

The Future of Research and Insight: 2021

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Summary of findings

Prior to all Rosenfeld Media conferences, it's customary that each conference curation team undertakes research to help them understand the topics and debates which are top of mind for the communities they serve. This research helps drive the agenda for Rosenfeld Media's monthly community calls and newsletters, and ultimately, the annual conference's program. In the case of the Advancing Research community, the curation team ran a series of focus groups (32 participants) and a light touch survey (196 respondents) to learn what was on the minds of research and insight community members.

We set out to answer two core questions in the course of our research:

1. How does the insight community feel about the current state of the industry as we start to emerge from the pandemic?
2. What are the most pressing opportunities to advance the research and insight field over the coming year?

Overall, our research suggests that those working in the research and insight fields feel cautiously optimistic about the state of the industry as we start moving out of the pandemic. Generally, respondents feel that:

1. The insight function is viewed as more valuable by those it serves and is driving greater strategic impact
2. More spaces are opening up to foster a sense of community and knowledge sharing
3. The community recognizes the need for advancements in tooling, which makes it easier to harness better data for analysis

Our research also highlighted a number of areas of dissatisfaction with the current state of the industry. These included:

1. The need to continually build an understanding of the strategic importance of insight
2. The need to ensure higher and more consistent standards in research education and career development
3. The need to ensure that simplified software solutions are used effectively to ensure quality insights are generated at all times

Many of our respondents expressed the perennial challenge of pushing forward the strategic influence and positioning of research in our industries. Our research also highlighted an increasing interest in how different parts of the insight industry—user research, market research and data science—can build bridges and tell more holistic narratives about customers. We also heard a lot from those we spoke with about the rising imperative to ensure that our own practices meet the highest levels of inclusivity by default.

We also saw some interesting conversations spark throughout the course of the research, centred around a range of topics: from democratization and the broadening of insight spaces to the call for industry standards to help us reach full maturity as a discipline.

As curators, we found a huge amount of richness across the themes which emerged from this study, and are looking forward to helping facilitate conversations, learning, and debate across these topics throughout our content programming and content for the Advancing Research community as we move into 2022.

We'd like to offer our thanks to *you*, the Advancing Research community, and to everyone who spent time sharing their thoughts with us. We also extend special thanks to our research analysts — Nepunee Birondo, Matt Readman, and Eileen Zar — who collated this report and helped us make sense of the data.

Warm wishes,

Jamika Burge, Chris Geison, and Jem Ahmed
Rosenfeld Media's Advancing Research Curators

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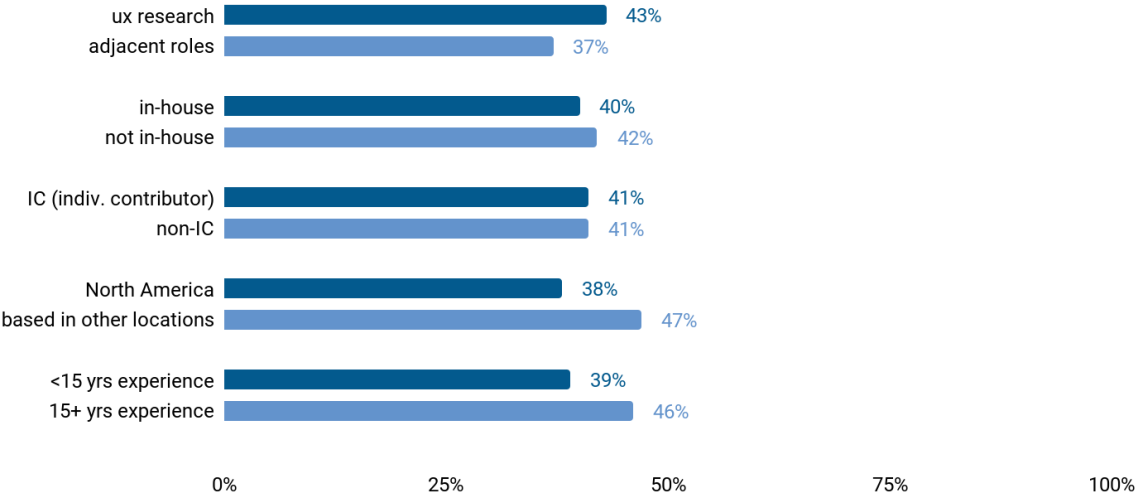
Current State of the Industry

Overall our survey reveals a positive picture as the industry emerges from the pandemic, with respondents feeling optimistic about the current state of the research and insight field.

More than 2 in 5 respondents (41%) ranked their overall feelings regarding the state of the industry as positive (8–10 on a scale from 1–10)—10x more than those who claimed to feel negative about the current state of the industry.

This sentiment was expressed consistently across different cohorts in our survey, with no statistically significant variations between any of the populations. This suggests that these overall positive views are held industry-wide.

Top three most positive rankings overall, demographic split:



Source: Rosenfeld Media Advancing Research Survey, Summer 2021

Question: On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is negative and 10 is positive, how positive do you feel about the current state of the research and insight industry? N=196. Base=all respondents.

Our research suggests that there are three core drivers of this optimism among respondents:

- The perception that research is increasingly valued, and is having greater influence across those it serves. As one respondent explained, there is now a “...recognition that UX makes a big difference in a company’s success, and that you often need research-specific roles to get there.”

- A feeling that there are more opportunities for those in the industry to gather, learn, and share knowledge, as well as more spaces to foster a sense of community. We found that many are practicing the “inclusion of multiple methods and ways of knowing”.
- Better tooling, which is making it *easier* to get *better* data. As one respondent said, there are “more products and services that aid the research process”, and as another put it, there is now “...automation and speed, and a greater use of data fusion”.

While most respondents expressed a positive sentiment, our research did reveal that some respondents still feel that there are a number of industry-wide challenges that need to be tackled as we move into 2021:

- There was a perception that research and insight is still not *universally* understood or valued. Some expressed the opinion that there remains a tendency for insight to be seen as a box-checking exercise or as a way to “stay on trend”. This lends itself to the idea that there is still work needed to help those we serve to gain greater value from insight as well as to enhance their use of it.
- Concerns about research education and career development were noted—specifically, respondents were concerned about the ability to create a robust pipeline to fuel a perceived rapid expansion in the industry, the clarity of career pathways for those working in it, and the perceived variable quality of training for those entering the industry. A consistent comment we heard from respondents indicated a “Lack of career paths for researchers in tech”.
- Enhanced software and tooling is seen as a double-edged sword, with some concerns emerging about potential overreliance on big name software platforms and tools. While many perceived these tools to be valuable in the hands of well-trained researchers, there was concern that these can also be “poorly understood and poorly

used” by people without adequate research training. Consequently, this can lead to subpar insight.

Opportunities for Industry Advancement

Our research suggests that there are 10 core themes which respondents believed were key to helping advance the research and industry field over the coming year.

Two of these themes were what we would term as established topics, with more than half of respondents believing these themes were the most important areas of focus in advancing the field of insight and research. These were:

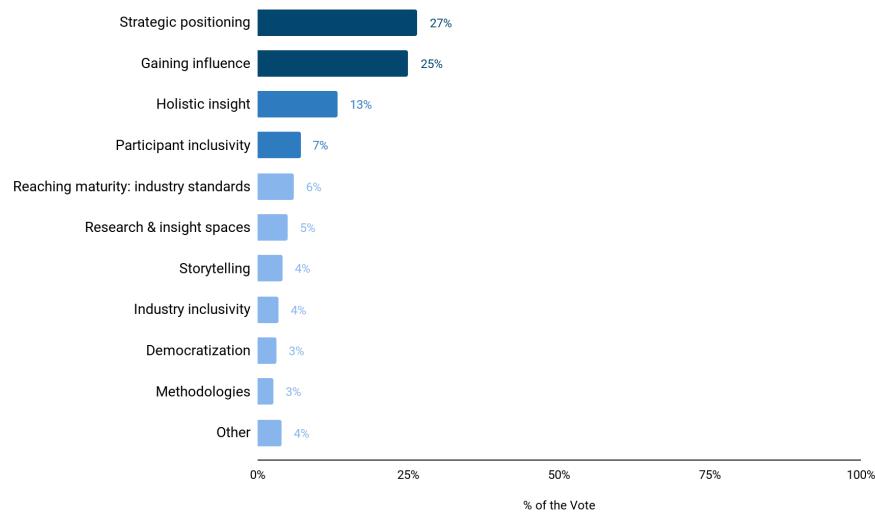
1. How insight is strategically positioned in a company
2. How to increase the influence of researchers’ findings

While less dominant, there was rising conversation from approximately 20% of our respondents regarding the need to build bridges across adjacent insight disciplines. This arose in response to our need to drive holistic narratives as well as ensure that our work is inclusive by default with consideration for core tenets that advance the insight and research fields.

Finally, we also saw a number of interesting conversations spark up throughout the research. While these themes did not experience widespread endorsement as the most important areas for helping to advance insight and research, a small number of respondents believe these areas are central to helping our industry evolve. As such, we believe that these topics have the potential to grow and evolve over the coming year and are important to explore. These topics were diverse and included:

1. Broadening insight spaces and the areas in which research and insight is conducted
2. Achieving maturity through industry standardisation
3. Landing and embedding findings through storytelling
4. Ensuring that those in the industry are representative of all communities
5. Evolving the methods we use
6. Diversifying who conducts insight and research

Which of the following do you feel is the one most important area where change is needed?



Source: Rosenfeld Media Advancing Research Survey, Summer 2021

Question: When it comes to helping advance the research and insight field, which of the following do you feel is the one most important area where change is needed? N=196. Base= all respondents.

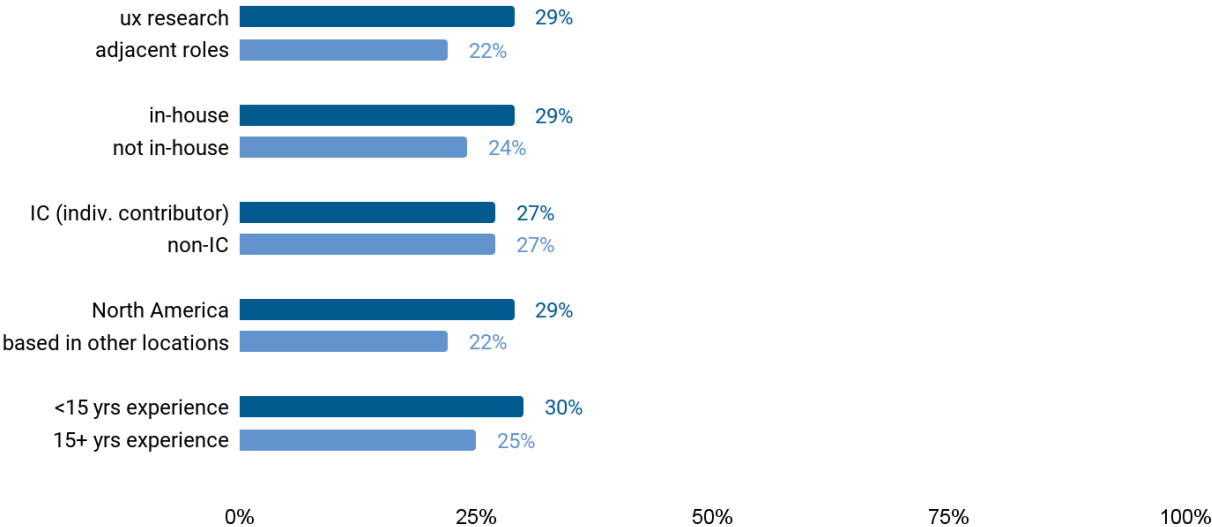
Established themes

Theme 1: Strategic positioning

The survey revealed how strategic positioning was the top consideration on respondent's minds, as 27% believing it the area where change is most needed. Z-tests showed no

significant variations between any of the populations, leading us to conclude that this perception is held industry-wide. Neither role, employer, experience, nor location influenced the respondent's views.

Strategic positioning, demographic split:



Source: Rosenfeld media advancing research survey, Summer 2021

Question: When it comes to helping to advance the research and insight field over the next 12 months, how important do you think it is that change occurs in strategic positioning? N=196. Base=all respondents.

Current state of play

Respondents mentioned how pockets of strategic maturity are growing across the field. While this was not necessarily a consistent outcome, we've seen emerging indicators of what reaching a more mature and advanced state could look like. These indicators include:

- More—and more diverse—thought leaders on a broader range of topics across the insight community are emerging. This indicates notable levels of knowledge and expertise are expanding across the field.

- A larger number of senior insight positions are opening up, including executive level roles. This indicates how insight gradually is perceived as more valuable, and is influencing from the top-down in some companies.
- Insight teams are showing more organizational independence as well as more space. This enables these teams to leverage a truly independent voice in the business—all the way to executive level—as well as allowing the space and permission to challenge conventional wisdom or normative thinking.

However, respondents also recognized that these changes were happening in pockets and not consistently across the industry. As such, our research suggests that there is more work to be done to ensure these indicators become more consistent and universal across the research and insight field.

What will help drive the change?

There is recognition that while the roots and shoots of change are emerging, there are certain pressures stagnating the growth of strategic influence. Respondents recognize that in order to achieve strategic influence consistently across the industry developments in multiple areas are required. These include:

- Communicating why our work is valuable and how it can be transformative, and showing that business objectives and outcomes aren't separate from customer outcomes. As things stand now, many business and product decision-makers are still confused about just what research does.
- The continued need for experienced researchers to pitch themselves and their work on a daily basis. Thus, the right community and connections are needed to boost morale and help support researchers in this endeavor.

- The need to find—and make the business case for—investment in senior hires by many organizations. Respondents feel strategic growth can't happen without senior representation.
- Helping teams operate with more independence across businesses. Lack of independence resulting from misplaced organizational insight can lead to misinformed decision-making at higher levels, and can occasionally impact the objectivity and independence of insights. This results in less space to challenge and push back on business decisions.
- Enabling teams to create space in their roadmaps to focus on more transformative strategic questions. For example, tactical insights — focused on short, sharp bursts without the opportunity to tell the whole story and answer deeper-level questions—make it hard to demonstrate strategic value.
- Safeguarding rigor in the work and training of the insight community was shown to be pivotal. To elaborate, there is no point in having a seat at the table if it is squandered by work not having the level of rigor it needs to support long term and high value decisions. There's a real concern that educational quality (for quantitative methods, for some new folks are entering into the field after light touch boot camps—including those in non-research roles who perform their own research with minimal training) creates a potential challenge. More rigor is needed at a strategic level, as the risks of poor or scrappy research are too high.
- Recognition that strategic influence should be reciprocal—we must be accountable for the hard metrics and ROI measurements necessitated by any business. There's a sense from respondents that many in the insight field shy away from taking on this accountability, and that you can't have one without the other. As such, embracing this accountability and increasing the business applicability of those in insight also matters.

Why would change help to advance insight?

For respondents, it largely feels like a no-brainer that improved strategic positioning should occur, as they feel it's what truly enables businesses to operate in a customer-centric way. Such an approach would offer a competitive advantage, reduced risk, and a drive for efficiency which actually leads to successful products. What company wouldn't want that?

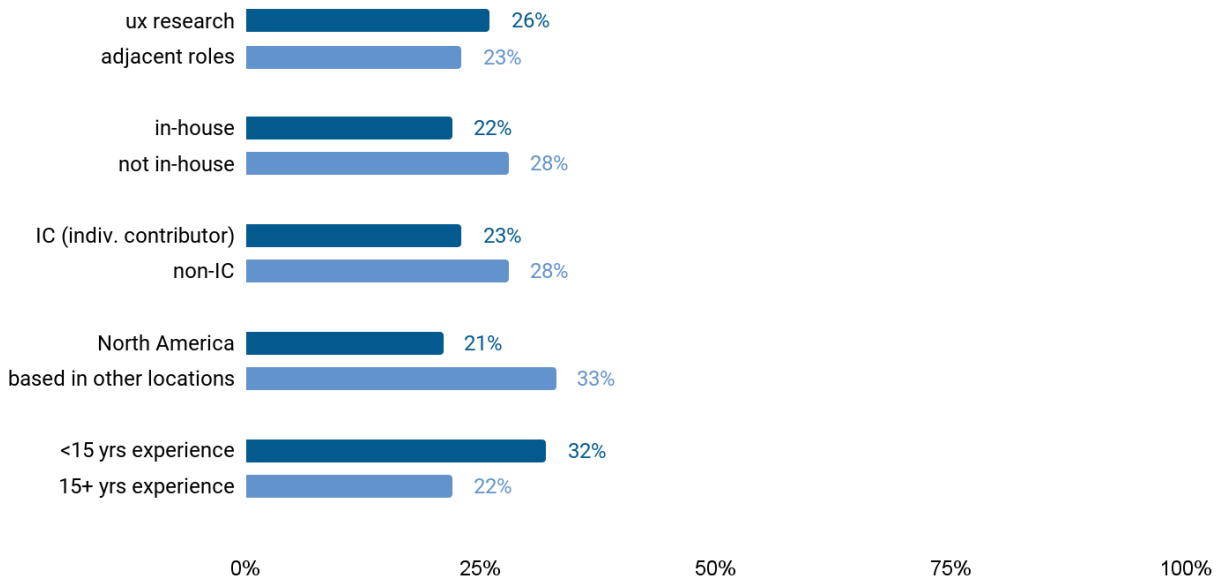
There is also a very real sense that this is the space that insight should be operating in and the sense that this is where we can truly offer the most value, particularly as others across organizations begin to be self-sufficient with best practices.

“... (the) company makes decisions based on what people actually need. And they do not advance ideas that nobody is waiting for. There will be less useless products on the market.”

Theme 2: Gaining influence

Across the survey, this was the second highest topic with 25% of votes. Once again, Z-tests showed no significant variations between any of the populations. This leads us to conclude that it's a perception held industry-wide, with the respondent's role, employer, experience, or location not influencing their views.

Gaining influence, demographic split:



Source: Rosenfeld Media Advancing Research Survey, Summer 2021

Question: When it comes to helping to advance the research and insight field over the next 12 months, how important do you think it is that change occurs in gaining influence? N=196. Base= all respondents.

Current state of play

Respondents report that there are areas where they see the increased influence of insight and research in their organizations. As with the previous theme, this is by no means consistent, but it does reveal that the influence of research is on the increase.

There are a number of indicators respondents have pointed to that suggest how influence is growing, including:

- A reported growth in investment in insight professionals and teams, which suggests that the discipline is proving valuable and becoming more widespread.

- The belief that research and insight is taken more seriously at the executive level, with new, higher organizational roles for research and insight recently put in place. One respondent reported a new role of Director of Global Experience, while another recognized that HCD/MBA programs place younger leaders who have an appreciation of the importance of the user-centered design process.
- Businesses are embracing the transformative effect insight has when implemented properly, including how it impacts long-term decision-making.

What will help drive the change?

While we hear of organizations where insight exerts strategic influence as the norm, we recognize that there are large hurdles to overcome before this is widespread. These include:

- A need for those working in insight to develop a high level of business acumen to ensure their findings align with business needs, are fully actionable, and are easily translated into business change.
- The perception that research is still seen by many as a supportive role, and not as important as other disciplines. Consequently, there is still an evangelizing and educating job needed to ensure that others are aware of the value of our work.
- A concern that those in the insight field need to find a balance between depth and breadth of insight work. A much-maligned consequence of insight doing a good job is that it can often lead to the desire to do more insight pieces, adding a productionizing element. This ultimately leads to a sacrifice in quality, depth, and rigor.

Why would change help to advance insight?

Respondents express that the ability of research and insight to exert strategic influence is the logical consequence of true customer centricity, and with that comes better

decision-making and fewer risks. This leads to better development of products and services for everyone.

“It opens the space to show the power of quality research in dispelling assumptions and bias, and connects people to the human impact of the decisions (product, service, policy, etc.) they make.”

“The fact that more research is being done is amazing and will hopefully lead to more conversations about how insights can create change in an organization, industry, or the world at large.”

Notable themes

Theme 3: Holistic insight

Current state of play

Across all our survey respondents, this was the third highest rated topic at 13%. However, it remains nascent area for most of our respondents. Most expressed that their own experience of this topic was limited, with holistic insights and bridge-building only just beginning in some pockets of the industry. Respondents report that they are only just starting to hear about different teams that explore the possibilities of combining insights, as well as how powerful this can be. Often this exposure stems from encountering a podcast, talk, or article, or a discrete collaborative effort on a piece of work.

Respondents report a number of barriers that stymie change, despite recognizing how insights can promote more collaborative ways of working. These include:

- How many in the research and insight community work in silos, making it practically challenging to collaborate where there are different reporting lines and priorities.
- Many people working in these teams are not aware of the work of other disciplines, and don't always understand the work of those related insight practices. This is particularly acute when it comes to bridging the gap between quantitative and qualitative insights.
- How politics can be rife in the perception that some teams are simply not interested in the work of other disciplines.

As such, our research has led to the sense that the industry is in the very early stages of implementing holistic working practices. Most report an *appreciation* of holistic working rather than the *application* of it. The benefits are currently extensively recognised within the insight community, yet those performing it are still relatively few.

What will help drive the change?

Our respondents are aware of the work required to bring the vision of holistic insights to life. Listed below are several takeaways that we've encountered:

- Respondents expressed a very real education and understanding hurdle that needs to be overcome to allow holistic insights to bloom. The different teams involved in this space, including data science, user research, market research, and customer experience, often speak different "languages" and have very different mental models.
- Respondents felt the importance of empowering teams to find a common ground as well as a shared understanding in creating holistic working practices.

- Respondents expressed that the practicalities of enabling collaborative insights were complex, involving factors such as time, money, budget, organizational structures, and the alignment of priorities between teams. Though these are considered critical to success, it is challenging to enable effective collaboration off the ground.
- There are very few proven models which provide a clear path for achieving collaboration—this has led to questions such as, where does one start? How do you show the value of one discipline without trading off the value of the other? How do you show the continued merit of qualitative data within a world of big data?

Why would change help to advance insight?

Most respondents spoke of collaborative insights almost in terms of an awakening—they've realized how adjacent fields can build on each other's strengths, counter each other's weaknesses, and tell richer, more complete stories. Respondents see the joining up of insights as very much being a case of the sum of the whole being greater than its parts, given a richer, more complete, and more accurate view of customers and their needs.

“People are beginning to see the immense power of data and at the same time the immense short-comings of how it is being deployed and used – and as the data analytics community matures they are calling out for more insight from the research disciplines.”

“... DS and UX researchers often do not “speak” the same language, nor have the same mental model...”

Theme 4: Inclusivity by default

Current state of play

While not consistently a top topic, participant inclusivity is a rising theme on the community’s minds (7%). Respondents report there is already an awareness and emerging conversation regarding the importance of diversity and inclusivity within communities we include in our insight work. It seems this rising awareness is opening up conversation and debate about ethics and representation, and seems to be largely driven by the recent cultural context and events, such as Black Lives Matter.

However, the increased awareness isn’t necessarily transforming into action yet, meaning that there is still a huge amount of opportunity in this space to ensure that insight work is truly representative of all voices and all communities.

What will help drive the change?

Our respondents recognized a number of very practical steps which need to be taken to help drive advancement in this space:

- There is an imperative to ensure that the insight community translates good intent to actions. Many respondents report a desire to ensure that clear paths and accountabilities are put in place to ensure concrete actions are taken.
- There is a need to work through, at a business level, how to account for the additional time, effort and money that is involved in carrying out research on a broader section of participants than may have been the case historically.
- There is a need to work through clear pathways for action on the insights being produced to ensure that insights being garnered in this space translate to action.
- There is a need to ensure that those working in insight are trained well to ensure that our practices are without bias and are always respectful of the humans with whom we speak.
- Industry inclusivity is perceived to be heavily tied to achieving these results. It is challenging for insight-driven individuals to raise up the experiences of a broader cross section without having people from those communities represented consistently within the insight field.
- There is a need to embrace true empathy to ensure that the efforts in this space go beyond virtue signaling or short-termism to ensure a lasting and meaningful change.
- For some respondents, there is a passionately held view that embracing sensitive or trauma-informed insight techniques is a vital part of this journey—and one where more education and discussion is needed.

Why would change help to advance insight?

In the simplest terms, respondents feel that including a broader representation of participants from all sections of society will result in products and services designed for ‘all’ rather than ‘some’. Respondents also feel it is beneficial for businesses to be investing more in this space, as exploring broader communities has the potential to open up a pool of

potentially untapped customers. It is also perceived as the ethical thing to do, as it explores the heart of what our field represents.

“I’m hearing people start to have more open conversations around what this means, and talk about activities like recruitment in a different way.”

“Social justice efforts over the past few years have made people much more aware of this need. The BLM revolution last year especially has woken some people up.”

Spark themes

Theme 5: Research and insight spaces

Current state of play

According to respondents (5%), the importance (and value) of understanding customers and employees is on the rise within organizations across multiple sectors where insight may not have been heavily relied upon in the past.

They report that insight is now reaching into numerous domains, with diverse organizations leveraging research and insight to provide benefits to both providers and the public via user-centered services.

Respondents are positive about the expansion of research into new fields. The opportunities for research to expand further into other spaces grows the potential for innovation with human-centred thinking at its core, which our research suggested would ultimately help

provide more innovative solutions, better products, and improved services across a broader range of spaces.

What will help drive the change?

Respondents raised very few concerns about how to drive advancements in this area forward, beyond the teams in this space continuing to chip away and demonstrate the value of the work they perform.

However, there was mild concern around the expansion of research and insight into new areas could result in fragmentation. Respondents were concerned that this in turn may result in a siloing effect where each sector uses what applies to them rather than industry-wide best practices. As such, many felt that advancement in this area necessitated the need for industry standardisation to ensure that industry-wide best practices are maintained.

Why would this change help to advance insight?

In addition to further supporting research and insight as a partner in strategy and business, our research suggested that insight broadening into new spaces would further the use of human-centred practices. This would lead to better products and services for a broader set of customers.

With research now branching into more domains, respondents also felt hopeful that this expansion into new sectors will result in more diverse researchers and potentially new innovations that would benefit all.

Theme 6: Reaching maturity

Current state of play

While this was not a dominant theme (6% of responses), there was a passionate response to the need for industry standards to consistently reflect the highest standards of ethical practice. As the insight industry begins to reach a point of maturation, many respondents believed that we are now at a point where industry-wide standards were required, and that there much which the insight field as a whole could learn from more mature branches of our field, such as market research.

What will help drive the change?

The areas where respondents felt standardisation of practice was needed were broad and many, including:

- **Training and education:** Respondents expressed that there is variable quality in insight education, and that there needed to be consistency in both course curricula and in what different qualifications mean. This would ensure that not only are high standards of training maintained, but that there is also consistency in the education levels and assessment across a wide variety of different courses.
- **Defining expectations of role requirements**
 - Many respondents expressed that this is a particularly pressing need for user research in particular—and that a lot can be learned from more developed branches of market research and data science.
 - Respondents expressed concern that there is a lack of definition for what is expected at the junior, mid-, and senior levels across the industry, or what progression between levels look like. For example, when comparing job advertisements for a mid-level researcher, the job specifications (i.e. years

experience, education level and so forth) for market research roles are similar, whereas those for UX researchers vary wildly.

- This lack of standardisation makes it challenging for people to know how to adequately equip themselves on what it takes to get an entry-level position, makes it hard to ensure equitable progression for researchers already working in the field, and makes it hard for hiring managers to hire talent fairly at an appropriate level.
- **Methodologies:** Respondents expressed the need to ensure a consistent shared understanding about how to conduct research, with topics ranging from lack of shared understanding on minimal recruitment levels for qualitative research to ensuring a consistently held view on what standard tool kits for insight practices should look like.
- **Ethics and standards**
 - Respondents expressed that there are many areas, such as AI, Machine Learning, and the application of Data Protection legislation where there is a lack of thoroughly defined standards or regulations shared industry-wide.
 - There is a desire to learn from what other insight disciplines are doing in this space, such as the MRS and ESOMAR for market research. This would ensure a thoughtful and more regulated set of practices are in place to enable us all to work to the highest ethical standards.

Why would this change help to advance insight?

Many of our respondents believe that without standardization, it will become impossible to ensure that the insight industry is able to operate in a controlled and ethical manner, given the breadth of topics which this area encompasses. It is felt that as we begin to reach a point of maturation, lack of industry standards and a common language will act as a ceiling for the continuing development of our practice.

Theme 7: Storytelling

Current state of play

While this was only top of mind for a small subset of our respondents, it was raised as nonetheless an important theme, with respondents sharing the view that without the ability to land and embed insights through effective communication, we were effectively just operating in an echo chamber.

Interestingly, respondents report they are seeing positive changes in this space due to the pandemic. With the need to work remotely, research and insights are finding themselves engaging with stakeholders more deliberately, and are being forced to think through how they land insights more creatively.

What will help drive the change?

Respondents report that there are a number of critical areas to address to ensure that insights are being communicated in the most effective way possible. These include:

- Ensuring that insights are shared earlier and are drip-fed into the organization to ensure they can be acted upon at the right time.
- Thinking about the way insights can be tailored and shared in more targeted and bitesized ways to ensure relevance in how they land.
- Finding ways to foster an environment where debriefs are seen as a must-attend to ensure stakeholders are brought in to findings.
- Ensuring that time and space is made to hone the craft of insight writing and communication. There is recognition that storytelling is a skill which takes time to acquire and refine, and that space must be made to enable those in insight to mature this skill.

Why would the change advance insight?

For respondents, the importance of communicating insights is a must for how we advance insights, and that without the ability to land and embed insights, we as an industry are only ever going to be doing work which is interesting rather than work which drives action.

“Researchers are starting to create more visual, bite sized artifacts for better storytelling. They are also starting to take more subjective stances rather than telling an objective story...”

“Data storytelling is a skill that is essential for the broader workforce for success in what he called the last mile of analytics.”

Theme 8: Industry inclusivity

Current state of play

While this theme was only ranked as most important for a low volume of respondents (4%), it is a topic which respondents expressed a deep care and ethical concern for. For these respondents, there is a strongly-held view that as an insight industry we are only able to represent a diverse range of voices and communities—and fully communicate their needs—if we ourselves represent a diverse range of perspectives.

What will help drive the change?

Respondents expressed the need to ensure equitable access into the industry as the main hurdle to overcome in order to enable the insight and research industry to advance in this space.

Many reported that insight can feel like quite an exclusive field, where those from backgrounds currently deemed uncommon or unconventional struggle to access training or entry-level positions, or where taking on low/no paid projects to build their portfolios was required. Respondents felt that this created a pipeline issue which blocked diverse talent from entering the industry.

Why would the change advance insight?

This change is seen as very positive—and for many, the change can't come quick enough. Our respondents expressed a belief that companies are not consistently adapting to the needs of all communities, meaning that exclusion is still a very real issue. There is both an ethical imperative to change this as well as a belief that ensuring diverse perspectives within the insight community will help us share richer and more meaningful insights.

“I would like to see more inclusivity of juniors and people trying to break into research from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. I do think that they bring different perspectives to the work.”

Theme 9: Methodologies

Current state of play

Unsurprisingly, the main evolution to methodologies expressed by respondents lay in the domain of remote ways of working. They report that the pandemic has led to an acceleration in the adoption of remote research methods, while across insight and research disciplines there is acknowledgement that there's been an explosion in the use of remote collaboration software.

Respondents expressed mixed opinions on this state of play: some felt that these remote tools would quickly fade as more traditional methods resume. Others felt the changes were here to stay and would cause fundamental shifts in methods moving forward, while others were more cautious and believed that a balance between remote and in-person would be struck.

What will help drive the change?

At the time of the research, respondents expressed uncertainty as to whether this trend would continue or not, and spoke of the pandemic ultimately being the core factor that would impact the longevity of this trend.

Why would the change advance insight?

Respondents were polarized as to if changes towards more remote ways of working would be a good thing, or not.

On the positive side, respondents believed that more remote methods had the potential to lower the barrier of entry for insight efforts. This indicated that it would make for an easier participant experience, enable more effective collaboration across time zones, and add ease and speed to the process.

Conversely, some respondents expressed caution if remote methods were here to stay, worrying about the loss of cultural context and immersive experiences which these methods had removed.

Theme 10: Democratization of insight

Current state of play

Respondents report that they are already seeing non-insight professionals—such as designers and product managers—performing research and data analysis on their own. They also report more of an interest within organizations for people other than those in insight to conduct these activities. Some even report they are creating the change themselves within their organizations by providing tools, methods, and education for non-researchers whilst cheerleading its benefits.

Respondents frame the democratization as a double-edged sword. With this increased participation, respondents feel it has led to more insight activities being conducted, which is leading to more customer informed work.

However, there is significant concern—especially among research respondents—over non-researchers conducting research themselves. Rather, concerns related to rigor, quality, bias, and knowledge management were top of mind.

What will help drive the change?

No consensus emerged among respondents as to whether democratization was a good thing or a dangerous thing. This lends itself to the idea that in order to drive advancement in this space, it is imperative that we begin to develop a shared understanding of:

- When democratization is appropriate and when it is not

- The need to develop a consistent understanding and application of the minimum training standards which are needed by those conducting their own insight
- Practical work that helps reduce the duplication of efforts or knowledge being lost in the cracks

Why would the change advance insight?

Generally this is a hotly-debated subject, and one which has the potential to increase the empathy of our stakeholders as well as free up insight professionals' time for more advanced insight work. However, it also has the potential—if not handled carefully—to reduce the quality of work. Teams will need to work through safeguards to allow a balance between breadth and quality.

Summary

Our research suggests that insight and research professionals are generally feeling optimistic and positive about the current state of the field. This is due to an increased sense of community and a belief that as our practice gradually matures, we are starting to gain real influence and offer important strategic value through our work.

That said, those same professionals are also recognizing the challenges we face and the tasks at hand that are needed to build on this momentum.

Additionally, our research highlighted ten core areas that are most likely to support the continued evolution and advancement of insight and research efforts.

The two foremost areas are:

1. How we position insight as a strategic and important function in an organization

2. How we can exert influence in organizations to ensure that the user's voice is always heard, and their needs are acted upon

There is also a moderate but notable sense that advancing the research and insight industry also requires us to embrace different ways of working by building bridges across different insight disciplines, and by ensuring that our work is inclusive by default. This would represent a diverse range of communities and voices both in the work we do and by whom the work is done.

While not dominant, we are also seeing the sparks of new ideas emerging for how we advance insight. Our research suggests these include the following:

- Continually broadening the spaces where research is conducted and by whom
- Advocating for industry standards
- Continuing to build our aptitude for storytelling

This report represents our attempt to take a snapshot of the state of the research and insights field in 2021—as well as the challenges and opportunities it affords us. We hope the themes identified in our report provoke further and deeper conversation within our community as we collectively advance research.

Research Analysts

We are the team of researchers who created this report. We hope you've found it useful!

Nepunnee Birondo



Nepunnee (pronounced Ne-pun-nee) Birondo is a San Francisco Bay Area UX professional who thrives in data-driven environments and collaborative work cultures.

Matt Readman

Matt Readman is a freelance user research consultant, and is taking his early steps in the industry having previously worked as a project manager, business analyst and designer in adjacent industries. Matt holds an MSC in Web Development from Edinburgh Napier University. He has a strong interest in usability research particularly in start up and scale up technology companies, and practices both qualitative and quantitative research methods. In his free time Matt enjoys skateboarding (poorly!), video games, and sports.



Eileen Zar



Eileen has an eclectic professional background, with a major focus on content development, editing and strategy. She learned how UX research can be key to product success while working on a content curation and discovery project as an entrepreneur. She is interested in both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In her free time, she enjoys karaoke, kayaking and hiking.