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OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

The AI and Big Data Readiness Report

Assessing the Public
Relations Profession's
Preparedness for an
AI Future

About

This Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Big Data Readiness Report provides an analysis of a global survey of public relations practitioners and academics and video/written evidence from senior practitioners concerning the profession's knowledge, skills, adoption of and attitudes towards AI, and to a lesser extent, Big Data. Its aim is to provide an overview of current AI understanding and preparedness, but most importantly, provide pointers to how the profession should equip itself to exploit the potential and guard against the possible dangers of AI.



Executive Summary

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Big Data have become increasingly integrated into modern working life, sometimes without people even recognising it. The purpose of the research outlined here is to discover how aware and how ready the public relations profession is for a world of work that will become increasingly AI and Big Data infused.

The research comprises a global survey (phase one) and testimonies (phase two) from practitioners to find out levels of skill, adoption, knowledge and attitudes towards AI. A central objective of this work is provide recommendations for how the profession may get itself fully up to speed so that it can capitalise of the opportunities AI and Big Data provide and to guard against potential dangers.

The report is structured into five areas of discussion based around the themes of questions covered by the global survey and practitioners' recorded/written testimonies.

(i) Knowledge of AI, where knowledge resides in an organisation, feelings about AI

Significant number of practitioners have limited knowledge and feel less confident (43.2%), and only a small number are very comfortable in using AI (13.9%); however, practitioners are optimistic and have an eagerness to learn. Organisationally, the data suggests that AI and Big Data knowledge resides with IT and digital specialists, but a concerning outcome is that 31% of respondents consider 'ownership' is unknown or seen as irrelevant which does not bode well for a wider understanding of the potential of AI.

(ii) Level of understanding and use of AI tools, systems, programmes

Practitioners show an awareness and understanding across a range of uses of AI tools – social media implementation tools, monitoring and analysis, and AI enabled writing (a core skill). Other areas where AI tools are being used include attribution software, behaviour change, crisis management, display marketing and communication research. Surprisingly, given the acceleration in the use of digital and AI in organisations during the COVID 19 pandemic, 52.5% said 'no' when asked whether they used AI tools in their PR role.

(iii) Development of AI skills, most relevant skills, how practitioners learn and rate their skills

On the job training is the most cited way practitioners have acquired skills along with webinars and awareness building courses. Whether that training is provided by skilled trainers is not clear. Among those who have no skills, there is a realisation that they need training, but finding the right choice of topic/courses remains the biggest challenge. The results show that 'one size does not fit all' when preferences for types of training were sought. These ranged from academic courses to personalised mentoring.

Asked about the most relevant AI skills, PR professionals consider audience targeting and monitoring as important, followed by ethics, strategy, governance and leadership. Most practitioners regard themselves as midway in a ranking scale measuring current skill levels, but in the case of organisational uses of AI, they rate themselves as having relatively low understanding. This is something that will need to change if practitioners are to have organisation-wide influence in the governance of AI and Big Data systems.

The ambition is to provide a guide on 'where to start' so that the lack of knowledge, challenges, concerns and apprehensions amongst professionals can be overcome and the profession can progress with confidence.

(iv) How AI could help in practitioners' roles and challenges for the future

Two distinct types of responses are noted here: strategic and tactical. Strategically, AI is seen as business critical, assisting in decision-making and providing high-level insight at the most senior level. Tactically, the most popular applications are in digital/social media and in making processes and workflow more effective and efficient. The answers also indicate that AI provides an opportunity for public relations to demonstrate the value it delivers in, for example, predicting trends, formulating deep insights and understanding audiences.

Amongst the challenges, ethics comes across as an important along with a concern that automation and AI will lead to a loss of human nuance, so important in building relationships.

Overall there is a keen appetite for using AI in the profession, but the main constraint is the requisite knowledge, skill and opportunity

(v) General opinion, fears and feelings expressed about AI.

A number of clear viewpoints emerge with respondents foreseeing huge potential and opportunities for the future. Practitioners are positive and excited about much of the 'drudge' work being removed which may begin to tackle some of the issues around over-work and the emphasis on tactical skills such as writing and perception auditing. Time will also be released for important strategic tasks such as building social capital, community building and working on the foundations and development of trust. AI also offers scalability for public relations services.

However, a number of risks and concerns emerge, particularly around ethical challenges, including inherent bias, the shifts in power to those with resources to harness AI, the potential for exclusion and job losses. An underlying challenge is the lack of knowledge about what AI can and will do and how it can be best used in public relations.

It is evident from this research that there is a small proportion of practitioners who are well advanced, but the majority are not operating at an optimum level. At the end of the report five recommendations indicate how the profession can move forward in policy and practice terms otherwise there is a danger of being left behind or absorbed into related disciplines such as marketing or management consulting. The ambition is to provide a guide on 'where to start' so that the lack of knowledge, challenges, concerns and apprehensions amongst professionals can be overcome and the profession can progress with confidence.

Dr Swati Virmani
Professor Anne Gregory
November 2021

Methodology

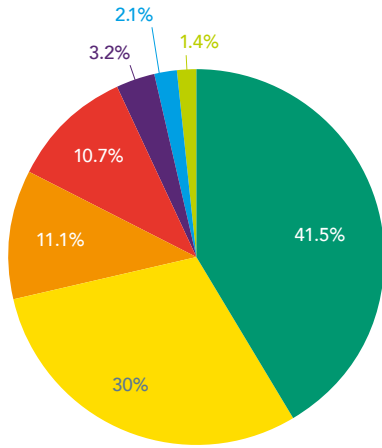
A mixed methods approach was taken and there were two phases to the data collection. An on-line survey (live in June and July 2021) collected both quantitative and qualitative data via closed questions and free text. This was followed (July and August 2021), by an invitation to provide more detailed information, either recorded or written, in response to open ended questions on the state of skills development, approaches to and methods of learning and the impact of AI and Big Data on the profession. Typeform was used to create the survey and collect data along with Google Sheets to analyse the quantitative data from the survey. Qualitative data from the survey and written/recorded submissions were analysed thematically.

The survey was available globally and the CIPR acknowledges the Page Society's partnership in ensuring coverage in the US in particular. Special thanks also to Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), Public Relations Institute of South Africa (PRISA) and Public Relations Society of Kenya (PRSK) for their support. There were 280 usable survey returns and 10 written and recorded submissions.

Results

The results below are grouped into topic areas covered by the survey. Commentary is provided at the end of each section and this also includes data drawn from the recorded/written submissions. Demographic data is provided at the end of the report in Appendix 1.

AI data and knowledge



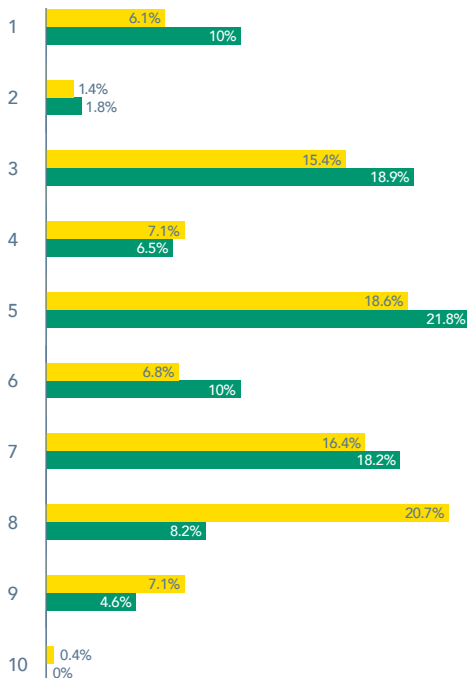
The first set of answers looks at the level of knowledge about AI and data, feelings about AI and where knowledge about AI resides in organisations.

1. How do you rate your knowledge of AI as a technology?

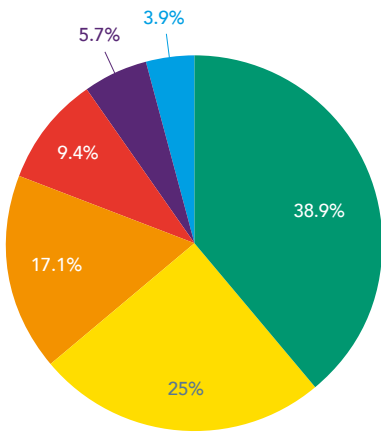
Respondents were asked to indicate their knowledge of AI by choosing from the list of seven options provided below:

	%
I'm comfortable with what it means but I am not technical	41.5%
I'm familiar but wouldn't confidently apply the knowledge in my role/at work	30%
Only what I have read in newspapers, online media, films or science fiction	11.1%
Very comfortable. I work using AI in my role	10.7%
Very comfortable. I work advising on AI builds and deployments	3.2%
I've no idea	2.1%
Other	1.4%

2. How much do you know about data and AI in terms of its relevance to the communication profession (e.g. data, data analysis, automation)?

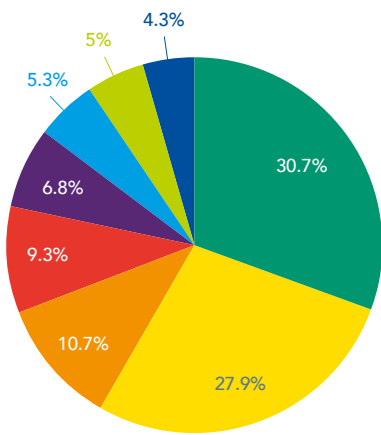


	"Data"	"AI"
1. I've no idea	6.1%	10%
2. I don't feel it is relevant to me in my current role	1.4%	1.8%
3. I'm familiar with how it is being used in the communication profession but haven't read/found out much about it in the role of the communicator	15.4%	18.9%
4. Only what I have read in articles and the profession guides, the AI in PR Panel has published	7.1%	6.5%
5. I'm familiar with how it used in communication and have started to explore it further in the role of the communicator	18.6%	21.8%
6. I'm familiar but wouldn't confidently apply the knowledge in my role/at work	6.8%	10%
7. I'm comfortable with what it means but I am not technical	16.4%	18.2%
8. Very comfortable. I work using data/ analytics (or AI) in my role	20.7%	8.2%
9. Very comfortable. I work advising on data/ analytics (or AI) builds & deployments	7.1%	4.6%
10. Other	0.4%	0%



3. How do you feel about AI? (select three in the order of importance)

Selected 1st option	%
Excited	38.9%
Aware of the challenges	25%
That I don't know enough	17.1%
No feelings	9.4%
Worried about its impact	5.7%
Overwhelmed. I feel I can't keep up	3.9%



4. At my organisation, I would say AI knowledge is represented where?

First choice	%
Nowhere/ Not sure/ Not relevant/ Independent practitioner	30.7%
IT/ Digital/ Analytics	27.9%
Specific business teams	10.7%
Across the whole org, including Board	9.3%
At C-Suite Level	6.8%
At Managerial Level	5.3%
All/ Mixed across client base	5%
PR Teams	4.3%
Non-Technical Teams	-

Commentary

From questions 1 to 4 above it can be seen that a very mixed picture emerges with a significant number of practitioners having limited knowledge, especially around the technical aspects of data and AI, but a small number being very comfortable in using and building applications and advising others on their use. What also is apparent is that data and AI are elided in most people's minds as the similar responses in question 2 indicates. One contributor to the second phase of the research stated that there was a significant need for the demystification of AI and a clearer explanation of its benefits to allay fears of the threat to the jobs and status of practitioners. Another captured their own state of knowledge as being 'scrappy' and that appears to be a good description more generally. For other respondents, there was a split in knowledge and interest in the 'nuts and bolts' of the technology including coding and the nature of algorithms, and uses and implications of Big Data and AI. The majority of professionals are optimistic about the prospects offered by AI, even though they are conscious of the challenges it poses and despite the learning that they need to undertake.

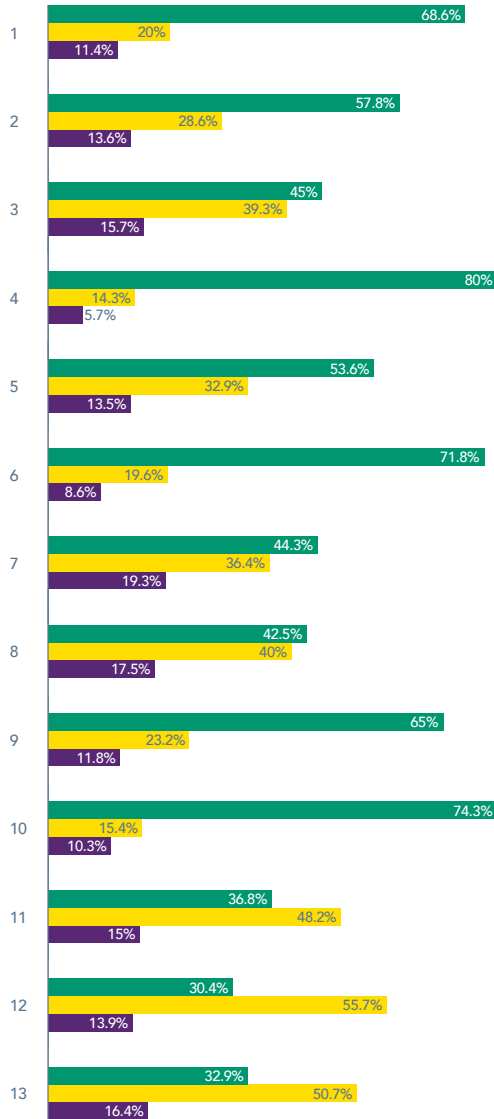
More concerning are the answers to question 4. It appears that Big Data and AI knowledge is firmly the province of IT and digital specialists, but that its 'ownership' is not known or seen to be irrelevant for 31% of respondents is surprising. As the CIPR's *Ethics Guide to Artificial Intelligence in PR*¹ makes clear, there is a significant role for public relations professionals to play, both in terms of being a source of knowledge about the potential impacts on organisations and its stakeholders and on governance issues. Encouragingly though, it does seem that in a number of cases knowledge is embedded across the whole organisation and/or in business teams. Phase two contributors confirmed that a working knowledge of AI, its uses and applications needed to be embedded at all levels in the profession right from the undergraduate entry level, up to Board room. One respondent commented that the move to purpose-driven organisations was seminal and that care of the organisational 'heart and soul' required the input of public relations professionals not just technology specialists.

¹ See https://cipr.co.uk/CIPR/Our_work/Policy/AI_in_PR.aspx

Understanding AI tools, systems and programmes

The second area for consideration is the level of understanding and use of AI tools, systems and programmes.

5. I understand how AI - AI tools, programmes and systems - are being utilised in the following PR and communication areas



	Yes/Aware/Some use or knowledge	No	Don't know
1. Data & data analysis	68.6%	20%	11.4%
2. Copy writing	57.8%	28.6%	13.6%
3. Press release writing	45%	39.3%	15.7%
4. Media monitoring/ media reports	80%	14.3%	5.7%
5. Targeting media outlets & contacts	53.6%	32.9%	13.5%
6. Sentiment analysis	71.8%	19.6%	8.6%
7. Predicting potential issues	44.3%	36.4%	19.3%
8. Campaign management	42.5%	40%	17.5%
9. Digital media	65%	23.2%	11.8%
10. Social media	74.3%	15.4%	10.3%
11. Video Creation	36.8%	48.2%	15%
12. Recorded content	30.4%	55.7%	13.9%
13. Creative design	32.9%	50.7%	16.4%

Other areas where AI tools should be considered or are being used by survey respondents included attribution software, behaviour change, crisis communication/management, customer research/support, display marketing, diversity & inclusion, ethics, event management, employee experience, communications research, PR activism, recruitment and in teaching.

Commentary

Broadly speaking, practitioners are aware of and understand a range of uses for AI enabled tools. Unsurprisingly, media and social media implementation tools, monitoring and analysis come top of the list, but AI enabled writing, a core practitioner skill, is also well represented, despite many not knowing about or using these tools. According to the recorded/written submissions, the 'capture' of core skills such as this represents a threat for the future. However, one respondent commented that skills are not really the issue: the profession will have to figure out how to live with AI 'colleagues' and integrate them into the work done.

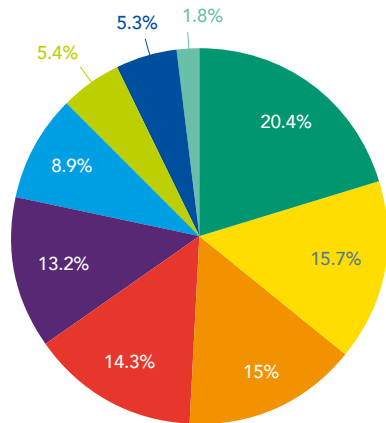
Other areas where AI tools should be considered or are being used by survey respondents included attribution software, behaviour change, crisis communication/management, customer research/support, display marketing, diversity & inclusion, ethics, event management, employee experience, communications research, PR activism, recruitment and in teaching. A respondent to phase two also recommends the use of AI and Big Data in strategy development and the resolution of complex problems, particularly in time constrained environments. A number of phase two respondents mentioned that they were more aware and concerned about the social impacts of AI rather than of the actual tools and skills necessary to be practically proficient.

Other respondents were more concerned about understanding the answers provided by AI tools given inputs and algorithms were not always transparent. One specifically called for enhanced questioning and critical thinking skills to spot errors and biases rather than upskilling in the use of AI tools per se, which they saw as relatively easy to acquire. Another phase two respondent noted that public relations professionals are more conservative in adopting AI tools than marketing colleagues and observed that skills in these areas were not out of the ordinary – the key issue is understanding the 'constraints and mechanics of these technologies'. For example, using Google search is not difficult, but professionals need to know how to break through the customisation of results that may apply to any one individual. Using AI tools to automate daily routines is not hard, but that does not take away the need to consider how best they are used and where human intervention is required.

What emerges from these responses is again a mixed picture. When asked if they used or did not use AI tools or programmes in their public relations role, 43.2% of respondents to the survey said yes, 52.5% said no, with the remaining 4.3% not knowing. Given the shift that has happened during the Covid 19 pandemic and how organisations have taken a step change in their use of technology, there may have been an expectation that use of AI in public relations would have been more ubiquitous. What is apparent is that there is a requirement for fundamental knowledge and skills acquisition at pace. What is questionable is whether hands-on knowledge and skills are needed, or whether it is knowledge about these technologies and their implications, or both.

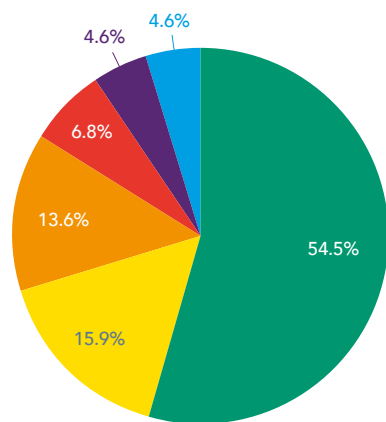
The development of AI skills

The third cluster of responses is about the development of AI skills, skills considered most relevant as a PR practitioner, and how respondents learned these skills.



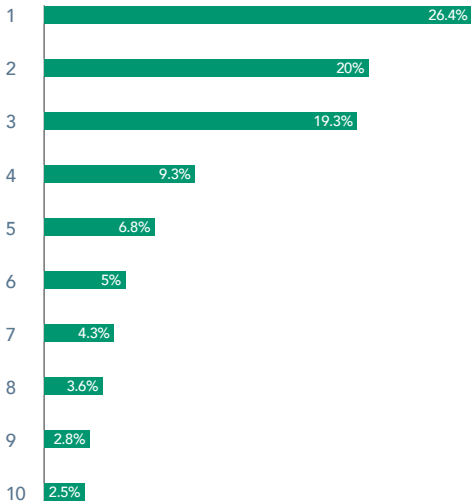
6. I have developed my data and AI skills...

First choice	%
On the Job	20.4%
None	15.7%
Attending Webinars	15%
Going on an awareness training course	14.3%
Reading books through leadership	13.2%
All/Others	8.9%
Listening to podcasts	5.4%
Going on a technical training course	5.3%
Training	1.8%



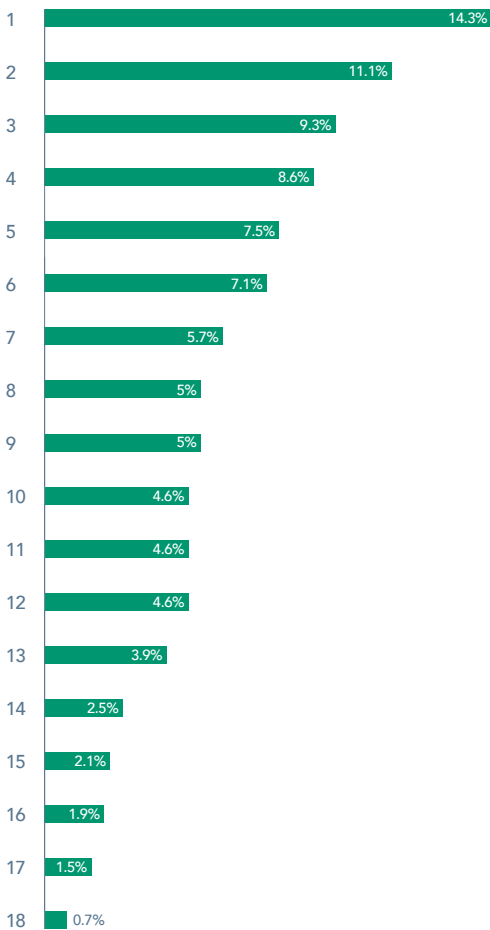
7. The respondents who said they had no data and AI skills were asked what had prevented them from gaining them

	%
Lack of skills/need for training	54.5%
Weak organisational support (with others)	15.9%
Other (cost; not aware of how it can be used in comms; lack of time; not focused on it etc.)	13.6%
Complexity of use	6.8%
Peer learning/ coaching & mentoring	4.6%
Security concerns/trust	4.6%



8. Biggest challenge to upskilling in data and AI

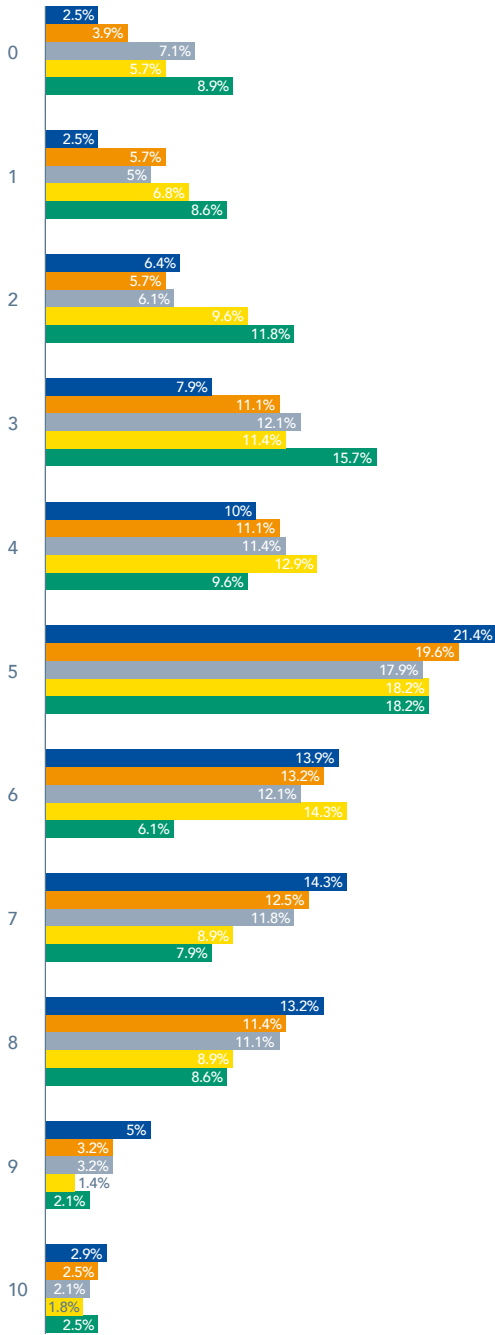
First choice	%
1. It's hard to find courses for non-technical people	26.4%
2. I'm not sure what course I should do	20%
3. I'm not sure what I need to know	19.3%
4. I don't know how to adapt my current PR practice & processes	9.3%
5. I don't know where to find information relevant to my role	6.8%
6. It's difficult to keep up with the requirements	5%
7. I find it difficult to find/ secure funding for AI training	4.3%
8. I don't foresee a skills gap	3.6%
9. No Response	2.8%
10. I feel AI is a long way off, so not relevant to me now	2.5%



9. AI skills believed to be most relevant as a PR practitioner

First choice	%
1. Targeting audiences more effectively	14.3%
2. Monitoring skills (media & social media)	11.1%
3. Communication (supporting to communicate more effectively)	9.3%
4. Strategy and business planning	8.6%
5. In-depth statistics	7.5%
6. Ethics	7.1%
7. Data & AI leadership skills	5.7%
8. Data Science	5%
9. Governance, compliance & policy	5%
10. Statistical awareness	4.6%
11. Workflow management	4.6%
12. General data literacy (numeracy/math)	4.6%
13. Machine learning	3.9%
14. Problem solving	2.5%
15. Creative skills	2.1%
16. General tech skills	1.9%
17. Others/ Don't know/ Impossible to answer/ What is AI	1.5%
18. Computer science	0.7%

No understanding – 0
Regular use – 10



10. I rate my current skills as (rating scale is 0-10, with 0 having no understanding or practical application, 5 is average, with 10 being regularly part of your role)

Data Skills

- Knowledge & Awareness on AI within PR role/function
- Knowledge & Awareness on AI within the advisory role of PR
- Practical application of AI within PR function, including tools
- Practical application of AI within your org/client, including builds & deployments and bought-in systems & services

Rating Scale	■ %	■ %	■ %	■ %	■ %
0	2.5	3.9	7.1	5.7	8.9
1	2.5	5.7	5	6.8	8.6
2	6.4	5.7	6.1	9.6	11.8
3	7.9	11.1	12.1	11.4	15.7
4	10	11.1	11.4	12.9	9.6
5	21.4	19.6	17.9	18.2	18.2
6	13.9	13.2	12.1	14.3	6.1
7	14.3	12.5	11.8	8.9	7.9
8	13.2	11.4	11.1	8.9	8.6
9	5	3.2	3.2	1.4	2.1
10	2.9	2.5	2.1	1.8	2.5

Commentary

On the job training, followed by webinars and awareness building courses are popular ways in which practitioners have acquired their skills. For those who have no skills, there is a question about them not knowing what they don't know, but also a clear sense that they need training. The responses to question 7 above confirm this view was borne out in the recorded/written submissions. There is still widespread ignorance about AI and Big Data and a sense that people don't know where to start: the elephant is big and unknown. There are huge numbers of courses available, on and off-line, but making the right choice of topic and at the right level remains a major challenge.

There are huge numbers of courses available, on and off-line, but making the right choice of topic and at the right level remains a major challenge.

The recorded and written respondents were asked to explain their approach to and methods of learning and again a variety were listed. More advanced practitioners were keen to be able to experiment and learn from other professions, disciplines and academic literature. Others wanted structured, academically sound, iterative approaches informed by working case studies while some preferred online and/or self-learning or bite-sized 1 or 2 hour sessions in non-technical language (time commitment, expense, and also the capacity to learn different 'scientific' skills were concerns). Some wanted a mix of courses, but also mentoring and reverse mentoring by digital natives or online companions, learning sets and networks of learning. This is particularly the case for more senior staff who were not digitally savvy. What comes from this is that approaches to learning are individually contingent on issues such as available time, comfort with technology, learning styles, seniority, nature of role, and existing levels of skill.

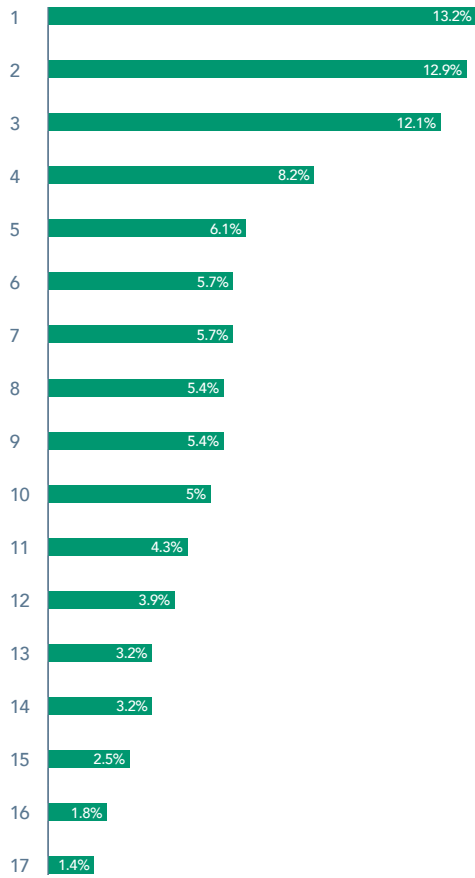
There was frustration voiced about the number of self-styled experts and expensive courses for more advanced AI which added little practical value for practitioners because they were not specific enough for PR, were too broad or shallow, and were aimed more at developers rather than users.

However, there was significant agreement that a 'conversation' on training needs was required and that a variety of routes be provided from the highly structured, to the more 'pick and mix'. There was frustration voiced about the number of self-styled experts and expensive courses for more advanced AI which added little practical value for practitioners because they were not specific enough for PR, were too broad or shallow, and were aimed more at developers rather than users. Disappointment was also expressed about the lack of collaboration between PR colleagues from different organisations who face AI challenges. The impossibility of any one individual being fully up to date on all AI developments, particularly in relation to channels, surfaced the need for a strategic and team approach to professional development in AI as well as the need for closer collaboration with IT colleagues.

The responses to question 9 above show that audience targeting and monitoring are seen to be the most relevant skills, which may indicate a more tactical orientation, but ethics, strategy, governance and leadership also feature relatively prominently suggesting strategic implications too.

Turning to how skilled practitioners are currently, most regard themselves as midway in the ranking scale, with a skew towards less understanding, particularly on organisational uses of AI. However, it is also apparent that there are a considerable number who regard themselves as highly skilled, although it should be borne in mind that this is a self-assessment with no benchmark against which respondents could measure themselves. This is representative of what appears to be a recognisable three-way split in the profession, with a) some having significant knowledge and skills at a high level and filling an advisory role in strategy, technical development, and implementation, b) others fulfilling technical and implementation roles and various levels of capability, and c) the 'left behinds' who are yet to become skilled. This split was confirmed in the recorded/written submissions.

AI now and in the future

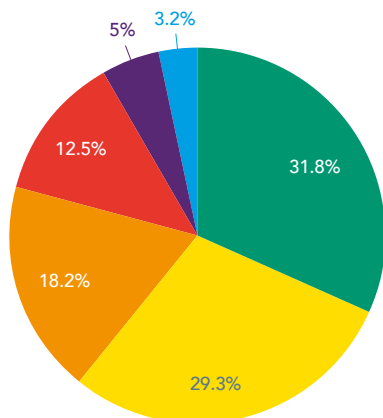


The next part of the research looked at how practitioners felt AI could help in their current role and at the challenges for the future.

11. How do you think AI tools & programmes can help in PR role?

First choice	%
All	13.2%
Providing insights to business/organisation executives recommending business adaptations and changes	12.9%
Digital media, including social media	12.1%
Managing workflow more efficiently, including process-driven elements such as time sheets, reporting and monitoring	8.2%
Utilising owned & third-party data for insights	6.1%
Campaign management, including insights & campaign deployment	5.7%
Horizon scanning	5.7%
Crisis communications	5.4%
Copywriting through automated content (internal/ external)	5.4%
Evidence to persuade or influence others	5%
Stakeholder engagement & management	4.3%
Media relations management	3.9%
Creatives for campaigns & other creative work	3.2%
Identifying ambassadors & influencers	3.2%
Risk management	2.5%
Project/programme management	1.8%
Team management/team working	1.4%

12. When it comes to implementing AI across an enterprise, what do you believe is the top challenge for PR professionals?



Responses	%
Lack of awareness around the tools	31.8%
Require more knowledge/ training	29.3%
Ethical considerations	18.2%
Unsure of how the tools will alter the practice PR	12.5%
Not part of my role	5%
Other (budget, cost, AI isn't developed enough yet, it's not a magic bullet!)	3.2%

Commentary

Some caution was raised about AI taking over a number of the skills-based tasks such as writing, where one respondent noted that the humanising elements of tonality and nuance would be a regrettable loss.

Practitioners' views on how AI can help them in their current role range from the business critical to the highly tactical. At the strategic level, AI can assist in decision-making in organisations and offer high-level insight. At the tactical level, help in the area of digital/social media constitutes the most popular applications. However, the use of AI in making public relations processes and management (workflow) more effective and efficient is notable: AI as a business assistant and partner in work is a notion that came through in the recorded/written submissions too. Also of note is the number of people who see AI being useful in all the options offered. This supports the overall impression taken from this research that there is a keen appetite for using AI infused tools, systems, and processes but the major constraint holding people back is the knowledge, skill and opportunity to indulge this appetite. This proposition is clearly supported in question 12 where lack of awareness and knowledge/training are identified as the major challenges facing public relations professionals. Ethics also comes across as a major concern and signposts the fact that knowledge and skills training in tool use is not the only requirement.

The recorded/written responses provided further detail on the potential impact of AI and Big Data on the profession. The rich responses indicated that it could help in providing evidence for the value it delivers, both for itself and as a support for other parts of the organisation. Deep insights, predicting and understanding audience and their trends were a part of this, as well as removing some of the more mundane tasks so that more focus could be put on the strategic. Some caution was raised about AI taking over a number of the skills-based tasks such as writing, where one respondent noted that the humanising elements of tonality and nuance would be a regrettable loss. Another surmised there could be less credence given to creativity and novel combinations of ideas and more emphasis on curation. One respondent noted that the acquisition of AI skills in and of themselves would not enhance professional identity. However, a lack of these skills may diminish it. Another respondent flagged the potential dangers of becoming obsessed with AI metrics and data and the profession losing the ability to think strategically and creatively. They warned against bland and empty content "carefully honed for algorithms, not for curious minds". Again, the challenge concerning the lack of knowledge about AI, its potential and the dangers at all levels in the profession was flagged and resonates with an earlier report from the CIPR's AlinPR Panel, *'The Effects of AI on the professions'*² which indicates that practitioners are "sleepwalking into AI".

² Available at https://cipr.co.uk/CIPR/Our_work/Policy/AI_in_PR/AI_in_PR_guides.aspx

Three Questions

Finally, the research gathered data in phases 1 and 2 on *three general questions* to which free form answers could be provided. To give a more visceral flavour of the range of opinions and strength of feeling coming from the survey results, word clouds of the responses are presented here.

Q1. What is your general view of AI in PR?



Q2. How will it change the PR profession?



Q3. What are your hopes and fears about AI?



Commentary

There are some clear themes that come through from these three questions. Many positives are envisaged with most respondents seeing huge potential and opportunities for the profession. Overall, there is excitement about AI and data and a view that much of the menial work can be removed. AI offers scalability of PR services and will help tackle some of the issues around overwork on tasks such as writing and perception auditing. Insight will come to the fore and AI will help ensure that the efficiency, effectiveness, and evaluated contribution of the profession can be enhanced. Also in prospect are the tools and time for new skills to develop in, for example, in social capital, relationship and community building to generate trust. As one respondent put it, "I feel empowered but curious at the same time because I can't visualise, yet, how AI will impact" in their case, consulting service provision. Another respondent also welcomed AI empowered tools but expressed some anxiety on mitigating the mistakes that were bound to happen when introducing AI tools and systems.

Many positives are envisaged with most respondents seeing huge potential and opportunities for the profession.

On the downside, many also see risks, an uncertain future, concerns about job losses, and ethical challenges, including over cultural bias, equality and diversity. Integration of all the communicative disciplines was seen as inevitable and close working with IT colleagues positively encouraged. The view was that the profession has much to learn from these colleagues on service design and ways of working. There was some concern expressed on the human rights implications of data ownership, both of the inequity of power this gave to those with resources to collect and analyse data and issues around its use and the biases inherent in collection and analysis systems. The challenge underlying all these concerns is the lack of knowledge about what AI can and will do and how the technologies can be fruitfully incorporated to support public relations professionals, not supplant them. The need for guidance, training and leadership from professional associations was clear.

Conclusions and recommendations

The conclusions that can be drawn from this research are relatively obvious and point to a plan of action, which is provided as a set of recommendations.

The answer to the central question which is ‘how ready is the public relations profession for the AI/Big Data age?’ is that it is not as ready as it should be. There are a proportion of practitioners who are well advanced in understanding, design, deployment and use at a strategic level, but the majority are at best operating competently at a tactical level and at worst have yet to begin the journey. The good news is that there is significant appetite to embrace these new technologies with their potential and opportunity-creating prospects being recognised and welcomed. The real issue is where to start and that applies either to the journey itself or in finding a way through the many pathways and roles that AI and Big Data opens up. Alongside this are a number of cautions, mainly around ethics and the possible threats to traditional tasks coupled with uncertainty about the shape and remit of the human element of public relations work into the future.

In September 2021, the UK Government published its National AI Strategy³ in which it notes a step change in progress is required if the UK is to capitalise on the opportunities for AI innovation and leadership. The conclusion of this report is that there is a similar requirement in the public relations profession. If that is to happen, the following recommendations are made to the profession:

1. AI and the fundamental structural change it will bring needs to become a part of a strategic conversation in the profession. The profession is re-shaping and this needs to be by design, not by default. In mapping a way forwards, the profession can build on three previous #AlinPR Panel Reports: *Humans still needed*⁴, *The Effects of AI on the Professions*⁵ and the *Ethics Guide to AI in PR*⁶.
2. That a pathways map is developed which plots the options that practitioners can take to secure various levels of competency in the strategic and tactical uses and governance of AI and Big Data.
3. That the current CIPR guides and resources on AI and Big Data are updated, made widely available to all members and publicised so that there is a basic, membership-wide understanding of what these concepts and technologies entail, their benefits, pitfalls and common uses.
4. That there are a number of focused events/initiatives driven centrally and via the regional groups to educate and inform members systematically on the topics mentioned above.
5. That becoming a knowledgeable and competent practitioner in AI is prioritised and incentivised so that the future of the profession is secured.

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November 2021

³ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-ai-strategy>

⁴ See https://www.cipr.co.uk/CIPR/Our_work/Policy/AI_in_PR/Consultations_.aspx

⁵ See https://www.cipr.co.uk/CIPR/Our_work/Policy/AI_in_PR/AI_in_PR_guides.aspx

⁶ See https://www.cipr.co.uk/CIPR/Our_work/Policy/AI_in_PR.aspx

Appendix 1

Demographic Details of survey Respondents

Work location/status

No. of Responses	
55.7%	In-house at an organisation, business or brand
28.9%	As an independent practitioner/ your own company
15.4%	At a PR agency

Geographic distribution

No. of Responses	
50%	Europe
24%	North America
10%	Africa
7%	Asia
5%	Australia/ Oceania
2%	Middle East
2%	South America

Gender distribution

No. of Responses	
60.3%	Female/ Woman
39.3%	Male
0.4%	Prefer not to say

Age distribution

No. of Responses	
33.6%	45-54
27.1%	35-44
16.8%	55-64
14.6%	25-34
4.3%	65 & over
3.6%	18-24

Which sector do you work in?

No. of Responses	
65%	Private Sector
21%	Public Sector
10%	Not for Profit/ Charity/ Voluntary
4%	All/ Multiple/ No Specific

Role

No. of Responses	
26%	Senior manager/ director
16%	Team lead/ manager
14%	C-level officer or equivalent
14%	Employee
13%	Self-employed
9%	Academic
4%	Member of the board or advisor
4%	PR Student

How long have you worked in PR Profession?

No. of Responses	
3%	PR Student
8%	0-2 years
8%	3-5 years
12%	5-10 years
15%	10-15 years
54%	15 years +

Amongst 15 years+ experience, how many are –

No. of Responses	
54%	Females
45.4%	Males
0.6%	Prefer not to say



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