

THE STATE OF GRC 2026

*The #1 GRC tool in 2026
is still a spreadsheet.*

Ayoub Fandi

GRC Engineer | grcengineer.com

March 2026

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WHY THIS REPORT EXISTS

Every year, analysts and vendors publish reports about the GRC market. They survey their own customers, interview their own prospects, and produce findings that conveniently validate their own positioning. The research is funded by the companies being evaluated. The conclusions are shaped by the relationships that fund the analysis.

I built The GRC Engineer because I believed GRC practitioners deserved a different voice. Not an analyst who watches from the outside. Not a vendor who sells from the top. A practitioner who builds from the inside.

Over the past two years, 12,000+ professionals have joined this community. They read the newsletter. They listen to the podcast. They share what's working and what isn't. And when I asked them to tell me the truth about how they work, 795 of them did.

This is what that truth looks like.

Why 795 responses matters. Most GRC market reports survey 100 to 300 people, primarily enterprise buyers sourced through vendor relationships. This survey reached nearly 800 practitioners across every seniority level, team size, and practitioner type. The full spectrum, not just the segment that takes analyst calls.

Why independent matters. No vendor funded this report. No sponsor influenced the questions. No partnership shaped the findings. When the data says the #1 GRC tool is still a spreadsheet, there is no commercial pressure to soften that message.

What is GRC Engineering? The idea that governance, risk, and compliance should be treated as an engineering discipline. That "compliance" and "engineering" are not opposing forces. They are the same force, applied with different tools.

795 of you shared your reality. Here is what it tells us.

Ayoub Fandi
Founder, The GRC Engineer

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KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE



#1 TOOL: SPREADSHEETS

93 respondents (17.7%) still rely on spreadsheets as primary GRC tool



SKILLS: 5.4/10 AVG

Nearly a quarter (22.8%) rate themselves 1-3 out of 10



CISOs MORE TECHNICAL

CISO/VP+ avg 6.5 vs Director 5.4

59%



59% UNADDRESSED

3 in 5 practitioners use no commercial tool



1 IN 5 TEAMS = SOLO

18% solo. 50% teams of 4 or fewer



NO VENDOR ABOVE 18%

Most fragmented enterprise software market

65%

47%



NEW CONTENT

PERSONA CLIFF

High-skill IPs choose commercial 65%, Engineers only 47%



SENIOR MANAGER OUTLIER

81% build solo vs Entry Level 10%



20%

AUDITOR SPREADSHEET RATE

20% of auditors use spreadsheets, highest of any persona

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report presents findings from the largest independent survey of GRC practitioners conducted outside of vendor-sponsored research. 795 professionals shared how they work, what tools they use, their technical capabilities, and where the industry stands today.

The data comes from subscribers of The GRC Engineer newsletter and community. This means the audience skews toward practitioners who are fairly senior in their career and are interested in the cutting-edge of GRC, which should be considered when interpreting results.

Survey Period: April 2025 to March 2026

Total Respondents: 795

Distribution: GRC Engineer newsletter subscribers and community

Bias Acknowledgement: Respondents self-selected from a GRC-focused audience. Results may over-represent practitioners actively investing in professional development and may not reflect the broader GRC population. Tool usage data reflects primary tool only.

How to Read This Report

The report is organized in two halves.

The first half presents the raw data: who responded, how teams are structured, what tools they use, and how they rate their technical skills.

The second half analyzes what that data means: where the market gaps are, why certain personas make different choices, and what it signals for vendors and practitioners.

Each analysis section has two parts: the data and the insight so you can get some relevant takeaways from the report no matter your persona!

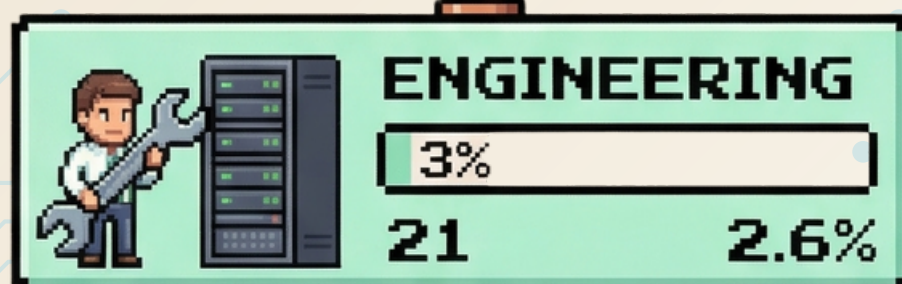
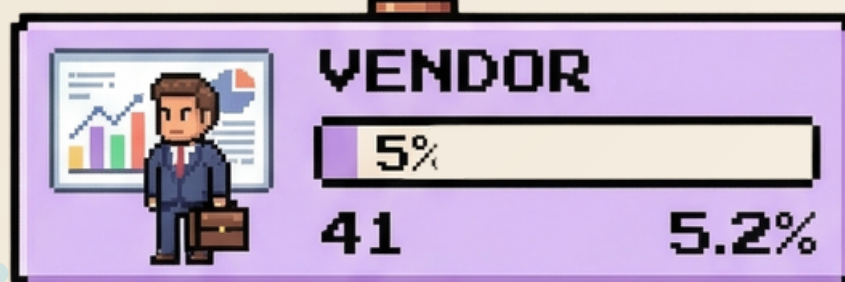
WHO RESPONDED



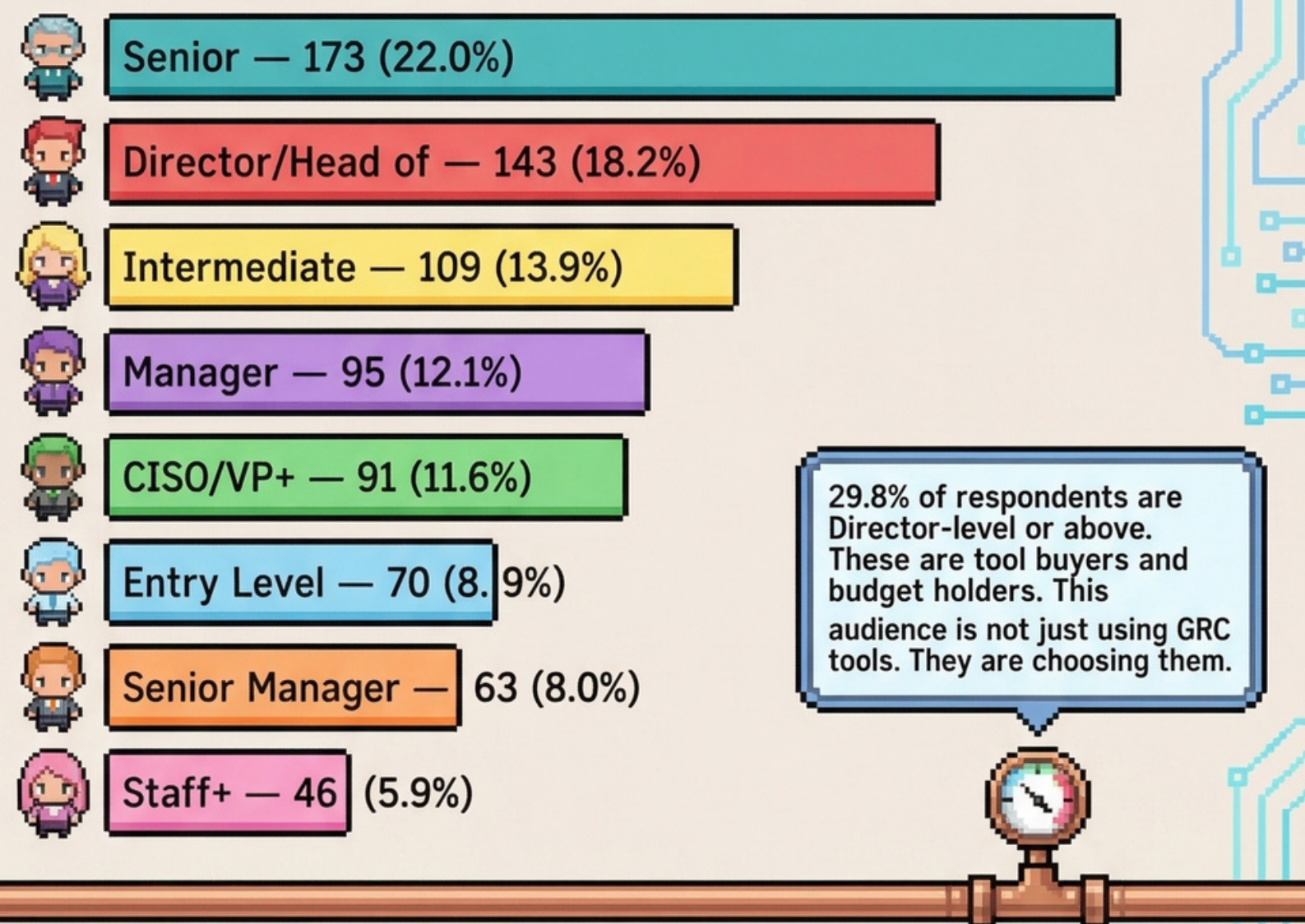
795



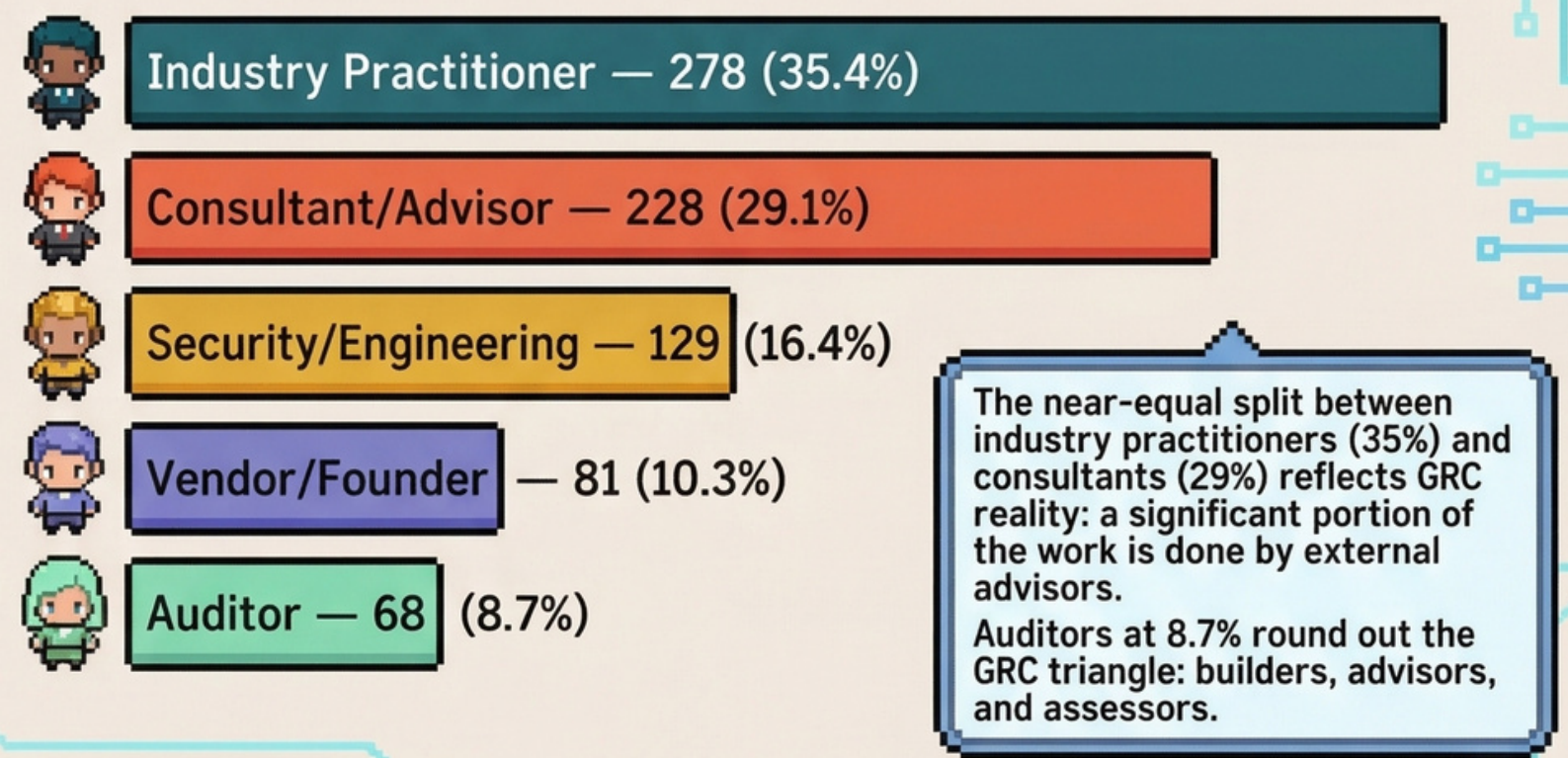
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SENIORITY DISTRIBUTION



PRACTITIONER TYPE



THE GRC WORKFORCE

Data

The survey drew 795 responses spanning every layer of the GRC profession. Nearly 70% identify as GRC practitioners, but 14% come from security teams, signaling that GRC content resonates beyond the traditional compliance audience. The 5.2% vendor representation provides market awareness without skewing results.

Seniority skews experienced: 29.8% are Director-level or above. These are not just tool users. They are tool buyers and budget holders. Senior (22%) and Intermediate (13.9%) round out the middle, with Entry Level at 8.9%.

The near-equal split between industry practitioners (35%) and consultants (29%) reflects GRC reality: a significant portion of the work is done by external advisors. Auditors at 8.7% round out the GRC triangle of builders, advisors, and assessors.

Insight

The consultant ratio is the hidden variable in every GRC market analysis. When 29% of your respondents advise multiple organizations, their tool preferences carry disproportionate influence. A single consultant who recommends XYZ tool to ten clients generates more pipeline than ten individual buyers. Nearly 30% of this audience influences purchasing decisions across multiple organizations simultaneously. The traditional vendor playbook targets the buyer at a single company. The GRC market rewards whoever wins the advisor.

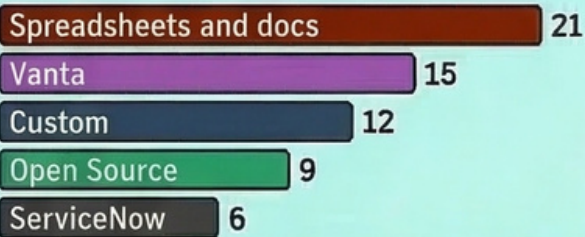
TEAM SIZE

The Shape of GRC Teams

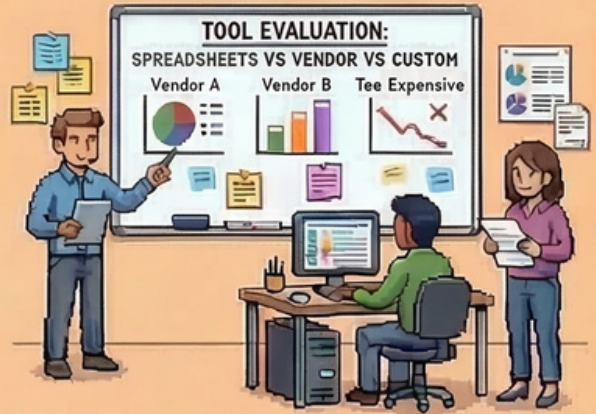


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SOLO (1 person) — 142 (18.0%)



SMALL (2-4) — 249 (32.5%)

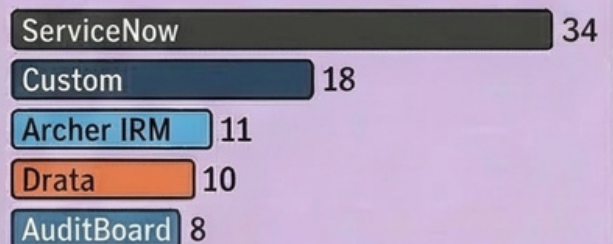


51.0% of GRC teams have 4 people or fewer.
The mid-market (2-10 people) is 56% of the market and the most underserved segment.
Nearly 1 in 5 practitioners run the entire GRC function alone.

MID (5-10) — 182 (23.7%)

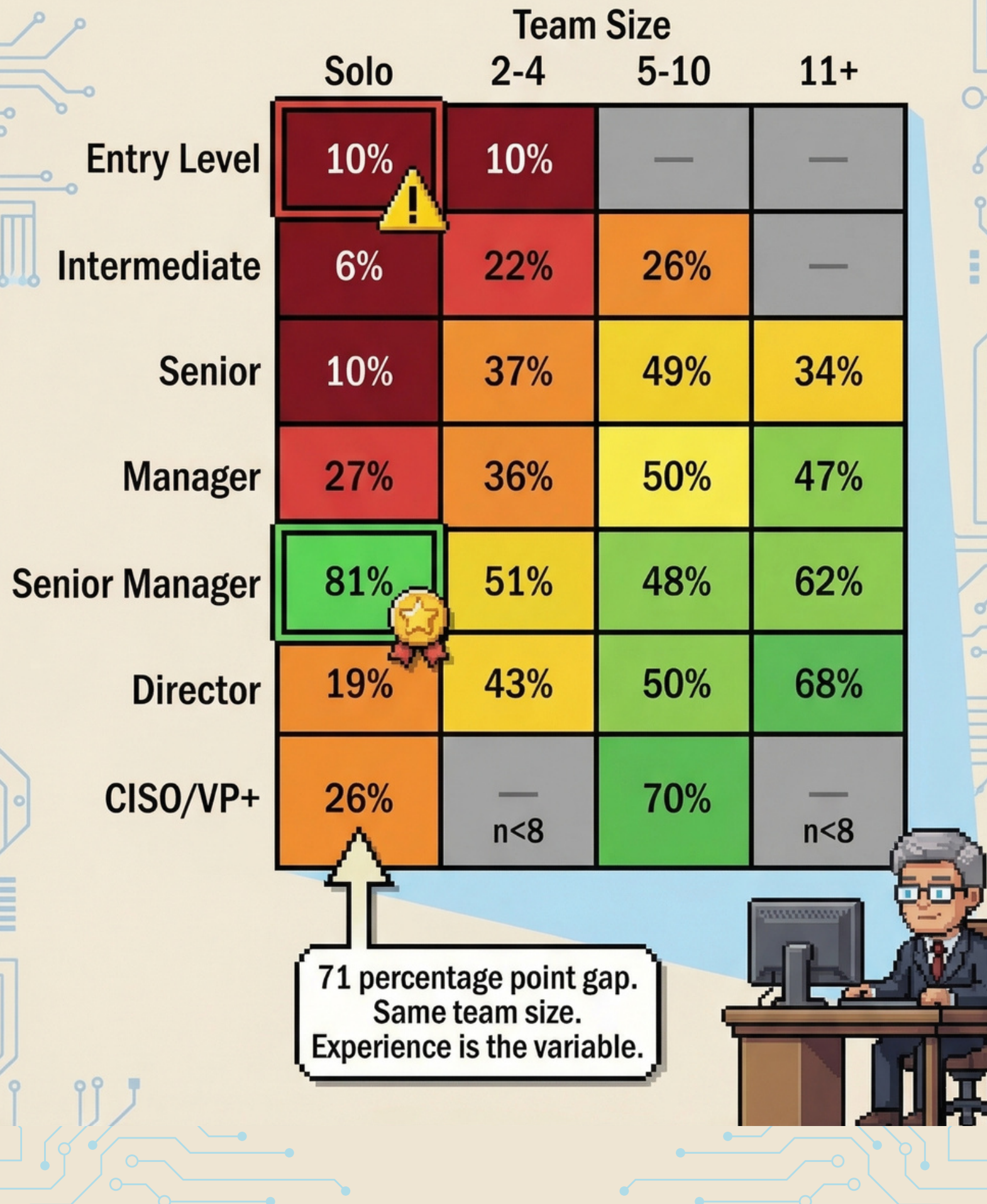


ENTERPRISE (11+) — 194 (25.3%)



THE ADOPTION MATRIX

Commercial Tool Adoption by Seniority x Team Size



THE SHAPE OF GRC TEAMS

Data

51% of GRC teams have 4 people or fewer. 142 respondents (18.5%) run GRC alone. The mid-market (2-10 people) is 56% of the market and the most underserved segment. Spreadsheets remain the #1 tool across every team size except 11+.

Solo does not mean junior. 40% of entry-level practitioners (28 of 70) work solo with an average skill of 3.6. But 19 CISOs (20.9% of all CISOs) also work solo, averaging 6.3. Same team size. Completely different reality. One group is drowning. The other chose to swim alone.

The 5-10 person team is the experimentation zone. 21 unique tools reported. Market concentration (HHI: 1010) is the lowest of any segment. Budget, headcount, and willingness to try everything. Nobody owns them yet.

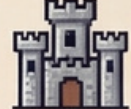
Insight

The data reveals a four-stage graduation path. At team size 1, 42% use no tool at all. Move to 2-4 and commercial adoption jumps to 51%. At 5-10, it reaches 58%. At 11+, it hits 62% and spreadsheets collapse to 3%. Each team size threshold is a buying trigger. The ladder is consistent: nothing, then spreadsheet, then commercial, then platform.

60 of 142 solo practitioners (42%) operate with no tool whatsoever. Among those who do adopt, Vanta leads with 15 users, a 7.4x overrepresentation versus its non-solo share (Fisher's exact $p=0.0002$). When one person runs the entire compliance function, automation is the only way the job gets done.

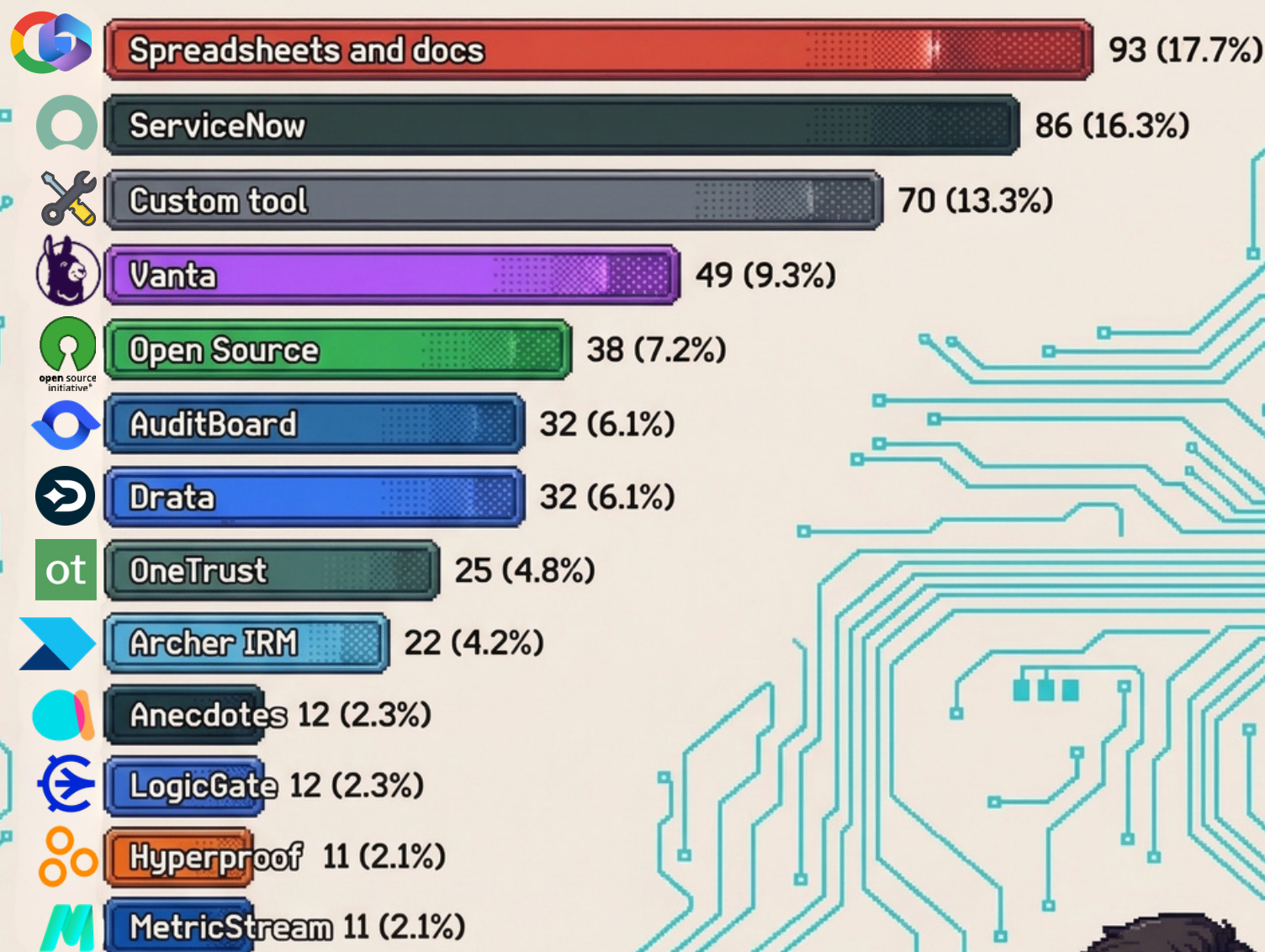
28 of those solo practitioners are entry-level. Average skill 3.6. No team, no mentorship, no architecture. They default to spreadsheets because that is what they know. This is where compliance theatre is born.

THE GRC TOOL LANDSCAPE



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WHO'S USING WHAT?



The #1 GRC tool in 2026 is still a spreadsheet. 93 practitioners rely on spreadsheets ahead of ServiceNow, custom tools, and every commercial platform.

Custom tool at #3 does not mean building from scratch. It means Jira, Notion, SharePoint: existing tech stacks repurposed for GRC because dedicated tools have not justified the switch.

Open Source at #5 beats OneTrust, Archer, and most vendors, with adoption strongest among solo (9) and mid-size teams (12).



WHY SPREADSHEETS STILL WIN

Data

93 practitioners rely on spreadsheets as their primary GRC tool. They average 4.9 technical skill. 41 of 93 work in teams of 2-4, the most spreadsheet-heavy segment.

70 respondents use "custom tools." But custom does not mean purpose built. It means Jira, Notion, SharePoint: existing tech stacks repurposed for GRC because dedicated tools have not justified the switch.

When you combine spreadsheets, custom tools, open source, and no-tool respondents, **59.1% of all practitioners are commercially unaddressed.** Three out of five.

Insight

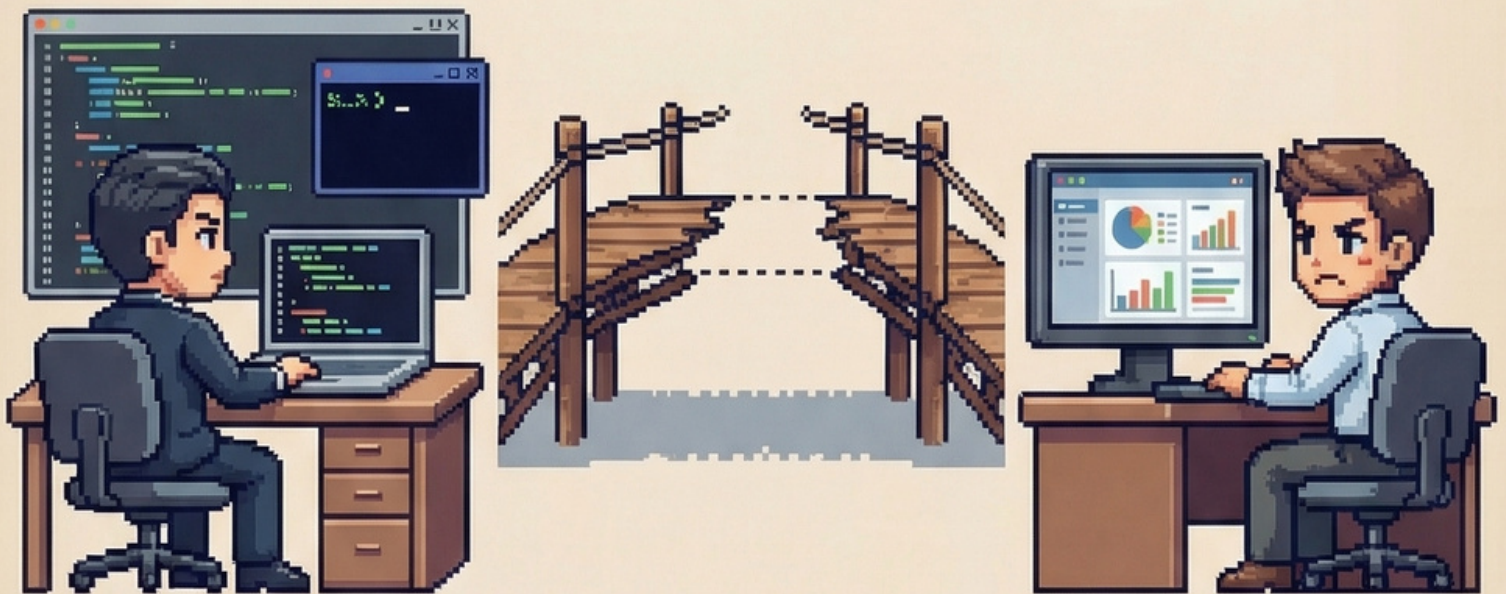
This is not a market share game. It is a market creation game. Almost every competitor analysis in GRC starts with the wrong assumption: that you are fighting other vendors. **You are fighting inertia, spreadsheets, and "I'll just use Notion."**

Entry-level practitioners have an HHI of 1777, the most concentrated segment in the survey. Spreadsheets dominate their landscape. At Director level, the same metric drops to 924. The higher you climb, the more fragmented the tool market becomes. Spreadsheets persist because many practitioners lack the technical confidence to adopt and configure a dedicated platform. The switching cost is not financial. It is cognitive.

The consultant multiplier makes this worse. 64.9% of consultants use non commercial solutions. 228 consultants in this survey. That could be hundreds of decisions steered away from commercial GRC products.

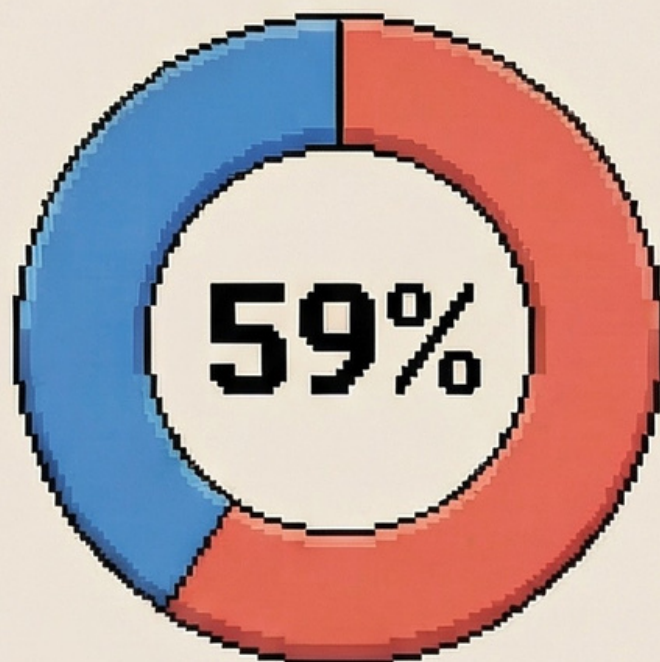
That is an estimated 1,480 annual decisions steered away from commercial GRC products. The most influential distribution channel in the industry is actively recommending against the category.

THE BUYER DISCONNECT



59% OF GRC PRACTITIONERS ARE COMMERCIALLY UNADDRESSED

COMMERCIAL
TOOLS (41%)



NO COMMERCIAL
TOOL (59%)



Spreadsheets
& Docs



93
(17.7%)



Custom Tools
(Jira, Notion,
SharePoint)



70
(13.3%)



Open
Source



38 (7.2%)

This is not a
market share.
It is a market
creation game.



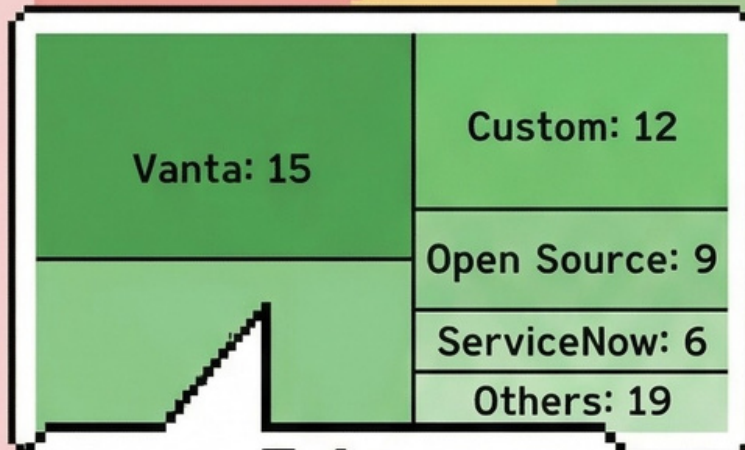
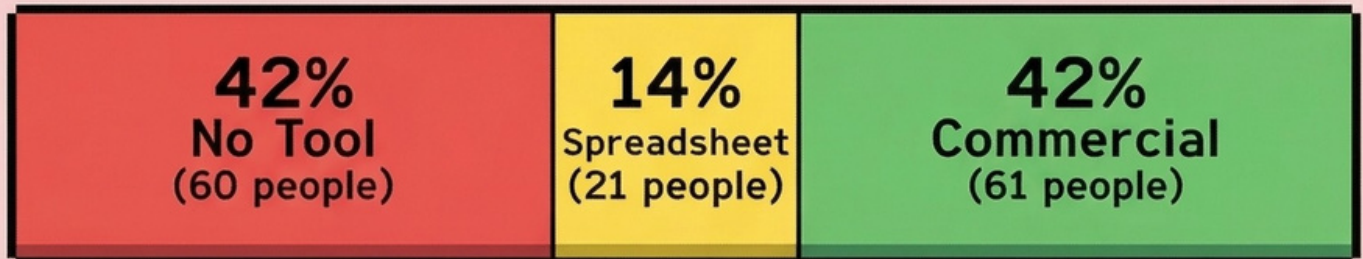
No Tool
At All



~105 (~20%)

42% OF SOLO PRACTITIONERS ARE TOOLLESS

(n=142)



7.4x
overrepresentation
vs non-solo
($p=0.0002$)

Just me and a spreadsheet.



60 SOLO PRACTITIONERS

*** ZERO TOOLING**

*** BIGGEST GREENFIELD SEGMENT**

THE CISO REJECTION WATERFALL

73.6% of CISOs use no commercial GRC tool

100%

ALL CISOs
(54 respondents)



73.6%

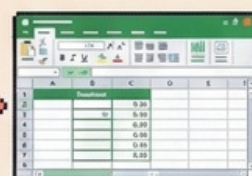
REJECTED COMMERCIAL TOOLS



Custom tools — 22.2%



Spreadsheets — 18.5%



Open Source — 14.8%



No tool — 18.1%



26.4%

USING
COMMERCIAL



The budget holders
have rejected the
entire category.

7.4% of CISOs use
ServiceNow vs 17.3%
for everyone else

BUYERS DON'T USE THE MARKET LEADER

Data

Only 7.4% of CISOs use ServiceNow, compared to 17.3% for all other seniority levels. Zoom out further: 73.6% of CISOs use no commercial tool at all. Custom builds, spreadsheets, open source, or nothing. The budget holders have rejected the entire category.

17 of 38 open source users are consultants. 64.9% of consultants use non-commercial solutions. Each consultant can directly influence client tool decisions through their engagements. 228 consultants in this survey. That could be hundreds of decisions steered away from commercial GRC products.

Insight

This is the most provocative finding in the survey. The people who approve GRC budgets don't use the market leader. And the Director level is the most contested buyer segment in the entire dataset: HHI of 924, the lowest concentration of any seniority level. Every vendor has a shot. Nobody has a lock.

CISOs know what's available. Their average technical skill (6.5) makes them the most capable seniority level. They evaluate tools rigorously. And they're choosing to build rather than buy for many reasons which could be a strong signal for vendors.

The consultant number should terrify every commercial vendor. When a consultant adopts open source for their own workflow, they carry that preference into every client engagement. 10 clients a year. 17 consultants. You do the math on that distribution channel.

And then there's the auditor problem. Your practitioner customer invests in a platform that produces evidence in structured formats. Their auditor expects screenshots and spreadsheet exports. The platform's value collapses. Not because the product failed, but because the person validating the output won't accept the format.

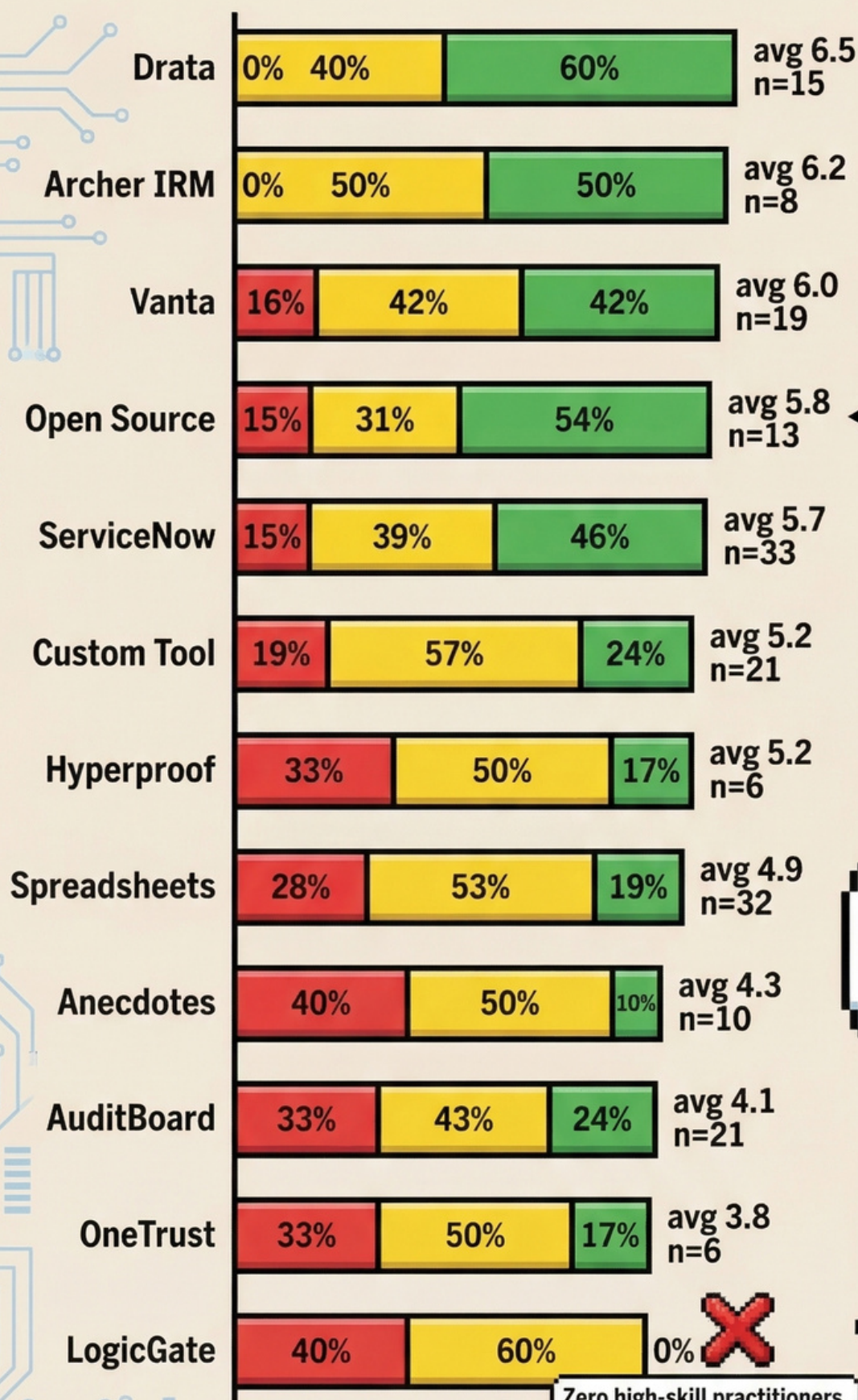
TOOL CHOICE AS TECHNICAL IDENTITY



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INDUSTRY PRACTITIONER TECHNICAL SKILL BY TOOL

278 Industry Practitioners only. No security engineers, no auditors, no consultants, no vendors.



Zero low-skill practitioners.
Every user rates 4+.



Most polarized:
69% at extremes.
Bimodal user base.

The shape
matters more
than the average.

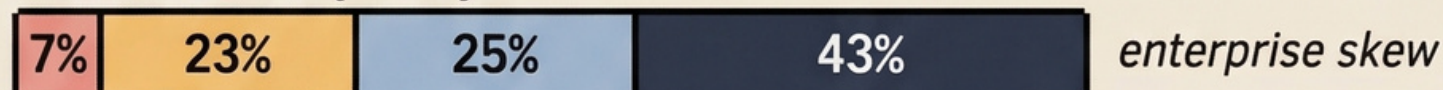
Zero high-skill practitioners.
100% rate themselves 1-6.

VENDOR TEAM SIZE DNA

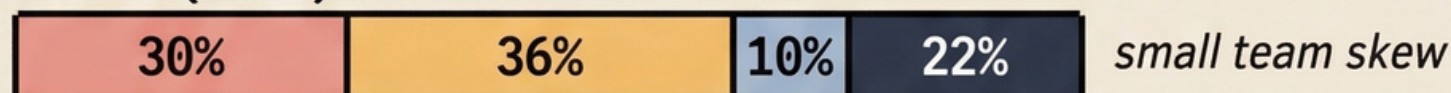
Who uses each tool, by team size

■ Solo ■ 2-4 ■ 5-10 ■ 11+

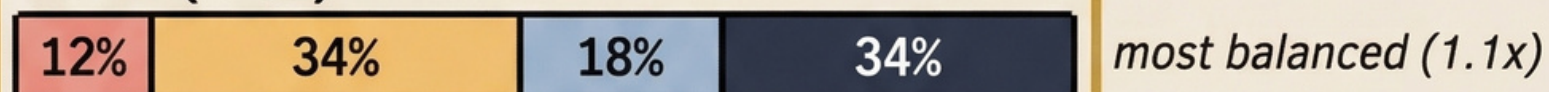
SERVICENOW (n=85)



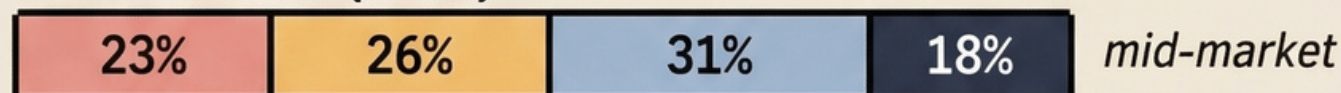
VANTA (n=49)



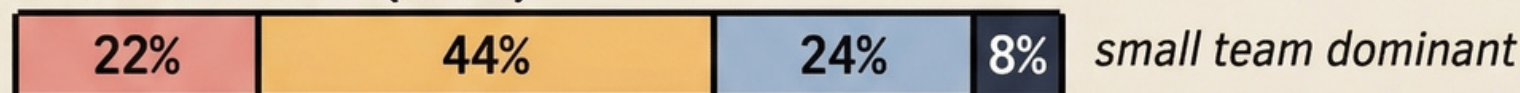
DRATA (n=32)



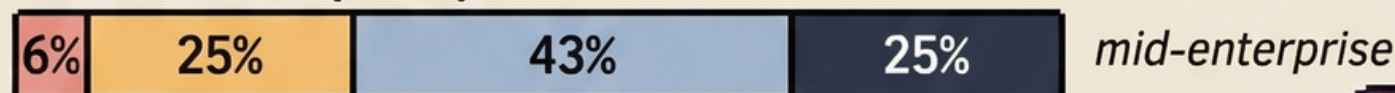
OPEN SOURCE (n=38)



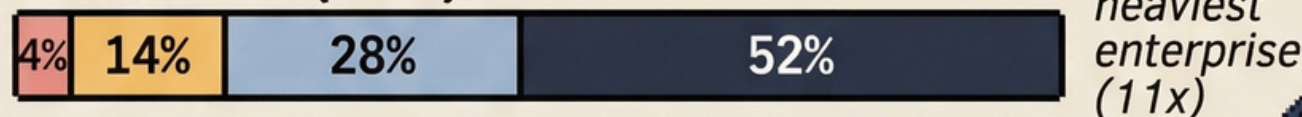
SPREADSHEETS (n=93)



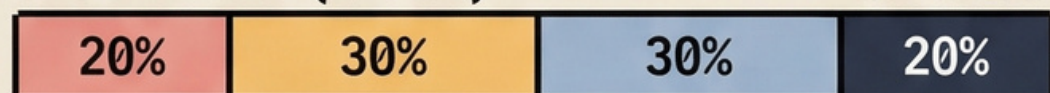
AUDITBOARD (n=32)



ARCHER IRM (n=21)

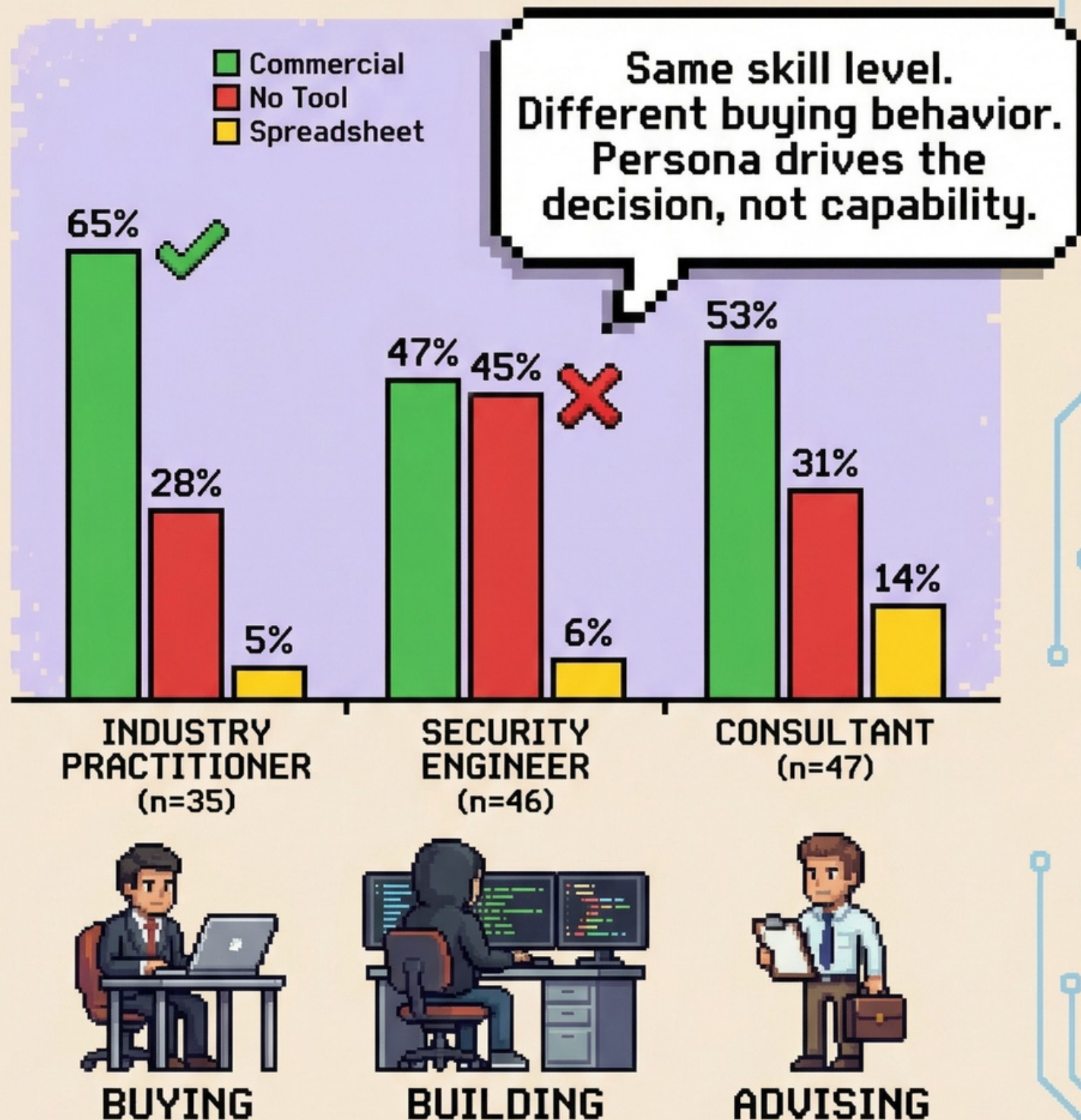


MISC TOOLS (n=100)



THE PERSONA CLIFF

At Skill 8-10: GRC Buys, Engineers Build



GRC-8+ BUYS (65%)

* ENGINEER-8+ BUILDS (45% NO TOOL)

YOUR TOOL CHOICE IS A MIRROR

Data

Strip out the security engineers, the auditors, and the vendor founders. Look only at the 278 industry practitioners. Cross their self-reported technical skill with the tool they use, then layer in team size. Two dimensions of the same person.

Drata's practitioners are the most technical in the sample: 6.5 average, zero below a 4, 60% scoring 7 or higher. Their team size DNA is equally distinctive: the most balanced distribution of any vendor (1.1x ratio between smallest and largest segment).

Vanta tells the opposite story. Technically strong (6.0 average, 42% high scorers), but with a dramatic small-team skew: 30% solo, 36% in teams of 2-4. The Vanta power user is the one-person compliance department. 28.6% of solo industry practitioners use Vanta vs 4.6% of non-solo (7.4x overrepresentation, $p=0.0002$).

ServiceNow is mid-range on skill (5.3) but 43% of its users sit in teams of 11+. Only 7% are solo. AuditBoard mirrors the pattern: 68% in teams of 5 or more. These are enterprise incumbents, and the data confirms it.

Open Source is the most polarized: 69% of practitioners at the extremes on skill, only 31% in the middle. Spreadsheets dominate small teams (44% in 2-4, 22% solo) with a mid-range skill average.

Insight

Every tool has a fingerprint: a combination of technical depth and organizational scale that defines who adopts it. Three market positions emerge.

The technical mid-market (Drata, Open Source): high skill scores, balanced team sizes, buyers who evaluate on capability. The automation-first startup (Vanta): strong technical users in small teams who need leverage. The enterprise incumbent (ServiceNow, AuditBoard, Archer IRM): mid-range skills, large teams, buyers who evaluate on integration.

The open source signal is the one to watch. As the industry trends more technical, open source adoption will accelerate. Today it is 38 users. Commercial vendors attracting technical buyers: you are not competing with each other.

Tool choice entropy is decaying. Early respondents reported 21 distinct tools (Shannon entropy: 3.71 bits). Later cohorts converged on 13 (3.25 bits). The market is consolidating. The long tail is already shrinking

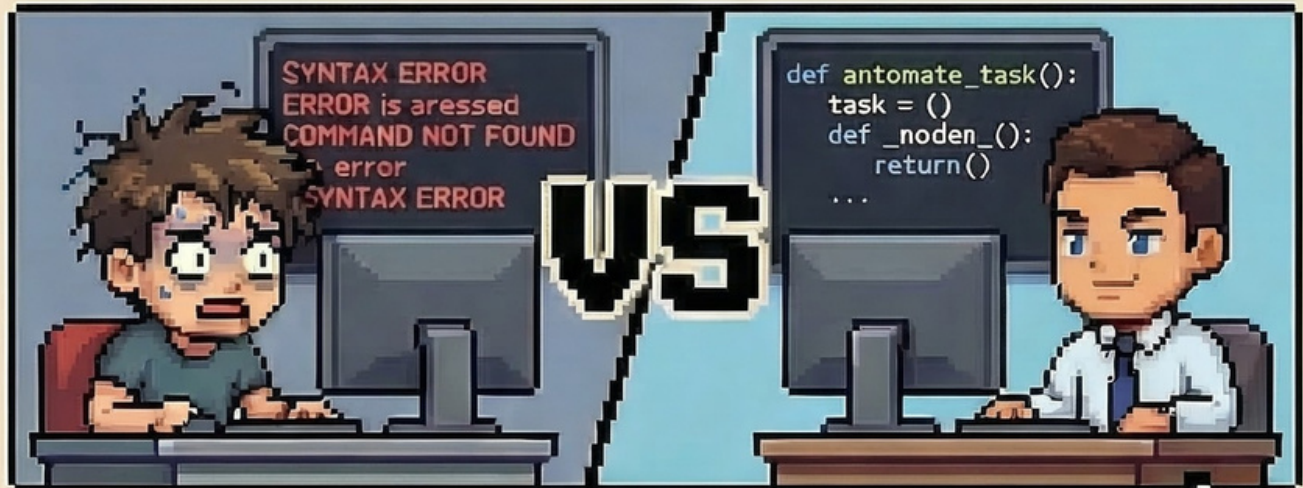
THE TECHNICAL SKILLS GAP



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THE GRC INDUSTRY IN THREE

Industry Practitioners Only (n=258)



Average: 5.3 / 10 | Median: 5.5

Half the industry sits in the middle. Not unskilled. Not engineering. AI-augmented.

LOW (1-3)

20.5% — 53 respondents

Python is a snake

MID (4-6)

50.4% — 130 respondents

Can prompt but not code

HIGH (7-10)

29.1% — 75 respondents

Building automation



20.5% **LOW** * 50.4% **MID** * 29.1% **HIGH**
* INDUSTRY PRACTITIONERS ONLY

CISOs ARE THE MOST TECHNICAL

Average Self-Reported Skill by Seniority Level

CISOs maintained their technical edge. The ones who reach the top are the technical ones.



CISO/VP+: 6.5 (n=91)

Staff+: 6.0 (n=46)

Senior: 5.7 (n=173)

Director/Head of: 5.4 (n=142)

Manager: 5.2 (n=95)

Intermediate: 5.1 (n=108)

Senior Manager: 5.0 (n=62)

Entry Level: 3.9 (n=68)

The Director dip:
bifurcation between
technical leadership
and governance
management paths.



THE INDUSTRY'S DEFINING CHALLENGE

Data

Among 258 industry practitioners: 20.5% score 1-3 (low). 50.4% score 4-6 (mid). 29.1% score 7-10 (high). Average: 5.3. Median: 5.5. Half the industry sits between spreadsheet defaults and automation capability.

But 62.3% of mid-skill practitioners already use a commercial tool. They bought the platform. They can't unlock it. The gap between owning a tool and operating it is where most GRC programs stall.

The seniority ladder confirms it. CISOs average 6.5. Entry Level: 3.9. But the middle is flat. Intermediate (5.1), Manager (5.2), Senior Manager (5.0), Director (5.4). Four levels spanning a decade of career progression, separated by less than half a point. Promotion doesn't come with technical growth.

Temporal data adds context. Comparing early respondents (Q2 2025) to late (Q1 2026), average skill barely moved ($p=0.36$). The industry isn't getting more technical. The audience is. Later cohorts skew more entry-level and solo. The high-skill bucket grew because more technical people arrived, not because practitioners upskilled.

Insight

The skills gap is three problems wearing one label.

First: *a capability gap, not an access gap.* Mid-skill practitioners have tools and budget. They lack the confidence to move beyond default configurations. Vendor onboarding solves the first week. Nobody solves months two through twelve.

Second: *a career structure problem.* The flat seniority middle means GRC has no technical forcing function between years 3 and 15. You can reach Director without writing a policy-as-code rule or configuring an API integration. The ladder doesn't reward technical growth because it doesn't require it.

Third: *a composition problem, not a development problem.* The industry looks more technical because the audience expanded to include engineers and security professionals, not because existing practitioners built new skills. The bridge between 5.3 (GRC practitioners) and 6.3 (security crossovers) isn't a training program. It's a hiring pattern.

The question facing every vendor and every practitioner is the same: does this gap close through deliberate capability building, or does it widen as automation demands outpace the people responsible for running it?

CONCLUSIONS

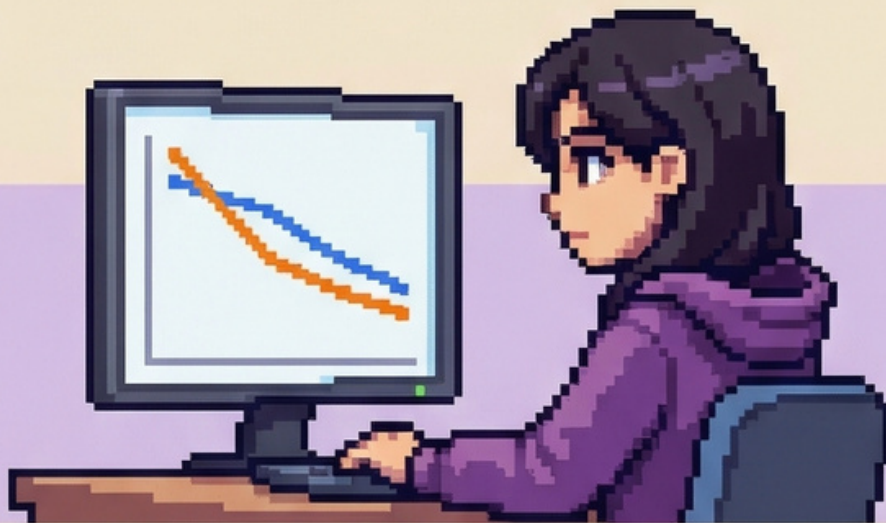
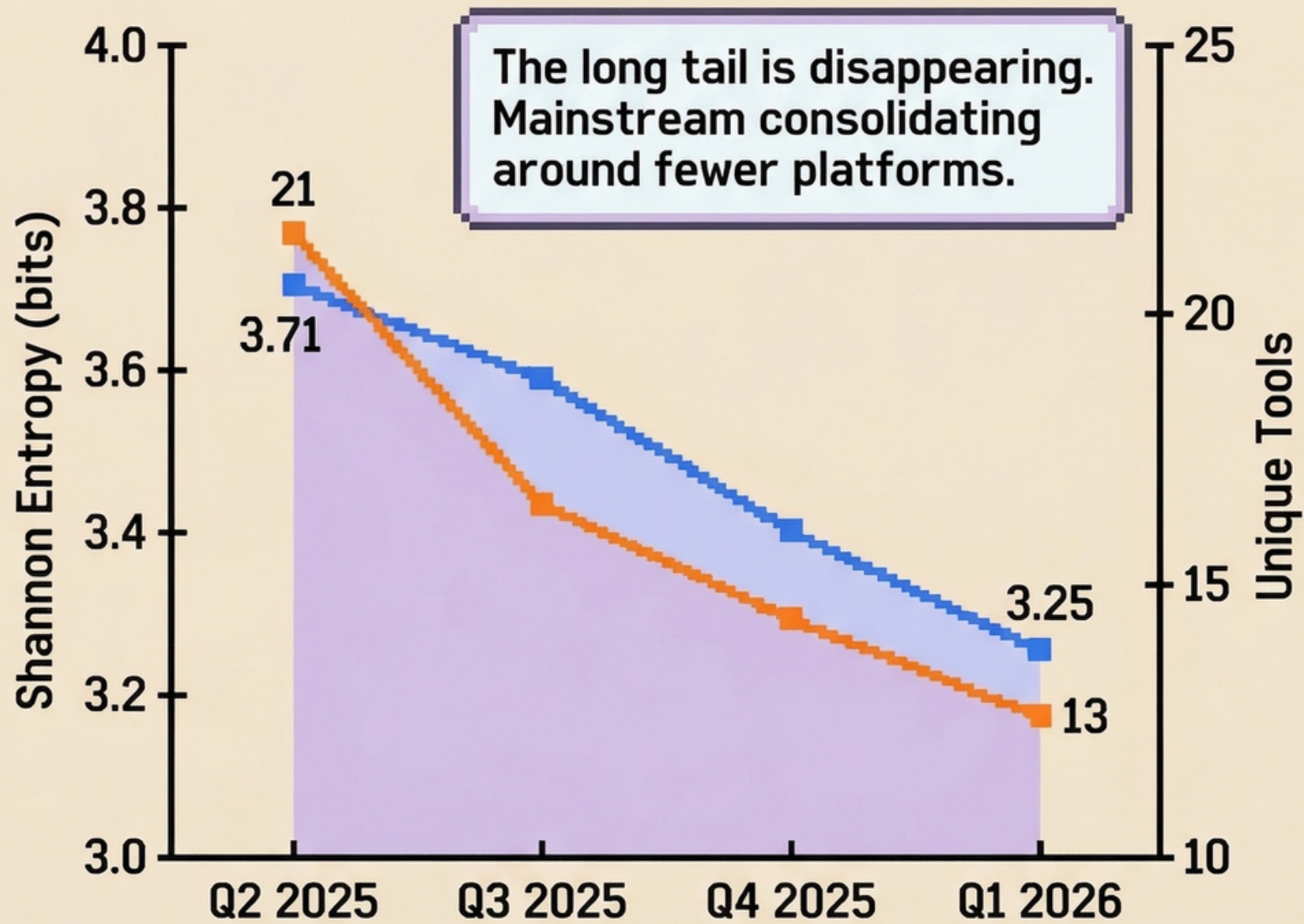


Five Strategic Takeaways



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TOOL ENTROPY DECAY

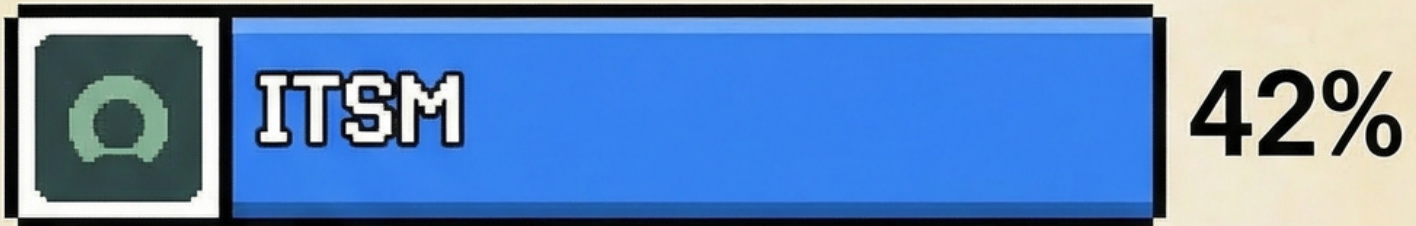


GRC IS THE LEAST CONSOLIDATED MAJOR SOFTWARE CATEGORY

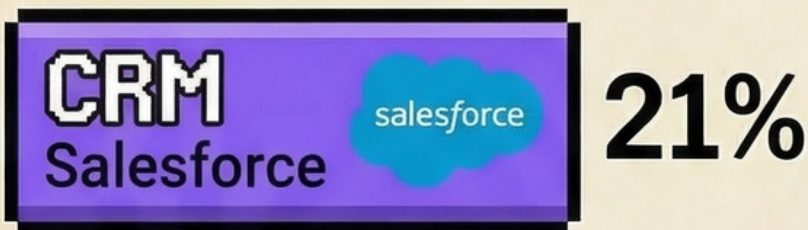
Top Vendor Market Share by Category



(Gartner 2025)



(analysts 2025)



(IDC 2024)

The market leader is a spreadsheet.



(GRC Engineer 2026)



FIVE STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS

1. The Mid-Market Is the Battleground

59% of practitioners use no commercial GRC tool. This is not a market share fight. It is a market creation problem. No tool holds above 18% share even among tool-users-only. Salesforce holds 21% of CRM. ServiceNow holds 42% of ITSM. Datadog holds 52% of observability. GRC's top "vendor" is a spreadsheet. This is the least consolidated major enterprise software category in the market.

The mid-market isn't fragmented by tool count. It's fragmented by buyer persona. The vendor that figures this out wins the largest segment.

2. Enterprise Is Decided. For Now.

ServiceNow owns enterprise GRC with 34 users in the 11+ segment. Nearly 5x spreadsheet usage. The real question: can automation vendors grow their footprint before ServiceNow absorbs their innovations?

3. The Open Source Threat Is Real

38 users. Ahead of OneTrust. Ahead of Archer. Average skill 6.3, 21% CISOs, 45% consultants. The most technically skilled, most senior, and most influential practitioners in the industry choose open source.

4. CISOs Don't Trust the Category

7.4% of CISOs use ServiceNow. The most important buyer segment prefers custom tools, spreadsheets, and open source over every commercial platform. This highlights an underlying trust problem from the key security persona.

5. The Skills Gap Is the Biggest Strategic Issue

5.4 average technical skill. 20.5% below 3. Every finding in this report traces back to this. Spreadsheet dependency persists because practitioners lack the technical confidence to switch. CISOs build custom tools because they have skills others don't. The mid-market is fragmented because no product serves both the technical and non-technical buyer.

The next year will be defined by which side of this gap you're on.

METHODOLOGY

Survey platform: Beehiiv subscription form

Collection period: April 2025 - March 2026

Total responses: 795 | **Unique respondents:** 748 (after deduplication)

Distribution: GRC Engineer newsletter subscribers and community

Data Integrity.

44 email addresses submitted more than once; 38 changed answers between submissions. All analysis uses the latest response per unique email. 32 vendor employees identified via email domain matching; 15 of 22 who answered the tool question selected their own product. These responses are included but flagged for transparency.

Response Completeness.

Three structural tiers: 5 questions (140 respondents), 6 questions (253), 7 questions (399). Entry-level respondents are 3.9x overrepresented among partial responders. Tool market share data is biased toward mid-career and senior respondents.

Self-Reported Skill.

Technical skill is self-assessed on a 1-10 scale. Entry-level shows high variance (CV: 0.559) while CISOs show tighter calibration (CV: 0.381). Scores should be interpreted as relative within seniority bands.

Bias Acknowledgement.

Respondents self-selected from a GRC-focused audience. Results may over-represent practitioners actively investing in professional development. Tool usage reflects primary tool only.

ABOUT GRC ENGINEER

GRC Engineer is the leading independent voice for the GRC Engineering discipline. Founded by Ayoub Fandi, it reaches thousands of practitioners weekly through the GRC Engineer newsletter, podcast, and LinkedIn community.

- Newsletter: grcengineer.com (weekly, free)
- Podcast: **The GRC Engineer Podcast** ([YouTube](#), [Spotify](#), also free haha)
- LinkedIn: [Ayoub Fandi](#) (where my hot takes live)

Coming later this year: The GRC Market Report 2026

A comprehensive vendor landscape analysis including detailed evaluations, decision frameworks, and buyer's guides by company size and maturity.

Interested in learning more? ayoub@grcengineer.com

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