

# User research crisis, what changed?

Learn from 200+ product and research teams.

# Content

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|                                             |    |
|---------------------------------------------|----|
| Introduction                                | 01 |
| How did we get this data?                   | 02 |
| Proactive teams are winning                 | 03 |
| People behind this data                     | 04 |
| Factors affecting user<br>research the most | 05 |
| Why user research fails?                    | 08 |
| Turning crisis into opportunity             | 18 |
| Opportunities to watch                      | 24 |
| Conclusion                                  | 25 |

# Introduction

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*We surveyed **200+** product managers, researchers and UX professionals to understand how user research is evolving from AI disruption to participant quality concerns.*

## What did we find?

- User research isn't failing because teams don't value insights
- User research is broken and changing at the same time
- Product teams are under pressure to ship faster using AI
- Every company is using different research methods, there's no one or right answer to the research method.
- One of the biggest bottlenecks: Slow participant recruitment and declining quality
- Unclear value metrics and challenges of integrating insights into decision-making

# How did we get this data?

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- Timing: Q4 2025
- Respondents: 200+ professionals (product managers, UX researchers, designers, marketing professionals)
- Startups to enterprise (10-person teams to 5,000+ employee companies)
- Geography: North America, Europe, Asia-Pacific
- Experience: 53% with 10+ years in user research
- Question Format: Mix of single-select, multiple-select, and open-ended questions

# Proactive teams are winning

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Research is happening more often, but still struggles to influence product decisions

Teams conduct studies after roadmaps are set, not before. By the time insights arrive, decisions are locked

ROI is rarely measured in consistent or trusted ways. Most teams measure research by activity (studies completed) rather than outcomes (decisions influenced, revenue impacted)

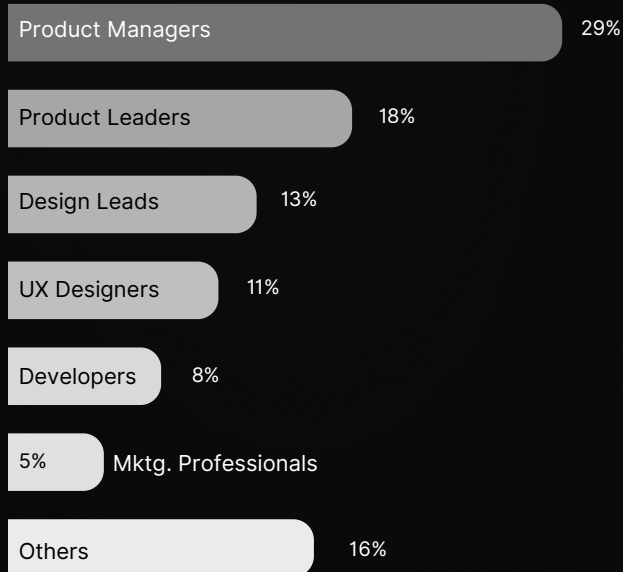
AI is speeding up tasks, but trust and adoption remain limited. While 76% see AI as helpful, teams struggle to identify which tasks should be automated vs. which require human judgment.

Operational gaps in time, tools, and buy-in continue to slow teams down.

The biggest opportunity in 2025 isn't just doing more research, it's doing it better with the right research operations infrastructure that works at product speed.

# People behind the data

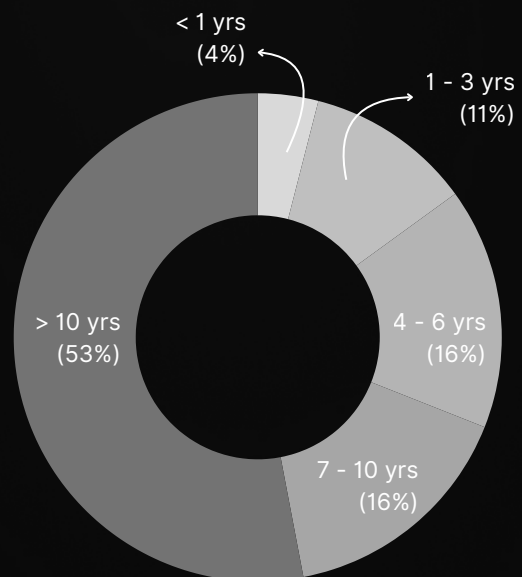
Our respondents represent a balanced mix of folks across startups and enterprises, those closest to product and research decisions, creating a well-rounded view of how user research evolves with maturity.



Roles of Participant %

Most responses came from product managers, UX researchers, and designers, those most directly involved in research and decision-making. This reflects a respondent pool deeply embedded in product and research cycles.

Most of our respondents aren't new to research, they have lived through multiple product cycles. Over half (53%) have more than 10 years of experience, with only a small fraction (**5%**) just starting out. This wealth of experience adds credibility to the patterns and insights that follow.



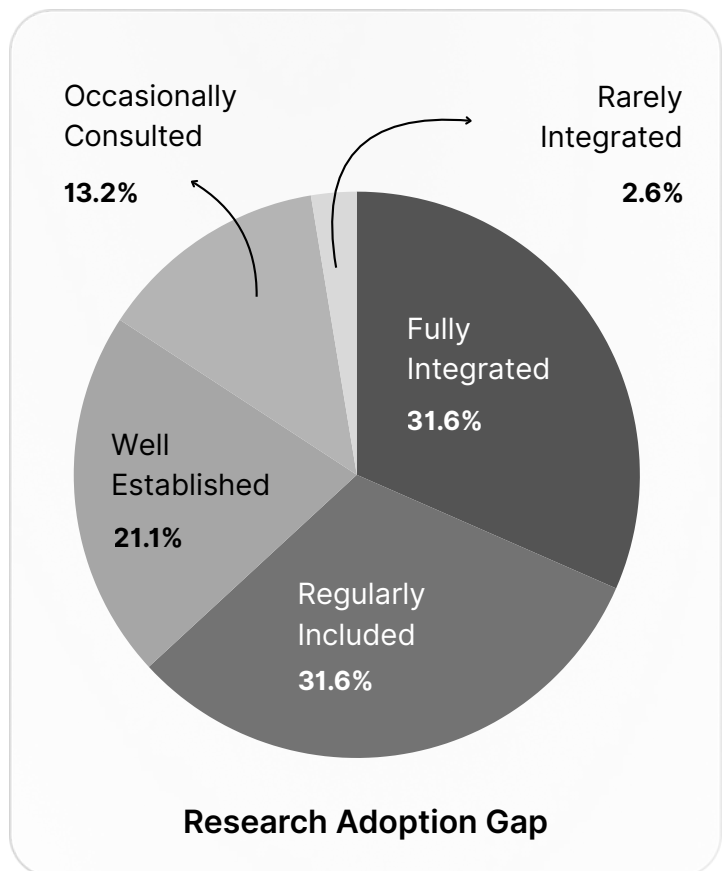
Yrs of experience of participants

# Factors affecting user research the most

*The responses show a clear pattern: research is more frequent, but still not translating into real product impact.*

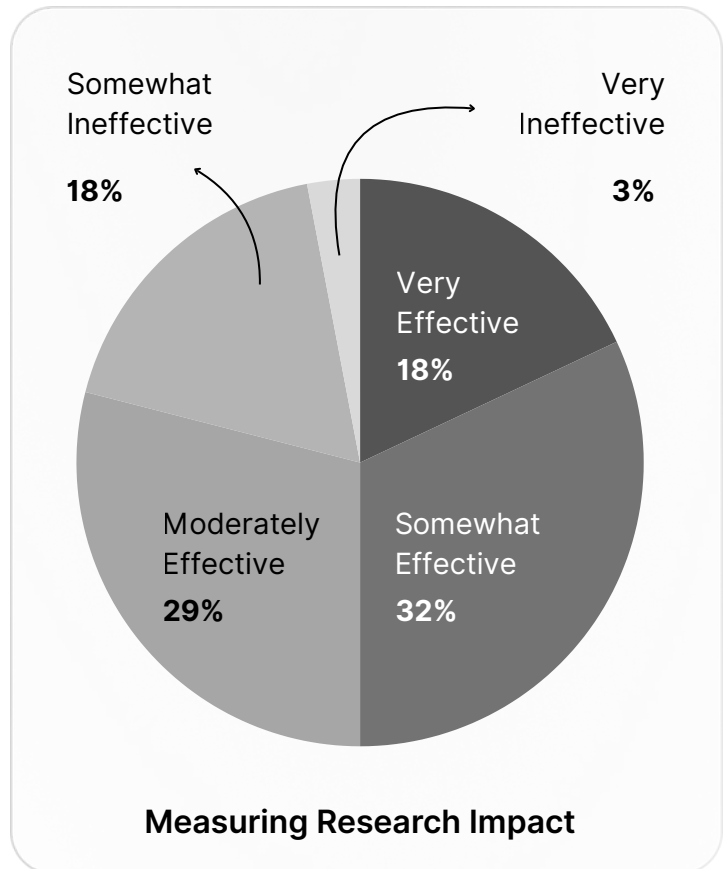
## Integration of user research in product decisions

- Only about 1 in 3 teams say research is fully integrated into product decisions
- An equal number say it's regularly included, which means research is used, but may not influence the full product cycle
- The remaining third report limited or inconsistent research use, highlighting a major operational gap



# Effectiveness of user research in demonstrating ROI

- Just **18%** of respondents think user research is very effective at proving its ROI
- A large portion selected "somewhat effective" or "moderately effective," indicating uncertainty around how research value is tracked and presented
- This lack of clarity makes it harder for teams to secure budget, resources, or leadership buy-in

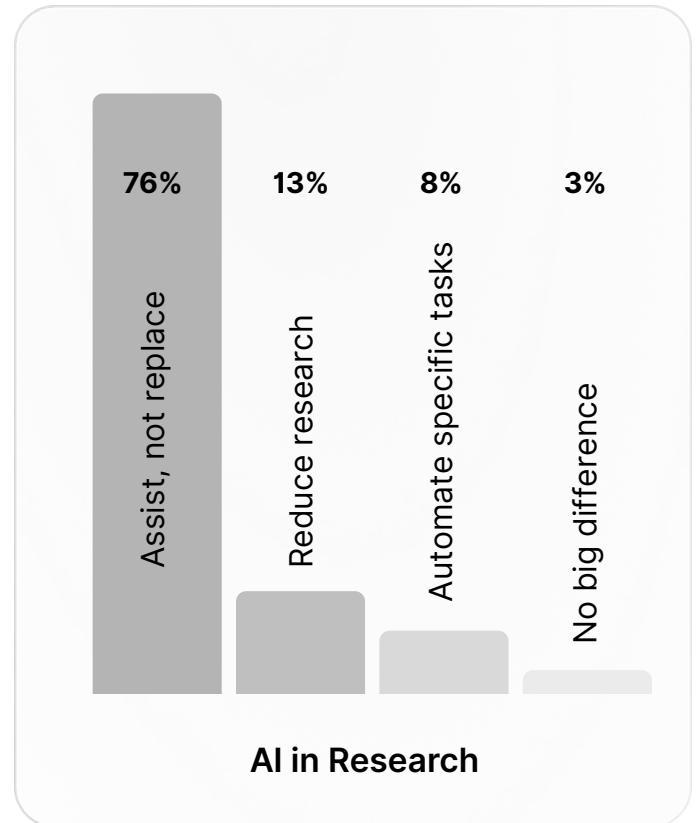


## The measurement problem

- **Research operates on faith, not evidence:** Without clear ROI measurement, teams can't prove value to leadership
- **Activity metrics replace impact metrics:** Teams measure studies completed and interviews conducted, not decisions influenced or revenue impacted
- **Budget justification becomes impossible:** Research struggles to secure resources precisely when it's needed most

# Impact of AI and automation on user research

- **76%** of respondents believe AI will support research, not replace it, showing cautious optimism
- A very small group expects AI to reduce or eliminate the need for research entirely
- Most teams see AI as a tool to handle repetitive tasks, but not something that can replace human judgment or context in user interviews



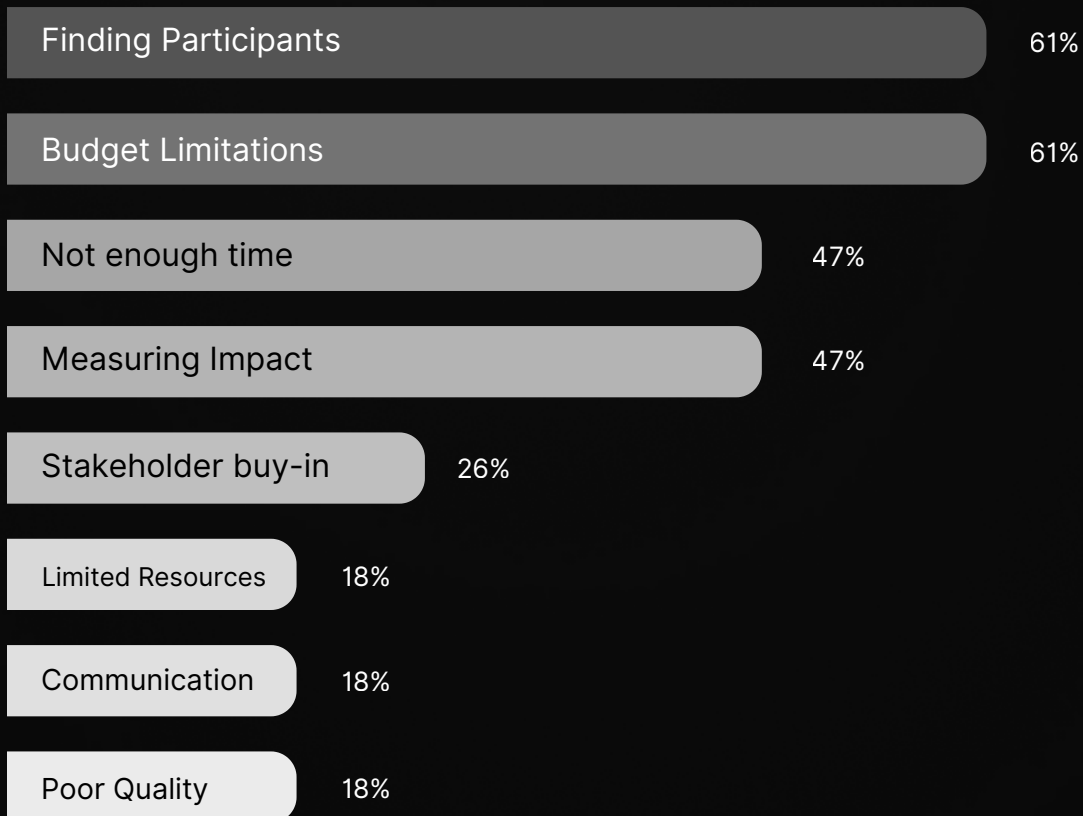
## Where AI helps vs. where humans lead

- **AI accelerates operations:** Handles transcription, tagging, and pattern detection to save hours of manual work
- **Humans interpret meaning:** Context, stakeholder dynamics, and strategic implications still require human expertise
- **Speed + depth:** The winning combination uses AI to work faster while humans ensure insights actually drive decisions

# Why user research fails?

Teams know how to research; the struggle lies in execution: delivering insights fast, proving value, and influencing decisions amid compounding operational pressures.

Before we examine each force in detail, here's the complete landscape of what teams are facing:



**The pattern is clear:** The top four challenges, participant recruitment, budget, time, and ROI measurement are not isolated problems. They compound each other, creating a constraint cycle that systematically undermines research effectiveness.

# Challenge #1 Participant quality & speed crisis

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## When finding the right people takes longer than the research itself

**61%** of respondents (n=200+) cited participant recruitment as a top challenge, tied with budget constraints as the most frequently mentioned barrier.

But the problem isn't just sourcing. It's about:

- Reaching the right personas (not just anyone who'll take an incentive)
- Matching timing with product cycles (finding participants within a 1-2 week window)
- Screening for relevance without adding another week to the timeline
- Budget constraints that force teams to compromise on quality

## The real impact

Quality suffers when teams compromise. Under pressure, teams skip proper screening, reuse old panels, or settle for whoever's easiest to reach. This undermines trust in insights and creates a vicious cycle: low-quality research leads to ignored insights, which reduces investment in future studies.

Time constraints compound the problem. **47%** of respondents cited time constraints as a major challenge. While research may be valued in theory, in practice it often gets squeezed into unrealistic timelines, especially when paired with budget and recruitment issues.

# Challenge #2 The ROI measurement gap

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## Insight Delayed Is Insight Denied

Only about 1 in 3 teams (n=200+) say research is fully integrated into product decisions.

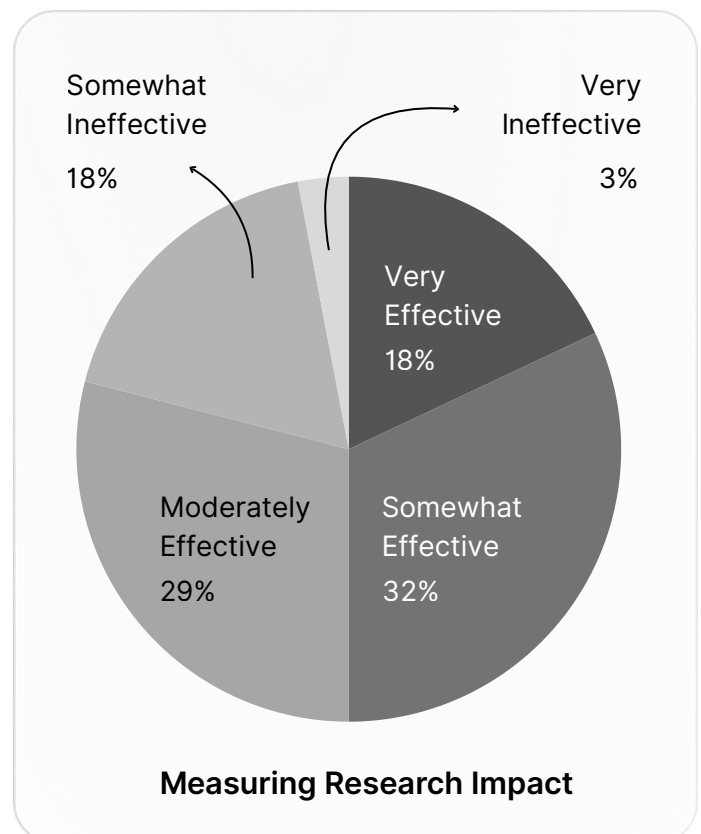
This is the most revealing finding in our survey. User interviews aren't failing because of bad methodology or poor insights. They're failing because they arrive too late to influence the decisions they're meant to inform.

## How teams describe their research maturity?

Many teams measure user interviews by:

- Number of studies conducted
- Interviews completed
- Reports delivered
- Presentations given

But none of these prove impact. They prove activity.



# Challenge #3 Integration & timing failure

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## When research can't prove its value, it can't justify its budget

**50%** of respondents (n=200+) say the user research industry struggles to demonstrate clear ROI.

This isn't just a communication problem. It's a measurement infrastructure problem. Most teams track research by activity (studies completed, sessions conducted) rather than outcomes (decisions influenced, features shipped, revenue impacted).

### How teams describe their research maturity?

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**18%**

described research as fully embedded:  
deeply integrated into workflows

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**13%**

described it as established: but not  
consistently tied to high-impact decisions

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**45%**

said research is strategic: recognized and  
often used to guide product direction

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**21%**

described it as developing: just starting to  
gain consistency

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**3%**

called their practice reactive: used only when stakeholders specifically ask for it

## The pattern

Most teams land between 'developing' and 'strategic', research is happening, but not always embedded in decision-making.

User research is more visible than ever, but visibility doesn't equal influence. Until research is embedded into planning and prioritization, it remains a supporting function, not a strategic driver.

Most teams land between 'developing' and 'strategic': research is frequent, but not always influential.

### What this looks like in practice

#### 01. Research as validation theater

Product team decides to build Feature X. They ask research to "validate" it. User interviews find problems, but momentum is too strong to change course. The feature ships anyway.

#### 02. Research without influence

Research team conducts excellent study. Findings are presented. Everyone nods. Nothing changes because the roadmap is already locked for the quarter.

#### 03. Research as afterthought

Product team makes decisions in Week 1. Research team learns about it in Week 3. They scramble to "add insights" but can't influence the core direction.

## Why this integration fails?

- **Structural barriers:** Research sits outside product org with no seat at planning meetings.
- **Timing barriers:** Research takes 6-8 weeks while product sprints run in 2 weeks.
- **Measurement barriers:** Can't prove which insights influenced decisions.

**The brutal truth:** If user interviews consistently arrive after decisions are made, the quality of the research is irrelevant. Timing beats perfection.

# Challenge #4 AI uncertainty & the changing role of researchers

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**When teams know AI should help, but not how to keep up.**

**76%** of respondents (n=200+) believe AI will support research, not replace it, showing cautious optimism. But teams struggle with what to automate vs. what requires human judgment.

## What the data tells about AI in user research

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**76%**

said AI will help, but not replace researchers

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**8%**

cited task-level support (transcription, organizing) as AI's primary role

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**13%**

believe AI will significantly reduce the need for researchers

**3%**

think AI won't make much of a difference at all

## The AI consensus

Research teams are using AI to handle data processing and pattern recognition, but human expertise remains central to:

- Interpreting context that AI misses
- Reading between the lines in interviews
- Understanding stakeholder dynamics that shape how insights land
- Making strategic recommendations that connect insights to business goals

### Where AI helps vs. where humans lead

#### AI helps

Transcription, tagging,  
pattern detection,  
summarization, translation

#### Humans lead

Contextual interpretation, strategic  
recommendations, rapport building,  
nuanced questioning, stakeholder  
navigation

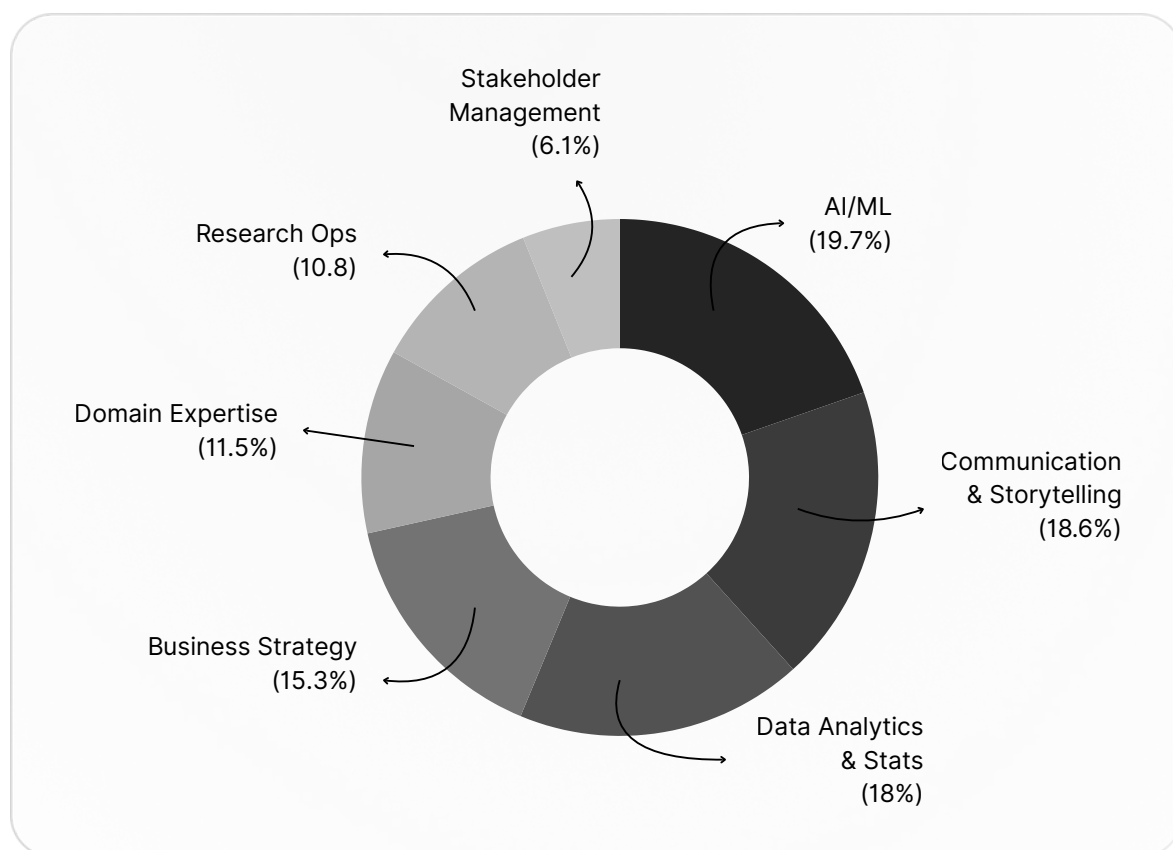
## The evolving role of researchers

Teams no longer want someone who can just "run studies." They want someone who can think in metrics, translate insights, and move fast without losing depth.

LinkedIn job postings for "User Researcher" roles in 2024-2025 now list "data analysis," "AI/ML familiarity," "business acumen," and "stakeholder management" as required skills, not nice-to-haves.

## Skills that will matter most (next 2-3 years)

*From AI-powered workflows to faster product cycles, the role of research is shifting, and so are the skills expected from researchers. Teams no longer want someone who can just “run studies.” They want someone who can think in metrics, translate insights, and move fast without losing depth.*



## What this means going forward

The future of research isn't just methodological, it's multidisciplinary.

Researchers are being asked to:

- Speak the language of product (metrics, OKRs, roadmaps)
- Understand technical systems (AI, algorithms, platforms)
- Operate at business strategy level (not just feature validation)
- Build scalable operations (not just individual projects)

Teams that don't help researchers upskill will lose them to competitors who do.

# Turning crisis into opportunity

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Here's the good news: these four challenges aren't death sentences. The research teams pulling ahead in 2025 share one trait and they stopped waiting for market conditions to improve and started improving their own operations instead.

Four strategic interventions keep surfacing among successful teams.

**1. Make participant recruitment a competitive advantage**

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**2. Build measurement frameworks that prove value**

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**3. Integrate research into product cycles**

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**4. Use AI to solve operations, not replace judgment**

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**5. Your 30/60/90 day action plan**

# Make participant recruitment a competitive advantage

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**The Problem:** *61% cite participant recruitment as a top challenge. Teams spend 2-4 weeks finding the right people, by which time product decisions have already been made.*

**The Solution:** *Build always-on participant access, not project-based sourcing.*

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## What high-performing teams do?

- Maintain participant pools, not one-off lists: Build relationships with user segments continuously
- Invest in screening infrastructure: Pre-qualify participants based on detailed criteria
- Use platforms with verified participants: Partner with providers who demonstrate participant verification
- Build internal participant networks: Create user panels from existing customers
- Leverage expert networks for B2B: Use expert platforms for specialized roles

This approach reduces recruitment time from 3-4 weeks down to 3-4 days, enabling research to influence decisions while they're still being made.

# Build measurement frameworks that prove value

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**The Problem:** 50% struggle to demonstrate ROI. Without clear measurement, research can't justify its budget.

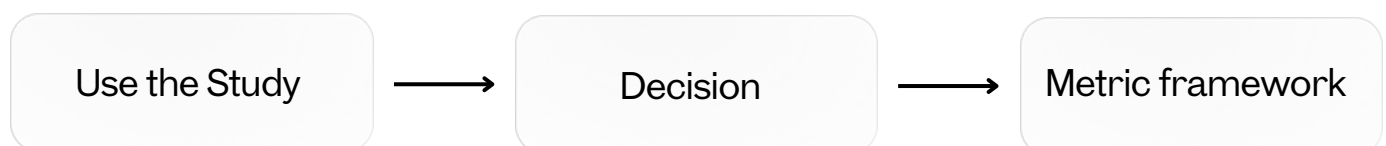
**The Solution:** Track outcomes, not outputs. Measure what research influences, not what it produces.

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## How to track research ROI

The ROI measurement gap isn't just a communication problem but it's a tracking problem. Most teams measure research by activity (studies completed, interviews conducted) rather than outcomes (decisions influenced, metrics moved, costs avoided).

Here's a simple framework that connects research directly to business impact:



Every research project should answer three questions:

1. What study did we conduct? (the research activity)
2. What decision did it inform or change? (the product/business action)
3. What measurable outcome resulted? (the business impact)

This creates a clear chain of causation from research to results.

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### **Example #1 Checkout flow optimization**

- Study: 15 user interviews with customers who abandoned carts
- Decision: Reduced checkout from 5 steps to 3, removed guest account requirement
- Metric: Cart abandonment dropped 68% → 52% = +\$240K monthly revenue
- ROI: \$8K research cost → \$2.88M annually (360x return)

### **Example #2 Onboarding experience**

- Study: 20 user interviews (10 converted, 10 didn't)
- Decision: Added progress indicator, eliminated 2 form fields
- Metric: Trial-to-paid conversion jumped 12% → 19% = +450 paid users/month
- ROI: \$12K research cost → \$264K annual recurring revenue (22x return)

### **Example #3 Feature prioritization**

- Study: 25 power user interviews validating roadmap assumptions
- Decision: Killed Feature X (low interest), invested in Feature Y (high demand)
- Metric: Avoided \$180K wasted dev costs + Feature Y drove 2.3x higher engagement
- ROI: \$15K research cost → \$180K saved + significantly higher user value

## How to Implement?

### Before the study

- Define which decision this research will inform
- Establish baseline metrics
- Set target outcomes

### After launch

- Measure results at 30/60/90 days post-implementation
- Compare against baseline and targets
- Calculate financial impact where possible

**Report it simply:** Create a one-page case study using this template:

### Element

### Details

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Research Question

What were we trying to learn?

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Key Finding

What did we discover?

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Decision Made

What changed as a result?

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Baseline → Result

Where were we before →  
where did we end up?

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Business Impact

Revenue gained, costs avoided,  
time saved

# Integrate research into product cycles

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**The Problem:** Only 1 in 3 teams say research is fully integrated. Most user interviews happen after decisions are made.

**The Solution:** Embed research structurally into planning, not just tactically into execution.

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## What integration looks like

- Research has a seat at planning meetings
  - Research inputs are required for major decisions
  - Continuous discovery is the default (weekly user conversations)
  - Research and product speak the same language
  - Research timing matches product timing (1-2 week cycles)
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## The Integration Spectrum:

Reactive → Developing → Strategic → Embedded → Continuous

# Use AI to solve operations, not replace judgment

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**The Problem:** 76% see AI as helpful, but teams don't know which tasks to automate vs. which require human expertise.

**The Solution:** Use AI for operational leverage, not as a substitute for research judgment.

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## Where to deploy AI

**AI handles:** Transcription, tagging, pattern detection, summarization, translation

**Humans lead:** Contextual interpretation, strategic recommendations, rapport building, stakeholder navigation

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## How to deploy

Use AI to accelerate delivery (reduce 8-12 week projects to 3-5 weeks), maintain quality through human interpretation of insights

*AI is a co-pilot, not the captain.*

# Your 30/60/90 day action plan

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*Leadership wants immediate next steps. Here's your roadmap:*

## Days 1-30: Foundation

- Audit current state
- Select pilot area
- Set up 3 KPIs (Study → Decision → Metric)
- Build participant pool (50-100 verified participants)

**Success metric:** *First interview within 48 hours of request*

## Days 31-60: Execution

- Run continuous discovery (2-3 interviews per week)
- Track decision influence
- Measure velocity improvement
- Share 1-2 case studies

**Success metric:** *One decision demonstrably changed by research with measurable outcome*

## Days 61-90: Scale

- Expand to 3 teams
- Implement research gates (no prioritization without user input)
- Train PMs on lightweight discovery
- Build ROI dashboard

**Success metric:** *60% of roadmap decisions cite research as influence factor*

*Total 90-Day Investment: \$45K-70K*

**Expected ROI:** *Prevent one failed feature (~\$150K-250K saved) + 15-20% increase in feature adoption*

# Opportunities to watch

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*As research teams adapt to new tools and shifting expectations, 2025 is shaping up to be a turning point. Survey responses pointed to five big opportunity areas:*

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## 01. Integrating AI, not replacing the researcher

"I think that AI injecting UX is extremely exciting and will help build better experiences, faster. The key is using AI to augment human insight, not replace the strategic thinking that only experienced researchers can provide."

— Product Manager

## 02. Making research proactive, not reactive

"Beyond reactive research, we should be studying issues before they appear, proactively understanding user behavior instead of diagnosing it after the fact."

— Product Head

## 03. Building research as a cross-functional muscle

"I'd love to see more PMs and designers confident in running basic research. Central teams shouldn't gatekeep. We should enable it."

— UX Research Ops Manager

## 04. Operationalizing speed without losing rigor

"Scaling the velocity of tests and streamlining the testing process without sacrificing quality, that's the future."

— Marketing Professional

# Conclusion

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The user interview landscape in 2025 isn't failing because teams don't value insights. It's failing because the operational infrastructure to deliver those insights reliably at product velocity is broken.

We surveyed 200+ professionals and the pattern is clear: research is more visible than ever, but systematically limited by slow participant recruitment **(61%)**, invisible ROI **(50%)**, time constraints **(47%)**, and integration failures (only 1 in 3 teams fully integrated).

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## The four challenges breaking user interviews

1. The participant quality & speed crisis: Finding the right people takes longer than research
2. The ROI measurement gap: Teams can't prove research value
3. The integration & timing failure: Research arrives too late to influence decisions
4. AI uncertainty & changing roles: Don't know what to automate + skills evolving faster than teams adapt

These aren't separate problems. They compound each other.

## But here's the opportunity

The teams pulling ahead in 2025 stopped waiting for conditions to improve and started rebuilding their research operations instead.

Four interventions restore healthy research economics:

- Make participant recruitment a competitive advantage
- Build measurement frameworks that prove value
- Integrate research into product cycles
- Use AI to solve operations, not replace judgment

The question isn't whether change is coming, it's whether you'll shape that change or react to it.

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*The biggest opportunity in 2025 isn't doing more user interviews. It's fixing the infrastructure that makes quality research possible at product velocity. The future belongs to teams who treat research not as a phase, but as strategic infrastructure: built into how decisions are made, products are shaped, and value is delivered.*