RESEARCH NOTE 01 SEPTEMBER 2026

THE STATE OF AI CONTENT STRATEGY 2026 REPORT

A data-led analysis of 36 coded source records and survey responses from 723 senior content leaders in the UK and US.

RESEARCH & ANALYSIS BY
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EXECUTIVE READ

AI has made content cheaper to produce. The harder question is now which ideas deserve investment.

The research points to a harder problem: deciding what deserves to exist, grounding it in evidence, making it discoverable across search and AI surfaces, and proving that it changed a business outcome.

50%	47%	91%
MENTION MEASUREMENT	MENTION AI SEARCH, GEO OR AEO	FRAME AI AS AN EXECUTION ACCELERATOR

The corpus analysis shows dense activity around generation, optimisation and workflow speed. The less-covered capabilities sit before and after production: evidence quality, opportunity qualification, governance, portfolio decisions and cross-surface measurement.

The survey adds an organisational layer. Content leaders are working more closely with SEO, but many lack confidence in how LLMs work, reject a separate AI-content strategy and expect more investment to go to writers than tools.

FINDING 01

The source material defines content strategy as a broader operating system

Across the coded records, content strategy extends beyond production into architecture, retrieval, governance, distribution and evaluation.

AI-search visibility appeared in 17 of 36 records, while 13 described content as a connected system rather than a sequence of individual assets.

AI-search considerations appeared in 47% of records

Seventeen of the 36 records connected content strategy with AI search, GEO, AEO, LLM discovery or citation visibility.

System language appeared in 36% of records

Thirteen records described topic clusters, structured knowledge, internal-linking networks, persistent context, reusable components, refresh cycles or quality gates.

ANALYTICAL TAKEAWAY
The material expands content strategy beyond production into architecture, retrieval, governance, distribution and evaluation.

FINDING 02

Production speed and feature breadth dominate the product landscape

The reviewed products compete heavily on how much content work they can accelerate or combine in one environment.

Generation, optimisation and workflow speed dominated product positioning. Eight of 36 records described broad, end-to-end production suites.

Broad production suites represented 22% of the corpus

Eight records combined functions such as ideation, keyword research, briefs, writing, visuals, publishing and analytics.

Agent frameworks focused on operating controls

The framework records associated reliability with bounded tasks, persistent context, inspectable hand-offs, stop conditions and human escalation.

ANALYTICAL TAKEAWAY
The reviewed market is more developed around producing content than deciding what deserves to be produced.

FINDING 03

The clearest gaps sit before and after content creation

The corpus contains extensive support for creation, but less consistent coverage of the decisions, controls and measurement surrounding it.

The least-covered capabilities were evidence and qualification before production, followed by lifecycle control and cross-surface measurement after publication.

Before production: evidence and qualification

Fewer records showed how a recommendation traces back to customer signals, product relevance and approved evidence—or how a proposed asset is tested before creation.

After publication: lifecycle and measurement

Refresh, consolidation and retirement were less visible than net-new creation. Rankings, AI citations, reviews, community presence and pipeline were also commonly measured in separate workflows.

ANALYTICAL TAKEAWAY
The recurring gap is a traceable decision layer connecting evidence, prioritisation, lifecycle control and performance.

FINDING 04

Buyer needs vary by operating context, but converge on decision confidence

Different teams require different levels of governance, but the underlying need is consistent: a defensible route from evidence to action.

Enterprise teams placed the greatest emphasis on governance; agencies needed repeatability and provenance; smaller teams needed prioritisation and lower cognitive load.

Enterprise content organisations

Enterprise-oriented records placed the greatest emphasis on permissions, approved source truth, auditability and cross-team consistency.

Agencies and consultants

Agency and consulting records combined pressure for repeatable delivery with a need to show clients how recommendations were reached.

Solo marketers and founders

For smaller teams, limited time and attention made prioritisation more relevant than enterprise-scale workflow depth.

ANALYTICAL TAKEAWAY
Decision support is the shared need; the required level of governance changes substantially by operating context.

FINDING 05

Content leaders are adapting to AI. The strain is showing.

AI is changing collaboration, budgets, career intent and performance priorities faster than it is building confidence.

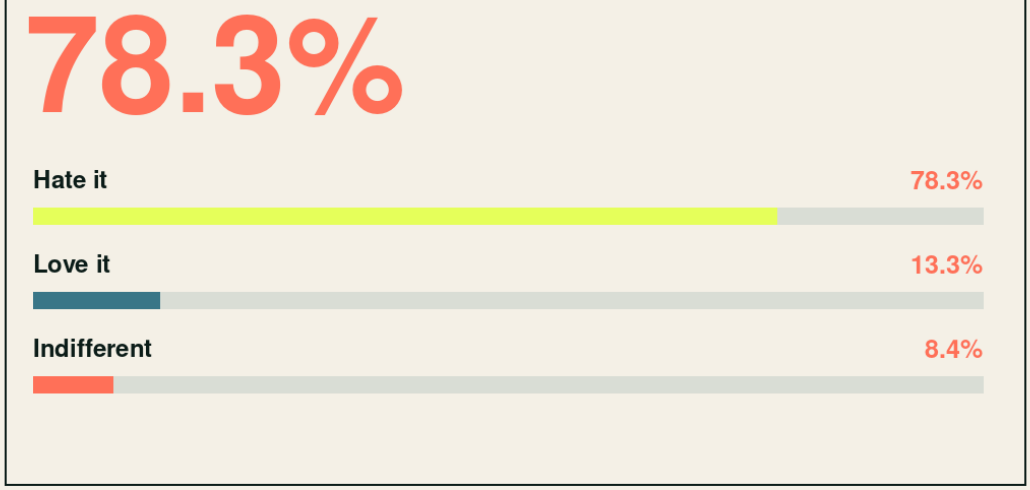
The survey shows leaders adapting in practice while remaining deeply uneasy about the transition: 96.8% are working more closely with SEO, 90.3% still prioritise writers, 84.6% are less than very confident about LLMs and 99% show an inclination towards a job switch.

The forced AI transition is deeply unpopular

78.3% selected ‘Hate it’, compared with 13.3% who selected ‘Love it’ and 8.4% who selected ‘Indifferent’. This indicates that adoption expectations are moving faster than workforce readiness. Content and SEO teams need staged training and clearer role boundaries now; without them, transition pressure may weaken retention and the quality of strategic decisions over time.

FINDING 05 / SURVEY 01

As a Head of Content, how do you feel about having to become AI-pilled overnight?



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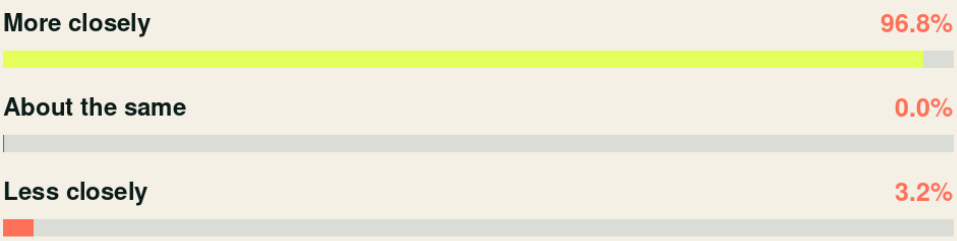
AI search has collapsed the boundary between content and SEO

96.8% selected ‘More closely’, while 3.2% selected ‘Less closely’ and 0% selected ‘About the same’. The near-consensus indicates that AI search is already dissolving the operational boundary between the two functions. Teams need shared planning, briefs and measurement today; in future, content and SEO roles are likely to overlap more substantially around discovery and visibility.

FINDING 05 / SURVEY 02

Do content teams collaborate more closely with SEO now than before AI search?

96.8%



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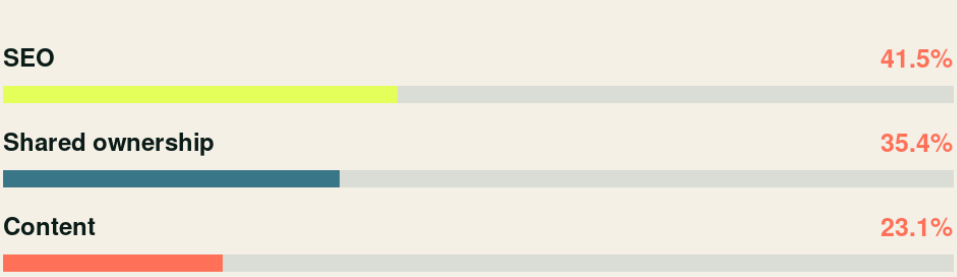
Ownership remains unresolved

41.5% selected ‘SEO’, 35.4% selected ‘Shared ownership’ and 23.1% selected ‘Content’. No model commands a majority, so closer collaboration has not yet produced clear accountability. Teams need an explicit owner and decision process now; as AI search matures, durable governance will matter more than which function’s name sits on the work.

FINDING 05 / SURVEY 03

Who should own AI-search strategy?

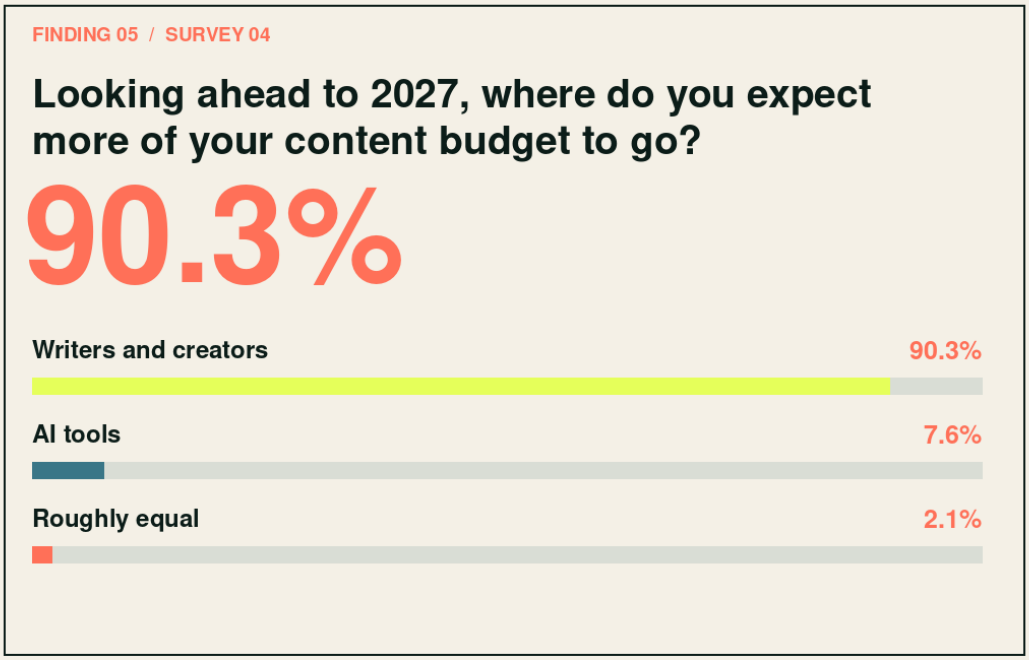
41.5%



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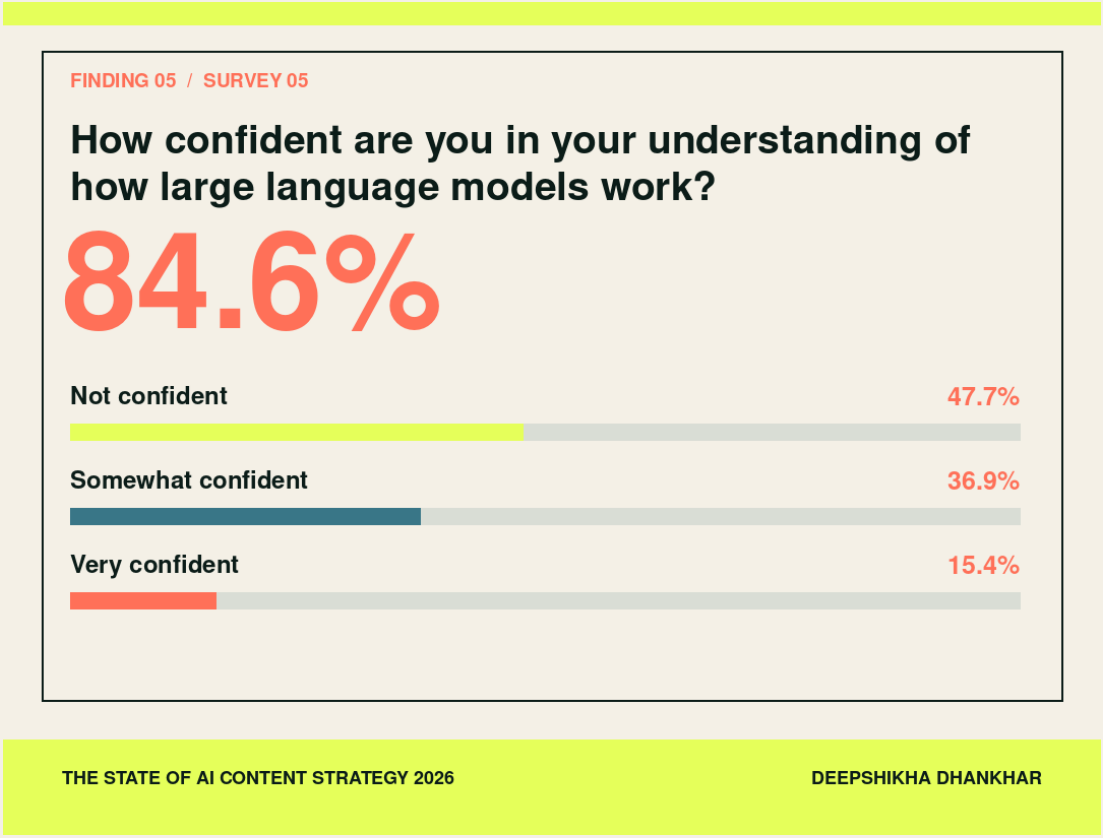
The budget story contradicts the replacement narrative

90.3% selected ‘Writers and creators’, compared with 7.6% who selected ‘AI tools’ and 2.1% who selected ‘Roughly equal’. The expected investment pattern positions AI as an augmentation layer rather than a near-term substitute for human creation. Teams should invest now in people who can use AI with judgement; future advantage is more likely to come from stronger expertise and evidence than from generating more content at lower cost.



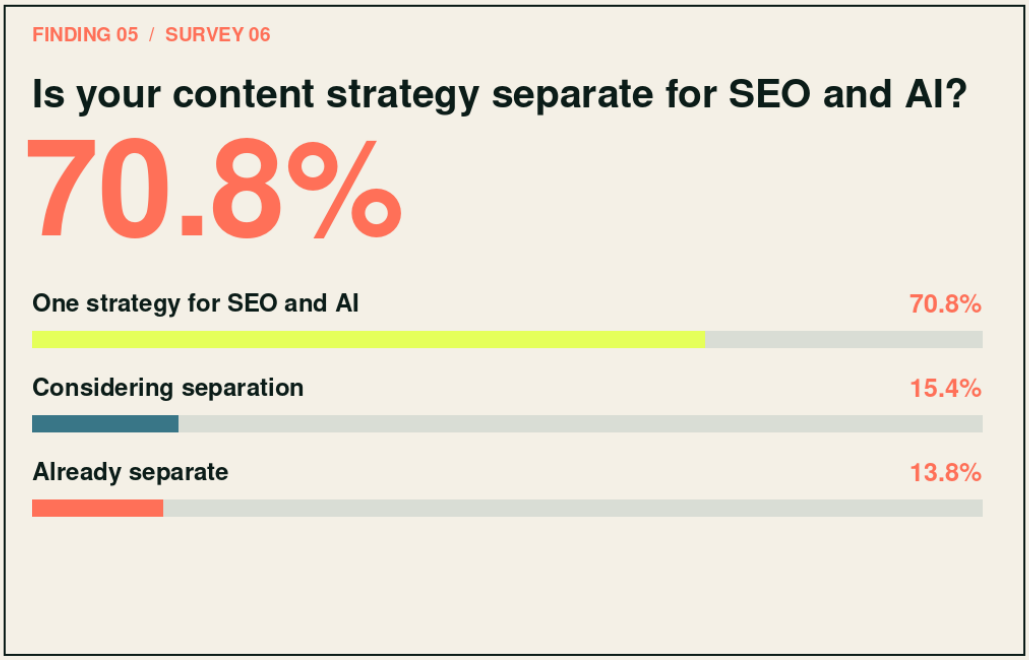
Technical confidence lags behind responsibility

47.7% selected ‘Not confident’, 36.9% selected ‘Somewhat confident’ and 15.4% selected ‘Very confident’. The 84.6% below the highest confidence level reveals a gap between expanding responsibility and technical understanding. Teams need practical LLM literacy now to evaluate recommendations and limitations; in future, that literacy is likely to become a core leadership competency across both content and SEO.



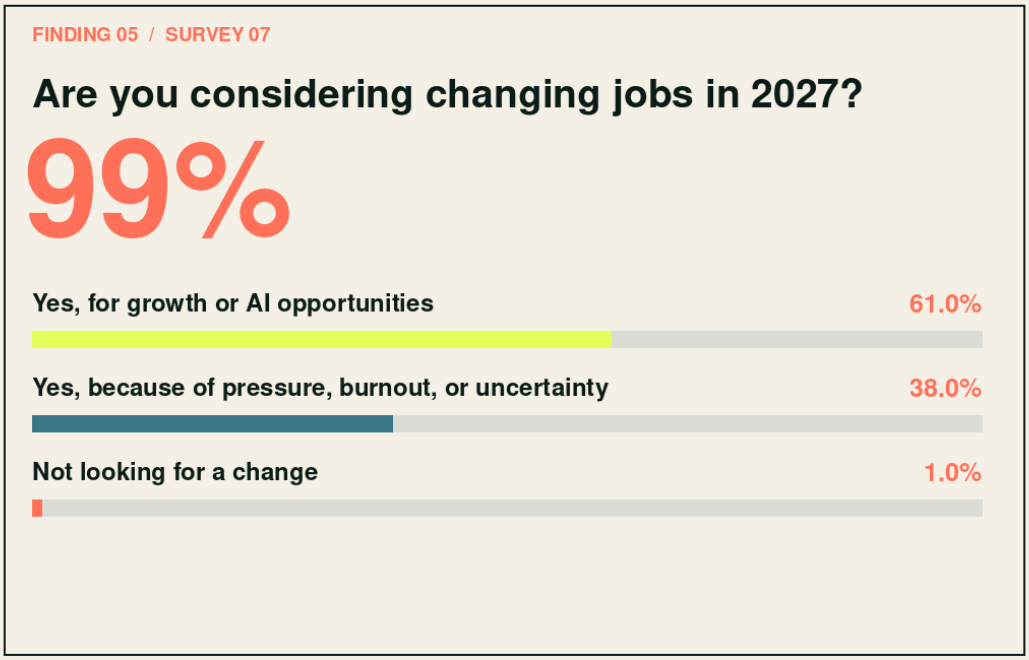
Most leaders reject a separate AI content strategy

70.8% selected ‘One strategy for SEO and AI’, while 15.4% selected ‘Considering separation’ and 13.8% selected ‘Already separate’. Most leaders therefore see AI search as an extension of search and content strategy, not a parallel discipline. Teams need one planning system with channel-specific execution today; over time, measurement will need to connect rankings, traffic, citations and business outcomes within the same view.



Career movement is the warning signal

61.0% selected ‘Yes, for growth or AI opportunities’ and 38.0% selected ‘Yes, because of pressure, burnout, or uncertainty’; only 1.0% selected ‘Not looking for a change’. The combined 99% inclination towards movement makes role clarity, development and workload an immediate retention issue. If teams do not address both opportunity and strain, future AI capability may be constrained less by technology than by the loss of experienced people.



AI visibility is changing the performance bargain

55.9% selected ‘It’s an acceptable trade off’, while 27.7% selected ‘We’re not willing to sacrifice SEO for GEO’ and 16.5% selected ‘We’re treating SEO and GEO as complementary’. The majority is willing to reconsider established performance priorities, but more than two in five are not prepared to accept a simple trade-off. Teams need guardrails and a combined scorecard now; future performance models will need to balance rankings and traffic with AI visibility, citations and downstream conversion.

FINDING 05 / SURVEY 08

As you shift focus and resources toward GEO/AEO, how do you feel about traditional SEO metrics (rankings, organic traffic) taking a hit?



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ANALYTICAL TAKEAWAY
Leaders are not resisting AI itself; they are absorbing a wider remit without equivalent confidence, clarity or stability. The data points to a human transition problem as much as a strategy problem.

METHODOLOGY

What this research can and cannot tell you

The report combines a coded market corpus with a survey of senior content leaders.

The report combines 36 coded source records with survey responses from 723 senior content leaders. Each finding is reported against its relevant denominator.

The practitioner survey

In September 2026, survey questions were fielded to Heads of Content and Content Strategy in the UK and US with a near-even geographical split and 10-15 years of professional experience. Survey findings in section 05 use 723 completed responses as their denominator.

How to interpret the survey

The survey captures reported attitudes and expectations within a targeted senior content-leadership cohort. It does not observe organisational behaviour directly and should not be treated as representative of every content professional.

The denominator that matters

Thirty-six identifiable source records were coded across open-source frameworks, commercial products, practitioner discussions, company positioning and long-form strategy guides. Unless a finding names a smaller subset, percentages use these 36 records.

What 20,000+ means

More than 20,000 publicly available pages and discussions formed the broader Exa discovery pool. They helped surface potential material, but were not individually coded. No percentage in this report uses 20,000+ as its denominator.