



Tempting
Talent

2026 ANNUAL BENCHMARK REPORT

From *Experimentation* to Execution

How Search & Recruitment industry leaders are applying AI in 2026

17

Founders & CEOs surveyed

100%

Using AI meaningfully

6%

Very confident it is working
well

temptingtalent.com

Contents

01	ADOPTION & MATURITY Where Firms Stand	06
02	WHERE AI IS BEING USED The Use Case Map	09
03	THE CONFIDENCE GAP Using AI is Not the Same as Doing AI Well	11
04	FUTURE PRIORITIES Where Leaders Want to Go Next	15
05	STRATEGY, OWNERSHIP & GOVERNANCE Who Owns AI, and Does It Matter?	17
06	CHALLENGES & CONCERNS What is Getting in the Way	21
07	THE INVESTMENT OUTLOOK What the Next 12 Months Look Like	24
08	IN THEIR OWN WORDS What Leaders Told Us	26

Every search firm in the US is using AI in one capacity or another. The question for leaders now, how is it benefiting the business?



Rob White

Founder, Tempting Talent

FOREWORD

A candid look at where we stand

We commissioned this research because we kept having the same conversation with clients and with firms we were building relationships with. Everyone is using AI. Yet almost nobody is confident they are doing it well. And very few could point to a clear return.

The firms that will win over the next three years will be the ones who move from experimenting with AI to executing with it. Consistent and measurable processes that strengthens rather than dilute the quality of their work.

The Numbers *That Matter*

Five data points define the state of applied AI in search and recruitment in 2026. Each tells part of the same story: widespread adoption followed by significant uncertainty.

100%

of respondents using AI in some meaningful way

88%

use AI daily for candidate sourcing and business development research

6%

very confident AI is used consistently and effectively across their firm

53%

use AI multiple times every day, but only 29% formally measure its impact

80%

rate their likelihood to invest in AI as a priority over the next 12 months

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Respondent *Profile*

This report is based on survey responses from 17 senior leaders across the search and recruitment sector, conducted in August 2026. Respondents were invited based on seniority and their firm's direct relevance to the subject. A small, focused data pool to deliver hyper accurate and curated statistics.

SENIORITY

100%

Founders or CEOs

AI USAGE

100%

Using AI meaningfully

DAILY USERS

88%

Daily or more frequent

All responses anonymised.

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01

ADOPTION & MATURITY

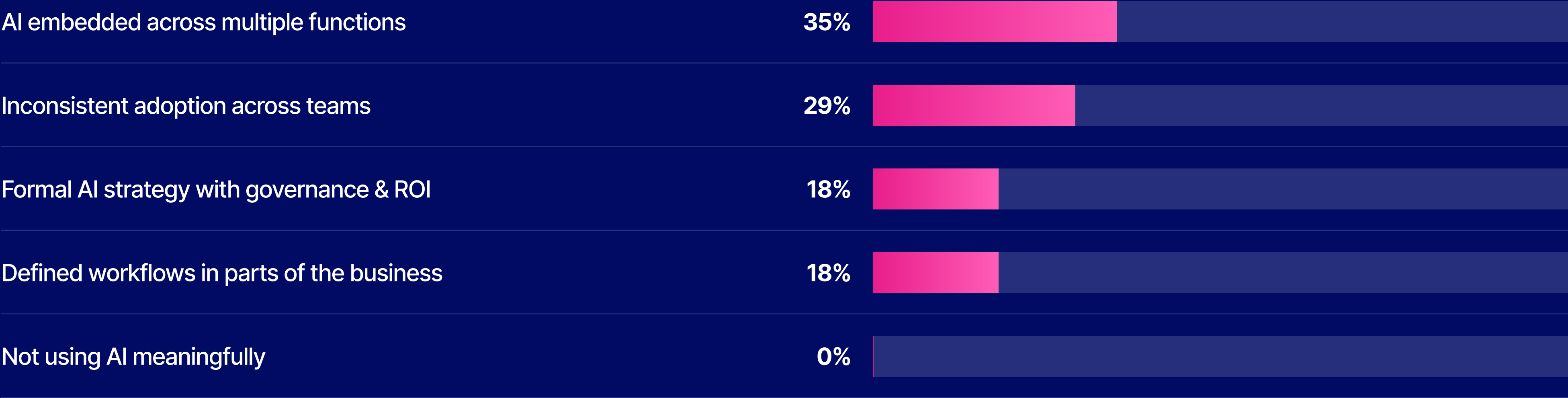
Where Firms *Stand*

AI *Maturity* Level

35% have AI embedded across multiple functions. 29% have inconsistent adoption across teams. 18% have a formal AI strategy with governance and ROI tracking. 18% have defined workflows in parts of the business. 0% are not using AI meaningfully.

35%

have AI embedded across multiple functions - the top response

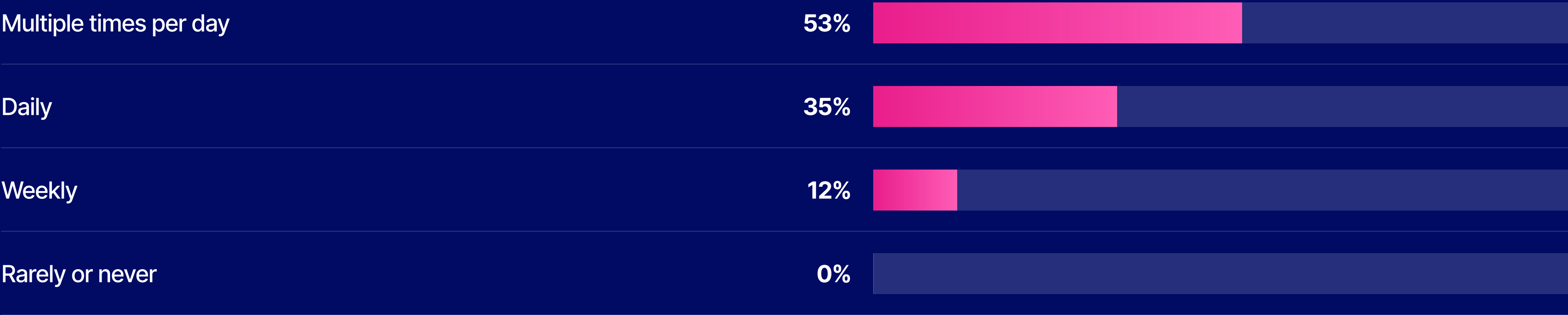


Usage *Frequency*

Nearly nine in ten respondents use AI every day, with the majority doing so multiple times.

53%

use AI multiple times
per day



This is not experimental behavior: it is embedded workflow.

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02

WHERE AI IS BEING USED

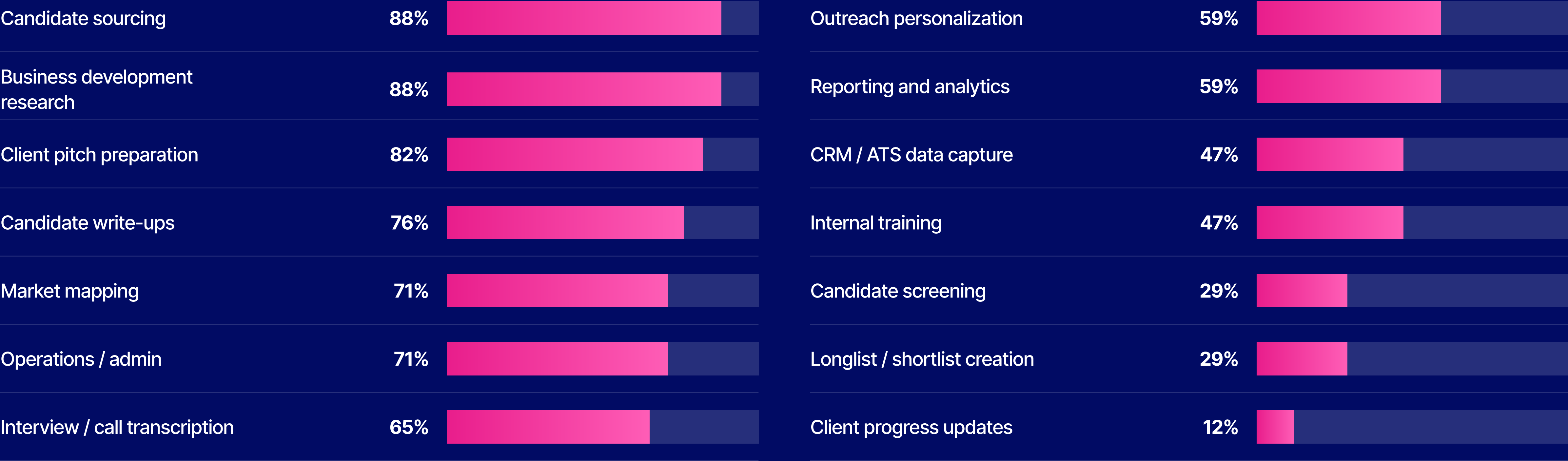
The Use Case *Map*

Top Use Cases by *Adoption*

AI has made its deepest inroads at the front of the recruitment cycle, specifically within candidate sourcing and business development.

88%

use AI for candidate sourcing and business development research



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03

THE CONFIDENCE GAP

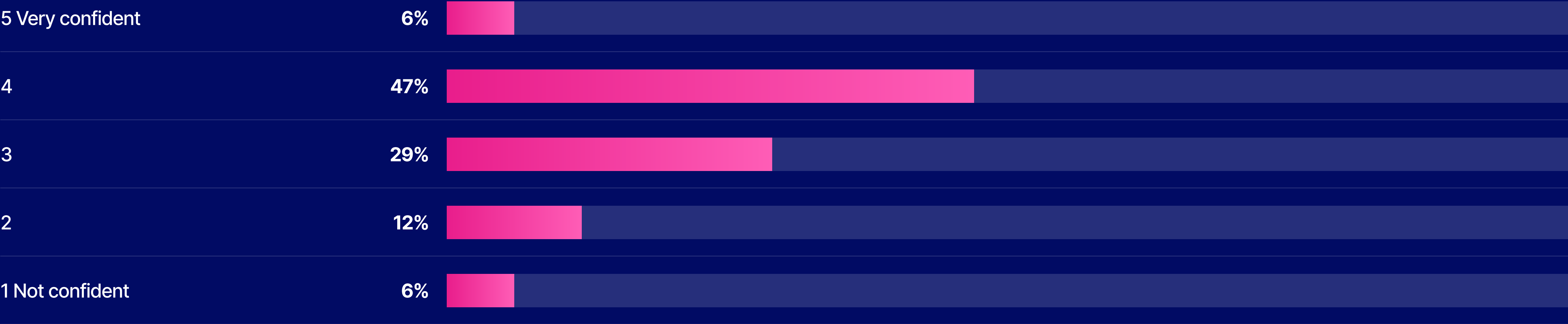
Using AI is Not the Same as *Doing AI Well*

Confidence in *AI Adoption*

Frequency of use does not equal effectiveness. The majority, 47%, score their confidence at 4 out of 5. They believe it is working, but they are not entirely certain.

6%

are very confident that AI is
being used consistently
and effectively across
their firm

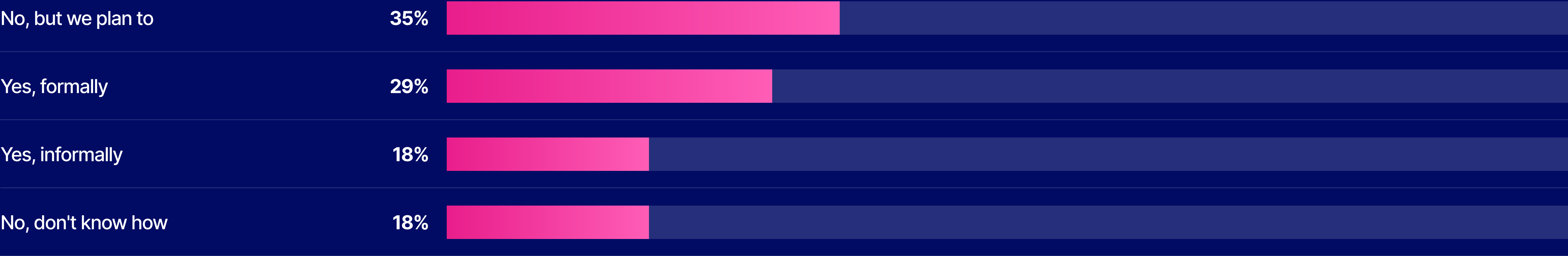


Measuring the *Impact*

If confidence is low, then in theory measurement should close the gap. It has not. A third plan to but have not started. Nearly a fifth admit they do not know how.

29%

measure the impact
formally, the rest are
informal, planning to, or
unsure how



RESPONDENT COMMENTS

”

"Has anyone materially increased GP per head as a result of AI?"

Founder / CEO

”

"Where is the biggest financial gain being experienced? Efficiency is one thing, but it is not dollars."

Founder / CEO

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04

FUTURE PRIORITIES

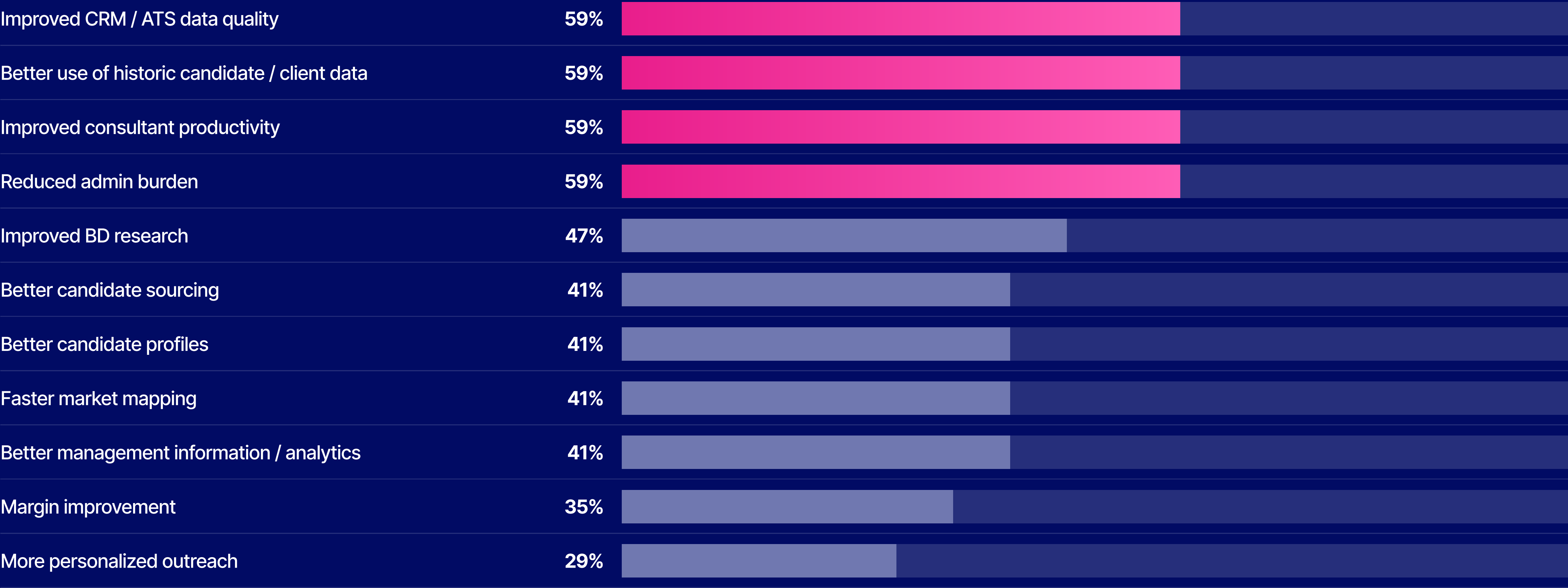
Where leaders want to *Go Next*

Where AI Could Create the *Most Value*

Respondents clustered heavily around four areas all tied at 59%. Strikingly, none of them are about acquiring new AI tools. All four require workflow redesign, data quality work, or process change.

59%

four priorities tied for the top spot and none involve acquiring new AI tools



05

STRATEGY, OWNERSHIP & GOVERNANCE

Who Owns AI, and *Does it matter?*

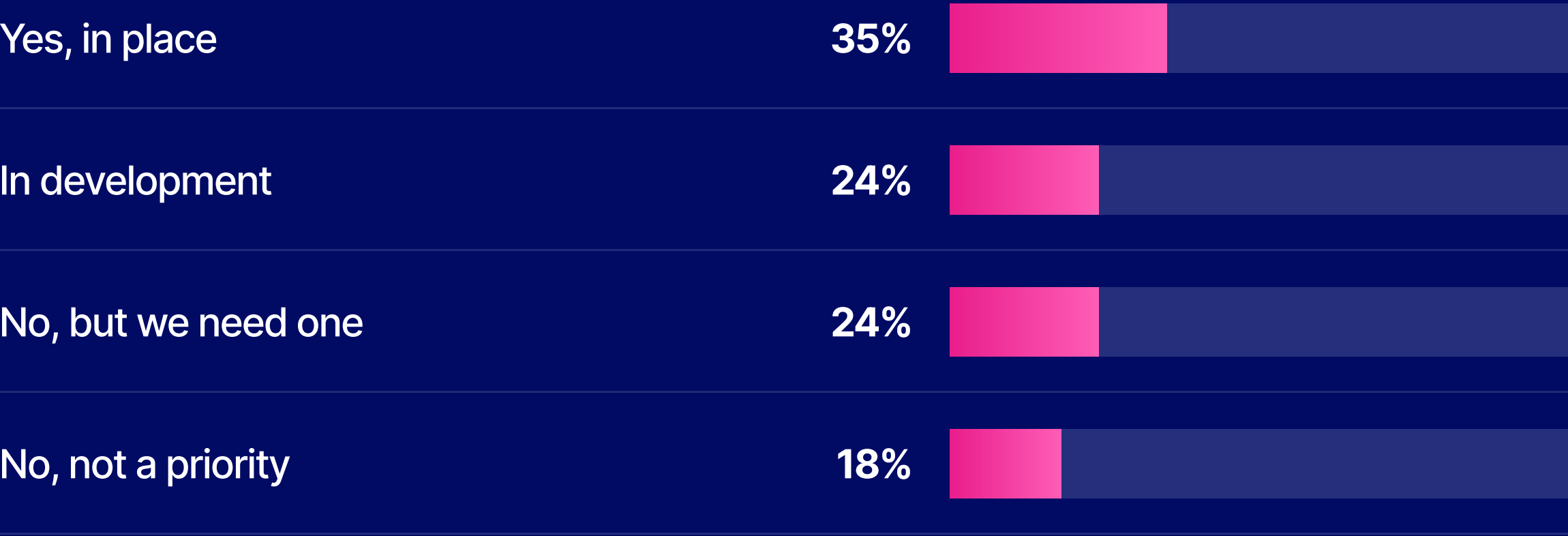
Strategy and *Adoption* Maturity

For AI to move from experimentation to execution, it needs a strategy and guardrails. The data suggests most firms are still building that infrastructure.

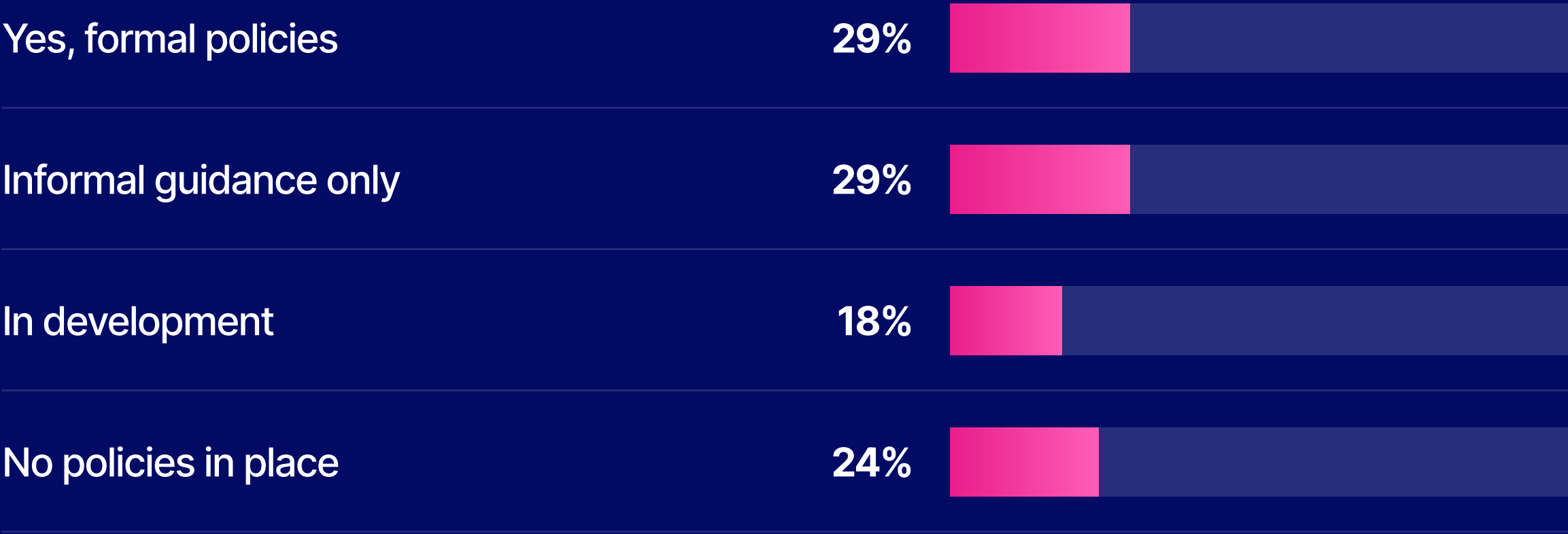
35%

have a formal AI strategy in place, the rest are still building one or haven't started

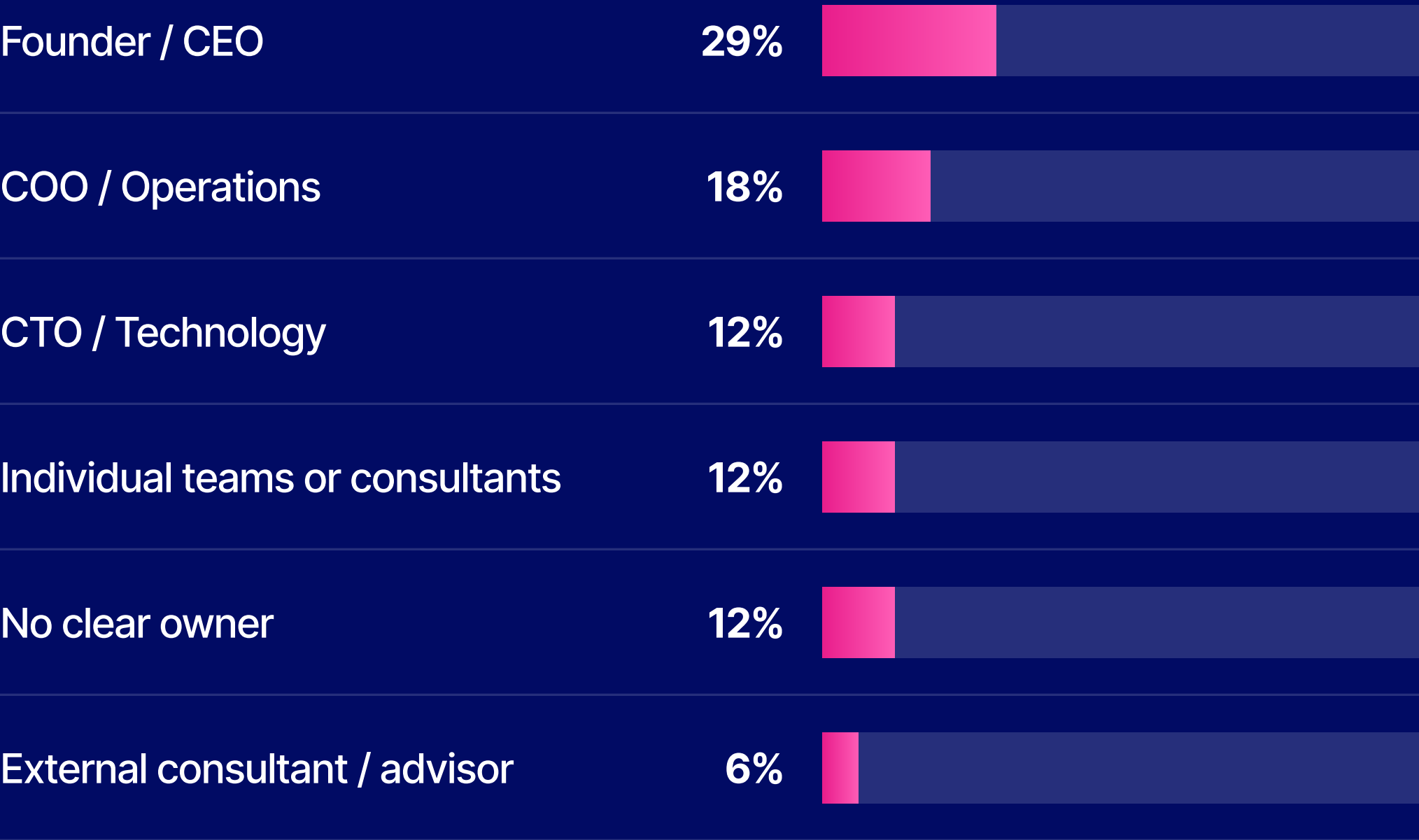
Do You Have a Formal AI Strategy?



Do You Have AI Usage Policies?



Who Currently Owns AI Adoption



When AI ownership sits with the most senior person in a firm alongside everything else they carry, it rarely gets the focused attention it needs. Different departments using different tools. Nobody accountable for consistency.

THE OWNERSHIP QUESTION

McKinsey's 2025 Global AI Survey found that high-performing organizations are three times more likely than their peers to have senior leaders who demonstrate active, visible ownership of AI adoption. The firms that scale AI most successfully have separated AI leadership into a dedicated role or external service provider with the purpose of keeping efficiency up.

What Other *industries* Are Doing

Large private equity

Apollo, Blackstone, KKR, and Carlyle have all established dedicated AI leadership at the firm level. The role exists to drive AI-led value creation across portfolio companies.

Middle-market PE

At firms managing between \$500m and \$2bn, a full-time Chief AI Officer is harder to justify. A market for fractional AI leadership has emerged, with senior practitioners supporting several firms on a part-time basis.

Law & professional services

At A&O Shearman, Clifford Chance, and Pinsent Masons, dedicated AI leadership roles sit alongside traditional partnership structures. Mid-size firms engage AI consultants on a retained or project basis.

What This Means for Search and Recruitment

Firms with ten to fifty consultants cannot justify a full-time CTO or a permanent Chief AI Officer. What they can justify is a clear strategy, an internal owner, and external support to accelerate the work they cannot do alone.

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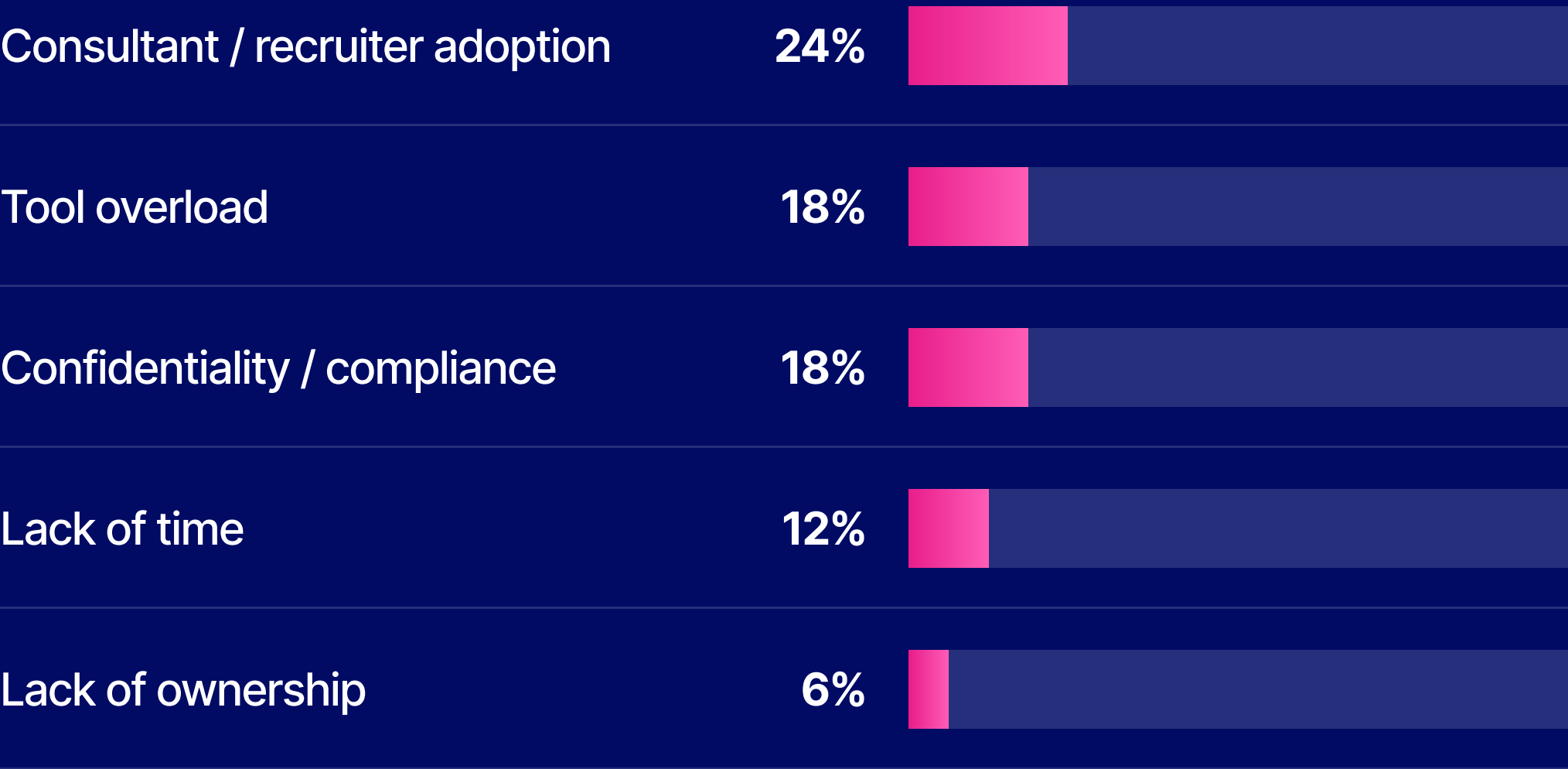
06

CHALLENGES & CONCERNS

What is Getting in the *Way*?

Biggest Internal *Challenge*

The biggest internal challenge is consultant and recruiter adoption, cited by nearly a quarter of respondents. The barrier is human, not technological.



TOOL OVERLOAD IS REAL

The boom of AI tools has created a new problem: firms that have acquired multiple tools without a clear strategy are finding themselves with fragmented workflows and underwhelmed teams.

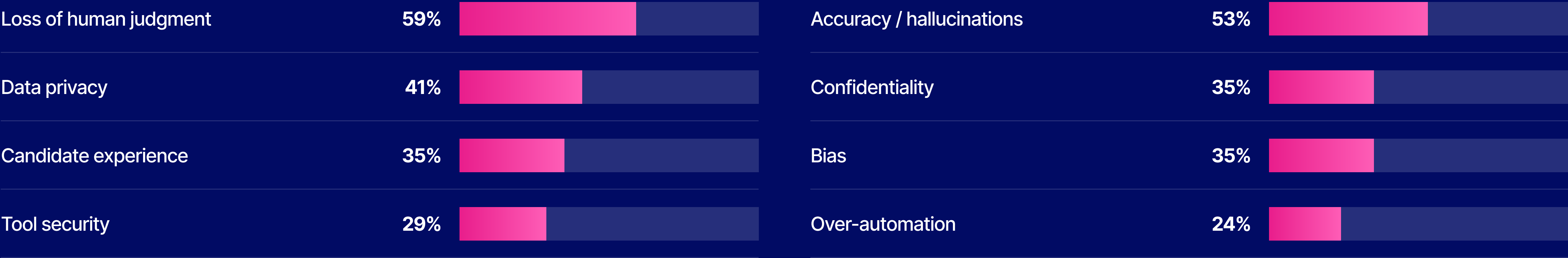
More tools is not the same as more capability.

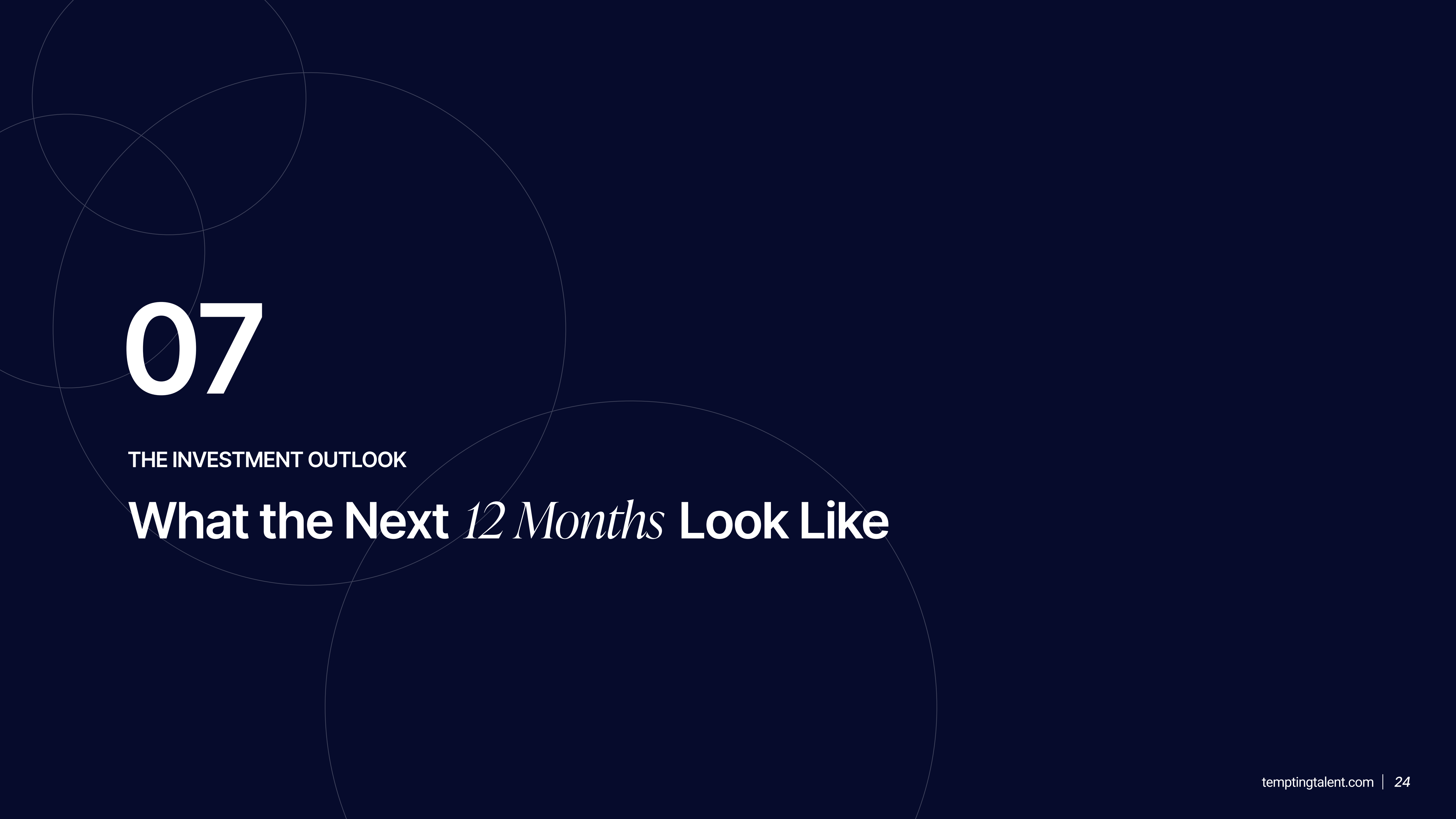
Concerns About Using *AI*

The dominant concerns are about what AI might do to the quality and humanity of the work.

59%

cite loss of human judgment as their top concern which is more than any fear about the technology itself



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07

THE INVESTMENT OUTLOOK

What the Next *12 Months* Look Like

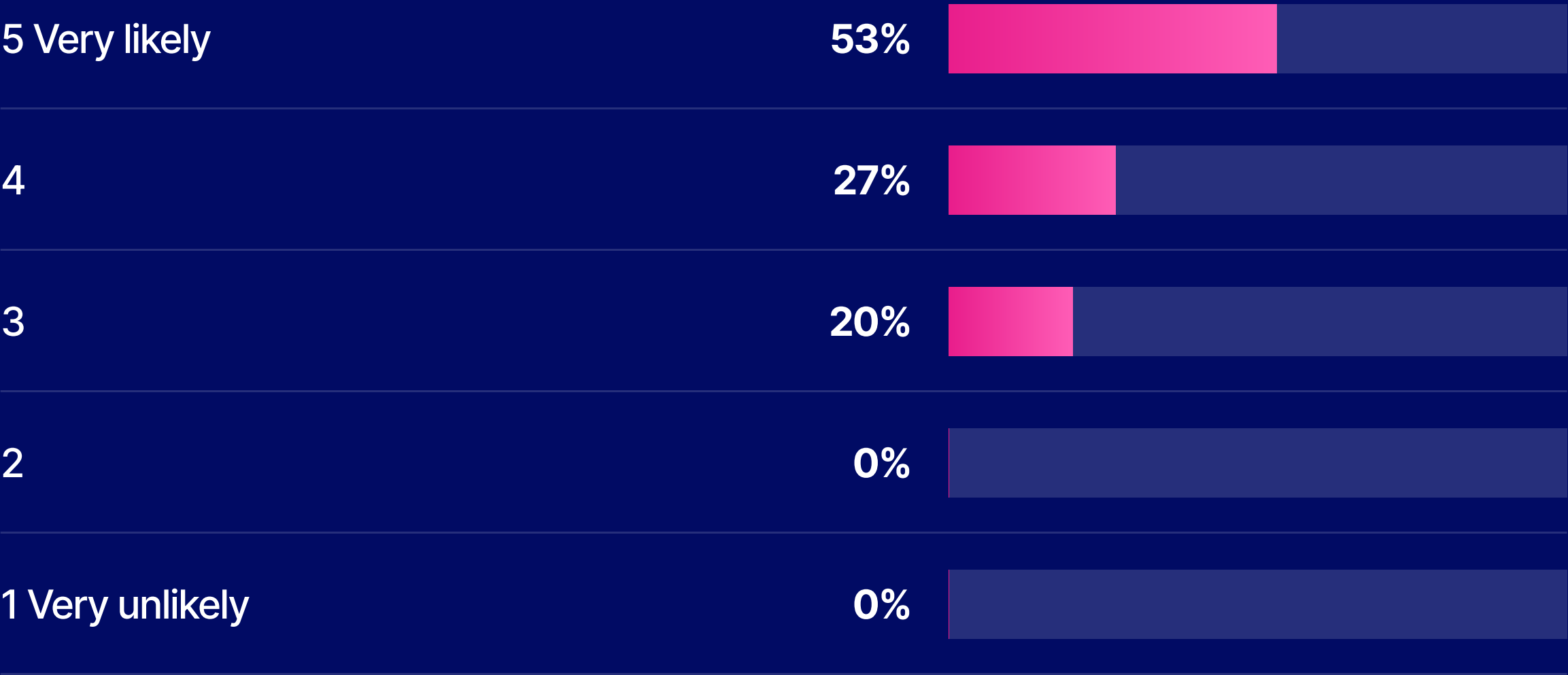
Investment Intent and *Support*

80% of respondents rate their likelihood to invest in workflow improvement, or AI enablement at 4 or 5 out of 5 over the next 12 months. Not a single respondent rated it 1 or 2.

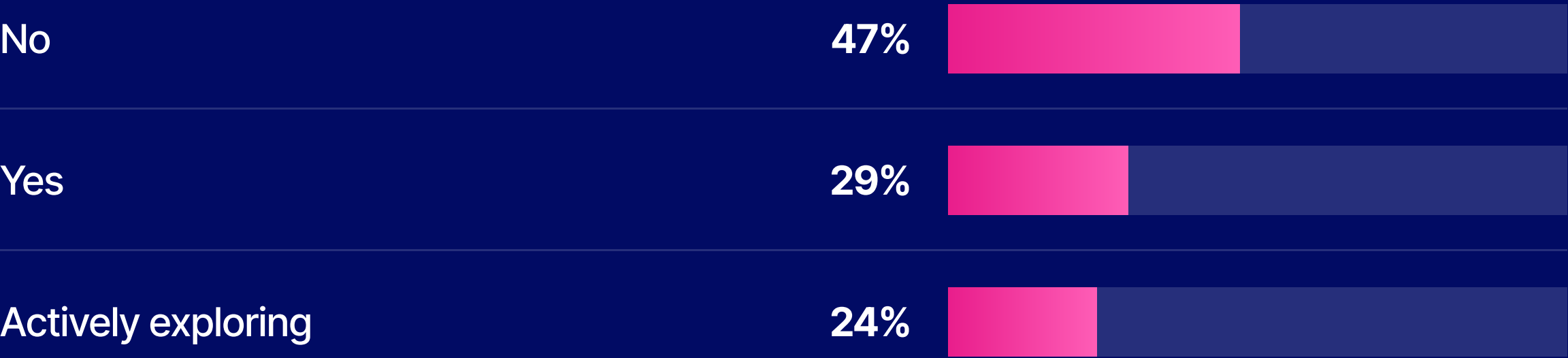
80%

rate their likelihood to invest in workflow improvement or AI enablement at 4 or 5 out of 5

Investment Likelihood (1–5)



External Support Engaged?



Of those not yet engaging support, the leading reason is a belief that AI should be owned internally (25%). The next most common: still understanding the opportunity (17%) and not knowing what type of support is needed (17%).

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08

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

What *Leaders* Told us

Most *Valuable* Use Cases

"Workflow automations across front and back office reducing external costs and headcount."

FOUNDER / CEO

"Building call lists and candidate write-ups along with monthly metrics and analytics analysis."

FOUNDER / CEO

"Preparation of candidate submissions, pre-screening and client presentations."

FOUNDER / CEO

"I believe there is a huge opportunity in BD related activity yet consistently applying and executing remains an issue."

FOUNDER / CEO

"We've done some patchy reporting and created some team-by-team dashboards, but we haven't yet spent enough time or effort to create a real use case. The board does not want us to focus on this on the basis that it could be a distraction."

FOUNDER / CEO

Questions *Leaders* Want Answered



"Has anyone materially increased GP per head as a result of AI?"



"I'd like to know how seriously other firms are pursuing this — I think we're losing ground."



"Are there any search firms developing their own model trained on their own data?"



"What are the recruiter-specific tools that actually work?"

CONCLUSIONS

From Experimentation to Execution: *Three things that matter*

01

Build a measurement framework before you scale

53% of respondents use AI multiple times per day but only 29% formally measure its impact. Measurement is not a luxury, it is the foundation of a credible AI strategy.

02

Treat AI as a workflow problem, not a tool problem

The top four priorities (CRM data quality, historic data utilization, consultant productivity, and admin reduction) are workflow challenges. Adding more AI tools will not solve them.

03

Protect the judgment, not just the process

The concern around losing human judgment is well founded. Firms that get this right will design AI into their workflows in ways that amplify consultant judgment rather than bypass it.

”

"I'd like to know how seriously other firms are pursuing this. I think we're losing ground and would like an indication of whether we're representative of the market or not."

FOUNDER / CEO, AUGUST 2026

Most firms are where you are: using AI regularly, uncertain whether they are doing it well, and unsure what structured progress looks like. The firms beginning to separate themselves are those who have moved from asking "should we use AI?" to "how do we use it to win?"





Start the Conversation

If you would like to contribute to next year's report, discuss the findings, or compare notes on how your firm is approaching AI adoption, we would welcome that conversation.

If you would like to book a discovery call or a career consultation with our team, please contact us on the details below:

 r.white@temptingtalent.com

 temptingtalent.com

