







James Yang/Getty Images

## PREPARING RESEARCH *professionals*

An assessment of skills, knowledge, and workplace competencies can empower today's marketing research professionals.

**By Madhav N. Segal and Edmund Hershberger**

In May 2006, *Money* magazine and salary.com researched hundreds of jobs, considering their growth, pay, stress levels, and other factors. They ranked marketing research as one of the top 10 careers, with a 10-year forecast of more than 20% job growth. This huge potential might not be fully realized unless we pay close attention to the changing market and workplace dynamics of our profession.

In the third millennium, the full force of technology and the rapid pace of marketplace globalization is greatly influencing the workplace of marketing research professionals. These changes are significantly affecting the marketplace, and transforming the nature of marketing research work through their impact on a combination of requirements for success in the profession today. Domains of marketing research knowledge have always been critical, but now are more susceptible to profound changes; even the skills set that employers desire is changing. What are the skills, knowledge, experience, and professional qualifications that are crucial for succeeding in today's dynamic and competitive marketing research field?

## Executive Summary

**This study assesses marketing research skills, knowledge, and position requirements that industry employers seek. It examines classified marketing research positions of both client organizations and research agencies, using a systematic content analysis procedure as a qualitative research technique. We identify several areas as critical for prospective employees. And we discuss implications for personnel, employers, and academic institutions preparing marketing research students for careers in the field.**

Frequently, job seekers are not fully cognizant of the specific competencies that research agencies and client organizations currently need. Therefore, this creates a gap between what is sought and what is offered or supplied. Awareness and understanding—of essential levels of skills and current knowledge—are necessary to secure marketing research positions and advance within the profession. Specialized training and professional development organizations, research-professional associations (e.g., American Marketing Association, Marketing Research Association, American Association for Public Opinion Research), research industry associations (e.g., Council of American Survey Research Organizations, Canadian Association of Marketing Research Organizations), and educational institutions preparing tomorrow's research professionals must tailor their programming efforts to the skills, knowledge, and other workplace competencies necessary for success.

Identification of essential skills and competencies continues to be a topic of much discussion and interest to both academicians and corporate practitioners. Several researchers and scholars have focused on assessing marketing research skills and knowledge via data collection methods, which are generally communication (questionnaire) based approaches. (See the first two items in the Additional Reading section.) However, this study might be the first attempt to use advertisements of marketing research positions to more accurately assess what knowledge and skills are needed in the marketplace.

### Purpose of the Study

As stated previously, the study sought to provide current and updated information on knowledge, skills, experience, and educational qualifications needed for marketing research personnel in today's dynamic marketplace. Classified ads for marketing research positions are identified as key sources of information on competencies and qualifications, because they represent a current snapshot of labor market needs. Both employers and employment recruiting agencies extensively utilize classified online/electronic advertising for marketing research positions, in addition to traditional print advertising. Therefore, the ultimate objective is to enhance current under-

standing of the profession and its needs, so that appropriate programs for professional development and training, education, recruitment, and placement of marketing research professionals can be created and implemented.

### Study Approach

This study uses the content analysis method to evaluate ads. We identified multiple sources of job placement classified ads to access a sufficient number of marketing research position announcements. (See "List of sources for advertised marketing research positions" sidebar.) Both online and traditional (publication) sources of advertised positions were searched. Only domestic jobs were identified for this study, resulting in a total sample of 610 ads. Of those 610 ads, 60 were used for pretest and coder training, and an additional 30 were used for posttest to assess inter-coder reliability. The remaining 520 ads served as primary data.

To generate the content analysis coding scheme, authors and coders worked together to identify expected criteria regularly found in ads for marketing research positions. An initial attempt distinguished and separated skills from knowledge areas, and then further subdivided the two categories into a total of 10 categories: three for knowledge and seven for skills. Individual categories were then segregated into specific components, which would then be identified for each ad. Some elements of these competencies might overlap, yet we believe they are sufficiently different to justify separate treatment.

Using the 10 categories of items, three coders analyzed 30 randomly selected ads to assess the inclusion of each identified criterion. If ads requested knowledge or skills that were not included in the coding scheme, then coders made a notation for further scrutiny by the authors. Using this input and the initial findings from this first set of 30 ads, the coding scheme was finalized to include as many potential job criteria as feasi-

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ble. Furthermore, in addition to the 10 main categories, data identifying the source of the ad, job level, employer name, and job title were collected.

The main sample of 520 ads was divided equally among the three coders, and analyzed independently. An online coding tool was developed so that the coders could submit the analysis through a Web format, thereby reducing any potential coding errors. After the data collection phase was complete, all three coders coded a final set of 30 ads, to evaluate inter-coder reliability. With one exception, all items exhibited acceptable reliability scores using this approach. Therefore, no further refinement of the approach was necessary.

## Major Findings

We tracked the overall frequency (percent) of response—based on number of times a requirement is mentioned in an ad—for all major categories identified in marketing research classified ads: knowledge, education, experience, and skills. (See “Overall position requirements of knowledge, education, experience, and skills” sidebar on page 22.) Experience (94%), education (71%), and knowledge (41%) were identified as critical for a majority of the ads. Skills area was further subdivided into the following identifiable categories: quantitative skills (83%), communication skills (82%), interpersonal skills (74%), analytical/conceptual skills (58%), program management skills (55%), and computer skills (54%). Quantitative, communication, and interpersonal skills were much more desirable in the current marketplace than program management and computer skills. Then again, basic computer skills might be assumed of all recent college graduates, and therefore might not be mentioned in ads as often as one expects.

**Knowledge.** To assess the level of knowledge that recruiting firms required, we identified six individual knowledge areas, including statistical analysis, research methods, and general marketing knowledge. We also provided the opportunity for other areas of knowledge to be recorded, but found that a majority of “other” knowledge indicated was industry-specific knowledge. The primary knowledge area that firms requested was statistical analysis, with more than 10% of the sample responses directly mentioning this as a requirement. About 8%, 7%, and 4% mentioned knowledge of general research methods, marketing, and business, respectively. Interestingly, only around 6% of the ads mentioned knowledge of marketing research. However, it is possible that—because these job listings were all for marketing research positions—the hiring firms assumed such knowledge.

**Education.** To determine preferred and required educational levels, we noted not only the level of the degree requested, but also any area of specialization that was expected in the job listing. Not surprisingly, more than 51% of the ads required at

## List of sources for advertised marketing research positions

### Online

Monster	<a href="http://www.monster.com">www.monster.com</a>
Job.com Inc.	<a href="http://www.job.com">www.job.com</a>
ResearchInfo.com	<a href="http://www.researchinfo.com">www.researchinfo.com</a>
American Marketing Association	<a href="http://www.marketingpower.com">www.marketingpower.com</a>
Promotion Marketing Association Inc.	<a href="http://www.pmalink.org">www.pmalink.org</a>
Marketing Research Services Inc.	<a href="http://www.mrsi.com">www.mrsi.com</a>
Pharmaceutical Management Science Association	<a href="http://www.pmsa.net">www.pmsa.net</a>
International Council of Shopping Centers	<a href="http://www.icsc.org">www.icsc.org</a>
Marketing Research Association	<a href="http://www.mra-net.org">www.mra-net.org</a>
Council of American Survey Research Organizations	<a href="http://www.casro.org">www.casro.org</a>
American Statistical Association	<a href="http://www.amstat.org">www.amstat.org</a>
World Association of Opinion and Marketing Research Professionals	<a href="http://www.esomar.org">www.esomar.org</a>
American Advertising Federation	<a href="http://www.aaf.org">www.aaf.org</a>
The Research Industry Coalition	<a href="http://www.researchindustry.org">www.researchindustry.org</a>
Direct Marketing Association	<a href="http://www.the-dma.org">www.the-dma.org</a>
American Institutes for Research	<a href="http://www.air.org">www.air.org</a>
Population Association of America	<a href="http://www.popassoc.org">www.popassoc.org</a>
Green Book (by New York American Marketing Association)	<a href="http://www.greenbook.org">www.greenbook.org</a>
Know This Inc.	<a href="http://www.knowthis.com/research/companies/majorfirms.htm">www.knowthis.com/research/companies/majorfirms.htm</a>

### Publications

*Journal of Marketing Research*  
*Marketing Research*  
*Marketing News*  
*Advertising Age*  
*Adweek*  
Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals Periodicals  
American Association of Advertising Agencies Periodicals  
*Marketing*  
*Marketing & Research Today*  
*Quirk's Marketing Research Review*  
*Entrepreneur*  
*Wall Street Journal*  
*Journal of Advertising Research*  
Market Research Society Periodicals

least a bachelor's degree. Although only about 11% of the jobs required a master's degree, more than 21% of the employers in our sample noted that a master's degree was preferred. Because we were solely looking at marketing research positions, the most requested bachelor's degree was in marketing—at approximately 17%. General business and statistics degrees were the next most-noted—at about 14% and 12%, respectively. We also coded for both research and marketing research degrees,

## Overall position requirements of knowledge, education, experience, and skills

Category	Frequency (%)
<b>Knowledge</b>	41.2
<b>Education</b>	71.0
<b>Experience</b>	93.7
<b>Skills:</b>	
Quantitative	83.3
Communication	81.9
Interpersonal	73.7
Analytical/conceptual	57.7
Program management	55.0
Computer	54.4
Other	79.0

but the relative dearth of such degrees resulted in few mentions: 1% and 7%, respectively. Although 14% of the listings requested that applicants hold a Master of Business Administration degree, only 2% of the listings requested that applicants hold a Master of Marketing Research (MMR) degree. Again, this is likely due to the relative dearth of MMR degree-granting institutions. Surprisingly, less than 5% of the job listings requested master's degrees in statistics.

**Experience.** It needs to be underscored that roughly 94% of the ads mentioned experience as a position requirement. An expected finding was that 45% of these ads mentioned positions with marketing research experience. However, a surpris-

ing finding was the amount required: an average of five years (see Exhibit 1). Little technique-specific experience was mentioned, appearing in only about 5% of the ads. Only about 32% of the ads required industry-specific experience: an average of four years. Furthermore, roughly 20% of the ads requested quantitative research/analysis experience (an average of three years), whereas about 15% of the ads requested software-specific experience (an average of four years).

## Skill Areas

In addition to the knowledge areas that we assessed, we felt it would also be useful to determine what skill areas were indicated in ads. (See "Marketing research skills mentioned in ads" sidebar.)

**Communication skills.** The first skill set we address is the presence of communication skills, as we believe these to be very important to employers. The analysis confirms our beliefs: Nearly all measured communication skills were evidenced in a high percentage of ads. Writing skills appeared most often (44%), whereas oral/verbal communication skills appeared in 34% of the ads. Presentation skills, report preparation skills, and general communication skills were found to be important, as they were mentioned quite frequently: 32%, 30%, and 28%, respectively.

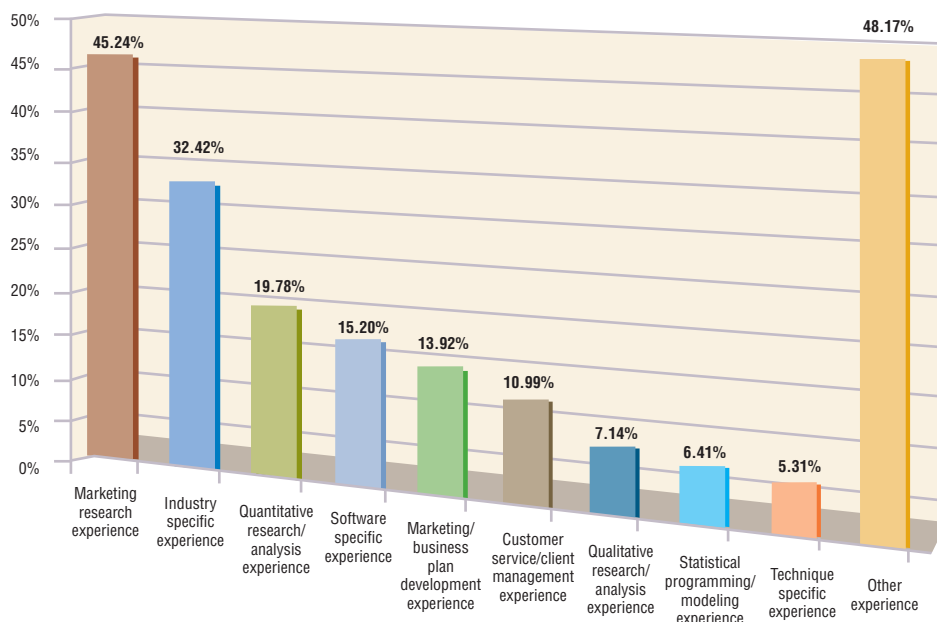
**Research skills.** Not surprisingly, research skills had a very strong presence in our sample of ads, with data analysis (quantitative) skills appearing most often: 60% of the ads. This was followed by research design/methodology and data interpretation skills—at 38% and 35%, respectively. General qualitative research/analysis skills were mentioned in around 17% of the ads, and sampling/data collection skills and questionnaire design skills were mentioned in 20% of the ads.

## Analytical/conceptual skills.

Although more than 35% of the ads directly mentioned analytical skills, only about 2% of them mentioned conceptual skills as a desired candidate trait. A little more than 17% of the ads mentioned both problem solving and detail orientation.

**Interpersonal skills.** It is generally believed that interpersonal skills are very important, but we felt it was critical to assess the presence of such skills in the requested skill set of prospective employers. Colleague relationship/teamwork skills were included in a large percentage of the ads (42%), although these skills were not as pervasive as expected. It is possible that teamwork and collegial relationship skills are assumed, or they might be assessed as part of the interviewing process. Therefore, these skills might not be mentioned in the ads. It is also interesting to note that an equal number of

**Exhibit 1** Experience requirements





### Marketing research skills mentioned in ads

Category	Frequency (%)	Category	Frequency (%)
<b>Communication skills</b>		<b>Program management skills</b>	
Writing	43.96	General project management	32.60
Oral/verbal	33.88	Deadline/time management	18.68
Presentation	32.42	Ability to manage multiple projects	15.75
Report preparation	30.04	Ability to multitask (general)	8.42
General communication	27.66	Ability to manage complex issues	3.85
Proposal writing	7.88		
Oral/verbal (other language)	2.01	<b>Computer skills</b>	
Writing (other language)	.92	Software:	
<b>Research skills</b>		MS Office	32.42
Data analysis (quantitative)	59.71	SPSS	12.82
Research design and methodology	37.91	SAS	10.99
Data interpretation	34.62	Windows	1.65
Recommendation making	22.89	Web (e.g., Java, ASP, HTML)	1.47
Questionnaire design	20.51	Lotus Notes	1.10
Sampling/data collection	20.33	Other software	13.55
General qualitative research/analysis	17.03	Personal computer	6.59
Research methods	10.81	Programming	3.85
Forecasting	7.88	Macintosh	.18
Other research	25.82	Other computer	6.59
<b>Analytical/conceptual skills</b>		<b>Other skills</b>	
Analytical	35.35	General management	43.41
Problem solving	17.22	Opportunity identification (business)	18.68
Detail orientation	17.22	Ability to work unsupervised	18.13
Research opportunity needs identification	7.88	Ability to be proactive	14.10
Conceptual (dealing with abstract concepts)	1.83	Sales/account management	10.99
Reasoning	.73	Project management	8.24
Other analytical/conceptual	2.01	Other	42.12
<b>Interpersonal skills</b>			
Colleague relationship/teamwork	41.76		
Client management/customer service	40.29		
Interpersonal (general)	20.15		
Vendor relationship	13.74		

employers needed client management/customer service skills (40%), whereas only 14% needed vendor relationship (management) skills. About one-fifth of the ads requested some sort of general interpersonal skill to round out this category.

**Program management skills.** Although nearly one-third of the ads requested general project management skills (33%), far fewer required any specific program management skills. Several ads mentioned time management skills and the ability to manage multiple projects (19% and 16%, respectively), whereas only 8% of the ads mentioned more general multitasking. Like other skills, we believe that multitasking is an ability that most employers assume. Therefore, they might not mention it as a skill.

**Computer skills.** The most commonly mentioned computer skills were very general ones, with 32% of the ads mentioning the ability to use Microsoft (MS) Office products. Although SAS (a statistical analysis system) and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) are generally recognized as industry standard data analysis software packages, only 11% and 13% (respectively) of the ads mentioned the need for skills in using them.

**Other skills.** We identified a set of skills that we felt was important to potential employers, but that did not fit into any of the previous categories. Although many of these skills indicate personal character traits, we believe they are skills that many employers expect—even though they might not state the

desire in an ad. Roughly 43% of the ads mentioned general management skills, whereas other skills were mentioned much less frequently. For example, approximately 18% of the ads mentioned both the ability to work unsupervised and business opportunity identification, whereas about 11% of the ads mentioned sales/account management skills.

### What It Means

Some significant information will be lost if we focus on only the aggregate analysis just presented. Therefore, the following offers additional insight as research professionals progress through their careers.

To analyze differences and assess employer expectations for varying levels of the positions, we divided the sample into three groups: senior management level (this typically includes executive managers, research directors, vice presidents, and top-level research and/or management positions), mid-management level (usually positions with some degree of managerial responsibility, such as project managers and senior level researchers), and junior level (any entry position). As one would expect, position requirements are quite different across the three categories (see Exhibit 2).

#### Senior management level position:

- Nearly every ad (98%) has an experience requirement.
- Interpersonal skills become even more important at this level (86%).
- Although management and leadership expectations are higher than in lower positions, research skills are still important.
- Not surprisingly, computer skills are mentioned least for these executive roles.

#### Mid-management level position:

- In almost every category, mid-management level positions fell between the junior and senior management level position requirements.
- The only category in which the mid-management level positions were ahead of junior or senior management level positions was the program management skills area.
- In the knowledge area category, a large increase is noted from the junior level positions to the mid-management level positions.
- Interpersonal skills become much more important at this level, whereas computer skills become less important.

#### Junior level position:

- Experience and education are very important position requirements.
- Research and communication skills are critical.
- Interpersonal skills and computer skills are needed, but project management skills are not mentioned as often.

Overall, it is clear that as research professionals climb the corporate ladder, they must pay close attention to acquiring relevant experience, honing their management skills, and keeping up with the professional knowledge base. Technical skills are vital at the junior level; however, job candidates and trainees must remain cognizant of their long-term career goals. These include progression through the professional hierarchy, and demand that job competence be maintained with sound communication and interpersonal skills.

Individuals aspiring for senior research positions must concentrate on further sharpening their communication and interpersonal skills, so as to become attractive for higher level positions. Interestingly, even the senior management personnel must not ignore the research skills set; it continues to be significant for all levels of managerial responsibility.

Some of the overall findings from this investigation are somewhat expected, and consistent with what we already know from previous studies. The detailed findings under each category of experience, knowledge, and skills have serious

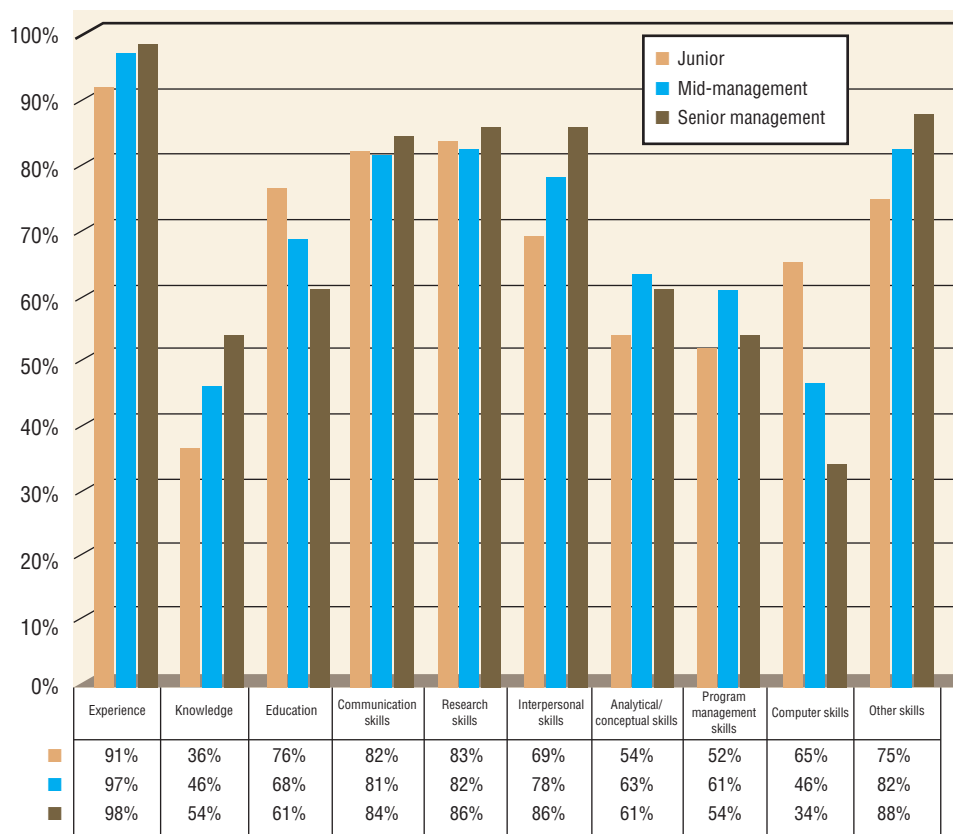
*Ads truly address the specific profiles that the research industry needs—and will explore—in recruiting candidates.*

implications for practitioners, academicians, and students. Many large research agencies and client organizations heavily invest in creating appropriate professional training and staff development programs. Findings can assist human resources personnel in addressing employee training needs and targeting these appropriately. Those in the profession who are currently involved in developing a certification program (e.g., Marketing Research Association's Professional Researcher Certification program) can also use the findings to further identify and describe specific content areas of marketing research competencies.

This exploration of ads might more accurately reflect an expectation of the research industry than academic self-reports through questionnaires. Although reports might provide suggestions of industry preferences, ads truly address the specific profiles that the research industry needs—and will explore—in recruiting candidates. Furthermore, all job seekers generally use classified ads during their job searches, and believe that they provide significant information on their career fields and what skills are in demand. Academic institutions must continue to design and offer programs that prepare entry level and mid-level marketing researchers. However, organizations offering professional training and development programs should seek to address requirements at all levels, with particular emphasis on middle and senior levels.

Although relevant experience is the most prevalent criterion included in the ads, the relative emphasis on research vs. indus-

## Exhibit 2 Position analysis



try-specific experience might vary depending on a number of factors—including the type of position to be filled. Specifically, when recruiting for positions of account management, sales support, and client services, several research agencies emphasize industry-specific experience. Furthermore, according to some research industry experts, there seems to be a general trend to develop a “sector” or industry focus to better serve the research needs of the end users. Such efforts must clearly be balanced against the risks of unnecessary “overspecialization” and prevention of cross-fertilization of research skills.

Regardless, given the significance of relevant experience, educational programs should attempt to integrate hands-on, real-life, and practical internships while providing students with a sound knowledge base. As oral and written communication skills are essential in lending credibility to competence, academic programs should ensure that the quality of candidates’ presentation styles, interaction abilities, critical thinking, and writing skills reflects the knowledge they have acquired.

Perhaps in no other field of marketing is the need to bridge the gap between practitioners and academicians more critical. Therefore, findings can also guide the development of appropriate curricular changes (e.g., to enhance qualitative research or project management skills, to introduce a course/topic as a part of the marketing research curriculum), to help educate

and prepare students of marketing research. These findings also raise questions, and challenge conventional wisdom and our implicit understanding of the skills/knowledge requirement for marketing research professionals. From this perspective alone, educators (especially those who have a graduate program in marketing research, such as our university, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, at [www.siu.edu/business/mmr](http://www.siu.edu/business/mmr)), students, and employers stand to benefit simply by having a meaningful discussion of the major findings.

It is also important to recognize that our study has some limitations (e.g., sampling considerations, degree to which classified ads reflect the actual marketing research job vacancies). These need to be taken into account prior to making generalizations and drawing implications. Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of this investigation, major findings from it should be viewed as early beginnings, rather than definitive conclusions. ●

### Additional Reading

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Kiger, Patrick J. (2002), “Why Customer Satisfaction Starts with HR,” *Workplace*, (May), 26-28, 30, 32.

Thomas, Jerry (2004), “Survival of the Fittest,” *Public Relations Quarterly*, (49), 2, 23, 25.

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