

Digital Transformation in Research Services

Lessons from 35,000 academic researchers



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Agenda

An Introduction to Prolific

The digital transformation landscape

Evidence from 35,000+ researchers

Key pain points and opportunities

Best practices from Prolific researchers

Strategic implications and discussion





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Who we are





An introduction to Prolific



Prolific Introduction

Co-founded at University of Oxford in 2014

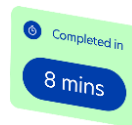
200+ employees

Series A funding round \$32M closed July 2023

35k+ researchers across 200 countries

700 studies launch every day

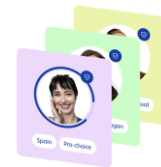
2 hours to complete a data-set on average



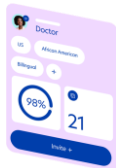
150k+ active, vetted, participants

80+ languages spoken across 38 countries

50% response rate



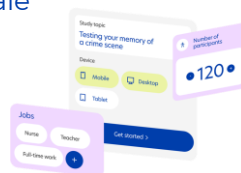
Independent research proves Prolific is significantly ahead in data quality



[Peer et al, Behaviour Research Methods, 2021](#)

Generating human powered AI training data at scale

Working with 17 AI model developers



Prolific Marketplace launched 2023

Connecting researchers with world class tools and technology



University of Sheffield

Duke University



University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam

Penn

北京大學
PEKING UNIVERSITY

Yale

Yale

OXFORD

香港大學
THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Columbia University

University of Bath

University of York

LSE

NUS
National University of Singapore



KING'S College LONDON

Univer of Glasg

THE UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

UCD DUBLIN
University College Dublin

PennState

- Are You a Real Software Engineer? Best Practices in Online Recruitment for Software Engineering Studies
- Learning Social Fairness in Kidney Placement
- Public perceptions of security robots now and in the future
- Towards Inclusive Fairness Evaluation via Eliciting Disagreement Feedback from Non-Expert Stakeholders
- Investigating the Online Recruitment and Selection Journey of Novice Software Engineers: Anti-Patterns and Recommendations
- Relationships between Instagram Use or Type of Use and Mental Well-Being
- Differing Perspectives on Artificial Intelligence in Mental Healthcare Among Patients
- Unlocking Social Media Success: How Prosumers Drive Brand Engagement
- Menopause in the workplace
- Public attitude toward technological adoption
- Understanding Cancer Patients' Perspectives on Financial Support During Treatment
- Experiences of Adults with ADHD Using Public and Other Transportation Services in the UK
- Self-employment in the Arts and Culture sectors
- How AI agents can enhance – and sometimes complicate – human collaboration and team dynamics in the workplace
- Evaluating the Accuracy and Limitations of Digital Twins in Reflecting Human Behaviour
- Daily unpredictability and uncertainty - how unpredictable the average working day can be
- Public perceptions of environmental campaigns
- Hotel check-in experiences
- How mindfulness relates to drinking attitude and behaviours among young adults
- A study on Thanksgiving family arguments
- Adventure character quest game - complete 6 tasks
- Fight the CyberGnostic Space Chicken for promotion
- Perception of Invisible Instruments in Digital Music Performance
- Understand speech produced by speakers who have speech disorders
- A study on the decline from MCI into Dementia
- Donor Network Design - Preferences in Blood Product Donation
- Smart Data Donation Service - help citizens across the UK to obtain copies of their digital trace data; assist them in using it to understand their digital lives.
- Are You a Real Software Engineer? Best Practices in Online Recruitment for Software Engineering Studies

Available Domain Experts

And always expanding

1,300+

Portuguese
Spanish
Italian
Arabic
Mandarin
French
Korean
German
Cantonese
Dutch
Urdu

Languages

200+

UK medical fields include:
GPs, Neurology, Psychiatry, Histopathology, Dermatology, Anaesthetics, Obstetrics and Gynecology, and more.

US medical fields include:
Neonatology, Primary Care, Anesthesiology, Psychiatry, Dentistry, Neurology, pathology, Radiology, and more.

Healthcare

500+

Biology
Chemistry
Mathematics
Computer science
Physics
Biomedical sciences
Engineering
Statistics
Medical sciences
Natural sciences
Others

STEM

500+

Python
Javascript
Java
HTML
SQL
PHP
TypeScript
C#
C and C++

Programming



Why digital transformation matters now



Why digital transformation in universities is so important right now

Research competitiveness depends on modern digital infrastructure

Cloud-based tools, high-performance computing, digital labs, and AI-driven analytics now underpin leading research globally.

Universities that fail to modernise risk slowing discovery, losing top researchers, and falling behind in funding competitions.

Explosion of data-intensive research fields

Disciplines from behavioural science to genomics rely on secure, scalable data systems. Digital transformation ensures researchers can collect, store, process, and share complex datasets efficiently and ethically.

Strategic urgency due to funding pressures and scrutiny

With tightening budgets and increasing accountability from governments and funders, universities must demonstrate efficiency, transparency, and measurable impact. Digital systems allow more reliable metrics, faster reporting, easier compliance, and evidence-driven decision-making.

Global collaboration models have changed permanently

Cross-institutional, remote, and interdisciplinary research now depend on digital platforms for collaboration, participant recruitment, and knowledge sharing.



Data driven insights from Prolific users



Research by UK institutions

Showing research conducted since Prolific launched in 2015, by **UK institutions**



£30+ million

research on Prolific - **£20+ million** paid directly to participants



127,975

Studies published



20,285

Registered researchers in UK institutions



Online Recruitment as Core Research Infrastructure

Traditional Recruitment (Student Pools / Labs)

- Still the largest data source
- Slow recruitment cycles
- Limited diversity
- Hard to scale
- Heavy admin for departments

Digital Recruitment (Prolific & similar tools)

- Prolific is a source in **~1 in 4 of 2025 papers**
- Large, diverse participant access
- Hours → days instead of weeks
- Enables rapid multi-wave and iterative study design

**Indicators are approximate and based on 2025 abstract analysis*



How the University of Bristol embedded Prolific into its research workflow

Challenge

A team from University of Bristol sought to determine whether large-language-models (LLMs) could evaluate emotional life-events in the same way humans do. They needed authentic human judgement as a benchmark, while managing a multi-phase workflow, ethically-sensitive content, and complex technical infrastructure.

Requirements

- Rigorous human-judgement data covering a wide range of emotional life-events (from everyday frustrations to major life changes)
- Phased participant cohorts with fresh, non-overlapping samples for each study stage
- Safeguards for participant welfare when exposing people to potentially triggering emotional content
- Technical infrastructure enabling real-time, synchronous pairwise comparisons of emotional statements without server overload

Solution

The research team used Prolific's platform and capabilities to handle each requirement

- Precision participant targeting via pre-screeners to recruit 18-30-year-olds efficiently.
- Participant-group management to ensure fresh cohorts at each phase and prevent overlap.
- Integrated content-warning features to alert participants of sensitive emotional content upfront.
- Throttled access controls to regulate participant flow and protect the synchronous comparison infrastructure from overload

Results

- ~1,000 participants recruited overall; for the main benchmarking task, 166 participants were accepted, with ~25 participants/hour and median completion time ~10 min 55 s.
- Human-AI alignment: The human judgements and LLM rankings correlated at 88%, demonstrating strong agreement.
- Participant engagement and data quality were high



Researcher Pain Points

Funding constraints

- Fragmented, outdated digital systems make research more expensive, forcing researchers to spend limited funds on workarounds, duplicate tools, or manual processes instead of core research activity.
- Inefficient data workflows and lack of automation increase project time and cost, meaning grants don't stretch far enough or become unviable for early-career researchers.
- Poor visibility over spending, subscriptions, and tool usage complicates budgeting, leading to overspend risks and stricter internal scrutiny.

Ethics delays

- Navigating ethics approvals can be slow and inconsistent, made worse by digital systems that can't integrate application forms, risk assessments, or audit trails in one place.
- Growing expectations around data security, storage, and participant privacy mean researchers must use multiple tools to stay compliant—each with different requirements, interfaces, and risks.
- Difficulty demonstrating compliance in real time (e.g., data access logs, consent tracking) causes delays and forces researchers to focus on admin over methodology.

Admin burden

- Researchers spend a disproportionate amount of time on manual admin—participant management, documentation, reporting—because tools don't talk to each other or require repetitive data entry.
- Institutional systems are often slow, complex, or designed for administrators rather than researchers, creating bottlenecks for tasks like onboarding participants, setting up studies, or managing approvals.
- Tracking project progress, outputs, and compliance across multiple platforms increases error risk and diverts time from analysis and writing.





Where Prolific can help



Dedicated Strategic Support

- Academic Customer Success Manager as single point of contact
- Tailored guidance, best practices, and tiered support escalation

Enhanced Research Quality & Growth

- Bi-annual reviews of research activity and participant feedback
- Opportunities to expand research reach across departments
- Roadmap previews with direct input into Prolific's development

User Engagement

- Twice-yearly office hours and workshops (e.g., Data Quality, onboarding new users)
- Demos and training sessions to empower academics and students

Efficient Participant Recruitment

- Collaborative sourcing and active recruitment support
- Discounts on representative samples for robust study design

Faster & Easier Research Operations

- Partnership with Research Ethics Committee to streamline approvals
- Centralised workspace & fund management for smoother operations
- Data dashboard for spend, researcher activity, and participant demographics





Looking ahead



What Successful Digital Transformation Looks Like for Research

Integrated, Streamlined Research Workflows

Universities connect their ethics, finance, procurement, and research support systems directly with Prolific, enabling faster approvals, centralised fund management, and smoother day-to-day study operations for researchers.

A More Supported & Connected Research Community

With dedicated strategic support, training, office hours, and data-driven insights from Prolific, institutions build a cohesive research ecosystem where academics, students, and digital teams are aligned and continuously upskilled.

Higher-Quality, More Scalable Research Output

Through enhanced recruitment, improved data quality practices, and institution-level collaboration, researchers gain access to reliable participants, better study design guidance, and new opportunities to expand research across departments and disciplines.



Connect with Prolific

Come and chat to us on the stand

We'll be following up after the event with **individual institution specific data** – if you'd like to see anything specific let us know

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Q&A

