



iapi

Pathfinder

CEO PULSE

Q1 2026



The primary objective of the survey is to assess both current and anticipated business conditions affecting the **creative and communications industry** in Ireland.

To achieve this a **quarterly pulse of Chief Executive Officers** across business operating in the media, creative, experiential, public relations and affairs industry is carried out by Amárach on behalf of Iapi.

The findings are an important bellweather for business sentiment as **fluctuations in marketing spend reflects wider market confidence** and a quarterly initiative will build a robust dataset serving as a long-term indicator of trends and shift over time.

These insights are important for external stakeholders helping to **inform policy makers and regulators** on key policy positions, aligning with other business sectors on key policy positions and drawing on international sectoral comparisons.



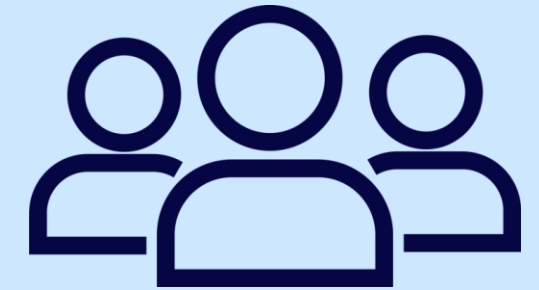
Methodology

Online survey of CEOs of Iapi member companies.



Sample Definition

CEOs from IAPI member companies.



Fieldwork dates

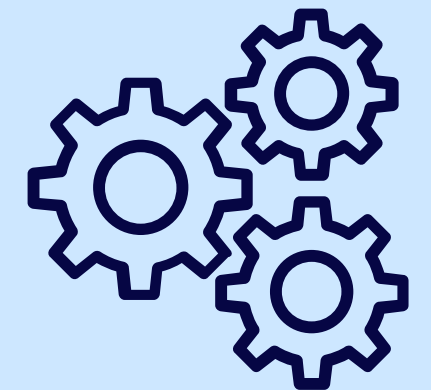
27/02/2026 –
16/03/2026



(note that the recent outbreak of conflict in the Middle East began on 28 February)

Sample Size

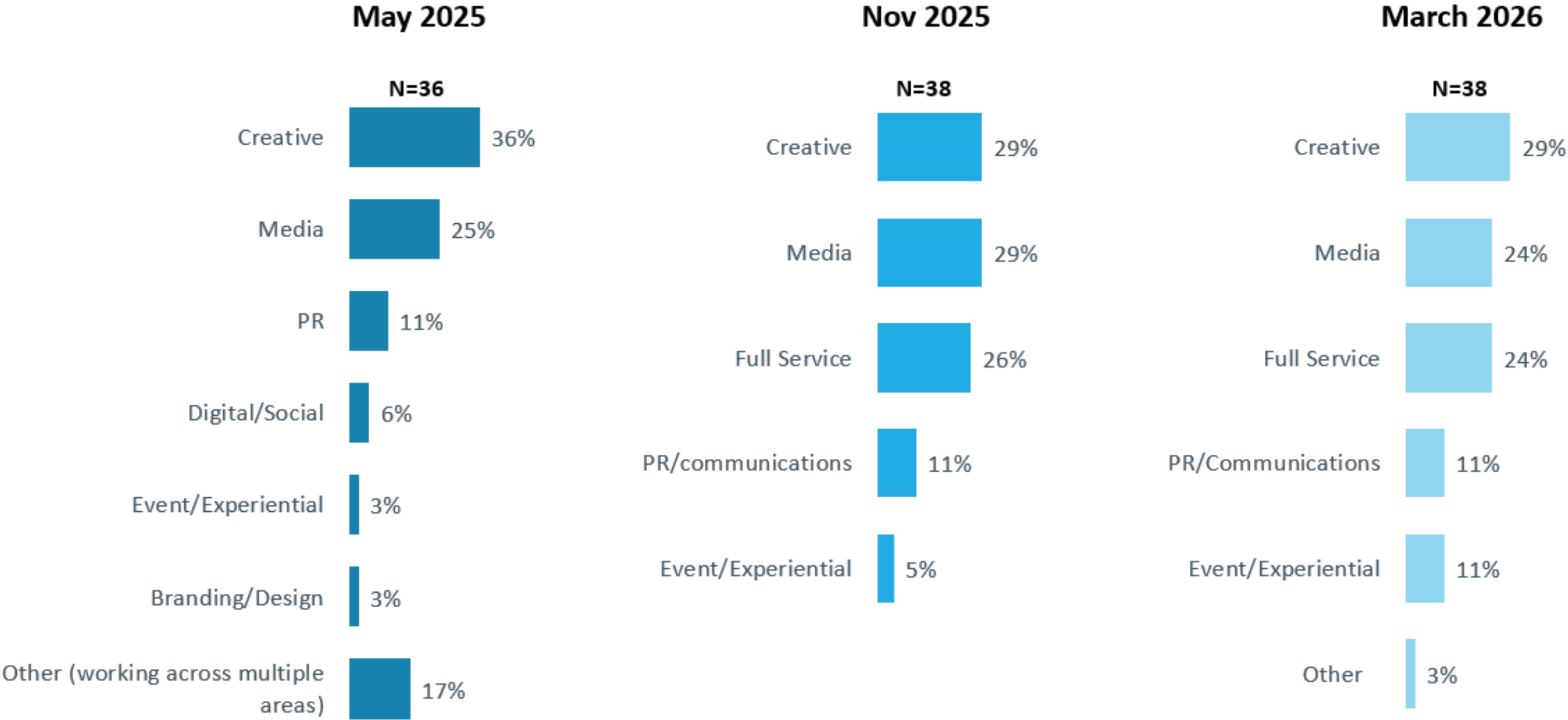
A total of 38 CEO surveys were completed in the current quarter, compared to 36 in the first quarter and 38 in the second quarter. Over 50% of CEOs from Iapi membership took part in the research.



Sample Profile



(Base: All respondents)



Q8. Is your agency mainly?

- Spending by clients (e.g. FMCG, Retail, Telecoms, Financial Services etc) on marketing activity remains under pressure, with **a net decline observed of -11%**, reflecting a broader downturn in confidence.
- **Overall optimism among respondents is positive (+11%)**, but has dropped compared to the same result (37%) in November 2025.
- This quarters pulse reflects greater caution than in the last Q of 2025. The **sentiment index is at 46**, down from 68 as reported in November 2025:
 - **Strongest positive sentiment** among IAPI members relate to new business acquisition, employee recruitment, and turnover growth.
 - **Negative pressures** identified include the cost of doing business, regulatory compliance and salary costs.

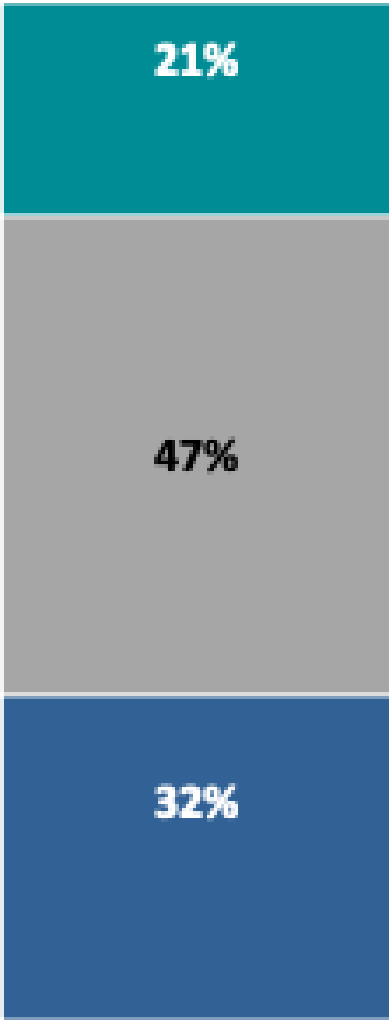
- **Key opportunities are shifting for the industry**, with expansion of services (47%), up from 21% as reported in the November 2025 survey, followed by technology and innovation (37%) and creativity/differentiation (32%).
- **The biggest challenges** facing agencies listed were client procurement/budgets (53%), new business growth (37%) and talent recruitment/retention (24%).
- **Regulatory and cost of business concerns remain prominent, including:**
 - regulation of consumer brands (83%), AI and copyright (49%), influencer/social rules (46%)
 - as well as rules related to public sector procurement (72%), employer social security expenses (56%) and HR-employment compliance (56%)

MAIN FINDINGS



Client spending outlook : net -11%, down from previous quarters. Businesses operating in the media are demonstrating positive growth, while those delivering creative or a full suite of services are reporting a reduction in client spending.

(Base: All respondents – 38)



Net increase/decrease -11% (-3%) [0%]

	BUSINESS TYPE		
	Creative	Media	Full Service
N=	11	9	9
Increased	0	44%	11%
Remain the same	64%	34%	45%
Decreased	36%	22%	44%
Summary			
Net Increase/Decrease	-36%	22%	-33%

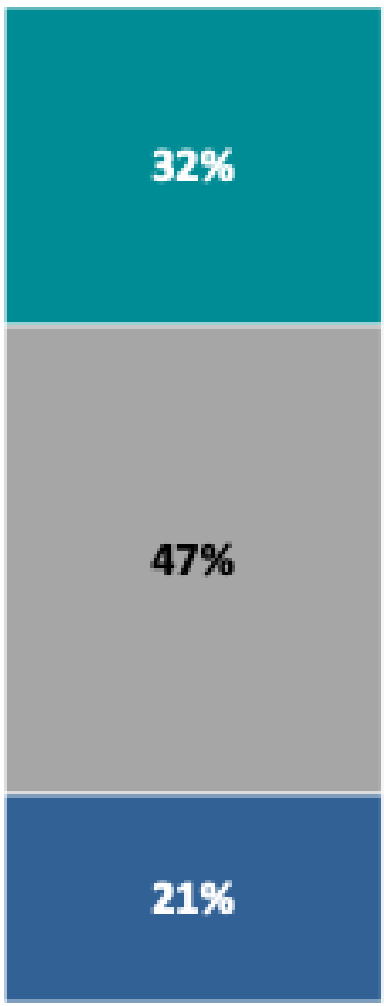
() = Nov 2025 (Quarter 2)

[] = May 2025 (Quarter 1)

Q1. Since the start of this year, has client spending with your agency increased, decreased or remained the same compared to the same period last year?

Overall, the sector remains optimistic about the year ahead, though less so compared to November. Media businesses show the highest net optimism (+33%), while Creative businesses are the least optimistic (-18%).

(Base: All respondents – 38)



Net increase/decrease 11% (37%) [23%]

() = Nov 2025 (Wave 2)
 [] = May 2025 (Wave 1). Note change in question wording

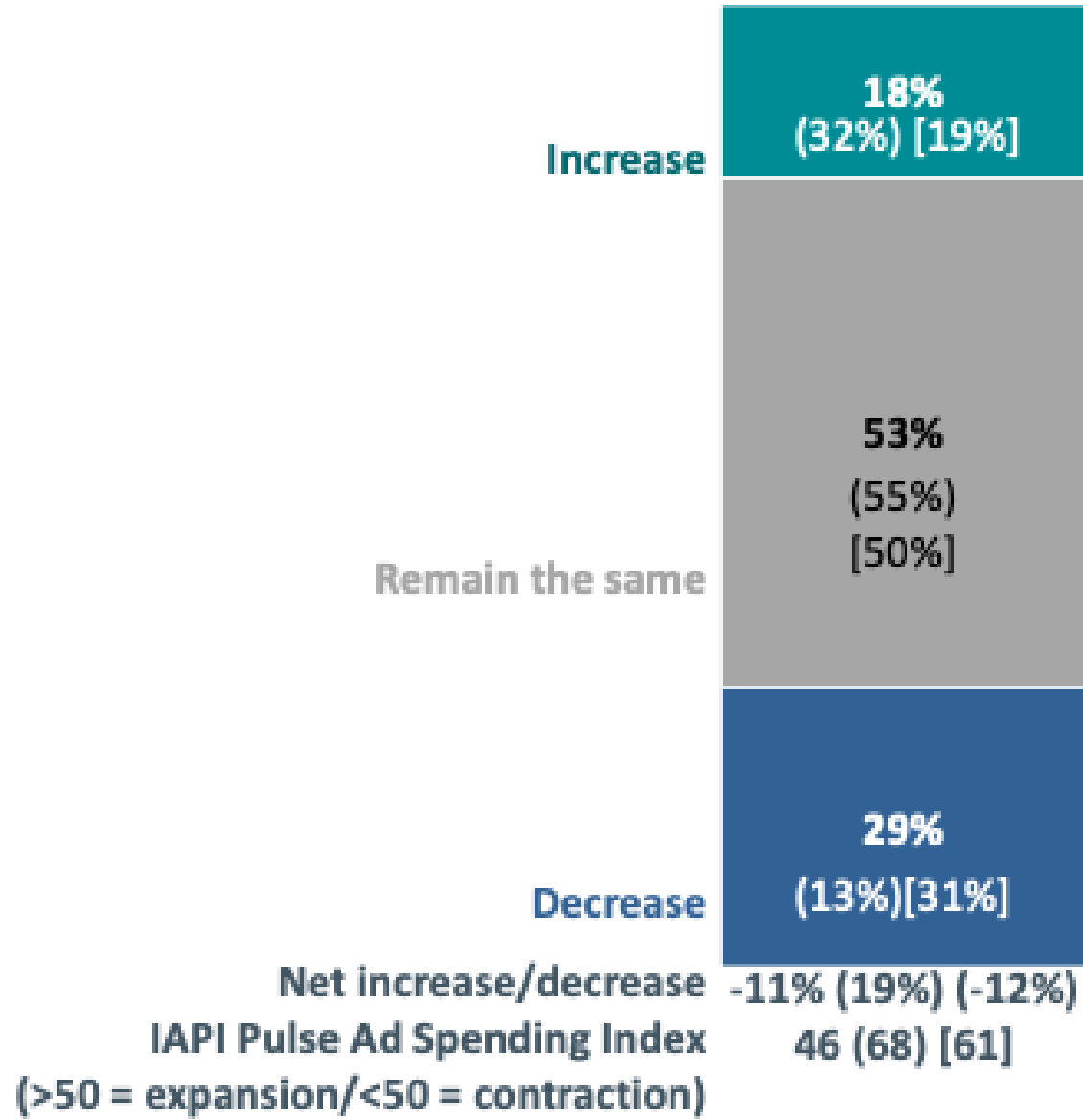
	BUSINESS TYPE		
	Creative	Media	Full Service
N=	11	9	9
Increased	9%	44%	44%
Remain the same	64%	45%	34%
Decreased	27%	11%	22%
Summary			
Net Increase/Decrease	-18%	33%	22%

Mar '26: Q2. Thinking about the rest of the year, do you expect client spending (current plus new) with your agency to increase, decrease or remain the same compared to 2025?
 Nov '25: Q2. Thinking about next year, do you expect clients' spending (current plus new) with your agency to increase, decrease or remain the same compared to this year?
 May '25: Q2. Thinking about the rest of the year, do you expect client spending with your agency to increase, decrease or remain the same compared to the year so far?

Expectations for client spend in 2026 have softened versus November 2025, reflected in a lower sentiment index of 46 (down from 68).



(Base: All respondents – 38)



	BUSINESS TYPE		
	Creative	Media	Full Service
N=	11	9	9
Increased	0	44%	11%
Remain the same	55%	45%	67%
Decreased	45%	11%	22%
Summary			
Net Increase/Decrease	-45%	33%	-11%

() = Nov 2025 (Wave 2)
 [] = May 2025 (Wave 1). Note change in question wording

Mar '26: Q3. For 2026, do you expect your clients' total spending on marketing (whether with you or other agencies) to increase, decrease or remain the same compared to 2025?
Nov '25: Q3. Looking ahead to next year, 2026, do you expect your clients' total spending on marketing (whether with you or other agencies) to increase, decrease or remain the same compared..
May '25: Q3. For 2025, do you expect your clients' total spending on marketing (whether with you or other agencies) to increase, decrease or remain the same compared to 2024?

Where are clients spending more/less?

(BASE : Expect clients' total spending on marketing to increase/decrease in 2026)

Clients' spending will increase (n=7)

'Social media, influencers, experiential, sponsorship and in tech / tool applications and usage'

'Strategy and creative strategy to maximise the assets they have and better understand the role of AI to help efficiencies.'

'Paid Social, Video, Pay-Per-Click, Retail, E-Comm.'

'Digital is where we are seeing the biggest increase in spend. We are also seeing more of our clients spending on TV both traditional and Video-on-Demand.'

Clients' spending will decrease (n=11)

'New campaign work and brand development are being paused or delayed, with fewer pitches and increased uncertainty across communications.'

'We see the biggest squeeze in production budgets, along with reduced spend on content creation, brand marketing and research.'

'Less spend on AV/TV and large format Out-of-Home, with downward pressure across most traditional media channels.'

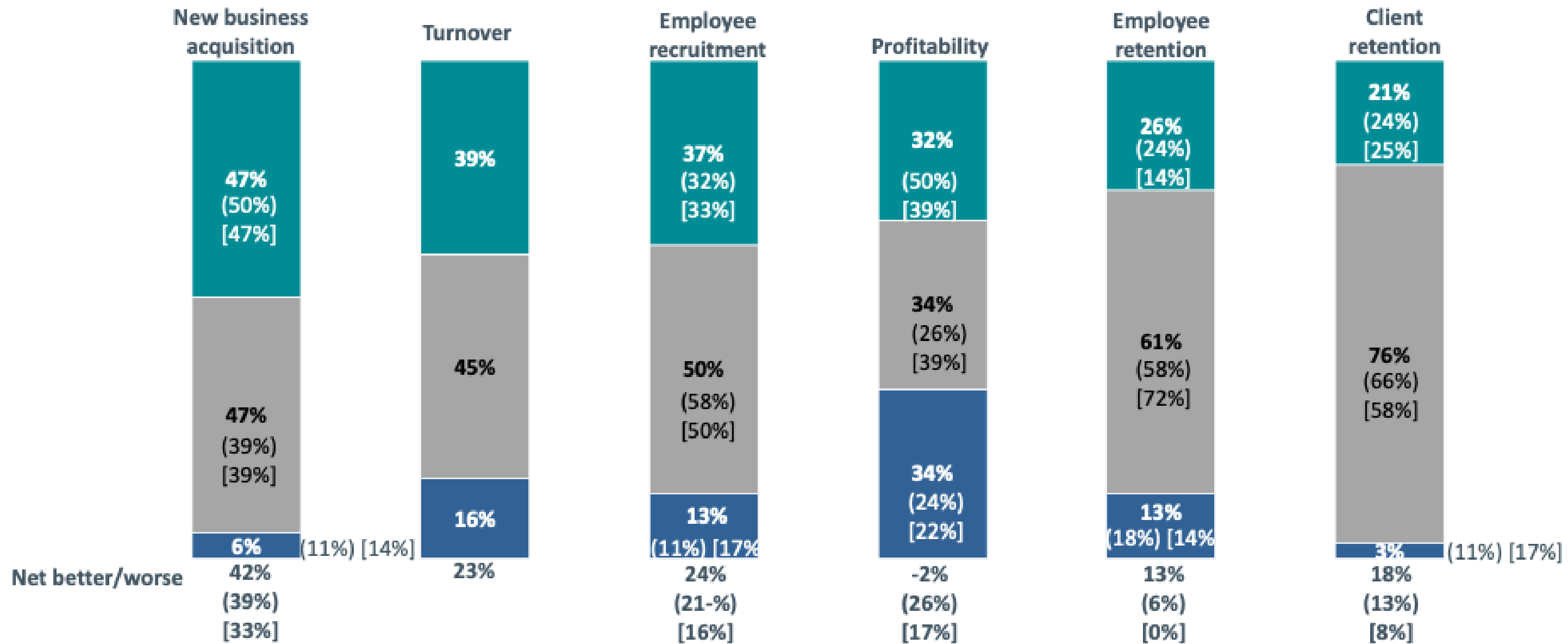
'There appears to be downward pressure on budgets across the board, driven by economic conditions, with clients renegotiating rates and placing less value on strategic and creative development.'

Q4a. Where are clients spending more than last year (say, by media category, or non-advertising activities if relevant)?

Q4b. Where are clients spending less than last year (say, by media category, or non-advertising activities if relevant)?

Expectation from business in the Creative and Communications industry for the rest of 2026 show the strongest net positive sentiment around new business acquisition (+42%), employee recruitment (+24%) and turnover (+23%).

(Base: All respondents – 38)



Mar '26: Q5. Over the rest of the year, do you think each of the following will be better, the same or worse than the year so far?

Nov '25: Q5. Looking ahead to 2026, do you think each of the following will be better, the same or worse than this year?

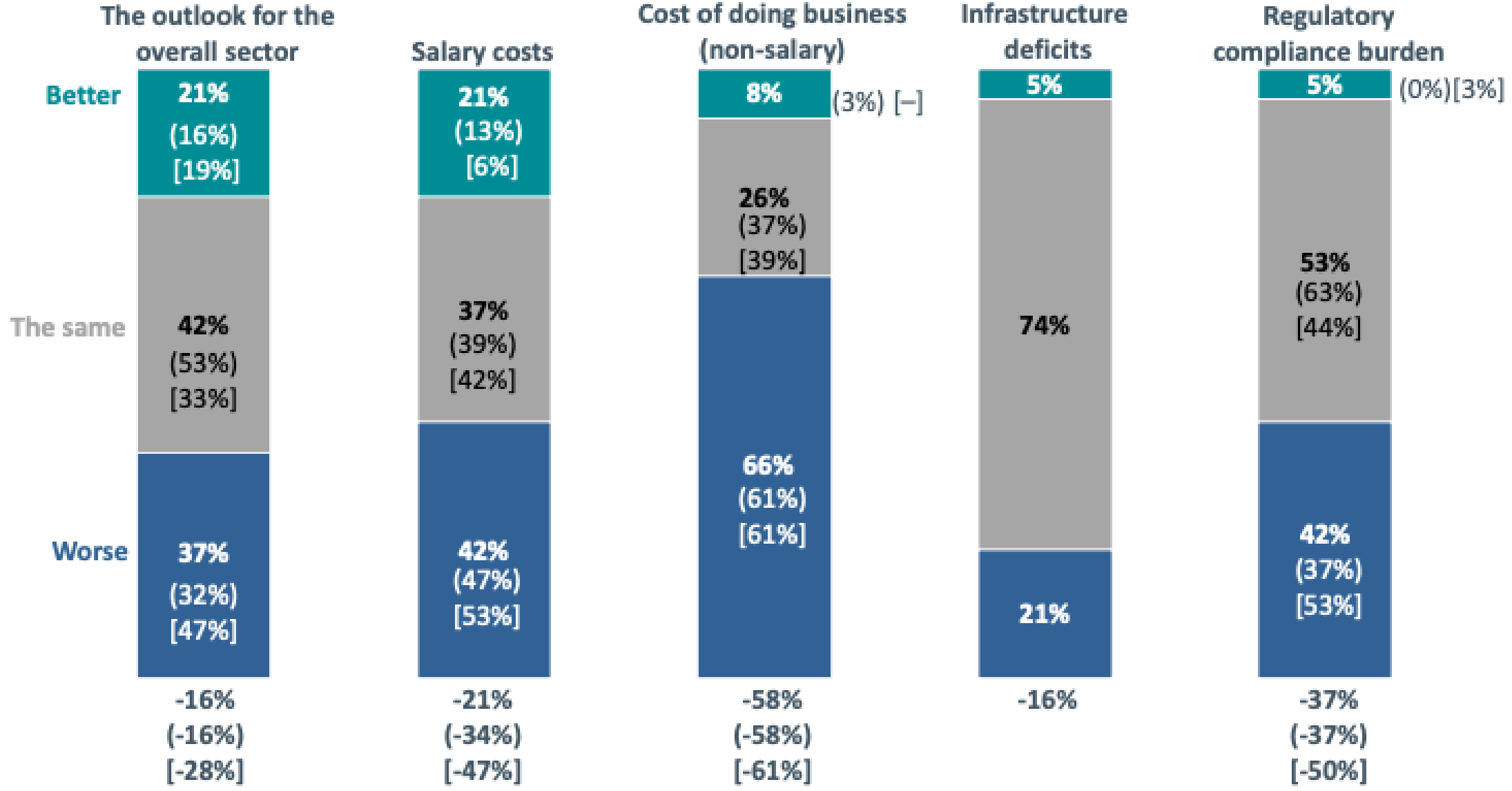
May '25: Q5. Over the rest of the year, do you think each of the following will be better, the same or worse than the year so far?

() = Nov 2025 (Wave 2)

[] = May 2025 (Wave 1). Note change in question wording

As in previous waves, the most negative sentiment is directed toward the cost of doing business (-58%), the regulatory compliance burden (-37%) and salary costs (-21%).

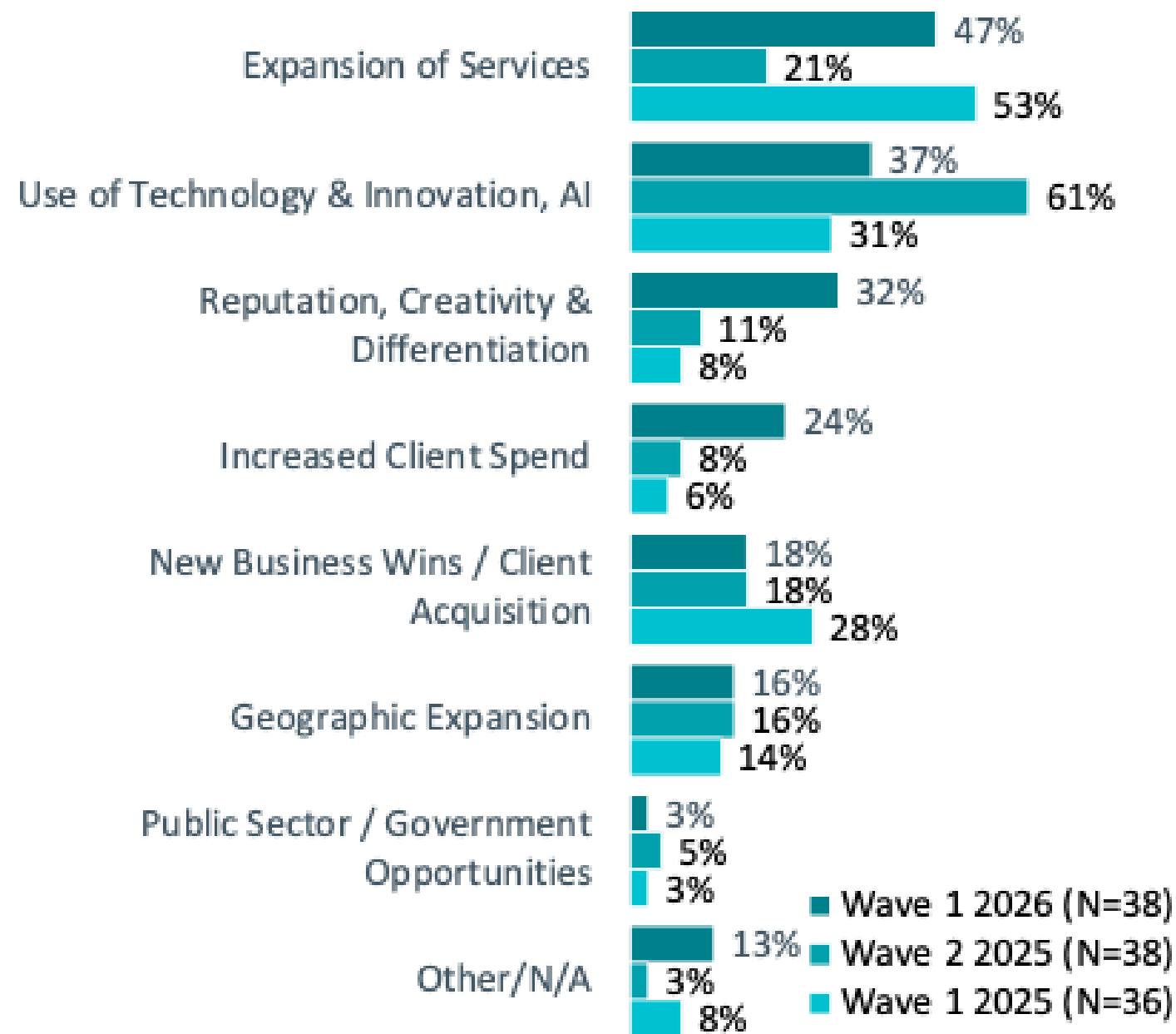
(Base: All respondents – 38)



Mar '26: Q5. Over the rest of the year, do you think each of the following will be better, the same or worse than the year so far?
 Nov '25: Q5. Looking ahead to 2026, do you think each of the following will be better, the same or worse than this year?
 May '25: Q5. Over the rest of the year, do you think each of the following will be better, the same or worse than the year so far?

() = Nov 2025 (Wave 2)
 [] = May 2025 (Wave 1). Note change in question wording

The 'expansion of services' is now the leading opportunity in the current quarter (47%), followed by 'use of Technology & Innovation' (37%) and 'reputation, creativity and differentiation' (32%).

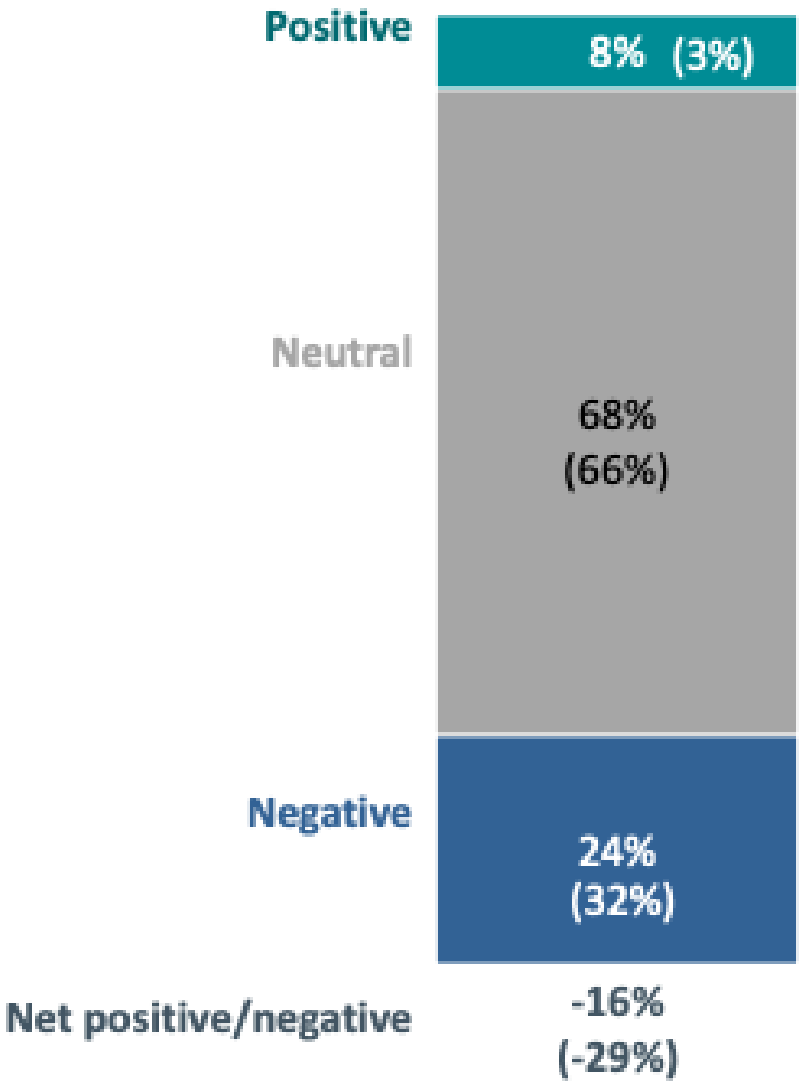


	BUSINESS TYPE		
	Creative	Media	Full Service
N=	11	9	9
Expansion of Services	55%	44%	44%
Use of Technology & Innovation, AI	27%	44%	33%
Reputation, Creativity & Differentiation	36%	22%	44%
Increased Client Spend	18%	33%	22%
New Business Wins / Client Acquisition	18%	11%	33%
Geographic Expansion	18%	0	11%
Public Sector / Government Opportunities	0	0	11%
Other/N/A	27%	11%	0

Q6. What are the top 2-3 opportunities for your agency right now, especially those that make you optimistic about the future of your business?

Approximately 24% of members feel government policies are having a negative impact on their business, with only 8% indicating a positive impact.

(Base: All respondents – 38)



		BUSINESS TYPE		
		Creative	Media	Full Service
	N=	11	9	9
Positive		-	-	11%
Neutral		55%	67%	89%
Negative		45%	33%	-
Summary				
Net positive/negative		-45%	-33%	11%

Reasons for saying current government policies are having a negative impact on business.

(BASE : Current government policies having a negative impact on business)

Negative Impact on Business (n=9)

'New employment obligations, including pension auto-enrolment, are increasing the cost of doing business in an already low-margin sector, materially affecting pricing, hiring flexibility and investment capacity.'

'Young, talented people can't afford to live in Dublin, reducing the available talent pool and making it harder to hire and retain good people.'

'Some recent regulation has not been introduced in consultation with the industry and is adding a burden of reporting, while global digital platforms continue to operate with comparatively lighter oversight.'

'Procurement policy is proving very frustrating, with lack of clarity, communication and flexibility, while additional compliance and reporting requirements are increasing costs for agencies.'

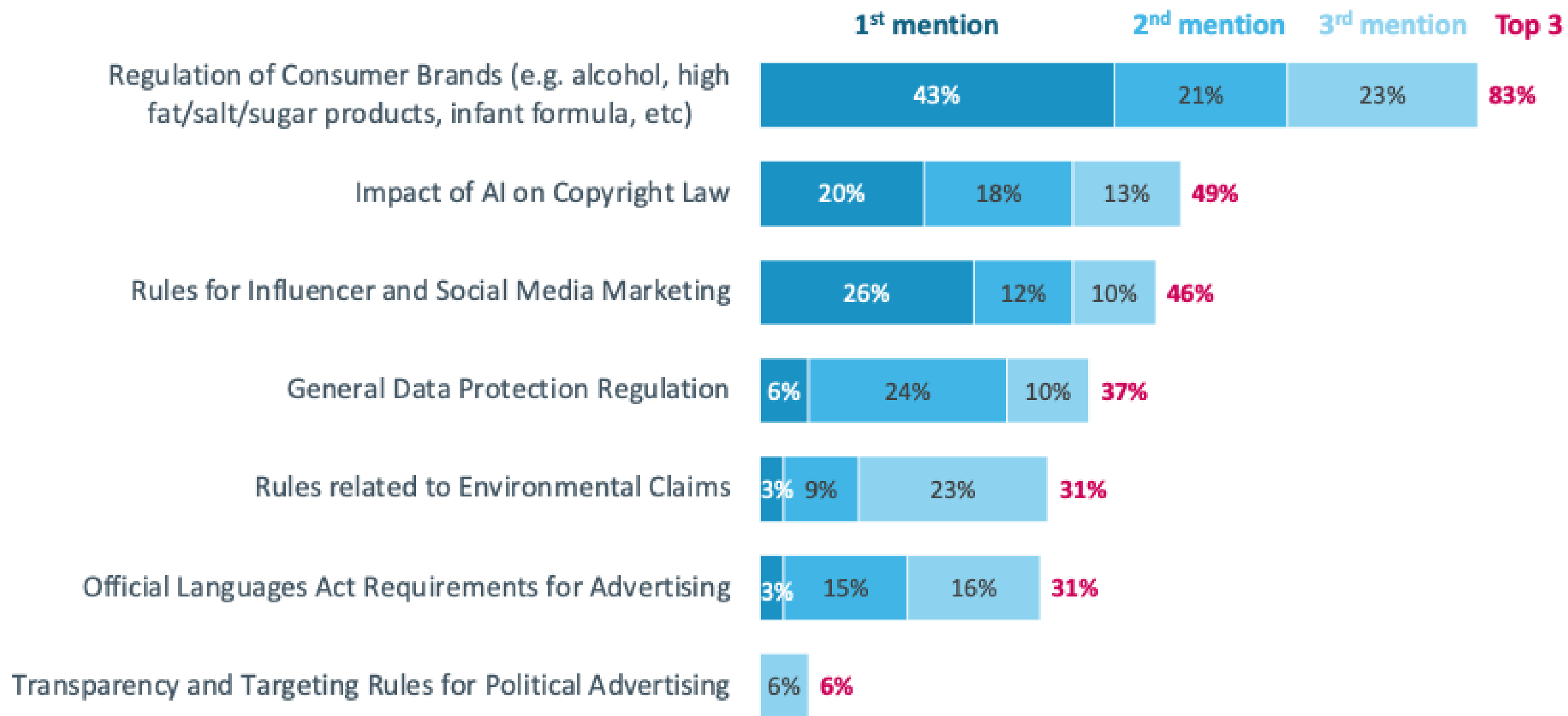
'The introduction of the Official Languages Act has caused significant operational challenges, including excessive reworking, budget inefficiencies and lack of clear guidance.'

'Certain policies are acting as a barrier to advertising spend in key categories, while additional compliance requirements are increasing workload and costs for agencies.'

'The uncertainty in the market has paused or stopped some planned work with brands, impacting confidence and forward planning.'

The top advertising-related regulatory concerns are regulation of consumer brands (83%), the impact of AI on copyright law (49%) and rules for influencer and social media marketing (46%).

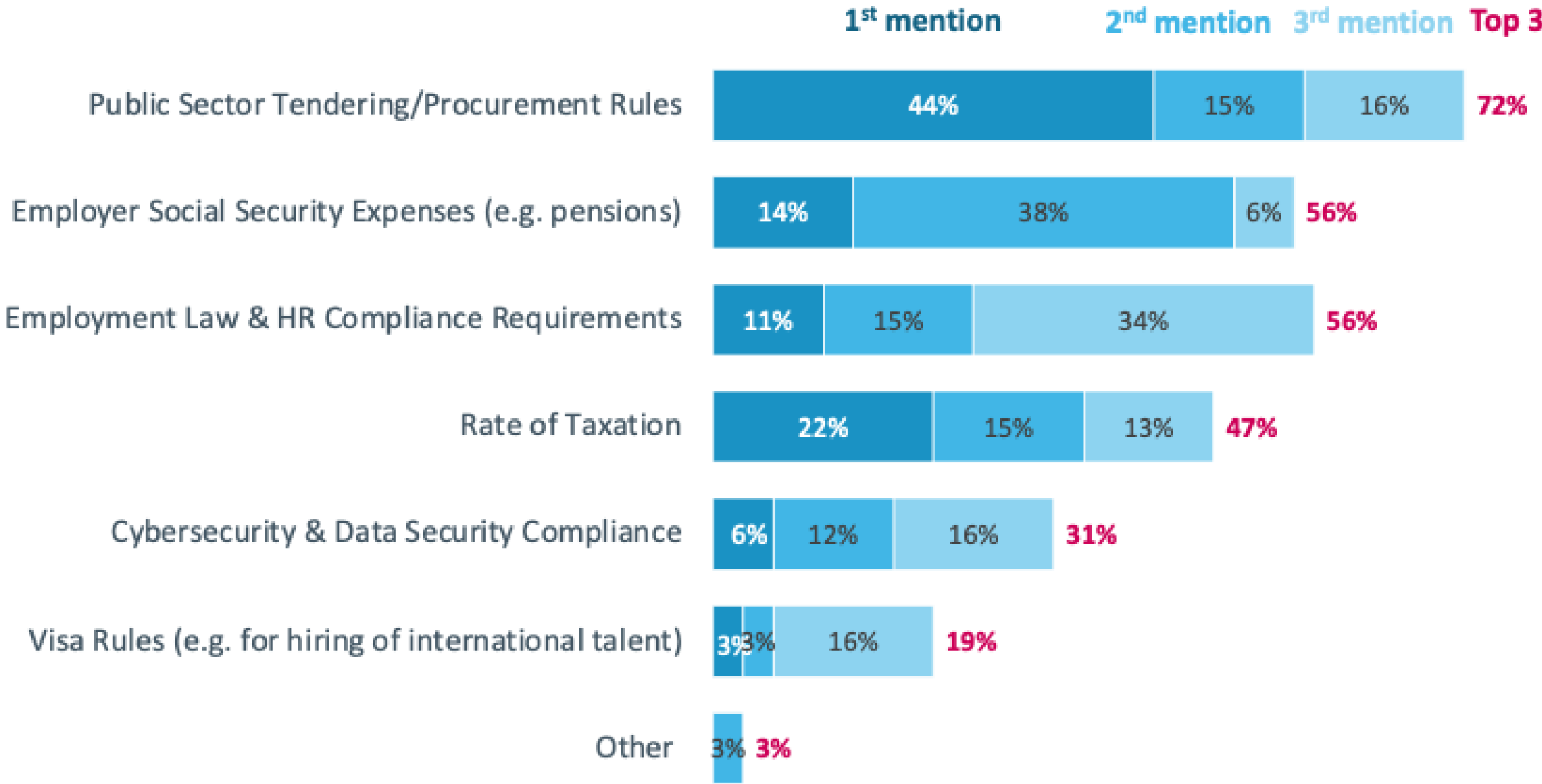
(BASE : All respondents – 35)



Q8. Which advertising-related regulatory issues are of greatest concern to your organisation? Please rank your Top 3

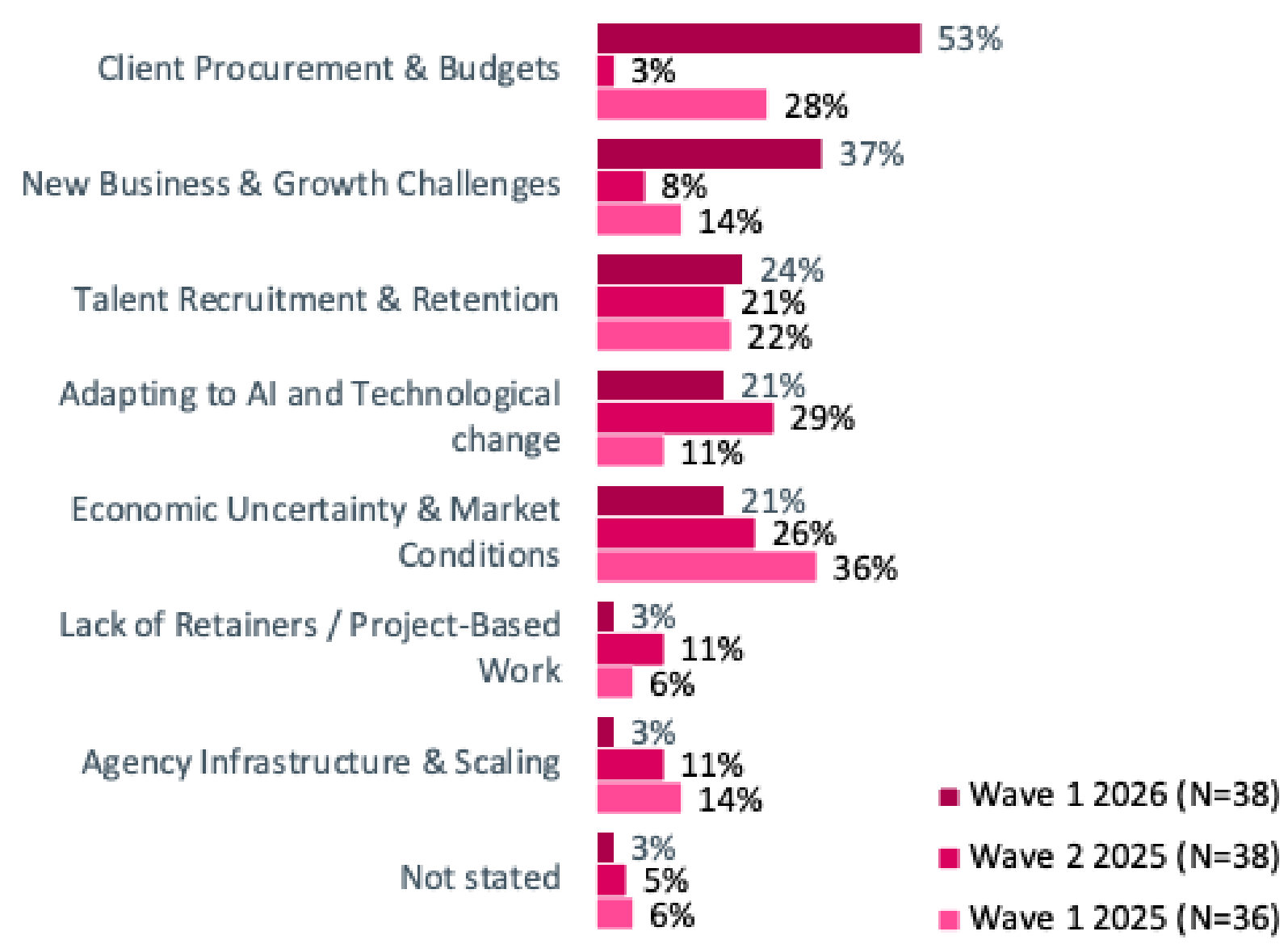
The most widely cited cost concern is public sector tendering/procurement rules (72%), followed by employers' social security expenses and HR compliance (both 56%).

(Base: All respondents – 36)



Q9. When thinking about the cost of doing business, which regulatory issues are of greatest concern to your organisation? Please rank your Top 3

The biggest challenge facing agencies right now is client procurement and budgets (53%), followed by challenges with new business and growth (37%) and talent recruitment retention (24%). This likely reflects the more challenging trading environment seen across the current quarter.



	BUSINESS TYPE		
	Creative	Media	Full Service
N=	11	9	9
Client Procurement & Budgets	64%	33%	78%
New Business & Growth Challenges	36%	33%	56%
Talent Recruitment & Retention	9%	33%	33%
Economic Uncertainty & Market Conditions	18%	11%	22%
Adapting to AI & Technological change	18%	22%	33%
Lack of Retainers / Project-Based Work	9%	0	0
Agency Infrastructure & Scaling	9%	0	0
NS	9%	0	0

Q10. In your own words, what is the biggest challenge facing your agency right now?

- **Cautious outlook emerging:** Optimism remains positive but is softening, with weaker expectations for 2026—particularly around client marketing spend—signalling a more constrained and uncertain external trading environment.
- **Cost of business concerns:** Ongoing challenges—including the rising cost of doing business, regulatory complexity, and salary pressures—continue to weigh heavily.
- **Internal confidence remains strong:** the sector continues to focus on growth levers such as attracting new business, recruitment, and expansion of services, indicating resilience and ambition despite external market pressures. It is embracing innovation as it adapts to remain competitive.



iapi

amárach
research 

www.iapi.ie

www.amarach.com