Whitepaper

State of SaaS Management 2026

Practitioner insights into visibility, cost, and AI

AJ Witt | November 2026

Presented by:

ITAM FORUM USU

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Executive summary

SaaS Management is a discipline still learning to see. Only 14% of the practitioners we surveyed call their approach optimized, 36% are still reactive, and the average maturity score is 46 out of 100.

14%
of practitioners call their SaaS management optimized

36%
are still firefighting, with no formal process

46/100
is the average maturity score

The common thread is visibility: teams cannot optimize, allocate or secure what they cannot see, and AI features are adding to the estate faster than most can track. These findings are somewhat expected and highlight that a lot of businesses struggled to get a handle on SaaS spending over the past decade. Perhaps for many organizations it wasn't a priority; the reality now is that AI has changed that forever.

In this whitepaper we'll examine six key results from the survey and provide practical advice for ensuring your organization gets value from its software subscriptions. The survey measured maturity of approach to SaaS Management across multiple dimensions.

Key findings

- **Most teams sit in the middle.** 46% are at the Managed maturity stage and 36% are Reactive.
- **Visibility is the top barrier.** 54% cite lack of usage visibility. Only 18% have a single view of SaaS spend, and 43% have fully siloed cost data.
- **Savings are real but partial.** Teams report saving about 27% of budget, yet about 31% of applications duplicate others and only about 21% are actively managed. That they are finding 27% savings with only one fifth of apps under management suggests that there is more money on the table to be found.
- **Cost allocation is half built.** 50% run showback, but only 18% calculate unit economics.
- **AI is widening the gap.** 75% saw AI features grow in 2025 and 61% say AI raised SaaS costs. These numbers are only heading in one direction and it's vital that Technology Value practices such as SaaS Management adapt to these new challenges.
- **Blind spots become risk.** Half name shadow IT as a top concern, 43% are slow to offboard users, and 46% have had an inadvertent renewal.

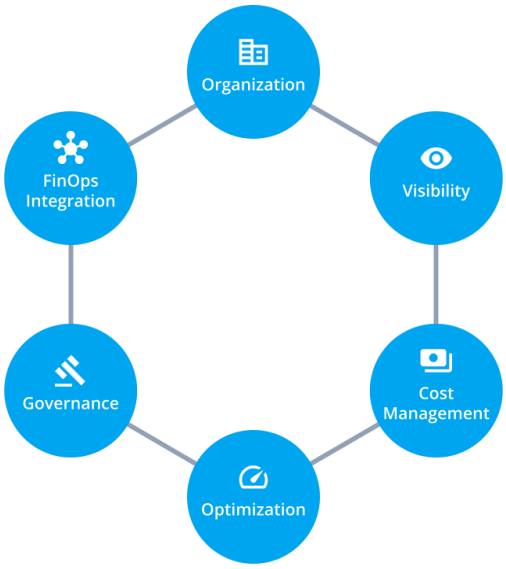
What we recommend

1. Build one inventory of applications, owners and contracts.
2. Consolidate SaaS cost data into a single view.
3. Move from showback to unit economics.
4. Track AI as its own cost line.
5. Close the risk gaps in discovery, offboarding and renewals.

Each results section below ends with specific “TAKE ACTION” actions and KPIs to measure progress.

About the research

The State of SaaS Management 2026 survey was run online by ITAM Forum in partnership with USU. Respondents were primarily from ITAM & SaaS Management roles in enterprise-scale organizations across Europe and North America. Questions measured maturity scores across six dimensions: Organization, Visibility, Cost Management, Optimization, Governance and FinOps Integration. We find that the results are broadly in line with our expectations as researchers and from our regular discussions with practitioners.



FINDING 1

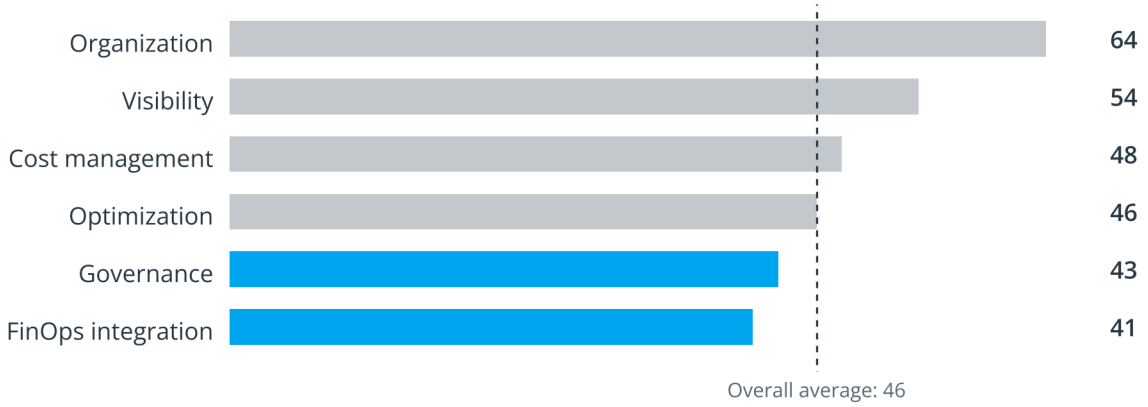
Most teams sit in the middle, and the middle is reactive

What we found. The typical respondent is at the Managed stage: a basic inventory and some process, but no automation. That describes 46% of respondents. Another 36% are Reactive, 14% are Optimized and just 4% are Predictive. Maturity scores back up the self-assessment: optimized teams average 64, managed 47 and reactive 39.

Organization is the strongest dimension at 64, followed by visibility (54), cost management (48), optimization (46), governance (43) and FinOps integration (41). Teams have people and structure in place. The disciplines that turn structure into savings require investment of focus and time.

Governance and FinOps integration are the weakest maturity dimensions

Average score by dimension, out of 100



Source: State of SaaS Management 2026 survey.

Why it matters. A 25-point maturity gap between optimized and reactive teams points to basics rather than tools alone: one record of what is owned, linked to cost and reviewed on a schedule makes the difference.

TAKE ACTION

- Score your own SaaS Management maturity now, using the same six dimensions. Set a baseline and repeat it every 12 months.
- Name an accountable owner for SaaS governance.
- Determine your “Crawl, Walk, Run” gates for SaaS Management, such as a definitive inventory, cost linked to each application and a scheduled portfolio review, so the move from Managed to Optimized is concrete.
- Consider formalizing application ownership. Role clarity may already be your strongest dimension, so use it to assign every application a business owner.

KPIS TO TRACK

- Overall maturity score
- Governance and FinOps integration dimension scores
- Share of applications with a named business owner
- Share of scheduled portfolio reviews completed on time

FINDING 2

The visibility gap holds everything back

What we found. Lack of visibility into usage is the barrier teams name first (54%), ahead of poor data quality (43%), siloed data and systems (39%) and resistance from business units (32%). The cost data bears this out: 43% have no consolidated view of SaaS spend, 39% have a partial one and only 18% have a single system of record. Respondents estimate that just over one-fifth of their applications are actively managed.

The survey shows that teams know where to focus. Discovery and visibility is the top improvement area for the next 12 months (61%), ahead of cost management and optimization (57%) and integration and automation (32%).

Lack of usage visibility is the top barrier to optimization

Share of respondents naming each barrier (up to three choices)



Source: State of SaaS Management 2026 survey.

Why it matters. Every other practice in this paper depends on this one. Optimization, allocation and security controls will all fail when they run on partial data.

TAKE ACTION

- Build a single inventory of applications, owners, contracts and costs, with a single accountable owner for the record. How you do this will depend on the tooling you have available, your access to disparate data sources, and the level of control you have over SaaS procurement.
- Combine several discovery sources, such as single sign-on logs, expense and accounts payable data, contracts and endpoint or network inventory. A multi-source approach is vital in uncovering blind spots and anomalies. At a minimum we recommend 3 sources: one as a baseline with the other two used to challenge and optimize that baseline.
- Work towards minimum data standards for every inventory record: business owner, cost center, renewal date, notice period and license count. Check completeness monthly.

KPIS TO TRACK

- Share of SaaS spend in a single consolidated view (survey: 18% fully consolidated)
- Share of applications actively managed (survey: about 21%)
- Inventory completeness: share of records with owner, cost center and renewal date
- Discovery coverage: share of SaaS spend matched to an inventory record

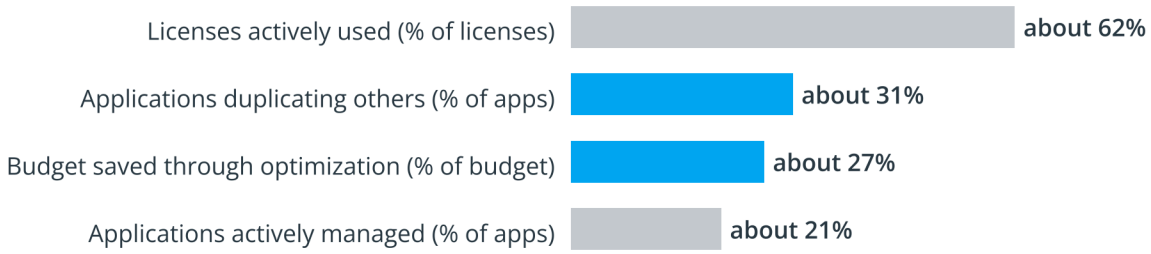
FINDING 3

Teams harvest what they can see

What we found. Usage optimization is the most common FinOps practice applied to SaaS (68%), followed by anomaly detection (46%) and showback reporting (43%). Respondents estimate that about 62% of licenses are actively used and that about 31% of applications duplicate or overlap with others. Reported savings from optimization average about 27% of budget.

Teams save about 27% of budget, yet about 31% of applications overlap

Respondent estimates, each as a share of its own base



Source: State of SaaS Management 2026 survey

Why it matters. The savings are meaningful, but they come from the part of the estate teams can already see. Overlap of about a third of the portfolio suggests a large pool of unaddressed duplication, and the 38% of licenses going unused is wasted spend and opportunity cost.

TAKE ACTION

- Set a recurring license reclamation cycle, reclaiming licenses with no login in the past 90 days and reviewing the largest applications every quarter.
- Rationalize overlapping applications category by category, working with end-users and teams to reduce duplication.
- Build a renewal calendar to provide a pipeline of optimization targets.
- Use usage data to right-size at renewal, starting the review at least 120 days before the notice deadline.
- Set alerts for spend spikes and new subscriptions so anomalies are caught in weeks, not at year end.
- Record savings in a ledger that Finance validates, separating realized savings from cost avoidance.

KPIS TO TRACK

- License utilization (survey: about 62%)
- Share of applications that duplicate or overlap others (survey: about 31%)
- Savings as a share of SaaS budget (survey average: about 27%)
- Share of reported savings validated by Finance
- Days to reclaim an inactive license

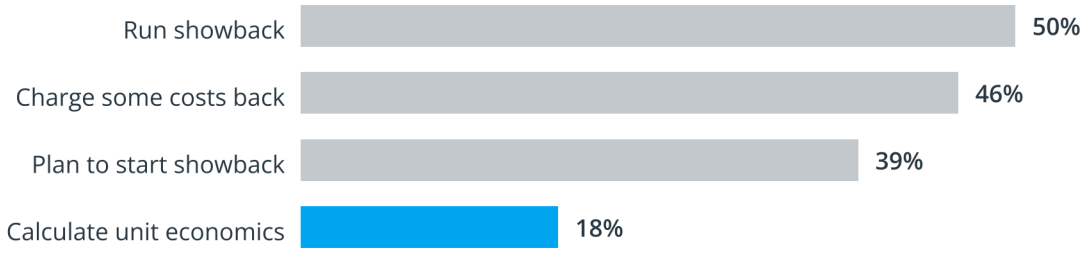
FINDING 4

Allocating cost to the business is emerging

What we found. Half of respondents run showback in some form, 39% plan to start in the next 12 months and 11% have no plans. 46% charge at least some costs back to the business. Only 18% calculate unit economics, so most teams can say what they spend but not what value that spend delivers.

Half run showback, but only 18% calculate unit economics

Share of respondents



Source: State of SaaS Management 2026 survey

Why it matters. Showback and chargeback create the accountability that drives behavior. Without unit measures, SaaS spend is hard to defend in a budget discussion or to link to value.

TAKE ACTION

- Start showback with the 20 applications that carry the most spend, and send a monthly report to each business unit lead. If you have a FinOps team, work with them to determine which departments are already on board with showback/chargeback of cloud costs and focus on them.
- Agree allocation rules with Finance before introducing chargeback. Clear rules reduce the business unit resistance that 32% of respondents report.
- Choose two or three unit measures, such as cost per active user, cost per employee or cost per customer for SaaS embedded in a product, and trend them quarterly.
- Reuse showback methods and tooling from your cloud FinOps practice rather than building a separate process.

KPIS TO TRACK

- Share of SaaS spend allocated to a business unit or cost center
- Share of business units receiving a monthly showback report (survey: 50% run showback)
- Number of unit cost measures tracked (survey: 18% calculate unit economics)
- Forecast variance: actual against budgeted SaaS spend by business unit

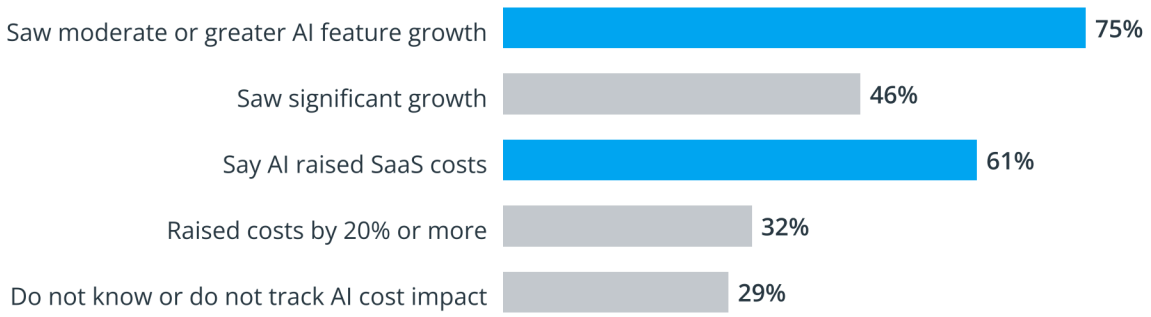
FINDING 5

AI is widening the gap

What we found. Three in four respondents (75%) saw moderate or greater growth in AI features across their SaaS estate in 2025, and 46% saw significant growth. 61% say AI raised their SaaS costs, 32% by 20% or more. Another 29% do not know or do not track AI's cost impact separately. Given the pace of change in AI these figures are likely to under-report the current reality.

75% saw AI features grow, and 61% say costs rose

Share of respondents



Source: State of SaaS Management 2026 survey

Why it matters. The true increase is higher than reported. Teams that cannot see their estate cannot yet see what AI is doing to it, and AI features often arrive as bundled price uplifts, add-ons or consumption charges.

TAKE ACTION

- Flag AI-enabled applications and AI add-ons in the inventory, including any usage-based credits or consumption pricing.
- Review contracts and renewals for AI uplifts, and negotiate caps, price protection and the right to disable features you do not use.
- Measure AI unit costs, such as cost per credit or per active AI user, alongside your wider unit economics work.

KPIS TO TRACK

- Share of applications with AI features identified in the inventory
- AI-attributable spend as a share of SaaS spend (survey: 29% cannot say today)
- AI spend variance against budget
- Utilization of purchased AI add-ons and credits

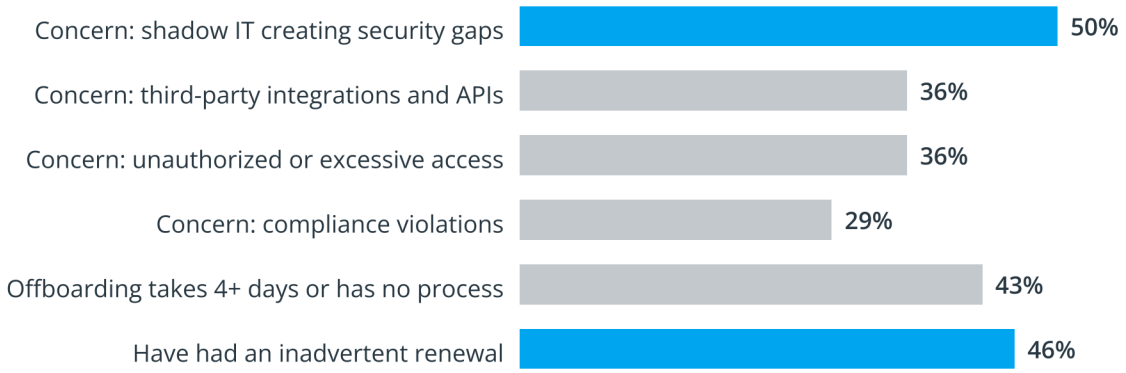
FINDING 6

Blind spots become risk

What we found. Shadow IT is the top security and compliance concern, named by half of respondents. Third-party integrations and API access (36%) and unauthorized or excessive permissions (36%) follow, then compliance violations (29%). The operational evidence is consistent. 43% take four days or longer to offboard a user from their SaaS applications, or have no formal process, and a quarter cannot say how long it takes. 46% have had an inadvertent renewal, and 21% have them multiple times a year.

Shadow IT tops the concerns, and 46% have had an inadvertent renewal

Share of respondents (concerns were up to three choices)



Source: State of SaaS Management 2026 survey

Why it matters. Each of these is a visibility failure with a cost or a risk attached. A departed employee with live access, or a contract that renews unseen, is an avoidable loss.

TAKE ACTION

- Implement continuous discovery of unsanctioned applications, and an onboarding route that makes the approved path easier than bypassing that process.
- Automate offboarding by linking deprovisioning to the HR leaver event, with a target of same-day access removal for high-risk applications. Make automation of onboarding/offboarding, with appropriate archiving or data retention features, a mandatory requirement in solution selection.
- Build and maintain a renewal calendar fed by the inventory, with owner alerts at 120, 90 and 60 days before the notice deadline and every auto-renewal flagged. Consider switching off auto-renewal for all but strategic applications.

KPIS TO TRACK

- Median time to remove a leaver's access (survey: 43% take four days or longer or have no process, 25% cannot say)
- Number of inadvertent renewals per year (survey: 46% have had one)
- Share of renewals reviewed before the notice deadline
- Unsanctioned applications discovered, and share of those brought under management or retired

SUMMARY

Conclusion

The survey describes a field that has the people and structure for SaaS Management but not yet the visibility. Teams harvest the savings they can see, 27% of budget on average, while duplication, unmanaged applications, AI-driven cost growth and slow offboarding persist where they cannot. The gap between optimized and reactive teams is built on the basics: one record of what is owned, linked to cost and reviewed on a schedule.

The actions in this paper follow the priorities respondents set themselves: discovery and visibility first (61%), then cost management and optimization (57%). Start with the inventory, because every other action depends on it. Then consolidate cost data, extend showback toward unit economics, track AI as its own cost line and close the risk gaps in offboarding and renewals.

KPI scorecard

The table collects the headline KPIs with the survey baseline. Set your own targets from your starting point, and review the scorecard quarterly.

KPI	Survey baseline	Desired direction
Fully consolidated view of SaaS spend	18% of respondents	▲ Increase
Applications actively managed	About 21%	▲ Increase
License utilization	About 62%	▲ Increase
Duplicate or overlapping applications	About 31%	▼ Decrease
Teams calculating unit economics	18% of respondents	▲ Increase
Teams unable to say AI's cost impact	29% of respondents	▼ Decrease
Slow or no offboarding process (four days or more)	43% of respondents	▼ Decrease
Inadvertent renewals	46% of respondents have had one	▼ Decrease to zero

Next steps

1. Score your own maturity against the six dimensions to set a baseline.
2. Choose the two KPIs above that matter most to your organization and record today's value.
3. Assign an owner to the inventory and agree its minimum data standards.
4. Repeat the assessment in 12 months and compare.

About the Authors

ITAM Forum is a project of The Linux Foundation. Its mission is to support the people who manage the value of IT assets throughout their lifecycle. This encompasses hardware and software assets, be they on-premises, in a data center, provided as SaaS, or in the Cloud. ITAM Forum also supports professionals working in the emerging discipline of AI Tokenomics.

AJ Witt is an experienced IT Asset Manager with a wealth of experience across broader IT roles. He has worked for ITAM Forum since its inception and is now Best Practices Lead. In this role, he works with the Technical Advisory Council, Working Groups, and Special Interest Groups to deliver research into best practices.

For more information, visit https://itamf.org

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