



CMO INSIGHTS 2026

HOW TODAY'S CMOs ARE DRIVING GROWTH

April 2026

Introductory message

Marketing: an organisation's growth engine and often the first port of call for finding efficiencies. More than ever this year, marketing leaders are being pulled in both directions, with AI being a major catalyst. When asked what they see as the biggest opportunity for GenAI this year, the top two answers from marketing leaders were 'Improving operational efficiency' (71%) and 'Improving customer experience' (64%), with 'performance' and 'growth' the two biggest budgetary priorities.

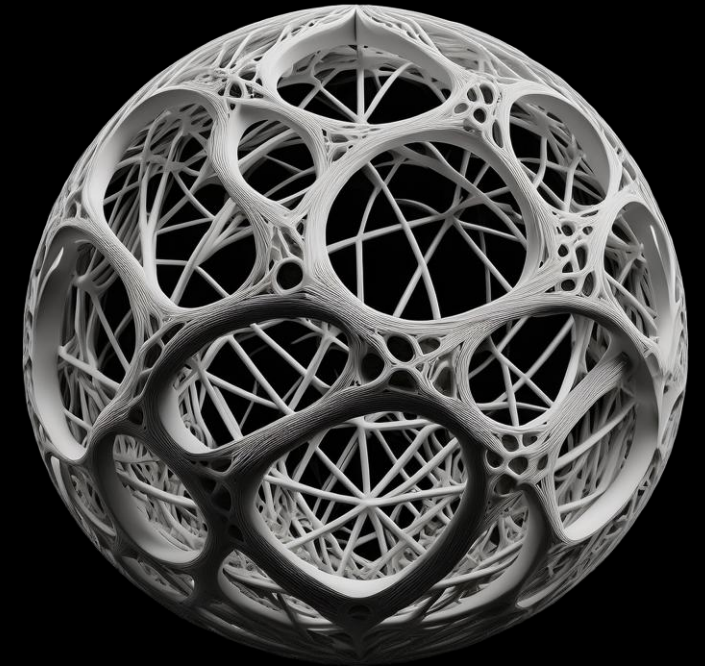
'Leveraging AI' is therefore unsurprisingly the most pressing issue marketing leaders claim to be facing in their role, up from #5 last year. Yet, despite all the talk of AI, it's the soft skills that leaders value most, with 'strategic thinking' the #1 rated skill deemed most useful for their role, followed closely by leadership and problem solving. And it's 'developing talent and culture' which is called out as the skill set that most needs to be improved.

It's this intoxicating mix of technology and the human that makes marketing such an exciting industry. A dichotomy? Not at all. Humans have always relied on technology. It's what sets us apart from other species. We've always been enhanced by it, marketing has always been at the forefront of it and AI is no different. Except this time it's happening just that little bit faster and promises that little bit more.

Here, we explore what's driving CMOs and Senior Marketing Leaders. We look at what's different, what's changed and what's to come.



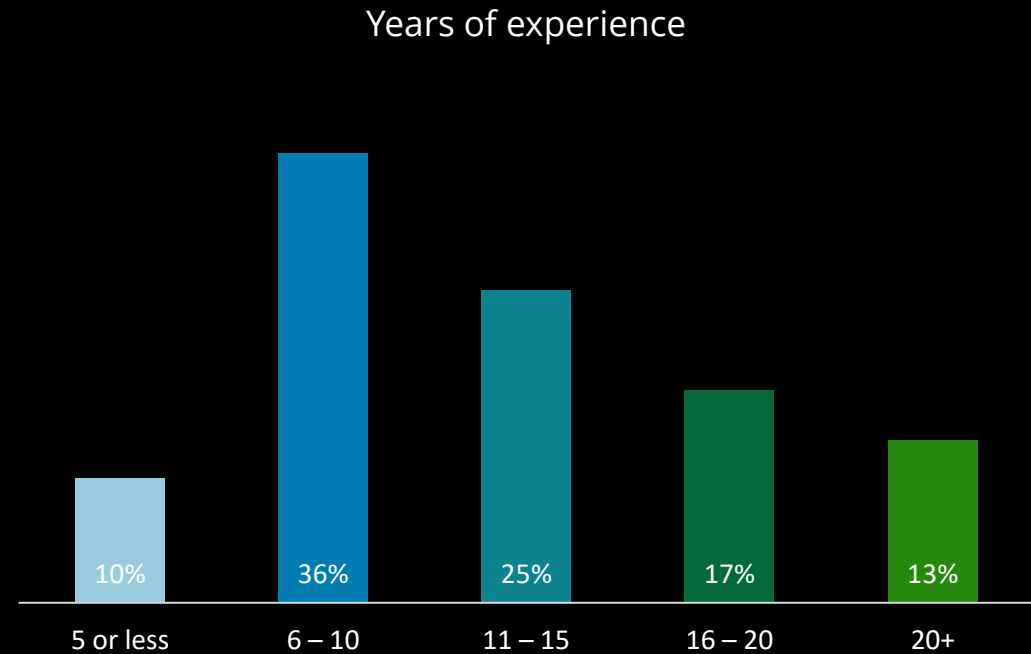
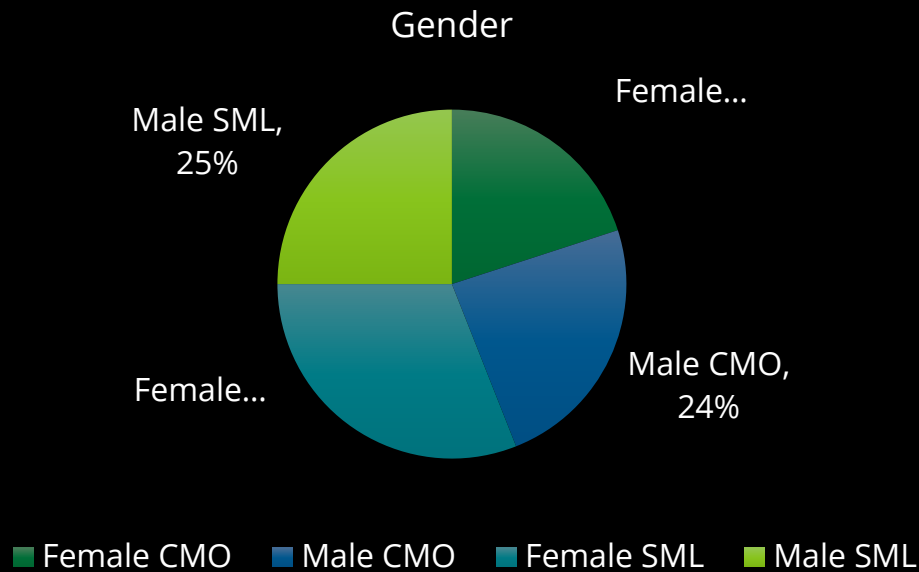
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CHAPTERS

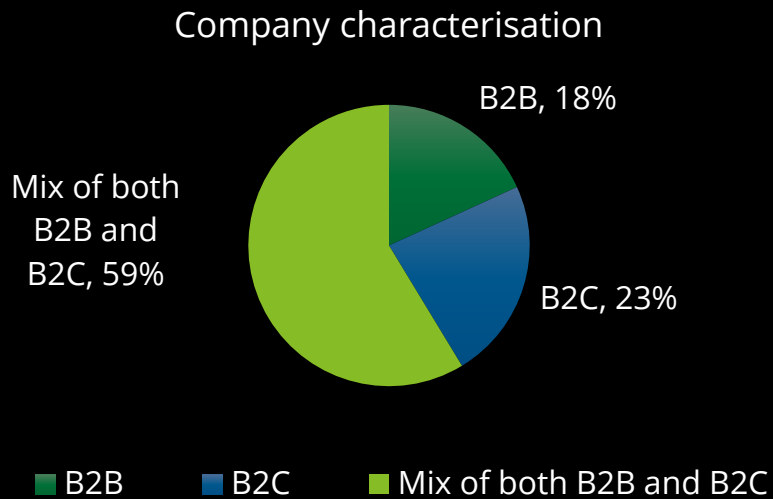
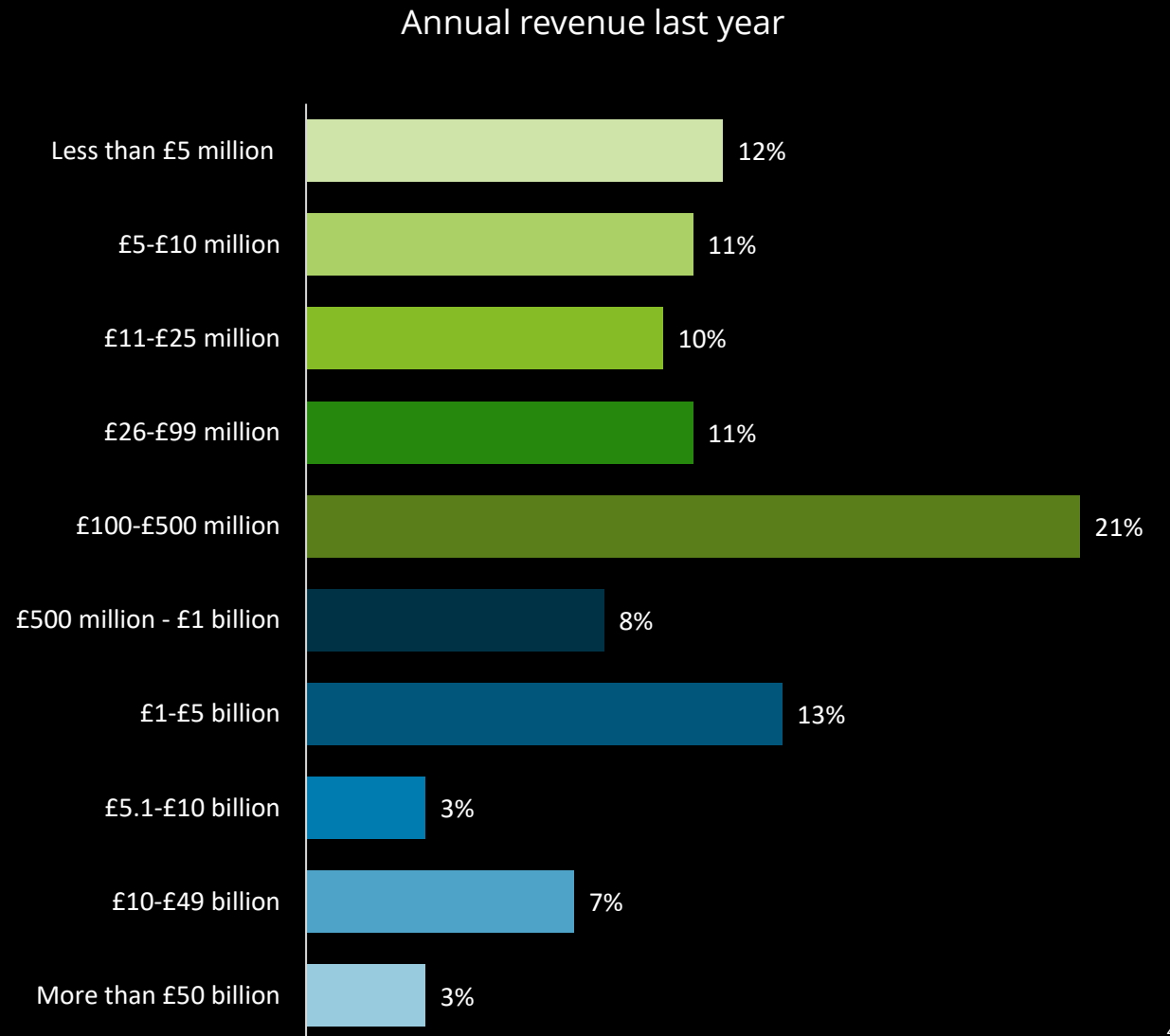
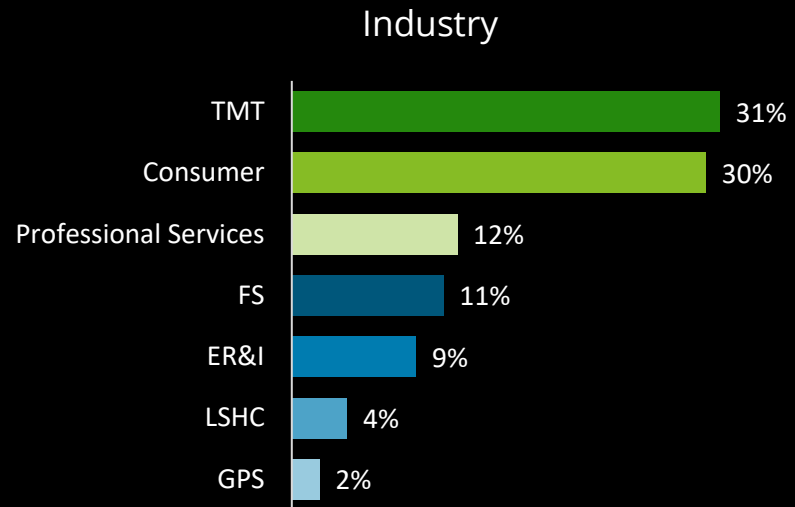
LEADING YOUR BOARD	p5 - p14
LEADING YOUR COLLEAGUES AND TEAMS	p15 - p27
LEADING YOURSELF	p28 - p44

The survey was completed in October 2025 by 53 Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) and 69 Senior Marketing Leaders (SMLs) in the UK



30% Have more than 15 years of experience

Representation was gained across industries, type and size of organisation



Executive Summary: CMO Insights 2026 - The new growth playbook

This report captures the strategic pulse of 122 of the UK's leading Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) and Senior Marketing Leaders (SMLs), revealing a function at a pivotal juncture. Leaders are navigating a complex landscape defined by technological disruption, economic pressures and a profound shift in required skills. The following themes distil the core challenges and opportunities that are shaping the future of marketing leadership.

The AI imperative

CMOs view AI as their #1 priority this year to achieve both productivity gains and increase growth through improved customer experience...

Artificial Intelligence is no longer a peripheral topic; it's the central focus. "Leveraging AI" has vaulted from the #5 to the #1 most pressing issue facing marketing leaders in just one year. This urgency is driven by the belief that AI is the key to unlocking critical business opportunities, with leaders prioritizing its use for improving operational efficiency (71%) and enhancing the customer experience (64%).

The Strategist's rise

This has an impact on the skills they need in the organisation, with an increased focus on 'strategic thinking'...

There has been a fundamental shift in the skills valued at the highest levels of marketing. "Strategic thinking" has officially dethroned "leadership" as the #1 most useful skill for senior marketers. This indicates a move away from traditional management and toward a greater emphasis on analytical foresight, problem-solving, and the ability to chart a clear path through ambiguity.

The value paradox

To justify budgets, this strategic thinking needs to be supplemented with robust measurement frameworks showing the ROI of marketing...

While budgets are trending upwards—with 53% of marketers expecting an increase next year—marketing investment remains a small fraction of the overall company budget for many. A significant 71% of marketing departments receive less than 30% of the total company budget. This paradox amplifies the pressure to justify every pound spent and focus on value, ROI and measurement, making "Performance" the undisputed #1 budget priority for both CMOs and SMLs.

The culture clash

The impact of this shift to more of a strategy and insights-led function, and away from operations, will require a marketing culture shift...

The pivot to a strategy-led function demands a cultural evolution. While CMOs align with the CEO (43%), their teams remain embedded in operational work with Operations (22%) and Finance (18%). This disconnect requires the entire marketing function to shift its mindset from execution to strategic influence, embedding the data-driven thinking now prized by leadership.

The influence gap

The adoption of AI and CX, which require cross-functional collaboration, increases the need for marketers to gain and use influence across the organisation...

CMOs and their leadership teams are focused on different C-suite relationships. While CMOs are building their primary strategic partnership with the CEO (43%), their SMLs are working most closely with Operations (22%) and Finance (18%). This divergence highlights an ongoing challenge: to prove marketing's value, leaders must learn to speak the language of every part of the business, from high-level growth vision to on-the-ground operational and financial impact.

The calm in the storm

Despite the increasing pressures, marketers are able to find time to improve their work life balance.

Despite mounting pressures, marketing leaders are finding a healthier equilibrium. A remarkable 71% now report having a healthy work-life balance, a dramatic increase from 56% the previous year. The improvement is especially pronounced for women, with 75% agreeing, compared to just 42% in the prior year, suggesting a positive cultural shift toward sustainability in a demanding field.

The speed of change is rapid and continuing to seek external perspectives and reference points to maintain momentum and course alignment is required

LEADING YOUR BOARD

Key findings

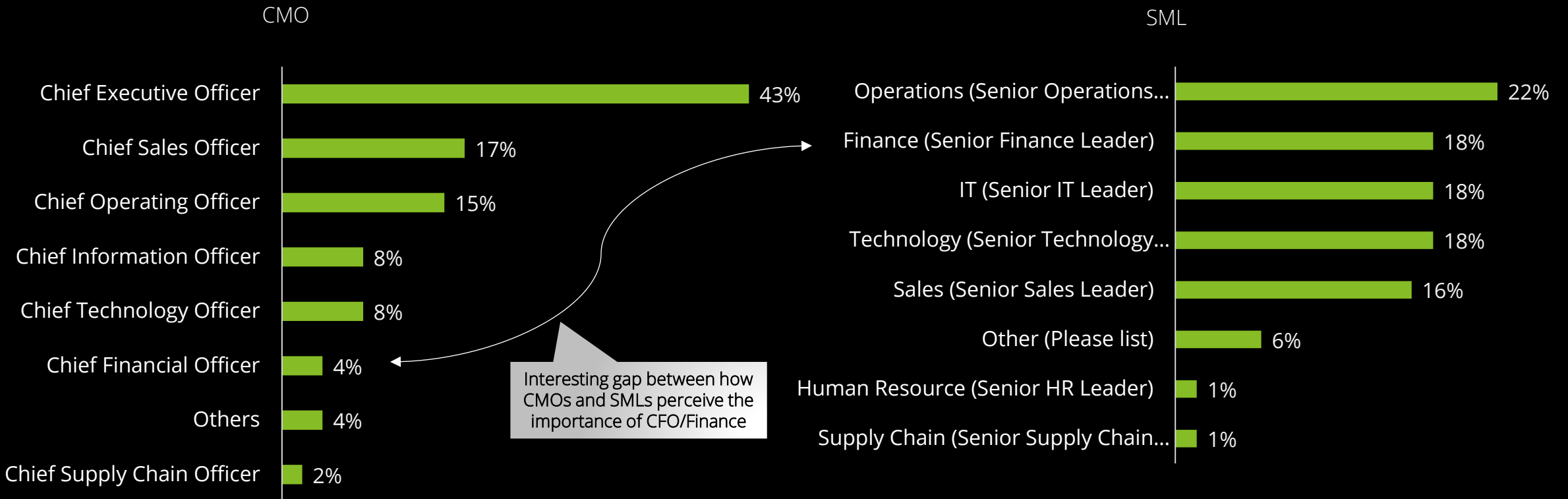
- **AI is the top concern:** "leveraging AI" has rapidly become the #1 most pressing issue for marketing leaders, a significant jump from its #5 ranking in the previous year.
- **Strategic skills are paramount:** strategic thinking is now ranked as the single most useful skill for senior marketers, overtaking "leadership" from the prior year.
- **Divergent strategic partnerships:** CMOs prioritise their connection with the CEO, whereas senior marketing leaders (SMLs) work most closely with operations and finance leaders.
- **The budget paradox:** while marketing budgets are generally on the rise, nearly a quarter of companies still allocate a low percentage of the overall company budget to the marketing function, creating a tension between expectation and investment.
- **Performance is the core focus:** despite other pressures, both CMOs and SMLs rank performance as their #1 budget priority for the upcoming fiscal year.

Recommended actions

1. **Frame AI strategically:** position AI investments as essential drivers for the top two business opportunities identified by leaders: improving operational efficiency (71%) and improving customer experience (64%).
2. **Build a strong business case:** justify budget requests by linking all marketing activities directly to performance metrics and ROI, speaking the language of your finance and operations partners.
3. **Develop strategic influence:** double down on honing strategic thinking and communication to effectively influence the board and demonstrate marketing's value beyond a cost centre.

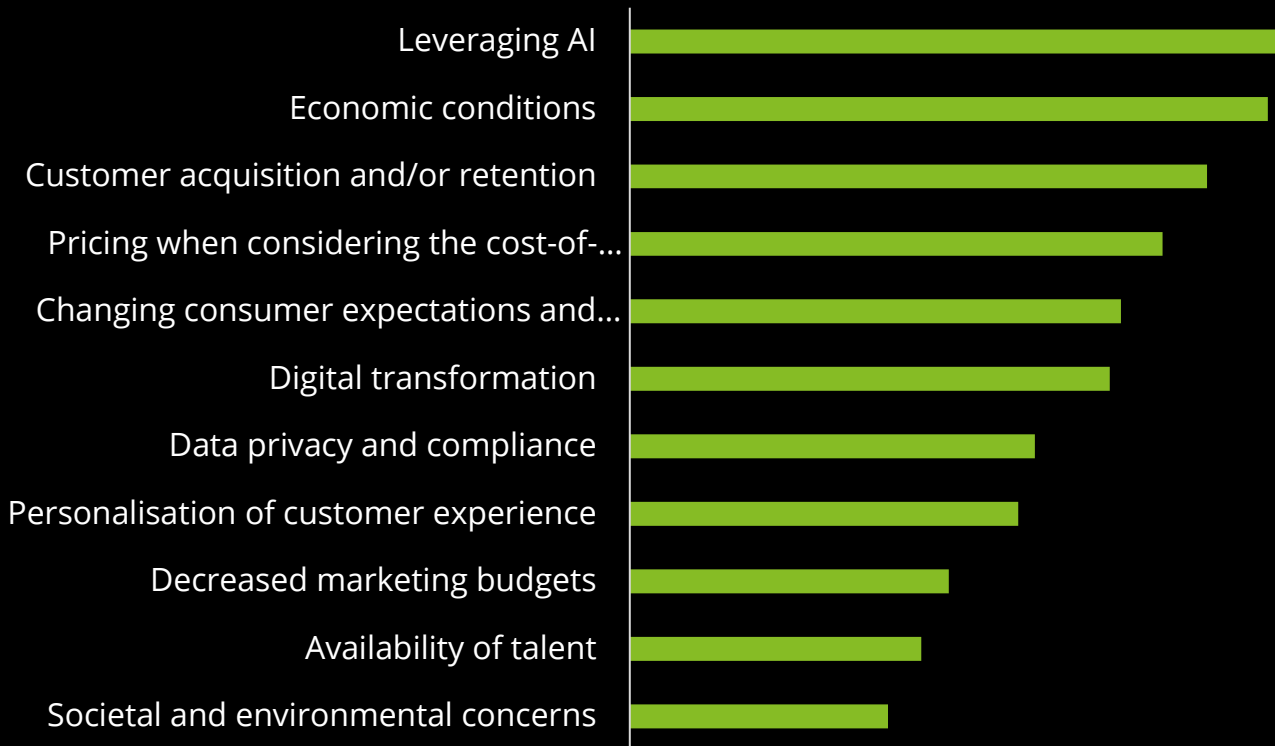
SMLs work most with operations and finance compared to CMOs who connect most with CEOs

Q. Who is your most important strategic partner in the organisation outside Marketing? (CMO vs SML)

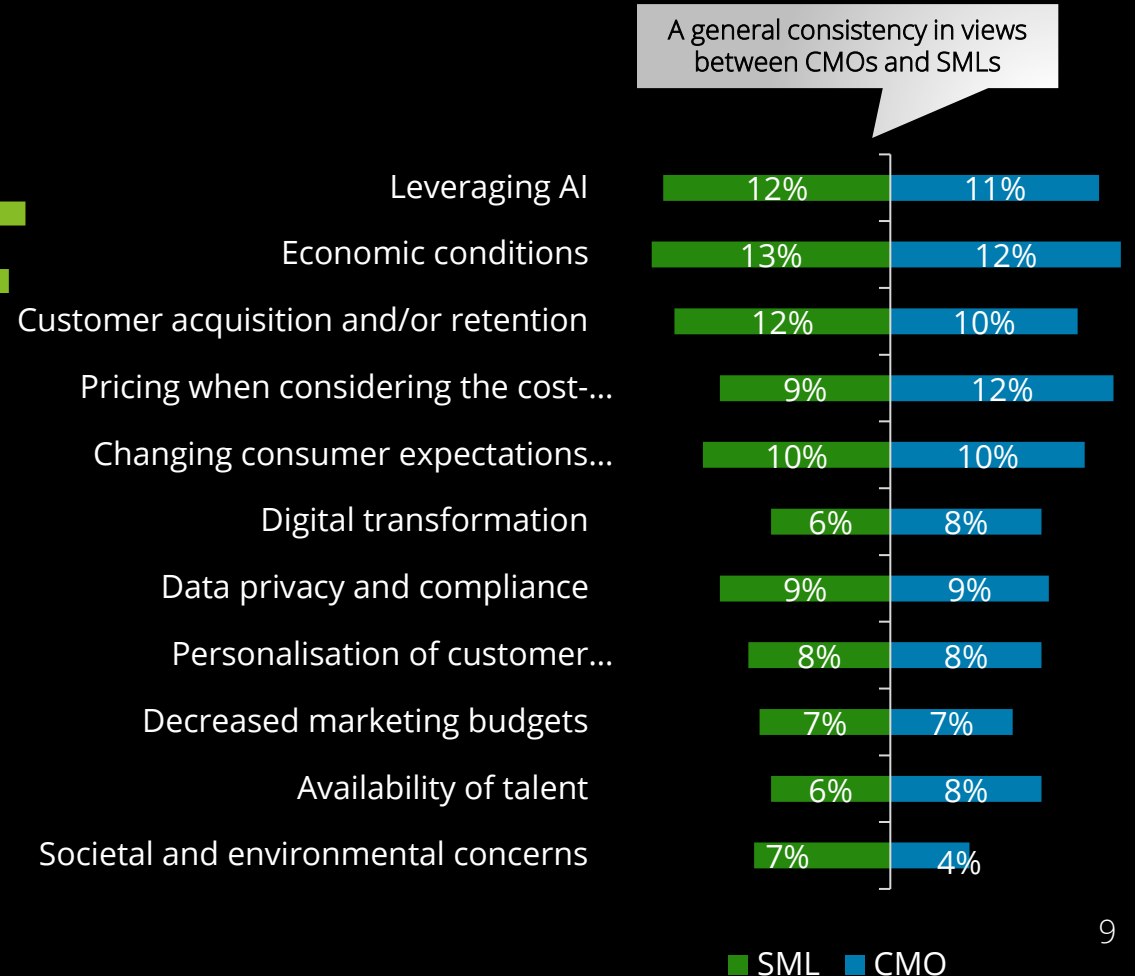


Leveraging AI and economic conditions are top concerns

Q. What do you think are the most pressing issues you're facing in your role today?



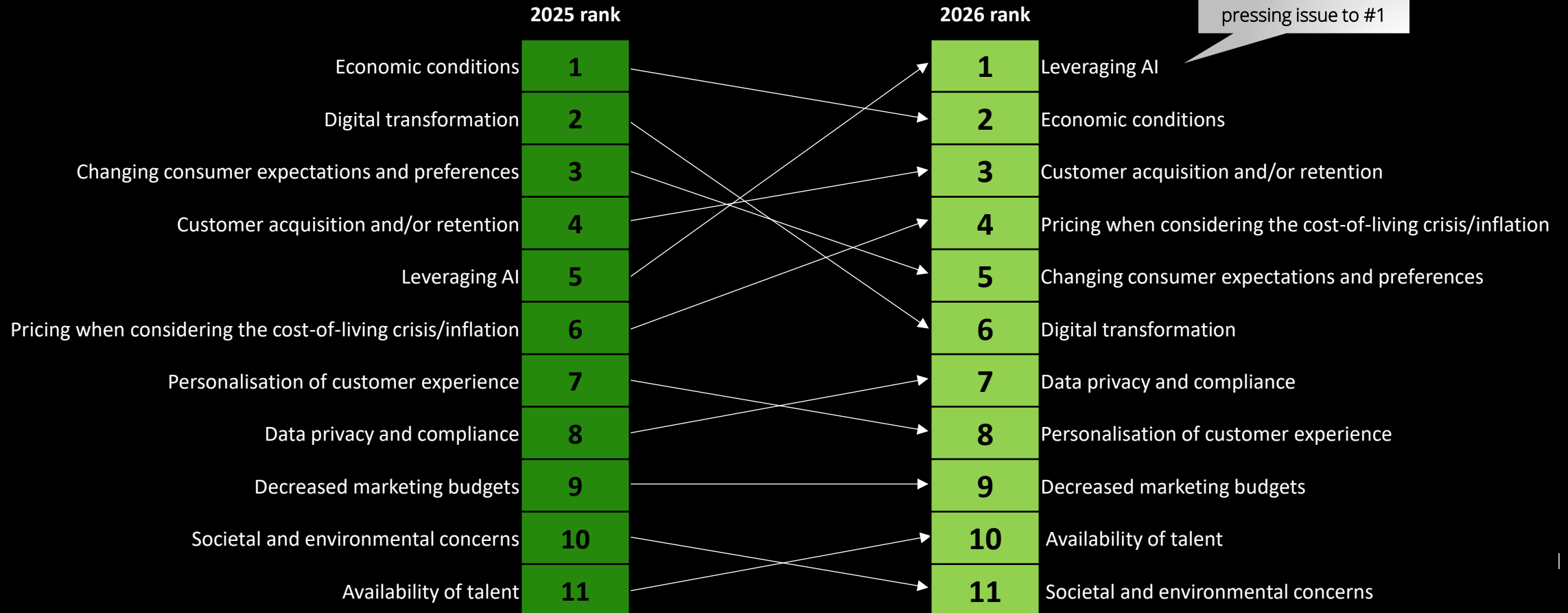
Rank Frequency



AI has taken on heightened urgency this year

Q. What do you think are the most pressing issues you're facing in your role today?

'Leveraging AI' moves from #5 most pressing issue to #1



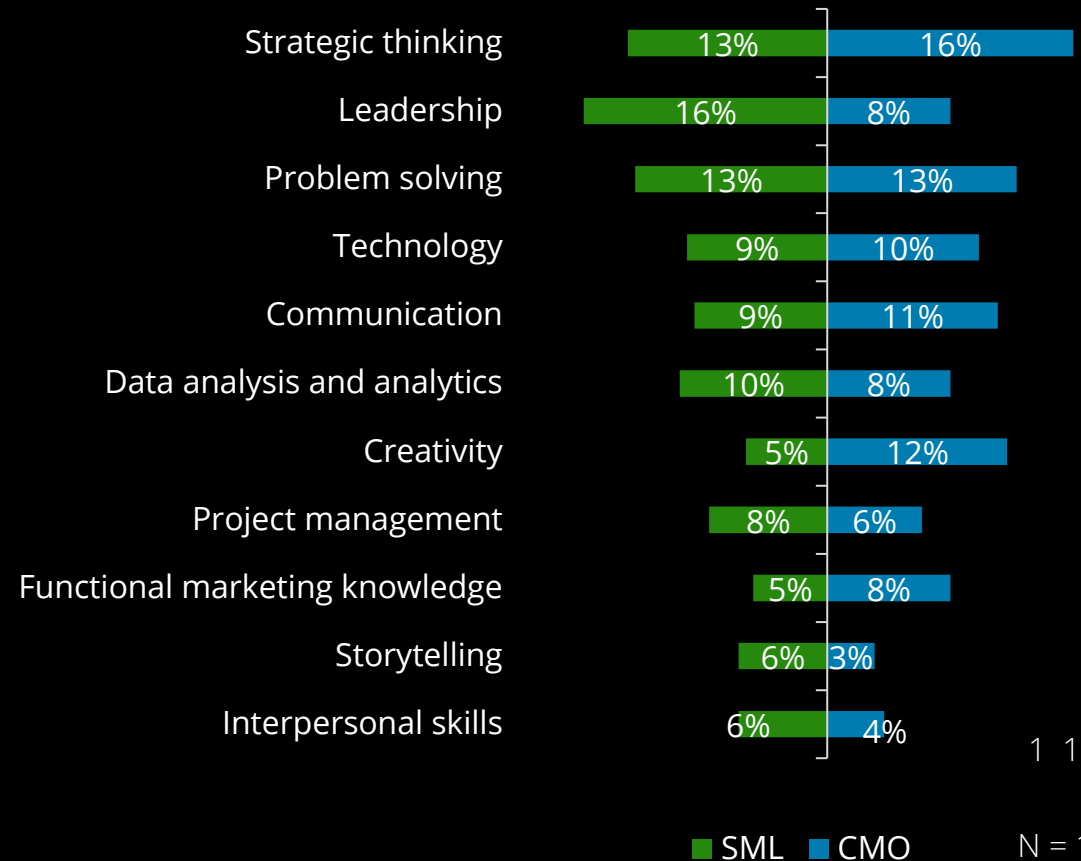
Strategic thinking is ranked as the most useful skill by CMOs

Q. What skills are most useful for your current role?

Total ranked skills

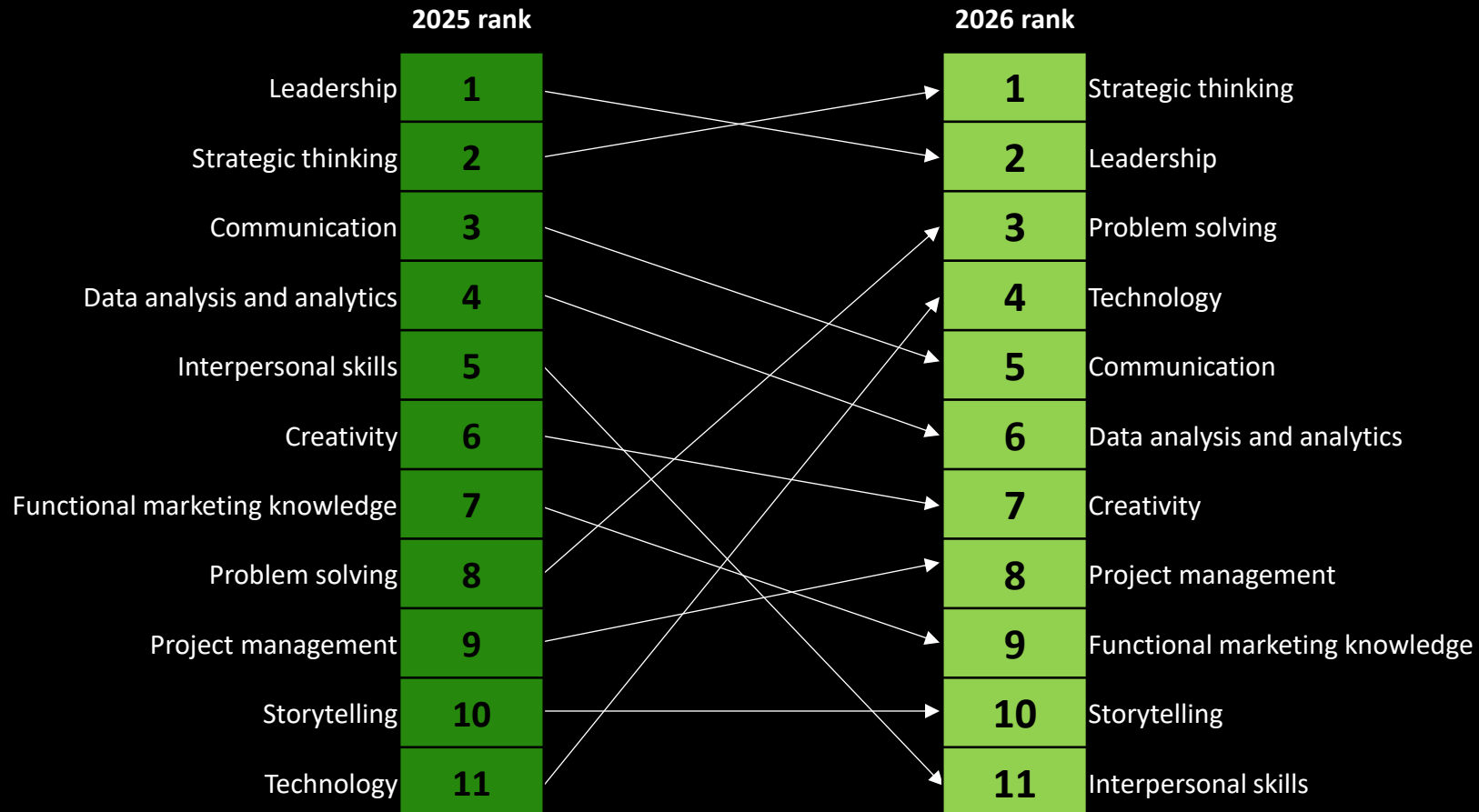


Skills ranked by SMLs vs CMOs



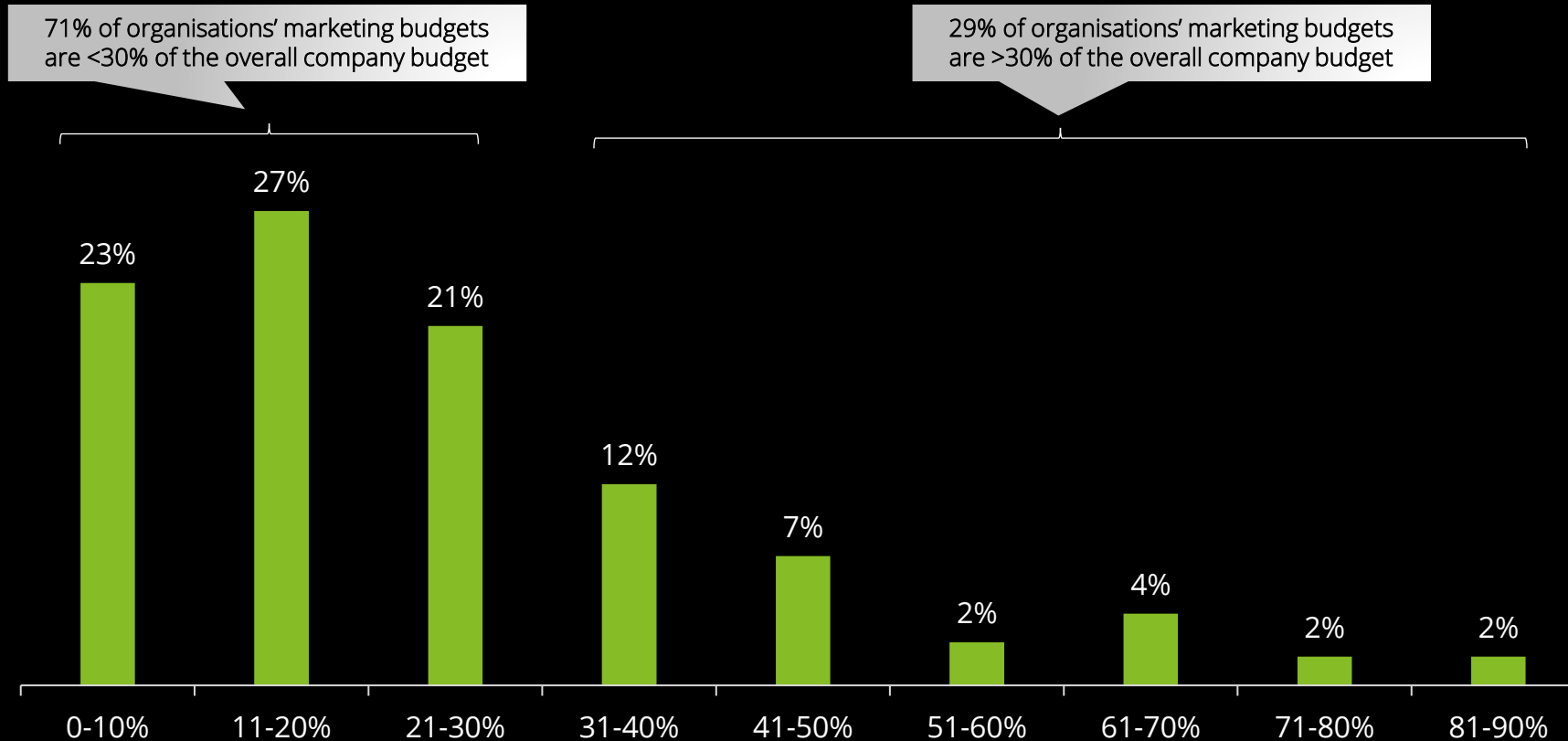
Strategic thinking has overtaken leadership as the most useful skill

Q. What skills are most useful for your current role?



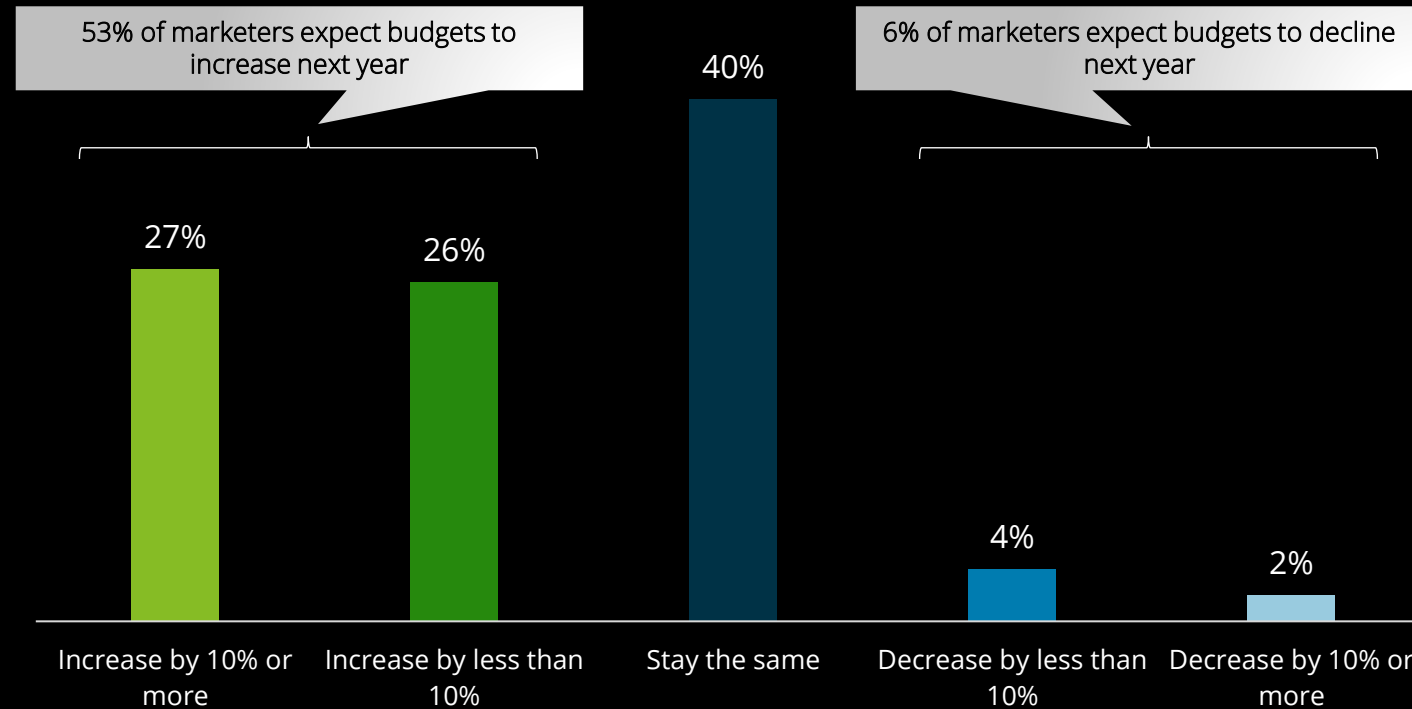
Marketing is a low budget priority for nearly a quarter of companies

Q. Approximately what percent of your company's overall budget comes to the marketing (or equivalent) function?



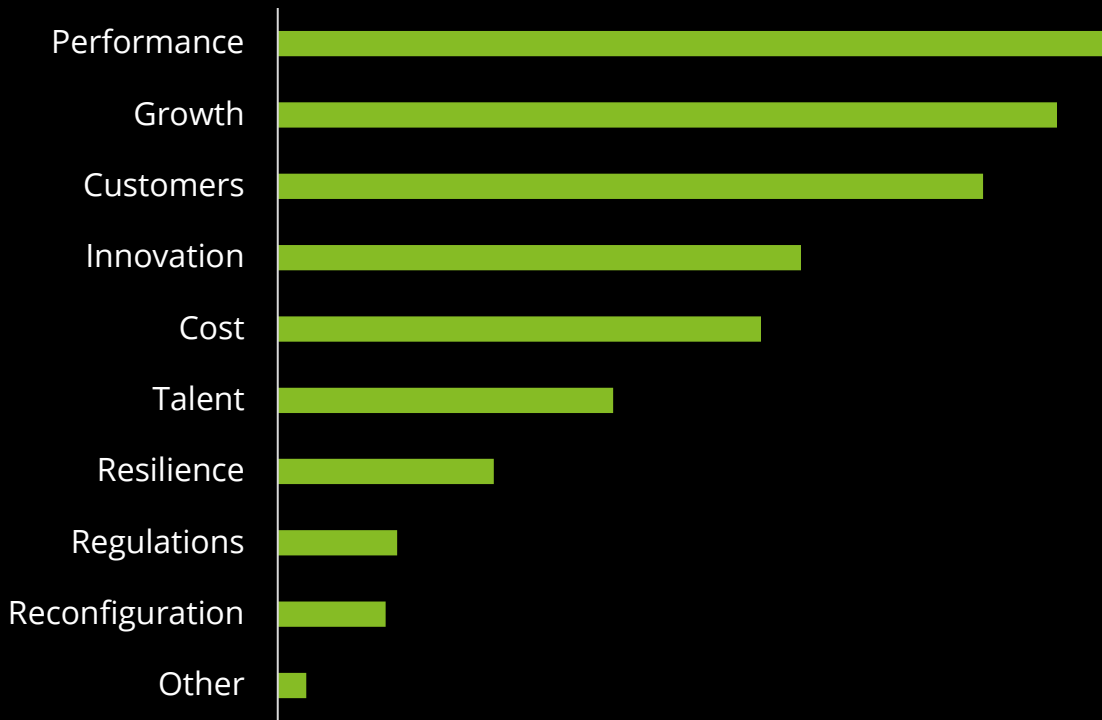
Marketing budgets are on the rise

Q. Compared to your current fiscal year, how much do you expect your organisation's marketing or equivalent annual budget to change in the next fiscal year?



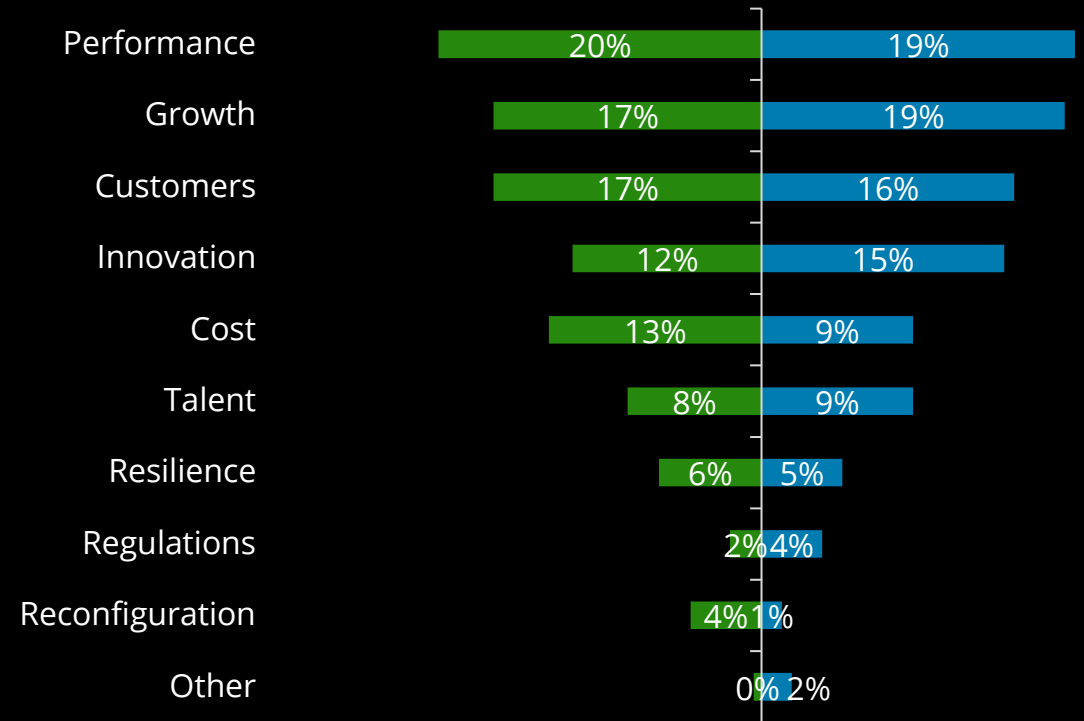
Both CMOs and SMLs rank performance as top priority

Q. What are your top 3 budget priorities for the next fiscal year? (please place in order of importance)



Ranked Frequency

Budget priorities ranked by SMLs vs CMOs



■ SML ■ CMO

LEADING YOUR
COLLEAGUES AND TEAMS

Key findings

- **AI is the top concern:** "leveraging AI" has rapidly become the #1 most pressing issue for marketing leaders, a significant jump from its #5 ranking in the previous year.
- **Strategic skills are paramount:** strategic thinking is now ranked as the single most useful skill for senior marketers, overtaking "leadership" from the prior year.
- **Divergent strategic partnerships:** CMOs prioritise their connection with the CEO, whereas senior marketing leaders (SMLs) work most closely with operations and finance leaders.
- **The budget paradox:** while marketing budgets are generally on the rise, nearly a quarter of companies still allocate a low percentage of the overall company budget to the marketing function, creating a tension between expectation and investment.
- **Performance is the core focus:** despite other pressures, both CMOs and SMLs rank performance as their #1 budget priority for the upcoming fiscal year.

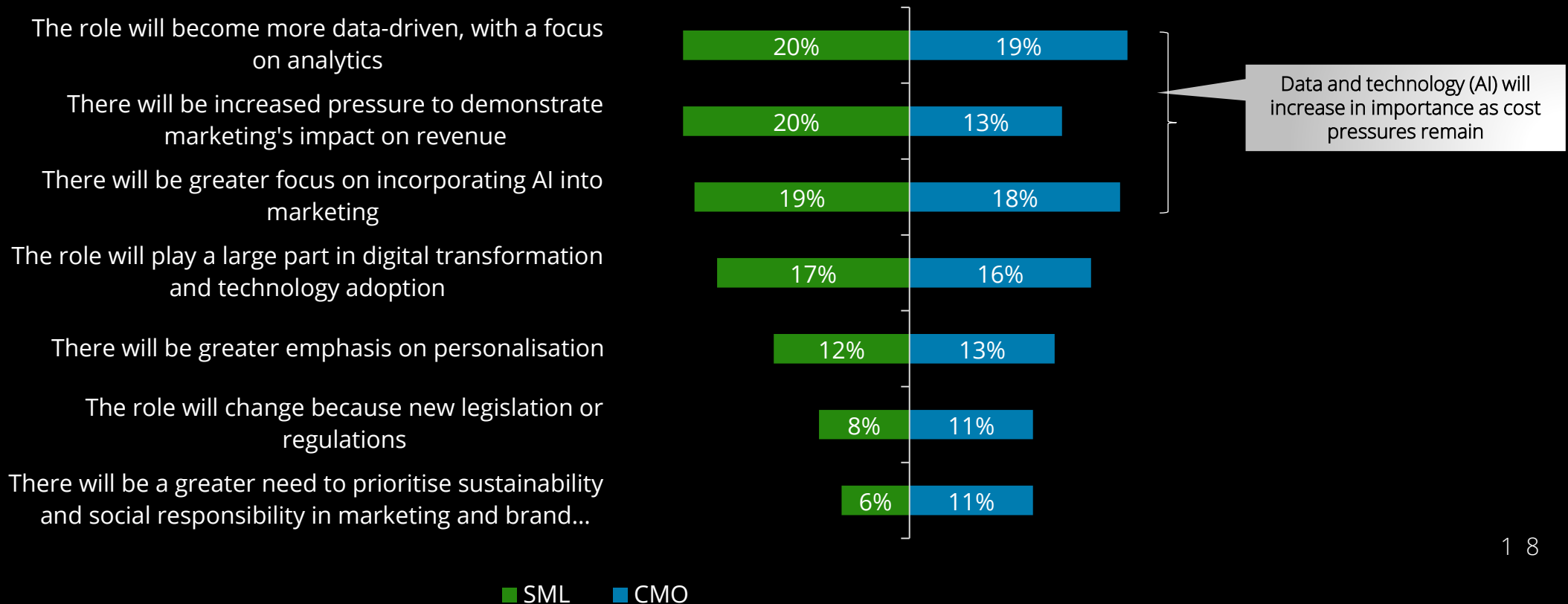
Recommended actions

1. **Prioritise talent development:** aggressively invest in hiring for data and analytics roles while simultaneously creating structured upskilling programmes for your existing team in analytics and performance marketing.
2. **Champion AI adoption:** launch pilot programs for GenAI that target clear, measurable outcomes in efficiency or customer engagement to build momentum and prove value.
3. **Establish clear metrics:** implement robust, shared dashboards that clearly communicate marketing's ROI and contribution to business goals, helping to alleviate pressure and prove impact.

SMLs feel more pressure to show marketing's impact

Q. How do you perceive your role will change in the next two years?

Ranked perception of change in role in the next two years by SMLs vs CMOs



Overwhelmingly CMOs said AI and technology while SMLs tended to point to AI as well as budgets and economic conditions

Q. What do you think is driving this change in your role?

SML

“Tightening marketing budgets, ongoing challenging trading conditions and disruption to the business model will necessitate increased adoption of AI”

“Increased marketing budget and footfall”

“Competition and the changing ways of marketing”

“The rapid advancement of AI and automation. Also, the shifting of customer expectations for personalisation will play a role. Lastly, the pressure from the board to prove marketing ROI”

“Changing economic and real world conditions changing how businesses work”

CMO

“The rapid advancement of AI and automation. Also, the shifting of customer expectations for personalization will play a role. Lastly, the pressure from the board to prove marketing ROI.”

“Squeeze on costs and pressure to deliver full funnel comms with same/ less budgets”

“The increasing use of AI and the way people interact with companies and brands”

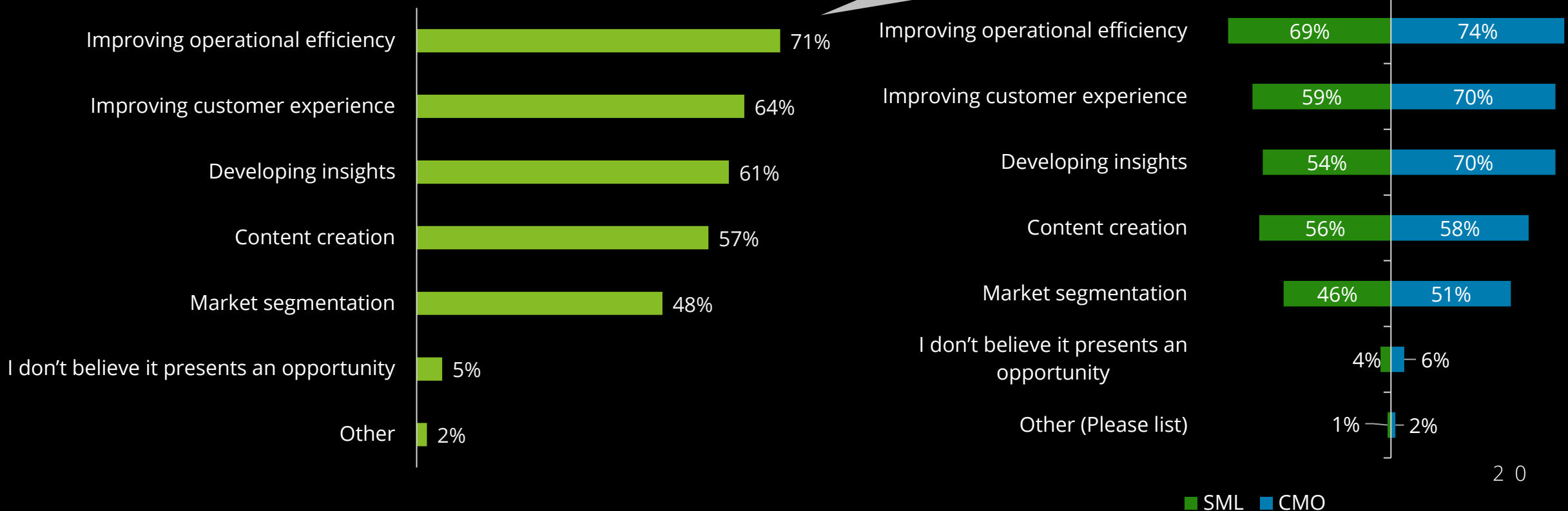
“We are focusing more on artificial intelligence to enhance productivity and reduce cost”

“There is more pressure to produce more effective campaigns in less time”

GenAI to improve efficiency and customer experience

Q. What do you see as the biggest opportunities of generative AI for your role?

Efficiency is still the main driver of GenAI initiatives. However, as capability matures, there's a gradual shift to effectiveness and customer experience benefits

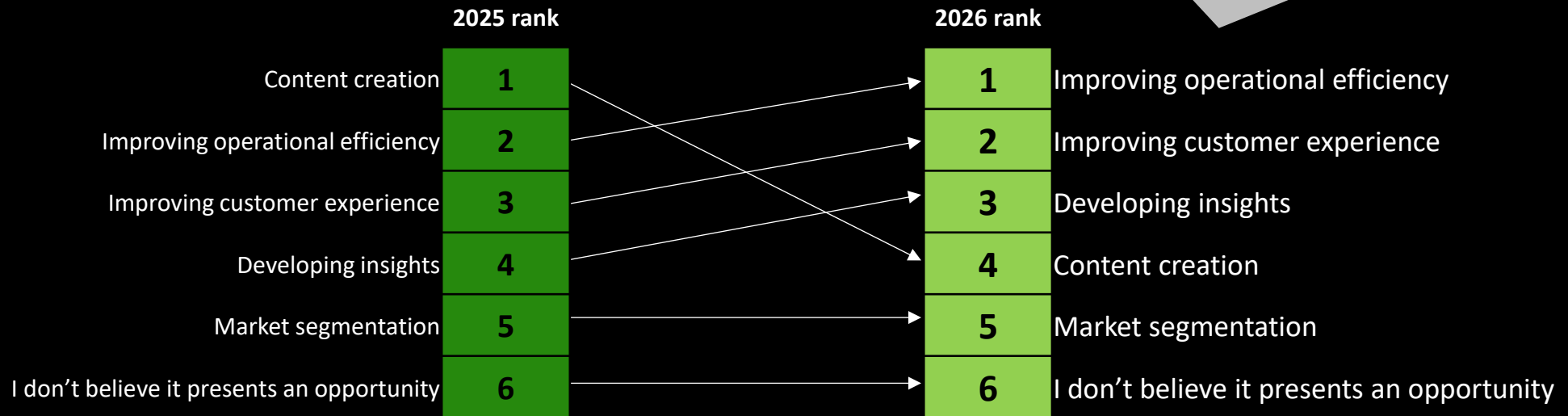


Q: Please estimate how your company's fiscal year 2024 US marketing budget is allocated across the following categories.

Massive increase in seeing opportunities from GenAI

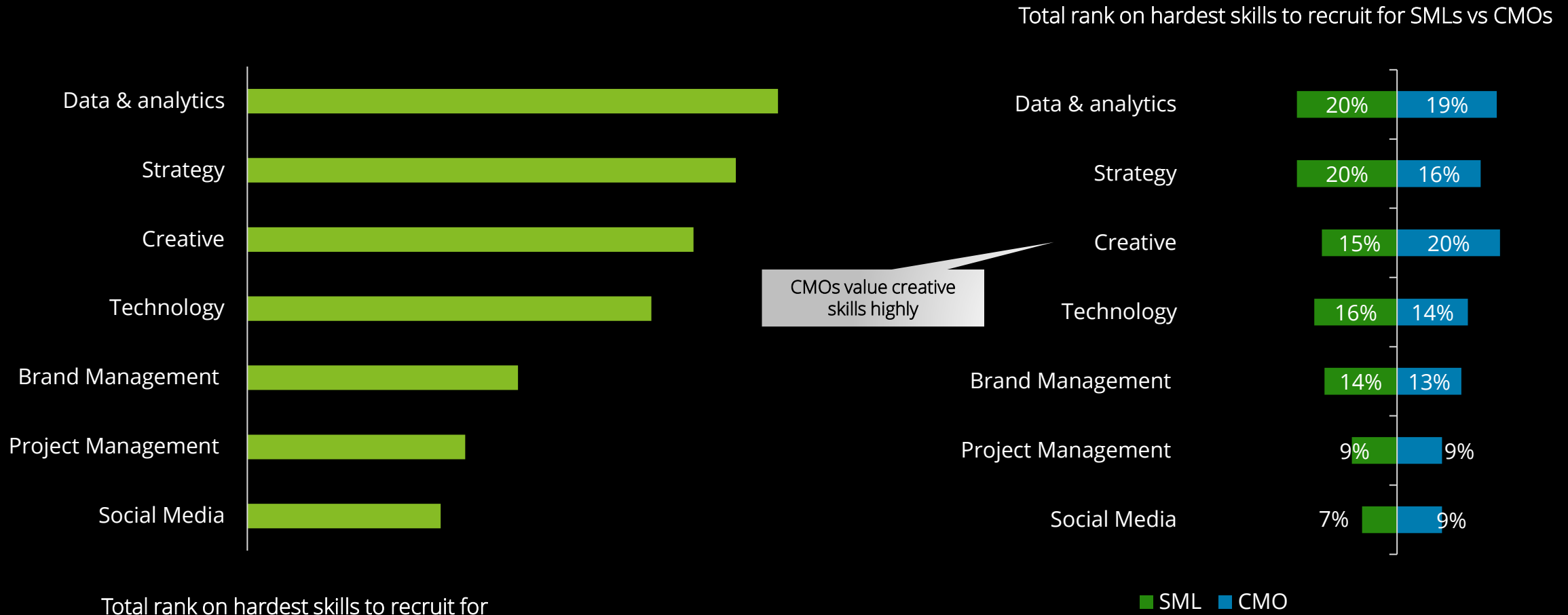
Q. What do you see as the biggest opportunities of generative AI for your role?

Content was seen as the obvious first use case for GenAI but capability is starting to increase and broadening from this initial view



Data and analytics roles are the most difficult to fill but CMOs also find creative skills hard to recruit for

Q. What do you find are the hardest skills to recruit for?



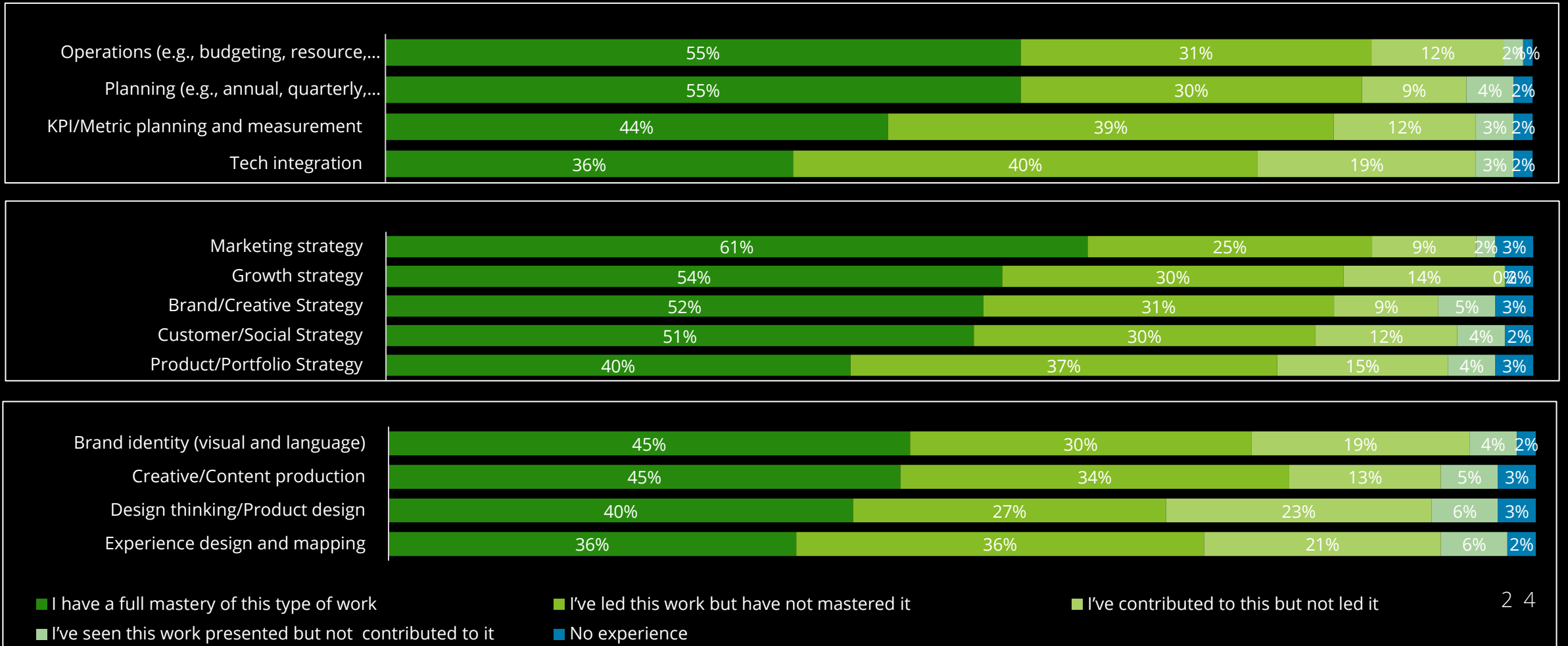
Data and analytics has overtaken strategy as hardest skill to recruit for

Q. What do you find are the hardest skills to recruit for? (ranked)



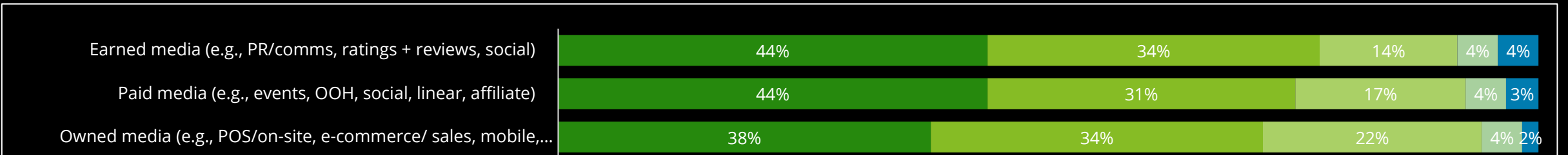
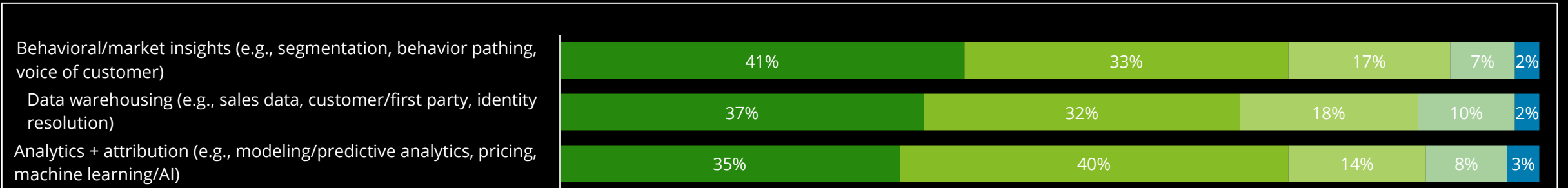
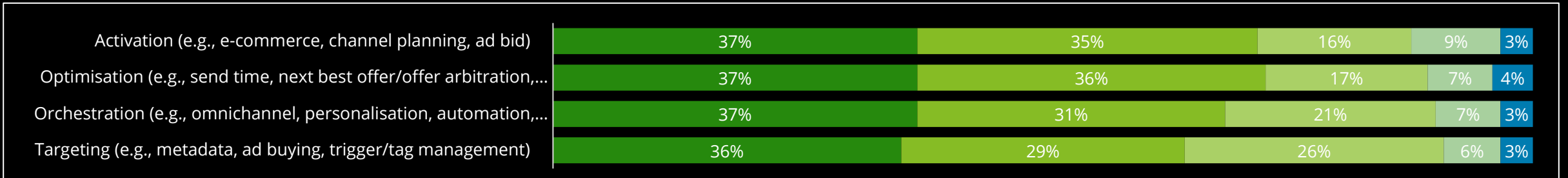
Both CMOs and SMLs perceive high competency

Q. Which best describes your level of experience in each of the following marketing areas?



Opportunities to develop analytical and channel skills

Q. Which best describes your level of experience in each of the following marketing areas?



■ I have a full mastery of this type of work
 ■ I've led this work but have not mastered it
 ■ I've contributed to this but not led it
 ■ I've seen this work presented but not contributed to it
 ■ No experience

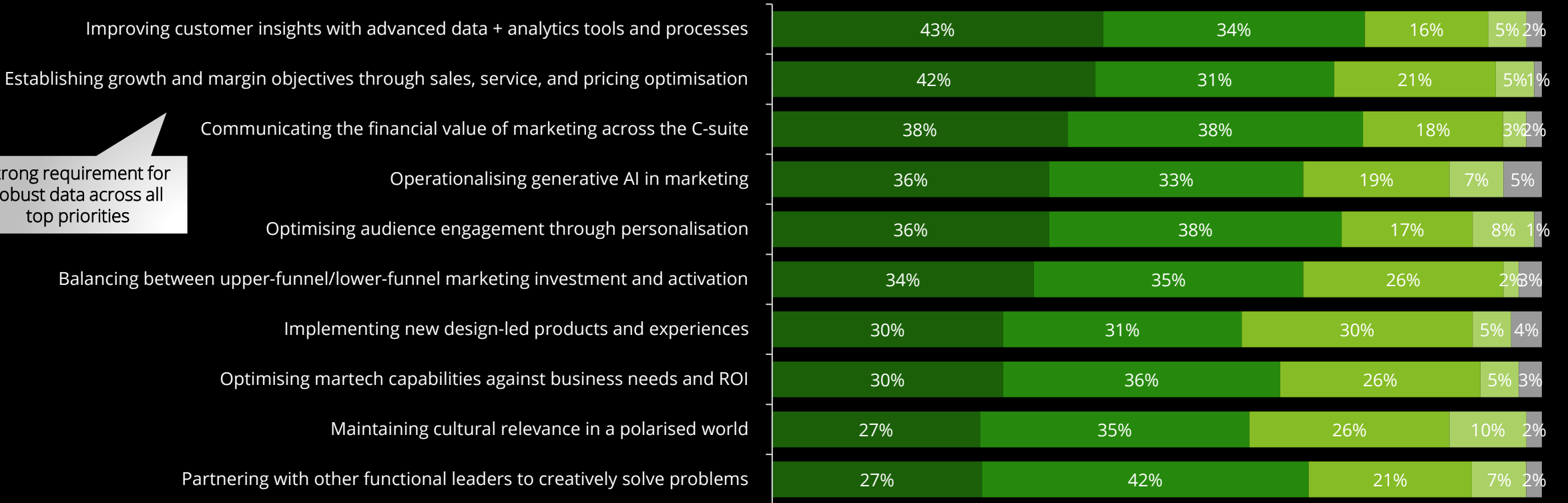
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Many competing priorities with analytics & AI top

Q. On a scale of 1-5, how much is your marketing (or equivalent) function prioritizing each of the following over the next 12 months?

■ Top priority ■ High priority ■ Medium priority ■ Low priority ■ Not a priority

Strong requirement for robust data across all top priorities



Data and analytics prioritised

Q. On a scale of 1-5, how much is your marketing (or equivalent) function prioritising each of the following over the next 12 months?



LEADING YOURSELF

Key findings

- **Personal skill gaps:** leaders from both groups feel they most need to improve their capabilities in analytics, technology, and growth strategy to be prepared for their next role.
- **The influence challenge:** a key struggle is the ability to effectively influence senior leadership. While confident in strategic leadership, this upward management remains a development area.
- **Work-life balance is improving:** 71% of leaders now agree they have a healthy work-life balance, a notable improvement from last year. This is especially true for women, where agreement jumped from 42% to 75% year-over-year.
- **CMO focus on culture:** when asked what skillset they most need to improve, CMOs uniquely prioritised developing talent and culture.
- **Readiness for the top job:** overall, marketing leaders feel 66% prepared to take on the top CMO role, highlighting a confidence gap that needs to be bridged through experience and skill-building.

Recommended actions

1. **Commit to continuous learning:** create a personal development plan focused on closing skill gaps in technology and data analytics. Stay current using top-rated sources like industry publications and LinkedIn.
2. **Master upward management:** proactively build relationships with the C-suite and refine your influencing skills to better manage stakeholders and advocate for marketing's strategic role.
3. **Lead by example:** prioritise the development of your team to build a strong talent pipeline and foster a positive culture, while also setting a healthy standard for work-life balance.

CMOs and SMLs both worried about having the skills especially related to technology but SMLs also worried about operations, culture and fit

Q. Before starting your current role, what were you most apprehensive about?

SML

“Before starting my current role, I was most apprehensive about how quickly I would adapt to the new work environment and expectations. Every organisation has its own culture, systems, and way of doing things, and I wanted to make sure I could integrate smoothly and add value early on”

“I was most apprehensive about fitting in with a new team and proving myself quickly”

“I worried about meeting expectations and adjusting to a different work culture”

“Aligning creative vision with measurable business outcomes”

CMO

“Being up to the rapidly changing environment”

“My current leadership role has an incredibly broad mandate of which Marketing is just one piece, therefore operating competently across this breadth is the biggest challenge”

“How to keep work life balance”

“I was most apprehensive about the need to implement new technologies to support our strategic goals”

“That I would not be capable of handling such a big role and it might be too much for me”

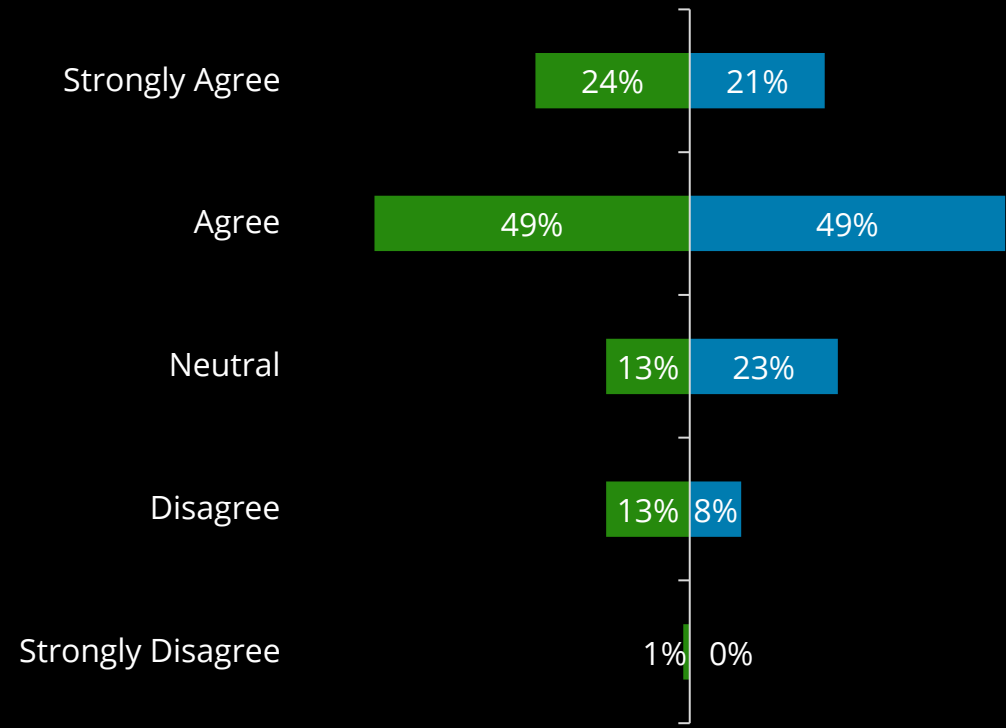
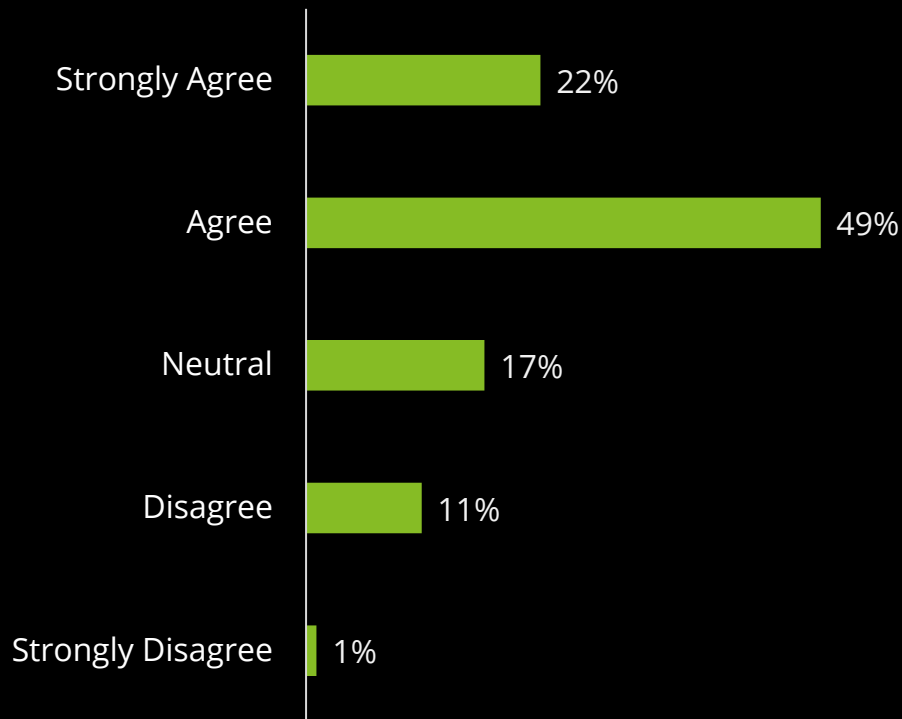
“If I had the right skills”

Scope of elevated role of the CMO and its broad remit is daunting, with many SMLs having to step outside their functional specialism to lead the function

71% agree they have a healthy work-life balance, with more SMLs agreeing than CMOs

Q. On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), please rate the following statement: "I feel I have a healthy work-life balance".

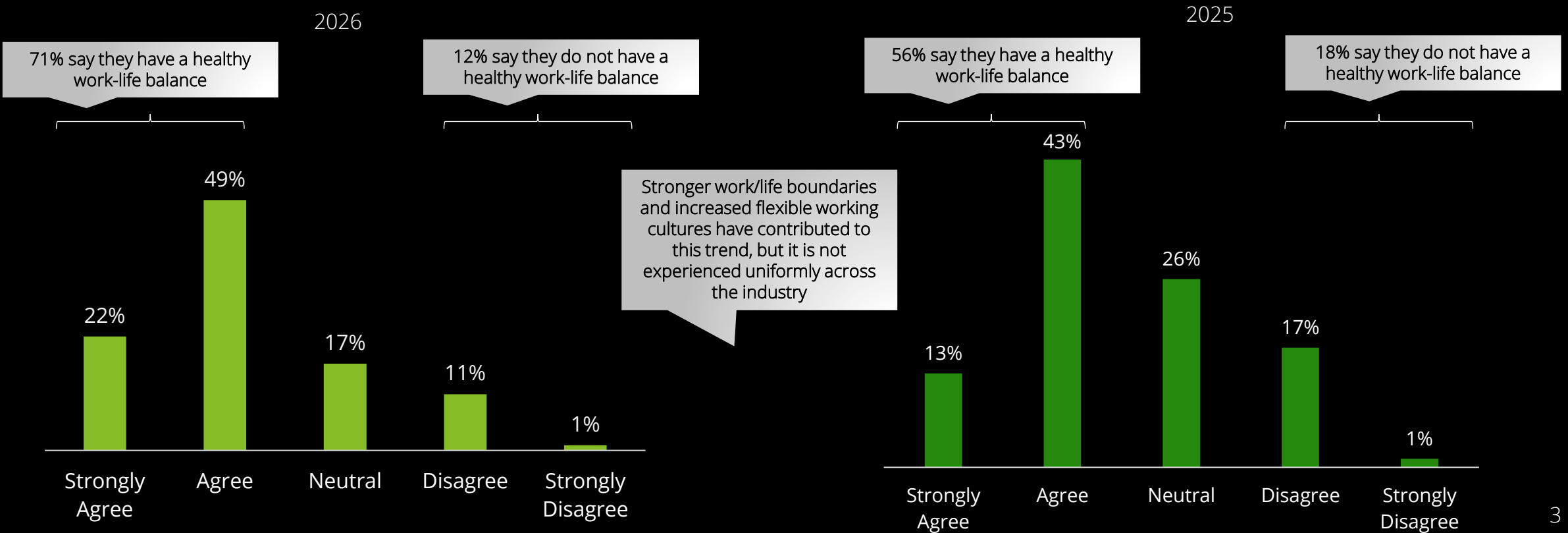
CMOs claim to have a healthier work-life balance which may be because they do, or because they have a higher tolerance threshold



■ SML ■ CMO

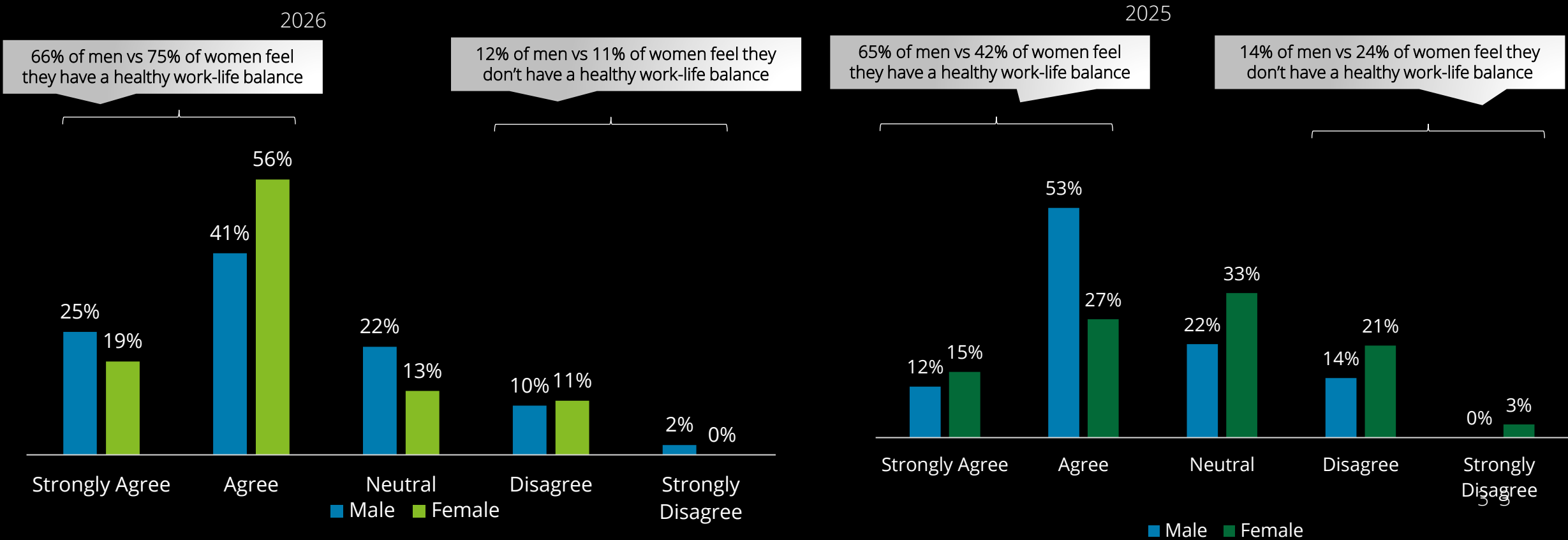
More CMOs and SMLs are finding better work-life balance this year compared to last year

Q. On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), please rate the following statement: "I feel I have a healthy work-life balance".



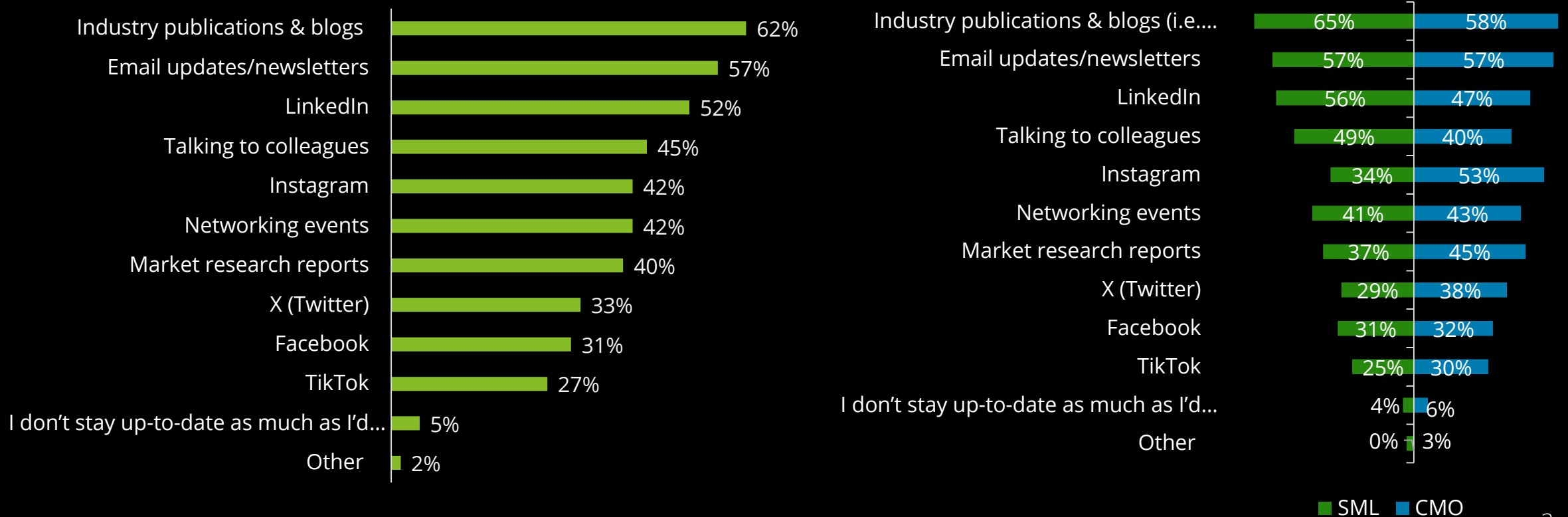
More women this year agree they have a balance (75% vs 42%)

Q. On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), please rate the following statement: "I feel I have a healthy work-life balance".



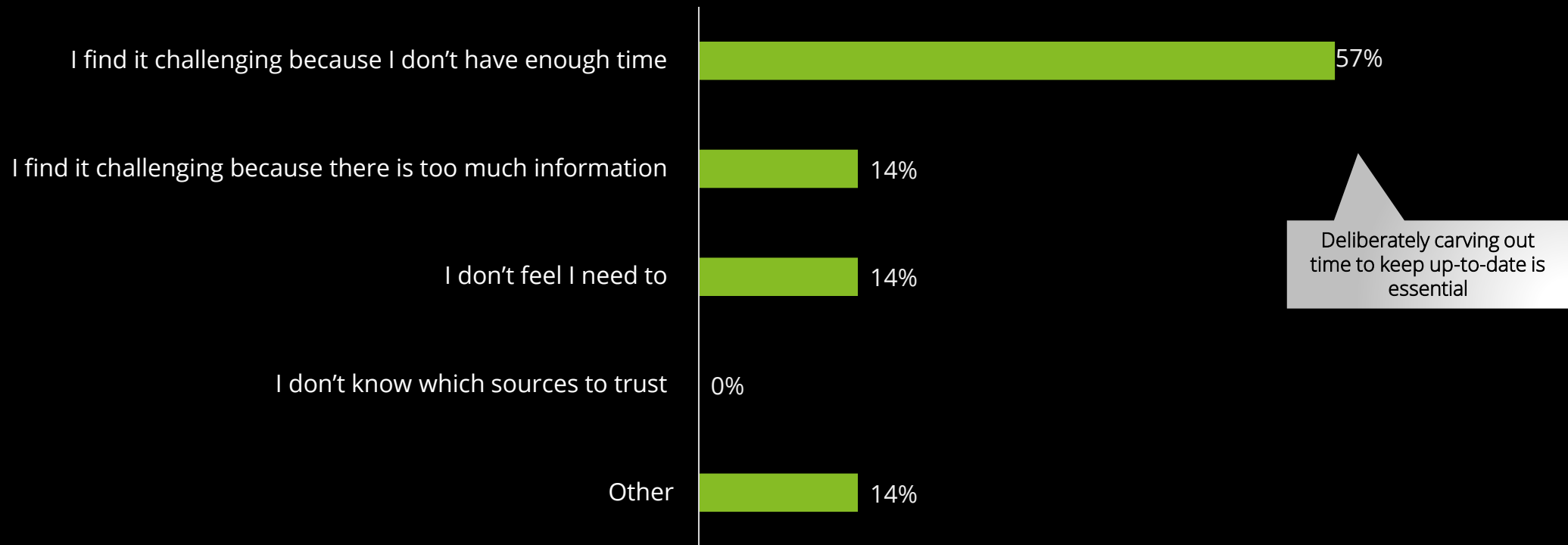
Industry sources and LinkedIn most popular but surprisingly 5% say they don't stay up-to-date

Q. How do you stay up-to-date on the latest marketing trends?



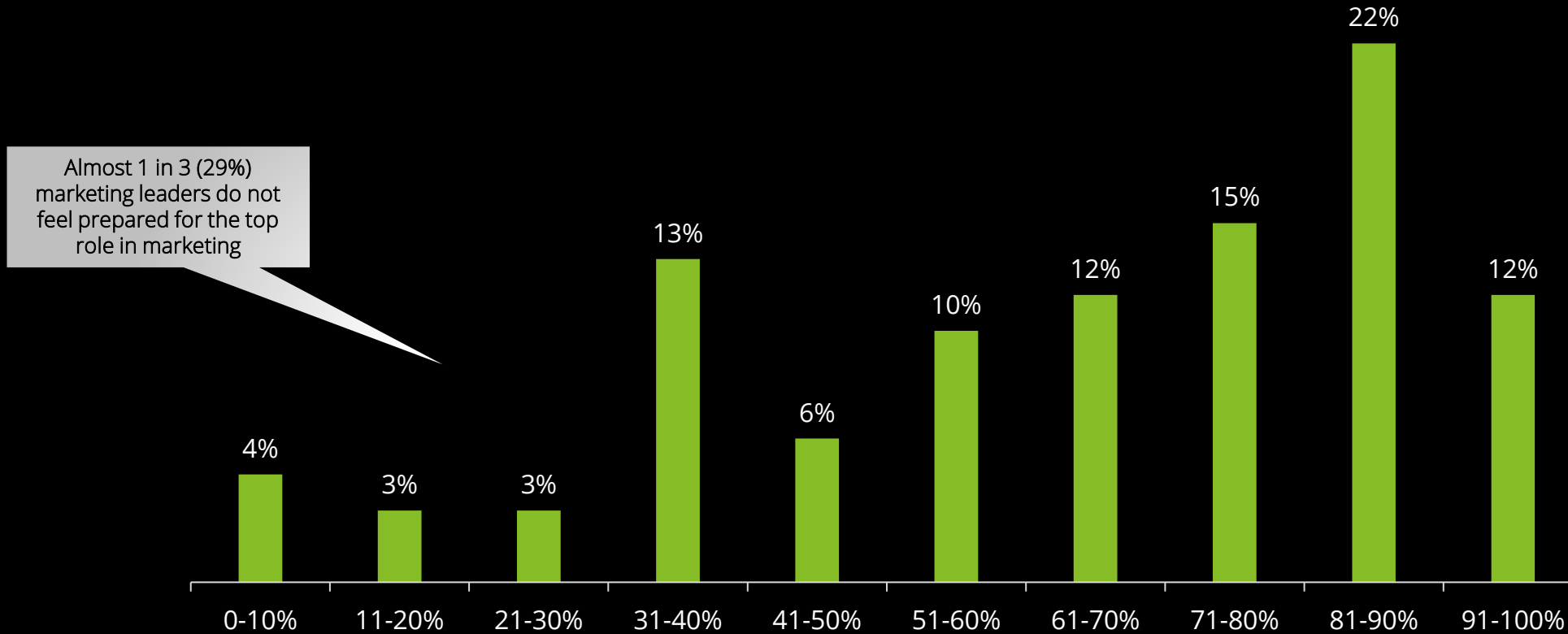
Lack of time is by far the biggest barrier to staying up-to-date

Q. Why don't you stay more up-to-date?



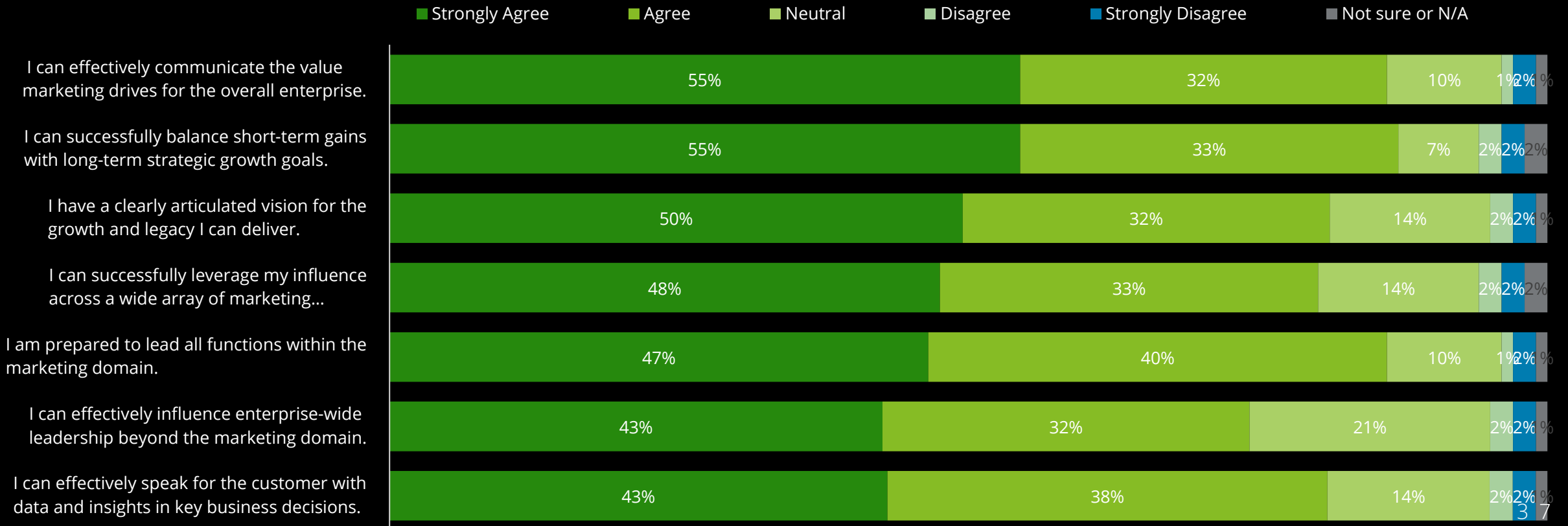
Marketing leaders overall feel 66% prepared for the top role

Q. On a scale of 0-100%, how prepared are you feeling to take on a CMO or equivalent role in marketing?



Being able to effectively influence leadership is a struggle

Q. On a scale of 1-5, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:



High level of confidence in achieving goals and communicating the value of marketing

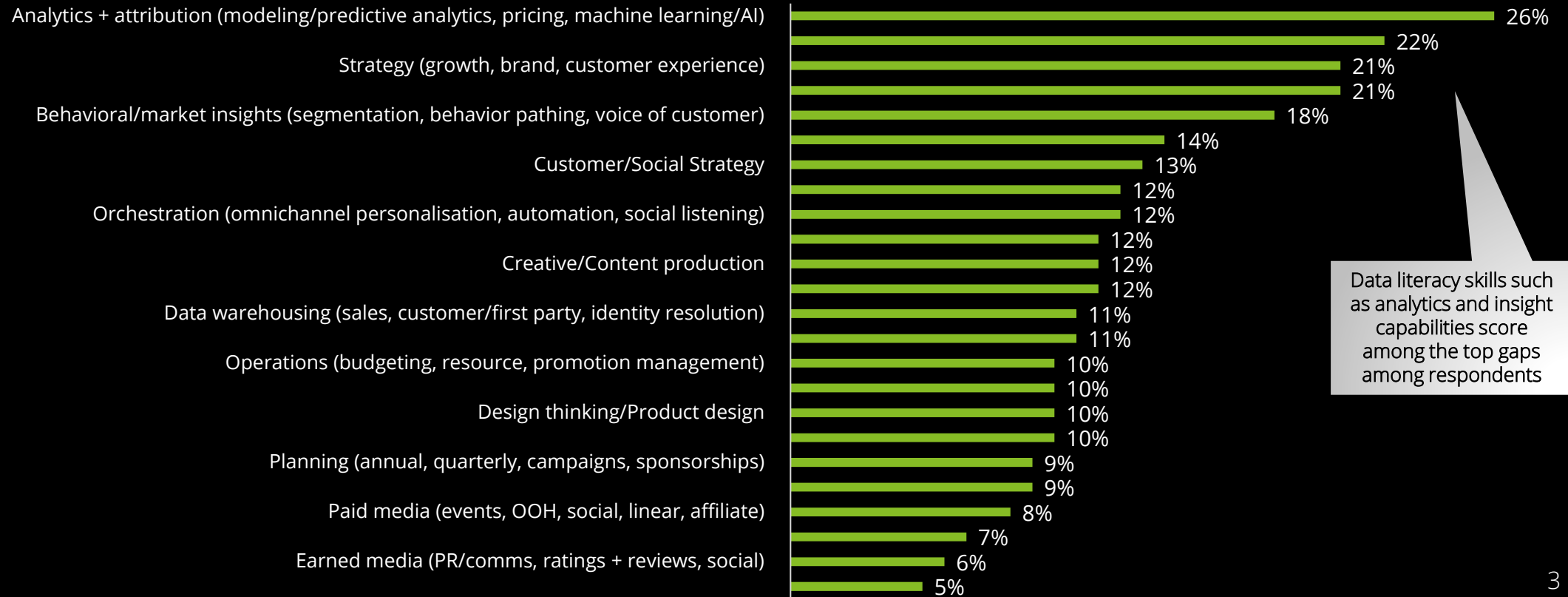
Q. On a scale of 1-5, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Strongly agree/Agree



Opportunity to improve analytics and tech skills

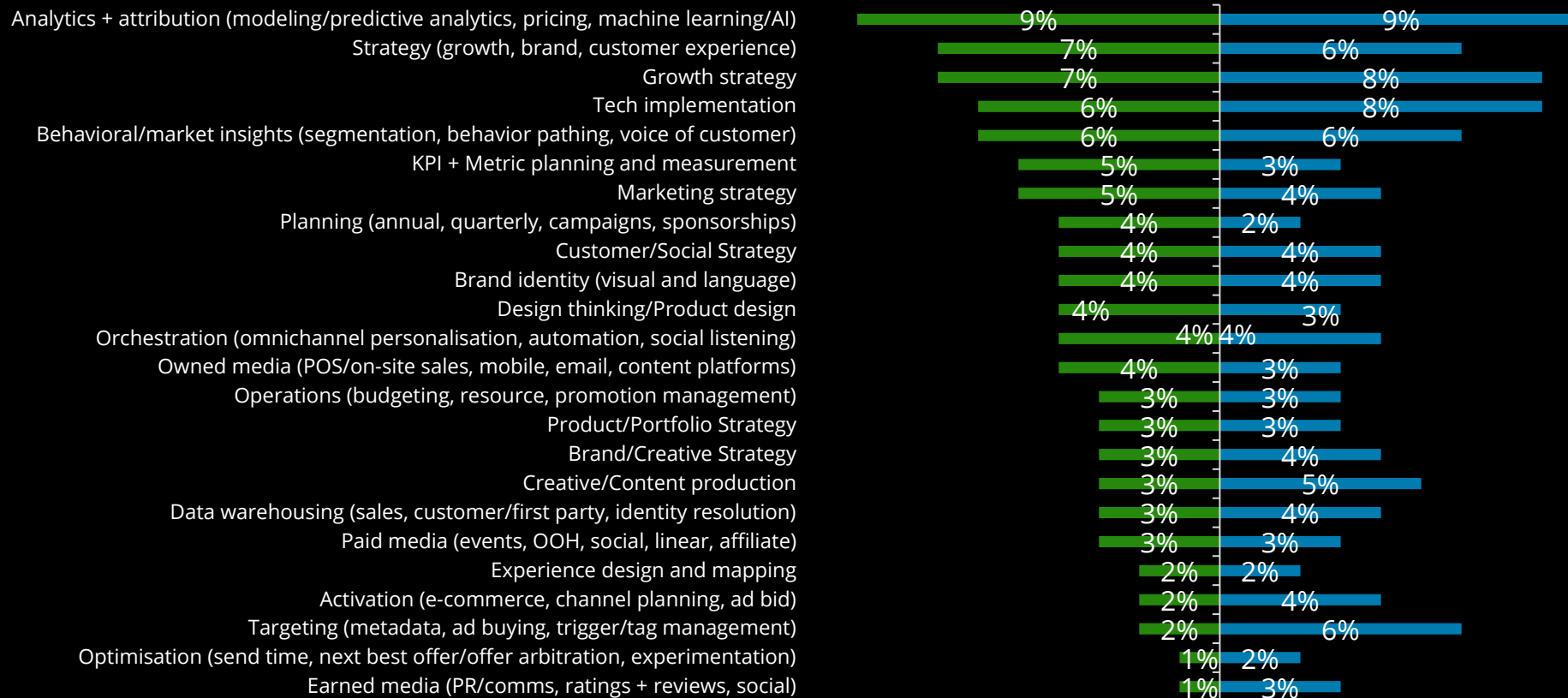
Q. Which of the following marketing capability areas do you feel you most need to improve to be prepared for your next role?



Data literacy skills such as analytics and insight capabilities score among the top gaps among respondents

CMOs and SMLs both feel they need to improve analytics, tech skills and growth strategy

Q. Which of the following marketing capability areas do you feel you most need to improve to be prepared for your next role?



Strategy, relationship-building and creativity top skills

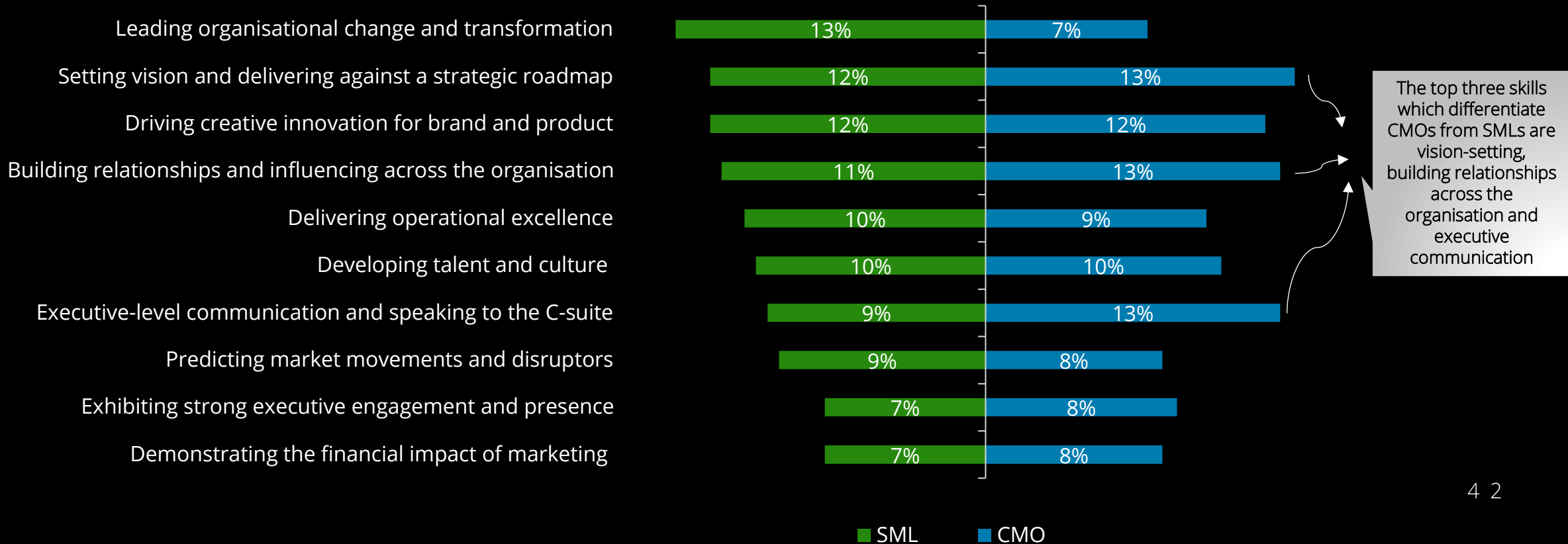
Q. Which of the following areas would you consider your top skills? Please select your top 3.



Being able to demonstrate and tell the story behind the numbers is a key skill of marketing leaders that is lacking

CMOs more confident in communications while SMLs lead change and transformation

Q. Which of the following areas would you consider your top skills? Please select your top 3.



Room for improvement in leading change and setting a vision but also for proving value of marketing

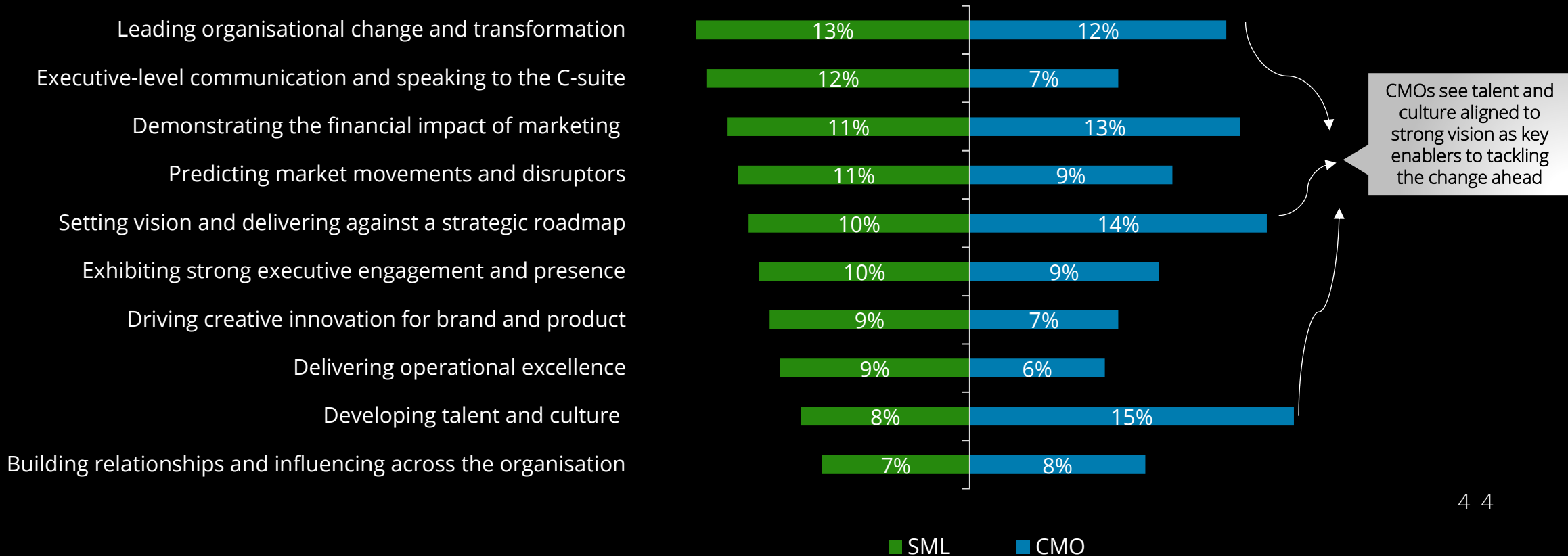
Q. Which of the following skillsets do you feel you most need to improve to be prepared for your next role? Please select your top 3.

Marketing leaders are anticipating significant change, reflecting the most pressing issues of 'Leveraging AI' and 'Economic conditions'



CMOs want to improve on developing talent and culture

Q. Which of the following skillsets do you feel you most need to improve to be prepared for your next role? Please select your top 3.



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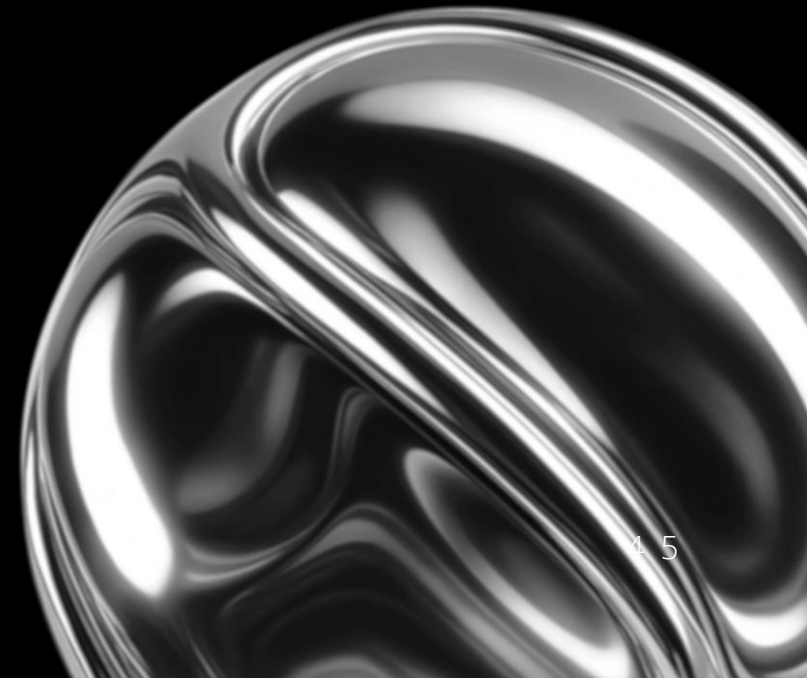
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