

The 2021 STATE OF DIGITAL CONTENT

Benchmarks for Building an Agile Content System

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Executive Summary

The biggest challenge for today's businesses is to consistently produce personalized content at a large scale, deliver it at breakneck speed, and credibly have an impact on revenue. Whether its acquiring leads through publishing research papers, or brand awareness through witty social media posts, the demand for high quality content that's relevant for specific audiences is constant. As a result, there are far more digital content stakeholders in an organization than there ever were before. It's no surprise that the task of creating, managing, delivering, and measuring the effectiveness of digital content is becoming one of the most complex challenges a business can face today.

The businesses that are successful in this endeavor have invested in an innovative set of capabilities that make up an "Agile Content System". These capabilities are:

- The ability to **create and deliver personalized content** based on sophisticated data use.
- A framework for **measuring the effectiveness of content**, and setting ambitious goals beyond brand awareness.
- Effective processes for **reviewing and approving content** for quality and compliance.
- A widely accessible platform for **managing and storing content** with automated tagging capabilities.
- The right **organizational setup that scales content production** without compromising on strategy or quality.

We surveyed 375 respondents from businesses around the world to determine maturity benchmarks for each of these key capabilities, and the practices that underpin them. Companies can use these benchmarks to rate their own progress and chart a path of improvement for their content teams.

KEY FINDINGS

- Brand awareness (35%) and thought leadership (28%) are the top content goals.
- Content teams that focused on more business centric goals such as lead generation, sales enablement and customer support were more digitally mature in practices such as data analysis, personalization and content production at scale.
- Producing content based on customer data is the top challenge for companies, followed by aligning teams on a strategy and hiring the right skills.
- A central content team is the most common production model (50%), but increasingly companies are shifting to a decentralized model (32%) to keep up with demand.
- Despite technological advancement, most companies still deploy inefficient "one-item-at-a-time" processes (62%) for content review and approval.
- Increasingly, businesses are using AI to help create audience segments (18%), generate content variations (19%) and power content testing processes (24%).

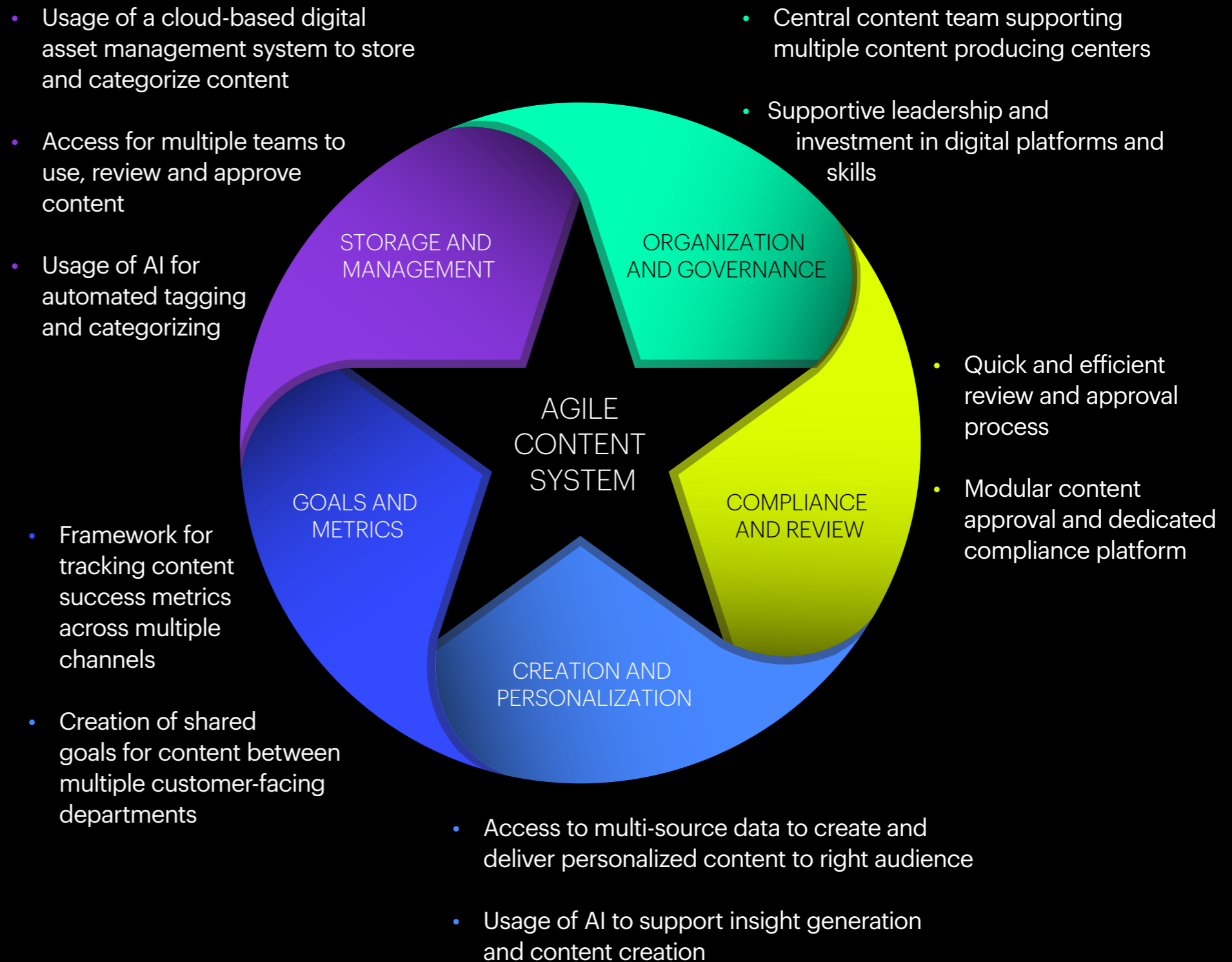
What is an agile content system?

Companies are creating more digital content than ever before. And feeding the content beast is a challenge that is pushing them to their limits. The list of channels where companies need to have a presence is ever increasing, with each year bringing a new TikTok or Clubhouse to consider. In addition, customers expect to receive high quality, compelling, and personalized experiences in every digital interaction with a company. While most businesses can personalize content to some degree, the unique challenge they face today is how to personalize content at a scale that meets the demands of a great customer experience. We believe the best way companies can meet this demand is to implement an “agile content system.”

An agile content system is a set of specialized practices that allow companies to produce a large amount of content in a relatively short amount of time. The “agile” element refers to deploying the right type of content, at the right time to the right person.

In order to do this, companies must become highly competent in five key capabilities (FIG 1). These include gaining insights from data, automating content creation, enabling real-time personalization on digital platforms and other technology-powered skills. It also includes non-technical factors such as the right organizational structure, executive support and a framework for tracking success. Implementing any one of these requirements is a capability improvement but putting them all together is nothing less than a transformation, a daunting prospect for most companies.

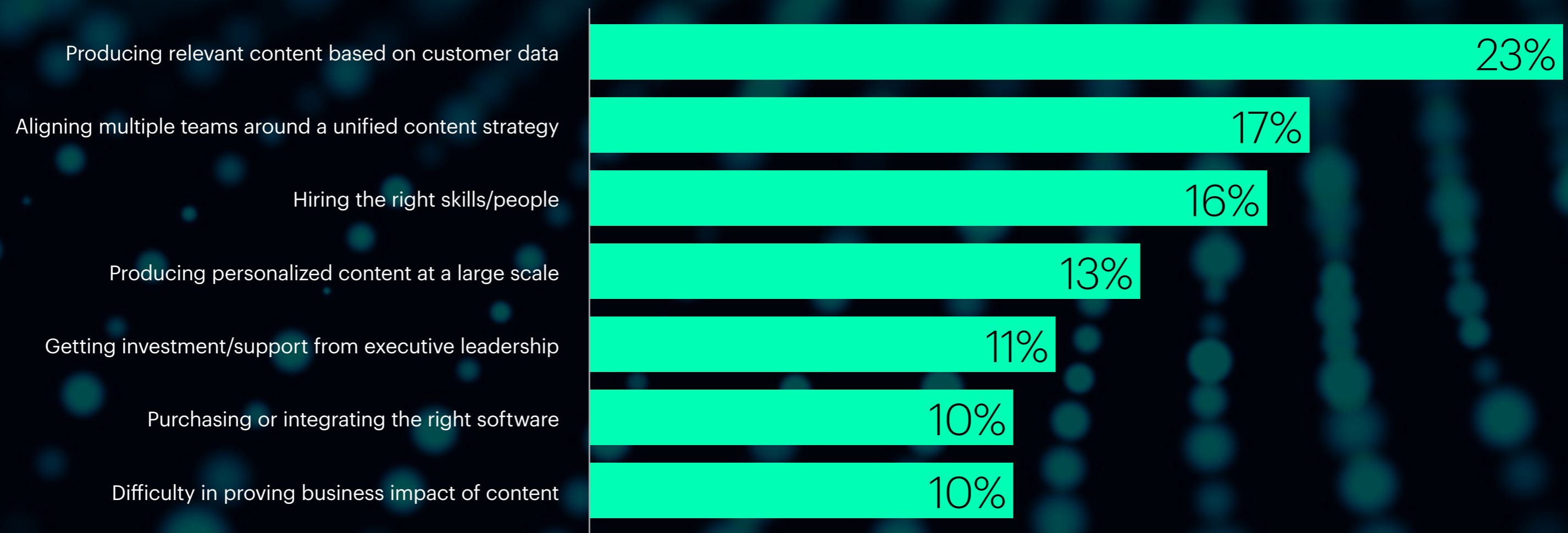
Figure 1: Key elements of an agile content system



When we asked businesses to rate their content challenges (FIG 2), the majority said producing relevant or personalized content based on customer data was their biggest struggle. However, the responses across other challenges were about evenly distributed, which highlights just how difficult it is to check all the boxes of an agile content system.

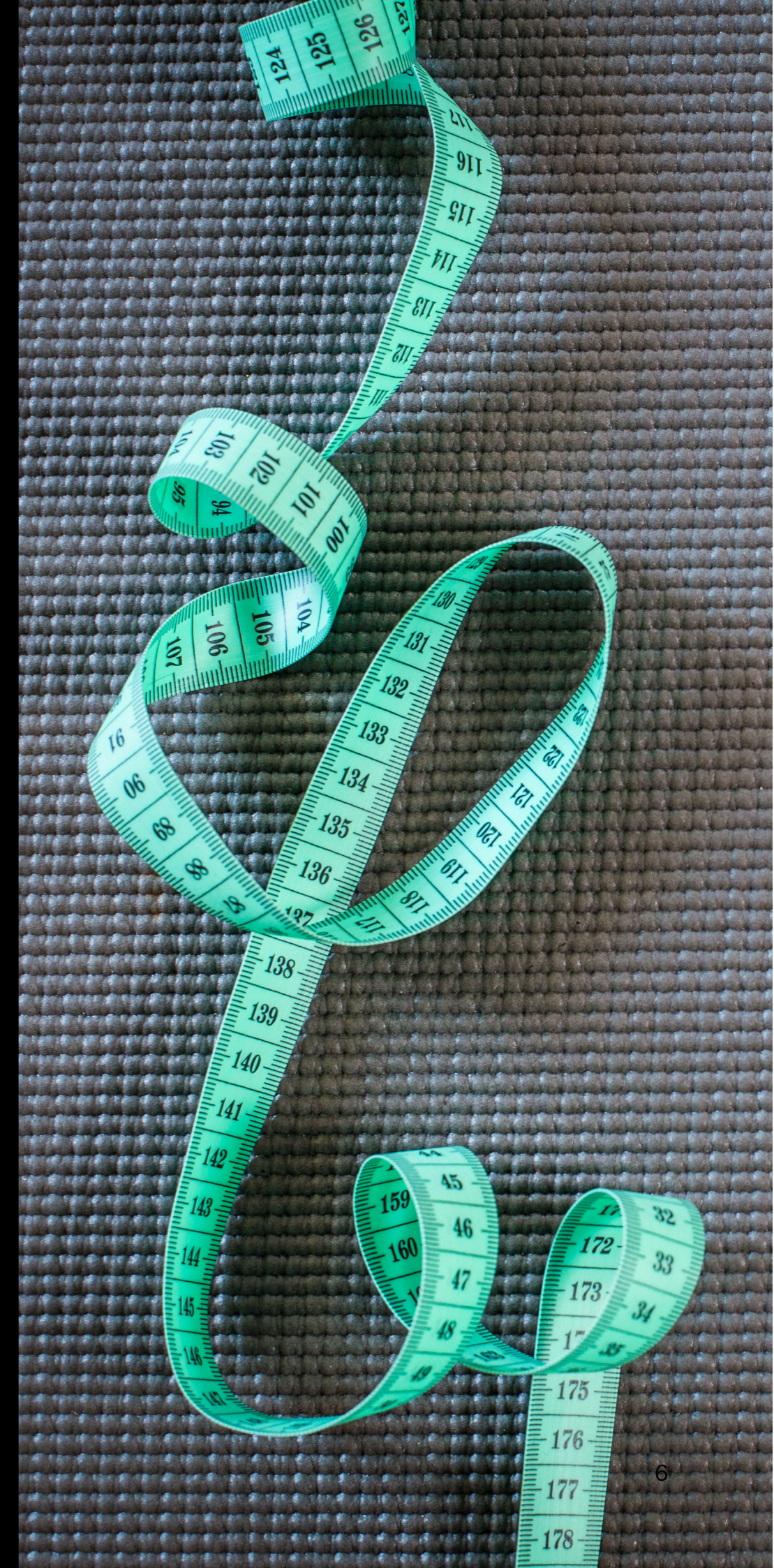
In our survey on the “2021 State of Digital Content,” we asked the top content executives at businesses around the world to rate their maturity in each of the key capabilities needed for an agile content system. Based on their responses, we’ve identified benchmarks to help companies evaluate their own progress in transforming their digital content operations. By investing in these key capabilities, companies can both improve the quality of their content, and increase output for superior personalization and multi-functionality.

Figure 2: What is the biggest challenge you face in creating and delivering content?



Goals and Metrics

Digital content has served many goals, most commonly for brand awareness and achieving credibility for the brand through thought leadership. While those are still the most common goals, we are seeing content teams embrace more ambitious ones, such as generating leads, saving money or even direct revenue through purchases. This signifies a shift away from marketing-centric content, to customer-centric content, which is in-line with the broader transformations happening within companies that prioritize customer experience.



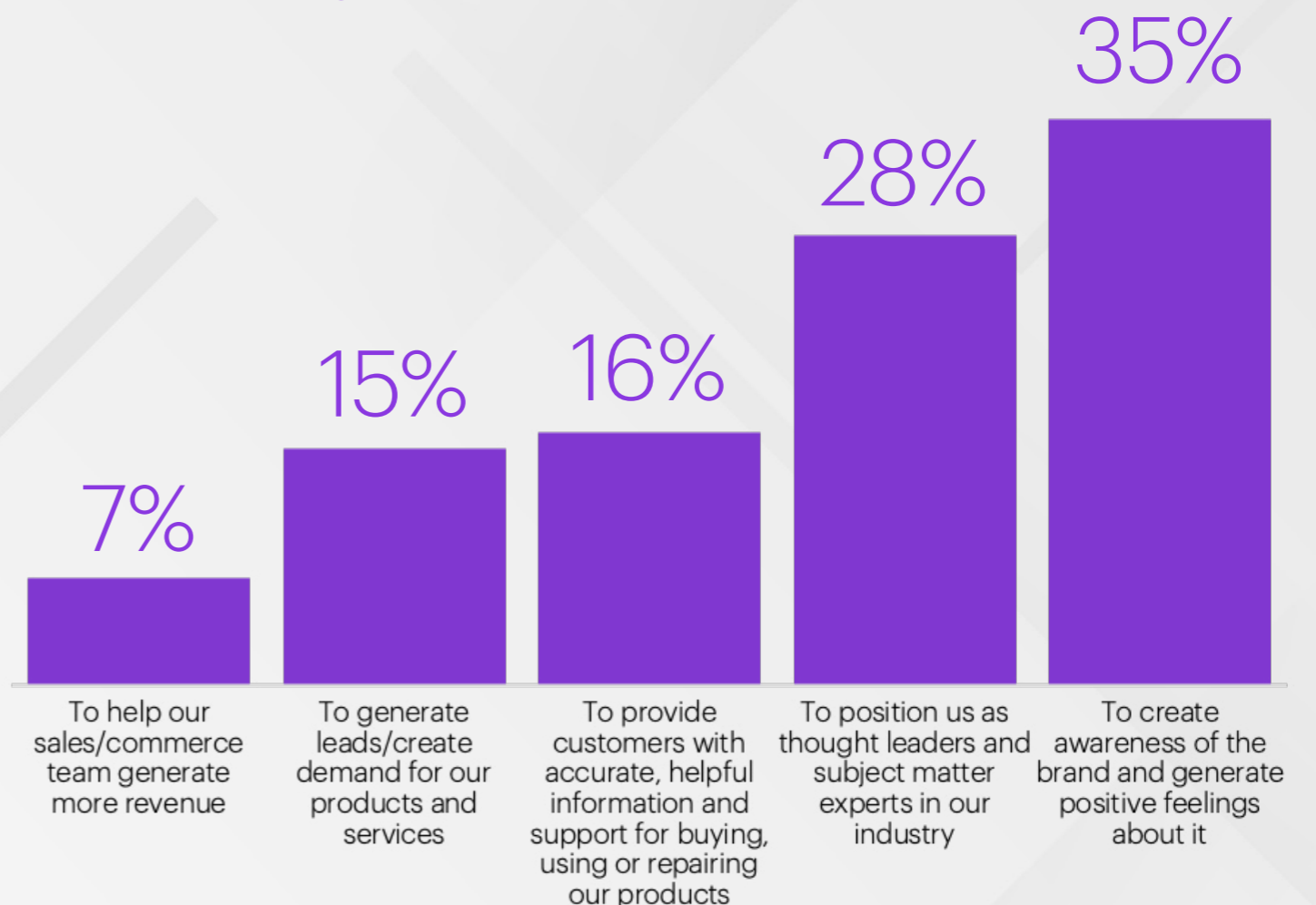
Brand awareness and thought leadership are the top content goals

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Figure 3: What is the primary goal for your content strategy?



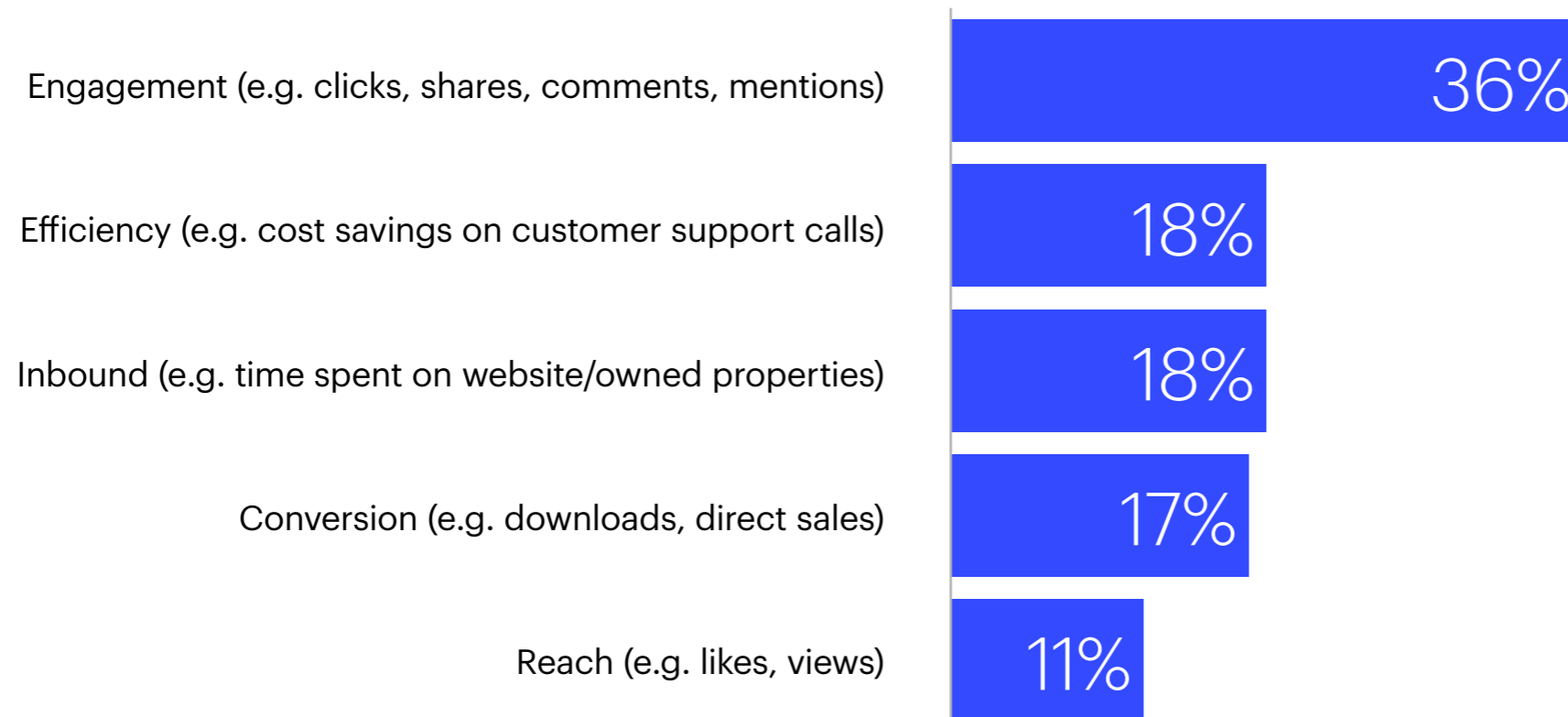
SOURCE: Altimeter “The 2021 State of Digital Content” n= 375

Engagement is still the top metric for success, while reach is the least used

Most companies have recognized that in the digital world, actions speak louder than views. Engagement (36%) is the top metric for measuring content effectiveness, while reach is the lowest at 11%. This shows how companies have evolved beyond the advertising-centric goal of reaching as many eyeballs as possible, to leading audiences to act on what they see either through clicks or shares, or “conversions” where they move noticeably closer to purchase.

Unsurprisingly, content teams focused on generating revenue picked “conversion” as their top metric (31%) while customer service teams picked “efficiency” as their top metric. This highlights how content goals don’t have to be the same for every department, and it makes sense to measure content differently depending on which stage of the customer journey it is deployed.

Figure 4: What is the most common metric you use to measure how your content is performing?



SOURCE: Altimeter “The 2021 State of Digital Content” n= 375



Majority of companies can measure content performance across the entire customer journey

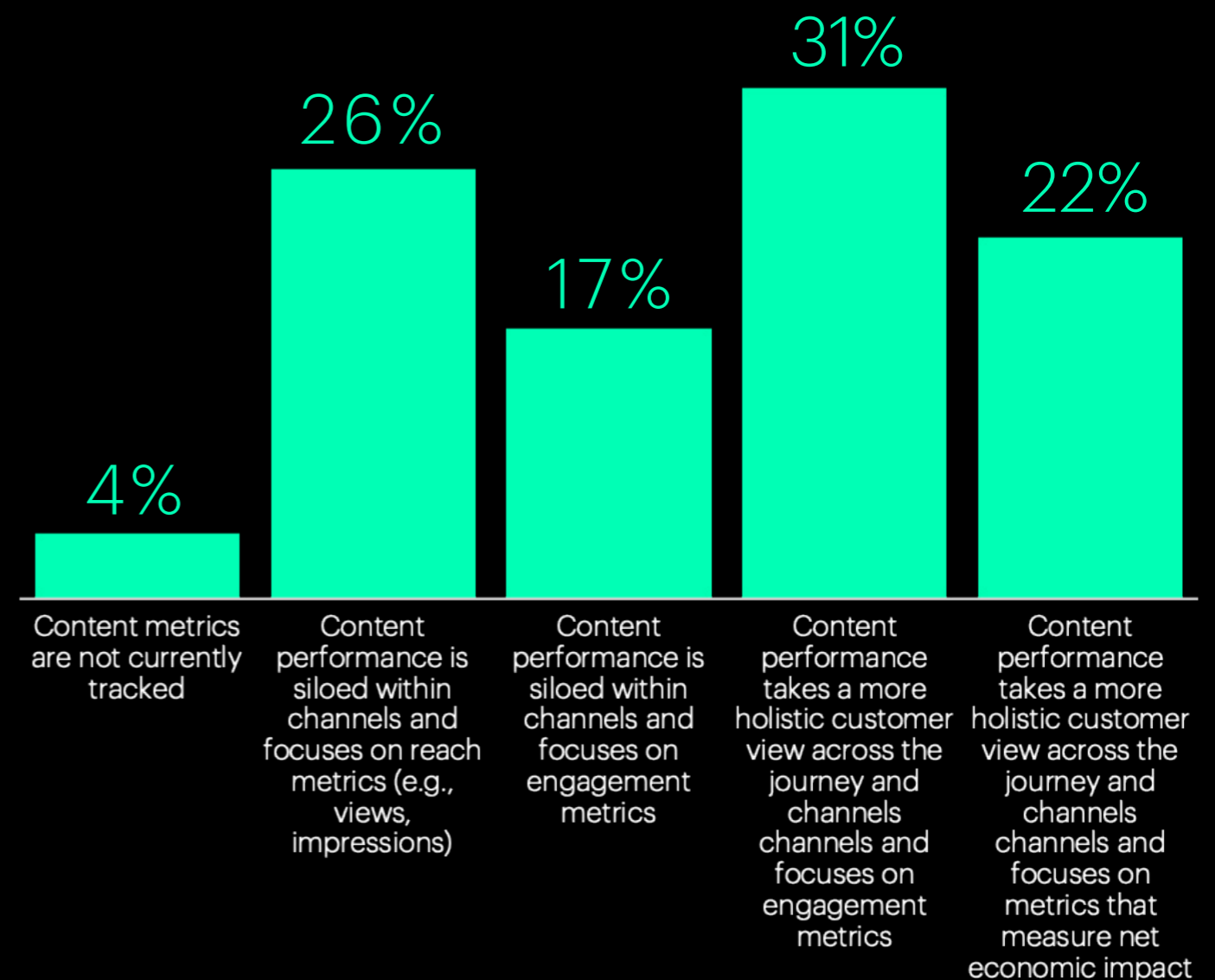
One of the reasons the demand for content has increased so much is that companies recognize the value it delivers beyond brand awareness and engagement. Mature companies can attribute more value to any single piece of content by tracking the complete movement of a customer across all digital properties after they have consumed that content. By doing this, they can attribute conversion, lead generation and even direct revenue to that specific content.

The majority of companies (31%) have taken the first step of tracking customer movement across multiple channels, but are still mostly using engagement metrics to measure success. The most mature companies (22%) have progressed to building the digital infrastructure on their channels that allows them to attribute harder metrics such as revenue or conversions.

Despite this progress, 26% of companies haven't evolved beyond tracking metrics siloed within each channel, and focusing on reach metrics. This indicates that plenty of firms are still using content in a brand-centric way, and a gap beyond them and the more mature companies is widening.

We also found that as content teams shifted focus from brand-centric and thought leadership goals to more commercial goals, they were much more likely to track content performance holistically, rather than in a siloed way. This is further indication that more mature companies are looking to prove content value beyond awareness.

Figure 5: How do you currently measure the success/effectiveness of each piece of content?



Organization and Governance

Most companies have an easier time focusing on technology and digital capabilities as the key drivers of digital content maturity. However, the way a team is organized and set up to create a content strategy and deliver on it is a crucial element of success. In this realm, we're seeing several shifts. Content production is shifting away from external agencies to internal teams. And even internally, we're seeing more content-producing centers within a company, rather than a single content producing team in order to cope with the increasing demand for personalized content.

Most companies have multiple content strategy owners

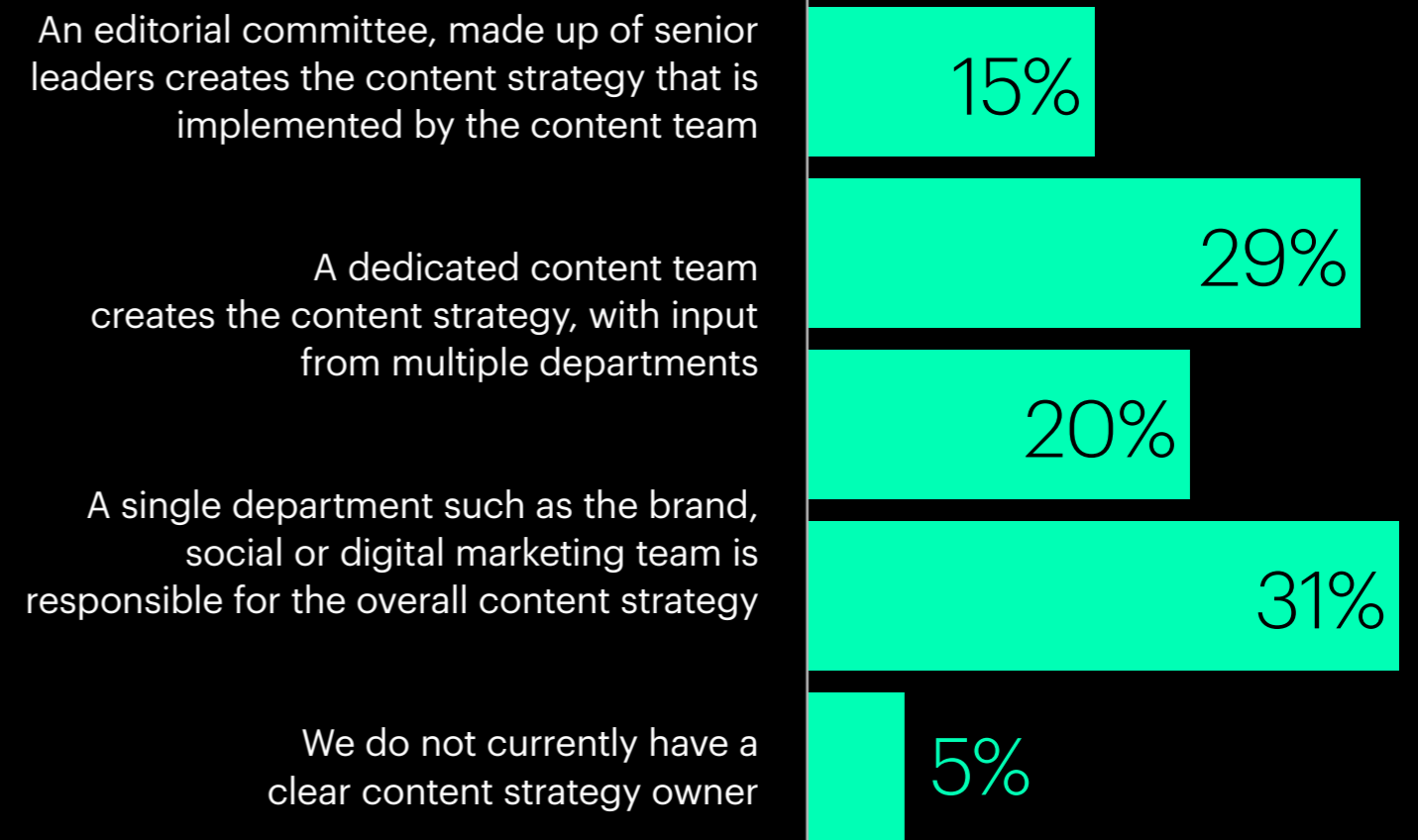
The majority of companies have assigned multiple content strategy owners (31%), which means that each function within the organization (e.g. brand, lead gen, product, sales or communications) could have its own content strategy and goals. While this distributed ownership allows for more freedom and experimentation, it also has potential drawbacks. When there are many different content strategies coming from the same company, it may create conflicting objectives within the central content producing team and a disjointed experience for the customer.

A good compromise is a hybrid model where leadership representing the interests of multiple departments and functions creates a holistic content strategy, but then allows the content team to own the production based on that strategy. Fifteen percent of companies use this approach.

Retail was the only industry where a single department (likely brand) was more likely to be the sole owner of the content strategy. This highlights how digital content is primarily used as a brand builder by retail companies.

Companies' responses also varied based on the top content goal they chose. Respondents who chose brand awareness as their top goal were much more likely to have multiple content strategy owners across the organization (40%). In contrast, respondents who used content primarily to generate leads or revenue were more likely to use a dedicated content team setting the content strategy. This indicates that a dedicated content team is more suitable for specific revenue-generating tasks, instead of brand-building content, which can be done by a variety of producers, both internally and externally.

Figure 6: Who is primarily responsible for your digital content strategy?

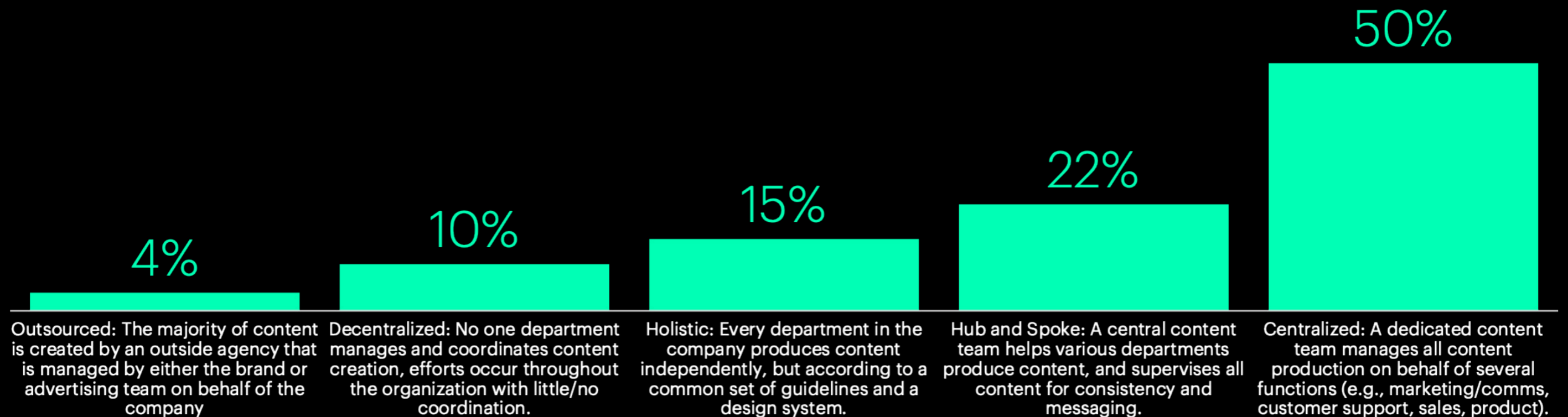


A centralized content team is the most common model for content production

One of the biggest shifts we've seen is companies moving their content creation from mostly external agencies to internal teams. Half of companies use this "internal agency" or centralized model for content production where an internal team creates content for anyone who needs it within the organization. That's in stark contrast to only 4% of companies outsourcing their content creation. It's a warning sign for creative agencies, who are unlikely to make their revenue purely through producing content for their clients. We expect agencies to offer other value-added services, especially in the realm of data and analytics to make up for the shift away from their creative services.

This finding also highlights just how strategic an asset digital content has become. Sophisticated companies use digital content to serve multi-functional teams, and meet a variety of goals beyond brand awareness. Outsourcing the creation of that content would slow down the key processes of an agile system such as data-based creation, automated insights, and testing and learning. It would also be much more difficult to find and vet an outside agency that could serve the content creation needs of all the different departments within the business.

Figure 7: Which model most closely describes how your company manages production across multiple departments or geographies?



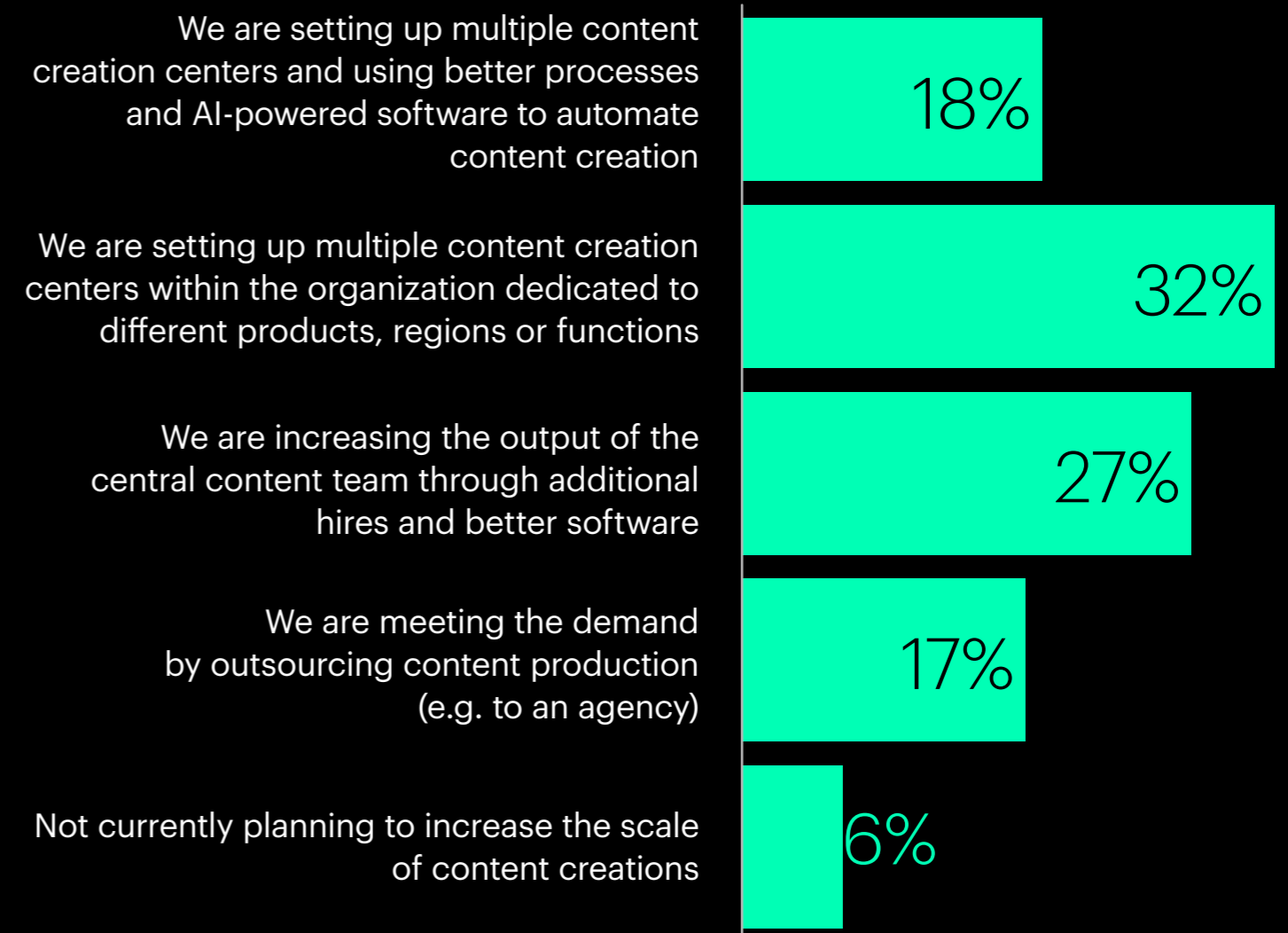
Content production is increasingly becoming decentralized to meet the demands of scale

To meet the increasing demand for content, companies can ramp up production within the central content team using better software and adding more personnel. Conversely, companies can also start distributing the creation to other parts of the organization so that the central team isn't the sole creator anymore.

Most companies are choosing the latter strategy (32%). The challenge with this approach is to maintain the quality and consistency of all the content produced, and tie it under some sort of unified strategy. However, with digital tools and skills becoming more available to all types of teams and departments, the case for centralizing content production becomes harder once the company grows beyond a certain size. Companies that successfully decentralize much of their content production must have a coherent unified strategy that is implemented by the center.

Among industry verticals, the digitally savvy retail (41%) and technology (29%) industries were more likely to set up multiple content creation centers to increase output, whereas digital laggards such as insurance (29%) and healthcare (44%) were more likely to up the headcount of the central content team. While this indicates that decentralizing content production is the mature solution, it also highlights how industries that deal with a lot of compliance are much more likely to keep content production centralized in order to better ensure compliance.

Figure 8: How are you scaling the production of content to meet the demand for increased personalization?



Content Creation and Personalization

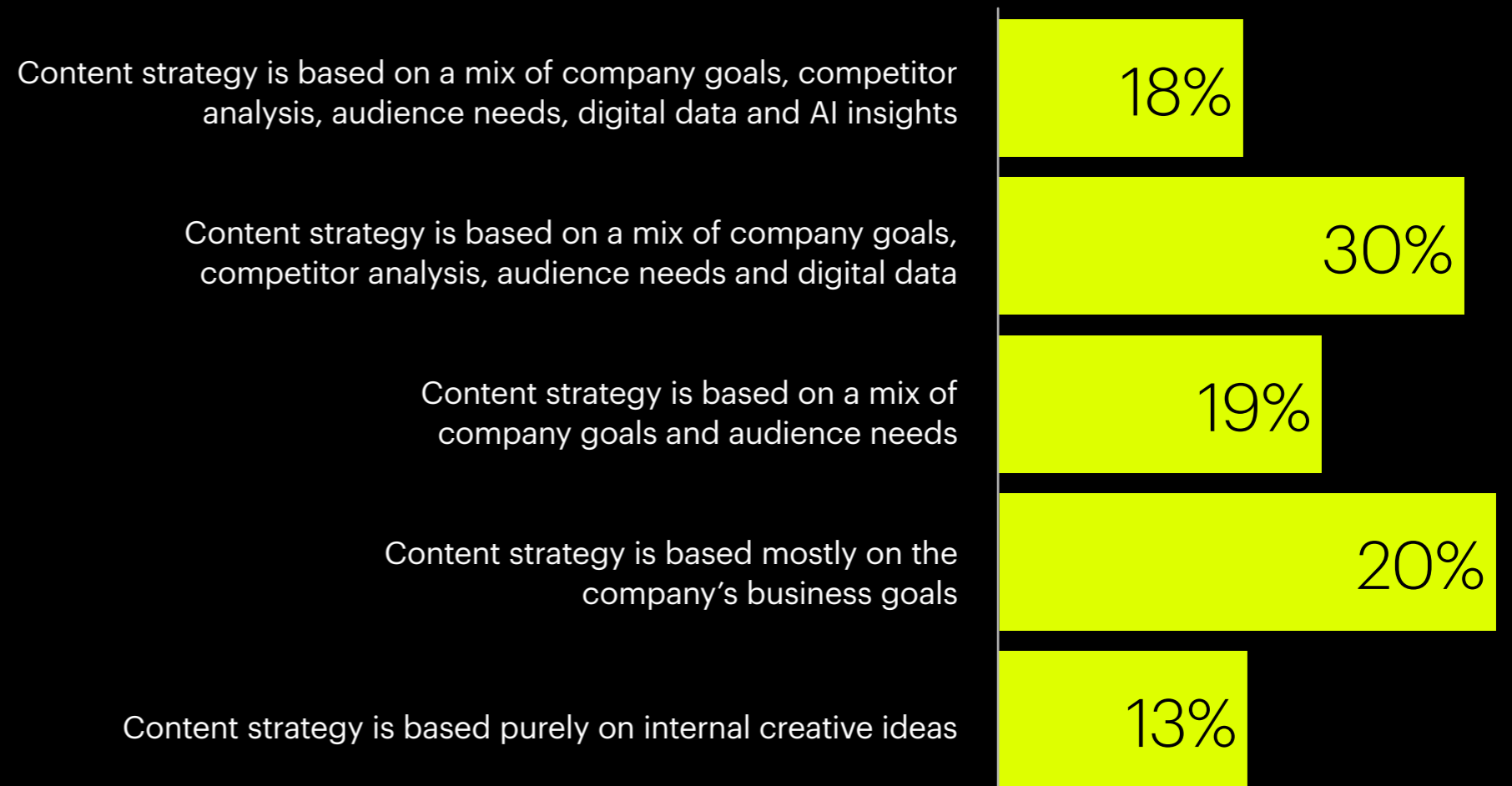
Creating quality content should be the top priority of any organization, which today means using data to both inform the creation of relevant content, and data to deliver the right content to the right person at the opportune time. In an agile system, content-creating teams have easy access to the data they need, as well as the ability to glean actionable insights from it. Much of these practices today are being supported, or fully performed, by AI-powered software that can analyze data to create segments, suggest content variations and deliver those variations in real-time across digital channels.

Companies are using more data inputs to create a content strategy

It used to be that creativity was the sole input into producing content, with brilliant copywriters or concept savants responsible for memorable catchphrases or visuals. Today, only 13% of companies rely on that type of creativity. Many companies (30%) tap into a variety of inputs including company goals, competitor analysis, audience needs and digital data.

Interestingly, companies that chose brand awareness as their top content strategy goal are far more likely to rely purely on internal creative ideas (26%), rather than use other inputs. This makes brand-focused content less likely to be relevant to a specific audience, or to achieve a specific business goal other than to keep a brand name visible. Conversely, teams that focused on lead generation were far more likely to use data based on audience needs in order to create relevant content.

Figure 9: What are the key inputs into creating your content strategy?



Most companies can deliver personalized content in real-time, to varying degrees

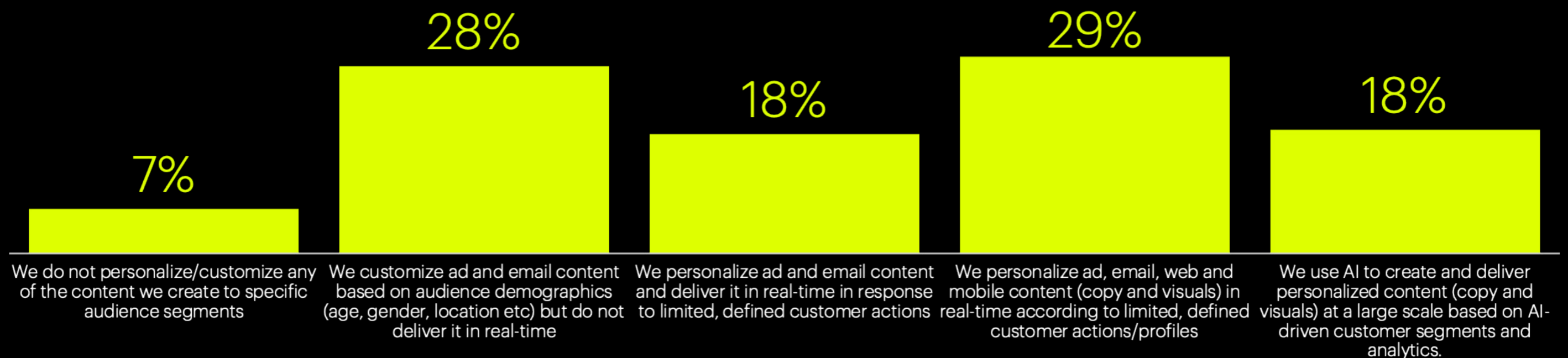
The majority of companies are able to implement some form of real-time content personalization based on recognizing customers and their digital interactions. Encouragingly, almost a fifth of companies are deploying AI to power this personalization, which makes it far easier to perform at scale.

This indicates that companies are investing in the sophisticated data analysis needed to power real-time personalization. It also means companies are getting better at building an effective content supply chain to deliver enough creative variations to feed into a personalization scheme.

Content teams focused on brand awareness were more likely to personalize based on demographic information (35%), whereas teams focused on sales enablement (41%) and customer support (38%) personalized based on recognizing the customer's specific profile attributes. This indicates that top-of-the-funnel personalization can rely more on demographic data, since most of the targets are anonymous; however, as customers get closer to purchase, or post-purchase, we can start personalizing based on their unique attributes or captured digital behavior.

The retail industry is the most capable industry when it comes to real-time personalization, where a majority of respondents (31%) said they used AI to support data analysis, segment creation and personalized content creation.

Figure 10: To what extent can content be personalized and delivered in real-time based on customer actions?

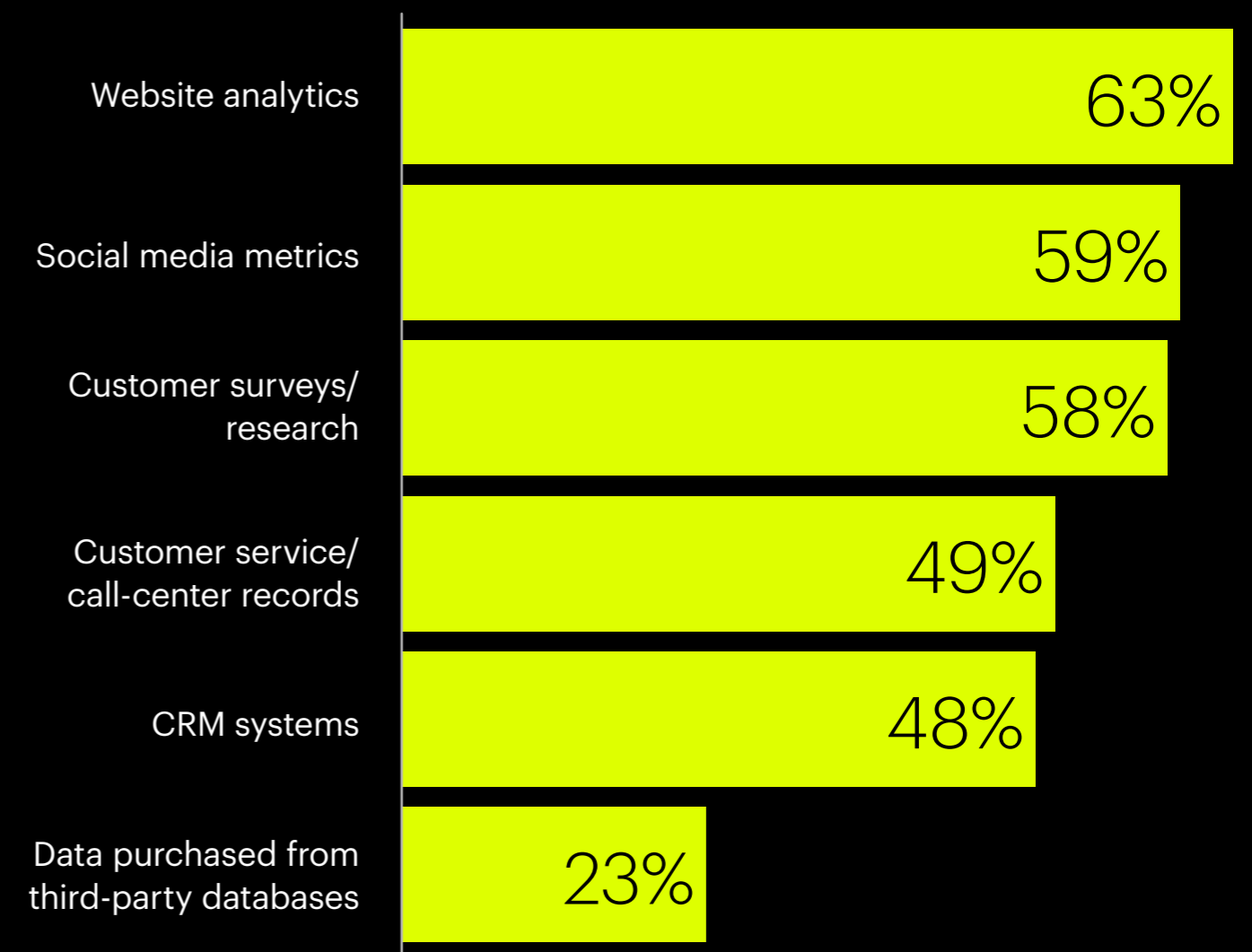


Content creators use both online and offline data to personalize content

Companies are increasingly becoming better at using data to inform content personalization, both at the creation and delivery stage. Unsurprisingly, website analytics are the top source of relevant data for personalization, given that most content resides on the company website and it is the source of both performance data as well as behavioral insights.

It's encouraging to see offline data such as surveys or call-center records also be used as much as digital data to inform content customization. These data sources provide a more complete picture of customer behaviors and preferences. Once it is combined with digital data, it can inform a much more relevant content customization that has a greater impact on the customer's progress.

Figure 11: What sources of data do you use to create personalized/customized content?



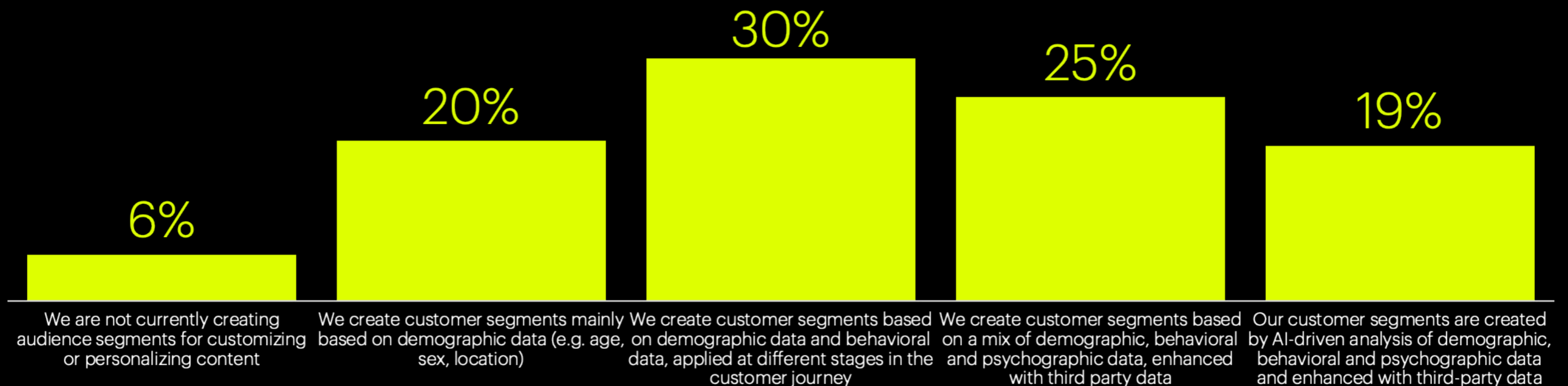
Demographic and behavioral data are used to create segments for personalization at different stages

Companies are getting better at using multiple data sources or identifying criteria to segment their customers. They can now choose to segment their customers based on demographic, behavioral, transactional or even psychographic data. The most sophisticated companies can create segments using a mix of attributes from the various data sources.

Twenty-five percent of companies are doing this, with almost a fifth (19%) leveraging AI to create and apply complex segmentation schemes. However, the majority (30%) can only use a single segmentation criteria at a time, applied at different stages of the customer journey.

Content teams focused on commercially-oriented goals such as lead generation, sales enablement and product support were much more likely to use multi-data customer segments than those focused on brand awareness or thought leadership. This implies that these teams are more sophisticated at using data and have access to a wider range of customer attributes through data gained from multiple functions.

Figure 12: How are you creating segments for customizing/personalizing content?



Content is increasingly optimized using test and learn processes across multiple channels

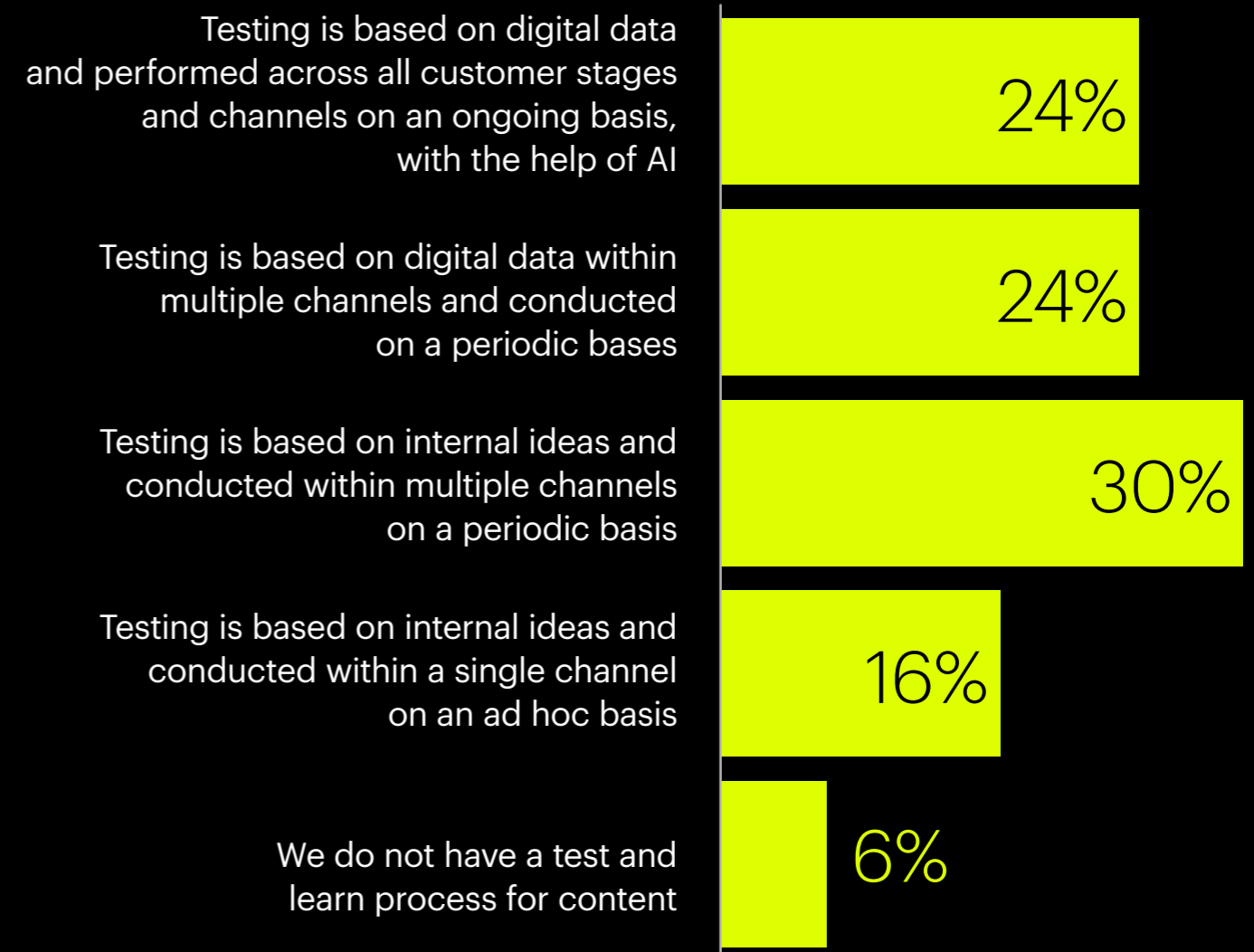
One of the hallmarks of a sophisticated content operation is testing and learning in order to optimize content. In the digital realm, this means testing variations of the same piece of content to specific audiences, tracking the results, and improving the content based on those results to ensure a higher success rate.

What sets apart the sophisticated companies is the use of digital data to not only generate testing variations, but also keep track of the results. The majority (48%) of companies use digital data to do this, with the more mature ones conducting these tests on an ongoing, rather than periodic basis. They are also likely to leverage the power of AI to automate and optimize this testing.

This isn't to discount the value of human insights when it comes to testing variations; however, it does show that the best way to conduct testing and personalization at a large scale is to enlist the help of technology to support creative intuition.

Technology (33%) and banking (38%) companies were the most mature industries, where the majority of companies were conducting ongoing digital tests with the help of AI to optimize content.

Figure 13: Is content being continually optimized based on a test and learn process?



Content Storage and Management

Agile content systems are heavily dependent on innovative content storage and management platforms. These platforms allow large quantities of content to be stored and made accessible to multiple teams and publishing channels. This level of access is crucial for key agile content processes such as efficient review, real-time personalization, and multi-functional content use.

Most companies store content in a cloud-based digital asset management platform, with varying levels of access

One of the biggest obstacles to efficiently creating, housing and accessing digital content has been on-premise storage platforms. The days of everyone saving files on their individual computers or file servers led to storage shortages and a proliferation of disparate tagging and naming schemes. Twenty-two percent of companies still operate this way.

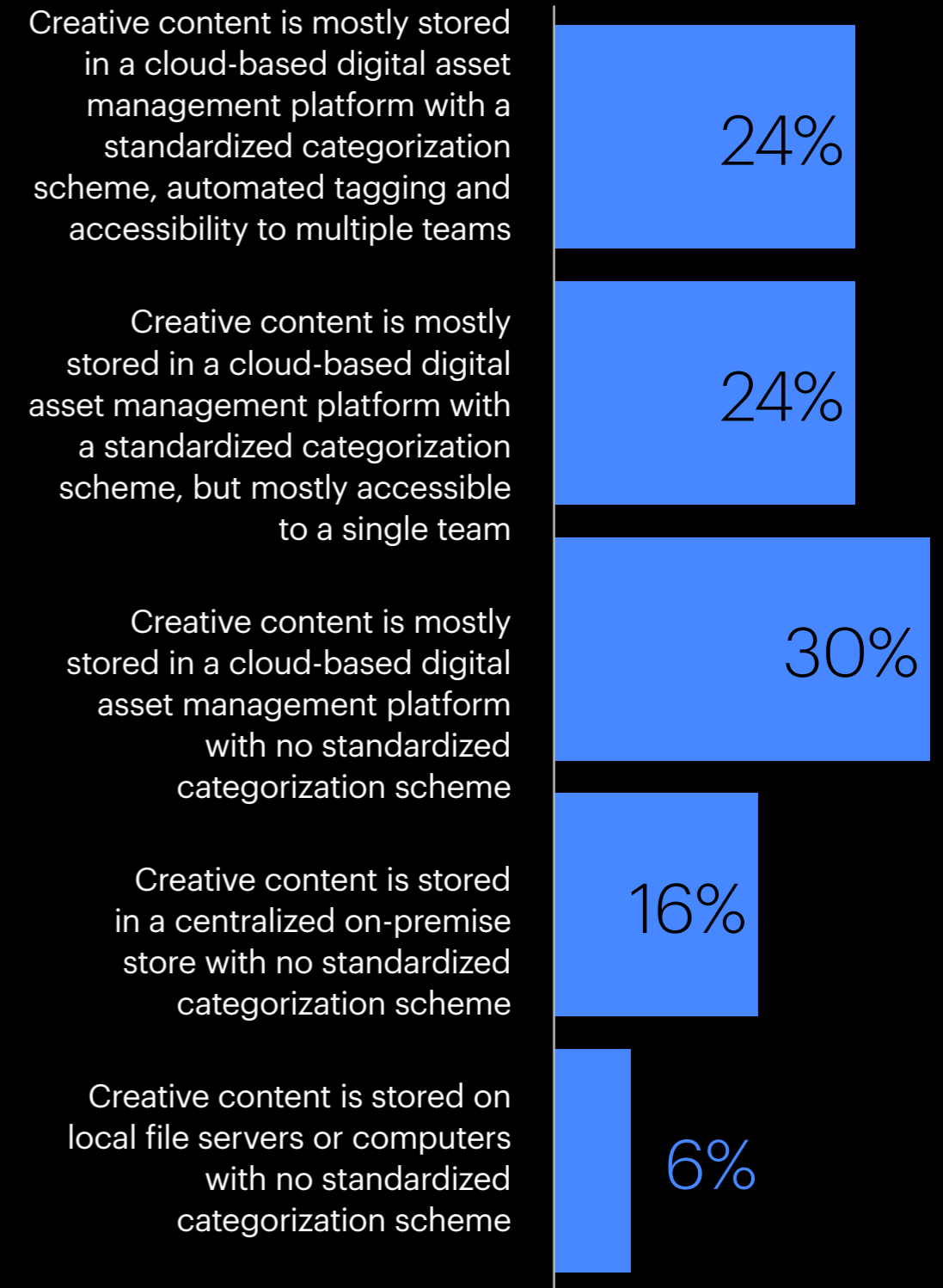
Thankfully, the vast majority of companies (78%) today have shifted to using a cloud-based storage or “digital asset management” (DAM) platform, which helps eliminate the storage problem, and allows multiple users to access a single repository of content. The more advanced platforms have features that allow for content review, as well as automated tagging and categorizing of both visual and text-based content.

The most mature companies (28%) are leveraging the advanced features of their DAM platforms and automating tagging, along with providing access to multiple teams. This is a key element of an agile system — by providing access to multiple stakeholders, it allows content created by one department to be deployed by many others seamlessly.

Content teams that focused on generating revenue (34%) or offering product support (42%) were much more likely than brand- or thought-leadership-focused teams to use a cloud-based DAM that was accessible to multiple teams. This underscores how important it is for collaboration between multiple functions for using content to achieve more commercial goals.

Again, companies in the banking (29%) and technology (35%) industries showed high maturity, where the majority of respondents stored content in a DAM, provided access to multiple teams and used AI-powered tagging.

Figure 14: How is your digital content stored and accessed?



Content Quality and Compliance

Ensuring that all digital content is consistently high quality, on-brand and compliant with industry rules and guidelines is a major endeavor for most companies. However, the existing processes used to review and approve content can slow down the content publishing process. In an agile content system, where real-time publishing is key, this can be a major obstacle. By investing in innovative practices, better software and streamlining approval chains, companies can meet the demand for content, without compromising quality and compliance.

A central design system is the most common practice for ensuring content quality and consistency

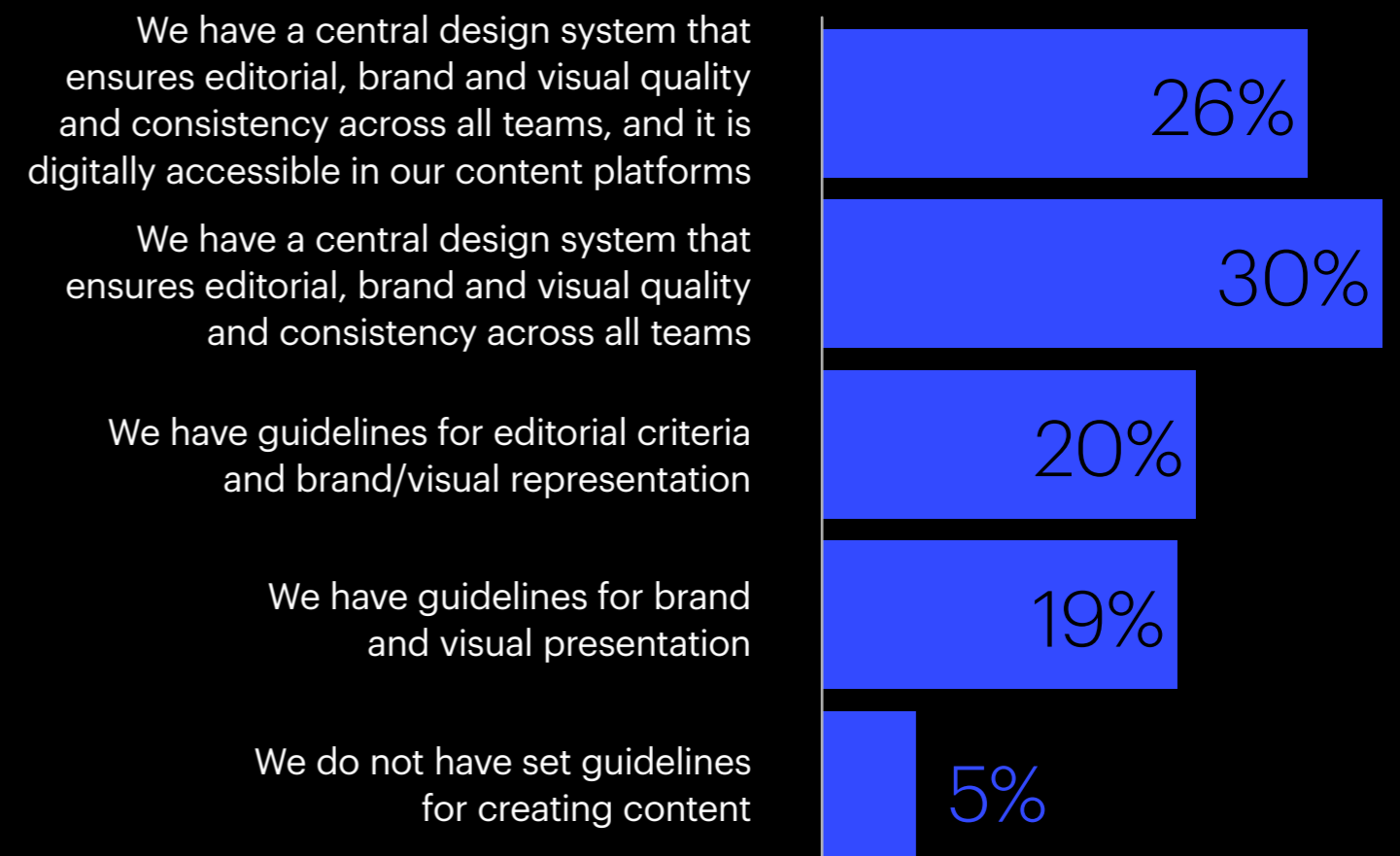
As our results have shown, one of the ways companies are meeting the demand for content is to set up more content creation centers within the business. While this makes it easier to produce more content, it also makes it harder to ensure consistency and quality of the content. While different content-producing centers may have unique goals or audiences, it's important for them to all share the same brand identity, and match the look and feel for all the content being produced by the same company.

A design system is a complete set of rules, guidelines and assets made available to all content creators within a company. They dictate editorial criteria, key visual elements, brand identity and production processes for all content.

While the majority of companies (30%) have such a design system hard coded, the more mature ones (26%) have it uploaded into all content-creating platforms. Practically, this may look like pre-loaded pictures or video or key messaging and copy that is readily accessible within digital platforms, but companies can expand this to include many more elements.

Banking (35%), manufacturing (35%) and technology (29%) industries were the most mature verticals, with the majority of respondents using a central design system that was digitally accessible on all content creation platforms.

Figure 15: What type of guidelines do you have for ensuring creation of consistent, high quality content?



Content approval processes are still based on inefficient, single item reviews

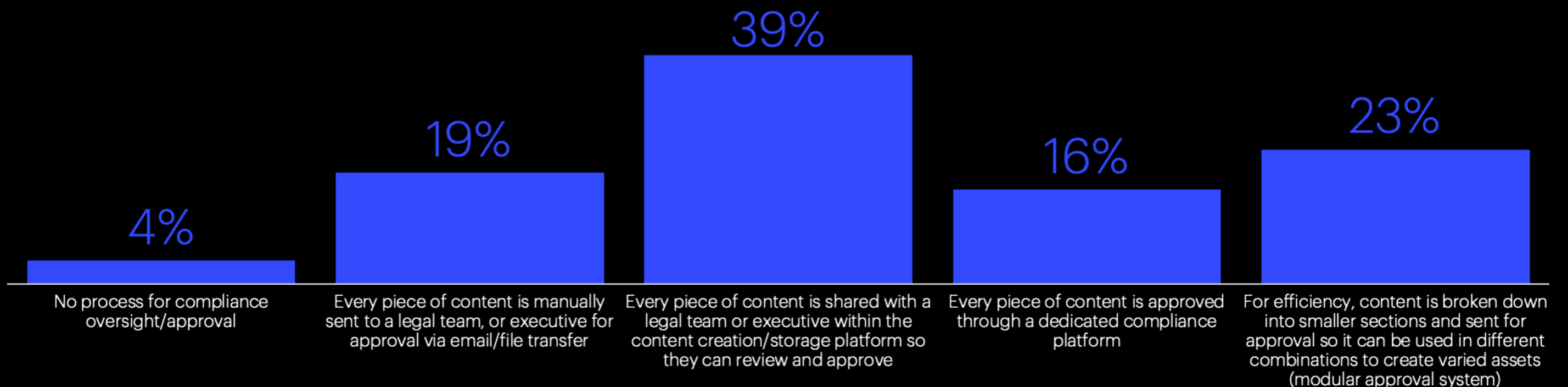
The results of this question highlight one of the biggest barriers to producing content at scale. Inefficient review and compliance processes slow down content output and make it difficult for the content to be re-used or tweaked for personalization across different functions.

A great majority of companies (39%) are still getting content approved the old-fashioned way, by sending each piece individually through a cycle of review from multiple stakeholders (e.g. executives or legal teams.) While this may be thorough, it becomes a major roadblock when large amounts of content must be produced, or if each variation of a content personalization scheme has to be individually approved.

Increasingly, companies are using better tools for approval. Sixteen-percent are using a dedicated compliance platform which streamlines the approval process and allows for quicker review. And 23% are using a “modular” content approval system, where small portions of content are sent for approval, and then recombined in different ways for personalization at scale. This allows creators to bypass having to send every variation for review again.

Despite the progress, this is an area where even the more digitally mature industries such as banking, retail and technology are lagging. It shows that improving the review system isn't just a matter of getting good at technology (which these industries have done) but overcoming embedded processes and mindsets to embrace innovative practices.

Figure 16: How would you describe your current content approval process for compliance?



Key Research Insights

Based on the survey results, we can identify some key areas for companies to prioritize as they continue to build their agile content systems.

Assess agile content capabilities

The research shows that companies vary greatly in their maturity across the key capabilities needed for an agile content system. Some may have made an early investment in technology, but still lack the skills to leverage it for the right kind of personalization or data analysis. Other companies may have all the tools and skills present but are operating less efficiently due to their organization structure. The key is to compare your content team's capabilities against the benchmarks in this report, and chart a path forward based on tackling the least mature areas first.

Invest in improving key data processes

It's not a surprise that the top two priorities for content producing companies in the next year (FIG 17) are both focused on improving the use of data to create (46%) and deliver (49%) personalized content. The key processes to invest in are: 1) accessing data to create the right target audience segments; 2) leveraging data to create the best variations for personalization; and 3) capturing performance data to continually improve the content, as well as attribute commercial value. An additional recommendation would be to embrace AI features within the software that help support each of the above processes.

While procuring and using the right technology is a crucial foundation for effective data usage, many companies would do well to evaluate non-technical aspects. This kind of repeatable access to data and analytics means investing in platforms that integrate with each other, educating the creative team on how to use data, and, most crucially, organizing groups to collaborate in a more efficient way.

Implement modular content creation

Quite possibly the single biggest success factor for creating quality content at scale is the modular content creation system. By creating smaller pieces of content (for example, a single block of text) that can be sent for quicker compliance and quality approval, content teams have a much better chance at increasing publishing speed. As an additional benefit, these small modules of content can be recombined in different ways that are customized for the preferences and behaviors of target audiences. They can also be fed into content software as building blocks for AI-powered personalization in real-time.

While sophisticated technology is the key element in this process, a big part of the challenge is overcoming legacy processes for review and approval. Even digitally mature companies have been slow to implement the modular creation process where less speed is seen as being more thorough. In this case, shifting the mindset with adequate proof points and training is the first step to change.

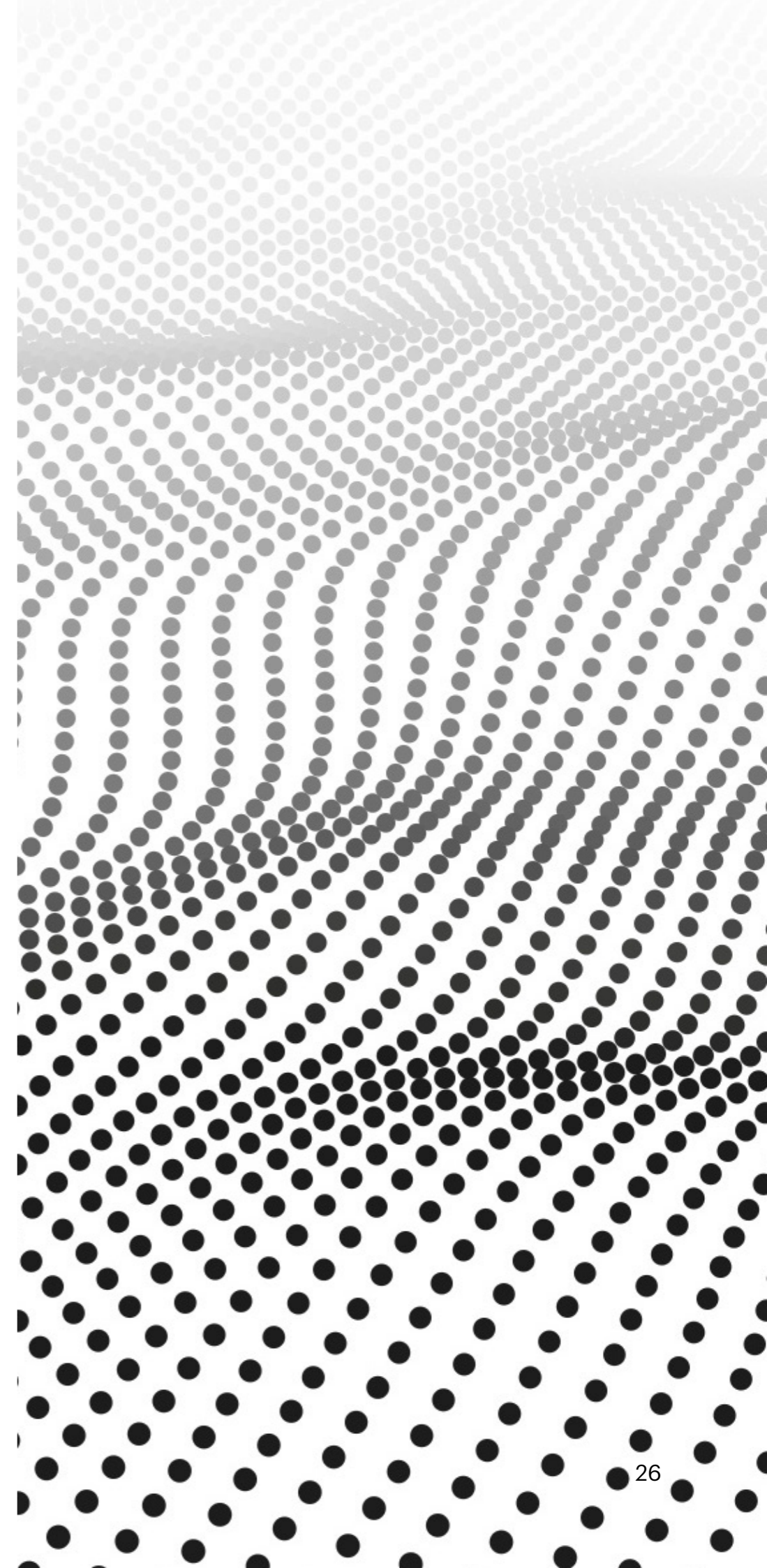
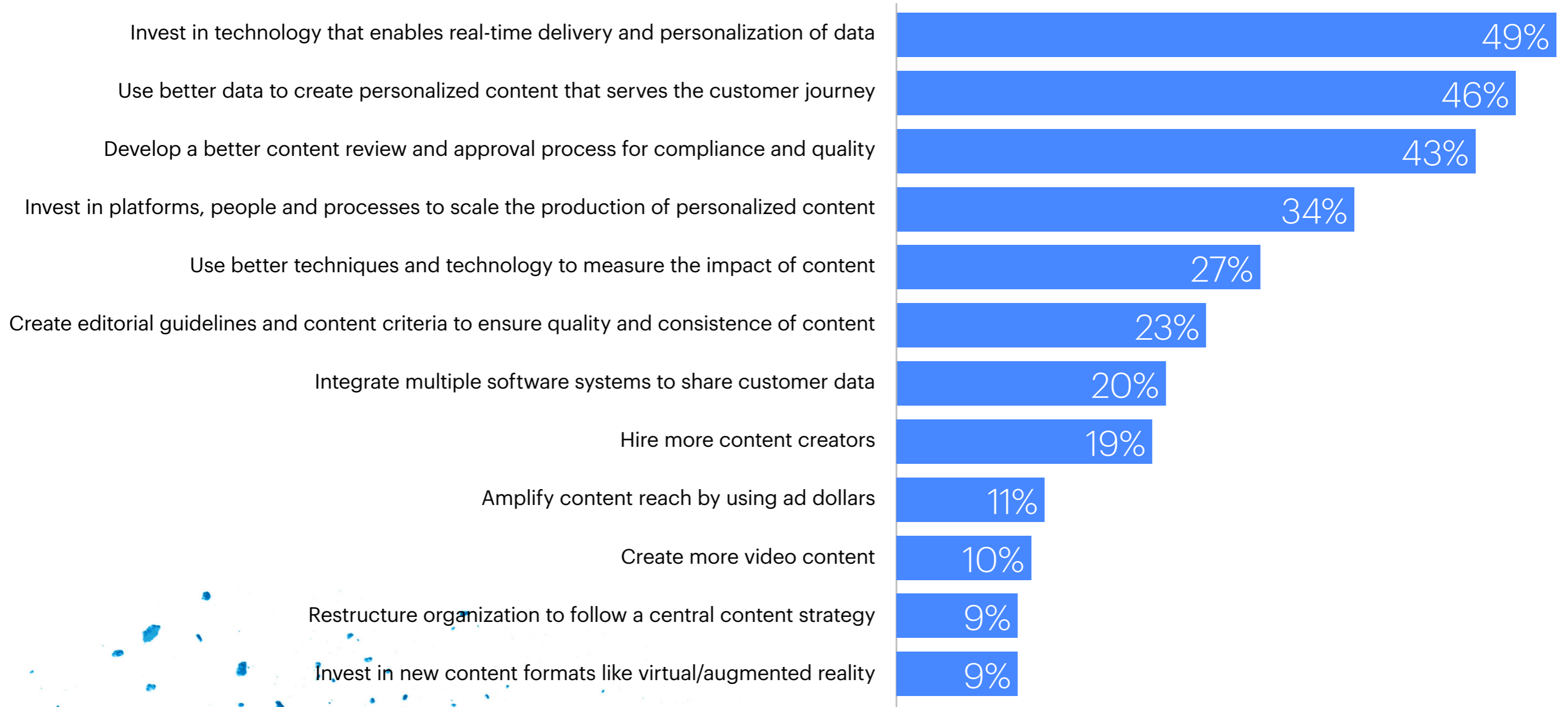


Figure 17: Which of the following initiatives are your top priorities in the next 12 months?



Expand the goals for content strategy

While brand awareness and thought leadership are still the top goals for most content strategies, we are seeing a shift towards achieving more revenue-centric goals. This includes lead generation, direct purchase, or cost-saving metrics such as efficiency. Our research shows that the content teams focused on these commercial goals were more digitally savvy and sophisticated than teams focused on brand awareness and thought leadership. Additionally, these teams were more likely to collaborate with a range of customer-facing teams such as sales and service, as opposed to only serving the brand or marketing functions.

By expanding the role of digital content to directly impact the bottom line, content teams are likely to receive more investment and be seen as a strategic tool in the business model. This makes it easier to fund capability improvements such as data analysis and real-time personalization.

Evaluate the content producing organization

The most popular organization model today is to have a central content team that acts like an internal agency and produces content for multiple teams or departments. As the demand for content grows along with the size of the company, this model can become difficult to sustain. Companies must then weigh the trade offs between continuing to centralize content and potentially have it become a bottleneck, or decentralizing it and potentially compromising quality, consistency and compliance. Most digitally mature companies are choosing the latter route, and enacting appropriate controls to ensure quality. However, there are cases where a centralized model may still work best. For companies focusing on thought leadership or lead generation, a central model is suitable since the content produced is specialized. But for other goals such as brand awareness, a decentralized model may work better, since it allows multiple lines of business or products to own their own awareness campaigns.

The key is to evaluate the goals of the business' content strategy, the availability of the technology, and the skills of all potential content producers within the company. Based on these inputs, the organization can be restructured into any number of decentralized, centralized or hybrid organization models.

Methodology

We surveyed 375 senior content team executives and practitioners in companies with at least 1,000 employees, across three geographies, The US, Europe (UK, Spain and Germany), and China. Additionally, we made sure to include a fixed quota of respondents from five industry verticals: banking / finance, healthcare, manufacturing, retail, and technology. We asked each respondent multiple choice answer questions about how they strategize, produce, deliver, and measure digital content.

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As an analyst and the research director for Altimeter, Omar publishes research that helps companies thrive on digital disruption. His areas of focus include content strategy, digital marketing excellence and marketing technology. These research reports include industry benchmarks, maturity models, guides for developing strategies, and frameworks for evaluating people, processes and tools.

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