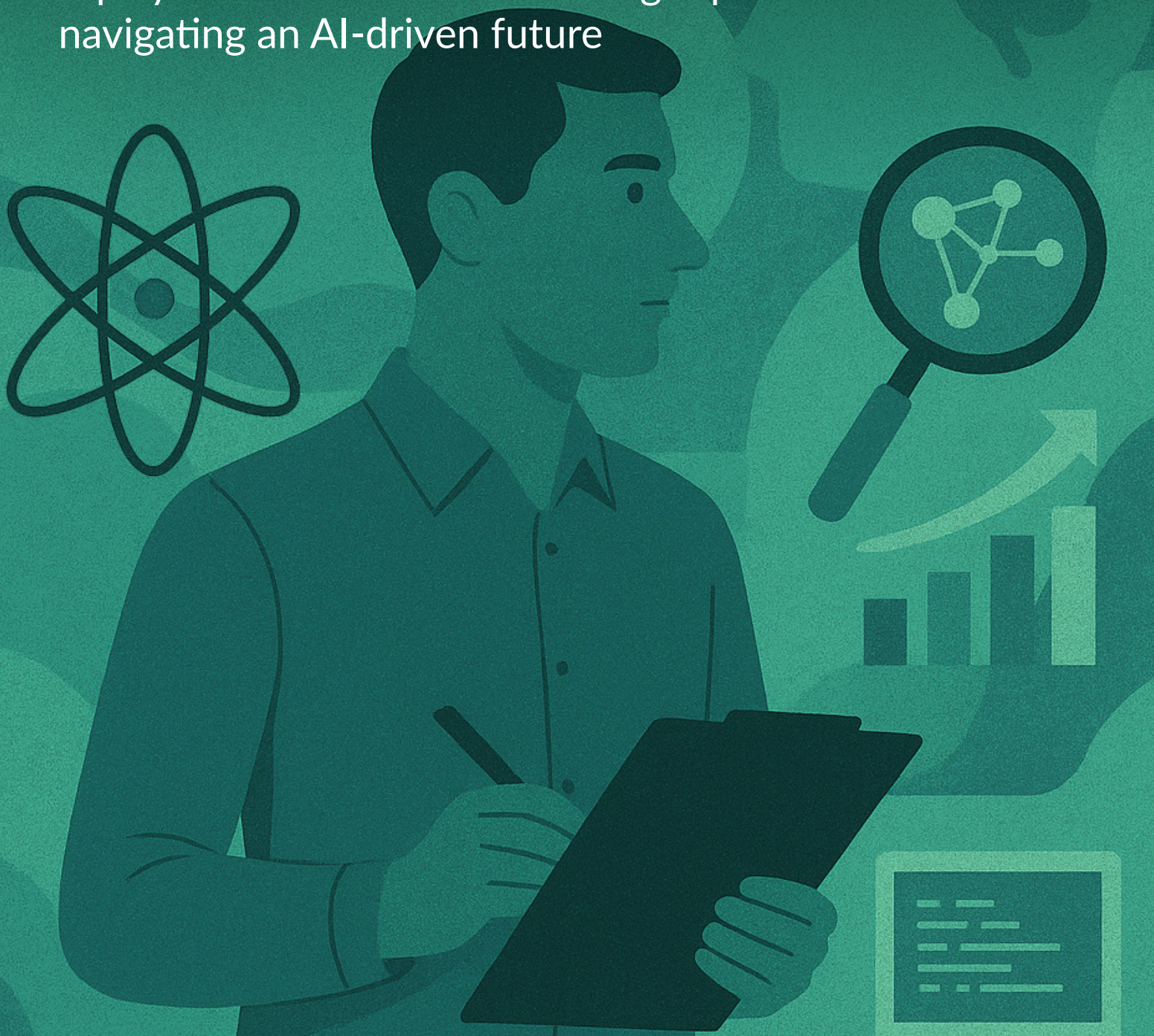




The role of the researcher in 2026 and beyond

A playbook for research and insight professionals navigating an AI-driven future



The contributors



Gary Topiol,
Managing Director,
QuestDIY



Erica Parker
Managing Director,
The Harris Poll

INTRODUCTION:

Introducing the age of the AI co-analyst

Artificial intelligence isn't just reshaping industries – it's redefining the very nature of work, and for market researchers, the changes are profound. As AI becomes even more embedded in business strategy and day-to-day operations, researchers face a pivotal moment: embracing automation without sacrificing the human judgment that gives insights their power.

The age of AI in market research is already here – by 2026 it will be further entrenched into our working processes. It's safe to say there's no going back.

“Researchers view AI as a junior analyst, capable of speed and breadth, but needing oversight and judgment.” – Gary Topiol, Managing Director, QuestDIY

We found that **98% of market research professionals have used AI in their work** over the past year, and **72% are using it daily or more** (39% daily, 33% several times per day or more).

AI is making analysis faster, surfacing insights researchers might otherwise miss, and fusing data across structured and unstructured sources.

But there is also caution. Concerns about **bias, accuracy, and data privacy** weigh heavily. Researchers recognize AI is powerful, but they also know it has limitations – even if the extent of those limitations are not yet fully understood.

The future is not about AI replacing researchers – it is about researchers working side by side with AI – a “co-analyst” that helps elevate their role.

This playbook, powered by QuestDIY, offers a roadmap for the researcher of 2026 and beyond. It explores how AI is transforming research workflows, how professionals are responding, and what it takes to scale your capabilities responsibly and strategically.

Contents

CHAPTER 1:	
AI is the new research reality	4
CHAPTER 2:	
The pitfalls to be aware of (and how to avoid them)	7
CHAPTER 3:	
What the researcher of the future looks like	10
CHAPTER 4:	
How QuestDIY can help	14
Methodology	19

CHAPTER 1:

AI is the new research reality

AI adoption: Omnipresent and on the rise

AI is already part of the researchers' toolkit, particularly when it comes to analysis and reporting. We asked more than **200 insights professionals** and found that the top AI use cases include:

- Analyzing multiple data sources (58%)
- Analyzing structured data (54%)
- Automating insight reports (50%)
- Analyzing open-ended responses (49%)
- Summarizing findings (48%)

In fact, **more than half (56%) of researchers save at least 5 hours per week with AI.**

And beyond time-saving, researchers report that **AI improves accuracy (44%)**, helps **surface missed insights (43%)**, **increases the speed of insights delivery (43%)**, and even **sparks creativity (39%)**. AI is not only accelerating tasks, but also enriching the quality and impact of insights delivered.

Considering the benefits of AI that you've experienced on your job, how much time do you feel it is saving you, if any?

5%

Takes more time

1%

No time saved

1%

Less than 1 hr/week

37%

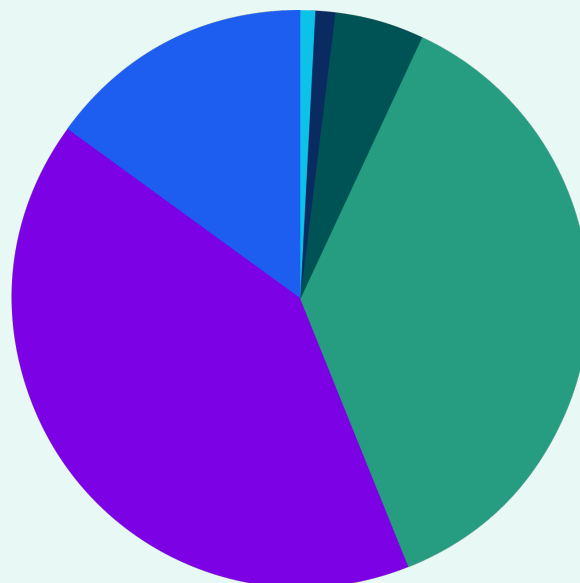
1-4 hrs/week

41%

5-10 hrs/week

15%

More than 10 hrs/week



The majority (89%) say AI has made their work lives better (64% say “somewhat better” and 25% “significantly”).

“AI frees researchers from the heavy lifting so they can focus on thinking strategically.”

– Erica Parker, Managing Director, The Harris Poll

From research design to data synthesis, AI is no longer an optional tool – it’s becoming a core part of our processes. There’s rising reliance – **80% are using it more than they were 6 months ago**, and 71% expect to increase usage in the next 6 months. Only 8% expect their usage to decline.



Widespread Adoption

98% of market research professionals have used AI at work in the past year



Frequent Usage

72% use AI daily or more (**39%** daily; **33%** several times/day)



Rising Reliance

Usage is trending up, with **80%** using it ‘somewhat more’ or ‘much more’ frequently vs. 6 months ago



Continued Growth

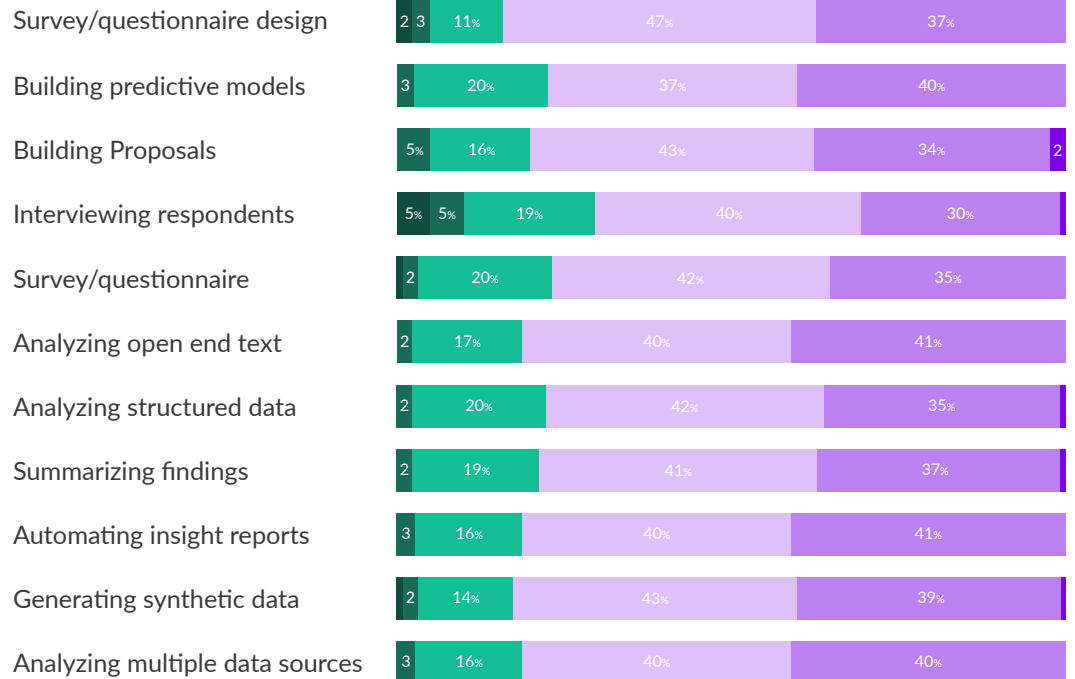
71% expect to increase usage in the next 6 months (only **8%** expect declines)

Researchers also highlight untapped potential. While fewer currently use AI for early-stage tasks like survey design (41%), programming (37%), and proposal creation (30%), most consider these appropriate use cases. This suggests a clear opportunity for AI in shaping the entire research workflow, not just analysis.

Which of the use cases are an appropriate use of AI in market research?

KEY

- Not at all appropriate
- Slightly appropriate
- Moderately appropriate
- Very appropriate
- Extremely appropriate
- Not sure / No opinion



The bigger picture: AI and business at large

At the macro level, AI is revolutionizing decision-making, personalizing customer experiences, and speeding up product development. For researchers, this creates both pressure and opportunity. Businesses now expect agile, real-time insights – and researchers must adapt their skills and workflows to meet that demand.



Next steps you can take now

1. **Embed AI in your workflow:** Treat AI not as a plugin, but as core infrastructure for analysis, research, reporting, survey builds, and analyzing open-ended questions. Start mapping out high-effort tasks that can be automated.
2. **Evaluate tools:** Audit your current research stack to ensure AI capabilities are leveraged in time-saving areas like survey creation, open-end coding, cross-source analysis, and automated reports.
3. **Align with business agility:** Match the real-time pace of business by reworking insight delivery timelines and integrating AI for faster turnaround. Set internal benchmarks for time saved using AI.

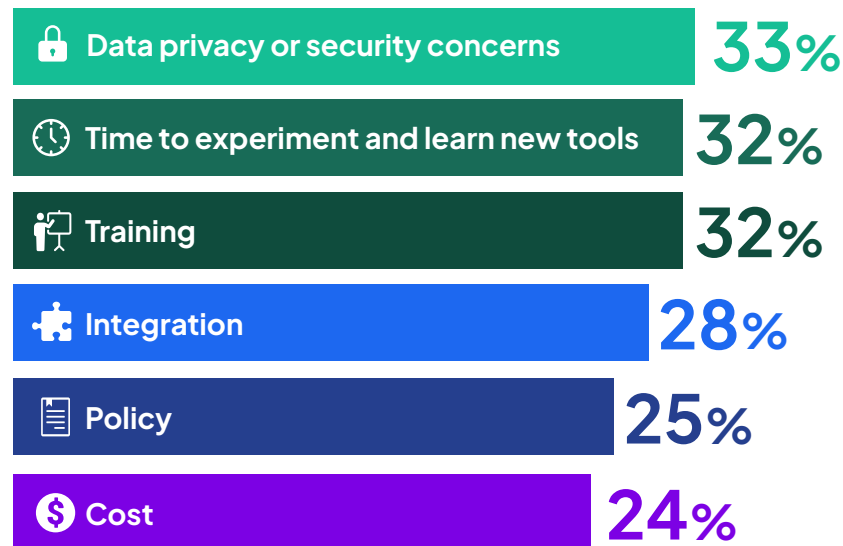
CHAPTER 2:

The pitfalls to be aware of (and how to avoid them)

The biggest barriers to AI adoption for researchers

When asked what would limit the use of AI at work, the greatest barrier to adoption identified was a deep concern around data privacy being violated (33%).

BARRIERS TO ADOPTION



Researchers also point to cost (24%) and internal policy restrictions (25%) as blockers. Together, these adoption hurdles underscore that enablement – training, security, transparency, and guided workflows – is as critical as AI’s raw capabilities.

Rather than piling on extra AI features, what’s needed are guided workflows, templates, and support that allow research teams to adopt AI safely without losing rigor. AI features need to be embedded in our secure research platforms, not add new point solutions to our tech stack.

“Onboarding beats feature bloat. The biggest brakes are time to learn and train. Packaged workflows, templates, and guided setup all unlock usage faster than piling on capabilities.”

– Erica Parker, Managing Director, The Harris Poll

A potential pain point is lack of transparency in AI use (31%), which could make it harder for researchers to explain results to clients and stakeholders. And it's important to note that sometimes clients will have no-AI clauses in their contracts. Addressing explainability is therefore key to successful adoption.

A third of researchers (31%) have experienced additional time spent validating AI's outputs due to concern over data accuracy, but we know from the data in most cases AI is saving considerable time. However, accuracy is the biggest frustration with AI experienced by researchers when asked on an open-ended basis. The more we rely on AI to speed up deliverables, the more likely acute errors (hallucinations) will be felt.

The message is consistent – quality and accuracy cannot be compromised, and AI outputs often need to be validated. This is where the human in the loop becomes critical. Researchers view AI as a junior analyst, capable of speed and breadth, but needing oversight and judgment.

“AI can surface missed insights – but it still needs a human to judge what really matters.”

– Gary Topiol, Managing Director, QuestDIY

Researchers view AI with mixed feelings. While it's improved the ability to work with large datasets (45%), helped identify insights that might otherwise be missed (43%), and improved speed of delivering insights to stakeholders (43%); at the same time, it's also introduced new risks around data quality or accuracy (37%), highlighted concerns around ethics (28%), job security (29%), how much these tools can be relied on when they sometimes produce errors (39%).

Introduced new risks around data quality or accuracy	37%
Increased reliance on technology that sometimes produces errors	39%
Reduced human input in areas where judgement is valuable	26%
Raised concerns about data privacy and ethics	28%
Led to more work re-checking or validating AI outputs	31%
Caused inconsistencies in style, tone, or formatting in deliverables	28%
AI has not made any aspect of my work life worse	11%
Increased pressure to deliver faster with fewer resources	31%
Created uncertainty about job security	29%
Reduced the need for certain skills I previously specialized in	24%
Required significant time to learn new tools and workflows	29%

The importance of the human

The consensus is clear: **researchers want AI as a partner, not a replacement.**

The ideal model is human-led research supported by AI; where AI tackles the repetitive tasks (coding, cleaning, reporting) and researchers focus on interpretation, strategy, and impact. Humans remain in charge, with AI doing the heavy lifting.

Researchers become the “Insight Advocate”, connecting AI output and insights to stakeholder challenges to drive better decision making. A key sense check and human steward in a world powered by machines.

“The center of gravity is analysis at scale – fusing multiple sources, handling both structured and unstructured data, and automating reporting.”

– Gary Topiol, Managing Director, QuestDIY



Next steps you can take now

1. **Lead with human judgment:** Treat AI outputs as a starting point, not a finished product. Build a habit of pausing to question, compare, and sense-check what AI produces against your own expertise and the needs of your stakeholders.
2. **Prioritize data ethics and privacy:** Establish clear rules for what data can be shared with which AI systems.
3. **Educate your team:** Run workshops on data misuse, bias detection, hallucinations, and ethical use. Start by hosting an internal conversation around data sharing and privacy risks.

CHAPTER 3:

What the researcher of the future looks like

Balancing human experience with AI power

Today, most researchers operate in a human-led, AI-supported model. Around one-third (29%) describe their workflow as human-led with significant AI support, while another 31% lean toward mostly human with some AI help.

“The future is human-led, with AI as a trusted co-analyst.”

– Erica Parker, Managing Director, The Harris Poll

Looking ahead to 2030, researchers expect AI to become a strategic decision-support partner:

- AI will take on more autonomous tasks, such as drafting survey questions, generating first-pass reports, and identifying insights across varied data sets.
- Researchers will act as strategic reviewers and context experts, evaluating AI-generated content through the lens of business needs.

Evolving the researcher role

AI is **elevating**, not replacing, the researcher. As it takes over repetitive and time-consuming tasks, professionals are freed to focus on advisory and strategic work. The net result is more influence, not less. As one respondent says, *“Human researchers will still guide strategy, but AI will handle most of the heavy data work, making the process smarter and more efficient.”*

Although on balance, many see AI as more of an opportunity than a threat – **that does not mean it is not viewed with some concern**. In fact, 29% said that AI was creating uncertainty about job insecurity. However, the majority (59%) view it as primarily a support, and 36% see it as an opportunity. Importantly, 89% say AI has already improved their work lives.

“AI gives researchers the space to move up the value chain – from data gatherers to Insight Advocates, focused on maximising business impact.”

– Gary Topiol, Managing Director, QuestDIY

Evolving skillsets

The skillset of the standout researcher is shifting. Previously, success relied on technical execution and methodological rigor. Now and in the future, we believe that critical skills for a future researcher will need them to become:

- **Culturally fluent and agile** – able to navigate shifting contexts and global perspectives.
- **Technologically confident** – working seamlessly with AI agents, platforms, and data pipelines.
- **Strategic storytellers** – turning data into narratives that resonate with business leaders.
- **Ethical stewards** – ensuring research is transparent, fair, and trustworthy.
- **Inquisitive insight advocates** – focusing on the right questions, validating AI outputs, and framing insights for impact.

Researchers will need to become translators of machine-generated output into business-relevant stories.

The human + AI model in practice

By 2030, **researchers envision AI as a decision-support partner (61%)**, with expanded roles across:

- **Generative capabilities (56%)** – drafting surveys, proposals, and reports.
- **AI-driven data generation (53%)** – synthetic and augmented data to complement traditional sources.
- **Automation of core processes (48%)** – project setup, cleaning, coding, and dashboarding.
- **Predictive analytics (44%)** – forecasting outcomes and scenarios.
- **Cognitive insights (43%)** – striving for deeper and more nuanced insights.

More research, not less

As we use AI more and move faster, we need to be careful to check the AI outputs regularly to ensure we're using them properly and they're guiding our research in the right direction. As one researcher puts it in open-ended responses: *"The faster we move with AI, the more we need to check if we're moving in the right direction."*

The strategic researcher of 2030

The researcher of the future won't be defined by technical execution alone, but by **strategic judgment, adaptability, and storytelling**. Their role will be to:

- Supervise AI systems, ensuring rigor, accuracy, and fairness.
- Guide stakeholders with culturally sensitive, ethically grounded narratives.
- Translate data into **decisions that shape business strategy**.

Research teams of the future will require AI Insights Agents alongside human Research Supervisors and Insight Advocates. AI will be a part of your team, roles will shift, and your research team will function as a command center.



AI will not replace researchers – **it will amplify their influence** and position them as trusted advisors at the heart of decision-making.

Evolving skills and attributes

Future career opportunities will center on helping researchers step into more strategic roles. Increasingly, they will be seen not only as data interpreters but as business advisors who guide leadership decisions.

Researchers will increasingly act as insight advocates, translating data into decisions that shape growth. With AI handling the heavy lifting, researchers step forward as consultants.

“AI is not replacing researchers – it’s elevating them to operate more often as strategic advisors and growth drivers.” – Erica Parker, Managing Director, The Harris Poll

WHAT RESEARCHERS OF THE FUTURE WILL SPEND THEIR TIME ON



Strategic
storytelling



Critical thinking
and validation

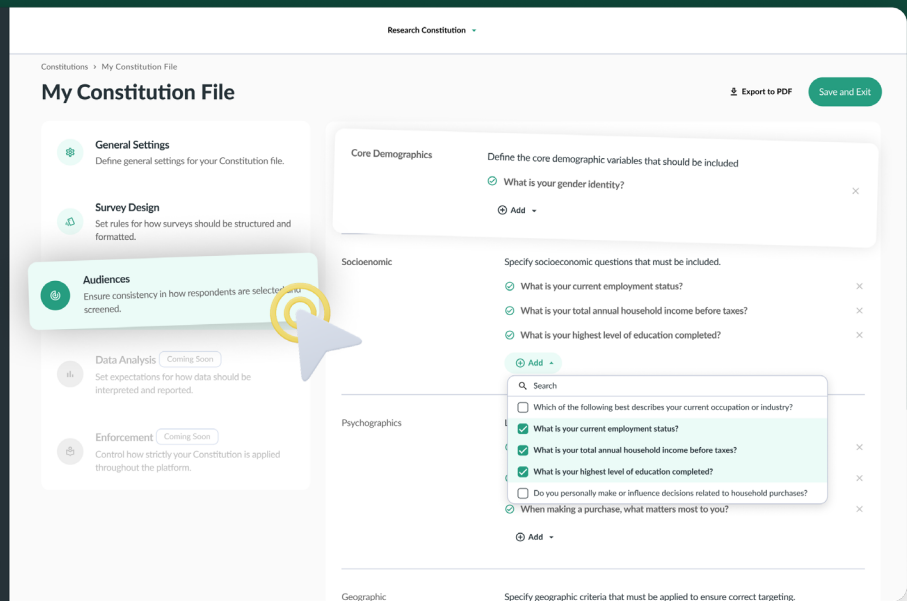


Client context and
ethical oversight



Next steps you can take now

1. **Build strategic capabilities:** Shift focus from execution to insight translation and business advising. Be in the room for the conversations where insights are being applied to the business.
2. **Create a personal learning plan to upskill in key areas, such as:**
 - Cultural fluency
 - Strategic storytelling
 - Ethical oversight
 - Technical fluency
3. **Explore tools that unify past research:** Break knowledge silos. Start by experimenting with AI-generated hypotheses or survey drafts.



CHAPTER 4:

How QuestDIY can help

QuestDIY infuses AI throughout workflows, streamlining every stage of the research process – from survey design to real-time insights – empowering research professionals to hit their KPIs with speed, precision, and impact.

Researchers can launch studies quickly, access high-quality global samples, and generate actionable results within hours – not weeks – enabling them to respond to business needs in real time.

“After submitting it for fielding, I literally watched the survey count climb and finish the same afternoon. It was a remarkable turnaround.” – Research Lead - Boutique Agency

With QuestDIY you’ll deliver research initiatives that drive strategic outcomes, and sharpened messaging that influences decisions at the highest level. It’s not just about working faster – it’s about delivering insights that matter, when they matter most.

QuestDIY, built by The Harris Poll, is the agile research platform designed to future-proof insights. You'll be able to:

- **Get deeper insights that drive faster results:** Quickly launch research that's built on proven best practices and designed to answer your specific business questions.
- **Deeply engage participants:** Use images, audio, or video to capture richer, more authentic feedback.
- **Reach the right audience anywhere:** Get responses from people in over 100 countries, so your insights reflect a truly global perspective.
- **Make confident decisions faster:** Access same-day feedback to validate messaging, sentiment, or creative ideas without waiting weeks.
- **Be confident knowing your data is protected:** QuestDIY is ISO/IEC 27001 certified, which is a leading standard for information security management. We also use next-generation firewalls, intrusion prevention systems (IPS), data loss prevention (DLP), antivirus technologies.
- **Pay only for what you need:** Choose between flexible subscription plans or on-demand pricing to match your budget and research pace.



Customer Targeting

Zero in on key audience segments to transform your media buying and create effective, focused marketing campaigns.



Portfolio Management

Monitor the performance of your competitors and evaluate potential partnerships with our customer behavior surveys.



Campaign Evaluation

Assess the impact of your advertising through a brand assessment with our real-time brand perception metrics.



Tracking & Benchmarking

Track your brand and products' performance over time via your custom dashboard.

QuestDIY is also designed with the trust factors researchers value most: accuracy, privacy, and explainability. QuestDIY is a self-serve survey and market-research platform that uses generative AI to help with survey creation, question design, analysis, and deployment. Some of its notable features:

- AI-assistant for survey drafting and templated surveys from Harris Poll's researchers.
- Deployment of surveys in 100+ countries.
- Real-time / fast feedback; many studies fielded in a few hours.
- Various question types, multimedia support, translation into many languages.
- Built-in best practices in survey design baked into templates / AI tooling to reduce common errors.

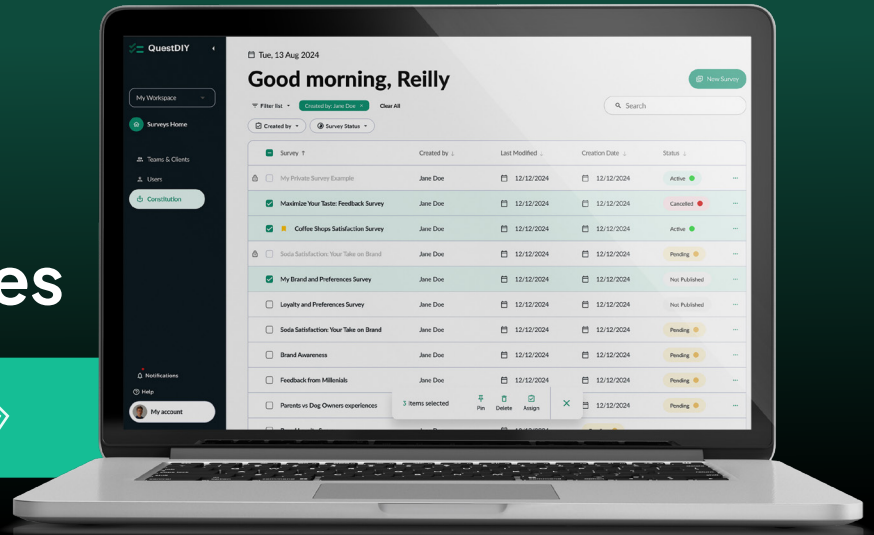
With QuestDIY, researchers can quickly design surveys, test hypotheses, and access real-time insights – all while upholding methodological rigor.

“In 2026 and beyond, the role of the researcher demands agility, speed, and cultural awareness – and QuestDIY delivers just that.” – Gary Topiol, Managing Director, QuestDIY



Create custom surveys in minutes

SCHEDULE A DEMO NOW »



CONCLUSION:

Agility, speed, and cultural awareness

By 2026 and beyond, the role of the researcher will be defined by agility, speed, and cultural awareness. AI is a powerful partner in that journey – a co-analyst that accelerates analysis, surfaces missed insights, and frees professionals to focus on strategy.

Market research is ahead of the curve in adopting AI, with researchers already realizing significant time savings. Early adoption has largely been driven by general-purpose tools like ChatGPT, but the next wave will see teams moving toward dedicated, purpose-built research platforms, with AI built into their core, supported by stronger training and onboarding.

Looking towards 2026-2030, **AI will shift from being a tool to acting as a junior team member** – taking on tasks like insights surfacing, data collection and cleaning, analysis, and visualization. Researchers will increasingly supervise AI agents, ensuring quality, ethics, and business alignment, while **team leads focus on translating outputs into strategy.**

Researchers emphasize that the ideal model remains human-led, AI-supported. By 2030, they expect AI to be an advanced partner – offering generative capabilities, AI-driven data generation, predictive analytics, and potentially cognitive insights – but always underpinned by human arbitration of quality and relevance.

With faster, more efficient tools, teams will not only be able to do more research but also critically assess the impact of AI-driven decisions – ensuring businesses move not just faster, but smarter.

QuestDIY, powered by The Harris Poll, is designed for this future. With AI-driven survey creation, intuitive workflows, and access to same-day insights across 100+ countries, QuestDIY helps research leaders deliver trustworthy results faster – without sacrificing rigor. 

AI doesn't erase the role of the researcher – it elevates it. By embracing AI responsibly, insight professionals can:

- Scale efficiently
- Focus on strategic thinking
- Lead in a world defined by speed and complexity

QuestDIY is built to enable this transformation – amplifying human judgment, surfacing new opportunities, and helping researchers thrive in an AI-first future.

Talk to our team. Discover how agile research tools can help your team scale safely.

Contact us for a demo

APPENDIX

Survey methodology

This research was conducted by QuestDIY among professionals in the U.S. insights and analytics industry. The study was designed to capture how market researchers are currently using AI, their perceptions of its benefits and risks, and expectations for the role of AI in the years ahead.



Sample

- **Base size:** 219 market research and insights professionals
- **Eligibility:** Ages 18+, employed full-time, working in roles related to market research or insights
- **Geography:** United States
- **Fieldwork period:** August 15-19, 2025

Survey design

The research explored:

- **AI adoption and usage patterns** – frequency, tools used, and growth over time
- **Human vs. AI balance** in current workflows and ideal future states
- **Use cases** for AI in market research, including analysis, reporting, survey design, interviewing, and other tasks
- **Perceptions of impact** on work, careers, and the industry overall
- **Time savings and efficiencies** gained through AI adoption
- **Challenges and risks** such as accuracy, bias, privacy, transparency, and workflow integration
- **Future expectations** for AI capabilities by 2030
- **Researcher skillsets** past, present, and future

Demographics collected included age, gender, industry, job title, tenure in insights, and company profile.

Approach

Respondents completed the survey online via QuestDIY's agile research platform.