PDQ

State of Sysadmin

Annual report on sysadmin and IT professional work, tech, and trends

2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2026, the systems are still running. It's the workload that's overheating.

Hybrid sprawl is now the default, security pressure is nonstop, and the margin for error keeps shrinking. However, the real strain isn't just technical: Sysadmins are increasingly accountable for outcomes shaped by users, leadership decisions, and tools they didn't design … plus that one legacy system everyone's afraid to touch.

Sysadmins are actively exploring new technology to make the job survivable. But without concerted efforts to reduce the invisible load, the next failure won't be a server but rather the person holding it all together.

KEY FINDINGS

STRESS IS STRUCTURAL

Stress is up in 2026, but not because sysadmins forgot how to sysadmin. The job just keeps absorbing more, and sysadmins are accountable for negative outcomes that actually start with users, leadership choices, or tools that don't quite fit.

SECURITY REMAINS THE TOP CONCERN

Security remains a top sysadmin concern, but in 2026, it's less "do we have security tools?" and more "do we actually understand our exposure?" And sysadmins feel the gap between responsibility and authority every time risk gets accepted above their pay grade.

HYBRID IS THE DEFAULT

Most orgs aren't "moving to the cloud." They're living in the messy middle: cloud + on-prem + legacy systems that refuse to die. With no clear finish line, complexity doesn't go away. It becomes the baseline.

AUTOMATION IS ABOUT SURVIVAL

Automation keeps growing, especially in patching and security, because human bandwidth is already spent. Full automation is still rare, but the intent is clear: Offload the repetitive, high-risk work so sysadmins can spend time on the stuff that actually requires a brain.

AI IS WELCOME, BUT ONLY ON A LEASH

Sysadmins want AI for the boring-but-dangerous parts: spotting patterns, surfacing risk, drafting reports, and cutting through noise. What they don't want is agentic "trust me, bro" behavior that acts in production and leaves them holding the incident ticket.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Sysadmins are absorbing change with less margin for error than most orgs realize. The move that matters now isn't "go faster." It's making the work lighter, safer, and more repeatable.

- **Close the responsibility gap:** Match accountability with authority (and budget).
- **Assume hybrid stays:** Standardize endpoints and reduce tool sprawl. Stop waiting for a "final state."
- **Automate the risky repeatables:** Systemize patching, vulnerability response, and baseline configs.
- **Use AI as an assistant:** Require visibility, auditability, override, and rollback.
- **Protect capacity:** Treat on-call load, institutional knowledge, and manual work as operational risk.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 02

METHODOLOGY 05

STRESS & WORKLOAD 06

MIGRATION TO THE CLOUD 10

"THE CHANGING NATURE OF SYSADMIN WORK" 12
By PDQ CEO, Dan Cook

TECHNOLOGY & THE ROLE 13

AUTOMATION & TOOLS 16

AI & AUTONOMY 19

"AUTOMATION VS. AUTONOMY IN THE AGE OF AI" 24
By PDQ VP of Product, Mark Littlefield

CONCLUSION 26

METHODOLOGY

PDQ has published the State of Sysadmin report for five years, drawing on thousands of data points.

For the 2026 report, we surveyed 1,034 sysadmins and IT professionals from October–December 2025. Respondents were tool agnostic (not limited to PDQ customers) and geographically diverse (with North America most represented). Participants received one of two survey versions, focused on either cloud migration or automation and AI.

Findings are presented here with supporting context and analysis.

ABOUT PDQ

PDQ builds IT management tools that are simple, secure, and pretty damn quick. Trusted by more than 33,000 system administrators, MSPs, and IT professionals worldwide, PDQ's suite of autonomous endpoint management (AEM) products (including PDQ Connect, Deploy & Inventory, and SmartDeploy) streamlines patching, deployment, and vulnerability and endpoint management across Windows and macOS devices.

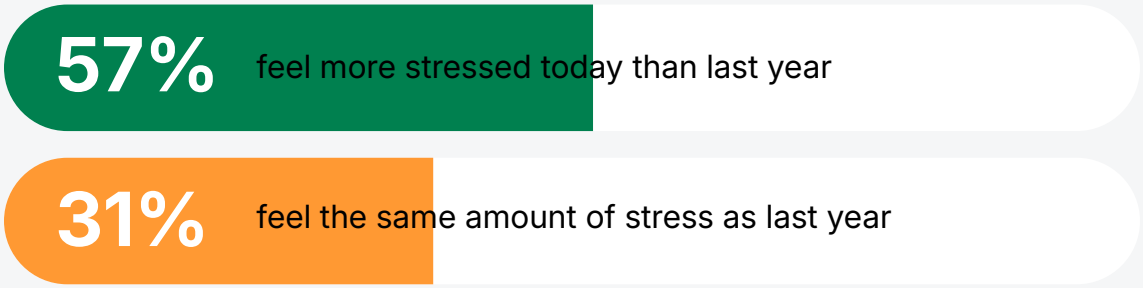
Founded in 2001 and based in Salt Lake City, Utah, PDQ is built for sysadmins, by sysadmins.

STRESS & WORKLOAD

In 2026, sysadmin stress is piling up.

Year over year, the same pattern holds: Workload intensity keeps climbing, and 52% of sysadmins say they're constantly playing catch-up with technology changes.

That makes stress less about a bad week and more about the way modern IT operates.



EXPERIENCE ISN'T A FIREWALL AGAINST STRESS

In previous years, stress hit newer sysadmins hardest. In 2026, that gap is gone.

Senior sysadmins are feeling it more, largely because they've become the default escalation path for anything messy, cross-platform, or political. That kind of load creates real risk: Orgs end up dependent on a few brains, and those brains burn out.

STRESS IS A RETENTION RED FLAG

High stress still tracks with "I'm looking." The difference in 2026 is that sysadmins are finally saying it out loud.

More are citing workload sustainability, not pay, as the reason they'd leave. Stress used to be the cost of doing the job. Now it's increasingly seen as fixable … and not worth tolerating.

TOOLS DON'T ALWAYS SHRINK THE WORK

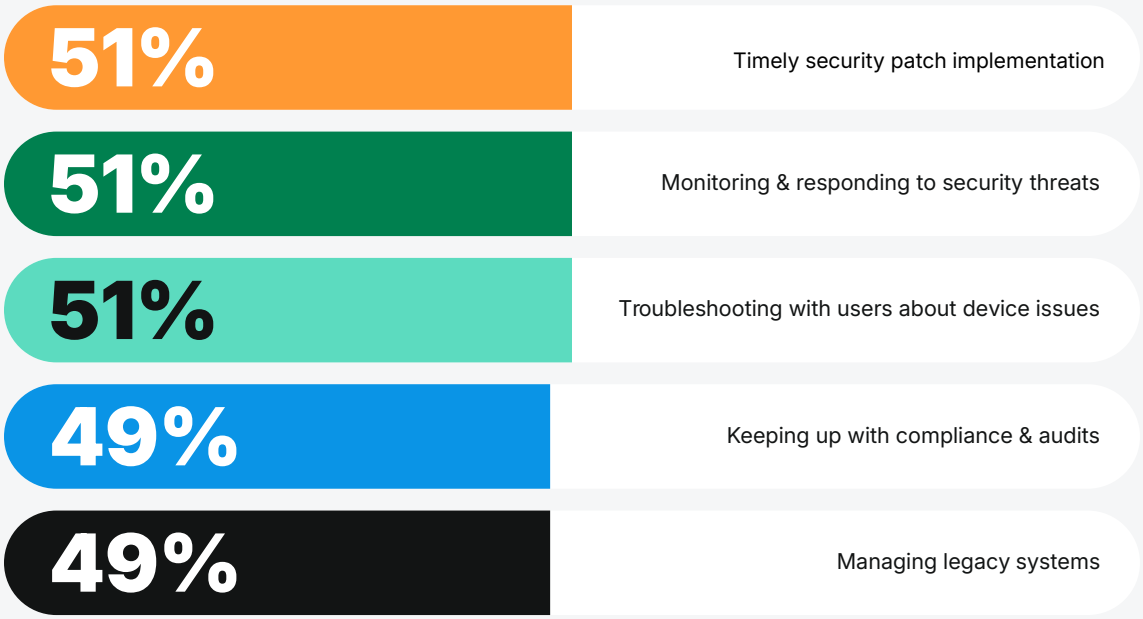
Sysadmins say they're frequently or constantly stretched thin, and fewer of them consider their workloads sustainable.

This trend has held for years. New tools show up, but the total workload still grows. The to-do list still keeps getting longer … just with more software around it.

CHART 01

EVERYDAY TASKS THAT TAKE UP "TOO MUCH TIME"

The percentage of tasks that sysadmins report as most tedious and time-consuming in 2026.



THE THINGS THAT KEEP SYSADMINS UP AT NIGHT

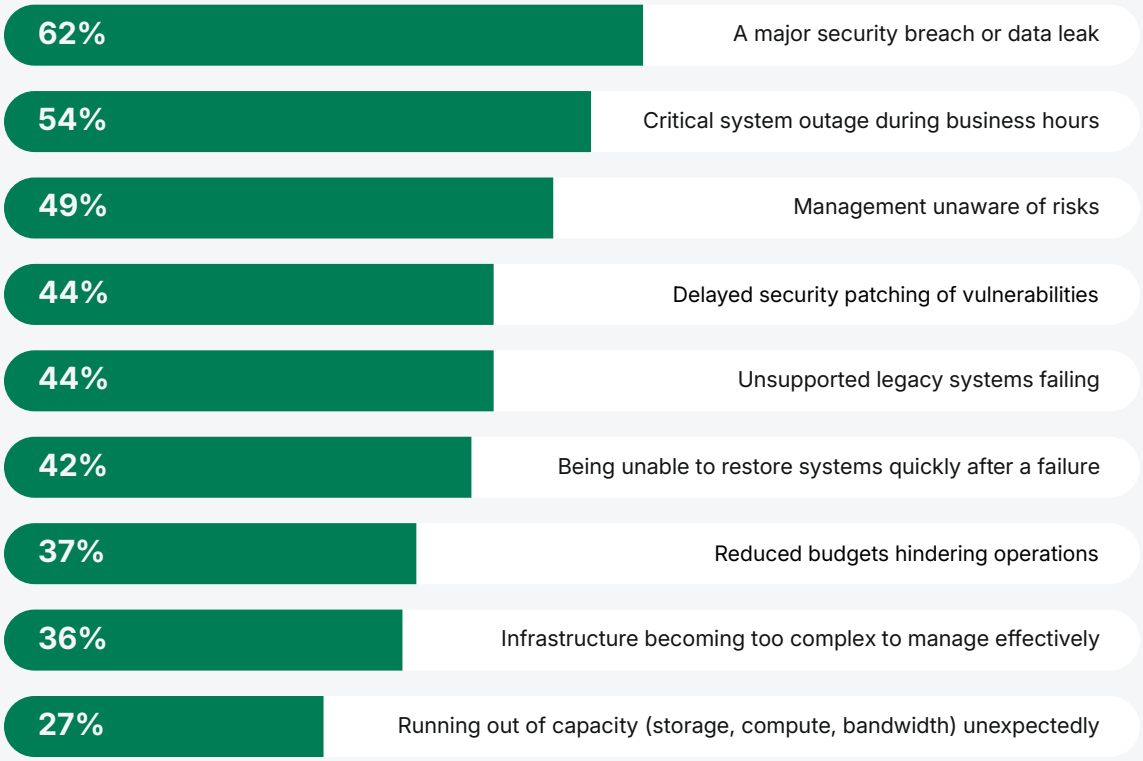
The grind isn't the whole story. **Security is still the #1 concern, year after year.**

Between "urgent" tickets for passwords, printers, and unplugged cables, sysadmins carry the heavier job in the background: keeping the organization safe. And that pressure never clocks out.

CHART 02

TOP ORGANIZATIONAL CONCERNS FOR SYSADMINS

The concerns making sysadmins feel under-resourced and over-exposed in 2026.



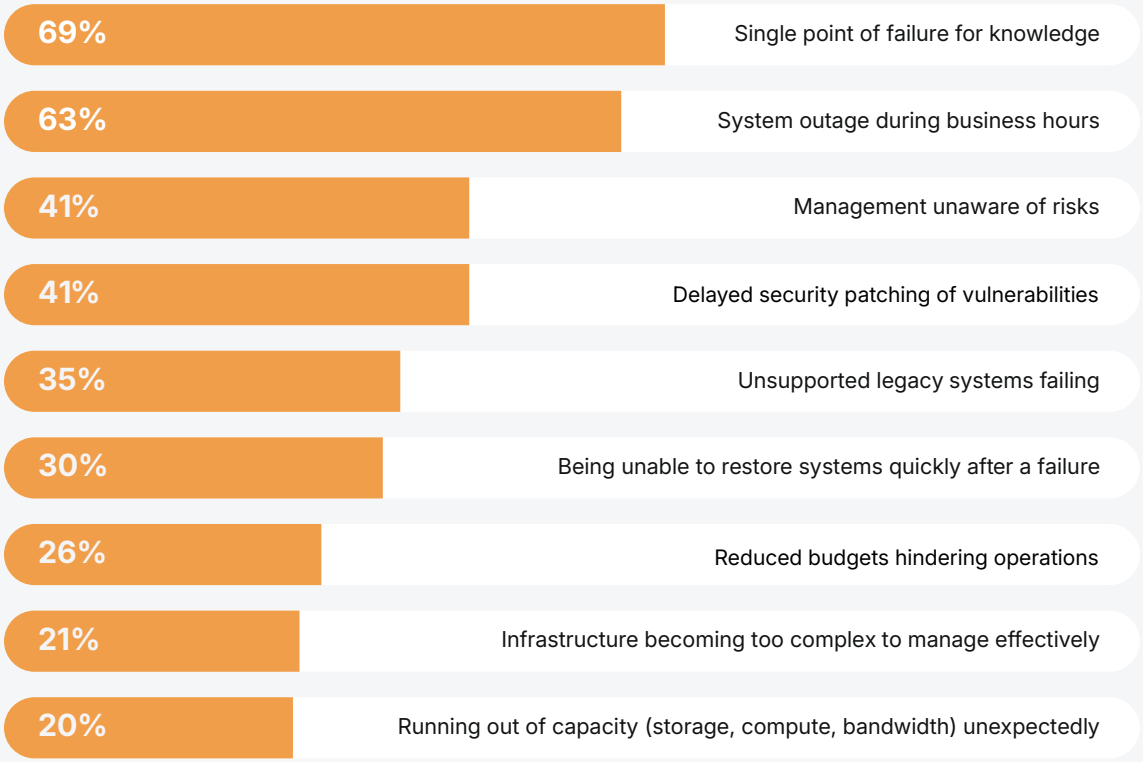
SYSADMINS CARRY IT PERSONALLY

Sysadmins put a lot of this pressure on themselves. Nearly 70% worry that they're a single point of failure for critical knowledge, and 63% fear that their skills are falling behind. This pressure, plus uncertainty, adds up fast.

CHART 03

PERSONAL AND CAREER CONCERNS FOR SYSADMINS

In 2026, sysadmins face the paradox of being indispensable and vulnerable.



MIGRATION TO THE CLOUD

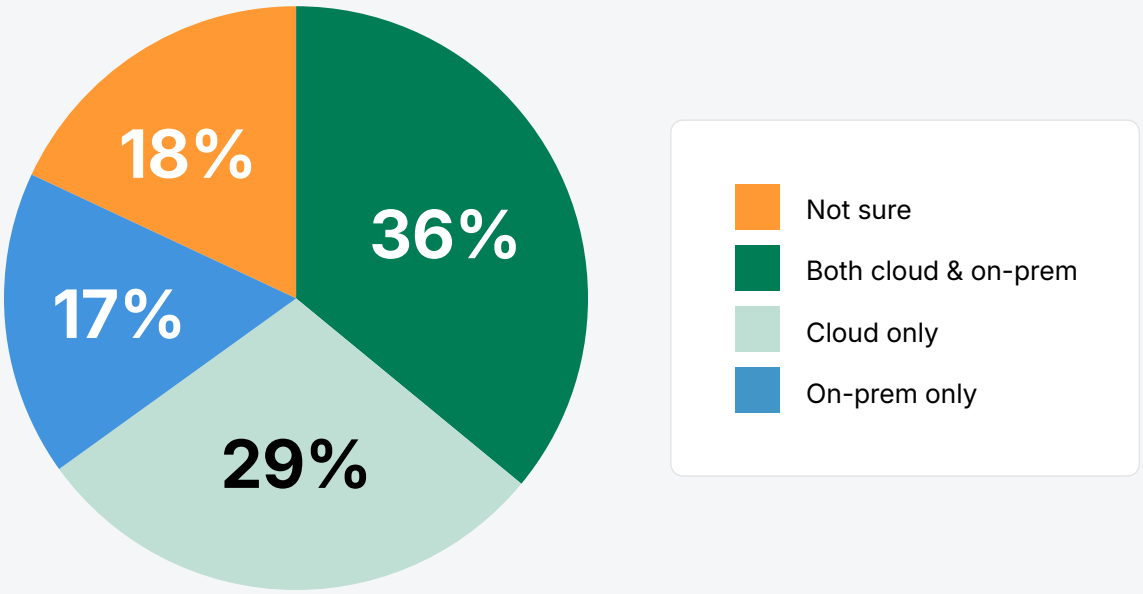
Cloud migration isn't wrapping up. For many orgs, cloud is already in the mix, and 65% expect to be hybrid or cloud-only within five years.

Getting there takes real labor: migrations, new cloud skills, and retraining the rest of the org.

CHART 04

ENDPOINT LOCATIONS OVER THE NEXT 5 YEARS

Sysadmins report that cloud-first and hybrid environments now dominate, while fully on-prem setups will continue to decline over the next five years.



MANY TEAMS ARE ETERNALLY MIGRATING

Cloud migration may never be done. Sysadmins point to the usual blockers:

- Legacy apps that won't cooperate
- Inconsistent tooling across cloud providers
- "Mostly cloud" setups that are still fragmented day-to-day

And since the environment keeps changing, the workload stays high.

INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE



THE CHANGING NATURE OF SYSADMIN WORK

BY DAN COOK, CEO, PDQ

If you've been a sysadmin for a while, change isn't the scary part.

> **Change is the job. What's different now is how much of it is hitting at once.**

This year's data shows 57% feel more stressed than last year because the work keeps expanding with more systems, more responsibility, and less margin for error. And it's not episodic anymore. It doesn't spike and settle. It accumulates, which is usually a systems problem, not a personal one.

Experience doesn't insulate you, either. Senior sysadmins are feeling it because they've become the escalation point for anything messy, cross-platform, or political. Meanwhile, cloud is now the baseline instead of the future. Hybrid is normal. The work just moved: Permissions, configs, integrations, costs, and failures are harder to see and harder to pin down.

Layer in automation, AI, and rising security demands, and it's no surprise people feel indispensable and under-resourced at the same time. But here's the part that matters: Sysadmins aren't resisting this. They're navigating it by adopting automation where it buys capacity, exploring AI where it adds visibility, and staying skeptical of black-box autonomy.

> **The future of this work won't be decided by hype. It'll be decided by the people running the systems and the tools that earn their trust.**

TECHNOLOGY & THE ROLE

THE SYSADMIN CAREER

The sysadmin role is still a solid bet. Pay is up slightly from last year, with most junior sysadmins landing $50k–$100k and senior sysadmins averaging around $100k–$150k.

Expect lower ranges for early-career roles, jobs outside the U.S., and work in government, education, and nonprofits.

HOW SYSADMINS SPEND THEIR TIME

Sysadmins now spend most of their time on defense and cleanup. The biggest time drains are patching, responding to security threats, and troubleshooting user issues (each 51%), followed by compliance/audits and keeping legacy systems alive (49%). Then come the “extras” that aren’t extra at all: failed updates (44%), printers (43%), and after-hours maintenance (42%).

Basically, the work of a sysadmin is keeping the lights on while everyone keeps flipping the switches.

SYSADMIN SKILLS OF THE FUTURE

We asked sysadmins which skills they want to build next. Compared to 2025, the biggest year-over-year jumps weren’t just “nice-to-haves;” they were survival skills.

- **AI integrations: 38% → 52%**
  Sysadmins aren’t trying to “learn AI.” They’re trying to make AI useful inside real workflows without adding new risk.

- **Cloud management: 36% → 45%**
  The cloud footprint keeps growing, so cloud competence is becoming the baseline.

- **Automation: 54% → 61%**
  Manual work is hitting its ceiling. Automation is how teams buy back time and reduce repeatable mistakes.

This data shows that the sysadmin role is shifting from hands-on execution to orchestrating systems and workflows.

RESPONSIBILITY CREEP IS REAL

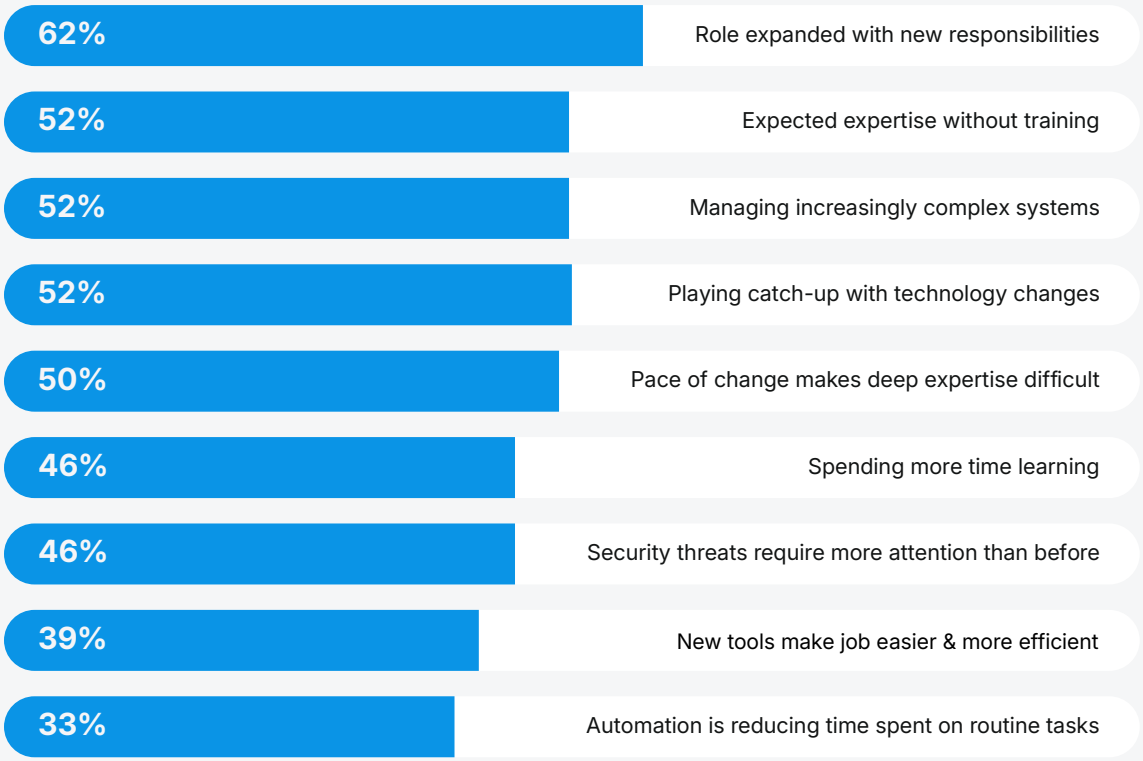
New tech is expanding the sysadmin job more than simplifying it.

Instead of replacing old work, each new platform adds more surface area to own, systems to understand, and risk to manage. The result is predictable: a role that keeps stretching, while the promise that tools will make everything easier lags behind reality.

CHART 05

NEW RESPONSIBILITIES DUE TO NEW TECH

Sysadmins report how new tools and other demands are affecting their core job responsibilities.



CONCERNS HAVE SHIFTED FROM FAILURE TO SUSTAINABILITY

The big fear used to be that one career-ending incident. In 2026, it's the simpler question: Can we keep this up?

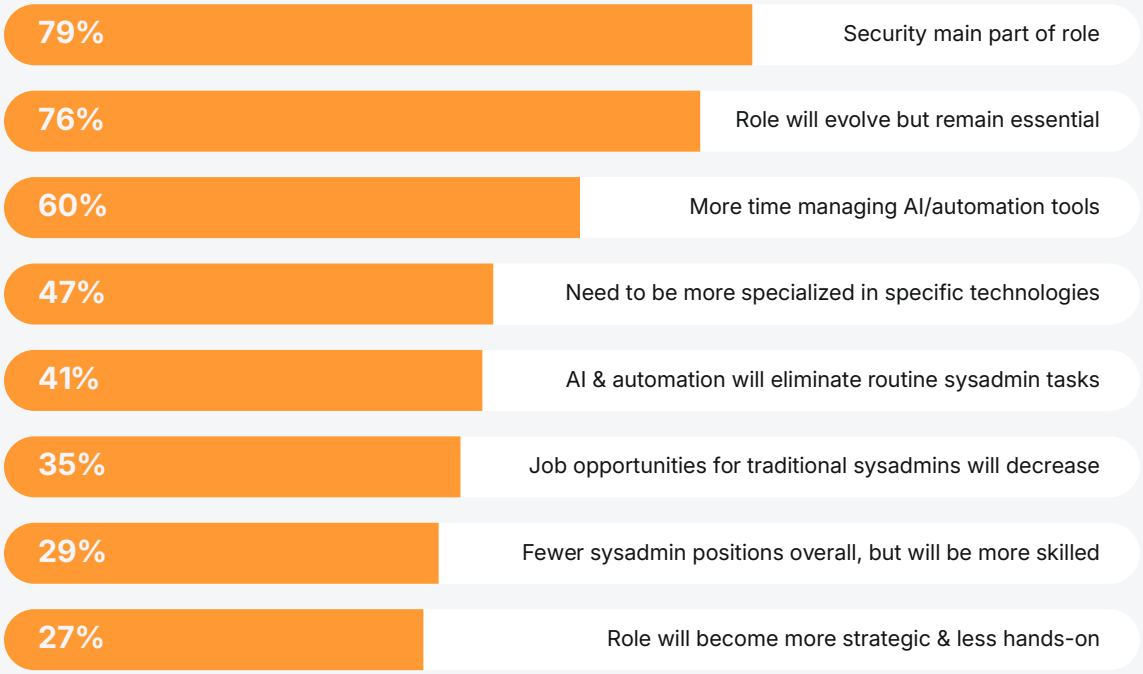
To make the work sustainable, sysadmins expect more security responsibility, more time managing automation and AI, and fewer pure "hands-on" tasks. Rather than seeing that shift as a loss, most view it as an evolution of the role toward less low-leverage work and more ownership of oversight, judgment, and risk.

Think of it as natural selection but with more dashboards.

CHART 06

HOW WILL NEW TECHNOLOGY AFFECT YOUR ROLE?

Sysadmins anticipate transformation, not replacement; evolving tech means an evolving role, with some changes likely to have bigger impacts than others



AUTOMATION & TOOLS

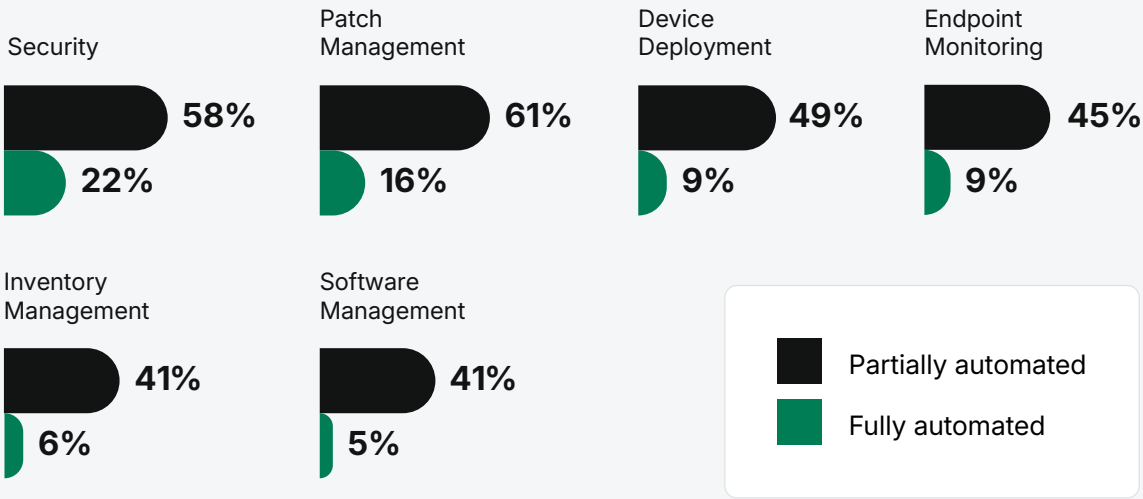
Automation is where sysadmins still see daylight.

It's already doing real work in patching and security, and that's the appeal: Let the repeatable, high-risk stuff run automatically to free up humans for tasks that call for better judgment.

CHART 07

WHAT'S BEING AUTOMATED

Full automation remains elusive for sysadmins who otherwise partially automate more and more of their core tasks.



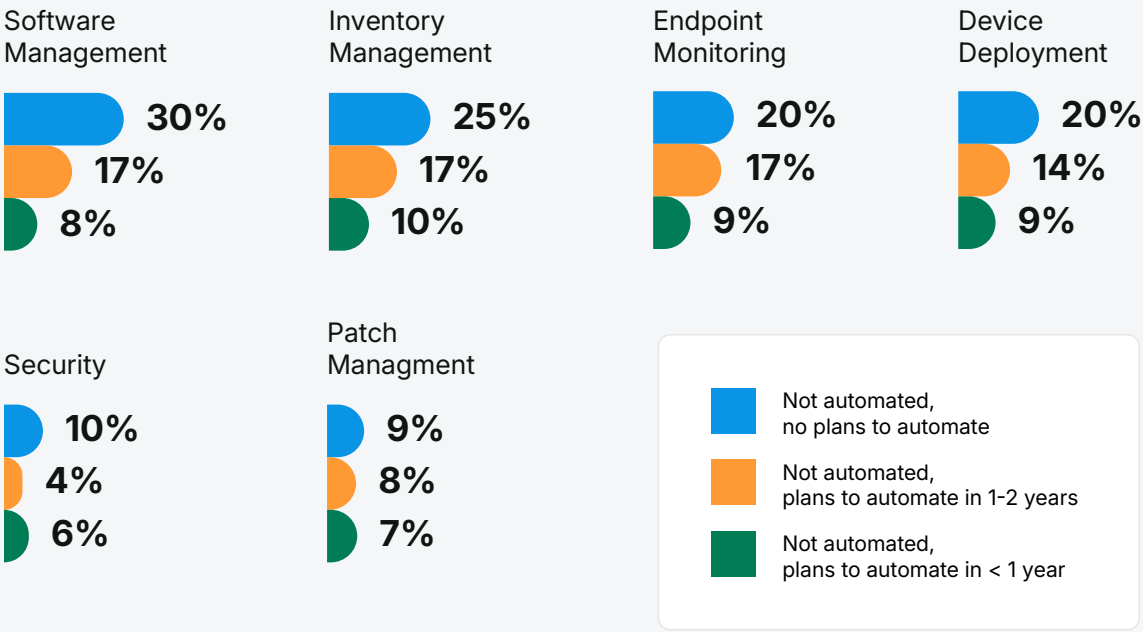
SOME TASKS STILL AREN'T WORTH AUTOMATING (YET)

Automation is growing, but a few areas are still manual. Often, it boils down to triage: If the payoff is quiet and nothing's actively on fire, it's harder to win the buy-in to automate it.

CHART 08

WHAT'S NOT BEING AUTOMATED

Sysadmins remain wary of, or face hurdles to, automating all of their core tasks.



THE AUTOMATION GAP

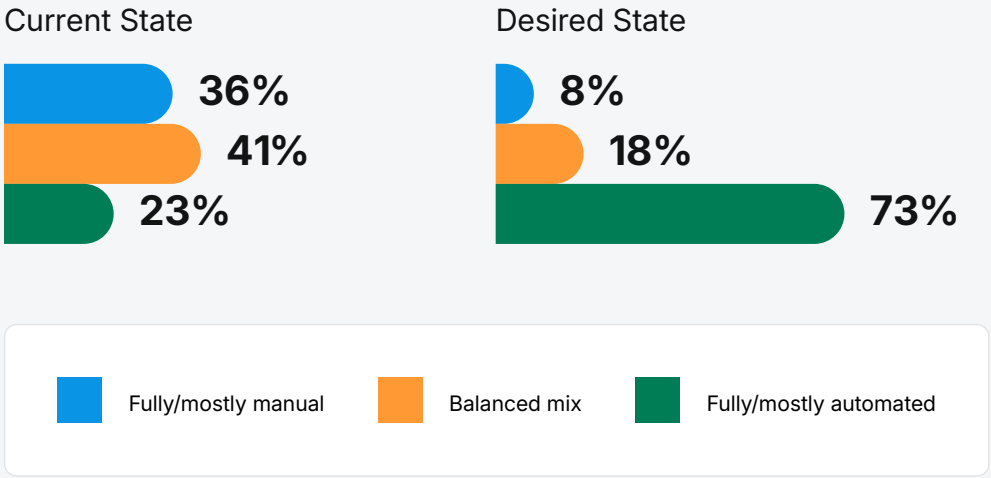
Right now, most teams are still in the middle when it comes to automation: 36% say endpoint management is mostly manual, and 41% are running a mixed setup. But the "ideal state" is loud and clear: 73% want endpoint management to be mostly or fully automated.

The gap stems from capacity. Building safe automation takes time, standardization, and trust that it won't create a new kind of outage. Until teams have that runway, automation stays stuck in the "some, but not enough" zone.

CHART 09

SYSADMINS WANT MORE AUTOMATION

Sysadmins see the value in automating a great deal, if not all, of their core tasks.



AI & AUTONOMY

Sysadmins see the upside of AI … but they also see the potential blast radius.

AI is welcome when it boosts visibility and speeds security/patch work. Interest drops when AI autonomy rises. In 2026, sysadmins prefer assistive AI to agentic AI for one simple reason: They're the ones stuck cleaning up the mistakes.

DESPITE THE HYPE, SYSADMINS WANT AI

The message from the data is clear: Sysadmins aren't anti-AI. Far from it.

An overwhelming majority in 2026 can already see concrete ways AI will improve their work.

CHART 10

SYSADMINS WELCOME AI

The percentage of sysadmins who see at least one way AI will improve their work.

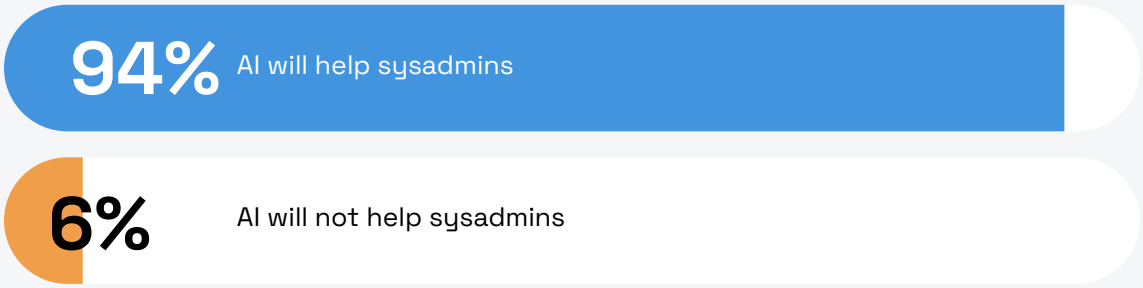
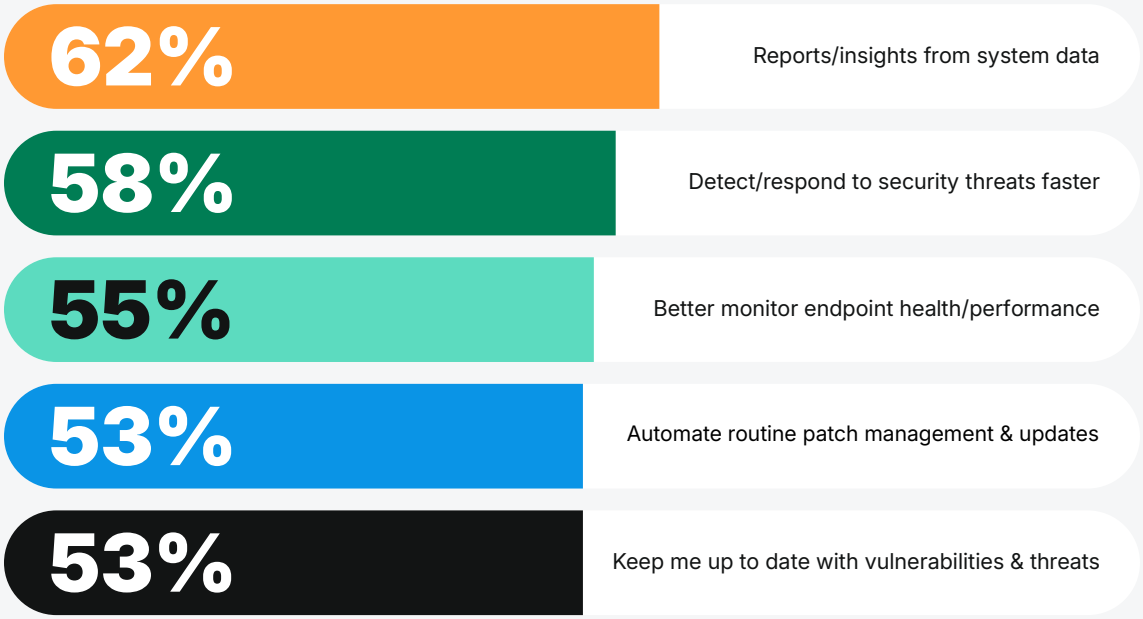


CHART 11

WHERE AI WILL HELP SYSADMINS

According to sysadmins, some daily tasks will benefit from AI more than others.



SYSADMINS ARE LEADING THE AI PUSH

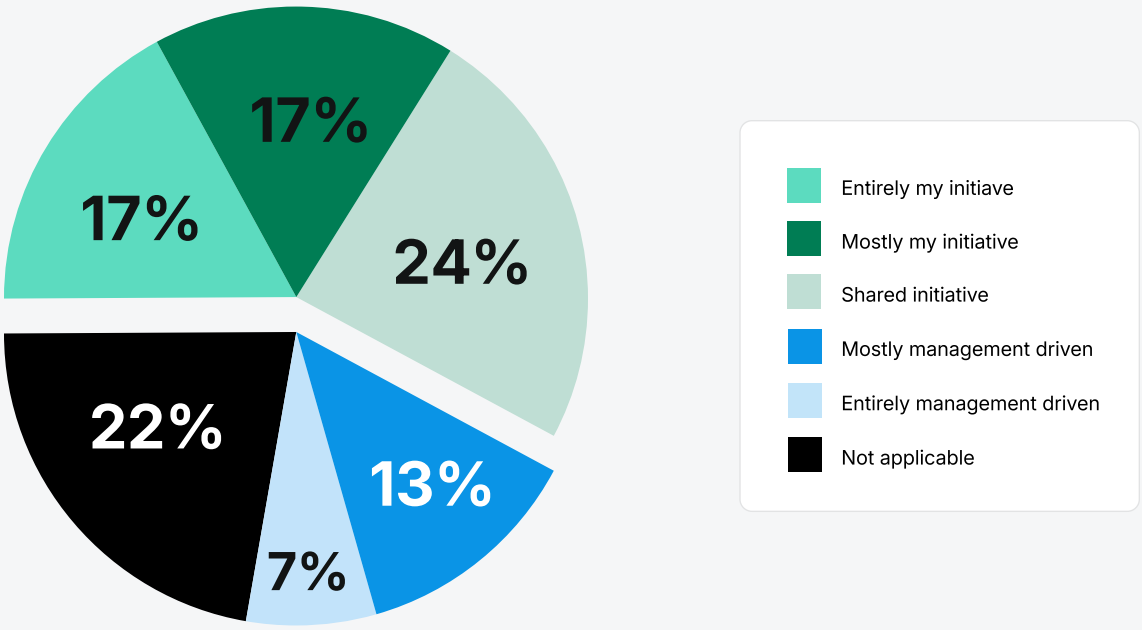
AI isn't being pushed onto sysadmins. More often, they're the ones leading the charge.

In 2026, 34% say AI exploration is mostly or entirely their initiative, and 24% say it's shared with management.

CHART 12

AI IS BEING ADOPTED DUE TO SYSADMINS' URGING

Sysadmins, either alone or in cooperation with management, are driving AI exploration in 2026.



AI BRINGS POTENTIAL (BUT ALSO CONCERNS)

Openness to AI doesn't mean trust by default.

The biggest fears here are simple: AI running unsupervised, making critical mistakes, and leaving sysadmins to clean up the damage … sometimes in ways they can't even troubleshoot.

CHART 13

FEAR OF COMPLETELY AUTONOMOUS TOOLS

AI has big potential, but sysadmins don't want to hand over full control. The percentages below show how many sysadmins are concerned about each risk of fully autonomous tools.

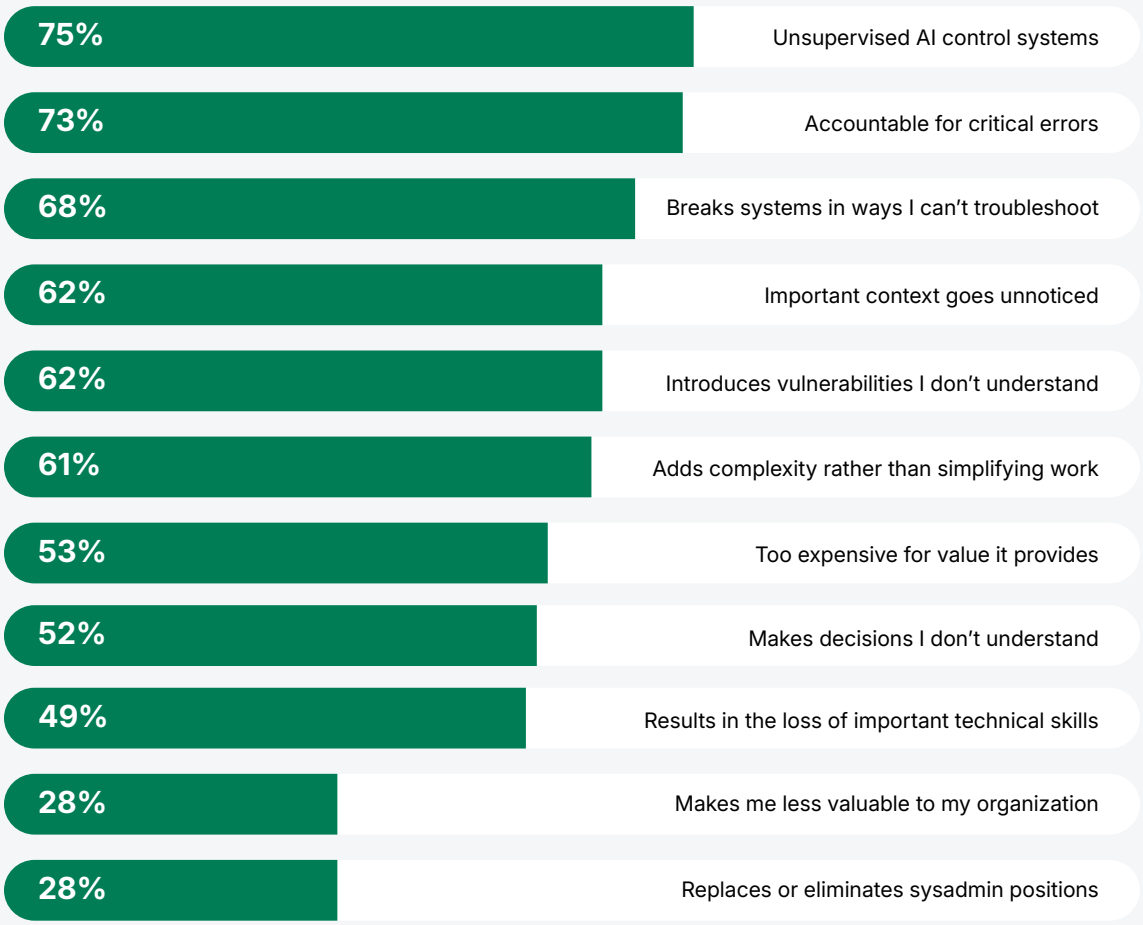
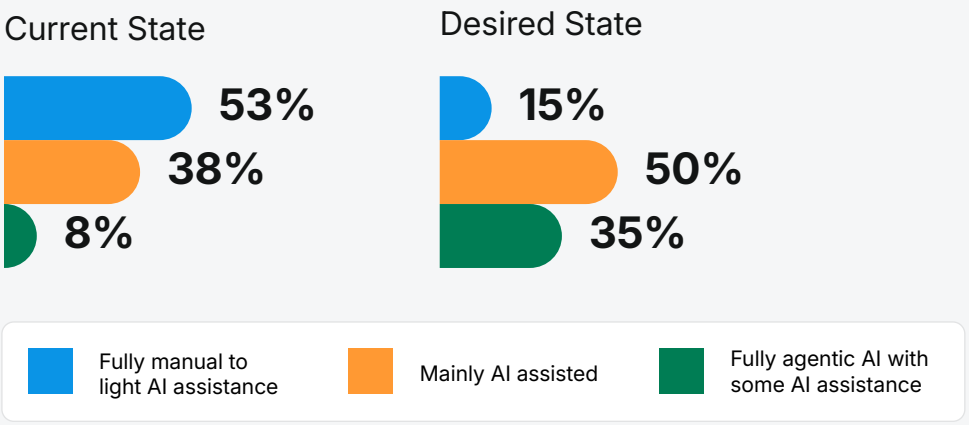


CHART 14

SYSADMINS WANT AI, JUST NOT FULLY AUTONOMOUS AGENTS

Sysadmins are happy to explore AI but want to maintain control through use of assistive technology, not fully agentic tech.



INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE



AUTOMATION VS. AUTONOMY IN THE AGE OF AI

BY MARK LITTLEFIELD, VP OF PRODUCT, PDQ

Sysadmins are practical about any new tool: Does it work, and will I get blamed for it later?

That's why the AI conversation gets interesting. Sysadmins aren't anti–new tech. They're often the ones introducing it. In 2026, automation adoption was high (especially patching, deployments, and routine maintenance), and 94% of sysadmins can name at least one way AI improves their work. In many orgs, sysadmins are driving that experimentation themselves.

> **But enthusiasm isn't trust. And automation isn't autonomy.**

Sysadmins want more automation (73% in their ideal future), even while some tasks still aren't on the automation roadmap (Chart 8). Not because they don't believe in automation but because it costs time and carries real risk when it misfires. The tone has shifted to: We know it helps, but we don't have the runway to do it safely.

AI follows the same pattern. Sysadmins see value in analysis, reporting, security oversight, and pattern recognition (Chart 11), and many are leading adoption (Chart 12). What they don't want is fully autonomous systems without guardrails (Charts 13–14).

In a world where sysadmins own outcomes, agentic tools concetrate responsibility rather than removing it. So the bar is clear: assistive, transparent, predictable, and reversible. The opportunity isn't to push past caution. It's to design for it … and earn trust one workflow at a time.

CONCLUSION

SYSADMINS ARE SHAPING WHAT COMES NEXT

Sysadmins aren't resisting change. They're the ones deciding what actually ships.

- They're **driving automation** and **test-driving AI**, then keeping what helps and rejecting what adds risk or noise.
- The job is **shifting upward** with less manual execution and more security, oversight, and judgment.
- They're not asking for replacements. They're asking for leverage through automation and assistive AI that keeps them in the driver's seat.

THE UPSIDE: BETTER WORK, FEWER BREAKING POINTS

Stress is real, but there's still leverage.

Automation, assistive AI, and modern autonomous endpoint management (AEM) won't magically make IT calm. But they can shave off the constant background load of repetitive tasks, manual checks, and cleanup work that eat hours without improving outcomes. That breathing room is where better decisions happen and where burnout stops feeling inevitable.

Sysadmins aren't looking for an exit; they're looking for relief. And they'll get it the same way they get everything else: one workflow at a time built by the people keeping the systems alive.

FEELING THE PRESSURE?

PDQ CONNECT CAN HELP

Security's still a top problem, but manual patching still doesn't scale. That tension doesn't resolve itself.

PDQ Connect handles the overlap: Find what's exposed, then fix it automatically.

Run a vulnerability scan. See the highest-risk CVEs first. Use the recommended packages. Automate the remediation. Done.

> **The whole team can spend less time trying to isolate issues and more time on actually executing — and even stepping away from device management to focus on strategic projects and operational needs.**

Susie Strangfield
Director of IT, Oregon State University Carlson College of Veterinary Medicine

Oregon State University

Try PDQ Connect free

for 14 days to see for yourself.