

Report  
September '22

EXTRACT



# PERSPECTIVES

Perceptions of Audit  
Firms in 2022



# What is this Client Perception Study?

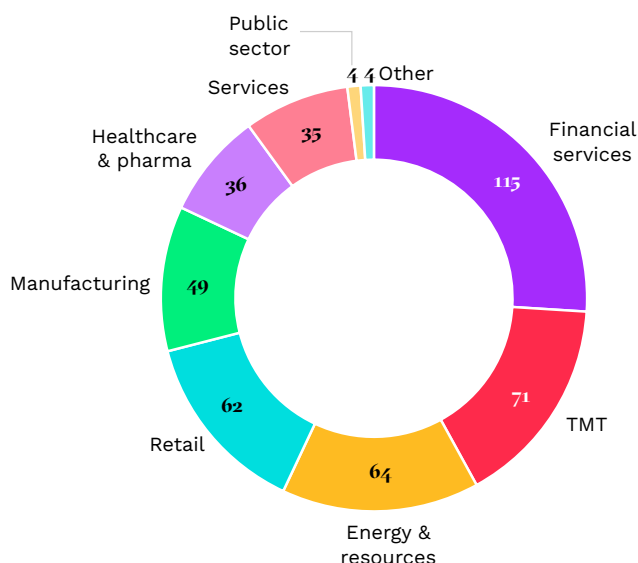
Underpinned by our extensive and industry-leading client survey, this report reveals what senior end-users think about the leading external audit firms in the US and UK. The report contains a detailed analysis of the client journey and examines how clients see firms differently as they move from awareness to then using a firm as their current external auditor. The report also includes rankings of the leading firms, in order to help you better understand your firm's positioning in the market, and the overall competitive landscape in which you are operating.

Created to provide you with a snapshot of client views, and to better understand how well positioned your firm is to support clients' needs, this report also comes with individual firm profiles to allow you to better understand your competition.

Below, we have illustrated the survey responses that underpin the analysis included in this report. You can read the full methodology [here](#).

## Who did we talk to?

We have 440 responses from our survey of CEOs, CFOs, and senior financial executives in the US and UK undertaken in July to August 2022, all of whom have been responsible for selecting external auditors or have worked with external auditors during the audit process in the past two years. We ask all respondents about their current auditor and two other firms they're familiar with, giving us 1,320 responses about different firms. They represent a wide range of sectors and business functions, and 91% work in organizations that generate more than \$500m in revenue.



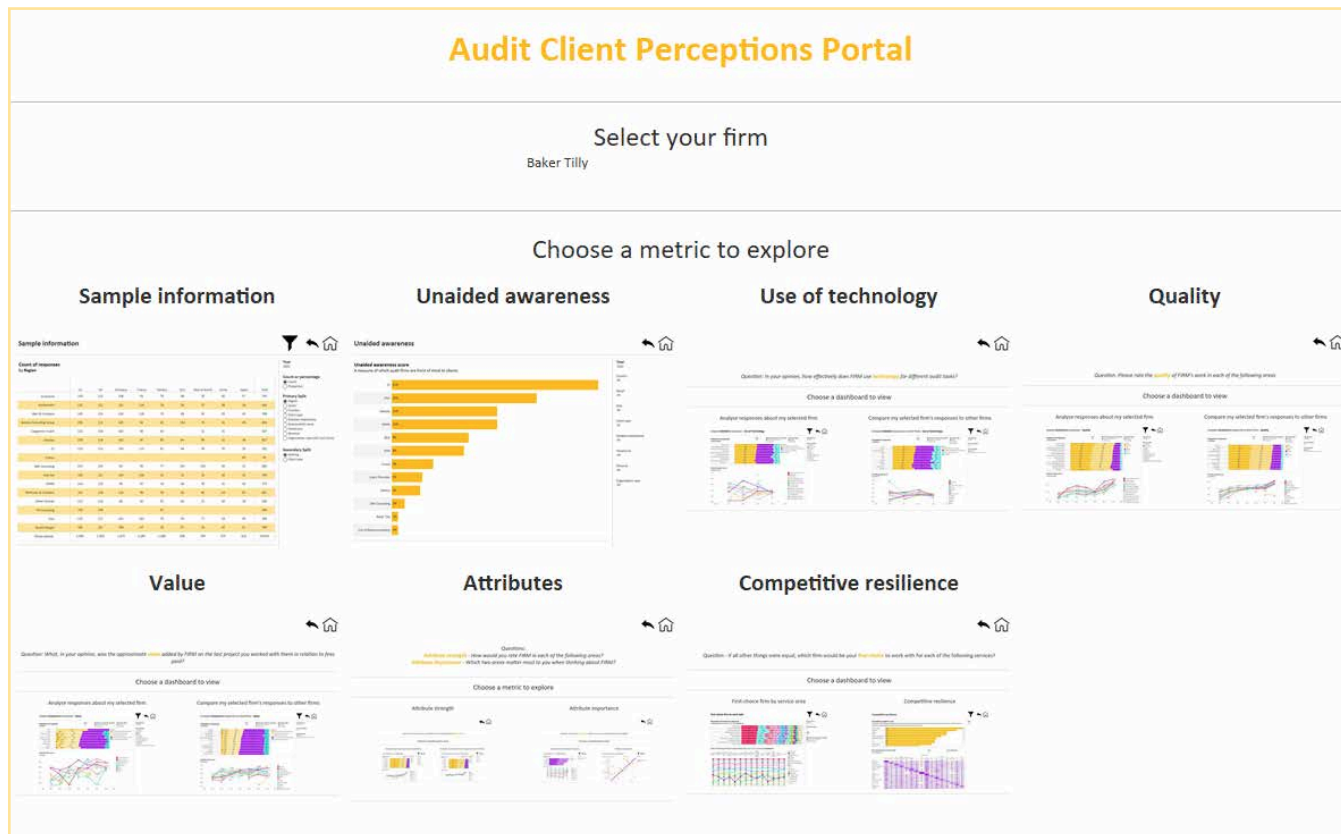
## Which firms are included in this report?

Firm	Did we ask about this firm in this market?	Did we ask about this firm in the US?	Detailed profile available?
Baker Tilly	X	✓	✓
BDO	✓	✓	✓
CLA (CliftonLarsonAllen)	X	✓	✓
Crowe	✓	✓	✓
Deloitte	✓	✓	✓
EY	✓	✓	✓
Grant Thornton	✓	✓	✓
KPMG	✓	✓	✓
Mazars	✓	✓	✓
PwC	✓	✓	✓
RSM	✓	✓	✓

# Discover more online

The data contained and referred to within this report is also available online on our new, redesigned online portal, where it can be sorted and filtered according to your preferences, also providing access to historic data from our past surveys back to 2019.

To access the data, visit the main [report page](#) and click the blue “Explore the data” button. Alternatively, you can visit the data portal page at <https://reports.sourceglobalresearch.com/portal/abacus/9352/dataview-audit-cps-2022-customer-data-portal>.



When you log on, you’ll notice a sample information dashboard. Here you can check the sample size for certain cuts of the data. In addition, hovering your cursor over values on a chart will display the number of responses related to that particular value. If you have any questions about any of the data, please [contact us here](#).

## How are these studies different?

The views about each firm expressed in this report come from senior end-users of external audit services—your clients and prospects, in other words. They differ from typical feedback studies firms often perform with their own customers in three important ways:

- **A multi-firm view.** Our reports enable professional services firms to see how they stack up against their competitors in the minds of clients.
- **A view from prospects, not just existing clients.** We include the views of direct clients (clients who currently use a firm as their external auditor) and prospects (clients who feel qualified to share an opinion about a firm but don't currently use it as their auditor). Prospects may have had exposure to advisory work the firm has done, used the firm previously as their external auditor, or they may have simply formed an impression based on reading a firm's thought leadership or being exposed to its marketing in some other form. This enables us to understand what we tend to think of as a firm's "brand pipeline", and about the differences between expectation (prospects) and reality (direct clients). It also tells us something about the differences between a firm's marketing and what it actually delivers.
- **Independence and expertise.** The trouble with conducting your own client research is that clients are often reluctant to express negative views about firms (and people) with whom they've worked closely. They have no such concerns when they're telling us. Added to which, we're able to bring the expertise we've gained over years of analysing the professional services market to bear, helping to interpret the results within the context of the wider market and the strategic priorities of firms.

It's important to remember that this is a study of client perceptions; a summarised view of what we're hearing from the market. It's not Source's view, nor is it a comment on market share or a recommendation to clients about which firms to buy from. The audience of these reports is very much the firms featured in them, and those interested in the strength of the competition in any given market.

We profile individual firms in our reports—indeed this remains one of the most popular parts of the reports with readers—and we do, separately, provide tailored presentations to firms that buy this report, contextualising the results for that individual firm. However, our Client Perception Studies are not exhaustive studies of clients' opinions about specific firms that remain statistically robust when filtered to provide detailed data about views at a very granular level of the market, and are not designed to replace the sort of in-depth client research that many firms often ask us to carry out for them.

All analysis is our own—as experts in interpreting client data, our aim is to help you make sense of it and bring the important messages to your attention quickly. It is not possible to influence our rankings either by subscribing to our research or by paying us money—it never has been and it never will be. To that end, Source Global Research is completely independent of any professional services firm we work with or comment on.

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These contradictory results may be because clients don't hold very strong preferences in favour of integrated firms	27
Clients think an independent auditor will be higher quality, and an independent consulting firm will have better technology	28

## 4 About this report

Our report mainly draws on our annual global client perceptions survey of senior end-users of risk firms. A detailed view of our methodology and more information about Source can be found below:

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## 4 Firm-by-firm analysis

A summary of clients' views about each firm in turn.

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RSM	69



# Overview of client perceptions of audit firms

## Leading firms across the buying cycle

A strong audit brand is not only one that attracts new clients to it, but can also then deliver strong work and retain them as clients.

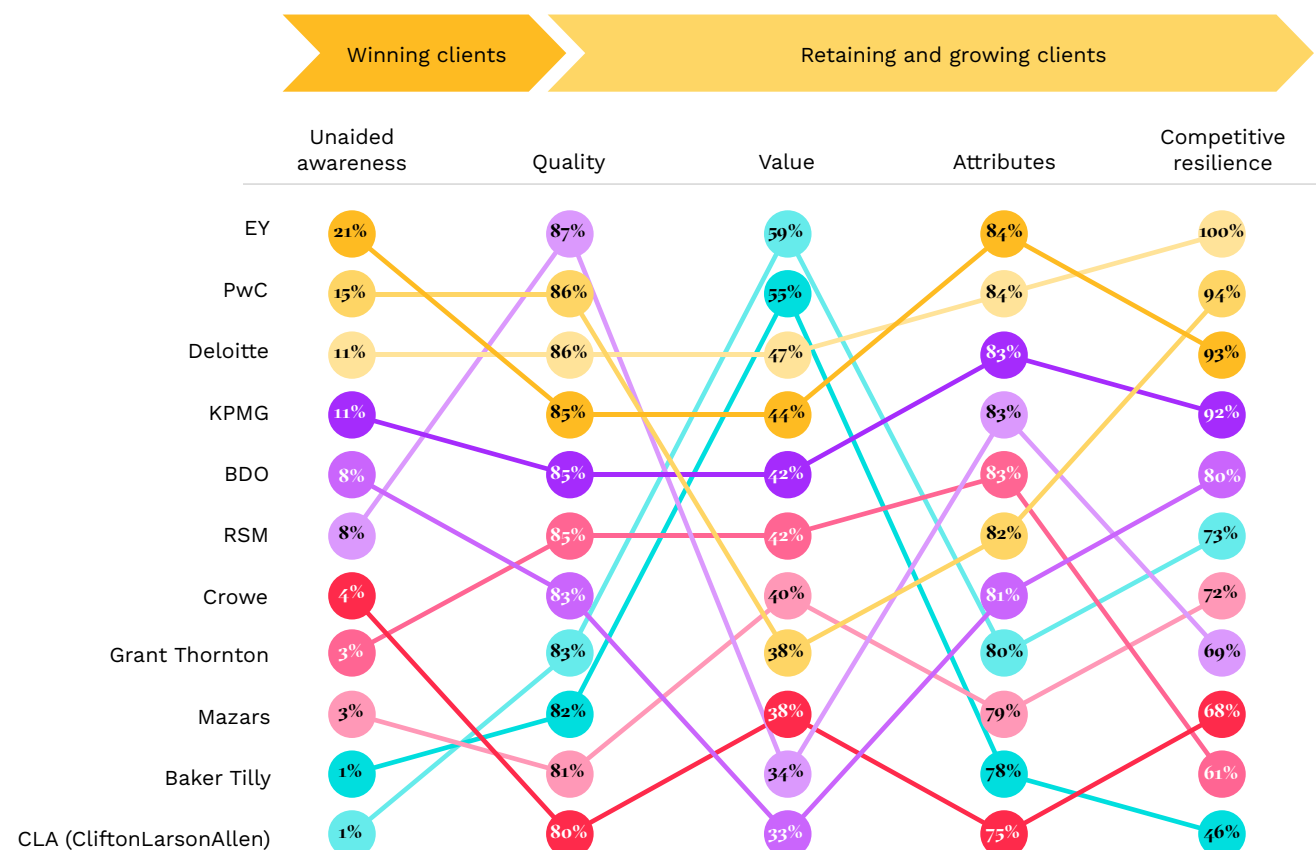
When it comes to winning clients, a key determinant is who is front of mind with buyers of audit. This will influence who clients are likely to shortlist for work and speak to first when considering who to go to as their external auditor. We look at this in the unaided awareness measure, which measures the first audit firm that comes to mind.

While grabbing the attention of clients is important to win their business in the first place, they won't be retained if clients don't think the firm can credibly deliver. To look at this further, we consider what clients tell us about the quality of firms' work across different aspects of the audit, the value relative to fees charged, and the experience of what it's like to work with a firm across a variety of attributes. The competitive resilience score also gives an indication of the extent to which firms are able to protect and keep the clients they have, and how likely they are to win additional clients from competitors.

The chart below shows the scores and ranking position of the firms we've asked about across all of those key metrics.

**Figure 1**

The top audit firms across key metrics





# What clients are telling us

## Technology overtakes people and innovation in importance to audit clients

Last year, clients were more concerned with the people firms put on audits, how innovative they were in their approach, and the decision-making demonstrated by the audit firm, than with firms' use of technology. The most important attribute was the use of advanced analytics, and while this is clearly technology dependent, the use of technology more broadly during the audit process was only said to be of middling importance.

This year, while being able to provide advanced analytics remains the most important attribute to clients, using advanced technology within audit has risen to become the second most important factor. Brand and reputation, communication, and quality of subject matter experts have also all become relatively more important.

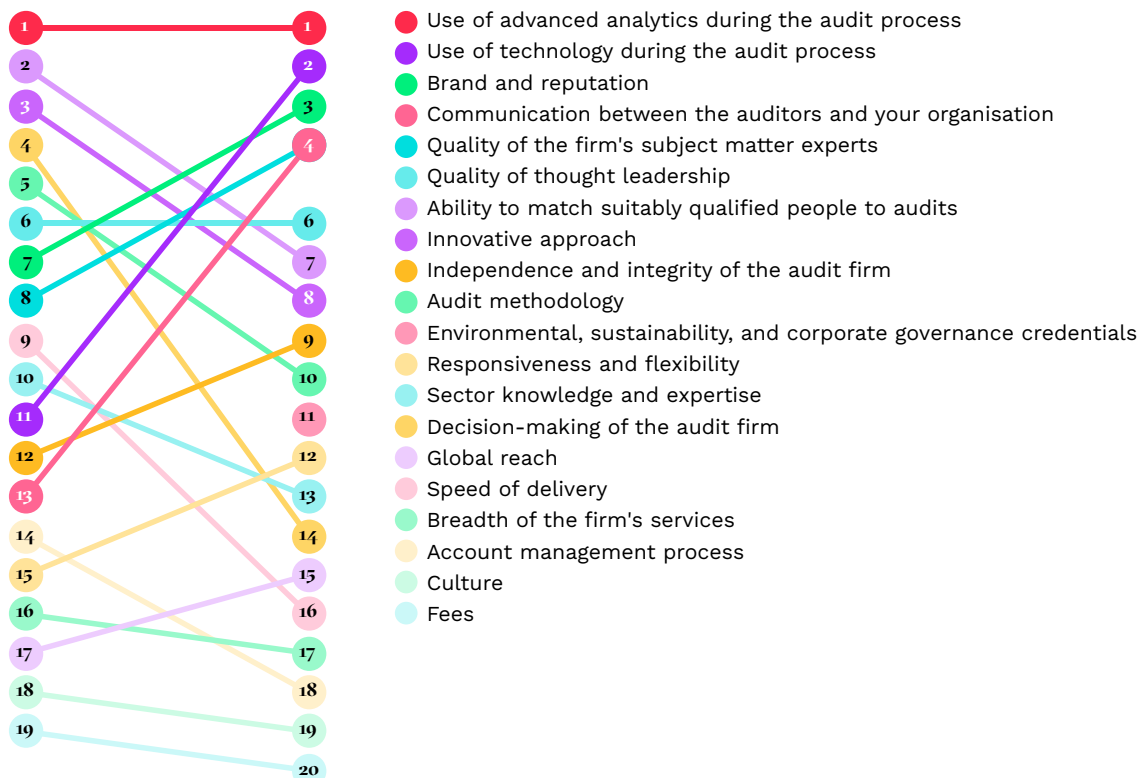
Figure 24

The use of advanced analytics and technology are now the most important attributes to clients

Attribute importance over time

2021

2022





# What clients think about the separation of audit and advisory services

## A majority of clients would prefer to work with an integrated firm

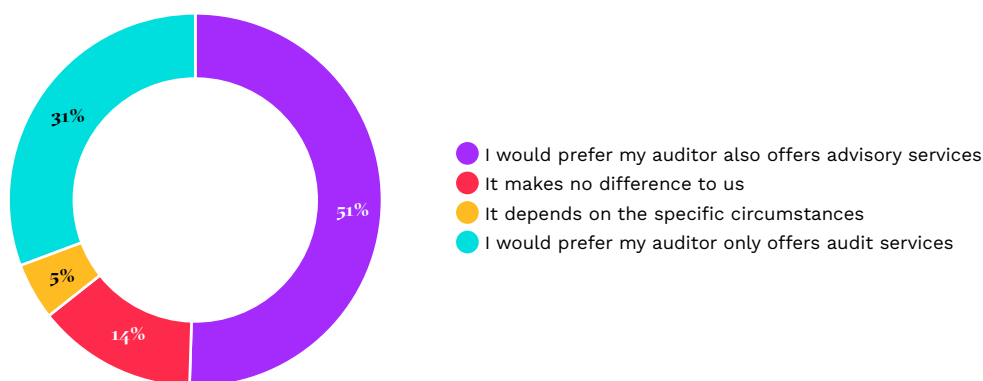
In May 2022, news broke that EY was considering splitting apart its audit and advisory businesses.<sup>2</sup> In September 2022, EY’s leadership announced their approval of the plan, but at time of writing, we still don’t know whether this will be approved by partners, and exactly what the new independent firms will look like.<sup>3</sup> However, we wanted to understand how audit clients felt in principle about working with an audit firm that only does audit, and indeed about working with a consulting firm that doesn’t do audit.

A sizeable minority (more than 30% of audit clients) would prefer to work with a separate auditor that only offers audit services. However, a larger proportion—around half of audit clients—would prefer to work with an integrated firm that offers consulting and advisory services, even if they can’t buy both types of services at the same time and the practices are operationally separate.

Audit clients express similar views about the consulting firms their organisations work with. Thirty percent would prefer consulting firms not to offer external auditing services, but the largest proportion (52%) would prefer a provider that offers both audit and consulting.

**Figure 27**

Half of audit clients would prefer an audit firm that also offers advisory services



<sup>2</sup> Financial Times, *EY plans global audit spin-off in drastic Big Four shake-up*, <https://www.ft.com/content/975214e6-a330-418d-9daf-f5b41b1847f7>.  
<sup>3</sup> Financial Times, *EY bosses approve radical break-up of Big Four firm*, <https://www.ft.com/content/41cc3968-0bcb-4300-82a8-22f1b9bdb838>.





# Firm-by-firm analysis

In this section of our report, we summarise the views of clients about each firm in turn. We explain further the methodology behind the data presented here in the [Methodology in full](#) section later in this report.

Baker Tilly	<a href="#">page 31 &gt;&gt;</a>
BDO	<a href="#">page 34 &gt;&gt;</a>
CLA (CliftonLarsonAllen)	<a href="#">page 37 &gt;&gt;</a>
Crowe	<a href="#">page 40 &gt;&gt;</a>
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# About this report

## Methodology in full

### Who did we talk to?

Figure 34

Respondents' role

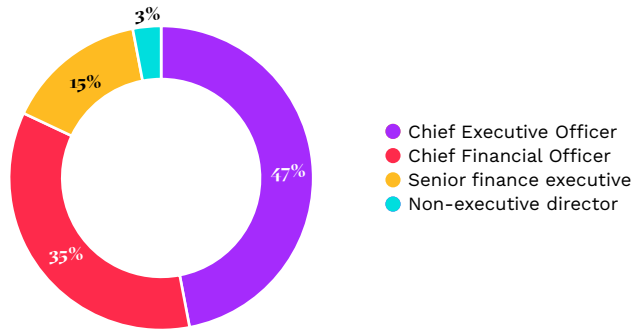


Figure 35

Respondents by sector

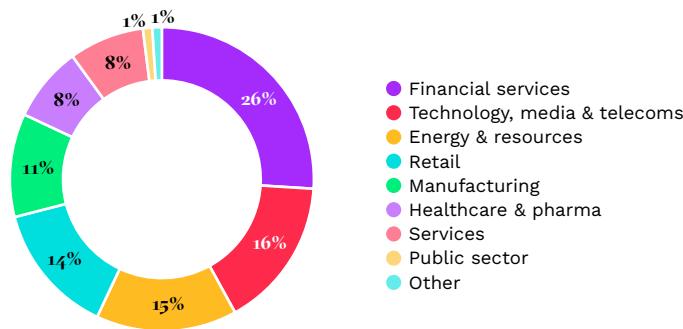


Figure 36

Respondents by organisation's headcount

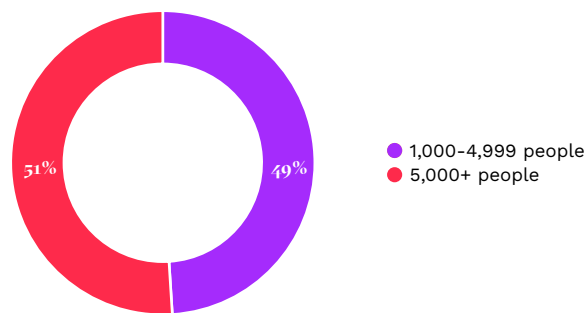
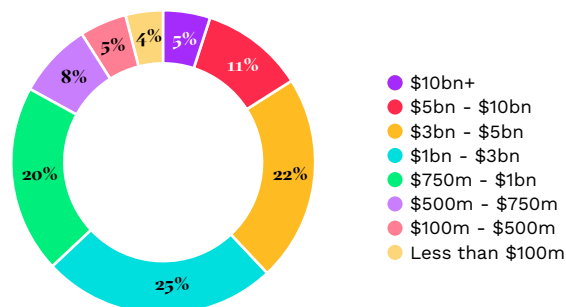


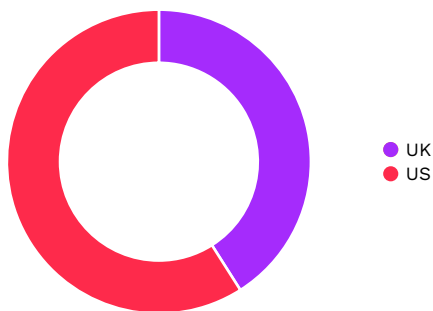
Figure 37

Respondents by organization's revenue



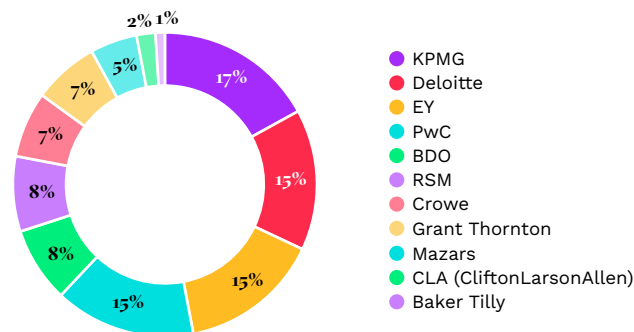
**Figure 38**

Respondents by region



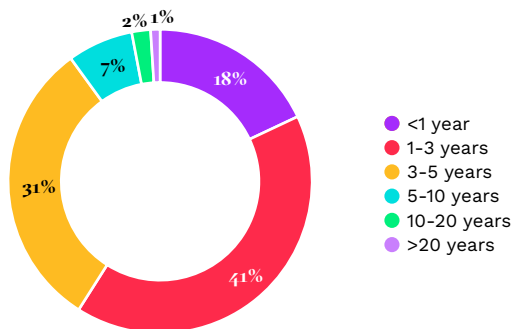
**Figure 39**

Respondents by current auditor



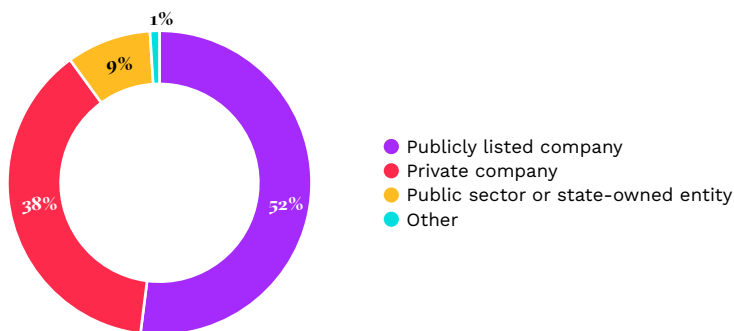
**Figure 40**

Respondents by length of relationship with current auditor



**Figure 41**

Respondents by type of organisation



## What did we ask them?

We ask respondents when thinking of firms providing external audit services, what is the first firm that comes to mind. We calculate an **unaided awareness score** based on the percentage of respondents who name each firm.

Each respondent was then presented with a list of 11 leading audit firms in the US or nine audit firms in the UK and asked to select their current auditor. Respondents who currently use an auditor outside of the list of firms we ask about are excluded from the survey. We go on to ask respondents to select two further audit firms whose brands they felt most able to comment on from the same list of firms (excluding their current auditor), even if haven't worked with those firms. We focus on the leading audit firms to ensure we have sufficient responses to carry out a detailed analysis.

We go on to ask further questions, focusing on the following areas:

- **First choice:** If all other things were equal, which firm (from the list of 11 firms we ask about in the US or nine in the UK) they say would be their first choice to work with. We calculate a **potential outshine score** for each firm as the difference between the percentage of respondents who give that firm as their first choice for audit, and the percentage of clients who state the same firm is their current auditor. A positive score means the proportion of respondents who would like to use the firm as their external auditor is higher than the proportion currently using that firm. A negative score means the proportion of respondents who currently use a firm is higher than the proportion that would like to as their first-choice auditor. We then go on to ask respondents why this firm would be their first choice for audit services, from a list of 15 possible reasons. We do not include this graph for any firm selected as first choice by fewer than 10 respondents.
- In the firm-by-firm section, we chart the relative threats between a given firm and the other firms we look at. Where a higher proportion of the clients of other firms would select the given firm than the proportion of clients of the given firm who would select that other firm, then we consider the given firm to be a relative threat to that other firm. In such cases the chord is coloured yellow. Chords in purple show where the proportion of the given firm's direct clients that would select that other firm is higher than the proportion of clients of that other firm who would choose the given firm as their first choice. In such cases, we consider the other firm to be a relative threat to the given firm. A blue chord shows where the proportions are equal.
- **Quality:** How they rate the quality of work of each of the three firms selected in nine different audit tasks. Respondents are asked to rate quality on a five-point scale where 1 is very low quality and 5 is very high quality. They're also given the option to answer, "don't know". We calculate a quality score based on the proportion of respondents describing quality (overall) as either "high" or "very high". We calculate a **quality outshine score** as the difference between the proportion of direct clients describing quality as "high" or "very high" and the proportion of prospects describing the quality as "high" or "very high". A positive score means direct clients hold more favourable views than prospects, while a negative score means prospects think more highly of a firm's quality than its direct clients.
- **Value:** Their view of approximately how much value each of the three firms selected add in relation to the fees paid for its services, or if they haven't worked with the firm how much they would expect the typical value to be. Respondents are presented with five options: less than the amount paid, around the same as the amount paid, twice the amount paid, five times the amount paid, or 10 times or more the amount paid. We calculate a value score based on the proportion of respondents that value is in excess of fees to any extent. We calculate a **value outshine score** by determining the difference between the proportion of direct clients and the proportion of prospects describing the value added by the firm as worth twice, five times, or 10 times or more the fees paid. A positive score means direct clients hold more favourable views than prospects, while a negative score means prospects think more highly of a firm's value than its direct clients.
- **Attribute strength:** How they rate each of the three firms selected across a range of 20 attributes of what it's like to work with audit firms. The full list of attributes is as follows (note that in many cases we shorten these for the sake of brevity):
  - Overall culture of the firm
  - The firm's audit methodology
  - The firm's innovative approach
  - The firm's account management
  - The breadth of the firm's services
  - The firm's brand and reputation
  - The firm's prices
  - The firm's overall speed of delivery
  - The firm's responsiveness and flexibility
  - The quality of the firm's thought leadership
  - The extent to which the firm puts suitably qualified people on your audit
  - The firm's environmental, sustainability, and corporate governance (ESG) credentials
  - The firm's global reach
  - The quality of the firm's subject matter experts
  - The quality of the firm's sector knowledge and expertise
  - Decision making of the audit firm
  - The firm's use of technology during the audit process

- The firm’s use of advanced analytics during the audit process
- Communication between the auditors and your organisation
- The independence and integrity of the audit firm

Respondents are asked to rate quality on a five-point scale where 1 is very poor and 5 is very good. They’re also given the option to answer, “don’t know”.

We calculate a score for an individual attribute based on the proportion of respondents describing the strength of the firm as either “good” or “very good”. The attribute score overall is calculated as the average across all attributes of working with a firm. We calculate an **attribute outshine score** as the difference between the proportion of direct clients describing the strength of attributes of working with a firm as “good” or “very good” and the proportion of prospects describing the strength of firms’ attributes as “good” or “very good”. A positive score means direct clients hold more favourable views than prospects, while a negative score means prospects think more highly of a firm’s attributes than its direct clients.

- **Attribute importance:** From the same list of 20 attributes, which two are most important when thinking about each of the three firms selected. We then aggregate their responses as the proportion of clients that gave each attribute as either their first or second most important attribute and rank each attribute from most to least important. Where two or more attributes have the same score, we take into account the share of clients who stated that the attribute was their first most important attribute. In the firm-by-firm section, we then overlay the ranking of the strength of the firm in each attribute over the relative importance in a chart to see where there’s alignment between the two measures.
- **Why they choose to work with audit firms:** We first ask, in a hypothetical world where the respondent’s organisation wasn’t forced by law or regulation to have an external audit, would they still choose to have an external audit? For those that would still choose to have an external audit, we ask why the respondent’s organisation would work with audit firms rather than relying just on internal resources. We ask them to rank the following reasons in order of importance: to achieve better outcomes than they could themselves, to minimize the risks associated with an audit, because it’s simpler and easier to use audit firms than to do it themselves, because it’s less expensive than using internal resources, and to complete the audit faster than they could themselves.
- **The firm’s use of sophisticated technology:** We ask direct clients and prospects to rate how effectively the audit firm uses technology for different audit tasks. Clients rate the use of technology as “non-existent”, “very basic”, “reasonably sophisticated”, or “sophisticated”. The graph in the firm-by-firm section shows how the proportion of clients rating a firm’s use of technology as “sophisticated” differs

from the proportion of clients saying the same about all other audit firms. The audit tasks are ordered from the most differentiating on the left (where the firm in question scores better than the rest of the market) to areas in which it lags behind the rest of the market (where the firm in question scores worse than the rest of the market).

- **The length of relationship with the firm:** We asked clients to tell us how long their current auditor has audited their organisation. The graph in the firm-by-firm section shows how the length of relationship with the firm differs from the length of the relationship for all other audit firms. We exclude from this chart respondents who replied, “don’t know”.

# Meet the expert

## Martin White

Martin is a Senior Analyst in our Client & Brand Insights team. As an experienced writer and analyst specialising in client perceptions, he helps professional services firms to understand how they are perceived in the market across multiple lines of business including consulting, risk advisory, tax advisory, and audit. His recent work with Source includes not only authoring a number of our Client Perceptions Studies and Market Trends reports, but also leading on brand benchmarking exercises, message testing projects, and conducting research involving extensive interviews and surveys. He regularly appears on the Source podcast, The Future of the Firm, and has been quoted in publications including Accountancy Today and the Financial Times. Prior to joining Source, Martin spent more than 11 years as an economic and financial consultant in a variety of roles at FTI Consulting and LECCG.

### Martin White

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# About us

## We help professional services firms **understand what really matters** when facing decisions of vital importance.

The best decisions are based on evidence, objectivity, and a willingness to change. That's why, at Source, we tell you what you need to hear, rather than what you want to hear.

We draw upon our deep roots within the professional services sector to provide firms with a clear picture of their clients' worlds. Through comprehensive research and meticulous analysis, we pinpoint what truly matters and deliver actionable insights that help firms map out the right way forward.

We believe in thriving individually and succeeding together. And we would love to help your firm crack its latest conundrum.

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# Programme schedule for 2022

Reports 2022	Market Trends Programme	Client Perception Studies	Emerging Trends Programme
Q1	January	UK US	
	February	Germany Financial Services	
	March	GCC France Healthcare & Pharma	Pricing: Your Biggest Barrier to Change?
Q2	April	Nordics Energy & Resources Technology, Media & Telecoms	
	May	China Japan	
	June		Agility and Multidisciplinary Working
Q3	July		Managed Services: Opportunities and Challenges
	August	Risk Tax	
	September	Audit	Products and Services: The New Consulting Mix
Q4	October		
	November		The New Consulting Value Chain
	December		

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