A Fresh Perspective on

AZETS



Audit

A Fresh Perspective on Audit

"The business that we do is about the opinion of the numbers, but it's fundamentally about relationships, understanding people and conversations."

CHRIS BUTT, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS UK

Compliance to Counsel: real audit value in an era of AI and regulation

Business leaders clearly recognise the benefits of external audits, but expectations run high and audit today needs to go beyond compliance to provide commercially relevant strategic assurance. While clients seek deeper insights to justify their spend, auditors are navigating a complex regulatory landscape where mounting compliance pressures threaten to sideline collaborative, value-add work.

The next phase of audit will leverage technology and AI to accelerate execution and deepen assurance, but this digital transformation must elevate, not replace, the human trust, candour, and seasoned business judgment that remain the core of the auditor-client relationship.

This Audit issue of Fresh Perspectives takes a closer look at external audit, from the perspective of both auditor and auditees. The report is built on 207 interviews with senior decision-makers and the real-world expert experiences of finance directors and audit leaders within Azets. Research was conducted in August 2026 across the UK, Ireland and Sweden.



About Fresh Perspectives

Welcome to Fresh Perspectives, the signature thought leadership series from Azets which looks at topical business issues through a new lens. Bringing together proprietary research, real-world stories, C-suite insights and the unique local knowledge and forward-thinking expertise of Azets' senior leaders, these reports offer a peer-to-peer conversation on our industry's most pressing topics.

Your Goals | **Our People** | **A Fresh Perspective**

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A Fresh Perspective on Audit

Audit at a Glance

86%

WOULD KEEP THEIR AUDIT EVEN IF THE OBLIGATION DISAPPEARED

THE VERDICT

Audit fundamentals are working well: 86% of business leaders would keep their external audits, even without a legal obligation. With 94% satisfaction and 93% of leaders reporting strong value, audit remains relevant and appreciated.

63%

SAY THE REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT HAS MADE THEIR EXTERNAL AUDIT MORE OF A BURDEN IN THE LAST 3 YEARS

THE TRADE-OFF: VALUE VS COMPLIANCE

Regulation has raised the standard but raised the effort: 83% agree that regulation has improved audit quality but almost two thirds (63%) feel it has also made audit more of a burden in recent years. 58% say audit now feels like more of a process to complete than a conversation and 73% say regulation pushes up costs.

88%

SAY MORE TECHNOLOGY MAKES HUMAN TRUST MATTER MORE, NOT LESS

THE PARADOX: AI TRUST & COST

AI in audit is here to stay, but a trust gap remains: 62% would trust an AI-assisted audit as much as a human led one but the ongoing need for human oversight is clear. In fact, 88% of leaders say more technology makes human trust matter more, not less. Contradictions prevail as 82% of leaders expect technology to make audit cheaper but experts confirm AI is on a journey and we are not there yet.

58%

WANT THEIR AUDITOR TO BE MORE ADVISORY AND FORWARD-LOOKING

WHAT NEXT: HUMAN TOUCH & RADICAL TRANSPARENCY

Leaders want pragmatic, trusted advice more than a big-name audit brand: 58% would like their audit to be more advisory and forward-looking and 88% value honesty even when the message is difficult. Audits of the future will combine technical clout with an authentic, local human touch.

Audit's Most Wanted:

What business leaders really want from their auditors

1.

Commercial Understanding of the Business

Audits are financial exercises, but auditors need to also understand the context behind the numbers.

91%

CITE COMMERCIAL UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR BUSINESS AND SECTOR AS HIGHLY IMPORTANT WHEN CHOOSING AN AUDITOR

25%

SAY MORE COMMERCIALLY RELEVANT OBSERVATIONS AND INSIGHT IS THE NUMBER ONE WAY TO IMPROVE AUDIT VALUE

2.

Proactive, Forward-Looking Advice

Clients are increasingly frustrated by audits focused on the past and are seeking a strategic health-check.

58%

WANT THE RELATIONSHIP TO BECOME MORE ADVISORY AND FORWARD-LOOKING, WITH THE AUDITOR ACTING AS A TRUSTED BUSINESS ADVISOR

43%

PLACE A MORE FORWARD-LOOKING RISK PERSPECTIVE IN THEIR TOP THREE WAYS TO IMPROVE AUDIT VALUE

3.

Regulatory Guidance and Peace of Mind

Navigating complex regulatory landscapes is a major pain point for businesses, and they rely heavily on their auditors here.

90%

CITE REGULATORY KNOWLEDGE AS A HIGHLY IMPORTANT FACTOR WHEN SELECTING AN AUDITOR

61%

SAY REGULATORY GUIDANCE IS WHERE AUDIT DELIVERED THE GREATEST VALUE OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS

4.

Tangible Improvements to Internal Processes

Clients want the disruption of an audit to result in practical takeaways that make their internal operations better.

56%

SAY THEIR AUDITOR ADDED MOST VALUE THROUGH FINDINGS THAT IMPROVED THEIR FINANCIAL REPORTING OR ACCOUNTING PROCESSES

52%

SAY THEIR AUDITOR ADDED MOST VALUE BY IDENTIFYING FINANCIAL RISKS OR CONTROL WEAKNESSES

43%

SAY THEIR AUDITOR ADDED MOST VALUE THROUGH PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS THAT CHANGED HOW THEY OPERATE

5.

Genuine Human Connection and Accessibility

Despite the rise of AI and automation, clients want to retain a human relationship with their auditor.

89%

RANK BEING AVAILABLE WHEN NEEDED / A REAL PERSON AT THE END OF THE PHONE, AS HIGHLY IMPORTANT

87%

VALUE A PERSONAL, HANDS-ON APPROACH FROM SENIOR MEMBERS OF THE TEAM

The Audit Landscape Today

Audit Is Still Needed, Valued And Performing Well

> Satisfaction is near universal and the fundamentals are working

Thinking about your most recent external audit, how valuable did you find it for your business; beyond simply meeting a legal requirement?

93% FOUND THEIR MOST RECENT AUDIT VALUABLE



EXTREMELY VALUABLE
IT DELIVERED REAL INSIGHT AND VALUE

QUITE VALUABLE
IT WAS USEFUL IN PLACES

NEUTRAL
IT MET THE REQUIREMENT BUT DIDN'T ADD MUCH BEYOND THAT

Leaders rate their auditors highly on the things that matter

91%
TRUST THEIR AUDITOR TO BE HONEST, EVEN WHEN THE NEWS IS DIFFICULT

89%
FEEL THEIR AUDITOR TRULY UNDERSTANDS THEIR BUSINESS

87%
SAY THEIR AUDITOR IS PROACTIVE IN FLAGGING RISKS, NOT JUST REPORTING WHAT THEY FIND

87%
SAY THE AUDIT DELIVERS VALUE PROPORTIONATE TO ITS COST

"The pace of change businesses face — be it fundraising, succession planning, an MBO, a sale, acquisition opportunities — means owners are far more alive to what strong financial controls and a clean audit history with a reputable firm actually deliver."

DAVE MCGARRY, HEAD OF AUDIT & ASSURANCE, AZETS IRELAND

Audit Value Creation

Greatest value delivery in audit:

- Practical and business-relevant rather than procedural
- Regulatory guidance, improvements to reporting and accounting processes
- Identifying financial risks or control weaknesses

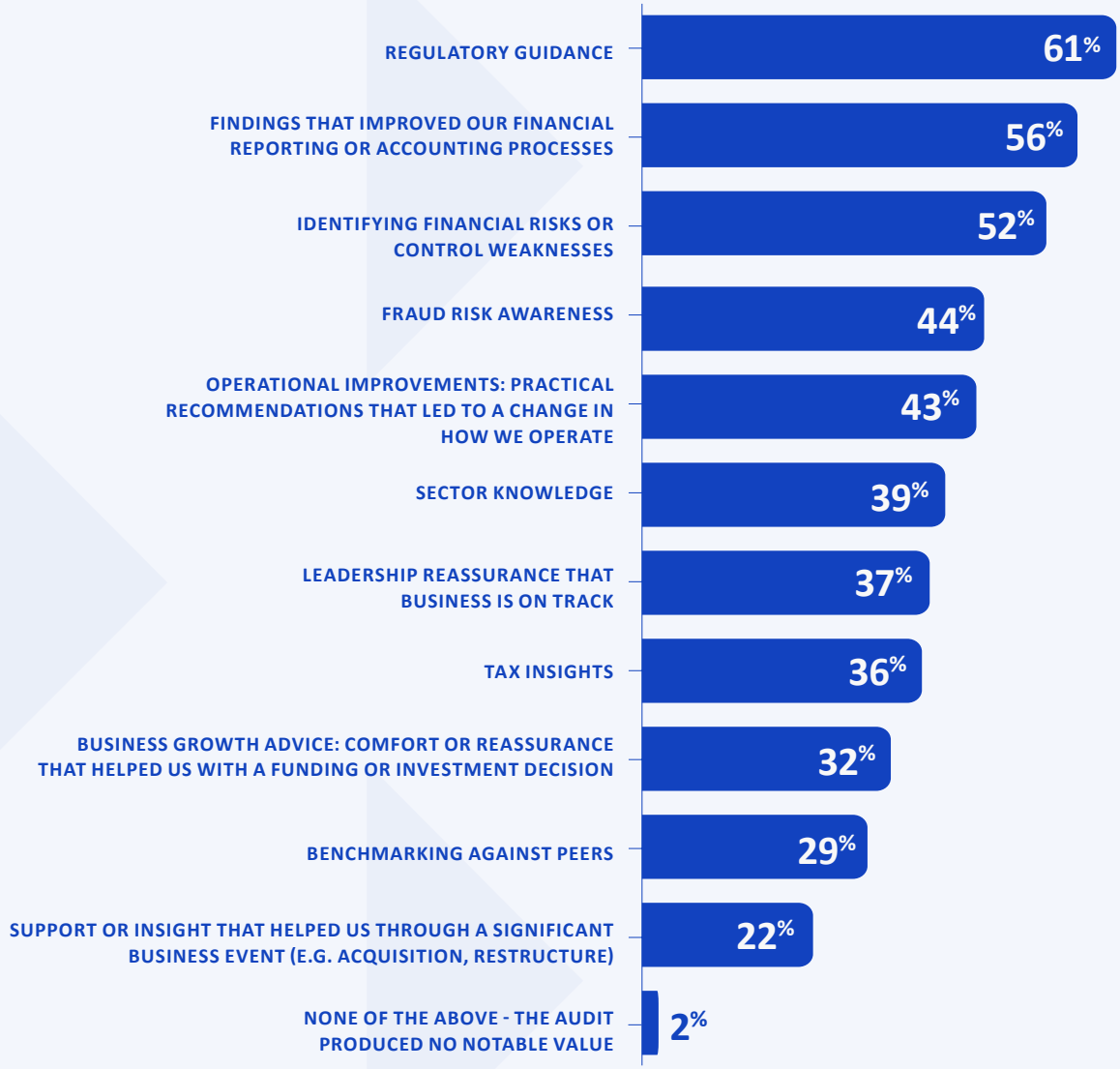
"When they challenge our thinking and go beyond merely following rules to provide proactive commercial insights."

FINANCE DIRECTOR, PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, UK

"An excellent audit understands our risk, challenges our thinking, and provides insights that help us make stronger decisions."

CFO, FINANCE & INSURANCE, IRELAND

In which areas (if any) has your auditor delivered the greatest value in the last two years?

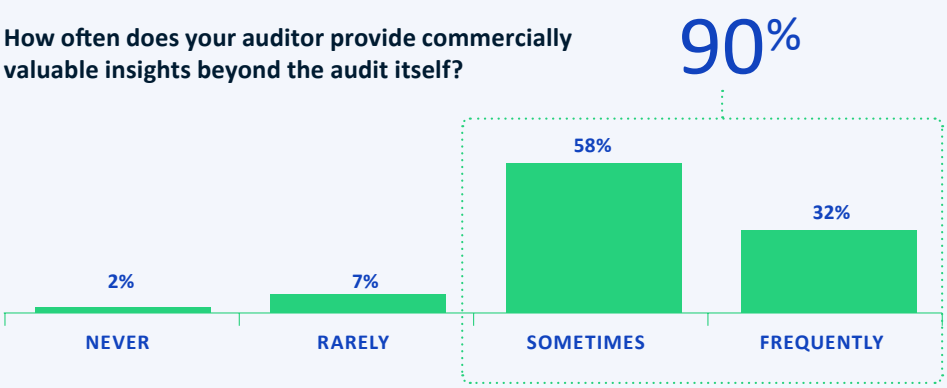


Audit Headaches

But are business leaders getting as much genuine insight as they think?

Most leaders get commercially valuable insight beyond the audit itself. **But only 32% get valuable insights frequently.**

How often does your auditor provide commercially valuable insights beyond the audit itself?



"The criteria rarely change and annual audits become perfunctory."

FINANCE DIRECTOR, PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, UK

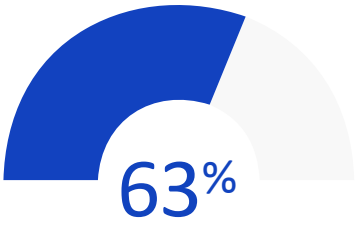


58%

SAY AUDIT FEELS LIKE A PROCESS TO COMPLETE, NOT A CONVERSATION

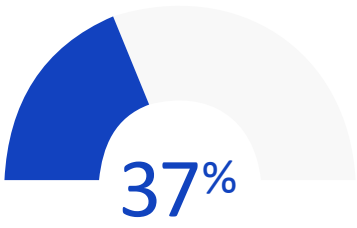
Many feel audits are becoming more of a burden over time: **more compliance heavy, more onerous**

Beneath top level satisfaction, the audit experience is becoming more transactional and more process heavy:



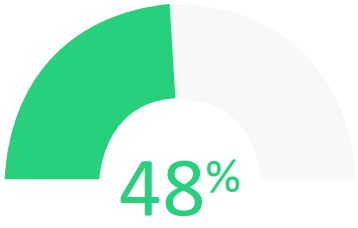
63%

SAY THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING AUDITED FEELS MORE TRANSACTIONAL THESE DAYS



37%

THINK THE AUDIT PROCESS TODAY IS LESS USEFUL THAN IT WAS 5 YEARS AGO



48%

SAY AUDITS TODAY FEEL TOO HARD VS THE VALUE THEY ACTUALLY GET OUT OF THEM

"The amount of detail and data they request seems to have steadily increased. I've also noticed an increasing use of automated tools, often with AI, like payroll analysis tools, bank transaction analysis tools, and then automated review of the integrity of our sales and receipts. That is increasing the number of follow-up queries that we then have to deal with. It feels as though the process has become more and more intensive in terms of the number of data points that we have to supply, and it seems to be taking longer in terms of elapsed time. So the time my accounts team has to spend on the audit, which is a drag on resource, seems to have got longer and longer."

MARK WILSON, FINANCE DIRECTOR, D. J. SQUIRE & CO., LTD

Audit Value Creation

A contradictory experience: satisfied with current audit set up – but not sure what they are missing?

94%

ARE SATISFIED WITH THEIR CURRENT AUDITOR

86%

WOULD KEEP THEIR AUDIT EVEN IF THE OBLIGATION DISAPPEARED

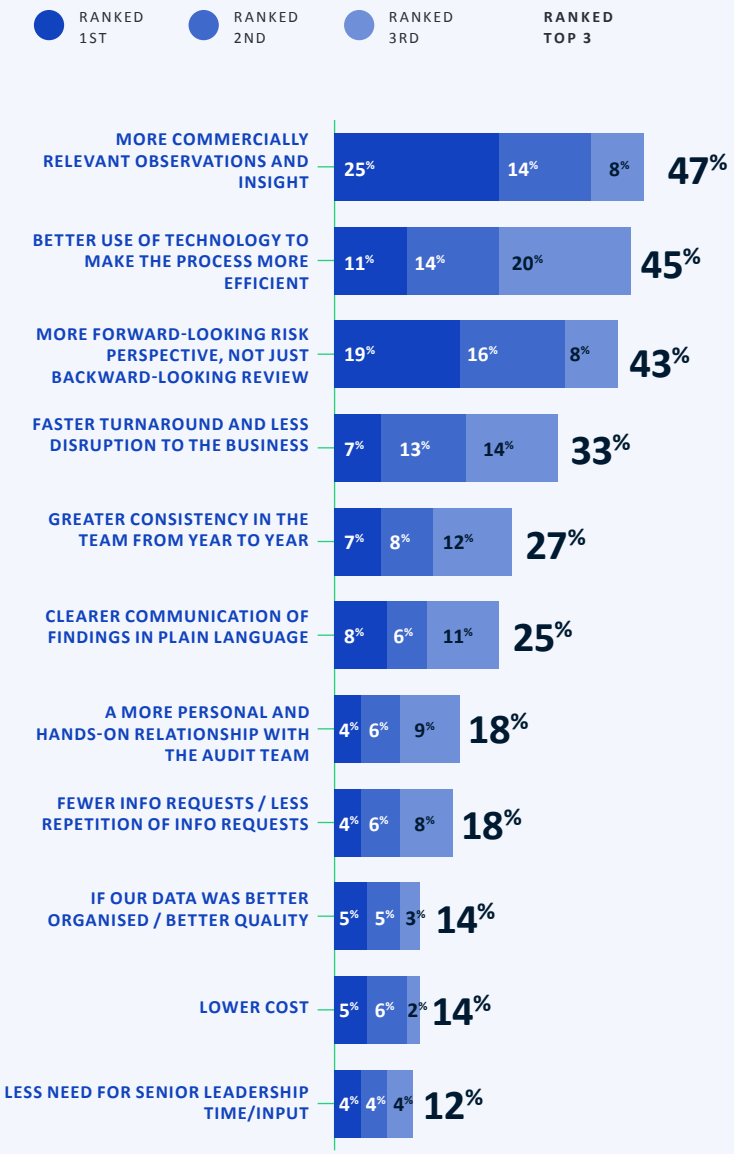
58%

SAY IT FEELS LIKE A PROCESS TO COMPLETE, NOT A CONVERSATION

54%

SAY REGULATION HAS CHANGED WHAT THEY EXPECT FROM THEIR AUDITOR — BUT CANNOT SAY WHETHER IT HAS GONE UP OR DOWN

What would most improve the value you get from your external audit?



Why aren't more clients getting the top tier?

Taking audits from good to great

- stay rigorous but feel more useful to management decisions
- more commercially relevant insight beyond basic compliance
- more forward-looking view of risk and a faster, less disruptive process.

"Clients increasingly judge a firm by the experience, not just the output. Technical competence is now assumed, what separates firms is whether the client feels genuinely looked after. The complaint I hear most is about continuity — a new team every year who has to be walked through the business from scratch. Clients want an audit team that already understands how they operate, so time is spent on substance and the real areas of importance to the business, rather than re-explaining the basics."

DAVE MCGARRY, HEAD OF AUDIT & ASSURANCE, AZETS IRELAND

How Do You Know Your Auditor Is Doing A Good Job:

Business Leader Voices – what does Audit Best Value look like?

"Clients still expect high quality assurance, but they increasingly want auditors to bring broader business insights to them. The value that we as auditors can give is to help them understand not only what has happened, but also what risks and opportunities lie ahead."

MALIN FORSLUND, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS AUDIT & ADVISORY, SWEDEN

"If a director or stakeholder walks away having learned something new about their own business, that's a successful audit."

DAVE MCGARRY, HEAD OF AUDIT & ASSURANCE, AZETS IRELAND

"A slick process where we have done our best to make sure that the client's world goes on. If we can walk away and they can say that they've had some extra value over and above the words on the opinion. That to me is a successful audit."

CHRIS BUTT, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS UK

"When they identify insights that we haven't spotted ourselves."

CEO / MANAGING DIRECTOR, EDUCATION, UK

"They understand our business well and identify risks without disrupting daily operations."

FINANCE DIRECTOR, TECHNOLOGY, IRELAND

"The real audit experience is understanding that you have a team that's fully dedicated to your function for a period of time, testing what you're doing and ensuring that it is effective from a company perspective, from a shareholder perspective, from a regulator perspective. It brings assurance and understanding of where things need to improve to perform at the level that our stakeholders are expecting. This is where audit brings value."

ROBERTO INFRICCIOLI, CHIEF RISK OFFICER, STELLANTIS FINANCIAL SERVICES UK

"You can tell an auditor is doing a great job when they understand the organisation's strategic goals as well as the details. Their work makes executives, boards, and stakeholders feel confident."

FINANCE DIRECTOR, TECHNOLOGY, SWEDEN

"An auditor does a great job by providing transparent communication, minimal operational disruption, and actionable insights that add real value beyond basic regulatory compliance."

CEO / MANAGING DIRECTOR, EDUCATION, UK

Spotlight On Regulation

The Trade-off:

Value vs Compliance

Regulation brings benefits – and trade-offs. Leaders largely believe regulation improves audit quality and most trust their auditor to be honest and transparent.

However, assurance and confidence come with a cost: documentation, more management time, heavier evidence requirements and higher fees.

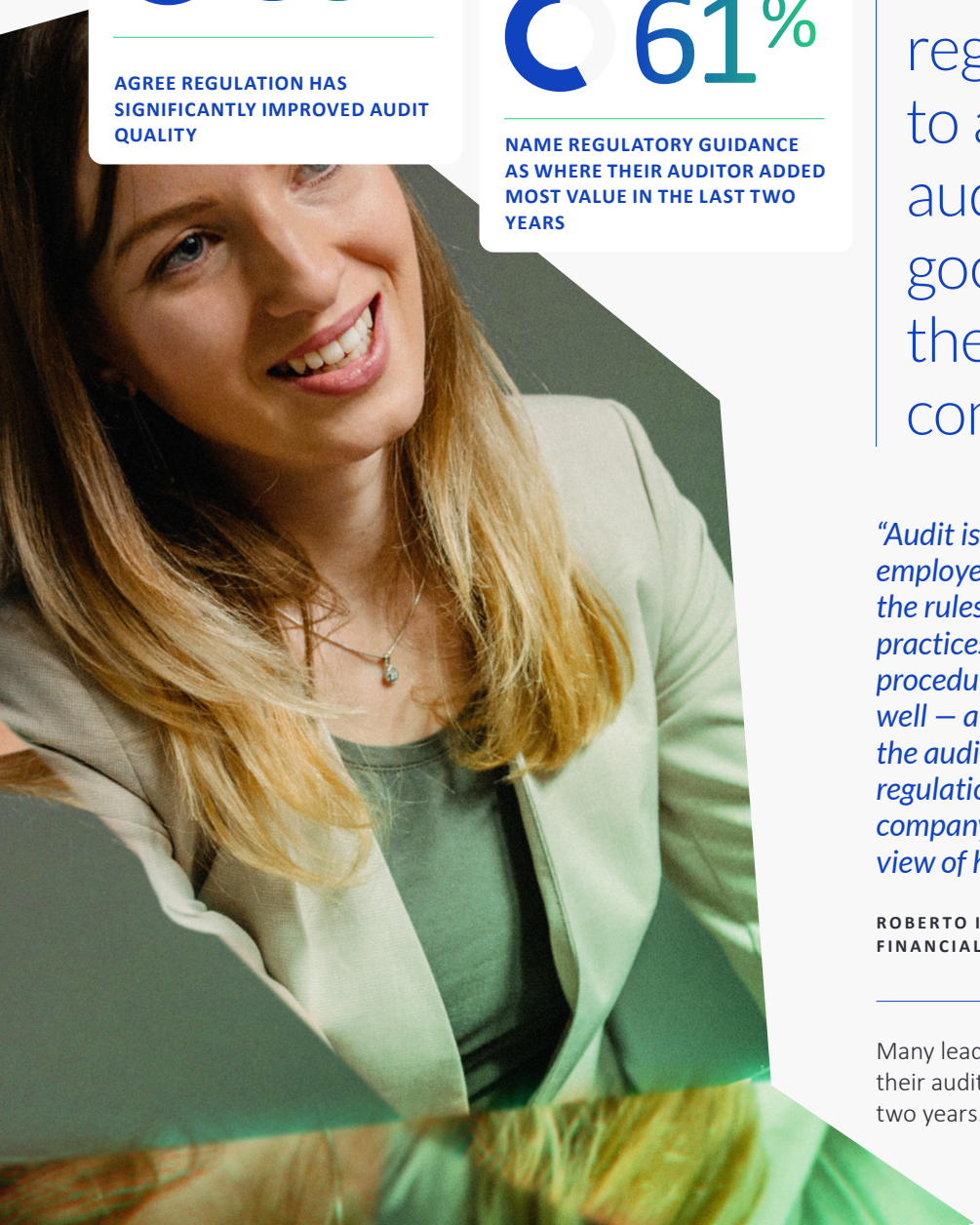
Are business leaders feeling the burden and wanting more visible value in return?

83%

AGREE REGULATION HAS SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVED AUDIT QUALITY

61%

NAME REGULATORY GUIDANCE AS WHERE THEIR AUDITOR ADDED MOST VALUE IN THE LAST TWO YEARS



The positives

Leaders agree that regulation adds value to audit quality and auditors are doing a good job of guiding them through the complexity

"Audit is no longer about checking that employees and departments are following the rules. It's about understanding how the practices of the business, our policies, our procedures are in line with the regulations as well — and testing it. That's the real part of the audit. It's a powerful thing, you take a regulation and see how it impacts the company across departments, a holistic view of how it should be implemented."

ROBERTO INFRICCIOLI, CHIEF RISK OFFICER, STELLANTIS FINANCIAL SERVICES UK

Many leaders say guidance on regulation is where their auditor has delivered the most value in the past two years.



73%

SAY THE REGULATORY BURDEN ON AUDITORS ULTIMATELY INCREASES THE COST OF AUDIT FOR THEIR BUSINESS



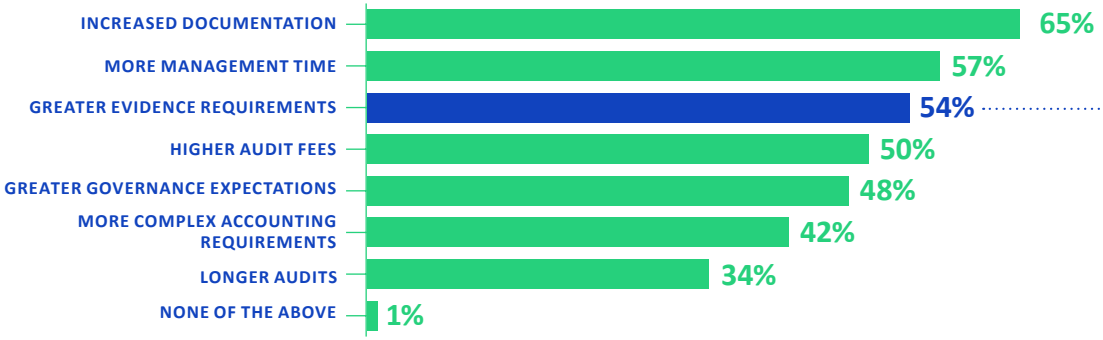
63%

SAY THE REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT HAS MADE THEIR EXTERNAL AUDIT MORE BURDENSOME IN THE LAST THREE YEARS

The Challenges:

Regulatory changes are creating more boxes to tick in the audit process

Which impacts of regulatory changes have had the greatest impact on your organisation?



Under scrutiny:

SMALLER BUSINESSES (UNDER 100 EMPLOYEES) ARE MORE LIKELY (74%) TO CITE 'GREATER EVIDENCE REQUIREMENTS' AS HAVING A BIG IMPACT

Taking up time which could be spent on more meaningful discussion?

"The flip side of this increased focus on the detail is that the value-added discussions about big conceptual things like, 'are we going to have to take an impairment charge on these assets?' or 'have we applied this accounting standard correctly?' or 'is the disclosure for this acquisition correct?' are often postponed, and they tend to come up at the end. Often those big conceptual questions are being discussed when time is beginning to run low, and also energy is beginning to run low."

MARK WILSON, FINANCE DIRECTOR, D. J. SQUIRE & CO., LTD

Compliance is tying the hands of auditors

55%

FEEL THEIR AUDITOR IS TOO CONSTRAINED BY REGULATION TO GIVE THEM THE ADVICE THEY ACTUALLY NEED

55%

SAY INCREASING REGULATION HAS MADE IT HARDER FOR THEIR AUDITOR TO ADD VALUE

82%

SAY THE LEVEL OF REGULATION APPLIED TO AUDIT IS APPROPRIATE

The Regulatory Squeeze on Advisory Potential:

Standardising quality, but stifling proactive commercial advice?

Regulation has narrowed the space in which an auditor can offer an opinion beyond the formal findings. The result is a profession that has learned to say less, as 55% say regulation has made it harder for their auditor to add value at all.

But this is not a call for deregulation. Four in five (82%) say the level of regulation is about right. **Leaders (and auditors) just want the conversation back.**

"As auditors, we like to be a key advisor to our clients. Regulation has, to some extent, stopped us from doing some of that and made auditors slightly more nervous. We've lost out as an industry where we've almost retracted into our shells and made sure we are doing the job that our regulator wants us to do, as opposed to adding value to our clients, getting under the skin of their business, telling them some insights that they didn't already know."

CHRIS BUTT, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS UK

Spotlight On AI

The AI Paradox:

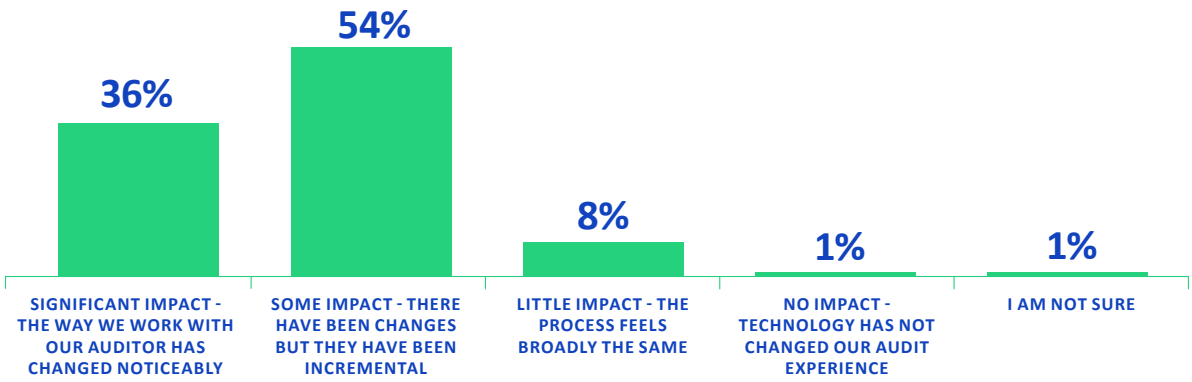
Costs, Trust and Talent

Technology is now firmly part of the audit story with 90% of leaders saying they have noticed the impact of technology on external audit (54% say they see incremental change vs 36% who call it significant) and 84% feeling confident that their data is in good enough shape to take advantage of a tech-enabled audit.

84%

SAY THE QUALITY OF DATA AND SYSTEMS IN MY BUSINESS IS GOOD ENOUGH TO GET FULL VALUE FROM TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED AUDIT

How much impact has technology had on your experience of external audit in the last two to three years?



88%

SAY THE MORE TECHNOLOGY IS INVOLVED IN AUDIT, THE MORE IMPORTANT IT BECOMES TO HAVE A TRUSTED HUMAN RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR AUDITOR

AI and technology in audit are on a journey and there are questions that need answering before leaders feel fully comfortable.

Businesses are not asking for a hands-off automated future. In fact, the advent of new tech in audit is shining a light on the importance of human relationships, and trust in AI is far from universal.

90%

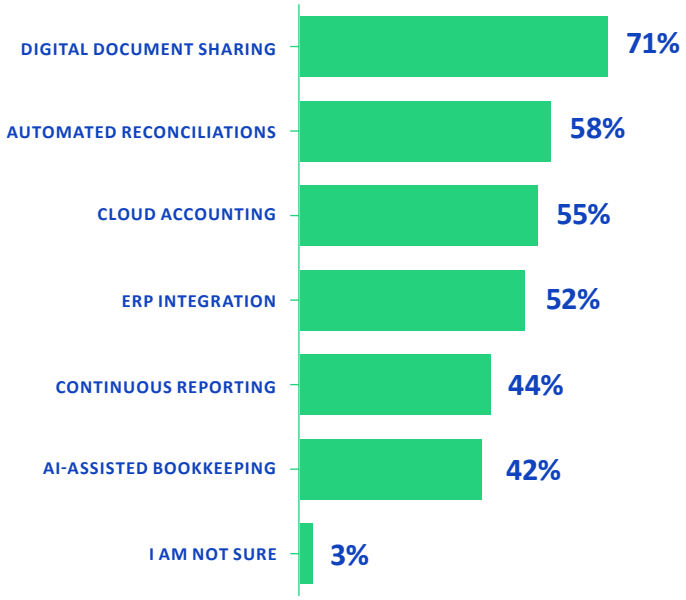
SAY TECHNOLOGY HAS ALREADY CHANGED THEIR AUDIT EXPERIENCE

Workflow focused tools have the biggest positive impact

Digital document sharing stands out as the technology most often improving audit today.

Automated reconciliations, cloud accounting, and ERP integration follow, showing the biggest gains are coming from connected, workflow-focused tools.

Which technologies are currently improving your audit experience?



Expectations are that AI will continue to increase in importance in the audit process

87%

SAY AI WILL BE IMPORTANT IN AUDIT IMPROVEMENT OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

AI is adding value to audit assurance

"What we've seen so far is that audit is predominantly about testing, checking, and validating information. Historically, that's been a sample-based approach but what we're seeing now with technology, with data analytics, and with AI, you are going to be able to challenge or test that population more holistically because you've got the means to do it quickly."

JAYKISHAN SHAH, PARTNER, AUDIT, ACCOUNTING & OUTSOURCING, BLICK ROTHENBERG

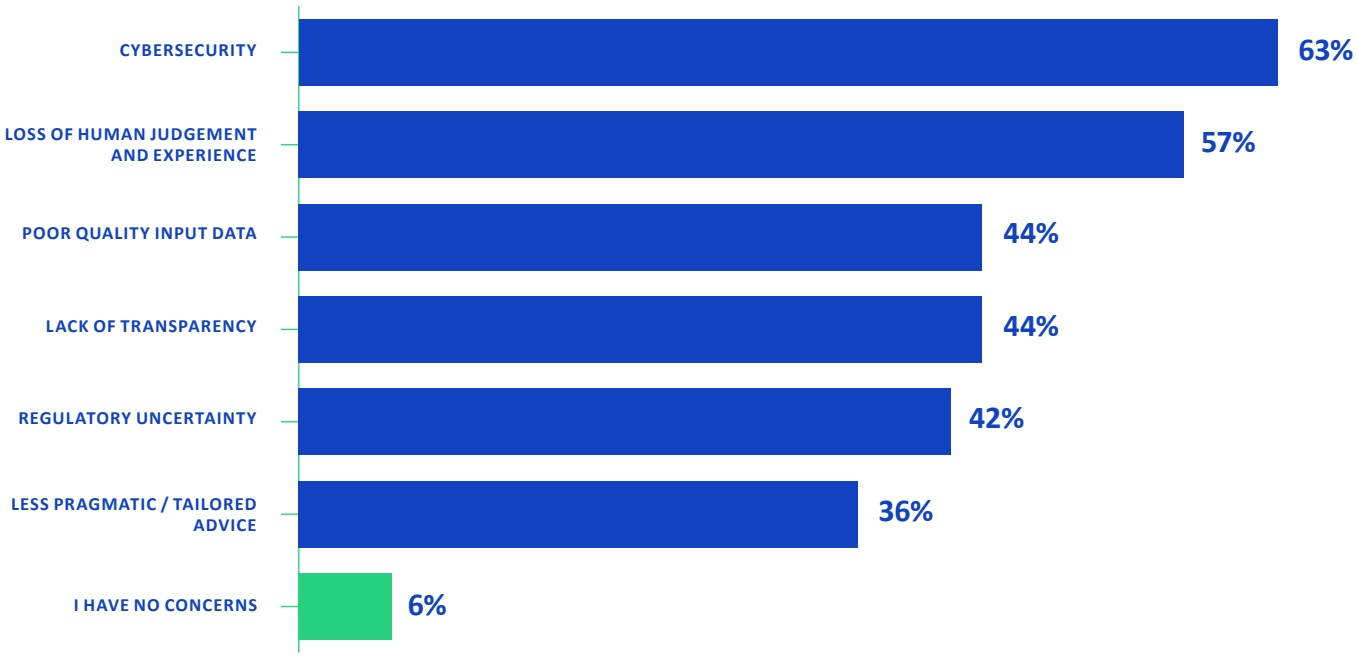
A Tech-enabled Audit Future?

Biggest AI Concerns

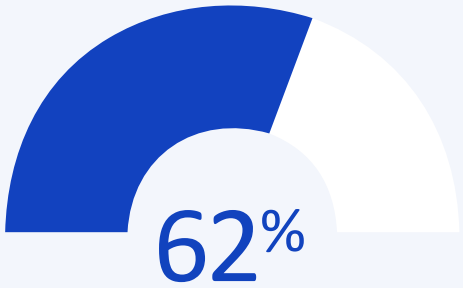
> Cybersecurity, a loss of judgement, poor-quality data and transparency

Only 6% say they have no concerns.

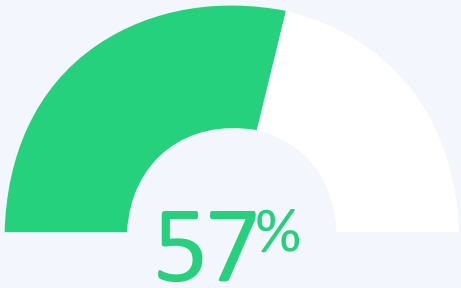
What concerns you most about AI in external audit?



A fear of losing human judgement and experience



SAY AI IS GOING TO REDUCE THE PRAGMATIC, COMMON-SENSE ADVICE THAT A HUMAN AUDITOR CAN OFFER



WORRY THAT INCREASED USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN AUDIT WILL REDUCE THE PERSONAL SERVICE THEY RECEIVE

Experts Know The AI Limitations At This Stage

AI in audit is on a journey and we are not there yet



"Anything that involves really using the grey matter to apply accounting standards or to apply judgement to scenarios, we won't be able to rely on AI to do that… in the short term. There are a lot of tools and a lot of noise in the audit industry around AI, but the reality is we're not there yet. It's neither saving us meaningful amounts of cost and time nor indeed adding more value to the client. That is a journey that we're going on and I believe as that journey continues, the big outcome will be a higher level of assurance in what we do, and greater coverage using automation – that's a big tick, using tools that are available to do more."

CHRIS BUTT, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS UK

"AI is brilliant at doing the heavy lifting, sifting huge volumes of data and flagging what needs a second look. But it can't sit across the table from a client and ask the right question at the right moment. Technology can process data faster than any person, but it can't read a room, challenge a client constructively, or build the trust that makes an audit actually work. That's still down to people."

DAVE MCGARRY, HEAD OF AUDIT & ASSURANCE, AZETS IRELAND

"You often see requests: the client uploads it to a data portal, the auditor downloads it, works on it, uploads it back, some more requests. And you can see an environment where, through no fault of anyone, it just becomes entirely transactional, and you've just got a flow of questions and responses. You will eventually get to the right answer, but it won't have felt like the right way of getting there. There will be an evolution of how we do things, but at the end of the day, it will be people working together, not hiding behind a data portal."

JAYKISHAN SHAH, PARTNER, AUDIT, ACCOUNTING & OUTSOURCING, BLICK ROTHENBERG



82%

SAY INCREASING USE OF AI AND TECHNOLOGY WILL MAKE AUDIT CHEAPER FOR BUSINESSES LIKE THEIRS



58%

SAY INCREASED USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN AUDIT MAKES THEM WONDER WHAT THEY ARE ACTUALLY PAYING FOR



50%

SAY HIGHER AUDIT FEES ARE ONE OF THE GREATEST IMPACTS OF REGULATORY CHANGES

If AI brings efficiencies, why aren't audit costs coming down?

The missing cost dividend: audit firms are adopting AI-driven analysis, yet fees keep rising.

"It feels as though we're paying more and more for less and less of what we want. I think what would change it would be if they said, 'look, we recognise that your audit cost is going up by more than the rate of inflation every year, and this is not sustainable. We want to apply more automation, more IT, more AI to simplify, and do parts of the process. In order for that to work, we need you to provide data in a less analogue way, populate templates, provide data in a certain format and that is going to enable us to give you a reduced cost of the service.' That conversation doesn't happen. I'm left with this suspicion that there is stuff now being done by AI and maybe being offshored and whatever without us really knowing about it. But meanwhile, we're being presented with cost increases on a like-for-like basis."

MARK WILSON, FINANCE DIRECTOR, D. J. SQUIRE & CO., LTD

The reality: enterprise AI technology and token pricing are expensive, and AI hallucinations mean human oversight remains mandatory, so AI shifts work rather than immediately reducing overall delivery costs.

"I've been very open with my client base that, yes, we've made some investments in AI, but they're not going to stop us sending six people out to do your audit next year. There's a difference between making investments in AI and what that means for cost of delivery and client value. I think there's a misconception that investing in AI will reduce our delivery costs. The AI is not cheap for a start, and it needs reviewing. You need to treat your AI as if it were a junior auditor, and therefore you need to check. It's learning. There has to be that human-in-the-loop element. It's getting that balance right and getting that integration of technology over time, rather than a big bang approach."

CHRIS BUTT, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS UK



62%

TRUST AN AI-ASSISTED AUDIT AS MUCH AS ONE DONE PRIMARILY BY PEOPLE

Ultimately, leaders want the efficiencies of AI, but don't fully trust it yet

"It's proven that AI can hallucinate, does hallucinate, and those are coming out as the big headlines. We don't want to do that. We've got to control it, you've got to build it up over time. There's a trust. It's just like trusting a trainee and building up their skillset; we've got to build up the AI skillset. And that involves training of our people. That's something that I think is quite often overlooked."

CHRIS BUTT, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS UK

"It's about understanding that there are limitations and there are clear examples where AI might hallucinate or might quote an accounting standard that doesn't exist. We've seen that. We encourage our teams to use it, play with it, but at the back of your mind know that you cannot, at the moment, trust it completely. See what works and share those best practices."

JAYKISHAN SHAH, PARTNER, AUDIT, ACCOUNTING & OUTSOURCING, BLICK ROTHENBERG

"You can use AI for bits and pieces in the audit, but then to bring it up to the higher level and see how they relate to each other, then our skills as more senior auditors become important."

JENNY BARKSJÖ FORSLUND, CEO, AZETS AUDIT & ADVISORY, SWEDEN

Audit Talent:

Pipeline threat

The missing stepping stones on a career journey: as AI automates evidence collection, leaders warn of a talent gap. 57% name finding audit talent as a top five-year challenge (#2 ranking).



"How much does AI threaten the junior role?

You either have fewer people come into the profession because they think AI is a threat, or the people that come in don't get sufficient training because elements of those roles are taken away.

It's really important for the talent that we do attract that we train them in the right way. The biggest risk of AI is that it's to the detriment of training a junior member of the team. We must be really mindful that we don't place too much emphasis on, or rely too heavily on AI, and we balance that with the training need."

JAYKISHAN SHAH, PARTNER, AUDIT, ACCOUNTING & OUTSOURCING, BLICK ROTHENBERG

"Auditing will be a more specialised profession in the future, which poses a problem on its own because to get to be a senior auditor, you need to have a journey, right? You need to start off as a junior, and usually the juniors are the ones collecting the evidence… but this is going to be replaced by AI.

So there will be a missing stepping stone to get to that next level. It's our role, either for university or for the qualifications, to bring up the level."

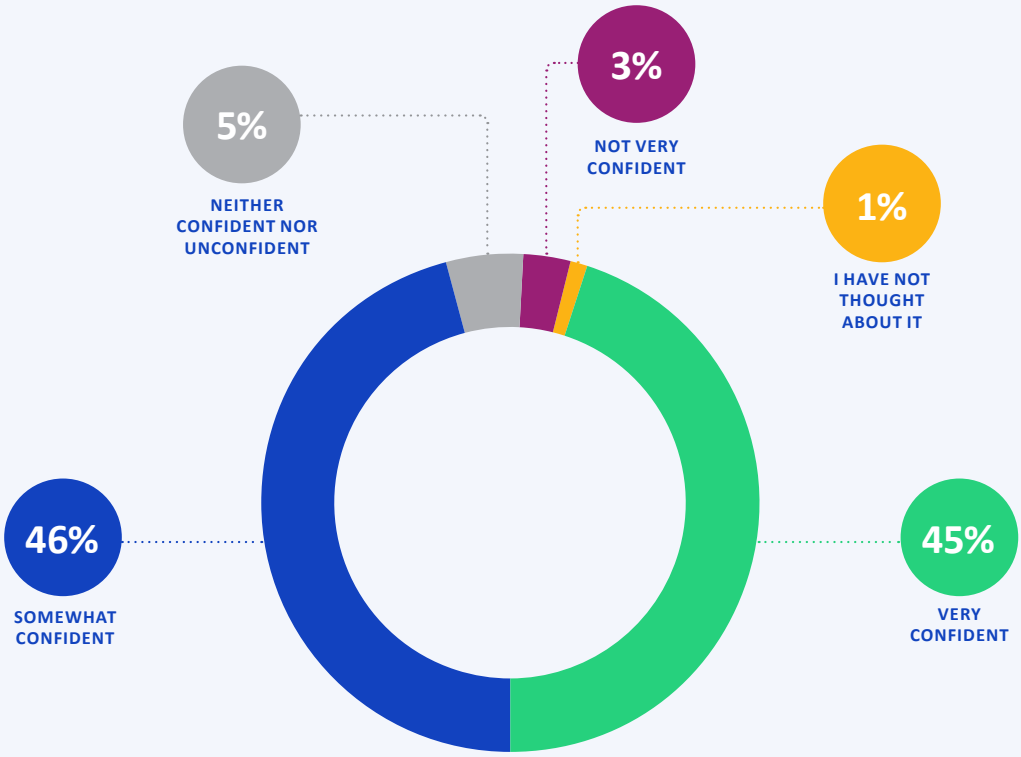
ROBERTO INFRICCIOLI, CHIEF RISK OFFICER, STELLANTIS FINANCIAL SERVICES UK



57%

SAY FINDING TALENT TO MOVE BEYOND COMPLIANCE IS A TOP CHALLENGE FOR AUDIT

Thinking about the audit professionals you work with, how confident are you that the next generation of auditors will have the skills and judgement needed to deliver high-quality audit?



Cautious Optimism for the Next Generation of Auditors

Despite the widening skills gap, business leaders remain largely hopeful that the incoming generation of auditors will rise to the occasion. 91% are either very or somewhat confident in the next generation of auditors.

There is a recognised gap between the compliance-heavy nature of the job today and the advisory-led role clients want tomorrow. Audit firms that can successfully train and retain strategic, forward-thinking talent will have a competitive advantage.

"Client service isn't a values statement on a wall, it's a discipline you teach."

DAVE MCGARRY, HEAD OF AUDIT & ASSURANCE, AZETS IRELAND

"It's that continued investment in people. I like to call it bedside manner, giving people the ability to develop relationships, build rapport quickly, understand people, as well as how the business works, and then use that to form extra insight for the clients. We're going back to basics on making sure that the people we recruit are given that skillset. There's a huge risk that with increased investment across the board in technology and AI, that bit disappears and we end up with a bunch of people who can't have those conversations."

CHRIS BUTT, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS UK



The Human Touch in a Data-Driven World

Soft skills & team continuity are the backbone of the audit process

Leaders and auditors agree that human dynamics make or break the audit, and field-team continuity is vital not only for efficiency but for building long-term trust.

Businesses want pragmatism and deep sector knowledge, so the most valued auditors are those able to understand specific industry nuances and distinguish between immaterial noise and genuine business risks.

The rapid integration of AI and automation is actually amplifying the demand for human connection, rather than replacing it.



88%

SAY THE MOST IMPORTANT THING AN AUDITOR CAN OFFER WILL ALWAYS BE HUMAN JUDGEMENT AND EXPERTISE



59%

SAY MAINTAINING THE HUMAN TOUCH IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FACING AUDIT

The Enduring Demand for Human Acumen and Knowledge

Judgement is irreplaceable: 88% of leaders agree that the most important thing an auditor can offer will always be human judgement and expertise.

"More senior people in the audit teams, like the partner or the manager, they see a lot of businesses and could add a lot of value by saying, 'oh, well, those people do it this way' or, 'have you thought about this?' It's quite frustrating because I know these people have very useful experiences and knowledge and benchmarks, which we don't tend to get the benefit of. And I think that's because they just don't have the time to do it."

MARK WILSON, FINANCE DIRECTOR, D. J. SQUIRE & CO., LTD

Leaders express concern around the idea of losing the 'pragmatic advisor' and there is real anxiety about technology eroding this relationship:

- 62% worry AI will reduce the pragmatic, common-sense advice a human auditor can offer
- 57% worry it will reduce the personal service they receive
- Greatest concerns regarding AI in audit include 'loss of human judgement and experience' for 57%

The defining challenge for the audit profession: 'Maintaining the human touch in an increasingly automated profession' is the biggest challenge (59%) for audit over the next 5 years, ahead of talent (57%) and keeping pace with technology (52%).



Human **'soft skills'** have never been more important

How important are each of the following in your choice of external auditor and your satisfaction with them?



88%

HONESTY WHEN THE MESSAGE IS HARD



89%

COMMUNICATION AND PEOPLE SKILLS



89%

BEING AVAILABLE WHEN NEEDED



89%

SOUND BUSINESS JUDGEMENT



"The best audits end with a proper conversation, not just a signed set of accounts. Walking through what was found, what it means for the business, and what should happen next. That presentation is where the real value sits; a document on its own gets filed, a conversation gets acted on."

DAVE MCGARRY, HEAD OF AUDIT & ASSURANCE, AZETS IRELAND

"It's very much about being authentic. I cannot say one thing and act in another way, that's a catastrophe for building trust between clients and advisors. It is important that we are genuine and authentic in the way we act and what we say. Be brave and say the right thing, not only when it's good things."

JENNY BARKSJÖ FORSLUND, CEO, AZETS AUDIT & ADVISORY, SWEDEN

"Openness and honesty. Defensiveness is hugely self-defeating."

CHIEF RISK OFFICER, PUBLIC SECTOR, UK

"They are approachable, explain things simply and provide practical guidance that adds value."

HEAD OF FINANCE, THIRD SECTOR, IRELAND

"Technology improves audits while human expertise guides better decisions."

HEAD OF FINANCE, FINANCE & INSURANCE, UK

Team continuity is key to client satisfaction

Staff turnover in audit firms is a known industry issue, and clients feel the pain of having to re-educate new team members every year.



84%

SAY CONTINUITY - DEALING WITH THE SAME PEOPLE YEAR ON YEAR - DRIVES SATISFACTION



87%

SAY A PERSONAL 'HANDS ON' APPROACH FROM SENIOR MEMBERS OF THE TEAM DRIVES SATISFACTION

Talent retention is directly tied to client satisfaction. Firms need retention strategies that keep knowledgeable people on the same accounts longer.

Continuity creates trust:

"One of the absolutely critical things is continuity of the team so that the crucial people understand your business, know the right questions to ask and have the background and the trust in me to take some things on trust without having to dig in. You can also say, 'this is the conversation we had last year, we decided the way we were going to go and we don't need to go through it again'. So just focusing on what's changed and, where issues have been closed in the past, keeping them closed. Too much turnover in the audit team can really waste a lot of time and lead to a poor process."

MARK WILSON, FINANCE DIRECTOR, D. J. SQUIRE & CO., LTD

Continuity matters:

"Support continues even after the audit officially finishes."

CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER, CONSTRUCTION, UK

"Building a long-term relationship with the individuals involved, so that they understand our business and we don't have to start from scratch each year."

SENIOR LEADER, THIRD SECTOR, UK

"They share big issues early so we can fix them, and they keep in touch all year."

CHAIR / NON-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, TECHNOLOGY, UK



89%

WANT AN AUDITOR AVAILABLE WHEN NEEDED — A REAL PERSON AT THE END OF THE PHONE

Keeping common sense in audit:

Pragmatism over pedantry

"I like pragmatism. Some auditors tend to go by the rules rather than understanding that every company's different, every industry is slightly different. The 80/20 rule is an important one in audit. You cannot really screen up to the penny, you need to set a tolerance where you accept there will be a margin of error. Sometimes audit tends to over-focus on things which are not material and then miss the bigger picture. Being pragmatic is important, understanding the big risks is important. The minor defects are negligible."

ROBERTO INFRICCIOLI, CHIEF RISK OFFICER, STELLANTIS FINANCIAL SERVICES UK

"In the world we operate in, I think there's a bit of miseducation and quite often, we're a little too negative internally about what we can do. But clients don't know, and often don't really care. They want help. It's really up to us to go, look, we can help you, but I want to make you aware that there's a line that we can't cross. If we end up getting to the point of needing to cross this line, then we'll tell you before we get there and we'll help you to find somebody that can help. We need to be able to put ourselves in that position without breaching our own regulatory requirements or the ethical standards and independence implications. But actually, there's often a way to help out. And for our client base, that's really key."

CHRIS BUTT, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS UK

Spotlight On
Enterprise Business

Despite their size and complexity, enterprise level organisations still need audit advisors to offer high-value strategic counsel: 70% of companies in the €100M–€250M revenue bracket are actively willing to pay a premium for auditors who deliver genuine, forward-looking commercial insight.

These large decision-makers have felt the impact of AI and digital tools faster than the broader market, with nearly half of €100M+ firms reporting a noticeable shift in how audits are conducted. They remain cautious of over-automation, citing the preservation of the 'human touch' as a notable challenge.

In fact, for larger organisations (€50M+ in annual revenue), business leaders see their external audit leaning closer over time to a procedural compliance exercise rather than a strategic partnership. This friction contributes to lower overall satisfaction and a higher likelihood of viewing basic audits as merely meeting legal minimums.

Impact of tech in audit is significant – but not fully trusted

Companies with revenues of €100M+ are significantly more likely to say technology has had a 'significant impact' on their experience of external audit over the last 2-3 years (47% vs survey average of 36%)

47%

SAY TECHNOLOGY HAS HAD A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON THEIR AUDIT EXPERIENCE

Ahead of the tech curve but still sceptical: When asked about the importance of AI in improving audit over the next 5 years, the survey average was 42% for 'very important' whereas at enterprise level (€250M+) this drops to 22% as they remain sceptical of AI's transformative importance vs other measures.

Concerned about losing the 'human touch'

69%

CITE 'LOSING HUMAN TOUCH' AS A TOP CHALLENGE FOR AUDIT

According to businesses in the €50M to €99.9M revenue bracket, the top challenge to audit as it tries to deliver value to businesses over the next 5 years is 'maintaining the human touch in an increasingly automated profession,' with 69% citing this as a top challenge vs a 59% survey average.

Even as larger companies deploy advanced technologies at pace, they still remain concerned about the audit process becoming a faceless, automated transaction.

Harder to add value as the enterprise size increases

Companies in the €100M+ revenue bracket are significantly less likely to have found their most recent audit valuable (86% vs. 93% survey average) and are significantly more likely to rate the experience as entirely neutral - 'it met the requirement but didn't add much beyond that' (14% vs. 7% survey average).

This data suggests it may be harder for auditors to add visible, strategic value to enterprise-scale organisations (they may have dedicated internal audit teams and auditors have less regulatory freedom the bigger the organisation gets). Does this regulatory limitation render the audit process more of a procedural compliance exercise for them?

Value-add insight is worth a premium

A significant 70% of companies in the €100M to €249.9M revenue tier would be willing to pay more for an audit that provided significantly greater business insight and tailored 'friendly' advice outside of the main scope, vs 50% of businesses on average.

70%

ARE WILLING TO PAY EXTRA FOR STRATEGIC COUNSEL

Despite significant size, these organisations are actively looking to pay a premium for strategic, value-add insights that go beyond the basic compliance checklist, and they are more likely than the smaller firms to have the budget to do so.



Continued advice:

"For a lot of our clients who are part of large groups, they want to get some confidence in the numbers that they're sharing with their group on a monthly or quarterly basis, that those are right. So actually, if there's something that's going on during the year that might have an impact, it's in their interest not to leave it until the end of the year, and then to have adjustments to their numbers that come as a bit of surprise to the group or to the directors."

Avoiding Transactional:

"You can see an environment where, through no fault of anyone, it just becomes entirely transactional, and you've just got a flow of questions and responses. You will eventually get to the right answer, but it won't have felt like the right way of getting there."

JAYKISHAN SHAH, PARTNER, AUDIT, ACCOUNTING & OUTSOURCING BLICK ROTHENBERG

A Fresh Perspective on Audit:

This data is taken from an independent research study commissioned by Azets Group. Based on a survey of 200+ C-suite executives, senior leaders and finance decision-makers and in conversation with Jaykishan Shah, Partner in Audit, Accounting & Outsourcing at Blick Rothenberg.

BLICK ROTHENBERG
a part of AZETS



A Fresh Perspective:

The way ahead for audit

Business leaders are clear they want more connection with their audit teams and more transparency on the inner workings of the audit firms.

Open dialogue on the auditor's own regulatory and talent pressures has the potential to build empathy and ease fee-related tensions.

"The most value my clients get from me personally is when we get to that point where we've got such a strong relationship that they can call me from the car at 5 o'clock on their way home after a tough week, chat it through, and ask for some of my thoughts. There's a balance to be struck in what I can and can't advise them on, but that shows me they have taken me as a trusted advisor. And that was the case early on in my career. As an industry, we've lost that. It would be good if regulations allowed us to get back there, particularly in the SME marketplace, where owner-managers or management teams aren't always as experienced, and don't always have the context to draw on from a wide client base that we do. It'd be nice to be able to give some of that value back."

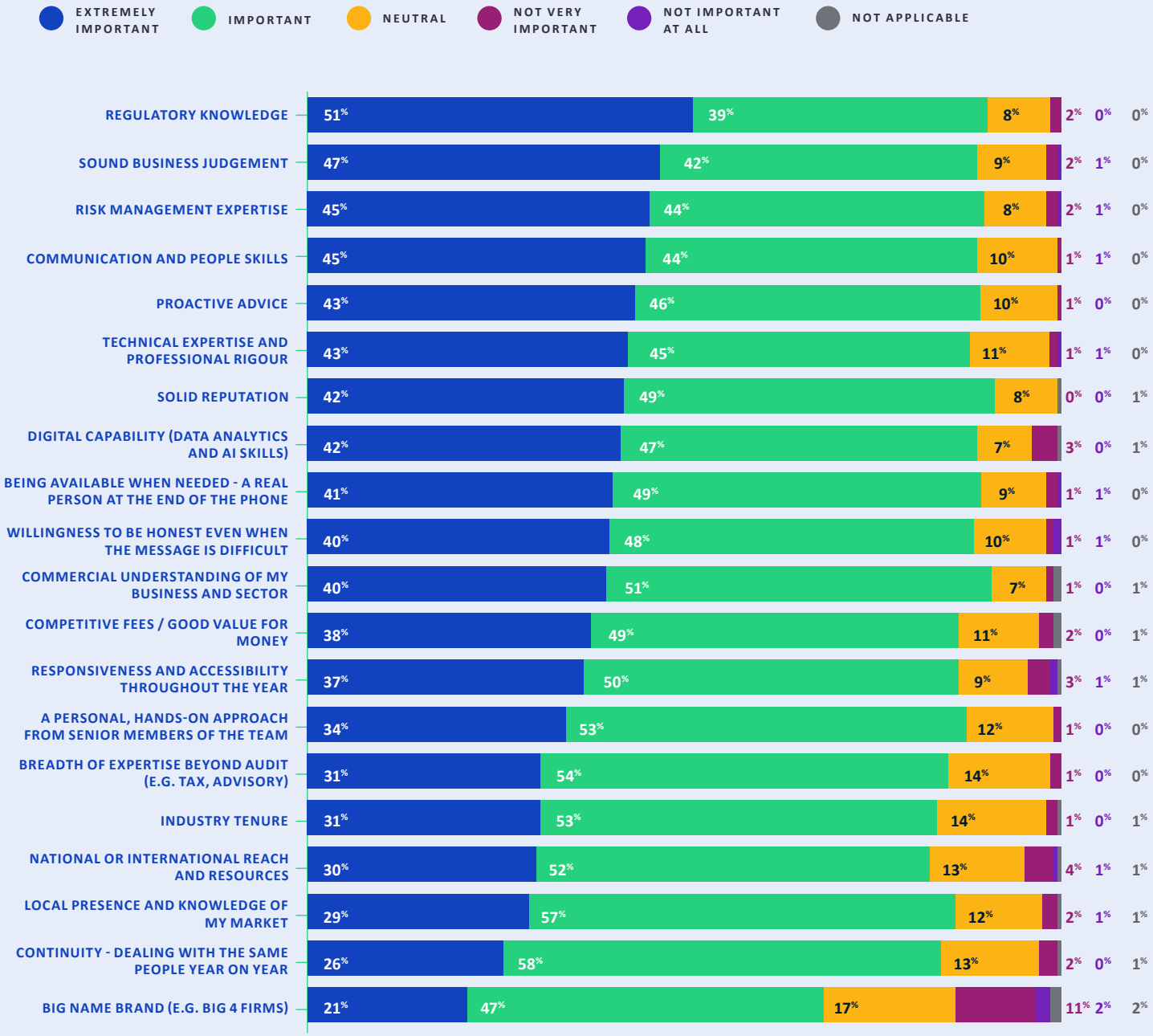
CHRIS BUTT, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS UK

The Auditor of the future

#1 Factors: Regulatory knowledge, solid business judgement and risk management expertise are the most important.

Lower on the list: Big-name brand is the least important factor, well behind service, judgement and sector understanding.

How important are each of the following in your choice of external auditor and your satisfaction with them?





87%

EXPECT THE AUDIT PROFESSION TO LOOK FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT IN 10 YEARS

Auditors need a new hybrid skillset

Technical accounting knowledge is now just the baseline. Today's audit buyers are looking for a much broader, multidisciplinary skillset from their audit teams.

Ranking what matters in choosing an auditor, leaders place high value across risk management expertise, communication and people skills, digital capability, technical rigour and breadth beyond audit.

What does this mean for recruitment?

Audit firms are now looking beyond traditional accounting skills and need individuals with strong commercial acumen and communication abilities. Training programmes for junior auditors are pivoting from purely technical compliance to holistic business advisory skills.

"The auditors of five to ten years' time are going to look very different to when I trained and very different to the training environment that we've got now. It's clear that the acceleration and pace of IT and AI capabilities will continue to move the dial. But we will never get away from the fact that we have to have face-to-face conversations with our clients. We have to make sound judgements based on information and experience, and they're not going to come from a very small number of people using big computers. The most successful people, without a doubt, have that balance of pragmatism, technical ability, and ability to learn quickly as well as build relationships and have conversations with people."

CHRIS BUTT, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS UK

"We need people who love asking clients questions and are eager to listen to the answers. We like people who want to challenge themselves and grow and be able to drive their own development."

MALIN FORSLUND, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS AUDIT & ADVISORY, SWEDEN

Transparency and Dialogue

The tension:
Regulations are understood, but auditor constraints seen as excessive

91%

CLAIM TO KNOW THE RULES GOVERNING WHAT THEIR AUDITOR CAN AND CANNOT DO AT LEAST FAIRLY WELL

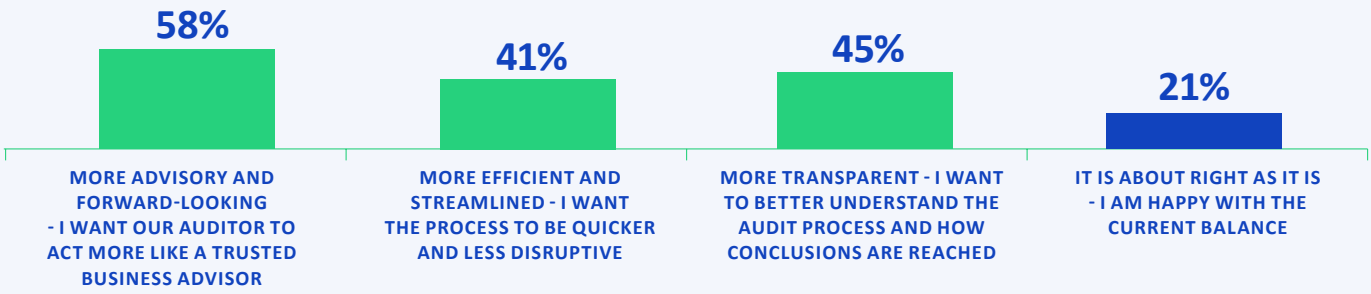
55%

FEEL THEIR AUDITOR IS TOO CONSTRAINED BY REGULATION TO GIVE THEM THE ADVICE THEY ACTUALLY NEED

54%

SAY THEIR AUDITOR IS SOMETIMES TOO CAUTIOUS AND HOLDS BACK USEFUL OBSERVATIONS FOR REGULATORY REASONS

Thinking about your relationship with auditors, which of the following best describes how you would like that relationship to evolve?



The answer:
Radical transparency upfront

"Part of it is being upfront with them. No one likes surprises, particularly if it's going to impact on what they thought their profit number was. You don't want to come into that final meeting and end up in a standoff, because that's not a good outcome for anybody."

CHRIS BUTT, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS UK

"It's rarely a problem if you're upfront about it early. The firms that manage this well tell clients where the lines sit before they hit them, so independence never feels like a nasty surprise mid-engagement."

DAVE MCGARRY, HEAD OF AUDIT & ASSURANCE, AZETS IRELAND

"Issues are discussed openly instead of simply appearing in the final report."

CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER, CONSTRUCTION, UK

"Transparent discussions encouraged trust and supported quicker resolution of complex accounting matters during fieldwork."

SENIOR LEADER, THIRD SECTOR, UK

"Better to deal with issues during the year rather than wait for the audit."

CHAIR / NON-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, TECHNOLOGY, UK



The Mid-Tier Advantage

When it comes to selecting an auditor, personalised service and commercial understanding outweigh the prestige of a Big Four brand.

89%

WANT A REAL PERSON AT THE END OF THE PHONE

79%

SAY MID TIER FIRMS OFFER A MORE PERSONAL AND ATTENTIVE SERVICE

73%

FEEL MID-TIER FIRMS ARE BETTER PLACED TO ADAPT TO THE CHANGING NEEDS OF MID-MARKET BUSINESSES

69%

RATE A BIG-NAME BRAND AS IMPORTANT — THE LOWEST-SCORING OF TWENTY FACTORS

"They're not really choosing between big and small, they're looking for real technical depth that still shows up like a local partner. The firms that win that trust are the ones with the scale to handle anything, without losing the accessibility that makes a client pick up the phone."

DAVE MCGARRY, HEAD OF AUDIT & ASSURANCE, AZETS IRELAND

"We certainly have different regulations for listed businesses than for small businesses, and it does feel at times that they are too onerous for some of the clients. We're starting to get a little bit more traction on making audits for smaller and less risky clients slightly more pragmatic, a slight adjustment to the auditing standards. The ethical standard has actually allowed auditors to do quite a lot, particularly in the smaller and medium-sized audits."

CHRIS BUTT, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS UK

70% of smaller firms (under 100 employees) agree that 'smaller businesses like mine are disproportionately affected by audit regulation designed for larger companies' (vs 50% on average)



On-site presence is a key trust driver:

Localising the Client Experience

Transforming the auditor role from external 'police' to trusted partner involves breaking down corporate barriers through face time in the office, communicating in the client's local language (e.g., Nordic languages over English) and acting as accessible business peers.

Switched-on audit firms are actively training their juniors in authentic client communication and delivering uncomfortable truths constructively.



SAY LOCAL PRESENCE AND KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR MARKET MATTERS IN CHOOSING AN AUDITOR



"To be the trusted advisor that the client comes to when they face a challenge, you build that kind of relationship by being close to them. Maybe not for the full audit, but for one or two days at the client site, it's important."

JENNY BARKSJÖ FORSLUND, CEO, AZETS AUDIT & ADVISORY, SWEDEN

86%

WOULD KEEP AUDIT EVEN IF THE OBLIGATION DISAPPEARED

89%

ARE OPTIMISTIC ABOUT AUDIT'S FUTURE VALUE

87%

EXPECT THE AUDIT PROFESSION TO LOOK FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT IN 10 YEARS

Audit's Future Is Bright

Embrace the efficiencies, but keep humans in the loop

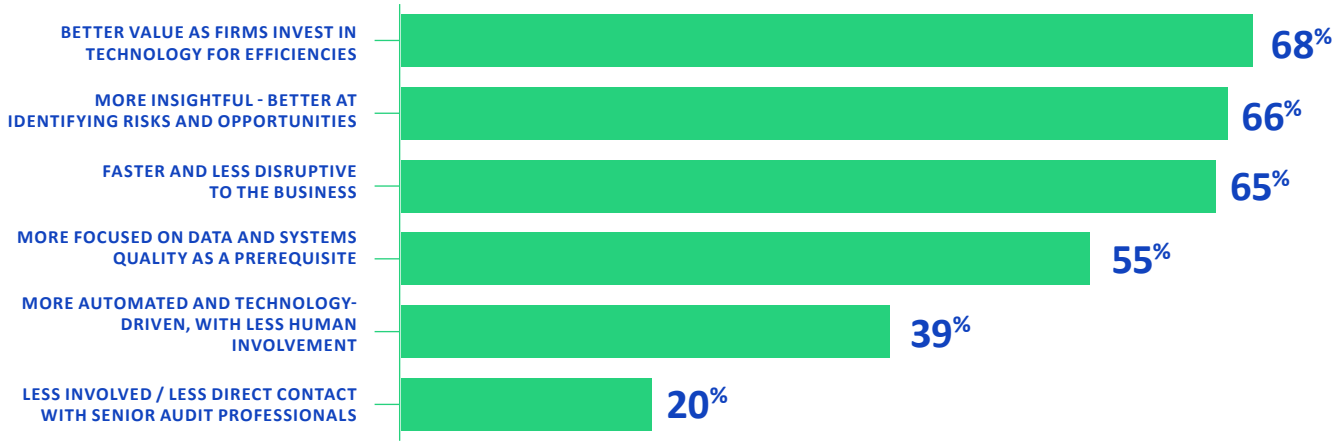
The strongest future priorities are better value, more insight, and a faster, less disruptive audit process.

Business leaders' advice: lean on automation but not at the expense of human contact and face time with auditors.

Insight worth paying for:

Asked whether they would pay more for greater business insight from their audit, **50% said yes** and 48% said maybe. Just 2% said no.

Looking ahead five years, how do you want your audit experience to change?



How Are Clients Pushing For Top Tier Audit Service?

Key Questions to ask your Auditor:

1.

What emerging risks or opportunities do you see on our horizon?

Auditors work across many businesses in your sector and know how your peers handle the same problems, but most clients never ask them what they see. Commercial understanding matters to 91% of leaders when choosing an auditor, and more commercially relevant insight is the single biggest improvement they want from their audit. Yet only 32% say they get commercially valuable insight frequently.

Asking the question directly is the fastest way to close that gap.

2.

How are you using AI and technology to streamline our audit?

82% of leaders expect AI and technology to make audits cheaper, and they want their own firm to get there faster. 45% put better use of technology in their top three improvements, second only to more commercial insight.

Asking this question ensures your audit firm is actively passing technological efficiencies, and cost savings, on to you.

3.

Can you explain how you reached these conclusions in straightforward terms?

The audit process shouldn't be a black box. 45% of leaders want a more transparent relationship with their auditor, specifically to understand how conclusions are reached.

Demanding plain language ensures you are really getting the insights you pay for.

4.

How will you ensure team continuity and senior-level involvement year on year?

Walking a new audit team through your business every year is a drain on management time. 84% of leaders say continuity, dealing with the same people year on year, drives their satisfaction, and 87% want a personal, hands-on approach from senior members of the team.

Ask who will actually be on your account, and who was on it last year.

5.

What are the hard truths you need to tell us about our data quality or financial controls?

91% of leaders trust their auditor to be honest even when the news is difficult, and 88% say a willingness to be honest when the message is hard is what they want from an auditor. That trust only pays off if you ask.

Giving your auditor permission to be candid about your internal shortcomings will save you time and money during next year's cycle.

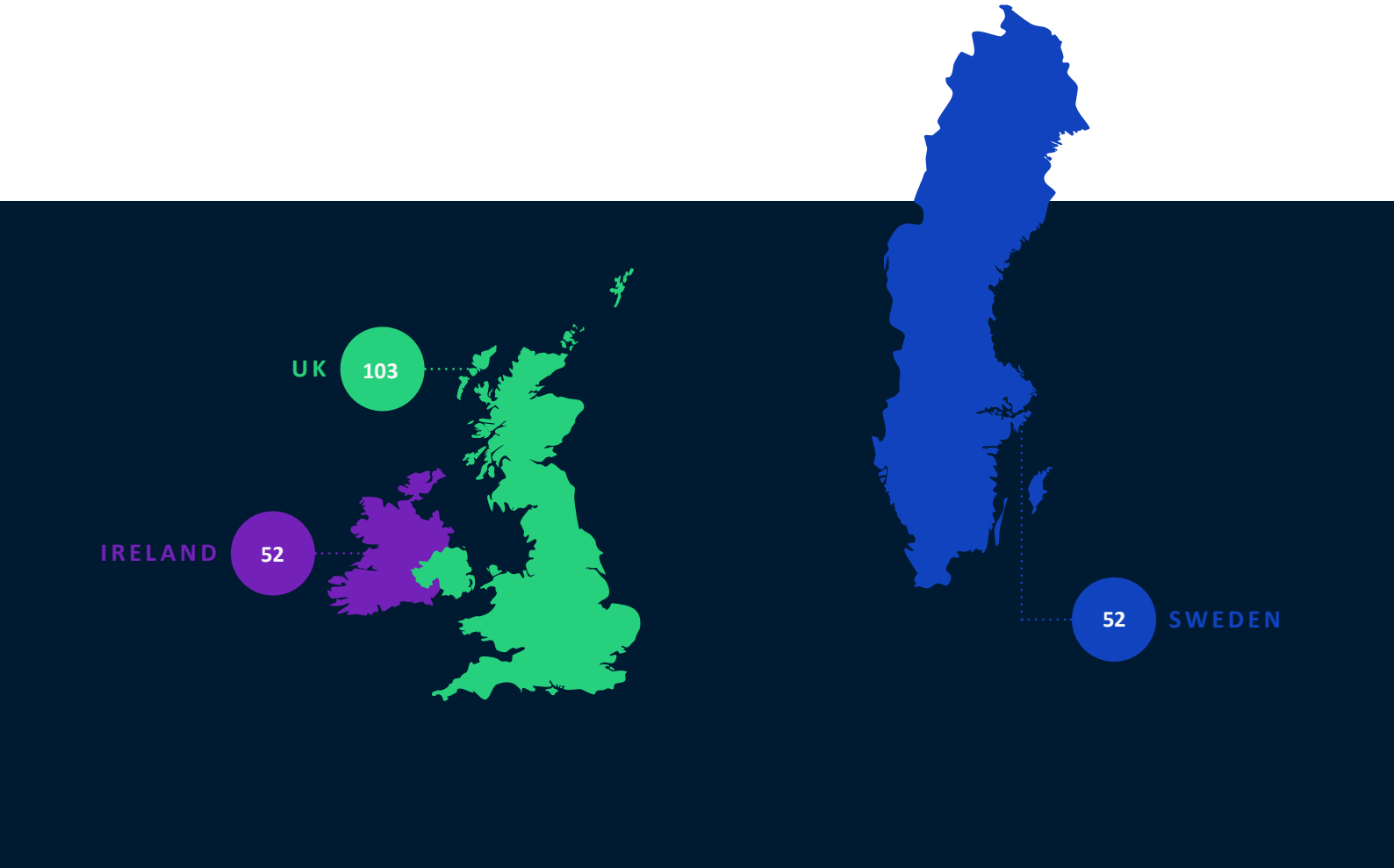
Methodology & Demographics

Who we spoke to

A Fresh Perspectives on Audit is an independent research study commissioned by Azets and conducted by Reputation Leaders.

All data is based on a survey of 207 C-suite executives, senior leaders and finance decision-makers in the UK, Ireland and Sweden, conducted in 2026. Respondents represent organisations of significant scale: 68% employ 250 or more people and 83% undergo a statutory external audit. Finance leaders account for 59% of the sample. Reputation Leaders conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with Azets executives and external opinion leaders to provide expert commentary and verbatim quotes within the report:

- Chris Butt, Head of Audit, Azets UK
- Malin Forslund, Head of Audit, Azets Audit & Advisory, Sweden
- Jenny Barksjö Forslund, CEO, Azets Audit & Advisory, Sweden
- Jaykishan Shah, Partner, Audit, Accounting & Outsourcing, Blick Rothenberg
- Dave McGarry, Head of Audit & Assurance, Azets Ireland
- Mark Wilson, Finance Director, D. J. Squire & Co., Ltd
- Roberto Infriccioli, Chief Risk Officer, Stellantis Financial Services UK



Move Forward With Confidence

Take a fresh look at audit

Leaders still see strong value in their audit process, but they want the next phase of audit to be faster, less burdensome, more insightful and more commercially relevant. The winning model is likely to be one that uses technology and AI to improve assurance, while preserving the human trust, candour and business judgement that auditors train for years to deliver.



"The future of audit is not about competing with technology. We need to grow with it. It's about using technology to deliver better insights while strengthening the human qualities that we know technology cannot replace... professional judgement but also trust and meaningful business relationships."

MALIN FORSLUND, HEAD OF AUDIT, AZETS AUDIT & ADVISORY, SWEDEN

Contact Us

Ready to discuss your business needs?

Contact Azets today for expert advice and support on your external audit. Our role is to ensure businesses are ready for what's coming, whether that's navigating shifting regulatory frameworks, managing the rapid integration of AI, or unlocking strategic foresight from complex financial data. By offering tailored solutions, human-led expertise, and pragmatic guidance, our specialist support can help you navigate your audit journey with confidence.


AZETS