

EXECUTIVE BRIEF

The EU AI Act, Explained: Risk Tiers, Obligations, and the Current Timeline

The EU AI Act is the world's first comprehensive AI law and the single most consequential regulation in the field. Here is how its risk tiers work, who it applies to, what changed with the 2025 Digital Omnibus, and how it fits alongside NIST AI RMF and ISO/IEC 42001.

IN THIS BRIEF

- A risk-based law, not a technology law
- The four risk tiers
- The application timeline after the Digital Omnibus
- Who the Act applies to
- General-purpose AI models

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prefer audio? A conversational, 23-minute walkthrough of the EU AI Act and what it means for how organizations govern AI.

The European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act is the first broad, horizontal law written specifically to govern AI. It entered into force on 1 August 2024 as Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, and its obligations phase in over several years. For anyone building an AI governance program, it is the single most consequential piece of regulation in the field, and its influence extends well past Europe's borders.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The EU AI Act (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689) is the world's first comprehensive law governing artificial intelligence. It regulates AI by risk, not by technology.
- It sorts AI into four tiers: prohibited practices, high-risk systems, limited-risk systems with transparency duties, and minimal-risk systems with no new obligations.
- The 2025 Digital Omnibus (Regulation (EU) 2026/1744) moved the heaviest high-risk deadlines back, but transparency duties and the prohibitions stayed live and the penalties did not soften.
- It reaches far beyond Europe. Providers placing AI on the EU market and deployers whose AI output is used in the EU are covered, wherever they are based.
- Compliance is built on evidence that accumulates over time: technical documentation, data governance records, logging, and post-market monitoring. It cannot be produced at the last minute.

WHAT THIS BRIEF COVERS

A risk-based law, not a technology law. The Act does not try to define or restrict AI by how it is built.

The four risk tiers.

The application timeline after the Digital Omnibus. The Act applies in stages. By late 2025 the original schedule was running ahead of the standards, guidance, and national authorities needed to support it, so the Commission proposed the Digital Omnibus on AI. The resulting instrument, Regulation (EU) 2026/1744, entered into force on 27 July 2026 and moved the heaviest high-risk deadlines back, while leaving the transparency duties and the prohibitions on their original timeline.

Who the Act applies to. The Act reaches organizations far outside the EU, an effect often called the Brussels effect.

General-purpose AI models. The Act sets a separate track for general-purpose AI, the large foundation models that power many downstream products.

Penalties. Enforcement has teeth, and the Digital Omnibus did not soften it.

How the Act fits with NIST and ISO/IEC 42001. The EU AI Act is law: it sets binding obligations tied to role and risk classification.

