



Professional Associations  
**RESEARCH NETWORK**

# Social Media

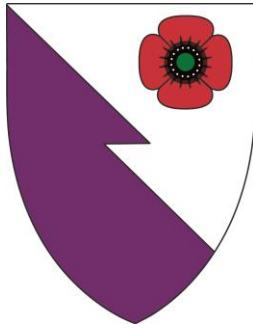
May 2015



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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Context for PARN Research

At the time of writing, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn are approaching their ninth, eleventh and twelfth birthdays, respectively. In technological terms, these platforms have now been around for quite some time. Yet in a professional context, it is still far from clear how these tools for communication can and should be best put to use. A good deal of effort has been expended in the professional literature on developing advice for organisations about *how* they should be attempting to communicate online. However, rather less has been said about some of the more strategic issues around policy, practice, risk, and the usefulness of measures of success when engaging with social media, particularly in the context of the UK professional body sector. This project therefore takes a systematic look at how professional bodies are currently dealing with issue of the governance of social media, and what the response to these issues implies for the organisation and its social media strategy.

In the context of this work, the term 'social media' is used in the broad sense of referring to websites, platforms or applications that enable users to create, exchange, deliberate, challenge and modify information and ideas. These channels are characterised by the speed of interaction that they facilitate, the variety of participants who are engaged, the multidirectional nature of the transmission and reception of information.

## 1.2. Research Questions

The following research questions were developed by PARN in consultation with the project steering group, made up of representatives of the funding professional bodies:

- Why are professional bodies engaging in social media?
- What are the strategic objectives?
- What are professional bodies actually posting on social media?
- What criteria are used to make judgements about success?
- How much can professional bodies control social media? How much should they control it?
- Where does the view of the individual staff member who is posting become the view of the organisation? Is there an issue around representing the organisation?
- Can social media be abused by disaffected members who are ill-informed and have a disproportionately loud voice? When should you leap in?
- What kinds of skills/support are required?
- Do professional bodies need a social media policy? If so, how should it be formulated?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. About our methods

This project was launched in August 2014 and was completed in April 2015. A survey of professional bodies' social media usage was employed to answer the research questions mentioned in the previous page.

The survey was launched on Tuesday the 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2014 and closed on Friday the 12<sup>th</sup> December 2014. It was initially sent to 663 contacts at organisations in Canada, Australia, Ireland and the UK, identified from PARN's database. The survey received responses from 122 different professional bodies, of which over 90% were from the UK. Overall, the response rate for this survey was approximately 20%. The information collected in this stage was analysed, and is presented here in this report.

### 3. About the Respondents

The first part of the survey asked about membership size and whether professional bodies have a social media account. The average number of (i) students, (ii) affiliates and (iii) total membership size for the sample is reported below. It should be noted that because of the differences in the membership size of responding organisations, and a small number of large ‘outliers’ (a few very large numbers which skew the results), the median is the more appropriate ‘average’ measure in this case. Nevertheless, we have reported both figures for interest.

|                       | Mean   | Median | No reply |
|-----------------------|--------|--------|----------|
| Total membership size | 23,392 | 6000   | 3        |
| Students              | 7260   | 300    | 14       |
| Affiliates            | 3611   | 120    | 28       |

Table 1: Number of Members

The vast majority of responding professional bodies have at least one ‘official’ social media account, while only around 6% do not. By ‘official’, we mean “an account in the organisation’s name or that of a named individual (e.g. CEO, other) who is widely identified as posting on behalf of the organisation”. This demonstrates wide engagement with social media across the professional body sector.

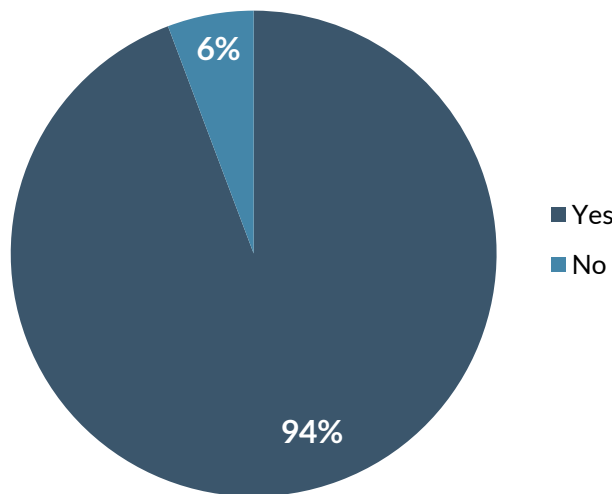


Figure 1: Does your organisation have an ‘official’ or corporate social media account(s)?

Of these 6%, around two thirds plan to begin using an official social media account in the future. The main barriers preventing this group from using an official social media account are:

- Not enough resource (5 mentions)
- Lack of expertise (4 mentions)



## 4. Social Media Platforms

As set out above, the term *social media* is used here quite broadly to refer to a variety of social media/networking platforms. We asked respondents about which platforms their organisation utilised. As shown in Figure 2, for those professional bodies with an official social media account(s), perhaps unsurprisingly, Twitter is the most popular platform with 88% of responding organisations having an 'official' account. This is followed by LinkedIn with 83% of respondents making use of this platform, and Facebook with 74%. It is worth noting that Youtube is also relatively well used by organisations across the sector, with 61% of respondents having an 'official' account on this platform.

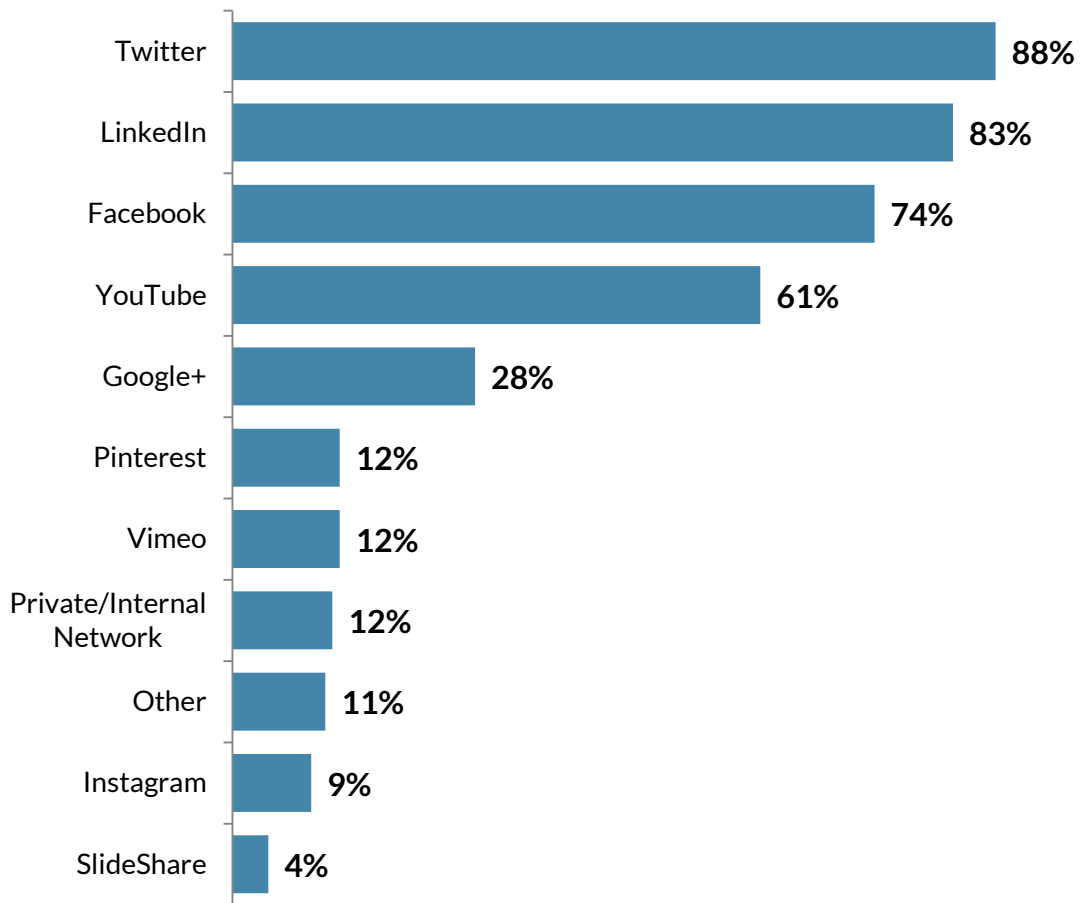


Figure 2: Which social media platforms do you use?

Table 2 shows the average number of followers/subscribers that professional bodies claimed to have for each of their 'official' social media accounts. Again, because of the issue with outliers discussed above, the median is the more appropriate average measure in this case. Once more, we've reported both figures for interest.

|                                 | <i>Median</i> | <i>Mean</i> |
|---------------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| <b>Twitter</b>                  | 3085          | 8474        |
| <b>Private/Internal Network</b> | 2481          | 9816        |
| <b>LinkedIn</b>                 | 2000          | 6879        |
| <b>Facebook</b>                 | 1420          | 18985       |
| <b>YouTube</b>                  | 100           | 2555        |
| <b>SlideShare</b>               | 98            | 152         |
| <b>Pinterest</b>                | 91            | 355         |
| <b>Google+</b>                  | 87            | 418         |
| <b>Instagram</b>                | 28            | 119         |
| <b>Vimeo</b>                    | 10            | 908         |
| <b>Snap Chat</b>                | n/a           | n/a         |

Table 2: Approximately how many followers/subscribers do you have on your official accounts?

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the median average number of followers/subscribers across various social media platforms. The graph illustrates that throughout the survey, respondents are generally discussing the questions asked in relation to where the majority of activity is i.e. Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook. Unless specified, private networks are often understood differently as they are usually for members only. Comparisons between organisations' private networks and other forms of open access social media platforms should therefore be read with caution.

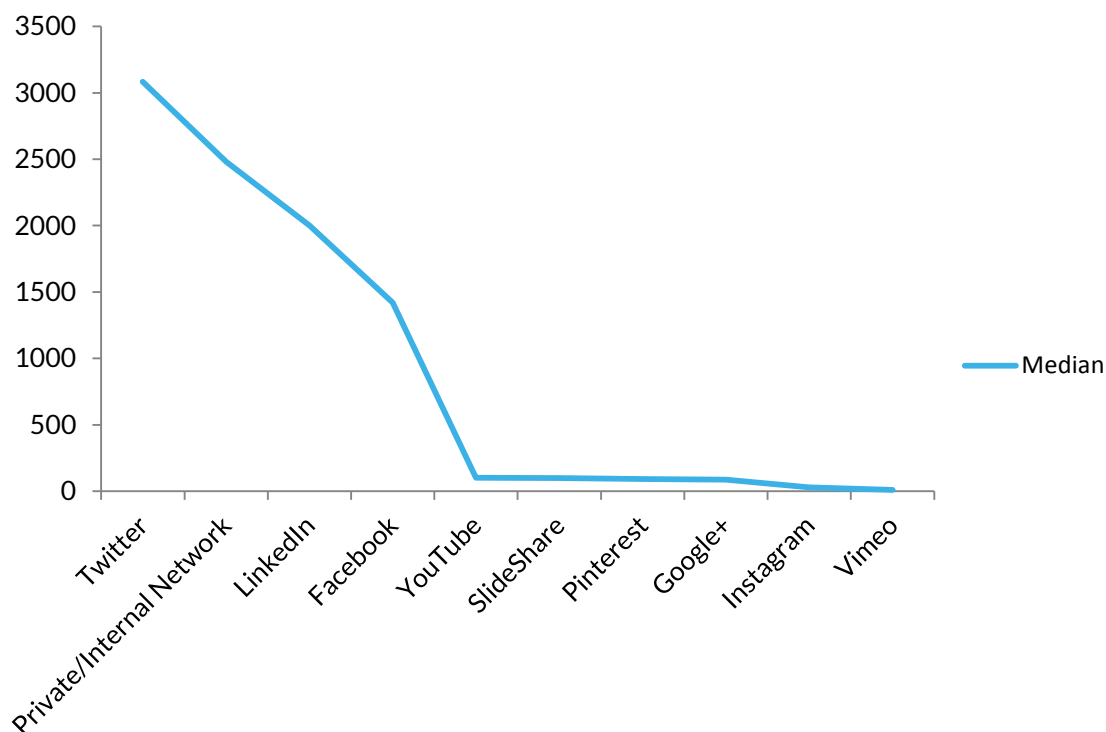


Figure 3: Distribution of followers/subscribers across platforms

The sample was asked to rank each of the platforms they used by level of importance. In the chart below, the base number of organisations that responded for each platform is shown in brackets on the left hand side, next to the platform name. For example, YouTube (73) means that 73 separate organisations answered the question for this platform. Twitter is considered to be the most important by far, with 87% of responding professional bodies identifying it to be either *Important* or *Very important*. This is followed by LinkedIn, which is considered *Important* or *Very important* by 79% of professional bodies. It is also worth noting that YouTube, even with a significant number of professional bodies using it (73) is thought to be considerably less important than Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn with only 15% selecting *Very Important*.

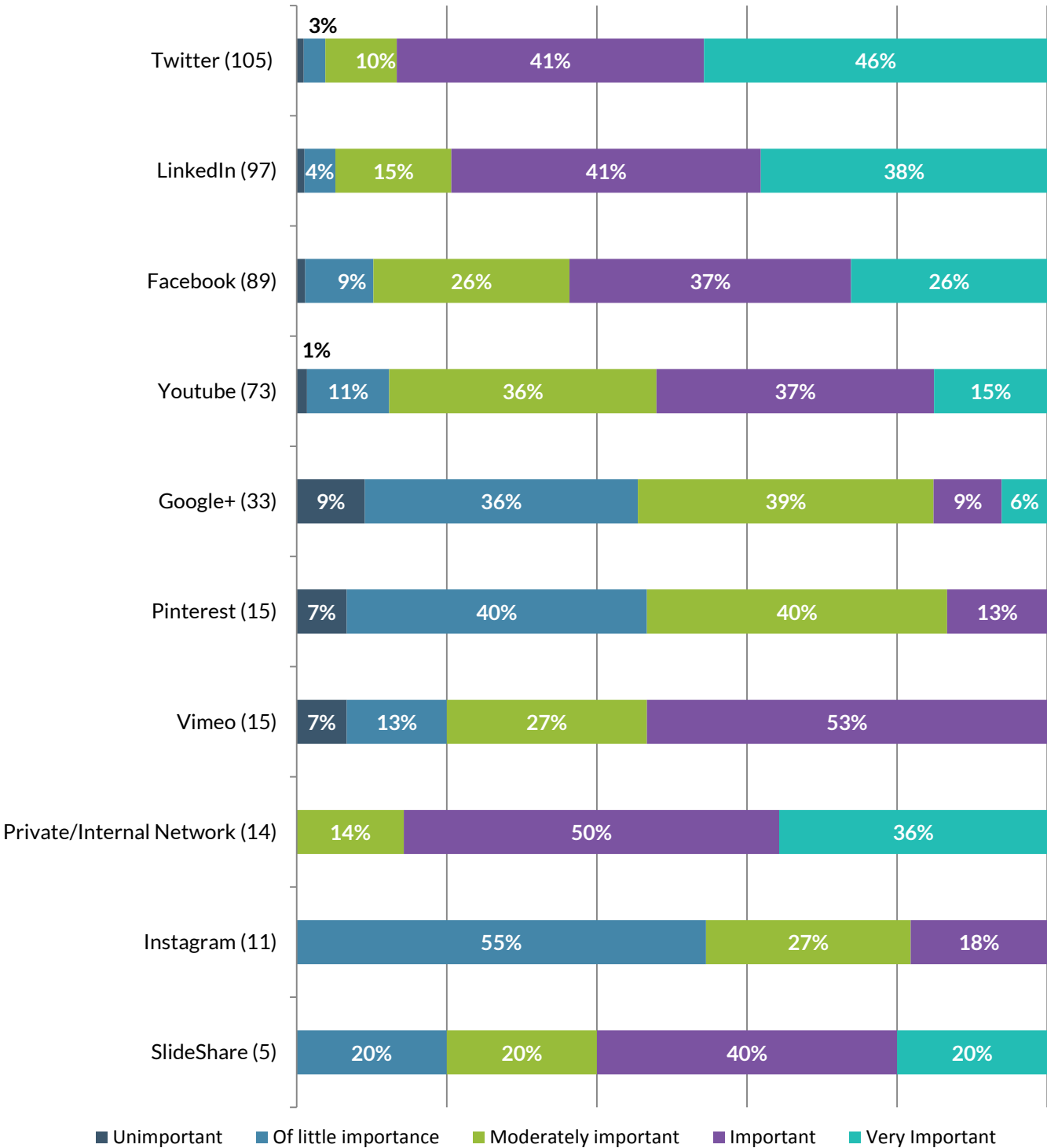


Figure 4: How important are the platforms you use?

Participants were additionally asked how successful they think their professional body is on the particular platforms they use. Figure 5 shows their perceptions of how successful they have been on different platforms; the base number for each platform is represented in brackets.

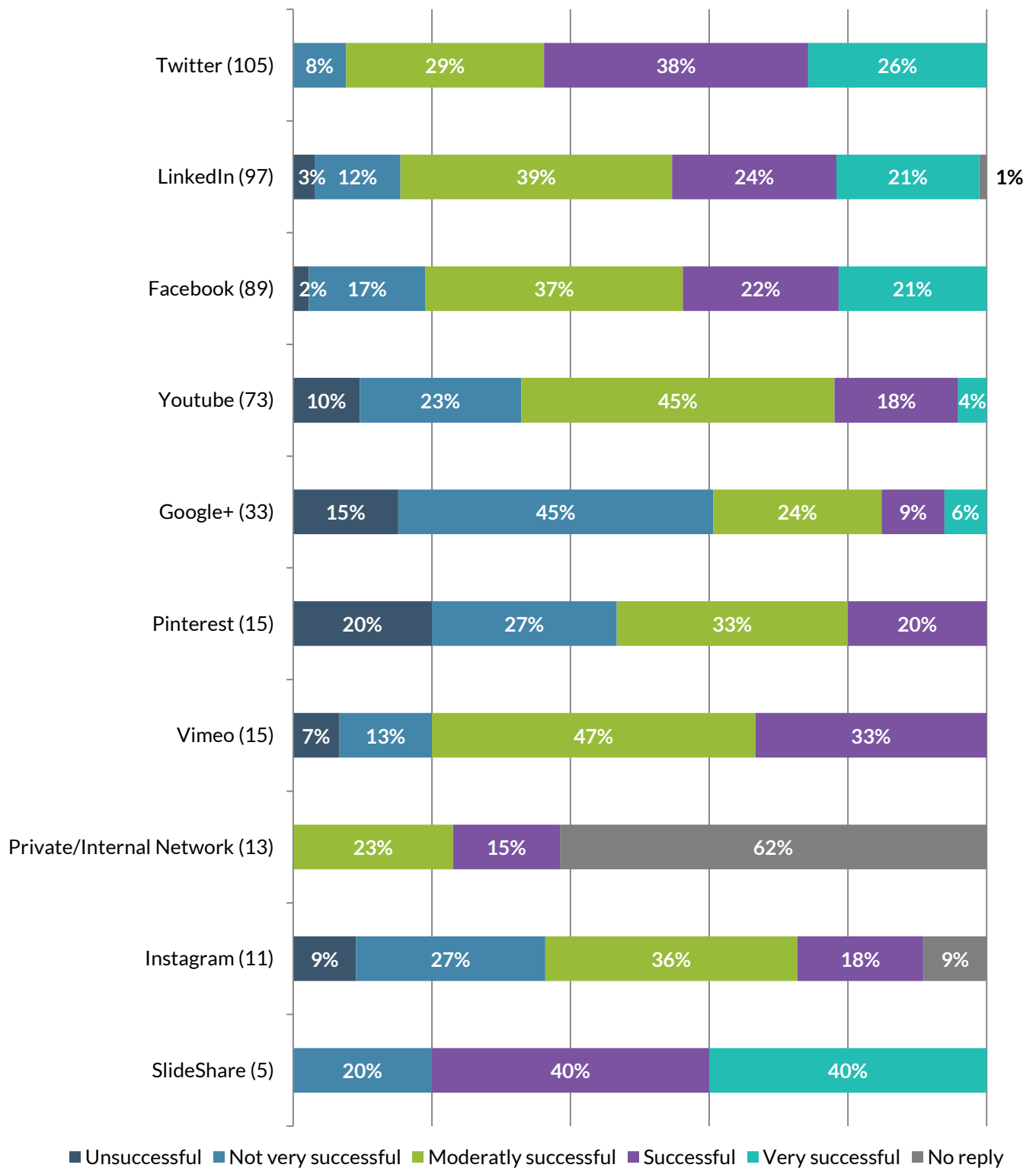


Figure 5: How successful do you think your organisation is in using these platforms?

Perhaps surprisingly, the most successful platform is SlideShare with 80% of users considering themselves to have been either *Successful* or *Very successful*. However, as discussed earlier, a small number of professional bodies in the sample are currently using SlideShare (4%) implying that these results should be interpreted cautiously. Other than SlideShare the next most successful platform is Twitter in which 64% of respondents consider their use to be *Successful* or *Very successful*. Respondents reported considerably less success using Youtube when compared with the other major platforms, with only 22% citing their use as *Successful* or *Very Successful*. This may be due to the level of resource needed for Youtube compared to Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn as creating regular videos requires a greater amount of time and money.

## 5. Social media strategy

The next section of the survey asked a series of questions about social media strategy. The majority of professional bodies reported having some form of social media strategy in place (83%). Of these, 32% have a standalone social media strategy; with 51% reporting that theirs was incorporated into a more general marketing and communications strategy.

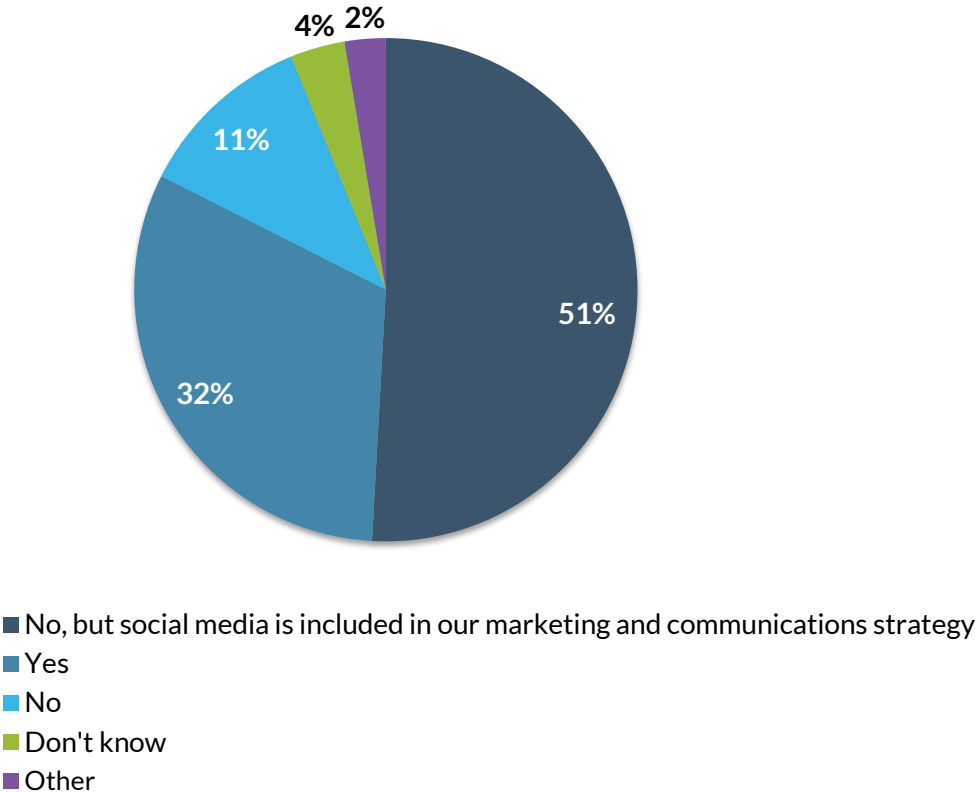


Figure 6: Do you have a social media strategy?

Of the organisations that do have some kind of social media strategy, 85% have linked it to the broader business strategy of their organisation in some way. 30% of these claim that social media is fully linked to the organisation's broader business strategy, while a further 55% claiming that it is only partly linked.

As indicated below, less than half (42%) of responding professional bodies have a budget for their social media activities.

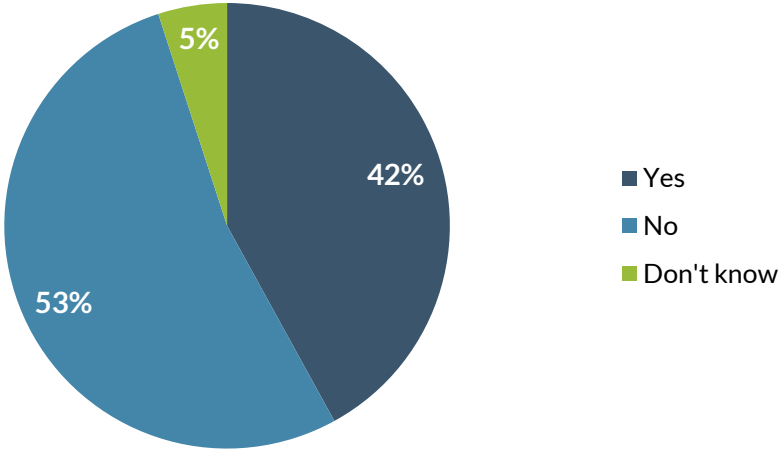


Figure 7: Do you have a budget for social media?

Of those with a social media budget, 36% have had this introduced within the past five years. Another 36% said the budget had increased since five years ago, while 26% said the budget had stayed the same. Only 2% reported that the budget had decreased.

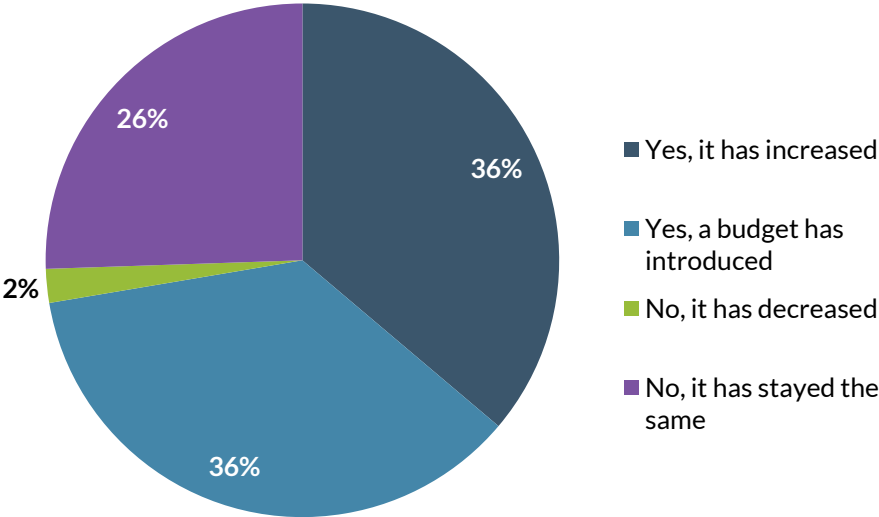


Figure 8: Has your social media budget increased in the last 5 years?

## 6. Content

The majority (57%) of responding professional bodies post content between 0-25 times a week on their social media accounts. Very few organisations post more than 100 items of content per week. An average of 70% of this content is generated directly by the organisation as distinct from re-tweets/reposts etc.

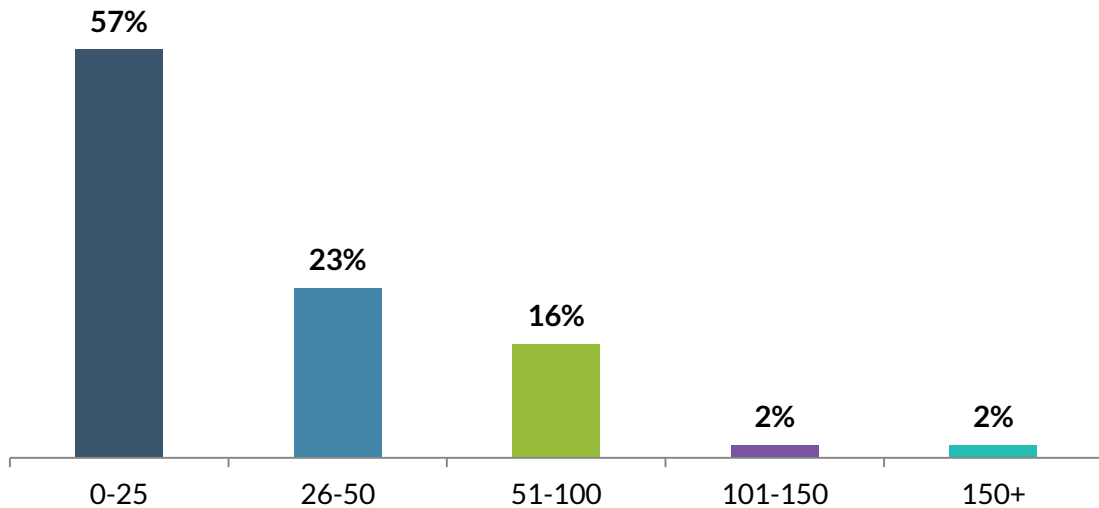


Figure 9: Approximately how many times per week do you post on your official social media platforms?

For 46% of respondents, at least part of the posting of social media content is automated i.e. content posted on one platform is automatically posted on others, or specific content is automated to be posted at a specific time.

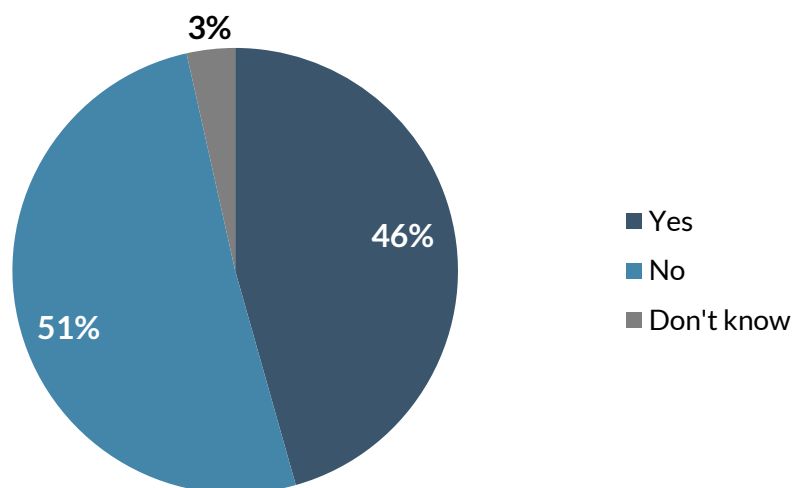


Figure 10: Is any of your social media activity automated?

Various tools are used to automate and manage social media. Figure 11 shows which tools are the most popular amongst professional bodies in the sample.

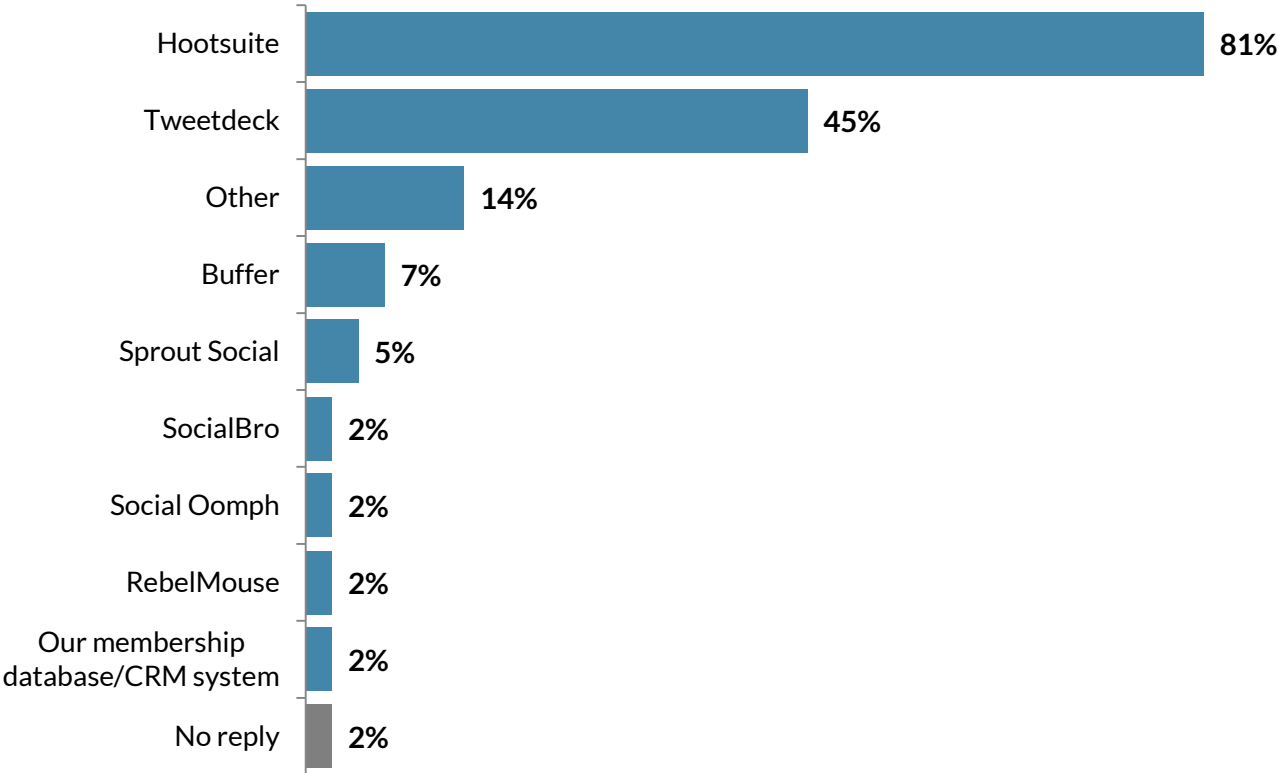


Figure 11: Do you use any of the following automation or management tools?



## 7. Staff

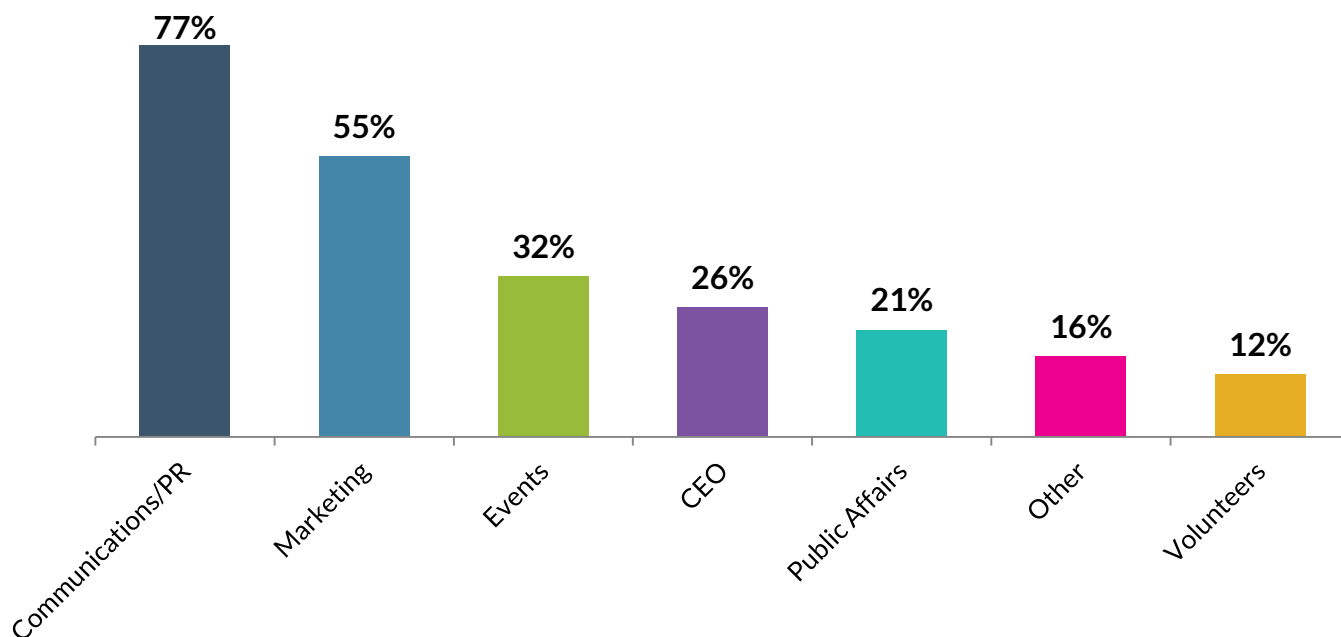


Figure 12: Where does responsibility for social media sit?

When asked about where the responsibility for using social media predominantly lies, the majority of professional bodies pointed to their *Communications/PR* (77%) and/or their *Marketing* teams (55%). Figure 12 shows the distribution.

Something to be considered here, however, is that many professional bodies will often have more than one social media account for any given platform. For example, there might be an 'events Twitter account' as well as the main account. Therefore at some professional bodies, responsibility for social media is split between parts of the organisation, with different departments being responsible for different accounts. The figures shown above do not quite capture this nuance.

We asked how many staff are involved in the use of social media on behalf of the organisation. We found that on average around 23% of the total number of staff are involved with social media and/or have access to the official social media accounts. This averaged at 6.2 staff members per organisation. Moreover, a quarter of professional bodies have staff whose annual review/appraisal incorporates performance targets relating to social media usage. On average, this relates only to 1.6 staff members, which is 6% of the average total number of staff.

We asked respondents to list any job titles or roles in connection to social media that had arisen at their organisations in the last 5 years. The responses are shown in the list below. The fact that 39% of the sample note a new job role at their organisation signals a restructuring of some professional bodies to accommodate social media.

- Digital Communications/Content Officer/Manager (22 mentions)
- Social Media Editor/Manager/Exec/Officer (13 mentions)
- Communications Officer (9 mentions)
- Community Leader (2 mentions)
- SEO (search engine optimisation) Leader (1 mention)

We then asked the sample if they offered any form of training or support to their staff. The results are shown in Figure 13. Around a third offer training for staff whereas 37% provide no kind of support or guidance.

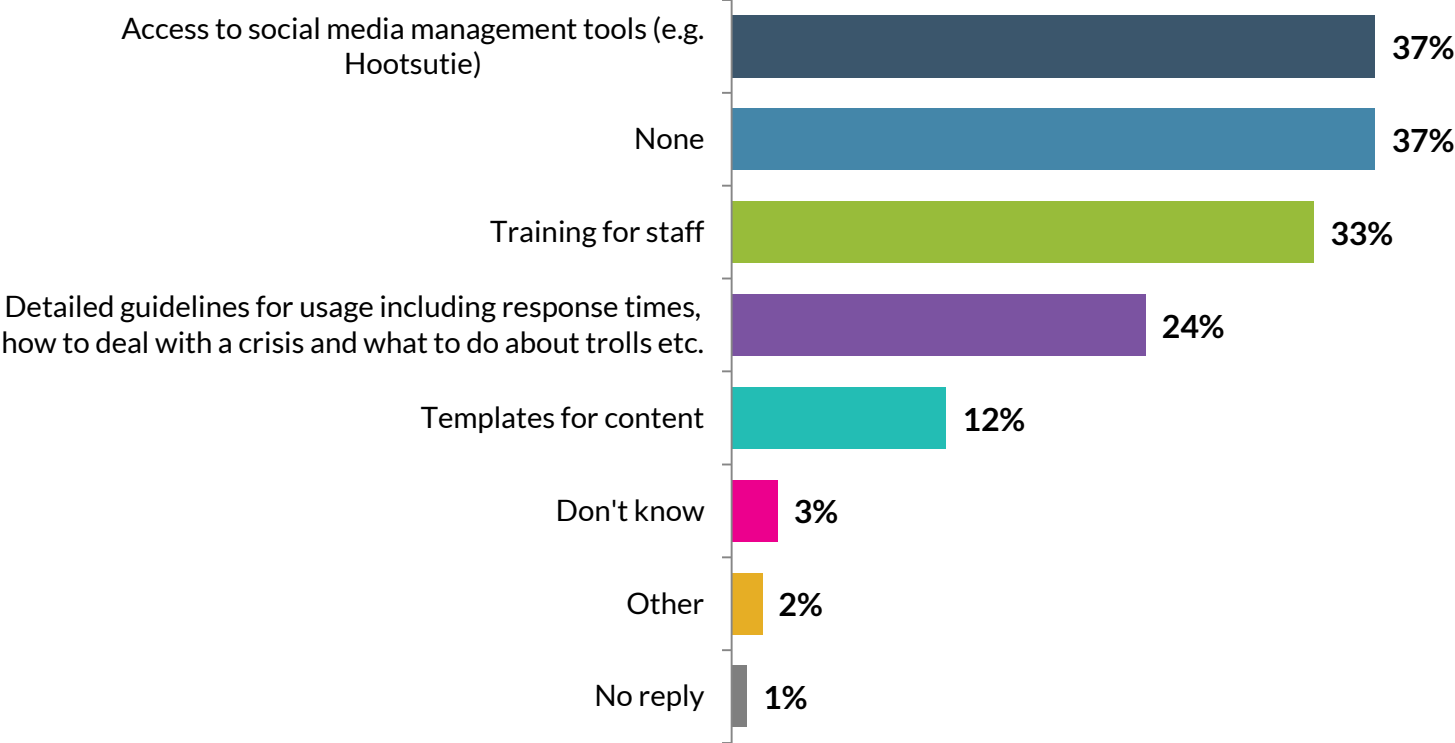


Figure 13: Do you provide any of the following for staff using the corporate social media channels?

In addition, we queried if the respondents have an internal social media policy or guidance for their staff or volunteers. Figure 14 reveals that 44% have no social media usage policy in place. Of these organisations that said they had no policy, around a third said that they did have plans to implement one in the future.

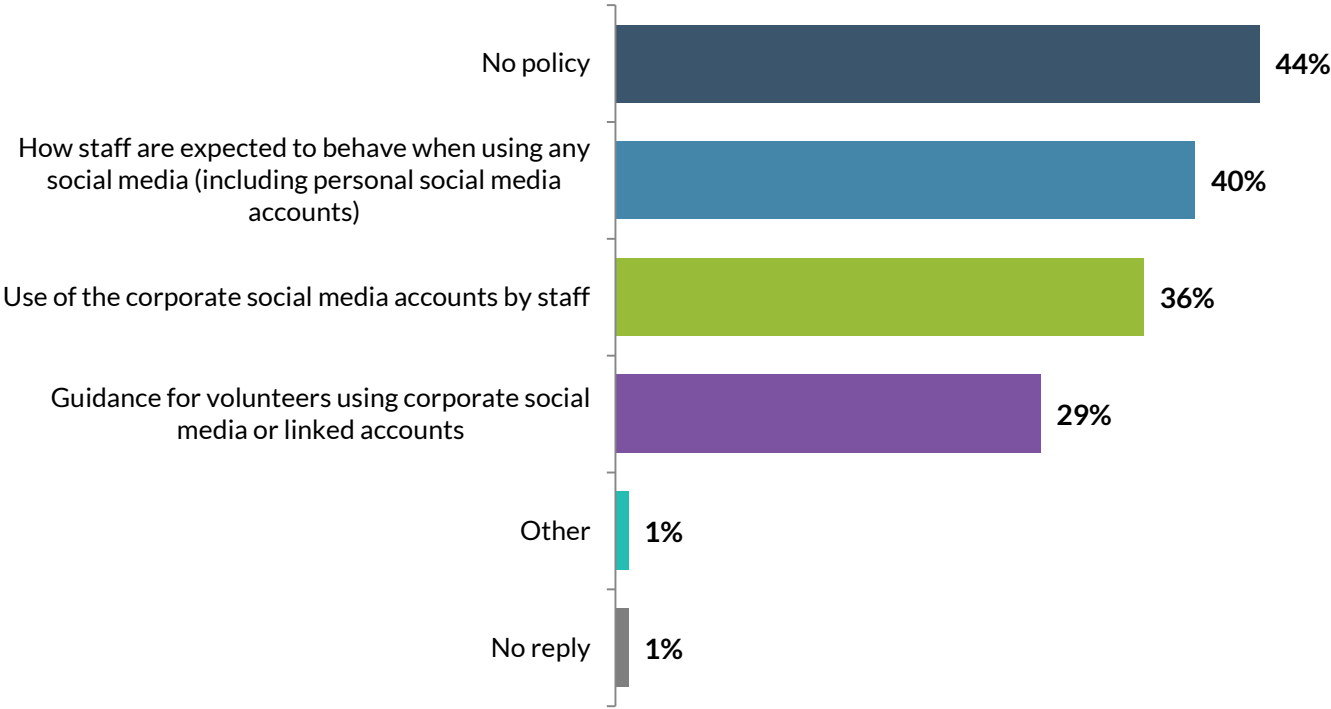


Figure 14: Do you have a social media policy for staff?

## 7.1. Staff skills

In this part of the survey, we asked respondents to detail what they thought were the most important skills needed to effectively make use of social media. Figure 15 shows that *Writing social media appropriate content* and *Content idea generation* are both considered either *Important* or *Very important* by 96% of the sample. *Using third party tools to manage social media* is considered the least important skill for social media staff.

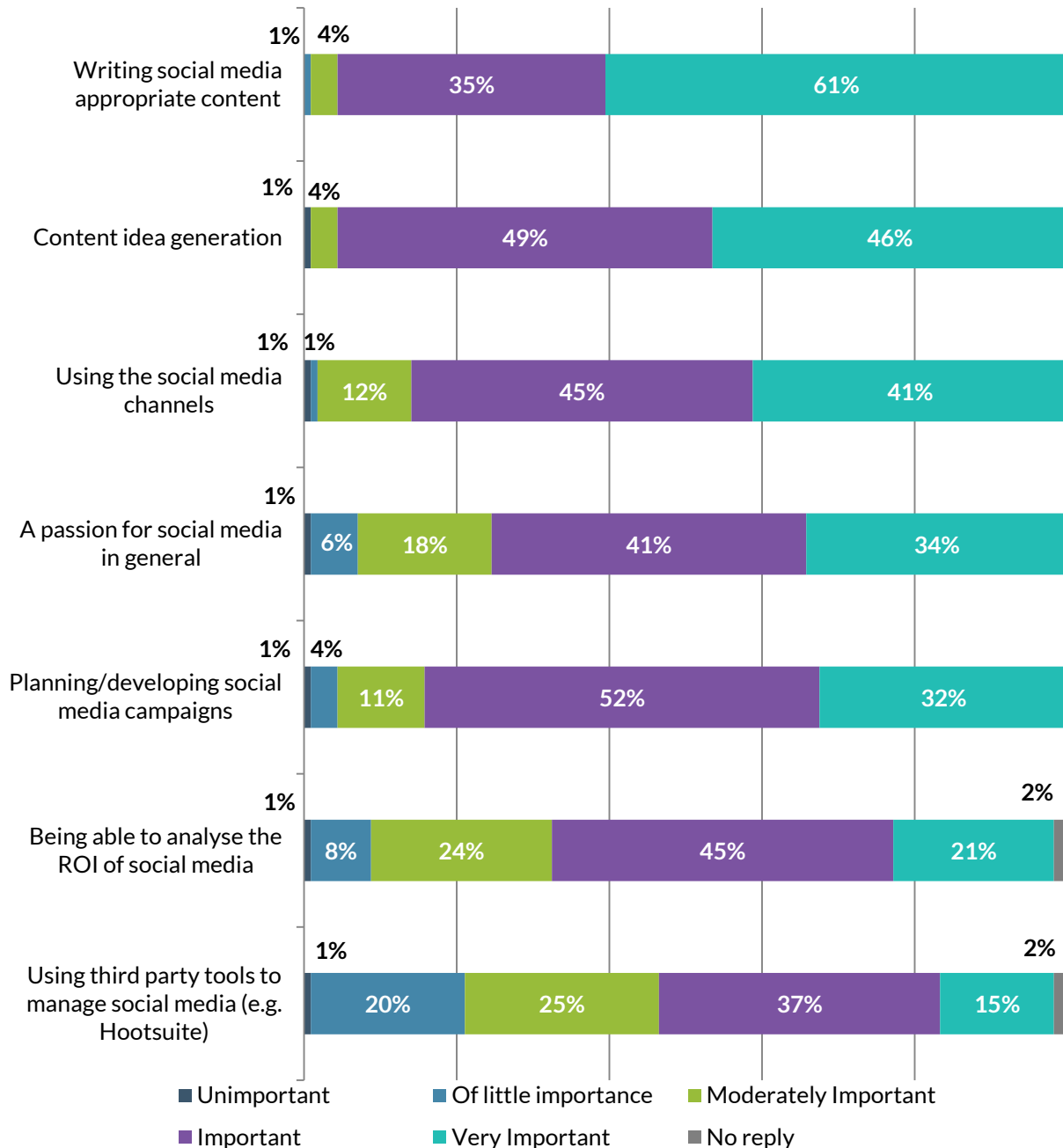


Figure 15: How important are the following skills for staff using social media?

We then asked about areas for improvement. Figure 16 shows that the majority of the sample believes that *Being able to analyse the ROI of social media* (75%) and *Planning/developing social media campaigns* (67%) are the two areas most in need of improvement.

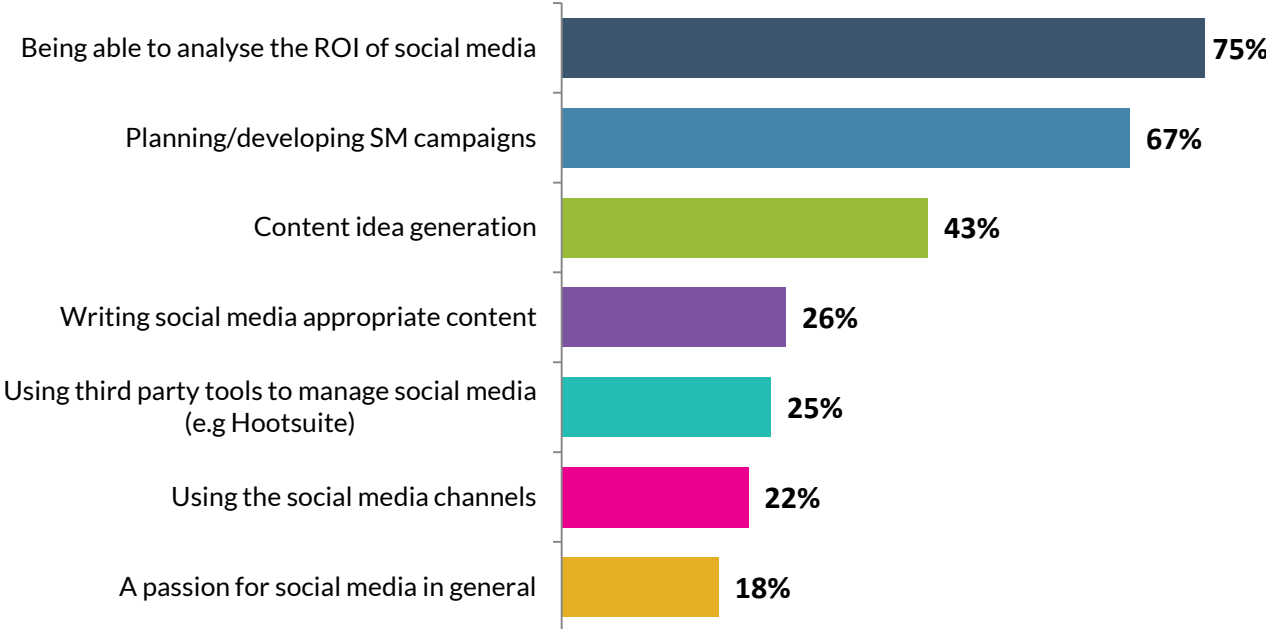


Figure 16: In which areas do you think are in need of most improvement?

## 7.2. Personal/Professional accounts

Around half of the sample encourages their staff with their own social media accounts to publish content relating to the organisation. In addition, around 30% of professional bodies publicise the accounts of their staff members, e.g. they have a link to staff members' social media accounts on their website

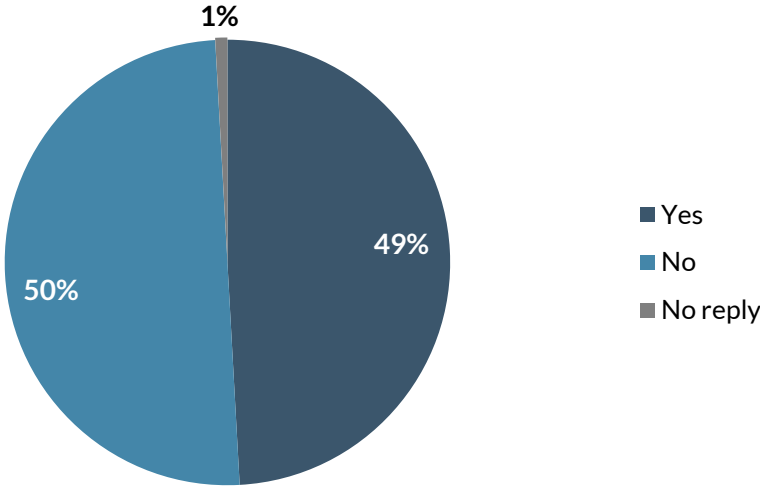


Figure 17: Does your organisation encourage staff with personal social media accounts to post content related to your organisation/sector on their own accounts?

## 8. Social Media Uses

This part of the survey sought to investigate specifically how professional bodies use social media. We found that the most common use was *Promoting organisation events at the professional body*, with 98% of the sample claiming this is done either *Occasionally*, *Often*, or *Always*. The least commonly selected is *Hosting debates* in which 75% of the sample either said they *Never* or *Rarely* do.

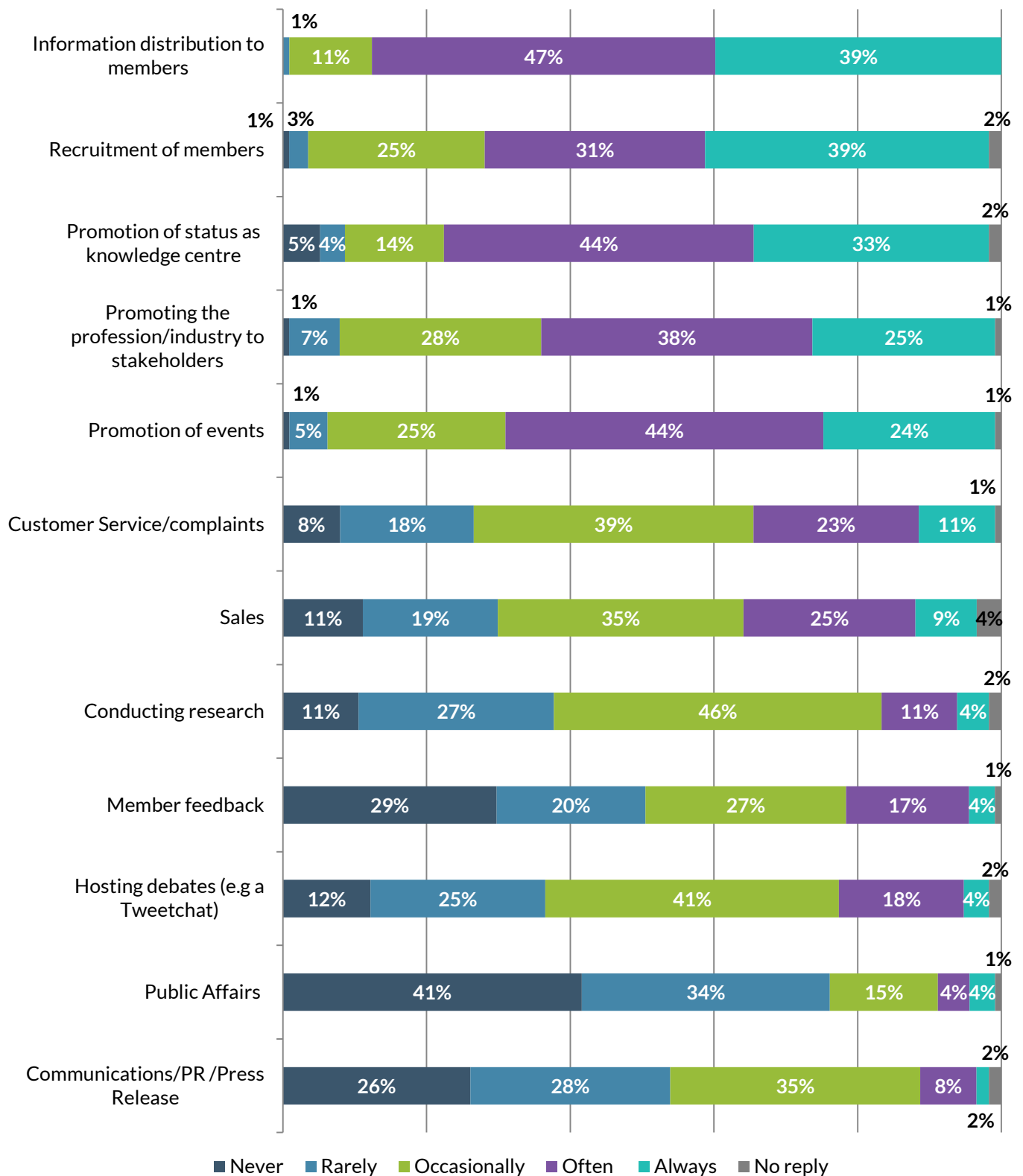


Figure 18: How often are your social media accounts used for the following activities?

We also asked the sample if professional bodies have used social media as part of a large-scale public engagement/awareness campaign. The results shown in Figure 19 reveal that just over half have not done this.

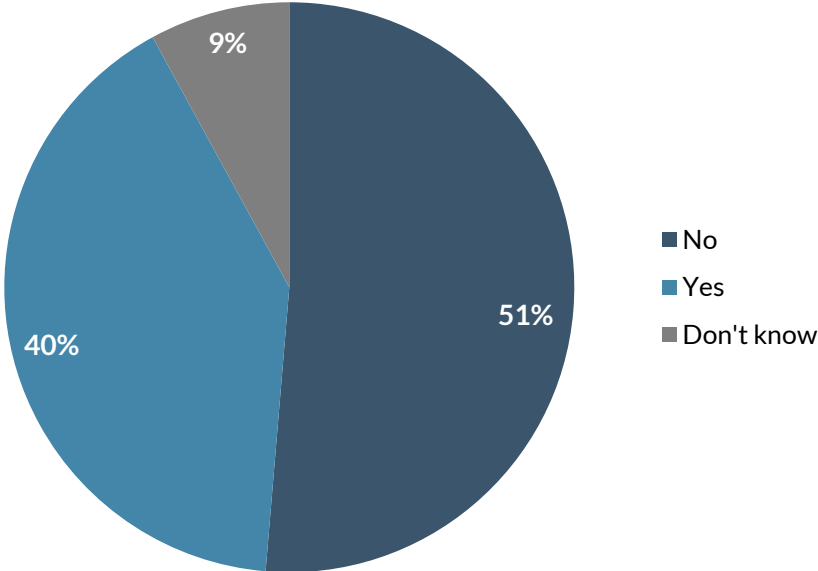


Figure 19: Have you used social media as part of a large-scale public engagement campaign?

## 9. Measuring success and other challenges of social media

This part of the survey tackled the vexed question of how to measure returns on investment (ROI) for social media. We ask the sample if and how they measure the success of their social media activity. The term 'activity' referred to the act of posting social media content and partaking of interactions. Figure 20 below shows that most of the sample measures their success by *Initial engagement* (79%) and the *Size of their audience* (76%). Only around half measure success by *Interactive engagement*. However, 11% have no means of measuring their success at all.

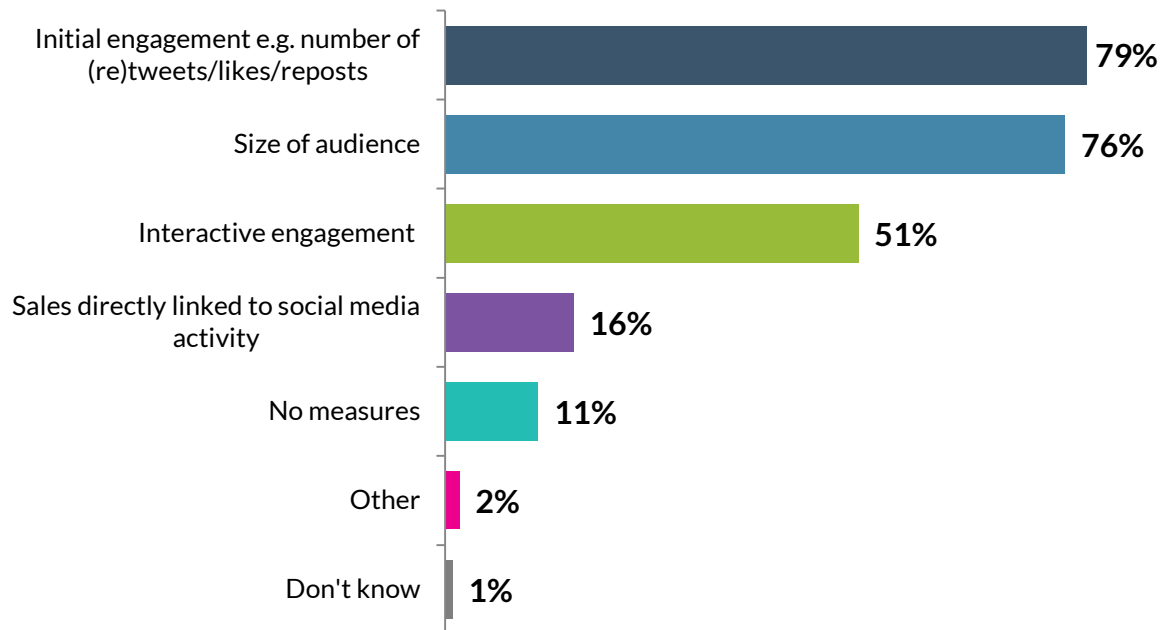


Figure 20: How do you measure to success of your social media activity?

We then asked the sample if and how they measure the success of their organisations social media strategy. In this context, 'strategy' refers to the broader view of how social media is working to fulfil formal or implicit organisational objectives. Figure 21 shows that the majority of the sample use some form of analytic tools to measure the success of their strategy, but a significant proportion (21%) do not use any measures at all.

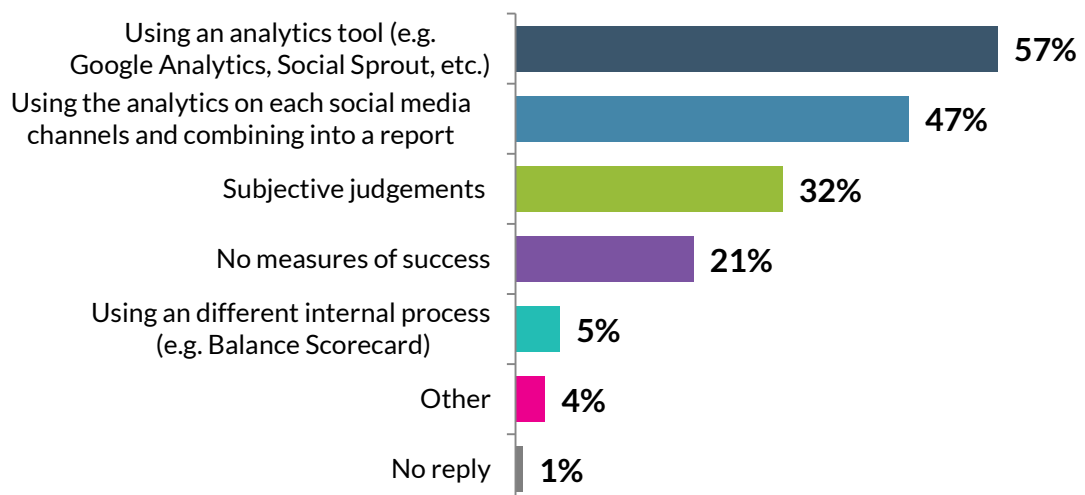


Figure 21: How do you measure the success of your social media strategy?



Respondents were then questioned over what they thought were the most successful areas of their social media use. This information was analysed to yield nine distinct categories of response, with some respondents citing more than one area as successful. The results can be seen in Figure 22.

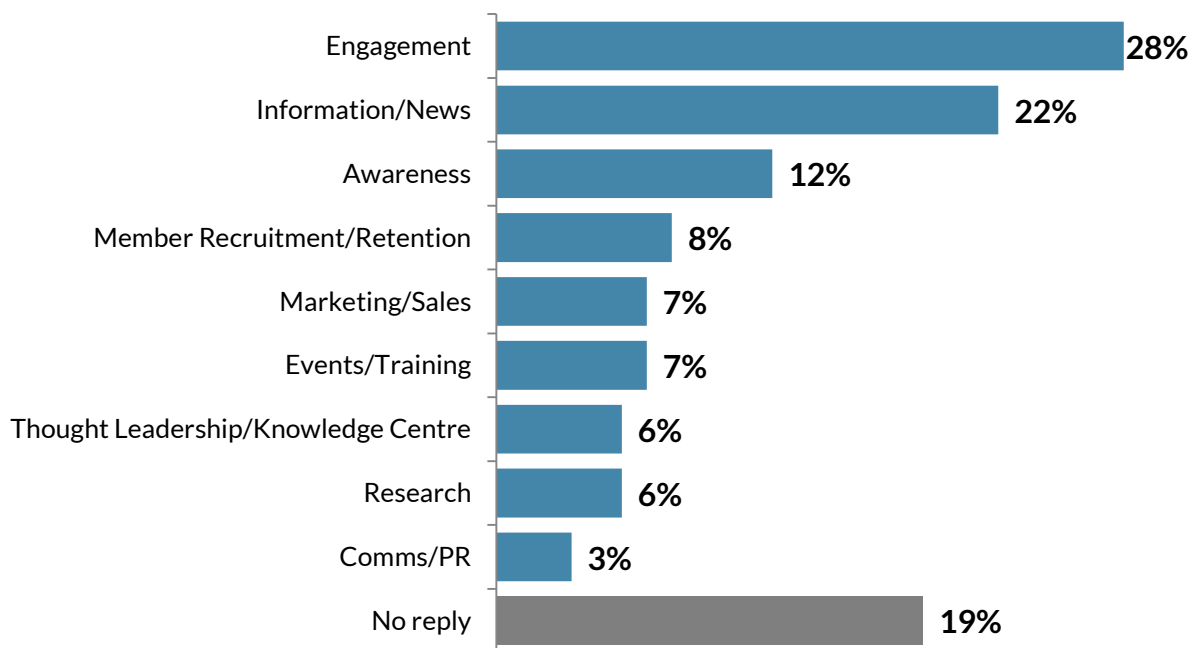


Figure 22: Based on those criteria, in which areas do you think you are most successful?

The process of *engagement* is the most frequently cited in the data. This refers to the organisation engaging with both members and non-members, and is in line with the data presented above in Figure 20 that shows 79% of the sample measures their social media activity through initial engagement. The *Information/News* response refers to organisation disseminating information and knowledge via social media. The *Awareness* response refers to an organisation using social media to spread awareness of their organisation and the profession.

In addition, we asked the sample to rate how significant the experience of various issues have been at their organisation; 1 being insignificant and 5 being very significant. Figure 23 shows that most organisations consider their experience of these issues to be mostly insignificant. The most significant issue experienced was *being unable to cope with the growth of the organisations social media channels and audience*.

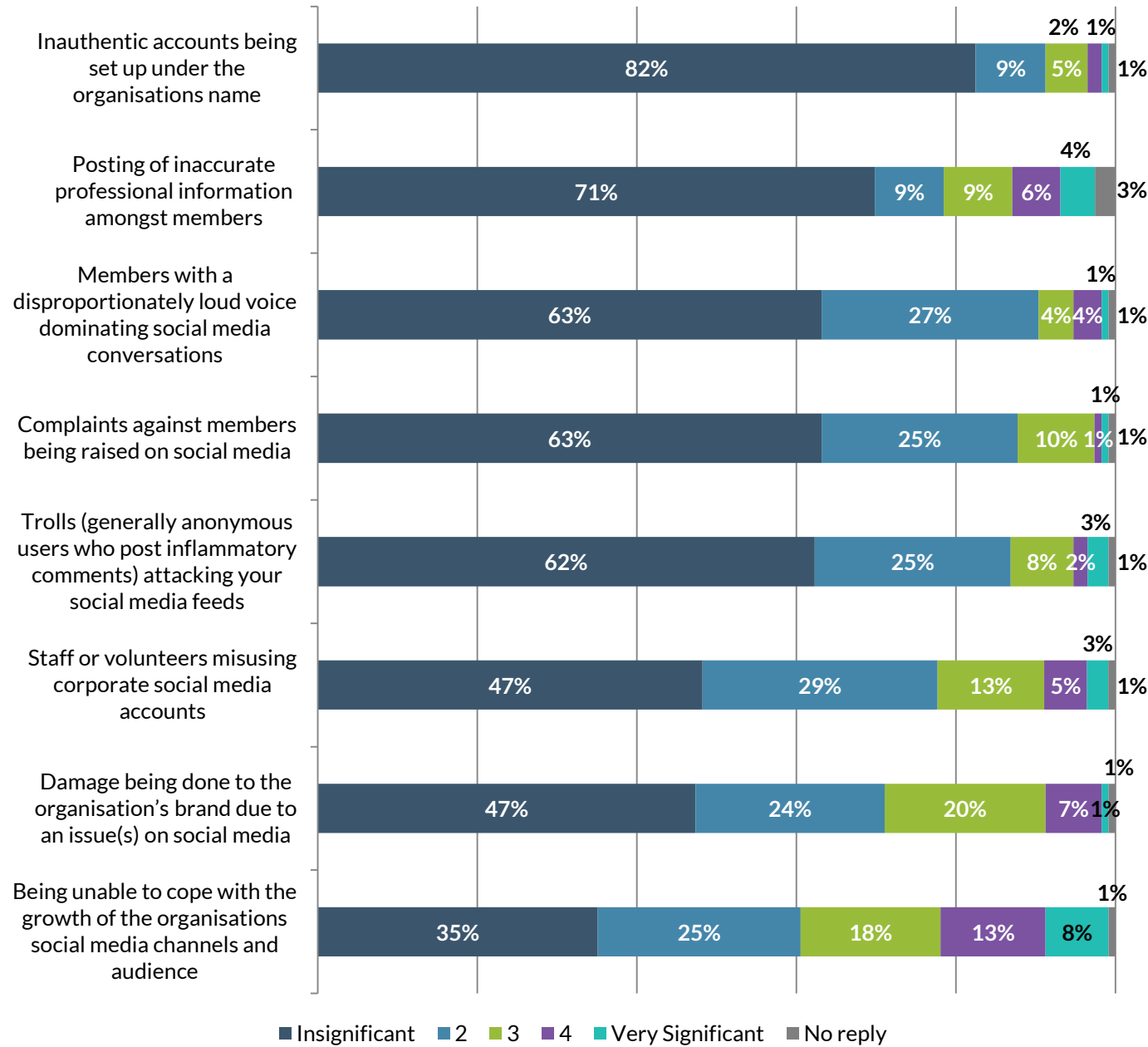


Figure 23: How significant are the following issues at your organisation?

## 10. Conclusions

The survey results indicate that virtually all professional bodies in our sample use various social channels to promote organisation events, with 98% of the sample claiming this is done either *Occasionally, Often, or Always*. The four most popular social media platforms were Twitter (88%), LinkedIn (83%), Facebook (74%) and YouTube (61%). It was found that their perceived importance broadly corresponded with their usage, that is, respondents on average rated LinkedIn as the most important while YouTube was the least out of the four previously mentioned platforms. Similarly, the usage of those platforms was found to be in general agreement with their perceived successfulness. The data showed 92% of Twitter users found they were at least successful in utilising the platform whereas a fewer 67% of YouTube users thought the same.

In terms of how the professional bodies judged this success, the survey data reveals that the most common measures of success for professional bodies' social media activity are *Initial Engagement* (79%) and *Size of Audience* (76%). In terms of making judgements about how well the strategy is progressing, professional bodies mostly rely on *Analytics tools* (57%) and *Channel Specific Analytics Reports* (47%). However, 32% said they use *Subjective judgements* to measure their progress and 21% have no measure of success at all. This suggests that professional bodies are still developing a well-defined set of criteria for measuring the success of their social media use. This is supported by the fact that 75% of the sample thought that the area in most need of improvement at their organisation was *Being able to analyse ROI of social media*.

Many organisations implement mechanisms to impose some control over the kinds of content posted on their social media channels, by both staff and the general public. For some organisations, this is quite tightly controlled. Elsewhere in the sector, we see patterns of a much lighter touch over what and how content is posted by staff, with a wider range of individuals allowed to use their discretion to post what they see fit.

The results in Figure 23 show that neither this, nor other potential social media challenges, was particularly significant at responding professional bodies. Only 21% saw that *Being unable to cope with the growth of the organisations social media channels and audience* as a significant concern.

Our research also offered insights into what professional bodies think are the requisite skills for using social media. Figure 15 shows that *Writing social media appropriate content* and *Content idea generation* are both considered either *Important* or *Very important* by 96% of the sample. *Using third party tools to manage social media* is considered the least important skill for social media staff. In terms of support, Figure 13 shows that 33% offer training for staff that use the corporate social media channels, whereas 37% offer no support at all.

Finally, Figure 14 revealed that 44% of professional bodies do not have a social media policy, with a third of those considering implementing one in the future. This suggests that the majority of the sample either have or are thinking about having a social media policy, although currently, more than half have no formal structures in place.