

White Space

Setting up for success: Thought leadership operating models and the quest for quality

Hot Topic Report

Dec 2024

Introduction

In recent years, uncertainty has been the watchword for clients of professional services firms, as they grapple with polycrisis as a new constant. Our Market Trends 2024 study finds that 76% of buyers of consulting services have had their confidence in the future of their organisation impacted by the macroeconomic environment.¹ For buyers operating in this landscape, managing complexity has become the price of doing business.

Against this backdrop, thought leadership has become increasingly essential to buyers as they try to stay abreast of industry developments and to decide which firms are best placed to help them navigate their challenges. Today, 84% of senior executives say they consume thought leadership often or sometimes.² Almost a third (31%) say they bought services from a firm as a result of reading its thought leadership.³

Recognising the opportunity thought leadership presents for firms to position themselves as a trusted adviser, thought leadership teams are continually working to raise the bar to stand out in a cluttered space. This year, the scores in our [Quality Ratings review](#) of thought leadership published in 2023 were higher than ever (averaging 10 compared to 9.72 the previous year). Yet we continue to observe variability in the scores within firms. Why? Our conversations with thought leadership teams shed light on some of the challenges within their ecosystems that might be playing into this.



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¹ Market Trends Survey 2024.

² Client Perceptions Survey 2024.

³ Client Perceptions Survey 2024.

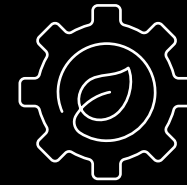
We think of firms as ecosystems—a constellation of strategic know-how, technologies, and skills. The ability to build bridges between distinct parts can be both a strength and a differentiating factor. Sixty-nine percent of buyers of consulting services are more likely to engage a firm because of the strength of its ecosystem.⁴

However, there is a difficult balance to strike. On one hand, firms need to empower teams at the “edges” of the organisation and closest to the market to drive their own agendas. On the other, thought leadership teams strive for consistency—a goal more easily met through a central force. Getting this right is a challenge—but the firms that can manage it will come out stronger.

In our conversations with eminent producers of thought leadership, we heard about issues of misalignment between teams in content creation and in the execution process, as well as difficulties standardising processes and output quality. In an environment where loyalty is low, this may come at a cost. Our quarterly survey of buyers of consulting services has shown that almost a quarter of executives say their use of a firm significantly decreased because they didn’t find its thought leadership helpful.⁵

How then, can firms build effective ecosystems of insight that drive consistency in quality? What does “setting up for success” look like? And how do you measure success?

As thought leaders take stock of the year, this report sheds light on how firms can organise themselves for thought leadership success.



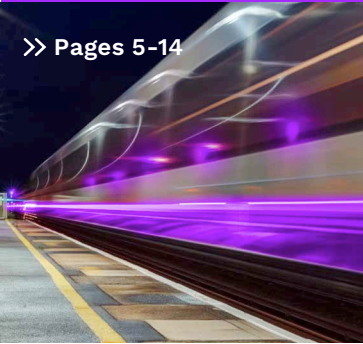

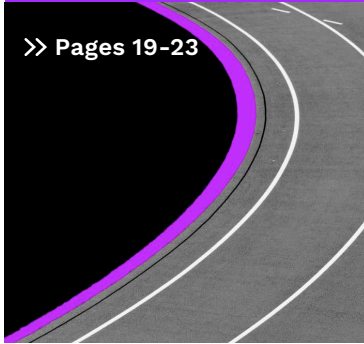

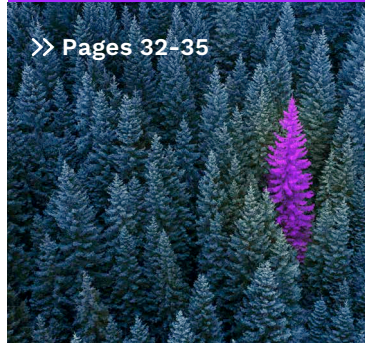
69%

of buyers of consulting services are more likely to engage a firm because of the strength of its ecosystem

⁴ Emerging Trends Survey 2024.

⁵ Quarterly Client Survey 2024.

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More than a brand awareness exercise

Thought leadership is most influential in the earlier stages of the buying process. However, we know from our wider research that it extends its tentacles beyond raising awareness of a brand to consideration—proving its value for both firms and their clients and prospects.

“For me, thought leadership is more than just insight. It’s about new thinking, different opinions, provoking change, and, importantly, prompting action. It is a really special thing when you get it right.” Maria McDonagh, Chief Marketing Officer, Grant Thornton UK.

In one of our recent surveys of some 3,800 buyers of consulting services,⁵ just 2% told us they don’t do anything after having read a piece of thought leadership that’s memorable to them. Saving content for future reference, sharing with colleagues and, reassuringly, implementing recommendations were the most commonly cited actions.

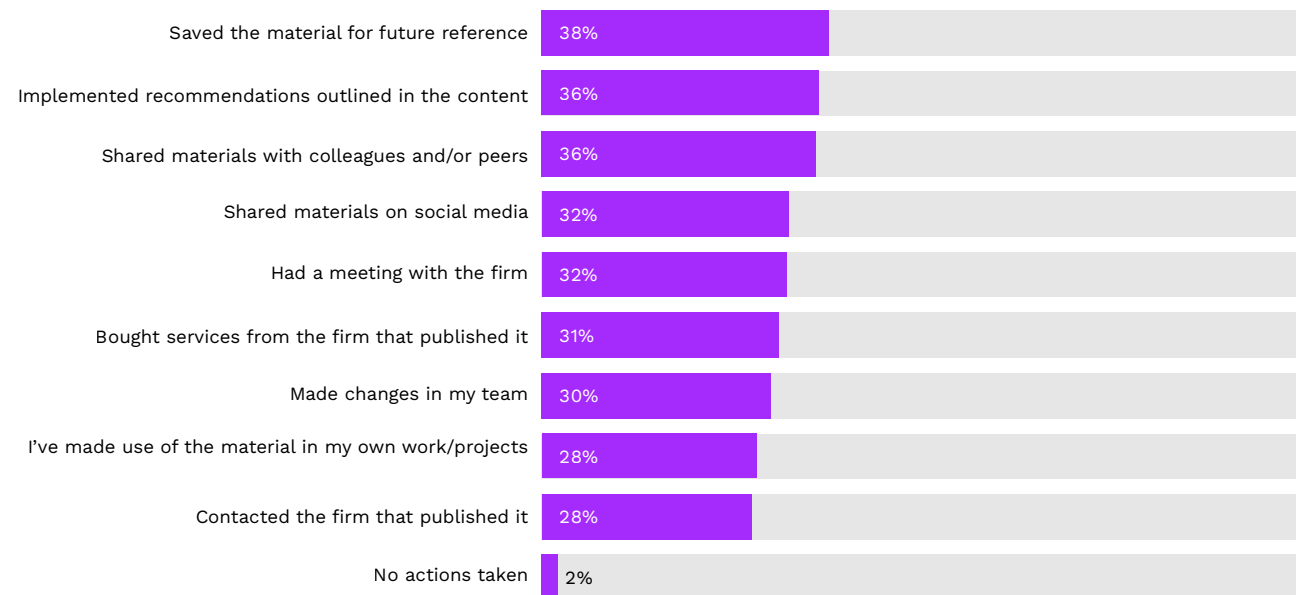


“Thought leadership does come into [our buying decisions]. We go to a firm’s website and look at their marketing materials, and if it starts resonating with what we’re going through, we’ll want to know more. It also gives us a good starting point to ask the right questions and means we can drill down to the pain points quickly because we already know their point of view.”

Chief Information Officer, financial services, US

Figure 1

What actions have you taken as a result of reading thought leadership?



Data source: Client Perceptions Survey 2024

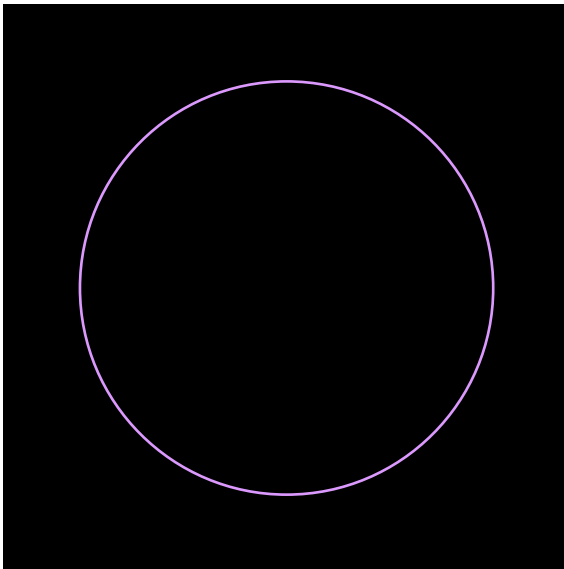
⁵ Client Perceptions Survey 2024.

Thought leadership operating models: centralised, decentralised or somewhere in between?

From our work with professional services and consulting firms, we see three typical operating models—centralised, hybrid, and decentralised.

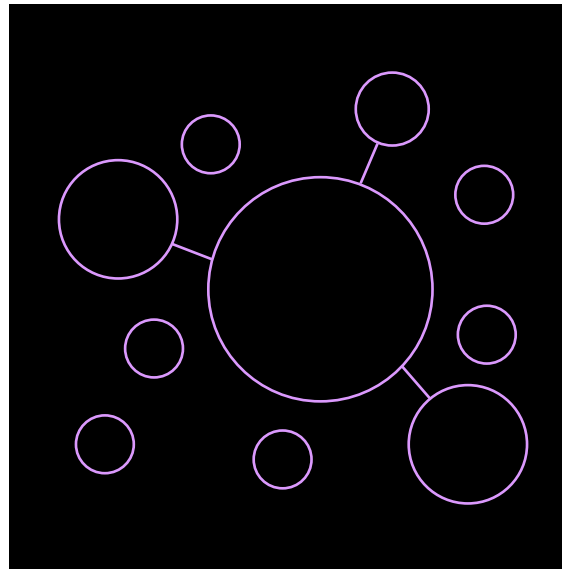
Centralised

Thought leadership is concentrated
in one central function



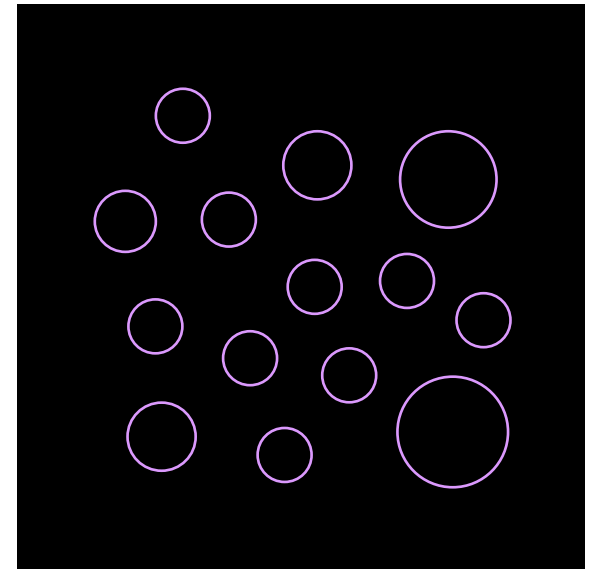
Hybrid

Central and local thought leadership

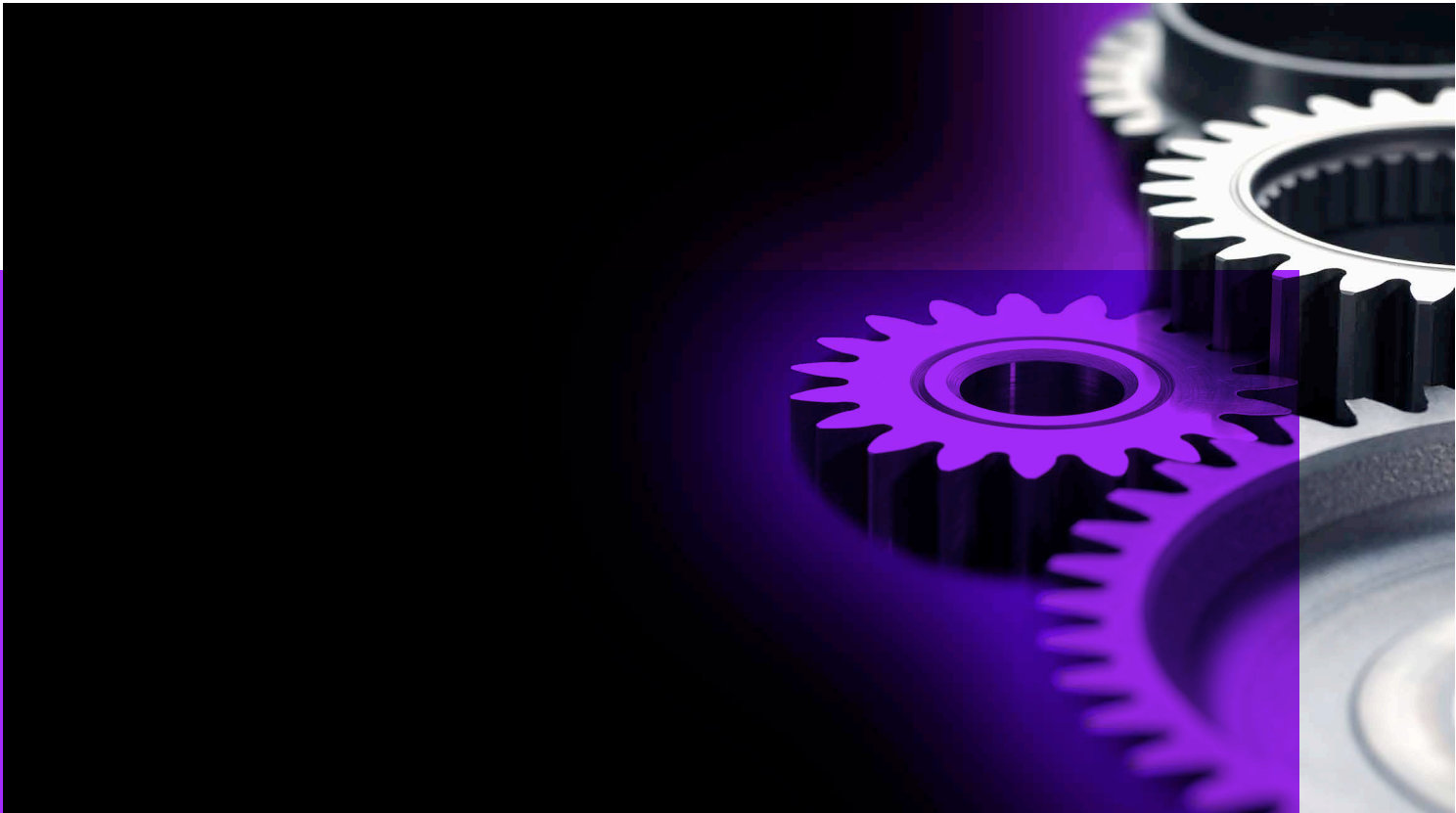


Decentralised

Thought leadership is dispersed
across the network



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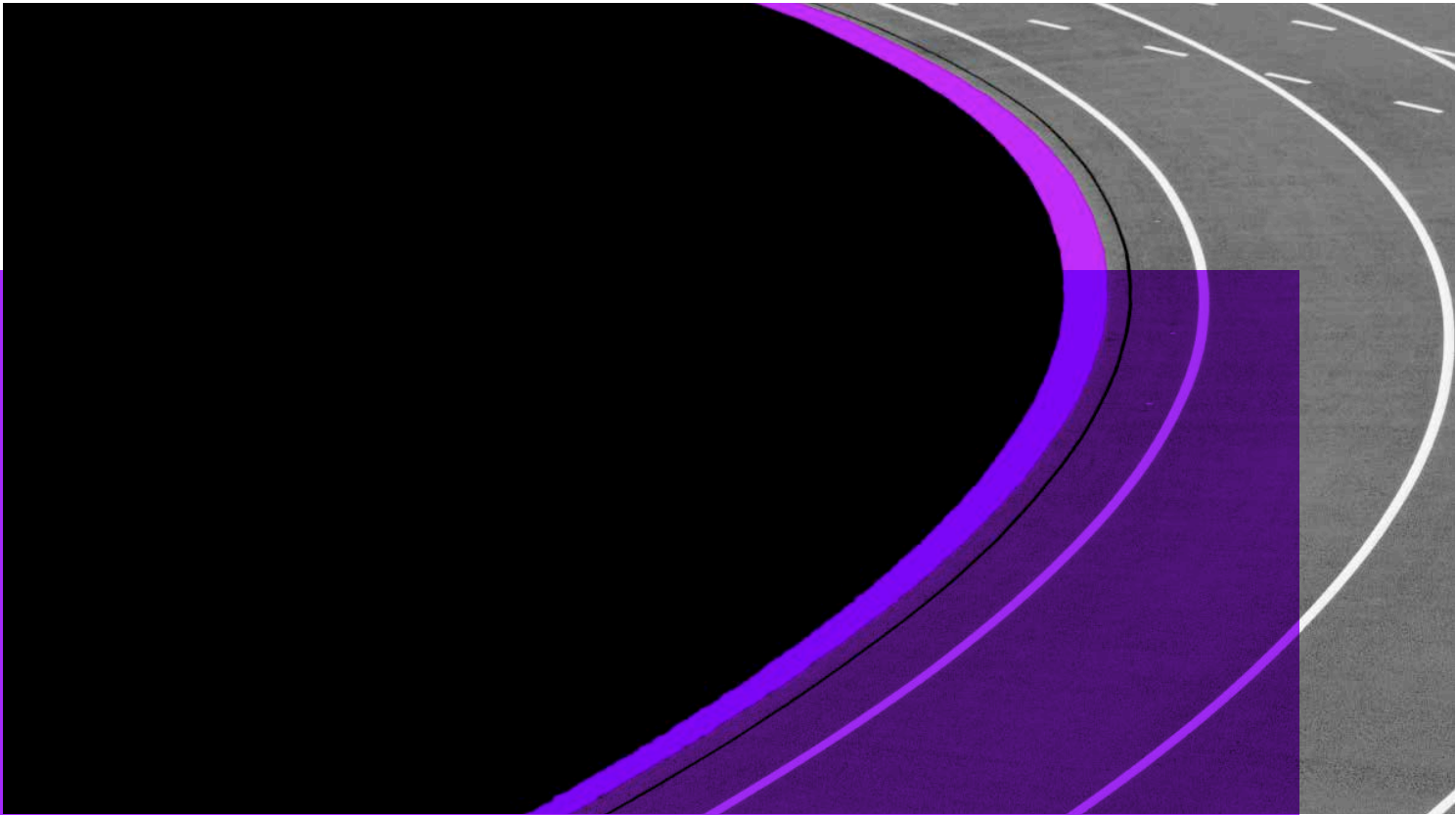
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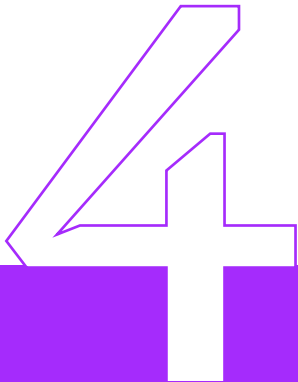
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The hot topic this year

GenAI has indeed been a hot topic this year, and so we couldn't conclude our last report of the year without some discussion of it. It has come up in almost every conversation we've had this year with our clients—and those senior leaders we spoke to before putting pen to paper for this report.

Not only that, but AI has the potential to transform, profoundly, the way thought leadership teams are structured. With its growing ability to analyse, aggregate research, edit, and even write, we expect to see this technology embedded in more and more processes—and those executives looking to examine the way they operate and make changes that set them up for success will need to keep this in mind.

At this point in time, the jury is still out on how this particular technology will impact thought leadership. But one thing is already clear: Teams are increasingly experimenting with it across the value chain. As firms roll out this technology, the process of generating quality insights across their ecosystems will be democratised.



“GenAI is helping at practically every stage of the process. At the very beginning of the development of a report if you will, when we are trying to understand a market or better understand a topic, GenAI helps us summarise tons of materials in a very succinct manner, really saving a lot of time.”

Jerome Buvat, Capgemini



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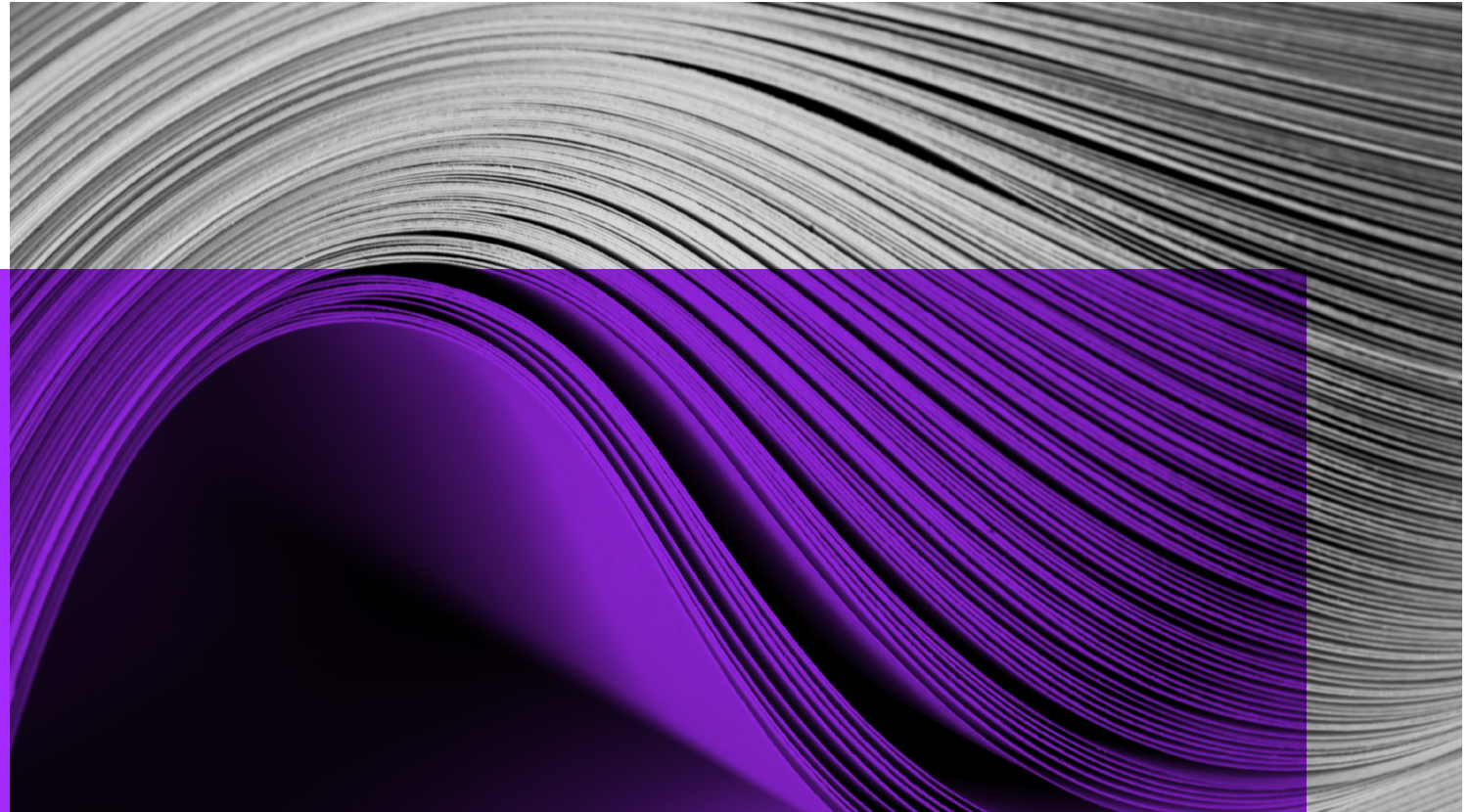
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About us

We help professional services firms *understand what really matters* when facing decisions of vital importance.

The best decisions are based on evidence, objectivity, and a willingness to change. That's why, at Source, we tell you what you need to hear, rather than what you want to hear.

We draw upon our deep roots within the professional services sector to provide firms with a clear picture of their clients' worlds. Through comprehensive research and meticulous analysis, we pinpoint what truly matters and deliver actionable insights that help firms map out the right way forward.

We believe in thriving individually and succeeding together. And we would love to help your firm crack its latest conundrum.

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Publication schedule for 2025

2025		Market Trends Reports	Market Trends Briefings	Client Perceptions Studies	Emerging Trends Programme	White Space Reports	White Space Insights
Q1	January	Forecasts for 2025 UK US GCC France		UK US GCC France			Featured thought leadership (monthly) Quarterly webinar series
	February				ET1		
	March					Quality Ratings Report (QRR)	
Q2	April	Nordics DACH Australia East Asia South East Asia Africa	India South America	Germany Australia China Japan Retail Energy & Resources Financial Services Technology, Media & Telecoms	ET2		Featured thought leadership (monthly) Quarterly webinar series
	May						
	June				ET3	Client Perceptions of Thought Leadership	
Q3	July	Energy & Resources Financial Services Technology, Media & Telecoms Sustainability	Healthcare & Pharma	Risk Tax			Featured thought leadership (monthly) Quarterly webinar series
	August				ET4		
	September					Thought Leadership Innovation	
Q4	October	Tax Risk Technology Planning for Growth in 2026	Public Sector	Audit Technology	ET5		Featured thought leadership (monthly) Quarterly webinar series
	November						
	December				ET6	Hot Topic Report	