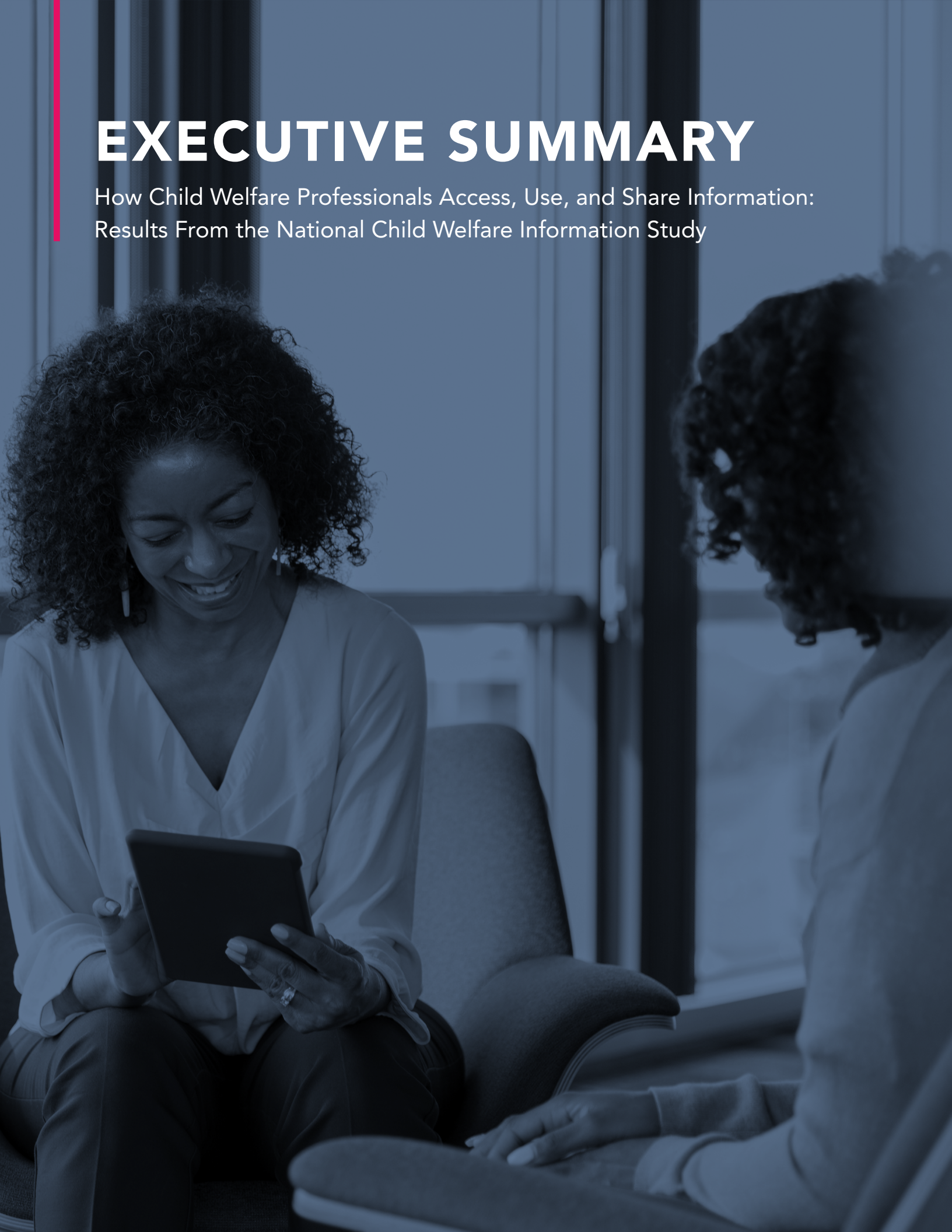
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How Child Welfare Professionals Access, Use, and Share Information: Results From the National Child Welfare Information Study



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We appreciate Kary James, Executive Director of Child Welfare Information Gateway, for her leadership and ongoing support of the study. Members of the study team who significantly contributed to the study and this report include Elizabeth Eaton, Dannele Ferreras, Katelyn Sedelmyer, Sarah Pfund, Joyce Shelton, and Brooke Shelley.

Matthew McGuire served as the Federal Project Officer for Child Welfare Information Gateway, and Brian Deakins provided general oversight of this study. Brian's guidance, leadership, and persistence helped ensure the quality of the overall study and the relevance of the resulting report and products.

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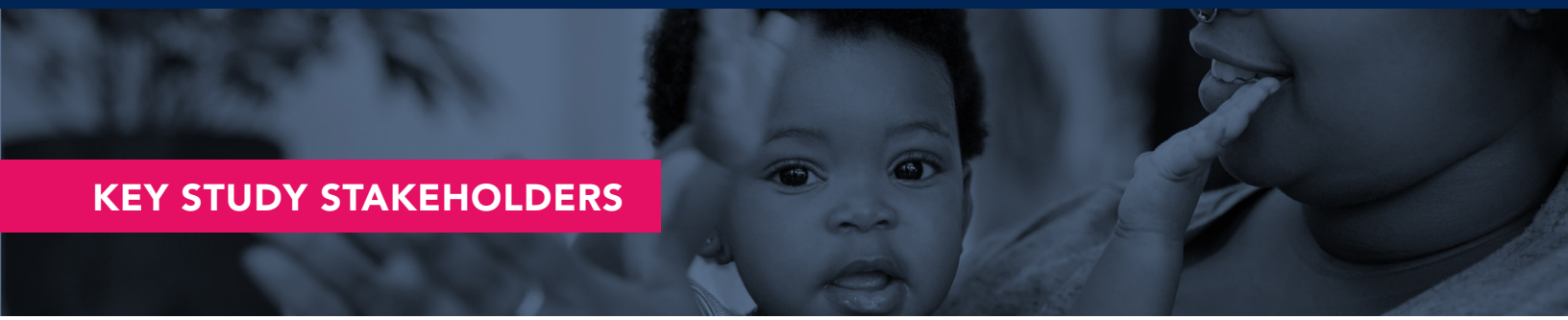

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This report reflects the efforts of a number of individuals who provided guidance and input over the course of the study.

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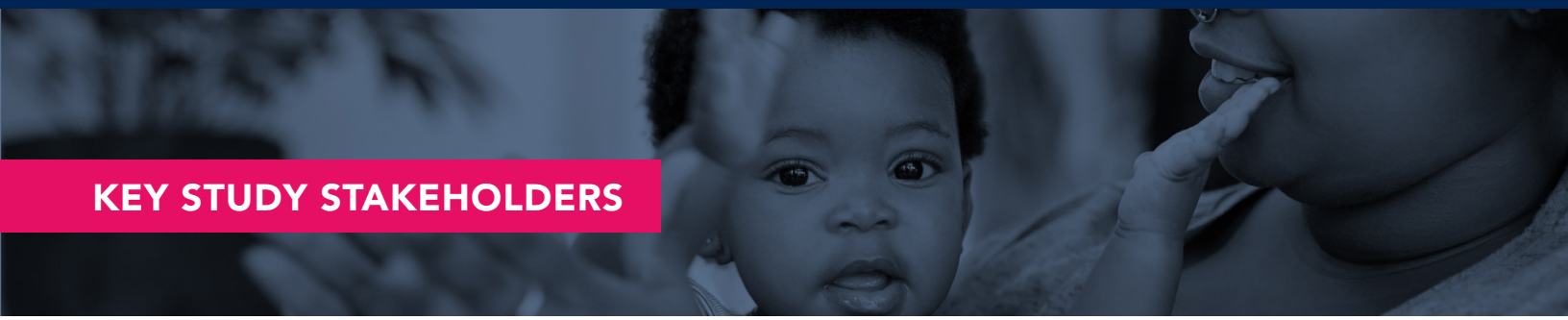

KEY STUDY STAKEHOLDERS

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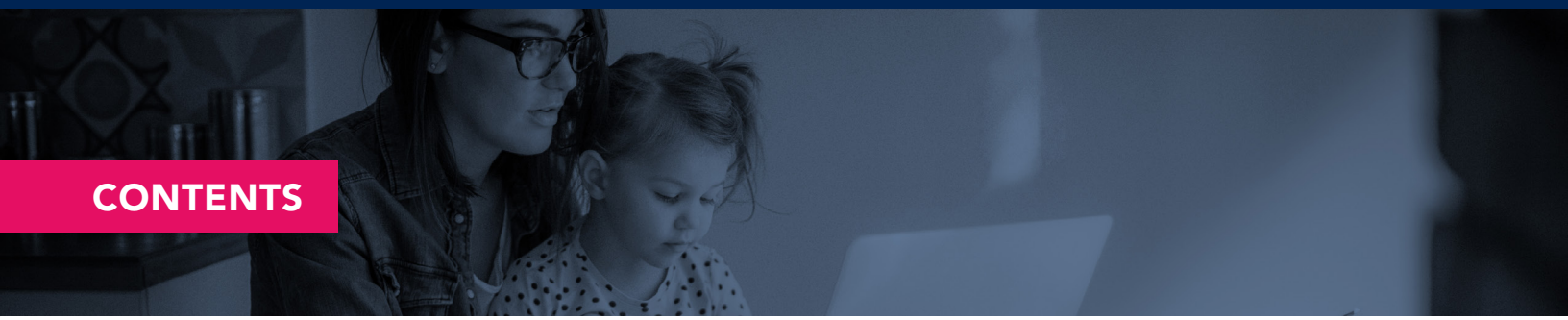

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STUDY OVERVIEW

Child welfare professionals need useful, trusted, and up-to-date information in order to provide effective services to children and families. In an era of rapidly evolving information technology, the ways in which child welfare workers access, use, and share resources are changing, and information providers must adjust their dissemination methods to meet worker needs.

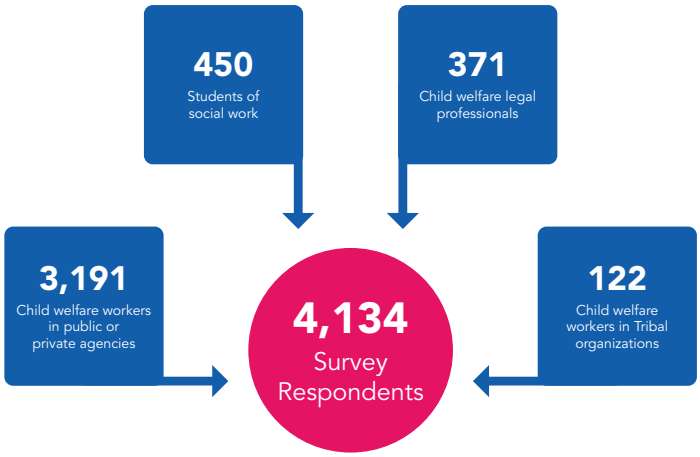
The National Child Welfare Information Study aims to understand how current child welfare professionals use information, and how information will be used by child welfare professionals in the future. The ultimate goal is to support the creation of enhanced resources that can effectively reach and benefit the field.

This executive summary was developed for child welfare professionals—such as technical assistance providers and agency training directors—who distribute resources and apply new research from the field. These findings can help these stakeholders formulate strategies and policies that make it easier for the child welfare workforce to access and use information. In addition, this study offers insights into the information habits of child welfare professionals and highlights how technology is reshaping how information is delivered and consumed.

INFORMATION HABITS OF CHILD WELFARE PROFESSIONALS

For this study, researchers surveyed a representative and geographically diverse sample of 4,134 participants, including child welfare workers in public or private agencies and Tribal organizations; legal professionals working in child welfare; and students of social work. To collect additional data, researchers also conducted phone interviews and focus groups with subsamples of the total survey population.

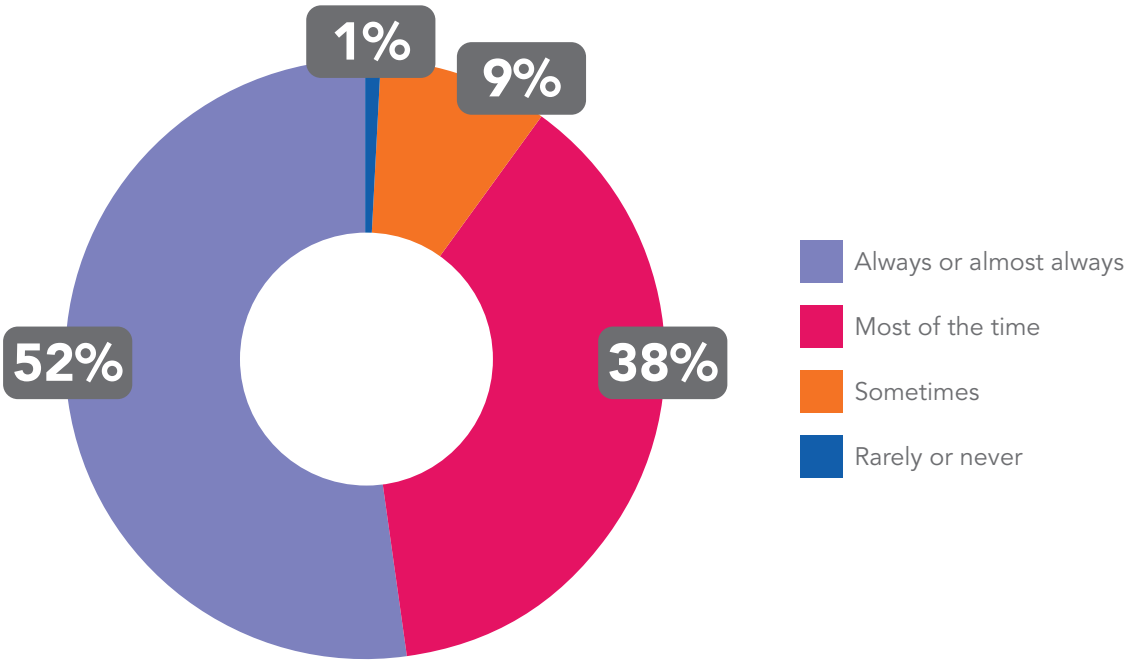
EXHIBIT 1: Survey participants by audience



ACCESS TO INFORMATION

When asked about their ability to access information online, 90% of all child welfare professionals—including child welfare workers in public or private agencies or who work with Tribal organizations—indicated that they had reliable Internet access during the workday at least most of the time.

EXHIBIT 2: Amount of time during workday in which child welfare professionals have reliable Internet access



THE VARIOUS STUDY AUDIENCES ARE DEFINED AS FOLLOWS:

- **Child welfare workers in public or private agencies:** Direct service providers (such as frontline workers) and senior agency officials (supervisors, managers, directors, and administrators).
- **Child welfare workers in Tribal organizations:** Personnel (including frontline workers, administrators, and program leaders) who work for Tribal governments.
- **Child welfare legal professionals:** Legal and judicial professionals who work directly with children and families involved in the child welfare system.
- **Students of social work:** Students enrolled in undergraduate- or graduate-level social work programs.

Two-thirds of child welfare professionals (67%) said they had enough access to child welfare information to do their work effectively, but they identified a need for more information about:

- Community and/or local services for families
- Child welfare laws and policies
- Opportunities for educational and professional development

Frontline workers are more likely than other child welfare professionals to seek out information directly from colleagues.

Some of these child welfare professionals also pointed out specific barriers to accessing information:

- Little to no time to search for information
- Workplace security measures and policies (e.g., firewalls)
- High cost of specialized search resources

SEARCHING FOR INFORMATION

Study participants were asked to identify the approach they use most often when seeking child welfare information, and nearly half of all child welfare professionals (48%) indicated that they prefer to search for information on the Internet.

Exhibit 3: Information search methods used by child welfare professionals

Information Search Method	Percentage
Searching for information using the Internet	48%
Go to their organization's website or intranet	28%
Ask a colleague or other professional contact	22%
Ask a social media group or online forum	1%

Child welfare professionals regularly search for a broad range of information, both online and offline.

Exhibit 4: Types of information sought by child welfare professionals

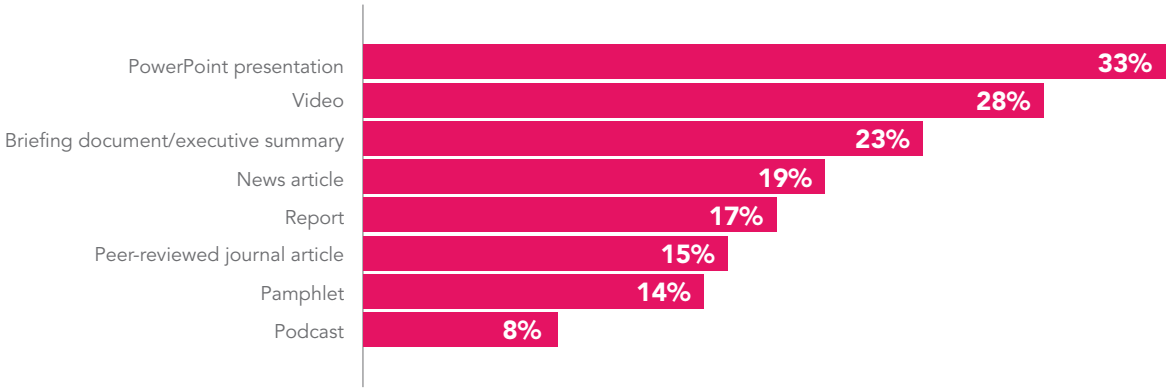
Type of Information	Percentage
Information or resources to share with clients	40%
News about child welfare-related topics	26%
Information about child welfare laws and policies	26%
Information about best child welfare practices	23%
Research on child welfare	17%

RECEIVING INFORMATION

Even when not actively searching for child welfare information, more than one-third (37%) of child welfare professionals taking part in the survey reported receiving information at least several times per week. PowerPoint presentations were identified as the most preferred format for receiving information.

- Compared to professionals in other roles, **frontline workers** tend to prefer consuming information using more visual formats, such as videos or pamphlets.
- **Senior agency workers** and **legal professionals** prefer consuming more formal resources, including briefing documents, reports, and peer-reviewed journals.
- Across all roles, **younger professionals** (ages 21 to 30) were more likely to prefer consuming information using videos and podcasts.

Exhibit 5: Preferred formats for receiving information among child welfare professionals



Almost one-third of child welfare professionals (30%) regularly receive child welfare information through subscriptions to at least one electronic listserv, newsletter, or other type of subscription list.

CHARACTERISTICS THAT MAKE LISTSERVS MOST USEFUL:

- Concise content
- Up-to-date information
- Information that is immediately relevant to their work

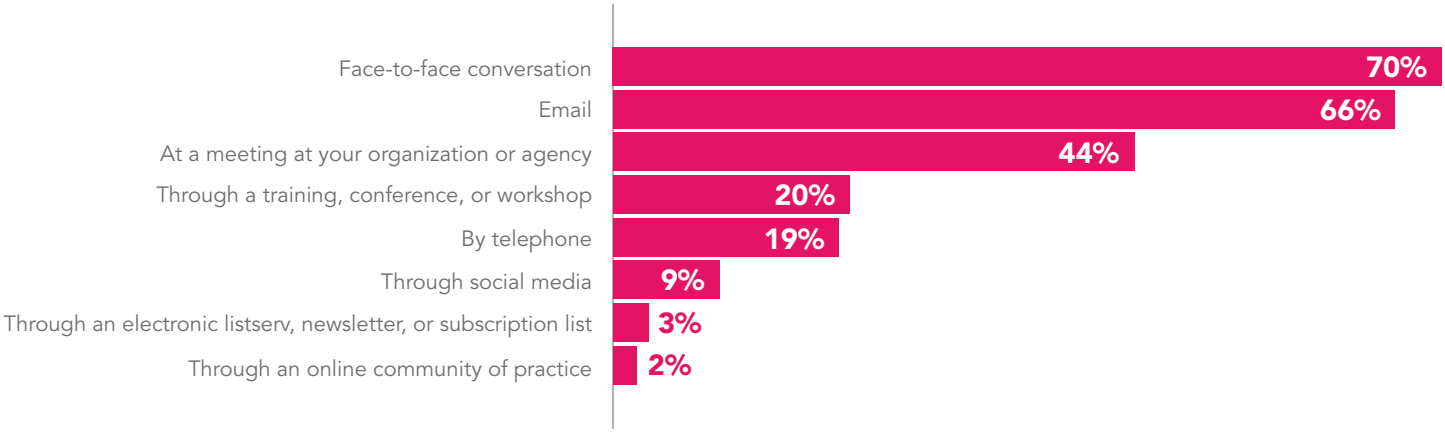
SUGGESTIONS FOR COMMUNICATING THROUGH LISTSERVS:

- Use a list format for easier reading
- Include hyperlinks
- Add photos and infographics
- Make sure that newsletters are mobile-friendly
- Use consistent formatting so readers know where to go

SHARING INFORMATION

More than half of child welfare professionals (51%) said they share relevant information with coworkers and professional contacts through various channels at least several times a week.

Exhibit 6: Child welfare professionals' preferred communication methods for sharing information



MOBILE DEVICES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

USE OF MOBILE DEVICES

Almost all child welfare professionals (98%) reported having a mobile device, and more than one-third (36%) of these respondents said they use their devices to search for, access, or share child welfare information at least several times per week.

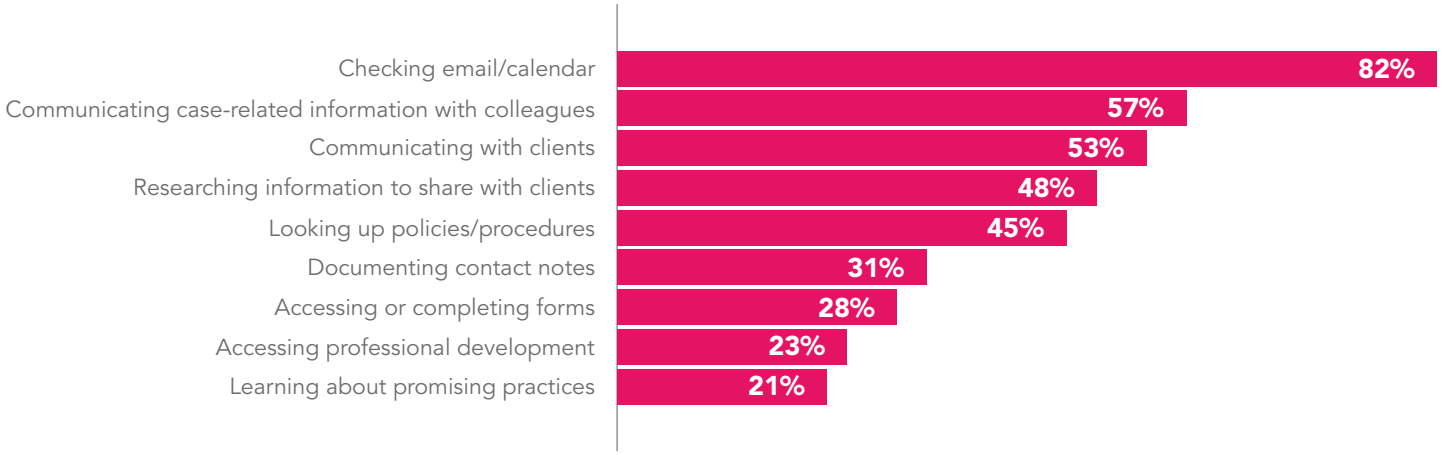
However, 40% of child welfare professionals identified each of the following three barriers to using their mobile devices to access, search for, and share child welfare information:

- Lack of relevant mobile applications
- Workplace rules about using mobile devices
- Limited access to Wi-Fi at their workplaces

Fewer respondents (20%) also said their limited technology skills were a barrier to mobile device use.

- **Frontline workers and students** are more likely to share child welfare information with colleagues through face-to-face conversations.
- **Senior agency workers** and **legal professionals** are more likely to share child welfare information with colleagues through email.
- **Students** are much more likely than current professionals to share child welfare information using social media.
- **Frontline workers in tribal communities**, as well as **older professionals** (age 50+) and **legal professionals**, are more likely to cite their own technology skills as a barrier to using mobile devices.

Exhibit 7: Work-related uses for mobile devices among child welfare professionals



USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Nearly half of child welfare professionals (48%) reported using social media to search for, access, or share information about child welfare—and they often use these platforms to share child welfare articles and locate the children and families that they serve. Facebook is the most popular social media site among these respondents.

Younger professionals (ages 21 to 30) are more likely than other groups to use social media for child welfare purposes

Exhibit 8: Preferred social media platforms among child welfare professionals for sharing child welfare-related information

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The ways that child welfare workers, legal professionals who work in child welfare, and students pursuing careers in the field access, consume, and share child welfare resources vary across sample groups and workplace roles. The following findings illustrate some key differences:

- Compared to more senior child welfare professionals, frontline workers are more likely to seek child welfare information directly from coworkers—and to share it during face-to-face conversations—than other professionals in the field, and they are more likely to prefer "visual" communication formats including videos and pamphlets. Also, frontline professionals working in Tribal communities are more likely than other groups to identify their own limited knowledge and skills using technology as a barrier to using mobile devices at work.
- Senior agency workers gather information from more formal sources including briefing documents, reports, and peer-reviewed journals. In addition, they are more likely than their junior counterparts to share child welfare information with coworkers via email.
- Legal professionals, like senior agency workers, prefer to receive child welfare information through briefings, reports, and peer-reviewed journals—and they primarily use email to share that information with colleagues. Legal professionals are also more likely to point to their own limited knowledge and skills using technology as a primary barrier to using mobile devices on the job.
- Students tend to share child welfare information during face-to-face conversations and on social media.
- Younger professionals across all roles are more likely to consume child welfare information in video and podcast formats. They are also more likely than older professionals to use social media to facilitate their work in child welfare.
- Older professionals, in contrast to their younger colleagues, are more prone to mention their limited knowledge and skills using technology as a barrier to using mobile devices.

Despite these differences, child welfare professionals also exhibit similarities when it comes to information sharing and consumption, including Internet usage when searching for child welfare information and a preference for Facebook as a primary social media platform for sharing child welfare information..

How different age groups and roles within the child welfare profession continue to adapt to and embrace emerging technologies—including mobile devices, social media, videos, podcasts, and beyond—will significantly impact how information is accessed, consumed, and shared both now and in the future.