

# Context



A letter from

# Maze

## Let's shape change together.

The research community has weathered a lot—shifting headcount, rising expectations, and constant pressure to prove value. Yet the work researchers do has never mattered more. AI can speed up execution, but clarity and judgment are what set teams apart in a crowded market. Research becomes powerful when it influences decisions at every level.

Over the past year, three shifts have stood out:

**Insight is becoming a leadership skill:**

80% of stakeholders want their research to be “strategically relevant”.

**Research creates value when it's integrated, not isolated:**

The strongest teams build relationships, not just reports.

**Systems of learning beat silos:**

High-impact orgs enable research at all altitudes with rigor and repeatability.

At Maze, our goal is to reduce busywork so you can focus on the uniquely human parts of research —framing problems, connecting teams, and shaping decisions.

These skills will define the future of product and innovation.  
We're proud to support the Learners community and sponsor Road to Research Week.



**Jonathan Widawski**

Co-founder & CEO, Maze



# Navigating a World That Won't Slow Down

If there was a consistent constraint throughout the day in Seattle, it wasn't just time—it was the feeling of time.

Everything is speeding up, but not in a clean or predictable way. The pace creates a strange tension: the pressure to move faster, paired with the persistent sense of being behind. It's easy to slip into overwhelm, to feel like you're reacting rather than choosing.

What stood out wasn't a push to do more, but a pull toward focus.



In one session, participants didn't leave with a long list of actions or frameworks. They left with something simpler: one thing to prioritize. One area to go deeper. One decision to commit to amidst the noise. It felt small, but it wasn't. In a context where everything demands attention, choosing less becomes a strategic act.

There was also a quieter layer to this conversation—an undercurrent of uncertainty about the future of the role itself. What does it mean to be a researcher right now? Where is the function heading? These weren't always spoken directly, but they were present.

And yet, naming that shared uncertainty shifted something. When worry is seen as collective rather than individual, it becomes easier to engage with it. Less like a personal shortcoming, more like a condition of the moment.

The takeaway wasn't to solve the pace of change—that's not within anyone's control. It was to navigate it more intentionally. To accept that context will continue to accelerate, and to respond not with more activity, but with sharper focus on what actually matters.

# Rethinking Value in the Age of AI

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If context is shifting everywhere, nowhere is it more visible than in the role of AI.

The question hanging in the room was clear, even when unspoken: What is my value if AI can do parts of my job?

It's a question that could easily lead to defensiveness or fear. But instead, the group approached it with curiosity. And what emerged wasn't a diminished sense of role—but a reframed one.

As execution becomes faster, cheaper, and increasingly automated, the center of gravity shifts. The value is no longer in simply doing the work, but in knowing what work should be done in the first place—and when it's ready to be put into the world.

In other words, judgment becomes the differentiator.

Researchers have always operated in this space, but the importance of that skillset is becoming more visible. Understanding what to build, identifying what matters, and recognizing when something is “good enough” are no longer supporting skills—they're core.



At the same time, there was a recognition that something critical risks being lost in the acceleration: deep thinking.

Speed has its advantages. Acting quickly can uncover new information and create momentum. But many of the best insights don't come from speed—they come from sitting with a problem longer than feels comfortable. Turning it over. Letting it unfold.

This kind of thinking felt underrepresented, even as its importance grows.

The future, then, isn't a choice between speed and depth. It's the pairing of both. AI enables faster exploration, quicker iteration, and broader reach. But it's deep thinking—the slow, deliberate kind—that turns that activity into insight.

Together, they form a new kind of practice. One where efficiency doesn't replace reflection, but makes space for it.

And in that balance, the role of the researcher doesn't disappear. It sharpens.



# Under-hyped vs. Over-hyped

## Under-hyped

### 1. The real value of research inside organizations

**The strategic value of research** deserves more attention as our practice evolves. We need even more conversations around: research impact, why research matters, and how research drives decisions. Research IS a strategic lever, not just a method.

### 2. Research operations & infrastructure

**Research operations and systems** are important but being under-discussed. There is an operational backbone of research, and it needs far more attention than it's getting.



### 3. Collaboration across roles

No matter how the technology changes, the value of **researchers working with designers, PMs, and strategists remains**. Research is a **cross-functional connector**.

### 4. Human connection & community

The **community and connection aspect of research** is meaningful and yet still understated. Research is a **human practice, not just a discipline**.

# Under-hyped vs. Over-hyped

## Over-hyped

### 1. Synthetic users / AI research participants

This was the **clearest repeated signal**. There is significant skepticism that **AI participants will replace real research anytime soon**.

### 2. Research tools

Many researchers feel our conversations lean **too much toward tools and technology**. Tools are helpful but **not the core of research value**.

### 3. Cost or efficiency narratives

Some researchers feel **cost-saving narratives** around research are overemphasized.





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