

Great Wolf Scales Hiring with an AI-Enhanced Candidate Experience



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Family-Focused Resorts with a Nationwide Footprint

Great Wolf Resorts, Inc., operates 22 indoor water park resorts across the United States, serving more than 13 million guests annually. Its properties have repeatedly earned industry recognition as family-friendly destinations, including honors from *USA Today*, *Orbitz*, and *Family Vacation Critic*.¹ Founded in 1997, Great Wolf Resorts is headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, with corporate offices in Madison, Wisconsin. It has more than 12,000 employees, referred to as “pack members” in alignment with its brand identity.

Hiring at Scale with the Candidate Experience in Mind

Most of Great Wolf’s hires—all but roughly 160 of its 14,000 annual positions—are hourly frontline employees, ranging from housekeepers and front desk agents to lifeguards and other aquatic personnel. As with other companies in the service and hospitality industries, HR leaders saw application numbers fall for both frontline and leadership roles following the COVID-19 pandemic, as workers sought alternative fields.

“That forced us into a position, especially for those frontline hourly positions, where we were having to essentially hire one out of every two people that came through our door. And in the service-based industry, you prefer to be more selective to secure higher-quality talent,” said Rachel O’Connell, Great Wolf’s Senior Vice President of Human Resources.

To improve recruiting for high-volume frontline positions, talent leaders recognized the importance of improving the candidate experience at scale. “Lack of speed is a frustration point,” O’Connell noted. “When you are hiring frontline hourly positions, time is everything, as candidates are not on the job market terribly long. You could be a great option for them, but if you are not the fastest in the game, you lose out on quality candidates.”

1 [“About Us,”](#) Great Wolf Resorts, 2025.

Summary

Challenge

- Hiring more than 14,000 hourly frontline employees annually—including lifeguards, retail associates, and food and beverage staff—in a highly competitive labor market.
- Filling corporate and leadership positions in a sector that many seasoned hospitality professionals left during the pandemic—and have been slow to return to.
- Facing internal skepticism about AI’s ability to offer personalized, positive candidate experiences in an industry that considers human-to-human connection paramount.

Solution

- Shifted the company’s strategic focus to immediate AI adoption opportunities to maximize business impact.
- Simplified hiring—from prehire to onboarding—by unifying TA solutions under a single stack powered by generative AI, automating 90% of the process.
- Enhanced and automated the candidate experience with “Emma,” a conversational AI assistant from Paradox.

Results

- Experienced a 300% increase in applicant volume and a 400% increase in scheduled interviews, while the candidate drop-off rate fell by 85%.
- Reduced time-to-hire for frontline roles from 31.5 to 9 days on average, saving \$700,000 annually in recruitment marketing costs.
- Achieved a 90.7% candidate satisfaction rate and increased guest satisfaction across all resorts.

Skepticism around AI in Hospitality Hiring

Since 2017, Great Wolf has used automation for interview scheduling and answering candidate questions from a manually populated knowledge base. These tools helped reduce repetitive administrative work and improved response times for job-seekers.

Despite these early advancements, company leaders were reluctant to fully embrace generative AI to automate candidate interactions. Concerns around maintaining the human touch in the hiring process contributed to an initial hesitance to adopt AI-powered communication tools more broadly.

“We’re a service industry, so the human-to-human interaction is paramount, and the quality of that interaction is paramount. Initially, we faced internal skepticism over whether AI was going to provide the type of interaction that a hospitality company would be proud of.”

Rachel O’Connell, Senior Vice President of Human Resources, Great Wolf Resorts

Automating Low-Touch Moments in the Hiring Process

Great Wolf embarked on the journey to revamp its talent acquisition (TA) approach by completely rethinking how its applicant tracking system (ATS) could best support a streamlined, candidate-centric hiring experience. The company embraced

generative AI at the core of its TA technology stack, making Paradox its ATS of record and the sole platform for the entire candidate journey—from recruiting through onboarding (see Figure 1).

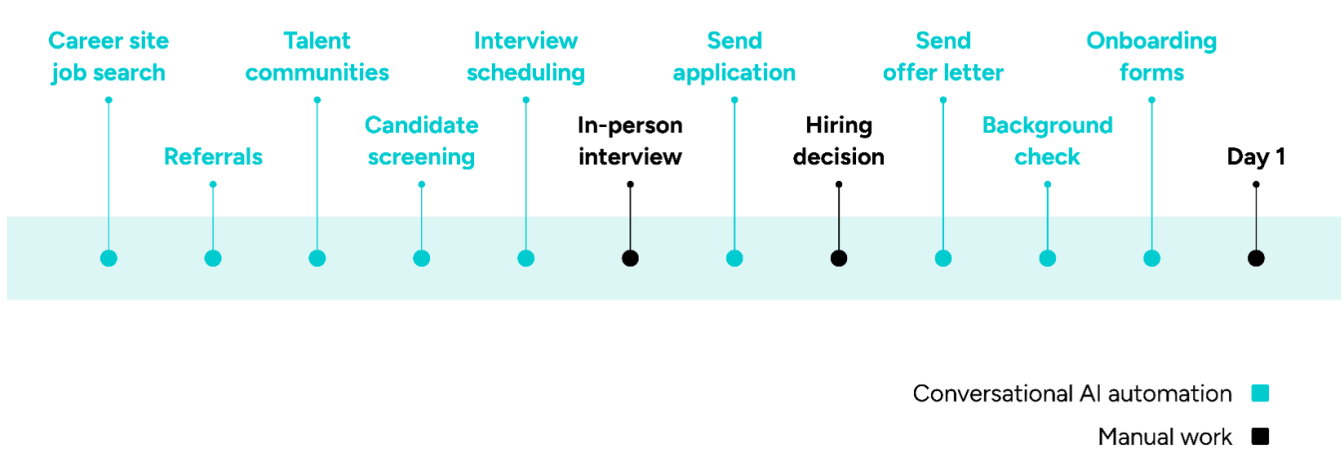
By integrating AI, 90% of the company’s TA process became automated, requiring human involvement only in critical high-touch moments such as in-person interviews and final hiring decisions.

Emma Joins the Pack

Great Wolf introduced “Emma,” a conversational AI assistant built by Paradox, to allow candidates to apply via chat. Emma supports both hourly roles and corporate or leadership positions. To make sure the AI-powered assistant has a human feel, the company hired an actor to visually represent Emma on the Great Wolf website and in all recruitment marketing materials (see Figure 2 on the next page).

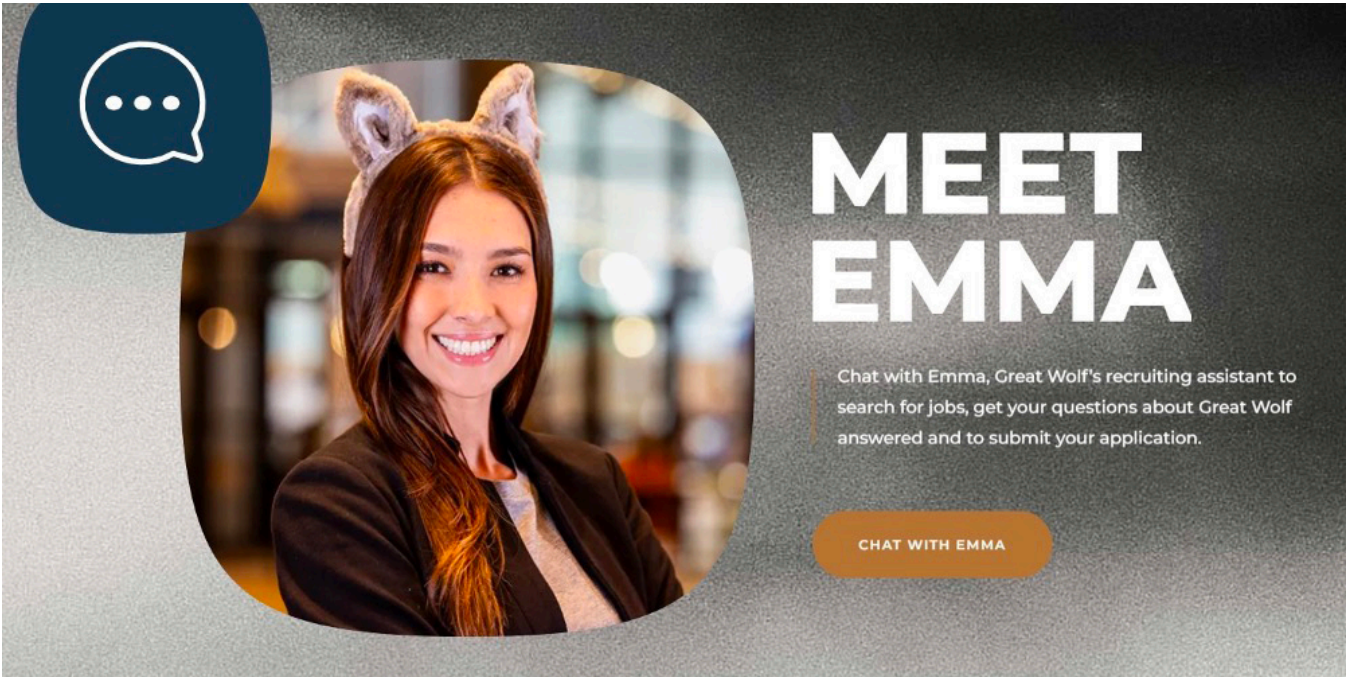
Emma not only schedules interviews but also verifies qualifications by delivering skill and cultural fit assessments to candidates (see Figure 3 on the next page). This allows Great Wolf to efficiently identify strong-fit candidates early in the process while maintaining a consistent and engaging experience.

Figure 1: Key Points of Automation in Great Wolf’s Hiring Process



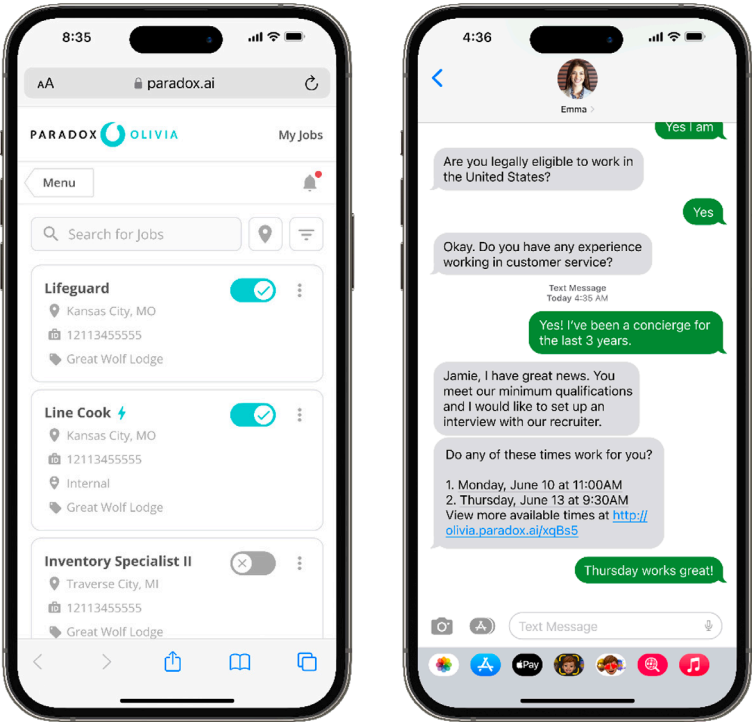
Source: Great Wolf Resorts, 2025

Figure 2: Great Wolf’s AI Assistant, Emma



Source: Great Wolf Resorts, 2025

Figure 3: Identifying Desired Positions and Scheduling with Emma



Source: Great Wolf Resorts, 2025

Initial concerns about the chat-to-apply process serving as a deterrent for some roles or people proved unfounded, O'Connell said. "I think people feel very comfortable with the chat-based interface," she explained. "Over the years, people have been trained by the Amazons of the world to know that when they have a need, they will chat."

Personalizing Candidate Communication with Emma

To personalize candidate communication at scale, Great Wolf leveraged generative AI to replace its manual knowledge base with more dynamic information from throughout the organization. "We have educated Emma by feeding her our website, our handbook, our benefits and policies, informational decks, and information on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Then, she's pulling from them to create a unique response, using an appropriate tone based on that candidate's conversation," O'Connell said. "It's now much more 'true AI' versus giving a canned response to every candidate."

The same environment that supports Emma's knowledge base also captures candidate insights gathered during hiring events—critical opportunities for the Great Wolf team to engage with their

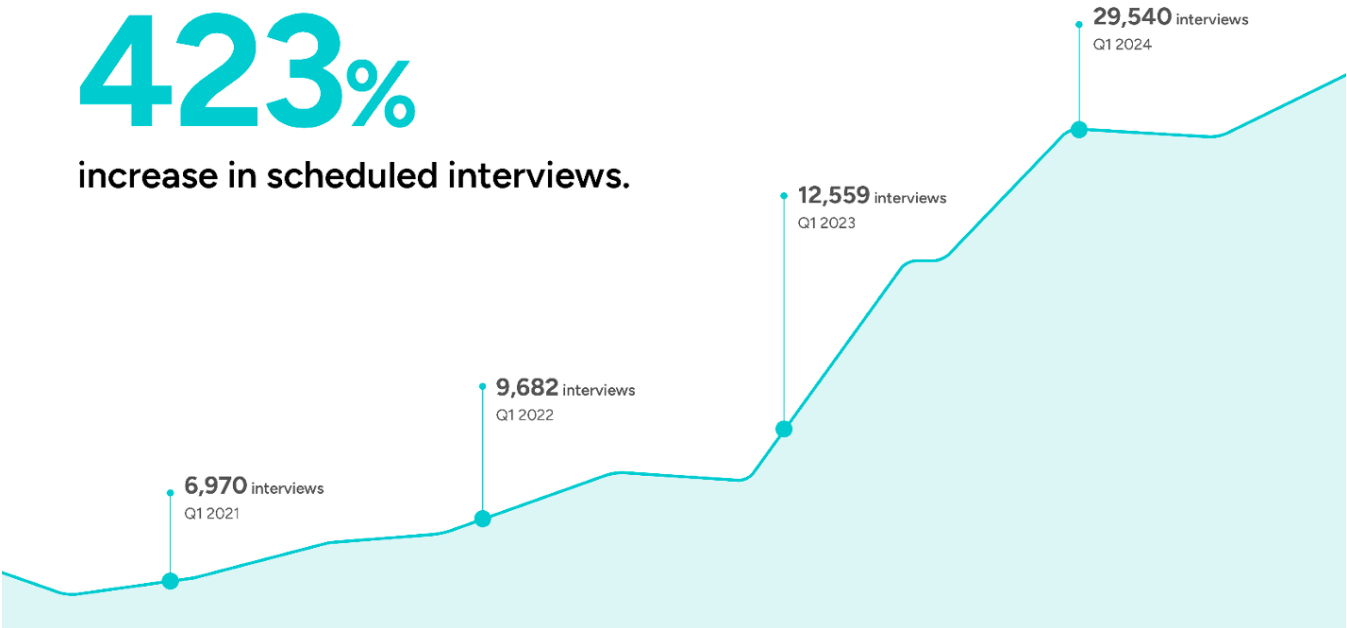
prospective hourly talent. Emma can serve up surveys via chat to gather information on how the candidate viewed their hiring experience and their engagement with the company at in-person events. "We are able to make immediate modifications to the process based on the data we're receiving," O'Connell noted.

Accelerating Time-to-Hire While Boosting Satisfaction

By embracing generative AI in recruitment, Great Wolf has seen significant shifts in its hiring performance indicators. Applicant volume surged by almost 400% immediately after Emma's rollout and has consistently remained 250% to 300% above preimplementation levels.

Drop-off rates have also fallen by about 85%, and interviews have increased by 423%, according to O'Connell, who attributes the improvements to the conversational flow (see Figure 4). "Because it's simpler, more people are willing to take the time to apply," O'Connell said. And because they've increased their interview scale, they've been able to decrease their annual recruitment marketing budget by \$700,000.

Figure 4: Increase in Interviews Scheduled by Emma



Source: Great Wolf Resorts, 2025

These efficiencies not only improved hiring outcomes but also contributed to a 90.7% candidate satisfaction rate. Moreover, Great Wolf reported improvements in guest satisfaction across all resorts—an outcome they attribute, in part, to improved hiring speed and candidate quality.

Emma has also helped Great Wolf by assisting with returning candidates, like college students who frequently reapply for temporary summer roles. “For people who are coming back, they can reapply in about 15 seconds,” O’Connell said.

In addition, the system collects information and automatically continues conversations with candidates in new markets where Great Wolf is not ready to hire. “We are still able to engage those candidates and have an ongoing dialogue with conversational AI,” O’Connell explained.

The streamlined process has dramatically reduced time-to-hire—especially for frontline roles—cutting the average from 31.5 days to just 9. “In less than two weeks, you can go from application to sitting in your very first orientation class,” O’Connell said. “The system has been a real win for us.”

Improvements in Candidate Quality

The nearly 200,000 candidates who now apply through Emma each year have enabled more competitive hiring. “Not only can we be staffed, [Emma] has also allowed us to be a little bit more discerning and select candidates we feel will deliver the highest quality service for our guests,” O’Connell said.

Despite early concerns, Great Wolf has also seen more experienced candidates apply for salaried leadership positions. Emma “has helped us stand out, because candidates say, ‘Wow, they’re investing in the technology, and they care about the candidate experience,’” O’Connell said. “I think that helps us to differentiate within the market with candidates and applicants.”

Surveys also suggest that new hires appreciate the seamless transition from applying to onboarding. “It just feels like a continuation of a single process,” O’Connell said. The biggest surprise has been the improvement in the quality of AI-powered chats as the technology has improved. “You would be shocked at the number of candidates who don’t know that Emma is not a real person,” O’Connell remarked.

Emma helps Great Wolf build a stronger talent pool—enabling more selective hiring focused on exceptional guest service.

Next Steps

As they manage the dramatic increase in candidate volume, talent leaders at Great Wolf are focused on further improving efficiencies in the hiring process. The company is exploring the use of AI to streamline the candidate experience for exempt salaried positions where “we have a little bit less automation built into the system,” O’Connell said.

The company also aims to better support hiring managers by leveraging more prescreening capabilities to flag exceptional candidates. By developing “success profiles” that define the ideal characteristics for candidates across various roles, the talent team hopes not to exclude unqualified candidates but to more effectively identify and highlight those who exceed expectations.

“We are looking at how we can better leverage prescreening to better indicate to our hiring managers how you should prioritize candidates and where you should focus first, versus identifying who is qualified or we don’t feel is qualified,” O’Connell explained.

Ultimately, the talent team hopes to leverage AI across a broader range of HR functions, including recruitment marketing, engagement, performance management, and shift scheduling.

Lessons Learned

Great Wolf demonstrates how companies can leverage generative AI to streamline the candidate journey and improve business outcomes. Here are some key lessons learned:

- **Challenge assumptions about generative AI’s role in recruiting.** Don’t assume that more-senior candidates will resist chat-to-apply functionalities and assistants without testing and collecting feedback from users first. When in doubt, start small and gradually build on AI capabilities and channels.
- **Incorporate surveys into the candidate journey.** Feedback about candidates’ experiences and satisfaction with the process can refine the applicant flow. Differentiating by role is essential to ensure the process doesn’t discourage applicants for any position. Don’t forget that digital and in-person touchpoints are equally important in the eyes of the candidate.
- **Leverage generative AI for low-touch hiring steps.** Generative AI can do more than just prescreen potential candidates—it can also manage the delivery and analysis of assessments. This not only streamlines logistics but also improves overall hiring efficiency.

About the Author



Stella Ioannidou

Stella is senior director of research and Global Workforce Intelligence Project leader at The Josh Bersin Company. In this role, she conducts empirical research on a variety of topics related to the skills economy, talent intelligence, and HR technology. Stella has almost 20 years of experience across several industries, including banking. Prior to joining The Josh Bersin Company, Stella was the HR transformation leader for Deloitte, where she led large-scale HCM implementations and designed frameworks for talent acquisition and performance management for the public sector. Stella holds master's degrees in engineering, information systems management, business administration, and lifelong learning. Stella lives and works in Greece and is pursuing her PhD in talent intelligence. She is a certified project manager, change management practitioner, lean six sigma green belt, and ICAgile HR professional.

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