

OPEN*POINT

THE STATE OF ENGAGEMENT 2026

Closing the gap between effort and outcome

Survey of 500+ engagement professionals and 1,000+ residents across North America

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INTRODUCTION

Engagement has come a long way from its origins as a procedural obligation. Across infrastructure, planning, regulation and local government, it now carries real consequences. It shapes whether projects get delivered, whether communities feel included in decisions that affect them, and whether organizations can demonstrate they have acted responsibly.

This research is published at a moment when the conditions for engagement have rarely been more demanding or more consequential. Public trust in institutions is low across much of the democratic world. Social and political divisions have made the work of bringing communities into decisions more contested and more scrutinized.

Against that backdrop, the acceleration of major infrastructure development, from the energy transition to large-scale transport projects, is placing communities at the center of critical long-term decisions and regulatory expectations around demonstrable stakeholder engagement are tightening.

Building a new bridge that once required a notice in a local newspaper now demands a decade-long relationship with a community. That relationship spans environmental experts, landholders and government bodies, and is subject to regulatory scrutiny and social license requirements.

What was once a simple task has become a critical institutional function, with the scale, complexity and accountability to match.

And yet, expectations and importance of the profession have grown faster than the systems and practices supporting it have been able to keep pace.

Community engagement and stakeholder engagement operate in different contexts, but both are under pressure from the same structural issues: fragmentation, weak traceability, and rising expectations of accountability.

To help the industry meet these challenges, we surveyed over 500 community and stakeholder engagement professionals alongside 1,000 residents across North America. What we found is a clear desire among residents for better engagement and a profession at a turning point, increasingly aware of what needs to change, and looking for the tools and models to make that change possible.





01

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT UNDER PRESSURE

Communities want to be heard. The question is whether the process is designed to find them.

The challenge at the front end of engagement is often framed as a participation problem. The data suggests something more nuanced.

The appetite for participation exists. More than half of the residents surveyed say it matters to them to shape decisions in their local area. But appetite and access are not the same thing.

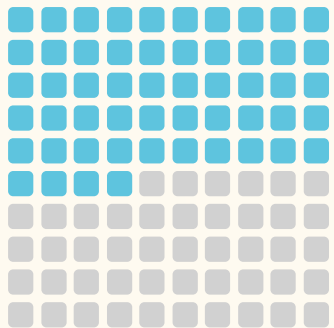
Only 54% have ever formally shared their views with a public body or organization.

55% say they have never been invited to take part. The participation gap is less about public reluctance and more about reach.

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the same thing.

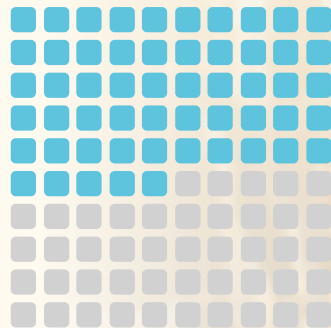
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Residents are also divided on how they prefer to engage, whether in person, digitally or in writing. Any single channel is likely to exclude as many people as it reaches.

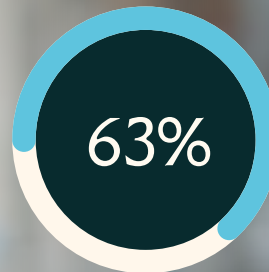
Where participation does happen, it is rarely evenly distributed. 63% of residents say the same small group tends to dominate discussions, and 95% of engagement professionals agree that outcomes are influenced by repeat or particularly vocal participants.

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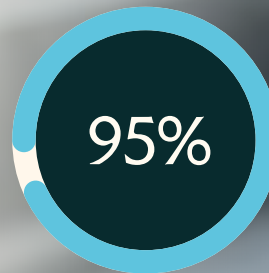
What emerges is a model that generates activity without necessarily generating breadth. Processes run and responses come in, but the range of voices represented is often narrower than the communities those processes are meant to reflect.

This divergence is not a question of intent. Professionals are trying to do the right thing. What it reflects is how engagement is experienced when the connection between participation and outcome isn't clearly demonstrated.

When people cannot see what their involvement led to, they are unlikely to feel that it mattered, regardless of how carefully the process itself was designed. And when it doesn't feel meaningful, there is little reason to participate again.



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agree that outcomes are influenced by repeat or particularly vocal participants

A GAP BETWEEN PERCEPTION AND EXPERIENCE

Professionals working in community engagement are, on the whole, reasonably confident that it's working. Many believe they are reaching broadly representative audiences and that participants feel genuinely heard.

The data from residents paints a less encouraging picture.

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When people cannot see what their involvement led to, they are unlikely to feel that it mattered, regardless of how carefully the process itself was designed. And when it doesn't feel meaningful, there is little reason to participate again.

38% of residents believe their views actually influence decisions.



45% believe engagement is a checkbox exercise.



25% felt clearly listened to or were told what would happen next.



60% believe decisions are made before consultation begins.

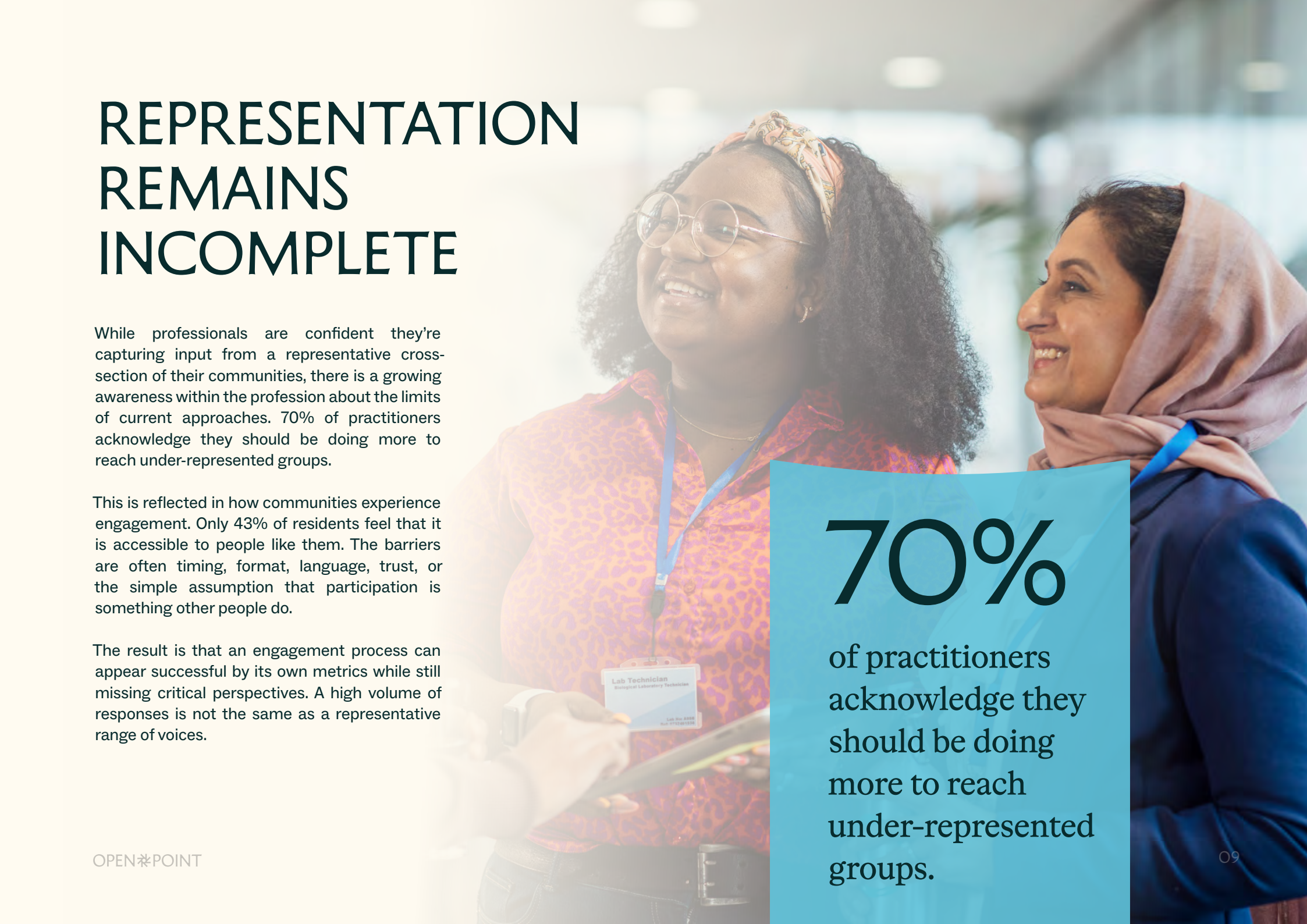


REPRESENTATION REMAINS INCOMPLETE

While professionals are confident they're capturing input from a representative cross-section of their communities, there is a growing awareness within the profession about the limits of current approaches. 70% of practitioners acknowledge they should be doing more to reach under-represented groups.

This is reflected in how communities experience engagement. Only 43% of residents feel that it is accessible to people like them. The barriers are often timing, format, language, trust, or the simple assumption that participation is something other people do.

The result is that an engagement process can appear successful by its own metrics while still missing critical perspectives. A high volume of responses is not the same as a representative range of voices.



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Top five challenges faced by community and stakeholder engagement practitioners.

O1

Engagement happens too late to influence decisions

O2

Limited internal support or ownership

O3

Hard to reach the right people

O4

Tools and data are fragmented

O5

Engagement is treated as a checkbox exercise



02

THE GROWING TRUST CRISIS

Skepticism isn't a barrier — it's a reasonable conclusion.

Beneath the participation challenge lies a widespread erosion of confidence in whether engagement processes are genuine.

Declining trust in public institutions has fundamentally altered the starting conditions for engagement. Organizations are not simply asking communities to take part in a process. They are asking them to do so against a backdrop of growing skepticism about whether institutions listen, and whether the systems through which decisions are made serve the public interest.

In that context, the numbers in this research are striking, but not surprising.

Nearly half of residents say they don't trust local government to listen to them, act on their feedback or be transparent about how decisions are made.

These are not, for the most part, the views of people who have never tried to engage. They are largely the views of people who have participated and come away unconvinced that it made any difference.

When the link between input and outcome is unclear, or when organizations fail to explain how feedback was used, engagement can begin to feel performative rather than genuinely influential.

An organization trying to engage a community that already believes the outcome is predetermined risks appearing as though it is simply going through the motions.

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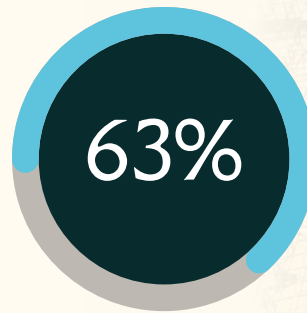
A GROWING EXPECTATION TO EXPLAIN AND JUSTIFY

This pressure to be accountable is felt both inside and outside organizations. Alongside the challenge of building public trust, engagement teams face increasing expectations to demonstrate value and account for the decisions they take.

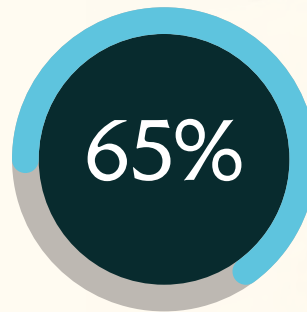
63% say they struggle to justify the costs of engagement publicly.

65% say they struggle to justify the decisions they take.

Running consultations and collating responses is no longer sufficient on its own. Organizations are increasingly expected to show, clearly and credibly, how engagement has informed decisions. This requires not only a well-structured process, but a record of that process that can withstand external scrutiny.



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03

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN REGULATED ENVIRONMENTS

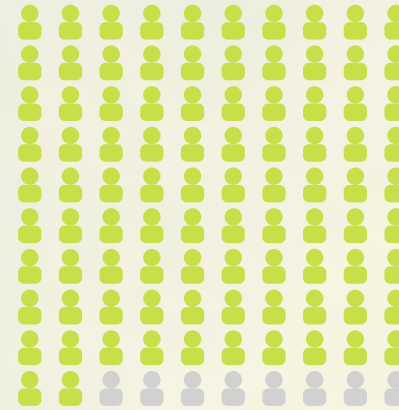
The information exists. The challenge is making sure it outlasts the people who hold it.

Beyond community consultation, engagement is also a core part of planning and delivering complex projects. The ability to onboard and manage key stakeholders is critical to a project's success or failure. Examples from the cancelled Atlantic Coast Pipeline to California's heavily delayed High-Speed Rail prove how high the stakes can be.

The infrastructure demands of the energy transition, the reshoring of supply chains, the build-out of data center capacity and the expansion of transmission networks are generating a pipeline of major projects across North America. These projects require sustained, structured engagement with a wide range of stakeholders over timescales that can stretch to decades. At the same time, the political and social environment in which they are delivered has become considerably more volatile.

Regulatory expectations around demonstrable stakeholder consultation are tightening across federal and state jurisdictions. The legal and reputational risks of inadequate engagement, particularly with Indigenous communities under evolving duty-to-consult obligations in Canada and UNDRIP commitments in the US, are significant and growing.

With 92% of those surveyed agreeing that stakeholder engagement is critical to project delivery, the importance of the function is well understood. What is less clear is whether the current model is still fit for purpose.



92%

agree that stakeholder engagement is critical to project delivery



COMPLEXITY IS INCREASING, BUT SYSTEMS REMAIN FRAGMENTED

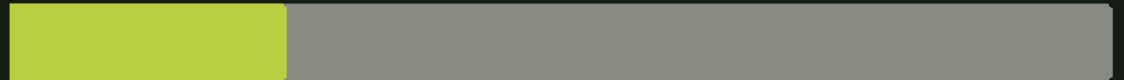
Engagement activity now spans multiple projects, teams and phases, generating a growing volume of interactions, commitments and data points that need to be tracked and retained. Managing this effectively requires a digital infrastructure capable of storing information for extended periods and reliably accessing it when needed.

In practice, that infrastructure is rarely in place.

The cumulative effect is a significant blind spot. Organizations often lack a complete picture of their own engagement history: who has been spoken to, what was agreed and what remains outstanding.

In environments where relationships span years and involve a wide range of parties, that gap carries real risk.

24% of organizations use a centralized engagement platform



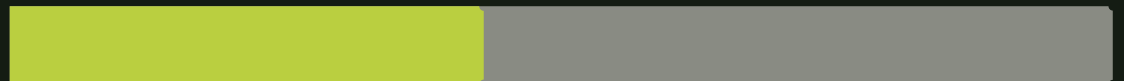
51% hold data across multiple disconnected systems



55% report that institutional knowledge is lost when staff move on



41% say they cannot reliably track conversations and commitments over time

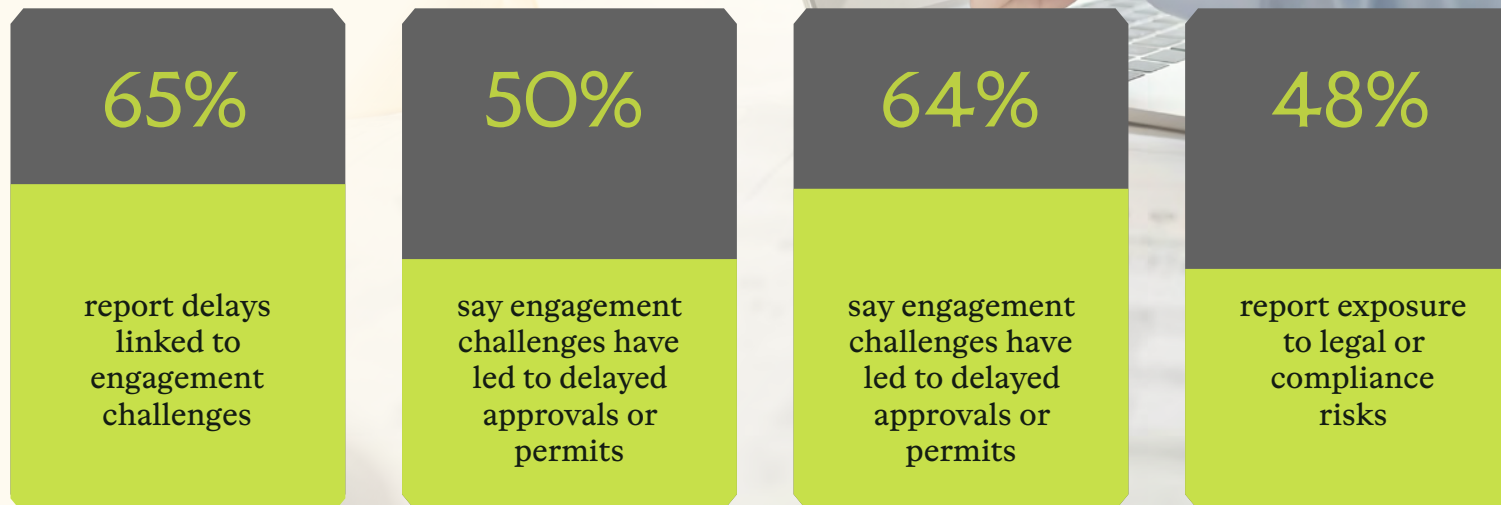


THE RISKS OF INCOMPLETE INFORMATION

When information is dispersed or incomplete, the consequences tend to be felt in project delivery.

65% report delays linked to engagement challenges, while 64% report increased costs for the same reason. 50% say engagement challenges have led to delayed approvals or permits, and 48% report exposure to legal or compliance risks.

These outcomes are rarely traceable to a single point of failure. They tend to emerge from an accumulation of smaller communication shortfalls that, over the course of complex, multi-year projects, compound.



ACCOUNTABILITY IS EXPECTED, BUT HARD TO EVIDENCE

Alongside the operational risks, there is a growing expectation that engagement will be demonstrable and defensible. Organizations are increasingly required to show not just that engagement took place, but how it was conducted and how it influenced the decisions that followed.

43% of stakeholder engagement practitioners say that engagement history is hard to evidence.

Without a clear and connected record, even well-run engagement can be difficult to defend. The process may have been thorough and conscientious, but if documentation is inconsistent or incomplete, that becomes difficult to demonstrate when decisions are challenged.

Poor record-keeping and limited visibility across projects can directly lead to the outcomes practitioners most want to avoid, such as delays, increased costs and legal exposure.

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KNOWLEDGE DOES NOT PERSIST

One of the more under-appreciated aspects of this challenge is what happens to institutional knowledge over time. Engagement generates a significant amount of context about stakeholders, relationships, commitments and the reasoning behind decisions.

Too often, this context resides with one or two individuals rather than being held by the organization.

More than half of practitioners report that knowledge is lost when staff move on, resulting in repeated effort, reduced continuity and the risk that critical context is unavailable when needed, sometimes years later.

Engagement is being asked to operate as a continuous, accountable institutional function but the infrastructure behind it is designed around individuals rather than teams.



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04

A FRAGMENTED MODEL

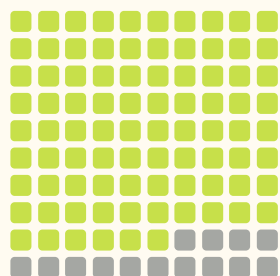
The pieces of good engagement are all there. They just don't connect.

The challenges revealed through the research, incomplete participation, eroded trust, dispersed data and accountability gaps, are often treated as separate problems requiring separate solutions. In practice, they reflect a broad underlying issue.

Across much of the sector, engagement activity has grown complex and processes supporting it haven't evolved. Consultations, meetings, reports and responses are often managed as separate workstreams rather than as a connected system, with different phases sitting in different tools, owned by different teams. Each element may be well-executed on its own, but the cumulative impact is limited when the parts don't connect.

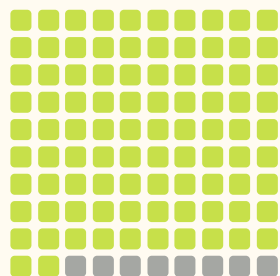
As engagement becomes more continuous and more visible, fragmentation becomes more problematic. The costs it generates, in delayed projects, eroded trust and missed accountability, become harder to absorb.

Practitioners recognize this and show an appetite for change:



86%

say technology should play a greater role in supporting engagement



92%

say centralization of engagement data and activity would improve efficiency

What is missing is a clear path from current practice to a more connected and effective way of working.



05

ENGAGEMENT BY DESIGN, NOT BY DEFAULT

The difference between trust built and trust lost is architecture.

If engagement now spans multiple stages, years and stakeholders, it needs to be supported in the same way as a connected function that maintains continuity across the full lifecycle of a project or relationship.

Much of what makes engagement difficult is structural. It lies in the tools being used, how information is retained and applied and whether learning from one stage is carried forward into the next.

When 45% of residents believe engagement is a checkbox exercise, and when many professionals struggle to demonstrate value or justify decisions, the issue is not just execution, but design.

A more intentional approach, where engagement is designed as a coherent system rather than a set of disconnected activities, would look quite different in practice.

- A clear and searchable record of stakeholder relationships and commitments over time
- Community input connected to decisions in a traceable way
- An ability to demonstrate how engagement has shaped outcomes

When 45% of residents believe engagement is a checkbox exercise, and when many professionals struggle to demonstrate value or justify decisions, the issue is not just execution, but design.



Most professionals believe technology should play a greater role, and there is real openness to tools, including AI, that support better analysis, improved accessibility and more effective coordination across complex engagement programs.

Until recently, the tools available to engagement teams, platforms, analysis capabilities and ways of managing large volumes of qualitative feedback, have lagged behind what is needed.

AI is now being used in practice to help analyze feedback at scale, identify patterns across large datasets, improve accessibility through translation and plain language, and maintain more complete records of complex stakeholder interactions.



of practitioners in this research see genuine potential in AI's contribution.

Technology has a critical role to play in designing engagement that builds trust, supports delivery and stands up to scrutiny.



SEATTLE PUBLIC UTILITIES: ENGAGEMENT AT CITY SCALE

Seattle Public Utilities serves over 1.6 million people across the greater Seattle area, managing everything from drinking water and wastewater to recycling and environmental programs. As the city has grown, so has the complexity of SPU's stakeholder relationships, spanning residents, businesses, community groups, and regulators across hundreds of concurrent projects and programs.

Before adopting Open Point, teams were managing engagement through a fragmented mix of spreadsheets, handwritten notes, and consultant-built systems. Stakeholder histories were scattered, information was lost during staff and consultant transitions, and different project teams were sometimes sending communications to the same people, creating confusion. The absence

of centralized records also created compliance risk, making it difficult to demonstrate adherence to public outreach and engagement mandates.

Open Point replaced this patchwork with a single platform, giving any team member immediate visibility into a stakeholder's full engagement history across projects and programs.

Community feedback now flows directly into the system, eliminating manual data entry and connecting public engagement to internal record-keeping. In a department where projects span from years to decades, and staff and consultants regularly rotate, this continuity has become operationally essential.



With Open Point, Community feedback now flows directly into the system, eliminating manual data entry and connecting public engagement to internal record-keeping.



06

FROM INPUT TO INSIGHT TO IMPACT

Counting responses is not the same as measuring impact.



Engagement is often measured by the activity it generates: how many people responded, how many events were held, how much feedback was collected. These are reasonable indicators of effort, but the gap between how professionals assess engagement and how communities experience it suggests that activity alone is not a reliable measure of success.

How professionals assess engagement and how communities experience it suggests activity alone is not a reliable measure of success.

More meaningful measures for community engagement practitioners include whether engagement builds trust over time, whether people feel genuinely heard, whether they remain involved across the life of a project and whether participation leads to outcomes that reflect what was said.

For those managing complex or regulated projects, the measure is different. It is whether engagement reduces friction in delivery, whether projects progress as planned, whether risks are identified early and whether decisions are robust enough to withstand scrutiny or challenge.

Across both settings, a great deal of engagement is happening, and much of it is happening with care and effort. But it is not consistently delivering the outcomes it is expected to support.

Closing that gap requires being clearer from the outset about what engagement is intended to achieve, and then building the conditions in which it can be properly measured and, where needed, improved.

CITY OF DURANGO: BUILDING TRUST THROUGH CONSULTATION

Durango is a community of around 20,000 residents, but city leaders recognized that the voices shaping local decisions did not reflect that full population. Residents who could attend public meetings were well represented but working parents and shift workers were largely absent from the conversation.

To address this, the city adopted Social Point as a centralized digital engagement hub. An early test came with the redesign of Durango's historic

Main Street. The city gathered resident feedback on proposed design changes, then used Social Point's tagging and sentiment analysis tools to identify patterns in open-ended responses. Findings were presented transparently back to the community, a process the city credits with strengthening public trust.

In its first year, the Engage Durango platform attracted over 19,000 visitors and public meeting attendance rose by 41%. The city was subsequently named IAP2 Organization of the Year.



The platform enables the city to interact with community members in ways that were not previously possible and helps ensure more voices are heard when shaping the future of the community.



07

TOWARDS A MORE EFFECTIVE MODEL

The will to change is there. The infrastructure needs to follow.

What the data consistently points to is that effective engagement, regardless of context, requires three things done well: genuine accessibility, visible accountability and continuity over time.

What residents make clear in this research is that what makes engagement feel meaningful is not the scale of the process or the number of opportunities to participate. It is whether they can see what happened as a result.

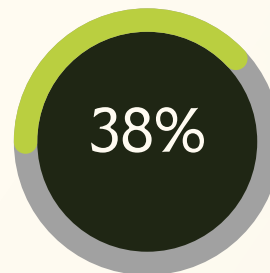
Only 38% believe their views actually influence decisions, and just 25% were told what would happen next following their involvement. In a context where 60% already believe decisions are made before consultation begins, failing to close the loop makes the starting conditions for the next engagement even more difficult.

In more complex, regulated settings, when stakeholder relationships are managed in a system rather than across disconnected files and inboxes, and when commitments are tracked and engagement history is preserved across time, two things tend to follow. Delivery becomes smoother, as risks are identified earlier and relationships are better managed.

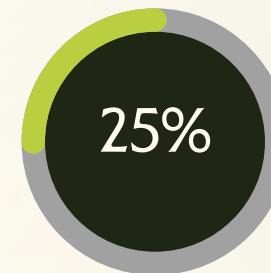
That ability to account for engagement clearly, credibly and consistently over time is increasingly a condition of maintaining public trust, and in many sectors, a regulatory requirement.

Across all contexts, organizations that build trust over time are those that treat engagement not as a series of events, but as a continuous relationship. That shift, from process to relationship, from activity to evidence, is not just a cultural one. It requires infrastructure that can support it.

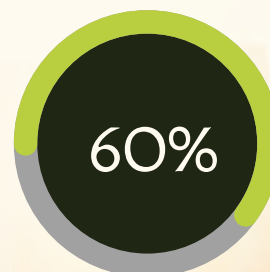
Better tools and models are part of the answer, but effective engagement also needs the right conditions from the outset: leadership that visibly supports the function, internal alignment on purpose and scope, realistic timeframes, clear governance, and transparent decision-making pathways. Above all, a genuine commitment to show how input informs outcomes.



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THAT IS THE GAP OPEN POINT WAS DESIGNED TO CLOSE

By bringing community and stakeholder engagement onto a single connected platform, organizations can move from managing engagement as a series of separate workstreams to building the kind of continuous, evidenced engagement the public and regulators now expect.

The gap between where engagement is and where it needs to be is real, but the profession has the will, and increasingly the means, to close it. The next step is building the systems to match the ambition.

METHODOLOGY

Research conducted by Censuswide Ltd in March 2026.
Survey of 1002 consumers aged 18+ and 552 professionals
in organizations of 100+ employees with decision-making
responsibilities for stakeholder or community engagement.

OPEN*POINT