

# STOPPING REVENUE LEAKAGE

HOW CLIENT LISTENING EMPOWERS  
ADVISORY AND ACCOUNTING FIRMS



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## FOREWORD

For decades, firms have built successful businesses on technical expertise, trusted relationships and exceptional client service. These foundations remain essential. But they are no longer enough on their own.

As technology reshapes service delivery and clients gain access to more providers, firms are facing a new challenge: how to protect and grow revenue in an increasingly competitive and commoditised market. The question is no longer whether clients are satisfied. The question is whether firms truly understand what their clients value, how their needs are evolving, and what will determine future growth.

This report explores a challenge many firms recognise but struggle to quantify: revenue leakage. It happens when clients take advisory work elsewhere, when fee increases become difficult to justify, when opportunities remain hidden inside existing relationships, or when a firm becomes interchangeable despite delivering excellent work.

At its core, revenue leakage is often an insight problem. Firms cannot act on needs they do not see, address concerns they do not hear, or create value around opportunities they do not understand.

That is why client listening matters.

Too often, client experience is viewed as a marketing initiative, a service quality programme or a client satisfaction exercise. In reality, the most successful firms treat it as a business discipline. They use client insight to strengthen retention, defend pricing, identify growth opportunities, improve service delivery and guide strategic decision-making.

The strongest firms are not necessarily those with the best surveys or the highest satisfaction scores. They are the firms that systematically turn client insight into commercial action.

Throughout this report, we draw on experience maturity data from MCorpCX's XOS Pulse benchmark, insights from HLB's Survey of Business Leaders, and interviews with leaders from HLB firms around the world. Together, these perspectives reveal a consistent message: **firms that listen better are better positioned to grow.**

Our hope is that this report helps firm leaders view client listening through a different lens. Not as a marketing activity. Not as a standalone programme. But as a strategic capability that influences revenue, profitability, differentiation and long-term firm value.

Because in a profession built on trust, the firms that thrive will be those that understand their clients best.



**Lesley Hornung**  
Chief Marketing Officer  
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## INTRODUCTION

Trust has long been the foundation of client relationships in professional services. Yet trust alone is becoming a weaker defence. As compliance work becomes more automated and clients gain more choice, firms can no longer assume that a satisfied client is a growing client.

Firm growth is already under pressure. In the past five years, the average growth rate for accounting and financial services firms has fallen from 13% to less than 10%.<sup>1</sup> In many cases, the slowdown has less to do with technical capability than with how proactively firms protect revenue inside existing relationships.

Revenue leakage is often quiet. A client stays, but sends the next piece of advisory work elsewhere. A fee increase is challenged because the value behind it was never made visible. A technically strong firm becomes interchangeable because the client experience feels no different from the next provider.

To explore where this leakage occurs and how firms can respond, HLB partnered with McorpCX to examine the role of client listening in professional services firm growth. The research combines XOS Pulse maturity data with interviews from HLB member firm leaders, drawing on first-hand experience of how firms collect feedback, act on client insight and connect experience to retention, pricing, expansion and differentiation.

<sup>1</sup> Accounting Today, 2026. Accounting firms lose ground on growth. Available at <<https://www.accountingtoday.com/news/accounting-firms-lose-ground-on-growth>>. [Retrieved 27 May 2026]



## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This report draws on XOS Pulse maturity data from McorpCX’s professional services benchmark, combined with interviews with HLB member firm leaders.

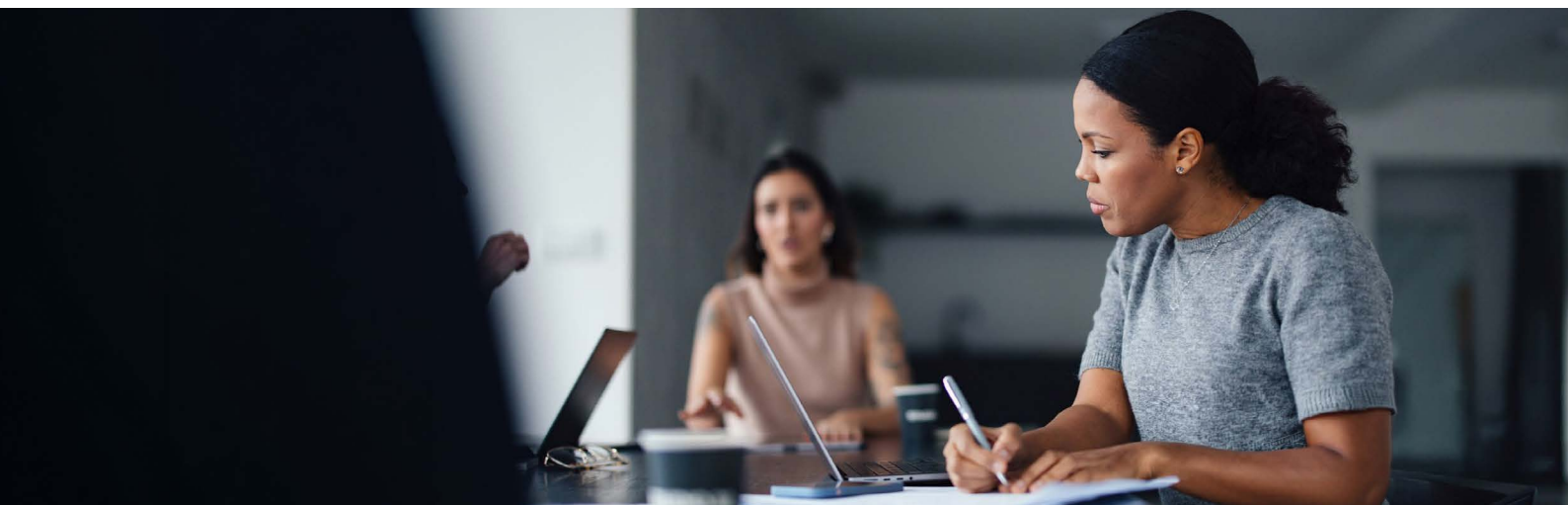
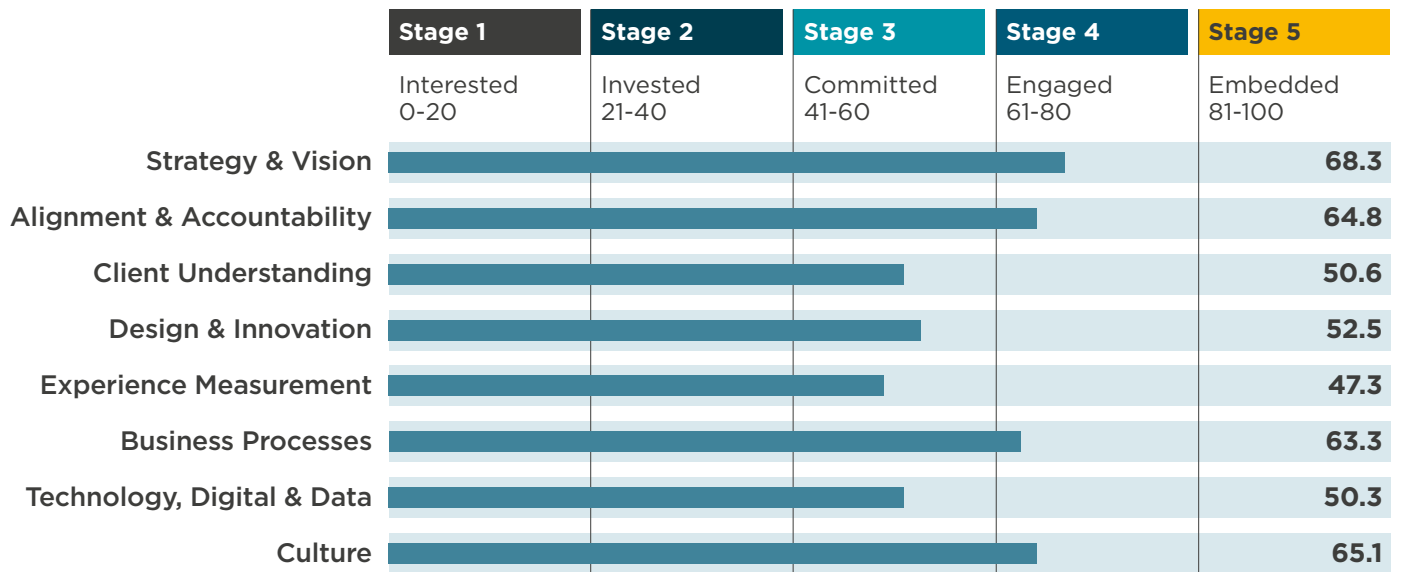
Together, the evidence shows where firms are strongest, where client understanding is weakest, and how structured listening can be connected to retention, pricing, expansion and differentiation.

Where the [HLB Survey of Business Leaders](#) is referenced, data from the 2026 Business Services sector is used. Responses from this data set include all firms identifying as ‘Business Services’ and does not mean solely accounting firms.

The [Experience Operating System™ \(XOS\)](#) is a client experience maturity assessment developed by McorpCX. For this report, the relevant benchmark is the professional services dataset. XOS Pulse captures respondents’ views of their organisation’s experience management capability and translates those inputs into maturity indicators across areas such as client understanding, experience measurement, business processes, and culture, among others.

### KEY SCORE MATURITY MODEL

Average scores positioned across the 5-stage maturity framework



## WHY FIRMS FACE REVENUE LEAKAGE

The economics of accounting services are changing. Clients have more choice, technology is compressing routine work, and trusted relationships no longer guarantee a larger share of spend. The firms most exposed are those that deliver well, but do not systematically understand what clients value, where expectations are shifting and where the next opportunity may emerge.

These pressures are connected. When firms are less differentiated, pricing becomes harder to defend. When client needs are not systematically heard, additional work moves elsewhere. And as automation compresses the value of routine compliance work, firms need stronger client insight to replace delivery-led growth with advisory-led growth.

### DIFFERENTIATION PRESSURE

The professional services sector has always been a relationship-based business. Trust matters, and so does technical quality. But neither is enough to protect fees when clients see several firms as capable of delivering the same audit, tax or advisory work.

That is the uncomfortable position many firms now face. They may be highly competent, responsive and trusted by clients, yet still struggle to stand apart. As compliance work becomes more automated and advisory markets become more crowded, the risk

is that clients will treat the firm as interchangeable: useful for core work, but not distinctive enough to command a larger share of spend.

The XOS Pulse professional services benchmark points to this gap. Professional services firms have an average CX maturity score of 57.9, with weaker capability in several areas linked to client understanding, including experience mapping, client data unification, insight generation, segmentation and client listening. In comparison, the average global experience XoS score across all industries, including professional services, is 62.5.

XOS Pulse ranks companies on a scale of 0 to 100, with a 100 signifying that client centricity is fully embedded in every process within the business. Although this is more of an idealistic target.

In the area of client understanding, specifically, professional services companies score 50.6 in total, suggesting there's room for improvement.

### PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FIRMS' MATURITY LEVELS IN CLIENT UNDERSTANDING

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
	Interested 0-20	Invested 21-40	Committed 41-60	Engaged 61-80	Embedded 81-100
Client Understanding					50.6
Client Listening					56.4
Client Segmentation					54.3
Client Data Unification					46.9
Insights Generation					55.5
Experience Mapping					41.8
Human-Centred Storytelling					46.6

Many firms appear to be strong on delivery, but less mature in the disciplines that help them understand what clients value, personalise the relationship and make expertise feel commercially distinctive. *“We’re still walking in like accountants, positioning ourselves as a compliance-focused auditor or tax person,”* observes Jason Delles, Chief Growth Officer of Eide Bailey. *“While instead, we should be looking more into understanding the client’s business and positioning ourselves as trusted advisors”.*

Clients, meanwhile, have more choices and a lower tolerance for sameness. *“Clients have no shortage of options today,”* says Steve Grivas, Managing Partner of HLB Mann Judd, Sydney. *“With AI and automation coming forth, human relationships will ultimately become the only factor that distinguishes you from your competitors. It’s really as simple as that.”*

For accounting firms, the warning is useful. Trust may keep a client from leaving today, but it does not guarantee growth tomorrow. Without a clearer understanding of what clients value, firms risk becoming dependable but replaceable: respected for competence, yet exposed when clients compare fees, award new advisory work or decide which adviser deserves a broader role.

## LOST CLIENT ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Most firms have some way of tracking client satisfaction. Far fewer have a disciplined way to measure whether the experience is actually contributing to retention, referrals, pricing confidence and additional work.

Satisfaction, for example, can be a lagging signal because it measures how they feel about past interactions, but may not reveal their future intentions. A client may report being happy with past services, yet still take advisory work elsewhere, reduce spend or stop seeing the firm as a strategic partner.

The XOS Pulse data points to this weakness. In the professional services benchmark, respondents score in the lower percentile of all industries, assessed by the XOS Pulse, on their ability to measure CX initiatives, capture client insight and connect those insights to value or ROI. In other words, many firms are listening enough to know whether clients are pleased with a service interaction, but not enough to understand whether the relationship is driving retention, referrals, or revenue.



**Lack of repeatability and scalability in experience monitoring, metrics management, and insights reporting results in a lower ability to demonstrate ROI from CX initiatives.**

### PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FIRMS’ MATURITY LEVELS IN EXPERIENCE MEASUREMENT

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
	Interested 0-20	Invested 21-40	Committed 41-60	Engaged 61-80	Embedded 81-100
Experience Measurement					47.3
Metrics Management					48.3
Data Gathering					52.5
Data Interpretation					41.8
Experience Monitoring					49.8
Insights Reporting					47.7
ROI & Value Demonstration					42.0

*“The revenue leakage happens not because we’re not pitching services or talking about those services. That’s only a portion of it. But more importantly, it’s because we’re not understanding what the business is doing, where they’re headed, and how we align to help,”* says Jason Delles of Eide Bailey.

The commercial consequence is already visible. In the UK, businesses now purchase 36% of advisory services from providers other than their primary accounting firm. Nearly half of firms said that between 26% and 40% of their clients’ advisory spend goes elsewhere, while a further 31% believe more than 40% leaves the firm entirely.<sup>2</sup>

Cristina Bové, Marketing Director at Bové Montero recalls conversations where clients disclosed their needs only after another adviser had already stepped in. *“You may think that the client knows absolutely all of the services that you can provide. But in the real world, it’s often not like that, and new business gets reallocated to other firms,”* she says.

## BUSINESS MODEL DISRUPTION

New technologies are reshaping the economics of accounting. AI adoption is giving firms new ways to increase efficiency, reduce manual effort and lower the cost of routine work. That creates opportunity,

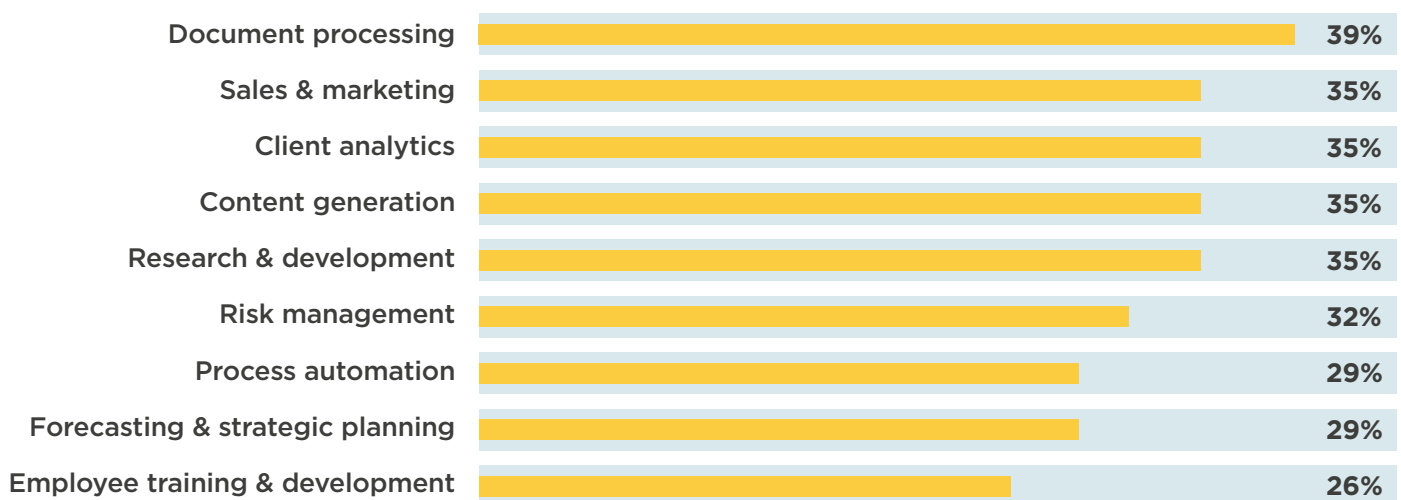
but also pressure. When the same tools become available to most firms, efficiency gains quickly move from advantage to expectation.

Compliance work is already feeling the squeeze. In the UK, 88% of accounting firms say compliance margins are under pressure due to AI-driven automation, while 63% believe compliance will at best be only marginally profitable within five years.<sup>3</sup> As core accounting tasks become faster and cheaper to deliver, the value of traditional, time-based billing models compresses.

HLB’s Survey of Business Leaders 2026 found that many companies in the business services sector primarily use AI for back-office and productivity-led use cases: 38% use it for document processing, while 33% use it for content generation and process automation. These uses can reduce cost, improve turnaround times and free up capacity. But these use cases are also increasingly replicable.

The bigger opportunity lies in using technology to strengthen the client relationship itself. Among business services firms that increased profit margins by 5% or more last year, AI use is more advanced in client- and growth-facing areas: 35% use AI in sales and marketing, 35% in client analytics, and 35% in research and development.

## WHERE THE MOST SUCCESSFUL FIRMS IN THE BUSINESS SERVICES SECTOR HAVE USED AI IN 2026



Source: HLB Survey of Business Leaders 2026

<sup>2</sup> Consultancy UK. 2026. Why are accounting firms losing advisory service revenue to competitors?. Available at <<https://www.consultancy.uk/news/43481/why-are-accounting-firms-losing-advisory-service-revenue-to-competitors>> [Retrieved 27 May 2026]

<sup>3</sup> Ravical. 2025. The State of Advisory in Accounting. Available at <<https://ravical.com/resources/the-state-of-advisory-in-accounting>> [Retrieved 27 May 2026]

Automation may protect margins in the short term by making delivery more efficient. But it does not, on its own, make the firm more valuable to the client. *“As our compliance services become more AI-led, which is going to happen, the work is going to be gone,”* says Mark Butler, Managing Partner of HLB Ireland. *“So we need to make sure that we’re positioning ourselves as truly that trusted advisor that is adding value, rather than delivering services alone.”*

The firms best positioned for the next stage are those using technology to understand clients better and design services around emerging needs. Technology can reveal patterns, but people still turn those patterns into better conversations, stronger advice and more confident fee discussions. *“We put quite a bit of resources into helping our associates move from task managers to advisors and leaders,”* shared Laura Oblinger, Director of Client Success and Growth at Rehmann. *“Our professional development is aimed at developing better commercial instincts to understand when to ask clients certain types of questions, how to ask them, and how to become a trusted advisor overall.”*



## CLIENT LISTENING: THE BASICS

### WHAT IS CLIENT LISTENING?

Client listening is the structured way firms hear, interpret and act on what clients value. It looks across individual relationships, specific engagements and the wider client portfolio to understand where expectations are being met, where risk is emerging and where new opportunities may exist.

### HOW DOES IT DIFFER FROM REGULAR PARTNER CHECK-INS?

Partner check-ins are informal, relationship-driven, and often confined to individual interactions. Client listening introduces structure: regular feedback collection, consistent questions, shared insight, pattern analysis and follow-up actions that help the whole firm learn from what clients are saying.

### WHERE IS IT USEFUL FOR MY FIRM?

Client listening is most valuable where revenue risk or growth opportunity is highest: key accounts, complex engagements, pricing discussions, and clients with cross-service potential. It helps detect early signs of churn, uncover unmet needs, strengthen fee conversations, and turn client feedback into advisory growth.

Trusted relationships alone no longer guarantee growth. Firms that rely only on informal conversations risk missing the early signals: dissatisfaction that never becomes a complaint, advisory needs that go to another provider, pricing pressure that builds quietly, or clients who remain “satisfied” on paper but stop expanding the relationship.

Client listening gives firms a more systematic way to protect and grow fees. Across the interviews, four stood out: retention, pricing, expansion and differentiation. Each addresses a different form of leakage, but all depend on the same discipline: asking better questions, capturing the answers consistently and acting before value is lost.



## FOUR WAYS CLIENT LISTENING PROTECTS AND GROWS FEE

### RETAIN AND PROTECT CLIENT BASE

Revenue leakage often stems from unseen retention risk and overtime fee erosion.

### DEFEND PRICING

Where service value is unclear, pricing pressure intensifies.

### EXPAND WALLET SHARE

Many firms leave significant commercial opportunities untapped within existing relationships.

### DIFFERENTIATE ON EXPERIENCE

Differentiation increasingly depends on client experience, not technical capability alone.

#### CLIENT LISTENING HELPS:

- Detect early signs of dissatisfaction, misalignment, or declining engagement through metrics
- Learn to identify “quiet churn” before clients formally review providers
- Address issues while relationships are still intact

#### CLIENT LISTENING HELPS:

- Understand what clients actually value
- Align pricing with outcomes, not just effort
- Strengthen positioning in fee negotiations

#### CLIENT LISTENING HELPS:

- Surface unmet needs beyond the current engagement
- Connect insights across service lines to identify cross-sell opportunities
- Shift conversations from delivery to client strategy

#### CLIENT LISTENING HELPS:

- Deliver more responsive, personalised, and consistent client experiences
- Turn relationship quality into a visible competitive advantage
- Compete on experience, not just expertise

## RETAIN AND PROTECT CLIENT BASE

Key accounts are usually lost gradually, not suddenly. Communication slows, small issues build up, and the firm misses changes in the client’s business. *“If you’re not asking clients how they’re feeling, you’re not finding out what the problems are,”* Linda Howard, Senior Marketing & CX Manager at Withum argues. *“Listening and fixing the client issues helps you deepen the relationship and prevents clients from taking on different service providers.”*

Yet the mere act of asking can be difficult. *“Clients don’t always feel comfortable expressing their intent to leave,”* observes Lavin Nalinababu, Partner at HLB HAMT. This reality underscores the importance of robust feedback mechanisms to support client retention effectively. Rather than waiting for annual reviews or relying on partner instinct alone, firms should define which clients require structured touchpoints, who owns the

relationship, what questions should be asked and how feedback will be followed up.

HLB Ireland has moved from annual feedback to a quarterly cadence. As Mark Butler explains, an annual survey gives the firm *“one number”*, but quarterly listening makes the feedback *“much more real”* because it becomes part of how the firm operates. *“We all give ourselves pats on the back about how great we’re doing and the relationships we have with our clients without actually asking them,”* he says.

HLB Mann Judd also makes a point of speaking to larger accounts at least every quarter and smaller accounts at least twice a year. *“Even the small clients sometimes can end up growing and becoming one of your larger clients,”* Steve Grivas stresses.

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Rehmann has developed a formalised process for client engagement to ensure important accounts are touched beyond the engagement itself, with more frequent contact for top-tier relationships. *“Essentially, we have a personal client experience system to make sure that each client is being touched beyond the engagement at hand,”* explains Laura Oblinger.

*“Outside of clients receiving an independent ambassador outreach, the client experience events themselves are subjective. It can be a golf outing or a lunch, but each has some specific requirements for the advisor hosting them. The goal is to ask very pointed questions, such as: what is the current state of your organization, where is the business going, what barriers might there be and what is the payout for getting to your vision. It’s important to Rehmann that we are obsessed with our client’s success and making sure we are serving to our fullest potential. These conversations give us extra informal intel to complement the survey data we collect.”*

Yet, feedback only protects retention if clients see follow-up action. HLB HAMA makes a point of being proactive about raised concerns or new requests. *“There are times when clients bypass the feedback form and reach out directly to a partner or director,”* explains Valerie Suaris, Office Manager at HLB HAMA. *“We document every issue, upload it to our portal, and assign it to the appropriate department to develop a solution or contact the client directly. We consider the issue resolved only when the client is satisfied, and only then do we close the ticket.”*

To gain more honest insights, HLB HAMA enables clients to share feedback anonymously. *“Some clients may hesitate to give negative feedback directly, as it can feel uncomfortable,”* Suaris notes. *“By offering an anonymous option and showing empathy, we encourage more candid responses, which our clients appreciate.”*

Withum has also created tight feedback loops to resurface issues early. *“If a client provides an NPS score of 6 or lower, our tool will automatically send a notification to the partner to follow up and put that situation right,”* says Linda Howard. *“We also ask partners to log notes into the system afterwards, so that we can use AI to figure out what the problematic themes were and whether those were a one-off issue or something more systemic that the firm needs to fix.”*



Clients in the lower NPS percentile are the highest-priority targets for follow-up. However, it's also worth looking into those in the Passive category (7-8 score), as they may also represent hidden disengagement risks or untapped growth opportunities for your firm.

In essence, client retention heavily depends on making relationship health visible. Informal partner knowledge is valuable, but it is not enough on its own. Structured client listening and proactive outreach give firms earlier warning signs, clearer accountability, and better evidence for action. When paired with prompt follow-ups, it helps firms move from reacting to complaints to actively protecting the relationships that matter most.

**ACTIONS TO TAKE:**



**MAKE RETENTION A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY**

Partners remain central to key account retention, but the wider team often sees the first signs of strain. Managers, directors and client-facing staff should know how to recognise dissatisfaction, record and escalate it. HLB HAMT has recently trained team members in client relationship skills and handling difficult clients, helping them become more approachable and better equipped to respond when issues arise.



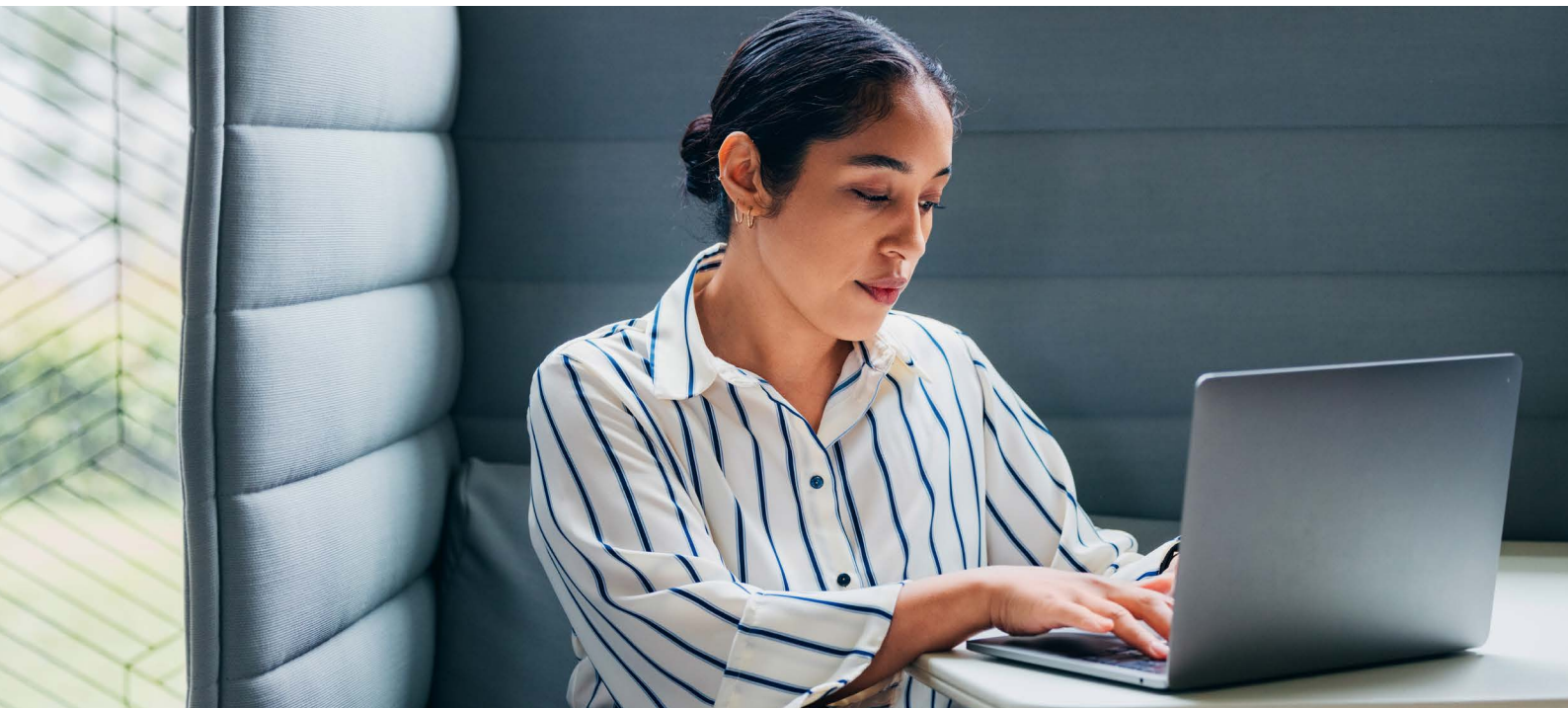
**ESTABLISH REGULAR TOUCHPOINTS TO PROTECT RELATIONSHIPS**

Do not wait until the next fee discussion or engagement close to ask whether the relationship is working. HLB Mann Judd hosts regular meetings with larger clients, sometimes involving the managing partner, COO, or marketing lead rather than only the engagement partner. Apart from securing general feedback, such meetings help introduce more service lines to the client.



**TURN SERVICE RECOVERY INTO TRUST-BUILDING**

A complaint is not only a risk signal. Handled well, it can strengthen the relationship. When firms acknowledge the issue, act quickly and communicate what has changed, clients see evidence that their voice matters. As Suaris put it, the goal is to create enough "comfort level" that clients still feel confident working with the firm, even when an issue occurs.



## DEFEND PRICING

Pricing power is a reflection of client value, differentiation and delivery confidence. Pricing concerns emerge when value is not well articulated, especially as traditional services are increasingly perceived as interchangeable. Lack of pricing transparency, poor scoping and partner discomfort with commercial conversations are also common issues.

Client listening equips firms with evidence for pricing conversations. It helps partners understand which parts of the service clients value most, which costs or risks they do not understand and which outcomes need to be made more visible before the invoice arrives.

*“Client relationships go far beyond negotiating fees,”* says Lavin Nalinababu. By actively seeking feedback and understanding each client’s unique challenges, firms can better explain the rationale behind their pricing. *“Our fees are based on factors like volume, process complexity, and risk,”* Nalinababu explains. *“Fee discussions give us a chance to demonstrate the value we provide and ensure clients truly understand our approach.”*

Some clients may react to price because they see only the immediate output: the audit report, the tax return, the filing or the advice note. Structured conversations help partners uncover what sits behind the concern. Is the client questioning the

fee because budgets are tight? Because the value has not been explained clearly? Because the scope has expanded? Or because another provider has offered a lower price for what appears to be the same service?

By having structured discussions, firms can separate genuine price resistance from weak value communication. That insight can then be used to develop more consistent messages that clients understand. *“Our fees include many pricing components, but I feel that not everyone at the firm knows how to effectively defend the pricing in front of the clients,”* says Cristina Bové. To help, she is working on an internal playbook to help advisors communicate the firm’s value proposition using different messaging frameworks and value anchors.

Pricing power depends on making value visible before it is questioned. Linda Howard shared Withum maps client value, satisfaction and usage data together, because *“if you have all that data, it will help inform our pricing strategy.”* This was echoed by others, who shared client feedback helped provide confidence in their pricing decisions.

When firms understand what clients value, pricing conversations become less defensive and more strategic: not a negotiation over cost, but a discussion about outcomes and the expertise required to protect the client’s business.



ACTIONS TO TAKE:



**USE CLIENT CONVERSATIONS TO UNDERSTAND WHICH PARTS OF THE SERVICE MATTER MOST FOR DIFFERENT CLIENT PROFILES**

Responsiveness, senior access, sector knowledge, regulatory confidence, speed, accuracy or proactive advice. This gives partners language for pricing conversations that reflects the client's own priorities. The collected data can then be used to create better internal training materials and public sales and marketing collateral.



**PROVIDE A WALKTHROUGH OF THE PRICING LOGIC**

Clients are more likely to accept higher fees when they understand the underlying drivers: workload, risk, urgency, specialist expertise, technology investment or regulatory change. Use client feedback to make that explanation specific rather than defensive.



**WORK ON EXPANDING THE RELATIONSHIP DEPTH**

*"At the end of the day, the more services you provide to a client, the easier the fee conversation is because they are more attached to the firm and know more people within the firm that they're comfortable reaching out to,"* says Steve Grivas. Broader relationships make the value of the firm more visible and reduce the risk that the client judges the relationship on a single deliverable or annual invoice.



## EXPAND WALLET SHARE

Once firms know advisory opportunities are leaking, the question becomes operational: how do they spot the next need before another adviser does? Client listening helps by turning scattered relationship knowledge into account planning, service-line coordination and timely prompts for the right conversation.

Rather than beginning client conversations with the service line, firms need to start with the client's direction of travel. "Client conversations should not be about selling, but about helping," Jason Delles is convinced. "Learn what's going on in the client's business. What makes your job hard, and what are you balancing? Just asking simple questions can lead to ways that we can help and assist." A tax conversation may reveal an international expansion issue. An audit engagement may surface systems, controls, or cybersecurity needs. A payroll relationship may reveal HR, compliance or advisory opportunities.

Digital technologies help scale data collection and link individual client listening findings to account planning and service innovation. Rehmann feeds survey data into client analytics tools to better align interactions with the most important parts of the client journey.

*"We have post-engagement surveys, and we have our annual NPS survey, which we run through Salesforce," says Holly Shier, Chief Marketing Officer at Rehmann. "One of the survey questions is, 'Are there any other areas that we can help you with?' Basically, how familiar are you with Rehmann? Clients may not know the breadth of our services. And this question helps us uncover upcoming pain points for them or other areas where they need support."*

The marketing team at Rehmann also uses this information to develop more focused campaigns, while advisors use it to identify cross-sell opportunities. "We also have a tool called Propense.ai," adds Shier. "It analyses our data and suggests the next likely service for a client, based on their similarity with others and propensity to buy."



HLB Mann Judd also links client data and account plans to decisions about where to invest more resources to expand service lines. *“After I spoke to a client, I then share the feedback with the engagement team, and we document everything that came out into an account plan,”* says Steve Grivas. The team then brings in partners or directors from other service lines to ask whether there is an additional service the firm could offer the client.

Client wallet share expansion depends on relevance. Clients are unlikely to buy more simply because a firm offers more. They buy more when the firm understands their business well enough to connect the right expertise to the right moment. Structured client listening gives firms the mechanism to do that consistently: surface unmet needs at scale, connect insight across service lines, and turn trusted relationships into broader revenue streams.

**ACTIONS TO TAKE:**



**USE FEEDBACK CONVERSATIONS AS GROWTH TRIGGERS**

A client survey or review should not end once a score is recorded. If the client mentions a future challenge, a regulatory change, a new market, a systems issue or a capacity constraint, that signal should be routed to the right partner or service team. Otherwise, the firm has listened but failed to convert insight into value.



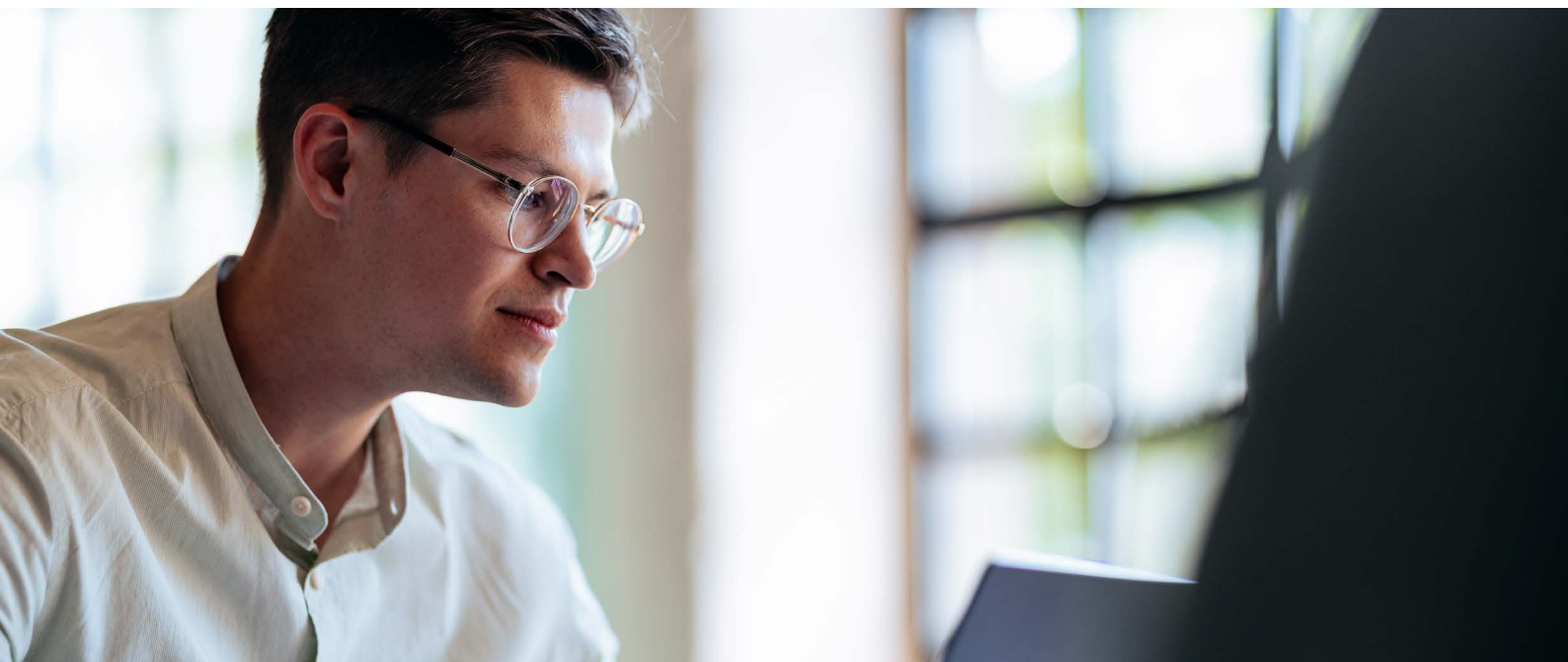
**TRAIN CLIENT-FACING TEAMS TO SPOT NEEDS**

Educate your advisory teams on services offered by other departments, so they can identify opportunities during project execution. Provide partners with simple prompts they can use in client conversations: What is changing in your business? What is creating pressure for your team? Where are you losing time? Such questions shift the conversation from delivery to business context, making it easier to spot where another service line could add value.



**USE DATA TO IDENTIFY THE NEXT LIKELY SERVICE**

Bring client feedback, CRM data, service history, and proposal outcomes into one shared view. Then look for patterns that signal what a client may need next. For example, if similar clients often move from audit into tax advisory or technology consulting, use those behaviour patterns to prompt a timely engagement. Real-time access to synthesised client data gives your advisors cues on when and where to act.



## DIFFERENTIATE ON EXPERIENCE

Retention, pricing and expansion all protect revenue inside existing relationships. Differentiation is broader as it determines whether the firm is seen as merely capable or as distinctively valuable before the next engagement even begins.

Technical quality is essential, but it is not enough to make a firm stand out. Many clients assume competent audit, tax and advisory delivery as a baseline. What sets firms apart is a deeper understanding of the client's business, ease of collaboration and advice that feels specific to the client's situation.

Mark Butler puts the shift bluntly: *"In the past, you became a partner because you were technically good."* But as technology changes delivery, *"a lot of standard services will be done elsewhere."* The differentiator, he argues, will be *"around a relationship"*.

Jason Delles of Eide Bailey also argues that senior people should spend more time on client activity that drives retention, revenue and differentiation. *"We're currently repositioning our senior people as growth partners, who are more engaged in value-driven, rather than task-driven work like getting an audit or a tax return done."*

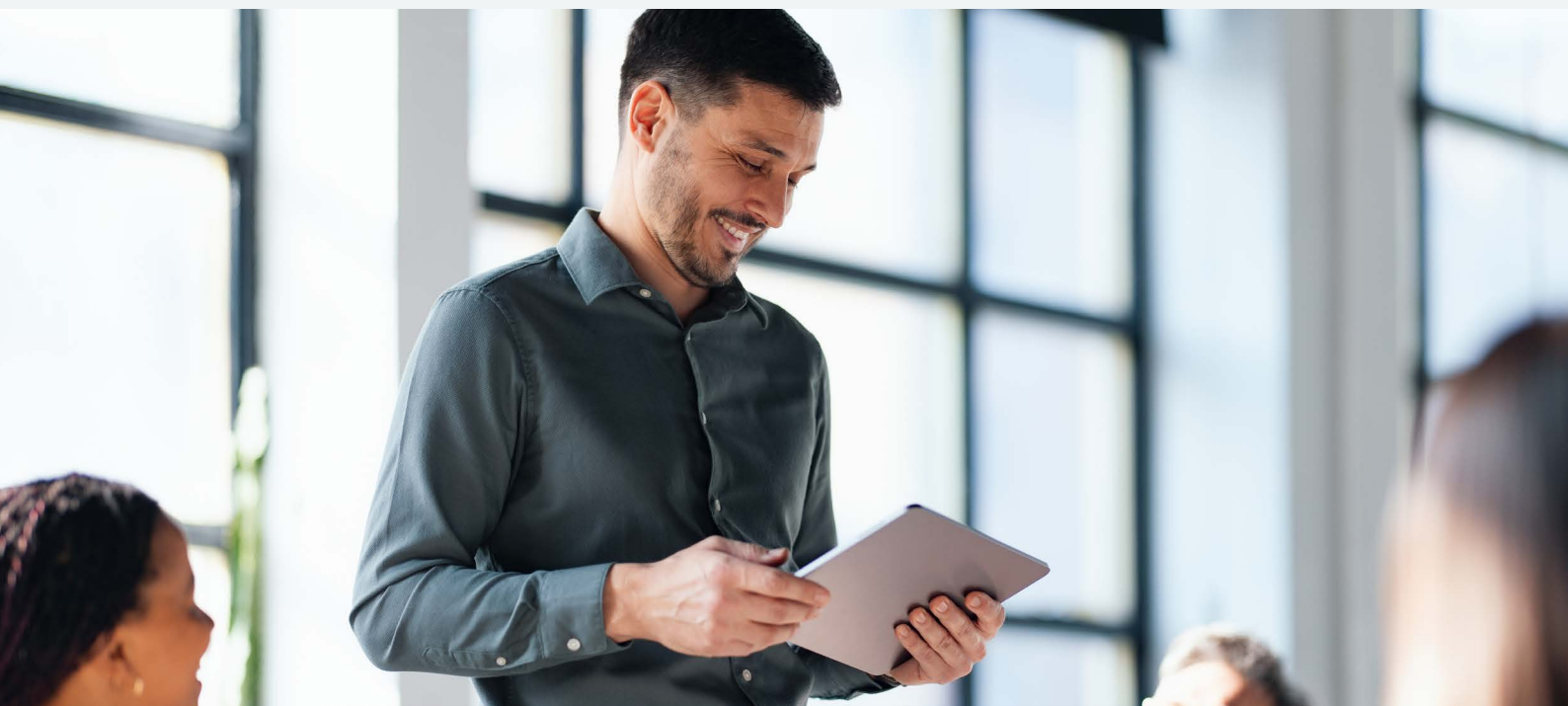
However, the shift creates a new challenge. If differentiation depends on the relationship, the firm needs a clearer way to describe, measure and replicate what makes that relationship valuable. Otherwise, the experience remains personal, inconsistent and difficult to defend commercially.

Cristina Bové came to recognise this issue at Bové Montero. *"Until recently, we didn't have very unified messaging. Some people would say one thing if they want to defend the price, another if they want to differentiate,"* she says. The firm held a session to define its positioning around *"commitment"*, identifying the firm's commitment to client growth as a differentiator that could support retention, expansion, pricing and differentiation.

The strongest differentiation often comes from the client's own words, not the firm's internal claims alone. According to Bové, *"clients start seeing differentiation when they start working with your firm,"* so firms need a systematic way to understand which parts of the experience clients actually notice, value and remember. Those insights can then be turned into sharper messaging, stronger proposals and proof points that reflect the client's lived experience, not just the firm's branding.

Rehmann also uses feedback to shape differentiation at the service delivery level. *"We occasionally host client panels and client focus groups to ensure that our service delivery model and ease of doing business are at the right levels,"* says Holly Shier. *"That feedback also helps us understand what parts of the journey might need more support technically or technologically to facilitate it."*

A couple of years ago, Rehmann noticed that clients wanted a better onboarding experience, so they invested in a digital client onboarding platform and hired a person to help develop and maintain consistent levels of client experience at this stage.



Withum has a similar ambition to build a “fully integrated voice of the client programme” that reports feedback regularly, identifies what is and is not working, and helps the firm prioritise improvements. “We incorporate automation into the action management process when client responses trigger an action, enabling our partners to follow up in real-time,” says Linda Howard. “As data populates in the system, AI helps us to identify themes and to determine if experiences are one-offs or systemic occurrences, so we are better informed on where and how the Firm needs to take action.”


Ultimately, client listening turns experience into a strategy. It helps firms uncover what clients truly value and which moments make the firm easier to trust, remember and recommend. As technical delivery often becomes interchangeable, firms can stand out by making their clients feel better understood and supported at every stage of their journey.

**ACTIONS TO TAKE:**



**TURN CLIENT FEEDBACK INTO A CLEAR EXPERIENCE PROMISES**

Use surveys, interviews and relationship conversations to identify the qualities clients value most: responsiveness, senior access, sector expertise, proactive advice, ease of doing business, or commitment to their growth. Then translate those findings into a simple experience promise that partners and teams can repeat, deliver, and defend in the market.



**CREATE CLEAR EXPERIENCE METRICS**

Link formal feedback to the outcomes that matter most: retention, revenue, referrals, share of wallet, proposal conversion, and fee recovery. “I have these goals built into my partner balance scorecards, so where the movement in the NPS score is going up or down has a real impact on profit shares and bonuses. It’s actually number one on the scorecard,” says Mark Butler of HLB Ireland.



**CLOSE THE LOOP VISIBLY**

When clients provide feedback, show them what changed. A simple “you said, we did” approach reinforces that the firm listens and acts. Over time, this makes the experience feel more responsive and personal, helping clients see the firm as a partner that adapts with them rather than a provider that only delivers what was agreed.



## START WHERE THE REVENUE RISK IS CLEAREST

Client listening does not require a firm-wide transformation. The most effective starting point is often smaller and more commercial: choose one place where listening is weak and one revenue lever you want to move.

The goal is to make listening purposeful. A short, structured feedback loop around a priority client segment, service line or engagement type can quickly reveal shifting expectations, unclear value, and emerging upsell opportunities. From there, you can turn client insight into action: better conversations, stronger account plans, clearer pricing messages, and a more consistent client experience.



If key accounts are drifting, focus on **retention**.



If clients challenge fees, focus on **pricing**.



If advisory work is going elsewhere, focus on **expansion**.



If the firm feels technically strong but interchangeable, focus on **differentiation**.

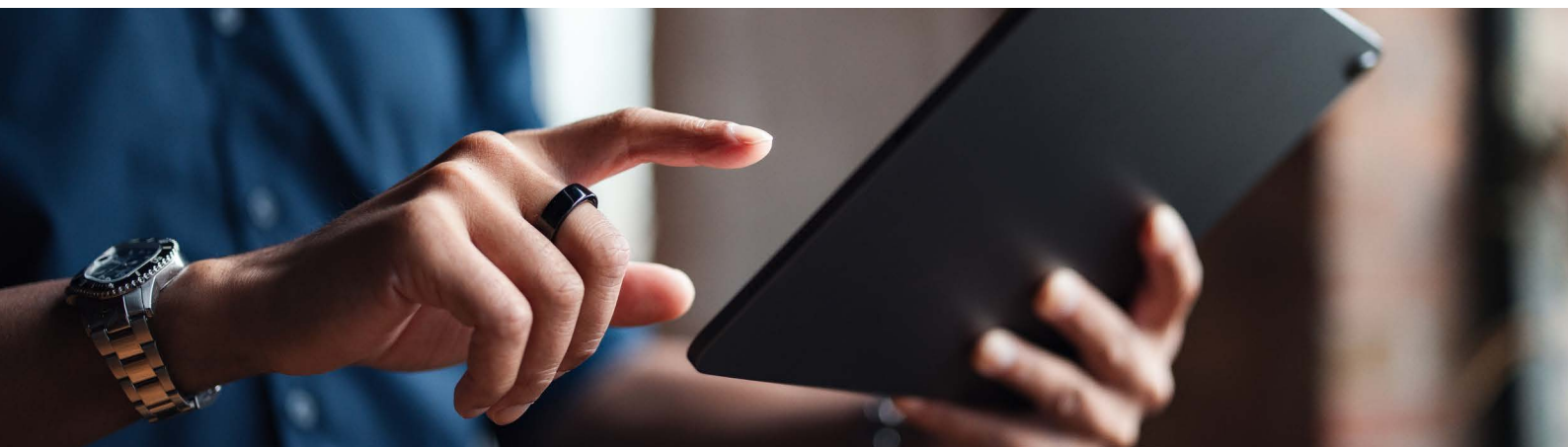
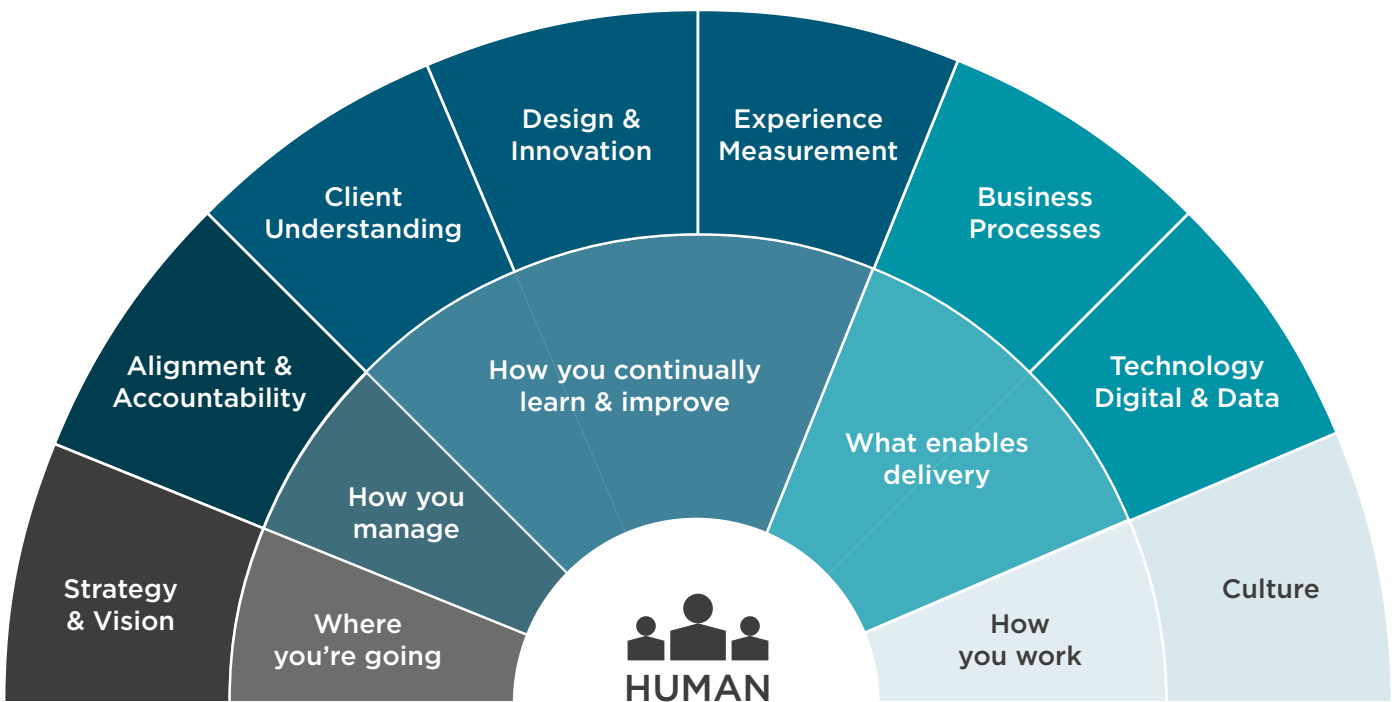


# METHODOLOGY

The Experience Operating System™ (XOS) is a client experience maturity assessment conducted by McorpCX on behalf of HLB International. The survey provides insight into how well organisations design, deliver and continuously enhance client and employee experiences.

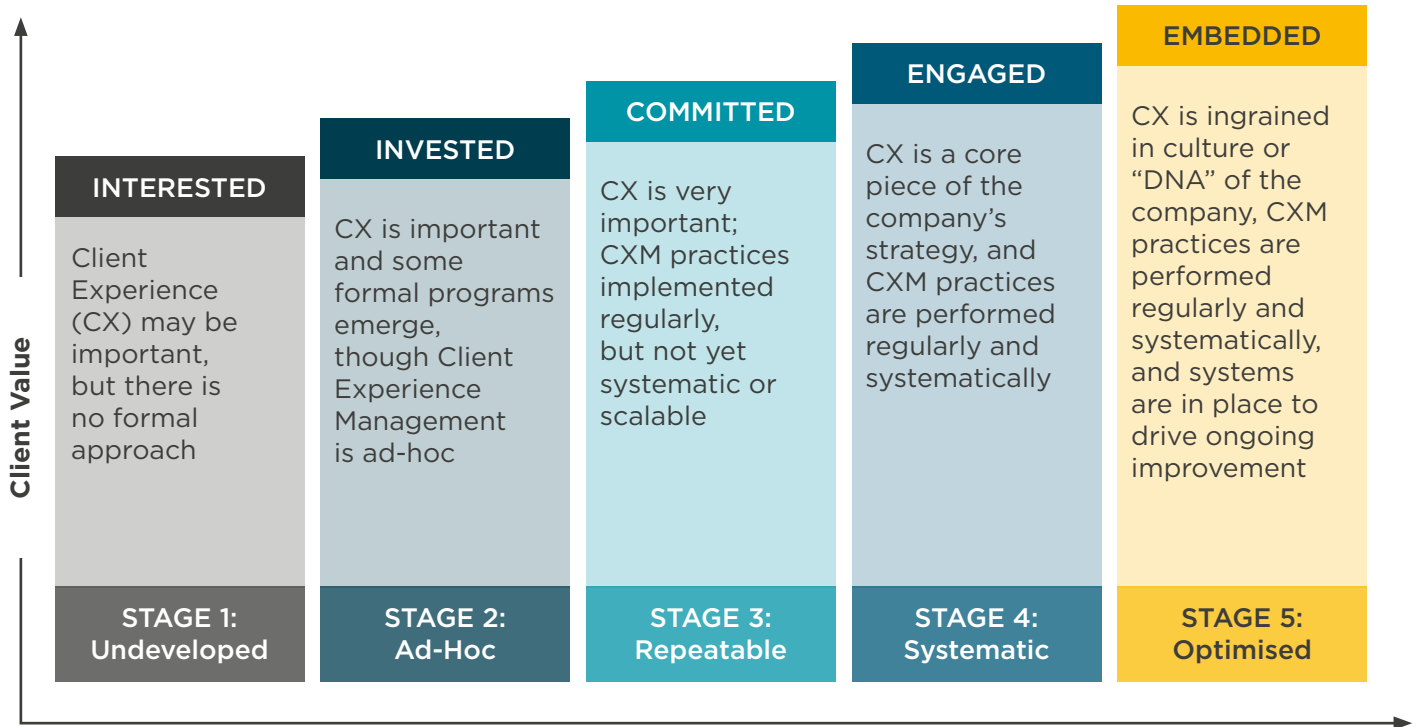
The XOS framework is built around eight experience-led capabilities that together show whether an organisation has the structure, data, processes and behaviours needed to turn client understanding into commercial performance.

For this report, the relevant benchmark is the professional services dataset. XOS Pulse captures respondents' views of their organisation's experience management capability, then translates those qualitative inputs into scores across the eight XOS keys. Each capability is scored from 0 to 100 based on the systems and behaviours supporting it.



The data is presented as maturity indicators, showing where firms are stronger, where capability gaps exist and how performance compares across areas such as experience mapping, client data unification, insight generation, segmentation and

client listening. Maturity is evaluated across six stages, each representing the degree of practices and processes in place to support each experience-led capability.



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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report has been developed in collaboration with McorpCX as part of HLB's ongoing commitment to advancing client experience excellence across advisory and accounting services. Launched in 2025, HLB and McorpCX form a strategic partnership with the objective of driving firm differentiation and growth opportunities for HLB firms through client experience maturity.

HLB is a global network of independent advisory and accounting firms operating in over 150 countries, helping clients grow across borders through audit, tax, advisory and accounting services.

McorpCX is a client experience consultancy and technology partner specialising in experience management, client insight and organisational transformation, supporting firms in building more client-centric organisations.

If you would like to discuss any matters raised in this report, please get in touch with [marketing@hlb.global](mailto:marketing@hlb.global). To learn more about McorpCX and their services, visit [www.mcorpCX.com](http://www.mcorpCX.com)

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