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The State of Security Champions Report

2026



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Introduction

Welcome to the second annual State of Security Champions report.

When we published the first edition in 2025, our aim was to fill a gap. Security Champion programs were widely recommended and thinly documented, and most available guidance arrived as tactical playbooks or as maturity models buried inside larger Application Security frameworks. That report gave the field an independent snapshot: how programs are designed, what they focus on, and where they struggle.

A year later, and the core questions have evolved. Readers of the 2025 report told us in various ways that they were already persuaded of the Champion program model. What they wanted to know was what running one actually takes. So, this year we asked what a program costs, how much time it consumes for the owner and for the Champions, how Champions are recruited and recognized, and what happens to engagement once the launch enthusiasm fades. Answering them took thirty-seven survey questions, up from roughly ten last year.

Our goals for this edition:

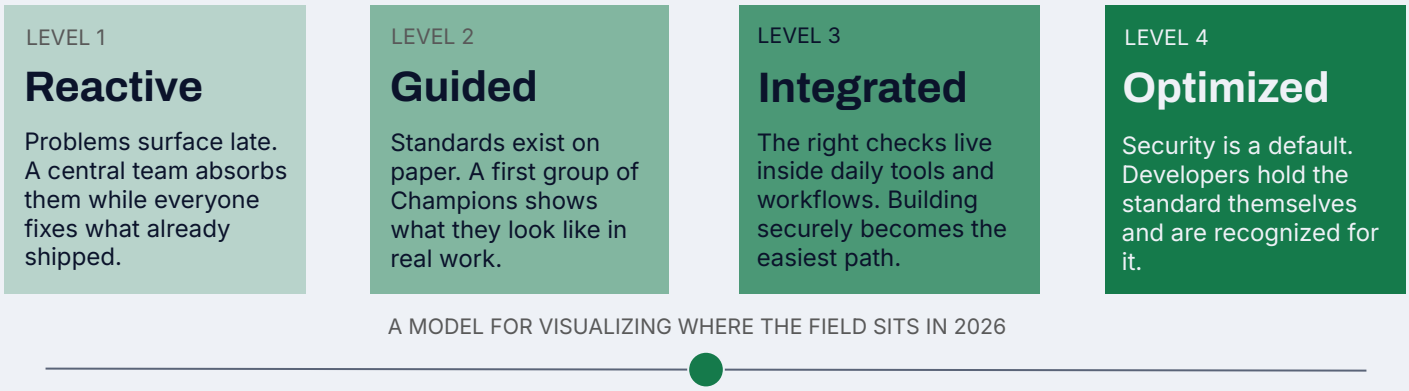
- Establish what resources a Champion program requires in practice.
- Identify what separates programs that sustain engagement from those that lose it.
- Track how the picture has changed since our first edition.

The findings draw on survey responses from 34 program owners and security leaders, analyzed alongside external benchmarks including BSIMM16 and Layer 8's Champions Impact Report 2026. Where our data can be compared with 2025, we show the comparison and explain any difference in how the question was asked. Where a finding is new this year, we say so.

How this report is organized

The State of Security Champions report comes in four parts. Part I describes the current state of Champion programs: who runs them, how far they reach, and what they focus on. Part II examines what programs cost in budget and in time, the area where this year's data breaks the most new ground. Part III covers the mechanics of running one: structure, engagement, measurement, and the challenges owners rate as hardest. Part IV sets our findings against industry benchmarks and turns them into guidance you can apply at your program's stage.

FIGURE 1: The Katilyst Maturity Model



A MODEL FOR VISUALIZING WHERE THE FIELD SITS IN 2026

Most programs have established standards and a committed group of Champions. Far fewer have moved those checks into daily engineering workflows.

Katilyst's published model uses "allies" and "builders"; this report uses "Champions" and "developers" throughout.

A note on maturity

In Part IV, we read the findings against the Katilyst Maturity Model, published openly alongside our Security Champion Program Success Guide. We use it as a lens rather than a scorecard. We did not ask respondents to rate their own maturity and we do not assign a level to any one program. What the model gives us is a shared vocabulary for describing where a program stands and what makes the next step possible.

Executive Summary

What are Security Champion programs?

Security Champion programs enlist developers, engineers, and sometimes business-side staff to serve as local advocates for secure practices. Champions bridge the gap between security and delivery teams, helping peers adopt secure coding practices, identify vulnerabilities earlier in the software development lifecycle (SDLC), and embed security into everyday decisions. They extend the reach of the central security team without increasing its headcount.

What we found in 2026

Our second annual survey reached 34 program owners and security leaders, 33 of whom run an active Champion program. The shape of the population held steady from 2025: roughly three-quarters of programs are still less than four years old, and secure coding remains the near-universal starting point at **87%** of programs surveyed. What changed was our ability to see inside these programs. This year we asked about how they're staffed, how they're budgeted, and how they are run. Three findings stand out...

The 2026 survey

34 respondents
33 with an active program

37 questions
up from roughly ten in 2025

Jan-Aug 2026
covering activity in calendar 2025

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One

2 hours

The monthly Champion time commitment threshold, above which 90% of programs report their Champions staying engaged. Below this threshold, 25% of programs do.

1. Time is the scarcest resource, and the one that decides engagement.

Among programs that secure more than two hours of Champion time each month, **90%** report that their Champions are staying actively engaged (consistent attendance at events and regular participation in Champion activities.) Among programs asking for two hours or less, only **25%** do. This is the strongest relationship in our dataset. The same threshold appears in how owners rate the difficulty of sustaining engagement: **3.5** out of 5 above the “two hour” line against **4.4** below it, where a higher rating means a harder problem. Time management is also the dominant reason Champions disengage, cited four times as often as budget. The challenge we added this year, finding time to nurture the program, debuted tied for second at **3.8**.

Budget (beyond salaries and tooling) behaves somewhat differently than expected. Two-thirds of all programs operate at no budget at all or under $10,000 annually. Fully bootstrapped programs (no budget) report **22.5%** active Champion participation against **45.7%** for everyone else. Above the $10,000 threshold, spending more shows no correlation with effectiveness. These programs are constrained more by calendars than by budgets.

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Two

44%

Active Champion participation in programs their organization counts on to meet security goals. Programs sitting outside the strategy (with goals of their own) report 24% active participation.

2. Strategic position, and not scale, marks a mature program.

Our 2025 report found that larger organizations ran larger programs and reported higher confidence in program impact and staying power. This year's data reframes that. Neither organization size nor Champion count shows a meaningful relationship with reported effectiveness as measured by the respondent on our provided 1-to-5 scale. Programs which their organizations rely on to meet security goals report **44%** active participation, against **24%** for programs sitting outside the strategy with goals of their own, with a clear higher impact on reducing vulnerability findings. Where a program fits in the organization's goals predicts outcomes; how many Champions it has does not.

The cohort figures make the point concretely. Programs running 10 to 25 Champions report the second-highest effectiveness in the survey at **3.9**, while programs running 51 to 100 report the lowest at **2.3**. Organizations under 500 employees average **3.6**, against **3.0** for those above 5,000. Neither pattern is a clean line in either direction, and that is the finding: adding Champions and adding employees do not, on their own, move the measures that matter.

What strategic position does move is what a program can reach. Strategically aligned programs report an average impact on reducing vulnerability findings of **2.6** out of 3, against **1.9** for standalone programs - the widest gap of any outcome we measured between the two groups. A program that the wider security organization depends on gets access to the pipelines, the data, and the attention that produce results. A program running separate from security strategy competes for all three.

WHAT WE SEE

76%

of programs say their organization counts on the program to support meeting its security goals.

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Three

4.0

Measuring program impact, rated out of 5, is the hardest program challenge for the second year running.

The programs delivering measurable value are the ones given time, position, and evidence.

3. Measuring impact remains the hardest problem, and the evidence for what to measure keeps strengthening.

Demonstrating program impact is once again the top-rated challenge, edging up to **4.0** out of 5 from **3.9** last year. Yet programs that track security posture measures report effectiveness of **3.7** against **2.9** for those that do not, and they are meaningfully more confident about the year ahead. Across the board, effectiveness and confidence now move almost in step: leaders who can see their program working believe it will keep working, and that link is far tighter than it was in 2025.

One focus area moved faster than any other. AI security now ranks above threat modeling in importance, **57%** against **45%**, and the appetite sits with programs one to four years old: **94%** rate it highly, against **25%** of programs four years or older.

The programs delivering measurable value are the ones given time and position to take action and produce evidence.

Methodology

To ground this report in real-world practice, we again surveyed Security Champion program owners and security leaders. The 2026 survey expanded considerably on the first edition, with the additions concentrated on how programs are resourced and operated day to day: budget, time commitment, recruitment, recognition, curriculum, and engagement health.

Survey design: 37 questions combining multiple choice, multi-select, Likert-scale matrices, and open-ended responses.

Fielding period: January through August 2026, covering program activity during calendar year 2025.

Respondents: 34 program owners and security leaders, 33 of whom operate an active Champion program. Unless stated otherwise, all figures in this report are based on those 33 active programs.

Data handling: Multi-select options are reported as the percentage of respondents selecting each option. For focus areas, which moved from a checkbox in 2025 to a five-point importance scale this year, we treat a rating of "very important" or higher as in scope when comparing against 2025.

Limitations: Small sample size; findings are directional rather than statistically representative. Where we describe a relationship between two measures, we are describing an association observed in this sample, not a tested cause.

How to read these numbers

Ratings throughout this report use a 1-to-5 scale, where higher means more challenging, more important, or more effective depending on the question. When we compare two groups, we treat differences under half a point as suggestive. The findings we describe as strongest reflect the largest gaps in the data and hold up under scrutiny; the rest are worth considering as signals rather than conclusions.

Demographics & Respondent Profile

Our respondents skew toward practitioners who own program delivery: **42%** work in Application or Product Security, **30%** in Information Security, and **18%** in DevSecOps, with the remainder in Security Awareness and Software Development. This is a population close to the day-to-day mechanics of running a program.

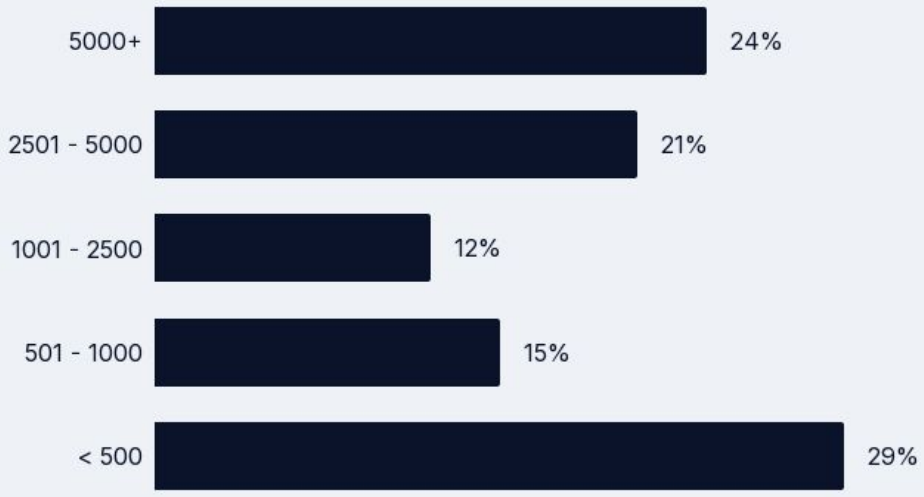
Respondents came from organizations across financial services, insurance, healthcare, logistics, software, and IT infrastructure.

Organizational size was more evenly distributed than in 2025. **29%** of programs run in organizations of 500 employees or fewer, while **57%** are in organizations of 1,000 or more. Last year **63%** of respondents represented organizations at that scale, so this edition gives better visibility into how smaller organizations approach the Champion model.

Who responded

42% Application / Product Security
30% Information Security
18% DevSecOps
9% Security Awareness & Software Development

FIGURE 2: Respondent Organizations by Size



N = 33 active programs

WHAT WE SEE

57%

of program owners represent organizations of 1,000 employees or more, down from **63%** in 2025. Smaller organizations are adopting the Champion model in greater numbers than our first edition captured.

Program age held remarkably steady year over year. **76%** of programs are less than four years old, against **73%** in 2025, confirming that this remains a young discipline with a continuing influx of new programs. A quarter of respondents have crossed the four-year mark, giving us a meaningful cohort of established programs to compare against.

FIGURE 3: Program Age



n = 33 active programs. The 2025 survey used four age bands; 6–12 months and 1–2 years were reported together.

WHAT WE SEE

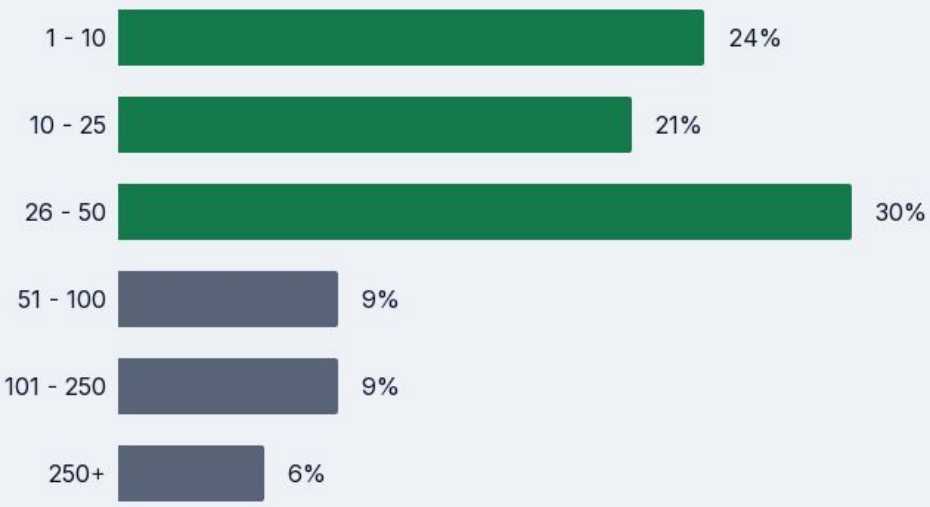
76%

A second year of data confirms the pattern: three-quarters of Champion programs remain under four years old. These programs are still in their first or second generation.

Champion network sizes cluster at the smaller end, with **45%** managing 25 Champions or fewer and **30%** in the 26-to-50 range. Across the sample, the median program runs roughly 1 Champion per 50 employees. Only **6%** operate networks of 250 or more.

Champion programs rarely begin with a formal mandate. A third of respondents started theirs because they had led or worked in one at a previous employer, and another third because a manager asked them to. The rest traced the idea to a conference talk, a peer's recommendation, or an article. For a practice that BSIMM now associates with the most mature security organizations, that is a strikingly informal set of origins.

FIGURE 3: Champion Network Size



n = 33 active programs. The median program runs roughly 20 Champions per 1,000 employees. This ratio is per employee, not per developer, and is not directly comparable with the BSIMM16 figures in Part IV.

WHAT IT MEANS

1 : 50

Champion networks stay small. Nearly three quarters of all programs run 50 Champions or fewer, and the median works out to roughly one Champion per 50 employees, a ratio that holds regardless of organization size.

Champions themselves are experienced practitioners rather than junior staff. **67%** of programs report an average of four to eight years of technical experience among their Champions, and **21%** report eight years or more. The Champion role is being filled by people with enough standing to influence their teams.

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Part I: The Current State

Program Reach

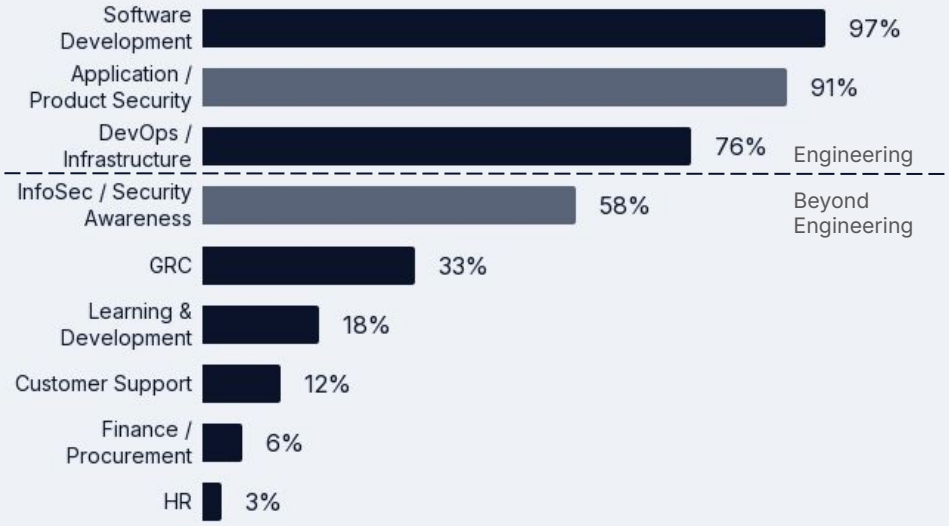
Objectives & Focus Areas

Program Reach

A program's reach is a function of where its Champions sit, not how many there are. A network of fifty Champions concentrated in one engineering org touches less of the business than twenty spread across engineering, infrastructure, and the functions that surround them. We asked our respondents which departments participate.

Engineering is near-universal: **97%** of programs include Software Development, **91%** include Application or Product Security, and **76%** include DevOps or Infrastructure. Past that boundary, participation thins out quickly: **58%** include Information Security or Security Awareness, **33%** include GRC, **18%** Learning and Development, **12%** Customer Support, **6%** Finance or Procurement, and **3%** HR.

FIGURE 5: Departments Participating in Champion Programs



n = 33 active programs. Multi-select; totals exceed 100%. Application Security and Information Security were added as options in 2026 and are excluded from year-over-year reach comparisons.

WHAT WE SEE

33%

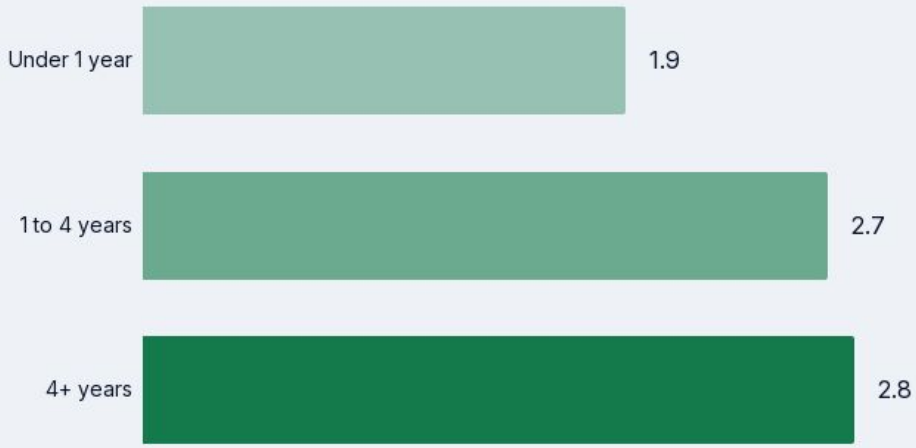
of programs include GRC, the highest participation of any function outside engineering and security. Below that, involvement falls away sharply.

Reach expands early, then stops

Setting aside the two security functions, which nearly every program includes by definition, programs under a year old reach an average of **1.9** additional engaged departments. Programs between one and four years reach **2.7**. Programs four years and older reach **2.8**.

Our 2025 report described departmental coverage as growing steadily with program age. This year's data refines that assumption: the growth is real, but it happens in the first few years and then flattens. Established programs are not reaching further into the business than programs half their age.

FIGURE 6: Average Non-security Departments Reached, by Program Age



n = 33 active programs (9 / 16 / 8 by cohort). Excludes Application Security and Information Security.

WHAT IT MEANS

2.7 → 2.8

Programs stop widening after their fourth year. Whatever drives expansion into the business happens early, and something other than time is needed to restart it.

Scale does not close the gap either. Programs running 101 to 250 Champions reach an average of **3.0** non-security departments; programs running 1 to 10 reach **2.1**. The difference across the whole range is under one department, and it does not increase steadily with size.

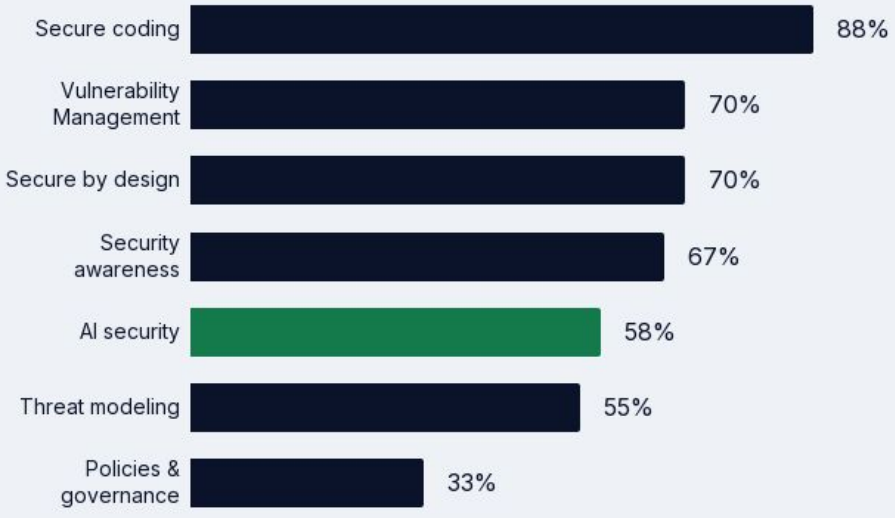
Growth in Champion numbers tells a similar story. **42%** of programs grew their network by 20 to 40% over the past year, and a further **15%** by 40 to 60%. But **21%** reported no growth at all, and only **9%** grew by more than 60%. Most Champion networks are expanding at a modest, steady rate rather than scaling sharply.

Objectives & Focus Areas

What a program asks its Champions to focus on says a great deal about what it expects them to change. This year we asked respondents to rate the importance of seven focus areas rather than simply check the ones in scope, which gives us a clearer picture of priority as well as presence.

Secure coding practices remain the anchor, rated very important or critical by **88%** of programs, the only area approaching consensus. Below it sits a tight cluster: vulnerability management and secure by design at **70%** each, and security awareness at **67%**. AI security follows at **58%**. Threat modeling reaches **55%** and policies and governance **33%**.

FIGURE 7: Focus Areas Rated “Critical” or “Very Important”



n = 33 active programs. Respondents rated each area on a five-point importance scale; bars show the share rating it 4 or 5. Secure by design and AI security are new options in 2026.

WHAT WE SEE

58%

of programs rate AI security as very important or critical, placing it above threat modeling in its first year as a survey option.

Programs cover an average of **4.3** of the seven areas. That average follows the same curve as departmental reach: **3.6** areas for programs under a year, **4.6** between one and four years, and **4.5** beyond four. Scope broadens quickly in the early years and then holds.

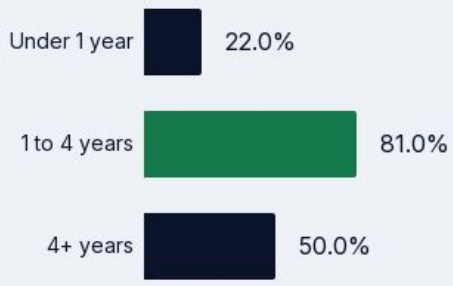
AI security arrives from the middle

The most striking movement in this year's data is AI security, which more than half of programs now rate as very important or critical, placing it above threat modeling in priority.

Where that appetite sits is more interesting than the headline. Among programs between one and four years old, **81%** rate AI security highly. Among programs under a year old, **22%** do. Among programs four years and older, **50%** do. The organizations absorbing AI security into their Champion programs are not the newest or the most established, but the cohort in between. These are programs with enough structure to take on something new and enough flexibility to change what they focus on.

BSIMM16 names AI as the leading force reshaping security priorities this year. Our data suggests the Champion model is one of the routes that shift is travelling.

FIGURE 8: Share Rating AI Security as "Critical" or "Very Important", by Program Age



n = 33 active programs (9 / 16 / 8 by cohort). The middle cohort is the largest in the sample; the outer cohorts are smaller (figures are directional.)

WHAT WE SEE

81%

of programs between one and four years old rate AI security highly, against roughly a quarter to a half of both newer and older programs, respectively.

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Part II: The Investment Question

What Programs Cost

Time as the Constraint

What Programs Cost

Almost nothing has been published about what a Security Champion program costs to run. Practitioner guides offer per-Champion budget estimates, and vendors offer pricing, but the field has had no picture of what organizations actually spend or how much of anyone's week a program consumes. We asked three questions: what budget was allocated last year, how much time the program owner and their team spend on it each month, and how much time Champions spend.

Budgets vary more widely than the conversation around this discipline suggests. **18%** of programs allocate $25,000 or more a year and **9%** exceed $50,000. At the other end, **27%** operate with no budget at all and a further **24%** on less than $5,000. What that spread conceals is that the line worth paying attention to sits at zero.

FIGURE 9: Active Champion Participation and Existence of Budget



n = 33 active programs (9 with no budget, 24 with any)

What a budget buys

Running without money has a measurable effect on participation. Fully bootstrapped programs (no budget at all) report an average of **22.5%** of their Champions as active, against **45.7%** for programs with any budget at all. That is one of the widest gaps in our data, and it holds up when we look only at programs under four years old (**22.5%** against **44.2%**) and only at programs with 25 Champions or fewer (**17.5%** against **53.4%**). The gap is not an artifact of bootstrapped programs being younger or smaller.

WHAT WE SEE

2x

Programs with any budget at all report roughly twice the active Champion participation of fully bootstrapped programs. The gap holds among young programs and small ones alike.

Running a Champion program on nothing is possible, and **27%** of our respondents are doing it. It appears to cost them about half their participation.

Above zero the picture flattens. Among the 24 programs with any funding, we found no relationship between the amount allocated and reported effectiveness, confidence, or participation. At that sample size the absence of a signal is weak evidence rather than a finding, and we would not read it as a ceiling. What it suggests is that past the first dollar, what a budget is spent on matters more than how much of it there is.

What the program costs its owner

Owner time is better understood as a cost than as a lever. **Two-thirds** of program owners spend between 8 and 32 hours a month on the program. **12%** spend under 8 hours, and **12%** spend more than 64, the equivalent of almost two full working weeks every month.

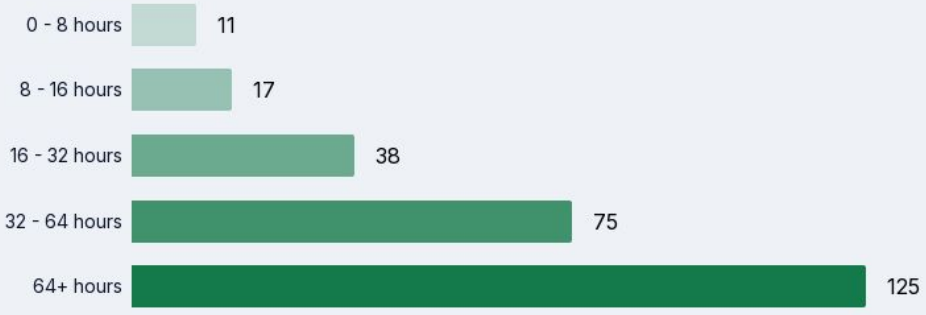
What predicts those hours is the size of the network being supported. Programs consuming under 8 hours a month run a median of **11** Champions. At 16 to 32 hours, the median is **38**. Past 64 hours, it is **125**. The relationship rises at every step, and it carries a straightforward implication for anyone planning to grow: the work of running a Champion program scales with the program's success. A network that doubles is a calendar that fills.

WHAT WE SEE

11 → 125

Median Champion count rises at every step of owner time, from 11 Champions at under 8 hours a month to 125 past 64 hours. The workload scales with the network.

FIGURE 10: Median Program Size, by Owner Hours Invested per Month



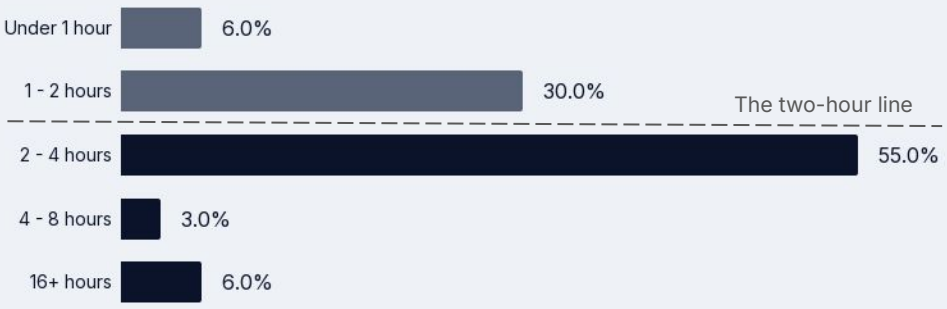
n = 33 active programs (4 / 11 / 11 / 3 / 4 by band). Values are the median number of Champions in programs at each level of owner time. The two largest bands hold three and four programs.

What time champions are asked for

The picture changes when we look at the time asked of Champions themselves. **55%** of programs ask for 2 to 4 hours a month. **36%** ask for 2 hours or less, including **6%** asking for under an hour. Only **9%** ask for more than 4 hours.

These are small numbers in absolute terms. A Champion contributing three hours a month is giving up roughly 2% of their working time. What our data shows is that the difference between two hours and three is the difference between a program that holds together and one that does not.

FIGURE 11: Champion Time Investment per Month



n = 33 active programs. No program reported 8–16 hours; that band is omitted.

WHAT WE SEE

36%

of programs ask their Champions for two hours a month or less. What happens on either side of that line is the subject of the next section.

Time as the Constraint

Among programs that secure more than two hours of Champion time each month, **90%** report that their Champions are staying engaged. Among programs asking for two hours or less, **25%** do. This is the strongest relationship in our dataset, and it is stronger than anything budget produces.

The same threshold appears in how owners rate the difficulty of sustaining engagement. Programs above it rate that challenge at **3.5** out of **5**. Programs at or below it rate it **4.4**. Active participation follows: **44%** against **31%**.

FIGURE 12: Programs Reporting that Champions Stay Engaged, by Time Commitment



n = 33 active programs (12 at two hours or less, 21 above). Respondents answered yes or no to whether their Champions are staying engaged with the program.

Two hours is not a magic number, and our sample is too small to treat it as a precise threshold. What the data supports is that somewhere around two to three hours a month, a Champion program crosses from something people intend to do into something they actually do.

WHAT IT MEANS

2 hours

Somewhere around two to three hours a month, a Champion program crosses from something people intend to do into something they actually do. No amount of budget substitutes for it.

Why the time is hard to find

Time is also the reason Champions disengage. Among programs reporting that their Champions are not staying engaged, time management was cited twelve times. Lack of budget was cited three times, stale content twice, and lack of interest once.

The constraint reaches program owners too. “Finding time to nurture my program” is a new question this year, and it arrived rated **3.8** out of 5, tied for the second hardest challenge in the survey, behind only measuring impact.

Layer 8’s 2026 report names lack of time as the leading barrier to starting a Champion program, then reports that no program already running cited it as a current challenge. Our data resolves that as it relates to technically-focused programs: time remains the binding constraint well after launch, for Champions and for the people who run their programs.

Respondents who have addressed it describe the same move. One told us to work closely with engineering managers to guarantee Champions get 10 to 15% of their time allocated in sprint planning. Another plans at least six months of program activity in advance so Champions can schedule security work around product deliverables. Both are negotiations with the calendar rather than with the budget.

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Part III: Running the Program

Structure & Operations

Engagement & Recognition

Metrics & Outcomes

Challenges

Structure & Operations

Champion programs are built out of a small number of recurring decisions: who joins, how often the group meets, how it stays in touch between meetings, and what Champions are given to learn. This section covers how our respondents made them.

Participation is overwhelmingly voluntary. **61%** of programs recruit volunteers only, **33%** use a mix of volunteers and manager nominations, and **6%** rely on manager selection alone. Layer 8's 2026 report puts voluntary participation at **83%** among security awareness programs, so the preference holds across both sides of the discipline.

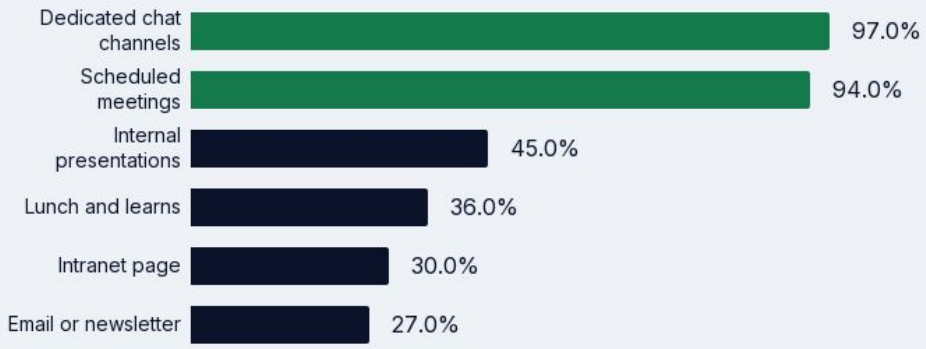
Volunteer programs also report better engagement: **80%** say their Champions are staying engaged, against **45%** of programs using a mixed approach. That gap narrows considerably once time is accounted for. Volunteer programs are more likely to secure two or more hours of Champion time each month (**70%** against **55%**), and among programs above that line the difference between volunteer and mixed selection nearly disappears. Selection method appears to matter mainly because of what it makes possible.

Most programs meet monthly. **45%** convene once a month, **33%** twice a month, and **15%** weekly or more often. No respondent reported a cadence longer than monthly.

Between meetings, two channels do nearly all the work. **97%** of programs use dedicated chat channels and **94%** hold scheduled meetings. Everything else trails well behind: internal presentations at **45%**, lunch and learns at **36%**, an intranet page at **30%**, and email or newsletters at **27%**.

Recruitment is even more concentrated. **97%** of programs find new Champions by word of mouth, more than twice the rate of the next most common route. Posts in chat channels follow at **52%**, then all-hands events and direct outreach at **33%** each. Champion programs grow the way they operate, through the people already in them.

FIGURE 13: How Programs Keep Champions Informed



n = 33 active programs. Multi-select.

WHAT WE SEE

94%

of programs run on a chat channel and a standing meeting. Every other channel is used by fewer than half of programs surveyed.

Curriculum and standards

55% of programs have a defined curriculum or Champion-specific learning roadmap. **79%** have secure coding standards their Champions share or enforce. Asked whether the program leans toward learning or toward action, **52%** describe a balanced mix, **33%** put action first, and **15%** put learning first.

Programs with a curriculum rate the challenge of providing ongoing training higher than programs without one, **3.4** out of 5 against **2.7**. The likely reading is that a roadmap makes the scale of the work visible. Programs without one have less to fall behind on.

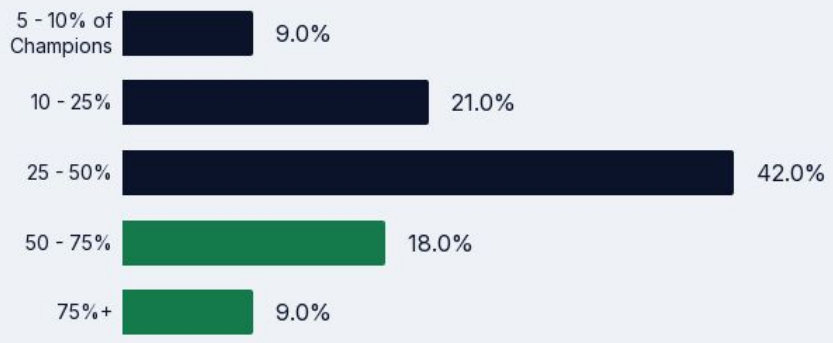
Engagement & Recognition

A Champion network only does its work if the Champions in it are participating. We asked what share of Champions are active (communicating in shared channels, showing up to meetings) and whether owners feel their Champions are staying engaged.

The answers are sobering. Only **27%** of programs report that more than half their Champions are active. **42%** put the figure between a quarter and a half, and **30%** report a quarter or fewer. A third of all programs say outright that their Champions are not staying engaged with the program.

The two measures agree with each other. Programs reporting that Champions stay engaged average **46%** active participation; programs reporting the opposite average **26%**.

FIGURE 14: Share of Champions who are Active Participants



n = 33 active programs. No program reported fewer than 5% active.

Asked why Champions disengage, respondents pointed overwhelmingly at time. Time management was cited **twelve** times, lack of budget three times, stale content twice, and lack of interest once. The constraint that runs through Part II runs through engagement as well.

WHAT WE SEE

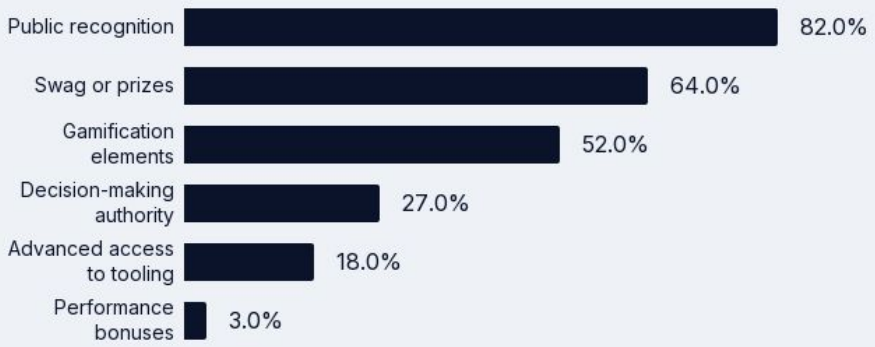
27%

of programs have more than half their Champions actively participating. In a third of programs, owners say Champions are not staying engaged at all.

How programs recognize Champions

Recognition is close to universal in some form. **82%** of programs use public recognition, **64%** use swag or prizes, and **52%** use gamification elements such as points, levels, or leaderboards. Further down: decision-making authority at **27%**, advanced access to tooling at **18%**, and performance bonuses at **3%**.

FIGURE 15: How Programs Recognize Champions



n = 33 active programs. Multi-select; totals exceed 100%. Write-in answers included conference tickets, newsletter features and certification funding.

No single method separates the programs that sustain engagement from those that do not. What does show a relationship is breadth. Programs using three or more recognition methods report **45%** active participation, against roughly **30%** for programs using two or fewer.

WHAT WE SEE

3+

recognition methods is where participation improves. Programs using three or more report **45%** of Champions active, against roughly **30%** for programs using two or fewer.

Metrics & Outcomes

Metrics are the mirror of program maturity. What an organization chooses to measure tells us what it values and what it is capable of observing. Our 2025 report found that early programs count activity while established programs measure posture. A second year of data says the same thing more clearly.

Across all programs, participation and attendance is the most common measure at **84%**, followed by security posture measures at **59%** with vulnerability remediation time and bugs found or fixed at **57%**. Departmental coverage sits at **44%**, Champion sentiment at **40%**, and improvement in developer experience at **15%**.

FIGURE 16: What Programs Measure, by Program Age

Metric	Under 1 year	1 - 2 years	2 - 4 years	4+ years
Participation / attendance	89%	83%	90%	75%
Vulnerability remediation time	44%	50%	60%	75%
Security posture scores	22%	67%	60%	88%
Security bugs found or fixed	44%	67%	40%	75%
Departmental / team coverage	33%	50%	67%	25%
Champion sentiment	66%	50%	20%	25%
Developer experience	0%	17%	10%	38%

n = 33 active programs; cohort bases are shown in the column headers.
Multi-select; columns do not sum to 100%.

Segmented by program age, the picture becomes a progression. Security posture measures rise from **22%** of programs under a year old to **88%** of programs past their fourth year, and developer experience isn't measured at all in younger programs, compared to **38%** of long standing programs. Champion sentiment moves the other way, from **66%** down to **25%**. Early programs count what they can see. Established programs measure the posture of what they touch.

WHAT WE SEE

22 → 88

Security posture measures rise from a fifth of the youngest programs to nearly nine in ten of the most established. Coverage measures fall over the same span.

What the choice of metric predicts

Last year we found that certain metric choices travel with higher confidence. That holds. Programs tracking security posture measures report effectiveness of **3.7** out of 5, against **2.9** for programs that do not, and they are meaningfully more confident about the year ahead. Programs tracking Champion sentiment show a smaller lift in the same direction. Programs tracking raw counts of bugs found or departmental coverage show no lift at all.

The eight programs tracking both a posture measure and a sentiment measure are the most confident group in the survey. Watching the system and watching the people appears to be a better combination than either alone.

61% of programs now have goals and objectives tied to KPIs, with a further **24%** working on them. Programs with KPIs defined report **44%** active participation, against **29%** for programs still developing them.

Effectiveness and confidence

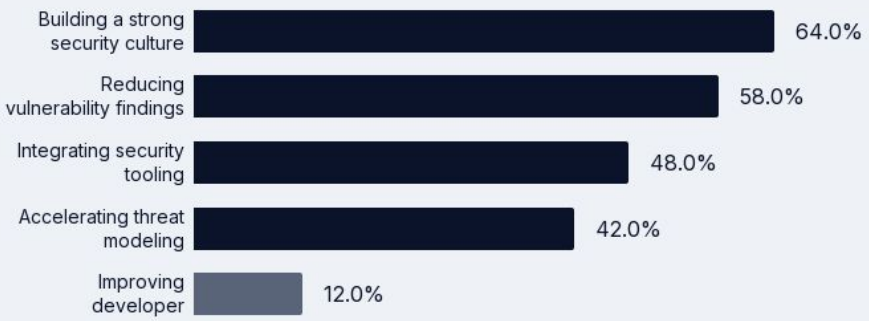
Respondents rate their program's overall effectiveness at **3.4** out of 5 on average and their confidence in its next twelve months at **3.6**. Both sit above the **3.2** we recorded in 2025.

More striking is how tightly the two now move together. In 2025 the relationship between them was moderate. This year it is strong: programs that rate themselves effective almost always rate themselves confident, and the reverse holds too. Taken with the metrics finding, the implication is practical. **Leaders who can see their program working believe it will keep working**, and what lets them see it is the measure they chose.

Where programs report impact

Asked to rate their program's impact across five areas, respondents put building a strong security culture highest, with **64%** reporting high impact. Reducing vulnerability findings and integrating security tooling follow at **58%** and **48%** each, respectively, then accelerating threat modeling at **42%**.

FIGURE 17: Areas Where Programs Report High Impact



n = 33 active programs. Respondents rated impact in each area as none, low, moderate or high; bars show the share reporting high.

Improving developer experience sits far below the rest. **12%** of programs report high impact there, the lowest of any area we asked about, and only **15%** measure it at all. Champion programs are frequently pitched as a developer experience win, and this is the one claim our data does not support. Whether that reflects programs not delivering it or not looking for it, the gap is large enough to be worth a program owner's attention.

WHAT WE SEE

12%

of programs report high impact on developer experience, the lowest of any area, and only **15%** measure it at all.

Challenges

We asked respondents to rate five aspects of running a program from 1, not challenging at all, to 5, very challenging.

Measuring program impact is the hardest, at **4.0**, with **73%** rating it a 4 or 5. Sustaining Champion engagement and finding time to nurture the program tie behind it at **3.8**. Gaining executive sponsorship follows at **3.5**, and providing ongoing training is the least difficult at **3.1**.

Measuring impact was also the top challenge in 2025, where it scored **3.9**. A year of additional practice and a wider set of available metrics has not made the problem easier.

FIGURE 18: Challenge Ratings for Various Program Aspects



n = 33 active programs. Rated 1, not challenging at all, to 5, very challenging. Measuring impact scored 3.9 in 2025; the other four are not directly comparable year over year.

Finding time is new to the survey this year and arrived near the top. Read alongside Part II, the three hardest challenges in this survey reduce to two underlying problems: programs struggle to prove what they are worth, and they struggle to get the hours to do it.

Katilyst

Part IV: Benchmarks & Playbooks

Industry Benchmark Context

Playbooks by Program Stage

Conclusion

Industry Benchmark Context

Our survey describes 33 programs in detail. Two larger datasets published this year describe the surrounding landscape, and reading all three together says more than any one of them alone.

BSIMM16, published in January 2026, assessed the software security practices of 111 organizations. It has tracked Champion programs for years under the older label of “satellite,” a term the report notes has now largely given way to “security champions.” Across its data pool, 65 of the 111 firms run a Champion program, with a median network of 45 Champions and an average of 100.

The headline relationship holds and has sharpened. Among the highest-scoring fifth of firms, **96%** run a Champion program. Among the lowest-scoring fifth, **30%** do. Last year those figures were **92%** and **32%**, so the gap between the top and the bottom of the field has widened.

WHAT WE SEE

96%

of the highest-scoring software security programs run a Champion program, against **30%** of the lowest-scoring. The gap widened from **92%** and **32%** a year ago.

FIGURE 19: Share of Firms with a Champion Program (BSIMM16)



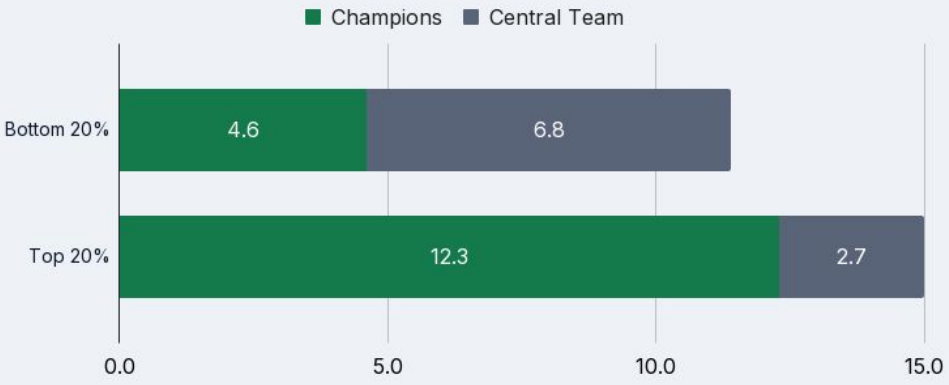
Source: BSIMM16, Black Duck, January 2026, Figure 13.
n = 111 firms. Not Katilyst survey data.

The staffing finding

The most useful number in BSIMM16 for a program owner is a ratio. Among the highest-scoring firms, there are **12.3** Champions for every 100 developers, against **4.6** among the lowest-scoring. Over the same span, the central software security group gets proportionally smaller: **2.7** members per 100 developers at the top, against **6.8** at the bottom.

The pattern is that mature software security organizations distribute security expertise outward and keep the center lean. Our own data points the same way from a different angle: neither organization size nor Champion count predicts reported effectiveness, while strategic position does.

FIGURE 20: Champions and Central Security Team per 100 Developers



Source: BSIMM16, Black Duck, January 2026, Figure 23. Firms grouped into quintiles by BSIMM score; the middle 60% is omitted for legibility. Not Katilyst survey data. BSIMM measures per 100 developers; the ratio in Figure 4 is per employee and the two are not comparable.

WHAT WE SEE

12.3 vs 2.7

The best software security organizations run more Champions per developer than anyone else, and a smaller central team. Expertise moves outward as programs mature.

BSIMM16 also finds that **84%** of firms assessed more than once have a Champion program, while **55%** of firms on their first assessment do not. Champion programs appear to be something organizations grow into.

One gap is worth naming. BSIMM credits its “create or grow a security champions program” activity to **49.5%** of firms, while **59%** have Champions in some form. BSIMM only credits an activity when it has sufficient coverage, formality and depth, so the difference between those two numbers is roughly the difference between having Champions and running a program. Our own data on curricula, KPIs and defined goals describes the same gap from the inside.

The awareness side of the discipline

Layer 8’s Champions Impact Report 2026 surveys security awareness Champion programs, a different population from ours. Half their respondents work in organizations of 20,000 employees or more, and **61%** of their running programs are three years old or more. Our sample skews smaller and younger, and ours is rooted in application security rather than awareness.

Where the two overlap, they agree. Layer 8 reports **83%** of programs are voluntary; we find **61%** volunteer-only and a further **33%** mixed. They report that **56%** of programs are a small part of someone’s role; we find two-thirds of owners spending between 8 and 32 hours a month. They report that only **7%** use a dedicated measurement tool and **26%** measure nothing at all; we find measuring impact rated the hardest challenge two years running.

On one point the two datasets resolve something neither could alone. Layer 8 names lack of time as the leading barrier to starting a program, then reports that no program already running cited it as a current challenge. Our data shows time remains the binding constraint long after launch, for Champions and for the people who run their programs. The barrier does not disappear at launch; it changes shape.

Reading the three reports together

No single dataset describes this field. BSIMM assesses software security initiatives and observes Champion programs as one activity among many. Layer 8 surveys awareness programs inside large enterprises. This report asks program owners what running a technical program actually takes. The table below sets the three side by side, and the gaps in it are as informative as the entries.

FIGURE 21: How the Three Datasets Compare

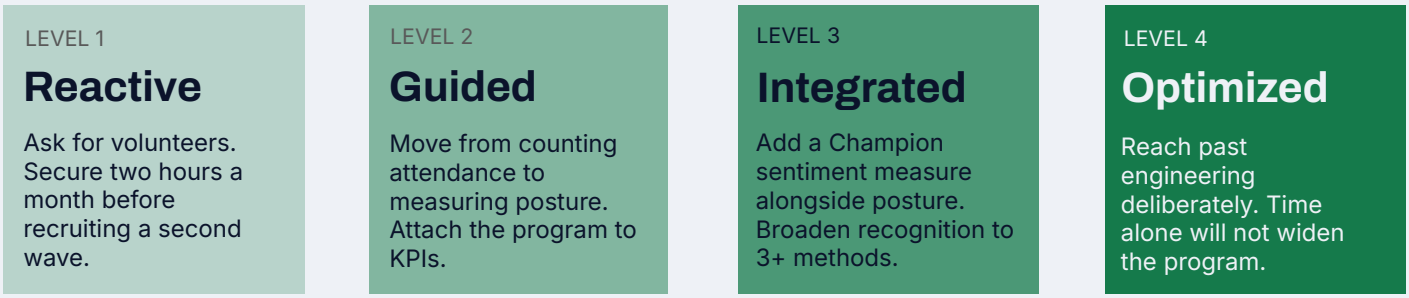
Dimension	This Report	BSIMM16	Layer 8 Report
Population	33 AppSec-led programs	111 software security initiatives	security awareness programs
Typical organization size	30% under 500 employees, 24% at 5,000+	not reported	half at 20,000+
Program age	76% under 4 years	not reported	61% three years or more
Participation	61% volunteer, 33% mixed	not reported	83% voluntary
Network size	median 26 - 50 Champions	median 45 Champions	not reported
Measurement	61% have KPIs; measuring impact is hardest challenge	posture activities rise with score	7% use a dedicated tool; 26% measure nothing

Sources: this report (n = 33); BSIMM16, Black Duck, January 2026 (n = 111); Layer 8 Champions Impact Report 2026. The three surveys covered different populations and worded their questions differently; rows are aligned by subject rather than by measure.

Playbooks by Program Stage

Throughout this report we have read the findings against the Katilyst Maturity Model. This section turns that reading into specific moves. We are describing what the programs in our data did, rather than prescribing a sequence every organization should follow.

FIGURE 22: The Next Move at Each Stage



Moves are drawn from what the programs in our sample reported doing. n = 33 active programs. The published model uses “allies” and “builders”; this report uses “Champions” and “developers”.

Reactive to Guided

The first move is people, and the second is their calendars. **Ask for volunteers**: 61% of programs recruit that way, and volunteer programs in our data report better engagement, largely because they find it easier to secure Champion time. Recruit by word of mouth, which 97% of programs use and which outperforms every formal channel.

Before adding a second wave of Champions, **secure more than two hours a month of their time**. Among programs that do, 90% report Champions staying engaged. Among those asking for two hours or less, 25% do. Recruiting past that line before you have crossed it produces a roster rather than a program.

Set up two communication channels and nothing more: a dedicated chat channel and a standing meeting, used by 97% and 94% of programs respectively.

Meet monthly to start; 45% of programs do. Write down secure coding standards, which 79% of programs have and which give Champions something concrete to carry.

Do not wait for a budget. 27% of the programs in our data run on nothing at all. Move above zero when you can, though: fully bootstrapped programs report 22.5% of Champions active, against 45.7% for programs with any funding, and that gap holds among young and small programs alike.

Guided to Integrated

This is the transition most programs in our data are working through, and the lever is measurement. Programs under a year old overwhelmingly count participation. Programs past four years measure security posture, with adoption rising from 22% to 88% across that span. Changing what you report changes what the program is understood to be for.

Attach the program to goals. 61% of programs now have objectives tied to KPIs, and those programs report 44% of Champions active against 29% for programs still developing them. Get the program named in the organization's security strategy rather than run alongside it: 76% of respondents describe themselves that way, and they report 44% active participation against 24% for standalone programs.

Build a learning roadmap, which 55% of programs have. Expect it to make training feel harder before it makes it easier — programs with a curriculum rate ongoing training more challenging than programs without one, which is what happens when the scale of the work becomes visible.

Integrated to Optimized

Few programs in our data have made this transition, so the guidance here is thinner and drawn from the programs reporting the strongest results, as well as our experience working with highly-optimized Champion programs.

Measure the people alongside the system. The eight programs tracking both a security posture measure and a Champion sentiment measure are the most confident group in the survey. Watching only the system tells you whether the work is landing; watching only the people tells you whether it will continue.

Broaden how you recognize Champions. No single recognition method separates the programs that sustain engagement, and breadth does: programs using three or more methods report 45% of Champions active, against roughly 30% for programs using two or fewer.

Then push past engineering, which is where the field currently stops.

A warning about time

Departmental reach expands quickly and then stops. Programs under a year old reach an average of 1.9 departments outside security. Programs between one and four years reach 2.7. Programs past four years reach 2.6. Scope broadens in the same pattern, and Champion network size does not close the gap.

The implication for an established program is direct. If your program has not widened in the last two years, waiting will not widen it. GRC participates in a third of programs, Learning and Development in under a fifth, and HR in one. Whatever reaches those functions is a deliberate act rather than the natural consequence of a program maturing.

Conclusion

Two years of data now describe the same discipline. Champion programs remain young, overwhelmingly voluntary, and thinly resourced. They are run by experienced practitioners in small networks, funded modestly or not at all, and measured with difficulty.

What this year's data adds is a clearer sense of what separates the programs that work. It is not size, and it is not spend. Programs that hold together are given three things: enough Champion time to make participation real, a position inside the security strategy rather than alongside it, and a measure that shows whether any of it is working.

The field sits between the Guided and Integrated levels of the maturity model. Standards exist and Champions are modelling them. Moving those checks into daily engineering workflows is the work ahead, and the programs furthest along that path are the ones already measuring posture rather than attendance.

Our thanks to the 34 program owners and security leaders who gave their time to this survey. This report exists because they were willing to describe their programs honestly, including the parts that are not working.

The 2027 survey opens in January. If you run a Champion program, we would like to hear about it.

Sources

BSIMM16. Black Duck, January 2026. Figures 13, 22 and 23; Part 9 data analysis.

Champions Impact Report 2026. Layer 8.

The Security Champion Program Success Guide http://www.securitychampionsuccessguide.org, CC BY 4.0.

The State of Security Champion Programs Report 2025. Katilyst.

Katilyst

No central team can reach five hundred builders. Champions can.

Katilyst designs the programs and builds the platform that turn a handful of motivated engineers into lasting change in how your organization builds software.

This report describes what separates programs that hold together from programs that stall: time, position, and evidence. If you want an objective read on where yours stands today, our Program Assessment looks at program structure, reach, motivational mechanics and impact reporting, and comes back with a roadmap for what to fix.

Book a program assessment - www.katilyst.com/demo

The Security Champion Program Success Guide is free and open to everyone at securitychampionsuccessguide.org. The 2027 survey opens in January.