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2026 GLOBAL REPORT

Inside the Candidate Experience

AI has reshaped hiring. Communication is still the missing link.

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Introduction

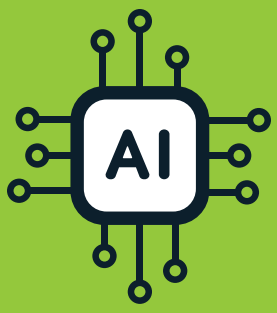
The story of candidate experience in 2026 is not, at its core, a story about artificial intelligence. It is the same story we have been telling for over a decade — just accelerated. In 2010, PeopleScout research found that only 5% of candidates rated their experience as excellent. In 2023, that number had crept up to fewer than two in ten (18%). In 2026, despite widespread investment in hiring technology, just 11% rate it as excellent.

What has changed over the last three years is not the experience — it's the tools. In 2023, AI was largely an employer capability — used to screen, sort and filter candidate data at scale. By 2026, candidates have much wider access to AI tools of their own to optimize applications, research companies, write résumés and CVs, and prepare interview answers in minutes.

Yet despite increased use of AI on both sides, the data suggests the fundamental experience of being a candidate has not improved. In many ways, it has gotten harder to navigate.

This report tells the story of that widening gap — between what employers intend and what candidates experience. It is not primarily a story about technology. It is a story about communication. Or rather, the lack of it. AI has not created the communication gaps evident in today's candidate experience. But it has made them more consequential.

This report draws from two data sources: a survey of over 1,000 job seekers across 10 global markets and PeopleScout's Candidate Experience Index which evaluates an organization's hiring journey. Together they tell a consistent story — one of a hiring environment where AI use is accelerating on both sides of the table and communication has not kept pace. They also point to the same findings: the organizations producing the best candidate experiences in our study are not the most technologically sophisticated. They are the most communicative. That finding holds in every region, every market and every demographic group we surveyed.



2010

5%

of candidates rate their experience as excellent

2023 ↗

18%

of candidates rate their experience as excellent

2026 ↘

11%

of candidates rate their experience as excellent



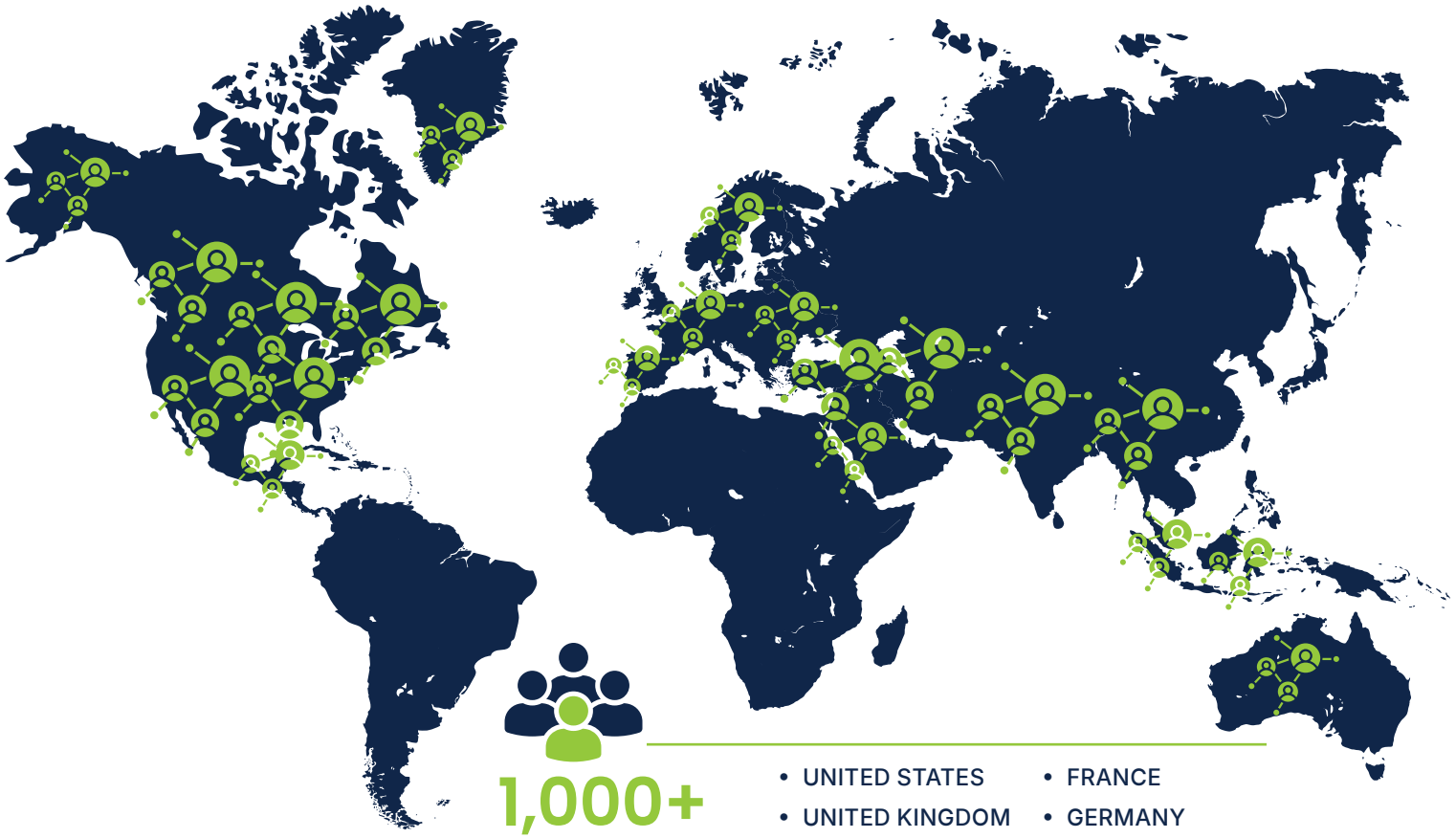
ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This report draws on two distinct but complementary research streams, giving us both an objective audit of employer behavior and a direct window into candidate sentiment.

THE GLOBAL CANDIDATE SURVEY

We surveyed more than 1,000 individuals who had applied for at least one job in the previous six months.

RESPONDENTS WERE DRAWN FROM 10 GLOBAL MARKETS:



1,000+
candidates surveyed

- UNITED STATES
- UNITED KINGDOM
- AUSTRALIA
- INDIA
- POLAND
- FRANCE
- GERMANY
- NEW ZEALAND
- SINGAPORE
- SPAIN

The survey was designed to understand how candidates are experiencing the modern hiring process, including the growing role of AI.

Questions covered:

- AI usage
- attitudes toward employer screening practices
- ghosting
- feedback
- overall satisfaction

THE CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE INDEX

We applied our proprietary Candidate Experience Index to the hiring journeys of organizations across 20 sectors around the world. Conducting the research from the perspective of a real candidate, we applied for roles at each organization and scored every step of the pre-interview process across five stages:

Awareness	How easily can candidates find your careers information?
Consideration	How are your values and purpose communicated? How is life as an employee communicated?
Activation	How are you generating interest among your talent audiences to convert them to applicants? How is the application process communicated?
Application	How easy is it to complete the application?
Engagement	How are you keeping candidates warm after they apply?

Each organization received a Candidate Experience Index score — a composite rating calculated from 40 key experience indicators. This includes 15 critical factors we have identified from working with hundreds of clients as those most likely to make or break the candidate experience. Scores range from 0 to 1.0; the higher the score, the stronger the candidate experience.

Index Score

- 5 stages
- 40 key indicators
- 15 critical factors

A NOTE ON COMPARABILITY

Where relevant, we reference findings from PeopleScout's 2023 Candidate Experience Report. While methodologies differ between the two studies, the directional comparisons are valid, and we've drawn on the three-year view throughout this report to add context.

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Key Findings

THE MUTUAL SILENCE

AI is being used on both sides, but no one is talking about it.

52% of job seekers globally used AI in their job search over the last six months. India leads at 84%, with the U.S. at just 22%

75% of candidates who used AI said nothing about it to employers – 54% simply weren't asked

52% believe AI is probably or definitely screening their applications

65% of candidates heard nothing about AI from any employer

This silence has consequences.

39% of candidates who suspected AI screening changed their approach as a result

THE GHOSTING PROBLEM

Most applications don't receive a response.

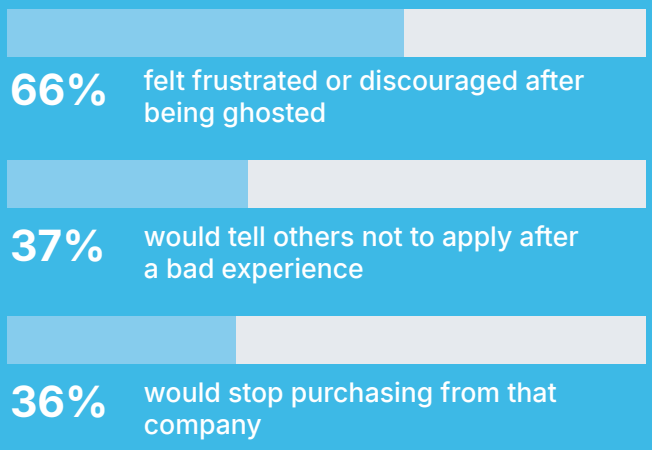
64%

of candidates heard nothing back from more than half the employers they applied to

Not being ghosted is the exception, not the rule.

less than 1 in 10

candidates were never ghosted at all

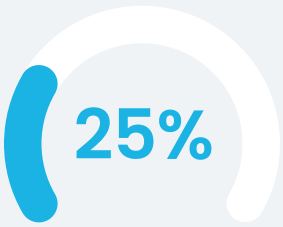


66% felt frustrated or discouraged after being ghosted

37% would tell others not to apply after a bad experience

36% would stop purchasing from that company

CONFIDENCE IN HUMAN REVIEW



25% of candidates are very confident that a human reviewed their application

30% are not sure

12% are not confident

THE CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE INDEX: HOW EMPLOYERS PERFORM

Awareness	77
Consideration	40
Activation	23
Application	38
Engagement	9



The Engagement stage covers everything after a candidate applies: acknowledgment, next steps, rejection communication, specific feedback. The automated response — the system confirmation that an application was received — is now close to universal. Meaningful communication after that point is not. For most candidates, the automated acknowledgement is the last thing they hear.

WHAT CANDIDATES ACTUALLY WANT

The top three priorities among job seekers — respect for their time, a transparent process and fair assessment — are Engagement-stage commitments.

Priority	Global Avg (out of 5)
Employer respects my time	**4.36**
Process is transparent	**4.28**
Fair assessment regardless of background	**4.27**
Clear feedback if rejected	4.17
Guaranteed human review	4.12
Application is quick (5–10 min)	3.99
Demonstrate skills (work sample)	3.58

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What Candidates Are Experiencing: The Global Picture

THE HIRING LOOP

Over half of candidates globally (52%) used AI tools in their job search. Candidates are using AI primarily to improve their language (41%) and save time (38%). Only 3% say their primary motivation was getting past screening systems.

What candidates used AI for



Why candidates used AI



The data suggests candidates are not trying to game the system — they are adapting to a hiring process that has become less transparent. In 2023, we reported that candidates were spending an average of three to four hours preparing and submitting a single job application — and nearly half (48%) received no feedback. Fast forward to 2026 and nearly two-thirds (64%) of candidates say they received no response to more than half of their applications.

64%

of candidates say they received no response to more than half of their applications

At the same time, 52% suspect they are being screened by algorithms, yet 65% heard nothing from employers about AI use at any point.

With that context, it should be no surprise that more job seekers are turning to AI tools to expedite the application process. Employer behavior has led candidates to treat job applications as low-investment transactions rather than the beginning of a professional relationship.

The global candidate experience has been shaped by this dynamic. Employers have automated screening to manage volumes and find efficiencies. Candidates aren't told how they are being evaluated. Candidates are ghosted and receive no feedback. Candidates minimize their investment per application by using AI to save time. Résumés and CVs start to look the same. Genuine differentiation becomes harder to detect. Employers rely more heavily on automated screening. And around we go.

52%

of candidates suspect they are being screened by algorithms

yet 65% heard nothing from employers about AI use at any point







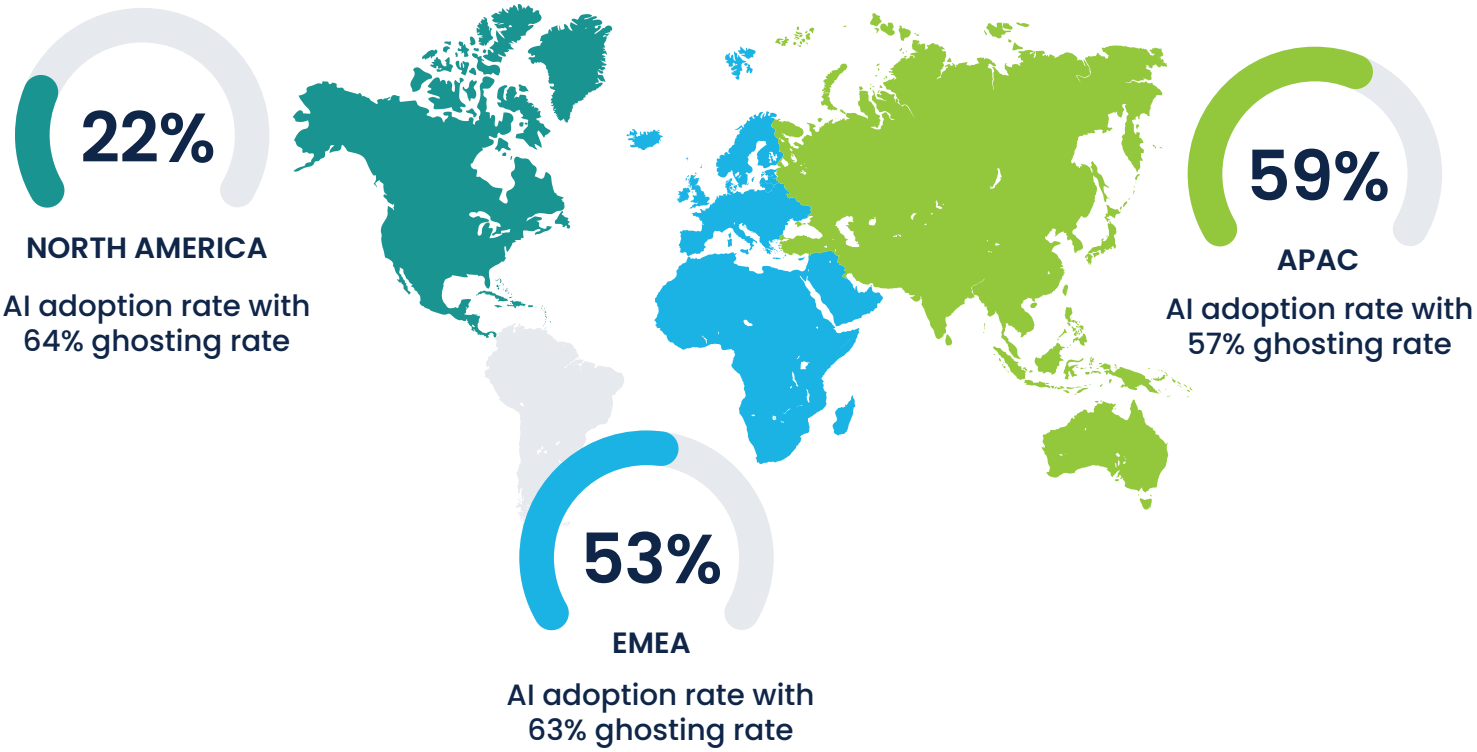


The data points to the presence of the hiring loop in all regions. The difference between them is the speed at which it's spinning.

APAC is running the fastest. Candidates there have adopted AI at higher rates than any other region (59% adoption, led by India at 84%), suspect AI screening at the greatest rate (57%) and are contending with a high ghosting rate with 67% of job seekers saying they were ghosted in over half of their applications.

EMEA has a 53% AI adoption rate, a 63% ghosting rate and the worst candidate experience of any region we surveyed—with 19% of candidates rating their most recent application experience as negative.

North America has the lowest AI adoption (22%), a 64% ghosting rate and the highest frustration after ghosting of any region at 82%. While AI adoption is lower, the lack of communication is already producing the same consequences seen in other markets.



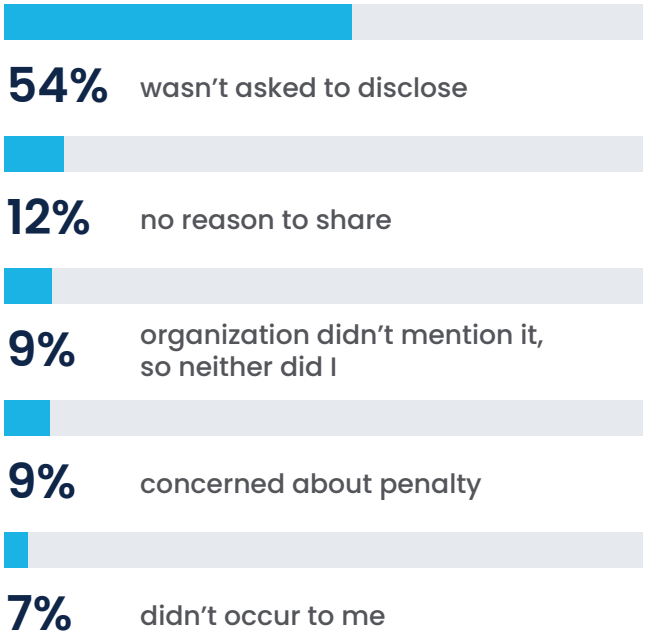
THE MUTUAL SILENCE

Three-quarters (75%) of AI-using candidates did not disclose their use to employers. The dominant reason — in every market, every region, every demographic group — was simply that nobody asked (54%). A further 9% say the organization did not mention use of AI, so neither did they, a direct connection between employer and candidate behavior.

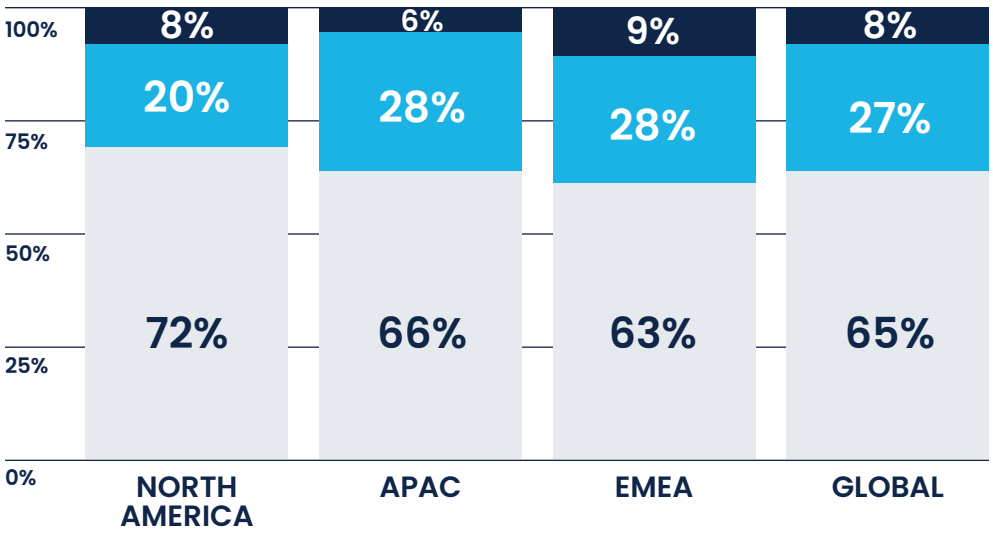
75% of AI-using candidates did not disclose their use to employers

The employer communication picture is also stark. Two-thirds (65%) of candidates globally say none of the employers they applied to mentioned use of AI at any point. North America has the worst track record at 72%.

Non-disclosure reasons



Frequency of employers mentioning AI



65%
of candidates globally say none of the employers they applied to mentioned use of AI at any point

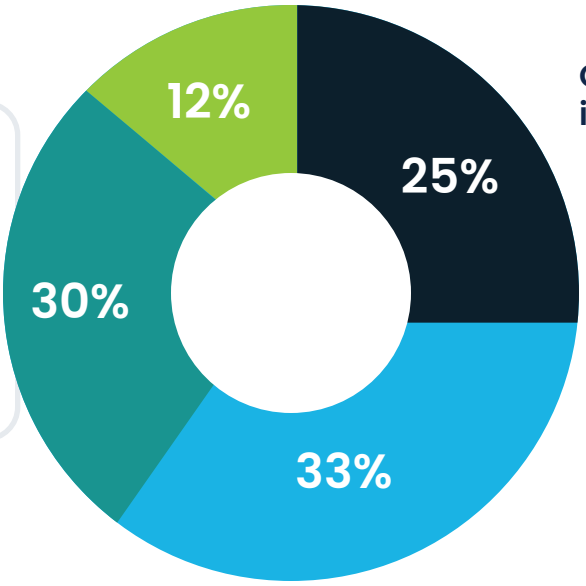
This is not a case of candidates deliberately concealing wrongdoing. It is a picture of a hiring environment where neither party has established clear expectations, and where silence on both sides has become the default. India is the exception that proves the rule. It is the most AI-advanced market in the study and the most communicative. Sixty-four percent of Indian candidates received some communication about AI from employers, the highest of any market in the study. The effect is measurable: where employers communicated openly with all candidates, 56% of those candidates were very confident a human reviewed their application. Where employers said nothing, just 24% were. Transparency makes a clear difference — it builds trust.

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THE CONFIDENCE GAP

Lack of communication around AI use produces a measurable downstream effect.
Only 25% of candidates globally are very confident a human reviewed their application.

25%
of candidates globally are very confident a human reviewed their application



Overall candidate confidence in human review

- **25%** Very confident
- **33%** Somewhat confident
- **30%** Not sure
- **12%** Not confident

The connection between presumed use of AI and human review confidence is one of the sharpest findings in the dataset. Among candidates who suspected AI was screening their applications, only 20% were very confident a human also reviewed their submission. Among those with no AI suspicion, 55% were confident. The gap is not caused by AI use — but rather, the silence around where and how it is being used.

Among candidates who suspected AI screening, only 20% were very confident a human reviewed their application. Among those with no suspicion, 55% were.



The regional picture on human review confidence shows meaningful variation. EMEA has the highest not sure rate of any region (31%) — the largest uncertain middle. APAC's very confident rate is lowest (23%), consistent with its highest AI suspicion. North America has the highest not confident rate (18%) and the most dramatic payout for transparency: where employers communicated openly, 63% of candidates were very confident of human review, compared to 31% where employers said nothing — the largest gap of any region.

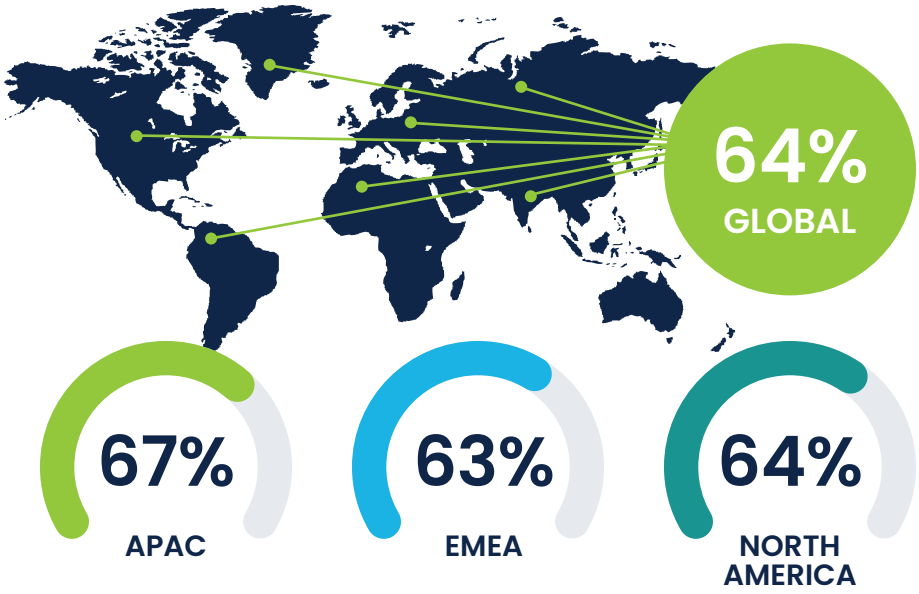
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THE GHOSTING PROBLEM

This lack of transparency culminates in its most basic and most damaging form: being ignored entirely. Globally, 64% of candidates were ghosted in more than half their applications.

More than one in three were ghosted in 75–100% of their applications. Less than 8% say they were never ghosted at all. Not being ghosted is the exception, not the rule.

GHOSTING RATES BY REGION



Trend: From January 2026, new legislation in Ontario, Canada is addressing ghosting, requiring employers to notify interviewed candidates of their hiring decision within 45 days or face penalties. It is the first jurisdiction to formalize what most candidates have long considered a basic professional courtesy. It is unlikely to be the last.

Among candidates with a negative experience globally, 37% would tell others not to apply and 36% would avoid purchasing from the company. The regional rates are similar, but the emotional and commercial consequences diverge.

37% **of candidates would tell others not to apply and avoid purchasing from the company**

North America's frustration with ghosting (82%) is by far the highest of any region, more than 20 percentage points above EMEA and APAC.

APAC candidates are the most likely to say they would feel less inclined to apply to that organization again (47%).

EMEA candidates share their experiences most broadly (22% shared with others) and carry the biggest impact to the bottom line (37% would avoid purchasing from that company).

For consumer-facing businesses, the candidate pool and the customer base are the same people. These are not candidate experience metrics. They're revenue protection metrics.

The efficiency savings from AI investment are real. But they need to be weighed against the revenue exposure created by the communication failures that are happening in parallel — the ghosting, the silence, the candidates who leave and don't come back. Most organizations are only looking at one side of it.

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The Candidate Experience Index: What Employers Are Delivering

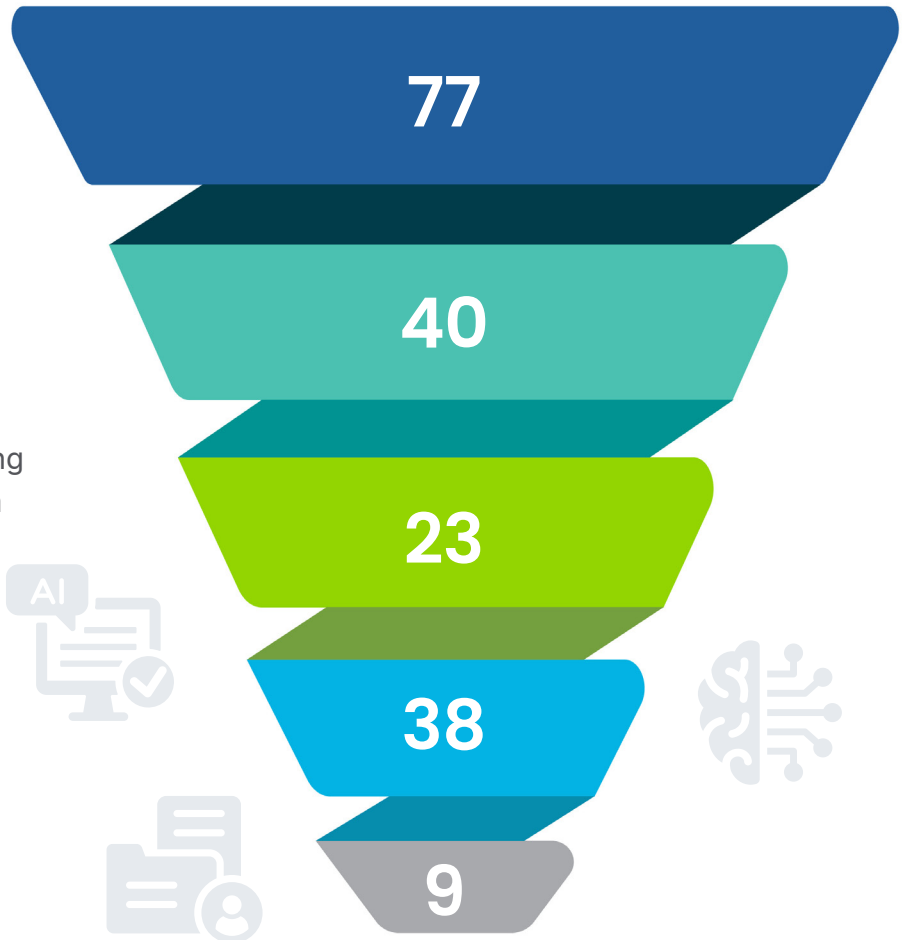
Awareness
How easily can candidates find your careers information?

Consideration
How are your values and purpose communicated? How is life as an employee communicated?

Activation
How are you generating interest among your talent audiences to convert them to applicants? How is the application process communicated?

Application
How easy is it to complete the application?

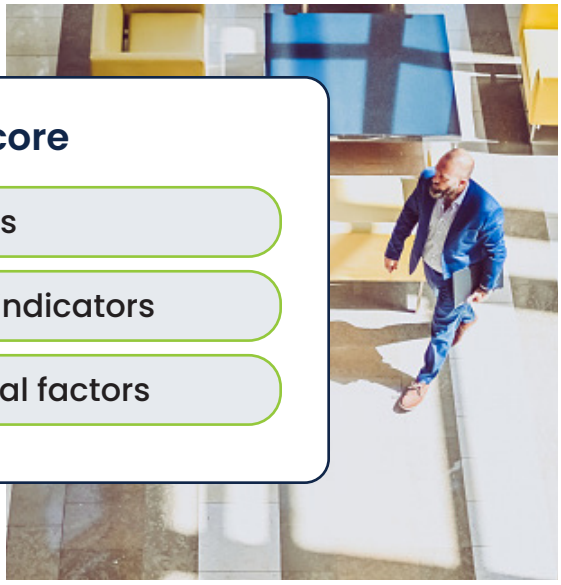
Engagement
How are you keeping candidates warm after they apply?



Candidate Experience Index scores are reported on a 0–100 scale.

The Candidate Experience Index assesses employer hiring processes from the perspective of a real candidate, scoring each organization against 40 key experience indicators across five stages of the pre-interview journey. It confirms, from the employer side, exactly what candidates described from theirs.

Looking at the funnel, the scores reveal that employers perform best where technology has introduced automation and fall short when it comes to genuine human communication with candidates.



Index Score

- 5 stages
- 40 key indicators
- 15 critical factors

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Awareness
77

Organizations are broadly findable on Google, careers pages are easily accessible from the main website and the basic infrastructure of attraction is in place. This is a stage where technology is being leveraged successfully, and the score reflects it.

Consideration
40

A candidate who arrives at a careers page wanting to know whether this organization is worth applying to will, in most cases, leave without an answer. The criteria assessed here — culture, values, purpose, employee stories, day-in-the-life content, benefits, working patterns, diversity — represent the material a candidate needs to make a genuine decision. The majority of organizations assessed are not providing it. This is not a technology problem. A careers page that tells the truth about what it is like to work somewhere is a content initiative, not a software one.

Activation
23

A candidate who has been convinced to apply needs to know what the process involves, how long it will take, what they will be assessed on and what to prepare. Most organizations we evaluated are not providing this information. Job postings frequently lack assessment criteria. Process overviews are absent. FAQs are rare. Candidates are being asked to commit time and effort to a process they cannot envision. Again, the barrier here is not technology. This is about publishing more information or making it easier to find.

Application
38

Technology has done more for this stage than any other in the middle of the funnel — applications are mobile-enabled and the basic mechanics are functional. But a score of 38 reflects something technology could address but largely hasn't: candidates are frequently asked to manually enter information already contained in their résumé, progress indicators are absent and tips and hints during the process are rare. These are configuration and design choices that employers have largely failed to address.

Engagement
9

This stage is assessed against five criteria: whether candidates receive an automated acknowledgement; whether they are told what happens next and how to prepare; whether rejections are issued within 48 hours; whether rejections include specific feedback on why the application was unsuccessful; and whether candidates are asked for their view of the experience. Most organizations are delivering the automated receipt. On the remaining four criteria, most are falling short. For the majority of candidates, the automated email is the last communication they receive.

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GETTING WORSE, NOT BETTER



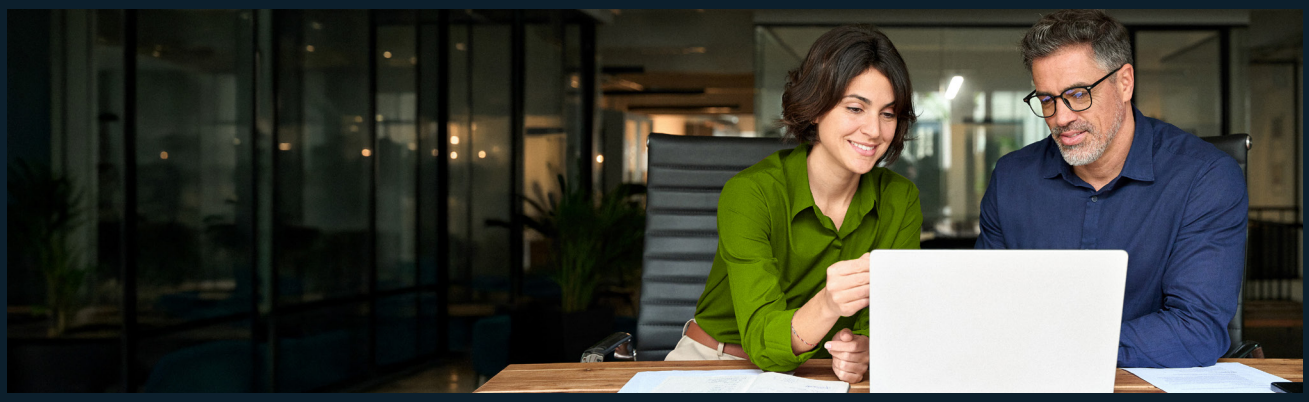
While the 2023 and 2026 studies differ in geographic scope and organizational sample, the directional comparison is striking. The 2026 Index is not unchanged from 2023. It is worse — across every stage, without exception.

Stage	2023	2026	Change
Awareness	90	77	-13
Consideration	53	40	-13
Activation	39	23	-16
Application	55	38	-17
Engagement	24	9	-15

The steepest drops are in the stages that require the most communication. This happened while organizations were investing more heavily in hiring technology than at any point in the previous decade. Yet this data shows that investment hasn't helped achieve the thing candidates actually want: to be treated as people, not processed as applications.

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AI Works Best on a Solid Foundation



Organizations across every region are investing heavily in AI and automation. AI has real and measurable value in hiring — it can help handle volume, reduce time-to-hire and improve consistency in screening. But the performance data suggests a mismatch between where that investment is going and where the real opportunity lies. Most AI investment is concentrated in stages that are already performing well, like Awareness which scores 77. The stage actively damaging employer brands, driving candidates away and eroding the return on that investment is Engagement, which scores just 9. The communication failures at this stage are not a technology gap.

Five candidate experience basics

- [ ] A careers page that answers: what is it actually like to work here?
- [ ] A clear statement of how AI is used in your screening process
- [ ] An automated acknowledgment within hours of application submission
- [ ] A personalized message within 48 hours
- [ ] Specific feedback at every candidate disposition point

The basics matter because AI works best when it is built on a foundation of clear communication and a process candidates trust. Without laying that groundwork first, AI-assisted screening produces diminishing returns — candidates invest less time and energy into their applications, therefore candidate quality declines and the efficiency gains at the top of the funnel are offset by brand reputation damage further down the pipeline. To maximize your AI investment, you must first win with the fundamentals.

What Candidates Actually Want

When we asked job seekers to rate what matters most to them in a hiring process, the answers were clear and describe a standard most hiring processes are currently failing to meet.

Priority (out of 5)	Global	EMEA	APAC	North America
Employer respects my time	4.36	4.36	4.36	4.36
Process is transparent	4.28	4.28	4.28	4.28
Fair assessment regardless of background	4.27	4.27	4.27	4.27
Clear feedback if rejected	4.17	4.17	4.17	4.17
Guaranteed human review	4.12	4.12	4.12	4.12
Application is quick (5–10 min)	3.99	3.99	3.99	3.99
Demonstrate skills (work sample)	3.58	3.58	3.58	3.58

The top-ranking priorities make it clear: candidates want respect for their time. Transparency about what happens next. Honest feedback when they are unsuccessful. A process that evaluates them on genuine ability. The regional differences in this table reveal specific concerns that employers in each market should understand.

APAC places fair assessment at the top (4.41), by far the highest of any region on this attribute and the highest priority in every APAC market. In a region with the highest AI adoption and AI suspicion rates globally, the concern that candidates are not being evaluated fairly runs deeper here than anywhere else.

EMEA prioritizes transparency and feedback, reflecting a region where employer silence is the highest, and candidates have learned not to expect follow-up.

North America leads on wanting their time respected (4.41) and fair assessment as a priority (4.36), consistent with a region where AI adoption is lowest, and candidates are unsure about how AI tools factor into the screening process.

One finding in the priorities data is unique. India is the highest-ranking market in the study for candidates preferring to complete a work sample to demonstrate their skills. In a market that is furthest along the AI adoption curve and has the highest employer transparency rates, candidates have moved beyond anxiety about algorithmic screening and toward how to prove genuine capability through the hiring process.

The top three candidate priorities — respect for their time, a transparent process, honest feedback — are Engagement-stage commitments.

What To Do About It

Many of our conversations with talent acquisition leaders about candidate experience arrive at the same question: what technology should we invest in next? This is understandable, given today's rapid adoption of AI tools across the talent lifecycle. But the data in this report points to a more fundamental consideration: is your hiring process built on a communication foundation that helps maximize that technology investment?

AI tools, automated workflows and ATS upgrades can deliver real value when they support a process that candidates trust. When they don't, the efficiencies AI creates can be offset by employer brand damage, lost revenue and reputational cost at a scale that erases the efficiency gains.



These five recommendations will help you build a foundation that ensures your technology investment pays off.

1 Know where you stand

You cannot fix what you cannot measure from the outside. Internal metrics — like time-to-fill, offer acceptance and drop-off rates — tell you how the process performs for you. They do not tell you how it's perceived by candidates. An objective, stage-by-stage diagnostic of your hiring journey, benchmarked against peers in your sector and region, identifies not just where performance is weak, but which specific gaps are costing you most in candidate quality, brand equity and commercial impacts.

2 Improve transparency around AI use

This is the action that costs the least and signals the most. Information on your careers page and job descriptions stating how AI is used and confirming that a human being is involved in every hiring decision will go a long way to boost trust with your candidates. The data shows it produces measurably different outcomes. In a world where 65% of candidates say none of the organizations they applied to mentioned AI at any point, employers that address it up front will immediately differentiate themselves.

3 Fix the follow-up

The 64% global ghosting rate is not a technology problem. The capability to communicate with candidates at every stage of the process exists in most modern recruitment systems. The gap is not in the tools — it is in the decision to use them consistently.

Consider implementing a minimum engagement standard — automated acknowledgment within hours, personalized message within 48 hours, specific feedback at every rejection. Measure compliance with this communication standard with the same rigor as time-to-fill. The business case is straightforward: 37% of candidates with a negative experience will tell others not to apply. Over a third (36%) will stop purchasing from the company. This is more than a hiring best practice, it's reputation management.

4 Close the Consideration gap

The drop from Awareness (77) to Consideration (40) is the sharpest fall in the entire Index. Candidates arrive at careers pages ready to make a decision — whether it's worth their time to apply to your organization — but cannot find the information they need to make it. Culture, values, benefits, real employee stories and career development pathways were absent from the majority of sites assessed. A well-executed set of employee stories will often be less costly than a recruitment marketing campaign and reach candidates at a more decisive moment. When looking at your careers site, ask yourself this question: can a candidate who has never heard of your organization understand within five minutes what it is genuinely like to work there?

PeopleScout's Talent Advisory team works with organizations to design and implement communication improvements that measurably improve candidate satisfaction and conversion. **Learn more.**

5 Use assessments to restore fairness

The desire for fair assessment is high across regions. Evidence-based, skills-focused assessments address two challenges simultaneously: they provide a signal of genuine capability that is harder to game than a keyword-optimized résumé or CV, and when well-explained, they give candidates confidence the process is designed to evaluate them fairly. Again, communication is key. Assessments introduced with a clear explanation can help build trust.

PeopleScout Assessment Design & Delivery teams create evidence-based assessment frameworks that are transparent, equitable and predictive of genuine job performance. **Learn more.**

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Conclusion

While AI adoption is growing across every market, employers aren't talking openly about how they're using it within the hiring process. That silence has consequences. Only 11% of candidates rated their experience as excellent. Two-thirds of candidates are ghosted in over half of their applications. Only 25% are confident that a human reviewed what they submitted. Candidates are responding by investing less time and effort in each application and using AI to do it faster.

11%

of candidates rated their experience as excellent

The employers that will build genuine competitive advantage over the next few years are those who do both: invest in AI and embrace its use through open candidate communication to make it more impactful. Technology that screens faster and more consistently is valuable. But its value is realized only when candidates trust the process enough to invest in their applications — and when the experience after submission doesn't undo the efficiency gains at the top of the funnel.

THE INTERVENTIONS ARE NOT COMPLEX, AND DO NOT REQUIRE A TECHNOLOGY OVERHAUL:

An AI transparency statement	**A timely follow-up standard**
A careers page that tells the truth about what it is like to work there	**An assessment process that signals fairness rather than obscures it**

We're at an interesting crossroads. Organizations are spending more than ever on AI tools designed to improve hiring outcomes. Meanwhile, the candidates those tools are assessing are investing less effort in their applications, having learned that additional effort does not always result in greater visibility, communication or feedback. As hiring becomes more automated, the data suggests candidates are not asking for more technology — they're asking for stronger signals that a human is paying attention.

THE FIX IS NOT A BETTER ALGORITHM. IT'S A CONVERSATION.

In a recruitment environment where technology can automate more of the process than ever before, communication has become a key differentiator. The organizations that lead with transparency will not just improve their candidate experience scores — they will build an employer brand that makes every subsequent recruitment campaign more effective, more efficient and more human.

How does your organization's candidate experience stack up? Find out with our Talent Diagnostic.

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