

Duolingo went AI-first: far more courses, slower growth

Facts as of 2026-10-23

At a glance

Duolingo told its staff and the public it would stop paying contractors for work AI can do, and would build its courses with AI. In plain words: AI writes the first draft of each lesson, and a smaller group of people checks it before learners see it. Our score is 6 out of 10. The courses came far faster and the business kept growing, but within a year that growth slowed a lot, and nobody has shown whether the public backlash caused it.

1. What they did

CEO Luis von Ahn's memo said the change would come gradually^[1]. In the memo, dated April 2025, von Ahn added that teams would get new hires only if they could not automate more of their own work^[2]. The shift was not new: Duolingo confirmed it had already cut about 10% of its contractors at the end of 2023^[3]. The memo put in writing a change that was under way. The reason was speed. Von Ahn said the first 100 courses took about 12 years to build^[4]. With AI, Duolingo launched 148 new ones in less than a year^[4].

2. What they got so far

From January to March 2026, Duolingo published 20,500 course units, many times its pace in 2024.^[5] From April to June 2026, sales were 18% higher than a year before.^[6] 2025 was a record year, with sales of \$1,037.6 million, up 39%.^[7] By June 2026, 23% more people used the app each day than a year earlier, well below its earlier pace.^[6] The cost: by mid-2026, Duolingo's own measure of profit fell to 25.9% of sales, which the company called a deliberate spend to win users.^[6] No full-time staff were let go, von Ahn says^[8]. Duolingo had more than 900 employees in 2025.^[9]

Luis von Ahn, the CEO, admits user growth slowed toward the end of 2025.^[10] Duolingo blames its own focus on charging users more, not the memo.^[7] Von Ahn said he gave too little context in the memo.^[8] Duolingo then dropped AI use from staff reviews.^[10] By mid-2026, Duolingo listed relying on AI suppliers among its business risks.^[6]

Morgan Stanley saw US users fall after the backlash, with no drop abroad.^[11] Jefferies said the dip could be tied to Luis von Ahn's memo.^[12] The Motley Fool tied the 2025 share price drop to the company's forecast and a strategic shift instead.^[13] On quality there are only stories: a current worker told The Washington Post the AI content falls short of the company's standard.^[14] Benjamin Costello, a fired contractor, found "tons and tons of errors."^[14] A learner of French found the AI stories wrong at times, and nobody has measured it.^[15]

Our view: Duolingo got the speed it promised and kept growing, and the slowdown is real, but its cause is not settled; the backlash may have cost users, and nobody has shown it did.

3. Our score

Our score: 6/10. Confidence: medium.

A 10 would be faster gains in sales and profit, courses ready in weeks, and users, staff and brand all intact. Duolingo got the speed and kept its staff, but the business has since lost much of its momentum, a grade that rests on the company's filed results, not on whether the backlash was to blame.

What we don't know

- Why new users stopped arriving as fast. If the backlash drove them away, the score falls; if its own push to earn more per user did, it rises.
- Whether the AI-made courses teach as well as the old ones. Learner results as good or better would raise the score; worse results would lower it.
- How much the company saved on contractors. A disclosed drop in what it spends on making content would raise the score.
- Whether today's pace is a pause or the new normal. A pickup would raise the score; a further fall would lower it.

4. What it means for your business

If you pay freelancers to write or translate, this is the part of Duolingo's move you can copy: AI writes the first draft. The draft is only as good as the person who checks it, and announcing the change loudly can cost you goodwill. One person who reads both languages well has to own it, reviewing every piece before a customer sees it, about 1 to 4 hours a week^[16]. For 50,000 words a year, freelancers cost about \$4,000 to \$15,000 and AI tools plus paid checking about \$950 to \$7,500, usually cheaper but not always, with nothing to build^{[17][18]}. This week, run a month of your copy through an AI tool, have your checker time the review, and compare the total with your last freelancer invoice before you tell anyone.

Sources

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16. Our estimate: Hours a week of someone's time to check AI-made translations. Low is 50 hours of light checking a year divided by 52 weeks, about 1. High is 200 hours a year divided by 52 weeks, about 4. Assumptions: Same 50 hours to 200 hours a year as the checking estimate, spread evenly over 52 weeks; the volume is an assumption. Setup time is not included because no source gave one.

17. Our estimate: What 5 people pay freelance translators in a year for 50,000 words of Spanish and English work. Low is 50000 words at 0.08 per word, the bottom of the general Spanish rate. High is 50000 words at 0.30 per word, the top of what freelancers charge direct clients. Assumptions: The business sends out 50000 words a year; this volume is an assumption, not from a source. Rates are US market rates in USD; Mexican, Costa Rican and Panamanian freelancers may charge less, so the real figure could be lower.
18. Our estimate: The first year all in for the AI version: subscriptions plus paid time to check the work. Low is 200 for one Pro plan plus 50 hours of checking at 15 an hour, which is 750, for 950. High is 1500 for 5 Team seats plus 200 hours at 30 an hour, which is 6000, for 7500. Assumptions: Checking time is paid at the freelance hourly rate for general work; an owner doing it themselves pays in time, not cash. The AI version is cheaper than the freelancer version when volume and rates sit mid-range, but the high case of 7500 can exceed the low freelancer case of 4000, so savings are not guaranteed.