Left Behind:

How Project Timelines Shape the Modern User Research Practice

A look at how long user research *really* takes—and tactics for doing our best work on tight timelines.

Harried by stakeholders, rushed by competing priorities, and limited by resourcing, user research is constantly benchmarked against the ticking clock. But to what extent is this the case *in-practice?* How salient is time for today's user experience researcher? And how are UXRs managing, accounting for, and reacting to expectations of time?

People Nerds wanted to begin putting this puzzle together and launched original research aimed at unpacking some of these questions.

In this report, we'll detail how UXRs perceive their project timelines, the expectations they face from stakeholders, the strategies they use to advocate for more time, and the extent to which organizational structure impacts the time.

We are grateful to the 300 UX practitioners who generously gave of their time to complete the survey that informed this work. Without your help these insights would not be possible.

So read on, and try to do so without checking the clock.

dscout

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METHOD

Study Design and Sample

This study employed an online survey, fielded via Google Forms. The survey contained three sections:

① The time expectations on a recent project
② The time expectations of projects in general
③ Contextual demographics (e.g. role type, industry)

The survey was shared via online communities like newsletters, Slack, and on social media. Data collection took place over roughly two weeks in August 2021. Participants were not compensated for their responses; many indicated an interest in seeing results for their organization.

In all, 300 participants were recruited. They represented a broad swath of industries, with "technology" the largest at nearly one quarter (25.2%). The sample is also dominated by self-identified practitioners (78.9%), although research-consuming collaborators (10.1%) and research team leaders (9.7%) are also present in the data. Breakdowns of industry and role are presented in the appendix below.

Sample Contextual Demographics

Which best captures the industry in which you currently or most-recently worked?

- Technology (25.2%)
- Consumer (9.9%)
- Software (8.2%)
- Consumer Products (7.8%)
- Financial Services (7.5%)
- Education (5.8%)
- Healthcare (4.4%)

Which of the following best describes your current or most-recent role?

- I conduct research as a primary job function (78.3%)
- I engage with research as part of my job function (10.3%)
- I direct a team focused on research initiatives (10%)

Which of the following best describes your current or most-recent team structure?

- Embedded Within a Team: Researchers are part of a single department (32.1%)
- Solo: I'm my company's only UXR (16.2%)
- Embedded across teams: Researchers are house across different teams (15.9%)
- Hybrid: Some researchers are centralized, some are embedded (15.2%)
- Central agency: Different departments come to us with requests (14.2%)
- Freelancer (6.4%)

Roughly how many projects do you/your team complete in an average quarter?

- mean = 15.86, median = 4, mode = 3

Which team or business unit are you delivering research to most often?

- Product, Design, UX/CX (62.3%)
- Executive Leadership (19.3%)
- Customer Success, Support (10.5%)
- Engineering, Data Science, Development (4.3%)
- Sales, Marketing, Account Management (4.3%)

Findings at-a-glance

- The average research project—across all project types takes **42 days.**

- **On average, "discovery" projects (60 days)** takes twice as long as **evaluative projects (28 days).**

- **When asked about a recent project, 63.1% of research said they had "Just enough time."** 22.4% had "Not enough time" and only 14.6% had "More than enough time."

- When asked **which activities researchers wish they had more time for** a majority (51.6%) said analysis. This was followed by recruitment (16.3%), delivery (15. 3%), fieldwork (9.5%) and design (7.1%).

- **Recruitment, site securing, and operations were the biggest source of project delays (36.3%).** Scope creep (19.6%) was the next most common.

- The ramifications of inadequate time was clear to researchers. 76.9% said, when there's not enough time, that "The full extent of insights were not mined and translated." **Insights get left behind.**

- **The most common tactic for buying time involves educating stakeholders on the ins-and-outs of research.** When needing more time for a project, 35% percent of those surveyed provided justifications for research—explaining why and how certain study designs, analysis tactics, or approaches to fielding might be more time consuming.

- **UXRs working in a "hybrid" model, or that are embedded across teams, are the least aligned with stakeholders on timelines.** In contrast, solo-UXRs and freelancers were the most aligned.

OVERVIEW

300+ UXRs on What Makes for Adequate Research Project Timelines

In this overview, we'll benchmark for time-to-complete an average user research project—exploring the range of timelines across different project types. From there, we'll explore what research activities take the most time and ask: what suffers when we don't have the time we need to conduct rigorous work?

How long does it take to finish a research project?

Participants were asked to report a general timeframe it took to complete their most-recent project (no matter the size). Most reported their project taking "weeks" to complete (59.3%), with nearly a third reporting months (30.3%). Overall, the median number of days to complete a recent project was **42.**

Timeline by project type

The *type* of project produced some differences in reported time-to-complete. Specifically, participants selected one of four phases of research to describe their most-recent project: discovery, iterative, evaluative, or post-release feedback. Most participants reported on a discovery project (42.1%), followed by evaluative (32.3%), generative (19.5%) and post-release feedback (6.1%).

When these project types were crossed with median days to complete, differences emerged: discovery projects (median = 60 days) were almost twice as long as iterative projects (median = 35 days) and more than twice as long as both evaluative and post-release feedback projects (both median = 28 days).


Discovery

Iterative

Evaluative

How ideal are research timelines?

### Do researchers feel they have enough time?

One of the driving forces for this work was to unpack the extent to which user researchers *perceive* they have "enough" time to complete any one project, and how that perception relates to that of their stakeholders.

Overall, participants mostly reported that they had "Just Enough Time" to complete a recent project (63.1%) followed by "Not Enough Time" (22.4%), and "More than Enough Time" (14.6%).

Just enough time

Not enough time

More than enough time
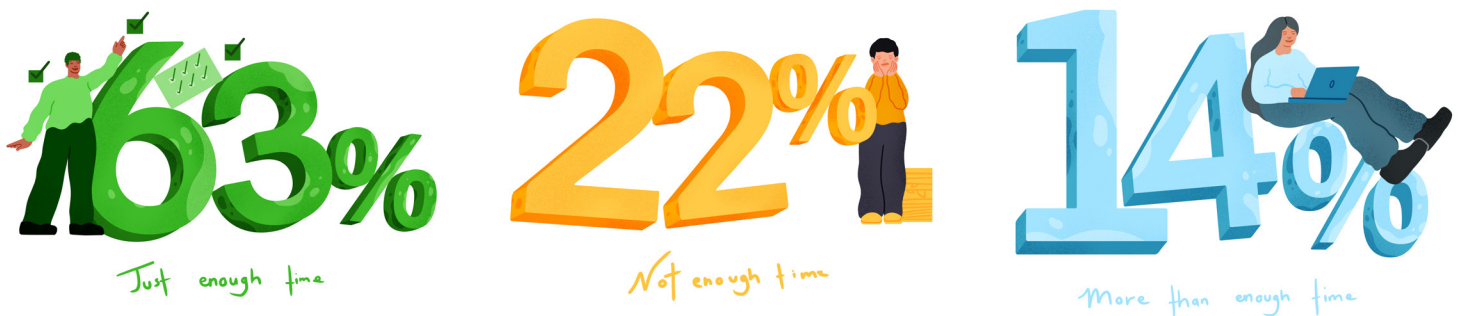
Do stakeholders feel researchers have enough time?

Participants' perceptions of stakeholder expectations shifted toward the "more than" end of the scale. Most participants reported their *stakeholders believed* they had "More than Enough Time" (49%) and "Just Enough Time" (48.3%) roughly equally, followed distantly by "Not Enough Time" (2.7%). In all, most (63%) of user researchers believed they had "just enough" time to complete a recent project and only a small percentage (14.6%) believed they had "more than enough time." However, nearly half (49%) of researchers believed their stakeholders viewed their timeline as "more than enough."

Stakeholder belief that UXR had "More than enough time"
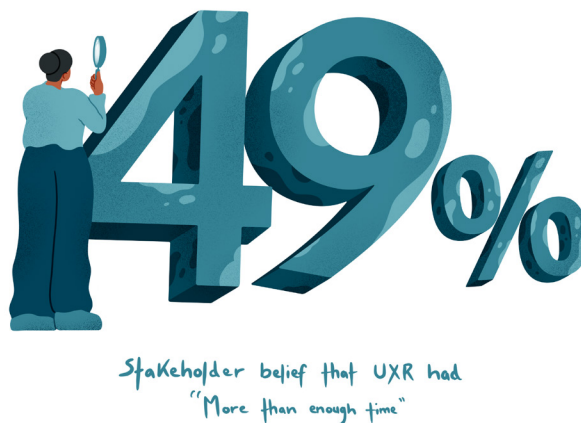
Importantly, stakeholders *themselves* were not surveyed—these data report on the perceptions of user researchers about stakeholder expectations. These are still useful to begin benchmarking comparative temporal expectancies.

There were no significant differences across project types for self or stakeholder perception of the time it took to complete. In other words, participants reported roughly the same breakdowns across reported time categories (i.e., "Not Enough," "Just Enough," "More than Enough") for each project type (i.e., Discovery, Iterative, Evaluative, and Post-Release Feedback).

In all, this suggests that the trend of "I have just enough time, leaning toward not enough" plays out across most types of projects today's user researcher takes on.

These results track with colloquial information related to the stakeholder/user researcher expectation gap. That is, stakeholders want "answers" ever faster and believe user researchers have ample time to complete requests.

A small percentage of these participants reported their stakeholders believed they had not enough time (2.7%). This might be most indicative of this dialectic tension, especially when compared to the nearly one-quarter of these same researchers who reported not having enough time (22.4%). Expectations can often be honed through rapport-building and ongoing partnership—it would be therefore instructive to learn from these researchers how long they've worked with and delivered insights to the stakeholders on whom they're reporting.

To what extent does a relationship mediate or moderate these differences? Are more senior user researchers better able to expectation-set with their stakeholders compared to more junior and new-to-field folks? These are useful questions to explore in future research.

What research activities take the most time?

Participants were similarly asked about the typical phases of a project (i.e., design, recruitment, fieldwork, analysis, and delivery) and which of these phases contributed to the time it took to complete a recent project.

Specifically, participants reported that analysis took the most time on a recent project (32.7%%) followed by recruitment (26.6%). Fieldwork (17.5%) and design (16.5%) were next most-reported, with delivery (6.7%) reported as taking the least amount of time.

Analysis takes up most project time

What activities do researchers need more time for?

Additionally, participants reported which of these same phases they wished to have more time for. This question was also posited for research projects *in general* (i.e., not just a recent project, but their practice overall).

When asked which phase they would have wanted more time for in a recent project, nearly half (49.7%) reported analysis. Interestingly, delivery was second (16.3%) followed by recruitment (13.6%), fieldwork (10.9%) and finally design (9.5%). For projects *overall*, the trend was replicated, with analysis at over half (51.5%) followed by recruitment (16.3%) and delivery (15.6%); fieldwork (9.5%) and design (7.1%).

I wanted more time for...

Analysis	51.5%
Recruitment	16.3%
Delivery	15.6%
Fieldwork	9.5%
Design	7.1%
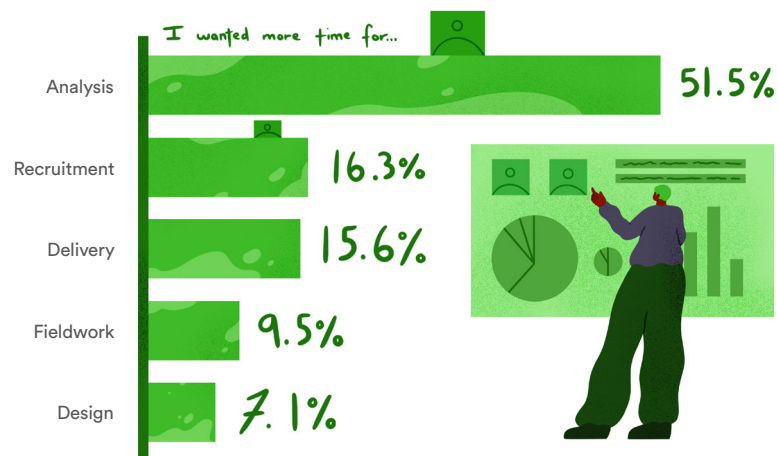
This trend—of researchers simultaneously reporting that analysis takes the most time and that they don't have enough for it—was largely replicated when examining across project types, save for two exceptions.

Namely, for both iterative and evaluative projects, participants reported a more equal distribution of time across all phases (sans delivery, which was still reported as taking the shortest amount of time). This trend was not the case in discovery or post-release feedback project types.

Overall, analysis—both for a recent project and for one's practice generally—seems to be the phase that which needs the most time and feels rushed simultaneously, creating quite a quandary for user researchers.

Arguably the most critical aspect of a UXR's charter: to render meaning and applicable insight from data, however gathered, analysis is still sorely lacking in time. However the field *got* here, it's plain that—at least this small sample—is craving more time to focus on the aspect of their practice which most showcases their value and expertise.
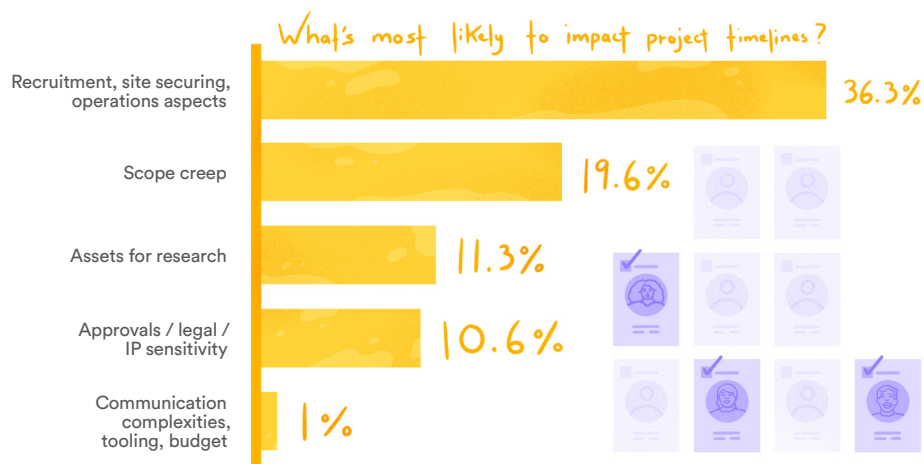
One final note: It is very interesting to see the consistently low percentages (usually no more than 5%) for "delivery and share out." Translating the hard-earned insights for audiences, via empathy-generating stories, workshops, or reports of all kinds, is hinted as something UXRs would like more time for, but don't prioritize currently.

Again, many UXRs juggle multiple projects concurrently and, once data are analyzed it's possible the delivery phase does not receive its just desserts due to scoping of new projects, fatigue, or a combination of both. This is speculation, to be sure, however the socializing of data findings is what helps "activate" data and truly turn it from a "finding" into an "insight." UXRs are still searching for the time to devote to this critical aspect of their practice.

What causes project delays?

Time constraints have the potential to weaken user research's effects and impact organizationally. Participants were asked about the reasons for time-constraints.

Results spotlighted the importance of research operations professionals, as "Recruitment, site securing, operations aspects" was far-and-away the most-selected response. 36.3% elected it as the reason for the project's time-to-completion. The next closest reason was "scope creep" at 19.6%.
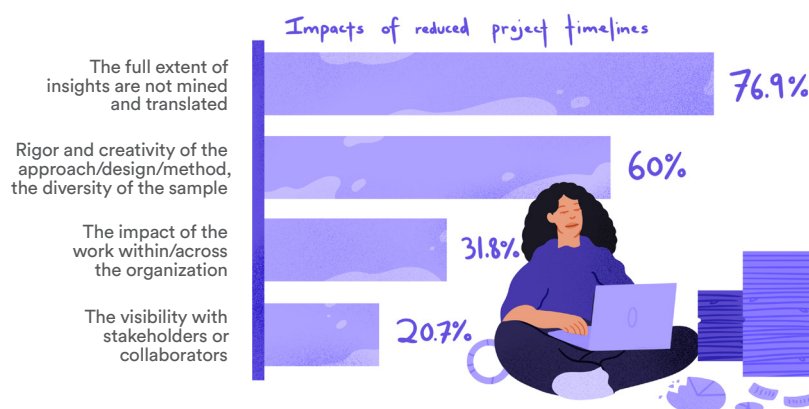

What's most likely to impact project timelines?

Recruitment, site securing, operations aspects	36.3%
Scope creep	19.6%
Assets for research	11.3%
Approvals / legal / IP sensitivity	10.6%
Communication complexities, tooling, budget	1%

Other reported bottlenecks included "Assets for research" (i.e. waiting on a prototype or concept—11.3%) and "Approvals/legal/IP sensitivity" (10.6%). Issues like communication complexities (between clients, stakeholders, or teams), tooling, and budget were all barely reported above 1% each. For this sample of user researchers, operational aspects of "doing" the work was the bottleneck to on-time completion of projects.

As user experience research matures and expands, these data suggest that leaders—both *of* these teams and organization-wide executives—prioritize the operations of insights gathering. Streamlining and organizing repeated aspects of work such as recruitment and incentives, site management (where applicable), and other variables like software licensing, templates, and repositories—will set companies up to more successfully harness the power of a user research function to meet its long-term goals... and do so at a pace to "keep up" with competitors. These operational aspects free user researchers to tackle the phase of their work most harmed: analysis, which, as explored above, has real implications for the impact of such work.

What are the consequences of not having enough time?

A multiple-select prompt was created to unpack the negative externalities of reduced project time. Despite offering participants an "Other" option, most chose from the provided responses.

The results show the full extent of harried, rushed, or shortened work: a full three-quarters of the sample (76.9%) selected "The full extent of insights are not mined and translated," demonstrating in stark terms that less time may also mean insights "left behind" and new opportunities under or unexplored.

Impacts of reduced project timelines

The full extent of insights are not mined and translated — 76.9%

Rigor and creativity of the approach/design/method, the diversity of the sample — 60%

The impact of the work within/across the organization — 31.8%

The visibility with stakeholders or collaborators — 20.7%

Three options were each selected by nearly 60% of participants: 1) "The rigor of the research design/method" 2) The creativity in approach/design/method used" and 3) The sample might not be as diverse or representative." Completeness, rigor, creativity, and diversity are all affected—according to these participants—when time to complete a project is reduced.

Other reported effects include "The impact of the work within/across the organization" (31.8%) and "The visibility with stakeholders or collaborators" (20.7%).

These findings align with other themes surfaced in this report. Specifically, that analysis is the area UXRs both have little—but want more—time for. Here again, when asked to select from a list of pernicious effects, these participants raised the spectre of insights, recommendations, learnings, and innovation "left on the cutting room floor," swept aside for—ostensibly—the next "critical" project and its "scrappy" timeline.

BUYING TIME

A 6-Approach Framework For User Researchers with Tight Project Turnarounds

Over 200 participants describe a go-to approach to securing more project time.

Many user experience professionals report a desire for more time to execute their work. This is the case both for specific aspects of a project (e.g., analysis, share out) and the work more broadly (e.g., aligning with stakeholders, assessing priority). How do experience professionals *make* time, *buy* time, or *create* time, if at all?

In this report, People Nerds analyzed open-ended responses to just that question, producing a six-theme matrix of strategies and tactics. Together, these create a window into how today's UXR is assessing, managing, negotiating—and in some cases, fudging—their project time.

Thematic organization

As a set, the themes organize around two axes: control (i.e., how much agency and/or control can a UXR exercise to flex a research timeline) and engagement (i.e., how much communication, transparency, and updating occurs between the UXR and their insight audiences). The combination of these two criteria are useful in situating each of the six themes outlined below.

- Low control, low engagement: White-Knuckling
- Low control, high engagement: Status Updates
- High control, low engagement: Efficiencies and Tricks-of-the-Trade
- High control, high engagement: Snackable Sharing and Educate/Advocate
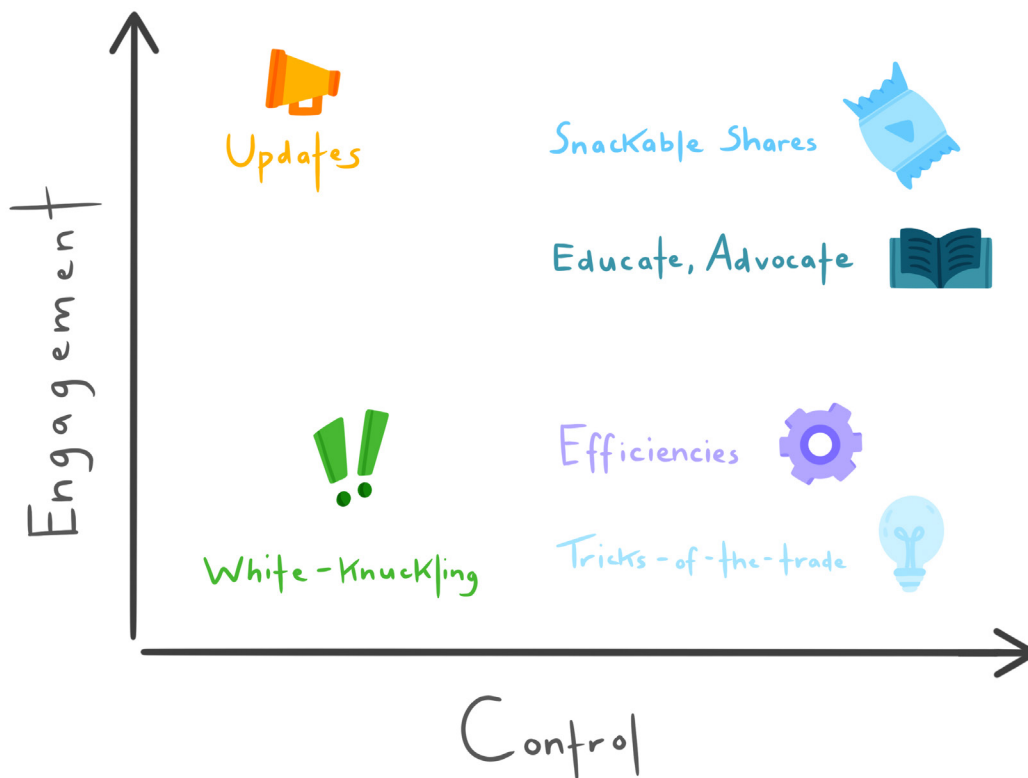
Below we consider the themes individually, defining the animating features and providing examples of each. Taken together, these themes represent a holistic look at how today's user research professional navigates and adapts to time pressure as an external constraint on the research process.

White-Knuckling (<1%)

Responses within this theme implicitly said "I can't not do this" and showcased participants going above-and-beyond expectations to meet deadlines. Responses here did not indicate any efficacy to ask for more time—doing so was not an option for folks in this theme. Instead, they leaned on networks, worked outside regular hours, or just simply "did more" to finish on-time.

Although the smallest in amount, the *White-Knuckling* theme is important to surface and discuss, as it relates to emergent—and important—conversations about burnout, mental health, and ideal worker norms within the user research industry.

Despite the smaller frequency, these are responses likely familiar to anyone working in the time-crunching, innovation-as-speed work of technology (which was the largest participant work industry reported). For some, it seems, more time is not an option.

Examples of this theme:

- *"Work outside normal hours."*
- *"Holding my breath. There are NO tactics that I can use to hurry compliance or legal."*
- *"Ask a friend to help."*
- *"Read faster."*
- *"Work on weekends."*

Resource for when you're worried you're "White-Knuckling":

- Dealing with Burnout as a User Researcher
- Why Self-Care Matters in UX Research
- Learning to Let Things Break: "Indirect Actions" that Promote Well-being
- 9 User Research Hacks for your Next Resource-Limited Project
- A Practical Synthesis Strategy for Busy UXRs

Status Updates (13.7%)

Responses within this theme focus mostly on status-updating and general outreach with collaborators and stakeholders. Some participants reported simply asking for more time, while others discussed regular progress updates.

Compared to the *Educate/Advocate* theme, this bucket of strategies was much more about straightforward need-to-know communication. Few responses in this theme mentioned modifying workflows—instead, foregrounding the importance of honest, forthright, and transparent communication *about the current state of things*. Again, responses in this theme lacked the educational element of *Advocacy*. For these folks, updating was enough to buy time and keep going.

Examples of this theme:

- *"Communicated status regularly."*
- *"Project ownership and communication with stakeholders."*
- *"Asking for more time."*
- *"Honest conversation with client/stakeholders."*
- *"Simply just asked my stakeholders if pushing a readout date is fine."*
- *"Identify hold ups and clearly communicate with stakeholders that more time is needed."*
- *"Ensuring key stakeholders are involved in early objective + alignment phases of planning."*

Resources for more effective stakeholder communication:

- How to Debrief Your Team After a Research Session
- 3 Stakeholder Negotiation Tactics for UX Researchers
- 8 Collaborative (and Fun) Ways to Communicate Insights Remotely

Efficiencies (17.1%)

For responses coded within this theme, time was all about organization, "proper" planning, and flexible adaptation. Two sub-themes emerged: the first about *working smarter* and the second about *doing less or reducing scope*. Both showcased a high degree of control and autonomy on the part of the user experience professional, but less consistent reliance on overt communication.

Some folks reported telling their stakeholders about the modifications, while others seemed to describe a playbook they typically reach for on any project whose deadline is steadily (or quickly) approaching. Strategies and tactics within this theme often referenced scheduling, "ruthless" prioritization," and workflow structures such as parallel pathing or sprints.

This theme also foregrounded a reliance on repeatable frameworks, templates, outlines, and other reusable research assets to help speed-up and streamline regular research components; many participants mentioned using templates for recruitment, certain study or test designs, and even deliverable forms.

In addition to time-boxing and templates, responses in this theme described shortcuts, workarounds, and generally "scrappier" ways of doing things (e.g., asking fewer questions in a survey, scheduling fewer interviews, recruiting the same folks for a second study). Overall, of these responses, the focus was that time can be found—even small chunks of it—with planning, shortcuts, and packageable phasing.

Examples of this theme:

- *"It's less about creating more time overall and more about creating the right shortcuts and templates in the timeframe to have more time to spend on different phases."*

- *"Use methodologies that build over time with the same respondents. That way, we can start early and get some findings but then also deepen findings later on."*

- *"Start project design in the proposal phase, before the project is fully commissioned, so we can hit the ground running."*

- *"Try to create repeatable frameworks for recruitment, approvals, methods to get things up and running quickly to leave more of the available time for analysis."*

- *"Set up a reporting style before fieldwork is complete (which can change during the actual reporting, but at least gets me thinking about style/content)."*

- *"Break down a piece of research into two, so that the most urgent data could be gathered, while the rest of the scope could still benefit from a proper, rigorous methodology."*

- *"I have skipped fancy design work on the deliverables and gone bare bones. Clients seem to approach minimalism anyway."*

- *"Factor in desk research at the start to buy time for recruitment. Learnings from desk research inform the screener and discussion guide."*

Resources for creating efficiencies:

- 3 Strategies for "Templatizing" Your User Research (Includes Example Templates)

- Stop Lights and Rainbow Charts: Two Engaging Templates for Qual Research Reports

- Using Private Research Panels for Ongoing, Rapid Customer Feedback

- Sample Study Designs: Personas, User Journeys, Concept Tests, Product Feedback, and More

- How to Write a User Research Plan That Sets Your Project Up for Success

- Make Every Step of Your Research Process More Efficient: Advice for Solo (or Bandwidth-Low) UXRs

Tricks-of-the-Trade (15.8%)

This theme showed shrewdness, a knowledge of "the game" of doing research, and a strong grasp of control and autonomy over who truly needs to know what, and when. For many of these respondents, the complexities of managing a project's phases, stakeholder needs for updating, and the time offered spaces to create "cloak and dagger" moments.

Tactics in this theme ranged from simply "padding time" in a proposal for recruitment or site securing, to dissembling or obfuscating statuses to secure more time. Others talked about embedding themselves into product team meetings to catch wind of projects before requests were officially made—saving time by getting a head start.

UXRs understand that products will likely be shipped with or without their insights, and these responses highlight professionals' adaptations to the machine of industry research—they're still delivering readouts that advocate for the user; the means by which they do so match the scrappiness of business.

Tactics within this theme were often done without alerting stakeholders or collaborators, and described communicating in covert ways. Reasons for delays were often not given, rationales *not* provided. Instead, this theme demonstrated that for some—we assume these folks to be more experienced researchers, although years working was not specifically asked—time is all a matter of perspective, and if cards are played "right," more time can be found.

Examples of this theme:

- *"Postpone the scheduled interview to gain more time — and let the designer know it was the respondent who had to reschedule."*
- *"Try to plan things taking longer than expected."*
- *"Not told anyone I was doing the research until it was done and synthesized."*
- *"...focus blame on things that can't be argued with like participant schedules / response rates."*
- *"Unofficially kickstarting recruitment for a project a few days prior to actually getting on a brief-setting call with the stakeholders to discuss the said project's scope."*
- *"Padding time. I know everything takes more time than I think it will, so I always increase the timeframes, especially for the parts I do not control."*
- *"Incorporate needs from additional/secondary stakeholders so the work covers more bases, and blame delays on the new stakeholders."*

Resources for buying more time, ahead of time:

- A Start-to-Finish Guide to User Research Project Management: Communicating a Timeline
- The 3 Types of Stakeholders You Work with as a UXR (and How to Win Them Over)

Educate/Advocate (35%)

This theme is largely about providing justifications and rationalizations for research—design, analysis, approach—decisions. Above and beyond simply "telling" stakeholders how long an interview might take, or informing them of a delay, responses coded in this theme showed the translational efforts undertaken by practitioners to educate their colleagues and stakeholders.

Educate/Advocate coheres around active and transparent time negotiations with stakeholders, with the twin goals of making the need for more time apparent, and securing buy-in on an extended timeline.

Very often, the means or processes by which user experience professionals produce and create insights are invisible; this theme demonstrates the impact rendering these means visible can (or might) have on timelines.

For participants leveraging these strategies and tactics, modifications to scope or a new question from a stakeholder was a teachable moment. Instead of simply adding time to the project, UXRs might surface the *impact on the timeline* or the rigor, scope, and kinds of recommendations they might make if such changes were adopted.

Importantly, this theme showcases the communicative adaptability, flexibility, and audience analysis many UXRs take to make their case most persuasive. Responses in this theme were often written in the language of industry, describing "cost-benefit analyses," the "ROI" of a design choice, or how a change might impact the rigor of recommendations and therefore, the eventual business or product experience impact.

This theme exemplified the efforts many front-line practitioners take to contextualize their practices for their stakeholders, reiterating just how little insights-hungry business units and stakeholders "know" about the practice of user experience research. For the bulk of our sample, education, advocacy, and expectation-setting is the manner by which they secure—or at least attempt to secure—more time.

Examples of this theme:

- *"Laying out the hard bottlenecks and making it clear where I can't compromise given the current place. I give stakeholders the options to make the research less rigorous, pick a different methods, provide extra resources, or give more time. Typically, this leads to extra time..."*

- *"Documenting time across all research projects to show how many hours we ACTUALLY used vs what was given to us. Then creating a 'calculator' based on historical data to better estimate when a new project will be."*

- *"Describe the tradeoffs and risks of cutting corners, e.g. if we don't take the time to talk to a representative sample, we risk making decisions based on potentially biased data."*

- *"Highlighting the risks of NOT learning about a specific thing. Especially if it's a big unknown and the risk is high of developing the wrong thing."*

- *"Explaining to stakeholders that the extent of insights are entirely dependent on the right research methods and time to analyze and translate the results. If rushed, key findings can be overlooked."*

- *"Referred to OKRs as a way to support doing things more intentionally vs. just quickly."*

- *"Sharing the cost of NOT doing it the right way (launching something incorrect = errors, tickets, bug fixes, support resources = more costly than doing research)."*

- *"...I'm the only person at my organization with a background in qualitative research, and stakeholders don't know what they don't know. Once they understand how much time is required to analyze and synthesize an interview, they are usually very understanding and accommodating."*

Resources for educating stakeholders:

- <u>Managing Research Timeline Expectations: When Scrappy Turns Crappy</u>
- <u>Contribute Meaningfully: The Power of a Research Strategy</u>
- <u>6 Pillars of Effective Researcher-Stakeholder Relationships</u>
- <u>Research Roadmaps: A Tactic for Greater Org-Wide Alignment (Template Included)</u>

Snackable Shareables (11%)

This theme showcases a strategic usage of time, with many participants describing early, ongoing, and iterative analysis to keep stakeholders at bay or interested in the data, buying them (the researchers) more time to dig deeper and more fully. Responses often used food-adjacent terms like "tease, "appetizer," or "snack" to situate a small, early look (or taste) of insights that buys more time for deeper, more fuller analysis.

Many user experience professionals are mixed methodologists, analyzing open and closed ended data together. The former often takes more time than the latter (transcribing, coding, thematizing, synthesizing) and every extra hour (or day) can make a big difference.

Within this theme, participants showcased a very strategic approach to analysis; instead of a single, long session keeping stakeholders waiting for a full report, they opted for a piecemeal, breadcrumb approach. This was often described to give "cover" for more time, and to keep stakeholders interested in the project and curious about other elements (therefore opening the space for a conversation about *shifting* or *expanding* the timeline).

In all, this theme showcases how tactical and flexible a user insights professional can be to "meet" a deadline, and the undefined nature of a "deliverable," which might be a series of rolling, bite-sized shareouts as opposed to a single, monolithic report. Interestingly, the share out/delivery phase was also one these participants reported wishing more time for in our top-line study. With this theme, we can see one way they're creating space for that, too.

Examples of this theme:

- *"Offer a teaser of the insights that piques stakeholder interest...so that I can pull more time for synthesis."*
- *"Sharing snippets or simple findings in order to satiate hungry stakeholders, which buys time for more thorough analysis and delivery."*
- *"Staggered delivery of reports/insights (topline followed by full report)."*
- *"Present first insights and associated questions collected in the beginning of the research to convince about the need to do more research to find answers."*
- *"Share out some small bites of potential insights along the research. Smaller deliveries."*
- *"Transparency: showing what is available unfinished as a teaser for what full analysis can yield."*
- *"I will lay out the findings document (aka report) in tandem with the interview script. This helps me focus on analysis when the fielding is complete and not trying to figure out how slides will look or how the information will flow."*

Resources for "snackable" share outs:

- How to Write Actionable User Research Summaries (With Checklist + Examples)
- How to Present Your Research So That Stakeholders Take Notice and Take Action

Conclusion

No one theme dominated the reported strategies and tactics for "obtaining" for project time. This demonstrates the diversity in execution of practices; an emergent field (even one with a "seat" at many an organizational table) such as user experience research is still firming its foundational approaches to methods and project management.

Granted, these responses were offered absent context around the goals, timelines, and success rates. In addition to the convenient, non-representative sample, the prompt used to generate these responses asked for a strategy or tactic, not *all* strategies and tactics. Future work should strive to collect more responses from broader swaths of the user experience community to establish reliability.

These methodological limitations withstanding, these data suggest robust set of potential strategies and tactics other UXRs and insights professionals might use if deadlines loom large. As user experience research and design thinking practices mature across and within industries, it is hoped that advocacy is smoother with more organizational buy-in and awareness generally of the impact such practices can have on experiences and the humans they hope to delight.

ASSESSMENT

Which "Time Buying Tactic" Does Your Team Rely On?

"If I need more time to complete a research project, I _____."

1. **Just put my head down and work faster.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

2. **Ask for more time.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

3. **Create rinse-and-repeat frameworks whenever possible.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

4. **Keep quiet on my progress until it's time to deliver report/insights.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

5. **Outline the pros and cons of a method on the delivery time.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

6. **Share a teaser or top-line readout before I've analyzed everything.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

7. **Find more time by working weekends or longer hours.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

8. **Schedule a conversation to discuss extending delivery.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

9. **Leverage ruthless time-tracking to find pockets of space.**

    ☐ Like me
    ☐ Unlike me

10. **Pad the time it will take to complete any/all phases of the work.**

    ☐ Like me
    ☐ Unlike me

11. **Highlight the risks of cutting corners or skipping steps.**

    ☐ Like me
    ☐ Unlike me

12. **Send small, bite-sized insights like a quote or frequency as I find them.**

    ☐ Like me
    ☐ Unlike me

13. **Ask for help from friends or colleagues not on the project.**

    ☐ Like me
    ☐ Unlike me

14. **Send regular updates on how each phase is moving/progressing.**

    ☐ Like me
    ☐ Unlike me

15. **Pre-planning subsequent phases before current ones finish.**

    ☐ Like me
    ☐ Unlike me

16. **Say "yes" to more requests to bloat the project and extend delivery dates.**

    ☐ Like me
    ☐ Unlike me

17. **Explain the differences between methods and why one fits better.**

    ☐ Like me
    ☐ Unlike me

18. **Stagger the deliver of my readout and the full report.**

    ☐ Like me
    ☐ Unlike me

19. **Grin-and-bear it: There's really no way to get more time.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

20. **Try to be transparent, keeping folks involved and in-the-know.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

21. **Chunking, breaking, or pathing projects up into manageable bites.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

22. **Blame slowdowns on "uncontrollable" things like show rates or collaborators.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

23. **Spotlight the importance more time can have on recommendation confidence.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

24. **Pick simple findings to give stakeholders and dig into richer questions later.**

   ☐ Like me
   ☐ Unlike me

→ Add up your score using the following:

"Like me to…"

Items 1, 7, 13, 19, = White-Knuckler

Items 2, 8, 14, 20 = Status Updater

Items 3, 9, 15, 21 = Efficiency Finder

Items 4, 10, 16, 22 = Tricks of the Trader

Items 5, 11, 17, 23 = Educator/Advocator

Items 6, 12, 18, 24 = Snackable Sharer

What's the Most Efficient Org-Structure for User Research? A Look At Stakeholder Alignment Across Team Types

To the extent that an organization's efficiency depends on the interconnectedness of its business units, teams, and front-line practitioners, any small disruption in workflows has the potential to ripple upward, affecting long-term strategy and OKRs.

People Nerds' recent examination of the role and impact of time in user-centered insights professionals' work has largely focused on the micro-level: the tactical, person-centric outcomes. What are the average completion times for projects and how do UXRs advocate or create the space for more time? These findings paint an important, but incomplete picture. Thus, in our final chapter, we'll fill in that picture by unpacking the implications for those building teams, growing companies, and working with insights functions.

Perceived stakeholder <> UXR alignment

One of the most important and repeatedly-examined concepts within the human-centered community is "alignment." We optimize for alignment within teams (e.g., how aligned are two UXRs on the best approach for supporting stakeholder asks) and between teams (e.g., how aligned are stakeholders with their insight-delivering partners).

Intra- and inter-team differences can take many forms, but expectations around project, insight, and outcome *delivery* is certainly one realm of misalignment that pervades the user research space. In short, UXRs and their stakeholders aren't always aligned on how long it takes (or ought to take) to complete any research request.

When 300 user experience professionals were recently surveyed about their perceptions of project timelines, they were asked about the extent to which they were aligned with their stakeholders. Almost half (49.2%) of participants reported being "Somewhat aligned" with their stakeholders, while about a third (34.4%) reported being "Mostly aligned". Fully 10% of participants reported they were "Not at all aligned" and only 6% of respondents felt they were "Aligned perfectly" with their stakeholders.

Not great news, but not entirely *terrible* news either. For this sample of UXRs and leaders, a significant minority reported good alignment, and the lion's share of folks reported at least some alignment on the time expectations to complete research projects. As we reported elsewhere, misalignment—usually with stakeholders expecting faster turnaround times than UXRs—can have organizational implications. Specifically:

- Under-mined or under-investigated projects—essentially, insights "left behind"
- Brittle or lax research approaches and designs—AKA, stifling innovation
- Narrow recruitment that lacks diversity and/or representativeness—stunting impact

What team structure is most aligned?

In addition to asking about perceived alignment, participants reported their current or most-recent team structure, electing one of the following response options (followed by the proportion of that structure in our sample):

- Embedded Within a Team (Research is part of a single department)—32.1%
- Solo (Company's only UXR)—16.2%
- Embedded Across Teams—15.9%
- Hybrid (Some researchers are centralized, others embedded)—15.2%
- Central Agency—14.2%
- Freelancer—6.4%

We crossed these team structures with variables examining stakeholder alignment, median days to complete a recent project, and the elements of executing research that typically elongates timelines. This created a unique profile for each org structure.

	Freelancer	Solo	Embedded Within a Team	Embedded Across Teams	Hybrid	Agency
Alignment Perception	57.9% Mostly 26.3% Somewhat	43.8% Mostly 37.5% Somewhat	46.3% Somewhat 38.9% Mostly	70.2% Somewhat 21.3% Mostly	54.5% Somewhat 25% Mostly 15.9% Not at all	52.4% Somewhat 28.6% Mostly
Time Impacts*	27.8% Recruitment/ site issues 27.8% Approvals/legal/IP	47.9% Recruitment/site issues 14.6% Assets for research 14.6% Approvals/legal/IP	35.1% Recruitment/ site issues 22.3% Scope creep	31.9% Recruitment/ site issues 23.4% Assets for research	37.8% Recruitment/ site issues 22.2% Scope creep	31% Recruitment/site issues 23.8% Scope creep
Median** Project Completion Days	45.5	28	28	42	42	42

* Other response options not represented: "Budget(s)," "Tooling/platform issues," "Resourcing bandwidth," "Client or stakeholder interruptions," "Other miscommunication."

** The median was used to account for a large standard deviation and is a more accurate representation of the number of days each structure "took" to complete a project.

The team structure with the least amount of reported stakeholder alignment was "Hybrid," which was the only one with a double-digit percentage of "Not at all aligned" (nearly 16%).

"Embedded Across Teams" is also of note here, as it had the smallest percentage of "Mostly aligned" reports (21.3%). Both freelancer and solo reported more "Mostly" alignment, at 57.9% and 43.8% respectively.

For this sample, it seems that structures which disperse UXRs across an organization (hybrid and embedded across teams) are less aligned than structures with smaller teams or teams-of-one. **No team structure had a majority of UXRs reporting being "mostly" aligned with their stakeholders;** whatever team structure, leaders might consider prioritizing alignment-increasing activities.

Recruitment, site issues, and other operations issues was the most reported reason for time delays for every single team structure, paralleling the results we surfaced in our top-line readout.

Operations—especially the management and support of recruitment—comprised no less than a quarter of the reasons for project timeline elongation and was as high as 47.9% (for solo researchers). These data, as well as research with organizational leaders, continues to spotlight the importance of operations professionals. When UXRs have support professionals to organize sites, manage recruitment, and establish partnerships for incentives, there is more space (and time) for collaboration and—ostensibly—stakeholder alignment.

After issues with research operations, participants across team structures mentioned "assets for research" (e.g., awaiting prototypes, app versions or other elements necessary for their work), "approvals/IP/legal matters" (e.g., uncertainty around what they can legally ask and show would-be participants), and "scope creep" as features elongating their project timelines. The first two could be slotted under the broader operations umbrella, while the third is another sign of misalignment between stakeholders, collaborators, and insights professionals. As we uncovered in another report, many of these participants leverage educational and advocacy-like strategies to "buy" more time for their work.

Time advocacy strategies and project completion time

Time-buying strategies (our open-ended analysis produced six in total) were crossed with both the median days to complete a project and team structure, producing teams-based profiles.

First, we examined how the strategies folks' reported might relate to the typical length of a recent project. Results showed that professionals working on shorter projects relied most on the strategies of "White-Knuckling" (e.g., working weekends) and finding "Efficiencies" (e.g., running research activities simultaneously).

Those working on longer projects relied most on "Tricks-of-the-Trade" and "Educate/Advocate" to minimize time pressures. It's important to note that "White-Knuckling" was reported as a strategy only by eight participants in our sample.

Here is a full breakdown of the strategies for obtaining more time and the median days to complete a research project:

Strategy Used	Status Updates	Educate/Advocate	Tricks-of-the-Trade	Efficiencies	Snackable Shareables	White-Knuckling
Median Days	35	49	56	28	42	28
N Reporting	32	81	37	39	27	8

We can't tell from these data, what the so-called "direction of causality" is. It may be, for instance, that White-Knuckling shortens timelines, such as when UXR pros work extreme hours to wrap projects. Alternatively, White-Knuckling may only be a *viable* time-buying tactic for shorter projects, with longer stints of the grin-and-bare-it approach risking burnout.

We also aren't able to tell from these data if longer timelines *necessarily* meant better, more rigorous projects (or if shorter timelines adversely impacted output quality). We do have evidence from these data that UXRs believe more time produces more impactful, rigorous, and creative research.

Second, we were interested in how a UXR's team structure related to their reported strategy for securing more time to complete a project. As previously reported, the most frequent time-buying strategy involved educating stakeholders, collaborators, and clients on the rationale for research design choices.

Drilling down further, we uncovered some team-specific differences of note:

- **Solo UXRs** are the most likely, followed by those embedded within a team, to leverage regular status updates.
- **Advocacy and educational strategies were reported the most by "Embedded Across Teams" structures** and least by "Embedded Within a Team" structures.
- **"Embedded Within a Team"** structures also reported using Tricks-of-the-Trade the most, nearly twice as much as the next team structure (freelancers).
- Although it was the least reported strategy across all team structures, **freelancers reported White-Knuckling it the most.**

In general, these data suggest that for most UXRs, attempting to advocate and educate stakeholders is the go-to method for buying project time, after which their team structure plays a role in determining their secondary strategy.

Here is the complete breakdown of time-obtaining strategies crossed by team structure:

	Updates	Advocate/Educate	Tricks-of-the-Trade	Efficiencies	Shareable Insights	White-Knuckling
Freelancer	7.1%	35.7%	14.3%	28.6%	7.1%	7.1%
Solo	18.4%	34.2%	13.2%	21.1%	10.5%	2.6%
Embedded	18.1%	29.2%	25.0%	16.7%	6.9%	4.2%
Team Embedded	7.3%	46.3%	12.2%	19.5%	12.2%	2.4%
Hybrid	12.9%	35.5%	12.9%	12.9%	22.6%	3.2%
Agency	10.7%	42.9%	10.7%	14.3%	17.9%	3.6%

Finally, we examined whether those time advocacy strategies that are *more* communicatively engaged associate with greater stakeholder alignment than those that are lower in engagement.

	High Engagement Strategies			"Work Smarter" Low Engagement Strategies		"Work Harder" Low Engagement Strategies
Strategy Used	Status Updates	Advocate/Educate	Snackable Shareables	Efficiencies	Tricks-of-the-Trade	White-Knuckling
Mean Stakeholder Alignment	2.41			2.31		1.88

To do this, we grouped the time advocacy strategies into supra categories, based on their level of engagement. The first supra category reflects the three *high-engagement* strategies (i.e., Updates, Advocate/Educate, Snackable Shareables). The second supra category reflects two *low-engagement* strategies that reflect a "working smarter" approach; these folks don't appear to engage stakeholders directly to buy more time, but use efficiencies or using tricks of the trade to resolve (or preempt) time crunches.

The third and final supra category consists solely of the White-Knucklers—those simply "working harder" and "putting their heads down" to meet deadlines.

High engagement strategies report highest stakeholder alignment (mean = 2.41), followed closely by "work smarter" low-engagement strategies (mean = 2.31). The least stakeholder alignment was reported among those (admittedly few respondents) who reported the "work harder" low-engagement strategy (mean = 1.88).

Conclusions

What might these data mean to a leader interested in the twin goals of on-time insight delivery and creating processes/workflows that enable their user insights professionals?

The first is to advocate for your team in stakeholder and cross-team meetings, and to coach UXRs to do the same. This was a strategy most-reported by our sample and one that "allowed for" longer project completion timelines.

User experience research—although a burgeoning field—is still evolving and maturing. It is critical to remind the organization of its role in advocating for the customer and creating the space for good design. Admittedly, this may frustrate front-line practitioners, who feel that advocating for their work feels precarious (as designers might have 20 years ago). These data seem to suggest, however, that it may "pay off" in added time, which can help UXRs execute to their full potential and delight stakeholders, to the benefit of users and customers.

The second is to consider one's team structure. This might be out of a leader's *immediate* control (e.g., budgets, internal organizational maps, growth curves), but these data suggest it does have an impact on important business-wide outcomes, such as cross-team alignment, project delivery timelines, and project quality.

Specifically, team structures where UXRs work more closely together—either in a single unit such as an agency or embedded together within a team—produces more collaborative time strategies such as advocacy and updates and reported shorter completion timelines. When UXRs are organizationally dispersed—embedded across teams or within a hybrid structure—perceived alignment drops and time to complete projects ticks upward.

PARTING THOUGHTS

Conclusions and Recommendations on Research Efficiency vs. Rigor

① Advocate for adequate analysis time.

Overwhelmingly, user researchers long for more time for analysis; it requires more time to do correctly than any other research activity, and was the project phase most likely to be cut short. When UXRs lack adequate time to complete a project, they're less likely to fully uncover the insights a given study may unearth. Educating stakeholders on the positive "ROI" of analysis time—in that it ensures maximum "insight yield" and more accurate findings—may help research teams bargain for the time they need.

② Invest more heavily in research operations.

Project delays often result from operational inefficiencies—with recruitment, site securing, approvals (legal/IP sensitivity) being oft-cited reasons for project bottlenecks. Investing in processes to streamline these activities, or in roles and teams to "own" research operations, could be invaluable for teams struggling to meet heavy demands for research insights.

③ Communicate, communicate, communicate

Predictably, high-engagement strategies (i.e., Updates, Advocate/Educate, Snackable Shareables) for "time-buying" led to greater researcher/stakeholder alignment. "White-Knuckling" ("overworking" to execute high-volume research) may feel necessary in "low-control" environments—but is unlikely to lessen the demands or improve alignment in the long run.

④ Optimize your team structure for stakeholder alignment.

Consider where within your organization user research "lives"—meaning, who insights professionals will most often be collaborating with and delivering to. If UXRs are not already embedded into those teams, be prepared to put in the extra effort towards education, advocacy, and cross-org communication.