



# QSR Success in 2026

Why the Next Competitive Advantage  
Is Getting the Basics Right

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# Executive Summary

After a decade of rapid digital growth – mobile ordering, multi-channel loyalty, delivery integration, and cloud platforms – the restaurant industry faces a new reality in 2026. The digital conveniences customers adopted over the past decade are now baseline expectations. Meanwhile, operators face persistent labor costs, unpredictable demand, and fatigue from increasingly complex tech stacks.

The industry is also on the verge of widespread AI adoption. This increases the potential for major efficiency gains but also heightens the risk of greater fragmentation if foundational systems aren't prepared.

With digital conveniences now standard and the advancement of AI, operators are shifting their mindset. The era of “add another tool” is ending. The new phase replaces expansion with optimization – strengthening the core and choosing smarter, more connected technology that works together instead of creating more work.

To understand how the industry is navigating this shift, PAR Technology collaborated with Gatepoint Research to survey restaurant leaders across 89 QSR, fast-casual, and full-service brands. Participants ranged from general managers running single locations to executives managing enterprise-scale operations. Among the executives, 80% held titles such as CxO or VP, while 20% were directors. The organizations' annual revenue ranged from Fortune 1000 companies to less than \$250 million.

Although challenges and priorities were remarkably similar across the revenue bands, the perspectives by role told a clear story:

- **General managers** feel technology at the front lines, with every delay impacting throughput, staff stress, and guest satisfaction.
- **Executives** view technology as an interconnected system, with every gap in integration, data, and workflows weakening profitability and scale.

Despite those different vantage points, the overarching conclusion was unified:



Operators are no longer pursuing innovation for innovation's sake. They are returning to fundamentals – stability, clean integration, and connected insights from technologies that work together reliably to improve day-to-day operations.

This swing in expectations is reshaping the market. Across pain points, priorities, and vendor requirements, restaurants now want **stable, fully integrated platforms – they want more value from fewer vendors.**

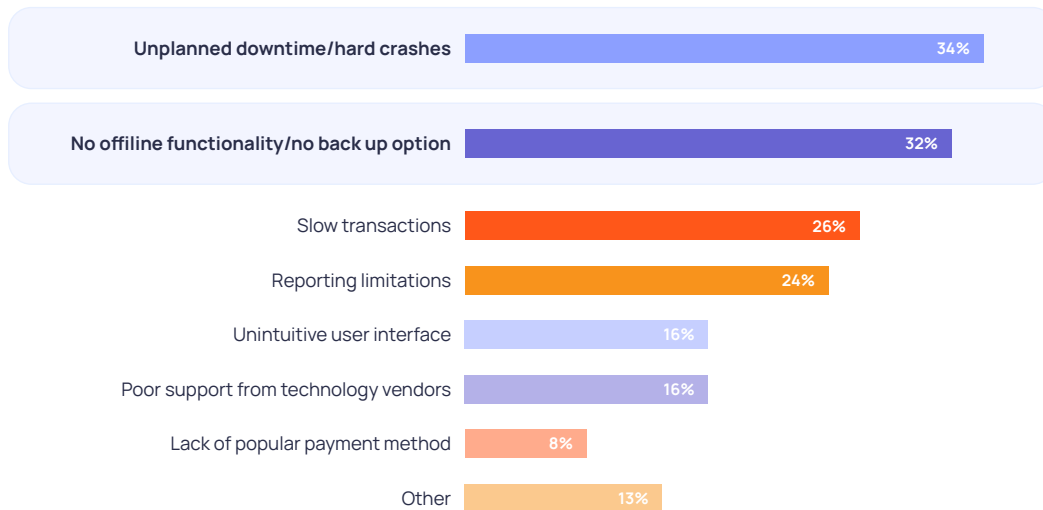
## PART 1

# Pain Points Reveal the Need to Get the Basics Right

Technology failures surface differently for managers and executives, but they point to the same root cause: systems that fail to deliver consistently on the fundamentals of stability and integration.

## Where Managers Feel It: Crashes During the Shift



Survey responses reveal a critical operational vulnerability: system disruptions that directly degrade the guest experience.



Managers cited recurring issues with POS and payments, including system freezes, delayed authorizations, and workflow interruptions that cascade across the line. These disruptions are remarkably consistent across brands of all sizes. Each interruption diverts attention from guests and amplifies pressure on already stretched teams.

Plus, the widespread cloud outage in 2025 across Amazon Web Services (AWS) underscored a hard truth. A POS that depends entirely on the cloud represents a single point of failure. When connectivity drops, so does revenue.

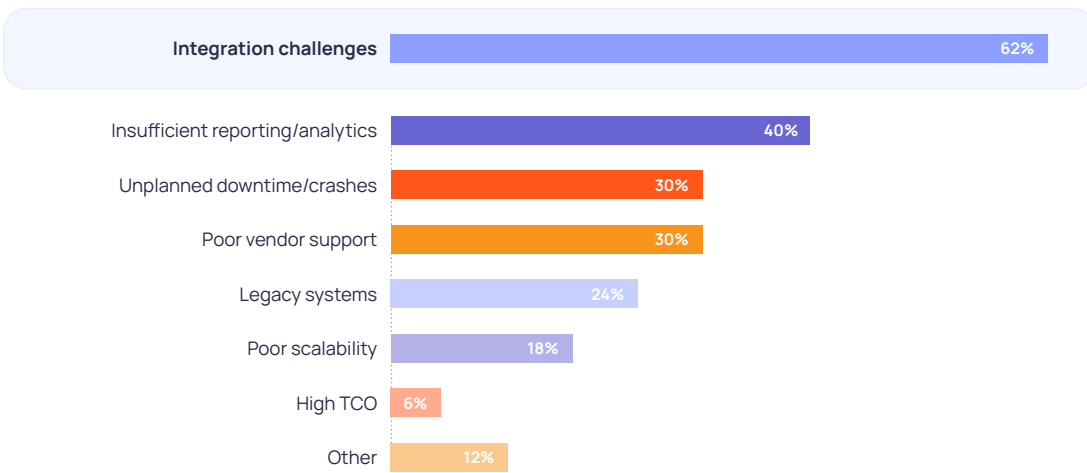
Modern POS architectures are evolving to address this risk through edge-based resilience, shifting critical functions from the cloud to the store. Key principles include:

 <p><b>Local execution</b> Core transaction processing runs on in-store devices, ensuring orders and payments continue even without a live cloud connection.</p>	 <p><b>Automatic failover</b> Redundant terminals maintain synchronized data so that if one device fails, another takes over seamlessly.</p>
 <p><b>Store-and-forward queues</b> Offline transactions are encrypted and queued for later sync, preserving compliance and operational continuity.</p>	 <p><b>Cached configuration</b> Menus, pricing, and tax logic are stored locally, enabling accurate service during extended outages.</p>

For restaurant managers, this is the opposite of complexity. It's about safeguarding staff workflow and the rhythm of the guest experience. In an environment where seconds matter, edge-based resilience transforms downtime from a catastrophic event into a manageable hiccup, keeping teams focused on guests rather than systems.

## Where Executives Feel It: When Fundamentals Break Across the System

Executives experience pain at the system level – and the signal is loud. **62% cite integration as their top challenge.** As one respondent put it, “Our tech stack doesn’t talk.”



Modern restaurant operations rely on a dense network of interconnected systems, including back-office platforms, online ordering, loyalty programs, kiosks, kitchen displays, mobile apps, delivery partners, and security systems. Most were not designed to work together, and each operates with different data models, performance requirements, and reliability thresholds. Using generic APIs and ad-hoc connectors has only added to the workflow issues and data inconsistencies.

Executives need to ditch their patchwork of one-off connectors for platform-level integration that is designed specifically for restaurants. With seamless integration, they hope to gain:



### Visibility

Reliable data for forecasting, reporting, and performance management.



### Flexibility

Freedom to choose the best-in-class partners in loyalty, deliver, payments, and AI partners.



### Scalability

Consistent workflows that hold across dozens or hundreds of locations.

## Consistency: A crucial factor in enabling AI

For executives, “getting the fundamentals right” boils down to one thing: consistency. Without uniform data, workflows, and system behavior across every location, forecasting is reduced to unreliable, reporting fragments. Training also becomes more burdensome, while implementing changes across a multi-location organization becomes slow and risky.

More importantly, as AI adoption increases industry-wide, inconsistency becomes an even greater liability. AI cannot deliver meaningful improvements when systems function differently or store data in an incompatible manner. It only works when the underlying platform is consistent and provides unified, complete data across all units. Without that foundation, AI outputs degrade quickly brands simply cannot scale AI operations or rely on it in everyday workflows.

Integration is therefore not just an IT concern; it is a strategic prerequisite. Brands that build consistency now will be able to deploy AI quickly, securely, and at scale. Those that don't will be stuck managing disconnected systems while competitors move ahead.





## What an integrated POS system looks like

An integrated, next-generation POS ecosystem should be thoughtfully architected with specialized interfaces for specific operational use cases:

### Above-Store Integration

- **Technology partner data feed:** High-volume, event-driven export for structured operational data at scale.
- **REST API:** Predictable transactional model for online ordering and cloud applications.
- **Webhooks:** Real-time events for kitchen bumps, item availability, and order status updates.

### In-Store Integration

- **In-Store REST API:** Purpose-built for kiosks, mobile order-and-pay, and line-busting for faster in-store processing.
- **Order event service:** Deep, real-time event stream for drive-thru systems, video analytics, and security cameras that depend on precise local order workflows.

With each interface, event stream, and data model intentionally designed to meet specific technology partner requirements, restaurants can enhance speed, reliability, and operational accuracy. The result is a flexible, scalable framework that provides partners with the right tools for the job, rather than a single rigid model.

## PART 2

# Priorities Show Technology Must Unite Strategy and Store-Level Performance

Pain points show where systems break. Priorities reveal what operators need technology to deliver next.

As labor costs rise, demand becomes more volatile, and expectations for digital convenience continue to increase, restaurant leaders face a defining challenge: they must drive meaningful innovation without introducing additional complexity or eroding margins. Solving this challenge requires more than adding new tools. It requires technology that can reliably translate brand-wide strategy into day-to-day execution inside every location.

This tension appears directly in the survey data:

## Executives

Executives gravitate toward system-level capabilities that allow them to define, scale, and control how the brand operates. Their top priorities included: integrated loyalty and payments (66%), automation (56%), AI-driven personalization (54%), advanced analytics (58%), and end-to-end integration (46%).

These are not abstract technology trends; they are mechanisms for enforcing consistency, managing cost, and driving growth across dozens or hundreds of locations.

## Their most appealing technology trends:

66%

Integrated loyalty with payments & digital wallets

56%

Automation to address labor shortages

54%

AI-driven personalized guest experience

40%

AI to improve menu & improve decision-making

38%

Consumer interaction with technology/self-service

## Managers

**Managers**, by contrast, prioritize tools that determine whether those strategies actually work during a shift. Faster order flow (60%), fewer errors (48%), and tighter system integration (44%) directly affect throughput, staff confidence, and the guest experience in real time. When systems are slow, fragmented, or unreliable, managers are forced to improvise — and brand standards begin to break down.

In short, executives focus on defining how the business should operate at scale, while managers focus on whether systems enable that strategy to be delivered consistently during daily operations.

**The takeaway is straightforward:** brands are no longer choosing between efficiency and innovation. They are demanding platforms that connect strategy to store-level performance.

## Tech features they would implement to improve operational success:

58%

Advanced/predictive analytics and reporting

58%

Cost control

48%

AI integration

46%

End-to-end integration

38%

Scalability

## How they would like to leverage technology in day-to-day operations:

60%

Speed up order-taking

48%

Reducing touchscreen and manual errors

44%

Have technology systems more integrated

40%

Improve and optimize customer data

30%

Increase customer self-service

20%

Address labor shortages



Executive strategy does not scale through policy alone. It scales when priorities like cost control, throughput, personalization, and growth are embedded directly into the tools stores use every day. Dashboards and after-the-fact reporting are insufficient. Locations need systems that guide decisions during service, not just measure outcomes afterward.

The brands that excel in 2026 will adopt platforms that:

- ✓ **Translate strategic objectives into frontline action**  
By embedding KPIs, guardrails, and recommendations directly into POS, ordering, and labor workflows so managers can act during the shift, not after it.
- ✓ **Deliver intelligence at the point of decision**  
Using automation and AI to support staffing adjustments, throughput optimization, upsell opportunities, and service recovery in real time.
- ✓ **Standardize execution without increasing friction**  
Through unified order flows, integrated systems, and consistent data models that reinforce brand standards automatically, even as menus, promotions, or pricing evolve.
- ✓ **Align every location to the same goals**  
By operating from a single source of truth across loyalty, payments, ordering, kitchen operations, and analytics, reducing variability and manual reconciliation.

When platforms carry the burden of execution, managers are no longer asked to interpret strategy on the fly or compensate for disconnected systems. Instead, they are equipped with tools that make the right actions obvious and repeatable.

This is how efficiency and innovation converge — and how brand strategy finally scales beyond the corporate office and into every shift

## PART 3

# What High-Performing Brands Demand From Vendors

Now that we understand what restaurant operators value, who do they trust to deliver it? Survey respondents identified the factors – beyond cost and fees – that matter most when selecting a technology vendor.



### Key factors when considering a vendor:

■ For Managers ■ For Executives

#### Features aligned with operational needs



#### Compatibility with existing hardware or software



#### 7/365 real-time support



#### User reviews and feedback from industry peers



#### Others



Vendor selection in 2026 is no longer about features. Instead, it's about **alignment with the priorities** this survey has identified.

When operators evaluate a vendor, they are assessing more than capabilities. They're assessing fit – how well a partner understands real restaurant operations, integrates into their ecosystem, and supports day-to-day continuity.

## Operational Alignment

The top selection factor across all roles (58–72%) was operational alignment. Operators want vendors that understand real restaurant environments: peak-hour pressure, how small failures add up, and the difference between technology that works when it matters and technology that looks impressive but doesn't cut it in real operations.

Operational alignment answers one question: *“Does your technology hold up in the realities of business?”*

## Compatibility

Compatibility ranked second (or a close second) across all roles (42–58%). Given that integration is the top executive pain point, compatibility is non-negotiable.

Brands are increasingly avoiding technology that requires reshaping existing workflows or rebuilding integrations. Instead, they're seeking platforms that:

- ✓ Integrate cleanly into existing ecosystems
- ✓ Preserve institutional knowledge
- ✓ Improve data consistency
- ✓ Prevent new operational silos

This approach goes beyond integrations to include the compatibility and configurability of the systems themselves. For example, can menu screens or order flows be easily customized so that it's simple to train staff to use the systems effectively?

Compatibility today means preventing the fragmentation that executives see as their main obstacle. It forms the foundation of stability and scale.



## Support

Support ranks third among executives, but it is closely tied for second with managers because they understand how quickly small problems can spread across organizations with a large footprint. While real-time responses are crucial for everyone, larger brands need consistency across hundreds of locations. Support is essential to operational continuity. Brands increasingly evaluate not only a vendor's technology, but also the execution, communication, and service infrastructure that surrounds it.

## CONCLUSION

# Unified Technology Is the Best Foundation for AI

Survey findings make one trend unmistakable: operators are moving away from novelty and toward stability, integration, and compatibility.

Managers want smooth shifts and dependable systems. Executives demand visibility, scalability, and predictable performance. Both groups agree that fragmented technology stacks cause operational failures and strategic blind spots.

This matters now more than ever because of the upcoming wave of restaurant innovation – AI-driven personalization, predictive labor scheduling, dynamic pricing, and automated upsell – can only succeed in a cohesive system. AI is not magic; it is math. The 2025 outages were a wake-up call about resilience, but they also foreshadowed the integration challenges ahead. If a brand wants AI to truly reduce redundancies, optimize labor, and boost profit margins, it needs a robust infrastructure that includes:



### **A unified data architecture**

Single source of truth for transactions, menus, inventory, and guest profiles.



### **Consistent workflows**

Standardized processes across locations to ensure AI recommendations can be executed reliably.



### **A connected ecosystem**

Seamless integration between POS, loyalty, delivery, kitchen systems, and the back office that avoids fragile connectors or manual reconciliation.

AI will not fix fragmentation. It will only amplify it. The brands that win in 2026 will be those that invest now in cohesive, resilient platforms – technology that aligns strategy with execution and creates the conditions necessary for AI to live up to its full potential.



## About PAR Technology

PAR Technology Corporation is a leading foodservice technology provider, powering a unified, purpose-built platform engineered to scale and adapt with brands at every stage of growth. Designed with flexibility and openness at its core, PAR's solutions — spanning point-of-sale, digital ordering, loyalty, back-office, payments, and hardware — integrate with others, yet deliver maximum impact as a unified system. With intentional innovation at the forefront, PAR's solutions streamline operations, drive higher engagement, and strengthen guest experiences for restaurants and retailers globally.



## About Gatepoint Research

Gatepoint Research conducts focused, opt-in, invitation-only surveys with management-level executives across targeted industries. With more than 10,000 survey campaigns deployed and over 25,000 participating executives annually, Gatepoint emphasizes respondent quality over volume. Surveys are intentionally brief and tightly scoped, ensuring insights are drawn from experts with direct, functionally relevant experience and decision-making responsibility.