IAB Australia Future of Search Working Group

2026

future search

skills

skills to future-proof search marketing

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Automation now runs much of the day-to-day work in search advertising, from bidding to campaign setup and reporting. That is changing what search marketers need to be good at, and how the industry trains them. This paper from IAB Australia's Future of Search Working Group sets out the three skills search marketers will need over the next few years, and what the industry needs to do to build them.

Search is not shrinking. Search advertising reached $8.6 billion in FY26 and remains the largest digital advertising investment sector. But where people search is changing. Discovery now happens across search engines, AI answers, social and video platforms, retail marketplaces and, increasingly, AI agents acting for consumers.

Recruiters are seeing the effect on hiring. In an IAB Australia survey of specialist search and performance marketing recruiters:

Nearly all say demand for AI-related skills has risen;

Two thirds expect demand for junior roles to keep falling over the next two to three years;

The hardest hire is someone who combines hands-on platform skills with strategy, commercial understanding and client leadership.

the three skills

01 **AI-driven search.** Using AI is becoming a baseline expectation. The skill is judgement: questioning what automated systems recommend, checking it against the business objective, and knowing when a person needs to make the call.

02 **Whole-of-search visibility.** Paid, organic, AI and social search are converging. Practitioners need to work across all of them, and measure search by business outcomes, not clicks alone.

03 **Building a hybrid skill stack.** Search depth still matters, but the most valuable practitioners pair it with a second specialty, such as measurement, commerce, AI workflow building or full-funnel planning. Six personas show how these combinations work.

Running through all three is commercial judgement: the ability to connect search activity to business results.

the junior paradox

Automation is removing the repetitive work through which junior practitioners used to learn the job. As the paper puts it, we can automate the task, but we can't automate the learning. The paper calls on employers, platforms, universities and practitioners to rebuild that learning deliberately: keep hiring at entry level, redesign junior roles around diagnosis, testing and judgement, give new starters supervised access to live platforms, and bring more performance marketing into university courses.

The paper closes with a skills checklist that current search practitioners, and people looking to move into search, can use to see where they stand and what to build next.

about this paper

This paper was developed by the IAB Australia Future of Search Working Group, which brings together search specialists from brands, agencies, publishers, platforms and retail media networks. It also draws on a survey of leading recruiters who place search and performance media talent in Australia, and on discussion at IAB Australia's Discovery: AI & Search Summit.

The aim of the paper is to help existing search professionals, in both SEM and SEO, expand their skills, and to help people preparing to enter the workforce understand how search-related roles are changing and what they will need to succeed in them.

IAB Australia Future of Search Working Group

Dan Aguirre-Davies
WPP Media

Jarrod Allen
Monks

Meg Bellemore
The Guardian

Greg Cattelain
Spark Foundry

Mike Cook
News Corp Australia

Bonnie Dodemaide
iProspect

Simon Dunwoody
Woolworths Group

Clare Farrugia
Hatched

Ben Froggatt
Cartology

James Hutchinson
Ryvalmedia

Diana Kaldelis
Suncorp

Jules Lau
Mars

Rhett Mitchelhill
Half Dome

Max Prosser
OMD

Renee Stopps
Microsoft

Tom Tilney
Reddit

Anne Tran
Admatic

Adrian Vallelonga
Google

Find out more about the Future of Search Working Group.

contents

Introduction	4
The Shifting Skill Set	4
Future Skill #1: AI-driven search	6
As execution gets smarter, commercial judgement matters more	6
Organisations need to create the conditions for good AI judgement	8
Practical learning framework for search practitioners	9
Future Skill #2: Whole-of-search visibility	10
Converging landscape	10
Quality Score 2.0: what this means for search in a new LLM-powered landscape	11
Ever Expanding PPC marketer toolkit	12
Measuring total search	13
Brand is now a search input	13
Future Skill #3: Building a hybrid skill stack	14
The future of our industry	16
What recruiters are seeing	16
Search skills checklist	19
A call to industry	20
Glossary	21
Sources	21

introduction

We've reached a pivotal point in the search industry, with the rise of AI search and LLM engines, increased automation across search advertising, and an ongoing shift in consumer discovery. The past couple of years have truly accelerated search marketing, with internet investment recording its strongest growth in four years, reaching $19.8 billion in FY26, and search retaining the lion's share of this. Coupled with pressure on agencies and media teams to deliver more with less, the rise of AI-powered workflows, platform automation and a lower volume of entry-level roles is changing the future of our industry. This leads to the core provocation of this paper. What does the future skill set of a search marketer look like? What's in their toolbox, and how do they succeed in the role?

Search is not disappearing. Google alone handles more than 5 trillion searches a year, and people who research on platforms like ChatGPT still tend to return to search to find the brand and buy. What has changed is where people search, and the fact that AI agents increasingly search for them. Discovery now runs across search engines, AI answers, social and video platforms, retail marketplaces and AI assistants. As one agency search lead put it at IAB Australia's Discovery: AI & Search Summit in July, most teams are still built to run search as a channel, when it has become a behaviour.

This paper sets out three skills that will define the search marketer of the next few years: AI-driven search, whole-of-search visibility in a converging landscape, and building a hybrid skill stack. Running through all three is commercial judgement: the ability to connect search activity to business outcomes. The paper closes with what this means for how the industry trains and hires, and a call to industry.

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the shifting skill set

As platforms automate more tasks (bidding, campaign setup, reporting), the practitioner focus moves upstream. Of course, this means that more time is spent on tasks that really matter: strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and the critical evaluation of campaigns and creative. And with further pressure on commercial results and investment, we see a closer connection to business results, CFOs and the financial functions of businesses. But placing the power of campaign management into automated workstreams still requires the due diligence of a search marketer who understands how these systems work and gets the most value from them for the business: call it human in the loop.

> *"Platform proficiency matters more than ever, even at senior level. People used to move off the tools as they progressed. That's no longer advisable."*
>
> Recruiter, IAB Australia survey, October 2026

To give full context of the massive overhauls we've seen on the likes of Google and Microsoft, let's review the history of search platforms, and what we expect to see in the near-future.

a history of search activation eras

01 Manual Search

2000 – 2015

Focus

Manual bidding, keyword match types, manual quality score management, hand-built ad copy testing.

Impact

Practitioner value = technical execution. Managing the levers was where the expertise sat.

02 Smart Push

2015 – 2020

Focus

Smart Bidding, Responsive Search Ads launched.

Impact

Value shifts from pulling levers to feeding good inputs/signals.

03 Consolidation

2021-2025

Focus

Performance Max launch. Enhanced Conversions launched.

Impact

Push towards consolidated campaign approach and strengthened measurement signals.

04 Generative Search

2025 – present

Focus

AI Mode, AI Overviews

Impact

Embarking on a new wave of search with AI-powered placements.

05 Agentic

2026 onward

Focus

Agents act for consumers (research, compare, buy) and for marketers (connecting platforms and data through protocols such as MCP).

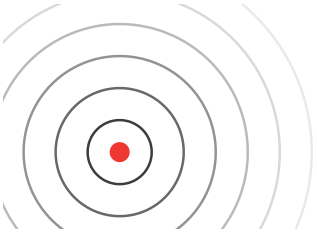
Impact

Shifting towards the automation of search campaigns end to end, with practitioners setting the goals and guardrails.

#1

future skill #1

AI-driven search



AI literacy is quickly becoming a baseline expectation rather than a differentiator on its own. As search execution becomes increasingly automated, the next question is what practitioners need to become better at. IAB Australia's 2026 talent research points in the same direction: employers are increasingly looking for people who can combine AI fluency with commercial judgement, strategic thinking and client leadership.

For search practitioners, this makes the question less about whether we use AI and more about what becomes more important as AI takes on more of the execution. Platforms can already automate bidding, targeting, creative decisions and analysis. The next wave is moving further again, with agents and connected workflows beginning to support planning, recommendations and cross-platform operations.

> *"Job titles and traditional experience requirements don't always reflect what someone can actually deliver. That makes it harder to distinguish between candidates who use AI tools and those who can apply them effectively to improve outcomes."*
>
> Recruiter, IAB Australia survey, October 2026

As execution gets smarter, commercial judgement matters more

Consider a familiar search scenario: An automated campaign may identify more conversion opportunities, lower CPA or find new query demand. On paper, the optimisation is working.

But what if those additional leads are lower quality? What if growth is coming from a market the business cannot service efficiently? Or the campaign is optimising towards form submissions when the business actually cares about qualified opportunities and revenue? These are not necessarily optimisation problems. They are business judgement problems.

As execution becomes faster and more automated, the practitioner increasingly needs to understand what the business is actually trying to achieve, what is happening in the market, and whether the system is solving the right problem.

Research that once required additional time or another specialist can increasingly be synthesised alongside campaign data. Performance questions can be investigated conversationally. Creative options can be explored quickly. Account audits that took hours can increasingly be completed in minutes.

AI is just as useful outside the ad platforms, for analysis there was rarely time to do. One agency search lead described matching search postcodes to ABS socioeconomic data to check whether campaigns were reaching the right people, and to compare who searches with who clicks through.

Microsoft, for example, says Stagwell has reduced some paid search campaign audits from hours to minutes using a Copilot agent connected to Microsoft Advertising data. Importantly, Microsoft's other published MCP examples still retain human reviewers before changes go live.

That distinction matters.

The opportunity is not simply to produce the same output faster. It is to move more practitioner time towards **interpreting, challenging and translating what the system produces**.

AI can surface patterns faster, interrogate more data and generate recommendations at scale. But more information does not automatically mean better decisions. A system might tell us that one audience is converting more efficiently, a query theme is growing or one message is outperforming another. The practitioner still needs to ask:

- Why is this happening?
- What context is missing?
- Does this line up with what we know about the customer and business?
- What should we actually do next?

Andrew Ng, founder of DeepLearning.AI, recently described this as a human **"context advantage"**. His point is that people carry years of customer, organisational and situational context that may never reach the AI system. That context continues to shape judgement even when AI becomes increasingly capable.

For search, the value is shifting from simply producing analysis to translating machine output into business insight and action.

This increases the importance of understanding commercial objectives, acquisition economics, customer and market context, and measurement. More optimisation and stronger technical capability do not automatically translate into a better commercial outcome.

> *"With AI giving clients easy access to information, they question decisions more, so the ability to influence and back up the work matters more."*
>
> Recruiter, IAB Australia survey, October 2026

If traditional search results are changing, the answer cannot always be another AI feature, broader automation or a better model. We still need to interrogate the fundamentals:

- Has the market changed?
- Has consumer behaviour or demand shifted?
- Has our competitive position changed?
- Is the proposition still compelling?
- Is the messaging working?
- Are we measuring the right outcome?
- Are the right conversion and customer signals being fed back into bidding?
- Is search being asked to solve the right acquisition problem?

The question that should come up more in discussions remains: Is this improving the business outcome and strategic direction of the campaign, or mainly improving the metric the platform has been asked to optimise towards?

organisations need to create the conditions for good AI judgement

Using AI tools is becoming easier. Building the right behaviour, skills and operating model around them is harder.

Deloitte's 2026 Australian research shows that gap clearly: 61% of Australian organisations report improved efficiency from AI, while only 30% say they are using AI to deeply transform how they work. Deloitte also reports that 69% are using autonomous AI agents, while only 22% have advanced agent governance models.

More automation does not necessarily mean a more mature system.
Maturity should not be measured by how few humans are involved. It is whether the organisation has made deliberate choices about what should be automated, what requires human review, what data the system can access, who owns the decision, how risk is managed and what success actually looks like.

In search, it means the organisation has deliberately decided:

- what should be automated, and to which extent;
- what still needs practitioner review;
- what business and customer data can be used;
- who owns the decision when the system recommends an action;
- how risk and brand controls are managed;
- and what success is ultimately being measured against.

For example, automatically flagging search-term anomalies or summarising an account audit may be relatively low-risk. Reallocating major budget, expanding into new demand, changing brand messaging or optimising against sensitive customer data may require much more context and human involvement.

If businesses want practitioners to move from execution to stronger judgement, they need to support that shift with clear AI direction, practical training, reviewed workflows, and shared expectations across practitioners, leaders, and clients.

IAB Australia's AI Readiness Advertising Infrastructure provides a useful reference point here, covering organisational maturity, data governance, vendor assessment, model risk, generative AI usage policies and incident response.

Its 2026 LLM Prompting Framework also reflects the move from individual experimentation towards more structured adoption, with a focus on reducing inconsistency and managing risks around accuracy, privacy, brand safety and commercial decision-making.

The founding principles still matter: objective before tool, good inputs, appropriate guardrails, a strong testing culture, action over perfection and measurement against meaningful business outcomes.

Adoption, education and organisational direction need to develop together.

practical learning framework for search practitioners

The framework below sets out four stages for building practical AI capability in search, from understanding the basics through to orchestrating connected workflows. Apply and Govern form the centre of gravity for most practitioners, with Govern as the key focus.

core capability

01 understand

Build enough AI literacy to use it safely and understand where it appears across Search planning and management.

primary goal **Understand AI basics, guardrails and safe-use practices, including privacy, security and how AI appears across campaign planning and management workflows.**

in practice

- Keep learning: Follow platform documentation, AI usage guidelines, workshops and industry updates.
- Treat outputs as drafts: Check claims, numbers and sources before use, in line with IAB Australia's LLM Prompting Framework.
- Know what data can go where: Understand privacy, security and approved-use requirements before sharing business or customer data.
- Know where AI sits in the workflow: Is it assisting, recommending, optimising or acting?

02 apply

Use AI features intentionally, monitor results closely and build practical understanding through testing.

primary goal **Apply, test and learn deliberately. Build a working understanding of where different features add value; incorporate tested AI features into day-to-day workflows.**

in practice

- Automated bidding: The platform manages auction-time bids while the practitioner still defines the conversion goal, value signal and efficiency target.
- Google's AI Max for Search: Test expanded matching, asset customisation and URL expansion with the right controls in place.
- AI-assisted analysis: Use conversational analysis and diagnostics to move faster, then validate the output against the business question.
- Test before scaling: Use experiments or A/B tests where possible and keep monitoring after launch.

03 govern key focus

Focus on measurement quality, business-value signals, attribution, QA, privacy, risk and human review.

primary goal **Make sure AI is optimising towards the right business outcome, fits into a scalable long-term operating model, and generates practical learnings that improve future tool, workflow and technique decisions.**

in practice

- **Optimise to qualified leads, not form fills:** Feed CRM outcomes back into bidding so optimisation follows business value.
- **Measure both campaign and AI impact:** Track commercial outcomes such as ROI alongside the effect of the AI feature or workflow itself.
- **Review machine-written copy:** Check AI-generated assets against brand, legal and category requirements.
- **Challenge the recommendation:** Ask whether the output makes sense against the market, customer, business objective and wider strategy.
- **Capture learnings:** Use results to inform future tools, techniques and automation decisions.

04 orchestrate

Explore connected workflows, agents and automation where they solve a real business problem.

primary goal **Scale useful workflows while keeping appropriate controls, review and accountability.**

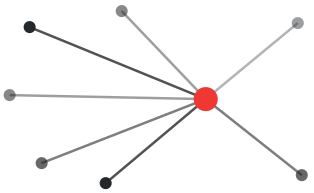
in practice

- Agent-assisted audits: Stagwell's Assembly used a Copilot agent connected through Microsoft Advertising MCP to cut some audits from hours to minutes, with practitioners reviewing outputs and making the final call.
- Connected workflows: Use APIs, MCPs or agents with clear permissions, approval points and ownership.
- Automate intentionally: Reduce repetitive work where the risk and workflow justify it.

greater technical complexity

#2 whole-of-search visibility

future skill #2



As search providers keep pace with the frenetic LLM product rollout, the worlds of paid and organic search are converging more and more. Where PPC and SEO teams worked in silos, competing for separate positions on the SERP, AI search results have created environments where both compete for the same real estate. As we know AI capabilities have begun to trickle into almost every search product, paid or organic. However, the tech isn't new to search as machine learning has underpinned a lot of the mechanics of search products in recent years, particularly with automated bidding solutions. The latest evolution (AI search results) brings the two landscapes closer than ever.

In this section the key themes we'll explore will be the converging landscape itself, the impact to quality score, how this translates to the modern search practitioner's toolkit and, finally, how we measure it.

Converging landscape

As a result of the convergence the lines are blurring between the skills required by the modern day search practitioner. In Future Skill #3 we deep dive into how the new skill sets can be categorised into different personas, which gives a more visual aid to outline where marketers could sit within an agency.

Convergence is not limited to paid and organic. Social platforms are now part of search.

Nearly half of people online aged 16 to 34 say searching for products is one of their main reasons for using social media, and Reddit now reaches more than 17 million Australians a month (IAB Australia, Social Search: The Discovery Revolution, 2025). Whole-of-search visibility has to include them.

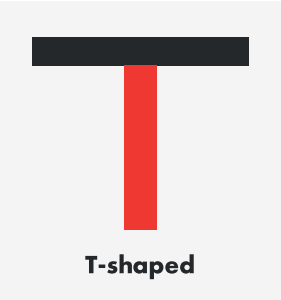
Where SEO and GEO focus on content such as buying guides and comparison content, PPC shifts to more pointed searches for specific product or service details. Nowadays there is a greater pull towards content-led strategies for the GEO practitioner which means the traditional paid search experts in some cases must pick up the slack.

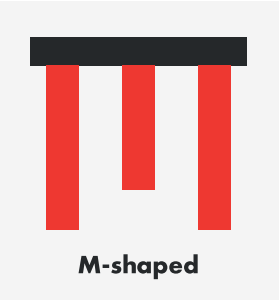
In fact a study from BrightEdge found that half of ChatGPT's holiday citations point to pages marketing does not own. Commercial pages are the highest cited content types across Google AI Overviews which sit as a function of a merchandising/marketing team, not GEO strategy (Google AI Overviews vs ChatGPT: Half of ChatGPT's Holiday Citations Point to Pages Marketing Does Not Own | BrightEdge).

The modern day paid search practitioner should consider SEO dynamics whilst also getting under the hood on AI visibility tools and other reporting solutions to satisfy growing client needs for greater visibility across the search landscape.

This evolution is described by Search Engine Journal in their State of PPC 2026 Report as the move from a T-shaped model to an M-shaped model (The PPC Career Evolution Nobody Is Talking About).

> *"The State of PPC 2026 report, suggests that the skills now expected of a competent PPC manager include data analysis, first-party data activation, creative testing strategy, attribution modeling, prompt engineering, and scripting."*





In short the T shape model represents one very deep specialism supported by a broad understanding of adjacent areas of expertise. The M model represents two or three areas of deep expertise with a much broader supporting base of knowledge.

"It looks like a generalist from a distance and like a specialist up close"

Some suggest the role is becoming less channel focussed and encouraging PPC marketers to look more broadly across "search intelligence".

Neither is right or wrong but a reflection of the demands in the modern day search marketer's role.

> *"I expect greater demand for professionals who can connect search, performance media, data and commercial outcomes, rather than operate within a single platform or channel."*
>
> Recruiter, IAB Australia survey, October 2026

Quality Score 2.0: what this means for search in a new LLM-powered landscape

Quality Score has underpinned search since its inception. As we know to avoid a Below Average user experience, the search engine's results must closely correlate to the initial query. Along comes Google's secret sauce to provide sponsorship opportunities to the search experience which applies the same logic to auction dynamics to create a relevancy economy. You can try to outbid the competition but the most relevant sponsored results will grab the coveted top spots (see IAB Australia, How Search Engine Advertising Auctions Work, 2025).

The same principles apply to this day but the conundrum search marketers are caught in now is how AI-powered search might shape the future of search copy due to changes in authority, relevancy, ranking and quality score. We have already witnessed an impact to search fundamentals with the rise in zero click searches (Study Confirms Google AI Overviews Cut Organic Clicks 38%) which pulls the scale of other search paradigm shifts into focus, although recent IAB Australia research on commerce and discovery found click-through from search is holding and time on search is up 22%.

LLM marketers will know the approach to copy is different to search, but much like AI-powered capabilities, the LLM marketing approach is also trickling through to search. As sponsored results in AI-powered search environments grow across search, +394% between March - October 2025 (25.6% of AI searches included sponsored results) (SERPs with Ads + AI Overviews Grew by Over 394% in 2025) so too does the way we approach copy. Many may have begun testing this but clients are now asking the question if we should be applying LLM marketing principles across search and more specifically to sponsored AI environments.

If you have been pressed on this by a client you'll know we are caught in the limbo of how best to approach copy. As always the data will tell you what's working well and what's not but we could be seeing a change in tack to relevancy and quality across search surfaces. Granted ad relevancy is one of three components but it can also impact Expected CTR if results are Above Average or Below Average. Ultimately platform growth and business impact are not linear (yet) so always test and let the data tell the story.

The ever-expanding PPC marketer toolkit: how converging landscapes impact reporting and optimisation tools. Could we see an agency structural shift?

In the past a core challenge for traditional search marketers has been fielding our client's questions on why or how performance has shifted week on week, month to month. To answer these questions the search marketers toolkit has expanded beyond the bread and butter search platform insights; e.g. auction insights, GA. We have increasingly relied on more market focussed tools to provide context on competitor behaviours.

With the rise in AI search results there is a growing blindspot in reporting and optimisation, which can't be tracked through traditional search platforms and reports. Once again the search marketer must dig through the toolbox to find the right tools for the job at hand. To help illustrate this a BrightEdge report found that to win in AI Mode marketers must consider three key inputs, product feed quality, supporting schema and differentiated on-page content, however these inputs sit across different team structures in a traditional agency structure.

AI Mode Optimisation Input	AI Mode Optimisation Input	AI Mode Optimisation Input
Product Feed Quality	**Schema**	**On-page Content**
Agency Team	**Agency Team**	**Agency Team**
PPC	SEO/GEO	SEO/GEO

With the shift in our approach to copy, the same case can be made for a shift in reporting and optimisation of the channel. While it may appear like an isolated instance, there are wider implications at an agency level.

In many agency structures producing AI visibility and tracking reports sit in the SEO and GEO teams. There is a demand for paid search marketers to also provide this level of insight in their reporting. Just as a paid search marketer would have analysed traffic sources in GA to explain if paid was the only channel that was up or down month on month, so too should we be analysing AI reporting capabilities.

Some agencies are already reorganising around this. Teams covering organic, paid, retail and emerging search are briefed together and, in the most advanced cases, share KPIs, so success is judged on total search rather than each channel defending its own numbers.

The ongoing question of search incrementality rumbles on and perhaps the way we report on search as a whole must change to reflect the convergence between the two. In the coming months we may start to see more unified metrics appearing in our reporting. One example could look like a Total Search Share/Presence which incorporates Paid visibility, Organic visibility, AI visibility, Brand demand and attention metrics.

measuring total search

For years, traffic stood in for success. That proxy is weakening. Whether or not AI answers are cutting clicks in a given category, traffic alone no longer explains performance. Practitioners are replacing it with a broader set of signals: engaged sessions, micro-conversions such as product page views, citations and sentiment in AI answers, and engagement on social, read alongside paid and organic results.

The new metrics carry a risk. Most AI visibility tools rely on simulated prompts rather than real user data, so their outputs are directional, and platforms use different names for similar measures. At the Summit, an audience member asked where the evidence was that these metrics convert to revenue. The panel's answer was that measurement has not kept pace, and many are, for now, vanity metrics.

Closing that gap is a core skill. Search marketers need to:

1	start from a measurement framework and the business questions it must answer, not from a tool;
2	hold one consistent source of business truth, such as sales, qualified leads or revenue;
3	treat AI visibility data as directional, and test whether it moves that business truth;
4	use incrementality testing and marketing mix modelling to connect paid and organic search activity to outcomes.

> *"ROI alone is no longer enough. Demand is growing for experience with CLV, contribution margin, MER, POAS, marginal CPA and incrementality. That relies on client data that hasn't always been on offer to agencies, so the experience is rare, and an opportunity as more clients open up."*
>
> Recruiter, IAB Australia survey, October 2026

For agent-led journeys, IAB Australia's paper Agentic AI: What does it mean for search marketers (2026) proposes four tests: was the brand considered, did the interaction earn trust, did the agent complete the task, and did it lead to the next step.

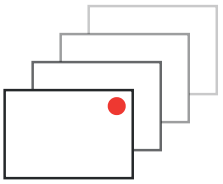
brand is now a search input

When AI builds the shortlist, the brands most likely to make it are those people already know and trust, with a clear and consistent position. LLMs and people both favour that. Each category also draws on different sources to generate AI answers, from Reddit and reviews to creators and affiliates. Search marketers need to know which sources shape answers in their category, and work with brand, PR, social and content teams to influence them. Pushing more budget into capturing existing demand is not a long-term plan if nothing is building the demand in the first place.

#3

future skill #3

building a hybrid skill stack



Search built its authority on technical complexity. Bidding structures, match types, quality score, and shopping feeds gave specialists a genuinely defendable skill set for years. Automation has eroded that. As the opening section covers, the platform is absorbing more of the execution layer, so search expertise on its own is no longer the moat it used to be.

That doesn't mean SEM depth stops mattering. It still matters, and being able to explain its strategy and value clearly is arguably more important than ever. What's changing is what sits alongside it and what capabilities you are compounding to add value. The practitioners with the most leverage now are the ones pairing search depth with a second (or more) capability that solves a broader business problem: creative, measurement, discovery, commerce, brand and full-funnel planning, or building the AI workflows underneath the account.

In Media agencies or in-house media teams, paid search and paid social have been the default hybrid pairing for years, partly because it's attractive to the practitioner (broader skill set, control of the whole performance budget). But that pairing is under pressure. Paid social is becoming a creative-led discipline in its own right, and platform fragmentation makes running both to a genuinely high standard harder for one person and, to be frank, is becoming a standalone skill set.

For publishers, the need to bring organic search expertise closer to editorial and content skills becomes critical to deliver consistent GEO practices and develop "GEO-to-Editorial" discernment, in order to win the discovery battle in LLM-powered search environments.

The shift isn't toward one universal search marketer who can do everything. It's toward the right combination for the problem in front of you.

> *"You either find people who are good in-platform and with data, or people who are good at thinking outside the box, strategy and client leadership. It's very difficult to find both, and we need both."*
>
> Recruiter, IAB Australia survey, October 2026

One way to bring this to life is to create different personas who have the same core skill sets but different adjacent specialities to navigate and answer the evolving search advertising landscape.

> *"Over the next two years, the most valuable search and performance marketers will be those who can direct and audit AI-run campaigns, feed algorithms better conversion and profit signals, and win visibility in AI search tools like ChatGPT and Google's AI Overviews."*
>
> Recruiter, IAB Australia survey, October 2026

Persona & Skill set Combines	**Why It's Effective**	**Who This Is For**
Performance **Search + Paid Social**	Owns the full paid performance budget, so spend shifts to whatever channel is actually working instead of being defended by channel.	Someone equally comfortable with a spreadsheet and a creative brief, who wants to own the whole performance budget.
Signals **Search + Measurement & Tracking**	Someone has to check the inputs feeding the automation. This is the person who catches bad data before it becomes a bad decision.	Someone who's drawn to data, wants to see behind the platform's curtain rather than take its word for it, and is genuinely comfortable getting technical.
Discovery **Paid Search + SEO/GEO + Social Search**	Paid, organic, social and AI-led discovery are converging into one surface. This persona defends visibility across all of it, not just their half.	Someone who thinks about how a brand is found everywhere, not just through one channel, and is genuinely curious about both paid mechanics and organic/content strategy.
Builder **Search + AI Workflow Design**	Someone needs to build and maintain the agents and workflows connecting tools and data, not just use them.	Someone naturally curious about how systems connect, who likes automating repetitive work and doesn't mind getting technical.
Commerce **Search + Retail Media**	Sponsored placements on retailer marketplaces run on the same auction mechanics as search, just on different inventory, and the budget behind it is growing fast. As AI agents start shopping for consumers, product feed quality becomes a deciding factor.	Someone commercially minded who wants to sit closer to the actual transaction, with a taste for operational precision like feeds and product data.
Full-Funnel **Search + Video/Upper-Funnel**	Search intent increasingly informs upper-funnel buying decisions and vice versa. This persona connects the two instead of running separate budgets.	For someone who wants to be a "full funnel marketer", beyond performance specialist, equally at home in brand and upper-funnel thinking as in direct response.

the future of our industry

One of the biggest questions created by AI isn't simply *which jobs will change*? It's how will the next generation learn the fundamentals when many of the tasks that traditionally taught those fundamentals are increasingly automated?

This is the "Junior Paradox": we can automate the task, but we can't automate the learning.

The numbers show how pressing this is. IAB Australia's 2026 Digital Advertising & Ad Tech Industry Talent Review found entry-level roles made up as little as 1% of open vacancies, while around half of advertised roles asked for six or more years' experience.

What recruiters are seeing

To test these themes against the hiring market, the working group surveyed 12 specialist digital and performance marketing recruiters in October 2026. The sample is small but experienced, so the results are directional rather than representative.

Fewer roles overall.

58% said demand for search and performance roles has fallen over the past 12 to 24 months. Views on the next two to three years are split: half expect demand to grow, 42% expect it to fall.

Junior roles are shrinking.

58% have seen demand for junior roles fall, a third of recruiters significantly, and two thirds expect it to keep falling over the next two to three years.

AI skills are now expected.

Nearly all (92%) said demand for AI-related skills has risen. The skills most sought are optimising content for AI search experiences and automating search tasks and workflows (83% each), followed by AI-assisted research and analysis, and data analysis using AI tools (75% each).

The hardest hire combines technical, commercial and AI skills.

The most common challenge was finding people with strong hands-on platform skills who can also think strategically, understand the commercial picture and lead clients. Some also find it hard to tell platform knowledge from proven results.

Commercial measurement is the next gap.

Recruiters expect growing demand for incrementality, marketing mix modelling, customer lifetime value and profit-based metrics, alongside AI search optimisation, creative testing, first-party data and retail media.

The pipeline is thin.

Recruiters pointed to a small local talent pool, universities teaching little performance marketing, and strong competition for good candidates, which drives up salaries and counter-offers.

> *"Fewer roles, higher bar. One strong person can now cover what a small team used to, so each hire needs to be hands-on, commercial and able to build."*
>
> Recruiter, IAB Australia survey, October 2026

> *"Fewer junior roles now means a thinner mid-level in a few years."*
>
> Recruiter, IAB Australia survey, October 2026

For years, search advertising provided an almost accidental apprenticeship. Junior practitioners learned by being close to the engine: building campaigns, testing ad copy, adjusting bids, interrogating search terms, pulling reports and trying to understand why performance moved.

Much of that work was manual and repetitive, and rightly, technology is making it faster and more efficient. But it served another important purpose: it taught people how advertising works. Through hands-on experience, practitioners learned to read data, recognise patterns and understand the relationship between an action and an outcome.

That's the paradox we need to solve. We shouldn't preserve manual tasks simply because they were once a rite of passage. But equally, we can't automate away the execution layer and expect someone entering the industry to leap straight into strategy. Strategic judgement isn't something you learn in theory. It develops through experience, seeing inputs and outcomes, asking why something happened and learning what to do differently next time.

> *"Gaps that would once have been seen as a development opportunity are now seen as a step too far."*
> Recruiter, IAB Australia survey, October 2026

Perhaps, then, we need to redefine what *"the basics"* are.

In an AI-powered advertising world, the fundamentals will increasingly be less about completing a task and more about understanding the system around it: setting the right objective, providing the right inputs, questioning recommendations, interrogating outputs, understanding consumer behaviour and connecting media performance to commercial outcomes.

> Junior practitioners can become an essential human in the loop, asking: *Does this make sense? What is the technology optimising towards? Is that aligned with the outcome we're trying to achieve? What can we learn from this, and what should we test next?*

Knowing which button to push becomes less important. Knowing why you're pushing it, what you're asking the technology to achieve and how to judge the result becomes considerably more valuable.

If the traditional apprenticeship is disappearing, we need to consciously design its replacement. Instead of apprenticeships built around repetitive execution, we need ones built around experimentation, diagnosis and judgement.

Give junior talent real business problems and real access to the platforms. Let them create hypotheses, provide inputs, interrogate AI recommendations, analyse outcomes and explain what happened. Give them an environment where they can experiment and learn from both success and failure. The goal isn't to move people prematurely into "strategy". It is to accelerate their exposure to the experiences and decisions that eventually create strategic judgement.

There is a broader responsibility here too. If technology is removing some of the traditional training ground, we have a responsibility as an industry to deliberately build a new one.

That means platforms, agencies, brands, universities and industry bodies working together to rethink how people enter our industry and learn their craft. Could the final year of university become more vocational? Could students spend more time working on real industry briefs? Could we create stronger internship and graduate pathways that combine hands-on experience with mentoring, industry training and exposure to AI-powered advertising?

> *"Universities in Australia are not teaching enough performance marketing to graduates coming out of marketing degrees, so the dependence on overseas candidates and visa holders is high across the market."*
>
> Recruiter, IAB Australia survey, October 2026

As execution becomes increasingly automated, training also needs to evolve beyond simply teaching people how to use features. We need to help practitioners diagnose performance, test hypotheses, understand signals and solve real business problems.

We don't need to protect the old tasks. We need to protect the learning those tasks created.

And this isn't only about junior talent. The same question applies to everyone working in search today: if technology is changing what we do, what capabilities will make us valuable tomorrow?

The future search marketer is unlikely to be defined by mastery of a single platform or the ability to execute a particular task.

That gives every practitioner an important question to consider:

What do I want my human advantage to be?

It might be strategic thinking. Measurement. Creativity. Customer insight. Commercial acumen. Data. Technology. Storytelling. The goal isn't to become an expert in everything. It's to build genuine depth somewhere while becoming increasingly fluent in the disciplines around it.

Ultimately, we shouldn't be teaching people to compete with AI on tasks AI can perform better. We should be teaching people how to think, question, experiment and make better decisions with AI.

If we get that right, automation doesn't have to weaken the advertising talent pipeline. It could create a better apprenticeship, one focused less on *doing the work* and more on understanding *why the work works*.

search skills checklist

Use this checklist to see where you are strong and where to build next. It applies whether you already work in search or are looking to move into it. Tick where you are today, then pick one or two areas to work on over the next six months.

Skill	What good looks like	Already in search: start here	New to search: start here	Where am I?
Platform fundamentals	Understands how the auction, Quality Score, bidding and product feeds work, even when they are automated.	Stay hands-on in the platforms as you get more senior. Check automated recommendations before accepting them.	Learn how the auction and Quality Score work (IAB Australia, How Search Engine Advertising Auctions Work). Complete Google and Microsoft Advertising certifications.	☐ Strong ☐ Building ☐ Not yet
AI judgement	Questions what AI systems recommend and checks it against the business objective before acting.	For each automated change, ask: why is this happening, what context is missing, and is it improving the business outcome?	Use AI tools on real tasks and check every output for accuracy. Follow IAB Australia's LLM Prompting Framework.	☐ Strong ☐ Building ☐ Not yet
Commercial understanding	Connects search activity to revenue, margin and customer value, and can explain it to finance teams.	Learn the metrics finance teams use: customer lifetime value, contribution margin, MER and marginal CPA.	Learn how a business makes money: margin, acquisition cost and the value of a customer over time.	☐ Strong ☐ Building ☐ Not yet
Measurement	Starts from a measurement framework, uses incrementality testing and MMM, and treats AI visibility data as directional.	Run an incrementality test on part of your activity. Learn how MMM results feed into search budgets.	Learn analytics basics and the difference between correlation and incremental impact.	☐ Strong ☐ Building ☐ Not yet
Whole-of-search	Sees paid, SEO, GEO, social search, retail media and AI answers as one system.	Learn the basics of the discipline next to yours. Track how your brands appear in AI answers.	Search your own category on Google, ChatGPT, TikTok and Reddit, and compare what you find.	☐ Strong ☐ Building ☐ Not yet
Signals and data	Feeds automation the right conversion, customer and profit signals, and catches bad data early.	Review conversion tracking and check whether bidding optimises to qualified leads and value, not form fills.	Learn how tracking and conversion data flow into automated bidding.	☐ Strong ☐ Building ☐ Not yet

Skill	What good looks like	Already in search: start here	New to search: start here	Where am I?
Building with AI	Builds and maintains workflows and agents that connect tools and data, with clear controls.	Build one workflow that saves your team time, document it and share it.	Learn basic scripting or a no-code automation tool.	☐ Strong ☐ Building ☐ Not yet
Communication and influence	Explains and defends recommendations in business terms, not platform metrics.	Present performance as business outcomes. Prepare for clients who arrive with their own AI-generated analysis.	Ask to present your own analysis to the team, and seek feedback.	☐ Strong ☐ Building ☐ Not yet
Hybrid depth	Pairs search depth with one adjacent specialty that solves a broader business problem.	Choose a persona from Future Skill #3 and plan the training and experience to get there.	Try more than one area early before choosing where to build depth.	☐ Strong ☐ Building ☐ Not yet

a call to industry

Automation is removing much of the work that used to train people. The industry needs to replace it deliberately. We are asking:

Employers (agencies, brands and publishers)	keep hiring at entry level, and redesign junior roles around diagnosis, testing and judgement rather than pure execution. Protect time for learning, give juniors supervised access to live platforms, and pair them with experienced practitioners.
Platforms	extend training beyond feature set-up to scenario-based problem solving, and give students and new starters sandbox access to practise with AI-powered campaign tools.
Universities	work with industry on final-year projects that use real briefs, data and platforms, so graduates arrive knowing how search, measurement and commercial outcomes connect.
Practitioners	choose the adjacent skill you want to build depth in, and start now.
IAB Australia & Future of Search Working Group	commitments to university engagement, training resources, and industry updates.

glossary

Acronyms used in this paper.

API	Application programming interface. A standard way for software tools to exchange data and instructions.
CLV	Customer lifetime value. The total value a customer is expected to bring a business over the whole relationship.
CPA	Cost per acquisition. Media cost divided by the number of conversions. Marginal CPA is the cost of each additional conversion as spend increases.
CRM	Customer relationship management. The systems a business uses to record customer and sales data.
CTR	Click-through rate. The share of people who click on an ad or result after seeing it. Expected CTR is one of the components of Quality Score.
GA	Google Analytics. Google's website and app analytics platform.
GEO	Generative engine optimisation. The practice of improving how a brand and its content appear, are cited and are described in AI-generated answers. It builds on SEO.
KPI	Key performance indicator. A measure used to judge whether activity is meeting its objectives.
LLM	Large language model. The type of AI model behind tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini and Copilot.
MCP	Model Context Protocol. An open standard that lets AI tools and agents connect to other software and data, such as advertising platforms.
MER	Marketing efficiency ratio. Total revenue divided by total marketing spend, across all channels.
MMM	Marketing mix modelling. Statistical method that estimates the contribution of each marketing channel to sales or other outcomes.
POAS	Profit on ad spend. Profit generated for each dollar of advertising spend, rather than revenue.
PPC	Pay per click. Advertising bought on a cost-per-click basis. Often used to mean paid search.
QA	Quality assurance. Checking work for accuracy and quality before it goes live.
ROI	Return on investment. The return generated relative to the amount invested.
SEM	Search engine marketing. Usually used to mean paid search advertising.
SEO	Search engine optimisation. The practice of improving how content is found and ranked in organic search results.
SERP	Search engine results page. The page of results shown after a search, including ads, organic results and AI-generated answers.

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