CONTENT MARKETING INSTITUTE®

SEMRUSH

The Invisible Key to Content Success

The Importance of Data Consolidation, Collaboration & Workflow

Biggest Content Challenges of 2018 and How to Address Them

Content has proven to be one of the most powerful marketing tools. However, even the content marketing practitioners that have risen to immense heights in their profession, still have to work hard and strive to make sure the result of their efforts meets both business needs and the expectations of their target audiences.

At SEMrush, we know what it takes to produce and manage large amounts of content. We are also constantly working on the development of a comprehensive toolkit to help content marketers of all skill levels reach their goals with minimal effort. That is why we decided to identify the biggest challenges to highlight the main bottlenecks for content marketers across different stages of the content lifecycle and gain a better understanding of what solutions might help them to overcome those challenges.

We teamed up with the Content Marketing Institute, and our work with them resulted in a research that we are excited to share with you.

The results of this research supported our main hypothesis concerning the issues that hold back content strategists, content writers, editors, project managers, and PR/marketing managers. The Whitepaper below contains our findings and insights on how to address these difficulties at all steps of the workflow.

We plan to use this data to bring our tools to perfection. In addition, we hope this Whitepaper will help content marketers to better understand which part of their workflow can be optimized to make the most of their content.

" New research finds that consolidating the content lifecycle through data, tools and better collaborative workflow may be the most important part of a digital content marketing strategy

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Introduction

The Invisibility of Great Content Marketing Strategy

There is a wonderful quote by Jared Spool, the American writer, researcher and educator on the subject of usability in software design. He said **"good design, when it's done well, becomes invisible. It's only when it's done poorly that we notice it."**

Digital content and marketing practitioners strive for creative and powerful user experiences. If anything, the marketer's job is to make things that stand out in a crowd. Marketers want audiences to notice the content, to click on it, to be impacted by it, and to ultimately be persuaded by it.

The digital marketer's instinct is to make sure that as much of the budget as possible is spent toward things that the audience will see. But a focus on "standing out", especially when combined with limited time, budgets and headcount, can lead marketers to unfortunately deemphasize some of the things that need to be designed well, but don't initially appear to help the brand stand out in

the marketplace of ideas. In other words, in many cases, marketers would rather spend money on the design of the new house, rather than ensuring the plumbing works well.

Content Marketing Institute conducted research in 2017, and found that only 9% of marketers have developed a completely systematic approach to producing, managing, and distributing content. Most marketers (69%) said that while there are **"some systems in place, there is still a lot of manual work."** Further, CMI found that only half (53%) of marketers have any kind of "formal workflow process" for planning, creating and delivering content.

Many organizations are simply not invested in this invisible, yet crucial infrastructure. In CMI's 2017 study, was found that only 17% of Content Marketers felt that their businesses had the right technology in place to manage content marketing efforts. Further, almost half (45%) said that while they "have the tools", they aren't using them to their potential.

The Need for People to Power Technology

A great content strategy is not, however, simply a technology challenge. That "systematic approach" is ultimately a people challenge. At Content Marketing World in 2017, CMI assembled a round table of experts who found that a common understanding and collaboration were one of the biggest challenges to success with content. Carla Johnson, president of Type A Communications and my co-author on the book Experiences: The 7th Era of Marketing put it succinctly. She said **"the first thing I see is people don't agree with what you're trying to accomplish with content marketing. Having a clear and common purpose or mission that everyone is behind and supports is probably the biggest solution I see to overcoming the bottlenecks."**

Additionally, a common access point to data can be the system to drive this common purpose or mission. In a recent study we just conducted at CMI, we found that of the Content Marketers that were strategically aligned with Sales and executives, 79% of them had access to a shared content and data repository. Among those who had low alignment with sales teams and executives, only 55% of them had this shared access.

These ideas of a common understanding, and shared access to data was underlined in an article in Harvard Business Review written by General Electric's Vice Chair Beth Comstock, called **Unleashing the Power of Marketing.** In the article, Comstock talks about how GE created a marketing framework that helped create a unified mission across all the different groups. This mission was created along three dimensions: **"principles (creating a common language and standards, people (getting the right leaders in place), and process (including very specific measures and systems for grading performance)."**

The Challenges to the Design

To be clear, marketers seem to understand there is a need for better collaboration and communication. There is a broad acknowledgement and recognition that marketers need to take more time and invest in the "invisible" infrastructure that can help make a content marketing strategy more successful. In CMI's 2017 study of marketers and content strategy, was found that 66% of marketers said that **"better using technology to manage content as an asset"**

was their primary educational need. Further, 64% said that **"how to build a scalable content strategy"** was the secondary priority in education.

So, if marketers understand that there is a challenge, where should they begin to solve it? This question, led us to design a research project that would help us uncover some of the answers. Specifically, we wanted to know:

Where, specifically, are the challenges with the different parts of the content lifecycle?

SEMrush, the digital marketing toolkit for SEO, PPC, SMM and Content Marketing professionals, – in partnership with The Content Marketing Institute — set out to study the current state of content workflow at the individual practitioner level. We sought to examine the current challenges of a number of internal personas and the content management process. These personas include:

- Content Strategist
- Editor
- PR/Marketing Manager
- Content Writer
- Project Manager

We asked about the specific challenges of each persona at each part of a content strategy workflow.

To accomplish this, SEMrush and CMI designed a survey for these practitioners and fielded it to the SEMrush and CMI Marketing Audiences. For purposes of this research, these personas were defined as individuals who self-identified with the title or function of the persona as indicated.

In particular, in this research we aimed to understand the cross-functional challenges at all steps in the workflow. In short: we wanted to identify the bottlenecks and challenges across the team, and across the workflow - not at just one particular persona or stage. Which tasks are most

time consuming? Which tasks are most challenging? How are topics decided? Who do you collaborate with? What tools are in place? Is automated scheduling in place? What would help you to do your job better?

Our overall findings support the following hypothesis: strategic content marketing is being primarily held back by a lack of shared access to data, and technology that unifies this analysis, and facilitates better internal communication.

In summary: **the invisible design of better access to data, infrastructure and workflow technology will help teams communicate and create a more successful content marketing approach.**

Methodology & Approach to the Research

Methodology & Approach to the Research

In the Fall of 2017, SEMrush, in partnership with CMI, conducted an electronic survey of randomly selected content practitioners from its broader audiences. A total of 1,884 surveys were completed from qualified content practitioners around the world.

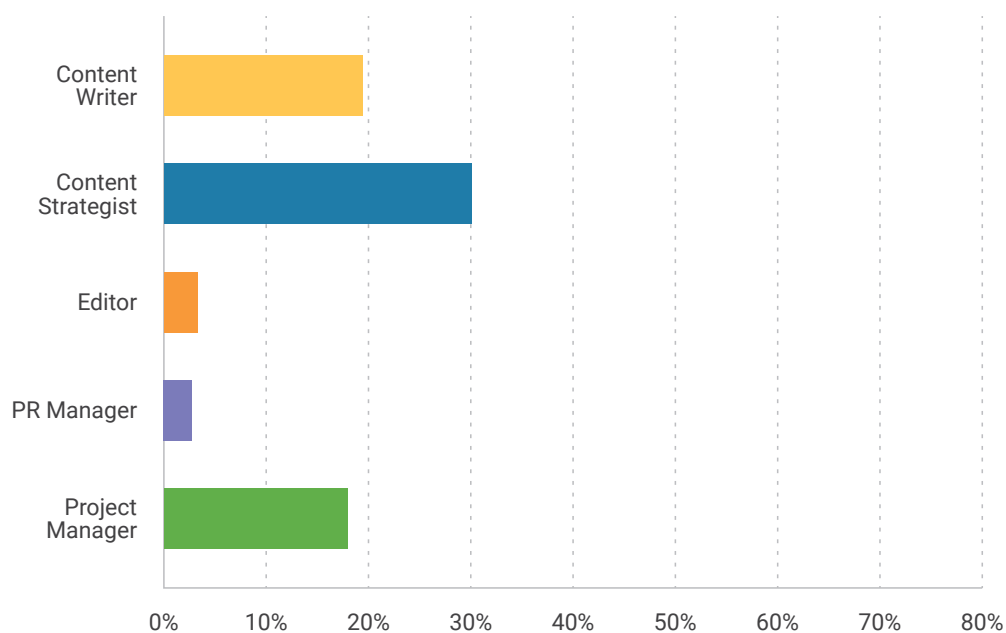The overall makeup of the respondents are reflected in Fig. 1.

Figure 1 - Self-Identified Roles Of Survey Respondents

The Process of Strategic Content

Then, as part of this research, SEMrush utilized a four-step workflow process as a baseline reference point for each of the different personas (Fig 2). This process includes:

Planning & Ideation　　Creation & Optimization　　Distribution　　Perfomance Tracking & Audit

Figure 2 - The Lifecycle Of Content

- **Planning & Ideation** – This includes the editorial planning, the process of researching and choosing topics on which to create content, and the overall strategic planning.

- **Creation & Optimization** – This includes the actual writing and editing process of the content, as well as the design, optimization for search engines, and production aspects of the finished projects.

- **Distribution** – This includes the publication of content to any media property. This could include owned properties such as Email, Web sites, or blogs, as well as the promotion and/or re-use of content across other distribution channels (e.g. other blogs, websites, social media, mobile etc..).

- **Performance Tracking & Audit** – This includes the measurement strategy, and process of looking at the performance of content, as well as auditing the internal processes of the effectiveness of the content strategy.

We have structured this report to examine the findings from the different content practitioner personas across each of these stages.

Findings

Planning & Ideation

Editorial planning and the process of deciding which content to create can be one of the most challenging parts of the content workflow process. And, many times this is the part of the process that gets the shortest straw in terms of investment.

In this particular research, we found that there were some interesting challenges here among the different personas.

When we asked, overall, about the most time-consuming aspect of the content lifecycle, Content Strategists identified **"creating a content plan"** as the top answer. Just over 36% of the Content Strategists said that planning was the most time-consuming part of their effort across the entire process (Fig 3). PR/Marketing Managers seemed to agree, saying that **"deciding what to write about"** was the second highest time-consuming task, with 26% mentioning it.
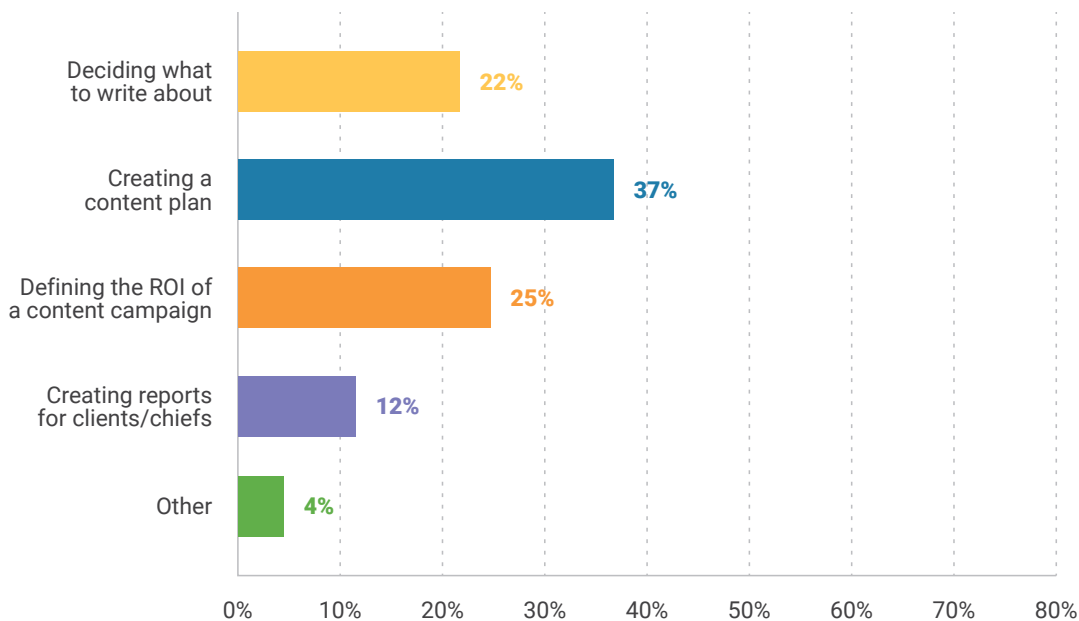

Figure 3 - Most Time-Consuming Tasks For Content Strategists

Project Managers defined "planning and resource management" as the most challenging of their tasks - just over 42% mentioned it as being their biggest challenge.

The Content Strategist is certainly the role one would assume would lead and/or manage the Planning and Ideation stage. And, when we examined this a bit closer, we revealed an interesting gap between the most **time-consuming** task vs. the most **challenging** aspect of being a Content Strategist.

When we asked Content Strategists what their most time-consuming task was, as mentioned previously **"creating a content plan"** was mentioned the most often at 36% (Fig 3). However, when we asked about the most "challenging" aspect of being a content strategist, **"creating a content plan"** was actually among the lowest responses, with only 12.6% mentioning it as the biggest challenge. Interestingly, here, **"developing the content pieces that resonate with target audiences",** and **"developing an ROI plan"** were the top two "most challenging" responses by far at 33% and 25% respectively (Fig 4).
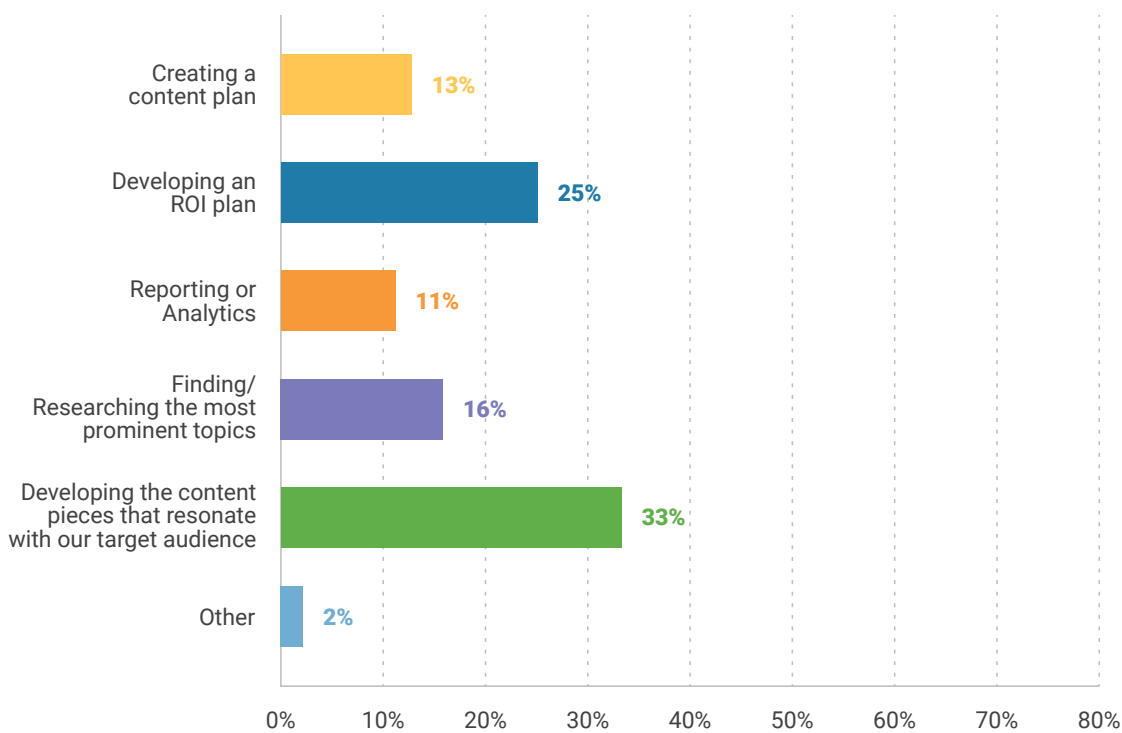

Figure 4 - Most Challenging Tasks For Content Strategists

COMMENT: These top three most challenging tasks at the planning stage can be summarised in one point - it can be difficult to guess how effective and useful content is going to be and whether it will help in achieving the desired goals. Despite content planning and ideation being partly a creative process, the importance of access to consolidated data for content marketers, which can help them to remove the guess-work and analyze their own and their colleagues' previous activities, is undeniable. And this analytical element, unlike the creative part, is usually the most difficult one due to the lack of consolidated and relevant data.

These results suggest that there may be an opportunity for those Content Strategists that are tasked with leading the Planning and Ideation portion of the content lifecycle to share some of the planning aspects. There may be a higher need for understanding and sharing of the overall content planning tasks, so that the Strategists can spend more time determining business goals and researching/developing the content pieces that will resonate with their target audiences.

Content Strategists should ask themselves if there might be a mechanism to communicate and/or collaborate some of the content plan development with their colleagues, so that they might be able to balance their overall work and priorities to getting to better content.

This brings us to the second part of the content lifecycle.

Creation & Optimization

The content creation and optimization stage is where content is written, edited, designed and ultimately produced for publication. Over the last few years, we have certainly seen brands try to focus on a more qualitative vs quantitative approach to the production of content.

The roles that typically have responsibility for the creation and optimization of content are, of course, the Editors and the Content Writers.

Generally speaking, across the roles, we found that the average number of content pieces that are being produced on a monthly basis was somewhere between 6 and 15 pieces. The second highest answer was between 3-5 pieces on a monthly basis.

When asked about their biggest challenge, almost half of the Content Writers noted that their biggest challenge was **"finding a balance between the creative element and search optimization in content".** And, further, almost four out of ten (37%) said that **"understanding the target audience and its problems"** were the most difficult part of content creation (Fig. 5). Editors, in its turn, mentioned "editing drafts" as their main time-consuming task.
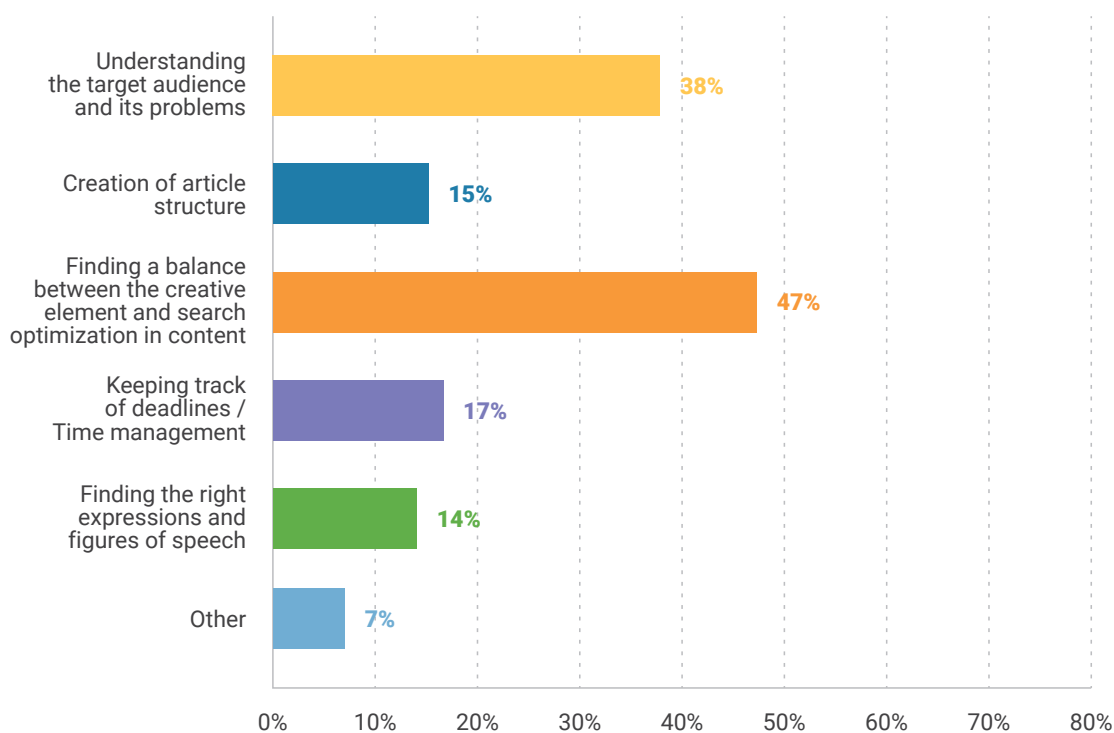
Figure 5 - Most Challenging Tasks for Content Writers

We then examined with whom the above mentioned interact most often, and discovered that a lot of "collaboration" happens between different team members. Almost half of the Editors defined "Content Writers" and "Designers" as persons they collaborate with the most often - 48.6% and 24.3% respectively. And for the Content Writers these people are "Content Strategists" - 27.5%, "Project Managers" - 24.9%, and "SEO Specialists/Analysts" - 23.8% (Fig. 6).
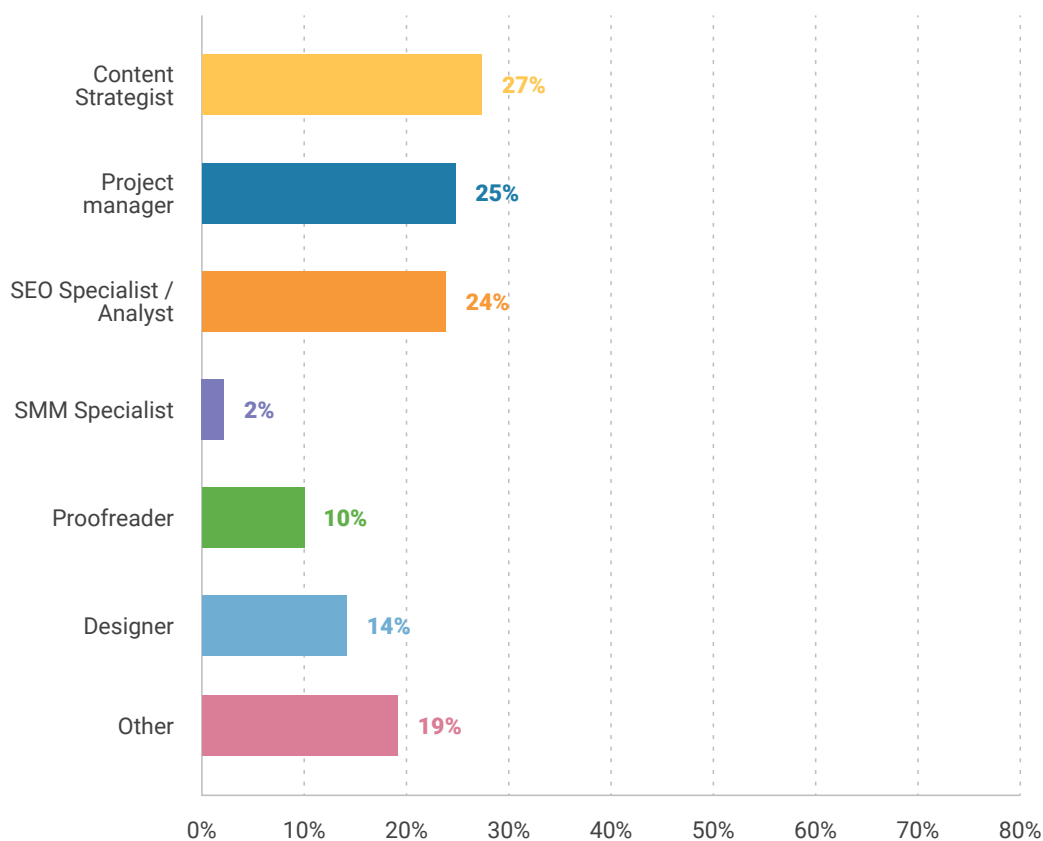

Figure 6 - Most frequent collaborations

COMMENT: Content is one of the main factors that determines your position in Google's search results. This leaves content marketers with no choice but to balance a creative approach with the requirements of the search engines in writing a good piece of content. The secret to success lies beyond just traditional keyword research. First, it requires a deeper analysis of audiences' interests in particular topics and, most importantly, questions they ask about them. Second is an understanding of how to structure a content idea and what vocabulary to use that can both influence position in Google and resonate with a target audience. Third is paying attention to the semantics used in texts, as for some time Google has taken into account the meaning of the whole sentence, not just particular words, and prioritises content that is relevant to people's interests.

In addition, content pieces/projects usually require a team of 2-3 people and it takes time to make sure that everyone is following the deadline, and on the same page in terms of the goal of the content piece/project.

All of the above mentioned requires consolidation in terms of data analysis and the work of different team members. These are challenges that would almost assuredly be better addressed in a more collaborative Planning and Ideation phase, at which are revealed such things as audiences' interests, what type of content resonates most and other valuable insights. So the goal is to create a system of communication and consolidation that can enable more effort toward understanding the target audience, finding the SEO balance, and clarifying the editorial focus for the content writers.
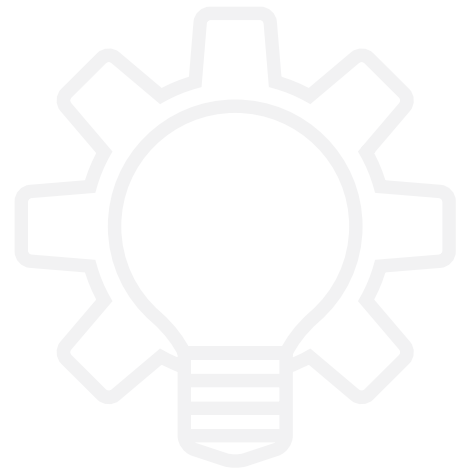
Distribution

Publishing and distributing content across channels remains one of the biggest challenges for content practitioners. Many businesses are still trying to determine the best strategies for this. In fact, in CMI's yearly Content Marketing Research, "Content Promotion/Distribution" is the second highest activity that businesses still outsource.

In this particular research, we found some interesting insights, especially when it came to using content on external distribution channels. The PR/Marketing Manager role is the one most likely to lead this, and when we ask how they find resources (media/blogs) for publishing their content, the highest percentage by far was to **"monitor what media/blogs are writing about my industry"** (Fig 7). Almost three-quarters of the PR/Marketing Managers use this method to find resources to publish their content.

Track where my competitors publish their content — **31%**
Monitor what the media/blogs are writing about my industry and make a list of the most relevant — **74%**
Target familiar media even if they are not direct contacts — **14%**
Analyze what resources performed best during the previous campaign — **50%**
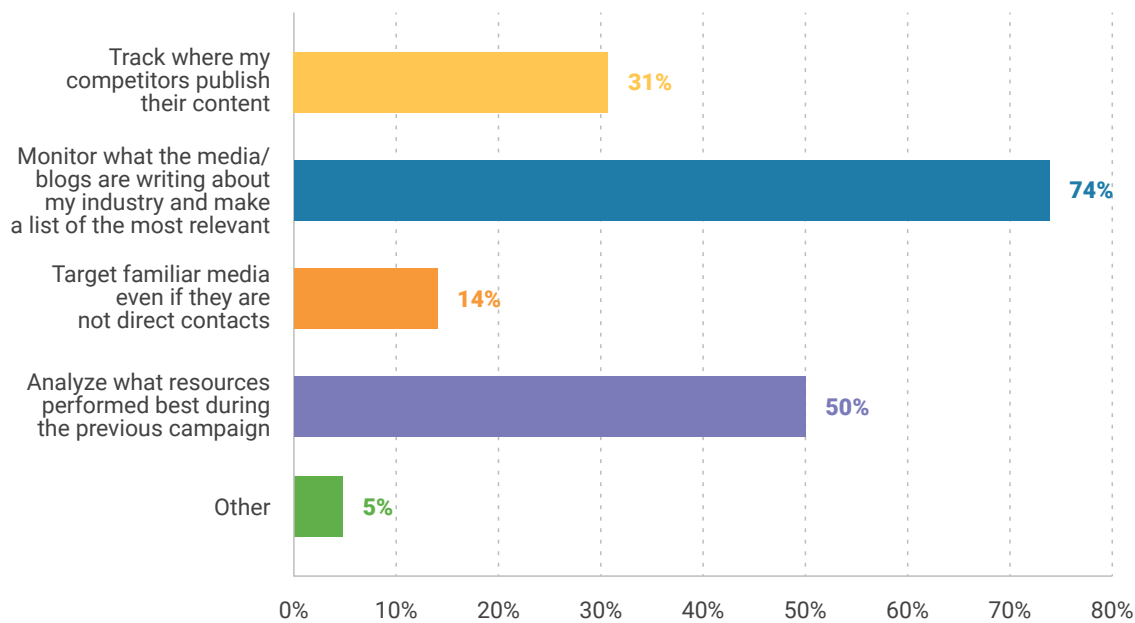Other — **5%**

Figure 7 - How PR/Marketing Managers Find External Content Platforms

Then, the second highest consideration was to "analyze what resources performed best in a previous campaign". Almost half of the PR/Marketing Managers are using this technique to determine which resources to publish content to. Interestingly, only 30% are actually tracking where competitors are actually publishing and using that as a resource to target their content.

When we asked how these PR/Marketing Managers evaluated the authority of the resource they were planning to pitch for this external content, the top two answers were tied in priority. Determining the source's **"brand reputation"** and the **"estimated monthly traffic"** were equally important for these content practitioners to evaluate the source's authority (Fig 8).
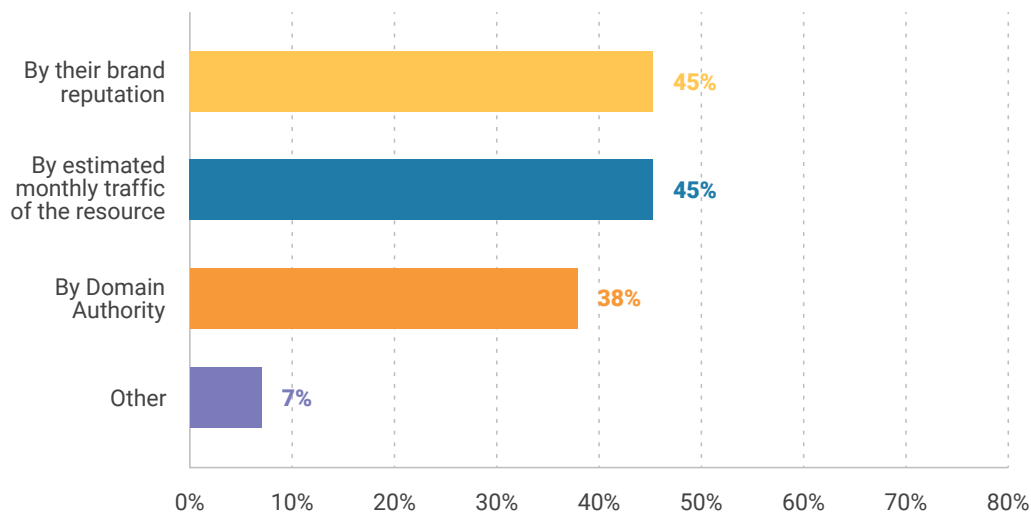
Figure 8 - How PR/Marketing Managers Evaluate The Authority Of An External Resource

Among these PR/Marketing Managers, when we asked what consumed the most time for them, interestingly **"defining ROI"** and **"deciding what to write about"** were the two largest tasks for them at (30% and 26% respectively). **"Finding a place to publish content"** was only mentioned by 19% of the PR/Marketing Managers as being a time-consuming task (Fig 9).
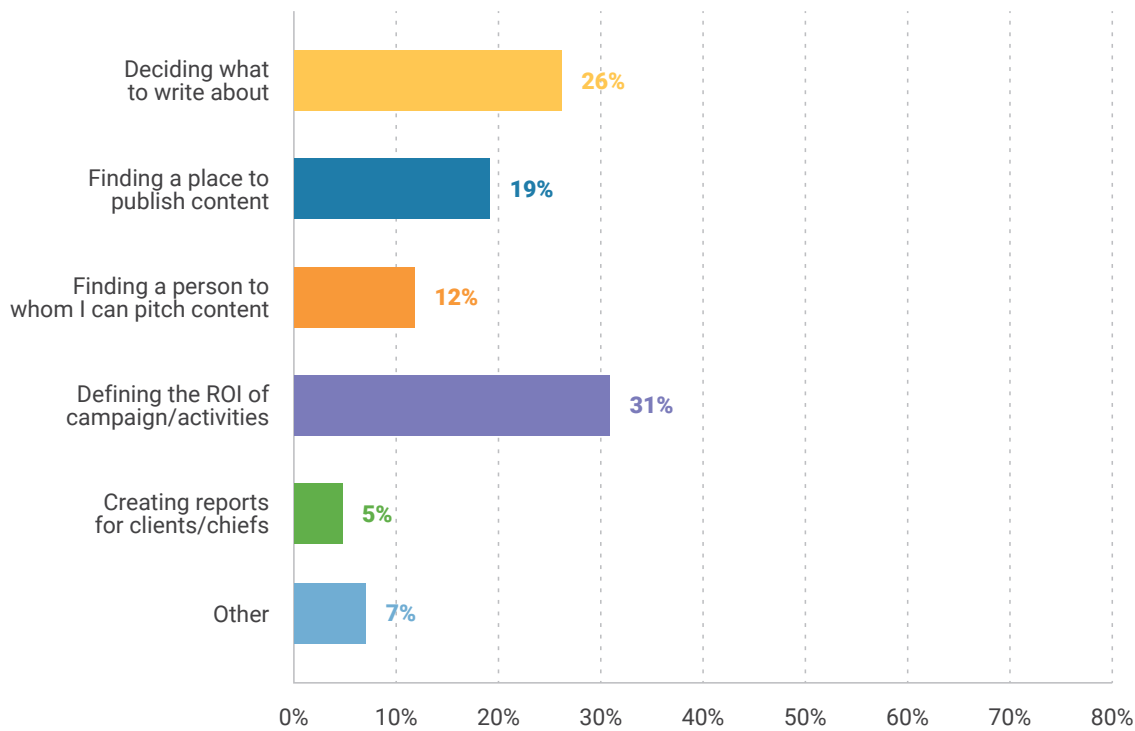
Figure 9 - Most Time-Consuming Tasks for PR/Marketing Managers

Considering these challenges, we also wanted to establish whether PR/Marketing Managers cooperate on these tasks with other team members, and what are their roles. The statistics showed us that PR/Marketing Managers communicate most often with "Marketing Analyst/Researcher" at 38%, followed by "Content Writer" at 30,9%; the third is "Content Strategist at 28.6%" (Fig. 10).
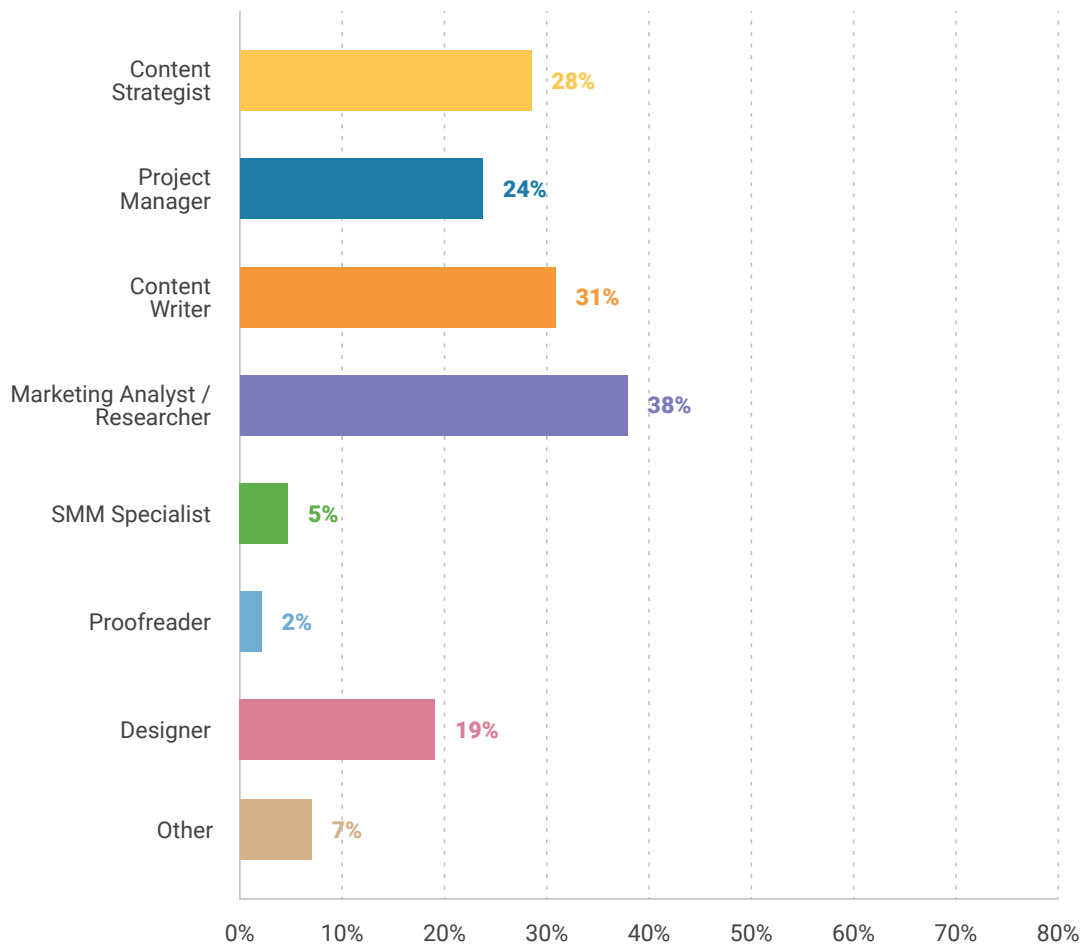

Figure 10 - Most frequent collaborations

COMMENT: Content distribution requires smart analytics and the evaluation of different resources' potential, as well as planning which content will work best for a particular resource and its audience. This means that content marketers need to process a lot of data and information to make a final decision about where to publish content, what content it should be and what should be the ROI of the content. If content professionals can access a "single source of the truth" when it comes to the audience's interests and relevant resources, they may be able to shorten the time needed to analyze the best channels.

Moreover, at this workflow stage there may be a big opportunity for closer collaboration with other team members, like Content Strategists and Marketing Analyst/Researcher during the Planning and Ideation phase, as well as with Content Writer during the Creation & Optimization phase to save these PR/Marketing Managers effort in terms of where they are spending their valuable time.

And measuring the output of that valuable time brings us to the last phase of the content lifecycle.

Performance Tracking & Audit

We at CMI have found that year after year, measuring performance and results is truly the most challenging content task facing most businesses today. In the 2018 version of CMI's yearly research, we found that only 19% of content marketers rated their alignment of metrics and goals as "excellent" or "very good".

As we mentioned earlier in the report, Content Strategists mentioned **"developing an ROI plan"** as being one of their biggest challenges. Similarly, among the PR/Marketing Managers, **"defining the ROI of campaign/activities"** was the most time-consuming task of everything the PR/Marketing Managers are doing.

When we asked Content Writers if they personally monitored the performance of their content an overwhelming 82% said "yes".

We then dug a bit deeper and asked what, specifically, organizations tracked as part of their overall strategies. Everything from website traffic, to number of leads, to search engine positioning and even social shares and bounce rate ranked in priority.

While "Traffic" was the number one success metric (49.1%), number of shares/likes across social (31.2%) and "position of content in search engines" were also high in priority (24.9%). success metrics (Fig. 11).
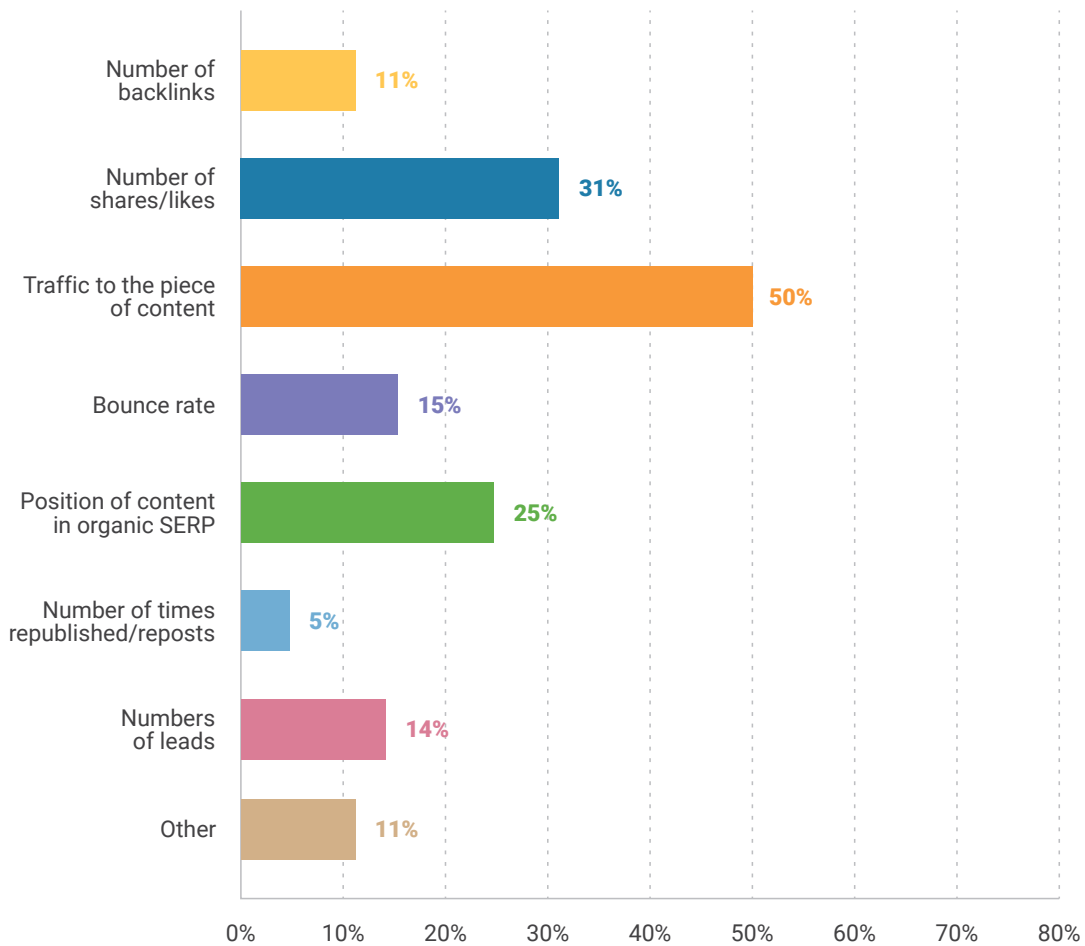

Figure 11 - Content Performance metrics tracked most often by Content Writers

COMMENT: The conclusion here seems to be that that content performance, and ROI, is something that almost every person on the team cares about. And interestingly, these success metrics tend to come from disparate measurement systems. As part of deepening the collaboration and sharing of results, companies could begin to look for systems that can aggregate these data into one dashboard, accessible to the entire team.

Which brings us to a possible solution.

Unified Content Collaboration and Planning

Unified Content Collaboration and Planning

As we said in the introduction to this report, an investment in designing a well-structured collaboration and governance process may be an invisible investment. In fact, the better designed it is, the more invisible it may be.

However, this investment may be the most important you make in creating a successful strategic content function in your business (Fig 12).
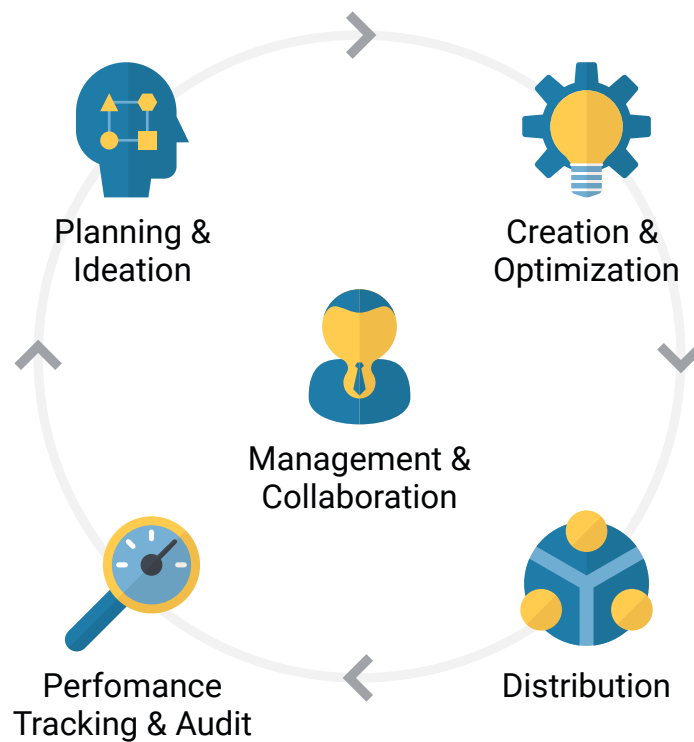

Figure 12 - Content Marketing Strategic Management Lifecycle

In CMI's 2018 yearly research, we asked marketers to rate their project management flow from concept through to completion. Only 36% rated their project management and collaboration as "very good" or "excellent".

However, investing in this collaborative approach can be invaluable. Forrester Research recently conducted an independent study that found that the economic impact of a workflow process platform resulted in a "three-year ROI of 176 percent, and a net present value of just over $1 million with a payback period of 10.5 months."

In this research, we discovered some interesting insights when it came to collaboration. When we asked the different roles with whom they collaborated, there was a large cross-functional need. Put simply, everybody needs to collaborate and communicate with everyone across all parts of the content lifecycle.

Across the board, from Content Strategist, to Project Manager, to Content Writer, to Marketing Analyst, Social Media Specialists, Proofreaders and Designers, they all had needs for collaboration with every role and across every part of the content lifecycle.

Additionally, access to information is extremely important. Data that is siloed, or inaccessible because it is contained in a tool that isn't available to one of the team members, is not nearly as valuable. These team members need access to centralized tools that can help share the load of projects, audience needs, results and the ability to create that common understanding of the content mission.

And, in fact the research supported this.

When we asked the Project Managers specifically about the tools they use in their work, **"planning and collaboration tools"** was mentioned second only to **"analytics tools"** in terms of frequently used software (Fig 13).
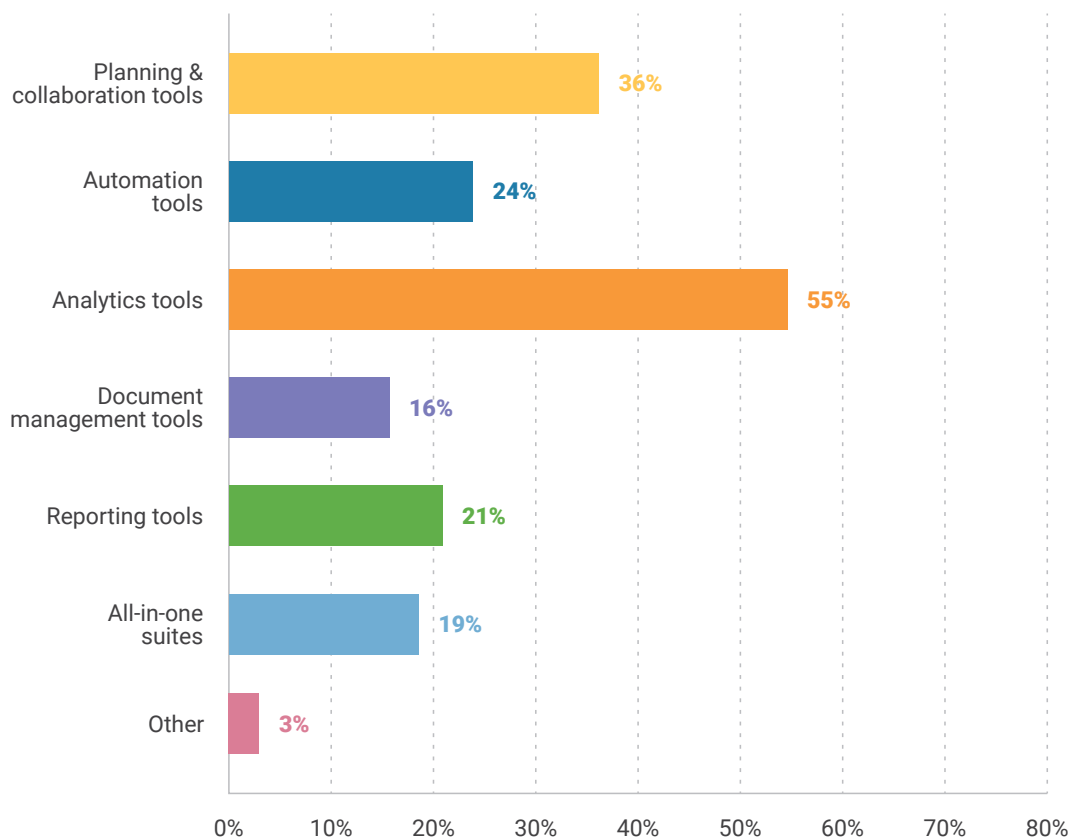
Figure 13 - Which Tools Do Project Managers Utilize

A total of 36% of the Project Managers said that they utilized "planning and collaboration tools" as part of their process.

And, perhaps most pointedly, when we actually asked Project Managers about their biggest challenge in their work, **"planning and resource management"** came up as the number one response by far. A total of 42% of the Project Managers mentioned this as their biggest challenge to being successful with content. Interestingly, **"process and documentation"** was the second most mentioned challenge at 33% (Fig 14).
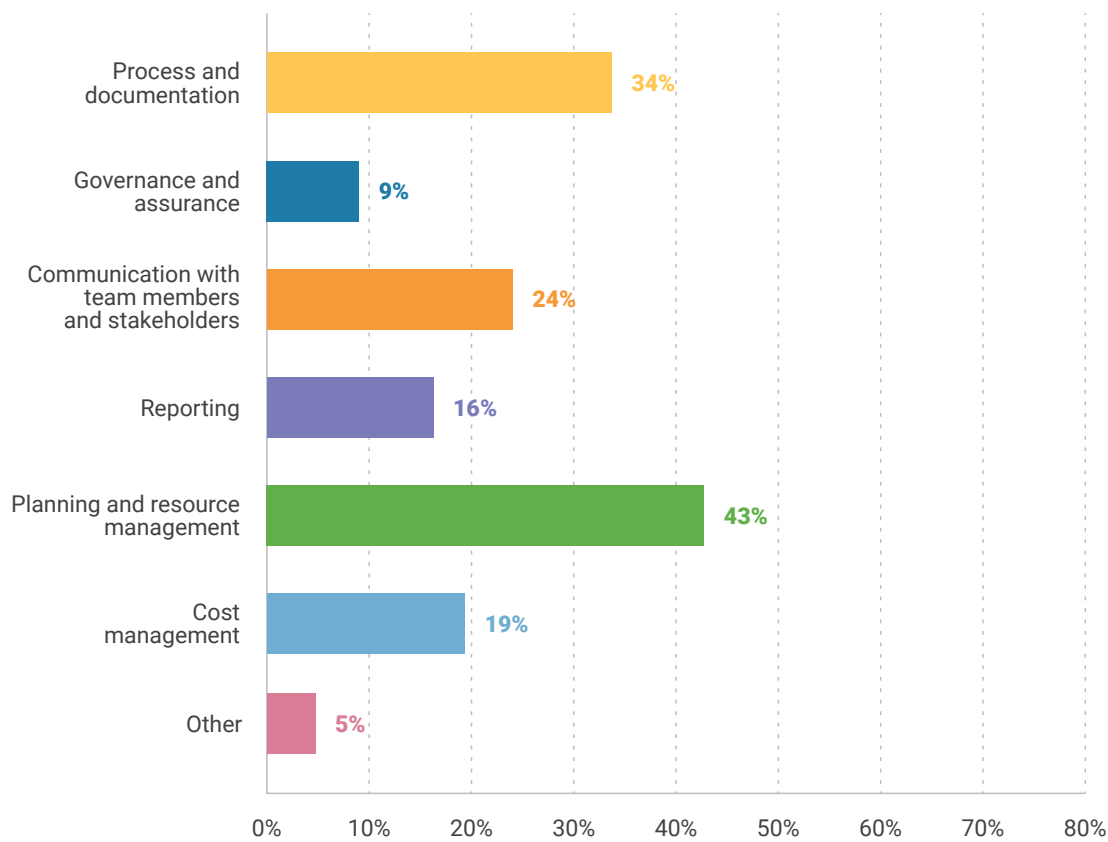

Figure 14 - Biggest Challenges For Project Managers

Furthermore, 27% of editors defined "coordinating the workflow" as one of their biggest tasks, as well as "managing the editorial calendar", which 21% said was the most time-consuming task for them (Fig 15).
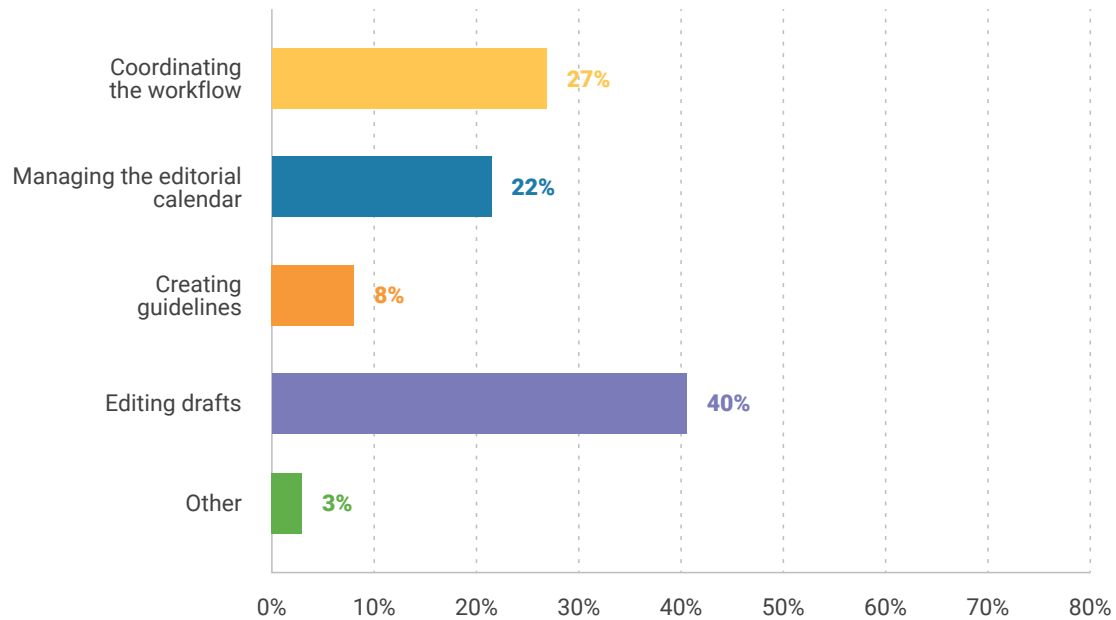

Figure 15 - Most Time-Consuming Tasks for Editors

Conclusion

The Invisible Magic of A Collaboration Strategy

Great workflow and collaboration solutions are like those great designs we discussed in the beginning. The best ones are unseen, and unnoticed by those that are using them. The teams adopt optimized processes, and these processes are facilitated by unseen, well-designed technology solutions, and our audiences never even know any of it exists.

Today's content analysis and collaboration solutions can be a perfect place to provide for that foundation of optimization. Streamlining the many activities involved in developing and delivering something as simple as a blog post,

or as complex as a multi-channel, global content marketing program, need investment in a consolidated approach to both the people and the technology.

From collaboration and design, to version control, security, keyword optimization, calendaring, metadata management, workflow, measurement and even distribution – this should all be made easier via a good content analysis and collaboration solution. As the hub of the activities across the content lifecycle, this solution needs to coordinate and manage the conversation between:

- **Teams; both local and dispersed (freelancers)**
- **Suppliers of services (agencies, other software providers)**
- **Visitors, leads and perhaps even customers**

At one of our recent conferences, a CMO of a technology company estimated that 70% of his budget has to do in some way with creating digital content. Optimizing that spend was absolutely central to his strategy. With as many different channels and search strategies that are evolving every single day, marketers must be able to collaborate and converse and focus on the efforts where they can have the biggest impact.

If the lack of collaboration, or insight into content planning, or developing ROI is where people are spending their time, then the content suffers. Centralizing into a cohesive collaboration and workflow strategy can help magnify the efforts.

It might be unseen to the average audience member, or visitor to the web site. But this invisible strategy might just be the lynchpin to everything that will enable marketers to create the content that WILL stand out to visitors, and move the business forward.

About SEMrush

SEMrush is a leading digital marketing toolkit for SEO, PPC, SMM and Content Marketing professionals worldwide. With over 25 tools within the software, search data for 140 countries and seamless integration with Google services, SEMrush provides solutions for in-house marketing teams and agencies working with clients in any industry.

In its niche and pricing segment, SEMrush is an absolute leader in the number of tools available from one account and the richness of its data. By ensuring an easy workflow between marketing team members, SEMrush helps them become frontrunners in their industries.

For more information, visit www.semrush.com/content-marketing/

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