

Exploring Stakeholders' Practical Needs for GDPR Compliance

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Abstract: In a time when various regulations and directives are enforced within the European cyberspace regarding cybersecurity and data protection, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements are still far from being completely understood and integrated into the practice of individuals personal and sensitive data processing. Having clear directions of what is needed to protect the privacy of personal data is essential but even more, is the availability of tools and mechanisms that can provide easy, structured and, hopefully, more automated ways to implement those requirements in practice. After more than six years of GDPR enforcement, how are people aware, knowledgeable and prepared to comply with GDPR in their daily practice? Moreover, what still needs to be done to improve this process? This work presents the results of a survey aimed to collect the perceptions, preferences and needs regarding interactive and assistive tools, together with its content, to support GDPR compliance in practice. Participants (n=62) from varied backgrounds and experiences agreed that such tools are very needed and can have beneficial impact in terms of Privacy, Knowledge, Efficiency and Productivity, but also in terms of Safety. Results also show that stakeholders who frequently need to perform personal data processing, do not many times have the knowledge, experience or required support to put compliance procedures into practice, and within their context. Our study contributes to understanding what content and functionalities a GDPR compliance tool must include to support those stakeholders.

1 INTRODUCTION

As with any legislation, the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (GDPR, 2016) is made to be generic. This may difficult the integration of its requirements in different domains (Quinn and Quinn, 2018; Cool, 2019), as it provides little or no technical guidance to the entities that are obliged to implement it. This approach aims to be impartial but may cause unforeseen complications when organizations attempt to adapt their processes to GDPR (Politou et al., 2018).

In a 2020 literature review (Ferreira, 2020), two years after GDPR enforcement, most proposed guidelines and proof of concepts in the literature were not tested or used in real settings.

Four more years have elapsed, and works focusing on understanding end users' needs, challenges and preferences regarding practical GDPR compliance or

identifying available, adapted and interactive tools that can support them with those challenges, are few.

On a search query in SCOPUS indexation database with the following terms: *TITLE-ABS-KEY (survey AND gdpr AND compliance)*, on the 5/12/2024, 58 results were retrieved. From the analysis of their titles and abstracts, only a few works were closer to the subject in exploration in this study.

A work (Iadinic et al., 2023) discusses the results of a survey applied to Croatian SMEs regarding GDPR compliance challenges. Commonly, SMEs fail to demonstrate an adequate level of compliance with the GDPR due to a lack of literacy on the data protection legal framework or a lack of supporting resources. Results also indicate that SMEs would greatly benefit from additional practical guidance and templates relating to various internal policies and GDPR requirements such as data retention, deletion, access, maintaining records of processing activities and training strategies for staff on data protection matters (Iadinic et al., 2023). There was no clear

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understanding of what type of practical guidance would be the most adequate.

Other works in the literature have explored if a tool/platform focusing on supporting GDPR compliance would be part of such guidance. The study (Tsohou et al., 2023) has answered positively to this question and described that end users highly expressed the need for a platform that enables them to: i) “clearly verify whether the basic GDPR principles and their rights are complied with; ii) know when their data is processed by third parties; iii) define their consent; and iv) is user friendly”. A platform was built in the ambit of that study. However, the authors could only find an online demo and no further testing results from user experience and impact on GDPR compliance or use in practice.

A 2021 review of GDPR compliance software solutions shows that organisations are being “greatly challenged in meeting GDPR compliance obligations, despite the myriads of software tools available to them” (Ryan et al., 2021) (IAPP-EY, 2019). Solutions commonly lack interoperable features or are not based on evidence.

Other works focused on specific requirements and try to validate GDPR compliance in an automated form (Chhetri et al. 2024) (de Montety et al., 2019) (Libal, 2021). Moreover, a specific software tool to provide support for Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIA) execution, in French, can be found here (PIA, 2024).

Although these mentioned examples are relevant, they address only a few specific GDPR requirements (e.g., DPIA or consent management), not all the main requirements. Also, those examples may potentially need extra knowledge in terms of configuration and data inputs for the various requirements associated with the regulation. In addition, it is not clear if such examples are adapted to the infrastructure and context where they are applied as well as the users' experiences and expectations.

In fact, existing solutions may not be as successful as predicted. Many organisations choose to use manual methods such as spreadsheets to manage their GDPR compliance (Ryan et al., 2021), while 76% do not use commercial software tools to carry out compliance activities (IAPP, 2019). Stakeholders continue to struggle with core GDPR compliance requirements such as DPIA, register of processing activities and data inventory mapping.

Functional, user-friendly, interactive, easy understandable, freely available tools are still scarce to find. Many times, the existing solutions are not context-oriented, difficult to adapt and commonly focus on a few specific GDPR aspects such as digital

consent management or data sharing. Maybe this is explained by the fact that no exploration works of stakeholders' needs, preferences, context specific needs and actual day by day activities are found in the literature. Solutions' design and development must be integrated from the beginning of its conception. Co-designing such tools with stakeholders can give a higher degree of assurance of what is required and really works in practice.

A recent work from the authors aims to target these challenges but with a focus on health research projects management (Ferreira et al., 2024). The authors propose the implementation of a high-fidelity prototype of a recommendation platform (IRIS) for compliance of health projects with GDPR. The work integrated user centered research methodologies and was performed in co-design with the target population. It addresses GDPR in the light of non-experts in law or its requirements so that it is easy for the lay user to get the main definitions and be guided on the main requirements. Being just an interaction design prototype, it only describes the interaction scenarios, and the focus is a specific context. However, some of its outcomes are being further explored in this present work.

Our present work aims to present the results of a survey to collect perceptions, preferences and needs regarding GDPR compliance within stakeholders' professional practice, from various domains, as well as the requirements for the development of an interactive/assistive tool to guide them in the compliance process. Asking stakeholders directly can provide insights into what are the real needs and challenges that need to be addressed and overcome.

Next section describes the applied methods while section 3 presents the obtained results. Section 4 and 5 discuss the results and conclude the work providing future research directions, respectively.

2 METHODS

2.1 Data Collection

An anonymous online survey was designed on google forms and shared in LinkedIn on the 18/10/2024, where it was available for a month. Participants from the authors' contact networks were invited to answer the survey via the post and to share it.

The survey was written in English to reach a wider audience and not limit replies from the authors' closer community.

2.2 Survey Structure

The online survey comprised the following 5 main parts:

1. Informed consent;
2. Demographics;
3. GDPR literacy;
4. Personal data processing;
5. GDPR compliance supporting tools.

More details are presented in Table 1 and in the text that follows.

Table 1: Detailed content of each survey section.

Part	Content
1.	Informed consent with project’s description; Purpose and type of data processing; Responsible researcher contacts; Participants’ consent to participate
2.	Demographic data: Age, Gender, Main Occupation, Areas of Activity; Years of Experience; Number of Employees of Working Institution
3.	Awareness, Knowledge, Relevance and Adequate Support regarding GDPR
4.	If personal data processing is part of the participant’s professional activity; What personal data processing is performed
5.	Available tools to support GDPR compliance; The need for such tools; Any free tools; The positive impact such tools could have; The need to be adaptable to context and requirements; The device to use it; The content such tools should include; The use of a chatbot/AI Assistant to either complement or replace such tools

Although the study is anonymous, section 1 is required for compliance with GDPR, to describe the ambit, nature of the study, together with personal data to be processed, to study participants before they choose to participate or not.

Section 2 aims to characterise the main participants’ demographic variables.

Section 3 bases the questions on one of the three main categories raised by (Ferreira et al., 2024) in the analysis of data collected from interviews, the main “Concerns about GDPR”.

Section 4 questions aim to detail our sample needs and associated activities for personal data processing.

Section 5 bases its questions on two of the three main categories raised by (Ferreira et al., 2024)

“Content for the tool” and “Tool characteristics”, to explore our sample needs in terms of supporting tool features and content.

2.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were extracted from the google forms report as well as from a .csv file exported from the same forms.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Demographics

The online survey was answered by 62 participants, 47% female, with an age ranging from 36 to 45 years old (31%) and 46 to 60 years old (50%).

Forty percent (40%) of participants work in research, 26% in Education while 26% in IT (Information Technology). Their main areas of actuation are Healthcare (47%), Cybersecurity and Privacy (42%) as well as IT engineering and networking (26%) (Figure 1).

More than half of respondents (58%) have more than 20 years of experience working in their specific areas while 15% have between 16 and 19 years of experience, 13% between 6 to 9 years of experience and 8% less than 5 years of expertise.

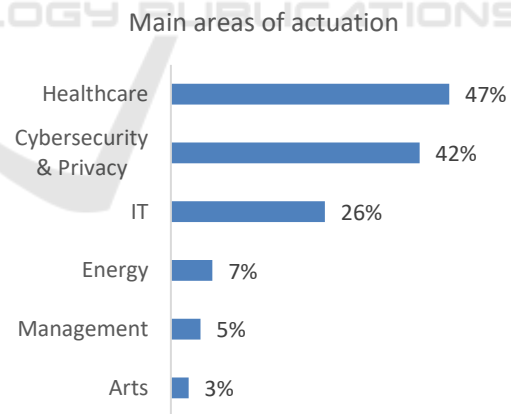


Figure 1: The main areas of actuation of the survey respondents.

Forty seven percent (47%) of participants work in large companies (more than 1000 employees) while others are distributed by companies between 200 and 1000 employees (21%), 50-200 employees (19%) and less than 50 employees (13%) (Figure 2).

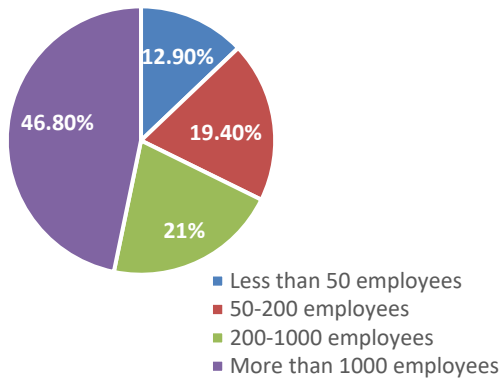


Figure 2: Participants' institutions dimension.

3.2 GDPR Perceptions

Most respondents (82%) completely agree or agree that they are aware of GDPR while 76% completely agree or agree that they are knowledgeable regarding this regulation (Figure 3).

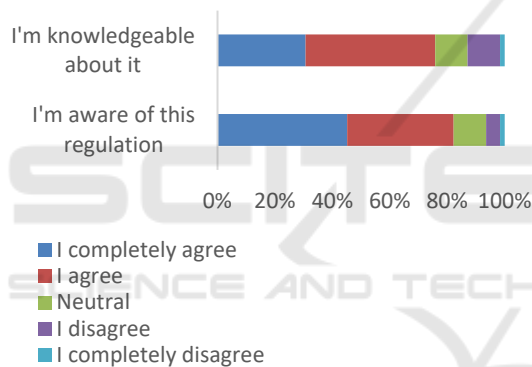


Figure 3: Perceptions of awareness and knowledge regarding GDPR.

3.3 Personal Data Processing

Eighty four percent (84%) of participants completely agree or agree that GDPR is essential for the protection of personal data processing. Moreover 34% affirm that personal data protection is frequently part of their main occupation, 37% state that sometimes it is while 29% answered No (Figure 4).

When asked what type of personal data processing was performed, 37% mentioned personal data from staff, clients or the academic community while 23% referred the processing of clinical/health/patient data.

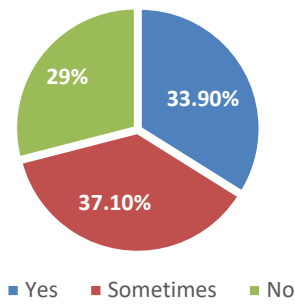


Figure 4: Answers from respondents regarding the frequency they engage in personal data processing on the course of their activity.

3.4 GDPR Supporting Tools

Regarding the knowledge of existing supporting tools to comply with GDPR during personal data processing, 48% of respondents do not know, 27% answered Yes while 25% replied No. Some characteristics referred by the participants about those tools are presented in Figure 5.

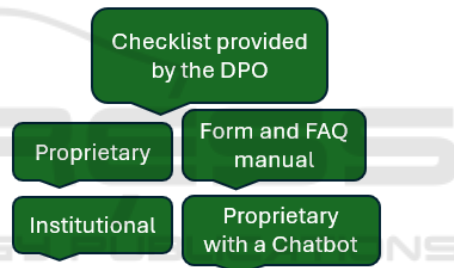


Figure 5: GDPR compliance supporting tools mentioned by the survey participants.

When asked specifically about free tools, 90% of respondents answered No and 10% answered Yes. Names provided for these free tools comprise: Ghostery, Cookie Script, PIA tool from CNIL; or the European Data Protection Board Guidelines.

3.5 Need for a GDPR Supporting Tool

Regarding the usefulness of a GDPR supporting tool, 89% of participants agree while 10% do not know. Participants agree in the positive impact such tools can have in terms of Privacy (76%); Knowledge (63%); Safety (60%); Efficiency (53%); and Productivity (45%) (Figure 6).

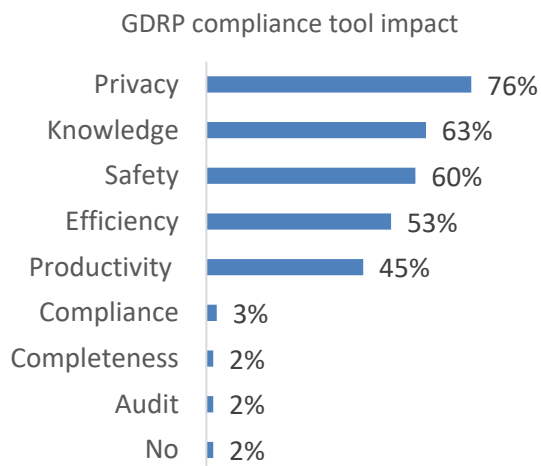


Figure 6: Respondents’ opinions regarding the impact that a supporting tool for GDPR compliance would have in their daily activities.

When asked to justify the need for such tool, participants gave various reasons. The most frequent justifications were that a tool would help: i) to understand legal concepts and requirements as well as provide adequate and even automated protection (n=11; 18%) and ii) to support non-experts in the field, including SMEs and researchers, to understand basic concepts (n=10; 16%). Other participants also referred that such tool could help in data processing management and efficiency and would be useful to provide a compliance score when self-evaluating their data processing procedures for GDPR compliance.

Quotes from the participants are presented in Figure 7.

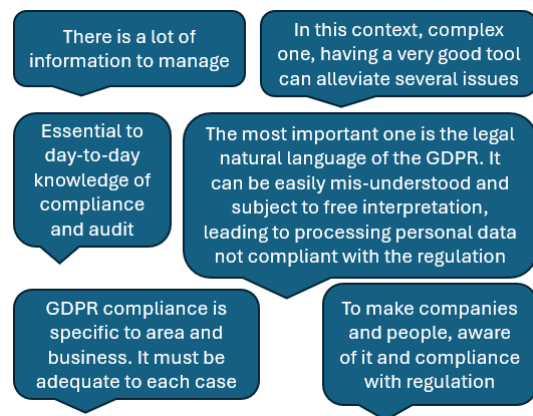


Figure 7: Quotes from survey participants on the need for a GDPR compliance supporting tool.

3.6 GDPR Supporting Tool - Design

A tool to support GDPR compliance in different contexts must necessarily integrate different functionalities and respond to various needs. Next, we describe tool’s characteristics that were mentioned by our sample.

Regarding tool content, 89% and 90% of respondents completely agree or agree they would like to have clarification of GDPR main terms and requirements, respectively, while 79% completely agree or agree to have clarification of data owners’ rights (Figure 8).

Moreover, when participants were asked about practical measures for data protection processing within the tool, 87% and 84% of respondents completely agree or agree they would like to have guided data protection processing and guided GDPR requirements application in the practice of data processing, respectively (Figure 9).

Also, 84% of participants would like to have access to recommendations of security measures and/or mechanisms to apply according to their own data processing needs.

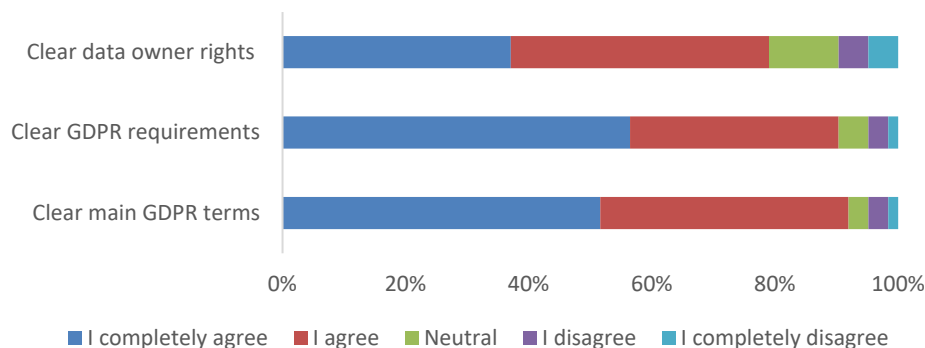


Figure 8: Participants’ opinions regarding GDPR supporting tool compliance content.

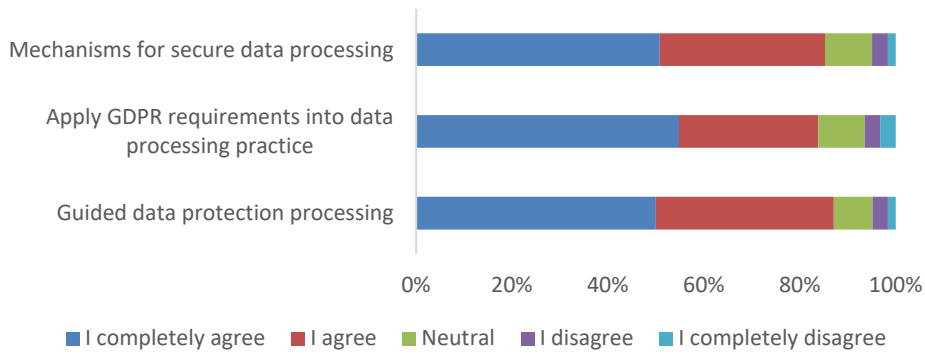


Figure 9: Participants' opinions regarding practical procedures for secure data processing.

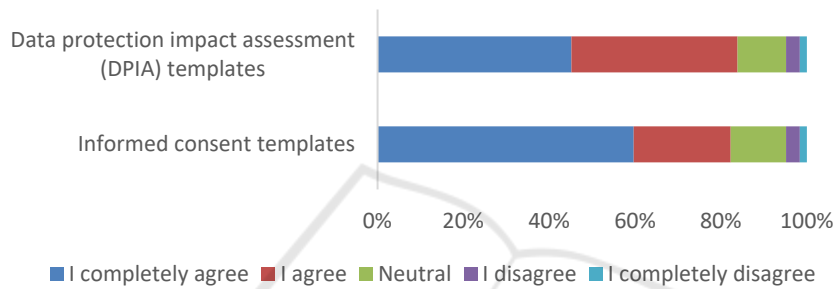


Figure 10: Participants' opinions regarding access to templates for informed consent or DPIA procedures.

Regarding templates the tool might include, 82% and 84% of participants completely agree or agree to have access to informed consent and DPIA templates, respectively (Figure 10).

Figure 11 shows the percentages of responses regarding the integration of a Chatbot/AI Assistant feature within the GDPR compliance supporting tool. Forty-five percent of respondents completely agree or agree with this integration while around a third of respondents did not have a defined opinion.

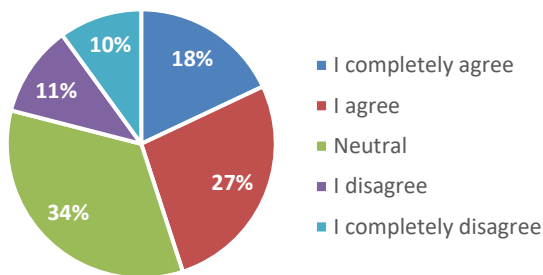


Figure 11: Opinions regarding the inclusion of a Chatbot/AI Assistant feature to the GDPR compliance tool.

For more clarification, participants were asked regarding the detachment of the compliance tool from the Chatbot/AI Assistant. If they would prefer both or only one of those tools. Answers show that 47% of respondents prefer the compliance tool alone while

42% prefer both tools. One participant also refers that including an AI Assistant implies that it needs to comply with the AI Act (AI Act, 2024).

Bringing to more general design and specifications, 74% of respondents agree that a GDPR compliance supporting tool must be adaptable to the context of data processing while 16% agree it to be adapted to both data processing context and users' needs.

Some quotes to justify these responses are presented in Figure 12.

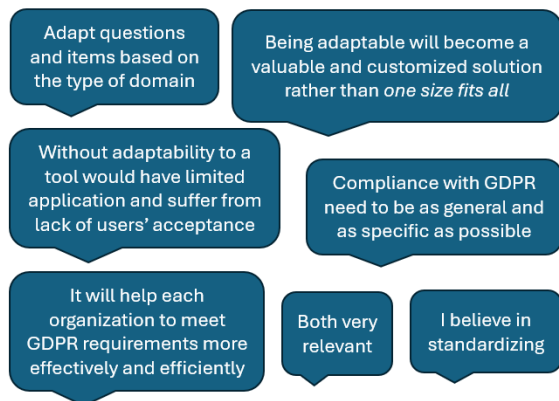


Figure 12: Quotes from survey participants regarding the need for the GDPR compliance support tool to integrate both context and users' needs.

Further, while asking the participants what type of device they would be more willing to use to access such tool, 81% mentioned they would prefer using a laptop while 15% a smartphone.

The last survey question asked the participants to provide other suggestions they would like to share with study researchers. We highlight here two of those suggestions for further discussion:

- “Possibility of generating the necessary documents from the provided data”
- “AI Assistance should be provided in the background, handling events, and helping to fill the gaps”

4 DISCUSSION

GDPR is to be applied in any domain where personal data processing is required and it needs to integrate the necessary privacy and security to prove that it is so. This demands that every such context needs the available expertise to implement it in practice. If we consider the type of knowledge such person needs to have, we reach a set of multidisciplinary and very different and complex subjects such as IT, privacy, cybersecurity, the domain associated to the context and law, just to name a few, which are not easily acquired.

This is likely unmanageable for many organizations, and this is why we need to devise other strategies to overcome these challenges. This study aims to contribute a step further in this direction.

The sample that participated in our online survey had a lot of experience in areas such as healthcare and IT which may mean they are more aware of the importance of protecting sensitive and personal data. However, as shown by our results, this may not also mean that they have the required knowledge or tools to implement GDPR compliance best practice, which research commonly shows (Iadinic et al., 2023) (Tsohou et al., 2023). Our sample was not so confident in their knowledge of GDPR as they were aware of it.

Almost half of our sample is working in large companies which may explain their frequent participation in personal data processing activities with some knowledge of existing tools to support those activities. However, most of the mentioned tools are in fact manual guidelines or procedures, also in accordance with previous works (Ryan et al., 2021). Even when in online format, they still lack interactive capabilities. Possibly those that mentioned

proprietary tools may have more of the late features integrated, but the authors could not assess them.

Regarding the mentioned free tools, these are specific tools which are not comprehensively tackling the main GDPR requirements or providing practical knowledge to users but rather focus on specific needs. For example: the *Ghostery* is a tracker and Ad blocker and includes online private search; the *Cookie Script* includes tools to make a website compliant with the latest privacy regulations including GDPR (not more details were provided in its description); the PIA tool from CNIL comprises mainly documents and guides for best practice while performing a DPIA, and the European Data Protection Board Guidelines are also documents to provide best practice and to clarify the law for better interpretation.

Overall, our sample clearly confirms the need of a more interactive and comprehensive GDPR compliance supporting tool, as explored in previous research (Iadinic et al., 2023) (Tsohou et al., 2023). The authors would like to stress this fact for future research in this area. Associated justifications focus on the complexity of the theme and the volume of knowledge and data there is to manage. A tool could alleviate and support that work as well as facilitate the communication, translation and interpretation of legal language to practical settings, in accordance with this previous study (Iadinic et al., 2023). It would also help in the compliance implementation and verification, again as shown already in the literature by (Tsohou et al., 2023), where the need for a platform to automatically verify compliance of specific GDPR requirements would be of great help.

Moreover, our sample clearly perceives and acknowledges the impact such tool could have not only on the protection of personal data processing but also on improved knowledge of the regulation and its requirements and practical implementation. In turn, this can have an impact on the efficiency and productivity of their professional activity. In addition, if the privacy of personal data is increased so can be the safety of the data subjects, especially in the healthcare domain (well represented in our sample), where breaches of confidentiality and privacy can negatively impact patients' safety and wellbeing.

Another contribution of this work is the specific characteristics and associated justification that the tool may include. Although a high experienced sample and actively dealing with data protection challenges, they value the integration of clear content from GDPR general knowledge and concepts as well as from more specific guidance in practice. Previous research also highlights the fact that there is a lack of literacy as well as supporting resources, guidance and

templates to provide for GDPR compliance in practice (Iadinic et al., 2023) (Ryan et al., 2021). A focus is put on the inclusion of templates, which can save a lot of time, especially regarding informed consent (mandatory), and in the suggestion of the most adequate security mechanisms or measures to apply and how.

Other tool components that may be useful to complement the main tool functionalities is a Chatbot/AI Assistant. Almost half of participants agree with the inclusion of this component but more than a third also remain neutral about this topic. Our sample perceives the benefit of an AI Assistant mostly when integrated in the main tool, as a complementary support. One participant even refers, as an added suggestion at the end of the survey, that AI Assistance should be provided in the background, handling events and maybe fill the gaps.

In addition, AI can be used not only to provide pre-defined legal recommendations as well as improve user's interaction experience, but also to be able to integrate and adapt users' requirements for specific contexts. As confirmed by our study, the majority of participants (74%) agree that supporting tools for GDPR compliance must comprise the need to be adaptable to context. AI can easily learn and integrate specific needs from specific contexts into the on-the-fly recommendations and support.

To notice also that another participant raised the issue that such Assistant needs to be AI Act compliant. In fact, the tool itself needs to be GDPR compliant, and this awareness is very important to keep in mind for future developments.

An important detail that was revealed by our sample is the preference of using a laptop device to access the compliance supporting tool. This may be because the laptop is still the most common working device and using this tool will be part of their professional context.

More than quantitative data, the survey also collected qualitative data to further explore the choices of our sample. The need for a compliance supporting tool is justified to alleviate the complexity of procedures as well as the day-to-day management of personal data processing, aiming to improve effectiveness and efficiency of the process. To accomplish this, such tool needs to be flexible and adaptable (mentioned by various participants – no one-size-fits-all solutions) to be able to consider both general and specific requirements. But not all participants have this opinion. One participant prefers standardized tools. These have obvious advantages for compliance procedures that are common to different domains and purposes and can even be used

across different regulations and legislations. However, to bring more value, the tool also needs to allow customization both for the context and specificities at hand as well as for the users that will interact with it. As mentioned by the participants, the tool needs to support both expert and lay people. As GDPR goes across every domain where personal data is processed, we cannot expect to have law experts in every possible setting.

This aspect goes along with some of the suggestions made by the participants at the end of the survey:

- *“Possibility of generating the necessary documents from the provided data”*. General templates can be made available, especially the ones concerning informed consent as a mandatory requirement for personal data processing. However, other documents may also be generated for specific domains, such as in research when an Ethics Commission needs to approve a study, or a record of activities performed in the ambit of the “right of access” or the “right to be forgotten” in healthcare;
- *“AI Assistance should be provided in the background, handling events, and helping to fill the gaps”*. AI can be very useful in filling the gaps to adapt and customise needs on the go, to learn what can be more relevant to a certain context at a certain time, and to answer to users' requests for different types of data processing or even added protection for more sensitive data.

4.1 Limitations

This work has some limitations, including the small sample size and the main recruitment venue being used was the LinkedIn platform. However, since this was a short period study, the authors agreed that it was a platform where a more varied sample of people could be reached and faster. Still, this can also be biased by the authors' connections most probably linked with their own personal and professional interests.

The analysis was only made with descriptive statistics, but a deeper exploration can be made to find possibly deeper connections between demographic variables such as age and domains of actuation to the specific tool characteristics, preferences and perceived benefits.

5 CONCLUSIONS

By 2024, more than 6 years after the GDPR has been enforced in all European State Members to regulate citizens personal data protection, not many works were found in the literature that aim to understand users' knowledge, needs and contexts to implement GDPR compliance in practice.

The lack of research on this topic impacts the way users and organizations will approach this requirement. Also, not many straightforward tools are available to provide the right knowledge and support the usage of that knowledge within stakeholders' professional contexts, without needing to be experts in law or privacy.

On the way to fill this gap, this study aimed to explore the perceptions, preferences and needs regarding interactive and assistive tools, together with its content, to support GDPR compliance in practice.

Our results show that stakeholders who frequently need to perform personal data processing do not often have the knowledge, experience or required support to put compliance procedures into practice in their context. This work contributes to understanding what content and functionalities could be included in an interactive tool to be designed to provide a holistic management of all requirements and further enhancing the capability of GDPR compliance.

Our study outcomes can be leveraged with the outcomes of previous works to integrate both user research needs not only at the interaction and design level but also on the content needs and expectations.

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