

2026

Edition • Original Research

The State of Agency Operations 2026

What 4,321 agency team members at 466 companies told us about how their work actually gets done. Fourteen agreement statements, eight open questions, and roughly 21,700 written answers.

Every response was collected at the start of an engagement with ZenPilot, during the Blueprint. This is what agency operations look like before.

88%

believe their clients are lucky to be
working with them

vs

41%

trust that things don't slip through the
cracks

We call it the Confidence Gap. It's the story of this report.

CHAPTER 01

The Confidence Gap

Agency teams believe in their work. They don't trust their systems.

Ask people whether their agency does great work and the numbers are overwhelming. 90% agree they deliver services that drive meaningful results. 88% say their clients are lucky to be working with them. 84% would recommend their workplace to friends.

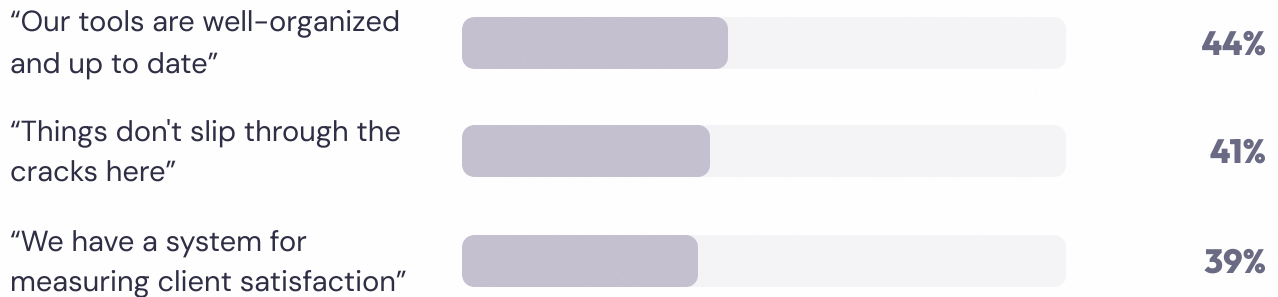
Then ask whether they trust the machine behind that work. Fewer than half agree their tools are organized and up to date. Only 41% believe things don't slip through the cracks. Only 39% say they have a system for measuring client satisfaction.

WHAT AGENCY TEAMS BELIEVE



47 point gap between what teams believe and what they trust

WHAT AGENCY TEAMS TRUST



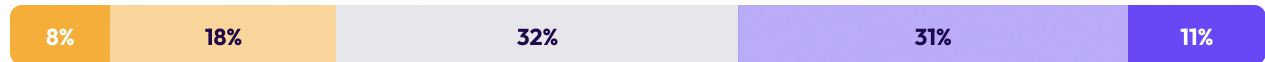
n = 4,321 survey responses. Percentages are respondents agreeing (4–5 on a 5–point scale). Bar widths show exact agreement rates.

That's a 47–point gap between how good teams believe their work is and whether they trust it to happen reliably. Great people, proud of their work, running on systems they know are failing them.

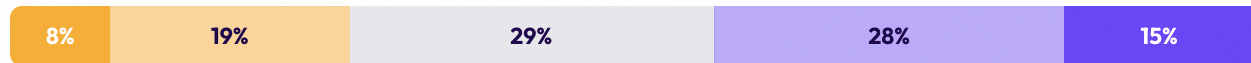
The full picture

Percent agreeing hides the shape of the answers. Here's the full 1–to–5 spread on four of the statements.

"Things don't slip through the cracks here"



"Our tools are well-organized and up to date"



"Documented process + accountability"



"I know what I need to complete each day"



1 2 3 4 5 1 = disagree, 5 = agree

n = 4,321 survey responses. Share of respondents choosing each point on the 1-5 agree scale. Segments under 7% are unlabeled.

Notice the shape. "I know what I need to complete each day" piles up hard on the right – people have their own act together. The system statements sag toward the middle and left. That contrast is the whole report in one chart.

81%

of respondents know what they need to complete each day. Personal organization is the one part of operations agency people have already solved.

46%

of that organized majority trust that nothing slips through the cracks

20%

among the people who don't know their day

Personal organization can't fix a system problem.

Every chapter that follows is a different view of that same gap.

CHAPTER 02

A Day in the Life

Follow one respondent through a single workday and the gap shows up everywhere. It starts before the first task is even opened.

Email is the front door to the workday

Out of 2,880 answers about morning routines, 764 mention email against 688 for ClickUp, and far fewer for every other PM tool. 310 people, 11% of respondents, explicitly start their day in the inbox. A dozen literally use the inbox as their task list.

WHERE THE WORKDAY ACTUALLY STARTS



n = 2,880 morning-routine answers. Counts are tool mentions; bars scaled to the most-mentioned tool.

And it's trending the wrong way. Email's share of morning-routine answers grew from 23.4% in the earliest third of responses to 29.1% in the latest. The end of the day looks the same: email is the most-mentioned end-of-day tool too, at 365 mentions vs 300 for ClickUp and 200 for Slack.

“I currently use my Inbox as my To Do list”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

One in four runs the day from a shadow system

Roughly 1 in 4 respondents assembles a private list every morning – a Google Doc, Apple Notes, a spreadsheet, a notebook – and works from that instead of the official tool. 290 answers explicitly describe a personal system outside the company PM tool.

114

answers describe running the day from a notebook, sticky notes, or paper

Why do shadow systems win? Trust. People keep private lists because the official one is cluttered or stale. And it runs top to bottom: owners and CEOs admit their own work lives in their head or a bullet journal. The people enforcing the system aren't in it either.

“I ignore ClickUp entirely (as I don't understand it/it isn't reliably up-to-date) and go from working head knowledge.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

“people tend to go a bit rogue with their spreadsheets, which sometimes link to other spreadsheets or docs, and it just turns into this weird Byzantine rabbit hole”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

The shadow-system penalty

The workaround is a symptom, not a quirk. Respondents who run their day from paper or a personal list score their systems dramatically lower than everyone else.

“Our tools are well-organized and up to date”

Runs the day from paper or a personal list



2.68 / 5

Everyone else



3.27 / 5

“Things don't slip through the cracks here”

Runs the day from paper or a personal list



2.69 / 5

Everyone else



3.16 / 5

Average agreement on a 1–5 scale. n = 154 respondents who mention running their day from paper or a personal list vs 2,738 who don't. Bars scaled to a 5-point maximum.

The morning scavenger hunt

The day's plan doesn't live anywhere. It has to be reconstructed every morning from fragments: PM tool, email, Slack, calendar, spreadsheet, paper.

27%

check two or more places every morning to assemble their day

9%

check three or more

ILLUSTRATIVE MATH

If the first 30 minutes of every day goes to assembling the plan, a 20-person team loses about 2,400 hours a year to the scavenger hunt – before any actual work starts.

30 minutes a day × 20 people × ~240 working days = ~2,400 hours

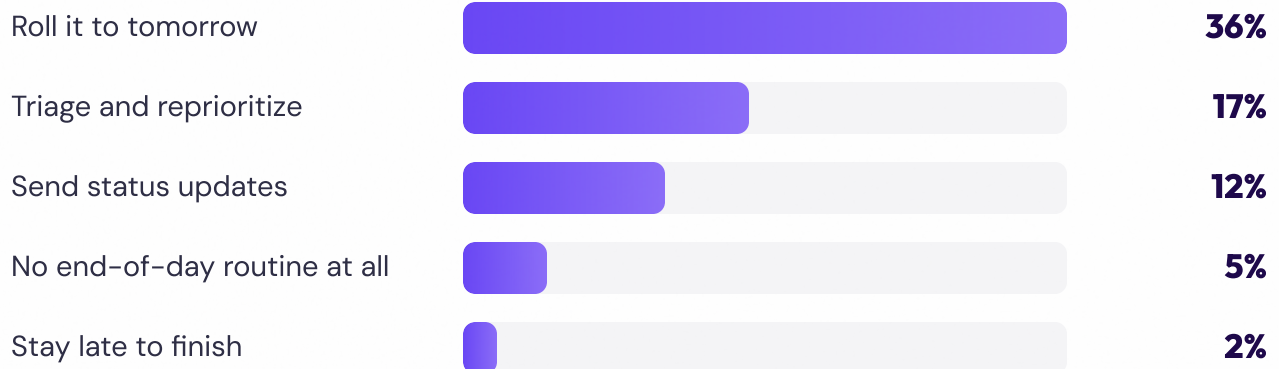
“As soon as I have a moment left for something else, I spend more time looking for a task than doing it.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

The 5pm decision

Every day ends with the same question: what happens to the work that didn't get done? For most teams, the answer is tomorrow's problem. 36% of end-of-day answers describe rolling unfinished work forward. Only about 2% mention staying late. Rescheduling, not grinding, is the dominant coping strategy – which explains why due dates decay into fiction. As one respondent put it, most deadlines are treated as soft unless there's a client presentation scheduled.

WHAT HAPPENS TO UNFINISHED WORK AT 5PM



n = 2,855 end-of-day answers. Percentages are keyword-count grounded shares; bars scaled to the largest category.

“Just be stressed about it and know I have to do it tomorrow.”

“the day never ends, it blends into the next day”

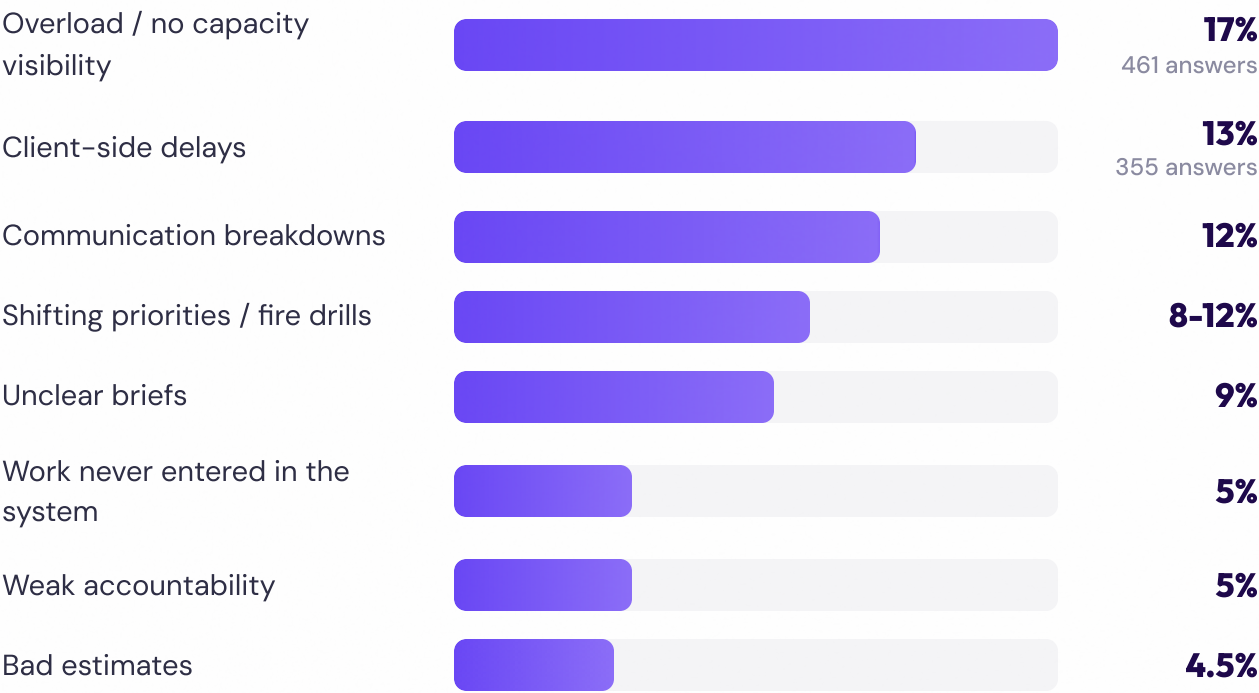
“Get out alive”

CHAPTER 03

Why Work Slips

We asked why deliverables end up missed or late. 2,725 people answered. Nobody blamed the software alone.

SELF-REPORTED CAUSES OF MISSED AND LATE DELIVERABLES



n = 2,725 answers. Percentages are keyword-count grounded shares; bars scaled to the largest cause.

Two things stand out. First, almost nobody says "understaffed" – just 6 answers out of 2,725. People frame overload as a planning failure, not a hiring failure. They don't want more coworkers. They want visibility into who's actually at capacity.

Second, only 5% claim tasks rarely slip at all.

Clients are the co-villain: they show up in 24% of all answers, mostly as late approvals, late feedback, and missing assets.

“We are stuck in the rut of (almost) everything is needed ASAP and if everything is a rush, nothing is a rush.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

69

The notifications irony

Notifications – the feature designed to prevent misses – are a named cause of misses in 69 answers. Alert floods train people to ignore alerts. One respondent summed it up: "Today, many team members view ClickUp notifications as noise rather than actionable information."

CHAPTER 04

The Slack Paradox

Slack is simultaneously the hero and the villain of agency operations.

Ask what's working in internal communication and Slack crushes it: 651 mentions vs 148 for ClickUp. That's a 4.4x margin. Ask what needs improving and Slack tops that chart too, with 355 mentions – tasks assigned in chat with no record, decisions buried in threads, context that never reaches the task.

THE HERO

651

mentions of Slack when we asked what's working in internal communication. ClickUp got 148.

THE VILLAIN

355

mentions of Slack when we asked what needs improving – the most-named tool on that list too.

Source: open-text answers on internal communication. Counts are tool mentions.

The most-celebrated "best practice" in the dataset is the double notification: update the task, then ping Slack about it. Teams describe it proudly. It's really an admission that the system of record is too slow to be trusted on its own.

“If we want a fast reply to a problem or a question, we use Slack because Click Up replies can take hours/days. Slack replies take roughly 2-3 minutes.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

“Too much communication happens outside of tasks; either in a client folder's group chat or in a bazillion combinations of group pings.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

Meanwhile, email is functionally dead inside agencies – it shows up in just 4.4% of internal-comms answers – while dominating the client-facing workday. Two different worlds, one team.

CHAPTER 05

Hero Culture Is Operational Debt

Asked what's working well in project management, 18% credited communication. A striking sub-genre credited pure human effort. Not the process. Not the tool. Effort.

“Now everything is manual & very human-related. Feels very much a hero-culture, not a system-culture.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

“The general feeling from team members of our current system is one of 'treading water.' Every day there is a low-grade panic that if just one thing goes wrong, it will throw off our day and subsequent days.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

“through a lot of manual work, the ongoing work is getting done and delivered to the clients but that's through sweat and tears!”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

*“I'm a sh*t show. I don't do this well at all. I recognize deadlines and scramble at the end to get it done. I don't do a good job of seeing stuff before it becomes a fire.”*

SURVEY RESPONDENT

“We have growing pains. What worked when the agency was 6 people is not working when we have 20.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

The most common caveat attached to every tool in the dataset: "works well when used properly." Or as one respondent put it, it's "a people problem, not a product feature problem."

Here's our read. Hero culture is unbilled operational debt. Talented people overcompensating with communication and manual effort will keep clients happy for a while. It works right up until your best people leave, get sick, or the team grows past what heroics can cover. The 6-to-20 breaking point shows up in this dataset over and over.

GUT CHECK

Does this sound like your team?

✓ Your to-do list is your inbox.

✓ You keep a private spreadsheet or doc nobody else can see.

✓ Everything is marked urgent, so nothing is.

✓ You update the task, then ping Slack about it anyway.

✓ Deadlines are soft until a client meeting looms.

✓ The first 30 minutes of every morning goes to figuring out what to work on.

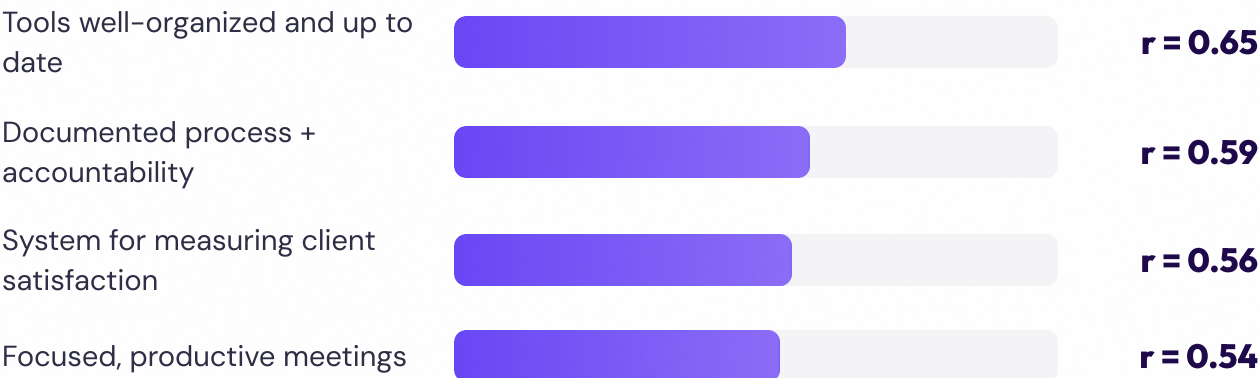
Each of these showed up hundreds of times in the data. None of them is a people problem.

[See where your team stands with the free PM Benchmark.](#)

What Reliable Teams Do Differently

Across 2,893 complete responses, we correlated every statement against "things don't slip through the cracks." The strongest predictors aren't about talent or effort. They're about structure.

WHAT PREDICTS “NOTHING SLIPS THROUGH THE CRACKS”



n = 2,893 complete responses across all 14 statements. Bars scaled to a correlation of 1.0.

Execution reliability is a workspace-structure problem before it's a people problem. Organized tools, documented process with accountability, a real system for client satisfaction, and focused meetings – that's the profile of teams where work doesn't slip.

And it flows through to retention. At companies in the top decile of operations scores, average agreement with "I'd recommend this workplace to my friends" is 4.69 out of 5. In the bottom decile, it's 3.98.

WORKPLACE ADVOCACY BY OPERATIONS SCORE

Top decile of ops scores  **4.69 / 5**

Bottom decile of ops scores  **3.98 / 5**

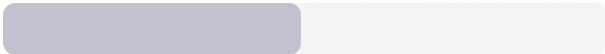
Average "I'd recommend this workplace to my friends" score, among 192 companies with 5+ respondents. Bars scaled to a 5-point maximum.

Focused meetings ripple outward

Cut the data by a single habit and the splits get stark. People who rate their meetings focused and productive report a different company: work slips less, and they're far more likely to recommend the place.

Nothing slips through the cracks

Rates meetings focused and productive  **3.48 / 5**

Doesn't  **2.46 / 5**

Would recommend this workplace

Rates meetings focused and productive  **4.57 / 5**

Doesn't  **3.96 / 5**

Average agreement on a 1-5 scale. n = 3,002 who rate their meetings focused and productive vs 1,318 who don't. Bars scaled to a 5-point maximum.

Process discipline is visible to your clients

The same split shows up on the client-facing side. Teams with documented process and accountability set healthier client expectations and actually measure satisfaction. Your clients can tell whether your house is in order.

Healthy client expectations



System for measuring client satisfaction



Average agreement on a 1–5 scale. n = 2,311 at teams with documented process + accountability vs 2,009 without. Bars scaled to a 5–point maximum.

8%

plan tomorrow the night before, or plan the week on Friday. It's the most in-control cohort in the whole dataset – the only group that starts the morning executing instead of reconstructing.

Teams want more structure, not less

One more thing the data killed: the idea that teams resist structure. The final open question skewed 5:1 positive – 184 praise mentions against 35 mentioning stress or burnout – and its most common substantive word was "process," at 275 mentions, ahead of any tool. Individual contributors ask for more accountability, including on themselves.

"I know I'm a weak link in the processes and consistency departments and need a system that can keep me accountable"

SURVEY RESPONDENT

“We all have the same mantra: If it's not in ClickUp, it doesn't exist.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT

1 in 2,855

The AI revolution hasn't reached daily operations

Across 2,855 end-of-day answers, exactly one mentions ChatGPT. One. In the question about operational challenges, AI is essentially absent.

Whatever AI is doing to pitch decks and marketing copy, it has not touched the daily operating routines of agency teams. They still start the day in the inbox and end it rolling work to tomorrow.

Read that as opportunity. This is the open frontier of agency operations: the first teams to wire AI into how work actually runs – capacity, handoffs, follow-through – are competing against teams that haven't started.



Every dot is an answer. One mentions AI.

Methodology

How this data was collected, counted, and where it's biased. We'd rather tell you plainly than pretend this is a random sample.

Who we surveyed

Respondents are team members at agencies undergoing ZenPilot operations assessments. That selection biases toward teams that felt enough pain to seek help. Keep that in mind when reading the numbers – though in our experience, the teams that never measure are rarely doing better.

What we asked

14 Likert statements on a 1–5 agree scale, plus 8 open-text questions. In total: 4,321 responses from 466 companies, roughly 21,700 written answers, and about 3 million characters of text.

When teams take it

At the very start of their engagement with ZenPilot, during the Blueprint – before anything has been fixed. Read every number in this report as the before picture. The only longitudinal claim we make is the email trend, comparing the earliest third of responses to the latest third.

How we counted

Likert percentages are exact. Percentages on open-text themes are keyword-count grounded approximations, with the underlying counts shown alongside them throughout the report.

Quotes

All quotes are verbatim, stripped of names, companies, and email addresses. Grammar left as written.

Sample sizes

n varies by question: 2,725 to 2,893 for open-text questions, 4,321 total Likert rows, and 2,893 responses complete across all 14 statements. Each chart notes its own n.

You've just read the before picture

Every response in this dataset came in at the start of an engagement with ZenPilot, before anything was fixed. Teams that re-take the survey later in their engagement improve dramatically, often within the first three months of working with ZenPilot.

That's the after picture, and we'd love to show you yours.

[Book a Call](#)

Want the fix itself? Start with [the Blueprint](#). Or benchmark your team against this dataset with the free [PM Benchmark](#).