# Market Research Trends Report

2026

qualtrics XM

# Introduction

**THE COMPANIES WINNING AREN'T JUST USING BETTER AI TOOLS. THEY'RE REDEFINING WHAT RESEARCH CAN BECOME.**

Research teams embracing AI capabilities are experiencing a fundamentally different competitive reality. They're predicting trends with greater accuracy, improving team efficiency, and reshaping organizational strategy in ways traditional approaches cannot match. The companies making this shift are seeing concrete results: more budget, more influence, and more direct involvement in critical business decisions.

But adoption alone is no longer a differentiator. Ninety-five percent of researchers are already using AI tools regularly or experimenting with them. Universal adoption has reset the playing field. What separates leaders from the rest is orchestration—how effectively teams unify human and machine intelligence across the entire research lifecycle.

The research teams gaining strategic influence aren't just adopting better tools. They're fundamentally reimagining what research looks like across the entire organization. By shifting from research as a gatekept service to research as an organizational capability, they're conducting different kinds of research, asking bigger questions, and moving earlier in the innovation cycle.

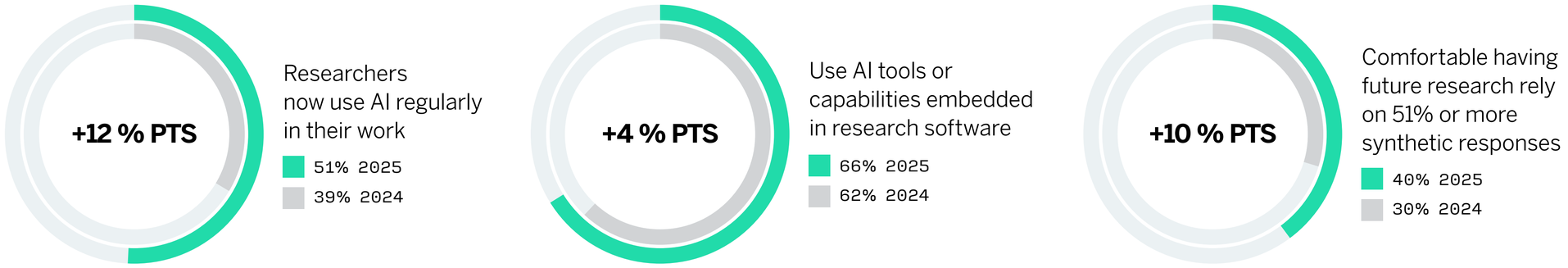

**of researchers are already using AI tools regularly or experimenting with them**

This is the moment to act. The methodologies are proven. The tools exist. The competitive gap between organizations that move now and those that wait will widen significantly—and be difficult to close.

How do organizations actually make this shift? The answer lies in understanding four interconnected trends reshaping the research landscape in 2026. These trends reveal where competitive advantage is concentrating, where traditional approaches are losing ground, and most importantly, where the opportunities for differentiation actually live.

This report explores each trend in depth and provides actionable guidance on how your organization can move from AI adoption to AI integration—unlocking the full potential of research to drive business outcomes.

**THE STATE OF MARKET RESEARCH**



# Meet the experts

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TREND 1

# Research agents turn self-service into multiplied impact

**STAKEHOLDERS ANSWER THEIR OWN QUESTIONS. RESEARCH TEAMS DRIVE DEEPER INSIGHTS**

The most forward-thinking research teams are already leveraging AI agents and conversational AI to put insights directly in stakeholders' hands. What was once the exclusive domain of specialists is now becoming accessible to anyone in the organization who needs answers.

Thirteen percent of researchers identify democratizing insights as the single most important AI benefit, a small but telling segment. That's important because of this group's vision for the future of what AI is capable of unlocking. Among them, 84% believe Research Agents will oversee more than half of research projects end-to-end within three years. They're not just early adopters, they're leading indicators of where research is heading. Sixty-one percent are most excited about agentic AI completely taking over specific phases of research projects.


agree Research Agents will oversee more than 50% of research projects end-to-end in the next 3 years

# 01

AI agents and conversational AI are redefining what researchers actually spend their time doing. Rather than fielding endless stakeholder requests, research teams are deploying agents that allow non-specialists to access research-grade insights directly. Product managers can test concepts without submitting tickets. Marketing teams can analyze sentiment without waiting for reports. Executives can explore markets without going through intermediaries. The barrier to insights is no longer specialist knowledge—it's simply asking the right question.

This evolution solves a persistent problem. There's always a gap between how much research stakeholders want and the scale and efficiency that research teams can deliver it. AI agents close that gap, not by making researchers work faster (though 84% of agentic AI users report their team's research efforts have become significantly more efficient, compared to just 68% of those who haven't tried it), but by multiplying research capacity without adding headcount. One researcher can enable dozens of stakeholders to find their own answers to routine questions, freeing the research function to focus on complex, high-stakes work that genuinely requires expert judgment.

The teams embracing this model aren't just more efficient. They're redefining research as an organizational capability rather than a gatekept service. Teams that gatekeep insights become increasingly isolated from decision-making teams; teams that democratize them become central to strategy. This shift translates directly to organizational impact: 72% of agentic AI users say their organization depends on research and insights significantly more than a year ago, versus 50% of non-users.

Research insights have moved from specialist gatekeepers to organizational access. Now it requires the right question, not the right credentials. But democratizing access to insights is only the first step. The teams seeing the biggest impact aren't just deploying agents, they're orchestrating entire research systems. They're choosing which AI capabilities handle which phases of research, unifying human judgment with machine intelligence to conduct research that was previously impossible. That's where the competitive advantage concentrates.

"The rise of artificial intelligence is already impacting many aspects of our consumer learning journey. It is enabling increased speed to insight, allowing our Insights teams to spend less time fielding research and synthesizing findings and more time applying the learning to inform business decisions. We are only scratching the surface regarding the application of AI in the way we work. We believe the strongest insights team will harness the power of AI to increase productivity and business impact and we're committed to continuously experimenting with new capabilities as they evolve."


SCOTT MARCOUX,
DIRECTOR, INSIGHTS AND ANALYTICS

# Strategic advice

### GETTING STARTED WITH AGENTIC RESEARCH

Democratizing insights doesn't mean removing expertise. It means redirecting it. Researchers stop managing requests and start designing systems.

SEE HOW QUALTRICS CAN HELP

1. **Position agentic research as multiplicative, not replacement.** Executives need to hear: "This multiplies research capacity. One researcher can serve 10x the stakeholder demand. We're not replacing researchers. We're elevating their expertise from tactical execution to strategic partnership." Researchers need to hear: "This frees you from request management. You focus on the methodology and designing the study; agents handle execution." Frame it correctly and adoption happens faster.
2. **Identify your top 20 routine research questions first.** This is your automation target. Map every recurring stakeholder ask: "What's the sentiment on this message?" "Does this concept resonate?" "Which audience segment prefers this positioning?" These are your agent candidates. Start there, not with complex strategic research.
3. **Measure what changes in researcher focus when agents handle routine questions.** Track agent-delivered insights (volume, velocity, user satisfaction). But also track what researchers do with freed time: Are they designing more ambitious research? Engaging more deeply with strategy? Collaborating more with stakeholders? If researcher time just shifts to new tasks without strategic elevation, you haven't won.
4. **Pilot with one stakeholder group, not organization-wide.** Start with product or marketing—groups that ask routine questions frequently. Let them experience self-service. Let them discover agent limitations. Use this feedback to strengthen guardrails before rolling out broader. Speed to value beats comprehensive launch.

> The future of research isn't about researchers doing more work—it's about timely research outcomes reaching more people. When you make research tools and insights accessible org-wide via intelligent agents, everyone, even non-researchers, becomes a part of the research conversation, and experts reclaim time for the work that actually requires human judgment.
>
> **ELLEN LOESHELLE // QUALTRICS**
> DIRECTOR OF PRODUCT, RESEARCH AND INSIGHTS

02

TREND 2

# General-purpose AI is losing ground to purpose-built research platforms

### MOVING BEYOND AI TOOLS TO AI ORCHESTRATION UNLOCKS WHAT RESEARCH CAN BECOME

AI adoption has reached a plateau. Nearly every research team now has some form of AI in their toolkit. But having AI and using it effectively are two different things. The teams gaining ground aren't searching for better tools—they're consolidating around purpose-built platforms built for research. They're moving from scattered point solutions to integrated systems designed specifically for research workflows. It's no longer about having AI—it's about having the right AI, deployed strategically across the research process. The gap between organizations using point solutions and those orchestrating integrated research systems is widening fast, and it's becoming the primary driver of competitive advantage.

02

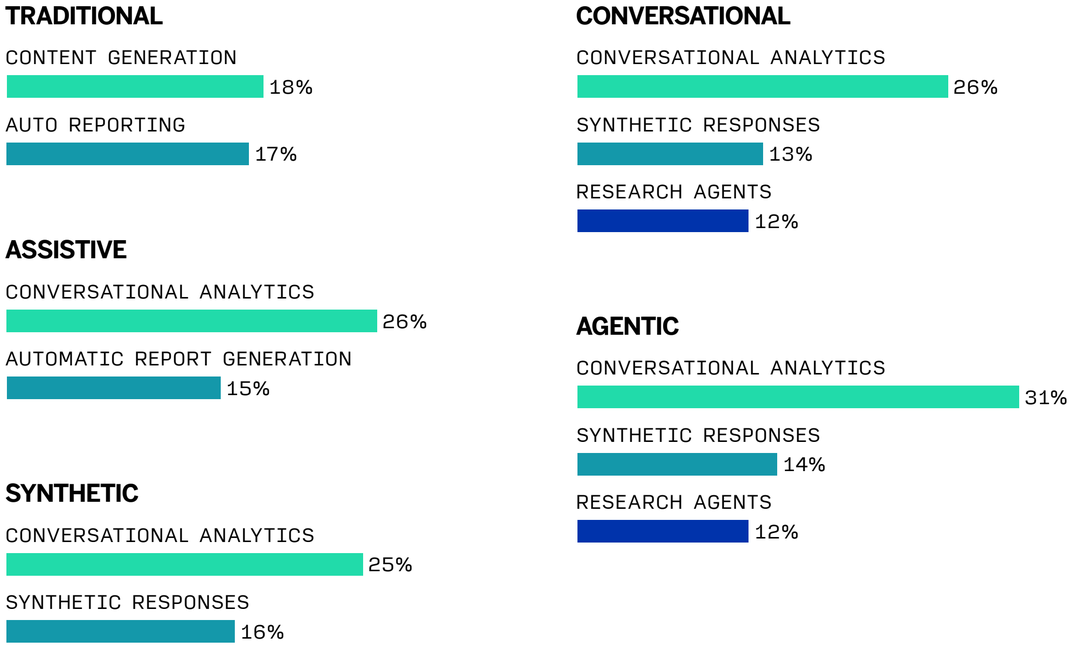
## FROM ADOPTION TO ORCHESTRATION

The shift is measurable and accelerating. Fifty-three percent of researchers now regularly use AI to support their team's research efforts, up from 42% a year ago. But here's what matters more: what type of AI they're using has fundamentally shifted.

General-purpose AI tools and chatbots dropped from 75% adoption in 2025 to 67% today. Meanwhile, AI tools and capabilities embedded in purpose-built research software grew from 62% to 66%. Researchers are actively trading generic solutions for purpose-built platforms designed to unlock what research can become.

This shift reflects deeper confidence in modern methodologies. Among researchers who have adopted synthetic data, 45% now view it as their most reliable data source, outpacing traditional online panels (37%) and CATI (18%). By contrast, non-users still trust online panels most (70%). The divergence reveals a fundamental realignment: researchers who embrace purpose-built capabilities aren't just working differently—they're making different quality judgments about their data sources.

## INNOVATION PRIORITIES BY ADOPTION STAGE



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But consolidation around the right platform is only half the battle. Organizations that stop innovating once they've switched platforms face the same constraint as those stuck with point solutions. It's critical teams continue progressing along the adoption curve.

Traditional researchers focused on efficiency gains still prioritize baseline capabilities that are now table stakes for everyone:

+ **Content generation**
  50% (up from 41%)

+ **Automatic report generation**
  49% (up from 44%)

These capabilities free researchers from repetitive work but teams plateau here, missing what purpose-built platforms actually enable.

Forward-thinking teams orchestrate beyond efficiency into capability:

+ **Conversational analytics**
  49% (up from 42%) enable researchers to ask questions of their data in real-time, uncovering insights that static reports never surface

+ **Visual content analysis**
  49% (up from 39%) using AI to summarize or tag video content, allowing researchers to extract insight from qualitative data at scale that would have taken weeks of manual work

This isn't incremental adoption. It's researchers discovering what becomes possible when they stop executing and start orchestrating.

**THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE**

Where you sit on the adoption curve determines what your research can actually accomplish. Teams leveraging purpose-built platforms and conversational workflows aren't just working faster—they're conducting fundamentally different research. They're asking bigger questions. Testing bolder concepts. Moving earlier in the innovation cycle.

This is where competitive advantage concentrates. The teams continuously moving up the adoption curve are the ones expanding their research scope, increasing organizational influence, and securing larger budgets. Stagnation on any single capability—no matter how advanced—becomes the constraint.

The organizations winning in 2026 are the ones that moved beyond asking "how do we use AI?" to ask "what becomes possible when AI handles the execution?"

“Qualtrics AI is transforming how we think about research processes, especially when survey length limitations restrict data depth or when stakeholders want to ask follow up questions to respondents or when we want feedback from niche or decision makers that don’t sit on traditional panels.”

SONNY SETHI,
DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH

# Strategic advice

### THE ADOPTION CURVE NEVER PLATEAUS

The gap between teams experimenting with scattered tools and those orchestrating strategically is widening fast. It's becoming the primary driver of competitive advantage.

SEE HOW QUALTRICS CAN HELP

1. **Consolidate around embedded platforms, not point solutions.** Replace your scattered toolset with a unified platform where AI handles recruitment, manages panels, automates analysis, and surfaces insights using natural language search. Switching contexts between tools kills momentum and introduces data risk. Integration kills disruption.
2. **Shift researcher focus from execution to strategy.** When AI handles routine data management and analysis, your team stops being data processors and becomes strategic interpreters. They ask better questions, design more ambitious research, and deliver insights that shape decisions. Measure success by tracking how much researcher time moves from repetitive tasks to strategic design.
3. **Track scope, not just speed.** Teams moving up the adoption curve improve on three metrics simultaneously: faster insights, broader research scope, and increased organizational influence. If you're only getting faster without expanding the research you conduct or the decisions you influence, you're still in the efficiency phase. Keep moving.

> The initial adoption of general-purpose AI tools inadvertently created new silos, as teams created isolated solutions that couldn't be shared or integrated across systems. Today, competitive advantage no longer belongs to the organization with the most AI tools, but to the one with the superior strategy. Teams winning in 2026 are trading fragmented solutions for purpose-built orchestrated platforms which allow them to continuously adapt and innovate together, fundamentally changing what research can achieve.
>
> **EMILY CURRIE // QUALTRICS**
> HEAD OF RESEARCH EXPERTS, QUALTRICS EDGE

03

TREND 3

# Resistance to change is costing researchers their seat at the strategy table

### THE DIVIDE BETWEEN MODERN AND TRADITIONAL RESEARCHERS IS WIDENING FAST

Research professionals aspire to be recognized as authorities shaping organizational strategy and driving innovation. The researchers who are embracing modern capabilities—synthetic data, predictive analytics, AI automation—are achieving exactly that. But for traditional researchers, that aspiration is colliding with measurable reality. Organizations are actively choosing to invest in modern capabilities instead, which is eroding the strategic value and organizational credibility traditional researchers spent years building.

### KEY DEFINITIONS FOR TYPES OF RESEARCH

**Traditional**
Our research relies exclusively on conventional methods. We do not use any form of AI in our research process.

**AI-Assisted**
We use AI tools to assist with specific tasks (e.g., question drafting, summarizing findings), but our data only comes from human respondents.

**Synthetic**
We are using synthetic data to supplement, or in some cases, replace human respondents.

**Conversational**
We use AI solutions to engage in conversation with simulated target populations or replicas of specific customer groups.

**Agentic**
We are actively using or developing advanced, autonomous Agentic AI-powered systems to manage entire stages of the research workflow with minimal human direction.

03

## THE DIVIDE IS REAL, AND IT'S GROWING

Organizations are actively choosing to invest in modern capabilities instead and traditional researchers are feeling the impact:

> **Organizational reliance:** 15% of traditional researchers report their organization depends less on their insights than a year ago—nearly 4x the overall rate
>
> **Demand:** 37% see flat or declining demand for their research, compared to 20% of cutting-edge researchers
>
> **Budget:** 32% report stagnant budgets while 71% of cutting-edge teams report increases

Meanwhile, those who identify as "modern researchers" are conducting fundamentally different work. Organizations now expect research teams to integrate modern capabilities with traditional rigor. When researchers themselves can't articulate their strategic necessity, with only 29% of traditional researchers believing their research function is critical to competitive edge, they lose the authority they spent years building. Executives naturally deprioritize investments in functions that can't demonstrate their own value.

Thirty percent of traditional researchers fear AI outpacing their personal or team abilities, compared to 26% overall. This isn't an abstract concern. It's organizational reality: researchers who can't articulate how modern capabilities serve their strategy lose relevance.

Among researchers resisting change, synthetic data adoption—or lack thereof—has become the clearest dividing line. Researchers who integrate synthetic are experiencing concrete strategic gains, while those resisting it are watching their influence erode.

03

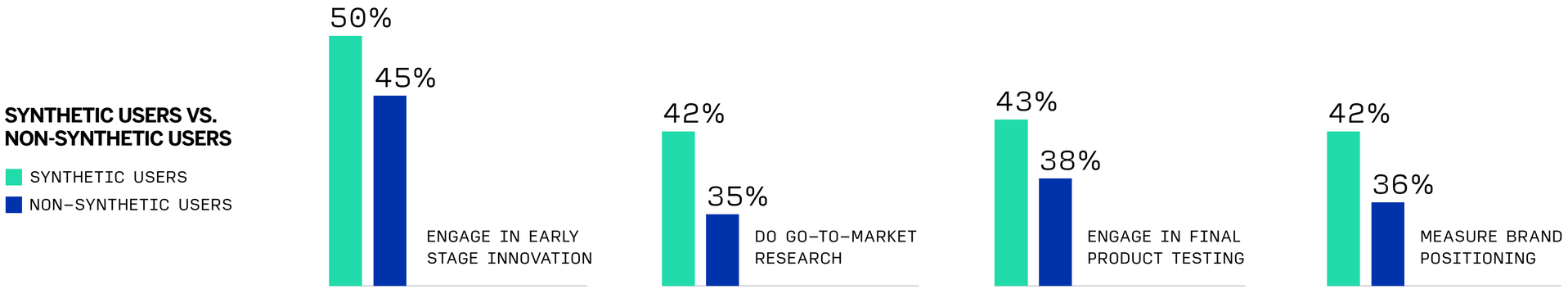
## SYNTHETIC DATA REVEALS THE STRATEGIC VALUE GAP

Modern researchers using simulated survey responses are conducting significantly broader, more strategic work with adoption creating capacity for expansion.

Researchers who have integrated synthetic data are 11% more likely to engage in early-stage innovation, 7% more likely to conduct go-to-market research, and 5% more likely to perform final product testing. This isn't incremental efficiency—it's a force multiplier. Teams aren't doing the same research faster. They're doing more kinds of research with the same resources.

The identity shift reinforces this. Fifty-six percent of synthetic adopters identify as cutting-edge innovators, compared to just 42% of traditional researchers. Among traditional researchers, 50% characterize themselves as dabbling in innovation, compared to 32% of modern researchers. The gap isn't subtle. Synthetic adoption correlates directly with strategic positioning and organizational credibility.

**SYNTHETIC USERS VS. NON-SYNTHETIC USERS**



“Synthetic data became our ‘cultural radar’—cutting research timelines from a week to hours while giving us confidence to test messaging against emerging trends. The blended approach lets us move faster on early-stage testing, then validate high-stakes decisions with human panels.”

gabb

GARRED SHEPPARD,
MARKETING RESEARCH DIRECTOR

# Strategic advice

### BLEND HUMAN AND SYNTHETIC DATA STRATEGICALLY

The divide between modern and traditional researchers is now organizational reality. Synthetic data adoption isn't optional—it's the baseline for conducting strategic research.

SEE HOW QUALTRICS CAN HELP

1. **Map your current research workflow to identify synthetic opportunities.** Start with foundational research, package testing, or early-stage concepts. These are your automation candidates. Reserve costly human panels for validation and high-stakes decisions. This creates capacity without sacrificing rigor.
2. **Use synthetic data to protect IP while expanding scope.** When testing new products, services, or competitive vulnerabilities, synthetic data eliminates risk of information exposure. More importantly, it frees your team to run more variants, test bolder concepts, and iterate faster, exploring what traditional panels constrain.
3. **Build synthetic-first workflows into your research process.** Don't treat synthetic as an add-on. Restructure how your team plans research: synthetic for breadth and human data for depth. Teams that integrate this structurally conduct 11% more early-stage innovation and 7% more go-to-market research than teams still treating synthetic as experimental.
4. **Articulate the strategic necessity of modern capabilities to leadership.** Don't assume executives understand why synthetic matters. Show them how it enables research teams to do more research without increasing budget, allowing you to catch market shifts earlier and get to market faster.

> Synthetic data isn't about replacing human insight—it's about changing the role of the researcher from a data validator to a strategic leader. In addition to reducing the amount of time spent on routine data collection, synthetic data invites researchers to experiment, test and learn on short timeframes, and improve research methodologies across the board. That's where influence lives.
>
> **JORDAN HARPER**
> SENIOR PRINCIPAL EDGE THOUGHT LEADER

04

TREND 4

# Leaders optimize for AI adoption. Teams optimize for AI survival.

### THE GAP STEMS FROM FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONAL PRESSURES

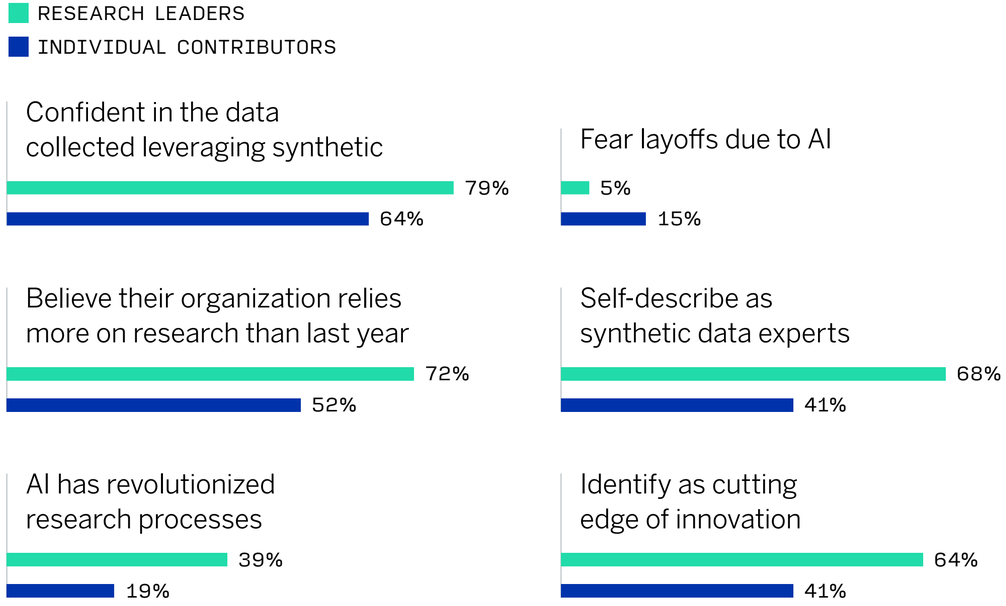
Even among the teams actively moving forward with AI, a different kind of friction is emerging. One that isn't a communication problem, but a structural one. Research leaders and individual contributors (ICs) are experiencing AI adoption through completely different organizational lenses. But organizations that intentionally bridge this gap have the potential to unlock significantly greater value and move faster up the adoption curve.

### THE PERCEPTION GAP REVEALS A LIVED EXPERIENCE GAP

Seventy-two percent of research leaders believe their organizations rely more on research than last year, while only 52% of individual contributors share that view. When it comes to synthetic data expertise, 68% of research leaders consider themselves experts compared to just 41% of ICs. Perhaps most telling, 32% of ICs have never tried synthetic responses, versus only 16% of leaders.

This isn't a knowledge gap. It's a lived experience gap.

**RESEARCH LEADERS AND INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS EXPERIENCE AI DIFFERENTLY**



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## THE STRUCTURAL DIVIDE RUNS DEEPER

But the real divide runs deeper than perception. It's rooted in fundamentally different organizational positions and pressures. Thirty-nine percent of leadership believes AI has revolutionized their research processes. Among individual contributors, that number drops to 19%. Eighty-three percent of research leaders say AI tools have made teams more efficient, but only 65% of ICs agree. The efficiency gains leaders celebrate aren't reaching the frontline, and it's critical that misalignment is addressed.

The challenges each group faces expose why this gap is so dangerous. Individual contributors prioritize budget constraints at 42%, speed to insights at 40%, and keeping up with new methods at 40%—these are operational survival concerns. Research leaders worry about communicating ROI at 40%, driving data-driven decisions at 41%, and managing disparate data sources at 42%—these are strategic concerns. Both groups rank AI outpacing their abilities as a top challenge, but ICs carry an additional burden: 15% fear layoffs due to AI, compared to just 5% of leaders. That fear compounds hesitation and prevents the alignment necessary for successful transformation.

**% WHO SAY AI TOOLS HAVE MADE TEAMS MORE EFFICIENT**

**83%**
RESEARCH LEADERS

**65%**
INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS

04

## WHAT ALIGNED ORGANIZATIONS ARE DISCOVERING

This misalignment stems from fundamentally different positions. Research leaders evaluate AI through a strategic lens: How can we scale research with current resources? Individual contributors evaluate it through an operational lens: What does this mean for my role and security?

When ICs don't understand the strategic vision, they interpret new tools as potential threats to their work rather than enablers of their impact. But when leaders explicitly address frontline concerns and co-create the transformation vision, something shifts.

Research leaders who don't explicitly address frontline concerns create the appearance of buy-in without genuine alignment. The result is organizations that look aligned at the leadership level but remain fractured at the point of execution. Research leaders invest in the wrong AI tools that don't have frontline buy-in. Dollars are wasted on technology employees don't want to use. The transformation stalls before it starts.

Organizations that build genuine alignment—starting before tools are implemented and continuing throughout—are the ones seeing the full value of AI adoption. Their teams move from compliance ("we have to use this") to ownership ("this actually helps us"), and both research leaders and ICs recognize AI as multiplicative to research capacity, not threatening to research roles. ICs gain a sense of achievement, understanding they contributed to the positive business impact and strategic vision alongside leadership. This shared ownership transforms the entire research function.

“It’s not just how can AI enhance our ability to collect and use insights effectively, but it’s also how do we make sure that we’re stewards of the human experience, and leverage our learnings and expertise to help our teams make decisions that don’t have an adverse effect on our customers and their employees.”

TAMMY SNOW // WORKDAY
VP, RESEARCH, ANALYTICS AND DESIGN

04

# Strategic advice

**BUILD GENUINE ALIGNMENT, NOT JUST BUY-IN**

Misalignment isn't a communication failure, it's structural. Leaders and research teams face different organizational pressures and evaluate AI through different lenses. Fixing this requires intentional structural work, not better messaging.

1. **Start with leadership explicitly addressing IC fears before implementing any new tools.** 15% of ICs fear layoffs due to AI versus 5% of leaders. That fear is rational given operational pressures (budget constraints, speed demands, keeping up with new methods). Address it directly: "Here's what we're automating (routine tasks). Here's what we're not (judgment, strategy, stakeholder collaboration). Here's how your role evolves." Without this, implementation feels like a threat, not an opportunity.
2. **Align leadership incentives to IC outcomes.** If leaders are measured on "AI adoption rate" and ICs are measured on "research delivered with current team size," they're working against each other. Restructure so leadership succeeds when ICs gain capacity and confidence, not just when tools are implemented.
3. **Create feedback loops between leadership and frontline teams before, during, and after each AI implementation.** Don't wait for resistance to harden. Regular check-ins catch misalignment early. Ask ICs explicitly: "What's working? What's creating friction? What are you worried about?" Listen for operational concerns (Will this require retraining?), not just adoption concerns.
4. **Build a shared understanding of what "success" looks like at each level.** Leaders see AI transformation. ICs see tool addition. Get alignment on a single definition: "Success is ICs spending 20% less time on data management and 20% more time on strategic questions." Make it measurable and shared. This shifts from compliance ("We have to use this") to ownership ("This actually helps us").
5. **Once aligned, orchestrate strategically.** Map your research workflow to identify which AI capabilities should handle which phases. Don't treat synthetic, conversational analytics, and agents as separate tools, orchestrate them as an integrated system. When leaders and ICs understand research as an orchestrated capability rather than a collection of separate tools, execution accelerates and strategic impact multiplies.

SEE HOW QUALTRICS CAN HELP

> The real challenge isn't getting leaders and teams to adopt AI—it's making sure they're adopting it together. When leadership sees transformation and the team sees disruption, you've lost alignment before you've even started. The most successful organizations we work with are the ones intentionally building shared understanding from day one.
>
> **ALI HENRIQUES // QUALTRICS**
> EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
> OF QUALTRICS EDGE

# Methodology

The data for this report comes from a global industry study that Qualtrics conducted in the third quarter of 2025. Using an online survey, Qualtrics collected data from 3,215 market researchers from 17 countries: United States, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, Australia, United Kingdom, Germany, Netherlands, France, Japan, Korea, Argentina, Colombia, Hong Kong, India, Singapore, and Spain.

The study population included over a dozen different industries, including representation from technology, consumer goods, retail, professional services, financial services, automotive, government, media, travel and hospitality, education, not-for-profit, healthcare and life sciences as well as market research agencies.

3,215 MARKET RESEARCHERS
ACROSS 17 COUNTRIES

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