ARITIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN SEARCH MARKETING 2026

Spiegel Research Center
Medill School of Integrated Marketing Communications
Northwestern University
2026 - AI in Search Marketing Study

Contents

Introduction

AI has rapidly moved from an emerging technology to essential infrastructure in search marketing, yet significant questions remain about the depth of adoption, organizational readiness, and measurable impact. To address these, the Spiegel Research Center conducted this study to uncover how marketing professionals are integrating AI into their search workflows, what business outcomes they are achieving, and where critical capability gaps persist. The findings will inform the development of targeted resources, actionable benchmarks, and programming designed to help marketers navigate AI adoption with confidence and build competitive advantage in an increasingly automated landscape.

Method

A nationwide survey of experienced marketing professionals was conducted to gather insights into current trends and practices in implementing AI in Search marketing practices. More than 200 professionals participated online. After cleaning the data by removing duplicates, checking response durations, and excluding incomplete entries, 198 valid responses were included in the analysis.

Key Insights

AI has become core infrastructure in search marketing, but marketers are limiting full automation. AI adoption in search marketing is nearly universal, with approximately 95% of professionals reporting some level of use, and most integrating AI into a significant share of their workflows (two-thirds report AI comprises 41–80% of activity). However, full automation remains rare, with only 6% reporting AI usage in more than 80% of their workflows, suggesting deliberate restraint. This pattern suggests the industry has moved beyond experimentation while maintaining human oversight in high-stakes decisions.

AI is strengthening in-house search capabilities and reducing reliance on external partners. In-house teams lead AI implementation by a wide margin, with 80% reporting internal ownership compared to 36% for agencies and 28% for freelancers. As AI delivers measurable performance gains, 43% of organizations report reducing reliance on outside vendors, while only 28% reported increased vendor use. Together, these trends indicate AI is enabling organizations to internalize core search functions rather than outsource them.

AI delivers strong performance and financial returns despite uneven user proficiency. Nearly three-quarters of marketers rate AI as very or extremely effective for search marketing (76%), and 97% report at least some measurable financial gains. Yet proficiency levels lag behind outcomes, as only 48% rate themselves as very proficient or expert, while 52% remain proficient, beginner, or just starting. This gap suggests AI tools are generating value even before organizations fully develop internal expertise.

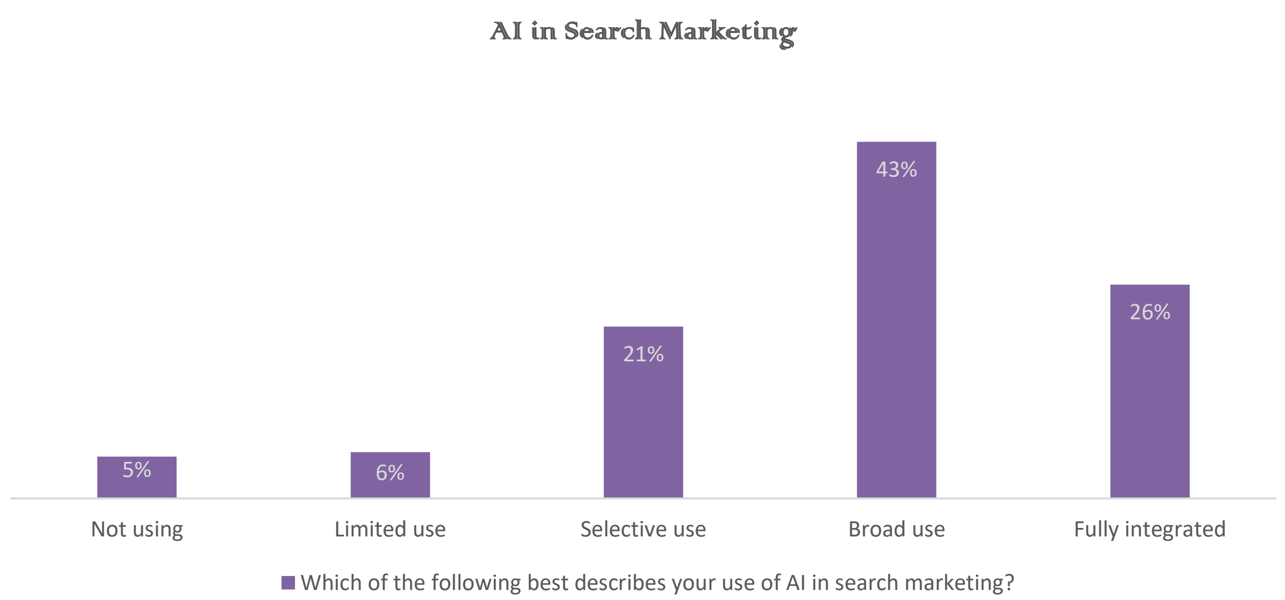
Productivity and performance gains are driving AI adoption. AI's impact is strongest in output and performance, particularly in SEO and paid search. In SEO, 93% report AI contributes to more than 20% of content production, with 51% seeing large increases in output. In paid search, performance is cited as AI's primary benefit by 57% of respondents, far exceeding speed or cost efficiency. While AI-generated content is largely rated as good to excellent (74%), practitioners appear willing to trade creative perfection for measurable performance gains.

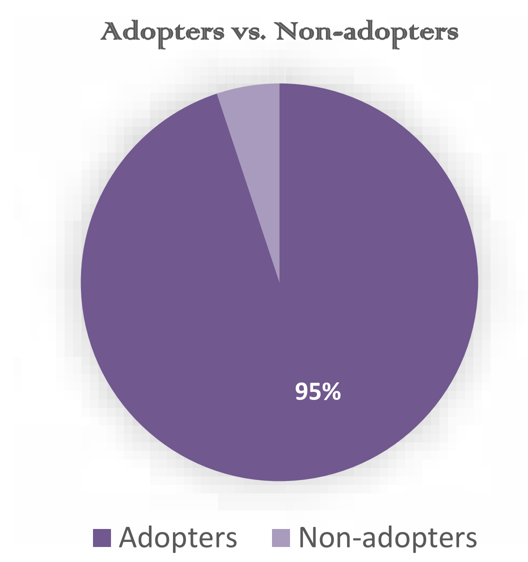
Governance, skills, and measurement are running behind the rapid adoption of AI. Despite widespread AI use, organizational readiness remains uneven. Nearly half of respondents cite hiring AI-skilled talent or understanding AI as one of their top concerns (47%), and over half report lacking finalized AI usage guidelines or being unsure of their status (51%). AI adoption is also lower in reporting (57%) and measurement (49%) than in research and content, suggesting governance and evaluation frameworks are trailing operational deployment.

Topline Results

Near-universal adoption with varying integration depths
Marketing professionals have overwhelmingly embraced AI tools, with approximately 95% reporting at least some use in their workflows.

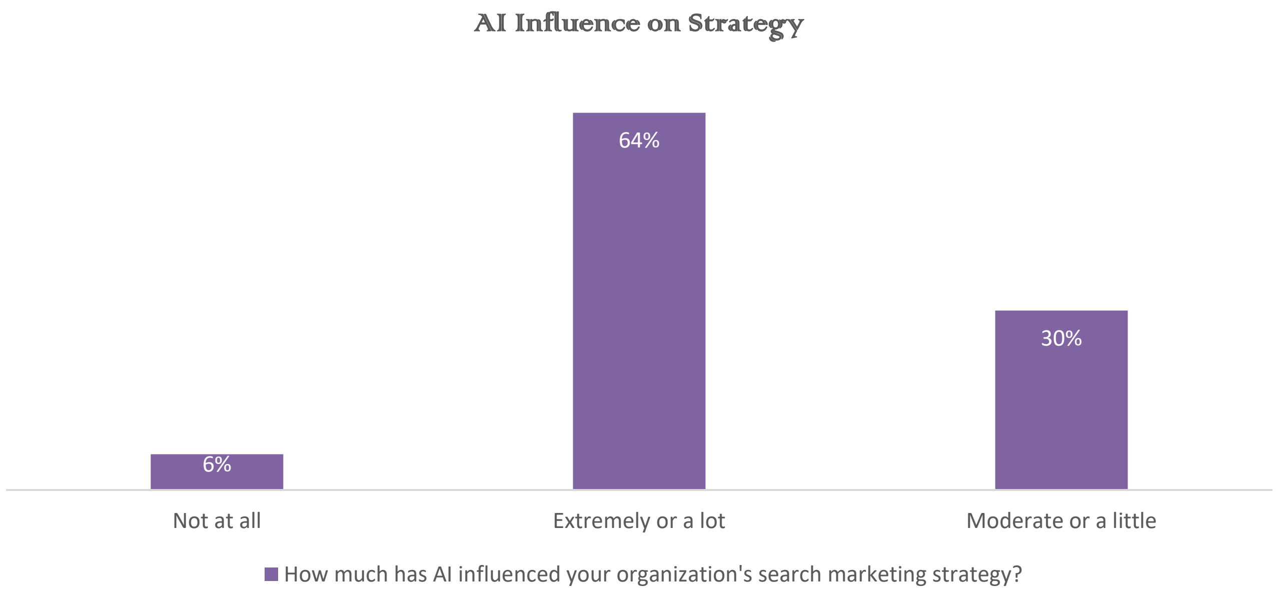
However, integration levels span a spectrum: while over two-thirds are using AI broadly across their work (43%) or have fully integrated it into their processes (26%), about one-quarter remain in selective or limited use phases (21% and 6%, respectively), suggesting organizations are at different stages of the adoption curve.

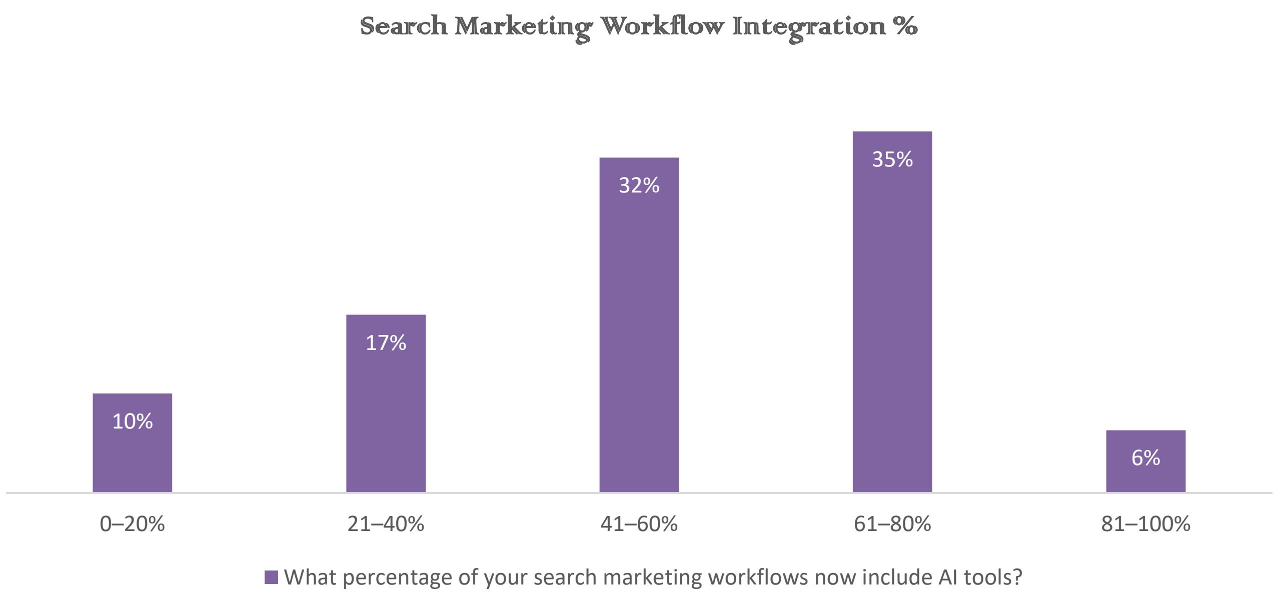




Moderate-to-high workflow integration dominates

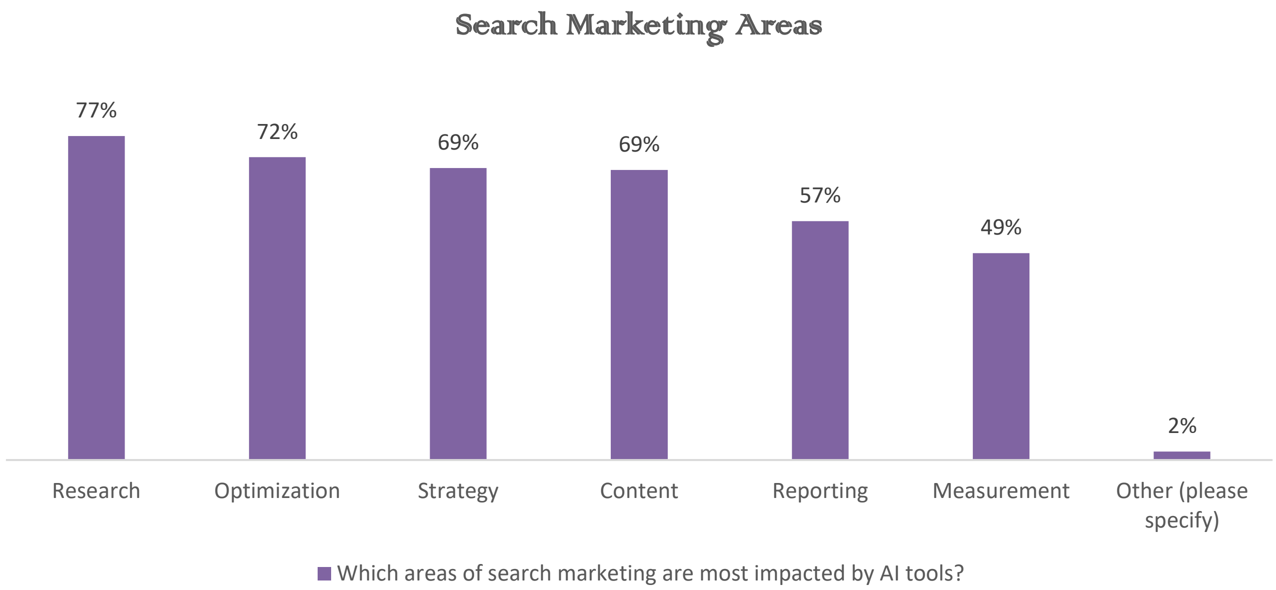
Two-thirds of professionals report that AI tools comprise 41-80% of their workflows, with the peak at 61-80% (35%). Few remain in the experimental phase (10% at 20% or below) or approach complete automation (6% at 81-100%), indicating the industry has moved beyond testing but has not reached full AI dependence.

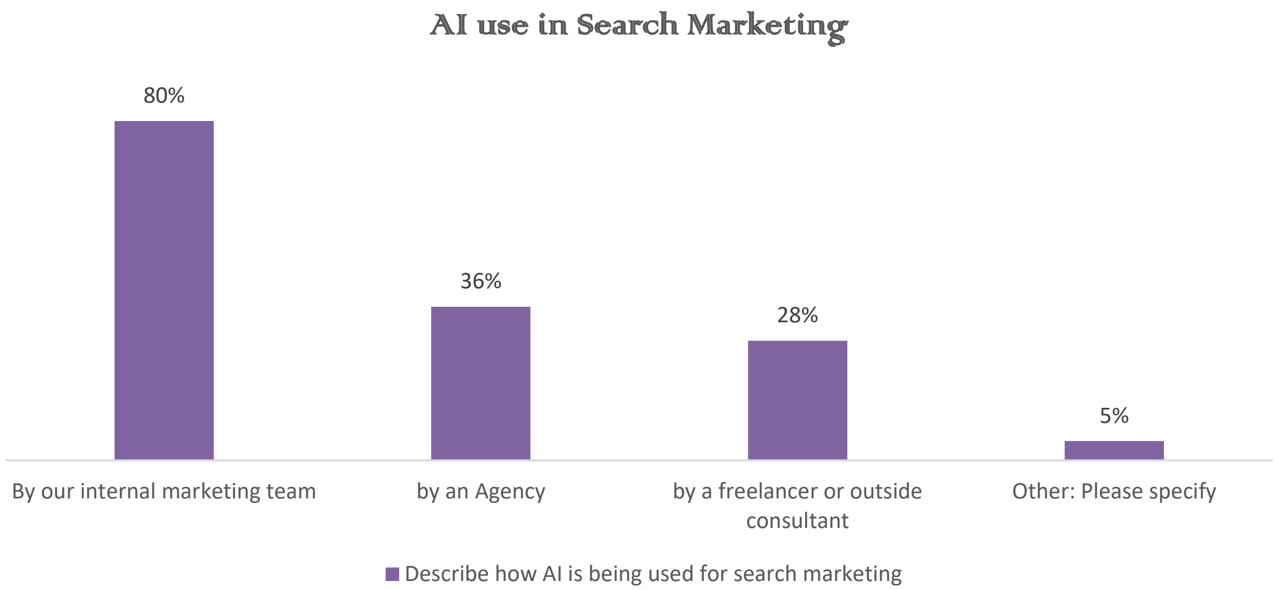




In-house teams drive AI across core search functions

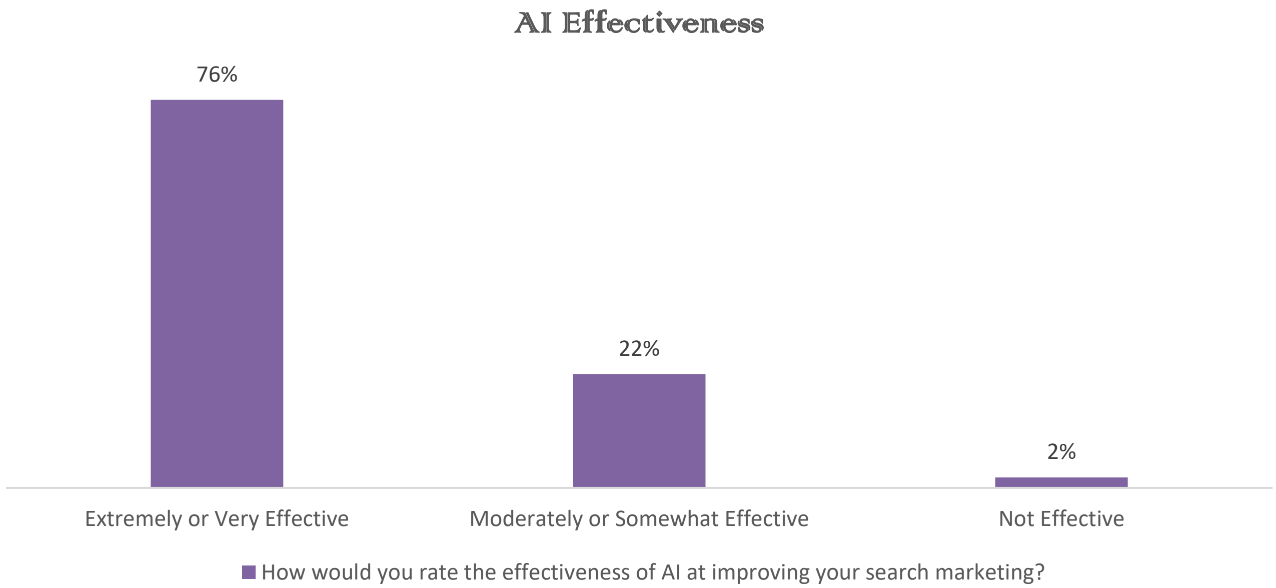
Internal marketing teams dominate AI implementation (80%), far exceeding agencies (36%) and freelancers (28%), suggesting organizations are building capabilities internally. AI's impact concentrates in research (77%), optimization (72%), strategy (69%), and content (69%)—a tight cluster indicating broad transformation of core activities, while reporting and measurement are at 57% and 49%, revealing potential gaps in measuring AI's effectiveness.

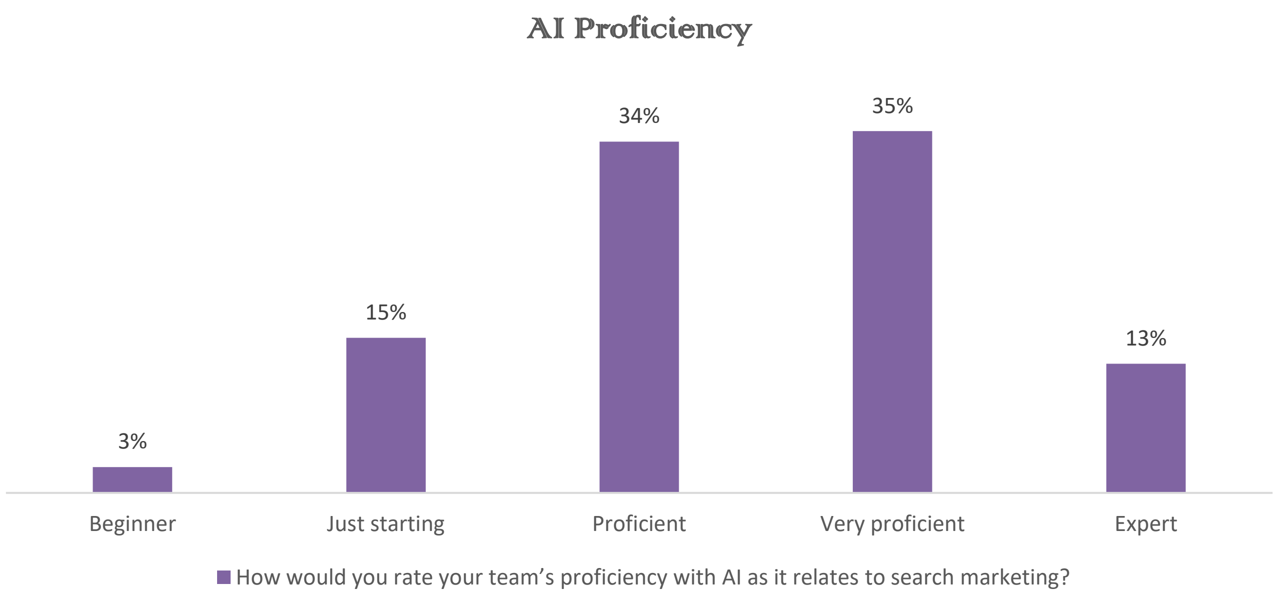


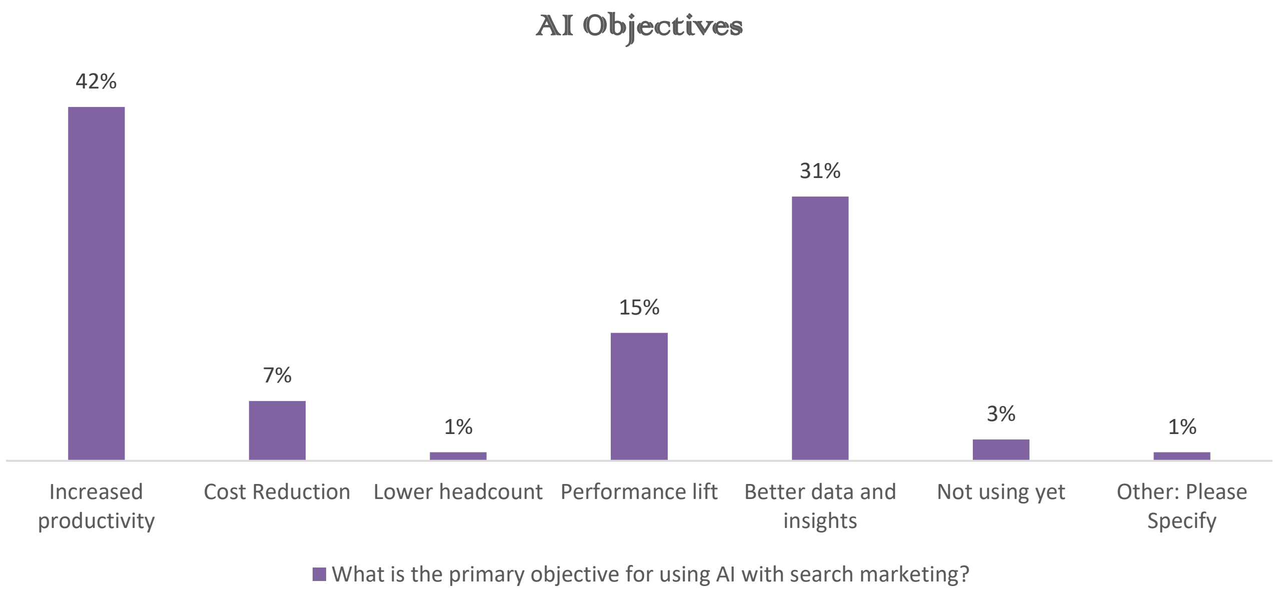


High effectiveness ratings despite moderate proficiency levels

Three-quarters of professionals rate AI as extremely or very effective for search marketing (76%), with only 2% finding it ineffective. However, self-reported proficiency reveals a gap: while nearly half rate themselves as very proficient or expert (35% and 13%), another third remains at the proficient level (34%), and 18% are still in beginner or just-starting phases. This suggests that AI tools are delivering value even for users who are still developing their skills.







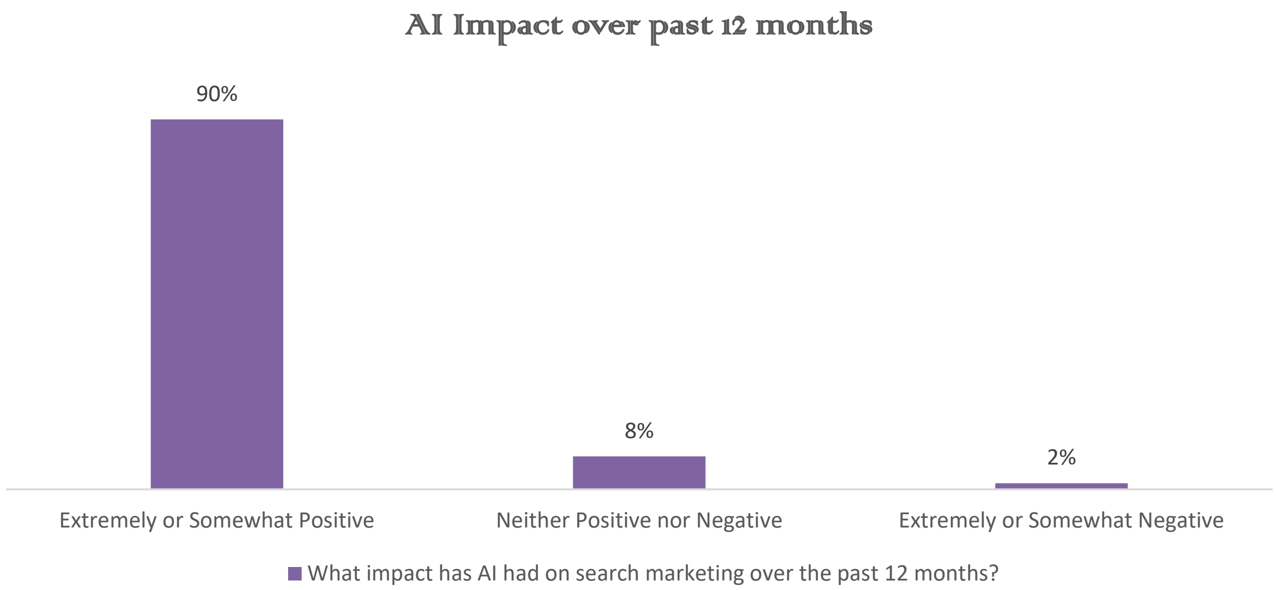
Financial return overwhelmingly defines success

Most respondents measure AI success through ROI, revenue, profit, and sales growth, with many explicitly referencing "ROI on AI investment." Conversion rates, clicks, and leads are the most common supporting KPIs. A secondary but notable theme is efficiency (e.g., hours saved, increased productivity, and reduced costs), while customer and employee satisfaction appear less frequently.

Word Cloud of Text Responses for "How are you measuring success?"

Overwhelmingly positive AI impact reported

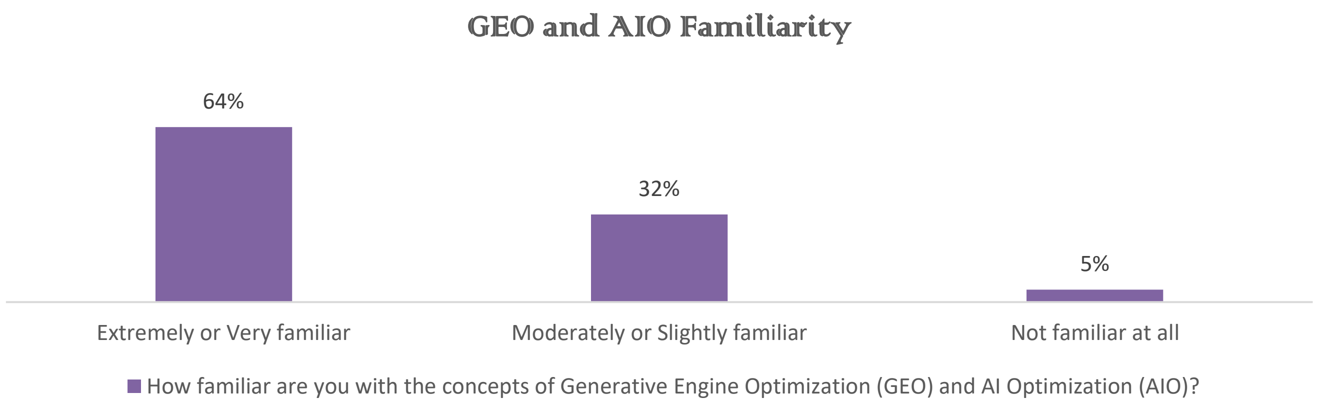
Nine out of ten professionals (90%) report that AI has had an extremely or somewhat positive impact on search marketing over the past year, with only 2% reporting negative effects and 8% reporting neutrality. This near consensus on positive outcomes aligns with the high effectiveness ratings, suggesting that AI adoption is delivering tangible value across the industry rather than generating hype without results.

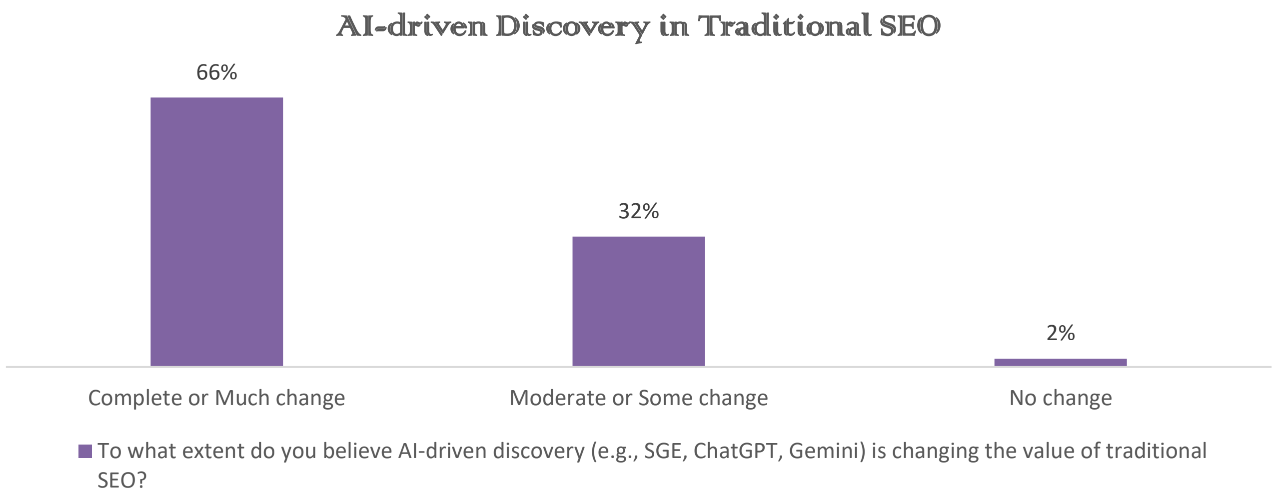


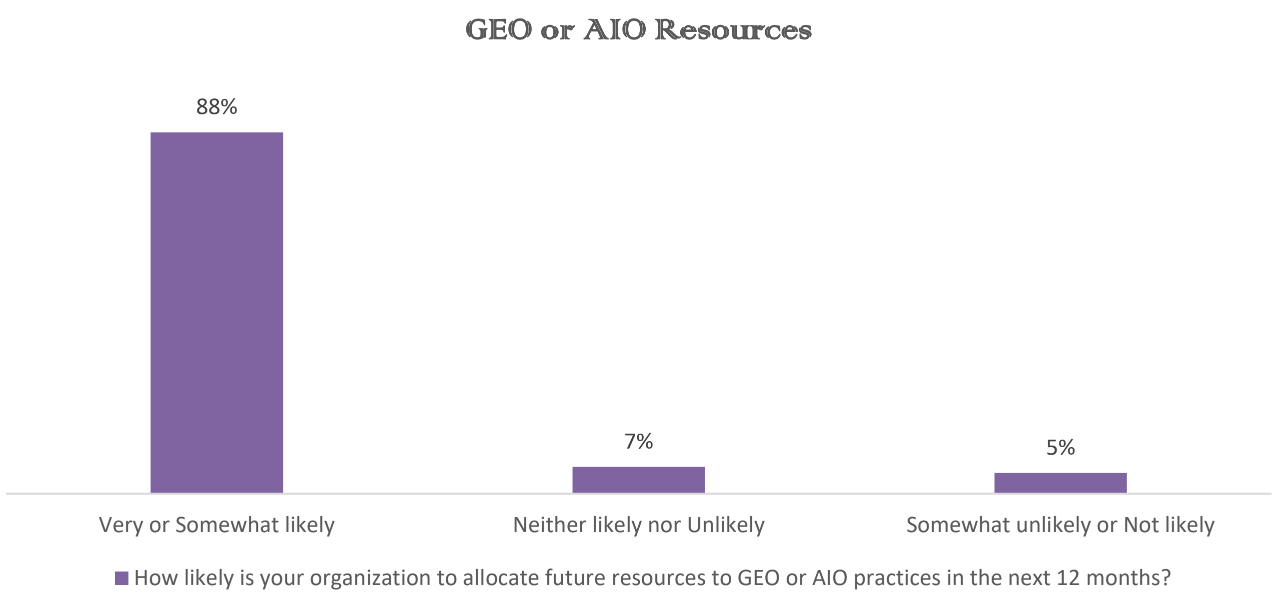
SEO

Strong commitment to AI-driven search despite industry disruption

Organizations show overwhelming intent to invest in GEO/AIO practices (88% very or somewhat likely), even as two-thirds of professionals believe AI-driven discovery is completely or significantly changing the value of traditional SEO (66%). High familiarity with GEO/AIO concepts (64% extremely or very familiar, only 5% unfamiliar) suggests the industry recognizes this shift and is actively preparing rather than resisting, viewing AI-driven search as the next evolution rather than a threat.


GEO and AIO Familiarity
64%
32%
5%
Extremely or Very familiar
Moderately or Slightly familiar
Not familiar at all
How familiar are you with the concepts of Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) and AI Optimization (AIO)?


AI-driven Discovery in Traditional SEO
66%
32%
2%
Complete or Much change
Moderate or Some change
No change
To what extent do you believe AI-driven discovery (e.g., SGE, ChatGPT, Gemini) is changing the value of traditional SEO?


GEO or AIO Resources
88%
7%
5%
Very or Somewhat likely
Neither likely nor Unlikely
Somewhat unlikely or Not likely
How likely is your organization to allocate future resources to GEO or AIO practices in the next 12 months?

AI tools are largely integrated into existing marketing technology stacks, though depth varies

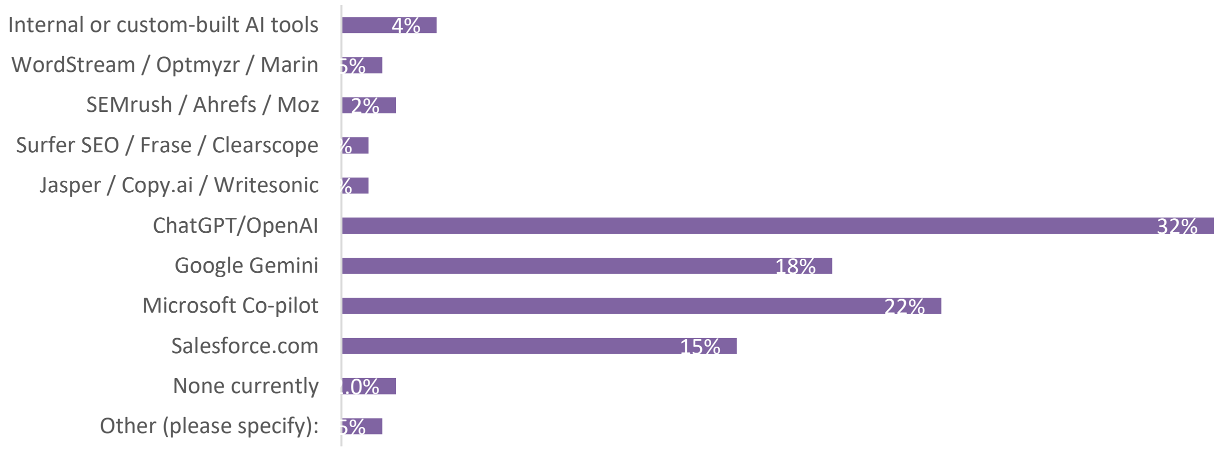
Most respondents report that AI tools for search marketing integrate well with their company's marketing technology stack, often connecting to analytics platforms, CRM systems, paid search tools, and content management systems to automate bidding, targeting, reporting, and content creation. Integration is primarily associated with improved efficiency, faster workflows, and better data-driven decision-making. However, adoption maturity varies: while many describe seamless or full-stack integration, others are still in early rollout phases, partially integrated, or not yet using AI at all.

Word Cloud of Text Responses for "How do AI technology and tools for Search Marketing integrate with your company's marketing technology stack?"

AI drives substantial content production increases

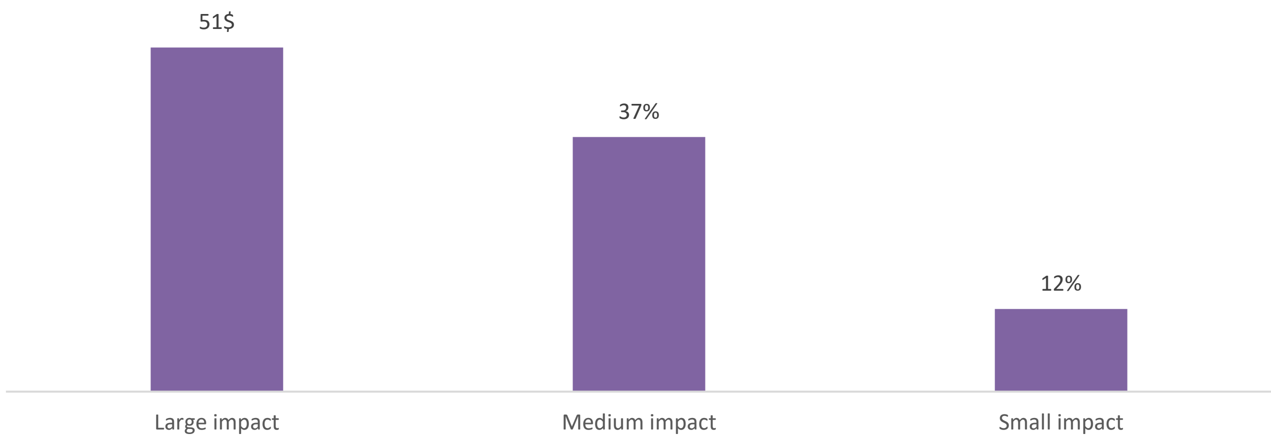
AI assistance concentrates in the 41-60% range for SEO content (33%), with 93% of professionals reporting that AI contributes to more than 20% of their content. This widespread integration has generated measurable volume increases, with half reporting a large impact on output (51%) and another 37% seeing a medium impact. The correlation between AI assistance levels and output gains suggests that AI is functioning as a productivity multiplier rather than merely a quality-enhancement tool.

AI Tools or Platforms

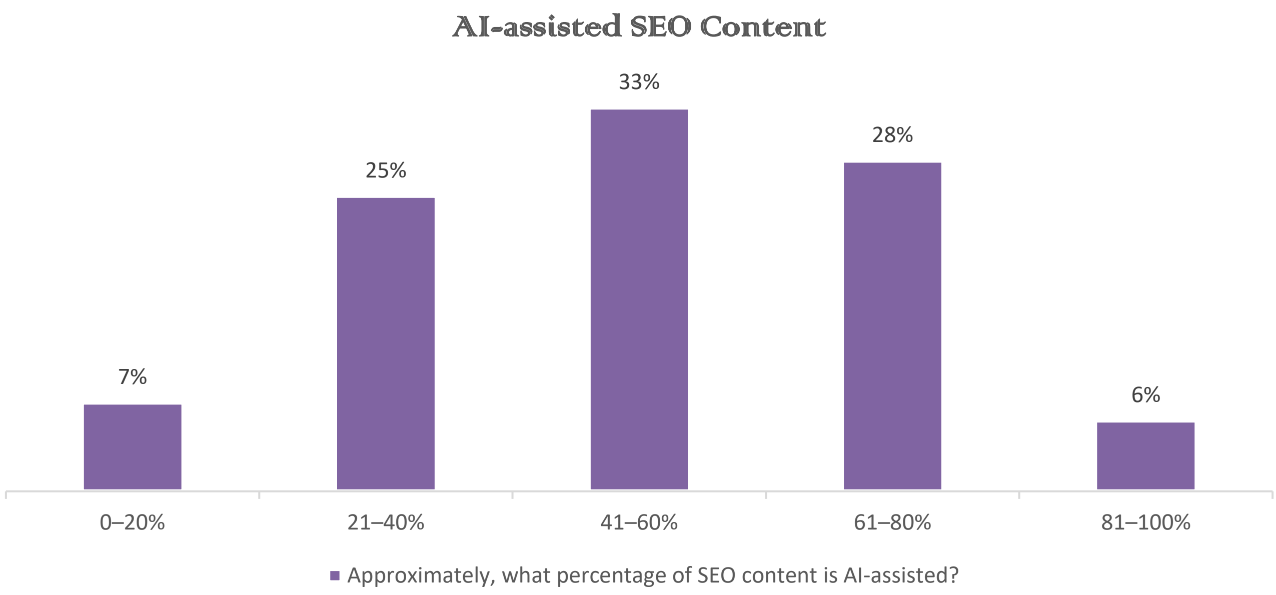


■ Which of the following AI-powered tools or platforms does your organization currently use for search marketing?

AI Impact on SEO Output

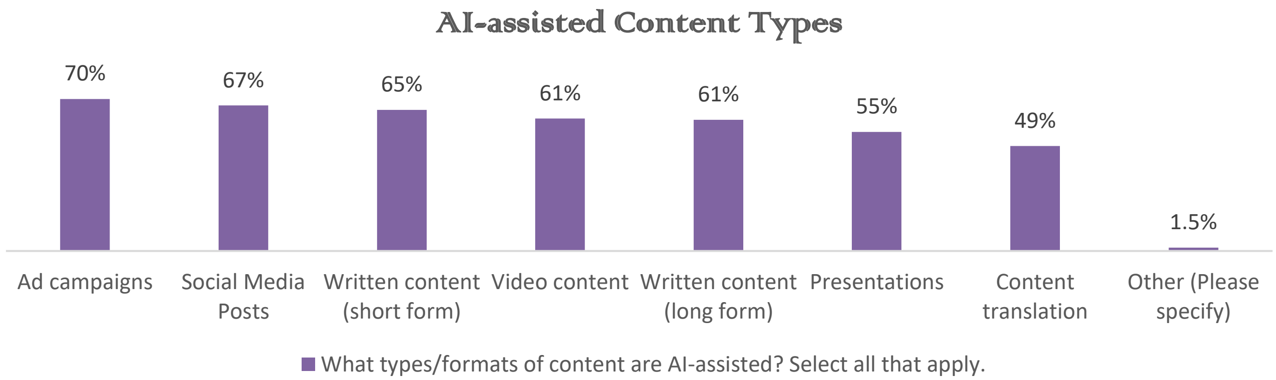


■ How much would you say that AI has impacted your SEO content output volume?

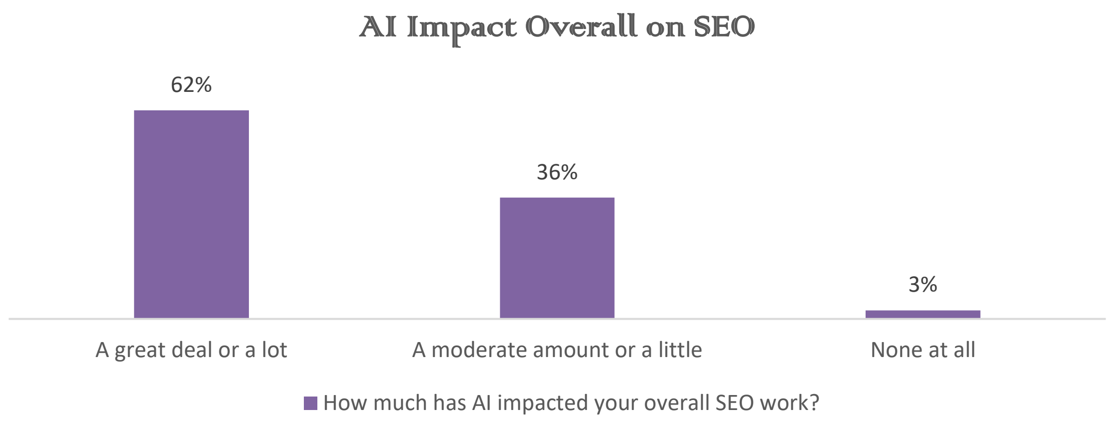


AI assistance spans diverse content formats with a concentration in promotional materials

Ad campaigns lead AI-assisted content at 70%, followed closely by social media posts (67%), short-form written content (65%), and video content (61%). The relatively even distribution across the top seven formats, all above 48%, indicates AI tools are being applied broadly rather than concentrating in text-only applications. Even traditionally labor-intensive formats such as video (61%) and presentations (55%) see majority adoption, suggesting that AI has expanded beyond simple text generation to assist with the production of complex, multimedia content across promotional and editorial contexts.



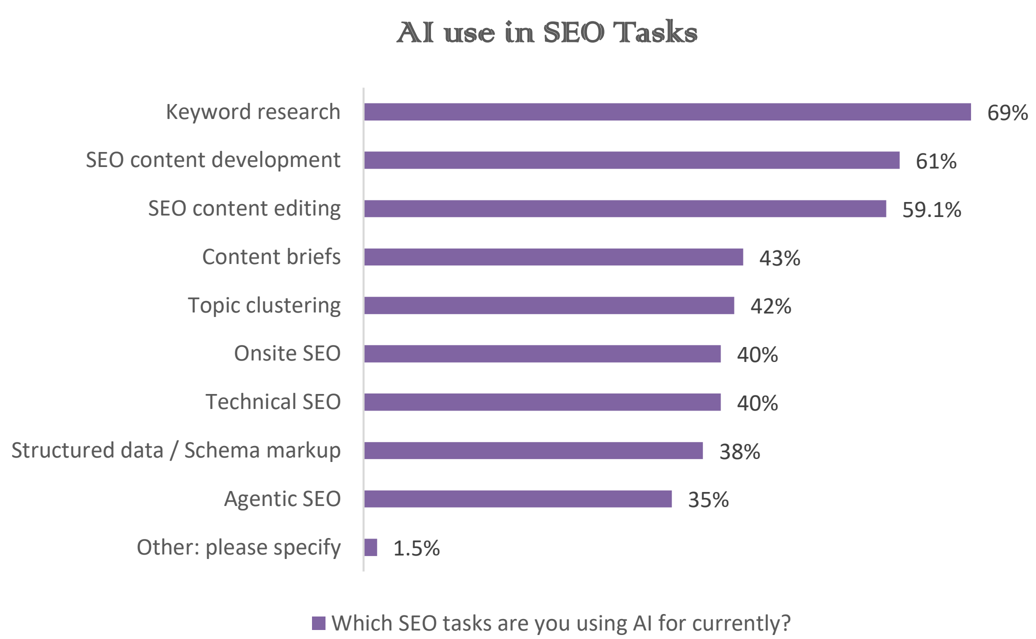
Nearly two-thirds (62%) report that AI has had a great deal or a lot of impact on overall SEO work, with another 36% reporting moderate or some impact, and only 3% reporting no impact.



Keyword research and content development dominate AI task usage

Keyword research leads AI adoption in SEO tasks at 69%, followed closely by content development (61%) and content editing (59%). The top three tasks all exceed 59%, showing strong concentration in research and content workflows.

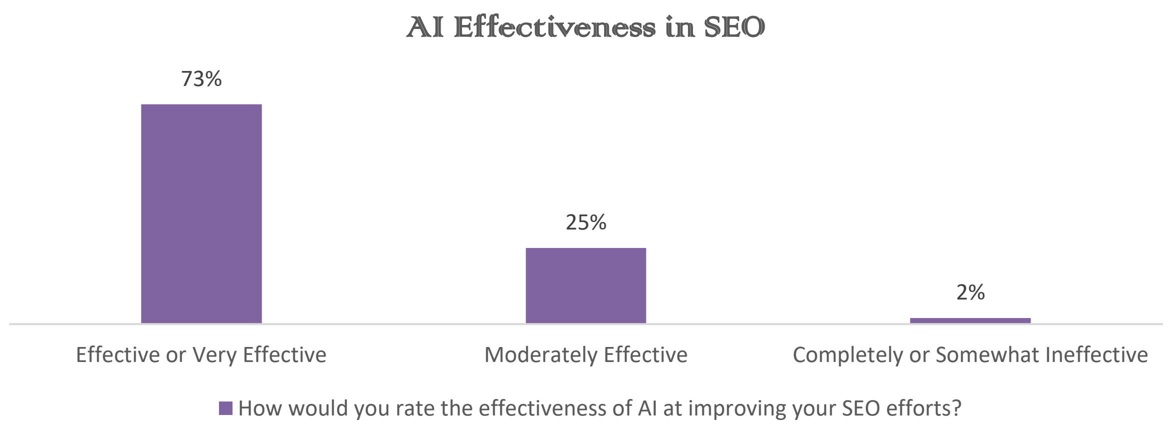
Mid-tier tasks including content briefs (43%), topic clustering (42%), and on-site SEO (40%) cluster around 40%, while technical SEO (40%), structured data/schema markup (38%), and agentic SEO (35%) show more moderate adoption, suggesting AI integration varies by task complexity and technical requirements.



Strong effectiveness ratings for AI in SEO tasks

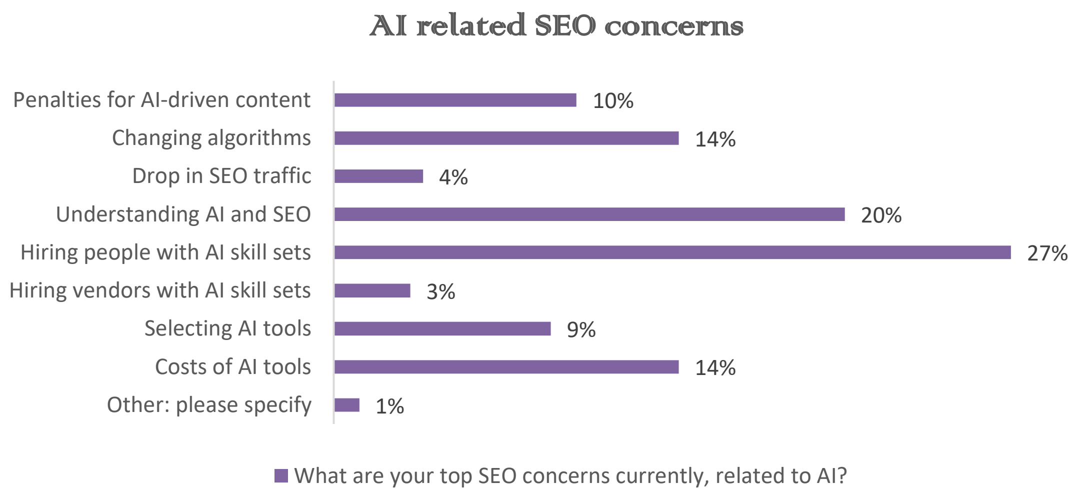
Nearly three-quarters of professionals rate AI as effective or very effective for improving SEO efforts (73%), with another quarter finding it moderately effective (25%). Only 2% report AI as completely or somewhat ineffective, indicating widespread satisfaction with AI's performance across SEO workflows.

This high perception of effectiveness aligns with the broad adoption of these tasks across keyword research, content development, and editing.



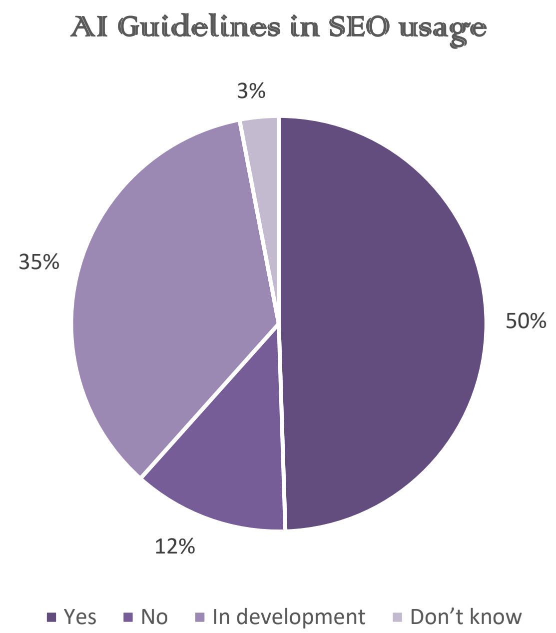
Skills and content quality emerge as primary AI concerns

Hiring people with AI skills (27%) and understanding AI (20%) are the top concerns, together accounting for 47% of responses and indicating workforce capability gaps as the dominant challenge. Penalties for AI-driven content rank third at 10%, followed by costs (14% combined for tools and sourcing), while quality issues like changing algorithms (14%) and traffic drops (4%) show relatively lower concern levels despite high adoption rates, suggesting practitioners are more worried about building internal expertise than AI's technical performance.



The majority have established AI guidelines, but gaps remain.

Nearly half of organizations have implemented AI guidelines for SEO (50%), while over a third have not yet established them (35%). Another 12% report guidelines are in development, and 3% are unsure of their status. The 51% without finalized guidelines (combining "No," "In development," and "Don't know") suggests that many organizations are operationalizing AI faster than they are formalizing governance, potentially creating challenges for consistency and quality control as adoption accelerates.



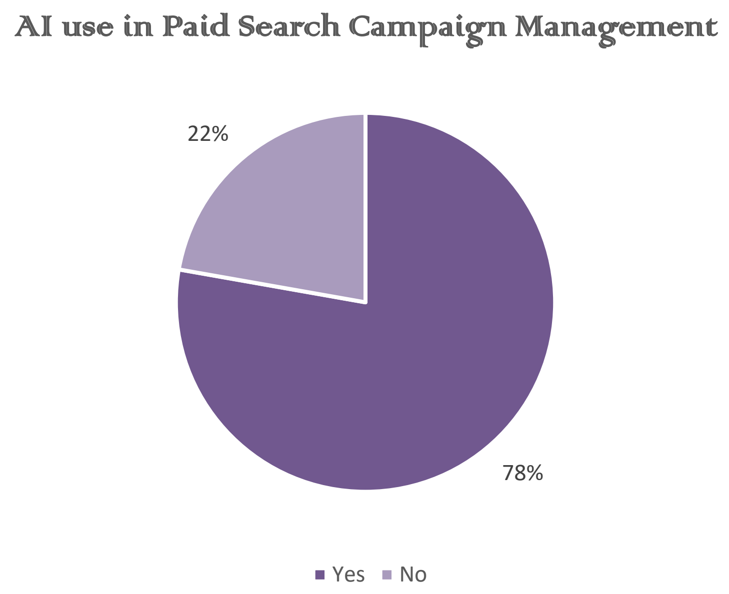
Full integration, content optimization, and ROI growth lead SEO and AI priorities for the next 12 months

Across responses, the dominant priority is deeper integration of AI into SEO workflows, moving from pilot stages to full, company-wide implementation. Many emphasize improving content quality, search visibility, and keyword targeting through AI-driven optimization, alongside increasing efficiency and productivity. Revenue growth and stronger ROI remain central goals, while training, hiring AI-skilled talent, and maintaining security and compliance emerge as important supporting priorities. Overall, organizations are focused on scaling AI adoption in ways that drive measurable performance gains without sacrificing control or quality.

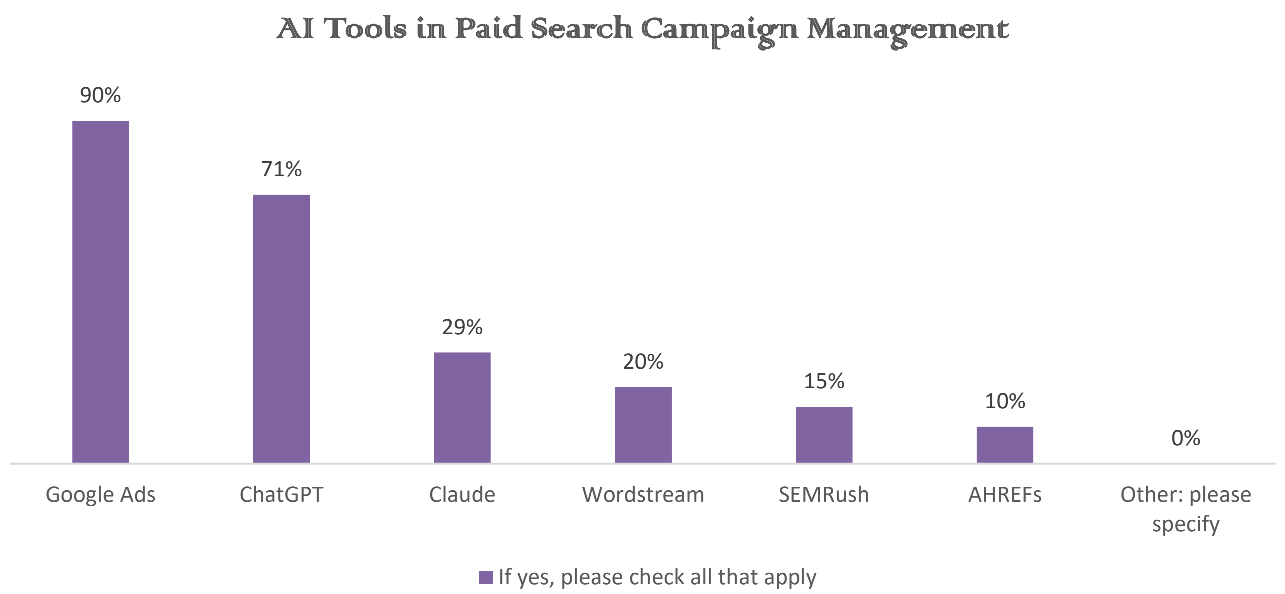
Word Cloud of Text Responses for "What is your top priority for SEO and AI in the next 12 months?"

High paid search AI adoption led by platform-native tools

Over three-quarters of professionals use AI for paid search campaign management (78%), with Google Ads' native AI features dominating at 90% adoption among users. This significantly outpaces general-purpose tools like ChatGPT (71%) and Claude (29%), as well as specialized platforms Wordstream (20%) and SEMrush (15%).

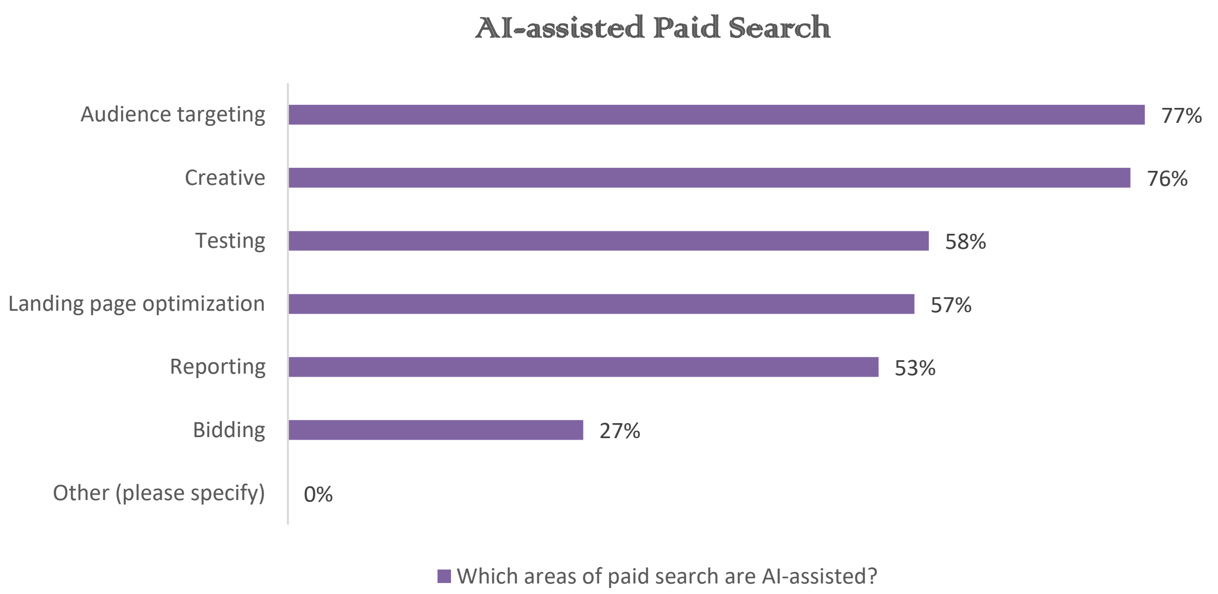


The preference for Google Ads' integrated AI capabilities suggests that practitioners prioritize platform-specific optimization tools that integrate directly into their campaign workflows over external solutions.



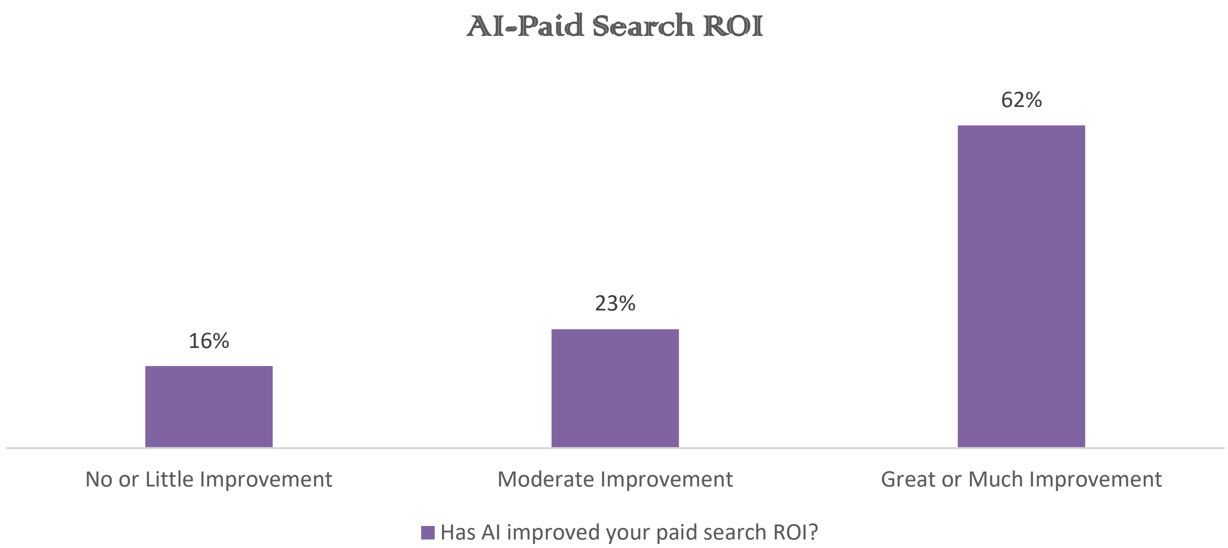
AI assists across the paid search lifecycle with emphasis on targeting and creative

Audience targeting leads AI-assisted paid search areas at 77%, closely followed by creative development at 76%, indicating AI's strength in campaign setup and messaging. Testing (58%), landing page optimization (57%), and reporting (53%) show more moderate adoption in the 53-58% range, while bidding lags significantly at 27%. This distribution suggests practitioners trust AI most for research and content tasks but remain more cautious with automated bid management despite its potential for real-time optimization.



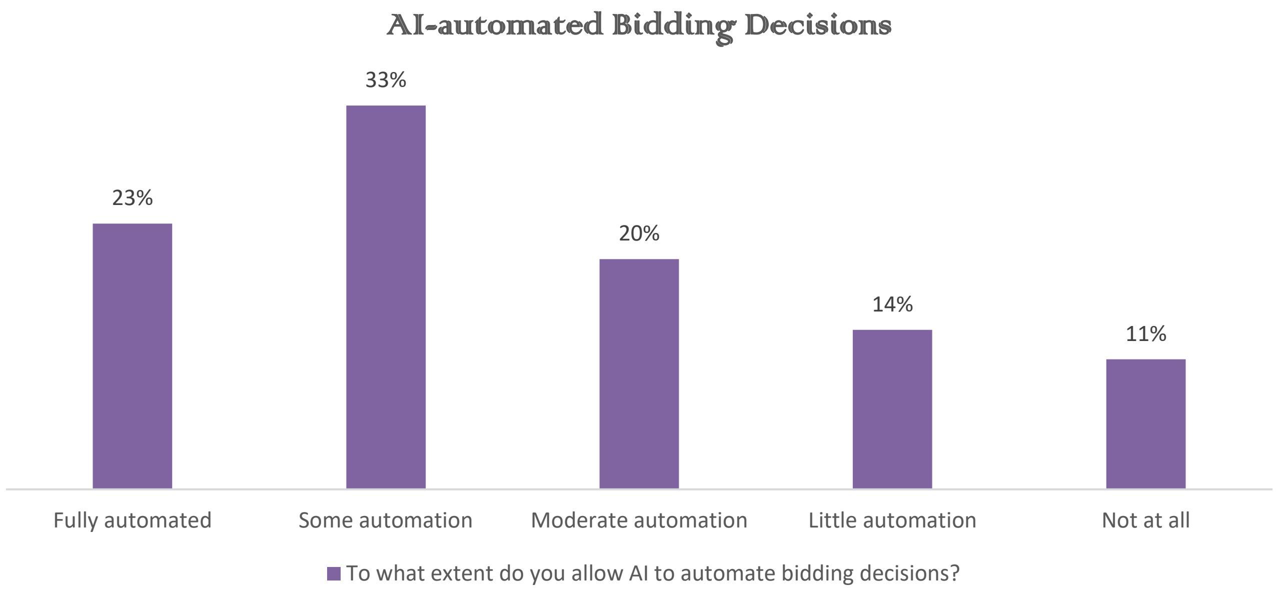
Strong ROI gains from AI in paid search

Nearly two-thirds report AI has delivered great or much improvement to paid search ROI (62%), with another 28% seeing moderate improvement. Only 16% experience no or little improvement, indicating AI's effectiveness extends beyond task automation to measurable financial returns.

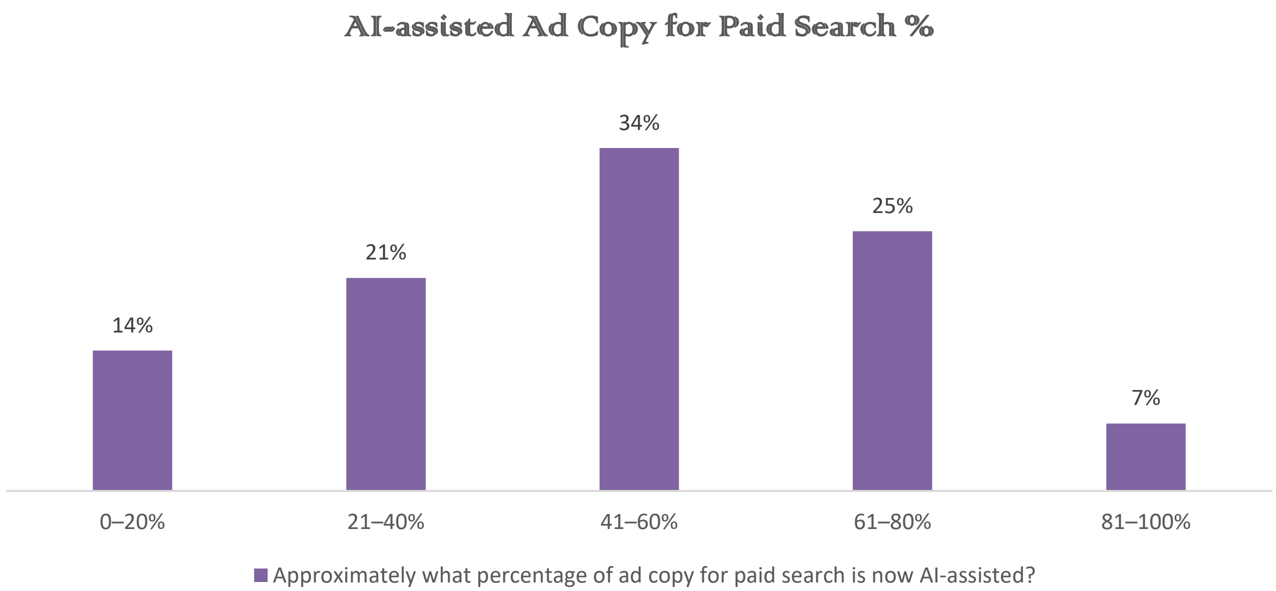


Cautious bidding automation contrasts with aggressive creative adoption

While 75% allow some AI-automated bidding, only 23% permit full automation, with most clustering at "some" (33%) or "moderate" (20%), indicating hesitancy regarding financial decisions.

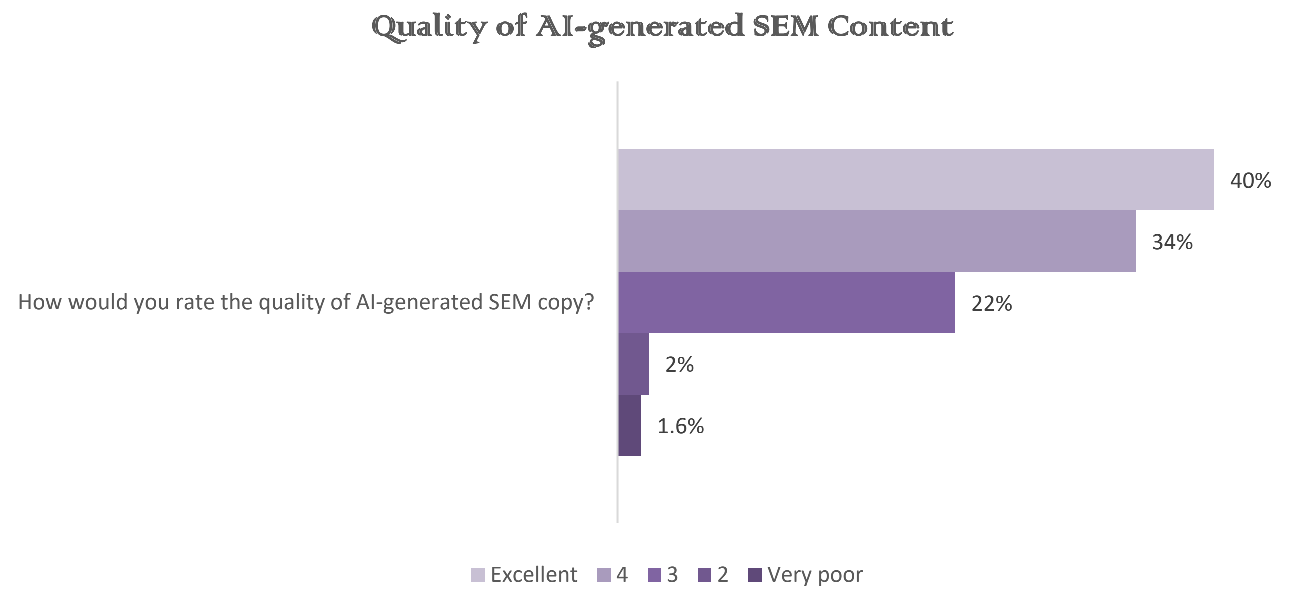


This conservative approach contrasts sharply with ad copy creation, where 59% report AI contributes to 41-80% of their content, and only 7% reach near-complete automation. The disparity reveals practitioners trust AI more for creative execution than budget allocation, despite earlier data showing strong ROI gains, suggesting lingering concerns about relinquishing financial control even as AI proves effective.

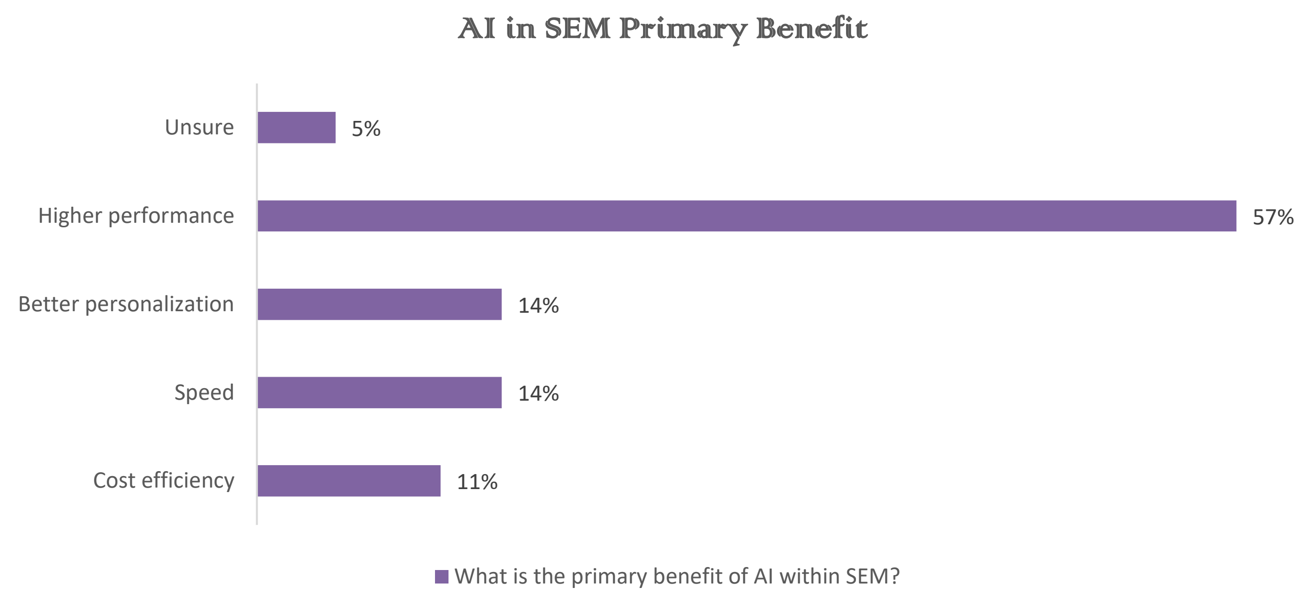


Performance gains drive SEM AI adoption despite quality concerns

Higher performance is AI's primary SEM benefit, at 57%, far exceeding speed (14%), personalization (14%), and cost efficiency (11%). However, quality perceptions reveal tension: while 74% rate AI-generated SEM copy as good to excellent (40% excellent, 34% rating "4"), only 22% rate it as middling ("3") and just 4% rate it poorly.



This suggests practitioners accept that AI's performance improvements justify adoption even when content quality does not consistently reach human-level excellence, prioritizing measurable results over creative perfection.



Automation, performance optimization, and ROI growth define SEM and AI priorities for the next 12 months

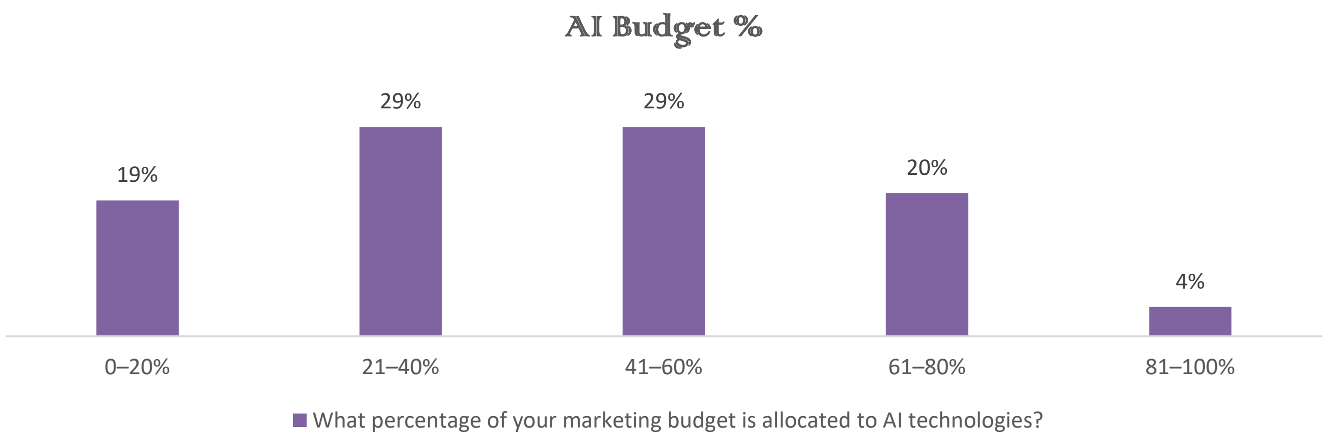
Most respondents identify improving campaign performance and maximizing ROI as their top priority, with a strong emphasis on AI-driven bidding, audience targeting, ad personalization, and conversion optimization. Automation is a dominant theme, as many aim to reduce costs, increase efficiency, and move toward more autonomous campaign management. Broader integration across departments and staff training also surface as key goals, signaling a push to scale AI-powered SEM beyond experimentation and into fully embedded, performance-driven systems.

Word Cloud of Text Responses for "What is your top priority for SEM and AI in the next 12 months?"

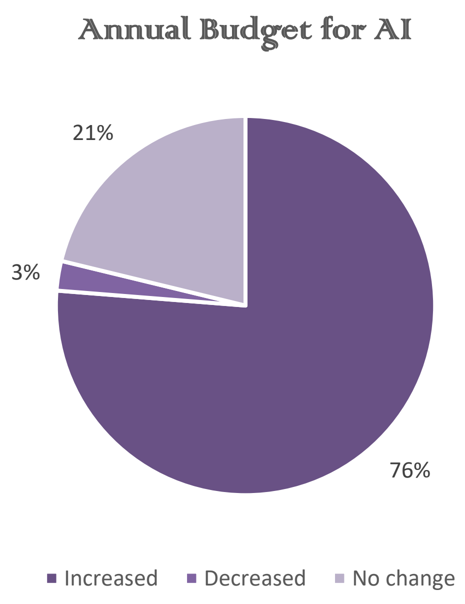
Budget

Growing AI budgets concentrate on moderate allocation ranges

Budget allocations cluster in the 21-60% range, with equal peaks at 21-40% and 41-60% (both at 29%), suggesting most organizations allocate moderate amounts rather than minimal or near-total investments. Only 4% allocate 81-100% of marketing budgets to AI, indicating strategic integration alongside traditional approaches rather than complete replacement of existing tools and methods.

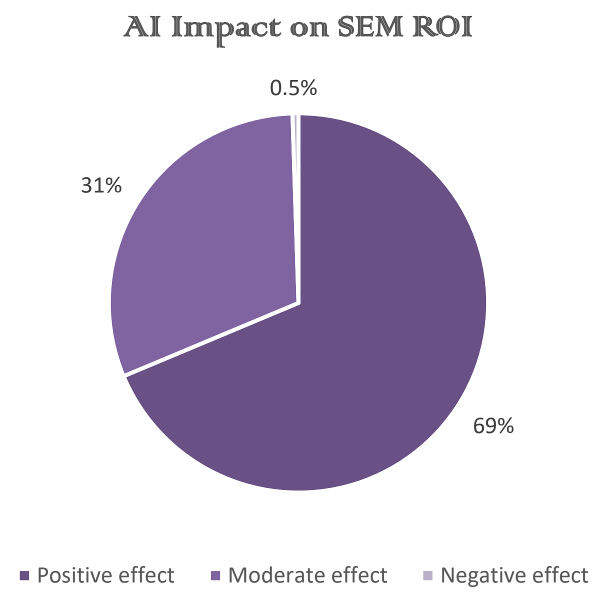


Three-quarters of organizations increased their annual AI budgets (76%), with only 3% decreasing and 21% maintaining current levels.

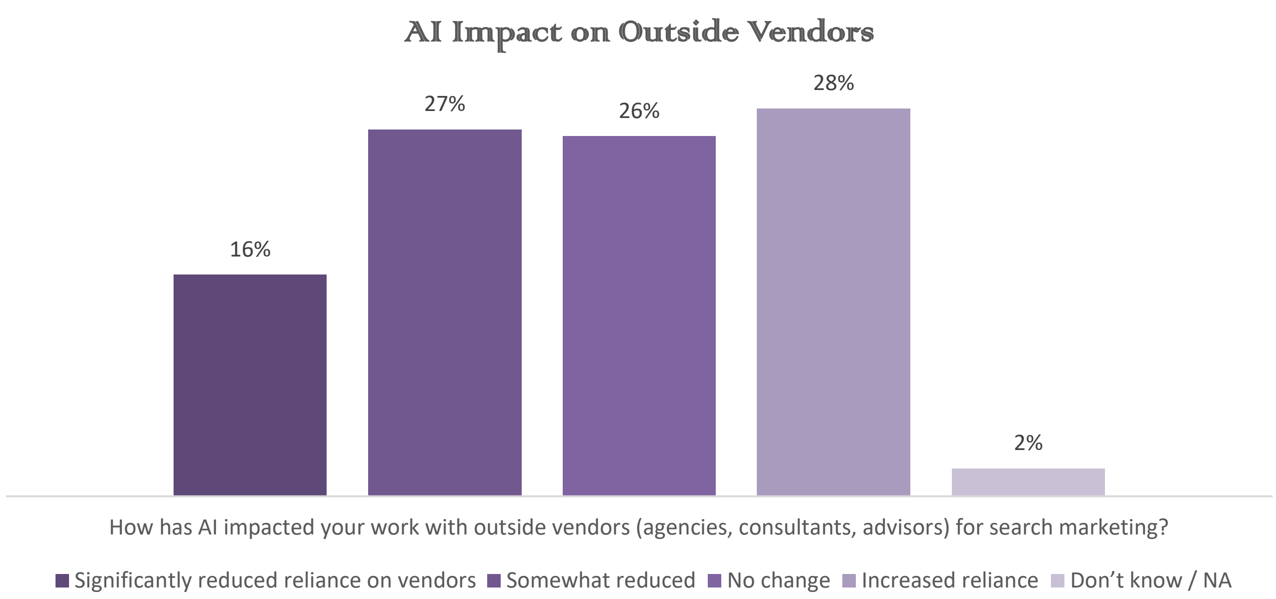


Strong SEM ROI gains coincide with reduced vendor reliance

AI delivers overwhelmingly positive SEM ROI impact, with 69% reporting positive effects and 31% seeing moderate improvements—only 1% experience negative outcomes. Simultaneously, 43% have reduced reliance on outside vendors (16% significantly, 27% somewhat), while 28% have increased reliance on outside vendors and 26% have seen no change.

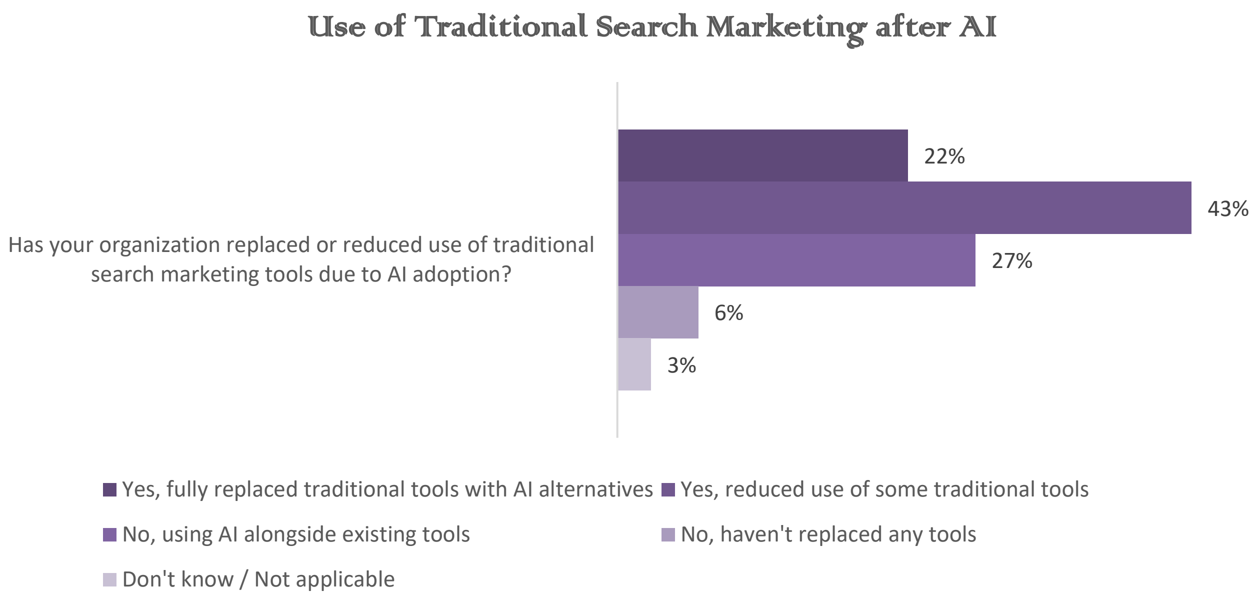


This mixed vendor impact suggests AI enables greater in-house capability for some organizations while others leverage external AI expertise, aligning with earlier findings that internal teams dominate AI implementation at 80%.

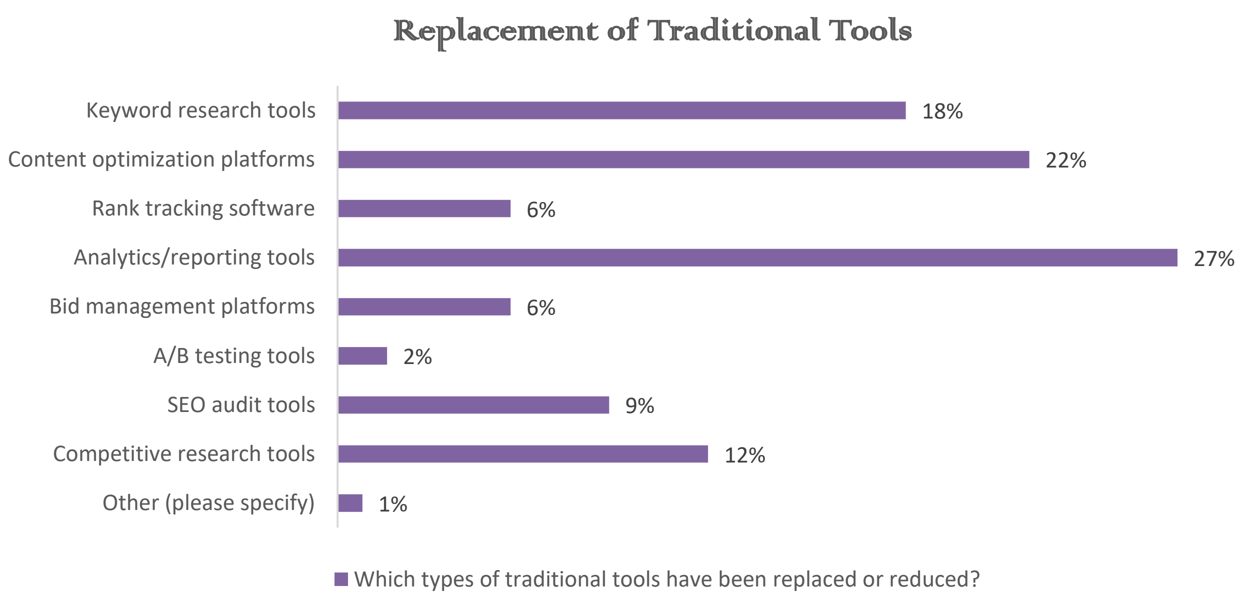


Selective tool replacement focused on analytics and optimization

Nearly two-thirds of organizations have replaced or reduced traditional tools (22% fully replaced, 43% reduced), with analytics/reporting leading displacement at 27%, followed by content optimization platforms (22%) and keyword research tools (18%).

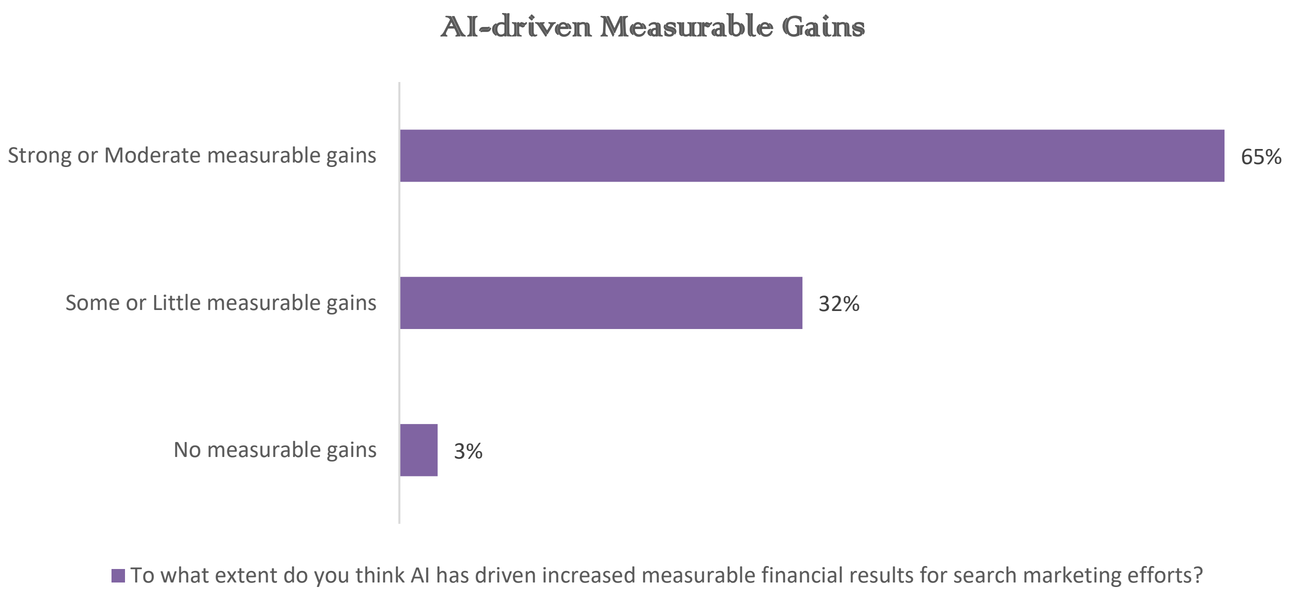


Mission-critical tools like A/B testing (2%), rank tracking (6%), and bid management (6%) show minimal replacement, suggesting practitioners substitute AI for analysis and content tasks while maintaining specialized tools for testing and performance monitoring. However, 27% continue to use AI alongside existing tools without reducing use, indicating that hybrid approaches remain common.



Widespread financial gains validate AI investment

Two-thirds report AI has driven strong or moderate measurable financial gains for search marketing (65%), with another 32% seeing some or little gains—only 3% report no measurable impact. This 97% rate of at least some financial benefit validates the industry's aggressive adoption patterns and growing budgets, confirming AI delivers tangible ROI beyond operational improvements in speed, content volume, and workflow efficiency documented throughout the survey.

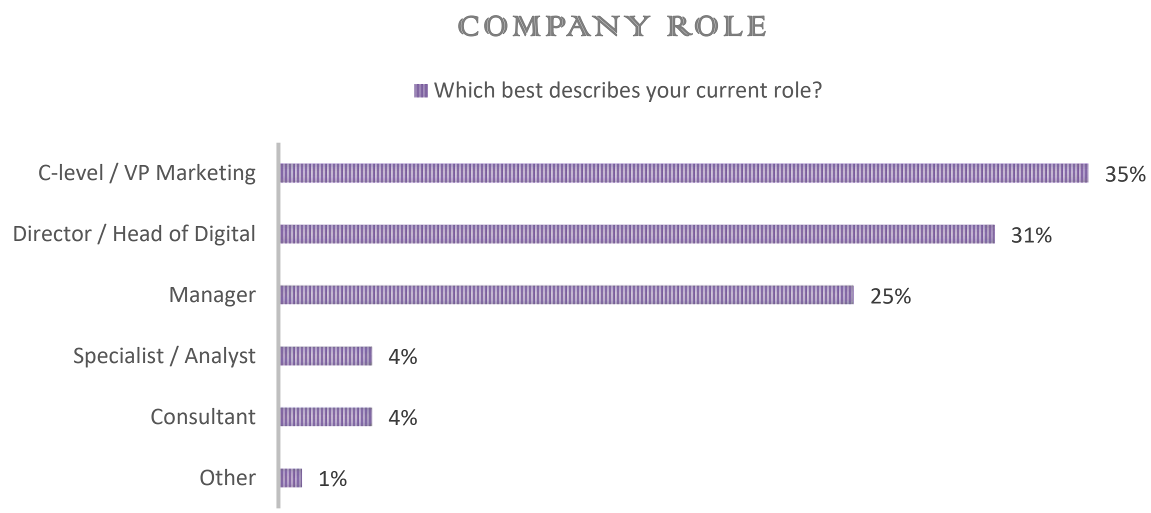

AI-driven Measurable Gains
Strong or Moderate measurable gains
65%
Some or Little measurable gains
32%
No measurable gains
3%
To what extent do you think AI has driven increased measurable financial results for search marketing efforts?

Sample Characteristics

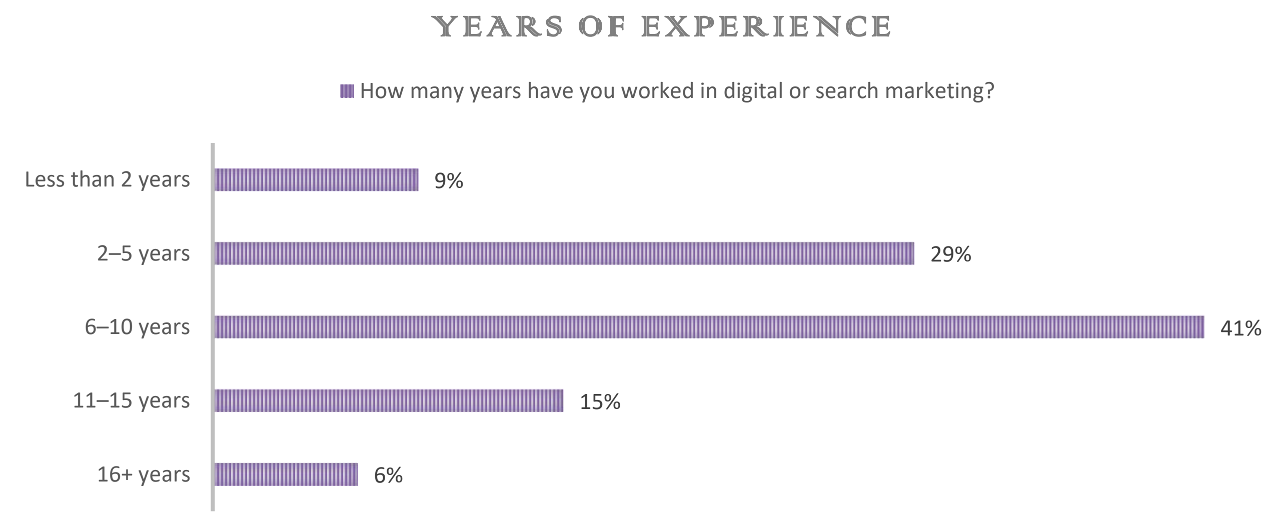
The survey captured responses from search marketing professionals across the United States, representing a mix of seniority levels, company sizes, and industry verticals. This diverse sample of experienced marketing leaders across company sizes, industries, and regions provides a comprehensive view of AI adoption patterns in search marketing practice.

Professional Profile

The sample skewed toward senior practitioners, with 90% holding leadership positions: C-level/VP Marketing (35%), Director/Head of Digital (31%), and Manager (25%). Specialists/Analysts and consultants each comprised 4% of respondents. This concentration of decision-makers and strategic leaders provides valuable insight into how AI adoption decisions are made at the organizational level.

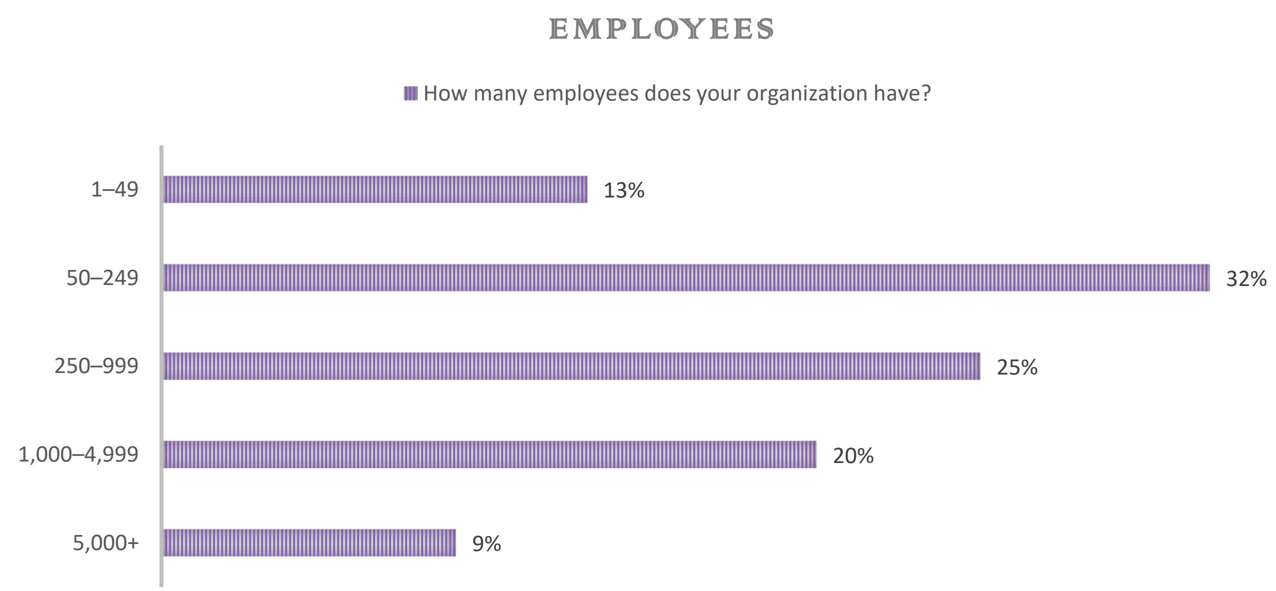


Experience levels reflected substantial industry tenure, with 71% having 6+ years in digital or search marketing. The largest segment (41%) reported 6-10 years of experience, followed by 2-5 years (29%) and 11-15 years (15%). Only 9% had less than two years of experience, indicating responses came predominantly from seasoned professionals navigating AI's impact on established workflows.

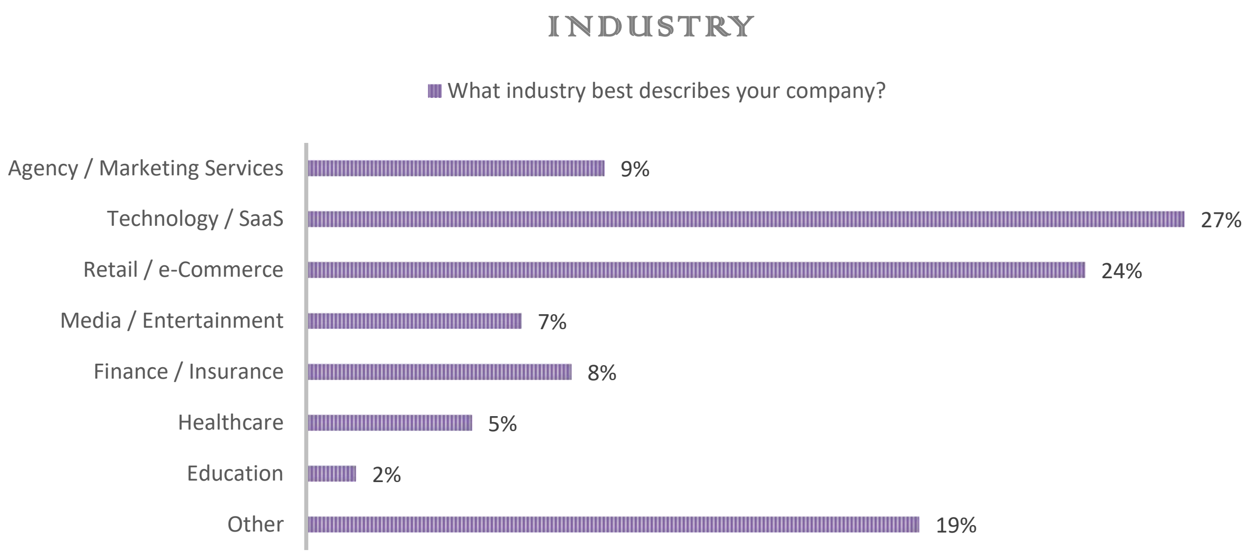


Organizational Context

Respondents represented a broad range of organization sizes. Mid-market companies (50-249 employees) comprised the largest segment at 32%, followed by 250-999 employees (25%) and 1,000-4,999 employees (20%). Small organizations (1-49 employees) accounted for 13%, while enterprise companies with 5,000+ employees represented 9%. This distribution ensures insights reflect AI adoption across different organizational resource levels and operational scales.

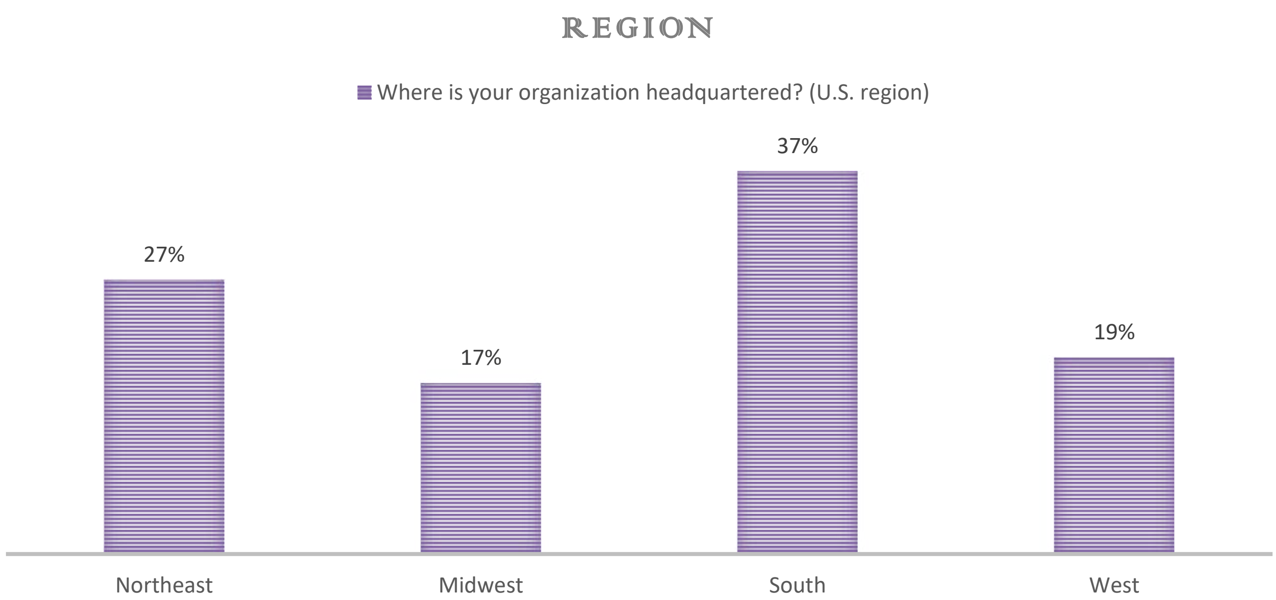


Industry representation was led by Technology/SaaS (27%), Retail/E-Commerce (24%), and a diverse "Other" category (19%). Agency/Marketing Services (9%), Finance/Insurance (8%), Media/Entertainment (7%), Healthcare (5%), and Education (2%) rounded out the sample, providing a cross-industry perspective on AI integration in search marketing.

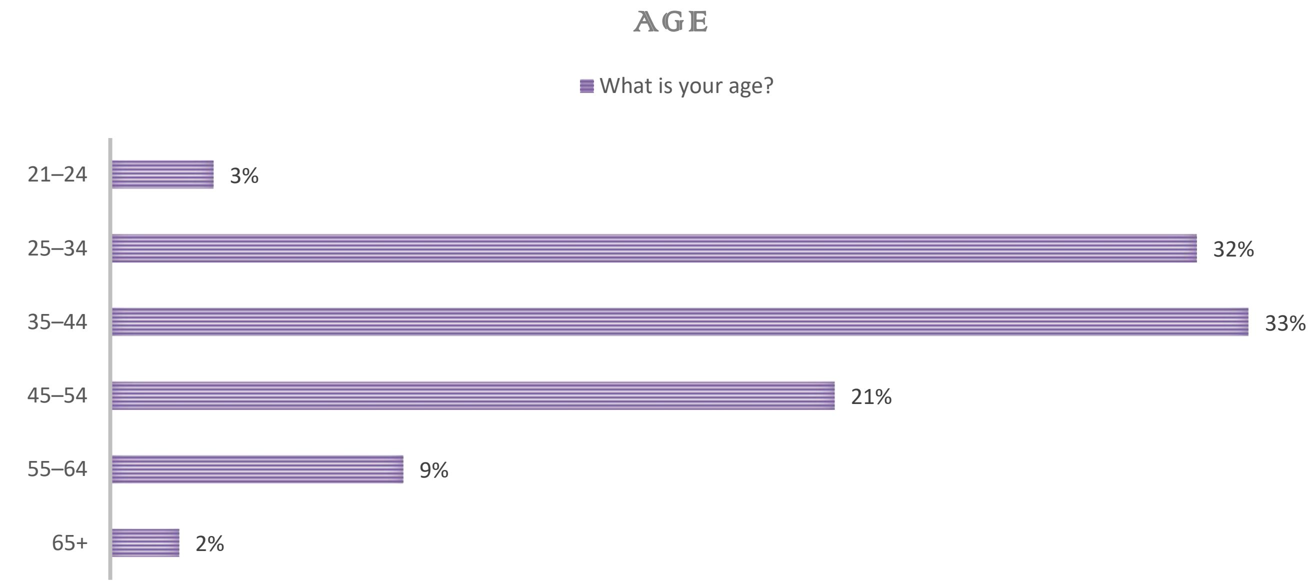


Geographic and Demographic Profile

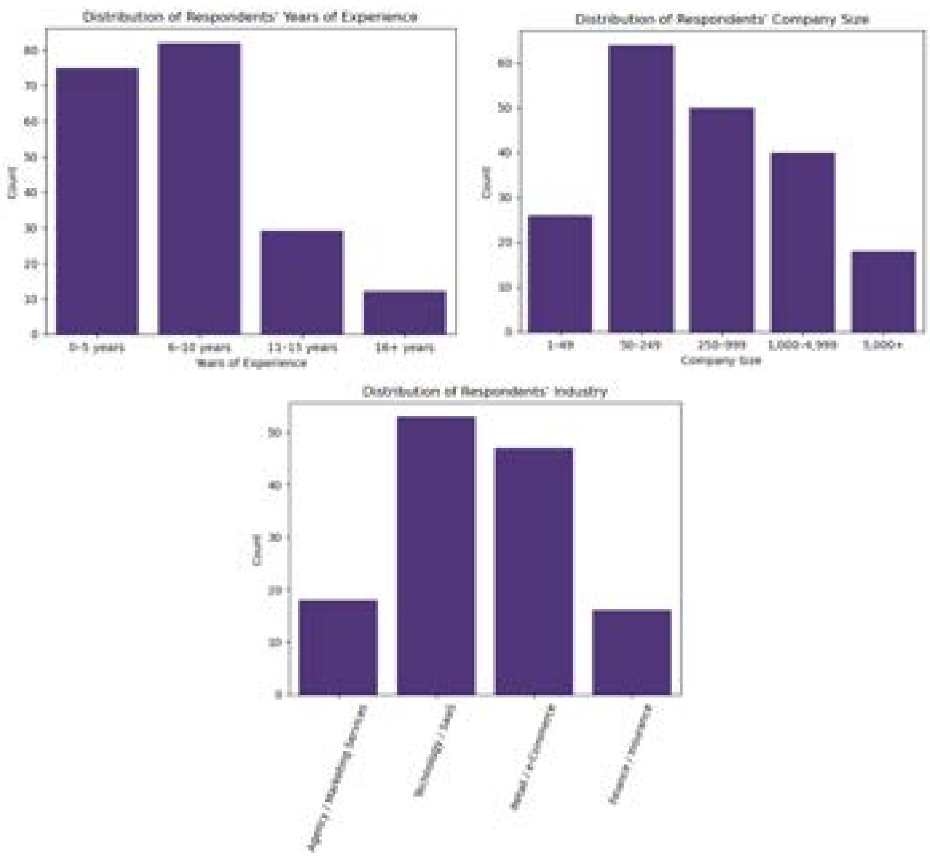
Regional distribution favored the South (37%), followed by the Northeast (27%), West (19%), and Midwest (17%), roughly aligning with U.S. population and business concentration patterns.



Age distribution centered on professionals in their prime career years: 25-34 (32%) and 35-44 (33%) together represented nearly two-thirds of respondents. The 45-54 age group comprised 21%, while younger professionals (21-24, 3%) and older professionals (55-64, 9%; 65+, 2%) were less represented.



The gender distribution showed 60% male and 40% female respondents, reflecting the ongoing gender composition of technology and marketing leadership roles.



Deep Dive

Part 1. AI Adoption and Integration

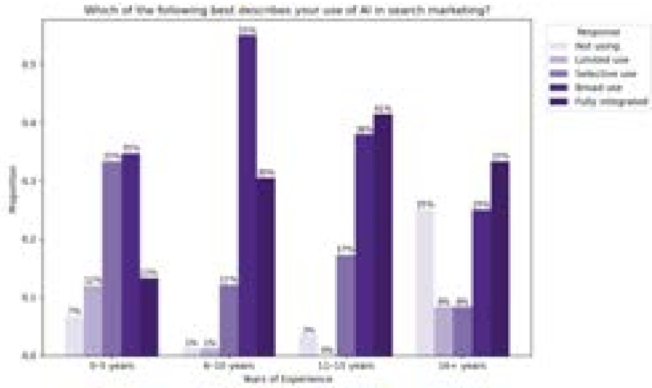
AI adoption is widespread across experience levels, company sizes, and industries, but the intensity and depth of integration vary by structural characteristics. Mid-career professionals and Technology/SaaS firms consistently report the highest levels of operational embedding, including greater workflow inclusion, automation, and AI-assisted output. In contrast, early-career professionals, the most senior respondents, and more traditional industries demonstrate more selective or moderate integration patterns.

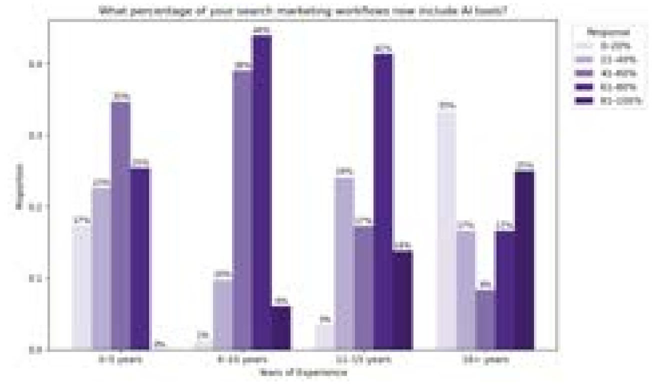
Influence Peaks for Mid-Level Professionals

AI is widely influencing search marketing across all experience levels, but its impact tends to weaken for the most- and least-tenured respondents. Professionals with 6-10 years of experience report the highest rates of AI influencing strategy "a lot" or "extremely" (76%), while those with 11–15 years also show strong influence.

Early-career professionals (0-5 years) report meaningful AI influence but are more likely to describe it as moderate rather than extreme. This suggests that while AI tools are broadly accessible, deeper strategic integration tends to increase with seniority and decision-making authority.

Senior professionals are split on AI's influence, with 50% saying that AI's influence is slim, and 50% reporting that it is significant.



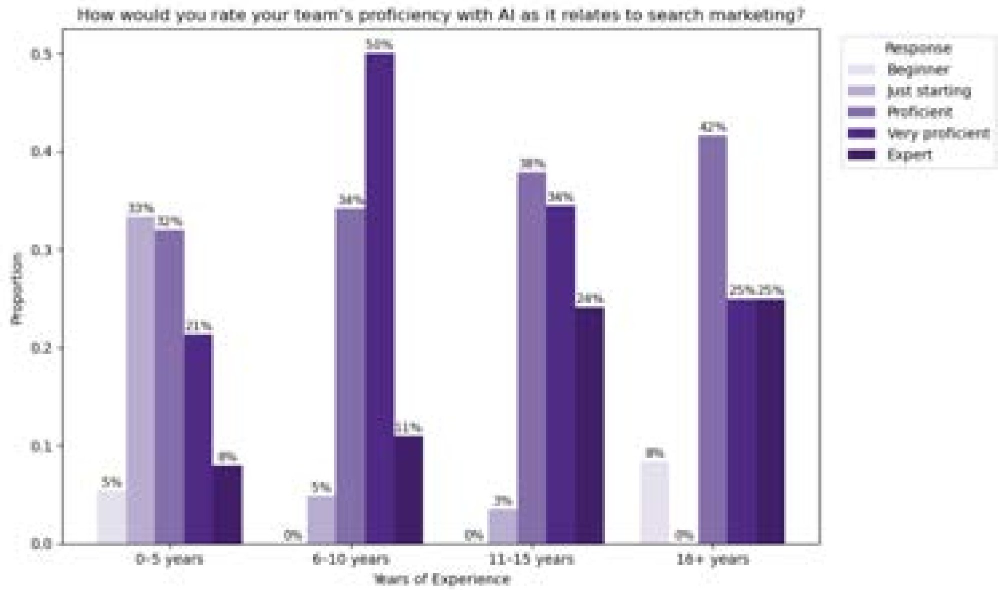


Senior Marketers Are More Likely to Opt Out

Despite AI's broad adoption, the most tenured professionals (16+ years) report the highest rate of non-use (25%), compared to fewer than 8% in all other groups. The strongest integration appears in mid-career professionals: 85% of those with 6-10 years and 79% of those with 11-15 years report broad use or full integration of AI.

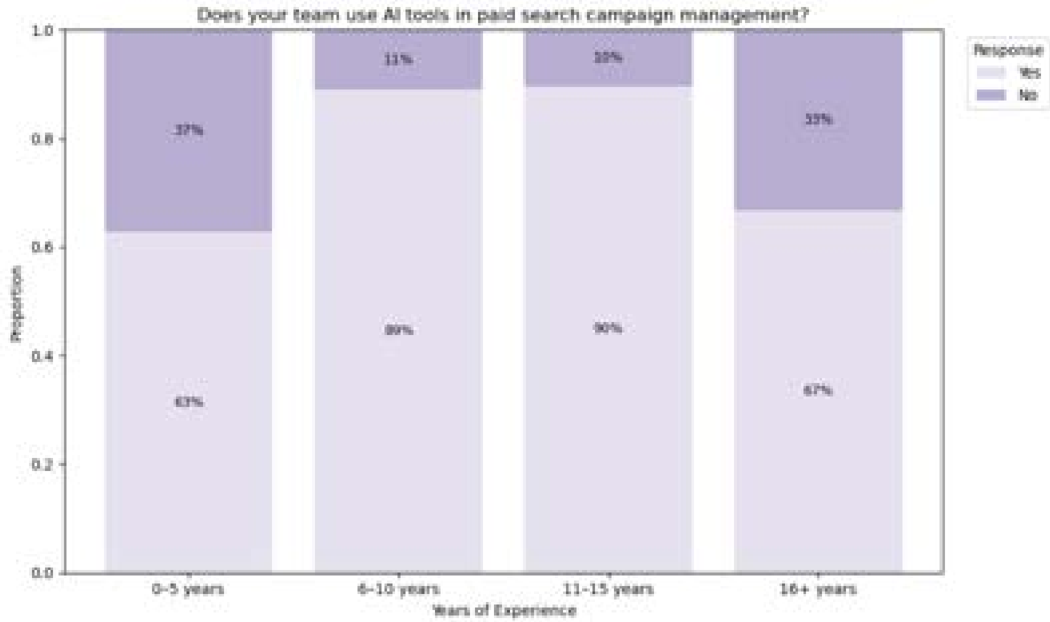
Workflow inclusion follows a similar pattern. One-third (33%) of the 16+ group report AI inclusion in only 0–20% of workflows, the highest among experience groups.

Taken together, this suggests that mid-career marketers are driving AI adoption most aggressively, while the most senior professionals are more cautious about embedding AI deeply into operations.



Senior Marketers are Most Confident in AI Proficiency

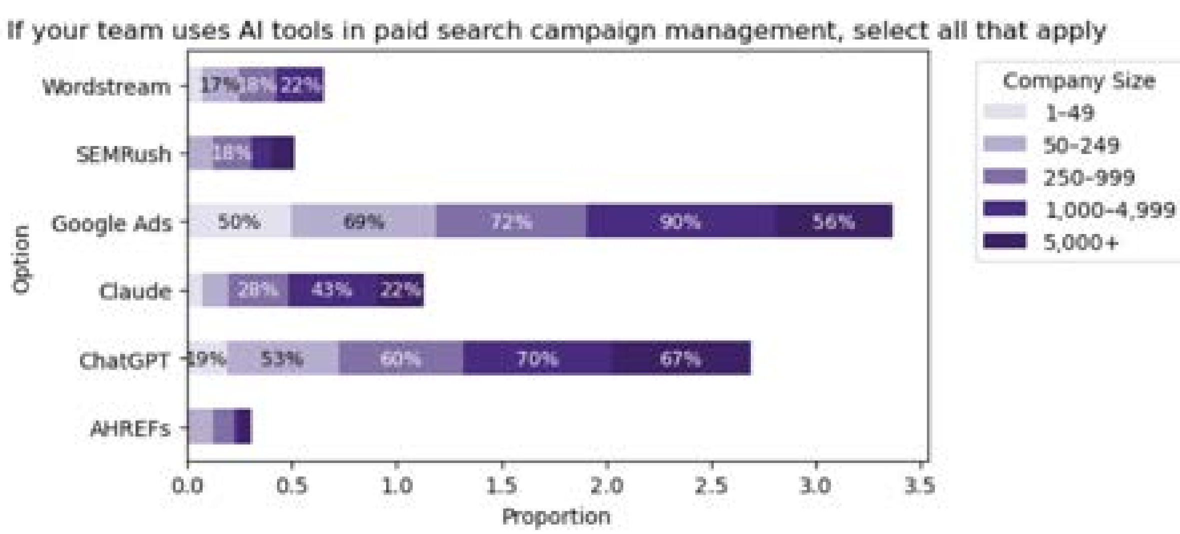
The most tenured professionals (16+ years) were most frequently selected as "expert" for their team's proficiency with AI as it related to search marketing (25%). This percentage decreases across age groups, suggesting that younger professionals are the most skeptical of their team's AI expertise.



AI Use in Paid Search Peaks in Mid-Career

AI adoption in paid search campaign management is highest among professionals with 6–15 years of experience: 89% (6- 10 years) and 90% (11- 15 years) report using AI tools.

Usage drops among the least and most experienced groups, with 63% of 0-5-year professionals and 67% of 16+ year professionals reporting adoption. This pattern reinforces the broader trend: mid-career marketers are the most operationally integrated with AI tools, while younger professionals may have less exposure and senior professionals may be more selective.



Note. Respondents shown are only those who selected that they did use AI tools in paid search campaign management.

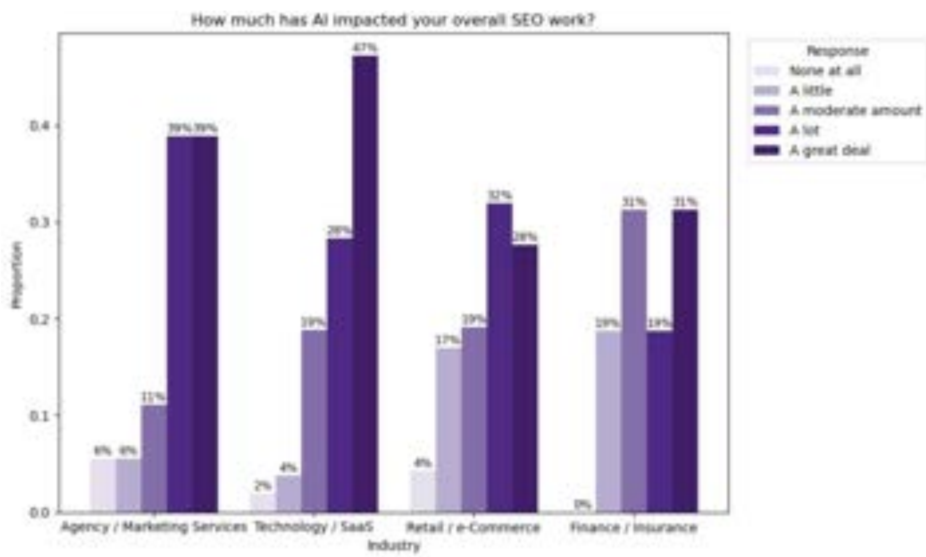
Google Ads and ChatGPT Lead Paid Search AI Tool Adoption Across Company Sizes

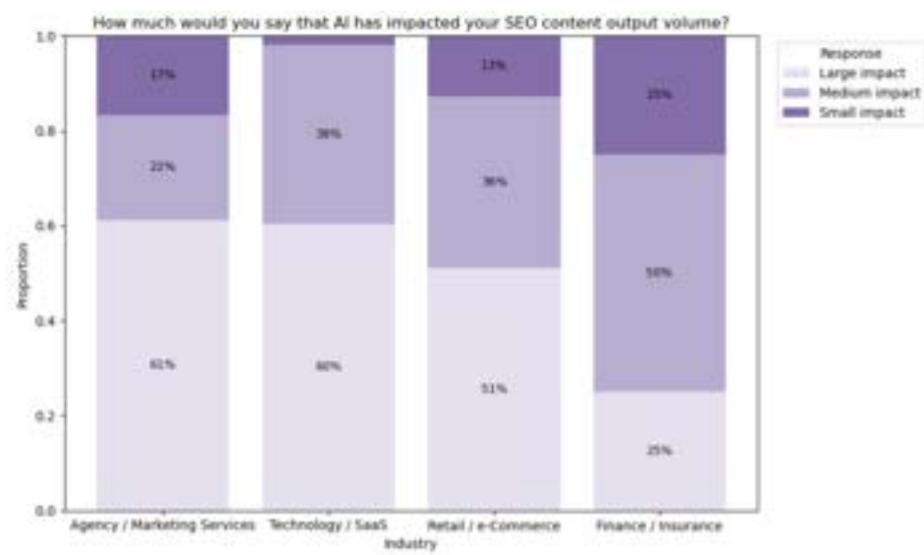
Among teams that use AI in paid search campaign management, Google Ads is the most widely used AI-enabled platform. Adoption is especially strong among mid-sized companies; Google Ads was selected by 90% of respondents from companies with 1,000-4,999 employees.

ChatGPT ranks second overall and is most heavily used by larger organizations:

- 70% of companies with 1,000-4,999 employees
- 67% of companies with 5,000+ employees

This suggests that while Google's native AI tools dominate, larger companies are layering in generative AI tools for additional optimization and analysis.

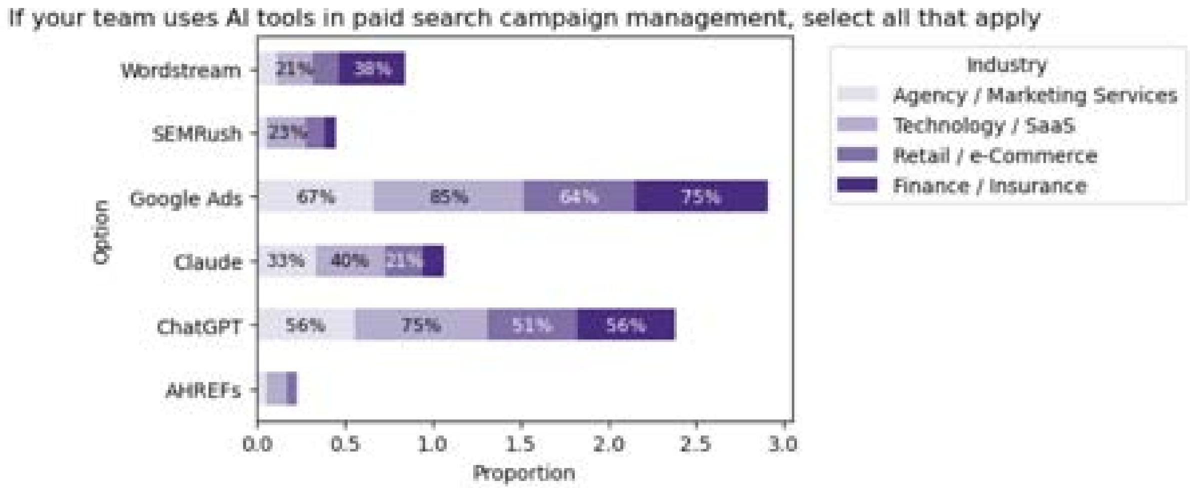




AI's Impact on SEO Varies by Industry

Agency/Marketing Services report the strongest impact of AI on SEO, with 78% stating AI has affected their SEO work "a lot" or "a great deal." Finance/Insurance reports the lowest high-impact rate at 50%.

The same pattern appears in SEO content output. Agencies again lead, with 61% reporting major volume impact, while Finance/Insurance trails at 25%. Industries most directly tied to digital marketing execution appear to be integrating AI most aggressively.



Note. Respondents shown are only those who selected that they did use AI tools in paid search campaign management.

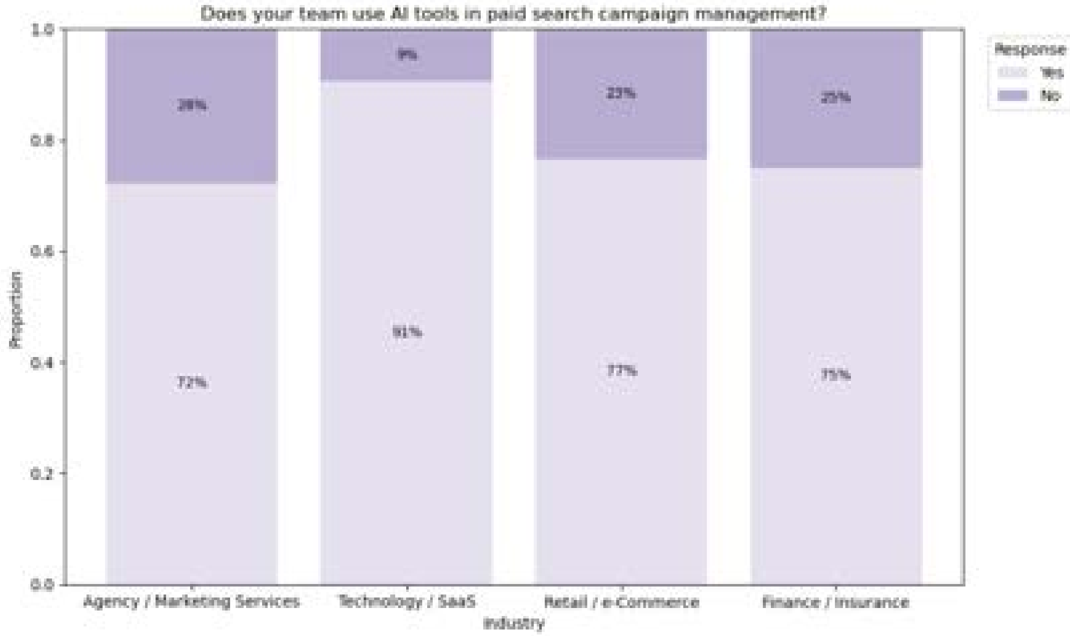
Google Ads Dominates; Generative AI Tools Skew Toward Technology

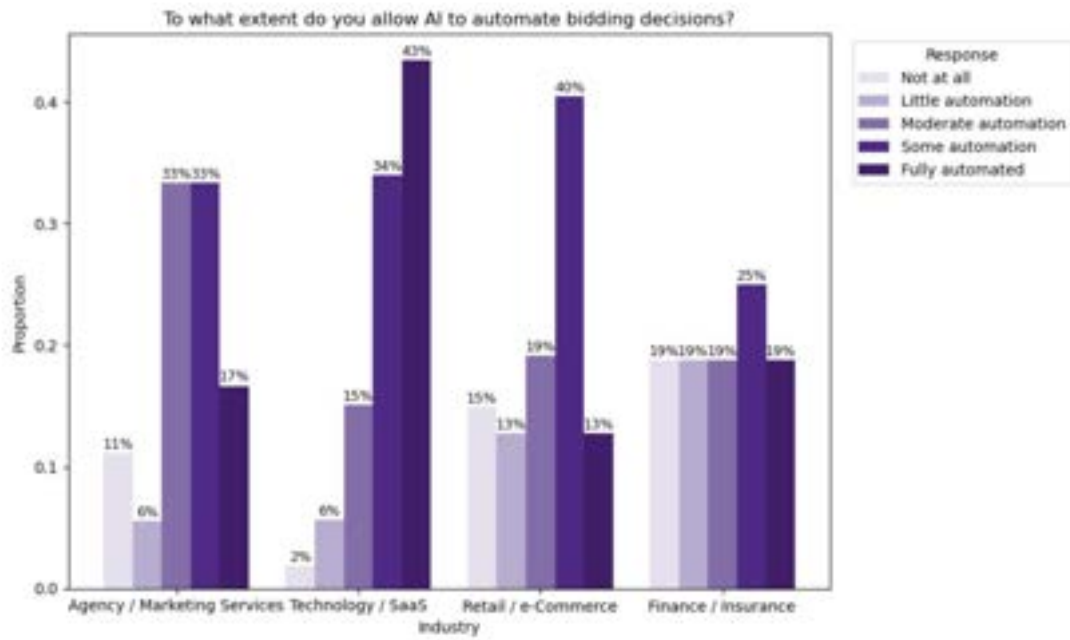
Google Ads is the dominant AI-powered tool for paid search campaign management across all industries. Usage is highest in Technology/SaaS (85%) and lowest (but still majority) in Retail/E-Commerce (64%).

ChatGPT is the second most widely used tool and is especially prominent in Technology/SaaS (75%). Claude usage is also significantly higher in Technology/SaaS (40%) than in other industries.

Finance/Insurance stands out for its relatively high use of WordStream (38%), suggesting greater reliance on structured optimization platforms over standalone generative tools.

Overall, Technology/SaaS demonstrates the most diversified AI tool stack.

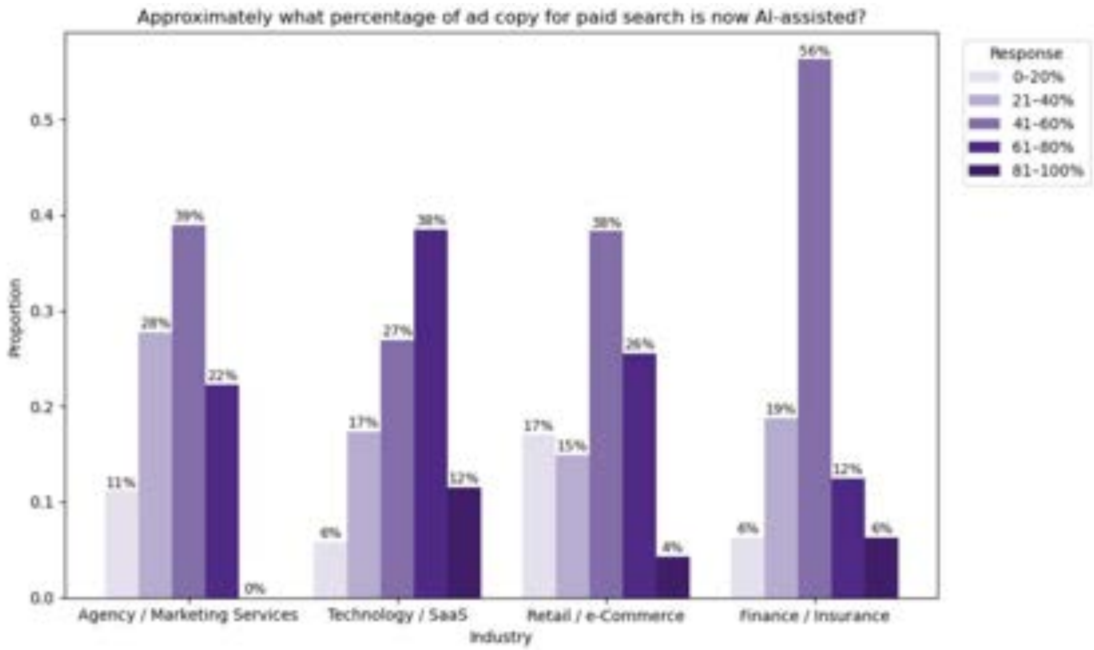




Technology/SaaS Leads in Paid Search and Bidding AI Adoption

Technology/SaaS companies report the highest use of AI in paid search campaign management, with 91% indicating usage. Other industries cluster around approximately three-quarters adoption. This suggests that digitally native sectors are pushing AI integration further and faster.

Technology/SaaS also shows the greatest willingness to fully automate bidding decisions (43%), while Retail/E-commerce lags significantly (13%). Finance/Insurance appears more cautious and fragmented, with no single automation level selected by more than one-quarter of respondents. Industries with stronger technical infrastructure and experimentation cultures appear more comfortable relinquishing control to AI systems.



Technology/SaaS Uses the Highest Share of AI-Assisted Ad Copy

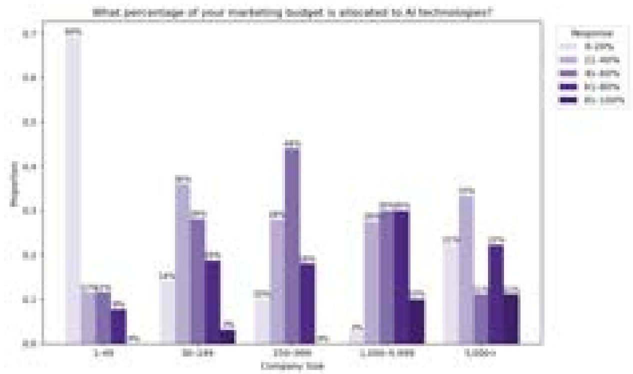
Adoption intensity for ad copy varies meaningfully by industry. Technology/SaaS leads, with 50% reporting that 61-100% of paid search ad copy is AI-assisted. This suggests Technology/SaaS is both the most confident in AI copy quality and the most willing to operationalize it at scale.

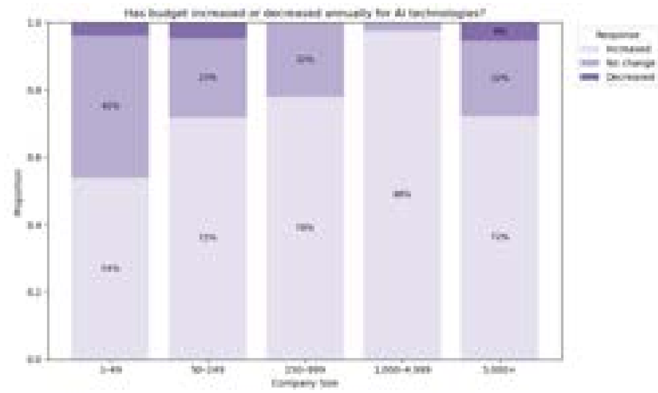
Agency/Marketing Services trail, with 39% reporting that only 0- 40% of ad copy is AI-assisted.

Retail/E-Commerce clusters in the mid-range (38% reporting 41–60%), while Finance/Insurance has a large share in the 41–60% bucket (56%) but limited full-scale adoption.

Part 2. Investment and Budget Allocation

Financial commitment to AI scales with organizational resources and digital maturity. Larger enterprises and Technology/SaaS firms allocate significantly higher proportions of marketing budgets to AI and report stronger annual budget growth. While smaller companies and more conservative industries are participating in AI investment, their allocation patterns suggest more incremental experimentation rather than full-scale transformation.

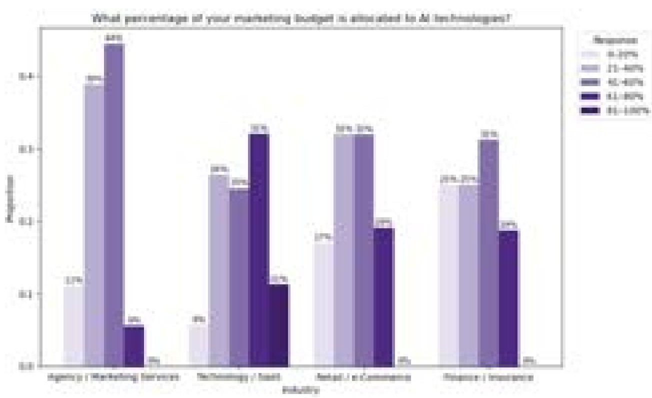


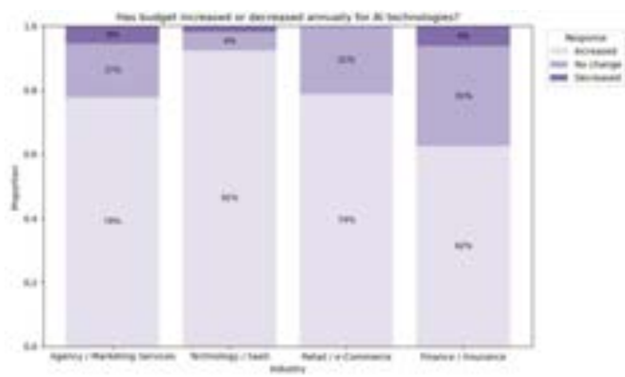


Financial Commitment to AI Increases with Company Size

Smaller companies (1-49 employees) are more likely to allocate only 0-20% of their budgets to AI (69%), and none report dedicating 81-100%. In contrast, the largest companies show the strongest financial commitment, with 11% allocating 81-100% of their marketing budgets to AI technology.

While 5,000+ employee companies lead in total allocation, mid-sized enterprises (1,000-4,999 employees) report the most widespread budget growth, with 98% indicating an increase. Overall, AI investment scales with organizational resources.





Technology/SaaS Allocates the Largest Share of Budget to AI

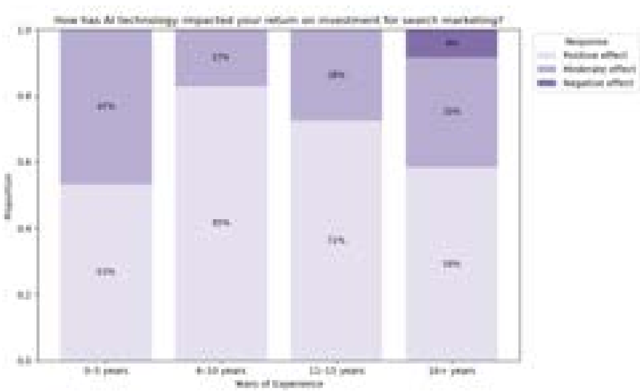
Technology/SaaS commits the highest proportion of marketing budgets to AI, with 43% allocating 61-100% of spend to AI initiatives. This significantly exceeds other industries. Finance/Insurance and Agency/Marketing Services are more conservative, with 50% of respondents in each industry clustered in the bottom two allocation buckets.

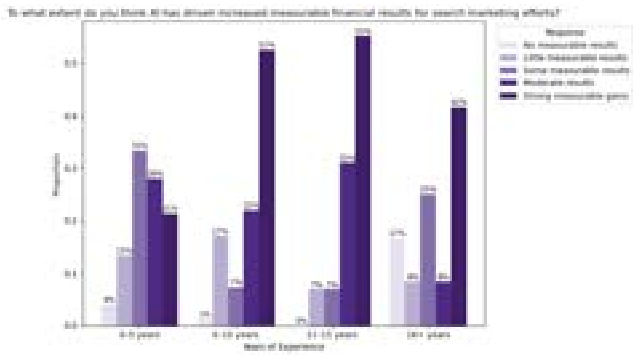
This reinforces the pattern of more aggressive AI investment in Technology/SaaS, and budget growth trends mirror allocation levels. Technology/SaaS leads again, with 92% reporting annual budget increases.

Finance/Insurance shows the most signs of stagnation or pullback, with 37% reporting either no change or a decrease in AI investment. This suggests widening divergence between fast-moving and cautious industries.

Part 3. Performance Outcomes

Across segments, AI is broadly perceived as delivering positive performance outcomes, though confidence levels vary. Technology/SaaS firms and mid-career professionals report the greatest improvements in ROI and measurable financial gains, while senior professionals and more regulated industries express greater variability or skepticism. Across segments, the same structural leaders in adoption and investment (mid-career professionals, larger firms, and Technology/SaaS organizations) also report the strongest performance gains, suggesting alignment between AI maturity and perceived returns.





Perceived ROI Impact Is Strongest Among 6-10 Year Professionals

Across all experience levels, most respondents report that AI has had a moderate or positive effect on search marketing ROI.

The 6-10 years group reports the strongest positive impact, with 83% indicating a positive effect.

Notably, the 16+ years group is the only cohort to report any negative ROI impact (8%), suggesting greater skepticism among the most senior professionals.

Financial Results Mirror ROI Sentiment

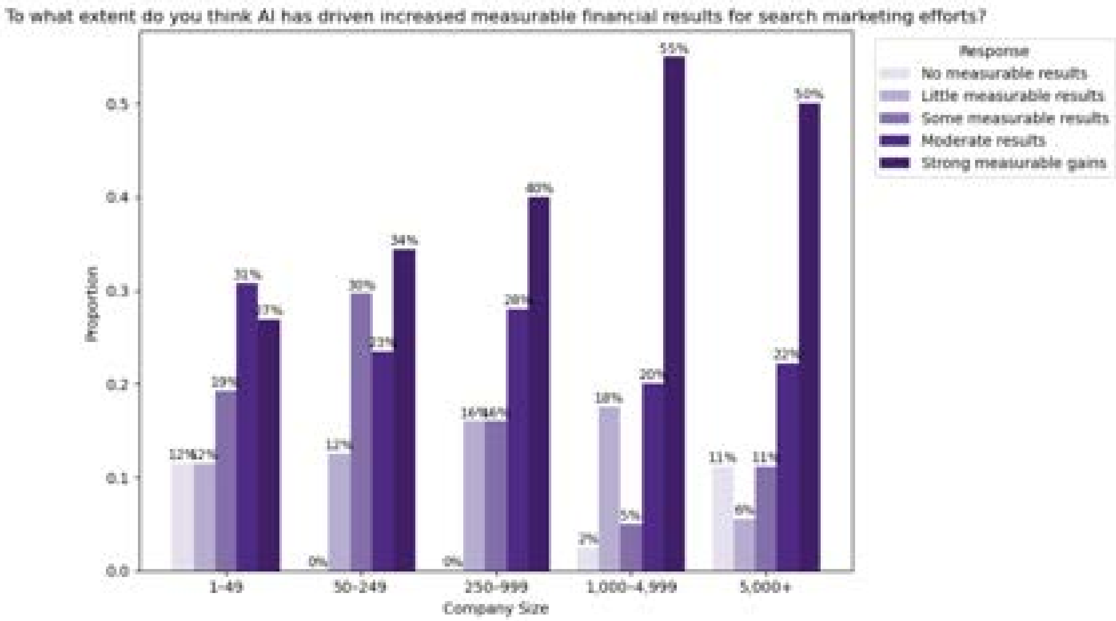
When asked whether AI has driven measurable financial results, mid-career professionals again report the strongest outcomes:

- 74% (6–10 years)
- 86% (11–15 years)

indicate moderate or strong results.

By contrast, the youngest (0- 5 years) and most senior (16+ years) groups show more variation. The 16+ group is again the most skeptical, with 17% reporting "no measurable results."

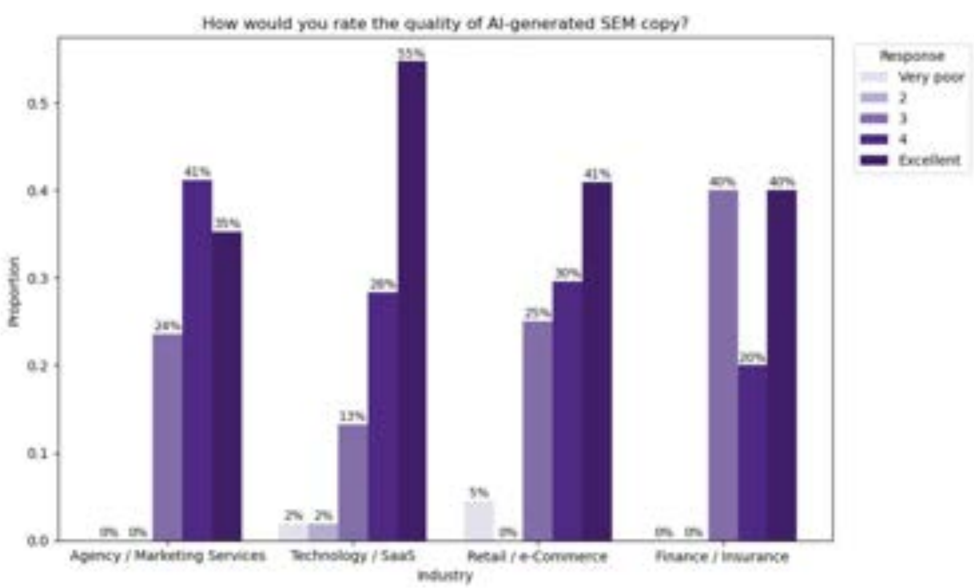
Together, these findings reinforce that confidence in AI's financial impact is highest among mid-level professionals.



Spending Mirrors Confidence in AI Outcomes for Larger Companies

Larger companies, which tend to allocate higher proportions of their budgets to AI, also report stronger performance impacts from AI adoption.

This alignment between investment and perceived results suggests that organizations committing more heavily to AI are seeing tangible strategic value.

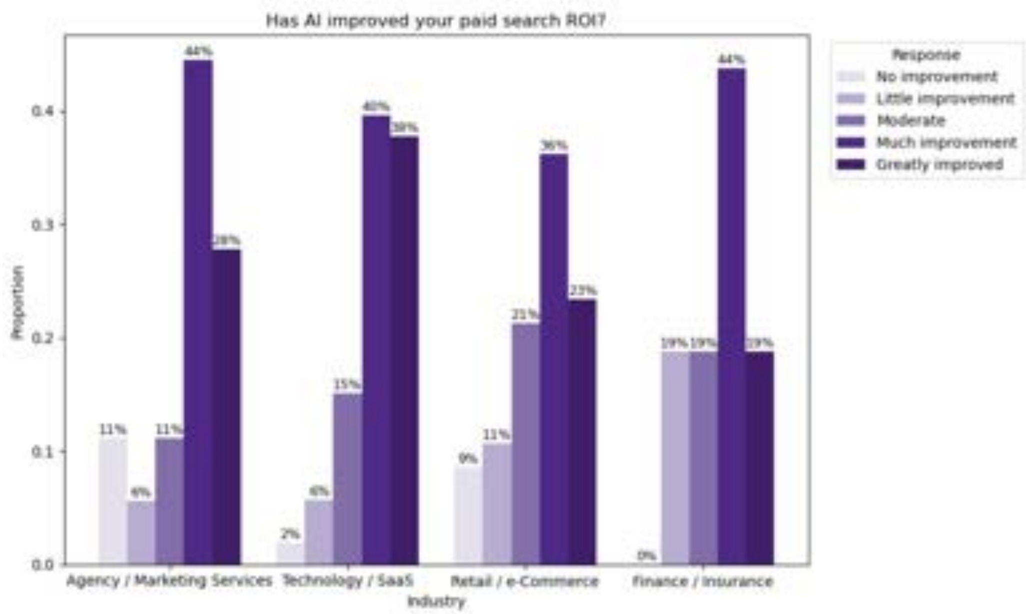


Technology/SaaS Rates AI Copy Quality the Highest

Technology/SaaS is the most satisfied with AI-generated SEM copy, with 83% rating quality as a 4 or 5.

Other industries lean positive but are more divided. Agency/Marketing Services cluster around mid-to-high ratings (41% rating 4, 35% rating 5), while Retail/E-Commerce and Finance/Insurance show broader distribution across ratings.

Overall, sentiment is favorable across industries, but Technology/SaaS demonstrates the strongest confidence in AI-generated ad quality.

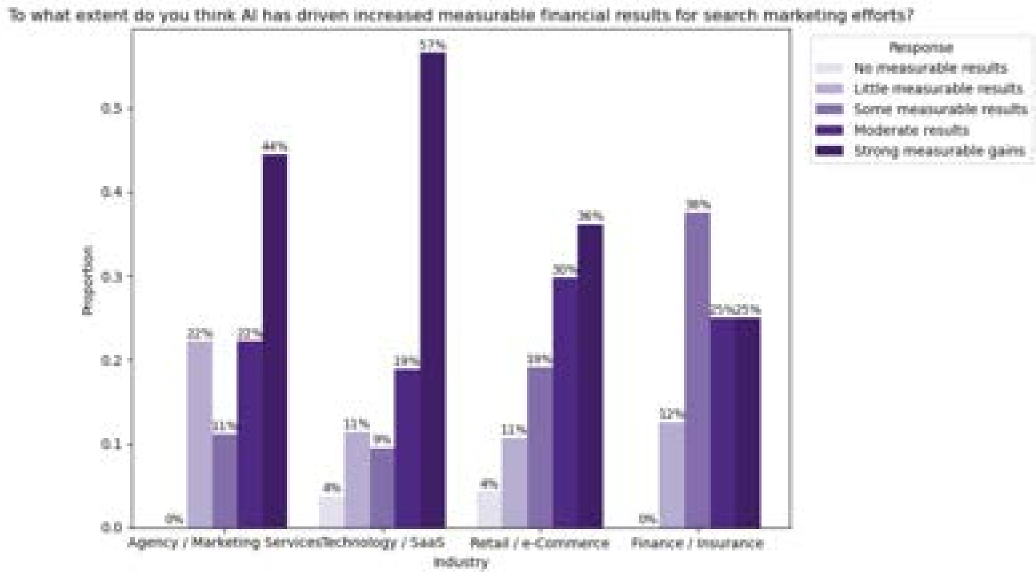


Technology/SaaS Reports the Strongest ROI Improvement

Technology/SaaS reports the greatest perceived ROI gains from AI, with 78% indicating results are "much improved" or "greatly improved."

Performance improvements are broadly positive across industries. Agency/Marketing Services reports the highest share of "no improvement," but even there it is limited to 11%.

Retail/E-Commerce and Finance/Insurance trend toward strong gains. Overall, AI-driven ROI gains are widespread, but strongest in Technology/SaaS.



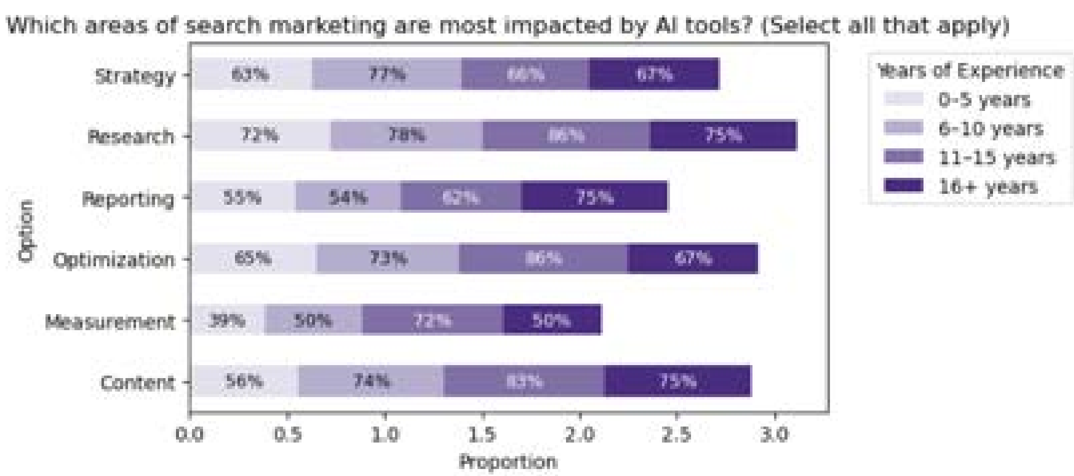
Measurable Financial Gains Are Strongest in Technology/SaaS

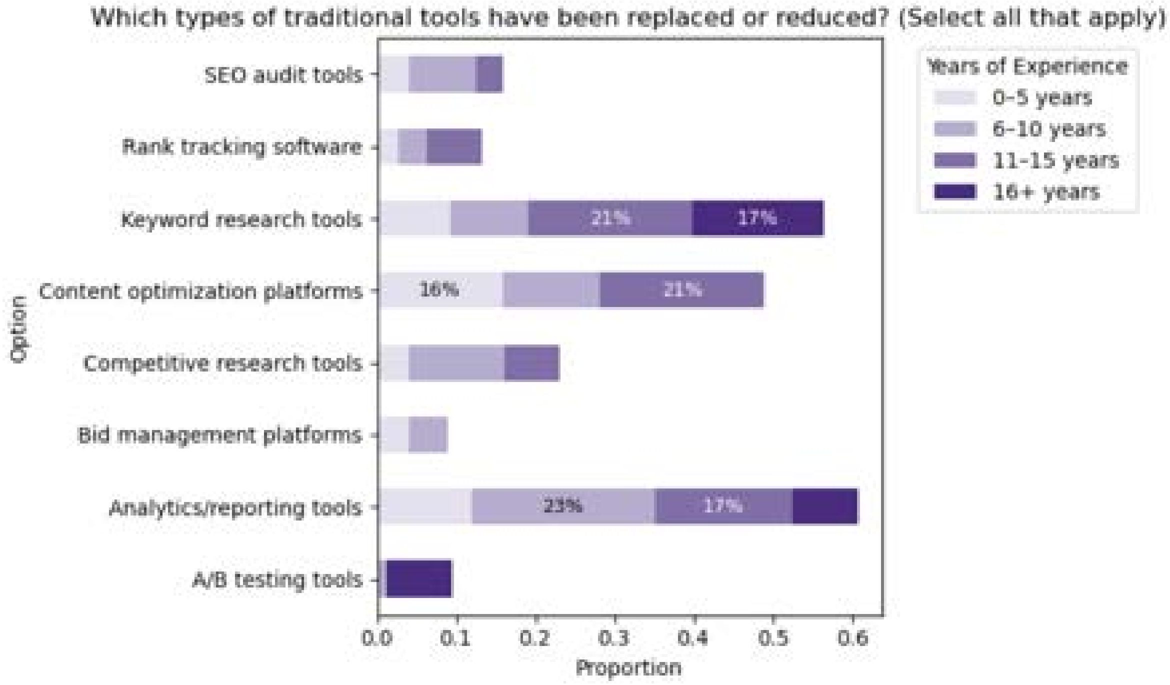
Technology/SaaS reports the most measurable financial gains, with 76% indicating moderate or strong results. Agency/Marketing Services reports the highest share of limited gains, with 22% indicating little or no measurable improvement. Retail/E-Commerce skews toward higher-gain responses, while Finance/Insurance remains split, with a large portion reporting "some" results (38%).

Again, Technology/SaaS emerges as the most confident in AI's financial contribution.

Part 4. Workflow Disruption and Tool Replacement

AI is reshaping search marketing workflows, particularly in research, optimization, and strategy, yet wholesale tool replacement remains limited. Across structural segments, AI appears to function primarily as an augmentative layer rather than a full substitute for existing platforms. Mid-sized firms and digitally mature industries exhibit the greatest signs of stack transformation, while most segments report incremental evolution rather than disruption.





Research Is the Workflow Most Impacted by AI Across Experience, but Few Tools Are Fully Being Replaced

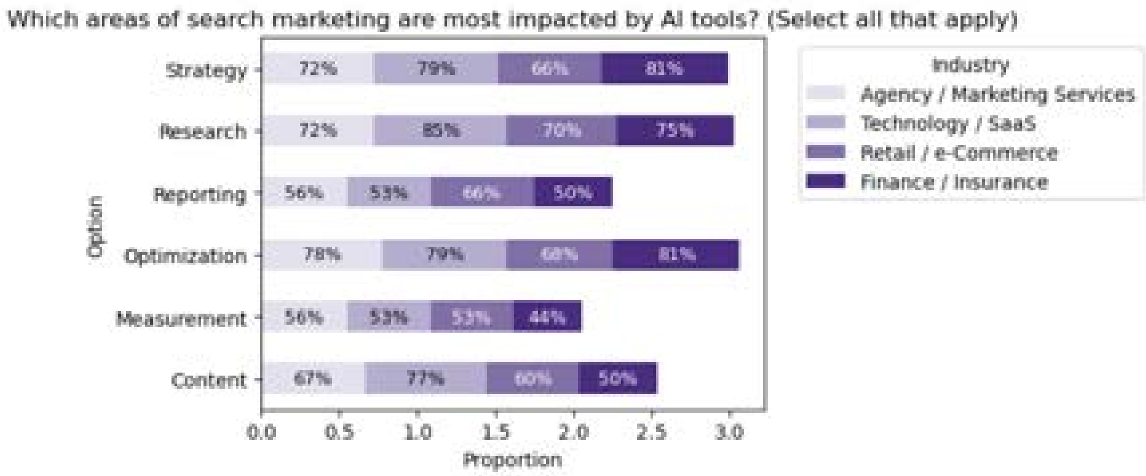
Across all experience groups, research is reported as the workflow most impacted by AI, with at least 72% of respondents in each group selecting it.

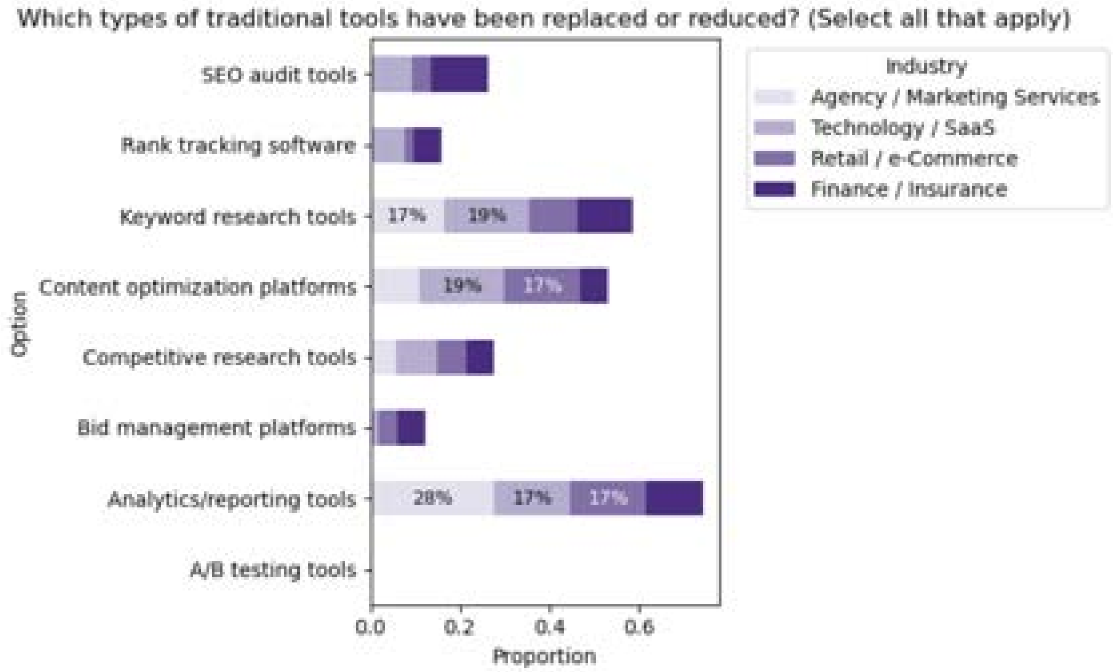
Optimization, content creation, and strategy follow, indicating that AI's influence spans both tactical and strategic components of search marketing.

Although AI is reshaping workflows, full tool replacement remains limited. Analytics/reporting tools are the most commonly reported to have been reduced or replaced, followed by keyword research tools and content optimization platforms. However, reported replacement rates are relatively low across all groups.

Bid management platforms are the least affected, with fewer than 10% of respondents in any experience group indicating reduction or replacement.

This suggests AI is augmenting, rather than wholesale replacing, most existing search technology stacks.





AI's Workflow Impact Differs by Industry Focus; Analytics and Keyword Tools Face the Most Disruption

Much like across experience levels, optimization, strategy, and research are the workflows most impacted by AI across industries.

Technology/SaaS cites research most frequently (85%), indicating strong reliance on AI for insight generation and analysis.

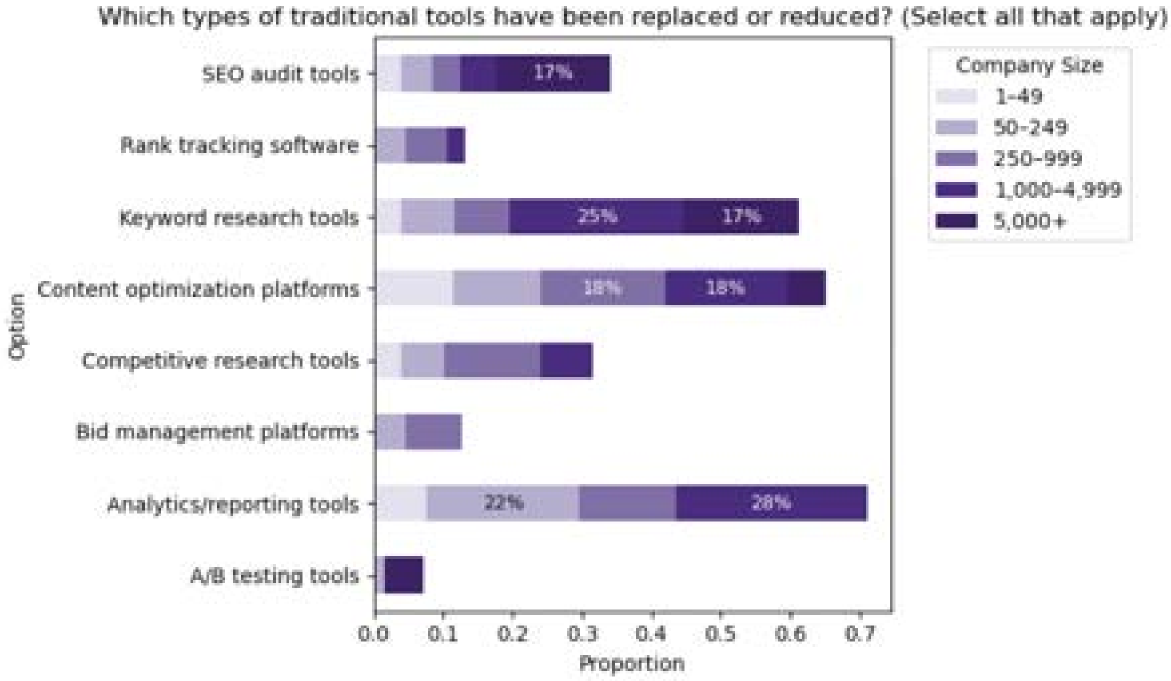
Finance/Insurance reports the greatest AI impact on strategy (81%) and optimization (81%), suggesting a more performance- and risk-oriented implementation.

While AI influences all major search workflows, industries appear to emphasize impact areas aligned with their operational priorities.

Consistent with experience-level findings, analytics and reporting tools remain the most frequently reduced category across industries, led by Agency/Marketing Services (28%).

Traditional keyword research tools are also under pressure, particularly in Technology/SaaS and Agency/Marketing. Content optimization platforms follow a similar pattern, with higher reported disruption in Technology/SaaS and Retail/E-Commerce.

Despite these shifts, replacement rates remain moderate overall, indicating evolution of the tech stack rather than wholesale displacement across industries.



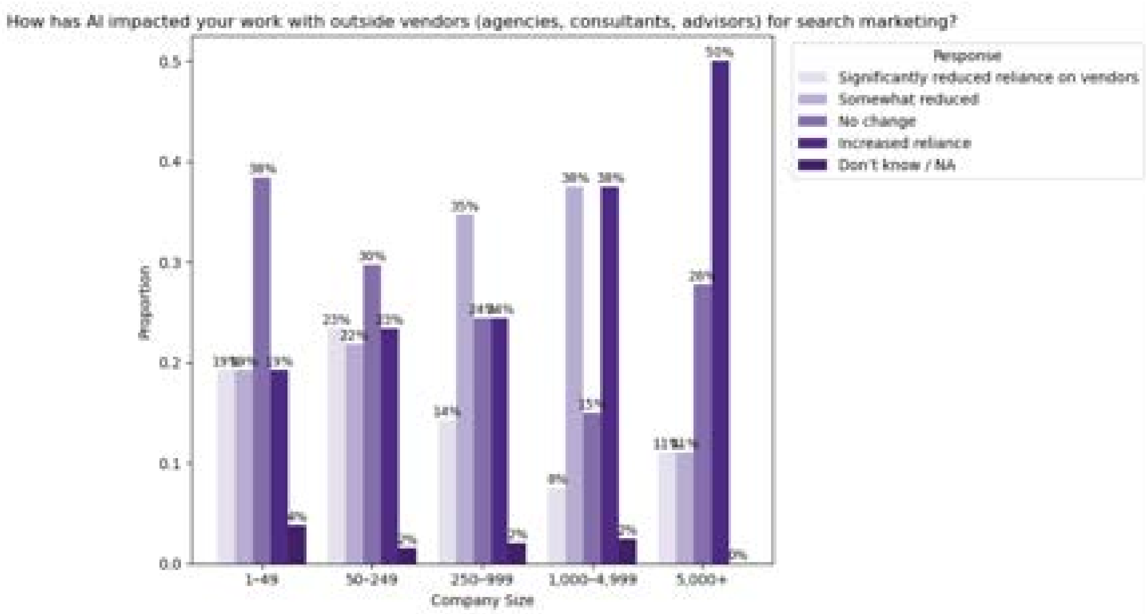
Tool Replacement Remains Limited, but Mid-Sized Firms Show the Most Disruption

Across categories, smaller companies tend to report the least tool replacement or reduction. For the smallest companies (1-49 employees), the highest reported replacement rate is in content optimization platforms (12%), with minimal change elsewhere.

Analytics/reporting tools are the most commonly reduced or replaced overall, followed by content optimization platforms and keyword research tools.

Companies with 1,000-4,999 employees report the most widespread disruption across traditional tools, indicating this segment may be undergoing the most significant AI-driven stack transformation.

Overall, AI appears to be augmenting existing systems rather than fully replacing them, though mid-sized firms are feeling the greatest structural shift.



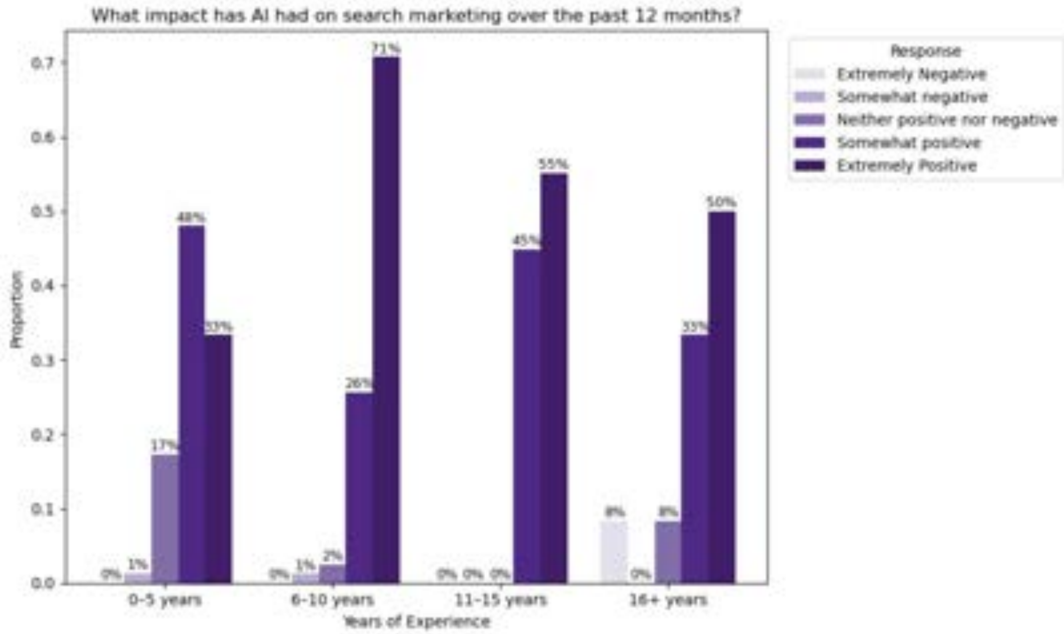
Large Enterprises Report Increased Reliance on External Vendors

Companies are divided on whether AI has reduced or increased reliance on external vendors. However, enterprises with 5,000+ employees stand out: they are the only size group in which more respondents report increased reliance than those reporting maintained/reduced reliance (50%).

Mid-sized firms show the opposite pattern. Companies with 250-999 employees report the strongest reduction in reliance (49%), suggesting they may be internalizing more AI capabilities. This indicates that while mid-sized firms may use AI to build in-house efficiency, large enterprises may rely more heavily on specialized external AI partners.

Part 5. Sentiment, Familiarity, and Perception

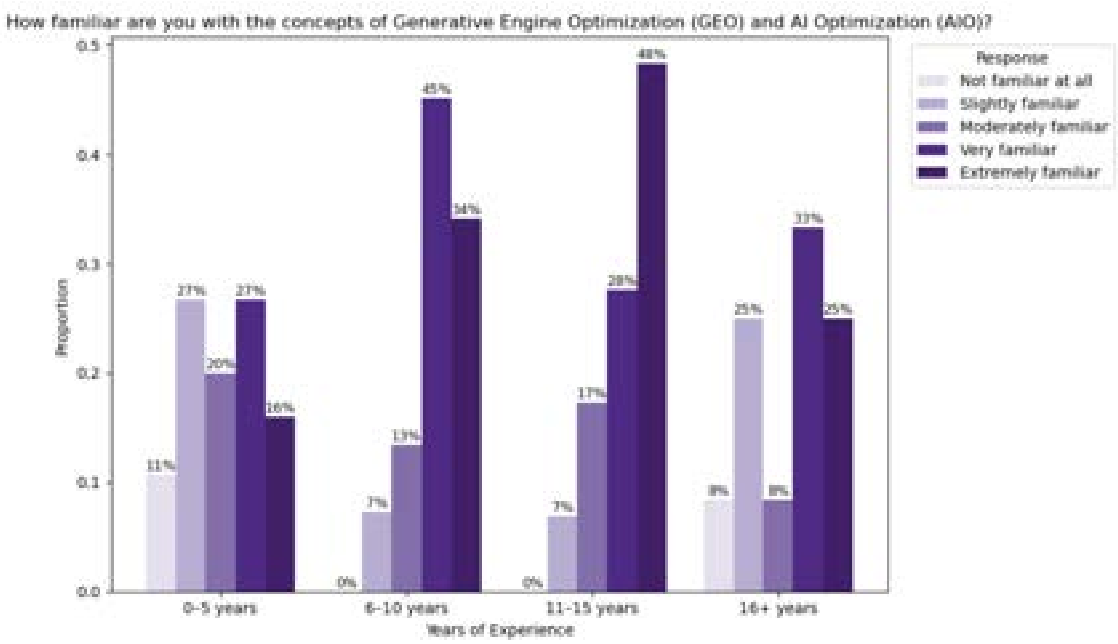
Attitudes toward AI are overwhelmingly positive across all segments, yet perceptions of disruption and strategic significance vary. Mid-career professionals and digitally native industries are more likely to view AI as materially reshaping SEO, whereas early-career and highly tenured respondents are more moderate in their assessments. Familiarity with emerging AI-driven search paradigms generally tracks with operational immersion and industry digital maturity.



Sentiment Toward AI is Largely Positive Across Experience Levels

Across all experience levels, sentiment toward AI remains overwhelmingly positive. More than 80% of respondents in every group describe their view as somewhat or extremely positive. However, the 16+ group shows slightly more skepticism, with 8% reporting somewhat or extremely negative sentiment, compared to just 0-10% among other groups.

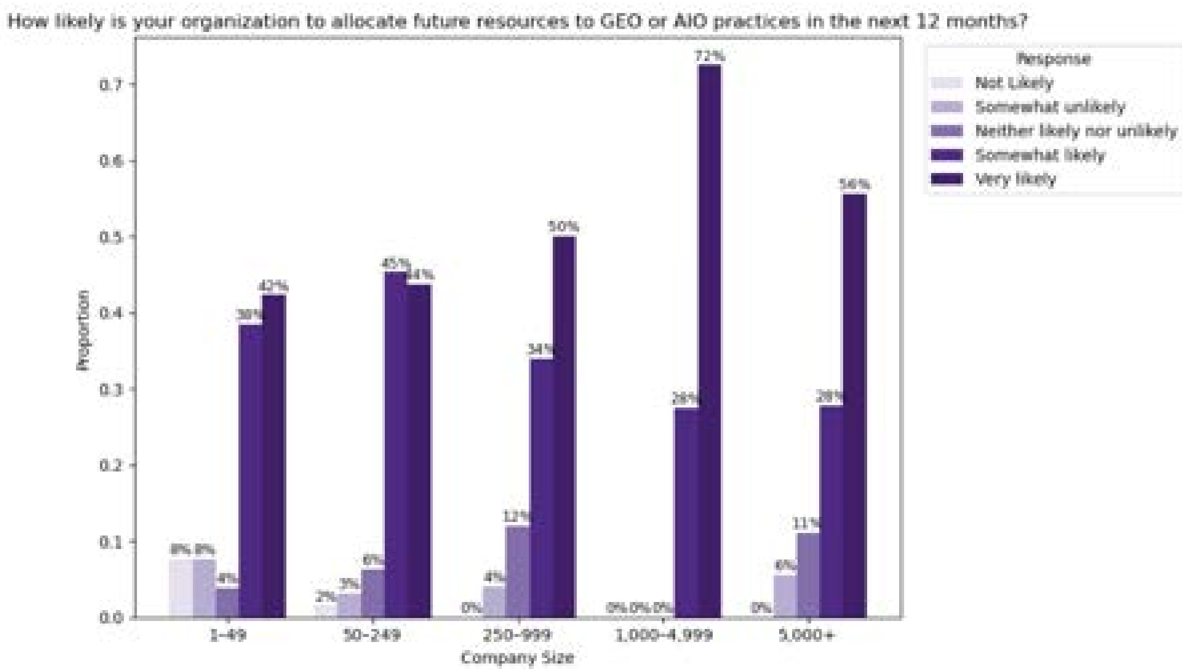
While attitudes are broadly aligned, senior marketers appear modestly more reserved than their junior and mid-career counterparts.



Mid-Career Professionals Lead in GEO and AIO Familiarity

Professionals with 6-15 years of experience report the highest familiarity with GEO and AIO, reflecting deeper exposure to AI-powered search strategy. In contrast, the youngest group (0-5 years) shows the lowest familiarity, with 38% selecting “slightly familiar” or “not familiar.”

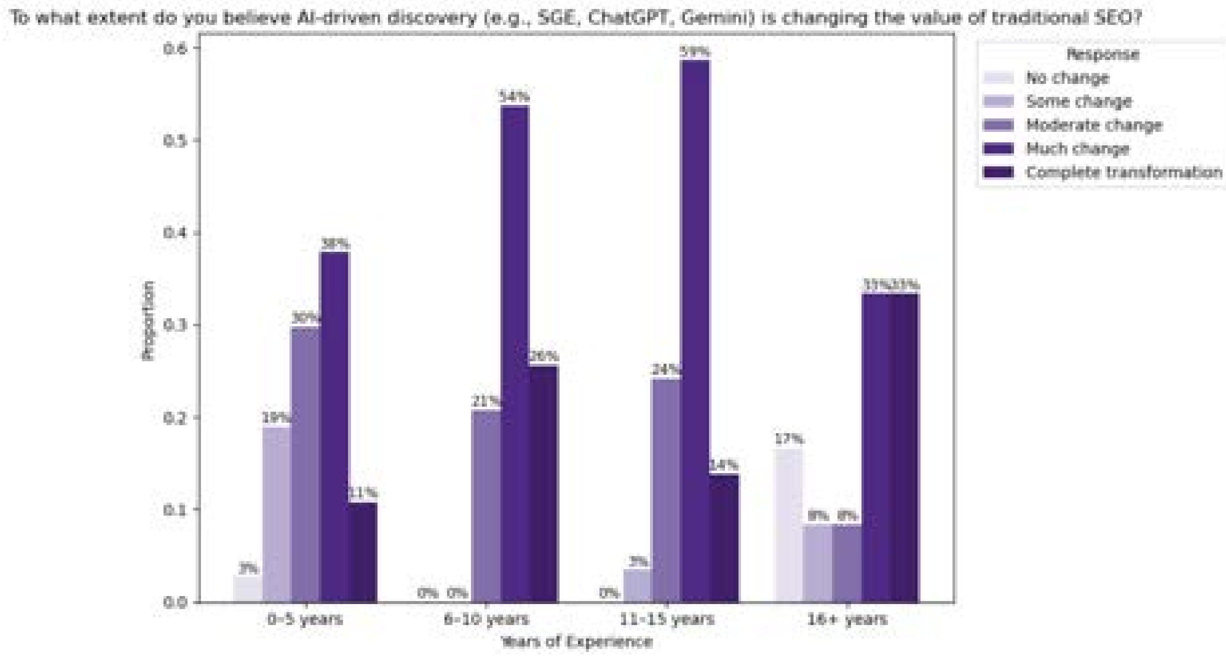
This gap suggests that mid-level professionals may be most immersed in strategic AI developments, while early-career marketers are still building foundational knowledge.



Organizations of all Sizes are Preparing for AI-Driven Search

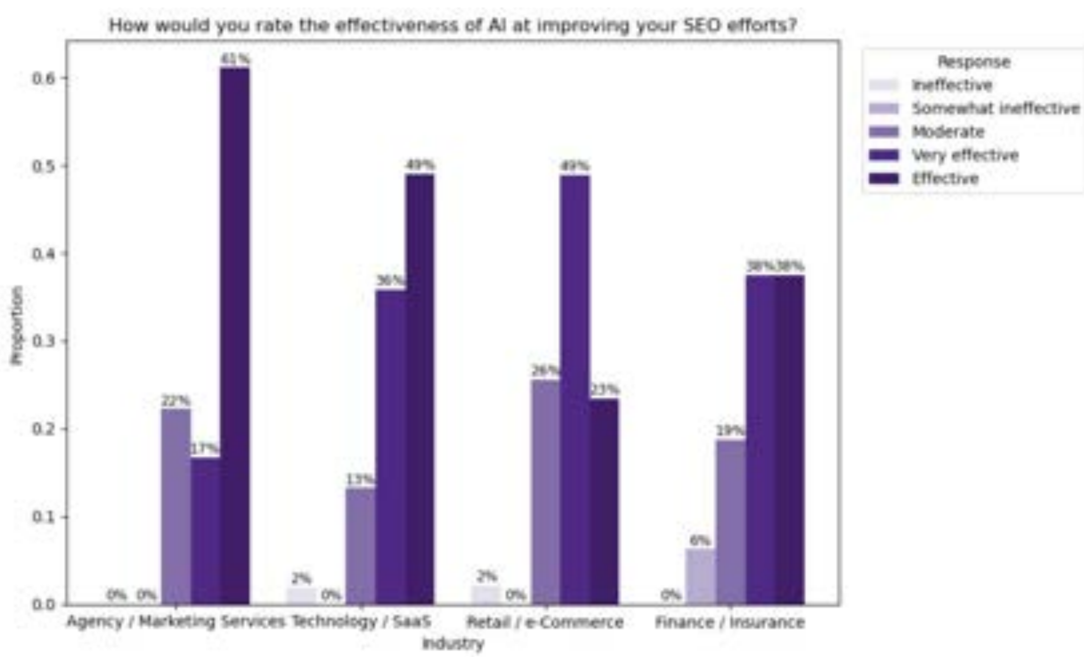
Across every company size, at least 80% of respondents say their organization is somewhat or very likely to allocate resources toward GEO or AIO in the coming year.

This indicates broad recognition that AI-powered search is reshaping marketing strategy: not just for large enterprises, but across the market.



Younger Professionals Perceive Less Disruption to Traditional SEOs

Views on how AI-driven discovery is changing the value of traditional SEO also vary by experience. A majority (52%) of professionals aged 0-5 years report only moderate or minimal change. By comparison, just 21% of 6-10-year-old professionals and 27% of 11-15-year-old professionals report low levels of change. This suggests that mid-career professionals are more likely to perceive AI as materially reshaping SEO, whereas younger marketers may not yet have the historical context to recognize the shift.



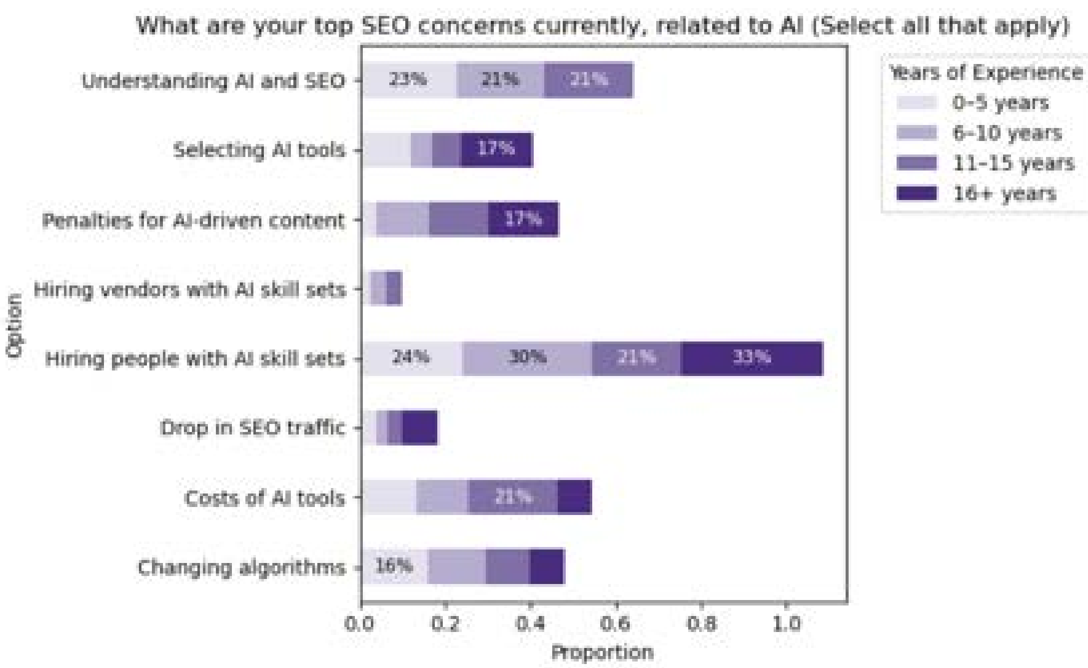
AI Is Viewed as Effective for SEO Across Industries

Despite differences in adoption intensity, consensus on effectiveness is strong. Across all four industries analyzed, more than 71% of respondents rate AI as “effective” or “very effective” in improving SEO performance.

Even industries with slower adoption recognize AI’s value.

Part 6. Concerns

Talent acquisition emerges as the most consistent AI-related concern across experience levels, company sizes, and industries. While secondary concerns differ, the need for internal AI capability development is nearly universal. Organizational readiness may hinge less on tool availability and more on workforce adaptation and expertise.

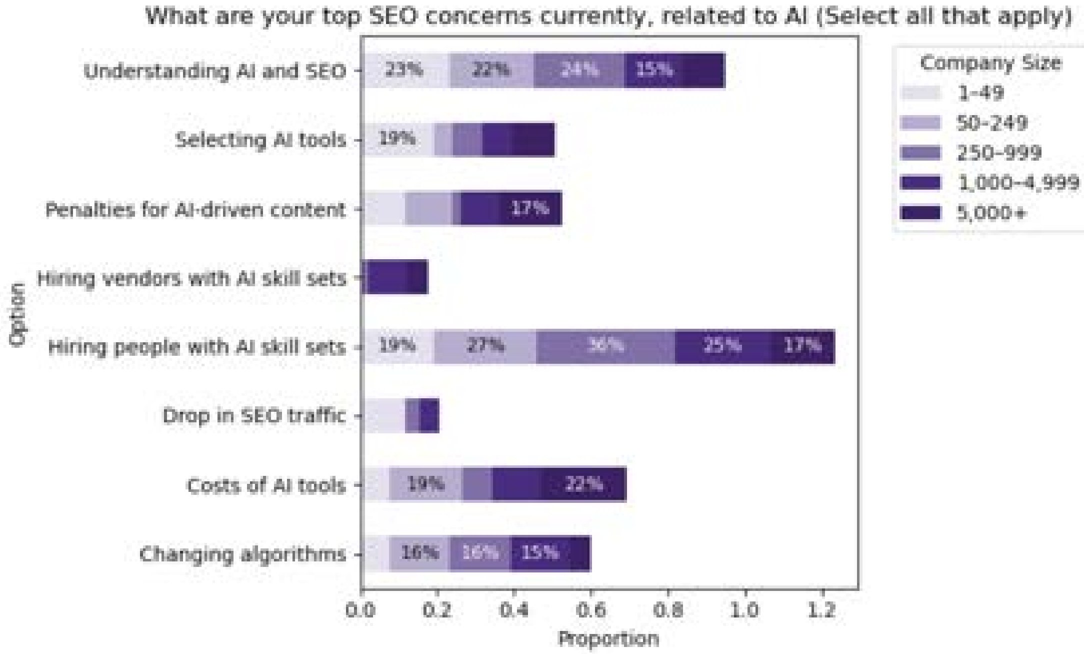


Hiring AI Talent Is a Concern Across Experience Levels

Hiring professionals with AI skill sets is a top SEO concern across all experience levels, with at least 21% in each group selecting it.

Concern is highest among senior professionals (33%), indicating that leadership is aware of AI talent gaps.

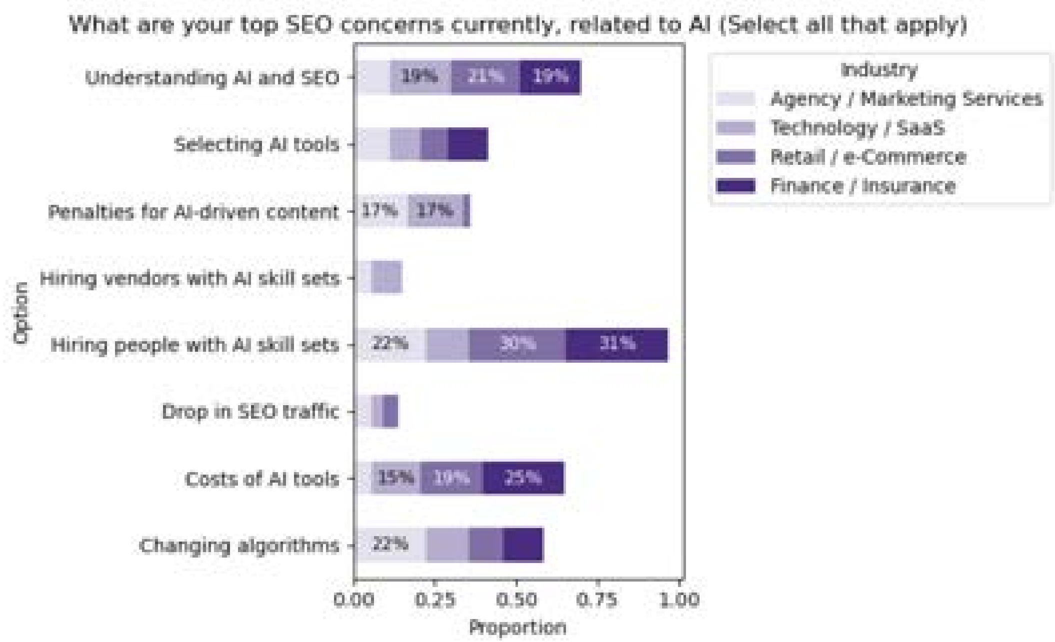
Understanding AI’s relationship to SEO is the second most cited concern, but only among the three less-experienced groups. Notably, no respondents in the 16+ year group selected this concern, suggesting that senior professionals may feel more confident in their conceptual understanding.



Hiring AI Talent is Also a Top SEO Concern Across Company Sizes

The concern of hiring employees with AI skill sets persists across all company sizes. Concern peaks among companies with 250-999 employees (36%), indicating acute competition for AI talent in the mid-market.

Understanding AI's role in SEO follows as the second-largest concern, particularly among small to mid-sized companies. Cost of AI tools ranks third overall.



AI-Related SEO Concerns Differ by Industry, but Hiring Still Leads

Hiring professionals with AI skill sets is a leading concern across industries, particularly in Retail/E-Commerce and Finance/Insurance.

Technology/SaaS reports greater concern about understanding AI's relationship to SEO and potential penalties for AI-driven content.

Agency/Marketing Services, alongside hiring concerns, is most focused on changing algorithms, reflecting the volatility of client-driven SEO environments.

While talent acquisition is universal, secondary concerns vary with industry exposure and risk profile.