



Practice Bulletin

Social Service Providers' Preferred Messengers, Sources, and Formats: Results of a National Survey

INTRODUCTION

Chapin Hall connects research to action. We bridge the gap between research and practice by providing practitioners and policymakers the evidence they need to inform their decisions. To best build that bridge, we take an evidence-based approach to dissemination. When new research and policy calls for new practices, this evidence helps us communicate effectively with human service providers. Understanding their communication preferences allows us to target our communications, which can lead to accelerated adoption of new, beneficial practices.

To build our body of dissemination evidence, we conducted a web-based survey with human service providers to determine their preferred messengers, channels, and formats. Representing more than a dozen sectors and every state, 921 human service providers responded to the survey. A descriptive report provides complete results with details about significant correlations based on demographic characteristics and position within organizations.

This practice bulletin focuses on our findings about social service providers' preferred messengers, sources, and formats.

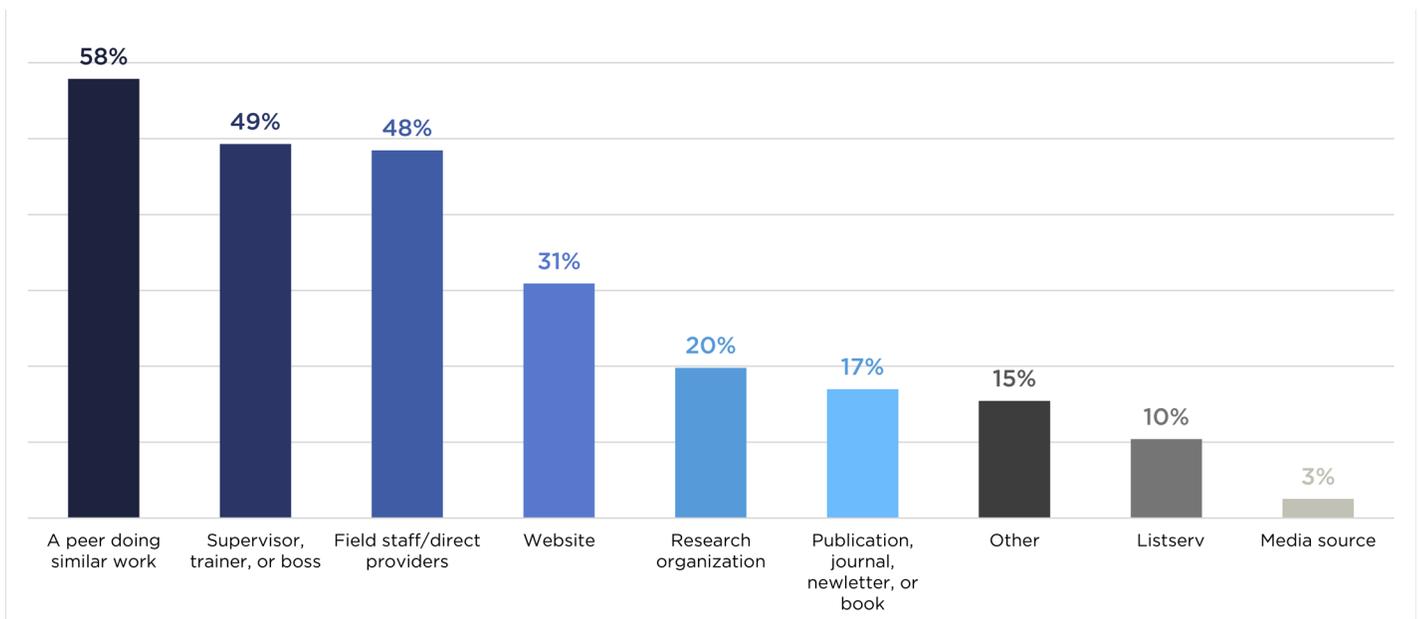


WHO HUMAN SERVICE PROVIDERS MOST TRUST

Respondents were asked about the sources they most trust for information relevant to their work with children, youth, and families. The average number of types of sources reported to be trusted was 2.36 (Standard Deviation=1.37) with most respondents reporting one (30%), two (27%), or three (24%) types of trusted sources. Only 2% of respondents did not report trusting any sources.

The most highly trusted sources were: a peer doing similar work (57%), a supervisor/trainer/boss (49%), or direct service providers at their work (49%). These top three sources are all personal contacts. In fact, most (87%) reported at least one personal source they trusted. However, most (54%) did not report trusting a nonpersonal source. While other, nonpersonal sources were also trusted by some respondents, there was a sharp drop-off after the top three. Websites were the fourth most-frequently trusted source (31%).

Figure 1. Peers and Supervisors are Highly Trusted Sources



WHERE PROVIDERS GET PROFESSIONAL INFORMATION

The next series of questions asked about the resource types respondents use in their work. Sources can share information in a range of formats. For example, a person might use a website repository of best practices (resource) because a trusted colleague (source) recommended it. We also asked respondents if they received information that improved their work from various resource types. The resource types were grouped into four categories: personal or instructor, online, print, and audio or video. Across all resource types, respondents used 14 resources on average.

For personal or instructor resources, respondents were given seven options. On average, respondents endorsed receiving information from six of them. The most frequently endorsed were direct conversations, conference speakers, and email (see Table 1).

Table 1. Personal or Instructor Resources

Resource Type	<i>n</i>
Direct conversations	93%
Conference speakers (live or virtual)	87%
Email	86%
Group training in workplace by outside speakers or presenters	79%
Group training from inside organization	77%
Group training external	74%
One-on-one instruction	72%

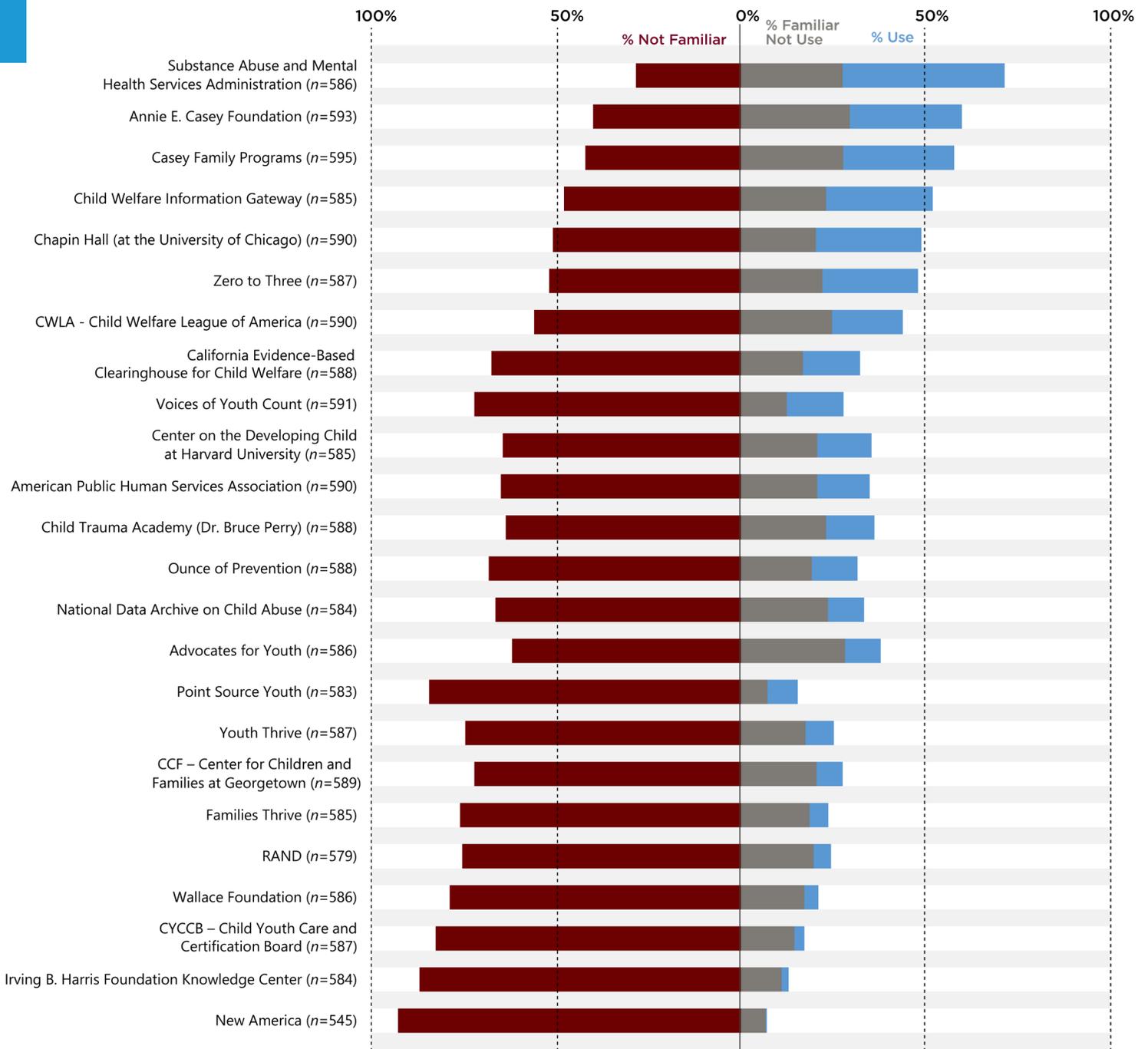
For online resources, respondents were given six options and on average endorsed receiving information from three of them. The most frequently endorsed option was a website repository of best practices, toolkits, or work-relevant information (see Table 2). The next most frequently endorsed were online newsletters and online academic publications.

Table 2. Online Resource Preferences

Resource Type	<i>n</i>
Website repository of best practices	82%
Online newsletters	64%
Online academic publications	60%
Online news sites	56%
Blogs, listservs, or online forums	47%

Website repositories of best practice information are the most frequently used online resource. To better understand which websites were most popular, respondents were presented with a list of 24 website repositories and asked to choose from three options: not familiar, familiar with but did not use it, or used it and were familiar. Figure 2 presents the responses in descending order of percent responding they use the website.

Figure 2. Most Used Websites



For print resources, respondents were given five options and on average endorsed receiving information from 2.1 of them. The most frequently endorsed options were books and brochures (see Table 3).

Table 3. Print Resources

Resource Types	<i>n</i>
Books	62%
Brochures	57%
Print organizational newsletter or mailings	43%
Print academic journals	30%
Print newspapers	27%

For audio or visual resources, respondents were given five options and, on average, endorsed receiving information from 2.9 of them. The most frequently endorsed options were webinars or videos. The next most frequently endorsed were TED talks and documentaries.

Table 4. Audio or Video Sources

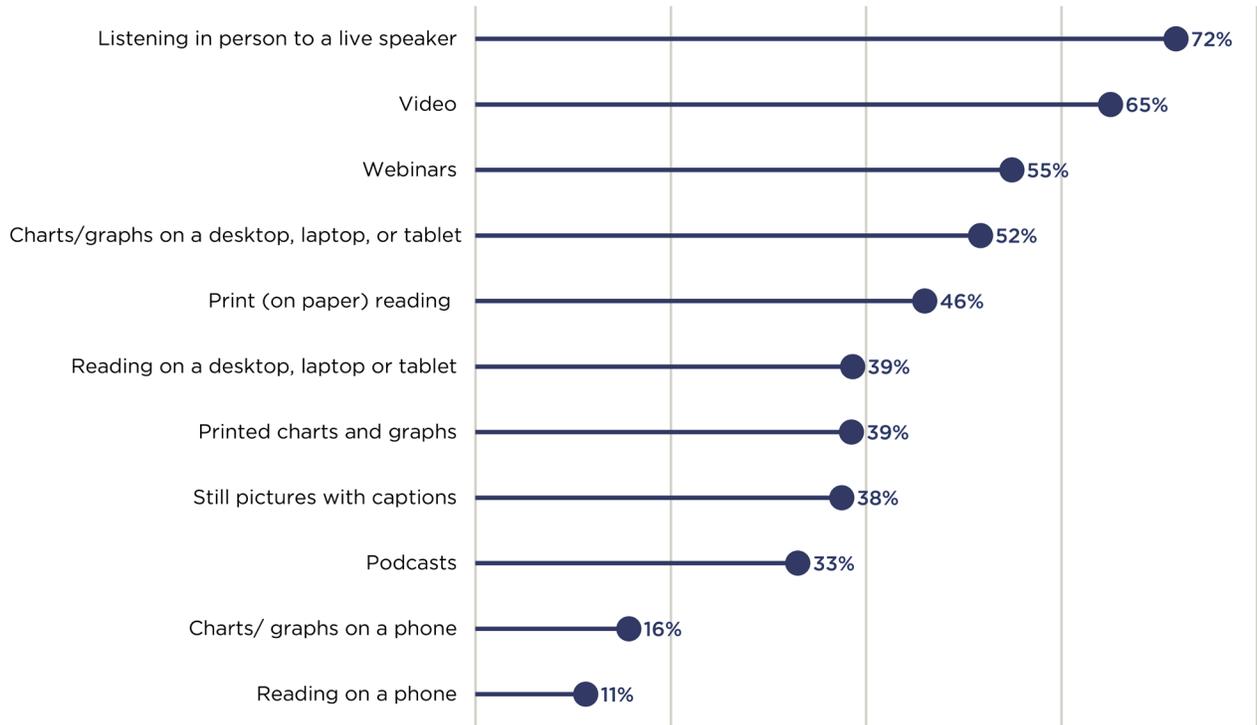
Source Type	<i>n</i>
Webinars or videos	94%
TED talks	56%
Documentaries	55%
Podcasts	41%
Radio shows	25%

PREFERRED FORMATS FOR PROFESSIONAL INFORMATION

Information can be communicated in many formats, from live speakers, to webinars, to printed reports. We were interested in the formats and methods that human service audiences most prefer, allowing us to make more strategic decisions about how to best share research findings.

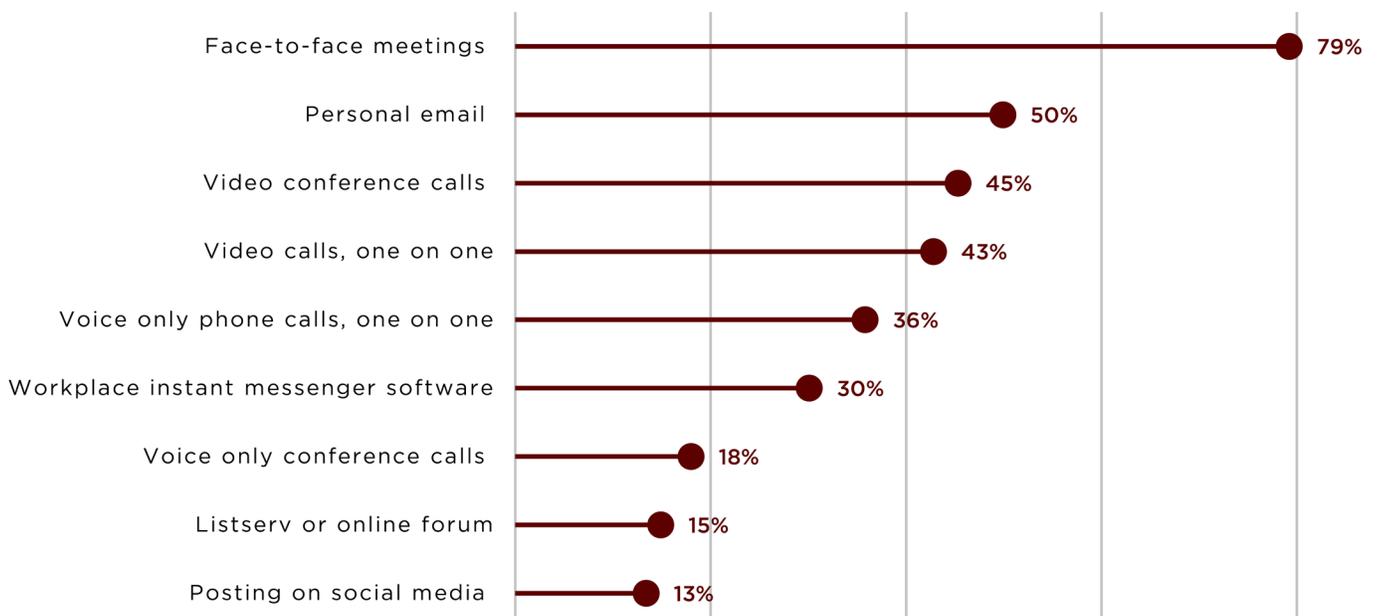
We asked about general preferences for consuming information in different formats. The most appealing options were listening to a live speaker, video, webinars, and charts/graphs on a desktop, laptop, or tablet (see Figure 3). The least appealing options were charts/graphs on a phone and reading on a phone, which were rated as “not appealing” by around half of respondents (49% and 53%, respectively).

Figure 3. Preferred Format for Information: Percentage Who Answered That the Format was “Very Appealing”



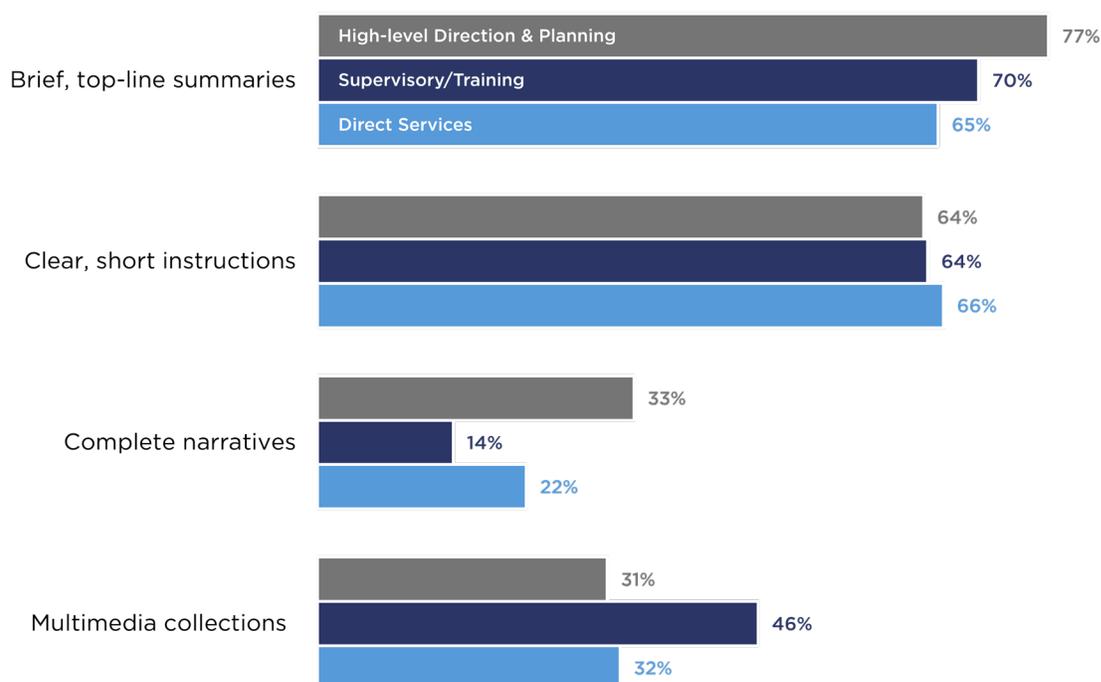
We also asked respondents about the channels they prefer for communicating with their colleagues (see Figure 4). A majority (79%) found face-to-face meetings “very appealing.” The next closest categories were personal email (50%) and video conference calls (45%). The options reported to be least appealing were listservs/online forums and posting on social media. Forty percent find listservs or online forums “not appealing.” An even larger number, 48%, found posting on social media an unappealing way to communicate with colleagues.

Figure 4. Channels Respondents Prefer for Communicating with Colleagues: Appeal of talking to peers via :



Respondents expressed a preference for receiving research in the form of brief and easily digestible summaries and instructions. Respondents were asked about the content structures they found to be of high value. The overall top answer was “brief, top-line summaries” (67%) followed by “clear, short instructions” (65%; see Figure 5). The other options—complete narratives and multi-media collections—were endorsed at much lower rates (26% and 33% respectively). This general pattern held across human service sectors (youth homelessness, early childhood, behavioral health, etc.). There were notable differences between position types in ratings of complete narratives and multimedia collections. Those who report spending most of their time in high-level direction and planning were more likely to endorse complete narratives than other groups. Those in training and supervisory positions were more likely to endorse multimedia collections than other position types.

Figure 5. Preferred Formats for Research Presentations



WHAT IT MEANS

Communication science has long affirmed the persuasive power of personal sources of information. This survey affirms that finding in the human services context. Respondents ranked personal sources as the most valued sources of information about research. Information provided by a colleague, trainer, or coworker were more trusted than those from a publication or research organization. Most respondents, in fact, did not report a trusted source that *wasn't* personal, such as a research organization or publication. It's clear that if new research is to be effectively disseminated to the human service field, trusted personal messengers are key.

Those in high-level direction, policy, or planning positions were the most likely to report trusting a nonpersonal source—such as a website, research organization, or publication. These senior staff are more comfortable with traditional research reports and more trusting of a broader variety of sources. These human service leaders are important connectors between researchers and the workforces that can benefit from the research, serving as trusted messengers to direct service staff. This type of messenger is also referred to as a “linking agent”

(MaCoubrie & Harrison, 2013). These findings highlight the need to directly reach those senior staff, and provide materials for them to pass on research findings to practitioners. Such materials—such as tools, tip sheets and practice bulletins—can equip them to be more effective linking agents.

Consistent trends emerged in how workers access and use information. They preferred live and interactive formats; speakers, webinars, and face-to-face meetings were highly appealing formats for getting information. When asked about the use of resources for improving practice, respondents also emphasized direct conversations, conference sessions, and trainings. (We should note that while this survey was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, we asked participants to respond outside of consideration of the pandemic.)

Respondents did cite other resources, including website repositories of best practices and toolkits, despite overall lower trust in websites as sources. They also cited online newsletters and academic publications and journals as resources to improve work, even though research organizations and publications were not rated as highly trusted sources. These findings are not necessarily inconsistent. Respondents reflected a preference for certain sources and formats, but even those less likely to be identified as trusted were not necessarily mistrusted. This indicates that these other channels can be important ones for reinforcing and amplifying messages.

The most preferred formats—conference presentations, trainings, live meetings, and webinars—are the most resource intensive. They require considerable planning, a time commitment by both leaders and participants, and have a limited reach. Given that, conferences should be chosen strategically, and audiences for webinars recruited carefully to have the maximum impact. You want the most trustworthy influencers in the room.

Not surprisingly, video emerges as a favored format after personal presentations. It most closely mimics those personal instruction experiences, and is easily accessible to a broad range of practitioners. When it comes to printed materials, respondents showed a clear preference for brief summaries with clear and actionable recommendations. This held true across all sectors and job types. After brief summaries, respondents next preferred clear short instructions to guide implementation of the recommendations.

These preferences put the onus on research and training organizations to go beyond full reports, and even beyond one-pagers and executive summaries. We must take findings and show a clear connection to practice, providing actionable recommendations. We must put this information in accessible, short documents and on video.

Effective dissemination is key to ensuring that evidence is applied in practice. And that effectiveness is dependent on key variables, such as messengers and communication formats. Delivering persuasive messages from credible messengers in the most preferred channels and formats, repeatedly and over time, provides the level of dissemination necessary for evidence to affect practice and, ultimately, outcomes for children and families.

Citation

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