Routes to the top

Insight & knowledge from today's credit leaders

2025

wade macdonald

INTRODUCTION

Chris Goulding, Managing Director

Chris has worked locally within recruitment since the late 1990's. Having spent 18 years with a corporate recruiter, holding a number of Director roles, he made the move to Wade Macdonald in 2018 to undertake the role of Managing Director.

Chris spent three years as Secretary of the CICM for the Bristol and West Branch, involved with both organising and presenting events for Credit Professionals.

During his 25 years in the recruitment industry he has seen huge changes in the way that head office functions are perceived within businesses and also the growing importance of those functions and their ultimate influence on the way that business decisions are made.

"Over the past 15 years, credit management has proven essential, especially during economic challenges like the banking crisis and more recently, the pandemic. These periods emphasised the need for efficient cash collection to maintain liquidity. Now, as we expect to enter a growth market, businesses must focus on optimising cash flow to reinvest and expand effectively. After speaking with numerous credit professionals, including CICM members, it's clear that credit control will continue evolving to meet the needs of businesses navigating recovery and future economic changes."

Zoe Jones, Senior Consultant
Temporary placements

Zoe Jones is a Business Manager at Wade Macdonald, having joined the business in 2018. She currently specialises in recruiting for transactional finance roles, which include credit control. She is very passionate about credit control recruitment having spent two of her years with us, solely focused on that area, networking with credit professionals at all levels.

Keeley Hamblin, Senior Consultant
Permanent placements

Keeley joined us in 2021 and has worked within the Accountancy & Finance team, primarily focusing on permanent non-qualified and part-qualified finance within transactional finance and Credit Control.

Having worked in customer-facing roles for over 10 years, Keeley is keen on building long-term relationships with both her candidates and clients.

Over the past few decades, the credit function has gained recognition as a crucial element of well-managed businesses, focusing on reducing bad debt and improving cash flow. As we approach 2025, the importance of Credit Control continues to grow, playing an increasingly pivotal role in financial stability and business resilience, particularly in the face of global economic challenges.

Credit Control requires highly specialised skills that differ significantly from other accounting functions. It's not just about collecting overdue payments; it's about cultivating relationships and building rapport with customers. The relationship between a credit controller and a client can often determine the success of payment collections. Effective credit management starts at the very beginning, by assessing the risk of potential clients. Deciding how much credit to offer, if any, is a crucial decision that can impact the business's cash flow and overall financial health. Additionally, the credit control team's ability to efficiently collect revenue is essential for businesses to reinvest, pay suppliers, and maintain sufficient cash flow for daily operations and payroll.

Ensuring compliance with a client's invoicing approval system is equally important. A small error in an invoice can have significant consequences, especially when many clients operate on a single monthly payment run. This means that if an invoice needs to be resubmitted, businesses could face delays of up to 60 days, which is untenable for many organisations relying on timely cash flow.

The role of Credit Managers has expanded considerably. In addition to the core functions of risk assessment and payment collection, today's managers are deeply involved in business partnering, delivering detailed board reports, managing key client relationships, and overseeing staff. Striking the right balance between chasing overdue payments and maintaining client satisfaction is an ongoing challenge, requiring both strategic insight and diplomatic skills.

To produce our report we surveyed over 100 local credit professionals to gain insight into how their roles have evolved and their expectations for the future. The findings underscored the critical importance of the profession, particularly during periods of economic uncertainty.

In the face of numerous challenges—ranging from the pandemic to inflationary pressures and global instability—credit professionals have proven their resilience and adaptability. They have become even more indispensable, particularly in safeguarding cash flow and ensuring business continuity. As market volatility persists, strong credit management remains a cornerstone of sustainable business success. When market confidence eventually returns, credit professionals will be vital in ensuring businesses have the liquidity needed for reinvestment and growth.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS

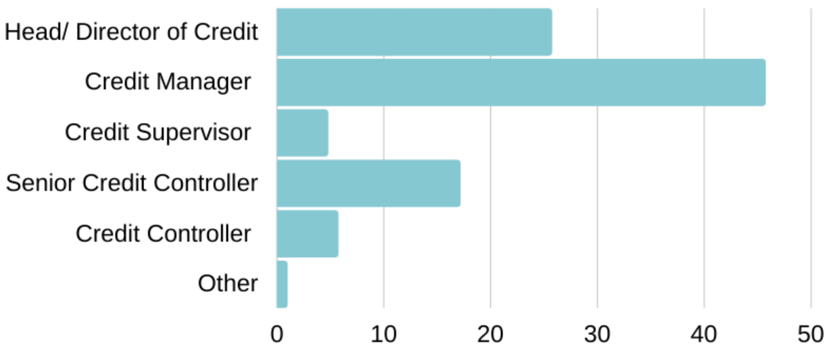

Figure 1: Job titles of respondents.

As you see in a later graph, the respondents of our survey were largely very experienced. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the vast majority of those who took part in the survey held staff management roles.

In fact 78% of respondents had teams to manage. 26% were "Heads of" or Directors, 45% were Credit Managers and 5% were supervisors.

Our survey indicates that management roles within credit tend to be held by a slightly older demographic compared to other professions. Nearly 60% of respondents were over the age of 45, with 24% aged over 55. Only 10.5% were under 35, with the remainder falling between 35 and 44.

This data may suggest several things. Firstly, it could reflect the critical importance of cash management to businesses, where such responsibilities are entrusted to highly experienced professionals. Secondly, it may indicate that credit management is a fulfilling career, with long-term professionals reluctant to leave the field. Alternatively, it might highlight the need for greater efforts to promote credit management as a career path, to attract and develop the next generation of leaders.

Interestingly, unlike in previous surveys where one gender was disproportionately represented, our findings showed a much closer gender balance in credit roles. Of the respondents, 52% were male, and 46% were female. While our survey didn't provide data on how this distribution changes at different levels of seniority, LinkedIn data suggests that more than 60% of Credit Managers (and above) in the UK are male, indicating some disparity at higher levels.

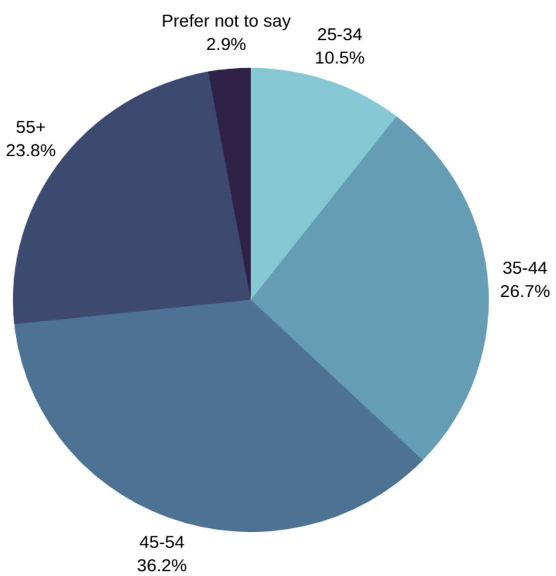

Figure 2: Age of respondents.

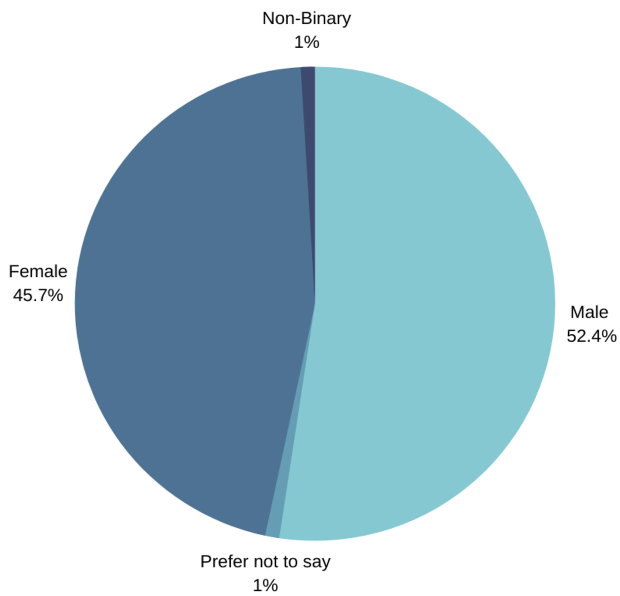

Figure 3: Gender of respondents.

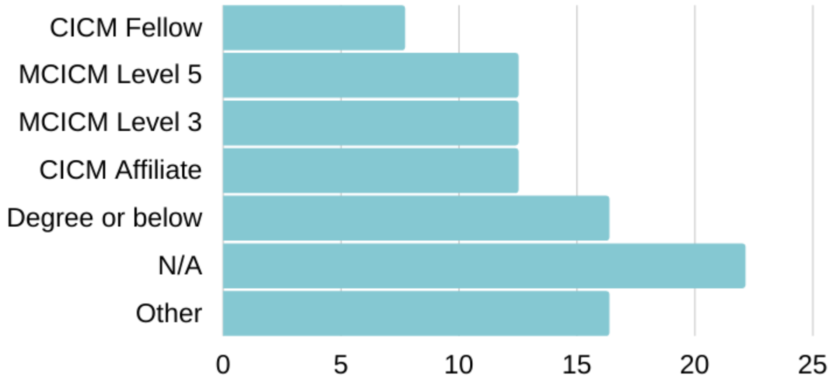

Figure 4: "What is your highest level of professional qualification within Credit?"

We asked three key questions regarding the Chartered Institute of Credit Management (CICM): how many professionals had studied it, how many businesses would support it, and whether those already in Credit Management saw it as an essential qualification for reaching senior positions in the future.

It was somewhat surprising to find that over 40% of respondents had neither studied CICM nor were members. While 22% of those surveyed were not in leadership roles, this was still a significant figure, especially when compared to similar surveys conducted with Finance and HR leaders.

A few possible conclusions can be drawn from this. One is that experience, rather than formal qualifications, is seen as the primary factor in reaching senior positions in credit management. It's also possible that CICM's presence was less prominent 25 or more years ago, meaning many of today's senior professionals may have advanced without this qualification. This is particularly relevant given that the majority of respondents were over 45.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that only 42% of respondents reported that their businesses would financially support CICM studies. Although CICM has made significant strides in raising its profile, over the past 15 years, there appears to be more work to do. It will be interesting to see whether more future leaders pursue formal CICM qualifications. However, this seems unlikely, given that only 36% of credit professionals see it as important to their career progression, coupled with the relatively low level of business support for the qualification.

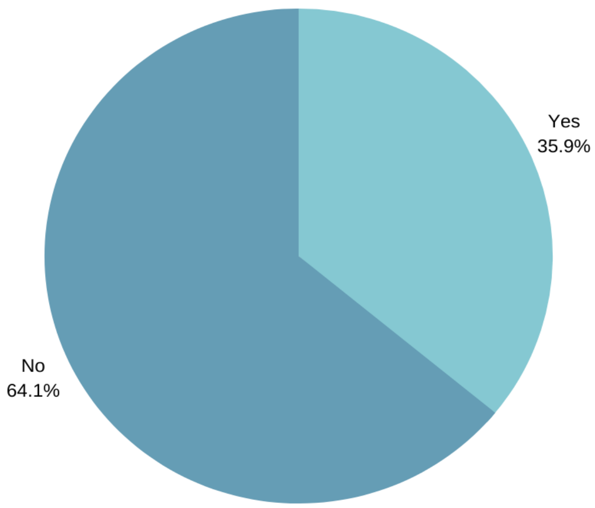

Figure 5: "Do you think achievement of the MCICM qualification is important to reach the top?"

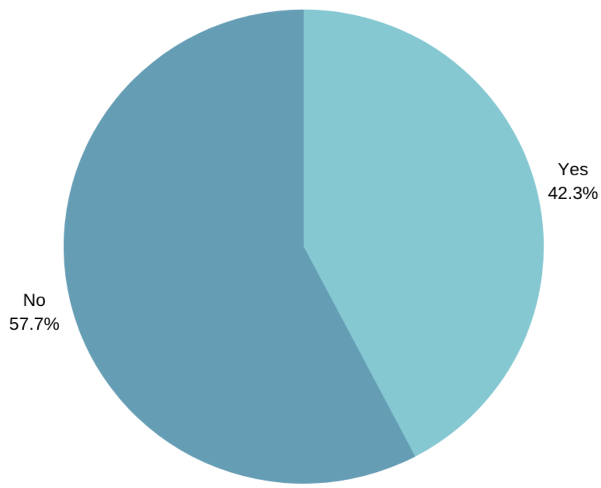

Figure 6: "Does your organisation provide financial support towards the MCICM qualification?"

"I can remember the pride I felt when I achieved the ICM graduate qualification... Career advancement is hugely fulfilling, and credit management offers so many different routes and directions, whether the route is generalist or specific."

Philip King
Former Chief Executive of CICM

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF CREDIT WITHIN BUSINESS

The survey highlights the significant standing of credit management within the broader business environment. Over half (52%) of respondents indicated that their most senior credit professional reports directly to either the Board of Directors or the Managing Director/CEO, reflecting the strategic importance of the role. The remaining 48% reported to the most senior finance professional, further underscoring the critical nature of cash management in business operations. These findings make it clear that managing cash flow is consistently a top priority at the highest levels of leadership, reinforcing its essential role in maintaining business stability and growth.

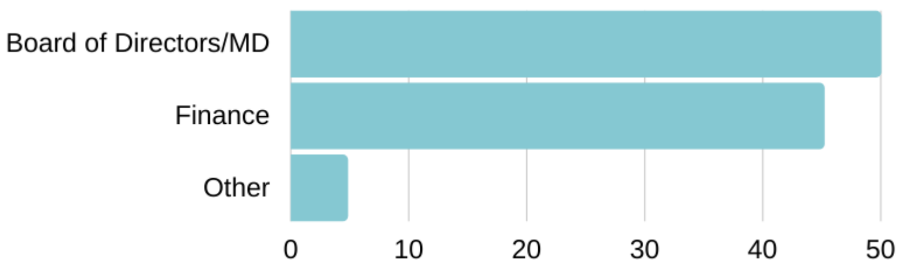

Figure 7: "Who does the most Senior Credit Professional report to in your organisation?"

10 YEARS OF CHANGE

Respondents were asked to select five priorities from a list of 18 options, reflecting their views on what was important five years ago, today, and what they believed would be their focus in the next five years.

The findings were particularly revealing. While three priorities—KPI-driven collections, debtor engagement, and team motivation—remained consistently in the top five across all timeframes, the shifts in other priorities were telling. These core aspects are foundational to credit management, so their stability is unsurprising. However, the movement of other priorities suggests that the role of the Credit Manager is clearly evolving, reflecting changing business needs and the broader economic environment.

10 YEARS OF CHANGE CONTINUED

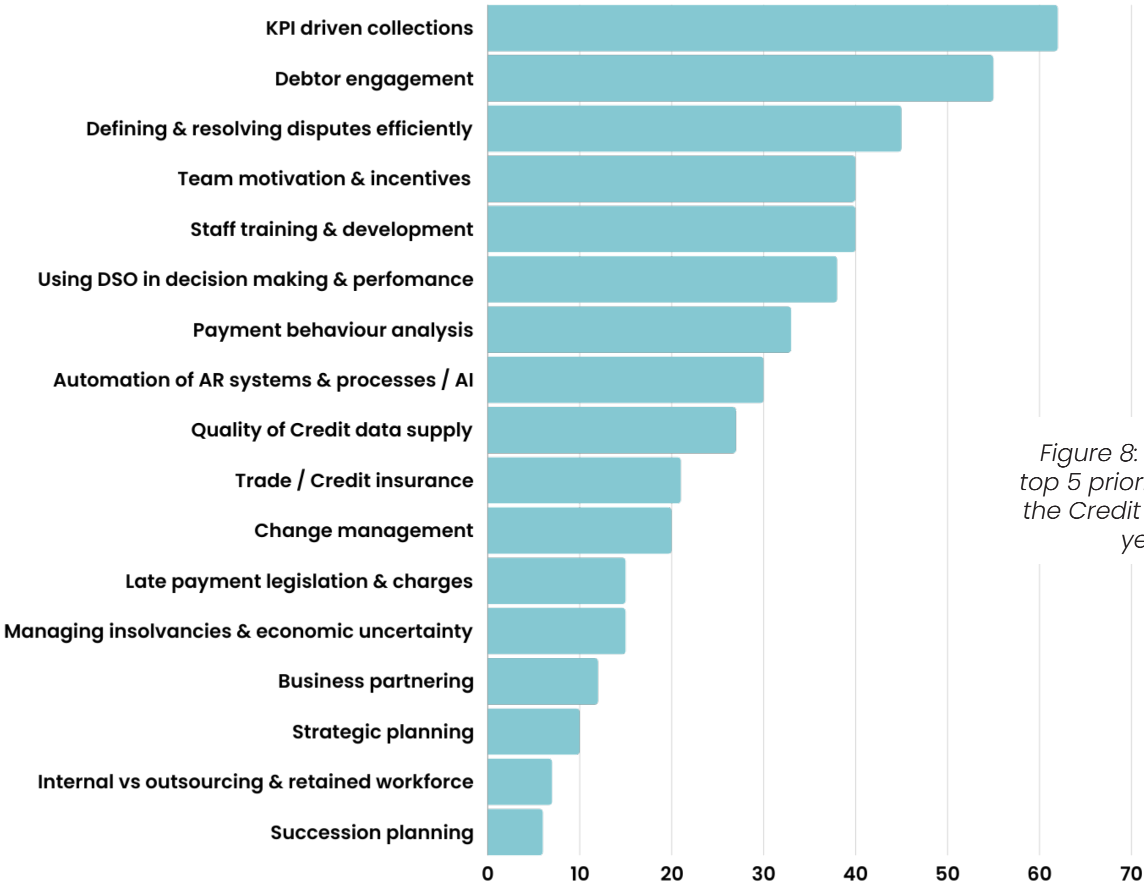

Figure 8: "What would the top 5 priorities have been on the Credit Control agenda 5 years ago?"

The most notable shift in credit management is its growing strategic significance, with business partnering and change management becoming more central to the role. Five years ago, strategic planning ranked near the bottom of the list of priorities, but it has steadily risen, now occupying a mid-tier position and projected to become the 3rd highest priority in five years. This suggests that credit managers will need to broaden their skill sets, moving beyond traditional responsibilities to embrace strategic decision-making and collaboration across the business.

Business partnering is also climbing the ranks, showing that credit managers are increasingly working closely with other departments. This collaboration enhances overall business performance by aligning credit decisions with broader corporate goals.

Automation and AI are perhaps the biggest changes. While barely on the radar five years ago, these technologies are now viewed as key drivers of future success. Business leaders anticipate that AI will fundamentally reshape how credit management is conducted, though not all credit professionals fully share this outlook. As automation rises, credit leaders will need to focus more on interpreting data and working with teams to leverage AI for improving cash flow and operational efficiency.

Conversely, dispute resolution is becoming less of a priority, dropping from a top concern five years ago to one of the lowest today. This shift could be attributed to automation reducing the emotional element of credit decisions or the enhanced collaboration between credit managers and other departments, leading to more informed credit decisions. Whatever the cause, it indicates a changing skill set for credit professionals, with less emphasis on conflict resolution and more on strategy and technology integration.

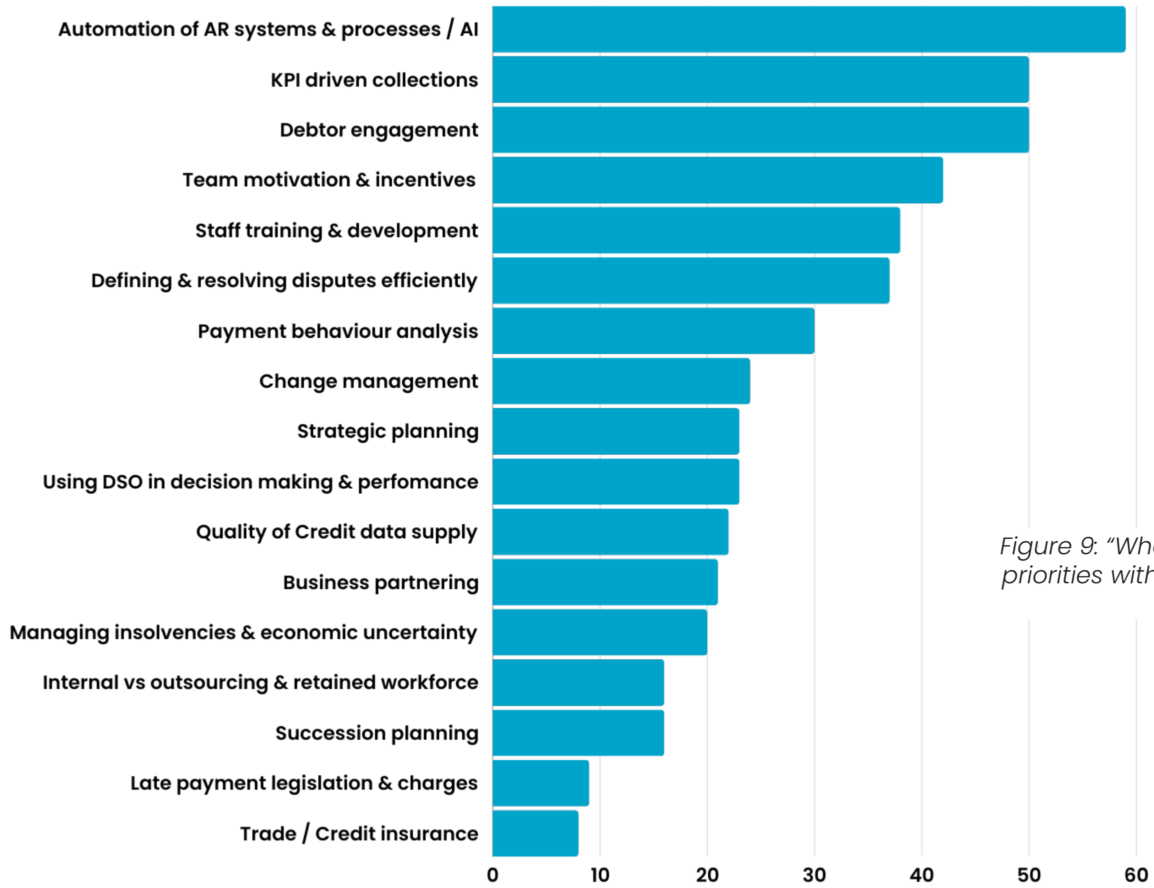

Figure 9: "What are the top 5 priorities within Credit now?"

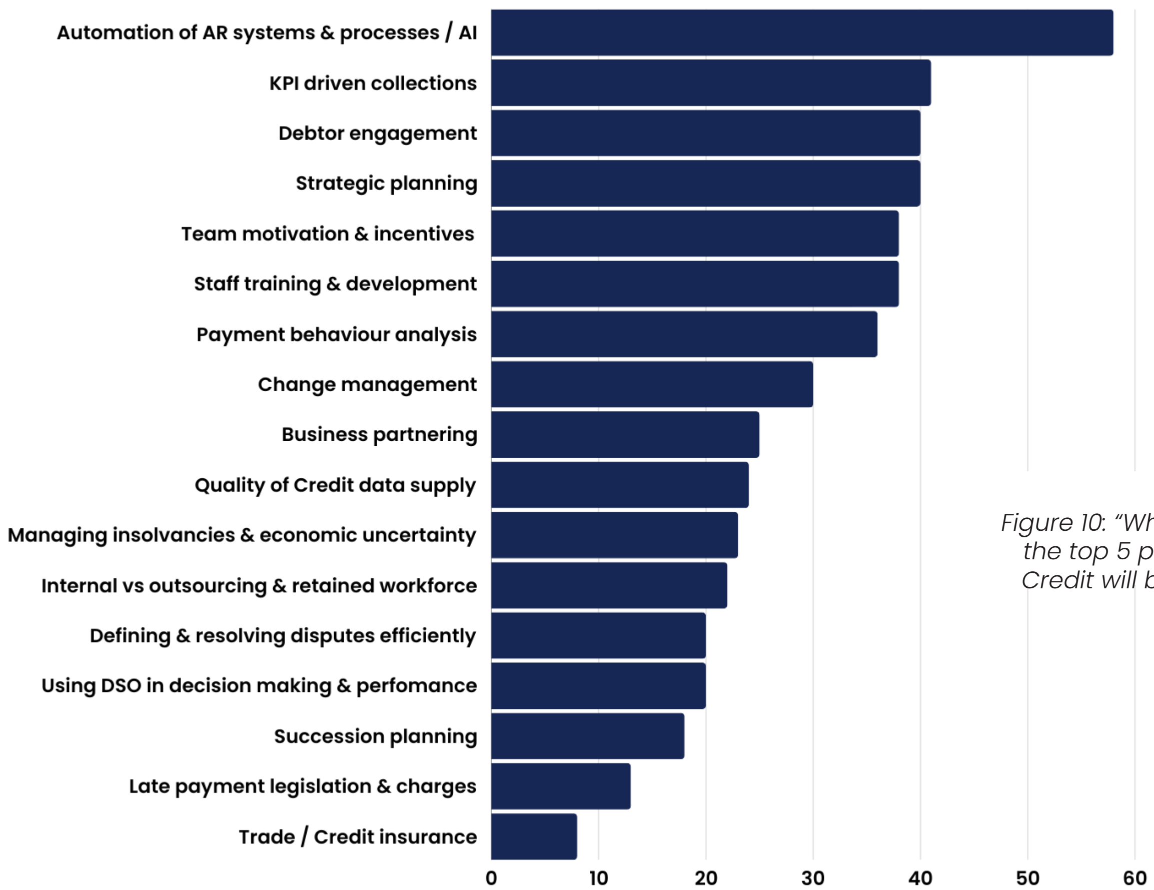

Figure 10: "What do you think the top 5 priorities within Credit will be in 5 years?"

At the bottom, we see that surprisingly that succession planning has never been a priority. This causes a degree of surprise because the credit population is ageing. However, it also possibly confirms our initial thoughts that those in credit management do not wish to leave a profession they love! Alternatively, quite simply not enough people are choosing a career in credit in the first place.

KEY SKILLS TO REACH THE TOP

The top skills that credit professionals believe are needed to reach the top are problem solving, flexibility to adapt to changing business conditions, communication, process improvements, the ability to stay calm under pressure and staff management. This shows that a wide and varied skill set is required for a successful career in credit management.

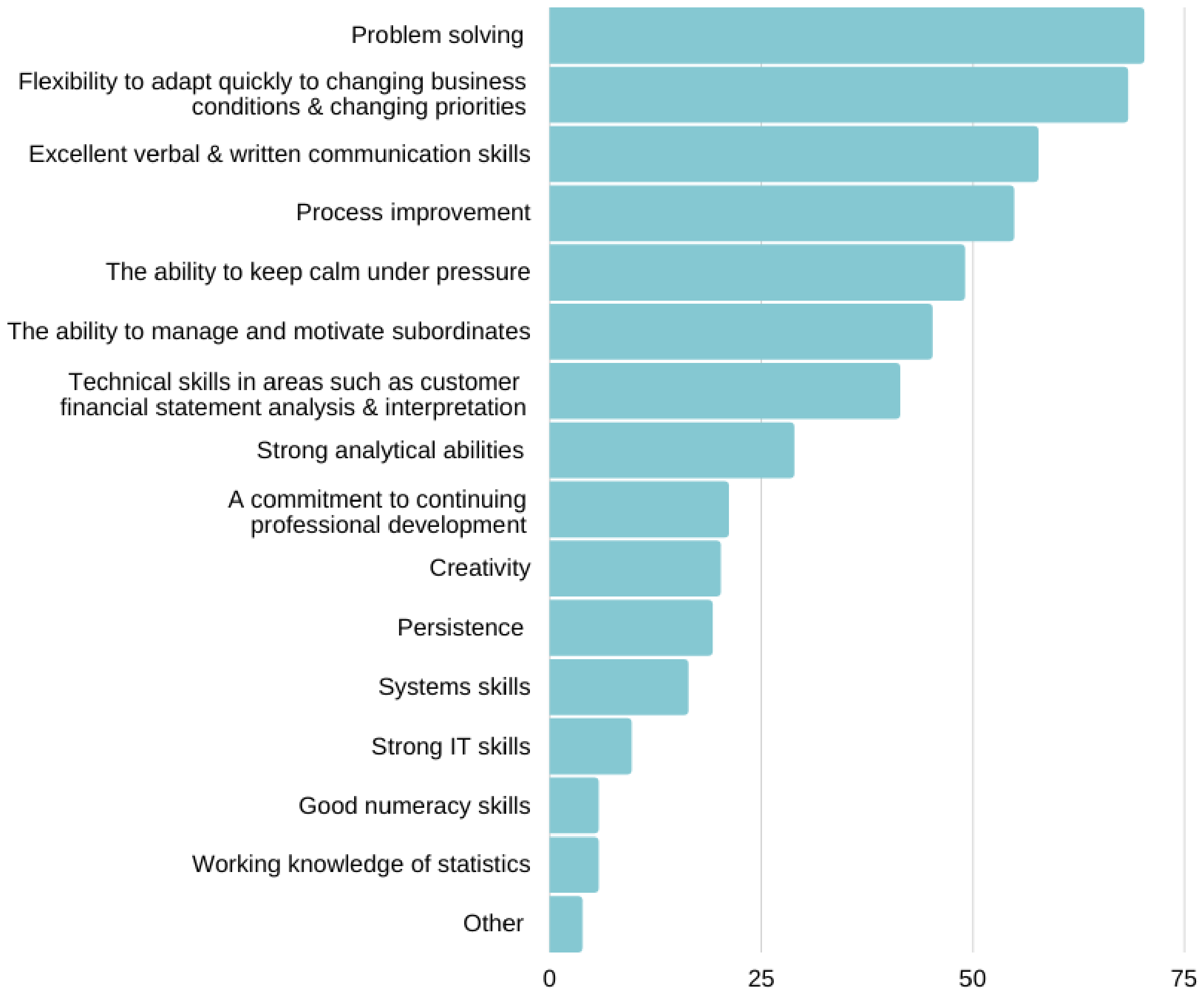

Figure 11: "What do you think the 5 most important skills are to develop, for those trying to reach the top in Credit Control?"

Over the past few years, credit professionals have had to navigate rapid changes in business conditions. The ability to adapt has been critical, with successful credit leaders focusing on relationship-building and collaboration rather than simply demanding payment. In today's environment, working with clients to address short-term challenges, while maintaining clear communication and a solutions oriented approach, has become a key strategy for ensuring collections are successful.

As we move beyond recent challenges, process improvement remains essential, especially in keeping pace with technological advancements like automation and AI. These innovations are transforming the way credit management operates, and credit professionals must be equipped to not only implement these tools but also to leverage them to improve cash flow and decision-making.

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BUSINESS PARTNERING

A key trend throughout the report has been that business partnering skills have become essential to the credit profession. We asked which areas of the business were mostly partnered with and overwhelmingly the answer was Sales (81%). As a 'sales' organisation ourselves it is easy to see how this trend has evolved. Pre-2008, it often felt that sales and credit management were going into battle, with credit management being seen as a "blocker" of deals. However, as we moved through the last decade and into this, it is clear that sales and credit management are working more closely together in order to get the balance between selling to anyone and those that will be able to pay.

Outside of sales, 20% said it was important to partner with finance and billings, 14% with operations and 12% with customer service.

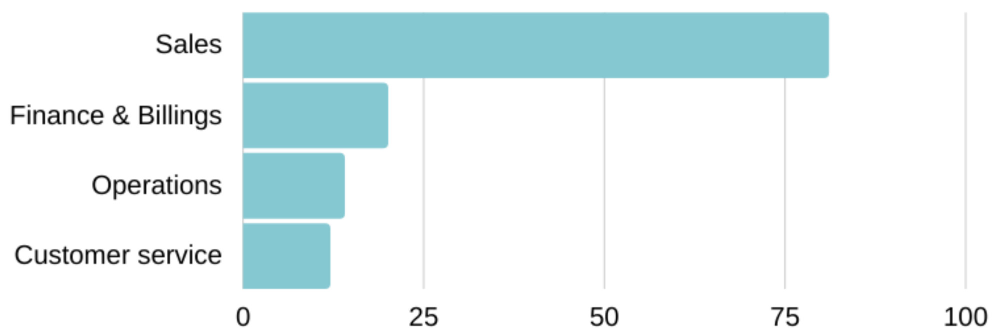

Figure 12: "Which departments do you feel Credit Control needs to partner with most closely?"

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

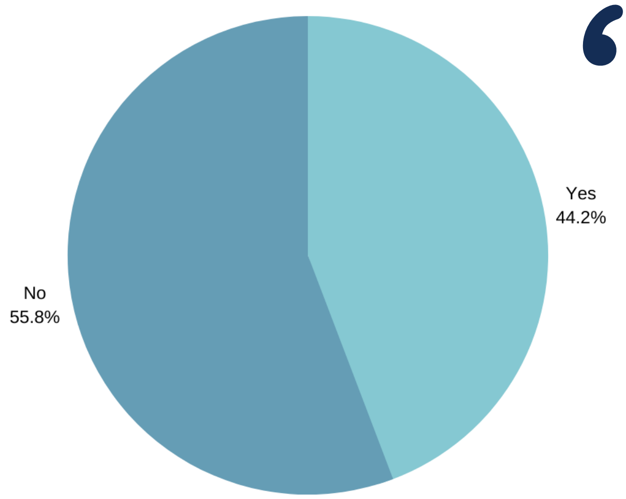

Figure 13: "Do you think that advances in AI will change the skills required within Credit Control?"

> *"Over half of European businesses (56%) believe that AI will significantly enhance their ability to manage late payments and optimise payment processes." This underscores how AI is viewed as a transformative tool in improving efficiency in credit management"*
>
> European Payment Report 2024

Having reviewed the data, it's clear that AI and automation are now viewed as the top priorities for credit professionals. In our recent survey, 56% of respondents identified these technologies as critical to their role today, with the same percentage predicting they will remain a priority in five years. Despite this recognition, only 44% of credit managers believe that their skill sets will need to evolve dramatically because of AI, a stark contrast to the 62% of finance professionals in our Route to the Top report who anticipated significant changes due to automation. This suggests that while credit professionals acknowledge the importance of AI, they may see its impact more in terms of process improvement rather than a wholesale shift in the skills needed to succeed.

That said, the role of credit managers is evolving in ways that extend beyond technology. Many professionals see the need to enhance their analytical and risk management capabilities, as well as business partnering skills. As credit management becomes more integrated with other business functions—particularly sales—customer-facing and negotiation skills are becoming increasingly important. Credit professionals expect to work more closely with sales teams, not only to manage credit risk but to support the broader goals of winning and retaining business. This shift towards greater strategic involvement is where their skill set will need to adapt most.

The increasing focus on business partnering reflects how the role of credit management is transitioning from a purely operational function to a more strategic one. As automation and AI take over routine tasks, credit managers will need to interpret complex data and collaborate more closely with other departments to drive decision-making. The need for cross-functional collaboration and strategic insight will push credit professionals to develop leadership and communication skills alongside their technical expertise. This transformation of the role suggests that while AI may not require dramatic changes to core credit management skills, it will demand that professionals balance technical and interpersonal skills to support business growth.

In contrast to other sectors, such as finance, where AI is expected to fundamentally alter the skill set, credit management appears to be evolving in a more nuanced way. While automation will streamline processes, much of the value in credit management will continue to come from human judgement, relationship management, and strategic thinking. Credit professionals are therefore likely to see their role as a balance between leveraging AI-driven insights and maintaining the personal touch that is essential in managing client relationships and ensuring business success. The evolution of credit management is not just about adapting to technology but about enhancing the skills that support a more strategic and collaborative role within businesses.

CREDIT MANAGEMENT A FULFILLING CAREER?

The final three questions of the survey were used to establish whether the respondents who took part in the survey had found credit management a fulfilling career.

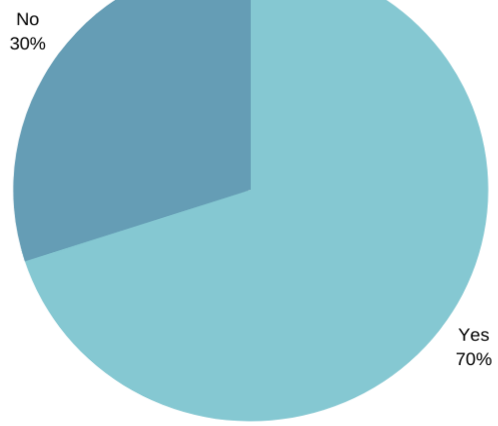

Figure 14: "If you could start your career again, would you still choose to work in Credit?"

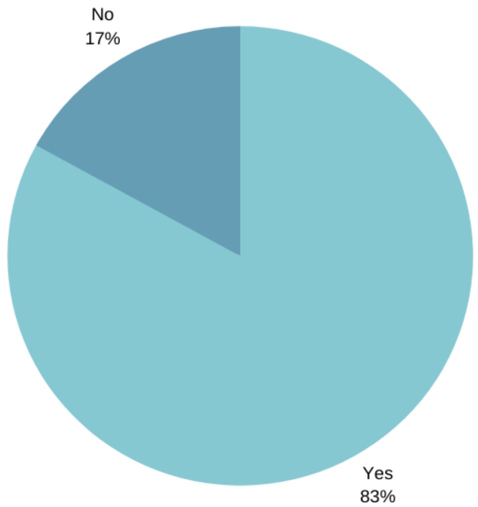

Figure 15: "Do you intend to still be in Credit in 5 years time?"

Of those who answered 70% stated that if they started their career again they would work in credit. This is around 10% less than those who we have asked in general finance or HR, where the feeling was that the core roles had actually seen more evolution than credit. However, 83% did say that they felt they would still be working in credit in five years' time, which suggest that, although many may have wished they had originally chosen a different career path, they were now satisfied with their career choice.

Of those looking to leave the credit profession there was no real trend to the roles that they said they wanted to be in with the highest being retirement!

THE FUTURE

Credit management is poised to become an even more critical function in the coming years. With cash flow remaining a key driver of business success, strong credit management processes will be essential to ensure financial stability and growth. As companies navigate increasingly complex financial landscapes, the role of credit management will continue to evolve and gain prominence.

Looking ahead, it's clear that careful planning is needed to develop the next generation of credit leaders. Current credit managers must actively engage with younger professionals, showcasing the potential of a fulfilling career in credit management. This includes promoting the strategic and impactful nature of the role, particularly as it increasingly involves business partnering and plays a vital role in driving overall business success.

As AI and automation become more integrated into credit processes, it is expected to become more attractive to the next generations. While core priorities, such as cash flow management and collections, may remain consistent, new skills will need to be developed. The focus will shift towards analytical thinking, business collaboration, and data interpretation. This transition highlights the need for ongoing professional development and skill-building to ensure credit management remains dynamic and future-ready.

CONTACT US

If you have any questions or comments regarding the report, please get in touch with us using the details below, or direct to our Managing Director, Chris Goulding on either:

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