The Boathouse Fifth Annual CEO Study

A 2026 U.S. QUANTITATIVE REPORT

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Research Overview and Sample

Research Overview

Welcome to The Fifth Annual Boathouse CEO Survey.

We began this research in 2021 as a one-time study, to better understand the declining respect for marketing and the shortened tenure of CMOs.

In our 2026 report, we present five years of data on marketing and the CMO, alongside new insights into how CEOs shape and execute strategy, including their decision-making drivers, internal constraints, and orientation toward future growth.

This year's study also examines the growing role of AI across the enterprise and within marketing, including investment priorities, areas of impact, and organizational readiness.

For ease of comparison, the years are presented as Study 1 (2021), Study 2 (2022), Study 3 (2023), Study 4 (2025), and Study 5 (2026).

Research Sample: 150 CEOs from Top U.S. Companies

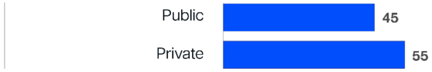
Sample provided by GLG Insight Network.

Survey in field: January 6–26, 2026

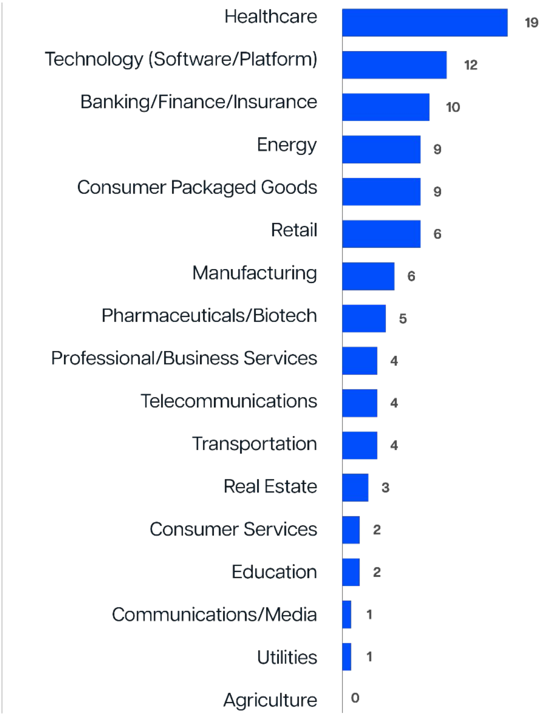
Bracket of Annual Revenue
% of respondents

Number of Employees
% of respondents

Type of Company
% of respondents



Classification of Industry Sector
% of respondents



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INTRODUCTION

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

CEO confidence is high and strategy is advancing but execution is becoming the primary constraint on growth.

CEOs are increasingly confident in their leadership and strategic direction, with clear progress underway. The challenge is shifting from defining strategy to delivering it, placing greater pressure on alignment, coordination, and internal capability. This is being further intensified by rising investment in AI, which is increasing expectations for performance while adding complexity to how organizations execute.

- 91% of CEOs believe their personal influence meets or exceeds benchmarks
- 47% are at least halfway to realizing their strategy; year-over-year significantly more say they are 76%–100% to realizing their strategy
- Organizational alignment (45%) and strategy development (37%) consume the most CEO energy
- 71% are increasing AI investment, while barriers in data, integration, and talent continue to limit its impact

The CEO's challenge has shifted from setting direction to building the systems required to deliver it.

Executive Summary

A gap is widening between CMO alignment and their perceived ability to drive growth.

As CEOs focus on execution, alignment across leadership is improving. CMOs are more trusted, integrated, and embedded in the business than ever before. However, this has not translated into stronger confidence in their ability to define and deliver new avenues of growth, particularly across both short-term performance and long-term brand and customer strategy.

- 79% of CMOs are strongly aligned with the CEO and Board, and 85% are seen as effective builders of trust
- Only 15% receive an “A” rating on overall job performance, while 53% are considered “average”
- 57% of CEOs view CMOs as execution leaders versus 43% strategic advisor
- 40% give CMOs a grade of “C” or lower in strategy and ability to drive company growth

CMOs are winning the relationship but losing on confidence to drive growth.

Executive Summary

Marketing is central to growth, but its role is narrowing toward execution.

Marketing remains critical to growth across sales, brand, and narrative. However, as expectations rise, organizations are increasingly prioritizing short-term, measurable performance, shaping marketing into an execution-focused function rather than a driver of long-term growth.

- 65% of CEOs cite sales growth as marketing's top mandate; narrative importance doubled from 23% to 47%
- Only 13% of CEOs are very confident in marketing's ability to demonstrate financial impact
- Perception has reversed: 60% now view marketing as a cost center, up from 35% last year (profit center fell from 65% to 40%)

In the push for proof, organizations are building marketing execution machines that lack the authority to drive growth.

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SECTION ONE

The CEO

The CEO

CEOs are increasingly confident in their leadership and strategy, but execution remains the primary constraint on growth.

CEOs possess high levels of personal leadership confidence regarding their influence on performance.

- 91% believe their personal influence meets or exceeds benchmarks from McKinsey
- A majority report greater confidence in company strategy over the past year
- 47% are at least halfway to realizing their strategy, with more CEOs reporting progress beyond three-quarters completion

Organizational alignment and strategy development consume the most CEO energy.

- 45% cite organizational alignment and 37% cite developing strategy as the most energy-intensive responsibilities

CEOs lead strategy, but rely on their executive team to shape it.

- 72% cite the executive leadership team as central to shaping strategy
- 58% identify themselves as CEO, reinforcing leadership ownership
- The CFO (82%) is the most trusted strategic advisor

Growth is constrained by internal execution challenges.

- Top barriers: talent gaps (39%), go-to-market execution (37%), siloed functions (35%)
- Reinforces that internal factors, not strategy and insights, are limiting growth

AI is driving both investment and complexity in execution.

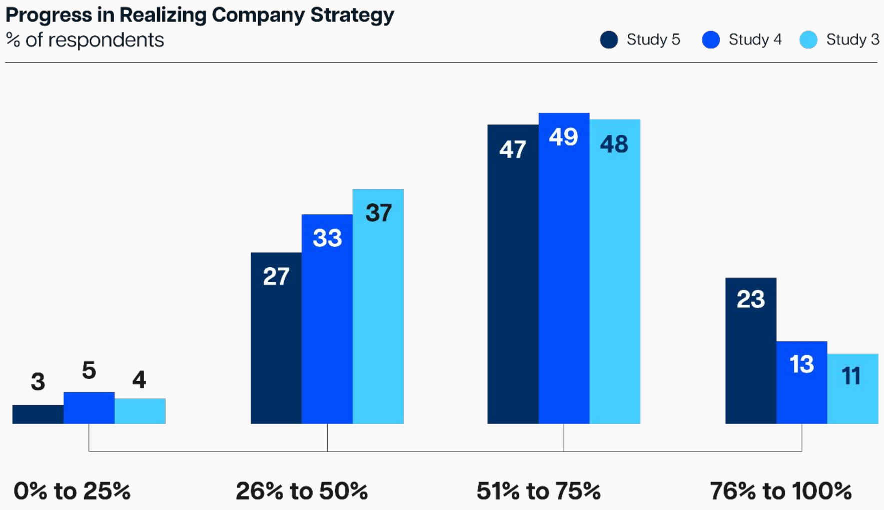
- 71% are increasing AI investment, focused on efficiency and growth
- AI is delivering the most measurable impact in customer service (55%) and operations (53%)
- Barriers preventing AI to deliver more value remain in data readiness, workflow integration, and talent shortages.

CEO confidence in their company strategy is rising.

Q: Over the past year, how has your confidence in your company's strategy changed?

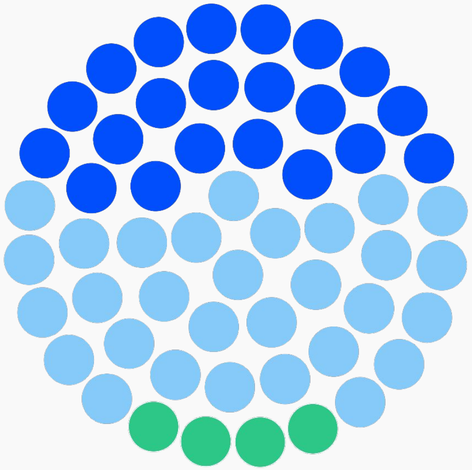
47% of CEOs are at least halfway to realizing their strategy. This year significantly more say they are over three-quarters to realizing their strategy.

Q: How close are you to realizing your company strategy?



91% of CEOs believe their personal influence on company performance meets or exceeds McKinsey benchmark of 45%.

Q: McKinsey research suggests CEO decisions account for roughly 45% of company performance. How would you rate the influence of your role on performance?



Perceived Impact of Leadership Role on Company Performance
% of respondents

41	More than 45%
50	About the same (~45%)
9	Less than 45%

CEOs spend most of their energy driving organizational alignment and strategy.

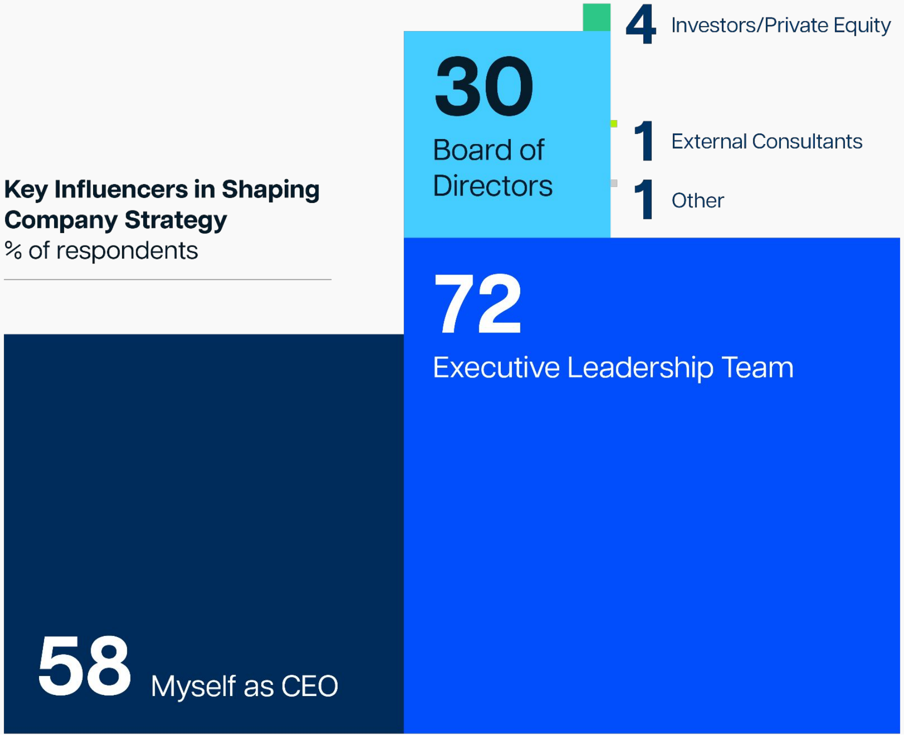
Q: Which aspects of your role consume the most energy today? Select the top two.

Aspects of Your Role That Consume the Most Energy Today
% of respondents

CEOs lead strategy, but rely heavily on their executive team to shape it.

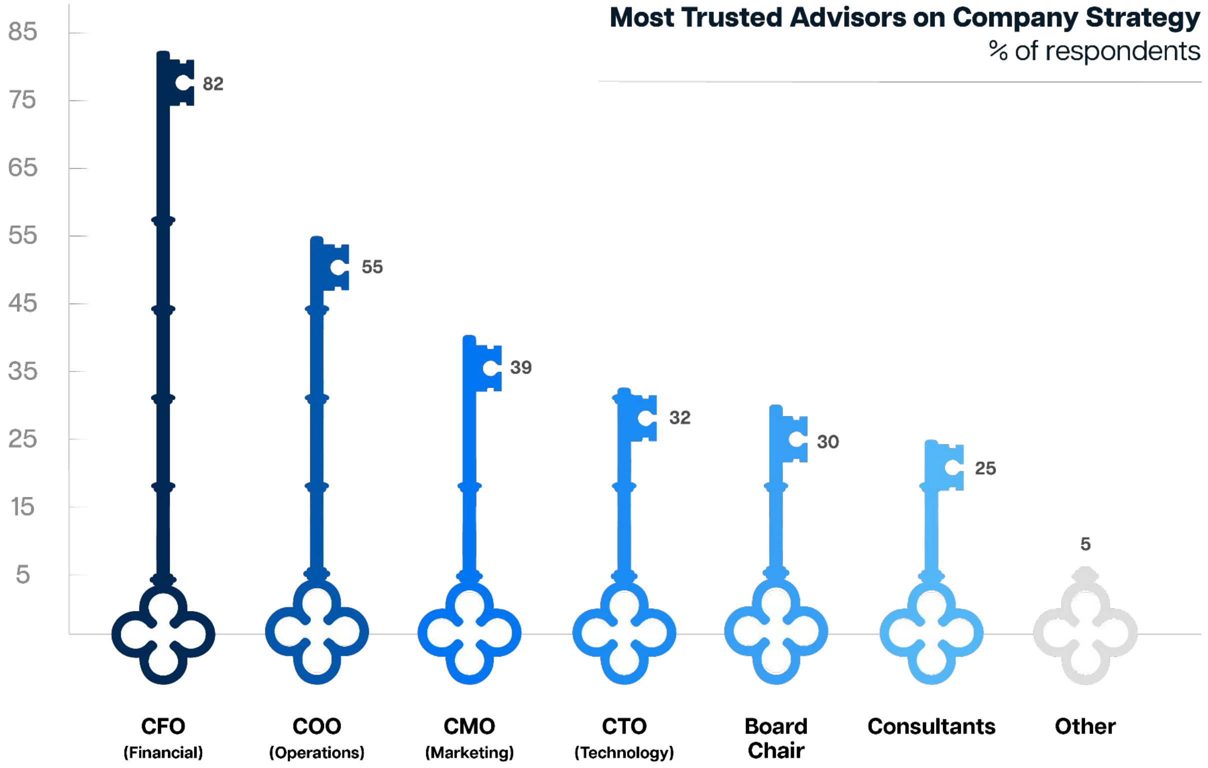
Q: Which individuals or groups play the most significant role in shaping your company's strategy? Select up to two.

Key Influencers in Shaping Company Strategy
% of respondents



Strategic trust is concentrated with the CFO, reinforcing the central role of financial leadership.

Q: Which individuals serve as your most trusted advisors on strategy?



Growth performance is where CEOs feel the most vulnerable.

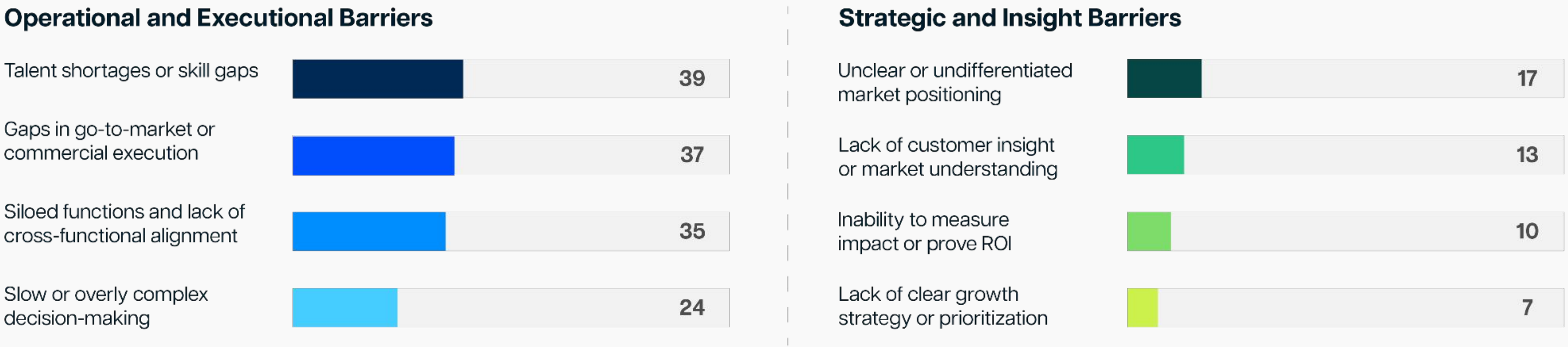
Q: In which area do you feel most personally exposed or vulnerable as CEO?

Area Where CEO Feels Most Personally Exposed/Vulnerable
% of respondents

Growth is constrained by execution, *not* strategy. Barriers to internal growth are predominantly talent gaps, go-to-market breakdowns, and siloed functions.

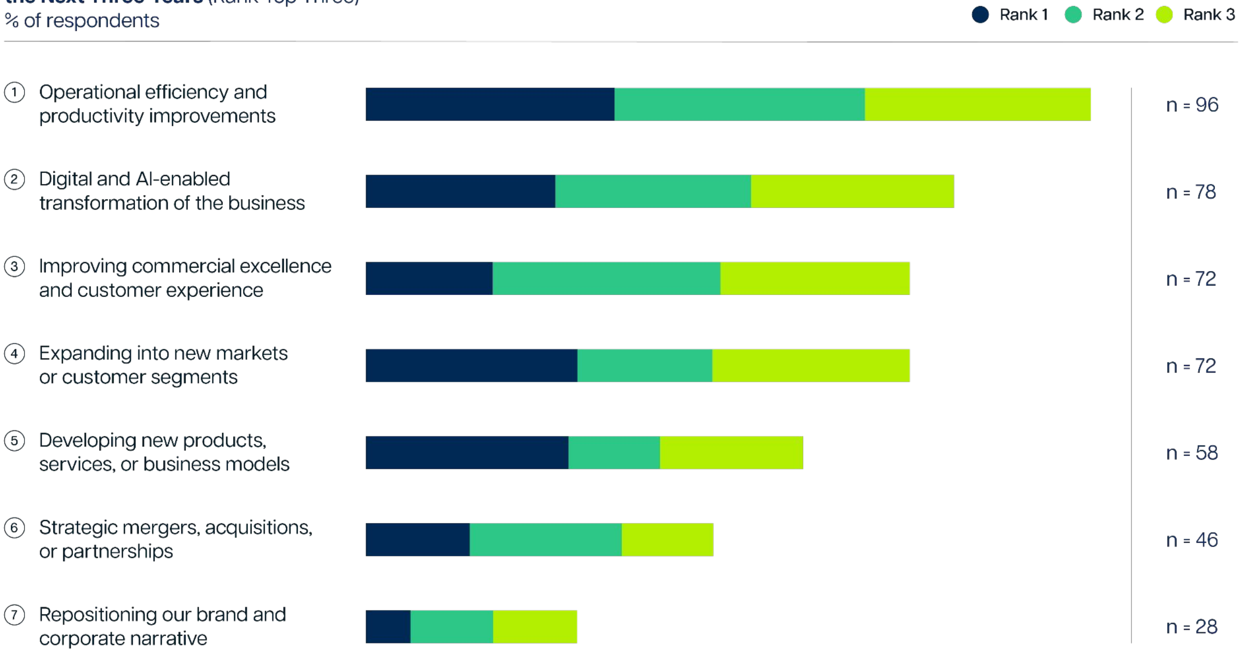
Q: What are the biggest internal barriers to growth today? Select up to two.

Biggest Internal Barriers to Growth Today (Select up to Two)
% of respondents



Top strategic growth investments shift to internal efficiency, productivity, and AI rather than traditional mergers and brand repositioning efforts.

Top Strategic Growth Investments for the Next Three Years (Rank Top Three)
% of respondents



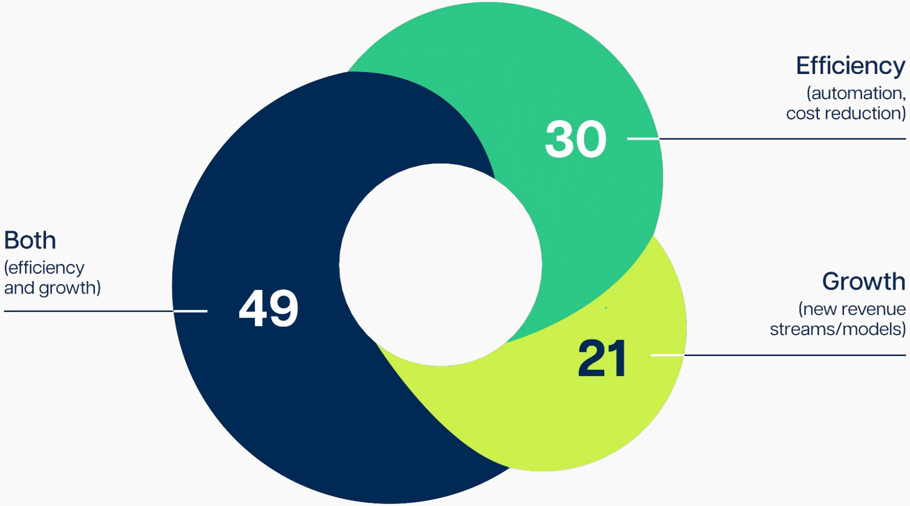
Q: Over the next three years, which strategic growth investments will be most important for your organization?

Rank your top three in order of importance.

71% of CEOs are increasing AI investments to simultaneously drive organizational efficiency and transform business growth.

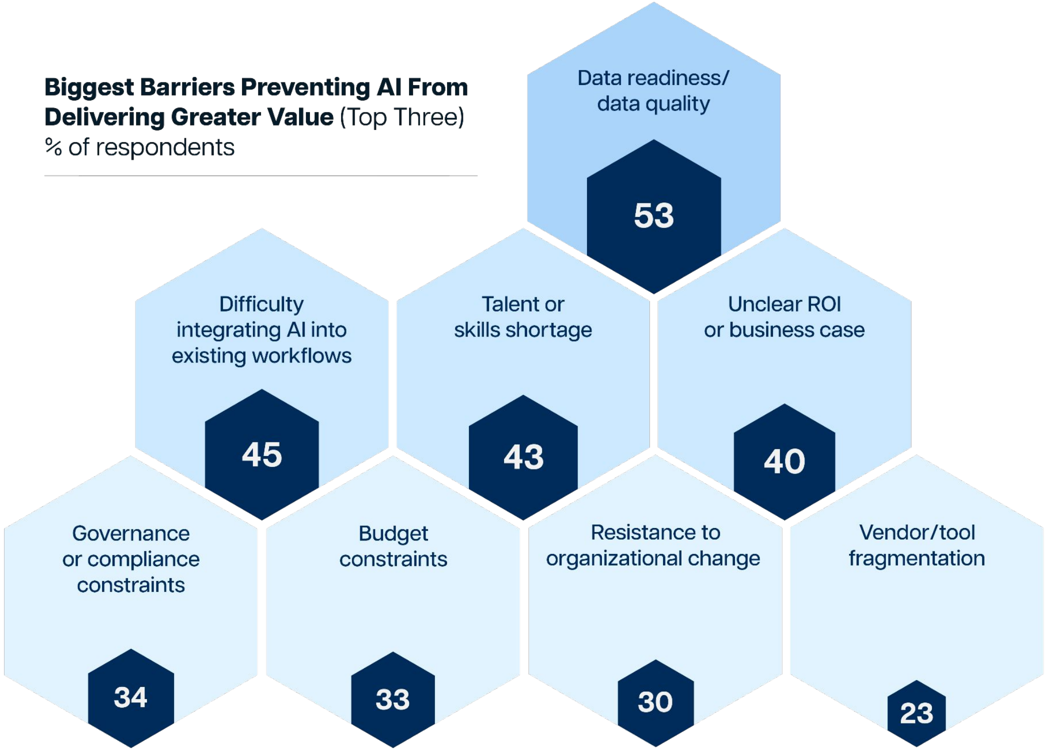
Q: What is the primary focus of your company's AI strategy?

Primary Focus of Your Company's AI Strategy
% of respondents



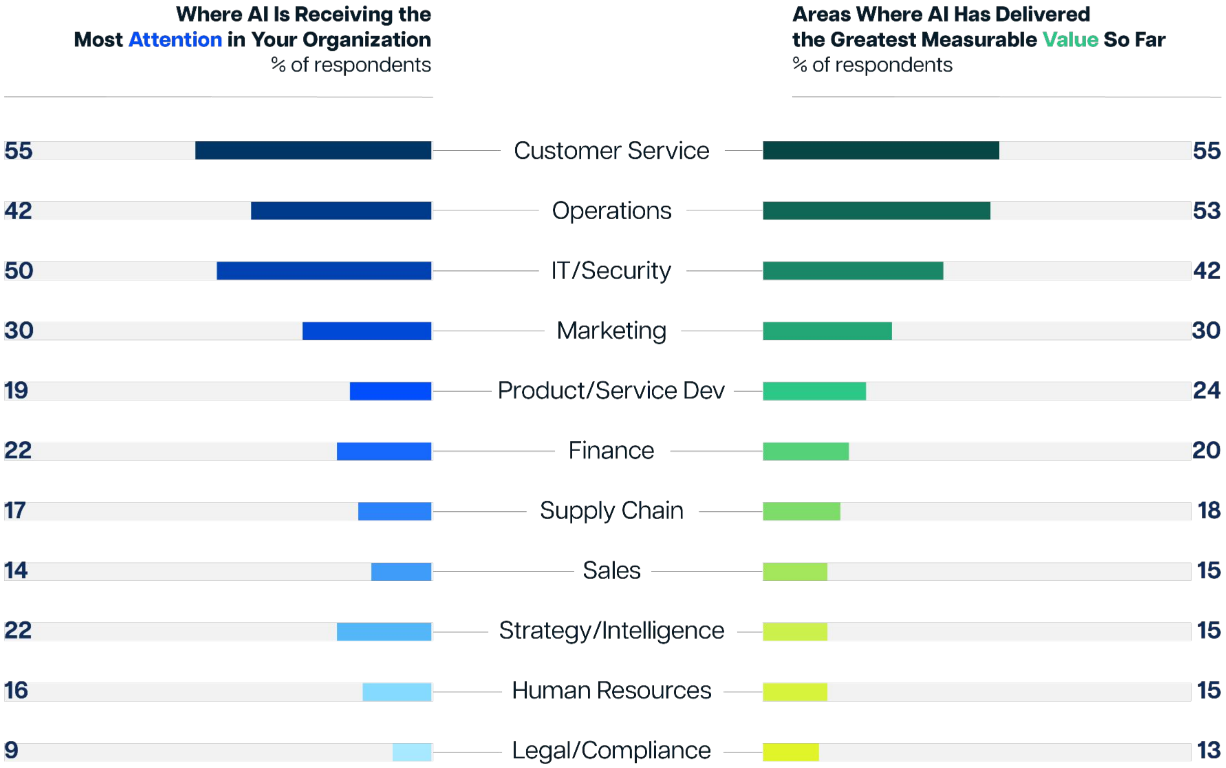
The biggest barriers preventing organizations from realizing greater value from AI are data readiness, workflow integration, and talent shortages.

Biggest Barriers Preventing AI From Delivering Greater Value (Top Three)
% of respondents



Q: What are the biggest barriers preventing AI from delivering more value? (Top 3)

Customer service and operations are delivering the most measurable AI value, while IT attracts heavy investment but lags in demonstrated returns.

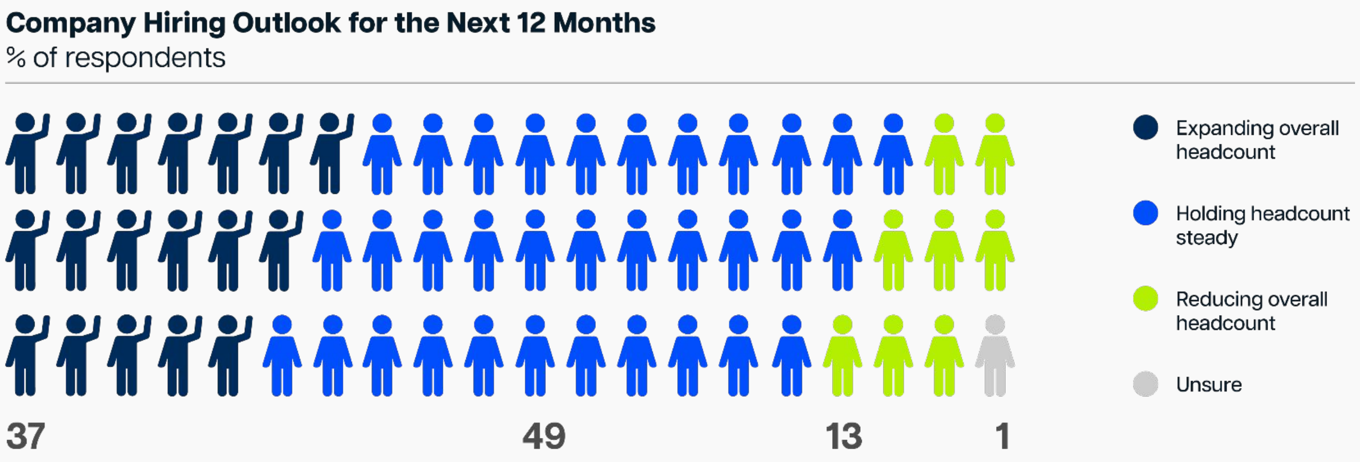


Q: Where is AI receiving the most attention in your organization? (Top 3)

Q: In which areas has AI delivered the greatest measurable value so far? (Top 3)

Nearly half of CEOs plan to hold headcount steady, while over a third prepare for organizational expansion.

Q: What best describes your company's hiring plans over the next 12 months?



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SECTION TWO

The Chief Marketing Officer

Chief Marketing Officers

CMOs are more aligned and integrated than ever, but are more often contributors to strategy than its primary drivers.

CMOs are increasingly embedded in the C-suite and actively contributing to enterprise strategy.

- 68% actively contribute or lead strategy, though only 8% are seen as leading it
- 74% of CEOs say CMOs push the organization forward, a strong rebound year-over-year

CMOs have reached record levels of alignment with the CEO and Board.

- 79% show strong commitment to the CEO and Board, the highest level in five years
- 71% prioritize company interests over their own function, reversing earlier skepticism
- 85% of CEOs say their CMO builds organizational trust, a consistent strength

CMOs are increasingly viewed as credible business and financial partners.

- 72% of CEOs are confident in their CMO's understanding of the P&L (up from 61%)
- 80% say CMOs understand board and internal dynamics, with 43% presenting regularly
- 67% report an effective CMO–CFO partnership on metrics and investment

Chief Marketing Officers

Despite stronger alignment, CMOs are not gaining confidence as drivers of growth.

Performance ratings highlight a gap between alignment and strategic impact.

- Only 15% of CMOs receive an “A”, while 32% are rated “C” or lower
- 53% are now rated “average,” a shift from prior years
- 40% are rated “C” or below in their ability to drive strategy and growth

CMOs are still more often viewed as execution leaders than strategic drivers.

- 57% of CEOs primarily view CMOs as execution leaders versus 43% as strategic advisors
- CEO–CMO discussions are increasingly focused on metrics and performance, with less emphasis on strategy

Perceptions of core leadership capabilities are declining.

- CEO ratings declined in problem-solving (from 57% to 49%), perspective-seeking (43%), and long-term vision (47%)
- Overall CEO confidence in the CMO role has declined to 43%

Expectations for the role are expanding faster than perceived capability.

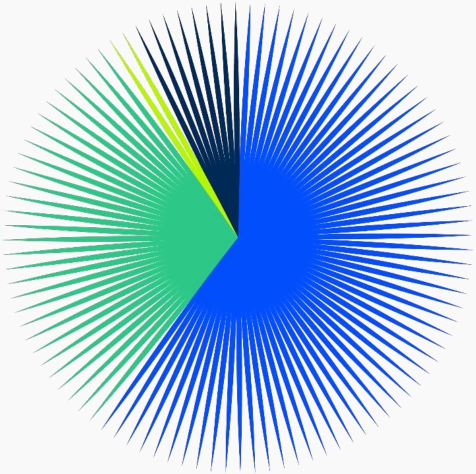
- CMOs are held 4x more accountable for AI ROI than any other executive
- Yet 46% of CEOs rate their AI capability as “C” or lower

Execution pressure extends beyond internal teams.

- Most organizations use a hybrid model (70% both in-house and external)
- CEOs rate external partners as producing stronger work (33% versus 22%)

CMOs are active contributors in shaping enterprise strategy with their CEO.

Q: How involved is your CMO in shaping enterprise strategy?

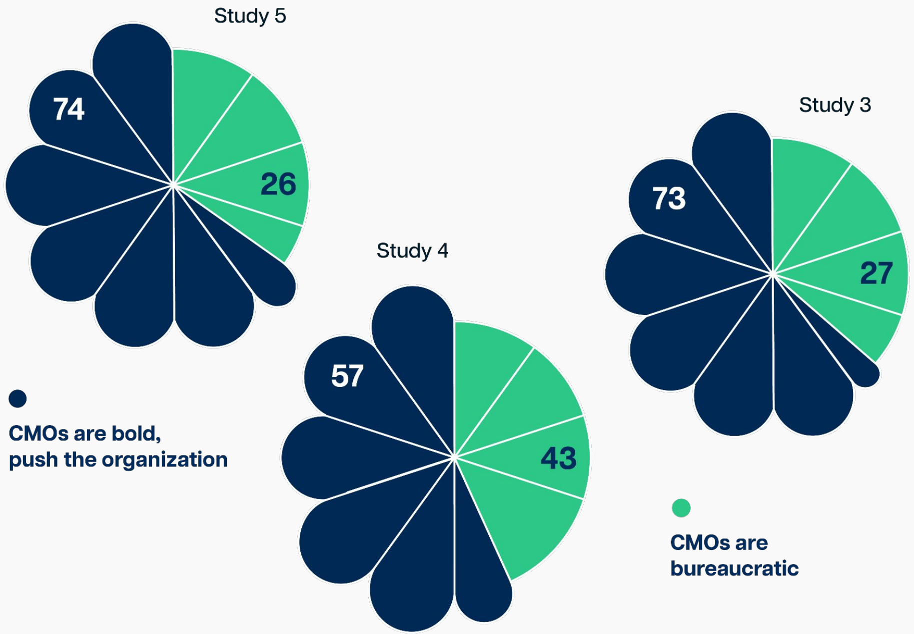


CMO Involvement in Shaping Enterprise Strategy
% of respondents

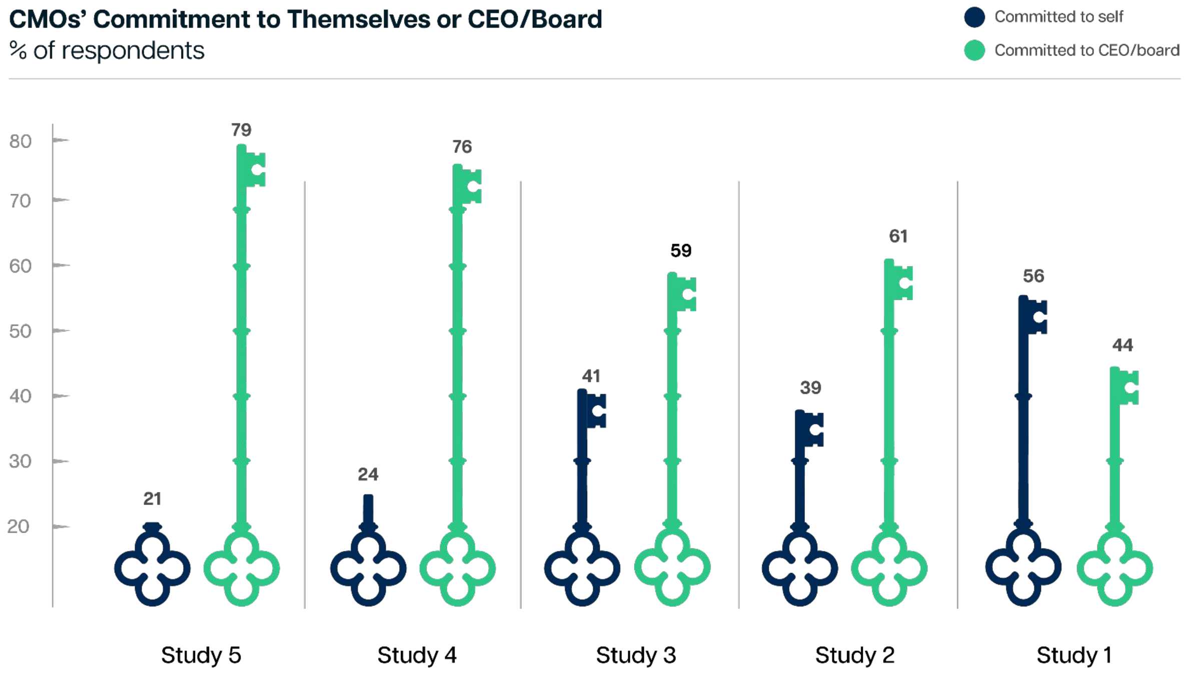
8	Leads strategy
60	Actively contributes
30	Provides input when asked
2	Not involved in strategy

74% of CEOs say CMOs push the organization forward, a sharp rebound from last year's study.

Q: Based on your experience, which description better reflects CMOs?



CMOs continue to show strong commitment to the CEO and Board, the highest of five studies at 79%.



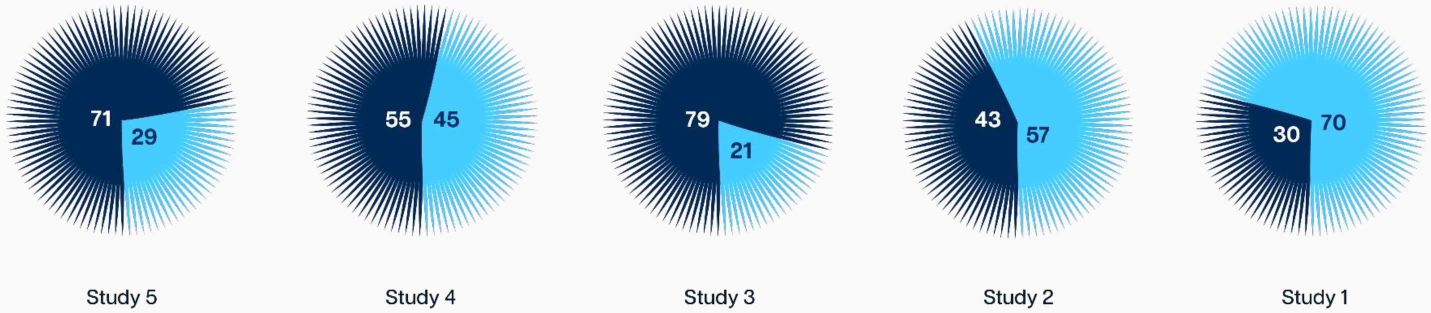
Q: Based on your experience, which description better reflect CMOs?

71% of CEOs believe CMOs prioritize CEO interests over their own, reversing early skepticism on their loyalty.

Q: Based on your experience, which descriptions better reflects CMOs?

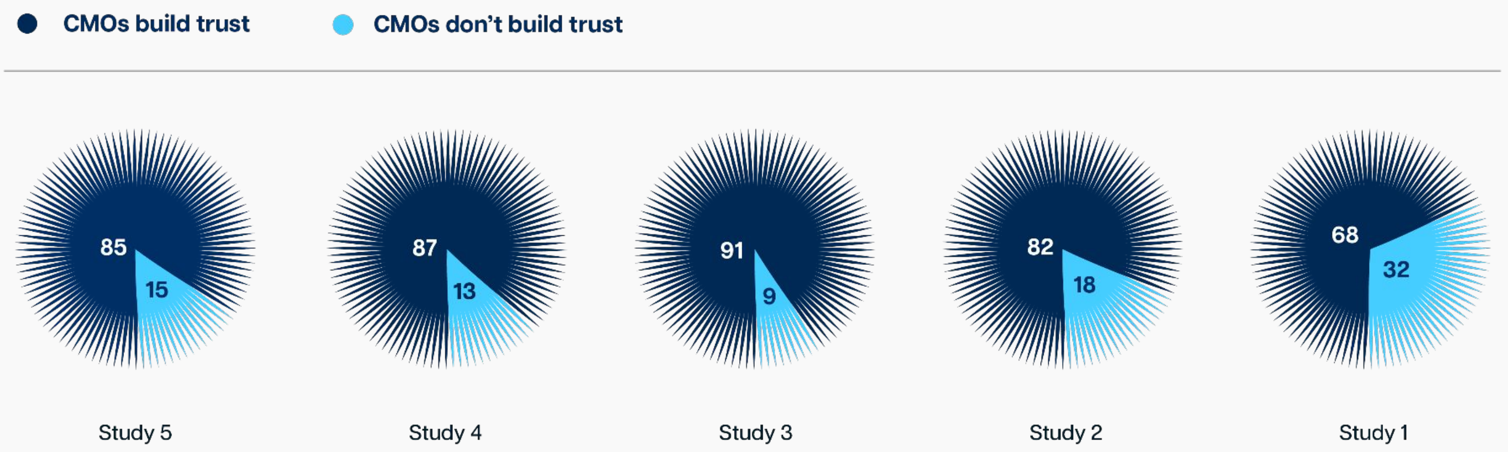
CMOs focused on CEO interests

CMOs focus on their own interests



85% of CEOs believe their CMO builds trust, a consistent theme over the last four years.

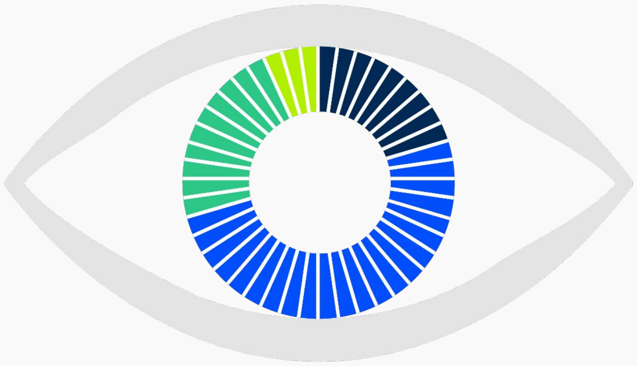
Q: Based on your experience, which description better reflects CMOs?



Two-thirds of CEOs believe there is an effective partnership between their CFO and CMO on aligning metrics and investment, although there is room for improvement.

Q: How effective is the partnership between your CMO and CFO in aligning metrics and investment?

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the CMO–CFO Partnership in Aligning Metrics and Investment
% of respondents



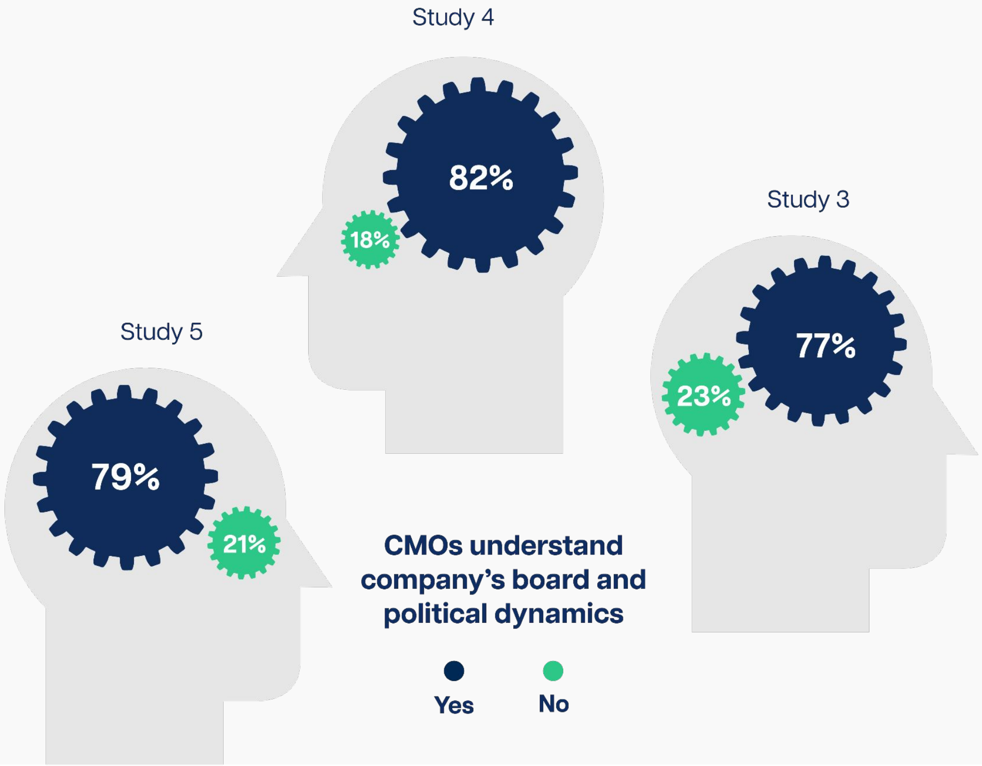
19 Very effective
48 Somewhat effective
25 Neutral
8 Not very effective

CEO confidence in CMOs' financial fluency is rising, with 72% saying their marketing leader understands the P&L and balance sheet.

Q: Do you believe your CMO understands your company's P&L and balance sheet?

79% of CEOs say their CMO understands the Board and internal political dynamics.

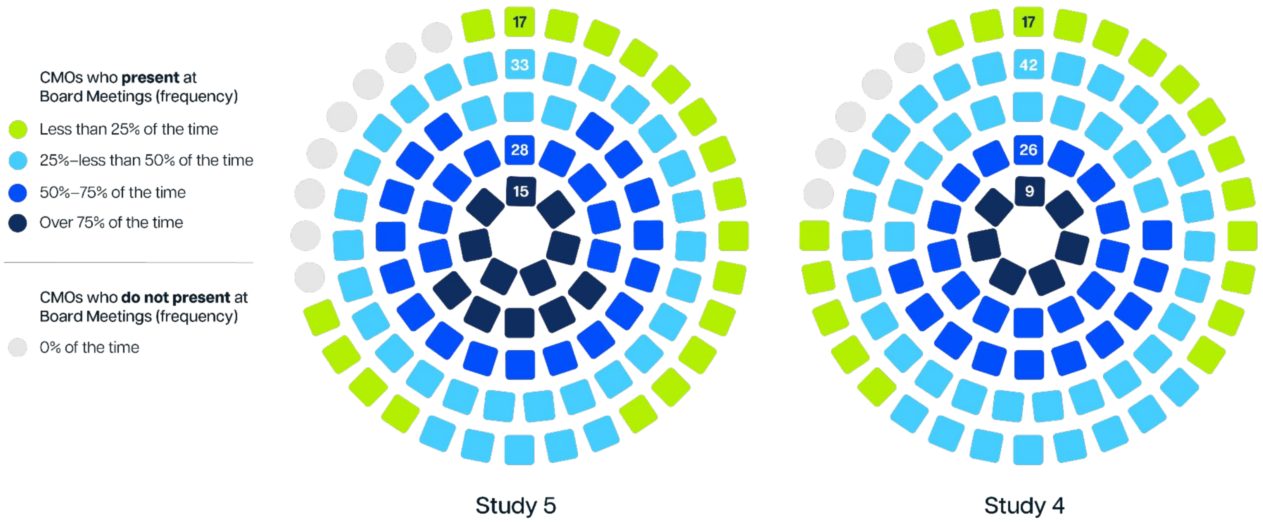
Q: Does your CMO understand your company's Board and the political dynamics?



CMO visibility in boardrooms is increasing—43% present at least half of the time.

Frequency of CMO Presentations at Board Meetings

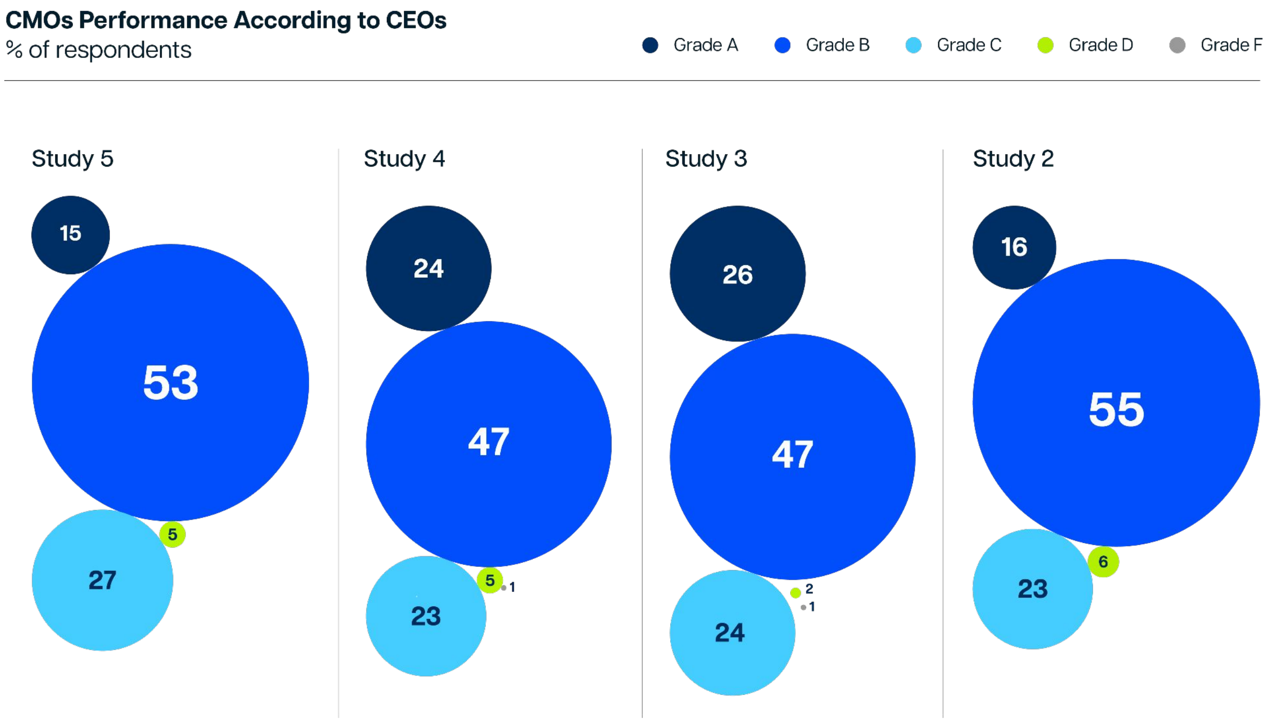
% of respondents



Q: How frequently does your CMO present at Board meetings?

However, top grades for CMOs on their role performance declined sharply this year, with only 15% of CEOs awarding an “A”; 32% got lower than a “C.”

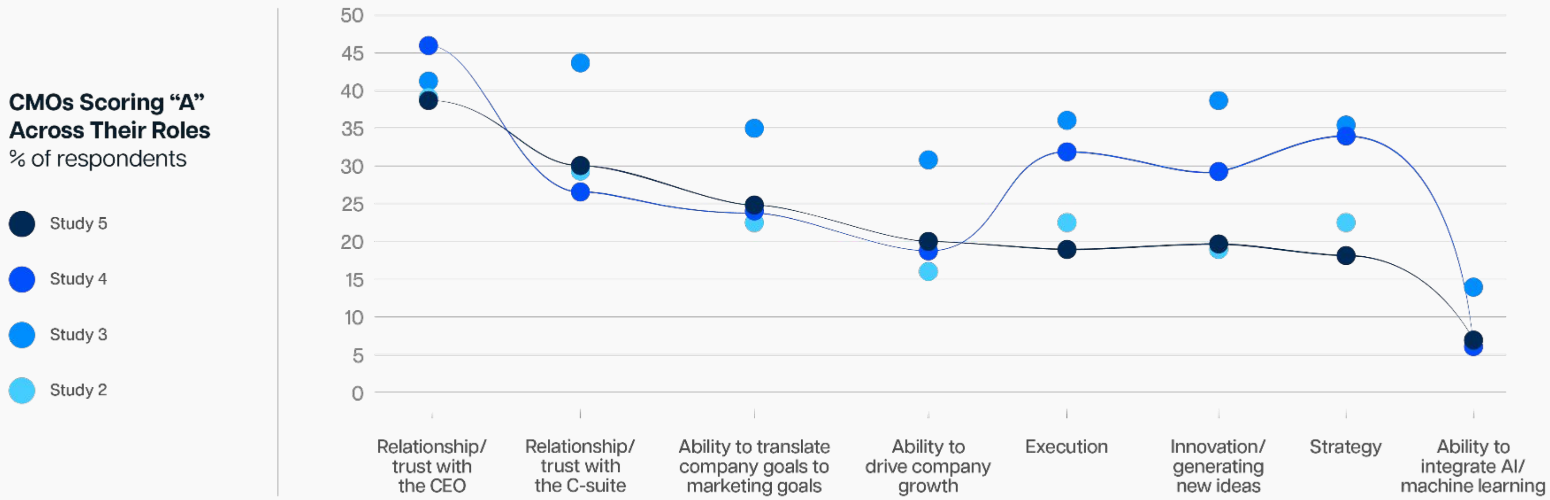
Q: Please grade your CMO on their overall performance in their role, using the academic scale where "A" is the highest grade and "F" is the lowest.



Top-tier CMO grades have declined across key capabilities, with strengths concentrated in relationships rather than strategy, innovation, execution, or AI. In fact, 40% of CEOs give CMOs a grade of "C" or lower in strategy and ability to drive company growth.

Q: Please grade your CMO against the following criteria.

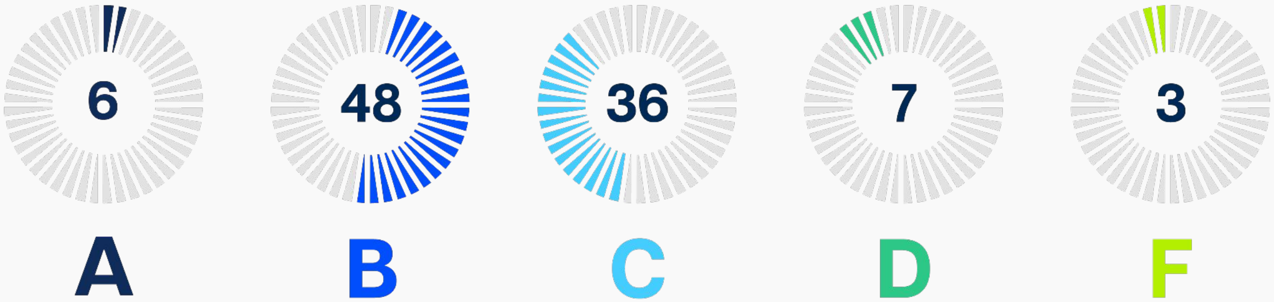
CMOs Scoring "A" Across Their Roles
% of respondents



Most CEOs view their CMO's AI capability as solid but not exceptional, with nearly half assigning a grade of "C" or lower.

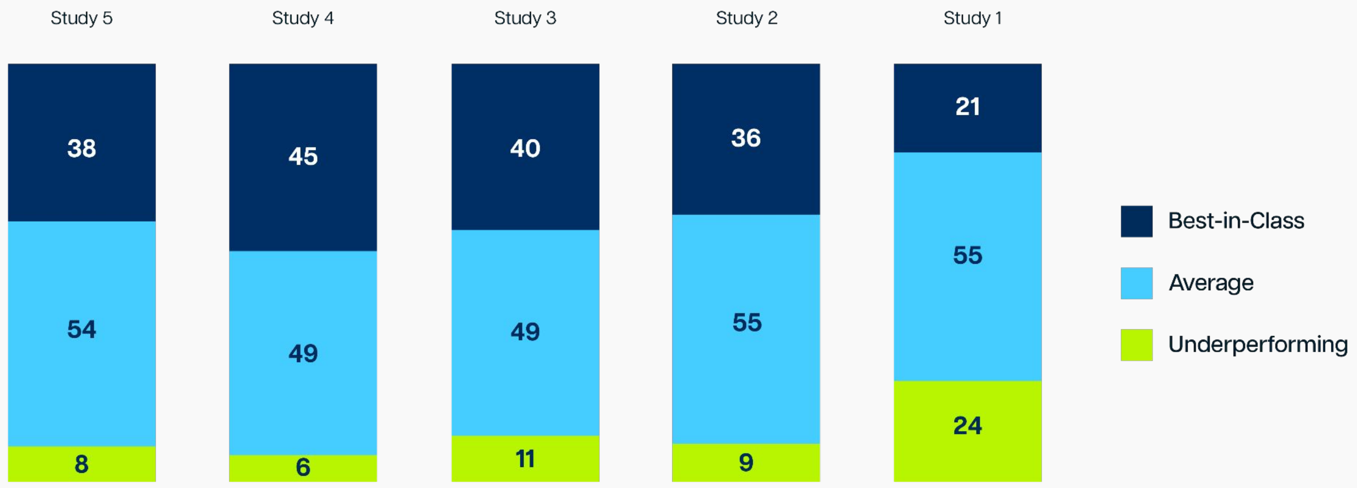
Q: How would you grade your CMO's AI savviness?

Grade of Your CMO's AI Savviness
% of respondents



“Best in Class” ratings have declined to 38%, while 54% of CEOs now view their CMOs as “Average.”

Q: Do you believe your CMO is...?

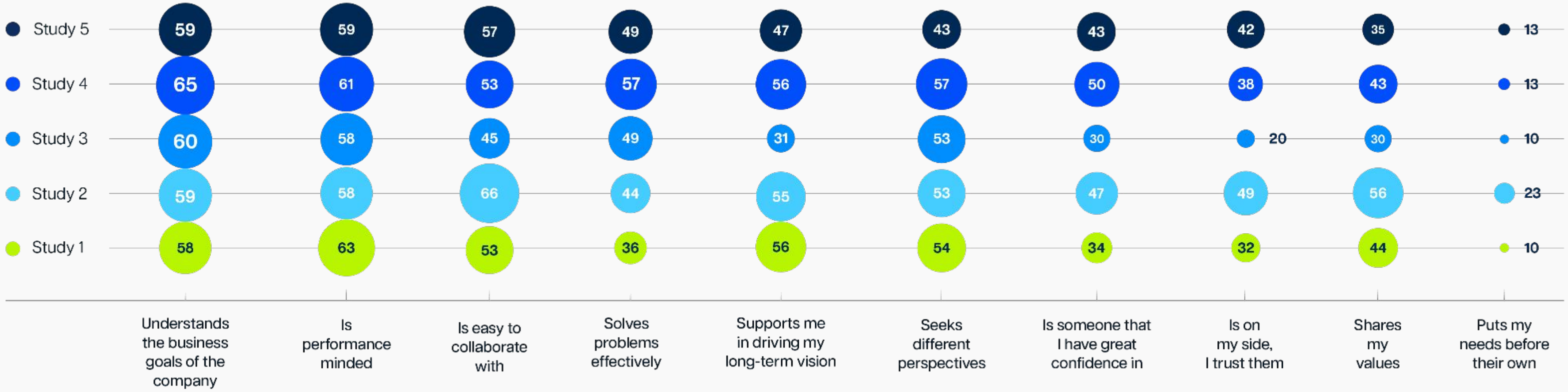


CEO perceptions of CMOs have shifted toward business alignment, but declined in problem-solving, perspective-seeking, and overall confidence.

Q: Based on your experience, which statement better reflects your perception of CMOs? Please select the option that aligns most closely with your view for each characteristic.

CEOs Who Select the Following Statements as True of Their CMO

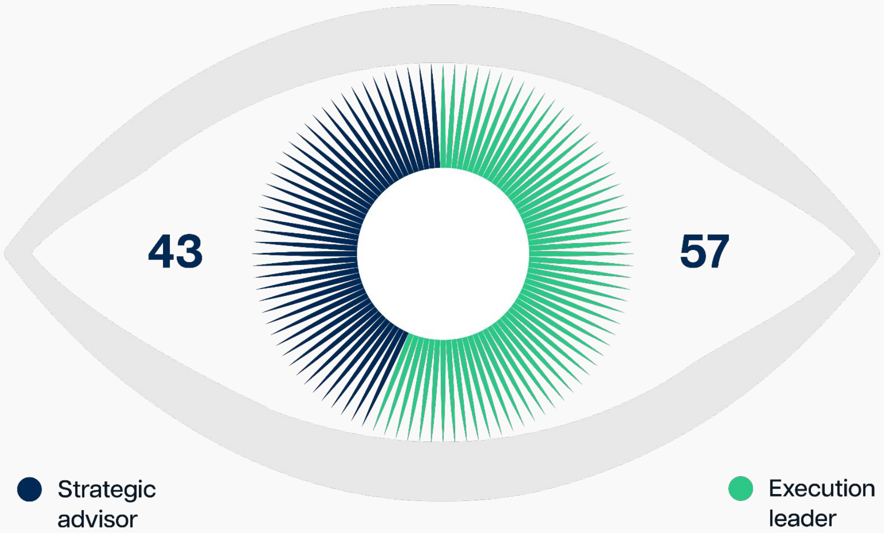
% of respondents



The CMO role remains tilted toward execution rather than strategy, in the eyes of CEOs.

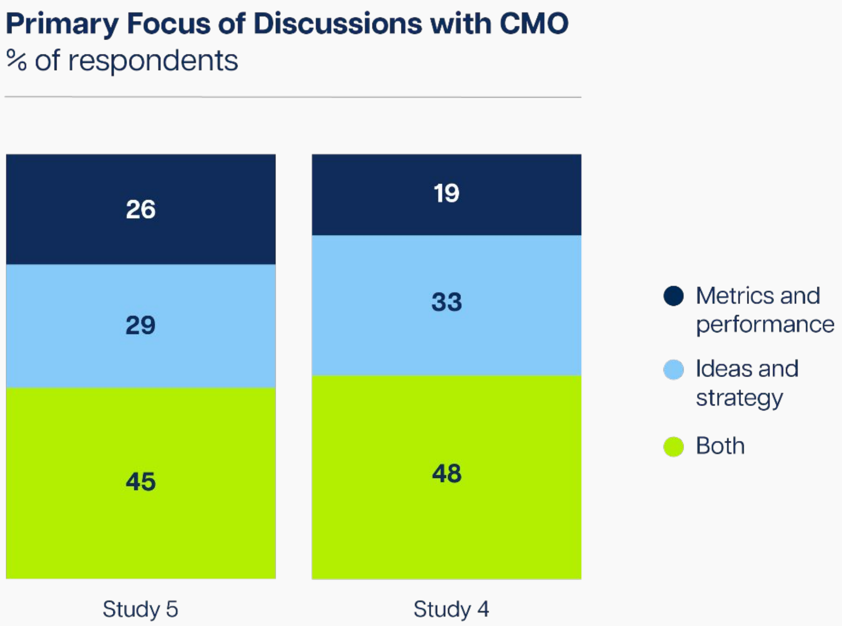
Q: How do you primarily view your Chief Marketing Officer's role?

Primary Perspective on the Role of Your CMO
% of respondents



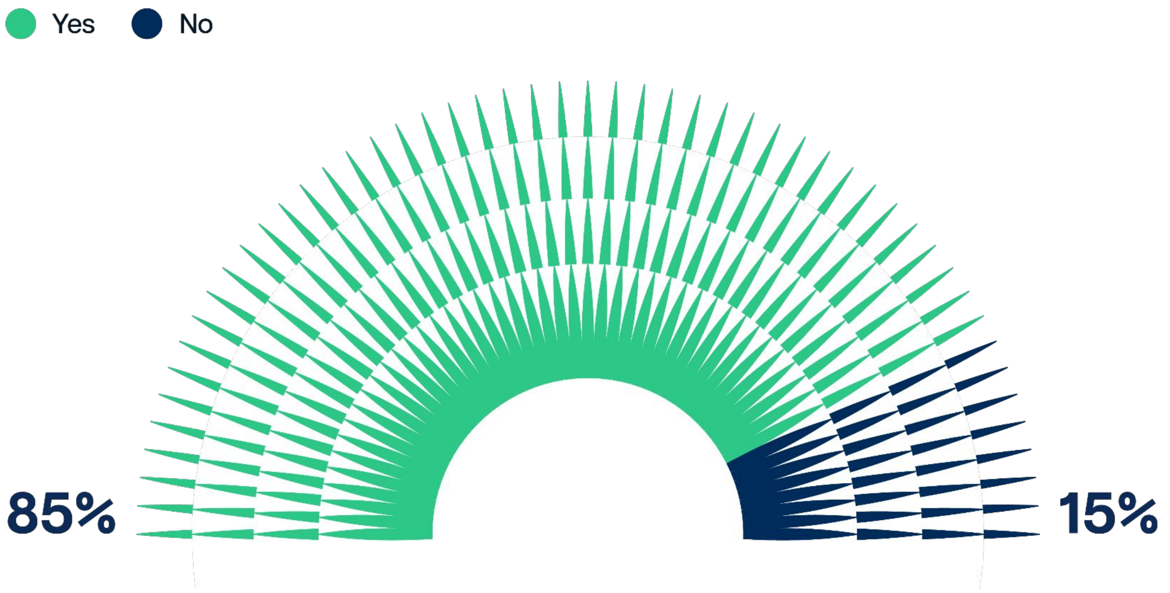
Discussions with CMOs are shifting toward performance and metrics, with slightly less emphasis on ideas and strategy year-over-year.

Q: What is the primary focus of your discussions with your CMO?



85% of CEOs believe the CMO role will still exist five years from now.

Future Existence of the CMO Role in the Next Five Years
% of respondents

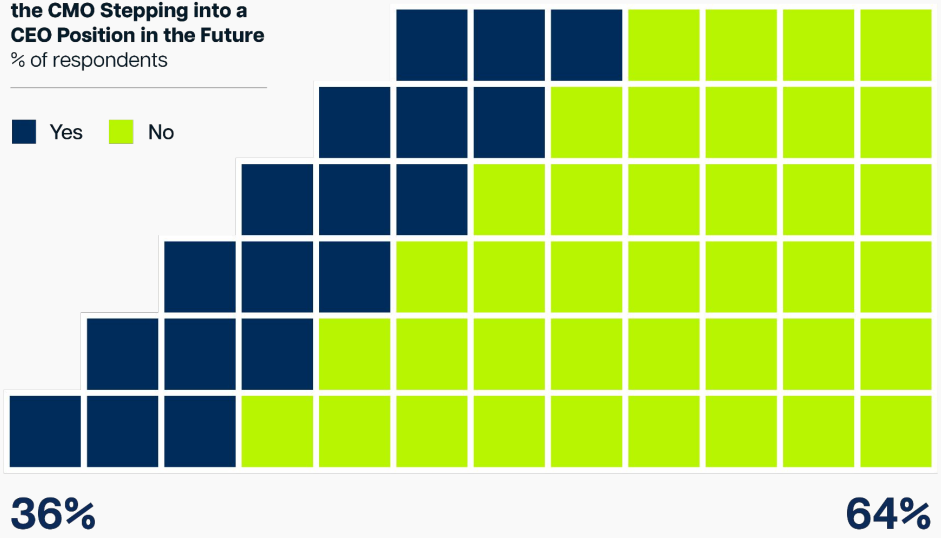


Q: Do you believe the CMO role will exist 5 years from now?

Just over one-third of CEOs believe their CMO could step into the CEO role in the future.

Q: Do you believe your CMO has the potential to step into a CEO role in the future?

Perceived Potential of the CMO Stepping into a CEO Position in the Future
% of respondents

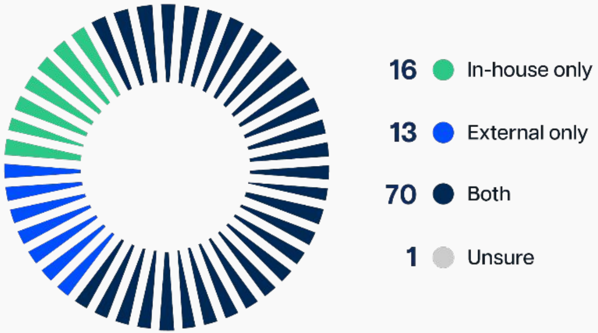


The hybrid marketing model prevails: most organizations combine in-house and external teams, yet CEOs more often rate external partners as producing stronger work (33% vs. 22%).

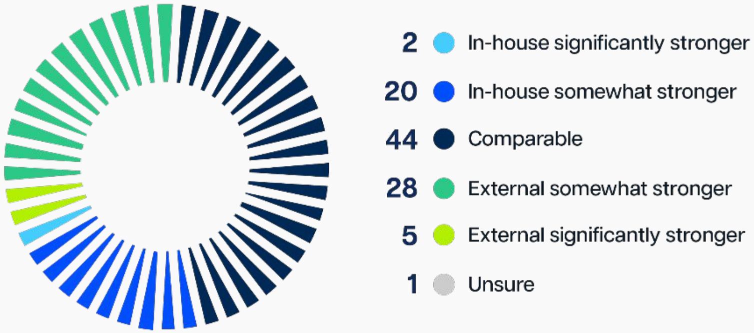
Q: What is the primary role of external agencies/consultants within your marketing organization?

Q: How would you compare the quality of work between in-house teams and external agencies/consultants?

Primary Role of External Consultants in Marketing
% of respondents



Comparison of Work Quality: In-House Teams vs. External Consultants
% of respondents



SECTION THREE

The Marketing Organization

The Marketing Organization

Marketing remains central to growth, but expectations are rising faster than confidence in its impact.

Growth remains the primary mandate, with rising emphasis on brand and narrative.

- 65% of CEOs cite sales growth as marketing's top priority, followed by improving brand reputation
- The need to transform company narrative doubled year-over-year (from 23% to 47%)

CEOs remain confident in marketing's role, but not overwhelmingly so.

- 59% of CEOs are confident in marketing's contribution to growth
- Only 15% are extremely confident, indicating limited strong conviction

Marketing remains relevant, but intensity of belief is declining.

- Marketing is still seen as relevant, but "much more relevant" responses declined (from 33% to 21%)
- This indicates a softening conviction rather than a loss of importance

Financial perceptions of the function have flipped from a profit center to a cost center as capability ratings decline.

- CEO perception has reversed from profit center to cost center (from 35% to 60%)
- Only 35% rate the marketing capability as best-in-class, continuing a steady two-year decline toward "average" ratings

The Marketing Organization

Marketing is strong in execution, but under pressure to prove its impact at the enterprise level.

Marketing is strongest in execution, but less effective in enterprise influence.

- Marketing effectiveness as a partner is rated highest with customers (45%) and employees (41%), while influence remains significantly weaker with the media (11%) and investors (7%)

Teams are viewed as agile, with a modest shift toward executional discipline.

- 56% describe marketing as methodical and analytical versus 44% creative
- Teams are valued for speed and predictability over experimentation

Measurement is established, but financial impact remains unclear.

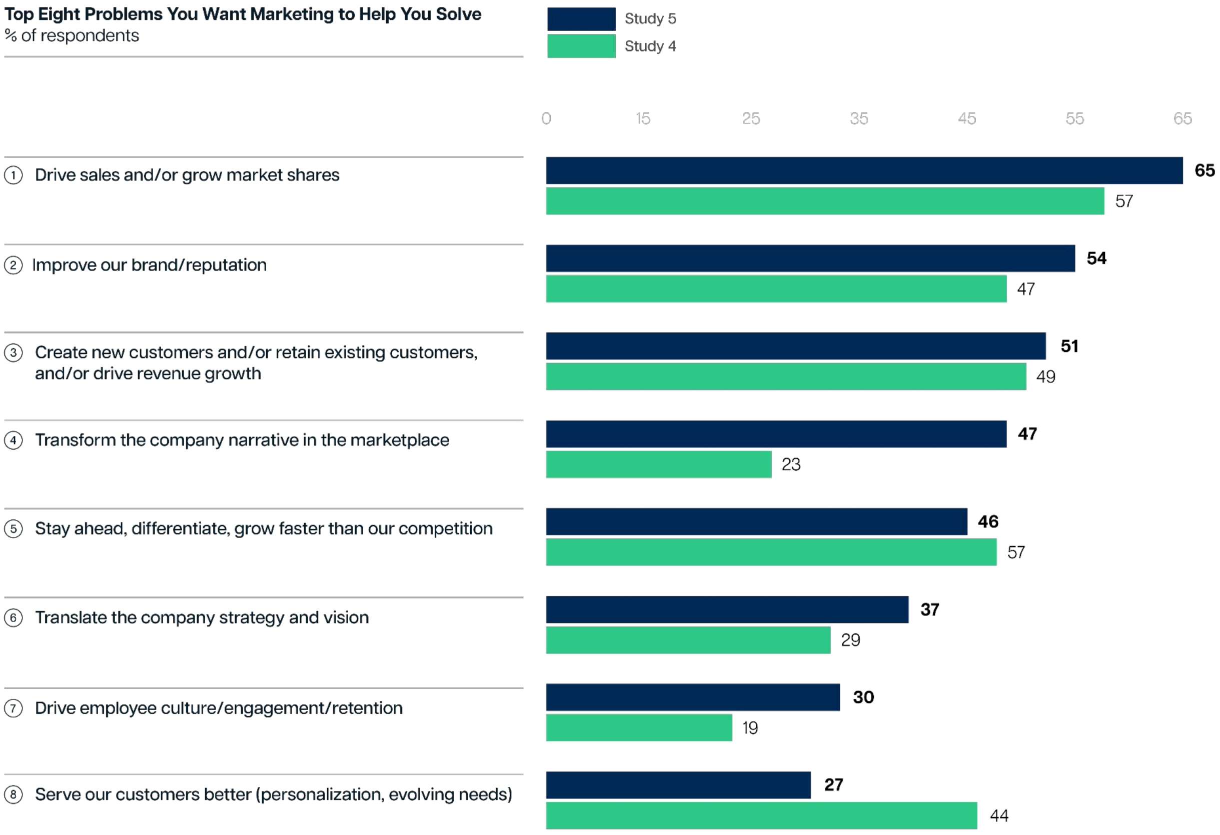
- Metrics are widely aligned with business goals (70%+)
- Yet only 13% of CEOs are very confident in marketing's ability to prove financial lift

AI is raising expectations, but remains focused on execution.

- 54% of CEOs expect AI to drive both growth and efficiency
- Most expect measurable impact within 6–12 months
- Adoption is concentrated in analytics (69%), CX (67%), and content (63%), with lower use in strategy (36%)

Sales growth remains marketing's top mandate for 65% of CEOs. Improving brand reputation follows.

Transforming company narrative doubled year-over-year.



Q: Which problems do you most want marketing to help you solve? Select only 5 (out of list of 16).

Over half of CEOs are confident that marketing can contribute to growth.

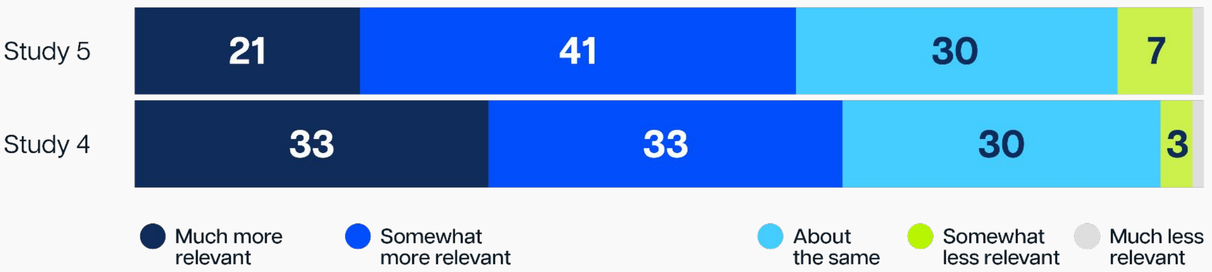
Confidence in Marketing's Meaningful Contribution to Company Growth
% of respondents

Q: How confident are you that marketing contributes meaningfully to your company's growth?

Marketing remains broadly relevant, but strong conviction has softened as "much more relevant" responses fell.

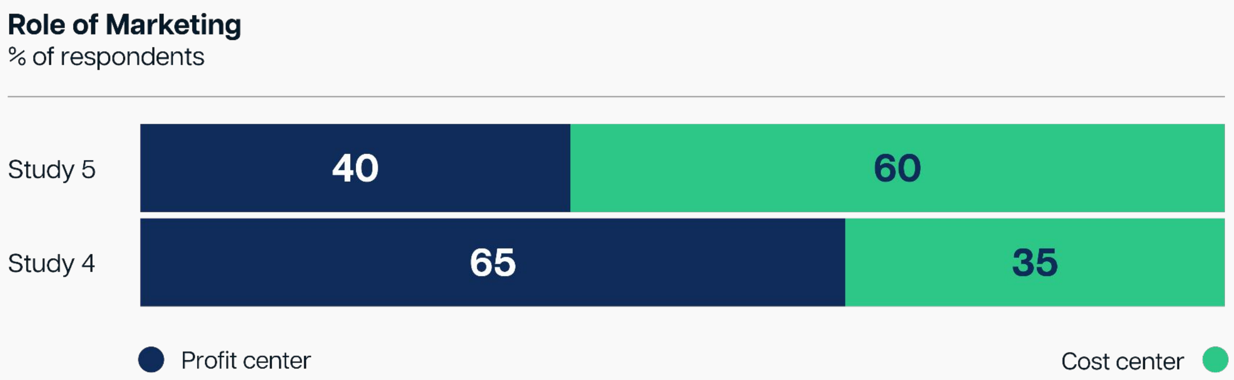
Q: Compared to three years ago, how has the relevance of marketing to your business changed?

Relevancy of Marketing
% of respondents

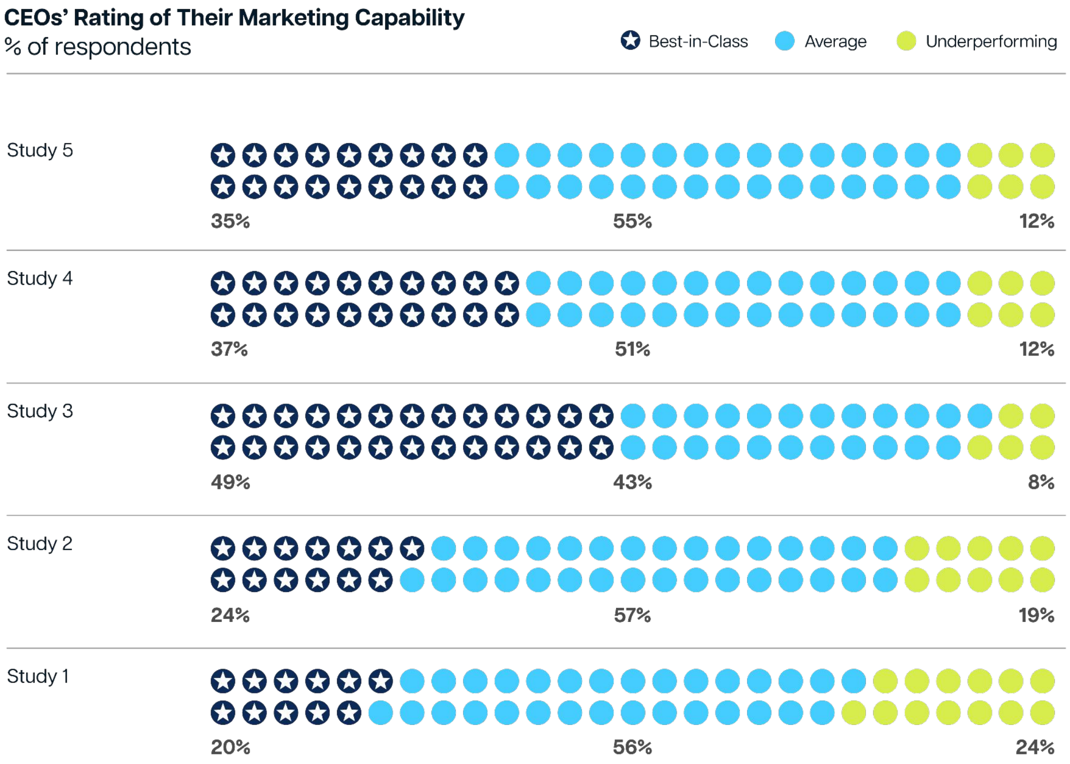


CEO perception of marketing has reversed from a profit center to a cost center in the last year.

Q: In your organization today, is marketing viewed more as a cost center or a profit center?



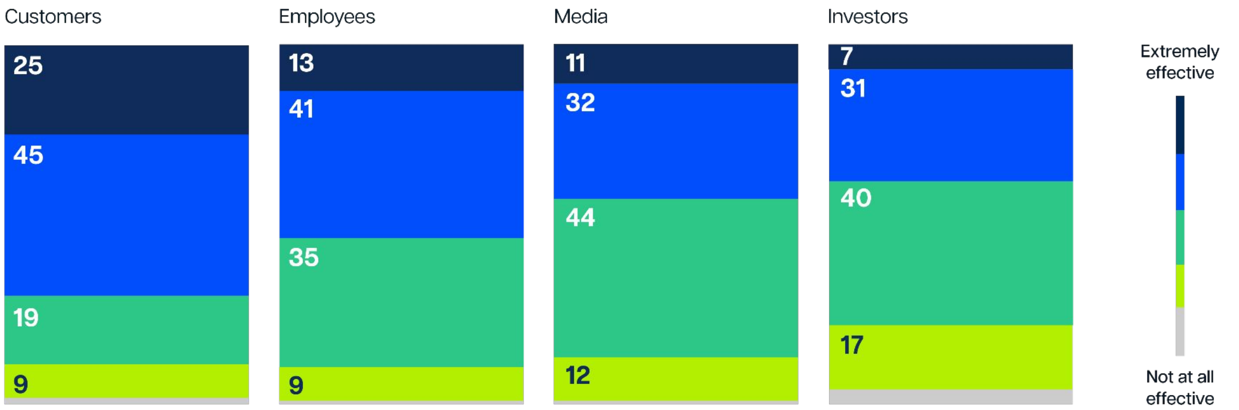
Only 35% of CEOs now rate marketing capability as "best-in-class," marking a steady two-year decline as more organizations drift toward average ratings.



Q: Do you believe your company's marketing capability is Best-in-class, Average, or Underperforming?

Marketing effectiveness is rated highest with customers and employees, while CEOs see significantly weaker influence with investors and media audiences.

Effectiveness of Marketing as a Strategic Partner and Change Agent Across Key Audiences
% of respondents

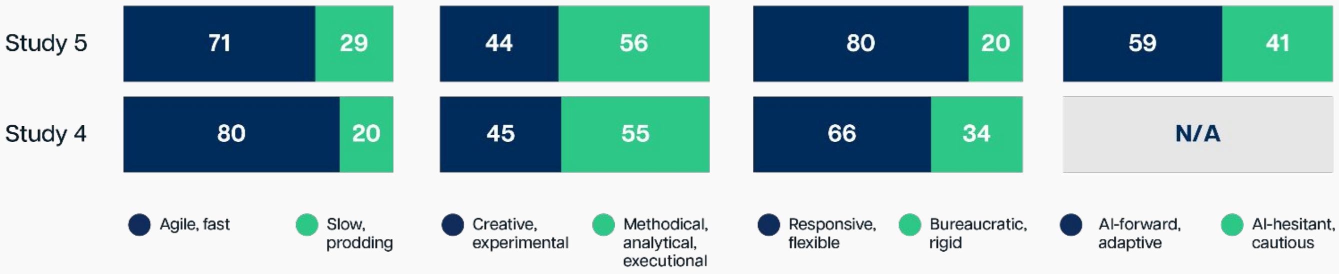


Q: How effective is marketing as your partner/change agent to help drive your company's strategy to the following audiences?

Marketing teams are widely viewed as agile and responsive, but slightly more CEOs describe them as methodical and execution-oriented.

Q: Which descriptions best capture the culture of your marketing organization?

Description of the Culture of Your Marketing Department
% of respondents



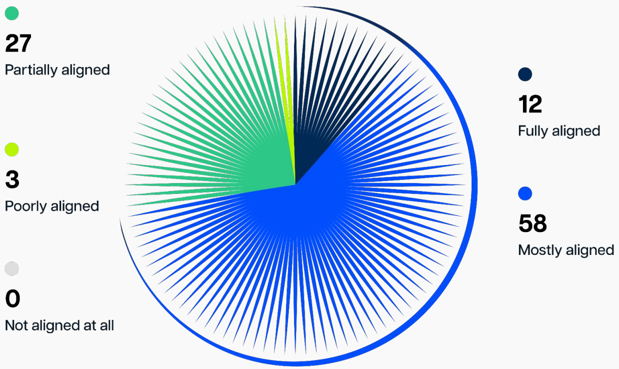
Marketing metrics are widely reviewed and largely aligned with business goals, yet CEO confidence in marketing's ability to prove financial lift remains limited.

Q: Do you regularly review a clear and consistent set of metrics with your marketing team?

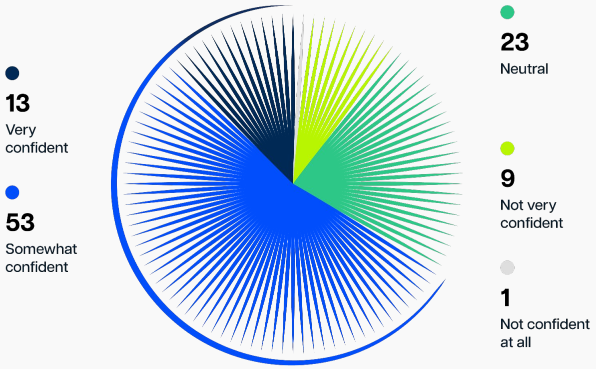
Q: How well aligned are marketing's metrics with your company's primary business metrics?

Q: How confident are you that marketing can demonstrate the incremental financial lift from its investments?

Alignment of Marketing Metrics with Primary Business Metrics
% of respondents



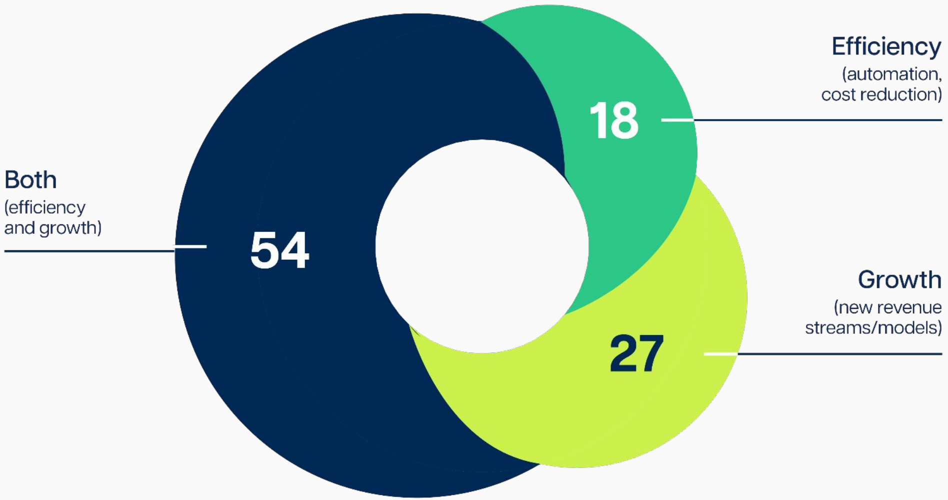
Confidence in Marketing's Ability to Demonstrate Incremental Financial Impact
% of respondents



AI in marketing is not just about cost reduction; most CEOs expect it to simultaneously drive efficiency and growth. This is significantly different than 30% of CEOs who think the primary focus of their AI strategy is efficiency.

Q: When you think about AI in marketing, is your primary intent focused on growth, efficiency, or both?

Primary Intent for AI in Marketing: Growth, Efficiency, or Both
% of respondents



Most CEOs expect AI to deliver measurable marketing impact within the next year.

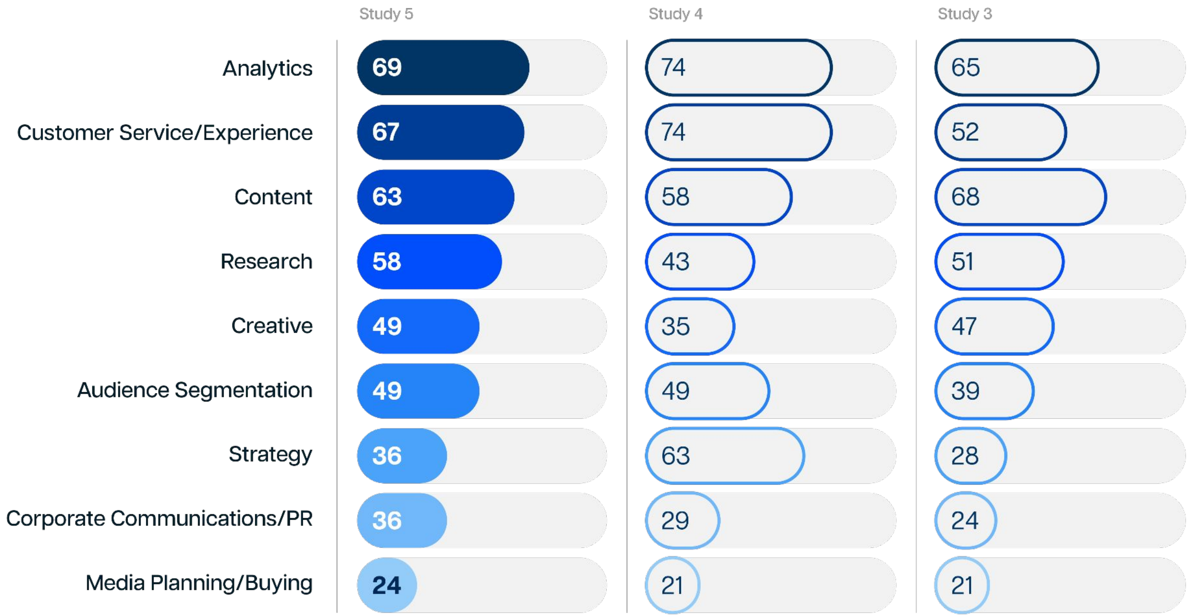
Q: When do you expect AI to deliver measurable business impact within marketing?

Expected Timeline for AI to Deliver Measurable Business Impact Within Marketing
% of respondents

10	Already delivering measurable impact today
14	Within the next 6 months
38	6–12 months
29	12–24 months
9	More than 24 months

AI adoption across marketing continues to expand, but its use remains concentrated in analytics and customer-facing functions rather than core strategy.

AI Integration within Marketing
% of respondents



Q: Where is AI currently being integrated within marketing? Grid: Yes, integrated; No, not integrated; I'm not sure

Thank you

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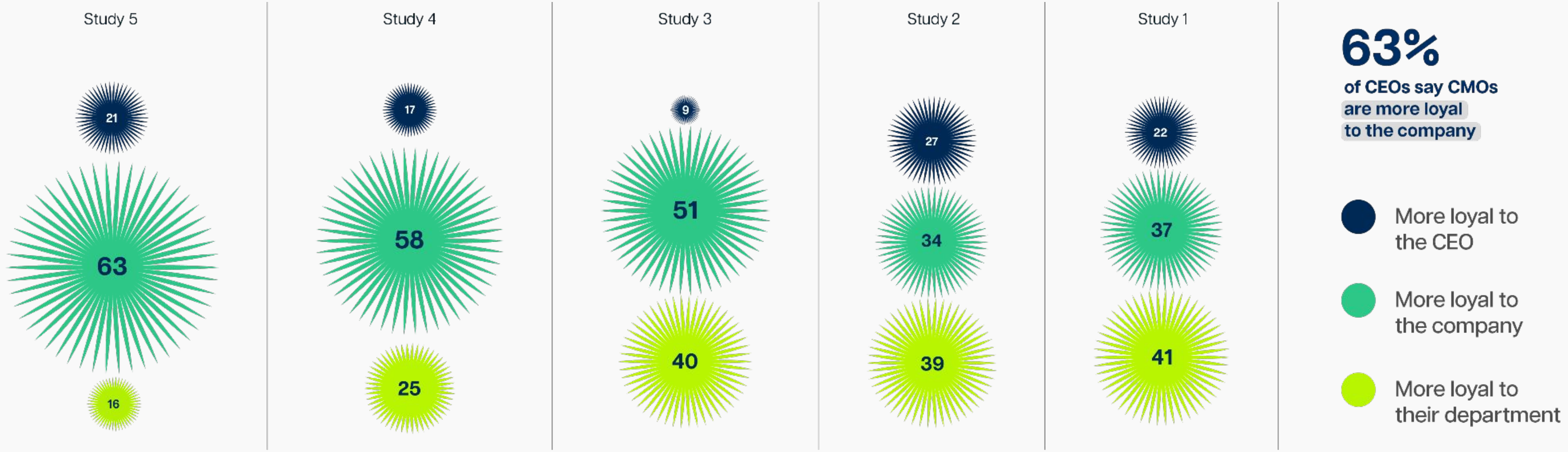
Appendix

CMO loyalty makes a significant shift over the last two years from their department to the company and CEO.

Q: Where does your CMO's primary loyalty lie?

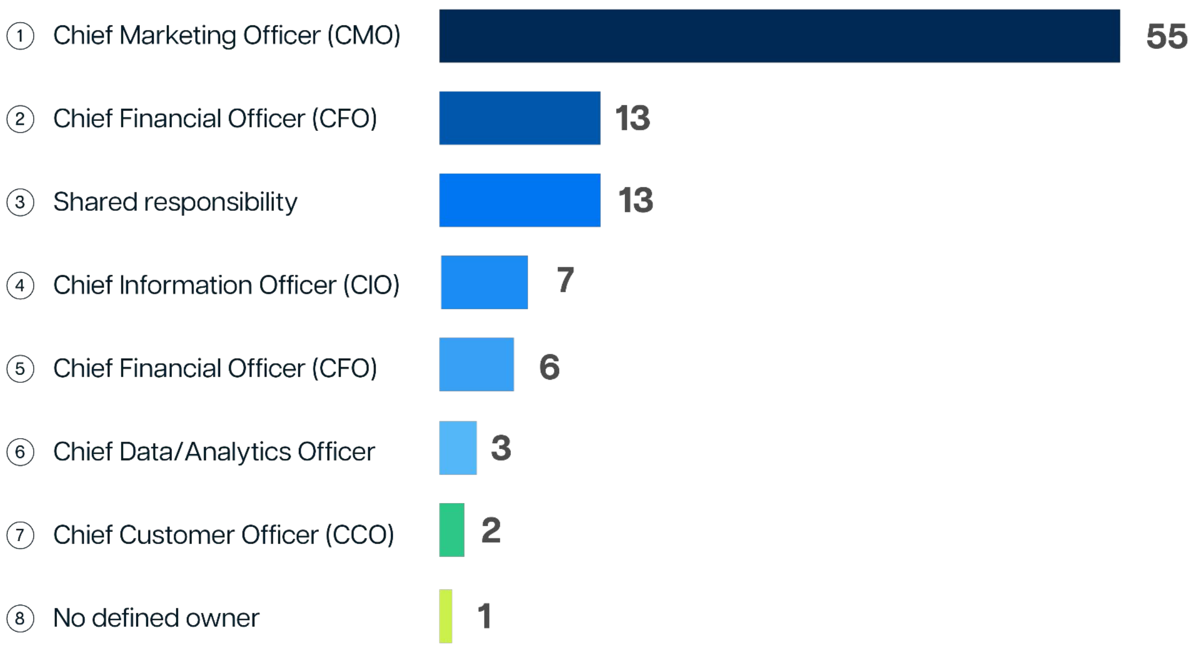


84% of CEOs review metrics with their CMOs.

Q: Do you regularly review a clear and consistent set of metrics with your marketing team?

CMOs are seen as primary owners of AI ROI in marketing.

Primary C-Suite Accountability for AI ROI in Marketing
% of respondents



Q: Which C-Suite leader is primarily accountable for delivering ROI from AI in marketing?