THE STATE of DATA 2026/7

kdr TALENT SOLUTIONS
the original data recruiter

DAMA UK
Nurturing a community of data professionals

THE YEAR OF PROOF

TRUST & VALUE

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Intro & Summary

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I'm pleased to introduce, in partnership with DAMA UK, The State of Data 2026/27, our annual benchmark of the data, and AI community.

Each year, this report gives us a view of how organisations are using data, where progress is being made, what is holding them back and what data professionals are experiencing across work, skills, hiring, leadership and technology.

This year's findings arrive at an important point for the market. Over recent years, the conversation has moved from data maturity and AI adoption into something more demanding: value, accountability and trust. Organisations are no longer simply asking whether they should be using AI or investing in data. They are asking whether those investments are delivering measurable outcomes, whether the foundations are strong enough to support them, and whether the right ownership, governance and skills are in place.

The results show a market that is continuing to progress, but not evenly. Many organisations are improving how they use data and embedding AI into the way they work, while others are still facing familiar barriers around quality, ownership, legacy infrastructure, budget, skills and communication between data teams and the wider business.

This is what makes the 2026/27 findings so useful because they show where ambition is running ahead of measurement, where governance is still forming, where people and leadership remain critical, and where organisations may need to focus if they want to move from activity to impact.

The report also explores the expanding role of data and technology teams. Cyber risk, data privacy, regulatory readiness, cloud and AI cost pressure, and confidence in AI outputs are all part of this year's picture. Some of these pressures are already influencing data strategy; others are emerging more unevenly across the market. Together, they point to a broader shift in what organisations now expect from their data functions.

As always, the people behind the data remain central. Working models, career progression, leadership, salary, candidate experience and retention all continue to shape the market. For employers, these findings offer a clearer view of what data professionals value, what frustrates them and what may influence whether they stay, move or engage with a hiring process.

Thank you to everyone who took part in this year's survey. Your insight helps us build a clearer picture of the state of data and supports better conversations across the data, analytics, AI and governance community.

Chris Bongard
Managing Director
KDR Talent Solutions

The findings in this year's report point to a market that is active and ambitious. Data usage is improving for many organisations, AI is present in more day-to-day work, and data teams are being asked to support a wider range of business priorities. But the report also shows that activity is not the same as assurance. Many organisations are still working through how to evidence value, manage quality and build confidence in the decisions being made from data and AI.

For DAMA UK, this is an important distinction. The next stage of maturity is about creating the conditions where data can be understood, trusted, reused and acted upon with confidence.
That requires an evidence chain. Without that chain, it becomes difficult to prove value, explain decisions or scale AI responsibly.

The barriers raised by respondents around data quality, unclear ownership, legacy systems, skills gaps, communication challenges, governance uncertainty and confidence in AI outputs are all connected and are symptoms of how well data is managed across its lifecycle.

The same is true of newer pressures such as AI governance, sustainability data, cloud and compute cost, regulatory readiness and data as a product. These areas may feel newer, but they rely on familiar capabilities: clear definitions, accountable ownership, metadata, architecture, quality controls, stewardship, literacy and alignment between data teams and the wider business.

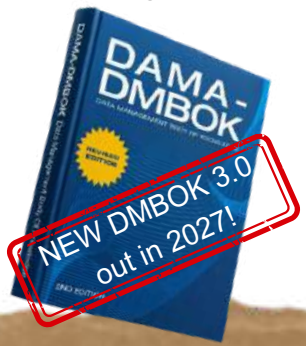
This is also why the forthcoming DAMA-DMBOK® 3.0 is so timely. The data landscape has changed significantly since earlier editions, and the next evolution of the Body of Knowledge is being developed to reflect modern data challenges, including AI, cloud and modern data platforms. Its relevance is that it gives the profession shared language, structure and principles at a time when data work is becoming broader, faster and more closely tied to business accountability.

The message from this year's report is clear: organisations cannot prove the value of data and AI without also proving the strength of the management practices underneath them.

Across the organisation there are takeaways. For data leaders, this means making ownership, quality, governance and value measurement visible. For business leaders, it means recognising that data management is not a back-office discipline, but a condition for trusted decision-making. For practitioners, it is a reminder that the fundamentals of the profession are becoming more important.

The organisations that progress furthest will be those that can connect ambition with discipline: data that is well defined, well governed, well understood and capable of supporting decisions people can trust.

Mary Drabble
Chair, DAMA UK



Headlines at a glance

Campaign Highlights

The dial has positively moved on data usage year on year from 67% to 74.89%

Concern over AI affecting skills, roles and career paths has risen

...PRACTITIONER VIEWPOINT

audacia

"As a strategic technology and delivery partner, the findings in this year's State of Data report closely reflect the conversations we are having with organisations delivering complex digital, data and AI programmes. Ambition is rarely the issue; the harder challenge is turning that ambition into measurable value. Many organisations are now moving beyond experimentation and asking more practical questions: is the data ready, can systems integrate, is governance clear, and do teams have the engineering capability to scale? The organisations that make the most progress will start with a clearly defined business problem, not a technology, and then put in place the data foundations, accountable ownership and engineering discipline needed to deliver results that are measurable, governed and trusted in production."

Richard Brown, Technical Director, Audacia

The 2026/27 State of Data results point to a market that is progressing, but under pressure.

Data usage has improved for around three quarters of respondents, and AI is now present in some form across most organisations represented in the survey. However, the findings also show that adoption is not the same as maturity. Many organisations are still working through how to measure value, clarify ownership, strengthen governance, modernise foundations and build the skills needed to scale.

The strongest message from this year's survey is that the next phase of data and AI maturity will be defined less by whether organisations are using the technology, and more by whether they can make it trusted, measurable, governed and useful.

Data usage improved over the last 12 months

74.89%

AI at live use case, embedded workflow or business-critical stage

65.29%

Data strategy is aligned or somewhat aligned to business strategy

91.67%

Clear ROI or productivity gains from AI

10.06%

Respondents reporting some form of AI use

97.06%

Cloud, data platform or AI tooling costs already affecting strategy

43.50%

Concerned about cyber-attacks

69.59%

Would or might consider leaving if office days increased

72.02%

Hybrid working

74.85%

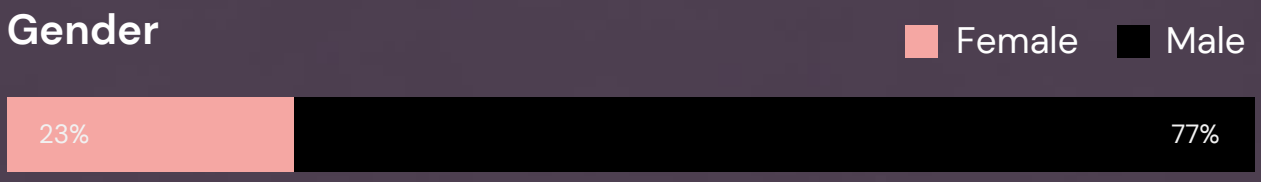
Respondent Profile

DISCIPLINE

Data Engineering	15.90%
Data Analytics & Insights	12.97%
Data Management	11.30%
Data Science/AI (applied AI, ML, Gen AI, LLMs, AI Research, AI Governance	20.50%
Product Management	4.60%
BI & Data Visualisation	3.77%
Digital & Web Analytics	0.42%
Other	10.04%
Data Leadership	20.50%

Entry-level	3.34%
Mid-Level	19.17%
Senior-level individual contributor	23.33%
Manager / Lead	18.75%
Head of	12.92%
Director	10.42%
C-Suite/Executive	6.25%
Consultant/Contractor	5.83%

Gender



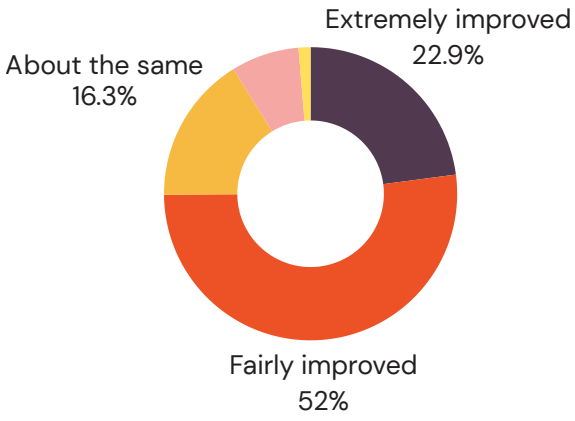
The survey received responses from across the data, analytics, AI and governance community, with a strong representation from senior and leadership-level respondents.

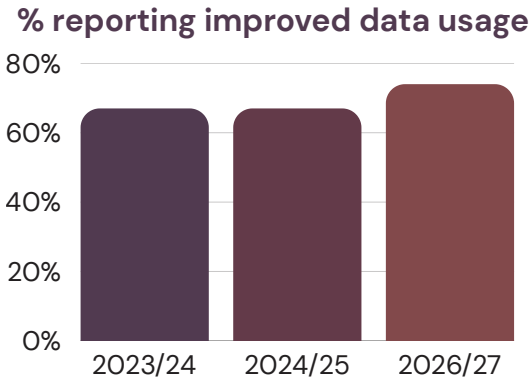
The largest discipline group was Data Leadership, and Data Science/AI followed by Data Engineering, Data Analytics & Insights and Data Management. This gives the report a strong mix of strategic, technical and delivery-focused perspectives.

The seniority of respondents is also important. The sample includes senior individual contributors, managers, heads of, directors and C-suite leaders, alongside mid-level professionals, consultants and contractors. The findings therefore reflect both the people delivering data work and those shaping data strategy, hiring and operating model decisions.

The respondent base also includes organisations of different sizes, from small businesses to large enterprises, with representation across technology, finance, healthcare, professional services, retail, public sector, telecoms, manufacturing and other sectors. The respondent base was predominantly male, with 77% selecting male and 23% selecting female. While this reflects a gender imbalance within the survey sample, and findings should be read with that context in mind, it is broadly consistent with wider evidence of gender splits across data, AI and technology roles.

Data Usage (real but uneven progress)





Each year, one of the central questions in the State of Data survey is whether organisations are improving how they use data. This remains one of the most useful indicators of maturity because it moves beyond whether a business has data, dashboards, tools or teams, and asks whether that data is becoming more useful in practice.

This year, 74.89% of respondents said their organisation's use of data had improved over the last 12 months. Broken down, 22.91% said it had extremely improved, while 51.98% said it had fairly improved. A further 16.30% said usage had stayed about the same, while 8.81% said it had poorly improved.

This marks a noticeable uplift from the previous two State of Data reports, where the proportion of respondents reporting improved data usage sat at 67%. After two years of consistency, the 2026/27 results suggest more respondents are seeing progress in how their organisations use data.

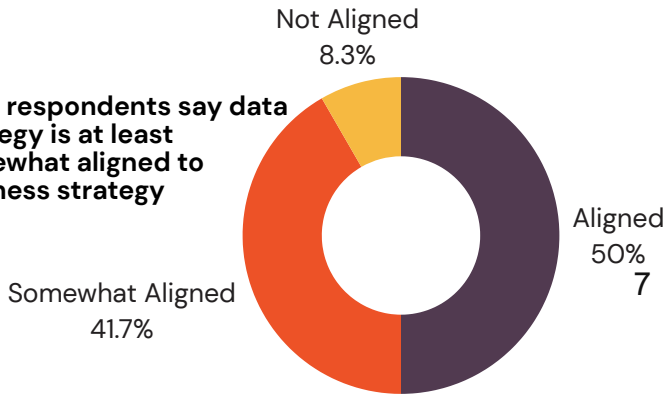
However, the picture is not one of universal improvement. Around one in four respondents said their organisation's data usage had either stayed the same or poorly improved. This is interesting because the wider findings show that improved data usage is not just about having more technology in place. The results also show a strong connection between data and business strategy. 50.00% of respondents said their organisation's data strategy was aligned to the wider business strategy, while 41.67% said it was somewhat aligned. Only 8.33% said it was not aligned. Combined, 91.67% said their data strategy was at least somewhat aligned to the wider business strategy.

On the surface, this is encouraging. However, the large proportion selecting "somewhat aligned" suggests there is still room for stronger connection between data ambition and business execution.

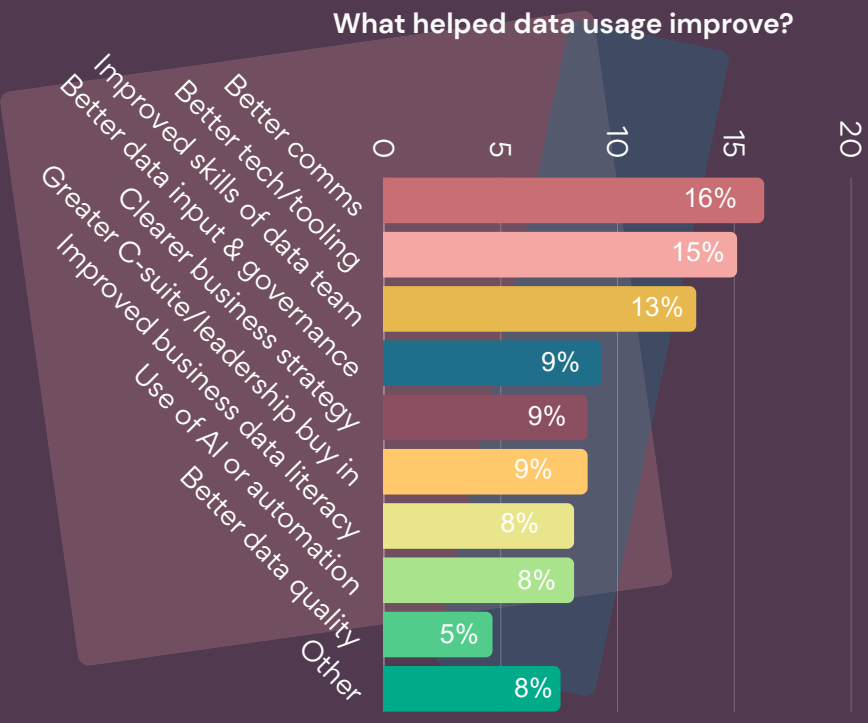
When respondents were asked what had most helped their organisation improve its use of data, the leading answer was better communication between the data function and business units, selected by 16.28% of respondents answering this question. This was followed by better technology or tooling at 15.12% and improved skills within the data team at 13.37%.

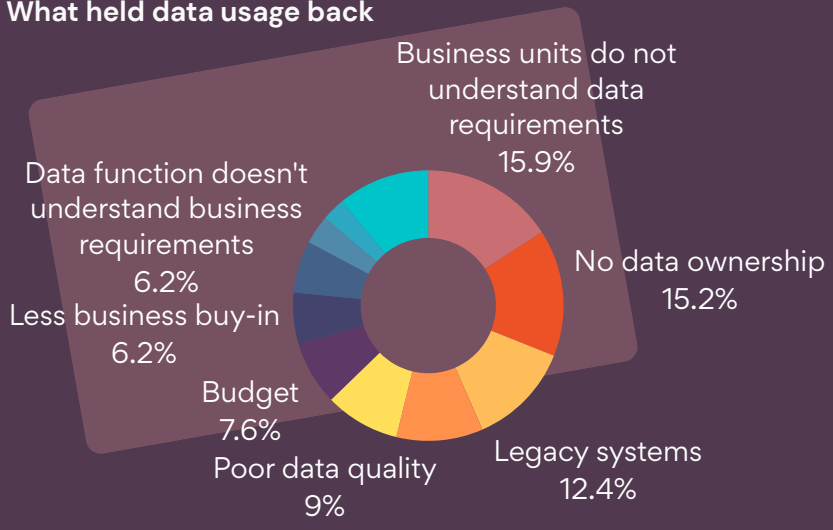
In client conversations, we are seeing improvement in data usage linked not only to better tooling, but also to stronger data enablement, clearer ownership and more product-style approaches to data. The key to progress seems to lie within really helping the business understand how to use data, not just giving them access to it.

Most respondents say data strategy is at least somewhat aligned to business strategy



Data Usage (cont..)





This is one of the most useful findings in the data usage section. It shows that communication sits slightly ahead of technology as a driver of progress. In a market where organisations are investing in platforms, automation and AI, the relationship between data teams and the wider business remains central to how data usage improves.

Where data usage had not improved, respondents most often pointed to business units not understanding data requirements, lack of data ownership and legacy systems. Among those answering this follow-up question, 15.9% selected business units not understanding data requirements, 15.2% selected lack of data ownership, and 12.4% selected legacy systems.

Taken together, the findings show a clear pattern. Data usage improves when data teams and business units communicate more effectively, when technology and skills improve, and when the business has a clearer understanding of what data is needed and why. It stalls when requirements are unclear, ownership is weak or infrastructure limits progress.

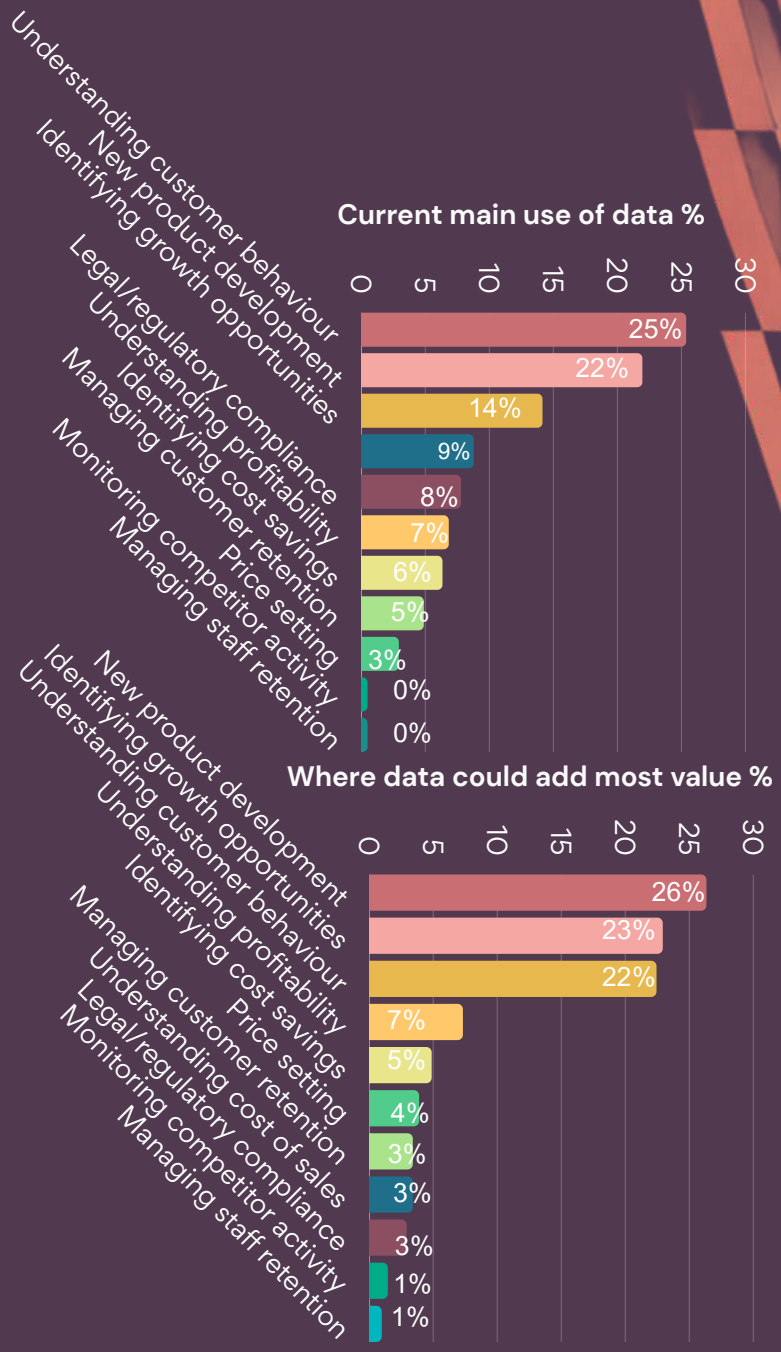
For data leaders, the practical message is that improving data usage is not only about investing in platforms or hiring technical specialists. Those solutions help, but they need to be supported by stronger communication, clearer ownership and a shared understanding of what the business is trying to achieve with data.

For business leaders, the message is equally important. Data quality, data usage and data value are not the sole responsibility of the data team. Business units play a critical role in defining requirements, capturing information correctly, engaging with insight and applying it to decisions.

The strongest message from this section is that progress is real, but uneven. More respondents are reporting improved data usage than in the previous two reports, but the foundations of progress remain familiar: communication, ownership, skills, technology and alignment between data teams and the wider business.

Where Data Creates Value

Improving data usage is only part of the picture. Another important question is where that data is being used, and whether organisations are applying it in ways that support better decisions, stronger customer understanding, product development, growth and operational performance.



This year's findings show that data is being used across a broad mix of commercial, customer and operational areas. The most selected current use of data was understanding customer behaviour, followed by new product development and identifying opportunities for growth.

The results become more interesting when current use is compared with where respondents believe data *could* add the most value. Here, new product development becomes the leading answer, followed closely by identifying growth opportunities and understanding customer behaviour.

This suggests that respondents see data's strongest value sitting close to commercial decision-making. Data is not only being viewed as a tool for reporting, compliance or cost control. It is being used, and could add further value, in areas connected to customers, products and growth.

There is also a slight notable difference between current use and perceived value. Understanding customer behaviour is the leading *current* use of data, but new product development becomes the leading area where respondents *believe* data could *add the most value*. This indicates that organisations might well be using data to understand customers, but there is still further opportunity to use that insight more directly in product, service and proposition development.

For business leaders, this is an important distinction. Customer insight has limited value if it does not translate into action. The organisations that gain the most from data will be those that can connect what they know about customers, markets and behaviour to decisions about products, growth, pricing, retention and investment.

For data leaders, the findings reinforce the importance of working closely with commercial, product, marketing, finance and operational teams. If the greatest value sits in product development, growth and customer understanding, then data teams need to be close enough to the business to understand what decisions are being made, what questions need answering and what outcomes the organisation is trying to influence.

Data Quality & Ownership

The foundations still decide

36.59% say clear definition is the most effective way to improve data quality.

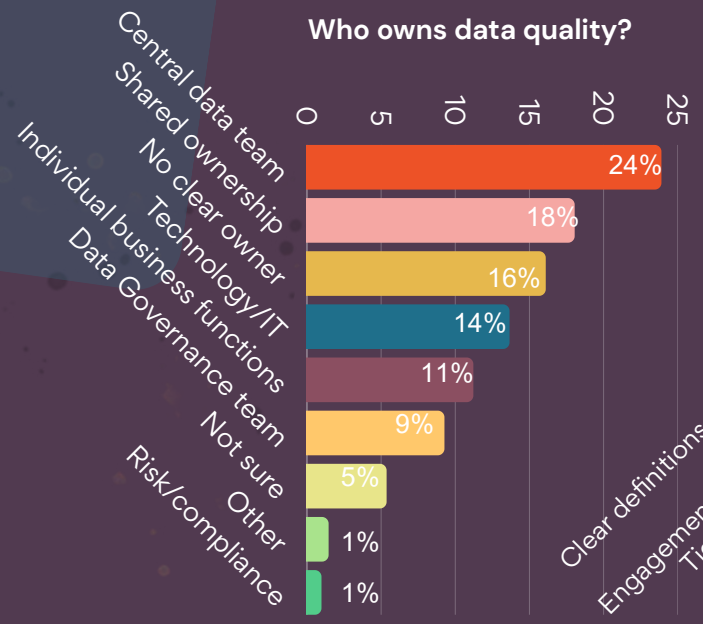
Whereas the previous section shows where data is creating value, this section now looks at what enables that value to happen in the first place.

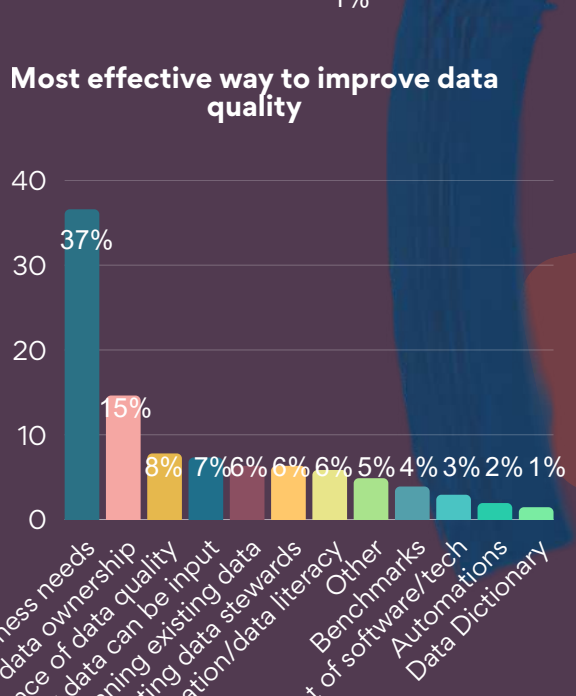
Across this year's findings, data quality and ownership continue to sit at the centre of the maturity conversation. Respondents were asked who owns data quality in their organisation, and the answers show a mixed picture. The most selected response was the central data team, followed by shared ownership across business and data teams, no clear owner, Technology / IT, individual business functions and the data governance team.

This spread of responses shows that there is no single dominant ownership model across the market. That demonstrates that data quality is not just a technical issue. The 2026/27 findings show that respondents continue to see clear definition and purpose as the most effective way to improve data quality. When asked which action would have the biggest impact, the most selected answer was having a clear definition of what data is needed for the business and why. Clearer data ownership was the second most selected answer.

This is consistent with a long-running theme in the State of Data series. Previous reports have repeatedly shown that data quality improves when organisations are clearer about what data is needed, why it matters and how it will be used. In the 2025 report, clear definition was also the strongest selected answer.

The continued strength of this finding suggests that many organisations are still working through the same practical challenge: data quality cannot be solved by cleaning data alone. Cleaning may be necessary, but it does not address the root cause if the business has not agreed what should be captured, who owns it, what good looks like and how the data will be used.





AI Readiness Starts with Data Foundations

As organisations increase their use of AI, analytics and automation, the strength of their underlying data foundations becomes more important.

This year's findings show that the barriers to scale are not limited to AI skills or tooling. Respondents also pointed to long-standing data challenges that affect how easily organisations can move from experimentation to reliable, repeatable use.

When asked which data foundation is most limiting their organisation's ability to scale AI, analytics or automation, the most selected answer was data quality. This was followed by unstructured data management and legacy systems.

These are not new issues for data teams. Data quality, legacy infrastructure, ownership and literacy have appeared repeatedly across the State of Data series. What is different this year is the context in which these issues are appearing. As organisations try to increase their use of AI and automation, the cost of weaker foundations becomes more visible.

Unstructured data management is also an important finding this year. As more organisations explore generative AI, large language models and automation, the ability to manage documents, text, emails, policies, knowledge bases and other unstructured sources becomes more relevant. The survey results show that this is already being recognised as a constraint by respondents.

For data leaders, the implication is practical. Before organisations can scale AI, analytics or automation with confidence, they need to understand where their foundations are weakest. That may mean improving data quality, modernising legacy systems, strengthening metadata and lineage, clarifying ownership, improving access controls or investing in documentation and literacy.

Modern data management systems are the foundation of AI, enabling the use of AI to enhance, process, and analyse data, as well as to generate insights and solutions.

Data Foundations limiting your organisations ability to scale AI, analytics, and automation

Data Quality	15.52%
Unstructured data management	14.37%
Legacy systems	13.79%
Data Integration	9.77%
Metadata management	8.05%
Lack of data ownership	8.05%
Data access / permissions	7.47%
Lack of documentation	6.32%
Poor data literacy	6.32%
Data lineage	5.17%
Other	5.17%

Is Data seen as a product?

One of the newer questions in this year's survey asked whether organisations have moved towards treating data as a product. This was included because we are seeing many data teams are now trying to move beyond centralised reporting and reactive data support, towards clearer ownership, better-defined data assets and more intentional use of data across the business.

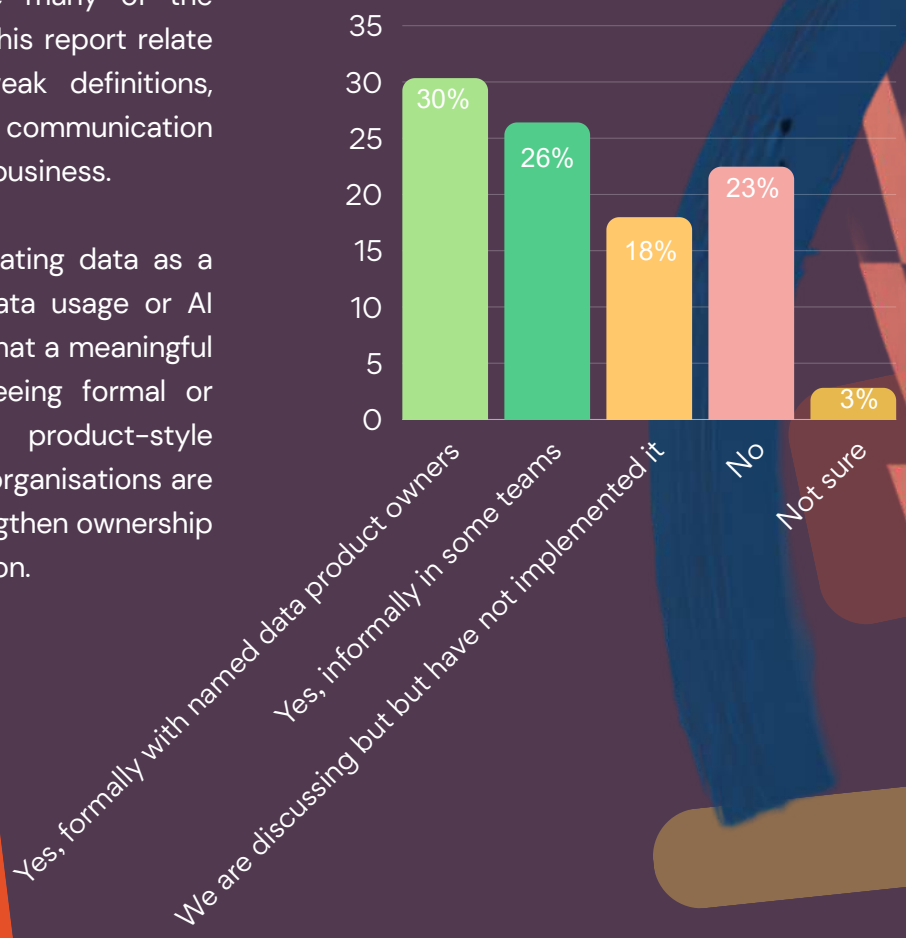
The results show that data as a product is no longer only a theoretical concept, but it is also not yet universal. 30.34% of respondents said their organisation has formally moved towards treating data as a product, with named data product owners. A further 26.40% said this is happening informally in some teams. 17.98% said it is being discussed but has not been implemented, while 22.47% said no.

This gives a useful maturity signal. Where data is treated as a product, there is usually a clearer expectation that it should have a purpose, an owner, users, standards and ongoing improvement. That is an important distinction because many of the challenges identified elsewhere in this report relate directly to unclear ownership, weak definitions, fragmented accountability and poor communication between data teams and the wider business.

The findings do not show that treating data as a product automatically improves data usage or AI readiness. However, they do show that a meaningful proportion of respondents are seeing formal or informal movement towards product-style approaches at the same time that organisations are trying to improve data quality, strengthen ownership and scale AI, analytics and automation.

For data leaders, this means data as a product should not be treated as a label or methodology alone. The value sits in the behaviours behind it: named ownership, clear definitions, user focus, quality standards, documentation, governance and a stronger connection between data activity and business outcomes.

Has your organisation moved towards treating data as a product



KDR Market View:

Whilst we can't emphatically say that treating data as a product automatically improves data usage or AI readiness, KDR client conversations suggest that product-style approaches can help. Where data has clearer ownership, defined users, quality standards and documentation, organisations are often better placed to support analytics, automation and AI use cases.

Data Maturity Curve

Maturity stage	What this looks like	What the survey findings support	Outcome
1. Stalled / Fragmented	Data usage has not improved or has worsened. Teams struggle with unclear requirements, lack of ownership and older systems.	Among respondents answering why data usage had not improved, the top blockers were **business units not understanding data requirements**, **lack of data ownership** and **legacy systems**.	Data maturity stalls when the business and data function are not aligned on what is needed, who owns it and how it should be used.
2. Operational but Inconsistent	Data is being used, but progress is uneven. Strategy may be only partly aligned, quality ownership is split or unclear, and teams are still working around process gaps.	**41.67%** said data strategy was only **somewhat aligned** to wider business strategy, while **16.10%** said there was **no clear owner** for data quality.	Many organisations are not failing, but they are not fully joined up. This is the middle ground where data activity exists, but accountability is still forming.
3. Improving / Better Connected	Data usage is improving because communication, tools and skills are getting better. Data teams and business units are working more effectively together.	**74.89%** said data usage had improved. The top improvement driver was **better communication between the data function and business units**, followed by better technology/tooling and improved skills.	Progress is not just about technology. The strongest signal of improvement is better communication between the data team and the business.
4. Structured / Scaling	Organisations are starting to put clearer ownership models in place. Data may be treated as a product, with formal or informal ownership.	**30.34%** said their organisation had formally moved towards treating data as a product with named data product owners, while **26.40%** said this was happening informally in some teams.	Data as a product is becoming a useful marker of maturity, but adoption is still uneven.
5. Accountable / Value-led	Data and AI activity is connected to outcomes, trust, governance and measurable value. This is where the market is heading, but fewer organisations appear to be fully there yet.	Only 10.06**%** said their organisation had clear ROI or productivity gains from AI initiatives. Only **19.05%** were extremely or very confident that AI outputs were accurate, explainable and appropriately governed.	This is the next maturity frontier: not just using data and AI, but proving value, governing outputs and building trust.

Cost Pressure – the hidden constraint on Data and AI ambition

Cost & Strategy

As organisations increase their use of data platforms, cloud infrastructure, analytics, automation and AI tooling, cost is becoming a more visible part of the strategy conversation.

This year's findings show that cloud, data platform and AI tooling costs are already affecting strategy for some respondents. 17.51% said costs are affecting strategy significantly, while 25.99% said they are affecting strategy somewhat. A further 22.03% said costs are not yet affecting strategy, but are becoming a concern.

This means 43.50% said costs are already affecting strategy, and 65.54% said costs are either already affecting strategy or becoming a concern.

Pressure points

When respondents were asked where cost pressure was being felt most, compute and AI tooling or licences were the most selected answers. Cloud storage, data platform licences, hiring, external consultants, training and cybersecurity were also selected, but compute and AI tooling sat at the top of the responses.

For business leaders, the findings are a reminder that data and AI investment should not be assessed only through initial adoption or visible activity. Organisations need to understand what they are spending, where costs are growing, what value is being created and whether investment is aligned to business priorities.

Are Cloud, Data Platform, or AI Tooling costs affecting strategy?

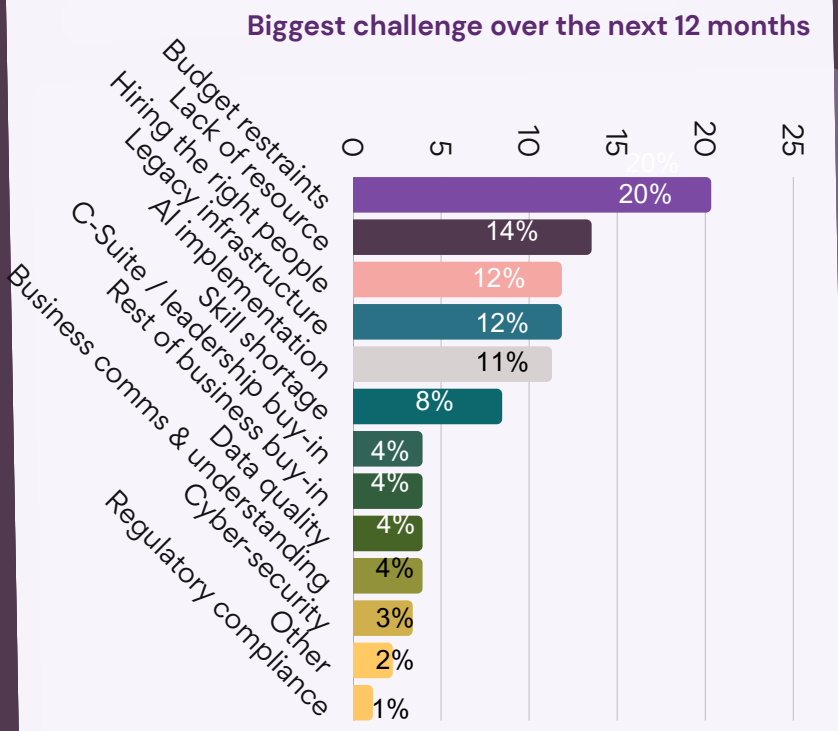
Yes significantly	17.51%
Yes, somewhat	25.99%
Not yet, but becoming a concern	22.03%
No	27.68%
Not sure	6.78%

Where cost pressures are being felt the most

Compute	22.16%
AI tooling / licences	21.59%
Not applicable	17.61%
Hiring	10.80%
Cloud storage	9.66%
Data platform licences	6.82%
External consultants	5.11%
Training / upskilling	3.41%
Cybersecurity / resilience tooling	1.14%
Other	1.70%

Challenges and skills

We wanted to know what would hold teams back in 2026/27



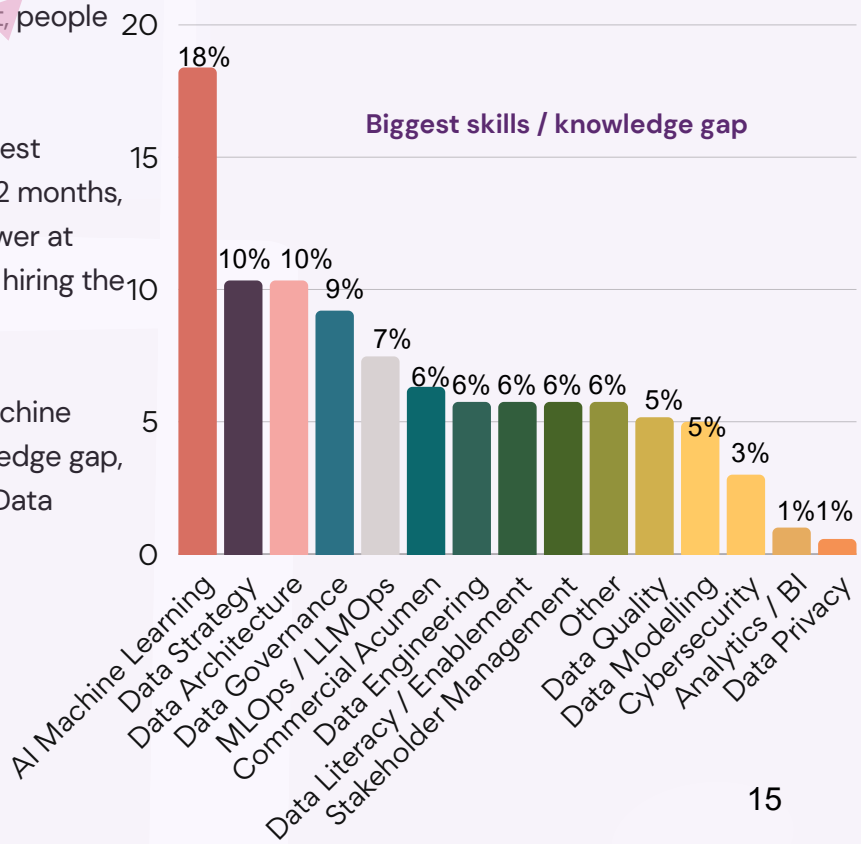
The findings show that organisations are not dealing with a single pressure point. Budget, resource, hiring, legacy infrastructure, AI implementation and skills gaps all appear in the results. This suggests that many data teams are trying to improve usage, modernise foundations and support AI adoption whilst also working within practical constraints around investment, people and technology.

When respondents were asked about the biggest challenge for their organisation over the next 12 months, budget restraints were the most selected answer at 20.34%. This was followed by lack of resource, hiring the right people, legacy infrastructure and AI implementation.

The skills picture reflects this pressure. AI / Machine Learning was the most selected skills or knowledge gap, followed by Data Strategy, Data Architecture, Data Governance and MLOps / LLMOps.

This range of answers shows that the skills challenge is not only about hiring more technical specialists. AI and machine learning capability clearly make a difference, but so do the strategic, architectural, governance and communication skills needed to make data and AI useful across an organisation.

For hiring managers, the findings suggest that the strongest teams will need a blend of capabilities. Technical depth remains important, particularly around AI, machine learning, architecture, engineering and operations. However, the results also point to the continued value of people who can understand business context, communicate clearly, shape strategy, manage governance and help stakeholders use data effectively.



AI Adoption

AI remains one of the strongest themes in this year's State of Data findings, but the nature of the conversation has changed.

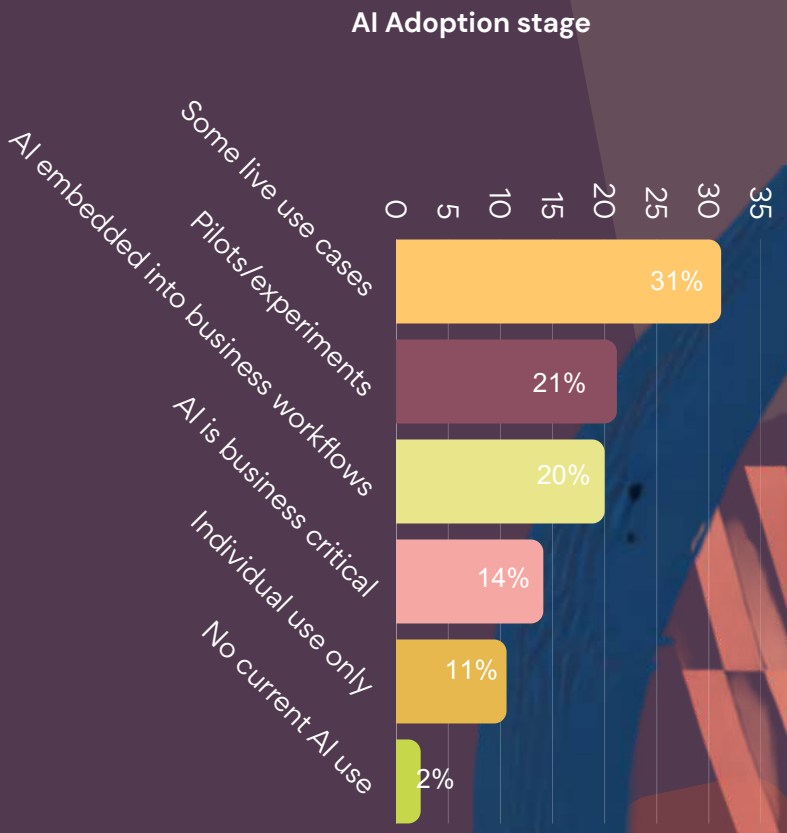
In previous years, the key question was whether organisations were adopting AI at all. In this year's survey, the responses show a more developed picture. Only 2.35% of respondents reported no current AI use. Most respondents said AI was being used in some form, ranging from individual use and pilots through to live use cases, embedded workflows and business-critical applications.

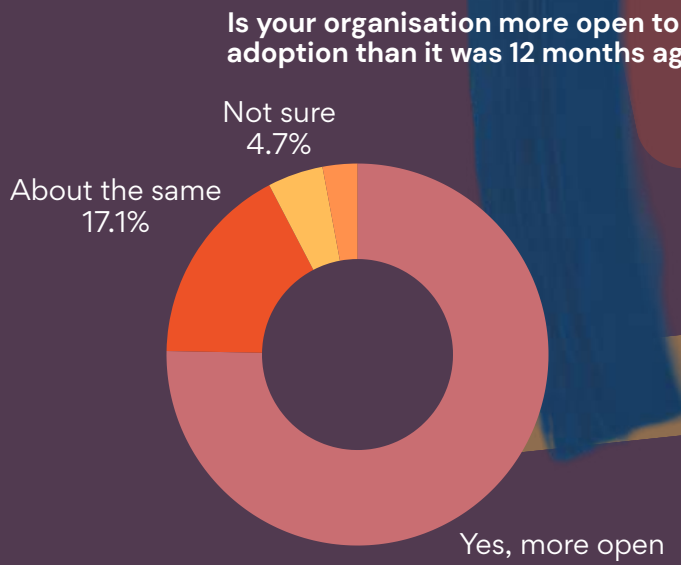
This moves the conversation away from simple adoption and towards maturity. There is a meaningful difference between individual employees using AI tools, organisations running pilots, teams operating live use cases, and AI becoming embedded into business workflows. The findings show that AI activity is widespread, but not all organisations are at the same stage.

The largest group of respondents said their organisation had some live AI use cases. Others reported that AI was still being used mainly by individuals, was in pilot or experimental stages, had become embedded into business workflows, or was now business-critical in some areas.

The results also show strong openness to AI. 75.29% of respondents said their organisation is more open to AI than it was 12 months ago. This supports the view that AI is no longer sitting outside mainstream data and technology strategy for many respondents.

However, adoption alone does not tell the whole story. The wider findings in this report show that AI maturity depends on more than usage. Going back to the point that organisations also need strong data foundations, clear ownership, governance, measurable value, confidence in outputs and the right skills to support responsible use.





AI Adoption cont...

In previous State of Data reports, respondents were largely unconcerned about AI taking over business functions, with 78% in 2024 and then 77% in 2025 saying they were not worried.

This year, the question was broadened to ask whether respondents were concerned about the impact of AI on roles, skills or career paths. On that basis, concern is much more visible: 14.20% said they were significantly concerned and 33.14% said they were somewhat concerned, giving a combined concern figure of 47.34%.

This should not be treated as a direct like-for-like comparison, because this year's question wording captured the wider career and skills impact rather than only fear of replacement. However, it does suggest that the conversation has shifted to how it may change the skills they need and the career paths available to them.

Are you concerned about the impact of AI on roles, skills or career paths?

Yes, significantly concerned	14.20%
Yes, somewhat concerned	33.14%
No	42.60%
Not sure	8.88%
Other	1.18%

AI Value Beyond Adoption

Only 10.06% report clear AI ROI or productivity gains

Respondents were asked how their organisation is measuring the value of AI initiatives. 10.06% said they had clear ROI or productivity gains. A much larger group, 40.83%, said they were seeing some value, but not measuring it consistently. Others said pilots were live but the value remained unclear, or that there was no meaningful value yet.

This is a strong signal that AI activity is widespread, but measurement discipline has not developed at the same pace.

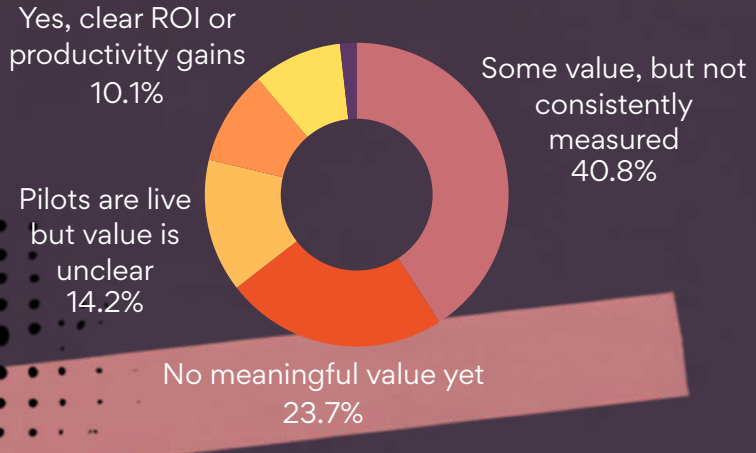
The findings show that many organisations may still be working out how to define, track and evidence the value of AI. For some, AI value may be appearing in productivity, speed, quality, automation or decision support, but not yet being captured consistently. For others, initiatives may still be too early to assess.

The main use cases reported by respondents also help explain where organisations are focusing. Automating repetitive tasks was the most selected use of AI, followed by code generation, business analytics or intelligence, augmenting human decision-making and content creation.

This shows that many organisations are currently applying AI to productivity and enablement use cases. Automation and code generation point to efficiency, while analytics and decision support point to improved insight and business judgement. However, the gap between use and measurement suggests that organisations may need stronger frameworks for deciding what value they expect AI to create and how that value will be assessed.

KDR Market View:

In client conversations, we are seeing that AI value often depends on whether organisations have the right mix of skills around AI, data strategy, architecture, governance, MLOps and business translation.



Main AI Use Case

Automate repetitive tasks	30.36%
Code generation	17.86%
Business analytics or intelligence	12.50%
Augment human decision-making	10.71%
Content creation	10.12%
Other	10.12%
Augment human data analysis	3.57%
Customer experience	2.38%
Monitoring / governance	1.19%
Define business strategy	1.19%
Identify risks or improve security	0%

AI Governance, Trust and Regulation

As AI becomes more widely used, governance, trust and regulation become more important.

This year's findings show that AI governance ownership is still developing across respondents' organisations. Technology / IT was the most selected owner of AI governance, followed by the data team, no clear owner, cross-functional AI committees and business leadership.

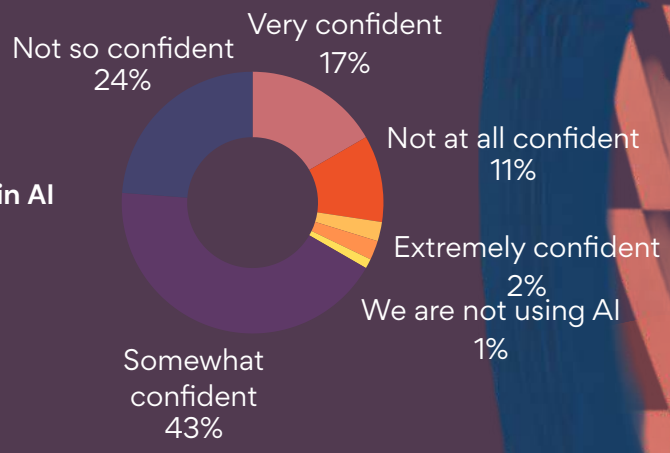
This spread of responses is interesting because it shows currently that AI governance touches multiple parts of an organisation.

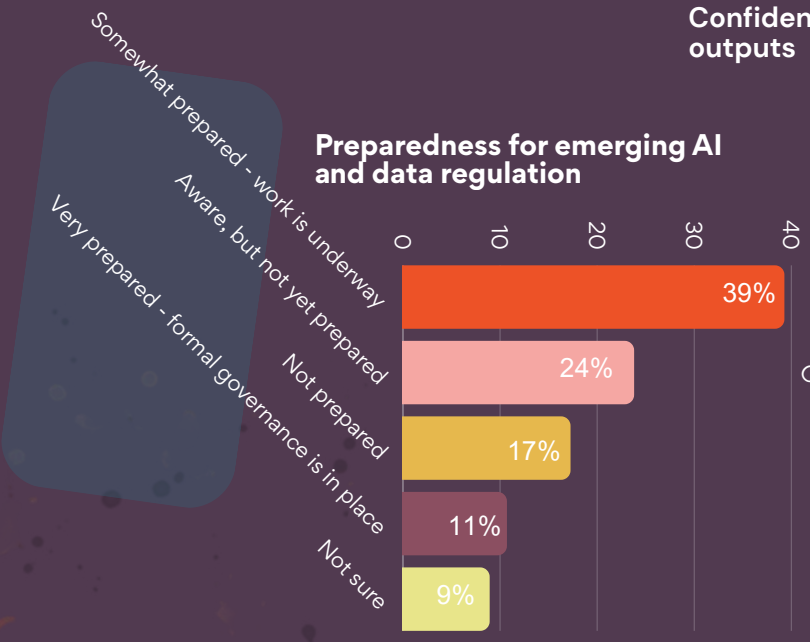
Respondents were also asked how confident they were that AI outputs in their organisation are accurate, explainable and appropriately governed. The largest group, 42.86%, said they were somewhat confident. When the positive responses are combined, 19.05% were very or extremely confident, while 34.52% were not so confident or not at all confident.

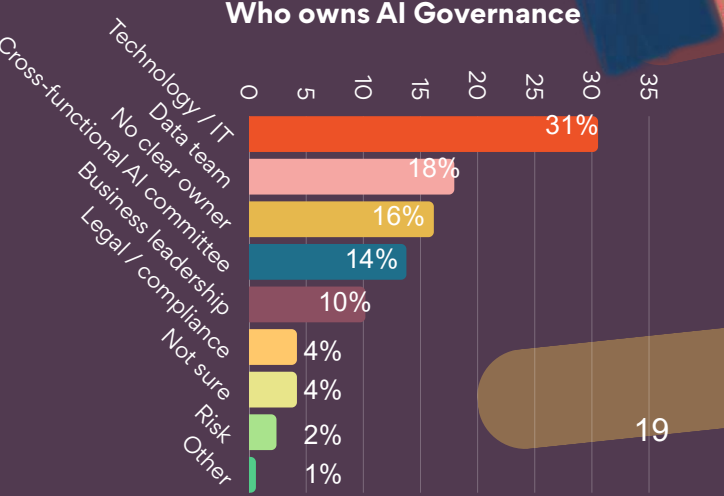
This is interesting because "somewhat confident" is not the same as strong assurance. Many respondents may have a degree of confidence in AI outputs, but that confidence is not yet complete.

Preparedness for emerging AI and data regulation was evenly split. 50.00% of respondents said they were very or somewhat prepared, while the other 50.00% said they were aware but not yet prepared, not prepared or not sure.

The key message from this section is that AI accountability is still under construction. The findings show widespread AI activity, but governance ownership, confidence in outputs and regulatory preparedness are not yet mature across the whole market.







AI Challenges

The survey also asked respondents to identify the biggest challenge in implementing AI in their organisation.

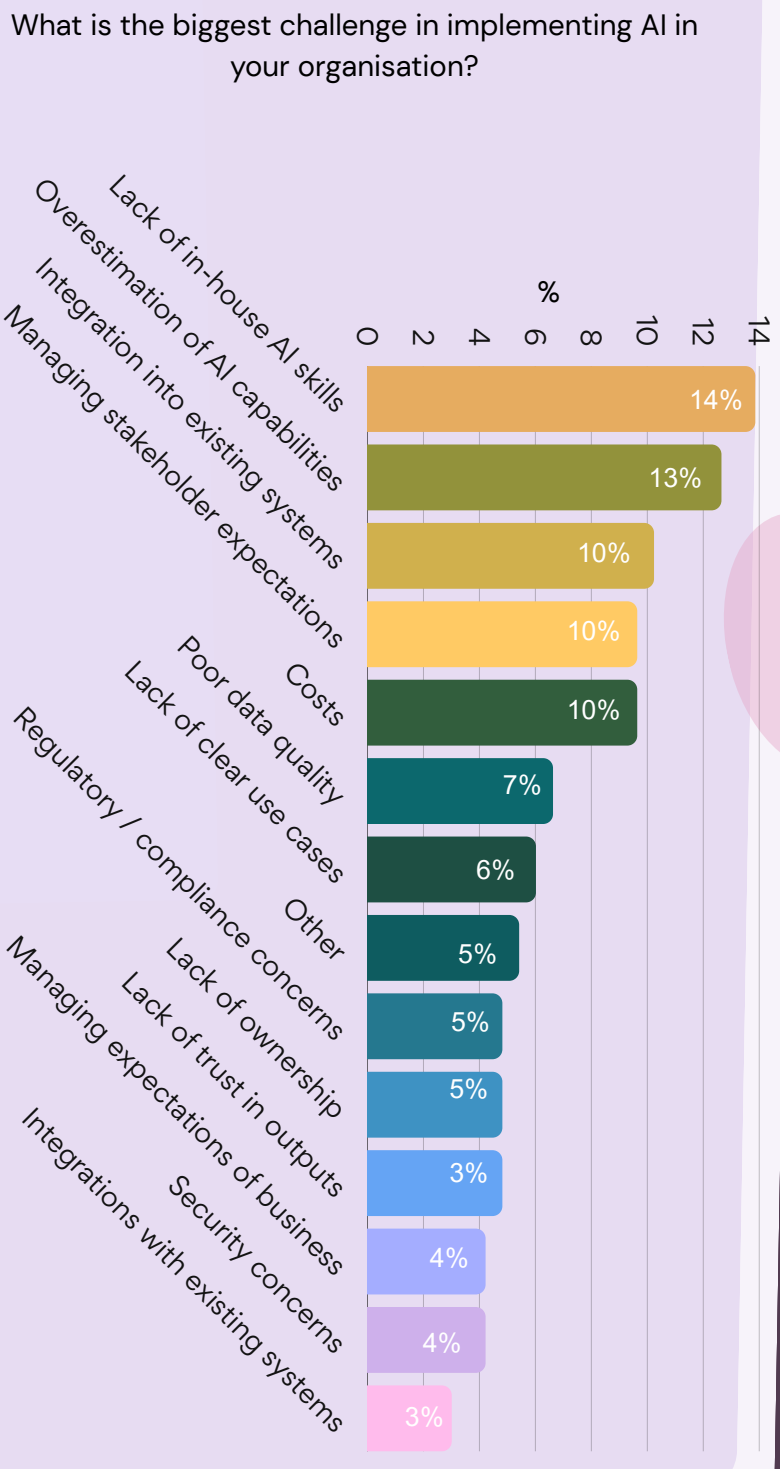
The most selected answer was lack of in-house AI skills, followed by overestimation of AI capabilities, integration into existing systems, managing stakeholder expectations and costs.

These findings are useful because they show that AI implementation challenges are not only technical. Skills and integration matter, but so do expectations, cost and trust.

Organisations may have access to AI tools, but implementation still depends on whether they have the capability, systems, use cases and stakeholder understanding needed to apply those tools effectively.

For data leaders, the findings suggest that AI implementation requires both technical and organisational management.

Teams need skills, infrastructure and data quality, but they also need to manage what the business expects AI to do, what it cannot do, and where human oversight remains necessary.



Risk Pulse

This year's survey included a short risk pulse looking at cyber-attack concern, data privacy and compliance concern, and ongoing skills gaps in talent acquisition.

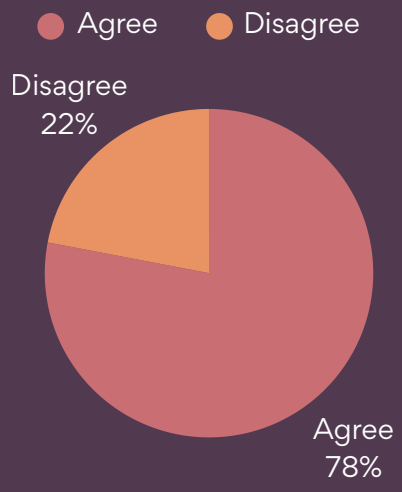
The findings show high levels of concern across all three areas. 69.59% of respondents agreed that they were concerned about cyber-attack attempts in the next two years. 70.18% agreed that they were concerned about data privacy and compliance as the regulatory landscape tightens. The highest level of concern was around ongoing skills gaps when it comes to new talent acquisition, at 78.95%.

These results show the breadth of pressure surrounding data and technology teams. Data teams are not only being asked to deliver reporting, insight, analytics, AI and automation. They are also operating in an environment where security, compliance, regulation and talent availability are significant concerns.

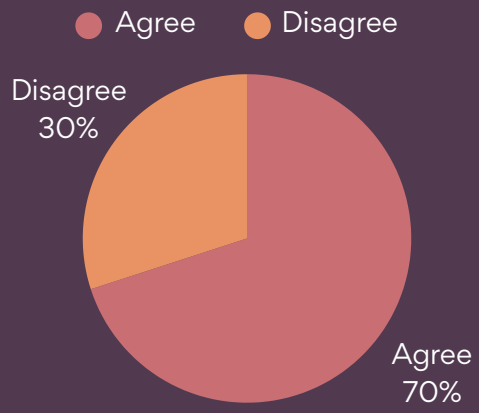
The cyber and compliance findings also connect to the AI governance findings. As organisations use more AI and automation, questions around privacy, security, access, explainability, accountability and regulatory readiness become more important.

The skills concern links directly to the hiring and workforce findings. If organisations are concerned about talent acquisition whilst also facing pressure around AI, governance, data quality and legacy systems, they may need to think more carefully about whether skills gaps can be solved through hiring alone.

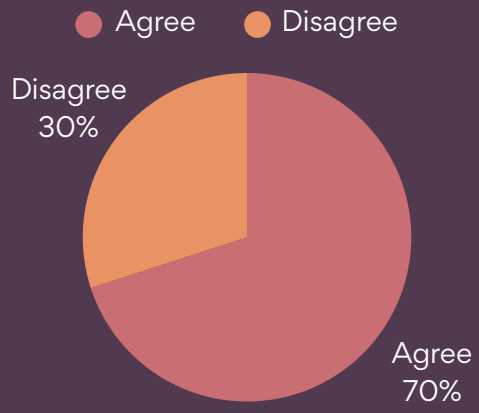
Ongoing skills gaps across data & AI



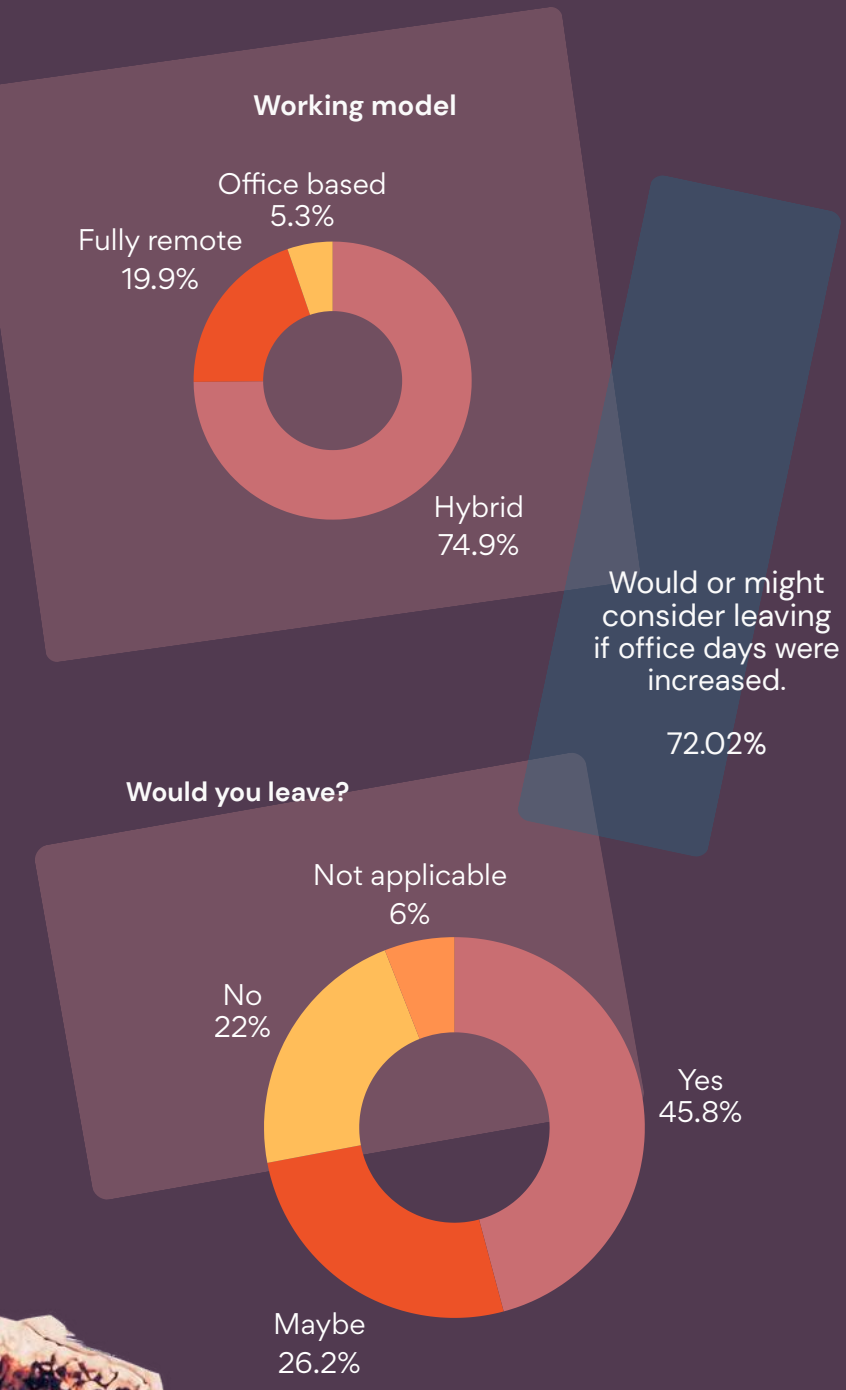
Data privacy and compliance



Cyber-attack attempts



Working Models: Hybrid Is Normalised



Hybrid working remains the dominant working model among respondents.

This year's findings show that 74.85% of respondents are working in a hybrid model, with 19.88% fully remote and 5.26% office-based. This confirms that hybrid working remains firmly embedded across the data and technology community represented in the survey.

However, the findings also show that working model decisions still carry retention risk. 45.83% of respondents said they would consider leaving if required to increase their office days, and a further 26.19% said maybe. Combined, 72.02% said they would or might consider leaving if office days increased.

This does not suggest that every employee would leave if office expectations changed, but it does show that increasing office days could affect retention risk for a meaningful proportion of respondents.

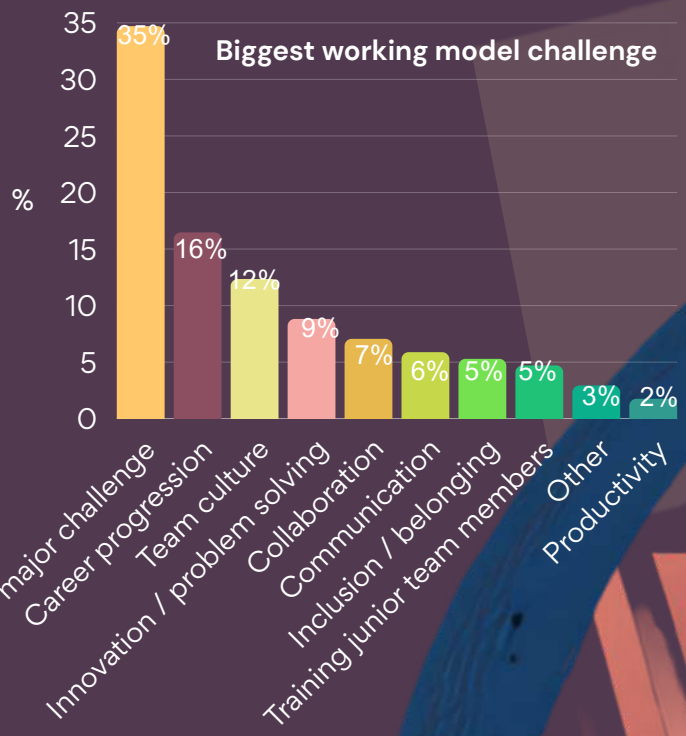
Working Model Challenges

If hybrid working is now normalised, the next question is whether it is working well.

The results show that 34.71% of respondents said there was no major challenge with their current working model. This is important because it avoids overstating the problem. For a significant group, current working arrangements appear to be working without a major issue. However, among the challenges selected, career progression was the strongest response at 16.47%, followed by team culture, innovation / problem solving, collaboration, communication, inclusion / belonging and training junior team members.

This suggests that employers need to think beyond office attendance. The issue is not only where people work, but how they progress, learn, build relationships and remain visible in hybrid or remote environments.

For employers, this is a useful finding. If hybrid is now the dominant model, the challenge is not simply deciding how many days people should be in the office. The bigger question is how to make hybrid work properly. That includes creating fair progression routes, building team culture, supporting junior development, designing effective collaboration and making sure remote or hybrid employees are not disadvantaged.



What people want

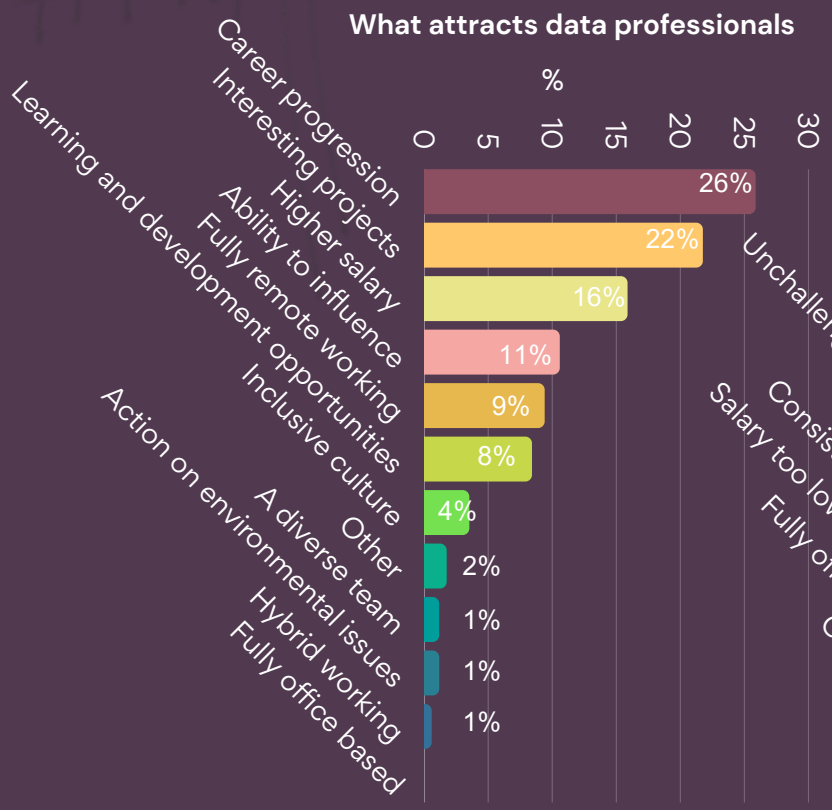
The people findings in this year's survey give employers a clear view of what attracts data professionals to a role and what may cause them to leave.

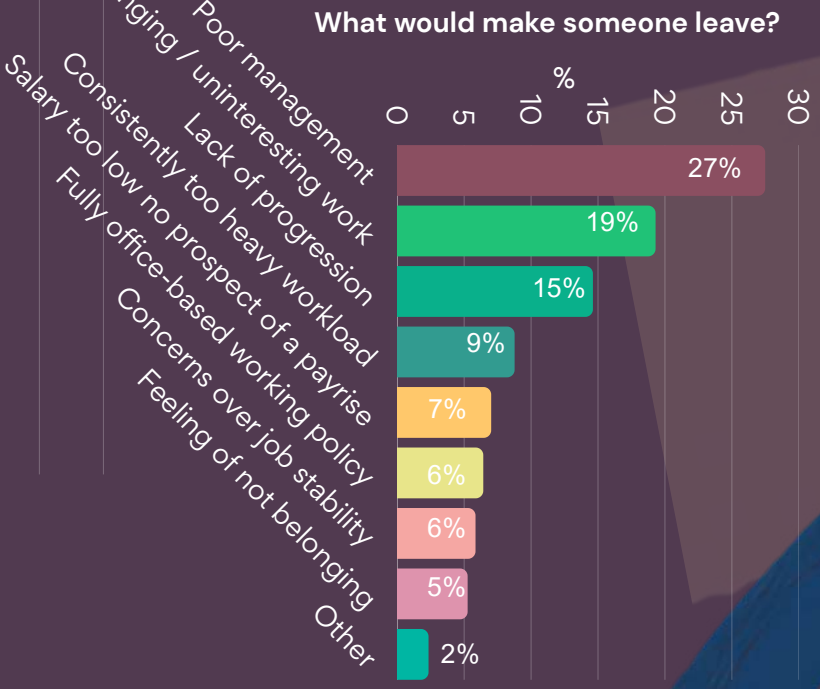
When respondents were asked what would most attract them to a new employer, the most selected answer was career progression / clear career pathing, followed by interesting projects and higher salary. Respondents also selected the ability to influence business strategy, fully remote working, learning and development, inclusive culture and other factors.

This shows that attraction is not driven by one factor alone. Salary remains important, but the findings show that progression and interesting work are stronger attraction drivers for this respondent group.
The reasons respondents would leave a role are just as important. Poor management was the most selected reason, followed by unchallenging or uninteresting work and lack of progression. Salary being too low was selected by a smaller proportion than poor management, uninteresting work and lack of progression.

This is a useful reminder for employers. Pay is important, but it is not the only retention lever. People are more likely to stay when they are well managed, challenged, developed and given a sense of progression. Poor management and stagnant work remain significant risks.

What attracts people





Leadership

Respondents were asked which quality is most important in a data leader. The strongest responses were adaptability, long-term vision, and listening and questioning. Empathy, commercial acumen, influencing, AI literacy, project management, technical skills and risk or governance also appeared in the results.

This gives a useful picture of what respondents believe data leadership now requires. Technical skills appeared in the results, but they were not among the leading answers. Instead, respondents placed greater emphasis on the ability to adapt, think long term, listen, question and understand the commercial context.

This reflects the wider findings in the report. Data leaders are operating in a complex environment. They are expected to support AI adoption, improve data quality, manage ownership, respond to cost pressure, understand regulation, support cyber and compliance concerns, build skills, manage hybrid teams and connect data activity to business value.

Listening and questioning remain important because data teams need to understand what the business is trying to achieve. Earlier sections of this report showed the importance of communication between the data function and business units, and the continued need to define what data is needed and why. Leaders who ask better questions and listen carefully are better placed to connect data work to business need.

Hiring Climate

Has the economy affected hiring plans: year on year comparison?

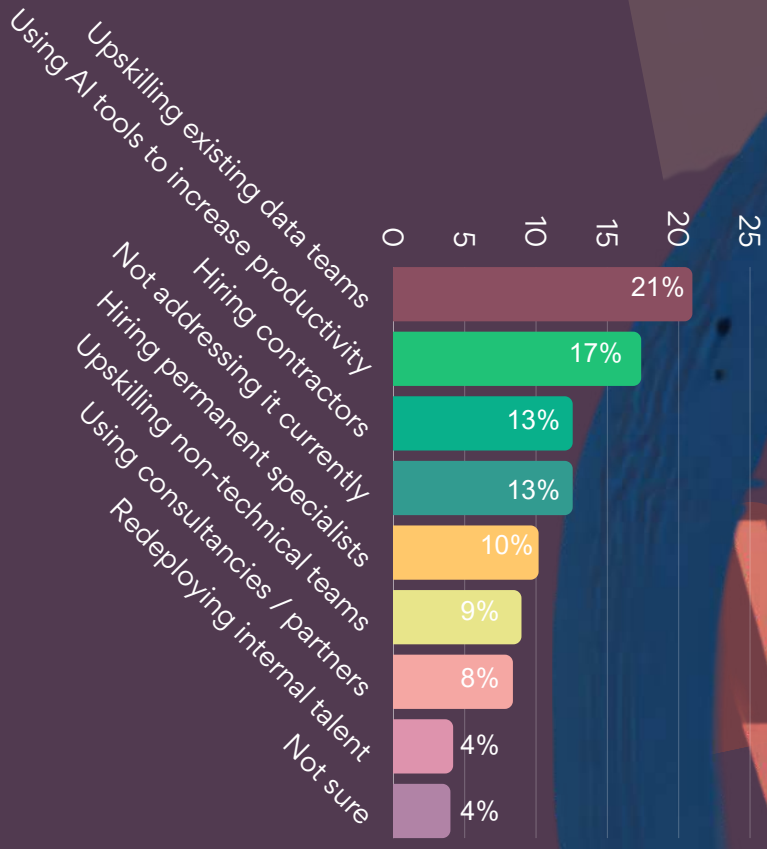
Hiring climate	2024	2025	2026/27
Hiring / recruiting as planned	**34%**	**39%**	**40.74%**
Hiring in a limited / prioritised way	**33%**	**34%**	**25.93%**
Hiring paused / on hold	**33%**	**27%**	**18.52%**

Hiring conditions appear to be gradually improving. The proportion recruiting as planned has risen from 34% in 2024 to 40.74% this year, while the proportion putting recruitment on hold has fallen from 33% to 18.52%. However, the picture remains cautious, with 25.93% limiting planned hires and 14.81% reducing headcount.

This creates a picture of a market that is still active, but cautious. Organisations are continuing to improve data usage and increase AI activity, but they are also dealing with budget restraints, resource limitations, legacy infrastructure, skills gaps and cost pressure. In that context, hiring decisions are likely to be more selective and more closely tied to business priorities.

Respondents were also asked how their organisation is addressing data and AI skills gaps. The most selected answer was upskilling existing data teams, followed by using AI tools to increase productivity, hiring contractors, not addressing it currently, hiring permanent specialists and upskilling non-technical teams.

How organisations are addressing data and AI skills gaps



This shows that organisations are not relying on one route to close skills gaps. Hiring remains part of the picture, but upskilling and productivity improvements are also prominent.

For hiring managers, the results suggest that recruitment processes need to be sharper. When hiring is selective, organisations need clarity on what skills are genuinely required, what can be developed, what level of experience is needed and how the role connects to business outcomes.

Recruitment Experience

Last year we introduced the idea that candidate experience is a brand moment, and this year is no different. The recruitment process remains a visible part of an organisation's employer brand.

This year's findings show that not receiving feedback / poor communication is still the most frustrating part of the recruitment process for respondents. Salary not being disclosed was the second most selected frustration, followed by unclear processes and job descriptions not matching the role.

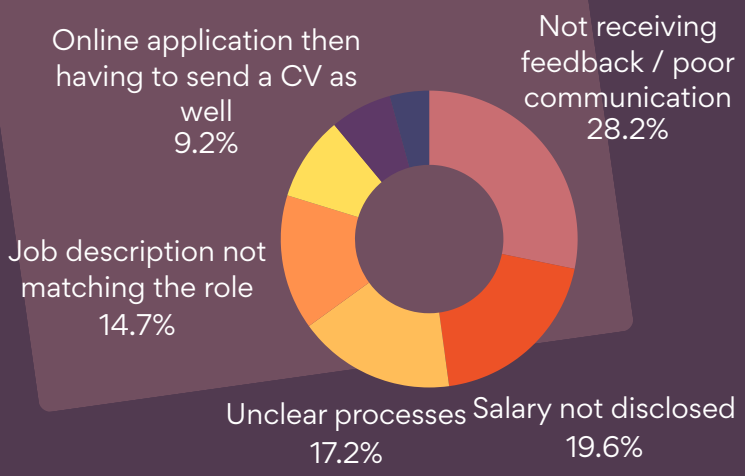
Interestingly many of these frustrations are avoidable. Poor communication, lack of feedback, unclear stages and salary opacity do not usually require major investment to improve. They require clearer process design, better expectation-setting and more consistent communication.

The fact that salary not being disclosed was one of the strongest frustrations is also useful for employers. In a market where candidates are making decisions carefully, salary transparency can help reduce wasted time, build trust and improve engagement.

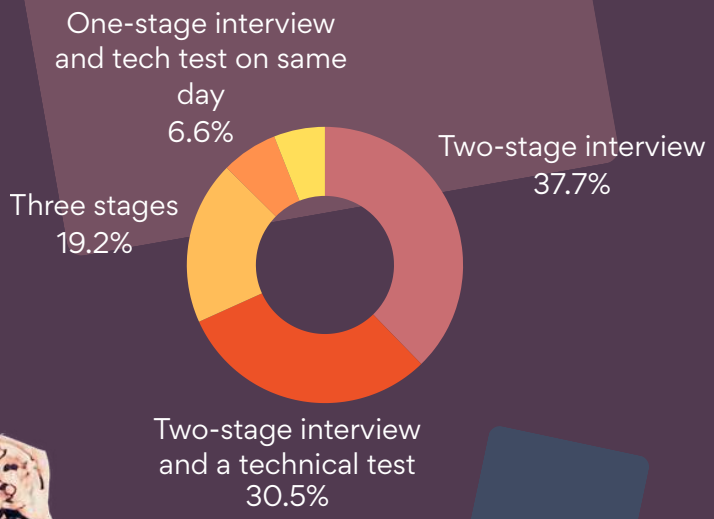
Respondents were also asked what the optimum recruitment process looks like. The strongest answers were a two-stage interview process and a two-stage interview process with a technical test. Combined, 68.26% selected a two-stage process with or without a technical test.

This suggests respondents are not necessarily opposed to assessment or structure, but they do appear to favour a process that is clear, proportionate and not unnecessarily long.

Worst part of the recruitment process



Optimal recruitment process



Market View

As employers introduce more technology and AI into recruitment processes, candidate experience becomes even more important. Tools may improve speed and efficiency, but they should not come at the expense of communication, feedback, clarity or trust. For candidates, the recruitment process is still a direct reflection of the employer brand.

Role Satisfaction

The final people measure in this year's survey looked at role satisfaction.

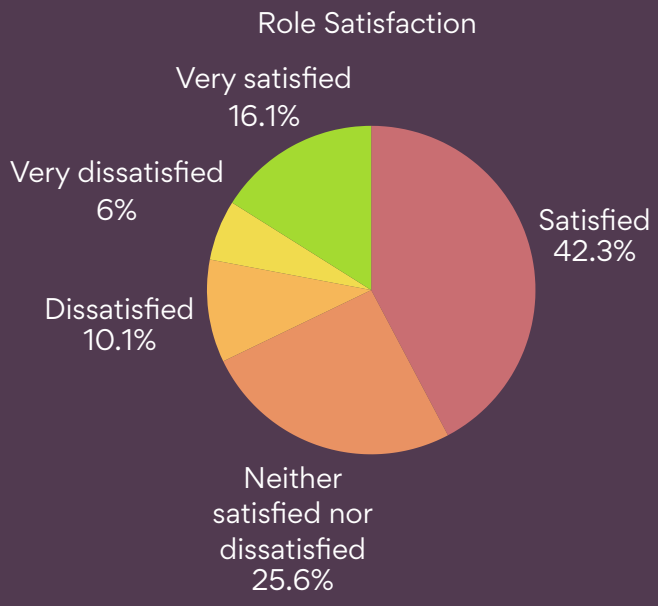
Most respondents said they were either satisfied or very satisfied in their current role. 42.26% said they were satisfied, and 16.07% said they were very satisfied. Combined, 58.33% were satisfied or very satisfied.

A smaller group said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, while 25.60% selected neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

This is a useful finding because it suggests that many respondents are broadly positive about their current roles. However, the neutral group should not be ignored. Neutral employees may not be actively dissatisfied, but they may also not be strongly engaged, committed or excited by their current position.

This links to the attraction and retention findings. Career progression, interesting projects and salary were the strongest attraction drivers, while poor management, uninteresting work and lack of progression were the strongest reasons for leaving.

For employers, the message is that satisfaction should not be mistaken for guaranteed retention. A broadly satisfied team may still contain people who are open to moving if progression stalls, management quality declines, office expectations change or the work becomes less interesting.



Conclusion

The 2026/27 State of Data findings show a market that is progressing, but still working through important questions around value, ownership, trust, skills and leadership. That is why we are calling it the year of proof.

Data usage has improved for many respondents, and organisations are using data across customer insight, product development, growth, compliance, profitability and operational performance. AI is now present in some form across most respondent organisations, and openness to AI remains high.

However, the findings also show that adoption is not the same as maturity. Many organisations are still working through how to measure AI value, govern outputs, assign ownership, improve foundations, manage cost and build the skills needed to scale responsibly.

The recurring themes in this year's report are clear. Data quality, ownership, communication between the data function and the wider business, legacy infrastructure, skills and leadership all are hugely linked to outcomes, but what has changed is the context. These foundations now affect the outcomes of business transformation projects such as AI readiness, automation or regulatory preparedness amongst others.

97.06% use AI in some form
10.06% report clear AI ROI

The people findings also show that data maturity depends on more than technology. Hybrid working remains dominant, but progression, culture and development still need attention. Career progression, interesting projects and salary continue to attract data professionals, whilst poor management remains the leading reason people would leave. Candidate experience also remains a visible part of employer brand, with poor communication, lack of feedback, unclear processes and salary opacity still causing frustration.

If 2025 was about moving from experimentation into operating model maturity, 2026/27 is about proof. Organisations are being asked to show not just that they are using data and AI, but that they can make them trusted, measurable, governed and useful.

The next phase of data maturity will not be defined by who adopts the most technology. It will be defined by who can connect data and AI to meaningful outcomes, strong foundations, clear accountability and better decisions.

KDR Talent Solutions has been part of the data recruitment market since 2003. Since then, the way organisations use data has changed massively, but the challenge has stayed the same: finding the right people to turn data into something trusted, useful and scalable.

We help businesses hire across the full data and AI landscape, from the engineers building modern platforms to the leaders shaping long-term strategy.

Salary Section

The salary tables in this section are designed as practical UK benchmarks for employers and data professionals. They are not based solely on this year's survey responses, because the survey collected broad salary bands rather than role-specific salary data.

To create these benchmarks, we have combined KDR's proprietary market insight with, live candidate and client conversations, and independent UK labour-market data.

Salary bands should be read as UK permanent base salary guidance. They may vary by location, sector, company size, leadership scope, bonus structure, regulatory environment, technical specialism and working model.

KDR's market view is that salaries remain steady across core data roles, with higher premiums attached to engineering, architecture, AI, governance and leadership roles. This aligns with independent job advert data showing higher median salaries for Data Scientist and Data Engineer roles than for broader Data Analyst roles.

Data Management

Role Family	Entry Level	Mid Level	Senior Level	Manager	Lead/Head
Data Governance/ Enablement	£30k-£35k	£35k-£45k	£45k-£70k	£60k-£90k	£90k-£150k
Data Quality	£30k-£35k	£35k-£40k	£45k-£65k	£50k-£90k	£90k-£150k
MDM	Up to £35k	£35k-£55k	£40k-£60k	£50k-£90k	£90k-£150k
Data Privacy	Up to £35k	£30k-£50k	£40k-£65k	£50k-£90k	£90k-£150k
AI Governance	£40k-£55k	£55k-£75k	£70k-£95k	£85k-£120k	£90k-£150k

Data Management remains one of the clearest examples of a discipline where the role has broadened. These roles are no longer only about control, compliance or process. They are increasingly connected to AI readiness, trust, literacy, enablement, ownership and regulatory preparedness.

And we can see this in this year's wider survey findings. Respondents identified data quality, unstructured data management and legacy systems as the top foundations limiting their ability to scale AI, analytics and automation. Clear definition of what data is needed for the business and why was also the most selected route to improving data quality.

That broader remit is also reflected in how data management teams are structured. Lead roles are often more delivery-focused, responsible for embedding data management practices across the organisation, while Heads and Directors typically carry broader accountability across a function or multiple data management disciplines. Structures vary by organisation, with some Heads of Data Management overseeing the full remit and others operating within a model where individual discipline Heads report into a Data Director or CDO.

Salary Section

Data Engineering

Role Family	Entry Level	Mid Level	Senior Level	Tech Lead/ Principal	Manager/Head
Data Engineer	£35k-£45k	£45k-£65k	£65k-£85k	£85k-£100k	£100k-£130k
Analytics Engineer	£30k-£45k	£45k-£60k	£60k-£75k	£75k-£90k	£90k-£110k
Data modeller		£50k-£65k	£65k-£90k	£80k-£130k	£100k-£150k
Data Platform	£40k-£55k	£55k-£75k	£70k-£95k	£90k-£125	£110k-£160k
MLOps/LLMOps	£50k-£65k	£65k-£85k	£80k-£110k	£100k-£135k	£120k-£170k

Engineering and architecture are central to the next phase of data maturity.

The salary premium is strongest where data engineering meets scale: cloud, architecture, platform, observability, AI operations and production-grade data pipelines.

Salary Section

Analytics and BI

Role Family	Entry Level	Mid Level	Senior Level	Manager/Lead	Head
Data Analyst	£30k-£40k	£40k-£55k	£50k-£70k	£65k-£90k	£90k-£130k
Insight Analyst	£30k-£40k	£40k-£55k	£50k-£70k	£65k-£90k	£90k-£130k
BI Analyst	£30k-£40k	£40k-£55k	£50k-£70k	£65k-£90k	£90k-£130k
BI Developer	£35k-£45k	£45k-£60k	£55k-£75k	£70k-£95k	£90k-£130k
Analytics Manager			£60k-£80k	£75k-£100k	£95k-£125k
Head of Analytics				£90k-£120k	£110k-£160

This year's wider State of Data findings show that respondents see data creating value through customer behaviour, new product development and growth opportunities. That places a continued premium on people who can turn data into usable insight, not just produce dashboards.

The strongest salary progression in this discipline tends to come when analysts move closer to commercial decision-making, product insight, customer strategy, experimentation, stakeholder leadership or management responsibility.

Analytics and BI salaries vary heavily by business impact. Analysts who can influence commercial, customer and product decisions typically sit above reporting-only roles.

Salary Section

Digital and Web Analytics

Role Family	Entry Level	Mid Level	Senior Level	Manager/Lead	Head
Digital Analyst	£30k-£40k	£40k-£55k	£50k-£70k	£65k-£85k	£90k-£120k
Web Analytics	£30k-£40k	£40k-£55k	£50k-£70k	£65k-£85k	£90k-£120k
Product Analytics	£30k-£40k	£40k-£55k	£50k-£70k	£65k-£85k	£90k-£120k
Experimentation/ CRO Analytics	£30k-£40k	£40k-£55k	£50k-£70k	£65k-£85k	£90k-£120k

The discipline remains relevant because data is increasingly being used to understand customer behaviour, improve product development and identify opportunities for growth.

Digital analytics salaries increase where the role moves beyond reporting into product, experimentation, customer journeys and commercial growth.

Salary Section

Data Science, Machine Learning & AI

Role Family	Entry Level	Mid Level	Senior Level	Tech Lead/ Principal	Head
Data Scientist	£35k–£45k	£50k–£65k	£70k–£90k	£85k–£110k	£120k–£150k
Machine Learning Engineer	£35k-£45k	£55k–£70k	£70k–£95k	£95k–£140k	£120k–£150k
AI Engineer / GenAI Engineer	£45k–£60k	£60k–£80k	£80k–£110k	£100k–£135k	£120k–£170k
MLOps / LLMOps Engineer	£50k–£65k	£65k–£85k	£80k–£110k	£100k–£135k	£130k–£180k
Deep Learning Engineer	£37k–£46k	£50k–£70k	£75k–£105k	£100k–£130k	£125k–£160k
Computer Vision Engineer	£30k–£40k	£45k–£58k	£70k–£90k	£90k–£120k	£120k–£160k
NLP Engineer	£35k–£42k	£52k–£65k	£75k–£100k	£95k–£125k	£120k–£150k
AI Research Scientist	£45k–£60k	£60k–£85k	£80k–£110k	£100k–£140k	£130k–£180k

The AI salary premium is strongest where candidates can move beyond experimentation into production, deployment, monitoring, governance and measurable business value.

Salary Section

Data Product & Business Facing Data Roles

Role Family	Entry Level	Mid Level	Senior Level	Tech Lead/ Principal	Head
Data Product Owner	£45k–£60k	£60k–£80k	£75k–£100k	£90k–£120k	£120k–£160k
Data Product Manager	£50k–£65k	£65k–£85k	£80k–£110k	£100k–£130k	£130k–£170k
Analytics Product Manager	£50k–£65k	£65k–£85k	£80k–£110k	£100k–£130k	£130k–£170k
Data / AI Translator		£60k–£80k	£75k–£105k	£95k–£125k	£120k–£160k

As organisations move towards data as a product, the market needs people who can connect data assets to users, business decisions and measurable value.

Salary Section

Data Leadership & Executive Roles

Role Family	Typical Range	Upper Market/ Specialist range
Analytics Manager / BI Manager	£65k–£100k	£100k–£125k
Data Engineering Manager	£80k–£120k	£120k–£160k
Data Science Manager	£85k–£125k	£125k–£150k
Head of Data	£90k–£110k	£130k–£180k+
Head of Data Engineering	£120k–£180k	£180k–£250k+
Head of Data Science / AI	£120k–£180k	£180k–£220k+
Data Director	£130k–£190k	£190k–£250k+
Chief Data Officer	£150k–£220k	£220k+
Chief AI Officer	£150k–£250k	£250k+

Data leadership salaries are shaped less by title alone and more by scope: budget, team size, influence, governance responsibility and connection to business strategy.

Salary Section

Salary benchmarks should always be adjusted for location, sector and role scope. London and South East salaries are often higher, particularly for engineering, AI, data science, architecture and senior leadership roles. Regulated environments such as finance, insurance, healthcare, life sciences, public sector, energy and utilities may pay premiums for governance, privacy, security, compliance and risk-aware data capability.

Specialist skills can also move candidates towards the top of a range.

Market Factor	Salary Effect
London / South East	Higher base salary, especially for senior and specialist roles
Finance, insurance and regulated sectors	Premium for governance, risk, privacy and compliance
AI / ML production experience	Premium where skills include deployment, monitoring and MLOps
Cloud-native engineering	Premium for AWS, Azure, GCP, Snowflake, Databricks and streaming
Leadership with budget ownership	Higher range than people-management-only leadership roles
Fully remote / national hiring	Can widen salary spread depending on benchmarking policy
Strong commercial translation	Premium where data professionals influence product, growth or revenue decisions

KDR market view:
We are seeing that after a period of strong upward pressure, the salary market has become more selective. Core data and analytics salaries remain steady, but the highest pressure is concentrated around roles that help organisations scale, govern and prove value from data and AI. Premiums are strongest where candidates combine technical depth with architecture, production experience, governance awareness or clear business impact.

Organisations are not only trying to adopt AI or improve reporting. They are trying to build the foundations, operating models, governance and skills needed to make data and AI trusted, measurable and useful. For employers, salary benchmarking should therefore be role-specific and outcome-specific. Paying for a job title alone is unlikely to be enough. The premium sits where candidates can combine technical capability with business impact, governance awareness, production experience and the ability to help data teams move from activity to measurable value.