

2026

Job Seeker Nation Report

Why More Candidates Are Pressing Pause

How a breakdown in trust is slowing the job market—and raising the bar for hiring teams.



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Executive Summary

For the past few years, the job market has been defined by the “Great Stay.” Candidates said they were satisfied with their current job—but still open to new opportunities. This year, that changed.

Openness to new opportunities dropped for the first time in three years (down to 43%), and the share of candidates actively looking fell from 42% to 35%. This is the shift from the “Great Stay” to what Employ is calling the “Great Pause.”

So, what’s driving it?

Yes, the job search is taking longer. It’s harder to land interviews. And it’s exhausting. But what really came through this year is something deeper: **trust is breaking down.**

More than half of candidates (53%) say they’ve encountered a job posting they believed was a scam. Others (34%) feel like they’re being filtered out by AI. And many (32%) say they’ve been ghosted, knocking their confidence about hearing back.

At the same time, a second trend is becoming more clear: **generational differences are starting to shape the job search in more meaningful ways.**

As Millennials and Gen Z make up a larger share of the workforce, their expectations are becoming the baseline. They’re more likely to prefer remote (23%) or hybrid (30%) work models, more likely to have concerns about AI-driven rejections (46%), and more likely to leave a job early if it doesn’t match expectations (27%).

These aren’t just trends—they’re signals of where hiring is headed, and what employers need to be thinking about next.

This year’s Job Seeker Nation report explores what’s driving these shifts, how they’re changing candidate behaviors, and what it takes to turn candidate interest into hires.

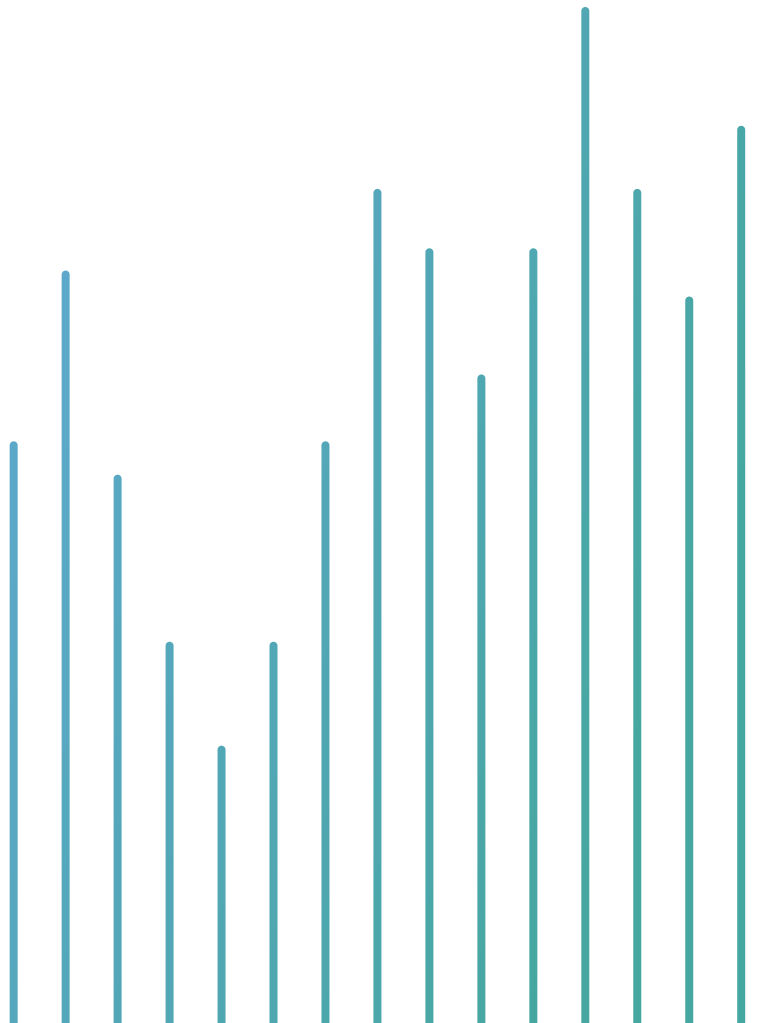
The TL; DR?

In a “paused” market, building trust and meeting candidates where they are isn’t optional—it’s your differentiator.

Let’s get into it!

1

From Open To Closed: Why Candidates Are Hitting Pause



Introducing The “Great Pause”

💡 Key Finding:

After two years of high job satisfaction paired with strong openness to new opportunities, 2026 marks a clear shift: candidates aren’t just staying in their roles—**they’re stepping back from the job market altogether.**

Over the past six years, the labor market has seen some pretty drastic shifts.

In mid-2020 and early 2021, millions of people started leaving their jobs each month, kicking off what became known as the “Great Resignation.”

But by mid-2023, the pendulum started to swing back again. Hiring slowed, layoffs picked up, and the market got tighter, ushering what many called “The Great Stay.”

We’ve watched this shift play out in real time in our job seeker data. Over the past two years, job satisfaction has been high and rising. But at the same time, candidates have remained very open to new opportunities, with many actively looking for their next role.

This year, things started to change. While satisfaction continued to tick up (48% in 2025 to 51% in 2026), openness to new opportunities dropped for the first time in three years (from 46% to 43%). And after climbing last year, the share of candidates actively job hunting fell sharply from 42% to 35%.

Unlike the past two years, people aren't just staying at their job; they're stepping back from the job market altogether. You could call it the next phase of the “Great Stay.” Or you could call it something more reflective of what's actually happening: the “Great Pause.” Candidates aren’t just cautious anymore; they’re closed off.



What's Driving This Shift?

💡 Key Finding:

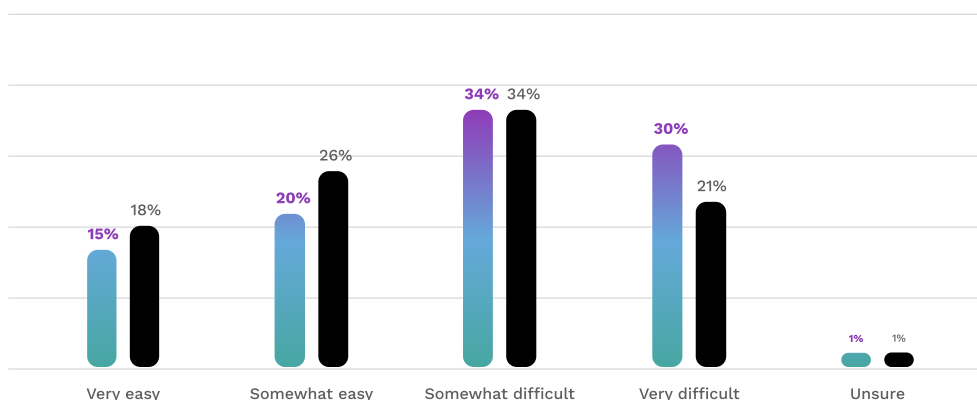
As job searches get longer and interviews become less consistent, candidates are losing confidence in their ability to land a new role **—and the motivation to pursue one at all.**

This shift—from being open to new roles to being more closed off—isn't happening in a vacuum. It reflects how candidates are experiencing the job market today. And this year's data tells us it feels harder than ever to land a new job, making people less willing to risk leaving the one they already have. You can see this come to life in a few ways.

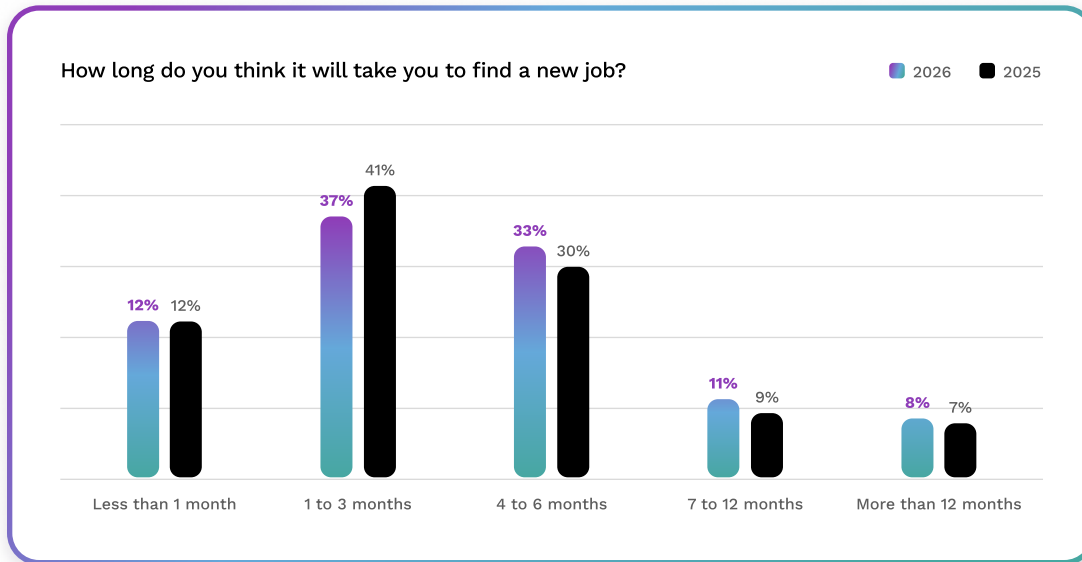
First, in how candidates perceive the market. Compared to last year, fewer respondents said they think the current market favors candidates (47%, down from 56% last year). That sentiment also shows up in how difficult the search feels. The share of job seekers who say finding a new role is “very difficult” jumped from 21% to 30%, while those saying it’s “somewhat easy” or “very easy” both declined.

How easy do you think it is to find a job in the current labor market?

■ 2026 ■ 2025



But it's not just perception—the difficulty is playing out in real outcomes. Fewer candidates expect to land a role within 1–3 months, while more now anticipate a search that stretches to six months or longer.



When you put these findings together, the picture is clear: the job search feels slower, less predictable, and harder to make progress. And that's changing behavior. Most candidates are playing it safe: 62% of active job seekers, and 74% of non-active job seekers say they wouldn't leave their current role without another job lined up.

And that's exactly what's driving the "Great Pause." When the job search feels this difficult, candidates don't just stay—they step back and stop looking altogether.



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Candidates may be more closed off, but it's not because they don't want to make a change. It's about their perceived ability to do so. When the job search feels harder to navigate, less predictable, and riskier than it used to, confidence drops—and so does the willingness to try. That's what we're seeing in the data.”

[Stephanie Manzelli](#)

Chief People Officer, Employ

What To Do About It

In a more cautious market, risk aversion is shaping how candidates evaluate every opportunity. That means hiring teams need to do more than present a role—they need to actively reduce uncertainty and make it easier for candidates to say “yes.”

> Give candidates a reason to act.

Be specific about stability, growth, and team culture. Vague enthusiasm won't move risk-averse candidates.

> Reduce uncertainty.

Clear timelines, steps, and expectations bring confidence in an unpredictable market.

> Move faster where it matters.

Speed signals decisiveness and keeps candidates from losing confidence.

> Quality > volume.

Targeted outreach to well-matched candidates—with a compelling pitch—beats volume in risk-averse markets.

> Look inward.

Fifty-one percent of workers have already looked internally for a new role—ensure those pathways are visible and accessible to your current workforce.



2 Job Search Motivations

Who Leaves A Job And Why?

💡 Key Finding:

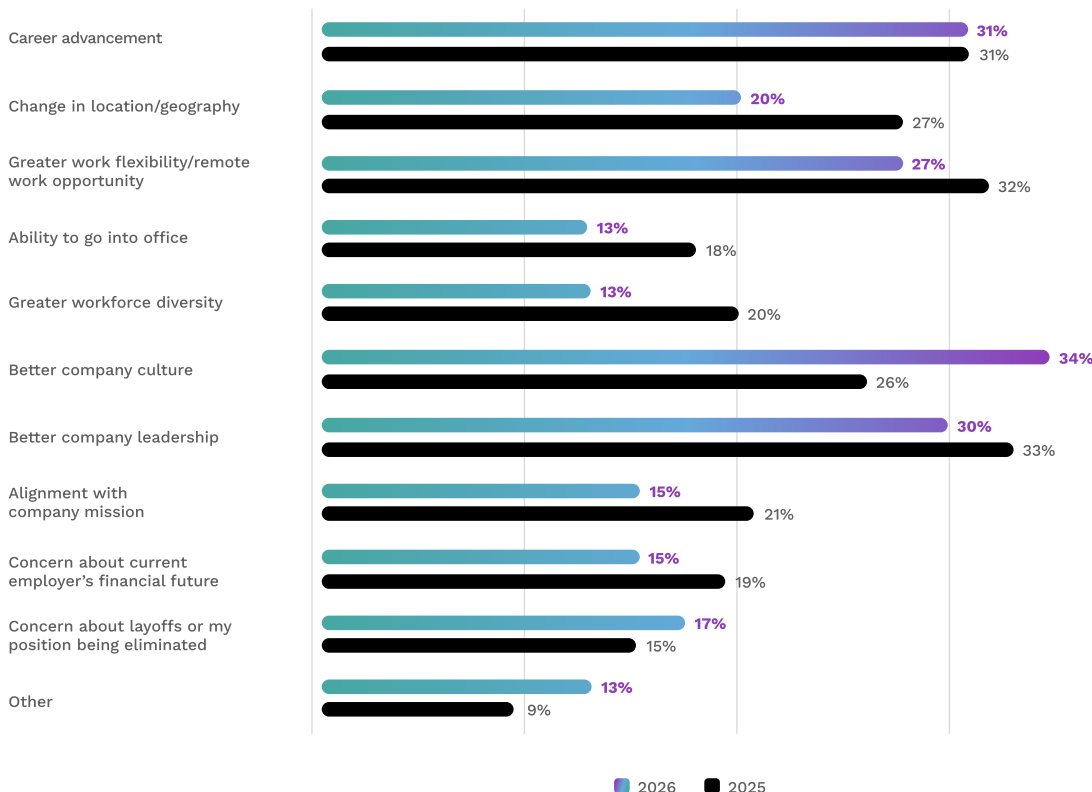
Fewer candidates are leaving their jobs—but when they do, it's driven by core gaps in culture, leadership, and growth.

And Gen Z is driving most of that movement.

We've already established that fewer candidates are open to new opportunities or actively looking. So, it's not surprising that fewer people are leaving their jobs, too. In the past 12 months, just 16% of workers reported leaving a role, down from 18% last year—another signal that the “Great Stay” (and now the “Great Pause”) is holding.

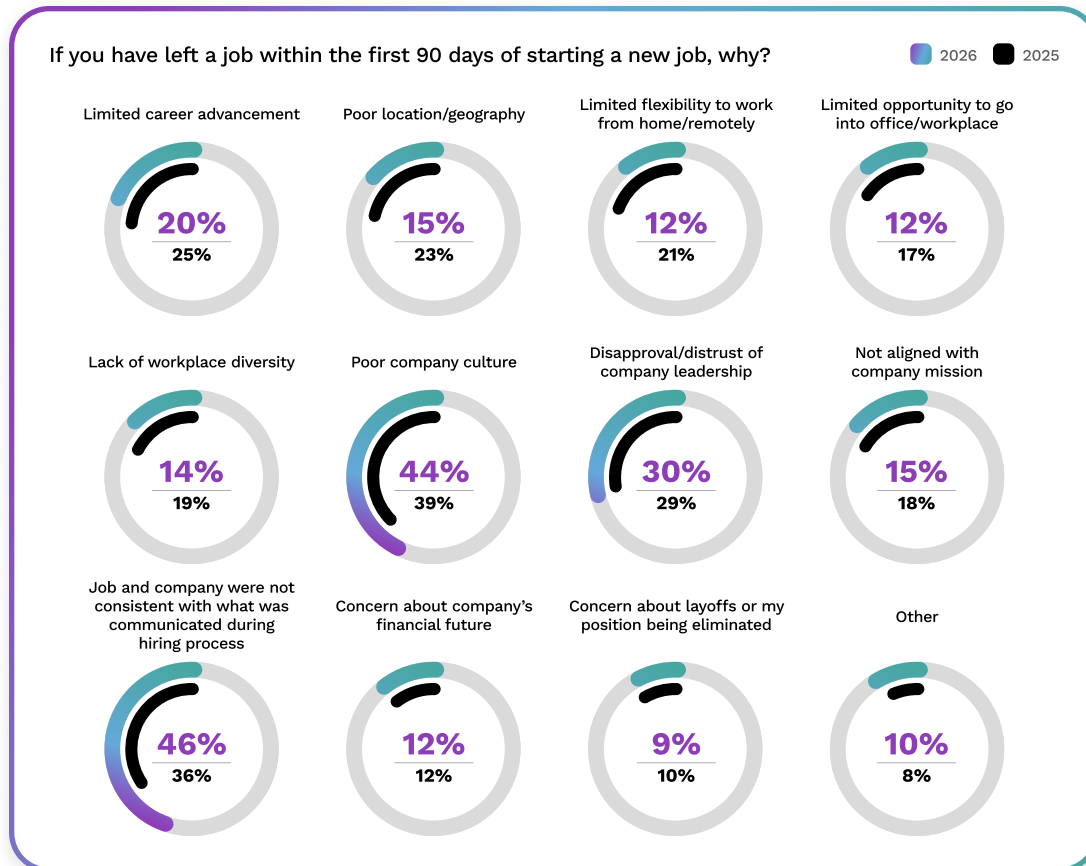
But the market isn't completely frozen, and some candidates are still making moves. Aside from compensation, the top three reasons for leaving include better company culture (34%, up 8 points), career advancement (31%), and better company leadership (30%). In other words, people aren't leaving on a whim—they're leaving when something important is missing.

Other than compensation, why did you leave your role in the last 12 months?



And sometimes, those gaps show up fast. About a quarter of workers say they've left a job within the first 90 days—a number that hasn't changed year over year. The biggest driver? A mismatch between what was promised during the hiring process and the reality of the role (46%, up 10 points).

Outside this mismatch, the reasons someone leaves in the first 90 days are the same as why someone leaves after a year: poor culture (44%, up 5 points), disapproval/distrust of leadership (30%), and limited career advancement (20%). When candidates do decide to make a move, it's driven by the same core issues—and those issues show up early and stick.



“

What stands out is that the reasons people leave after 90 days are the same as the reasons they leave after a year. That tells us these aren't issues that develop over time—they show up early and persist. For employers, that's a clear signal: the first 90 days aren't just onboarding. They're where the employee experience is defined, and where retention is either built or broken.”



Joey Price
President & CEO, Jumpstart HR

The Generational Divide: Turnover Trends

Gen Z reports the highest rate of voluntary turnover in the last 12 months (26%), followed by Millennials (17%) and Gen X (12%). They're also the most likely to leave early, with 27% saying they've left a role within the first 90 days.

Much of this comes down to their career stage. Many Gen Z workers are still figuring out the roles, companies, and paths—so more movement is expected, especially when expectations don't match reality.

In contrast, Millennials and Gen X are further along, more settled, and more selective—clearer on what they want and more likely to stay when they find it.

What Candidates Are Looking For Next

💡 Key Finding:

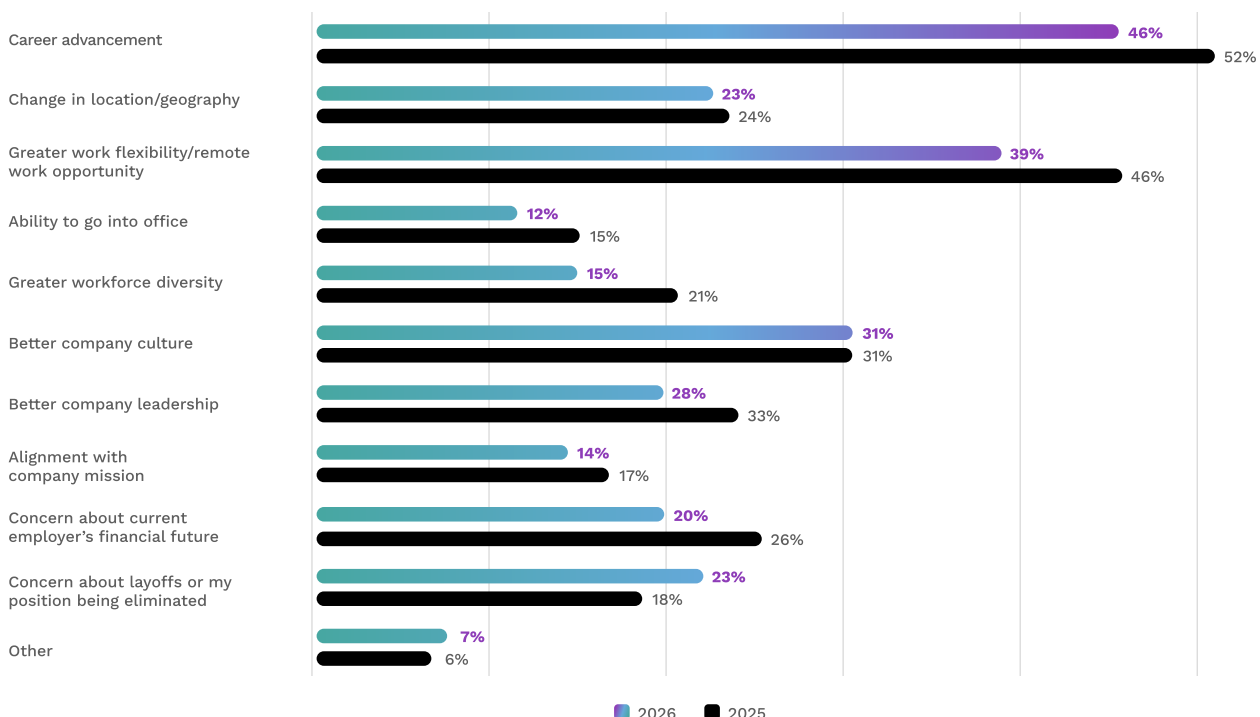
Candidates look for the same things that make them leave—better culture, leadership, and growth—but flexibility is what gets them to take action. **And for younger generations, it's not a perk—it's the baseline.**

When candidates start thinking about their next move, they're not starting from scratch—they're thinking about what's missing in their current role. That's why the reasons people leave a job are often the same ones that show up when they start looking—or consider looking.

Among active job seekers, the top reasons for looking are career advancement (46%), increased work flexibility/remote opportunities (39%), better company culture (31%), and better company leadership (28%). And even among those who aren't actively looking, the story is similar.

ACTIVE JOB SEEKERS

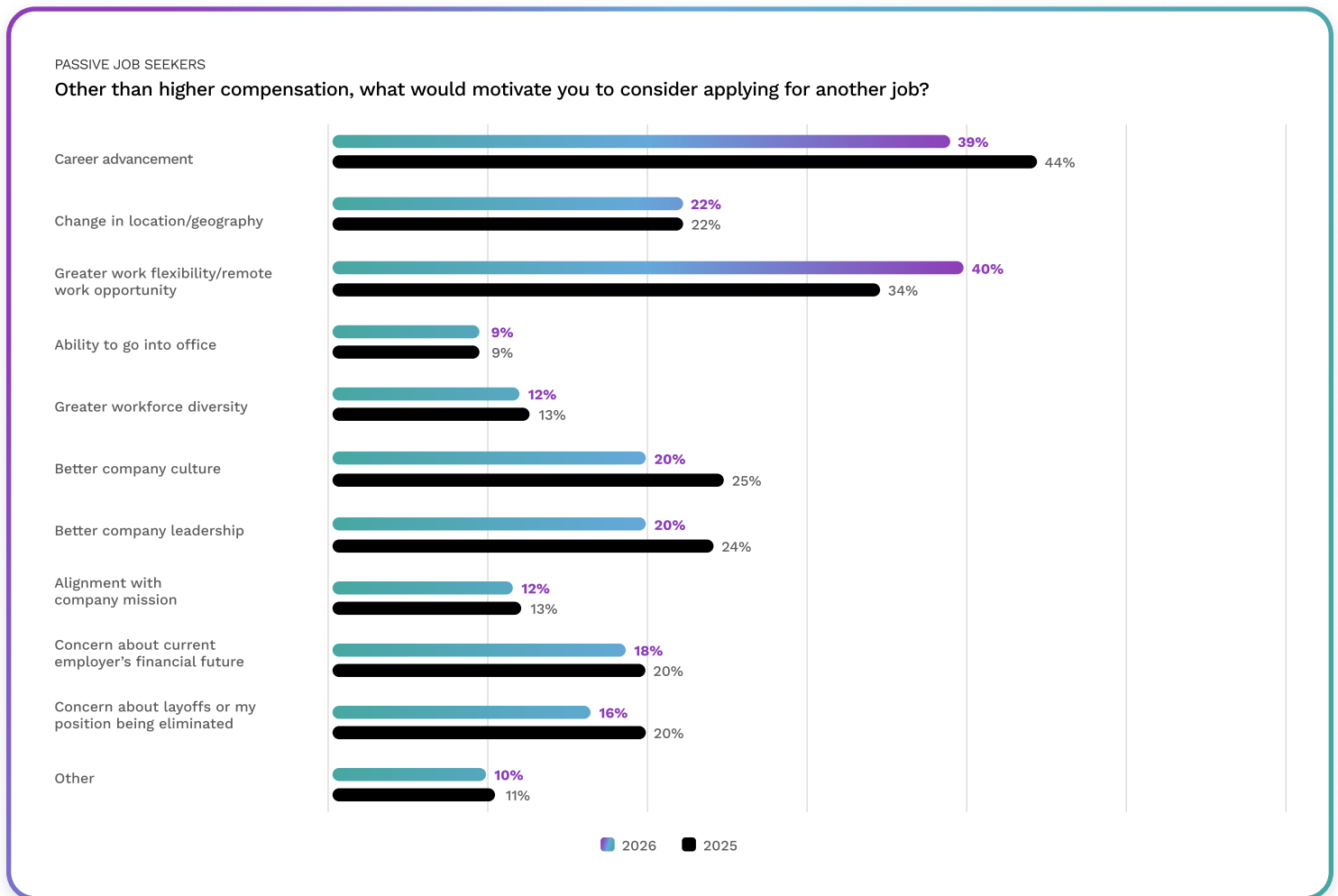
Other than higher compensation, why are you actively looking for a new job?



But there's one difference that stands out: flexibility.

While flexibility isn't a top reason people leave, it's one of the biggest factors in what gets them to look—or even consider looking in the first place. In fact, 63% of workers say flexibility is at least “somewhat important” when deciding whether to accept a job.

In a market where most workers aren't making a switch, offering remote and hybrid options can be a powerful way to motivate candidates to take that next step.



The Generational Divide: Flexibility Preferences

Gen X tends to be more split, with workers either preferring fully in-person (27%) or fully remote (26%) environments. In contrast, Gen Z and Millennials are more aligned. Both groups lean toward fully remote work (23%) or a hybrid model (30%).

A lot of this probably comes down to how each generation has experienced work. Many Gen X workers built their careers in primarily in-person environments, where remote work was limited or reserved for certain roles. For Gen Z, it's the opposite. They entered the workforce during or after the pandemic, when flexibility was already the norm.

What To Do About It

Candidates aren't guessing what they want next—they're reacting to what's missing now. Culture, leadership, and growth drive decisions, but flexibility is what ultimately gets candidates to start looking—and, in many cases, make a move.

So, in a market where most workers are hitting pause, the bar isn't just offering these things—it's defining them clearly, tailoring them accordingly, and delivering on them consistently.

> **Make growth tangible—not theoretical.**

Align on employees' short- and long-term goals and build clear development plans. For candidates, outline progression paths, timelines, and opportunities upfront.

> **Bring the role to life.**

During the hiring process, show how teams actually work day-to-day—meetings, communications, decision-making, leadership style. Close the gap between description and reality.

> **Treat flexibility as a core part of the offer, not a perk.**

Define what it looks like (remote, hybrid, schedule autonomy) so candidates can assess fit. If flexibility is limited, offer alternatives like predictable schedules or clear boundaries.

> **Continuously pressure-test the experience.**

Don't wait for exits. Use candidate feedback, new hire check-ins, and onboarding insights to spot and fix misalignment early.





The Job Search Experience

Using AI In The Job Search

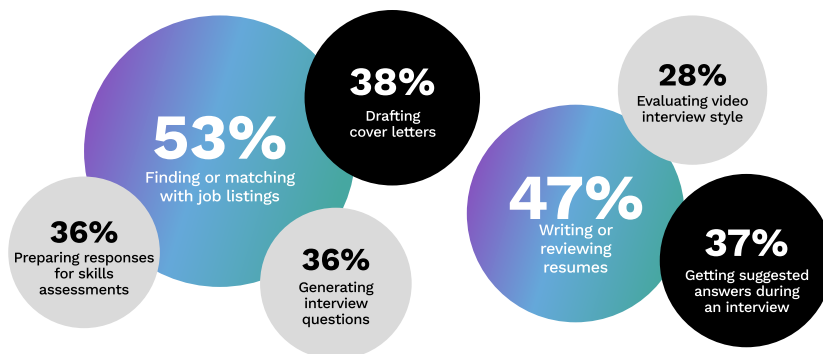
💡 Key Finding:

AI is becoming a practical tool in the job search—but adoption is more measured than expected, with **candidates using it selectively across the process** rather than fully embracing it end-to-end.

AI is increasingly part of the job search conversation, but adoption isn't as widespread as you might think. While it can feel like “everyone” is using AI, only 28% of candidates say they're actually using it to assist with their job search—a slight decrease of 3 points year over year.

For those who are using it, though, it's not limited to one part of the process. AI is showing up across the entire journey. Candidates are using it to find and match with relevant job listings (53%), write or review resumes (47%), draft cover letters (38%), and even prepare for interviews—whether that's generating questions (36%), prepping responses for skills assessments (36%), or getting suggested responses in real time (37%).

How do you use AI to help you in your job search?



There's also a generational split happening under the surface. Gen Z and Millennials are more likely to report using AI in their job search (38% and 34%, respectively), pointing to a higher level of comfort with younger generations.

And that makes sense. For younger candidates, AI has been part of the job search experience for a larger share of their careers. Older generations, on the other hand, built their careers without it—and are now adjusting to its role in the process.

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Today, companies want to hire candidates with AI skills, so banning its use across the hiring process isn't realistic. The question becomes: where do you draw the line? Using AI during the job search or to improve a resume should be expected. But if a candidate is relying on it for real-time interview answers, that's misrepresentation—and not a true reflection of who they are or how they actually work. That's why hiring teams need to define the boundaries—and make them clear to candidates—so AI use doesn't slip into fraud territory.”



Dara Brenner
Chief Product Officer, Employ

What The Job Search Feels Like

Key Finding:

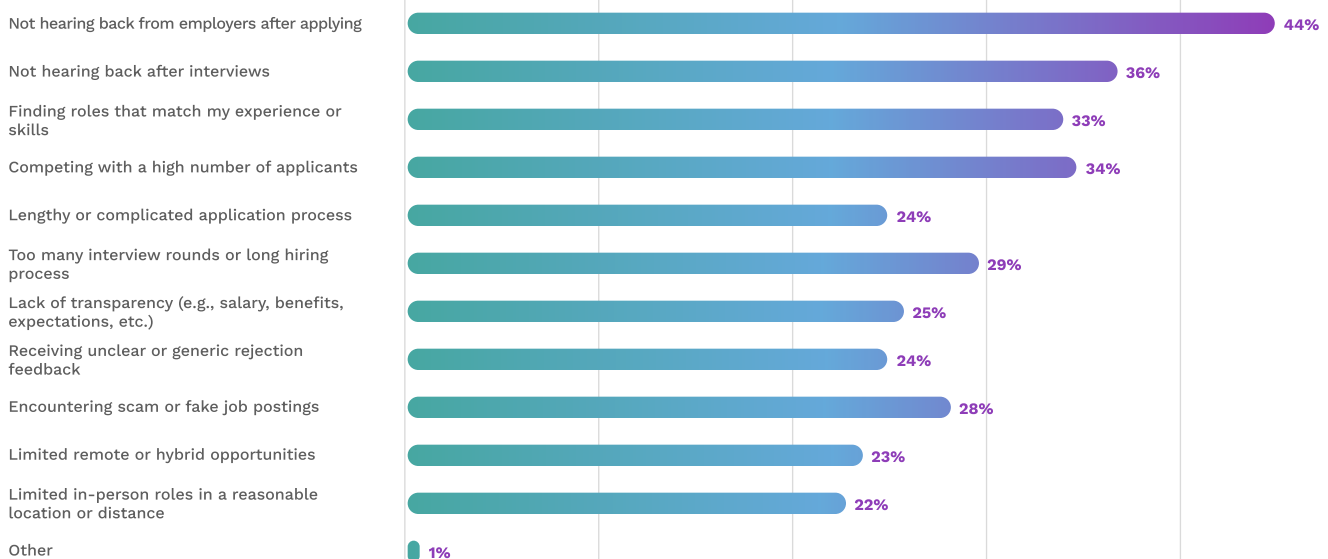
The job search is becoming more frustrating and less predictable, **driving higher burnout and eroding candidate trust.**

For many candidates, the job search is exhausting and getting worse. This year, 69% say they feel burned out from the job search, up from 66% from last year.

So, what's driving that burnout? A big part of it comes down to communication—or the lack of it. The most common challenge candidates face is not hearing back after applying (44%), followed closely by not hearing back after interviews (36%).

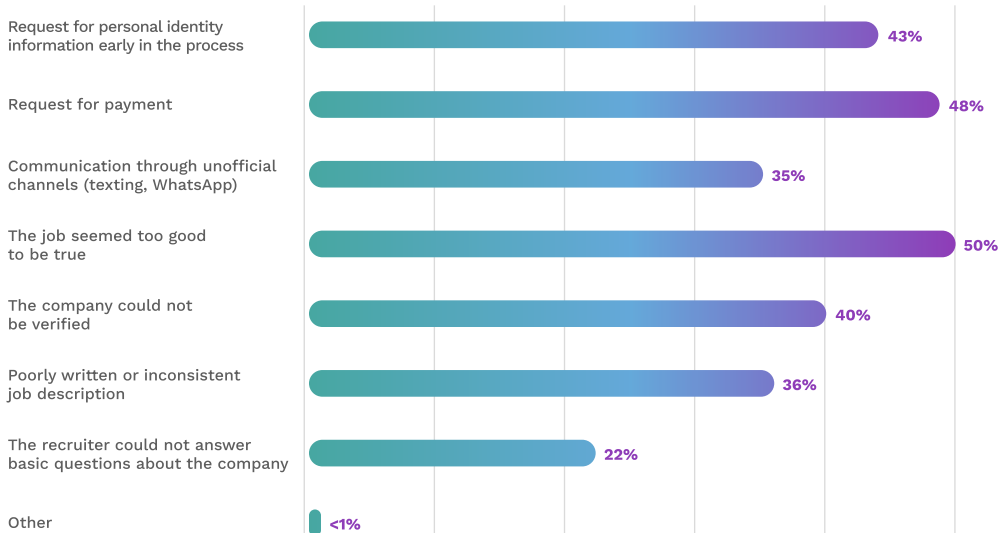
At the same time, the process is getting more competitive. After communication, more than a third (34%) say competing with a high number of applicants is one of their biggest challenges, making it harder to stand out and move forward.

What have been the biggest challenges in your job search?



And as the process becomes more exhausting, more competitive, and harder to break into, trust is starting to break down. More than half of candidates (53%) say they've come across a job posting they believed was a scam. The biggest red flags include roles that seem "too good to be true" (50%), requests for payment (48%), or being asked for personal identity information too early (43%).

If you encountered a scam job posting, what made it seem suspicious?



That erosion of trust has real consequences. As candidates become more risk-averse, small moments of friction can be enough to stop them from applying. Even standard parts of the process—like identity verification—can feel risky if they're introduced too early or without context.

How Comfortable Are Candidates With Verification?

💡 Key Finding:

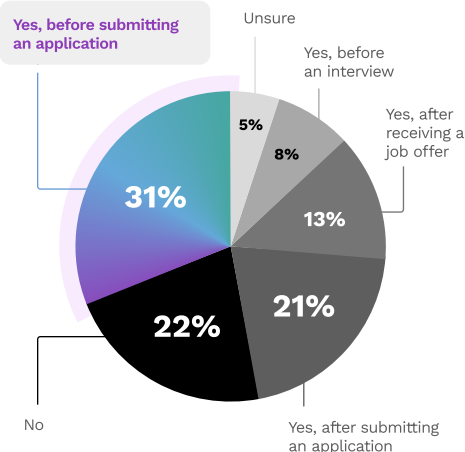
Candidates are generally comfortable with verification—but **when it happens too early or without context**, it creates friction and can undermine trust.

Candidates aren't opposed to identity verification—most are open to it. Half (50%) say they're "very comfortable," another 33% "somewhat comfortable," and only 8% would abandon an application if asked upfront.

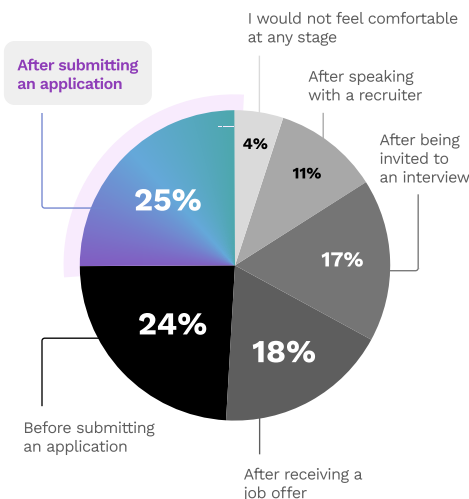
The challenge isn't willingness, it's timing. Many candidates are being asked to verify too early: 31% before even applying and 21% right after. Far fewer encounter it later in the process, such as before an interview (8%) or after an offer (13%).

But when you look at when candidates actually feel comfortable verifying their identity, the picture shifts. Comfort is more evenly spread across later stages—after applying, after speaking with a recruiter, or once they've progressed further in the process.

Have you ever been asked to verify your identity during the hiring process?



What is the earliest stage in the hiring process where you would feel comfortable verifying your identity?



There's a clear mismatch between when employers ask for verification and when candidates are comfortable providing it, creating unnecessary friction. And when introduced too early or without context, it can resemble the very scam signals candidates are trying to avoid.

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The data confirms what we're hearing from employers every day—candidates want a process they can trust, and employers need to know who they're actually hiring. Identity proofing at the right point in the hiring lifecycle solves both problems. It's not an extra step; it's the missing step that makes background checks, onboarding, and system access actually reliable.”



[Taylor Liggett](#)
Chief Growth Officer, ID.me

Application Expectations

💡 Key Finding:

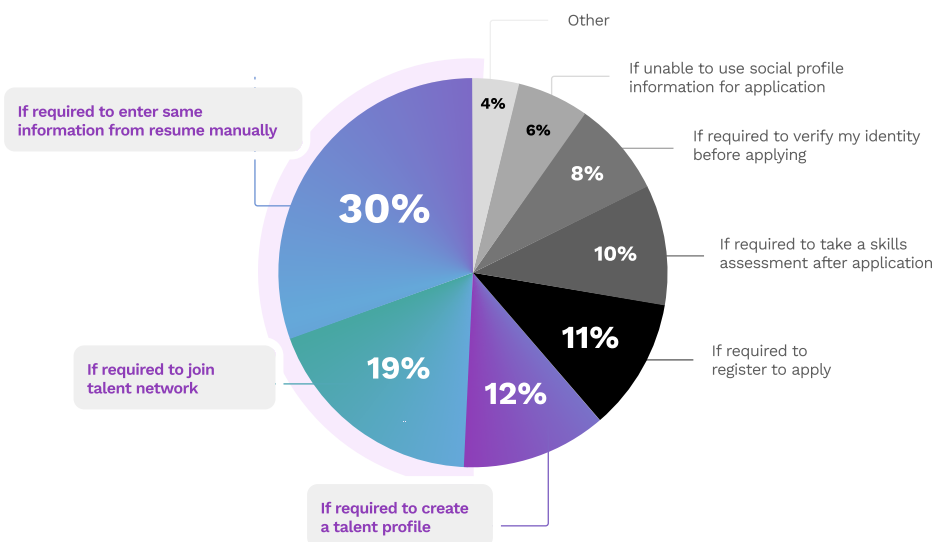
Candidates are willing to invest time in applications—**but only when it feels meaningful**. When it doesn't, even small friction leads to drop-off.

In an era like the “Great Pause,” where fewer candidates are switching jobs, we’ve already seen how trust and timing impact whether someone feels comfortable moving forward. But once a candidate decides to apply, the question becomes: what does that experience need to look like to keep them moving?

At a high level, candidates want it to be fast. Nearly 70% expect the application process to take less than 30 minutes, while only 9% expect it to take more than an hour.

And while most candidates say they wouldn’t abandon an application outright, friction still creates meaningful drop-off. About a third (33%) say they would jump ship if the process took too long—especially when they’re asked to re-enter information from a resume (30%), join a talent network (19%), or create a talent profile just to apply (12%).

At what point would you abandon an application?



These are the moments that feel repetitive and unnecessary—and where candidates start to disengage.

What To Do About It

In a market where candidates are more cautious and selective, every step of the process matters—and small moments of friction can have an outsized impact.

> Make the experience clear and predictable.

Set expectations upfront, communicate what's next, and follow through, so candidates aren't left guessing.

> Be intentional about where you ask for effort.

Candidates will invest time—but only if it feels worthwhile. Eliminate low-value friction and be thoughtful about when you introduce higher-effort steps.

> Build trust at every step.

Timing and context matter. Introduce sensitive asks (like verification) in a way that feels legitimate, not like a red flag.

> Give candidates control over their data.

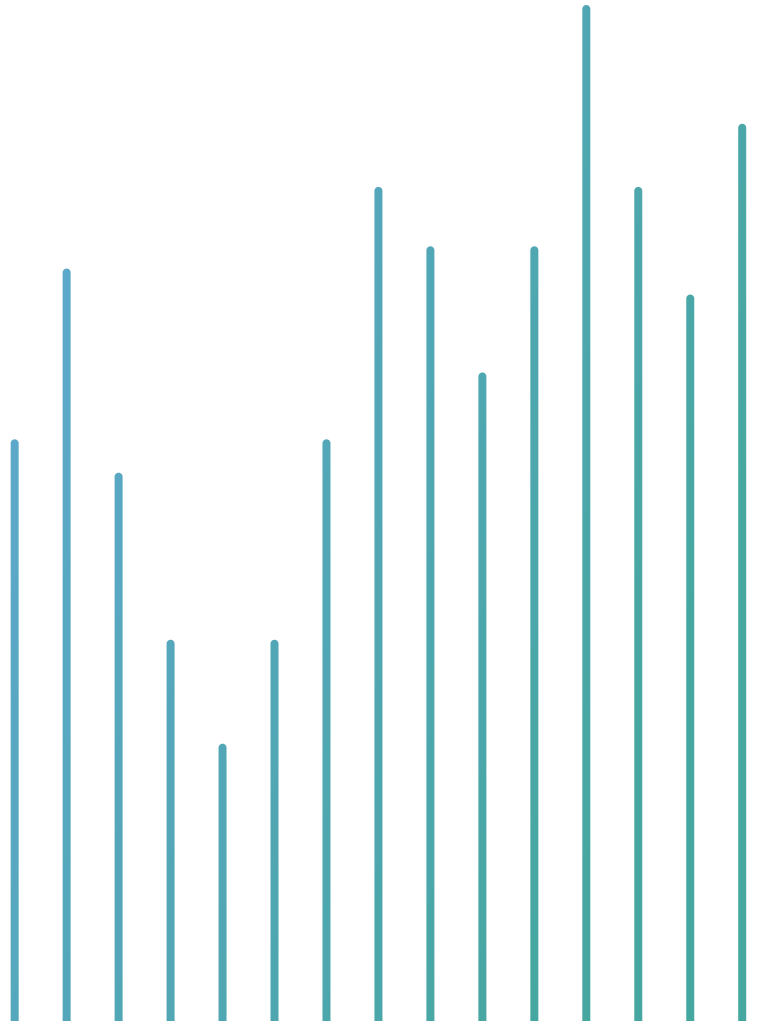
Enable secure sharing and clear consent to reinforce trust, especially when verification is involved.

> Set clear expectations around AI—and adapt.

Be clear on AI use and evaluate for thinking, communication, and problem-solving—not just polished outputs.



4 The Candidate Experience



What Actually Makes A Good Candidate Experience?

💡 Key Finding:

A smooth, easy process is undoubtedly still the foundation of a positive candidate experience but **transparency, personalization, and communication matter more than ever.**

The candidate experience can make or break whether organizations consistently attract top talent or struggle to source every time a new req opens. And as the job search demands more time and effort, candidates are raising the bar for what they expect once they've hit apply.

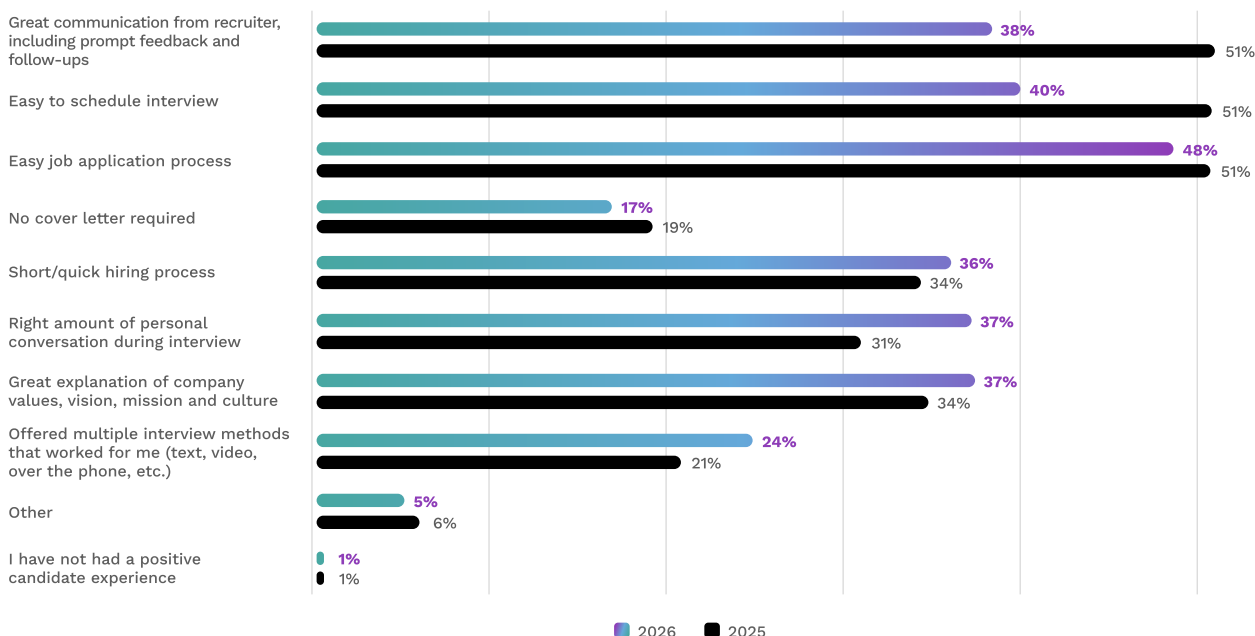
But what defines a “good” experience—and what just adds noise—is starting to shift. And teams need to pay attention, especially given that [candidate experience ratings remained flat from 2024 to 2025 at 2.9/5.](#)

So, what actually drives a positive candidate experience today?

TL;DR: Candidates want an easy experience.

48% of candidates cited an easy application process, while 40% pointed to easy interview scheduling as top factors shaping a positive experience.

If your most recent candidate experience was mostly positive, which were the reasons?



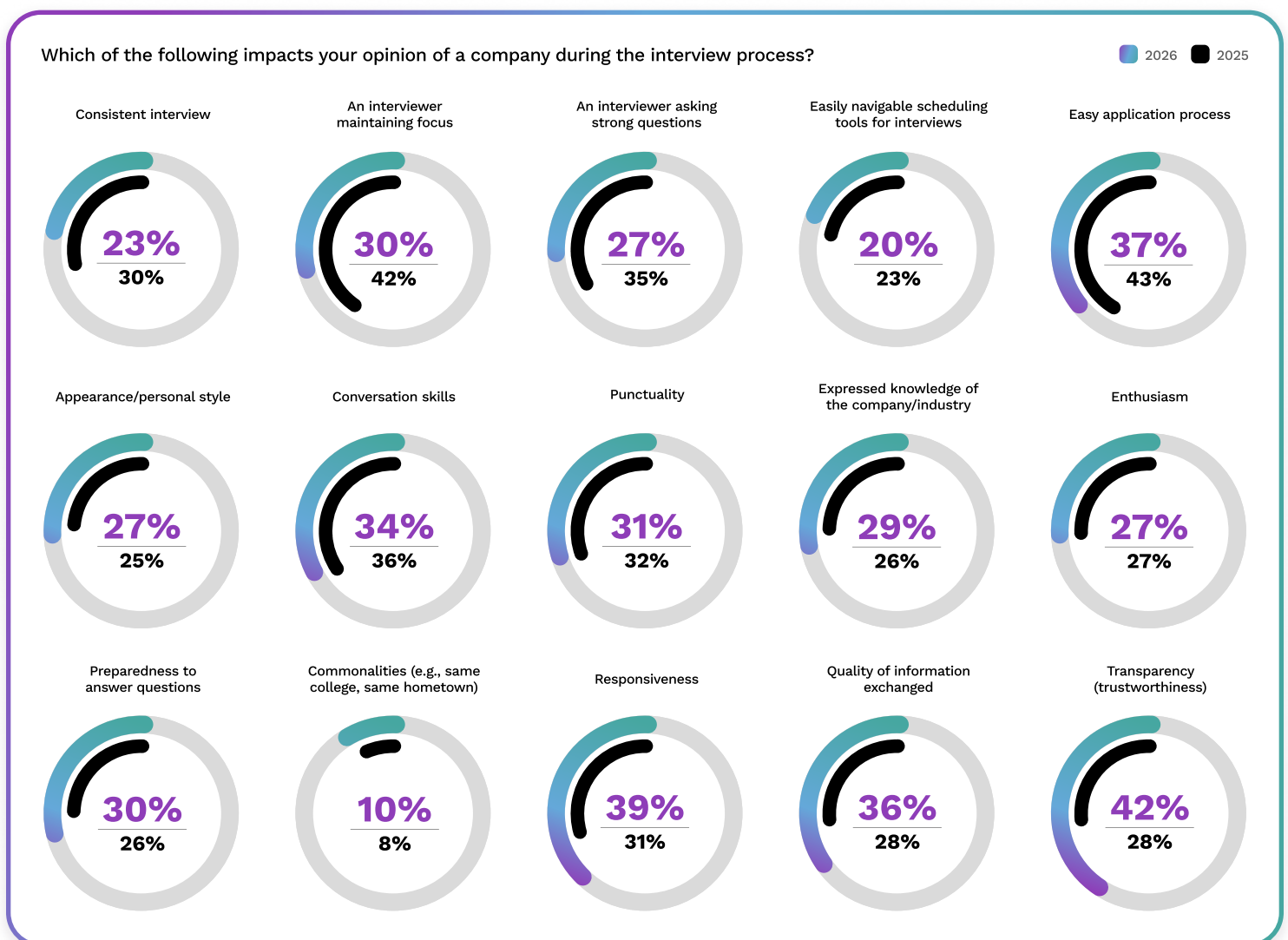
But the YoY movement tells us a more nuanced story. While ease and efficiency remains foundational to shaping an experience, other factors are gaining importance—including the length of the hiring process (36%, up from 34%), the right amount of personal conversation (37%, up from 31%), and clear explanations of company values (37%, up from 34%).

Together, these shifts point to a changing mindset. Candidates are increasingly evaluating their experience through the lens of personalization, communication, and transparency. In other words, they want connection.

But what creates a strong candidate experience doesn't always match what shapes a candidate's overall impression of a company.

This year's data makes that clear: a process can feel efficient on paper but still leave candidates with unanswered questions—and lingering doubts.

What's increasingly shaping perception isn't just speed, but how human the experience feels. Transparency (42%, up 14 points YoY), responsiveness (39%, up 8), and quality of information (36%, up 8) are all rising—signaling that in a world of Zoom calls, chatbots, and AI everything, candidates are paying closer attention to how clearly and authentically you communicate.



Who's Ghosting Who? When Communication Goes Quiet

💡 Key Finding:

The ghosting narrative is shifting as candidates report being left without updates more often than disappearing themselves.

Ghosts don't just exist in horror films. They're showing up in hiring too—and for candidates, it's becoming a real problem.

Because when communication disappears—on either side—so does trust. And in today's “paused” market, trust isn't a nice-to-have. It's what keeps candidates engaged in the first place.

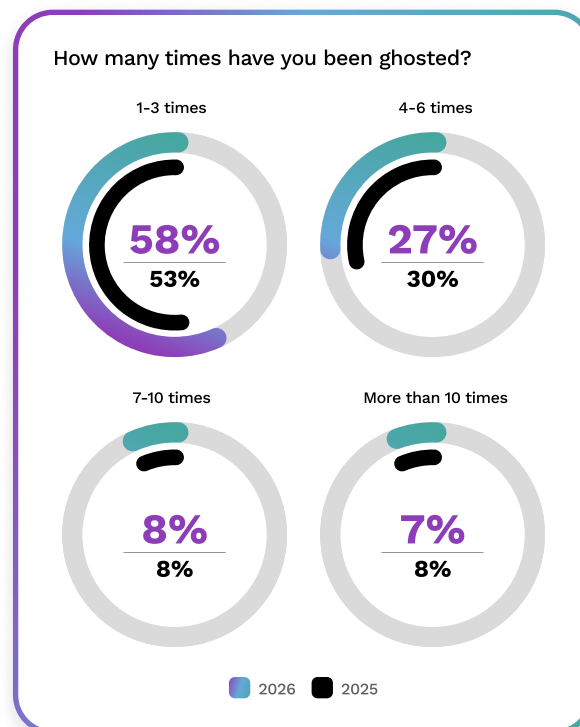
And candidates are feeling it: Reports of ghosting by hiring managers and recruiters are on the rise—32% of candidates experienced it this year (up from 30% in 2025), and 42% of them say it's happened more than three times.

This suggests ghosting isn't just an occasional breakdown—it's becoming a repeated experience for many candidates. And over time, that pattern can erode an employer brand, reduce engagement, and increase drop-off from qualified talent.

But it's often a symptom of a bigger issue. As AI-driven fraud and mass applications rise, teams are facing an **applicant avalanche**—more volume, more noise, and more time spent verifying candidates. When every req is flooded, consistent communication becomes harder to maintain.

On the flip side, only 14% of candidates report ghosting employers—suggesting most are staying engaged, even as timelines stretch.

The takeaway: communication gaps are shaping the candidate experience. And determining who stays in the process.



How Candidates Really Feel About AI In Hiring

💡 Key Finding:

Candidates are open to AI assisting in the hiring process—but **expect human oversight alongside it.**

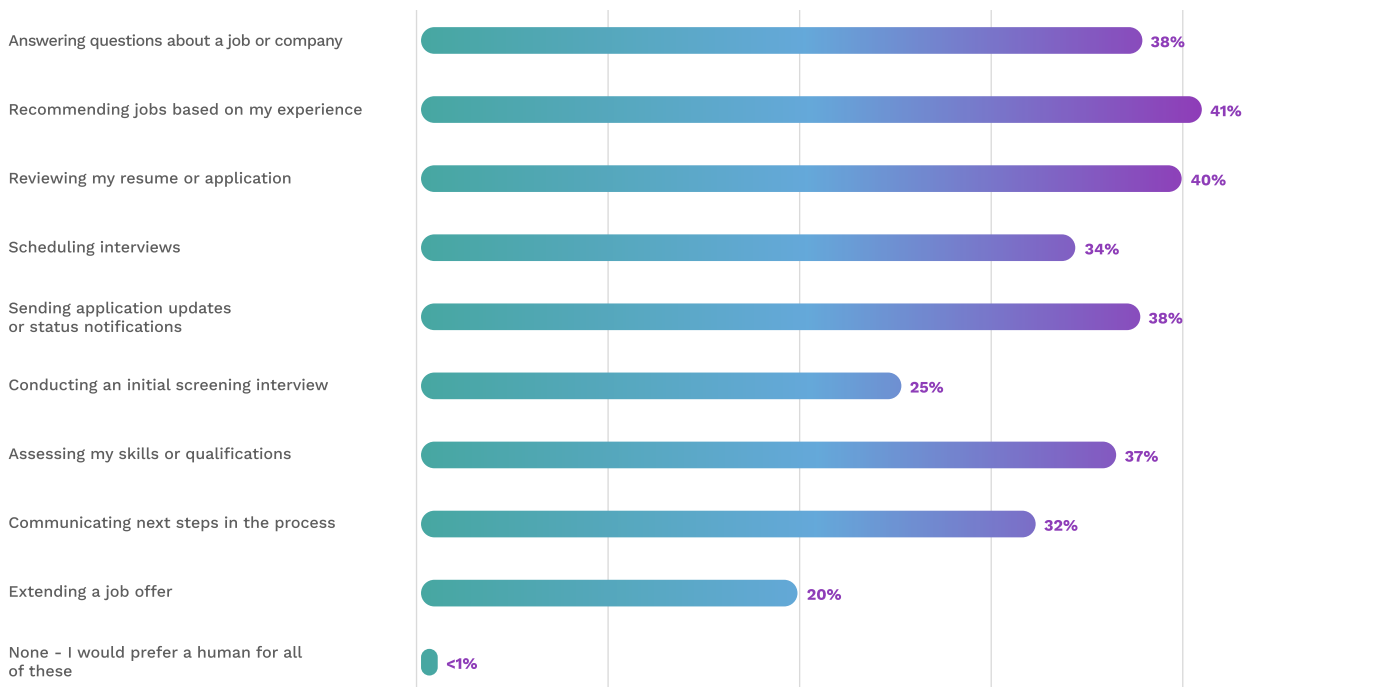
Not-so-hot take: AI is everywhere—and it's reshaping hiring fast. Creating efficiencies, redefining workflows, and raising new questions from candidates along the way.

What's clear from this year's data is that candidates are largely comfortable with AI assisting in the hiring process. In fact, 63% said they're comfortable with AI guiding them throughout the process.

But for candidates, not all AI use is created equal—especially when it starts shaping decisions. This year we saw a clear line in the sand between tasks candidates are happy to have automated and moments they feel still require a human touch.

Candidates are most comfortable with AI handling administrative or supportive tasks.

Which parts of the hiring process would you feel comfortable having AI handle instead of a recruiter?

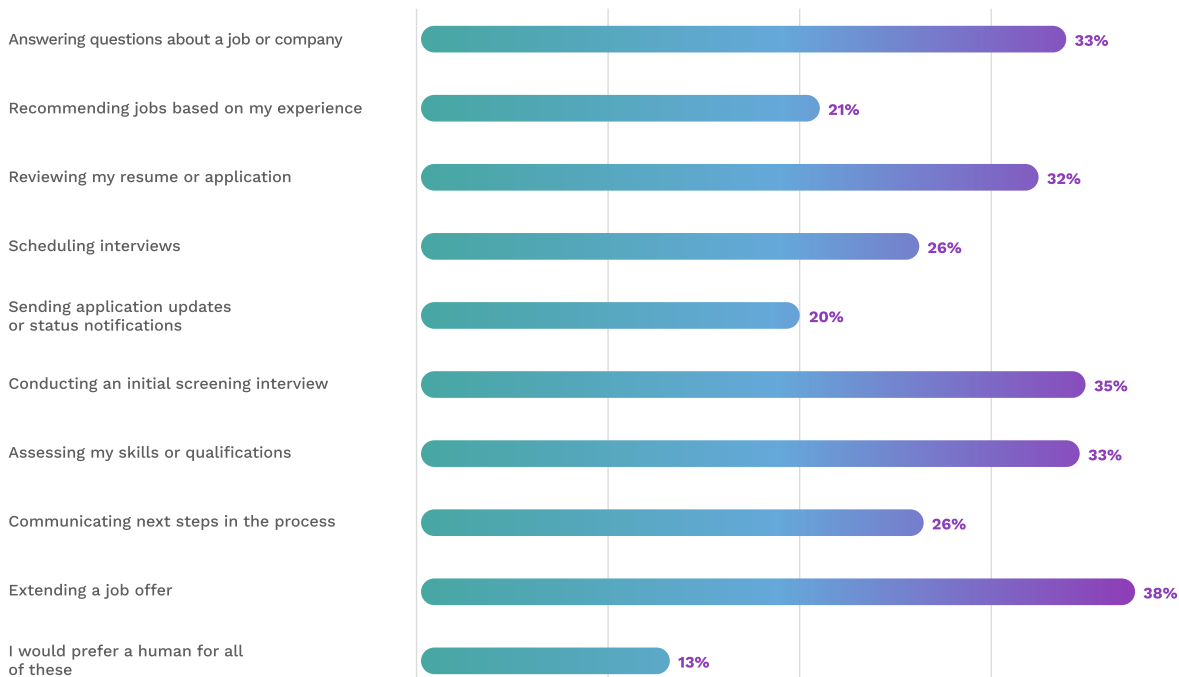


But when decisions feel higher stakes, preferences shift.

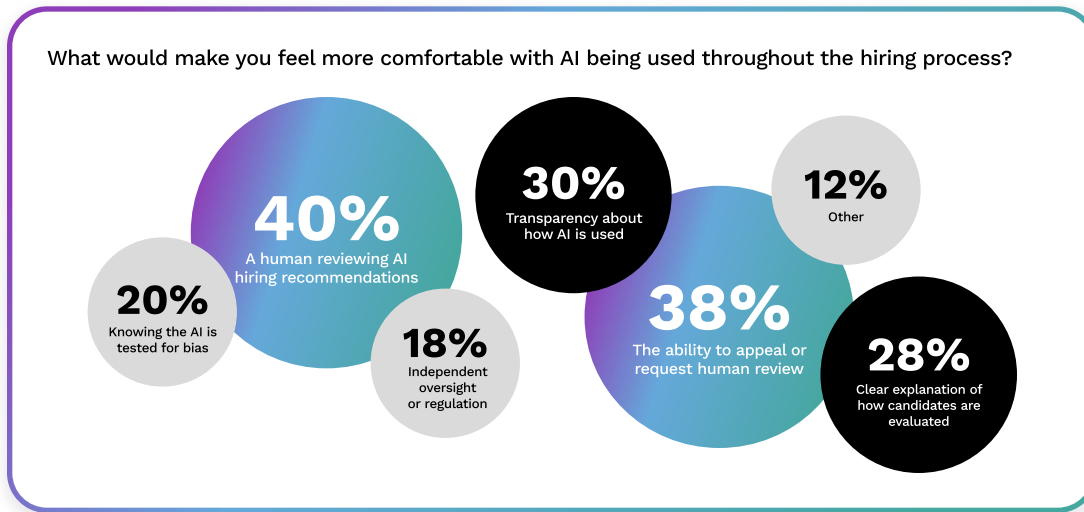
And that delineation makes sense—especially given that 34% of candidates believe they’ve been automatically rejected by AI, reinforcing ongoing trust concerns.

Taken together, it’s not resistance to AI—it’s a call for accountability.

Which parts of the hiring process would you prefer to be handled by a human (such as a recruiter or hiring manager)?



When asked what would make them more comfortable with AI in hiring, respondents largely pointed to human oversight.



In short: human oversight can't be tacked on, it has to be the core of your process.

And transparency is a big part of that. In fact, 91% of candidates say it's important for companies to be upfront about when and how AI is used (63% very important, 28% somewhat important).

As AI becomes a core part of hiring on both sides of the process, candidates want more than speed—they want clarity in how decisions are made, confidence in the outcome, and proof that a human is still in the loop where it matters most.

The Generational Divide: The AI Trust Gap

Here's where it gets interesting: younger generations are generally more comfortable with AI—but they're also more sensitive to how it's used in hiring decisions.

On one side, Baby Boomers are the most concerned about companies relying too heavily on AI, with 60% expressing concern, followed by Gen X at 49%. That concern drops among younger generations, with 40% of Millennials and 39% of Gen Z reporting the same.

But when it comes to feeling directly impacted, the trend flips. Younger candidates are far more likely to believe they've been automatically rejected by AI. Nearly half of Gen Z (46%) say they've experienced this, along with 38% of Millennials, compared to 28% for Gen X and just 15% for Baby Boomers.

This likely comes down to exposure. Younger generations work with AI more in their day-to-day lives—and their own application process. So they expect it to be used by hiring teams. But they're also much more tuned into how it can impact decisions if left unchecked.

What To Do About It

Ease and efficiency are still the baseline for a positive candidate experience—but it's not the bar anymore. Today's candidates expect personalization, communication, connection, and a hiring process they can trust. Especially if AI is involved.

> Scale fast but stay personal.

Use technology to tailor communication, deliver timely updates, and create relevant touchpoints.

> Set the roadmap early—and stick to it.

Be clear about timelines, interview stages, and how decisions will be made, then keep candidates in the loop every step of the way.

> Make the process feel human.

Balance speed with meaningful touchpoints, thoughtful interactions, and moments of connection that go beyond checkboxes.

> Use AI to support—not replace—human judgment.

Leverage AI to scale efficiency, while keeping evaluation, decision-making, and accountability human.

> If AI's involved, say it.

Clearly communicate where AI supports the process, how decisions are made, and what level of human oversight is involved.



New This Year: Skills > Credentials

Proving The Work: The Growing Role Of Skills Assessments

🔑 Key Finding:

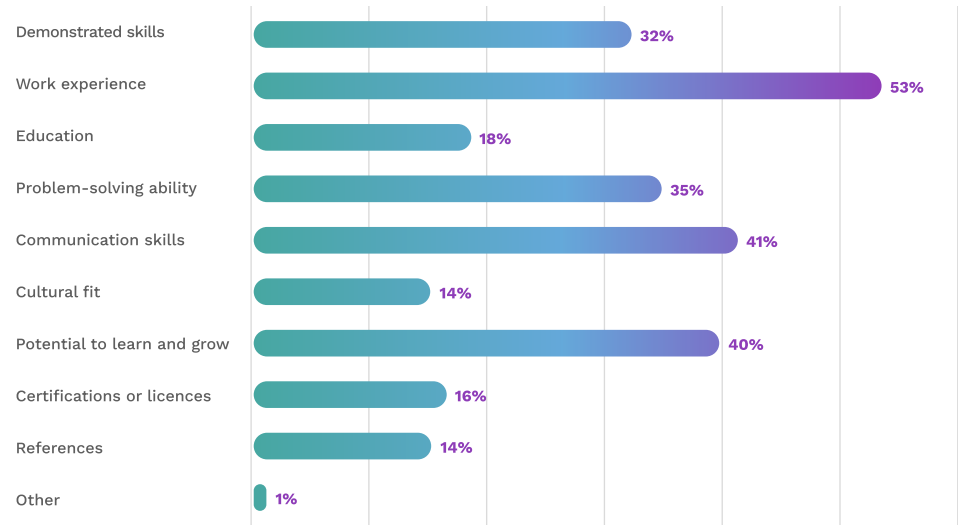
What it means to be “qualified” is expanding. And candidates are increasingly open to skills assessments and other evaluations to demonstrate fit beyond what a resume alone can show.

The definition of “qualified” is getting a redline edit—and younger generations are holding the pen.

Work experience still tops the list of what candidates think employers should prioritize in their evaluation—but it’s no longer the whole story.

Yes, 53% point to experience, but a growing share of candidates want recruiters and hiring teams to look beyond it, with communication skills (41%), potential to learn and grow (40%), problem-solving ability (35%), and demonstrated skills (32%) all close behind.

What do you believe employers should prioritize most when evaluating candidates?



This shift is being driven, in large part, by Gen Z and Millennials. These groups are less likely to say employers should prioritize work experience (41% and 48%, respectively), compared to Gen X and Baby Boomers (61% and 68%). At the same time, 22% of Gen Z and 16% of Millennials cited culture fit as a priority—more than double Gen X (9%) and Baby Boomers (5%).

But the question then becomes, how do organizations confirm these kinds of skills?



In large part that can be answered with two words: skills assessments.

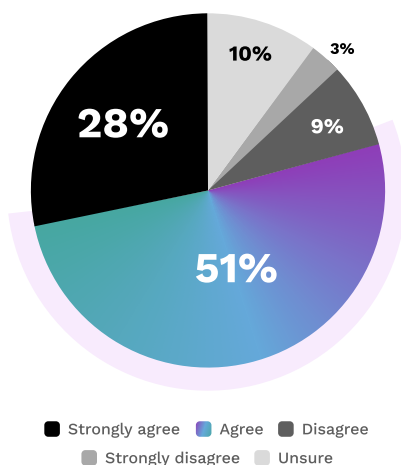
Skills assessments are already a typical (and likely expected) part of the application process, with 73% of candidates reporting they've completed a skills assessment or work sample during the hiring process.

And in a more competitive market—where candidates are not only competing with more applicants, but sometimes fraudulent ones that look perfect on paper—the opportunity to showcase skills directly is becoming more appealing.

A sentiment which is proven by the fact that 79% of surveyed job seekers agree that skills assessments help employers better evaluate whether a candidate can perform the job.

This is especially true in highly technical or regulated industries. Workers from finance, insurance, and accounting (40%) and clinical healthcare (38%) are more likely to strongly agree that skills assessments help employers evaluate job readiness.

Do you agree or disagree, skills assessments help employers better evaluate whether a candidate can perform the job?



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Skills-based hiring sounds straightforward, but job titles and CVs can't verify skills, and AI that ranks on keywords just makes that mistake faster. Real skills-based hiring requires structured, AI-driven assessment at the point of application, before a human ever reviews a profile, screening for demonstrated capability rather than claimed experience. The result is a shortlist that's genuinely decision-ready, and recruiters spending their time on conversations that actually matter.”



Ritu Mohanka
CEO, VONQ

What To Do About It

What it means to be “qualified” is shifting. Today’s candidates want to prove their skills, show their potential, and demonstrate growth...not just list it on a resume.

> Prioritize skills alongside experience.

Align early on what’s actually required vs. what can be taught and where potential matters most.

> Use assessments (thoughtfully) to see what candidates can really do.

Keep them lightweight for high-volume roles and more in-depth where specialized skills matter.

> Be upfront about why assessments are part of the process.

When candidates understand the purpose, they’re more likely to see them as fair—not friction.

> Create consistency in how candidates are evaluated.

Shared scorecards and clear criteria help teams assess skills more fairly.





You're Hired: What Happens After The Job Search

Salaries & Negotiations

💡 Key Finding:

Even as candidates feel salaries lag behind inflation, **most aren't pushing for higher offers.**

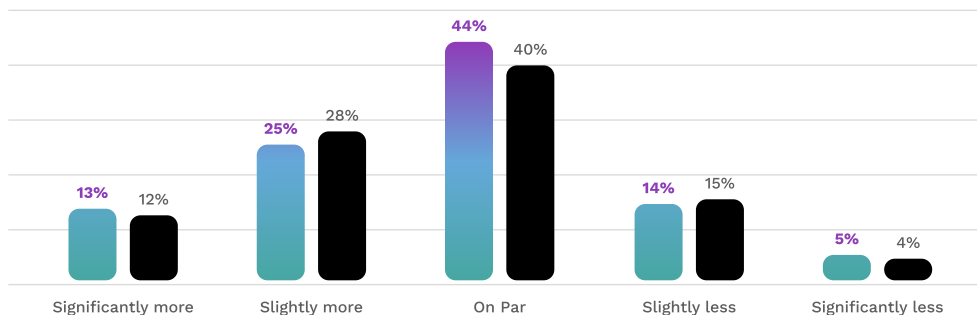
Even as candidates expand how they define job fit, compensation remains a key part of the equation.

But the real question isn't whether pay matters. It's whether it's keeping up with expectations—and what that means for attracting (and keeping) talent.

On the surface, we're seeing that things look relatively steady. The majority of candidates report that salary offers meet or exceed expectations, with 13% receiving significantly more than expected, 25% slightly more, and 44% landing right on par.

For your current/most recent job, was your initial salary offer what you expected?

2026 2025



But underneath that stability, there are signs of slowing momentum. Only 19% of candidates believe salaries are keeping pace, compared to 28% the year prior.

Because of this, you might expect more candidates to be actively negotiating—but the opposite is happening. Just 33% are attempting to do so, down from 37% in 2025.

Why? In a “paused” market defined by higher competition and less certainty, many are choosing to accept what’s in front of them rather than risk losing the opportunity altogether.

But here’s the twist.

When candidates do negotiate, it works. In 79% of cases, negotiations result in higher pay.

The takeaway isn’t just about candidate behavior—it’s a signal for employers.

Breaking Down Benefits

💡 Key Finding:

The benefits wish list is shifting. Core offerings still matter, **but mental health support is climbing fast** as younger candidates prioritize well-being in and beyond the job search.

Compensation has never been just about salary. And today? Candidates are looking well beyond the paycheck, evaluating whether the full offer actually supports how they want to live and work.

While “standard” benefits remain table stakes, mental health support is quickly moving up the priority list, especially among younger workers. When asked to rank the most important potential benefits offered by employers, respondents pointed to both foundational coverage and quality-of-life support. Healthcare topped the list (64%), followed by 401(k) programs/matching (55%), paid family leave (49%), bonuses and stipends (44%), and mental health resources (38%).

In fact, [according to a recent McKinsey report](#), 40% of Gen Z say they feel “almost always stressed,” nearly double the overall average. As a result, candidates aren’t just looking for benefits, they’re looking for support systems. Mental health resources are no longer a nice-to-have, but a signal that an employer understands the realities of modern work.

This shift reflects a broader trend: candidates are placing a significantly higher emphasis on wellness.



When Candidates Say “No”

💡 Key Finding:

In a tighter market, fewer candidates are declining offers—
**but younger generations are still holding out for roles that align
beyond compensation.**

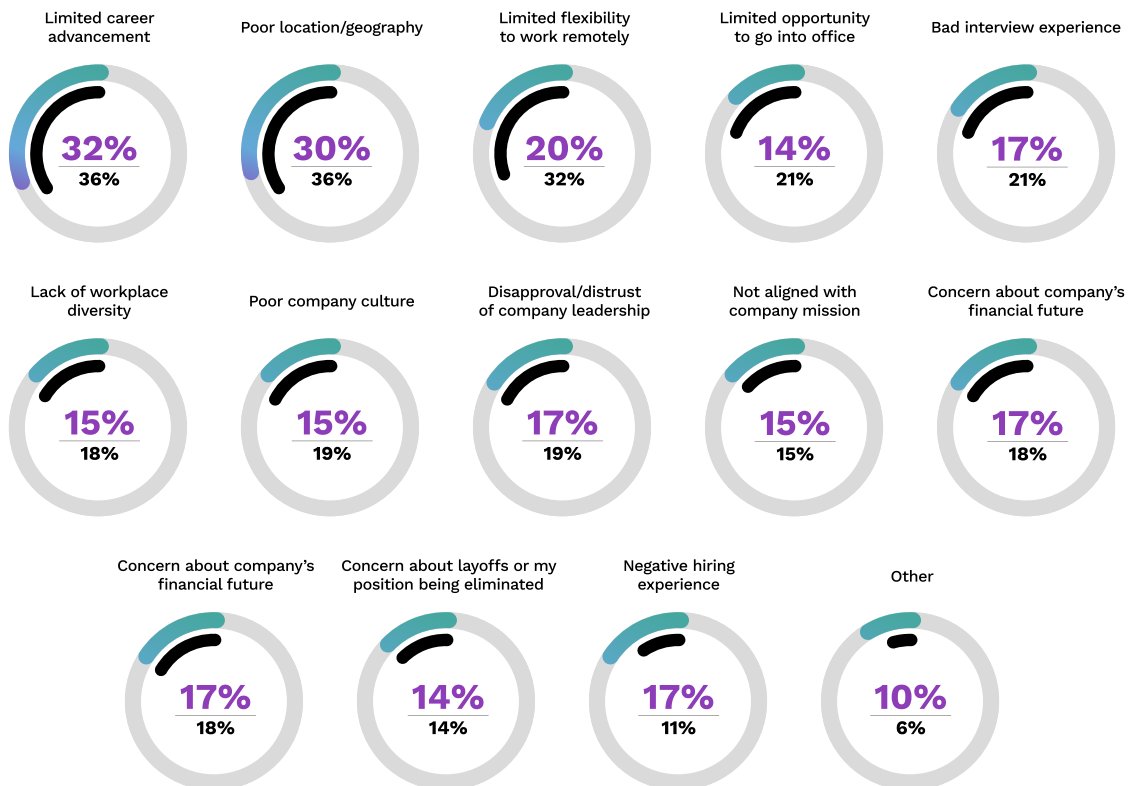
You found the perfect hire. You made the offer...and they said no. So, what happened?

Here's the breakdown: with a more cautious outlook on the job market, only 20% of candidates report declining an offer in the past 12 months—down from 23% in 2025.

But when candidates do walk away, the reasons—beyond compensation—are both familiar and revealing. Limited career advancement (32%) continues to lead, followed by poor location or geography (30%, down 6 points year over year) and limited flexibility to work from home or remotely (20%, down 12). In other words, the same factors pushing candidates out of their current roles are also driving them to turn down new ones.

If you declined a job offer in the last 12 months, which of the following factors other than compensation had the most significant impact on your decision to decline the offer?

2026 2025



That said, a shift is happening—one that puts more weight on the hiring process itself. Candidates declining offers due to a negative experience jumped from 11% in 2025 to 17% in 2026.

And it makes sense. For many, the hiring process is the first real window into how a company operates. When it feels slow or impersonal, it can signal something bigger about the culture behind it.

Generational Breakdown: Declining Job Offers

Gen Z workers are the most likely to have declined a job offer (31%), compared to Millennials (22%), Generation X (15%), and Baby Boomers (9%).

But what's even more telling? Why they're walking away.

While overall the reasons fell into a similar pattern (limited career advancement and poor location/geography), 25% of Gen Z declined offers due to a negative hiring experience (compared to 17% of Millennials, 9% of Gen X, and only 6% of Baby Boomers).

That's not just a higher expectation. It's a completely different decision-making lens.



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If a candidate doesn't feel seen, heard, or valued—they're not only more likely to drop out of the process, but also share their negative experience. Most employers approach hiring from the lens of 'what do we want?' The best hiring teams are also thinking 'what do *candidates* want?' If you are actively listening to candidate needs and preferences, you are much more likely to provide cutting-edge places of employment that attract candidates and keep them invested for the long-term.”

[Laura Mazzullo](#)

Owner, East Side Staffing

What To Do About It

From salary negotiations to final decisions, the end of the hiring process is where offers are won—or lost. Pay matters. Benefits matter. Growth matters. But so does the experience. And increasingly, candidates are weighing all of it together when deciding whether to say yes.

> Be transparent about compensation from the start.

Share [salary ranges early](#)—paired with context around benefits, bonuses, and growth potential.

> Use employee feedback to shape your benefits approach.

Regularly ask what matters most—and adjust your total rewards strategy as expectations evolve.

> Find out what matters to the candidate—and lean in.

Use early conversations to get crystal clear on what actually matters—flexibility, growth, stability—then carry that through your conversations and offer.

> Don't be shy about what makes your organization stand out.

Don't bury standout benefits—bring them forward in job descriptions, career pages, and conversations.

> Treat the hiring experience like your employer brand in action.

Invest in tools and processes that allow your team to reduce friction, move faster, and create a more consistent, thoughtful experience.



7 The TL;DR: Bringing It All Together



Candidates may be hitting pause on their job search—but when they choose to leave, and where they go, reveals what really matters.

While we may be firmly in an **employer's market**, top talent teams aren't standing still. They're using this moment to refine their processes, better align with candidate expectations, and win over the talent that truly fits—both for the role and the culture. Not just for today, but for what's ahead.

So to wrap it all up, here's the TL;DR: what it all means, where things are headed, and what to do next.

From the 'Great Stay' to the 'Great Pause'

Candidates are stepping back from the market. Confidence is down, and job search activity is slowing—but demand for growth isn't.

What you can do

Focus inward. Upskill your workforce, create clear paths for advancement, and promote from within.

Why candidates leave (and what they're looking for)

When candidates make a move, it's often driven by culture and leadership. And in the next role, the bar is higher: stronger culture, clearer growth opportunities, greater flexibility.

What you can do

Get honest about your culture and build an environment people are excited to be a part of. And show it off.

Early exits vs. long-term attrition

Early exits tell a clear story: when expectations set during recruiting don't match reality, new hires will walk away.

What you can do

Set clear, consistent expectations about the role, team, and culture from the very first interaction.

Trust in a high-risk market

As candidates navigate scam job postings and organizations face increasingly sophisticated fraudulent applicants, confidence in the hiring process is under pressure.

What you can do

Validate candidate skills—but also reinforce credibility in your process. Set expectations early around verification steps, explain why they exist, and introduce them at the right moment so they feel like protection.

Speed vs. safeguards

Candidate experience is still a top priority—but rising candidate fraud is forcing teams to rethink how they deliver it. Speed and ease matter, but so do the safeguards that protect your hiring funnel.

What you can do

Layer safeguards together, so gaps are covered without adding unnecessary friction (we call this the [Swiss Cheese method](#)).

AI + human judgment

While candidates are increasingly comfortable with AI, they still expect clarity around how and when it's used.

What you can do

Use AI to streamline the manual, time-consuming parts of the process—then reinvest that time into your candidates. Remember, keep humans at the heart of your hiring.

Now seeking skills

As resumes lose reliability, teams are putting more weight on validated skills—using assessments and real-world evaluations to see what candidates can actually do.

What you can do

Tailor assessments to the role. High-volume, lower-skill roles can rely on quick, lightweight evaluations, while more specialized positions call for more robust assessments.

The generational divide

Younger candidates are redefining what job fit looks like—placing greater emphasis on wellbeing, flexibility, and sustainable work experiences.

What you can do

Regularly assess how candidates experience your process and organization—and evolve your process to reflect the shifting priorities of your future workforce.

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Hiring is no longer just a talent problem; it's a trust problem. AI has accelerated the sophistication of fraud and introduced new risks for both candidates and employers. What was once an isolated challenge is now more prevalent, complex, and difficult to detect across the hiring funnel. In response, Talent Acquisition must evolve, operating more like forensic analysts to identify and mitigate risk throughout the candidate journey.”



Amber Parker
Director of Global
Talent Acquisition, Mitek

Report Methodology

This report is based on a nationwide online survey conducted by Zogby Analytics on behalf of Employ in March and April 2026. The survey captured insights from more than 1,500 U.S. adults who are currently working full-time, part-time, or actively seeking work.

Findings include year-over-year comparisons with 2025 data, as well as results from net new 2026 survey questions focused on how AI is reshaping the job search and interview process, how candidates are thinking about verification and trust, and the continued shift toward skills-based hiring. Together, these data points provide talent acquisition and HR teams with a timely, research-backed view of the candidate experience throughout the job search process—including how expectations and priorities are shifting as both the job market and the workforce itself continues to evolve.

About Zogby Analytics

Zogby Analytics is respected nationally and internationally for its opinion research capabilities. Since 1984, Zogby has empowered clients with powerful information and knowledge critical for making informed strategic decisions.

The firm conducts multi-phased opinion research engagements for banking and financial services institutions, insurance companies, hospitals and medical centers, retailers and developers, religious institutions, cultural organizations, colleges and universities, IT companies and Federal agencies. Zogby's dedication and commitment to excellence and accuracy are reflected in its state-of-the-art opinion research capabilities and objective analysis and consultation.

About Employ, JazzHR, Lever, & Jobvite

Employ delivers people-first intelligent hiring solutions that empower companies to overcome their greatest hiring challenges. From startups to Fortune 100 organizations, Employ powers hiring at scale, having processed 100 million job applications and made 650,000-plus hires made across our customer community.

Through our AI-powered hiring platforms—including JazzHR, Lever, and Jobvite—Employ enables teams to move faster, hire smarter, and build strong workforces. Trusted by more than 26,000 organizations globally, Employ combines innovation, insights, and human-centered design to help companies with confidence.

Employ also publishes Job Seeker Nation and Recruiter Nation, two of the industry's most trusted and tenured research reports, turning real-world hiring data into insights that shape how companies attract, evaluate, and hire talent.



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