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2026 Talent Acquisition Trends Study

Executive Summary

Application volume is rising faster than hiring teams can review it. At the same time, teams short on capacity are cutting the steps that build trust with candidates, such as feedback and personalized communication.

That's the central finding of our 2026 Talent Acquisition Trends Study.

Earlier in 2026, we surveyed 998 talent acquisition leaders and 1,000 active job seekers across North America, EMEA, and APAC. Here's what we found.

Teams can't review what they receive. 72% of employers report higher application volume over the past year, but fewer than six in ten (59%) can thoroughly review most of the resumes they get.

AI saves recruiters time but creates new work. 71% of recruiting teams use AI, and 76% of those teams save two or more hours a week per recruiter. Nearly half also say it has increased the need for oversight. Only 20% of organizations have AI governance that is regulated and audited. With "agentic hiring" or "recruiting agents" showing up in nearly every advertisement and marketing message right now, employers need to understand how this is changing recruiting work at a fundamental level.

Employers plan to spend saved time on candidates, yet they're cutting candidate activities. Employers most want to put time freed by automation toward candidate experience (57%). Over the past year, though, 80% of teams cut at least one activity because they lacked capacity, most often candidate feedback loops (34%).

Employers say they trust resumes but rely on them less in final decisions. 76% are confident resumes reflect true skills. But 64% have hired someone whose performance didn't match their resume, and 18% say the resume carries most of the weight in the final decision.

Employers and candidates doubt each other. Three in four employers (74%) believe candidates misrepresent themselves at least occasionally, and only 15% of candidates call employer branding very honest. Both groups name lack of feedback as the top reason candidates lose trust (50% of employers and 61% of candidates).

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72%

of employers report higher application volume over the past year, but fewer than six in ten (59%) can thoroughly review most of the resumes they get.

Candidates want a person making the final hiring decision. Just 13% are comfortable with AI choosing who gets hired. If AI is used to evaluate them, 45% expect the option to request a human review.

AI is reducing entry-level hiring. 65% of employers say AI and automation have reduced the entry-level roles they need to fill, and 83% have at least some concern about the long-term effect on their talent pipeline.

These findings point TA leaders to three priorities.

1. Decide how recruiters will spend the time AI saves them, and make someone responsible for candidate communication.
2. Agree on how to evaluate skills assessments, structured interviews, and work samples so teams depend less on resumes.
3. Audit any AI that ranks or screens candidates, including tools that only produce a shortlist.

In this report, you'll find the full findings on application volume, AI use, resumes, trust, and what candidates want from employers.

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More Applicants, With Fewer Worth a Closer Look

Over the past two years, in our own hiring and in our work with client organizations, we've watched the same pattern play out again and again. Job postings pull in more applicants than ever, but a smaller share of them deserve a closer look. Even as we've added new people to our own team at Lighthouse Research & Advisory, the number of irrelevant and/or unverified resumes was overwhelming. Even for a small, well-defined set of roles, we kept running into applicants who didn't meet the stated requirements, didn't respond to outreach, or didn't follow the application instructions.

The data backs up what we've seen firsthand. 72% of employers say application volume rose over the past 12 months, and 38% call the increase significant or dramatic. Fewer than six in ten hiring teams (59%) can thoroughly review most of the resumes they receive. Three in ten review some while many go unread, and 11% told us that reviewing resumes feels like a game of chance.

To be fair, employers and candidates built this situation together. On the employer side, we made applying almost effortless. One-click applications, auto-fill forms, and job boards designed for volume made it easy to apply without much thought about fit. Then AI made it easier still, for both sides.

Job postings pull in more applicants than ever, but a smaller share of them deserve a closer look.

11% **told us that reviewing resumes feels like a game of chance.**

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Figure 1: How Employers Describe Resume Review Today



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=998 employers)

But as our team has shared on numerous stages in keynote presentations and employer advisory sessions on the research in the last year, the relationships we value most weren't built on speed and efficiency. They were built on trust. And the current environment shows a distinct lack of trust on many fronts.

Employers use AI to screen faster. 55% call resume or profile screening a high priority for AI investment over the next 12 to 18 months, and a third (33%) already use AI-based resume screening or matching as their primary first screen. Candidates, meanwhile, can use AI to tailor a resume or write a cover letter in seconds. In our experience, that means less thought goes into each application. More than half of employers name AI-written resumes and cover letters (53%) and tools that submit applications automatically (51%) as ways candidates game the hiring process.

Unfortunately, neither side comes out ahead. Employers are overwhelmed with more applications than they can meaningfully review, and candidates hear nothing back, or get a form rejection, after putting time into applying.

55%

call resume or profile screening a high priority for AI investment over the next 12 to 18 months, and a third (33%) already use AI-based resume screening or matching as their primary first screen.

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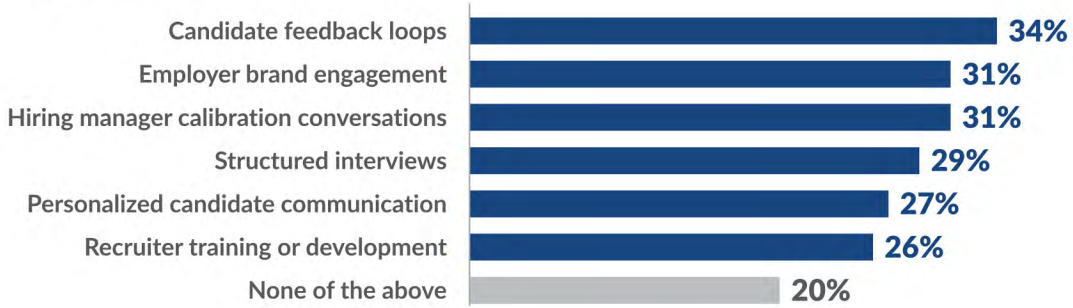
At the same time, teams short on capacity have cut activities that help build trust with candidates.

Candidates want speed, too. Asked what matters most to them in a hiring process, 58% picked a smooth, easy application. That's nearly three times the 21% who picked a hiring test that lets them show off their skills. Employers and candidates are both prioritizing speed, and the parts of hiring that take time are getting less attention.

At the same time, teams short on capacity have cut activities that help build trust with candidates. In the past year, employers reduced or stopped:

- Candidate feedback loops (34%)
- Hiring manager calibration conversations (31%)
- Personalized candidate communication (27%)

Figure 2: Activities Employers Reduced or Stopped Due to Capacity Constraints



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=998 employers)

Employers and candidates largely agree on what hurts trust most. Employers say lack of feedback (50%) and rejection without human contact (44%) do the most damage. Candidates rank the same two items highest, at 61% and 59%.

The rest of this report looks at three reasons the problem persists: limited capacity, AI moving faster than hiring processes, and AI-generated resumes that make it harder to judge a candidate's true ability.

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What AI Is Doing for Recruiting Teams

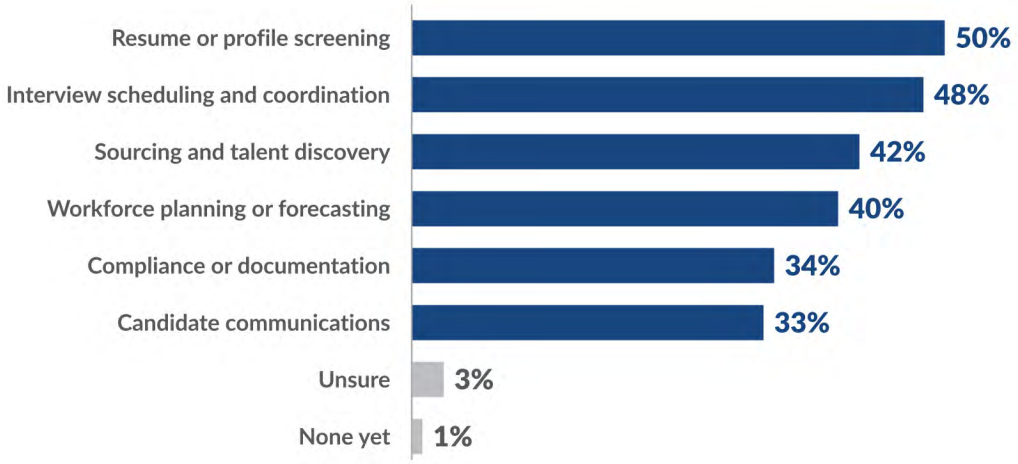
71% of recruiting teams now use AI, and 46% of employers are increasing their investment based on results they've seen. Most of the conversation now is about where AI belongs in the hiring process.

Teams using AI get the most value from it in three areas:

- Resume or profile screening (50%)
- Interview scheduling and coordination (48%)
- Sourcing and talent discovery (42%)

Most of the conversation now is about where AI belongs in the hiring process.

Figure 3: Where AI Has Delivered the Most Value in Recruiting



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=709 employers using AI)

Scheduling (48%) and sourcing (42%) are also where vendors are moving from assistive features to agents that complete multi-step tasks, such as finding candidates, contacting them, and booking interviews.

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An agent that acts creates more to monitor than a tool that suggests, so oversight demands will grow along with capabilities. Before adopting one, teams should ask what the agent can do without approval, what it logs, and how much review time it adds to each recruiter's week.

Teams using AI are saving time. Roughly three in four (76%) save two or more hours a week per recruiter, and 75% say AI has reduced their team's overall workload.

However, AI has also created new work.

Nearly half (45%) say it has increased the need for oversight or validation, and 38% have added tools without the people to manage them. When AI hasn't delivered, employers most often blame a poor fit with their existing recruiting operating model (20%) or vendors who overpromise (18%). Recruiter skill requirements (49%) and hiring manager involvement (48%) have changed as well.

Greg Muccio, former head of talent acquisition at Southwest Airlines, shared what thoughtful use looks like at scale:

"I've also seen AI create real value when used thoughtfully. In a previous role, our team faced an enormous hiring challenge for Flight Attendants. We regularly received more than 10,000 applications within just a few hours of posting a role. Reviewing every applicant manually was not realistic, which meant some qualified candidates might never be seen simply because of capacity constraints.

At the same time, teams short on capacity have cut activities that help build trust with candidates.

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By using AI to help process applications, we were able to work through the entire requisition and give more qualified candidates an opportunity to be considered. We kept the initial screening simple and used one-way interviews so each qualified, interested candidate had a chance to share their story in their own words. The result: we met our targets faster and saw stronger candidate engagement.

The key difference was that AI did not make the hiring decision for us. It helped us manage scale so recruiters could spend more time where human judgment mattered most."

Candidates make the same distinction. Just 13% are comfortable with AI deciding who gets hired, and a third (34%) aren't comfortable with AI at any stage. They're more accepting of AI that helps with scale and access: 41% are fine with AI matching them to roles, and 26% with a chatbot that answers questions on their own schedule. Once AI appears to be making the decision, comfort levels drop.

"The key difference was that AI did not make the hiring decision for us. It helped us manage scale so recruiters could spend more time where human judgment mattered most."

— Greg Muccio, Southwest Airlines

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Employers are much more confident about AI than candidates are. Two-thirds of employers using AI (66%) are very or extremely confident they can explain its ROI. Our qualitative research seems to indicate that number is high. When pressed, most of that ROI can be tied back to faster steps in the process, even if it doesn't mean more hires, better quality, or other outputs. AI is seen as a fast, capable tool for helping with hiring, but the actual outcomes may or may not always pay off like expected.

62% **Compliance, risk, and fraud detection is the top AI investment priority for the next 12 to 18 months, rated high priority by 62% of employers.**

Resume screening is second at 55%. Interview scheduling, workforce planning, and candidate sourcing follow closely, each at about 53%.

Figure 4: Top AI Investment Priorities for the Next 12 to 18 Months



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=998 employers)

66%

Two-thirds of employers using AI (66%) are very or extremely confident they can explain its ROI.

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Most Hiring Tech Now Includes AI, but Few Teams Audit It

Last year, 23% of employers were shopping for anything related to AI and automation. This year, it's 39%, a relative increase of nearly 70%! Scheduling, screening, and sourcing tools are often coming with AI built in, so the increase suggests employers now expect AI in nearly every hiring tool they buy.

Oversight of that AI varies a lot. One in five organizations claim to have AI governance that is regulated and audited, and 32% actively govern and monitor AI use in hiring.

Governance needs to cover the decisions AI influences as well as the decisions it makes. Picture a recruiter who reviews the top 15 names on a ranked list of 200. A person made the final call, but the system decided who made the list.

Glen Cathey, a sourcing and recruiting expert, makes the same point in his August 2026 article on automated decision-making and the "attention budget" in hiring. "A recruiter who reviews the top 50 results and stops has just let a relevance algorithm decide which 3,450 people don't exist," he writes. In his view, the test for a hiring system isn't whether a person was involved. It's whether "the rule [was] explicit, validated, monitored, and contestable."

Governance needs to cover the decisions AI influences as well as the decisions it makes.

32% **actively govern and monitor AI use in hiring.**

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20%

of organizations have AI governance that is regulated and audited.

Note: as part of our 2027 research, we're going to explore this more fully to understand how the tasks, review time, and skills of the modern recruiter are changing and what it means for organizations trying to make the most of algorithms and people.

Figure 5: How Mature Is Your Approach to Responsible AI in Hiring?



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=998 employers)

Agentic tools that send outreach, schedule interviews, and move candidates between stages without a person reviewing each step raise the governance bar further. Audits for these tools need to define what the agent is permitted to do, who can override it, how its actions are logged, and how a candidate can contest an outcome. With only 20% of organizations reporting governance that is regulated and audited, most teams would be adding autonomous tools to an oversight/governance approach that was built for simpler software.

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Teams using AI anywhere near a hiring decision need audits, documentation, and a named owner in place before a regulator or a rejected candidate asks for them. This kind of additional time and oversight changes the ROI calculations on AI technology, and many teams aren't ready for this type of change.

This is Parkinson's Law at work. C. Northcote Parkinson observed in 1955 that work expands to fill the time available for it. Recruiter hours freed up by AI get filled the same way, with whatever work is already waiting. Our data can't show exactly where those hours go, but there's no shortage of demands on them: 43% of employers say their hiring needs exceeded forecast, 72% report rising application volume, 45% say AI created more oversight work, and 38% say it added tools with no added capacity. Some of those recruiters are carrying heavier requisition loads, but others are just sending more emails and frittering their time away without a real plan.

At a recent keynote speaking session, one of the audience members spoke up from the perspective of leading a professional recruitment organization. He said that his biggest battle with AI time savings was keeping it from going to Netflix, TikTok, and other time wasters for his firm's recruiter talent.

45%

say AI created more oversight work, and 38% say it added tools with no added capacity.

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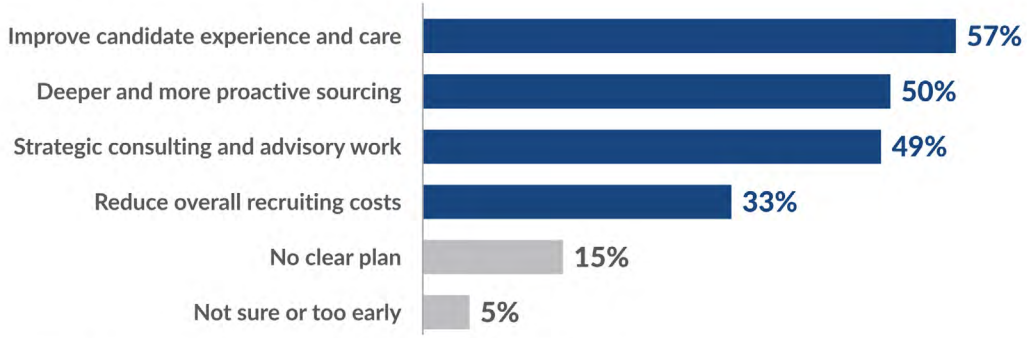
Where Does the Time Saved by AI Go?

Improving candidate experience takes someone who owns it.

We asked employers how they plan to use the time freed up by AI and automation, and the responses ranged from “we don’t know” to some of the strategic priorities every talent team is juggling.

Figure 6: How Recruiting Teams Are Expected to Use Time Saved Through Automation



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=998 employers)

Over the same period, eight in ten teams (80%) reduced or stopped at least one activity because of capacity constraints. A third (34%) cut candidate feedback loops, and 27% pulled back on personalized communication. For candidates, lack of feedback is the biggest reason they lose trust in an employer (61%).

Improving candidate experience takes someone who owns it. Before the time savings show up, decide who owns candidate communication, what the standard is (a response within a set number of days, for example), and which metric tracks it. Without an owner, an agreed upon set of metrics, and clear expectations, nothing changes for candidates.

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Employers Trust Resumes but Rely on Them Less and Less

Employers say they trust resumes. But their hiring results and practices don't back that up.

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In a discussion with a technical recruiter for an enterprise organization recently, she mentioned that she was "taking on more of a role as a private detective" in her work as a recruiter as she tried to discern which candidates, skills, and profiles were real and which were not.

Today, 76% of employers have some degree of confidence that resumes accurately represent a candidate's true skills and experience, but at the same time the majority of employers think that AI-generated resumes are common in their pipelines.

54% **Their biggest concerns about resumes reflect why that's a problem: AI-generated content hiding a candidate's true ability (54%) and exaggerated or fabricated skills (49%).**

Their hiring results tell a less rosy version of the story. 64% of employers have hired someone whose on-the-job performance didn't match the qualifications on their resume, and 39% have done so more than once. One in five (20%) suspected it happened but couldn't confirm it.

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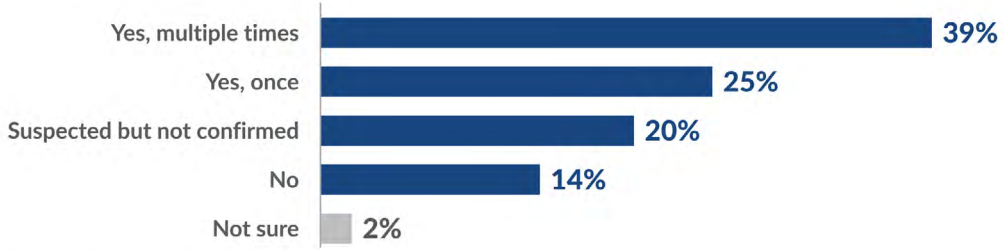
Figure 7: Employers Who Have Hired a Candidate Whose Performance Didn't Match Their Resume



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=998 employers)

At the screening stage, 32% of employers say the resume is the primary decision driver (another 50% claim it's one of several key/critical inputs). By the final decision, its role is smaller: 18% say it carries most of the weight, 38% say it plays a supporting role, and 10% keep it mainly for compliance or documentation.

98% of employers already trust several other signals more than the resume:

- Skills or work-based assessments (58%)
- Structured interviews (50%)
- Work samples or simulations (43%)
- Behavioral assessments (39%)

Only 2% say resumes still come first. Employers use similar methods to verify what candidates claim: practical exercises (46%), behavioral questions (46%), probationary evaluation after hire (44%), and reference checks (40%).

Between AI-proctored interviews and/or assessments, hiring leaders are trying to provide something that employers always used resumes for: context.

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98%

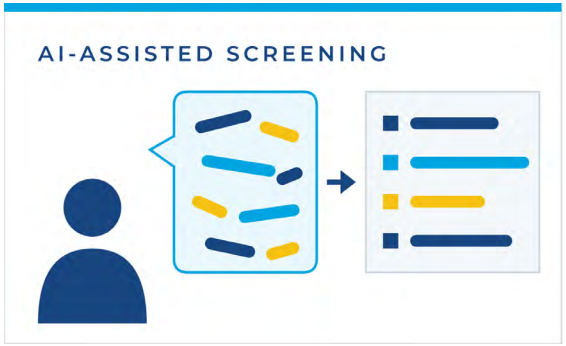
of employers already trust several other signals more than the resume

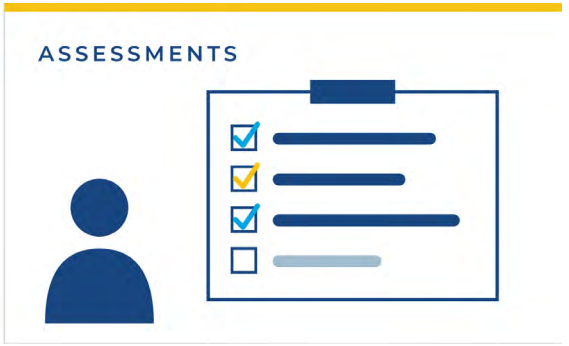
Employers are split on what comes next. Over the next 12 to 24 months, 36% will keep relying heavily on resumes, 32% intend to reduce their dependence, and 25% are redesigning hiring around other signals.

Asked what would help them move beyond resumes, employers most often ask for internal standards for evaluating other signals (44%), followed by screening tools that don't rely on resumes (37%).

Employers are using two main methods to try and disrupt the brokenness caused by the resume flood. Between AI-proctored interviews and/or assessments, hiring leaders are trying to provide something that employers always used resumes for: context. AI interviews allow employers to capture video or audio of a candidate speaking about their experiences and work, giving them a more robust picture of the person's abilities on the job. Additionally, assessments of any type are meant to do the same thing through a more rigorous, scientific mechanism.

Candidates make this harder. Seven in ten (72%) worry that other applicants are using AI to misrepresent themselves, but just 21% prioritize a hiring test that lets them show their skills. Far more (58%) put a smooth, easy application first. That's a hurdle for any skills-based alternative.





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Trust Is Low on Both Sides of Hiring

Most Employers Expect Some Misrepresentation

Three in four employers (74%) believe candidates misrepresent their identity, experience, or work product at least occasionally. For nearly a third, it happens frequently or very frequently.

Employers don't assume bad intent, though. More than half (54%) blame pressure to compete in a crowded market, and 47% blame unclear or unrealistic job requirements. A quarter (25%) point to deliberate fraud. About a third also fault their own processes: roles marketed one way and evaluated another (32%), and automated or impersonal hiring steps (32%).

Candidates are just as skeptical of employers.

Only 15% describe employer branding as very honest, 70% call it somewhat honest, and 15% say it's not honest at all. 72% also worry that other candidates are using AI to misrepresent themselves, which creates a weird sort of arms race for candidates to use AI so that they can keep up with the rest of the applicants in the pipeline. As a result, most hiring starts with both sides on guard. Employers and candidates each present their best (exaggerated) version and assume the other is doing the same.

74% **Three in four employers (74%) believe candidates misrepresent their identity, experience, or work product at least occasionally.**

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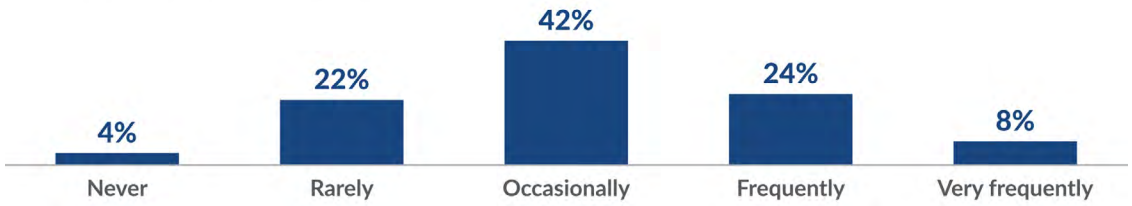
Figure 8: How Often Employers Encounter Candidates Misrepresenting Themselves



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=998 employers)

Most Employers Don't Know the Full Range of AI Tools Candidates Use

Employers can't guard against tools they don't know exist. We showed employers five ways candidates can use AI to game the hiring process and asked which ones are real. All five are.

About half recognized the better-known tools, such as AI-written resumes and cover letters (53%), auto-apply tools (51%), and AI interview practice (50%). Far fewer knew about software that feeds candidates answers during live virtual interviews (31%) or deepfake video (20%). Only 15% answered correctly, meaning 85% of employers can't identify all the ways candidates can use AI in the hiring process today.

Employers should plan for application volume and resume similarity to keep climbing, and build screening around signals that are harder to automate, such as live skills demonstrations and structured conversations.

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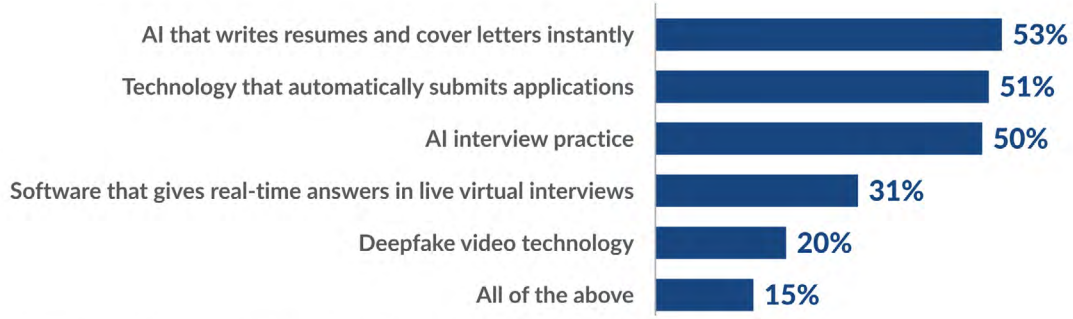
85%

of employers can't identify all the ways candidates can use AI in the hiring process today.

Figure 9: Which of These Are Real Tools Candidates Can Use to Game the Hiring Process?



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=998 employers)

Auto-apply tools, which 51% of employers recognize, are an early form of agentic AI: software that finds roles, tailors materials, and submits applications for a candidate. Our study did not measure agent adoption directly, but more capable agents will let one candidate generate dozens of applications with little personal involvement in each. Employers should plan for application volume and resume similarity to keep climbing, and build screening around signals that are harder to automate, such as live skills demonstrations and structured conversations.

From a fraud detection or candidate verification perspective, there are a range of options employers are adopting to try and help them stay ahead of the curve. Some providers have built liveness checks into their processes while others have partnered with identity verifiers like Clear or ID.me to give employers a way to prove people are who they say they are.

While we've seen some very vocal people on social media talking about identity verification being intrusive or a privacy issue, the truth is that most candidates accept basic identity checks. 70% are comfortable with government ID verification and 62% with a background check.

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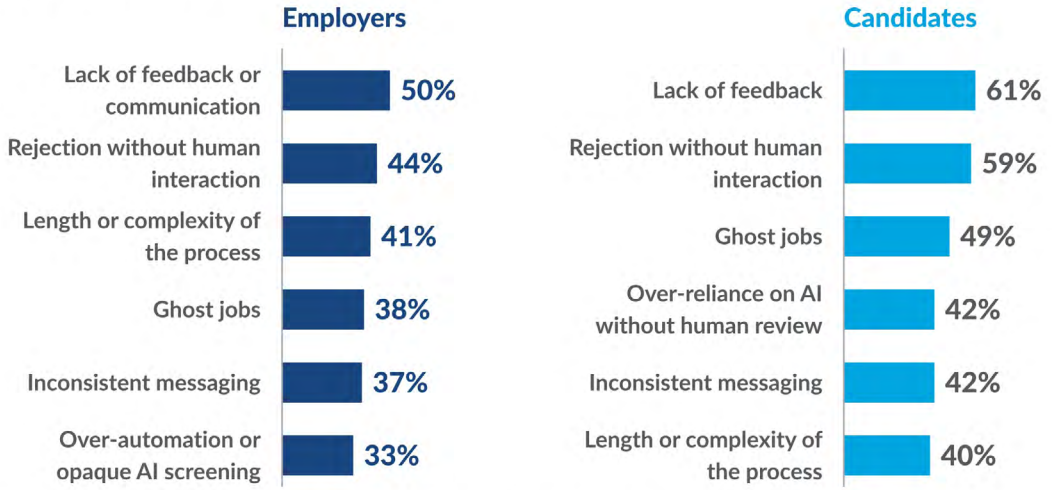
Employers Feel Good About Candidate Experience, Despite the Cuts

Most employers (62%) are very or extremely confident their team is preserving a human-centered candidate experience while being asked to perform with fewer resources. In the same year, 80% cut back or stopped at least one activity because of capacity constraints. Candidate feedback loops were cut more than anything else (34%). Lack of feedback is also what employers (50%) and candidates (61%) both say hurts trust most.

Figure 10: What Damages Candidate Trust, According to Employers and Candidates



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=998 employers; n=1,000 candidates)

62%

Most employers (62%) are very or extremely confident their team is preserving a human-centered candidate experience while being asked to perform with fewer resources.

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What Candidates Want From Employers

Candidates have been, and still continue to be, frustrated by employers and their lack of responsiveness.

To see the hiring process from the job seeker's side, we surveyed 1,000 active candidates about their experience and what they'd like employers to change.

Most candidates are frustrated.

Eight in ten (81%) feel frustrated during the hiring process, 42% frequently and 39% occasionally. What frustrates them most:

- Ghosting or no updates (61%)
- Long, drawn-out processes (55%)
- Unrealistic expectations (46%)
- Lack of personal touch (46%)

Unfortunately these numbers are pretty much the same that we've seen in the last three or four years with little movement. Candidates have been, and still continue to be, frustrated by employers and their lack of responsiveness. While some companies treat this as a priority, many treat it as a nice to have, meaning it falls through the cracks when they are pressured to do more with less.

81% **Eight in ten (81%) feel frustrated during the hiring process, 42% frequently and 39% occasionally.**

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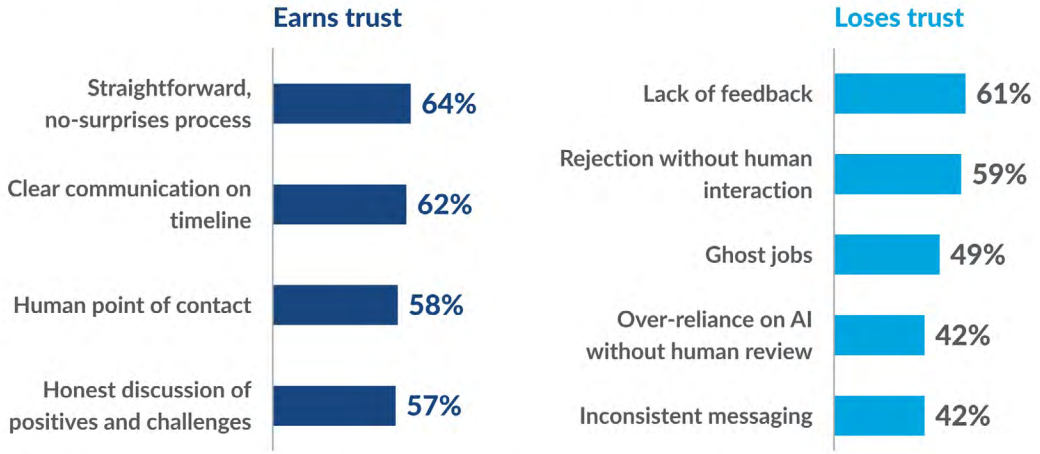
Candidates are specific about what earns and harms their trust.

Figure 11: What Earns and Loses Candidate Trust



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=1,000 candidates)

How employers handle rejection matters to candidates. If they aren't selected, three in four (75%) want to hear as soon as possible, and 46% want to be considered for other roles. Asked what would leave them with a positive impression of a company that turned them down, 65% point to a clear reason they weren't selected, and 57% to a timely response.

17% of candidates say they use AI tools in their own job search today, which is low by every metric we've seen from applicant tracking system providers that can see resume similarity in submissions and across applicant pools.

75%

If they aren't selected, three in four (75%) want to hear as soon as possible, and 46% want to be considered for other roles.

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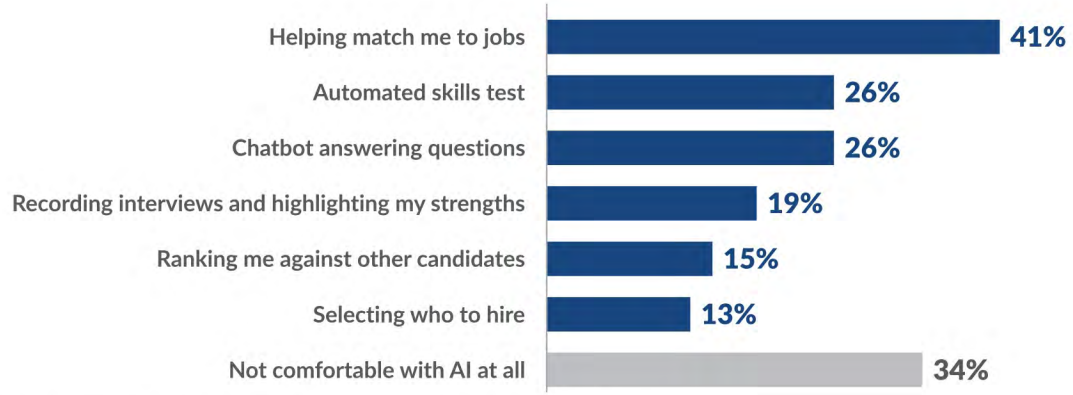
Candidates are wary of how employers use AI.

Candidates are wary of how employers use AI. Two-thirds (67%) trust AI less than a person, or not at all, to make fair hiring decisions. They're most comfortable with AI that matches them to jobs (41%) and least comfortable with AI choosing who gets hired (13%). If AI is used to evaluate them, they expect:

- The option to request a human review (45%)
- Being told that AI was involved (41%)
- An explanation of the decision (32%)

Figure 12: Where Candidates Are Comfortable with Employers Using AI



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=1,000 candidates)

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Candidate Experiments: Preferences and Priorities

We didn't just ask candidates what they wanted. We also showed them real examples and asked them to choose.

We didn't just ask candidates what they wanted. We also showed them real examples and asked them to choose. We ran three experiments. In them, each candidate saw several versions of the same job posting, AI disclosure, or rejection notice and picked the one they preferred.

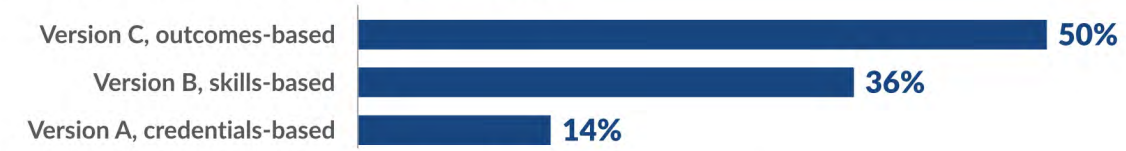
Experiment 1: How Job Postings Describe Requirements

We showed candidates three versions of a job posting. Each described the requirements for the role differently:

- **Version A** asked for credentials: a bachelor's degree, five years of experience in a similar role, and a proven track record in comparable environments.
- **Version B** asked candidates to prove their skills: no degree required, but a portfolio or work sample and a graded task related to the job.
- **Version C** described what success looks like: what the new hire would learn in the first 30 days, the measurable impact expected by 90 days, and a note that success is judged on outcomes, not hours.

Half of candidates (50%) preferred Version C, the outcomes-based posting. 36% chose the skills-based version (B), and just 14% chose the credentials-based one (A).

Experiment 1: Preferred Job Posting



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=1,000 candidates)

This lines up with what employers told us about resumes. Employers increasingly trust signals other than credentials, and candidates respond better to postings that move away from them too.

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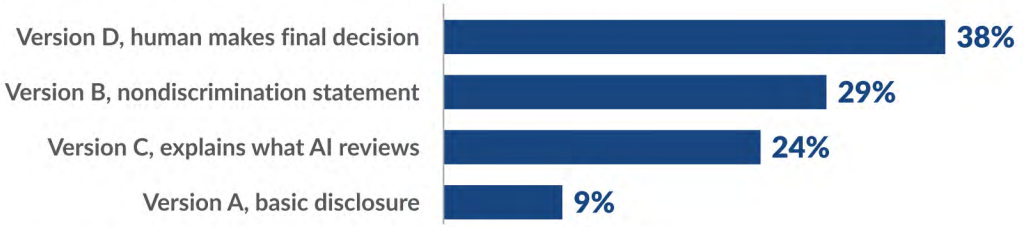
Experiment 2: How Employers Disclose AI Use

Next, we showed candidates four versions of a notice about AI use in screening. Each one ended with a button to consent and apply:

- **Version A** said only that the process uses automated tools to support application screening.
- **Version B** added that those tools don't evaluate candidates on age, gender, race, ethnicity, disability status, or other protected characteristics.
- **Version C** explained that AI tools review application information for relevant skills and experience, and don't make final hiring decisions.
- **Version D** said that automated tools assist with screening and ranking, and that a human reviewer makes the final decision.

The version that named a human reviewer (D) came out on top, chosen by 38% of candidates. 29% preferred the version with the nondiscrimination statement, and 24% preferred the one explaining what the AI reviews. The bare disclosure made only 9% of candidates most comfortable applying.

Experiment 2: Preferred AI Disclosure Notice



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=1,000 candidates)

This matches what candidates told us elsewhere in the survey. Only 13% are comfortable with AI choosing who gets hired. If AI is used to evaluate them, 45% expect the option of a human review.

38%

The version that named a human reviewer (D) came out on top, chosen by 38% of candidates.

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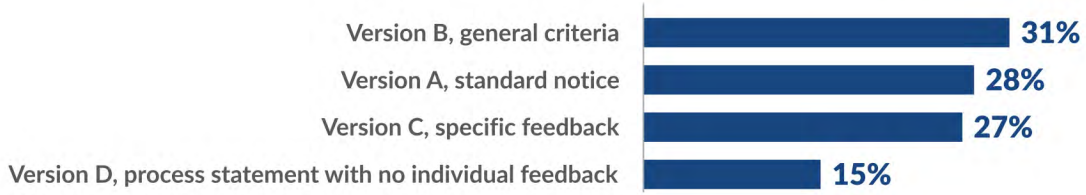
Experiment 3: How Rejection Notices Are Worded

Finally, we showed candidates four rejection notices and asked which would make them more likely to apply to the same company again:

- **Version A** was a standard notice: after careful review, the company is moving forward with other candidates.
- **Version B** named the general criteria: other candidates were a closer match on role-specific skills, experience, or team needs.
- **Version C** gave specific feedback: the company prioritized candidates with stronger experience in a particular skill, and developing that skill would strengthen future applications.
- **Version D** described the process: candidates were evaluated on the same job-related criteria, but individual feedback isn't available.

No single hiring ad stood out. Versions B (31%), A (28%), and C (27%) finished within four points of each other. The process-focused notice, which said no individual feedback was available, trailed well behind at 15%.

Experiment 3: Rejection Notice That Most Encourages Reapplying



Source: 2026 Lighthouse Research & Advisory Talent Acquisition Trends Study (n=1,000 candidates)

The result for Version C stands out. Elsewhere in the survey, 65% of candidates said a clear reason for a rejection would leave them with a positive impression of the company. In this experiment, though, the notice with the most specific reason did no better than the standard one.

15%

The process-focused notice, which said no individual feedback was available, trailed well behind at 15%.

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Closing Summary and Key Takeaways

What This Means for Talent Leaders

The 2026 data describes a hiring system where speed has outrun judgment. Applications and AI tools have multiplied, while the human steps that build trust (feedback, calibration, personalized communication) are the first to go when capacity tightens. Employers say they trust resumes yet keep hiring people who don't match them. Candidates and employers each assume the other is exaggerating. Both sides want faster hiring, and neither is getting better outcomes from it.

Three forces drive most of this. Volume grows while capacity stays flat. AI saves hours, but oversight work and the existing backlog absorb them. And the resume has become less reliable as a signal just as AI floods the pipeline with polished, similar-looking submissions.

Employers that win will use AI, but they will use it carefully, deliberately, and always in conjunction with the human element that makes hiring work. Successful talent acquisition practices are both art and science, and the organizations that outhire the competition will do so by playing to the strengths AI and humans bring to the table.

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Key Recommendations for Talent Leaders

1. **Application volume doesn't measure hiring success; test a new screening approach.** Selecting the most capable candidate is the top hiring priority for 62% of employers. Pick one or two high-volume roles and pair a skills assessment or work sample with a structured interview, with scoring criteria agreed before anyone is evaluated. Keep the early steps short, since most candidates prioritize an easy application, and consider outcomes-based job postings, which half of candidates preferred.
2. **Time saved by AI gets wasted unless someone owns it.** Employers plan to spend AI time savings on candidate experience (57%), but 80% cut at least one activity last year because they lacked capacity. Freed-up hours go to whatever work is already waiting unless someone owns candidate communication, a response standard is set, and a metric tracks it. A proactive approach wins here.
3. **Missing feedback does the most damage to candidate trust.** Feedback loops were cut more often than any other activity (34%), and employers and candidates both name lack of feedback as the top reason candidates lose trust. 75% of candidates want to hear as soon as possible if they aren't selected, and 65% say a clear reason would leave them with a positive impression of the company. Automated status updates and rejection notices can provide both, with people still making the selection decisions.
4. **AI that ranks or filters candidates needs the same oversight as AI that decides.** A ranked shortlist shapes the outcome even when a person makes the final call, yet only one in five organizations audits its AI use in hiring. Candidates expect openness: if AI is used to evaluate them, 41% expect to be told, and 45% expect the option of a human review. Document how each tool works, assign an owner, and test results before a regulator or rejected candidate asks. Tell candidates when AI is involved, name the human reviewer in the disclosure, and offer a path to human review.
5. **Moving beyond the resume requires shared evaluation standards.** Most employers (64%) have hired someone who didn't match their resume, and 58% trust skills or work-based assessments more than resumes. 44% say clear internal standards would help them most. Interviewers also need to know what candidates are using: only 15% of employers could accurately identify the AI use cases on the candidate side of the equation.

About the Authors



Ben Eubanks is the Chief Research Officer at Lighthouse, providing trusted advice for today's modern talent leaders. Prior to joining Lighthouse, Ben worked as a research analyst and an executive practitioner. His analyst work focused on learning, talent acquisition, and talent management. During his career, he has published more than 100 pieces of research and provided advisory services to executives from some of the largest and most respected organizations in the world.

Unlike most analysts, he also has hands-on experience working as an HR executive, leading both strategic and tactical talent practices. Ben is the host of We're Only Human, a podcast focused on the intersection of people, technology, and the workplace. In addition, he runs upstartHR.com, a website serving HR leaders that has reached more than 1,000,000 readers since its inception.

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Roberta Gogos is a HR Industry Go-to-market Leader and Lighthouse Research and Advisory Analyst. She has been behind the scenes at market-leading companies to help them shift market narrative, influence buyer behavior and expand into new markets. She is known for her ability to turn strategic vision into measurable execution through positioning, storytelling, and operational rigor.

Since 2024, Roberta has been focused on industry research used by investors, corporates and vendors to assess technologies and inform M&A decisions, improve GTM, enable sales, inform product development, and develop thought leadership.

Nearly 20 years of experience in marketing, positioning, and strategy, with 10+ years of that being directly related to talent and the workforce.

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About Lighthouse Research & Advisory

Lighthouse Research & Advisory is a modern analyst firm dedicated to setting the standard for excellence in talent, learning, and HR. By providing compelling research and actionable insights for business leaders, our team's mission is to navigate the rapidly changing field of human capital management to support today's talent and learning functions.

Our advisory, research, content, events, HR Awards Program, and other offerings serve tens of thousands of employers across the globe every year.

Find out more about LHRA

Put simply: our goal is to chart a new course for talent. We do this with compelling research, innovative ideas, and a strong grasp of the current state of talent and technology at work. We have supported hundreds of organizations with our research, advisory, and insights since our beginning in 2016. In addition, our data also inform key product and strategy decisions at the industry's leading technology and service providers.