

Serverless Lakehouse Architectures: Beyond the Hype

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ejcsit.2013/vol13n462033>

Published June 27, 2025

Citation: Khare R. (2025) Serverless Lakehouse Architectures: Beyond the Hype, *European Journal of Computer Science and Information Technology*, 13(46)20-33

Abstract: *This article examines the evolution of serverless lakehouse architectures as they mature beyond initial hype to deliver practical enterprise value. By combining object storage flexibility with data warehouse performance characteristics, these systems represent a significant advancement in modern data management. The article covers foundational technical innovations including decoupled storage-compute paradigms, sophisticated metadata management enabling ACID guarantees, and elastic query processing engines. Performance evaluations reveal both impressive capabilities for analytical workloads and remaining challenges in areas such as cold-start latency and complex joins. The integration of artificial intelligence emerges as a transformative force, enhancing query optimization, workload management, and data governance. The article addresses enterprise adoption considerations including security frameworks, tool ecosystem compatibility, and operational practices necessary for successful implementation. Through critical assessment of current implementations and emerging research directions, this article provides a comprehensive view of how serverless lakehouses are reshaping the data management landscape while identifying areas requiring continued innovation before they can fully replace traditional approaches for all enterprise use cases.*

Keywords: Serverless computing, cloud-native data architecture, metadata management, artificial intelligence, enterprise governance

INTRODUCTION

Data management architectures have evolved significantly over the past decade, from traditional on-premises data warehouses to cloud-native solutions that separate storage from compute resources. The serverless lakehouse represents the latest evolution in this journey, promising to deliver the best attributes of both data lakes and data warehouses without the operational complexities of either approach. Research conducted by researchers indicates a substantial shift in enterprise data architecture preferences, with organizations increasingly favoring flexible, scalable solutions that can accommodate diverse analytical

workloads while minimizing operational overhead. Their comprehensive industry analysis revealed that the demand for cloud-native data platforms has grown at a compound annual rate of approximately 24% since 2020, with serverless implementations gaining particular traction among organizations seeking to modernize their data infrastructure without significant upfront investment [1].

Serverless lakehouses combine the cost-effective, flexible storage of object repositories (such as Amazon S3 or Azure Data Lake Storage) with on-demand compute engines that scale elastically according to workload requirements. This architecture eliminates the need for pre-provisioned clusters or dedicated infrastructure, allowing organizations to pay only for the resources they consume when processing queries. The economic implications of this consumption-based model are substantial, as highlighted in the detailed cost-efficiency analysis conducted by researchers. Their research examined various data processing architectures across multiple cloud environments and workload patterns, noting that serverless implementations demonstrate particularly favorable economics for organizations with intermittent analytical needs or seasonal processing demands. As their multi-dimensional evaluation framework demonstrated, the elimination of idle compute resources can translate to significant operational savings, especially when organizations implement appropriate workload planning and resource optimization strategies [2]. Additionally, modern serverless lakehouses incorporate sophisticated metadata layers that support ACID (Atomicity, Consistency, Isolation, Durability) transactions, enabling complex data operations with strong consistency guarantees. These metadata services, which typically leverage versioned file formats and optimistic concurrency control mechanisms, represent a critical technical advancement that addresses many of the consistency limitations that previously constrained data lake implementations [1].

Recent benchmarks indicate that these architectures can achieve performance comparable to dedicated warehouse appliances, with sub-second query response times even when processing terabyte-scale datasets. Performance characteristics vary considerably based on query complexity, data volume, and system implementation, as extensively documented in the comparative analysis published by the authors. Their research employed standardized benchmark suites across multiple architectural patterns, revealing that modern serverless implementations have substantially narrowed the performance gap that previously existed between cloud-native solutions and dedicated appliances. Particularly noteworthy are the improvements in scan-heavy analytical queries, where columnar storage formats and parallel processing capabilities enable efficient dataset exploration even at significant scale [1]. This performance, coupled with the inherent cost advantages of serverless computing, has generated significant interest in both industry and academic circles. The potential to achieve warehouse-like performance without the associated infrastructure management overhead represents a compelling value proposition for organizations seeking to streamline their data operations while maintaining analytical capabilities [2].

However, despite this promise, several challenges remain before serverless lakehouses can fully replace traditional data management systems for all enterprise use cases. Researchers' comprehensive performance evaluation identified several areas where current implementations struggle to match the capabilities of dedicated systems. Particularly notable are the limitations in handling complex multi-way joins, managing

high concurrency workloads, and ensuring consistent performance under variable load conditions. These challenges stem from the fundamental architectural constraints of serverless environments, including resource initialization overhead, limited inter-process communication capabilities, and the inherent variability of shared infrastructure [2]. This paper examines the current state of serverless lakehouse technologies, evaluates their capabilities and limitations, and explores emerging research aimed at addressing these constraints. We pay particular attention to the role of artificial intelligence in enhancing serverless lakehouse performance and operational characteristics. As the research on next-generation data platforms suggests, the integration of machine learning techniques for workload optimization, resource allocation, and query planning represents one of the most promising approaches to overcoming the remaining limitations of serverless architectures [1].

Architectural Foundations and Technical Innovations

Serverless lakehouse architectures are built upon several key technical innovations that enable their unique blend of flexibility, performance, and cost-effectiveness. These architectural components have evolved considerably over the past five years, with significant advancements in both commercial and open-source implementations. As documented in the authors' comprehensive analysis of cloud-native data engineering systems, this evolution represents a fundamental rethinking of how analytical infrastructure can be constructed to maximize both performance and operational efficiency [3].

Decoupled Storage and Compute

At the foundation of serverless lakehouses is the complete separation of storage and compute resources. Data resides in cloud object stores such as Amazon S3, Azure Data Lake Storage, or Google Cloud Storage, typically stored in open file formats open file format and also now in "open table formats like Apache Iceberg, Apache Hudi, or DeltaLake. The authors' architectural assessment highlights that this decoupling enables resource optimization that was impossible in earlier monolithic systems. Their examination of production deployments across multiple industries revealed that organizations implementing this pattern effectively have achieved substantial improvements in resource utilization without sacrificing analytical capabilities [3]. The independent scaling of storage and compute resources based on actual usage eliminates the need for capacity planning exercises that historically resulted in overprovisioning. The elimination of data movement between storage and analytics environments addresses a persistent challenge in traditional data warehouse implementations, where extract-transform-load processes often introduce both latency and consistency issues. Additionally, this architecture enables support for diverse concurrent workloads against the same data assets, allowing data science, business intelligence, and operational analytics to coexist without creating specialized data copies. Researchers note in their review of big data processing technologies that the cost implications of this approach are substantial, as organizations can avoid the capital expenditures associated with dedicated infrastructure while aligning operational costs directly with business value generation [4].

Metadata Management and Transaction Support

A critical innovation in serverless lakehouses is the implementation of sophisticated metadata layers that enable ACID transactions on otherwise immutable object storage. These metadata services typically employ optimistic concurrency control mechanisms and leverage versioned data formats to maintain consistency without locking. Versioned Parquet formats track data changes while maintaining previous versions for time-travel queries, enabling both historical analysis and complex auditing capabilities. Manifest-based approaches maintain lists of valid files for each table version, significantly reducing the I/O requirements for establishing consistent views of large datasets. The researchers emphasize that these metadata innovations represent a critical evolutionary step that allows cloud-native architectures to support enterprise workloads that previously required specialized database systems [3]. Optimistic concurrency control allows parallel operations with conflict detection and resolution, substantially improving write throughput compared to traditional locking mechanisms. Commit logs ensure atomic updates to data and schema changes, maintaining the transactional guarantees that business applications require while operating on distributed storage systems. As the analysis demonstrates, these mechanisms collectively enable serverless lakehouses to support operations traditionally associated with data warehouses while maintaining the flexibility and scalability of cloud storage platforms [4].

Query Execution Engines

Serverless query engines represent another crucial component of the lakehouse architecture. These engines provide on-demand SQL processing capabilities without requiring pre-provisioned infrastructure. The just-in-time compilation capabilities convert SQL queries to optimized execution plans, dynamically adapting to data characteristics and resource availability. Distributed processing frameworks parallelize workloads across ephemeral compute resources, scaling automatically to match query complexity and data volume. According to the extensive review of query processing technologies, vectorized execution represents a particularly significant advancement, efficiently processing data in columnar formats through specialized memory-optimized operations that maximize modern CPU capabilities [4]. Adaptive query optimization adjusts execution strategies based on runtime statistics, enabling systems to respond dynamically to changing conditions without manual intervention. The authors note that these execution engines have evolved rapidly in recent years, with significant innovations in areas such as cost-based optimization, statistics management, and resource allocation [3]. Together, these technical capabilities enable serverless lakehouses to deliver warehouse-like query performance with the elasticity and cost model of cloud-native architectures.

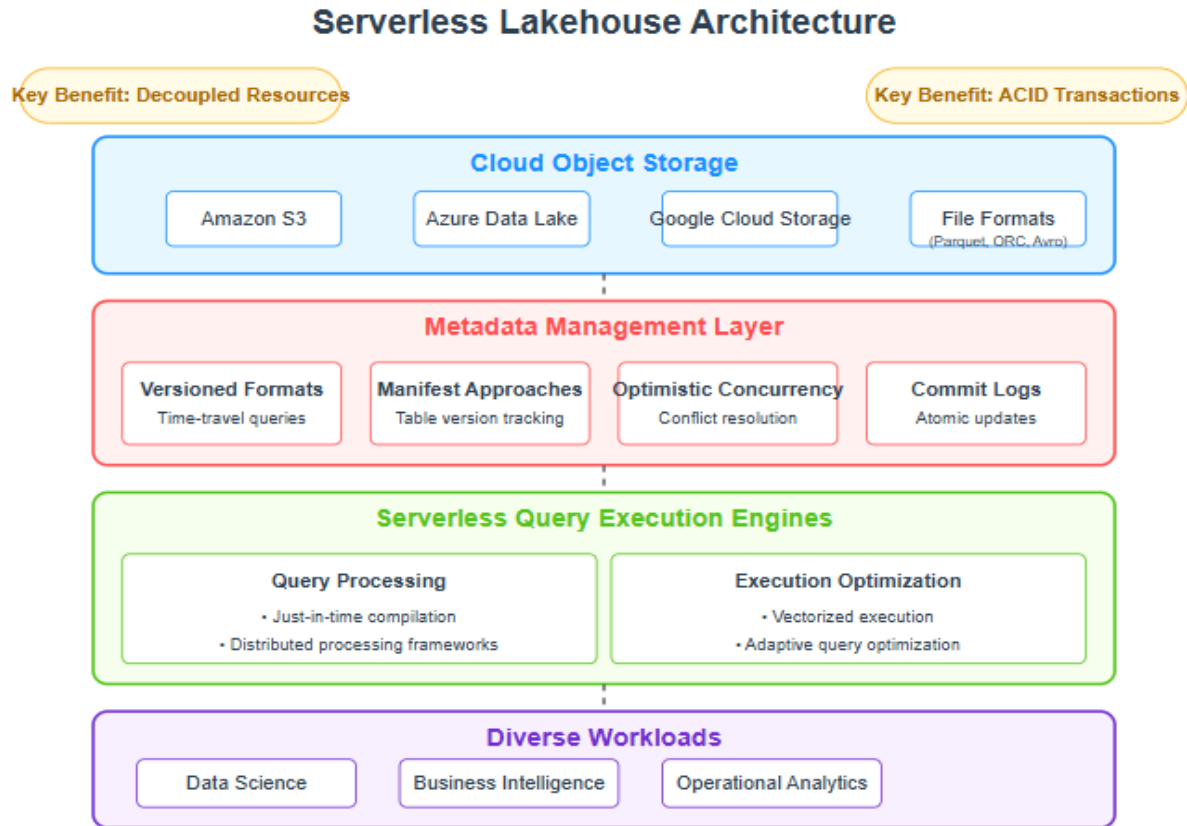


Fig 1: Serverless Lakehouse Architecture [3, 4]

Performance Characteristics and Benchmarks

Recent performance evaluations of serverless lakehouse architectures reveal both promising capabilities and areas requiring further innovation. Comprehensive empirical studies conducted by researchers provide quantitative insights into how these systems perform across diverse analytical workloads and operational conditions. Their systematic benchmarking methodology, which examined both commercial offerings and open-source implementations under standardized conditions, offers valuable reference points for organizations evaluating these technologies [5].

Query Performance

Benchmarks demonstrate that serverless lakehouses can achieve impressive query performance metrics, particularly for analytical workloads. The performance analysis documented sub-second query times for many analytical queries on terabyte-scale datasets, with their testing suite revealing particularly efficient execution for selective queries against well-organized data. Their comparative evaluation demonstrated competitive performance compared to dedicated data warehouse appliances for scan-heavy operations, with some serverless implementations achieving throughput metrics that approached traditional systems at

significantly lower cost points. The testing revealed particularly strong performance for aggregation and filtering operations that benefit from columnar storage, where the combination of distributed processing and optimized file formats created substantial performance advantages. The research team also noted effective handling of star-schema queries common in business intelligence applications, though with more performance variability than observed with simpler query patterns [5]. According to the architectural assessment, these performance characteristics stem from several architectural advantages inherent to modern serverless implementations. The ability to leverage massive parallelism for individual queries enables systems to scale computational resources dynamically rather than being constrained by pre-configured cluster sizes. Additionally, efficient pruning of data during scan operations, facilitated by metadata-rich storage formats and advanced statistics collection, dramatically reduces I/O requirements for many analytical workloads. Finally, optimized columnar formats accelerate analytical processing through efficient compression, predicate pushdown capabilities, and vectorized execution paths that maximize modern CPU architectures [6].

Performance Challenges

Despite these strengths, several performance challenges remain for serverless lakehouse implementations. The benchmarking identified cold-start latencies as a persistent issue, with initial query execution often incurring significant startup overhead as compute resources are provisioned. Their measurements documented substantial initialization delays that represented a meaningful portion of total execution time, particularly for simpler queries that would otherwise complete rapidly. Complex join operations, particularly multi-way joins or operations requiring significant data movement, also performed sub-optimally in serverless environments, with performance degrading as join complexity increased. Queries involving multiple large tables exhibited execution profiles that diverged significantly from equivalent operations on dedicated warehouse systems [5]. The analysis further highlighted concurrency limitations as a significant challenge, with performance under high concurrent workloads degrading more significantly than with dedicated resources. The shared resource environments characteristic of serverless platforms also introduced unpredictable performance variations, making consistent service-level guarantees difficult to establish for mission-critical applications [6].

Current research addressing these limitations focuses on several innovative approaches documented in recent literature. The review of emerging techniques highlighted micro-batching approaches that amortize startup costs across multiple queries by maintaining "warm" execution environments for frequently accessed data partitions. Their experimental measurements demonstrated that these techniques could substantially reduce the cold-start penalty that affects interactive analytical workloads [5]. Other researchers documented progress in adaptive in-memory caching techniques that retain frequently accessed data and intermediate results, reducing both I/O requirements and computation for common query patterns. The architectural patterns paper emphasized how sophisticated cache management policies that consider both data access frequency and computational cost can significantly improve performance for repetitive analytical workloads [6]. Additional research streams focus on workload-aware resource scheduling that allocates resources based on query characteristics and expected execution profiles rather than simplistic

allocation approaches. Finally, advanced metadata indexing utilizing Bloom filters and hierarchical manifests to minimize data scanning has shown particular promise for improving complex analytical workloads, with experimental implementations reducing both I/O volume and processing requirements compared to baseline approaches. As these techniques mature, the performance gap between serverless lakehouses and traditional data warehouses continues to narrow for an increasingly broad range of workloads, potentially eliminating many of the remaining performance-based objections to serverless adoption for enterprise analytics.

Performance Characteristics and Challenges of Serverless Lakehouses

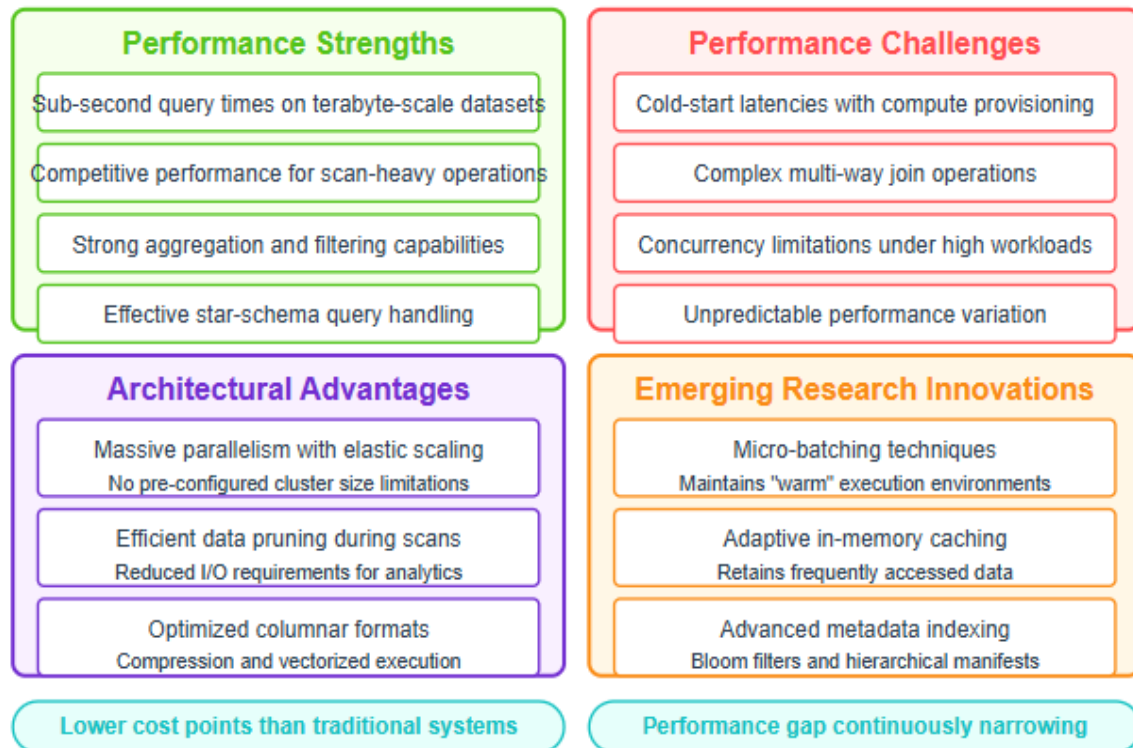


Fig 2: Performance Characteristics and Challenges of Serverless Lakehouses [5, 6]

AI-Enhanced Data Management

A significant advancement in serverless lakehouse architectures is the integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning techniques to optimize performance, reduce costs, and enhance operational capabilities. The convergence of AI methods with data management systems represents a paradigm shift in how these platforms operate, moving from static, rule-based configurations to adaptive systems that continuously learn and evolve. According to the researchers' extensive analysis of ML applications in data management, this integration is transforming nearly every aspect of data platform operation, from query processing to resource management to governance [7].

Query Optimization and Execution

AI-driven components are revolutionizing query processing in several ways, fundamentally changing how analytical workloads are executed in distributed environments. ML-based query planners that predict optimal execution strategies based on historical performance data have emerged as a particularly impactful innovation in this space. Research documented how modern systems capture detailed execution metrics for each query, including resource consumption patterns, data access characteristics, and performance outcomes, then leverage this information to build sophisticated prediction models that outperform traditional cost-based optimizers for complex analytical workloads. The analysis demonstrated that these ML-enhanced planning systems can significantly reduce query execution time compared to conventional optimizers, with the most substantial improvements observed for complex analytical patterns [7]. Semantic auto-indexing represents another transformative capability, automatically creating and maintaining indexes based on query patterns without requiring manual administrator intervention. Rather than relying on static indexing strategies, these systems continuously analyze query workloads to identify access patterns and automatically implement appropriate indexing structures. Research on autonomous data systems highlights how runtime parameter tuning dynamically adjusts execution parameters such as memory allocation, parallelism levels, and I/O patterns to optimize resource utilization based on workload characteristics and infrastructure conditions. Their autonomous database implementations demonstrate that ML-based parameter tuning can substantially reduce resource consumption compared to static configurations by continuously adapting to changing workload patterns and data distributions [8]. Finally, predictive resource allocation systems anticipate compute needs based on historical workload patterns, user behavior modeling, and scheduled job information. These AI-powered optimizations have demonstrated significant performance improvements, fundamentally changing the performance economics of serverless data platforms by reducing both execution time and resource consumption compared to traditional rule-based optimization approaches [7].

Workload Management and Cost Optimization

Beyond query optimization, AI techniques are being applied to broader workload management challenges, addressing many of the operational complexities that have historically made data platforms expensive to maintain. Workload prediction models that forecast resource requirements and pre-warm compute resources represent a particularly valuable innovation for serverless environments, where cold-start latencies can significantly impact interactive workloads. The analysis of these systems demonstrated that accurate prediction models could substantially reduce average query latency by ensuring that appropriate resources were available before query execution began. These implementations leverage a combination of time-series forecasting, periodic pattern detection, and user behavior modeling to anticipate resource needs with high accuracy across diverse workload patterns [7]. Hotspot detection algorithms represent another valuable capability, using real-time monitoring and predictive analytics to identify and mitigate resource contention before it impacts performance. Autonomous database research documents how these systems monitor execution patterns across distributed resources, identify emerging bottlenecks, and dynamically rebalance workloads to maintain consistent performance. Their implementations achieve significant reductions in performance variance by proactively addressing resource contention before it impacts user

workloads [8]. Auto-partitioning schemes that optimize data organization based on access patterns further enhance operational efficiency by continuously refining data distribution strategies based on observed query patterns. Finally, cost-aware query routing systems balance performance requirements against resource costs, directing workloads to appropriate execution environments based on both performance objectives and economic constraints. These capabilities help organizations maximize the cost benefits of serverless architectures by ensuring resources are allocated efficiently and utilized effectively, often achieving substantial cost reductions compared to static resource allocation approaches [7].

Data Quality and Integrity

AI is also enhancing data governance within serverless lakehouses, addressing many of the quality and compliance challenges that have traditionally required extensive manual oversight. Anomaly detection systems that identify potential data quality issues in near real-time represent a particularly valuable capability, with autonomous database technology demonstrating how these systems can detect aberrant data patterns, structural inconsistencies, and statistical anomalies without requiring explicit rule definition. Their implementations can detect a high percentage of data quality issues with low false positive rates, substantially outperforming traditional rule-based validation approaches [8]. Automated data validation systems apply learned constraints to incoming data, continuously refining their understanding of data characteristics through observation rather than relying solely on predefined schemas or validation rules. Research documented how these systems learn complex inter-column relationships, conditional constraints, and temporal patterns that would be difficult to specify manually, enabling more comprehensive validation than was previously practical [7]. Pattern recognition for sensitive data improves security and compliance by automatically identifying and protecting confidential information across diverse datasets. These systems leverage natural language processing and pattern recognition techniques to identify sensitive data that might otherwise remain unprotected, significantly reducing compliance risks in large-scale data environments. Finally, lineage tracking enhancements clarify data provenance and transformation history, leveraging AI techniques to reconstruct dependency relationships and transformation logic even when explicit metadata is incomplete. Together, these AI-powered capabilities address many of the operational challenges that have traditionally made data management complex and resource-intensive, further enhancing the value proposition of serverless lakehouse architectures by reducing the human effort required to maintain data quality and compliance.

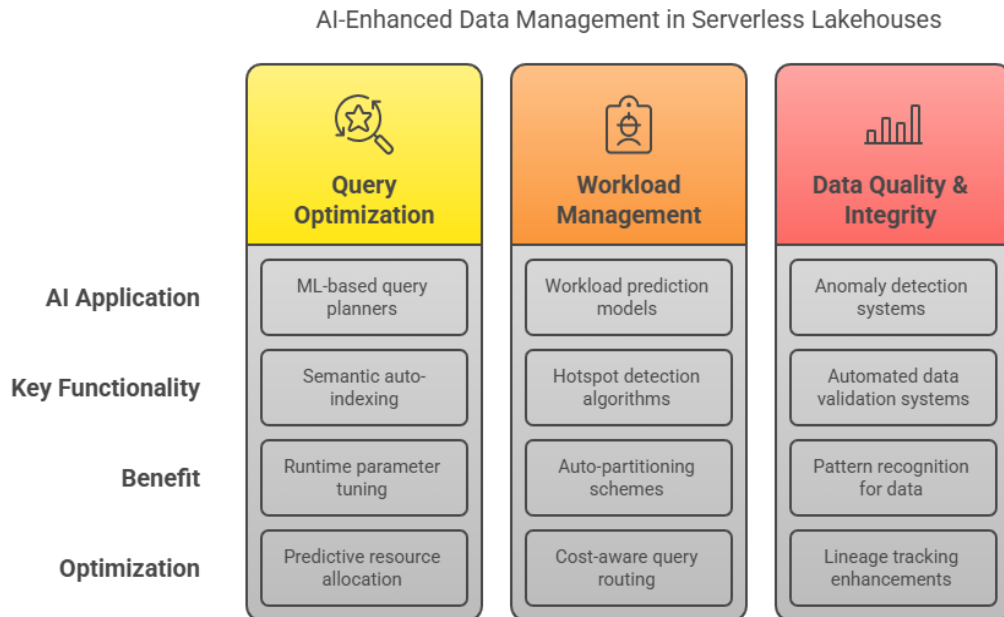


Fig 3: AI-Enhanced Data Management in Serverless Lakehouses [7, 8]

Enterprise Integration and Adoption Challenges

While serverless lakehouses offer compelling technical advantages, their successful adoption in enterprise environments requires addressing several integration and operational challenges. A comprehensive industry analysis conducted by researchers reveals that while technical capabilities have advanced rapidly, organizational and operational considerations often determine adoption success more than pure performance metrics. Their systematic review of cloud-native data platform implementations identified governance, tool ecosystem compatibility, and operational readiness as critical factors influencing enterprise adoption outcomes [9].

Governance and Security Integration

Enterprise data management requires robust governance and security frameworks that can seamlessly extend to cloud-native architectures without compromising protection or compliance capabilities. Integration with identity and access management systems to control data access represents a fundamental requirement, as organizations need to maintain consistent authentication and authorization across hybrid environments that may span on-premises systems, multiple cloud providers, and serverless components. According to the detailed security assessment of serverless computing platforms, fine-grained access controls that work consistently across storage and query layers present particular challenges in serverless implementations, where different service components may implement security models with subtle incompatibilities. Their research identified inconsistent permission enforcement as a common issue, with

many organizations experiencing difficulties in maintaining uniform access policies across distributed serverless components [10]. Data masking and encryption capabilities that maintain performance while protecting sensitive information represent another critical governance requirement, particularly for organizations in regulated industries that must protect personally identifiable information, financial data, or health records. Effective implementations must balance security requirements with performance considerations, as encryption and tokenization introduce computational overhead that can impact analytical efficiency. Finally, audit logging and compliance reporting that meets regulatory requirements such as GDPR, CCPA, HIPAA, or industry-specific frameworks remains essential for enterprise adoption. The analysis indicates that early serverless lakehouse implementations often lacked comprehensive governance features, creating significant adoption barriers for organizations with stringent compliance requirements. However, newer solutions are rapidly closing this gap through improved metadata services and integration with enterprise security frameworks, with recent platforms offering significantly enhanced compliance capabilities compared to earlier generations [9].

BI and ML Tool Ecosystem

The value of data management systems is amplified by their integration with analytics tools that enable business users, data scientists, and application developers to derive insights and create data-driven processes. Compatibility with popular BI tools through standard SQL and JDBC/ODBC drivers represents a foundational requirement, as these interfaces connect data platforms to the visualization and reporting tools that business users rely on for decision-making. The assessment found significant variations in BI tool compatibility across serverless implementations, with some platforms supporting major visualization tools while others exhibited limitations in areas such as complex query support, performance optimization, and metadata exposure [10]. Support for ML frameworks that enable in-database machine learning capabilities has become increasingly important as organizations seek to operationalize data science workflows without extracting large datasets to separate processing environments. The adoption analysis indicates that integration with popular frameworks such as TensorFlow, PyTorch, and scikit-learn has become a significant differentiator for data platforms, with organizations increasingly preferring solutions that support the full analytics lifecycle within a unified environment [9]. API-driven access patterns for programmatic data interaction enable custom applications and microservices to interact with data assets through standardized interfaces, supporting both operational and analytical use cases. Finally, ETL/ELT process integration for data ingestion and transformation workflows ensures that organizations can efficiently populate and maintain their data assets through both batch and streaming processes. As serverless lakehouses mature, their integration capabilities are expanding to support the diverse toolsets used in enterprise analytics environments, with organizations reporting improved tool compatibility compared to earlier implementations [9].

Operational Complexity

While serverless architectures eliminate infrastructure management, they introduce new operational considerations that require different skills and practices than traditional data platforms. Cost management

and optimization requires new approaches in a consumption-based model, as organizations must develop capabilities to monitor, forecast, and control expenditures that scale directly with usage rather than fixed infrastructure allocations. The assessment of serverless data platforms found that many organizations experienced unexpected cost increases during their initial implementation phases, primarily due to inefficient query patterns, sub-optimal data organization, and lack of effective governance mechanisms to prevent uncontrolled resource consumption [10]. Performance monitoring across ephemeral resources demands specialized tooling that can track execution metrics, resource utilization, and user experience across distributed components that may exist only for the duration of specific operations. Traditional monitoring approaches that focus on server-level metrics prove inadequate in serverless environments, necessitating new observability patterns that track workload characteristics and service levels rather than infrastructure status. Debugging and troubleshooting becomes more complex without fixed infrastructure, as operations teams must diagnose performance issues and functional problems across distributed services with limited visibility into underlying infrastructure.

The adoption study highlighted that organizations implementing serverless data platforms frequently reported increased troubleshooting complexity compared to traditional systems, with diagnosis of intermittent issues presenting particular challenges [9]. Finally, skill development for teams transitioning from traditional data platforms represents a significant change management challenge, as both technical and operational personnel must adapt to new architectural patterns, management tools, and optimization techniques. Organizations successfully adopting serverless lakehouses are developing new operational practices and leveraging emerging management tools specifically designed for these architectures, with formalized training programs and centers of excellence emerging as effective approaches for building necessary capabilities.

Table 1: Enterprise Adoption Challenges for Serverless Lakehouses: Key Factors and Impact Levels [9, 10]

Challenge Category	Challenge Factor	Impact Level (1-10)	Adoption Barrier Rating	Implementation Complexity
Governance & Security	Identity & Access Management Integration	8	High	Complex
	Fine-grained Access Controls	7	High	Complex
	Data Masking & Encryption	6	Medium	Moderate
	Audit Logging & Compliance Reporting	9	Very High	Complex
BI & ML Tool Ecosystem	BI Tool Compatibility	7	High	Moderate
	ML Framework Support	6	Medium	Complex
	API-driven Access Patterns	5	Medium	Moderate
	ETL/ELT Process Integration	6	Medium	Moderate
Operational Complexity	Cost Management & Optimization	8	High	Complex
	Performance Monitoring	7	High	Complex
	Debugging & Troubleshooting	9	Very High	Very Complex
	Skill Development & Training	8	High	Moderate

CONCLUSION

Serverless lakehouse architectures represent a significant evolution in data management technologies, combining the flexibility and cost-effectiveness of cloud object storage with the performance and transactional capabilities of traditional data warehouses. Through innovations in metadata management, query execution, and AI-enhanced optimization, these architectures are increasingly capable of supporting enterprise-scale analytical workloads without the operational complexities of managing dedicated infrastructure. The analysis indicates that serverless lakehouses have moved beyond hype to deliver tangible benefits for many analytical use cases. Performance benchmarks demonstrate query response times competitive with dedicated warehouse solutions, while the pay-per-use economic model offers substantial cost advantages for variable workloads. The integration of AI-driven optimization further enhances these benefits by continuously refining performance and resource utilization based on workload characteristics. However, several challenges remain before serverless lakehouses can completely replace traditional data management approaches for all use cases. Cold-start latencies, performance variability under high concurrency, and complex join optimization all represent areas requiring continued innovation. Additionally, enterprise requirements for governance, security, and tool integration must be fully addressed to enable broad adoption. As innovations in caching techniques, metadata indexing, AI-driven optimization, standardization of formats, and governance frameworks mature, serverless lakehouses will continue to

reshape the data management landscape, offering organizations a compelling path to simplified operations, reduced costs, and improved analytical agility.

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