

USER INTERVIEWS

The State of User Research 2021

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About User Interviews

[User Interviews](#) is a user research recruiting platform trusted by thousands of companies, including brands like Adobe, Grubhub, Intuit, Nielsen Norman Group, Pinterest, and Spotify. As of February 2021, researchers have launched over 32,000 research projects on our platform.

We believe quick, easy access to qualitative insights is the key to better decision-making and faster growth. (And we should know—our founders' first company [failed without user research](#).)

With our panel of over 450,000 vetted users, User Interviews is the fastest way to recruit research participants.

Researchers can also use our [Research Hub](#) platform to manage their own panel of users, automatically schedule and message session participants, and track research history all in one place.

Start recruiting with 3 free participants:
userinterviews.com

USER INTERVIEWS

Made for user researchers who need to:

Uncover fresh points of view

450k+ participants in 7 countries, 140+ industries.

Collaborate with their team

Team calendars, draft sharing and commenting, session moderators.

Simplify logistics with automations

Instant incentives, Zoom integration, Document Signing, synced calendars.

Get a recruit done ASAP

Bulk messaging, reuse screener surveys, full project duplication.
Median time to first qualified participant: 3 hours.

Build and maintain their own panel

Opt-in forms, CRM tools, custom emails.

About this report

The State of User Research gets bigger and better every year.

We've run this report annually [since 2019](#), using data we collect by surveying user researchers about their work over the past year.

For our 2021 report, we collected responses through our newsletter and social media (Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook) and by posting in Slack, Facebook, and LinkedIn communities. The breakdown of responses from our own channels vs. communities was an even 50/50 split. Our survey was open from December 2020 to January 2021.

In the end, we heard back from 525 people who do research (PwDRs) as at least part of their job.

We hope that the insights in this report will help you to have important conversations and empower your team to do more and better research in 2021.

A whopping **90% of user researchers** have worked entirely remotely since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to just 21% who said the same last year.

The average number of dedicated researchers and PwDRs is 6 and 8, respectively. [Kate Towsey](#)⁺ identified 8 PwDRs as the threshold after which a [research operations](#) function becomes necessary—a threshold many companies have now crossed.

Researchers whose stakeholders know how to access research findings and do so at least some of the time rated themselves as more fulfilled than those who said stakeholders never access research—**7/10 on average vs. 5.5/10.**

A fifth (21%) of researchers said they made changes to their research practice this year in order to focus more on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Remote-friendly tools were all the rage. Notably, Miro's popularity among our researchers grew **650% year over year**—60% of people say they use it to organize their notes, compared to 8% last year.



User Researchers

USER INTERVIEWS

Methodology + audience

This year, 525 people who do research (PwDRs) completed our survey—up from 336 respondents last year. These are people who spend more than 10% of their time on research. Most (67%) describe their primary job as UX/user research, with a further 17% working in product/UX design. Three-fourths (75%) of the people surveyed are individual contributors.

The majority (52%) of the people we heard from are 25 to 34 years old. On the whole, user researchers are a highly educated bunch—just under half of those surveyed (49%) hold graduate degrees.

Over half (51%) of respondents live in the United States, with the majority located in major cities like San Francisco, New York, Seattle, Austin, and Portland, OR.

We're also going global: We received responses from 44 different countries (compared to 33 last year). After the US, the countries most represented in our sample are Canada, the UK, Germany, India, Israel, and the Netherlands.

Special shout out to the lone survey takers in Bulgaria, Nigeria, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Peru!

- **525 responses**

- **44 countries and 31 US states**

- **68% identify as female/women**

- **52% of people surveyed are 25-34**

This year, we made our gender and racial/ethnic identity questions multiselect. For example, someone could select both “African American, Black” and “Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander” or both “male/man” and “transgender.”

Most respondents (68%) identify as female/women—which matches up with last year's survey (67%), as well data from [Payscale](#)^s in which 70.4% of survey respondents identified as female.

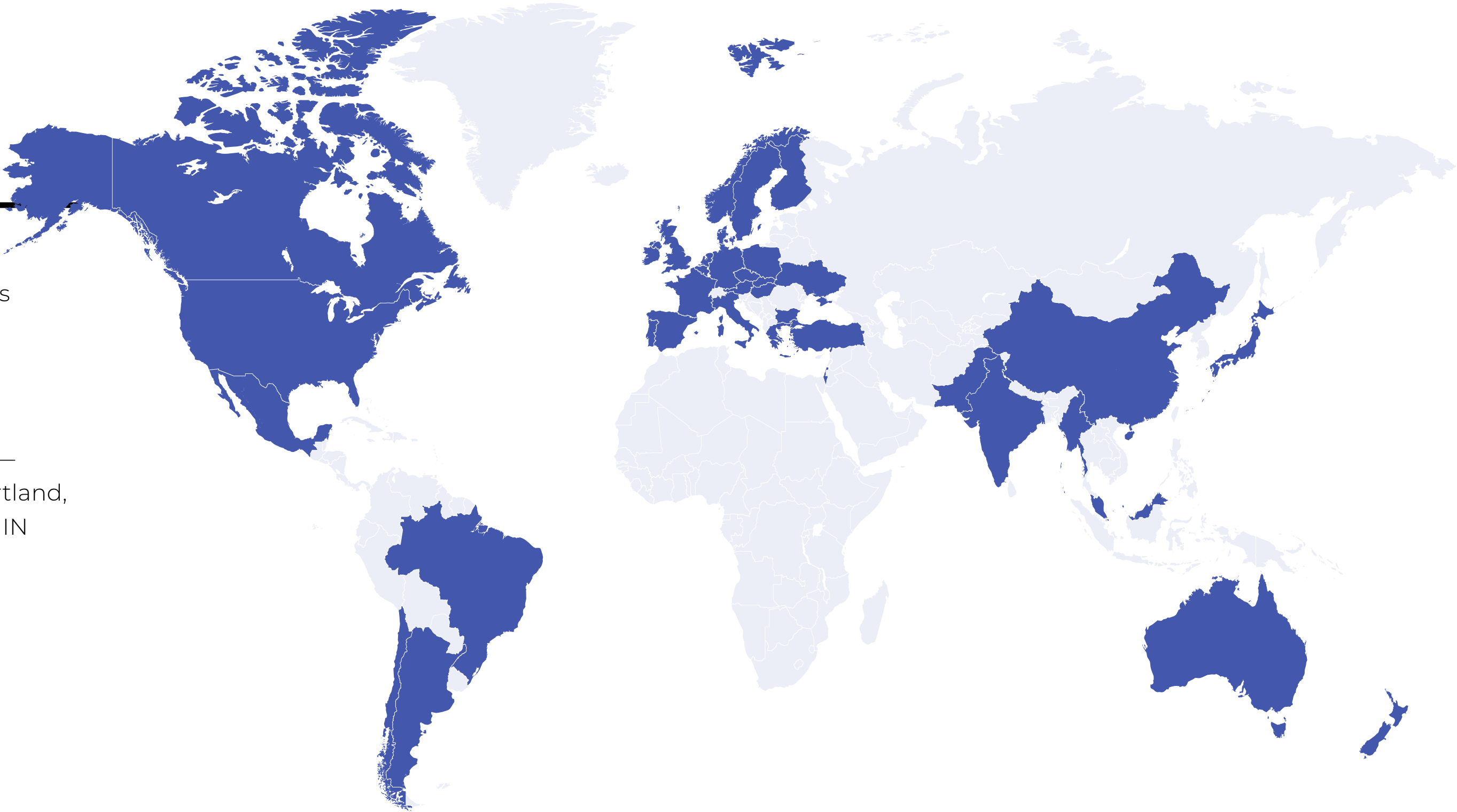
This was the first year we asked about racial/ethnic identities. Most respondents (62%) identify as white, followed by Asian and/or Desi (15%), Hispanic/Latinx/Latin(a/o) (9%), and African American/Black (4%).

All demographics questions were optional.

Location

User researchers from 44 countries took our survey this year. Just over half (51%) of responses came from US-based researchers, followed by Canada, the UK, Germany, India, Israel, and the Netherlands.

Most of our US respondents live in major cities—like San Francisco, NYC, Seattle, Austin, and Portland, OR—but towns like Ludlow, VT and Newburgh, IN also made an appearance in the data.

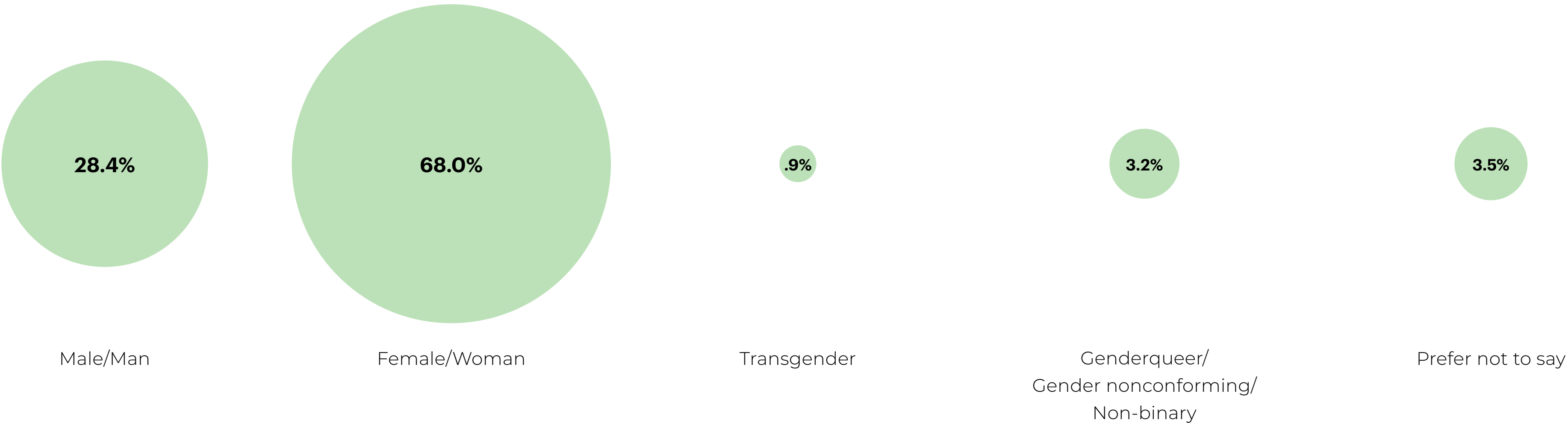


United States of America	51.2%	Netherlands	2.1%	Poland	0.6%	Italy	0.3%
Canada	6.8%	Portugal	1.5%	Singapore	1.2%	Malaysia	0.3%
Germany	4.5%	Mexico	1.2%	Sweden	0.9%	Malta	0.3%
United Kingdom	6.0%	Spain	1.5%	Turkey	0.6%	Myanmar	0.3%
India	2.7%	Czech Republic	0.6%	Austria	0.3%	New Zealand	0.6%
Israel	2.4%	Denmark	0.6%	Belgium	0.3%	Norway	0.3%
France	1.8%	Finland	0.6%	Bulgaria	0.3%	Pakistan	0.3%
Argentina	1.5%	Greece	0.6%	Chile	0.3%	Slovakia	0.3%
Australia	1.5%	Hungary	0.9%	China	0.3%	Ukraine	0.3%
Brazil	1.5%	Japan	0.6%	Ireland	0.3%		

How do you identify?

This year, we made this question multi-select. For example, a researcher could identify as both male/man and transgender. We also included a write-in option, but no researchers chose to use it.

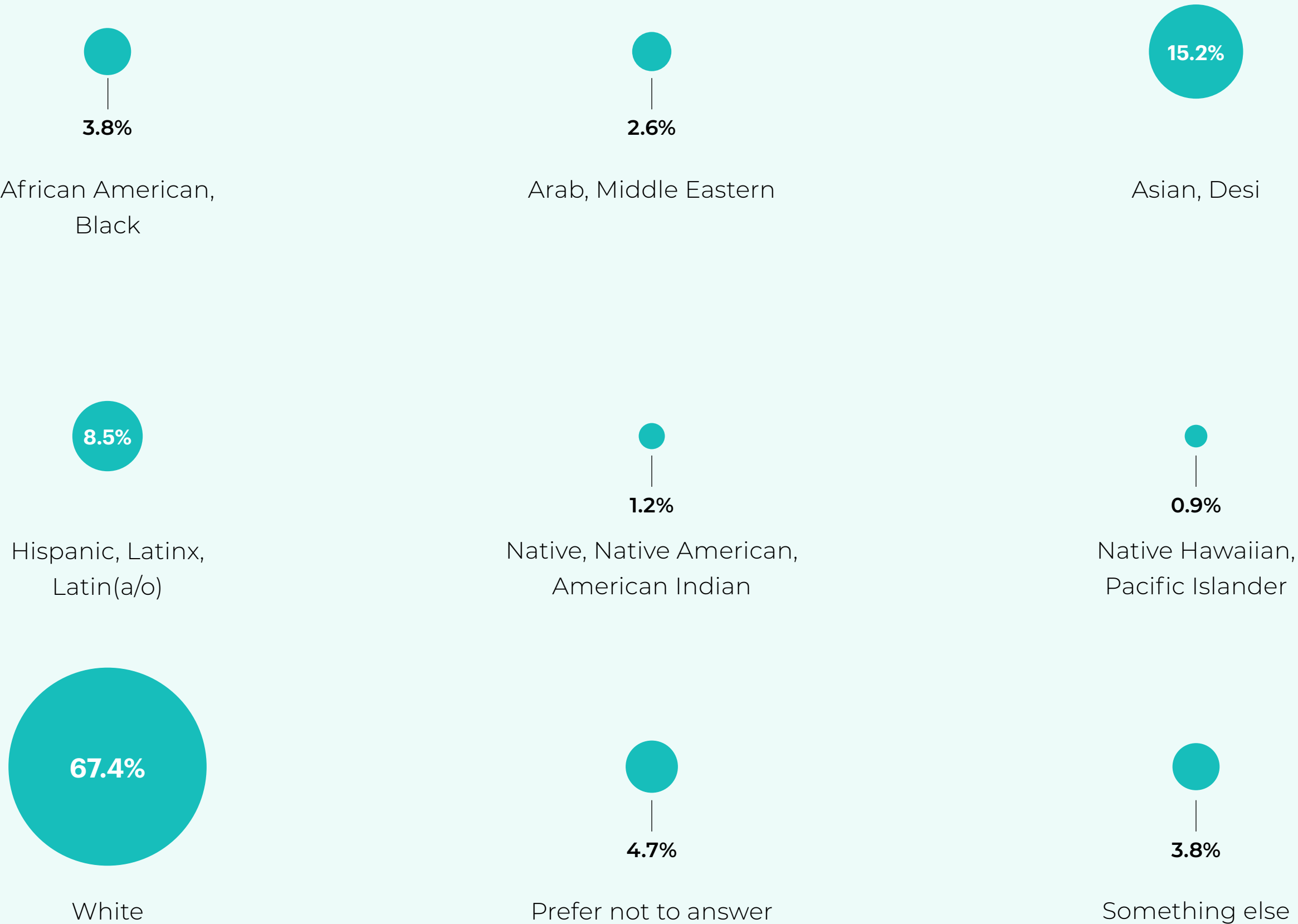
All demographic questions were optional.



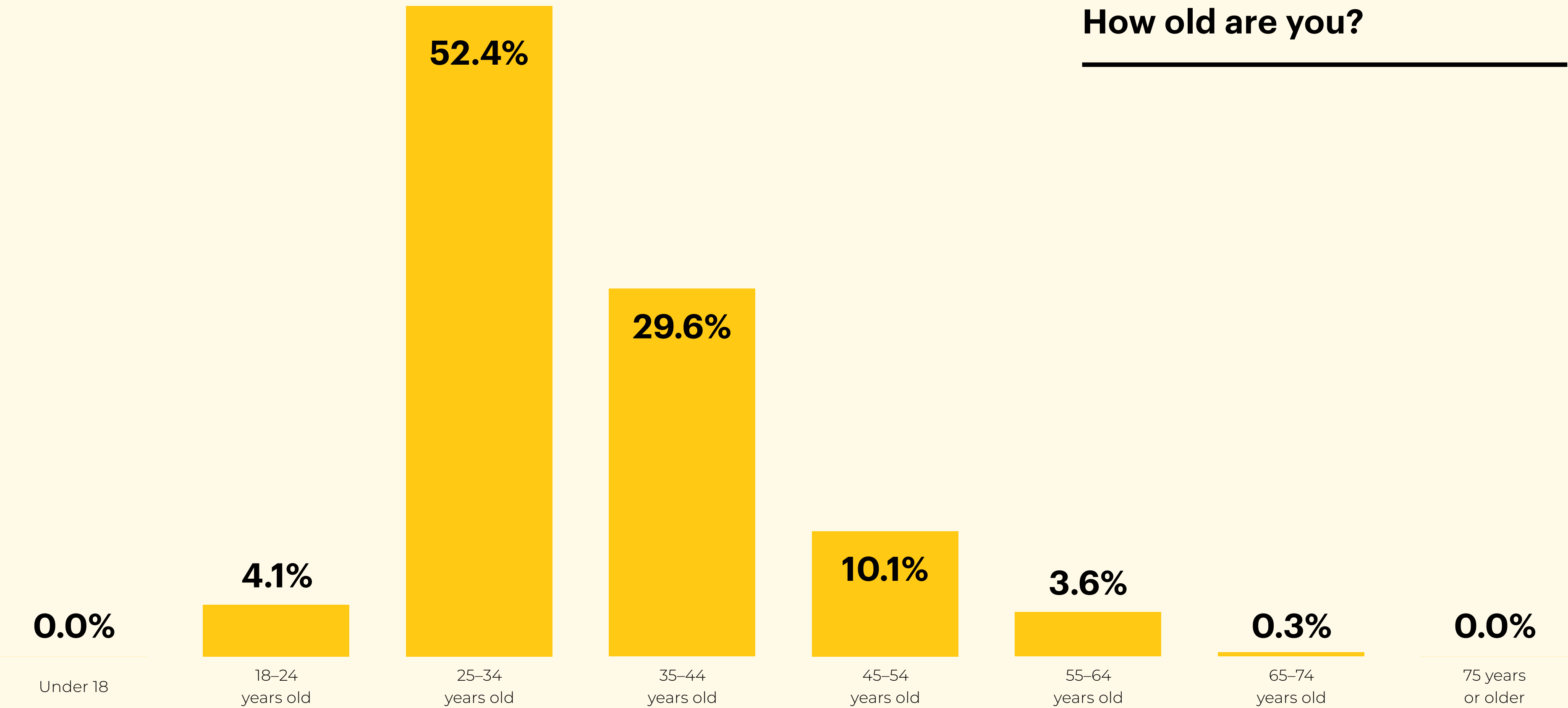
How do you identify?

This question was multiselect. For example, a researcher could identify as both African American/Black and Hispanic/Latinx/Latin(a/o). We included a write-in option, and 13 people wrote in an identity not listed.

All demographic questions were optional.

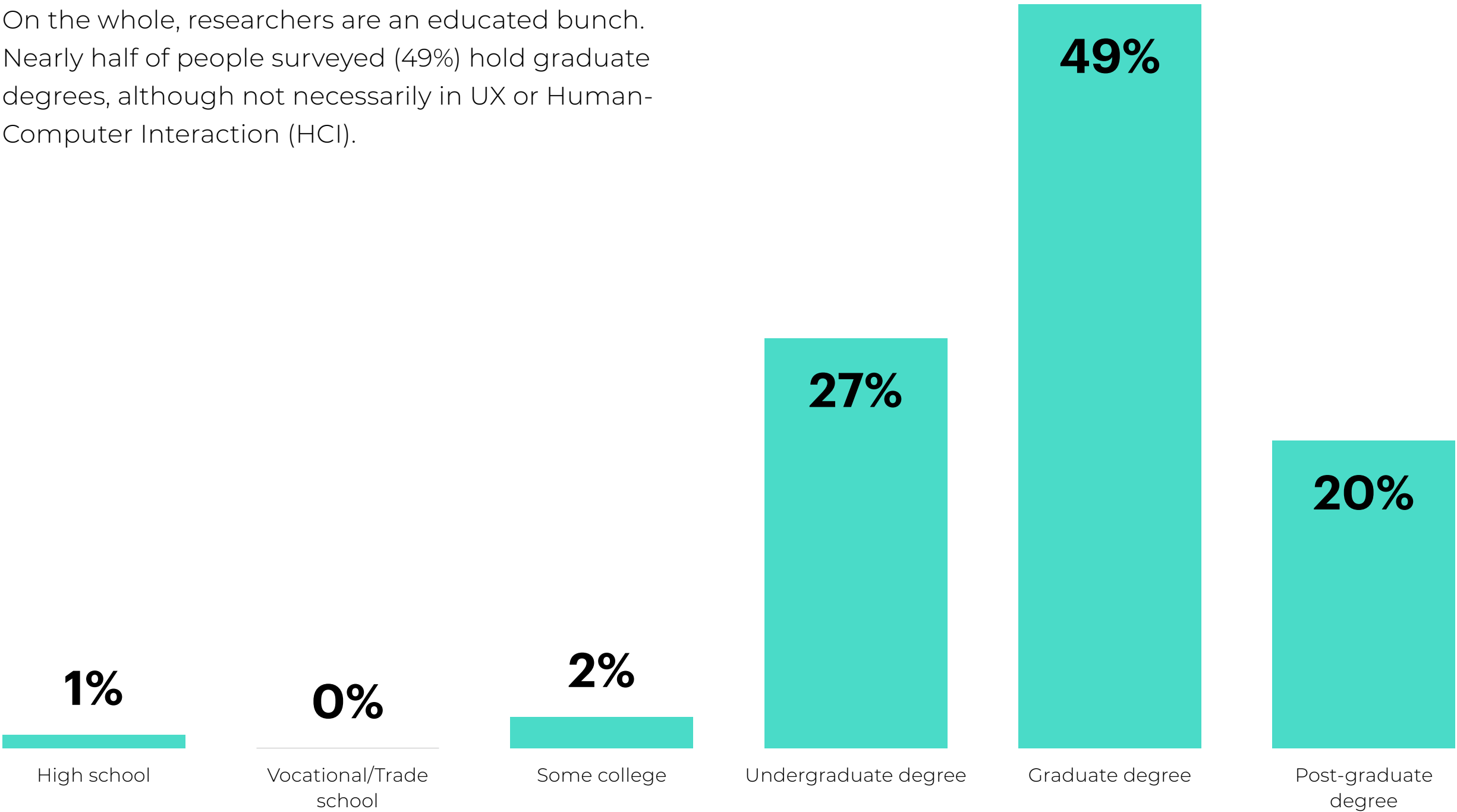


How old are you?

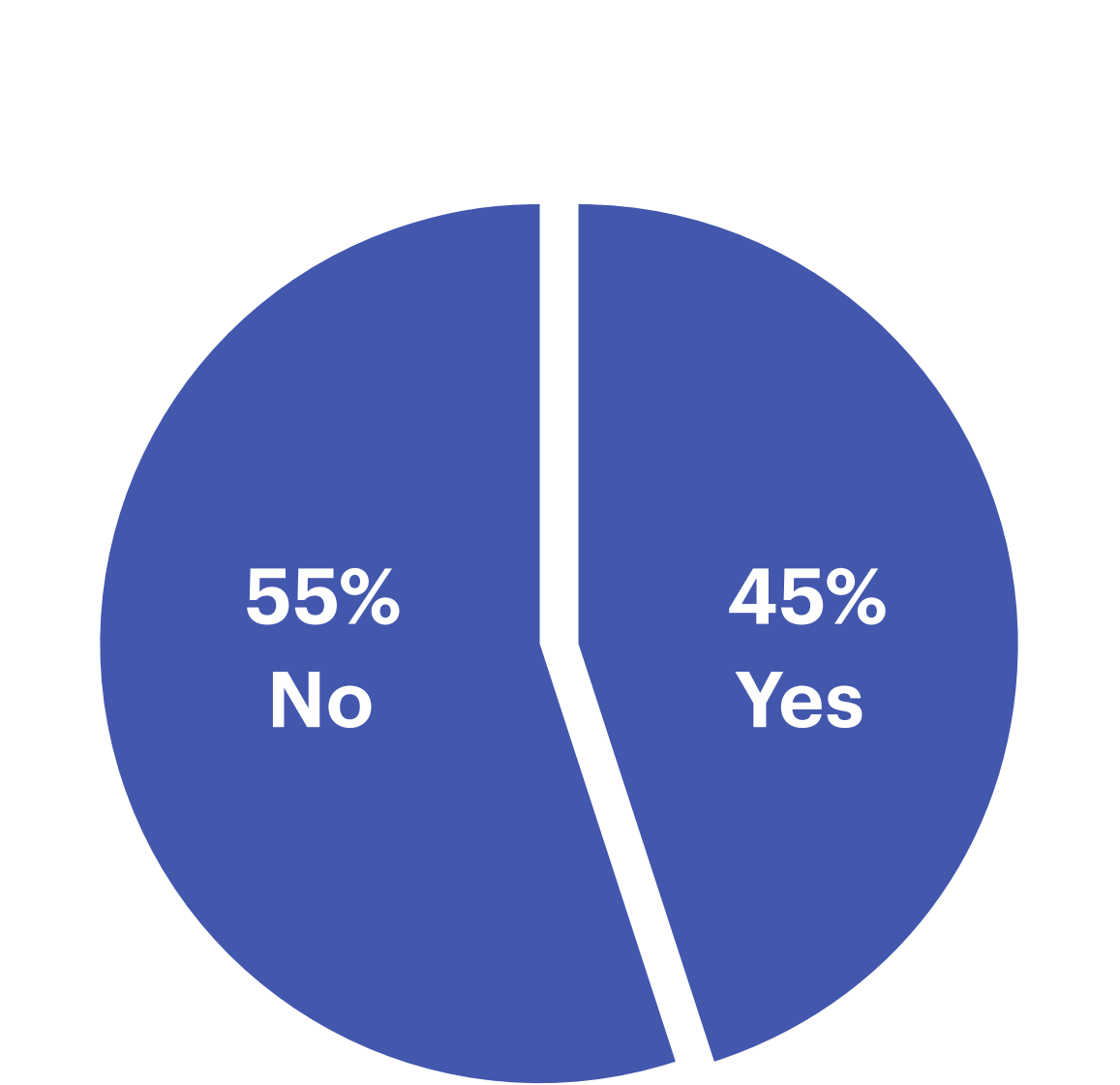


What is your highest level of education?

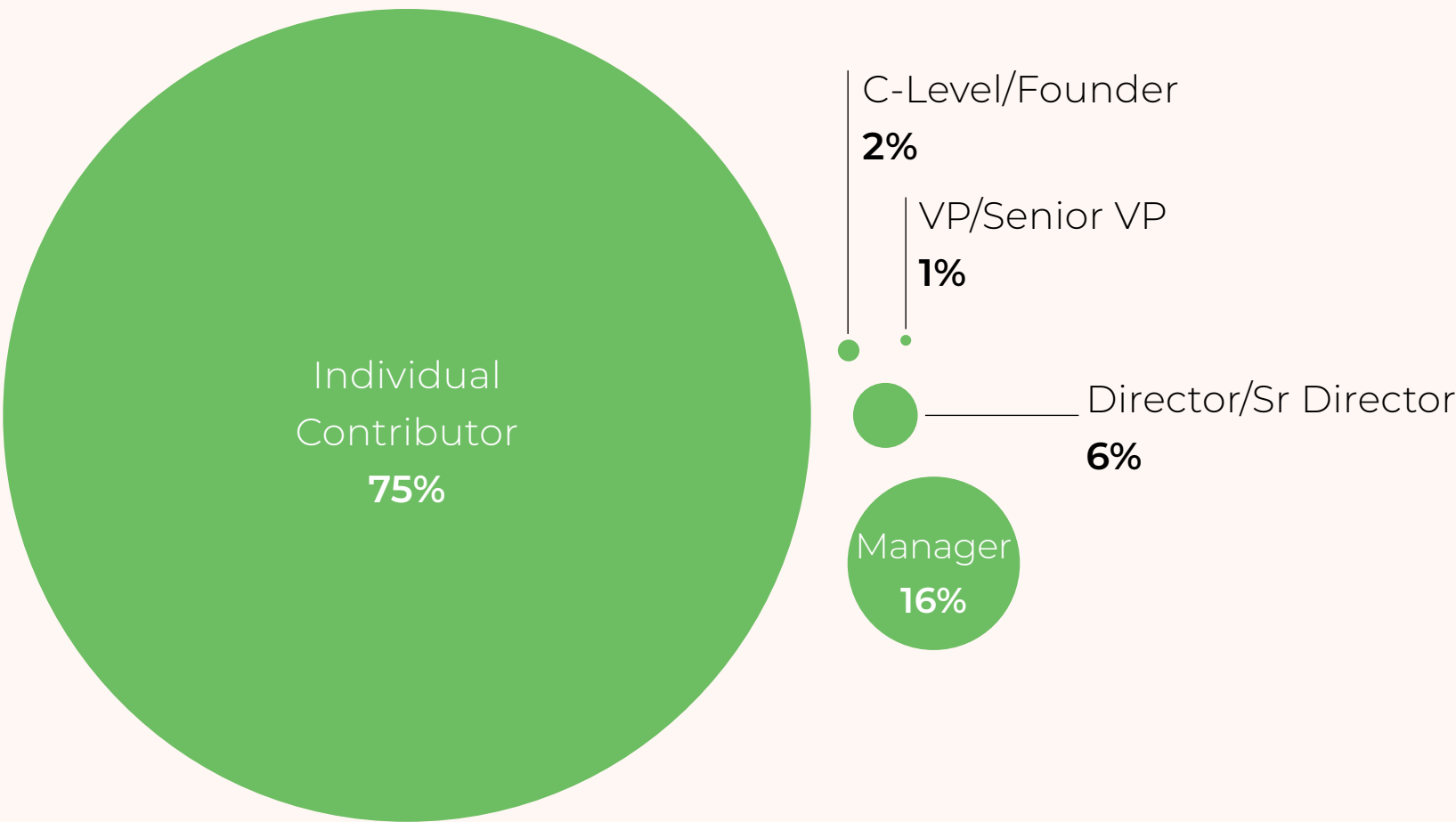
On the whole, researchers are an educated bunch. Nearly half of people surveyed (49%) hold graduate degrees, although not necessarily in UX or Human-Computer Interaction (HCI).



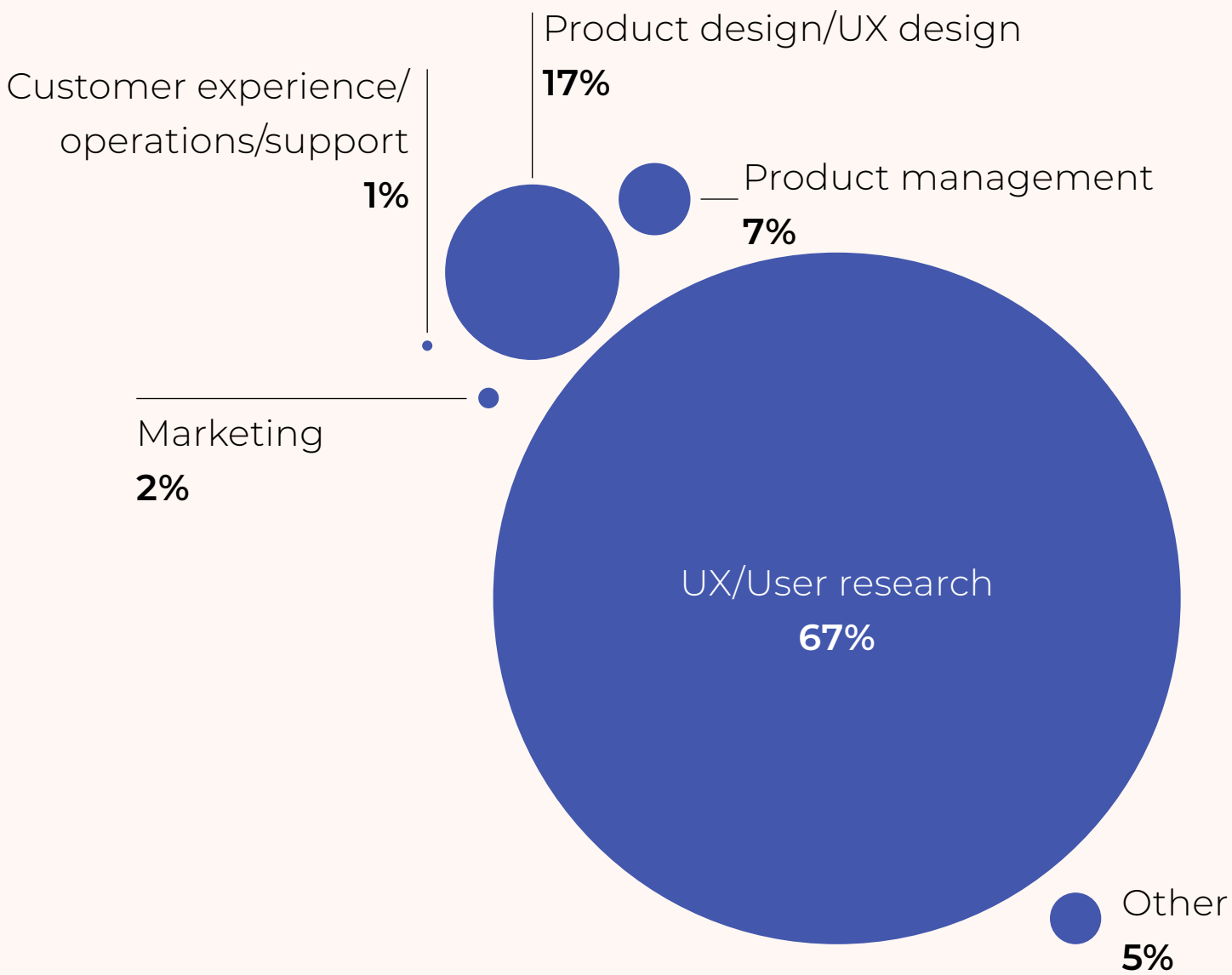
Do you hold any degrees or certifications in UX/HCI?



Which most accurately describes your role?

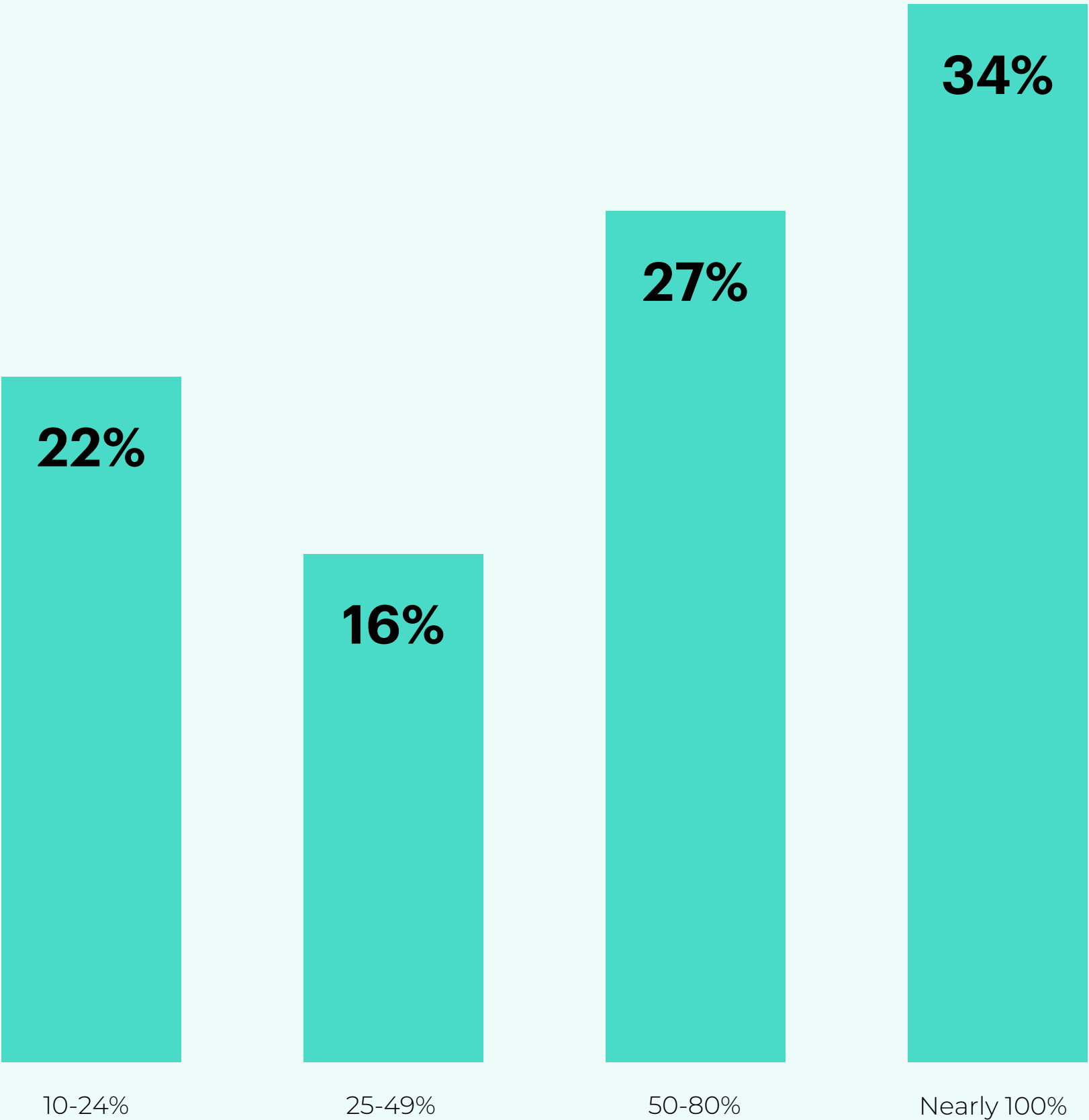


Which is closest to your title/function?



Roughly what percent of your job involves research?

Most of the people (61.5%) who took our survey spend at least half of their time doing research. The remaining 38.5% include product managers, UX designers, and managers who spend 10-49% of their time doing research.



User research experience + salary

As the field matures, user researchers are becoming more experienced each year. In last year's survey, 14% of people said they had 15 or more years of experience; this year, that number grew to 20%.

A plurality (30%) of the researchers we heard from have 5 to 9 years of experience. Over half (53%) of people surveyed have been working in the field for less than a decade.

The vast majority (85%) have been in their current role for less than 4 years—29% of people said they've held their current role for less than a year.

Salaries varied widely, depending on experience and location. Among non-US researchers, a plurality (25%) reported a salary of \$50k-\$75k. Close to half (44%) of researchers living outside the United States say they earn under \$50k annually.

- 29% of people have been in their current role for less than a year.
- Close to half (46%) of US-based researchers earn between \$100k and \$150k per year.
- Over a third (36%) of researchers say they work more than 40 hours per week.

The numbers look quite different for researchers living in the United States, where the [median household income](#)⁺ (in 2019) was \$68,703. The most commonly reported salary range among US researchers was \$100k to \$150k, with 46% of people saying they earn this much per year—1.5 to 2.2 times the median income.

Fewer than 5% of US-based researchers said they earn under \$50k. The same percentage reported salaries of over \$200k annually.

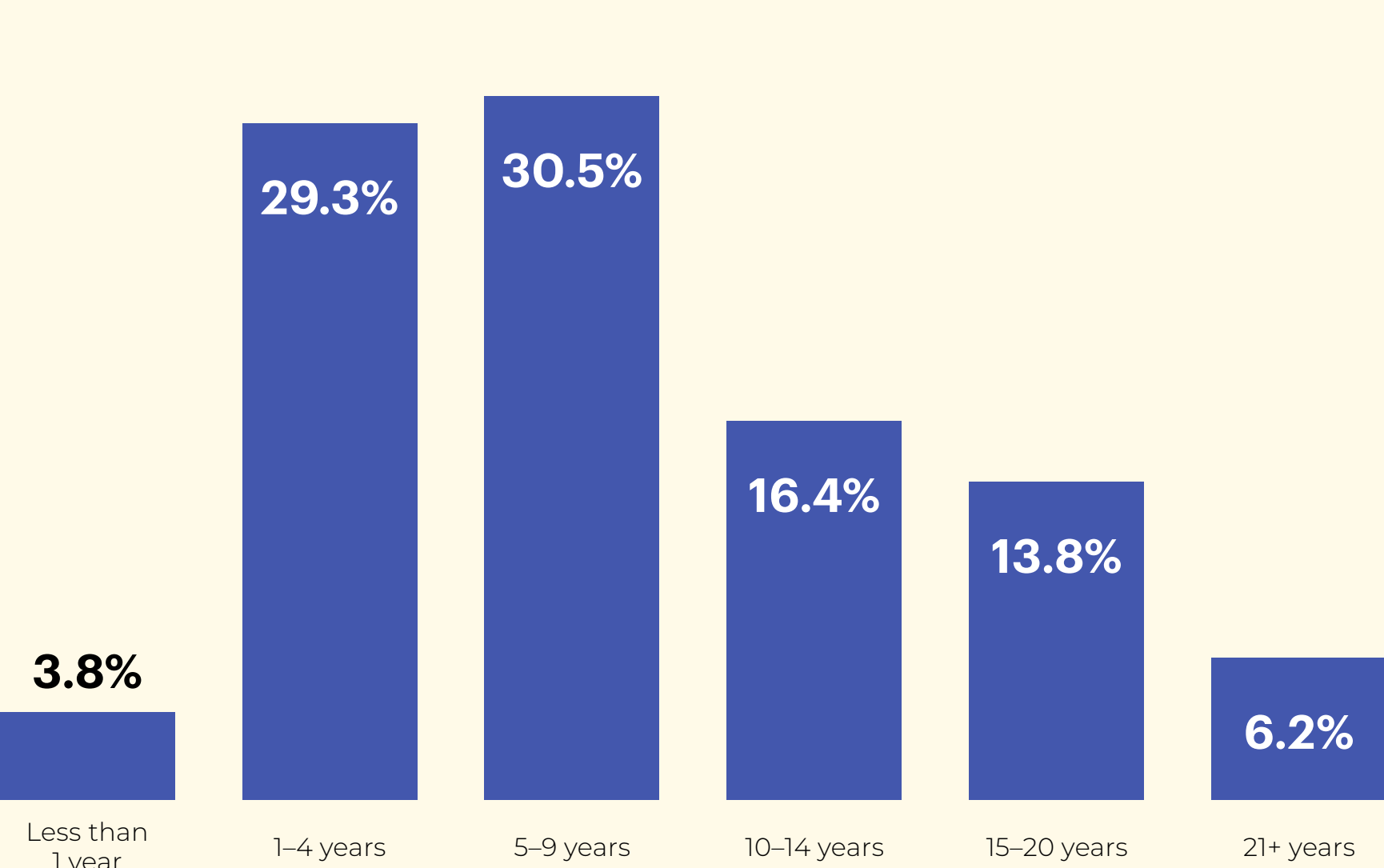
There is evidence of a gender-pay gap among researchers: Close to half (47%) of all survey takers who identify as male/men reported salaries over \$100k per year; 37% of people who identify as female/women reported the same, along with 36% of genderqueer/gender non-conforming/non-binary folks.

Among US-based researchers, 70% who identify as white (n=87/125) report salaries of \$100k+. Over half (55%) of people who identify as Asian and/or Desi (n=15/27) reported the same, along with 50% of Hispanic/Latinx/Latin(a/o) (n=4/8) and 45% of African American/Black researchers (n=5/11).

All those salaries are hard-earned—36% of people say they typically work more than 40 hours per week.

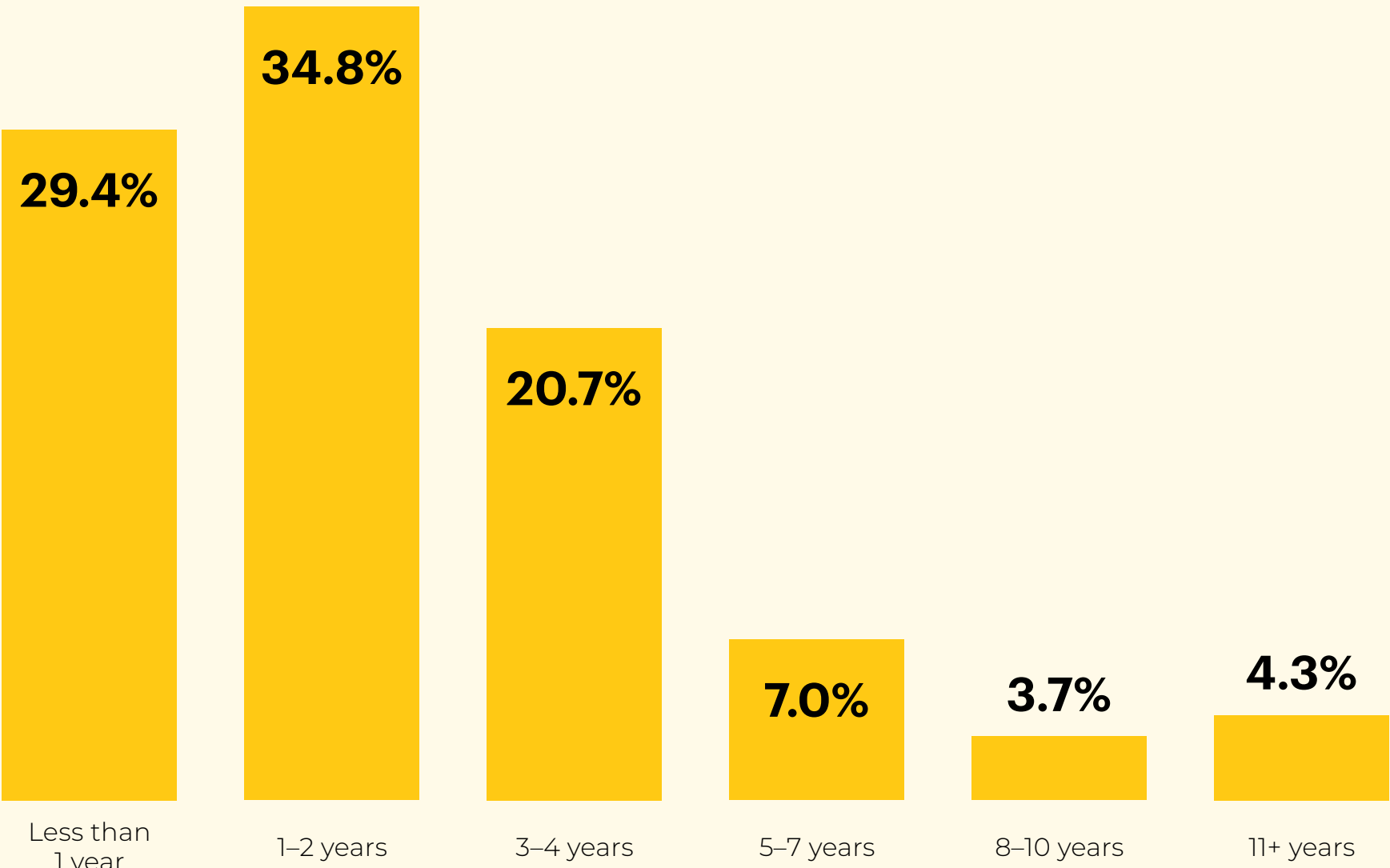
How many years of professional experience do you have?

As a group, user researchers are getting more experienced. In last year's survey, 14% of people said they had 15 or more years of experience; this year, 20% reported the same.



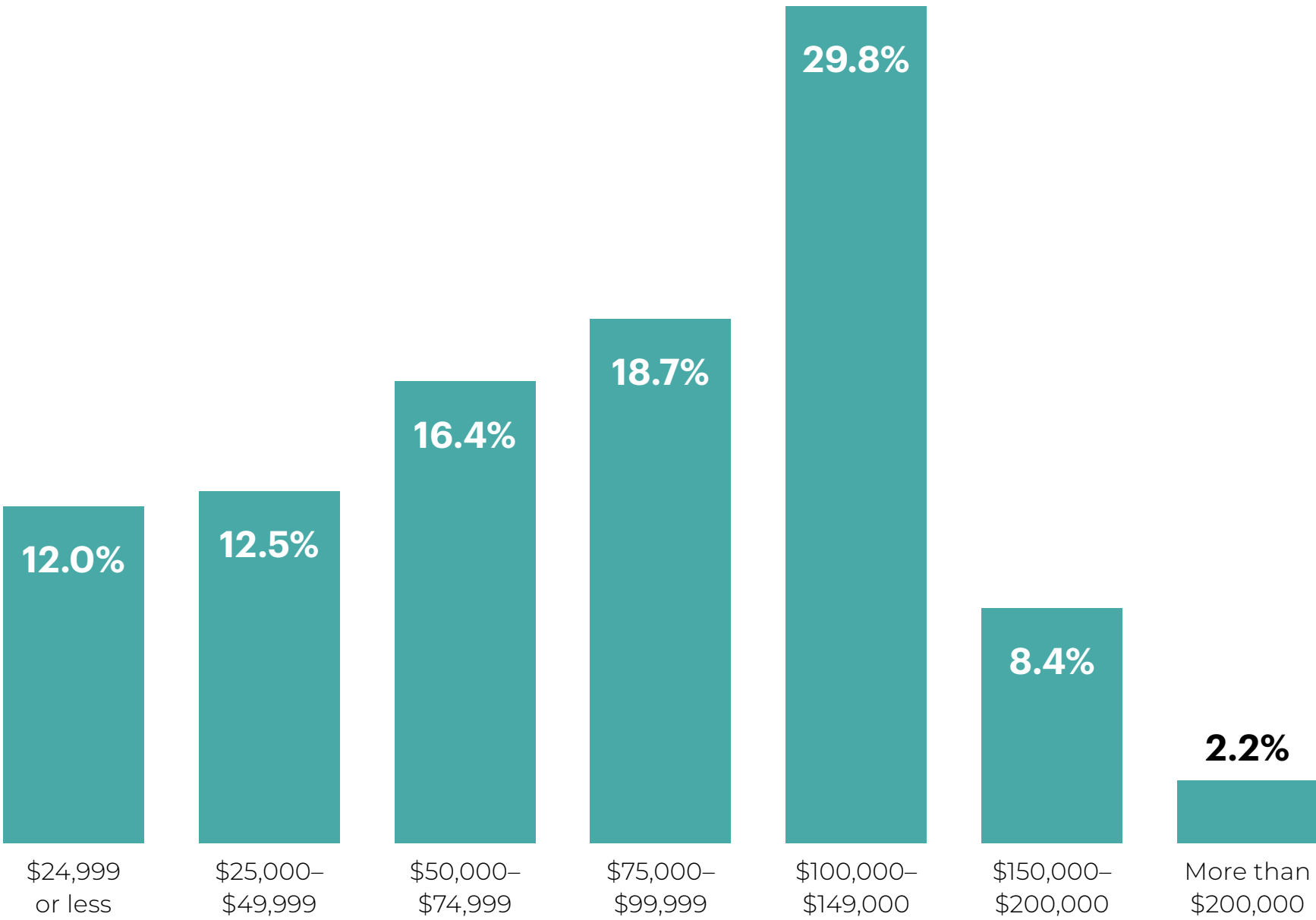
How many years have you been at your current job?

The vast majority (85%) of people have been in their current role for less than 5 years. Almost 30% of researchers say they were hired or moved into new a role within the last 12 months.



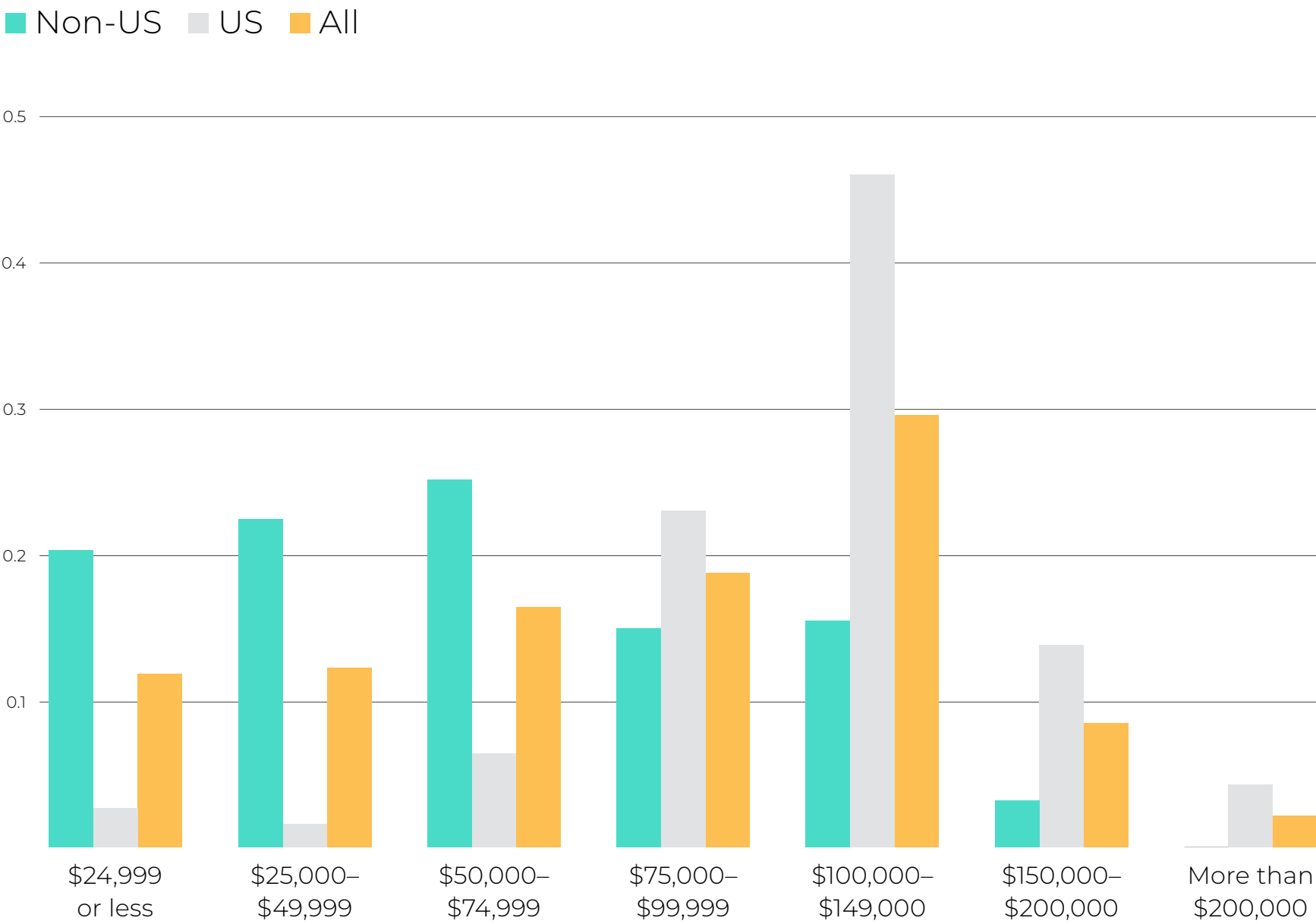
How much do you earn in a year?

Almost half (47%) of people who identify as male/men reported salaries over \$100k per year; 37% of people who identify as female/women and 36% of genderqueer/gender non-conforming/non-binary folks reported the same.



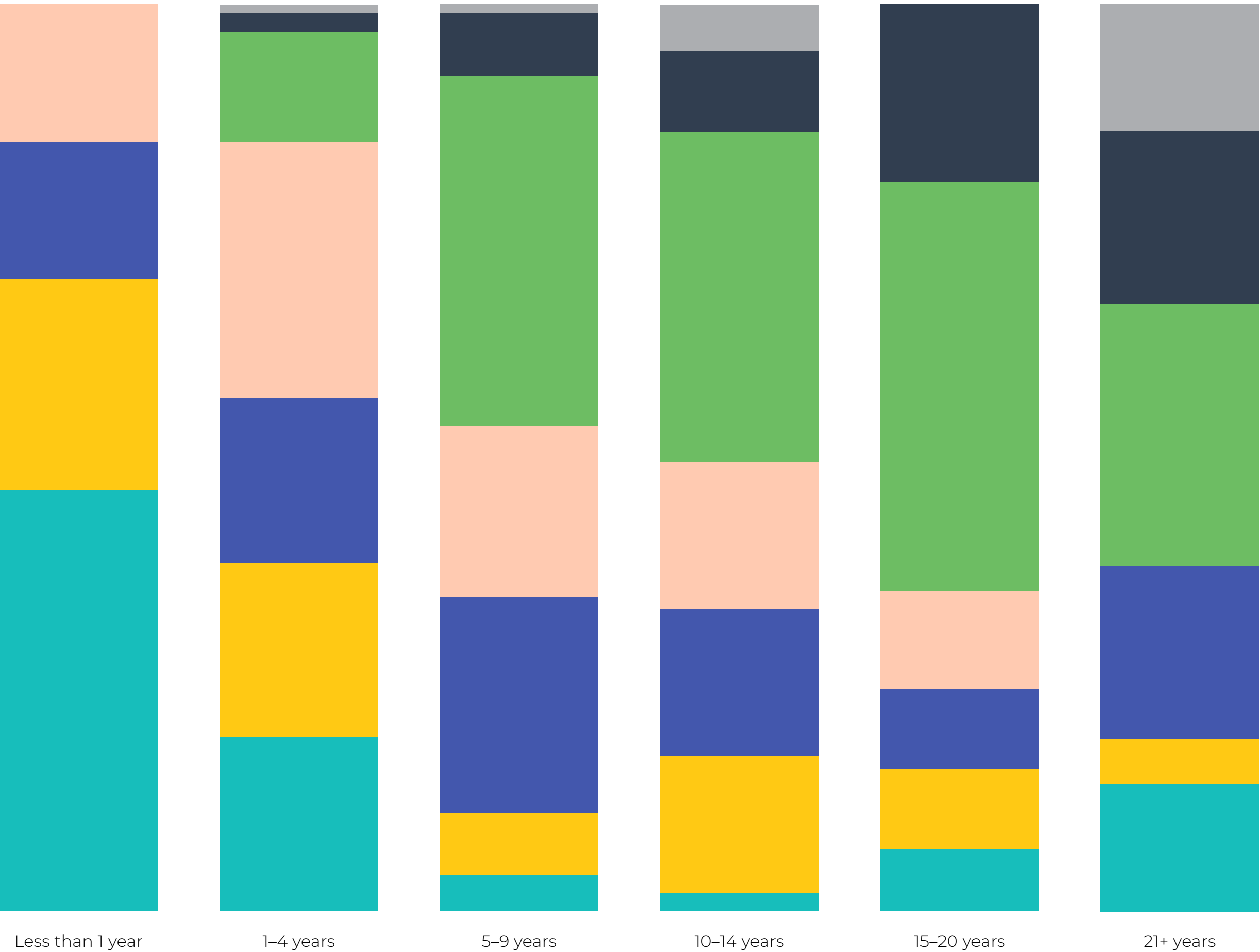
Annual salary

The most commonly reported salary among US researchers was \$100k–\$150k. Among non-US researchers, a plurality (25%) reported a salary of \$50–75k.

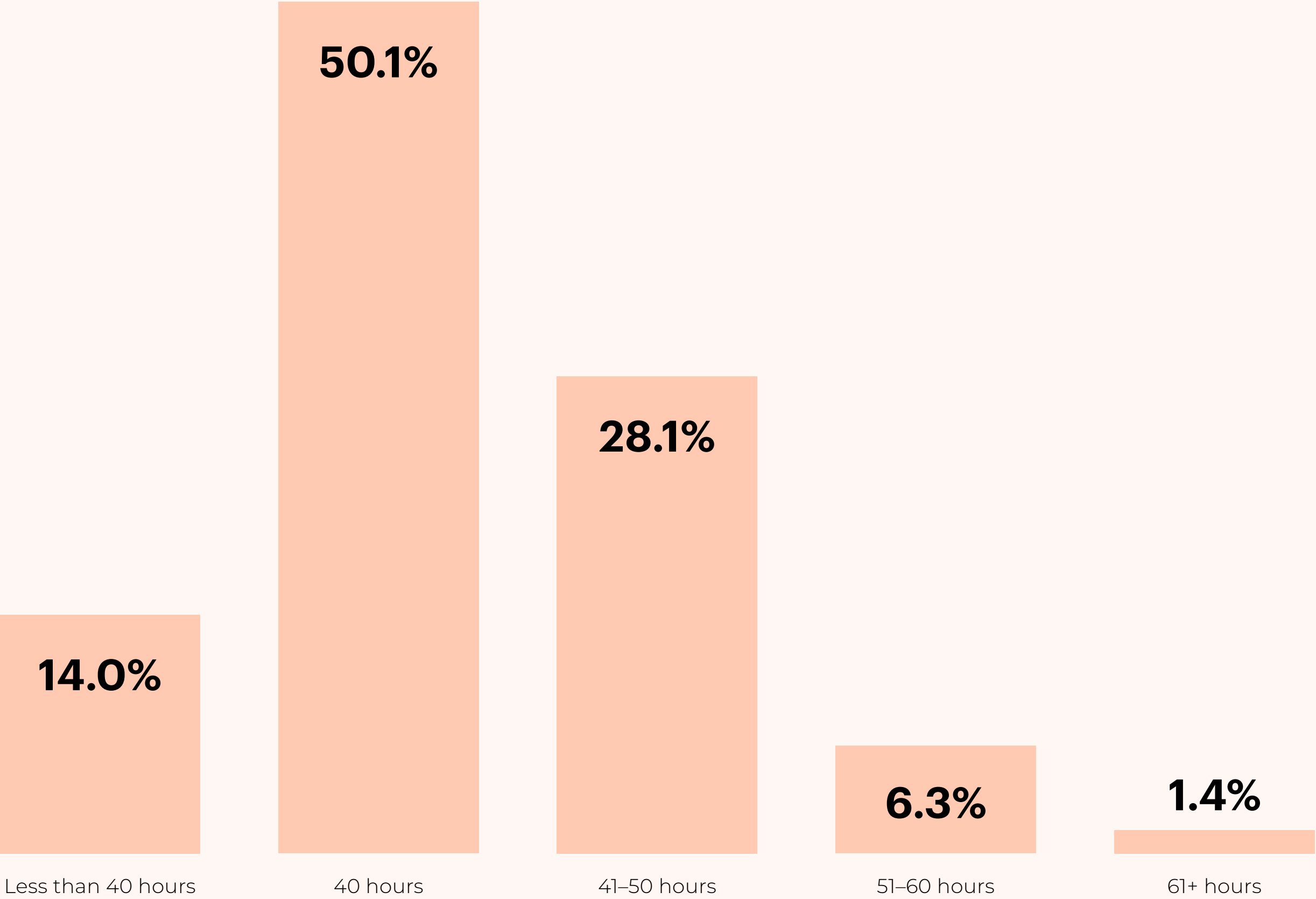


Years of professional experience vs. salary

- \$24,999 or less
- \$25,000–\$49,999
- \$50,000–\$74,999
- \$75,000–\$99,999
- \$100,000–\$149,000
- \$150,000–\$200,000
- More than \$200,000



How many hours per week do you work?





Research Teams

USER INTERVIEWS

Company + team structure

Each year that we run this survey, we end up hearing from more and more people working in large, enterprise companies. This year, 21% of survey responses came from researchers working in companies with 10k+ employees.

Still, nearly half (49%) of responses came from folks at companies with fewer than 500 employees. Just over 5% of people described themselves as freelancers. A little over 16% of people work at an agency (of any size), the same as last year and the year before.

We also asked people what industry they work in. A plurality of user researchers work in “tech” (no real surprise there) with 30% working in fields like IT, internet, and network security.

Over 10% said they work in banking or financial services, which may include folks in fintech. We also heard from people in medicine, health, and wellness-

related fields (9%), design (7%), telecommunications (3.5%), and education (3%).

One person also wrote in that they work in matchmaking. ❤️

So, what does the average research team look like?

In general, the number of people who do research scales up with company size. This is true for both dedicated researchers and PwDRs. At SMBs with 50-199 employees, the average number of dedicated researchers is 3; that number increases to 5 for a company with 500-999 employees, 8 for a company with 1000-5000 employees and so on.

When we look at the entire data set, the average number of dedicated researchers and PwDRs is 6 and 8, respectively. These numbers point to a growing need for research ops; [according to Kate Towsey](#)⁺, once a

company has around 8 people doing research on a regular basis, the demand for organization around research reaches a threshold, beyond which a dedicated operations function is needed for research to be effective.

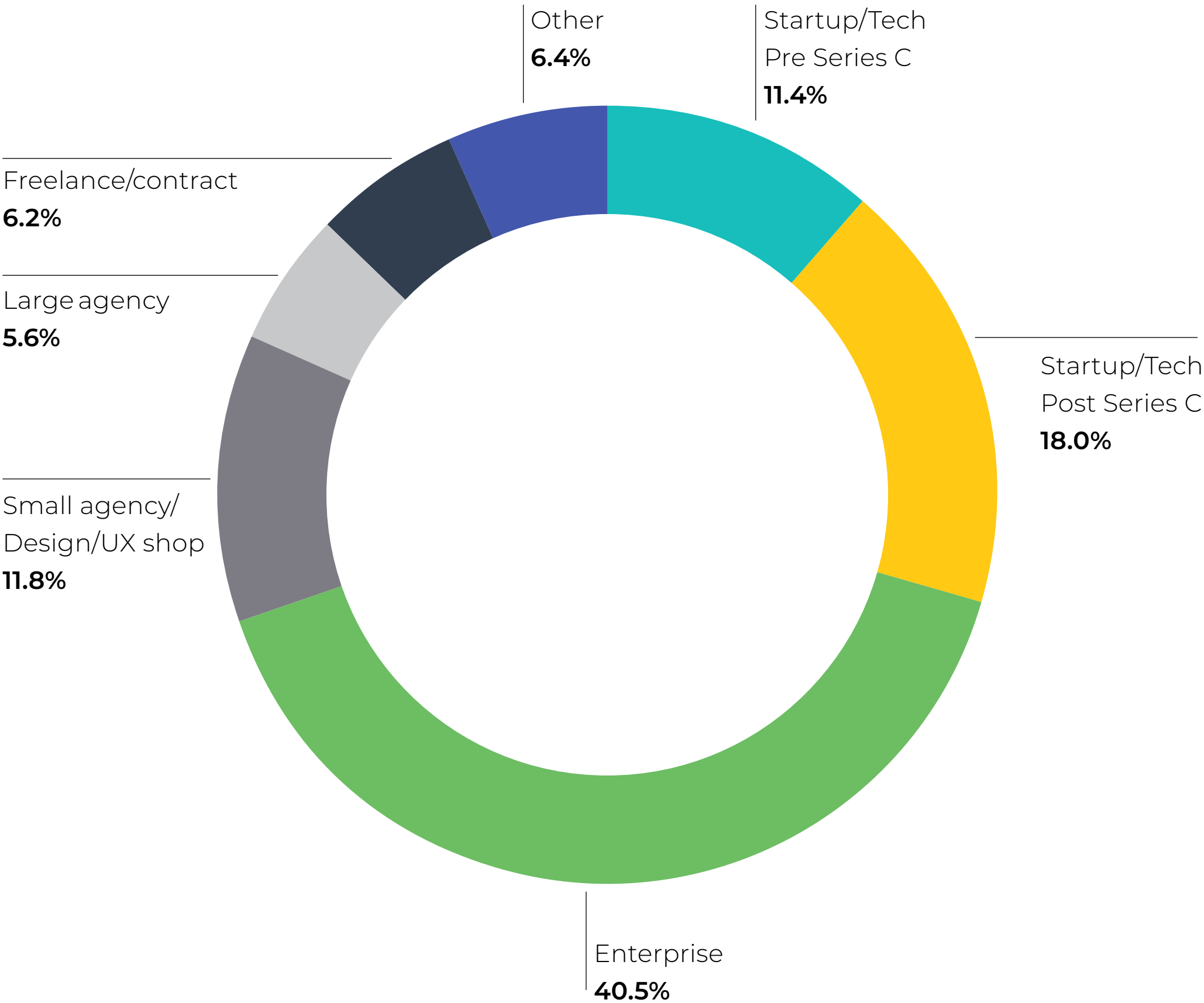
- A fifth (21%) of researchers surveyed work at large companies with 10k+ employees
- The most common industries were tech (30%), finance (10%), health (9%) and design (7%)
- The average number of dedicated researchers and PwDRs is 6 and 8, respectively

What industry do you work in?

Our survey included 60 possible options for this question. We later combined certain options. For example, we grouped industries like IT, Computer Software, Internet, and Network Security together as “Tech.”

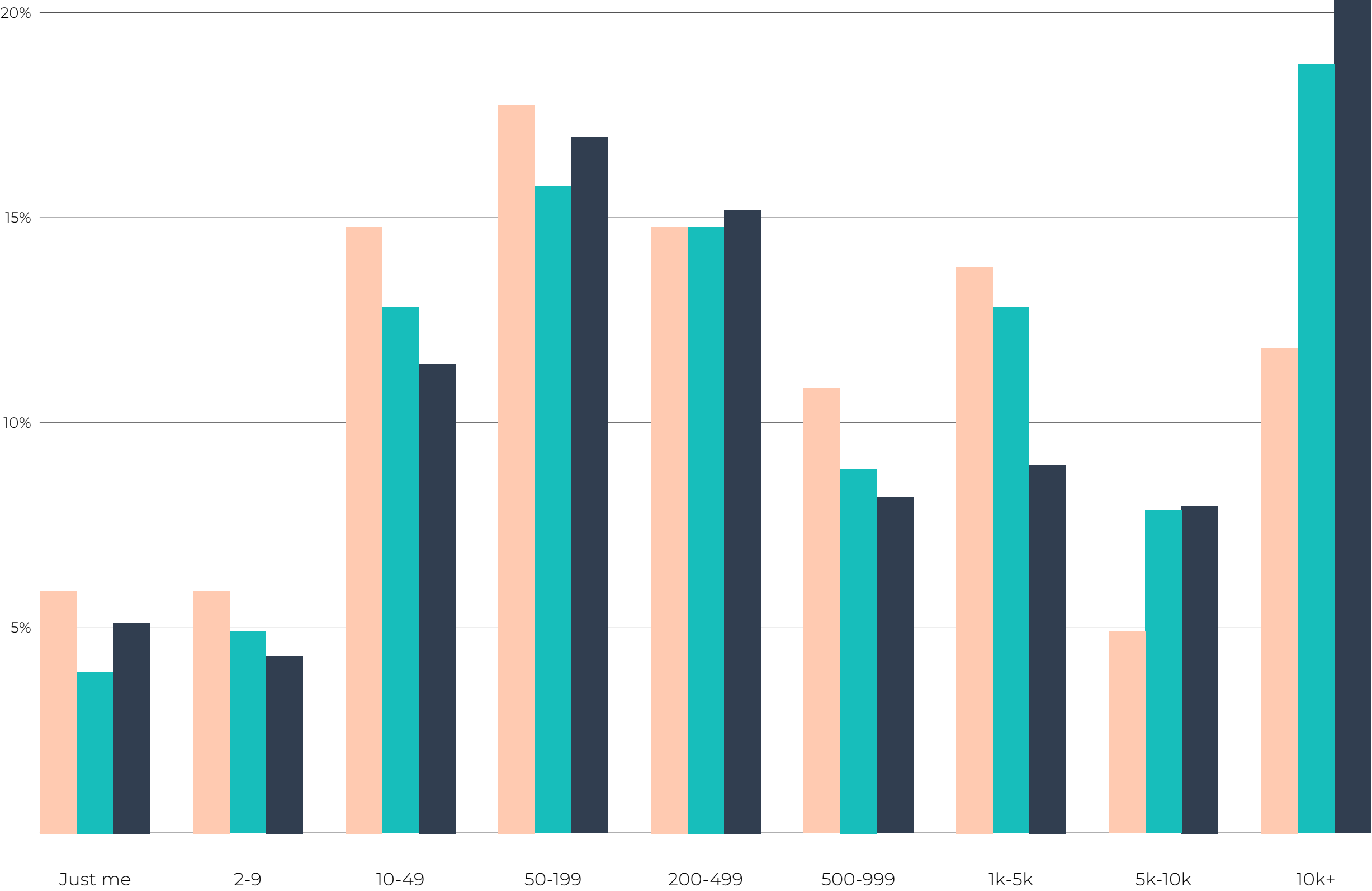
Tech	29.82%	Media	2.19%
Financial Services	10.53%	Marketing & Advertising	1.97%
Medicine, Health & Wellness	9.21%	Human Resources	1.75%
Design	6.80%	Consumer Services	1.75%
Telecommunications	3.51%	Government Administration	1.54%
Education	3.29%	Insurance	1.54%
Entertainment	3.07%	Logistics & Supply Chain	1.54%
Auto & Transportation	2.85%	Real Estate	1.54%
Consumer Goods	2.63%	Civic & Social Organization	1.32%
Food & Beverages	2.19%	Hospitality & Tourism	1.10%
Retail	2.19%	Other	5.48%
Research	2.19%		

Which best describes your company?

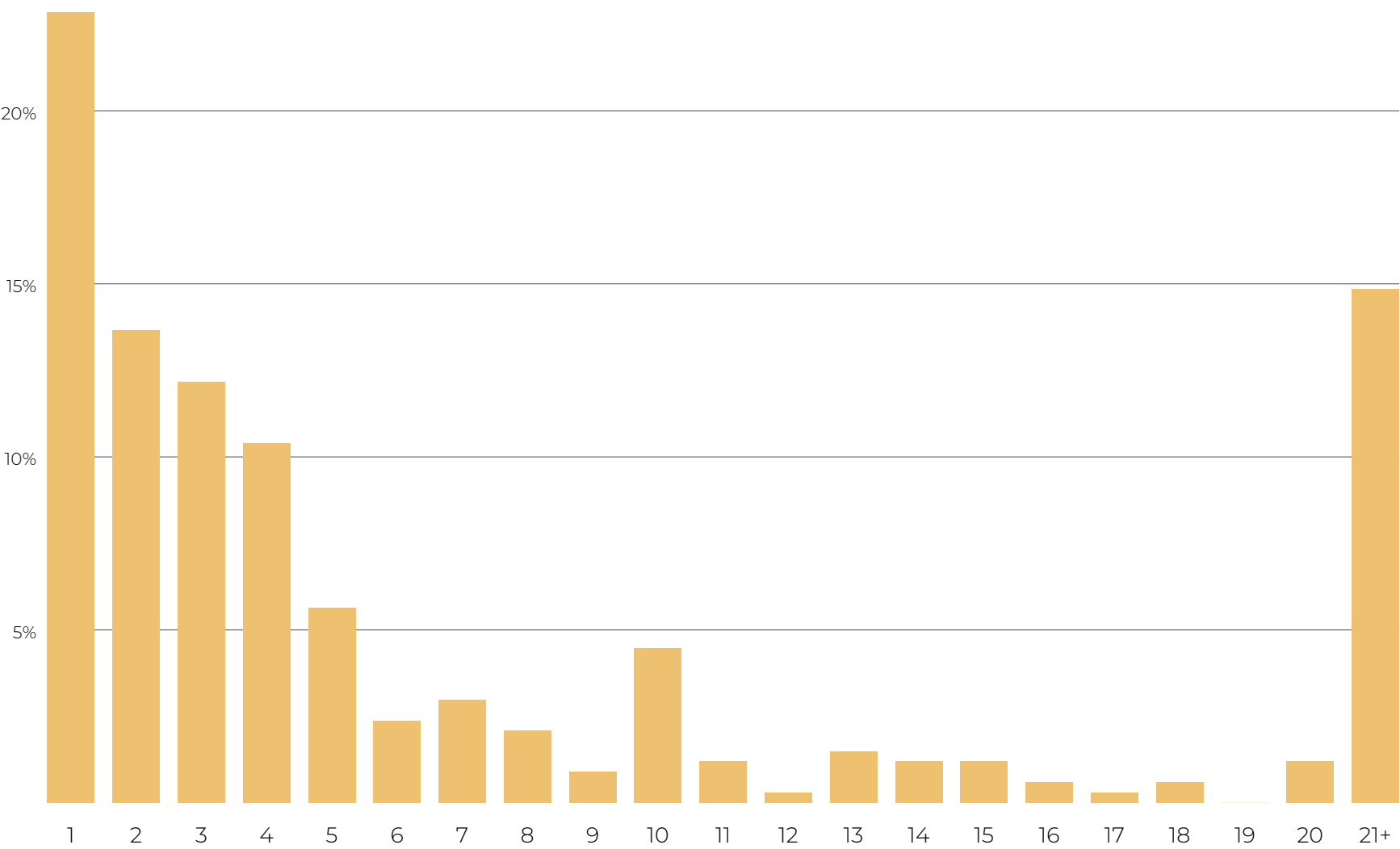


How many people work at your company?

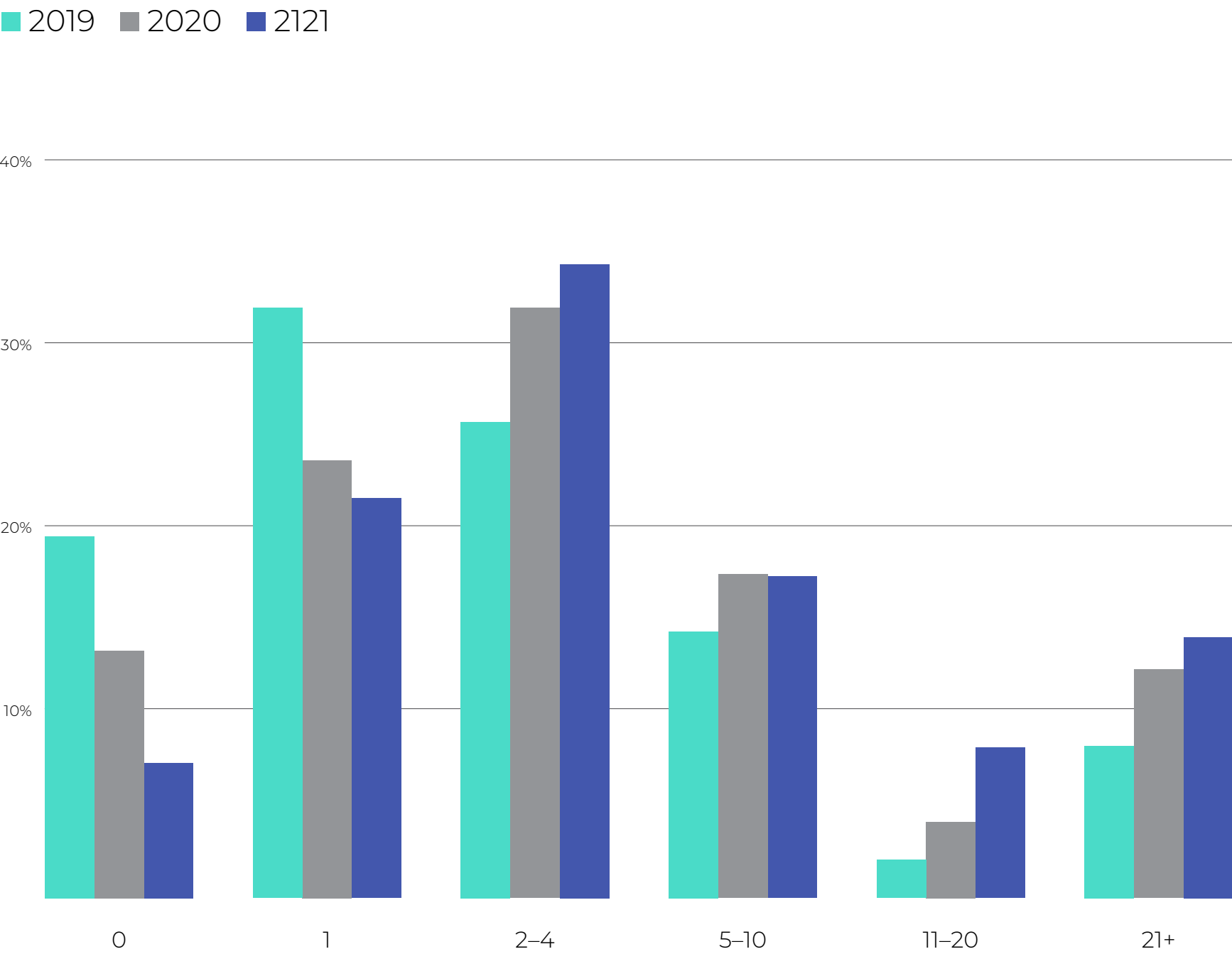
2019 2020 2021



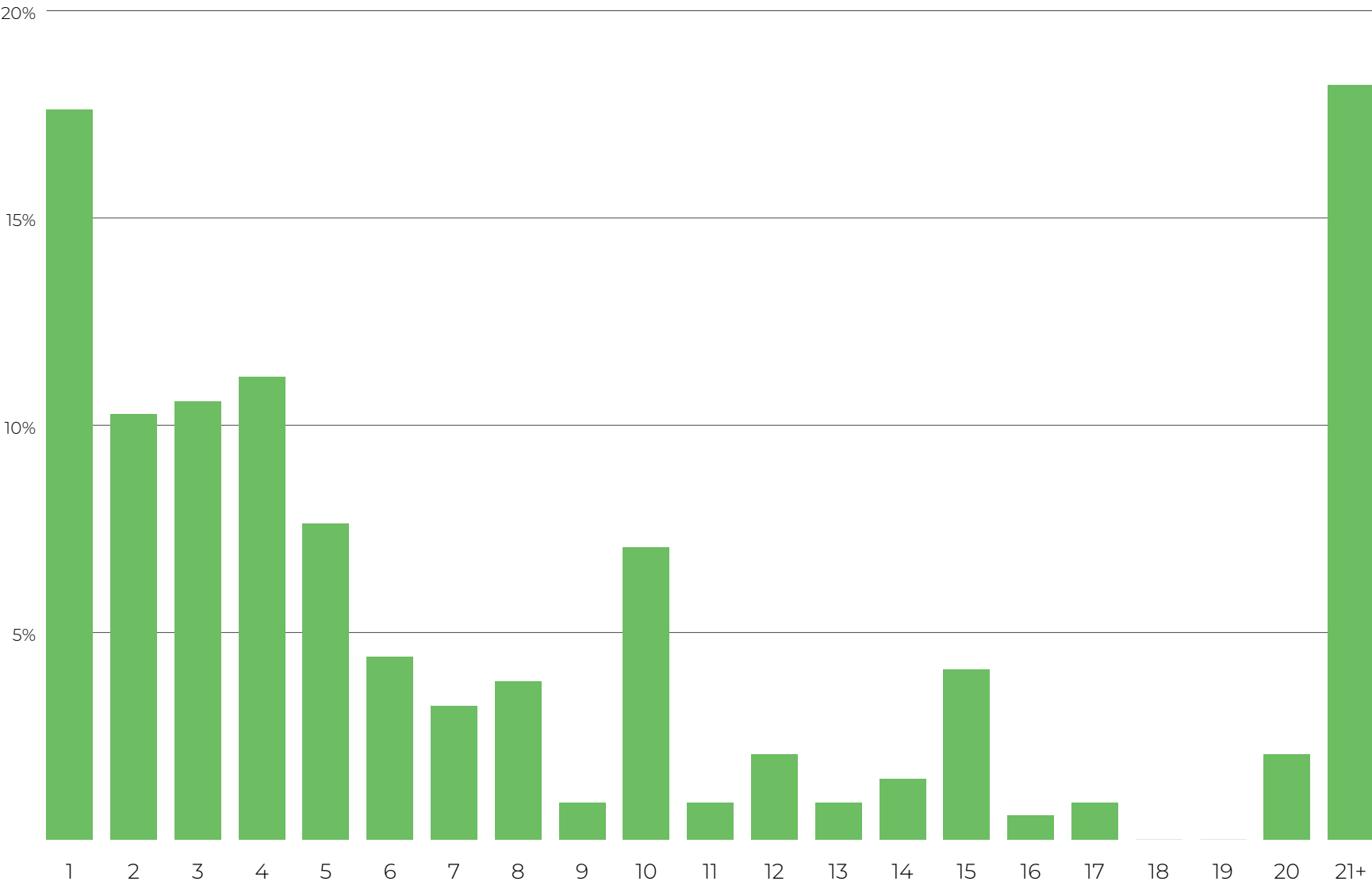
How many dedicated researchers are at your company?



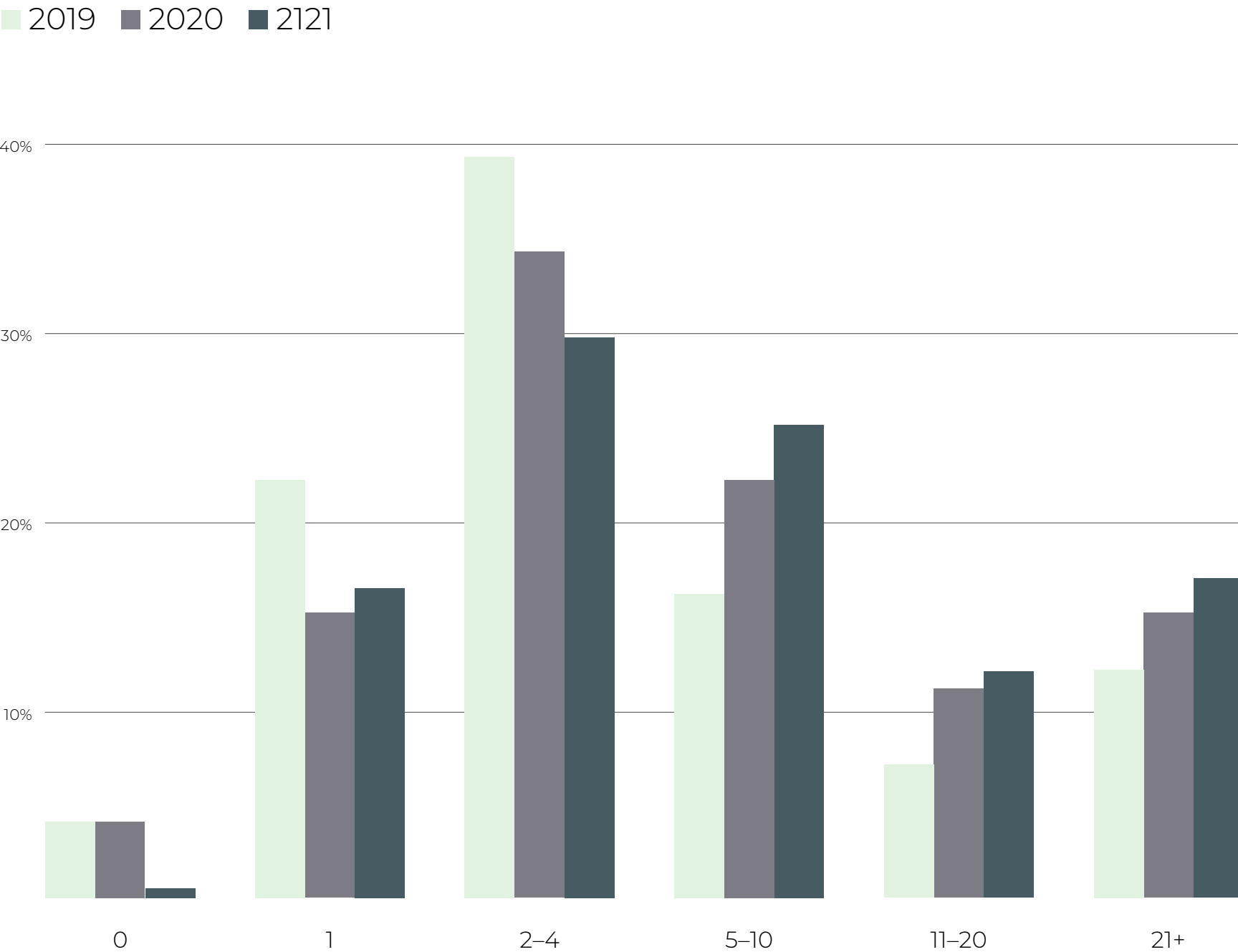
Number of Dedicated Researchers, 2019 to 2021



How many people regularly conduct user research at your company?



Number of PwDRs, 2019 to 2021



Dedicated researchers and PwDRs

The number of people who do research—either full-time or as just one part of their job—scales with company size. The average number of dedicated researchers for a company with 200–499 employees is 4; for a company with 1,000 to 5,000 employees, that number doubles (8).

- Dedicated researchers
- PwDRs





Research Process

USER INTERVIEWS

Planning + recruiting for user research

User research is a big task, with lots of moving parts. We asked people who do research how they typically plan and [recruit](#) for sessions.

The design/prototyping phase is the most popular time to do research (93%) followed by the pre-design stage (90%). But in fact, research happens throughout the product life cycle—over half (54%) of people said their company does research at all stages of the product life cycle, from before design to after launch.

Most (72%) said their research is planned over a week in advance, with over 33% of people indicating that typically they start planning for a research session 2 to 4 weeks ahead of time.

Recruiting closer to the date of research can help reduce no-shows, since it gives participants less time to forget about the session. And indeed, it seems there's about a week of lag time between planning

and recruiting. Most (72%) people said they start recruiting within 2 weeks of a research session, and 11% said they start recruiting just a few days before.

In general, companies conduct research using their own customers or a panel of participants more often than with participants sourced by an agency or recruiting tool. Just over 60% of people said they use their own participants more than half of the time.

This isn't surprising—it's easier to get consistent insights from people who are already invested in the success of your business, like your customers. What's more (👏shameless self-promotion alert!) solutions like [Research Hub](#) make managing a panel of participants a breeze.

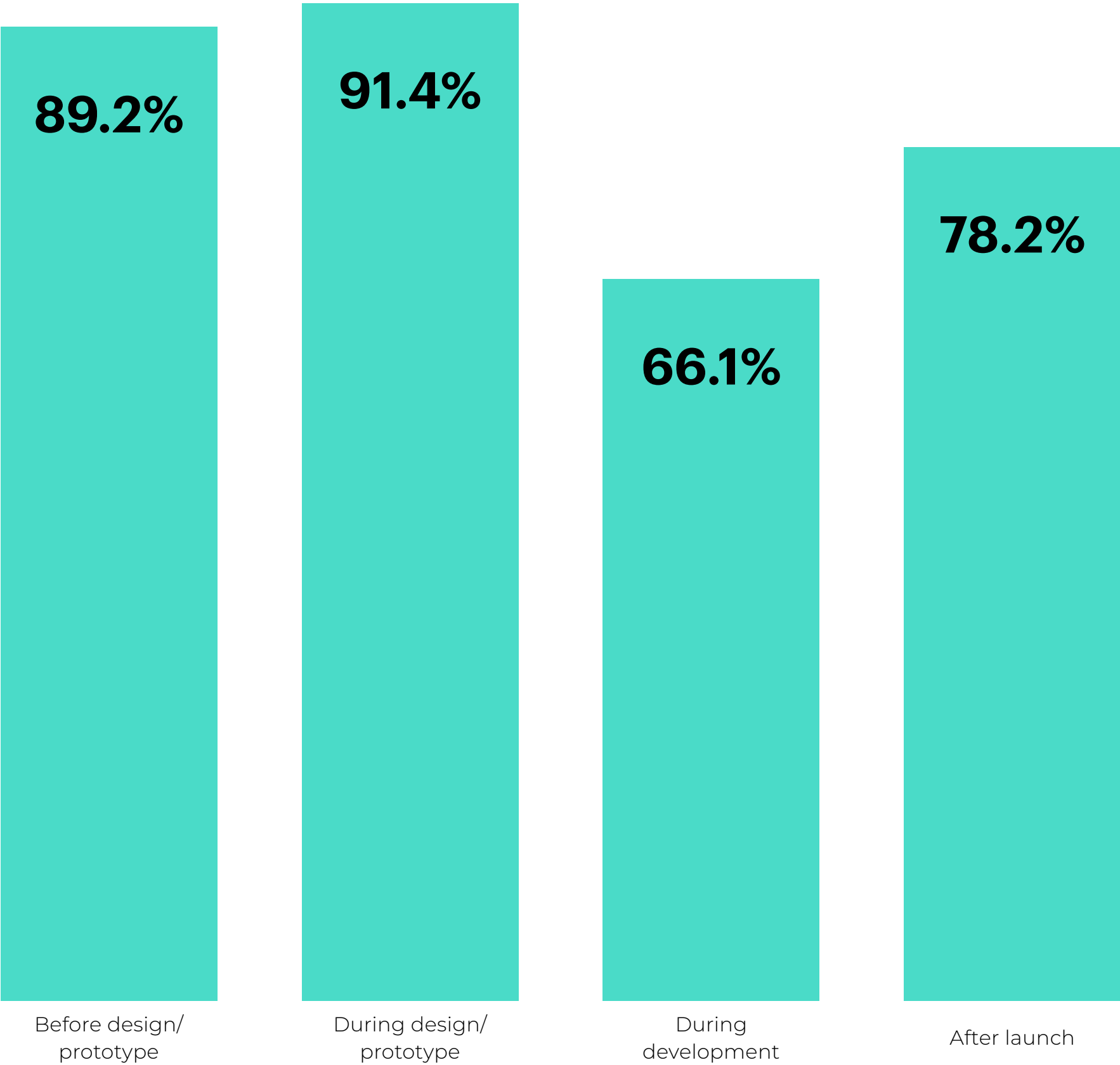
The most popular tool for recruiting your own users is Calendly (used by 30%), followed by User Interviews (23%) and Survey Monkey (21%).

For recruiting outside participants, User Interviews was tied with external recruiting agencies as the most popular solution (27% each).

- Over half (54%) of people said their company does research at every stage of the product life cycle, from pre-design to post-launch.
- 6% of people are last-minute planners who start planning for a research session just a few days in advance.
- Nearly a fifth (18%) of people said they only ever do research with their own users.

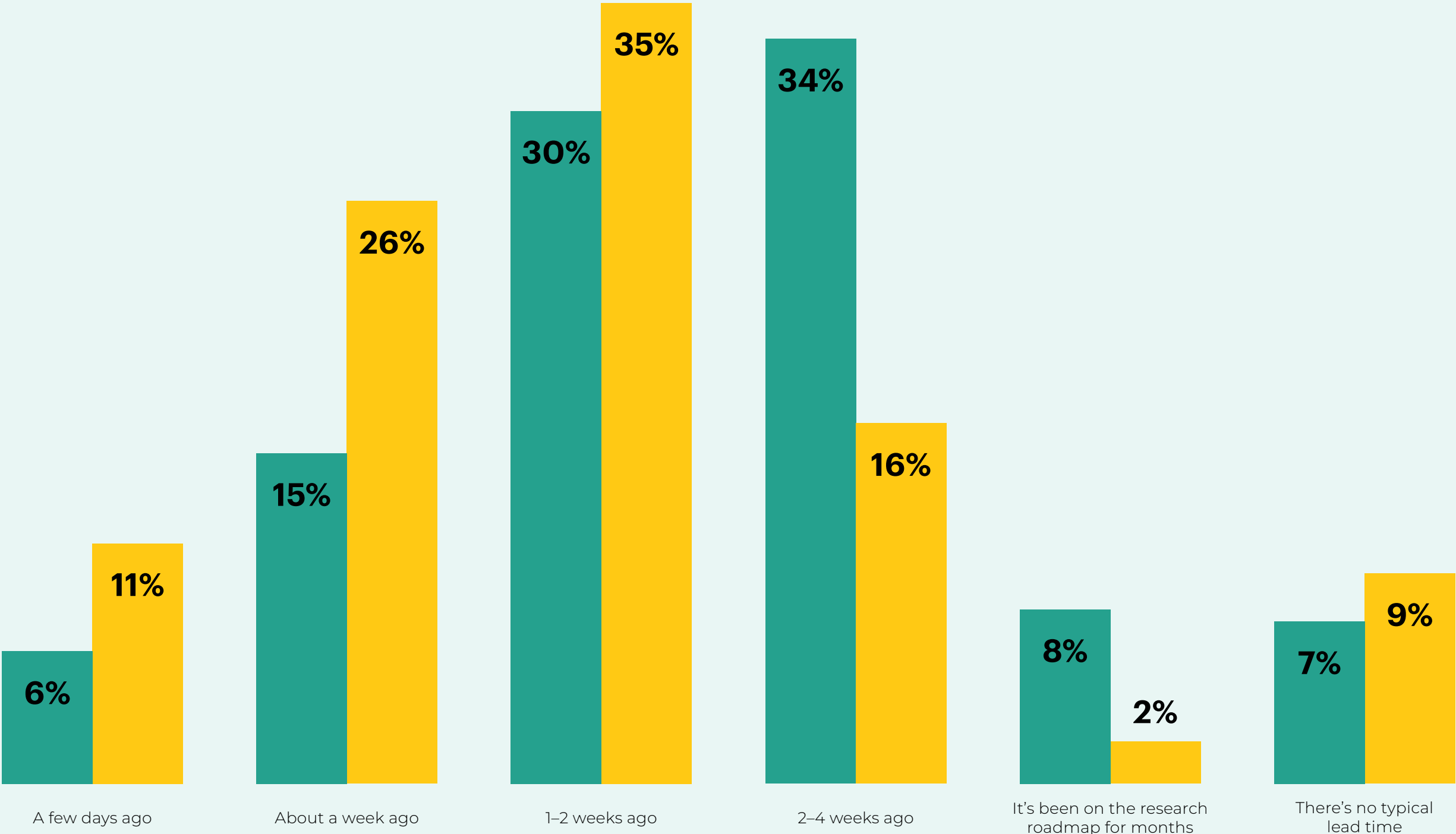
When in the product cycle does your company conduct research?

Over half (54%) of people said their company does research at all stages of the product life cycle, from before design to after launch.



You’re planning a “typical” research session.
How far in advance did you start planning it? ●

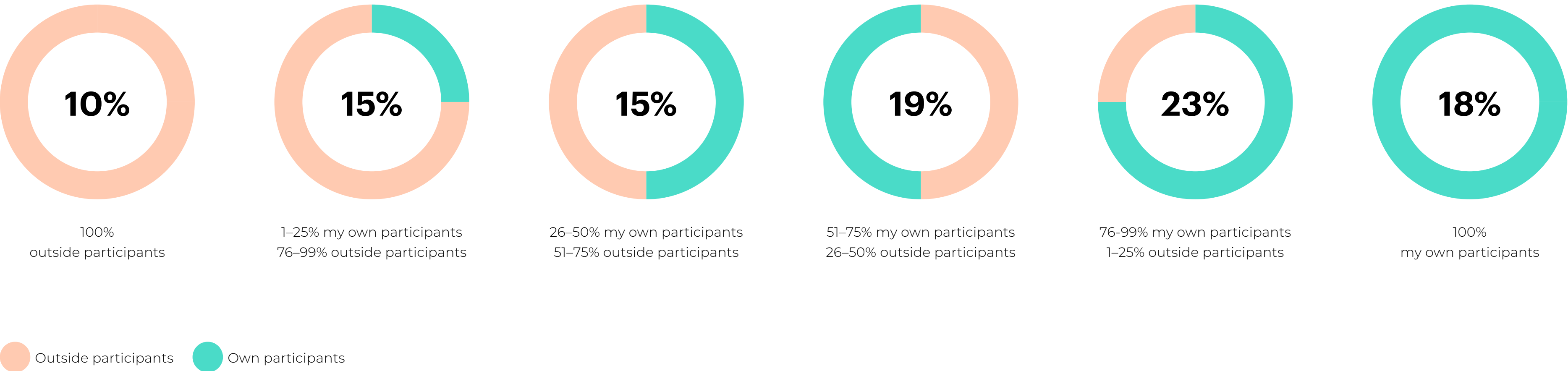
In the same scenario, how far in advance did you start recruiting, specifically? ●



What percentage of your research sessions in a year are with your own audience (customers, users, a panel you own/manage) vs. outside sourced participants?

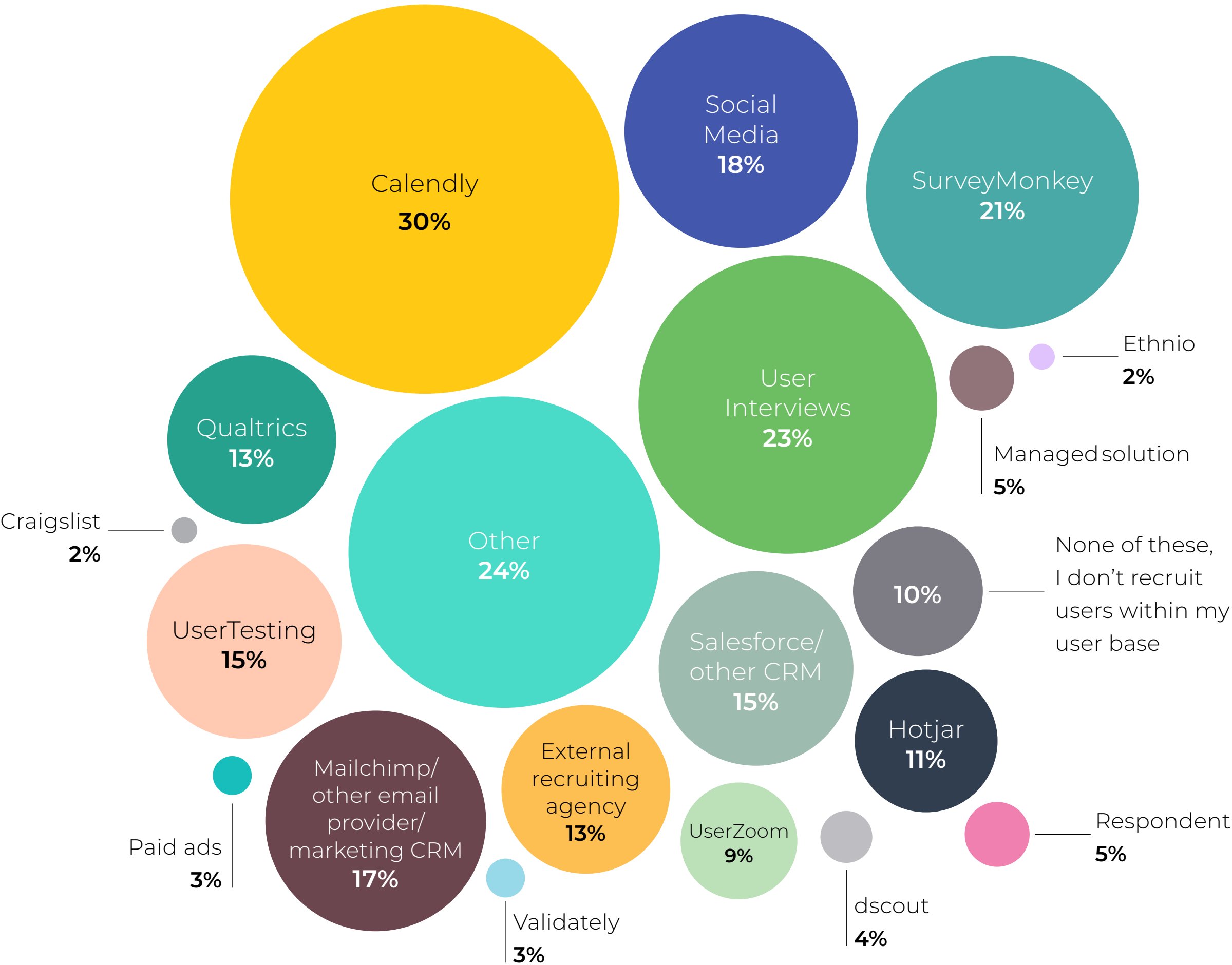
Over 60% of people said they use their own participants or a panel of participants they manage (versus participants sourced by an agency or recruiting tool) more than half of the time.

Psst—We can help with that. [Research Hub](#) is designed to make managing a panel of your own participants faster, easier, and more efficient.



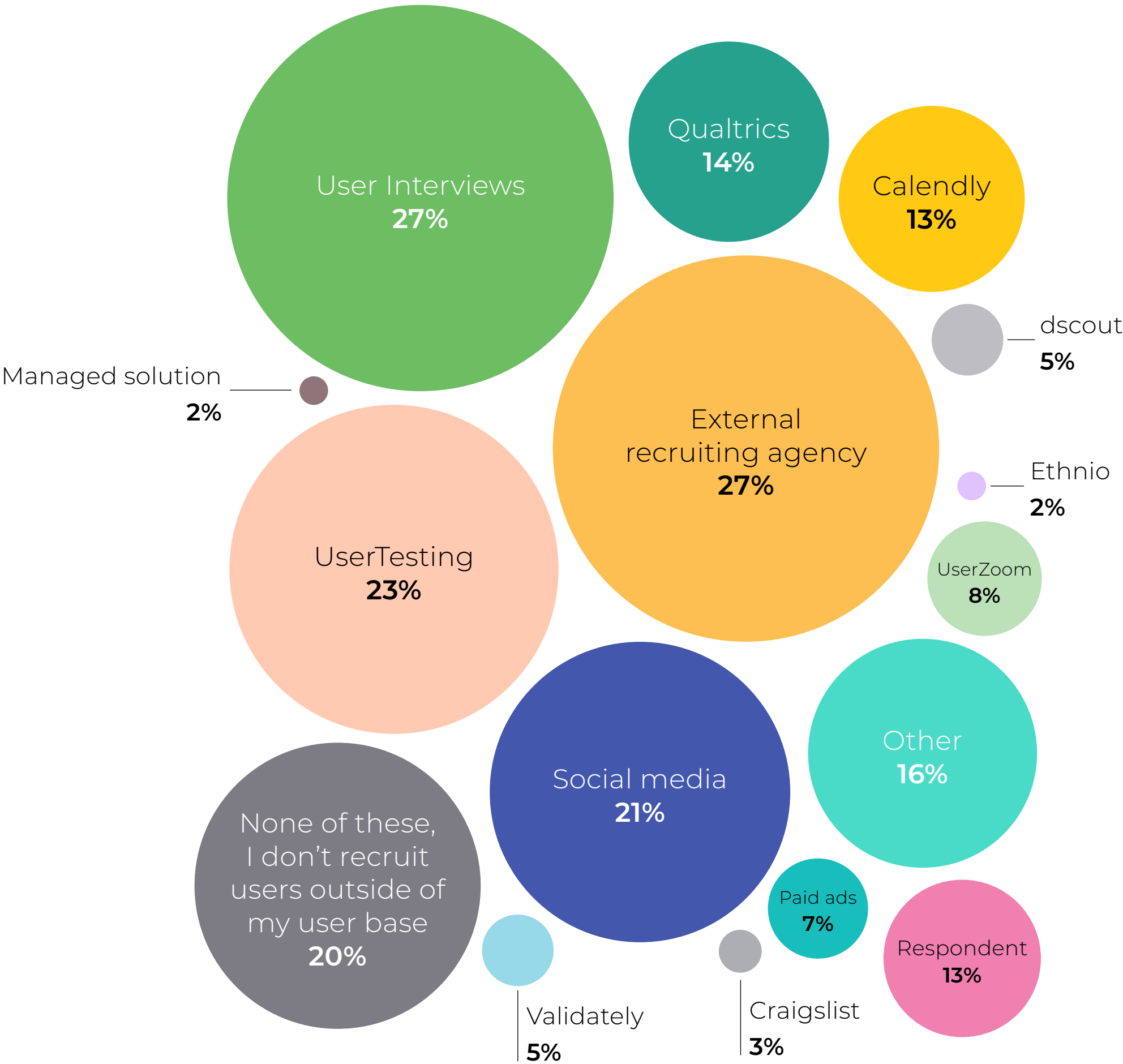
What tools do you use to recruit participants from your own user base?

These options were not exclusive. For example, 25% of people who said they use Calendly to recruit their own participants also use User Interviews.



What tools do you use to recruit participants from outside your user base?

These options were not exclusive. Among people who said they use User Interviews to recruit outside participants, 32% also said they use UserTesting, social media (25%), and external agencies (25%).



User research methods + tools

What do we mean when we talk about user research? Depending on the product, project, or team, “user research” could entail usability tests, generative interviews, field studies, and so on.

We asked researchers about what kind of research they do, and what tools they use to do it.

According to our survey, the most popular form of research is user/generative interviews—46% of people surveyed said it was the form of research they do most often—followed by moderated usability tests (19%) and surveys (15%).

The *least* common (but not the least important) type of research is accessibility testing. Over a quarter (26%) of researchers said they do this the least frequently, followed by diary studies (19%) and tree tests (13%).

As for which tools researchers use to conduct research, a few winners emerged from the pack:

2020 was the year of Zoom, so it’s no huge surprise that the video conferencing tool was the most popular tool for conducting sessions—59% of people said it was part of their stack, up from 48% in last year’s survey.

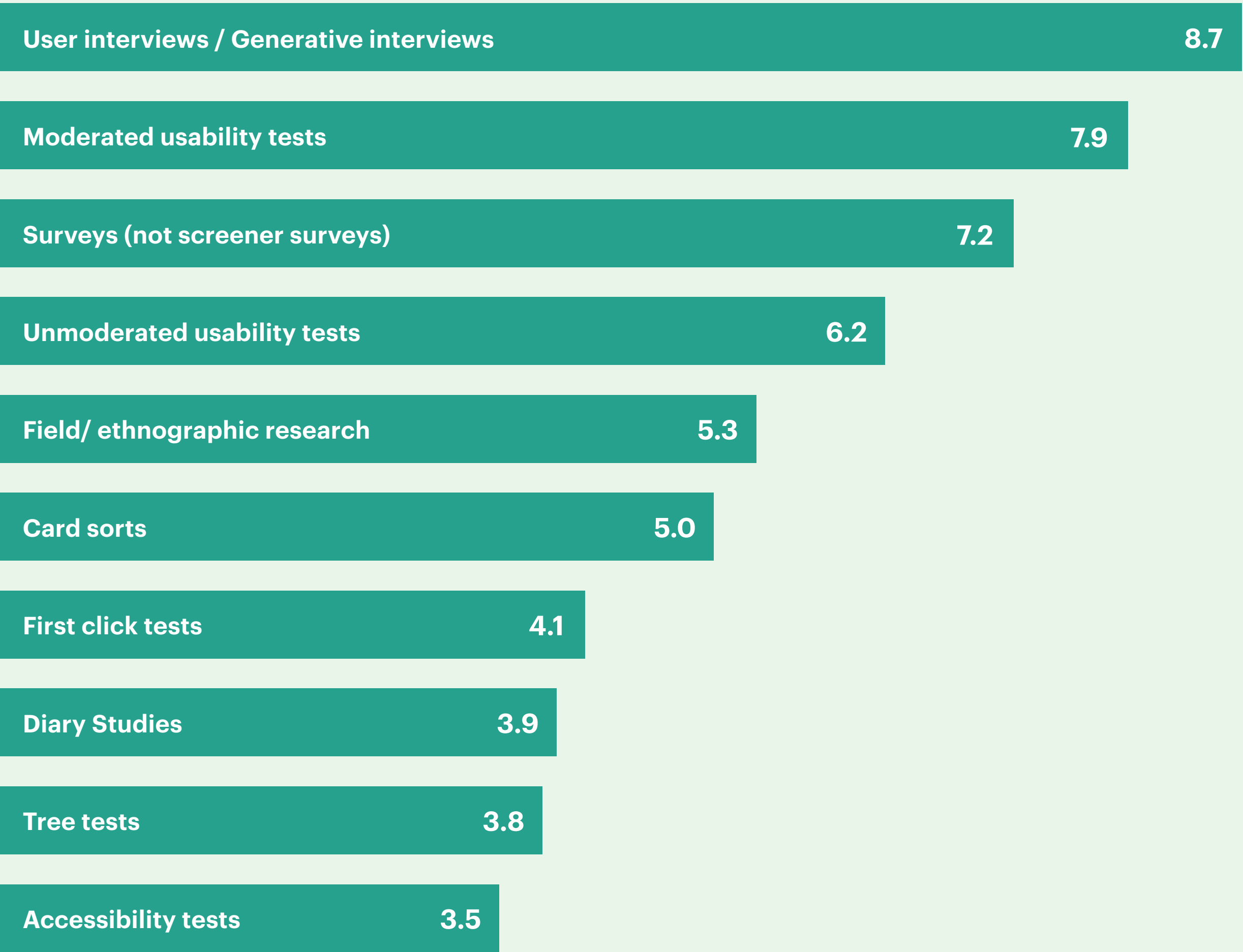
Other popular tools for video sessions were Google Hangouts (32%), Microsoft Teams (28%) and UserTesting (17%).

For surveys, Google Forms and SurveyMonkey are neck and neck, with 46% and 45% of people saying they use these tools to conduct research, respectively. Qualtrics (22%) and Typeform (22% again) were other popular options.

- 46% of people said they do user interviews/generative interviews the most often.
- 26% said accessibility is the form of research they do least frequently.
- 59% of PwDRs use Zoom to conduct sessions—up from 48% last year.

Which of these research methods do you use most often?

We asked people to rank the types of research they do most often by frequency, from 1 (most often) to 10 (least often). The numbers in the graph represent the average ranking each method was given.



% of respondents who ranked each method #1 (most used)

User Interviews/generative interviews was ranked as the most common form of research by 46% of people.

- User interviews/Generative interviews **45.6%**
- Moderated usability tests **22.3%**
- Surveys (not screener surveys) **11.5%**
- Unmoderated usability tests **7.7%**
- Field/ethnographic research **7.7%**
- Diary studies **1.4%**
- Card sorts **1.4%**
- First click tests **0.8%**
- Tree tests **0.8%**
- Accessibility tests **0.8%**



USER INTERVIEWS

% of respondents who ranked each method #10 (least used)

Conversely, 26% of people said they did accessibility tests least often.

- Accessibility tests **26.4%**
- Diary studies **22.0%**
- Tree tests **13.6%**
- First click tests **12.5%**
- Field/ethnographic research **8.6%**
- Card sorts **6.5%**
- Unmoderated usability tests **3.6%**
- User interviews/Generative interviews **2.4%**
- Surveys (not screener surveys) **2.4%**
- Moderated usability tests **2.1%**



What tools do you use to conduct your sessions?

This question was multi-select. Among the 59% of people who said they use Zoom to conduct research sessions, 34% also use Google Hangouts and 24% also use Microsoft Teams. There was also a write-in option.

Among the tools that received more than one mention were Whereby (x3), WhatsApp (x2), Maze (x2), and good old-fashioned phone calls (x2).

Zoom	59%	Optimal Workshop	9%	Helio	1%
Google Hangouts	32%	GoToMeeting	8%	Userbrain	1%
Microsoft Teams	28%	Validately	5%	Userbob	1%
UserTesting	17%	dscout	4%	None of these, I only conduct sessions in-person.	1%
WebEx	14%	Blue Jeans	3%	Other (please specify)	10%
UserZoom	14%	Userlytics	2%		
Skype	13%	Loop11	1%		
Lookback	12%	TryMyUI	1%		

What tools do you use for surveys?

This question was multi-select. Among the 46% of people who said they use Google Forms to run surveys, for instance, over half (51%) also use Survey Monkey and 33% also use Typeform. There was also a write-in option, and 46 people told us they use something not listed.

Among the tools that received more than one mention were Microsoft Forms (x11), LimeSurvey (x3), Get Feedback (x2), and Feedback Loop (x2).

Google Forms	46%	Lookback	2%
Survey Monkey	45%	Medallia	2%
Qualtrics	22%	Respondent	2%
Typeform	22%	Validately	1%
UserZoom	12%	Userlytics	1%
UserTesting	10%	UserVoice	1%
Optimal Workshop	10%	Crowd Signal	1%
Hotjar	9%	Confermit	1%
User Interviews	7%	None of these, I don't conduct surveys	5%
Survey Gizmo	5%	Other (please specify)	14%
UsabilityHub	5%		
dscout	3%		
TryMyUI	2%		

Analyzing + sharing user research

Collecting insights is only one part of doing research. Analyzing results, storing research artifacts, and presenting research to stakeholders and the wider team are all part of an effective user research practice.

So how are user researchers doing all that?

Most of the researchers we heard from leave their sessions with more than one type of artifact and 14% said they leave sessions with transcripts, video recordings, raw notes, coded notes, *and* participant-created materials.

After a research session, most researchers communicate their findings in a variety of ways: 90% have a meeting with stakeholders to share their results and 83% share a summarized report of their findings (76% do both).

As a result, most researchers said that at least some of their stakeholders know how and where to access research results (and do so).

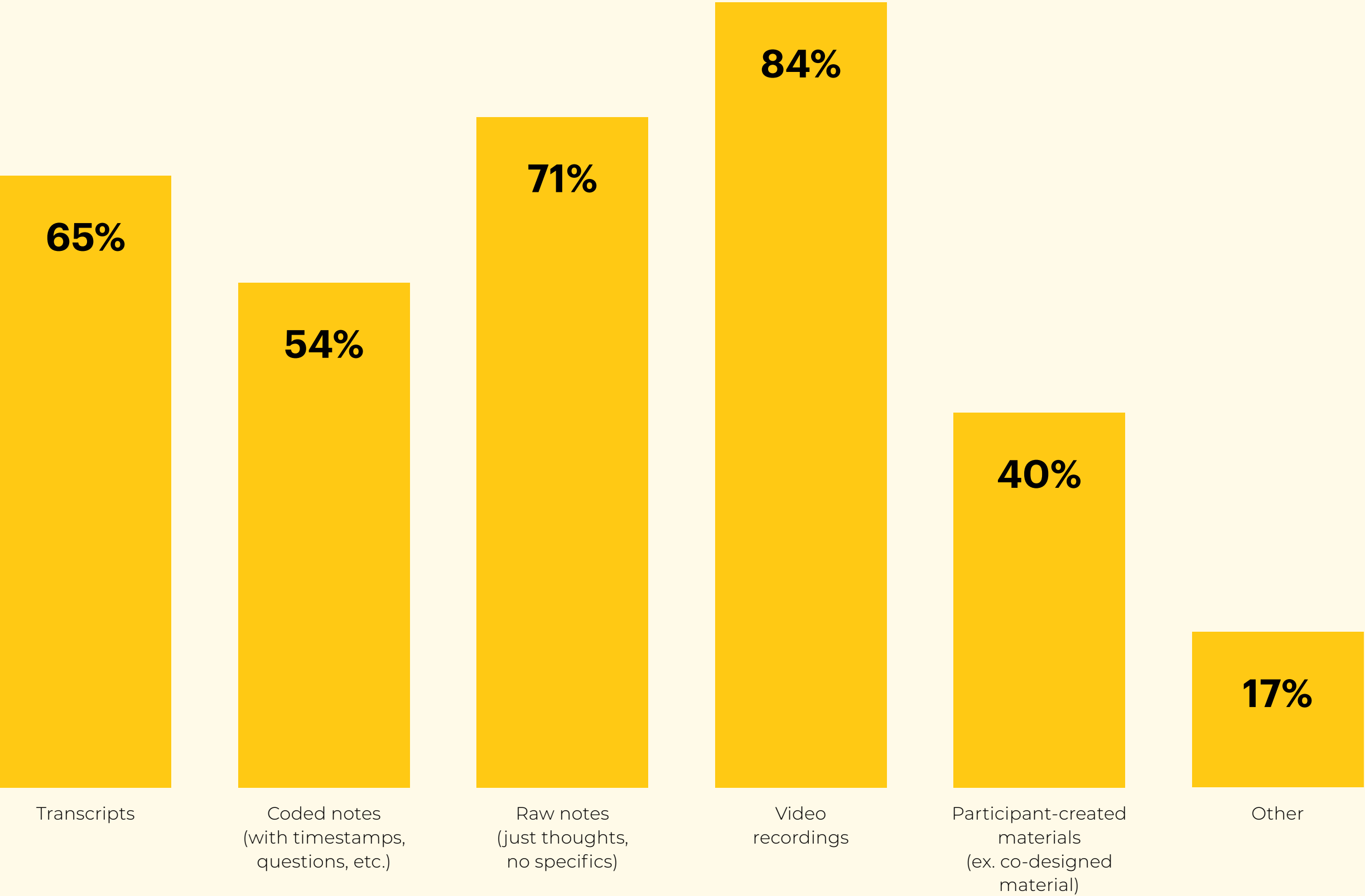
That's a good thing, for more reasons than you may think. People who said most stakeholders know how to access research findings and do so at least some of the time rated themselves as more fulfilled than those who said stakeholders never access research—7/10 on average vs. 5.5/10.

Most people (81%) use a spreadsheet tool like Google Sheets or Microsoft Excel to make sense of their notes and gather feedback.

The second-most popular tool for this purpose was Miro, which 60% of people said they use. That's a huge leap from last year, when 8% of researchers said the same. Miro's soaring popularity in 2020 can likely be attributed to its remote-friendliness—a whopping 90% of researchers said they were fully remote this past year.

Mural was another remote-friendly tool that saw a big rise this year—22% of researchers reported it as part of their stack, compared to just 2% in last year's survey. That's a 1000% increase in popularity year over year.

- Only 8% of people said that most stakeholders know how to access results and do so frequently.
- Miro's popularity among our researchers grew 650% year over year—60% of people say they use it to organize their notes, compared to 8% last year.
- Mural also had an astronomical rise—there was a 1000% increase in popularity among survey respondents.

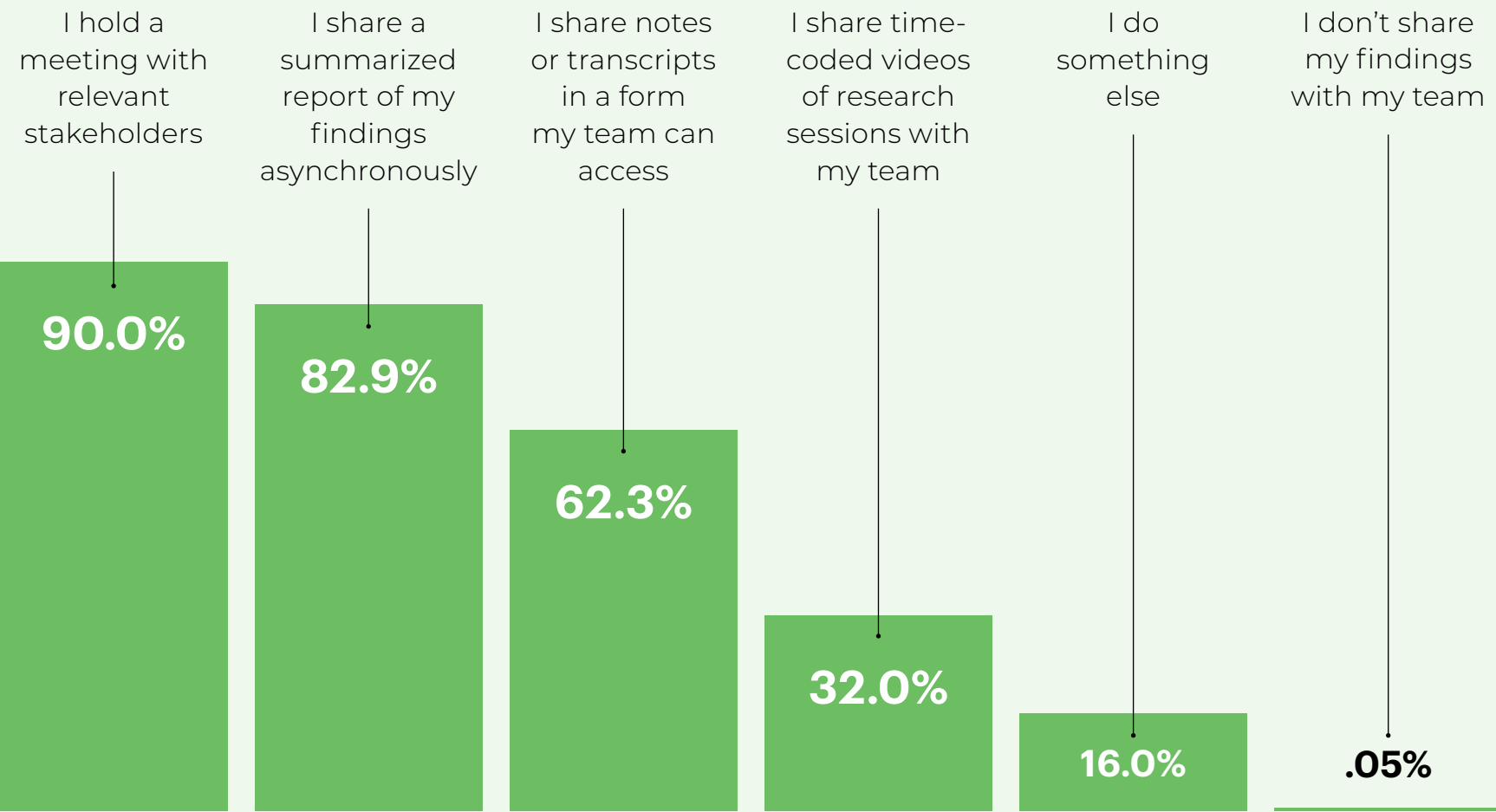


What artifacts come out of your research sessions?

These options were not exclusive; researchers were asked to select all that apply. Most people said that more than one type of artifact comes out of their research, and 14% said they leave sessions with all five of the listed options.

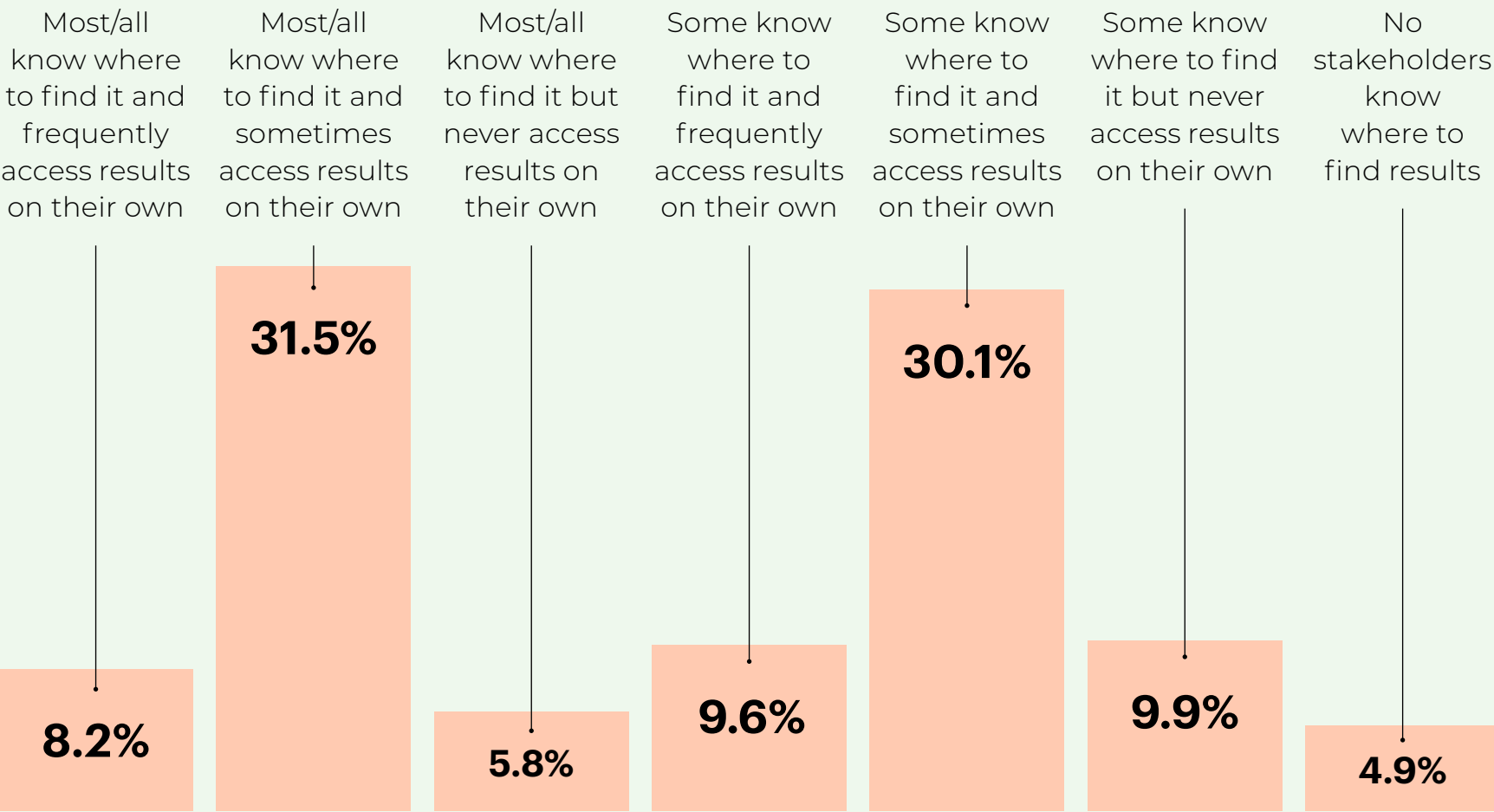
How do you communicate your research findings with your team?

This question included a write-in option, and 16% of people told us they share their research in a different way. Some interesting approaches include holding workshops, atomic research libraries, Slack messages, and presenting at monthly all-hands meetings.



Do your stakeholders know how to access research results on their own?

People who said most or all of their stakeholders know how to access research findings and do so at least some of the time are more fulfilled at work—they rated their fulfillment as 7/10 compared to 5.5/10 from those who said their stakeholders never accessed research findings.



What tools do you use to make sense of your notes and gather feedback?

Teams turned to remote-friendly tools in a big way. Miro was 650% more popular with researchers than it was last year (60% vs 8%). Similarly, 22% of people reported using Mural this year, compared to 2% before—a 10X increase.

Other tools with notable growth in popularity include Optimal Workshop (19% vs. 3%) and Notion (17% vs 2%). Even accounting for the fact that all of these tools were write-ins last year, those are significant upticks.

Notable write-ins from this year include Lookback (x5), Figma (x5), Otter.ai (x3), Whimsical (x3), and Coda (x2).

Excel/Google Sheets

81%

Miro

60%

Confluence

27%

Mural

22%

Trello

21%

Optimal Workshop

19%

Airtable

17%

Notion

17%

Dovetail

10%

productboard

5%

UserVoice

2%

EnjoyHQ

2%

Handrail

2%

Aurelius

1%

ConfirmKit

1%

Delve

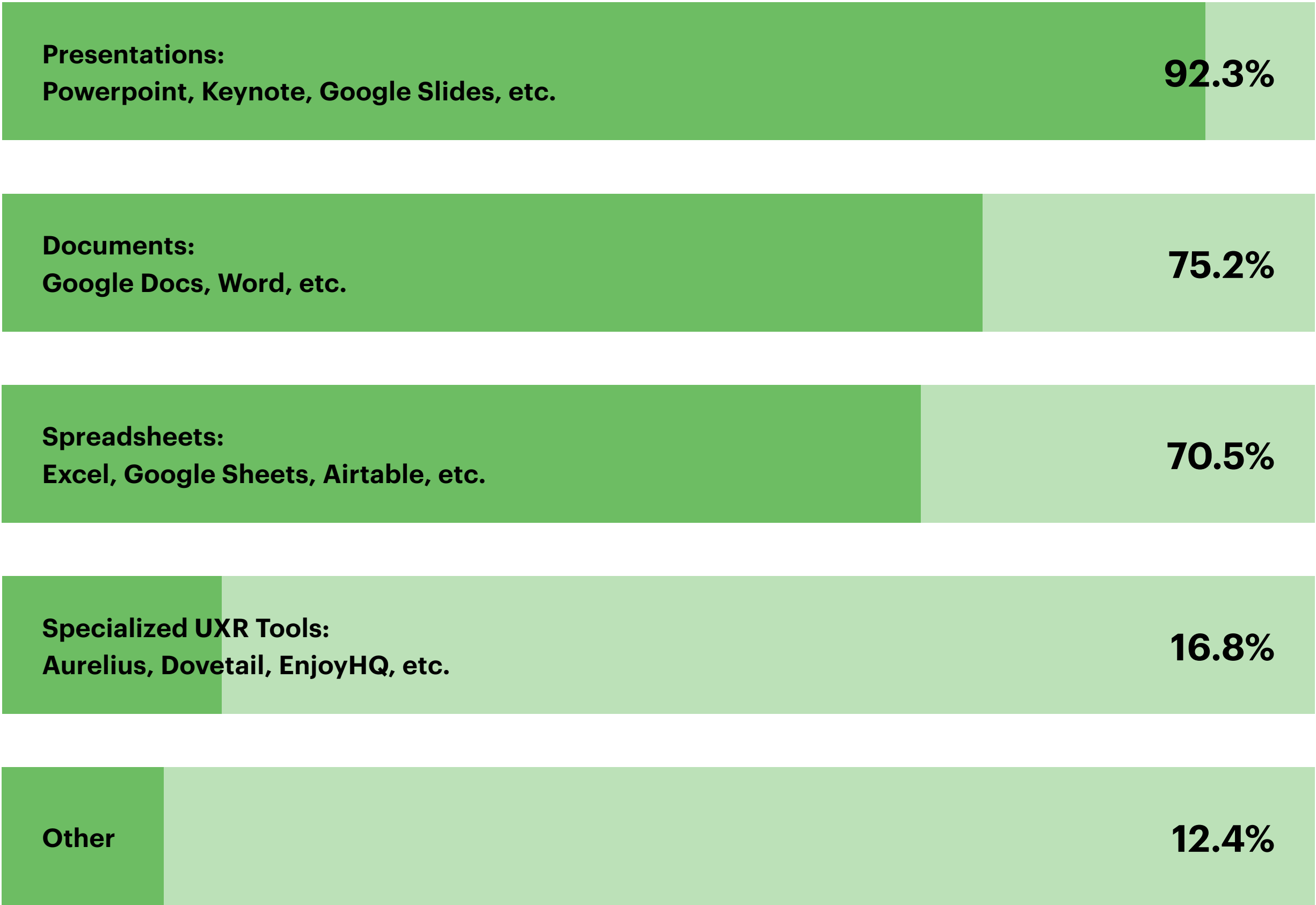
1%

Dedoose

1%

Other (please specify)

24.2%



What tools do you use to catalog and share your findings?

Confluence (x11), Miro (x10), Notion (x4), Mural (x3) and Figma (x3) were the most popular write-ins. And one researcher felt very strongly about using email as a tool to share their results.

User research budgets

All of these tools and sessions come at a cost. We wanted to know how much.

Unfortunately, close to half (44%) of researchers couldn't tell us, because they weren't sure of what their research budget was in the first place. This is the same percentage as last year, so there hasn't been any increase in transparency. As research grows as a discipline and a practice, we hope to see more benchmarks around this.

Of those who *did* know, a plurality (19%) said their budget was under \$100. Half of researchers with a sense of their budget estimated it to be under \$1,000. Meanwhile, 10% of those in the know reported a research budget of \$75k or more (lucky them!).

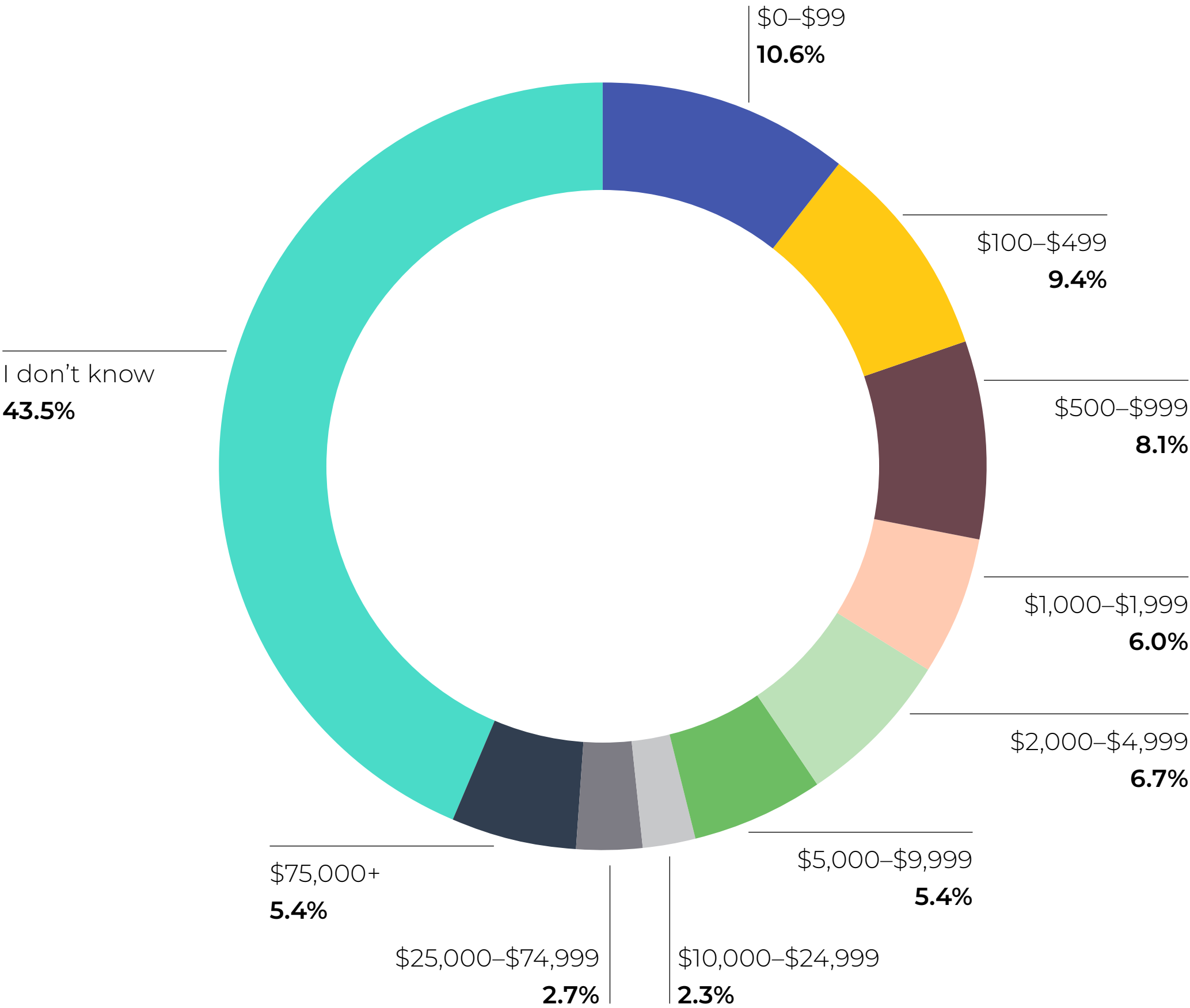
Most (56%) people told us their research budget didn't change this year. We failed to include an "I don't know" option for this question, so it's possible some people picked this as a "neutral" option, rather than skipping the question.

Nevertheless, 25% of researchers said their research budget actually *increased* in 2020. That's more than the 20% who said their budget was cut.

- Nearly half of researchers (44%) didn't know or couldn't guess their monthly research budget.
- Most people (56%) said their budget was unaffected this year, despite the economic downturn.
- In fact, 25% said their research budget increased in 2020 (7% said it did so significantly).

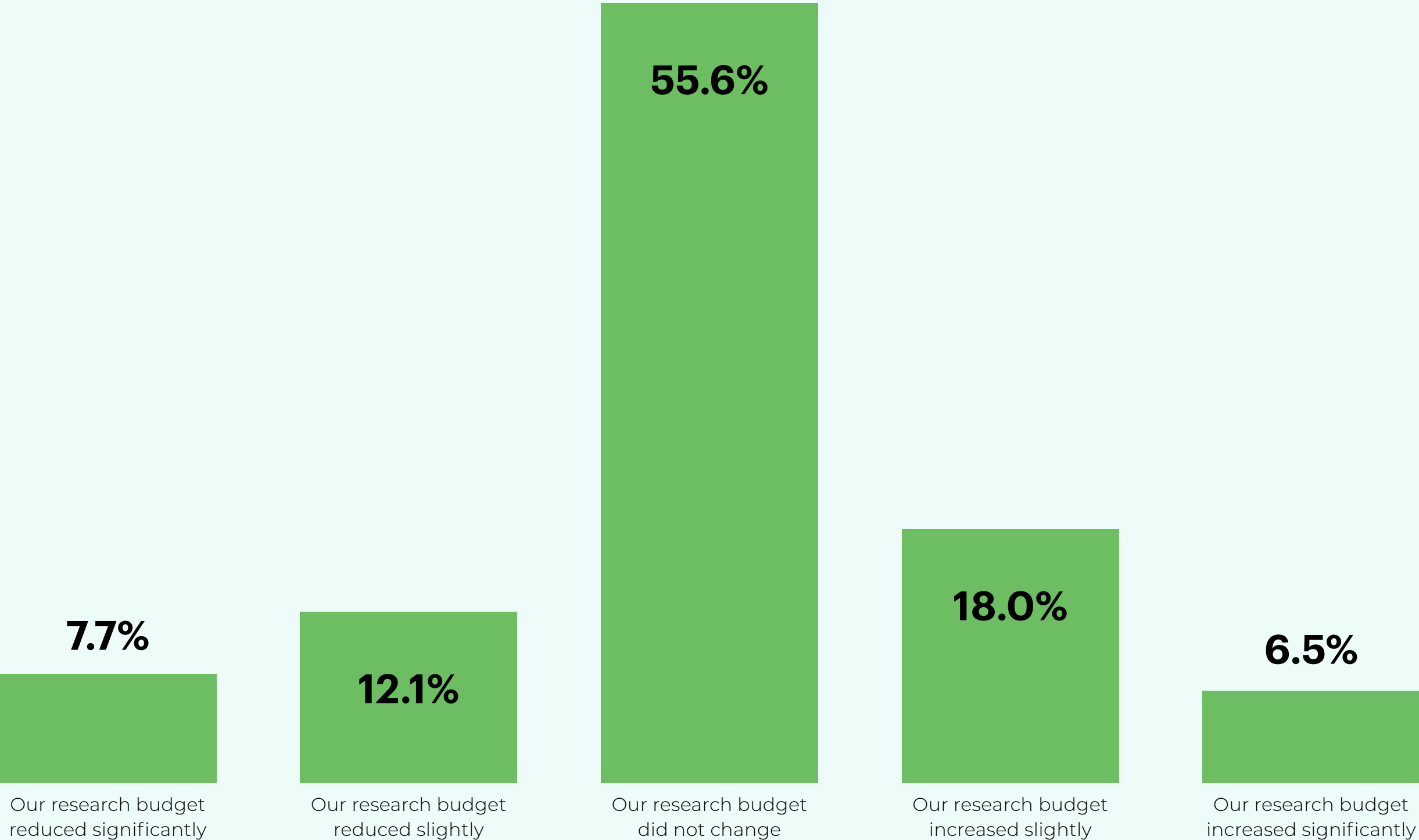
What’s your monthly budget for research?

We asked researchers to give us their best guesses about their monthly research budgets, excluding salaries but including participant incentives, recruiting fees, technology, travel, and freelance/contract help. Unfortunately over 40% simply had no idea.



Were there any changes to your research budget this year?

We failed to include an “I don’t know” option for this question. Given that 44% of researchers said they didn’t know their monthly budget, it’s possible that some people picked “did not change” as a “neutral” option (although they could have also skipped the question).





User Research in Context

USER INTERVIEWS

Diversity, equity, inclusion + user research

No two users are the same. Without a diverse group of research participants (and researchers, for that matter), can you truly create products that are inclusive, accessible, and useful for all the people who want or need to use them?

Of course not.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are essential considerations for doing ethical and unbiased research.

In 2020, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the United States and around the world inspired many teams to take a closer look at their own work, and the ways in which it contributes—however unintentionally—to systems of inequality.

For some teams, this meant paying closer attention to details like the identity questions on surveys or the accessibility of particular design elements. Many companies also took time to reflect and make meaningful changes to things like hiring practices and research participant diversity.

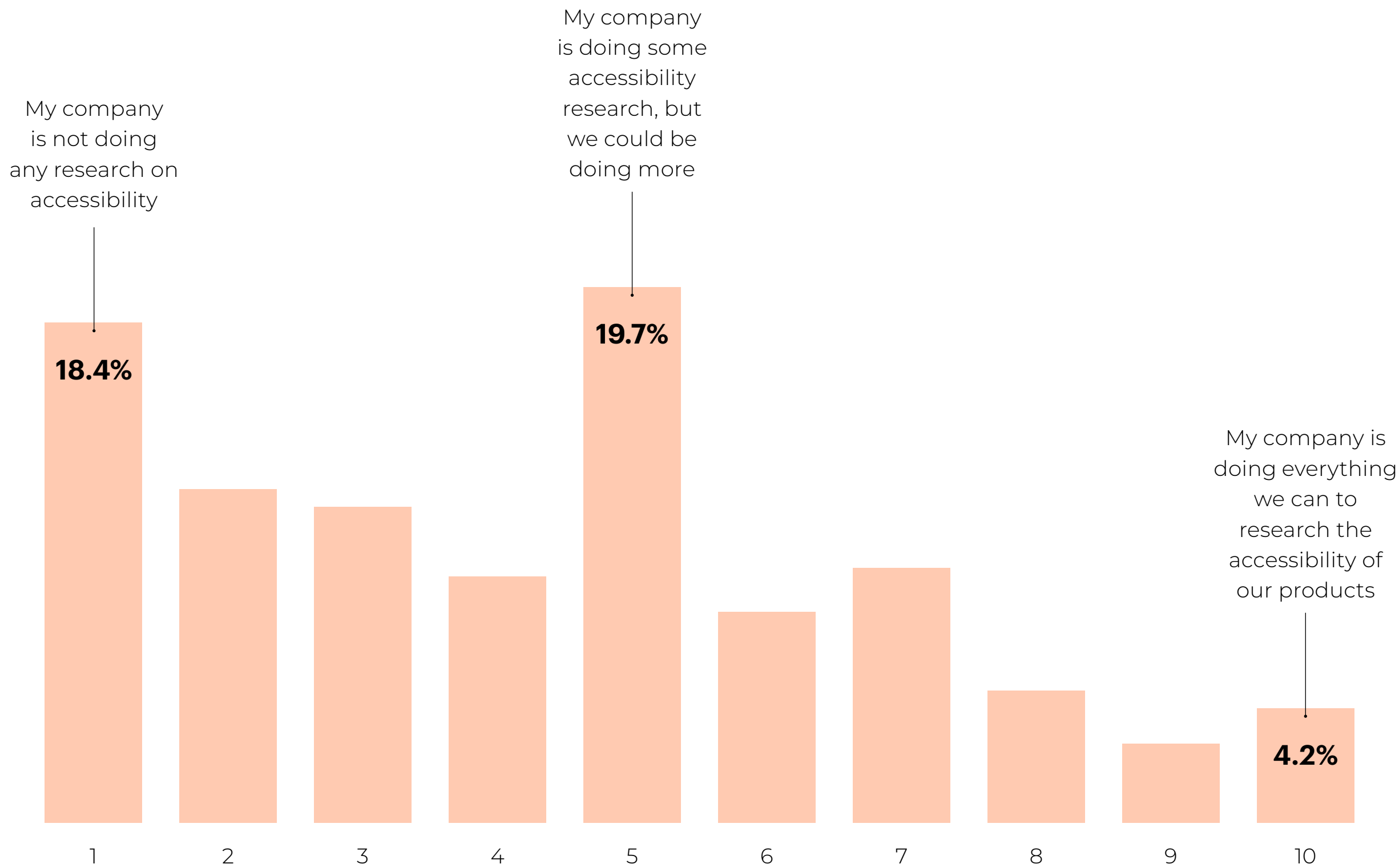
So how do user researchers feel they're doing on that front?

On the whole, not so great. On average, people gave their company's accessibility efforts a rating of 3.9/10. They rated efforts to ensure that their research is equitable and inclusive of diverse/representative perspectives slightly higher at 4.5/10.

But when we asked researchers about how their team tries to make sure their work is diverse, equitable, and accessible, we found that most (88%) are making an effort. And a fifth of people (21%) said they made changes to their research practice this year in service of DEI goals.

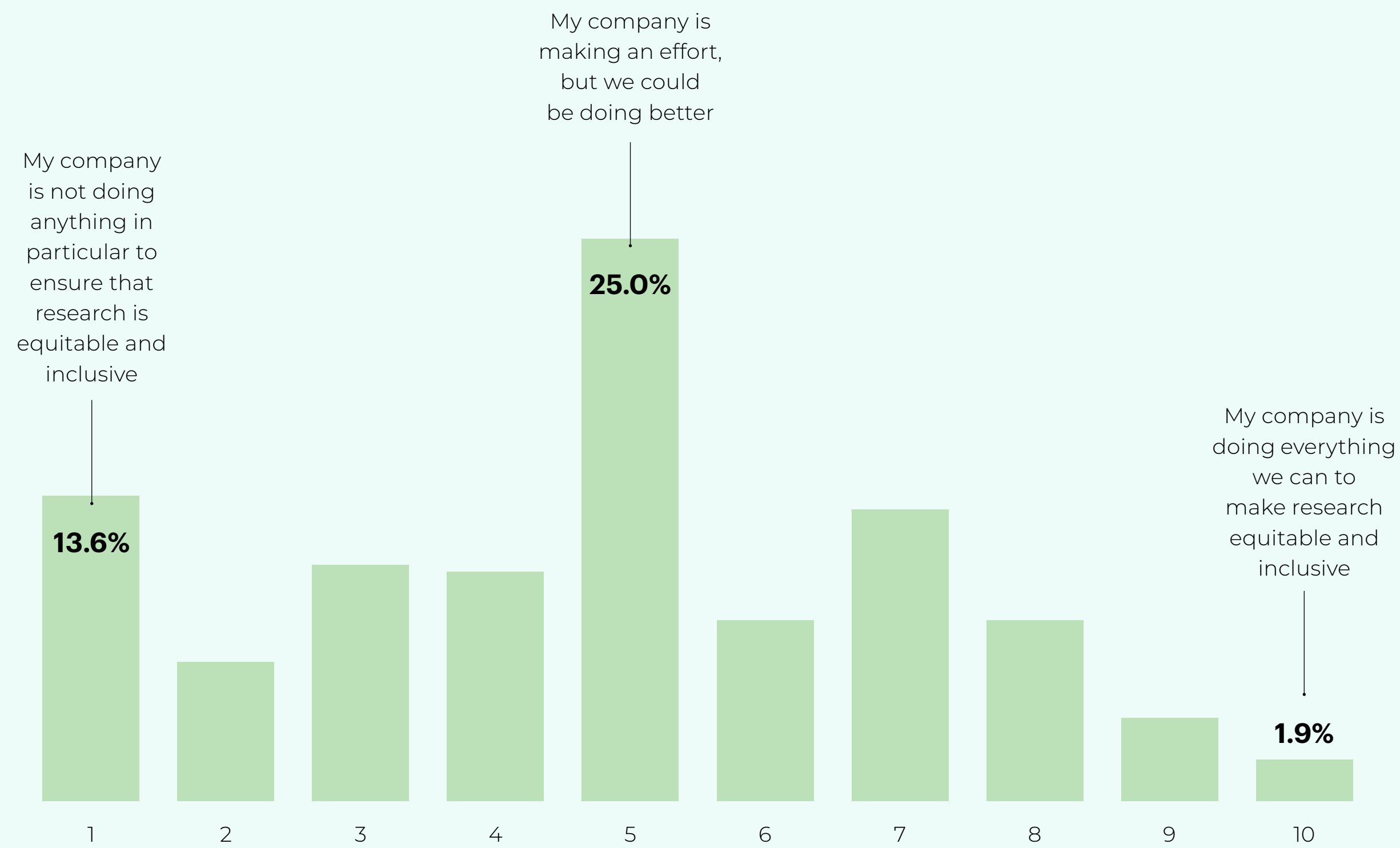
Only 11% of people said a DEI committee or function serves as a stakeholder in research. These researchers rated their accessibility and inclusion efforts a 5/10 and 5.7/10, respectively—about 1 point higher than the average.

- A fifth (21%) of researchers said they made changes to their research practice this year with DEI in mind.
- Only 11% of people said a DEI committee or function is included as a stakeholder in their research.
- 34% said their company uses tools to test for accessibility.



Does your company make an active effort to research the accessibility of your products?

Most researchers felt their company could be doing more to research accessibility. Only 26% rated their efforts as 5/10 or higher, and 27% rated their efforts between ≤1 out of 10.

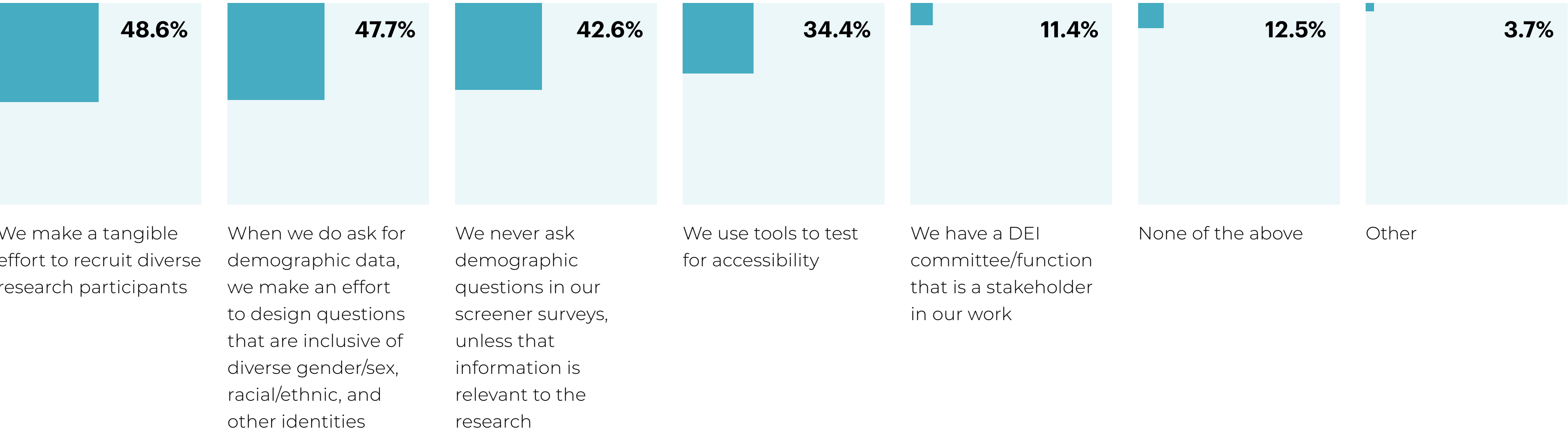


Is your company making an active effort to ensure your research is equitable and inclusive of diverse/representative perspectives?

As with accessibility, most researchers felt their company could be doing more to ensure their work is equitable and inclusive of diverse/representative perspectives. Only 32% rated their efforts as 5/10 or higher, and 20% rated their efforts between ≤1 out of 10.

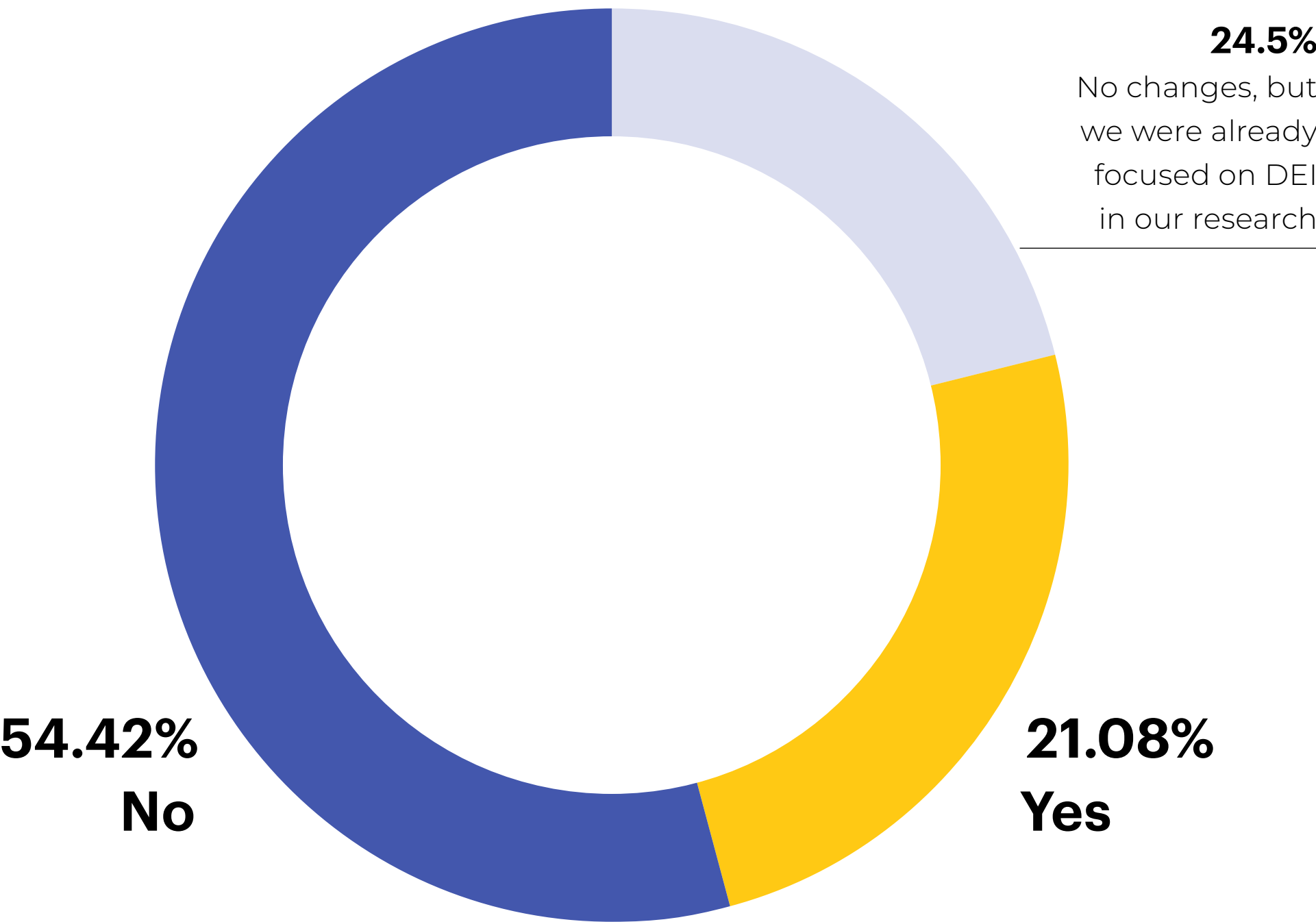
How does your team ensure that your research is diverse, equitable, and accessible?

This question was multiselect. Most (87.5%) teams are making some sort of effort, even as they acknowledge they could be doing more. Almost half of researchers said they were making a tangible effort to recruit a diverse pool of research participants.



Did you make any changes
your UX research practices
this year in order to focus
more on diversity, equity,
and inclusion?

A fifth (21%) of people said their teams made changes to their research practices this year to focus more on diversity, equity, and inclusion. A further 25% said they didn't make changes, but were already focused on these goals.



User research in the COVID-19 era

It's hardly possible to talk about 2020 without talking about COVID-19. The coronavirus pandemic continues to claim lives, livelihoods, and entire industries.

Without minimizing the individual losses and struggles of user researchers around the globe, as a field, user research has [fared quite well](#).

Of the researchers in our survey, 30% said their company experienced COVID-related layoffs. Yet a third (34%) reported that their company hired normally despite the crisis.

What's more, most researchers (67%) said their compensation and benefits were unaffected. A handful of people even told us their benefits improved; several said they now receive more vacation and/or mental health days, stipends to offset the cost of working from home, and (in one case) paid internet and psychiatric care.

Still, a sizable minority of researchers (28%) said their pay or benefits package was negatively impacted, and others wrote in that they had turned to freelancing after losing their job due to the pandemic.

For many researchers, the most dramatic change to their work was not salary or staffing but location: 90% of people surveyed said they've been exclusively working

from home since the pandemic began, including 87% of people who rarely or never worked remote before. And 14% of researchers said their previously on-site companies still have no plans of returning to the office.

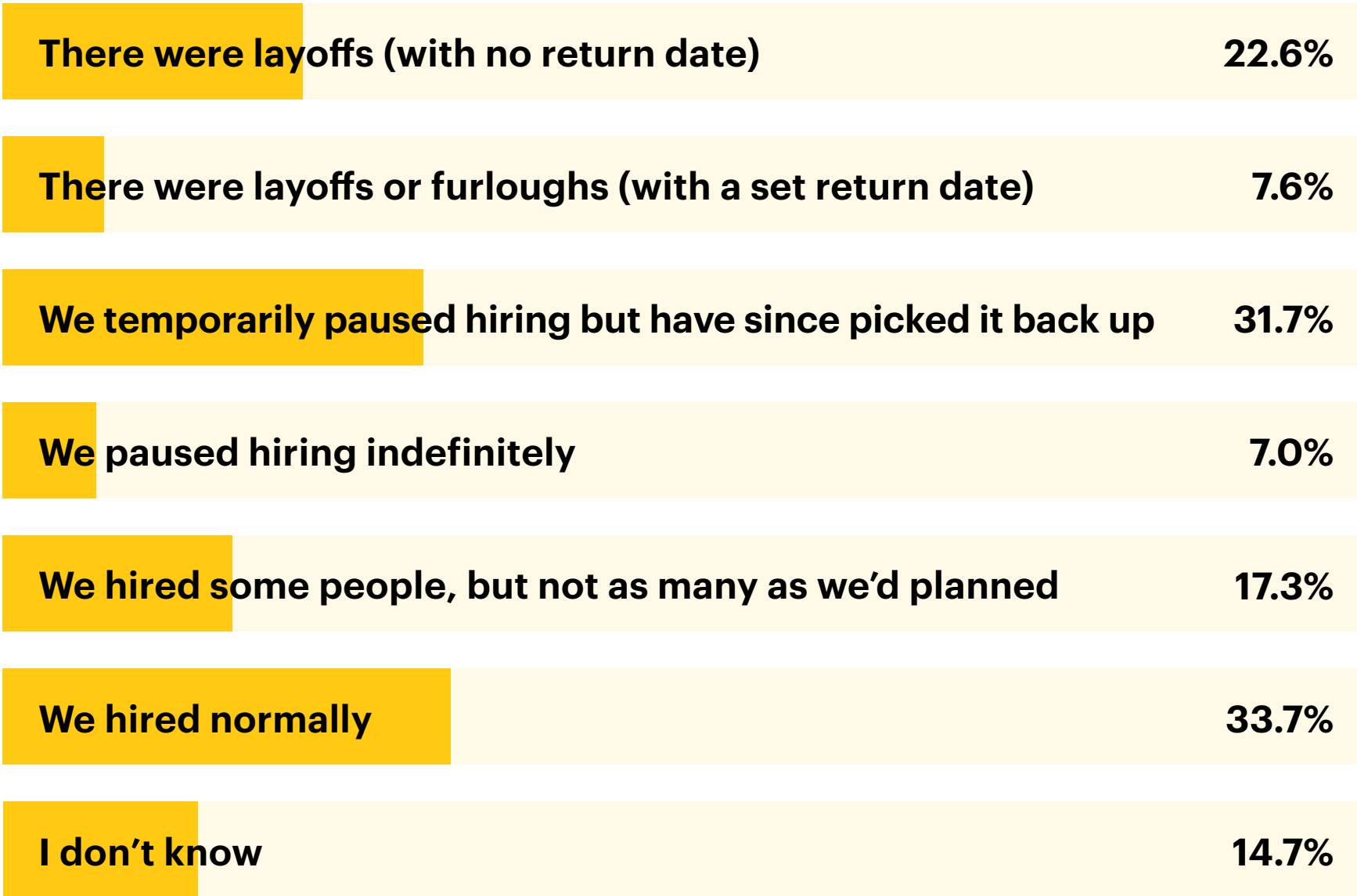
That's a big shift, and one that's not without its challenges. Over 42% of people said the hardest part of working remote has been the lack of in-person communication with teammates. Another 25% cited the blurring of lines between work and home life as the most challenging aspect.

Not everyone agrees—19% of researchers feel that in terms of working remotely, everything is actually going pretty great. That includes 17% of people who never or rarely worked remotely pre-COVID.

- 90% of user researchers have exclusively worked remotely since the start of the pandemic.
- Lack of in-person communication with teammates has been the hardest part of remote work for 42% of researchers.
- Yet 13% of people surveyed took a pay cut as the result of COVID-19.

In the past year, did your company make any of the following personnel changes in response to COVID-19?

These options were not exclusive. Researchers were asked to select all that apply.

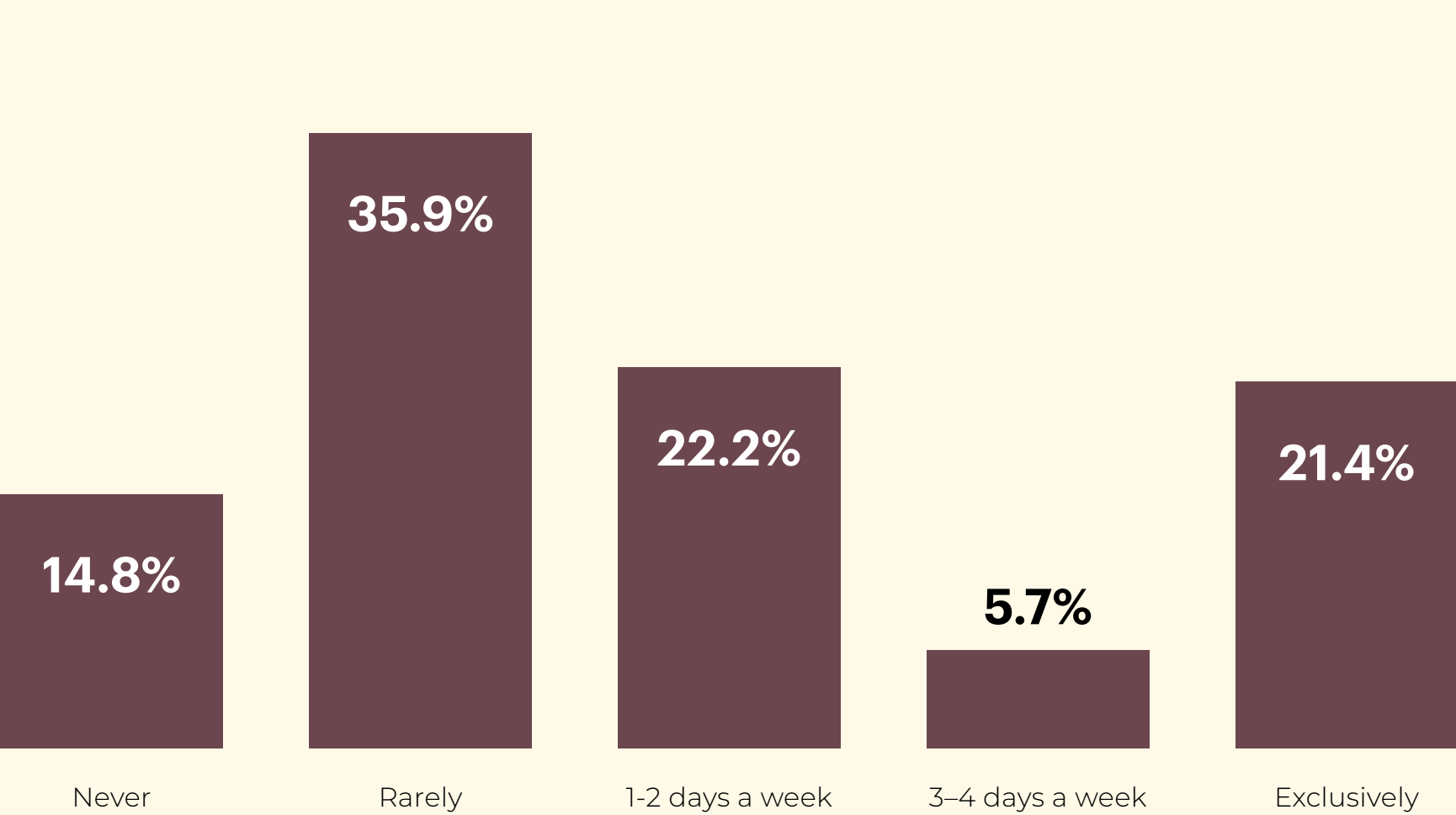


Have your compensation and benefits been affected by the COVID pandemic?

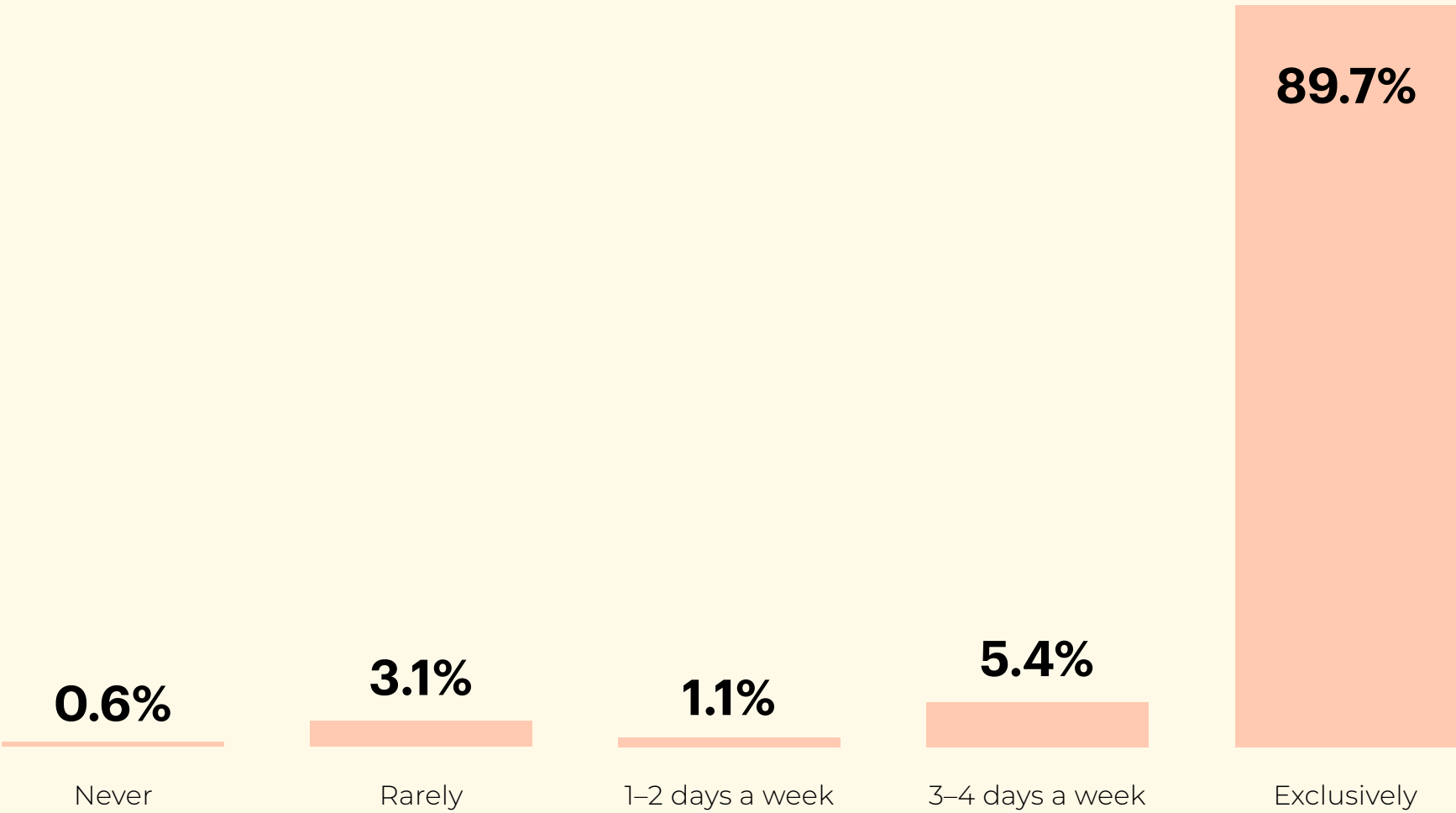


How often did you work remotely pre-COVID?

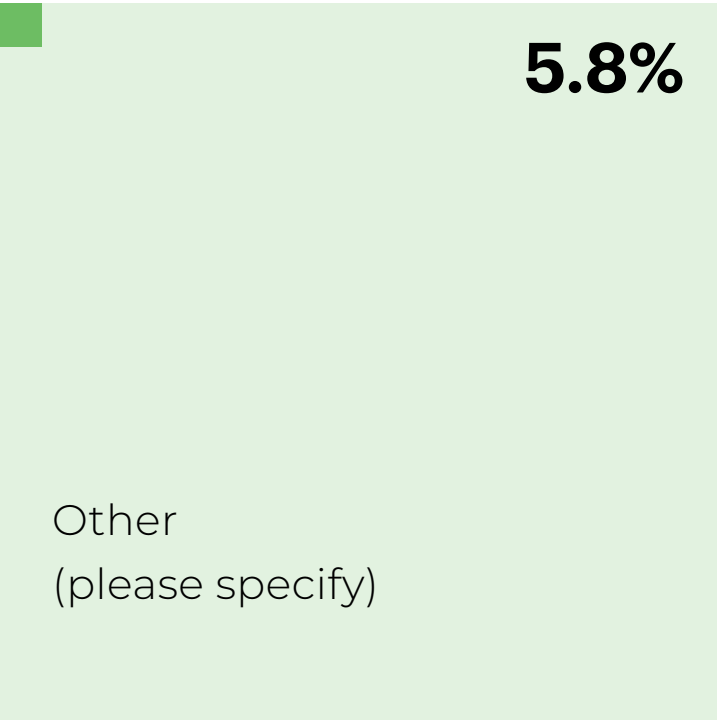
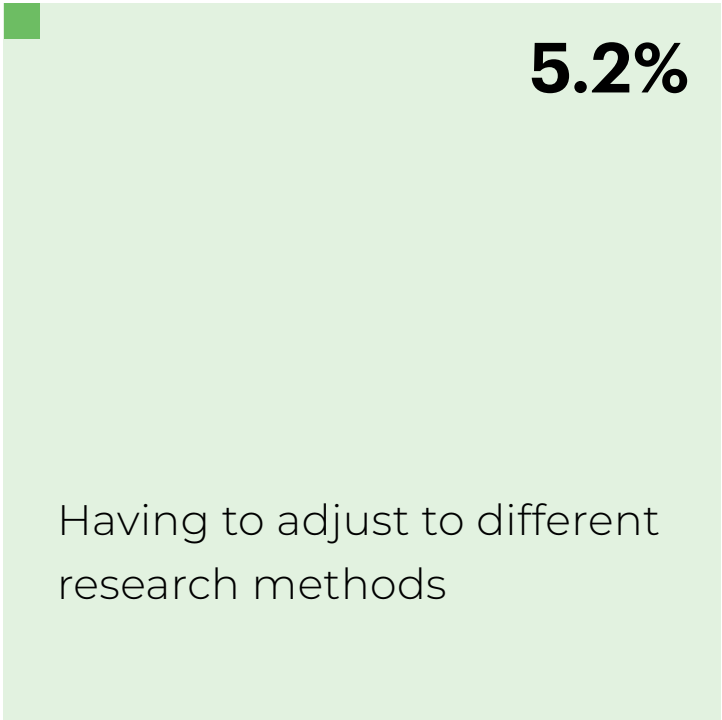
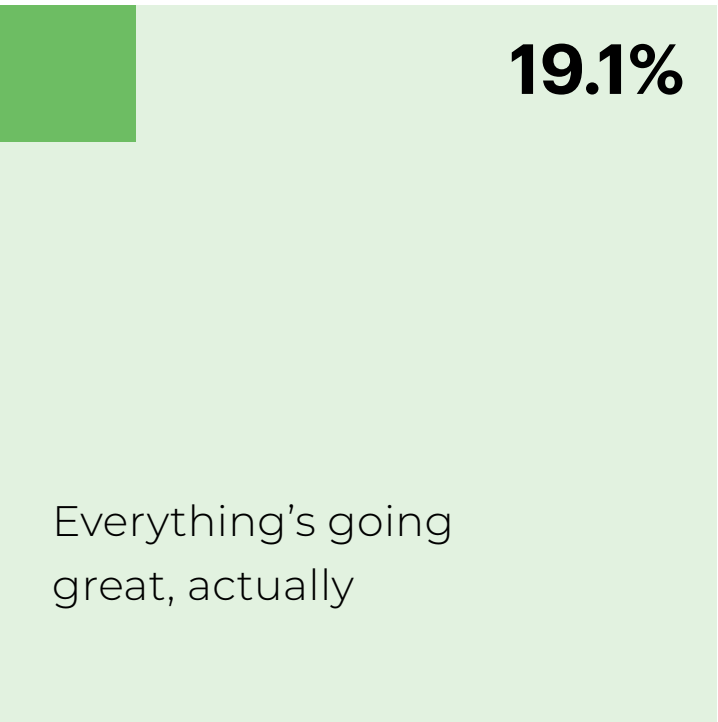
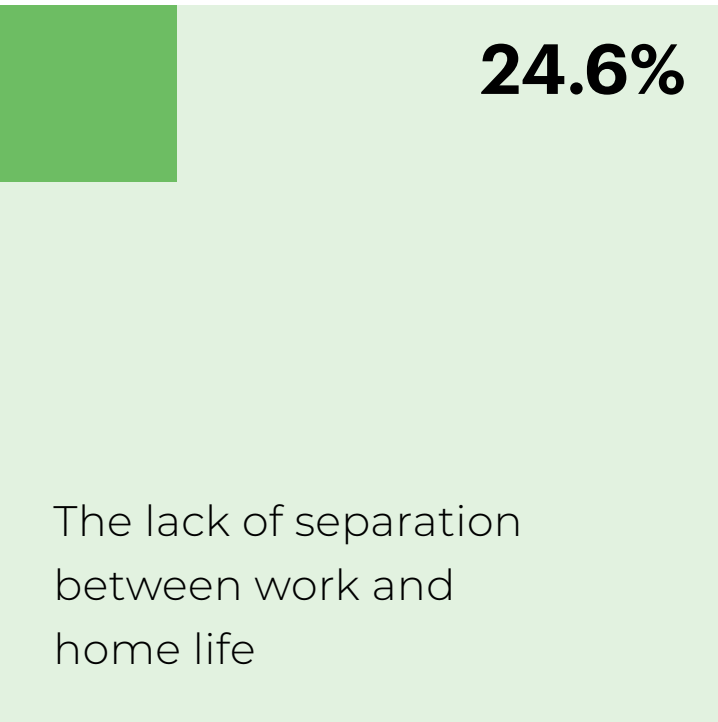
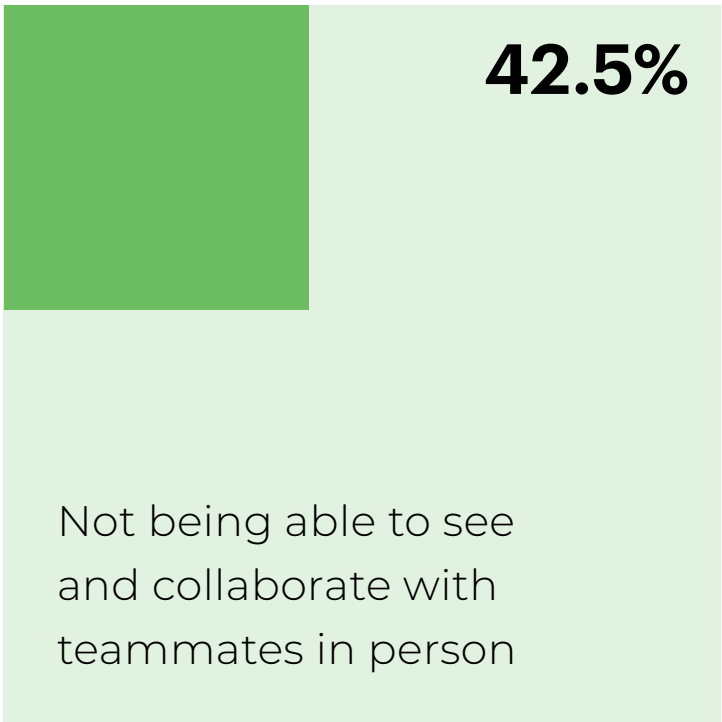
87% of people who said they never or rarely worked remotely pre-COVID are now working from home exclusively.



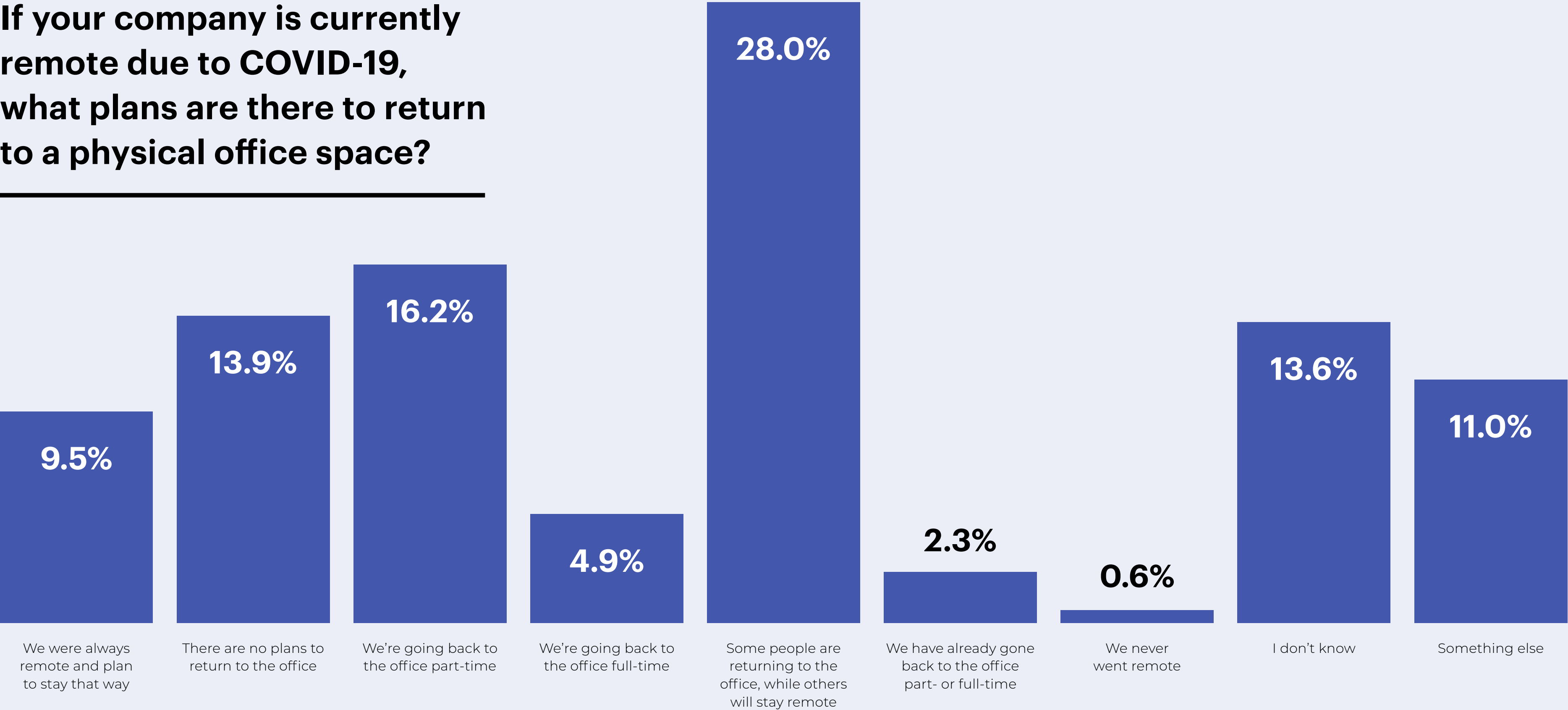
How often have you worked remotely since the COVID-19 crisis began?




What has been the hardest part about working remotely due to COVID-19?



If your company is currently remote due to COVID-19, what plans are there to return to a physical office space?





Emotional State of User Researchers

USER INTERVIEWS

Happiness + fulfillment

Are researchers happy?

We asked people to rate their fulfillment at work on a scale from 1 (unfulfilled) to 10 (very fulfilled). The average score was 6.4—just 0.3 points lower than the last time we asked this question. Considering the 2020 we had, that feels like a win.

We also asked researchers about their biggest frustration at work. A plurality (29%) said organizational structure or bureaucracy was the biggest thorn in their side. This frustration was felt harder among people who work at enterprise companies; 37% of enterprise researchers said this was their biggest frustration, compared to 24% of non-enterprise folks.

The second-most common frustration was around budget and/or resource constraints (18%)—including 3 of the people who said their monthly research budget was over \$75k!

Yet the lowest average fulfillment score (5.3) actually came from the 14% of researchers who felt most frustrated by the lack of buy-in about the importance of research. The second-lowest score (5.7) came from the 8% of researchers who felt most frustrated by no clear path for career growth.

When asked if they felt their company did enough research, most (73%) gave a score of 5/10 or less.

A plurality of researchers (30%) think their companies use research somewhat effectively to meet goals, but could be doing better; the average score was 4.7/10. That's a steep drop from last year, when researchers rated effectiveness of research at 6.8.

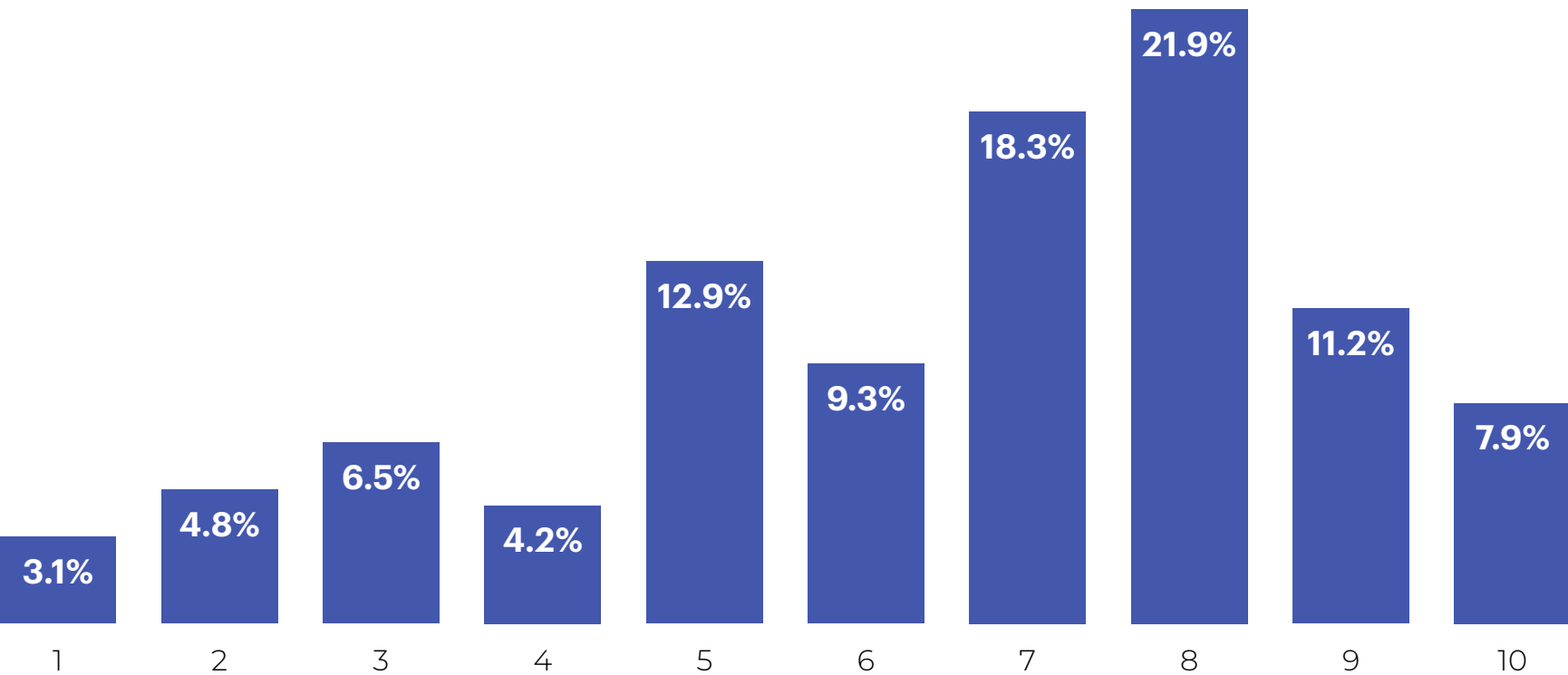
People were slightly happier with the way research was used to make decisions—the average rating was 5.5/10.

The scores researchers gave on these three questions had a big impact on how fulfilled they feel at work. People who rated the amount and effectiveness of research at their company higher than the average also had higher fulfillment scores—7.2 in both instances. And those who gave a higher-than-average rating of the way research is used to make decisions were the most fulfilled at work: their average fulfillment score was 7.5.

- A plurality (37%) of researchers at enterprise companies said organization structure was their biggest frustration.
- People rated their fulfillment as 6.4/10 on average—0.3 points lower than last year.
- Researchers who approve of the way research their company uses to make decisions rated their fulfillment as 7.5—1.1 points above the average.

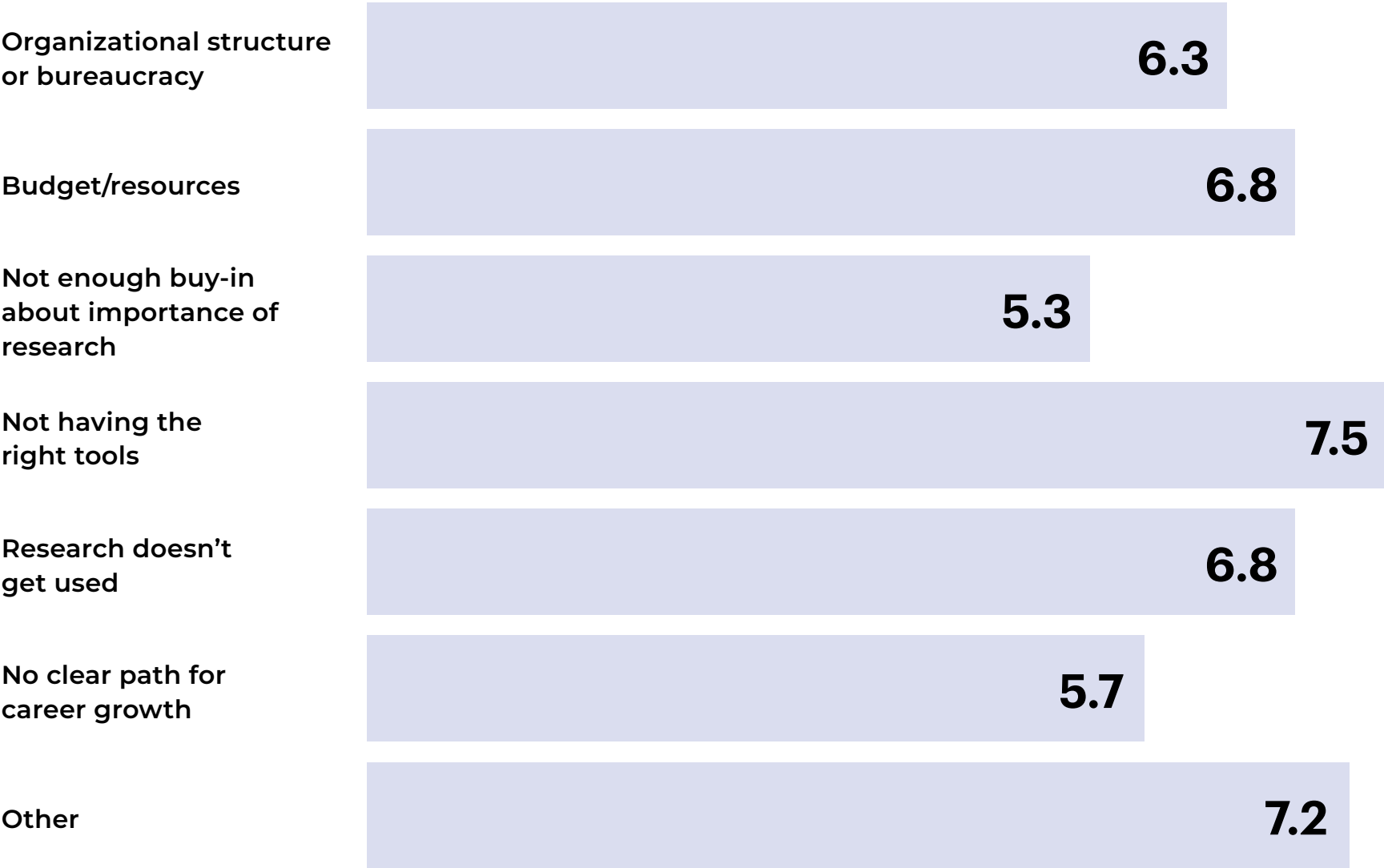
On a scale of 1-10, how fulfilled do you feel at work?

People who are happy with the way research is used to make decisions are more fulfilled. Their average score was 7.5/10, compared to an overall average of 6.4.



What’s your biggest frustration at work?

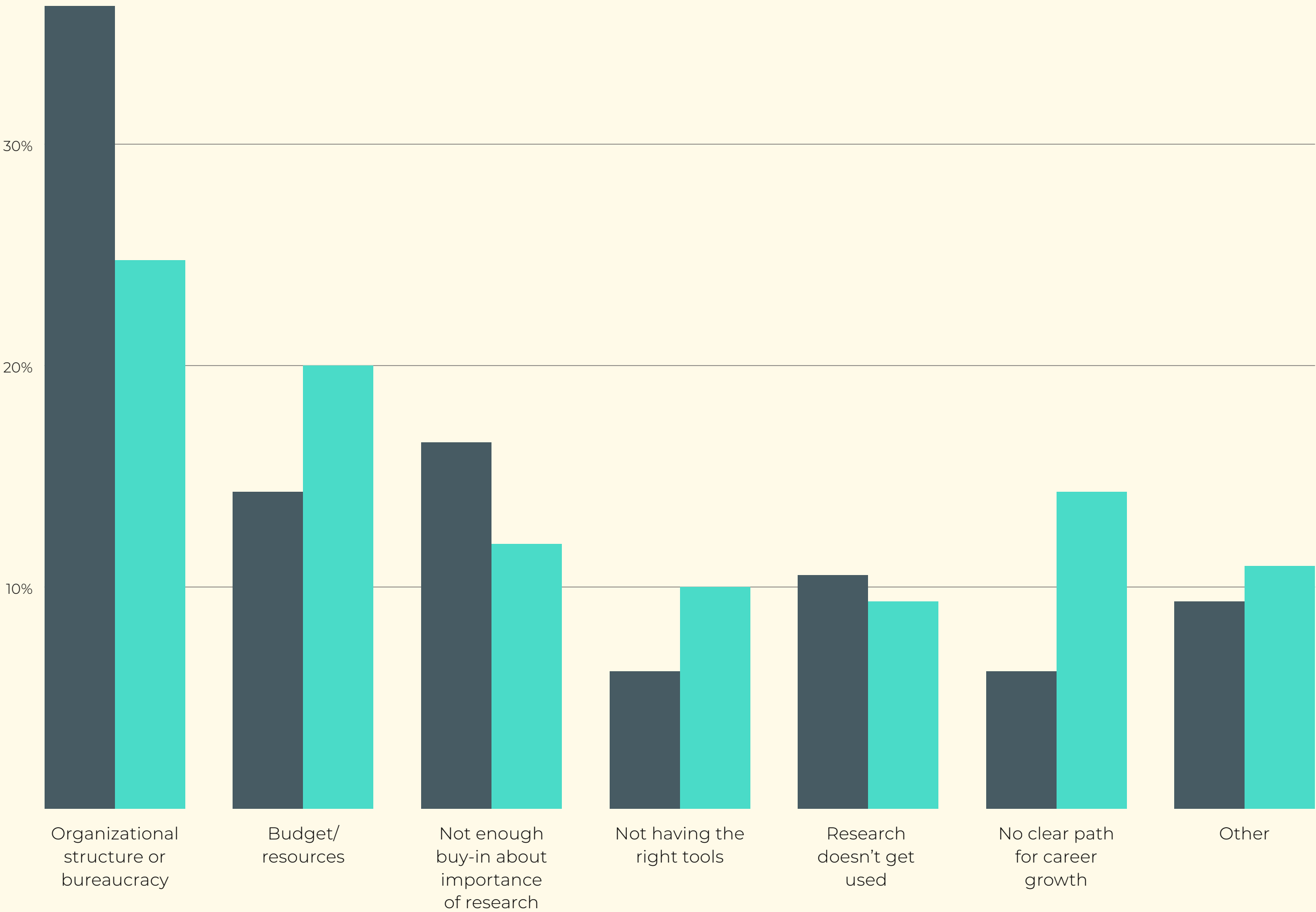
The 14% of researchers say their biggest frustration is lack of buy-in about the importance of research were the least fulfilled, with an average score of 5.3/10.



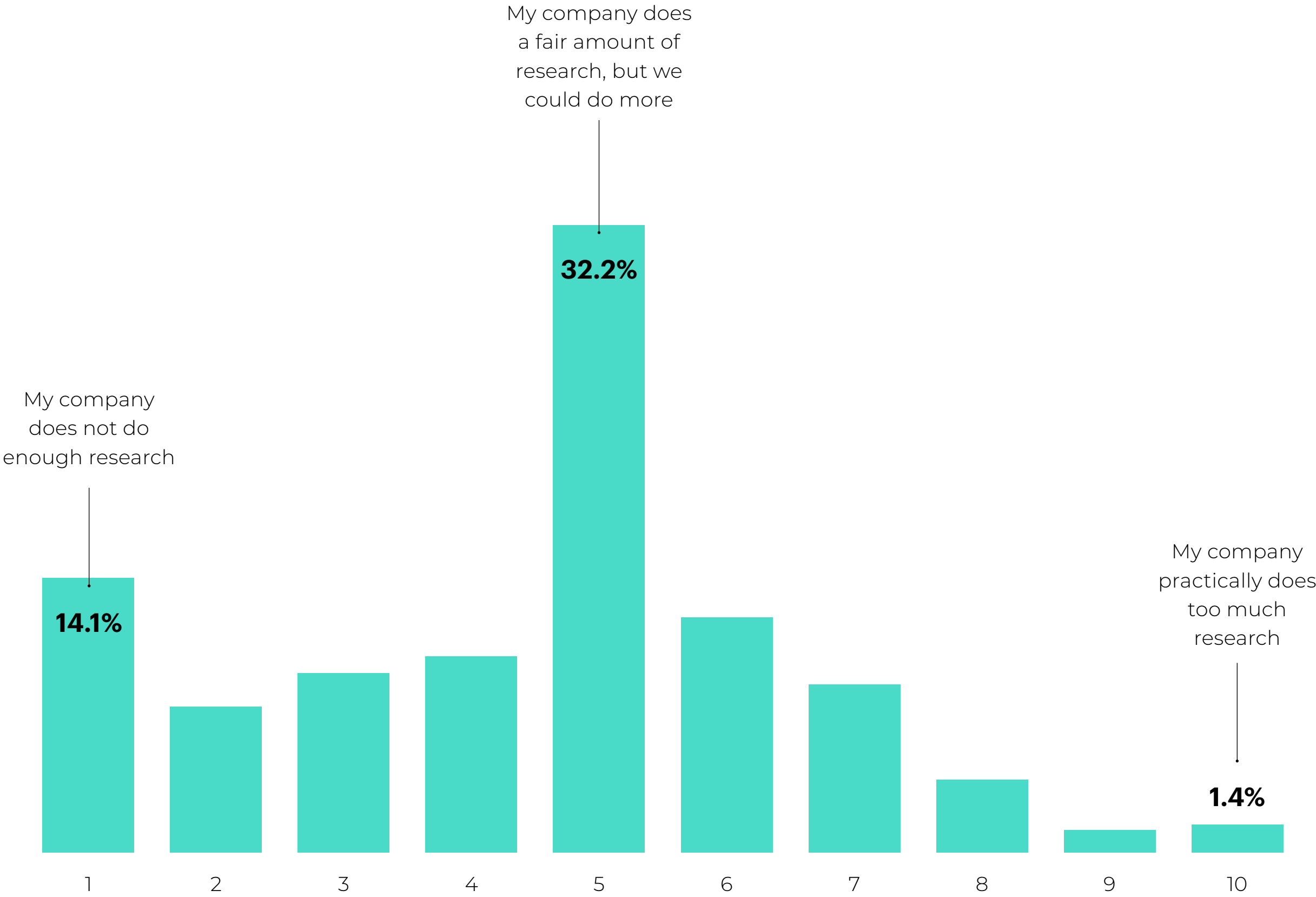
What’s your biggest frustration at work?

Organizational structure or bureaucracy was the biggest frustration for a plurality of researchers. Nearly a quarter (24%) of all non-enterprise researchers cited this as the most frustrating part of their current job; 37% percent of people at enterprise companies said the same.

■ Enterprise ■ Other



Are companies doing enough research?

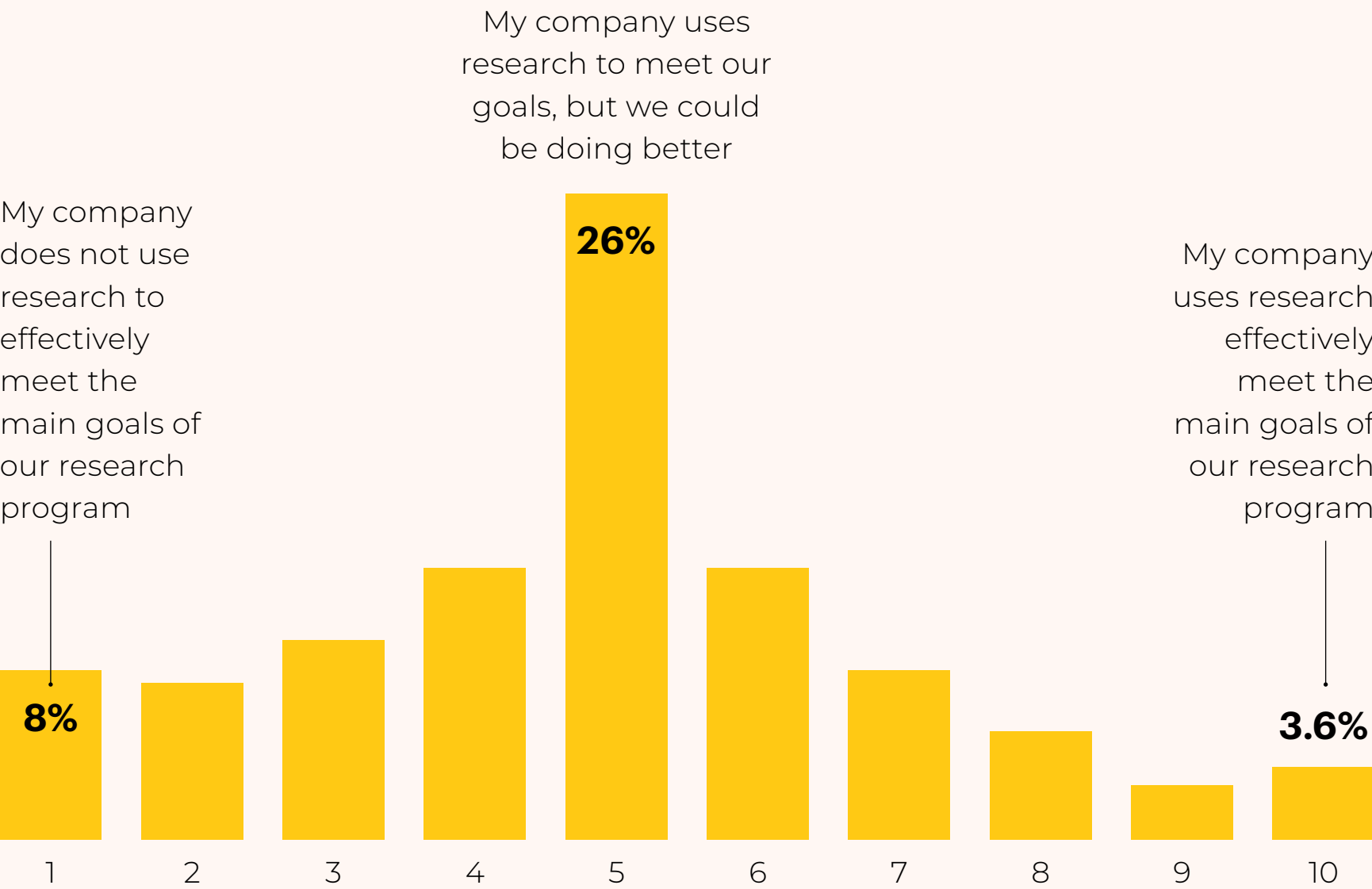


In your opinion, does your company do enough research?

We asked researchers to rate their response on a scale from 1 (“my company does not do enough research”) to 10 (“my company practically does too much research”). Most (73%) of researchers gave a rating of 5 or lower.

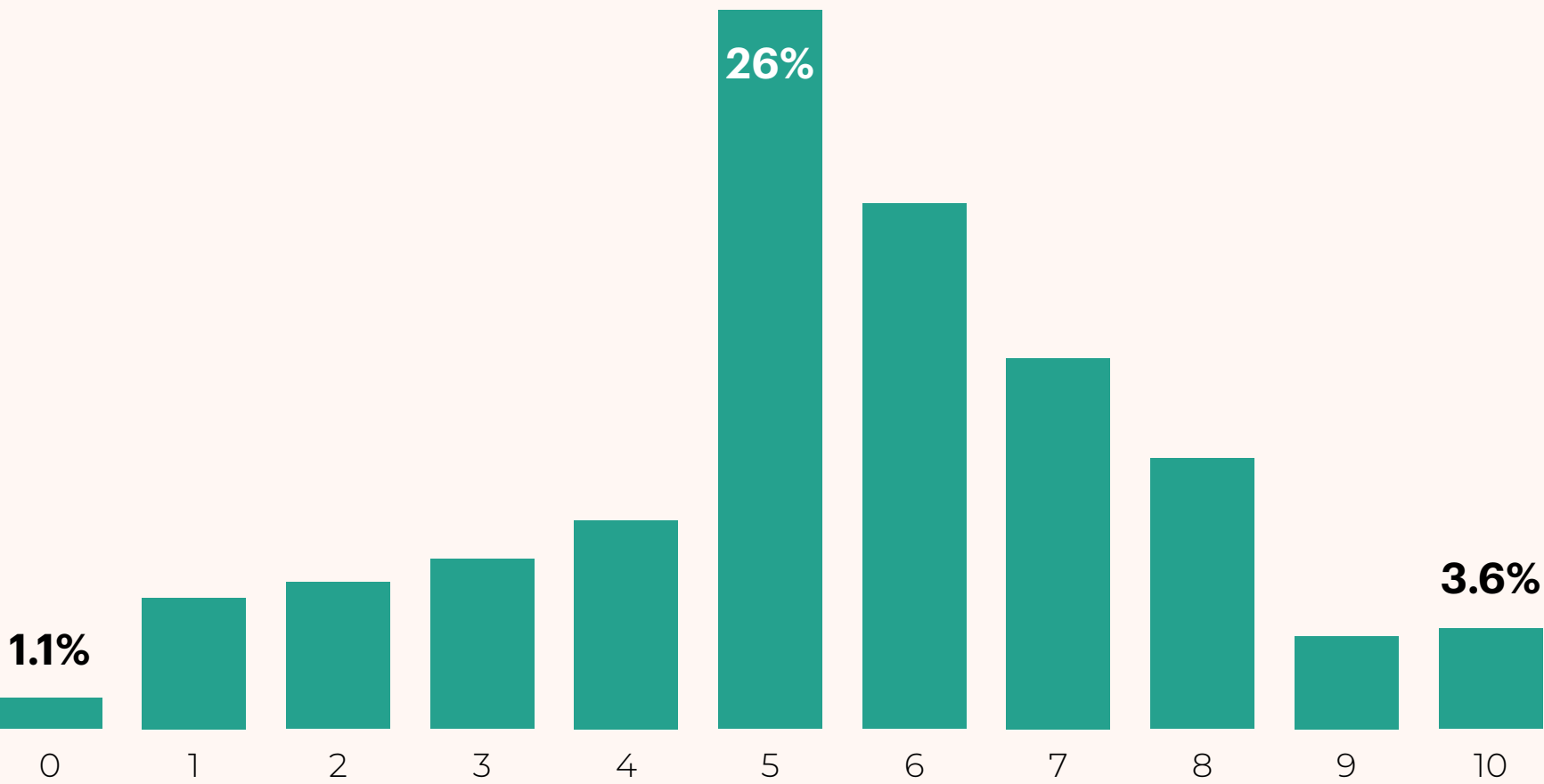
In your opinion, how effectively does your company use research to reach its goals?

Last year, researchers rated the effectiveness of research at 6.8/10 on average; this year, that number dropped over 2 points to 4.7/10.



Are you happy with how research is used to make decisions at your company?

Researchers who gave a higher-than-average (5.5) score on this question also rated themselves as more fulfilled on average—7.5/10, compared an overall average of fulfillment score of 6.4/10.



Why we research

All this talk about fulfillment and job satisfaction (or dissatisfaction, as the case may be) begs the question—why do people do research in the first place?

More specifically, what are researchers' main goals? And what do they love most about their work?

The answers to both of these questions have been remarkably consistent year over year.

Understanding customer needs has been ranked at the most important goal by researchers every year that we've run our survey (it was ranked as slightly more important this year than last: 6.3/7 versus 6.1/7). This goal is followed by validating early-stage solutions, voice of the customer/internal education, validating late-stage solutions, understanding quantitative data, settling internal disputes, and testing for accessibility—always in that order.

Similarly, researchers' favorite thing about user research has remained unchanged: It's the ability to make decisions with better evidence.

At least, that's the case for 43% of people surveyed—the same percent as last year.

User researchers also love bringing the voice of the customer to the wider team (32%) and simply talking to fellow human beings (20%).

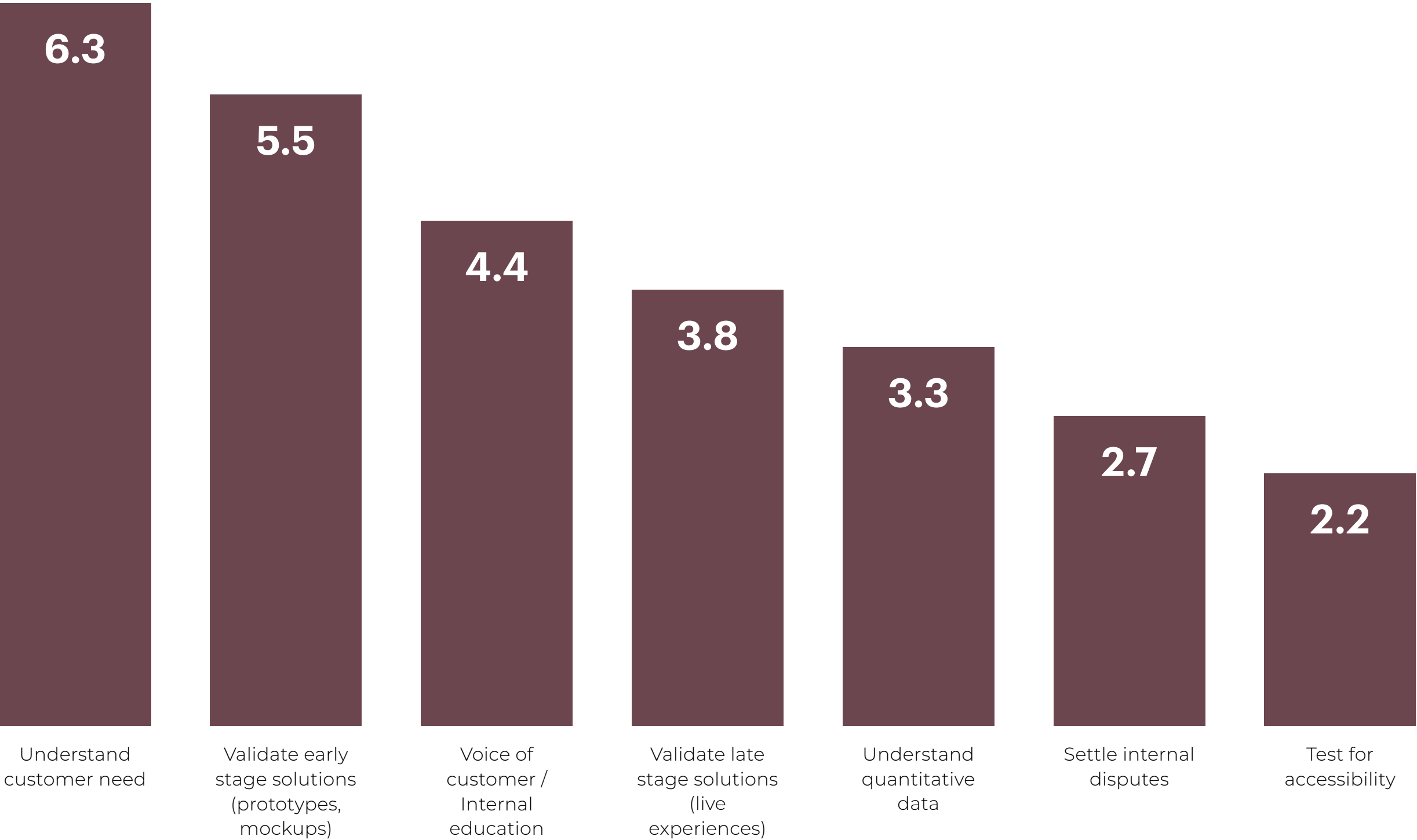
Some folks wrote in to say that they love all these aspects equally, while one person summed up the value of user research quite nicely: Their favorite thing about research is “solving the problems real people have [in order] to make their lives better.”

- 43% of researchers said making decisions with better evidence was their favorite part of the job.
- 69% of people said understanding customer needs was the most important goal of their research program.
- Almost half (49%) of people ranked testing for accessibility as their least important goal.

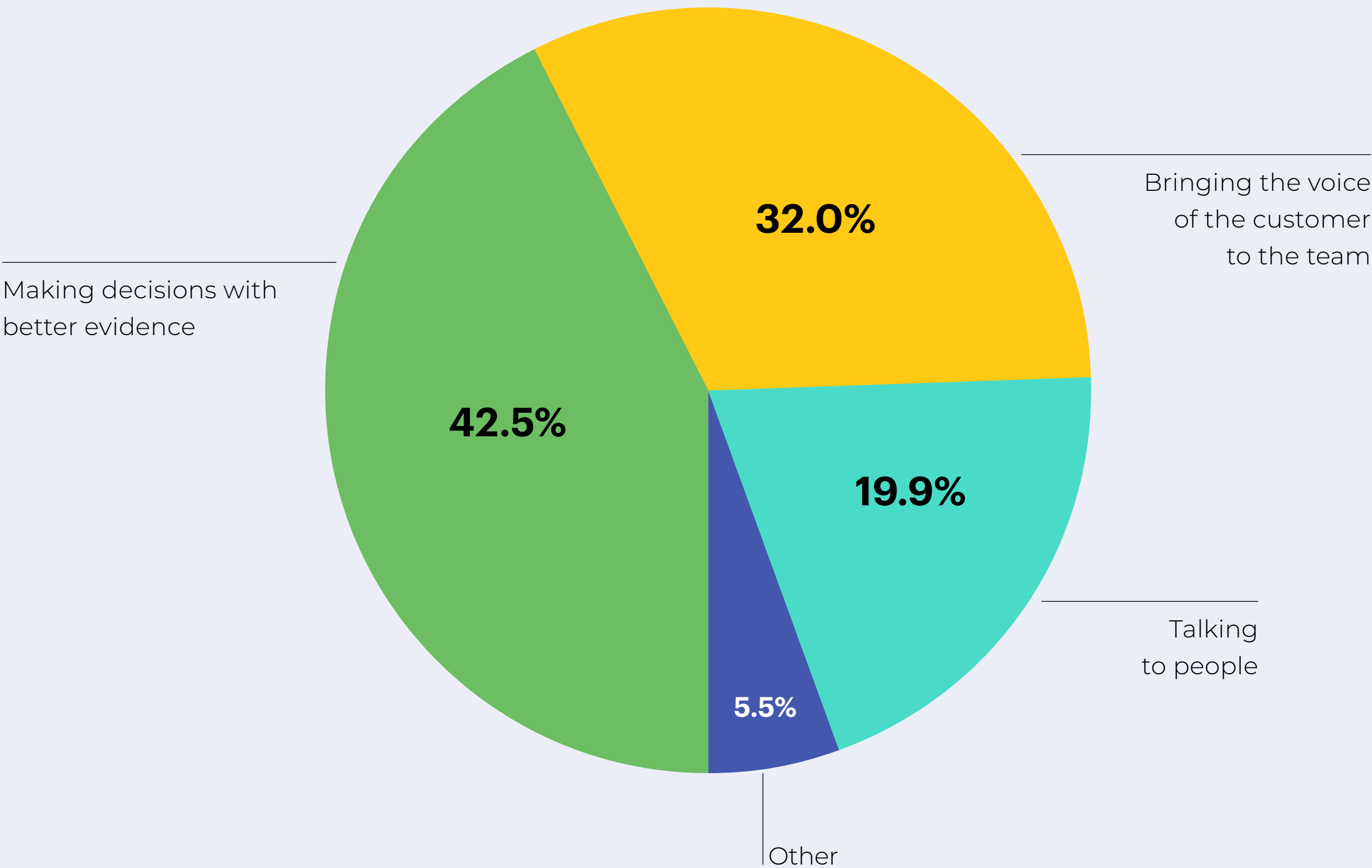
What is the most important goal of your research program?

We asked researchers to rank their goals from 1 (most important) to 7 (least important). The numbers in this graph represent the average ranking given to each goal.

69% of people said understanding customer needs was the most important. And almost half (49%) ranked testing for accessibility as least important.



What’s your favorite thing about user research?





Looking Ahead

USER INTERVIEWS

We're so happy to put this third annual report into the world. Thank you again to everyone who participated in our survey.

In addition to satisfying our curiosity, the insights we gather through this report help us create more relevant, thoughtful UXR resources year round. On the [User Interviews blog](#), we'll continue exploring the data we gathered, what it means for user research, and what we can expect from the year ahead.

If you'd like to be a part of this survey next year, [**sign up for our newsletter**](#)—we'll let you know when the State of User Research 2022 survey rolls around.

In the meantime, happy researching!

– The User Interviews Team

‡ U.S. Census Bureau. (2020, September 25). Income and Poverty in the United States: 2019. (Report number P60-270). U.S. Department of Commerce. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-270.html>

§ Average UX Researcher Salary. (2021, January 21). PayScale. https://www.payscale.com/research/US/Job=UX_Researcher/Salary

+ May, E. & Forster, JH. (Hosts). (2019, May 1). Kate Towsey on Starting a Research Ops Practice [Audio Podcast Episode]. In Awkward Silences.. <https://www.userinterviews.com/blog/kate-towsey-on-starting-a-researchops-practice>