

colt

From concern to confidence:

How telcos can embrace AI without leaving people behind



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Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming how telcos operate, make decisions and serve customers. From boosting efficiency to shaping smarter strategies, AI offers vast potential to drive performance. When implemented thoughtfully, it has the potential to support inclusion by reducing bias, enabling inclusive career development and supporting more equitable workplace practices.

But without care and proper governance, AI can negatively impact people, organisations and the wider ecosystem. Companies must ensure AI operations align with their values and priorities.

While many reports cover AI use cases and market forecasts, few explore how employees really feel about AI, particularly its impact on gender balance, which is an ongoing challenge within the telco industry. To address this, we surveyed over 1,000 telco professionals and conducted qualitative interviews with four subject matter experts. We wanted to discover how telcos can engage with the technology without leaving people behind.

The results show both optimism and concern: AI's benefits are clear, yet many fear its effect on job security and the future of work. A key finding is that, if poorly managed, AI could worsen gender disparities and inclusion within the industry.

Inclusive AI adoption is therefore a core requirement for ethical and successful AI integration, and with an inclusive and equitable approach to build, adoption and change management, risks of furthering inequalities can be mitigated.

While based on input from telco professionals, the findings hold value for businesses in every industry.



Key takeaways

1 AI can have a positive impact on inclusion, but risks are high and it's unclear how many organisations are mitigating them

While gender diversity in telecoms remains an area for improvement, respondents believe AI has the potential to improve progress on gender equity. But given that many of the [roles likely to be most impacted by AI](#) tend to be predominantly held by women, organisations must take conscious and sustained efforts to manage risk and support their employees when AI is deployed.

The report indicates that of employers with good or excellent gender diversity, only 30% know of work being done to mitigate the risks AI poses to gender disparities. When it comes to companies with poor or very poor gender diversity, just 9% are aware of work being done to address the risks.

2 AI's advancement is negatively impacting perceptions of job security

The findings show that many telco professionals are concerned about AI displacing all or some of their role, particularly in functions such as marketing,

admin, finance and customer service. Similarly, few respondents reported that they are confident in their job security, highlighting the importance of proactive communication and engagement, making sure that employees are brought on the journey. AI deployment should happen with employees, not to them.

3 Employees recognise the potential impact of AI

Almost all respondents believe parts of their role could be automated, while the majority expect AI to impact everything from data gathering to strategy, research and project management.

Without effective governance at both organisational and AI model levels, the technology presents large risks of perpetuating existing societal imbalances. If AI is trained on biased data sets, these will be perpetuated in decision making.

Governance is needed across the entire lifecycle, from identifying and prioritising opportunities to building, procuring and decommissioning models.

Organisations need to assess the impact of their AI workloads and products they use or build on top of, throughout the supply chain. Effective procurement and vendor and technology evaluation processes are needed. Businesses and their leaders should not take notions of ethics and responsible AI at face value.

4 Confidence in job security rises when support is present

Employees who feel supported through AI adoption are more likely to feel confident in their job security, proving the value of a people-first approach. The report reveals that those who receive AI-specific training and regular communication on adoption feel more confident in their roles. Here, organisations should broaden training beyond just technical roles to support all departments and educate employees on the technology itself along with its risks and limitations.

5 AI is already transforming telco operations

The vast majority have already started integrating AI into their day-to-day operations, with a variety of tools being used on a regular basis. However, while adoption rates are high, most are in the early stages of their journey, highlighting a cautious but steady move towards AI adoption.

Insight #1

AI adoption could improve gender diversity or widen inequalities

The survey findings show that gender diversity could be improved across all business levels.

As it stands, only small percentages state that the level of gender diversity at board level (20%), senior management level (20%) and across the company (22%) is excellent.

However, they expect AI to have a positive impact in this respect. Almost two thirds (63%) of respondents say they believe AI will improve progress on any gender targets their company is working on/will work towards.¹

63%

believe AI will improve progress on any gender targets their company is working on/will work towards

“Maybe AI could help women move into more resilient roles, but that shift is not happening by default.” Head of DE&I

This could be achieved in several ways, such as augmenting decision-making processes to remove bias and recommending personalised upskilling opportunities based on employees’ goals and performance, as opposed to assumptions about gender and background. Meanwhile, AI-powered systems can help to design flexible schedules, assignments and workload management schedules that accommodate diverse work styles and time constraints.

It’s important to note the tension here between employees’ optimism about technological progress, and the reality that roles that are more prone to automation are disproportionately held by women.

Businesses must be aware that positive gender diversity outcomes will not happen passively. Without proactive intervention and an inclusive approach, AI deployment could widen gender inequalities within the telco sector.

Organisations need to embed well-designed governance processes and policies into the lifecycle of their AI workloads, whether built or bought, aligning them with broader organisational objectives and ethical principles, and engaging a diverse set of stakeholders along the way.

“Too often, decisions about AI are being made in rooms where there’s no one thinking about equity.” Head of Diversity, Access and Participation



Findings from our interviews with industry professionals reveal concerns that this is being overlooked in boardrooms.

Results from our survey indicate that many businesses are not taking meaningful steps to mitigate the risks AI poses on gender equality.

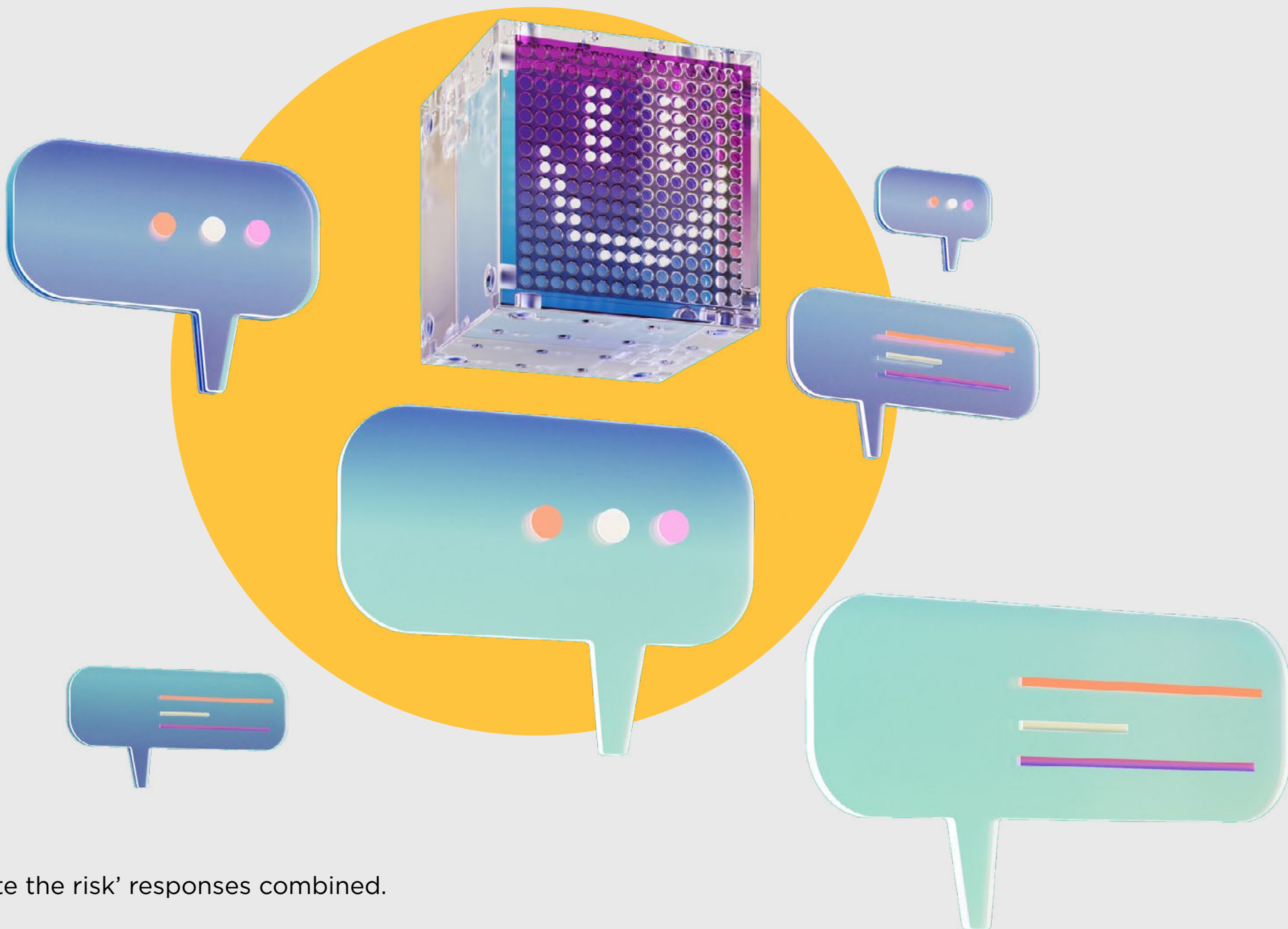
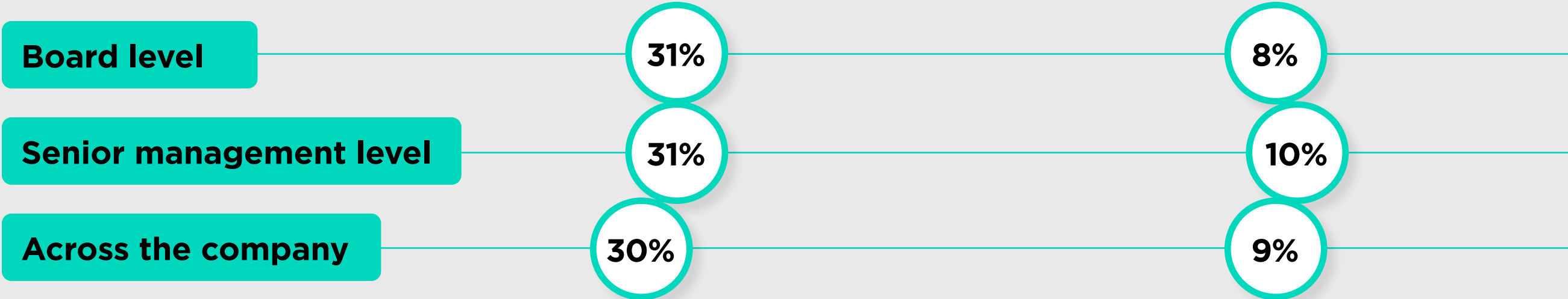
60% say they are aware that their company is considering how AI could worsen gender disparities in the workplace and society², however only 22% say that work is currently taking place to mitigate the risk.

What’s telling is that employers who already have either good or excellent gender diversity are doing a better job of this than those in which gender diversity is lacking.

“We need more diverse people feeding into these models, right now it’s mostly the same demographic building the tools.”
Chief Technology & AI Officer

% of respondents who say there is good or excellent gender diversity at this level and who say work is taking place to mitigate the risk of AI worsening gender disparities

% of respondents who say there is poor or very poor gender diversity at this level and who say work is taking place to mitigate the risk of AI worsening gender disparities



¹ ‘Will greatly improve progress’ and ‘Will slightly improve progress’ responses combined.
² ‘Yes – and there is work taking place to mitigate the risk’ and ‘Yes – but I am not aware of work taking place to mitigate the risk’ responses combined.

Insight #2

People have concerns over the potential impact of AI on their role

55%
say they are concerned about AI displacing their role or part of their role in the future

Given that telco workers expect AI to impact all business functions and career levels, it seems only natural that many harbour concerns over AI.

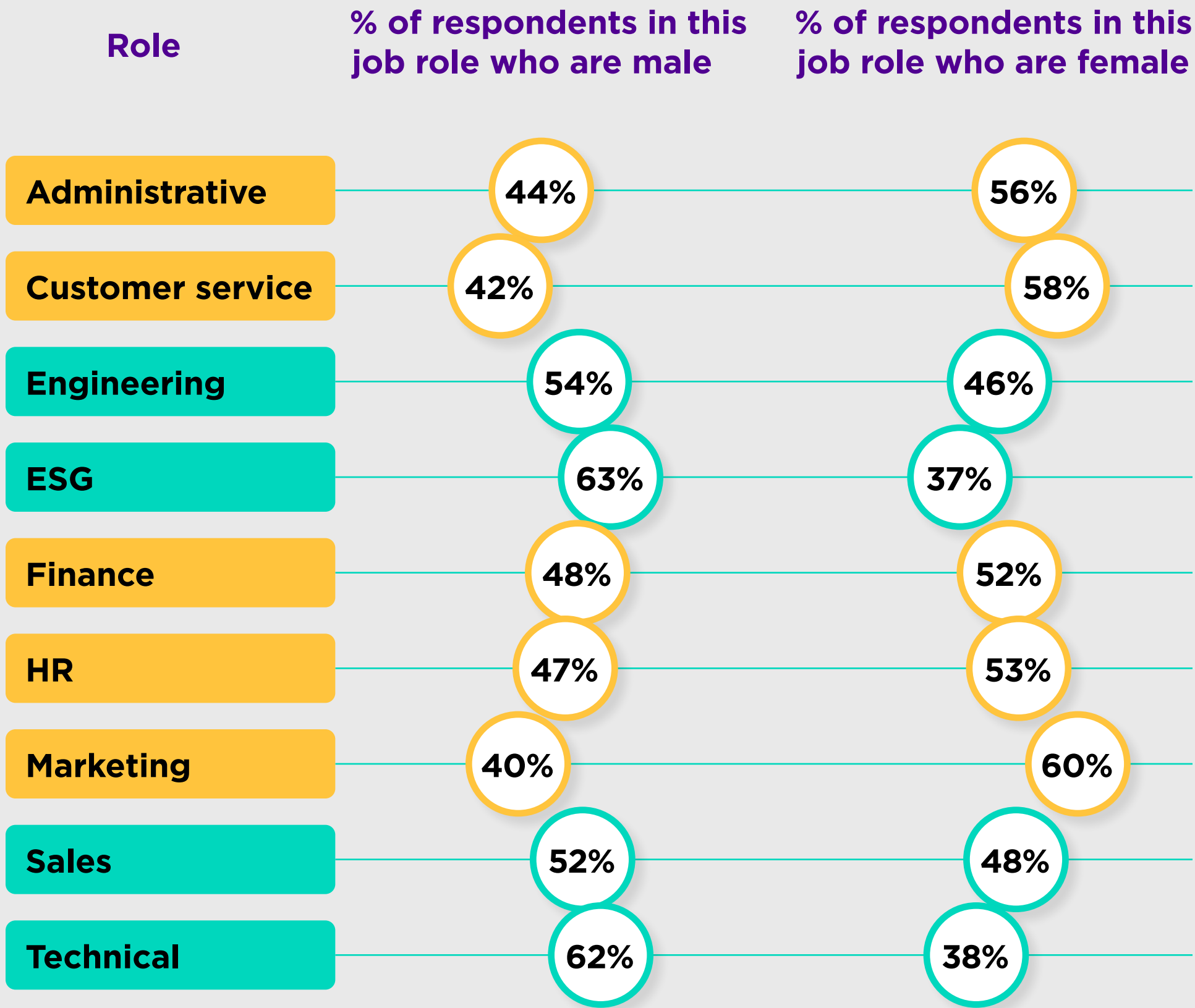
55% of respondents say they are concerned¹ about AI displacing all or part of their role in future, while just 22% say they are unconcerned.²

The findings also reveal employees in marketing (60%), finance (60%), customer service (59%) and admin (58%) roles are more likely to be concerned¹ about AI displacing their role.

Concerningly, these are all roles that are more likely to be held by female respondents. This is reflected in the breakdown of male and female respondents in our survey and also supported by industry data. According to LinkedIn, 60% of [marketing roles in the US](#) are performed by women. Meanwhile, the [2021 UK Census](#) showed that women held approximately 78% of admin and secretarial roles.

A study from the UN's International Labour Organization (ILO) revealed that [roles dominated by women](#) are three times more likely to be replaced or transformed by AI than those traditionally held by men.

“If you look at the areas that are being automated first, they tend to be roles often filled by women.” Head of Diversity, Access and Participation



“Customer services, marketing copy, knowledge articles, those are already automated. Those are areas where women are well represented.”
Chief Technology & AI Officer

“If the data reflects historical bias, and the system learns from that, we are just codifying inequality.”

Academic, Women & Gender Studies

If roles such as this are reduced or eliminated because of AI, without clear pathways to reskill or transition, women may be disproportionately displaced.

As part of AI governance and change management processes, organisations should proactively assess the roles and stakeholders who will be affected and build plans for reskilling and role realignment into project plans and business cases.

It is often cited that AI will ‘unlock time for higher-value work’ and that a key focus is on augmentation rather than automation, however if employers are serious about this (and protecting the breadth of their people), they will need to think seriously about these topics early on with responsible AI by design from the outset, rather than as an afterthought.

“There’s this idea that if you’ve had a gap or slowed down your pace, you’ve fallen behind. AI is just going to make that perception worse.”

Academic, Women & Gender Studies

AI systems should be built and deployed in account of and for diverse perspectives, otherwise it will fail to serve all employees equally and negatively impact gender equality and women’s career development.

Insights from our qualitative research also reveal concerns around AI’s impact on employees with caregiving responsibilities. For example, without oversight, AI may deepen bias against women re-entering the workforce after maternity leave or caregiving gaps, especially when this data is exposed to AI systems in HR-related domains such as performance profiling or hiring algorithms.

“We don’t know yet how these systems will judge a fragmented CV, but we can guess. And women will be the ones most impacted.”

Head of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion



¹ ‘Very concerned’ and ‘Somewhat concerned’ responses combined.

² ‘Very unconcerned’ and ‘Somewhat unconcerned’ responses combined.

Insight #3

Concerns over AI's impact are affecting perceptions of job security

The research uncovers uncertainty among telco workers when it comes to job security.

Just 51% say they are confident¹ in their job security, with less than a quarter (23%) saying they are very confident. Meanwhile, almost 3 in 10 (28%) say they feel unconfident² when it comes to their job security.

**Just
23%**
say they are very
confident in their
job security

Levels of uncertainty vary across different job roles and seniority levels. For example, respondents in engineering (47%) and finance (45%) roles are much less likely than those in HR (63%) to feel confident¹ in their job security.

Meanwhile, people in entry level (38%) and intermediate (41%) roles are far less likely to feel confident¹ than C-level execs (70%) and those in senior management (66%) roles.

A closer look at the findings suggests that this lack of confidence is being driven by concerns over job roles being replaced by AI.

The data shows that those who feel unconcerned about all or part of their role being displaced are considerably more likely to feel confident about their job security than those who are concerned (66% vs. 46%).

This highlights the need for employers to help employees to feel empowered rather than threatened by AI as they integrate the technology into their business operations.

When deploying AI, these concerns should be carefully considered, and steps taken in areas such as transparency and corporate communications, cross-functional communities and governance groups, and AI literacy and role-specific training programmes.



¹ 'Very confident' and 'Somewhat confident' responses combined.

² 'Very confident' and 'Somewhat confident' responses combined.

Insight #4

Negative perceptions of job security can be eased through mature approaches to AI deployment and employee engagement

Despite concerns and uncertainty around job security, people still recognise the benefits of AI, citing quicker analysis (35%), speeding up the time it takes to complete tasks (35%), and boosting productivity (32%) as the most impactful to their role.

Biggest benefits respondents hope AI will bring to their role:

1. Quicker analysis of data (35%)
2. Speed up time to complete tasks (35%)
3. Boost productivity (32%)
4. Easier to find information (31%)
5. Less time spent doing repetitive tasks (28%)

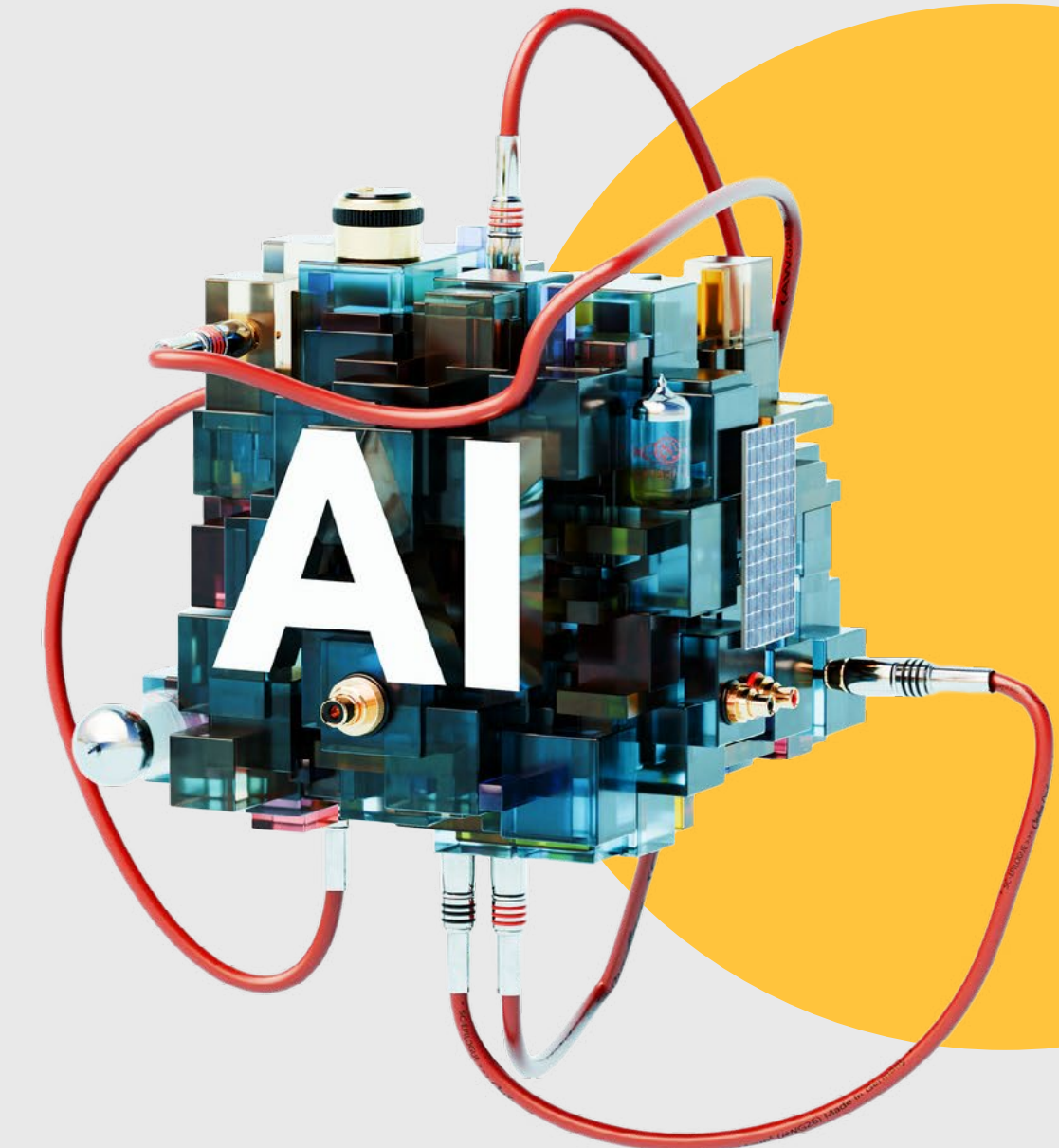
The fact that many respondents are hopeful AI will benefit them in their role could be a sign that organisations are doing a good job at helping employees feel empowered. But there are many other influences on people's perspectives and experiences of AI ranging from political changes, marketing materials and personal use. Leaders should stay aware of these and how they may impact people from different regions and backgrounds.

The findings suggest a link between AI adoption and feelings of job security. The data reveals that respondents who are confident¹ in their job security are more likely than those who are not confident² to say that their company has integrated AI to a medium (41% vs 29%) and high (20% vs 8%) extent.

These stats suggest that businesses who are more mature in AI deployment and adoption are also more likely to be supporting their employees on this journey, fostering a sense of confidence and security rather than uncertainty.

41%

of respondents who are confident in their job security say their company has integrated AI to a medium extent



¹ 'Very confident' and 'Somewhat confident' responses combined.

² 'Very unconfident' and 'Somewhat unconfident' responses combined.

Insight #5

Open communication and training are essential for a positive experience

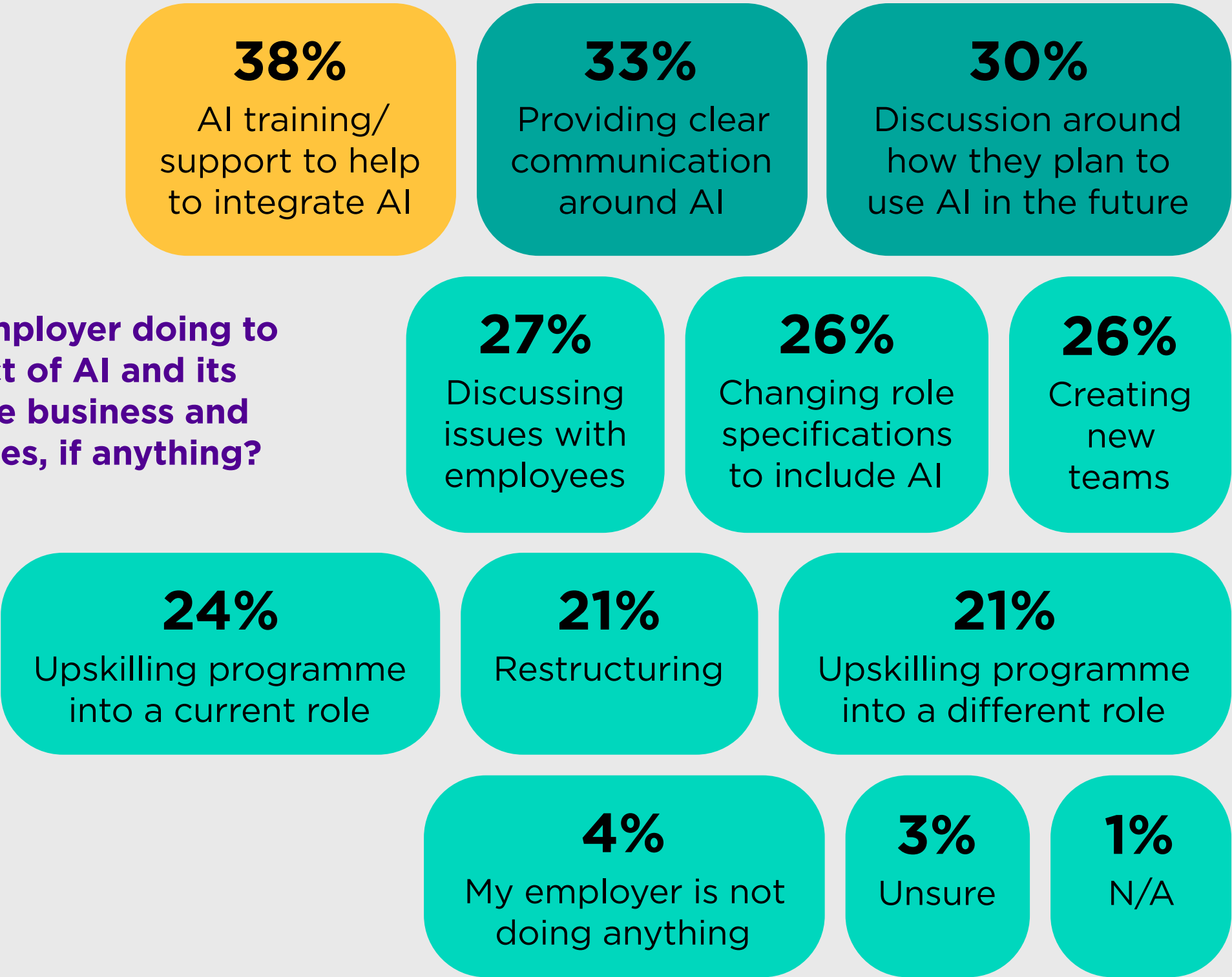
According to respondents, there are several things businesses could be doing that would ensure employees are more comfortable with AI, including AI training (46%), changing role specifications to include AI (33%) and implementing an upskilling programme for employees' current roles (31%).

Meanwhile, over a quarter (27%) also say that an upskilling programme for entering into a different role is important for their business to do in the context of adopting AI.

Encouragingly, the research shows that many businesses are already taking steps to manage the impact of AI and its integration into day-to-day activities.

“There is an assumption everyone is ready to adapt, but a lot of people are just overwhelmed and staying silent.”
Chief Technology & AI Officer

Q. What is your employer doing to manage the impact of AI and its integration into the business and day-to-day activities, if anything?



The results show a focus on training and open dialogue surrounding plans for AI integration.

When it comes to upskilling, the findings show that most employees have access to a variety of tools and events including online courses (47%), reading materials (41%), conferences (35%) and in-person courses (33%).

In fact, just 6% say they do not currently have access to any upskilling tools, methods or facilities in the workplace.

What’s promising is that, by providing the means to upskill, telcos are building employees’ confidence in their job security. For example, 54% of respondents who feel confident¹ in terms of their current job security say they have access to online courses, while just 40% of those who do not feel confident² say the same.

Whatever upskilling tools are on offer, it is important that these are designed with inclusivity in mind. Programmes that overlook the unique barriers faced by certain demographic groups, such as time constraints or existing biases in training content, may widen the skills gap they are looking to address, reducing representation in AI-enhanced roles as a result.

Respondents also say businesses are providing voluntary courses (57%) and working groups to join (56%), while almost half say their employer is providing compulsory training (48%).

The findings suggest compulsory training may be key to building employee confidence in job security. Those who feel less secure are much more likely to report having access only to voluntary courses (66%) than compulsory ones (47%), indicating that employees may require more handholding in order to feel empowered by AI.

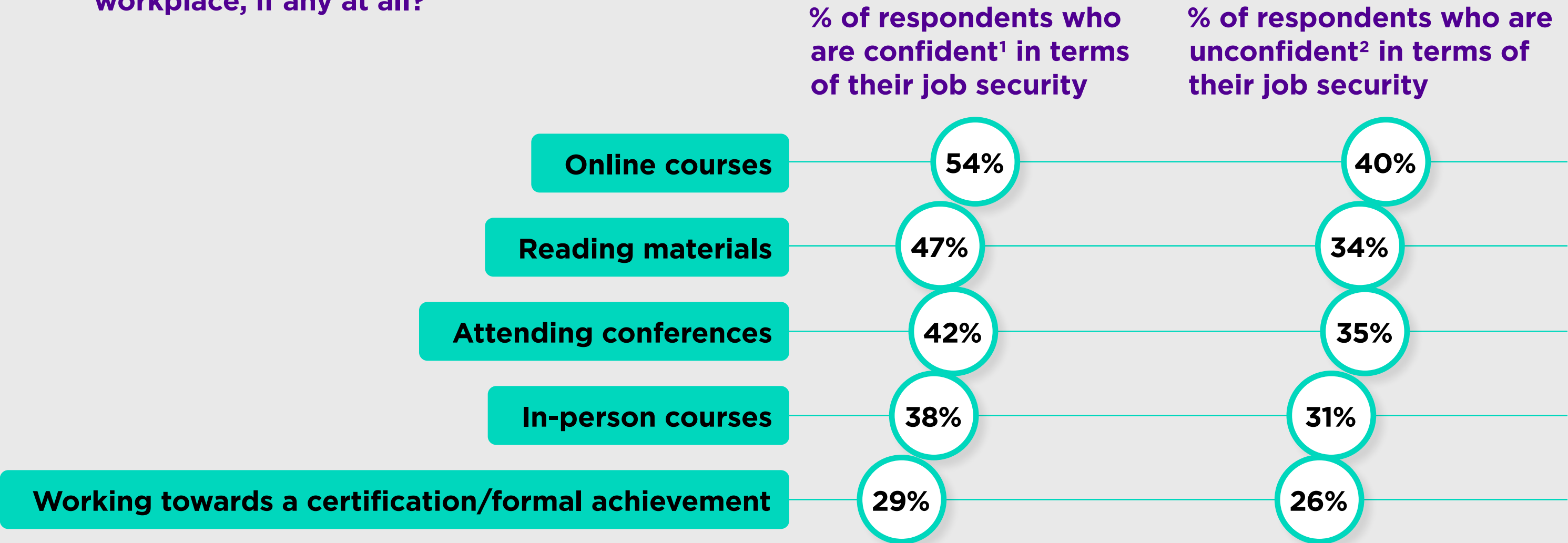
Support for AI literacy (now required under the EU AI Act for all employees involved in AI operations) must reach every role and function. Training should not only equip people to use AI and unlock its opportunities, but also address its risks and limitations, from inaccuracy and hallucinations to automation bias.

To achieve this, companies need a mix of approaches: technical training, external resources, role and tooling-specific guidance, and mandatory sessions on areas such as security and data protection. Cultural and community initiatives, such as centres of excellence, projects and hackathons, can also build trust and shift perceptions.

Together, these efforts can help demystify AI and help people incorporate it into their daily activities.

“We are expecting people to self-select into AI learning, but those least confident are not putting their hands up.”
Chief Technology & AI Officer

Q. What upskilling tools, methods or facilities do you currently have access to in the workplace, if any at all?



¹ ‘Very confident’ and ‘Somewhat confident’ responses combined.
² ‘Very unconfident’ and ‘Somewhat unconfident’ responses combined.

Insight #6

Telcos are integrating AI into day-to-day operations one step at a time

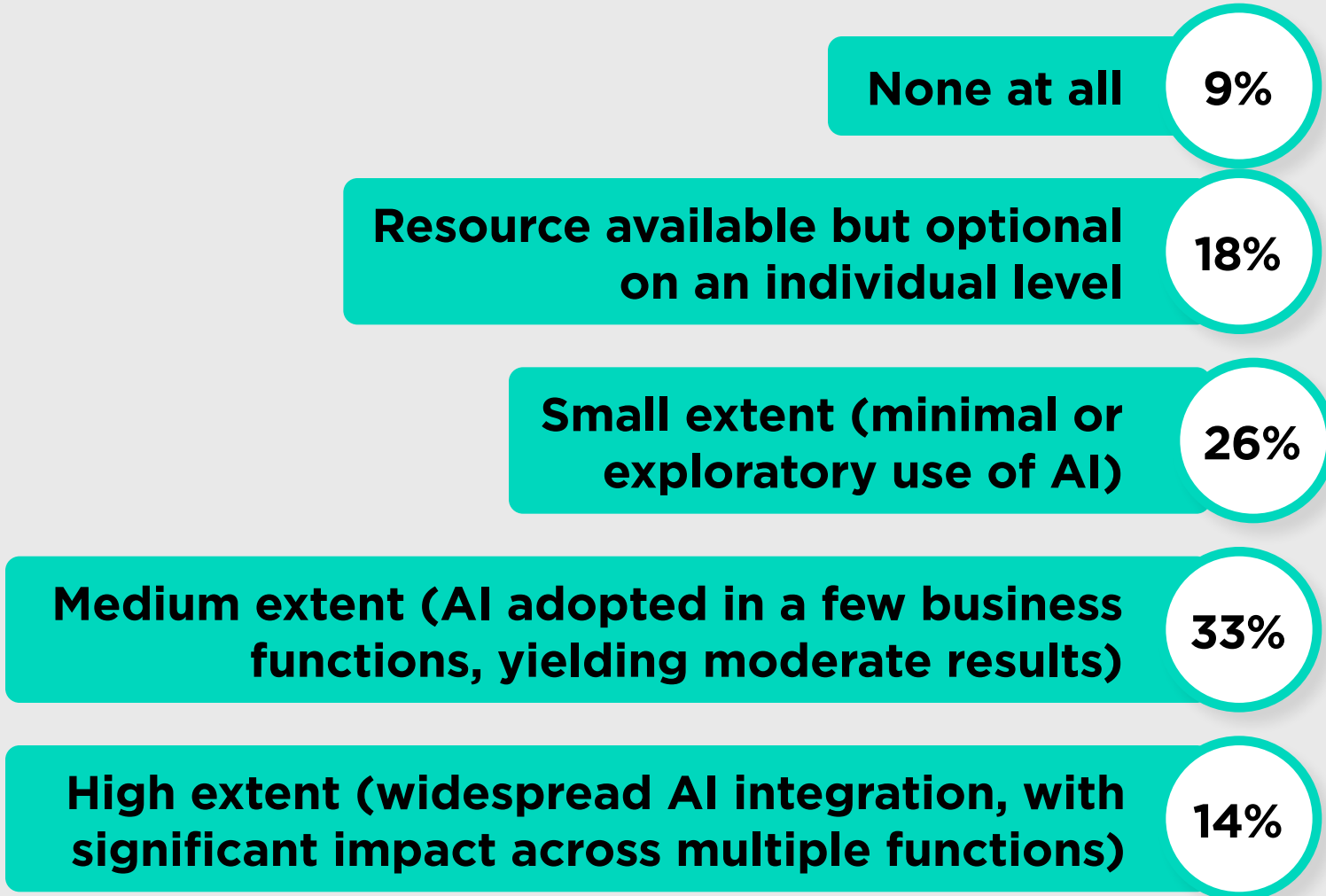
According to Statista, as of 2024, approximately 72% of [global organisations had integrated AI](#) into at least one business function, marking a significant increase from 55% in 2023.

Our research shows that this is especially likely to be the case among telcos. In fact, 91% of survey respondents say that their business has integrated AI into its day-to-day operations to some extent¹, with just 9% saying they have not done this at all.

However, businesses are at different stages of their AI journey, reflecting an industry that's still finding its feet when it comes to effectively leveraging the technology.

At present, respondents display some hesitancy towards fully embracing AI, perhaps due to the risks and limitations associated with the technology and a lack of best-established best practice in how to manage this. Those we surveyed were most likely to say that their company has adopted AI to a medium extent, integrating it into a few business functions, yielding moderate results (33%). However, the findings show that the impact of AI becomes more profound when businesses commit to integrating the technology across various areas of the organisation. In fact, 1 in 7 (14%) respondents say they have adopted AI to a high extent and that this is having a significant impact across multiple functions.

Q. To what extent, if at all, has your company started to integrate AI in day-to-day operations?

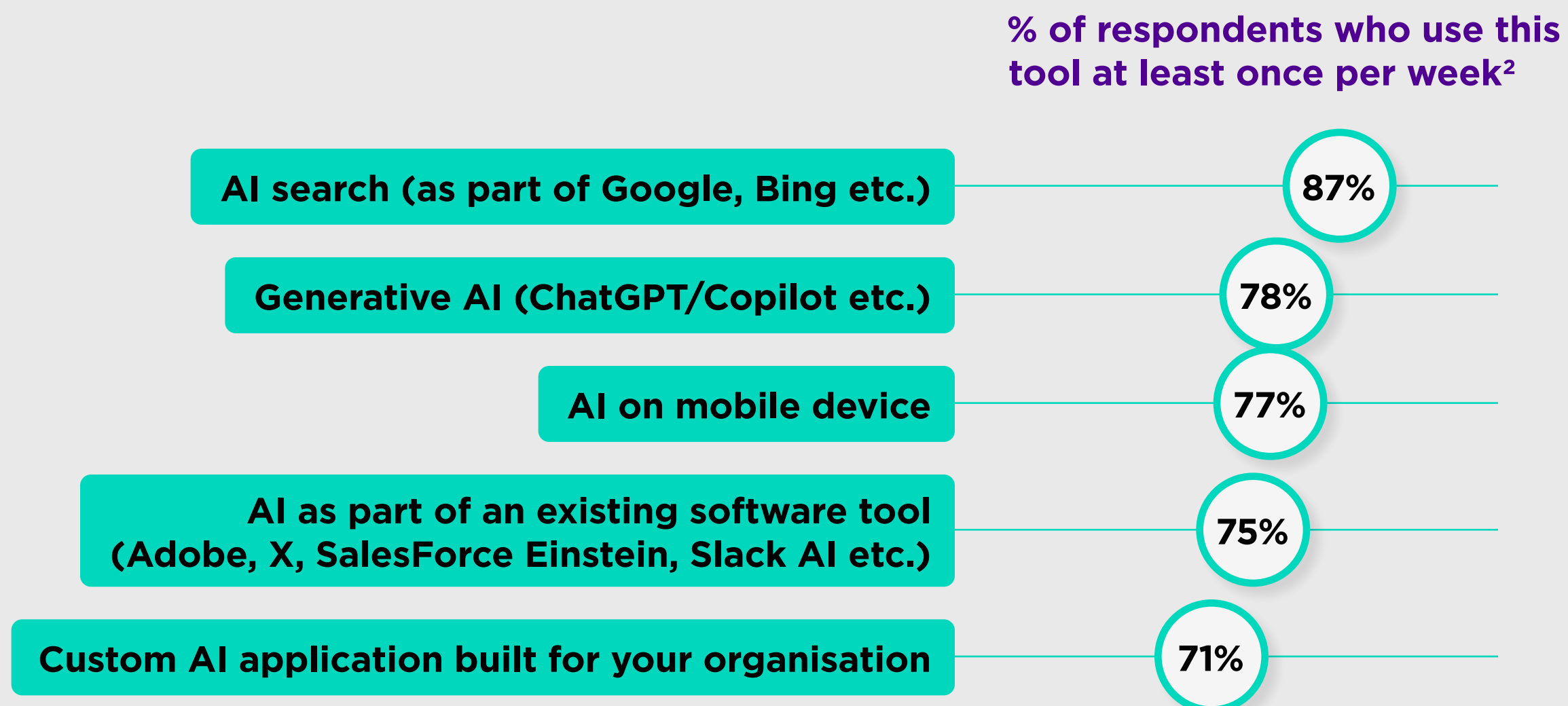


There's no question that AI training is crucial for telcos to unlock AI's transformative potential, yet, interestingly, less than half (46%) of respondents said AI training is important for their business to do.

38% of employees say their business is providing AI training and support to help to integrate AI, with these respondents also stating that voluntary courses (57%), working groups (56%) and compulsory training (48%) are on offer.

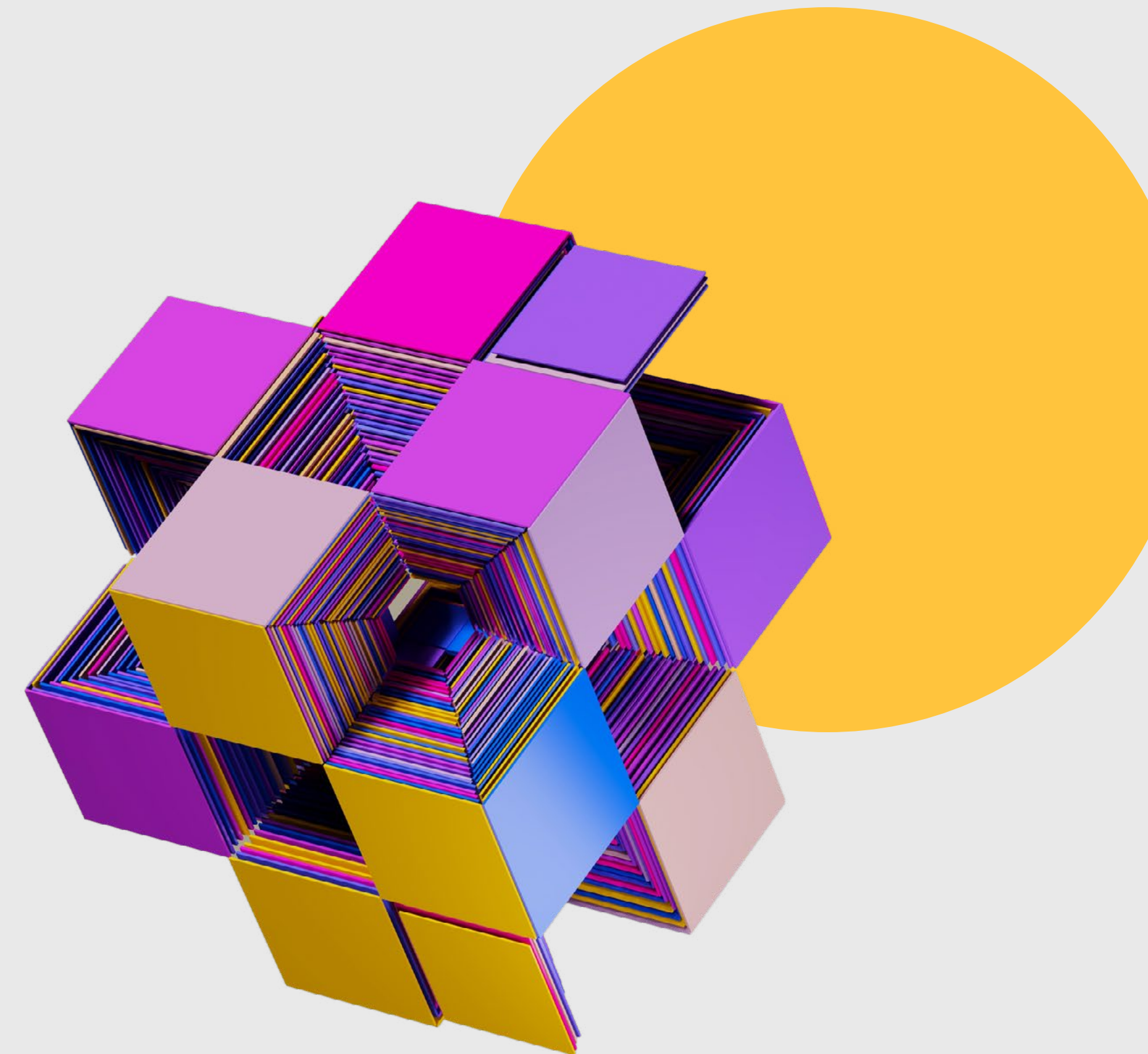
The fact that high percentages of telco employees are already using a range of AI tools also highlights how urgent it is for businesses to provide multi-disciplinary training to staff across technical and non-technical domains. Not only will this help to build employee confidence, but it will increase the likelihood that AI adoption will gather momentum and allow businesses to experience the full range of benefits sooner.

How often, if ever, do you use the following types of AI in the workplace?



¹ Reverse of 'None at all'.

² 'Every day', '4-6 days a week', '2-3 days a week' and 'Once a week' responses combined.



Insight #7

Telco employees believe a large part of their roles could be automated

The results show that almost all (99%) respondents think their day-to-day role and the tasks they complete could be automated to some extent¹, with 72%² saying up to half of their role could eventually be automated.

72%
of respondents say up to half of their day-to-day role and the tasks they complete could eventually be automated

Those working in telecoms believe AI will have an impact across a wide variety of business operations and job functions, including data gathering (77%), planning (69%), strategy (67%) and project management (68%).³

That said, they are more likely to expect that AI will have a stronger impact in some areas than in others. For example, just over 2 in 5 (41%) respondents say they think AI will have a significant impact on data gathering, while under 1 in 5 (18%) say the same is true for HR and working with or managing stakeholders, tasks that require more human connection.

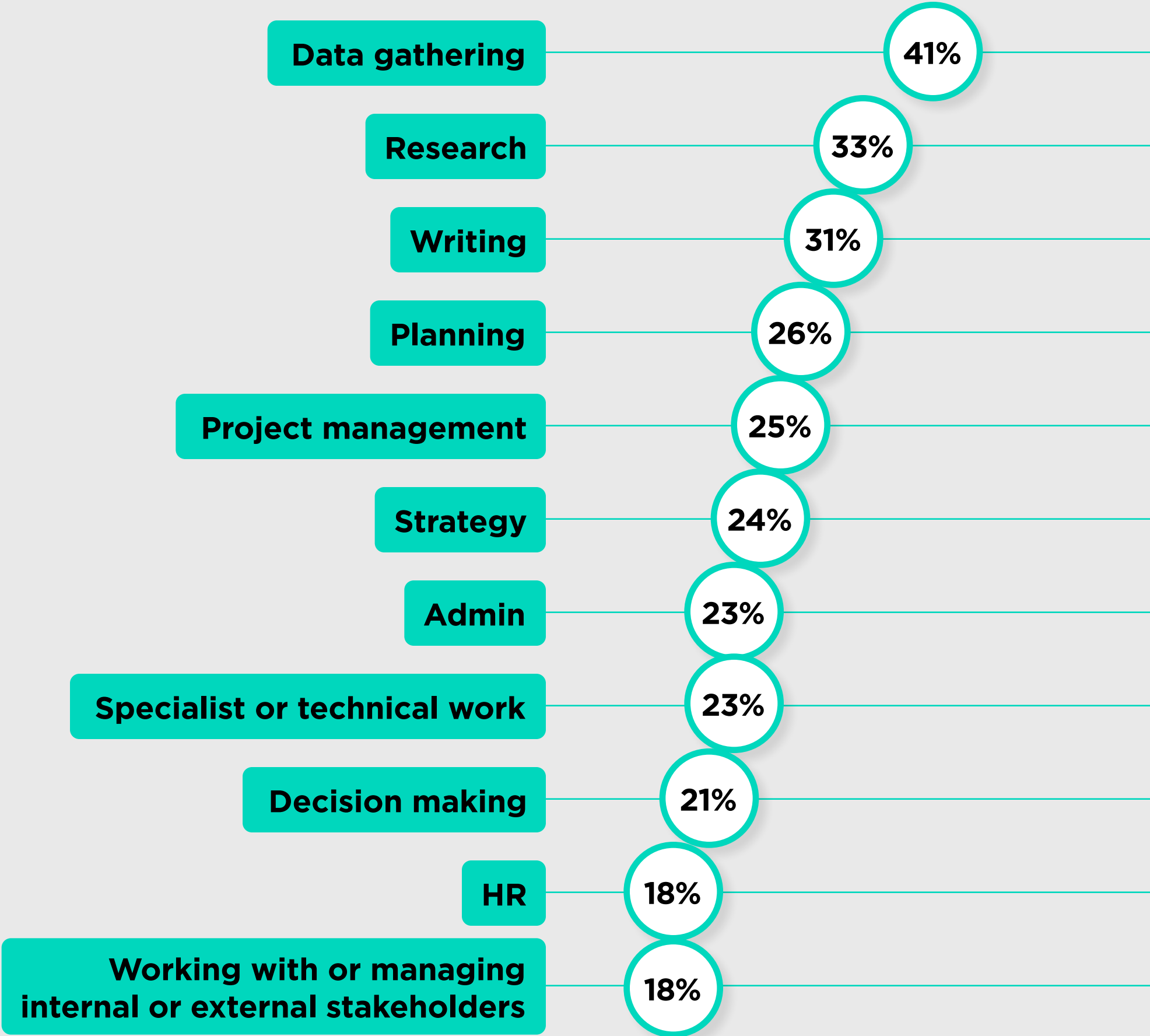
AI is expected to impact all career levels. Respondents are most likely to expect that AI will have an impact³ on

day-to-day work at graduate (69%) and junior (66%) levels, perhaps as these roles tend to involve more repetitive tasks that could be performed by AI.

However, many also believe that C-suite (54%), VP (51%) and director (57%) level roles will be impacted.³

Q. How much of an impact, if any, do you think AI will have on the following types of work?

% of respondents who say AI will have a significant impact on this type of work



¹ Reverse of 'None (0%)'.
² 'Small minority (1-25%)', 'Minority (26-49%)' and 'Around half (50%)' responses combined.
³ 'Significant impact' and 'Some impact' responses combined.

Our recommendations: Making AI fair and inclusive

As AI becomes more widespread, it's important that telcos carefully consider how the changes will benefit their entire workforce. In collaboration with [Mildon](#), we've put together five ways they can ensure AI is used in a fair and inclusive way:

1. Put people first and be clear

AI brings big changes to how people work. Leaders should listen to employees' concerns and explain how AI might change roles. It's important to be open about possible risks and limitations of the technology and how the organisation plans to manage them. Honesty builds trust, but it must be reinforced with action. Employers should embed workforce impact and mitigation planning into the AI business-case approval process, with role-impact assessments carried out before any funding is approved. For affected roles, AI career pathways with learning paths and placement options should be available.

2. Involve different people from the start

To make AI fair, organisations need to include people with different experiences and backgrounds, not just when it comes to providing feedback, but also engaging in AI projects leading the work. Talk to teams early and often, especially those who are most likely to be affected. Create safe spaces where everyone can speak up and share ideas. Ensure that a diverse range of voices are heard and respected.

3. Help employees learn and feel ready

AI works best when people understand it and know how to use it. Employers should offer AI, data protection and model-risk training tailored to suit different roles and learning styles. Everyone should understand not just how to use AI, but how to use it fairly and safely. Listening to and actioning feedback will also help people feel more confident.

4. Use data fairly and watch for bias

AI systems learn from data, but data can have hidden bias. Employers should validate their suppliers and understand how AI tools are trained, tested, managed and used throughout their lifecycle, looking for unfair patterns. Employers can require vendors to certify that their AI uses appropriate training data, has been tested and includes necessary safeguards. Go beyond simple categories and think about how different parts of someone's identity affects their experience. Track the impact of AI over time and use feedback from a diverse group of people to improve.

5. Plan for risks and be responsible

AI often makes mistakes. The risks stemming from this are increased in fast developing and novel areas such as generative and agentic AI. Organisations should set clear rules about procurement and development processes, what AI can do and how it can be checked. Efforts should go down the supply chain and include the validation of claims made by suppliers. Teams with different skills (like legal, IT and HR) should work together to spot risks and make sure AI is used safely. Employers should create and implement tailored change and communication plans and publish an AI roadmap update every quarter, based on emerging trends and risks.

The people-first approach is key for telcos adopting AI

As AI reshapes the telco landscape, the path forward must be built on a balanced approach to innovation and inclusion. Organisations should map their corporate values and priorities to their AI operations.

While adoption is widespread and growing, many telco employees harbour real concerns about the implications of AI on their jobs and futures.

However, the good news is that when employers take a people-first approach grounded in transparency, training, and thoughtful consideration of diversity, AI can become a source of empowerment rather than anxiety.

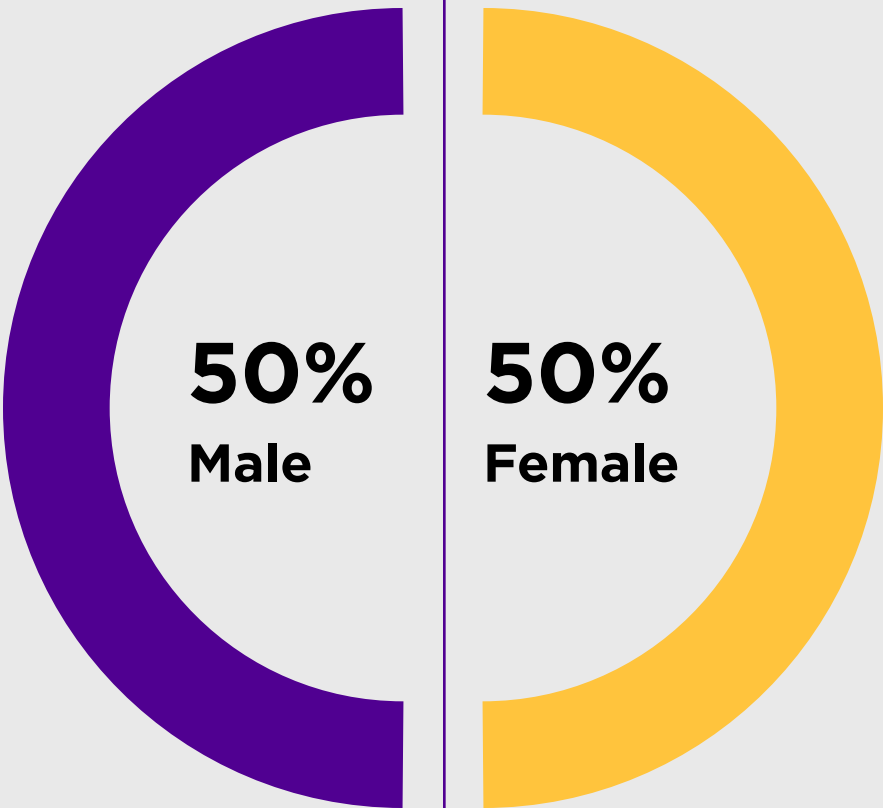
Confidence rises when employees feel equipped, supported and included on the journey. By actively addressing their concerns and building inclusive strategies, telcos can unlock the full potential of AI, driving progress without leaving anyone behind.

About the research

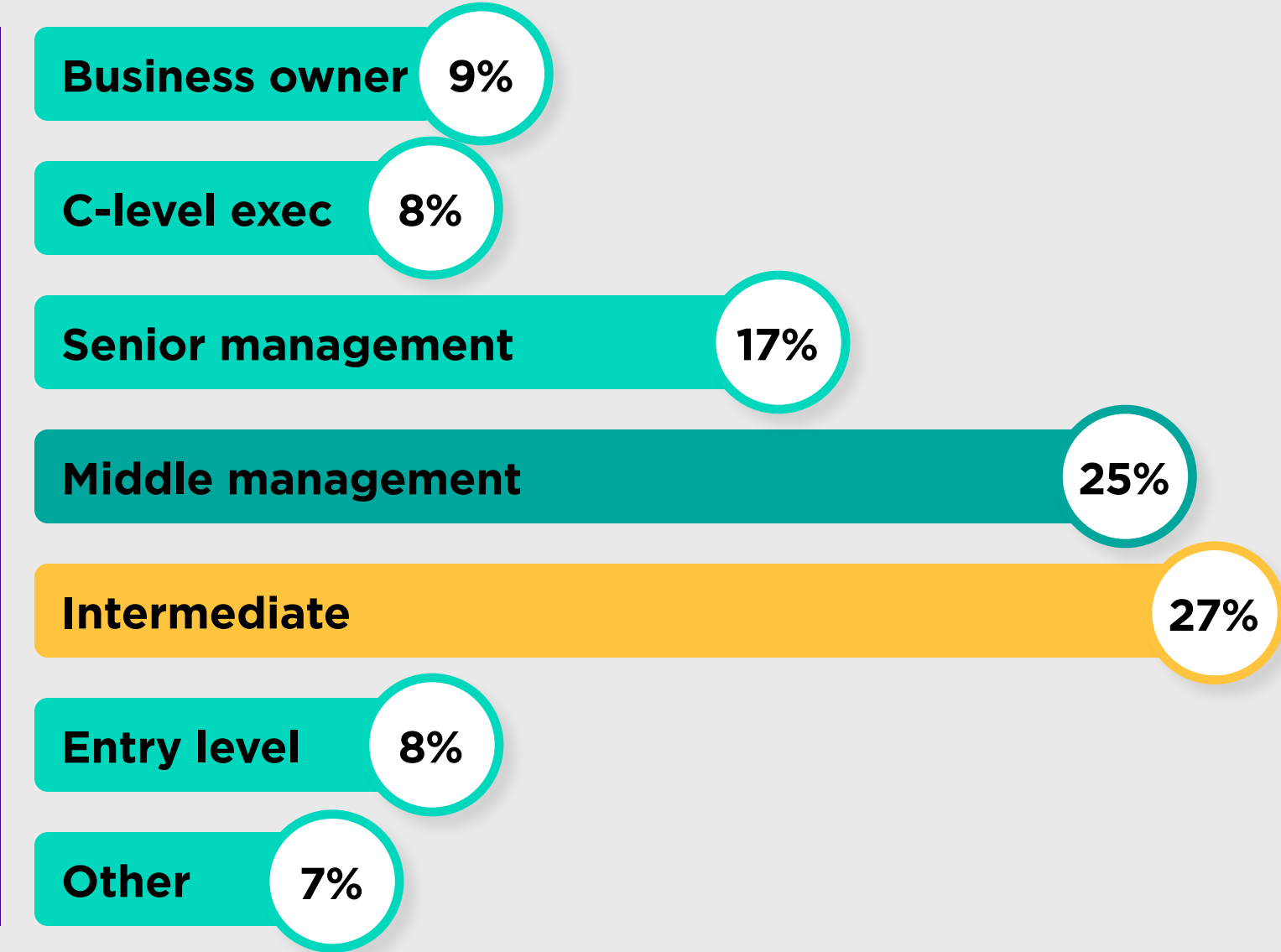
Colt partnered with Censuswide to survey 1,005 respondents working in telecommunications organisations across the UK, US, Germany, Italy, France, Spain, Finland, India and Japan between 28/03/2025 - 14/04/2025.

Who we surveyed

Gender



Employment level¹



Censuswide also conducted online qualitative interviews with the following subject matter experts:

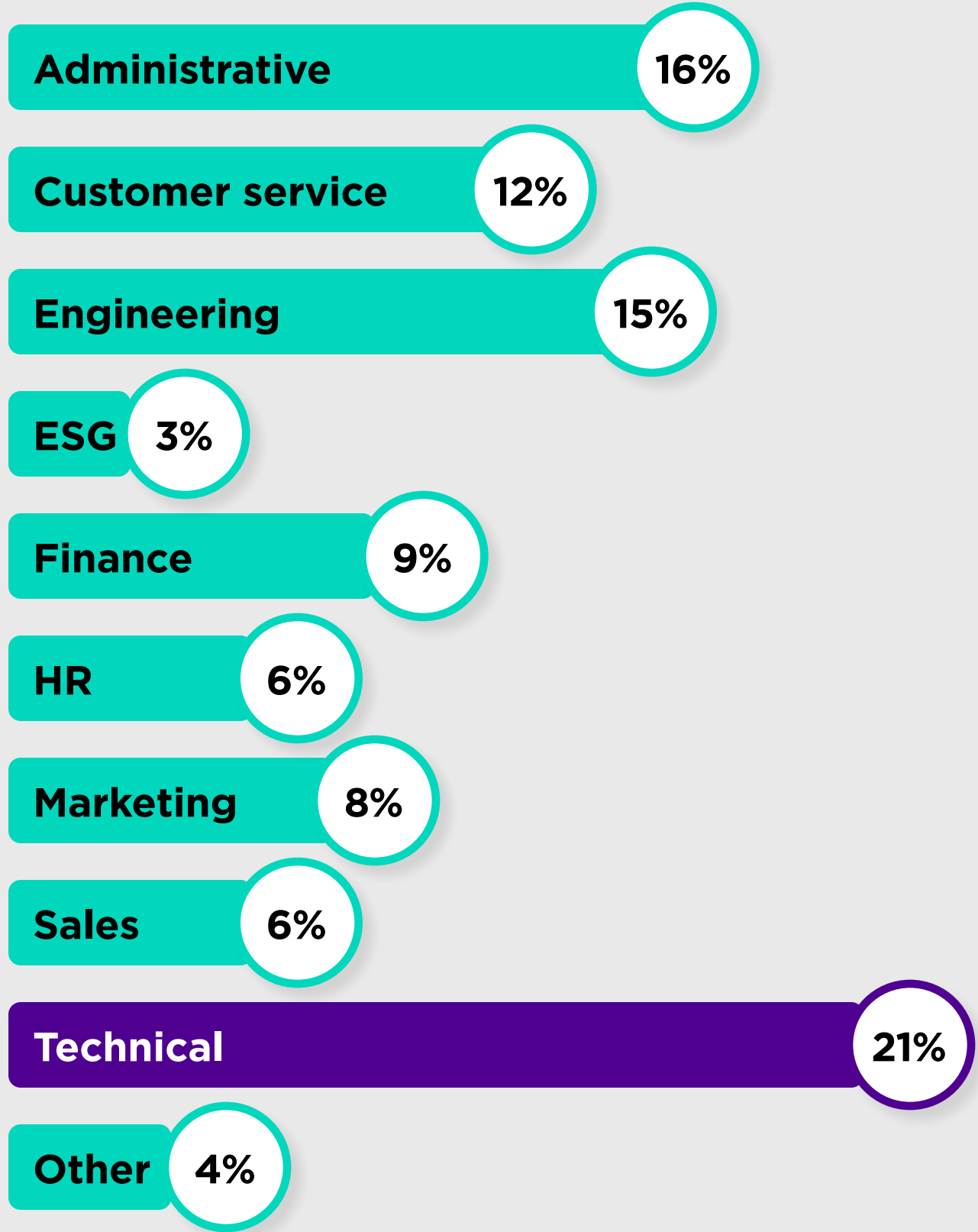
Job role

- Academic, Women & Gender Studies
- Head of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion
- Head of Diversity, Access and Participation
- Chief Technology & AI Officer

Sector

- Education & Academia
- Media
- Education & Academia
- Technology

Role type



Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society and follows the MRS code of conduct and ESOMAR principles. Censuswide is also a member of the British Polling Council.

CENSUSWIDE
THE RESEARCH CONSULTANTS

¹ The percentages of respondents at each employment level have been rounded up to the nearest whole percentage. For this reason, these percentages appear to total 101%.