BARC

Data Products and Data Contracts in 2026: The Foundation for AI Success

BARC Research Study

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As founder and CEO, Dr. Carsten Bange has built BARC into Europe's leading market analysis and consulting firm for data & analytics over the past 25 years. With his team of 50 people, he helps companies make the strategic, organizational and technological decisions that ensure their successful transformation into data- and analytics-driven organizations.

Dr. Bange is considered one of the leading experts on the technology market and the beneficial use of data & analytics, which makes him a sought-after speaker, author and consultant for companies, software vendors and service providers as well as investors.

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As an author of BARC Scores, Research Notes, and Surveys, he regularly shares his insights and expertise. He frequently moderates events on data management topics. He is particularly fascinated by the rapid pace of technological advancement and the central role of data management in enabling the success of forward-looking technologies such as artificial intelligence.

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Table of Contents

Foreword

This survey examines the adoption and impact of data products and data contracts across 300+ organizations. Data product adoption has risen dramatically since our last survey in 2024, with organizations using data products company-wide demonstrating markedly superior AI outcomes. While data quality for decision-making and reliable AI systems emerge as the primary drivers of adoption, the research uncovers critical challenges in implementation and reveals the future trajectory of the concept according to practitioners. These findings suggest that data products have evolved from an abstract framework with multiple interpretations into an operational necessity for organizations seeking to deliver trustworthy, production-grade AI, at scale.

Dr. Carsten Bange, Florian Bigelmaier
February 2026

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

1 Highlight – Data Products Are Mainstream

Data products have left the tarmac. Adoption increased from 48% in 2024 to 69% in 2026, representing a 21 percentage-point leap in just 13 months[1]. 93% of self-identified leaders[2] of this survey have adopted data products in their organizations. This represents a fundamental shift in how organizations design, build, and share data assets.

Data contracts are following closely behind, with only a 6-percentage-point gap between data product and data contract adoption. Organizations recognize that contracts are an important building block of data products, particularly when quality, governance, and trust are the central objectives. Also, organizations adopting the Open Data Contract Standard (ODCS) are significantly more likely to have scaled data products company-wide.

Industry and regional patterns are instructive. Insurance and financial services lead adoption, driven by regulatory pressure and data-centric business models. Manufacturing and services are some way behind, constrained by legacy systems and fewer standardized processes. In terms of a regional divide, North America is outpacing Europe in data product adoption.

[1] 13 months passed between capture of the data for 2024 and 2026 reports

[2] For a definition of "leaders," see Demographics section

2 Highlight – Data Products Fuel AI Reliability

Organizations with company-wide data products demonstrate markedly superior outcomes in AI project rollouts. Our research reveals a direct correlation: 85% of companies that have established data products across the enterprise have three or more AI projects in production, compared to just 25% of those without that level of data product maturity. We suggest diving into the report below to find out more on this correlation and whether this is also true for agentic AI.

This relationship works on two levels. First, there is clear causation: data products directly improve data quality, which earlier BARC research shows is the number one barrier to AI success. Better data quality means more reliable AI systems; whether it's a chatbot, a self-driving car, or an advanced customer retention model.

But the correlation also reveals something about organizational readiness. It stands to reason that many companies scaling AI these days possess the investment capacity, technical skills, and data culture that is also needed for rolling out data products enterprise-wide.

Executive Summary

3 Highlight – Data Quality Drives Data Product Adoption

Two drivers of data product implementation dominate: creating trustworthy inputs for AI (60%) and decision-making (59%). Early adopters are already delivering on these ambitions. 41% report improved AI reliability, and 45% cite increased confidence in decisions.

Interestingly, data democratization (a rallying cry during the data mesh hype) is declining in priority as data quality is taking center stage. One hypothesis is that ungoverned data democratization initiatives (including data marketplaces and self-service environments for data preparation and analysis) have inadvertently compromised data quality in some organizations, potentially creating a backlash against democratizing data access now.

Role-based differences reveal some friction. C-level executives emphasize the need for trustworthy data for AI and decision support. Data and IT professionals prioritize easier internal data sharing and the advantage of reusable components, addressing their own operational pain points first.

The organizational challenge is clear: the most persistent obstacles are cultural rather than technical, and building a data product mindset and establishing effective governance are essential.

4 Highlight – Navigating Challenges and the Road Ahead

Compared to 2024, challenges in scaling data products and securing ongoing funding are slowly growing. We interpret this as a typical sign of maturation, particularly as organizations have resolved other common data product challenges.

Governance models are shaping the challenge landscape: Decentralized organizations demonstrate greater agility in design and implementation, benefiting from more effective integration of domain and data expertise. Centralized models report fewer governance headaches, thanks to coordination and harmonization. Federated approaches face the most challenges and require careful coordination.

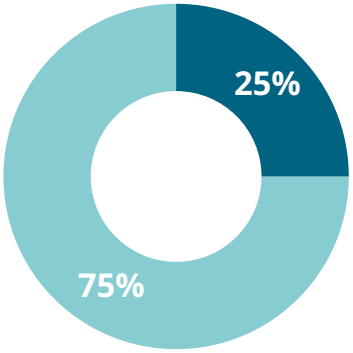
Looking forward, data observability is the next critical priority. 43% of organizations plan to invest here to further increase trust in data and detect issues earlier. Mature organizations are now applying data product principles to AI systems, treating models and agents as products with consumer-first design.

Three recommendations stand out: apply product thinking to AI systems, standardize data contracts early, and solve data quality at its source—the business process—not downstream in staging areas.

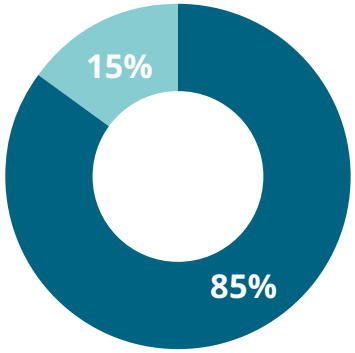
Survey Results

Data Products Are the Foundation for Agentic AI

Companies that do not use data products or are only experimenting with them

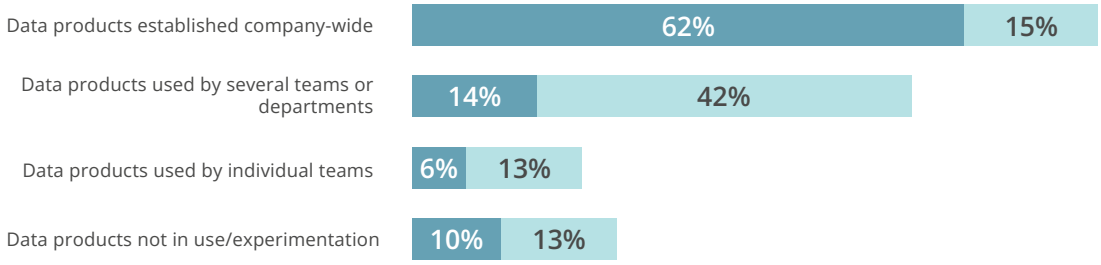


Companies that have established data products company-wide



3+ AI projects in production 2 or fewer AI projects in production

Agentic / Autonomous AI Adoption by Data Product Usage



Agentic/autonomous AI in full production Agentic/autonomous AI in limited production

Figure 1: Correlation between AI project adoption and data product usage (n=308)

Figure 2: Correlation between agentic AI adoption and data product usage (n=308)

Viewpoint

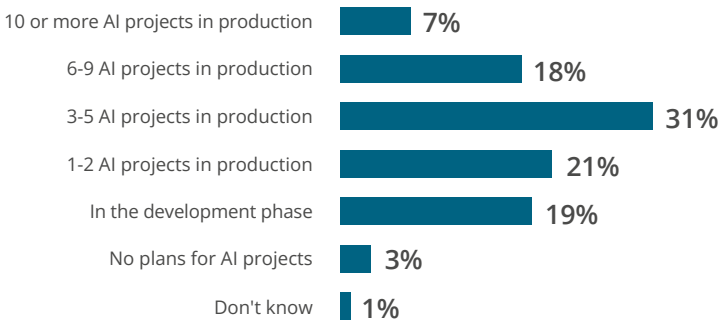
A clear correlation emerges: Organizations that use data products across multiple teams are significantly more advanced in deploying productive AI use cases, indicating higher AI maturity. 85% of companies that have established data products company-wide report three or more AI projects in production. By contrast, only 25% of companies that are not using or experimenting with data products have reached this stage. We interpret this as a clear indicator that data products support the road to productive AI.

The talk of the town right now is less AI in general (including other machine learning methods) but rather agentic AI, or AI automation. We found that 77% of organizations with company-wide data products have at least one agentic or autonomous AI system in limited or full production. The inverse holds equally true: 77% of those merely experimenting with data products—or not using them at all—have not yet deployed agentic AI in production.

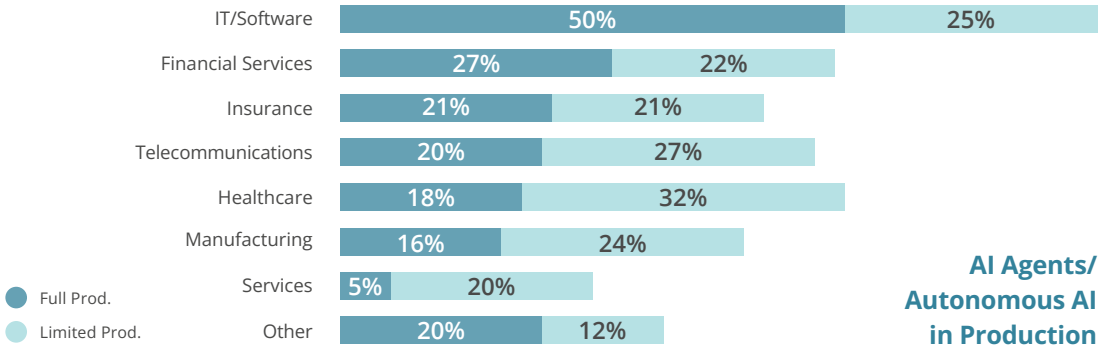
Multiple plausible explanations for this relationship exist, collectively making it highly likely that we have a clear causal relationship. As we will show later, data reliability is a major concern for organizations today, and this survey proves measurable gains in data trustworthiness across all roles surveyed, thanks to data products. Other BARC research clearly points to the fact that data quality is a massive make-or-break aspect of AI success[1]. This strongly suggests that data products function as a fundamental lever for AI success: via increasing the trustworthiness and utility of data. As pointed out above, however, it is quite likely that both AI success and high data product maturity depend on the general interest and capability of an organization to deliver on data, analytics, and AI initiatives.

[1] BARC Survey "Lessons From The Leading Edge", p.15, 2025

The Uneven Pace of Agentic AI Adoption



What is the current deployment status of AI projects in your organization?



AI Agents/ Autonomous AI in Production

AI Projects Deployed by Region

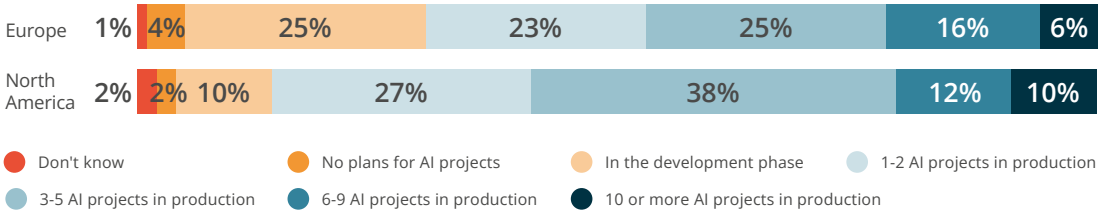


Figure 3: What is the current deployment status of AI projects in your organization? (n=308)

Figure 4: Agents in production by industry (n=308)

Figure 5: Regional gap in delivering AI projects (n=308)

Viewpoint

A significant regional divide persists in AI adoption. While 86% of North American organizations have advanced at least one AI project to deployment, only 70% of European respondents have done so. This adoption gap has been consistent at least since the early days of the generative AI trend. BARC reported on it repeatedly in 2023 and 2024.

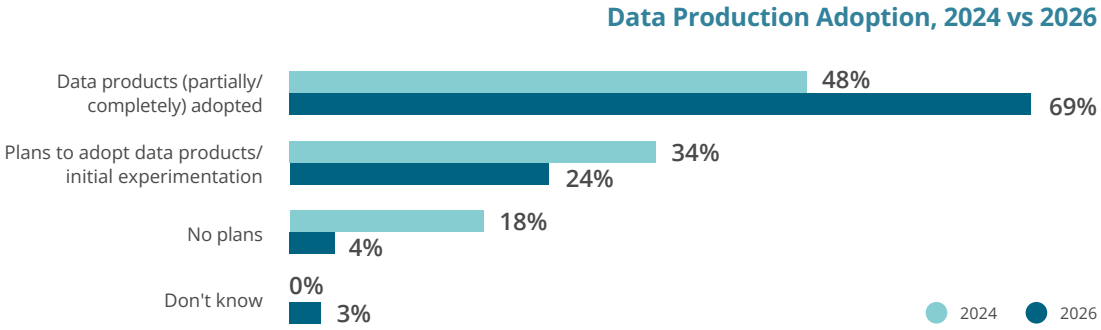
Looking at agentic AI specifically, industry differences are very pronounced. IT and software is the only sector where (far) more than 50% of companies report having at least one agent or autonomous system in limited or full production. In many cases, those should be coding agents that quickly realize their potential at scale according to Harvard Business School research[1].

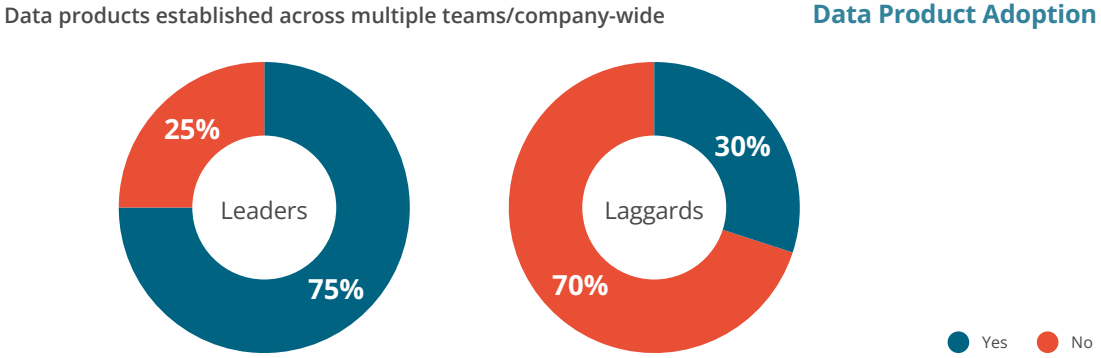
In the mid-range, we find financial services, healthcare, telecommunications, and insurance. The immediate potential for AI automation in these industries is high due to standardized processes and inputs. In the insurance industry, for example, a 2025 Study of the Luxembourg Institute of Science and Technology and University of Limerick found out that pricing and risk management are widespread established AI applications[2]. Insurers typically have well-governed data estates that make it much more realistic to develop such use cases.

Trailing some way behind is the service industry at approximately 25%. This gap likely stems from structural factors: service businesses typically operate less standardized processes, maintain intense, individualized customer contact, and perform knowledge-intensive work that requires substantial contextual intelligence and frequent situational deviations. While these characteristics theoretically support strong agentic AI use cases, the technology does not yet deliver benefits at scale in these contexts. In other words, AI automation in services will need to fundamentally reshape business models and customer interaction; a transformation that requires more time, investment, and organizational readiness than incremental automation in more standardized industries.

[1] "Generative AI and the Nature of Work" by Hoffmann et al., 2025
[2] "AI revolution in insurance: bridging research and reality" by Bhattacharya et al. 2025

Data Products Enter Roll-Out Phase; Data Contracts Follow Closely Behind





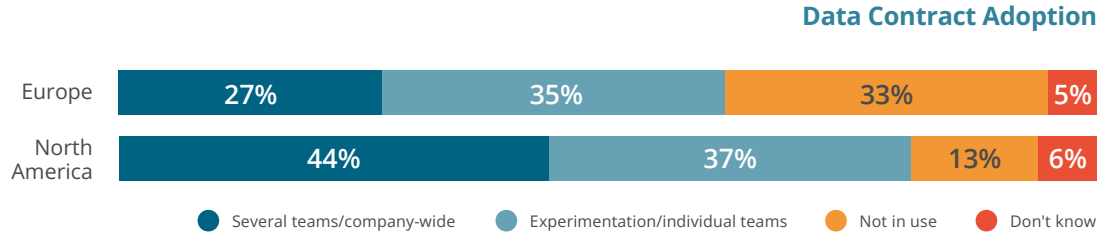


Figure 6: Adoption of data products over time; aggregations applied for time-series comparison (n=308)

Figure 7: Data products established across multiple teams/company-wide (n=178)

Figure 8: Adoption of data contracts varies by region (n=308)

Viewpoint

The evidence is clear: 69% of organizations now deploy data products in active, operational capacities. This is no longer experimentation; it represents a fundamental shift in how companies plan, design, build, and share their data assets. The pattern is even more pronounced among top performers: 93% of self-identified leaders[1] report operational use of data products.

The pace of adoption has been remarkable. In BARC's 2024 research, 48% of organizations had adopted data products at least to some extent (52% had not)—an evenly split sample.

For leading organizations, the conversation has moved beyond adoption toward scale, governance, and continuous improvement, while product management principles for data continue to deliver measurable benefits. We explore this in greater detail in the following chapters.

Data contract adoption follows closely behind data product adoption, with only a small gap: 61% of respondents use data contracts operationally (at least in specific areas), trailing only slightly behind data product adoption at 69%. Also, we can see that 41% of the companies that have implemented data contracts all over the organization already use the Open Data Contract Standard (ODCS) as the comon basis for these contracts. Further down, we analyze the priorities of participants for the next 12 months—data contracts do not rank as a top initiative here. However, we expect continued development of the concept in the field since 26% have plans to enforce data contracts.

Regional differences are notable: North America and the rest of the world are further along in implementing data products than Europe, where a considerably higher share of respondents indicate they will not pursue data products at all. The same pattern holds for data contracts, as shown in Figure 8.

Recommendation on data contracts: Adopt open standards from the outset to ensure interoperability, especially when scaling data products. Begin with identification and governance metadata, ownership metadata, and data quality metadata, then expand coverage as you mature.

[1] For definition see demographics section

Regulation as a Catalyst: How Compliance Drives Data Product Adoption

To what extent does your organization use data products?

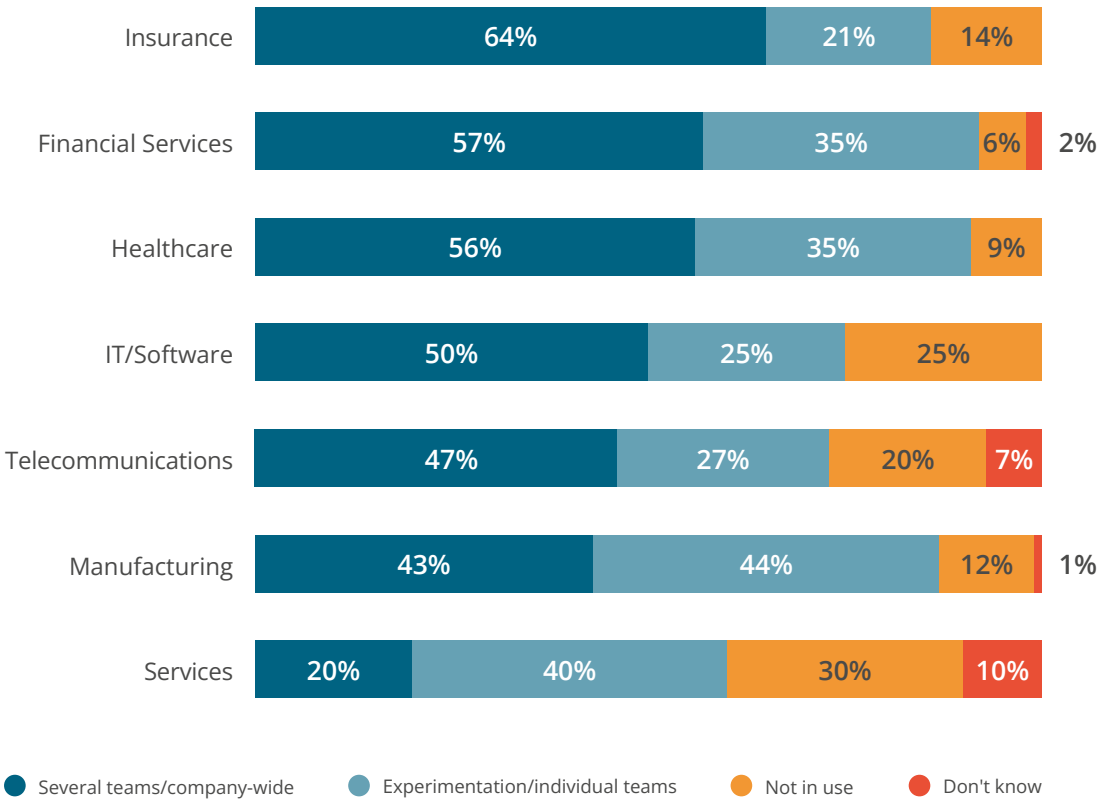


Figure 9: Adoption of data products varies by industry (n=308)

Viewpoint

In recent BARC surveys, we have seen a pattern: Organizations in regulated industries—such as insurance, financial services, and healthcare—are performing particularly well—not only in the field of data quality, but also in delivering AI projects. Here we can see that this is also true for data product adoption, and the reasons are manyfold: Regulatory pressure to get data-heavy processes right requires many aspects of data product thinking; especially clear ownership and well-maintained metadata. Policies, role models, and processes established years ago have since been internalized by data teams in these industries, becoming embedded in their work culture and professional identity.

Let's make this more tangible with a typical example of a data product in banking, a "Customer Credit Risk Score." It combines transaction history, payment behavior, and external credit data into a standardized, easy-to-access score that is consumed by loan officers, automated lending systems, and risk management dashboards—with clear data lineage, defined SLAs for freshness, and a dedicated product owner responsible for its accuracy and evolution. Regulations such as BCBS 239 and rigorous audits allow little room for significant deviations.

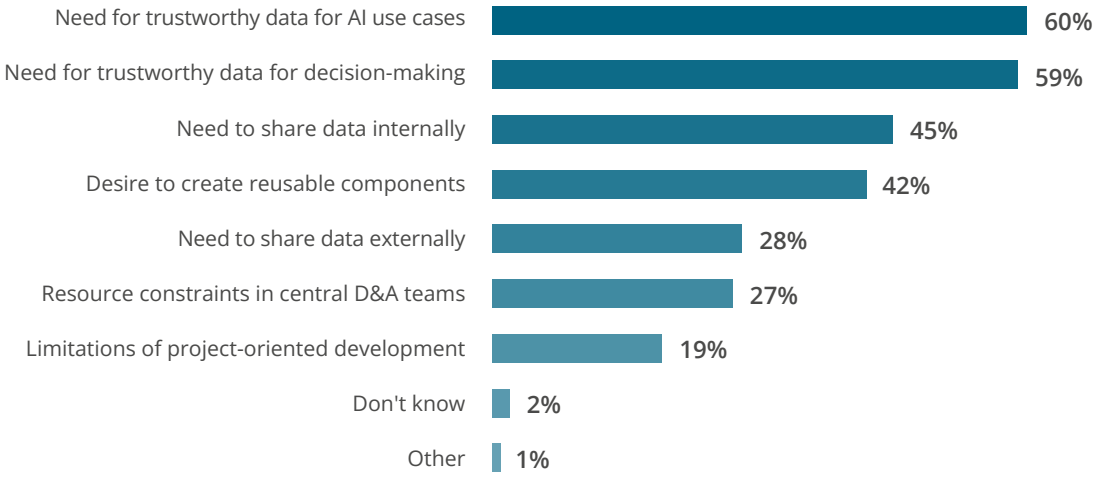
Now that we know why regulated industries are ahead, why are others trailing behind? In manufacturing, legacy systems and operational technologies certainly complicate integration, but the primary barrier is organizational. We have observed multiple times that teams in manufacturing companies prioritize product and process excellence while overlooking the potential of data generated as a by-product.

The gap in the service industry is structural, as explained above. Service companies tend to be smaller than asset-intensive sectors, which limits economies of scale, and data products deliver their ROI particularly when used at scale. Operational processes are also less repeatable; decisions are more individual per case, leading to historically less data-driven decision-making.

Recommendation: Ask yourself: What does my organization want to achieve with this concept? Is it a question of data quality? Or is it strengthening your data culture? Or is it something else? Use this concept to your organization's benefit.

Data Quality Drives Data Product Adoption

Main Drivers for Implementing Data Products



Top 5 Benefits Realized with Data Products

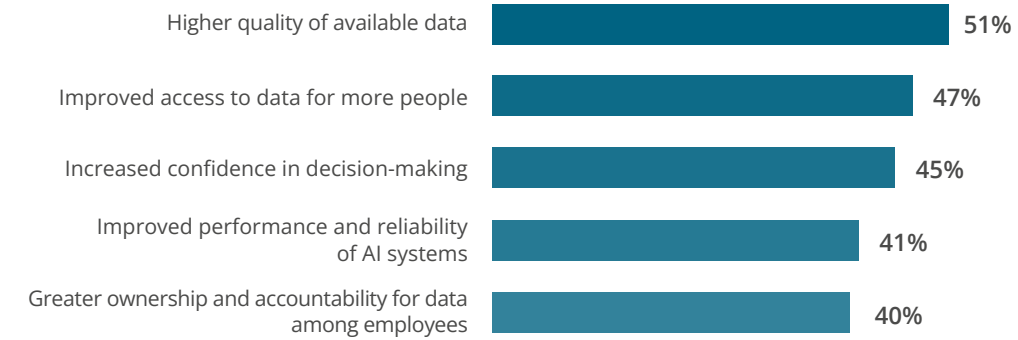


Figure 10: What are the main drivers for implementing data products? (n=296)

Figure 11: What benefits has your organization realized from implementing data products: Top 5 (n=296)

Viewpoint

Two clear drivers emerge for data product implementation: creating data products that deliver trustworthy inputs for decision-making (59%) and for AI use cases (60%). Early adopters demonstrate that data products deliver on these ambitions: 41% report improved AI system performance and reliability, while 45% report increased confidence in decision-making. More than 2 out of 3 respondents are already achieving their ambitions, indicating the success of the concept. When examining the different roles of respondents, we observe that operational experts in data & analytics and IT have a distinct set of priorities: internal data sharing and reusable components rank as their primary concerns when implementing data products, indicating that they prioritize easing their day-to-day pain points.

Data products emerged alongside the data mesh trend. However, this concept and especially the narrative behind it has lost traction. Data products under data mesh served to decentralize data asset creation. The goal was always to enhance agility and increase the value of data assets for downstream consumers by incorporating domain expertise. However, this survey shows that many companies ultimately adopt the concept while aiming to enhance value, trustworthiness, and utility; irrespective of whether their governance model is decentralized, federated, or centralized.

Despite the significant gains identified above, opportunities for improvement remain. Data products should accelerate downstream processes through reusability, enhanced discoverability, and automated governance. Yet only 31% of respondents report faster AI project development or quicker responses to ad hoc data and AI inquiries. This may indicate unrealized potential in operational efficiency, or it could suggest that data products are simply not the bottleneck in many AI projects; for instance, when AI applications rely purely on prompt engineering.

Challenges: Fewer Hurdles, but a Mix of Technical and Organizational Issues

Challenges when implementing data products: 2024 vs 2026

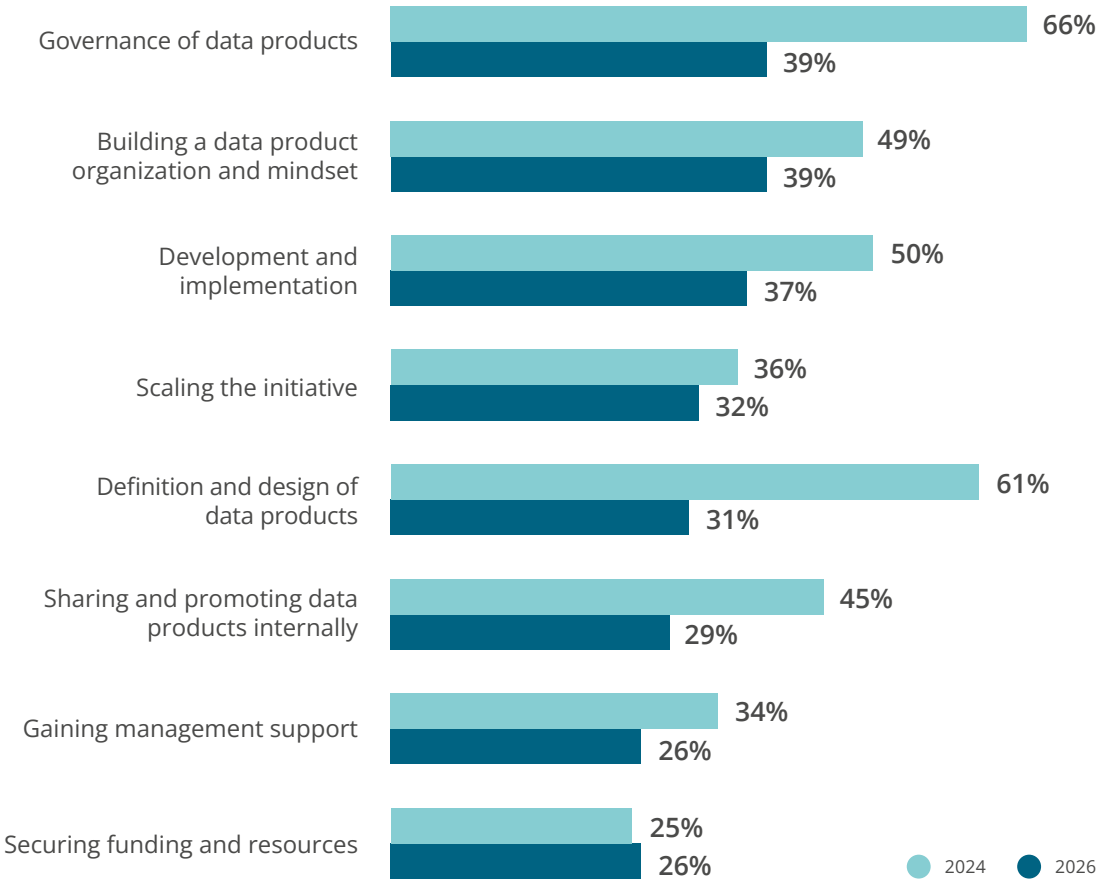


Figure 12: Challenges when implementing data products (count), time-series data, reduced to the options available in both samples (n=295)

Viewpoint

Compared with BARC's 2024 data, companies generally report fewer challenges when adopting data products (despite a much higher adoption rate), indicating a level of maturity and, more importantly, suggesting that many companies have found solutions to those initial difficulties. This is most evident in the challenges of governing and defining data products. The share of companies reporting challenges in these areas has halved in just 13 months[1]. In the meantime, however, some respondents have encountered difficulties in scaling the concept and securing ongoing funding.

Larger companies derive greater benefits from data products, but they also face greater challenges. Smaller companies primarily gain benefits around confidence in decision-making, while medium and large companies report benefits around higher data quality and improved data access for more people. That makes sense—data democratization is certainly an initiative that is more beneficial from a certain company size upwards. The top challenges are comparable across company sizes. However, larger companies are more likely to be affected by governance challenges.

On the data culture side, it is encouraging to see significant progress in building data product organizations and mindsets, and in sharing and promoting data products. In conversations with early adopters in previous years, we found that data and analytics decision-makers particularly sought advice on issues related to data culture. Many companies, especially in Europe, invested money, time, and effort here. This is paying off now.

[1] 13 months have passed between capture of the data for 2024 and 2026 reports

Future Priorities: Data Quality Still Tops the Agenda

Main priorities for the next 12 months

Figure 13: Areas (relating to data products) organizations are prioritizing in the next 12 months (n=308)

Viewpoint

Across all segments we analyzed, companies are actively building and scaling data products. This is clear evidence that adoption has moved beyond experimentation into the mainstream. So, what's next?

Data observability is emerging as the next critical priority. 43% of organizations plan to invest in deeper visibility into their data infrastructure to detect issues earlier, maintain trust, and support more reliable AI and decision-making systems.

But observability is not the only frontier. Mature organizations are now applying data product principles to AI projects. 59% of those organizations that already realize the greatest benefits from data products plan to treat models, agents, and chatbots as products with a consumer-first mindset, too. This is a significant evolution: Data products are no longer "just" about tables but about operating the entire data estate with the principles of ownership, consumer-orientation, and usability at the core. Organizations that master the data product mindset and apply it smartly will be better positioned to deliver AI systems that users trust and adopt.

Another encouraging priority is expanding access to data products. 30% of respondents plan to invest here. With near-zero marginal costs beyond compute, broader access unlocks additional value, one of the core promises of data products.

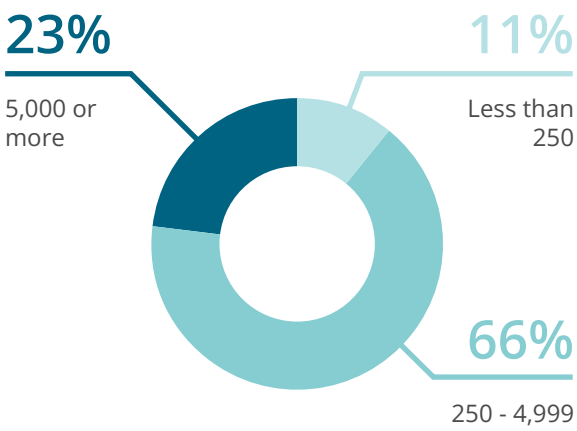
Success with data products correlates strongly with execution and sustained investment: Organizations realizing the greatest benefits now are also planning to invest the most in the future, tackling more initiatives across the board than others in our sample. Beyond these behavioral factors, the demographic patterns discussed earlier hold true: North American organizations are ahead of their European counterparts, and regulated industries are leading the service industries in terms of adopting data products and realizing benefits from them.

The takeaway: Companies continue to invest in improving data quality by scaling data products, maturing data contracts, and investing in data observability. They do this not only for data and analytics, but also to ensure AI success. The ones with the most positive experiences with data products are also applying the concept to their AI projects.

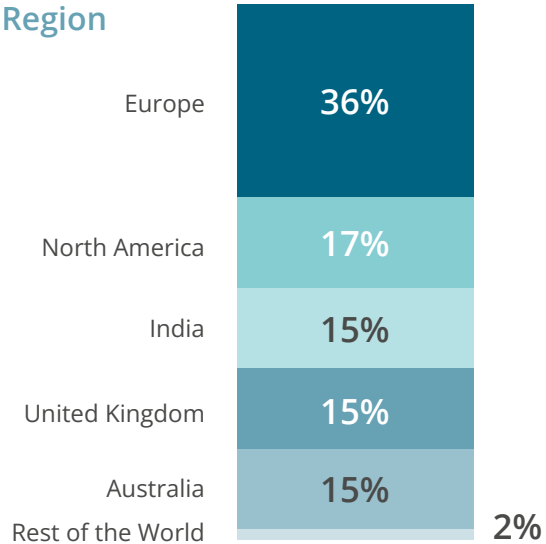
Methodology

Demographics

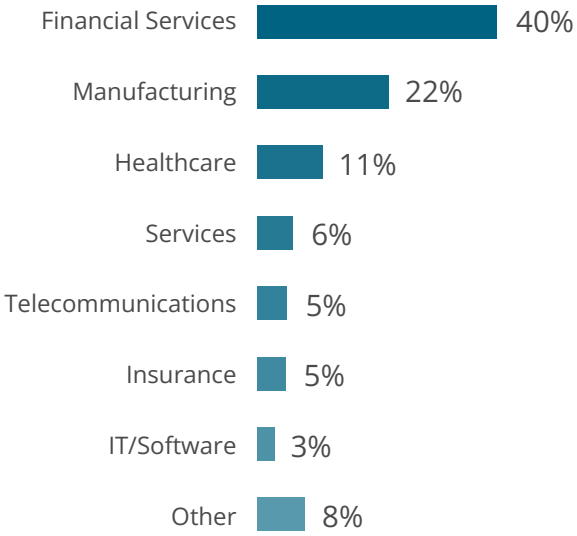
Number of Employees



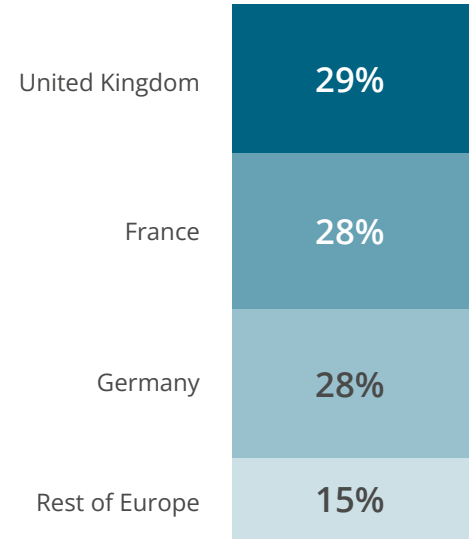
Region



Industry



European Countries



Information on the Survey

A detailed demographic breakdown will follow. However, two key definitions are important to understand first:

1) Leaders vs. Laggards
We classify respondents as "Leaders" or "Laggards" based on their self-assessment in response to the question: "How do you rate the skills and competencies in the handling of data in your company compared to your main competitors?" Leaders represent those at the top of this scale, while Laggards are at the opposite end.

2) Data Product Benefit Index
We created an index based on responses to the question: "What benefits has your organization realized from using data products?" Benefits were weighted as follows:

Monetary and other measurable benefits: 3 points
Most other benefits: 2 points
"Other" responses: 1 point

Respondents were then categorized into three groups based on their total score (weighted sum of benefits achieved):

Low Benefits: 0–5 | Medium Benefits: 6–9 | High Benefits: ≥10

This study is based on a quantitative online survey conducted in November 2025. The objective of the survey was to gain a detailed understanding of the current relevance and strategic importance of data products and data contracts within organizations. A total of 308 qualified individuals were included in the final analysis after data cleansing. The participants represented various industries and company sizes and were globally distributed.

A structured questionnaire design was used to collect the data, specifically developed to enable deeper insights into the participants' expertise and experiences. The respondents were selected at random to ensure a broad and representative database. Due to rounding differences, the percentage values shown in the figures may not add up to exactly 100% in individual cases. Response options such as "I don't know" were not included in the analyzed sample.

About BARC

BARC

BARC is the leading analyst firm for data & analytics, AI, corporate performance management (CPM), and ESG with a reputation for unbiased and trusted advice. Our expert analysts deliver a wide range of research, events, and consulting services for the data & analytics community. Our innovative research evaluates software, vendors, and service providers rigorously and highlights market trends, delivering insights that enable our customers to innovate with data, analytics, and AI. BARC's 25 years of experience with data strategy & culture, data architecture, organization, and software selection helps clients transform into truly data-driven organizations.

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The BARC consulting practice is entirely focused on translating companies' requirements into future-proof decisions. The holistic advice we provide helps companies successfully implement their data & analytics strategy and culture as well as their architecture and technology. BARC's research and experience-founded expert input sets organizations on the road to the successful use of data & analytics, from strategy to optimized data-driven business processes.

Events

At BARC events, leading minds and industry experts come together to share insights and drive innovation. Our conferences, roundtables, and online webinars attract over 10,000 participants annually, offering a unique blend of information, inspiration, and interactivity. These events provide a platform to exchange ideas with peers, explore emerging trends, and gain expert perspectives on market developments. By engaging with thought leaders and industry practitioners, participants discover actionable strategies to enhance their business and stay ahead in the evolving world of data & analytics.

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