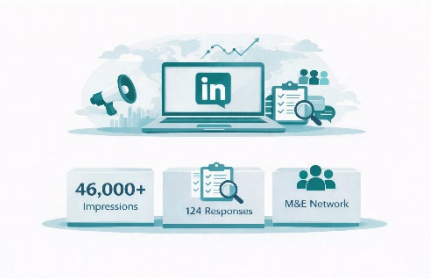
DATA CONSCIOUS

AI IN RESEARCH AND EVALUATION:

What Peers are Doing, and Where They are Getting Stuck

WHAT WE DID

In January 2026, Data Conscious ran a short survey on LinkedIn through our network and M&E professional groups. The posts generated over **46,000 impressions** and **124 completed responses**. This is a convenience sample, so treat it as a useful pulse check rather than a representative picture of the whole sector.



WHO RESPONDED

Respondents mainly sit close to evaluation and research delivery and management: **48%** deliver evaluations/research and **39%** commission/manage them. Organisationally, the largest groups were **freelance/independent (26%)**, **INGOs (20%)**, **UN agencies (13%)**, and **academia/research organisations (13%)**, plus consultancies and multilateral organisations.

WHAT EVALUATORS/RESEARCHERS WANT

Across the sample, AI is mainly seen as a way to move faster and handle volume, especially in text-heavy workflows. The **top three reasons** for using AI in research and evaluation were: **speed under tight deadlines** (71%), **making sense of qualitative data** (65%) and **language and production support** (61% use AI for translation, 52% for better reporting).

WHERE PEOPLE DRAW THE LINE

The pattern in how people already use AI is that AI feels most acceptable for **supporting** evaluation work (drafting, translating, scanning, transcription support, structuring write-ups), and much less acceptable for **replacing human judgement or human interaction**. One clear signal is discomfort with AI-led interviewing: nobody said they are comfortable using AI to conduct KIIs/FGDs, while **18%** of respondents explicitly said they are **uncomfortable** with it.

THERE ARE SOME BIG CONCERNS

Concerns are less about "how do I start?" and more about risk, quality, and governance:

TOP 3 CONCERNS	SHARE OF RESPONDENTS
QUALITY RISKS	**87%** selected hallucinations, weak evidence trails, & quality control.
SENSITIVE DATA	**84%** worry about sharing sensitive information with external providers/tools.
BIAS	**74%** selected risks of outputs disadvantaging certain groups or distorting findings.

REGULATORY AND GUIDANCE AWARENESS is also uneven, which matters a lot. Most people have at least a working awareness of GDPR and basic data protection expectations. Beyond that, awareness looks patchier. References to the EU AI Act and sector guidance like CDAC's SAFE AI initiative or NTEN's nonprofit-focused guidance were relatively limited in the responses. That gap is important because it leaves people trying to make judgement calls about risk and accountability without a shared framework. It also helps explain why "what's allowed?" and "how do we do this safely?" came through so strongly as concerns from the respondent group.

SUPPORT NEEDS

When asked what would be most useful from "AI assurance" support, respondents prioritised capability-building plus practical controls: training for managers and evaluators on what "good practice" looks like was the most popular (81%) while 68% of respondents want a practical control checklist with templates.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

If you recognise yourself or your organisation in these results, you are not alone. People want the efficiency gains, but they do not want to trade away data protection, credibility, or trust in findings. The practical next step is to move from ad hoc experimentation to a simple, defensible way of working. Here's a sensible sequence that works well for evaluation and research teams:

1	MAP YOUR USE CASES. List where AI is being used (or is likely to be used soon): transcription, translation, summarising, qualitative analysis, drafting reports, proposal writing, safeguarding triage, and so on.
2	SORT THEM BY RISK. Separate low-risk tasks (formatting, plain-language edits) from higher-risk tasks (anything involving sensitive data, vulnerable groups, safeguarding, eligibility decisions, or claims that will land in public reports).
3	PUT IN BASIC CONTROLS. Agree a minimum standard for prompt hygiene, data handling, checking outputs, documentation, and human sign-off. Decide what data should never go into public AI tools.
4	ANCHOR PRACTICE TO THE RIGHT FRAMEWORKS. Most teams already have GDPR in mind. The next step is making sure your practice also lines up with the EU AI Act and the sector guidance your donors, partners, and peers are increasingly using. This is where organisations often feel exposed.

CONTACT US

If you want help doing this quickly and cleanly, Data Conscious offers short AI Assurance Calls to get you started. It is a practical working session to:

- clarify your main AI use cases and where risk sits
- sense-check your current tools and workflows against GDPR expectations and emerging AI governance norms
- identify the few controls that will reduce the biggest risks without slowing you down
- leave you with clear next actions (and, if useful, a lightweight checklist you can adopt internally)

If you want to book a call, send me a message on LinkedIn or book via the Data Conscious site.

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