

HOW AI IS CHANGING SEARCH: WHAT IT MEANS FOR PEO MARKETING

BY DEAN MOOTHART

For years, educational content has been one of the most effective marketing tools available to PEOs.

Articles explaining co-employment, PEO pricing, compliance support and HR outsourcing models have helped introduce prospects to the PEO concept while attracting a steady stream of organic search traffic. For many organizations, that content strategy has been a major driver of early-stage buyer engagement.

But the search landscape is changing quickly.

Since the introduction of AI-generated answers in search engines—and the rapid adoption of tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Perplexity—many companies across industries have seen organic website traffic decline. In some cases, analysts report traffic drops approaching 60%

when AI-generated answers appear directly in search results.

For PEO marketers, this shift can feel alarming, but it doesn't mean search-driven marketing is disappearing. Instead, it signals an important evolution in how prospects research HR outsourcing solutions—and how PEOs must structure their content to remain visible.

WHY PEO BUYER JOURNEYS BEGIN WITH EDUCATION

Companies rarely begin their search by looking for a specific PEO provider. Instead, they start with questions about HR challenges they are trying to solve. Typical early-stage searches include:

- What is a PEO?
- How does a PEO reduce workers' compensation costs?
- PEO vs. ASO: what's the difference?



To remain visible in this new environment, many organizations are focusing on a newer discipline called answer engine optimization (AEO).

- Is a PEO worth it for companies under 100 employees?

These informational queries account for a large share of organic traffic for many PEO websites.

That traffic is valuable because it introduces prospects to the PEO model long before they begin evaluating vendors. Since PEO buying decisions often involve multiple stakeholders—CEOs, CFOs, HR leaders, and advisors—research may take place months before a company contacts a provider.

Educational content has historically allowed PEOs to build credibility early in this process.

THE RISE OF ZERO-CLICK SEARCHES

Traditionally, someone researching a topic would type a question into Google, review several results, click on an article, and read the answer. Today, that process is increasingly different.

When Google's AI Overviews appear at the top of search results, the system generates a summarized answer by combining information from multiple sources. In many cases, users receive the information they need without clicking through to any websites. This behavior is known as a zero-click search.

Across industries, marketers are seeing measurable declines in click-through rates when AI-generated answers appear—especially for informational questions like those that dominate PEO research.

For organizations focused primarily on website traffic as a success metric, this shift can feel like a major setback. But traffic alone has never been the most meaningful measure of marketing success.

WHY TRAFFIC ISN'T THE METRIC THAT MATTERS

High traffic does not automatically

translate into business growth. Many websites attract thousands of visitors who never engage deeply with the content or move closer to becoming customers. As AI reshapes search behavior, marketers are increasingly focusing on metrics that reflect real business impact, such as:

Engagement rate: Are visitors actually reading the content and exploring additional resources?

Session-to-contact conversion rate: What percentage of visitors become leads or sales conversations?

Repeat visitors: Are prospects returning as they continue their research?

Email audience growth: Is the organization building an audience it can nurture over time?

These indicators provide a clearer picture of whether content is contributing to pipeline development rather than simply generating page views.

AI IS CHANGING WHERE RESEARCH HAPPENS

Another major shift is where research is taking place. Instead of relying solely on search engines, decision-makers are increasingly asking questions directly to AI assistants (i.e., ChatGPT, Gemini, or Perplexity).

- A business owner might now ask:
- Should a company with 75 employees consider a PEO?
 - What are the advantages of a PEO versus internal HR?
 - How do PEOs reduce workers' compensation costs?

AI systems synthesize answers from trusted sources and present summarized recommendations.

Recent studies suggest AI tool usage grew from roughly 8% of internet users in 2023 to nearly 38% in 2025, and

analysts expect AI-generated answers to play an increasingly large role in online research. For PEO marketers, this creates both a challenge and an opportunity.

ENTER ANSWER ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

To remain visible in this new environment, many organizations are focusing on a newer discipline called answer engine optimization (AEO).

Traditional SEO focuses on ranking pages high in search results. AEO focuses on structuring content so AI systems can easily extract, summarize, and cite it when generating answers.

This typically means creating content that is:

- Clearly structured
- Fact-based and authoritative
- Written in a question-and-answer format
- Supported by credible explanations

When AI systems identify a website as a trusted source, its content may be referenced or cited within AI-generated responses—shaping how prospects understand HR outsourcing long before they visit a company's website.

WHY AEO MATTERS FOR PEOs

Several characteristics of the PEO industry make answer-engine visibility especially important.

First, the PEO model requires education. Prospective clients must understand concepts like co-employment structures, compliance support, workers' compensation pooling and benefits purchasing power. Well-structured educational content is exactly the type of information AI systems prioritize when generating answers.

Second, PEO sales cycles tend to be long. Prospects often research

HR outsourcing solutions for months before contacting providers. Appearing consistently in educational resources—whether through search engines or AI answers—helps build familiarity during this extended decision process.

Finally, trust plays a central role in vendor selection. Because PEOs manage payroll, benefits administration, compliance and employment risk, credibility is critical. When a company’s expertise repeatedly surfaces in educational content, it reinforces authority within the industry.

THE OPPORTUNITY AHEAD

AI-generated answers represent one of the most significant changes in search behavior in more than a decade. While they may reduce some traditional website traffic, they do not diminish the importance of educational content. In fact, the demand for clear, credible information about HR outsourcing is growing.

For PEOs, the opportunity lies in ensuring their expertise is visible wherever prospects are researching—whether that happens in search results, AI-generated answers, or

industry resources.

Organizations that adapt their content strategies accordingly will be well positioned to educate the market, build trust with prospective clients, and generate sustainable growth in the evolving digital landscape. ■



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