

executive summary

Our 2025/26 Data Maturity Index finds most organisations existing in something of a mid-maturity data plateau. There are some pockets of progress, but areas of stagnation that echo some of the concerns we have seen in previous reports.

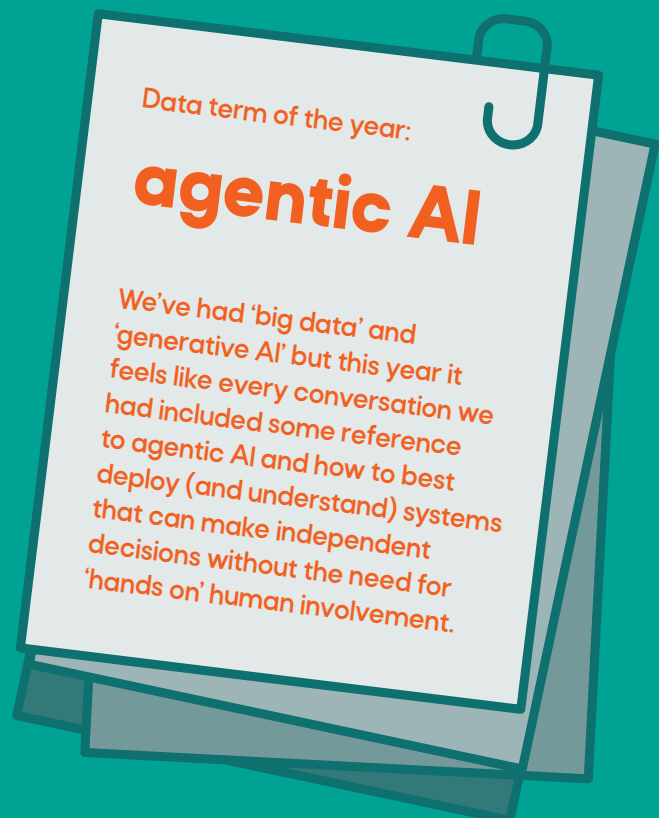
28% of organisations say they still have no data strategy. Organisations like this could soon find themselves (if they are not already) stuck in something of a data 'black hole' in which they are unable to maximise the potential of their data while being exposed to significant risks. As we see a continued trend for organisations having multiple governance approaches and frameworks, it may make it even more difficult to develop and maintain a cross-business strategy and navigate out of this sticky situation.

One thing is for sure – AI adoption is not stagnating. 40% of organisations now say AI is being used by a high number of employees, either across the organisation or in certain departments (up from 21% in 2024). For the first time, no respondents said that AI is not being used at all.

However, despite this increase in AI use and dependency, and (for the most part) greater focus on governance, we have seen no movement in bridging the gap on data literacy. There is an urgent need to invest in people to unlock the true potential and value of data and these AI tools. 58% report that most of their employees are not data literate.

The most-cited obstacles to achieving better data literacy were leadership buy-in, a lack of time and resources, deep-rooted cultural resistance and poor access to appropriate training. These

are deeply 'human' considerations. Organisations appear to be embracing tools and technology to help leverage the power of data but unlocking the transformational potential needs to be considered through a more human lens. Policies, governance and processes need to be more human-centred and easier to navigate. This year's report suggests that too many organisations are treading water on making data policies less clunky and complex.



In the not-too-distant past we saw boards and C-suites entering (or being dragged) into major discussions about organisational approaches to data by GDPR.

Now we're in the 'second coming' of data, bringing with it a new wave of strategic conversations about how to properly deploy data and unlock its potential through AI. The questions being asked are far less about 'how to be compliant', rather, they are centred around more purpose-driven topics. Where do we want to go with our data? Why? For whom? And to what end?

As this survey shows, most organisations believe that technology benefits their use of data, but there is work to be done in helping to quantify and qualify the true impact of AI within an organisation. This points to a wider theme – the need for greater understanding about what we understand by 'value' at both an organisational level and as individuals. In doing so, organisations will be able to focus efforts on where AI, and tools in general, can provide the greatest benefit.

This year we've introduced our inaugural 'data term of the year' to help reflect the most prevalent conversations we've had with data leaders. What will we be talking about through 2026? As organisations grapple with this 'second coming' and the mix of possibilities and pitfalls, we believe that a number of important conversations will be shaped by the idea of autonomous data management – how, when and why we should be deploying it.

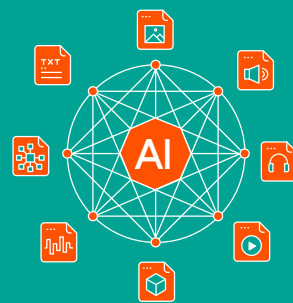
The adoption of AI tools will likely continue to soar in 2026, but it is important to remember that AI is a catalyst, not a cure. Organisations that want to convert AI into measurable value must stabilise their data foundations: fix quality and integration gaps, make governance practical and lightweight, and invest in role-specific literacy and operating models that embed analytics into decision workflows. Without those steps, organisations will continue to live on the mid-maturity plateau if not slip backwards.



28% of organisations still have no data strategy. Are they stuck in something of a 'black hole'?



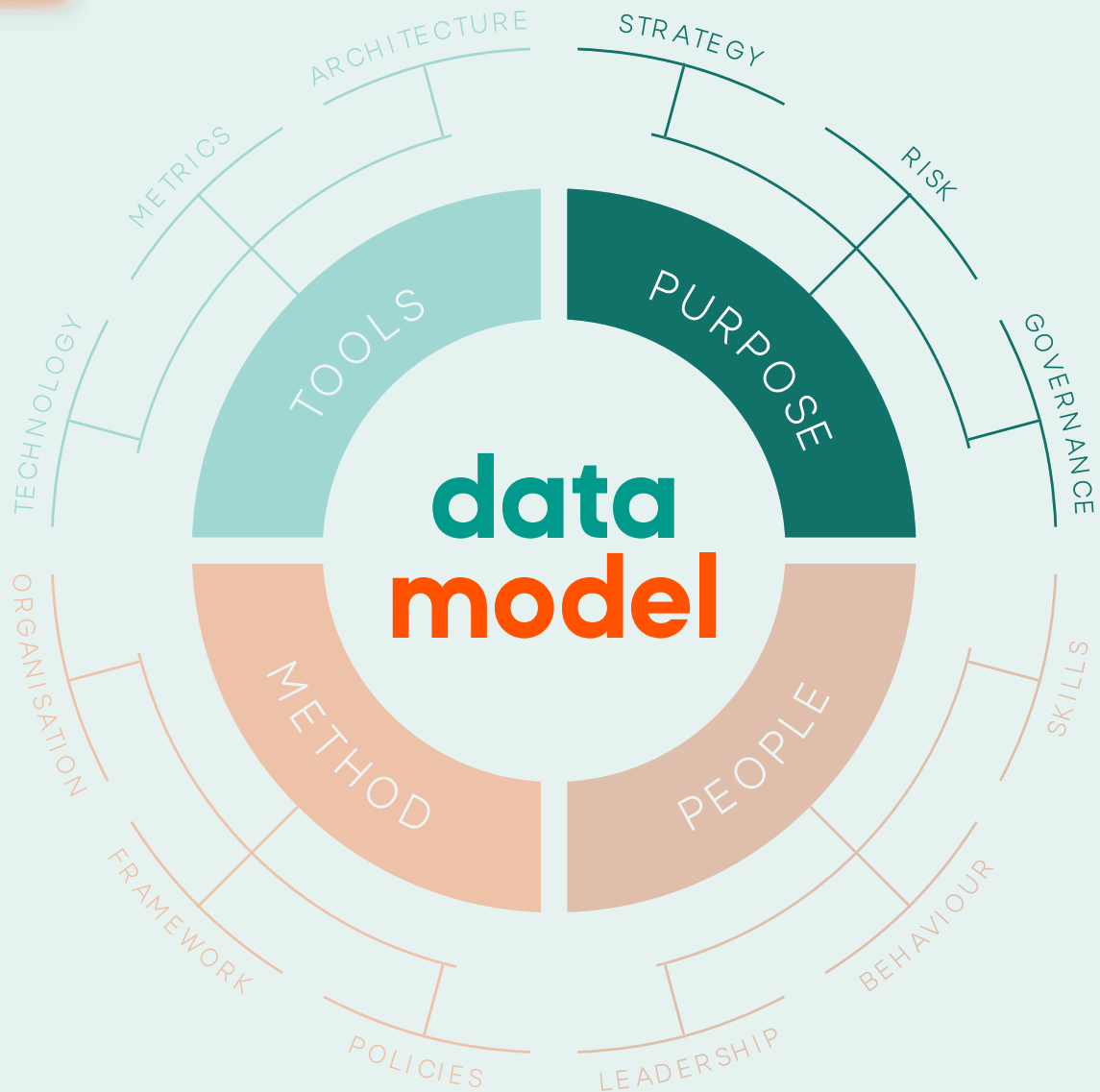
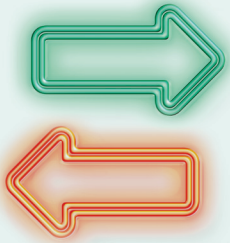
58% say that most of their employees are not data literate. We're using more tools without bridging the knowledge gap.



AI is very much here. **0%** of respondents say that AI is not being used at all in their organisation.



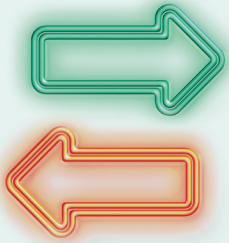
Caroline Carruthers,
CEO, carruthers + jackson



purpose:

Are your data and business goals on the same page?

Data can tell us where you've been, but it's even better at helping us understand where your business is going.



in our adaptive governance era (where data strategies meet real-world complexity)

Organisations are continuing to shift away from rigid, one-size-fits-all data governance, embracing a more adaptive and department-specific approach. This year's insights show that multiple governance frameworks are becoming the norm rather than the exception, a sign of increasing data maturity, but also a warning light.

As governance diversifies across the business, questions emerge: how do these frameworks connect, and at what point does that fragmented approach hinder an organisation's ability to develop a unified data strategy?

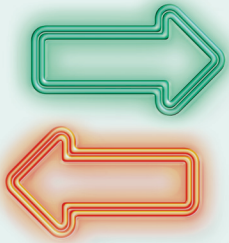
Per one respondent, "the lack of clarity of the operational strategy and decision-making process makes it hard to get the right data in the right hands at the right time". This echoes what we heard from a number of data leaders about the challenges of siloed ways of working with fragmented data approaches.

A clear, robust strategy is key to reaping the benefits of data while navigating the growing risks that come with increased deployment, but a

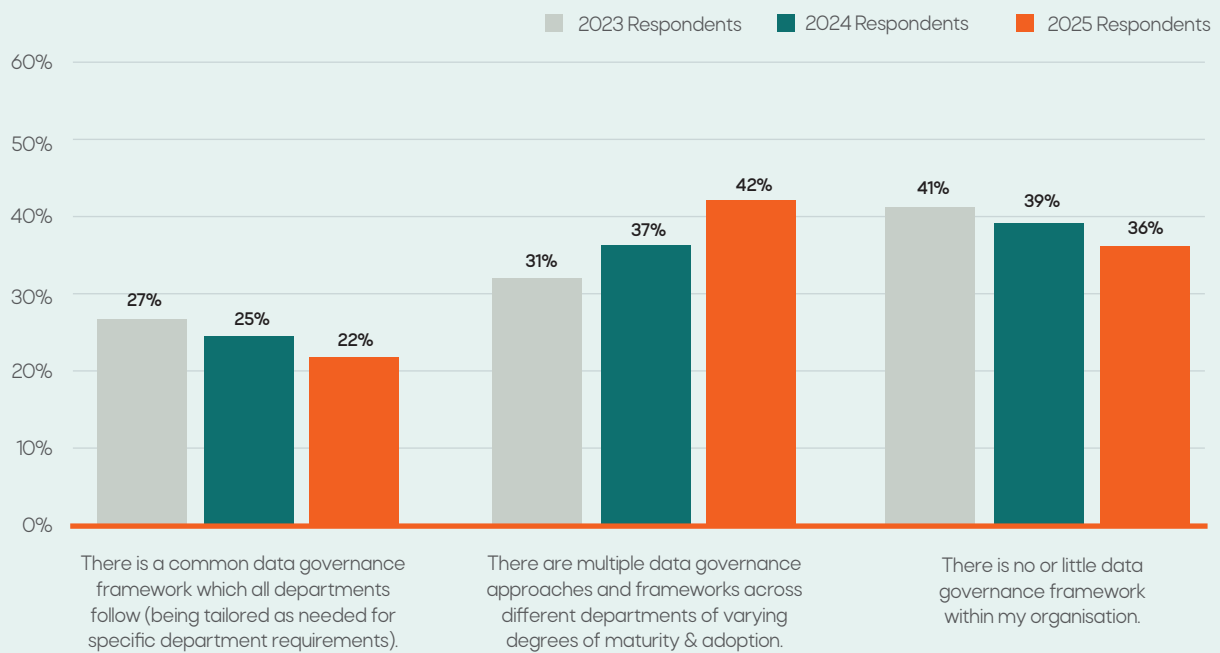
worrying trend emerged in our survey. Many data leaders reported governance being perceived as a 'blocker rather than an enabler', and data management being seen as a 'bureaucratic barrier to delivery'. Leaders must take heed and challenge these unhelpful myths across their business.



36%
say there is little or no data governance framework in their organisation.



which of the following best describes the structure of data governance in your organisation?



There is a clear trend towards more of a department-specific approach to data governance and frameworks, with 42% now saying they have adopted multiple different approaches across their organisation. The marginal year-on-year decrease in those with little or no data governance points towards greater maturity, but the proportion of organisations without a framework in place is still worryingly high.

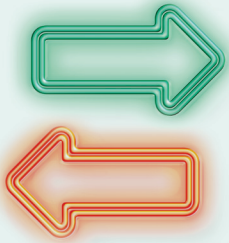
// the c + j expert take:

"It's good to see that organisations are slowly moving towards greater maturity in data governance. There is a clear sign that organisations are figuring out what works best for them, as is often the case when we see multiple approaches in one organisation.

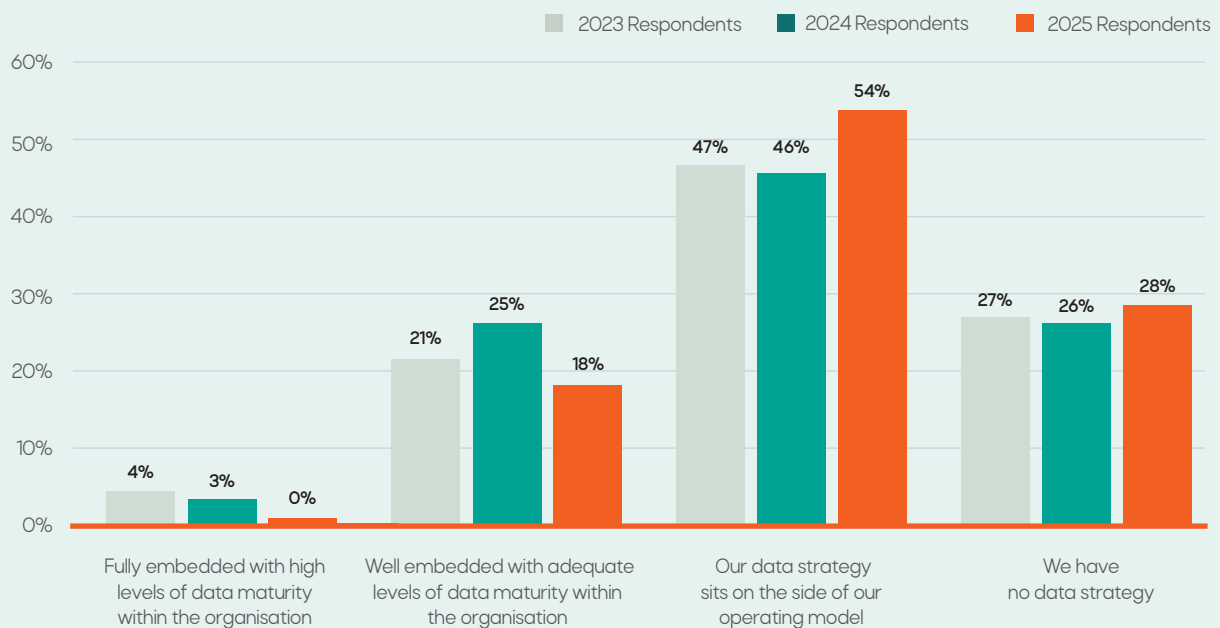
The danger of leaving it too long without an agreed approach and framework is that it becomes a job that never gets finished. This can harm a business in many ways, such as not understanding where all the critical data is stored, who owns it, and how best to manage it to minimise the risk, loss or theft of data.

Fundamentally an organisation would be lost without access to its critical data – you only have to look at the high profile instances this year to see how your business can grind to a halt!"

Andrew Lunt
data management director, carruthers + jackson



how embedded is your data strategy within your business processes?



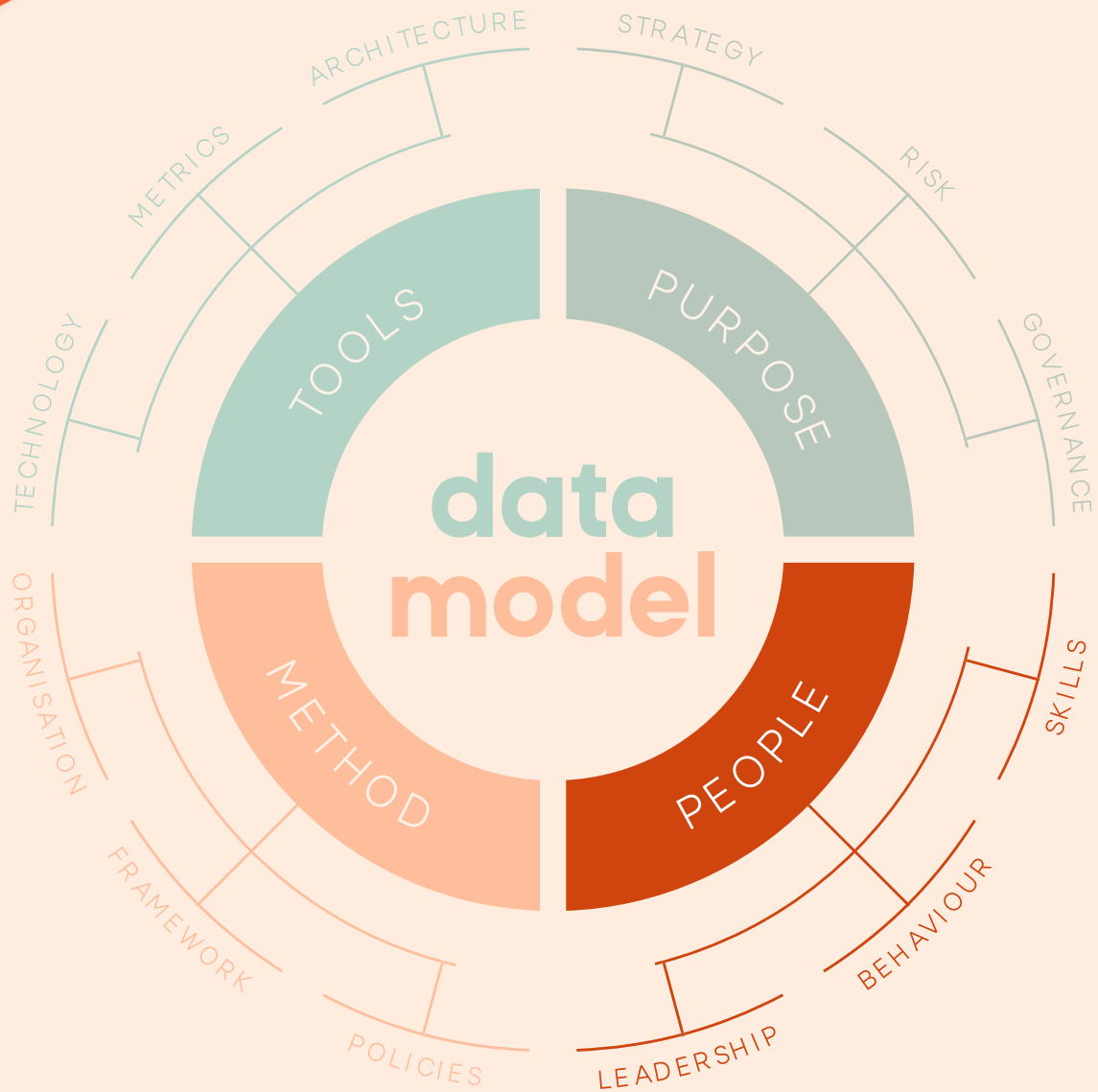
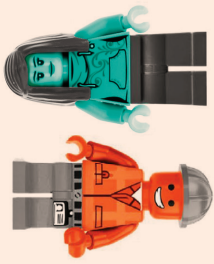
28% say they have no data strategy in their organisation. This is a slight uptick on the previous reports, perhaps pointing to something of a 'black hole' of organisations who have not yet addressed the urgent need to have at least a basic framework for managing data assets. This will lead to significant risk exposure, but also an uphill battle to maximise the potential of data for supercharging a business.

Over half of data leaders now say that their data sits on the side of their operating model, a higher percentage than previous years. Fully embedding data strategies can be a struggle when there are diverse governance frameworks at play, and a proliferation of tools being used across departments. Data is now everyone's business – and a data strategy needs to reflect that.



0%
say they have a fully embedded strategy.

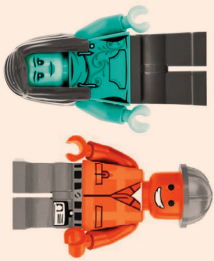
Does this reflect the challenge of aligning multiple data governance approaches?



people:

Is your team inspired to drive data forward?

No? It could be that they don't understand data or its potential. But data is simple, once you know how to use it.



welcome to the age of AI... but did anyone read the manual?

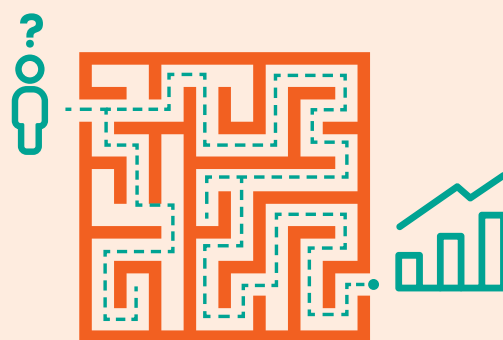
AI adoption is accelerating rapidly across organisations, but the level of understanding needed to use it and other data tools responsibly and effectively is not keeping pace.

In keeping with what you might expect in a mid-maturity plateau, data leaders describe pockets of experimentation amid a growing push to embed AI into everyday work, yet many employees still lack clarity on the fundamentals of when, why and how data should be used. The result is a widening gap between the scale of AI deployment and the confidence people have in interpreting the action needed.

This year's qualitative responses reveal a strong sense of frustration. Many leaders talk about "a lack of applied training" and literacy programmes that fail to connect learning to real tools, real data and real decisions. Others highlight a cultural shift towards a belief that AI will soon do the interpreting for them, reducing the perceived need to build their own skills. Bottom-up enthusiasm exists, but without clear expectations or role-specific development, employees remain unsure of what data literacy should look like in practice.

As AI becomes deeply woven into operational processes, relying on basic knowledge is no longer an option. Organisations must urgently rethink

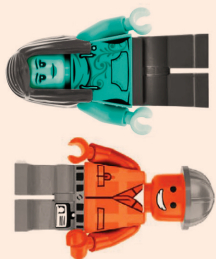
data and AI literacy as part of their response to the 'second coming' of data - grounding their approaches in relevance, context and application to ensure their workforce can use these tools safely, thoughtfully and to their full potential.



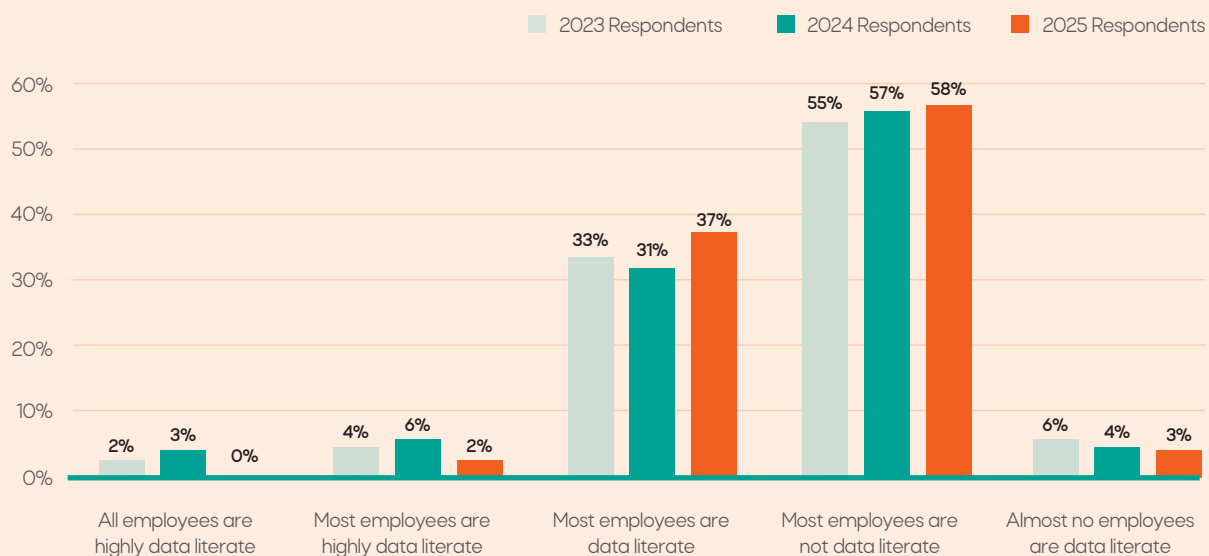
This year we asked a new question about the obstacles to greater data literacy.

Data leaders pointed to:

- Leadership buy-in
- A lack of time and resources
- Deep-rooted cultural resistance
- Poor access to appropriate training.

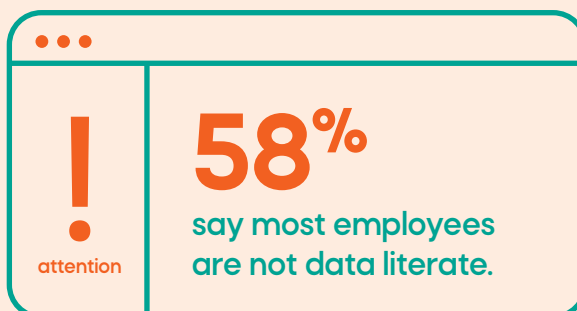


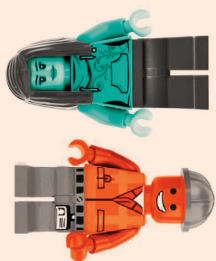
outside of the data team, what would you say is the average level of data literacy within your organisation?



The worrying year-on-year trend continues. 58% of data leaders now report that most employees are not data literate (and a further 3% say almost no employees are).

Against a backdrop of increased AI adoption across organisations and a greater emphasis being placed on data use in day-to-day operations, we can see a troublingly large gap between the scale of data usage and the understanding of 'why', 'when' and 'how' data should be used. Improved data literacy needs to become a priority, and fast.





who is utilising AI within your organisation?



2024

10%

A high number of employees at every level of our organisation are using AI

11%

AI is being utilised by a high number of employees, but only within certain departments

73%

AI is only being used by a small number of employees within my organisation

7%

AI is not being utilised at all within my organisation

2025

11%

29%

60%

0%

AI use is soaring. 40% of data leaders now say that AI is being used by a high number of employees - either across the organisation or in certain departments. This points to a rapid move towards democratising AI within businesses as tools become more and more integrated into BAU activity. Organisations are increasingly positioning AI as a core productivity tool and urging employees to embrace it.

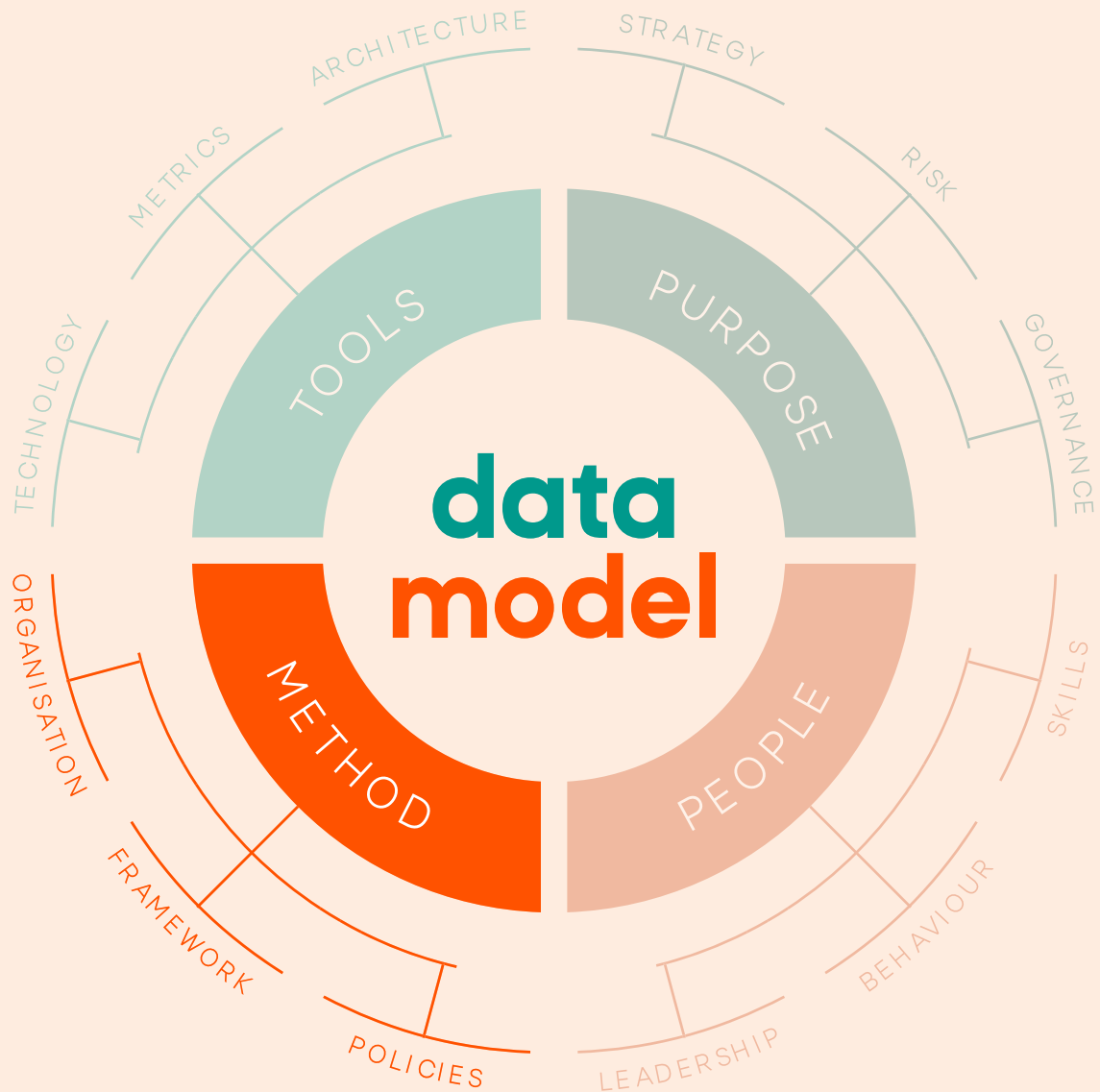
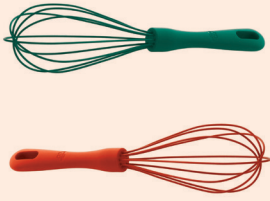
Coupled with the lack of movement on perceived data literacy, this presents an urgent challenge. The knowledge gap will only widen as AI tools become more embedded in operational processes and simply knowing the basics may not suffice, so the time to act is now. Organisations should invest in helping their employees to use AI effectively and safely within the appropriate and defined data framework and help them to harness the potential of these tools to drive innovation and value.

the c + j expert take:

"AI adoption is accelerating across industries, but workforce data literacy isn't keeping pace. This gap increases organisational risk and concentrates capability in the hands of a few. Low data literacy reduces trust in AI, leads to misinterpretation of outputs, and heightens compliance and reputational risk.

Companies that pair AI with strong data literacy innovate faster, make better decisions, and maintain a competitive edge. Without this foundation, a small AI-fluent minority becomes gatekeepers, slowing collaboration and leaving teams behind. Elevating data literacy alongside technology adoption is essential to unlock AI's full value."

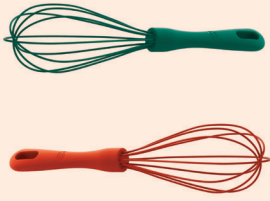
Gaziz Zhotabayev,
managing consultant, carruthers + jackson



method:

Does your data have the right environment to reach its full potential?

Ensuring everybody understands what they need to do and how, when it comes to your business's data.



policy paralysis threatens progress on ethical AI use

As AI becomes more deeply woven into day-to-day operations, organisations are being pushed to reassess the foundations of their data policies – not just for compliance, but to keep up with the ethical questions emerging in real time.

Yet many data leaders admit their policies remain clunky, hard to interpret and increasingly mismatched to the complexity of modern data use. In some cases, this is tipping into policy paralysis where frameworks have become so fragmented, outdated or unclear that they actively stall progress on deploying responsible, ethical AI.

This year's reflections suggest a widening divide. Some organisations are beginning to formalise ethical discussions and strengthen their frameworks, but many others report that AI has had little impact on their approach so far. For those standing still, the risks are growing with concerns around bias, transparency and data privacy intensifying far more quickly than policies are evolving.

Data leaders describe a sense of the ground shifting beneath them with new ethical challenges surfacing almost monthly, and a need for underpinning frameworks that can adapt just as fast.

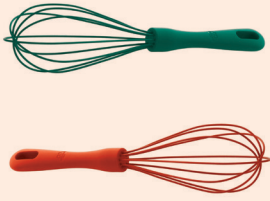
To avoid muddying already turbulent waters, ethics can't remain an afterthought. As we move into the 'second coming' of data, organisations need data policies that bring clarity, agility and accountability, ensuring they are ready for whatever the next wave of AI brings.

Navel gazing on ethics won't help organisations push beyond mid-maturity, and so frameworks and processes need putting in place to stop the very real threat of going round and round in circles.



By 2026, the data conversation will pivot from infrastructure to impact. The focus will be on data trust, lineage, and measurable ROI, not just volume. Expect sharper debates around multi-cloud interoperability, data sovereignty, and the carbon footprint of our pipelines and models. Overall, the frontier isn't more data; it is better, faster, and more accountable data operations.

From the survey's qualitative responses



how would you describe your data policies?



2024

10%

Streamlined and easy to understand

33%

Easy to understand but clunky in places

33%

Clunky and difficult to understand

24%

We don't have a data framework

2025

4%

39%

33%

23%

A third of data leaders say that their organisation's data policies are clunky and difficult to understand – just as we saw in last year's report.

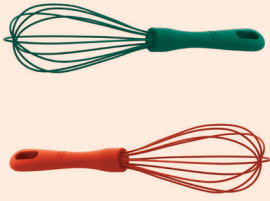
Are too many organisations treading water on this? There's no question that data management is becoming more complex as responsibilities and policies become more fractured and tailored to the operational reality of individual departments.

These added layers of intricacy could be making it harder for organisations to clearly define and communicate their data policies.

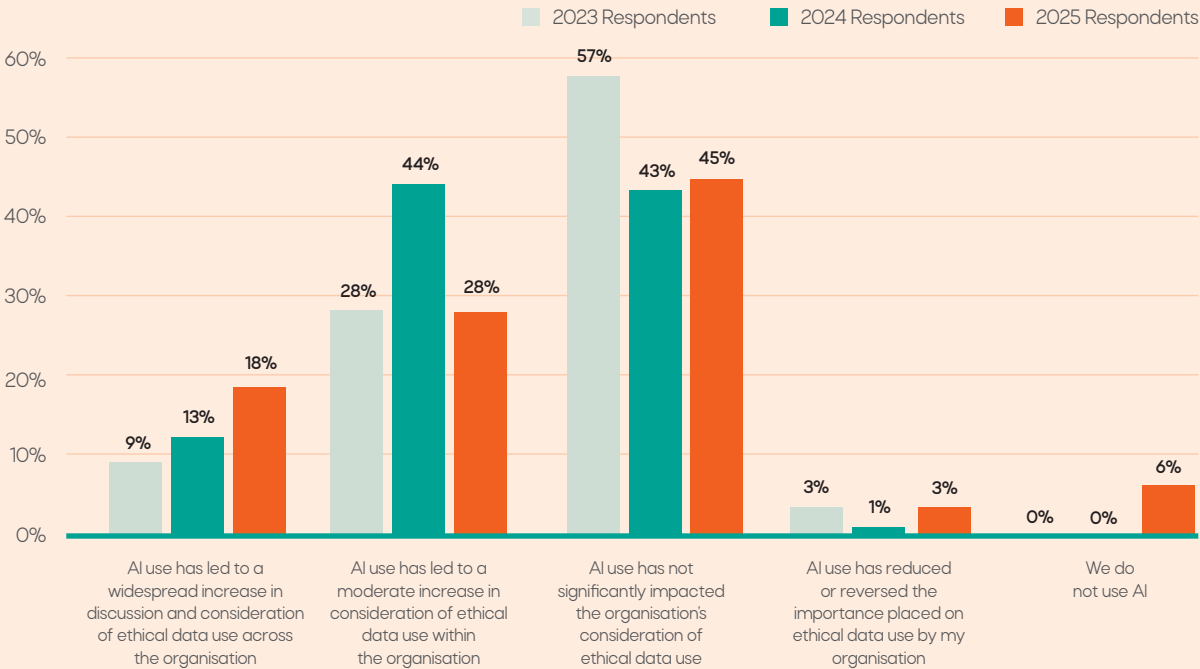
"Too often we see policies that are jargon-heavy and impossible to remember. The aim of a policy is to inform the reader on how they are impacted, actions they need to take, behaviours that need to change and, vitally, the leadership commitment that underpins the policy. Many organisations operate modular frameworks, so clarity and consistency are critical.

Policies should use common language, shared principles and clear links between frameworks. Aim for concise two-to-three-page documents that are easy to navigate. Savvy organisations can go further by using rollouts as data literacy boosters, moving beyond passive policy publications. In short, clarity, brevity and active engagement are the cornerstones of policies that have impact and drive change."

Sarah Dunstan,
principal consultant, carruthers + jackson



how has the use of AI impacted on ethical considerations around data within your organisation?

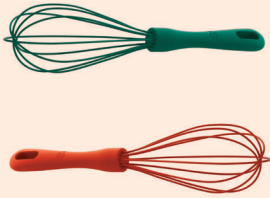


Though some organisations are reflecting on the impact of AI on their ethical data use and adapting accordingly, 45% say it has not significantly impacted their approach.

Those in this bracket may well be more susceptible to concerns of bias, privacy and transparency as customers and regulatory bodies become more focused on AI and its ethical and appropriate use.

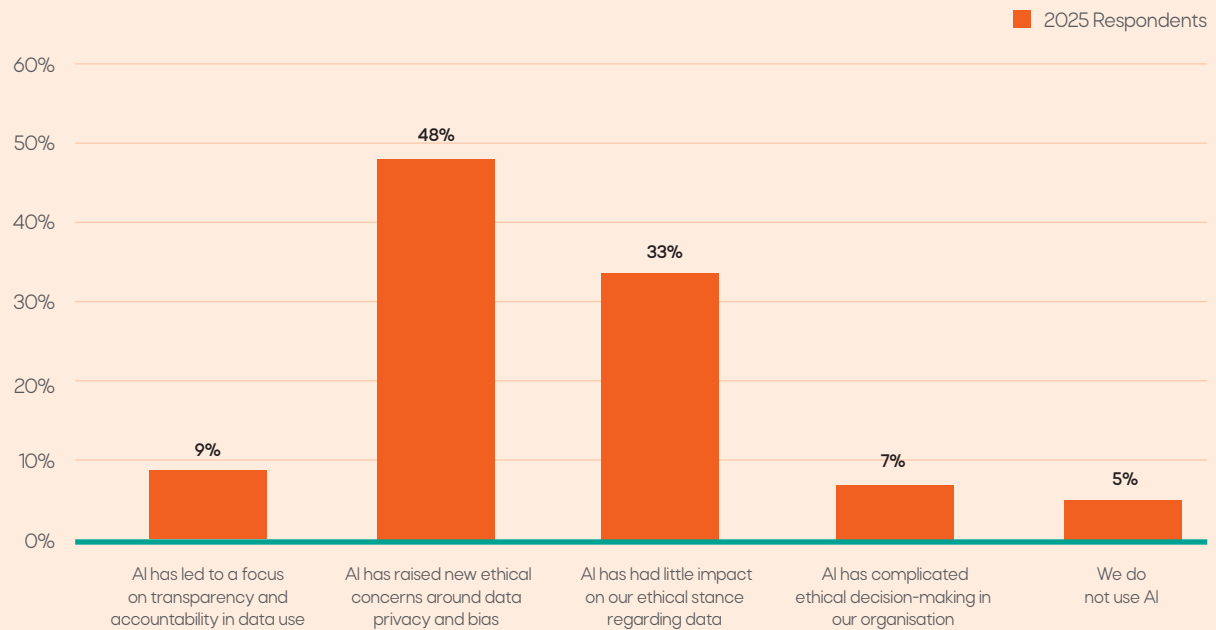
While organisations are starting to formalise these discussions and build awareness and frameworks for ethical AI use, there is a long way to go for more systemic change.

18% say AI use has led to widespread discussion of ethical data use.



new study

has your approach to data ethics changed over the last year due to AI?



The last year has been particularly transformative for how data leaders approach ethics. Almost half say AI has raised new ethical concerns around data privacy and bias.

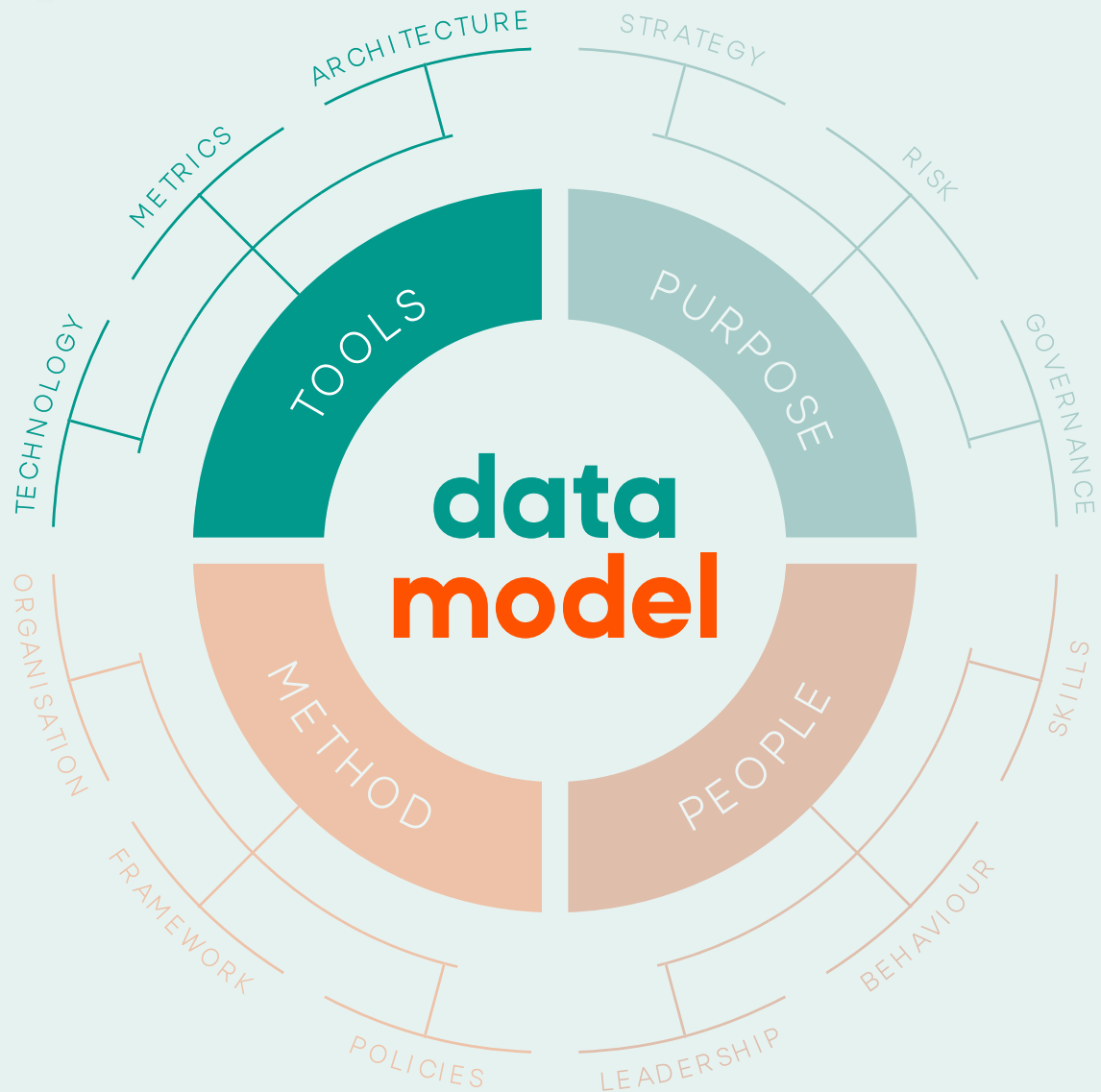
With the rapid pace of change, there is a need for underpinning data frameworks that allow organisations to work swiftly and decisively in adapting ethical frameworks as challenges emerge. A proactive approach to this can help avoid 'muddying the waters' as these new ethical concerns come to the fore.

"Organisations treat ethical consideration as an add-on. As organisations scale AI solutions, a tick box approach will not work as the consequences scale to impact everyone your organisation engages with.

Privacy, accountability and transparency must be built into every step of the data life cycle. A broad cultural shift is needed with data ethics at the centre of design, execution and operation. Beyond a framework, your people need better data skills so that they understand both the strengths and the limits of the data they use. This includes being able to spot and reduce bias and being aware of how unfair outcomes may impact customers and colleagues.

Most organisations should consider an AI ethics committee empowered to review AI products against the ethics policy to safeguard customers, employees and your organisation's reputation."

Kishore Nadarajan,
principal consultant, carruthers + jackson



tools:

Do you have the technology and structures in place to nurture your data and use it effectively?

Let's make sure everyone in your business has what they need to do their jobs effectively.



untangling the knots in today's data pipelines

As organisations collect, create and connect more data than ever, keeping it flowing smoothly and securely has become a growing challenge. For the second year running, fewer data leaders feel confident in their data flow, and the majority now say the data journey within their organisation is unclear. The picture that emerges is one of increasing complexity: more tools, more sources, more AI - but not always the right mix of governance, technology and skilled people to make it all work seamlessly. The upshot of this? Organisations could find themselves languishing in the mid-maturity plateau for longer than they would like.

Leaders describe siloed workflows, unclear decision-making pathways and technology that sometimes helps but often hinders. In some cases, tools are simply not fit for purpose; in others, the widening knowledge gap means teams aren't equipped to get the best from them.

The rapid rise of AI is adding new layers of confusion too. While pockets of teams report real value, over half of respondents say it's still 'hard to tell' which raises questions about how we define value in this new era.

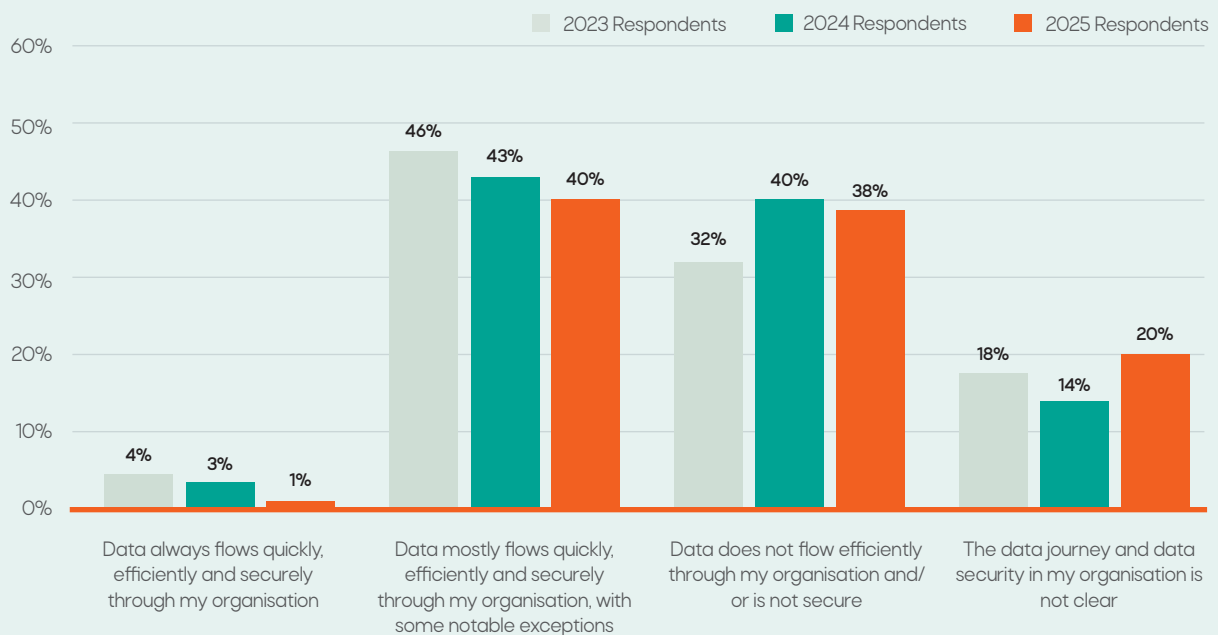
Despite soaring AI adoption, many organisations still lack a clear policy or remain stuck in planning mode. To unlock genuine value, teams need clarity, tools that are chosen deliberately and draw on operational expertise, frameworks that evolve with pace, and a shared understanding of how data and AI can drive the business forwards.



30% of data leaders say that the technology available in their organisation mostly, or overwhelmingly, hinders their use of data.



does data flow through your organisation in the way you need it to?



Data flow within organisations is becoming increasingly challenging. For the second year in a row, the percentage of organisations reporting efficient data flow has dropped.

Furthermore, one in five data leaders now say that the data journey and data security in their organisation is not clear.

As organisations handle growing volumes of data from a wide range of sources, keeping that data flowing smoothly and securely becomes increasingly challenging. Achieving this requires the right mix of governance, technology and skilled people - none of which can be overlooked.



20% of data leaders say the data journey and data security in their organisation is not clear.



does the technology available at your organisation help or hinder your use of data?



2024

4% Overwhelmingly helps

64% Mostly helps

27% Mostly hinders

4% Overwhelmingly hinders

2025

8% Overwhelmingly helps

62% Mostly helps

25% Mostly hinders

5% Overwhelmingly hinders

There has been little change year-on-year when it comes to whether technology helps or hinders the use of data - 70% now say it mostly or overwhelmingly helps their use of data.

Why, though, is it a partial or significant hindrance for so many organisations? It may be that the technology available is not fit-for-purpose, or it could be a downstream effect of the widening knowledge gap outlined earlier in this report.

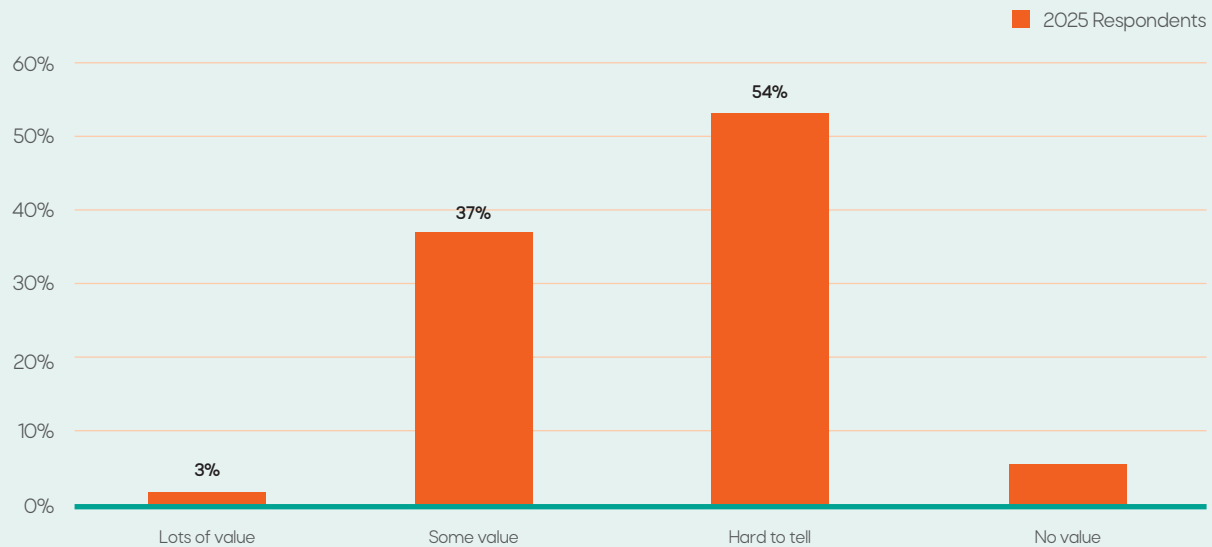


70% of organisations say technology either overwhelmingly or mostly helps when it comes to data use.



new study

what value is AI bringing to your company currently?



Two in five data leaders say their company is currently getting some or lots of value from AI.

Perhaps the more interesting statistic is the 54% of respondents who say it is 'hard to tell'. As AI use continues to soar, it will be essential to better understand its impact to properly assess where it can provide the most value.

It also raises an important question – how do we define value? Organisation-wide efficiency and ROI are oft-used measurables but there are opportunities here to view AI through other lenses that are harder to quantify; cultural value, compliance, creativity, trust, etc.

A proper grasp on the value of AI to an organisation, department or individual will help with internal buy-in, provide benchmarks, and identify which other processes may benefit from AI adoption.

“Value is a top-down effect. Organisations need a clear purpose: what they do and why they do it. This determines their strategic objectives and goals, which goes beyond just revenue generation.

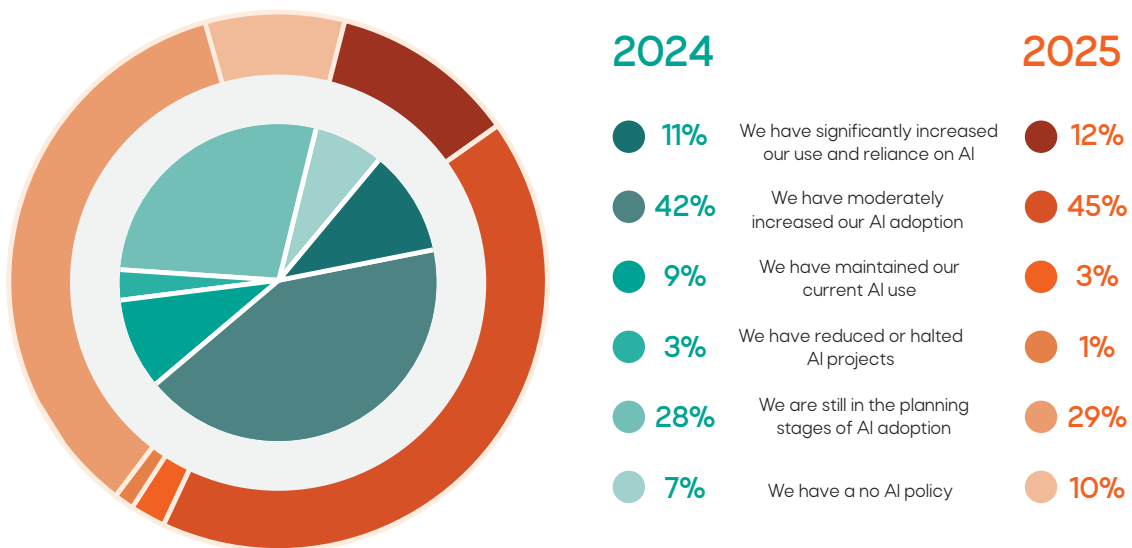
Value should be measured by aligning quantitative and qualitative metrics to these objectives and honestly evaluating over time whether they are moving towards fulfilling them. Then, each component of the business needs to interpret this organisational value locally, so each area and team must determine what they do to create that organisational value.

Different organisations will have different purposes, missions, and objectives, and operate in different sectors, so their definitions of value will be unique. When respondents say it is 'hard to tell' if AI is adding value, it means that somewhere along the way value, and how to determine it, has not been clearly defined and communicated.”

Jonny Varga,
principal consultant, carruthers + jackson



has your organisation's approach to AI changed over the past year?



We've already seen that AI use is soaring, with no respondents reporting that AI is not used at all within their organisation (page 11). And yet, despite that reported surge in AI deployment, one in ten say they have no AI policy at all, and 29% remain locked in the planning stage.

Organisations need to move swiftly to define their approach to AI and empower their teams to use tools in line with the company's policies, else they risk being overtaken by competitors who are unlocking the potential that AI brings.

Developing a clear framework is vital to act as a 'north star' for navigating challenges around resources, knowledge gaps and ethical concerns, but it is worth noting that company-wide AI policies are rarely fully polished when first installed. With a rapid pace of change, re-evaluating and evolving your approach is a natural part of the process. Organisations should be bold in moving forwards to avoid being left behind.

To get value from the above qualitative responses, which included thousands of words from hundreds of data leaders, Carruthers + Jackson used a generative AI tool to analyse responses.

This AI analysis was combined with human insight to generate the above section of the report - we believe this is how AI is most effectively and responsibly used, by viewing it as a tool to improve the way humans work without wholly relying on it to produce copy or data-driven conclusions. The organisations that gain the most value from AI innovations will be the one which successfully implement AI tools in a way which is responsible, effective and, ultimately, empowering for employees.



Carruthers + Jackson Data Maturity Assessment

Put simply, the Carruthers + Jackson Data Maturity Assessment identifies a plan of action for harnessing and managing an organisation's data.

At the heart of the Data Maturity Assessment is the Carruthers + Jackson Data Model which covers the four core areas which contribute to an organisation's data maturity: Purpose, People, Method and Tools.

Through a series of interactive workshops, the Carruthers + Jackson team gets right under the skin of an organisation, by focusing on the 12 elements

from our Data Model. From this, our consultants can develop a deeper understanding of the current data landscape and most importantly, how improvements to this can increase value throughout a business.

For more information about our
Data Maturity Assessments please visit:
carruthersandjackson.com/data-maturity

About Carruthers + Jackson

Carruthers + Jackson is the world's leading data consultancy, bringing together experts in data driven transformation to help organisations across the world to get the most out of their data.

In addition to transforming data operations and data literacy within some of the world's biggest businesses, Carruthers + Jackson is a focal point for the global data community, bringing together data leaders

from around the world for a series of free to attend events, including the Data Leader's Summer School.

For more information please visit:
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simple.**

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