MRS Evidence Matters™

Advanced Insights and Analytics Council

The Future of AI-Augmented Research

How will the role of researchers
evolve in an AI-driven world?

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Introduction:
The shifting role of researchers in an AI world

The rapid rise of AI in market and social research is not just changing how insights are generated, it's fundamentally disrupting the industry. This is not a slow evolution but a seismic shift that is redefining the researcher's role. While AI delivers unmatched speed and scale, it still falls short in areas requiring business acumen, cultural interpretation, and deep human insight. We believe the future of research will be shaped by how effectively human expertise and AI-driven capabilities are integrated.

However, this transformation is unfolding unevenly. In-house research teams are shifting toward strategic consulting and insight curation, requiring them to develop new skill sets such as prompt engineering, activation, and controlled use of LLMs to ensure consistency and comparability across projects. Meanwhile, research agencies must fundamentally rethink their value proposition to remain competitive in an AI-driven market.

This paper explores the disruptive impact of AI on research workflows, the critical skills needed for success, and how both in-house and agency researchers must adapt to thrive in this new landscape.

The MRS Advanced Insights & Analytics (AIA) Council

The MRS Advanced Insights & Analytics (AIA) Council is dedicated to helping research professionals navigate the evolving landscape of AI-powered insights. Comprising experts from global brands, research agencies, and academia, the AIA Council's mission is to foster best practices, drive industry collaboration, and shape responsible AI adoption in market and social research.

From execution to strategic leadership

AI is automating many traditional executional tasks across both in-house and agency research teams, shifting the researcher's role toward higher-value functions such as framing the right research questions, contextualising AI-driven insights, and translating data into actionable strategies. However, this is not just an evolution of responsibilities, it is a fundamental restructuring of research workflows and team compositions.

Interpretation over automation

AI can surface patterns, but data does not equal insight. The most valuable researchers will not compete with AI but will instead refine their ability to extract meaning, apply context, and guide decision-making. This is particularly relevant in qualitative and social research, where AI may assist in pattern recognition but currently lacks the depth of human interpretation.

Key skill shifts:
How AI will impact in-house vs. agency researchers

While all researchers will need to adapt, we expect the skills required to differ between inhouse and agency roles. The table below outlines the core skill shifts and how we believe they will manifest in each setting:

Skill	In-house Researchers	Agency Researchers
AI literacy & data fluency	Must critically assess AI-generated insights before making strategic recommendations.	Must ensure AI-powered methodologies maintain data integrity and transparency.
Critical thinking & synthesis	Focuses on translating AI findings into business or policy impact.	Must demonstrate how AI-enhanced research delivers superior insights, not just faster outputs.
Ethical stewardship & bias mitigation	Responsible for ensuring AI aligns with brand values and ethical guidelines.	Must audit AI-generated insights for hidden biases before delivering findings to clients.
Prompt writing & collaboration with AI developers & data scientists	Requires strong prompt writing to extract the best outputs from AI tools, and acts as an internal bridge between insights, data science, and business teams.	Works with tech partners to refine AI methodologies for client projects and must stay up to date with changes in systems and tools while avoiding treating AI as a 'quick fix'.
Influence & storytelling	Must distil AI-driven insights into compelling business or policy recommendations.	Needs to articulate AI-enhanced insights in a way that resonates with diverse client needs.

The reality:
AI's impact on research headcount

AI is fundamentally reshaping research teams, reducing traditional execution-heavy roles while creating demand for new strategic and AI-integrated expertise. Execution-focused tasks like data processing, charting, and basic synthesis are increasingly automated. As a result, teams will likely shrink at the junior level, requiring fewer analysts and coordinators to perform operational tasks.

However, this shift is not purely about job loss, it is about the redistribution of responsibilities. The demand for mid-to-senior researchers who can synthesize AI-driven insights, apply strategic thinking, and influence decisions will increase. Research leaders must determine how to reinvest AI-driven efficiency gains, whether by scaling back teams or reinvesting in higher-order research capabilities.

The 'AI will replace researchers' myth reframed

The biggest misconception is that AI will eliminate the need for human researchers. While specific roles like transcribers, desk researchers, and coordinators may be restructured or automated, the core need for human-led research remains.

Instead of wholesale replacement, AI is reshaping the structure of research teams:

- Fewer execution-focused roles as AI takes over repetitive tasks.

- Increased demand for AI-fluent research strategists who can critically evaluate, synthesise, and guide AI-generated insights.

- New hybrid roles emerge, such as AI research auditors and AI-integrated research consultants.

The AI productivity paradox:
More insights, not fewer jobs?

AI can make certain types of research, such as desk research, social media analysis, transcription, workshop write-ups, and synthesis, faster and cheaper. However, how organisations use these efficiency gains will determine their true impact on roles and outcomes. Other industries have shown that automation does not necessarily eliminate jobs, it shifts them toward higher-order work. The same could happen in research: fewer traditional researchers, but a growing need for AI-integrated specialists.

Challenges and risks beyond bias

Beyond bias, one major risk of AI-driven research is the loss of deep consumer or citizen intuition. If AI optimizes based on past data, it risks reinforcing existing trends instead of identifying emerging shifts.

Human researchers remain essential for:

- Spotting cultural weak signals before they become trends.
- Challenging AI-generated outputs when they contradict real-world observations.
- Navigating ethical complexities that AI cannot fully grasp.

Ensuring synthetic respondents reflect real humans. AI tools are only as good as the datasets they are trained on and cannot substitute for audiences they don't understand.

LLMs also increase the volume of content researchers must process. What once was a single line of insight might now become several verbose AI-generated paragraphs, potentially overwhelming researchers and burying the core message. Used poorly, this erodes the magic of insight.

A practical framework for insight teams to adapt

We believe research teams should take a structured approach to integrating AI into their workflows. Below is a practical framework for in-house and agency teams to adapt and build AI capabilities:

Phase 1:
Assess and audit

Begin by reviewing current research processes. Often, integrating AI requires a full revision of messy or outdated workflows. Then, identify where AI is already embedded in research workflows.

For example, Heineken used AI-powered social listening tools to automate the tracking of brand perception across 14 markets, replacing a manual monthly reporting process. This freed up analysts to focus on interpreting market-specific cultural nuances and advising local brand teams.

Phase 2:
Upskill and educate

- Provide AI literacy training for all researchers.
- Develop a shared understanding of AI ethics and bias mitigation.

Phase 3:
Redefine roles and processes

- Shift in-house researchers toward strategic oversight and decision-making. Equip agency researchers with advanced AI-powered methodologies.

For example, Unilever's People Data Centre integrated AI into their consumer insights function, blending machine learning with human interpretation to spot emerging trends faster. AI was used to surface early interest in vegan haircare, which researchers then validated and shaped into product innovation briefs.

(Source: Unilever case study via ESOMAR, 2021)

Phase 4:
Test and learn

- Run pilot studies with AI-assisted methodologies.

- Compare AI-driven insights with traditional research outputs.

For example, Sky Group piloted the use of generative AI to assist with qualitative research analysis, auto-generating theme summaries from video transcripts. Researchers then refined these summaries, significantly accelerating time-to-insight without compromising depth.

(Source: MRS Annual Conference. 2024)

Phase 5:
Establish and optimise best practices

- Define clear guidelines on AI use in research.

- Develop transparent frameworks for integrating AI-generated insights into decision-making.

- Continually refine AI adoption based on learnings.

- Encourage collaboration between AI specialists, researchers, and business teams.

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Conclusion:
A call to action for research leaders

We do not see AI as the end of research roles, it is a revolutionary transformation. However, this shift comes with trade-offs: some roles will shrink, others will transform, and entirely new capabilities will be required.

The future of research is not about choosing between AI and human researchers; it is about mastering their interplay. Research leaders must actively shape how AI is integrated, deciding where human oversight is critical, how to develop ethical frameworks, and what new skills to cultivate.