

The Competence Trap: Findings No. 001

FRDTLAB RESEARCH LAB — COMPILED FIELD RESEARCH

One phenomenon, studied from two sides: what happens to capable people, and what happens to capable businesses. The pattern is the same from both ends of the hallway. Here is what the data says.

1. The most capable people are quietly breaking

- **84.9%** of marketers have experienced imposter syndrome; for **50%** it intensified in the past year. *(Marketing Week 2026 Survey, 2,350 marketers)*
- **65.3%** felt overwhelmed, highest in the mid-career 26-45 band actually carrying the load. *(Marketing Week 2026)*
- **42.5%** would not tell their manager how they feel. The most capable are the least able to say they're struggling. *(Marketing Week 2026)*
- Women leaders report burnout at **43%** vs **31%** for men, and perform up to **70%** more emotional labor. *(Workplace burnout & emotional-labor research)*

Competence didn't protect them from the load. Competence is what selected them for it.

2. The same trap hits the business, as a freeze

- **40-60%** of qualified B2B deals end in no decision at all. *(The JOLT Effect, 2.5M sales conversations)*
- **56%** of those stalls are driven by indecision and fear of the wrong call, not status-quo preference. *(The JOLT Effect)*
- Small-business revenue-growth expectations fell to their **lowest level since 2020**. Demand didn't vanish; confidence did. *(Federal Reserve 2025 Small Business Credit Survey, 6,525 firms)*
- Buyers who feel personal relief, peace of mind and reduced anxiety, are nearly **50% more likely to act**. *(Bain, The B2B Elements of Value, HBR)*

What capable people are actually trying to buy is permission to set something down.

3. Search moved inside the answer

- Google's AI Overviews has **2.5 billion** monthly users; AI Mode has passed **1 billion**. Answers now cite sources. (*Google, 2026*)
 - **~70%** of high-conversion product queries we analyzed included a size, not a brand. People search the problem, not the catalog. (*FRDTLAB client analysis, anonymized*)
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4. The market is moving toward this exact gap

- The fractional-services market is projected to grow from **\$14B to \$116B+ by 2035** at a **26%+ CAGR**. (*Fractional-services market research*)
 - Fractional engagement among **\$5M-\$50M** companies is growing **42% year over year**. (*Fractional-services market research*)
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The throughline

The capable person who became load-bearing, and the capable business that became a single point of failure, are the same story. AI didn't create the trap; it revealed it. The solve is the same at both altitudes: separate what actually needs you from what you've never put down, then build the thing that carries the rest.

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