

Search Engine **Journal**[®]

STATE of SEO

Performance, Salaries &
Budgets For 2023

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Welcome To Our Second Annual State Of SEO Report.

3,623 SEO professionals responded to our survey, sharing their thoughts on what happened in the industry this year and what they expect for the future.

We are thrilled to share the results with you and insights from SEJ in-house experts and others.

2022 was a year of continuing growth with many industry newcomers. Businesses and SEO professionals alike changed their strategies in response to:

- Changing consumer trends and COVID developments.
- Google updates focused on baseline performance, like Core Web Vitals and the Page Experience Update.
- Expected industry disruptions and economic conditions.

We've compared this year's results to last year's. In some cases, a year-over-year comparison wasn't possible due to new questions and changes to our process (see [Limitations](#) for details).

Look out for our supplementary industry reports in the upcoming months:

- **In-House Insights**
- **Agency Insights**
- **B2B Insights**
- **B2C Insights**

As always, feel free to share your feedback by emailing editor@searchenginejournal.com.



Loren Baker

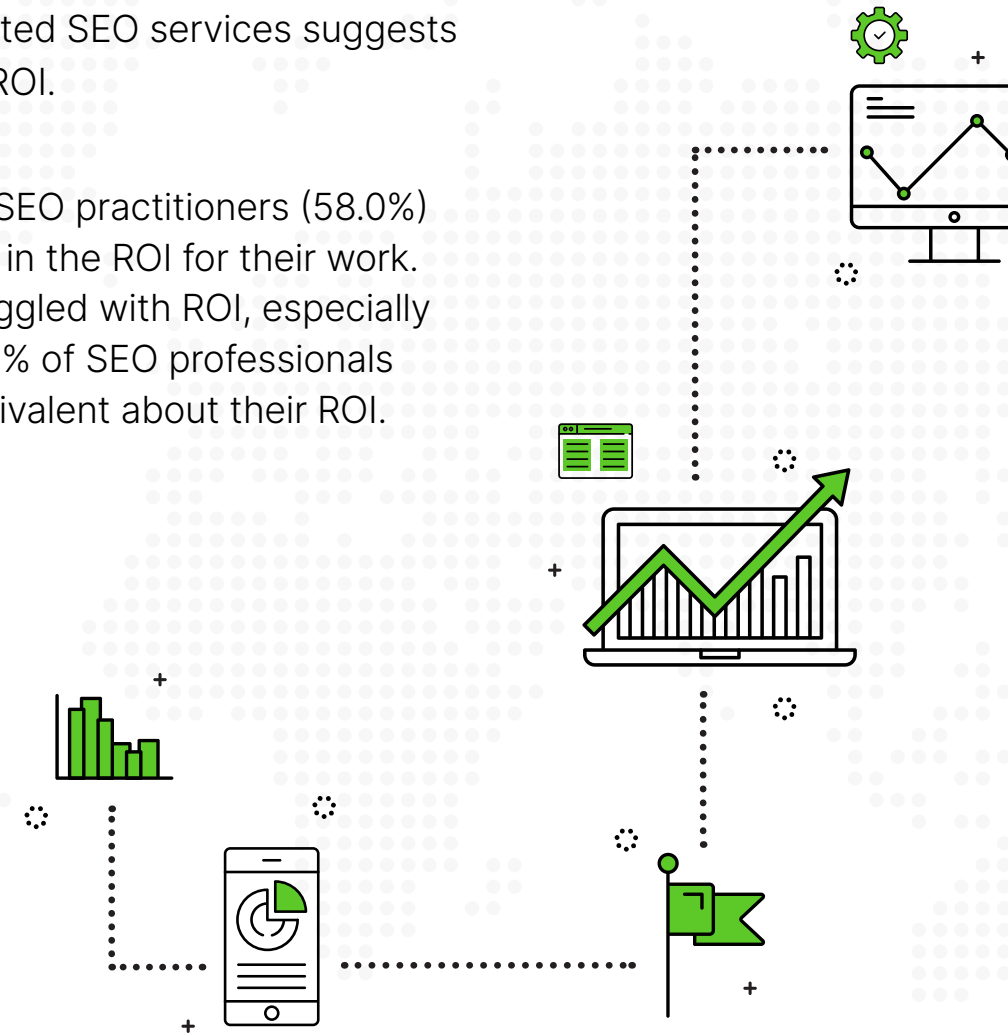
Founder, Search Engine Journal

12 TOP INSIGHTS ON THE STATE OF SEO IN 2022



- 1 SEO saw an influx of new professionals, and the demand is high. Over a quarter of all SEO professionals surveyed (28.7%) had two years of experience or less. More than half (53.9%) who are managers and department heads had less than five years of experience.
- 2 Growth had different effects on salaries in different regions. In the U.S., 62.0% of respondents had fewer than five years of experience, but the average salaries remained high.
- 3 In countries with significantly different currencies and economic conditions – such as India, Bangladesh, and Spain – average salaries were much lower.
- 4 The top three areas participants spent the most time this year were: technical SEO (15.0%), SEO strategy and planning (13.5%), and keyword research (13.5%).

- 5 When asked to select their three top success metrics in 2022, SEO pros picked these most often: keyword rankings (15.0%), pageviews/sessions (12.4%), and conversions & goal events (9.0%). The discrepancy between these results and the most-requested SEO services suggests difficulty in tracking ROI.
- 6 Just over half of the SEO practitioners (58.0%) reported an increase in the ROI for their work. Still, many SEOs struggled with ROI, especially freelancers, and 29.0% of SEO professionals reported feeling ambivalent about their ROI.



CAREER INSIGHTS



The SEO Industry Has Grown, Bringing Many Newcomers And Salary Changes

- 28.7% of respondents had less than two years of experience.
- 83.6% of junior/mid-level respondents had less than five years of experience.
- 53.8% of manager/department head respondents also had less than five years of experience.
- 45.6% of freelancer respondents had less than five years of experience.

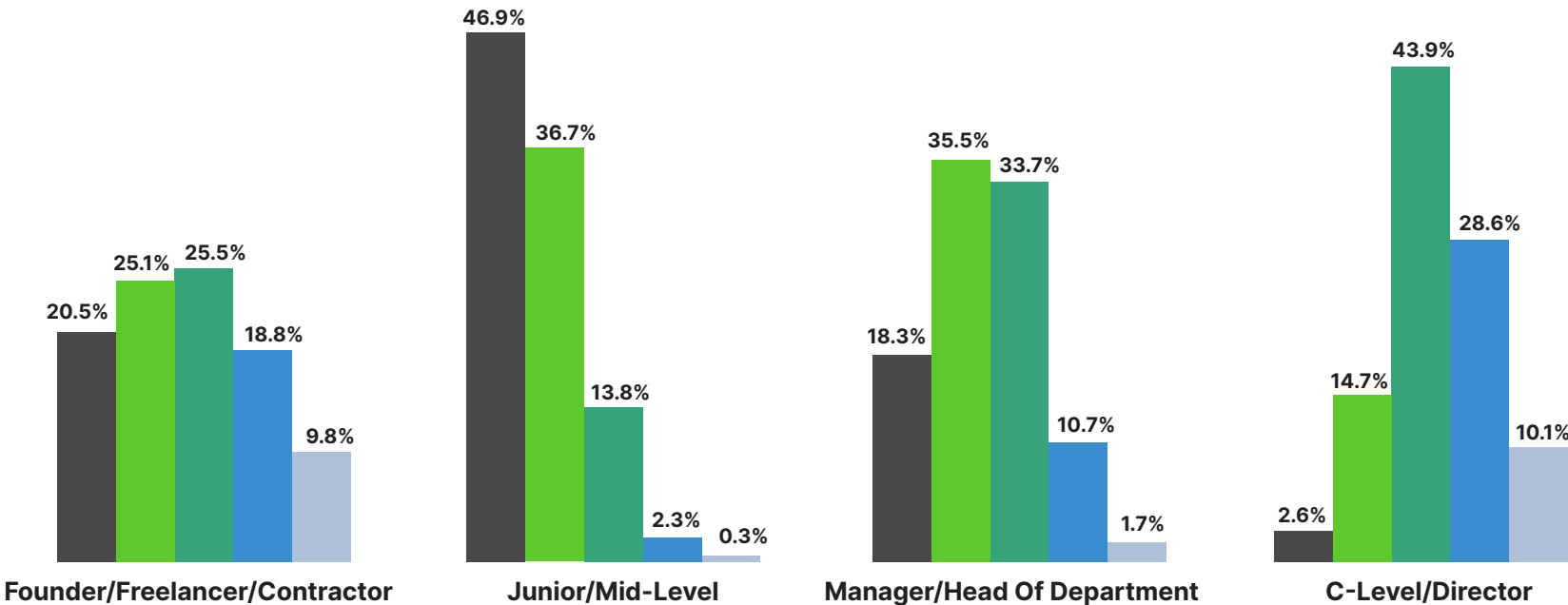
How Long Have You Worked In The Search Industry?

Respondents: 3,623

Less than 2 years	28.7%
Between 2-4 years	32.7%
5-10 years	25.5%
11-20 years	10.1%
20+ years	3.0%

Experience Vs. Role

- Less than 2 years
- Between 2-4 years
- 5-10 years
- 11-20 years
- 20+ years



Q. How long have you worked in the search industry? 3,623 responded.
Q. How would you describe your role? 3,623 responded.

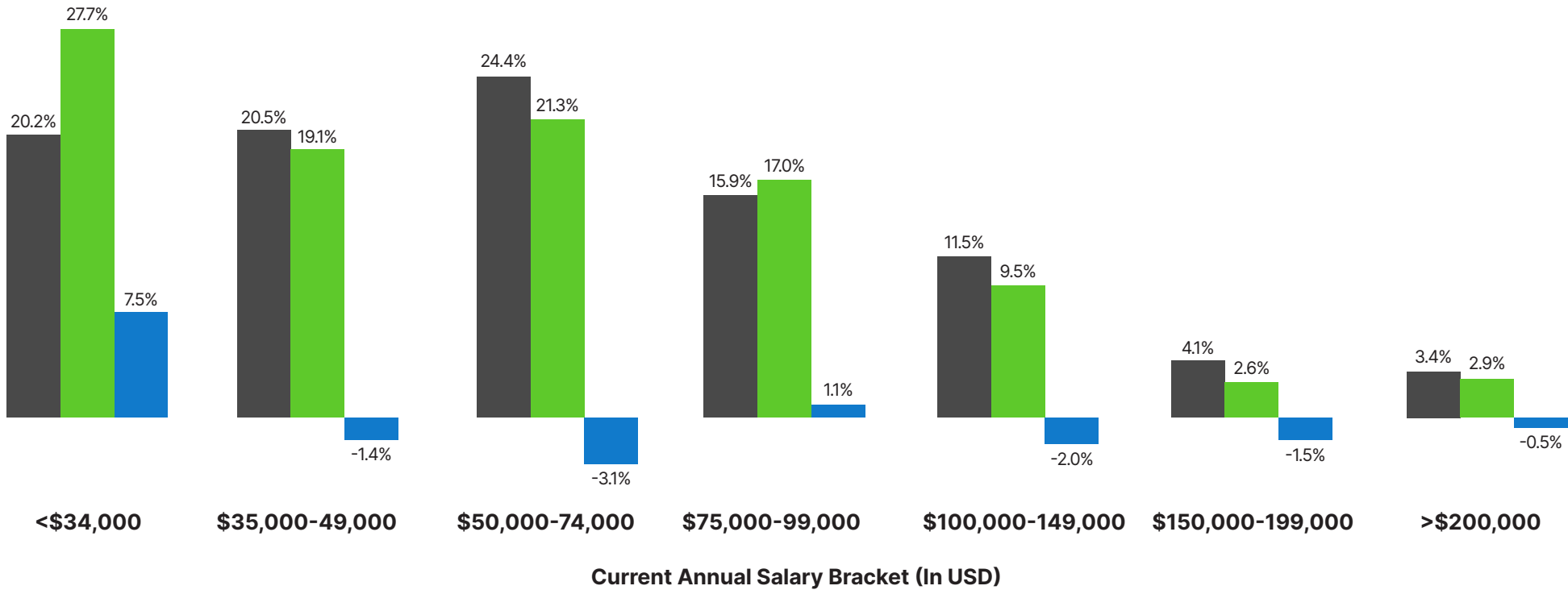
More respondents reported lower salaries this year compared to last:

- Most notable was the 7.5% increase in SEO practitioners earning \$34,000 or less.
- There was also a 3.1% reduction in the number of people reporting salaries in the \$54,000-\$74,000 range.

Considering the growth of SEO in countries where the industry is younger and regions where the currency and cost of living are much different from the U.S., the changes make sense.

SEO Salaries

- 2021
- 2022
- Change

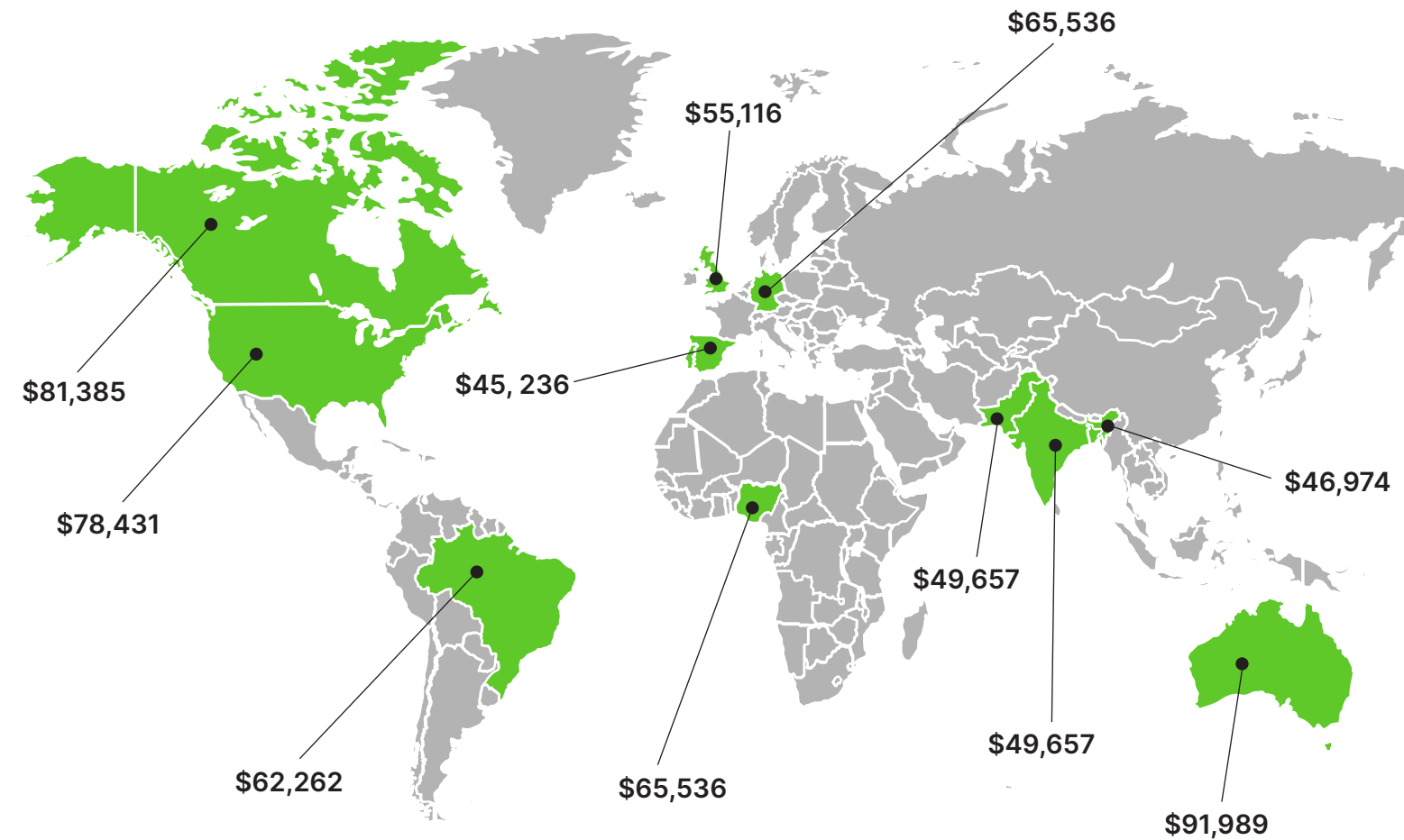


Q. What is your current annual salary bracket (in USD)? 3,623 responded.

SEO Industry Salaries By Country

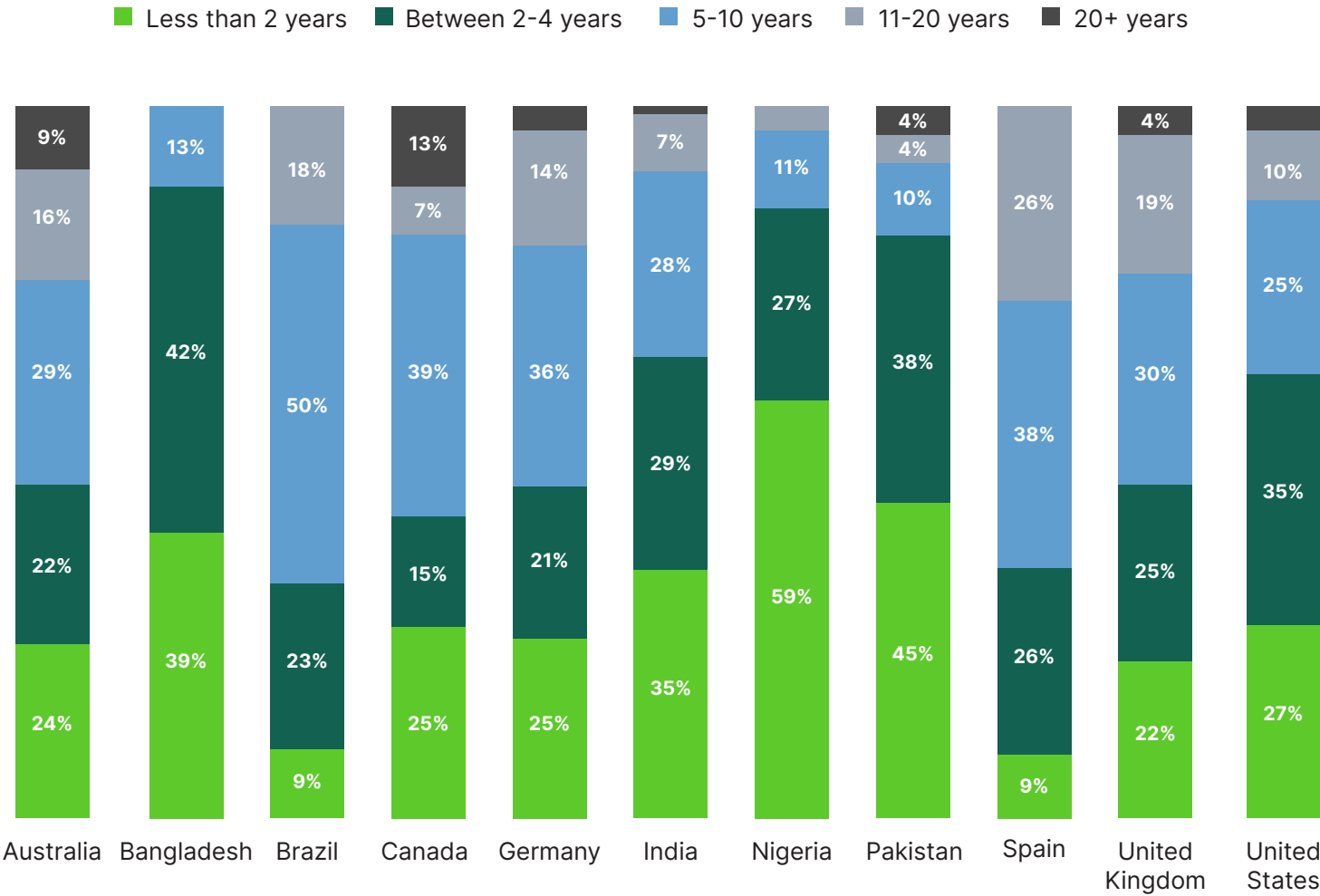
- General salary estimations and insights are difficult with so many countries represented.
- We are benchmarking based on U.S. dollars. Salaries reported in other countries are estimates based on exchange rates at the time of this report going to press, and don't account for the economic conditions in those regions.
- **When you plan your career or research salaries for SEO roles, base your numbers on the average in your region.**

Average SEO Salaries By Country



Q. What country do you live in? 3,623 responded.
Q. What is your current annual salary bracket (in USD)? 3,623 responded.
Q. How long have you worked in the search industry? 3,623 responded.

Country & Time In The Industry

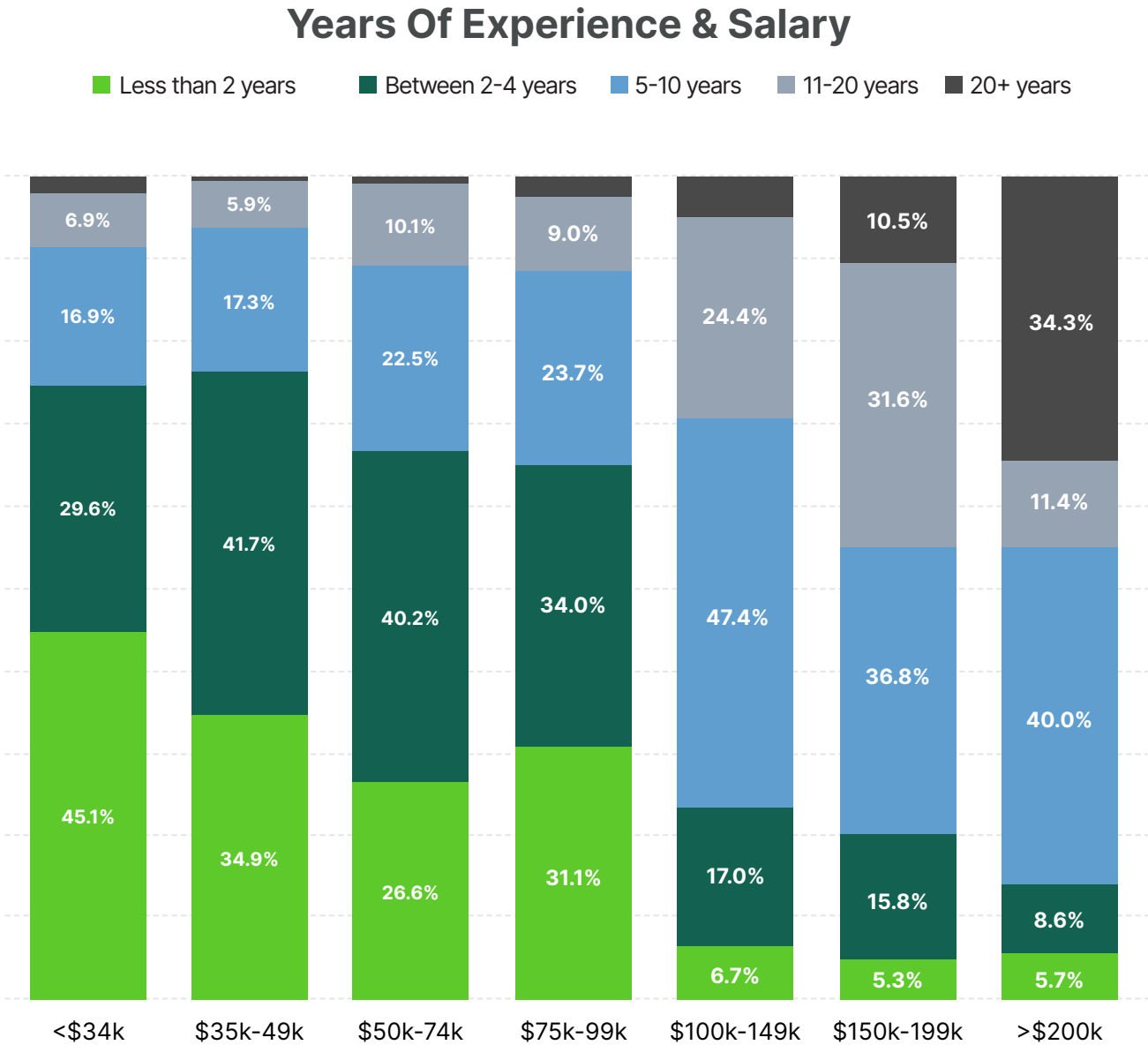


- SEO professionals in Australia had the highest average salary (\$91,989). But, 46.0% of practitioners had fewer than five years of experience. This could indicate a high demand for qualified professionals in Australia.
- In the U.S., 62.0% of SEO professionals had fewer than five years in the industry but had an average salary of \$78,431, potentially indicating growth in both the industry and businesses’ willingness to pay more for SEO talent in the U.S.
- The SEO industry in Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Pakistan is young, with many of their practitioners having just started. That was reflected in their salaries.
- SEO practitioners in Spain earned the least, with an average in 2022 of just \$45,236 per year.

Q. What country do you live in? 3,623 responded.
Q. What is your current annual salary bracket (in USD)? 3,623 responded.
Q. How long have you worked in the search industry? 3,623 responded.

How SEO Professionals Get Their Start

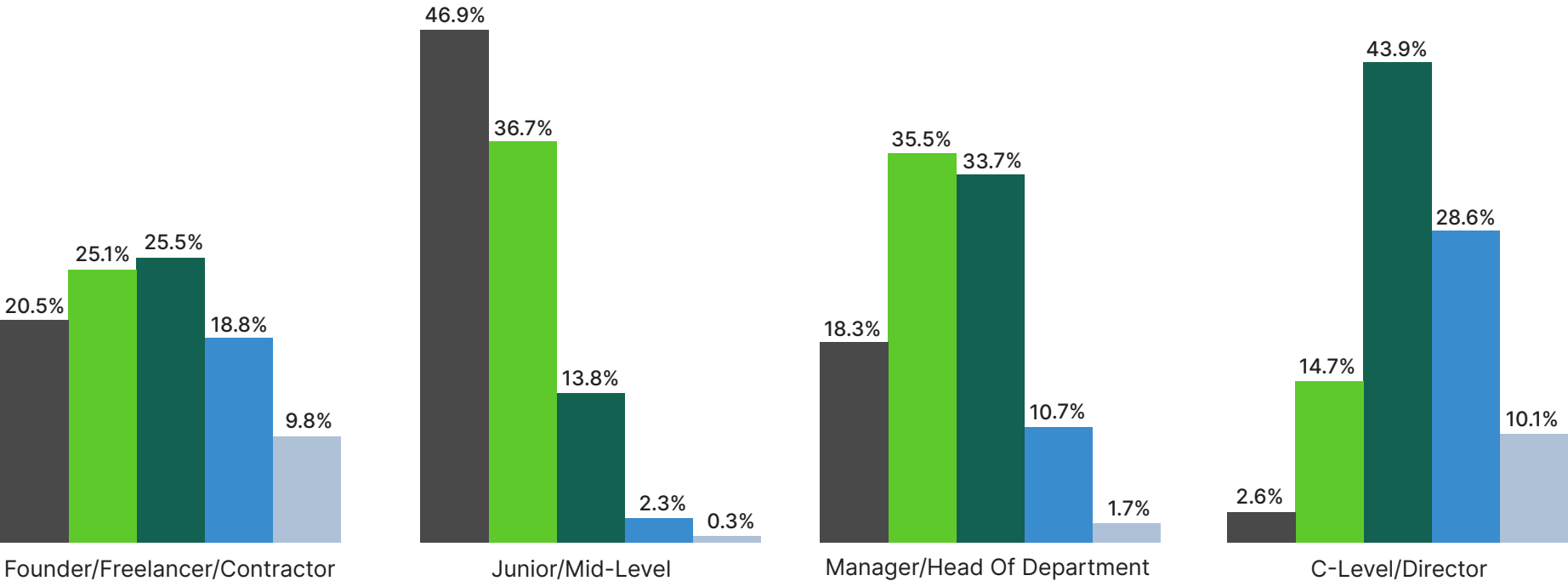
- Significant numbers of people with less than five years of experience in SEO can earn a salary of up to \$99,000. In the \$75,000 to \$99,000 bracket:
 - 31.1% had zero to two years of experience.
 - 34.0% had two to four years of experience.
- Salaries under \$34,000 also had a wide range of respondents in the bracket:
 - 45.1% had zero to two years of experience.
 - 29.6% had two to four years of experience.
 - 16.9% had five to 10 years of experience.
- This tells us a lot about just how much salaries can vary by region.
 - We can make the case that in countries where SEO is booming, and currency value is high, SEO professionals can propel into higher salary brackets with only a few years of experience.
 - But in countries where SEO is new and/or the currency value is lower, more experienced professionals earn lower wages.



- The statistics change significantly above \$100,000. A clear majority of these respondents have more than five years of experience, indicating that no matter where you live, you need multiple years of experience and proof of your work to break into six figures.
- Freelancers and founders can find significant success with the right experience and strategy. More than half (65%) of freelance and contract respondents reported earning more than \$75,000 per year.
- Just over one-third (34.3%) of SEO pros earning \$200,000 or more had over 20 years in the industry.
- In 2022, there were key opportunities for growth in the first four years of an SEO professional's career.
- Many SEO professionals are becoming managers and earning higher salaries on just a few years of experience.
- However, many SEO pros remained in junior positions.

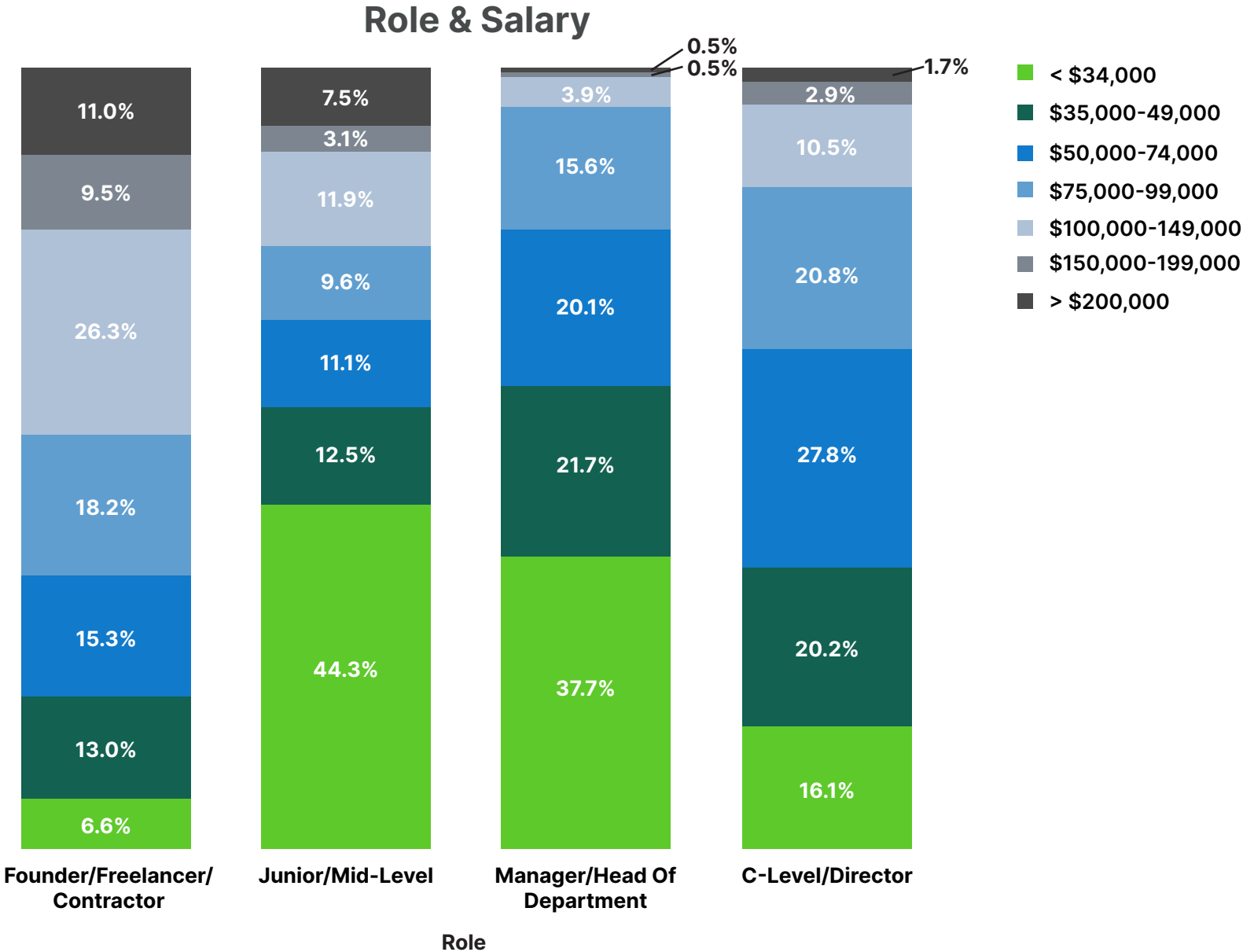
Experience Vs. Role

- Less than 2 years
- Between 2-4 years
- 5-10 years
- 11-20 years
- 20+ years



Q. How would you describe your role? 3,623 responded.
Q. How long have you worked in the search industry? 3,623 responded.

- Factors beyond pure time and experience can impact roles and salaries. An influx of lower salaries may be from countries with burgeoning SEO industries.
- Region, soft skills, and other areas of expertise can contribute to the positions and salaries of SEOs.
- Businesses should take all of these into account when seeking new candidates.



Q. How would you describe your role? 3,623 responded.
Q. What is your current annual salary bracket (in USD)? 3,623 responded.

Out of the total number of respondents with less than two years of experience:

- 66.4% were in junior roles.
- 23.3% were managers.
- 9.4% were freelancers or founders.

Out of the total number of respondents with two to four years of experience:

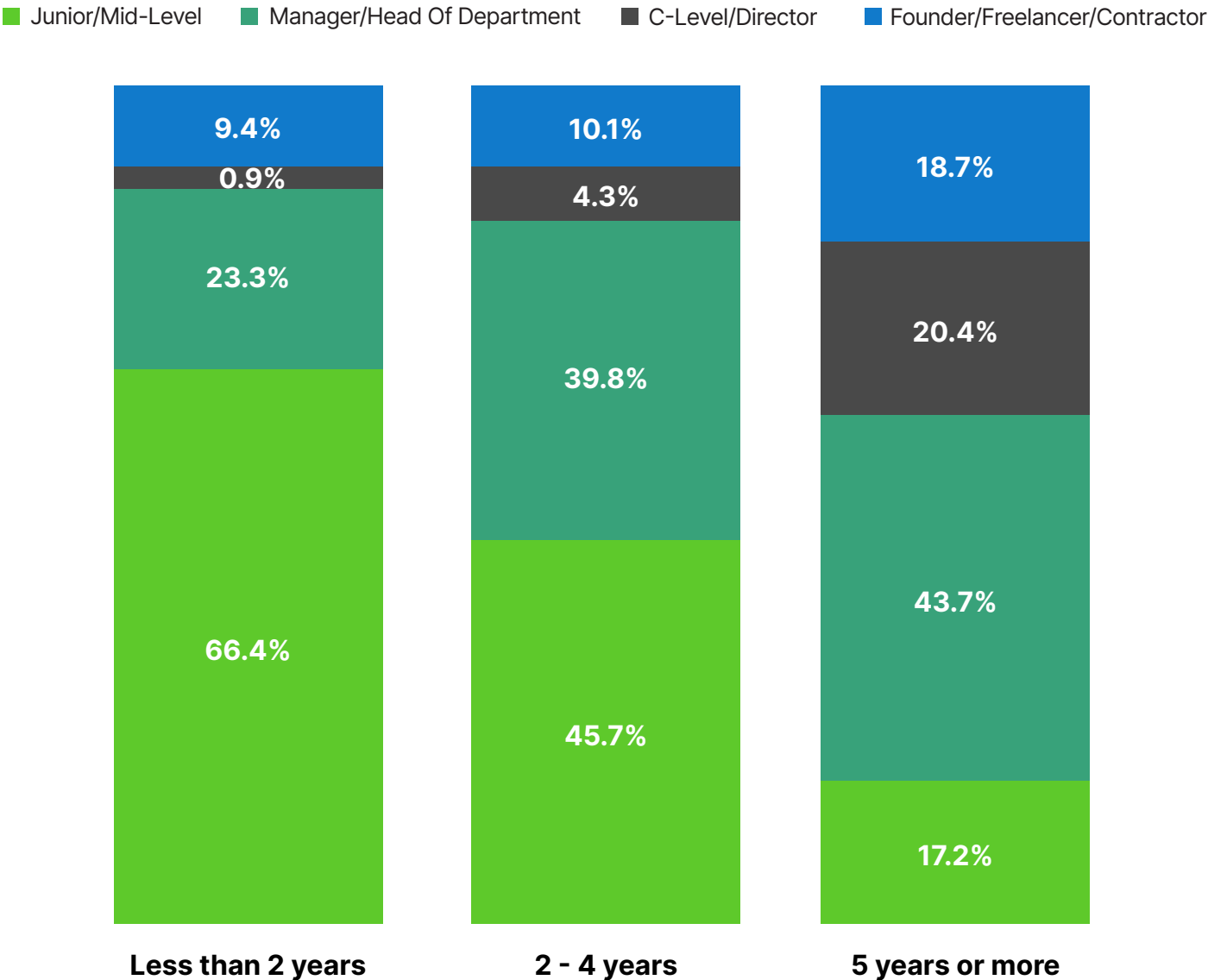
- 45.7% were in junior roles.
- 39.8% were managers.
- 10.1% were freelancers or founders.

Concerns about digital growth and a looming [global recession](#) could have a cooling effect on salaries and demand.

On the other hand:

- Many of our respondents expect increases in digital marketing budgets ([Page 49](#)).
- Responses also indicate that brands focus on improving their website user experience and technical performance ([Page 28](#)).
- Finding leadership candidates with core technical competencies and the right leadership skills can be difficult.

SEO Professionals: Role Level Vs. Years Of Experience



Q. How would you describe your role? 3,623 responded.
Q. How long have you worked in the search industry? 3,623 responded.

This presents challenges for employers and opportunities for SEO pros willing to upskill.

There's both a growth case and a reduction case to be made when it comes to hiring in the SEO industry. As Search Engine Journal in-house expert **Shelley Walsh** puts it:

“The last few years have seen a shortage of SEO professionals, and demand has been high with a lot of work circulating. Now, I am starting to see more people in the industry actively looking for work. I think the recent headcount reductions at Shopify after an overestimation of growth could be the start of a turning tide.”



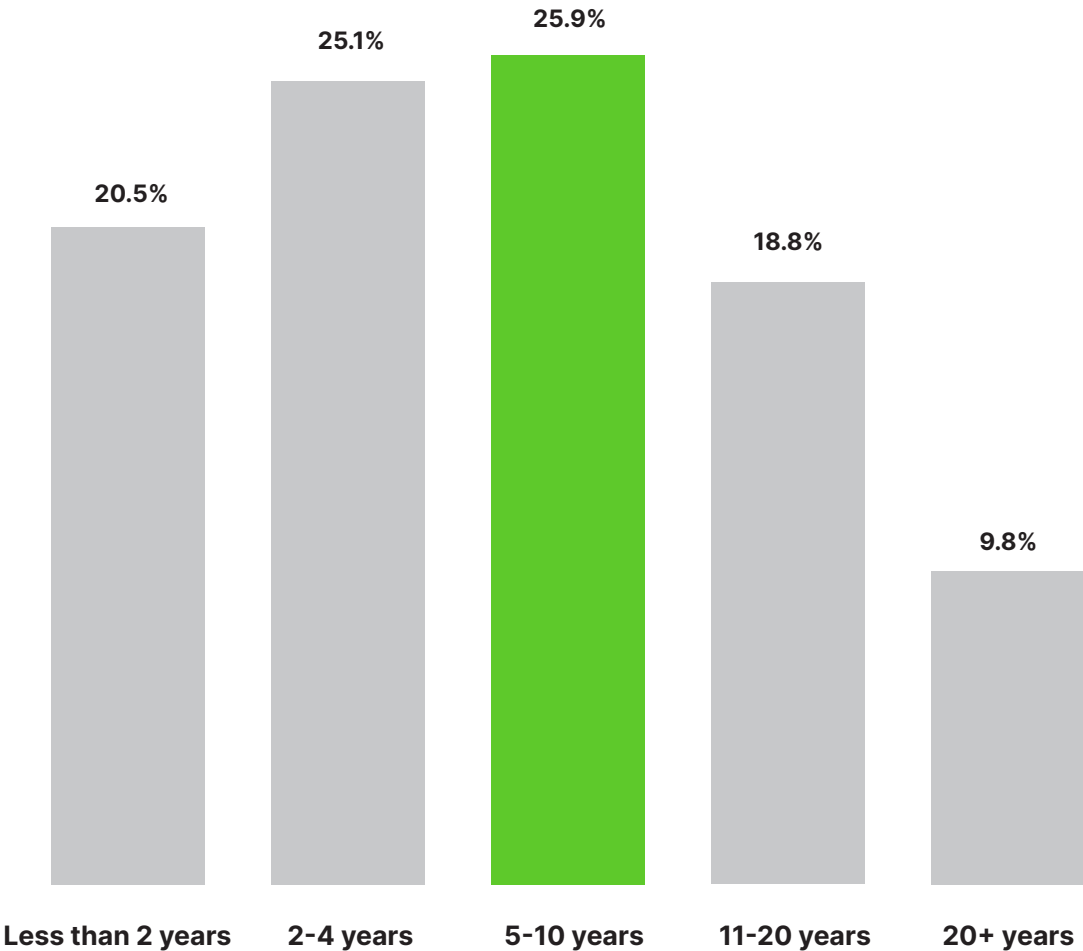
The SEO Freelancer’s Journey

Although freelancers and founders are a relatively small group compared to others, they can often command higher rates than their peers. And many of them were newcomers.

- Almost half of all freelancers and founders (45.6%) had four or fewer years of experience.
- Only 6.6% of freelancers and founders took salaries of \$34,000 or less (see [Page 14](#)).

“Founders” may account for the higher salary brackets found in this group, meaning that freelancers may need to build a book of business before commanding the highest rates.

Freelancer’s Years Of Experience



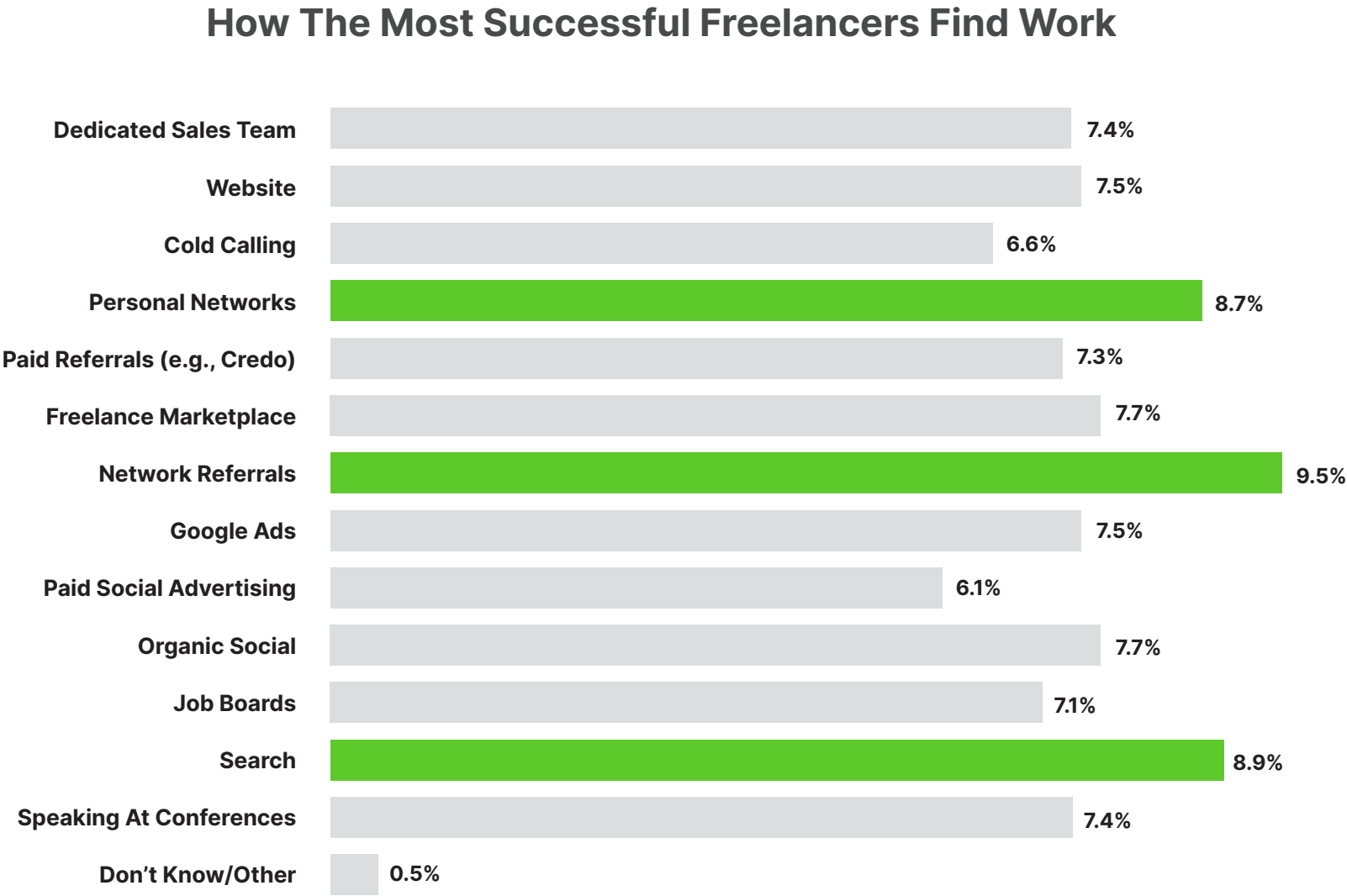
Q. How would you describe your role? 3,623 responded.
Q. How long have you worked in the search industry? 3,623 responded.

The highest-earning freelancers and founders (those earning \$100,000 or more) spent most of their time doing technical SEO and strategy tasks.

When asked for their top three tactics for finding new business, they relied mostly on:

- Network referrals (9.5%).
- Their personal networks (8.7%).
- Search (8.9%).

Paid social advertising (6.1%) was the least popular tactic.



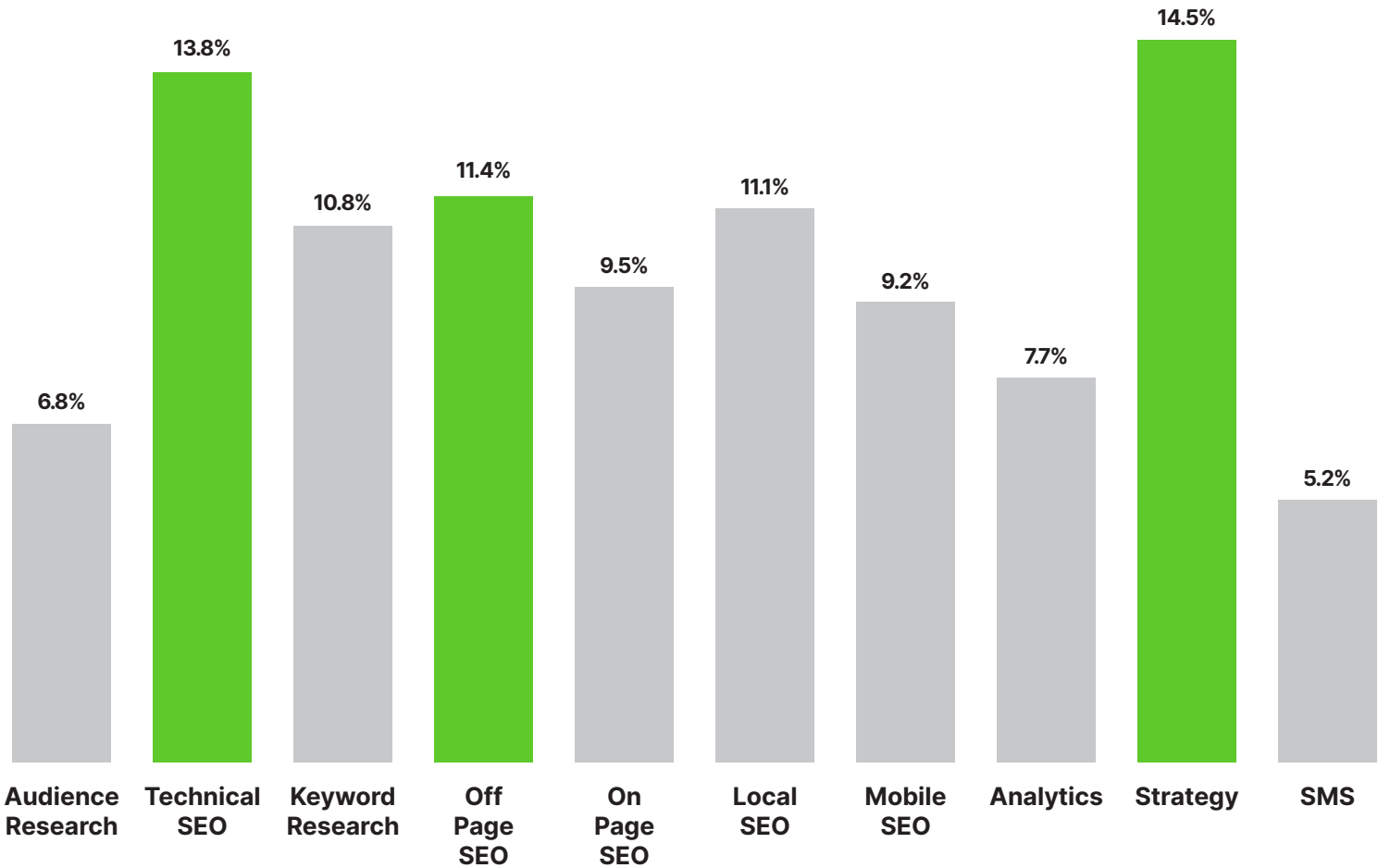
Q. How would you describe your role? 3,623 responded.

Q. What is your current annual salary bracket (in USD)? 3,623 responded.

Q. How would you describe who you work for? 3623 responded.

Q. Where have you allocated the majority of your clients' budget for SEO this year? Open to only agency and freelance/founder participants. 2314 respondents selected up to three options.

What SEO Tasks Do The Highest Earning Freelancers Spend Their Time On?



In other words, freelancers who earned the most often relied on reputation and word-of-mouth to generate work.

Newer or lower-paid freelancers and contractors are at a disadvantage in this regard since they are less likely to have the experience, portfolios, or client lists necessary to generate a higher income.

However, websites and search were also popular, which is where newer freelancers and founders could prove themselves.

Q. In the last 12 months, compared to the year before, would you say your SEO ROI decreased a lot, decreased a little, stayed the same, increased a little, increased a lot? 2,962 responded.

Q. Which channels drive the most new business for you or the company you work for? 2314 respondents selected up to three options.

Q. How would you describe your role? 3,623 responded.

Q. How would you describe who you work for? 3623 responded.

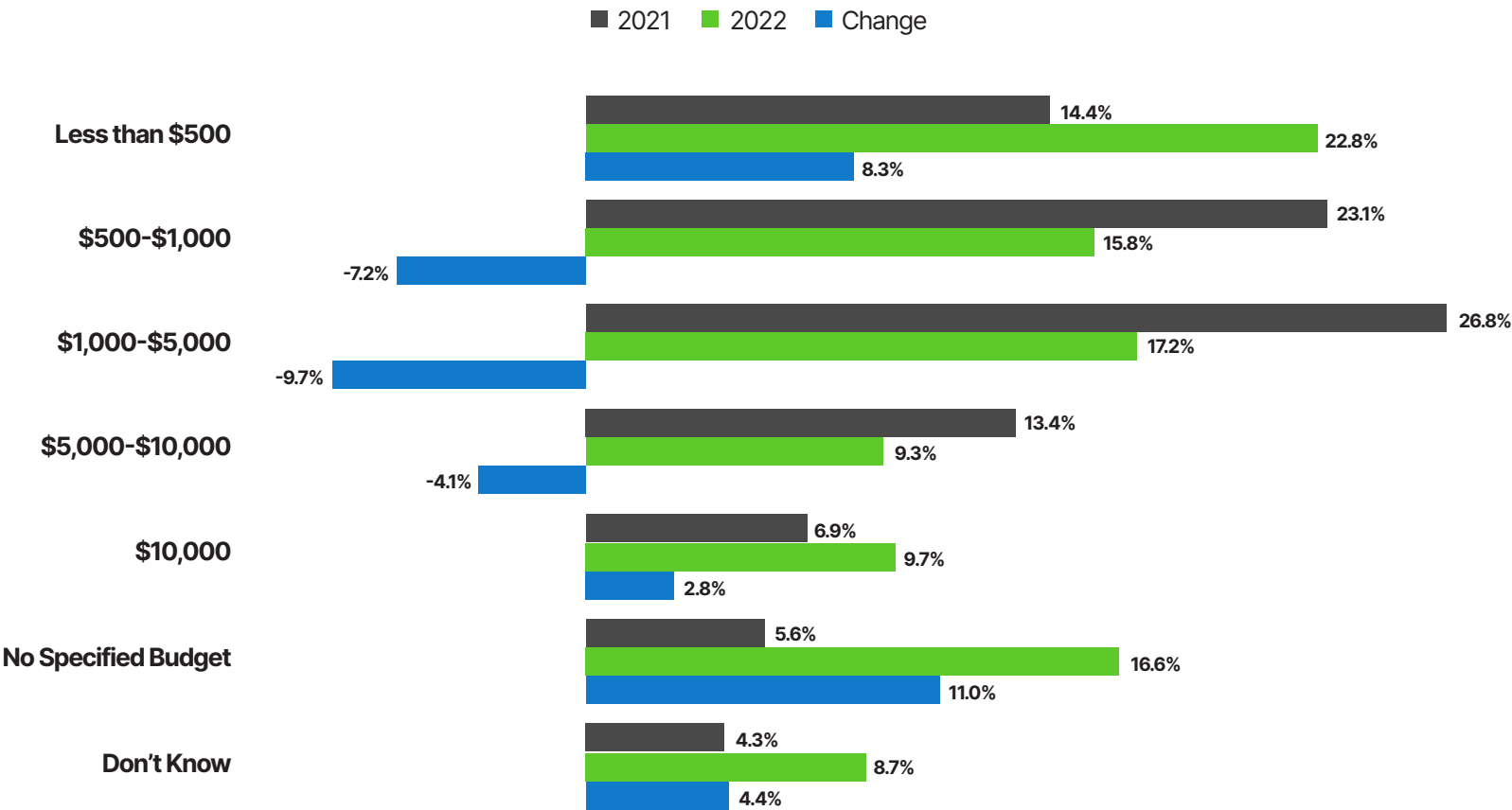
SEO BUDGETS AND BUDGET PRIORITIES

The background is a solid dark green. Overlaid on the right side is a faint, light green graphic consisting of a bar chart with several bars of varying heights, and a large, thick arrow that curves upwards from the bottom left towards the top right, pointing towards the bars. The overall aesthetic is clean and professional, with a focus on growth and data.

Small Budgets Get Smaller. Big Budgets Get Bigger.

- The majority of SEO budgets reported by State Of SEO Survey respondents were less than \$500 (22.8%).
- This is down from the \$1,000 to \$5,000 average reported in 2021.
- Budgets of \$10,000 or more increased by almost 3.0%.
- More SEO professionals (+11.0%) reported that they’ve moved to operate with no specified budget.

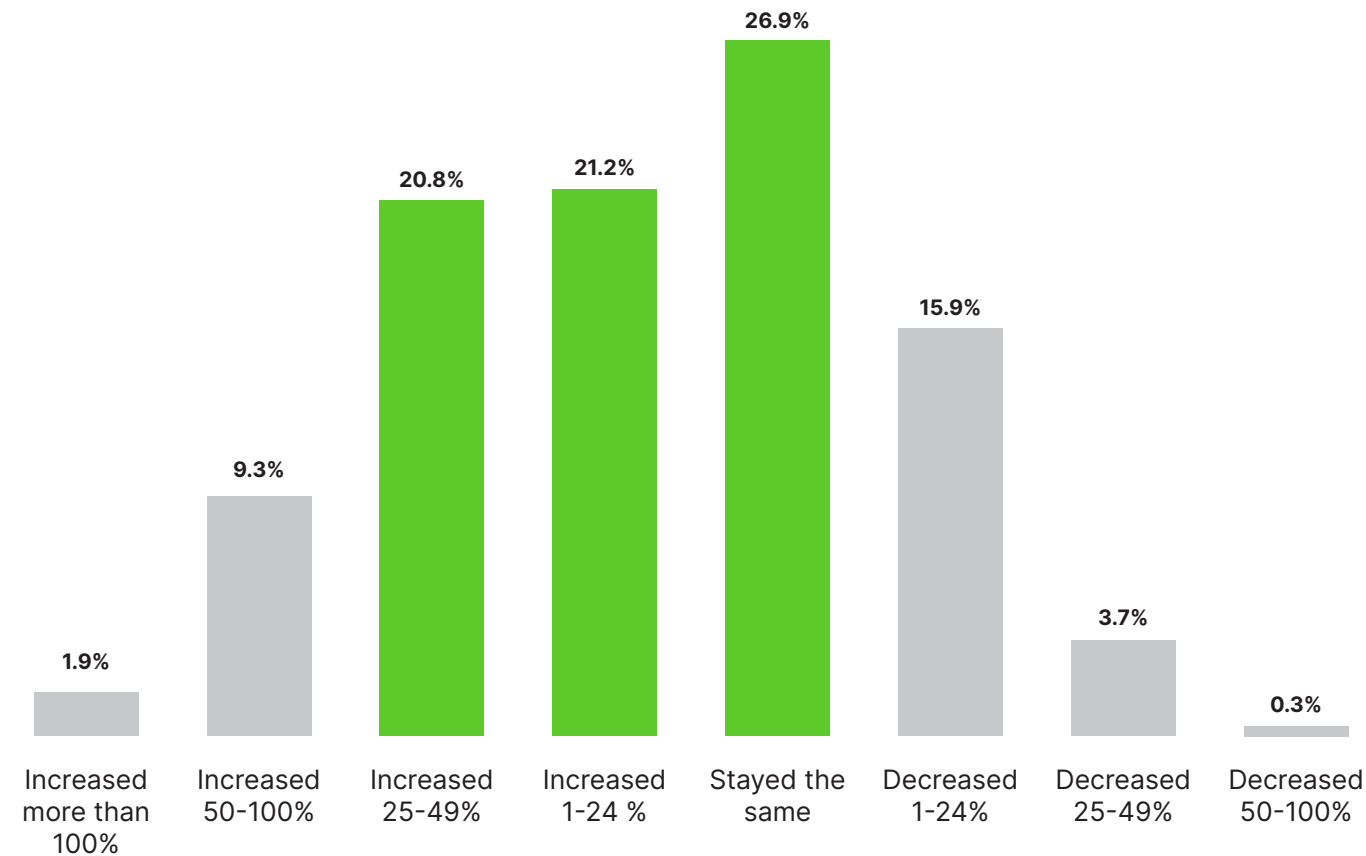
Significant Fluctuations In SEO Client Budgets



Q. What is the average/usual monthly budget for SEO (USD)? Open to only in-house participants. 746 responded.

Q. What is the average/usual monthly budget paid, per client, for SEO services (USD)? Open to only agency and freelance/founder participants. 2314 responded.

Client Budget Changes



Small budgets could have many different reasons.

- Regional differences could account for an increase in smaller budgets; where the industry is younger, budgets may not be as large.
- COVID and changing consumer patterns could be causing an increase in small budgets.
- Businesses might be reassessing their digital priorities in preparation for tumultuous seas ahead.
- Businesses with smaller budgets may have been pushed out by an abundance of new brands and novel strategies in their niches.

Q. In the last 12 months, how has your client's budget for SEO changed from the year before?
Open to only agency and freelance/founder participants. 2,314 responded.
Q. Do you anticipate your clients' SEO budgets for next year will increase, decrease, remain the same? 3,060 responded.

On the other hand, digital-first trends likely aren't going anywhere.

- “No specified budget” responses could indicate in-house positions (where salary makes up the bulk of budget) or that businesses began using ROI models to justify spending.
- Most agency and freelance respondents reported that budgets stayed the same or increased.

Brands looking to weather uncertain times may well double down on digital marketing due to the availability of data and the level of control they can have over their spending.

“Consumer demand may be returning to a prior equilibrium after the pandemic forced a dramatic shift toward ecommerce.

That shift was good for SEO budgets in the ecommerce space, but Moz saw a decline in Local SEO spend during that time. We may see more fluctuation again as the pendulum swings, bringing increased SEO budgets to some verticals and not others.

Overall, SEO as an industry fared rather well during the pandemic, and demand for competent SEO professionals remained high.

As an industry, we're getting better at demonstrating the bottom-line value of SEO, and that will eventually translate into more budget for that expense long term.”



Insights From The Moz Search Scientist Team:
Tom Capper, Dr. Pete Meyers, and Miriam Ellis
Prepared by Brittani Dinsmore.

Top-Requested SEO Outcomes

The overall top three services that agency SEOs were asked to provide were:

- Increased website traffic (21.8%).
- Lead generation (19.5%).
- Better search rankings (18.1%).

The top three services in-house SEO teams were asked to provide were:

- Increased website traffic (26.2%).
- Lead generation (20.9%).
- Better search rankings (17.5%).

The top priorities are the same across agency, in-house, and freelancer respondents, but with different concentrations.

In-house SEO teams likely tended to be more consistent when selecting goals due to the consistency of their work.

Agency SEO professionals were asked to meet other expectations more frequently.

Freelance respondents showed the most variety in the types of results they were asked to deliver.

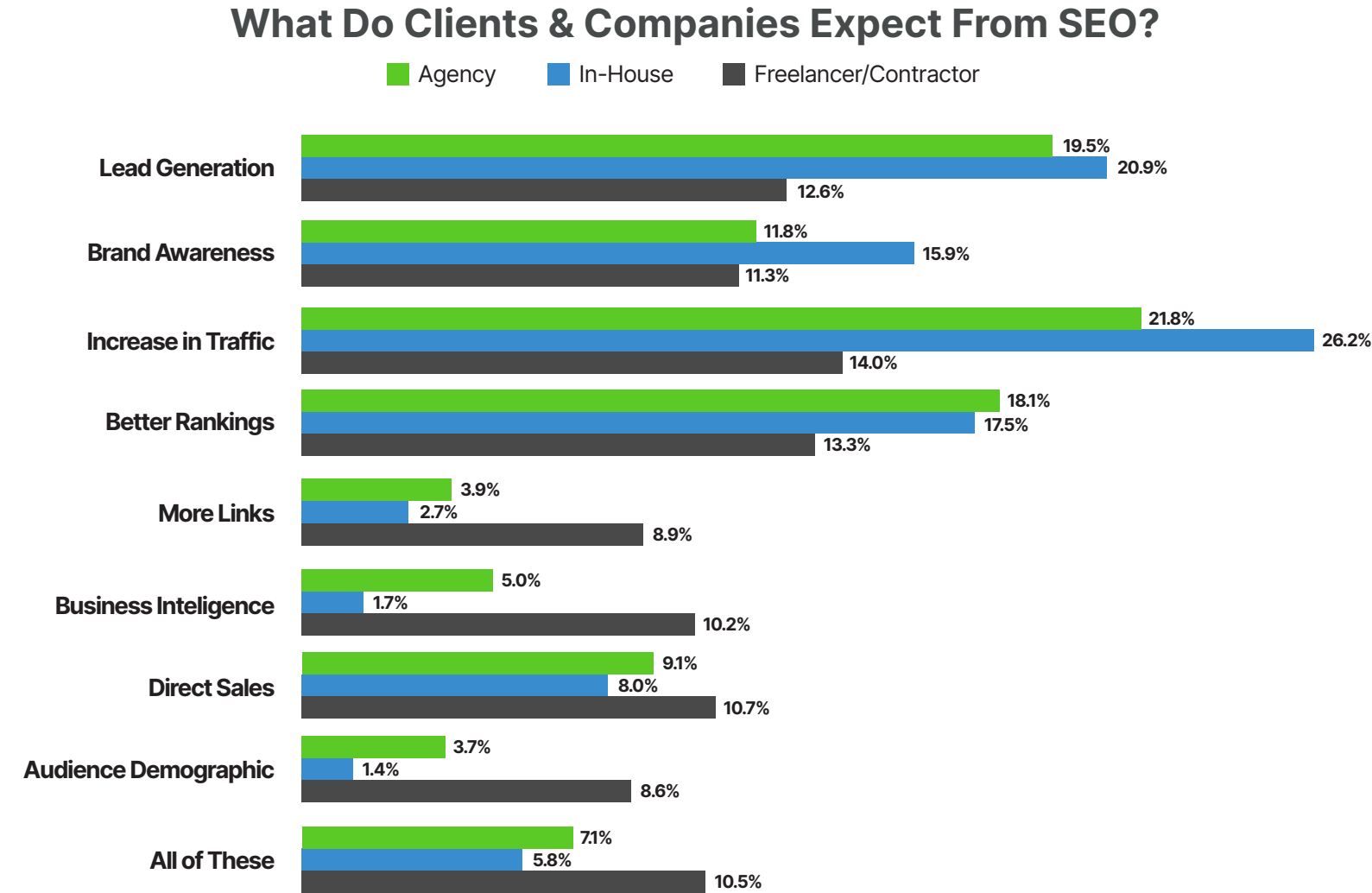
These results make sense. Agencies serve a variety of different clients, but likely have their own processes in place. Freelancers are more likely to deliver custom services with various project scopes.

“There is very real value in viewing SEO as part of the broader marketing discipline and understanding the full customer journey. Mature search marketing strategies go beyond gaining impressions at any cost. Drive relevant traffic and provide value for customers, and you’ll see rewards in revenue.

SEO professionals should be taking notice that Google’s evolution toward demanding authority and authenticity is moving in tandem with consumer demand for trust, connection, and shared values.”



Insights From The Moz Search Scientist Team:
Tom Capper, Dr. Pete Meyers, and Miriam Ellis
Prepared by Brittani Dinsmore.



Q. What are the top outcomes your client(s) or company expects of SEO? Open to only freelance/founder participants. 2,314 respondents selected up to three options. Not all options were offered in 2021.

Q. What are the top outcomes your company expects of SEO? Open to only in-house participants. 746 respondents selected up to three options.

WINNING STRATEGIES AND MEASURING SEO SUCCESS

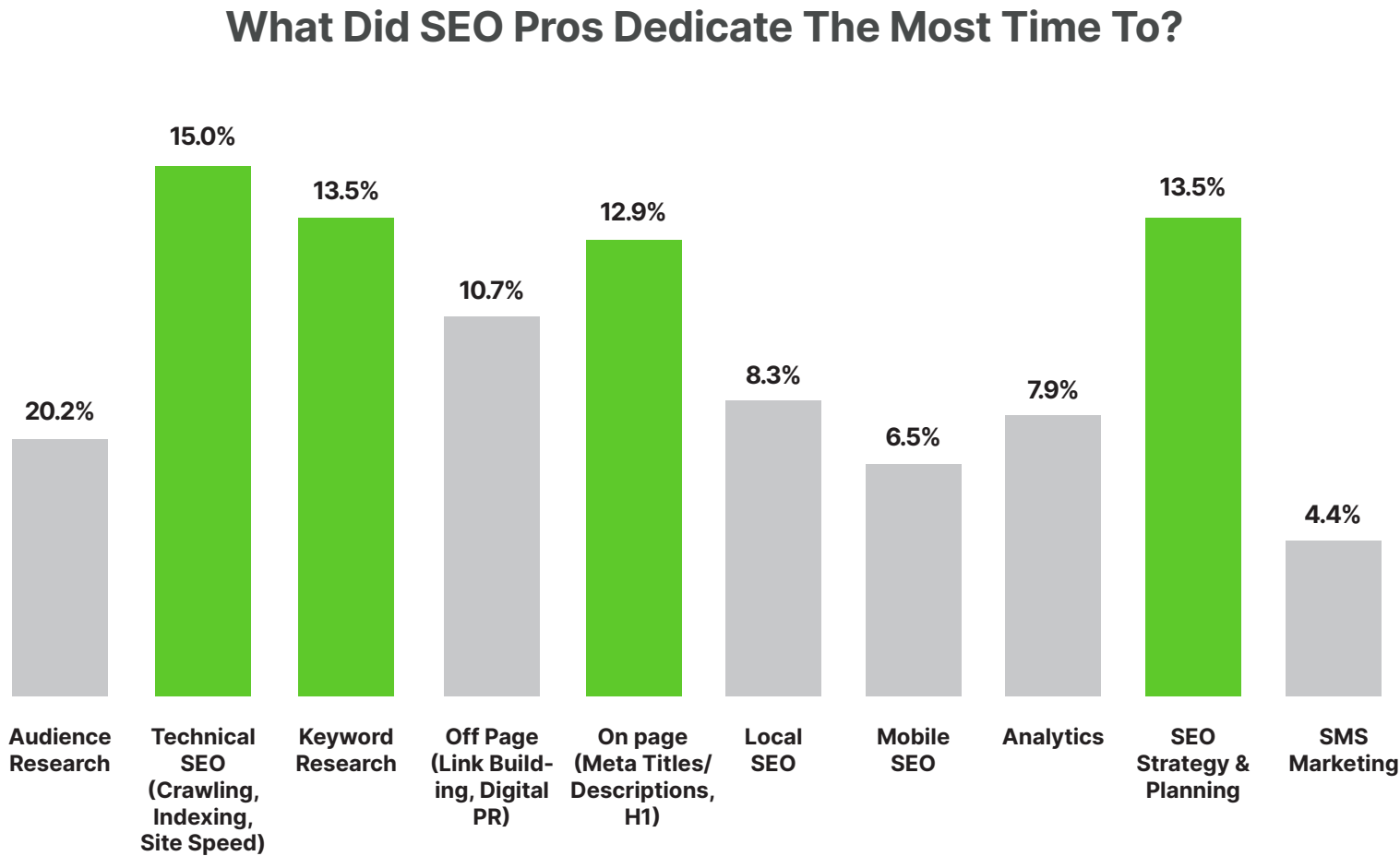


SEO Pros Go Back To Basics While Technical SEO Leads The Way

In 2022, technical SEO rose to prominence. Overall, SEO professionals spent the most time on:

- Technical SEO (15.0%).
- SEO strategy and planning (13.5%).
- Keyword research (13.5%)

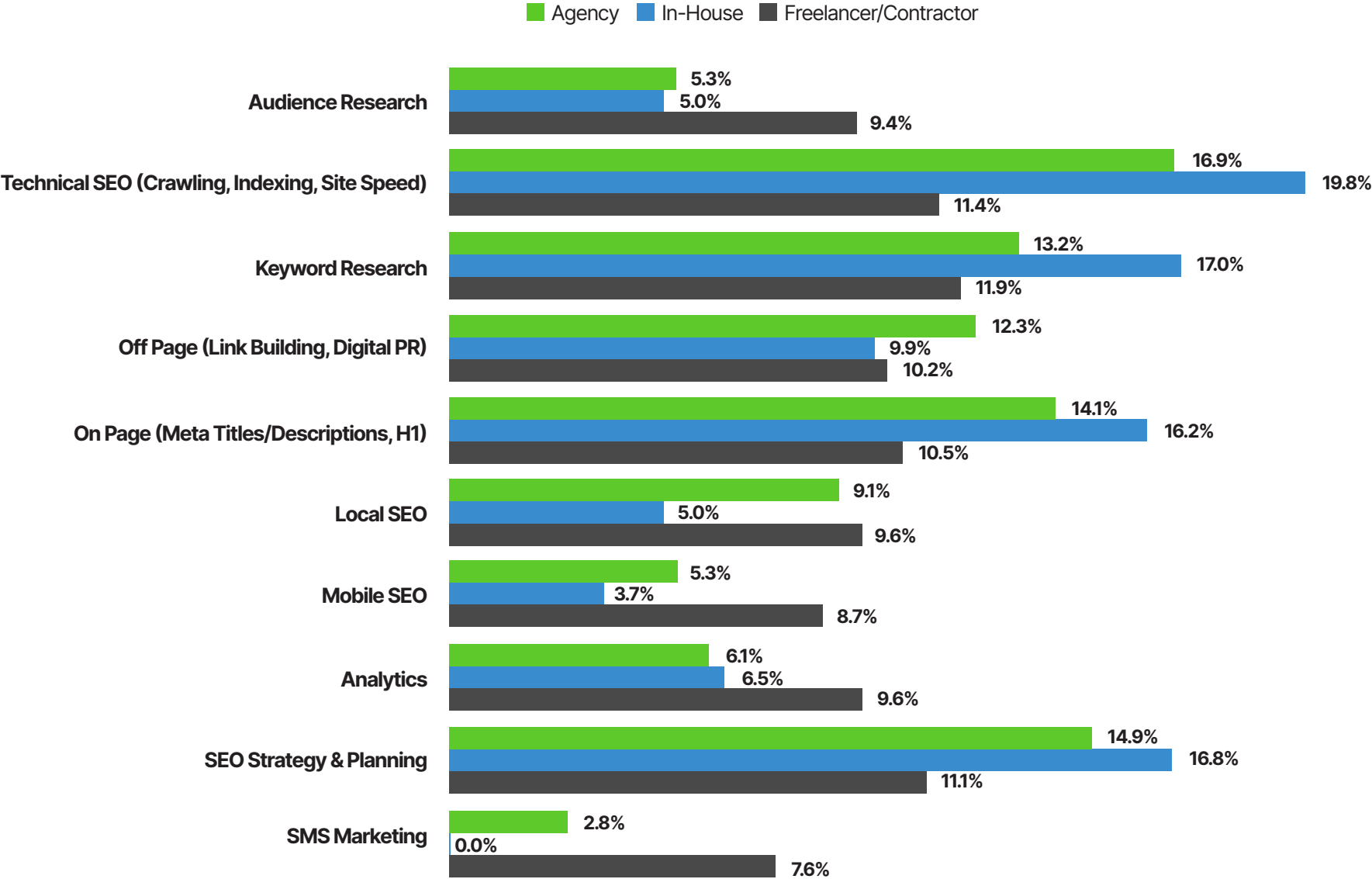
When we break down the responses by business type, we can see similar results to the previous page. In-house SEO pros have the greatest focus, agency SEO pros have slightly less, and freelancers perform a wide range of activities.



Q. Where have you allocated the majority of your clients' budget for SEO this year? Open to only agency and freelance/founder respondents. 2,314 respondents selected up to three options.

Q. Where have you allocated the majority of your time for SEO this year? Open to only in-house respondents. 746 respondents selected up to three options.

What Did SEO Pros Focus On This Year?



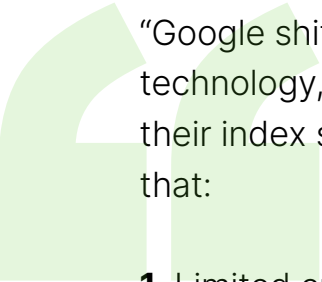
Q. Where have you allocated the majority of your clients' budget for SEO this year? Open to only agency and freelance/founder respondents. 2,314 respondents selected up to three options.

Q. Where have you allocated the majority of your time for SEO this year? Open to only in-house respondents. 746 respondents selected up to three options.

These focus areas may reflect the many updates made by the search engines this year, which often focused on technical aspects like Core Web Vitals and refinements to broader search segments. These included adjustments to how they rank product reviews and local profiles.

The focus on research and strategy may suggest that SEOs are reevaluating strategies implemented with the fast digital growth in the pandemic and preparing for shifts in consumer trends.

Search Engine Journal in-house expert **Vahan Petrosyan** lays out why technical SEO has become so prominent this year:



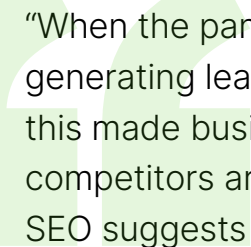
“Google shifted its focus more on user experience and technology, to establish a performance norm that all sites in their index should satisfy. There are a few reasons behind that:

1. Limited crawling resources: When a website is not optimized, Google spends more computer resources and, therefore, energy and money to crawl and render it.
2. Google’s commitment to sustainability: More resources spent on crawling means more carbon dioxide is emitted into the atmosphere. Google has to be picky when indexing.

3. User experience on Google Search: When users click on a website from the SERP that loads too slowly or has a broken design, they might blame Google for a bad experience and churn.

That’s why Google introduced Core Web Vitals scores as a ranking factor and page experience update. All this means business owners should pay more attention to the technical part of SEO to appear in Google’s index and rank well.”

SEJ in-house expert **Matt Southern** isn’t surprised by these changes in priorities, either:



“When the pandemic hit, businesses were forced to depend on generating leads from web search more than ever before. I think this made businesses acutely aware of where they and their competitors are ranking in Google. A shift in priority to on-page SEO suggests businesses are going back to the basics to build a stronger foundation for greater success in search results. It’s easy to get so caught up with feeding the content machine that you overlook fundamentals like on-page optimization. Since on-page SEO didn’t appear in the top five last year, this change feels like businesses are now focusing on an area they’ve neglected.”

Mismatched Brand Goals And Metrics Reveal Common ROI Problem

Keyword ranking was the top metric SEO pros used to measure performance over the past year. Participants picked their top three metrics, and keyword rankings won 15.0% of responses.

Also in the top five:

- Pageviews/sessions (12.4%).
- Conversions & goal events (9.0%).
- Revenue increases (6.2%).
- Marketing or sales qualified leads and branded vs. non-branded traffic tied for fifth place (6.0% each).

Creating custom metrics might sound good in theory, but only 3.2% of SEO professionals used it the most.

Metric	
Keyword Rankings	15.0%
Pageviews/Sessions	12.4%
Conversion & Goal Events	9.0%
Revenue Increases	6.2%
Branded vs. Non-Branded Traffic	6.0%
Marketing Qualified Leads (MQL)	6.0%
Backlinks	5.9%
Bounce Rate	5.7%
Page Speed	5.3%
Average Time on Page	5.1%
Social Media (Shares, Likes)	5.0%
Customer Acquisition Costs (CAC)	4.7%
Customer Lifetime Value (CLV)	3.6%
Email Subscriptions	3.6%
PR Mentions	3.3%
Custom Metrics	3.2%

Q. Which metrics did you use most to measure SEO performance in the last 12 months? 2965 respondents selected up to three options.

These findings suggest a notable disconnect between client and brand goals and how they measure ROI. Remember that the top three requested services were, in order: web traffic, lead generation, and search rankings. (See [Page 25.](#))

- “Keyword rankings” was the top-tracked metric but only the third-most requested service.
- “Qualified leads” was tied for fifth place as a tracked metric, but lead generation was the second most requested service.
- And while pageviews took second place on the tracked metric list, web traffic was the top requested service.

The freelancers and contractors we surveyed were more likely to use a mix of metrics.

They were also more likely to create their own custom metrics and measurements to inform their clients, demonstrate their value, and track their progress.

Which Metrics Are Agency, In-House & Freelance Professionals Using?

	Agency	In-House	Freelancer/ Contractor
Backlinks	5.3%	6.1%	6.3%
Bounce Rates	5.4%	5.0%	6.3%
Branded Vs. Non-Branded Traffic	6.5%	6.5%	5.6%
Conversions	10.5%	10.0%	7.6%
Custom Metrics	2.4%	1.4%	4.7%
Customer Acquisition Costs (CAC)	4.4%	3.0%	5.7%
Customer Lifetime Value (CLV)	3.0%	1.5%	5.1%
Email Subscriptions	2.4%	1.3%	5.4%
Marketing Qualified Leads (MQL)	5.8%	7.0%	5.8%
Page Speed	4.6%	5.2%	5.7%
Pageviews	13.7%	18.8%	8.6%
PR Mentions	2.6%	1.1%	4.9%
Rankings	19.0%	22.0%	9.5%
Revenue	6.3%	5.6%	6.4%
Social Engagements	4.1%	3.4%	6.3%
Time On Page	3.6%	4.5%	6.0%
Other	0.5%	0.4%	0.2%

Q. Which metrics did you use most to measure SEO performance in the last 12 months? 2965 respondents selected up to three options.
Q. How would you describe your role? 3,623 responded.

Which Metrics Are Professionals Using? B2B & B2C

	B2B	B2C & Ecommerce
Rankings	14.9%	14.5%
Pageviews	12.2%	11.9%
Conversions	8.8%	8.7%
Marketing Qualified Leads (MQL)	7.8%	5.1%
Bounce Rates	6.2%	5.6%
Backlinks	6.1%	6.3%
Time On Page	5.9%	4.7%
Customer Acquisition Costs (CAC)	5.6%	4.7%
Social Engagements	5.5%	5.1%
Revenue	5.4%	7.1%
Page Speed	5.4%	5.5%
Customer Lifetime Value (CLV)	4.6%	3.4%
Email Subscriptions	3.8%	3.9%
PR mentions	3.8%	3.5%
Custom Metrics	3.4%	3.5%
Branded vs. Non-Branded Traffic	0.2%	6.2%
Other	0.2%	0.3%

They tended to favor pageviews and rankings over other metrics, however.

There aren't too many key differences between the metrics that B2B and B2C businesses use, but there are two key distinctions we noticed:

- B2C/ecommerce SEO pros care more about the difference between branded and non-branded traffic.
- B2B SEO pros cared more about qualified leads as a metric of success.
- Neither of these distinctions is particularly surprising.

Q. Which metrics did you use most to measure SEO performance in the last 12 months? 2,965 respondents selected up to three options.

Q. What sector do you work in? 3,623 responded.

A disconnect between a brand's target goals and tracking data makes it extremely difficult to prove ROI.

SEO also faces unique ROI challenges, as Petrosyan explains:

"SEO usually takes several months to deliver results. Business owners may spend big budgets on improving SEO, but the outcome may not be visible for a year, which puts SEO pros in an uncomfortable situation.

SEO also requires buy-in and assistance from other departments, which can be difficult – and can slow down results. The biggest challenge I see is that too many SEO pros do not educate or set expectations well, allowing clients or companies to have expectations greater than what they can deliver in the timeline they have."

Southern also explains why hyper-focusing on particular metrics may not accurately represent a campaign's performance:

"It sounds like this mismatch in priorities could cause an ROI issue. There are a number of ways to achieve the goal of increasing website traffic or increasing pageviews, and improving keyword rankings is only one of them. Media mentions and email subscription lists can be valuable sources of traffic, for example. For some reason, those both ended up at the bottom of the list of priorities when they should be much higher if the desired outcome is more traffic. If a business depends solely on keyword rankings to drive traffic, it's missing out on many other opportunities."

It is clear, however, that SEO professionals are focusing on more impactful metrics to prove their results. Many turned away from more nebulous metrics, such as [bounce rates](#), to focus on the bottom line.

"There isn't one metric that ever tells the whole story. Lifetime Value (LTV) comes from the first sale, which comes from search traffic, which comes from ranking. If any of these pieces are missing then your sales funnel will leak. Look at the forest and the trees. KPIs across the entire funnel paint a richer picture and help to identify where investments are making an impact."



Insights From The Moz Search Scientist Team:

Tom Capper, Dr. Pete Meyers, and Miriam Ellis
Prepared by Brittani Dinsmore.

YoY SEO Results A Mixed Bag, Leaving Opportunities For Improvement

Proving returns remains challenging for SEO professionals.

- Almost half of the SEO pros we surveyed (41.4%) said the ROI from their SEO investments either stayed the same or decreased this year.
- A small majority (58.7%) enjoyed improved SEO ROI over the 12 months prior to our survey.

Those who saw a reduction in ROI only saw nominal losses, with 16.4% saying ROI decreased “a little” and only 3.7% indicating it had decreased “a lot.”

Increased a lot	20.1%
Increased a little	38.6%
Stayed the same	21.3%
Decreased a little	16.4%
Decreased a lot	3.7%

SEO ROI In 2022

	B2B	B2C & Ecommerce	Agency	In-House	Freelancer/ Contractor
Increased a lot	18.9%	19.9%	29.0%	30.2%	9.8%
Increased a little	37.1%	38.7%	39.7%	43.5%	35.5%
Stayed the same	23.0%	20.2%	40.0%	15.0%	26.9%
Decreased a little	17.5%	17.0%	9.5%	8.2%	24.5%
Decreased a lot	3.5%	4.2%	5.1%	3.0%	3.3%

Some SEO professionals struggled with ROI more than others.

- Agency SEO pros were most likely to see ROI stay the same.
- ROI outcomes didn’t change significantly based on whether an SEO professional worked in B2B or B2C. How the SEO worked, and with what kind of team, mattered more.
- Freelancers were most likely to see an ROI decrease.
- Freelancers were also the least likely to see a significant ROI increase.

This suggests that while they earn quite highly, freelancers can struggle to prove ROI without the support of a team.

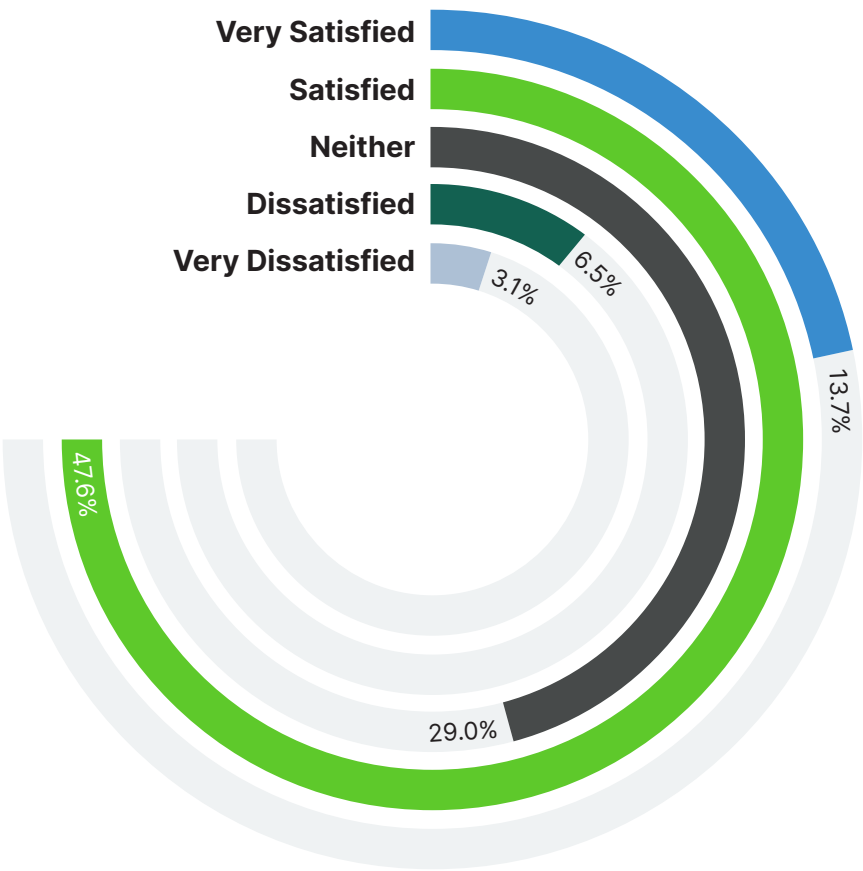
SEO pros across all sectors are largely satisfied with the results of their efforts this year:

- 61.3% are satisfied or very satisfied with their SEO results.
- 6.5% reported being dissatisfied.
- 3.1% are very dissatisfied.

A surprising 29% of SEO professionals seem ambivalent about their results over the past year – they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their results.

Satisfaction Rate With SEO Results

Last 12 Months



Q. In the last 12 months, compared to the year before, would you say your SEO ROI decreased a lot, decreased a little, stayed the same, increased a little, increased a lot? 2,962 responded.

Q. How would you rate your satisfaction with your SEO results from the last 12 months? 2,969 responded.

Q. How would you describe who you work for? 3,623 responded.

Q. What sector do you work in? 3,623 responded.

SEO CHALLENGES AND THREATS

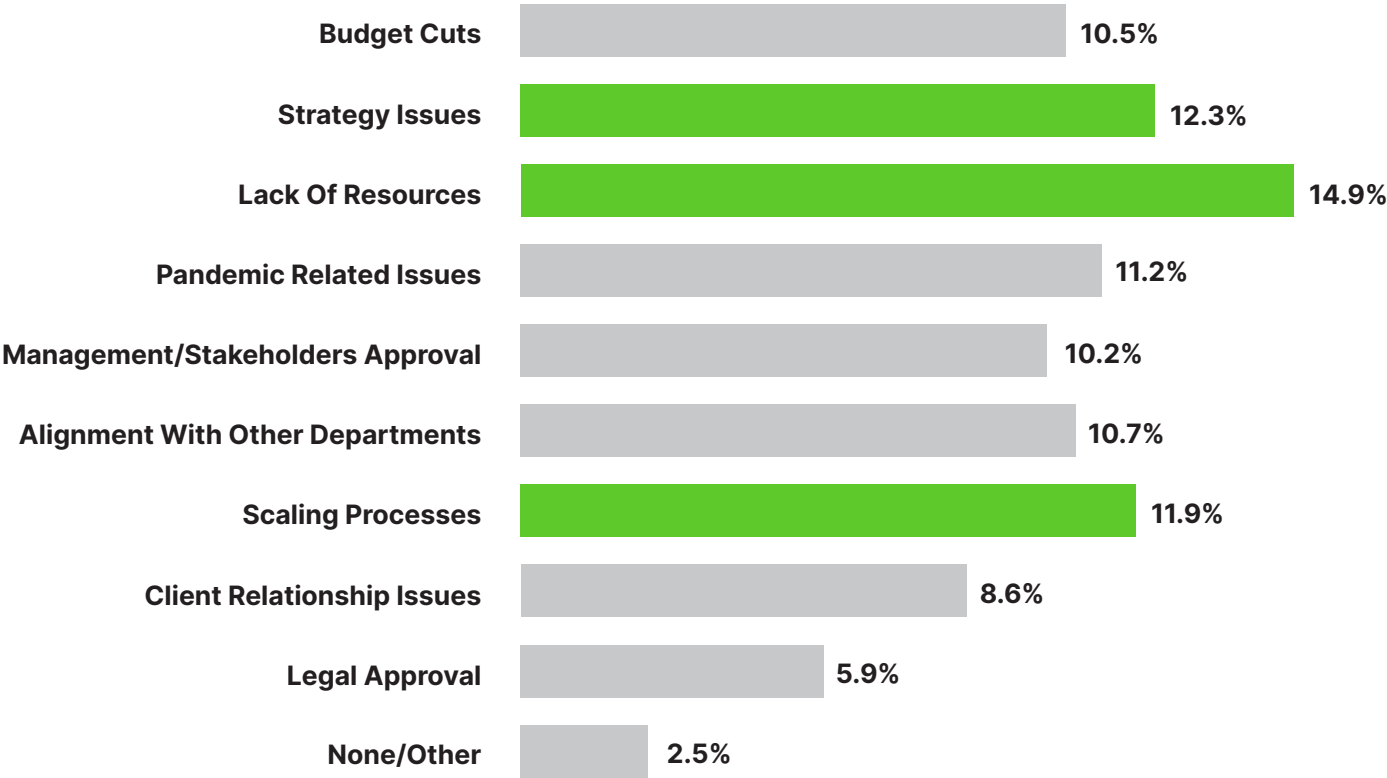


Lack Of Resources, Strategy Issues Hindering SEO Success

What’s standing in the way of SEO success? When providing their top three, participants identified these as their greatest challenges over the last 12 months:

- Lack of resources (14.9%).
- Strategy issues (12.3%).
- Scaling processes (11.9%).
- Budget cuts fell from the number one challenge SEO professionals faced in 2021 to number six this year.
- This year, pandemic-related issues remained in the fourth spot as a major concern, with 11.2% of responses.

Challenges To SEO Success In 2022



A possible reason why SEO pros struggle with resources is team size. Many of the SEO pros we surveyed (47.7%) worked on teams with 10 or fewer people. Meanwhile, only 13.9% worked on teams larger than 50. But it’s probably not the whole story.

Strategy issues may suggest that SEO professionals are struggling to prove their ROI.

Scaling was also a concern for more SEO professionals, indicating that many responded to real or expected growth and increasing demand.

Team Headcount

It’s just me	4.8%
<5	21.4%
5-10	21.5%
11-25	20.9%
26-50	17.5%
51-100	8.9%
>100	5.0%

Q. In the last 12 months, what were your biggest challenges to SEO success? 2,969 respondents selected up to three options.

Q. What is the size of your agency or team? 3,623 responded.

These challenges could also result from:

- The budget cuts last year.
- Adapting quickly to increasing and ever-changing online shopping behaviors.
- Training large numbers of newcomers, which may have strained teams.
- Undercharging for services.
- Changing priorities or strategies.

SEO Challenges & Roles

	Junior/ Mid-Level	Manager/Head of Department	C-Level/ Director	Founder/ Freelancer/Contractor
Alignment with Other Departments	12.2%	13.9%	9.9%	8.0%
Budget Cuts	13.1%	10.3%	10.8%	16.2%
Client Relationship Issues	11.2%	8.6%	10.5%	8.6%
Lack of Resources	14.8%	18.1%	18.1%	20.4%
Legal Approval	7.3%	7.9%	5.1%	2.0%
Management/ Stakeholders Approval	11.6%	12.1%	12.3%	8.9%
Scaling Processes	12.3%	14.1%	16.0%	14.2%
Strategy Issues	15.0%	13.0%	12.2%	16.1%
Have Not Experienced Any Challenges	2.4%	2.0%	5.0%	5.7%

Q. In the last 12 months, what were your biggest challenges to SEO success? 2,969 respondents selected up to three options.

Q. How would you describe your role? 3,623 responded.

SEO Professionals Watch Machine Learning, AI, and Core Web Vitals As 2023 Approaches

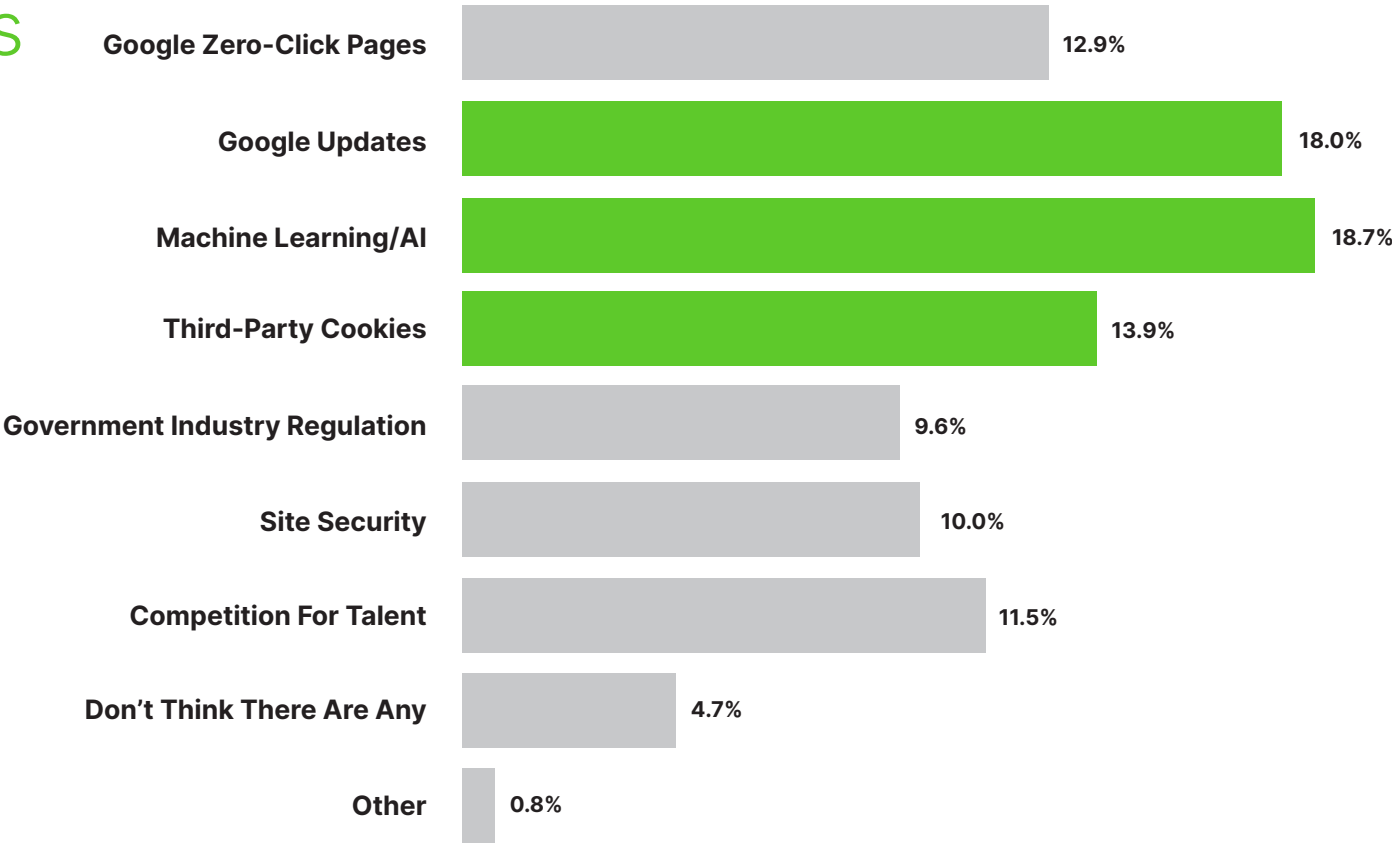
In 2021, many in the SEO industry expected zero-click pages to have the most impact on search.

In 2022, we asked respondents to select up to three “biggest shifts” and industry changes in SEO to see how industry trends and expectations have changed.

Here are their top responses:

- Machine learning and AI (18.7%).
- Google updates (18.0%).
- Third-party cookie deprecation (13.9%).
- Google zero-click results (12.9%).
- Competition for talent (11.5%).

What Will Cause The Biggest Shift In SEO Over The Next Two Years?



Q. In the next two years, what do you think will impact the biggest shifts in SEO? 2,887 respondents selected up to three options.

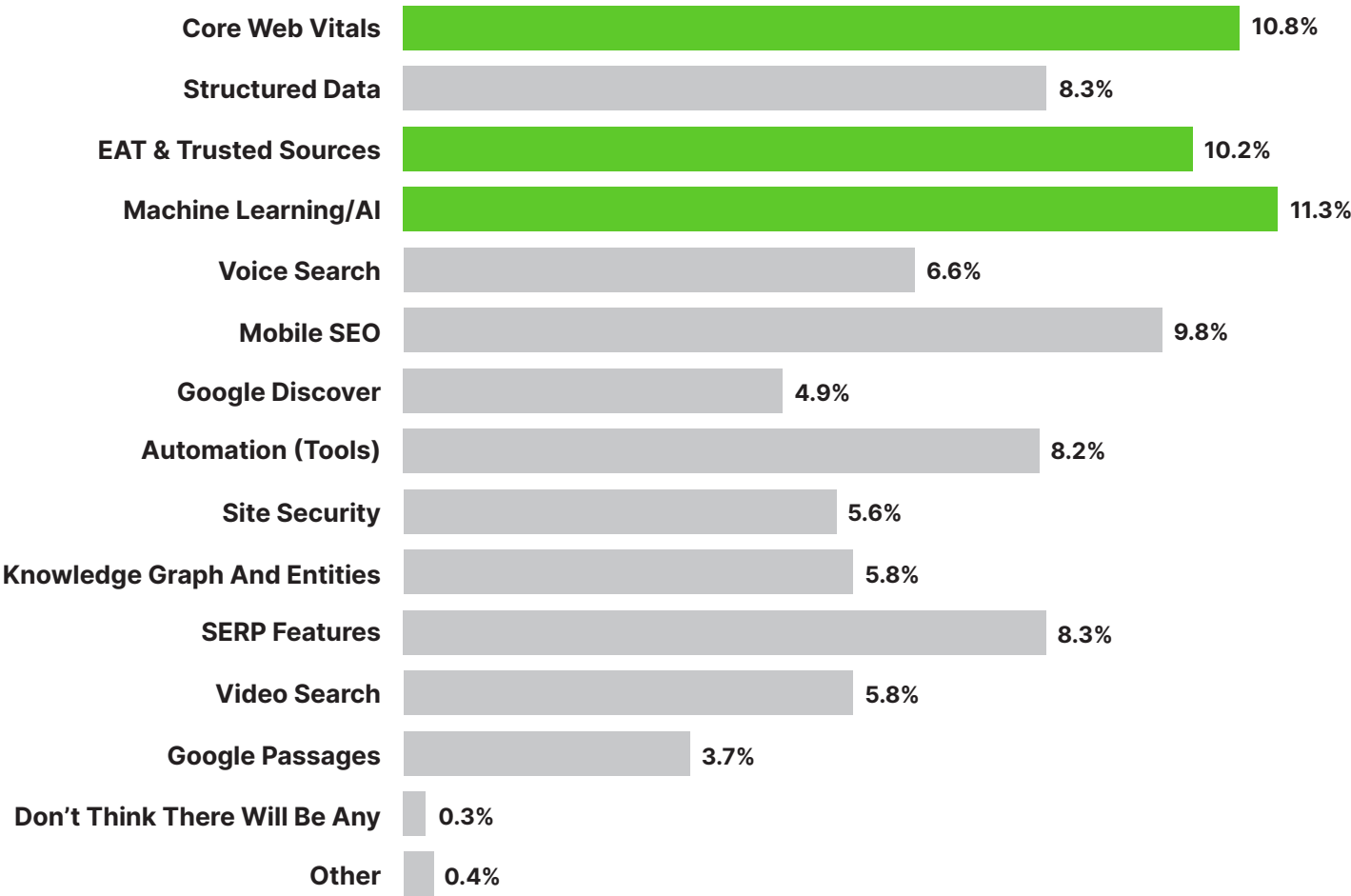
The fact that competition for talent made it into the top five concerns suggests that employers will need to pay close attention to salary trends in their regions in order to attract ideal candidates.

Machine learning & AI were also identified as the most important emergent factor in SEO. In this three-choice question, it took the top spot with 11.3%.

Other top five factors SEO professionals are watching as emergent factors are:

- Machine Learning and AI (11.3%).
- Core Web Vitals (10.8%).
- EAT & Trusted Sources (10.2%).
- Mobile SEO (9.8%).
- SERP Features (8.3%).

Which Emergent Factors In SEO Will Be Most Important In The Next Two Years?



Q. In the next two years, what will be the most important emergent factors in SEO? 2,887 respondents selected up to three options.

[Core Web Vitals](#) was considered the most important emergent factor in our 2021 survey, followed by structured data and EAT/trusted sources.

Structured data, video search, and knowledge panels remained lower on the list, despite the increasing popularity of video, as well as the rising importance of search features and the knowledge graph.

AI and ML have improved by leaps and bounds over the last few years to become prominent in multiple verticals and used in many ways.

Walsh warns against relying on burgeoning AI tools, especially for content:

“As a disruptor, I can’t yet see AI being able to replace critical decisions and choices where there are several routes to take, and you have to make a choice based on expertise. The tool is only as good as the person driving it. At the moment, there is a flood of tools powered by GPT-3. These are great for low-end volume content, such as product descriptions, but they widen the divide and elevate well-researched thought leadership quality content. As niches online become saturated by AI-spun content, the quality will be the only way to stand out. Ultimately, overuse will only have a detrimental effect.”

Emergent Factors By Sector

	B2B	B2C & Ecommerce
Machine Learning	11.2%	10.8%
CWV	10.6%	10.4%
Mobile Search	9.8%	10.0%
EAT	9.7%	10.9%
SERP Features	8.3%	8.3%
Structured Data	8.0%	8.1%
Automation	8.0%	8.0%
Voice Search	6.8%	6.7%
Knowledge Graph	6.2%	5.9%
Video Search	6.0%	6.0%
Security	5.9%	5.6%
Discover	4.7%	5.0%
Google Passages	4.1%	3.9%
Other	0.3%	0.3%
None	0.3%	0.2%

Q. In the next two years, what will be the most important emergent factors in SEO? 2,887 respondents selected up to three options.

But when it comes to how search engines of all kinds evaluate content and present results, AI will be a continuing disruptor.

If you're focused on AI consumer tools, you might miss the biggest changes that AI and machine learning cause.

Google has shown the precision and benefits of well-crafted AI with features such as [MUM](#). AI allows search engines to continually train and improve their algorithms.

Petrosyan agrees:

“Using various ML algorithms, Google pulls instant answers into SERPs and displays various search features, such as ‘People also ask’ or ‘Related searches.’ These features keep users on SERP pages rather than sending them to a website. SEO’s goal is to drive traffic to a website from organic search. More than two-thirds of searches end up without clicks – so-called ‘zero-click searches’ – and that number is growing. Since it is affecting organic traffic, one of the primary metrics for tracking ROI, AI will be a significant disruptor for SEO pros.”

Machine learning & AI were also identified as the most important emergent factor in SEO by the 31.3% of SEO professionals who selected it as one of their three choices.



SEO TRENDS AND OPPORTUNITIES



In-house SEO professionals preferred these channels for finding new business:

- Website (25.5%).
- Google search (21.9%).
- Google Ads (14.1%).

Agency SEO professionals said their companies preferred these channels:

- Website (16.0%).
- Network referrals (11.9%).
- Google search (11.7%).

Freelancers and founders had much less clear-cut favorites, but they relied most on network referrals (9.5%), Google search (8.9%), and in-person networks (8.7%).

Agency, and especially freelance SEO pros, rely more on reputation and recognition within the business community, while in-house teams focus on the direct ROI of their company’s website.

Which Channels Drive The Most New Business For You Or The Company You Work For?

	Agency	In-House	Freelance
Cold Calling	3.8%	1.7%	6.6%
Dedicated Sales Team	10.2%	9.2%	7.4%
Google Ads	7.4%	14.1%	7.5%
Google Search	11.7%	21.9%	8.9%
In-Person Professional Business Networks	9.6%	4.0%	8.7%
Online Job Boards	3.7%	0.8%	7.1%
Paid Referral Platforms (e.g., Credo)	3.2%	2.0%	7.3%
Referrals From Your Network	11.9%	3.9%	9.5%
Social Media Not Paid	5.4%	4.3%	7.7%
Social Media Paid Ads	6.1%	7.5%	6.1%
Speaking At Conferences	4.5%	1.6%	7.4%
Freelance Marketplace	3.4%	1.1%	7.7%
Website	16.0%	25.5%	7.5%
Don't Know	2.0%	0.9%	0.2%
Other	1.2%	1.6%	0.3%

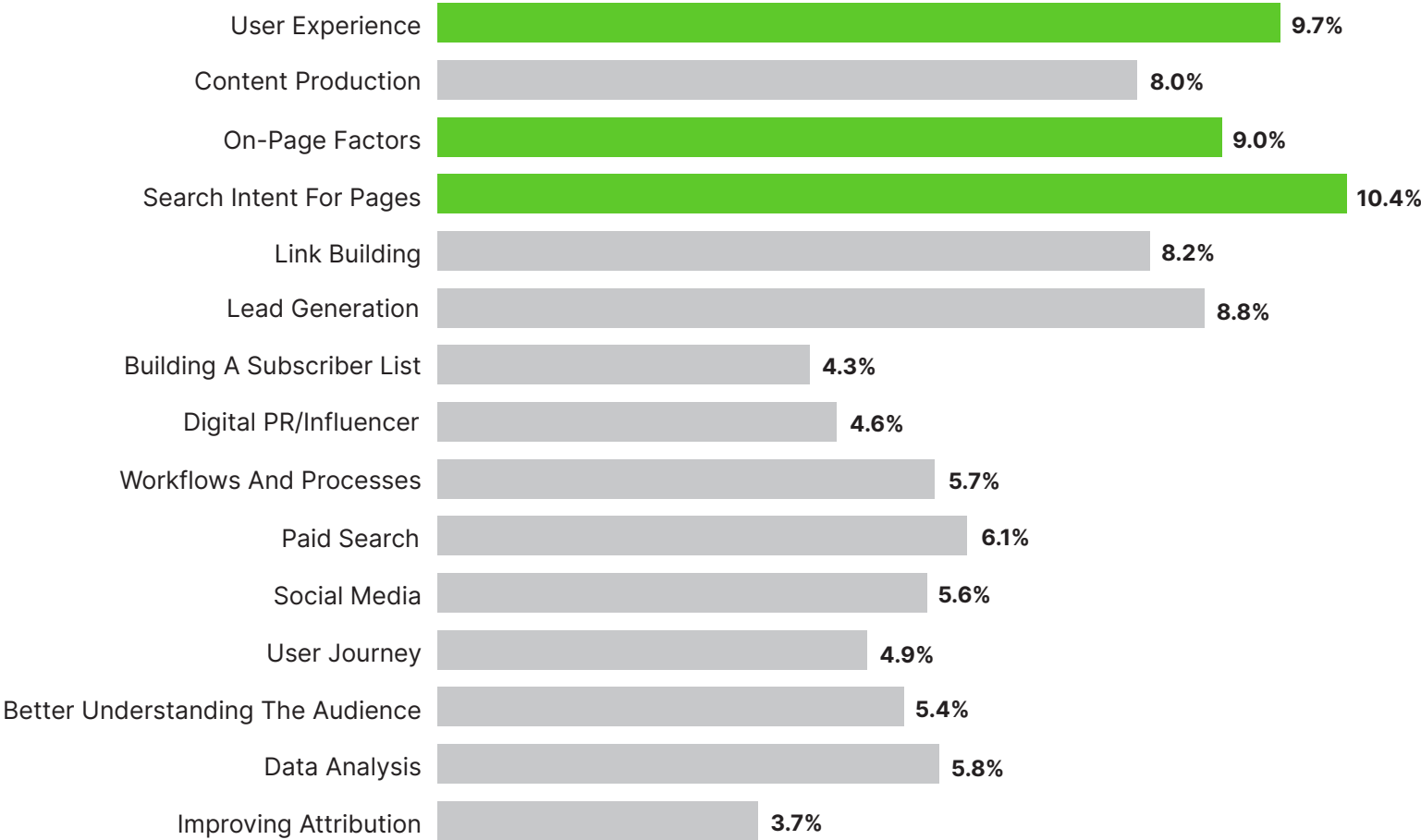
2023 Is The Year Of Search Intent For SEO Professionals

When asked for their top three selections, forward-looking SEO professionals chose these options most frequently:

- Search Intent (10.4%).
- User Experience (UX) (9.7%).
- On-Page Factors (9.0%).
- Lead Generation (8.8%).
- Link Building (8.2%).
- Content Production (8.0%).

Going into 2022, UX was the top priority, followed by content production.

What Will SEO Pros Focus On In The Next 12 Months?



Q. Which areas do you intend to focus on most in the next 12 months? 2,887 respondents selected up to three options. Not all responses were available in 2021 survey.

These developments make sense going into an uncertain economic environment in 2023. Finding the right searchers at the right time can make conversions more likely. Businesses might be prioritizing well-defined audiences over broad-reaching awareness campaigns.

“Building a subscriber list” fell out of the top 10 to 14th place. With the increased focus on user experience by Google in its updates and the ever-looming death of the third-party cookie, this finding was unexpected.

“Intent, UX, and on-page make sense to focus on as Google still holds a massive global share of search and will for the foreseeable future.

Focusing on the customer experience is an overall win in any channel.

Who wouldn’t want a site that is faster, is more reliable, establishes expertise, displays authority, and invites trust, culminating in rewarding the business?

A business’s website remains the area of the web for which brands have full control of the UX. Our tip is to use your website to its fullest extent as a driver of exceptional customer service while making whatever use is best of additional platforms to point back to it.”



Insights From The Moz Search Scientist Team:
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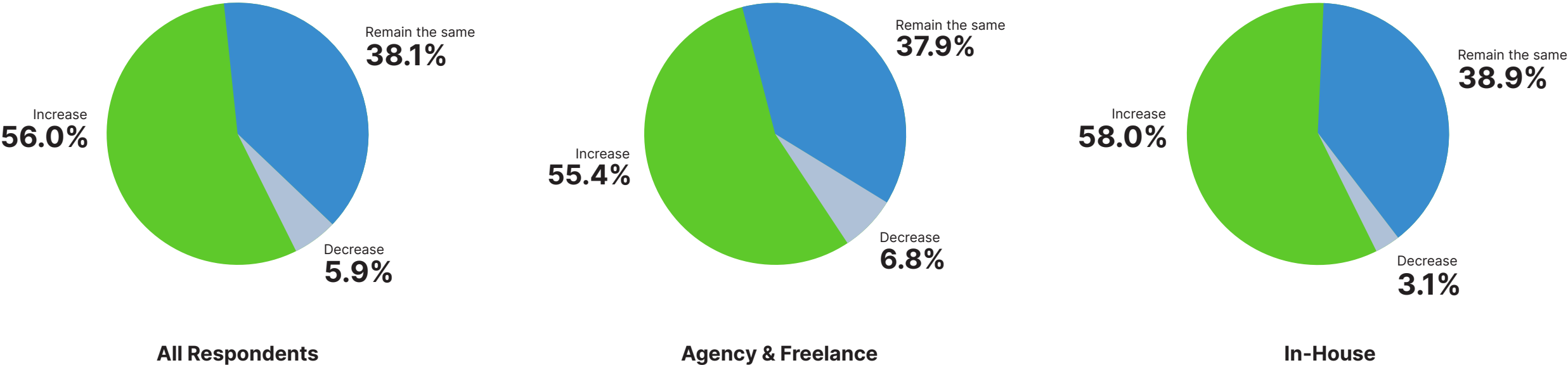
**SIGNIFICANT
GROWTH EXPECTED
IN SEO'S FUTURE**



When asked how they expected SEO budgets to change over the next 12 months, SEO professionals responded that the future looked bright.

More than half of all practitioners said they expected budgets to increase, while less than 7% of agency SEO pros and less than 6% of all participants.

Expected SEO Budget Change



Q. Do you anticipate your clients' SEO budgets for next year will increase, remain the same, decrease? Open to only agency and freelance/founder participants. 2,314 responded.
Q. Do you anticipate your SEO budget for next year will increase, remain the same, decrease? Open to only in-House participants. 746 responded.

These outlooks don't change with much significance when broken out between agency and in-house SEO pros.

Agency and freelance respondents had a slightly more conservative outlook, with 6.8% expecting a decrease versus the 3.1% of in-house SEO pros.

Overall, however, both groups lean toward positive outlooks for next year.

That positive outlook might run into roadblocks. Cooling factors like [Shopify's layoffs](#) and ongoing discussions about the recession could change how SEO pros approach their budgets next year.

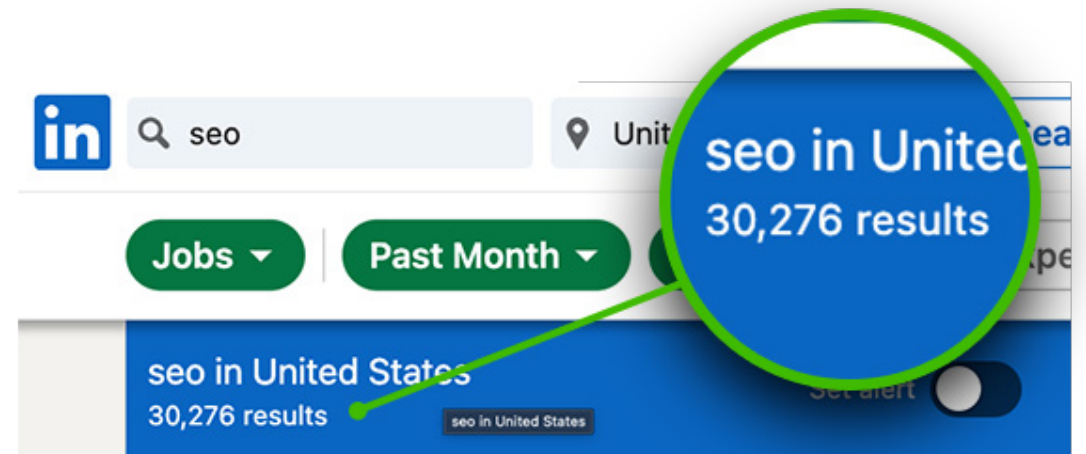
However, there's an argument to be made that digital marketing is a discipline primed better than most to weather a financial downturn.

At the time of writing (end of October 2022), over the last month, more than 114,000 digital marketing jobs and over 30,000 SEO jobs were posted to LinkedIn.

With the focus on user experience and on-page factors, while Machine Learning and AI become more prominent, 2023 is sure to be a busy year.



Screenshot: LinkedIn Job Search, October 2022



Screenshot: LinkedIn Job Search, October 2022

“As is typical with economic downturns, some industries will struggle and others will thrive.

We could see an increase in SEO budgets and a decrease in other areas of marketing spend to balance the focus on efficiencies.

At the base level, SEO will always be around as long as people need a way to find products, services, stores, answers, etc.

What’s unique about the SEO industry is that as long as people need to find things, there will be search engines and there will be SEO. How that looks from a tactical standpoint may change dramatically, but as the world’s information scope continues to expand, SEO isn’t going anywhere – even in times of economic uncertainty.”



Insights From The Moz Search Scientist Team:
Tom Capper, Dr. Pete Meyers, and Miriam Ellis
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Thank You!

Thank you for reading our State Of SEO 2023 report. We're thrilled by the SEO community's response to the survey and grateful to everyone who took part. We hope these insights will help you develop your SEO strategy for next year.

As you'll see in the Limitations section, we changed a few things this year. Last year was our first year doing the State Of SEO survey. We learned a lot and made some changes this time around. We hope you bear with us as we continue to refine and improve this project. Let us know if there are any additional insights you'd like to see next year.

In particular, I want to thank Angie Nikoleychuk, SEJ's content marketing manager, for her invaluable contributions to the research, charts, and content of this report.

If you have comments, please email us at editor@searchenginejournal.com.

If you're interested in diving more deeply into a particular aspect of the report, stay tuned for the four supplementary reports:

- **In-House Insights**
- **Agency Insights**
- **B2B Insights**
- **B2C Insights**



Ben Steele

Senior Editor, Ebooks, Search Engine Journal

Limitations

- 1** 3,623 people responded to the State Of SEO survey. The responses come from professionals of all stripes in the SEO industry, from multiple different countries.
- 2** These results reflect a statistically significant portion of Search Engine Journal's audience of SEO professionals. But SEO is a diverse, global industry, and we don't claim the final word on industry trends. Nevertheless, we hope they spark conversations with your peers.
- 3** We calculated a margin of error of +/- 1.63% based on an infinite population assumption and a 95.0% Confidence Interval.
- 4** Due to the number of countries represented in the results, it's important to be careful when making blanket statements about the industry based on these answers. Regional differences should factor into your analysis and decisions.
- 5** Results are rounded to one decimal place. Due to this rounding, not every set of percentages will equal 100 exactly.
- 6** We included several multiple choice questions with up to three answer inputs in the survey. This year, we changed how we calculated the results for these questions. We are confident enough in last year's results to comment on their positions relative to one another (top and bottom results from last year, for example). However, direct, percent-to-percent comparisons between this year and last year aren't possible.

About The Survey

Thank you to all our survey participants who made this report possible and to our exclusive sponsor, Moz.



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