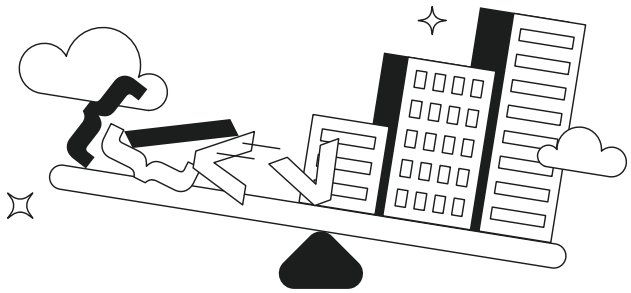
storyblok

The Enterprise Developer Shift 2026

Talent Economics in Legacy vs Modern Architecture

Executive summary

Every year, organizations running on legacy architecture have a budget conversation about infrastructure. They weigh migration costs against operational risk, decide the timing isn't right, and move on. The workforce cost of that decision rarely makes it onto the spreadsheet.



That cost shows up elsewhere. In the engineer who spends most of their week patching systems instead of building anything new. In the candidate who asked about your stack during the interview and went somewhere else. In the VP of Engineering who keeps losing people to companies they've never heard of, for reasons that have nothing to do with salary.

This report is about the cost, but not the infrastructure cost of legacy architecture, which gets plenty of attention. **It's about the talent cost, which rarely makes it into the room.**

Storyblok surveyed 250 developers, security engineers, and platform professionals in March 2026. All had at least two years of experience. We asked them about their tech environment, how it affects their work, and what they expect to see in the market over the next few years. We split the findings by stack type (legacy, mixed, and modern) because the aggregate numbers flatten exactly the differences worth paying attention to.

Here is what we found:

More than half of respondents (58.59%) spend at least 30% of their working week on maintenance rather than building. In primarily legacy environments, that number climbs to 85%. In modern stack organizations, it drops to 51%.

Four in ten technical professionals (40.63%) have either left a role or seriously considered leaving because the stack felt outdated or was holding back their growth. Among respondents now working in modern environments, the rate of having actually left a previous role for this reason is the highest of any group. The most likely explanation is not that complicated: they already left. Where did they go? Probably somewhere with a cleaner stack. While the survey cannot confirm that directly, the pattern is consistent enough to take seriously.

Nearly 1 in 4 respondents (23.05%) say they are not confident their organization can attract and retain the engineering talent it needs over the next five years.

69.14% expect the talent gap between legacy and modern expertise to grow. Only 5.86% expect it to shrink.

Not everything points in one direction. The salary data is split, and 13% of respondents see legacy expertise as a career advantage rather than a liability. We'll discuss that in detail later.

But the overall picture is clear enough. The workforce cost of legacy architecture does not typically appear on a future risk register. But for many organizations, it is already here.

41%

of technical professionals have left a role or seriously considered leaving because the tech stack felt outdated or was limiting their growth.

The ones who actually left are now, in all likelihood, working somewhere else.

85%

of engineers in primarily legacy environments spend at least 30% of their week on maintenance.

In modern stack organizations, that drops to 51%, making the gap not subtle.

69%

expect the talent gap between legacy and modern architecture expertise to grow over the next 2 to 3 years.

Only 6% expect it to shrink. The engineers closest to this problem are not optimistic.

1 in 4

organizations is not confident they can attract and retain the engineering talent needed to maintain their current systems over the next five years.

That is a present risk already.

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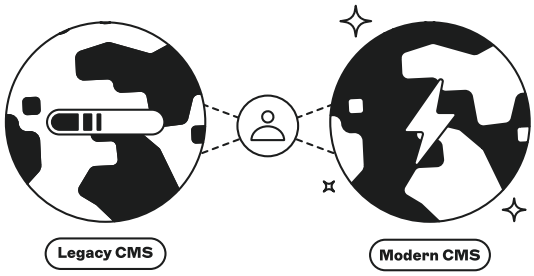
SECTION I

The Environment: Who we surveyed and where they work



Most conversations about legacy architecture are really about two kinds of organizations: those that are clearly stuck on old systems and know it, and those that have already modernized and moved on. But that framing misses the real picture.

In our survey, 51.56% of respondents work in what most people would call a **mixed environment**: a legacy core with modern tooling layered on top. Only 7.81% work in primarily legacy systems. 40.62% work in primarily modern or cloud-native architecture.

That middle group is where the most interesting tensions live, and it is who this report is really for.

Mixed environments are not a temporary state on the way to something cleaner. For most large organizations, this is the permanent condition: years of technology decisions stacked on top of each other, where the monolith still runs the operations that matter most, and the modern tooling handles everything built in the last few years. The engineers working in these environments know the tension well. They context-switch between old and new systems daily. They maintain things they didn't build and build things that have to talk to systems nobody fully understands anymore.

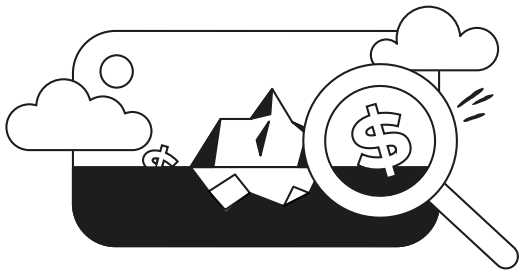
The talent cost in these organizations is harder to see than in a fully legacy shop. There is no obvious burning platform. The systems mostly work. The problems are slower and quieter: a slightly longer time-to-hire, a resignation here, a team that spends more time firefighting than building. By the time the pattern is visible, it has usually been building for a while.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

If you are in a mixed environment and nobody on your leadership team is actively tracking engineer attrition by stack type, start there. Not because the answer will be alarming (it might not be yet), but because mixed environments are where the signal is hardest to read until it is too late to act on cheaply.

SECTION II

The Hidden Tax: Maintenance burden and innovation capacity



Slow deployments. Vendor lock-in. Integration debt. These are the problems that show up in every replatforming proposal, and they are real.

The version that gets talked about less is what that environment does to the people working inside it.

Engineers are expensive to hire, slow to onboard, and hard to replace. Most organizations know this. However, what fewer organizations track is how much of that expensive, hard-to-replace engineering capacity is spent keeping things running instead of building.

58%

of technical professionals in our survey spend at least 30% of their working week on maintenance, patching, or keeping existing systems running rather than building new features or capabilities.

But that number looks different depending on where you work.

85%

of engineers in primarily legacy environments spend at least 30% of their week on maintenance. In modern stack organizations, that figure is 51%.

The gap between those two numbers is not just an efficiency story. It is a talent story. Engineers who spend the majority of their time on maintenance are not developing the skills that make them more hireable over time. They are not working on the problems that attracted them to engineering in the first place. They know it.

When we asked respondents how much their current tech stack limits their ability to work on innovative or high-impact projects, 45.32% said it limits them either somewhat or significantly. In primarily legacy environments, that figure rises to 80%. In modern stack organizations, it flips entirely: 57.77% say their stack enables innovation rather than limiting it.

45%

of all respondents say their stack limits their ability to work on innovative or high-impact projects. In legacy environments, that number is 80%.

This matters beyond engagement scores. There is a direct link between the work engineers do and whether they stay. An engineer spending 70% of their week on maintenance is not building the skills or the portfolio that the market values. At some point, they start doing the math, and it is not mathing.

WHAT THE BROADER RESEARCH SAYS

Technical debt is the single biggest frustration at work for professional developers, according to the Stack Overflow 2024 Developer Survey, cited by 62.4% of respondents across 65,000 developers in 185 countries. It ranked above every other challenge, including stack complexity, tool reliability, and security maintenance.

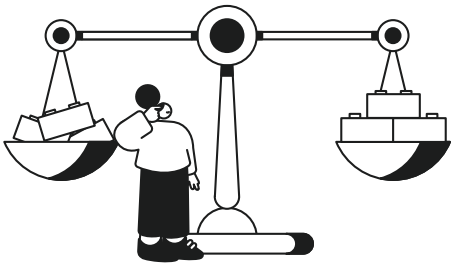
The organizations most exposed to this dynamic are not always the ones running entirely on legacy systems. They are often the ones in the middle, in the mixed environments where legacy debt is real but not yet dramatic enough to force a decision. Often, the engineers doing that work are those who notice before the organization does.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

Pull your last three sprint retrospectives and look at how much of the discussion was about maintenance, incidents, or technical debt versus shipping new capability. If the ratio surprises you, that is the number to bring into your next architecture conversation.

SECTION III

The talent signal: Developer preferences, career perception, and retention risk



Most organizations think about retention as a compensation problem. Someone gets a better offer, you counter, they stay, or they don't. The stack rarely makes it into that conversation, but the data suggests it should.

When we asked respondents how important the organization's technology stack is when evaluating a new job opportunity, 81.64% said it is at least important. One in five said it is the first thing they look at.

82%

of technical professionals say the technology stack is at least an important factor when evaluating a new job opportunity. For 1 in 5, it is the first thing they look at.

That is a hiring filter most job descriptions do not account for. Organizations recruiting for engineering roles are competing not just on salary and benefits but on the quality of the environment they are offering. A candidate who has options will factor in what their day-to-day work actually looks like. The ones you most want to hire usually have options.

The career perception data puts a number on it. When asked how working primarily on legacy systems affects an engineer's long-term career prospects, 78.52% said it either significantly narrows future opportunities or somewhat limits career growth over time. Only 13.28% said legacy expertise could be a career advantage.

79%

of technical professionals believe working primarily on legacy systems limits long-term career growth. That belief shapes hiring decisions, resignation letters, and the LinkedIn searches that happen at 11 pm.

This is perception data, not career outcome data. We did not follow engineers through their careers and measure what actually happened. But perception is what drives behavior. If engineers believe legacy work limits their future, they will act on that belief regardless of whether the market objectively agrees. The talent pipeline consequence is real either way.

WHAT THE BROADER RESEARCH SAYS

The same survey found that **improving code quality and developer environments is the top driver of job satisfaction** for professional developers — ranked first regardless of whether respondents described themselves as happy, complacent, or unhappy at work. Learning and using new technologies came second. Only 1 in 5 professional developers describes themselves as happy at work.

40.63% of respondents have either left a role or seriously considered leaving because the tech stack felt outdated or was limiting their growth. That figure holds across all stack environments, but the pattern inside it is worth examining.

Among respondents now working in modern stack environments, the rate of having actually left a previous role for this reason is the highest of any group at 23.1%, compared to 13.6% in mixed environments and 15% in legacy. The obvious interpretation is that modern stack engineers are more demanding or more mobile. The most likely explanation is less interesting: they already left. They are now working somewhere else.

If that reading is right (and the survey cannot prove it directly, only suggests it), then the talent flow has been running in one direction for some time. The mixed environment respondents are the ones to watch next. 38.6% of them have left or seriously considered leaving over stack concerns.

41%

of technical professionals have left a role or seriously considered leaving because the tech stack felt outdated or was limiting their growth. The ones who actually left are now, in all likelihood, working somewhere else.

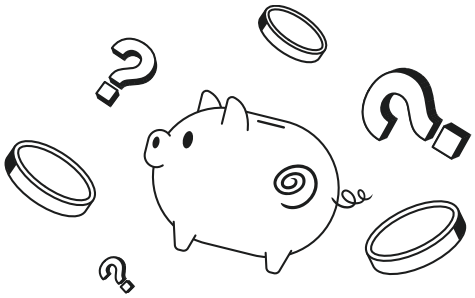
The organizations least likely to see this coming are the ones in the middle. Not dramatic enough to force action, not modern enough to attract and keep the engineers who have choices.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

The next time you lose a strong engineer, ask directly whether the stack was part of the decision. Most exit interviews do not surface this because nobody asks. If you start asking and the answer comes up more than once, you are not looking at an individual retention problem; you might be looking at a pattern.

SECTION IV

The cost question: Salary perception and budget unpredictability



The salary data does not paint a clear picture, and that's actually worth paying attention to.

We asked respondents whether engineers working primarily on legacy systems command higher, lower, or comparable salaries to those working on modern stacks. The market has no consensus.

36.33% said comparable. 27.34% said higher for legacy. 26.56% said lower. 9.77% said they did not have enough visibility to say.

36%

comparable. 27% higher. 27% lower. The market, as perceived by the people working inside it, has no consensus on what legacy talent actually costs.

The instinct is to look for a directional story here. Legacy skills are scarce, so they command a premium, or modern stack engineers are more in demand, so they earn more. The data does not support either clean narrative. The market is split, and that split has operational consequences that do not show up in a salary benchmark report.

When a hiring manager cannot predict what a legacy engineer will cost, budgeting becomes unreliable. When a finance team is benchmarking compensation and the external data points in three different directions, headcount planning gets harder. When a legacy engineer and a modern stack engineer sit on the same team, internal equity conversations get complicated fast.
None of that requires the salary to be going up or down.

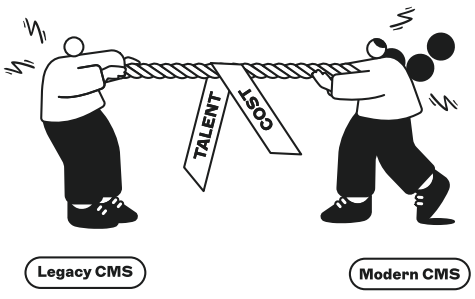
There is a second dimension here that the salary data suggests (without proving, though). Organizations running on legacy architecture are not just competing for legacy talent. They are also trying to hire modern stack engineers to build the new layer on top of the old one. Those engineers have a clearer, more favorable market. They know what they are worth and that they have options. The organization ends up managing two distinct talent markets simultaneously, with different cost profiles, expectations, and retention risks.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

If your headcount plan assumes a stable cost for legacy engineering talent, challenge that assumption now rather than during a hiring cycle. The engineers who know what they are worth in this market are the ones you cannot afford to lowball or lose mid-negotiation.

SECTION V

The hiring reality: Recruitment friction, security exposure, and organizational confidence



41.41% of respondents report some level of hiring difficulty over the past 12 months. 11.72% describe it as very difficult, with roles going unfilled for months. Another 29.69% call it competitive but manageable.

41%

of technical professionals report their organization faced some level of hiring difficulty over the past 12 months. 1 in 8 say roles went unfilled for months.

That 27% is worth noting separately. They said they had not been actively hiring or lacked visibility into the process. Organizations that are not actively tracking hiring difficulty are often the ones where the problem is least visible and most likely to compound quietly.

The security picture adds another layer. When asked about the security risk profile of their current infrastructure, 48.04% of respondents acknowledged some level of exposure. 14.06% described legacy systems as creating significant, ongoing security vulnerabilities. 33.98% said some exposure exists but is being actively managed.

Those numbers do not sit comfortably alongside the talent findings. The organizations carrying the highest maintenance burden are also the ones most likely to be managing security debt. The engineers keeping those systems running are the same ones spending 70% of their week on maintenance instead of building. At some point, the capacity to manage both runs thin.

48%

of respondents acknowledge some level of security exposure in their current infrastructure. 14% describe it as significant and ongoing.

The forward-looking data is where the picture gets most serious. When asked how confident they are that their organization can attract and retain the engineering talent needed to maintain current systems over the next five years, 23.05% said they are not confident. That is nearly 1 in 4.

1 in 4

organizations are not confident they can attract and retain the engineering talent needed to maintain their current systems over the next five years. That is not a future risk. That is a present one.

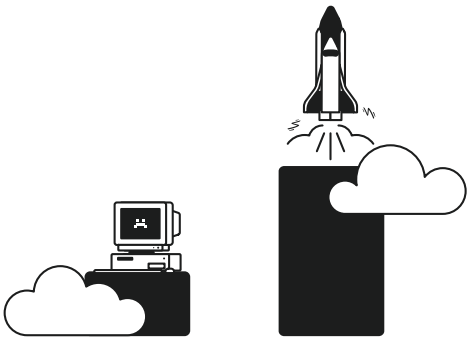
50% said they are somewhat confident. That number also deserves more attention. “Somewhat confident” is not confident. It is the answer people give when they believe things will probably be fine, but cannot point to specific reasons why. In the context of a five-year talent sustainability question, that level of uncertainty has real consequences for workforce planning, succession, and infrastructure decisions.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

The 27% of respondents with no visibility into hiring difficulty is the most useful number in this section for a self-assessment. If your organization is not tracking time-to-fill, offer decline rates, or early attrition by role type, it looks more like a talent hope, rather than a talent strategy.

SECTION VI

The trajectory: Where the talent gap is heading



We asked respondents whether they expect the talent gap between legacy and modern architecture expertise to grow, shrink, or stay the same over the next two to three years. 69.14% expect it to grow. 33.98% expect it to grow significantly.

69%

expect the talent gap between legacy and modern architecture expertise to grow over the next 2 to 3 years. Only 6% expect it to shrink.

That 69% is not a prediction from analysts or consultants. It is the assessment of the engineers and security professionals closest to the problem. The people who spend their days working across the gap between old and new systems, watching who gets hired and who leaves, tracking what skills the market values. When that group says the gap will widen, it is worth taking seriously.

The logic runs in one direction. The pool of engineers who want to work primarily on legacy systems is not growing. The universities are not producing COBOL graduates at scale. The engineers who have spent years on legacy work are aging out of the workforce faster than they are being replaced. The demand for modern stack skills is not slowing down as more organizations modernize.

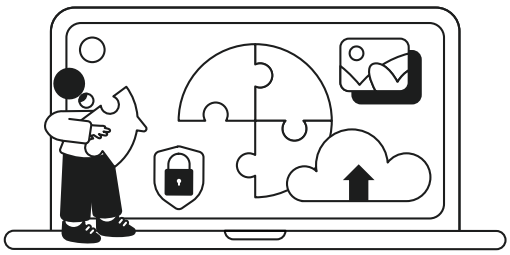
The organizations caught in the middle of that dynamic are those with mixed environments. They need legacy expertise to maintain what they have and modern expertise to build what comes next. As the talent pool for legacy skills shrinks, the cost and difficulty of maintaining that first category go up. The pressure to accelerate modernization increases. The technology hasn't changed. The people who can maintain it are becoming harder to find and more expensive to keep.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

The talent gap is expected to widen regardless of what your organization does. The relevant question is whether your three to five-year technology roadmap was built assuming the current supply of legacy-skilled engineers will still be available when you need them.

SECTION VII

What the data doesn't say



This report has made a consistent argument: legacy architecture creates talent costs that most organizations are not tracking, and those costs are going to get harder to ignore. That argument is supported by the data. But it is not the whole picture.

A few findings push back against a clean narrative, and they are worth naming directly.

On salary, the market is genuinely divided. 36.33% of respondents said legacy and modern stack engineers command comparable salaries. 27.34% said legacy skills command a premium because they are scarce. Only 26.56% said modern stack engineers are valued more highly.

There is no majority position here. Organizations planning headcount on the assumption that legacy talent is either cheaper or more expensive than modern stack talent are working from a premise that the market does not support.

On career prospects, 13.28% of respondents said legacy expertise can be a career advantage rather than a liability. That is a minority view, but it is not a negligible one. In specialized industries where legacy systems are deeply embedded and unlikely to change quickly, that assessment may be accurate. The talent economics look different in a regulated financial institution running systems from the 1980s than they do in a digital-native retail business trying to modernize its content stack.

On organizational confidence, 76.95% of respondents said they are at least somewhat confident their organization can attract and retain the engineering talent it needs over the next five years. That is not a picture of widespread panic. Most organizations believe they will be fine, at least in the near term. The concern is in the qualifier. “Somewhat confident” is doing a lot of work in that number, and the five-year window is short enough that organizations not yet feeling the pressure may simply not have reached it yet.

None of this undermines the broader argument. It contextualizes it. The talent cost of legacy architecture is not uniform across every organization, every industry, or every engineering team. What the data shows is a direction and a trajectory, not a sentence. Organizations with strong retention, clear modernization roadmaps, and realistic talent strategies may be managing these risks well. The ones most exposed are the ones that have not yet looked.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

Before using this report to make a case for modernization internally, be honest about which segment your organization actually sits in. The argument lands differently in a regulated financial institution running 1980s infrastructure than it does in a retail business trying to modernize its content stack. Know which conversation you are actually in.

CONCLUSION

Modernization as a workforce strategy

The business case for modernization has been made in infrastructure terms for years. Most technology leaders have heard those arguments enough times to recite them back. This report has tried to make a different one.

The talent cost is already here. The framing most organizations use ("modernize before this becomes a problem") is already outdated for many of them. The maintenance burden is real now. The resignations have already happened. The hiring friction is this quarter, not next year. The 23% of organizations that are not confident in their five-year talent sustainability are not describing a future scenario. They are describing their current situation with a five-year horizon attached to it.

The mixed environment is the most dangerous place to be complacent. Fully legacy organizations at least know they have a problem. Modern stack organizations have largely resolved it. The mixed environment is where the cost accumulates invisibly: real enough to matter, not dramatic enough to force a decision. The signal is there. It is just quiet enough to ignore for another year. And then another.

Inaction is not a neutral choice. The talent gap is expected to widen. The pool of legacy-skilled engineers is aging out faster than it is being replaced. Every year of delay makes the eventual modernization harder, more expensive, and more disruptive. Staying put does not preserve optionality. It spends it.

The infrastructure decision and the workforce decision are the same decision. Organizations that treat modernization purely as a technical upgrade are leaving the talent economics out of the calculation. **The data in this report is consistent on this point: the stack shapes who you can hire, how long they stay, what they are able to build, and whether your organization can sustain the engineering capacity it needs five years from now.**

Methodology

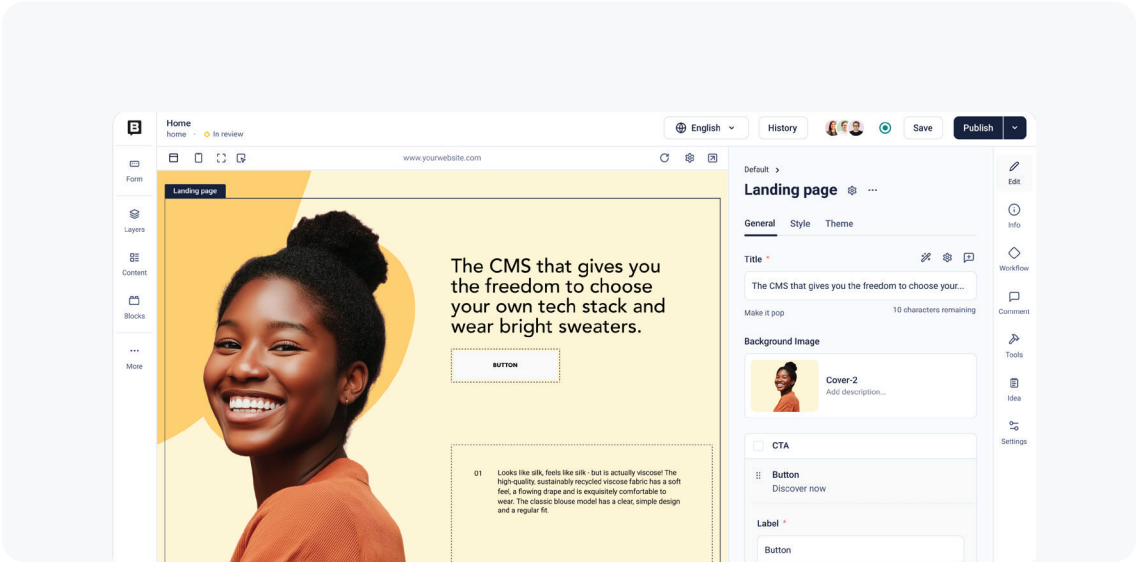
This report is based on a survey of 250 developers, security engineers, and platform professionals conducted in March 2026. Respondents were screened to include only those working in technical roles with at least two years of professional experience. All questions used a single-select format.

Findings are segmented throughout the report by the respondent's current technology environment (primarily legacy, mixed, or primarily modern) as reported in Q1. These segments were used to cross-tabulate responses to questions on maintenance burden, innovation capacity, and retention risk. The goal was to surface differences that aggregate percentages tend to flatten.

All data reflects respondent perception rather than verified organizational records, payroll data, or HR systems. Where the report draws inferences from the data (particularly around

the career trajectory of engineers who have moved from legacy to modern environments), those inferences are identified as such in the text.

About Storyblok



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Marketers get a visual editor with reusable components, in-context preview, and workflows to launch fast and stay on brand. Developers have the freedom to use their favorite frameworks and integrate with anything through the API-first platform. Brands get one source of truth for content that is accurate, flexible, and measurable.

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