

THE CAREER PATH OF A SOCIAL MEDIA PROFESSIONAL

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Introduction



Monday at 11:00 AM

More than 7 in 10 Americans use social media to connect, engage, and be entertained according to [Pew Research](#). With the widespread use of social media, nearly every organization has a social media account, as resources are increasingly shifting to these digital channels and networks. In [USC's 2019 Global Communications Report](#), 38% of U.S. CEOs said social media and online influencers will be the most valuable component of their company's communications strategy in the future, more so than owned, earned, and paid media. Social media managers are responsible for giving brands their voice. However, little research has been conducted on the individuals who fill this critical organizational role that has grown exponentially over the past 10 years.

The Institute for Public Relations Digital Media Research Center, Ragan Communications, and the University of Florida collaborated on this research project to study the careers and roles of social media managers. We surveyed more than 400 social media managers to determine their job roles and responsibilities, reporting and management structure, history and levels of experience, performance review systems, and career ambitions.



Tina McCorkindale and 291 others

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Key Findings



Social media managers are ambitious.

Seventy percent of social media managers want to be promoted in their positions, but only 40% saw that possibility in their current roles.



Social media managers typically work more than the standard 40-hour work week.

Most social media managers worked slightly more than the standard 40-hour work week, averaging 41-59 hours per week. In terms of comparing what they do to others in their function, 48% said they worked the same number of hours as their colleagues while 47% said they worked more. [Research](#) has found burnout is definitely a concern for the “always on” social media manager.



Facebook and Twitter were the most frequently managed company channels.

The top five social media channels managed included Facebook (81%), Twitter (77%), LinkedIn (67%), Instagram (66%), and YouTube (51%).



Social media is often housed in communication/public relations and marketing departments.

Half of the respondents (51%) said social media was in the communication/public relations function while slightly more than one-third (38%) said it resided in marketing. Only 4% said it was a stand-alone function.



The primary role of social media managers is to create content and strategize.

Two-thirds of respondents said their primary role as a social media manager was to create content (41%) and to strategize (27%). Twenty percent said their primary role was to improve brand awareness and reputation.



Social media managers frequently participate in internal strategy conversations.

At least two-thirds of social media managers are involved in social media strategy (76%) and department/function strategy (68%). Forty-one percent participate in the overall business and organizational strategy.



Many social media managers rate their value to the organization highly.

Fifty-nine percent said their value to the organization in terms of social media responsibilities is above average or excellent.



Engagement and replies are the top metric for evaluating the performance of social media managers.

Forty-six percent of social media managers are evaluated on their engagement and replies to stakeholders. Other evaluation metrics include progress toward goals (36%) and follower counts (33%). Thirty percent said their social media performance was not evaluated at all.



Many social media managers report to a senior manager or a director.

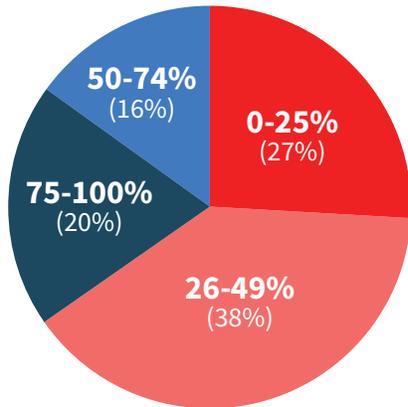
Forty percent report to a senior manager or a director while nearly one-quarter (23%) report to the C-suite.



Many social media managers will be leaving their current role within two years.

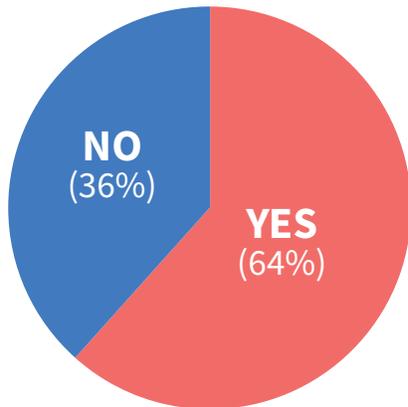
More than half (57%) of the social media managers did not anticipate being in their current role for more than two more years. Social media managers were split as to whether their next position would be a social media role or not.

About the social media managers



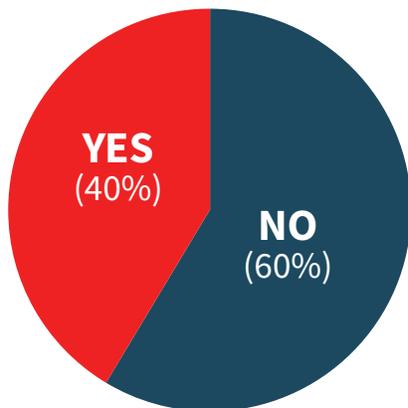
What percentage of your job is related to social media in some way?

More than half of the respondents (65%) spend 50% or less of their job in social media.



Are you the senior most social media person in your organization?

64% said they were the senior most social media person in their organization.



Do you manage a team?

While nearly two-thirds are the most senior social media person in their organization, only 40% managed a team.

Which social media channels do you manage or are you involved with?



FACEBOOK
81%



TWITTER
77%



LINKEDIN
67%



INSTAGRAM
66%



YOUTUBE
51%



PINTEREST
14%



SNAPCHAT
8%



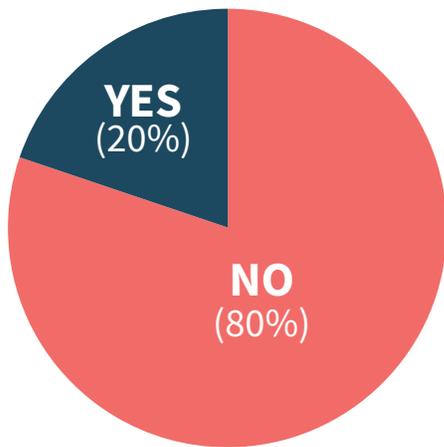
TIKTOK
6%



OTHER
3%



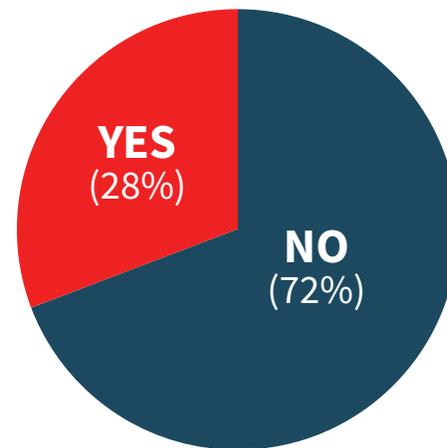
NONE
2%



Did you take a college course in social media?

The majority (80%) of social media managers had not taken a college course in social media, most likely due to a course not being offered when they were in college.

Did you manage any social media accounts in college?



Of the limited number of respondents who took a college course, social/digital media marketing, strategy, and management were the most popular.

If yes, which course(s) (check all that apply)?

SOCIAL/DIGITAL MEDIA MARKETING.....	8% (N=32)
SOCIAL/DIGITAL MEDIA STRATEGY.....	8% (N=29)
SOCIAL/DIGITAL MEDIA MANAGEMENT.....	8% (N=29)
SOCIAL/DIGITAL MEDIA ANALYTICS.....	6% (N=22)

How long have you been managing or involved with your organization's social media account?

LESS THAN A YEAR.....	16%
1 TO 3 YEARS	42%
4 TO 7 YEARS	25%
8 TO 10 YEARS.....	12%
11 YEARS OR MORE.....	5%

More than three-quarters of respondents (83%) have been managing or involved in their organization's social media account for 7 years or less.

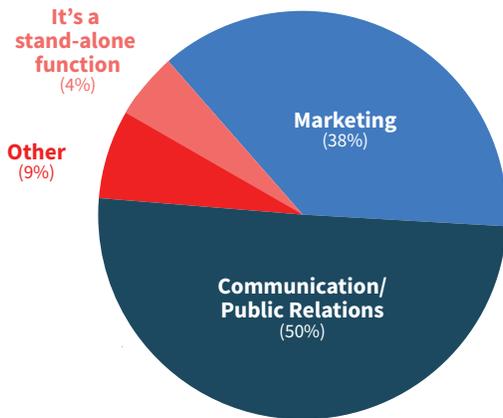
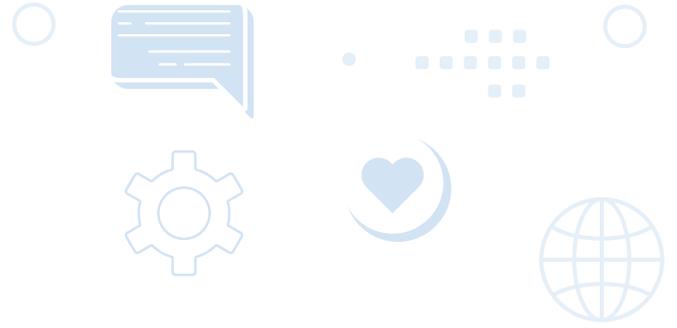
Top 10 functions that respondents had experience with prior to current role

1. **SOCIAL MEDIA**..... 68%
2. **MARKETING**..... 65%
3. **PUBLIC RELATIONS**..... 64%
4. **MEDIA RELATIONS**..... 60%
5. **COMMUNITY RELATIONS**..... 50%
6. **BRAND BUILDING**..... 46%
7. **ADVERTISING**..... 43%
8. **EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION**..... 43%
9. **CRISIS AND RISK COMMUNICATION**..... 33%
- 10 **EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATION**..... 33%

Most respondents had previous experience in social media (68%), marketing (65%), public relations (64%), and media relations (60%) before their current role.

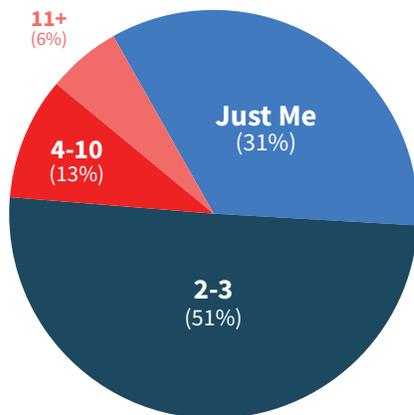


Current structure



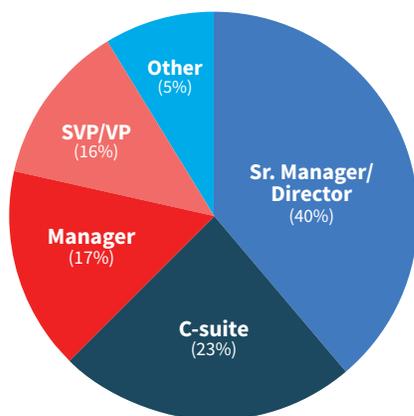
Where does social media sit in your organization?

Half of the respondents (51%) said social media was in the communication/public relations function, while slightly more than one-third (38%) said it resided in marketing. Only 4% said it was a stand-alone function.



How many people are on your organization's social media team?

Half of the respondents said there were 2-3 people on their social media team. thirty-one percent said they were the sole person responsible for social media. The mean size of a social media team is five.



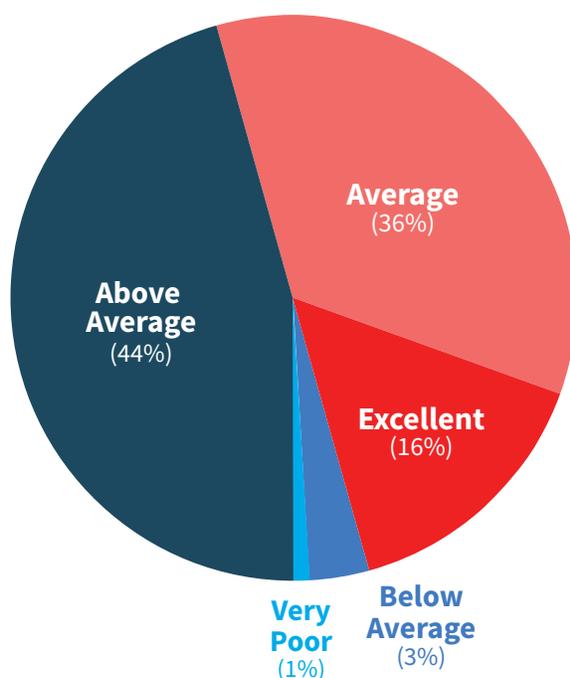
What level of manager do you report to?

Concerning the reporting structure, 40% report to a senior manager or director while, nearly one-quarter (23%) report to the C-suite.

Job roles & performance

How often do you participate in the following:				
	NEVER	SELDOM	ABOUT HALF	USUALLY/ALWAYS
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY	2%	9%	13%	76%
DEPT/FUNCTION STRATEGY	4%	12%	16%	68%
BUSINESS/ORG STRATEGY	9%	28%	22%	42%

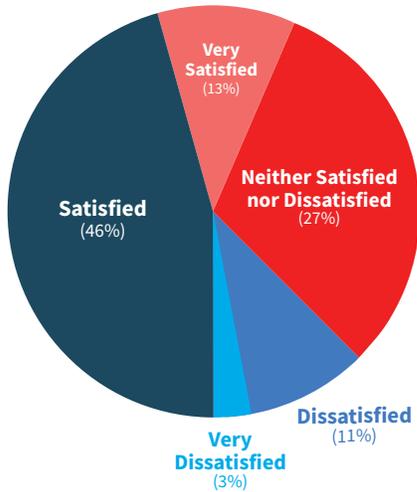
Regarding strategy, social media managers are actively involved. At least two-thirds of social media managers are usually or always involved in the social media strategy (76%) and the department/function strategy (68%). Forty-one percent participate in the overall business and organizational strategy.



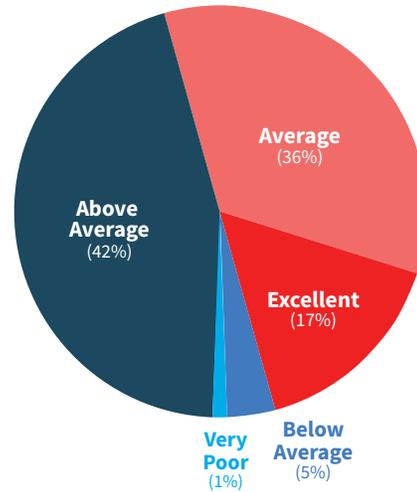
How would you rate your job performance in your social media role?

Overall, more than three-quarters of social media managers perceive their job performance and value to the organization to be “average” or “above average.”

How would you rate your job satisfaction with your social media role?



How would you rate your perceived value to the organization in terms of your social media responsibilities?

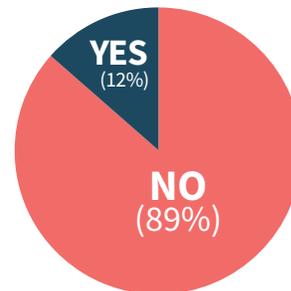


Fifty-nine percent of social media managers were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” in their social media role. Less than 14% were “dissatisfied.”

How is your job performance relating to social media evaluated (check all that apply)?

ENGAGEMENT/REPLIES.....	46.4%
PROGRESS TOWARD GOALS.....	36.1%
FOLLOWER COUNTS.....	32.7%
MY SOCIAL MEDIA PERFORMANCE IS NOT EVALUATED.....	30.1%
REVENUE.....	10.8%
RESPONSE TIME.....	10.6%
SATISFACTION SCORES.....	7.4%
OTHER.....	5.8%

Do you receive monetary bonuses or incentives based on your social media performance?



The top three metrics for how the job performance of social media managers is evaluated are engagement/replies (46%), progress toward goals (36%), and follower counts (33%). Less popular metrics for performance evaluation are revenue (11%), response time (11%), and satisfaction scores (7%). Nearly one-in-three social media managers (30%) said their social media performance was not evaluated at all.

Only a small percentage (12%) received monetary bonuses or incentives based on their social media performance.

Which of the following professional development activities do you engage in to improve your social media management (check all that apply)?



Webinars

68%



Seminars or Workshops

58%



Industry Conferences

49%



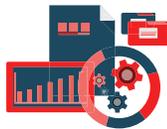
Online Education courses

46%



Professional Organizations

37%



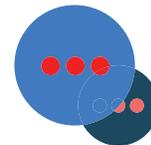
Internal Training Programs

21%



Graduate School

12%



Other

6%

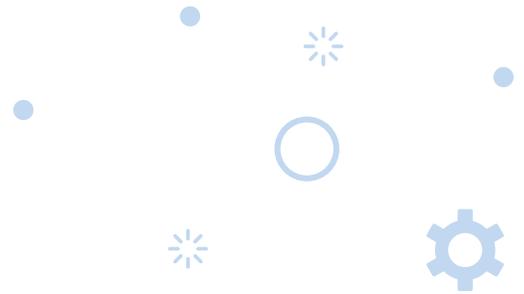
The most common professional development activities included webinars (68%) and seminars or workshops (58%).

Which of the following best describes your primary social media role (choose one):

CREATE CONTENT	41%
STRATEGIZE	27%
IMPROVE BRAND AWARENESS AND REPUTATION	20%
ENGAGE WITH FOLLOWERS	4%
CUSTOMER SERVICE	2%
CULTIVATE LEADS AND SALES	1%
OTHER	5%

Two-thirds of respondents said their primary role as a social media manager was to create content (41%) and to strategize (27%). Twenty percent said their primary role was to improve brand awareness and reputation.

Position management

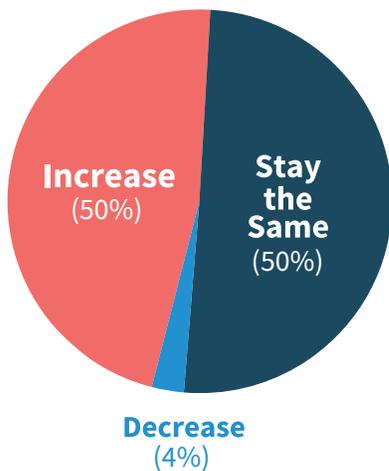


What is your annual social media budget?*

NO BUDGET.....	27 %
UNDER \$10,000.....	34 %
\$10,001 - \$30,000.....	15 %
\$30,001 - \$50,000.....	5 %
\$50,001 - \$100,000.....	6 %
OVER \$100,000.....	12 %

More than one-quarter (27%) of social media managers, did not have a budget. Most budgets were under \$30,000.

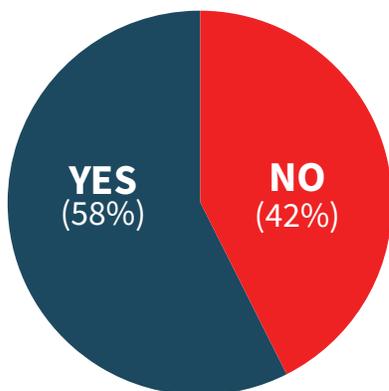
*Of those who responded and knew (44 didn't know)



Do you anticipate your next social media budget to:*

Looking ahead to the future, most anticipate that their budgets will increase (47%) or stay the same (50%). Only 3% said they anticipated a decrease in the budget.

*Of those who responded and knew (66 didn't know)



Do you have the authority to purchase social media tools and services for your department?

Fifty-eight percent said they have the authority to purchase social media tools and services for their department.

How satisfied are you with how your organization supports your social media professional development?

VERY SATISFIED.....	14%
SATISFIED	35%
NEITHER SATISFIED NOR DISSATISFIED.....	31%
DISSATISFIED.....	17%
VERY DISSATISFIED.....	3%

Forty-nine percent said they were satisfied with how their company supports their professional development. Thirty-one percent had a more neutral response, while 20% were dissatisfied.

What industry best represents the social media account you manage or are involved with (choose one)?

CONSUMER PACKAGED GOODS.....	3%
EDUCATION/NONPROFIT.....	30%
ENERGY AND UTILITIES.....	2%
FINANCIAL SERVICES/INSURANCE.....	8%
GOVERNMENT.....	10%
HEALTHCARE, PHARMACEUTICALS, AND BIOTECH	10%
MANUFACTURING.....	3%
MEDIA AND ENTERTAINMENT.....	4%
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES/CONSULTING.....	6%
REAL ESTATE AND CONSTRUCTION.....	2%
RETAIL.....	2%
SOFTWARE, INTERNET, ELECTRONICS.....	4%
TRAVEL, HOSPITALITY, RECREATION, AND LEISURE.....	9%
OTHER.....	8%

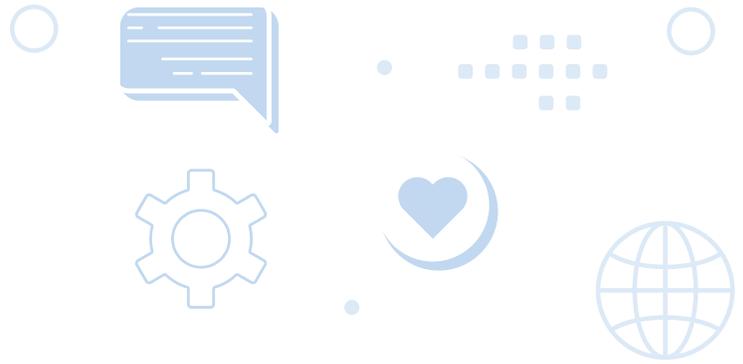
Social media managers oversee accounts in a wide variety of industries. Nearly one-third (30%) focused on education and nonprofits. Other top industries included healthcare, pharmaceuticals, and biotech (10%); government (10%); and financial services (8%).

Which of the following functions do you work in with your current role (check all that apply)?

Social media managers span a variety of functions, especially marketing (76%), public relations (72%), brand building (68%), and media relations (63%).

1. MARKETING.....	76%
2. PUBLIC RELATIONS.....	72%
3. BRAND BUILDING.....	68%
4. MEDIA RELATIONS.....	63%
5. COMMUNITY RELATIONS.....	58%
6. ADVERTISING.....	51%
7. ORGANIZATIONAL STORYTELLING.....	51%
8. EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION.....	50%
9. CRISIS AND RISK COMMUNICATION.....	44%
10. EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATION.....	39%

Looking ahead



What is your career ambition?

I WOULD LIKE TO BE PROMOTED TO A MORE SENIOR-LEVEL ROLE.....	43%
I WOULD LIKE TO BE THE TOP LEADER IN MY FUNCTION/DEPARTMENT.....	27%
I AM CONTENT IN MY CURRENT ROLE	23%
I WOULD LIKE TO CHANGE CAREERS.....	3%
I WOULD LIKE TO START A SOLO PRACTICE OR MY OWN AGENCY.....	2%
OTHER.....	2%

Social media managers are ambitious and overall, would like to move into more senior roles. Forty-three percent said they would like to be promoted to a more senior-level role, while twenty-seven percent said they would like to be the top leader in their function/department.

What is the likelihood that you will have an opportunity to advance to a more senior position in social media?

DEFINITELY.....	13%
PROBABLY.....	27%
NEUTRAL	27%
PROBABLY NOT.....	24%
DEFINITELY NOT.....	9%

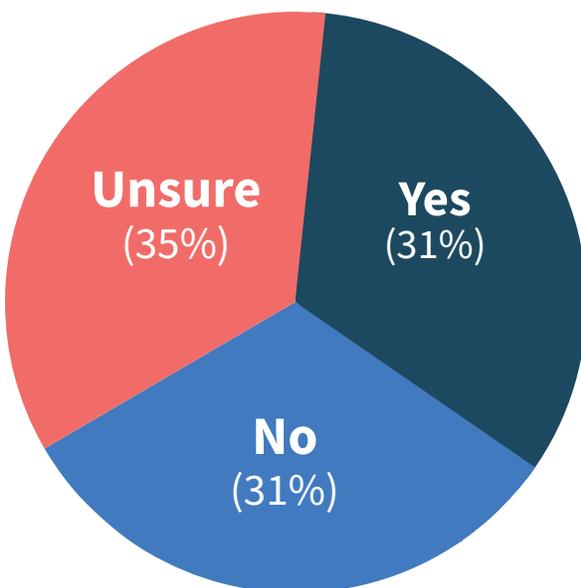
Social media managers had a wide range of responses regarding the ability for them to advance in this senior-level role. Forty percent thought they would likely have an opportunity to be promoted with 33% being more skeptical about advancing.



How long do you anticipate being in your current role?

ACTIVELY SEEKING OPPORTUNITIES, WITHIN OR OUTSIDE THE ORG.....	22%
LESS THAN A YEAR.....	27%
1 TO 2 YEARS	30%
3 TO 4 YEARS	22%
5 OR MORE YEARS.....	19%

More than half (57%) of the social media managers did not anticipate being in their current role for more than two more years.

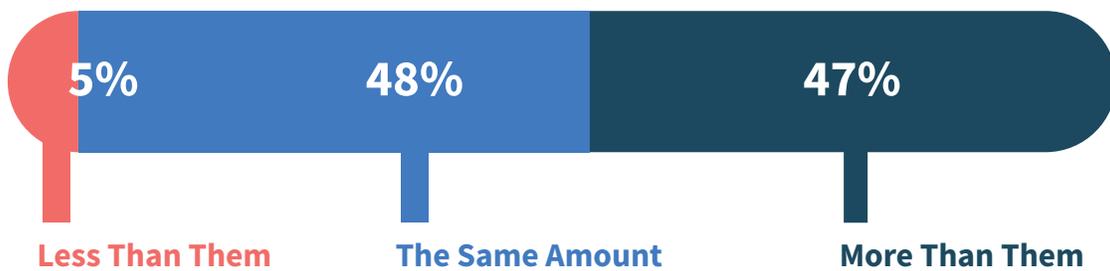


Do you anticipate your next position to be a social media role?

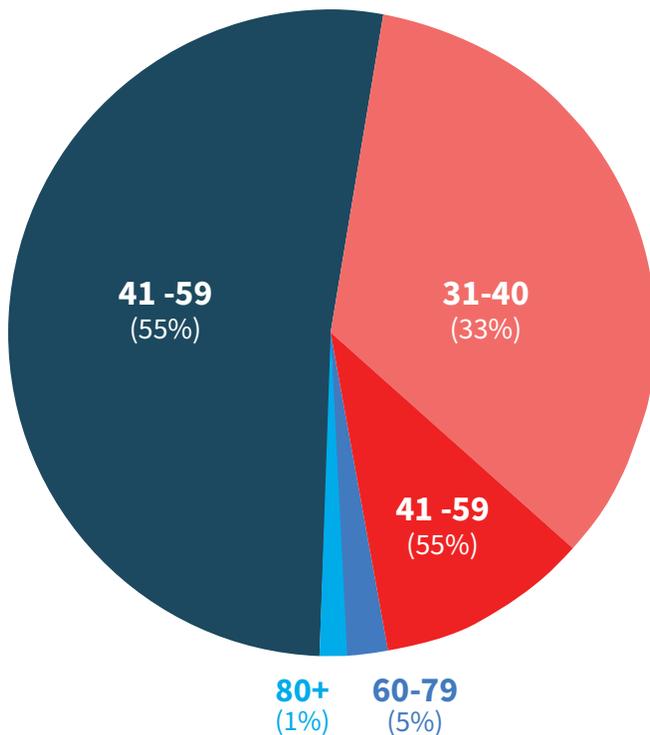
Social media managers were split as to whether their next position would be a social media role or not.

Position management

Comparing your role to others in your department/function, do you feel you work:



How many hours do you work in a typical week?



Most social media managers worked slightly more than the standard 40-hour work week, averaging 41-59 hours per week. In terms of comparing what they do to others in their function, 48% said they worked the same amount while 47% said they worked, more hours than their colleagues.

Demographics

WHAT IS YOUR HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION?

HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA.....	1%
SOME COLLEGE, NO DEGREE.....	3%
ASSOCIATE DEGREE.....	3%
BACHELOR'S DEGREE.....	61%
MASTER'S DEGREE.....	31%
PROFESSIONAL DEGREE.....	1%
DOCTORATE DEGREE.....	2%

WHAT IS YOUR GENDER?

FEMALE.....	79%
MALE.....	20%
NON-BINARY.....	0%
PREFER NOT TO ANSWER.....	2%

WHAT IS YOUR AGE RANGE?

18 - 23.....	3%
24 - 29.....	23%
30 - 39.....	31%
40 - 49.....	23%
50 - 59.....	14%
60 - 69.....	6%
70 AND ABOVE.....	0%

WHAT TYPE OF ORG DO YOU WORK FOR?

CORPORATE.....	33%
AGENCY.....	10%
NONPROFIT / NGO.....	23%
EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION.....	18%
GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION.....	11%
OTHER.....	5%

WHAT IS YOUR BASE SALARY RANGE?

UNDER \$40,000.....	11%
\$40,001 - \$50,000.....	18%
\$50,001 - \$75,000.....	30%
\$75,001 - \$100,000.....	23%
\$100,001 - \$150,000.....	13%
MORE THAN \$150,000.....	4%

Methodology

The Institute for Public Relations, Ragan Communications, and the University of Florida conducted a survey about the career path of social media professionals, including the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Respondents were given an opportunity to enter a drawing for three \$50 gift cards and to receive a copy of the report at the end of the survey.

A total of 451 respondents participated in the survey. Twenty-two people indicated that they are not involved with their organization's social media, so they were removed from the study. Fifty people did not complete the study after the first question. Therefore, the study included 379 respondents with a margin of error of +/-5%.

Link to study page: <https://instituteforpr.org/dmrc-challenges-sm-professional/>

