



Commerce & Contract
Management Institute

Benchmark report 2025

The race is on: navigating uncertainty through CCM resilience

In collaboration with



sirion

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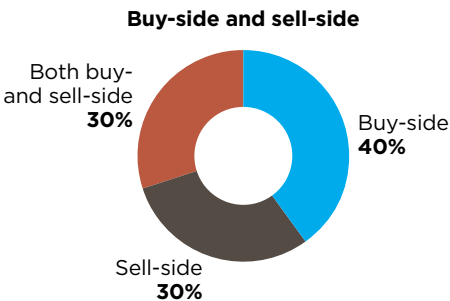
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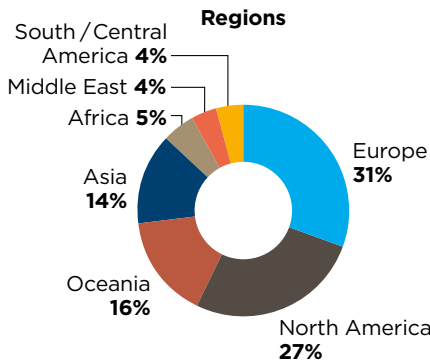
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Respondent demographics for this report



Total participants



Executive summary

Our research shows that executives get it – 88% understand that commercial and contract management (CCM) excellence matters, and they know they need to improve. But there's a massive gap between recognition and action.

For most, CCM capability features on a lengthy list of improvements and actions that have been deferred. Are they wrong in pushing this down the priority list? Our 2025 report suggests the answer may be yes. In reality, commercial and contracting resilience may be the catalyst for meaningful business discipline and growth.

While this study reveals many individual improvement initiatives, most lack a fundamental ingredient – consistent and well-defined process. Without process, there is confusion and with confusion there is delay, discord and a lack of resilience.

The good news – as of June 2025, there is a Global Contract Management Standard (CMS).¹

Through adoption of the CMS, organizations can make a break-through and generate the foundation for excellence.

The business landscape is demanding. Far from a 'return to normal', our latest research shows that 87% of organizations are dealing with high levels of uncertainty – and recognizing that this represents a 'new normal'. In terms of commercial and contracting capability, current conditions demand a fresh attitude to risk and highly adaptive processes and skills. But this isn't simply a call for people or culture transformation. CCM technology, long viewed as a tool for efficiency, is now poised to become a catalyst for a fundamental shift in contracting.

The widening gap between leaders and laggards, the rise of agentic Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems, and the push for efficient resource utilization are accelerating a profound evolution – from transactional workflows to experiential platforms that learn, anticipate and act.

Historically, CCM solutions mirrored the complexity they sought to manage: rigid workflows, manual inputs, and steep learning curves. But that focus on *how* work gets done is giving way to a new emphasis on *what* can be achieved. Intelligent, conversational systems are emerging – ones that understand context, anticipate outcomes, and take on the operational burden, empowering humans to focus on judgment, strategy, and value creation. The organizations that harness this shift will not merely weather uncertainty – they will define what comes next.

This report also points to a growing divide between sectors, buy-side and sell-side, and leaders and laggards. The changes we have identified are not random – they reveal how we are in the midst of profound, often chaotic transformation with:

- No consensus on organizational model
- AI forcing restructuring around new capabilities
- Resource constraints driving changes as much as strategies
- Simultaneous external and internal change creating role / structure confusion
- Different maturity levels across organizations and supply networks creating performance variation.

In this environment, we see organizations experimenting with different models, at different speeds, with different resource levels, and with inconsistent deployment and limited visibility of impact. Again, without a defined process, sustained improvement will not occur.

This matters because today we are facing fundamental questions about how to organize ourselves and our supply networks, what our workforce will look like, and how AI is going to change everything– from the way we measure success to how enterprises experience contract management. This report represents important reading for the insights it provides and the reflection that it should provoke. Are you providing the leadership needed to support this critical capability?



Tim Cummins
Executive Director,
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Ajay Agrawal
CEO, Sirion

¹ See *Contract Management Standard 4th edition (CMS)*, WorldCC and NCMA, 2025.

Introduction: Forecasting is critical to weathering the storm

The insights from the latest Benchmark Survey confirm that there are three major types of uncertainty that are simultaneously hitting us. Each of these is different in nature, with some being temporary while others are structural, some are predictable while others are unpredictable.

The three major types of uncertainty are:



Forecasting and understanding the types and nature of the uncertainties we may confront is critical.

First, there's the geopolitical chaos and market instability that we've become somewhat used to managing. But now we've added organizational uncertainty into the mix – people at every level are genuinely worried about their jobs and whether they'll still be relevant tomorrow. That's compounded by AI, which is making everyone question what human value creation actually looks like.²

When external market pressures combine with internal anxiety about the future, the quality and direction of leadership becomes essential. This study indicates that around 10% of organizations have been successfully executing on a plan – and that around 50% are struggling to formulate a response. What is also evident is that many are allowing their contracts and contracting practices to follow a traditional path – embedding greater controls and more risk aversion. 'Battening down the hatches' is one way to deal with uncertainty, but is it the best way?

The core dilemma

48% of respondents acknowledge there is no clarity over who is accountable for the quality and integrity of the contracting or commercial process. And following analysis of the answers from those who believe there is clarity, it quickly becomes evident that the real number isn't 48%, but 70-80% of organizations lack true accountability. CCM is the victim of shared responsibility – superficial structure without genuine ownership. It's a recipe for inertia and poor performance. This is a fundamental governance failure that no amount of centralization, AI tools, or skills uplift can fix.

Continued over

10%

of organizations have a plan for the quality and direction of CCM.

50%

of organizations are struggling to formulate a CCM response to uncertainty.

70-80%

of organizations lack clarity on who is responsible for CCM.

2. See *AI adoption in contracting*, WorldCC, February 2025.

Introduction (*continued*)

The gap between knowing and doing

Executives understand the importance of contracting and commercial capability in the management of uncertainty and change. At the same time, practitioners appreciate their need to focus on the right things³ – generating greater value – but they're stuck, constrained by processes that need re-engineering and skills that need fundamental uplift. And in many cases, they also lack guidance – in the context of contracting, what does 'value' actually mean? As a result, most of the CCM workforce is still operating in defense – mitigating risks, fixing performance issues, reacting to change rather than managing risk and creating better financial returns and outcomes.

The extensive executive awareness of the need represents a window of opportunity for practitioners to show the art of the possible in terms of how to deliver value creation and capture through the contracting lifecycle. It's an opportunity that will require boldness and leadership, in particular around the adoption of a contracting process that is consistently applied and deployed both internally and with external partners.

Why CCM is pushed down the priority list

For senior leadership, contract and commercial reform often lands in the 'too difficult' pile. They know it's important, but it gets pushed to being a second-tier priority because it's complex. It requires cross-functional coordination, cultural change, and sustained investment in both technology and people.⁴

Organizations which have successfully made technological advances in their contracting processes are measurably better at navigating market uncertainty.

But is this perspective completely wrong? Are uplifted CCM capabilities not merely one element in a program of change, but actually the key catalyst for that change?

Organizations which have made real progress in their contracting capabilities tell us that managing market uncertainty has become significantly easier. This suggests that CCM excellence isn't something you do after you've sorted everything else out – it's a prerequisite for organizational resilience.

CCM and contracting excellence are prerequisites for organizational resilience

The real opportunity is to find ways to act differently and measure effect within the frameworks of today. By demonstrating value in advance of larger scale change we can raise CCM excellence up the agenda. One of the simplest things here is to pivot our language from preventist to optimist,⁵ and from our functional language to business language explaining how actions affect business outcomes in a positive way.

Continued over



Contract and commercial reform often lands in senior leadership's 'too difficult' pile.

3. 88% of executives acknowledge the importance of CCM capabilities and 66% of practitioners appreciate the need to increase their strategic relevance and value.

4. See *Humans and AI: together, transforming contract management*, WorldCC, April 2025.

5. See *Optimism and prevention in contracting*, WorldCC, October 2019.

Introduction (*continued*)**Technology: The game changer?**

To a degree, the path forward is becoming clearer: it's the alignment between technology and skills that provides the ultimate foundation for CCM transformation.

The analysis provided by this and previous reports⁶ show that organizations which have successfully made technological advances in their contracting processes are measurably better at navigating market uncertainty. However, that success is founded on clarity of process, ensuring that the necessary tasks are consistently defined and that the organization is equipped to perform them. Who is responsible for that performance will vary – it may be highly-trained practitioners, it could be operational teams, or it may be via self-service applications.

We need to stop thinking about technology as a nice-to-have support tool and start recognizing digital capability as fundamental infrastructure for modern commercial relationships. A new combination of people enabled by intelligent systems can address the issues of speed, data fragmentation and confused responsibilities, which if left unchecked, turn uncertainty into confusion, and volatility into chaos.

In this context, it's clear that 'the race is on'.

Statistics from this year's survey show:

- 40% of respondents say their contracts / commercial staff are already using AI in an approved form, with a further 23% stating it's under review.
- 80% of the organizations already reporting high levels of contracting quality confirm their interest in progressing AI and machine learning versus 57% of those with a less integrated approach to the process.
- AI is also accelerating its presence. In addition to use in contract repositories, it is increasingly used for contract creation or drafting; creating contract summaries; or contract review. Obligation extraction is a fast-growing area for focus.

The evidence is pointing to a future where CCM excellence, enabled by a global process standard and thoughtful technology adoption, becomes the foundation for organizational adaptability.

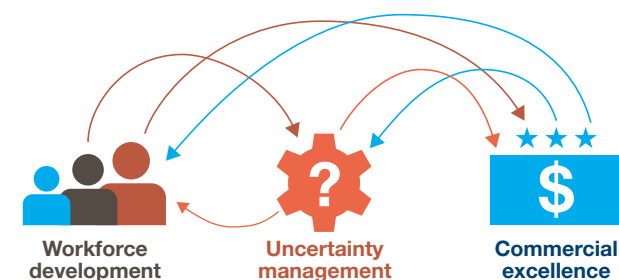
CCM excellence is delivered by CCM capability – a mix of human, technology and digital strategies which align and balance the people, the tools, and the data.

The race is on

The organizations that thrive are those that recognize how uncertainty management, workforce development, and commercial excellence are all connected. The question isn't whether to invest in CCM transformation anymore – it's how quickly and effectively you can align your contracting capabilities with your organization's strategic needs and the demands of an uncertain world.

The data is clear: uncertainty isn't going away, but the tools and approaches to manage it effectively are within reach for those willing to prioritize and invest in commercial and contracting excellence. Success depends on clarifying the responsibility for change, overcoming the confusion that prevails today. Organizations must distinguish between overall responsibility for the process, versus operational responsibility for individual transactions, relationships or policies.

The next frontier is not more controls – it's clarity through collaboration. Organizations that connect their data, decisions, and teams through trustworthy, explainable AI will move from reactive risk mitigation to proactive value creation.



In order to thrive, organizations must recognize how uncertainty management, workforce development, and commercial excellence are all inter-connected.

6. For example: *The ROI of contracting excellence*, WorldCC, July 2023.

What do we mean by uncertainty?

The 'big three' characteristics of current uncertainty are market, geopolitical, and organizational, with regulatory, technological and financial concerns also featuring strongly, but with greater variability between sectors and geographies.

Figure 1: Leading categories of uncertainty

The three major types of uncertainty

Market uncertainty

Economic conditions, competition, customer demand, sources of supply



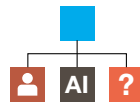
Geopolitical uncertainty

International relations, political instability, trade policies, tariffs, supply chain risks, disruptions to flow of goods and services



Organizational uncertainty

Restructuring, changes in leadership, layoffs, mergers and acquisitions, work-force availability, scarcity of skilled labor



Other uncertainties which feature strongly

Regulatory uncertainty

Government direction, procurement regulations, new legislation



Technological uncertainty

AI, digitization adoption, other new systems (both internal and external)



Financial and budgetary uncertainty

Budget constraints, funding impacts, access to capital



No organization can avoid at least one of these sources of uncertainty (Figure 1) and most face a combination. Within each category of uncertainty, the following were highlighted by multiple survey respondents:

Why we have linked uncertainty to adaptability, resilience, and contracting quality

In our survey, we gathered input on each organization's level of adaptability, resilience and contracting process quality. These three dimensions represent critical capabilities for managing uncertainty in commercial relationships.

Adaptability measures an organization's ability to respond and adjust to shifting conditions. In a volatile environment, rigid processes and structures become liabilities. Organizations that can move at speed to pivot strategies, reconfigure resources, and modify approaches are better positioned to navigate the 'big three' uncertainty sources (market, geopolitical, organizational) we identified. Adaptability is the dynamic capability that allows organizations to stay relevant as conditions shift.⁷

Resilience captures the capacity to absorb shocks and recover when uncertainty creates disruption. Unlike adaptability (which is about changing), resilience is about maintaining core function through turbulence. Resilient organizations have built redundancy, contingency plans, and robust systems that prevent

single points of failure. This is particularly critical for managing supply chain disruptions, regulatory changes, and geopolitical instability where organizations may have limited control over external events. Equally, a portfolio of customers, markets and offerings can provide resilience from a market and revenue perspective.

Continued over

Uncertainty requires flexibility

Flexibility in the context of an uncertain environment requires an appropriate level of *adaptability* and *agility*.

Adaptability: the ability and willingness to consciously move or change in a planned manner.

Agility: the ability to move or change in a swift manner to unforeseen events.

⁷ *Thriving in Uncertainty: Adaptability for Commercial Leaders*, WorldCC webinar featuring Ross Thornley, CEO, AQAI.

What do we mean by uncertainty? (continued)

Quality of contracting process represents the governance mechanism that either enables or constrains both adaptability and resilience in commercial relationships. Well-designed contracts and procurement processes can:

- Build in flexibility mechanisms (change management, pricing adjustments) that support adaptability
- Establish clear risk allocation and dispute resolution that enhance resilience
- Create collaborative frameworks rather than adversarial relationships
- Embed and enable consistent data flows and sharing
- Enable rapid decision-making when uncertainty requires action.

Importantly, contracting quality reflects whether organizations have moved beyond a risk transfer or 'preventist' mentality and whether they have consolidated data flows to support management decisions. Sophisticated contracting recognizes that uncertainty often can't be transferred away, but must be managed collaboratively through well-structured relationships informed by data transparency.

Increasingly, this decision velocity depends on AI systems that are transparent and auditable. When explainable agents surface insights and recommended actions with traceable rationale, organizations can adapt faster and with greater confidence.

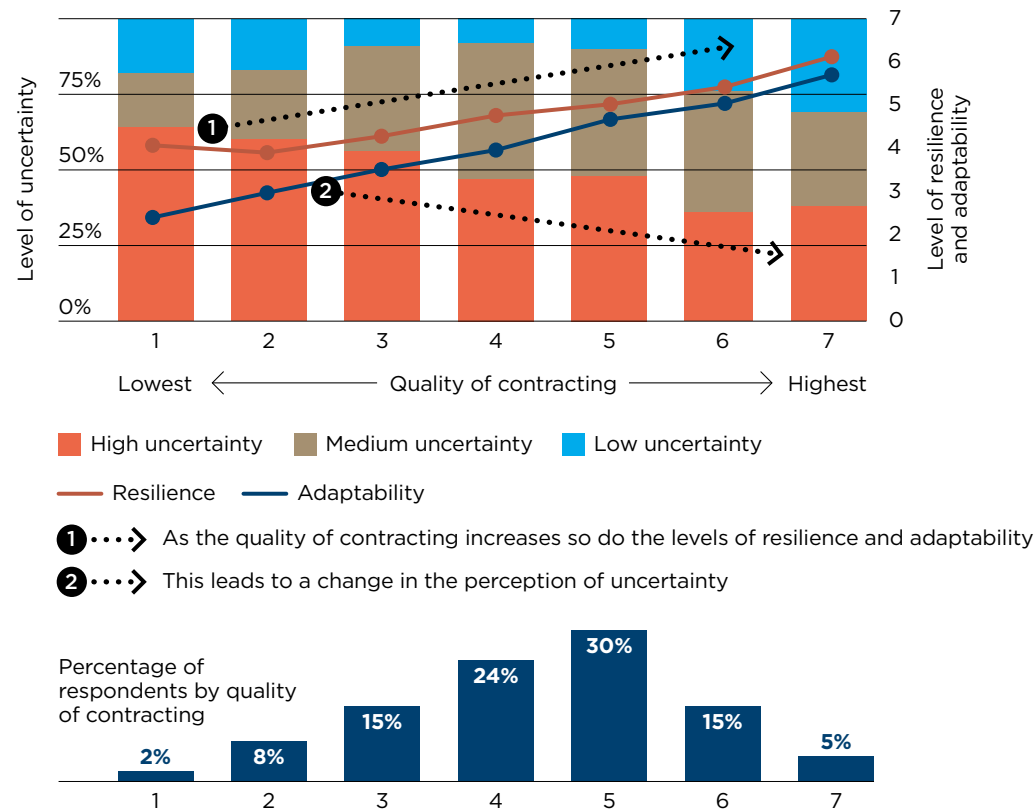
Together, these three capabilities form a comprehensive uncertainty management system:

- **Contracting quality** sets the governance foundation
- **Adaptability** provides the dynamic response capability
- **Resilience** ensures continuity through disruption.

Organizations strong in all three can turn uncertainty from a threat into a manageable operational challenge and in doing so create an opportunity for competitive advantage.

Figure 2 shows how the severity of perceived uncertainty declines as the quality of contracting capability grows.

Figure 2: Quality of contracting as a driver of uncertainty management through resilience and adaptability



Uncertainty by region

The major geographic regions show significant variations in the perceptions of both the extent of uncertainty and their ability to handle it, see Figure 3.

We have analyzed the data to see whether perceived levels of uncertainty are matched by perceived levels of capability: a score below 1 indicates a shortfall in current capabilities, while a score above 1 implies an ability to adjust rapidly to unexpected events.

Based on this analysis, Africa (1.23) and South / Central America (1.19) emerge as strong performers. It's a result which will surprise many, but it reflects uncertainty management born from necessity. Organizations here have developed genuine adaptability and resilience through decades of operating in volatile market and geopolitical environments. Their moderate uncertainty scores don't reflect complacency or ignorance but reflect normalized volatility – change is constant and they have developed capabilities accordingly. However, those capabilities are limited, especially when it comes to operating in international markets where their weaknesses in contracting and underlying technology deployment act as constraints.

The strong performance from Asia (1.12) reflects a combination of resource abundance (vast, low cost labor pools) and cultural agility. It is also built on a healthy appetite for risk, which by many is viewed as representing opportunity. Organizations in Asia have often used human resources effectively while also embracing rapid technological and organizational change. However, some of this capability may still rely on 'throwing people at problems' rather than pure efficiency and again does not represent a sustainable model for the future.

Europe (0.95) and Oceania (0.87) represent the paradox of stability – success in stable environments may reduce adaptive capacity. Established regulatory frameworks, mature institutions, and predictable markets have created organizational cultures less equipped for current volatility. Their higher uncertainty perception reflects significant discomfort with environments that their systems and organizational culture weren't designed to handle.

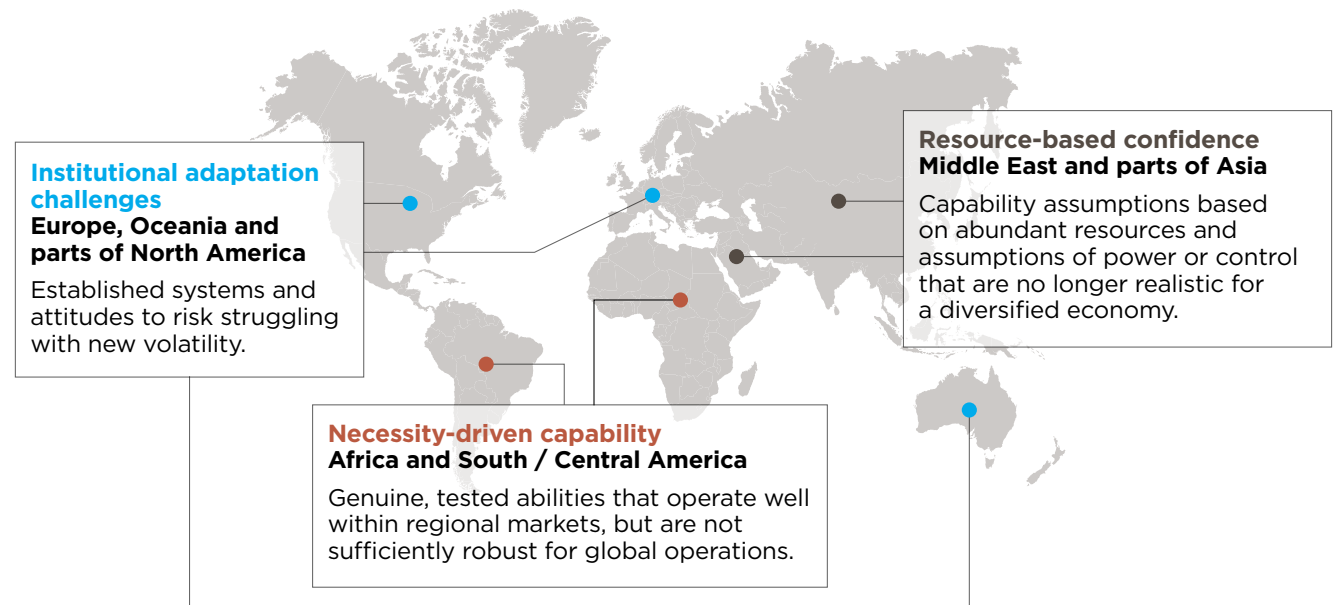
North America (1.03) is closest to balanced performance, reflecting a greater openness to change and capabilities that are aligned. This does not mean that they do not need to learn and improve, but the data reveals a greater readiness to question and adjust. This is reflected in greater levels of investment in technology and skills, although continued political and geopolitical turbulence are putting these capabilities under stress.

Finally, the overall 'winner' is the Middle East with a score of 1.34. However, analysis indicates that this represents a level of confidence that does not withstand testing. It is based on a set of assumptions that represent outdated approaches to the market:

- Historical risk transfer to suppliers
- Oil wealth enabling 'buying out of trouble'
- Major transformation initiatives creating aspirational thinking
- Cultural factors favoring confident self-assessment.

The Middle East's low uncertainty perception of 3.76 (where 1 is low and 7 high) reflects confidence in traditional mitigation methods that are no longer sufficient, while high capability scores appear to represent investment confidence rather than operational reality.

Figure 3: The data reveals three distinct geographic uncertainty management paradigms



Uncertainty by sector

The analysis applied to major geographic regions (see previous page) has also been used to evaluate overall performance by sectors, listed here in order of their capability.

Sectors performing best at managing uncertainty



Manufacturing and processing Uncertainty capability 1.20

Shows a relatively moderate level of uncertainty and exceptionally strong management capabilities, especially in resilience (5.41). It's a sector where operational performance and quality are fundamental to growth, and change management is an endemic issue, a dependency for survival.



Technology and software Uncertainty capability 1.12

Also reports moderate levels of uncertainty, with well-developed adaptability and process capabilities. The moderate uncertainty scores reflect their comfort with technological change itself – it's the market disruption and organizational transformation that creates their uncertainty and represents their market opportunity. The frequency of product updates and associated commercial models means that by definition this sector is adaptable.



Oil, gas and energy Uncertainty capability 1.09

Has a history of operating in environments with high uncertainty – geopolitical, environmental and economic – and has developed performance capabilities to match, although it is lagging in terms of technology adoption and this will increasingly constrain adaptability.



Telecommunications Uncertainty capability 1.07

Operates with high uncertainty (4.61) due to a rapidly changing technology landscape – such as 5G, AI, Internet of Things (IoT) – regulatory battles over spectrum and net neutrality, geopolitical tensions around infrastructure, market saturation pressures, and complex organizational transformations. Overall, the sector has worked hard to build the capabilities needed for this environment.



Business services and consulting Uncertainty capability 1.03

Has the most balanced capability profile, scoring consistently well across adaptability (4.67), resilience (4.75), and contracting quality (4.54). This suggests the sector has developed mature, well-rounded uncertainty management capabilities, reflecting a business model which requires operating across diverse client environments, adapting to varying organizational contexts and frequent shifts in requirement.

Continued over

Uncertainty capability scores above 1

= an ability to adjust rapidly to unexpected events.

Uncertainty capability scores below 1

= a shortfall in current capabilities.

Uncertainty by sector (*continued*)

Sectors that are struggling with uncertainty-capability gaps

**Engineering and construction**
Uncertainty capability 0.96

Faces high uncertainty (4.74) and believes that it has developed capabilities which come close to matching. However, detailed analysis suggests that the true score should be 0.75-0.80, indicating a need for substantial improvements to overcome the delays, cost overruns and frequent disputes associated with this sector. Participants appear to perceive the use of standards and well defined process as an indicator of quality, whereas their rigidity is contributing to low margins and structural weaknesses.

**Aerospace and defense**
Uncertainty capability 0.95

Has the lowest adaptability score (3.42) across all industries. However, their resilience (4.69) is quite strong, suggesting they're excellent at maintaining operations through disruption but less effective at pivoting when conditions change.

Long-term programs, complex supply networks, extensive regulations, and high safety / security requirements create organizational structures optimized for consistency rather than adaptability and agility. They're built to withstand shocks but not to change direction quickly. Contracting processes are similarly strong, but behind others on technology deployment and framed to handle strict compliance requirements.

**Banking, financial services and insurance (BFSI)**
Uncertainty capability 0.93

Has a moderate uncertainty perception (4.40), weak adaptability (3.83), but strong resilience (4.74). This suggests the sector is not comfortable with change but has built robust controls to weather disruption. Their contracting process quality (3.67) is the second-lowest across all industries and the data reflects heavy regulatory constraints, legacy systems, and risk-averse cultures that prioritize stability over flexibility.

BFSI may be well-prepared for known risks but potentially vulnerable to disruptive change requiring rapid organizational adaptation. It's also a market being disrupted by new digital entrants without legacy technology platforms.

**Healthcare and pharma**
Uncertainty capability 0.89

Also has a high level of uncertainty: volatile markets for drug pricing, geopolitical supply chain risks (especially post-COVID), complex organizational structures, intense regulatory scrutiny and safety standards, and rapid technological disruption in biotech. It's another environment which constrains adaptability (3.96) and encourages investment in technology.

**Government and public sector**
Uncertainty capability 0.82

Shows the most concerning pattern – facing high uncertainty (4.77) but having the weakest management capabilities, particularly in adaptability (3.43). The sector's exposure to geopolitical instability and regulatory changes are compounded by market pressures through budget constraints and public expectations, plus organizational complexity from political cycles.

In many jurisdictions, politicians are pushing for major changes, without a clear appreciation of the implications and the conflicts this creates with long-established public procurement principles and procedures.

Uncertainty capability scores above 1

= an ability to adjust rapidly to unexpected events.

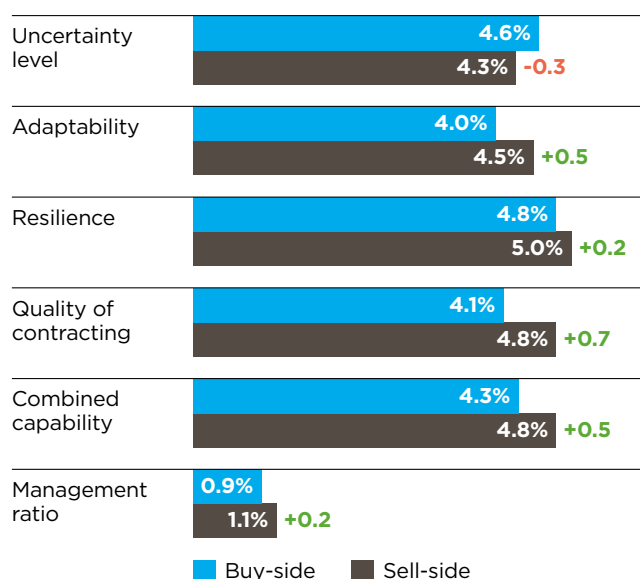
Uncertainty capability scores below 1

= a shortfall in current capabilities.

Buy-side and sell-side capability

Who is winning in the race for capability? The research confirms other recent findings: sell-side capabilities are consistently out-performing those of buy-side, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Comparative analysis of uncertainty management capabilities (buy-side versus sell-side)



Once again, perceived levels of uncertainty are influenced by capability and experience. Because they work with a diverse range of customers, each with its own requirements, many suppliers are forced to build capability. Hence, while today's business conditions may be challenging, those on the sell-side see them as less daunting than the buy-side.

This matters because it suggests that traditional power assumptions may be wrong.

Buyers assume leverage gives them control, but if suppliers have superior uncertainty management capabilities, they may in fact hold the strategic advantage. Because buy-side resources operate in more stable internal environments, they have developed greater organizational rigidity, equipped with processes and systems that are designed for compliance and control. When markets are disrupted, buyers find it harder to adapt and this becomes particularly evident in the quality of contracting (rigid templates, long cycle times for negotiation, under-investment in skills and technology). It also explains the frequent challenges associated with innovation or improvement: **when sellers offer new approaches or ideas, buyers may lack the capacity or capability to take advantage of them.**

This data strongly suggests that buyers should shift from adversarial risk-transfer approaches to collaborative partnerships where they can learn from suppliers' superior adaptive capabilities. The traditional 'buyer power' model may be creating buy-side vulnerabilities rather than advantages.

Do integrated buy-side and sell-side resources perform better?

A significant proportion of organizations operate with some level of buy-side / sell-side resource integration. When it comes to technology costs and data flows, this approach delivers obvious benefits. But what does the research tell us about the impact on broader performance?

The benefits hypothesis

Integrating buy-side and sell-side resources should bring market advantages by:

- Improving overall skills through cross-functional learning
- Operating with shared systems and processes
- Improving data flows and knowledge sharing
- Breaking down adversarial barriers
- Allowing for better flow down and integration.

Initial assessment

Integrated teams underperform sell-side but show a meaningful uplift from buy-side baseline. Additionally, integration creates a stronger foundation for continued capability development.

As can be seen from Figure 4, integrated buy-side / sell-side teams significantly outperform pure buy-side across all metrics. This means they have closed 63% of the gap to sell-side performance (1.12 ratio), with the strongest gains in adaptability (+10%) where buy-side was weakest.

Overall, at least in respect of contract management, it appears that integration brings benefits, especially in environments of greater uncertainty and complexity.

There are interesting differences in the focus of AI use between buy-side and sell-side. For example, on the buy-side there is greater deployment for contract creation and drafting, negotiation support and reporting, whereas the sell-side is significantly ahead in contract review, approval, contract summaries, obligation extraction and portfolio analysis.

Buy-side and sell-side CCM processes

In this and other recent reports, we have highlighted variations in approach and performance between buy-side and sell-side CCM processes and organization.

The data points to improved capabilities on the sell-side contributing to both greater efficiency and better financial returns, in particular through reduced value leakage.

A number of factors may be contributing to this:

Contract terms

The buyer community is more likely to succeed in using its standard terms and templates (76% of the time). However, it is far less likely to undertake regular reviews of its terms and templates or to have engaged in efforts to simplify its contracts (39%) when compared against the sell-side (67%). This not only adds to friction, but also raises the risk of incomplete or inappropriate terms which threaten performance and potentially lead to higher prices. For example, studies of public sector contracting have indicated that their use of fixed templates may be generating a price premium of more than 10%.

Resources and their role

The buyer community is less likely to deploy full-time, dedicated contract managers (53%) than is the case among suppliers (79%). Buy-side personnel are more likely to say that the contract management (48%) and commercial management (58%) roles lack clarity; this compares with 36% and 44% making this same observation on the sell-side. This is further compounded by the fact that just 10% of those on the buy-side have full responsibility across the contracting lifecycle, versus 33% on the sell-side.

Organizational structure and positioning

The picture here is more nuanced and reflects the point that there is no established 'best practice' model. Figures 5 and 6 shows the extent of variability in both how CCM resources are organized and where they report. Both factors clearly have an impact on how they perceive and perform their role – for example, the extent to which it is focused exclusively on transactional support, the degree to which there is effective information exchange and learning, and the influence that a particular stakeholder function has upon the perceived purpose of the role.

Overall, this data helps explain or confirm the core buy-side disadvantage (0.93 versus 1.12). Buy-side suffers from greater fragmentation:

- More decentralized (24% versus 19%)
- More 'no consistent line' (14% versus 32%)
- Reports predominantly to Procurement (33%) – a function that typically focuses on cost and compliance over strategic value.

In comparison, sell-side resources operate with greater coherence:

- More centralized (38% versus 32%)
- More matrixed but with clear commercial / legal focus
- Reports to a distinct commercial or contract management function (32%) or Legal (24%) – functions that are potentially more aligned on value creation and risk management.

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Figure 5: CCM resource organization (buy-side versus sell-side)

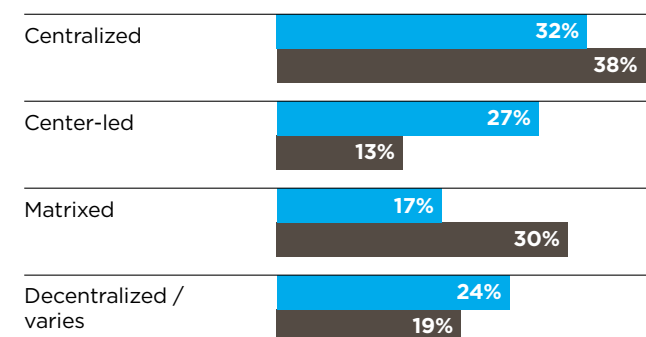
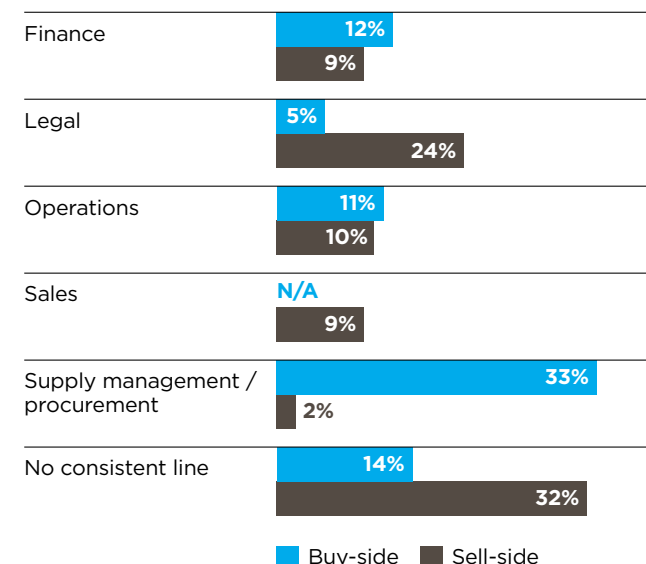


Figure 6: CCM resource reporting (buy-side versus sell-side)



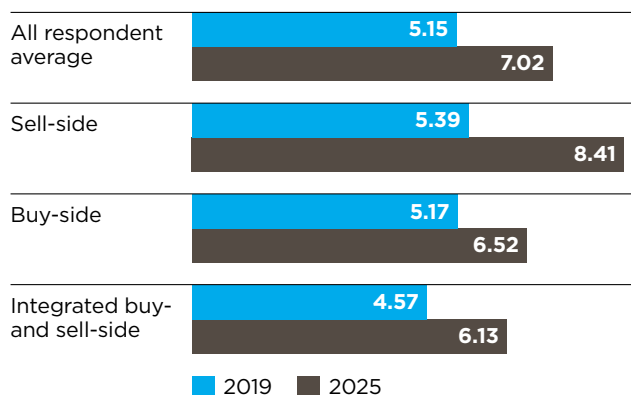
Buy-side and sell-side CCM processes (*continued*)

AI has potential to provide interconnected capabilities – for example, data extraction, analytics and obligation monitoring. However, a concern is that these capabilities will be developed as separate use cases, especially in organizations where there is no overall process ownership by different functional stakeholders. This will dilute the benefits achieved.

The benchmark data provides insights to the extent of technology enablement. We have assessed this by examining the capabilities (or functionality) that have been deployed or are in process of deployment. In total, we examined 17 possible capabilities, such as obligation extraction and digital playbooks.

On this measure, as shown in Figure 7, the level of ‘capability per person’ has made significant progress since 2019, further confirmed by the continued intentions to deploy. However, looking beneath the surface, there are significant variations between buy-side and sell-side, and the size of organization. There is also slow progress in developing use cases for AI, especially among organizations with low levels of adaptability.

Figure 7: Technology capability per person 2019-2025



The next stage of maturity will not be defined by how many features organizations deploy, but by how coherently those capabilities connect to form a reliable decision layer. The emerging pattern across high performers shows that contracting technology adds value when it is integrated, explainable, and lifecycle-aware – linking insights, obligations, and performance data across pre- and post-award stages. This evolution shifts technology’s role from static repository to trusted, insight-driven infrastructure for commercial decisions.

This surge of investment by sell-side organizations has led to 37% more capabilities per capita. This is a massive technology advantage that directly contributes to their performance superiority (1.12 versus 0.93 ratio).

Integrated buy- and sell-side teams – which are extensively from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) – have closed the gap on buy-side.

Buy-side and sell-side CCM capability gaps

There are some significant variations in the adoption of key functionalities, as shown in Figure 8.

- Obligation extraction is a major contributor to contracting quality
- Digital playbooks capture institutional knowledge providing systematic guidance for handling non-standard situations
- Post-signature monitoring contributes to resilience (5.01 versus 4.79) enabling sell-side to identify performance issues earlier
- AI / machine learning remains a low level of adoption on both sell- and buy-sides, it does not include some of the embedded capabilities within Contract Lifecycle Management (CLM) systems (e.g. as part of obligation extraction) and based on future plans, the gap will widen
- In analytics portfolio sell-side has a modest advantage but both sides are weak, largely due to challenges with data collection and accuracy.

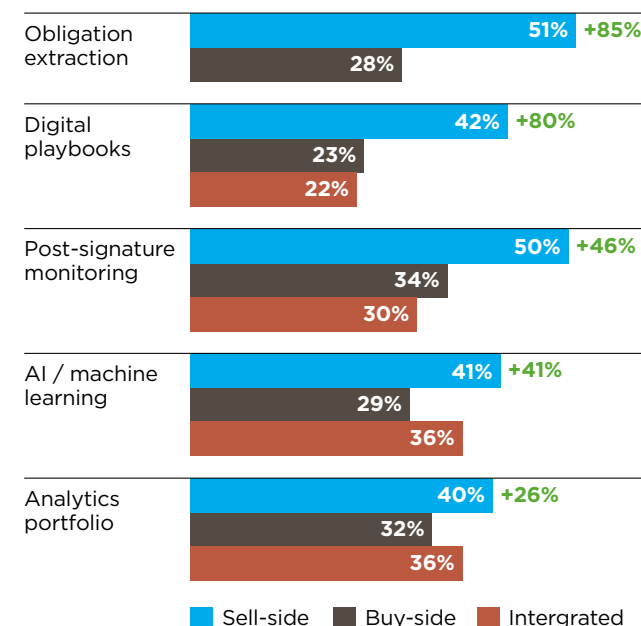
Figure 8 also shows that integrated sell- and buy-side teams match or exceed expectations in two key areas: Analytics portfolio, because for SMEs, a smaller portfolio means less data to absorb; and AI / machine learning, due to greater adaptability, less constrained by overall business complexity.

However, they also lag behind in two key areas which impede their overall quality of contracting: digital playbooks; and post-signature monitoring – for both of which integrated teams are lower than sell- or buy-side.

Integrated / SME teams are prioritizing analytical and AI capabilities (forward-looking) over operational process automation (obligation extraction, monitoring). This is either:

- Strategic: Investing scarce resources in capabilities that provide most leverage
- Necessary: Can't afford comprehensive CLM platforms, so choosing targeted tools.

Figure 8: Capability, by sell-side, buy-side and integrated teams



Contracting quality versus excellence

The *ROI of contracting excellence report* looked at the concept of excellence in relation to the process of contracting and introduced the Contracting Excellence Framework.

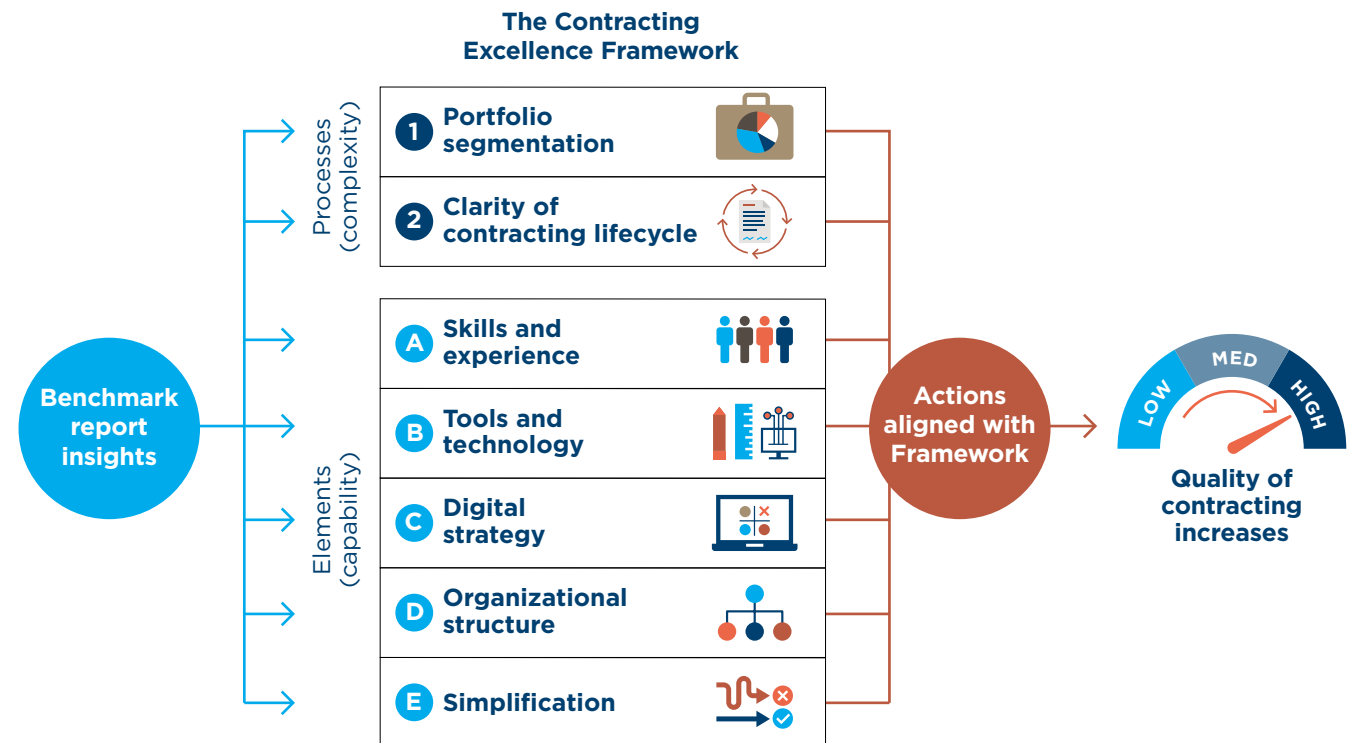
This Framework highlighted action areas (processes and elements) that are found in organizations that achieve higher levels of performance and excellence in their contracting. These are areas where tangible action can be taken to raise performance and excellence.

Contracting Quality is the score given to the output and outcomes of the contracting process. A high score depends on undertaking the actions and investments highlighted by the Contracting Excellence Framework.

Excellence, therefore, is not a fixed end-state but a living capability – the ability to continuously learn from performance, apply insight across the lifecycle, and embed those lessons into how decisions are made. In practice, this means developing contracting processes that are transparent, data-informed, and capable of self-improvement through clear feedback and governance loops.

In the following sections we will look at perspectives that can be linked to a number of the areas highlighted in the Contracting Excellence Framework.

Figure 9: Insights, Framework, actions = increased contracting quality



Strategic priorities and barriers

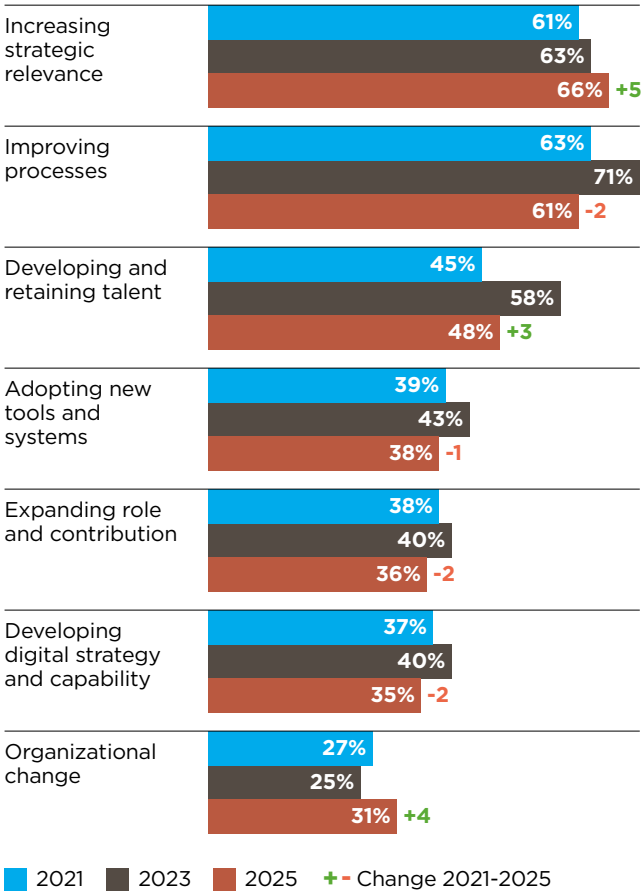
The overall priorities for CCM in 2025 show interesting shifts when compared to past years and represent clear links to many of the elements in the Contracting Excellence Framework. Many of the barriers to achieving these priorities have not altered.

Looking at Figure 10, the dramatic spike in ‘improving processes’ (71% in 2023) followed by a sharp decline to 61% in 2025 suggests that organizations responded to post-COVID chaos with process fixes, but are now focusing on deeper strategic positioning. The steady rise in ‘increasing strategic relevance’ (61% in 2021, 63% in 2023, 66% in 2025) suggests a growing maturity from reactive fixes to proactive positioning.

Linking strategic priorities and barriers to the Contracting Excellence Framework

- 2 Clarity of contracting lifecycle
- A Skills and experience
- B Tools and technology
- D Organizational structure
- E Simplification

Figure 10: Strategic priorities, 2021-2025 trends



When looking at the ranking of the strategic priorities by level of contracting quality (Figure 11), we observe ‘increasing strategic relevance’ and ‘expanding role and contribution’ rising up the ranking for both those in the medium and high levels of contracting quality.

Figure 11: Strategic priorities, rank per level of contracting quality

Contracting quality	Low	Medium	High
Increasing strategic relevance	2	1	1
Improving processes	1	2	2
Developing and retaining talent	3	3	3
Adopting new tools and systems	4	4	4
Expanding role and contribution	7	5	5
Developing digital strategy and capability	6	6	6
Organizational change	4	7	7

Continued over

Strategic priorities and barriers (continued)

As shown in Figure 12, at 39%, the 'level of uncertainty and constant change' represents the 3rd highest barrier. It has emerged as a distinct, recognized challenge separate from operational issues. Those facing the highest levels of uncertainty are also most likely to point at concerns over 'quality of functional leadership' (30%) and 'lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities' (27%) and 'organizational structure' (25%). Together, these factors suggest that many organizations are struggling with direction and coherence in volatile environments.

Linking strategic priorities and barriers to the Contracting Excellence Framework

2 Clarity of contracting lifecycle

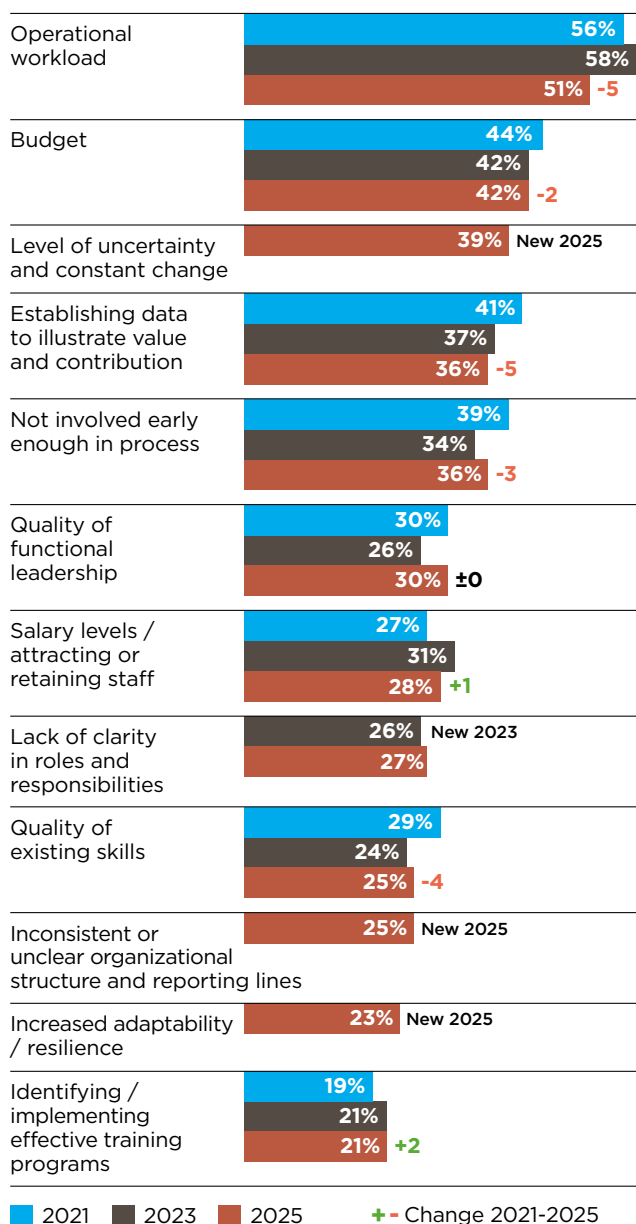
A Skills and experience

B Tools and technology

D Organizational structure

E Simplification

Figure 12: Barriers to success, 2021-2025 trends



Looking at the barriers by level of contracting quality (Figure 13), operational workload is consistently the number 1 barrier. However, the data suggests that at the lower end of capability, this is a result of a heavy administrative burden, whereas at the higher end it is about the extent to which the CCM function is in demand for its value contribution. Confusions over role and structure decline, though problems then shift to retaining these value-focused personnel.

In relation to uncertainty, for those with low contracting quality, uncertainty ranks number 2, whereas it drops down the ranking as the levels of contracting quality increase with budget and business pull rising up above it.

Figure 13: Barriers to success, rank per contracting quality (all respondents, 2025)

Contracting quality	Low	Medium	High
Operational workload	1	1	1
Budget	3	2	2
Not involved early in process	4	5	3
Level of uncertainty and constant change	2	3	4
Quality of functional leadership	4	7	4
Establishing data to illustrate value and contribution	8	4	4
Salary levels / attracting or retaining staff	9	7	4
Increased adaptability / resilience	11	11	8
Quality of existing skills	10	10	9
Identifying / implementing effective training programs	12	12	10
Inconsistent or unclear organizational structure and reporting lines	6	9	11
Lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities	6	6	12

Connecting strategy and barriers to capability findings

Process improvement: The right kind matters

2 E

The decline in improving processes as a strategic priority from 71% in 2023 to 61% in 2025 is indicative of progress but we also identified that not all process improvement is equal. Performance data captured in the overall benchmark findings point at two very different approaches and drivers for the process focus:

Risk-focused approach:

- Tightening controls, adding approval gates
- Standardizing for consistency
- Cost reduction through elimination
- These build resilience but reduce adaptability.

Adaptability-focused approach:

- Improved data flows and real-time visibility
- Quality of data entry enabling better decisions
- Streamlined review / approval procedures
- Automating routine tasks freeing capacity for strategic work.

Linkage to the Contracting Excellence Framework

1 Portfolio segmentation

2 Clarity of contracting lifecycle

E Simplification

Contracting as a business level process:

- Focusing on the handoffs and interfaces with other people and processes as much as the transactions carried out by CCM
- Acting as the custodian of the end-to-end contracting process for the business, ensuring that it delivers both in terms of outcomes and performance.

The challenge and opportunity in relation to improving processes:

The decline to 61% reflects progress in making process updates, but organizations must reflect on whether the actions they have taken are assisting performance and value, whether they have enabled flexibility rather than constraining it. The quality of contracting only achieves sustained improvement when contracting is viewed as a business level process.

Uncertainty as explicit barrier

1 2

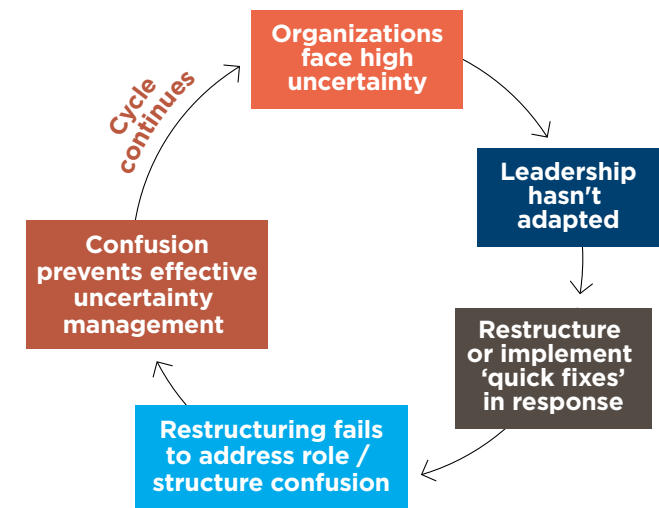
While a new question in 2025, the fact that 39% now identify 'level of uncertainty and constant change' as a barrier is significant. It suggests:

- **Conscious incompetence:** Organizations have moved from not knowing they couldn't handle uncertainty to recognizing it as a distinct capability gap
- **Persistent volatility:** Unlike COVID (temporary shock) or supply chain disruption (fixable), current uncertainty feels permanent and therefore demands a new approach
- **Capability recognition:** Aligns with our overall finding that 87% view uncertainty as an on-going challenge for which many are not fully equipped.

In this environment, it becomes steadily more obvious that uncertainty management must become a strategic capability, not just addressed through exception handling or crisis management.

Since our last report, there has been a major reduction in skepticism about the use and contribution of AI in the contracting process, with more than 80% envisaging a major role within the next two years.

Figure 14: The organizational uncertainty cycle



Continued over

Connecting strategy and barriers to capability findings (continued)

Four highlighted barriers represent a governance challenge

2 B

Respondents recording high levels of uncertainty identify four specific barriers which suggest a structural and leadership challenge:

- Quality of leadership
- Tactical rather than strategic response
- Continued confusion or conflict over roles and organizational structure
- No clear point of accountability for performance.

The fact that they identify these specific uncertainties as barriers shows a recognition that they lack the capability to handle volatility. This in turn causes many to question the quality of functional leadership which hasn't evolved the necessary mental models, decision-making approaches, or risk frameworks. Leaders who still operate with pre-2020 assumptions address uncertainty through more rigid controls and are frustrating the adaptability that is needed.

Linkage to the Contracting Excellence Framework

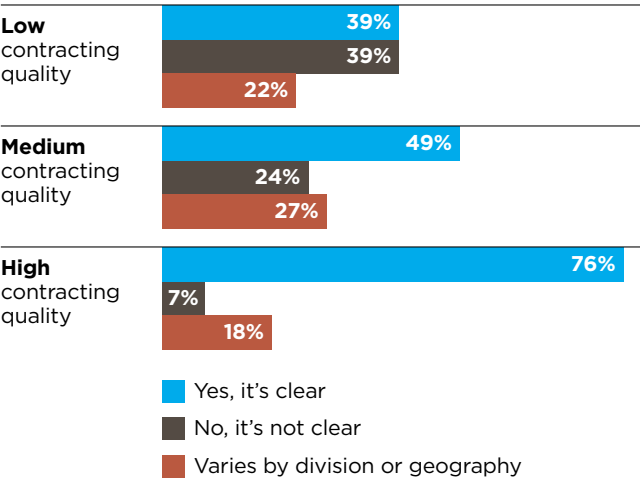
2	Clarity of contracting lifecycle
A	Skills and experience
B	Tools and technology
C	Digital strategy
D	Organizational structure

Clarity of roles and responsibilities and of organizational structure are not new issues. CCM has long struggled with these issues. The benchmark data tells us that some have made real progress with these issues, which are key to digitization and successful technology deployment. But for all those who make improvements, others are yet to awaken to the need.

This is an particularly pressing issue on the buy-side, where responsibility for outputs and outcomes is especially murky. It is also highly variable by sector, with confusion over accountability, who decides what, who owns which risks? Ambiguity paralyzes adaptive action.

Together, the above four barriers combine and are characteristic of the low performers.

Figure 15: Clarity of who is responsible for the contract lifecycle process (its quality, integrity and performance)



In order to address these issues, an important early step is to create clarity around responsibility and accountability for the contracting process. Figure 15 shows that organizations achieving high levels of contracting quality are almost twice as likely to have clarity and almost six times less likely to have no clarity.

Does declining operational workload reveal a priority shift?

A C D

Operational workload dropping 8 points since 2023 doesn't mean work has decreased – it means that some have become far better at managing it. Leading organizations are less focused on firefighting and more focused on strategic positioning ('increasing strategic relevance' up to 66%). This is especially notable in industries such as technology and software, business services and consulting and manufacturing and processing.

This shift from operational to strategic aligns with the recognition that uncertainty requires capabilities, not just harder work. It's a shift from 'we need to work harder' to 'we need to work differently' – and in many cases, that is reflected in growing investment in technology. It is what underlies the growing gap between sell-side and buy-side capabilities.

Organizational change: digital uplift

B C

'Organizational change' (31%) and 'developing digital strategy and capability' (35%) continue to represent significant priorities. As some complete their initiatives, others embark on the journey. To this point, the data shows that momentum on the sell-side has been greater, again contributing to the growing performance gap between buy and sell.

Talent and technology

Artificial Intelligence is a massive driver of uncertainty. The patterns around technology and talent management both as strategic drivers and as barriers is interesting.

In 2021, ‘developing and retaining talent’ was a strategic priority for 45%: this was pre-ChatGPT and an era of traditional talent planning. In 2023, the increase to 58% reflected peak anxiety – ChatGPT had just launched, organizations realized the implications for massive change.

Today, that early belief in rapid adoption has given way to a more structured approach. Use cases are progressing, but slowly, and organizations are still working on determining what talent they need in an AI-transformed world. The drop in the number seeing ‘quality of existing skills’ (from 31% to 25%) as a barrier isn’t due to improvement – it’s uncertainty about what skills really matter.

Linkage to the Contracting Excellence Framework

A Skills and experience

C Digital strategy

In an AI-transformed world, what skills really matter?

In this context, technology is becoming increasingly pervasive. While technology uncertainty is only highlighted specifically by 15.4%, Generative AI (GenAI) is closely linked to other factors, for example:

- **Market uncertainty:** AI-enabled competitive disruption
- **Organizational uncertainty:** Restructuring around AI, role elimination
- **Geopolitical uncertainty:** AI regulation, chip wars, data sovereignty.

AI is contributing to the widening of the capability gap. Organizations with strong adaptability are experimenting, learning, and evolving with AI. Those with weak adaptability are moving at a much slower pace – struggling to pilot or transform. The sell-side’s superior adaptability and contracting quality position them to leverage AI faster, potentially widening their advantage over more rigid buy-side organizations. As AI becomes embedded in contracting processes, a new human-machine balance is emerging. The differentiator will be how transparently people can understand and supervise AI-driven decisions, and how well organizations align those systems with their own governance and playbooks. Building trust in AI’s outputs is now part of the talent equation itself – requiring new skills in interpretation, assurance, and ethical use.

Moving at slow pace, struggling to transform, e.g:

Buy-side 3.97

Public sector 3.43

versus

Strong adaptability, experimenting, learning, and evolving with AI, e.g:

Sell-side 4.51

Manufacturing 4.86

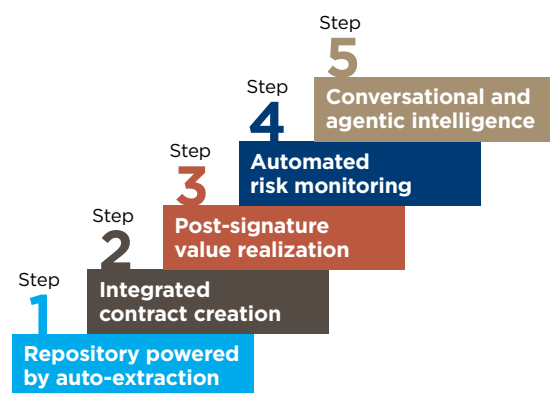
Adoption of CCM technology

There is significantly greater adoption of CCM technology for those recording high levels of contracting quality versus all respondents.

This is perhaps not surprising as the combination of technology, people and data is critical to being able to not just make quicker decisions but also better decisions. This realization also converts into a higher level of interest in developing technologies (see Figure 16).

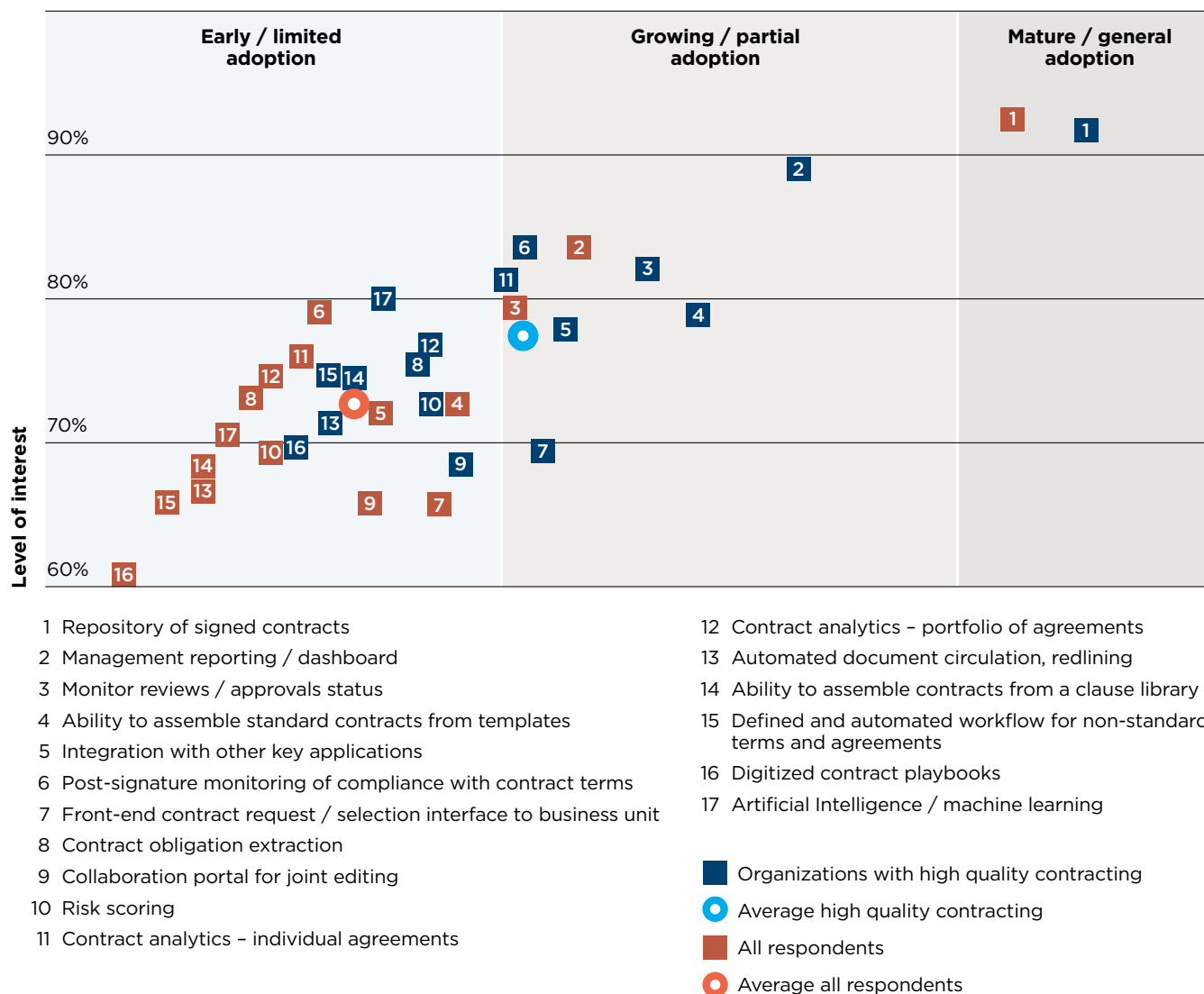
The buy-side challenge

Gaining the investment to supplement existing systems is challenging. Traditional technologies focused on standardized processes and templates which are not suited to a more service-oriented and dynamic market. Current systems are skewed towards pre-award (templates, redlining) and are weak in post-award capabilities that drive performance.



In planning technology development, it's helpful to understand the typical steps towards full CCM capability.

Figure 16: Levels of interest in and adoption of CCM technology



Are priorities aligned with capability needs?

The benchmark survey data reveals a mixed picture with some strategic priorities where there is alignment with the capability needs of today and the future, but against this there are more where there are potential misalignments.

Priorities aligned with capabilities

Recognition of uncertainty as a distinct challenge

The new 39% barrier validates our capability gap findings.

Strategic over operational

The focus on 'increasing strategic relevance' (66%) matches the need for adaptability over just resilience.

Process de-emphasis

The decline from 71% to 61% suggests organizations are learning that efficiency does not automatically result in adaptability.

Priorities misaligned with capabilities

Declining talent priority

48% of organizations (down from 58%) are either de-prioritizing or delaying talent uplifts just when they need capability building most. This is a risk – you can't build adaptability without the right people.

Increasing strategic relevance versus execution capability

66% want to be more strategic, but for those with weak adaptability this is the wrong sequence. They need to first build capability so that they can execute on strategic relevance and value.

Leadership quality is ignored

30% identify it as barrier, and progress appears slow, perhaps linked to the issues related to talent development and acquisition.

Structural clarity issues persist

Process initiatives and digitization need to address the continued lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities and organizational structure. Too many operate with contention systems that generate friction and internal competition for authority.

Budget as an excuse

42% cite budget as a barrier, but sectors with similar resources show vastly different capability ratios (Manufacturing 1.20 versus Public Sector 0.82). Budget is a symptom, not the cause.

In summary, organizations have correctly diagnosed the problem (uncertainty and uncertainty management is a capability gap, not just external conditions), but many are not pursuing the right solutions:

✓ **39%** Recognize uncertainty as a barrier

✗ but de-prioritize the talent development needed to address it

✓ **66%** Want strategic relevance

✗ but often lack adaptability to execute strategic shifts which are important for their strategic goals

✓ **61%** Have made progress on process fixes

✗ but may not have addressed structural confusion (roles 27%, structure 25%)

✓ **30%** Identify functional leadership quality as a barrier

✗ but fail to translate 'importance of CCM' into actions that elevate its leadership capability

The data suggests that organizations understand that uncertainty requires new capabilities, but aren't investing in the fundamentals (talent, leadership development, adaptive culture and technology) needed to build them. Instead, they're reorganizing structures and chasing strategic relevance, which explains why capability ratios remain weak.

Current actions: Are we doing the right things?

In terms of the actions that are currently underway or in plan, there is a surprising level of consistency between buy-side and sell-side in five notable areas:

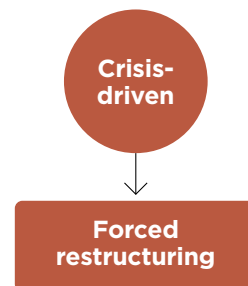
1. **Adoption of new tools, software**
2. **Contract analytics capability**
3. **Skills development**
4. **Development of new or revised terms**
5. **Contract simplification**

These are largely tactical improvements which may have a marginal impact on capability and should improve efficiency. Unless the overarching issues of process governance and accountability are addressed, there is a very real risk that many of these technology adoptions will fail because:

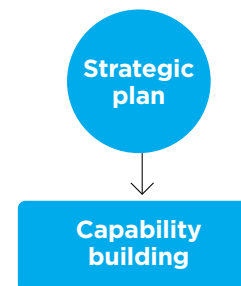
- Poor data quality will continue to frustrate analytics
- Contract improvements will be delayed
- Lack of consensus among stakeholders.

Organizational change is under active consideration by almost a third of our survey respondents, and the trend is towards centralization of CCM activities. However, at an overall level there is still no consensus on the right model, and new technology appears to be adding to the confusion over future service delivery. In many cases, especially on the buy-side, change appears to be more crisis-driven than strategic – forced restructuring rather than conscious capability building.

**What organizations
are doing:**



**What organizations
should be doing:**



Conclusion

The data reveals that most organizations, regardless of buy-side, sell-side, sector, or size, face a damaging mismatch between the uncertainty ahead of them, and their capacity to manage it.

Organizations often pursue the wrong solutions because they're not learning from others: they engage in minimal benchmarking activity and make no investment in CCM research. One result is that the top 5 actions they are taking (tools, analytics, skills, terms, simplification) address symptoms, not root causes.

What's missing? Clarity of accountability, well-defined roles and responsibilities, leadership development, strategic AI integration, talent strategy. There is no consensus or conscious linkage to organizational strategic goals on organizational structure (four models in use), on reporting lines (seven different functions) or on how to measure and monitor performance and value.

While 48% acknowledge these problems, 52% claim accountability is clear, yet their responses reveal that many do not even understand the question. They confuse transactional responsibility with overall process ownership.

As a result, there is often shared responsibility across multiple parties ('business owns', 'committees decide'), senior titles without clear performance measures, role confusion between contract management, procurement, legal and commercial management.

Sell-side's technology advantage directly enables their superior performance, but still leaves them struggling to exert influence and deliver the outcomes that are achievable. Too often, they have implemented technology without process integration, made investments that do not create strategic insight and failed to gain recognition at executive level. The result? Continuing as operational executors rather than strategic partners, unable to leverage the CCM discipline as a catalyst for business transformation.

These structural inconsistencies also create unnecessary friction. Buyers and suppliers operate with different mental models, different priorities. Many buy-side processes are optimized for cost control, while sell-side is a mix of either risk mitigation or value creation. While some variation is necessary (different business models require different approaches), much of it creates waste, confusion, and poor outcomes.

Contracting becomes adversarial by default due to structural misalignment. Organizations can't build adaptability without the right people, can't execute transformation without evolved leadership.

Without clear accountability and leadership no amount of technology or training will close capability gaps. Many organizations have invested in technology but with these flaws:

✗ Wrong focus

Repositories without analytics leads to rich data but with insight poor

✗ Wrong phase

Over-focused on pre-award efficiency, under-invested in post-award effectiveness

✗ Wrong priorities

AI deployment extremely low despite transformational potential

✗ Wrong to outsource

Multiple instances of contract administration offshore while lacking technology to automate it internally

Self-assessment of CCM status

Where do you stand on the journey to CCM adaptability, resilience, and quality? Use our fast and simple **online self-assessment form** to find out your overall score, based on the six categories listed below. Completion only takes a few minutes and you'll receive immediate feedback.

The assessment has six categories

1. Governance and accountability

Foundation

2. Strategic positioning

Direction

3. Adaptability

Dynamic capability

4. Resilience

Absorbing shocks

5. Contracting quality

Execution excellence

6. Technology enablement

Tools and systems

What your overall score will mean

0 to **12** = **Crisis state**

Governance failures, tactical positioning, rigid processes

Immediate action needed to establish accountability, secure executive sponsorship, stop outsourcing core capabilities

Your focus would be:

Foundation building before technology investment.

13 to **24** = **Development stage**

Some foundations in place but significant gaps

Inconsistent performance, unclear direction

Your focus would be:

Strategic clarity, leadership development, targeted technology deployment in post-award capabilities.

25 to **36** = **Capability leader**

Strong governance, strategic positioning, adaptive systems

Positioned to leverage uncertainty as competitive advantage

Your focus would be:

Continuous improvement, innovation, capability multiplication through AI.

Help yourself and our community

Maintaining full confidentiality of your input, we will consolidate data from all assessment submissions to generate periodic benchmark updates on the state and progress of CCM. A feedback loop that will help your organization and the wider CCM community.

[Online self-assessment form](#) →

Call to action

So, what was your score on the journey to adaptability, resilience, and quality? The journey begins with honest assessment and most organizations will need some, or significant improvement.

While it's easy to see uncertainty as a challenge, if we can flip our mindset to seeing it as an opportunity with **Contracting Quality** as the enabler of adaptability and resilience then in many situations it can become a source of competitive advantage. That is what the many people who report their contracting quality as high have done. From the insights of this benchmark survey it is apparent that they are on a journey. One which has flipped the narrative and taken a systematic approach to re-positioning contracting as a business level process that creates and captures value in line with their organizational strategy.

The market realities demand that organizations rethink the balance between risk and opportunity. Those who remain inward-looking, who allow CCM to be relegated to the back of the queue, who pursue tools without addressing governance – will fall further behind.

The data shows the path forward, and the fact that you are still reading this report makes it likely that you have an aspiration to move towards where the leaders of the pack are, in terms of contracting quality.

The question is: are you ready to invest the time and effort required to challenge old perceptions and build capability in this neglected business process?

The winners won't be those who invest most in technology, but those who:

- 1 Establish accountability for an adaptive contracting process and its performance
- 2 Develop leadership capable of navigating uncertainty and AI disruption
- 3 Build capabilities through strategic technology deployment
- 4 Invest in their people with talent strategies aligned to AI-era needs
- 5 Look outward: benchmark, learn, adapt proven practices
- 6 Claim their voice, and position CCM as a strategic enabler, not a back-office function



To avoid falling further behind, organizations must rethink the balance between risk and opportunity.

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The Institute seek to improve the world through higher standards in buying and selling. Our rigorous, practical research and insights, both relevant and useful, shape global policy and practice. We help society by driving up standards for the exchange of goods and services, resulting in better trading outcomes in both the private and public sectors. As a not-for-profit organization, we were founded, and are supported, by World Commerce & Contracting and NCMA.

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About Sirion

Sirion is the world's leading AI-native CLM platform, pioneering the application of agentic AI to help enterprises transform the way they store, create, and manage contracts. By uniting an intuitive conversational experience with specialized AI agents, the platform has redefined enterprise contracting. The world's most valuable brands trust Sirion to manage 7M+ contracts worth nearly \$800B and relationships with 1M+ suppliers and customers in 100+ languages. Leading analysts such as Gartner, Forrester, and IDC have consistently recognized Sirion as a leader in CLM for its focus on category-leading innovation.

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