations. The cost of on-chip memory is still prohibitive for most applications, and chip designers must address this challenge.

### Storage

AI applications generate vast volumes of data-about 80 exabytes per year, which is expected to increase One potential disruption in storage is new forms of to 845 exabites by 2025. In addition, developers are non-volatile memory (NVM). New forms of NVM now using more data in AI and DL training, which have characteristics that fall between traditional also increases storage requirements. These shifts memory, such as DRAM, and traditional storage, such could lead to annual growth of 25 to 30 percent as NAND flash. They can promise higher density than DRAM, better performance than NAND, and better from 2017 to 2025 for storage-the highest rate of all segments we examined.<sup>3</sup> Manufacturers will power consumption than both. These characteristics increase their output of storage accelerators in will enable new applications and allow NVM to response, with pricing dependent on supply staying substitute for DRAM and NAND in others. The in sync with demand. market for these forms of NVM are currently smallrepresenting about \$1 billion to \$2 billion in revenue Unlike traditional storage solutions that tend to over the next two years-but it is projected to account take a one-size-fits-all approach across different use for more than \$10 billion in revenue by 2025.

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cases, AI solutions must adapt to changing needsand those depend on whether an application is used for training or inference. For instance, AI training systems must store massive volumes of data as they refine their algorithms, but AI inference systems only store input data that might be useful in future training. Overall, demand for storage will be higher for AI training than inference.

The NMV category includes multiple technologies, all of which differ in terms of memory access time and cost, and are all in various stages. Magnetoresistive random-access memory (MRAM) has the lowest latency for read and write, with greater than five-year data retention and excellent endurance. However, its capacity scaling is limited, making it a costly alternative that may be used for frequently accessed caches rather than a long-term data-retention solution. Resistive random-access memory (ReRAM) could potentially scale vertically, giving it an advantage in scaling and cost, but it has slower latency and reduced endurance. Phasechange memory (PCM) fits in between the two, with 3D XPoint being the most well-known example. Endurance and error rate will be key barriers that must be overcome before more widespread adoption.

### Networking

AI applications require many servers during training, and the number increases with time. For instance, developers only need one server to build an initial AI model and under 100 to improve its structure. But  $training with real \, data-the \, logical \, next \, step-could$ require several hundred. Autonomous-driving models require over 140 servers to reach 97 percent accuracy in detecting obstacles.

If the speed of the network connecting servers is slow-as is usually the case-it will cause training bottlenecks. Although most strategies for improving network speed now involve data-center hardware,

developers are investigating other options, including programmable switches that can route data in different directions. This capability will accelerate one of the most important training tasks: the need to resynchronize input weights among multiple  $% \left( {{{\left[ {{{{\mathbf{n}}_{{\mathbf{n}}}}} \right]}_{{{\mathbf{n}}_{{{\mathbf{n}}}}}}}} \right)$ servers whenever model parameters are updated. With programmable switches, resynchronization can occur almost instantly, which could increase training speed from two to ten times. The greatest performance gains would come with large AI models, which use the most servers.

Another option to improve networking involves using high-speed interconnections in servers. This technology can produce a threefold improvement in performance, but it's also about 35 percent more expensive.

### Semiconductor companies need new strategies for the AI market

It's clear that opportunities abound, but success isn't guaranteed for semiconductor players. To capture the value they deserve, they'll need to focus on endto-end solutions for specific industries (also called microvertical solutions), ecosystem development, and innovation that goes far beyond improving compute, memory, and networking technologies.

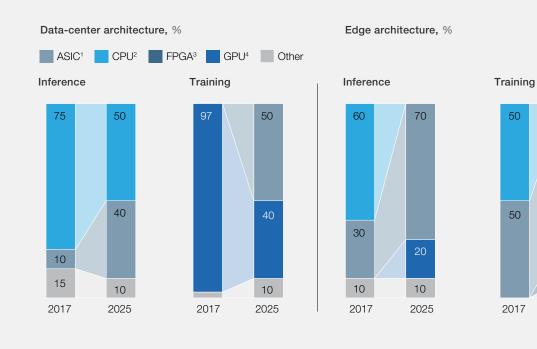
### Customers will value end-to-end solutions for microverticals that deliver a strong return on investment

AI hardware solutions are only useful if they're

## How we estimated value

We took a bottom-up approach to estimate the value at stake for semiconductor companies. Consider accelerators used for compute functions. First, we determined the percent of servers in data centers that were used for AI. We then identified the type of logic device they commonly used and the average sales price for related accelerators. For edge

computing, we conducted a similar review, but we focused on determining the number of devices that were used for AI, rather than servers. By combining our insights for data centers and edge devices, we could estimate the potential value for semiconductor companies related to compute functions.



1 Application-specific integrated circuit. 2 Central processing unit. 3 Field programmable gate array. 4 Graphics-processing unit. Source: Expert interviews; McKinsey analysis

compatible with all other layers of the technology stack, including the solutions and use cases in the services layer. Semiconductor companies can take two paths to achieve this goal, and a few have already begun doing so. First, they could work with partners to develop AI hardware for industry-specific use cases, such as oil and gas exploration, to create an end-to-end solution. For example, Mythic has developed an ASIC to support edge inference for image- and voice-recognition applications within the healthcare and military industries. Alternatively, semiconductor companies could focus on developing AI hardware that enables broad, cross-industry solutions, as Nvidia does with GPUs.

The path taken will vary by segment. With memory and storage players, solutions tend to have the same

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Exhibit 6

### The preferred architectures for compute are shifting in data centers and the edge.

technology requirements across microverticals. In compute, by contrast, AI algorithm requirements may vary significantly. An edge accelerator in an autonomous car must process much different data from a language-translation application that relies on the cloud. Under these circumstances, companies cannot rely on other players to build other layers of the stack that will be compatible with their hardware.

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2025

### Active participation in ecosystems is vital for success

Semiconductor players will need to create an ecosystem of software developers that prefer their hardware by offering products with wide appeal. In return, they'll have more influence over design choices. For instance, developers who prefer a

certain hardware will use that as a starting point when building their applications. They'll then look for other components that are compatible with it.

To help draw software developers into their ecosystem, semiconductor companies should reduce complexity whenever possible. Since there are now more types of AI hardware than ever, including new accelerators, players should offer simple interfaces and software-platform capabilities. For instance, Nvidia provides developers with Compute Unified Device Architecture, a parallel-computing platform and application programming interface (API) that works with multiple programming languages. It allows software developers to use Compute Unified Device Architecture-enabled GPUs for generalpurpose processing. Nvidia also provides software developers with access to a collection of primitives for use in DL applications. The platform has now been deployed across thousands of applications.

Within strategically important industry sectors, Nvidia also offers customized softwaredevelopment kits. To assist with the development of software for self-driving cars, for instance, Nvidia created DriveWorks, a kit with ready-to-use software tools, including object-detection libraries that can help applications interpret data from cameras and sensors in self-driving cars.

As preference for certain hardware architectures builds throughout the developer community, semiconductor companies will see their visibility soar, resulting in better brand recognition. They'll also see higher adoption rates and greater customer loyalty, resulting in lasting value.

Only platforms that add real value to end users will be able to compete against comprehensive offerings from large high-tech players, such as Google's TensorFlow, an open-source library of ML and DL models and algorithms.<sup>4</sup> TensorFlow supports Google's core products, such as Google Translate, and also helps the company solidify its position

within the AI technology stack, since TensorFlow is compatible with multiple compute accelerators.

### Innovation is paramount and players must go up the stack

Many hardware players who want to enable AI innovation focus on improving the computation process. Traditionally, this strategy has involved offering optimized compute accelerators or streamlining paths between compute and data through innovations in memory, storage, and networking. But hardware players should go beyond these steps and seek other forms of innovation by going up the stack. For example, AI-based facialrecognition systems for secure authentication on smartphones were enabled by specialized software and a 3-D sensor that projects thousands of invisible dots to capture a geometric map of a user's face. Because these dots are much easier to process than several millions of pixels from cameras, these authentication systems work in a fraction of a second and don't interfere with the user experience. Hardware companies could also think about how sensors or other innovative technologies can enable emerging AI use cases.

### Semiconductor companies must define their AI strategy now

Semiconductor companies that are first movers in the AI space will be more likely to attract and retain customers and ecosystem partners-and that could prevent later entrants from attaining a leading position in the market. With both major technology players and start-ups launching independent efforts in the AI hardware space now, the window of opportunity for staking a claim will rapidly shrink over the next few years. To establish a strong strategy now, they should focus on three questions:

 Where to play? The first step to creating a focused strategy involves identifying the target industry microverticals and AI use cases. At the most basic level, this involves estimating the size of the opportunity within different verticals, as well as the particular pain points that solutions could eliminate. On the technic companies should decide if they want to hardware for data centers or the edge.

- How to play? When bringing a new solut to market, semiconductor companies sho adopt a partnership mind-set, since they gain a competitive edge by collaborating established players within specific indus They should also determine what organized structure will work best for their busines some cases, they might want to create gro that focus on certain functions, such as F all industries. Alternatively, they could d groups to select microverticals, allowing develop specialized expertise.
- When to play? Many companies might b tempted to jump into the AI market, since cost of being a follower is high, particular DL applications. Further, barriers to ent rise as industries adopt specific AI stand and expect all players to adhere to them. rapid entry might be the best approach for some companies, others might want to ta a more measured approach that involves slowly increasing their investment in sel microverticals over time.

The AI and DL revolution gives the semicond industry the greatest opportunity to generate that it has had in decades. Hardware can be th differentiator that determines whether leadi

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AI	applications reach the market and grab attention. As		
cal side,	AI advances, hardware requirements will shift for		
focus on	compute, memory, storage, and networking—and		
	that will translate into different demand patterns.		
	The best semiconductor companies will understand		
tion	these trends and pursue innovations that help take		
ould	AI hardware to a new level. In addition to benefitting		
might	their bottom line, they'll also be a driving force		
with	behind the AI applications transforming our world.		
stries.			
zational			
ss. In	<sup>1</sup> Liam Tung, "GPU Killer: Google reveals just how powerful its TPU2 chip really is," ZDNet, December 14, 2017, zdnet.com.		
oups &D, for	<sup>2</sup> Kaz Sato, "What makes TPUs fine-tuned for deep learning?," Google, August 30, 2018, google.com.		
ledicate	<sup>3</sup> When exploring opportunities for semiconductor players		
them to	in storage, we focused on NAND. Although demand for hard-disk drives will also increase, this growth is not driven by semiconductor advances.		
e	<sup>4</sup> An open-source, machine-learning framework for everyone, available at tensorflow.org.		
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rywill	DC, office, Zach Jacobson and Andrea Queirolo are		
•	associate partners in the New York office, <b>Siddarth</b>		
ards	Madhav is a partner in the Chicago office, and Nick		
While	Santhanam is a senior partner in the Silicon Valley office.		
or			
ıke	The authors wish to thank Sanchi Gupte, Jo Kakarwada,		
	Teddy Lee, and Ben Byungchol Yoon for their		
ect	contributions to this article.		
	Designed by Sydney Design Studio		
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