



The State of Modern Research Report 2026

Closing the Listening Gap



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Introduction

Most companies say they listen to their customers. They point to all the satisfaction surveys they run and the focus groups they commission. They invest in new, improved tools to collect more feedback than ever before. They tell you customer obsession is a core value and that the voice of the customer matters. The truth is more complicated.

We surveyed 309 researchers, research consumers, and the people who lead both groups to understand how research is evolving, what's working, and where the field is heading.

We found a contradiction at the heart of modern research: 94% of respondents told us their leadership believes research is important. But only 27% said their organization references research in almost every major decision it makes. The rest sit somewhere on a spectrum from "sometimes" to "almost never."

In other words, companies say they want to listen to customers, but customer insights don't consistently make it into their business decisions.

That's the listening gap. The distance between leaders wanting more customer research and that research actually showing up in the rooms where decisions get made. Even with the best intentions, they're failing to embed insights into organizational operations.

Not everyone is stuck in the gap. The companies that invest in insights infrastructure reference research more often, measure its impact more rigorously, and get more out of their AI investments. Even better, they're closer to understanding their customers.

The numbers behind the listening gap

94% vs 27%

94% of respondents say leadership believes research is important. Only 27% say it's referenced in almost every major decision.

73% vs 37%

73% of leaders say reviewing existing research is a formal step before major decisions. Only 37% of the practitioners doing the work agree.

52% vs 30%

52% of ICs and managers identify as "enablers of customer understanding." Only 30% of directors and above do.

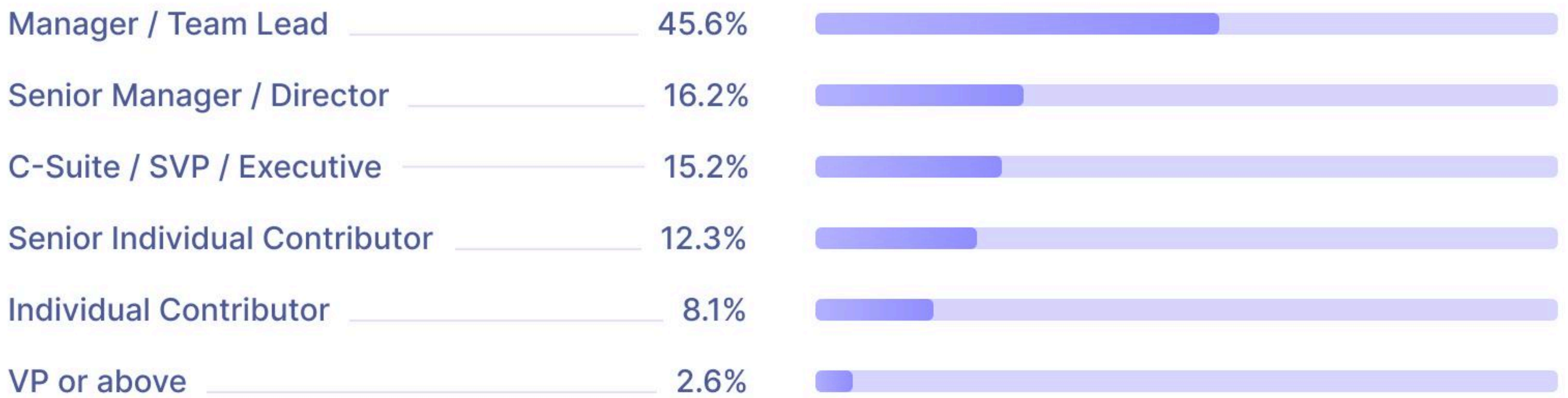
51% vs 16%

Organizations with an active insights repository (51%) are more than 3X as likely to see significant AI time savings as those without one (16%).

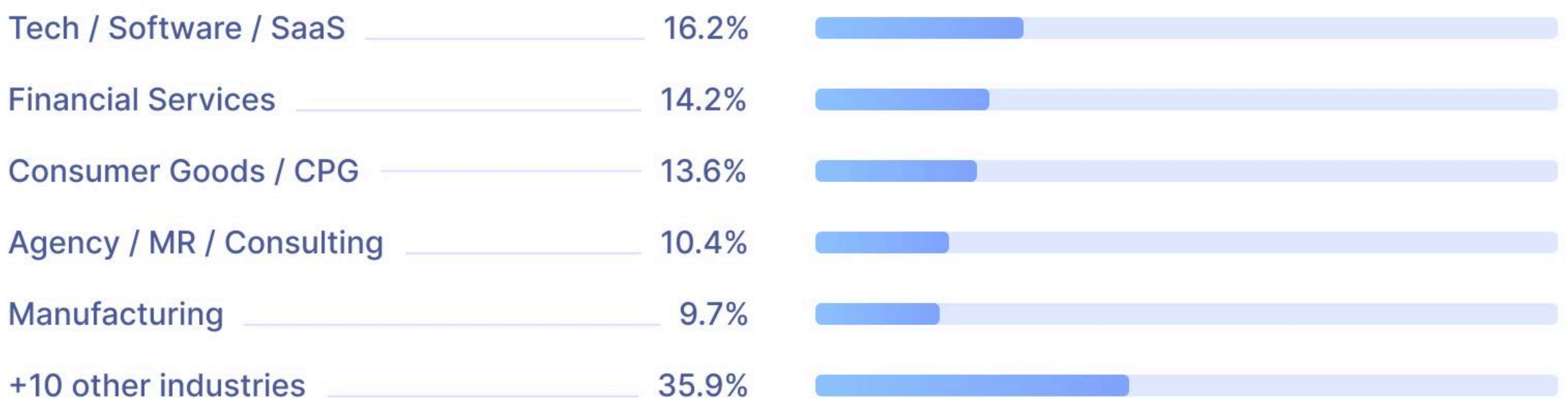
Our audience

We surveyed 309 researchers in a range of roles, industries, and company sizes, and four consistent patterns showed up across all of them. They show up regardless of seniority, company size, or sector, and they compound over time.

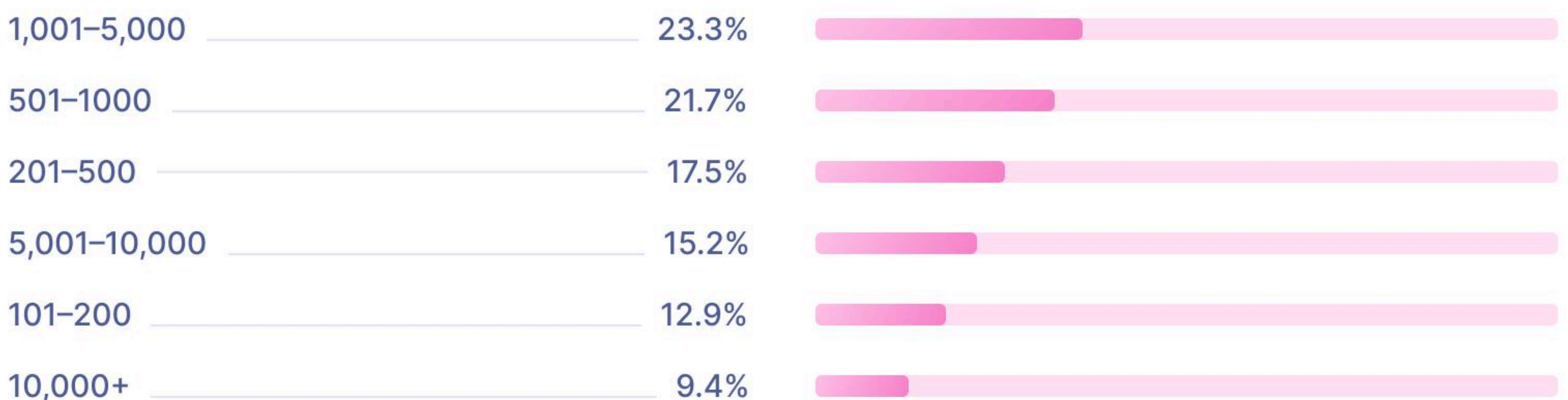
Seniority (N=309)



Top Industries (N=309)



Organization Size (N=309)



Four major trends defining the state of modern research

01

Research has scaled. The supporting systems haven't kept up.

Research has quietly become an always-on function, even without the infrastructure to support it.

Teams used nearly four different research methods in the past 12 months. On average, they're managing all that work across more than six software tools in 3.4 tool categories. And 90% outsource at least some research functions. At the same time, less than half (48%) actively use a research repository or dedicated system to compile their customer data, research, and insights.

The research stack is more complex than most organizations realize.

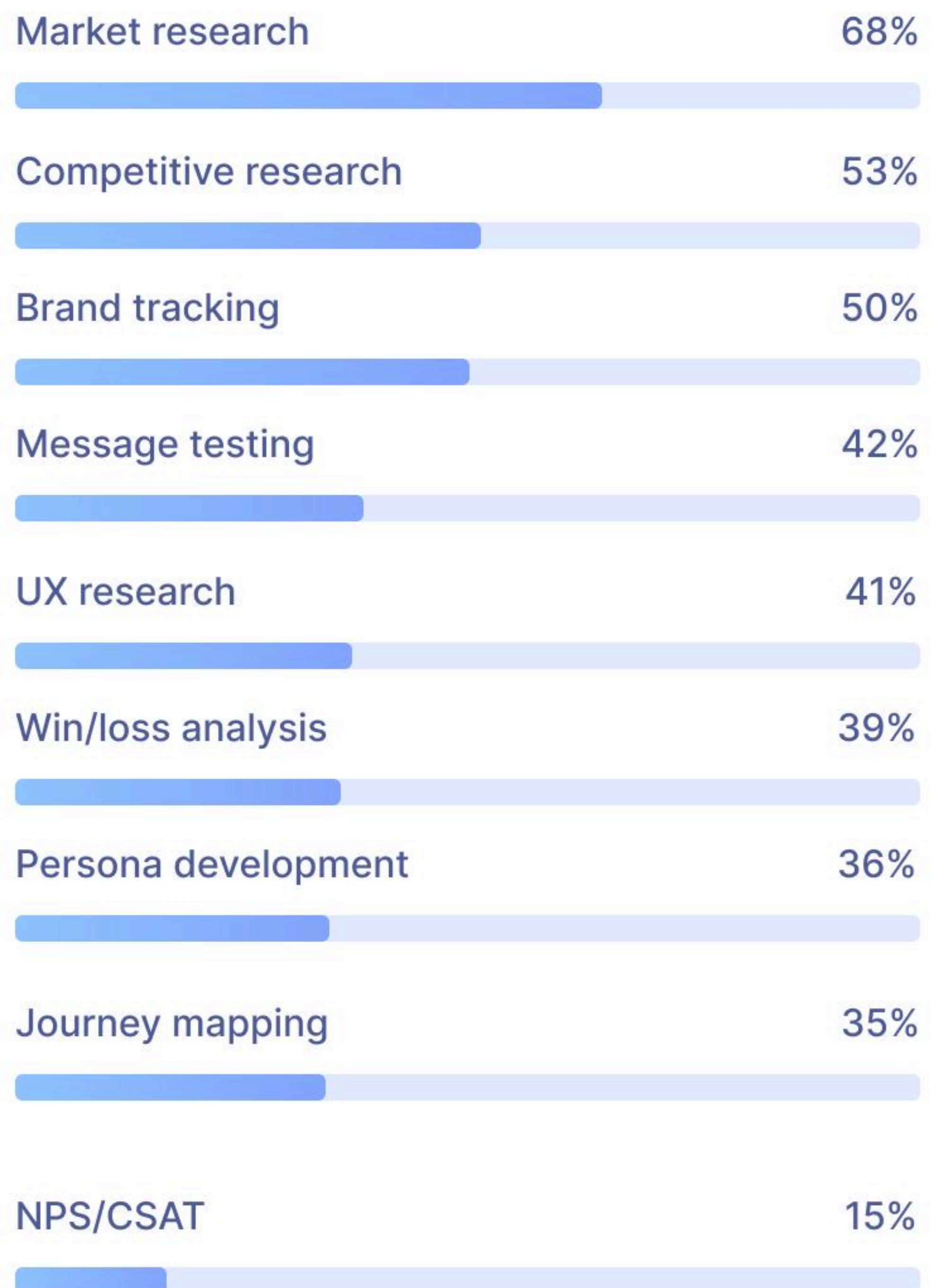
Tool categories

Select all that apply - N=309



Research methods

Select all that apply - N=309



The work has scaled significantly, but only 35% of the organizations we surveyed run a primarily always-on research function. The other two-thirds are either project-based or running a hybrid model with no consistent structure.

Research roles are also deeply embedded, which is a part of the problem. Researchers are more likely to report directly to the C-suite than a research leader. Only 7% report into a research function inside their organizations. Most teams report into marketing, product, customer experience, the executive office, design/UX, and engineering, in that order. With research distributed across so many functions, the connective tissue that makes insights shareable across the whole organization often doesn't exist.

On top of that, respondents reported having just two research champions within their organization. Only 18% of those champions include the C-suite. Top-down mandates have outpaced the structures to deliver on them.

Our take

Research has accumulated more demands without the structure to deliver on them. More methods, more tools, and more outsourcing, but only 7% of research functions have standalone authority. You can't scale a function that has to borrow authority from every team it serves.

02

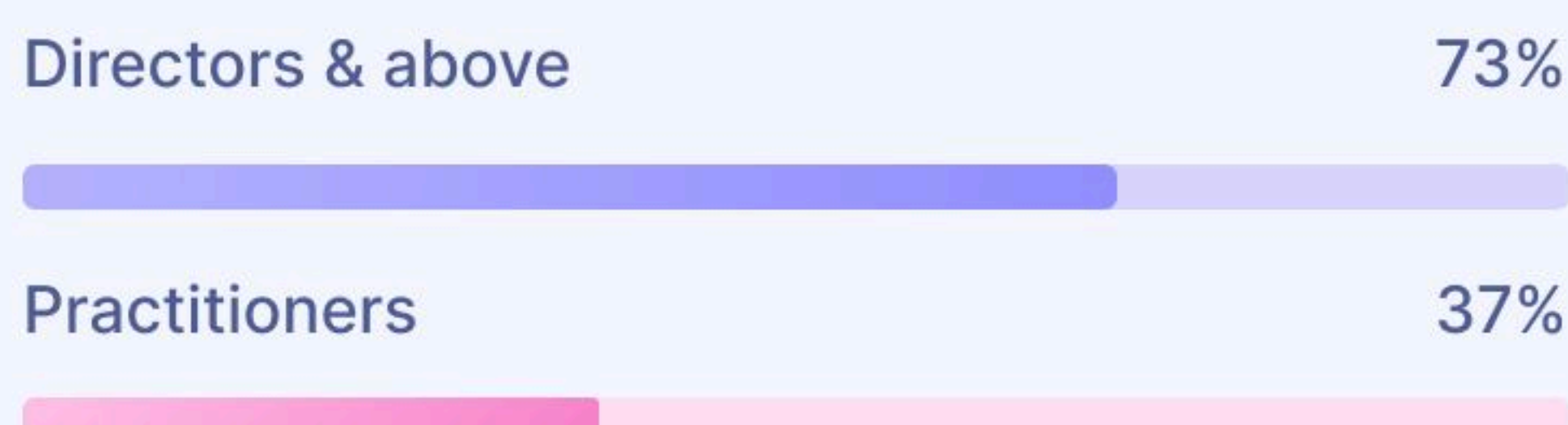
Senior leaders and practitioners disagree about the problem. But they're both right.

There's a persistent mismatch between how leadership experiences research and how researchers experience it.

Among director-level respondents, 73% say reviewing existing research is a formal requirement before major decisions. Only 37% of IC-level respondents agree, and 43% describe research review in their organization as informal or inconsistent.

Is reviewing existing research a requirement for major decisions?

Single choice - N = 309



That disconnect has consequences. If leaders believe a formal research review process is in place and practitioners say it isn't, leaders are making decisions without the evidence they think they already have.

When we asked both groups why customer insights don't make it into decisions, their answers again pointed in different directions.

Senior leaders cited systems: customer knowledge is fragmented across too many tools and teams (41%), research findings are too academic or hard to act on (41%), and research demand is outpacing team capacity (39%).

Practitioners mostly cited prioritization: decisions get made too quickly for research to inform them (37%), research is treated as a nice-to-have (32%), insights aren't acted upon at all (30%), and they're regularly asked to validate decisions that have already been made (29%). The biggest frustration, though, reflects leadership's concern about research demand; practitioners say they spend too much time on logistics instead of the actual work (39%).

Why do organizations make decisions without customer insights?

Top 3 for leaders

Select all that apply - N=309



Top 3 for practitioners

Select all that apply - N=309



Finally, and maybe most telling, only 30% of researchers say their executive leadership regularly accesses customer insights. The gap is even wider for engineering teams who are charged with building the products customers use (16%). Research is valued in theory, but in practice, the people making the most consequential decisions don't have the evidence they need.

Our take

When leaders believe a formal process exists and practitioners don't, you have a decision-making problem, not a research problem. Better infrastructure alone doesn't fix a culture that treats research as validation. Better culture alone doesn't fix a tech stack that makes insights impossible to find. You need to solve for both.

Researchers are using AI. Few are getting the most from it.

Almost everyone in research is using AI now. Across the survey, 93% of respondents are actively using or experimenting with it. The productivity results are measurable: 72% are saving 25% or more of their time, and nearly a third are cutting certain tasks in half.

AI adoption by the numbers



Researchers say they use AI at every stage of their workflow (collection, analysis, synthesis, and distribution), mostly as a tool for acceleration. Interestingly, no capability is used by more than 52% of respondents.

Most are reaching for general-purpose tools like ChatGPT and Claude rather than purpose-built research AI. Only one-third are using AI features built into research tools.

The researchers closing the listening gap have one thing in common: an active insights repository that makes every AI capability more effective.

The 48% of organizations with an active repository see significant AI time savings at more than three times the rate of those without one (51% vs. 16%).

They also use more AI capabilities across the board, such as synthesis, report generation, and purpose-built research AI.

Our take

At 93%, AI adoption sounds like a field that has figured out AI. It hasn't yet. An active insights repository changes that because it gives AI real data to work with, so its outputs are verified. The difference between researchers using AI to move faster and those using it to change what's possible is their insights infrastructure.

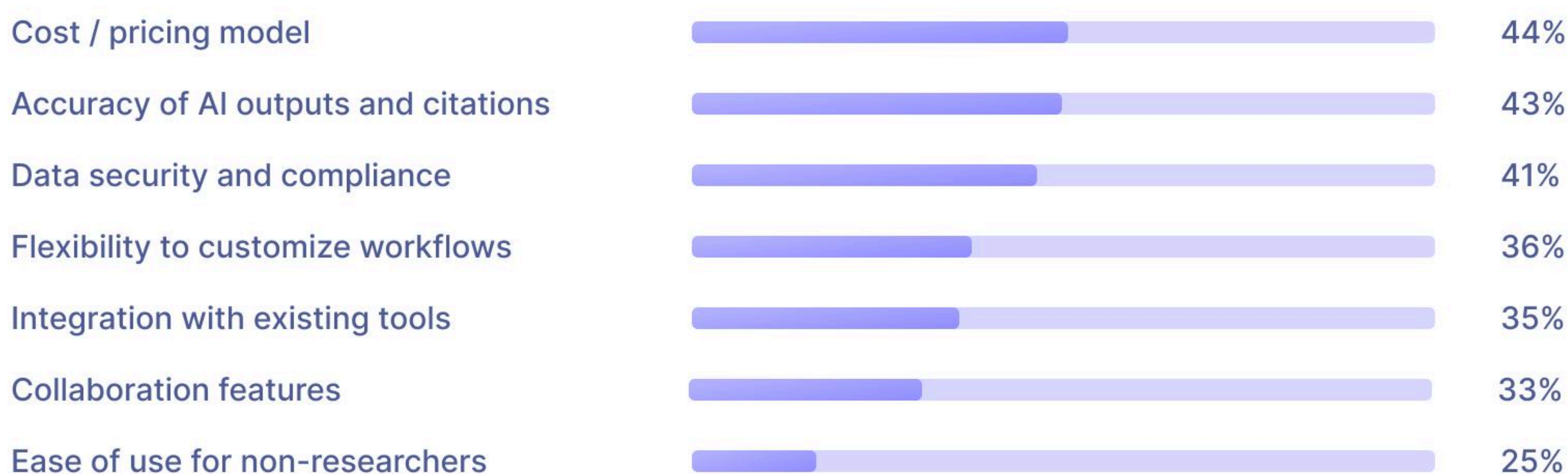
Organizations say they want democratized research. But they don't choose tools everyone can use.

Research teams say one of their biggest priorities is making insights accessible to everyone. Their buying behavior tells a different story.

Cost leads tool evaluation criteria (44%), followed by AI accuracy (43%), and security (41%). Those are reasonable priorities. The problem is what ranks last on the list: ease of use for non-researchers, cited by 25% of respondents.

Tool evaluation criteria

Tool evaluation criteria — select all that apply, N=309. Selected criteria shown.



Looking at that criteria, it's clear that buyers are optimizing for budget constraints and the research team's workflow, not for the cross-functional teams who need to use the insights. Part of why this contradiction persists is who's making the buying decisions (senior leaders, director and above) and how they see their role.

How respondents view their research role

We asked all respondents to choose the statement below that best describes how they see their role as a researcher.



Enabler of customer understanding

I make insights accessible across the organization



Strategic advisor

I help leadership make evidence-based decisions



Gatekeeper of customer insights

I conduct and control access to research



Service provider

I execute research requests from stakeholders

Today, 44% of researchers describe themselves as "enablers of customer understanding" who want to make insights accessible to everyone. Another 27% identify as "strategic advisors," and 21% still see themselves as "gatekeepers."

But that identity isn't evenly distributed. Individual contributors and managers are nearly twice as likely as directors to identify as enablers (52% vs. 30%). Meanwhile, directors are three times more likely than ICs to identify as gatekeepers (36% vs. 12%).

The researchers closest to the data want to democratize it. The directors with authority and budget to do so are more likely to keep access closed. And the tools the organization buys make that gap wider.



Our take

The people with budget authority are more likely to see themselves as gatekeepers. That means most organizations actively buy tools that reinforce the problem they say they want to solve. Adding "ease of use for non-researchers" to your tool criteria won't fix everything, but it's one lever practitioners can control.

The listening gap is real. So is the path to close it.

Not everyone is struggling with the listening gap. We call these teams "modern research" teams, and they've built infrastructure that makes insights accessible to **everyone**.

Traits of modern research teams:

1. An active insights repository
2. Leaders and practitioners measuring the same metrics
3. AI built into every stage of the research workflow
4. A persistent, always-on insights layer

Importantly, all these pieces work together. An active insights repository without leadership alignment becomes a well-organized library nobody visits. Research teams without persistent insights produce more reports nobody reads.

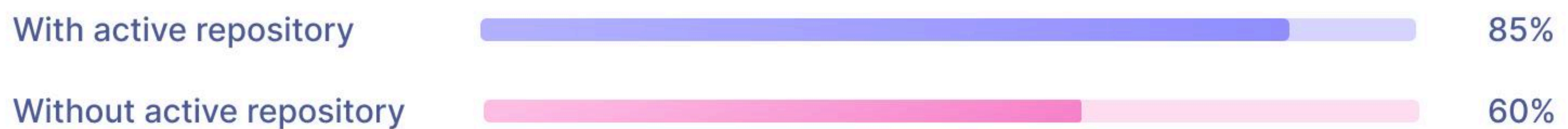
01

Activate insights, don't just store them

Fewer than half of organizations (48%) have an active insights repository. Among those that do, research shows up in major decisions significantly more often.

How often is research explicitly referenced in major decisions?

Select one - N = 309



Organizations with an active repository reference research "often or almost always" in major decisions at a rate 25 percentage points higher than those without one (85% vs. 60%). The gap is even sharper at the highest threshold; they reference research in almost every major decision at four times the rate (43% vs. 12%). They're also 2.5 times more likely to track research's influence on decisions, and 2.8 times more likely to have built-in effectiveness metrics.

Active is the operative word. About one-third (36%) of organizations with a repository describe theirs as “stagnant.” A repository that stores transcripts and collects dust doesn’t produce outcomes. Neither does one that stops tracking at the decision moment — roughly one-third of organizations track decisions but not outcomes. This means they lose visibility into whether those research-influenced decisions improved business results. The organizations that close the loop track metrics across the entire research lifecycle.

When insights are searchable and findable for everyone, they show up in decisions. When they're not easy to access, they don't.

Our take

The 25-point gap in how often research shows up in decisions is the starkest number in this dataset. The single highest-leverage investment most research teams could make is work to make the research they already have more findable, usable, and measurable.

How to put it into practice

Most research dies after the project gets presented. The findings get cited once or twice, and the work gets filed away and no one remembers it exists. To counteract this, treat your repository as a living system. When a stakeholder asks a question you've already answered, the answer should take seconds, not days. Researchers who do this become indispensable because their work becomes the institutional memory of their company.

The best organizations measure and communicate

We asked research professionals to rank their top priorities for the next 12 months, and the order is revealing.

Top priorities for the next 12 months

Share of respondents ranking each option as their #1 priority - N = 309



To our surprise, increasing research headcount and budget ranked last. The conversation has moved on from "we need more research." The priority now is to make research matter more, to more people, in more decisions.

Even with impact measurement ranked first, only 47% of organizations have established KPIs for customer research. The rest are still drafting metrics or admit it isn't a priority. The most effective organizations demonstrate value in concrete terms. Half (50%) show the time or cost savings from avoiding bad decisions. Another 43% track stakeholder satisfaction with research, and 40% tie insights directly to specific product decisions. These are metrics that earn research a permanent role in strategic conversations.

Our take

Teams still drafting their measurement frameworks are stuck in a circular trap: research lacks influence because its value is invisible, and its value is invisible because no one has defined success. The teams that have broken the cycle focus on communicating insights rather than simply collecting them.

How to put it into practice

Most research teams wait for leadership to define success. Define it yourself instead to proactively prove your work matters. Bring three concrete impact metrics to your next quarterly review: the time or cost saved by avoiding a bad decision, stakeholder satisfaction with your research, and research tied to a specific product decision.

Use AI across the full research workflow

The researchers getting the most from AI use it at every stage of the research lifecycle: collection, analysis, synthesis, and distribution. And they have the infrastructure to make it effective at each one.

General-purpose AI helps individual researchers move faster. Research-native AI that works with your methodology and customer data transforms what the research function can do at scale.

We asked researchers which capabilities they most want to adopt, giving us a strong indication of where AI is heading: AI-generated competitive intelligence (52%), real-time analysis during live interviews (48%), and AI-supported research assets (43%). Around one-third of respondents say they already use AI for these more advanced use cases, which indicates modern research teams have a process for integrating AI across the full workflow. The common thread is AI that helps research reach more people, faster.



Our take

Researchers aren't describing a wishlist when they ask for real-time analysis during interviews or AI-generated competitive intelligence. They're describing what's already possible for modern research teams with the infrastructure to support it. If you're using AI only for transcription or report creation, you're barely scratching the surface. The capabilities that move the needle are the ones that help insights reach more people in the moment they need them.

How to put it into practice

Modern researchers seeing the biggest gains from AI use fewer tools, more deliberately. An active insights repository gives every new AI capability something to build on. Pick one AI use case per quarter, and build the case for the infrastructure that supports it. Every study you run should make the last one more valuable. The right infrastructure surfaces insights automatically when anyone (no matter their role) needs to make a decision.

Turn your research into persistent, always-on insights

Modern research organizations have stopped treating their work as a series of projects with a start date, an end date, and a deliverable. Insights are always on, always findable, and always feeding into the decisions happening right now.

The organizations that have made this shift describe it as a change in how research is positioned inside the company.

It now functions as persistent infrastructure that the whole organization draws on. Insights from six months ago are still relevant. Patterns across studies are visible. The result is an organization where every new project builds on everything that came before it.

Our take

Decisions don't wait for research to finish. The teams that have figured this out aren't running more projects — they've established processes so insights from past projects stay alive and accessible in an active repository. Customer knowledge compounds and gets more valuable over time, as long as it has somewhere to live.

How to put it into practice

Every piece of research you've ever run should still work for you. The shift to always-on research requires a repository that keeps insights findable and usable. Start building the habit of asking: where will someone find these insights in six months? Who needs to know it exists? What decision is it most relevant to right now? These three questions help you build infrastructure that resurfaces customer insights at the moments that really matter.

Conclusion

Despite leadership enthusiasm to “listen to your customers,” most customer insights never reach the people who could act on them.

That's the listening gap. And for many, it's getting wider.

The distance between investing in research and actually using it to drive your business is a risk that compounds with every decision.

The modern research organizations closing the distance aren't doing something unusual. They build infrastructure that makes insights findable, and they measure research impact in language their whole organization understands. They use AI deliberately, across the full research workflow. And they treat customer knowledge as something that compounds over time, so they can make decisions that reflect what customers need.

Modern research teams that close the listening gap have built infrastructure that makes insights accessible to *everyone*.

The organizations closing the listening gap aren't outliers. They just started earlier than everyone else.

About this report

This report is based on a survey of 309 researchers, research consumers, and research leaders conducted by HeyMarvin in April 2026. Over 82% of respondents either actively plan/execute research (44%) or own/lead research initiatives (38.2%). Nearly half (45.6%) are Managers or Team Leads, with a strong Director+ contingent (34.0% combined).

309

researchers surveyed

82%

actively plan or execute research

84.5%

primary tool decision-maker or strong influencer

3

top industries:
Tech/SaaS, Financial Services, Consumer Goods/CPG

Nearly half of respondents (47.9%) work at companies with 1,001+ employees, spanning an industry mix led by Tech/SaaS (16.2%), Financial Services (14.2%), and Consumer Goods/CPG (13.6%). Critically, 84.5% say they are either the primary tool decision-maker (46.0%) or a strong influencer (38.5%). This is not a passive audience — these are the people choosing how research gets done.

We used HeyMarvin to analyze the survey data for this report, synthesizing responses across all participants and surfacing patterns by seniority and industry that shaped our findings.

[Download the full dataset](#)



About HeyMarvin

HeyMarvin is an AI-native customer insights platform that turns scattered knowledge into a living system that gets smarter over time, and makes insights easy to discover, share, and put into action. With centralized knowledge, built-in research guardrails, and enterprise-ready security, HeyMarvin makes it easy for any team to ask a question and get an answer grounded in cited evidence. Teams at the world's most loved companies and brands use HeyMarvin to understand their customers and make better decisions faster. Trusted by companies like Microsoft, Included Health, Best Buy, and NRG Energy, and backed by leading AI investors including Sam Altman and Fuel Capital, HeyMarvin is redefining how businesses use research to accelerate ideas. For more information, visit HeyMarvin.com.

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See how HeyMarvin helps research teams close the listening gap.

[Book a demo](#)

