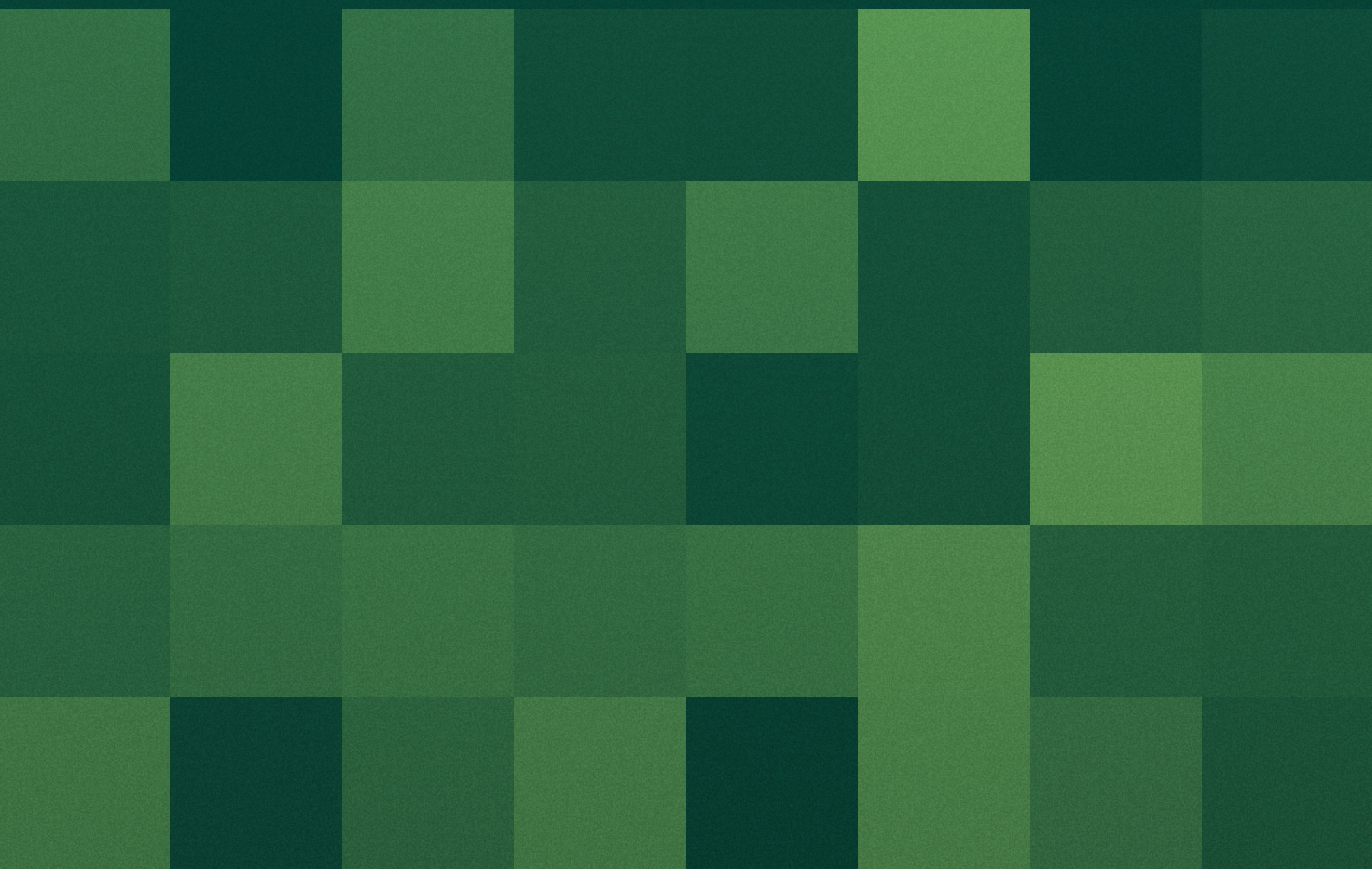




2026 Staffing Candidate Insights Report



Welcome

Job seekers in 2026 are operating in a labor market that has changed under their very feet. They are finding themselves in an AI-augmented environment, searching for new positions in ways that would not have been possible even three years ago – drafting variably tailored resumes, parsing job descriptions, and matching themselves to roles with tools that did not exist commercially in the prior cycle. At the same time, they are AI-anxious: aware that the same technology is being used to screen them, and uncertain whether the firms to which they are applying still see them as people or rather as inputs to a model or some arcane algorithm.

Against that backdrop, the staffing and recruiting industry's value proposition with candidates is being actively reassessed. Candidates can apply directly to most jobs in mere seconds. They can request instant feedback from a model. They can simulate interviews. The question this report exists to answer is simple: where does the human recruiter still earn a seat at the table, and what does it take for a staffing firm to deliver an experience candidates want to repeat themselves and recommend to others?

This report presents findings from the ClearlyRated 2026 Staffing Candidate Survey, a nationwide study of 300 U.S. job seekers, fielded in March 2026 and rim-weighted to reflect realistic employment-status and staffing-usage distributions. The research explores how today's candidates evaluate the staffing relationship across five dimensions:

- Profiling the 2026 Job Seeker
- Perceptions of the Staffing Industry
- AI in the Job Search & Hiring Process
- The Role of the Human Recruiter
- The Candidate Experience, including a Placed Talent deep dive and ClearlyRated's published 2026 Net Promoter Score (NPS) benchmark number

Two analytical lenses run through the report: the general job seeker (the overall weighted base of n=300) and the Placed Talent cohort (n=104 unweighted), candidates who have been placed in a role through a staffing firm in the past year. The general job seeker drives the report's overarching narrative. Placed Talent data appears as callouts and within a dedicated deep dive in Topic 5, where the experiential richness of their answers earns the spotlight and where ClearlyRated's 2026 industry NPS benchmark score of 40 is defined and established.

These insights are grounded in direct feedback from the people who decide whether to engage staffing firms, accept their offers, and refer their friends. We invite you to use these findings to understand the candidates for whom you're competing, to benchmark your own firm's performance, and identify where the next defensible edge lives.

Sincerely,

Stephen Banbury
Vice President, Marketing
ClearlyRated

Many thanks to our sponsor:



American Staffing Association

Executive Summary

Profiling the 2026 Job Seeker

The pool of 2026 job seekers are operating in a market they perceive as soft, with 75% saying finding a new job today is harder than it was a few years ago and 77% concerned about the broader economic outlook. Yet only 46% are actively looking, while another 46% are open to the right opportunity without conducting an active search. The dominant search posture is “open, not hunting,” with implications for how staffing firms engage passive talent. Candidates are AI-augmented: 65% of active job seekers have used at least one AI tool in the past 12 months, with resume writing, AI job matching, and interview prep leading uses. Online job boards (87%) and direct company career sites (83%) lead channel usage; staffing agencies sit fifth at 53%, behind even social media as a methodology of choice.

Perceptions of the Staffing Industry

Candidate perception of staffing firm value has improved over the past 2–3 years: 36% view firms as more valuable than they used to, versus only 9% less valuable. But the gains are fragile. More than half (55%) report no change, and the modest “less valuable” minority is concentrated among candidates who used a firm and felt let down, meaning the candidate experience is the primary lever of perception movement. The biggest hesitation is fear of being steered toward lower-quality positions (26%), cited at twice the rate of any other concern. Only 32% would consider a staffing firm as a first step; the majority (51%) wait until their own efforts have failed, entering the relationship already carrying rejection and elevated expectations. Pay leads as the acquisition lever (69% top-3 ranking), but the more actionable signal is what wins when pay is held constant: a dedicated human recruiter (48%) and a guaranteed response or placement timeline (47%).

AI in the Job Search & Hiring Process

Candidates are using AI themselves while at the same time believing – and resenting – that staffing firms use it on them. Some 46% believe a human recruiter reviews their application today, but 66% wish that were true. Only 19% will trade human review for faster placement; 54% want a balance, and 14% want the opposite. Disclosure expectations rise sharply with the stakes: 67% expect disclosure of more basic administrative AI use, 75% for AI screening, and 80% for AI assessing personality or cultural fit. The cost of getting this wrong is high. More than a third – 36% – would lose trust and reconsider using the firm if they discovered undisclosed AI screening, and another 38% want transparency. The candidate tolerance for opacity is thin.

The Role of the Human Recruiter

Candidates are clear about where humans matter most: salary negotiation (78% want a human leading), emotional support during a difficult search (74%), advocacy with potential employers (72%), and understanding personal career goals (70%). AI is viewed as acceptable for status updates and initial matching, but never for the moments that define whether a candidate feels valued. Belief in the value of recruiters is broad: 95% of candidates say a recruiter's support can be at least somewhat meaningful, 76% rate the potential impact as very or extremely meaningful, and 26% call it life-changing. Roughly 70% have either personally experienced meaningful recruiter impact (37%) or believe it is still possible (33%). Among Placed Talent, the case strengthens: 85% rate the recruiter's potential impact very or extremely meaningful, and 58% have personally experienced it, more than double the rate among non-placed candidates.

The Candidate Experience

Ghosting is endemic and damaging. Nearly half – 46% of candidates – indicate they have been ghosted by a staffing firm, 24% more than once, and 78% say even a single instance would make them hesitate to use that firm again. The tolerance window is short: 73% consider 3 to 5 business days of silence (or less) to be ghosting. Among Placed Talent, the on-assignment experience is broadly strong, 90% felt treated well by the placement organization, 89% said the role was accurately described, and 88% are satisfied overall. But the end-of-assignment moment is where staffing firms drop the relationship. Only 74% of candidates were contacted prior to the end of the assignment about the transition, the lowest score in the entire Placed Talent journey. Ratings of the recruiter relationship split cleanly into two tiers: 83% to 90% on transactional dimensions (professionalism, responsiveness, issue resolution), but only 77% to 80% on the deeper relational dimensions (caring about the candidate as a person, having a strong relationship) that most predict loyalty (translating into long-term candidate retention for future job searches, and a willingness to refer a trusted staffing firm to friends).

Satisfaction & Performance Benchmarking

Placed Talent register a Net Promoter Score (NPS) of 40 (resulting from 53% of candidates indicating they are Promoters, 35% as Passives, and 13% as Detractors). This is ClearlyRated's published staffing industry NPS benchmark for 2026, a 10-point improvement over the prior published figure of 30.

Candidate return intent confirms the signal: 67% of Placed Talent say they are very likely to use the same agency for their next job search, with another 25% indicating they are somewhat likely. This year's NPS figure reflects the true performance baseline among candidates who have actually been placed. We believe the data shows any future lift to a higher industry-wide NPS will come from extending that quality of experience to more candidates, not from improving the placement product itself.

Background & Methodology

For more than a decade, ClearlyRated has conducted annual industry-specific research to establish client and candidate satisfaction benchmarks, to identify emerging trends, and to analyze topics of importance in each industry we serve. This report presents findings from our 2026 Job Candidate Survey, a comprehensive online study of U.S. job seekers' attitudes toward staffing and recruiting firms, the candidate experience, the role of AI in hiring, and the human-recruiter value proposition. The survey captured responses in March 2026 from 300 candidates across the United States, with sampling and weighting designed to reflect the realistic distribution of employment status and staffing-firm usage in the U.S. workforce. The report draws on two cohorts: the general job seeker (the overall weighted base of 300) and Placed Talent (104 unweighted respondents who have actually been placed in roles through their primary staffing firms). ClearlyRated's in-house team of data analysts and client experience experts have analyzed this year's results to highlight the takeaways most useful to staffing firm operators, marketers, and recruiter teams.

SECTION 1

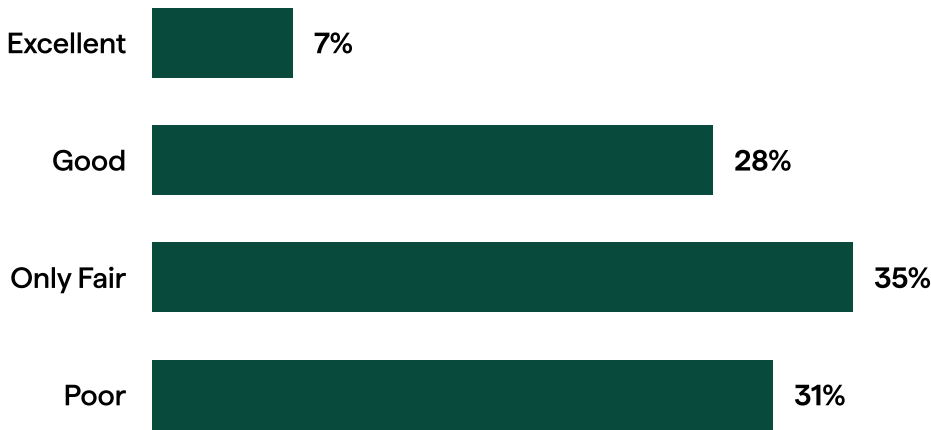
Profiling the 2026 Job Seeker



How Candidates See the U.S. Economy

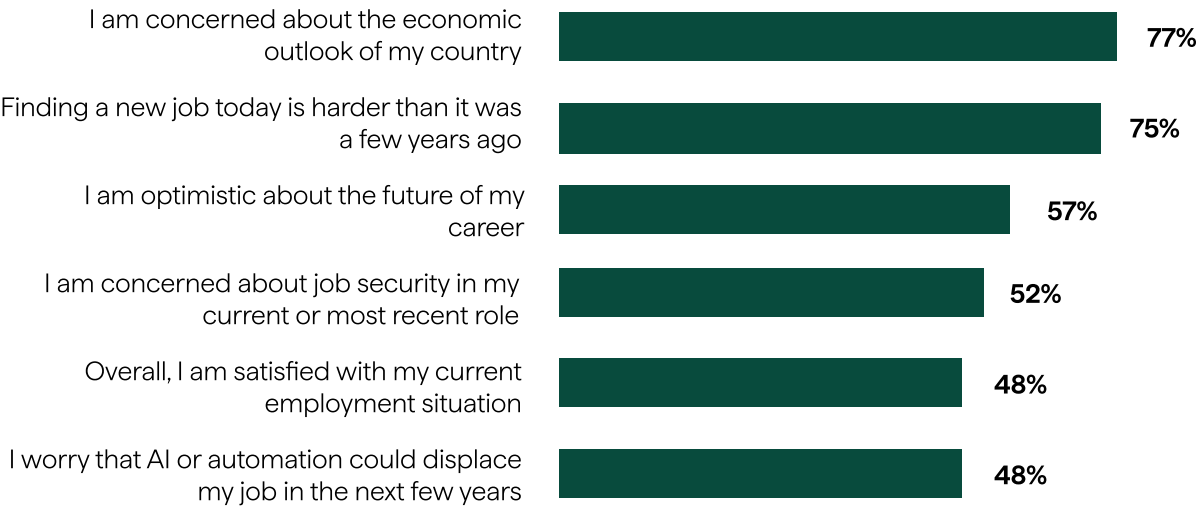
Candidates are notably bearish on the broader economic picture. Two-thirds rate current economic conditions as Only Fair or Poor, and only 35% say they are Good or Excellent. That sentiment is reflected in their job-market read more directly: three-quarters of candidates agree that finding a new job today is harder than it was a few years ago.

How Candidates Rate Today's Economy



This is an important backdrop for framing all our other findings. The 2026 candidate is not approaching the labor market from a position of confidence. They are anxious about the economy, increasingly worried about AI displacement, and often unsure about their own job security. Specific findings on this underlying mix are as follows:

Career and Economic Outlook, % Agree



Two findings stand out. First, despite a rough macro read, 57% remain optimistic about their personal career future, an indicator that candidates seem to worry more about the system as a whole than their own prospects. Second, 48% worry that AI or automation could displace their job within the next few years, a concern roughly on par with their concern about general job security. That tension, AI as a personal threat, shapes how candidates approach AI in their own searches.

Younger Candidates have more AI-Displacement Anxiety:

58% of under-35 candidates worry AI or automation could displace their jobs within the next few years, vs. only 33% of age 55+ candidates: a 25-point gap. This finding is in line with broader workforce research: Randstad's Workmonitor 2026 report (n=27,000 workers across 35 markets) finds that Gen Z is the most concerned generation, while Baby Boomers show greater self-assurance and are the least worried about AI's impact and their ability to adapt.¹ Staffing firms engaging this group should expect to address AI-disclosure and human-recruiter concerns more proactively than with older candidates.

¹ Randstad Workmonitor 2026, January 2026. Press release: randstad.com/press/2026/randstad-releases-new-workmonitor-2026-report/

Job Search Status

Roughly half of candidates are actively looking for jobs, and roughly half are open to considering new roles without actively searching for them. Only 8% are fully off the market.

92%

are either actively looking (46% active seekers) or are open to new positions but not actively looking (46% passive seekers).

The implication for staffing firms: nearly half of the addressable candidate pool is reachable without being inbound. These are the candidates who say they would consider the right opportunity but aren't trawling job boards. They will not find a firm; a firm has to find them, and the way that engagement happens – channel, communication style, depth of personalization – determines whether a given attempt at contact effectively lands or instead feels like spam.

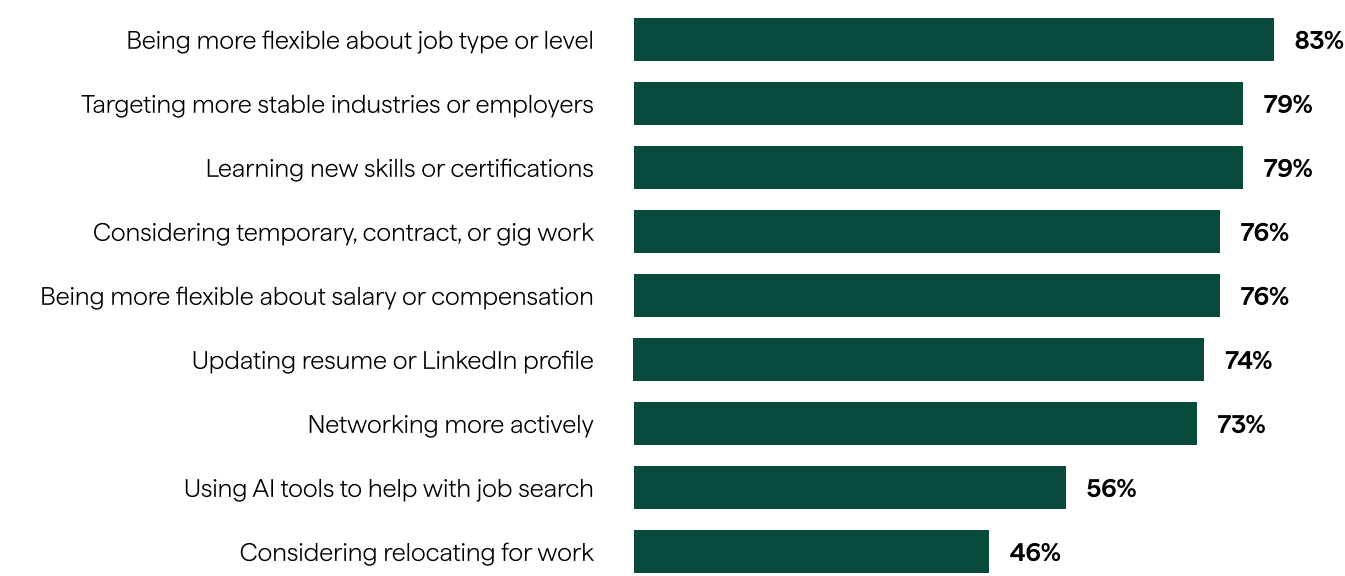
Different Sectors, Different Outreach Strategies:

Active job-search rates are highest among Engineering/IT/Scientific candidates (58% actively looking, the highest of any sector) and Office/Clerical candidates (51%). The “open, not actively looking” posture is most concentrated among Professional-Managerial candidates (60%). Outreach playbooks should differ accordingly: the tech-side cohort is most reachable inbound while the senior professional cohort needs proactive engagement.

What Candidates Are Doing About It

Candidates are not passive in the face of a difficult market. Across nine action areas measured, every single one is undertaken by a majority of respondents, and four of them by more than three-quarters.

Actions Candidates Are Taking in Response to Conditions, % Yes

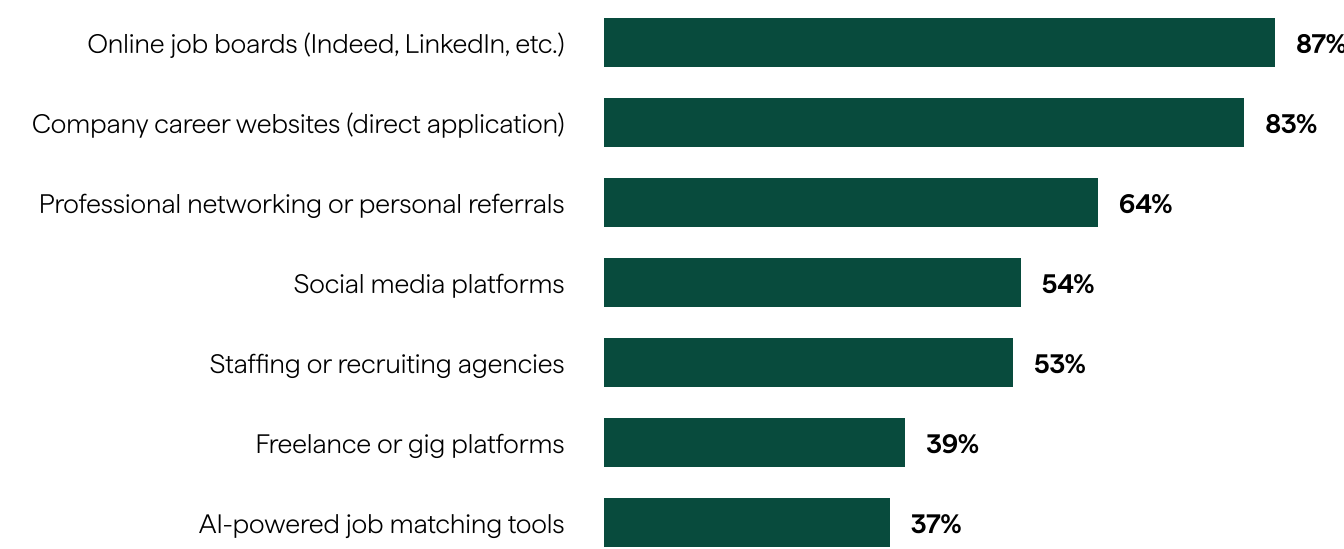


Flexibility leads the list: 83% are being more flexible about job type or level. That is good news for staffing firms as candidates are more open to non-traditional engagements than they have been in recent years. Echoing the willingness of candidates to be more flexible, 76% are willing to consider temporary, contract, or gig work, a meaningful demand-side opening for the staffing industry's bread-and-butter offering. The AI tools number (56%) is a leading indicator for Topic 3: more than half of candidates have already worked AI into the mechanics of their search.

Where Candidates Look for Work

Direct application channels dominate: Online job boards and company career sites are used by more than 80% of candidates. Networking and social media are next. Staffing or recruiting agencies are used by 53%, placing them fifth on the list, ahead of freelance/gig platforms and AI-powered job matching, but behind direct channels.

Sources Actively Used in Current / Recent Job Search, % Yes



The story here is not necessarily that staffing firms are losing share, as 53% is meaningful penetration. The problem is that staffing is one channel among many, and the channels ranked above it are free, fast, and immediate. The competitive bar a staffing firm has to clear is no longer “better than nothing” but “better than Indeed and the company’s own careers page combined.” That bar is set by how quickly and visibly a firm demonstrates specific value from the very first interaction.

Job search channel mix varies sharply by sector:

Engineering/IT/Science candidates use AI-powered job matching tools at 59%, which is nearly twice the rate of most other sectors (Industrial 31%, Office/Clerical 32%, Professional-Managerial 37%). Healthcare candidates lean the other direction, sourcing through professional networking and personal referrals at 90% (vs. 58-70% elsewhere) and using staffing agencies at 69%, the highest of any sector. For staffing firms, this means the entry point into a candidate relationship looks different by vertical category: tech-adjacent talent often meets you through tools, while healthcare talent meets you through people.

Key Takeaways: Profiling the 2026 Job Seeker

- Three-quarters of candidates think finding a new job today is harder than it was a few years ago; 77% are concerned about the broader economic outlook.
- Many candidates are “open, not actively looking” (46%), essentially tied with those who are actively looking (46%). Staffing engagement methods should be built for both groups, and especially for the harder-to-reach passive half.
- Candidates are focusing on flexibility to keep options open: 76% are willing to consider temporary, contract, or gig work, and 83% are flexible about job type or level.
- Staffing agencies are the fifth-most-used channel (53%), behind direct application and networking. The bar for a firm to add visible value above free alternatives and new AI tools is higher than it has ever been.

SECTION 2

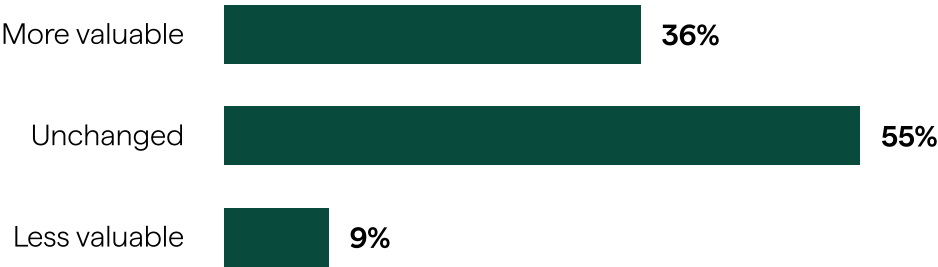
Perceptions of the Staffing Industry



How Perceptions Have Shifted

The directional news for staffing firms is positive. Net perception of staffing firm value has improved over the past 2–3 years.

Perception of Staffing Firm Value vs. 2–3 Years Ago



That said, 55% of candidates report seeing no change in their perceptions of staffing firms’ value, and the modest “less valuable” minority is concentrated among candidates who have used a firm before and felt the experience didn't deliver, making the candidate experience the key lever for defending the gains shown here.

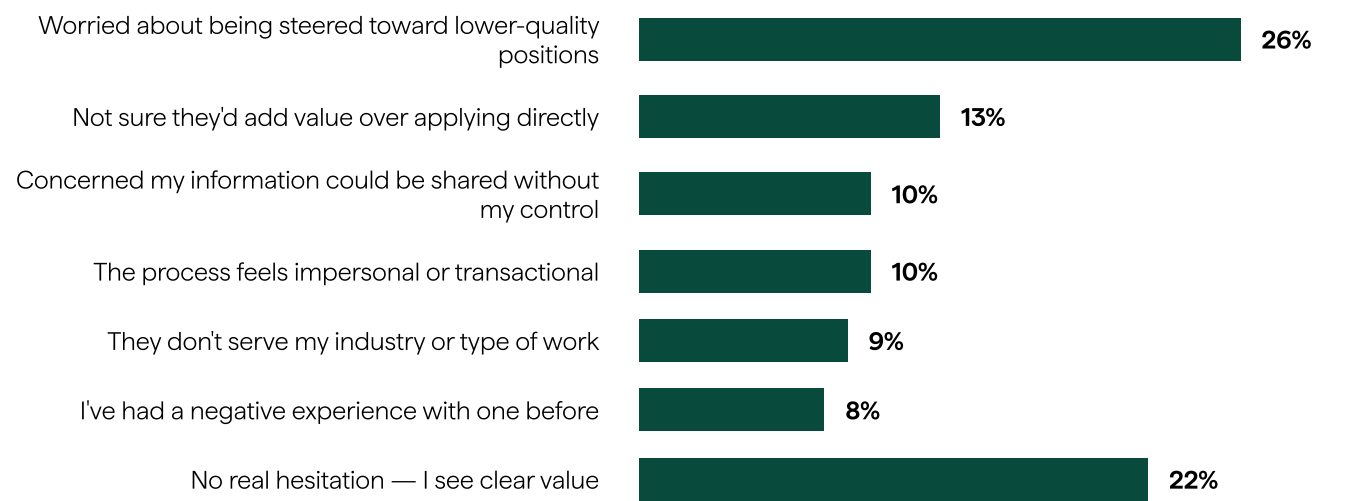
Age Splits the Perception Story:

The perception shift is heavily age-skewed: 44% of under-35 candidates view staffing firms as more valuable, vs. only 16% of 55+ candidates. The 55+ cohort, where 73% report unchanged perception, is the hardest perception lift, and the cohort with the most loyalty upside if it can be moved.

Why Candidates Hesitate

Even among candidates who would consider using a staffing firm, hesitation exists. The single biggest concern, by a meaningful margin, is being steered toward lower-quality positions.

Biggest Hesitation About Using a Staffing Firm

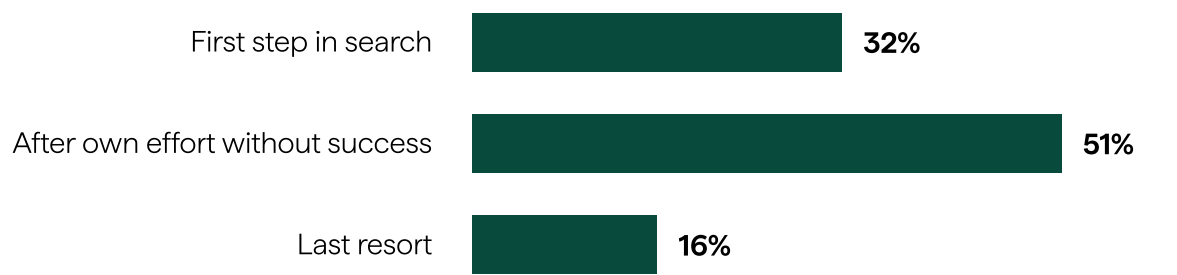


More than a quarter of candidates (26%) name lower-quality placements as their primary worry, twice the rate of the next highest concern. The second-most-cited response is “no real hesitation, I see clear value” at 22%, which is encouraging: roughly one in five candidates is essentially pre-sold. But the rest of the list is a catalog of trust and fit anxieties: information sharing without control (10%); impersonal/transactional feel (10%); industry mismatch (9%); and prior bad experience (8%). None individually is dominant, but together they reflect cumulative skepticism the industry has to overcome.

When Candidates Would Consider Engaging a Staffing Firm in Their Search

Positioning is a persistent challenge. Half of candidates would turn to a staffing firm only after their own efforts had not produced results.

When Candidates Would Consider Using a Staffing Firm



Only one in three candidates (32%) would consider a staffing firm as a first step in their search. Half (51%) wait until their own efforts have failed. And 16% see staffing firms as a last resort. For staffing firms, this means the entry point into a candidate relationship is most often a candidate who has already experienced rejection, bringing both lower trust and higher expectations. Firms that can earn first-step consideration enter the relationship in a fundamentally different psychological state.

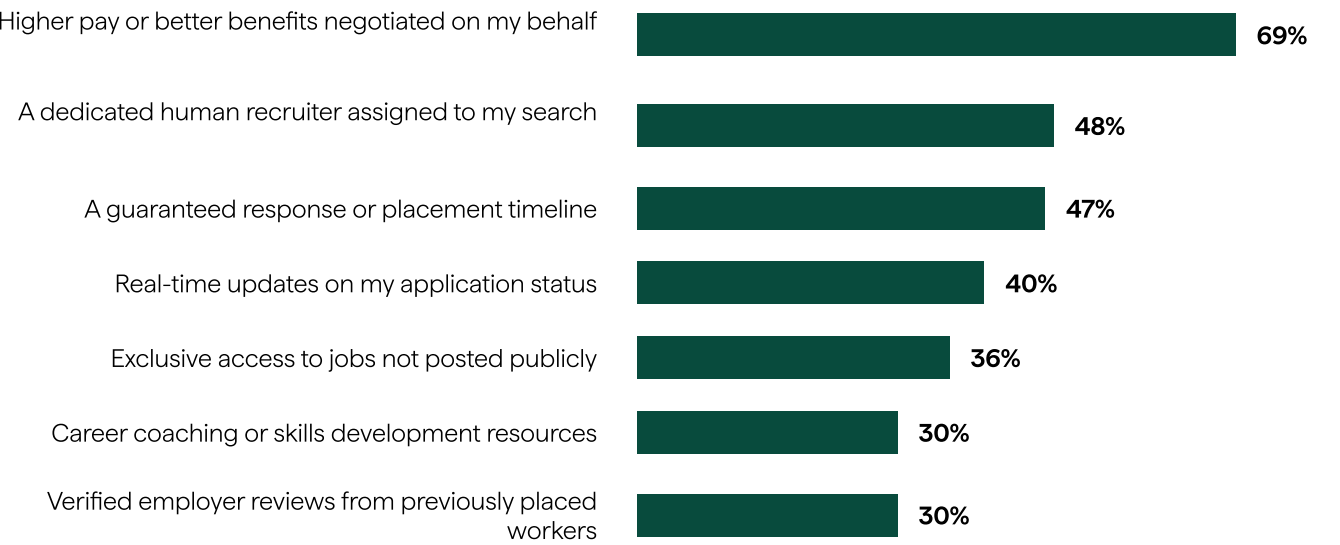
First consideration of staffing firms skews younger AND tech-side:

Nearly four in 10 – 38% – of under-35 candidates would consider a staffing firm first, vs. only 19% of 55+ candidates. By sector, Engineering/IT/Scientific candidates are over twice as likely as candidates in other sectors to enter at the first step (47% vs. 20%, statistically significant). This makes them the most accessible first-touch audience, even if Healthcare candidates ultimately use staffing agencies at higher rates overall.

What Would Move the Needle

Asked what would most increase their likelihood of using a staffing firm on their next search, candidates' preferences cluster around two themes: economic outcome and human relationships. Unsurprisingly, higher pay or better benefits leads the field at 69%, placing it in a top-3 rank, twice the next strongest non-recruiter lever. Pay is table stakes in any preference question, but the more useful signal is what wins when pay is held constant.

What Would Most Increase Likelihood to Use a Staffing Firm, % Ranked in Top 3



Behind pay, two concepts virtually tie for second: “a dedicated human recruiter assigned to my search” (48%) and “a guaranteed response or placement timeline” (47%), with real-time application status updates close behind (40%). Career coaching, exclusive access to unposted jobs, and verified employer reviews lag behind in their impact. Candidates generally rank service attributes above value-proposition language.

The takeaway is that differentiation by application status, content library, or coaching program is clearly secondary to the two table-stakes outcomes: pay candidates better and put a person in front of them.

Key Takeaways: Perceptions of the Staffing Industry

- Net perception of staffing firm value has improved: 4× more candidates view firms as more valuable than less valuable vs. 2–3 years ago. But, as 55% report no change, there's room to move uncommitted candidates.
- The biggest hesitation about using staffing firms is potentially being steered toward lower-quality positions (26%). The industry has a quality-perception problem more than an awareness problem.
- Only 32% would consider a staffing firm as a first step in a search. Half wait until their own efforts have failed, meaning firms usually enter the relationship after the candidate has already experienced rejection.
- Pay leads as an acquisition lever (69% give it a top-3 ranking), but it functions as table stakes. What wins when pay is held constant: concrete service mechanics (a dedicated human recruiter at 48%, a guaranteed response timeline at 47%).

SECTION 3

AI in the Job Search & Hiring Process

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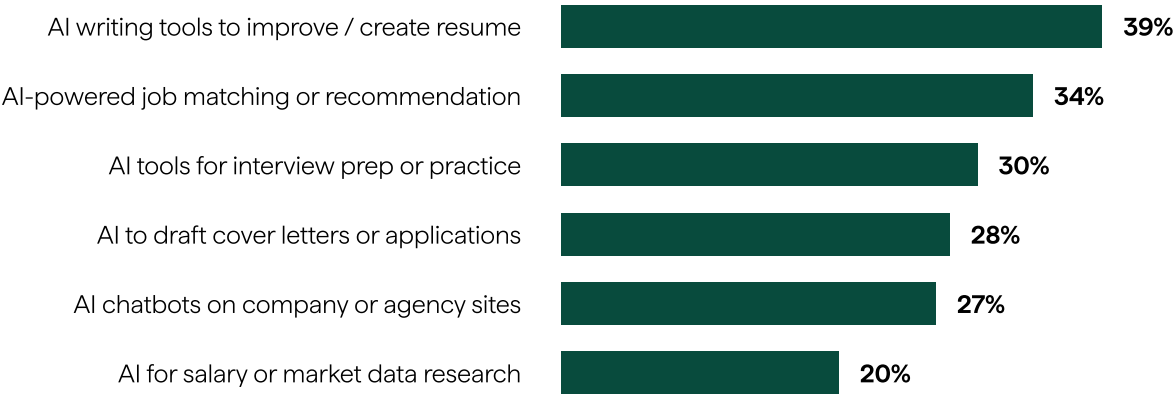
AI as a Candidate Tool

Nearly two-thirds of active job seekers have used some form of AI in their job search in the past 12 months, with adoption broadest in writing tasks and job matching.

65%

Of active job seekers have used AI tools in the job search in the past 12 months

AI Tools Used in Job Search in Past 12 Months, % Yes



The figure above reflects only Active Placed job seekers (n=140)

Among candidates currently (or recently) engaged in an active search, resume writing leads at 39%, followed by AI-powered job matching (34%), interview prep (30%), cover letter drafting (28%), AI chatbots on company or agency sites (27%), and salary research (20%). Only 35% of active job seekers have used no AI tools at all.

The pattern is broad rather than deep: most active candidates have tried one or two AI applications, mostly around writing and job matching, rather than running a fully AI-augmented search workflow. AI shows up most consistently where the candidate workload is highest (resume tailoring, application volume), and least where the task is more relational (salary negotiation, employer research).

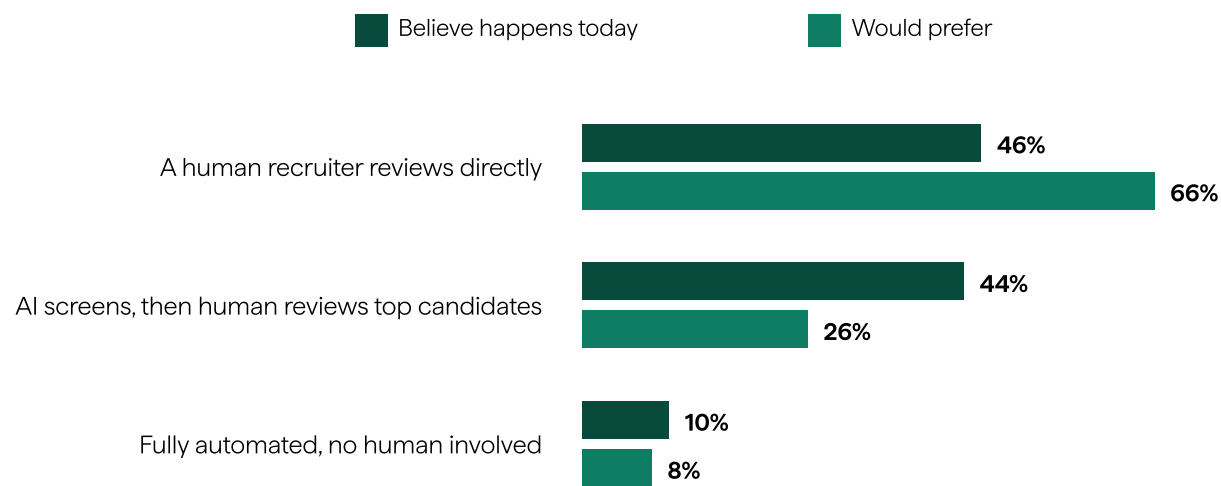
AI tool usage in the job search drops sharply with age:

Across the full candidate sample, under-35 candidates are roughly three to four times more likely than 55+ candidates to have used AI for resume writing (41% vs. 15%) or cover letter drafting (32% vs. 8%). The candidate AI fluency curve mirrors the broader consumer adoption curve.

Perception vs. Preference: Who Should Review an Application

When it comes to AI in the application review process, compare what candidates believe happens when they apply through a staffing firm against what they wish would happen, and a clear gap emerges.

Who Reviews an Application: Candidate Belief vs. Preference



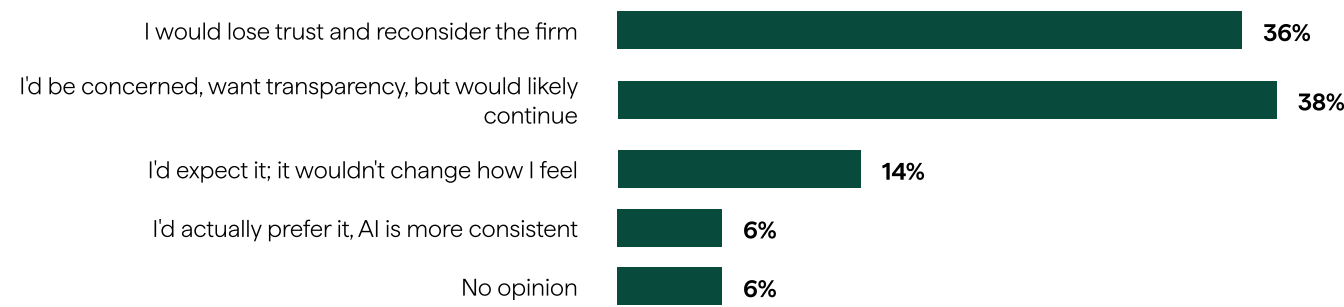
Candidates are split nearly evenly on what they believe happens today: 46% think a human reviews their application directly, 44% think AI screens first with humans reviewing top candidates, and 10% believe the review is fully automated. But preference skews dramatically toward direct human review: 66% would prefer that, against just 26% who want AI-then-human and 8% who want the process fully automated.

This is a powerful finding: staffing firms that can credibly position themselves around human-first or human-only application review, and back the claim with actual practice, have a meaningful trust advantage available to them.

AI Disclosure Expectations

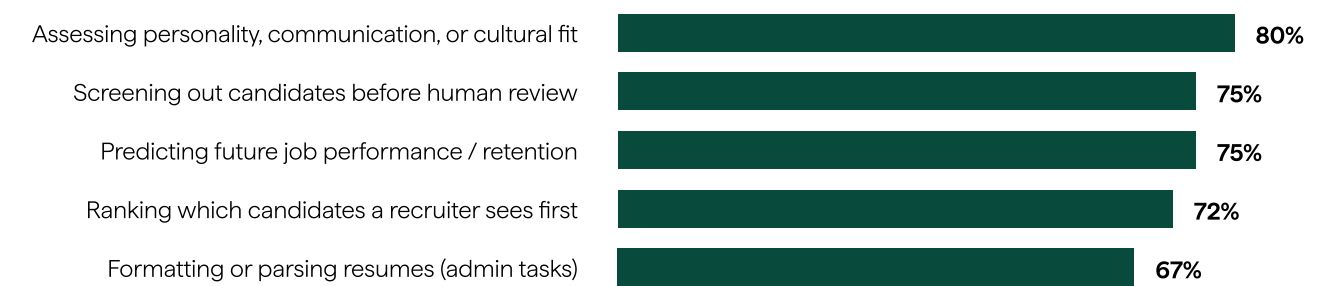
Candidates are not fully unified about AI use, but they have a much stronger consensus around AI disclosure. The combined reaction to undisclosed AI screening is sharp: 36% would lose trust and reconsider working with the firm, and another 38% would be concerned and want transparency. In other words, 73% have a meaningfully negative reaction, while only 21% are neutral or positive. Candidates seem to treat the absence of disclosure as itself an act of bad faith.

Reaction If Staffing Firm Used AI to Screen You Out Without Human Review



Disclosure expectations rise with the stakes of how AI is being used. Even administrative AI use (resume parsing, formatting) carries a disclosure expectation from 67% of candidates. More evaluative AI uses (screening, personality assessment, performance prediction) push that expectation to 75-80% of candidates.

Should Firms Disclose AI Use? % Saying Yes, Disclosure Required at each step

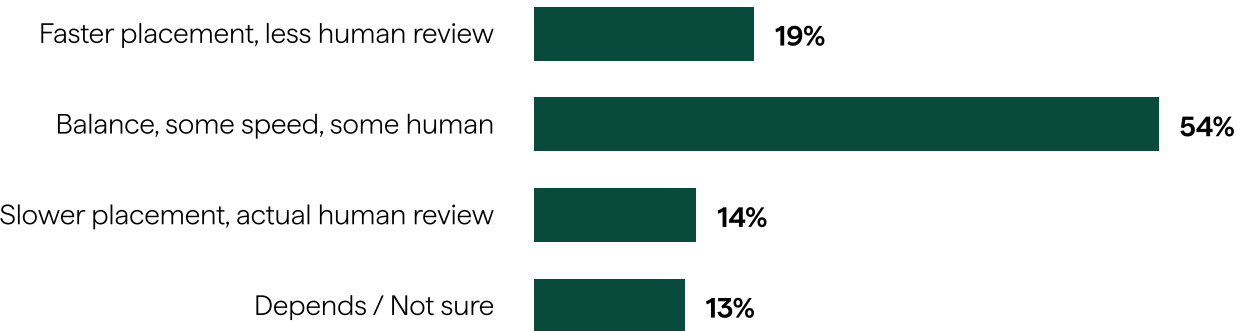


The pattern is quite clear: there is no AI use case in which a majority of candidates is comfortable with silent deployment.

The Speed vs. Human Review Tradeoff

Candidates were asked to weigh a specific tradeoff: if AI could match them with qualified positions 30% faster, would they accept less human review of their application early in the process? They aren't uniformly opposed to the trade. Roughly 1 in 5 (19%) will accept less human review for faster placement while 14% want the opposite. The largest group (54%) lands in the middle, preferring some speed gains as long as a human stays involved.

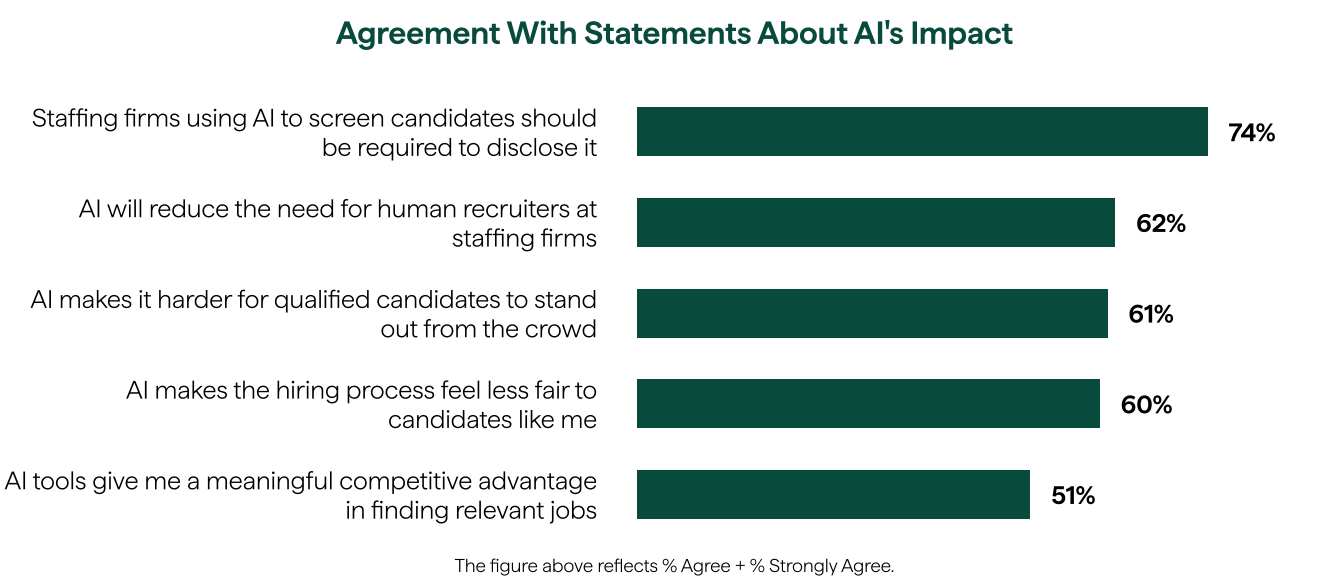
Candidate Preference: 30% - Faster AI Matching vs. Less Human Review



The data points to a candidate market that is open to AI in the workflow but isn't ready to remove human oversight from the process. The plurality preference (54%) is for AI to speed up matching while a human still reviews applicants. The minority that will trade human review away (19%) is meaningful but not dominant, so staffing firms designing speed-optimized placement workflows should expect roughly four out of five candidates to push back if the human element disappears entirely from the equation. The harder operational question isn't whether to deploy AI for speed, it's where to draw the line on human review so the gain in speed doesn't cost the firm the trust of the majority of candidates.

How Candidates Feel About AI's Role in the Job Search

Across five summary statements about AI's impact on the job search, candidates' views are mostly concerned and concentrated:



Three-quarters of candidates (74%) agree that firms using AI to screen should be required to disclose it, directly reinforcing the disclosure-expectations finding above. Despite 62% having used at least one AI tool in their search, only 51% agree AI gives them a meaningful competitive advantage as job seekers, suggesting AI use is widespread but its perceived candidate-side benefit is uneven. The story is mixed but leans negative: candidates are using AI because they have to, while often resenting that it is being used on them.

Key Takeaways: AI in the Job Search

- Two-thirds (65%) of active job seekers have used at least one AI tool in their search in the past 12 months. Resume writing (39%), job matching (34%), and interview prep (30%) lead.
- There is a 20-point gap between candidates who want a human recruiter reviewing their application (66%) and those who believe one currently does (46%).
- Three in four (73%) have a negative reaction to undisclosed AI screening, and only 21% are neutral or positive. The candidate tolerance for silent AI deployment is thin.
- Disclosure expectations are high even for administrative AI (67%) and rise with stakes, up to 80% for personality/cultural-fit assessment.
- Candidates aren't uniformly opposed to AI when it's used for speed, but a clear majority want human oversight preserved. More than half (54%) prefer a balance of speed and human review, 19% will accept faster placement with less human involvement, and 14% want the opposite.

SECTION 4

The Role of the Human Recruiter



The Human Recruiter Impact

The case for the human recruiter starts with how candidates themselves describe its potential. Asked how meaningful the support of a recruiter from a staffing firm can be in improving a candidate's career or life situation, nearly every candidate with an opinion says it can be meaningful at some level.

95%

of candidates believe a recruiter can be at least somewhat meaningful in shaping their career or life situation.

76%

rate the potential impact as “very” or “extremely” meaningful.

26%

call it an “extremely meaningful or life-changing” potential impact.

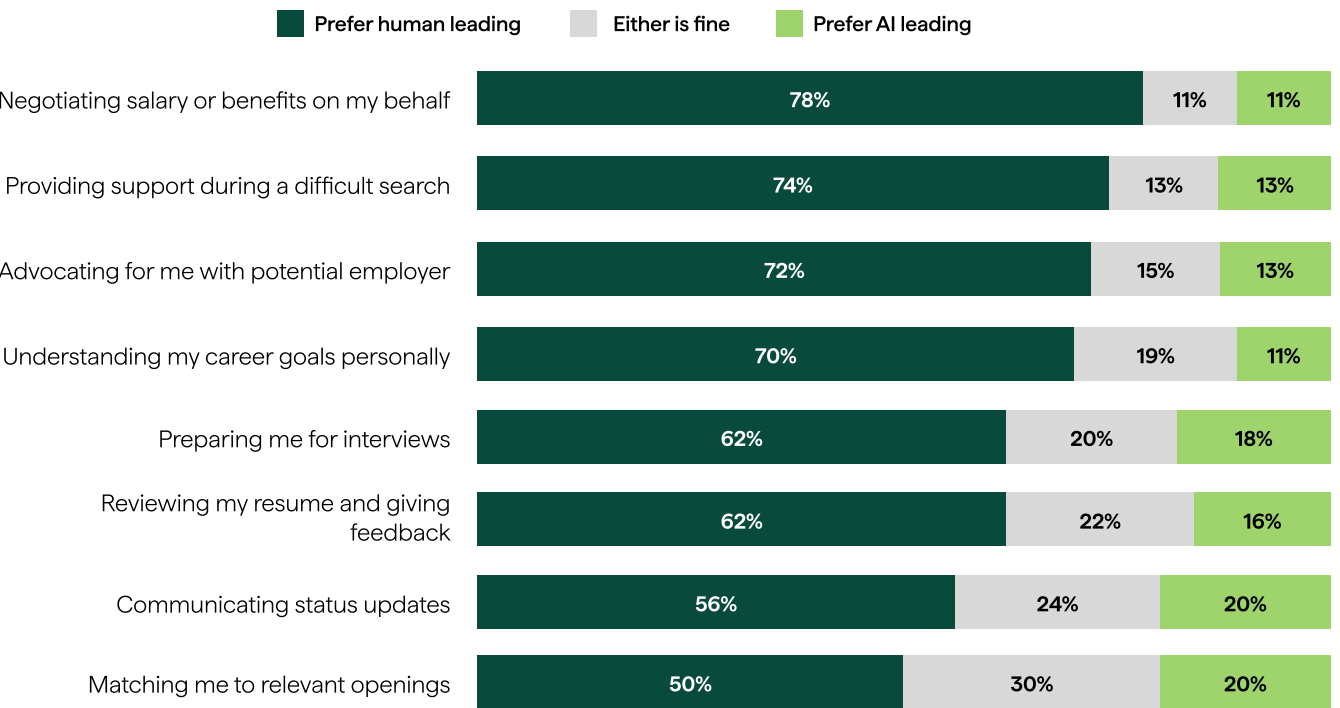
Belief in what's possible doesn't always match what candidates have actually experienced, but the gap is narrower than skeptics might expect. Roughly 70% of all candidates either have personally experienced meaningful recruiter impact (37%) or believe it's still possible they will (33%).

These rates are even higher among Placed Talent, the cohort that has actually been through the staffing process. A gratifying 85% rate potential recruiter impact “very” or “extremely” meaningful, including 38% who call it “extremely meaningful or life-changing,” and 58% among the Placed Talent group say they have personally experienced meaningful recruiter impact.

Candidates broadly believe the human recruiter can matter, and the candidates who've actually worked with one believe it more strongly and more often based on direct experience.

Where Candidates Want a Human Leading

Across eight tasks where staffing firms might use either humans or AI, candidates show a clear pattern: they want humans leading on advocacy, negotiation, and emotional support, and are open to AI for more transactional work.



Salary negotiation tops the list: 78% want a human to lead this effort, by far the highest of any task. Support during a difficult search is second (74%), advocacy with the employer is third (72%), and understanding personal career goals is fourth (70%). At the other end of the spectrum, even on the most AI-friendly tasks measured, 20% or fewer actively prefer AI to lead. This shows that candidates want humans at every moment of advocacy, and are merely tolerant of AI in mechanical contexts.

Placed Talent Is Less Sold on the “Humans Irreplaceable” Pitch:

Placed Talent holds sharper preferences than non-placed candidates, and they tilt in a counter-intuitive direction. On tactical tasks (matching, resume review, status updates), they want a human at higher rates. But on the representational tasks firms most often market as the human recruiter’s irreplaceable value, the pattern reverses: Placed Talent picks “Prefer AI leading” at roughly twice the rate of non-placed candidates on negotiating salary (18% vs. 9%), advocating with employers (21% vs. 10%), and providing support during a search (19% vs. 11%), all statistically significant. The cohort with the most lived experience of recruiter representation is the least convinced humans are irreplaceable in those roles. A plausible explanation is that experienced candidates trust AI-driven market benchmarks as more objective and harder to dispute than a recruiter’s judgment. The implication: firms could position AI-assisted compensation benchmarking as a feature rather than a concession, particularly with candidates who have been through the placement process before.

What Role Should the Recruiter Play

Asked which single role best describes what a human recruiter should take in their search, candidates' answers spread across roles fairly evenly, but with a top three that point clearly at value over volume.

Most Important Role a Human Recruiter Should Play



When asked what role a recruiter should play, candidates pick people-centered roles over transactional ones. Connector (19%), Supporter (18%), and Advocate (16%) lead, accounting for 54% of responses combined. Accelerator (find a job faster) merits only 14%, and Middleman (passes along opportunities with little broader impact) sits at 11%. The roles candidates value most are the ones AI is least equipped to replicate: opening doors, advocating with employers, and providing support through the search.

Key Takeaways: The Human Recruiter Value Proposition

- Belief in the value of a human recruiter is broad: 95% of candidates believe a recruiter can be at least somewhat meaningful, 76% rate the potential impact as “very” or “extremely” meaningful, and 26% call it “extremely meaningful or life-changing.”
- Overall, 70% of candidates either have personally experienced meaningful recruiter impact (37%) or believe it's still possible (33%). The case strengthens among Placed Talent: 58% have personally experienced it, more than double the non-placed rate.
- Salary negotiation (78% want human involvement), emotional support during a difficult search (74%), and advocacy with the employer (72%) are the strongest human-preferred tasks. AI is tolerable on status updates and initial matching, but never leads.
- Candidates want the recruiter to be a Connector, Supporter, and Advocate (combined 54%), not an Accelerator or Middleman. The roles candidates value are the ones AI cannot replicate.

SECTION 5

The Candidate Experience



Ghosting: Prevalence and Tolerance

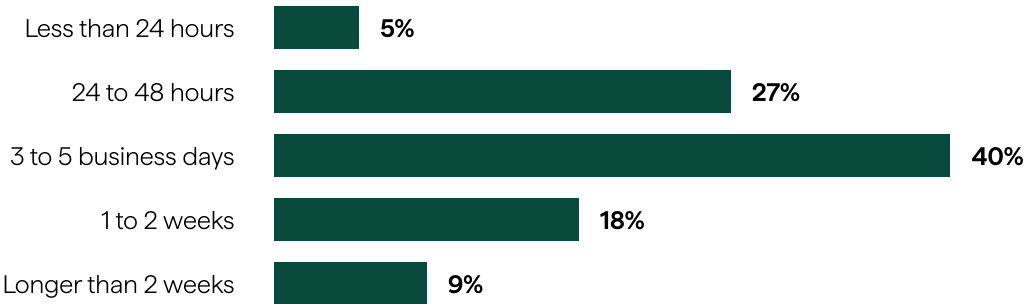
Ghosting refers to a staffing firm going silent on a candidate during an active hiring process: no response, no explanation, no closure. Ghosting is one of the highest-frequency, highest-damage failure modes in the candidate experience, and nearly half of candidates report they have been ghosted by a staffing firm.

46%

of candidates have been ghosted by a staffing firm, including 24% who have been ghosted more than once.

And the tolerance window is short. Candidates do not need to wait long before they consider silence to be ghosting:

How Long Without Response Counts as Ghosting?



More than two-thirds (73%) of candidates consider waiting 3–5 business days or less for a response from their staffing firm to be ghosting. Only 9% wait more than two weeks before mentally writing off a relationship. The implication for firms is operational: the silent threshold a recruiter has before candidates consider themselves abandoned is measured in just a few business days, not in weeks.

Younger Candidates Get Ghosted More while Older Candidates Forgive Less

Under-35 candidates have been ghosted at significantly higher rates than 55+ candidates (59% vs. 36%), but they are also the most willing to give a firm another chance: 74% say they would hesitate to use the firm again, compared to 90% among candidates 55 and older. Younger candidates appear more likely to have normalized ghosting as a feature of the modern job search, while older candidates have not, and won't.

For staffing firms, the consequences of ghosting candidates are concrete, measurable, and large.

If Ghosted, How Candidates Would React, % Agree

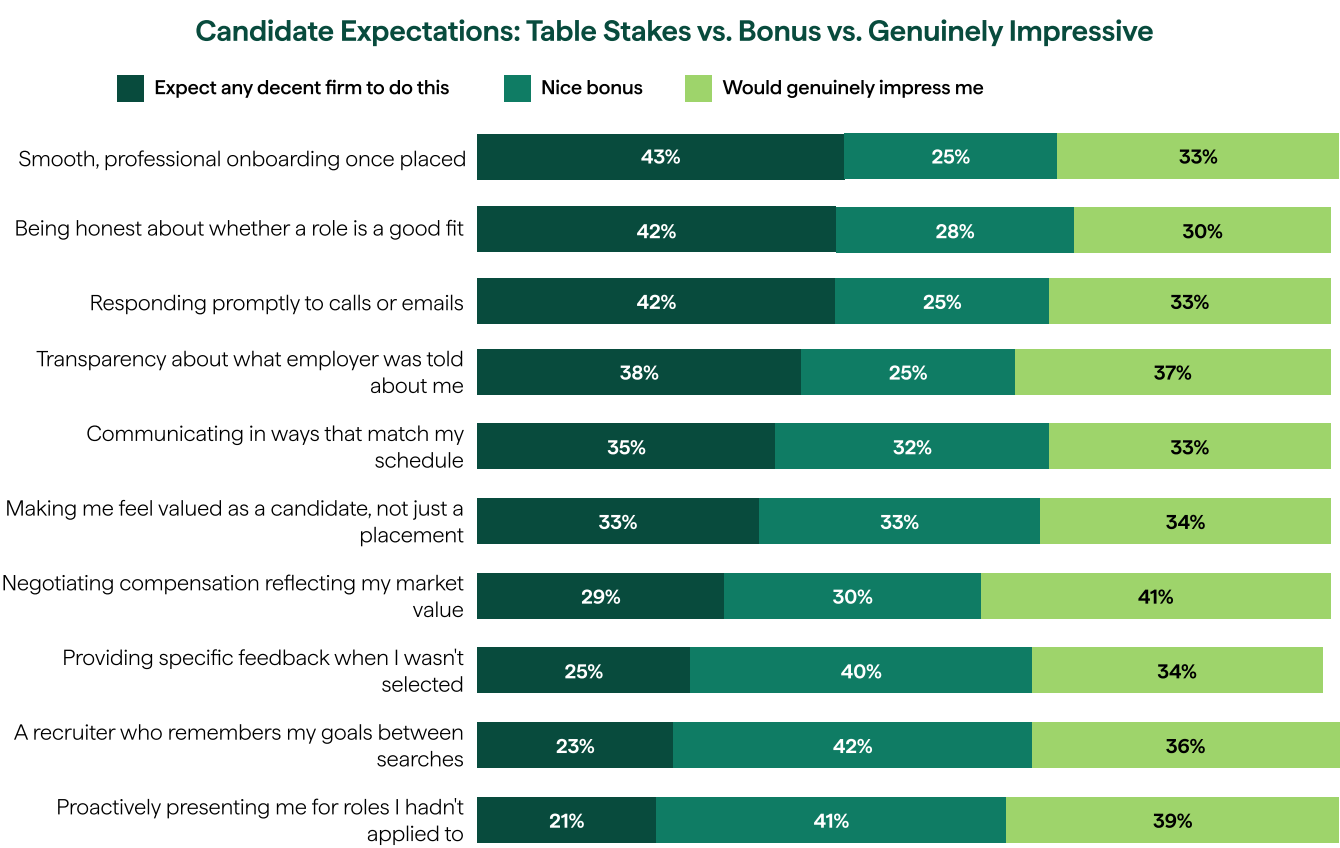


The figure above reflects % Agree + % Strongly Agree.

The numbers are devastating: Four out of every five candidates (81%) would actively look for a different staffing firm if they felt they were being ghosted; 78% would hesitate to use that firm again; 76% would share the experience with their network; and 75% say it would permanently damage their trust in the firm. The only ghosting consequence below the 75% line is posting a negative online review (45%), meaning negative experiences spread, but mostly through private channels rather than public reviews. The damage from a single ghosting incident reaches further than firms typically account for, and it doesn't show up in their star ratings.

What Candidates Expect, Want, and Are Impressed By

Across ten key behaviors a staffing firm might exhibit, candidates were asked whether each is something they'd simply expect any decent firm to do, a benefit that would be perceived as a nice bonus, or something that would genuinely impress them. This breakdown shows the floor (basic expectations), the ceiling (behaviors generating a genuine “wow” factor), and the space in between.



Three behaviors are more widely treated as basic expectations: smooth onboarding (43% expect), honesty about fit (42% expect), and prompt responses (42% expect). Three behaviors are most likely to genuinely impress: market-value compensation negotiation (41% impress), proactive presenting of roles (39% impress), and transparency about what the employer was told (37% impress). While candidates expect responsiveness and honesty as table stakes, the ways firms can exceed their expectations are to provide proactive advocacy and visible transparency about how the candidate is being represented to employers.

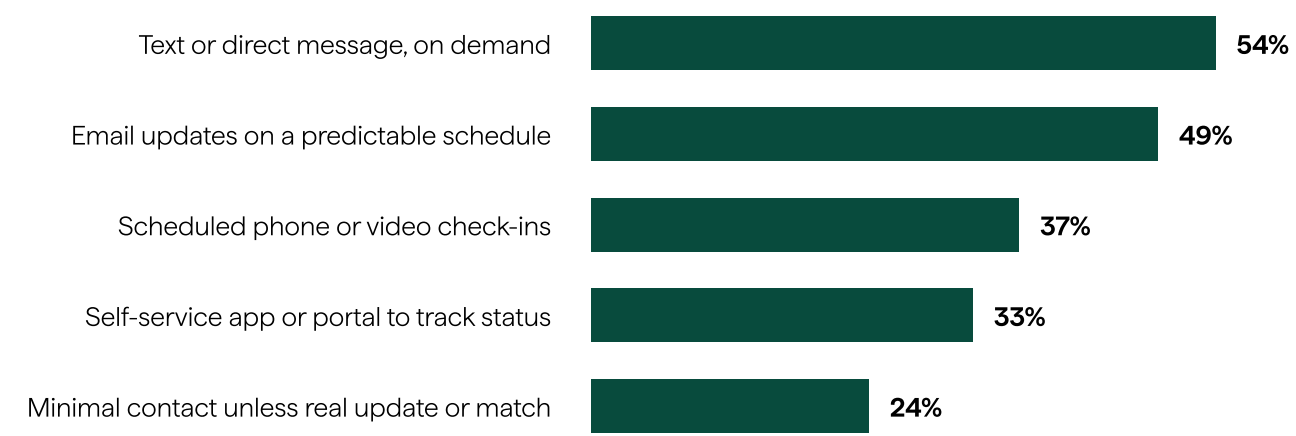
Office/Clerical Candidates See Pay Negotiation as the Differentiator

Office/Clerical candidates are the most likely to say negotiating market-value compensation would genuinely impress them (56%), notably higher than other sectors which cluster in the high-30s to mid-40s. The sectors where candidates may be most receptive to a staffing firm's pay-negotiation pitch differ meaningfully by where they sit.

How Candidates Prefer to Communicate

Asked to rank their top two communication preferences, candidates' answers reveal a market that has moved meaningfully toward text-based, on-demand communication, but where scheduled phone or video check-ins remain widely valued.

How Candidates Prefer to Communicate, % Ranked in Top 2



Text or direct message on demand (54% top-2 rank) leads, followed by predictable email updates (49%) and scheduled phone/video check-ins (37%). Self-service portals (33%) and minimal contact (24%) trail. There is no one-size-fits-all preference, but the bias is toward asynchronous channels, text and email, with phone calls retained for higher-touch moments. Firms that default to phone-first contact risk friction with the majority of their candidates.

Communication Preferences Cross Age Lines

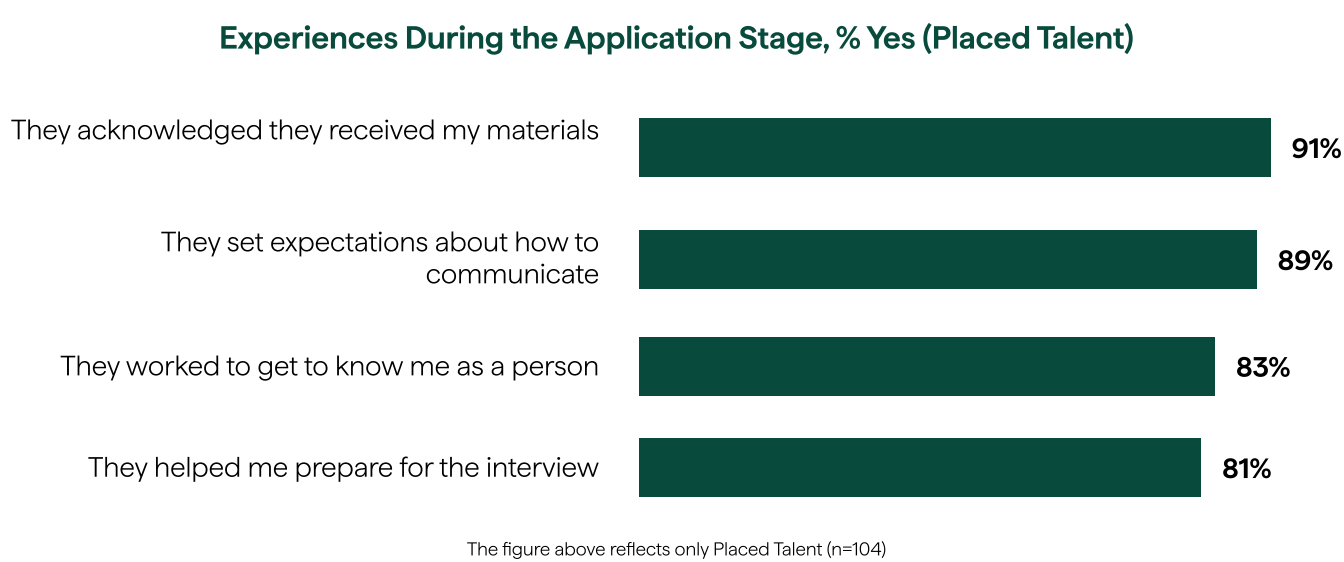
Communication preferences are more similar across age groups than stereotypes suggest. Text on-demand has roughly equal preference across age bands (47%-57%, with 35-54 highest, not under-35). Phone check-ins actually skew slightly younger (43% under-35 vs. 38% 55+ and 34% 35-54). Firms designing communication mix by age should not assume the expected generational split actually exists.

Placed Talent Deep Dive

This section shifts from universal candidate expectations to a focused look at Placed Talent (n=104), candidates who have actually been hired for or placed in roles through a staffing firm. This is where the experiential data is richest and where the industry's actual performance becomes visible against the expectations established above. All percentages in this section reflect Placed Talent only and form the basis of ClearlyRated's published industry Net Promoter Score (NPS) benchmarks.

First Impression: The Application Stage

Placed Talent's application-stage experience is strong on the basics. The relational dimensions sit slightly lower than the procedural ones, but every measure in this battery clears 80%.



The application stage is the strongest leg of the Placed Talent journey. The procedural basics (acknowledging materials, setting expectations) clear 90%, and even the lowest score in this battery sits above 80%. The misses cluster more around relational dimensions: nearly 1 in 5 placed candidates was not helped to prepare for the interview, and a similar share felt the firm did not work to get to know them as a person. These are the dimensions most directly tied to the recruiter value proposition candidates said they want, and they happen at the very front of the engagement period, where trust is either being established or eroded.

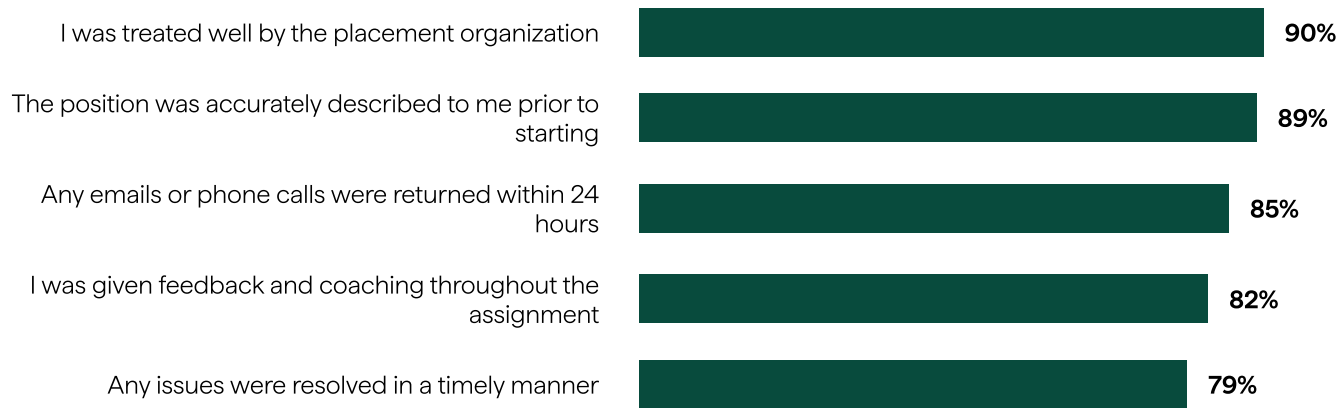
Application Stage NPS Impact:

Among Placed Talent, “helped me prepare for the interview” is the highest-leverage application-stage behavior. Candidates who received this benefit from their staffing firms registered NPS +58; candidates who didn't get any help preparing registered a -21 NPS, a 79-point spread. Interview prep at the front of the engagement is the single most decisive application-stage moment for establishing loyalty.

During the Assignment

Once they are in their work environments, Placed Talent describe their on-assignment experiences as broadly positive. The cohort feels well-treated, well-informed, and consistently in touch with their staffing firms.

Experiences During the Assignment, % Yes (Placed Talent)



The figure above reflects only Placed Talent (n=104)

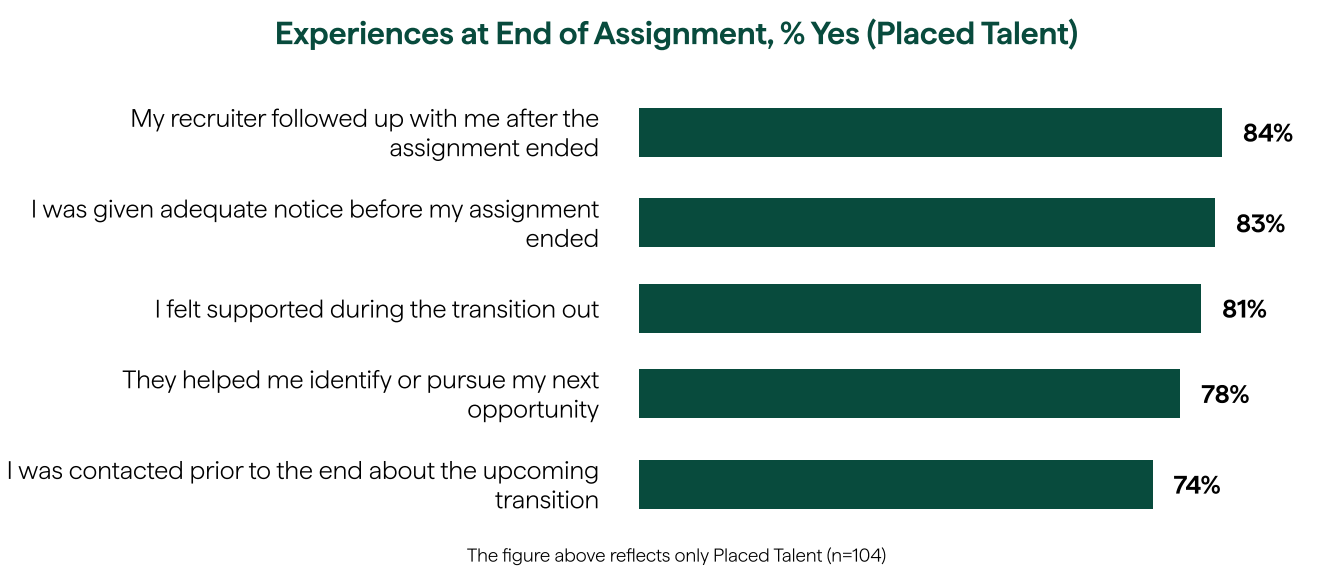
The on-assignment experience reads mostly positive but is somewhat uneven. Treatment by the placement organization and accuracy of the role description are strong, and responsiveness holds up well. The weak points sit on the operational dimensions where execution actually gets tested: timely issue resolution lands lowest, with more than 1 in 5 candidates reporting issues that weren't promptly handled. Coaching and feedback also lag.

During Assignment NPS Impact:

Among Placed Talent, “I was treated well by the placement organization” carries the largest NPS spread of any during-assignment item: +48 when delivered, -10 when not, a 58-point gap. Notably, this is the measure most outside the staffing firm's direct control. The implication is that firm loyalty is partly underwritten by the quality of the placement environment, so the choice of which client to place a candidate into is itself an NPS lever.

End-of-Assignment & Transition

End-of-assignment handling shows the clearest pattern of disengagement in the Placed Talent journey.



The end-of-assignment moment is where the Placed Talent journey leaks most consistently. Every behavior in this battery carries a meaningful miss, and the most operationally important behavior, telling a candidate what comes next before the current assignment ends, is also the weakest. Roughly 1 in 4 placed candidates exits without the basic handoffs that define a renewable relationship: no proactive conversation about transition, no help into the next opportunity, no feeling of support through the off-ramp. The misses here aren't dramatic, but they cluster at the moment that most determines whether a placed candidate returns for a subsequent search, which makes this section a higher-leverage place to invest.

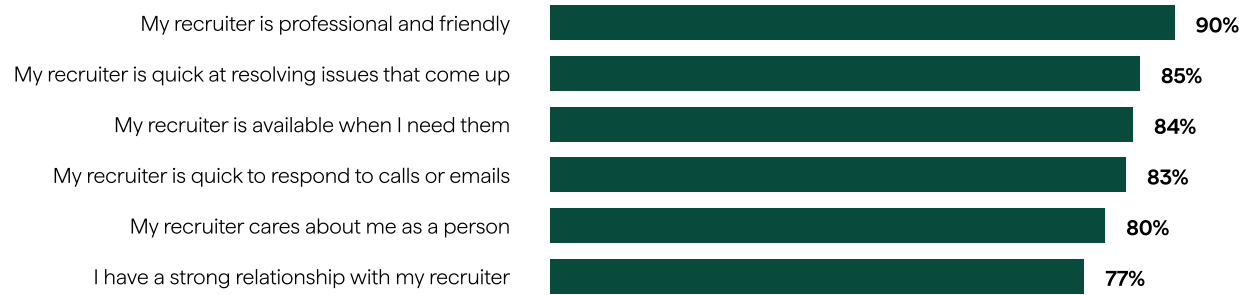
End-of-Assignment NPS Impact:

Among Placed Talent, “I felt supported during the transition out, not just during the assignment” is the highest-leverage end-of-assignment behavior. Candidates who experienced it register NPS +52; candidates who didn't register NPS -5, a 57-point spread. End-of-assignment execution isn't just about retention mechanics, it's the moment where the firm's behavior most directly decides whether a placed candidate becomes a Promoter or Detractor.

Recruiter Relationship Satisfaction

Placed Talent rates the recruiter relationship strongly on the surface dimensions and meaningfully lower on the deeper ones. The transactional layer is delivered consistently; the relational layer less so, leaving definite room for improvement.

Recruiter Relationship Ratings, % Agree (Placed Talent)



The recruiter relationship splits cleanly into two tiers. The transactional layer (professionalism, responsiveness, issue resolution) performs more consistently, while the relational layer (caring about the candidate as a person, having a strong relationship) underperforms. Roughly 1 in 5 placed candidates does not feel their recruiter cares about them personally, and nearly 1 in 4 does not have what they'd call a strong relationship with their recruiter.

Satisfaction with Placed Positions

Placed Talent is broadly satisfied with where they landed, with long-term career-goal alignment trailing the pack, but only modestly.

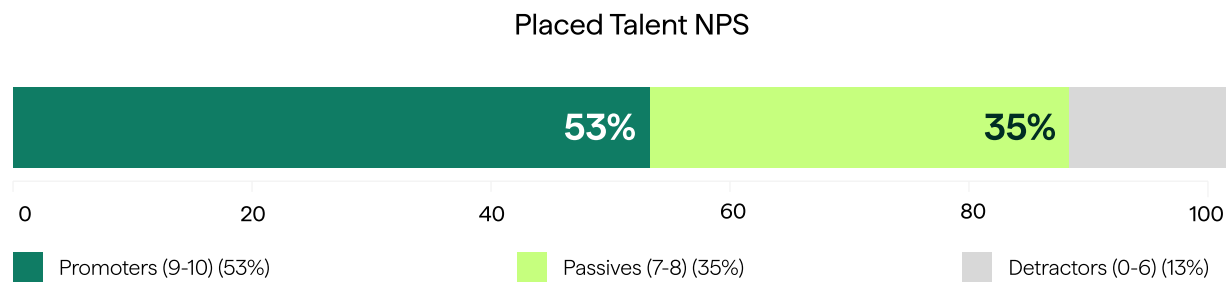
Position Satisfaction Ratings, % Agree (Placed Talent)



Placement satisfaction is broadly strong, but roughly 1 in 5 placed candidates does not feel the position aligns with their career goals, that the pay is fair, or that they are valued in the role. The placement itself often works out even if the softer dimensions around it are where the gaps are noticed.

Loyalty and NPS

ClearlyRated's Placed Talent 2026 benchmark NPS is 40 (53% Promoters, 35% Passives, 13% Detractors), with Promoters outnumbering Detractors by roughly four to one.



The figure above reflects only Placed Talent (n=104)

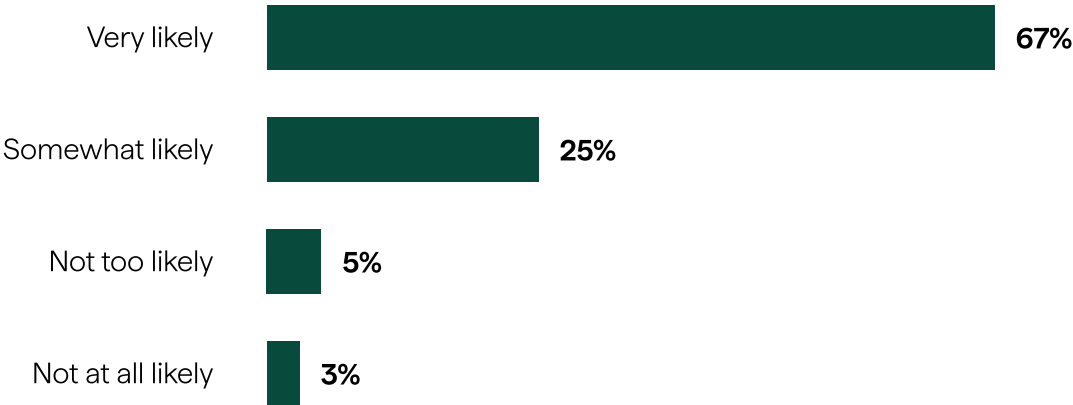
40

Staffing Industry Placed Talent NPS Benchmark

An NPS of 40 is a solid mark for the staffing industry's placed candidate audience. The 53% Promoters base is the foundation of word-of-mouth growth, repeat placements, and renewable assignment relationships. The 13% Detractor rate is not low in absolute terms but is meaningfully contained compared to the broader staffing user base, where Detractors have historically run closer to 20%. This 2026 Placed Talent benchmark of 40 marks a 10-point improvement over ClearlyRated's prior published figure of 30 NPS at the end of 2024.

Return intent confirms what NPS suggests. Two-thirds (67%) of Placed Talent say that they are very likely to use the same agency for their next job search, with another 25% are somewhat likely. Successful end-to-end engagement converts directly into stated return intent.

Likelihood to Use Same Agency for Next Job Search



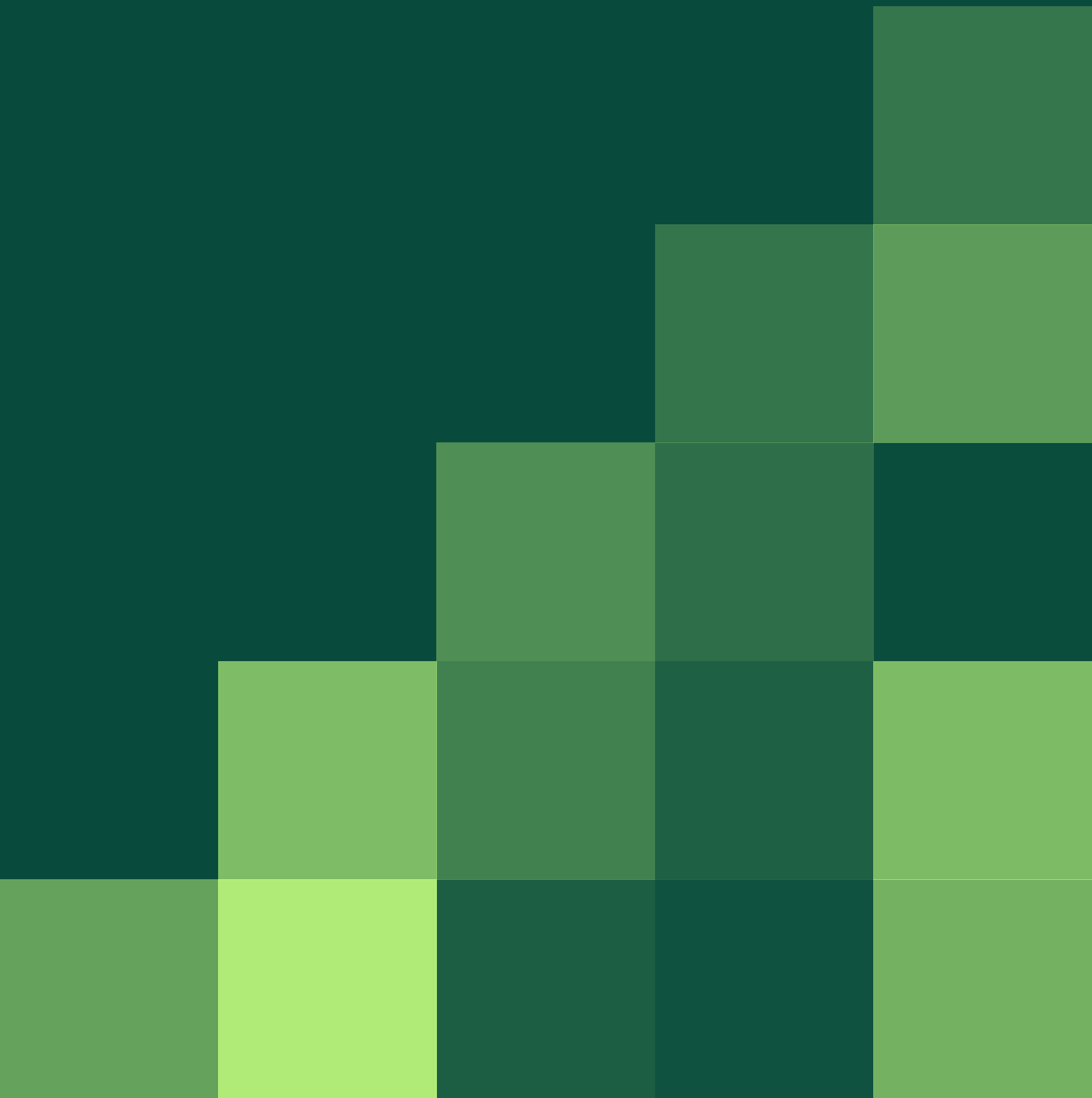
The figure above reflects only Placed Talent (n=104)

The path to widening this cohort runs through fewer dropped relationships at every stage of the candidate journey: cleaner end-of-assignment handoffs, more relational recruiter relationships, faster responsiveness, and more interview prep at the beginning of the engagement. It’s important to note that NPS is a lagging indicator that demonstrates the results of successful placement efforts; the many other factors noted earlier in this report serve on the other hand as leading indicators, and can be used to predict – as well as to create – positive downstream outcomes.

Key Takeaways: The Candidate Experience

- Significantly, 46% of candidates have been ghosted by a staffing firm; 24% more than once. More than two-thirds (73%) consider a lack of contact or response to inquiries of 3 to 5 business days or less to be ghosting. The window for silent failure is short and the consequences are heavy: 81% would actively look for a different firm after even one such incident.
- Candidate table stakes are responsiveness, honesty about fit, and smooth onboarding. The ways to genuinely impress are negotiating market-value compensation, proactive presentation of roles, and transparency about what the employer was told about a candidate.
- Text on-demand (55% listed it in the top-2 most important communication categories) and scheduled email updates (49%) lead candidate contact preferences; phone/video (37%) remains valued but is not a preferred default for most candidates.
- Among Placed Talent, application-stage and during-assignment execution is broadly strong (most measure 80% or higher), but end-of-assignment retention support is the largest gap: only 74% were contacted prior to the end of their assignment about what comes next.
- Recruiter relationship strength splits into two tiers: high-performing professionalism and responsiveness (83% to 90%) and lower-performing care and depth (77% to 80%). The transactional dimensions are being delivered; the relational ones, which candidates value most, lag.
- Position-satisfaction is broadly strong except on long-term career-goal alignment (78%), the lowest score in the satisfaction battery and the dimension most directly tied to the “Navigator” role candidates wish their recruiter played.
- Net Promoter Score (NPS) of 40 is solid, with 53% of candidates considering themselves Promoters and only 13% seen as Detractors, representing a strong baseline with meaningful room for growth through the levers identified in this report.
- Return intent is also strong: 67% of placed talent are very likely to use the same staffing agency for their next job search.

Conclusions & Guidance



Conclusions & Guidance

The State of the Candidate Relationship

The 2026 Staffing Candidate Insights reveal a candidate base that has not given up on the human recruiter but has become meaningfully more skeptical of how the industry actually delivers on the recruiter's potential and might be utilizing AI in ways that candidates don't trust. A very strong 95% of candidates believe a recruiter's support can be at least somewhat meaningful, and 76% rate that potential as very or extremely meaningful. Similarly, 37% report they have personally experienced the benefits of using a staffing firm, and another 33% still believe they will. Candidates are AI-augmented in their own search, AI-skeptical when AI is used on them, and clear about where humans matter most: advocacy, negotiation, and emotional support. They are not asking for impossible things, they are asking for the basic execution of what staffing firms have always promised, delivered with the transparency a 2026 candidate now requires.

Two patterns run through the data and frame the rest of this guidance.

The first is a belief-practice asymmetry. Candidates broadly believe in the human recruiter at every level (potential impact, where humans should lead, the kinds of roles a recruiter should play). What they do not consistently experience is the relational depth that turns that basic belief into loyalty. Across the data, the surface-level dimensions of the recruiter relationship (professionalism, responsiveness, issue resolution) are delivered reliably, while the deeper relational dimensions (cares about me as a person, strong relationship with my recruiter) are where the misses cluster, and where the largest NPS gaps live.

The second is an operational leakage pattern. The misses across the candidate journey cluster at moments of transition. At the front of the engagement, interview prep underperforms relative to administrative steps. At the back of the assignment, candidates are most likely to exit without a structured handoff to what comes next. Beyond the placement itself, only 32% of candidates enter the relationship through first-step consideration. The industry is not underperforming the placement product. It is underperforming in terms of the relationships that surround it.

Three Operational Priorities

Close the basic responsiveness gap.

It's vital to remember that 46% of candidates have been ghosted by a staffing firm, and that 73% consider 3 to 5 business days of silence to be ghosting. The reaction is severe: 81% would actively look for a different firm after even one such incident, and 75% say a single ghosting incident would permanently damage their trust. The fix is operational discipline at scale rather than process redesign.

Invest in the relational depth of the recruiter relationship.

The recruiter-relationship dimension with the lowest score ("a strong relationship with my recruiter" falling at 77% in the Top-2 Box) carries the largest NPS spread in the entire dataset: +74 among candidates who strongly agree versus -7 among those who are neutral, an 81-point gap. The pattern is consistent across the eight tasks where candidates were asked whether they want a human or AI leading: the relational tasks (advocacy, negotiation, support during a difficult search) are the ones where human presence matters most. Becoming a Connector, Supporter, and Advocate (54% of candidates' chosen most-important role for a recruiter) is the operational definition of what candidates are asking for.

Get the transitions right, especially end-of-assignment.

Roughly 1 in 4 placed candidates exits an assignment without the basic handoffs that define a renewable relationship. Being contacted prior to the end of the assignment about what comes next is the lowest score in the entire Placed Talent journey at 74%, and every end-of-assignment behavior carries a positive NPS lift above the +40 baseline when delivered. The cheapest customer is the one you already have, and the data shows the industry is leaking placed candidates at the moment they are most renewable.

Where This Study Points

The firms that win will be the ones that lean into what only humans can do, communicate clearly about what AI is doing on their behalf, and treat the end of an assignment as the start of the next relationship rather than the end of the current one. The 2026 candidate market rewards firms that do the basic work of a human relationship at scale. The firms that get this right have a defensible competitive position. Those that don't have a churn problem dressed up as an awareness problem.

Conclusion

The 2026 Staffing Candidate Survey shows candidates actively reshaping their expectations while remaining fundamentally hopeful about what staffing firms can offer them. They are clear about what they want: a real human in the moments that matter, transparent disclosure when AI is involved, responsiveness that doesn't lapse into ghosting, and a relationship that doesn't end when the placement does. Firms that respond by closing the ghosting gap, investing in the relational dimensions of the recruiter role, becoming credibly transparent about AI, and treating the end of an assignment as a renewal opportunity will earn higher NPS, deeper loyalty, and a defensible position with a candidate base that hasn't given up on them but is increasingly willing to walk at the slightest provocation or failure.

About ClearlyRated

ClearlyRated® is a leading provider of client and candidate satisfaction surveys and service quality research for professional service providers. We help staffing and recruiting firms leverage the Net Promoter Score® survey methodology to measure the candidate and client experience, differentiate on service quality, and build online reputation. Staffing firms partnering with ClearlyRated have access to:

- Proprietary satisfaction survey tool, specifically designed to support candidate and client survey best practices for staffing and recruiting firms.
- Real-time response data and issue tracking to ensure proper follow-up, candidate redemption, and client retention.
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