

The background features a dark blue gradient with a subtle circuit board pattern. A large, light blue circular graphic is centered on the page. Inside this circle is a document icon with horizontal lines representing text. Surrounding the document icon are several curved arrows pointing in a clockwise direction, suggesting a continuous cycle or process. The overall aesthetic is clean, modern, and tech-oriented.

Contract Management Trends Report 2026

A comprehensive analysis of priorities,
challenges, and strategic shifts shaping
contract management in 2026

Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary.....	4
2. Methodology.....	5
3. The Speed Paradox.....	8
4. Negotiation Bottlenecks.....	12
5. The Visibility Gap.....	14
6. AI Adoption Accelerates.....	17
7. Preparing for 2026.....	20
8. Wrapping Up.....	23
9. About IntelAgree.....	24

SECTION 1

Executive Summary

Every legal and contract management team enters a new year with a mix of assumptions and blind spots. What helps is understanding how others are setting their priorities: where they're investing, what's expected of them, and what challenges they're up against. This report provides that context to give you a clearer starting point for managing contracts in 2026.

The findings show an industry at a critical inflection point. Turnaround times continue to shorten, AI is beginning to influence drafting and negotiation, and leaders are pushing for more contract insights that support forecasting, revenue accuracy, and risk decisions.

Key Findings:

62% worry about unknown exposure in older agreements

95% are exploring or implementing AI, though usage varies

34.5% are focusing on stronger templates and fallback terms to reduce risk

In this report, we'll discuss what's influencing these numbers, and what that means for contract management next year.

Legal has become the first line of defense. Industries keep getting more restrictive, regulations keep coming down, and we're the ones making sure everything gets done correctly. We help each department check their boxes, providing the support and guidance they need."

- Kimberley B., professional sports industry

SECTION 2

Methodology

Between August and October 2025, we surveyed 50+ general counsel, legal operations leaders, and senior contract professionals to capture unfiltered perspectives on their biggest challenges and strategic priorities for 2026.

The survey respondents represent a broad range of contracting operations, from small legal teams overseeing high volumes to enterprise functions supporting global portfolios. Together, they provide a dataset that mirrors the complexity of modern contracting.

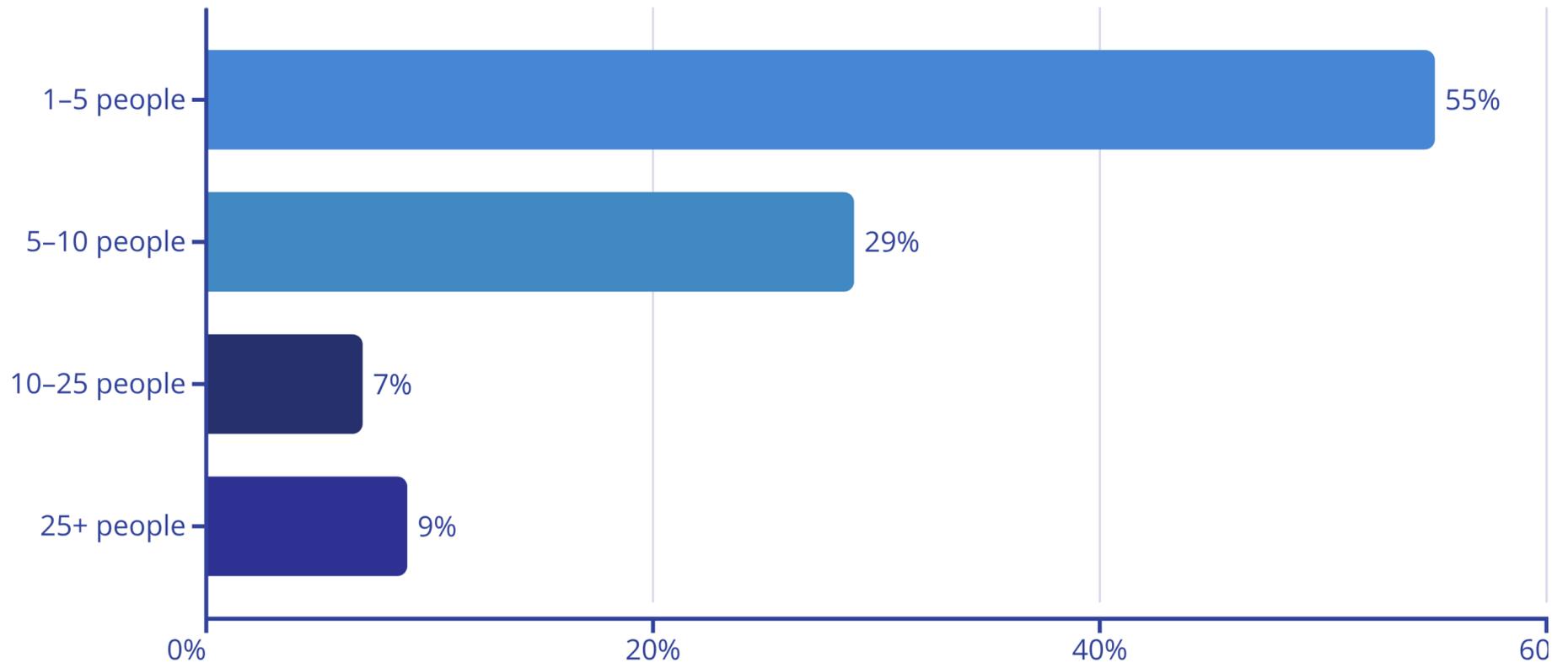
The sections ahead draw on that full dataset, combining quantitative results with qualitative insights from respondents' written feedback and in-depth interviews.

Participant Overview:

- ✓ 50+ legal and contract management leaders interviewed across diverse industries and geographies
- ✓ Organizations ranging from 50 to 10,000+ employees, with over two-thirds from companies with 500+ employees
- ✓ Diverse role representation spanning general counsel, contracts managers, corporate lawyers, paralegals, and legal operations leaders

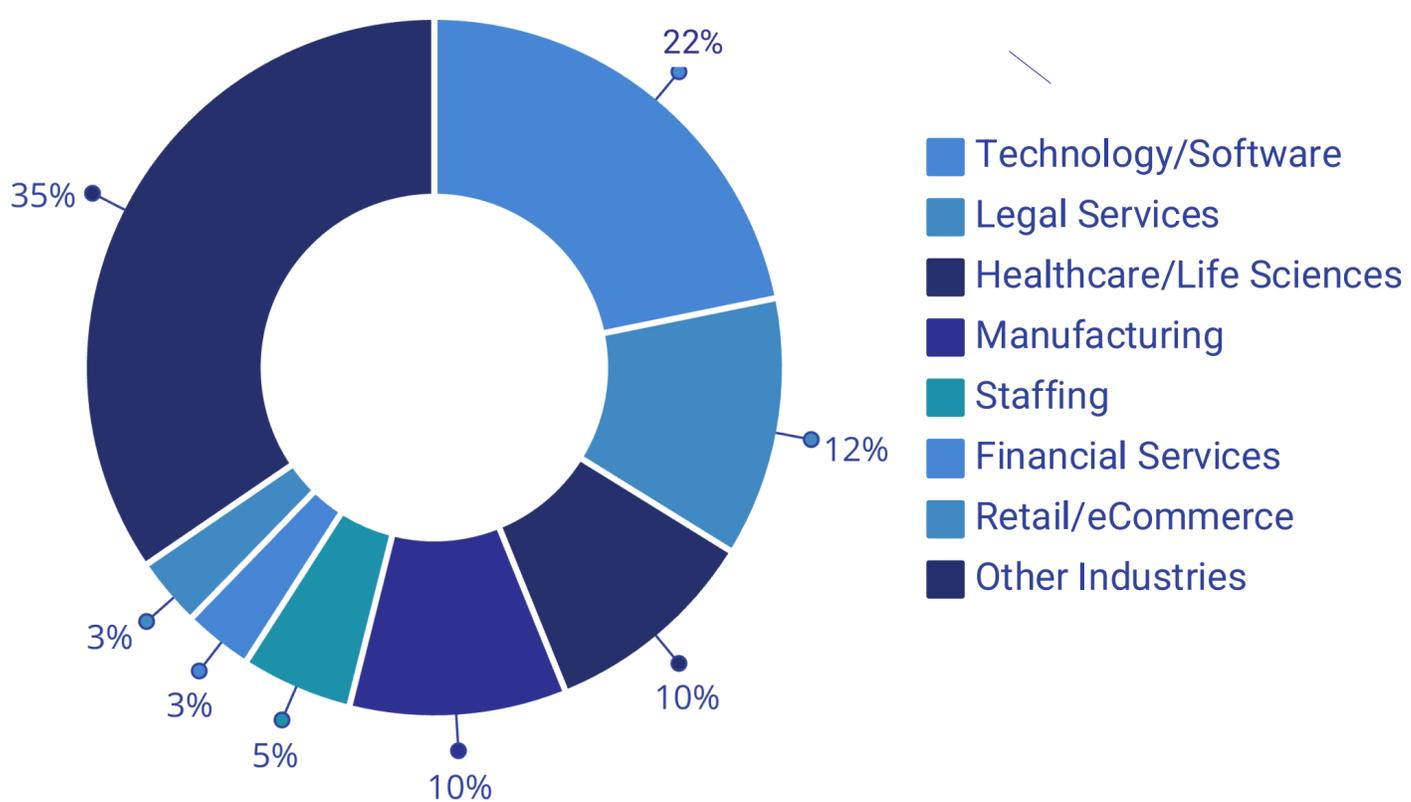
Methodology – Continued

Team Size



Most teams operate lean, with over half managing contract operations with five or fewer dedicated legal and/or contract professionals.

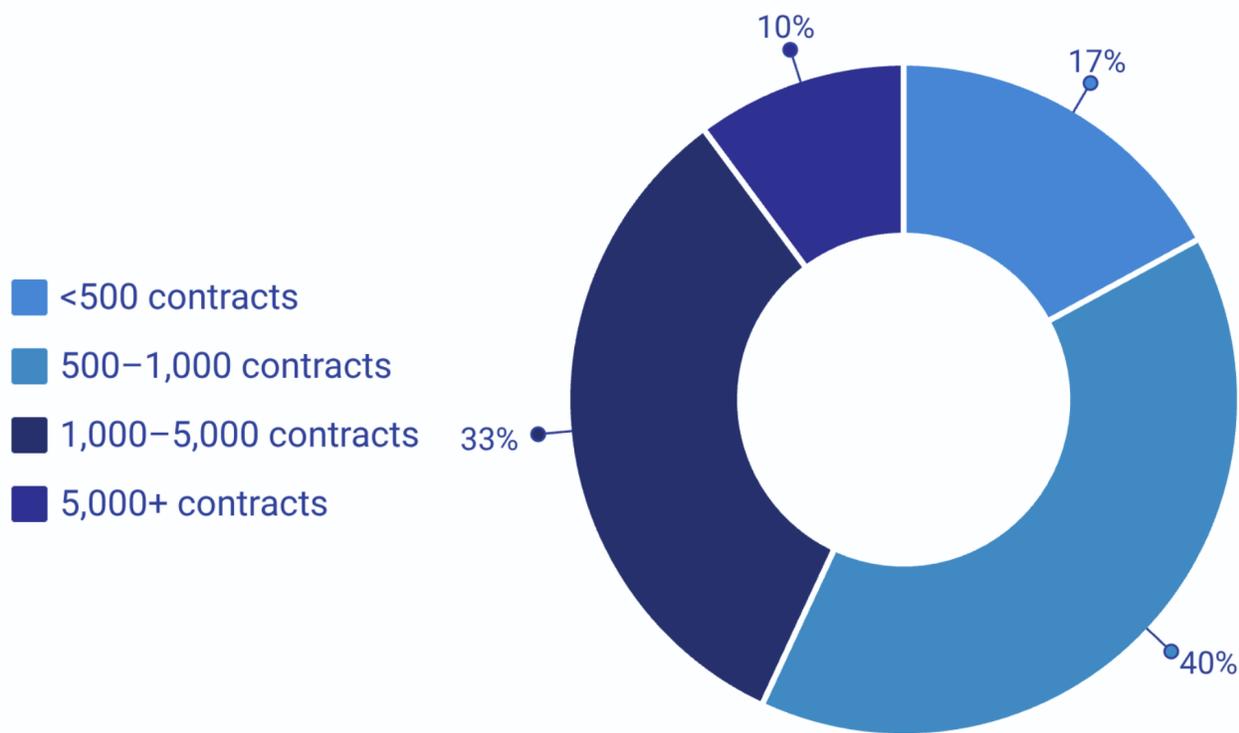
Industry Makeup



Over a quarter of respondents come from highly regulated industries – like healthcare, legal services, and financial services – where contract management carries the highest stakes.

Methodology – Continued

Annual Contract Volume



Nearly three-quarters manage between 500 and 5,000 contracts annually, ensuring insights reflect moderate-to-high contract volume operations.

Top Roles Represented

9%

General Counsel

7%

Contracts Manager

7%

Corporate Lawyer

SECTION 3

The Speed Paradox

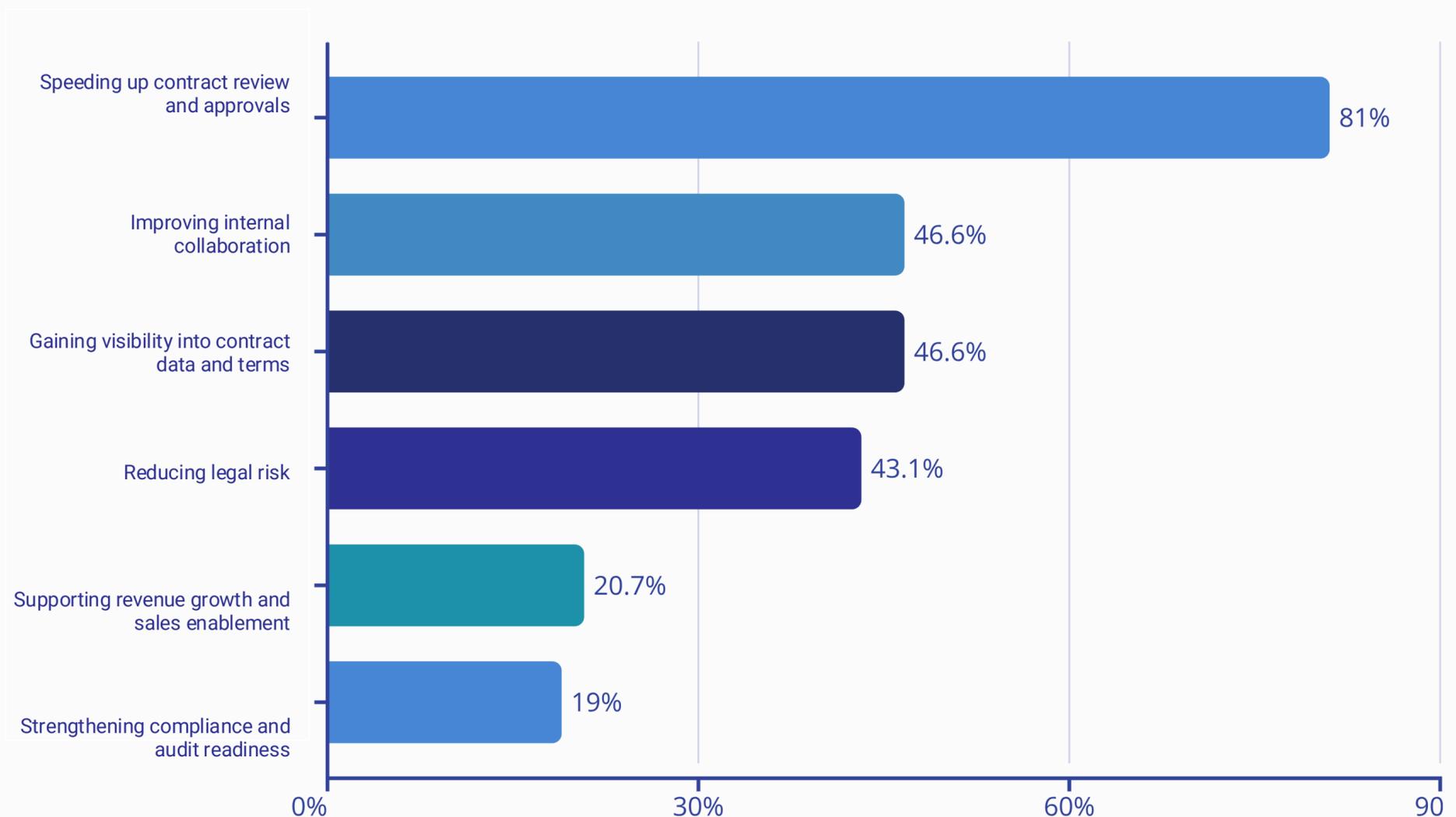
The Speed Paradox

With the majority citing faster contract cycles as their first priority and shorter turnaround times as their top challenge (70.7%), teams are working in a world where the amount of work has increased but the time to do it has not.

“There's always something at stake. With our contracts, there could be orders or business relationships pending. Each contract is part of a bigger chain, and the rest of that chain can't move until we do,” explains Michelle R., who works in the industrial manufacturing and engineering industry. “Everything is tied to something immediate and everybody wants it now.”

Under that pace, it becomes harder to stay on top of obligations and emerging risks across a growing portfolio of agreements. So, it's unsurprising that speeding up contract cycles (81%), gaining visibility (46.6%), and reducing legal risk (43.1%) are among the top priorities — teams need systems that help them work quickly without compromising the accuracy their contracts require.

What Are Your Top Three Contract Priorities for 2026?



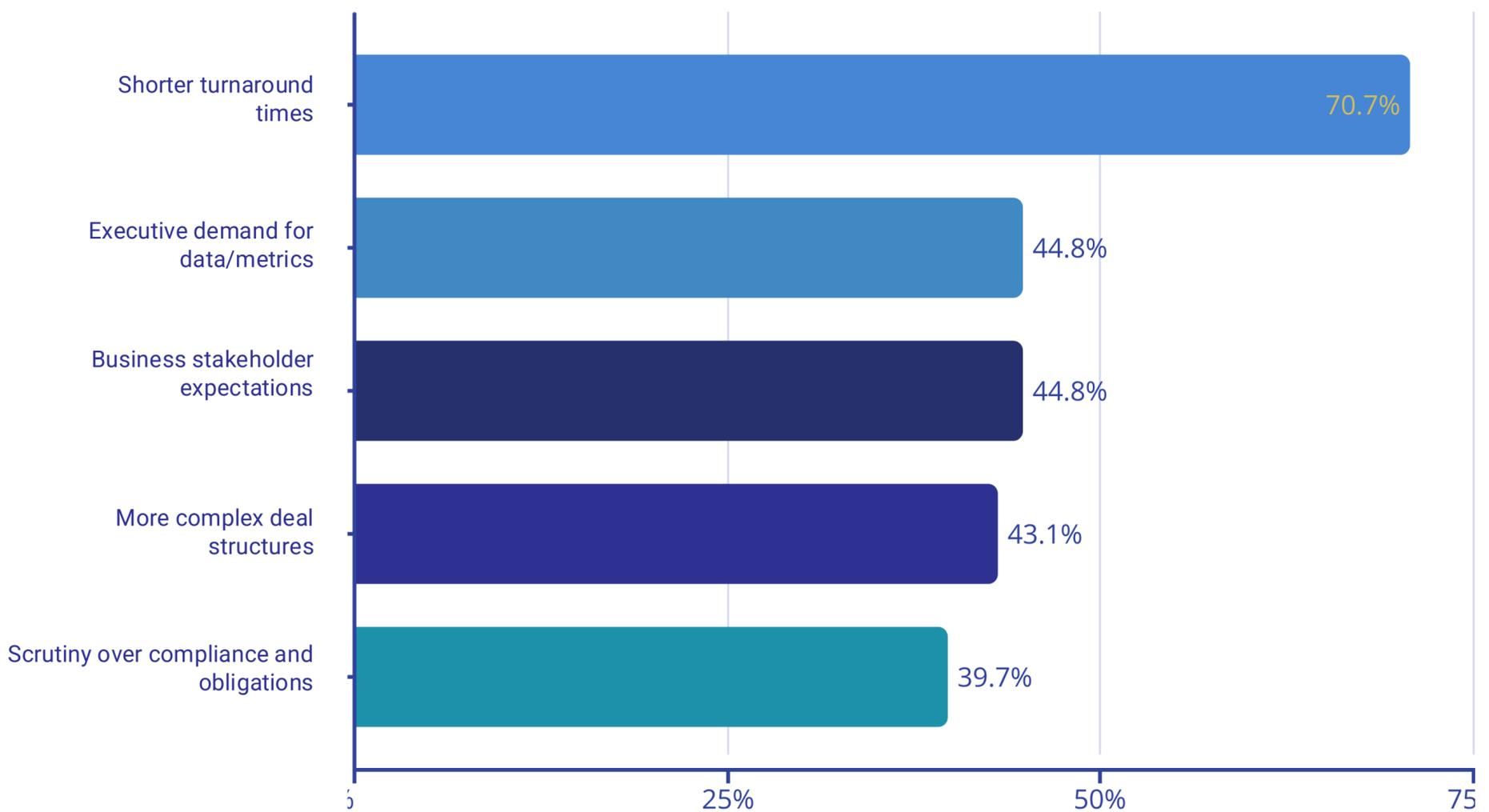
Section 3

Complexity Continues

Contract work itself is also becoming more complicated. Survey respondents point to executive demand for data and metrics (44.8%), rising stakeholder expectations (44.8%), and more complex deal structures (43.1%) among the top challenges shaping their workload in 2026.

As contracts move through more jurisdictions, rely on more systems, and involve more early input from the business, the path from request to signature becomes far less linear. More variables mean details shift more easily and the business loses clarity on what it's agreeing to. As these variables expand, organizations will need stronger visibility, analytics, and governance to keep contracting aligned with how the business now operates.

Which Contract Challenges Are Increasing Pressure?



Who's Driving Contract Transformation?

Executive leadership is driving contracting transformation in 65.5% of organizations – far more than any other group. Finance follows at 34.5%, sales and revenue teams at 32.8%, and only 3.4% say their legal or contract team is driving the change.

What stands out is how contracting has moved from document execution to enterprise intelligence. Leaders want the data inside agreements to inform forecasts, financial accuracy, and planning, and that appetite is driving a huge push for modernization.

“When you have a tool that can analyze contracts at scale, the expectations for the legal department are raised. You need to know which contracts are expiring, which will auto-renew, which have built-in rate increases. You have to be more knowledgeable – it can't just be 'let me get back to you.'”

– Ryan E., medical services industry

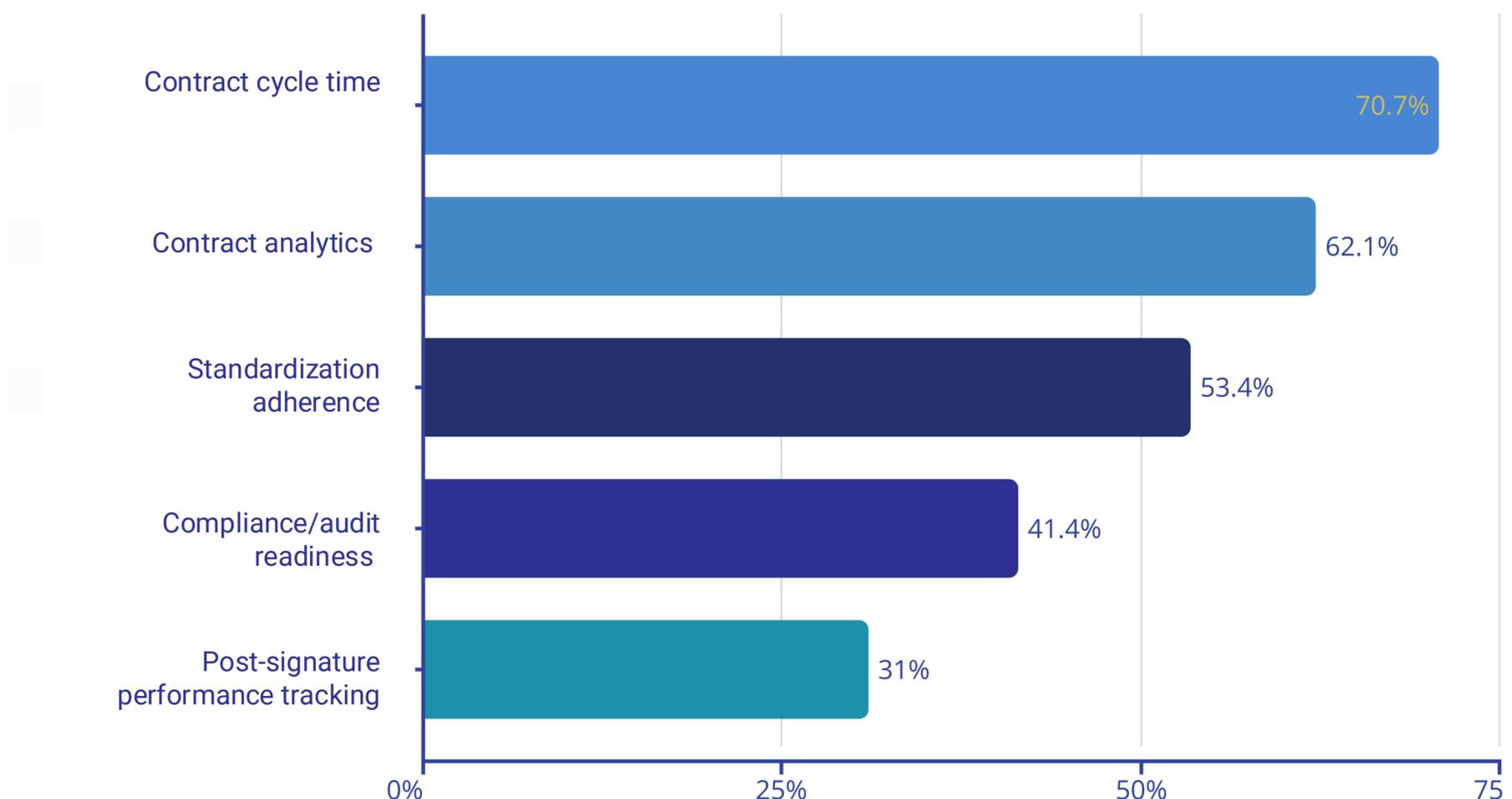
What Data Executives Want to See

- Revenue at risk
- Renewal and churn hotspots
- Third-party exposure
- Critical deviations
- Cost of friction
- Counterparty behavior patterns
- New regulatory vulnerability
- Missed obligation risk

What Success Looks Like

The KPIs teams plan to track in 2026 show a shift toward deeper visibility into the health of their contracts and the processes behind them. Contract cycle time remains the top metric at 70.7%, but organizations are also prioritizing contract analytics (62.1%) and template standardization adherence (53.4%). Rather than viewing productivity as the sole indicator of success, teams are emphasizing visibility, consistency, and quality – the foundations that make speed achievable and sustainable.

Which Three Contract KPIs Are Most Important for 2026?



Historically, legal departments didn't have the tooling or data structure to measure much beyond volume or turnaround time. The KPIs gaining traction now demand more mature processes and reliable data – signs that contracting is moving toward operational rigor rather than reactive, task-by-task effort.

“KPIs are crucial for spotting slowdowns or gaps in the process. But at the end of the day, the biggest measure of success is the strength and quality of the contract, not just how quickly it was finalized.”

– Maggie M., healthcare and insurance industry

In a contracting environment defined by rising variability, these KPIs function as guardrails. They help teams identify where work is veering off-track and where risk is accumulating long before it becomes a problem. Ultimately, they give teams a firmer basis for making decisions about where to focus their time – and where not to.

SECTION 4

Negotiation Bottlenecks

Negotiation Bottlenecks

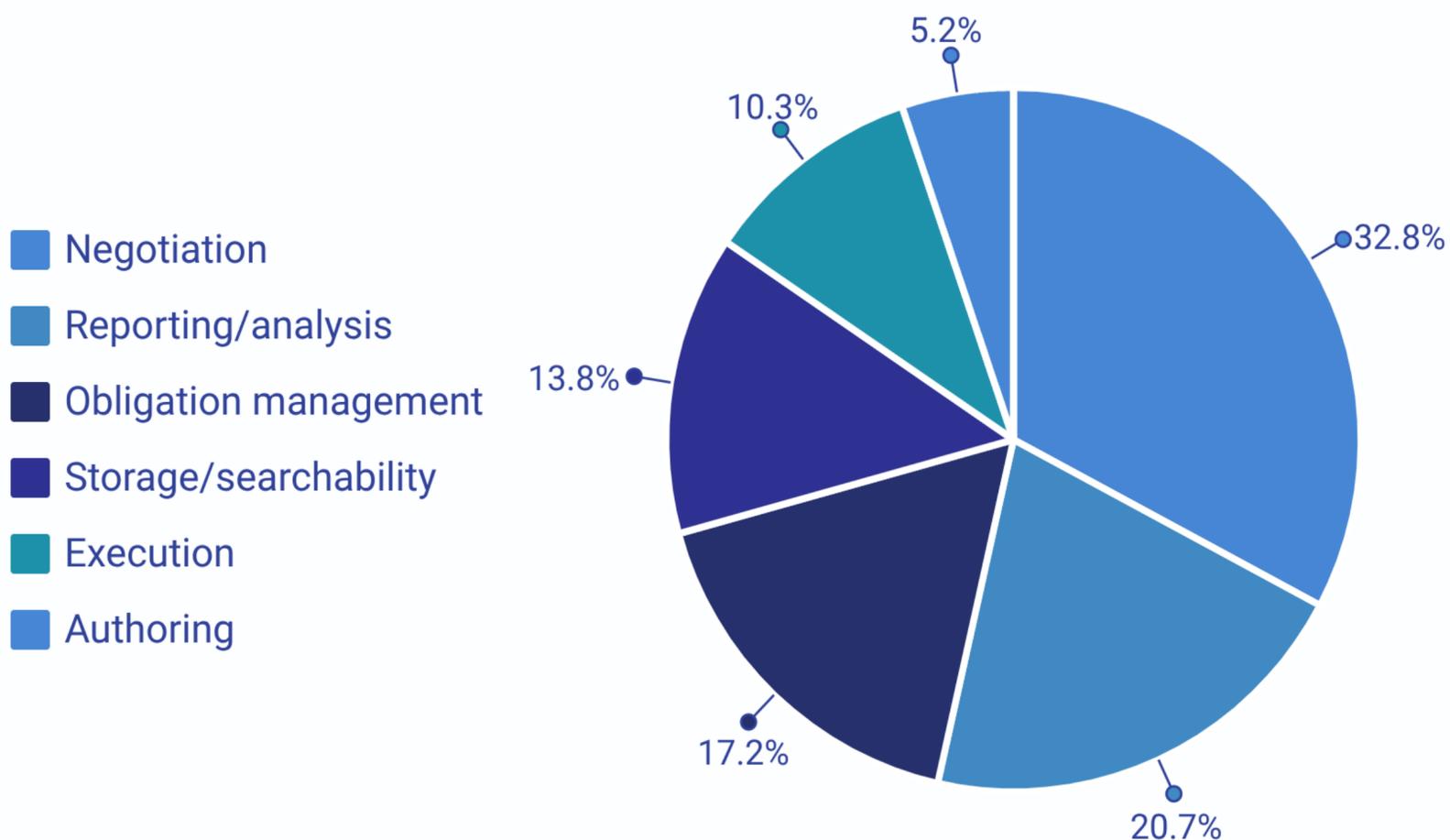
Nearly a third of respondents say negotiation creates the most friction, and the common denominator is **control**. Drafting, review, and execution run within predictable guardrails. Negotiation doesn't, and once multiple parties or external dependencies enter the picture, workflows get harder to manage.

By the time a deal reaches negotiation, a lot of eyes are on it. Everyone has a stake: the customer needs the software, sales wants the commission, the business wants the contract closed. That pressure and anticipation create friction all on their own."

– Lee R., software and technology industry

Interestingly, respondents' top two risk-reduction strategies – stronger templates and clearer fallback language – may seem unrelated to negotiation, but they point to a push to settle as many decisions as possible *before* a contract ever hits the negotiation table. Both strategies are ways to avoid mid-negotiation surprises and bring more predictability to the process.

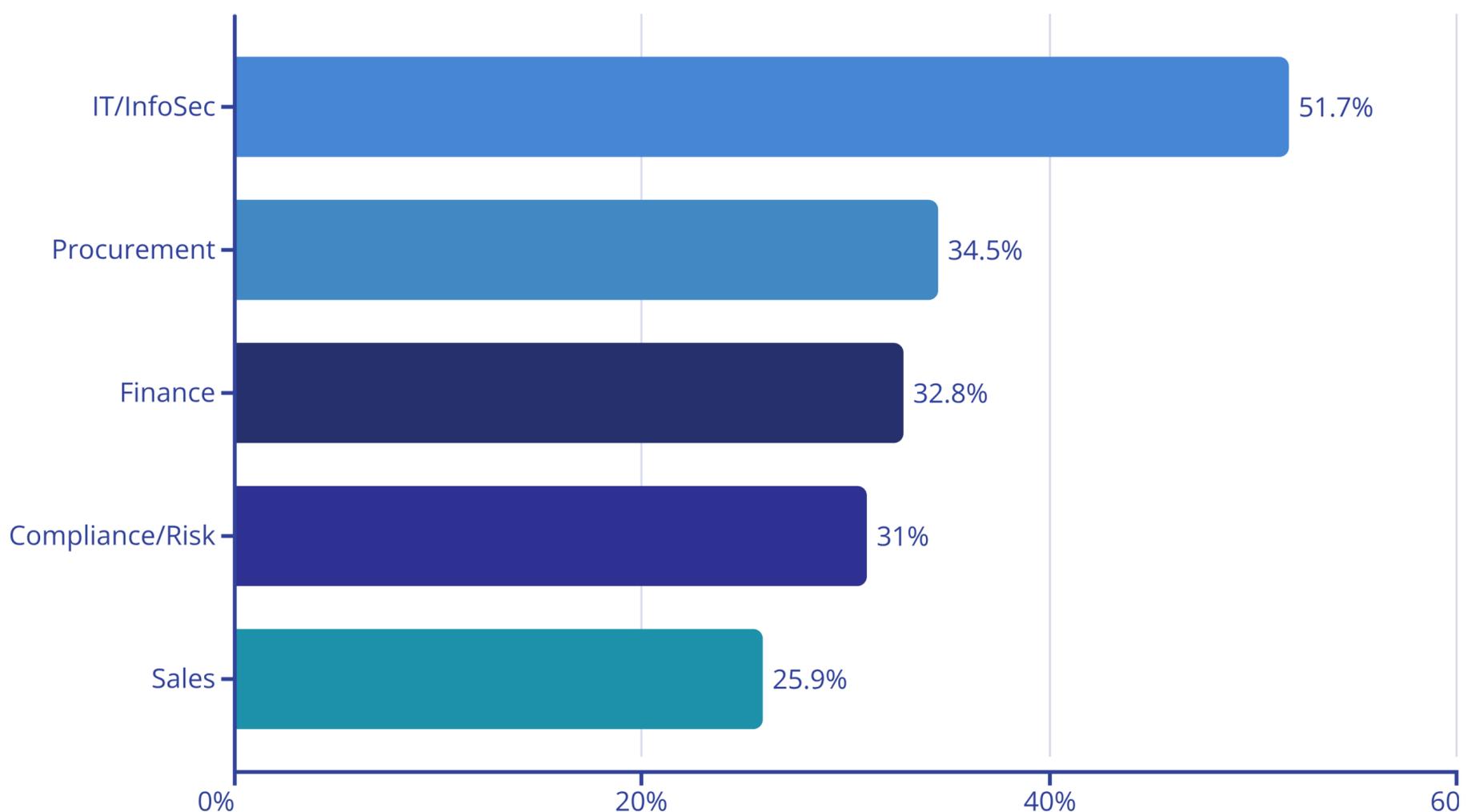
Which Part of the Contract Lifecycle Poses the Greatest Risk or Friction?



Collaboration Growth

Collaboration is shifting toward the teams that own the organization's biggest risks, like IT and InfoSec (51.7%), procurement (34.5%), finance (32.8%), and compliance and risk (31%). Their increased involvement reflects how much higher the stakes have become around data, security, and spend – and how little room there is for getting those decisions wrong.

Which Departments Are Collaborating on Contracts More Often?



For contract and legal teams, the real work is reconciling these competing demands into a contract that holds up under scrutiny and still gets signed on time:

“Negotiation has been the biggest challenge. The ‘awaiting approval’ and ‘in negotiation’ steps happen at the same time – every reviewer requests changes, those edits go back to the business, and then we go back and forth with the counterparty. We rely on the departments requesting the contract because they’re the experts on what’s needed, but that also adds more cycles.”

– Erin L., higher education industry

SECTION 5

The Visibility Gap

The Visibility Gap

The riskiest parts of many portfolios are the agreements that have been in place the longest: 62% of teams cite unknown exposure in older contracts, and 57% say missed obligations are among the top risks heading into 2026.

Many legacy contracts fall short of the clarity regulators, auditors, and internal stakeholders now expect. The business is being asked to defend commitments created in a different contracting environment, and teams are discovering how little of that history is documented in a way they can rely on. Even when the documents are accessible, it's difficult to confirm what's current, what has been amended, and where risk may still sit.

“As contracts get longer and more complex, it becomes harder to be confident you've caught everything. A ten-page agreement feels manageable; a two-hundred-page one is where you start to wonder what you might have missed.”

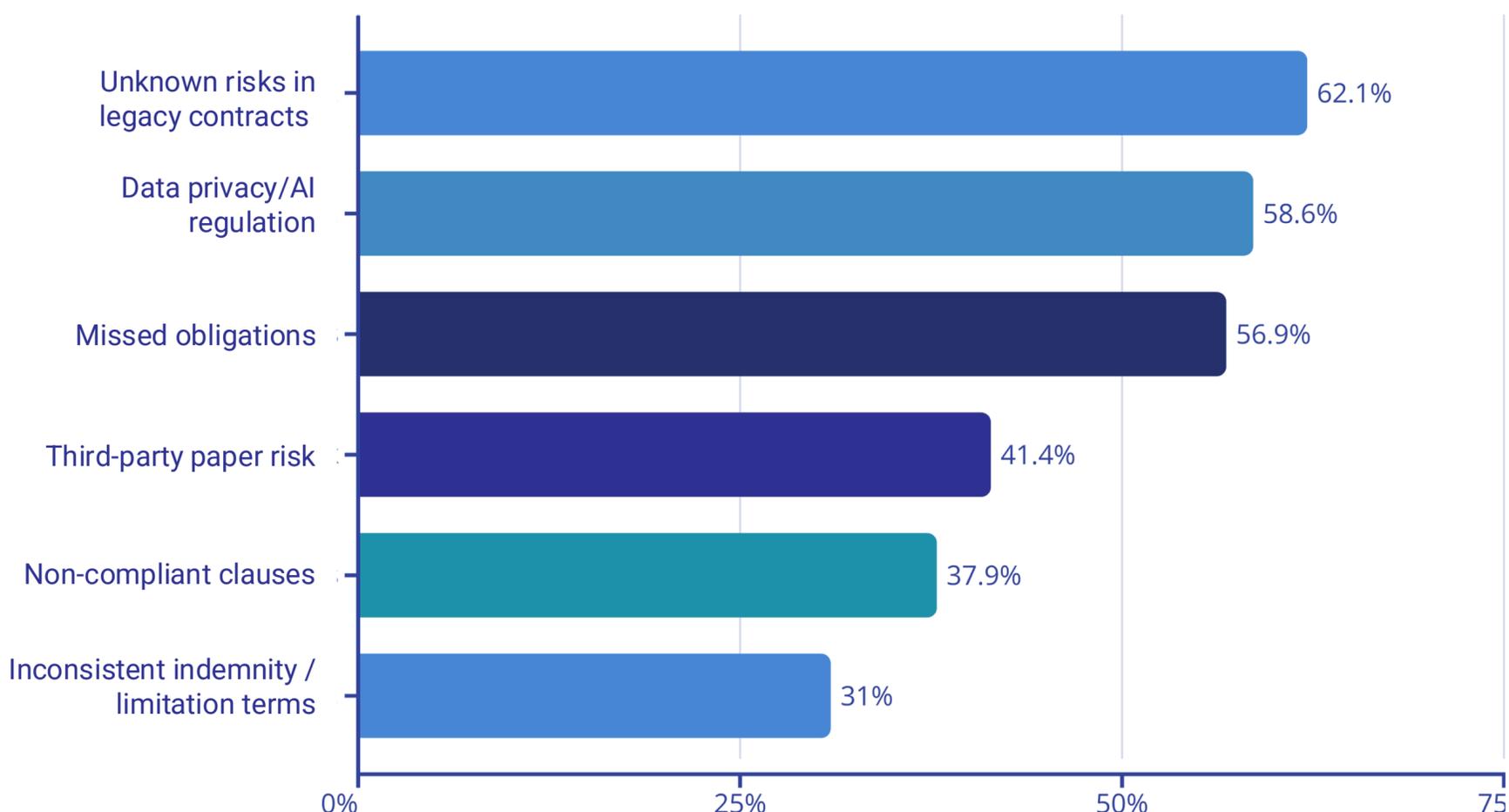
– Meredith W., engineering industry

For many, that uncertainty deepens over time:

“There's always a fear of the unknown in contracts you didn't negotiate yourself. The longer something stays buried, the closer you get to a problem you didn't see coming – and the less time you have to prevent or mitigate the risk.”

– Ryan E., medical services industry

What Contract Risks Are You Most Concerned About for 2026?

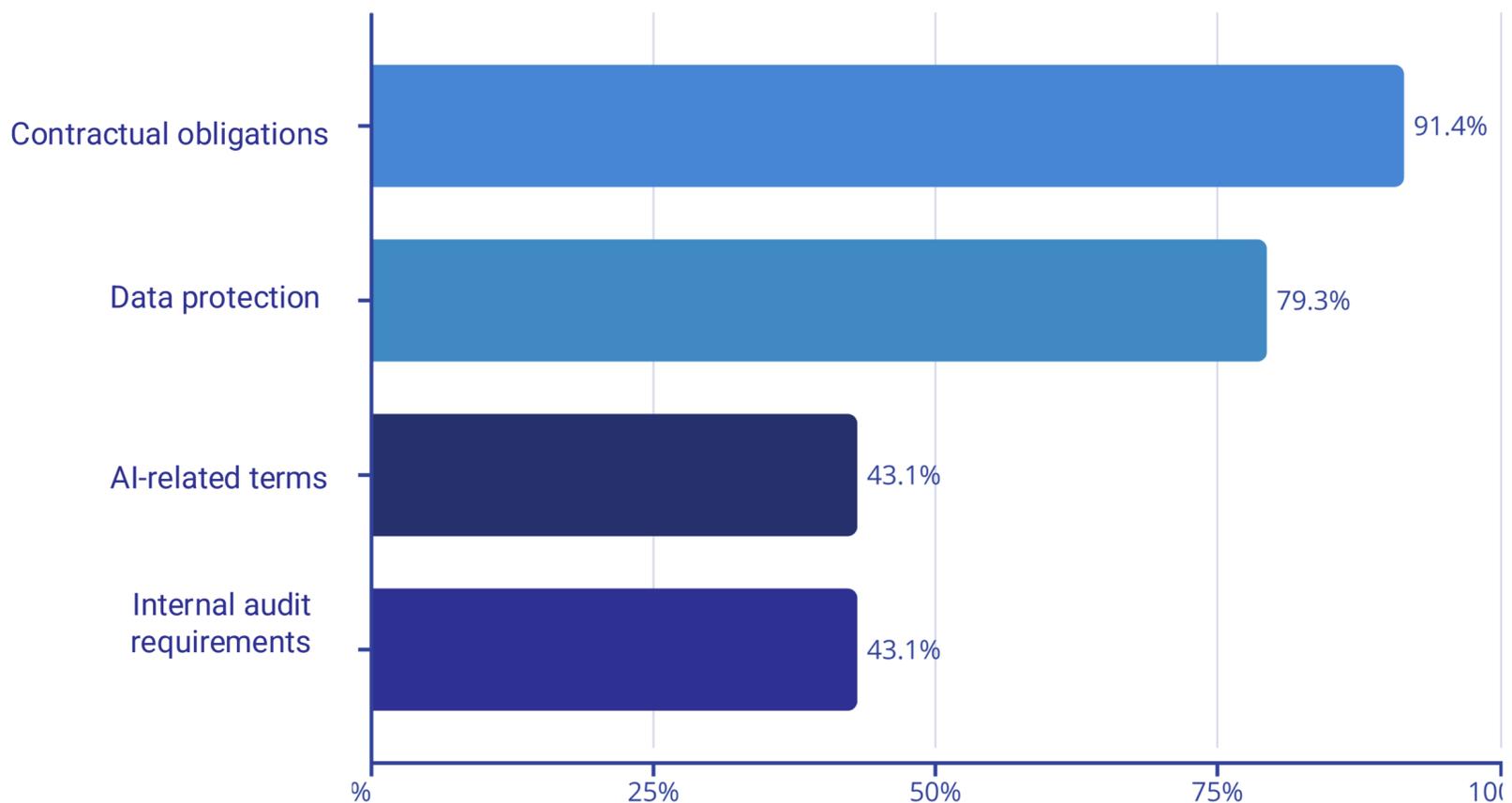


Contract Areas Under Scrutiny

The four contract risk areas drawing the most scrutiny heading into 2026 – obligations (90%), data protection (79%), AI terms (43%), and audit requirements (43%) – all face the same challenge: constant change.

New regulations, evolving data privacy frameworks, and the pace of change in AI keep redefining what "compliant" looks like. Teams adjust language, but when the goal posts keep shifting, keeping contracts aligned remains one of the hardest parts of the job.

Which Three Compliance or Risk Areas Receive the Most Scrutiny?



“With the changing economy and everything the government is doing – especially around labor staffing and contract compliance – every new state regulation forces us to rethink how our contracts hold up in that particular hotel or municipality. The target keeps moving.”

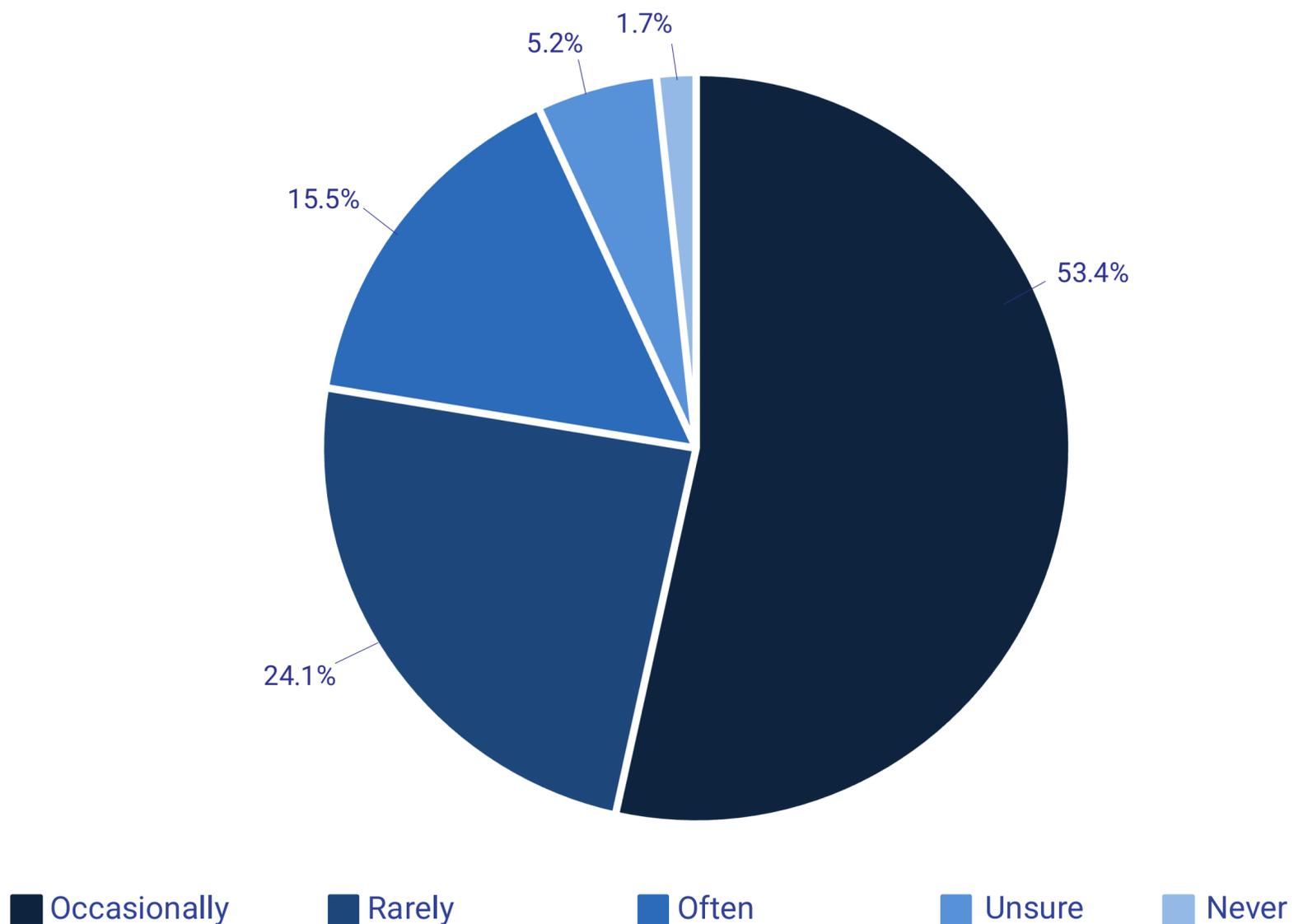
– Eric H., hospitality industry

That lag hits vendor agreements hardest. Seventy-one percent of respondents expect these type of contracts to feel the most pressure from external change, followed closely by privacy and security assessments. Since these documents hinge on ever-evolving data and security requirement, it’s unsurprising that they’re often the agreements that teams must recalibrate first.

Third-Party Complexity

Everywhere third parties show up, the work gets harder. Most respondents say they encounter contract challenges with vendors or partners at least occasionally (68.9%), with 15.5% saying they see them often.

How Often Do You Encounter Contract Issues with Third Parties?



For many teams, the sticking points they see trace back to how much of today's contracting relies on third parties. Vendors, for example, handle key pieces of the workflow, from how data is processed to how systems integrate, yet internal teams inherit the outcomes.

"Anytime a contract depends on a third party — data, services, integrations — it takes longer and the risk goes up, because we don't control those pieces."

— Erin L., higher education industry

As organizations head into 2026, those external dependencies will play a bigger role in how confidently teams can meet their own standards, respond to audits, and keep up with change.

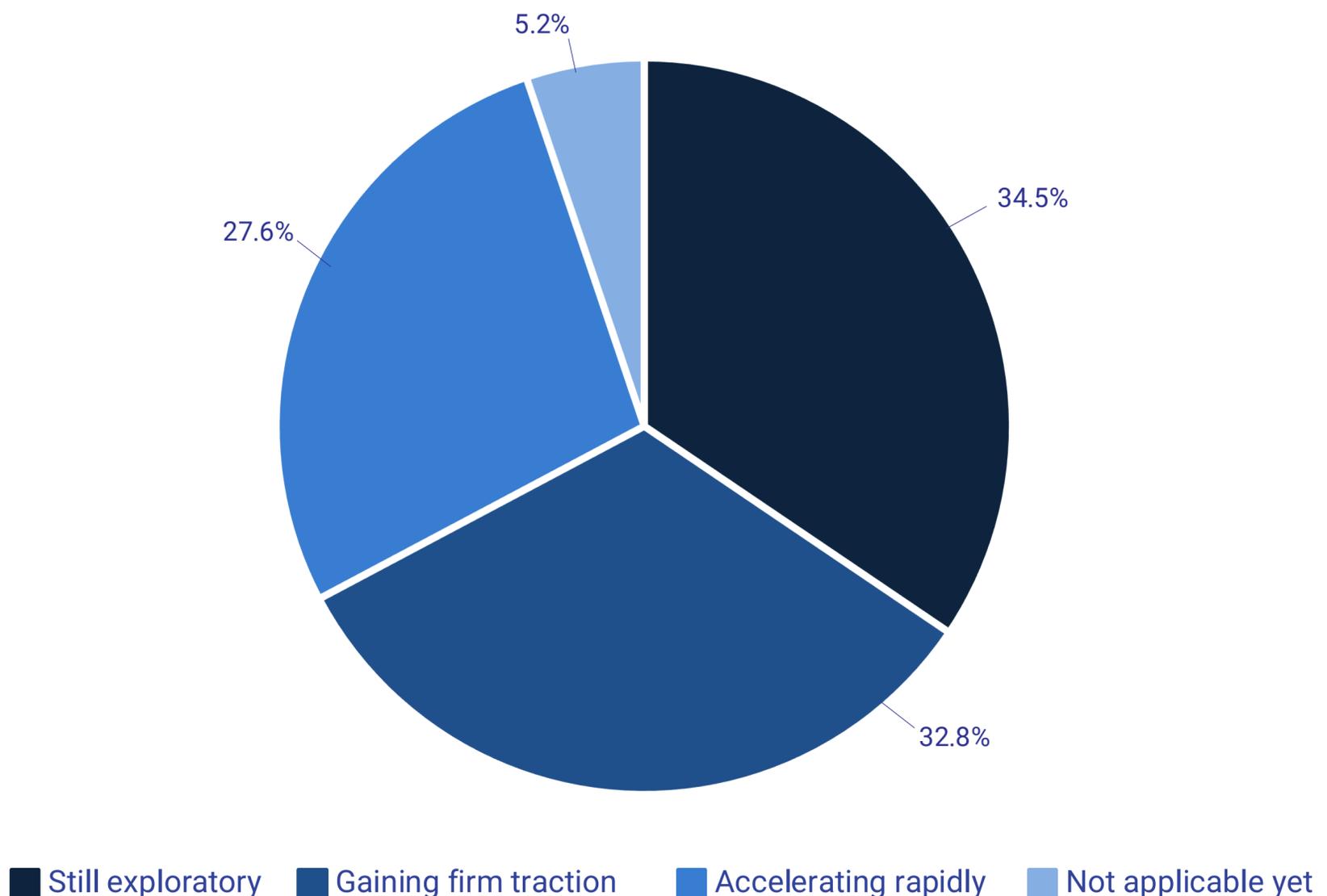
SECTION 6

AI Adoption Accelerates

AI Adoption Accelerates

Across nearly everyone surveyed, AI is moving from experiment to expectation. Ninety-five percent of teams are either exploring or actively implementing it, and the range of adoption stages – exploratory (34.5%), gaining traction (32.8%), and accelerating rapidly (27.6%) – reflects an industry finding its footing.

How Would You Describe the Pace at Which AI Is Being Adopted?



So far, teams are using AI for the high-volume, low-risk tasks that have historically drained hours from legal, including drafting, summarizing, clause detection, and search. Search and reporting are the most common uses (29.3%), followed closely by AI-assisted authoring (25.9%). Set against the broader expectations for AI, it's a reminder that adoption remains uneven across the lifecycle – strongest in the stages where teams feel a little more confident about what AI should do, and far lighter where operationalizing it is still unclear.

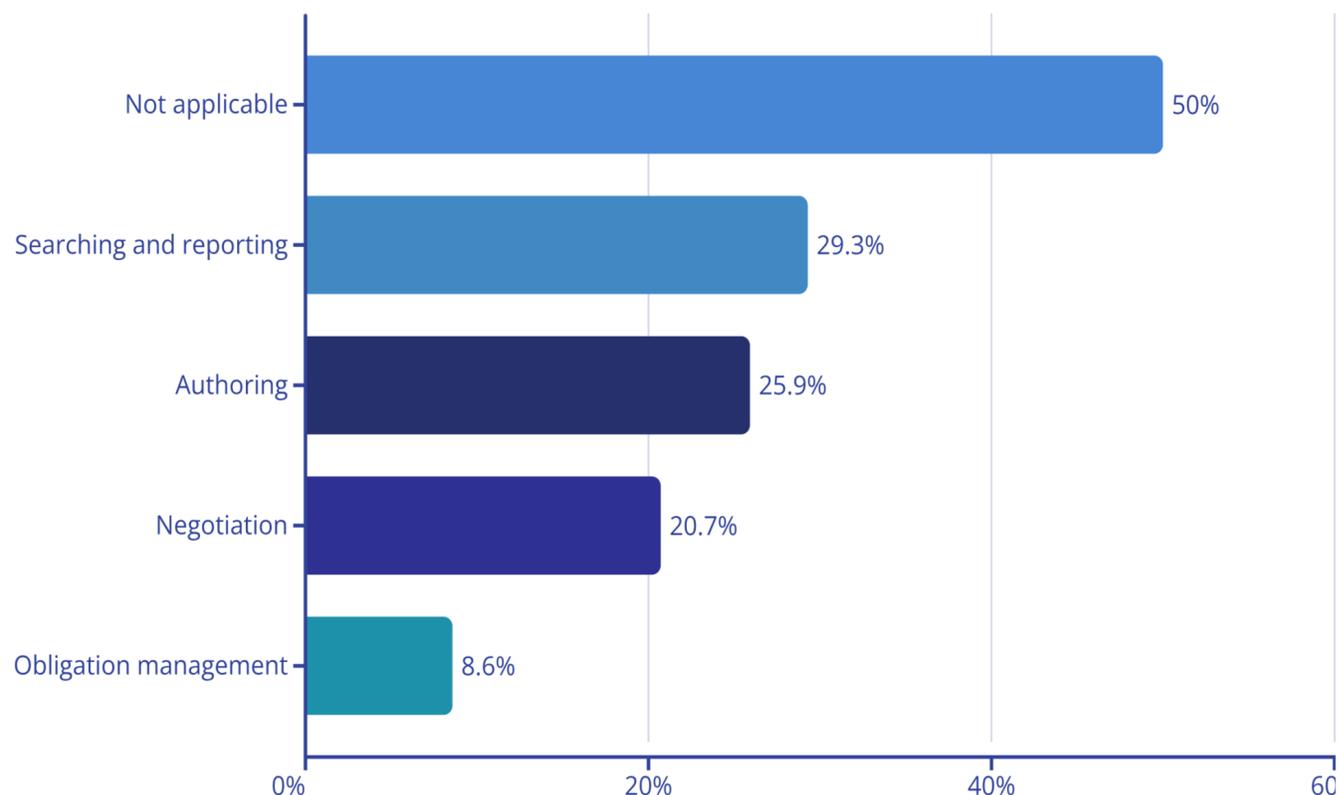
"AI is ultimately about increasing productivity without adding headcount. By 2026, I expect it to handle the first layer of work on almost every contract we touch – whether we drafted it or it came from a counterparty – which lets us shift people toward higher-level work."

- Steve B., retail industry

Agentic AI: Expectations vs. Reality

Agentic AI has gained a foothold in many organizations, and a significant share are exploring or scaling AI more broadly. But looking at where it's used, only around 20% apply it to negotiation-specific tasks. That disconnect raises a central question: if AI is accelerating work, why isn't it being used where friction in the contract lifecycle is highest?

What Areas of Contract Management Are You Using Agentic AI For?



Comments point to a mix of awareness and readiness issues: Do we trust our templates and playbooks enough to let an agent act on them? How often should we revisit our policies to make sure the agent acts according to our current contract process? Who confirms that an agent's output aligns with the intended goals?

Until the policies and the division of responsibility across legal, IT, risk, and operations feels clearer, teams will keep using agentic AI in narrow, well-controlled ways, even when the technology could reasonably support more.

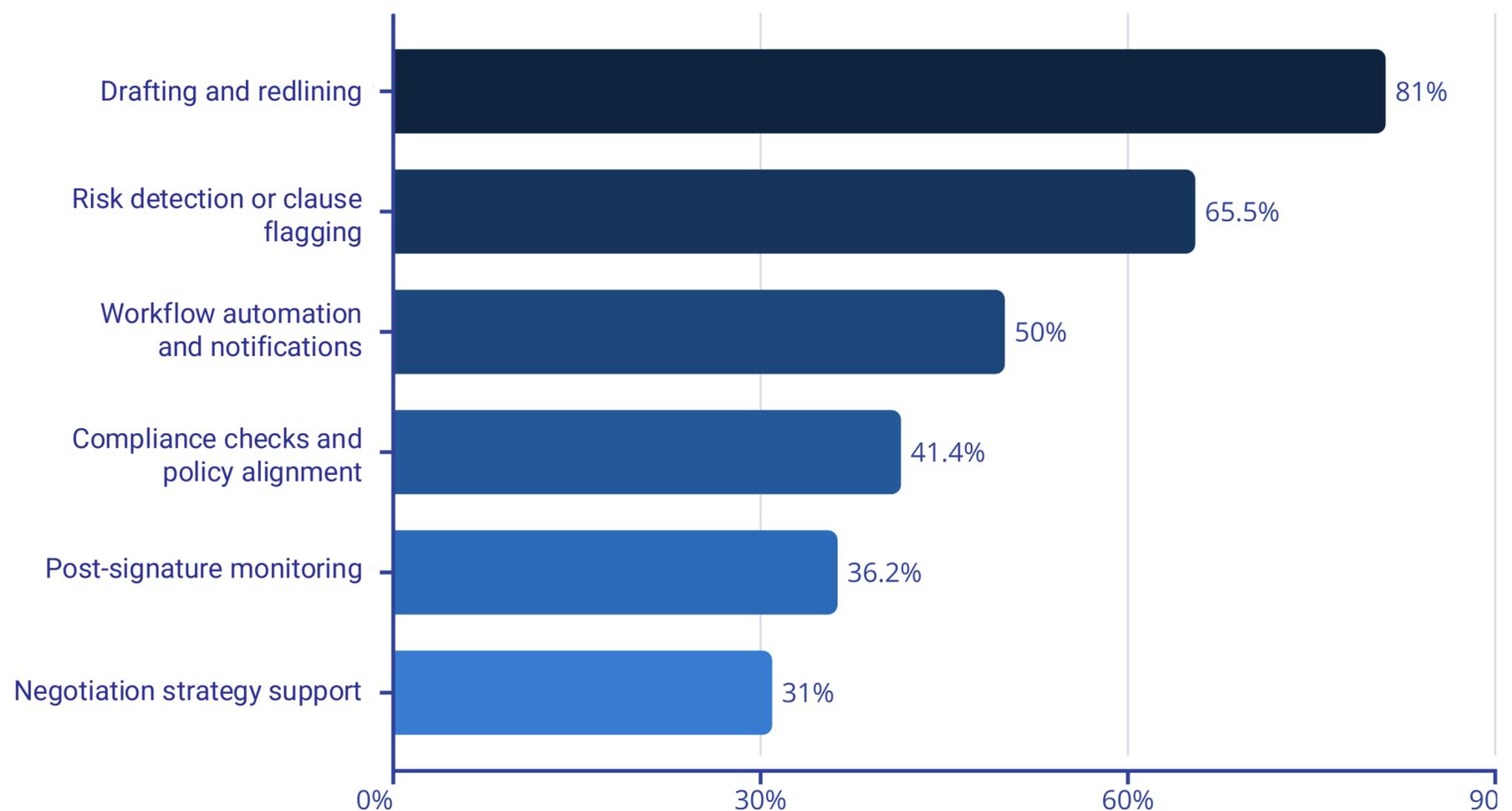
"AI governance is like the house and the AI policy is the furniture. People rush to create policies, but without governance guardrails—without understanding what's unique to your organization first — those policies have no foundation."

- Bahara S., higher education industry

Defining AI Success

If operational readiness explains *where* AI isn't yet applied, the lack of benchmarks and a shared definition of success explains *why* teams struggle to measure the impact of the AI they already use.

Where Do You Expect AI to Drive the Most Productivity in 2026?



Respondents overwhelmingly expect AI to make drafting and redlining faster (81%), strengthen risk detection (65.5%), and automate more of the workflow (50%). But even in these high-confidence areas, many say they still haven't agreed on the indicators that show AI is actually improving the work. Without shared benchmarks, it's difficult to compare value across teams or pinpoint which use cases deserve more investment.

"We're seeing a lot of potential use cases, but we're still figuring out which ones are the best and how to measure whether they work. Right now, the clearest sign of success is adoption itself – getting people comfortable enough to use the tools and learn what's possible."

– Steve B., retail industry

SECTION 7

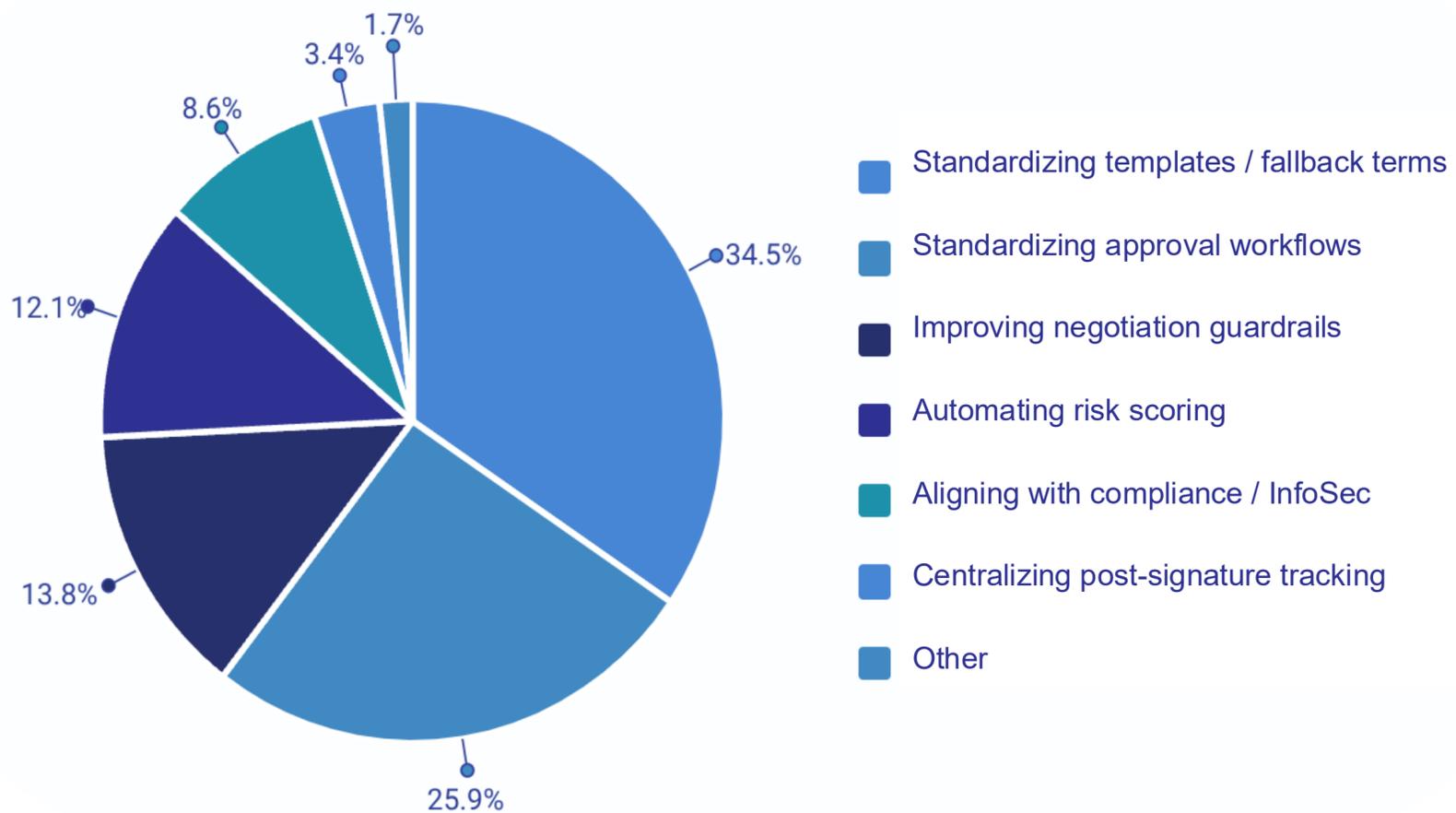
Preparing for 2026

Preparing for 2026

Teams preparing for 2026 are focusing less on adding new tools and more on reinforcing the structures that make their work predictable. Standardization — of templates, fallback terms, approval paths, and negotiation guardrails — has emerged as the single strongest lever for reducing contractual risk.

In the survey, the top two opportunities to mitigate exposure were standardizing templates or fallback terms (34.5%) and standardizing approval workflows (25.9%). The results suggest that as more factors around the contract keep changing, teams increasingly need the process itself to be the constant.

Where Do You See the Greatest Opportunity to Reduce Risk?



“Our big push isn't just technology or adoption or getting faster. We have to figure out how we need to adjust our processes and rules to account for new technologies. It requires a lot of flexibility as we think about being lawyers not only in 2026, but also in 2030.”

- Steve B., retail industry

For many organizations, standardization is becoming the connective tissue that holds modern contracting together. It's what enables faster internal reviews, clearer negotiation boundaries, and a more consistent experience for business users. It's also what creates the conditions for AI to be effective — the more uniform the structure of the work, the easier it becomes to automate the first pass of a document, compare clauses, or align changes with internal policy.

Integration on the Rise

Every team approaches contracts with different assumptions about what matters. From various risk appetites to mismatched terminology, reviewers often need to align on interpretation to make sense of a contract.

This year's responses show more teams treating integration as a way to bring consistency to reviews that involve multiple stakeholders and systems. As workloads grow and expectations tighten, they're prioritizing anything that reduces rework and reconciling data from numerous tools.

“Approvers all care about different things – finance wants one set of metrics, legal wants another. The real work is figuring out how to pull those details together and surface them in the software so people can actually see what matters and report it up the chain.”

– Lee R., software and technology industry

Four Questions Before Integration

Which decisions does this data support?

Integrate only the fields that move an approval forward, clarify risk, or validate pricing or scope – the inputs that directly influence action.

Have we defined these fields the same way across systems?

Align definitions for vendors, contracts, obligations, and statuses so CLM software isn't translating different versions of the same concept.

Does this make reviews simpler for approvers?

Choose integrations that reduce steps and surface the spend, history, ownership, or risk context people usually have to track down.

What improvement should we see once it's live?

Success should mean better alignment across teams, fewer follow-ups, faster approvals, and more reliable reporting.

SECTION 7

AI Proficiency as a Core Skill

Nearly every respondent pointed to AI proficiency as a must-have skill for 2026. Teams understand that knowing how to direct, question, and validate AI output is quickly becoming part of the job.

“Having a growth mindset is everything. You have to embrace AI. AI isn't going to replace your job – but someone who knows how to use AI in their workflow will. That's the real competition.”

– Bahara S., higher education industry

But technical fluency only goes so far. The harder skill is judgment – the human-in-the-loop that decides whether an AI-generated clause meets the spirit of a negotiation, whether a risk is truly acceptable, or when a contract needs escalation. The more automation enters the workflow, the more valuable that discernment becomes.

“Critical thinking is still the most important skill. Just because something fit a cookie-cutter approach once doesn't mean it works the next time. You have to build relationships, loyalty, and trust on all sides – and remember that a contract is supposed to be mutually agreeable.”

– Michelle R., industrial manufacturing and engineering industry

| Wrapping Up

Across industries, teams are looking for the same thing: more predictability in the less predictable aspects of contract management.

Right now, process consistency is still hard to achieve. Inherited legacy agreements, external dependencies during approvals, and evolving regulations continue to bottleneck teams and pull them back into work they thought was already completed. But the findings throughout this report show where stability is most accessible, and how targeted improvements can create outsized impact.

Focus Areas for 2026:

- Improve visibility into legacy and high-risk agreements
- Streamline routine reviews and approvals
- Standardize negotiation starting points and playbooks
- Build AI capability on a strong foundation of skills and standards

The more teams reinforce the pieces they *can* control — the language, the templates, the underlying approval processes — the easier it is to see where the true roadblocks are, and to overcome them faster.

About IntelAgree

IntelAgree is an AI-powered contract lifecycle management (CLM) platform that helps enterprise teams do impactful work, not busy work. The platform uses machine learning to identify, extract, and analyze text in agreements, making contract analytics more accessible.

With tools like Saige Assist, IntelAgree's generative AI-driven assistant, teams can automate complex tasks such as drafting, negotiation, and clause analysis. IntelAgree is trusted by leading companies, ranging from major league sports teams to Fortune 500 companies, to streamline the most painful, costly parts of the contracting process. For more information about IntelAgree, visit intelagree.com.