

The 2026

CMX

Community Industry Report

On staying.

This industry is at an interesting moment, and I think most of us can feel it.

Community is changing. AI has gone from a future possibility to a daily tool for 93% of community professionals. Budgets are moving in different directions. Expectations continue to grow while many teams are still being asked to do more with the same, or fewer, resources. It's understandable that many people are asking what the future of community work looks like.

And yet, the statistic that stayed with me most wasn't about AI adoption, budgets, or ROI.

It was this: **65.8% of community professionals plan to stay in the industry for at least the next two years.** Just as encouraging, the percentage of people planning to leave community for a different field is the lowest it's been in three years.

To me, that says something important.

Even with all of the change, community professionals still believe in the value of this work. We know that while technology will continue to transform how we work, it won't replace why we do it. AI can help us analyze data, streamline operations, and take care of repetitive tasks. But it

can't create belonging. It can't build trust. It can't foster the relationships that turn a group of people into a community.

In many ways, that's what makes this moment so exciting. As AI takes on more of the administrative work, we have the opportunity to spend more time on the parts of community that matter most: bringing people together, creating meaningful experiences, and helping people feel like they belong.

I'm incredibly honored to be leading the Community Industry Report for the first time. Community has shaped my own career in ways I never expected, and working on this report only reinforced why I care so deeply about this profession. The 305 community professionals who shared their experiences made this report possible, and I'm grateful for the honesty, thoughtfulness, and generosity they brought to every response.

The challenges facing our industry are real, and this report doesn't shy away from them. But neither do the people doing this work every day. My hope is that the pages ahead leave you with not only a clearer picture of where community is today, but optimism for where it's headed next.



"We are the moat."

Cat Nilsson

Community & Growth Lead, Bevy / CMX

Key Takeaways

1

In-person is back, and growing, not just recovering.

55% of teams hosting in-person events saw attendance increase; 22% saw growth over 20%. Only 11% declined. The first year the data shows genuine growth, not stabilization.

2

Teams are still small, but less invisible.

Every team-size category grew year over year, and organizations with no dedicated community staff dropped from 17% to 12%. Community is being actively resourced.

3

The data infrastructure exists. The business story doesn't.

CRM connectivity held at 33.7%, but ROI confidence dropped from 24% to 17%. The gap isn't access to data: it's the translation layer that moves budgets.

4

AI is the floor, not the ceiling.

93.1% of community professionals now use AI tools, up from 81%. Non-adoption dropped from 19% to 6.9% in a single year. The question is no longer "should we."

5

Budgets aren't stalling. They're splitting.

"I don't know" responses dropped from 25% to 5.9%. That clarity revealed 36.6% of teams saw increases and 22.8% saw cuts. The middle is thinning.

6

Community professionals are choosing to stay.

79.5% are satisfied with their career, up from 77%. 65.8% plan to stay for the next two years: the highest in three years. Exit intent is at a three-year low.

7

The field is watching, both the possibility and the risk.

AI dominates both excitement and concern. In-person connection is rising as a source of hope. Most professionals see their work becoming more important, not less.

Table of Contents

*	Note from the Editor On staying. On the moat. On why community matters more now.	2
*	Key Takeaways The seven findings that cut across the full report.	3
*	Respondent Snapshot A profile of the 305 community professionals who shaped this report.	5
*	About This Report + Methodology How the survey was conducted, who responded, and how to read the data.	9
01	Community Programs In-person is back and growing. What teams are building and running.	11
02	Community Teams Still small, still doing it all. How team structure has shifted.	16
03	The Business of Community CRM connectivity, ROI confidence, and the gap between data and story.	19
04	AI in Community 93% adoption, rising sentiment, and the real question: how do we use it well?	26
05	Community Budget Trends Budgets splitting, not stalling. The case for community and how to make it.	31
06	The Community Professional Job security, satisfaction, and a role expanding into new functions.	36
07	What Comes Next Where the field is placing its hope, and its concern.	42

ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

Respondent Snapshot

305 community professionals. One clear picture.

305

total
respondents

58.4%

work in technology

57%

based in the
U.S.

61.8%

identify as female

WHAT'S INSIDE THIS SNAPSHOT

01 The Individual

Nature of work, how they self-identify, job level, and role focus.

02 Demographics

Gender, age, racial & ethnic identity, and where in the world they're based.

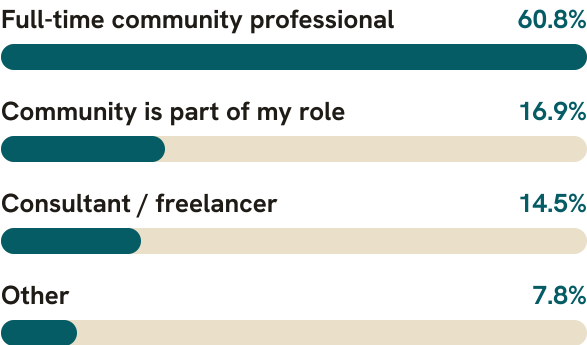
03 The Organization

Industry, community size, program stage, and business model.

The Individual

Nature of work

Sample size: 255



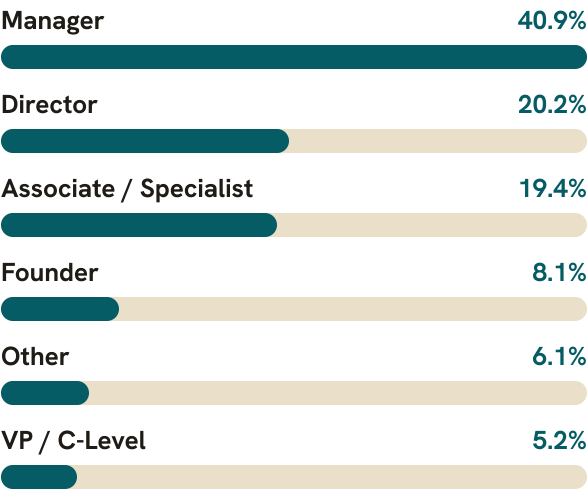
How they view themselves

Sample size: 212



Job level

Sample size: 247



Director-and-above is 25.4%, decision-makers, not just practitioners.

ROLE FOCUS

18.4%

describe their role as **pure community management**: the second-most common answer to "What best describes your role?", just behind Community + Marketing (23.5%). The full seven-way breakdown appears in Section 6.

Sample size: 234

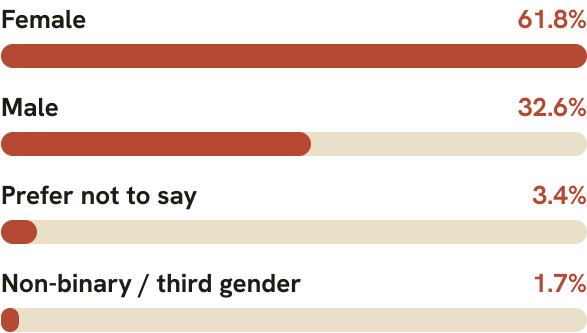
Who they are, in brief

The majority are in-house community practitioners, 60.8% work on community full-time, 16.9% include it within a broader role, and 14.5% are consultants or freelancers. 74.5% identify primarily as community professionals. Director-level and above represents 25.4% of the sample: this report is reaching decision-makers, not just practitioners. Most communities are mid-to-large, with 1,000–9,999 members the most common size (26.9%), and 42.5% of teams are scaling an existing community rather than starting one.

Demographics

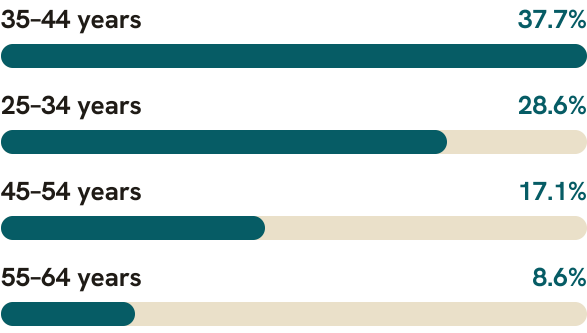
Gender identity

Sample size: 178



Age range

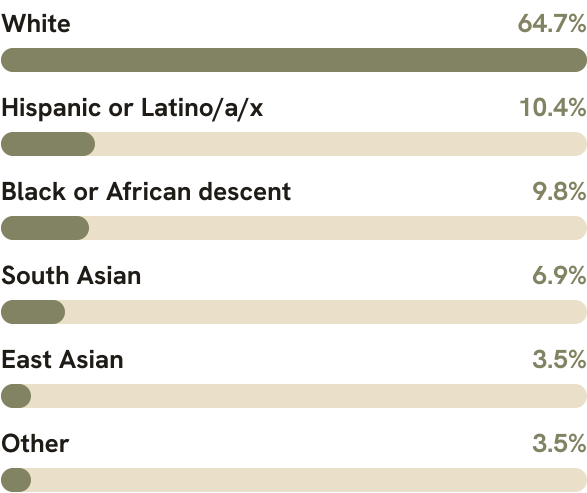
Sample size: 175



No respondents under 25 or 65+. The field clusters firmly in mid-career.

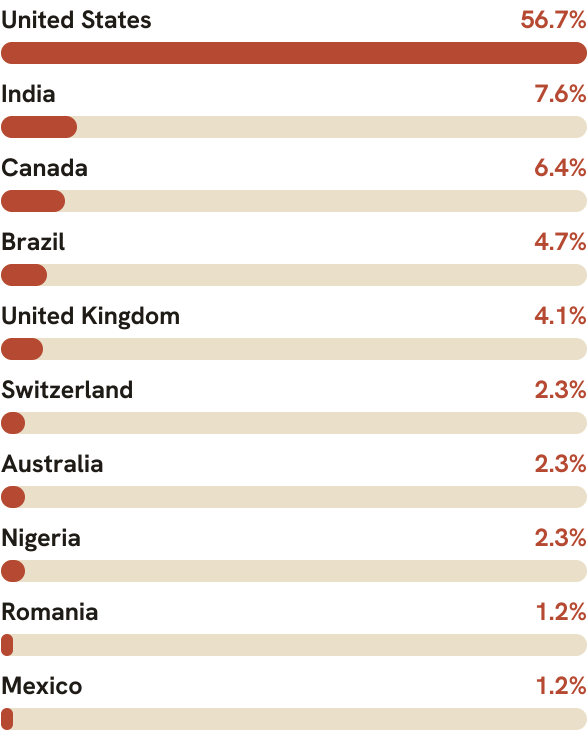
Racial / ethnic identity

Select all that apply, totals exceed 100% · Sample size: 173



Top countries

Sample size: 171

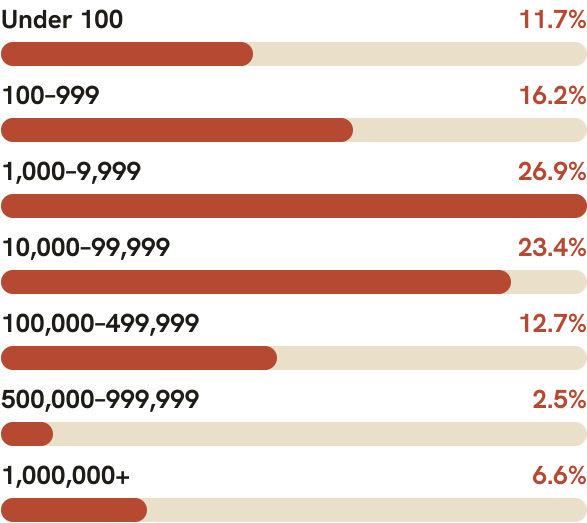


The community profession skews female (61.8%) and mid-career: nearly two-thirds of respondents are between 25 and 44. Respondents were invited to select all racial and ethnic identities that apply, so those totals exceed 100%.

The Organization

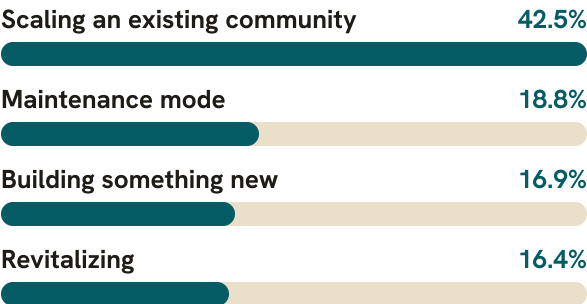
Community size

Sample size: 197 · excludes "I don't know"



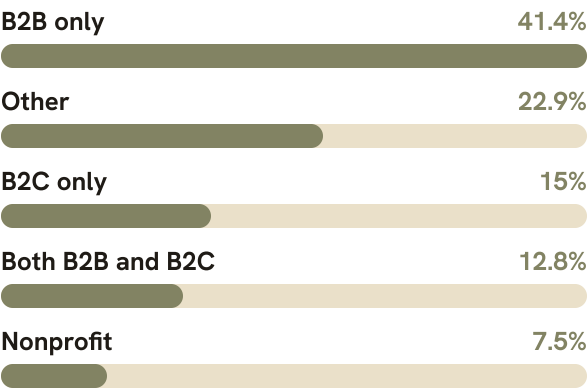
Community stage

Sample size: 196



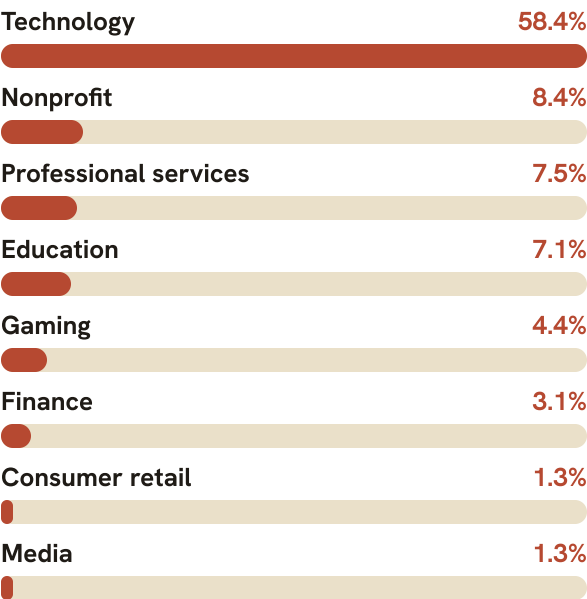
Organization type

Sample size: 227



Top industries

Sample size: 226



Read this context forward. Technology dominates at 58.4% of respondents, so findings will skew toward B2B SaaS community norms, but nonprofit, professional services, and education each represent meaningfully different mandates. These profiles are the backdrop for everything that follows.

Methodology

How the survey was conducted

We collected responses through an online survey in May–June 2026 via outreach from partnered organizations and individuals in the industry, and by sharing it across the CMX Community on LinkedIn, Slack, and through email.

What we asked

We retained many questions from previous years to track long-term trends, and introduced new questions, most notably around AI adoption and sentiment. Alongside multiple-choice questions, we invited written insights, analyzed by role level and community type. Selected quotes appear throughout, lightly edited for length and clarity.

Year-over-year comparisons

Where possible, 2026 findings are compared to the 2025 CMX Community Industry Report (n=589) and, in select cases, 2024. Comparisons are directional; differences in sample size and respondent composition should be kept in mind when interpreting trends.

How to read the data



Bases & sub-samples

Percentages are calculated from the base of respondents who answered each question. Some questions were only shown to a sub-set (e.g. event questions to those who run events). Sub-sample sizes are noted in chart labels throughout. Where sub-samples fall below n=30, findings are described as directional only.



Single- vs. multi-select

Multi-select questions allow more than one answer, so those percentages sum to more than 100%. Single-select questions sum to 100% excluding non-responses. Cross-tabulation analyses appear where noted.



A note on AI-assisted analysis

Data analysis, chart generation, and initial drafting for this report were conducted with AI assistance. All findings were reviewed and edited by CMX for accuracy, tone, and alignment with the community industry context. Statistics, percentages, and quotes have been verified against the source data.

Questions or feedback?

We'd love to hear from you. Reach out to the CMX team at team@cmxhub.com or through the CMX community.

cmxhub.com

01

SECTION ONE

Community Programs



In-person is back, and better than ever.

The recovery narrative is behind us. Here's what teams are building, running, and handing to members.

55%

of in-person teams saw attendance increase

49%

of virtual-event teams saw attendance grow

69%

hosted in-person events in the past year

IN THIS SECTION

01 What community teams are running

02 Events: virtual, in-person & hybrid

03 Community takes the wheel

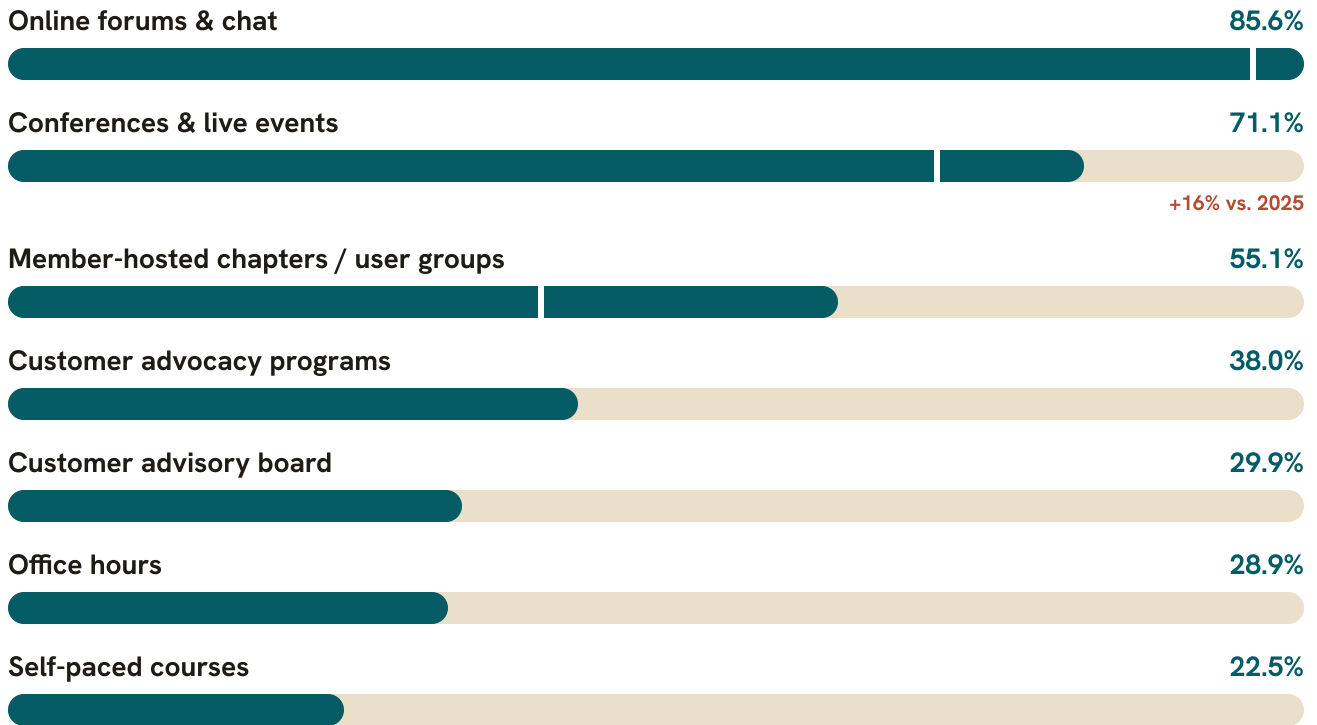
04 Where forums live

What community teams are running

Community isn't a single tactic anymore. The typical team now runs a mix of always-on spaces, live events, and member-led programs side by side.

The portfolio is getting broader, not narrower

Share of teams running each program type · Sample size: 187



■ 2025 comparison · shown for top programs

85.6%

run an always-on online forum or chat space

71.1%

host conferences & live events

55.1%

run member-hosted chapters or user groups

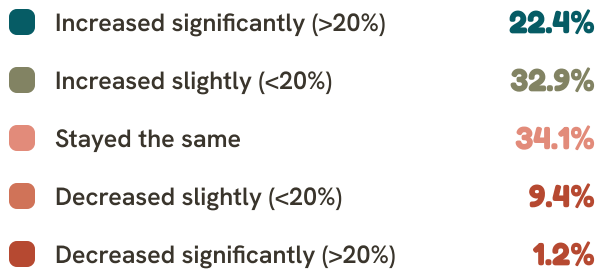
What we're seeing: the portfolio is widening. Online forums remain the foundation: nearly 86% of teams run one, but the story of 2026 is how much is layered on top: live events, advisory boards, office hours, and courses. Most notably, community is becoming more member-run, with over half of teams now operating member-hosted chapters or user groups rather than programming everything themselves.

Events: virtual, in-person, and hybrid

Virtual remains the most widely-hosted format (85.5%), but in-person has crossed a threshold, and for most teams, attendance grew.

In-person attendance change

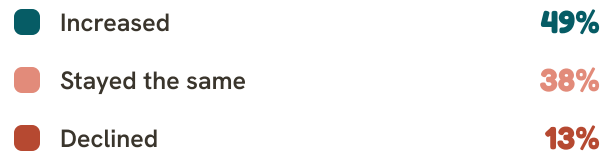
Change vs. prior year



Sample size: 85 (hosted in-person events in the past year)

Virtual attendance change

Change vs. prior year



Sample size: 107 (hosted virtual events in the past year)

Both formats are trending up. For in-person, only 11% saw any decline; for virtual, 13%.

The challenges aren't gone

Biggest barriers to in-person attendance · Sample size: 109



Growth, not just recovery. This is the first year in-person attendance is genuinely up rather than stabilizing, 55.3% of teams saw it rise (22.4% by more than 20%) versus just 10.6% who saw any decline. After years of rebuilding, in-person events are expanding again relative to last year.

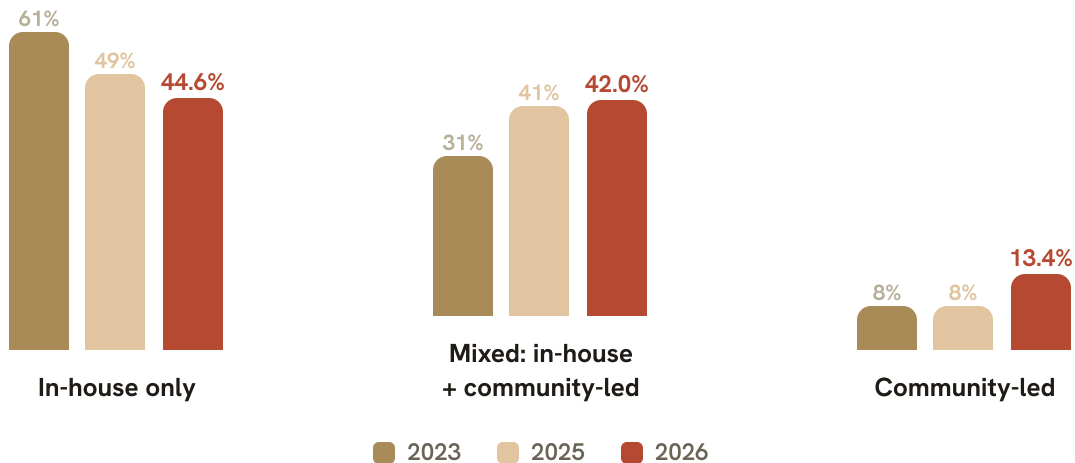
"[We're seeing] a return to in-person community experiences. The largest AI companies in the world are hiring human community managers now."

— CMX 2026 survey respondent

Community takes the wheel

Forum management is becoming collaborative

How online forums / message boards are managed · 3-year trend · Sample size: 157 (2026)



In-house-only management fell from 61% (2023) to 44.6% (2026), while community-led jumped 5 points to 13.4%: the same shift happening with chapters and events.

CMX RESOURCE

The CMX Social Identity Cycle

Understanding why members show up, stay, and become advocates starts with identity. The Social Identity Cycle maps how members move from outsider to insider to champion, useful for moderation strategy, onboarding, and engagement programming.

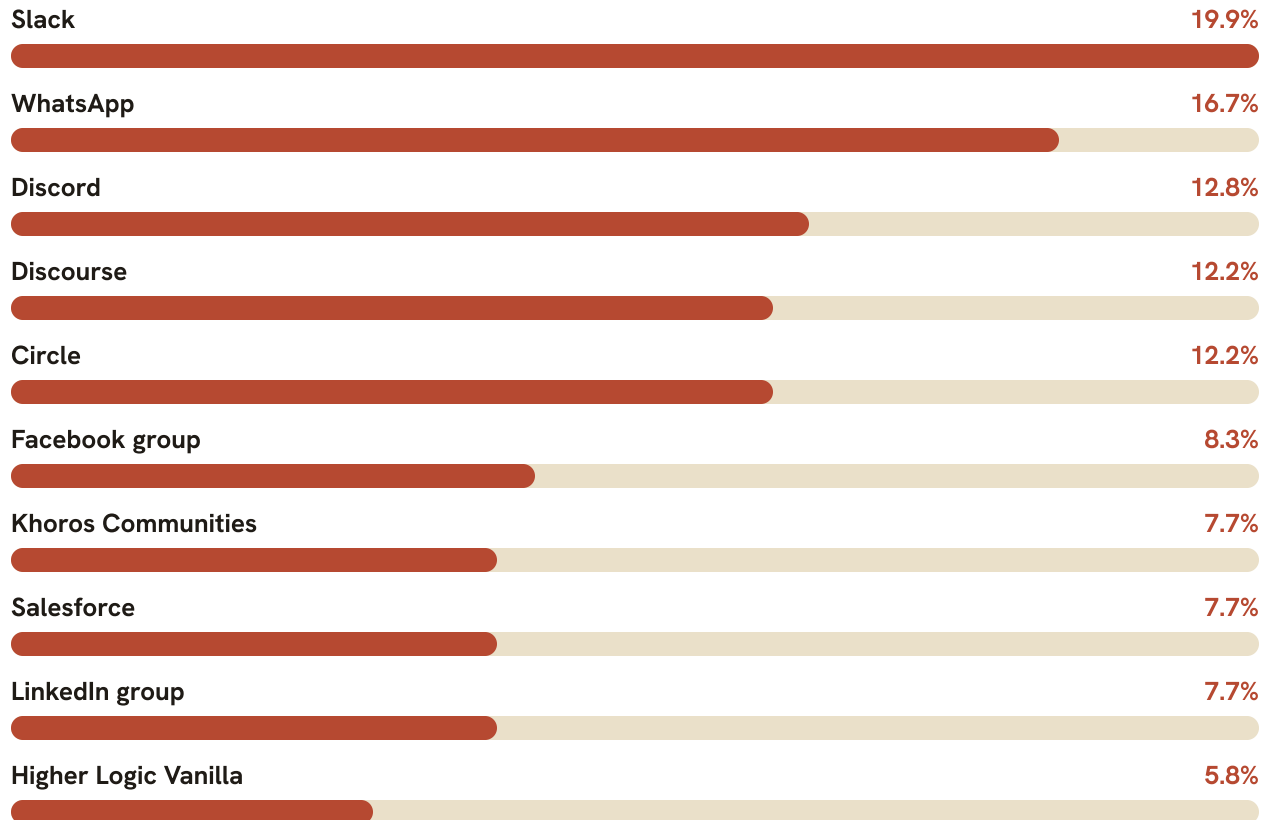
[Explore the framework →](#)

What we're seeing: community teams are programming more, delegating more, and seeing real results. The recovery narrative is behind us. The growth narrative is just beginning.

Where forums live

No single platform dominates. The field spreads across chat tools, dedicated community software, and social networks alike.

Primary forum / community platform · top 10 · Sample size: 156



No dominant platform: the field is highly fragmented (top 10 shown).

What we're seeing: platform fragmentation is the norm, not the exception. Slack leads but claims only one in five teams, and chat-first tools (Slack, WhatsApp, Discord) now rival purpose-built community platforms. Meeting members where they already are matters more than any single "right" tool.

02

SECTION TWO

Community Teams

Still small. Still doing it all.

Lean, multi-functional, and quietly growing. How team structure, roles, and reporting have shifted.

34%

have just one full-time community person

12%

have no full-time staff: down from 17%

88%

have at least one full-time community pro

IN THIS SECTION

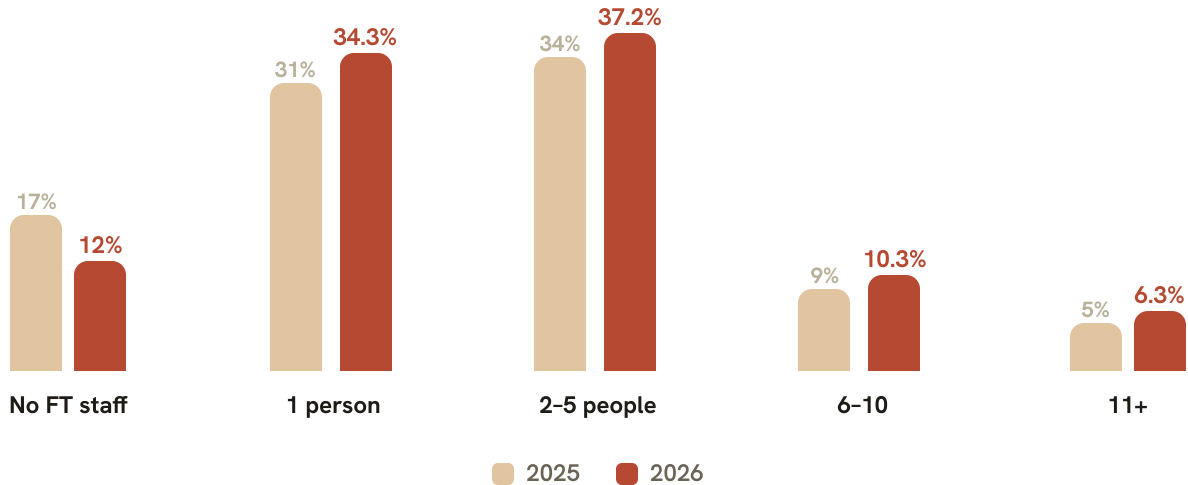
01 Small, and quietly growing

02 What teams are, and aren't, doing

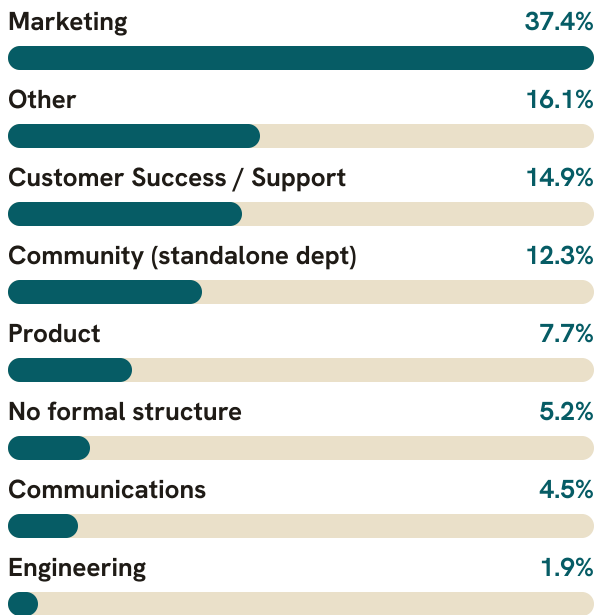
Small, and quietly growing

Every team-size category grew year over year

Distribution of community team sizes, 2025 → 2026 · Sample size: 175



Where community lives in the org



Marketing grew from 31% to 37.4%; standalone departments fell from 18% (2024) to 12.3%.

5.2%

of teams now have no formal org structure: down from 10% in 2024.

Fewer community teams are floating in ambiguity. More are attached to a department, a budget line, and a reporting structure.

What we're seeing: teams aren't just holding steady, they're quietly growing. Chapter programs are coming back, consistent with the in-person revival, while marketing-driven acquisition is being deprioritized. Community is becoming less of a silo: for better or worse, it's increasingly embedded inside Marketing.

What teams are, and aren't, doing

Community teams don't get to specialize. Nearly every core function falls on a small number of people, but two roles tell the most interesting year-over-year story.

COMING BACK

Chapter-based event programs

42% (2025) →
38.6% (2026)

Share of teams saying "we don't do this" fell year over year: the clearest signal that in-person chapter work is returning.

BEING DEPRIORITIZED

Growth through marketing

19% (2025) → **22.6%**
(2026)

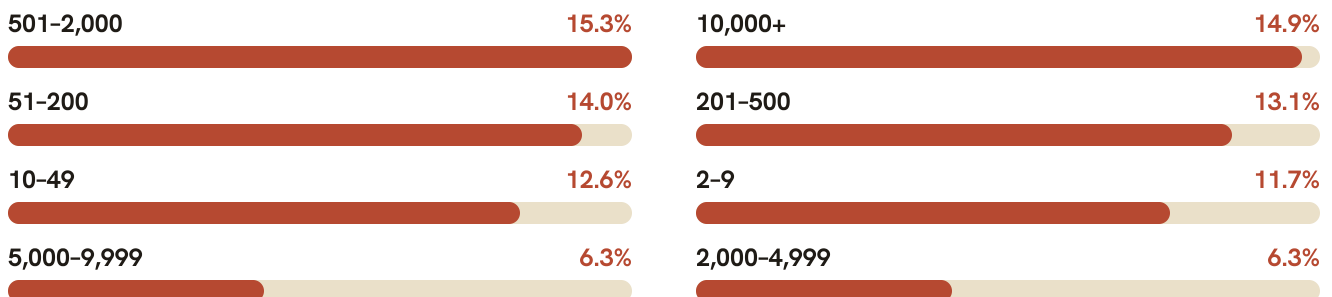
Share of teams saying "we don't do this" rose year over year, more now skip marketing-driven acquisition, leaning on organic growth instead.

"More work for the community team as in-person events become more popular: it's all moving into the same person's role."

— CMX 2026 survey respondent

Community is a cross-size discipline

Organization size (employees) · No single org size dominates · Sample size: 222



Roughly a third of respondents work at companies under 200 employees; about a quarter at enterprises of 2,000+. Community work isn't concentrated in any single company type.

What we're seeing: small teams are still doing a lot, but they're starting to draw lines, making deliberate choices about where to focus. The picture of community teams in 2026 is lean, multi-functional, and increasingly sitting inside Marketing while staying focused on the community-native work that drives real outcomes.

03

SECTION THREE

The Business of Community

The data's there. The story isn't.

The belief is strong and the infrastructure is there. What's missing is the translation layer.

84%

say community had a positive impact on their org

17%

can confidently quantify it: down from 24%

57.6%

of CRM-connected teams rate community highly successful

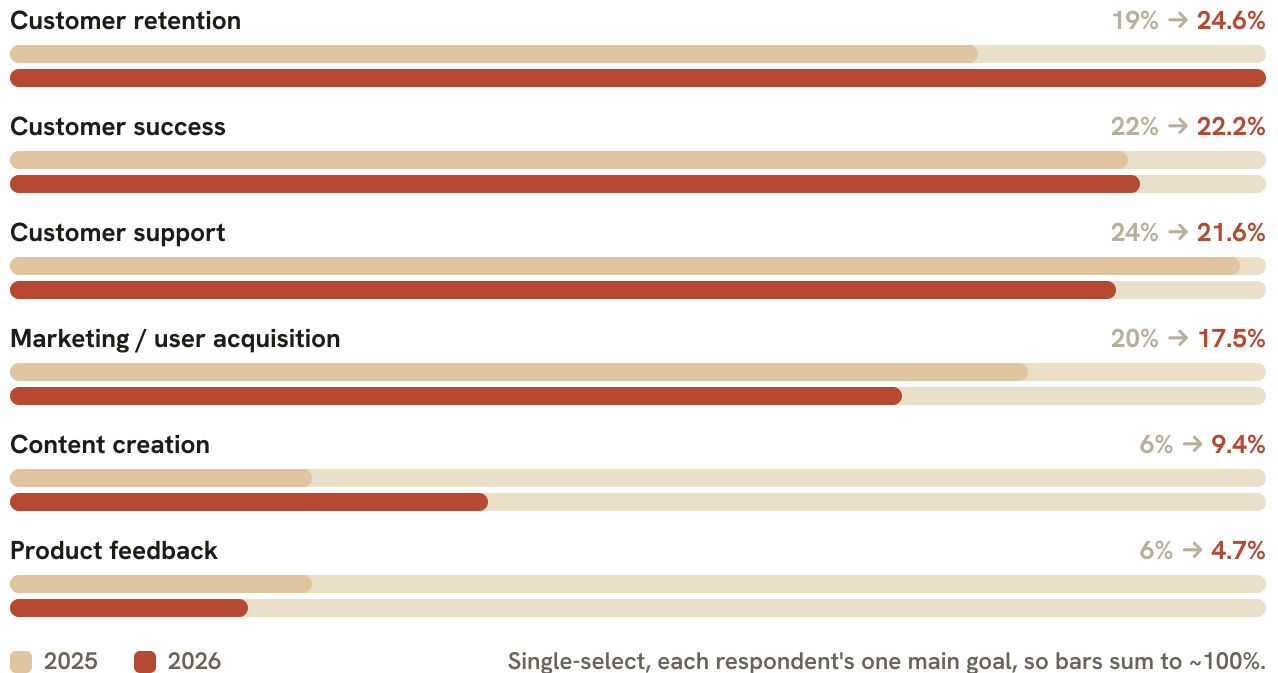
IN THIS SECTION

- 01** What community is supposed to do
- 02** The full objective stack
- 03** Data is still the difference
- 04** The confidence gap
- 05** How teams measure community health
- 06** Believed in everywhere, funded nowhere near enough

What community is supposed to do

The priorities are holding steady

Primary objective (single-select) · 2025 → 2026 · Sample size: 171 (2026), 245 (2025)



What we're seeing: customer retention, success, and support have been the top three objectives consistently across years. What has not held steady is teams' ability to prove they are delivering on them, which is the tension this section sits with.

The full objective stack

Most community teams carry several mandates at once. Asked which objectives community serves, respondents rarely pick just one.

Objectives community serves · Select all that apply · Sample size: 174

Multi-select, every objective community serves, so bars exceed 100%.



CMX RESOURCE

The SPACES Model of Community Value

CMX's SPACES model maps the business value of community into six categories, **S**upport, **P**roduct, **A**cquisition, **C**ontribution, **E**ngagement, and **S**uccess. The stack above maps almost one-to-one onto it, and most teams are serving several SPACES at once.

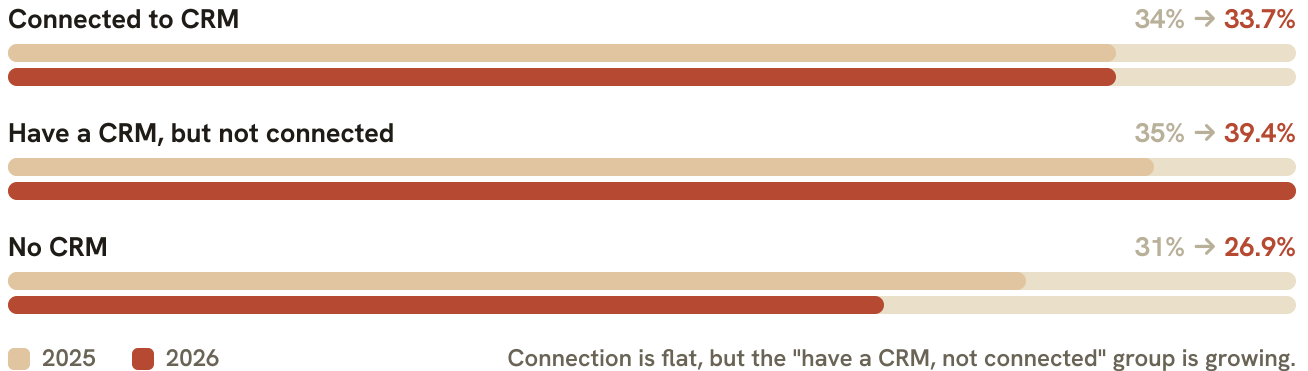
[Explore the SPACES model →](#)

What we're seeing: most community teams carry multiple mandates. Retention, support, and success each appear in roughly 65% of community strategies. Content creation (47%) and product feedback (51%) aren't far behind. The mandate is broad, which makes the case for dedicated measurement even more important.

Data is still the difference

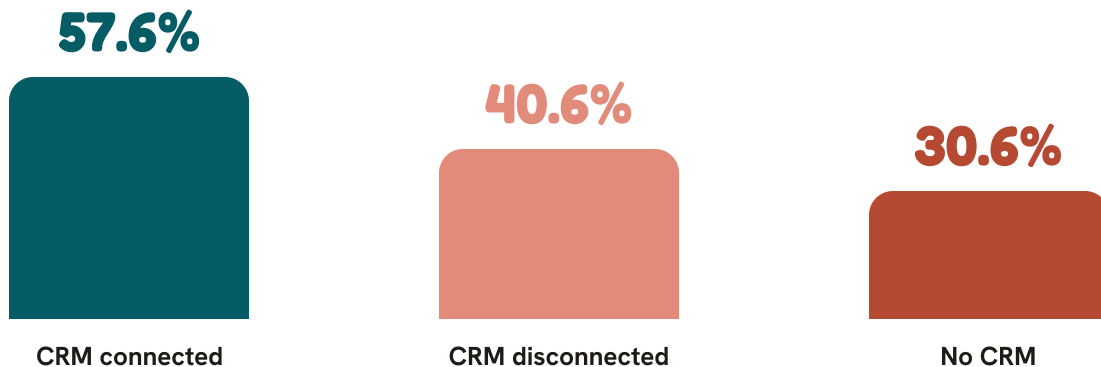
The infrastructure is there

Community data & CRM connection · 2025 → 2026 · Sample size: 175 (2026), 251 (2025)



CRM connection tracks with perceived success

Share rating their community "extremely / very successful" · Sample size: 164



A nearly 17-point gap between connected and unconnected teams: the case for doing the work of integration.

What we're seeing: the teams that connect community data to their CRM are far more likely to call their community a success. The infrastructure isn't the bottleneck anymore, turning that data into a story leadership acts on is.

The confidence gap

Can you confidently quantify community's business value?

Sample size: 174



Yes, can quantify Work in progress Not yet

CAN CONFIDENTLY QUANTIFY VALUE, YEAR OVER YEAR



A striking drop, from 24% confident in 2025 to 17.2% in 2026. The "work in progress" and "not yet" groups both grew, likely a sign that the bar for what counts as "confident" has risen, not that community delivers less value.

Among teams who can quantify, the value is significant

34.6%

report over \$1 million in business value generated in the past year

19.2%

report over \$5 million in value, when the story comes together, it's compelling

The challenge is that only a small fraction of teams have gotten there. Sample size: 174.

CMX RESOURCE

CMX Community MBA

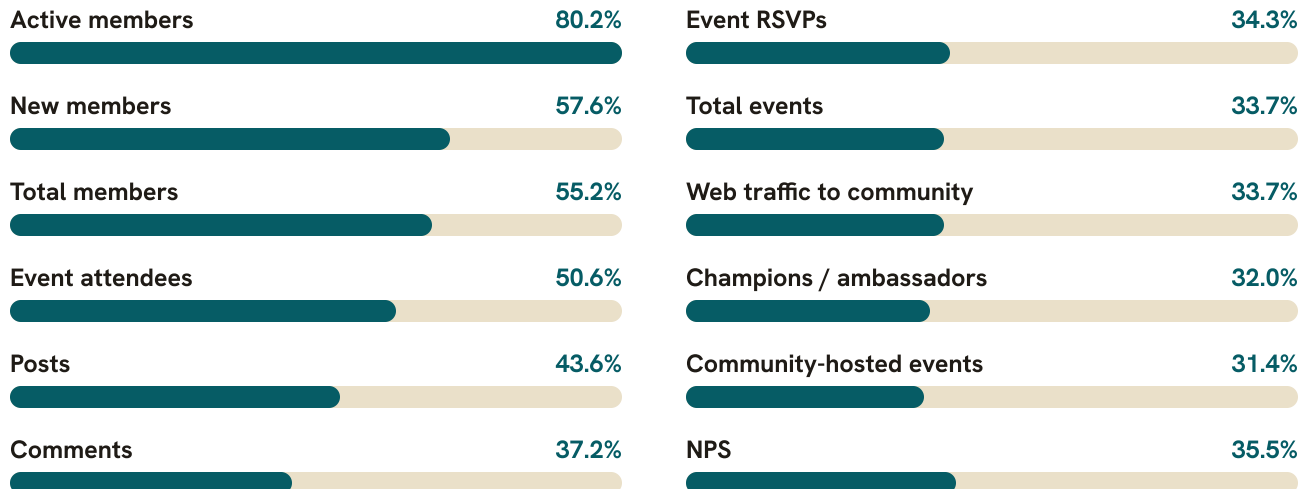
Closing the confidence gap starts here: building a business case for community, measuring ROI in terms leadership understands, and translating community data into strategy.

[Start learning →](#)

How teams measure community health

Activity tracking is near-universal. Business-outcome metrics are far rarer, which is exactly where the confidence gap comes from.

Metrics teams track · Multi-select · top 12 · Sample size: 172



80.2%

track activity, active members is the single most common metric

35.5%

track sentiment, NPS, the closest thing to a business signal, trails far behind

What we're seeing: nearly every team counts activity, active members, new members, posts. Far fewer connect community to business outcomes like NPS, champions, or revenue-linked signals. Measuring engagement is easy; measuring impact is the harder, more valuable work. The gap between "we track it" and "we can prove it matters" is exactly where community professionals are losing the ROI argument.

Believed in everywhere, funded nowhere near enough

Believed in... but not funded

% agreeing · Sample size: 173-174

Critical to company's mission

84.5%



Positive impact on objectives

84.4%



Increased interest from other departments

78.2%



Expect investment to grow

43.1%



The funding expectation has been stuck at 43-47% for three years, even as belief in community's value stays near universal.

What we're seeing: believed in everywhere, funded nowhere near enough. 84.5% say community is critical to their company's mission, but only 43% expect investment to grow, a gap that has held for three years running. The infrastructure gap is a confidence gap; closing one closes the other.

"Because of AI, we'll be able to better connect all the community data with business data, get stronger buy-in, and build stronger relationships with humans."

— CMX 2026 survey respondent

WHAT WE'RE SEEING

What we're seeing here isn't that community is struggling to prove its value. It's that the proof is harder than the infrastructure suggests it should be. The CRM connections are there. The business objectives are clear. The belief is strong. What's missing is the translation layer: the ability to take data that already exists and turn it into a story that moves budgets. That's what the AI section picks up next.

04

SECTION FOUR

AI in Community

AI is the floor, not the ceiling.

The adoption question is settled. The real one: how do we use it well?

93.1%

now use AI tools: up from
81% in 2025

6.9%

not using AI at all: down
from 19%

81%

excited to learn more about
AI's impact

IN THIS SECTION

01 What teams are actually doing with AI

02 Adoption is nearly universal

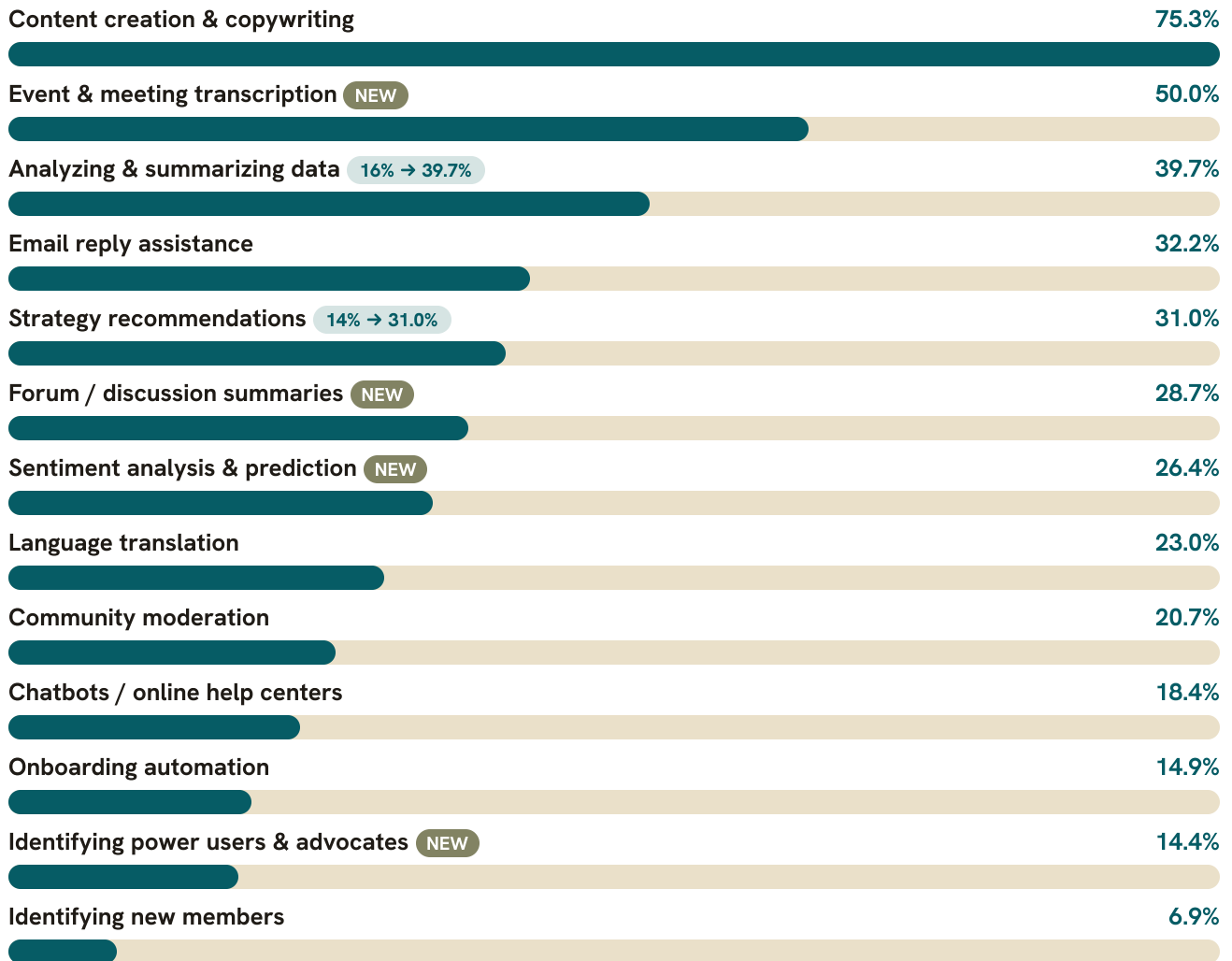
03 In their own words

04 AI use & ROI confidence

What teams are actually doing with AI

AI is moving into higher-stakes work

Most common AI use cases · Sample size: 174



Content creation leads at 75.3%. Data analysis more than doubled year over year (16% → 39.7%); strategy recommendations nearly doubled. Four use cases are new in 2026.

What we're seeing: AI isn't just for drafting anymore: it's moving into higher-stakes work. Content creation still leads, but the category has deepened: four uses absent in 2025 are now common (transcription 50.0%, forum summaries 28.7%, sentiment prediction 26.4%, spotting power users 14.4%). The fastest growth is analytical, data analysis more than doubled (16% → 39.7%) and strategy recommendations nearly doubled (14% → 31.0%). And the 6.9% still opting out increasingly cite choice or data-privacy concerns, not lack of access.

Adoption is nearly universal

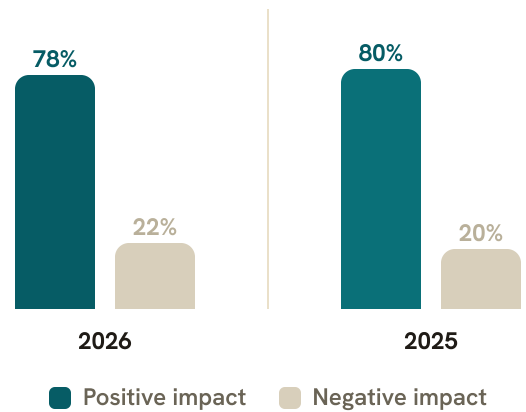
ADOPTION SHIFT

6.9%

still aren't using AI at all: down from 19% just a year ago. Non-use dropped by two-thirds in a single year, the fastest single-year shift in the report. The remaining holdouts cite choice, not access.

AI's expected impact on the industry

Positive vs. negative · 2025 → 2026 · n=204 (2025), 132 (2026)



78% believe AI will have a positive impact on the community industry over the next three years, essentially flat from 80% in 2025. The optimism is holding; the questions are getting sharper.

Excited to learn more about AI's impact on their work?

Sample size: 174

81%

Excited 81% Unsure 10.3% Not excited 8.7%

Enthusiasm runs high, but the 10.3% who are *unsure* are the ones to watch, in a field this energized, ambivalence signals where support and education are still needed.

"Relationship building and genuine human connection are things AI can't replicate, because they're inherently human. Even as we automate more, AI is pushing us toward deeper human connection, which is exactly what community is about."

— CMX 2026 survey respondent

In their own words

Two distinct and deeply held views came through this year, and both deserve to be heard.

The optimists

AI absorbs the slog, and what's left is more human, not less.

"Relationship building and genuine human connection are things Claude or ChatGPT can't replicate. Even as we automate more, AI is pushing us toward deeper human connection, which is exactly what community is about."

"People will want to connect with each other MORE. Trust will become a 1:1 thing again. Community will rule the roost on this one."

"AI handles the busywork so I can spend my time on the things that actually need a human: the relationships, the judgment calls, the moments that matter."

"It's like having a junior teammate who never sleeps. I can finally keep up with the data and still be present for members."

The skeptics

Their concern isn't AI itself: it's AI as an excuse to underinvest in the human work.

"Community is one of the last places I expect to see humans, and replacing that human touch with automated, AI-written copy is a big concern for me."

"Companies will try to automate community management and content, and users will not like it... the companies that lean into the human side will again see community as a moat. But it'll take 3-5 years."

"My worry is leadership seeing AI as a reason to cut headcount instead of a tool to make small teams more effective."

"If every forum answer becomes AI-generated, what's left to belong to? The value was always that a real person took the time."

What we're seeing: optimism is holding, but the questions are sharper. In 2025, skeptics worried AI would make communities feel less human. In 2026, the concerns are more specific: AI-generated content degrading forum quality, zero-click search eroding traffic, and AI used as cover to cut community roles.

AI use & ROI confidence

The payoff comes later, not immediately

ROI confidence by AI breadth (number of use cases) · Sample size: 173

AI USE LEVEL	CAN QUANTIFY	IN PROGRESS	NOT YET	N
Not using	8.3%	41.7%	50.0%	12
Light (1-3)	20.5%	45.2%	34.2%	73
Moderate (4-6)	11.8%	58.8%	29.4%	68
Heavy (7+)	30.0%	55.0%	15.0%	20

Heavy users (7+ tools) have the highest ROI confidence and the lowest "not yet" rate. Heavy users (n=20): directional only.

Community: the trust layer AI can't replicate

AI can summarize a forum thread, draft an onboarding email, and predict which members are about to go quiet. What it can't do is make someone feel genuinely seen by their peers. In a world flooded with synthetic content, authentic peer-to-peer connection becomes rarer, and rarer means more valuable. That's not a soft argument. It's a structural advantage.

"With every piece of information on the web being highly generated from AI, human content would be far more useful going forward, and if a community can have an AI-powered community search engine, it'll do wonders."

— CMX 2026 survey respondent

Community Budget Trends

Budgets aren't stalling. They're splitting.

The fog has lifted. What it revealed is a field pulling in two directions at once.

36.6%

saw budget increase: up
from 26%

22.8%

saw budget decrease: up
from 18%

43.1%

expect investment to grow
next year

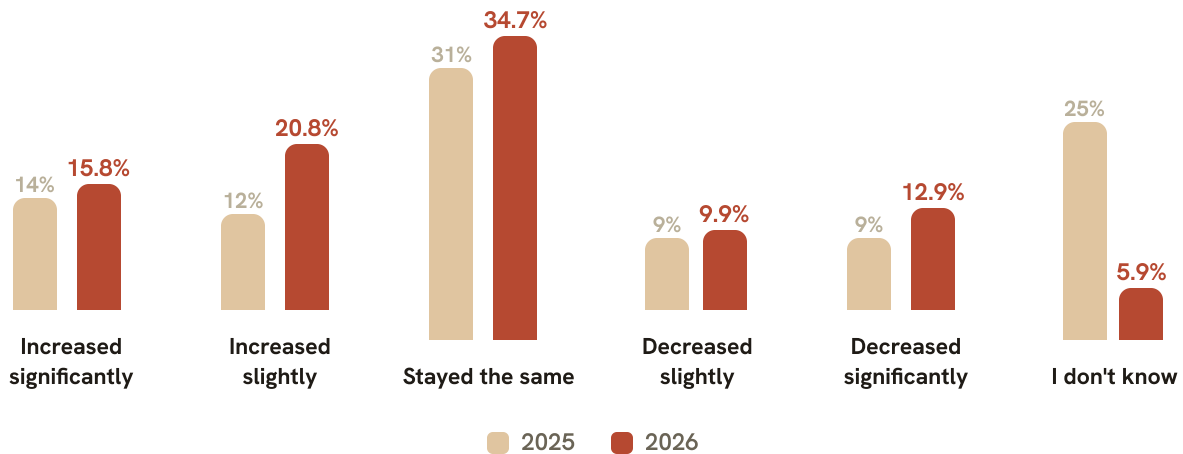
IN THIS SECTION

- 01** The middle is thinning
- 02** What's driving the change
- 03** The challenge mix has spread
- 04** From the field: how to make the case

The middle is thinning

The tails have grown in both directions

Budget direction among teams with visibility, 2025 → 2026



36.6%

saw their budget increase in 2026: up from 26% who increased in 2025

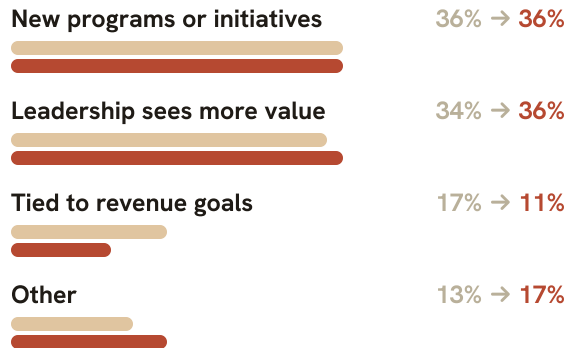
22.8%

saw their budget decrease: up from 18% in 2025. Both tails grew

What we're seeing: budgets aren't stalling, they're splitting. The "I don't know" rate dropped from 25% to 6%, so the fog has lifted. What it revealed is a widening gap: more budgets meaningfully up, more meaningfully down. For community teams that can demonstrate value, this is a good environment. The case just has to be made.

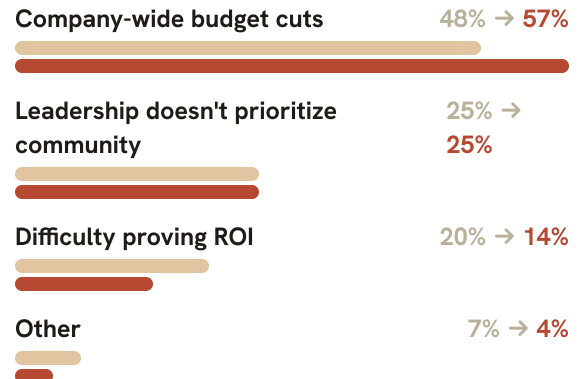
What's driving the change

▲ FOR TEAMS THAT GREW



2025 → 2026 · n=47. Revenue-tied dropped; teams win budget through relationships and momentum, too.

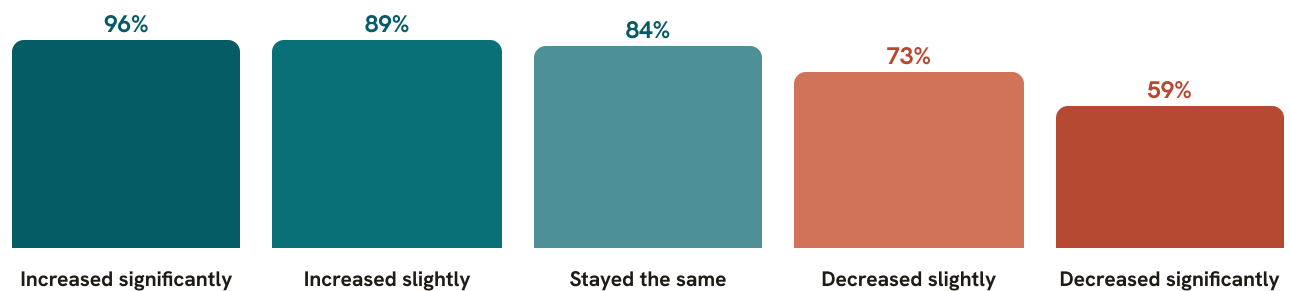
▼ FOR TEAMS THAT WERE CUT



2025 → 2026 · n=28. Most cuts aren't a verdict on community's value, they're collateral damage from org-wide cuts.

Budget isn't just a resource question: it's a morale question

Share satisfied with their career, by budget direction

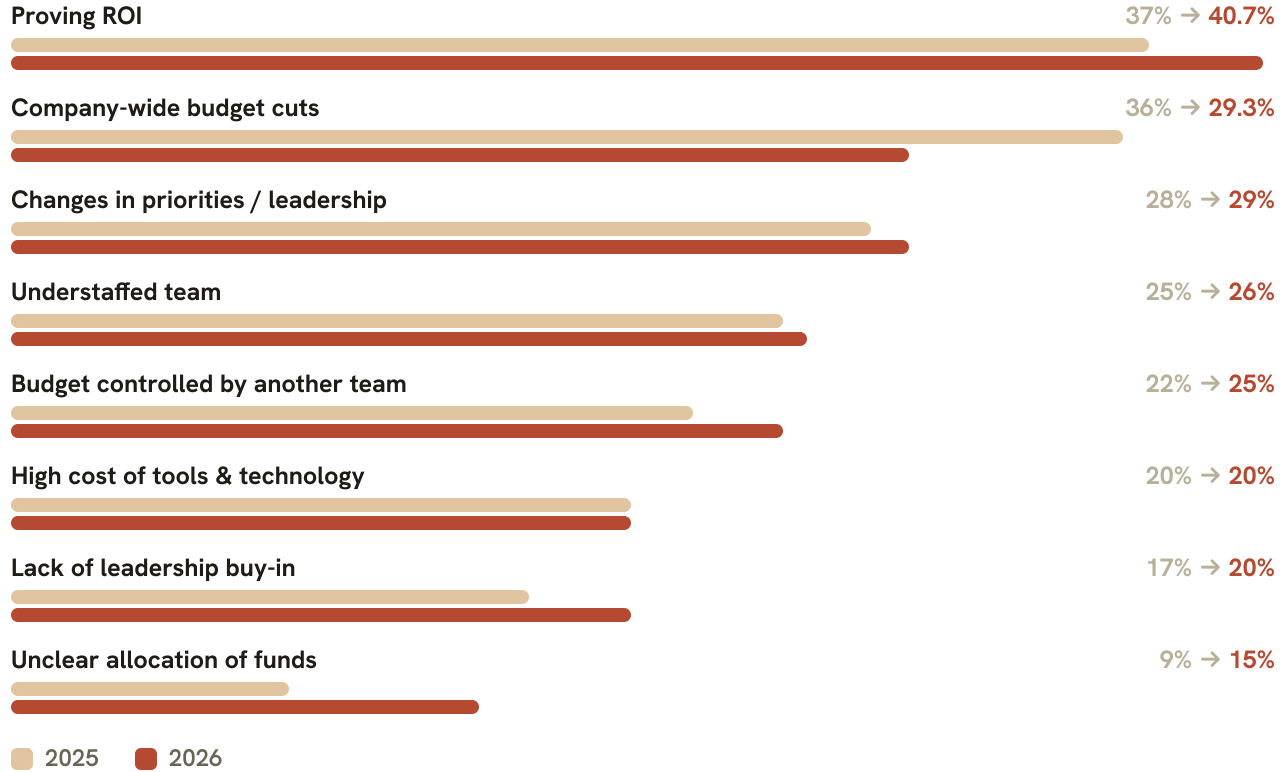


Career satisfaction falls in lockstep with budget, 96% when it grew significantly, 59% when it was cut significantly.

What we're seeing: growth and cuts have different stories. Teams that gained budget point to leadership buy-in and new program launches, relationships and momentum, not just a revenue formula. Teams that lost budget mostly cite company-wide cuts, not a verdict on community itself. And the stakes are human: funding decisions ripple straight into morale and retention.

The challenge mix has spread

Top budget challenges · Multi-select · Sample size: 167



2025 → 2026. Proving ROI climbed to a clear #1 while budget cuts eased: the landscape is less uniformly difficult than last year.

What we're seeing: proving ROI is still the number-one challenge, and it's now well ahead of everything else. But the rest of the list has flattened and spread: no single external pressure dominates the way budget cuts did last year. The core problem is less "the money disappeared" and more "we still can't prove what community is worth."

CMX RESOURCE

CMX Community Strategy Canvas

The nine fundamentals of a strong community strategy, from value proposition to success metrics, a practical starting point before any budget conversation.

[Get the canvas →](#)

From the field: how to make the case

Six themes emerged consistently from respondents' advice for peers working to secure or grow their budget.

1

Tie community to business outcomes

Retention, revenue, support deflection, product adoption. Appeared in over half of responses.

"The moment I started reporting community's impact on retention, the budget conversation changed completely."

2

Tell the story, not just the data

Member wins and direct quotes make the case where spreadsheets can't.

"Show up with numbers, but close with a member story. The story is what they remember in the budget meeting."

3

Get leadership directly involved

Leaders who see community firsthand become advocates in rooms you're not in.

"Get an executive to attend one event. One. After that, you're not fighting for budget alone anymore."

4

Align with other teams' goals

Make the ask feel like shared investment, not a separate line item.

"When sales and success see community as their tool too, you're no longer defending the line item alone."

5

Come in with a real ask

"Ask for more than you need and you might get what you actually need."

"Vague asks get vague answers. Come in with a number and a plan attached to it."

6

Use AI to become a data menace

New in 2026: AI finally makes data reporting manageable for smaller teams.

"AI turned me into an absolute data menace. I walk into every review with numbers I never had time to pull before."

What we're seeing: 43% of respondents expect investment in community to grow next year, flat with 2025 and 2023. This section describes a profession getting clearer about what works: budget visibility is up, "I don't know" has dropped sharply, and teams that can make the case are getting rewarded. The challenges are real, but so is the progress.

"Is budget the most important thing? Have impact first. Budget will follow."

— CMX 2026 survey respondent

06

SECTION SIX

The Community Professional

They're choosing to stay.

The conditions haven't gotten easier. And still, most are choosing to stay.

79.5%

satisfied with their career:
up from 77%

65.8%

plan to stay for the next two
years

3-yr

low for exit intent: the
lowest since 2023

IN THIS SECTION

- 01** Security & satisfaction
- 02** The commitment is holding
- 03** "Community+" is the new default
- 04** The frustrations have sharpened
- 05** Pay & what's ahead

Security & satisfaction

Two forces pulling in opposite directions, concern is ticking up, yet satisfaction keeps climbing.

Were you or your team affected by layoffs in the past 12 months?

2024 → 2025 → 2026 · n=232

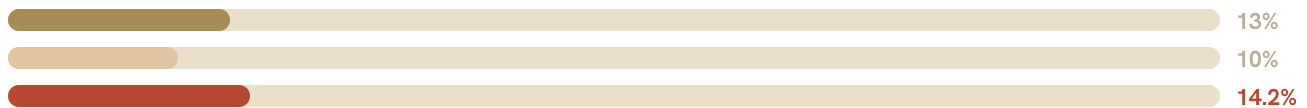
No layoffs on my team



Team member laid off



Personally laid off

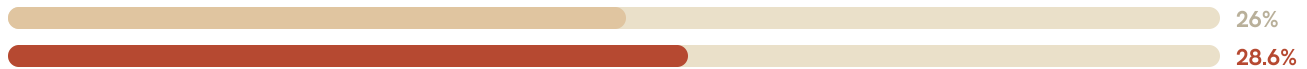


■ 2024 ■ 2025 ■ 2026

Career satisfaction

2025 → 2026 · n=232

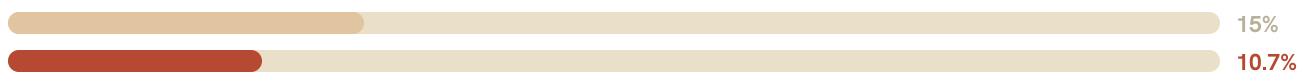
Extremely satisfied



Somewhat satisfied



Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied



Somewhat dissatisfied



Extremely dissatisfied



■ 2025 ■ 2026

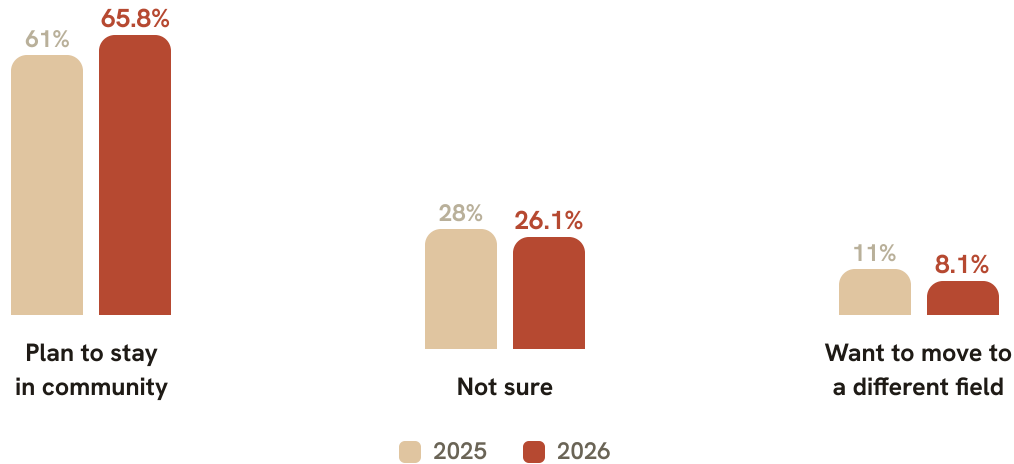
A modest uptick, not a new wave. Layoff impact rose slightly (35.5% affected) and "very concerned" ticked up from 10% to 15.1%. Neither alarms on its own, but the combination is worth watching as teams do more with the same or fewer resources.

Yet more people land positive. Satisfaction is up for the second year running; the on-the-fence middle shrank from 15% to 10.7% and the extremely-satisfied group grew. People are getting more decided, and most decide they're happy to be here.

The commitment is holding

Plan to stay in the community industry (next 2 years)

Intent for the next two years, 2025 → 2026 · Sample size: 234



Plans to stay rose to 65.8% (approaching the 67% high from 2024), while those wanting to leave the field fell to 8.1%.

What we're seeing: exit intent is at its lowest in three years. Fewer community professionals want to leave the field than at any point in recent data, and those staying aren't staying reluctantly: 40% report being extremely satisfied with their careers. The commitment feels less like inertia and more like a genuine choice.

"What excites me most is that community is finally being treated as a strategic business function: not just a feel-good initiative. Leaders are connecting community engagement to real outcomes: retention, product adoption, revenue. That changes everything."

— CMX 2026 survey respondent

"Community+" is the new default

More than half of professionals say their role expanded to include non-community responsibilities this year. Pure community management is now the minority.

51.5%

expanded their role scope

34.3%

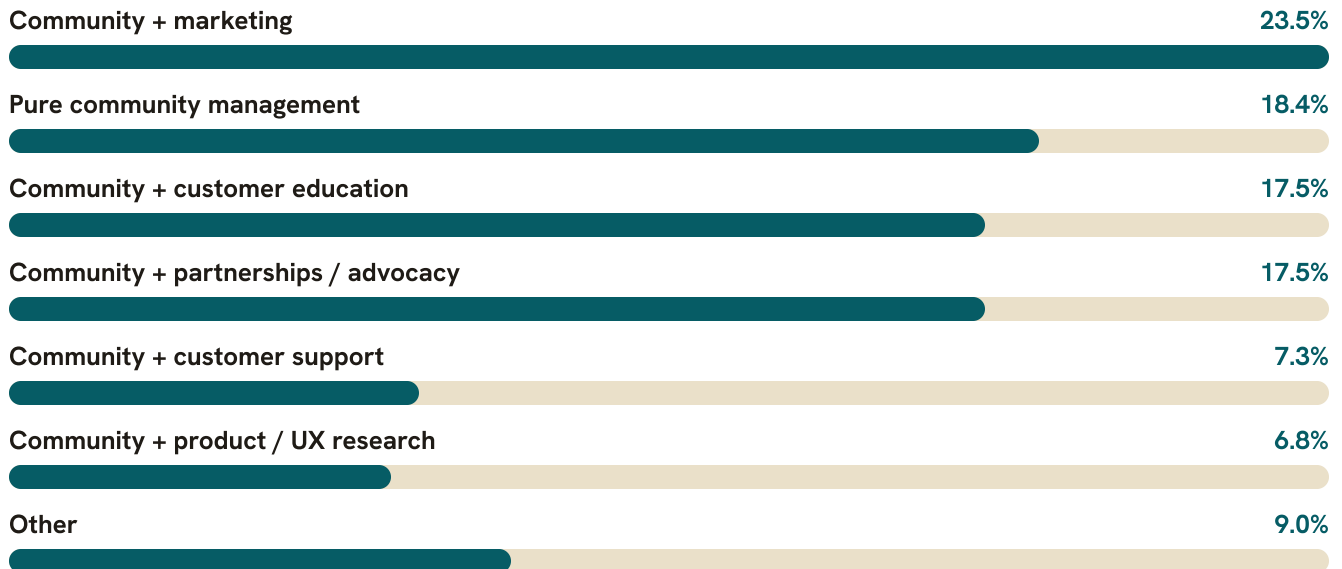
stayed the same

14.2%

narrowed to focus only on community

What best describes their role

Single-select · Sample size: 234



A direct year-over-year comparison isn't possible here, since the 2025 report asked a different question, focused on what else those in hybrid roles worked on, rather than whether scope had expanded. But the direction is consistent: in 2025, communications (49%), marketing (48%), and content creation (46%) topped the list of supplementary responsibilities. This year, those same functions dominate the role blend data.

What we're seeing: "Community+" is the new default. The standalone community role is becoming the exception, not the rule. More than half of respondents have absorbed non-community responsibilities, and only 1 in 5 describes their role as pure community management. The profession isn't shrinking: it's integrating deeper into the business.

"Seeing how community professionals continue to evolve their career paths and roles to be 'Community-plus,' positions that are more fully integrated with the business segments they serve."

— CMX 2026 survey respondent

The frustrations have sharpened

For years the top frustrations stayed remarkably consistent, but this year, proving ROI returned to the top spot, overtaking the engagement challenge that led in 2025.

Top frustrations · select up to 3 · 2025 (n=251) → 2026 (n=175)

Hard to quantify the value of community NEW #1



Efforts are largely manual, not automated



Difficult to consistently engage members



Not enough staff



Not enough budget



Lacking cross-functional collaboration



Difficult to attract new members



Can't access the data I need



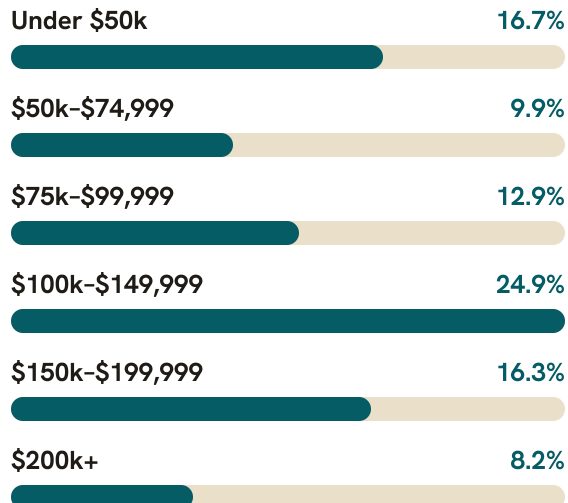
2025 2026

What we're seeing: proving value is back on top, and the data gap is growing. "Hard to quantify value" reclaimed the #1 spot after engagement led in 2025 (41% → 30.3%). At the same time, "can't access the data I need" rose from 14% to 17.1%. Even as AI adoption grows, the underlying data-access problem hasn't been solved, community pros can't prove ROI with data they can't reach.

Pay & what's ahead

What community professionals earn

Global dataset · Sample size: 207



\$100k-\$149,999 is the most common bracket. Global dataset, compensation varies by region and seniority. First time salary data appears since 2025, which removed it, noting the global respondent pool made comparisons less meaningful.

Biggest expected impact, next 12 months

Sample size: 174



AI tops the list by more than 4x the next response.

What we're seeing: community professionals are staying: not because conditions are perfect, but because the work matters, satisfaction is climbing, and most still believe in what they're building. The clearest signal in this year's data: fewer people want to leave than at any point in the last three years.

"Let's think about what AI can't replace, and double down on it."

— CMX 2026 survey respondent

07

SECTION SEVEN

What Comes Next

Watching both the possibility and the risk.

When community professionals look ahead, AI dominates both their excitement and their concern. In-person connection is rising as a source of hope. The professionals who've spent their careers building trust between strangers aren't naive about what's coming, but most of them see their work becoming **more important, not less.**

IN THIS SECTION

01 The same force, two directions

02 From the Community ROI Podcast

03 Looking ahead

The same force, two directions

When we asked what excites professionals most about the year ahead, and what concerns them most, the answers shared a lot of the same words.

What energizes the field

Thematic coding of open-text responses · n=82

AI and its potential for the profession	50%
Return to human connection & in-person events	26%
Community recognized as a strategic function	15%
Better tools for measurement and ROI	15%

"Getting to create a safe haven in an ever digitized and unsocial world."

What's on people's minds

Thematic coding of open-text responses · n=84

AI replacing jobs / hollowing out community	54%
Proving ROI, leadership buy-in, job security	30%
Member engagement & behavior shifts	27%
Budget cuts & underfunding	17%
Burnout & capacity strain	13%

"My biggest concern is that community gets hollowed out in the rush to prove ROI... we risk optimizing for activity over genuine connection."

An emerging signal worth watching: AI search visibility

A theme that didn't appear in any previous edition: community's role in AI search. As AI-generated answers reshape how people find information, community content is emerging as one of the few trusted, peer-sourced knowledge bases AI models can credibly draw from. The opportunity, authentic member content may surface more credibly than polished brand pages. The challenge, most teams can't yet track whether their content shows up in AI answers at all. Community isn't just a retention play. It may become a discoverability play.

"Creating and building a community, platform and content plan, that helps our brand and content show up in LLMs and AEO."

"How to feed correct information to LLMs and how to keep our forums top of mind for customers as the official source for troubleshooting."

"Not being able to track community content showing up in Gen AI models."

What we're seeing: the same force driving concern is also driving optimism. Community professionals aren't naive about the risks, but the dominant feeling isn't fear: it's a clear-eyed sense that AI can take the busywork, freeing them to do the work that actually requires a human.

From the Community ROI Podcast

Six themes that surfaced across 50+ conversations with community leaders this year, shared by host Yurii Lazaruk.

1 · Connect to outcomes, not activity

Measured by retention, adoption, advocacy, and revenue influence: not posts and comments.

"Community goals are not activity metrics.", Joshua Zerkel

"I don't know if you should have just a pure community goal.", Zach Hawtof

2 · Community supercharges other teams

The highest-performing teams don't behave like isolated departments.

"Community is a multiplier.", Barry McDonald

"Success is when other teams are talking about community in a room where you're not in.", Michelle Baltrusitis

3 · Human value before measurable ROI

The most meaningful moments are the hardest to quantify, and worth protecting anyway.

"You need to go speak to each of them and find out why they care about the community.", Zach Hawtof

"It's where people find belonging.", Nuri Demirci Lopez

"The goal isn't an event people attend. It's a moment they remember.", Veronica Kaulinis

4 · Community managers are translators

Raw community signals don't move leadership. Interpretation and business context do.

"Replace one engagement metric in your next report with a business insight.", Jenifer De Figueiredo

What we're seeing here: The data confirms it. Only 17% of community professionals say they can confidently quantify their community's business value, down from 24% last year. Another 52% say it's a work in progress. The storytelling layer is what's still missing. As Jenifer De Figueiredo puts it: the job isn't just to collect data, it's to translate it into something leadership can act on.

5 · Not every valuable member is loudest

Lurkers still benefit; a handful of champions create outsized impact. Depth over scale.

"Lurkers aren't disengaged. They're consuming, learning, and benefiting.", Ruthie Berber

"A handful of champions can do what hundreds of passive members can't.", Erica Hanson

"Some of our most impactful community moments happen in small, curated rooms.", Ed Giansante

6 · Human connection grows more valuable

As AI automates performance work, real trust between real people becomes rarer, and more valuable.

"The communities that win will be the ones whose member voices are credible enough to surface in AI-generated answers.", Jillian Bejtlich

"AI can handle the operational work. What it can't do is create genuine trust between members.", Ana Julia Braga

Looking ahead

The 2026 Community Industry Report lands at a moment when the profession is more visible, more stretched, and more essential than it's ever been. AI is reshaping the landscape in ways that no one fully understands yet, but community professionals are already adapting, staying, and finding reasons to be optimistic.

The data in this report is a snapshot: one year, one sample, one moment in a field that's moving fast. But the patterns it reveals are consistent. Engagement is harder to prove than it is to create. ROI is the pressure that never goes away. The role keeps expanding. And the people doing the work keep choosing to stay.

That's not a small thing. In a year when a lot of things felt uncertain, the community profession showed up, built things, and kept going.

"I'm looking forward to seeing how the community industry evolves and adapts in the AI era. I think many communities will go back to fundamentals, where human interaction and community-led events will become most relevant."

— CMX 2026 survey respondent

FROM CMX

CMX Resources

Everything you need to grow as a community professional.

CMX Academy

Join our community of trained Community Professionals and get certified with CMX Academy! We've worked with industry experts to build courses on what matters most. Whether you're a beginner or a veteran, CMX Academy has what you need!

[Explore CMX Academy →](#)

CMX Community

The CMX Slack Community facilitates sharing information, resources, and encouragement among over eight thousand community professionals. Share your knowledge, learn something new, and join a great group of peers.

[Join the community →](#)

Upcoming CMX Events

From CMX Summit, our flagship conference, to regional meetups and virtual sessions. CMX Connect, our distributed events program, brings community professionals together in real time, virtually and in person, to learn, grow, and connect.

[See upcoming events →](#)

CMX Job Board

Looking for your next community role or your next hire? The CMX Job Board is the go-to resource for connecting talented community professionals with organizations investing in community.

[Browse the job board →](#)

WITH GRATITUDE

Acknowledgements

We want to acknowledge and thank the community professionals, including our CIR Ambassadors, Partner Organizations, and CMX Fellows, who helped share and promote the survey so we could hear from more voices across the community industry.

CIR Ambassadors



Matthew Clegg



Aaron Weiss



Josh Zerkel



Francisco Opazo



Nicole Saunders



Gabrielle Leith



Yurii Lazaruk



Evan Hamilton



David Spinks



Michael Puhala

Partner Organizations



Led by
Community



the community
collective



CMX Fellows



Beatriz Ramos



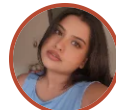
Wendy Batton



Michael Kimathi



Niv Hajaj



Awantika Nigam



Kishi Wuraola
Fadeko



Tarun Gupta



Ari Waller



Khadijah McGill



Tany Rios Castro



Dani Weinstein



Nicholas
Provenzano



Jenna Feldman



Katie Mast

Production & Design

This report was produced and designed by Cat Nilsson and Claude, with final design touches from John Martin Tan and support from the broader Bevy team. And to every one of the 305 respondents, you are the reason this report exists.

Thank you.

When I started reading through this year's responses, one thing stood out more than any chart or statistic: the stories.

Hundreds of community professionals took the time to share what they're celebrating, what's challenging them, where they're finding momentum, and what they hope comes next. Those responses reminded us that behind every metric in this report is a person doing the often invisible work of creating spaces where people feel seen, supported, and connected.

Community has changed countless careers and lives, including mine. It's encouraging to see community becoming more deeply embedded within organizations, and even more encouraging to see that so many community professionals want to continue building their careers in this field despite the very real challenges they face.

We're also entering a new chapter. While there are different perspectives on how AI will shape community work, one thing comes through clearly: optimism. Not because AI can replace

what community professionals do, but because it has the potential to take on more of the repetitive work, such as analyzing data, streamlining operations, and handling administrative tasks, so people can spend more time doing what only humans can: building trust, creating belonging, and fostering meaningful connections.

Community has always been built on generosity. On people sharing what they've learned, showing up for one another, and believing that we're stronger when we build together. That spirit is reflected throughout this report, and it's one of the reasons this industry continues to grow and evolve.

Thank you for sharing your experiences, your challenges, your wins, and your vision for what's next. This profession is still being written, and every conversation, every community, and every person contributing to this report is helping shape its future.

I can't wait to see where we go next!

– Cat

THANK YOU

305 professionals. One industry, paying attention.

Thank you to everyone who shared their experience and their honesty to make this report possible.

Questions or feedback? team@cmxhub.com