

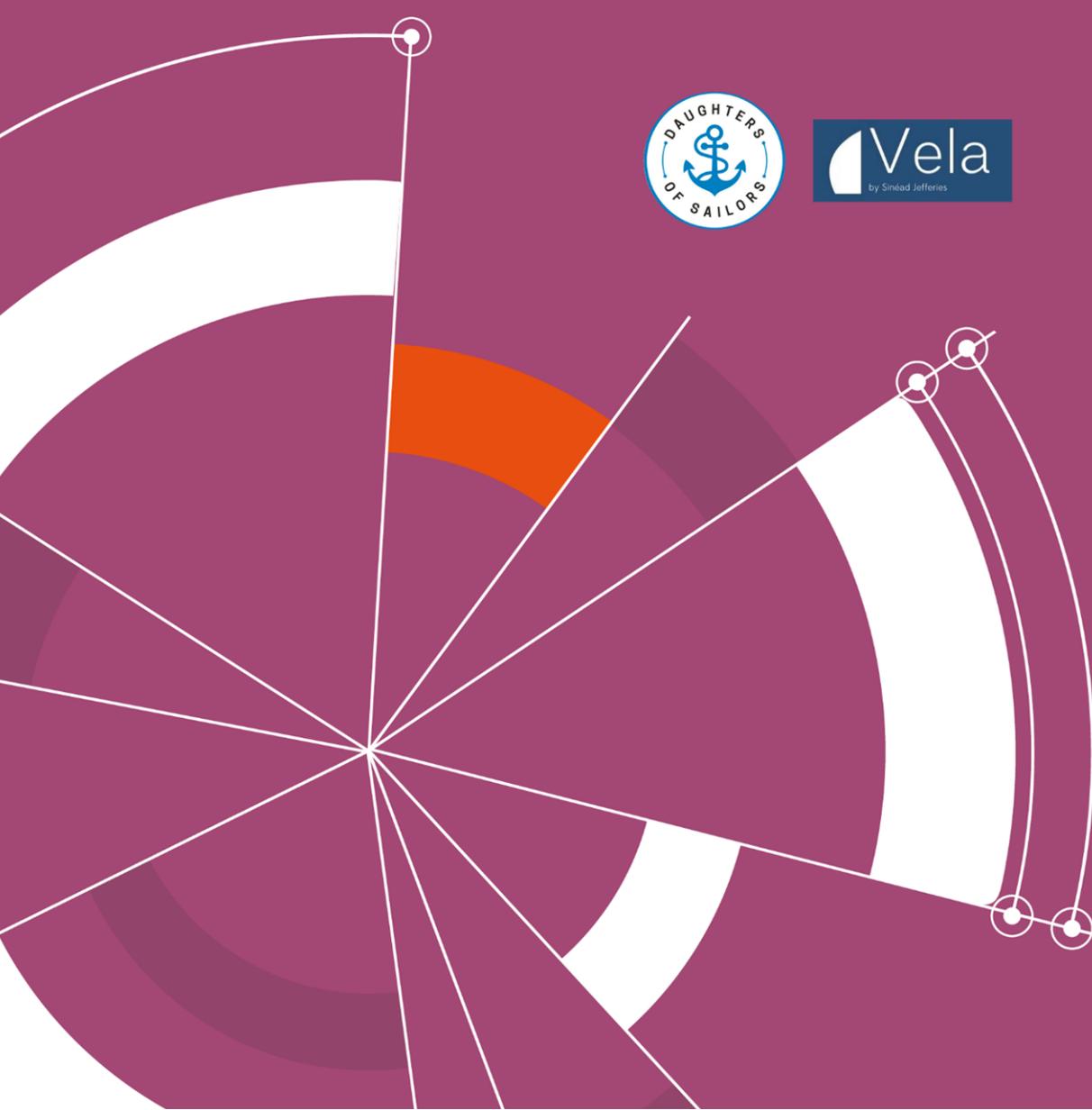


Report

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# RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT IN THE RESEARCH & INSIGHT SECTOR

## Understanding our shortages of talent



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## Comments from MRS CEO

The “War for Talent” from the very start of the cycle (attracting the right junior candidates) to the constant battle to retain the right talent at a cost that is affordable, is consuming so many column inches in the business press. It is a major issue in the conversations I have with CEOs and senior clients as well.

It may, or may not, reassure you that our colleagues across marketing services and across Europe are having the very same discussions.

It is very true that our sector may not have the immediate “kerb appeal” of services like advertising or media, it is also true that we will rarely, if ever, be able to compete with the big consultancies on salary. However, we can do some things to improve our chances in this hyper-competitive jobs market. We can commit to the ethical standards in Inclusion and Sustainability that are increasingly demanded by young people, and we can certainly listen, at the very least, to the emotional messages from this research to understand the shortage of talent and retention and recruitment issues in the Research & Insight sector. However good we may think our systems, leadership processes and commitment to development may be, it is clear we need to get better.

This research is overwhelmingly agency side and the issues that surface are ones which our colleagues in the advertising industry are also struggling with. There will be lessons to be learnt from there. I commend to you the MRS Delphi Group report “[The Insight Alchemist](#)” which has much to say on the subject of cultural change and the qualities needed for future success in the sector. The [resources](#) available free to MRS accredited company partners on flexible working and wellbeing are also useful.

My thanks to Vela and Daughters of Sailors as well as the ICG for all their hard work in creating this very important research.

**Jane Frost CBE**

Chief Executive Officer, MRS

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## Comments from MRS Chair

Anyone who has worked in the research & insight sector for any length of time will agree that “It’s all about the people”. The value we bring is in the human intelligence that helps design, interpret, frame, and bring to life the insights that fuel business decision-making and inform public sector policymaking. Our people are – by far – our most precious and valuable asset.

This research has highlighted some critical challenges our people are currently facing, and therefore that all of us are facing as a sector. That there is huge demand for people to fill insight roles at the moment points to a vibrant and thriving research world. That there are not enough people to fill them is worrying. In conversations with people at all levels and working in different types of company, this research highlights a number of sector-wide issues that need to be examined and addressed.

Yes, every employer has its own responsibilities and its own priorities when it comes to being a place that people want to work. But there are themes that run beyond that, and I think it is important that, through MRS, we use our collective brainpower, energy and determination to identify the best practices, the new ideas and the support and resources that are needed to ensure we have a stream of new and exciting talent entering our workplaces – from all walks of life and at all stages of their careers – and that they find this an enriching and rewarding place to stay and work.

**Sinéad Jefferies**

Founder, Vela

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## Introduction

With unprecedented levels of vacancies across the sector, MRS, working with Daughters of Sailors, embarked on an exploratory qualitative research project to understand the underlying issues and identify potential solutions to the talent challenges. This work comprised a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with people across the sector, focusing primarily on the supply-side, including company CEOs, HR & Resourcing managers, executives at all levels and in different sizes of company, as well as those who have recently decided to leave employment to either freelance within the sector, or leave the research & insight sector altogether.

It is a qualitative sample, so cannot be said to be fully representative of the sector, but the sample sought to include the views of a wide range of companies and experiences. The findings do not reflect the experiences of employees in all organisations, however given the recurrence of similar themes across the sample, it is clear that the issues leading to challenges in the sector are fairly widespread. Feedback on the initial top-line report also suggests the themes identified resonate broadly and were recognised by many in the sector. It is therefore important to look at these issues in terms of the impact on the sector as a whole and to use the findings to identify ways to make this sector a great place to work for everyone.

This report sets out the broader details of the issues and the challenges, as reported by those interviewed, and seeks to explore potential solutions to address these. What's clear is that there is no one solution to the challenges faced and for some of the issues identified there are no 'magic wand' remedies. In the words of one participant, some of the solutions will be found by engaging with employees and sometimes small changes can make a big difference.

*"Listen to your employees and then try to change a bit of what's wrong - if everyone did that we'd be in a better position. Sometimes small changes can make a big difference ... and often not difficult to implement"*

**(AD – Freelancer, previously in agency)**

Other solutions will require a greater level of commitment and change, but irrespective of the magnitude of the actions required, coming together, and working on these challenges as a united sector, will be fundamental to addressing them.

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## Context

Organisations across many sectors, particularly in white-collar, office-based sectors such as consultancies, advertising, PR, etc, are facing challenges with recruitment and resourcing. As yet, there is little evidence that these challenges are subsiding quickly as life returns to 'normal' and people return to offices and/or hybrid working patterns.

There has been much press coverage of 'The Great Resignation' with apparently high levels of job dissatisfaction, and unhappiness with company cultures, leading to employees feeling they have had enough and moving on.

Although some of the findings emerging from this research are concerning, it is clear this is not a situation facing our sector alone – however, it does not mean that specific action cannot be taken to look at the issues being faced, and start identifying actions that could be taken

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## Overall state of play

There is a general sense within the supply-side that not everyone is in a good place, with some employees not feeling positive and happy in their jobs. Many employees who took part in the research reported that they, and others in their workplace or wider network, are feeling fatigued, over-worked, and fed up. Indeed, beyond fatigue, mentions of stress and burnout were relatively frequent among the sample. Employees believe that long working hours have long been the status quo within the sector, and that this is not driven by the pandemic, but that remote working and insufficient resource have pushed it to new levels and to some extent hidden the problem.

Lack of adequate resource within teams also means that participants don't feel they are doing the job they 'should' be doing – either more senior executives stepping down to pick up the slack where there is a lack of junior support, or junior executives having to do things they don't feel they are ready for or have had adequate training on. Supply-side employers are concerned about the impact on their teams in terms of existing team members being stretched, but also acknowledge the growing importance of flexibility as a core requirement and having to change their approach accordingly.

All told, the issues and challenges are having a significant and varied impact on businesses, not least of which are growth, with recruitment moving from a business-as-usual operation to a key strategic issue, and the quality of work delivered.

Behind this overall state of play lie four key challenges for the sector to address going forward:

- The lasting impact of the pandemic
- A perceived culture within the supply-side of excessive working hours and unreasonable demands on staff
- Challenges with recruitment and resourcing gaps
- Perceptions that the financial rewards are lacking, in both absolute and relative terms

This section of the report explores each of the challenges in turn, but of course these are all linked in many respects, and it is this linkage that has exacerbated the issues faced.

## 1. The lasting impact of the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on businesses across our sector, and the whole of the UK economy:

- Wholesale shift to remote working
- Reduced revenues – often significantly reduced
- Employees being placed on furlough
- Organisations making redundancies
- Organisations unable to continue to operate

It was clear from the accounts of participants' experiences that this combination of factors impacted working lives in so many ways, although the experiences were not homogenous. Depending on personal circumstances, the type of role and their employers' initial and on-going reactions to the pandemic, the impact was felt in different ways. The common theme, however, was the consequences it brought to people's working and personal lives. For many there were benefits, often unforeseen, in the ability to work from home and to take a more flexible approach to their working life. However, for others the combination of pandemic effects had negative consequences.

Many of those interviewed believed that the company they worked for had, in a sense, panicked and either furloughed too many people in the first instance or made too many redundancies (or both). This immediately put pressure and strain on those who remained in employment and in some cases created an atmosphere of resentment. In short, they were working longer hours, knowing they had colleagues who were furloughed, therefore not working, and yet still being paid (albeit at a reduced amount). In some cases, where salaries had been cut across the board, those furloughed were earning the equivalent of those who had not been furloughed. It was noted that in some cases this had changed the working culture and created hitherto unknown divisions and tensions.

*"Those not furloughed felt resentment as they didn't get a break. This has impacted on the company culture and brought in a divide not previously there."*

### **(Senior Director - small agency)**

The initial uncertain financial and business outlook for supply-side businesses was, according to some participants, the reason behind

employers wanting to create efficiencies and work to get more from less. Ultimately, however, this impacted on the quality of work and left employees feeling too stretched and over-worked. For many, it was only personal pride and not wanting to let clients down that kept them focused and working long hours.

*"In the end it all works out because we want to deliver a perfect report/project. In the end this is because this is what we want to do, and this is what we want to achieve."*

**(AD – Freelancer previously in agency)**

Whilst understanding that it was extremely difficult to predict how the pandemic and lockdown would impact business demand, some participants were critical that their employer did not react quickly enough when it became clearer that business confidence was returning and that there was a significant uptake in opportunities and work. They felt that more could have been done to bring people back from furlough earlier as well as to retain employees rather than following through with redundancies.

*"People are leaving small agencies for large, leaving companies that handled the pandemic badly for those that handled it well. People could have been furloughed for less long. We could have done with fewer people furloughed. All our expertise was furloughed, we lost the knowledge, there were things we needed help with. People have retired or gone freelance."*

**(Research Manager – medium agency)**

For others, notably more junior executives, the pandemic created opportunities because they had to step up and take on roles and tasks typically carried out by more senior members of the team. They weren't expecting to take on such responsibility so soon in their careers and whilst pleased they were not placed on furlough, the experience created challenges and strains.

*"I am glad I wasn't furloughed. [But] I have gone too quickly, taken responsibility I'm not ready for and everyone I can learn from is gone. I am now integral to a company that has lost lots of people. I need the occasional day off to recover."*

**(RM – medium agency)**

Although not explicitly voiced by the majority, some participants questioned how ethically their employer behaved during the height of the pandemic. For some it seemed like their employer was making decisions that were solely focused on the bottom line, rather than thinking about the impact on employees. In this context, perceptions of 'profit before people' started to emerge. That said, there was sympathy expressed for the difficulties of running a business during such uncertain times and a recognition that business had to continue, and difficult decisions made to protect the long-term viability of the organisations. What's important in this respect is how employers in those situations engage with and communicate to employees. The more open and freer flowing the communication was, the better employees felt about the decisions made and the impact on them.

For others it was clear that their employer had strived to put in place actions and policies designed to help with staff welfare and morale. These were generally appreciated, particularly at the start of lockdown, but as time went on, the positive impact of such measures began to wane.

For some, the pandemic, and the experience of working at home, had led them to re-evaluate their life priorities. Within this context some employees in the sector took the decision to either leave entirely or move to a freelance way of working. Whilst this was a largely positive experience for those making that decision, for those left behind the impact was felt.

*"There have been some people who have been here a long time who have just had enough and left. Some fairly significant people have left and that's had a big impact. Key people who you wouldn't want to lose."*

**(Research Director – medium agency)**

## **2. A perceived culture of excessive working hours and unreasonable demands on staff**

Regardless of level, a prominent and consistent theme throughout this research was the culture of long working hours in the sector, particularly notable for those working supply-side. Whilst this was sometimes raised in the context of the pandemic, it was very clear that excessive hours are not new and not just simply a consequence of the pandemic. During the pandemic, however, the hours employees were working became somewhat invisible, and people often felt isolated, rather than having the support of colleagues around them.

### **2.1 Experiences**

Reports of having to work 60–70-hour weeks were not uncommon, and the general consensus was that working hours have increased over time and that the situation has become normalised. Working hours are not restricted to Monday – Friday with reports of having to work over the weekend simply to catch up and prepare for the week ahead.

*"I don't like the very long hours, it's far more than I am paid for, my work life balance is not good, and I have no time to produce work that I am proud of. I am constantly spinning plates; we are massively under-resourced."*

**(RE - medium agency)**

*"I found myself not going out [when I was] working from home. I haven't seen anything. I can look out of the window and see everything is happening and I am sitting in here. It's dark when I am not working, even in the summer."*

**(Senior Freelancer – left agency to work freelance)**

*"It is unacceptable to run on a system where it is expected everyone will do 12-hour days on a routine basis ... I am having, at a relatively young age, essentially a mid-life crisis about jacking my whole career in and that is the fault of the industry."*

**(Senior Freelance researcher - previously an even mix of agency and client roles)**

This 'normalisation' of long hours manifests itself in many ways, but the most concerning is a perception among some executives that there is an expectation from employers and line managers that they will be available to work whenever needed.

*"The expectation is that I am always available, I am asked to do something at 6pm and have it ready for 8am the next day."*

**(RE – medium agency)**

*"I am quite strict and believe in a work-life balance but then you think, God, I am getting behind because you have so much work - far more than you can fit into a 45-hour week, so then the panic starts - oh my God, I am behind on everything I need to do."*

**(AD – Recent Leaver from sector)**

As noted previously, the long hours culture was a key theme across many of the interviews conducted, and the view held by many was that this is a sector-wide issue and not limited to a few employers. The belief that 'it's the same everywhere' in some cases acted as a barrier to thinking about moving to another company.

*"They've gone on to other companies and are still working 50-60 hour weeks."*

**(Mid-level – Leaver)**

*"At the moment I don't believe it's different in any agency."*

**(AD – Leaver)**

## **2.2 Why the long hours?**

The drivers of long working hours are diverse and not consistent across businesses. For some, it's about the day-to-day challenges of getting the 'nuts and bolts' right so research projects run smoothly, for others it's more about the culture of the business and a belief that their leaders never say 'no' to new business opportunities or client demands.

For many of those interviewed there was a belief that leaders were very reluctant to decline opportunities to pitch for new business. Whilst there was a recognition that building the new business pipeline was important

and the financials must work, they were frustrated by how this was being managed. Some reported that a key driver of long working hours was spending time writing proposals and pitching for new business the agency was highly unlikely to win.

*"I'm not sure the business (senior management) managed the level of demand we were experiencing. There has been a huge amount of pressure to sell. I understand they need to think about the financial security of the business, but the balance isn't right. A lot of commercial pressure, there is a very strong sales culture here. We're owned by private equity."*

**(Research Director – medium agency)**

*"Senior leaders I worked for were heard saying 'I don't care how busy they are - get them working'."*

**(Senior Freelance researcher – previously an even mix of agency and client roles)**

However, in contrast to this, the view of some senior leaders interviewed as part of the research was that they are starting to become more selective about which new business opportunities to go for and only dedicating resource and focus on those supply-side businesses had a realistic chance of winning and/or that they have adequate resource for.

Beyond the work going into sales and new business there was a belief among some that, regardless of executive capacity, supply-side organisations are unwilling to decline new work. This results in a 'juggling' exercise where executives are very stretched with heavy workloads, or are moved from one project to another to fit new work in. Some believe that the consequence of this is not just longer working hours but that levels of service and delivery to clients suffers as a result. For many executives, ensuring that clients receive a high standard of work is key and will drive them to work the longer hours.

*"We take on more and try to figure it out."*

**(AD – Freelancer)**

*"Agencies tend to forget about employees in terms of what was agreed on, what types of projects you are working on. At the end of the day, you find yourself jumping on this project, jumping on that project - helping out there."*

### **(AD – Leaver)**

For others, the reasons behind the long working hours were more rooted in ways of working and in particular the amount of time that is spent on the more manual parts of the research process, that could potentially be automated.

*"There are so many things I feel can't be fixed because in many ways [AGENCY] is a bit broken because they don't have the tech to stop all the manual stuff. It takes so long for people, and I don't see how that can improve."*

### **(Senior Director – Leaver)**

Others pointed to the amount of time they spend in meetings, some of which were not necessarily needed or productive. These meetings soaked up valuable hours and were a driver for having to work late. For some, the pandemic and lockdown had significantly increased the time spent in virtual meetings – much of this was focused on checking-in on employees, managing workloads and a sense that what might have been a five-minute meeting in the office, turned into a half-hour session on Teams.

*"It is so meeting heavy. In a 40-hour week I would probably have 10 hours to actually sit and do work."*

### **(Mid-level Leaver)**

## **2.3 The impact**

The overall impact of consistent and sustained long working hours was one of stress and reports of general fatigue and even burnout. As a result, people are questioning if research is the right career for them and are looking outside the sector. Indeed, amongst those who have either left the sector or are now freelancing within the sector, the key driver behind the decision to do so was to avoid long working hours and a desire to take control of their own working conditions and define their own flexibility.

*"I feel slightly broken by it and am quite scared."*

### **(Senior Freelance researcher – previously an even mix of agency and client roles)**

*"I'm feeling fatigued and fed up."*

**(AD – medium agency)**

*"I am stressed, I finish work at 10pm, cancel plans with friends, am not spending time with my husband. I am very anxious for the first time in my life, I am not normally an anxious person."*

**(RE - medium agency)**

The reasons behind this are clearly multi-layered and there is not one solution to solving a culture of long hours. Where this culture exists, the key to addressing it is to talk to employees and identify what the key drivers and pain-points are. For some, the solutions will be relatively easy to address, for others the reasons are more deep-rooted and will require more of a culture shift and perhaps more radical changes.

Another, often hidden, impact is the challenges faced by line managers who are usually at the coal face of dealing with fatigued, concerned and stressed direct reports. Many in this position do not feel they are adequately trained or experienced in supporting employees who have challenges with burnout and mental wellbeing, and this places a strain on them – in some cases they are experiencing the same feelings as their direct reports but feel they need to hide this in order to be strong and able to support their colleagues. In this respect, better training, coaching and guidance would really be appreciated by line managers.

### 3. Challenges with recruitment and resourcing gaps

The challenges of recruitment and consequent resourcing issues are a main topic of discussion for many sectors of the UK economy at present. The research and insight sector is no exception and discussions with recruiters and employers reveals that the challenges are widespread. In summary, the research sector faces a situation where there are too few good candidates across all levels, a high number of vacancies and no let-up in the demand for excellent research and insight. From the combination of each of these three factors, it's easy to understand that this situation is one significant driver of the long-hours culture.

The shortage of availability of strong candidates is evident at all levels, from junior executives to senior roles. A very notable pain-point is the dearth of Senior Research Executives and Research Managers. During the pandemic, levels of graduate recruitment fell within some organisations, and two years on, the key consequence is a shortage of executives with two to three years' experience. Those who were recruited and retained prior to the pandemic haven't had the same learning and development as those who went before them. A great deal of their research careers has been spent working remotely and they certainly feel that they have missed out on some key aspects of their career development.

*"When it comes to trying to get applicants. Two years ago, we had 40 - 50 applicants per open role. This year we're lucky to get 3 or 4."*

#### **(MD – medium agency)**

*"Even at exec level roles, the level of interest not been what it used to be. Usually, we would have very high levels of interest, this time it hasn't been the case. We're usually awash with letters and applications, but just not this time."*

#### **(MD – medium agency)**

*"We are suffering because of the lack of competent people in the market at a junior level."*

#### **(Head of Research – small agency)**

The impact of the challenges of recruitment was described by some as a vicious circle. In order to deliver to clients, employees must work harder to fill the gaps. For example, a lack of Research Managers is pushing the work in two directions. Firstly, upwards to Research Directors and Associate Directors who are doing more of the day to day, which means

costs on projects go up. Secondly, downwards with a need to lean more on Research Executives and Senior Research Executives and they are feeling the weight of taking too much on.

Not only does this lead to longer working hours, it also means that more experienced researchers are having to fulfil more junior tasks, taking them away from activities that will help them progress. This then can potentially lead to them leaving the business, creating further vacancies that are already difficult to fill. Also, more junior researchers are feeling stretched, being asked to step up and undertake tasks they weren't quite ready for, and don't have either the time to do the training they need or access to the senior people to support them, as they have already left the business.

*"Everyone has had to step down a level to get things done."*

### **(AD - medium agency)**

*"It's frustrating, my time is being spent doing charting that I shouldn't be doing because of lack of resource."*

### **(AD - small agency)**

As with graduate recruitment, a consequence of the pandemic was that other, more general recruitment, was either put on hold or slowed significantly, and there were also redundancies in many organisations within the sector. Uncertainty about the future business outlook dampened confidence and now the general shortage of strong candidates has come at a time when many organisations are trying to deal with the backlog of recruitment needs. Talking to recruiters within the sector it is clear that employers are often looking to hire to fill multiple roles within their organisations – often with more than one vacancy at the same level. Some employers reported that recruitment has now become a key strategic issue, rather than a business-as-usual activity and the responsibility for recruiting strong talent has been passed to very senior employees. Some employers have made changes to the way they recruit, adopting an 'always on' approach. This manifests itself as always being on the lookout for strong candidates and being prepared to scope out a role for someone, rather than starting with a clearly defined role.

From a commercial perspective, there are two key impacts of the challenges of recruitment.

The first is an inability to meet growth targets and the second is the impact on the bottom line of having to pay higher salaries to attract talent. It was noted by many who had responsibility for hiring that candidates' expectations in terms of salary and other benefits were notably higher than

pre-pandemic. In some cases, there were reports of 'gazumping' – in one example a Research Manager was offered £10k more by another supply-side employer.

Not only does this affect overall profitability, it also distorts existing salary bands and can lead to tension with existing employees. For some it raises questions about integrity.

*"We're grappling with issues of integrity when it comes to salaries. We could be offering more money for some roles, but then we end up paying them more than existing staff, or even existing more senior roles. I'm not willing to do that as it's not right, plus it creates problems down the line."*

**(Director – large agency)**

The shortage of strong candidates has changed the dynamic of recruitment. Without doubt it is currently a seller's market with candidates able to exercise greater leverage over a whole range of aspects of the recruitment process.

*"It feels like now it's the candidates interviewing the employer, not the other way around, as there are so many jobs available."*

**(Director – large agency)**

As a result, employers are having to re-think the recruitment process. This can manifest itself in simple ways, for example, re-framing the wording of job descriptions and role specifications to making more radical changes to terms and conditions, re-considering what the essentials are in terms of experience and background, or looking to other sectors to source strong candidates.

As a short-term solution, some agencies have employed freelance researchers to plug resource gaps. In many cases this has been well received and has relieved some of the strain executives were experiencing. There has, however, been some resentment expressed by permanent employees, that freelance researchers can effectively pick and choose which projects they want to work on, work the hours they want and can easily say 'no'. These are the key reasons why executives choose to work freelance in the first instance and the greater visibility in companies of freelance researchers is in part driving the move towards freelance working and greater flexibility.

#### **4. Perceptions that financial rewards are lacking**

The majority of those we spoke to mentioned that the salary levels in the sector are lower than those in other comparable professional sectors. This was felt to be the case both in absolute terms and relatively.

At the absolute level the view exists that the salaries in the sector fall well below those paid in other sectors – including public sector roles within the Civil Service or in private sector companies, and particularly in consultancy.

*"I would get much more money in the Civil Service for what I currently do, I am not fresh out of university, I know what a work life balance should be, I am not willing to sit here."*

**(RE – medium agency)**

*"They need to pay a market rate for what people are doing"*

**(RE- medium agency)**

*"There's nobody out there. I don't think they (agency) are offering enough money. Internal employees are being paid less than those coming in - it's one in one out at the moment - it feels like profit is too much of a priority over people."*

**(RE – medium agency)**

In the relative context, many of those interviewed were making 'hours vs reward' calculations and arriving at the conclusion that, given the number of hours they were working in an average week, the salary and overall package were low.

*"For the amount of work you put in, the sector is not paying enough. When you go into Consulting you know you'll be working 60+ hours but you get the money for it."*

**(AD – Freelancer)**

Comparisons with other sectors is leading some to re-think their careers and consider making a move out of research & insight altogether. A key enabler of this is the general consensus that the skills and experiences gained in the sector are very transferable. There was a confidence that the skills people have developed would be very relevant and desirable in other sectors.

*"I think people working in market research can do a lot of other things because they are used to working under pressure and used to taking on the full project life-cycle from the beginning to the end."*

**(AD – Leaver)**

*"One of the problems is that skills are too transferable ... all those general skills are very transferable."*

**(Director – Leaver)**

*"One of the most helpful things I've done is go to research and then come back to marketing."*

**(Mid-level - Leaver)**

*"I am trying to upskill and learn and move to an environment that values work life balance where I am looked after."*

**(RE – medium agency)**

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## The role of MRS

Throughout the interviews and irrespective of level, there was a widely held view that the MRS has a significant role to play in helping to address the challenges. In particular, leading on raising the profile of the sector, training and development, general sharing of best practice and leading the discussions on the challenges the sector faces and potential solutions.

### Actions and next steps

The research itself, and subsequent discussions with leaders across the sector, point to a number of areas we need to improve. Some of these are for employers within the agency/supply-side to think about and tackle themselves, others would benefit from some cross-sector collaboration and resources.

These are some suggestions that have come out of the research, but there are many other ways that individuals, employers and clients may wish to act and respond to the learnings from this research.

### More effective recruitment into/within the sector

1. Attracting and retaining a wider range of people into the sector – this ranges from school leavers, apprentices and graduates, through to those perhaps making a career switch later on in their career, and those who have left the sector or workplace and want to make a return to research & insight.
2. Changing perceptions and expectations of the right skills and experiences for a particular role when recruiting. Some employers are moving away from traditional CVs to use cognitive testing and other approaches that aren't about meeting explicit criteria but looking for candidates' potential and skills fits instead. This is also a factor in improving the diversity of our recruitment.

## Better workplaces to support retention and reduce work overload

1. Ensuring research supplier workplaces are supportive and rewarding places to be, where people feel valued and appropriately paid for the work they do.
2. Thinking about the right balance between getting the revenues a business needs to survive and thrive, and not overwhelming supply-side staff with endless proposal and pitch writing. Giving staff input into the briefs to respond to, and triaging what comes in, so resource is being used in the most effective way.
3. Clients & suppliers working together to effectively manage expectations and asking/giving what is reasonable. This ranges from not issuing a brief to too many suppliers through to being sensible on timings and what can be delivered within a given budget.

## Thinking differently about career paths

1. Sharing more stories of how people have moved into and within the sector, highlighting alternative routes to the traditional junior executives to director path.
2. Exploring how apprenticeships and placements could be open to people at all levels to allow people to explore new parts of the sector, rather than these only being open at entry-level.

As a result of this research and its findings, MRS is setting up a new programme of work to look at People & Talent across the sector. This will comprise four key workstreams, each of which will have specific areas of focus to drive action and achieve real change. The workstreams proposed are:

- **New & returning talent** which will consider recruitment targets, recruitment communications and channels, broadening out the UK University Roadshow programme and introducing a school's outreach initiative to attract more apprentices and graduates into the sector.
- **Wellbeing** which will review existing resources, such as those provided by the MRS Flex Forum and the Company Partner Service and enhance where necessary to ensure that research practitioners have

the support they need.

- **Professional learning & development** which will review MRS' current training and qualifications provision and oversee the new Market Research Executive apprenticeship programme and identify further apprenticeship opportunities to broaden out the pool of talent attracted to the research sector.
- **Agency culture & leadership** which will identify areas within the supply-side and other sectors where there is good employment practice and staff support and use these examples to identify areas where sector wide improvements can be made. MRS will work with suppliers, across all levels of seniority, to make changes, where necessary, within their businesses to improve supply-side culture and leadership approaches.

**This programme of work will be starting in June 2022.**

Report compiled by Pam Armstrong (Daughters of Sailors) and Sinéad Jefferies (Vela) – MRS Chair.

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