



Reporting & Analytics



2026 Engineering Benchmarking Report

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The data your engineering firm needs to perform at its best.

There's no shortage of data inside an engineering firm. Timesheets, invoices, project budgets, payroll. It all exists. What's been missing is the context to understand what any of it actually means. Is a 64% utilization rate good? Is a 20% profit margin something to be proud of, or are you leaving money on the table? Without a point of comparison, those numbers tell you almost nothing.

That's what this report is built for. Every year, BQE analyzes anonymized performance data from thousands of engineering and architecture firms across North America and turns it into the benchmarks you need to actually run your business. Use it to find your gaps, set your targets, and make decisions you can defend.

The Gap Between Good and Great

I'm excited to launch our third annual Engineering Benchmarking Report.

We set out to create our first edition in 2024 with a simple goal: give firm leaders a lantern. The firm leaders I speak with are often curious about how other firms run their businesses, but are understandably "in the dark." We wanted to shine a light by providing information that would help them understand where they stood against similar firms.

Over the past two years, we've been thrilled to hear from firms that have used these reports to do exactly that. Some have used the benchmarks to start internal conversations. Some have used them to set targets. Others have used them to validate what they already suspected, or to identify opportunities they had not yet seen clearly. As one firm leader told me, "The report gave us a common language for what we needed to improve." This is what makes this work so meaningful to us.

There are a lot of important metrics in this report: revenue per FTE, utilization,

backlog, and more. But fundamentally, every firm needs to answer one very important question: are we building a stronger, more profitable business?

What continues to stand out is the size of the gap between the firms at the top and the firms at the bottom. Across the past several reports, the difference between top- and bottom-quartile firms has been roughly 20 points of profit margin. That gap matters.

That gap is likely to widen. The pace of change in our industry — AI, shifting client expectations, economic volatility — is expanding the range of possible outcomes for firms. The firms that lean into operational discipline will compound their advantages faster than ever. The ones that don't will find it harder to keep up. In an environment where the "fan of outcomes" is growing, operational excellence isn't just good practice. It's an imperative.

Engineering firms most frequently talk about differentiating based on the quality of their work and specific expertise. And of course, great work will

always matter. But what we see in the data, and what we hear from the firms we work with every day, is that the best firms also differentiate through operational excellence.

A firm Principal I recently interviewed suggested: “The baseline of having your license is that you’re good at the work. So then, how do you differentiate? It starts with the internal people and process...and then the product.”

Operational excellence – that process – starts with data. As the old adage goes, “You can’t manage what you can’t measure.” The firms that improve the fastest are the ones that know which numbers matter, track them consistently, and create the discipline to act on what they see. That discipline is harder to build on spreadsheets. The firms seeing the best results are the ones tracking these numbers inside their practice management systems, where the data is live and the whole team can see it.

My hope is that this report helps spur action inside your firm. If you take away one “to do,” let it be this:

- *Pick one metric*
- *Set up tracking for it*
- *Build a defined action plan to improve it*
- *Create a regular cadence to review progress*

Operational excellence is not usually achieved by swinging for the fences. More often, it comes from walks and singles: small improvements, made consistently, that compound over time. And in a market where the best firms are

pulling away, consistent compounding is how you close the gap — or extend it.

Three years in, the lantern is brighter. The dataset is larger, the trends are clearer, and the firms using this data are seeing real results. My hope is that this edition gives you not just a benchmark, but a starting point for the kind of disciplined, compounding improvement that separates the best firms from the rest. Small steps, taken consistently, add up. The data is here. The question is what you do with it.

“The gap between high and low performing firms has held at roughly **20 points** of profit margin across three years of data. In an environment where the range of possible outcomes is growing, that gap is likely to widen. Operational excellence isn’t just good practice. It’s an imperative.”



Matt Cooper
CEO, BQE Software

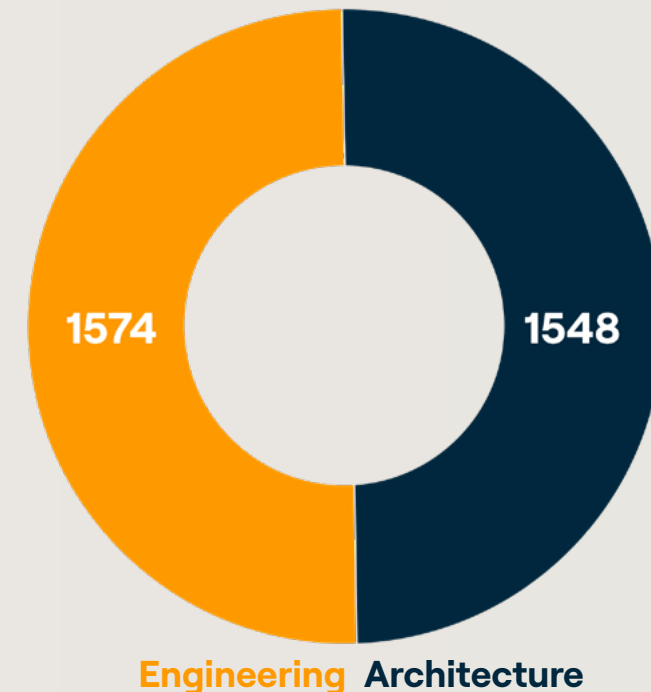
Real Data from Thousands of Firms.

Good benchmarks are only as valuable as the data behind them. Before you act on anything in this report, it's important to understand exactly how these numbers were built.

We started with anonymized performance data from over 3,000 architecture and engineering firms across the United States and Canada, representing more than 50,000 active monthly users on the BQE CORE platform. This is not a survey of self-reported estimates. It is real operational data from firms actively tracking their projects, time, billing, and financials inside CORE every single day.

From there, the dataset went through a rigorous cleaning process. Each metric was evaluated independently, and firms were filtered to include only those with sufficient data history to produce reliable results. Statistical outliers — firms whose figures fell outside a defensible range for a given metric — were identified and removed to ensure the benchmarks reflect genuine industry performance rather than anomalies that would otherwise distort the averages. The result is a dataset that is both large enough to be meaningful and clean enough to be trusted.

Count of Industry



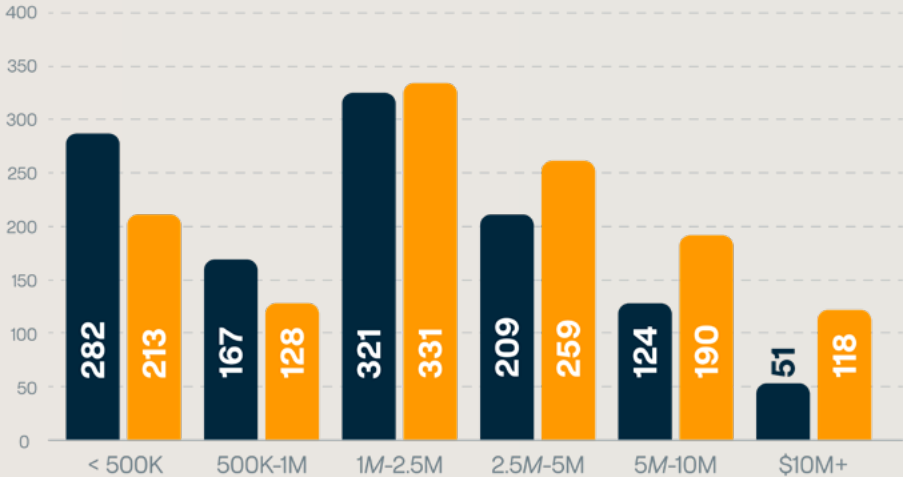
We then identified the key performance indicators that show up consistently in well-run firms and that have a meaningful relationship with profitability, growth, and operational efficiency.

For each metric you will find four things: a plain-language definition and equation so there is no ambiguity about what is being measured, an industry average across all firms in the dataset, a breakdown by firm size so you can compare yourself against firms with a similar headcount, and a quartile distribution so you can see not just where the average sits but where the entire range of firms lands. That last piece matters. Averages hide a lot. The distribution tells the real story.

These benchmarks are grounded in actual firm performance. That is what makes them worth acting on.

This year, for the first time, we went beyond the individual metrics to look at how they interact with each other. What we found was often surprising. There is no correlation between realization or utilization rates with profit margin. Low backlog leads to higher margins, faster growth, and lower write-downs. Billing multiplier turns out to be the single strongest predictor of revenue growth in the entire dataset. These are not conclusions you would reach by looking at any one metric in isolation. They are what emerges when you have enough data to see the full picture.

Firm Count by Revenue Size



Engineering Architecture

**The data is in.
Time to see where you land.**

There is a version of how your firm is performing that lives in your head. Built from gut instinct, last quarter's invoices, and a rough sense of how busy the team has been. That version is useful. It is just not always accurate.

The metrics on the following pages are drawn from real performance data across thousands of engineering firms in North America. For each one you will find a clear definition, an industry average, a breakdown by firm size, and a full distribution so you can see exactly where your firm sits. Not just whether your number is high or low, but where it falls across the full range of firms, from the bottom quartile to the top.

Some of what you find will validate what you already knew. Some of it will challenge assumptions you did not know you were making. Either way, you will walk away with a clear, honest picture of where your firm stands and exactly where to focus next.

Revenue/FTE

$$= \frac{\text{Net Revenue}}{\text{\# of Full Time Employees}}$$

Definition

Revenue per full-time employee (Revenue/FTE) measures how much net revenue your firm generates for each person on the payroll. It's calculated by dividing total net revenue by the number of full-time equivalent employees — including firm owners, principals, and non-billable staff like office managers or marketing coordinators. Part-time employees and those who worked only part of the year should be prorated in the calculation.

\$171,651 **AVG**

How to Use This Metric

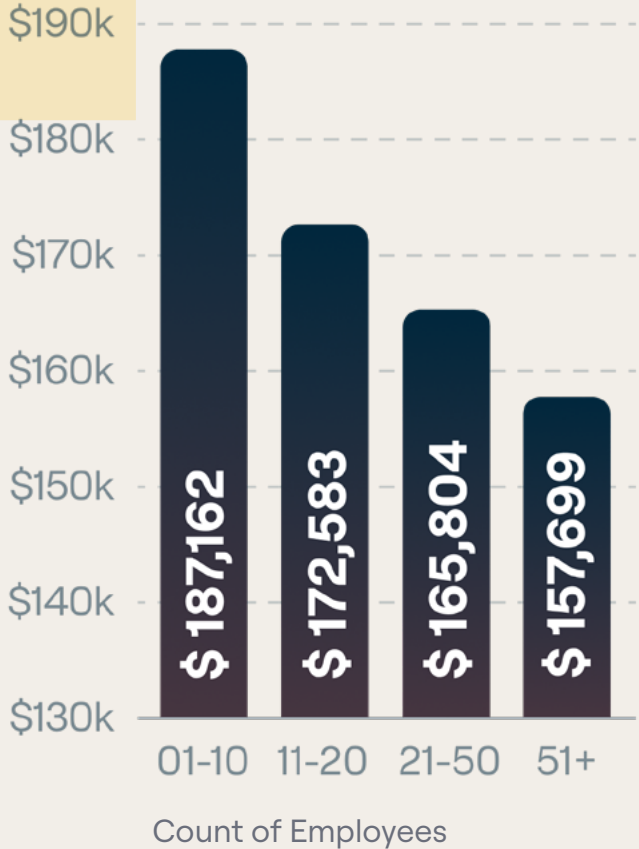
Revenue/FTE is one of the clearest indicators of firm productivity. A higher number generally reflects strong billing rates, good utilization, and an efficient staff structure. A lower number often signals that the firm is carrying more overhead than its revenue can support.

Use this metric to evaluate whether growth is actually improving your firm's efficiency — adding headcount without improving Revenue/FTE typically makes the problem worse, not better. Tracking it monthly and looking at performance over time helps you catch a declining trend before it affects profitability. BQE CORE makes this easy to monitor in real time.

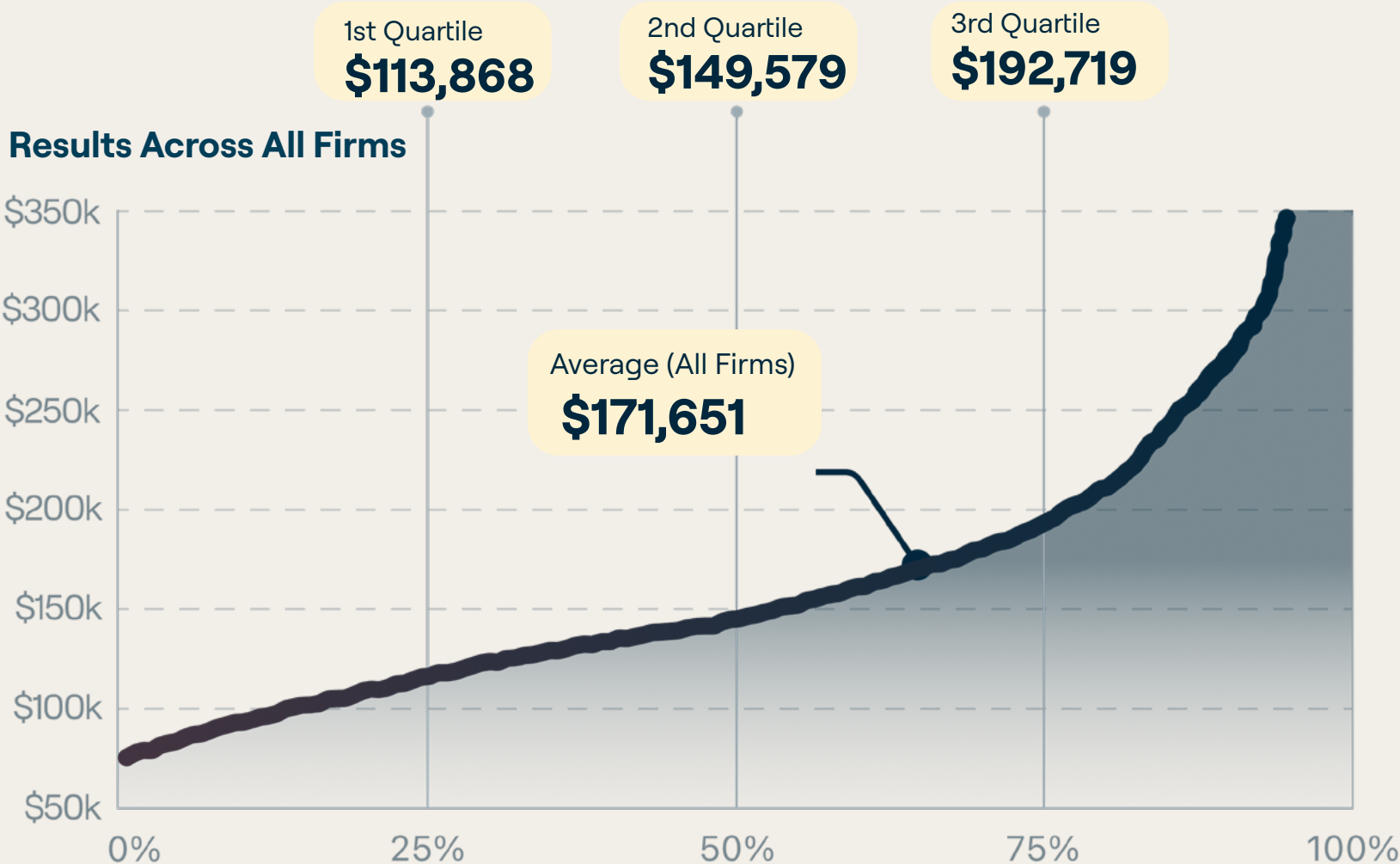
Revenue/FTE

How much revenue does your firm generate for every person on the payroll?
Top-quartile firms generate nearly \$80k more per employee than bottom-quartile firms. If your number is lagging, focus on boosting revenue and billing rates before adding headcount.

Averages by Firm Size



Results Across All Firms



n = 910
Filter = Engineering firms with Revenue/FTE between \$75,000 and \$1,000,000

Expense/FTE

$$= \frac{\text{Net Expense}}{\text{\# of Full Time Employees}}$$

Definition

Expense per full-time employee (Expense/FTE) measures the average net expense your firm incurs for each person on the payroll. It is calculated by dividing total net expenses by the number of full-time equivalent employees, using the same FTE calculation as Revenue/FTE.

\$130,076 AVG

How to Use This Metric

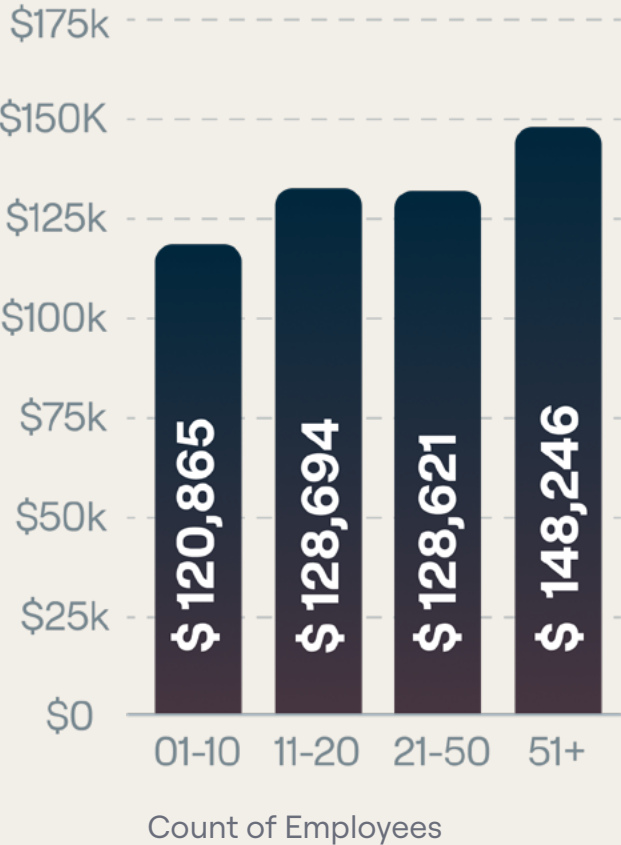
Expense/FTE is best understood alongside Revenue/FTE — the gap between the two is your Profit/FTE. A rising expense per person isn't always a problem if revenue is growing faster, but when the two converge, margin disappears quickly.

This metric is especially useful when evaluating growth decisions. Adding staff increases both direct and overhead costs, and those costs hit your Expense/FTE immediately — often before new hires are generating full revenue. Firms that track this monthly and view trends over time can spot a deteriorating cost structure early and course-correct before it shows up in their profit margin.

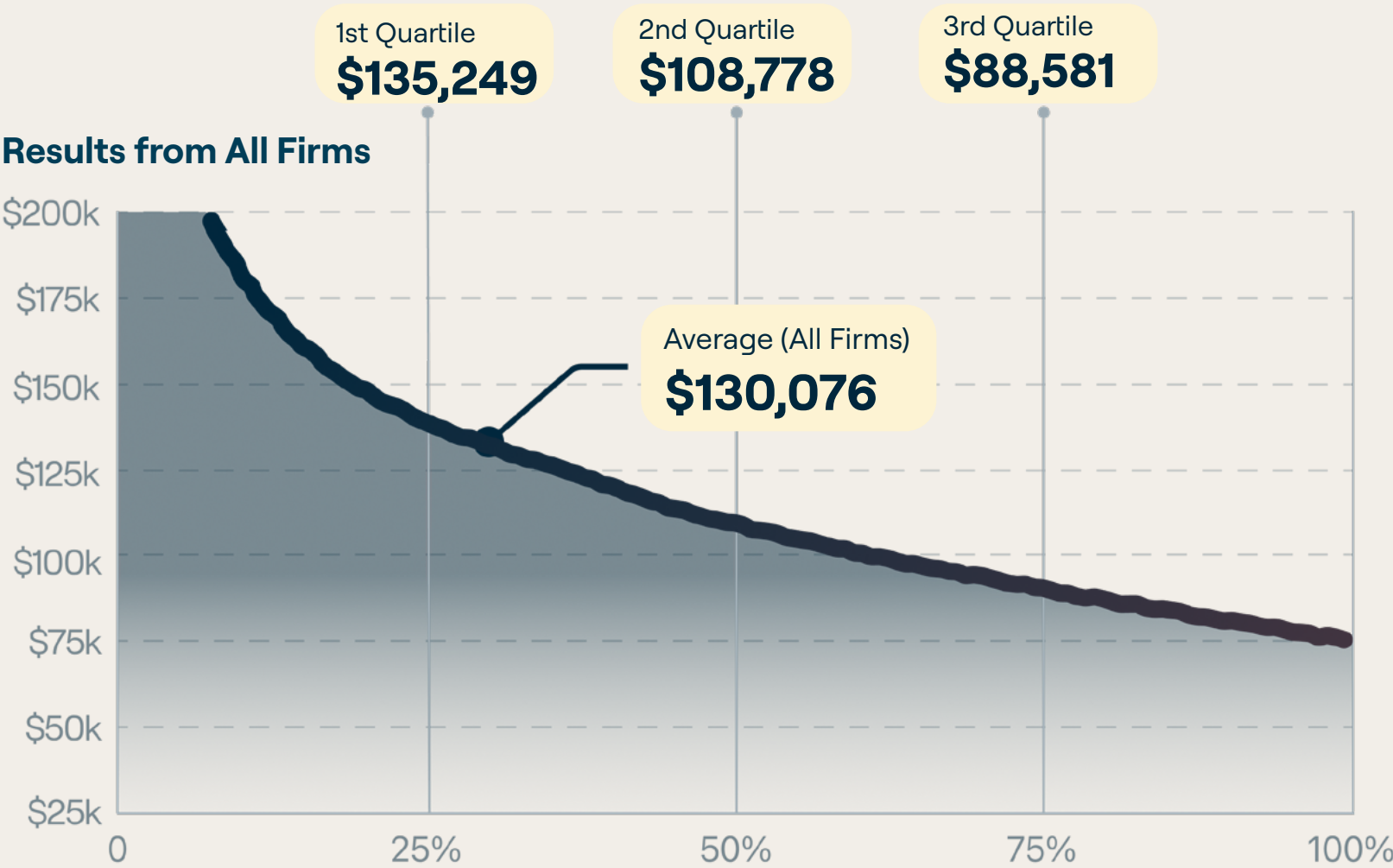
2 Expense/FTE

How much does it cost to keep each person on your team productive? The average engineering firm spends \$130k per employee in net expenses. If your number is climbing, don't just look at salaries — overhead costs like software, rent, and office expenses are often where the inefficiencies hide.

Results by Firm Size



Results from All Firms



n = 556
Filter = Engineering firms with Expense/FTE between \$50,000 and \$500,000

Profit/FTE

$$= \frac{\text{Net Profit}}{\text{\# of Full Time Employees}}$$

Definition

Profit per full-time employee (Profit/FTE) measures the average net profit your firm generates for each person on the payroll. It is calculated by dividing total net profit by the number of full-time equivalent employees.

\$42,680 AVG

How to Use This Metric

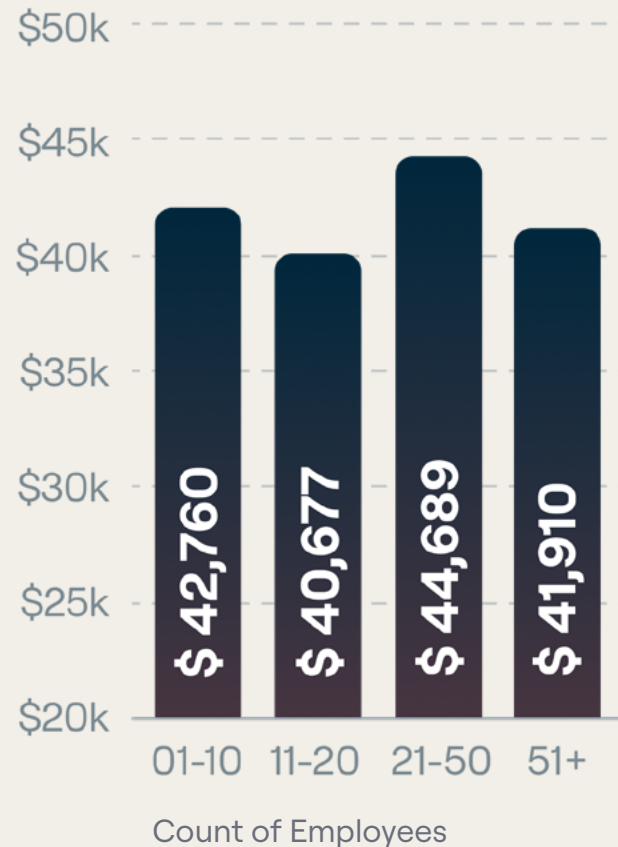
Profit/FTE is one of the most direct measures of firm efficiency. Unlike profit margin, which measures profitability as a percentage of revenue, Profit/FTE tells you how effectively your firm converts its human capital into bottom-line results.

This metric is particularly valuable when evaluating growth. Revenue and headcount can both increase while Profit/FTE quietly declines — a warning sign that the firm is growing less efficiently, not more. If your Profit/FTE is lagging, the issue is rarely solved by adding revenue alone. It usually requires a closer look at how time is being spent, what work is being written down, and whether your staff structure matches your workload. Tracking this alongside Revenue/FTE and Expense/FTE in BQE CORE gives you a complete picture of whether growth is actually making your firm stronger.

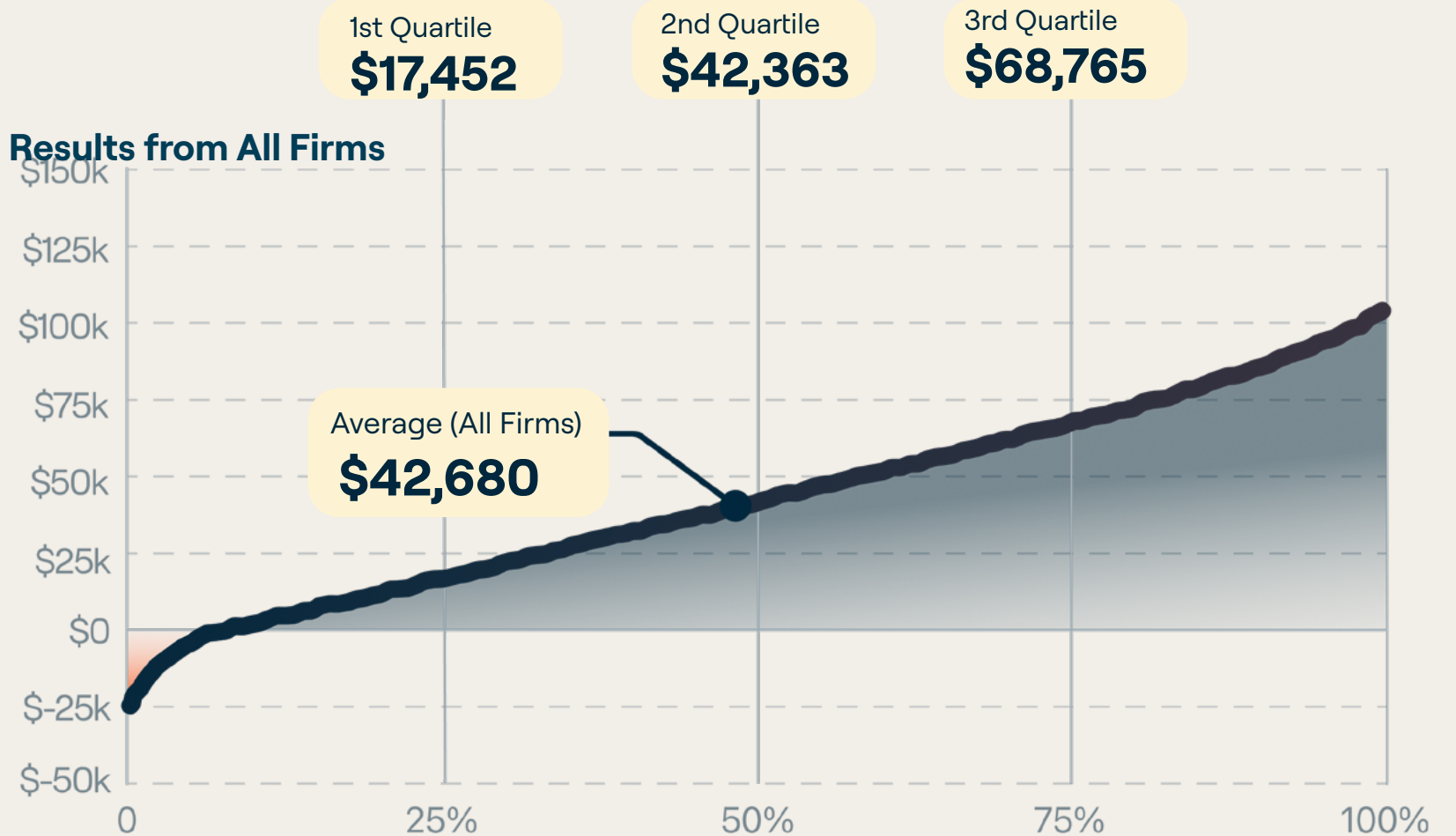
Profit/FTE

How much profit does each person on your team generate? The average firm earns \$41,082 in net profit per employee — but top-quartile firms generate \$68,000 or more. If your number is low, the fix isn't always adding revenue. It often means getting more efficient with the team you already have.

Results by Firm Size



Results from All Firms



n = 835
Filter = Engineering firms with Profit/FTE
between -\$100,000 and \$100,000

4 Breakeven Multiplier

$$= \frac{\text{Net Expenses}}{\text{Direct Labor Costs}}$$

Definition

The Breakeven Multiplier is the multiple of direct labor costs that a firm must bill to clients in order to cover all business expenses without making a profit or incurring a loss. For example, if your breakeven multiplier is 2.53, you need to bill \$2.53 for every \$1.00 of direct labor cost just to break even.

2.53 AVG

How to Use This Metric

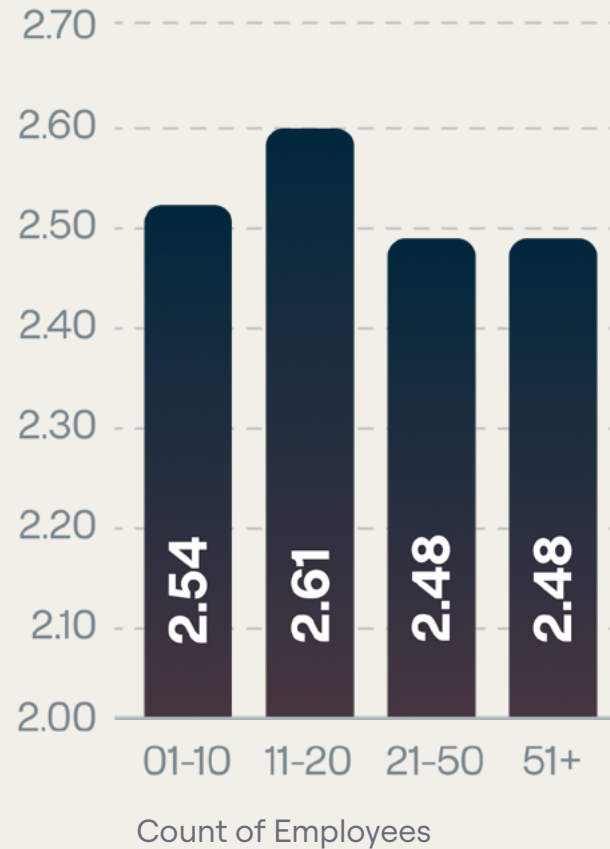
The Breakeven Multiplier sets the floor for your billing rates. Any work billed below this multiple is costing your firm money, regardless of how busy your team is. It's a critical number to know before setting fees, negotiating contracts, or evaluating whether a project type is worth pursuing.

A lower multiplier is better — it means your overhead is lean relative to your labor costs, giving you more pricing flexibility and a lower bar to clear before generating profit. Firms with high breakeven multipliers are often carrying too much overhead relative to their billable capacity. The quickest way to bring it down is to reduce non-billable expenses or increase the proportion of revenue-generating staff. Knowing your breakeven multiplier at all times is one of the most practical steps a firm leader can take to run a more financially disciplined practice.

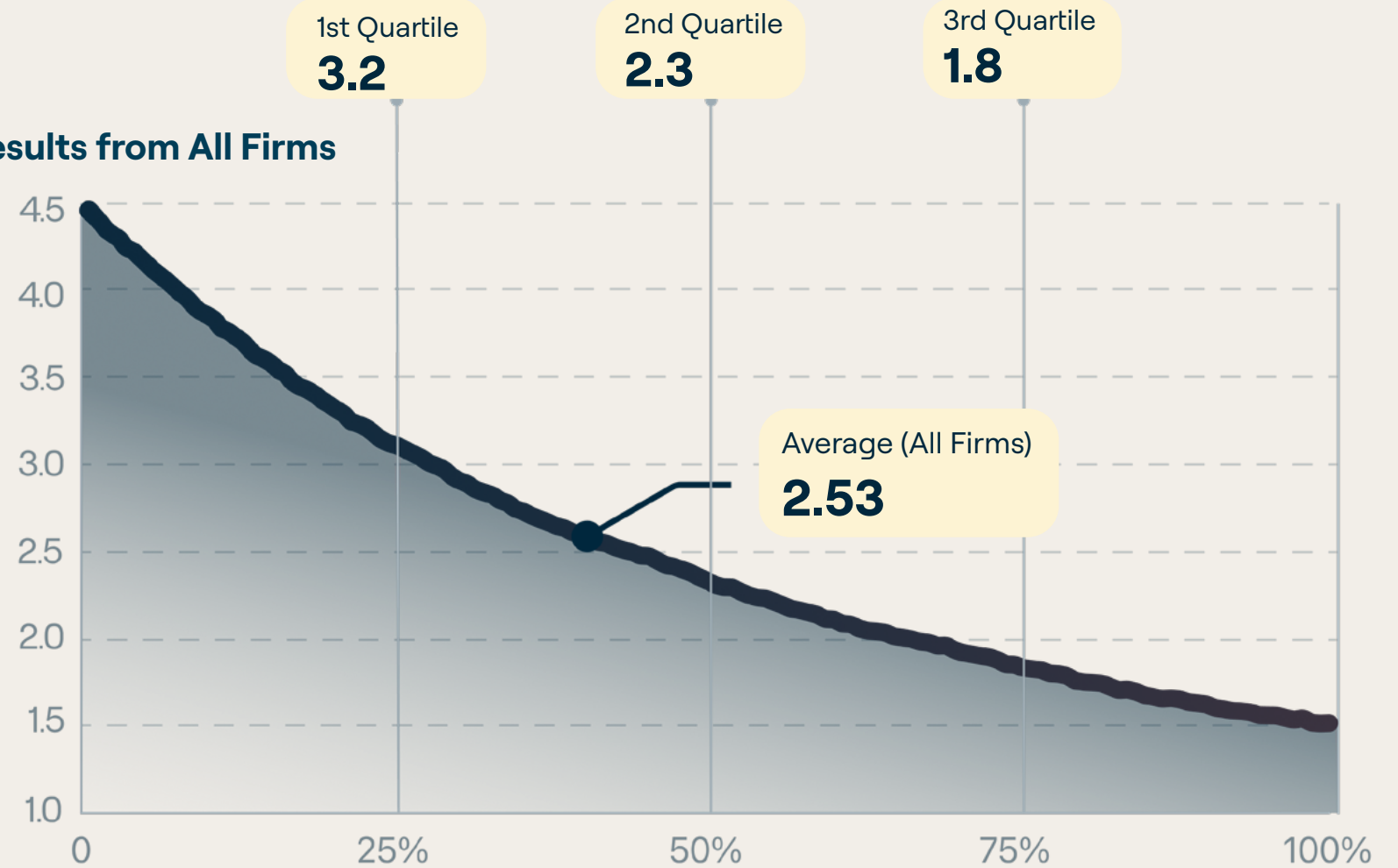
4 Breakeven Multiplier

For every dollar you spend on direct labor, how much do you need to bill just to break even? The average engineering firm needs to bill \$2.53 for every \$1.00 of labor cost before turning a profit. If your multiplier is climbing, overhead is usually where to look first.

Results by Firm Size



Results from All Firms



n = 724
Filter = Engineering firms with a Breakeven Multiplier between 1.5 and 4.5

Overhead Multiplier

$$= \frac{\text{Overhead Expenses}}{\text{Direct Labor Costs}}$$

Definition

The Overhead Multiplier measures the ratio of overhead expenses to direct labor costs. For example, if your overhead multiplier is 1.53, the firm spends \$1.53 in overhead for every \$1.00 spent on direct labor. Unlike the Breakeven Multiplier, which accounts for all expenses including direct labor, the Overhead Multiplier isolates only the overhead portion — making it a precise tool for evaluating cost structure.

1.53 AVG

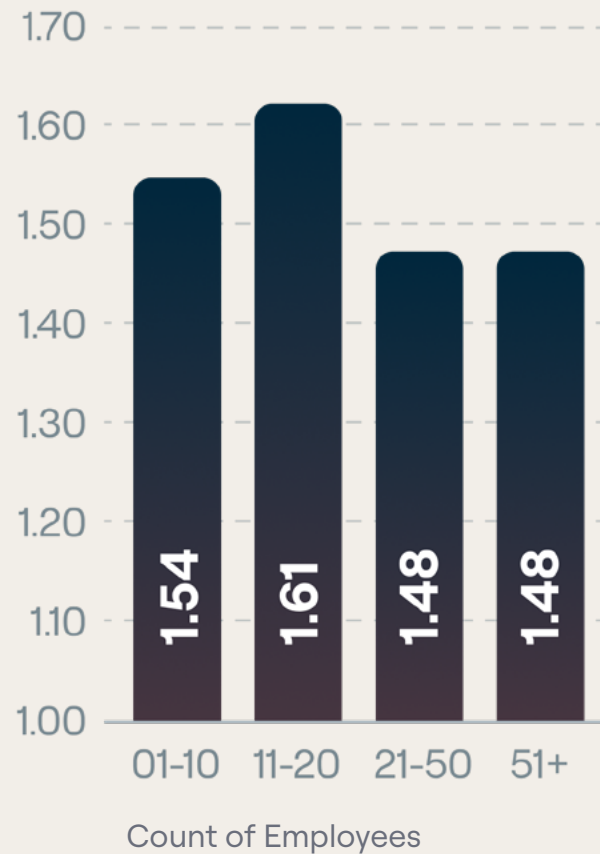
How to Use This Metric

The Overhead Multiplier tells you how much of your revenue is being consumed by the cost of running the business before a single billable hour is counted. A lower number indicates a leaner operation with more room for profit. A higher number doesn't automatically signal inefficiency — larger firms naturally carry more overhead — but it does mean your billing rates need to be correspondingly higher to stay profitable.

If your Overhead Multiplier is climbing, the culprit is usually one of three things: growth in non-billable staff, rising facility or software costs, or a decline in billable headcount relative to total staff. Isolating which factor is driving the change is the first step toward addressing it. Note that your Overhead Multiplier is simply your Breakeven Multiplier minus 1 — so the two metrics move together and should always be evaluated as a pair.

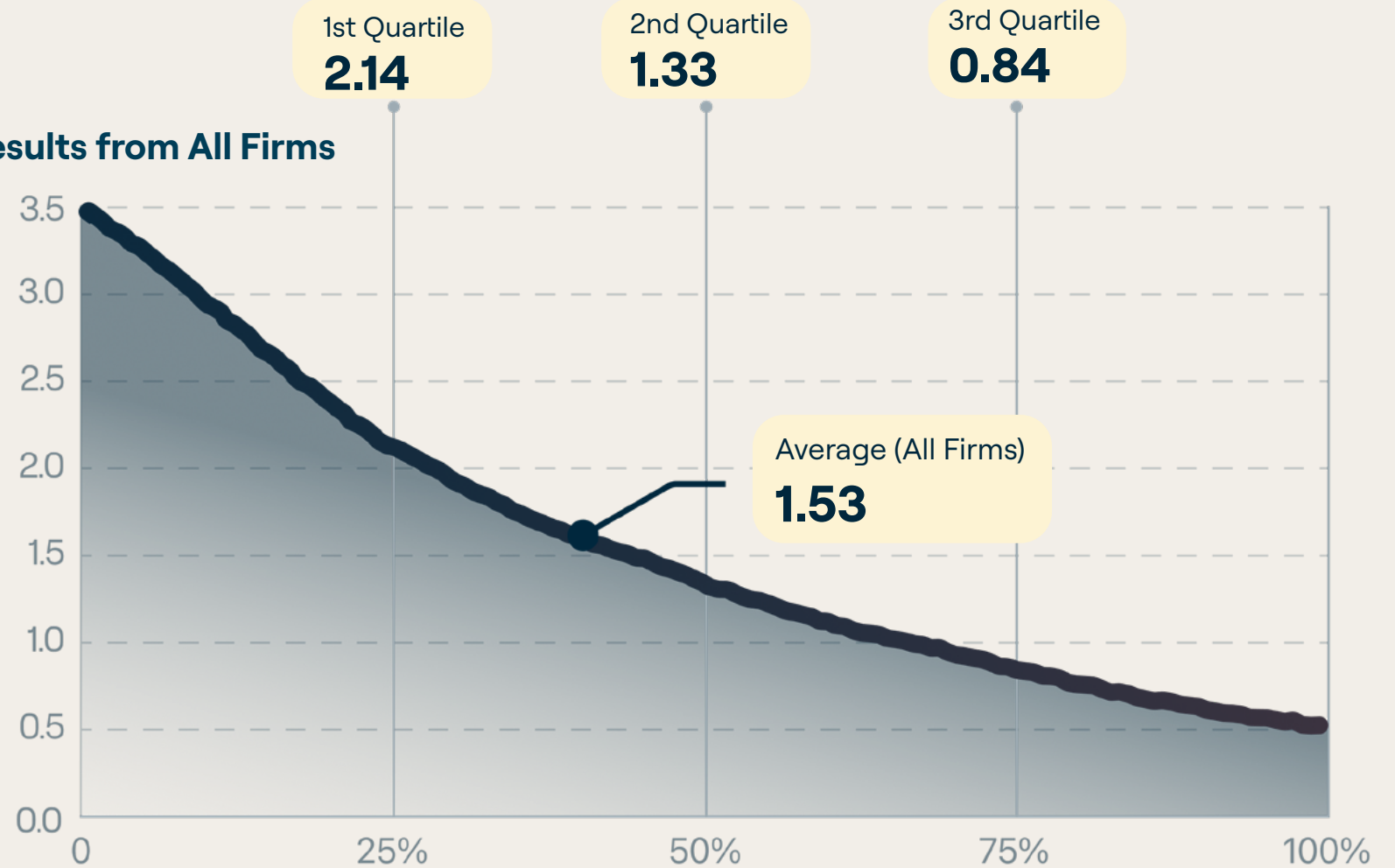
Overhead Multiplier

Results by Firm Size



For every dollar spent on direct labor, the average engineering firm spends \$1.53 on overhead. Top-quartile firms keep that below \$0.84. If your number is high, non-billable staff, software, and facilities are usually where to start.

Results from All Firms



n = 724
Filter = Engineering firms with an Overhead Multiplier between .5 and 3.5

Billing Multiplier

$$= \frac{\text{Net Revenue}}{\text{Direct Labor Costs}}$$

Definition

The Billing Multiplier measures the ratio of net revenue to direct labor costs — in other words, how much revenue your firm generates for every dollar spent on direct labor. For example, a billing multiplier of 3.25 means the firm is generating \$3.25 in revenue for every \$1.00 of direct labor cost.

3.25 AVG

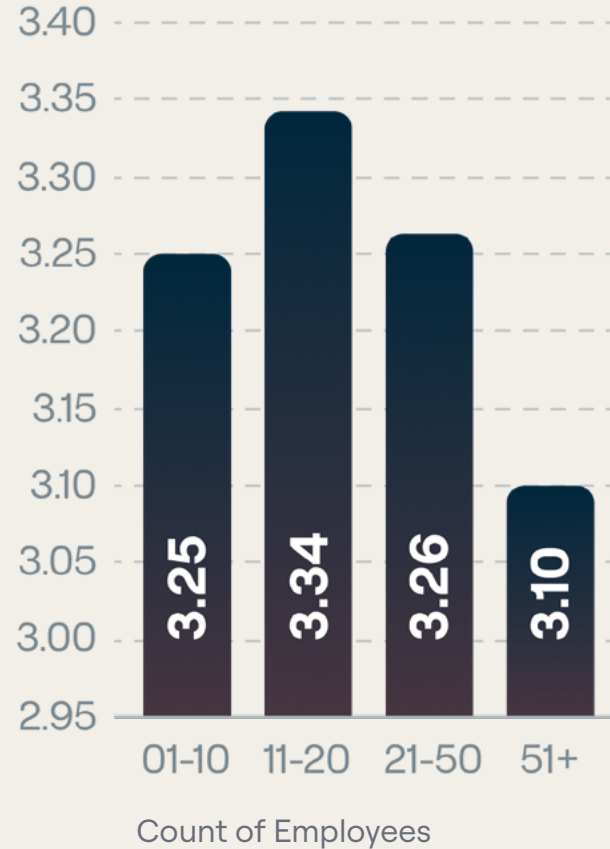
How to Use This Metric

The Billing Multiplier is best understood in relation to your Breakeven Multiplier. The gap between the two is where your profit lives. A firm with a breakeven multiplier of 2.53 and a billing multiplier of 3.25 has a margin of 0.72 — that spread represents the firm's profitability per dollar of labor. Narrowing that gap, whether through underpricing, scope creep, or write-downs, directly erodes profit margin.

If your Billing Multiplier is low, there are typically two causes: your fees aren't high enough relative to your labor costs, or your team isn't staying busy with billable work. Both are worth examining independently, as the solutions are different. Firms that track their Billing Multiplier regularly are better positioned to identify when a project type, client, or service offering is underperforming — before it shows up as a surprise at year end.

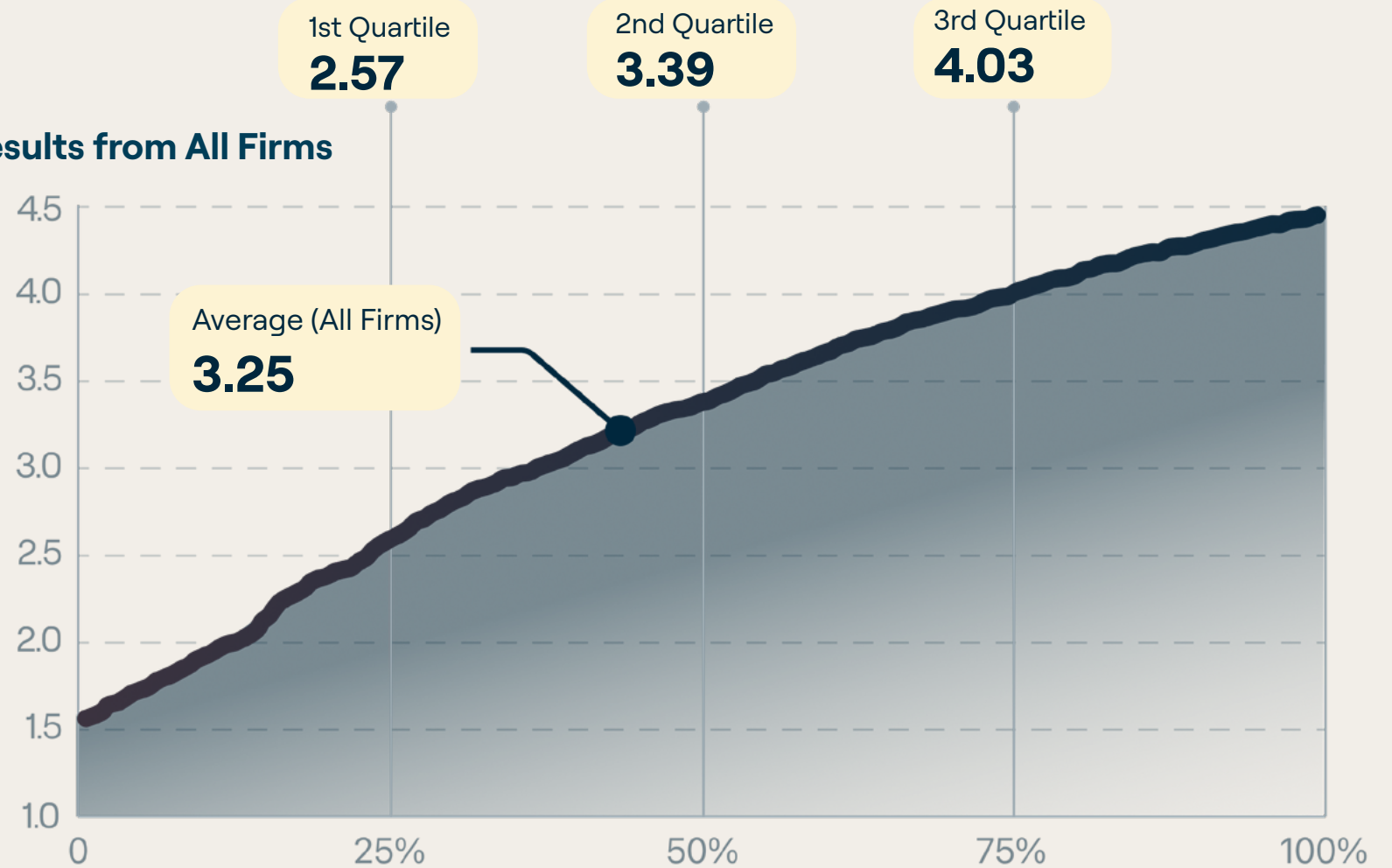
Billing Multiplier

Results by Firm Size



For every dollar you spend on direct labor, how much revenue are you actually generating? The average engineering firm achieves a billing multiplier of 3.25, but top firms reach 4+. If your multiplier is low, you're likely undercharging for your work or not keeping your team busy enough with billable projects.

Results from All Firms



n = 354
Filter = Engineering firms with a Billing Multiplier between 1.5 and 4.5

Profit Margin %

$$= \frac{\text{Net Revenue} - \text{Net Expenses}}{\text{Net Revenue}}$$

Definition

Profit Margin % measures the percentage of net revenue that remains as profit after all expenses — direct labor, overhead, and operating costs — have been deducted. It is calculated by dividing net profit by net revenue and expressing the result as a percentage.

19.9% AVG

How to Use This Metric

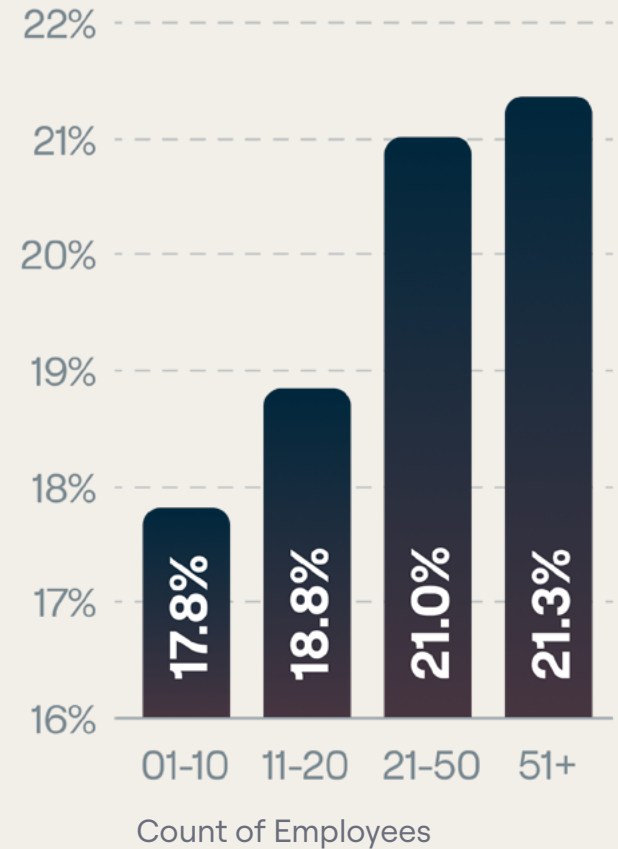
Profit Margin % is the single most important indicator of firm financial health. It tells you whether the business model is working — not just whether the firm is busy. A firm can have strong revenue, a full team, and a healthy backlog and still produce thin or negative margins if its cost structure is misaligned.

The 2026 average of 21% is a reasonable benchmark, but the spread between quartiles is wide — top-performing firms achieve margins above 30% while bottom-quartile firms operate near or below breakeven. That gap is rarely explained by revenue alone. The firms at the top tend to have higher Revenue/FTE, lower labor expense as a percentage of revenue, and tighter control over overhead. If your margin is lagging, those are the metrics worth examining first. Profit Margin % is the outcome — the other metrics in this report are the levers.

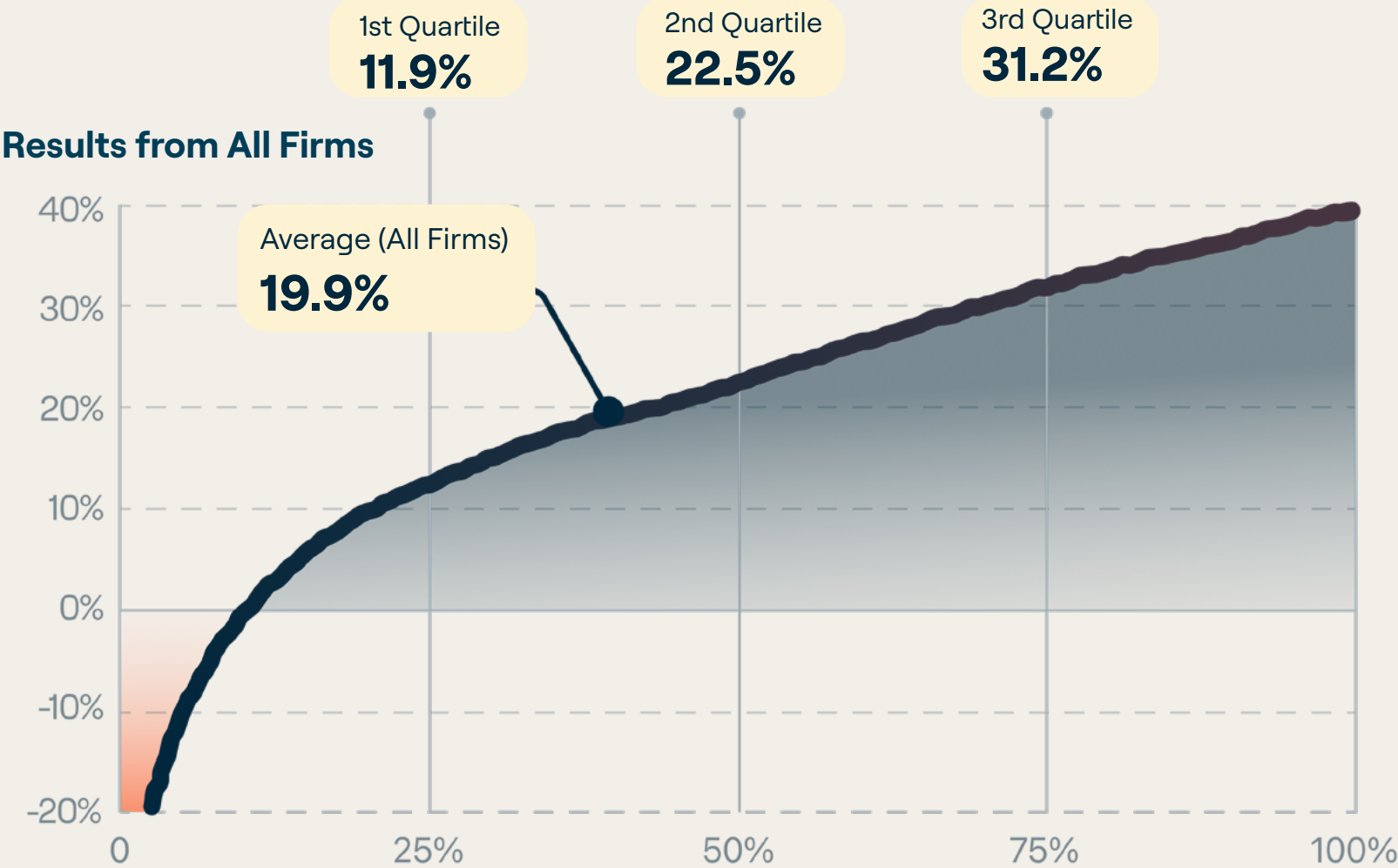
Profit Margin %

What percentage of revenue is left after every bill is paid? The average engineering firm nets about 20%, while top firms achieve over 30% margins. If your margin is lagging, focus on revenue per employee and labor costs as a percentage of revenue — those two levers move the needle most.

Results by Firm Size



Results from All Firms



n = 349
Filter = Engineering firms with a Profit Margin between -40% and 40%

Utilization Rate

$$= \frac{\text{Total Billable Hours Logged}}{\text{Total Hours Logged}}$$

Definition

Utilization Rate measures the percentage of your team's total logged hours that are spent on billable work. It is calculated by dividing total billable hours by total hours logged across all staff, including principals and non-billable employees.

62.1% AVG

How to Use This Metric

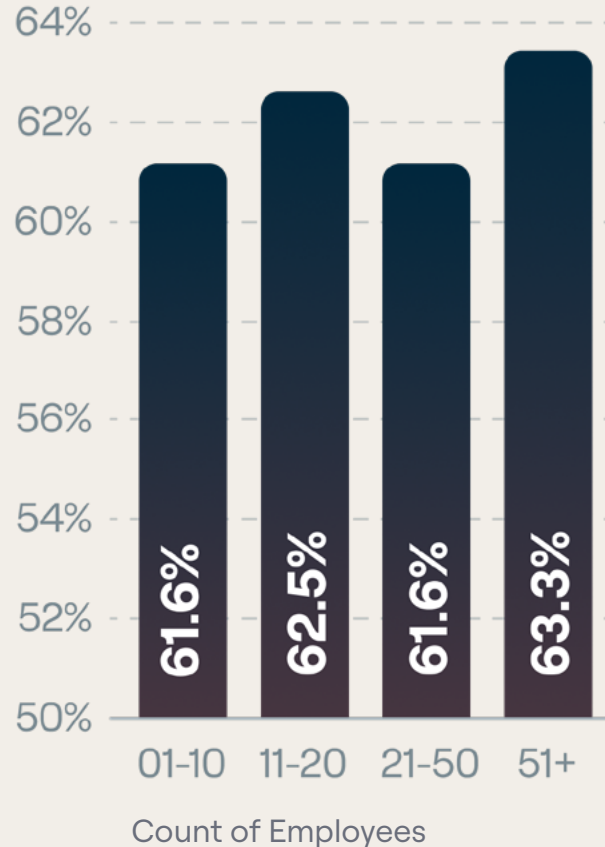
Utilization Rate is a measure of how effectively your firm is converting available time into revenue-generating activity. A higher rate generally indicates that more of your team's capacity is being directed toward client work — but higher isn't always better. Excessively high utilization leaves no room for business development, training, internal management, and the other non-billable work that keeps a firm healthy and growing.

The most useful application of this metric is identifying where time is going, not just how much of it is billable. A low utilization rate can stem from a pipeline problem, an overstaffed team, or a culture where time isn't being tracked consistently. That last point matters more than most firms realize — poor time tracking can artificially deflate utilization and makes the firm look less efficient than it actually is. Accurate, consistent time logging is the foundation this metric depends on.

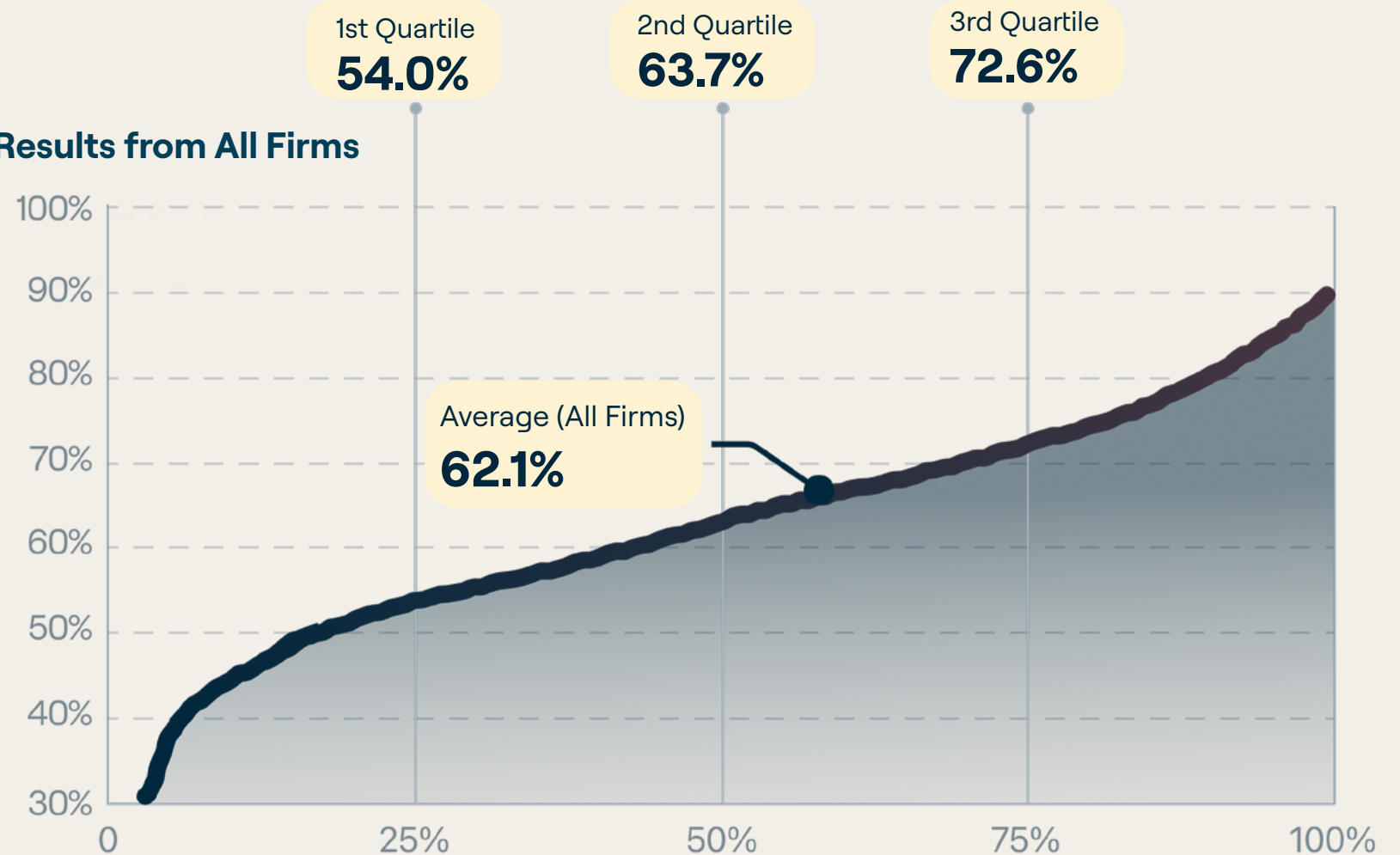
Utilization Rate

What percentage of your team's hours are spent on billable work? The average firm hits 62%. Remember higher isn't always better. It's about balance. Look at how much time is absorbed by non-billable overhead before adding headcount or chasing new work, and balance things like training and mentorship with billable tasks.

Results by Firm Size



Results from All Firms



n = 1098
Filter = Engineering firms with a Utilization Rate between 10% and 90%

Realization Rate

$$= \frac{\text{Net Revenue}}{\text{Value of Billable Work}}$$

Definition

Realization Rate measures the percentage of billable work your firm actually invoices and collects. It is calculated by dividing net revenue by the total value of billable work performed at standard billing rates. For example, if your team performs \$1,000,000 in billable work but only invoices and collects \$850,000, your realization rate is 85%.

88.4% AVG

How to Use This Metric

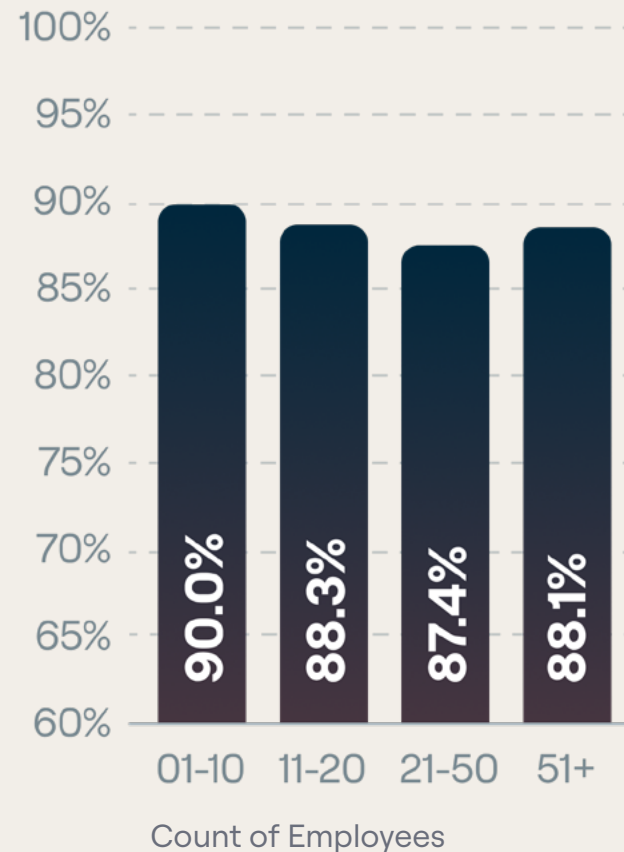
Realization Rate reveals the gap between the value your firm creates and the value it captures. A firm can have strong utilization and healthy billing rates and still underperform financially if its realization rate is low. That gap represents real revenue that was earned but never collected — most commonly through write-downs, scope creep that wasn't billed, or time that was logged but never invoiced.

Unlike many metrics in this report, realization rate is highly actionable at the project level. Firms that review realization by project, by client, and by project type can quickly identify where value is consistently being left on the table. The pattern is often more revealing than the overall number — a low realization rate on a specific project type or with a specific client is a signal worth acting on. Improving realization doesn't require working more hours; it requires capturing the value of the hours already being worked.

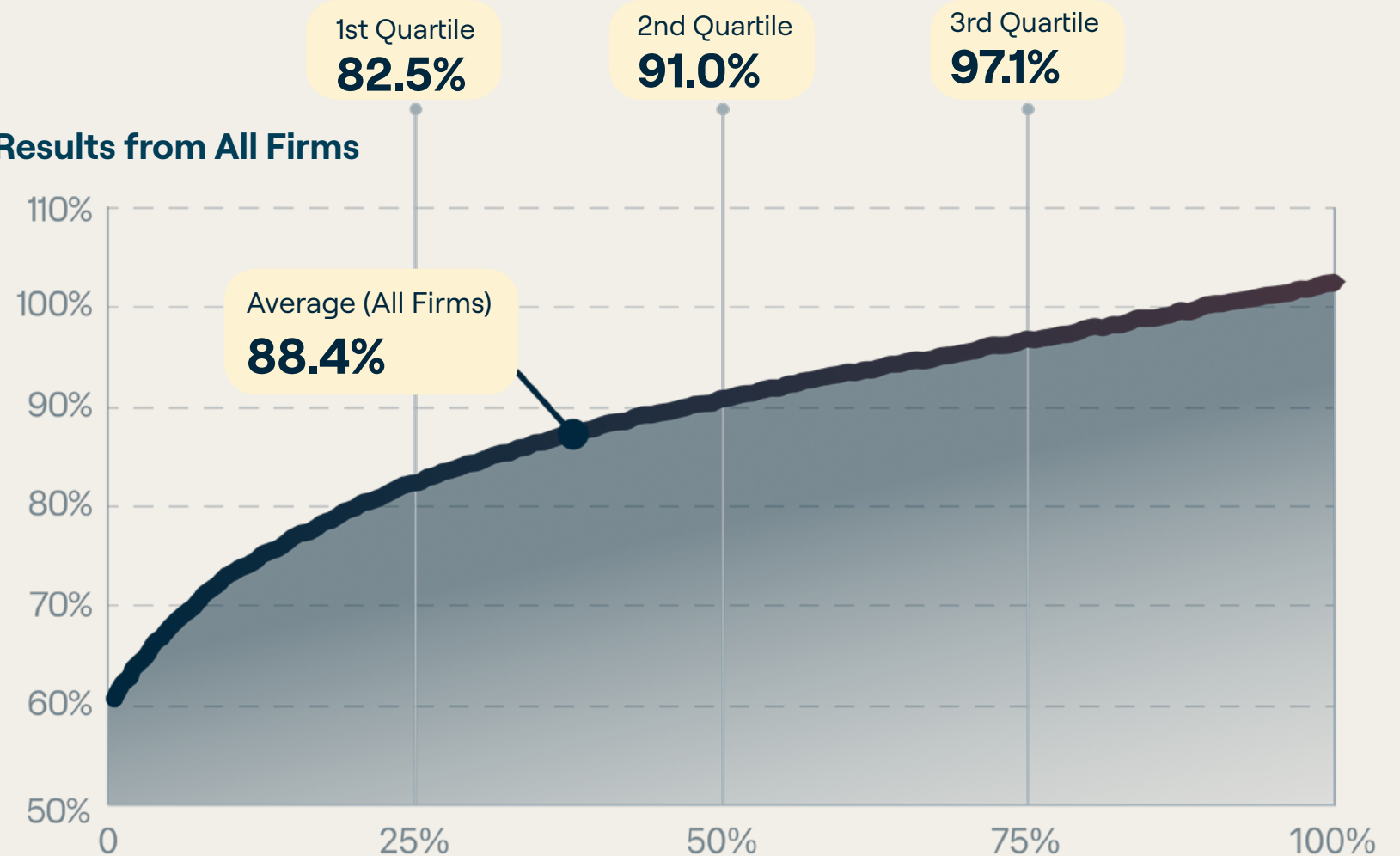
Realization Rate

What percentage of your billable work actually converts to revenue? The average engineering firm realizes about 88% while top firms capture over 95%. Some even achieve over 100%. If your number is lagging, scope creep, write-downs, and unbilled time are usually where the revenue is disappearing.

Results by Firm Size



Results from All Firms



n = 1134
Filter = Engineering firms with a Realization Rate between 60% and 200%

Average Contract Value

$$= \frac{\text{Total Contract Value}}{\text{Number of Contracts}}$$

Definition

Average Contract Value (ACV) measures the average revenue your firm earns per contract over a given period. It is calculated by dividing total net value of contracts signed in a given period divided by the number of contracts signed in that same period.

\$39,900 AVG

How to Use This Metric

Average Contract Value is a useful lens for understanding the composition of your revenue. Two firms with identical total revenue can have very different risk profiles — one built on a few large contracts, the other on many small ones. Neither is inherently better, but each carries different implications for staffing, cash flow, and business development effort.

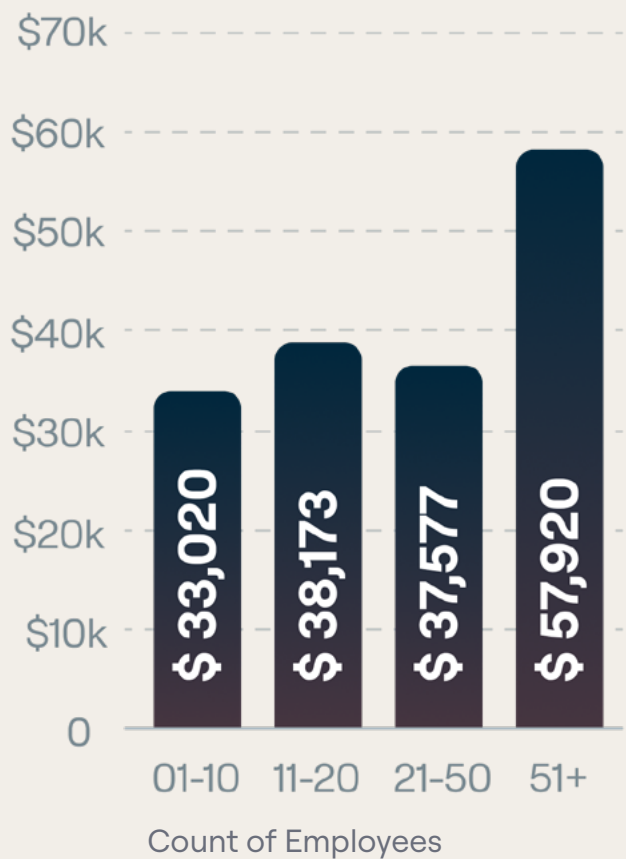
Tracking ACV by project type or client sector helps identify where your highest-value work comes from and where to focus growth efforts. It's all about balancing business development effort to contract size and profitability of project types. Combined with your proposal win rate, it can also help you estimate how many leads your pipeline needs to generate to hit a revenue target — making it one of the more practical planning tools in this report.

10

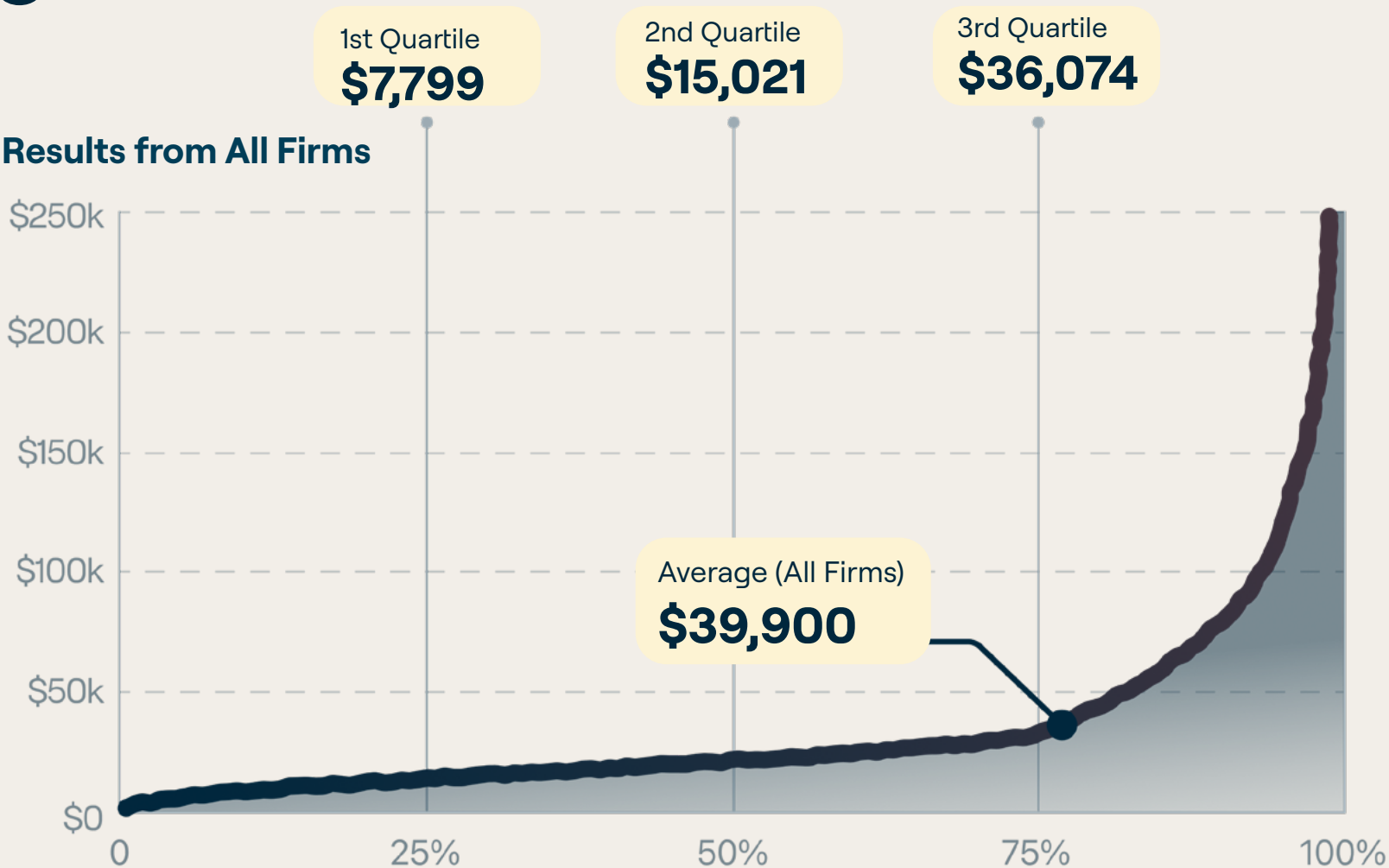
Average Contract Value

What is the average value of a single contract at your firm? The industry average is around \$40k, with larger firms averaging significantly higher contract values. If your number is low, pricing, project scope, and client mix are the first places to look.

Results by Firm Size



Results from All Firms



n = 1236
Filter = Engineering firms with an Average Contract Value \$1k and \$2m

Average Collection Period

$$= \frac{\text{Account Receivable Balance}}{\text{Total Net Sales}} \times 365$$

Definition

Average Collection Period measures the average number of days it takes your firm to collect payment after invoicing. It is calculated by dividing your accounts receivable balance by total net revenue, then multiplying by 365.

59.7 AVG

How to Use This Metric

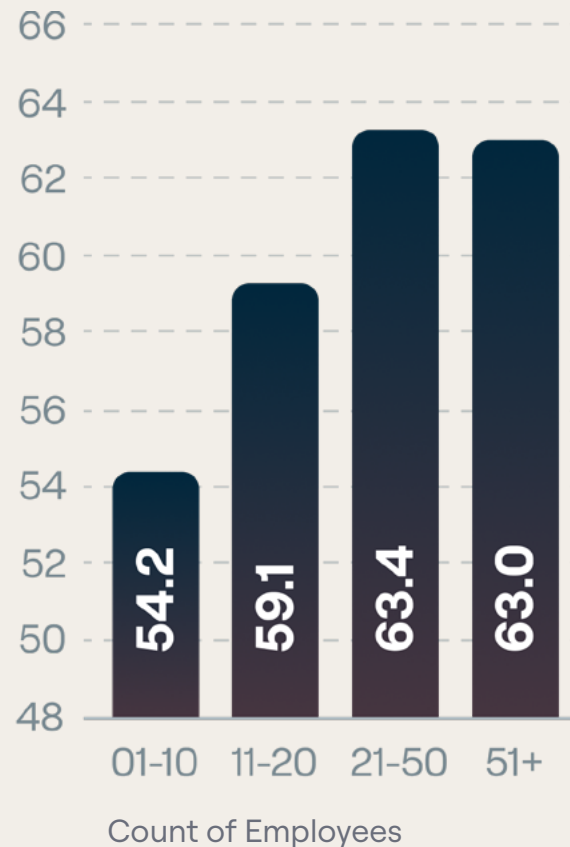
Average Collection Period is a direct measure of cash flow efficiency. A shorter collection period means money moves from completed work to your bank account faster — reducing the need to carry receivables and giving the firm more financial flexibility. A longer period can create cash flow strain even when the firm is profitable on paper.

The most effective levers for improving collection period are consistent invoicing practices, clear payment terms established in the contract, electronic payment options that reduce friction for clients, and automated reminders. Firms that invoice promptly and make it easy for clients to pay outperform those that treat billing as an afterthought. It's also worth segmenting your collection period by client type — institutional and government clients often have longer payment cycles by design, which can skew your overall number and mask strong performance elsewhere in your portfolio.

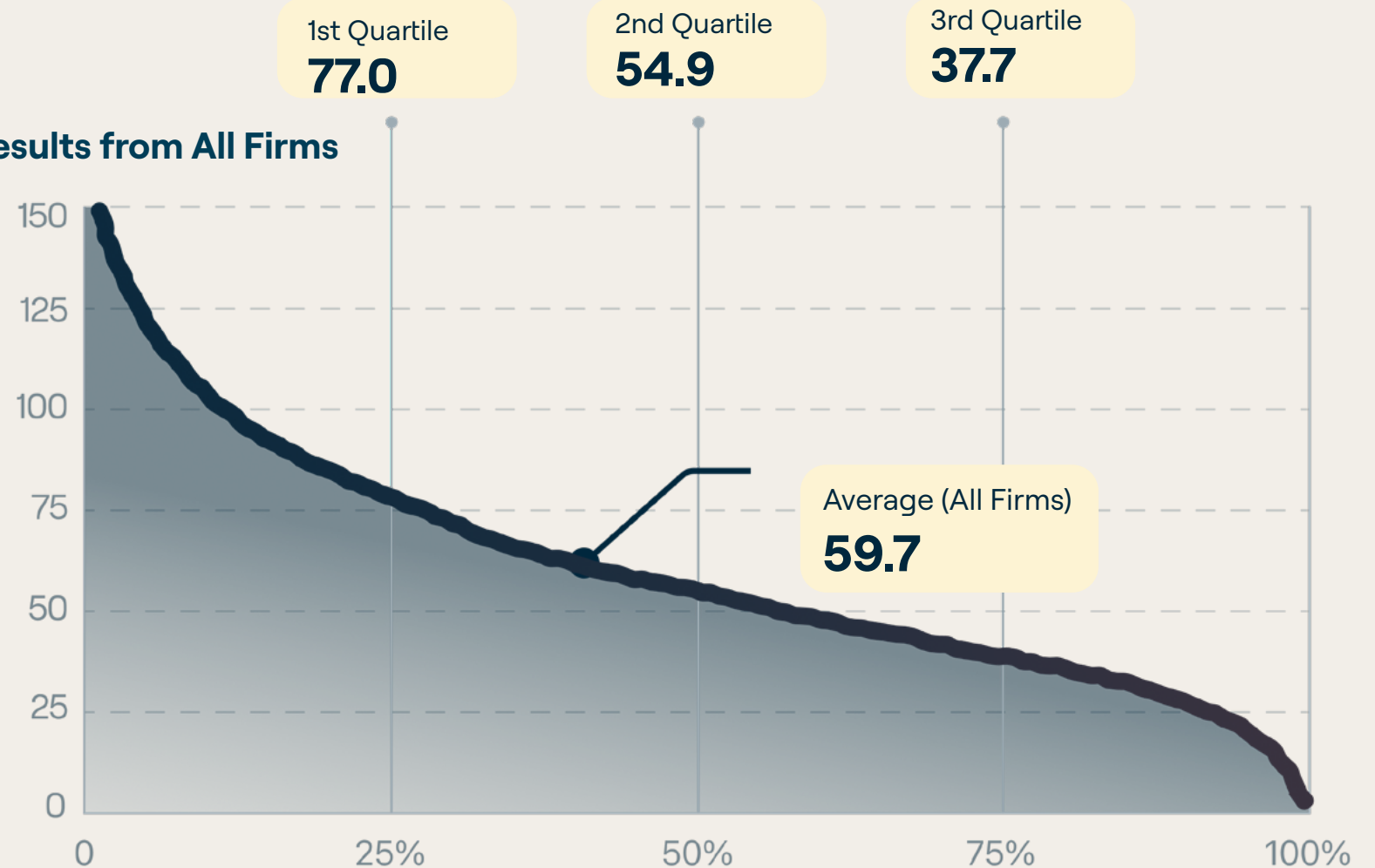
Average Collection Period

How long does it take your firm to get paid after sending an invoice? The average engineering firm waits almost 60 days — top firms collect in under 38. If your collection period is long, a defined invoicing process, automated reminders, and electronic payment options are the fastest levers to pull.

Results by Firm Size



Results from All Firms



n = 1143
Filter = Engineering firms with an Average
Collection Period between 1 and 365 days.

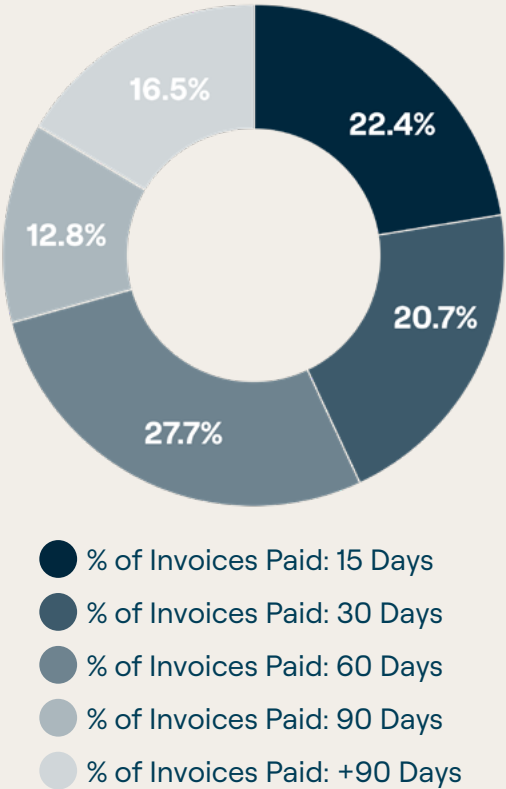
Average Collection Period

About 43% of all invoices are paid within 30 days. The firms waiting longer are usually working with institutional clients on larger projects. If your collection period is high, a tighter invoicing process and electronic payments are the fastest ways to close the gap.

Results by Firm Size

Firm Size	% of Invoices Paid: 15 Days	% of Invoices Paid: 30 Days	% of Invoices Paid: 60 Days	% of Invoices Paid: 90 Days	% of Invoices Paid: 90+ Days
01 to 10	27.3%	20.5%	24.7%	12.1%	15.2%
11 to 20	24.9%	20.5%	25.7%	11.8%	17.1%
21 to 50	20.0%	20.3%	28.8%	13.4%	17.6%
51+	15.0%	21.8%	33.7%	14.1%	15.3%
Grand Total	22.4%	20.7%	27.7%	12.8%	16.5%

% of Invoices Paid Over Time



Year Over Year Revenue Change

$$= \frac{\text{Net Revenue in Current Year} - \text{Net Revenue in Previous Year}}{\text{Net Revenue in Previous Year}}$$

Definition

Year-Over-Year Revenue Change measures the percentage change in net revenue from one year to the next. It is calculated by subtracting the prior year's net revenue from the current year's net revenue, dividing by the prior year's net revenue, and expressing the result as a percentage.

8.7% AVG

How to Use This Metric

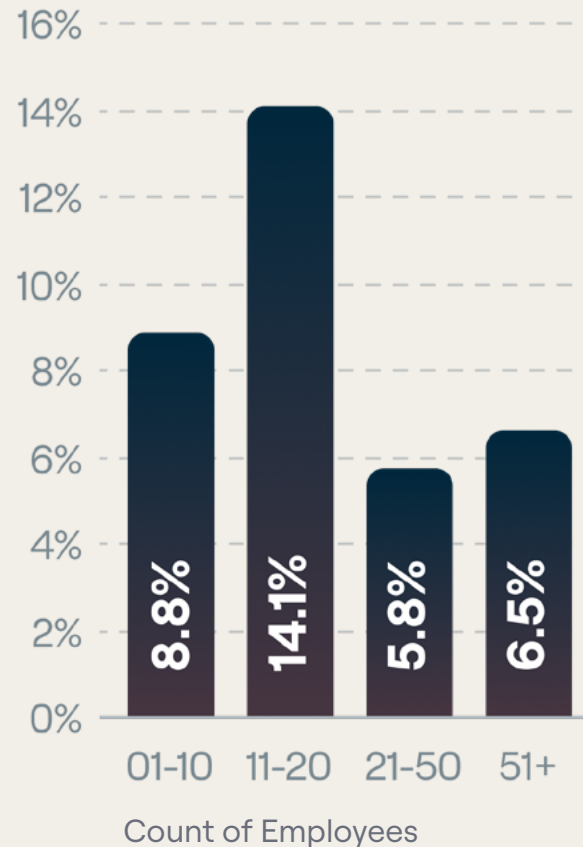
Year-over-year revenue growth is the most fundamental measure of business momentum. A positive number confirms the firm is expanding; a negative number is an early warning sign worth taking seriously, even if current profitability looks healthy. Revenue decline has a way of compressing margins quickly once overhead costs — largely fixed in the short term — can no longer be absorbed.

What this metric doesn't tell you is why growth is happening. A firm can show strong revenue growth by winning more work, raising fees, or carrying over a large backlog from the prior year. Understanding the source of growth matters as much as the number itself. Tracking this metric alongside backlog percentage gives you the earliest possible view of where revenue is headed before it shows up in your annual results.

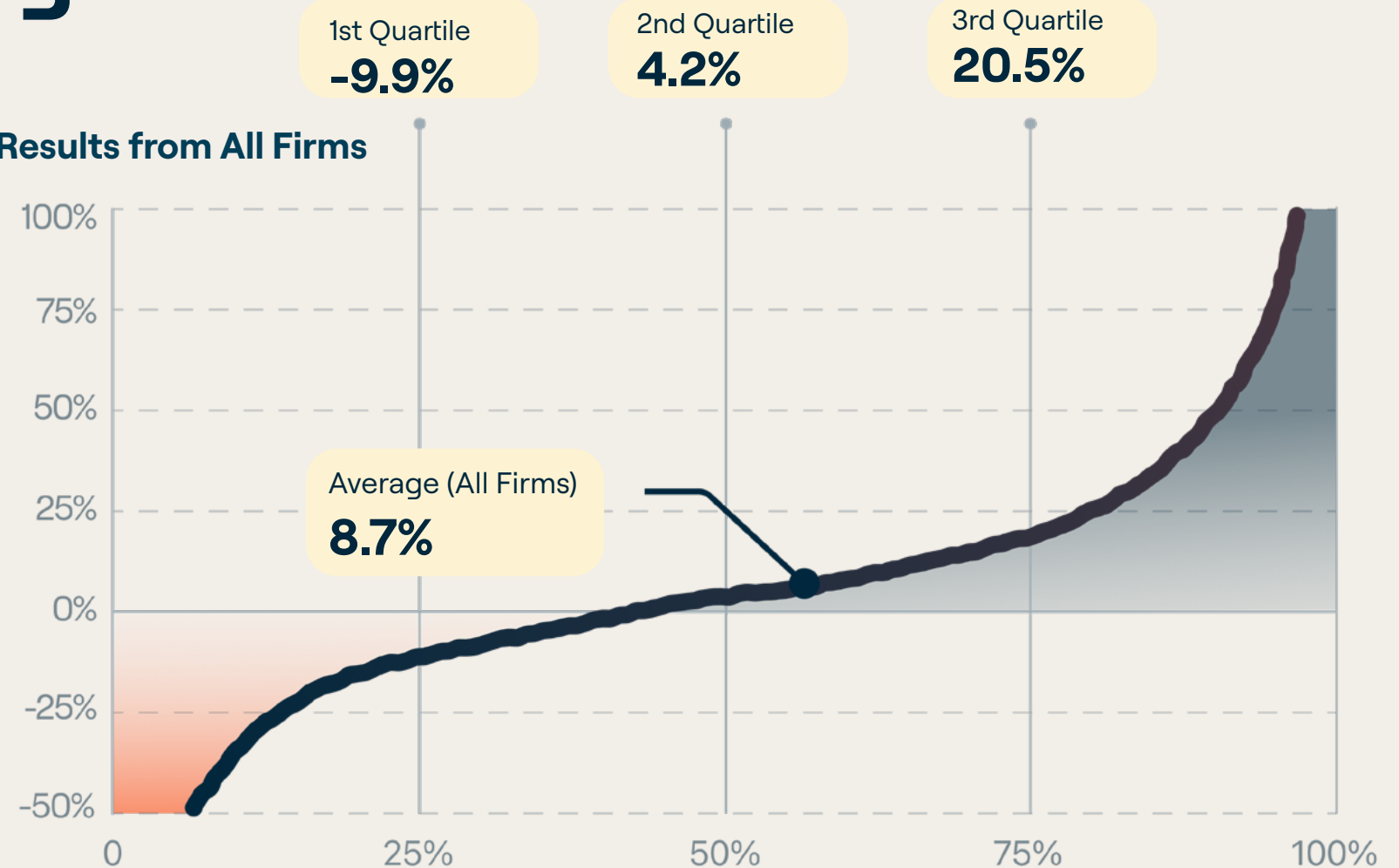
Year Over Year Revenue Change

Is your firm growing year over year? The average engineering firm grew revenue by 8.7% — but top-quartile firms achieved growth of 20% or more. If your growth is flat or negative, pipeline development and backlog management are usually the first areas worth examining.

Results by Firm Size



Results from All Firms



n = 1067
Filter = Engineering firms with an YoY Revenue Change between -100% and 300%.

13

Backlog %

$$= \frac{\text{Backlog in \$}}{\text{Annual Net Revenue}}$$

Definition

Backlog % represents the proportion of your firm's annual revenue capacity that is already committed to signed contracts. It is calculated by dividing your current backlog in dollars by your annual net revenue and expressing the result as a percentage.

23.7% AVG

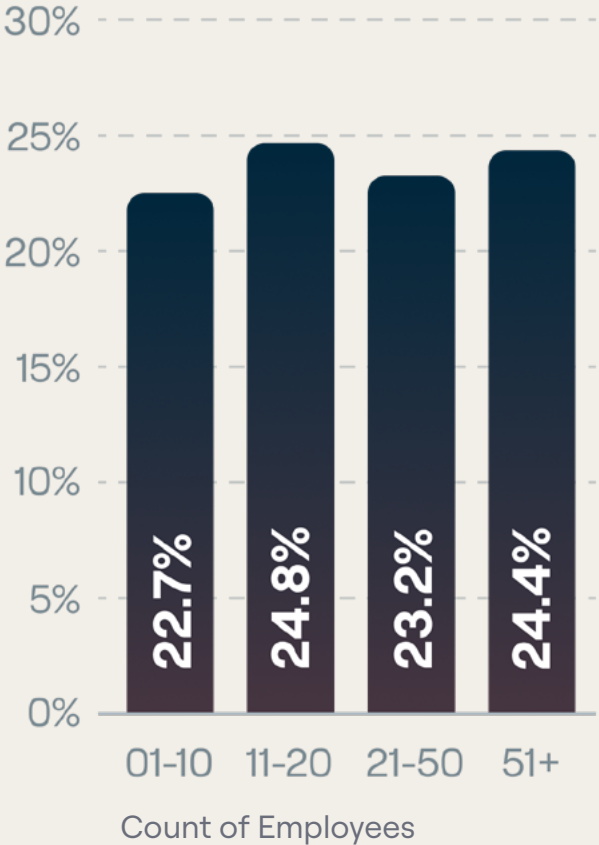
How to Use This Metric

Backlog % is one of the best forward-looking indicators in this report. Unlike most metrics which measure past performance, backlog tells you where you're headed. A healthy backlog reduces pressure on short-term business development and gives leadership the confidence to make hiring and investment decisions. The ideal range varies by firm size, project type, and sales cycle length — a firm doing large institutional projects needs more runway than one doing smaller residential work.

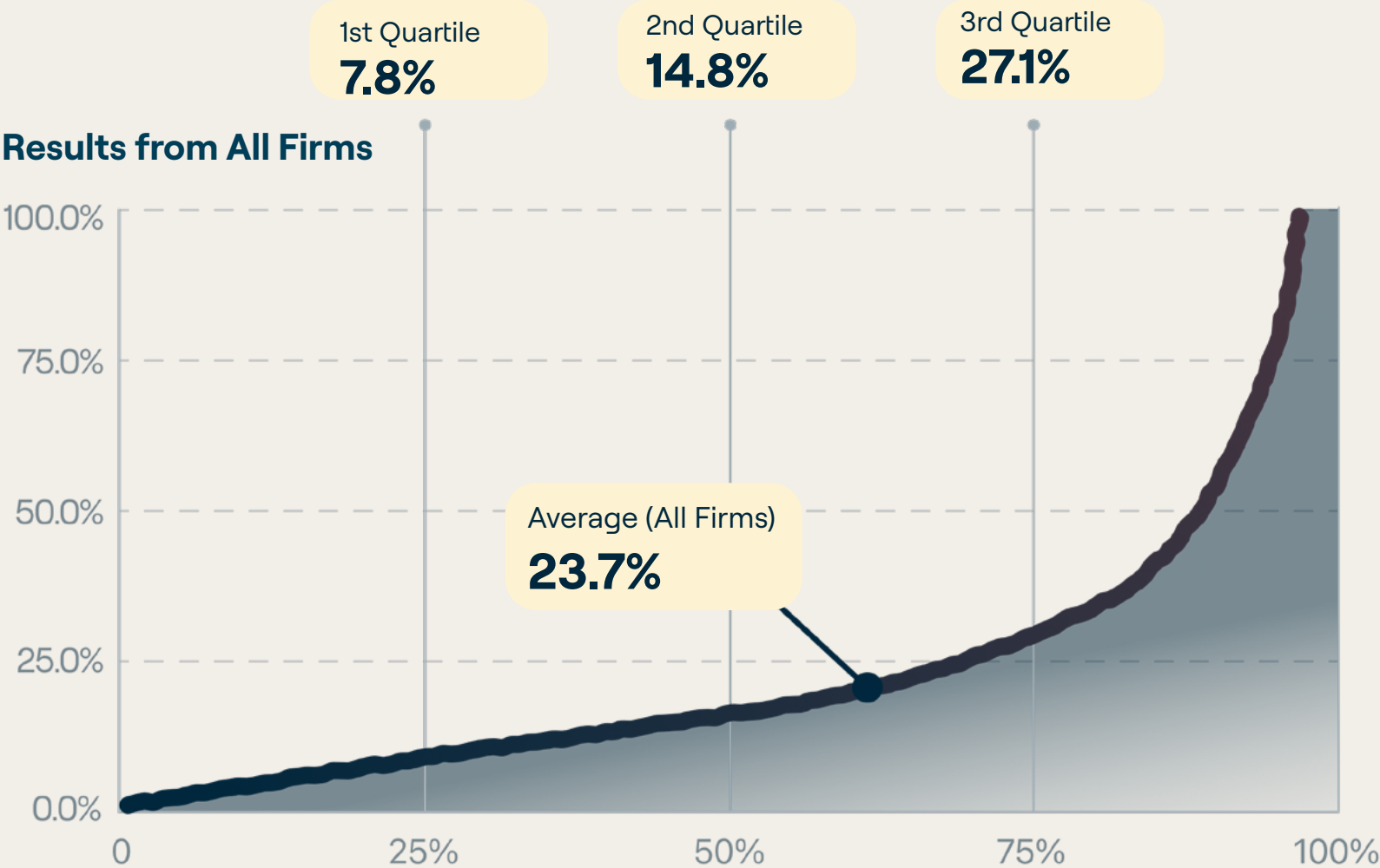
One important nuance: backlog in dollars doesn't account for how efficiently that work will be delivered. A large backlog on projects with poor scope definition or difficult clients can be misleading. The most useful firms pair backlog % with realization rate to get a clearer picture of how much of that committed revenue will actually make it to the bottom line.

13 Backlog %

Results by Firm Size



How much of your firm’s annual revenue capacity is already committed to signed contracts? The average engineering firm carries a backlog of about 24%. Too little risks underutilizing your team; too much can strain delivery. The goal is balance - more isn’t always better.



n = 1146
Filter = Engineering firms with an Backlog % between 0% and 300%.

14 Direct Labor %

$$= \frac{\text{Direct Labor Expense}}{\text{Annual Net Revenue}}$$

Definition

Direct Labor as % of Net Revenue measures the proportion of your net revenue that is spent on direct labor — the value of the salaries of employees whose time is charged directly to client projects. It is calculated by dividing total direct labor costs by net revenue and expressing the result as a percentage.

25.0% AVG

How to Use This Metric

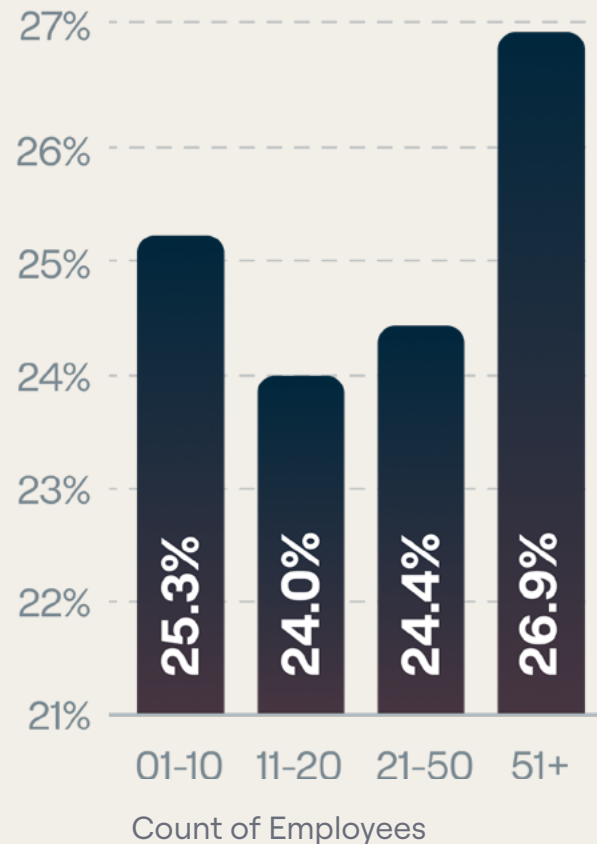
Direct labor is the engine of an engineering firm — it's where the work gets done and where revenue is earned. This metric tells you how efficiently your firm is converting labor investment into revenue, and how much pricing headroom you have before labor costs start compressing your margin.

Tracking this alongside total Labor Expense as % of Net Revenue — which includes non-billable time and overhead staff — gives you a complete picture of your firm's total people costs. The spread between the two is worth paying attention to: a widening gap often means overhead staffing is growing faster than billable capacity, which quietly erodes margin even when revenue looks healthy.

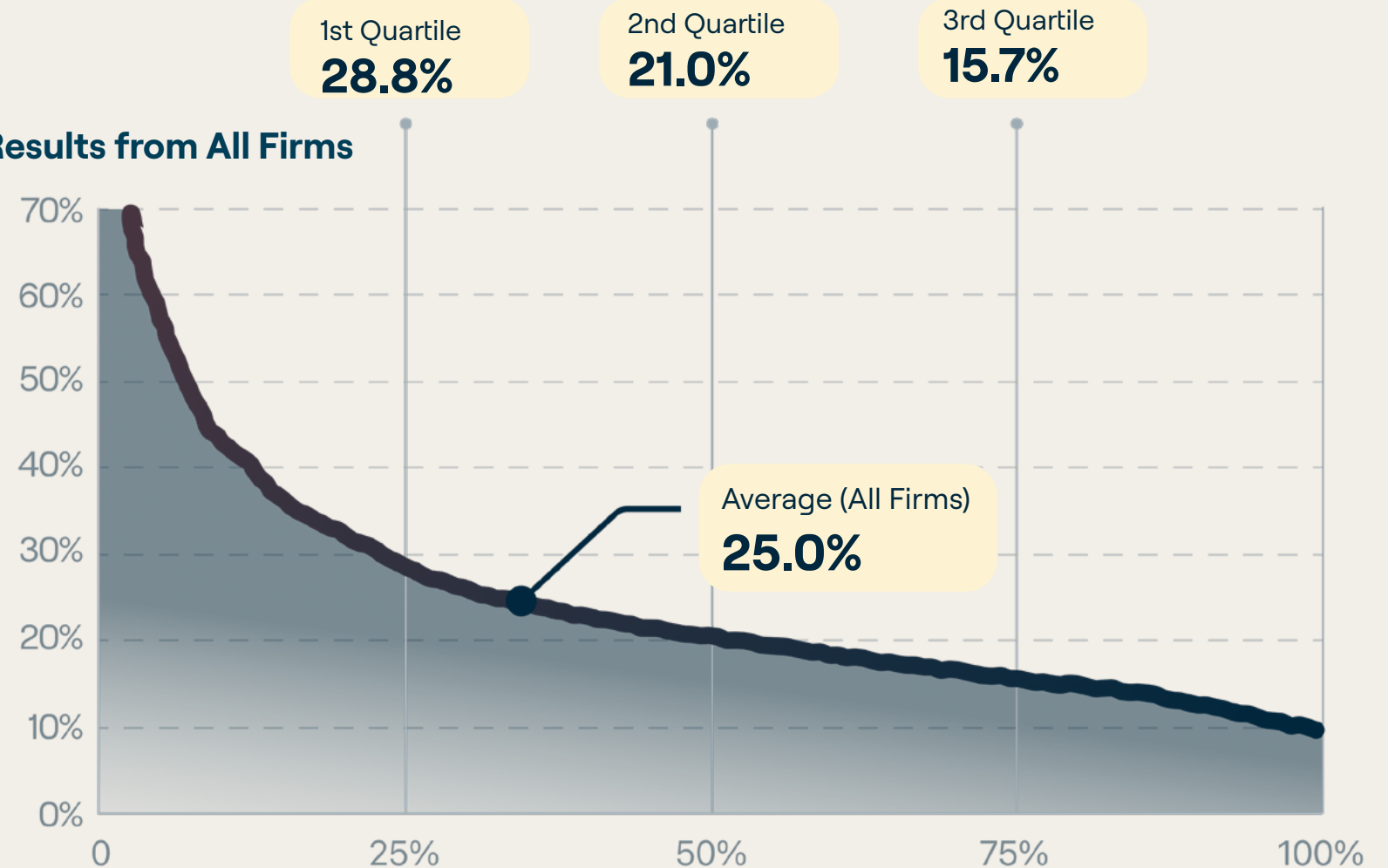
14 Direct Labor %

What share of your revenue goes towards paying the people doing billable work? The average engineering firm spends 25% of net revenue on direct labor — top-quartile firms keep that below 16%. If your number is high, it means your billing rates aren't keeping pace with your labor costs or your team isn't efficient.

Results by Firm Size



Results from All Firms



n = 833
Filter = Engineering firms with a Direct Labor % between 10% and 100%

Labor Expense %

$$= \frac{\text{Total Labor Expense}}{\text{Annual Net Revenue}}$$

Definition

Labor Expense as % of Net Revenue measures the proportion of net revenue spent on total labor costs — including both direct labor charged to projects and all overhead staff such as principals, administrators, and marketing or finance personnel. It is calculated by dividing total labor expenses by net revenue and expressing the result as a percentage.

34.1% AVG

How to Use This Metric

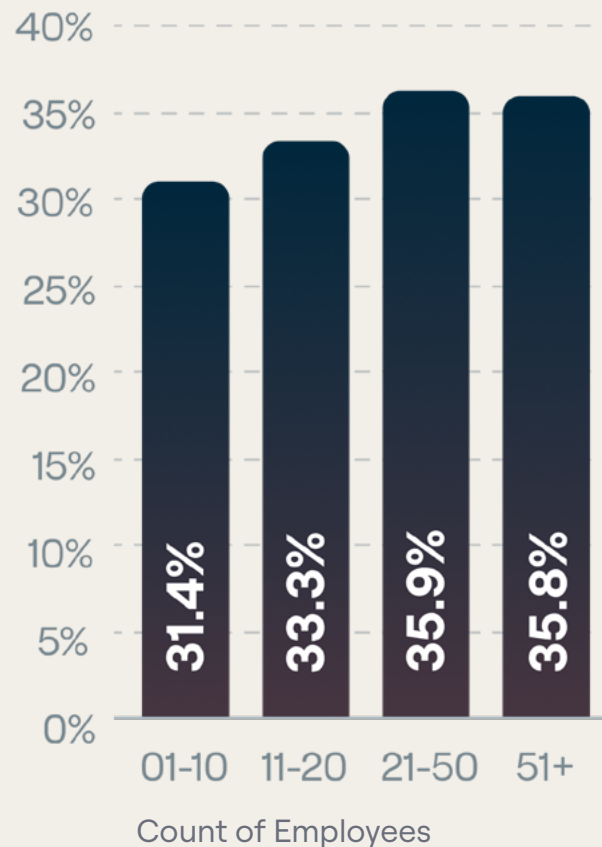
This is the broadest measure of people costs in this report, and for most engineering firms it represents the single largest expense category. Because labor is largely a fixed cost in the short term, this metric has an outsized influence on profit margin — when revenue dips, labor expense as a % of net revenue rises quickly, compressing margins faster than almost any other factor.

The most useful application of this metric is evaluating your firm's staffing structure relative to its revenue base. A high percentage doesn't always mean the firm is overstaffed — it may reflect a deliberate investment in talent ahead of anticipated growth. But when it remains elevated over multiple periods without a corresponding improvement in revenue or profit, it's a signal that the firm's cost structure needs attention. Tracking this quarterly in BQE CORE makes it easier to spot the trend before it becomes a problem.

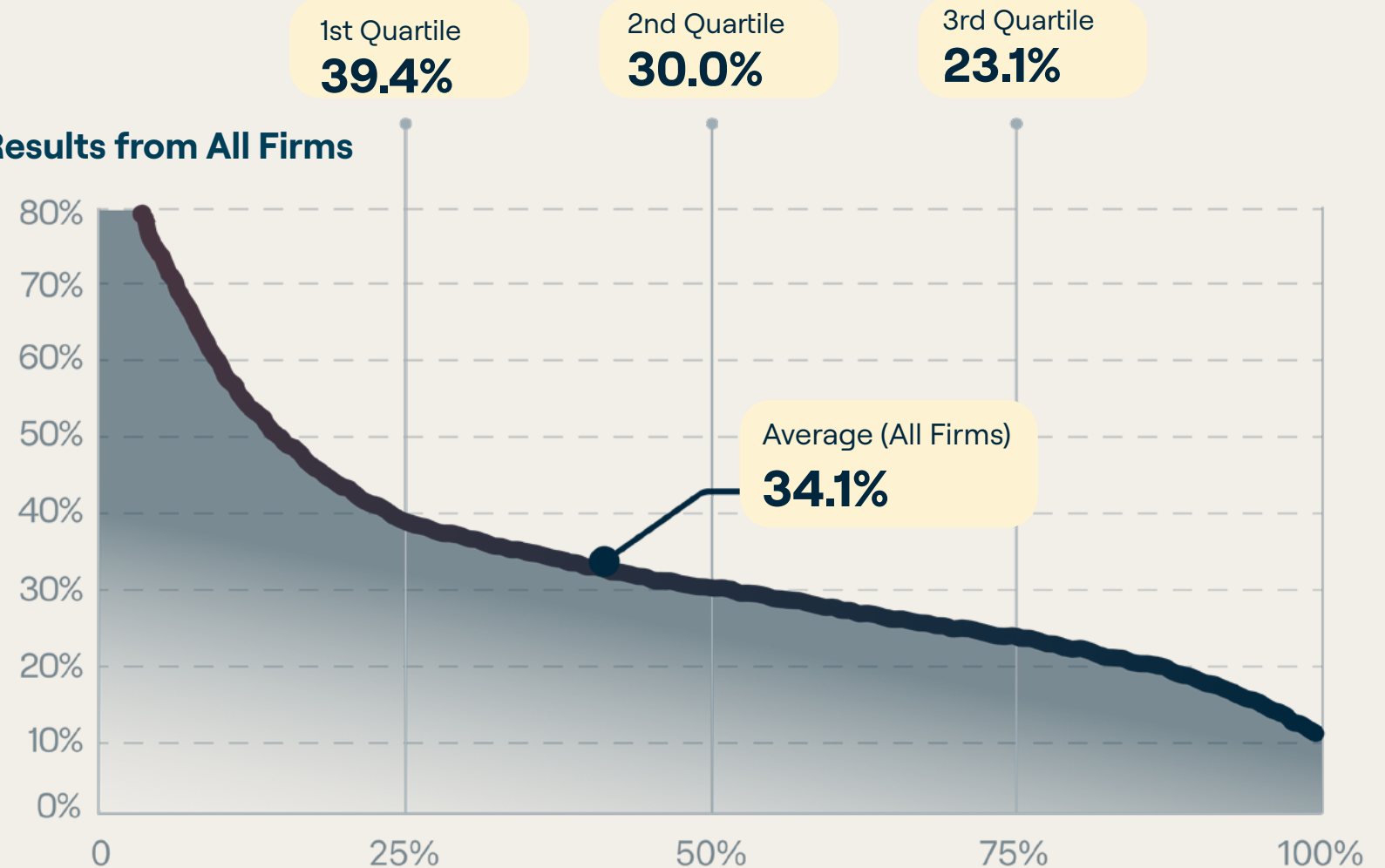
Labor Expense %

What share of your revenue goes to total labor costs — billable staff and overhead combined? The average engineering firm spends about one third of their revenue on labor. Top firms keep that below 25%. If your number is high, look at your ratio of billable to non-billable staff before adding headcount.

Results by Firm Size



Results from All Firms



n = 919
Filter = Engineering firms with Labor
Expense % between 10% and 100%

Effective Billing Rate

$$= \frac{\text{Net Revenue}}{\text{Billable Hours Logged}}$$

Definition

Effective Billing Rate measures the average hourly rate your firm actually realizes across all billable work. It is calculated by dividing total net revenue by total billable hours. Unlike your standard billing rates, which reflect what you charge, the effective billing rate reflects what you actually collect — making it a more honest measure of pricing performance.

\$191.40 AVG

How to Use This Metric

The gap between your standard billing rates and your effective billing rate is one of the most revealing numbers in your firm's financial picture. A significant gap typically indicates that write-downs, discounts, or scope creep are eroding the value of your work before it reaches the bottom line. Many firms set competitive billing rates but systematically undercut them through informal discounting or failure to bill for out-of-scope work.

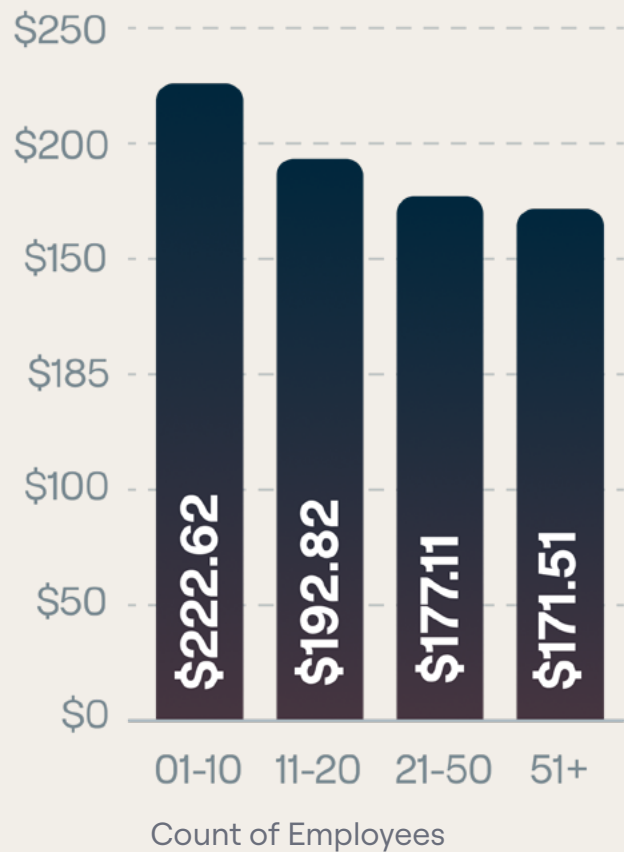
This metric is most powerful when tracked by project type, client, and service offering. A low effective billing rate on a specific project type is often a signal that either the fee structure needs to change or the scope management on those projects needs attention. Firms that close the gap between standard and effective billing rates — without adding a single hour of work — can see meaningful improvements in both revenue and profit margin.

16

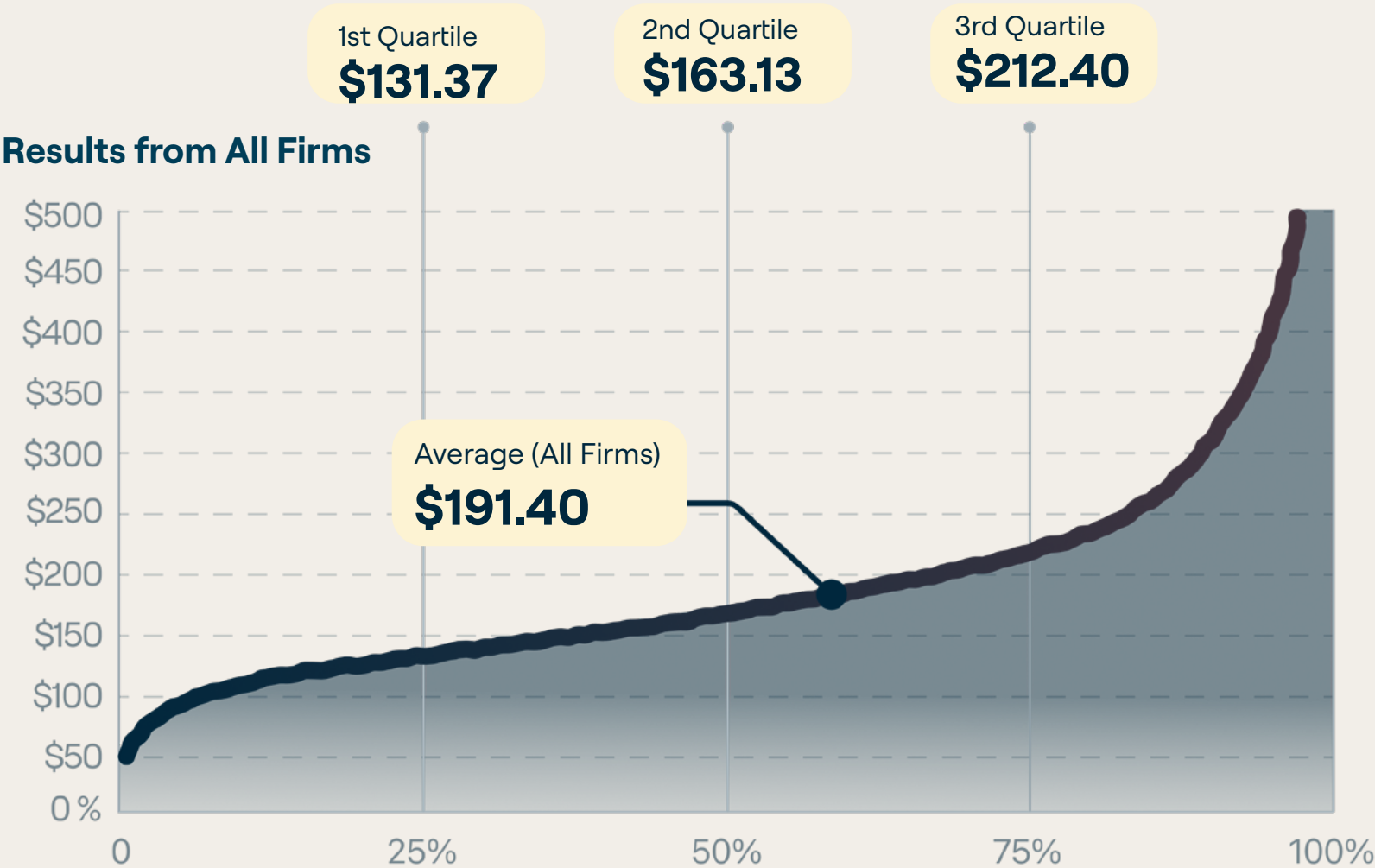
Effective Billing Rate

What is your firm actually earning per hour of billable work? The average engineering firm realizes just over \$190/hour while top firms earn \$210 or more. If your effective rate is low, the culprit is usually underpricing, excessive write-downs, or both.

Results by Firm Size



Results from All Firms



n = 1075
Filter = Engineering firms with Effective Billing Rates between \$40 and \$800

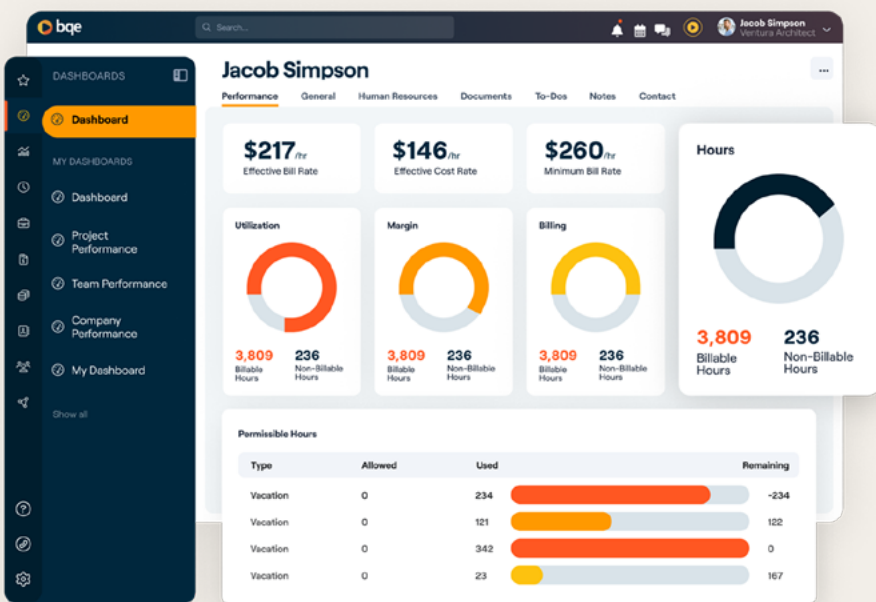
Data without action is just numbers.

You have now seen how your firm compares across the metrics that matter most. Maybe a few of those numbers stung. Maybe you performed better than expected in others. Either way, reading a benchmarking report and moving on is the easiest thing in the world to do. The firms that actually move the needle are the ones that do something with what they just learned.

That starts with picking the metrics where the gap between where you are and where you want to be is biggest. Not all of them at once. Pick one or two that would have the most meaningful impact if improved. Set a target. Track it. Share it with your team. When everyone understands what you are working toward, the numbers stop being something only the principal worries about and start becoming something the whole firm owns.

The following pages go deeper into what the data is actually telling us, how these metrics relate to each other, and the specific moves that separate high performing firms from the rest.

How to Use These Metrics to Drive Results



[Read More About Benchmarking](#)

A benchmarking report is only useful if it changes something. Not your perspective or your general sense that there are areas to improve. Something concrete. A target that did not exist before. A metric that someone now owns and tracks every single week. The firms that get the most out of data like this are not the ones that read it most carefully. They are the ones that act on it fastest. Here are three ways to make sure that happens.

01 Track What Matters

Use this report as a baseline, but don't stop there. Identify other metrics that correlate to increased revenue and profit. Track specific KPIs monthly, quarterly, and annually to identify trends, not just one-off results. Patterns over time offer insight into your firm's direction and give you early warnings when things go off course.

02 Share the Data

Your team can't hit targets they can't see. Share key performance metrics and goals with staff to build a culture of transparency and accountability. When everyone understands where the firm is headed, they can help steer it in the right direction. Build dashboards and reports for each role in your firm using software like BQE CORE, so everyone has the data they need to succeed.

03 Automate and Improve

Manually managing metrics is time-consuming and error-prone. Use firm management software to automate data collection, visualize actuals vs. targets, and keep leadership focused on strategy—not spreadsheets. Tools like BQE CORE make continuous improvement easier, faster, and more reliable.

What happens when you stop looking at metrics in isolation.

Every metric in the previous section tells part of the story. Your utilization rate matters. So does your realization rate, your profit margin, and your average collection period. But here is what most firm leaders miss: these numbers do not exist independently of each other. They push and pull against each other in ways that are not always obvious, and understanding those relationships is what separates firms that react to their data from firms that actually use it.

The findings on the following pages are drawn from the combined performance data across thousands of architecture and engineering firms using CORE every day. Some of what you are about to read will confirm what you already suspected. A lot of it will not. High backlog hurting your margins. Realization rate being a surprisingly poor predictor of profit. These are not intuitive conclusions. They are what the data shows when you look at how your metrics interact rather than what any single number says on its own.

That is the point of this section. Not more benchmarks to measure yourself against, but a clearer picture of the forces actually driving performance in your firm.

01 Effective Billing Rates

Top firms bill at more than twice the hourly rate — and the gap compounds into every other metric.

The effective billing rate across A&E firms in this dataset is \$166 per hour. But the spread between the top and bottom quartiles is dramatic. Firms in the top billing rate quartile earn \$91,849 more in Revenue/FTE (\$213,687 vs. \$121,838), have a higher profit margin (25.0% vs. 17.5%), and grow faster year-over-year (12.8% vs. 3.8%). Effective billing rate is a composite signal — it reflects rate discipline, project selection, staffing leverage, and scope management all at once. Firms that let billing rates drift low tend to underperform across every dimension simultaneously.

TOP-QUARTILE FIRMS:

\$290/hr

BOTTOM-QUARTILE FIRMS:

\$112/hr

02 Labor Cost Structure

Firms where labor consumes less than 20% of net revenue outperform on both margin and growth.

Labor expense as a percentage of net revenue is one of the strongest predictors of financial performance. Firms in the lowest labor-cost quartile (spending 20% or less of every revenue dollar on labor) average 28% profit margin and 11% year-over-year growth. Firms in the highest labor-cost quartile (spending 50%+ on labor) average 19% margin and only 2.5% growth. The mechanism is straightforward: when labor cost is a high proportion of revenue, there is little room left for overhead, profit, or reinvestment. High labor cost relative to revenue reflects below-market billing rates, underperforming project margins, or a staffing structure that has outpaced revenue.

TOP-QUARTILE FIRMS:

28.0%
profit margin

BOTTOM-QUARTILE FIRMS:

19.7%
profit margin

03 Backlog Management

Firms with lower backlog outperform on profit, growth, and billing quality — simultaneously.

Firms carrying light backlog outperform on every dimension at once. Compared to the highest-backlog quartile, low-backlog firms run 8.2 points higher profit margin, grow nearly four times faster (9.9% vs. 2.5%), and write down significantly less billable work (8.5% vs. 22.2%). The pattern is telling: when firms are overcommitted, billing discipline deteriorates — hours go unrecorded, invoices get delayed, and write-downs become a tool for managing strained client relationships. Backlog % is not just a pipeline indicator; it's an early warning signal for downstream billing and profitability problems.

04 Realization/Write-Down

Low write-down firms earn more revenue per person and grow faster, but margins are nearly identical.

Write-down rate turns out to be a revenue efficiency and growth predictor, not a margin predictor. Firms with the lowest write-down rates average \$202k in revenue per FTE and 8.6% year-over-year growth, compared to \$153k per FTE and 4.1% growth for high write-down firms — a \$49k per-person revenue gap and a 4.5-point growth gap. Yet profit margins are nearly identical (21.6% vs. 20.3%). High write-down firms tend to compensate through cost controls, keeping margins stable even as they bill less. But the revenue efficiency loss compounds over time — firms that capture more of what they produce build a meaningfully larger base to grow from.

LOW BACKLOG FIRMS:

25.1%
profit margin

HIGH BACKLOG FIRMS:

16.9%
profit margin

05 Utilization Rate

High-utilization firms grow 12.6 points faster — but carry almost identical profit margins.

Utilization rate is the strongest growth predictor in the dataset. Top-quartile firms average 10.9% year-over-year revenue growth versus -1.7% for bottom-quartile firms — a 12.6-point gap. High-utilization firms also run overhead multipliers of 0.83x, less than half the 1.96x carried by low-utilization firms. Yet profit margins differ by only 2.8 points (21.3% vs. 18.5%). Utilization is a growth and capacity indicator, not a margin indicator — what it measures is the degree to which a firm's people are actively deployed against billable work. Firms with fully deployed teams generate more revenue, even when their margin looks similar to peers.

TOP-QUARTILE FIRMS:

+10.9%
avg YoY revenue growth

BOTTOM-QUARTILE FIRMS:

-1.7%
avg YoY revenue growth

06 Profit & Growth

The most profitable firms are the fastest-growing, challenging the assumption that margin and growth are a trade-off.

The assumption that profitability and growth pull in opposite directions isn't supported by the data. Top-quartile profit margin firms average 6.9% year-over-year revenue growth versus just 0.3% for bottom-quartile firms — a gap that holds across firm sizes and disciplines. The operational capabilities that produce high margins — rate discipline, lean cost structures, efficient staffing — are the same ones that make a firm attractive to clients and able to take on new work without sacrificing quality. Profitability and growth are not a trade-off. They are the same underlying capability.

TOP-QUARTILE FIRMS:

\$202K
avg Revenue/FTE

BOTTOM-QUARTILE FIRMS:

\$153K
avg Revenue/FTE

TOP-QUARTILE FIRMS:

6.9%
avg YoY growth

BOTTOM-QUARTILE FIRMS:

0.3%
avg YoY growth

07 Architecture vs. Engineering

Engineering firms write down 4.5 points less and grow 3.7 points faster than architecture peers.

Engineering firms write down 9.1% of billable work on average, versus 13.6% for architecture firms, a 4.5-point gap. Engineering firms also grow faster (4.2% vs. 0.5% median YoY) and realize more billable work (91% vs. 86%). Architecture firms carry a higher median profit margin (26% vs. 22%) and collect faster (44 vs. 55 days), reflecting different contract and project mix. The gap is structural: engineering engagements tend to be specification-driven with hard deliverable boundaries, while architecture's iterative design culture normalizes over-service in ways that are difficult to unwind without deliberate operational changes.

ENGINEERING FIRMS:

9.1%

write-down rate

ARCHITECTURE FIRMS:

13.6%

write-down rate

08 Billing Multiplier

Firms achieving higher billing multipliers run better margins and grow more than twice as fast.

The billing multiplier remains one of the strongest performance indicators in A&E benchmarking. Top-quartile firms average 23.3% profit margin and 9.4% year-over-year growth versus 15.8% margin and 3.1% growth for bottom-quartile firms, a 7.5-point margin gap and a 6.3-point growth gap. The multiplier reflects billing rate, overhead structure, and direct labor efficiency combined. Firms with strong multipliers have constructed a process where labor cost and revenue stay in a consistently favorable relationship, through rate discipline, appropriate staffing, and scope management to prevent unbilled hours from accumulating.

TOP-QUARTILE FIRMS:

9.4%

avg YoY growth

BOTTOM-QUARTILE FIRMS:

3.1%

avg YoY growth

09 Backlog + Write-Down

High backlog and high write-down rate are the two faces of the same operational problem.

The correlation between backlog percentage and write-down rate is one of the strongest in the dataset. Firms in the lowest backlog quartile average 8.5% write-down versus 22.2% for the highest — a 13.7-point gap. When a firm has contracted more work than it can handle, project teams begin writing down hours to manage client expectations or miss billing for all time logged. The effect compounds: high-backlog firms earn less per billable hour, carry more unfinished work, and grow more slowly (2.5% vs. 9.9%). Backlog and write-down rate are not two separate problems — they are two symptoms of one.

TOP-QUARTILE FIRMS:

8.5%

write-down rate

BOTTOM-QUARTILE FIRMS:

22.2%

write-down rate

10 Overhead Expenses

The firms with the lowest overhead are the ones keeping their teams the busiest.

The overhead multiplier's strongest correlation is with utilization rate: overhead isn't primarily driven by expenses like software, rent, or office supplies — it's a function of how fully the team is deployed on billable work. Firms with high utilization carry an overhead multiplier of 0.83x; low utilization firms carry 1.96x. The same fixed cost base produces dramatically different overhead ratios depending on how much billable revenue is generated against it. A firm that increases utilization doesn't simply grow revenue — its overhead ratio drops simultaneously, without adding a single dollar of fixed cost.

TOP-QUARTILE FIRMS:

0.83x

avg overhead multiplier

BOTTOM-QUARTILE FIRMS:

1.96x

avg overhead multiplier

Performance is not a single metric. It is a system.

There is a tendency in this industry to fixate on the work. When it comes to the business, leaders focus on simple numbers that are easy to calculate. Utilization is the one we hear about most often. If utilization is up, the thinking goes, the firm is doing well. If it is down, something is wrong. Pull the lever, fix the number, move on and get back to designing.

The problem is that is not how firms actually work. And the data in this report makes that clearer than anything we could say anecdotally.

Take realization rate. It is one of the most talked about metrics in engineering. It's a metric I reference often when advising firms. Firm leaders check it religiously, celebrate when it climbs, and panic when it drops. But when you look at the data across thousands of firms, realization rate has almost no relationship with profit margin. A firm can have a realization rate in the top quartile and still be barely breaking even. Meanwhile, a firm with a moderate realization rate and tight overhead control will quietly outperform it every single year. This was surprising to find. The metric is not wrong. It is just incomplete. And treating it as a proxy for financial health is a mistake that costs firms real money.

This is the pattern that shows up again and again in the correlations section of this report. The firms that perform best are rarely the ones that have optimized any single number. They are the ones that understand the relationships between their numbers and make deliberate decisions based on what those relationships are actually telling them.

Here is a good example. High backlog feels like success. A full pipeline means the phone is ringing, clients want you, and the team is busy. But the data tells a more complicated story. Firms with the highest backlog percentages write down nearly three times more of their billable work than firms with the lowest backlog. When teams are overcommitted, billing discipline breaks down. Hours go unrecorded. Write-downs happen to preserve client relationships under pressure. Being overextended means things get missed. The backlog does not turn into revenue the way it should. What looked like a sign of health turns out to be a hidden margin problem that compounds quietly over time.

3x

The profit difference between top and bottom performers. Top-quartile engineering firms are nearly three times more profitable than their bottom-quartile peers. That gap isn't explained by any single metric. It's the compounded result of firms that understand their numbers as a system — and make deliberate decisions based on what that system is telling them.

The same counterintuitive logic applies to collection periods. Every firm wants to get paid faster. Faster collection means better cash flow, less time chasing invoices, less stress. All true. But the firms in this dataset with the longest average collection periods actually run higher profit margins than the fastest-collecting firms. The reason is not that slow collection is good. It is that the firms with longer collection periods tend to serve larger institutional clients who pay on procurement schedules, not because they are slow payers by nature. Those clients also generate bigger contracts, longer engagements, are more predictable in payments made, and often create more recurring work. Trying to force a 30-day collection period on a government agency or a large commercial developer is not a billing improvement. It is a client mix problem in disguise.

None of this means that individual metrics do not matter. They do. Most clients should pay in under 30-days. What a metric means depends entirely on context. A utilization rate of 64% looks different at a 5-person firm where the principal is doing a lot of billable work than it does at a 50-person firm with a dedicated business development team and layers of project management overhead. A profit margin of 20% looks different for a firm that pays its owners a market rate salary than for one where the principals are taking draws below what they would earn working for someone else. The number on these pages are only the beginning of the conversation.

The most important shift a firm leader can make is to stop asking “is this number good or bad?” and start asking “what is this number connected to, and what is it actually telling me about how my firm operates?” That question leads somewhere useful. The first one usually leads to a spreadsheet that gets updated once a quarter and then forgotten.

What the top firms using BQE CORE have in common is not a perfect score on any single metric. It is a clear-eyed understanding of where their performance is strong, where it is not, and why the gap exists. They are not guessing. They are not running on instinct alone. They have built systems and utilize firm management software that give them visibility into their business, and they use that visibility to make decisions that compound over time.

That is what this report is designed to help you do. Not to hand you a scorecard, but to give you the context to read your own firm more clearly. The benchmarks are the starting point. The correlations are where it gets interesting. And what you decide to do with both of those things is what will actually determine where your firm ends up.

The firms that are most successful are not necessarily the ones with the highest utilization or the fastest collection periods or the biggest backlogs. They are the ones whose leaders understand their business as a system, identify the right levers to pull, and have the discipline to pull them consistently. The leaders who spend the time to design their business, set up systems and processes, and execute consistently are the ones that will see success.

That is not a complicated formula. But it is a deliberate one. It’s also a place where many firms fall flat. Of course you would rather design a project than your business. But focusing on the business is what gives you the means to deliver great work.

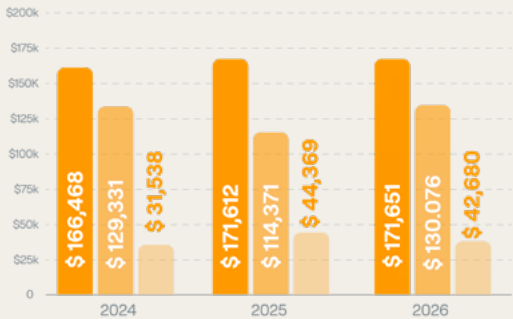


Lucas Gray

Director of Content & Community, BQE Software

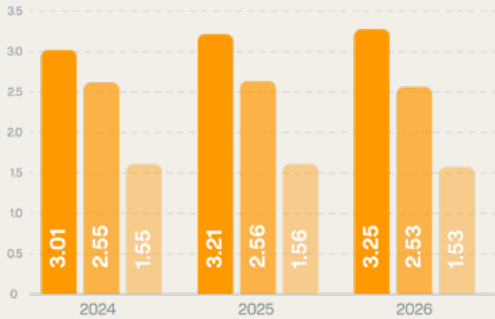
Three Years in Review

A single data point tells you where you stand. A trend tells you where you're headed. The firms that improve fastest aren't just benchmarking against peers — they're benchmarking against themselves. Year-over-year data turns a snapshot into a story, revealing whether the gap is closing or widening, and whether the changes you made last year actually moved the needle. That's the difference between information and insight.



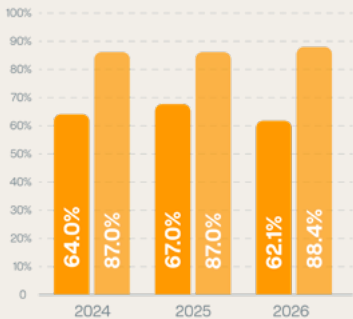
Revenue, Expense & Profit per FTE

Revenue per FTE has been essentially flat across three years — the industry hasn't found a meaningful way to move per-person productivity. Expense per FTE tells a more volatile story: costs dropped sharply in 2025, driving a strong profit per FTE gain, then climbed back in 2026, pulling profit back down with it. The pattern suggests firms are managing margin primarily by controlling costs rather than growing revenue — a lever that clearly works, but only until expenses creep back up.



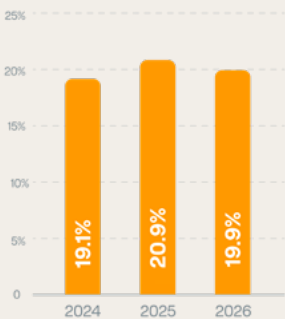
Billing, Breakeven & Overhead Multipliers

Breakeven and Overhead multipliers have been nearly immovable across three years — firms' cost structures are stable, for better or worse. The more encouraging trend is in the billing multiplier, which has climbed steadily while breakeven held flat. That widening spread between what firms need to bill to break even and what they're actually billing is where profit lives — and it's been quietly growing. Rate discipline and scope management appear to be working.



Utilization & Realization Rates

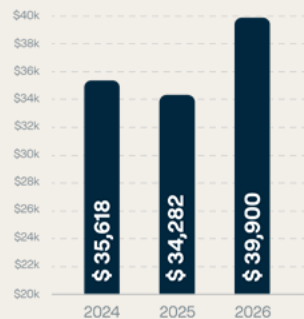
Utilization peaked in 2025 before dropping back below 2024 levels — a swing that likely reflects slower project intake and the staffing adjustments that followed a period of high demand. Realization has been the steadier of the two, holding consistent across all three years with a modest improvement in 2026. Firms maintained billing discipline even as their teams became less fully deployed. The two metrics are telling different stories right now, and utilization is the one worth watching.



Profit Margins

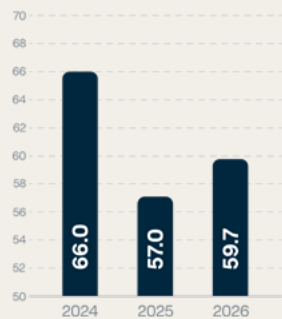
Margin improved in 2025 then gave a little back in 2026, landing nearly where it started three years ago. The average has been stubbornly range-bound — and that stability is somewhat misleading. What the average obscures is that the spread between top and bottom performers remains wide, and the firms at the top aren't waiting for industry conditions to improve. They're compounding operational advantages year over year while the middle of the market treads water.

Three Years in Review



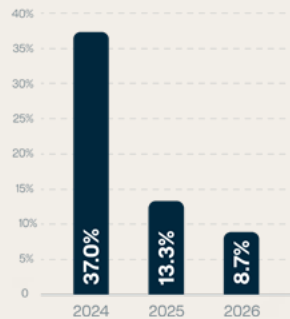
Average Contract Value

Contract value dipped in 2025 before jumping meaningfully in 2026 — the strongest single-year move in the dataset. That increase suggests firms are either winning larger engagements, getting more disciplined about which work they pursue, or both. A rising average contract value is one of the more efficient ways to grow revenue without adding headcount, and the 2026 number points in an encouraging direction. The question is whether it reflects a deliberate strategic shift or a favorable market moment that may not hold.



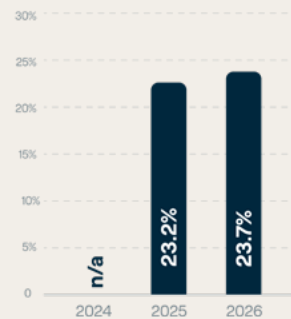
Collection Period in Days

Collection periods improved sharply in 2025 then ticked back up slightly in 2026 — still meaningfully better than three years ago. The 2025 improvement likely reflects deliberate operational changes: tighter invoicing practices, electronic payment adoption, clearer contract terms. The 2026 uptick is worth monitoring. If it continues, it's usually a sign that billing discipline is softening or that the client mix is shifting toward larger institutional work with longer payment cycles by design.



Year-Over-Year Revenue Change

The deceleration here is hard to miss — growth has come down sharply from the post-pandemic surge and is continuing to normalize. That trajectory is expected, and a healthy 8.7% average in 2026 is nothing to alarm over. But the direction matters as much as the number. Firms that rode demand tailwinds without building the operational infrastructure to sustain growth are the ones most exposed as conditions tighten. The firms growing at or above the average today are doing it on fundamentals, not momentum.



Backlog Percentage

Margin improved in 2025 then gave a little back in 2026, landing nearly where it started three years ago. The average has been stubbornly range-bound — and that stability is somewhat misleading. What the average obscures is that the spread between top and bottom performers remains wide, and the firms at the top aren't waiting for industry conditions to improve. They're compounding operational advantages year over year while the middle of the market treads water.

Additional Resources



Benchmarking Calculator

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Engineering is a relationship business built on creativity, trust, and craft. But behind every great firm is a business that has to perform. Projects need to stay on budget. Invoices need to go out on time. Drawings and calculations need to be delivered. And someone needs to have a clear picture of whether the firm is actually profitable.

That is what BQE CORE is built for. Not generic business software retrofitted for engineering firms, but a platform designed from the ground up for the way A/E firms actually operate. CORE brings your projects, time tracking, billing, resource planning, and financial reporting into one connected system, so the data you just read about in this report is not something you have to calculate manually in a spreadsheet. It is something you can see in real time, any time.

The firms in this report that perform in the top quartile on revenue per FTE, profit margin, and realization rate are not guessing at their numbers. They have systems that give them visibility, and they use that visibility to make better decisions faster. BQE CORE is how thousands of firms get there.

If any of the benchmarks in this report made you want to take a closer look at your own numbers, that is exactly where we can help. Book a demo and see what your firm looks like inside CORE.

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