

## TREND 1

# Collaboration Is the New Currency:

*Why Clients Expect More Than Services*

The A/E/C industry is undergoing a pivotal evolution in how value is defined and delivered. **Clients are no longer sourcing technical services**—they're selecting strategic partners who can mitigate risk, contribute foresight, and navigate complexity alongside them. In a market shaped by constrained resources and heightened expectations, collaboration has become the differentiator. According to survey findings, 58% of respondents anticipate a significant uptick in demand for collaborative project delivery.

## THE FORCES DRIVING THE DEMAND FOR PARTNERSHIP

The A/E/C industry is experiencing a definitive shift in how clients define value. Increasingly, they are seeking more than technical proficiency—they are looking for strategic partners who will share risk, bring proactive insight, and help navigate complexity with confidence.

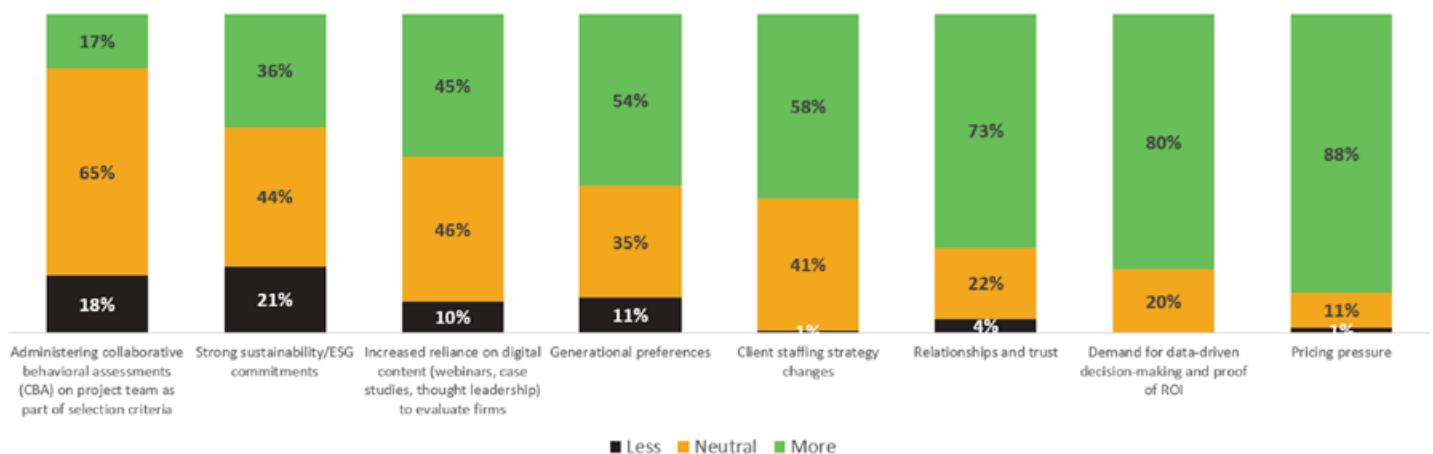
This trend is especially pronounced among clients overseeing high-stakes, resource-constrained projects. More than 80% of survey respondents cited cost pressure, the demand for ROI transparency, and data-informed decision-making as the defining influences on their future buying behavior. As one executive succinctly stated,

**“Owners want to lower risk—that’s the bottom line.”**





We asked respondents: ***What trends/disruptors do you expect will shape the buying behaviors and procurement preferences based on how you think client behaviors are evolving?*** (Indicate the degree of change you anticipate: More, Less, Neutral)



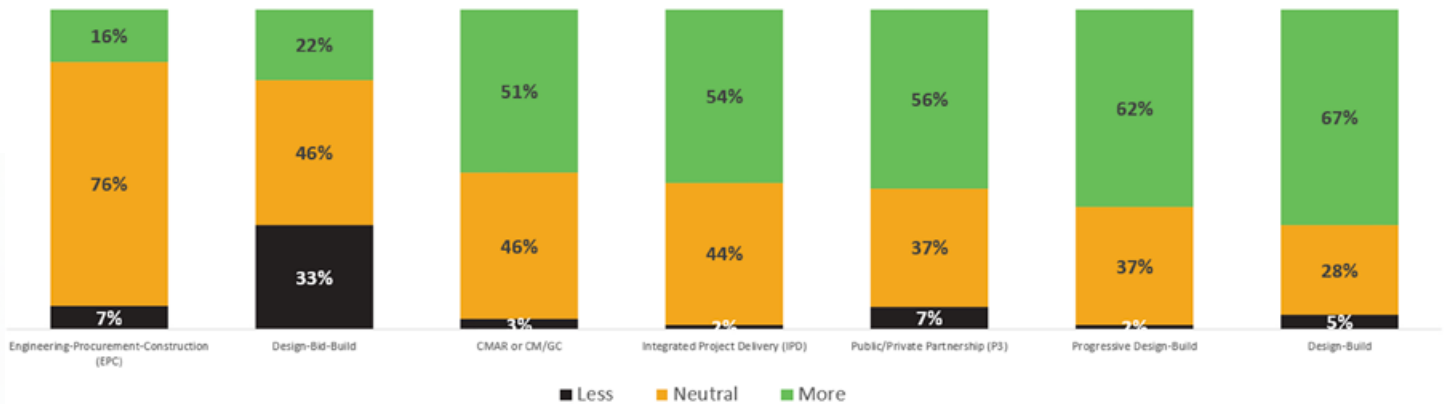
***80% of the Emerging Trends survey respondents see a growing demand for clients to make buying decisions based on data and proof of ROI. Book end this with pricing pressures and decisions based on trusted relationships, winning firms will be those who bring solutions, share risk, and make collaboration the cornerstone of delivery.***

## ALTERNATIVE DELIVERY AS STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

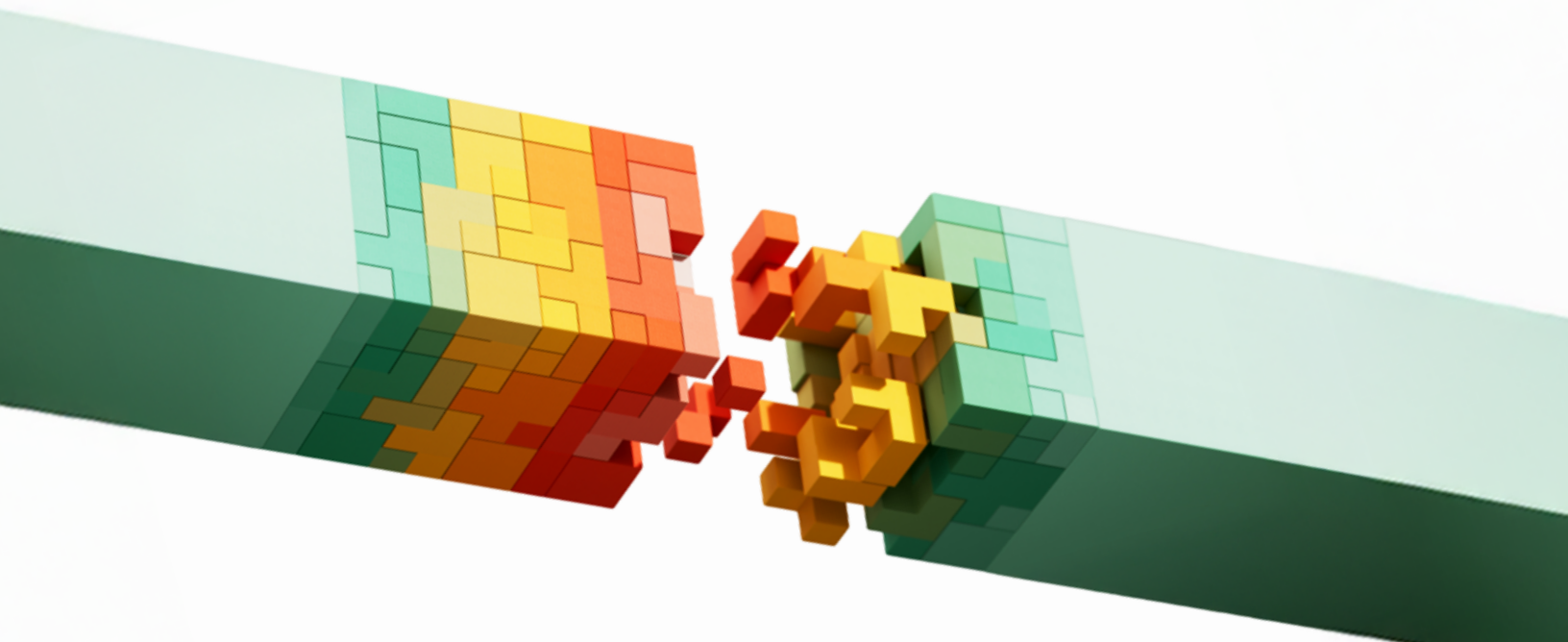
As project complexity increases and internal client resources become scarce, delivery models such as design-build, CMAR, and P3s are gaining traction. These frameworks embed collaboration early in the process, aligning incentives and enabling nimble decision-making—exactly what clients now prioritize.

Nearly two-thirds of survey participants anticipate increased use of design-build in the coming years, with over half forecasting expanded CMAR and P3 adoption—especially across public infrastructure and industrial sectors. States advancing design-build legislation, such as California, Washington, and Colorado, signal a broader trend toward delivery models that formalize partnerships, transparency, and shared accountability.

We asked respondents: ***How do you expect clients' preferences for delivery methods to evolve?*** (Indicate the degree of evolution in delivery: More, Less, Neutral)



*Design-build (67%), progressive design-build (62%), CMAR (51%), and P3s (56%) lead as the delivery methods expected to grow most. These models enable early collaboration, risk-sharing, and faster decisions—core to navigating today's complex, resource-limited environments. Survey respondents also foresee EPC gaining ground, reinforcing a shift toward integrated, partnership-driven approaches.*





## Next-Gen Decision Makers Are Raising the Bar

A generational shift is reshaping how clients evaluate firms and define partnerships. As Millennials and Gen Z step into leadership roles within client organizations, they bring new expectations for communication, trust-building, and collaboration. According to the U.S. Department of Labor's 2024 Trendlines Report, these two generations now make up more than half of the A/E/C workforce, with Gen Z ascending more rapidly than retiring Baby Boomers.

As one Senior executive reflected,

“We’re working to give younger team members more tools and resources for business development, but something was lost with the retiring generation—not just the gray hair, but the seasoned perspective that could say, ‘Here’s why these matters, and here’s what happens if you don’t.’”

These generational dynamics are not a passing trend—they are fundamentally redefining client expectations and procurement behavior. According to the Emerging Trends survey, 54% of respondents anticipate a significant shift in client behavior driven by generational preferences, underscoring the need for firms to adapt their marketing strategies and engagement models.

**Millennials and Gen X now dominate decision-making roles**, bringing with them values centered around trust, inclusion, and collaborative problem-solving.

As Gen Z accelerates into positions of influence, their comfort with digital platforms and insistence on purpose-driven, value-led partnerships will increasingly shape how firms are selected and retained. Deloitte's 2023 Global Human Capital Trends report confirms this shift, highlighting the demand of younger generations for meaningful digital interactions and authentic brand experiences. Simultaneously, the growing adoption of AI among buyers is altering how decisions are made, raising the bar for relevance and responsiveness.

To remain competitive, **firms must adjust not only how they communicate but also how they build trust and demonstrate value**. This evolution touches everything from proposal development to project delivery. Key areas of generational influence include:

## Digital-first Engagement

Younger decision-makers expect intuitive, frictionless experiences, from a firm's website and proposal templates to follow-up communications. Traditional methods, such as cold calls and static brochures, are often ineffective compared to dynamic content, responsive digital tools, and well-branded virtual interactions.

## Values-driven Decision-making

Purpose and impact matter. Millennial and Gen Z clients care deeply about a firm's mission, culture, and social commitments. Prioritizing sustainability, innovation, diversity, and community engagement is no longer optional—it's expected.

## Transparency and Authenticity

These buyers are savvy and skeptical of performative marketing. They seek real-world outcomes, candid conversations, and demonstrable impact over polished messaging or inflated claims.

## Speed and Efficiency

Raised in the on-demand era, younger clients prize responsiveness and streamlined processes. Lengthy procurement timelines or convoluted communications are often seen as red flags, signaling a lack of adaptability or modern capability.

**Ultimately, generational change is influencing more than procurement—it's reshaping the nature of client relationships.** Firms that can embody cultural alignment, digital fluency, and purpose-forward messaging will be better positioned to build trust and loyalty with the next generation of decision-makers. Those who ignore this shift risk becoming disconnected from the values and expectations that drive today's and tomorrow's client choices.

## Smart Tech, Savvy Buyers: Navigating the AI-Powered Landscape

Artificial intelligence is beginning to redefine how A/E/C firms are evaluated, not only through the services they provide but also in how they communicate value, differentiate expertise, and engage with clients. Increasingly, procurement teams are incorporating AI-assisted tools for scoring, proposal analysis, and vendor management. Automation is becoming standard in early-stage filtering, enabling clients to assess qualifications at scale with unprecedented speed and accuracy.

As one business development leader observed,

**“ We are already witnessing a shift in client buying behaviors driven by AI innovation and the increasing commoditization of written proposals.”**

Internally, A/E/C firms are expanding their use of technology to influence perception and positioning. AI-enabled CRM systems, video-based storytelling, and strategic social media deployment are no longer “nice-to-haves”—they are decisive elements of brand credibility. According to Gitnux, 60% of construction marketers report that social media engagement, including project walkthroughs and short-form video updates, directly generated new business opportunities.

The increased reliance on AI has two immediate implications for firms seeking to compete effectively:

### Written content alone is no longer sufficient.

Algorithms can rapidly detect boilerplate responses, compare standardized language across submittals, and identify overlap among qualifications. Firms that lean too heavily on recycled content risk becoming indistinguishable from their competitors—especially when the first screen is automated.

### Live presentation and digital presence carry greater weight.

Clients are shifting focus toward real-time engagement: how teams communicate, connect, and deliver insight under pressure. Storytelling and team chemistry are increasingly critical differentiators.



This evolution places strategic pressure on marketing and business development functions to adapt:

- Marketing teams must ensure that case studies, project summaries, video content, and team bios are **current, relevant, and aligned with the firm's positioning**. Differentiation now depends on precision, quality, and resonance with client priorities.
- BD professionals must be equipped to lead with credibility and connection. Including **presentation coaching, narrative development, and relational fluency** that goes beyond technical credentials.

Ultimately, this shift necessitates a fundamental reevaluation of messaging and engagement strategies. The mandate is clear: move beyond promotion toward partnership. It's no longer sufficient to explain what you do. Firms must demonstrate how they think, why they matter, and how they collaborate. Marketing and BD are no longer downstream support functions; they are primary vehicles for building trust, influencing outcomes, and achieving competitive advantage.



## Redefining Collaboration Through Technology

For emerging generations of clients, technology is not an add-on—it's an expectation. Millennials and Gen Z professionals operate in digital-first environments and expect the same level of fluency from their partners. In this landscape, technology is not merely a communication tool; it is a strategic enabler of transparency, agility, and trust.

**These clients are seeking more than convenience, and they are drawn to environments where ideas are exchanged openly and where platforms enhance, rather than replace, human interaction. As AI and**

digital collaboration tools become more embedded in daily workflows, the role of technology is shifting. It is no longer viewed as a substitute for human judgment but as an extension of strategic thinking and innovation.

Recent research highlights the emergence of “collaborative intelligence” a model in which human expertise and AI capabilities are designed to complement each other. In this paradigm, firms don't just deliver insights; they **co-create solutions with clients in real-time, using technology to unlock speed, accuracy, and deeper alignment.**

To remain relevant, A/E/C firms must adopt this mindset. The most successful firms will be those that:

- **Embed technology into the client experience** rather than layering it on top of outdated processes.
- **Use digital tools** to foster clarity and responsiveness, not just efficiency.
- **Demonstrate fluency in collaborative platforms** as a reflection of their broader adaptability and forward-thinking culture.

In short, the future of collaboration is a hybrid of high-tech and high-touch. **Firms that treat digital tools as part of a broader commitment to strategic partnership, not as a workaround, will signal their ability to lead with relevance in a rapidly evolving marketplace.**





# The Risk of Having a Transactional Delivery Mindset

In a market defined by complexity, uncertainty, and rising client expectations, **firms that cling to a transactional delivery model face significant strategic risk**. Clients are no longer seeking vendors—they're looking for advisors. They expect proactive guidance, shared accountability, and a commitment to long-term value.

When marketing and business development teams default to generic messaging, recycled proposals, or last-minute pursuit strategies, they reinforce the perception that they are interchangeable. And in today's environment, **interchangeable means expendable**.

## The cost of a transactional mindset is measurable:

### Early engagement opportunities are lost.

Without demonstrating insight or value early in the client journey, firms are excluded before the shortlist is even formed.

### Differentiation erodes.

Clients struggle to distinguish between firms offering similar technical services, making decisions based on price or convenience rather than alignment or trust.

### Brand equity suffers.

Transactional behaviors can diminish the firm's ability to be seen as a strategic partner, ultimately weakening positioning in competitive pursuits.

Moreover, marketing teams that lead with capability lists rather than impact stories dilute the firm's value proposition. Business development professionals who fail to initiate strategic conversations or offer pre-positioning insights risk appearing out of sync with client needs. The lack of pre-positioning isn't just a matter of winning or losing projects; it also affects the overall success of the organization. It is about protecting the firm's relevance, reputation, and long-term growth trajectory.

**Firms that continue to operate with outdated approaches will fall behind**, not because their services are weak but because their mindset isn't aligned with the market they're trying to reach.

## THE REWARDS OF EMBRACING COLLABORATION

Firms that intentionally foster collaboration—across delivery models, pursuit strategies, and client relationships—are not just keeping pace with change; they're gaining measurable strategic advantages.

According to research from the ACEC Research Institute, 40% of firms reported increased profitability on projects characterized by high collaboration, particularly in design-build environments. The message is clear: collaboration is not a feel-good value; it's a business accelerator. Marketing and business development leaders play a pivotal role in turning this opportunity into performance. When these functions align with a collaborative mindset, firms are better positioned to:

- **Strengthen client relationships by providing insight-rich content**, thought leadership, and consistent value before, during, and after the pursuit.
- **Influence projects earlier**, shaping scope, strategy, and delivery expectations before formal procurement begins.
- **Differentiate meaningfully**, moving beyond generic responses to demonstrate a deep understanding of client priorities.
- **Elevate win rates by anchoring proposals in partnership**, not just qualifications.

This approach requires more than updated talking points. It demands a cultural shift in how firms present themselves in the marketplace. Collaborative storytelling, values-forward messaging, and impact narratives must be embedded throughout marketing materials. Meanwhile, BD professionals must evolve from "rainmakers" to relationship stewards, individuals trusted not only to win work but also to sustain it. As one respondent shared,

“**Success in Design-Build and CMAR isn't just about price or schedule. It's about collaboration, transparency, and service.**”

Firms that embrace this philosophy, from first contact to final deliverable, build trust that endures beyond any single project. **Collaboration, when practiced with intention, becomes more than a delivery method.** It becomes a market position, a growth strategy, and a differentiator that clients can feel.



# What now?

## *Turning Insight Into Action*

Today's clients are navigating a landscape marked by economic volatility, political uncertainty, and generational transition. In response, their expectations are evolving. They want more than qualified firms. They want strategic partners who engage early, collaborate deeply, and provide proactive solutions.

For A/E/C firms, this is not just a moment of change; it is a call to recalibrate both how work is delivered and how the firm shows up in the market. Marketing and business development leaders are uniquely positioned to lead this evolution.



## HERE'S HOW TO MOVE FROM INSIGHT TO EXECUTION:

### 1 Evaluate Your Current Strategic Position

Evaluate how effectively your messaging, pursuit strategy, and client relationships convey a collaborative and consultative approach.

- Are your proposals tailored and **aligned with client values**?
- Do your digital assets convey **expertise, impact, and trust**?
- Are BD professionals **empowered to engage** early and strategically?

### 2 Define Your Collaborative Advantage

Clarify where your firm creates distinct value in a shifting market.

- Do you excel in **mitigating risk, accelerating delivery, or navigating complex procurement**?
- Is your brand aligned with your **internal capabilities and cultural ethos**? This is the moment to articulate how your firm helps clients succeed, beyond scope and schedule.

### 3 Prioritize Differentiation and Strategic Investment

Equip marketing teams to tell compelling stories of trust, adaptability, and resilience.

- Highlight firmwide commitments to **DEI, ESG, and innovation**.
- Ensure BD teams are trained to **initiate high-value conversations** and build trust across generational lines.
- **Strengthen your digital presence** to compete in AI-influenced, tech-forward procurement environments.

This shift in client behavior isn't a passing trend. It represents a **structural shift in how decisions are made**, relationships are formed, and value is perceived.

The most successful firms will be those that internalize **collaboration as a mindset**, embody it in their market presence, and leverage it as a strategic edge.

In a time where **clarity is the ultimate differentiator**, now is the moment to lead with purpose, communicate with conviction, and invest in the relationships that will shape your firm's future.

