TRUST AS THE ULTIMATE WIREFRAME: UX IN THE AI AGE

SEATTLE RESEARCH COMMUNITY SURVEY | IPSOS

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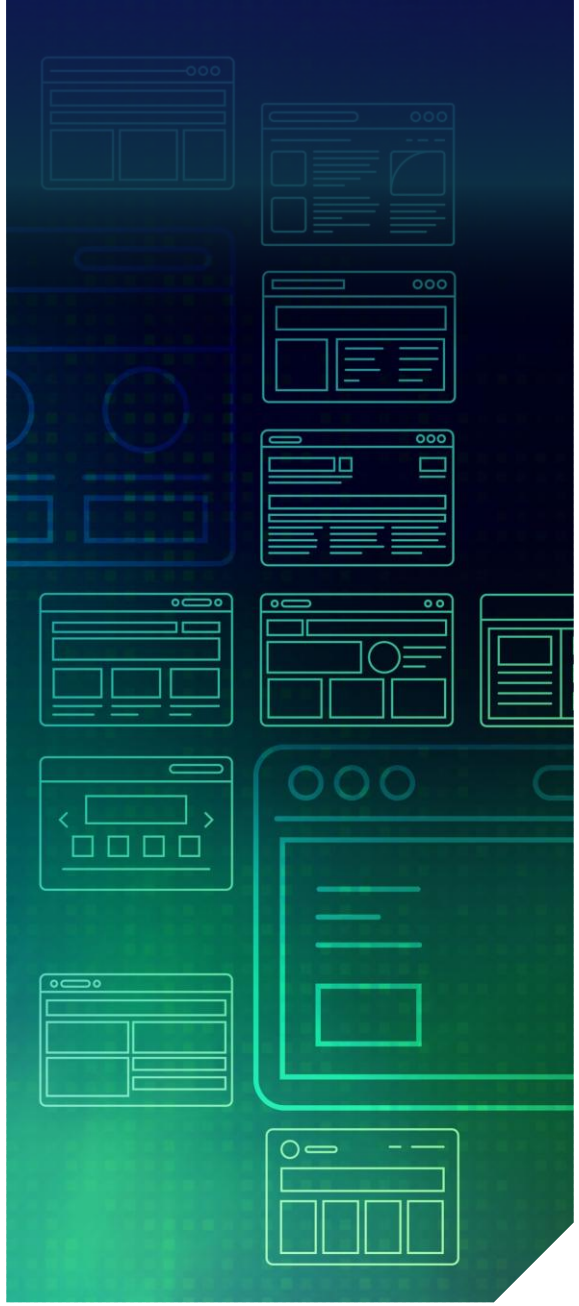

The tension of AI for UX researchers: The promise of speed vs. the peril of losing user trust

AI is embedded in every stage of the research process, from every angle. Researchers are using AI tools to conduct the research itself, but they are also exploring AI features in their products. **AI is everywhere. But trust in AI is less pervasive.**

This report, based on feedback from the Seattle Research Community, sheds light on the AI paradox from the researchers' perspective, and what it means for:

1. End users
2. Senior leaders
3. UX researchers

While this doesn't represent the views of every UX researcher in the U.S. and is based on a relatively low sample size of researchers in Seattle, it provides a useful look at how this community sees the UX world at this moment.

UX researchers are the guardians of user trust and must shepherd their products through the new wilderness with both AI speed and human credibility — because the competition is moving fast, and growth is on the line.

As UX researchers navigate AI for end users and their organizations, trust can become a **wireframe for human connection** in a time of rapid evolution.

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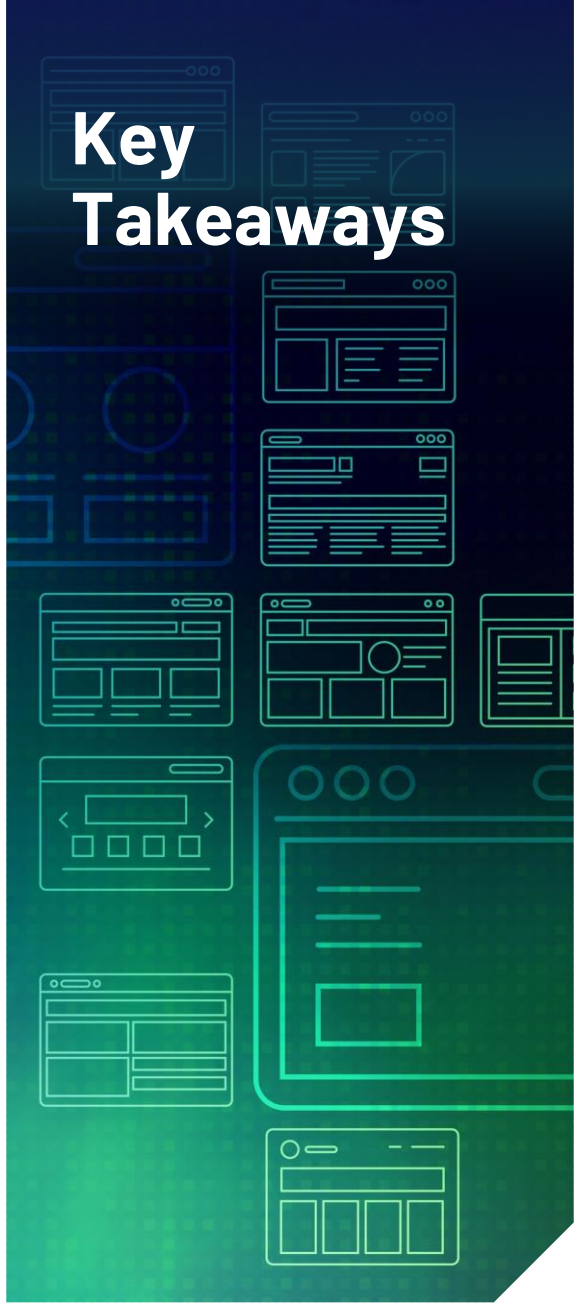
Source: Seattle Research Community/Ipsos Research April 2026, given the small sample size, the findings should be read as analytical and illustrative, not as statistical measurement.

Key Takeaways



1 USER CONTROL & SYSTEM TRANSPARENCY BUILD TRUST

Users currently experience a sharp tension: they want the benefits of AI but remain uncertain about its outputs. To bridge this gap and overcome AI limitations amidst heightened expectations for performance, **embedding user control and system transparency into features is critical** according to the researchers in this study.

2 SENIOR LEADERS ARE LAGGING IN TRUST MEASUREMENT

User trust is essential for AI adoption, but dedicated research on trust is lagging because **senior leadership frequently gives trust "lip service" instead of focusing on actionable measurement frameworks,** according to the researchers we spoke with. Small companies are falling furthest behind in this arena, leaving researchers to track user sentiment with a fragmented variety of unstandardized methods.

3 HUMAN TOUCH STILL MAKES THE DIFFERENCE FOR RESEARCHERS

The UX researchers we spoke with successfully leverage AI to handle logistical burdens, specifically reducing upfront tasks and accelerating qualitative insight analysis. However, **researchers maintain that a human touch is irreplaceable for the core aspects of research that require deep empathy and a real expert perspective**.

Source: Seattle Research Community/Ipsos Research April 2026, given the small sample size, the findings should be read as analytical and illustrative, not as statistical measurement.

How UX researchers see users engaging with AI

> There's an interesting tension right now where people are **simultaneously more and less trusting** (ex: trusting AI outputs blindly vs. rejecting anything AI created at all). What inspires trust and what breaks it? What seeds a feeling of trust or distrust before using an AI tool?"

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AI features are mainstream according to the researchers we talked to, but consumers say they are feeling overwhelmed by rapid change...

79% of UX researchers we spoke with work on AI features[1]

The Ipsos Consumer Tracker survey tells us:

66% of Americans say AI development needs to slow down[2]

76% of Americans say people need to keep up with AI[2]

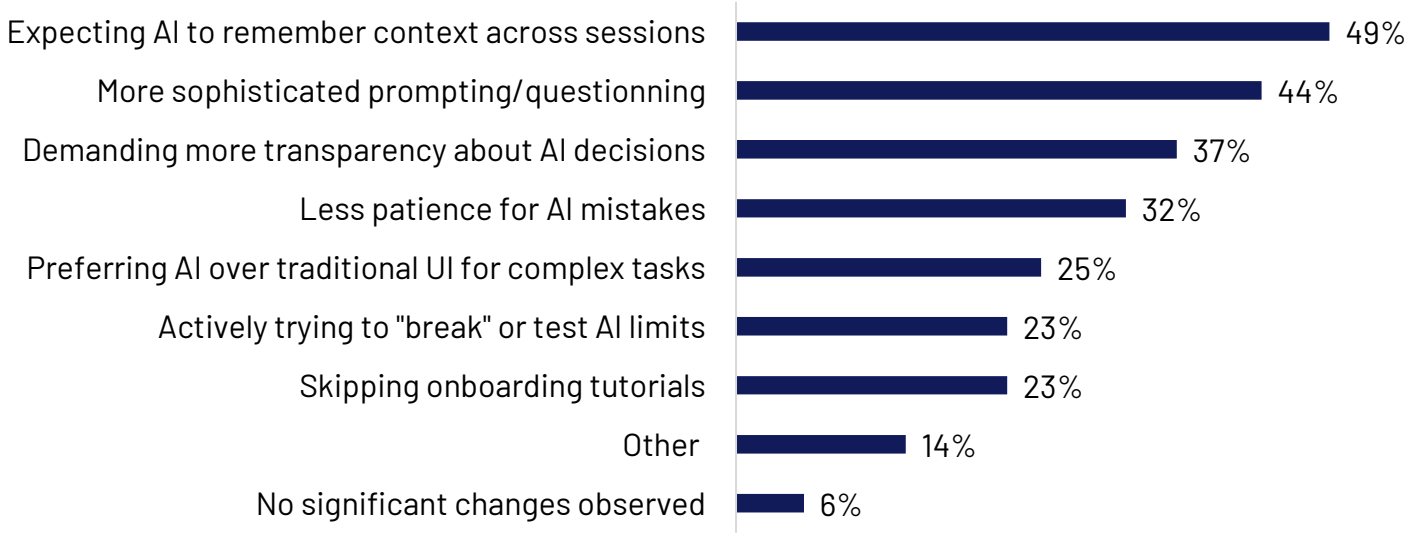
AI features are now mainstream, but the **most effective way to introduce AI features is still up for debate.** Users are challenged by AI, yet they are increasingly relying on AI-driven features daily, often unknowingly. For example, users may love “smart summaries" or “predicted actions" in their software even when they claim they are wary of AI. How the product facilitates the "reveal" of AI can drastically impact trust in the AI feature itself.

Users are approaching AI tools not with pure curiosity, but with systemic fatigue and the fear of professional displacement. UXR thinking must shift from maximizing engagement to **minimizing cognitive friction and intimidation**. Since users feel forced to adapt, the researcher’s role is to make that adaptation **feel safe rather than stressful.** Researchers can advocate for hyper-gradual onboarding, transparent system boundaries, and interfaces that actively alleviate user anxiety, positioning AI as a stabilizing assistant that helps users keep pace without making them run on a treadmill.

Source: [1]Seattle Research Community/Ipsos Research April 2026, given the small sample size, the findings should be read as analytical and illustrative, not as statistical measurement.
[2]Ipsos Consumer Tracker March 2026

And user expectations of AI are rising

Recent changes to user expectations of AI for these researchers



Q. Over the past 12 months, what changes have you observed in how users interact with AI features? (Select all that apply) n=71

> ***A consistent and reliable experience meeting or exceeding expectations with a product or brand helps maintain trust. A big challenge companies face is continuing to provide a positive experience in the midst of dramatic and rapid changes like AI.***

The data from these researchers signals a definitive shift in the user mindset: the novelty phase of AI is officially over, and users are rapidly replacing their initial curiosity with strict, enterprise-level demands. The overwhelming observation that users expect AI to remember context across sessions (35 responses) proves that users' mental model has evolved from treating AI as a "stateless search box" to viewing it as a continuous service. This expectation of seamless continuity, paired with a sharp decrease in patience for AI mistakes (23 responses) and a surge in sophisticated prompting (31 responses), indicates **that user literacy is aggressively outpacing current interface designs**. Users are no longer content with passive, magical outputs; they are stress-testing systems, demanding transparency behind algorithmic decisions, and expecting AI to function less like an unpredictable novelty and more like a mature, competent utility.

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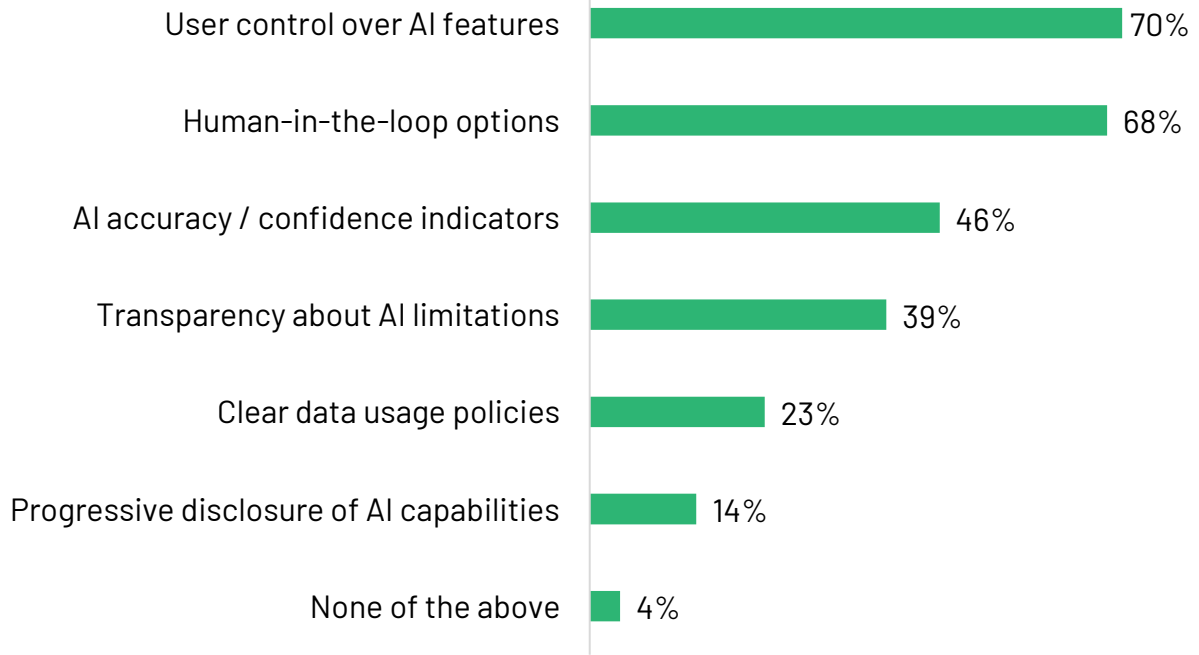
When AI is used, user trust is driven by control and transparency

The data from this group of researchers clearly demonstrates that **control and transparency are the foundational pillars** for effective trust-building today. While "Transparency about AI limitations" is named by 40% of these researchers as a key driver of trust, the top three strategies are fundamentally exercises in control and transparency themselves. Offering **human-in-the-loop options** (67.9%) requires pulling back the curtain so users can see what the AI is proposing, evaluate it, and intervene when necessary. Similarly, providing **accuracy and confidence indicators** (46.4%) directly exposes the system's internal certainty level to the end user. Ultimately, UXRs are finding that trust isn't built by making AI appear flawless; rather, it is built by being completely honest and transparent about **what the AI is doing, how confident it is, and where its boundaries lie.**

> ***I have found that people are more likely to trust if they have the opportunity to dive in deeper to the results or suggestions provided by the AI.***

The most effective trust-building approaches for these researchers



Q. Which trust-building methods have proven MOST effective in your AI-related UX work? (Select all that apply) n=71

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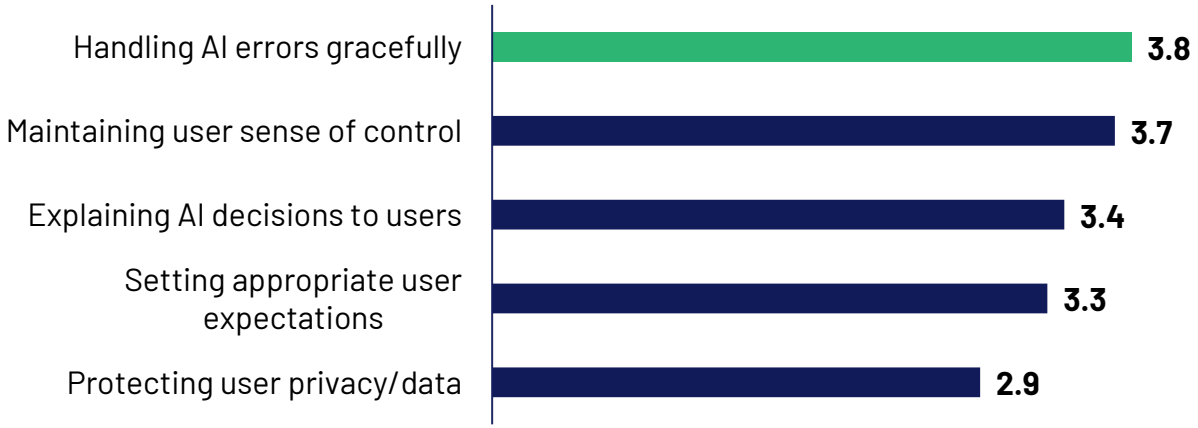
But building transparency and control in AI features is challenging

UX Design Challenge Score 1-5 (higher = more challenging) for the researchers in this study



Q. Rate how challenging these trust-related aspects have become when designing AI features (1=Not challenging, 5=Extremely challenging) n=56

> **Trust is an integral part of anything regarding AI. There is a balance between ensuring companies stay relevant with the newest AI capabilities while continuing to create products/experiences that are user-centric.**

The feedback from researchers in this study demonstrates a fundamental shift in the product design landscape: UX researchers are no longer primarily blocked by established hurdles like data privacy, which now benefit from well-structured corporate playbooks and legal guardrails. Instead, the real battlefield of AI UX is **managing the probabilistic, volatile nature of machine learning itself**. Traditional software breaks in binary, predictable ways, but AI fails via confident hallucinations and subtle context drift. When a system becomes unpredictable, a user's sense of agency immediately plummets. The high friction around error recovery and user control indicates that our current design systems may be ill-equipped for collaborative, non-deterministic interfaces. To bridge this gap, UXRs must move away from designing rigid user flows and start designing for "graceful degradation," creating flexible interaction frameworks that keep humans in the driver's seat even when the model loses its way.

Source: Seattle Research Community/Ipsos Research April 2026, given the small sample size, the findings should be read as analytical and illustrative, not as statistical measurement.

2

SENIOR LEADERS ARE LAGGING IN TRUST MEASUREMENT

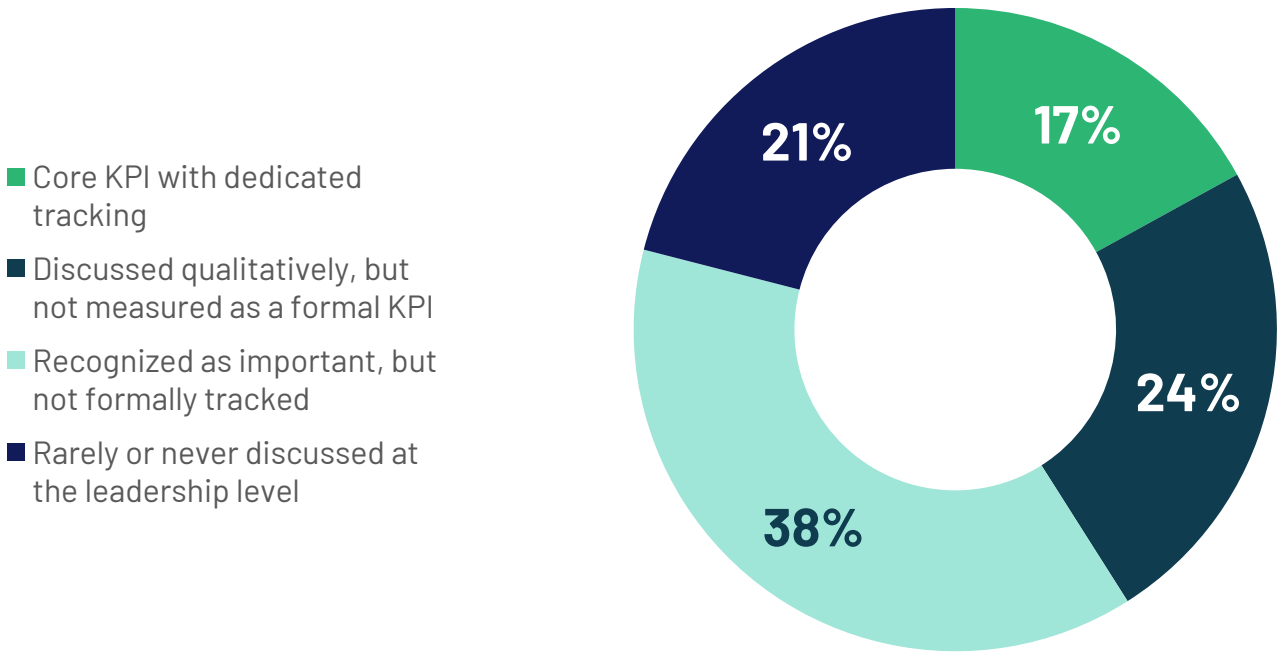
How UX researchers see trust measurement

> *I would love the opportunity to see more strategy around how to get leadership buy-in on frameworks for measuring trust instead of just giving it lip service."*

Source: Seattle Research Community/Ipsos Research April 2026, given the small sample size, the findings should be read as analytical and illustrative, not as statistical measurement.

Despite trust being critical, these researchers don't see senior leaders making it a priority

How and if executive leadership measures trust as a KPI at the companies of the researchers in this study



Q. To what extent does your executive leadership team recognize "User Trust" as a measurable Key Performance Indicator (KPI)? n=71

> ***Trust in UX is not a concept that many businesses consider. Businesses should think more about trust in UX as a factor that might cause prospective buyers from not proceeding to complete purchases or take other desired actions.***

Despite broad agreement that user trust is essential for AI adoption, **83% of organizations fail to formally quantify it**, largely because senior leadership often struggles to measure abstract, socio-psychological concepts with the same rigor as traditional operational metrics. When trust is relegated to casual discussion or ignored entirely, companies risk launching AI products that suffer from low adoption, hidden biases, or severe reputational damage. To shift this paradigm, **UX researchers must translate "trust" from a vague sentiment into a hard business driver.**

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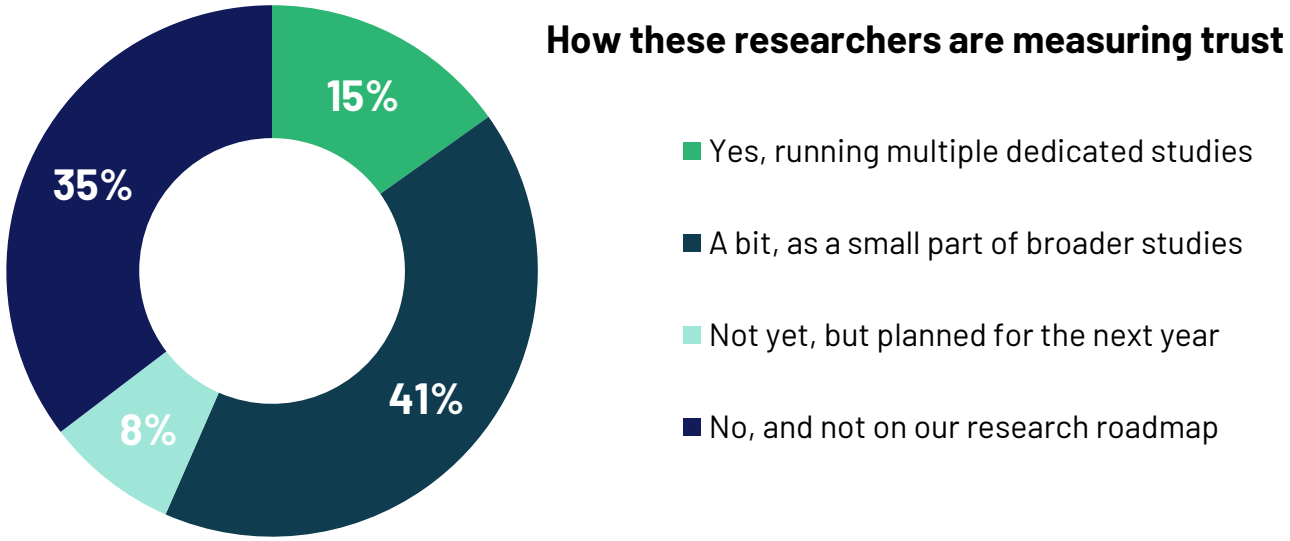
For the researchers we spoke with, research on trust is lagging

> ***I think researchers are ahead of the game in studying trust in AI, but our product partners have not caught up with a guardrails-first approach due to exec pressure and market competition."***



Q. In the last 12 months, has your team conducted research specifically aimed at understanding user trust? n=71

This massive deficit in active research highlights exactly why the velocity paradox remains unresolved. While users scramble under the pressure to keep up with an AI landscape they feel is moving dangerously fast, 85% of research teams are failing to formally or systematically track user trust. With only 15% of organizations running dedicated trust studies and a striking 35% omitting it from their roadmaps entirely**, product teams are flying blind during a profound psychological shift in user behavior**.

To bridge the gap between user anxiety and technological acceleration, **trust measurement cannot remain an occasional afterthought** (41%). Dedicated, proactive benchmarking is the only concrete mechanism UXRs have to diagnose exactly where the system's velocity is outpacing human adaptability. Without this data, teams cannot intentionally design the scaffolding, the precise transparency indicators and control mechanisms, needed to transform a user's frantic attempt to "keep up" into a safe, confident, and stable interaction.

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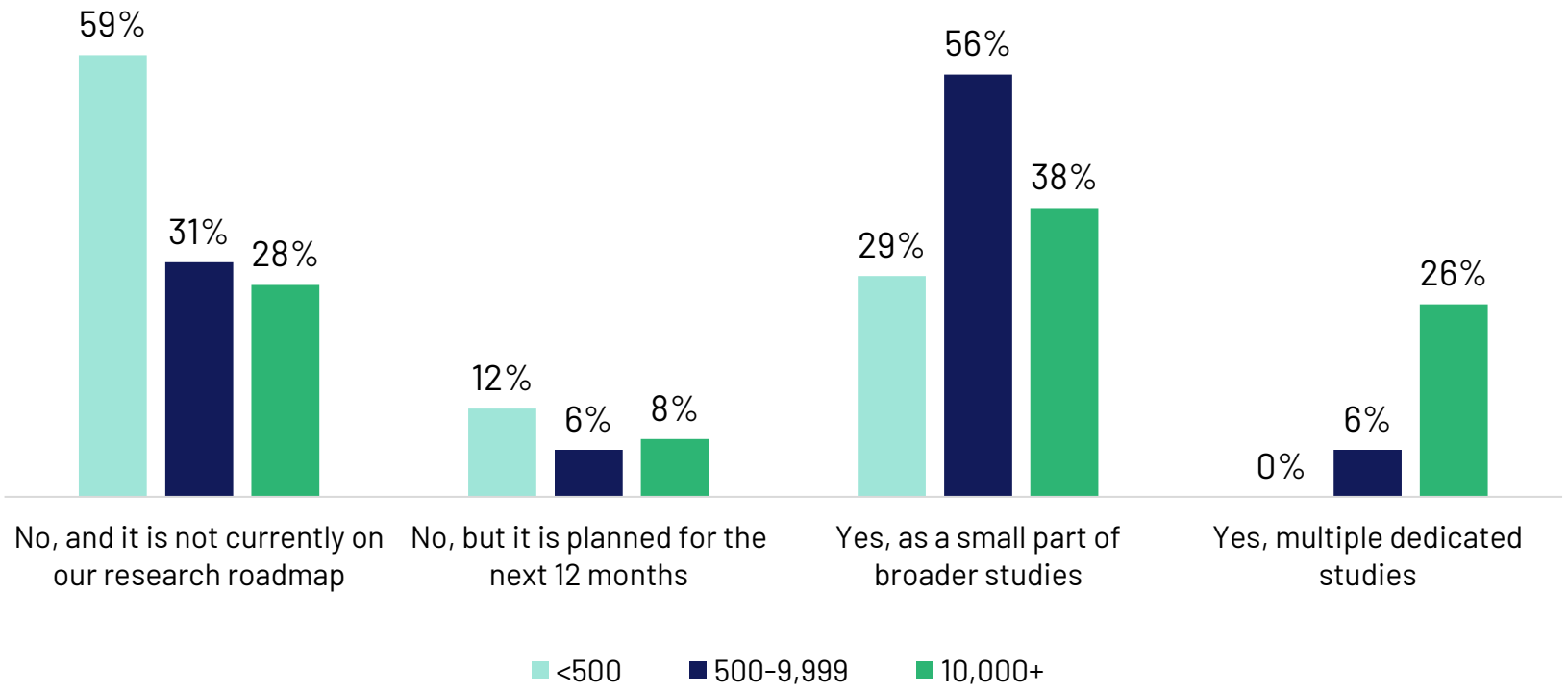
Small companies are especially falling behind in measuring user trust

The data reveals a stark contrast in how user trust is prioritized in these researchers' companies, based on organization size: **26% of enterprise companies (10,000+ employees)** run multiple dedicated trust studies, compared to a staggering **0% of small firms (<500 employees)**, the majority of whom don't even have trust on their roadmap (59%). While larger organizations clearly have the resources for heavy, longitudinal trust benchmarking, smaller firms are missing a critical window of opportunity. They may mistakenly assume that measuring user trust requires massive enterprise budgets and lengthy timelines, unaware that highly agile, cost-effective methods exist.

Trust measurement by company size of the researchers in this study



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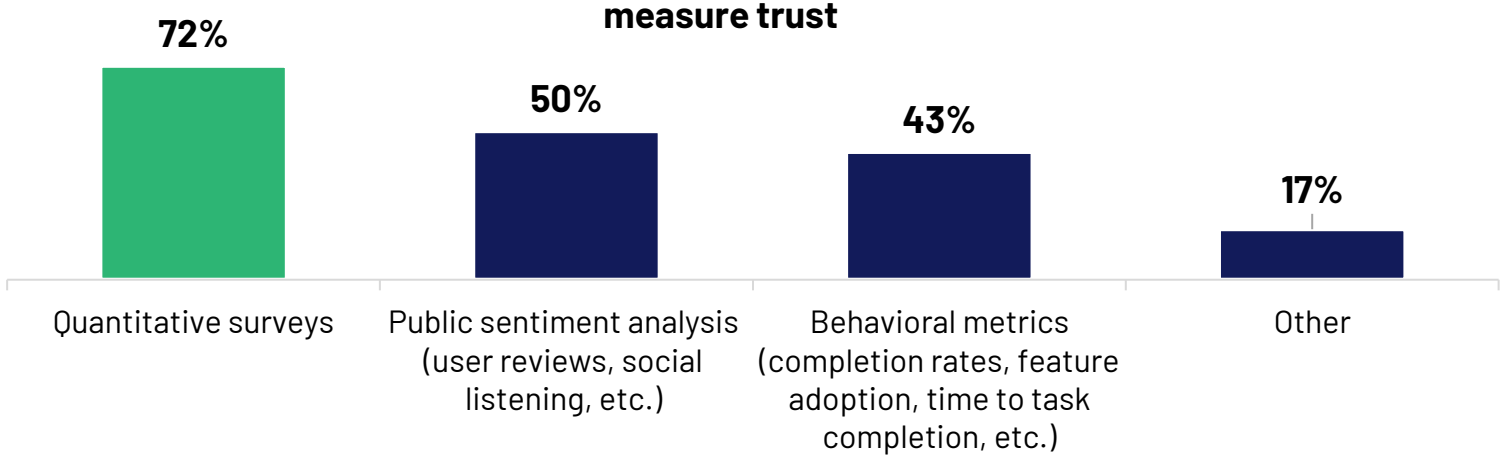
When these researchers do measure trust, they use multiple methods

Among those who claim to measure trust, quantitative surveys lead the charge as the most popular methodology at **72%.** UX researchers rely on a multi-faceted approach to capture user trust, frequently leveraging public sentiment analysis (**50%**) and behavioral metrics (**43%**).

To accelerate time-to-insight without adding operational overhead, teams are also exploring newer methods like **AI-moderated user testing**. AI research assistants can dynamically probe user hesitations in real-time qualitative interviews, analyze emotional sentiment at scale, and rapidly cluster complex qualitative feedback, giving UXRs deeper, actionable insights at the speed of quantitative tracking.

Methods used for trust research among researchers in the study who currently measure trust



Q. Which of the following methods do you use to measure user trust? (Select all that apply) n=46

> ***I am so excited that folks are also thinking about this space. Admittedly, my team and I are just kicking off this work stream, but we are recognizing the importance of trust in AI.***

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3

HUMAN TOUCH STILL MAKES THE DIFFERENCE FOR RESEARCHERS

How UX researchers see themselves engaging with AI

> I do believe that AI will play an increasingly prominent role in UX, although when it comes to doing user research, I don't fully trust that it can ever replace our jobs. I am most excited to explore AI platforms that will optimize our research operations, such as recruitment sourcing and post-study follow-ups."

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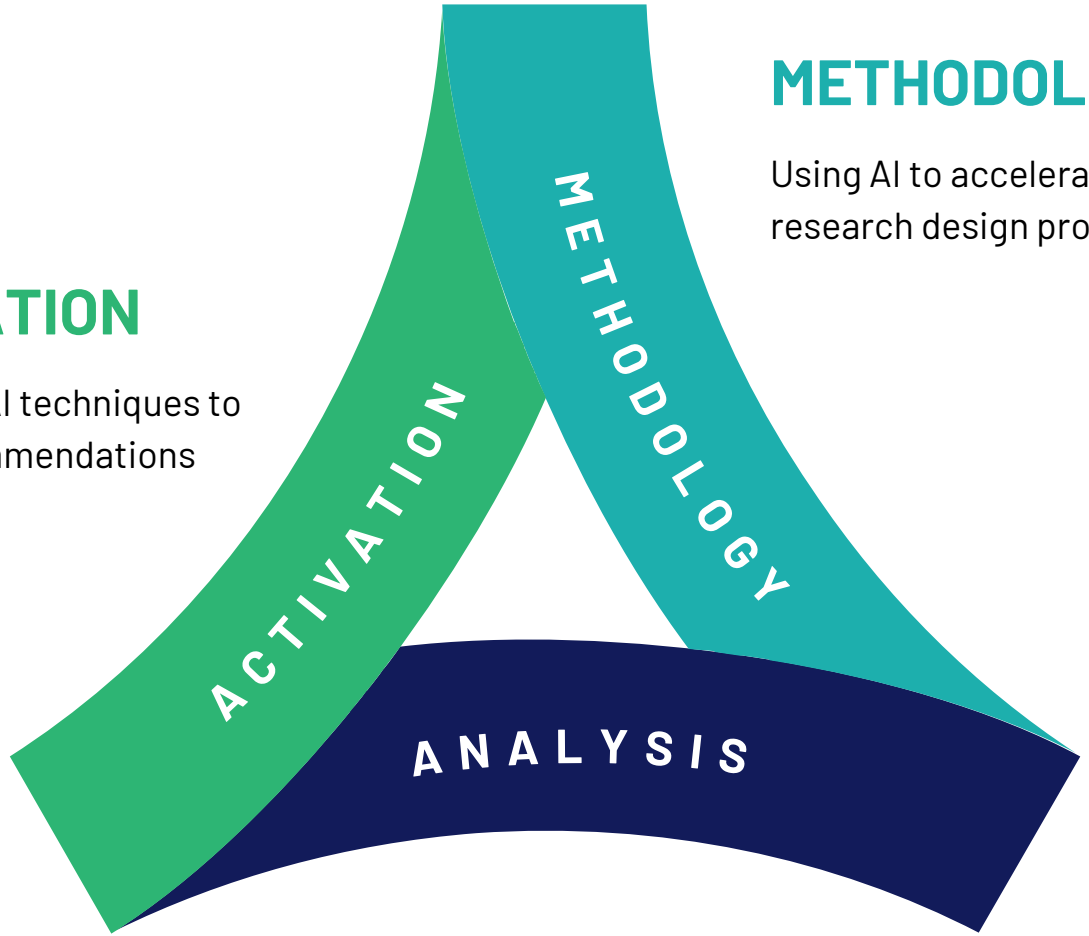
AI is being used at multiple stages of the UX research process by these researchers



METHODOLOGY

Using AI to accelerate the research design process

ACTIVATION

Using novel AI techniques to create recommendations

ANALYSIS

Bringing together data from multiple sources to uncover insights with AI

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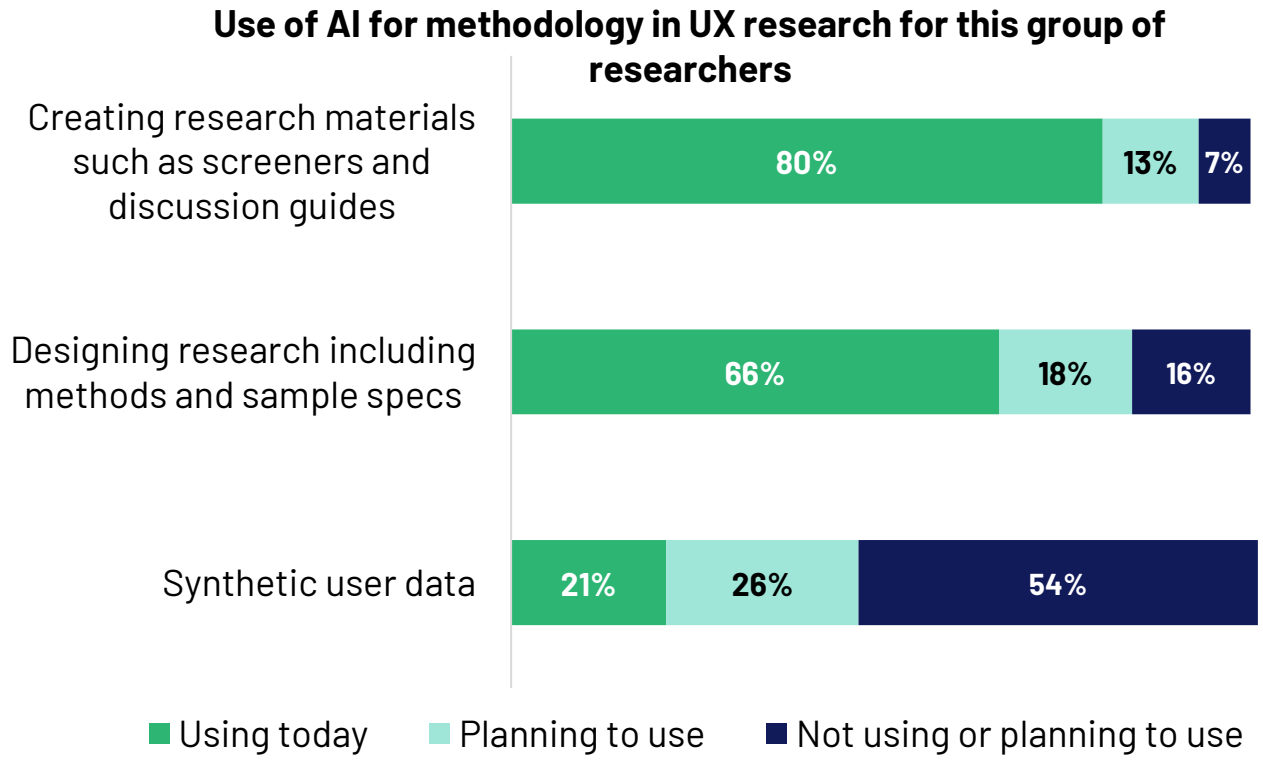
AI is already helping to reduce the burden of upfront methodology tasks for these researchers

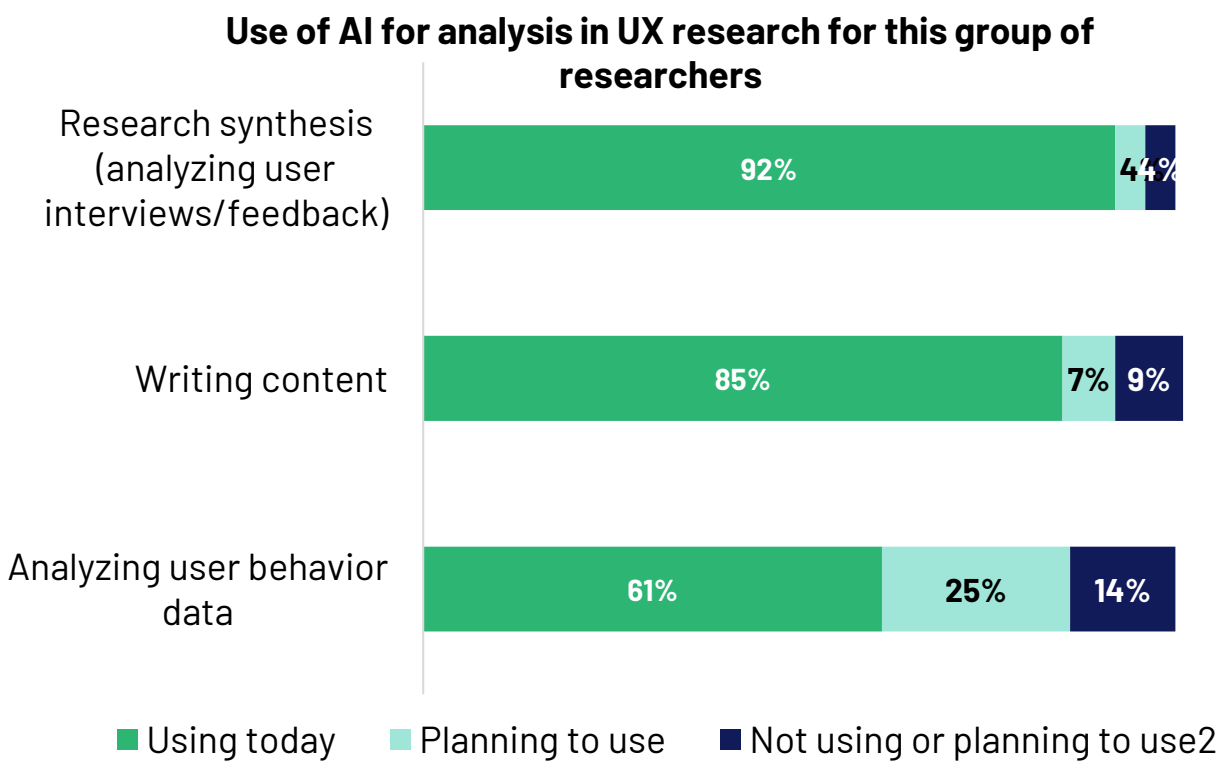
The data highlights a clear progression in how researchers integrate AI into their study setups, showing an enthusiastic adoption of operational support alongside a more cautious, measured approach to changing core methodology. An overwhelming **80% of UXRs are already using AI to support the development of materials** like screeners and discussion guides, and **66% leverage it to help design their research approach**, proving that AI has quickly become an indispensable assistant for lessening the heavy lift. When it comes to synthetic user data, the research community is more divided. While a 54% majority are holding off for now, a substantial 47% are either already experimenting with simulated users or planning to do so within the year. Rather than an outright rejection, this split indicates a healthy, pragmatic skepticism. Researchers are eager to offload logistical prep work, but they are **taking a careful approach to synthetic data**, ensuring it can genuinely complement real human insight.



Q. How is your UX team using AI tools in *your own* workflow? n=71

Source: Seattle Research Community/Ipsos Research April 2026, given the small sample size, the findings should be read as analytical and illustrative, not as statistical measurement.

Research analysis, especially qualitative insight, is accelerated by AI



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Data synthesis has rapidly transitioned from a manual craft to a fundamentally AI-accelerated workflow — and particularly on the qualitative side, where a staggering **92% of UXRs in this survey are already using AI to analyze user interviews and feedback**. Historically, sorting through hours of transcripts and open-ended text to find thematic patterns was considered the most time-consuming, human-intensive phase of research. Today, the near-universal adoption of these tools proves that these researchers are aggressively using AI to break through the "transcription bottleneck." While the vast majority use AI to synthesize and write, the use of AI for the actual analysis of user behavior data is lagging. This could be because researchers feel there's a need for human touch in prioritizing insights, or that there's a lack of trust in AI to perceive things correctly.

Ultimately, AI use isn't about outsourcing the critical thinking; UX researchers are **using AI as a high-powered filter to mine** and accelerate some tasks that allow for a human focus on others.

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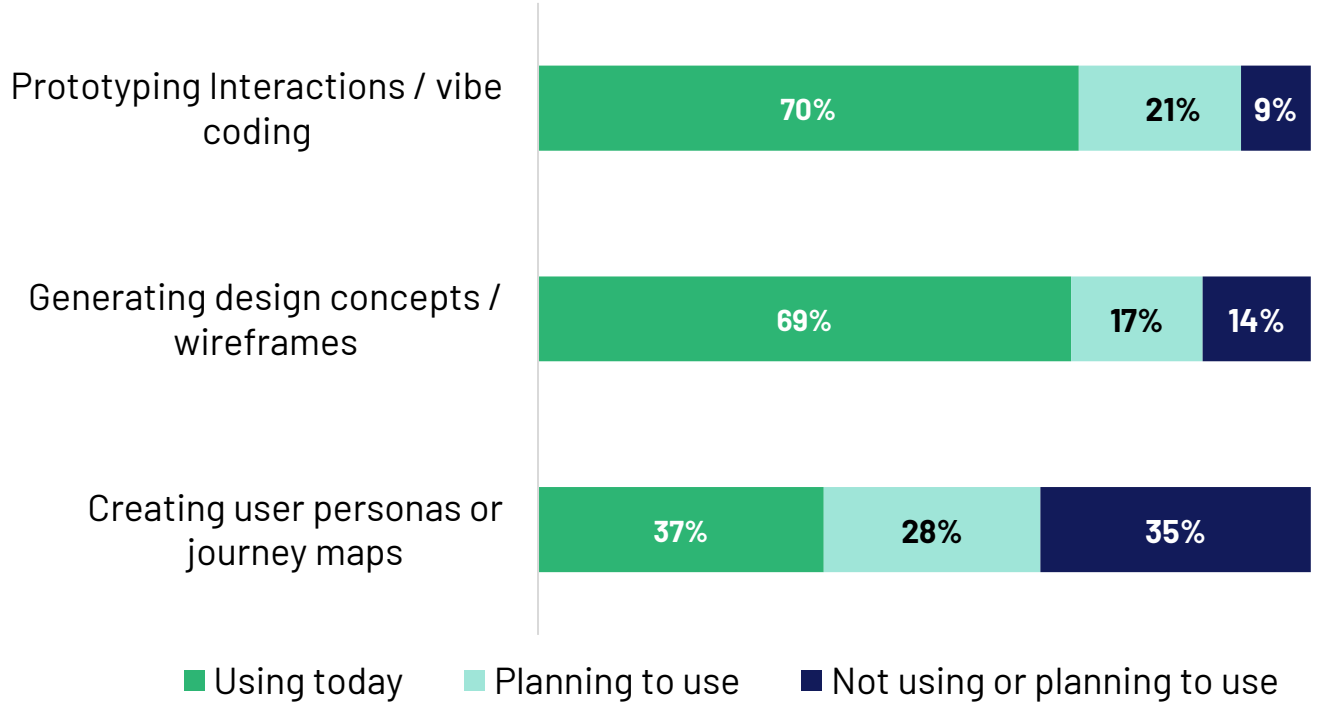
AI is already boosting visual activation, but empathy still requires a human touch according to these researchers

The data reveals a dramatic evolution in how researchers "activate" their insights, highlighting a clear preference for turning raw data into rapid, tangible artifacts rather than traditional, text-heavy documentation. A striking **70% of UXRs are already leveraging AI for prototyping interactions and "vibe coding,"** while **69% use it to generate design concepts and wireframes**. These high numbers show that AI has effectively collapsed the historical wall between research synthesis and design execution, allowing researchers to instantly translate user pain points into functional, visual realities that product teams can test immediately. Conversely, **creating user personas or journey maps** lags significantly behind at just **37% current adoption**, with a massive 35% rejecting it entirely. While AI is an accelerator for generating layouts and exploring design sandboxes, researchers still believe that emotional narratives and user archetypes require a human touch.

Use of AI for activation in UX research for these researchers



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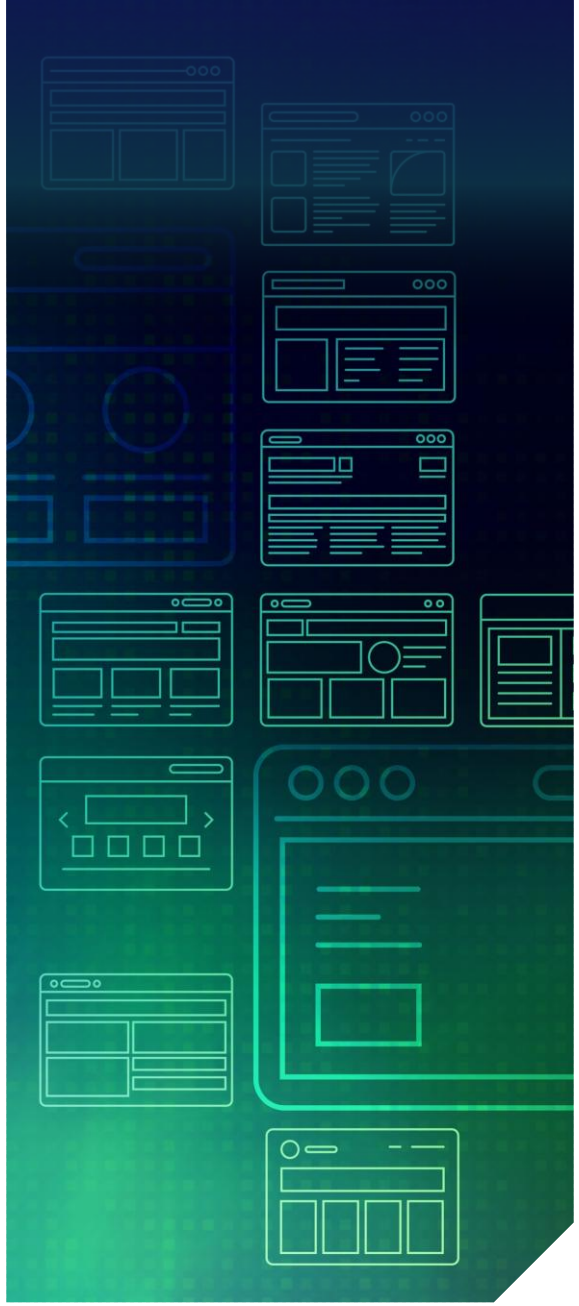

Researchers can lead the way forward, making trust the “wireframe” for human and AI connection

By establishing standardized, quantifiable UX trust metrics, such as system transparency ratings and user reliance rates, UX researchers can present leadership with the concrete data required to elevate trust from a qualitative afterthought to a core, tracked KPI.

1. **Tie Trust to the Bottom Line:** Connect low trust directly to financial risk. Show how a drop in user trust correlates with increased customer churn, higher support ticket volumes, or dropped onboarding funnels.
2. **Deploy Standardized Trust Frameworks:** Instead of asking vague questions, use validated scales adapted for AI engagement and compare results to national data, just as from the Ipsos Consumer Tracker. Measuring specific dimensions like predictability, capability, and benevolence makes the data look and feel rigorous to data-driven executives.
3. **Highlight the "Cost of Overtrust":** Remind leadership that trust isn't just about making users like the AI. If users trust an AI too much, they may miss critical system errors, leading to compliance failures, liability issues and long-term distrust in company products.
4. **Create a "Trust Dashboard":** Don't wait for permission to track it. Start tracking a baseline trust score in your regular research projects and present it alongside standard metrics.

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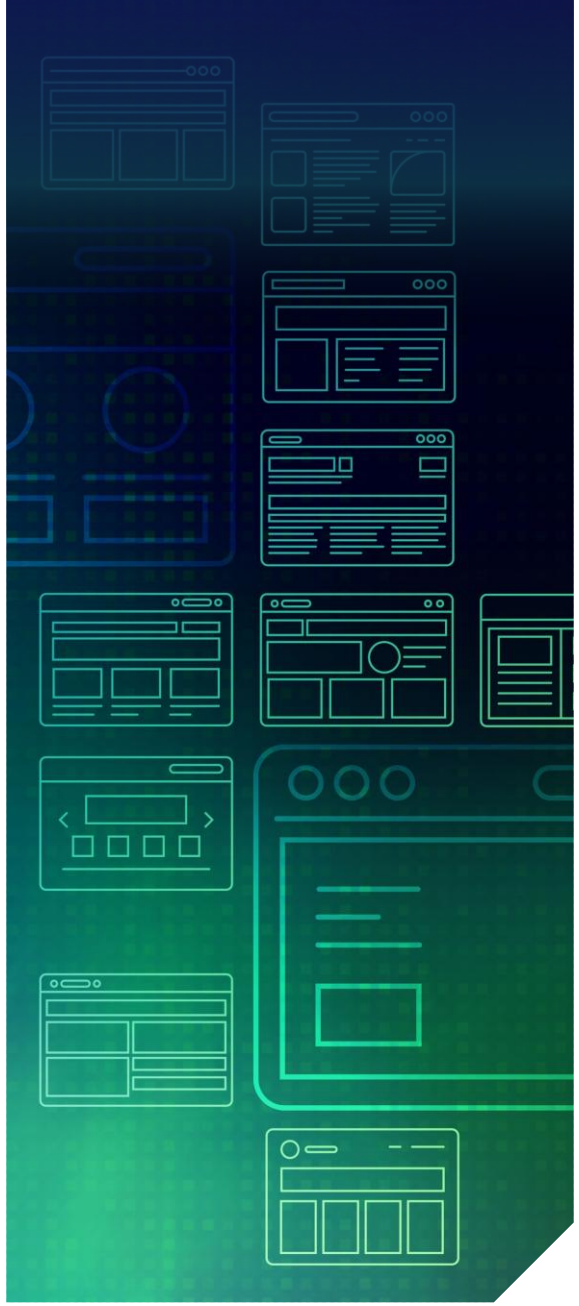


METHODOLOGY

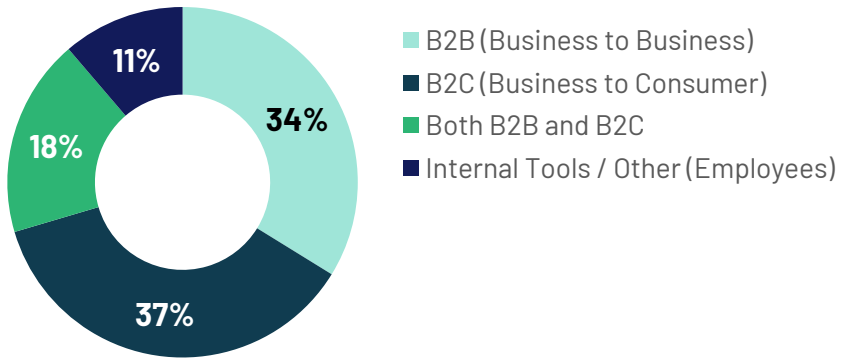
The UX researchers surveyed for this report

Respondents in the study represent a convenience sample of 71 US-based User Experience (UX) researchers. This data represents only those people included in the survey who were recruited by the **Seattle Research Community,** which also includes UX researchers outside the Seattle area. While there's no census benchmark for the UX researcher population, the data collected approximately reflect available data around UX researchers by audience focus and business size. LinkedIn Sales Navigator lists 7.5K people in the United States with a title related to UX research. This study collected feedback from approximately 1% of all people in this role. Of the people listed on LinkedIn, 15% work at companies with less than 500 employees, 28% work at companies with 501-10K employees, and 47% work at companies with greater than 10K employees. The sample represents researchers who work with diverse user types, for both internal and external products.

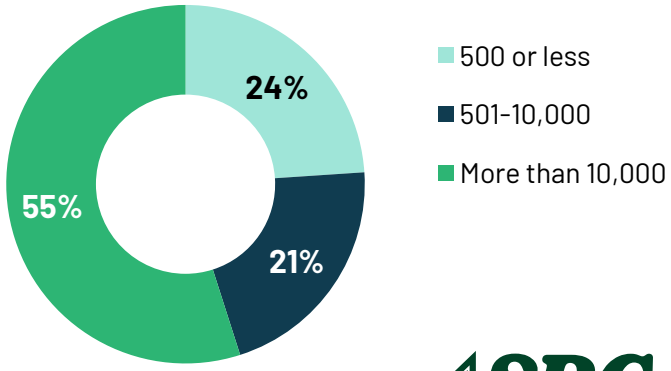
Participants were interviewed online in English, April 24-30, 2026.

It has not been weighted or statistically tested due to the sample size and only reflects the people surveyed. Given the small sample size, the findings should be read as analytical and illustrative, not as statistical measurement.

UX Audience Focus



Numbers of Employees in Their Organization



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