

The LeadDev

Engineering Leadership Report 2026

How engineering leadership is evolving, and what it means for the future of the role.



Editor's note

Software engineering leadership is operating under huge pressure. Organizations are flattening. AI is reshaping how code gets written, reviewed, and shipped. Job security anxieties are rising, even as actual layoff rates remain relatively stable.

Through it all, engineering leaders are being asked to do more: technically, strategically, and managerially, often forcing them to work longer hours.

Based on responses from 600 engineering leaders, the data tells a story of an industry in genuine transformation under sustained and compounding forces.

This report synthesizes the findings across five key themes: how organizations are changing, how the engineering leader's role is evolving, the state of AI adoption, the impact on engineering talent, and the human cost of transformation.

The data won't make the moment easier, but it will make it legible.

Michael Hill

Editor, LeadDev



A note from Postman

Postman is an API platform for building and using APIs. It simplifies each step of the API lifecycle and streamlines collaboration so you can create better APIs – faster.

We built an API platform to transform API development from a fragmented, multi-tool challenge into a unified, collaborative process that spans design, testing, documentation, and monitoring.

The results in this report reinforce what we hear from the Postman community: as AI accelerates development, teams need more unified, collaborative ways to build, test, and scale.

Built from a foundation of developer love and evolved to meet enterprise demands, Postman is architected for an AI-first future. It enables organizations to build AI-ready APIs across both human and agentic teams while maintaining the security controls, compliance frameworks, and governance standards that enterprises require. Automate your APIs, code, and workflows across dev, test, and production.

Postman powers the world's APIs, helping 40 million developers and 500,000 organizations – including 98% of the Fortune 500 – build and scale APIs with confidence.



Key findings

84% believe AI will make it harder for junior developers to enter and grow in the profession.

41% say their team is less motivated than 12 months ago.

45% of leaders are working more hours than this time last year.

37% of engineering leaders are doing more technical work.

AI for internal use is now the #1 engineering priority – up from

45% to 77%

One in three managers are considering **ditching management** to become an individual contributor.



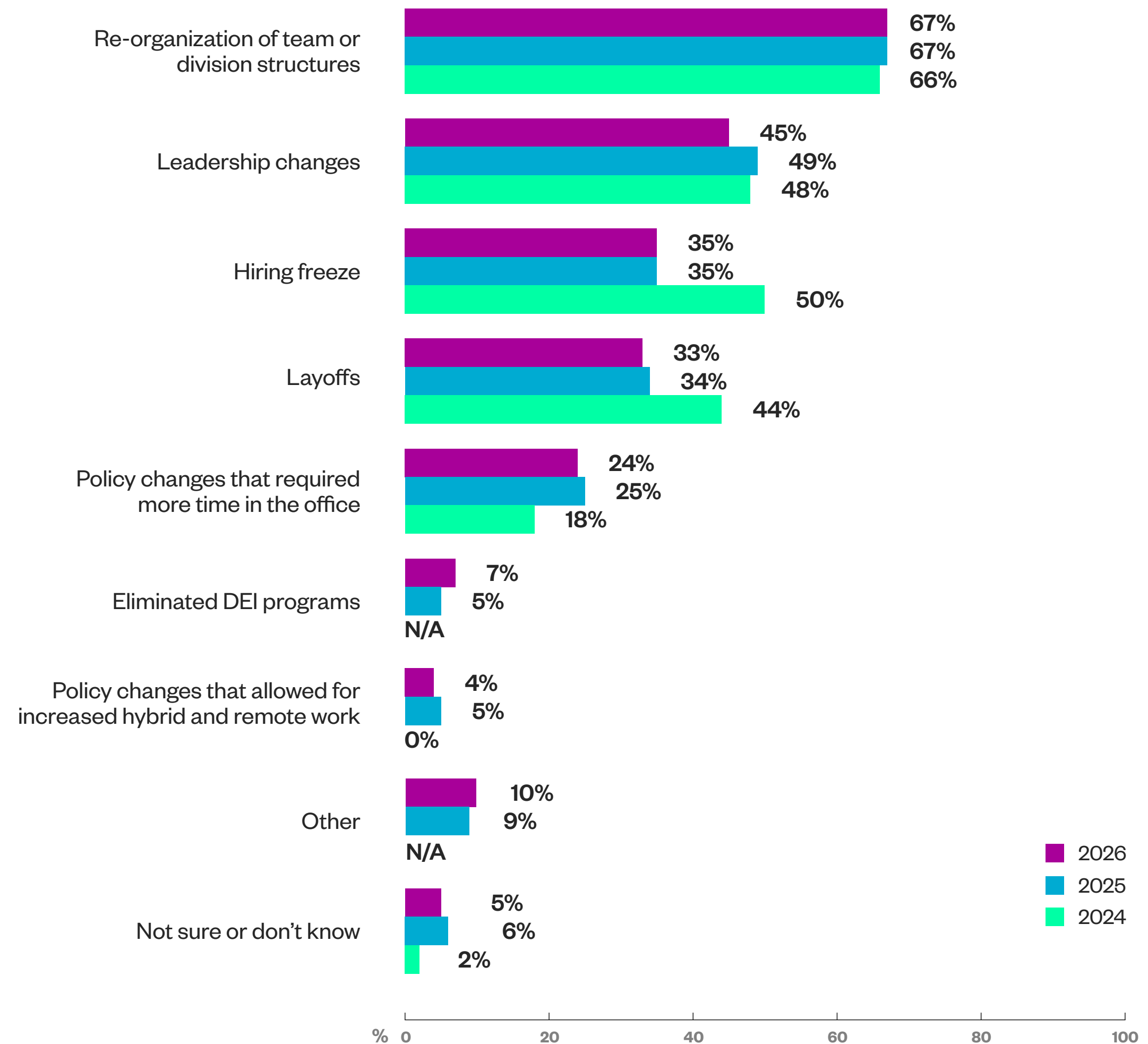
**Organizations
are changing,
not falling apart**

The dominant narrative around technology companies in recent years has been one of contraction. Layoffs, hiring freezes, and the systematic thinning of management layers have dominated headlines. The data from this year's report complicates that picture.

Re-organization of team and division structures represents the most common significant change, cited by 67% of respondents – a figure that has held steady across the last three years of this study. Leadership changes affected 45% of respondents, while hiring freezes (35%) and layoffs (33%) were reported at similar rates to 2025.

Crucially, there has been **no significant uptick** in either of those categories despite the economic and technological turbulence of the past year. For engineering leaders worried that the floor is about to drop out, the data offers a measure of reassurance: most organizations are adapting, not dismantling.

What significant changes has your company made to its workforce in the last 12 months?



The **management layer** picture is more nuanced, with 22% of respondents reporting a decline in managerial jobs and 19% seeing an increase in 2026.

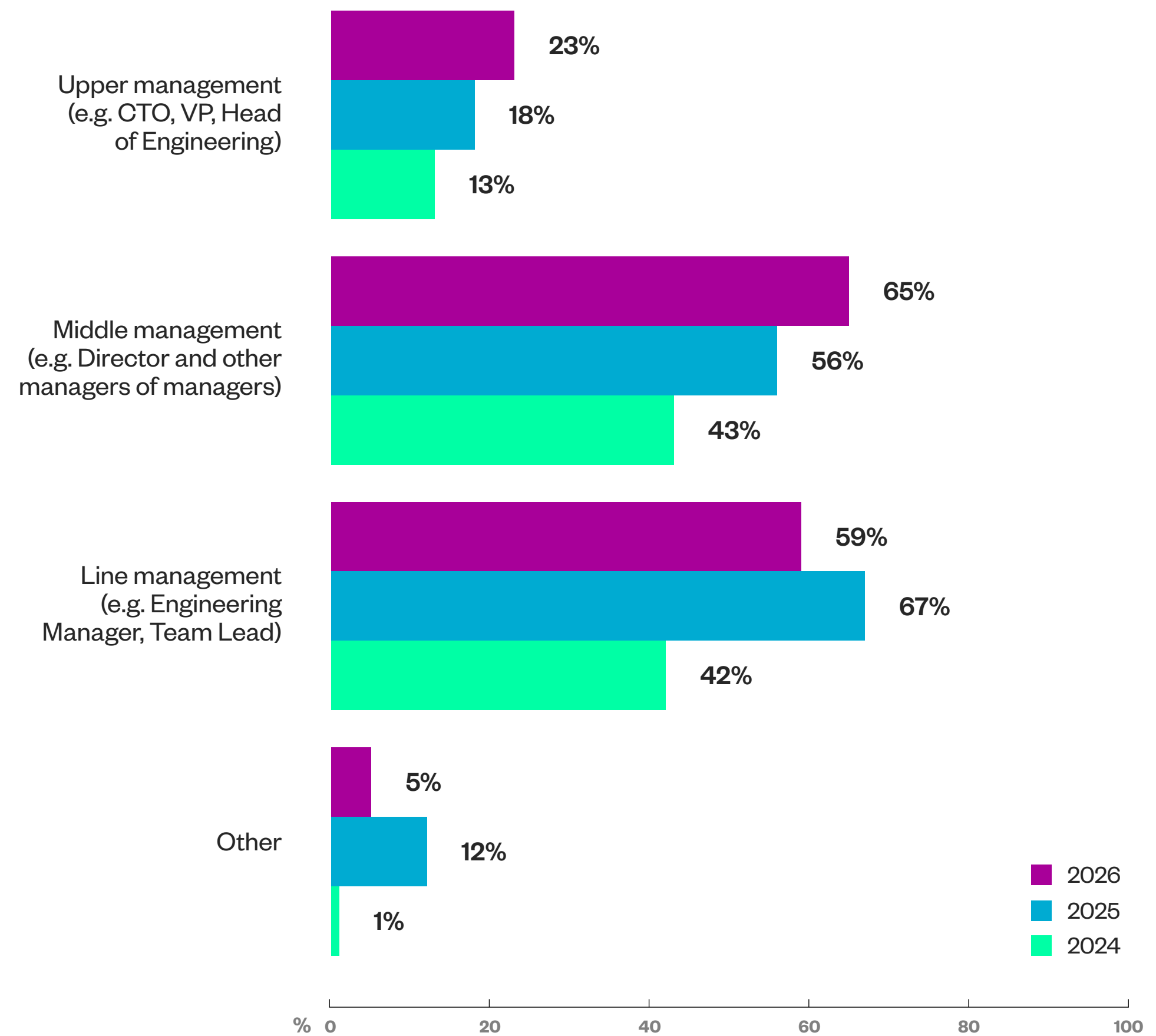
Among respondents whose organizations saw a decrease in manager roles, the impact was concentrated at the line management (59%) and middle management (65%) level.

However, a notable shift is occurring at the top: 23% of those reporting manager decreases said upper management has been significantly impacted, up from 18% in 2025 and 13% in 2024.

The flattening is becoming less selective in who it affects.

When organizations are hiring managers, the focus remains on line (67%) and middle management (50%). The demand for people-facing leadership has not disappeared. What is changing is the expectation of what that leadership looks like and what it requires of the individuals doing it.

If the number of managers has decreased, which levels were significantly impacted?

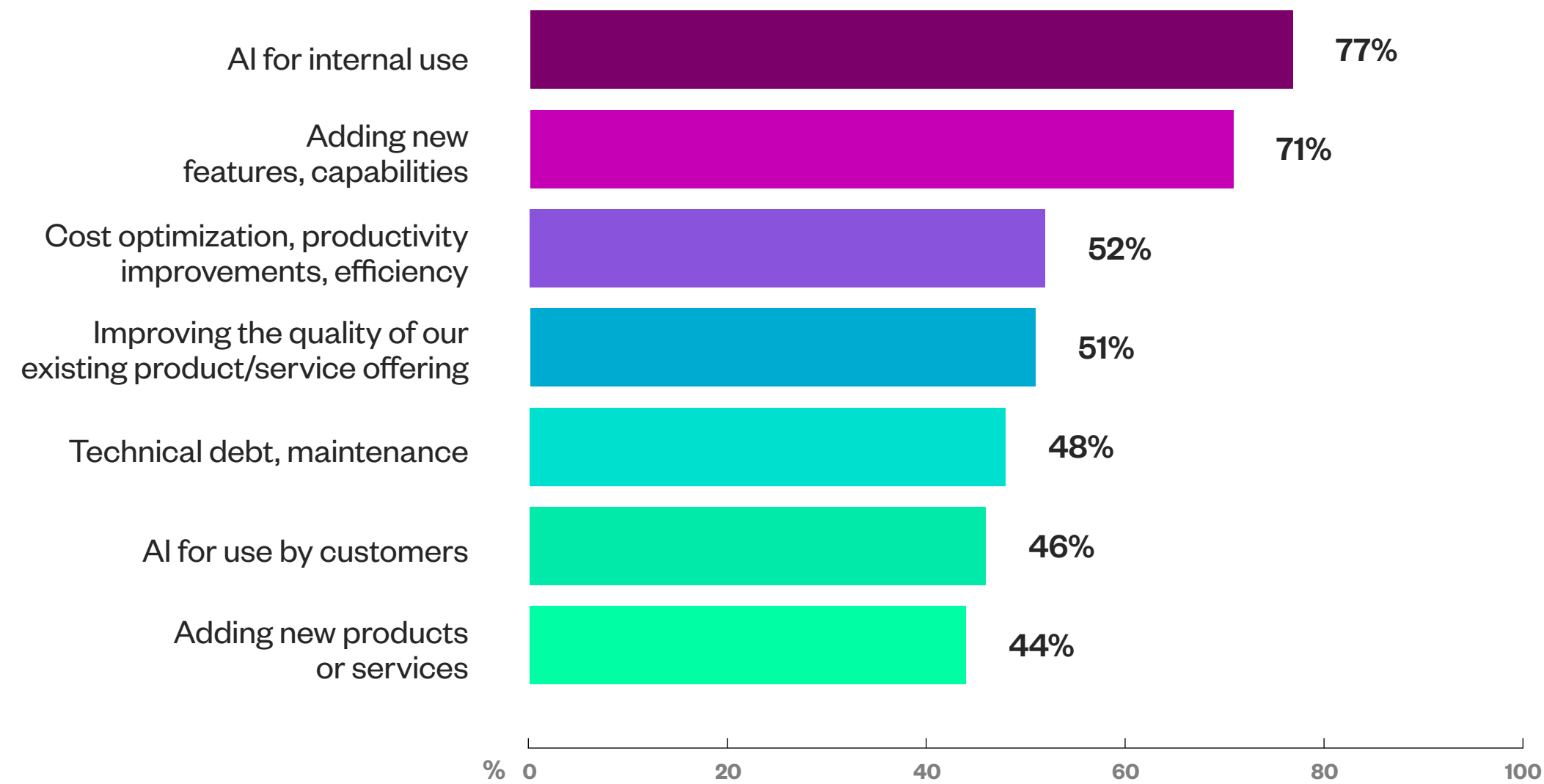


Looking at the type of work being prioritized over the next 12 months, one shift stands out: **AI for internal use** has jumped to the top of the priority stack, cited by 77% of respondents, up from 45% in 2025.

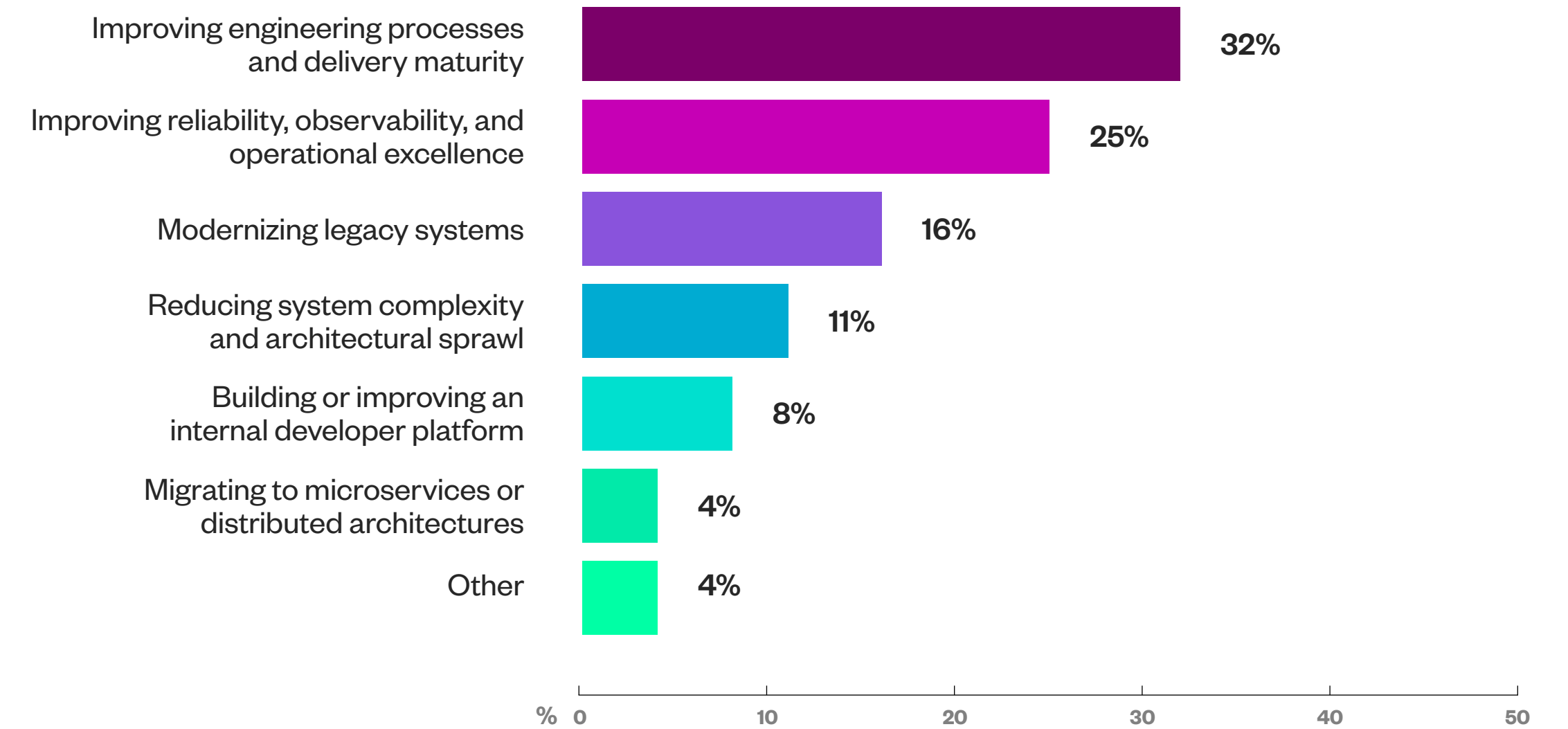
Beyond AI, the other top priorities tell a consistent story: cost optimization

and productivity improvements (52%), improving existing product quality (51%), and technical debt and maintenance (48%). Engineering teams are focused on doing more with what they already have, rather than building for growth.

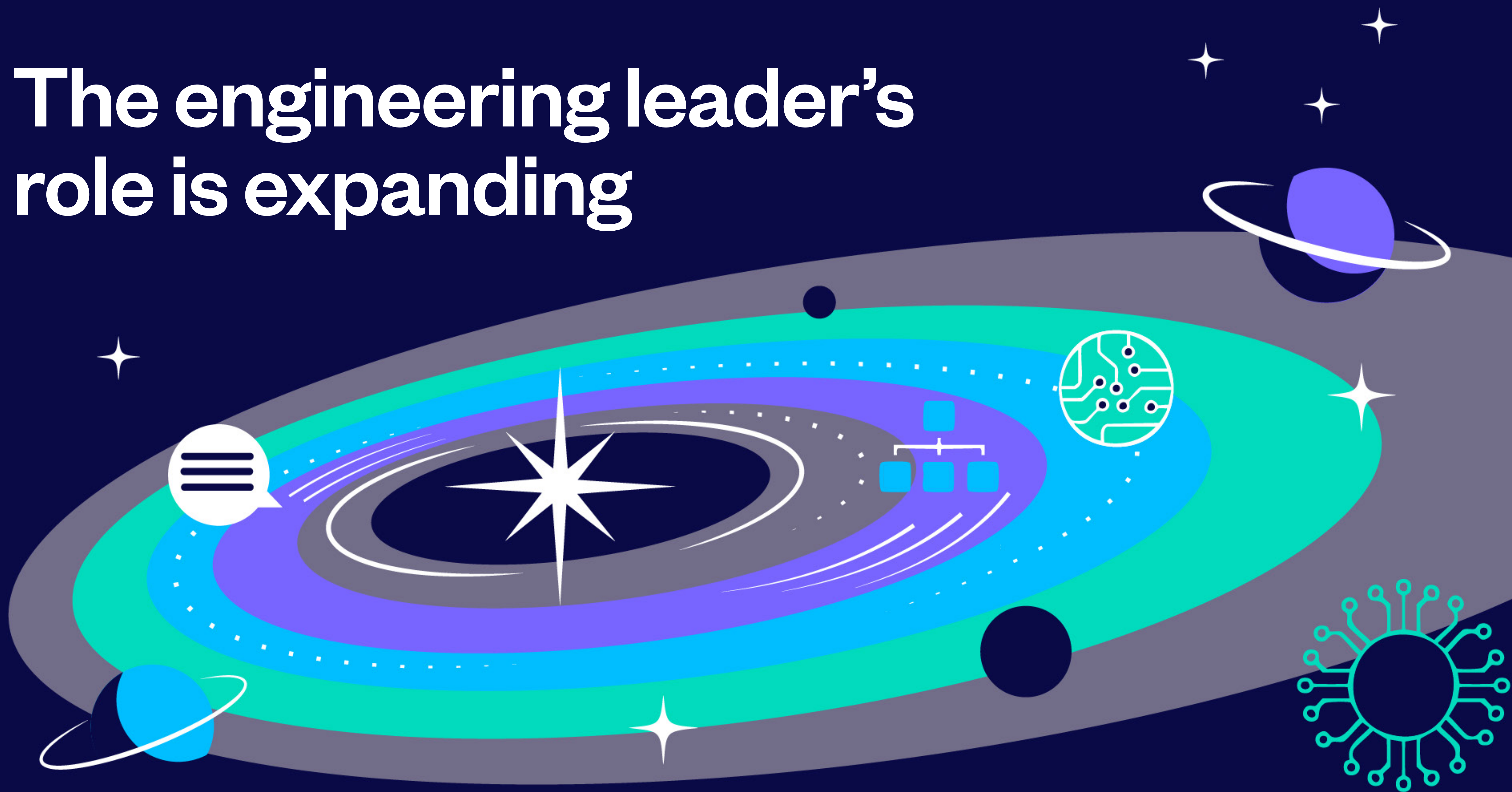
What type of work are you and your team(s) prioritizing over the next 12 months?



Discounting AI, which engineering transformation initiative is currently the highest priority for your organization?



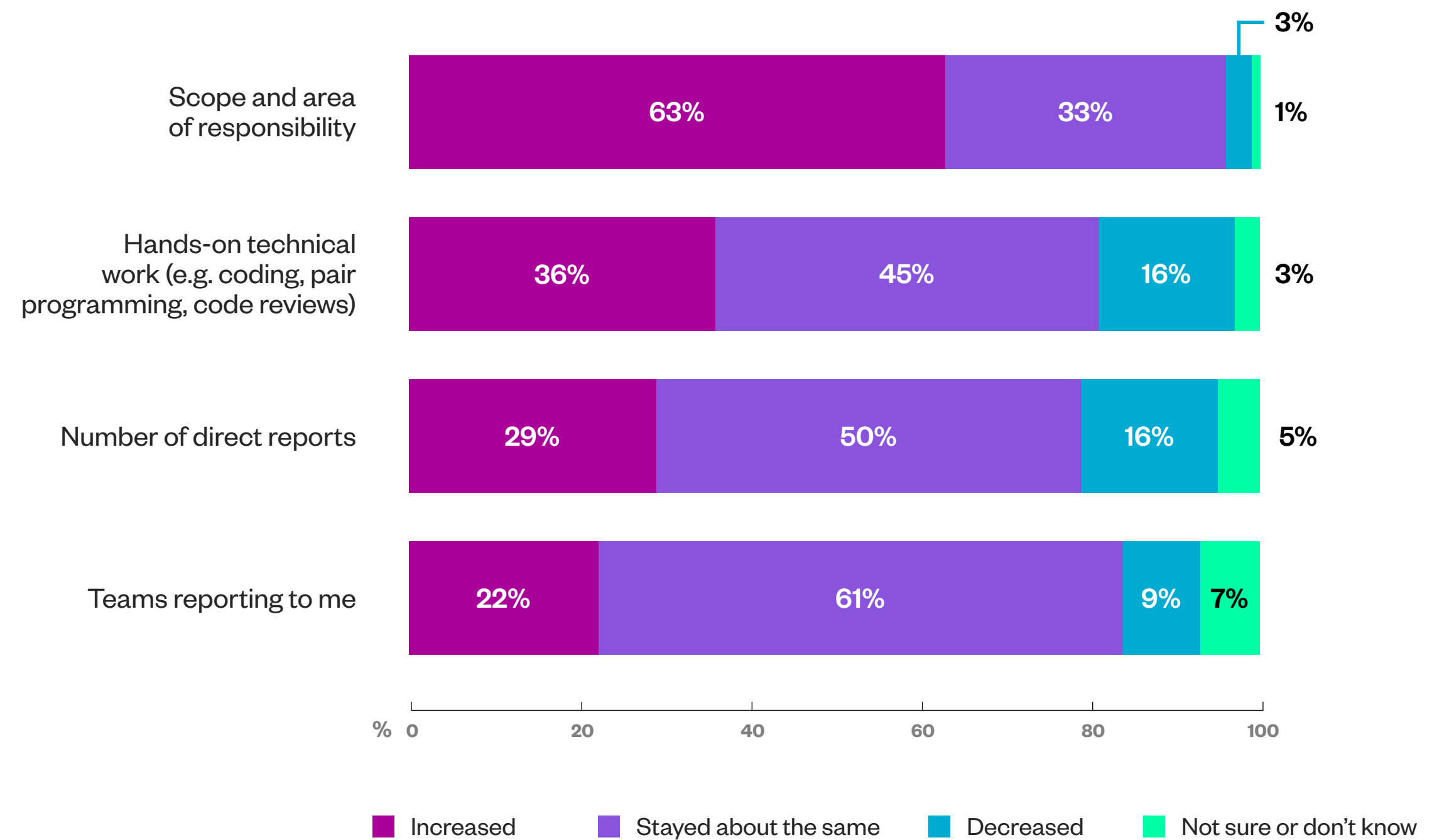
The engineering leader's role is expanding



Perhaps the most striking finding in this year's report is the extent to which engineering leaders are being pulled in more directions simultaneously, along with the speed at which those demands are changing.

Scope and area of responsibility increased for 63% of respondents, consistent with previous years. However, the nature of that expansion is shifting significantly.

How have your roles and responsibilities changed over the past 12 months?



Technical work is returning to the leadership agenda in a way that would have surprised many observers just two years ago. More than a third (37%) of respondents say their hands-on technical responsibilities have increased in the last 12 months, compared to just 25% in 2025.

All job roles **except software engineers** reported a jump in hands-on technical responsibilities. Most notably, 52% of advanced engineers (staff, principal, and distinguished) report an increase, up from 30% in 2025. Even managers of managers are feeling this: 25% now say they spend more time on technical-related tasks than a year ago, up from 18% in 2025.

“Given that most leaders come from an IC path, and now that AI tooling makes it so much easier to contribute, I’m not surprised leaders are getting more hands on, especially when it comes to building prototypes and internal tooling,” says James Stanier, CTO at Nordhealth. “I’m having a lot of fun too!”

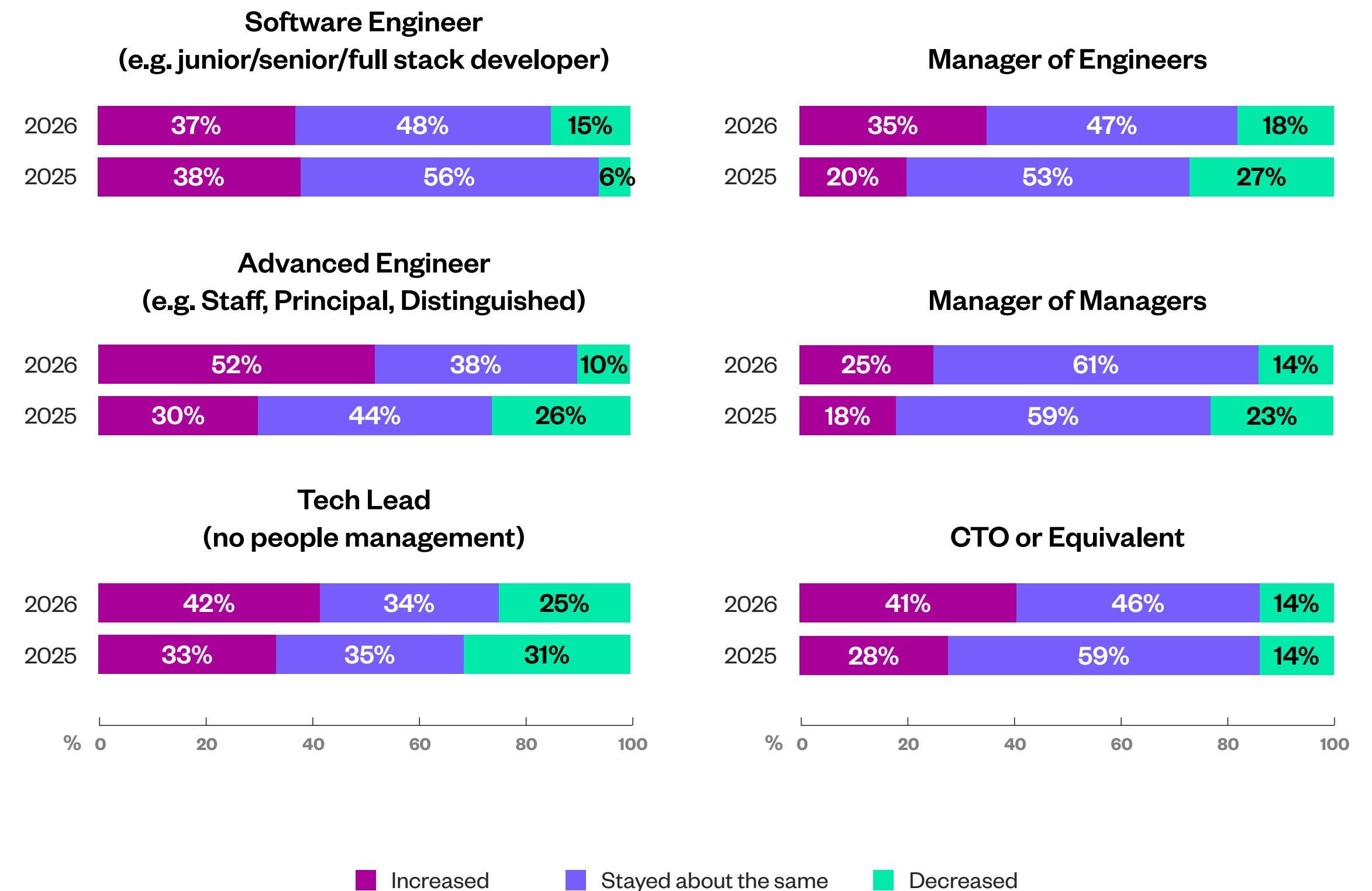
The balance between **technical and management work** reflects this shift. Nearly half of respondents (48%) say they spend more time on technical-related tasks than management-related ones, up from 42% in 2025.

Leaders across the board spent more time doing hands-on coding and code reviews compared to the previous year, including tech leads (41%), managers of engineers (31%), managers of managers (30%) and CTOs (or equivalent) (44%).

Architectural decisions and technical strategy saw the most respondents citing increased time dedicated to it, up from 44% in 2025. Communication with team members, customers, and stakeholders also increased for 60% of respondents, consistent with previous years.

AI is simultaneously expanding what leaders can do technically and what is expected of them organizationally, without reducing the demands on their time in either dimension.

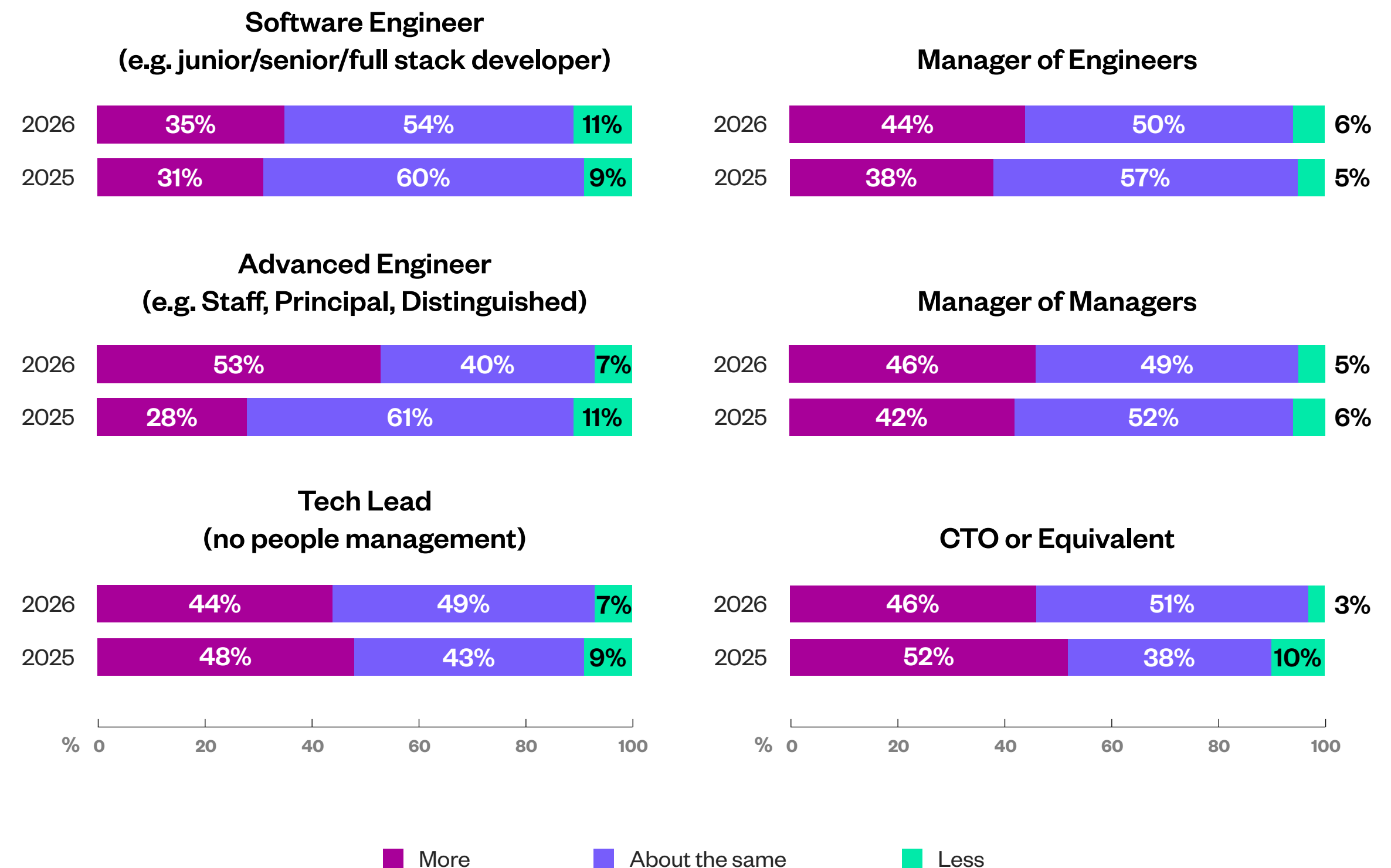
How have your hands-on technical roles and responsibilities changed over the last 12 months?



That tension is reflected in the data on **working hours**. Just under half (45%) of respondents report working more hours each week than at this point last year, up from 38% in 2025 and 35% in 2024. The biggest increase was among advanced engineers, 53% in 2026 compared to 28% in 2025, followed by managers of engineers (44% vs. 38%) and managers of managers (46% vs. 42%).

The trajectory is consistent, while also concerning. **As the scope of the role expands, the hours required to meet it are rising too.**

Are you working more or less hours each week than this time last year?



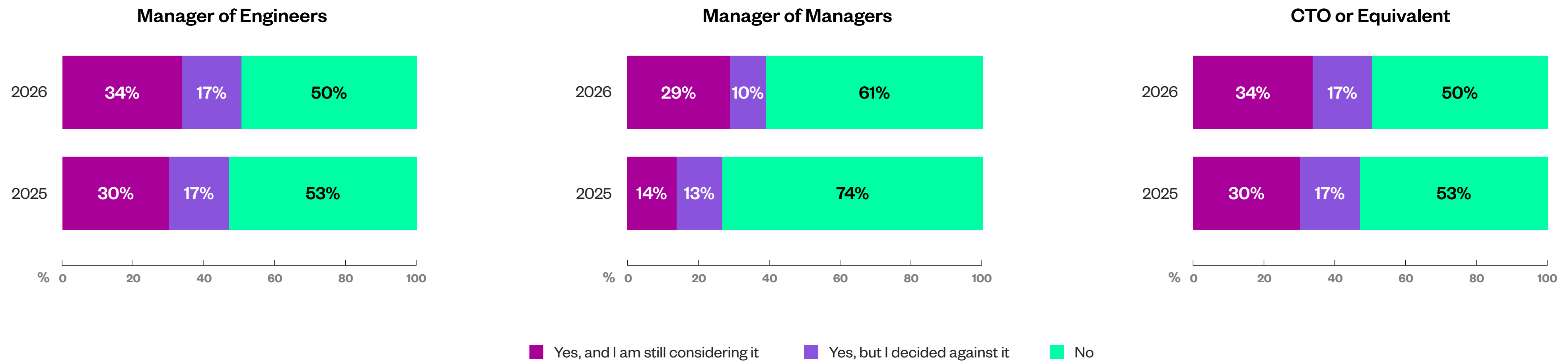
One measure that reveals the human weight of this expansion is the number of leaders considering a **return to individual contributor (IC) roles**. A third (32%) of those in managerial positions say they are currently considering this transition, up from 24% in 2025. Managers of managers (29%) are less likely to transition back to IC roles compared with managers of engineers and CTOs (both 34%).

The appeal of stepping back from management responsibilities, in favor of more focused technical work, is clearly growing. Whether that represents a healthy

recalibration or a warning sign about sustainability in the leadership pipeline is a question the industry will need to take seriously.

“Now more than ever, leaders must keep their technical skills sharp in order to understand, adopt, measure, and validate their team’s usage of AI tools,” says engineering leader Vaidehi Joshi. “In 2026, engineering leaders are juggling more responsibilities than they ever did before, all while there are fewer engineering leadership roles in the market.”

Have you considered transitioning back to an individual contributor role in the last year?



**AI adoption
is widespread
but poorly measured**



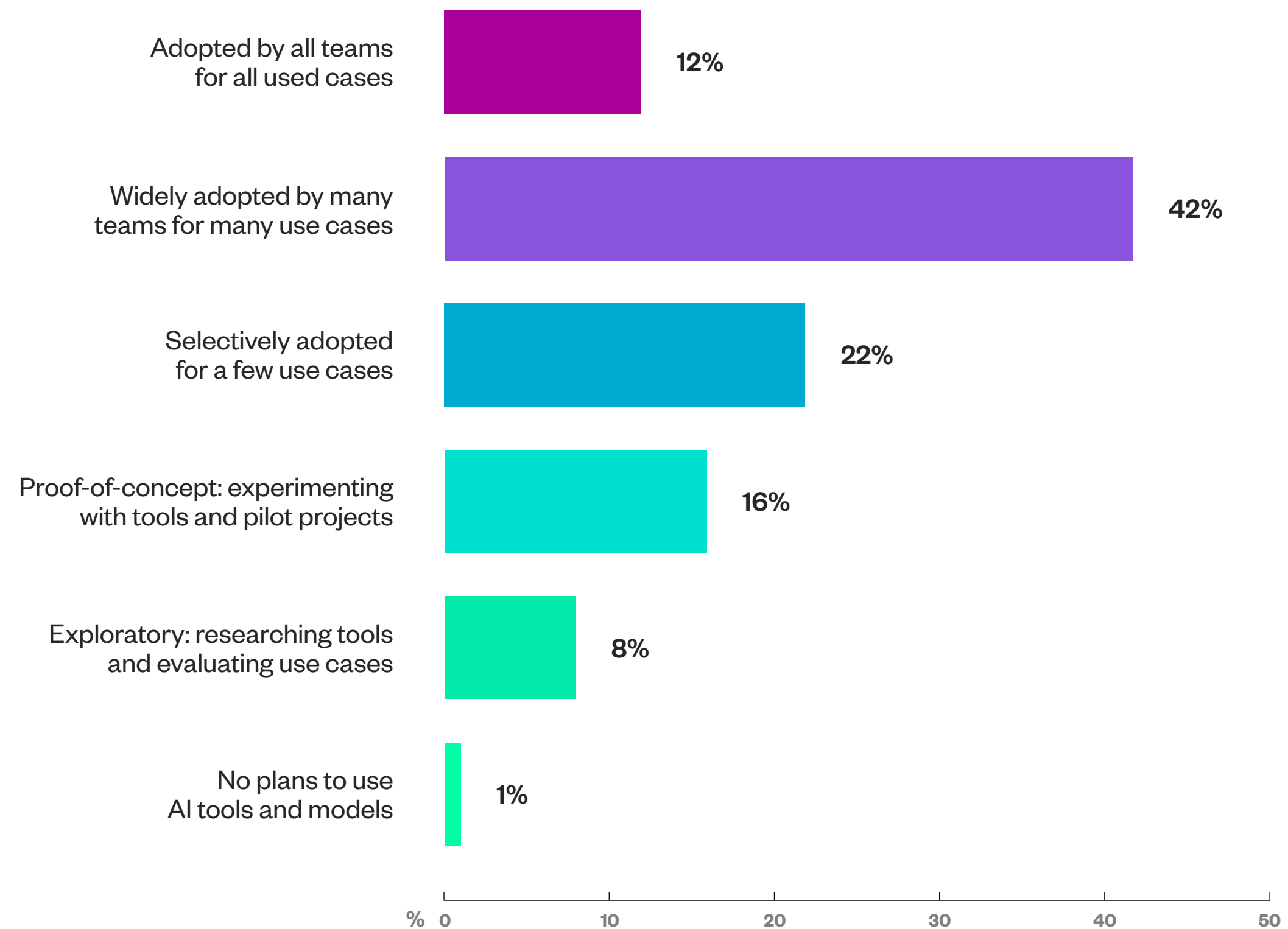
AI-coding tools and agents are now mainstream in engineering organizations. More than half (54%) of respondents say their organization has widely or totally adopted these tools. Only 1% say they have no plans to use them at all. The debate about whether to adopt AI has largely been resolved. The question of how to adopt it well is just beginning.

For the first time in this study's three-year history, internal **AI adoption (77%)** has overtaken **feature development (71%)** as the leading engineering priority.

"Internal AI adoption has been a challenge, but it is becoming easier over time as AI helps engineers be more productive and enjoy their work more (who wants to write boilerplate code any more?" says Stanier.

AI for customer-facing use cases has also grown, cited by 46% of respondents, up from 40% in 2025, but the internal adoption story is where the energy is concentrated. Engineering organizations are no longer experimenting with AI at the edges. It has become the central work.

Which of the following best describes the stage of your engineering organization's adoption of AI-powered coding tools and agents?

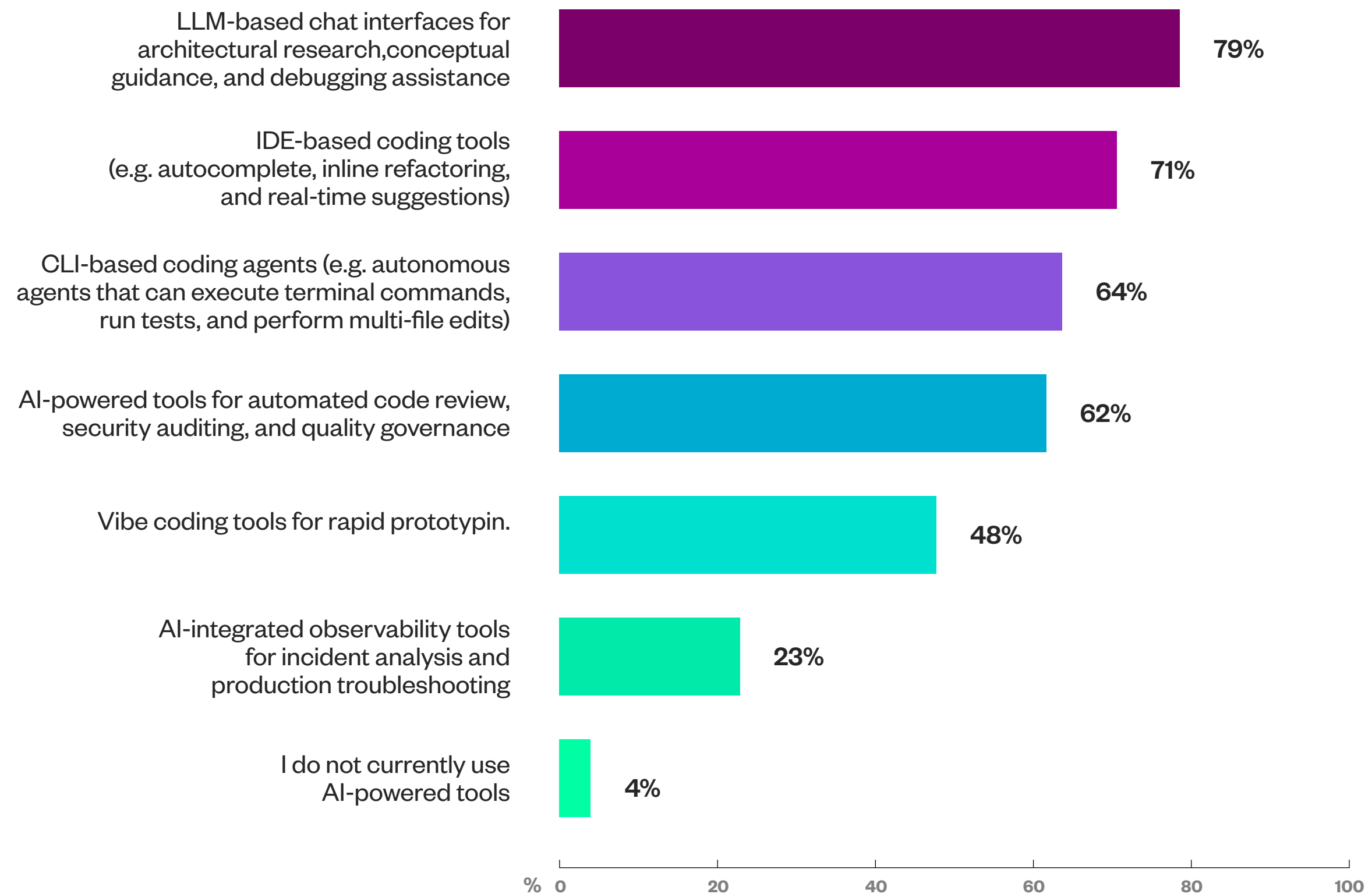


The tools being used reveal where AI adoption currently sits in practice. LLM-based chat interfaces for architectural research and debugging are the most widely used, cited by 79% of respondents.

IDE-based coding tools with autocomplete and inline suggestions follow at 71%. CLI-based coding agents, autonomous tools that can execute terminal commands, run tests, and perform multi-file edits, are used by 64% of respondents, a figure that is higher than many might expect and suggests agentic workflows are already more prevalent than the public conversation acknowledges.

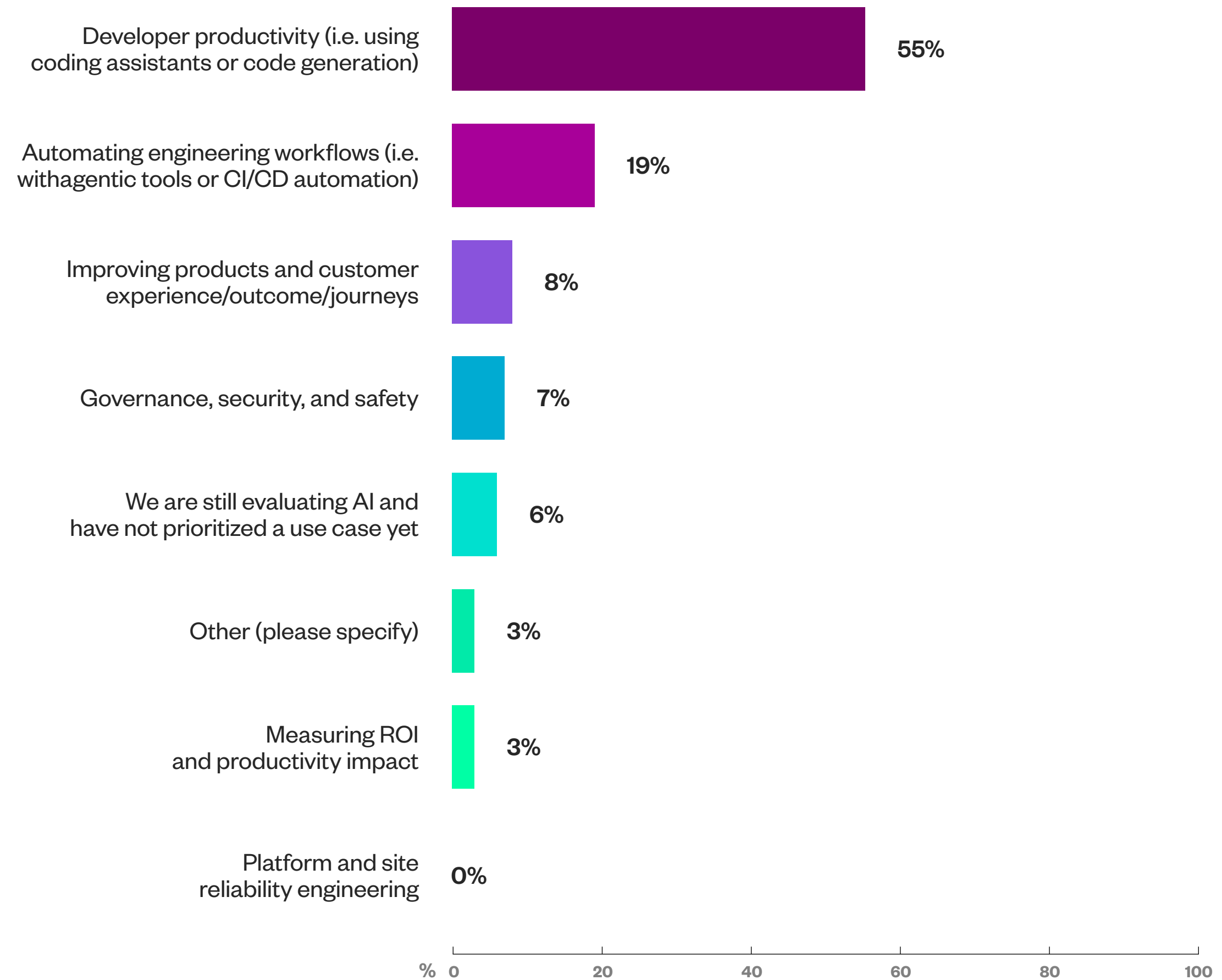
Vibe coding tools for rapid prototyping are used by 48% of respondents overall, and 66% of CTOs personally. This is a significant finding. The most senior technical leaders in engineering organizations are not just enabling AI adoption; they are actively using the most experimental and least governed category of AI tool for their own work.

Which of the following types of AI-powered coding tools and agents do you personally use?



Developer productivity remains the dominant AI priority, cited by 55% of respondents as their engineering organization's highest area of AI focus. Automating engineering workflows comes second at 19%.

Which area of AI adoption is currently the highest priority for your engineering organization?

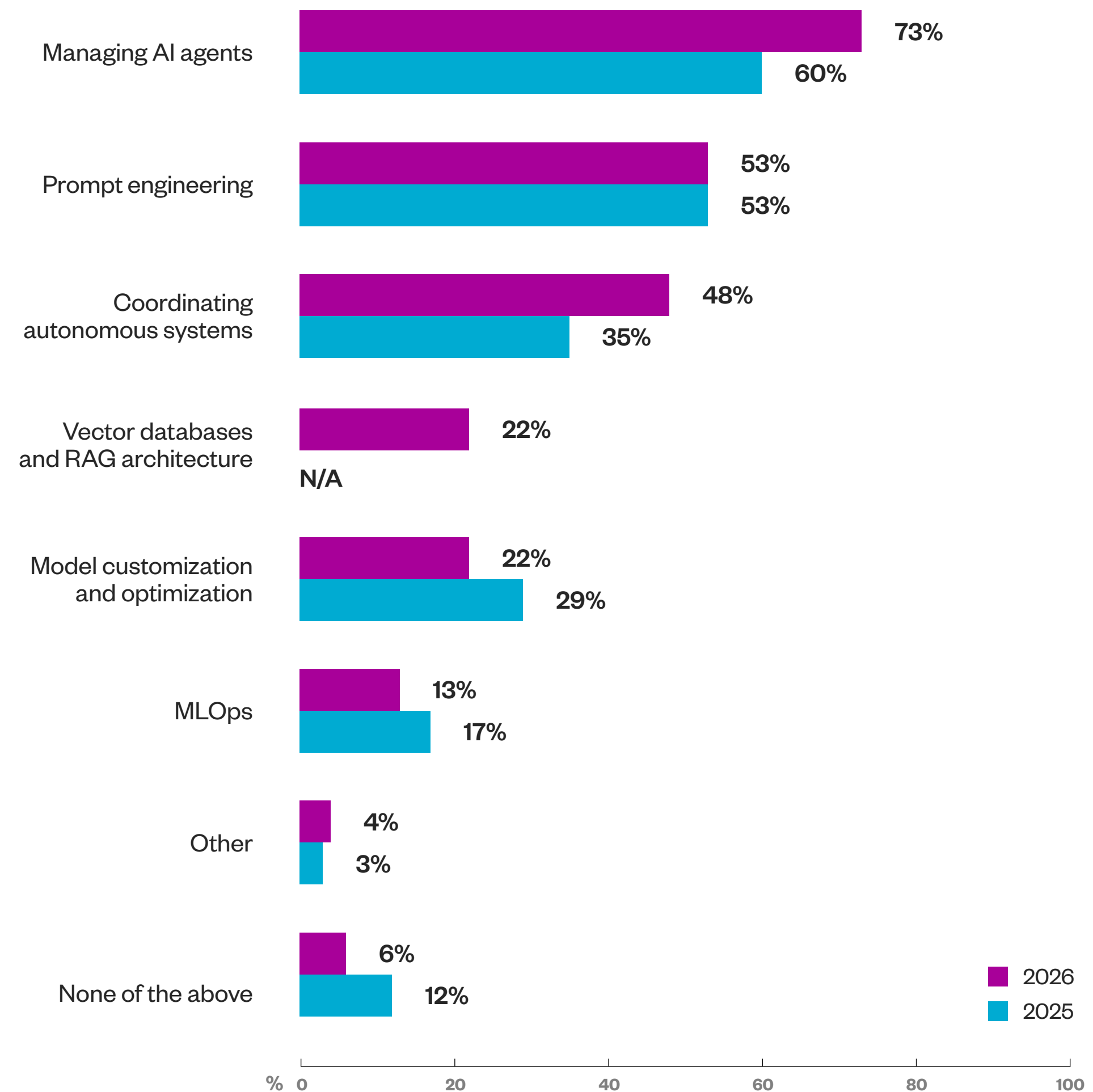


The gap between **adoption velocity and governance maturity** is one the data makes visible without understating: organizations are moving fast, and the safety infrastructure has not kept pace.

The AI skills leaders want to develop reflect the direction this adoption is heading. Managing AI agents is now the top priority for personal skill development, cited by 73% of respondents, up from 60% in 2025. Coordinating autonomous systems has grown from 35% to 48% over the same period.

Interest in prompt engineering has held flat at 53%, suggesting that engineers are beginning to look beyond basic prompt skills toward the harder challenge of orchestrating AI systems at scale.

Which of the following emerging AI-related skills will you likely personally focus on developing in the next year?



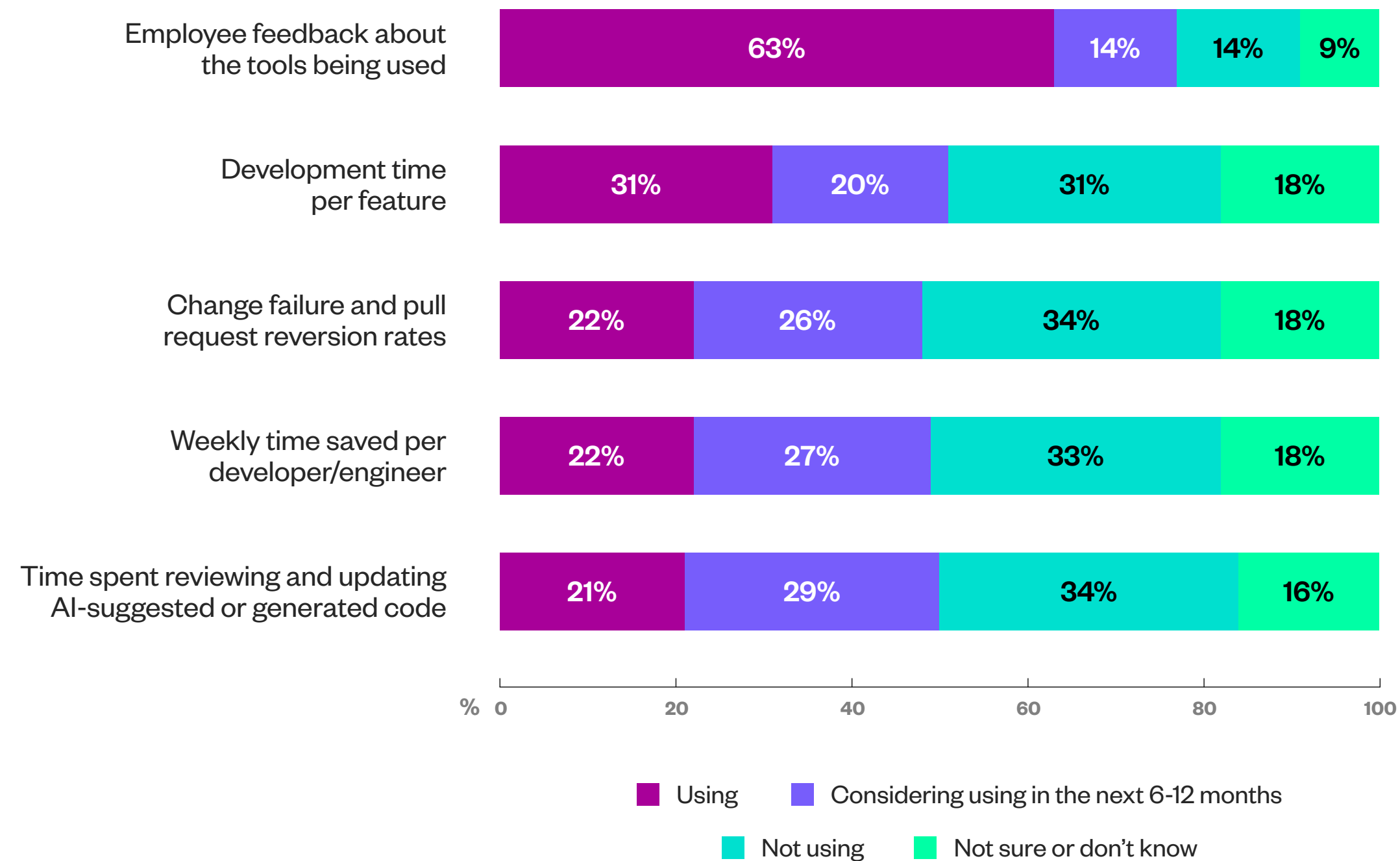
Measuring the **impact of AI systems**, however, remains a significant gap. Employee feedback is the most commonly used metric for assessing AI's impact on productivity (63%), but it is an imprecise instrument.

More rigorous metrics like development time per feature (31%), change failure and pull request reversion rates (22%), weekly time saved per developer (22%), and time spent reviewing and updating AI-suggested code (21%) are used by only around a fifth of organizations.

“Self-reported productivity has never been the best signal,” says Stanier. “It should be paired with other signals, like the traditional DORA metrics (are we actually going faster?) and token spend (who is using the tools the most?).”

The gap between **adoption and measurement** is one of the defining challenges today, and it has real implications for whether organizations can learn from their AI investments or are simply flying blind.

Is your organization using or considering the following metrics to assess the impact of AI-powered coding tools and agents on engineering productivity?



AI concerns, risks, and the junior developer crisis



For all the momentum behind adoption of AI-powered coding tools and agents, the concerns among engineering leaders are substantial and deserve serious attention.

Impact on **code maintainability** tops the list of concerns at 73%, closely followed by the **quality of AI outputs** at 71%. These are not abstract worries. They reflect the daily reality of working with codebases that are growing faster than they can be understood, reviewed, or maintained. The verification gap is real, and it is growing.

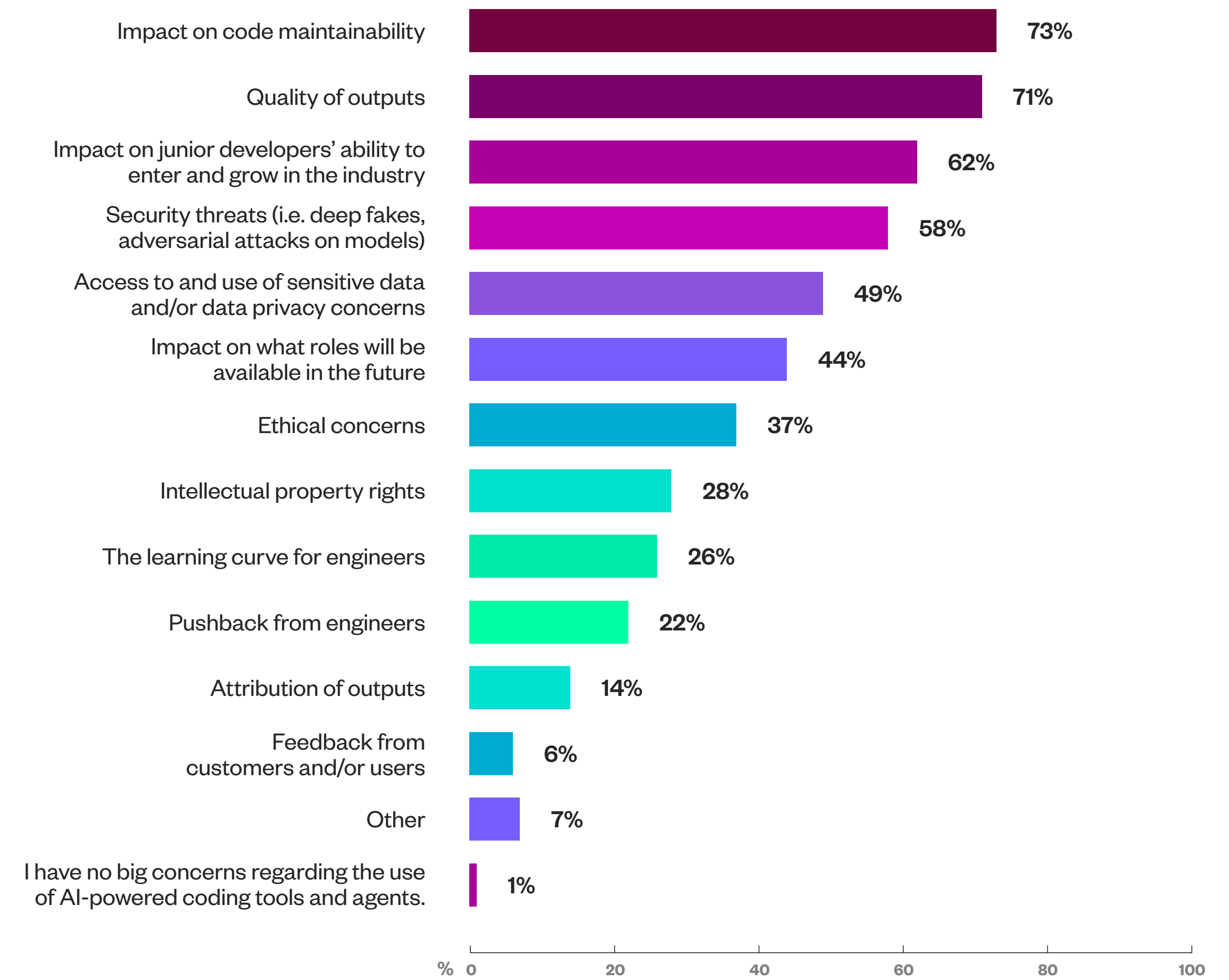
“These concerns point to a deeper issue: we’ve accelerated code generation without evolving our verification and ownership models,” says Mallika Rao, senior software engineering manager at Zocdoc. “Teams are producing more than they

can reason about. Until we invest in better abstractions, testing strategies, and system boundaries, this gap will continue to widen.”

Stanier encourages everyone to think long-term. “Codebases have been structured and programming languages have been designed for humans over the past few decades. Are we reaching an inflection point where, in the not-too-distant future, codebases will need to be designed and structured for AI instead?”

The **impact on junior developers** is the third most cited concern at 62%, and it is the one with the longest-range implications for the industry. Based on another question, we know that 84% of respondents believe AI-powered tools will generally have a negative impact on junior developers. This finding demands attention.

What are your biggest concerns regarding the use of AI-powered coding tools and agents?



The traditional on-ramp to engineering – writing code, making mistakes, learning from review – is being systematically altered by AI tools that do much of that work automatically. If the learning pathways that created today’s experienced engineers are being bypassed, the pipeline of experienced engineers a decade from now may look very different.

However, the talent strategy response to this concern is strikingly thin. Only 4% of respondents cited supporting junior engineers’ development in an AI-assisted world as the primary way AI is affecting their approach to engineering talent. The gap between concern and action is significant. Leaders who recognize the risk but have not yet addressed it are building a problem that will compound over time.

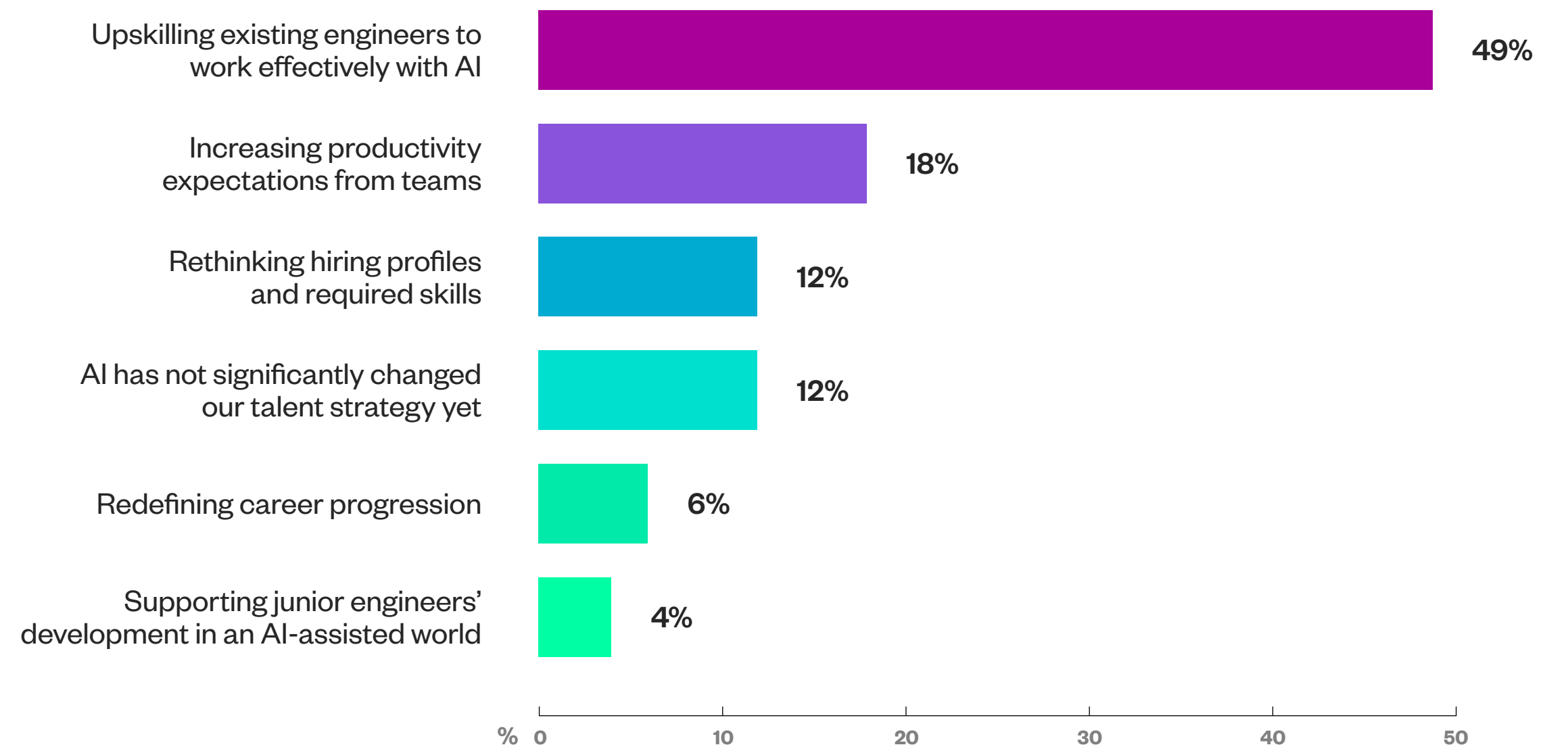
The dominant talent response to AI is upskilling. Just shy of half (49%) say upskilling existing engineers to work effectively with AI is the primary way AI is affecting their talent strategy.

Meanwhile, 18% are increasing **productivity expectations** from teams and 12% are rethinking **hiring profiles and required skills**.

These are reasonable responses to the immediate demands of AI adoption, but they are insufficient for longer-term questions about career pathways, skill development, and the sustainability of the engineering profession as a whole. On headcount, the picture is more measured than the disruption narrative suggests. Only 8% say AI reduced their headcount in 2025, far lower than the scale of the AI adoption story might imply. However, 21% believe AI will reduce headcount in 2026, suggesting a meaningful expectation that the impact will accelerate even if it has been limited to date.

For engineering leaders managing team anxiety about job security, the distinction between current reality and anticipated future is important to communicate clearly.

How is AI most affecting your approach to engineering talent?



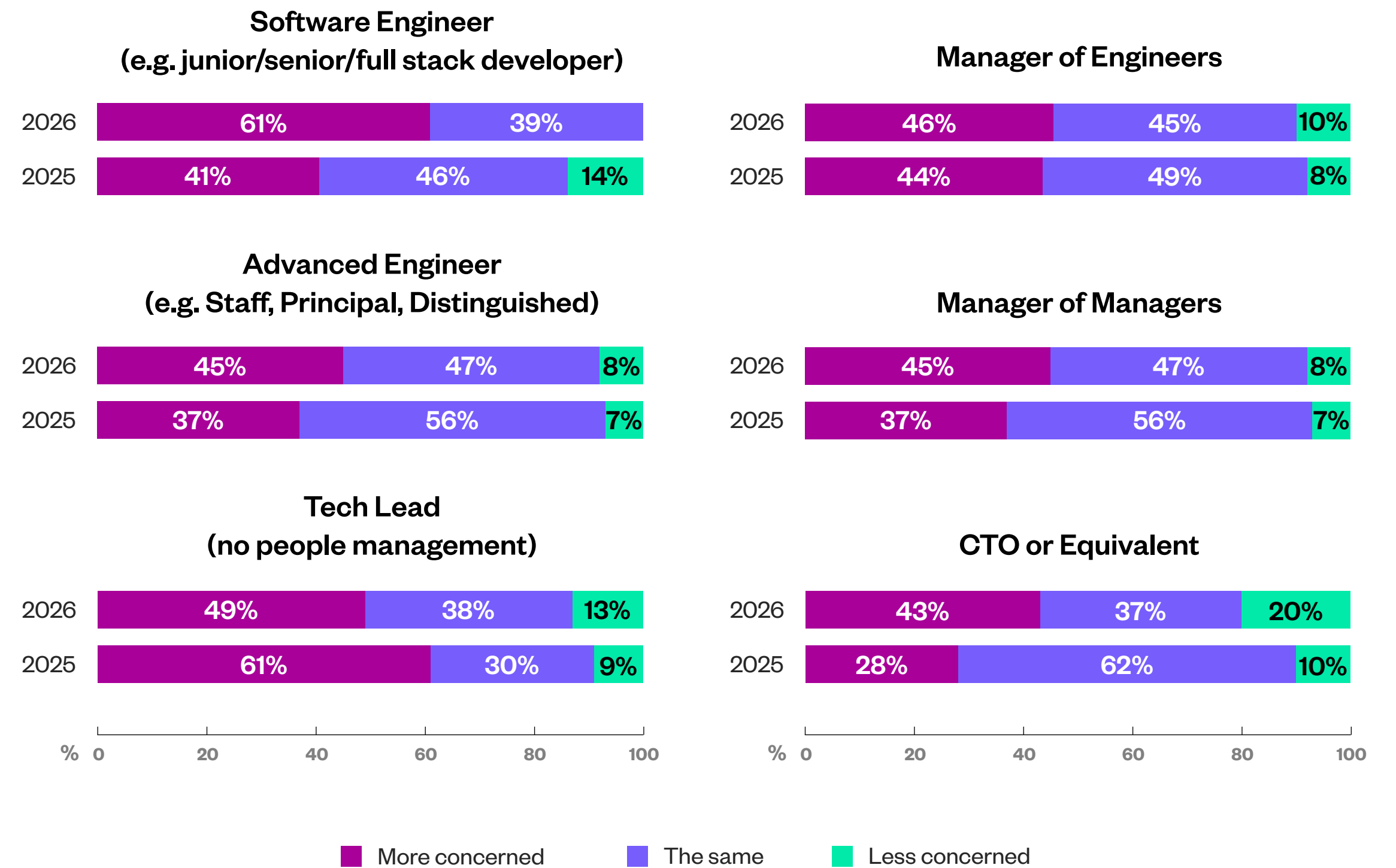
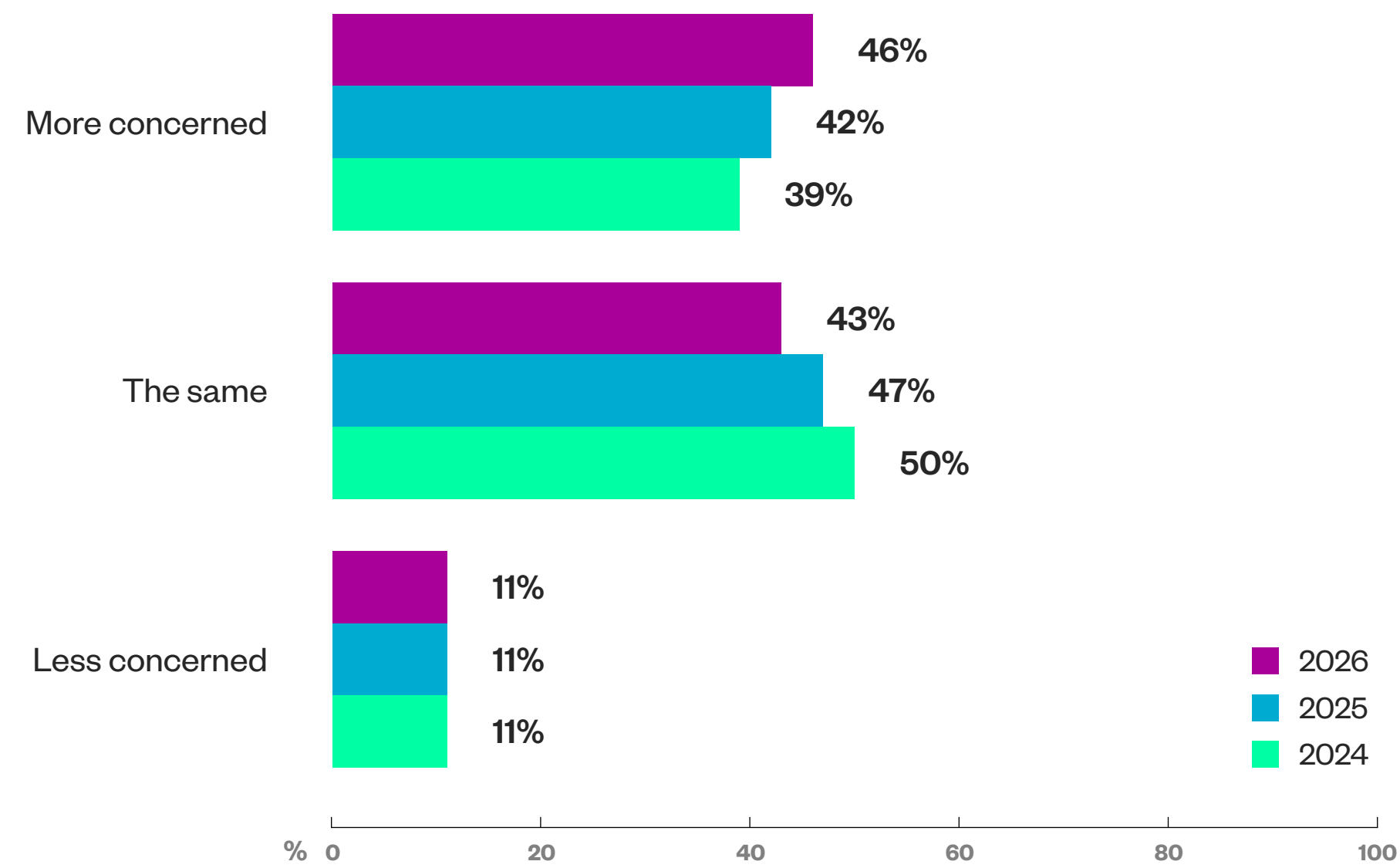
The human cost of transformation



If the data on organizational change and AI adoption tells the story of **external pressures**, the data on team health tells the **human story** of what those pressures are doing to the people inside engineering organizations. That story contains some of the report's most urgent findings.

Job security concerns have risen for the third consecutive year, with 46% of respondents more worried than at this point last year, up from 42% in 2025 and 39% in 2024. Software engineers are most concerned (61%), followed by tech leads (49%) and managers of engineers (46%).

Are you more or less concerned about your job security than at this point a year ago?



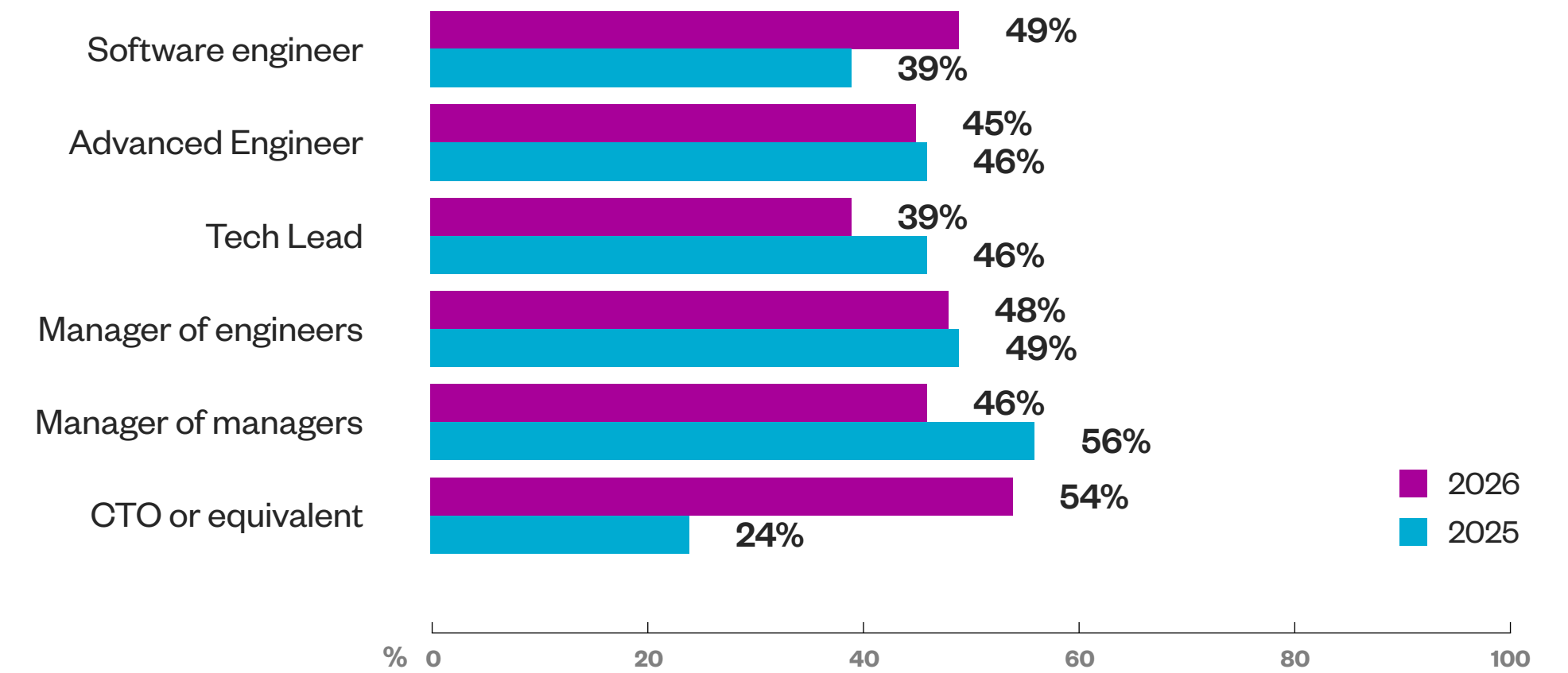
Given that actual layoff rates have not increased significantly, this rising anxiety is almost certainly being driven by AI uncertainty rather than observed job losses. The psychological cost of the transformation is already being paid, even before the predicted workforce impacts materialize.

“The disconnect between stable layoffs and rising anxiety highlights that this is less about actual job loss and more about loss of clarity” says Rao. “AI is changing what ‘valuable work’ looks like, and leaders haven’t yet provided a clear narrative for how roles evolve. That ambiguity is what’s driving unease.”

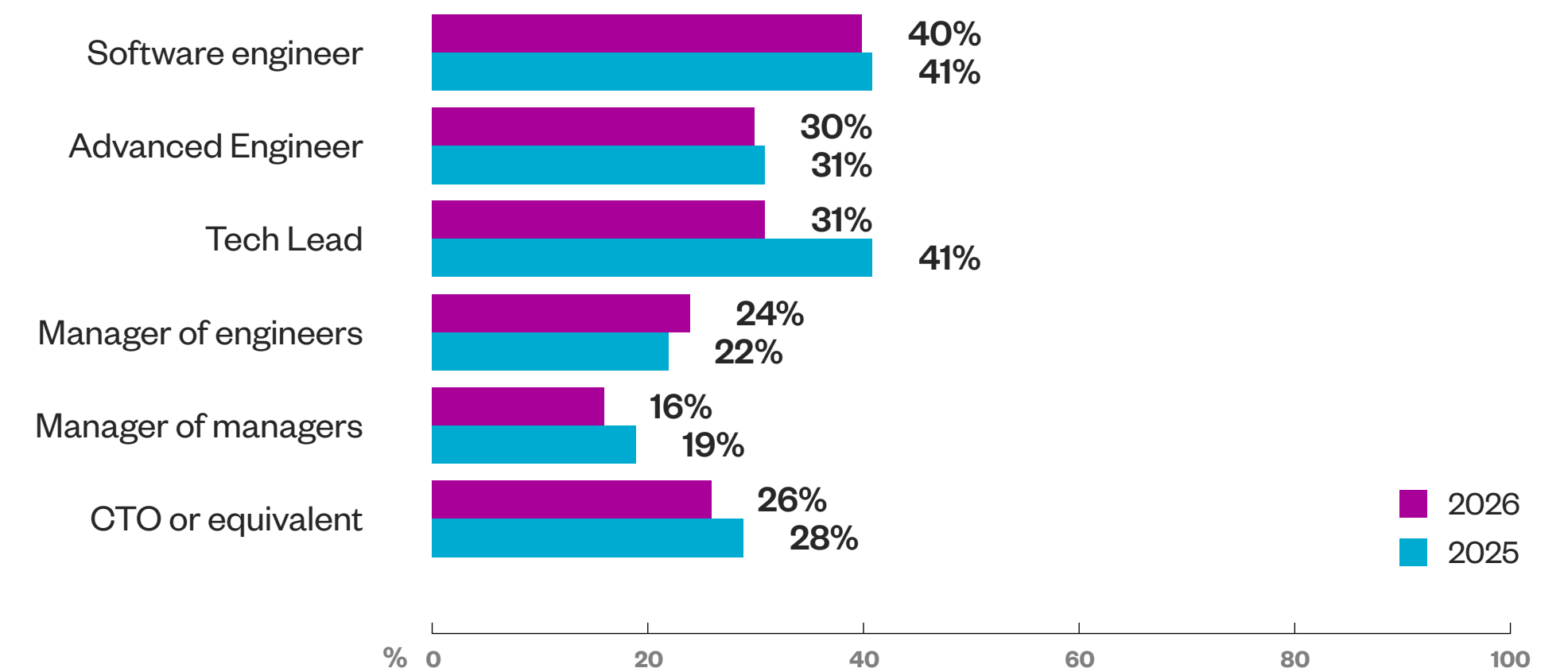
Burnout indicators deserve specific attention. CTOs show the most dramatic shift: 54% report feeling emotionally drained from their work at least once a week, compared to just 24% in 2025. This represents a 30-percentage-point increase in a single year.

“CTOs are burning out because AI has given teams virtually infinite capacity, creating relentless pressure to write highly detailed product specs to ‘feed the beast,’” says Thomas Johnson, CTO at Multiplayer.

At least once a week I feel emotionally drained from my work



At least once a week I receive positive feedback about my work



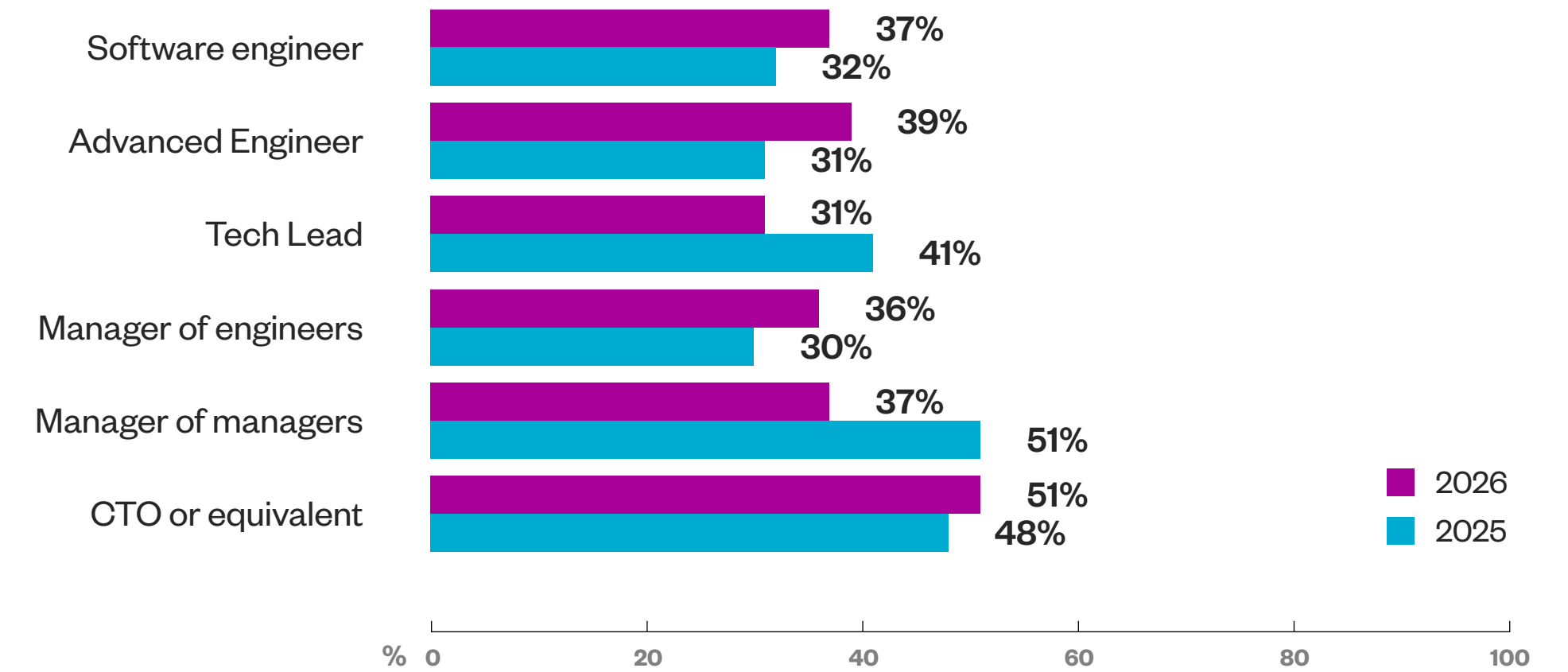
Additionally, leaders live in constant fear that a business-killing bug is lingering in some unread, AI-generated corner of the codebase, he adds. “It is emotionally exhausting to manage an infinitely hungry AI workforce while knowing there is no longer direct human ownership over every line of code.”

The burden of **navigating AI transformation** at an organizational level, while managing the expectations of boards, investors, and engineering

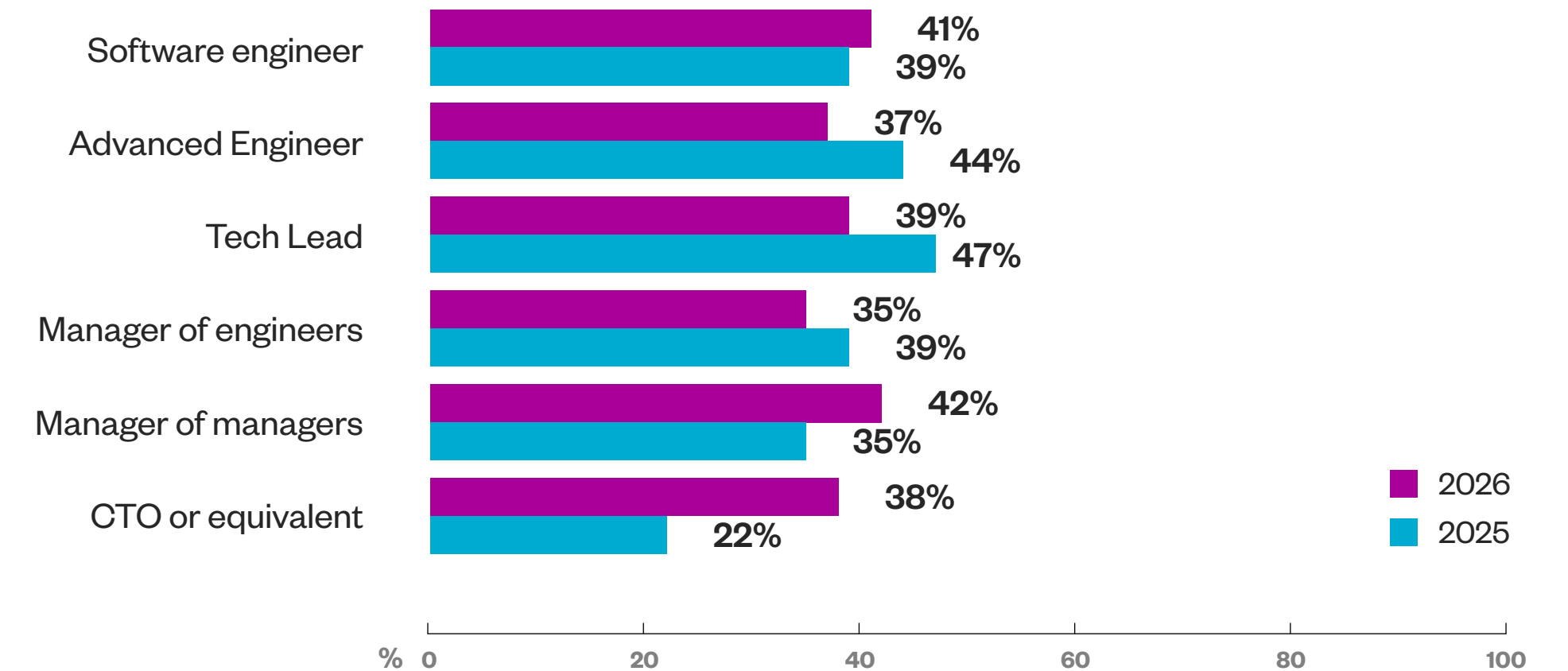
teams simultaneously, appears to be landing particularly heavily on those at the top.

Tech leads show a different but concerning pattern. Their receipt of **regular positive feedback** has dropped from 41% to 31%, while cynicism about their jobs is rising. The people in the middle of the leadership structure and the ones translating strategy into delivery appear to be under particular strain.

At least once a week, work demands interfere with my personal life



At least once a week I feel cynical about my job



Team motivation continues to be a challenge, with 41% of respondents saying their team feels less motivated than 12 months ago, although this is a slight improvement from 44% in 2025.

The free-text responses explaining this motivation challenge are revealing:

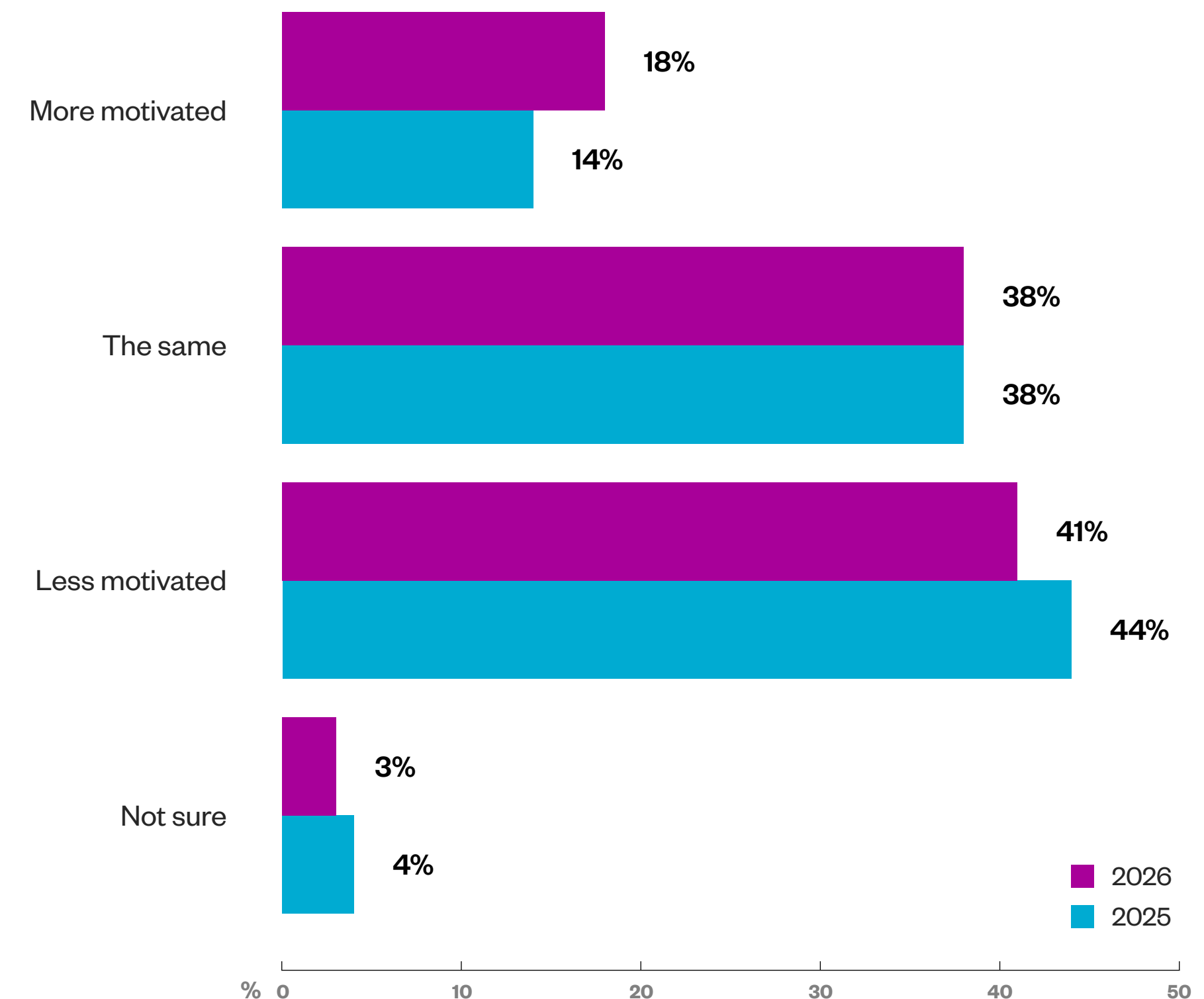
- Several people noted that teams are finding that rewarding creative work is being displaced by the maintenance and review of AI-generated code.
- One respondent described being told to use a specific AI-coding tool or face being laid off, with an internal leaderboard based solely on token usage. “Something we were excited about has been turned against us.”
- Another described a “**TikTok-ification**” of engineering problem solving driven by AI, characterizing the result as making engineering “a babysitting chore, rather than doing interesting work.”

These are not the words of people who are opposed to AI. They are the words of people who are experiencing a gap between the promise of AI adoption and the reality of how it is being implemented in their organizations. That gap is a leadership problem as much as a technology problem.

On **diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)**, the data shows an erosion of these efforts. Over a quarter (27%) of respondents say DEI is less of a priority than 12 months ago, up from 18% in 2025. Only 51% say DEI remains a priority overall, down from 63% a year ago.

“This is a concerning but somewhat predictable shift in periods of uncertainty,” says Rao. “When pressure rises, organizations tend to revert to short-term execution metrics. The risk is that this erodes long-term organizational health and innovation capacity. DEI is not orthogonal to performance; it’s foundational to it.”

Do you feel like your team is more or less motivated to come to work than 12 months ago?



What does this mean for engineering leaders?

The 2026 Engineering Leadership Report paints a clear picture: this is a profession under pressure, and the forces driving it are compounding.

AI adoption is accelerating faster than the governance, measurement, and people frameworks needed to support it. The engineering leader's role is expanding technically at the same time as it is expanding managerially, with no reduction in either dimension.

Working hours are rising. Job security anxieties are growing despite stable layoff rates. Team motivation is fragile, particularly around the displacement of meaningful work by AI-driven maintenance tasks. The junior developer pipeline, the source of the next generation of experienced engineers, is at risk in ways that are recognized but not yet adequately addressed.

What this moment demands of engineering leaders is not simply technical adaptation. It demands **the kind of leadership** that can hold the organization's AI ambitions alongside its human responsibilities.

The organizations that navigate this well will not be the ones that adopted AI fastest. They will be the ones that built the conditions – the trust, the clarity, the investment in people – that allows AI to amplify human capability **rather than erode it**.

That is the leadership challenge of 2026, and the data in this report makes clear that many organizations are still in the early stages of rising to meet it.

Methodology

This survey was conducted between **31 March** and **16 April 2026**. Results are based on the responses of **600 engineers** of which **530 completed all the questions** that were presented to them. Due to rounding, not all charts add up to 100%.

