THE STATE OF DATA

2025

THE STATE OF DATA 2025

NAVIGATING CHANGE, ONE YEAR ON

I'm pleased to share The State of Data 2025: Navigating Change: One Year On (U.S. Edition). This year's report comes amid shifting economic conditions, a continuing re-definition of work and a regulatory landscape for data and AI that for some industries more than others adds further complexity to how data teams must adapt to fast-changing technologies and evolving ways of working. Against that backdrop however, the data community again shows resilience and pragmatism: doubling down on foundations while selectively scaling AI. This year our report will inform you around issues such as how data is being used but not only that, where the industry's professionals believe the data should be being used, what are the challenges they are facing and what solutions have they found to help them succeed? We can see from the data that the salaries for the various sectors are strong and holding up against an increasingly challenging economic backdrop. At the time of writing, the latest U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) sector datasets looking at percentage changes within vacancies posted (over Q2) show continued resilience in professional, scientific and technical services postings relative to several other sectors.

We can also see that attitudes are shifting with regards to AI adoption, perhaps reality in 2025 off the back of experimentation in 2024 is kicking in. Interestingly there are shifts to being more open to AI as well as very small shifts away from the adoption of AI.
When we look at the geopolitical landscape that many businesses are operating in we can see that economic pressures resulting from the landscape, could be starting to affect how data teams perceive their ability to execute on data initiatives: with a higher percentage this year stating they would be unable to execute plans as well as continue hiring, a higher percentage worried about global events like cyber-attacks and a higher percentage worried about safety of data and infrastructure.

There's a lot of information to digest and I hope you enjoy reading the report. Each year I feel incredibly lucky to work within such innovative and resilient professionals within the data market and this report aptly demonstrates this.

Chris Bongard

MD, KDR Talent Solutions

HEADLINES AT A GLANCE

67 Two-thirds (67%) say data usage improved year-on-year.

73 73% report their organization has adopted AI. Up from 66% →73% (+7ppt).

28 Budgets and skills gaps still bite. Top challenge: Budget: 23% (2024) → 28% (2025), the pressure has intensified.

80 Hybrid 73% → 80% (+7ppt).

42 42% of respondents cite clear comms as the key to improved data usage

DATA USAGE

From the data we can say that sectors with established digital operating models (e.g., Info/Comms, Manufacturing) report more momentum; whilst complex governance and legacy stack profiles appear to temper improvement rate.

What's Moving the Dial in Data Quality and Usage?

The 2025 data tells a clear story: the organizations improving data usage aren't just "doing more", they're doing foundational things better. When asked what has improved data quality in their organization, respondents overwhelmingly favored proactive, structural interventions:

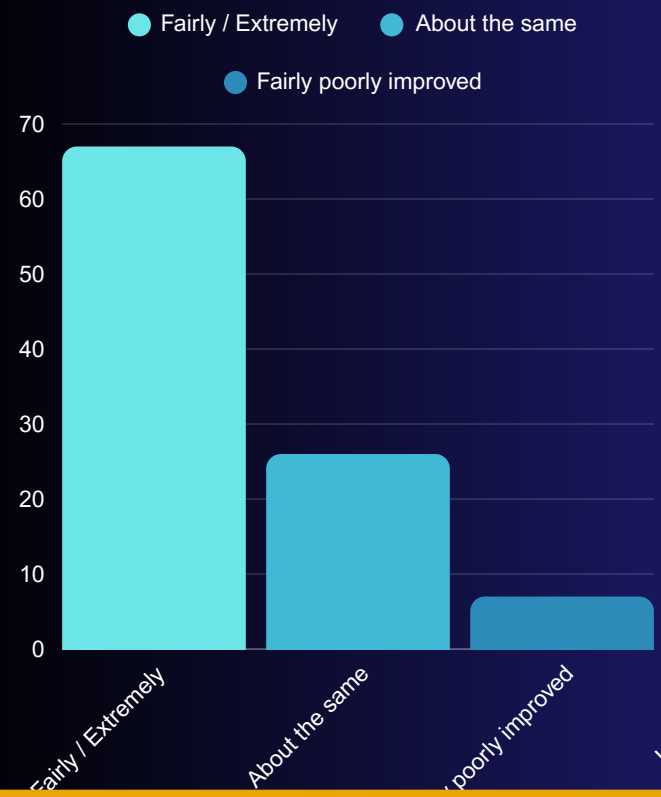
42 42% cited having a clear definition of what data is needed and why, enabling business units to understand their role in data collection and ownership.

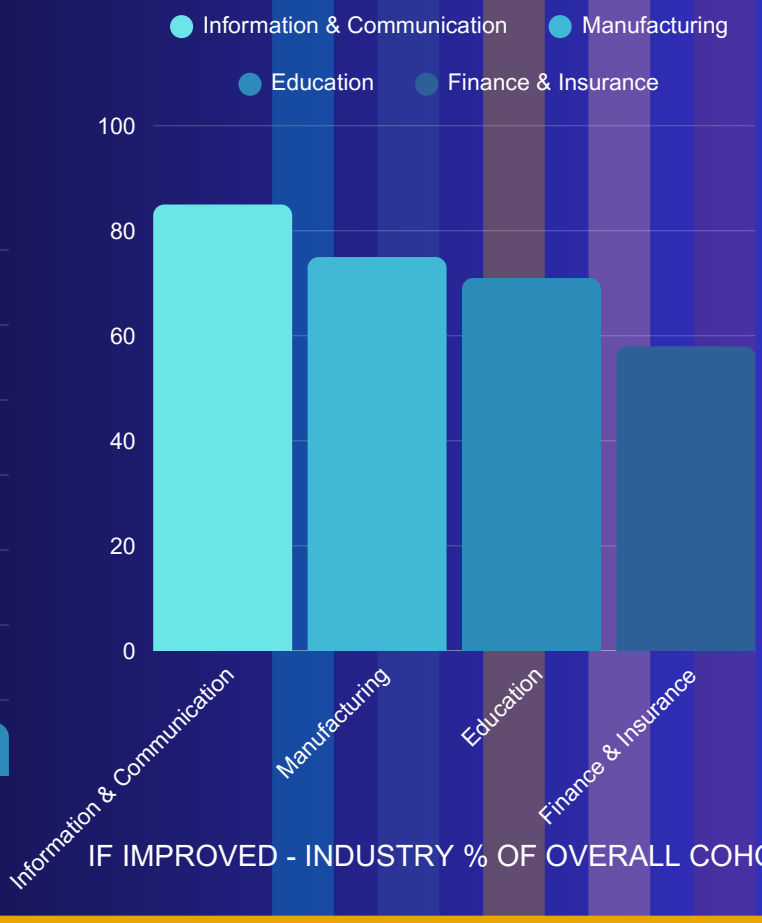
13 13% mentioned tight controls on input, moving quality efforts upstream rather than relying on post hoc cleansing.

12 12% pointed to the appointment of data stewards, signalling an investment in long-term governance and accountability.

This represents a noticeable shift from 2015, where responses leaned more toward reactive measures like cleaning legacy data, fixing errors, or improving dashboards. In 2025, the emphasis is on preventative enablement: setting clear expectations, embedding responsibility, and raising the baseline quality at source.

HAS YOUR DATA USAGE IMPROVED?





IF IMPROVED - INDUSTRY % OF OVERALL COHORT

THE OVERALL SHAPE OF DATA

The overall shape of the data is strikingly similar between 2024 and 2025. This suggests that the foundational drivers of improvement, skills, technology, governance, and communication, remain consistent year to year.

However, there are a few subtle signals of maturation:

- Skills rose slightly in 2025, showing that organizations continue to invest in people alongside tech.

- Financial investment was cited less in 2025, suggesting a shift away from throwing money at the problem toward more disciplined enablement.

- Input/governance improvements held steady and even gained a bit, validating the growing emphasis on upstream controls seen elsewhere in the 2025 report.

In short: organizations are not scaling insights by scaling tools, they are scaling them by embedding shared understanding, accountability and control where data originates.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU - DATA LEADERS

Consider decentralizing responsibility by assigning product owners or data stewards within functions.
Prioritize work that connects data to real business action.
Track visibility, not just delivery.
Move beyond report delivery to measuring business change from data use.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU - NON-TECHNICAL STAKEHOLDERS

Get involved early because the biggest improvements came from aligned cross-functional input at the start, not feedback at the end.
Ask the “so what?” questions like what decision will this data enable? What behavior should change as a result?
Empower your teams to read and question the data, not just consume outputs.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU - EARLY CAREER PROFESSIONALS

Stay curious: Ask why a dashboard or pipeline exists, what outcome is it meant to drive?
Get close to the business because data makes the most sense when you understand the commercial context.
Be a translator, you’re often closest to the tools and the work so you can help to bridge gaps between data and decision-makers.

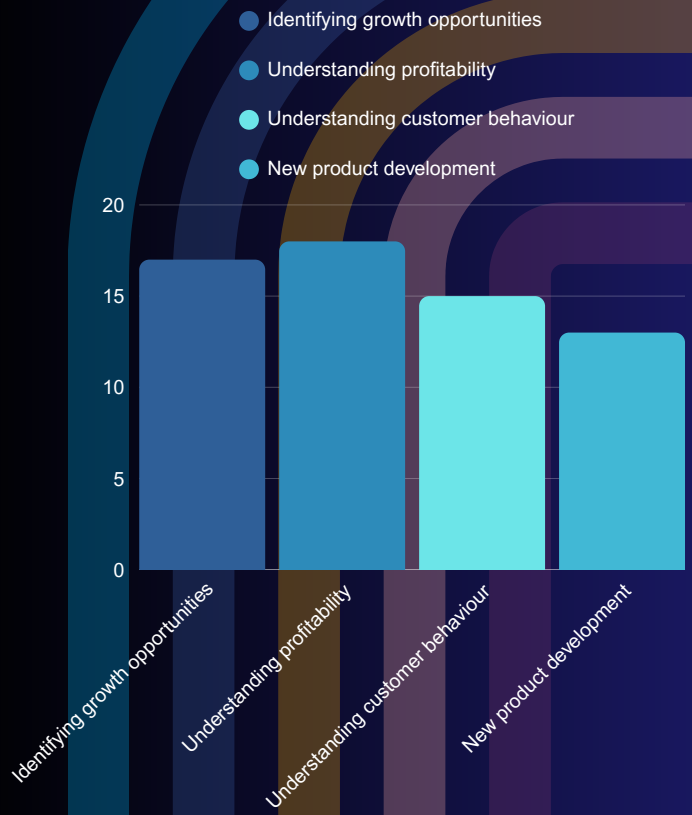
HOW IS DATA BEING USED TODAY V'S WHERE IT ADDS MOST VALUE

If 2024 was about laying tracks, 2025 is about execution. Two thirds (67%) of respondents say data usage improved over the year, but the story underneath isn't "more dashboards", it's fewer, better-owned uses that ship decisions into the front line.

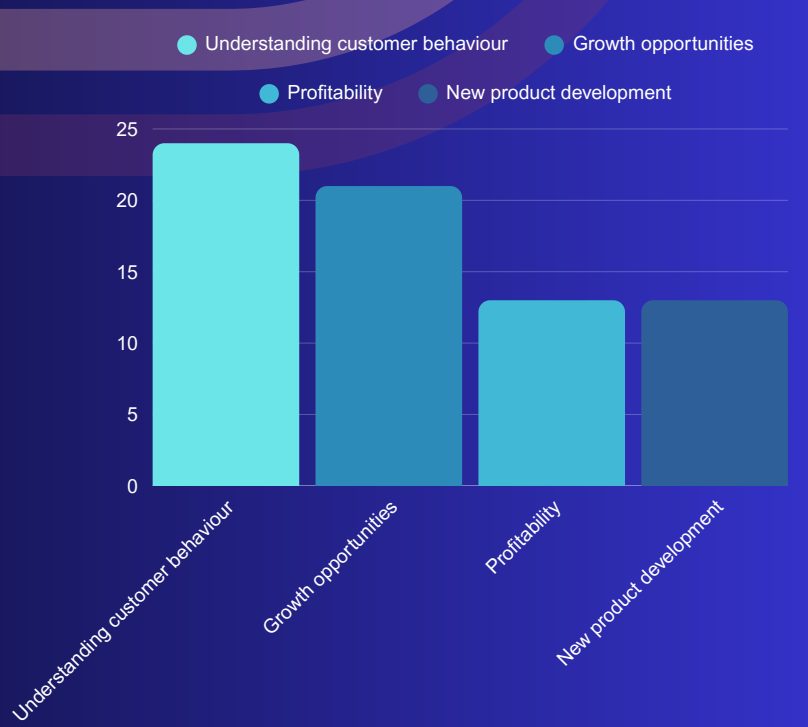
On the ground, most teams still reach first for growth and profitability lenses. The single top answers for current use skew toward identifying growth opportunities and understanding profitability (17% & 18%), followed by understanding customer behavior (15%) and new product development (13%). Cost saving remains a staple (10%), while compliance and price setting are present but niche (6% each). In other words, the center of gravity is commercial performance rather than reporting for its own sake.

Where respondents believe data should create the most value aligns, but isn't identical: understanding customer behavior leads (24%), with finding growth opportunities close behind (21%), then profitability and new product development (both 13%). This reveals a familiar tension: organizations are using data to measure the business, but they believe the biggest gains lie in anticipating and shaping customer demand.

HOW IS DATA USED IN YOUR BUSINESS?



HOW DO YOU THINK THE DATA *SHOULD* BE USED?



WHY THE GAP? THREE PATTERNS EMERGE

1) Data quality and integration debt that slows activation into CRM/marketing/sales ops

(2) Fragmented ownership (marketing, product and finance optimize locally rather than to a shared growth objective),

(3) Skills & expectation management around what analytics/AI can credibly deliver.

(It's no coincidence that the top AI blockers are data quality, inhouse skills and integration, the same bottlenecks that hold back value creating use cases.

CHALLENGES (NEXT 12 MONTHS)

As organizations look ahead to 2026, they face a complex mix of operational constraints and transformative opportunities. The coming 12 months are expected to test not only the technical resilience of data teams but also their strategic alignment with business goals. While investment in data and AI continues to be a driving force, operational challenges threaten to limit the pace and scale of progress.

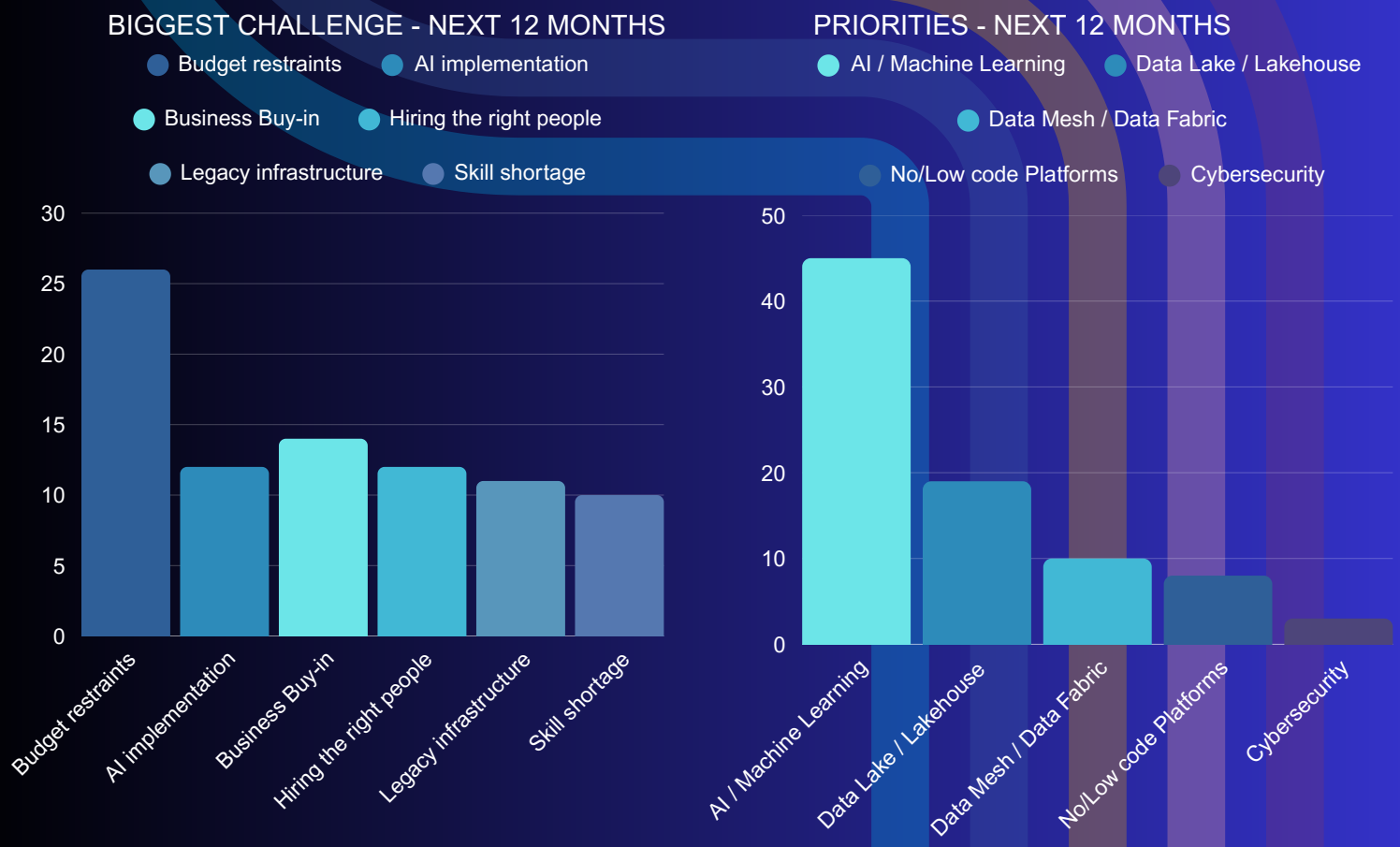
Budget constraints have emerged as the single biggest challenge for data and technology teams, cited by 26% of respondents. This reflects a broader economic climate where business optimism is tempered by caution around cost control. Despite the pressing need to modernize data systems, many organizations are being forced to make difficult trade-offs when it comes to talent, tooling and infrastructure.

Securing wider business buy-in followed at 14%, and the implementation of AI technologies follows closely behind, noted by 12% as their most pressing challenge. This is not surprising, given the speed at which generative AI and machine learning tools have entered the mainstream. While excitement is high, many teams are still grappling with foundational questions around governance, integration and ROI measurement.

CHALLENGES (NEXT 12 MONTHS)

Tied in 3rd place was hiring the right talent, at 12%. As AI projects grow more ambitious, cross functional support and skilled execution become critical. Yet many organizations struggle to bring leadership on the journey or to attract the high calibre candidates required to deliver on data strategy. Despite strategic hiring continuing in key areas like AI and governance, the market remains talent-constrained, with a mismatch between demand for new AI skillsets and the actual availability of experienced professionals, creating a highly selective hiring landscape where roles attract volume but not always relevance. Skills shortages in general remain a persistent obstacle, identified by 10% of respondents. Although this figure has softened slightly compared to previous years, as mentioned above, the growing complexity of modern data stacks means that gaps in expertise, particularly around AI, governance, and architecture, continue to limit scalability.

Legacy infrastructure was cited by 11%, highlighting the ongoing drag that outdated systems place on transformation efforts. These older architectures often lack the flexibility and speed needed for real-time analytics, AI enablement and scalable data operations.



PRIORITIES (NEXT 12 MONTHS)

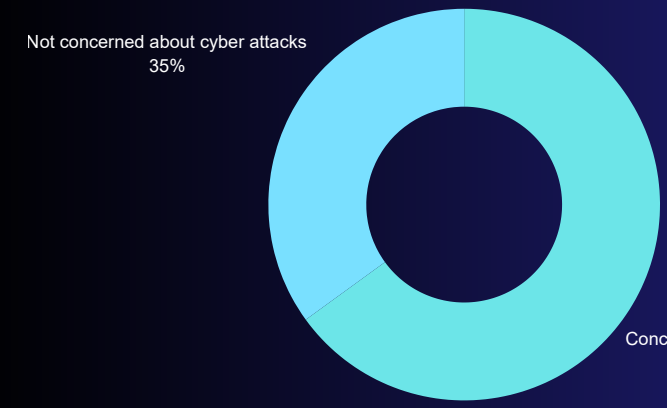
Despite the challenges, organizations are setting ambitious priorities for the year ahead. Unsurprisingly, AI and machine learning dominate the agenda, with 45% listing it as their top technology focus. This signals a clear shift from experimental use cases to operational deployment, with a growing emphasis on decision support and automation.

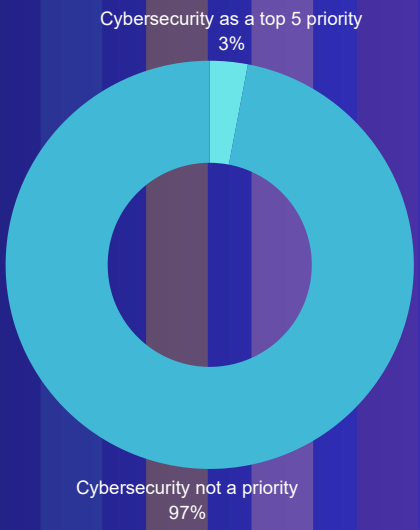
The second highest priority, chosen by 19%, is investment in Data Lakes and Lakehouses. These platforms are increasingly seen as foundational to scalable AI and analytics environments, particularly as organizations seek unified architectures that handle both structured and unstructured data.

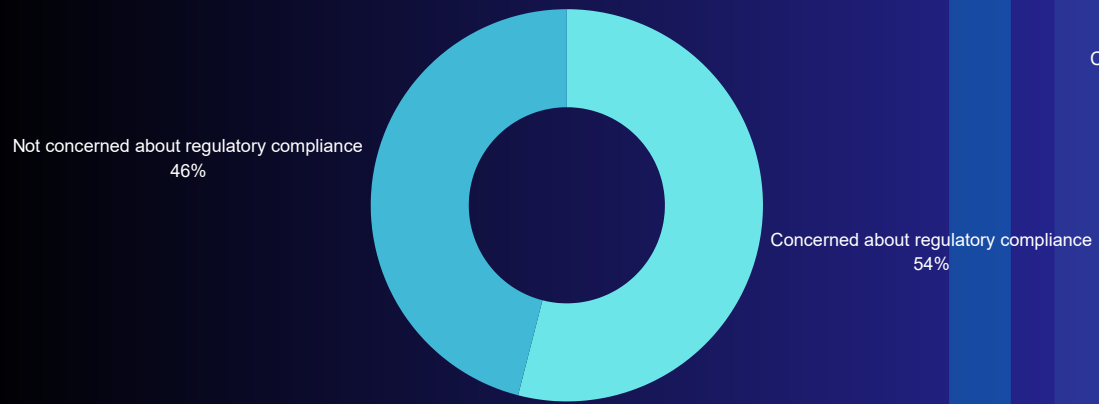
Data Mesh and Data Fabric follow at 10%, reflecting a trend toward decentralized data ownership and real-time data sharing across teams. These approaches are being explored by organizations with mature data governance and distributed data teams looking to improve agility and access.

No/Low Code platforms are beginning to gain traction too, selected by 8% of respondents. Their rise signals a growing desire to empower non-technical teams and reduce development bottlenecks, particularly for internal analytics and automation use cases.

Cybersecurity was named as a top priority by only 3% of respondents, despite 65% expressing concern about the likelihood of cyberattacks within the next two years. Data leaders are clearly concerned about cyber security, yet a low number of respondents listed as a top priority suggesting the execution of cyber security is handled by other teams and further exploration into this relationship would be interesting to understand the impact of data usage, accessibility and democratization across organizations.







THE FUTURE SECTION

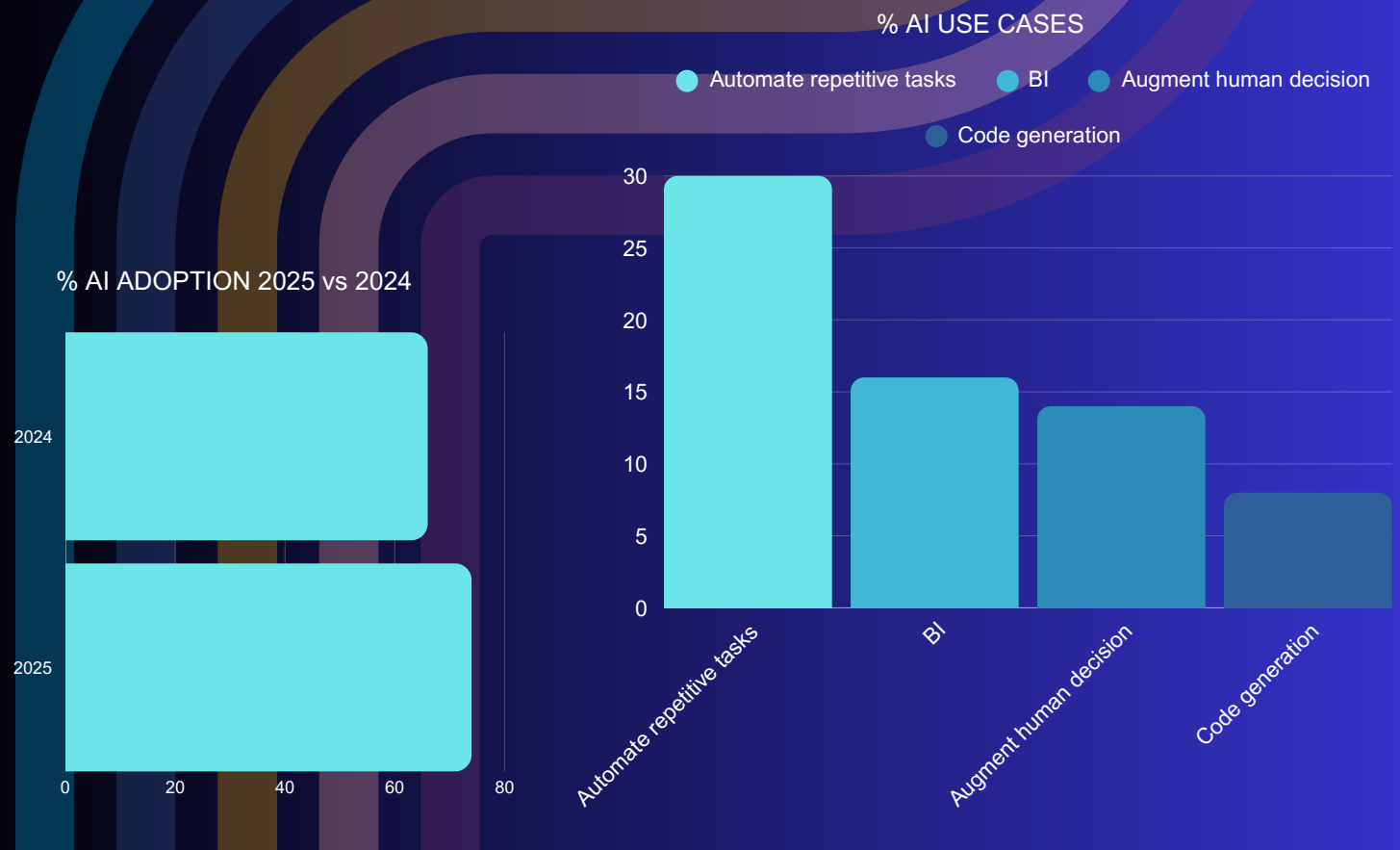
AI

As of 2025, AI has firmly transitioned from a frontier technology into an operational tool across many industries. Adoption is up, confidence is growing and AI is increasingly being embedded into workflows beyond isolated experiments. Yet, as organizations move from concept to execution, they are encountering familiar roadblocks, many of which echo those seen in 2024, though with shifting emphasis.

Adoption and Trajectory
This year, 74% of organizations reported adopting AI, a small but meaningful increase from 66% in 2024. This signals continued momentum, with a larger proportion of businesses moving beyond experimentation into real deployment.

AI use cases in 2025 are following a trajectory similar to 2024, but with clearer strategic intent: Automating repetitive tasks (30%) remains the dominant application; Business analytics and intelligence (16%) continues to feature; Augmenting human decision-making (14%) is rising; Code generation (8%) and Content creation (7%) remain niche but steady.

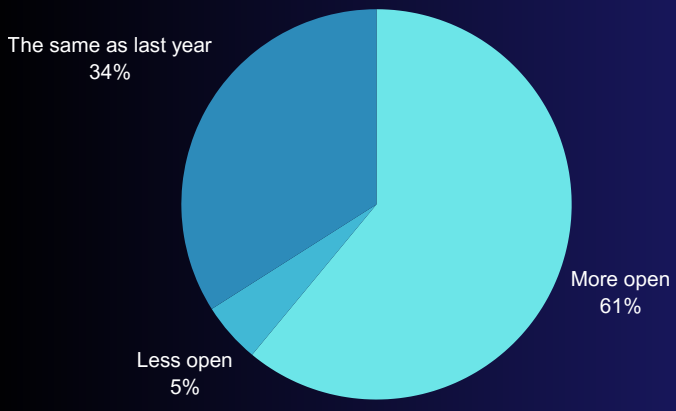
Business analytics and intelligence came in at 16%, showing consistency with 2024 as organizations continue to apply AI to enhance data interpretation and insight generation.
Augmenting human decision-making rose to 14%, reinforcing a growing trust in AI's role as a copilot rather than a replacement. Code generation (8%) and content creation (7%) remain lower priority, but steady compared to 2024 levels, suggesting niche but growing adoption.



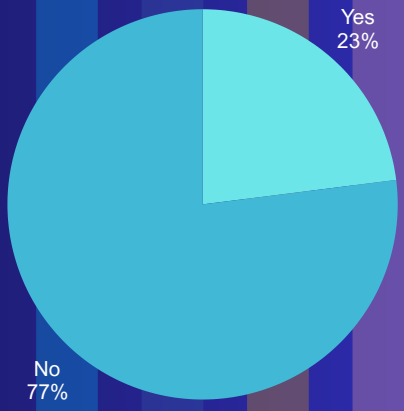
SENTIMENT PULSE CHECK

77% of respondents say they're not worried about AI replacing human business functions (near 2024 levels). 61% say their organization is more open to AI adoption than the previous year; 5% say less open.

IS YOUR BUSINESS MORE OPEN TO AI?



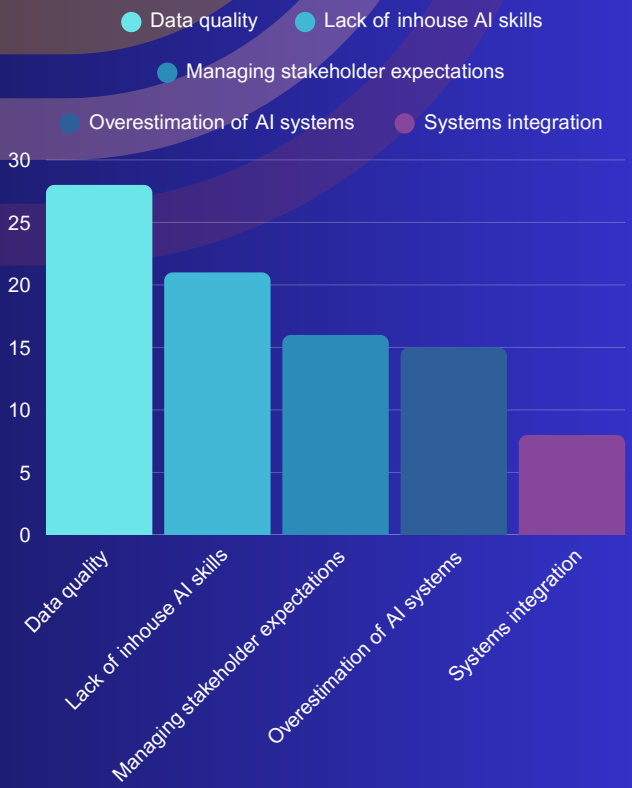
% WORRIED ABOUT AI TAKING JOBS



IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

The hurdles to AI adoption in 2025 closely mirror those seen in 2024, but their relative weight is shifting: Data quality (28%) remains top; Lack of in-house AI skills (21%) persists; Managing stakeholder expectations (16%) and Overestimation of AI systems (15%) remain critical; Systems integration (8%) shows gradual progress.

Managing stakeholder expectations and overestimation of AI systems are still critical, both cited by 16% & 15% of respondents, virtually unchanged from 2024. Then systems integration stands at 8%, slightly down from last year, perhaps reflecting gradual progress in cloud adoption and platform interoperability.



From Hurdles to Foundations

While the types of challenges organizations face in implementing AI remain broadly consistent with those reported in 2024 (issues like poor data quality, skill shortages, stakeholder over-expectation and integration barriers), there is a noticeable shift in how these challenges are being approached in 2025.

What's changed is not the nature of the obstacles, but the mindset around managing them. The data points from this year's survey suggest that businesses are moving beyond reactive problem-solving and are instead beginning to embed long-term solutions. There is an increased emphasis on establishing infrastructure and practices that support sustainable AI deployment. Terms such as MLOps, data contracts, product ownership and model risk governance are now part of the common vocabulary among respondents. These weren't widely cited in the 2024 report, where converzations remained more tactical, focused on firefighting talent shortages or gaining executive buy-in.

This evolution reflects a growing maturity in the data and AI space. Organizations are no longer simply experimenting with AI in silos; they are building the operational scaffolding required to scale these systems responsibly. There's a greater acceptance that successful AI implementation demands not just the right tools, but organizational alignment, cross-functional ownership and robust, well-governed data ecosystems. On a side note, there were also quite a few reports of Data now coming under Technology as a reporting structure, given the businesses appetite for AI adoption.

For readers planning their 2026 strategies, this suggests a new benchmark for readiness: it's not enough to be experimenting with AI, you need to be institutionalising the supporting structures that will let it thrive at scale.

This maturing mindset should give confidence to those still tackling foundational challenges. The roadblocks are well understood, and the 2025 data shows a clearer path forward, one rooted in pragmatism, not hype.

A SHIFT IN MINDSET: WHAT 2025 TELLS US

2024: AI challenges were seen as blockers e.g. lack of skills, unclear governance, siloed implementation.

2025: The same challenges exist, but the response has evolved. Organizations are no longer surprised by hurdles like data quality or stakeholder over-expectation. There's a growing focus on building infrastructure and changing operating models, not just adopting tools.

Concepts like MLOps, data contracts and AI product ownership are now widely understood and implemented.

This shift marks the early signs of AI industrialization where AI is moving from pilots to processes.

What it means for 2026 planning:
Success will hinge less on whether you have AI tools, and more on whether you've built the foundations to support them at scale.

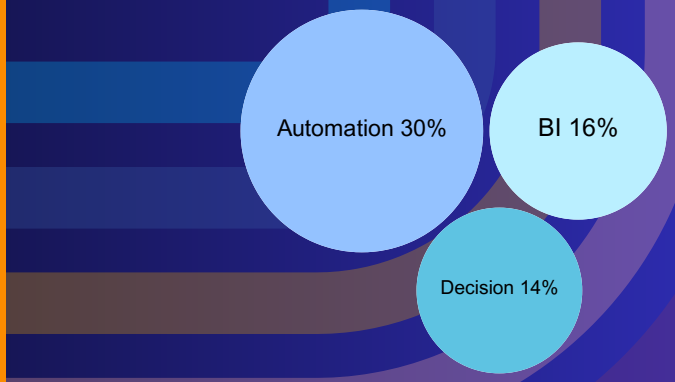
The real shift from 2024 to 2025 isn't in the problems, but in how businesses are preparing to solve them.

In both years, one insight holds true: AI adoption correlates strongly with data usage maturity. Organizations that already use data to drive product decisions, understand unit economics and forecast growth are more likely to scale AI successfully.

What Good Looks Like in 2025
The 2025 data paints a clearer picture of what defines AI maturity. The organizations seeing the greatest return on AI investment are no longer those with the most experimental use cases, but those with repeatable, scalable and governed frameworks for delivery.

These types of businesses are following a two-tiered approach:

Start with automation.
30% of organizations say their primary use of AI is automating repetitive tasks. This remains the most common and accessible entry point, as it delivers short-term wins, improves productivity, and frees up technical talent for higher-value work.



Use cases like business intelligence (16%), decision augmentation (14%), and governance/monitoring are gaining traction. These are more complex but offer scalable value, particularly when AI is embedded in enterprise-wide processes.

But what distinguishes high-performing organizations in 2025 is not just what they build, it's how they organise to support it.
AI is Driving Operating Model Change
Survey responses and qualitative interviews reveal that forward-thinking companies are no longer treating AI as a "bolt-on" innovation project. Instead, they are undergoing organizational transformation to support the industrialization of AI. This includes:

Product ownership of AI use cases
More organizations are assigning end-to-end accountability for AI initiatives to specific product owners, ensuring tighter alignment with business goals and more accountable delivery.

Data contracts
As AI use cases span more teams, firms are formalising access rights, data contracts, agreements that set expectations around data quality and refresh rates between teams. This is especially useful in data mesh or decentralised environments.

MLOps pipelines
These are now being treated as essential infrastructure. They enable repeatable, governed deployment of models and reduce the friction between data science and production environments.

Model risk management (MRM)
Especially in regulated industries like finance and insurance, model governance is moving from theory to practice. Firms are building structured oversight for how models are trained, validated, monitored and retired, aligning AI with enterprise risk frameworks.

AI MATURITY IN 2025

There are signs of maturity from the 2025 data and several indicators from this year's report reinforce the maturity narrative:

77

77% of respondents say they are not worried about AI replacing human roles, showing increased confidence in managing its role in the workplace.

61

61% report their organization is more open to AI adoption than last year, reflecting growing cultural alignment and internal buy-in.

In contrast to earlier years, when blockers were often abstract or cultural, such as fear of job loss, uncertainty around AI's business role, or a lack of executive sponsorship, the 2025 picture is grounded in real operational challenges that organizations are increasingly equipped to solve. The most cited implementation blockers are no longer abstract fears, they're practical, solvable issues: data quality (28%), lack of in-house AI skills (21%), and stakeholder expectation management (16%).

These signals suggest that the early hype cycle is over, and AI is entering a phase where success depends more on operational excellence than innovation theatre.

Let’s take a deeper look at what these signals are:

1. Higher AI Adoption (74%)
In 2025, three-quarters of organizations report having adopted AI.

Why it matters:
Mass adoption suggests AI is no longer just “innovative”, it’s now part of the operating fabric. The phase of experimentation is narrowing, and execution matters more than novelty.

2. Most common use case: Automating repetitive tasks (30%)
This continues to be the top use case, as in previous years.
Other growing use cases, BI (16%), decision augmentation (14%), are support functions, not flashy breakthroughs.

Why it matters:
These are operational, not speculative, applications. They’re about efficiency, consistency and scaling capabilities, not launching ideas without substance. That shows AI is becoming business critical, not just a headline generator.

3. Practical implementation challenges now dominate
Data quality (28%), lack of in-house skills (21%) and managing expectations (16%) top the list.

Why it matters:
These are solvable problems that require discipline, process and investment, hallmarks of a post-hype environment. Solving them is hard, but it’s not speculative. It’s now moved into the realms of engineering.

4. Rise of operating model enablers
Organizations now cite product ownership, data contracts, MLOps, and model risk management. These are not tools, they’re frameworks that institutionalise repeatable AI success.

Why it matters:
You don’t invest in MLOps and governance unless you’ve moved past hype. These are foundations for scale, not experiments. Their adoption shows a move from “we should try AI” to “how do we do this reliably, securely and consistently?”

5. Sentiment stability
77% of respondents say they’re not worried about AI replacing human functions, roughly the same as in 2024. 61% say their organization is more open to AI than last year.

Why it matters:
Fear and hype often go hand in hand. A steady sentiment suggests that expectations have settled and people now see AI as part of normal operations, not a radical disruptor to fear.

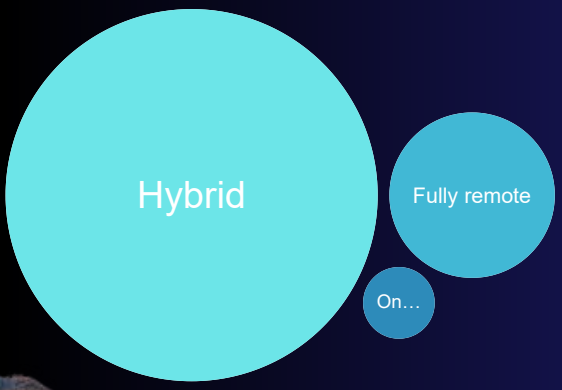
THE PEOPLE SECTION - WORKING MODELS

In 2025, flexible working remains the dominant model across the U.S. data and technology workforce. While the “return to office” (RTO) debate continues to polarize opinion across industries, the data community appears to have settled into a relatively stable hybrid equilibrium, with clear implications for both talent retention and attraction.

Working Models

81% of respondents are currently working in a hybrid model.

16% are fully remote, while just 3% are fully office-based, a clear indication that pre-pandemic norms have not returned at scale.



The most common in-office pattern is 2 days per week (reported by 42%), followed by 1 day (33%) and 3 days (20%). Anecdotally, the data collected somewhat contradicts what we see during client briefings where a move to more days in the office seems to be trending. This mismatch may be due to respondent levels of seniority or length of tenure, where more established team members are able to flex their working models.

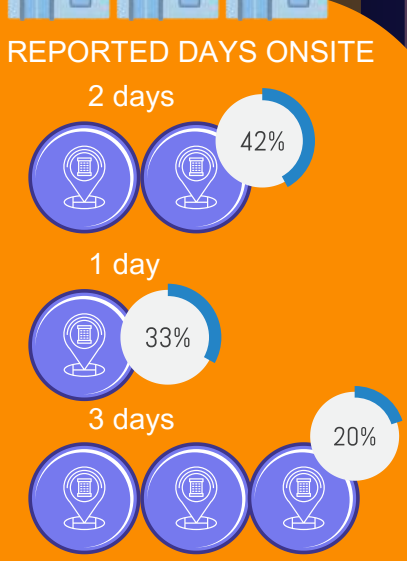
Regardless, these results suggest that flexibility has become a baseline expectation for professionals working in data-centric roles. The distribution also reflects how deeply embedded hybrid models have become in team operations, culture and workflow architecture.

Attrition Risk: The Cost of Mandating Presence

Crucially, the survey reveals that 63% of respondents would consider leaving their current role if required to increase their days in the office.

This finding underscores a key tension for employers navigating post-pandemic workforce policies. While some companies are attempting to tighten physical presence expectations, doing so without nuance appears to come at a clear retention cost. For many professionals, particularly in data, engineering and analytics roles, autonomy over location has become a non-negotiable aspect of the employee value proposition.

It’s worth noting that this flight risk is not distributed evenly. Older professionals, women, and primary caregivers are more likely to value flexibility, and thus more likely to respond negatively to rigid RTO mandates. As such, blanket policies not only risk attrition but may also disproportionately impact inclusion. However debates around how younger professionals learn and progress if they are not exposed to the casual upskilling that happens from watching more experienced colleagues continue to rumble on.



kdr TALENT SOLUTIONS

Strategic Insight: Rethinking RTO through role design

Broad-brush return-to-office mandates could increase flight risk. In contrast, organizations that adopt clear communication around purpose (e.g., collaboration needs, client-facing responsibilities, training requirements) are likely to see stronger results in both engagement and retention.

Rather than issuing mandates, forward-thinking companies define office time based on team function and task type, and support hybrid work with intentional design (team days, collaboration zones and asynchronous workflows). Insights align with Gallup workplace surveys, Stanford WFH Research (Bloom et al.) and SHRM commentary.

In a market where strategic hiring continues, but where top talent remains in short supply, organizations that offer hybrid-first working models and role-based flexibility are better positioned to retain high performers and compete for the most in-demand candidates.

HIRING CLIMATE IN 2025

The data hiring market in 2025 is best described as cautiously active. While the era of “growth at all costs” is behind us, most organizations aren’t standing still either.

39% of respondents say they are hiring as planned.

34% are still hiring, but in a more limited or prioritised way.

27% have paused hiring altogether.

This creates a landscape that is selective, opportunity-driven and performance-focused. Leaders are looking to hire into roles that create measurable value, rather than filling out headcount against speculative growth forecasts.

Talent is still moving, but the bar is higher and expectations are clearer.

Notably, even in sectors with tighter budgets, strategic hiring continues, particularly in areas tied to AI implementation, governance and platform modernization, where skill shortages persist.

INSIDE TALENT: TAKEAWAYS FROM THE FRONT LINE

“Right now, it’s a buyers market. Noticeably, time to hire has increased significantly due to the volume of applications hitting inboxes perhaps giving hiring managers confidence that a once unrealistic checklist of skills is now a possibility.

To maximise their chances of being shortlisted. I would advise candidates, who are open to work, to really focus on applying for roles where their skill set matches almost 100% and ideally within an industry they have experience of”.

Sam Prentice
Senior Consultant USA

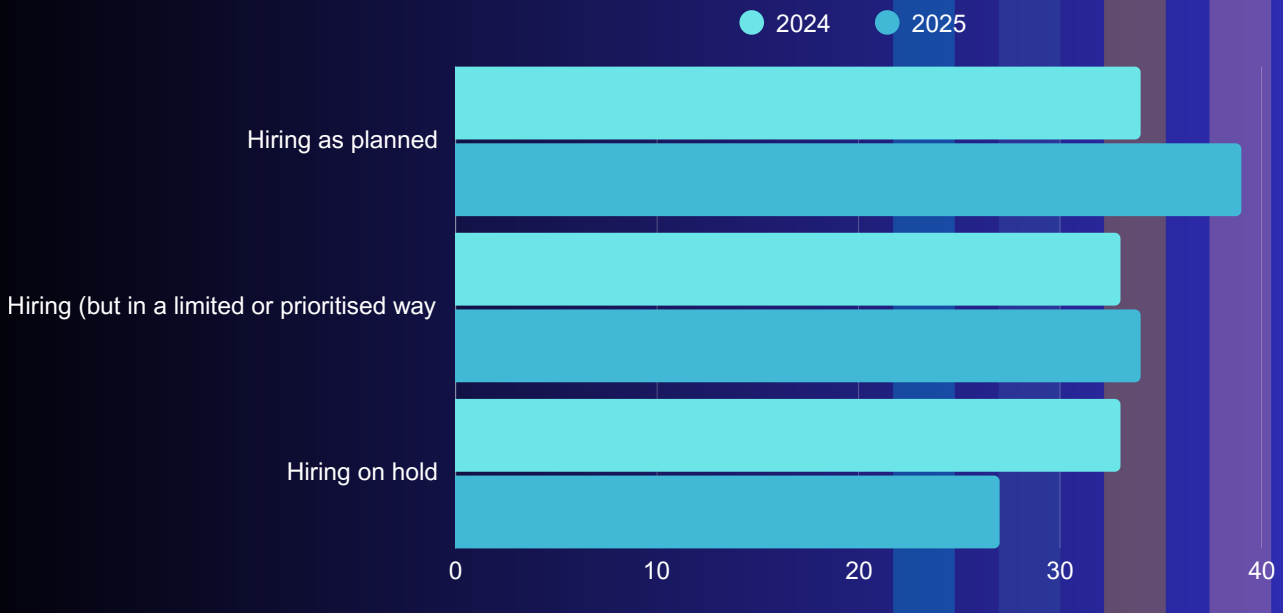
HIRING CLIMATE 2024 v 2025

2024 snapshot

Last year, the hiring environment was described as evenly split, essentially, a third of businesses were:

Hiring as planned (34%)
Hiring in a limited or prioritised way (33%)
On hold with hiring (33%)

This suggested a tentative approach to growth, with economic caution clearly affecting resourcing decisions.



This year’s data marks a 6% shift, with fewer companies pausing hiring and more moving into active, but cautious recruitment, indicating increased confidence and more open (albeit cautious) hiring windows.

While the economy continues to influence decision-making, 2025 reflects a marginally more optimistic tone than 2024. Businesses are still operating in a high-scrutiny hiring environment, focused more on critical roles than headcount expansion, but they are less frozen by uncertainty.

Practical takeaways:
Talent teams should prepare for a resurgence in demand, especially in areas like data engineering, AI/ML and governance, where indicated gaps are holding back execution.

Hiring remains selective, not expansive, making candidate experience (clear process, communication, speed) even more critical.

If you're a candidate, 2025 is still a competitive environment, but the door is opening a little wider, especially for roles that unlock cost efficiency, business value or enable AI adoption. Seek to demonstrate business value when talking about previous experience.

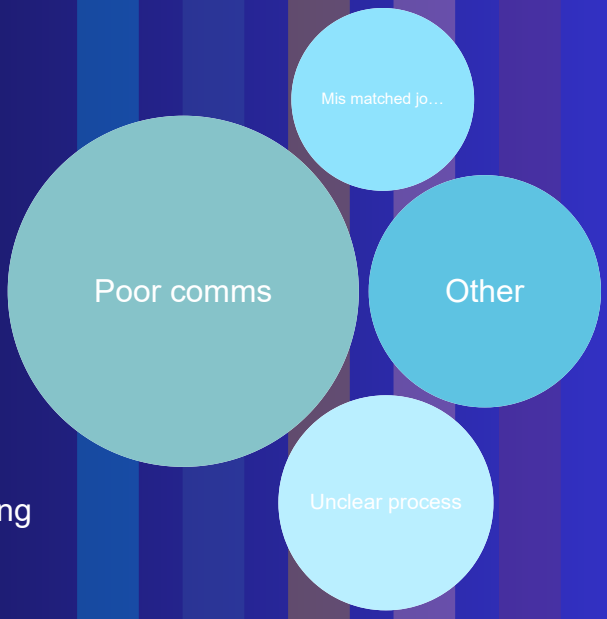
THE PEOPLE SECTION - RECRUITMENT EXPERIENCE

When asked about their recent experiences of the hiring process, respondents were clear on both the preferred structure and persistent pain points.

What good looks like:

44% say the ideal interview process is a two-stage format, seen as efficient, respectful of time and sufficient to assess fit.

Clear communication, expectations and feedback loops are repeatedly cited as key differentiators in candidate experience.



Common pain points:

Issue	% Reporting
Poor communication / lack of feedback	48%
Unclear process (length/stages)	18%
Job description did not match actual role	13%

In a market where top candidates often receive multiple offers or are gainfully employed and only open to meaningful moves, these friction points become deal-breakers.

We would go so far as to say, the experience of the process should now form part of the value proposition.

Practical Fixes: Build Trust Early

For employers competing for high-skill talent, hiring experience is a brand moment, not just an HR function.

Small changes can significantly improve outcomes:

Publish the process upfront (number of stages, timelines, interview formats) and stick to it

Timebox internal decisions, especially between final interview and offer.

Commit to feedback SLAs for every candidate, including those not progressing.

These steps don't just improve conversion rates, they signal a culture of clarity, accountability and respect, which increasingly matters in how candidates evaluate potential employers. They also contribute to wider talent pooling for future recruitment drives.

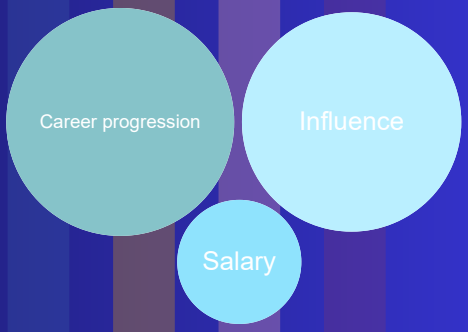
THE PEOPLE SECTION - MOBILITY DRIVERS

This year's survey reveals meaningful differences in what motivates men and women to join or leave roles in the data sector. While some themes, like management quality and meaningful work are shared, the underlying priorities differ in ways that matter for hiring and retention strategies.

Women in data roles are most strongly motivated by opportunities for career progression (27%) and the ability to influence business strategy (25%). These motivators suggest that visibility, trust, and long-term development are more compelling than salary alone. Only 8% cited pay as a top attractor.
When it comes to reasons for leaving, poor management stands out, cited by 1 in 3 women (33%), the highest of any factor. Rigid location policies are also a concern: 14% would leave if asked to be in the office full time. While fewer women cite "not belonging" directly, 5% still do and qualitative responses highlight the importance of inclusive cultures that go beyond statements.

For Women: Think About Progression, Inclusion and Strategic Voice
Implication: Employers looking to retain women in data must go beyond flexible working and pay. Invest in inclusive leadership, make career progression explicit and create environments where strategic input is invited, not earned over time.

What motivates women



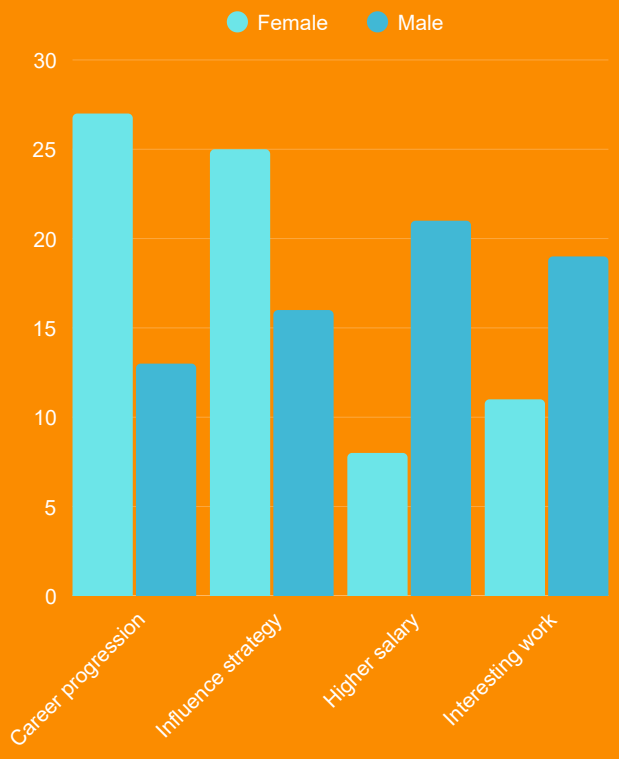
For men, higher salary (22%) and interesting projects (20%) are the strongest attractors. Influence on business strategy also ranks highly (16%), and only 14% cite career progression, suggesting that immediate challenge and autonomy take precedence over long-term paths.
The top reason for leaving is again poor management (26%), followed by uninteresting work (18%). Notably, 13% of men say they would leave due to a lack of belonging, more than double the rate among women. This finding challenges assumptions that inclusion is only a female concern.
Men are also more tolerant of return-to-office mandates, though 9% would still leave over a fully office-based policy.

For Men: Think About Challenge, Autonomy and Cultural Fit
Implication: Retaining male talent requires more than competitive salaries. Ensure roles remain engaging, leadership is credible, and cultural alignment is maintained, especially for those in hybrid or remote setups.

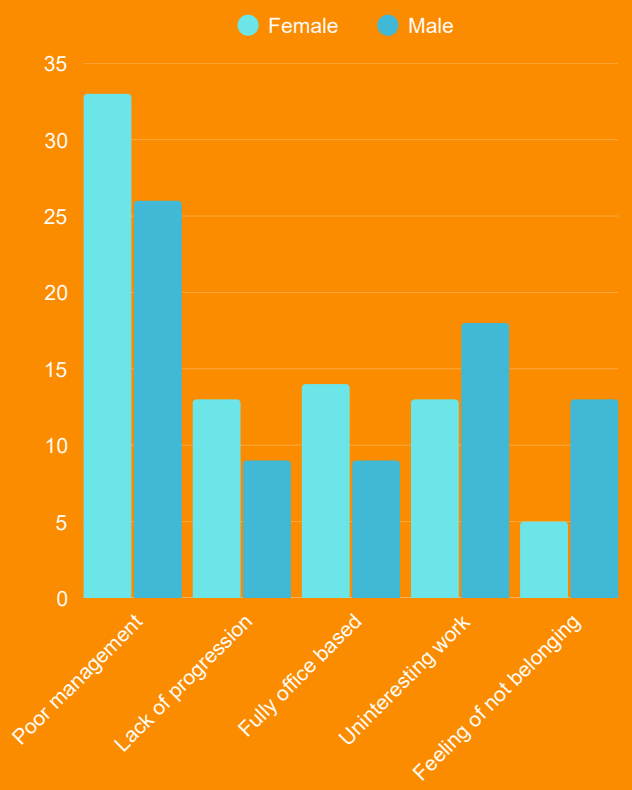
What motivates men

THE PEOPLE SECTION - MOBILITY DRIVERS

Main Motivators that **attract** professionals by Gender



Main Motivators to **leave** a role by Gender



The Shared Message: Leadership Is the Retention Lever

Across both groups, one message is consistent: poor management is the leading reason for leaving. It outpaces salary, flexibility, and workload. This underlines the importance of technically credible, communicative leadership in data teams, particularly when managing hybrid or cross-functional roles.

DEEPER DIVE - WHY MIGHT MEN CITE "NOT BELONGING" FOR 2 YEARS ON THE RUN?

For the last couple of years there has been a very stark shift towards men citing "a feeling of not belonging" as one of the main reasons for leaving a role. We thought it would be worth digging into this to see if there are any takeaways for employers. At first glance, "not belonging" is often assumed to be a bigger issue for underrepresented groups, so seeing male respondents cite it more is unexpected. But there are several likely explanations, grounded in both organizational psychology and the structure of modern data teams:

1. Role Misalignment in Maturing Data Functions
As companies evolve from ad hoc data requests to productised, platform-led models, some roles (especially legacy ones) may become marginalised. More experienced or traditional data professionals, who are disproportionately male, may feel sidelined in orgs pushing toward cloud, agile, or AI-native structures.
In this instance, belonging may reflect "I no longer feel relevant or valued" not just social inclusion.

2. Lack of Strategic Voice
In environments where data teams are service providers rather than strategic partners, many men in mid-senior technical roles may feel like they're not influencing business direction. This can manifest as a sense of exclusion or stagnation, especially if leadership prioritises newer AI roles or externally hired data scientists.
"Not belonging" for this reason may stem from organizational positioning more than interpersonal exclusion.

3. Underdiscussed Emotional Landscape for Men
Research shows that men are often less supported or less vocal about interpersonal or emotional challenges at work, due to stigma or cultural norms.
In surveys like ours where we don't give infinite choices for responses, "not belonging" could become a catch-all for frustration, isolation, or cultural mismatch, particularly where more specific language isn't offered. If this is the context then men may select "not belonging" when they experience friction but lack a more specific term for it.

4. Shifting Cultural Expectations
The push for diversity, equity and inclusion has rightly focused on historically marginalised groups. But some male employees may (fairly or unfairly) interpret this as exclusion, particularly if efforts are poorly communicated or seem performative rather than embedded.
This doesn't undermine DEI but shows why clarity of intent and inclusive execution matter for all.

How Should Leaders Interpret This?

Don't dismiss this signal, but don't misread it either. "Not belonging" means different things to different people. For some, it's about identity; for others, it's about purpose, alignment or visibility.

DEEPER DIVE - WHY MIGHT MEN CITE "NOT BELONGING" WHAT OUR DATA SHOWS

From those who cited "not belonging," a common pattern emerged:

They were more likely to report only moderate or no improvement in their organization's data usage.

Several also highlighted frustrations such as:

- Data being inaccessible or poorly organised
- Lack of clear communication between teams
- Low data literacy in the business
- Feeling that data strategy is disconnected from day-to-day decisions.

This group often responded negatively or neutrally to questions about having the right tools or support or seeing progress in collaboration between business and data teams.

Interpretation: Belonging is Tied to Enablement

These responses suggest that lack of belonging may correlate with a broader sense of disconnection, not just socially or culturally, but in terms of how well individuals are empowered to work with data.

When employees feel their work isn't supported by usable data, a clear alignment between teams, or a shared understanding of data's value, they may not only feel frustrated, but excluded from meaningful contribution.

Recommendation

When people cite 'not belonging' as a reason to leave, it's often more than cultural. It's about enablement. In our data, those who felt disconnected were also more likely to say their organization hadn't improved its data usage, citing poor communication, weak tooling, and unclear value. Inclusion in data work starts with making sure people have access, context, and the confidence to use it.

THE PEOPLE SECTION - LEADERSHIP

In 2025, respondents emphasised the importance of soft leadership skills over technical prowess. The top leadership skills were:

- Listening and questioning
- Influencing
- Long-term vision

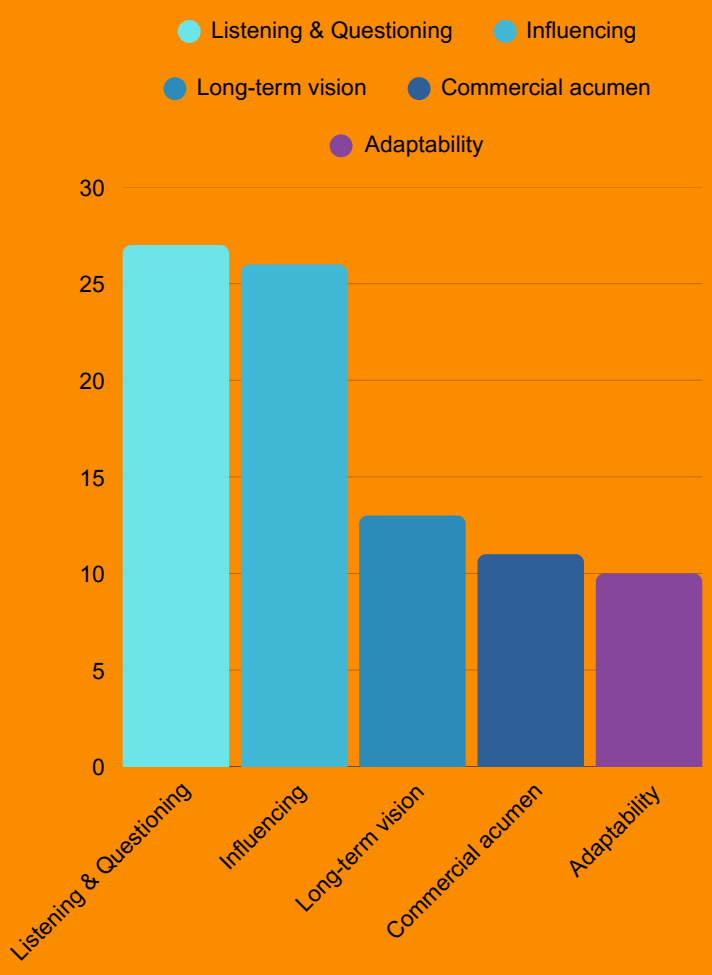
The importance of long-term vision may be attributed to the rapid evolution and adoption of AI, echoing back to similar conditions in 2015 when “big data” and predictive analytics first reshaped the landscape.

Leaders now, like then, must look far ahead to anticipate the impacts of emerging technologies and regulatory changes.

Communication skills like listening, questioning and influencing all weave into better outcomes across successful data teams.

Anecdotally, these are the skills most often requested during client briefings. The data around data usage improvement shows that when communication is clear and everyone understands what is expected of them, and more crucially, why they are expected to do it, then teams are more successful in improving data usage.

TOP 5 RATED SKILLS FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP



THE SALARY SECTION - DATA MANAGEMENT

Recorded / reported salaries have been rounded to the nearest £5k interval.

	Entry Level	Mid Level (Analyst)	Senior Level (Senior Analyst)	Manager (including 'Lead')	Head of
Data Governance (including enablement / literacy focussed roles)	60k – 80k	80k – 100k	100k – 140k	125k – 175k	155-225k
Data Quality	55k – 75k	75k – 95k	95k – 130k	110k – 165k	140-200k
Master Data Management	60k – 80k	80k – 105k	95k – 125k	110k – 165k	145 – 210k
Data Privacy	60k – 80k	75k-95k	95k – 130k	115k - 170k	150 - 210k

*Candidates evidencing CPD and industry recognised qualifications such as CDMP via DAMA achieve closer to the top of advertised salary bandings.

"Salaries across data management have remained largely steady through 2025, which in itself reflects a maturing market. What's evolving faster are the roles themselves, we're seeing traditional data management positions broaden to include enablement and AI capability alongside governance and quality. That blend of operational rigour with innovation focus is where demand is heading, and by 2026, it's likely to be the differentiator for both hiring and retention."

Mark Townsend
Head of Client Services/Data Management specialist
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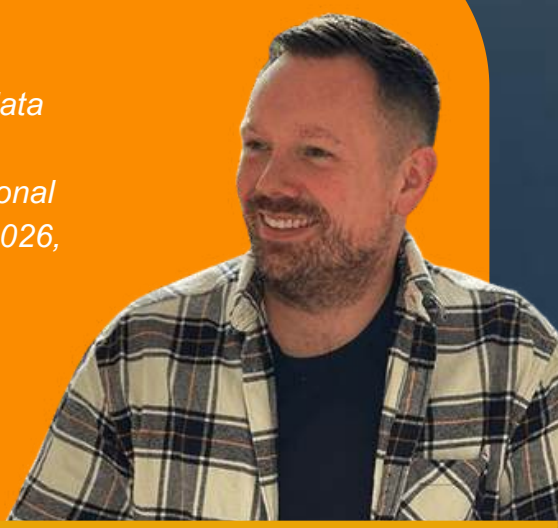

THE SALARY SECTION - DATA ENGINEERING

	Entry Level	Mid Level	Senior Level	Tech Lead	Head of/Manager
Data Engineer	80k - 105k	105k - 130k	130k - 160k	150k - 185k	170k - 230k
Analytics Engineer	75k - 100k	100k - 120k	120k - 145k	140k - 170k	165k - 220k
Data Architecture					
Data Architect			125k - 160k	150k - 190k (principal)	
Data Modeller			100k - 130k	125k - 165k (principal)	

"Between 2025 and 2026, I expect the base salaries for data engineering roles to remain broadly stable, but premium tool skills will increasingly drive differentiation. Candidates with DataBricks expertise, real-time streaming, or data observability capabilities are already commanding top-tier rates.
So while core engineering pay holds, the real upside will be for those who combine infrastructure, AI ops and cloud fluency.

Sam Prentice
Senior Consultant, Data Engineering
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THE SALARY SECTION - AI & DATA SCIENCE

	Entry Level	Mid Level	Senior Level	Tech Lead	Head of/Manager
Data Scientist	90k - 115k	115k - 145k	145k - 175k	170k - 200k	185k - 125k
ML Engineer	95k - 125k	120k - 150k	150k - 185k	175k - 205k	190k - 245k
AI Engineer*	95k - 120k	120k - 150k	160k - 185k	170k - 200k	
Deep Learning Engineer	95k - 120k	120k - 145k	155k - 190k	190k - 220k	210k - 250k
Computer Vision Engineer	85k - 110k	110k - 135k	135k - 165k	165k - 200k	190k - 235k
NLP Engineer	95k - 120k	120k - 145k	145k - 170k	175k - 205k	185k - 235k

* including but not exclusively LLM/GenAI

"In today's market, core salaries for AI and data science roles are stabilizing, but the real premium is going to those who bring end-to-end delivery skills, especially in AI/ML operations, model monitoring and cloud-native tooling. For roles combining data science with MLOps and cross-functional product exposure, we're already seeing compensation bands exceed standard data science ranges, particularly in major U.S. metros."

Mike Thacker-Cooke
Director of Recruitment, AI & Data Science
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SUMMARY

The 2025 data landscape reveals an industry in transition, not from stagnation to growth, but from reaction to reinvention. If 2024 was marked by rapid shifts, early AI enthusiasm and a cautious return to growth, then 2025 shows a sector that is starting to embed those changes in more sustainable, structured ways. This year, the tone of the profession is different: more grounded, more pragmatic and more focused on long-term value.

Compared to last year, there's a noticeable change in how challenges are being approached. The nature of the problems hasn't shifted dramatically, budget constraints, skills shortages, and data quality issues remain high on the list, but teams are no longer surprised by them. Instead, there is growing clarity on how to manage these hurdles: with stronger infrastructure, better role definition, and deliberate hiring strategies. The sharp urgency of 2024 has given way to more strategic prioritization.

AI continues to dominate both attention and investment, but the focus has evolved. While last year was about adoption and experimentation, 2025 is about scale and integration. The organizations seeing the most success are no longer simply deploying AI tools, they're restructuring how they work. Product ownership of AI use cases, MLOps pipelines, and data contracts are now common among high-performing teams. Model risk management, once seen as a compliance tick-box, is becoming a core competency, particularly in regulated industries. Automation remains the staple, but the long-term value lies in decision support, governance and monitoring.

In terms of people and culture, hybrid working continues to dominate, but the story beneath the headline is more complex. Signals around management quality, progression, working patterns and belonging all tie back to leadership and enablement. These are not just cultural challenges; they are talent risks.

Governance, cybersecurity and risk are still catching up. While concern about cyberattacks and compliance is high, they remain under-prioritized in tech roadmaps, a clear gap between perception and investment. What's clear is that trust, interoperability and responsible AI are rising up the strategic agenda, even if not yet universally implemented.

Overall, 2025 is not a year defined by hype or panic, it's a year shaped by consolidation and confidence. Data leaders are refining what works, discarding what doesn't, and moving from tools-first thinking to operating-model maturity. They are no longer asking whether AI or platform modernization are the right direction, they are working out how to scale them sustainably, ethically and securely in the U.S. context.