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The future of bespoke software in an AI era

Insights from the 2026 Propel Tech Software Wishlist Survey

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Bespoke Software development continues to support and underpins every aspect of business, work, and modern life. As technology changes, expectations of what software should deliver for organisations, individuals, and society are becoming more ambitious, and our latest survey has revealed in 2026 the expectation is for software to be more human.

Alongside the expectation that software will support every aspect of life, artificial intelligence (AI) has moved decisively forward, from experimentation to everyday business reality. With this shift has come both optimism, setbacks, hype and concern: optimism about what software and AI can enable, setbacks of failed projects and foundational data issues, hype around the scale at which AI may replace humans, and concern about the risks they introduce if implemented without care.

In 2026, we conducted our **third annual Software Wishlist Survey**. We asked the same critical question: What do you want software to improve in 2026 and beyond? We also added some new questions around AI specifically. The following report builds on insights gathered in 2024 and 2025 to show a changing landscape of views and an evolving focus on bespoke software as AI understanding moves from rhetoric to reality.

We are delighted to see that more than **900 respondents** shared their views on the role software should play over the next decade and on AI as part of this. These views cover not only driving business performance but also improving working lives and addressing global challenges.

This guide presents the findings of the 2026 survey (conducted December 2025), compares them with previous years, and explores what they reveal about the **future potential of bespoke software development and AI**.

Andy and David

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In this guide:

A recap of previous years' key themes (2024 - 2025)

Across the 2024 and 2025 surveys, several consistent themes emerged:

1. **Software should improve the employee experience,**

   supporting wellbeing, collaboration, and problem-solving rather than surveillance or pressure.

2. **Businesses expect software to enable better decisions,**

   improve efficiency, and support sustainable growth.

3. **Globally, software is seen as a force for social good,**

   with strong emphasis on healthcare, sustainability, ethics, and equality.

4. **AI adoption should be cautious and responsible,**

   balancing transformation with potential harm.

These themes provided the foundation for interpreting the 2026 results, and, importantly, for identifying what has changed.

Real-world context (2025):

Developments during 2025 broadly align with the expectations identified in our earlier surveys.

- Across sectors, organisations increasingly invested in software and AI to improve efficiency, decision-making, and resilience in response to economic pressure, skills shortages, and operational complexity.
- At the same time, public debate and regulatory attention to AI intensified, particularly regarding workforce impact, data quality, transparency, and ethical use.
- High-profile cases of automation-led restructuring, alongside growing emphasis on AI governance frameworks and data readiness programmes, reinforced the view that technological capability alone is insufficient without strong foundations and human oversight.

> "Together, these trends suggest that the concerns and aspirations expressed in the 2024 and 2025 surveys were reflective of the real world and structural shifts already taking shape in practice but not yet fully felt in processes and software requirements."
>
> David Ritchie - Managing Partner, Propel Tech

The 2026 survey: what's new?

The 2026 survey sits against a backdrop of ongoing economic uncertainty, rapid AI change, and increasing public attention on the societal impact of digital systems. During 2025, this attention was reflected not only in organisational practice but also in heightened legal and regulatory focus on software and AI in the UK. New and emerging frameworks around data protection, online safety, cyber resilience, and responsible AI use brought greater scrutiny to how digital systems are designed, deployed, and governed.

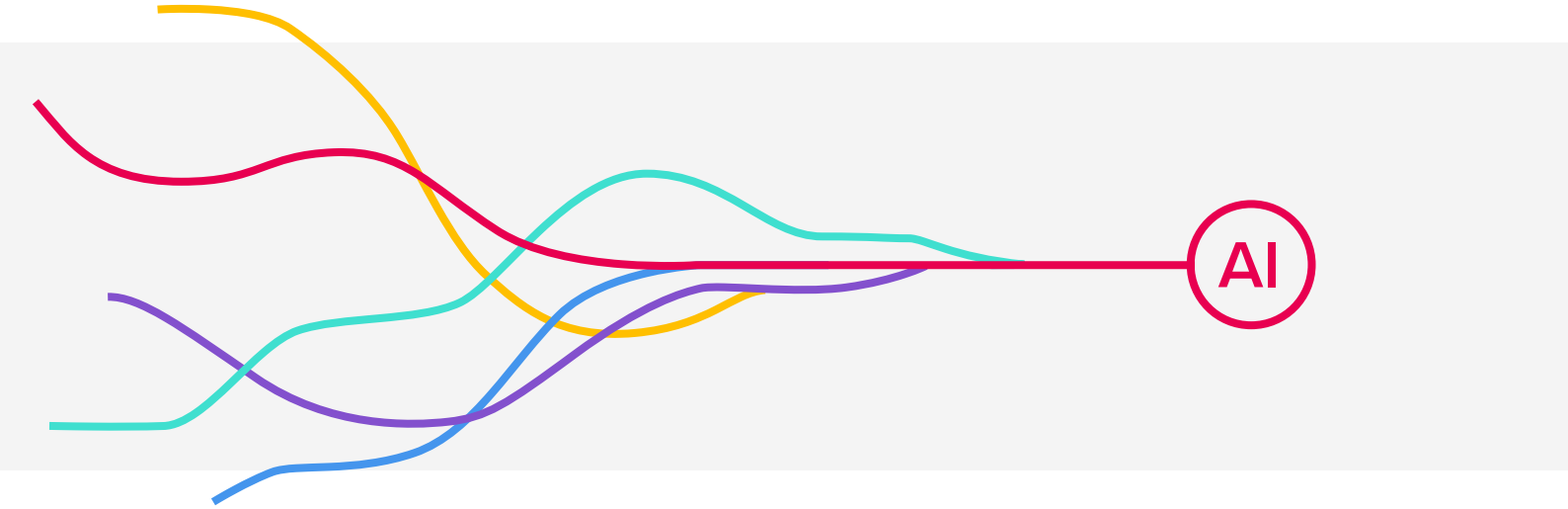
While many of the priorities identified in earlier surveys remain consistent, the latest findings reflect a more grounded and experience-led perspective. Respondents continue to articulate what they want software to achieve, but do so with greater awareness of the conditions required for technology to deliver meaningful and sustainable outcomes. In particular, there is clearer recognition that strong data foundations, accountable system design, and ethical oversight are not optional considerations, but essential components of effective software and AI implementation in an increasingly regulated environment.

The 2026 survey confirms many of the priorities seen in earlier years, but it also reveals a **significant shift in expectations from software and AI maturity**.

In previous surveys, respondents spoke largely about what software could or should do. In 2026, responses increasingly reflect **direct experience**, particularly with AI.

Across the data, three changes stand out:

1. Software is viewed as **more critical than ever** to social, economic, and workplace outcomes.
2. AI has moved to **centre stage**, no longer theoretical but operational.
3. Respondents show **greater awareness of complexity**, especially around data quality, system readiness, workforce impact, and ethics.



How should bespoke software improve the employee experience?

2026 priorities

When asked what software should be prioritised for employees, respondents in 2026 highlighted:

- **Well-being and work-life balance**
- **Training and development**
- **Productivity and collaboration**
- **Reducing repetitive, low-value tasks**
- **Supporting creative thinking and problem-solving**

This marks a continuation of the shift seen in 2025, where well-being overtook productivity as the top priority.

How does this compare to previous years

2024: Productivity, collaboration, and task automation dominated when respondents could select multiple priorities.

2025: Well-being moved decisively into first place.

2026: Well-being remains the top priority, but training and development gain further prominence.

Software Priorities for Employees (Directional)

Priority	2024	2025	2026
Well-being & work-life balance	Highest	Highest	Highest
Training & development	Medium	High	High
Productivity & collaboration	High	Medium	High
Reducing repetitive tasks	High	Medium	Medium
Creative / problem-solving work	Medium	Medium	Medium

Interpretation

Respondents increasingly see software as something that should **support people, not push them harder**. Productivity remains important, but not at the expense of health, learning, and autonomy. This reinforces the value of **bespoke, people-centred software** that adapts to users rather than forcing users to adapt to systems.

How should bespoke software improve business in the future?

2026 priorities

For businesses, respondents prioritised software that can:

- **Increase operational efficiency and reduce costs**
- **Enable better decision-making through analytics**
- **Improve competitiveness and revenue**
- **Strengthen data security and privacy**
- **Support innovation and new product development**

These priorities are tightly clustered, suggesting businesses no longer see these outcomes as trade-offs.

Comparison with 2024 and 2025

2024: Efficiency, analytics, and revenue were all widely selected.

2025: Analytics emerged as the single top priority.

2026: Efficiency, analytics, and competitiveness are viewed as equally critical.

Software Priorities for Businesses (Directional)

Priority	2024	2025	2026
Decision-making / analytics	High	Highest	High
Operational efficiency & cost	High	Medium	Highest
Revenue & competitiveness	High	Medium	High
Data security & privacy	Medium	High	Medium
Innovation / new products	Medium	Medium	Medium

Interpretation

The 2026 findings suggest a more **integrated view of value**. Software is expected to deliver insight, efficiency, and growth simultaneously, and to do so securely.

How should bespoke software improve the world?

2026 global priorities

Respondents believe software should play a role in addressing:

- **Sustainability and environmental impact**
- **Global health**
- **Food and water scarcity**
- **Education and inclusivity**
- **Economic opportunity**
- **Ethical and socially responsible practices**

No single issue dominates, reflecting the scale and complexity of global challenges.

Three-year perspective

Across 2024–2026: Sustainability, health, and ethics consistently rank at the top.

The leading issue shifts by year, but the underlying values remain stable.

Software Priorities for the World (Directional)

Priority	2024	2025	2026
Sustainability	High	Medium	Highest
Global health	High	Highest	High
Social responsibility / ethics	High	High	Medium
Economic opportunity	Medium	Medium	Medium
Education & inclusivity	Medium	Medium	Medium

Interpretation

There is a durable expectation that software, particularly bespoke solutions, should contribute to **positive societal outcomes**, not just organisational performance.

The growing role of AI in 2026

Context: From expectation to reality (2024-2026)

Over the past three years, the Software Wishlist Survey has tracked a clear progression in how people think about software and AI, a progression that closely mirrors real-world developments in the UK.

In 2024, survey responses reflected aspiration. Respondents articulated what they wanted software to become: a tool that improves employee wellbeing, supports better decision-making, and contributes to positive social outcomes. AI was largely discussed in terms of potential, accompanied by early caution around ethics and governance.

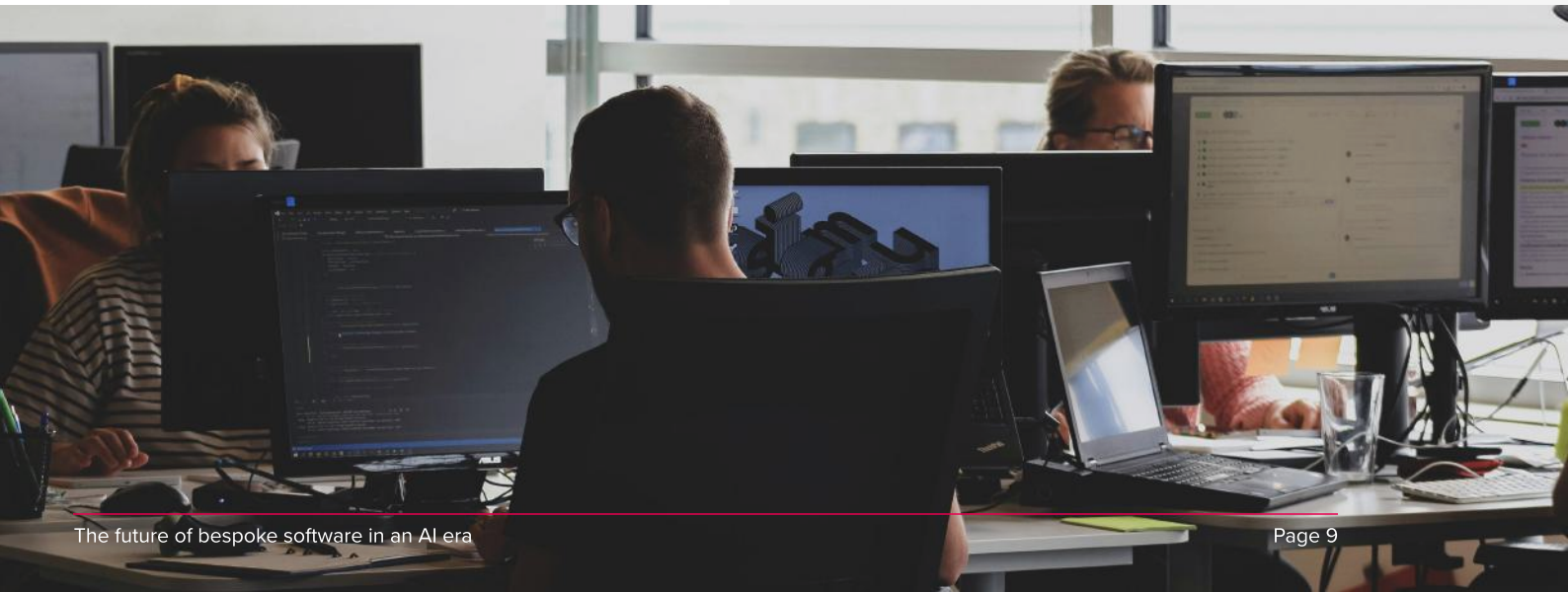
By 2025, this aspiration began to accelerate. Software and AI adoption increased across sectors as organisations sought efficiency, resilience, and growth. At the same time, respondents placed greater emphasis on wellbeing, analytics, and ethical responsibility. Public debate and policy attention in the UK are increasingly focused on AI's workforce impact, data readiness, and the need for skills and governance, signalling that implementation challenges are becoming visible.

The 2026 survey reflects a shift into lived reality. Software is now widely seen as critical infrastructure rather than an optional capability, and AI has moved firmly to centre stage.

Respondents express stronger concern about potential harm and job displacement, alongside near-universal acknowledgement that AI investment is already underway.

Crucially, the focus has shifted from what AI can do to what is required for it to deliver value responsibly, including strong data foundations, effective systems, and people-centred design.

Taken together, these findings suggest that attitudes toward AI have not swung unpredictably year to year. Instead, they track a familiar adoption curve: from expectation, to acceleration, to consequence. This context is essential for interpreting the AI findings that follow.



What do people expect AI to do?

Across the 2026 survey, respondents implicitly expect AI to:

- Support **better decision-making**
- Reduce repetitive or administrative work
- Enhance learning and capability
- Improve outcomes rather than simply automate processes

Are people concerned about AI? - Yes, and increasingly so.

- Concern that AI could cause more harm than good has risen steadily.
- The belief that AI will replace people in many areas of work increased sharply in 2026.

Three-Year AI Attitude Trends (% Agree / Yes)

Statement	2024	2025	2026
AI could cause more harm than good	41.5%	53.1%	70.9%
AI will replace people in all areas of work	41.5%	41.3%	73.0%
Software investment > people investment	45.8%	56.3%	81.5%

At the same time:

- Most respondents report that their organisations are already investing in AI.
- Many have seen AI-related redundancies first-hand.
- AI projects frequently expose issues with data, systems, cost, and people readiness.

2026 AI Reality Snapshot

Indicator	2026 %
Organisation already investing in AI	93%
Plans to spend more on AI	95%
AI-related redundancies experienced	87%
AI projects uncover data issues	29%
AI projects uncover system issues	29%
AI projects uncover people issues	22%

Interpretation

The 2026 data suggest a shift from AI debate to **lived experience**. Respondents do not reject AI, but they are increasingly aware that **outcomes depend on how it is implemented**.

Differences by seniority and sector

Seniority

Respondents believe software should play a role in addressing:

- **Early-career respondents** focus on wellbeing, skills, and job security.
- **Mid-level managers** emphasise analytics, coordination, and delivery.
- **Senior leaders** prioritise decision-making, capability building, and risk management.

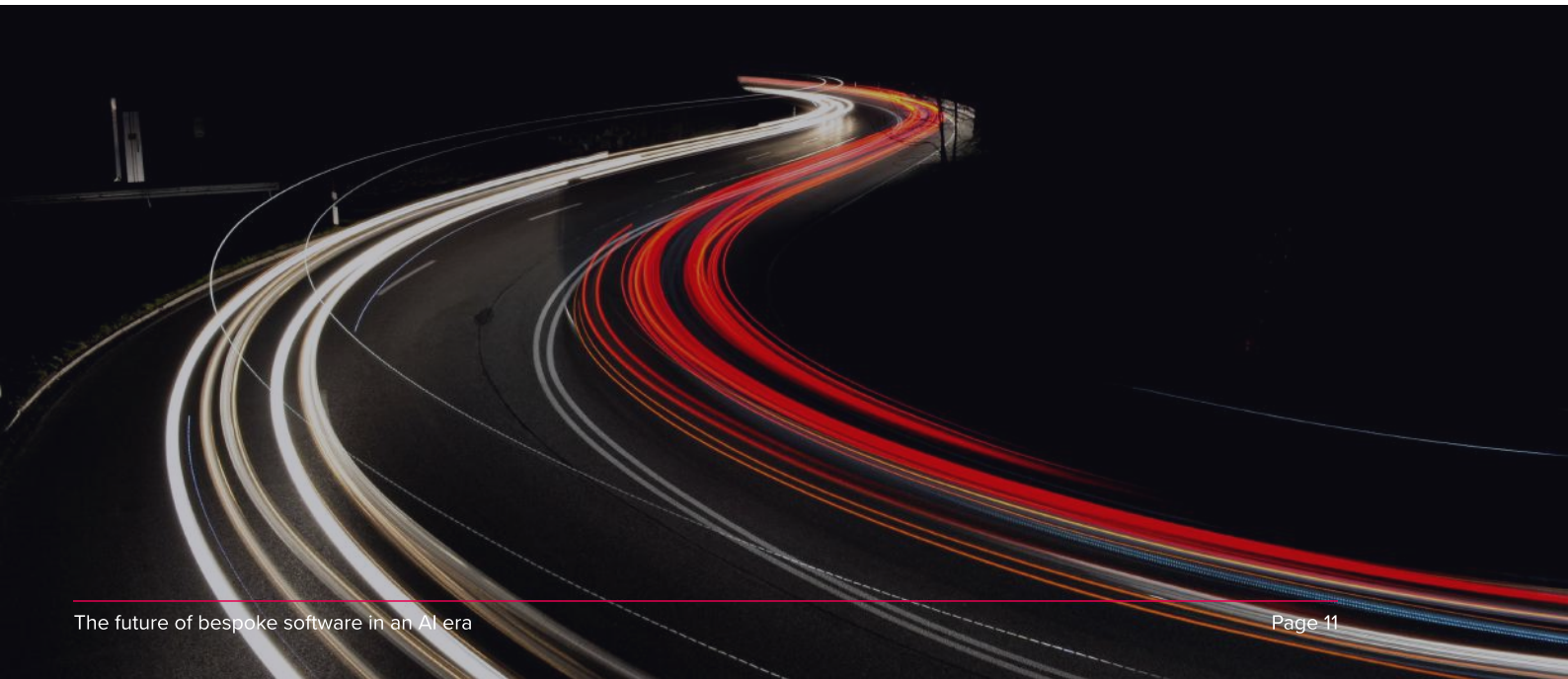
Sector

- **Technology and professional services:** software as strategic infrastructure.
- **Public sector, education, healthcare:** software as a public good and service enabler.
- **Manufacturing and operations:** software as a stabiliser of performance and efficiency.

These differences are consistent across years and reflect **contextual needs**, not disagreement.

How Software is Viewed by Seniority (2026)

Group	Primary View of Software
Early career	Protector of well-being and future opportunity
Mid-level management	Coordination and efficiency engine
Senior leadership	Strategic capability and risk platform



The power of bespoke, people-centred software

Across the 2026 survey findings, one message comes through clearly: **bespoke software makes a difference**.

As organisations face growing complexity, faster change, and rising expectations from employees and customers, the limitations of off-the-shelf solutions are becoming more visible. What people want instead is software that fits their reality, software that reflects how work actually gets done, not how a system assumes it should.

Built around real ways of working

Survey respondents consistently highlight the value of solutions that **fit real workflows**. This reflects a wider shift away from forcing people to adapt to technology and toward designing technology that adapts to people. When software is shaped around real users, teams spend less time working around systems and more time creating value.

Bespoke software makes this possible by starting with understanding, understanding the organisation, the challenges it faces, and the people who will use the system every day. That foundation is what enables software to feel intuitive, relevant, and genuinely useful.

Making systems work together

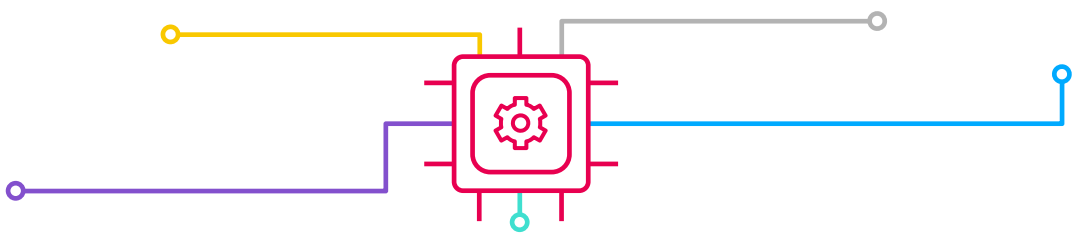
Modern organisations rely on a patchwork of platforms, tools, and data sources. One of the strongest signals in the survey is the importance of integration across systems. When systems don't talk to each other, insight is lost, processes slow down, and frustration grows.

Bespoke development allows organisations to connect what they already have, bringing data and functionality together in ways that make sense for the business. Rather than replacing everything at once, organisations can build solutions that bridge old and new, unlocking value without unnecessary disruption.

Designed with people in mind

Wellbeing, training, collaboration, and fairness remain top priorities for employees in 2026. These findings reinforce a simple truth: software is successful when it supports people, not when it controls them.

People-centred software design puts usability, accessibility, and empathy at the heart of development. It recognises that good software should make work clearer, easier, and more rewarding, whether that means reducing repetitive tasks, enabling better collaboration, or supporting learning and growth.



Ready to grow and evolve

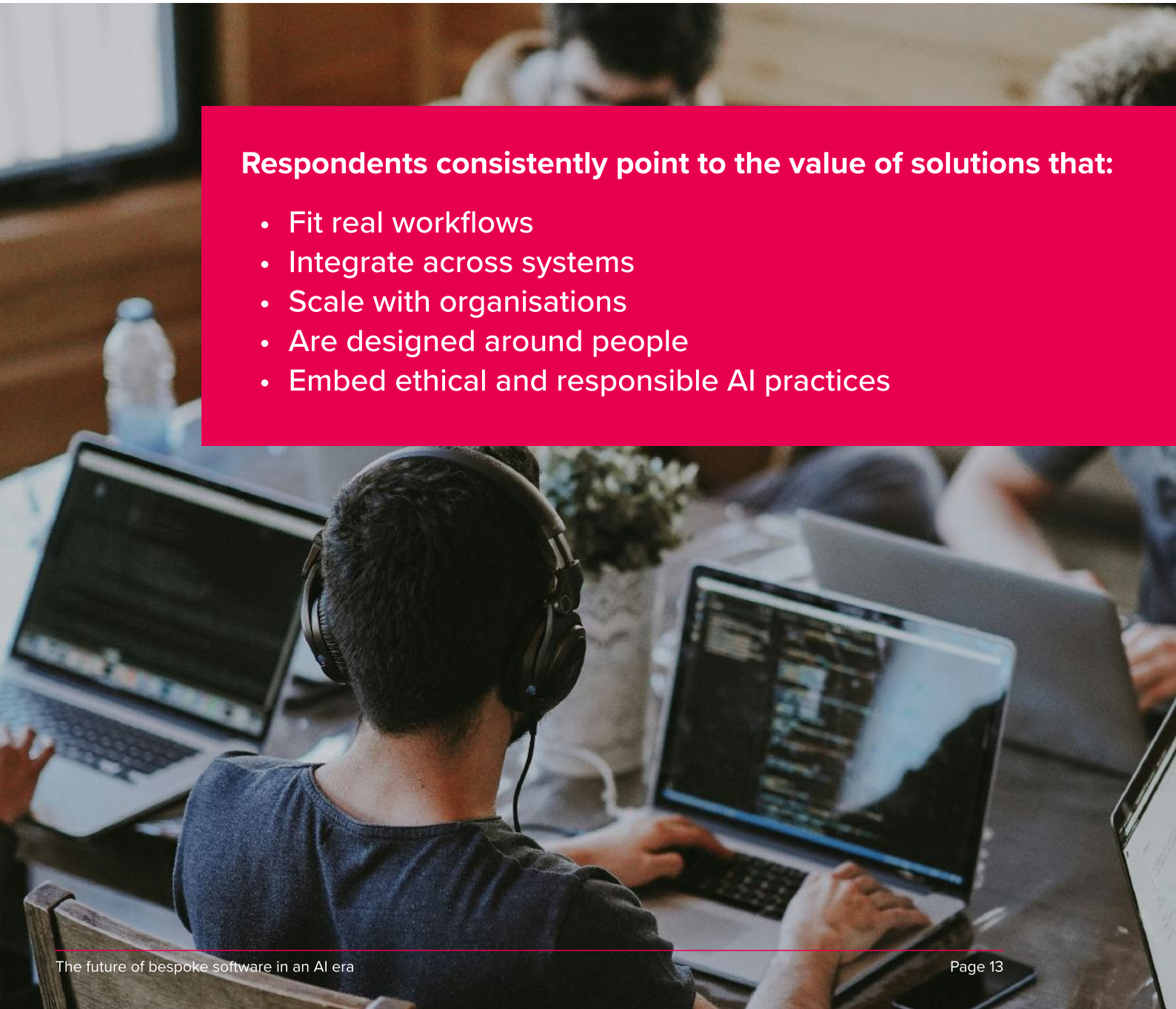
The survey also reflects an understanding that organisations don't stand still. As teams grow, priorities shift, and new opportunities emerge, software needs to keep pace. Bespoke solutions can be built to scale and evolve over time, avoiding the constraints and compromises that often come with fixed products.

This flexibility is particularly important as organisations explore new uses for data and AI. Software that is designed to grow can adapt to new capabilities without needing to be rethought from scratch.

Bringing it all together

Taken together, the 2026 findings point toward a future where the most successful software is not defined by complexity or novelty, but by **how well it serves people and purpose**.

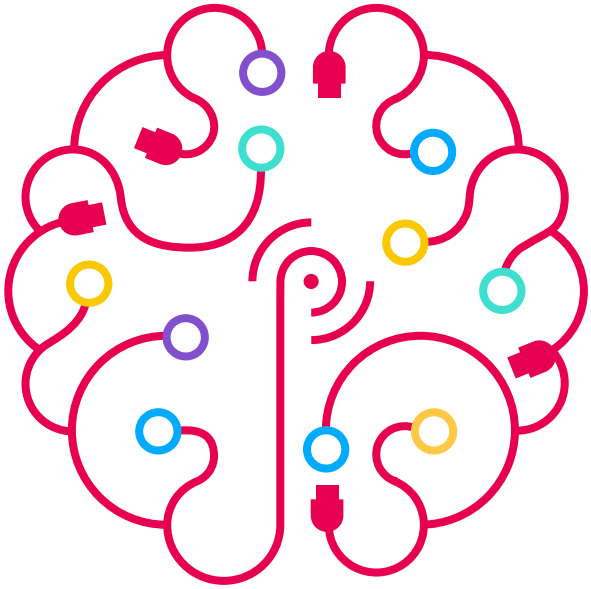
Bespoke, people-centred software offers organisations a way to turn ambition into practical outcomes, connecting systems, supporting teams, and applying AI thoughtfully to solve real problems.



Respondents consistently point to the value of solutions that:

- Fit real workflows
- Integrate across systems
- Scale with organisations
- Are designed around people
- Embed ethical and responsible AI practices

Looking ahead: what the 2026 findings suggest



The 2026 survey presents a picture of a software landscape that is not simply evolving in capability, but maturing in expectation. Compared with earlier years, respondents no longer frame software, or AI, purely in terms of potential. Instead, their views are shaped by direct experience of implementation, organisational impact, and the broader social and regulatory environment in which technology now operates.

Across the data, three characteristics consistently emerge. The future of software is expected to be more ambitious, more complex, and more human.

More ambitious

Respondents increasingly expect software to deliver value across multiple dimensions simultaneously. In 2026, software is not seen as successful if it improves efficiency alone; it is expected to enhance decision-making, support employee wellbeing, enable learning, strengthen security, and contribute to wider societal outcomes such as sustainability and inclusion.

This ambition reflects real-world pressures: organisations face economic uncertainty, skills shortages, and rising expectations from customers, employees, and regulators alike.

The survey also shows that AI has become central to these ambitions. Widespread investment and plans for increased spending indicate that AI is now viewed as a core capability rather than an optional enhancement.

> “Respondents increasingly recognised in 2026 that AI’s value is reliant on foundational elements such as data quality, system integration, and organisational readiness, areas where many organisations continue to struggle.”

More complex

The 2026 findings reveal growing awareness that software and AI implementation are rarely straightforward. Respondents frequently report that AI initiatives expose underlying issues with data, systems, cost structures, and people capabilities. This aligns with wider developments seen during 2025, where UK organisations increasingly encountered regulatory scrutiny, cyber-resilience requirements, and ethical considerations alongside technical delivery.

As a result, the role of software development is no longer viewed as narrowly technical. Bespoke integrations, cross-system understanding, and long-term maintainability are seen as essential to navigating complexity.

"The survey suggests that organisations are moving away from the idea of "plug-and-play" solutions being able to fix all, and a growing recognition that sustainable value from software investment comes from strong data foundations, thoughtful design and contextual understanding that allows for an agile system."

More human

Perhaps most strikingly, the 2026 survey reinforces that expectations of software are becoming more human-centred in its problem-solving. Wellbeing, training, collaboration, and fairness remain top priorities for employees, even as automation and AI adoption accelerate. At the same time, concern about workforce impact and potential harm from AI has increased markedly, indicating that respondents are weighing benefits against consequences more carefully than in previous years.

This shift mirrors broader public discourse in 2025, where debates around job displacement, responsible AI use, and accountability became increasingly prominent in the UK.

Respondents appear to be calling not for slower innovation, but for more deliberate and responsible application.

As Andy Brown, Managing Director at Propel Tech, observes:

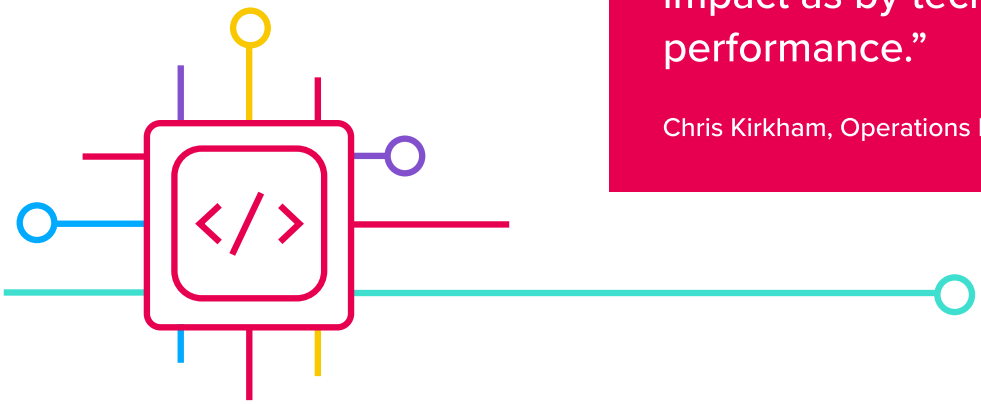
"The organisations seeing the greatest value from software and AI are those that understand the whole picture , the people, the processes, and the systems , not just the technology. When software is designed with that context in mind, it becomes a genuine enabler rather than a source of friction."

Andy Brown, Managing Director, Propel Tech

A considered future for software development

Taken together, the 2026 findings suggest that the future potential of bespoke software development lies not in technology alone, but in how thoughtfully it is applied.

Bespoke software, carefully designed integrations, and responsibly implemented AI are increasingly viewed as mechanisms for aligning organisational ambition with human and societal outcomes.



> "This represents a shift from asking what technology can do to asking what it should do, and under what conditions. The answers emerging from the survey point toward a future where success is defined as much by trust, usability, and impact as by technical performance."
>
> Chris Kirkham, Operations Director, Propel Tech

Key takeaways: Looking ahead

- **Complexity is increasing, elevating the importance of bespoke design, integration, and long-term thinking.**
- **The most successful software initiatives will be those that balance ambition with responsibility.**
- **Expectations of bespoke software are becoming more explicitly human-centred, not less.**
- **The future of software is multi-dimensional: efficiency, insight, wellbeing, and social impact are expected together.**
- **AI is now embedded in organisational reality, not experimental, but its value depends on strong foundations.**

Act now: - Book your **Free Software Health Check** - Use the **AI Readiness Calculator** - Start designing your **AI-enabled bespoke software roadmap**.

Why Propel Tech: We help UK businesses turn complexity into clarity through: - Audits and discovery - AI consulting and planning - Bespoke software development.

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