

Quality Ratings of Thought Leadership for the First Half of 2021

White Space





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Introduction

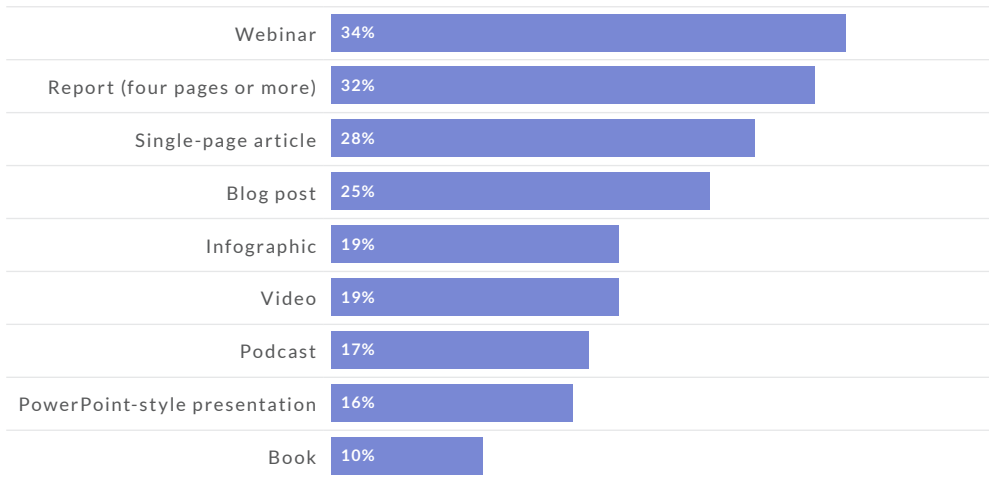
Long live the long report

The COVID pandemic continues to alter the rankings picture. A flurry of publishing activity on the part of firms that have only occasionally appeared in the rankings led to one of our biggest ever rankings tables in 2020, featuring 24 firms. That extraordinary burst of activity has now eased off for some, and in H1 2021, we are back to a more usual cohort of 20 publishers. This has inevitably changed the shape of the rankings table, mainly in the lower half.

However, the pandemic is not the only factor at play here. Clearly, some firms are moving away from publishing the longer-form reports that we assess in the quality ratings to focus on short-form content. This is perhaps understandable in a world in which so many competing forces are fighting for attention, but firms should not be too hasty to focus principally on more snackable content. We carried out a survey in June and July 2021 of 100 buyers of professional services in the US and UK, and the results were definitive: Long-form reports are still favoured by clients and rank only behind webinars in terms of their popularity. It's a situation we continue to monitor—there is, after all, no point in having a ratings report dedicated to a format that end users have no interest in, which would be the ultimate in academic exercises. But in 2021, the long-form report remains as relevant as ever.

Figure 1

How do you tend to consume thought leadership produced by professional services firms?
Please select the two formats you use most





Methodology

Our definition of thought leadership

We include material that is intended to say something new about business, technology, or the economy, and is positioned by the firm as such (e.g., thought leadership, insight, or research).

We do not include material that:

- is primarily and obviously designed to sell a particular consulting service or solution or is clearly straightforward marketing material;
- describes a single case study, except in cases where a firm is doing so to illustrate a broader point it is making about a subject;
- outlines the results of a survey with minimal analysis, or;
- provides factual operational guidance on legislative or accounting changes.

However, what seems perfectly clear on paper can at times be less clear when applied in practice. The first challenging boundary to manage is material around guidance on legislative or accounting changes. On this one, we do our utmost to separate factual guidance (which shouldn't be included) from material that brings the firm's experience and perspective to add value to the reader (and so should be added to our list).

A second challenge is generated by firms themselves when they decree some material to be "thought leadership" and other material (although it fits our criteria) as something other than thought leadership. In order to be fair to all firms, we take the intelligent reader's perspective: If they would view this in the same light as other "thought leadership", then we do too.

The third and final area we often find ourselves debating is around material produced in conjunction with outside bodies. On this one, if the intelligent reader would assume the consulting firm is the key driving force behind the piece, then we do too, and we add it to the list.

Formats

We include material that the reader would perceive as thought leadership—this may be a traditional PDF, an online report, or material presented through an interactive site. In order to compare like with like, we exclude blogs and blog-like material as well as standalone videos. In order to ensure that we look at substantive material, our focus is on material that exceeds 2,500 words in length.

Where content is presented in multiple ways, we always aim to score the optimum format or mix of formats.



Sampling

We review a random sample of each consulting firm's thought leadership based on a minimum of 20% of output or 10 pieces, whichever is the greater. For those firms producing more than 150 pieces of thought leadership in the six-month period, we cap our reviews at 30.

Firms included

The primary driver for inclusion in our list is the size of firm. However, some large firms produce little thought leadership, and some smaller firms produce a significant amount of high-quality content. The former we exclude from our process (although we keep a close eye on output), and the latter we consider including if we see a persistent commitment to thought leadership.

The following firms have appeared in our rankings at some point but have been previously excluded and not reinstated due to a scarcity of relevant content: BearingPoint (last appeared H1 2018), Booz Allen (H2 2018), DXC Technology (FY 2020), L.E.K. (H2 2019), Grant Thornton (FY 2020), Mercer (H2 2015), North Highland (FY 2020), PA Consulting (H2 2018), and TCS (FY 2020).

Please do let us know of any firms we are not analysing that you believe merit inclusion.

Our quality criteria

Our criteria are based on primary research with senior executives in large organisations that assesses the factors that drive individuals to pick up a piece of content; to read past the first paragraph and beyond; to have confidence in the value of what they have read; and to take action based on what they have absorbed.

Each piece is rated individually against a series of 15 questions. For each criterion, the piece of content receives a score between 1 and 5. This generates a total score for each piece of between 4 and 20.

Full details, including information about how each question is scored, can be found on White Space [here](#).