

From Search To Discovery: Why SEO Must Evolve Beyond The SERP via @sejournal, @alexmoss

The search landscape undergoes its biggest shift in a generation.

If you've been in SEO long enough to remember the glory days of the all-organic search engine results pages (SERP), you'll know how much of this real estate has been gradually taken over by paid ads, other first-party products, and rich snippets.

Now, the most aggressive transition of all: AI Overviews (as well as search-based large language model platforms).

At BrightonSEO last month, I explored how this evolution is forcing us to rethink what SEO means and why discoverability, not just ranking, is the new north star.

The “Dawn” Of The Zero-Click Isn't Just Over – It's Now Assumed

We've been reading about the rise of zero-click searches for some time now, but this “takeover” has been much more noticeable over the past 12 months.

I recently searched [how to teach my child to tell the time], and after scrolling through a parade of paid product ads, Google-owned assets, and the AI Overview summaries, I scrolled a good three pages down the SERP.

Google and other search and discovery platforms want to keep

users in their ecosystems. For SEO pros, this means traditional metrics such as click-through rate (CTR) are becoming less valuable by the day.

From Answer Engines To Assistant Engines

LLMs have changed not just the way a result is displayed to the user but also changed the traditional search flow born within the browser into a multi-step flow that the native SERP simply cannot support in the same way.

The research process is collapsing into a single, seamless exchange.

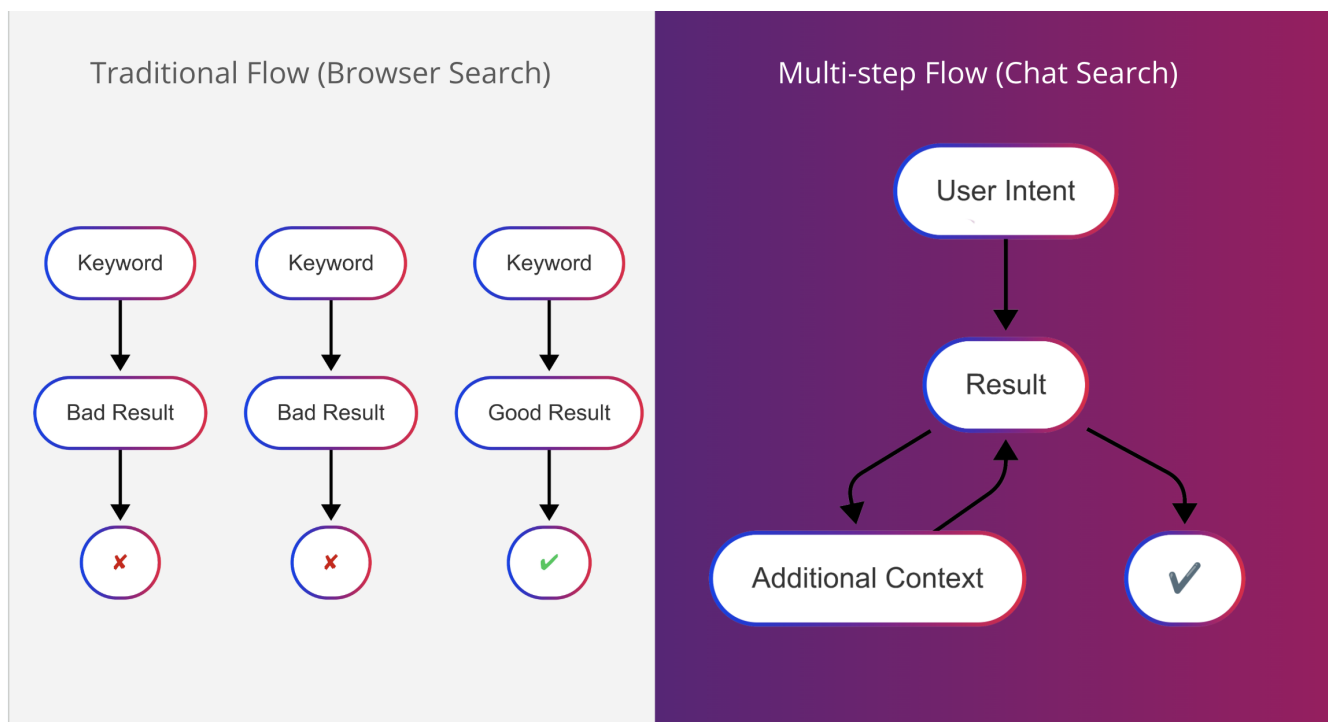


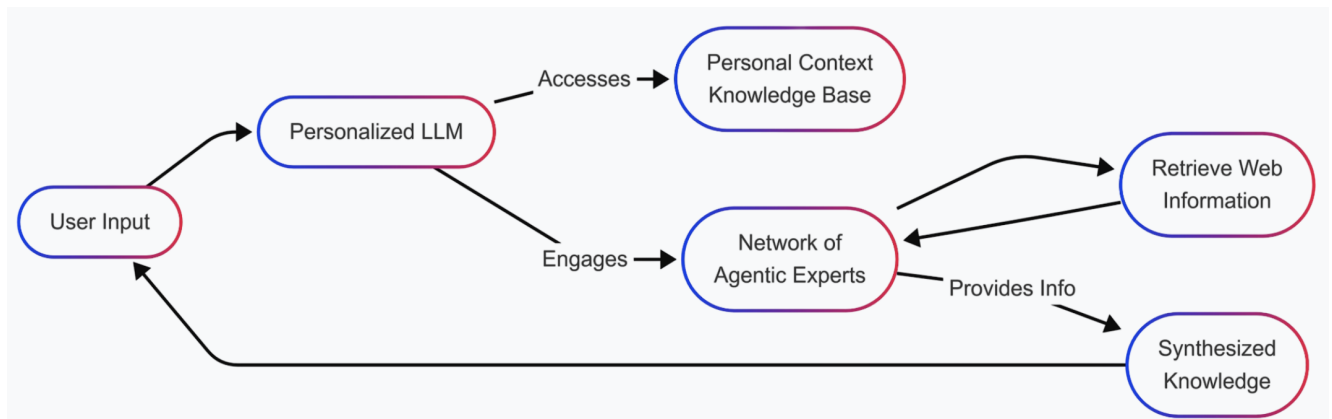
Image used with permission from Alain Schlessor, May 2025

But as technology accelerates, our own curiosity and research skills are at risk of declining or disappearing completely as the evolution of technology exponentially grows.

Assistant engines and wider LLMs are the new gatekeepers between our content and the person discovering that content – our potential “new audience.”

They parse, consume, understand, and then synthesize content, which is the deciding factor in what it mentions to whom/what it interacts with.

Structured data is still crucial, as context, transparency, and sentiment matter more than ever.



Personal LLM agent flow diagram by Alain Schlessler, used with permission, May 2025

Challenges Are Different, But Also The Same

As an SEO, our challenges with this new behavior affect the way we do – and report on – our jobs.

In reality, many are just old headaches in shiny new wrappers:

- **Attribution is a mess:** With AI Overviews and LLMs synthesizing content, it's harder than ever to see where your traffic comes from – or if you're getting any at all. There are some tools out there that do monitor, but we're in the early days to see a standard. Even Google said they have no plans on adding insights on AI0 within Search Console.
- **Traffic is fragmenting (again):** We saw this with social media platforms at the beginning, where discovery happened outside the organic SERPs. Discovery is now happening everywhere, all at once. With attribution also

harder to ascertain, this is a bigger challenge today.

- **Budgets are under scrutiny from fear, uncertainty, and doubt (FUD):** The native SERP is changing too much, so some may assume there's less (or no) value in doing SEO much anymore (untrue!).

The Shift Of Success Metrics

The days of our current success metrics are dwindling. The days of vanity-led metrics are coming to an end.

Similar to how our challenges are the same but different, this also applies to how we redefine success metrics:

Old Hat	New Hat
Content	Context + sentiment
Keywords	Intent
Brand	Brand + sentiment
Rankings	Mentions
Links from external sources	Citations across various channels
SERP monopoly	Share of voice
E-E-A-T	Still E-E-A-T
Structured data	Entities, knowledge graph & vector embeds
Answering	Assisting

What Can You Do About It?

Information can be aggregated, but personality can't. This is why it's still our responsibility to help "assist the assistant" to consider and include you as part of that aggregated information and synthesized answer.

- **Stick to the fundamentals:** Never neglect SEO 101.

- **Third-party perspective is increasingly important**, so ensure this is maintained and managed well to ensure positive brand sentiment.
- **Embrace structured data**: Even if some say it's becoming less crucial for LLMs to understand entities, structured data is being used right now inside major LLMs to output structured data within responses, giving them an established and standardised way to understand your content.
- **Educate stakeholders**: Shift the conversation from rankings and clicks to discoverability and brand presence. The days of the branded unlinked mention suddenly have more value than "acquiring X followed non-branded anchor text links pcm."
- **Experiment with your content**: Try new ways to produce and market your content beyond the traditional word. Here, video is useful not only for humans but also for LLMs, who are now "watching" and understanding them to aid their response.
- **Create helpful, unique content**: To add to the above, don't produce for the sake of production.

LLMs.txt: The Potential To Be The New Standard

Keep an eye on emerging standards proposals, such as llms.txt, which is one way some are adapting and contributing to how LLMs ingest our content beyond our traditional approaches offered with robots.txt and XML sitemaps.

While some are skeptical about this standard, I believe it is still something worth implementing now, and I understand its true benefits for the future.

There is (virtually) non-existent risk in implementing something that doesn't take too much time or resources to produce, so long as you're doing so with a white hat approach.

Conclusion: Embrace Discoverability And New Metrics

SEO isn't dead. It's expanding, but at a rate we haven't experienced before.

Discoverability is the new go-to success metric, but it's not without flaws, especially as the way we search continues to change.

This is no longer about "ranking well" anymore. This is now about being understood, surfaced, trusted, and discovered across every platform and assistant that matters.

Embrace and adapt to the changes, as it's going to continue for some time.

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