

Search Engine **Journal**[®]

STATE OF SEO 2024

Disruptions • AI • Content Strategies

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Introduction

Welcome to the third annual State Of SEO report by Search Engine Journal!

In 2022, it looked a lot like SEO professionals were going back to basics, focusing on their core competencies like technical SEO and looking for solid metrics of success.

This year, rapidly developing technology threatens to throw wrenches into the works.

SEO pros struggle most with – and are most focused on – content and content strategy.

Marketers are still trying to work out what healthy adoption of generative AI for content looks like. Meanwhile, Google upped its standards, adding “experience” to “expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness” to make E-E-A-T.

Competition in the SERPS, issues with budgets, client dissatisfaction, and competition in the job market are also on the minds of SEO professionals as disruptive forces.

The most experienced respondents are honing in on ways to match their work to specific business goals and measures of audience quality.



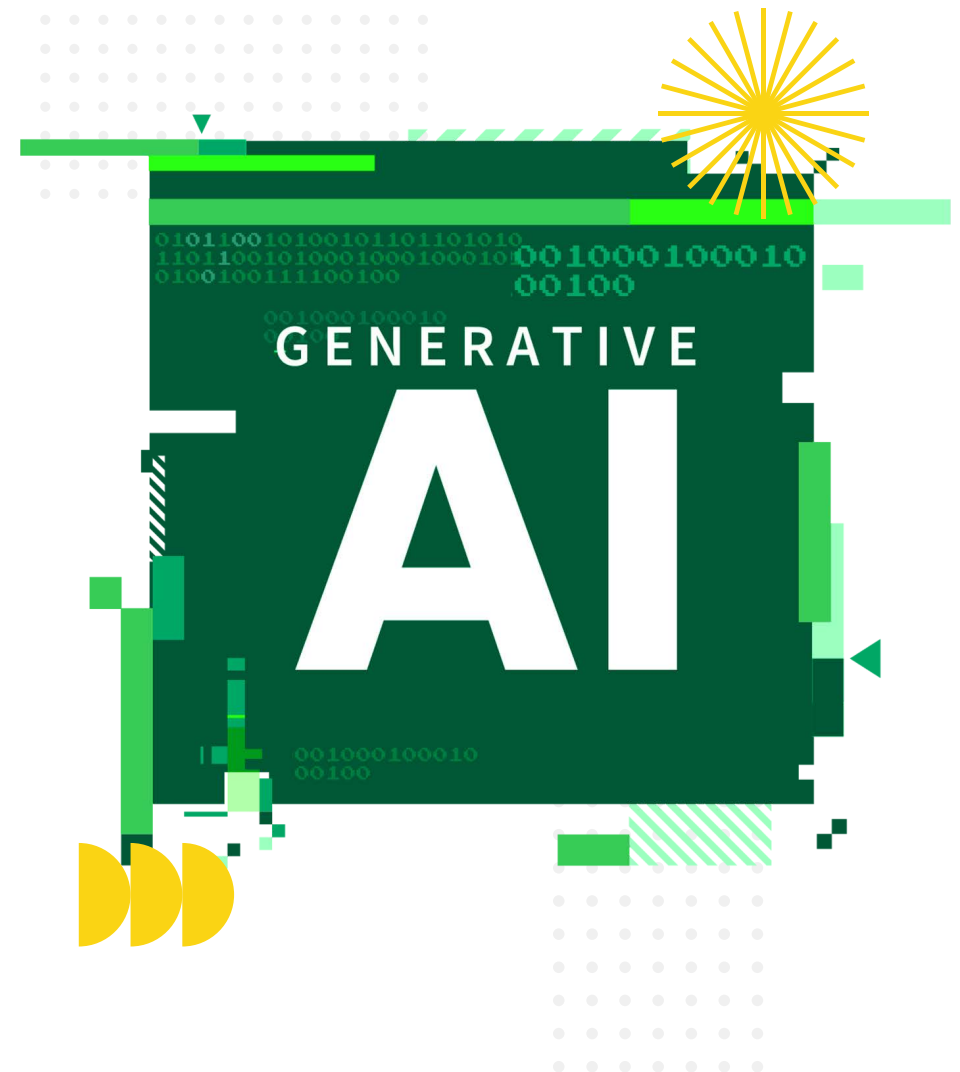
Generative AI is moving at a breakneck pace, and Google's "Search Generative Experience (SGE)" has many worried about the future of organic traffic. While still experimental, SGE is the latest in a series of changes that give users more information directly in SERPs without having to click a website at all, so there is trepidation about its eventual full release.

There are always opportunities to achieve greater success, even (and sometimes especially) during periods of change. We collected survey data from 3,890 SEO professionals to help you gather insights and plan your next 12 months.

First, a few notes:

- ✓ Around half of the responses are from the U.S., giving the data a heavy regional bias toward the U.S.
- ✓ All currency is in USD, but we gave respondents a link to a currency converter if they aren't in the U.S.
- ✓ The data includes people from multiple backgrounds, jobs, levels of experience, and income. When we pivot the data to look at smaller groups, it may become less accurate.
- ✓ See the [Limitations page](#) at the end for a full list of disclosures.

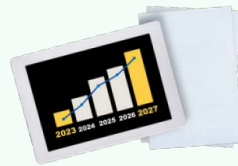
Click or tap this icon ☰ on the lower right of each page to navigate back to the Table of Contents.



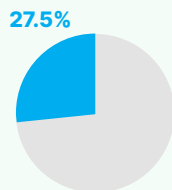
The background features a dark blue gradient with a glowing, multi-layered ring structure in the upper right quadrant. This ring is surrounded by a trail of small, bright blue particles that appear to be moving or dispersing. The overall aesthetic is futuristic and data-oriented.

Top Insights

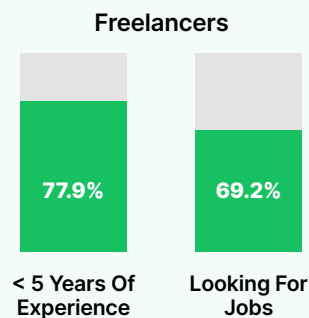
1 **Five years** is a critical career mark for SEO – **49.8%** of managers and **56%** of directors or higher have five to ten years of experience.



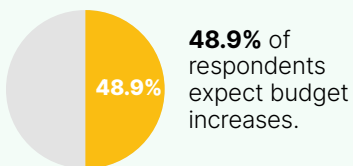
2 **27.5%** of managers only had two to four years of experience, which could indicate a demand for SEO skill sets. On the other hand, there are many SEO professionals with under five years of experience in the workforce and looking for new opportunities. Competition for entry-level jobs is high.



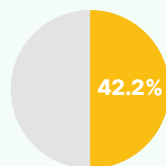
3 **77.9%** of respondents who classified themselves as freelancers have fewer than five years of experience, and **69.2%** of freelancers are looking for positions within companies, generally preferring SEO agencies over in-house positions.



4 The most common SEO budget range is **\$1,001-\$5,000** per month, with **28.6%** of responses.



48.9% of respondents expect budget increases.



42.2% expect no change in the budget this year.

5 The top three disruptions in SEO performance are expected from:

- 1** **Generative AI**
- 2** **E-E-A-T & trusted sources**
- 3** **Automation tools**

6 The top three shifts in the SEO industry are expected from:

- 1** **Competition for talent**
- 2** **AI in general**
- 3** **Google updates**

7 SEO professionals are focused on content and content strategy this year, naming it as the:

No. 1 top focus of their work this year.

No. 2 priority for implementing software automation.

No. 1 most effective overall SEO strategy.

No. 1 most difficult aspect of their jobs.

8 Respondents ranked their top three barriers to success in the past 12 months as:

- 1 Budget cuts and acquiring approval**
- 2 Competition in SERPs**
- 3 Client relationship issues**

- This could indicate difficulty communicating the importance and impact of their work in the face of an increasingly competitive landscape.
- Many respondents (**48.9%**) expect budget increases this year, which could also indicate confidence that they have overcome these issues or that the industry is stabilizing.

9 SEO professionals prioritize metrics that help build an understanding of how users interact with SERPs:

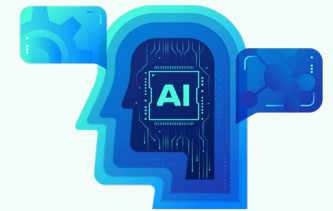
- 1 Click-through rate**
- 2 Branded vs. non-branded traffic**
- 3 Keyword rankings**

10 The highest earners (> **\$100,000/year**) prioritized these success metrics:

- 1 Branded/non-branded traffic**
- 2 Qualified leads**
- 3 Click-through rate**

- They also used a greater variety of metrics than lower earners. This could indicate that they are tailoring their reporting to specific business goals, and seeking ways to better understand user behavior, intent, and the quality of traffic.

11 The majority of respondents (**72.4%**) feel positive about AI's potential impact. **68%** of respondents wish to invest in AI-powered software or services this year.



- The larger the team, the more interested respondents are in AI tools.

12 SEO professionals named these top priorities for implementing automated solutions:

- 1 Making the most of generative AI**
- 2 Content generation**
- 3 Content audits**



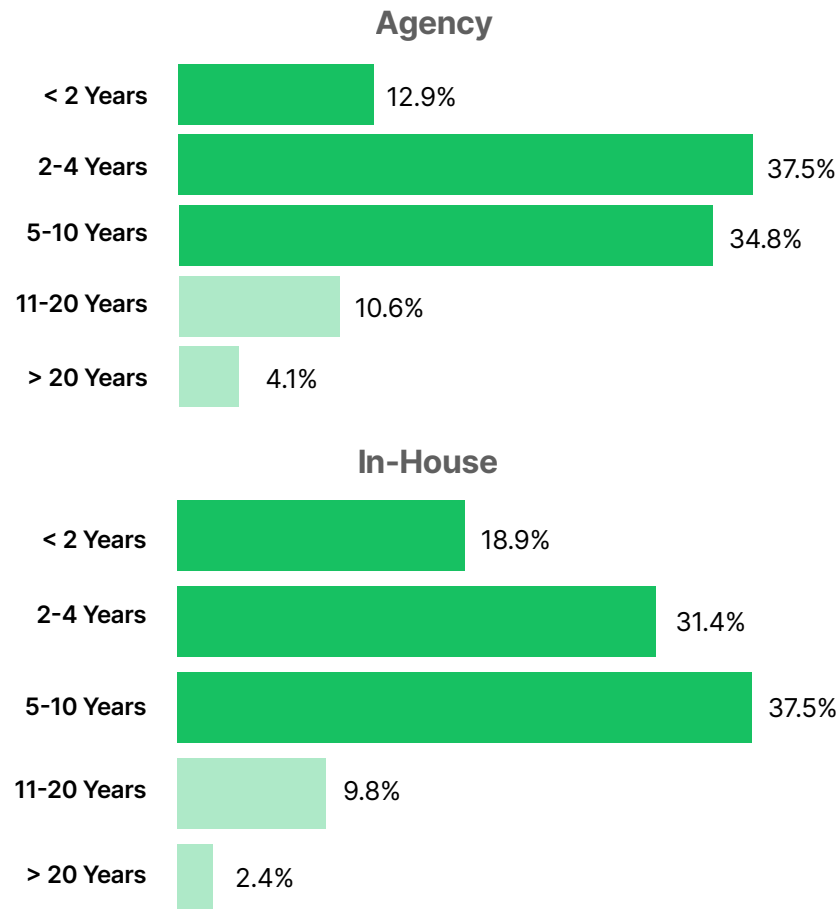
SEO Career Movement

Five Years Is A Critical Threshold In SEO Careers

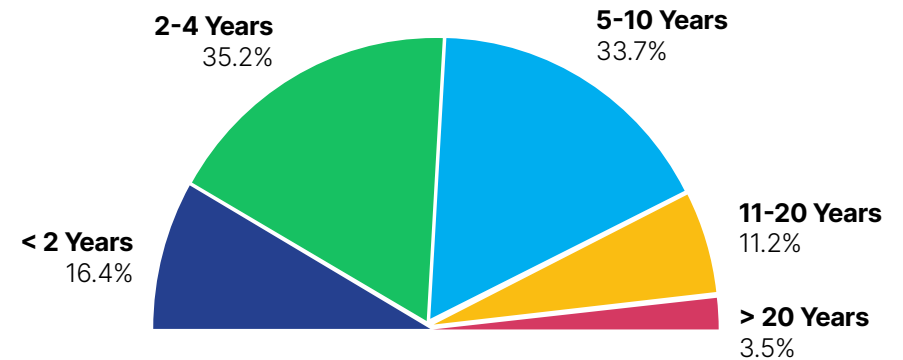
There seems to be significant competition for junior roles and high demand for experienced SEO professionals within organizations.

- ✓ **51.6%** of respondents have fewer than five years of experience.
- ✓ **64.8%** of managers have more than five years of experience.
- ✓ **81.1%** of directors or above have more than five years of experience.

Years Of Experience: Agency & In-House Teams



Years Of Experience: Overall



Experience distribution is very similar between in-house and agency roles.

While there are minor differences, half of the respondents working on agency teams (50.4%) and half of those on in-house teams (50.3%) had fewer than five years of experience.

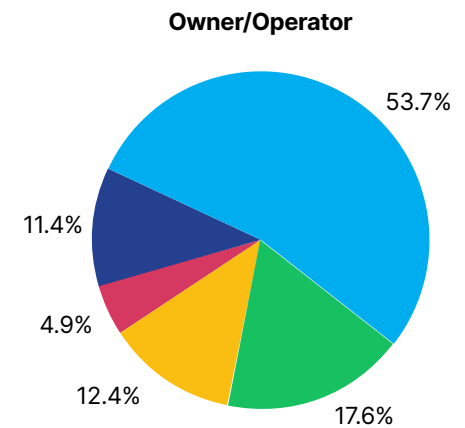
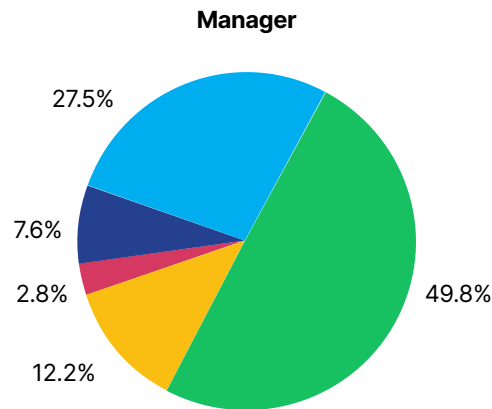
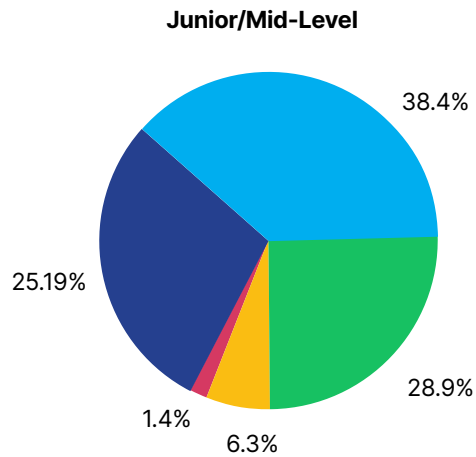
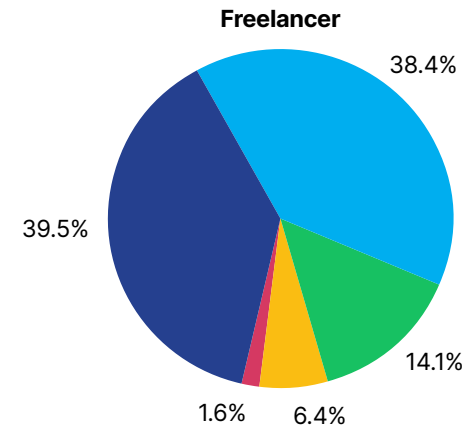
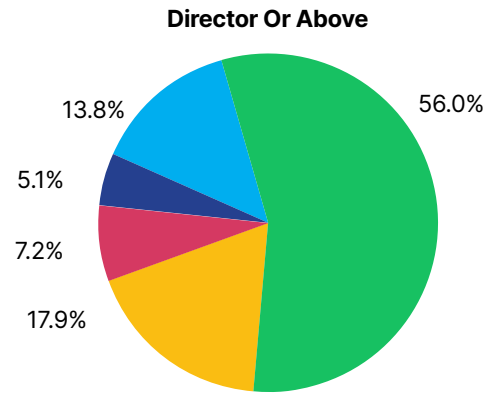
Five years seems to be the critical career mark for advancement into higher positions.

However, 27.5% of managers have two to four years of experience, so early advancement is quite possible.

49.8% of managers and 56% of directors responding to the survey have five to ten years of experience.

Experience By Position

- < 2 years
- 2-4 years
- 5-10 years
- 11-20 years
- > 20 years



53.7% of owner-operator respondents have two to four years of experience.

The group with two to four years of experience is also the most concerned about competition for talent ([Pg. 18](#)).

There seems to be high competition for entry-level in organization roles, pushing newer SEO pros to strike out on their own. While SEO skill sets are in demand, there are also many newcomers to the industry working within organizations, and many working for themselves who are seeking the jobs available.

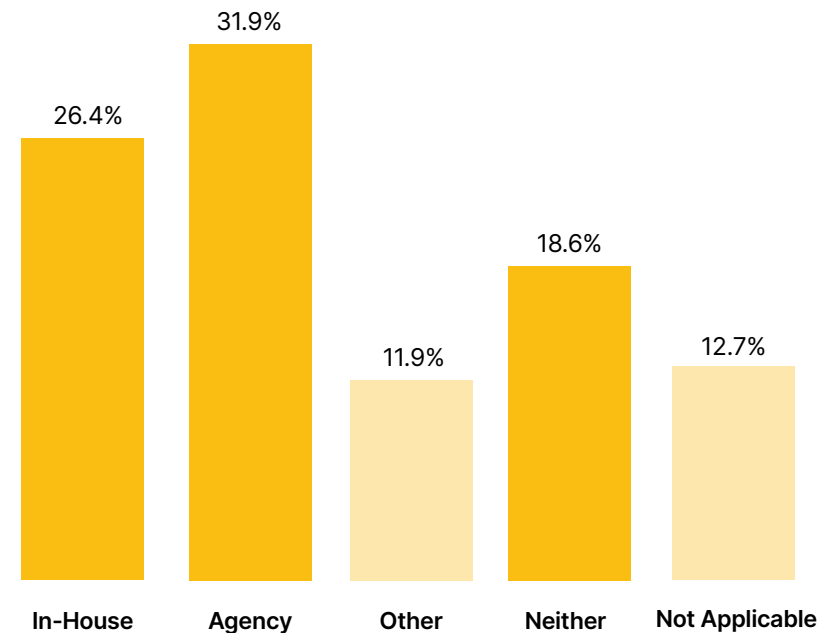
Freelancers In The SEO Industry

69.2%

The number of freelancer respondents looking for new positions this year.



Are You Looking To Move In-House Or To An Agency This Year?



Freelancers are most likely to be new to the industry; 77.9% surveyed have fewer than five years of experience.

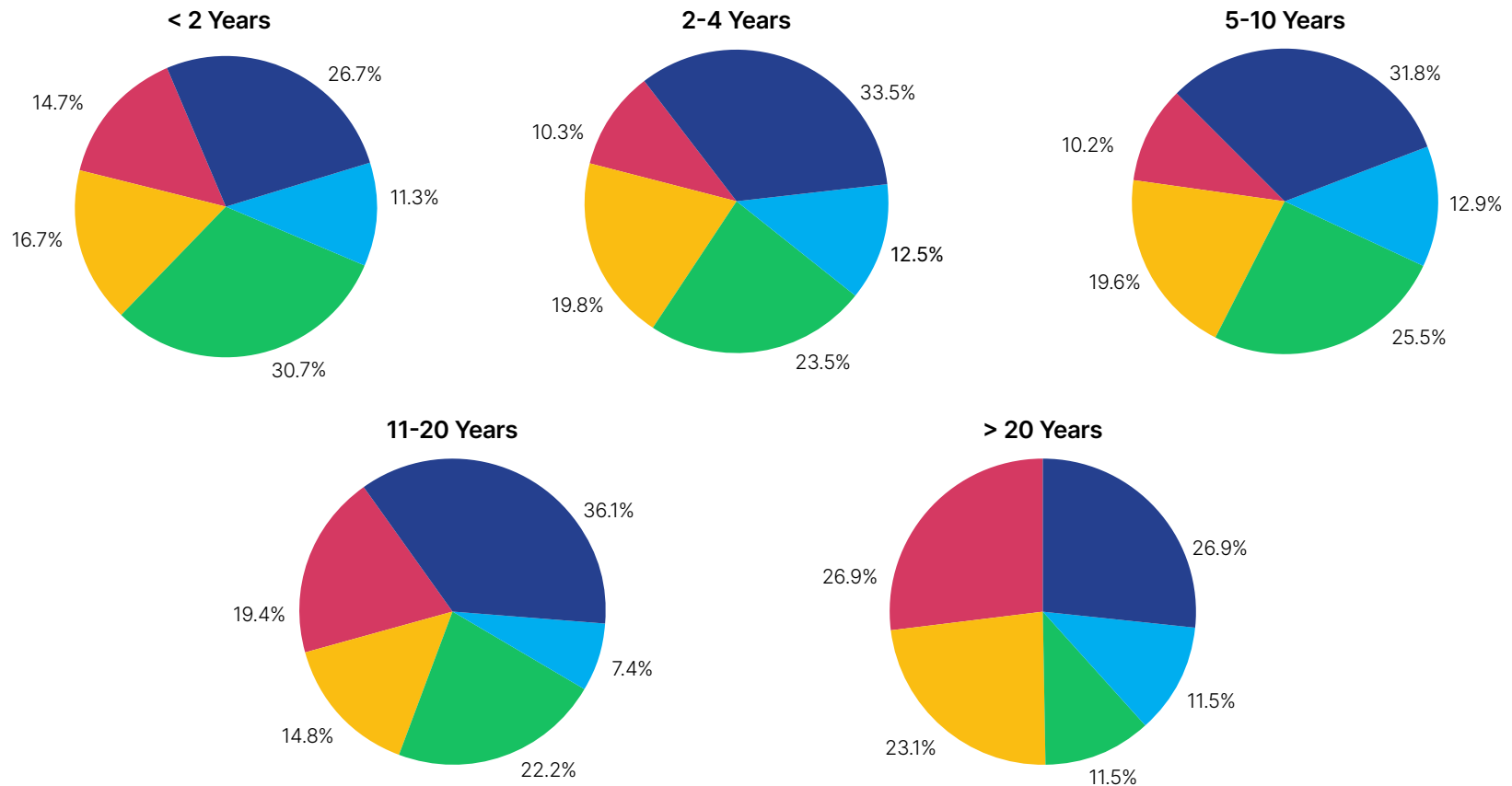
Agencies are the most sought-after position types among freelancers; 31.9% desire agency positions.

Even freelancers with many years of experience want to change gears with a new position.

65.7% of freelance respondents with 11-20 years of experience would prefer to move.

Are You Looking To Move In-House Or To An Agency This Year? By Experience

■ Agency ■ Either ■ In-House ■ Neither ■ Not Applicable



SEO Professionals Have A Positive Outlook On Budgets

More than half of SEO professionals reported working with monthly budgets ranging from \$500 to \$5,000.

\$1,001-\$5,000

The most common SEO budget range (28.6%).



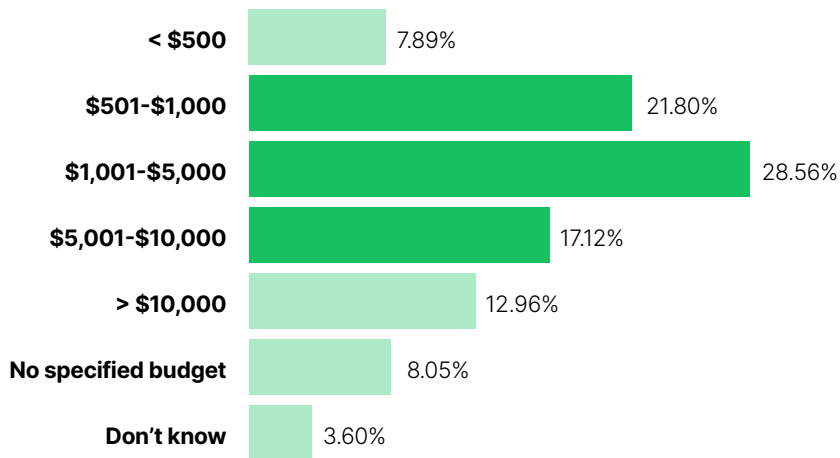
NOTE: We asked respondents to provide their budgets in USD and provided them with a link to a currency converter. However, the real-world implications of budget vary by region. Since half the survey responses are from the U.S., this data has a U.S. regional bias. See the [Limitations page](#) for more details.

12.96% of SEO practitioners reported they were working with budgets of more than \$10,000.

The spread of budgets looks similar between respondents working in B2B and B2C/ecommerce.

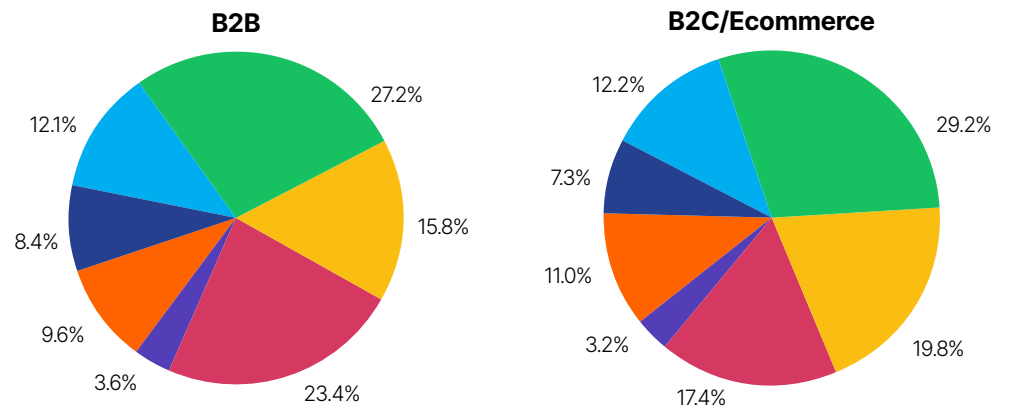
But more B2B SEO professionals work with a budget of more than \$10,000 (23.4%) than those working in B2C/ecommerce (17.4%).

Budgets



B2B and B2C SEO Budgets

Legend: < \$500 (dark blue), \$501-\$1,000 (light blue), \$1,001-\$5,000 (green), \$5,001-\$10,000 (yellow), > \$10,001 (pink), No specified budget (purple), Don't know (orange)



48.9%

of SEO professionals expect budget increases this year.



Have You Changed Your Rates Over The Last Year?

Increased



Decreased



Stayed the same



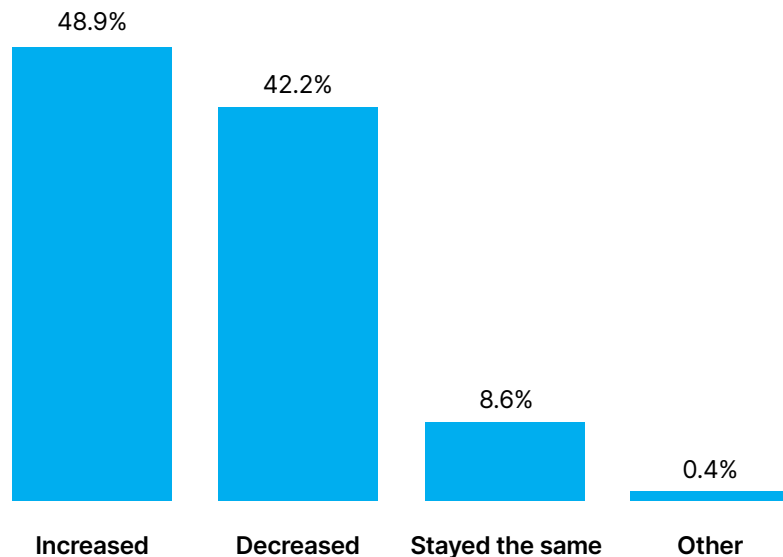
On the other hand, almost half (49.8%) of freelance and agency respondents said they increased their rates recently.

So, it seems that freelancers are experiencing more fluctuation than others.

42.2% expect budgets to stay the same.

However, we asked freelance and agency respondents whether they've changed their rates over the past year, and 31.7% have decreased their rates recently.

Do You Think Your (Or Your Clients') SEO Budget Will Increase/Decrease This Year?



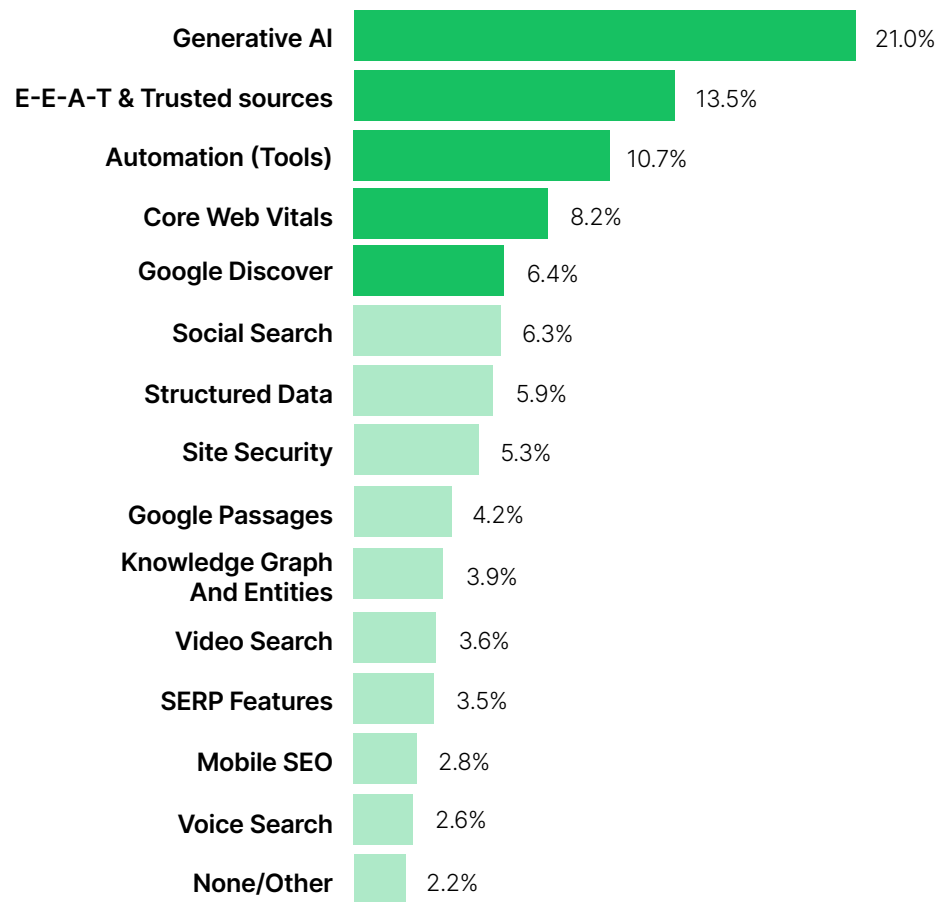
SEO Industry Disruptors & Opportunities

- **Content Strategy & Production**
- **Difficulty Proving SEO Value**
- **Generative AI & AI Software**

SEO Performance In 2024

We asked SEO professionals to tell us what they felt would cause the biggest disruption to their SEO performance in the next few years.

Most Significant Disruption In SEO Performance



21% Generative AI

The top SEO performance disruptor this year



13.5% E-E-A-T & Trusted Sources

The second SEO performance disruptor

(Note the extra E, which stands for Experience, was added in December 2022.)



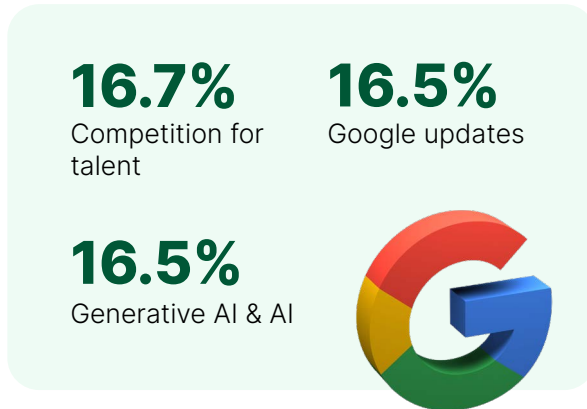
10.7% Automation With Tools

The third SEO performance disruptor



SEO professionals have a lot of new technology and updates to think about this year. Tools like ChatGPT and Google's "Generative Search Experience" are causing a lot of buzz – and concern.

When we asked respondents where they thought the biggest shifts in the overall SEO industry would come from, three concerns were effectively tied for the top slot.



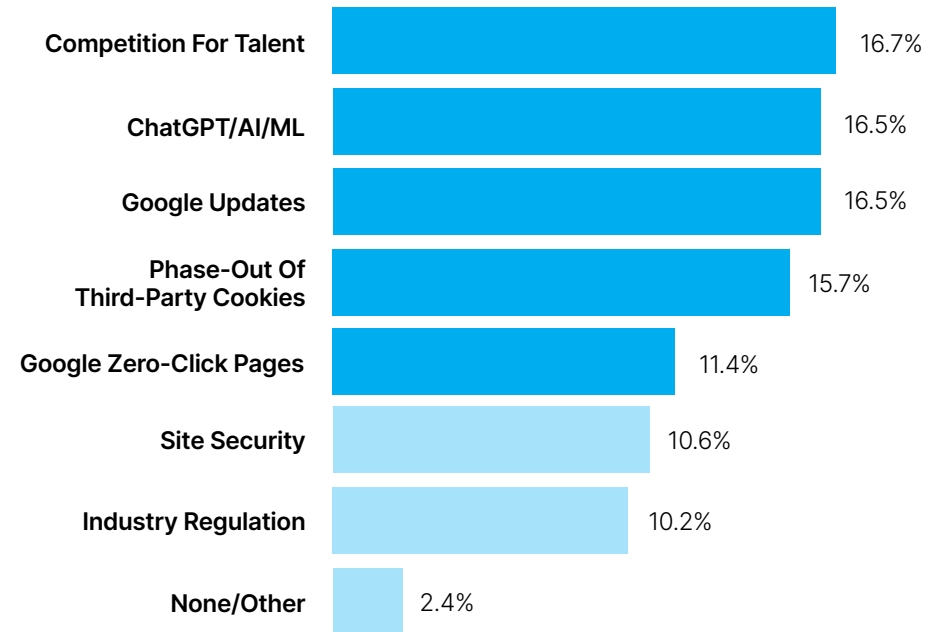
Competition for talent is technically the top concern, but only by 0.2% (about eight responses).

The next concern is the phase-out of third-party cookies (15.7%).

This makes sense when considering how many newcomers there are to the industry.

From a worker's perspective, it can be difficult to stand out from the crowd. And from a hiring perspective, that can make it difficult to find experienced candidates.

The Biggest Shifts In The SEO Industry



PRO TIP:

The key to survival in the SEO industry is a deep understanding of the fundamentals, an eye that's always fixed on the SERPs, and the ability to leverage change for growth.

Traditional SEO tactics and data will remain relevant for the foreseeable future – partly because many search intents cannot be better served by generative AI, and partly because SEO fundamentals remain foundational to how Google consumes the web.



Tom Capper
Senior Search Scientist




SEO professionals with less than two years of experience chose generative AI/AI most often as causing the biggest industry shifts.

They are also notably less concerned about the phase-out of third-party cookies than everyone else.

Respondents with two to four years of experience chose three options above generative AI/AI:

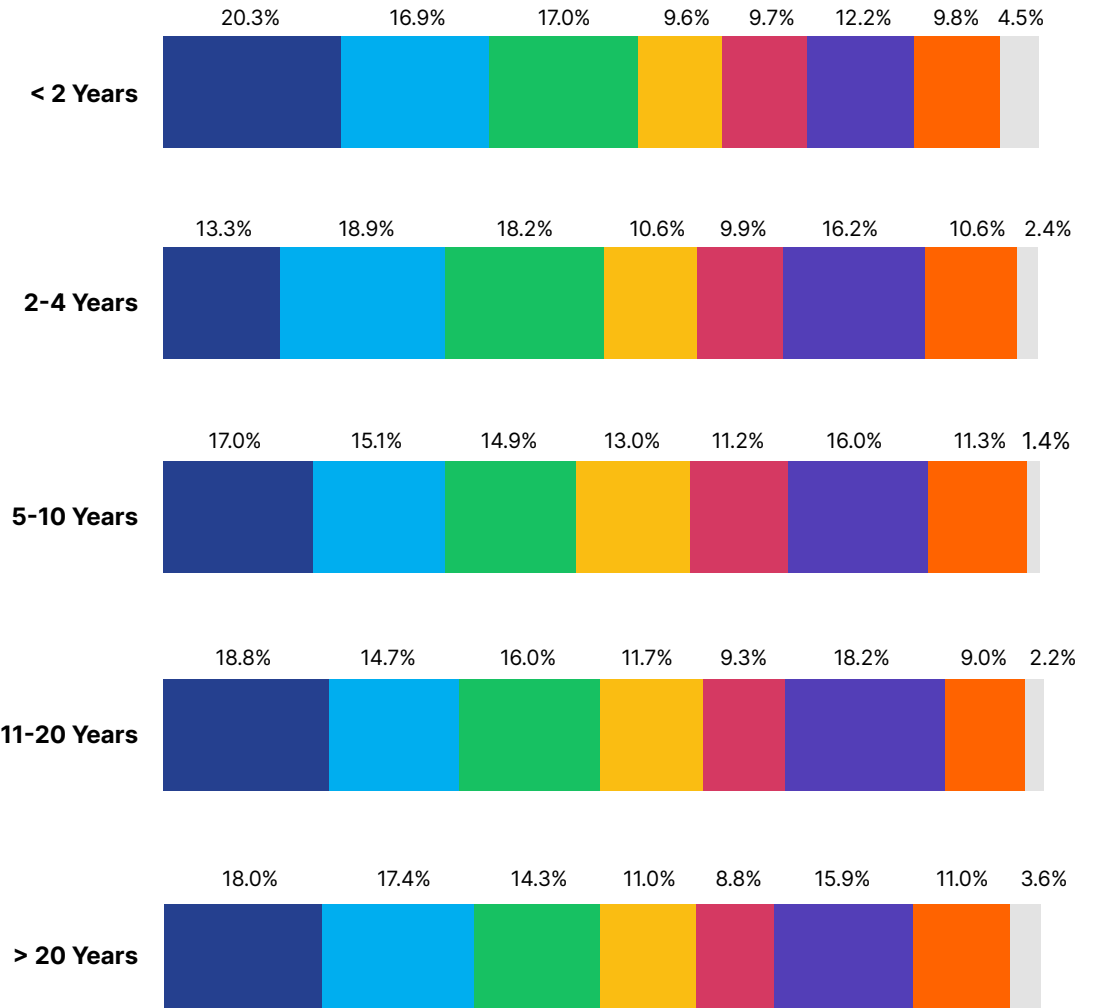
- ✔ Competition for talent.
- ✔ Google updates.
- ✔ Phase-out of third-party cookies.



This group is most concerned about competition for talent, earning it the first overall spot.

Since respondents of this experience level are unlikely to be in management/hiring positions, their concern likely has more to do with people competing directly with them for roles than it does finding talent.

SEO Industry Shifts By Experience



SEO Disruptor #1: Content Strategy & Production

Content Is The Most Difficult Part Of SEO

Content is on the minds of most SEO professionals this year. In December 2022, Google added “experience” to its measure of “expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness” (E-E-A-T).

In addition, generative AI exploded in popularity in recent months.

Content is getting more ubiquitous and Google’s standards are getting higher. It’s getting harder to:

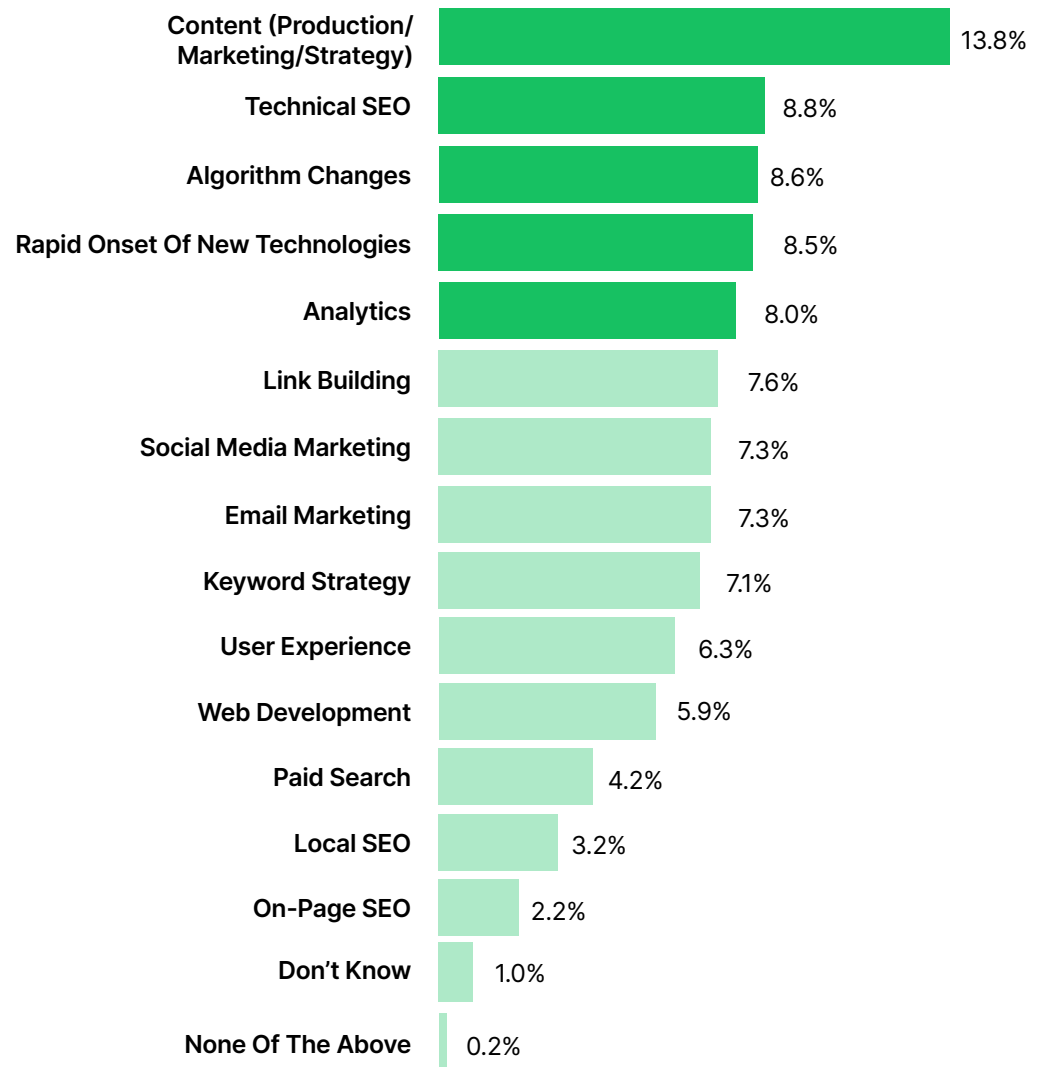
- ✓ Control what information users see on SERPs.
- ✓ Acquire organic traffic.

Google is experimenting with more SERP features that result in “zero-click” searches, most recently using generative AI to provide content directly in the SERP with Google Labs.

It’s no surprise that the most difficult aspect of SEO, according to respondents, is content production and strategy (13.8%).

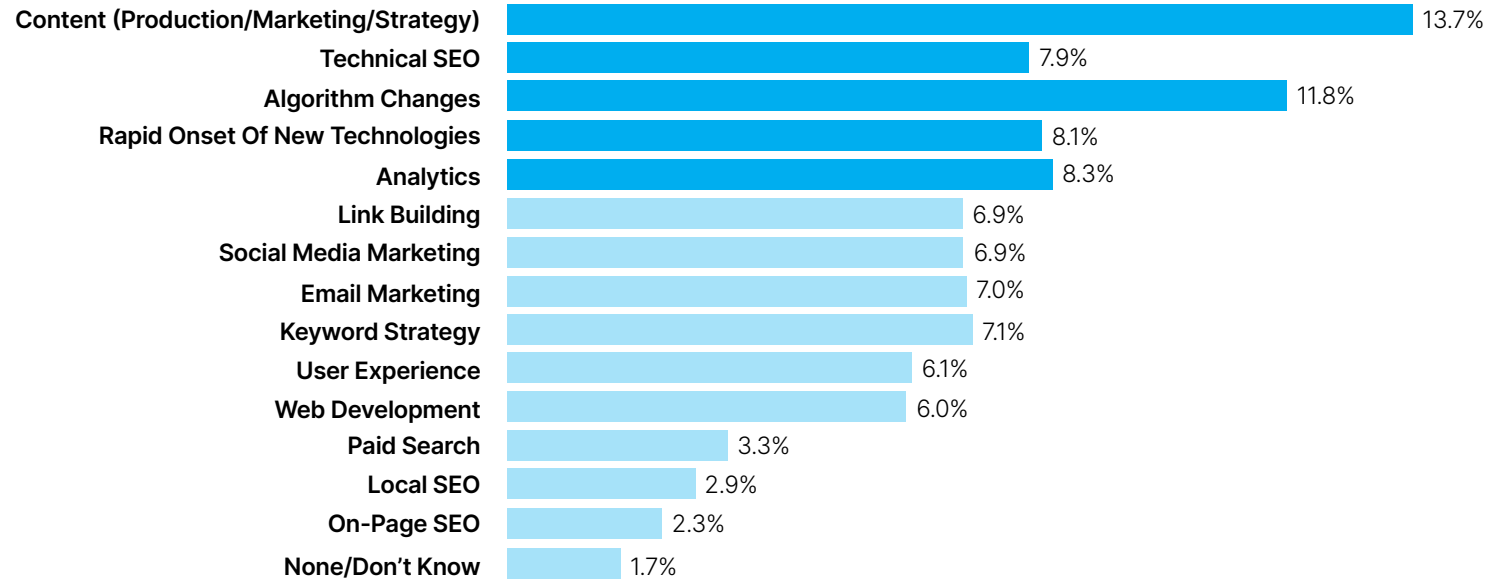
Content was the top difficulty across all experience ranges.

What Are The 3 Most Difficult Tasks Of SEO?



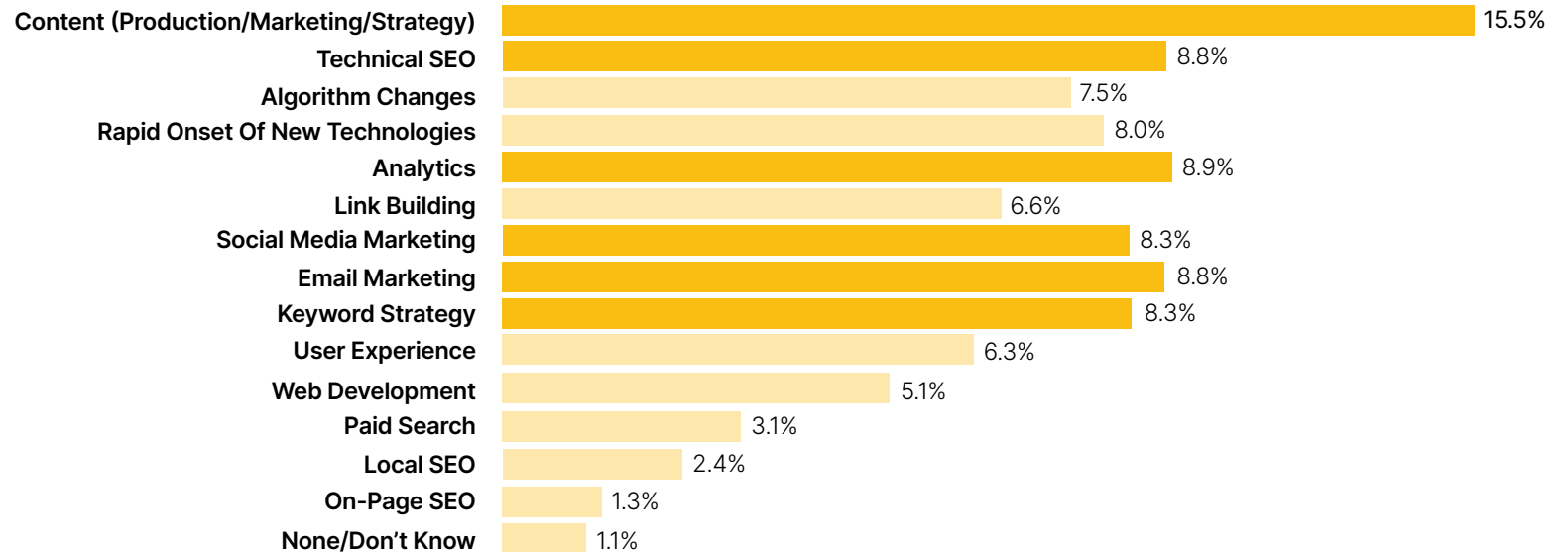
Most Difficult Aspects Of SEO

< 2 Years Of Experience



Those with less than two years of experience were much more likely to worry about algorithm changes than other respondents.

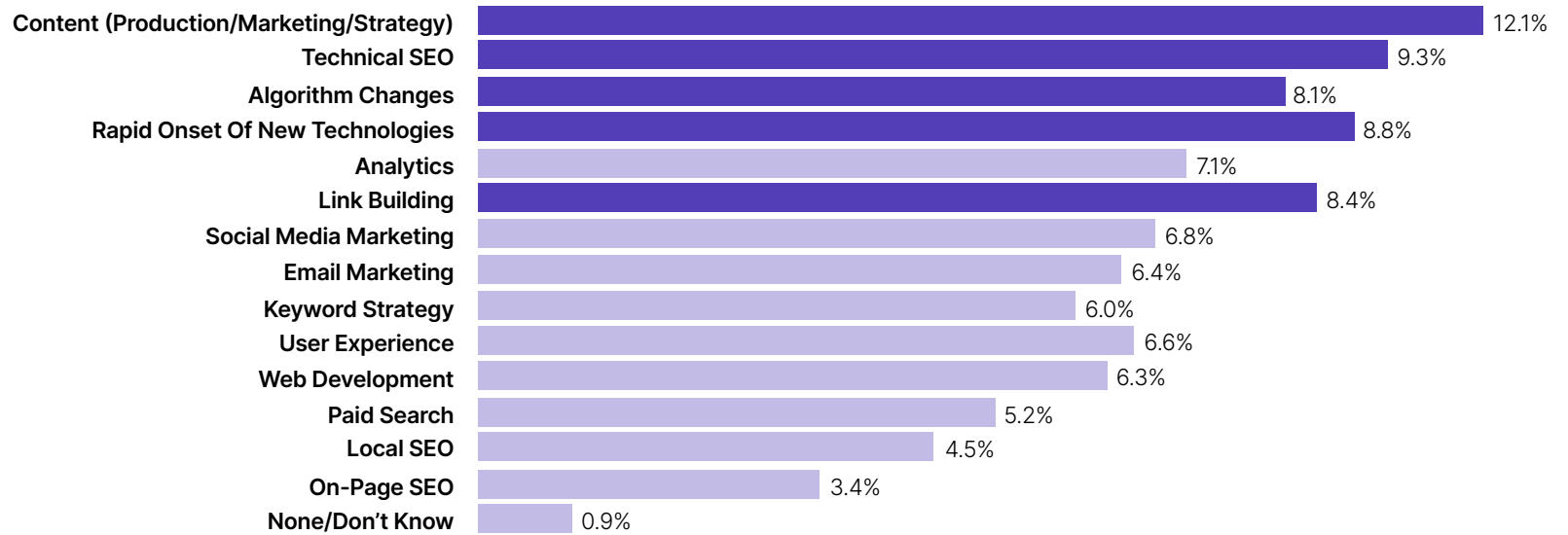
2-4 Years Of Experience



Evolving SEO professionals with two to four years of experience are also concerned about analytics, technical SEO, and email marketing, but content is their primary concern.

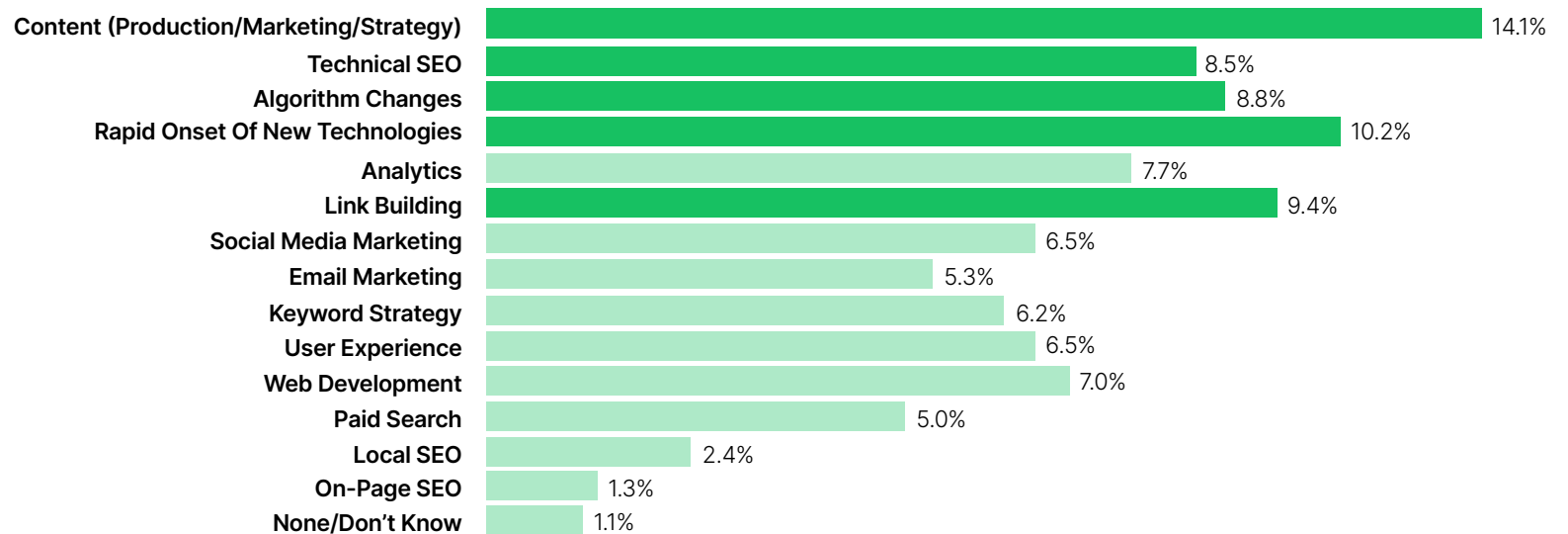
Most Difficult Aspects Of SEO

5-10 Years Of Experience



SEO professionals with five to ten years of experience are most concerned with technical SEO, new technologies, and link building, after content.

11-20 Years of Experience

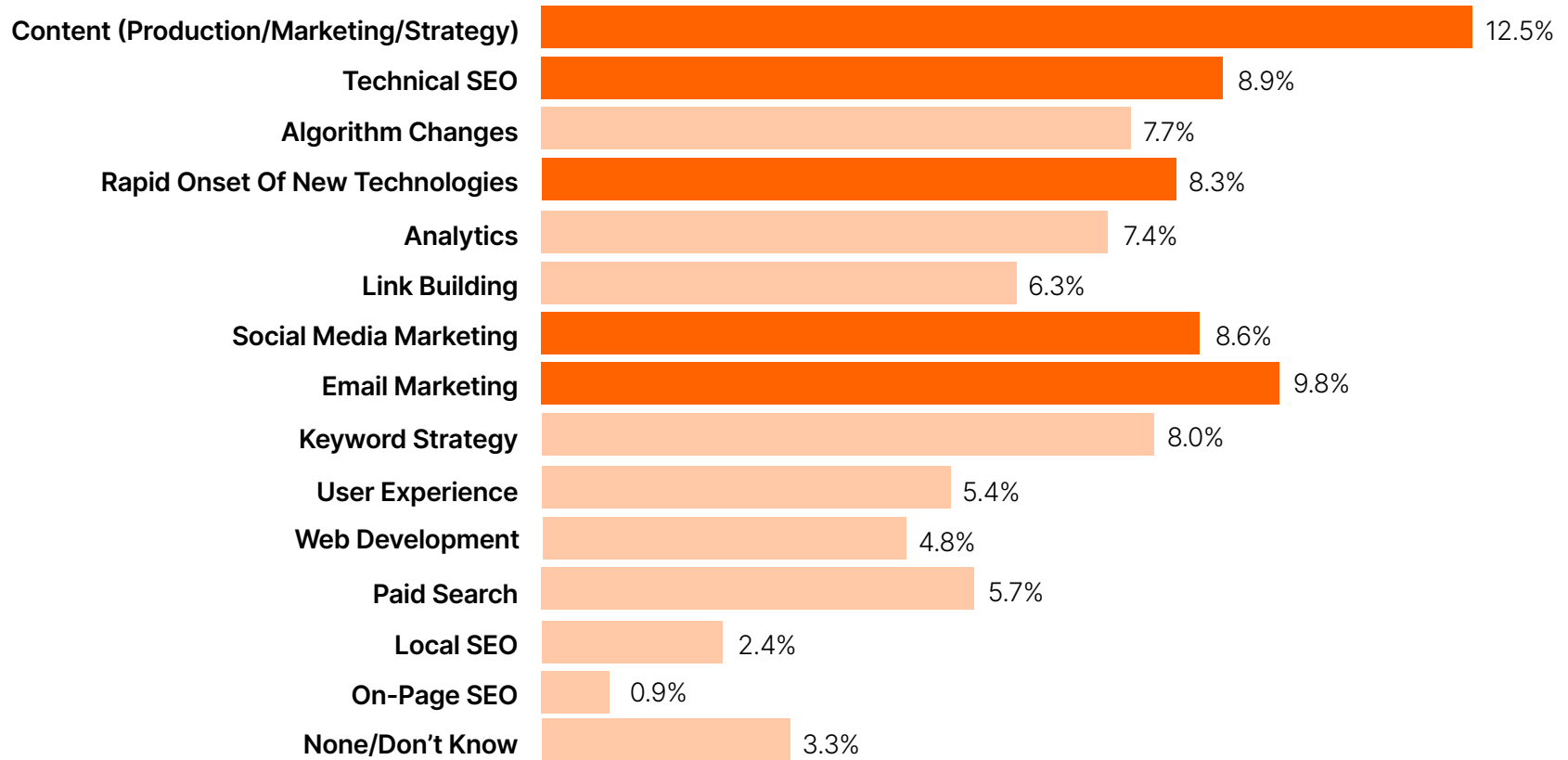


Those with 11-20 years of experience are most concerned about new technologies, link building, and algorithm changes, after content.

Long-time SEO pros with more than 20 years of experience named email marketing as their second biggest challenge, after content.

Most Difficult Aspects Of SEO

> 20 Years Of Experience



Content Will Be A Major Focus In 2023 & 2024

Respondents of all experience levels also plan to focus primarily on content strategy and production in the next 12 months.

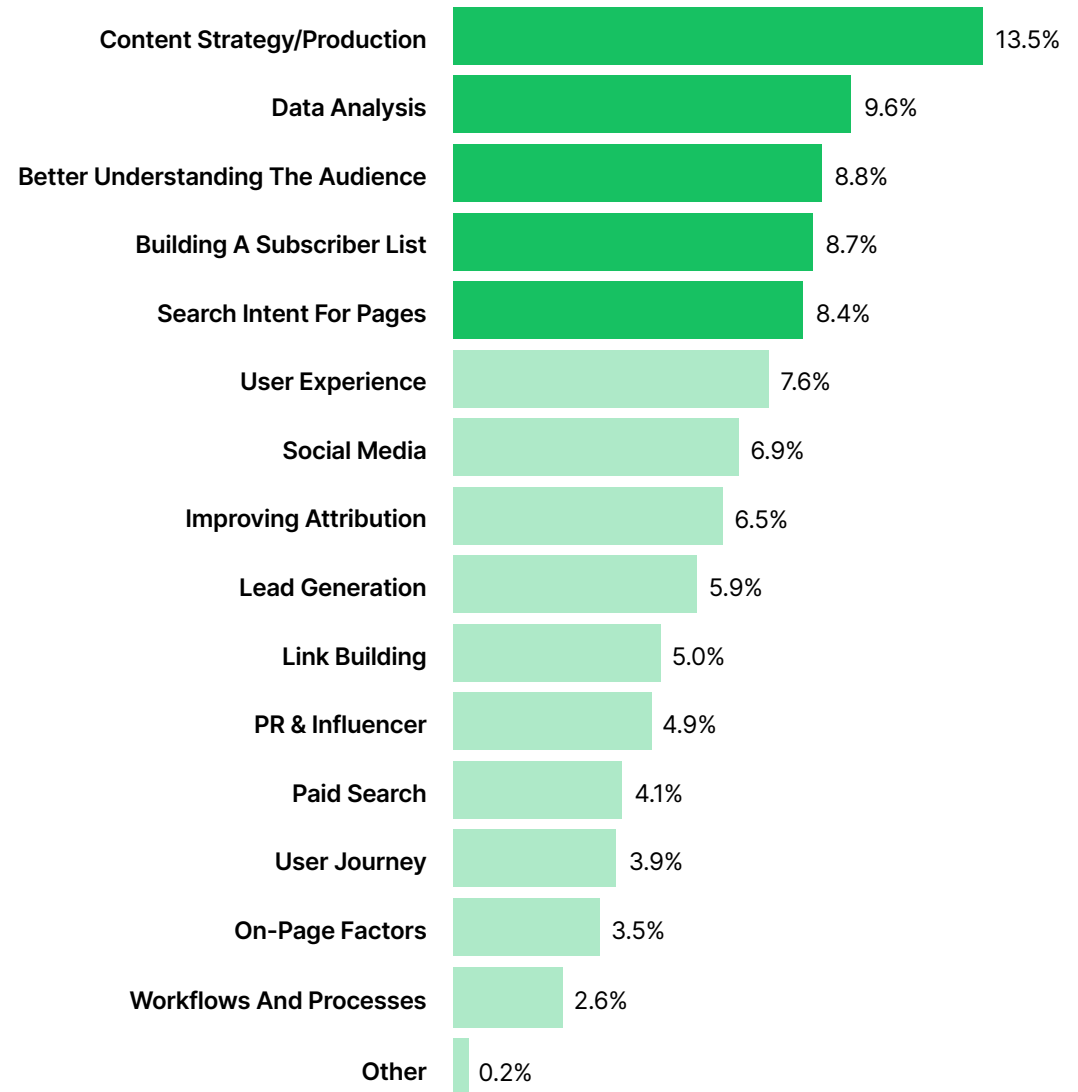
Content is both highly difficult and high-priority for SEO professionals. These responses make sense in the face of recent challenges:

- “Experience” rolling out in E-E-A-T.
- Potential content disruptions due to generative AI tools.
- Traffic reduction due to ever-expanding SERP features.

Content might be the main focus, but SEO professionals are also looking for ways to understand what audiences need and how content matches those needs.

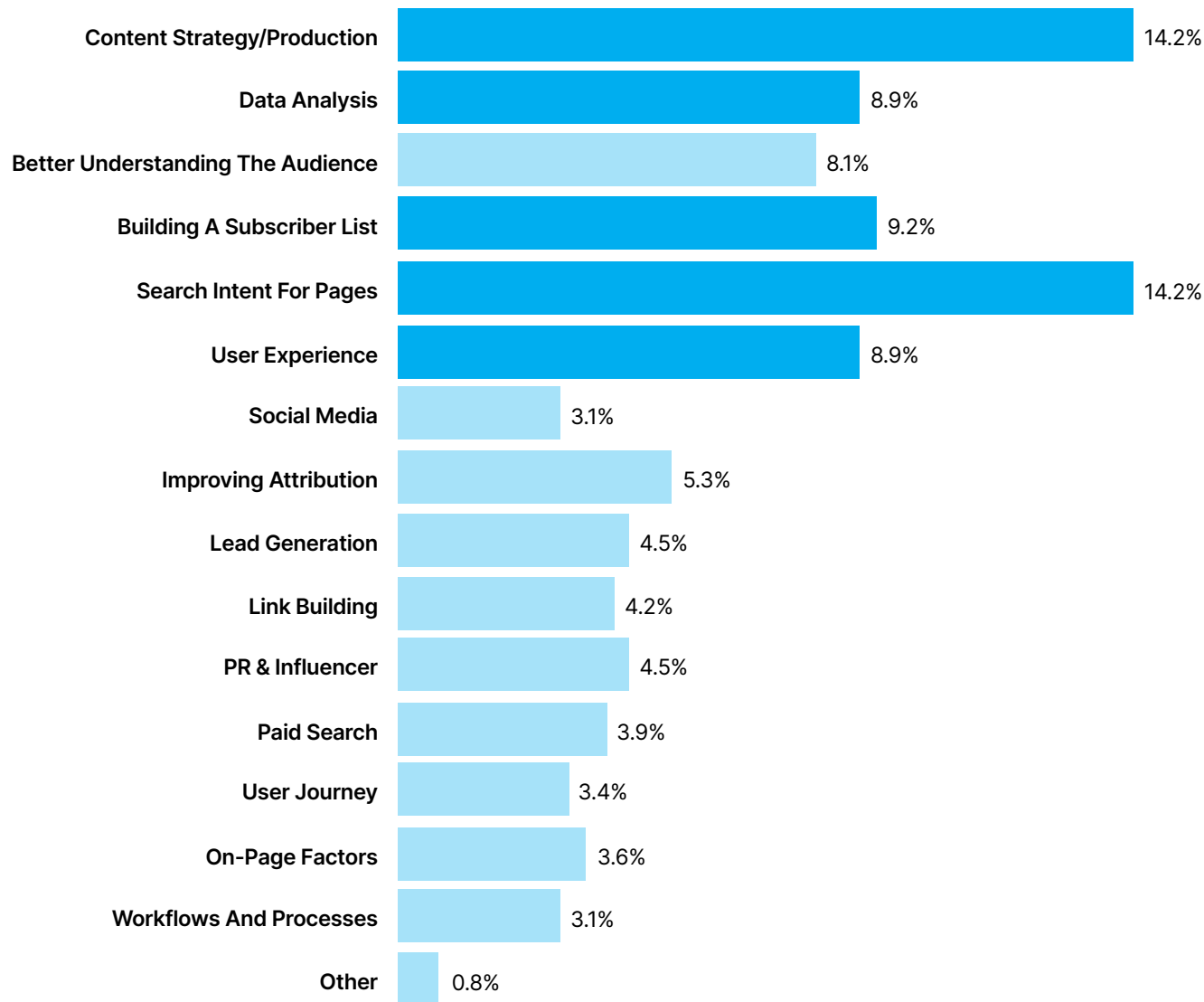
Analyzing data, understanding the audience, building subscriber lists, and search intent – taken together – indicate that SEO professionals are trying to build strong core audiences.

Which Areas Do You Intend To Focus On Most In The Next 12 Months? (Select Up To 3.)



What Do You Intend To Focus On Most In The Next 12 Months? (Select Up To 3.)

> 20 Years Of Experience



The most experienced SEO professionals, those with more than 20 years under their belts, will focus on search intent just as much as content.

This is an interesting outlier because they are the only group to weigh search intent this strongly.

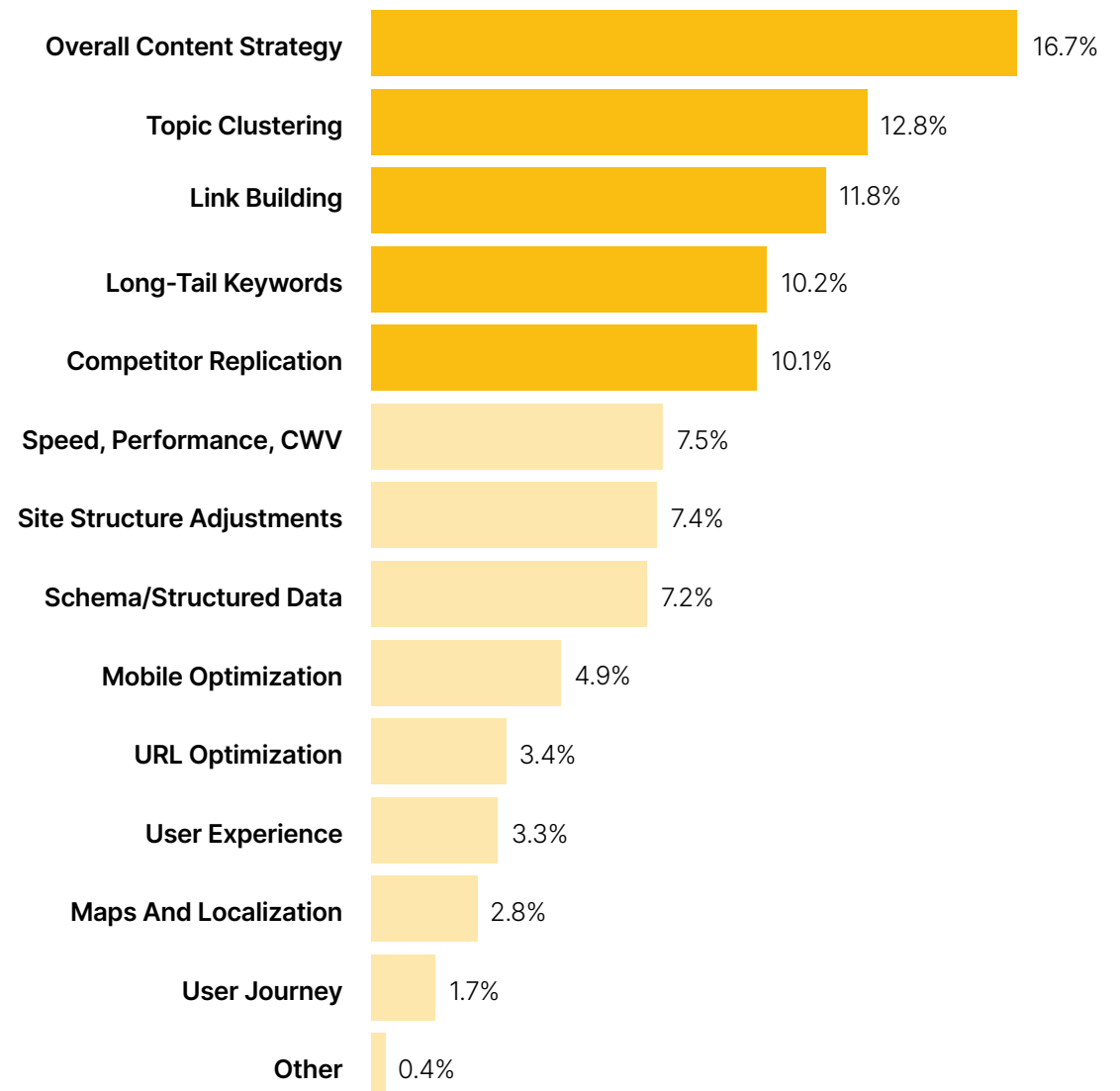
They are also the only group for whom content shares its first-place spot with another answer (search intent).

Opportunities In Content Strategy & Production

Since SEO professionals rate content as the highest-difficulty task, it's no surprise that they also rate content (16.7%) and topic clustering (12.8%) as the most effective strategies.

This is a “top three” question, but it's important to note that none of these SEO strategies exist in a vacuum. We can talk about which moves the needle most, but many of them rely on or complement one another.

What Is The Most Effective SEO Strategy You've Used Recently?



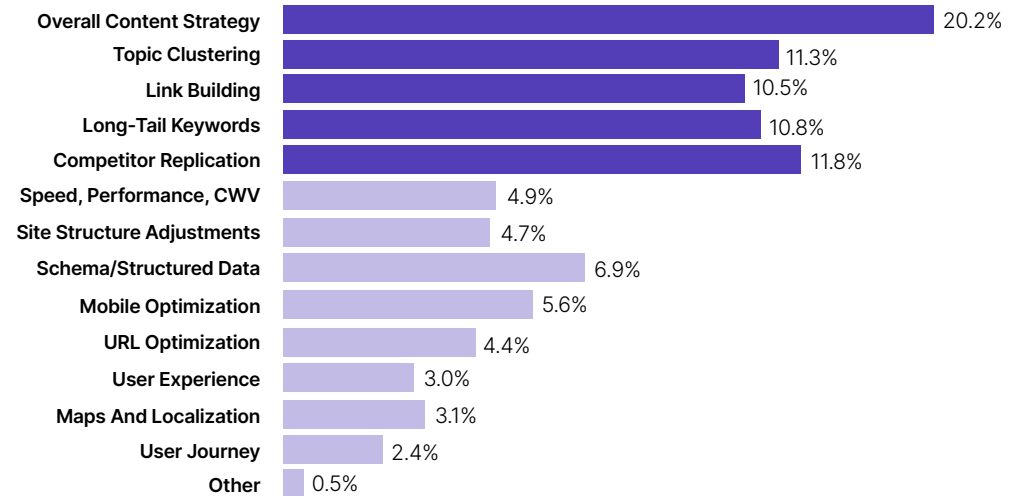
There are notable differences in strategies between experienced and new SEO practitioners.

SEO professionals with less than two years of experience rate these as their most effective strategies:

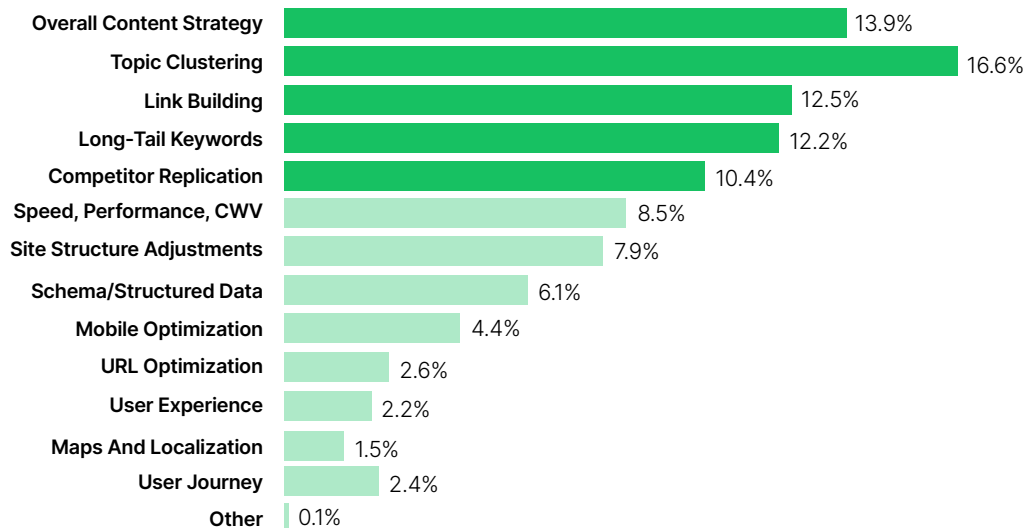
- Content strategy - 20.2%
- Competitor replication - 11.8%
- Topic clustering - 11.3%

More experienced respondents still found competitor replication useful, but not in their top three.

Most Effective SEO Strategy By Experience < 2 Years



Most Effective SEO Strategy By Experience 2-4 Years



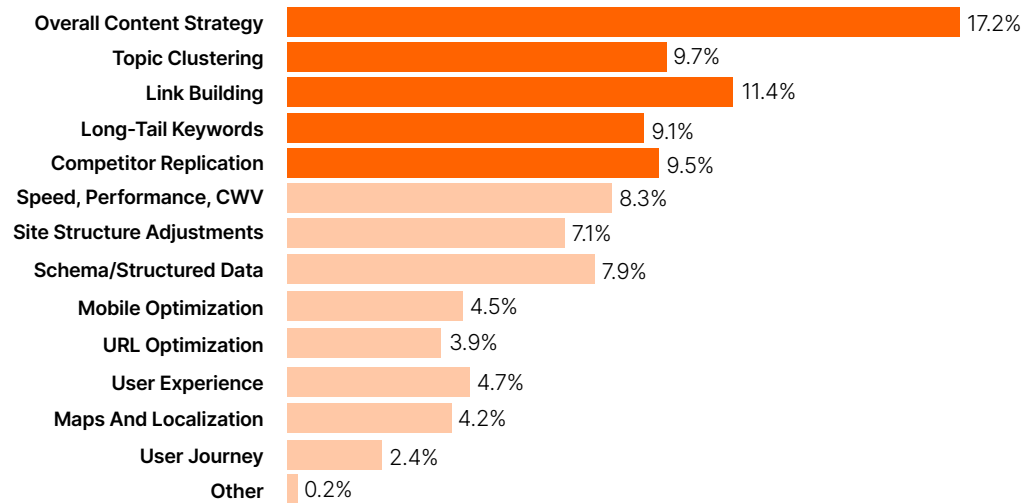
SEO professionals with two to four years of experience chose topic clustering more than any other group, perhaps speaking to experimentation or learning occurring during this phase in their careers.

They favor:

- Topic clustering - 16.6%
- Content strategy - 13.9%
- Link building - 12.5%

Most Effective SEO Strategy By Experience

5-10 Years



Content strategy comes back into focus for SEO professionals with five to ten years of experience.

They favor:

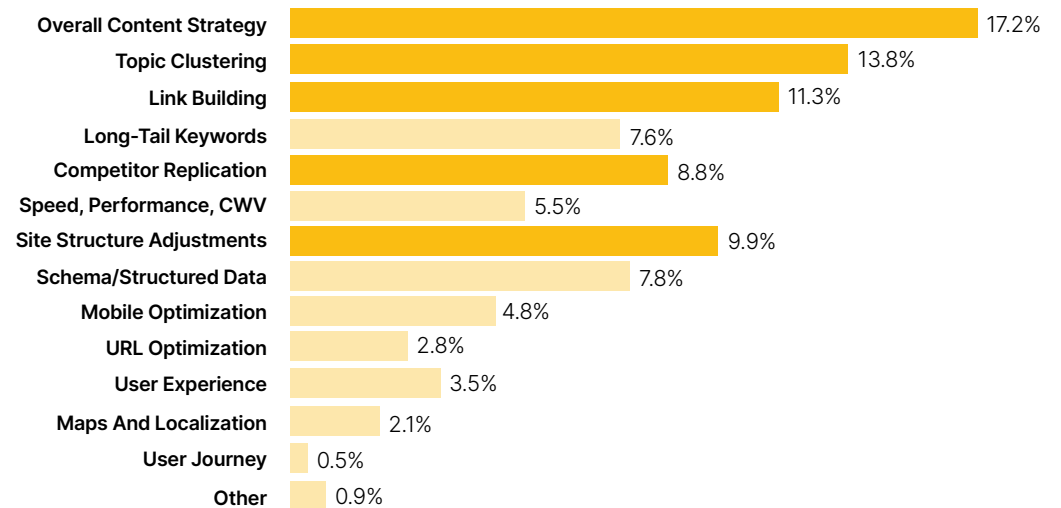
- Content strategy - 17.2%
- Link building - 11.4%
- Topic clustering - 9.7%

Not much changes with professionals who have 11-20 years of experience. Their top answers are similar to the five-to-ten-year group.

- Content strategy - 20.7%
- Topic clustering - 13.8%
- Link building - 11.3%

Most Effective SEO Strategy By Experience

11-20 Years



Those with more than 20 years of experience prioritize link building (15.3%), followed by topic clustering (10.2%) and site structure adjustments (10.2%).

This is a strong shift in priorities from all other respondents.

They also rate mobile optimization just as highly as content strategy (9.5%).

Out of all respondents, they are the least interested in long-tail keywords, competitors, and content strategy.

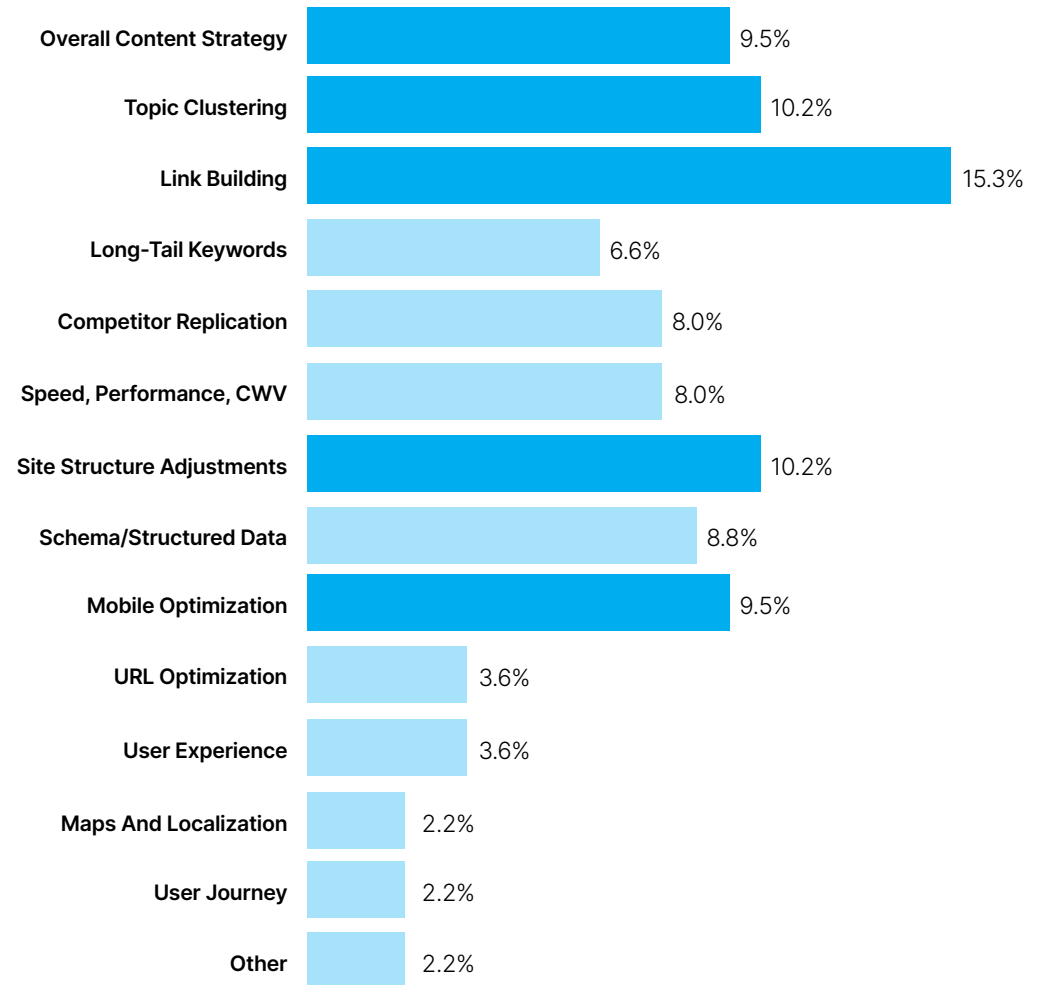
They are the most interested in link building, mobile optimization, schema, and site structure.

Google has high expectations that publishers and SEO professionals find it more difficult to compete in SERPs.

Many experienced respondents seem focused on rising to meet Google's high standards by better planning and categorizing content.

It's easy to get swept up in hype or fear during times of uncertainty. But it's good to remember the general trajectory of Google's updates and priorities, as well as practice good SEO fundamentals.

Most Effective SEO Strategy By Experience > 20 Years



Note: Those with > 20 years of experience are the smallest group at only 3.53% of respondents, making the data less reliable. However, we found the discrepancies interesting enough to include them as a separate group. See the [Limitations page](#) for details.

Support Content With Deep Understanding & Complementary Strategies

Let's repeat some information from earlier. When asked what they plan to focus on in the next 12 months, respondents answered:

- Content strategy - 13.5%
- Data analysis - 9.6%
- Better understanding the audience - 8.8%
- Building a subscriber list - 8.7%
- Search intent for pages - 8.4%

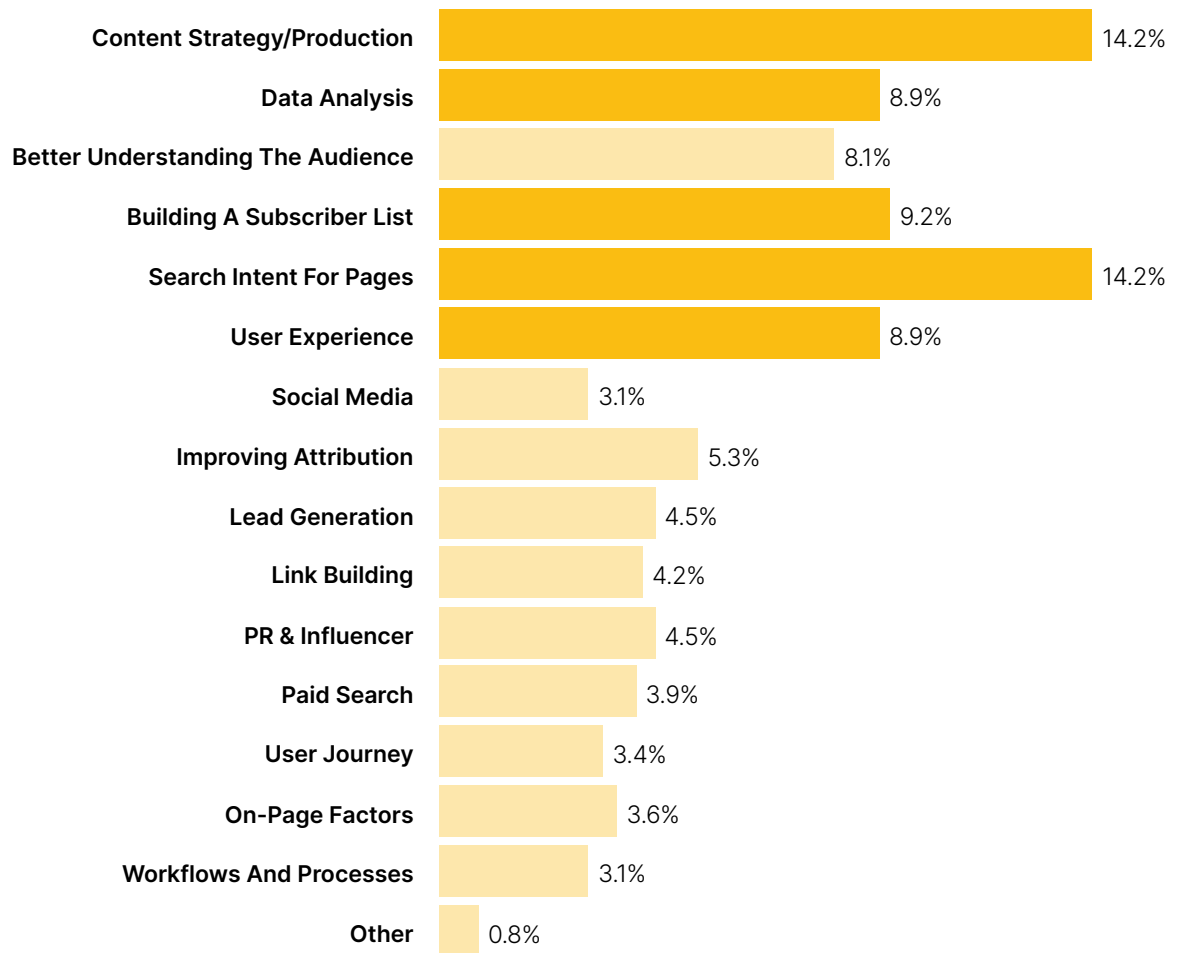
The most experienced (20+ years) respondents answered:

- Content strategy - 14.2%
- Search intent for pages - 14.2%
- Building a subscriber list - 9.2%
- Data analysis - 8.9%
- User experience - 8.9%

They are also more likely to weigh link building and topic clustering as their most effective strategies ([Pg. 29](#)).

What Do You Intend To Focus On Most In The Next 12 Months? (Select Up To 3.)

> 20 Years Of Experience



Overall, the top four most effective SEO strategies all relate, at least tangentially, to content strategy.

Content strategy might be the top answer, but topic clustering, link building, and keywords all relate to it.

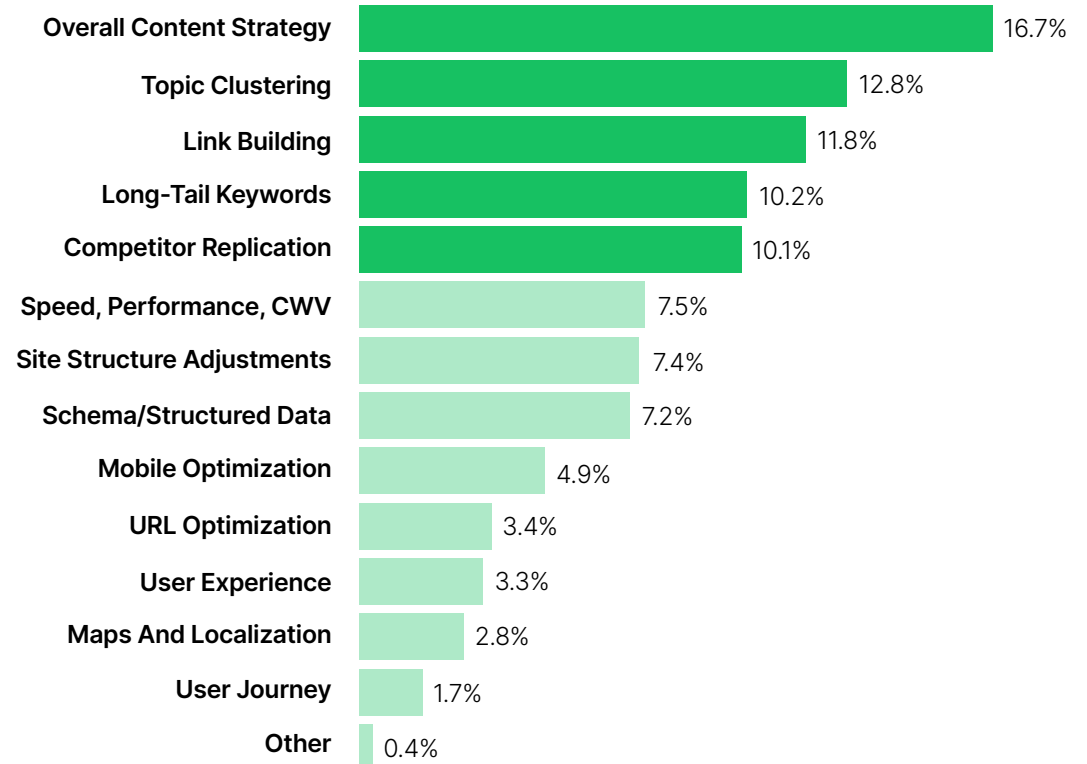
From start to finish, successful SEO professionals seem to be moving to an audience-focused understanding of content.

They're looking beyond keywords and for ways to match content to the right type of user by:

- Understanding audience intent and experiences.
- Maintaining contact with ideal users (subscriber lists).

Then they support their efforts with tried-and-true SEO activities like link building, site organization, and data analysis.

What Is The Most Effective SEO Strategy You've Used Recently?



PRO TIP:

Many buyer journeys start and stop within a search engine.

To support this top-to-bottom funnel, SEO professionals should understand the motivating factor (informational, commercial, transactional) behind any given query – what are searchers intending to find with each keyword?

This is why customer research – conducting interviews, listening to sales calls, etc. – and search analytics are so essential. Once you understand your audience, you can track the right keywords and deliver the right content at the right time.



Tom Capper
Senior Search Scientist



SEO Disruptor #2: Difficulty Proving SEO Value

Budget Cuts, SERP Competition, And Client Relationship Issues

Top Barriers To SEO Success 2022

- ✓ Lack of resources.
- ✓ Strategy issues.
- ✓ Scaling processes.

Top Barriers To SEO Success 2023

- ✓ Budget cuts and approvals - **12.2%**
- ✓ SERP competition - **11.1%**
- ✓ Client relationship issues - **10.8%**

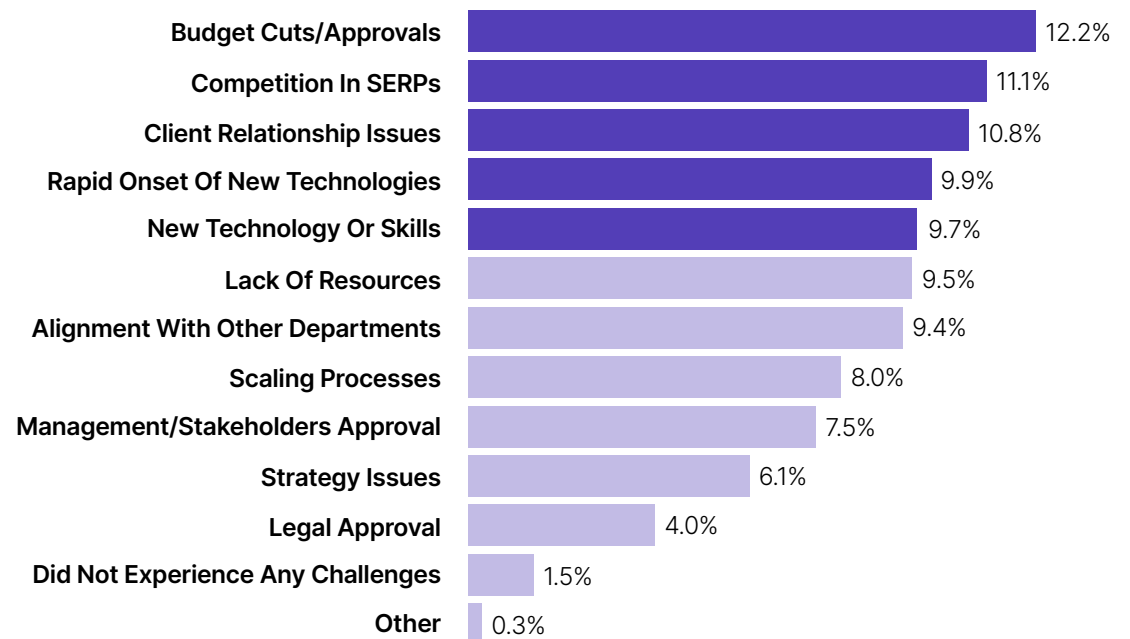


In 2022, we also noted that respondents seemed to be struggling with effectively tracking and reporting the results of their work.

It would be reading between the numbers a little too much to say that there's a causal relationship between our conclusions last year and this year's results.

However, struggling to communicate the importance and value of SEO work could contribute to issues getting approvals and keeping clients happy, especially in the face of rising costs (increased budgets). SERP competition could be a factor in both cost increases and performance issues.

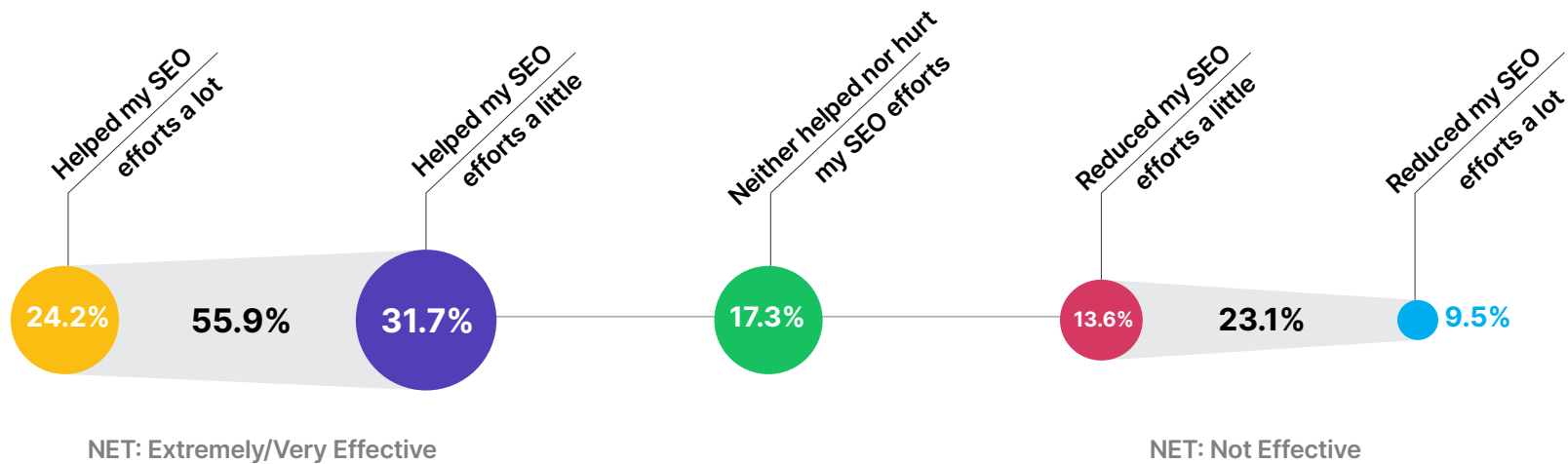
In The Last 12 Months, What Were Your Biggest Barriers To SEO Success? (Select Up To 3.)



Google algorithm updates were mostly positive for SEO professionals amid fierce competition.

When asked, **55.9%** of SEO practitioners told us that the many algorithm updates over the last year have helped their SEO efforts.

How Have Core, Or Otherwise Significant Changes In The Google Algorithm, Impacted Your SEO Efforts Over The Past Year?



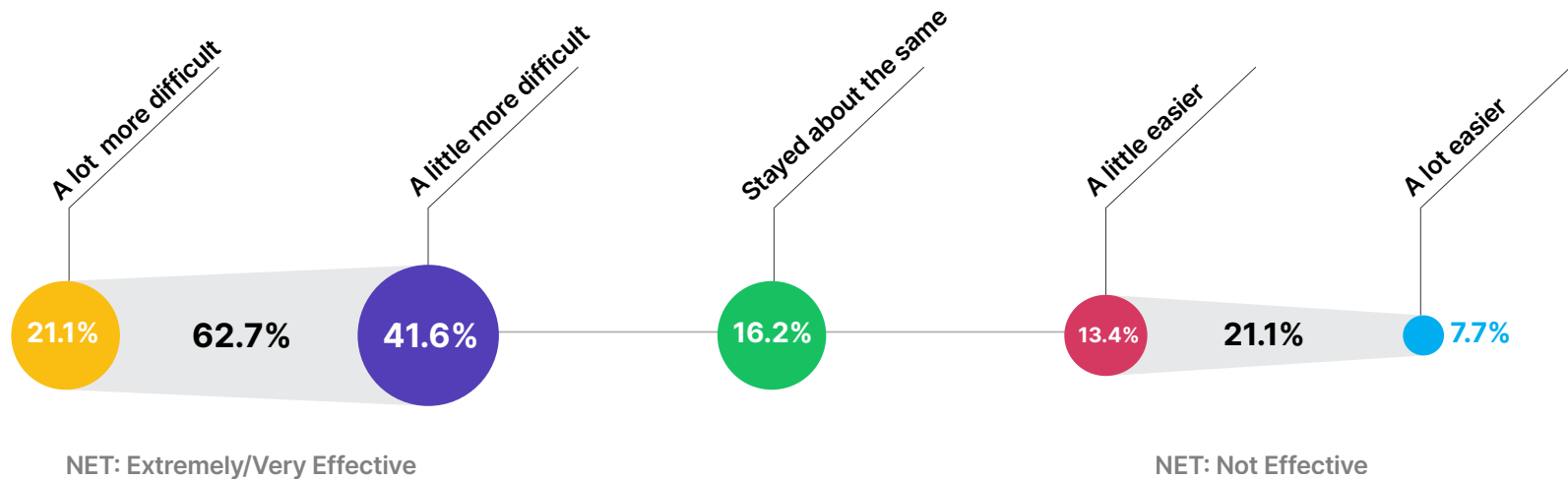
62.7% of SEO professionals say that competition in SERPs has become more difficult.

Despite positive experiences with Google updates, SEO professionals report that the SERPs are getting far more difficult to break into.

A positive algorithm update doesn't negate issues like:

- ✓ Zero-click searches.
- ✓ Size / momentum keeping big names at the top of results.
- ✓ SERPs becoming more populated with competition.
- ✓ New sponsored results taking up real estate as keywords become more popular for targeting.

Has Competition In Your Industry SERPs Gotten:



PRO TIP:

[Research the SERP features](#) in your unique keyword space – which align with your business? Which are easier to influence? Then optimize, monitor, iterate, and ensure you have a SERP tracking strategy that surfaces new opportunities as they appear.

In Google's ongoing quest to keep searchers on the SERP, its additions of geo-location and SERP features mean a single keyword can return a multitude of highly-targeted, increasingly rich SERPs, giving SEO professionals more chances to rank.



Tom Capper
Senior Search Scientist



SEO Misconceptions

Client communications were the third most popular barrier to success with 10.8% naming it as a significant barrier to success.

Much of client communications involve managing expectations and demonstrating what is and is not possible. To that end, we asked about the misconceptions SEO professionals encounter most often.

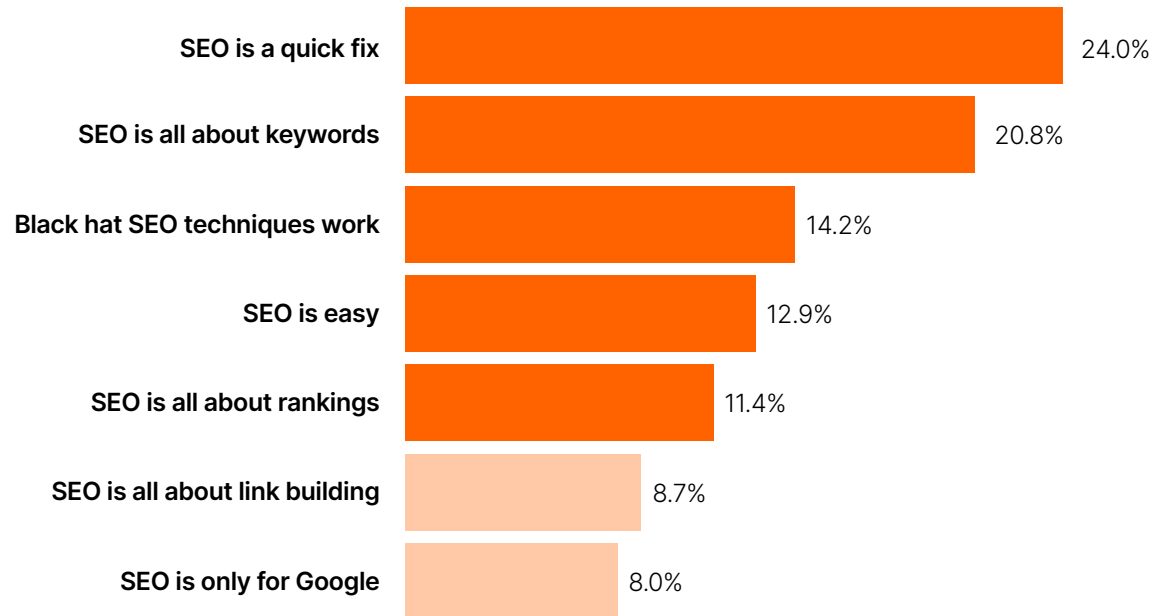
“SEO Is A Quick Fix”

The most common misconception about SEO that respondents come across (24%).

24% selected “SEO is a quick fix” and 20.8% reported that they hear “SEO is all about keywords” most often.

SEO misconceptions often happen when agency professionals are dealing with clients, but they can also be common internally in an organization.

Which Misconception About SEO Do You Come Across The Most In Your Line Of Work?



PRO TIP:

Make it simple for stakeholders by limiting pitches to two to four high-impact initiatives and invest more time in explaining the rationale.

We all know it's common practice to estimate the positive ROI of action.

However, what's less common, and much more persuasive, is to spell out the risk of inaction.

Comparisons with competitors also go far – falling behind is an easy story to tell.

While the arcane technical details – SEO beyond “keywords” – may sound weightier, they're difficult to contextualize. So, stay away from those technical talks.



Tom Capper
Senior Search Scientist



Opportunities In Proving SEO Value

Away From Organic

Over 55%

of respondents estimated that less than half of their site traffic comes from organic search.



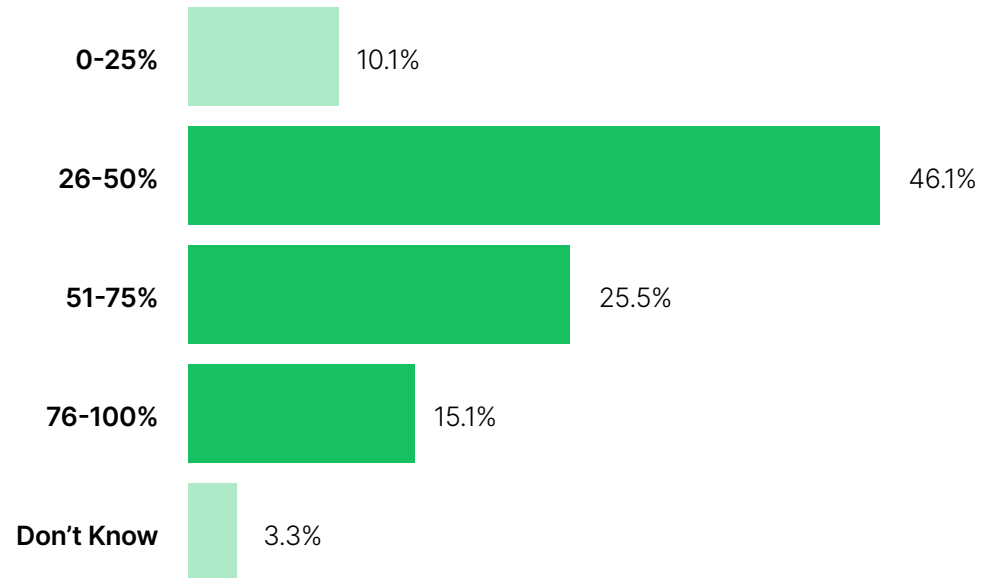
Organic traffic may become even more difficult to acquire in the near future with the expansion of AI-powered zero-click searches.

Organic strategies require tracking many different metrics, but SEO professionals seem focused on understanding how users interact with SERPs and their journey with a brand.

On the other hand, most respondents said that Google algorithm changes have had a positive impact on their efforts ([Pg. 34](#)). This could be driving the focus on content and content strategy.

SEO professionals seem confident that search engines will continue to reward content that meets users' needs.

What Percentage Of Your Website's Traffic Would You Estimate Comes From Organic Search?



Performance Metrics 2023

1 **9.2%**
Click-through rate

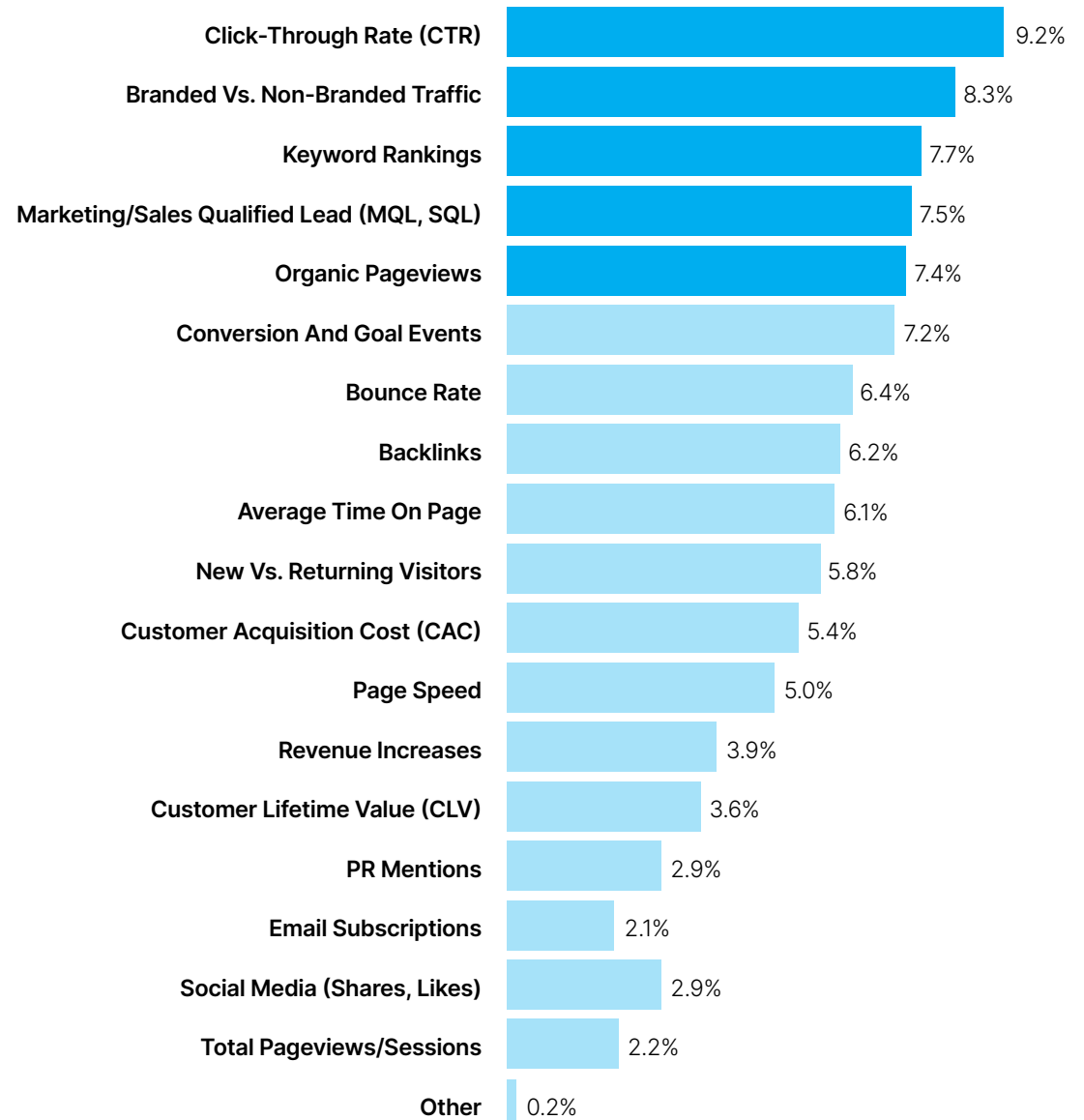
2 **8.3%**
Branded vs.
non-branded traffic

3 **7.7%**
Keyword rankings



Looking at the top performance metrics respondents chose, it looks like SEO professionals are focused on understanding user journeys from the SERPs through to on-page conversions.

Which Metrics Did You Use Most To Measure SEO Performance In The Last 12 Months? (Select Up To 3)



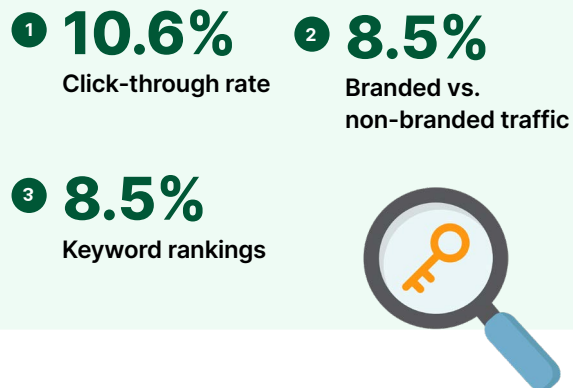
Tracking & Communicating Results

The top metrics respondents use vary depending on their income.

This could be due to differences in responsibilities and the outcomes they are responsible for. SEO professionals with salaries at the top of the range are more likely to be accountable for KPIs connected to revenue and business goals.

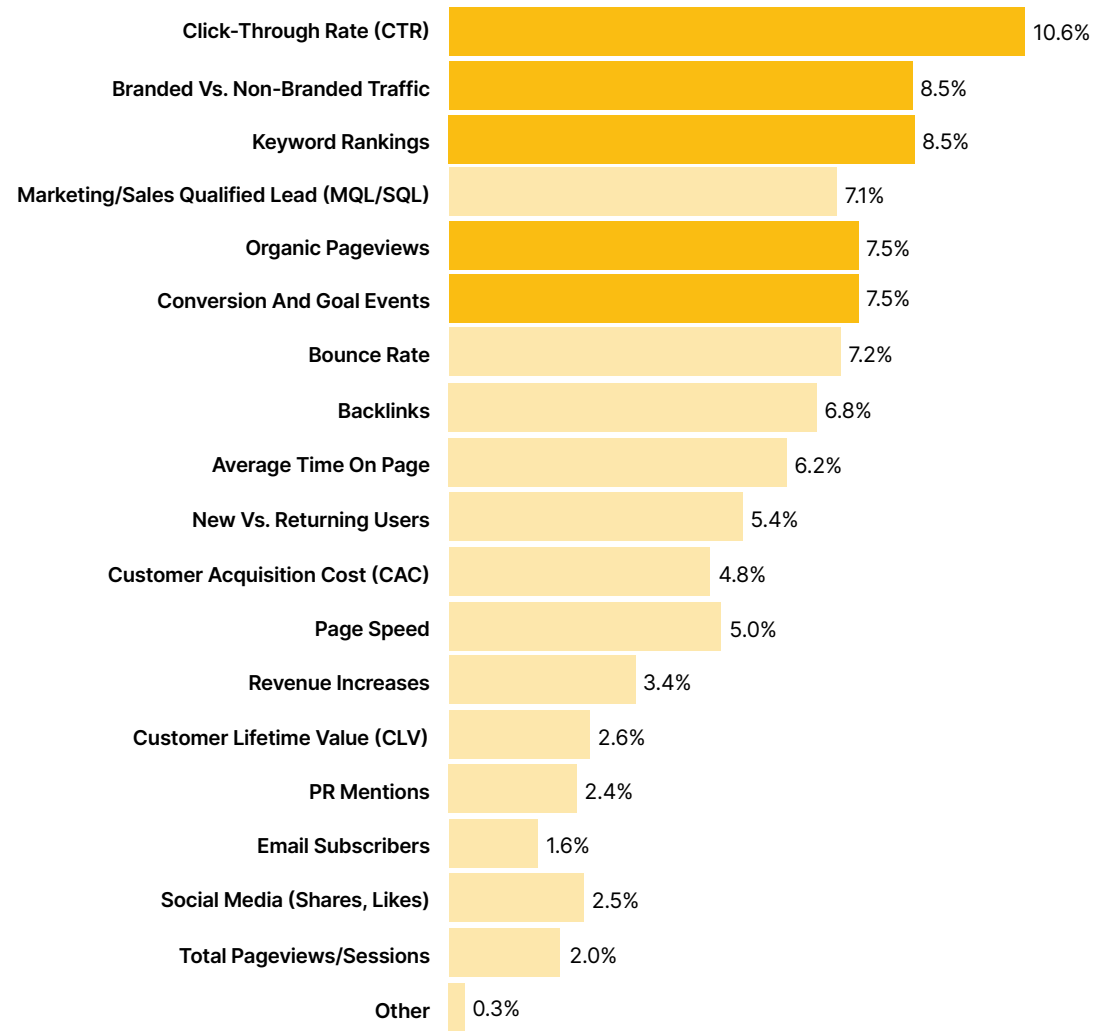
This doesn't mean that other SEO professionals are doing it wrong, necessarily. It could simply mean that they are responsible for different outcomes.

The top three metrics for those earning under \$76,000 are:

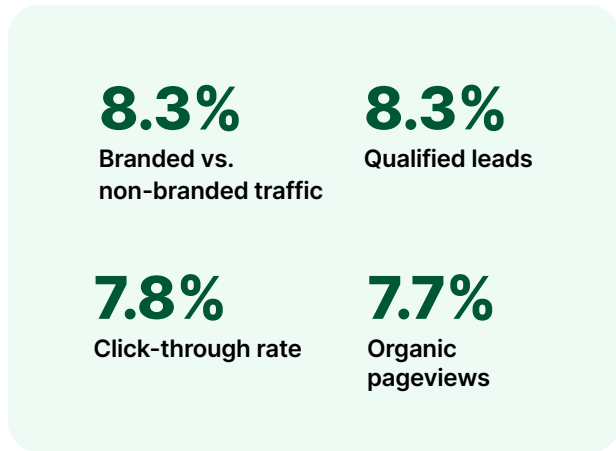


Metrics By Income

Lower Income: < \$76k USD



Those earning over \$100,000 distributed their answers more evenly. Their top metrics are:



They also focus less on bounce rate, keyword rankings, backlinks, conversions, and time on page as metrics of success.

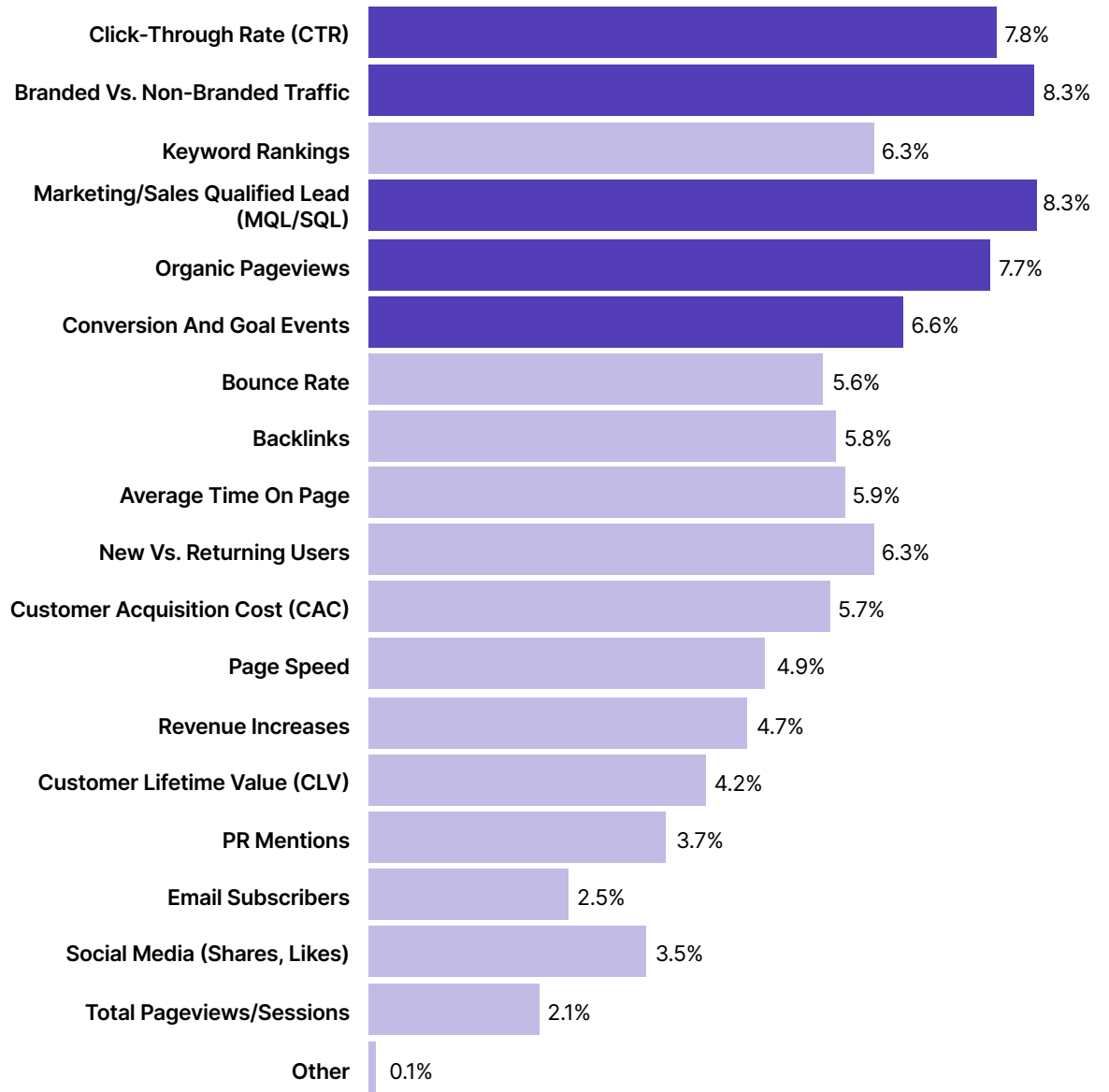
This group is more likely to measure qualified leads, new vs. returning users, customer acquisition cost, and customer lifetime value.

While CTR is the top overall response, those earning over \$100,000 don't favor this metric as much as qualified leads and branded vs. non-branded traffic.

Understanding how SEO efforts contribute to overall business KPIs could be key to career advancement.

Metrics By Income

Higher Income: > \$100k



Expand Skill Sets

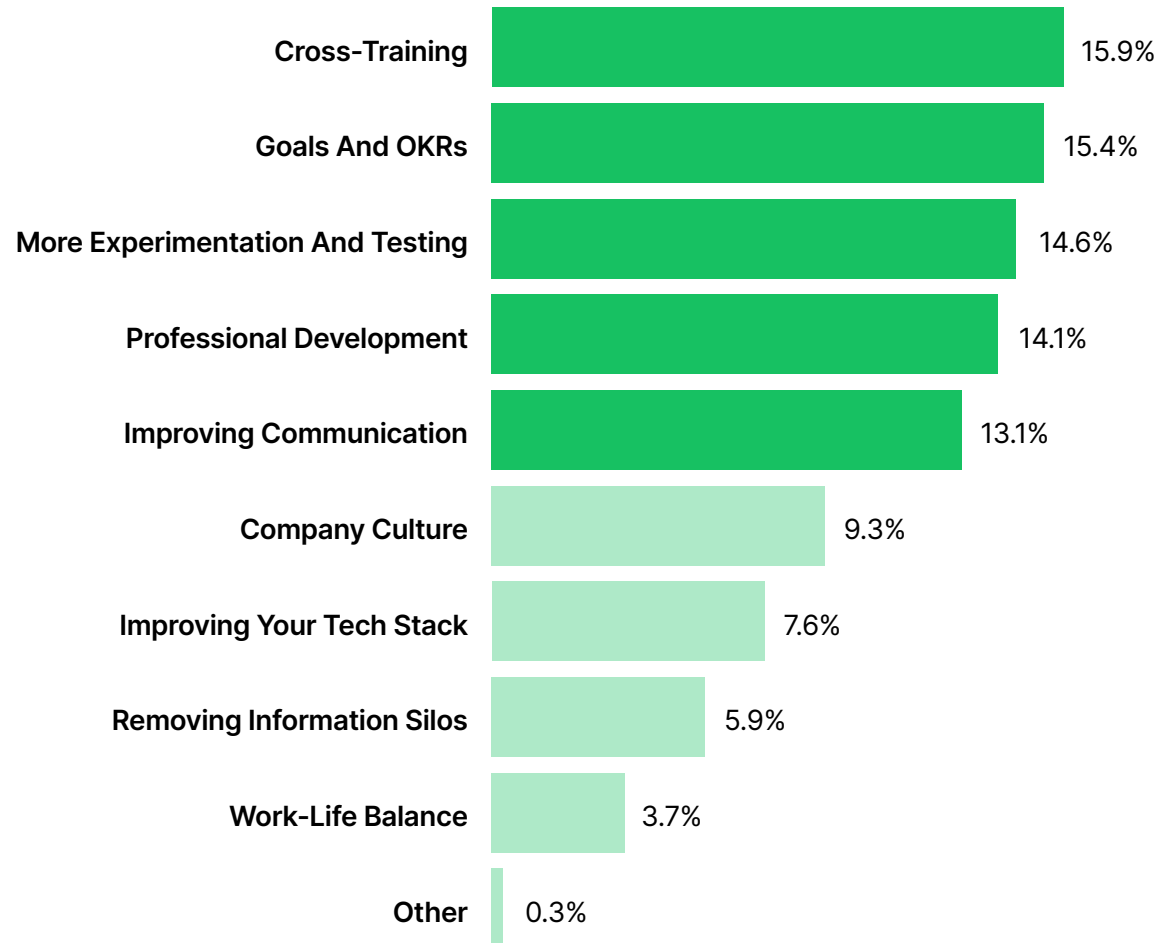
15.9% of SEO professionals said they will explore cross-training to improve productivity in 2023.

Almost as many said they will focus on goals, as well as objectives and key results (OKRs).

Experimentation and testing come in third at 14.1%, complementing the variety of metrics respondents reported using.

Communication is fifth on the list at 13.1%.

What Will You Focus On Over The Next Year To Make You Or Your Team More Productive?



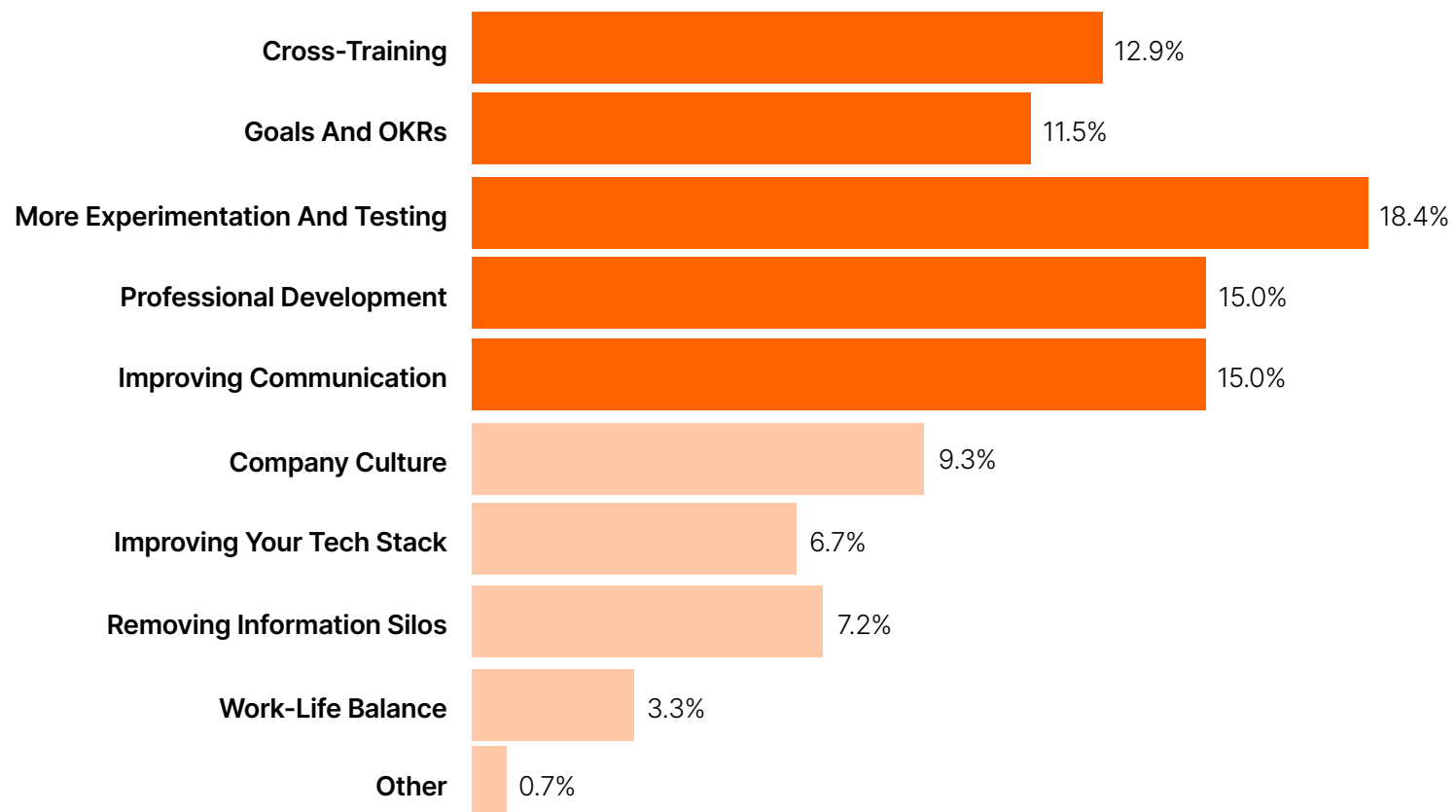
More experienced SEO professionals, who are likely in leadership positions, have different top answers.

Those with 11-20 years of experience favor:

- Experimentation and testing - 18.4%
- Professional development - 15%
- Communication - 15%
- Cross-training - 12.9%

How Will You Increase Productivity?

11-20 Years Of Experience

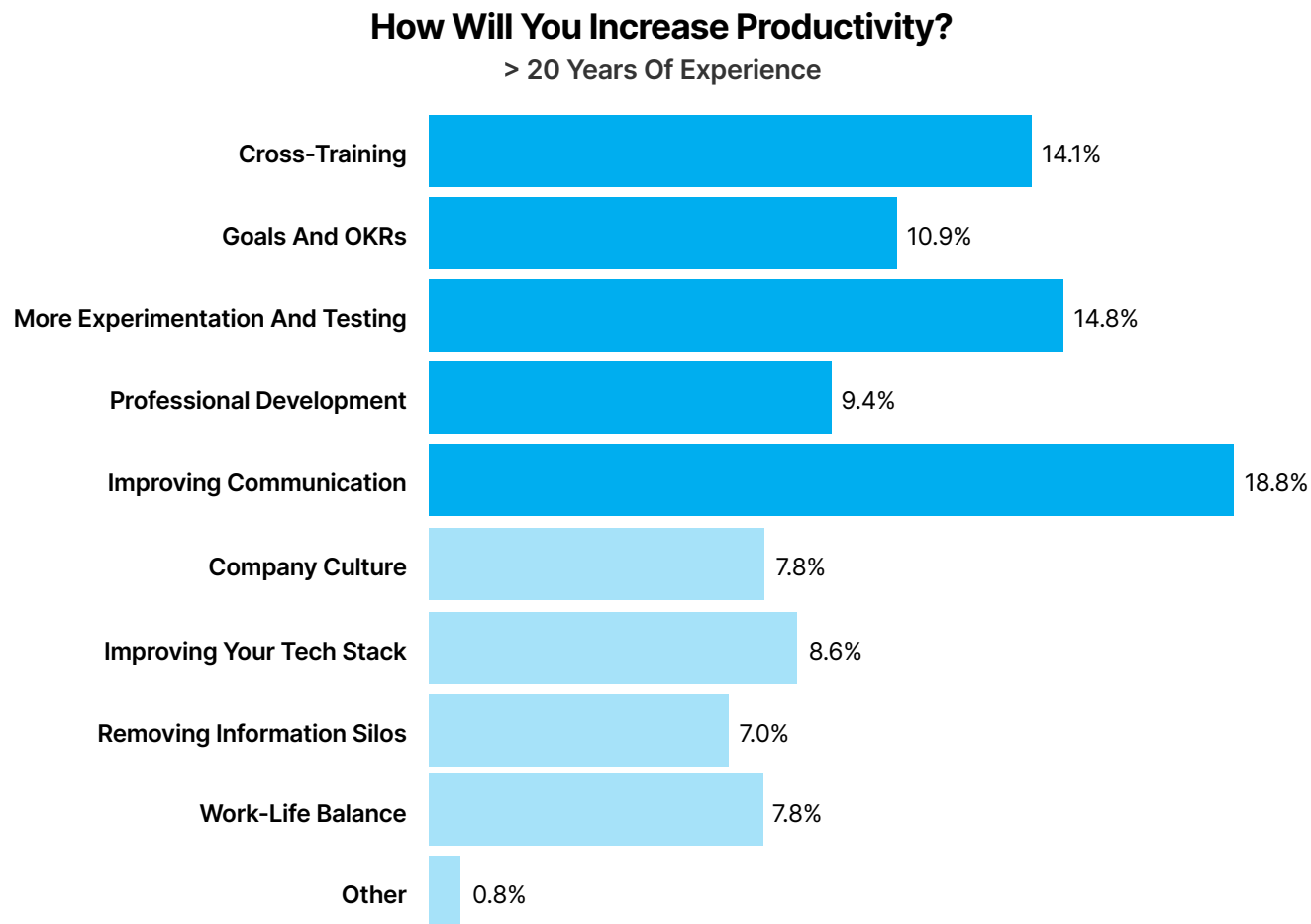


Those with more than 20 years of experience favor communication most highly. They tend to favor:

- Improving communication - 18.4%
- Experimentation and testing - 14.8%
- Cross-training - 14.1%
- Goals and OKRs - 10.9%

The prevalence of cross-training as a focus area across all levels of experience indicates that SEO has become multi-disciplinary.

Experienced SEO professionals also favor experimentation and testing, indicating that they are focused on tracking results and seeking novel strategies.



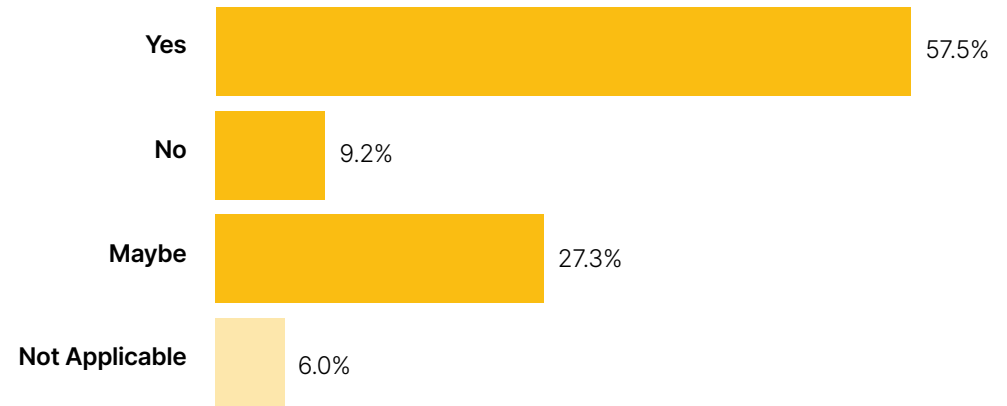
This year, we asked respondents – freelancers or those who work for agencies, specifically – if they’re expanding their service offerings into areas beyond SEO.

A clear majority said yes (57.5%). An additional 27.3% said they are considering it.

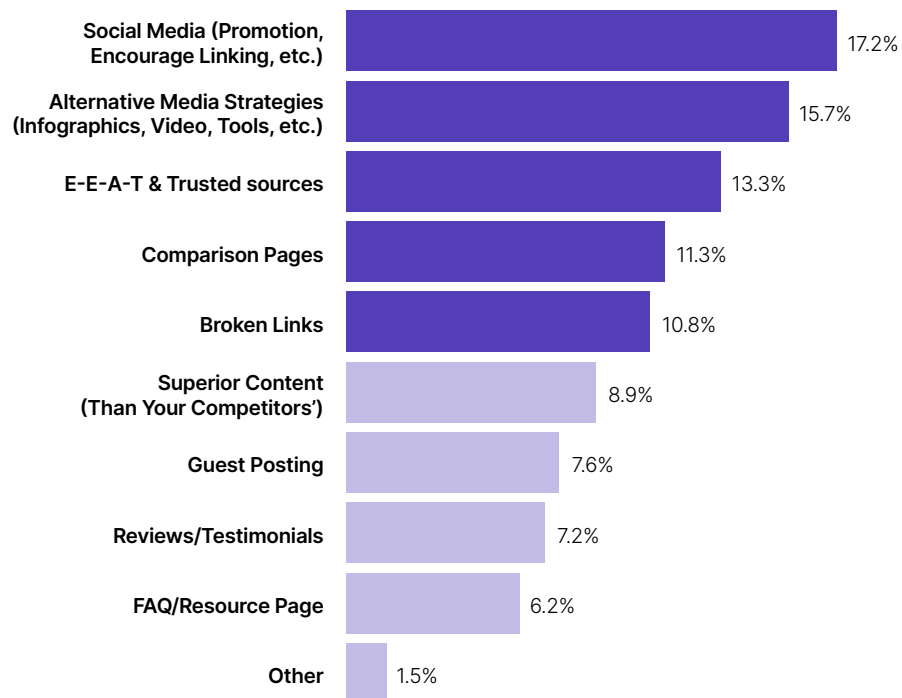
This could reflect uncertainty about the future effectiveness and profitability of traditional SEO efforts.

It could also indicate leaps forward in capabilities due to the emergence of new technology and tools.

Are You Planning To Expand Into Non-SEO Offerings This Year?



What Have You Found To Be The Most Effective Link Building Strategy?



SEO roles may require more advanced or expanded skills.

Interestingly, when asked about link building strategies:

- 17.5% of respondents said they use social media outreach and promotion to acquire links.
- 15.7% use alternative media, underlining a need for additional skills.



SEO Disruptor #3: Generative AI & AI Software

SEO Professionals Have A Positive Outlook On AI

Generative AI is a hot topic in SEO this year. It seems like large language models and their iterative tools have completely consumed the discourse.

“SEO is dead!” some shout.

“SEO isn’t dead, but…” others hypothesize.

The majority of respondents feel positive about AI’s potential impact; 72.4% say it will help either a lot or a little.



PRO TIP:

Despite a recent shift in usage, generative AI tools like ChatGPT were not intended for information retrieval, and even though they generate text, they’re much better at producing fiction than fact.

That said, there are appropriate AI SEO use cases:

- Producing titles.
- Creating meta descriptions or alt tags at scale.
- Grouping keywords and topics.
- Creating Schema structured data markup for technical SEO needs.

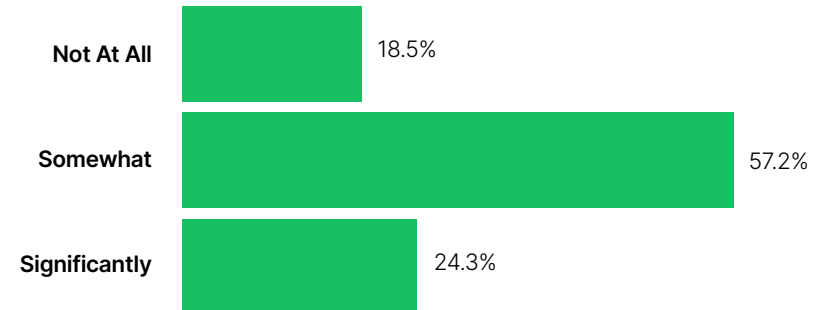
In all cases, though, human oversight is a must.



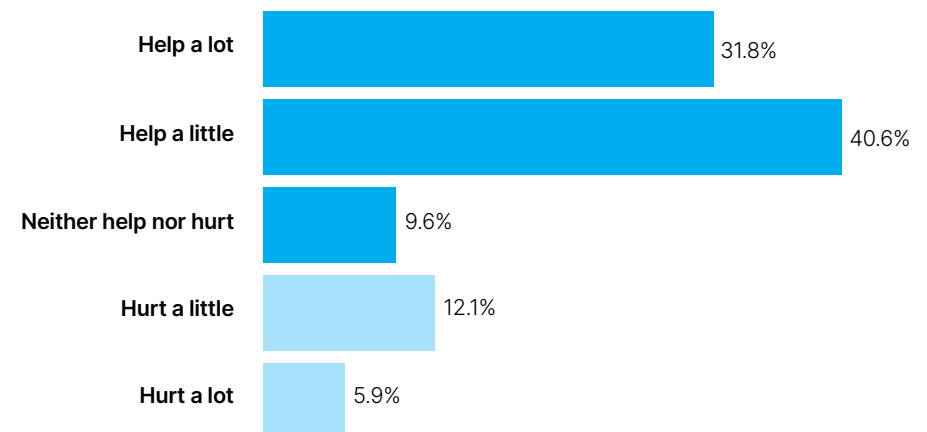
Tom Capper
Senior Search Scientist



How Much Has The Introduction Of Generative AI Impacted Your SEO Strategy Thus Far?



Do You Think Generative AI And/Or Machine Learning Will Hurt Or Help Your Business This Year?



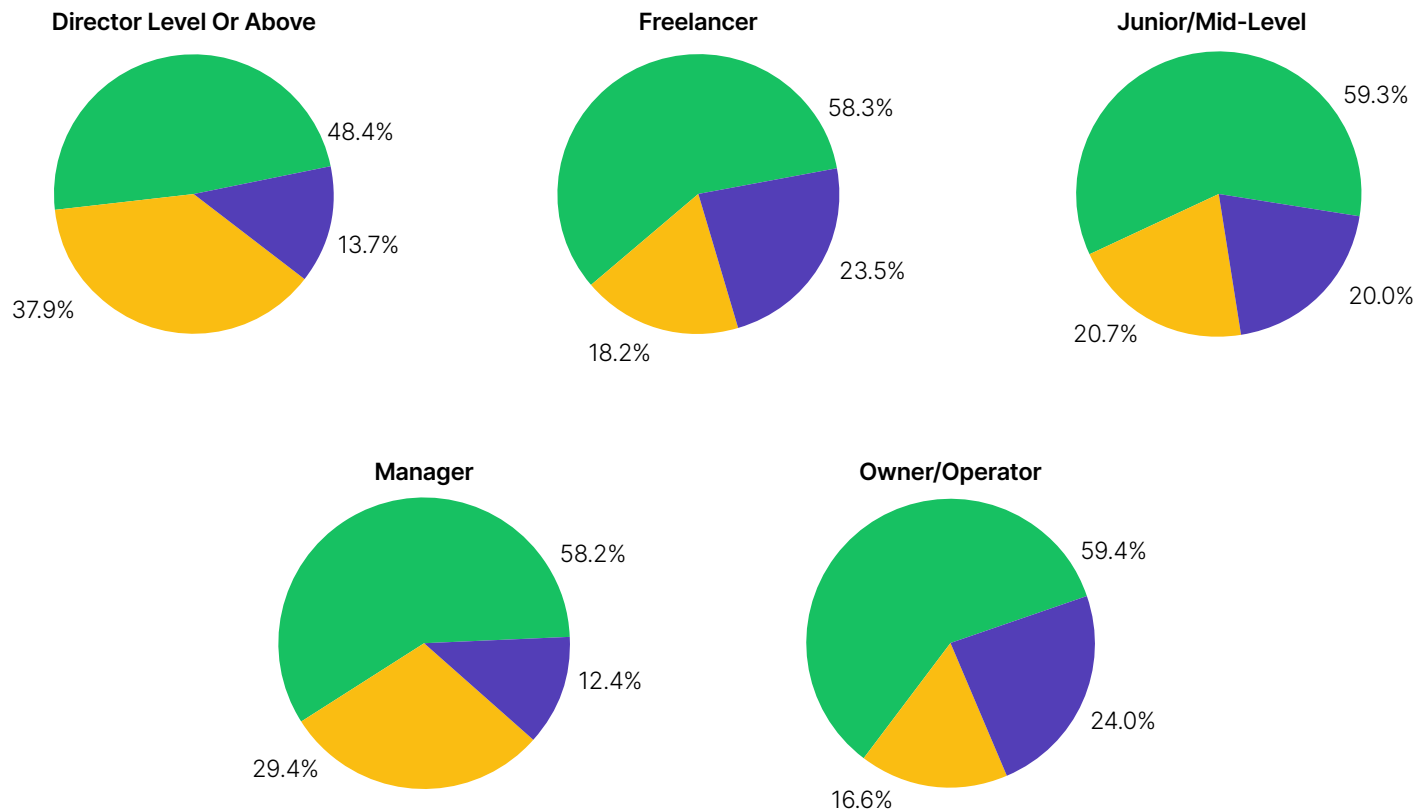
81.5% of respondents say that generative AI has impacted their SEO strategy at least somewhat.

Freelancers (23.5%) and owners/operators (24%) are the most confident that generative AI will not impact their strategy.

Directors and above were the most likely to say that it has impacted their SEO strategy significantly (37%).

How Much Has The Introduction Of Generative AI Impacted Your SEO Strategy Thus Far? By Role

Not at all Significantly Somewhat



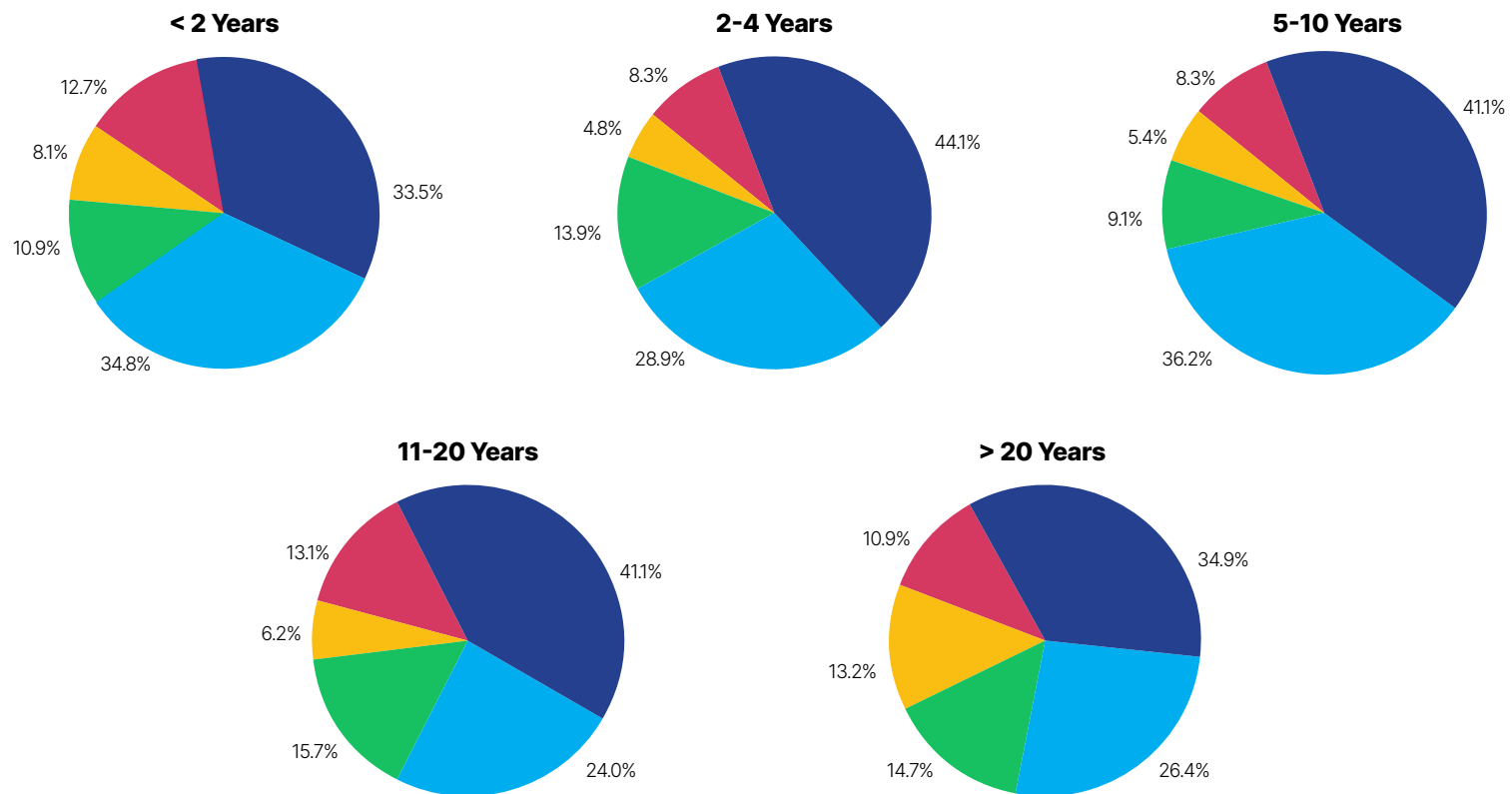
Respondents with five to ten years of experience are the least likely to be concerned about generative AI, with 77.3% positive and 14.5% feeling negative.

However, they are also most likely to feel that generative AI will help “a lot” (36.2%).

Industry veterans with more than 20 years of experience are the most likely to be concerned about AI, with 27.9% of them expressing doubts. They are also most likely to say that generative AI will hurt “a lot” (13.2%).

Do You Think Generative AI And/Or Machine Learning Will Hurt Or Help Your Business This Year? By Experience

■ Help a little ■ Help a lot ■ Hurt a little ■ Hurt a lot ■ Neither help nor hurt



Opportunities In Generative AI & AI Software

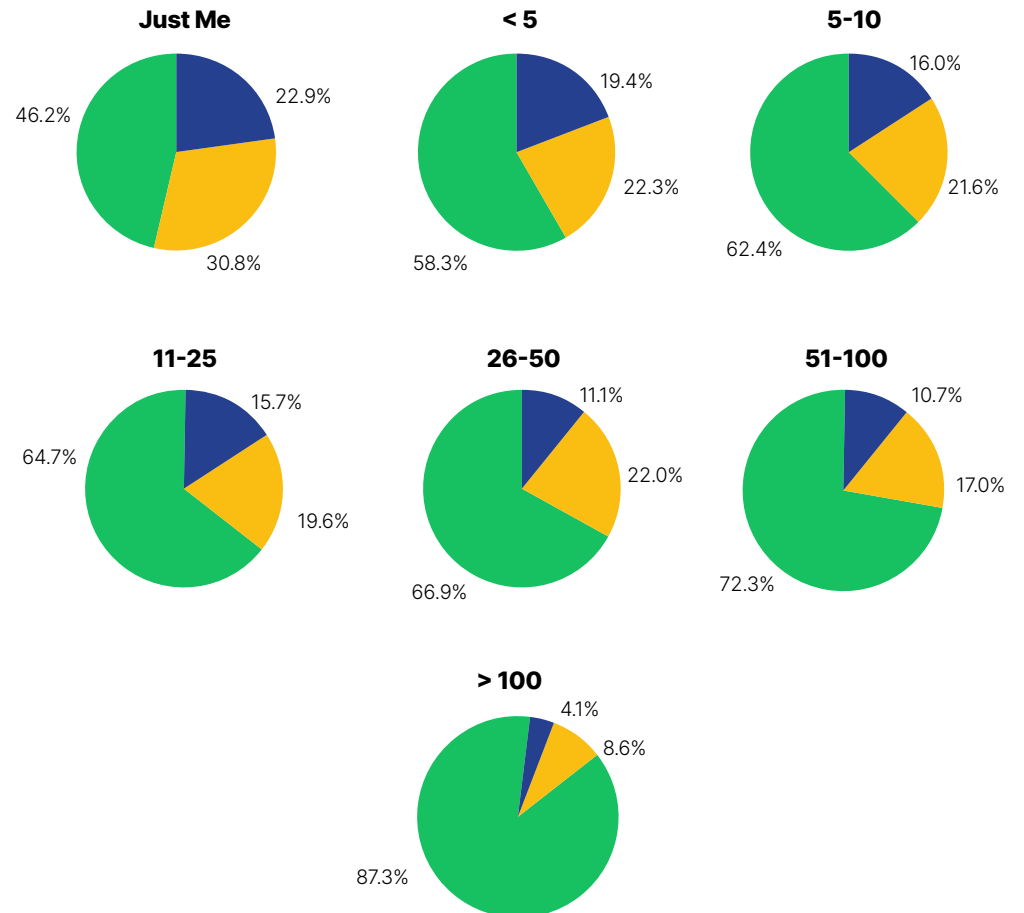
68%

The number of SEO professionals looking to automate tasks or use an AI-powered service.

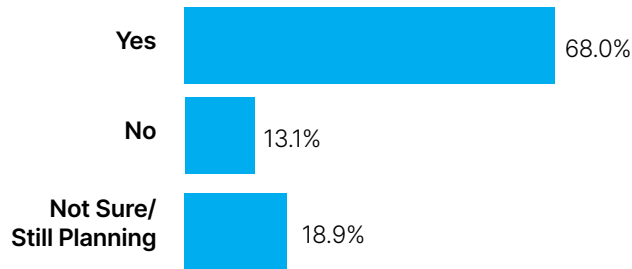


Will You Be Looking To Automate Or Invest In AI-Powered Services this year? By Team Size

■ Yes ■ Not sure/Still planning ■ No



Will You Be Looking To Automate Or Invest In AI-Powered Services This Year?



A clear curve emerges when responses are broken down by team size, indicating that larger organizations might be more likely to lean into automation.

The bigger the team, the more interested they are in AI software solutions.

We asked respondents which tasks they are most interested in automating:

13.3%

Getting the most from generative AI

11.1%

Content generation

10.7%

Content audits

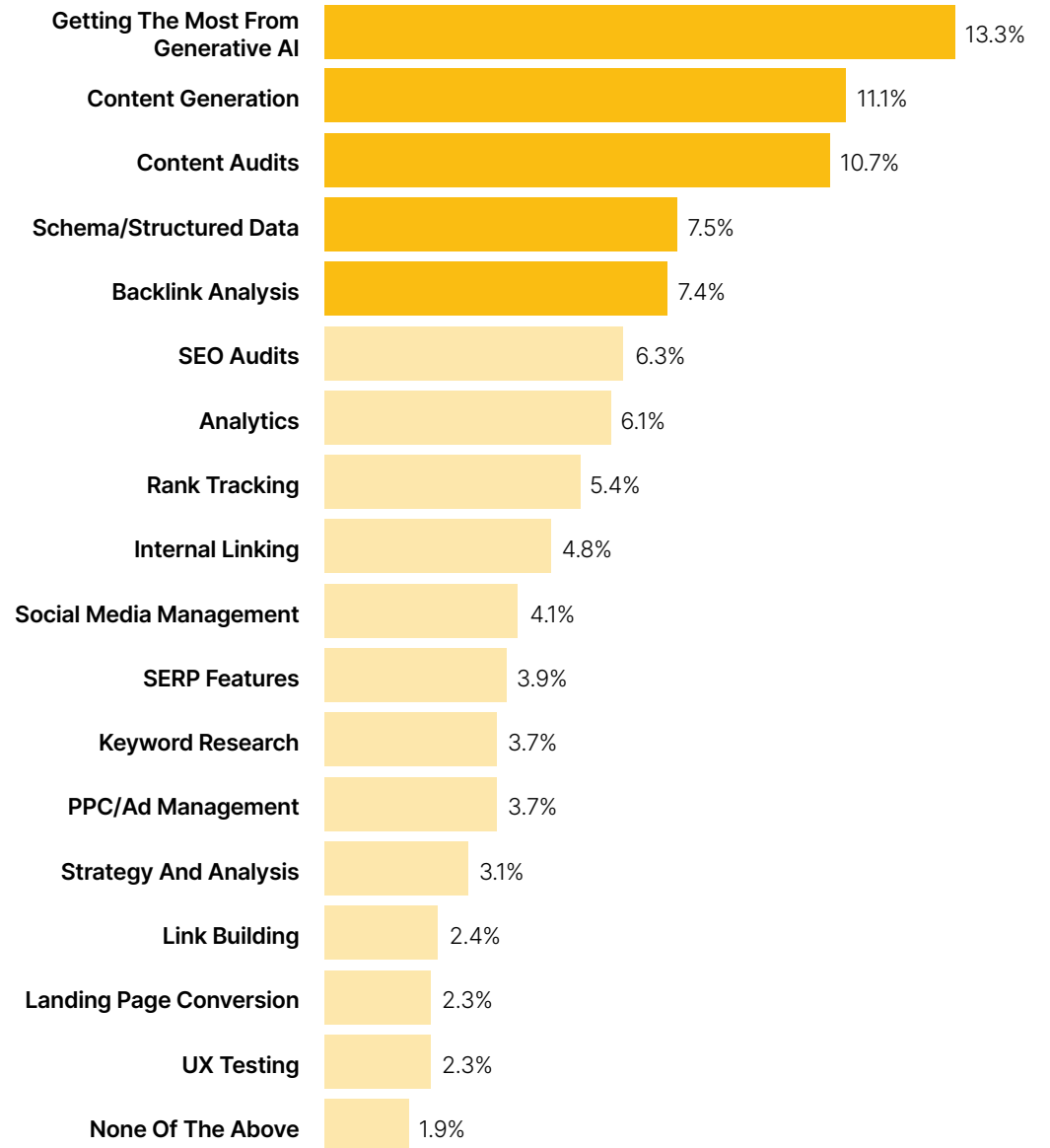
7.5%

Schema/structured data

Generative AI could play a key role in making teams more efficient this year so that they can focus on critical tasks.

But generative AI is imperfect, and will need experienced practitioners at the helm.

Which Tasks Or Responsibilities Are You Looking To Automate With Software In The Next Year?

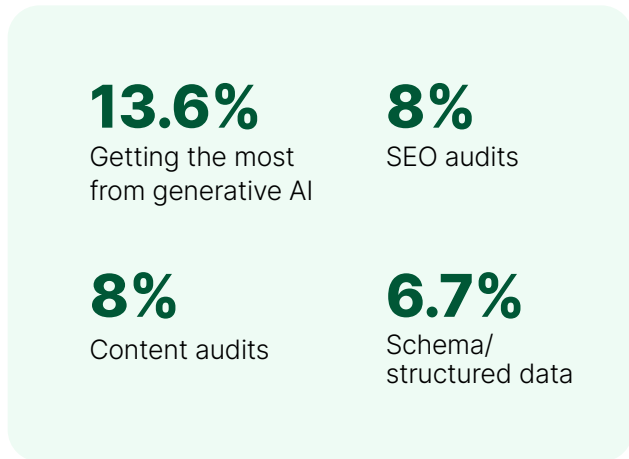


For SEO service providers, there seem to be two major opportunities that might sound mutually exclusive, but are not:

- 1 Embrace generative AI and AI tools.
- 2 Enhance automation with personalization.

Tool and software service providers also have an opportunity to capitalize on the demand.

The top four priorities for those who are directors or higher in position are:



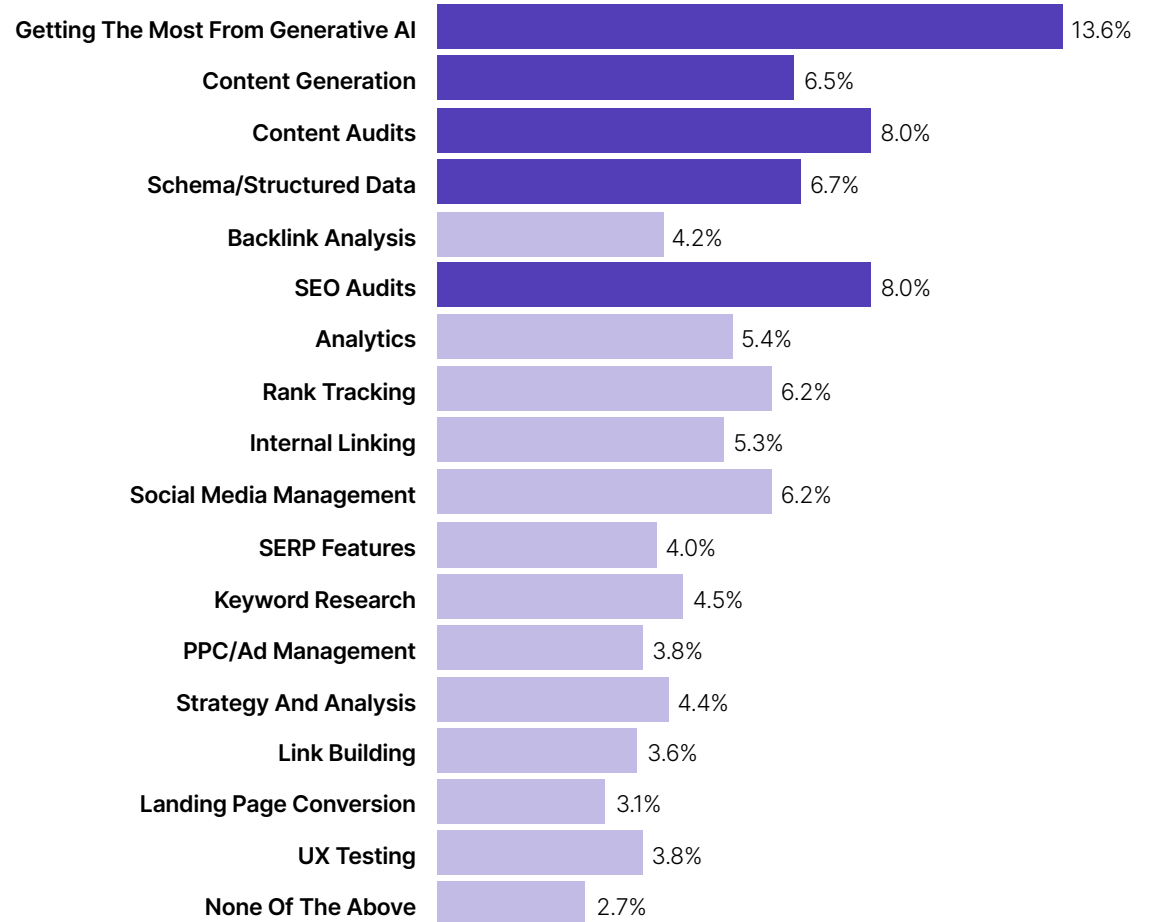
Content generation is their fifth priority overall.

This is a key group to pay attention to since they're most likely to have purchasing power.

People working on teams of different sizes also have different priorities.

The Tasks Or Responsibilities SEOs Are Looking To Automate Next Year

Director Level & Above



When looking at automation priorities based on team sizes, most teams have the same top three answers. The only notable difference is that respondents on teams under 10 people are more likely to prioritize software for performing content audits than others.

Tasks Respondents Look To Automate Next Year By Team Size (Top 3)

< 5



- 1 Content audits - 15%
- 2 Getting the most from generative AI - 13.6%
- 3 Content generation - 12.5%

5-10



- 1 Content audits - 15.9%
- 2 Getting the most from generative AI - 13.1%
- 3 Content generation - 13.1%

11-25



- 1 Getting the most from generative AI - 14%
- 2 Content generation - 12.9%
- 3 Content audits - 10%

26-50



- 1 Getting the most from generative AI - 13.9%
- 2 Content generation - 12%
- 3 Content audits - 10.8%

51-100



- 1 Getting the most from generative AI - 15.3%
- 2 Content generation - 10.4%
- 3 Content audits - 9.7%

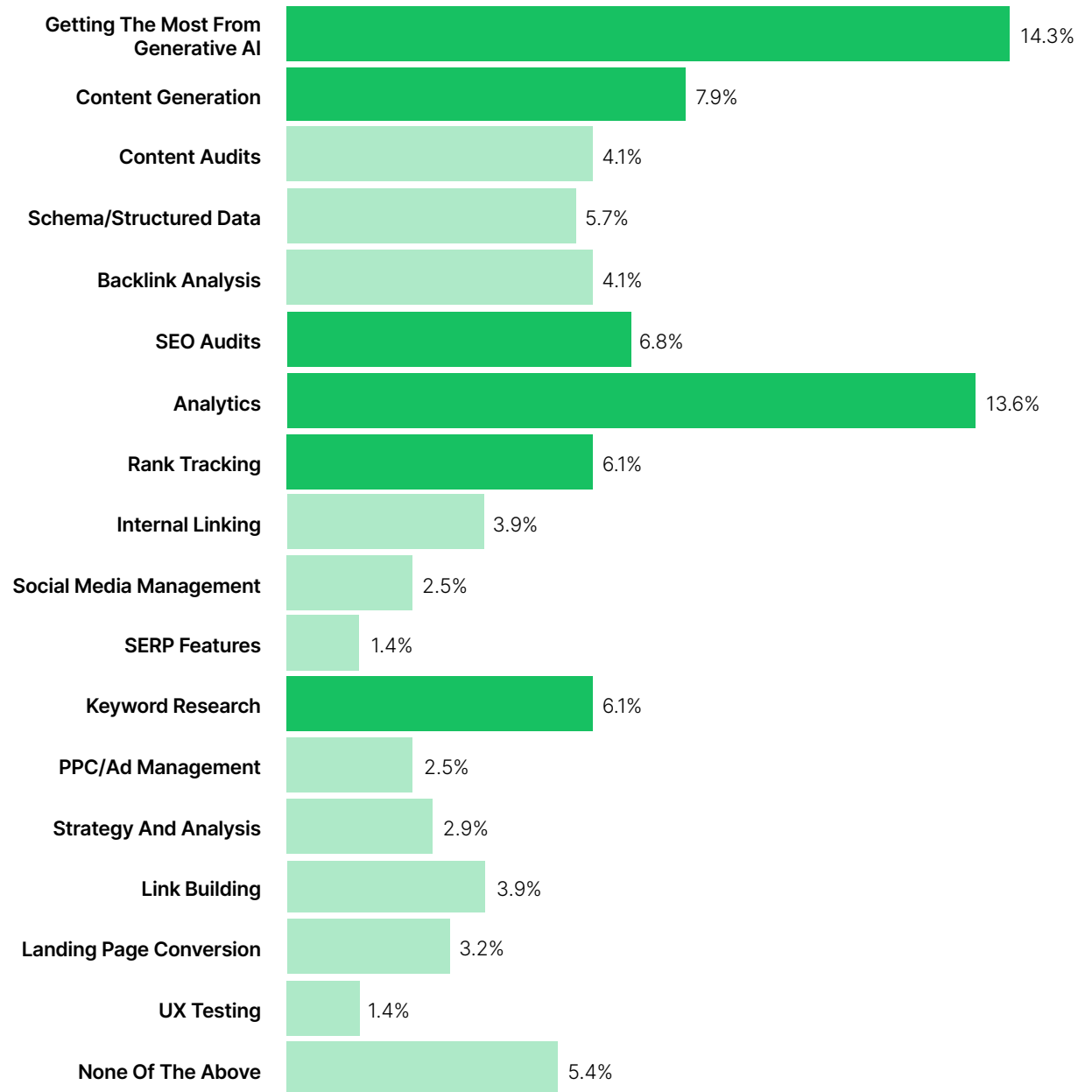
There are exceptions to the top answers provided by most respondents in the survey. They come from independent SEO professionals and those who work on teams larger than 100 people.

Individual SEO practitioners working on their own prioritize generative AI first, and analytics second.

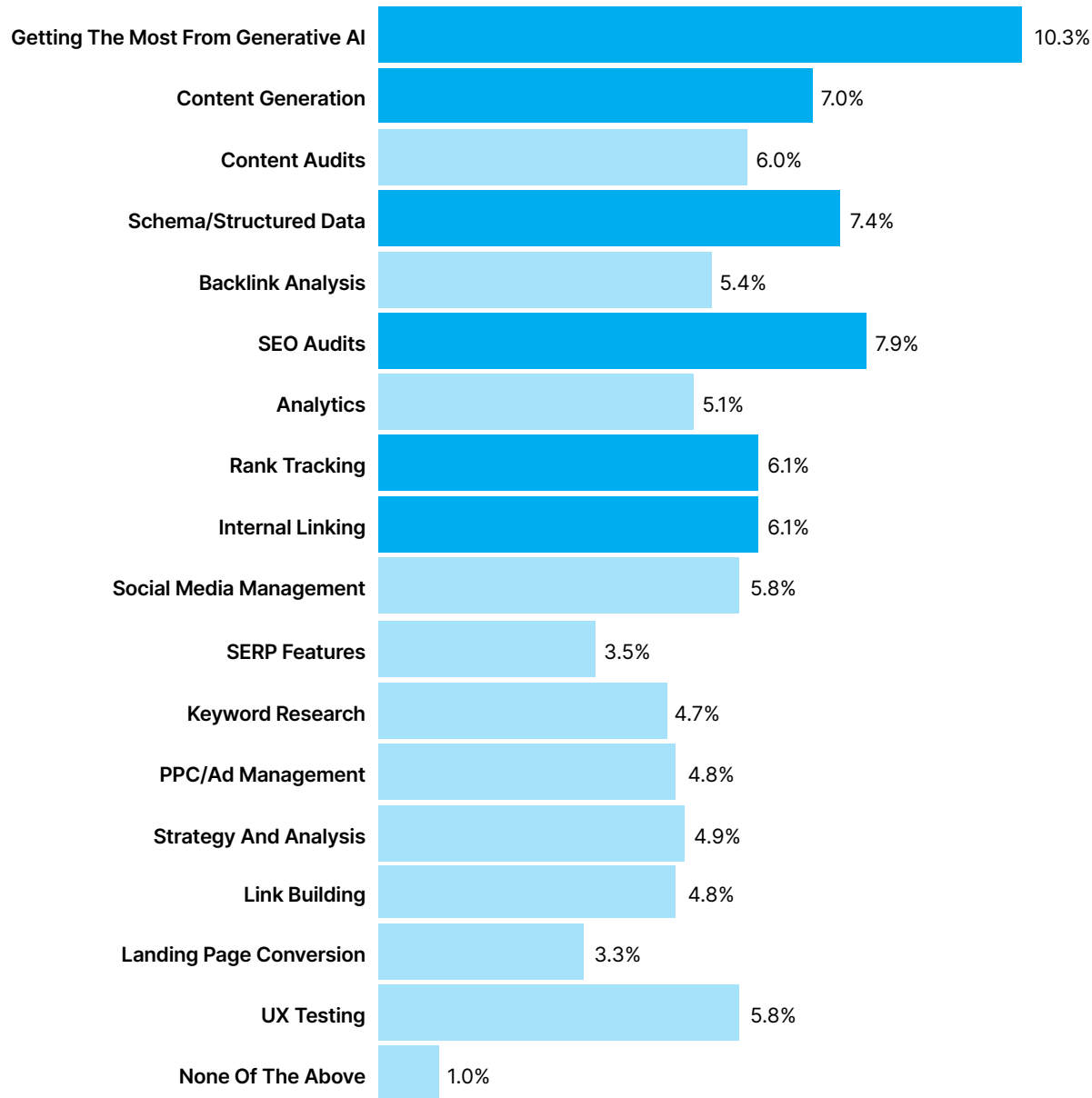
They are somewhat more likely to look for keyword research automation.

They are also most likely to answer “none of the above.”

Automation Priorities - Single-Person Teams



Automation Priorities - Teams Of 100+



Teams of more than 100 people ranked their top automation priorities as:

10.3% Generative AI	7.9% SEO audits
7.4% Schema/ structured data	7% Content generation
6.1% Internal linking	6.1% Rank tracking

Smaller teams, and especially individual SEO professionals working independently, offered the least enthusiastic response to AI.

Less than half of respondents who are working independently plan to integrate generative AI into their work in the next year.

This could be because smaller teams don't have the resources to keep up with the rapidly changing technology.

It could also be because they're betting on a business model that sets them apart from the crowd.

If you're on a smaller team with limited resources, the right AI implementations could give you the bandwidth to refocus on strategy and experimentation. Or, they could allow you to expand skill sets and offer services you might not otherwise be able to.

As team sizes get larger, the enthusiasm for generative AI increases. The sentiment makes sense.

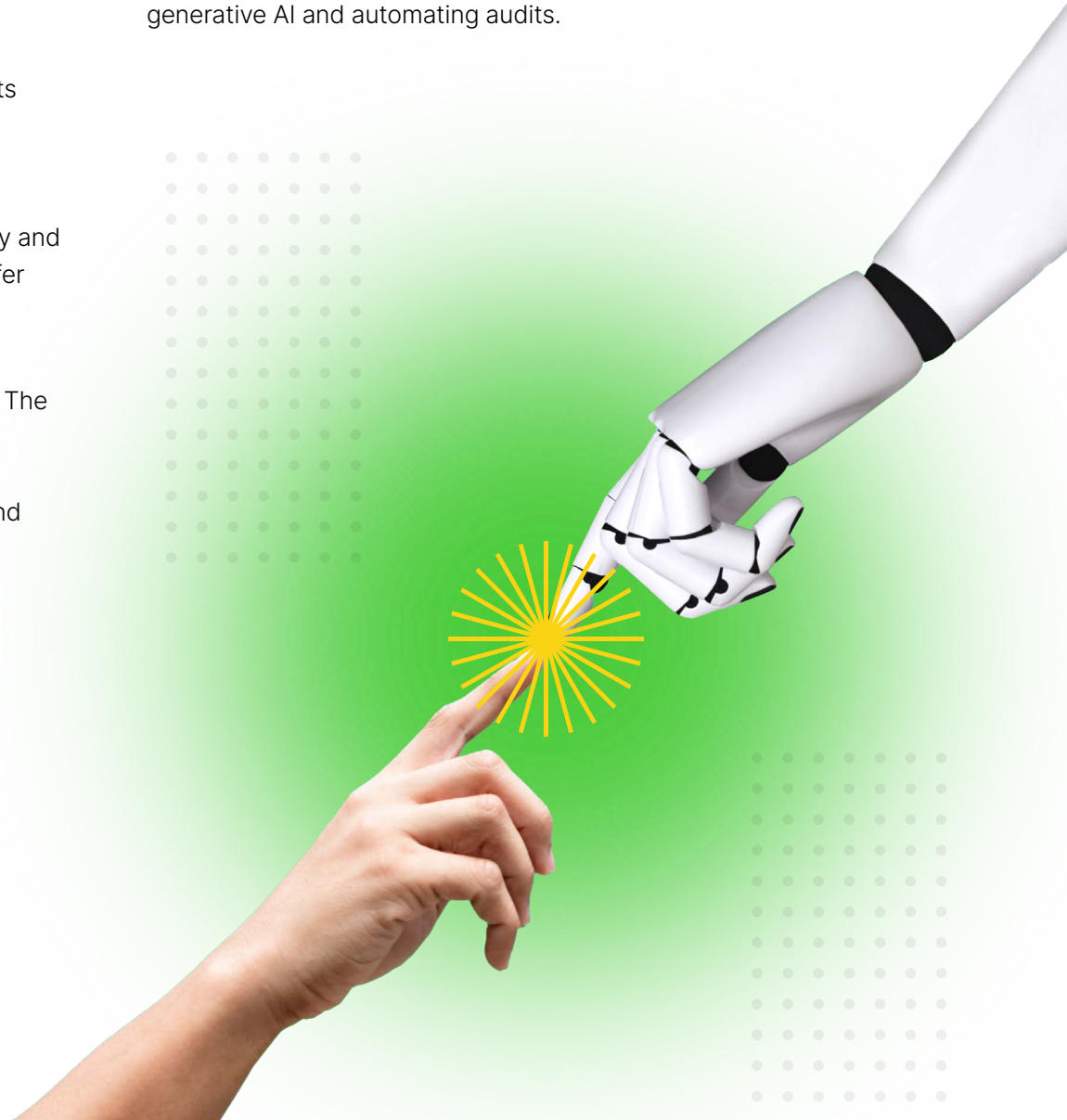
Those teams may be in good positions to pivot to new technology and experiment with new types of services.

They may also encounter more process problems that need solving.

It could also be a good time to sell software and software services to SEO professionals.

Leaning into ways that AI, especially generative AI, can expand your services could help you win large accounts.

Directors and other decision-makers are particularly interested in generative AI and automating audits.



Thank you for reading the State Of SEO Report for 2024.

We hope you find the data and insights useful as we head into the uncertainty of the next year.

If you're interested in learning what the experts have to say about coming trends in their own words, subscribe to the SEJ newsletter to get notified about the coming PPC Trends ebook in November, and the SEO Trends ebook in December.

For each ebook, we ask our colleagues in the SEO industry what they think the year ahead will bring.

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If you have any feedback or questions about this report, you can always email us at editor@searchenginejournal.com.





Limitations

1 **3,890** people responded to our third annual State Of SEO survey. The responses come from a diverse group of professionals 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; we don't claim the final word on industry trends. Nevertheless, we hope they spark conversations with your peers.



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. They will be noted when they appear – and are weighted by total number of responses – meaning they could have up to three times more responses than there are participants.

3 **51.67%** of respondents are from the U.S., meaning the data likely have a heavy regional bias toward the U.S.



7 When we pivot the data by different groups, the margin of error may increase. That is because there are fewer respondents in each group than there are in total respondents to the survey. For example, the group of respondents with 20 or more years of experience is very small, with only 137 people. We felt it was interesting to highlight their responses in several places since it's more than 100 people, but their responses will have a higher margin of error.



4 We calculated a margin of error of $\pm 1.571\%$ based on an infinite population assumption and a 95% confidence interval.

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



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Tom Capper
Senior Search Scientist

Tom heads up the Search Science team at Moz, working on STAT and Moz's next generation of tools, insights, and products.