

Customers are candidates.

And candidates are customers.

A wake-up call for anyone in resourcing.

Highly revealing insight into the way recruitment treats its audience and where it can go terribly wrong.

This paper is about the extraordinary value of the people you don't employ.

And why, after 35 years, I think recruitment has been looking at everything the wrong way.

Dedicated to the millions of people in the UK who search and apply for jobs every year.

…Particularly those who never hear back.



Introduction



I've spent 35 years in recruitment. And there's something I still can't understand.

I've worked in recruitment communications and creative for 35 years. During that time, I've worked with some of Britain's biggest employers, helped create recruitment campaigns, developed careers websites, designed employer brands and watched technology transform an industry that, when I started, still relied on newspaper advertisements, application forms and the Royal Mail.

I've sat in countless meetings with HR directors, resourcing teams, recruitment managers and marketing departments. I've listened to wonderfully ambitious plans to attract the very best people. I've seen employers spend fortunes developing sophisticated employer brands, beautifully crafted employee value propositions and recruitment campaigns worthy of the biggest consumer advertising agencies.

And yet, throughout all those years, one thing has continued to astonish me.

Why does HR so rarely make the connection that customers are candidates, and candidates are customers?

It sounds so obvious when you say it aloud. Almost too obvious to be worth writing about. But I've come to believe that this simple observation could fundamentally change how organisations approach recruitment, the way they treat people and, perhaps most importantly, the way they understand the commercial value of the people who apply to work for them.

Let me explain.

Think about how much money an organisation spends attracting and retaining customers. Millions, sometimes billions, invested in advertising, customer experience, brand loyalty, digital technology and understanding what makes people tick. Marketing departments obsess over every interaction. Retailers study the positioning of products on shelves. Supermarkets invest heavily in making shopping easier and more enjoyable.
Airlines worry about the smallest details of the passenger experience because they understand that people have choices, and a bad experience might mean losing a customer forever.

Meanwhile, on another floor of the same organisation, recruitment is doing something quite extraordinary.

It's attracting thousands of people, encouraging them to become emotionally invested in the business, asking them to give up their time, share their personal information and imagine a future working for the company.

Then, in many cases, it's rejecting the vast majority of them with a standard email. Or worse, never responding at all.

And nobody seems particularly concerned about what happens next.

I've often wondered what would happen if marketing treated its customers the way recruitment treats its candidates. If somebody walked into a supermarket and asked where the milk was, and a member of staff replied that if they hadn't received a response within fourteen days, they should assume the supermarket wasn't interested in serving them.

There would be an almighty fuss.

Yet in recruitment, we've somehow normalised this behaviour. We've even built technology to make it easier.

And here's the thing that should make every CEO, commercial director and HR leader sit up and take notice.

The people you're rejecting might already be your customers. They might have been loyal customers for years. They might recommend your products to friends, spend thousands of pounds with your business, or influence what other people think about you.

And after their experience with recruitment, they might never buy from you again.

I know that sounds dramatic. But there is some fascinating research that suggests the consequences are very real.

Before we get to the numbers, though, I want to talk about something we've almost completely forgotten in recruitment.

People.

Russell Dalton, Creative Founder, Genius

The most personal rejection of all.

Imagine you're a single mum, bringing up two children.

Money is tight. The mortgage has gone up, the energy bills seem to arrive with alarming regularity, and despite working hard, you're constantly trying to make the numbers add up. You've been thinking about finding a better job for months, but with work, school runs and everything else, there never seems to be enough time.

Then one evening, after the children have gone to bed, you spot a vacancy.

It's with a well-known company. Somewhere you know, somewhere you've shopped, perhaps somewhere you've admired for years. The money looks better, the hours might work and there's the possibility of some career progression.

You start imagining what life might look like if you got it.

Perhaps you could stop worrying quite so much about the bills. Perhaps you could afford a proper family holiday. Perhaps you could finally replace the car that's been threatening to give up for the last six months.

So you apply.

You find your CV, update it, check the job description and carefully answer the application questions. You might even ask somebody to read through everything before you press submit.

An hour later, it's done.

You feel quite pleased with yourself. Excited, even.

And then you wait.

A few days pass. Then a week. Then two. You keep checking your emails, wondering whether you've missed something. Perhaps you open the careers website again to see whether the vacancy is still advertised.

Nothing.

Eventually, you realise that you're probably not going to hear back.

Now, I've invented that particular woman to make a point, but there are millions of real people with their own versions of that story. Some are looking for their first job, some are trying to escape difficult working conditions, others have been made redundant or simply want to do something more fulfilling with their lives.

And for every one of them, applying for a job involves something that recruitment rarely measures.

Hope.

That's the part I think we've forgotten.

When somebody applies for a job, they're not simply submitting information into a database. They're putting themselves forward for judgement. They're saying, in effect, I think I'm good enough to work for you.

And when that application is rejected, particularly when no explanation is offered, it can feel like a judgement on the person rather than the application.

You can return a faulty television. You can complain about bad service in a restaurant. You can send back a pair of shoes that don't fit. But you can't return a rejection of yourself quite so easily.

People will forgive an awful lot. A hair in their salad, a rude salesperson, a late delivery. They may complain, but quite often they'll give the business another chance.

Being rejected for a job is different. It can be deeply personal, particularly when somebody has invested considerable time and emotion in the opportunity.

What's interesting is that academic research is beginning to demonstrate just how significant this can be.

In a study published in the Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics in 2026, researcher Rocco Zizzamia examined the psychological cost of repeated rejection among young workers in South Africa. The experiment found that participants were sometimes willing to sacrifice potential earnings to avoid further exposure to rejection. In other words, the emotional discomfort of being turned down could become sufficiently powerful to change somebody's willingness to pursue opportunities. [1]



Now, that's one study, in a particular setting, and it would be wrong to pretend it describes every jobseeker in Britain. But the finding is fascinating.

People may literally be prepared to earn less to avoid feeling rejected again.

And what are we doing as an industry?

We're rejecting people in their hundreds and thousands, often without a meaningful explanation, and then wondering why candidate engagement is so difficult.

I sometimes think HR has developed an extraordinary ability to discuss people without actually seeing them as individuals.

We talk about application volumes, conversion rates and rejection percentages. A vacancy receives 1,000 applications, 100 are shortlisted and 900 are rejected. The figures go into a spreadsheet, and somebody presents them at the next resourcing meeting as evidence of a successful campaign.

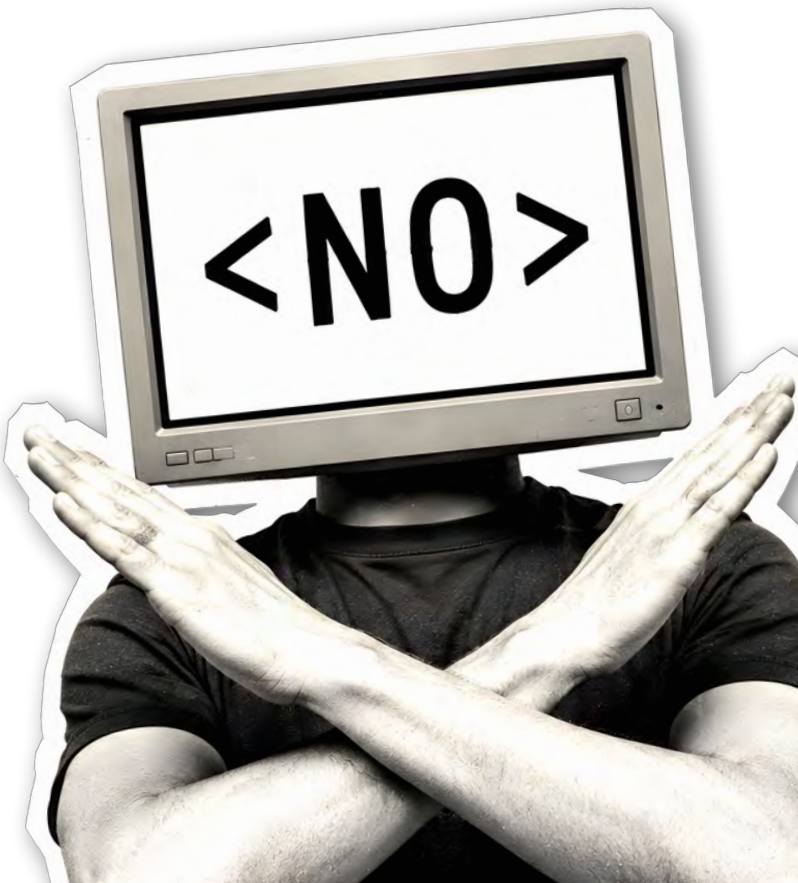
It's rather like an old general studying casualty figures on a battlefield map. The numbers tell him what happened, but they tell him very little about the individual lives behind them.

I know recruitment teams are under enormous pressure. I know the volumes can be ridiculous, particularly when vacancies attract hundreds of applications. But surely that makes the need for a proper candidate experience more important, not less.

Because every one of those 900 rejected applicants was a person who, for a moment at least, wanted to become part of your organisation.

And you had an opportunity to make them feel something positive about it.

What did you do with that opportunity?



Rejected by email. Ignored by everyone.

I want you to think about the last time you were waiting for some important news.

Perhaps you were waiting for a medical result, an offer on a house or confirmation that you'd been accepted for something you really wanted. You'll remember the peculiar mixture of excitement and anxiety, and the temptation to keep checking your phone.

Now imagine that the person responsible for giving you the news simply decided not to bother.

No response. No explanation. Nothing.

You'd think they were incredibly rude.

Yet recruitment does this routinely.

CV-Library's 2026 Candidate Behaviour Barometer, which surveyed 1,043 UK candidates and 233 recruitment professionals and employers, found that almost 68% of candidates had experienced being ghosted after applying for a job. Even more astonishingly, 47% reported being ghosted after attending an interview.

Just consider that second figure.

Nearly half the people surveyed had experienced going to an interview, spending their time meeting an employer, discussing their background and ambitions, and then hearing absolutely nothing afterwards. [2]

I've heard recruiters defend this practice by saying they simply don't have the resources to respond to everyone. But in an age when technology can send millions of personalised communications, I find that explanation increasingly difficult to accept.

We can send tailored marketing emails based on somebody's shopping habits. We can remind customers that they've left a pair of trainers in an online basket. We can wish them a happy birthday, offer them a discount on their favourite coffee and recommend products based on what they bought three years ago.

But apparently we can't tell somebody they haven't got a job.

How did we arrive at that?

And then there's my particular favourite, the sentence that has somehow survived decades of recruitment communications:

If you haven't heard from us within fourteen days, please assume that your application has been unsuccessful.

Think about what that actually says.

We've invited you to invest your time in our organisation, but we don't consider you important enough to acknowledge if we decide not to employ you.

I cannot imagine a marketing department allowing that sentiment anywhere near a consumer communication.

It would be corporate suicide.

Perhaps we're so accustomed to dealing with high volumes that we've simply stopped appreciating the people behind them. Perhaps the technology has made it too easy. Or perhaps recruitment has always thought of unsuccessful candidates as an administrative problem rather than a valuable audience.

Whatever the reason, the result is the same.

We make people feel insignificant.

And there's a particularly uncomfortable irony in all of this. The very departments responsible for demonstrating an organisation's values can be the ones that undermine those values most spectacularly.

An employer might advertise itself as caring, inclusive, respectful and people-focused. Its values might appear on every page of the careers website. The recruitment film might feature wonderfully authentic employees talking about how the company puts people first.

Then a candidate applies, invests several hours in the process and never receives another word.

What should they believe? The glossy film, or their own experience?

I think we all know the answer.

And there's another reason why this matters.

People talk.

They talk to their partners, their friends, their colleagues and their families. They post reviews, share experiences and warn other people about companies they feel have treated them badly.

A rejected candidate doesn't simply disappear when you close their application.

They take the experience with them.

Sometimes for years.



The day 2.2 million people changed the way I thought about recruitment.

I remember the conversation as though it happened yesterday.

We'd created and launched a new careers website for Sainsbury's. It was a substantial project, and about six months after launch, I was interested in how it was performing.

I asked our Chief Technology Officer how many hits the site was getting.

Now, our CTO was a wonderfully matter-of-fact character. Working in technology, he was accustomed to dealing with figures that would make most people's eyes water. He had a look through the analytics, considered the numbers for a moment and casually announced:

"2.2 million."

I was astonished.

"2.2 million? A year?"

I thought that was an absolutely enormous number.

"No," he replied, looking up from his screen. "A month."

Then he smiled.

"That's more than the corporate website."

I just stood there.

Two point two million.

A month.

I don't think he had any idea of the effect that little conversation would have on me. To him, it was simply an interesting statistic about website traffic. To me, it was one of those moments when something suddenly becomes so obvious that you wonder how you've managed to miss it for years.

Because I wasn't thinking about website traffic.

I was thinking about people.

Millions of visits from people interested enough in Sainsbury's to explore the possibility of working there. People who already knew the brand, many of whom would already be customers, and others who might become customers in the future.

And I suddenly realised that the careers website wasn't simply an employment website.

It was an extraordinarily powerful consumer touchpoint.

I did what any excitable creative director would do when confronted by a number like that.

I reached for my calculator.

I started playing with the figures. What if those 2.2 million visits represented shoppers, and what if each of those shoppers spent an average of £120 a week on groceries? Multiply that by 52 weeks and you arrive at the rather extraordinary figure of £13.7 billion.

Holy shit.

Now, I know what you're thinking. And yes, it's extremely crude maths. The 2.2 million was a historical traffic figure, not a verified count of unique shoppers. People visit websites more than once, and I certainly wasn't suggesting the careers website was responsible for generating £13.7 billion in revenue.

But that wasn't what interested me.

What interested me was the scale of the audience and the commercial influence those interactions might carry.

Even if only a tiny proportion of those visits resulted in somebody feeling more positively or negatively about Sainsbury's, the potential effect on the business could be significant.

And here was the really extraordinary part.

We were discussing the careers website in the context of recruitment, when it might have been reaching an audience larger than the main corporate website.

To the recruitment department, these people were potential employees.

To the marketing department, they were potential consumers.

But nobody seemed to have joined the two together.



Sainsbury's

Ever since that conversation, I've told the story to almost every major client we've worked with on a careers website.

And the reaction is often rather revealing.

People nod, smile and acknowledge that it's an interesting point. Then the meeting returns to the usual discussion about application conversion, ATS integration, employer branding and recruitment advertising.

But I don't think it's just an interesting point.

I think it fundamentally changes the commercial significance of recruitment.

For a major retailer, supermarket, airline, bank, hospitality group or consumer-facing business, the careers website might be one of the most influential digital platforms the organisation owns.

And yet it's frequently treated as a relatively minor piece of HR technology.

Think of the care that goes into a major retailer's e-commerce experience. Every button, image, navigation element and checkout interaction is scrutinised. Designers conduct research into how customers behave. Analytics teams spend hours understanding why people abandon shopping baskets.

Why?

Because the business understands that every lost customer represents lost revenue.

Now consider what happens when somebody visits the same company's careers website.

Often the experience is fragmented, confusing and unnecessarily complicated. We make it difficult to find the right job, difficult to understand the opportunity and sometimes absurdly difficult to apply.

Then, having encouraged somebody to become emotionally invested in the business, we reject them.

And we wonder why nobody seems particularly enthusiastic about our employer brand.

The point I've been making to clients for years is actually very simple.

Your careers website has the power to strengthen your business far beyond recruitment. And it has the power to do enormous damage.

I didn't have the research to prove that when I first had my revelation.

But somebody else eventually did.

And the result was extraordinary.



£4.4 million.
The cost of saying no.

In 2014, Virgin Media did something that I wish every major employer would do.

It started investigating what happened to people who had applied for jobs and been rejected.

Not just whether they were satisfied with the recruitment process, but whether their experience affected their relationship with Virgin Media as a customer.

It's an important distinction.

Instead of treating recruitment as an isolated HR function, the company started examining its potential impact on commercial performance.

And what it discovered was remarkable.

At the time, Virgin Media was rejecting approximately 123,000 applicants a year. Around 18% of those applicants were also Virgin Media customers.

The company analysed its candidate experience and estimated that approximately 7,500 rejected applicants were switching to a competitor because of the way they'd been treated during recruitment.

The estimated annual revenue loss was £4.4 million. [3]

Four point four million pounds.

Not because the broadband was unreliable. Not because the television service was poor. Not because somebody in customer services had been rude.

Because people had applied for jobs and come away feeling badly treated.

The figure was an estimate derived from research rather than a complete accounting of every individual's subsequent spending, but it was sufficiently compelling for Virgin Media to take action.

I find this story fascinating for several reasons.

First, it demonstrates that the relationship between candidate experience and customer behaviour isn't simply some romantic notion dreamt up by a creative person who thinks companies should be nicer to people.

There can be a measurable commercial consequence.

Second, it reveals how recruitment can inadvertently undermine the efforts of marketing and customer service.

Imagine spending millions attracting customers through sophisticated marketing campaigns, only to have another department persuade some of them to leave.

You'd be furious.

And third, it illustrates how difficult it can be to recognise a problem when the people responsible for it aren't measuring the consequences.

A recruitment department might be congratulating itself on filling vacancies efficiently while the finance department is recording the loss of customers, with neither department realising there's a connection.

Virgin Media used its findings to reshape its approach to candidate experience. Subsequent published accounts describe improvements in candidate advocacy and more thoughtful treatment of unsuccessful applicants.

What particularly interests me about the story is that somebody finally made the commercial connection.

The person who didn't get the job still mattered to the business.

And once Virgin Media could attach a financial value to that relationship, the conversation changed.

It was no longer simply about being a good employer or doing the right thing.

It became a business issue.



There's some wider research that makes the same point.

In a 2017 study by Future Workplace and CareerArc, 64% of surveyed US jobseekers said a poor candidate experience would make them less likely to buy products or services from that employer.

That's an expression of intention rather than proof that 64% actually stopped purchasing. But it's a remarkably powerful warning about how people connect recruitment experiences with their perceptions of a company. [4]

And when you put that alongside the Virgin Media evidence, the implications become difficult to ignore.

I think every chief executive of a consumer-facing organisation should ask their HR director a very simple question.

How much revenue did our recruitment process lose us last year?

My suspicion is that very few organisations would have an answer.

Not because the figure is necessarily small.

But because almost nobody is measuring it.



We've become obsessed with employer branding. Perhaps we've forgotten what a brand actually is.

I should probably say something at this point about employer branding, because it's a subject close to my heart.

I've spent a considerable part of my career working in creative communications. I love a great campaign, a beautifully executed piece of design and an idea that makes somebody stop and think. I've worked on employer brands, developed propositions and created recruitment advertising for organisations that genuinely want to stand out.

So I'm hardly likely to suggest that employer branding is a waste of time.

But I do think the industry has developed a rather peculiar misunderstanding of what an employer brand actually is.

We talk about creating employer brands as though they're physical objects. Something you can commission from an agency, have designed, approved by a steering committee and then rolled out across the organisation.

Of course, you can create an identity. You can develop an employee value proposition. You can establish a tone of voice, design a campaign and communicate what makes an organisation distinctive.

You can do all of those things, and do them brilliantly.

But you can't simply create a reputation.

A reputation belongs to the people who experience your organisation.

It's what they think about you, what they feel about you and, perhaps most importantly, what they tell other people about you.

You can influence it. You can nurture it. You can certainly damage it.

But you can't manufacture it in a creative studio.

I think this distinction has been lost in a great deal of the discussion about employer branding.

We spend so much time developing the promise that we sometimes forget to examine whether the experience actually delivers it.

Picture a beautifully crafted recruitment campaign.

A wonderful video featuring employees talking enthusiastically about the company culture. Lovely photography. Inspiring language about belonging, inclusion, opportunity and respect.

The employer brand has been launched. The HR director is delighted. The agency has won an award.

Then somebody decides to apply.

They're transferred to a third-party applicant tracking system that looks nothing like the careers website. They're asked to create an account, upload a CV and then manually type out the contents of the CV they've just uploaded.

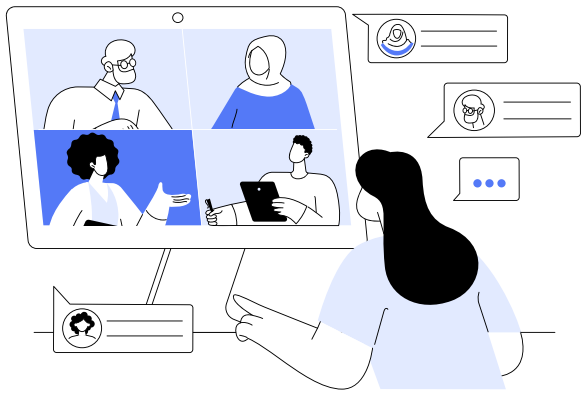
They spend forty minutes completing the application, receive an automated acknowledgement and never hear another word.

The employer brand promised respect.

The experience delivered indifference.

Which one do you think the candidate remembers?

It's interesting that even the CIPD's definition of employer brand reflects this distinction. Its guidance describes employer brand as the way an organisation is perceived by current employees, potential candidates and other audiences. In its 2024 research, 81% of organisations reported taking steps to improve their employer brand, but only 14% reported measuring the impact of those efforts. [5]



Now consider another finding.

In its 2026 Resourcing and Talent Planning research, the CIPD reported that only 33% of organisations were collecting candidate experience data. [6]

Think about that.

We have an industry that invests heavily in shaping perceptions, yet a remarkably small proportion of employers are systematically collecting information about one of the most important experiences that creates those perceptions.

It's rather like a restaurant spending a fortune on advertising, menus and interior design while never asking whether anybody enjoyed the food.

I sometimes wonder whether we've made employer branding unnecessarily complicated.

We conduct research into EVP pillars, employer brand architecture, messaging hierarchies and audience segmentation. There's nothing inherently wrong with any of it, but perhaps we should begin with a simpler question.

What is it actually like to deal with us?

Because that, ultimately, is your brand.

If you want a reputation for being respectful, treat people respectfully. If you want to be known as inclusive, remove the barriers that make it difficult for people to apply. If you promise transparency, tell people what the job pays and what working there will really involve.

And if you want unsuccessful candidates to speak positively about your organisation, give them a positive experience even when you can't offer them the job.

You can spend a million pounds telling the world you're a wonderful employer.

Or you can spend some of that money making sure people actually believe it.

Personally, I'd much rather do both.

But if I had to choose, I'd start with **the experience.**



Your careers website is the shop window.
Your ATS is the checkout.
So why is the checkout so bloody awful?

Let's imagine something that would never be tolerated in online retail.

You've spent £500,000 creating a beautiful e-commerce website. The photography is exceptional, the design is wonderful and everything has been carefully developed to make shopping as enjoyable as possible.

Your marketing department launches a campaign, thousands of people arrive and the analytics look fantastic.

Then somebody finds a product they want to buy.

They press the purchase button.

And suddenly they're transferred to a completely different website.

The branding disappears, the layout changes and they're asked to register an account with a complicated password.

They enter their name and address. Then they're asked to upload a document containing their name and address. Then they're asked to enter the same information again.

Eventually, having spent twenty minutes completing the checkout process, the website announces that their session has expired.

Can you imagine?

The marketing director would have a nervous breakdown. The e-commerce director would be hauled into a board meeting. Somebody would be demanding answers about abandoned baskets and lost revenue.

And yet this is remarkably similar to the experience candidates encounter on careers websites every day.

I've seen so many examples over the years that I've occasionally wondered whether anybody in HR has actually tried applying for one of their own vacancies.

The problem is partly historical.

Many Applicant Tracking Systems were developed to make recruitment easier to administer. They were designed to organise applications, manage vacancies, provide reporting and help hiring managers process large volumes of people.

All perfectly reasonable objectives.

But somewhere along the way, convenience for the recruiter became more important than the experience of the candidate.

The result is a peculiar situation in which employers spend substantial amounts of money attracting people to their careers websites, only to hand them over to technology that makes applying feel like an endurance test.

And there's some wonderful research that illustrates just how disconnected recruiters can be from the people using their systems.

CV-Library's 2026 survey found that 71% of candidates had abandoned an application because it was too long or complicated.

Now, that's bad enough.

But when recruiters and employers were asked about their own application processes, 96% described them as streamlined or reasonably efficient.

Ninety-six per cent.

I almost laughed when I read that.

Not because it's amusing that candidates are struggling, but because the difference in perception is so enormous.

Seven out of ten candidates say they've abandoned a complicated application, while almost every recruiter believes their process works reasonably well. [2]

What an extraordinary disconnect.



Perhaps the problem is that recruiters rarely experience their own systems as candidates do.

They know where everything is. They understand the terminology. They know what the application questions mean and why the information is being collected.

The candidate knows none of this.

They might be applying on a mobile phone during a lunch break, sitting on a train with a poor internet connection or trying to complete the form after the children have gone to bed.

They might have a disability that makes navigating an inaccessible website particularly difficult.

Or they might simply decide that life is too short to spend an hour applying for a job when they don't even know whether anyone will read the application.

And the damage isn't limited to the people who abandon the process.

Think about what the experience says about the organisation.

If a company can't manage something as straightforward as allowing somebody to apply for a job, what does that suggest about working there?

Now, I know there are complexities. Recruitment involves legal obligations, eligibility checks, safeguarding, security, assessment and a whole range of requirements that don't apply to buying a pair of shoes.

But complexity behind the scenes doesn't have to mean complexity for the person using the system.

That's what good digital design is supposed to solve.

One of the findings from Greenhouse's 2026 UK recruitment benchmark really caught my attention. Looking at approximately 7.3 million applications across 561 organisations, the research found that employers averaged around 183 applications per hire.

It also found that the average role took 56.5 days to fill, with 18.6 days spent getting candidates to their first interview. [7]

Eighteen days before that first conversation.

Now, some roles genuinely require complex assessment and extensive checks. But I find it extraordinary how comfortable we've become with making people wait while we move them through administrative processes.

What happens to their enthusiasm during those eighteen days?

What happens to the excitement that made them apply in the first place?

And what happens to their perception of the organisation if nobody communicates with them?

This is why I believe the careers website and ATS are the two most important candidate interaction points an employer controls.

They aren't separate systems in the eyes of the candidate.

They're one experience.

The careers website creates interest, excitement and expectation. The ATS should continue that experience, make applying easy and provide a thoughtful, transparent journey from beginning to end.

It's not complicated as a philosophy.

But it does require a change in priorities.

We need to stop asking how technology can help recruitment process more people.

And start asking how technology can help people experience recruitment better.

Salary: Competitive.

Two words that have driven me mad for 35 years.

There's something else I've never understood about recruitment.

And I've been arguing about it since the days when job advertisements appeared in the back pages of newspapers.

Salary: Competitive.

What does that mean?

Competitive with whom? Competitive for what?
And why, if the salary is so competitive, is the employer so reluctant to tell anybody what it is?

In my early days working in recruitment advertising, we'd regularly receive briefs from employers who wanted a beautifully written job advertisement but absolutely refused to publish the salary.

I'd ask why.

And occasionally, somebody would be refreshingly honest.

"The salary's not particularly good. We'd rather get them interested in the job and discuss it at interview."

I always found that extraordinary.

You want somebody to become excited about a job, perhaps spend several hours completing an application, take time off work and travel to an interview, only to discover that the position pays less than they're earning already?

Why would you deliberately waste somebody's time like that?

More importantly, why would you treat somebody with so little respect?

Imagine Tesco advertising a television for sale with the price listed as competitive.

You select the television, put it in your trolley, queue at the checkout and eventually discover that it costs twice what you expected.

You'd be furious.

And rightly so.

Yet recruitment has been doing exactly this for decades.

Now, I appreciate that salaries sometimes depend on experience and that employers need flexibility. There's nothing wrong with publishing a sensible salary range and explaining the circumstances that determine where an individual might sit within it.

What I object to is the idea that withholding essential information somehow improves recruitment.

It doesn't. It simply transfers the inconvenience from the employer to the candidate.

And it can have wider consequences.

Candidates without inside knowledge of a business or the confidence to negotiate are potentially disadvantaged when salary information is withheld. The CIPD's inclusive recruitment guidance specifically recommends displaying salaries or ranges to help improve transparency and reduce inequalities. [8]

The latest numbers are telling.

In October 2026, CV-Library reported that 41% of surveyed UK jobseekers wouldn't apply for a vacancy that failed to disclose salary information.

Meanwhile, its analysis of job market data found that 42% of adverts published over the preceding twelve months still omitted it. [9]

So almost half the job advertisements are potentially putting off a substantial proportion of the people employers are trying to attract.

And we wonder why recruitment is difficult.

Then, on 10 November 2026, something rather significant happened.

The UK government announced its intention to introduce legislation requiring employers to publish pay information in job advertisements, or provide it in writing before interview where a position isn't publicly advertised.

The announcement followed a consultation in which 94% of respondents supported the proposal. The new requirement has not yet become law, but the direction of travel is clear. [10]

I welcome it.

But I also find it rather depressing.

After all these years, we're apparently going to need legislation to persuade employers to tell people how much they'll be paid.

That's not a particularly flattering reflection on the recruitment industry.

And salary transparency is only part of the problem.

I've seen job advertisements that fail to explain shift patterns, working hours, weekend requirements, realistic locations or what the successful candidate will actually spend their day doing.

Sometimes the job description is so full of corporate language that you finish reading it with very little understanding of the job.

We're so determined to make everything sound attractive that we forget the value of being honest.

Which brings me to something I feel strongly about.

If telling somebody the truth about a job puts them off applying, that's probably a good thing.

You've saved them from disappointment and saved yourself from interviewing somebody who was never likely to accept the position.

Honesty is not an obstacle to successful recruitment.

It's one of the foundations of it.

And if we're serious about improving candidate experience, perhaps we should begin by treating people as adults who deserve the information they need to make sensible decisions.



The airline pilot who had never flown a plane.

I have a story I often tell when the conversation turns to CVs and the way we assess people.

We were talking to the HR director of a major airline, and she began laughing about a candidate they'd recently interviewed for a pilot position.

The applicant had submitted what appeared to be an exceptionally impressive CV.

He claimed thousands upon thousands of hours flying Boeing 737s.

Now, if you're recruiting pilots, that sounds like a pretty good starting point. Considerable experience on one of the world's most widely used commercial aircraft.

Understandably, the airline was interested.

An interview was arranged involving the Chief Pilot and senior recruitment colleagues.

The candidate arrived, a pleasant, rather unassuming man in his early thirties, and everything seemed quite normal until the Chief Pilot began asking some obvious questions.

Which airlines had he flown for?

What ratings did he hold?

Where had he accumulated all these flying hours?

There was apparently an awkward pause.

The candidate looked slightly bemused.

And then, after some further questioning, the truth emerged.

He hadn't actually flown a real Boeing 737 at all.

His extraordinary flying experience had been accumulated on a flight simulator in his bedroom.

He was an incredibly enthusiastic virtual pilot.

I can only imagine the expressions around the interview table.

Now, it's a funny story, and one I've enjoyed telling for years. But I also think it illustrates something quite important about recruitment.

A CV is a story that somebody tells about themselves.

Sometimes it's an entirely accurate and useful account of their experience. Sometimes it's rather embellished. Occasionally, as our enthusiastic virtual pilot demonstrated, it bears only a passing resemblance to the reality.

And now, with the arrival of generative AI, creating an extraordinarily convincing CV has become easier than ever before.

You can feed an AI system a relatively ordinary career history and ask it to rewrite the document for a particular job. Within seconds, it can produce a beautifully structured CV filled with exactly the language, terminology and competencies the employer is looking for.

It can make somebody sound like a brilliant communicator, an exceptional leader and a strategic thinker with a remarkable history of delivering transformational change.

Whether they actually possess any of those qualities is another matter.

I sometimes think we've created a rather ridiculous situation.

Candidates use AI to make their CVs more impressive.

Employers use AI to analyse and rank those CVs.

Candidates then use AI to improve their chances of getting through the employer's AI screening.

And recruiters respond by introducing more sophisticated systems to detect AI-generated applications.

It's becoming an arms race between machines, with the human being somewhere in the middle wondering whether anybody is actually interested in what they **can do.**



In CV-Library's 2026 research, 69% of recruiters said AI-generated applications were making it harder to identify strong candidates.

Meanwhile, the CIPD reported that 27% of employers who'd attempted to recruit believed candidates were making excessive use of generative AI in their applications. [2][6]

Now, I don't have a problem with candidates using technology to help present themselves more effectively. We've always encouraged people to write better CVs, prepare carefully for interviews and seek advice on applications.

But the distinction between presenting your abilities and possessing those abilities is fundamental.

And I wonder whether we've been asking the wrong questions.

Instead of asking how we can analyse CVs more efficiently, perhaps we should be asking why we're relying on CVs so heavily in the first place.

Why not find out what somebody can actually do?

That's where skills-based recruitment becomes so interesting.

Rather than relying entirely on somebody's career history, we can present relevant situations, ask thoughtful questions and assess the skills and behaviours genuinely required for the role.

How would you deal with a difficult customer?

What would you do if two urgent tasks needed your attention simultaneously?

How would you handle a disagreement with a colleague?

What would you do if a customer was distressed, confused or becoming angry?

Properly developed, structured assessments can reveal something about a person's judgement and capabilities that might never appear in a CV.

Of course, there are limits. A situational judgement test is not a substitute for verifying an airline pilot's licence, qualifications, logged hours or fitness to fly. Our simulator enthusiast wouldn't have got very far once those checks began.

And a poorly designed skills assessment can be just as unfair or misleading as a poorly designed CV screening process. Questions need to be relevant, scoring needs to be defensible, and reasonable adjustments and alternative formats are essential.

But the principle remains powerful.

Surely it's better to give people an opportunity to demonstrate their ability than simply judge how effectively they've described it?

This is particularly important for people whose career histories aren't conventional.

Someone returning to work after raising children. Someone changing industry. Someone who's acquired valuable skills outside traditional employment. Someone who has the ability to do a job brilliantly but isn't particularly good at writing about themselves.

A skills-based approach can open doors that conventional CV screening might otherwise close.

And, if it's thoughtfully designed, it can be a much more positive candidate experience.

Because you're no longer simply asking people to convince you they're capable.

You're giving them a **chance** to show you.



Rejected by a robot. Whatever happened to the human in Human Resources?

There's a rather delicious irony in the way recruitment has embraced artificial intelligence.

The department responsible for human resources is becoming increasingly enthusiastic about removing the human from one of the most personally significant decisions people experience.

Now, I'm not anti-technology, and I'm certainly not anti-AI.

We've been building digital recruitment systems for years, and I think technology can transform the way organisations attract, assess and communicate with people.

But I do wonder whether we're becoming so excited about what AI can do that we're forgetting what it should do.

Take automated CV screening.

The argument is familiar. Employers receive thousands of applications, recruiters are overwhelmed, and AI offers the opportunity to process everything much more quickly.

Fair enough.

But there's an important distinction between using technology to support a considered decision and allowing technology to make significant decisions about people without sufficient scrutiny.

If somebody is rejected by an algorithm, what explanation are they given?

Do they understand what information was considered?

Can they challenge an error?

Is anybody checking whether the system consistently disadvantages particular groups of people?

And, perhaps most importantly, is there a genuine human being somewhere in the process who's prepared to take responsibility?

These aren't hypothetical concerns.

In March 2026, the Information Commissioner's Office published findings from its examination of automated decision-making in recruitment. The regulator had engaged with more than 30 employers and subsequently written to 16 organisations about improvements required to their practices.

It raised concerns about transparency, meaningful human involvement and the need for proper safeguards against unfair or biased decisions. [11]

The ICO doesn't say that automated recruitment is inherently wrong. Indeed, it recognises that technology can make recruitment faster and more consistent. But it makes clear that the use of automated decision-making carries responsibilities, including appropriate safeguards and routes to challenge significant decisions.

And the government's Responsible AI in Recruitment guidance points to risks associated with technologies that attempt to infer personal characteristics or abilities from unreliable signals, such as facial expressions or patterns of behaviour. [12]

That matters enormously.

Because recruitment isn't a harmless administrative exercise.

We're making decisions that can influence somebody's income, wellbeing, career and future opportunities.



And the fact that a decision is made by sophisticated software doesn't automatically make it fair, accurate or sensible.

I've heard technology described as objective because it doesn't have human emotions.

But technology is created by people, trained on information shaped by people and configured according to assumptions made by people.

It can still make mistakes.

It can still reproduce bias.

And when it does, it may do so at a scale that would be impossible for an individual recruiter.

The answer isn't to abandon technology. That would be absurd.

The answer is to use it intelligently and responsibly.

I would far rather see AI helping recruiters create relevant assessments, communicate more effectively and reduce unnecessary administrative work than simply allowing them to reject more people more quickly.

And I think candidates would agree.

CV-Library's 2026 research found that 42% of surveyed candidates were uncomfortable with recruiters or employers using AI, while 58% said they'd feel more comfortable if they were guaranteed that a person would review their application. [2]

There's an obvious message there.

People want to know that somebody has considered them.

Not simply **processed** them.

At Genius, this philosophy has influenced the way we've developed iQ. We believe AI can be enormously useful in assisting with assessment creation and other supportive tasks, while employers remain responsible for making fair, explainable recruitment decisions based on relevant evidence.

The objective isn't to remove the human.

It's to help the human make a better decision.

Because if technology allows us to become less considerate towards people, I think we've misunderstood what progress is supposed to look like.



The rejection email might be the most important communication your company ever sends.

Here's something I've come to believe very strongly.

The rejection process may have more influence over an employer's wider reputation than the job offer.

I know that sounds a little provocative, but think about the numbers.

An employer might receive 50,000 applications and appoint 500 people.

Those 500 successful candidates are likely to be delighted. They've got the job they wanted, and their initial feelings about the organisation will probably be positive.

But what about the other 49,500?

They're the ones who are going to remember how the company treated them when the answer was no.

And some of those people will be customers. Some may have family members who work for the company. Others may have friends who are considering applying.

They might never have another interaction with the recruitment department, but they'll almost certainly have opinions about the organisation.

I've always found it extraordinary how little attention we give to this part of recruitment.

We devote considerable energy to welcoming successful candidates, preparing offers, arranging onboarding and making people feel excited about joining the business.

Quite rightly.

But the unsuccessful candidates, who represent the overwhelming majority of our audience, are often left with the digital equivalent of a shrug.

One of the particularly revealing findings in the 2025 Candidate Experience Benchmark research was that 56% of surveyed candidates received no feedback after rejection during screening or interviewing, while only 6% received feedback on assessment or test results.

The same research, which covered an international group of participating employers rather than just the UK, found that communication and lack of follow-up remained the leading source of negative candidate comments. [13]

I find the assessment feedback figure particularly disappointing.

We've asked somebody to complete a test. They've given up their time, answered our questions and allowed us to form a judgement about their abilities.

And in the overwhelming majority of cases measured by that research, we apparently couldn't find anything useful to tell them about the results.

What a wasted opportunity.

Imagine instead that somebody applies for a customer service position and completes a relevant situational assessment.

Their responses indicate that they're particularly strong at understanding customer needs and demonstrating empathy, but less confident when prioritising competing tasks under pressure.

They don't get the job.

But rather than receiving a standard rejection email, they're given a short, thoughtful explanation of where they performed well and what they might want to develop.

They might still be disappointed. Of course they will.

But they've gained something from the experience.

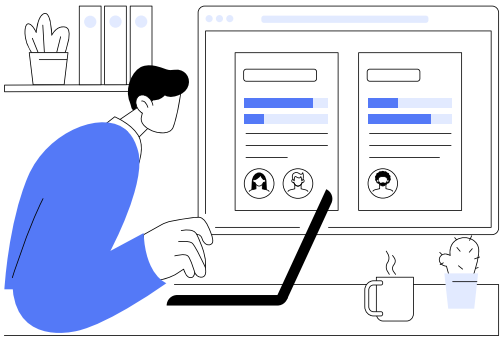
They have information that may help them in their next application.

They know that their effort was recognised.

And, perhaps most importantly, they have a reason to believe the organisation treated them fairly.

This is one of the principles we've been developing through iQ: using relevant assessment evidence to support more meaningful, individual candidate communications.





The opportunity is to make good feedback practical at scale.

A recruiter shouldn't have to spend half an hour writing a unique letter to every unsuccessful applicant. That simply isn't realistic.

But technology can organise assessment results, identify relevant strengths and development areas, and help prepare thoughtful communications that reflect the evidence available.

The important thing is that the feedback is genuine.

We should never invent a reason for rejection simply because a system can generate a convincing paragraph. Nor should we assume that every stage of recruitment produces sufficient evidence for detailed individual feedback.

Someone who hasn't met an essential qualification deserves a clear explanation of the requirement. Someone who has completed a substantial assessment should receive meaningful information about their performance where the assessment supports it. And somebody who has attended two interviews and reached the final stages deserves a proper personal conversation.

That shouldn't be a revolutionary idea.

Interestingly, Acas notes that employers generally aren't legally obliged to provide feedback explaining why a candidate was rejected, although it encourages the practice because it helps people understand decisions, improve future applications and maintain positive relationships. [14]

Perhaps that's another part of the problem.

We've become so accustomed to thinking about what recruitment is legally required to do that we've neglected what good recruitment ought to do.

There's a wonderful contradiction in the way large employers communicate this.

For example, McDonald's UK explains on its public recruitment FAQ that its virtual assistant, Olivia, supports parts of the recruitment process but that hiring decisions are made by human recruiters.

That's a **useful** reassurance.

Yet the same FAQ explains that, because of the high volume of applications, the company cannot provide specific feedback on applications or interviews. [15]

I mention this not to single out McDonald's for criticism. High-volume employers face genuinely difficult operational challenges, and McDonald's is at least clear about its policy.

But it illustrates the dilemma perfectly.

We have technology capable of supporting millions of interactions, yet providing useful individual feedback remains something the industry often considers impractical.

I think we can do better.

And if we're going to invest in sophisticated recruitment systems, wouldn't it be wonderful if one of their main objectives was to help employers deliver something approaching the courtesy and consideration we expect in everyday life?

There is research suggesting that doing so could have significant benefits.

The 2025 Candidate Experience Benchmark programme reported that giving candidates useful feedback was associated with a 50–75% increase in willingness to refer other people, depending on the type of feedback provided. [13]

These are associations from the programme's research, not proof that a particular feedback email will cause a precise improvement.

But the direction is compelling.

Even when somebody doesn't get the job, the way they're treated can affect whether they'd recommend the organisation.

And that brings us back to the central argument of this paper.

A rejection doesn't have to destroy a relationship.

Handled thoughtfully, it might even strengthen one.

What if every rejected candidate became a customer?

Let's try looking at the problem from a completely different angle.

Instead of asking how we can make rejection less disappointing, what if we asked how we could make the experience genuinely positive?

Not by pretending the rejection doesn't matter, and certainly not by offering people some meaningless consolation prize.

But by recognising that they've demonstrated an interest in our organisation and treating that interest as something valuable.

Let me give you an example I've often used when discussing this idea.

Think about Caffè Nero.

It's a familiar consumer brand with thousands of daily customer interactions, an established network of coffee shops and a product that people frequently purchase.

Now imagine a recruitment operation generating approximately 100,000 candidate emails a year. That's an illustrative volume we've used when discussing a business of this type, rather than a freshly audited total.

Those communications already exist. The employer is already sending acknowledgements, interview invitations, application updates and rejection messages.

What if some of those interactions could be used to create goodwill?

Suppose somebody applies for a position at Caffè Nero and is unsuccessful.

They receive a thoughtful explanation, they're thanked for their interest, and perhaps they're offered an invitation to enjoy a coffee as a gesture of appreciation.

A free drink.

A small discount.

Something that says, We're sorry we couldn't offer you the job, but we appreciate the time you've given us.

It's a tiny gesture, but emotionally it's quite powerful.

Instead of remembering only the disappointment of rejection, the candidate might remember that the company treated them rather well.

They might visit a coffee shop, perhaps buy a sandwich while they're there, or bring a friend.

And they might apply for another job with the company in the future.

The idea is wonderfully **simple.**

But once you start looking at candidate communications as an opportunity to build relationships, rather than simply close applications, all sorts of possibilities emerge.

Think about an airline thanking unsuccessful cabin crew applicants and encouraging them to remain part of its community.

Or a fashion retailer offering suitable applicants the opportunity to stay connected with news, events and future vacancies.

Or a hospitality group creating a genuinely helpful programme for people beginning their careers, regardless of whether they were successful on this particular occasion.

None of these relationships should be manipulative.



There would be no value in trying to cover up an appalling recruitment process with a free cup of coffee. And there are important data protection and electronic marketing rules to observe: recruitment communications don't automatically provide permission to send marketing promotions, so any promotional element must be properly permissioned and transparent.

But the principle is sound.

Candidates have voluntarily expressed an interest in the organisation.

Why wouldn't we want to maintain a positive relationship with them?

We already know this approach in marketing.

Brands spend enormous amounts creating loyalty schemes, member communities, customer rewards and content designed to keep people engaged.

They understand that somebody doesn't have to be buying something today to be valuable tomorrow.

Yet recruitment frequently treats an unsuccessful application as the end of a relationship.

I think that is an extraordinary waste.

Imagine a major consumer brand receiving 250,000 applications a year.

If only 2,000 people are employed, that leaves 248,000 applicants who didn't get the job.

Now suppose the recruitment process made even a small proportion of those people more inclined to buy from the business, recommend it to friends or apply again.

The potential value could be substantial.

Of course, you would need to measure actual behaviour rather than make assumptions. Increased goodwill doesn't automatically translate into sales, and discounts have costs that need to be considered.

But that is precisely the point.

Why aren't we testing it?

Why aren't marketing and recruitment working together to understand whether a better candidate experience improves customer loyalty?

Why aren't we asking unsuccessful candidates how they feel about the organisation afterwards?

And why aren't we looking at the entire candidate audience as a valuable relationship in its own right?

We're sitting on an extraordinary opportunity.

And in many organisations, we're simply allowing it to disappear into an ATS database.



Recruitment has spent decades measuring the wrong things.

I don't want anybody to think I'm suggesting that recruitment teams should stop worrying about efficiency.

Of course efficiency matters.

Vacancies need to be filled. Hiring managers need good people. Recruitment budgets need to be managed, and organisations have perfectly reasonable expectations about the performance of their recruitment functions.

But I've always been slightly uncomfortable with how narrow our definition of performance has become.

We measure cost-per-hire, time-to-hire, source of application, number of interviews and offer acceptance rates.

All important.

But those measures tell us remarkably little about the experience of the people moving through the process.

And they tell us almost nothing about the commercial value of the relationships we create.

In its 2026 Resourcing and Talent Planning report, the CIPD found that only 19% of organisations calculated the return on investment of their recruitment processes.

It also found that 46% still approached recruitment in an ad hoc way. [6]

Now, those are two remarkable figures when you consider the scale of recruitment expenditure in major organisations.

We spend substantial amounts attracting people, employing recruiters, purchasing technology and running assessment processes.

Yet relatively few organisations seem to be calculating the wider return on those investments.

I think there's an opportunity to ask a completely different set of questions.

Instead of simply measuring how many candidates applied, why not measure how many people completed the application process and how many abandoned it?

Instead of measuring how quickly applications were processed, why not measure how long candidates waited without meaningful communication?

Instead of congratulating ourselves on filling a vacancy, why not ask the unsuccessful applicants whether they felt respected?

And instead of reporting on the effectiveness of employer brand advertising, why not examine whether the actual recruitment experience strengthened or weakened people's perceptions of the company?

For consumer-facing businesses, I'd go further.

I'd want to understand whether people who have a positive recruitment experience become more loyal customers.

I'd want to know whether the opposite is true.

And I'd want to see those findings shared with the marketing director, commercial director and chief executive.

Imagine a board meeting in which the HR director was able to say:

"We attracted 150,000 candidates this year, and although we employed fewer than 2,000 of them, 92% of the people who completed our recruitment process felt positively about how they were treated. We know that because we've asked them.

"We've also been working with marketing to understand whether those positive experiences influence future customer behaviour. Early indications suggest there's an opportunity to strengthen loyalty, and we're now testing it."

Wouldn't that be a rather different conversation from reporting that the average time-to-hire has fallen by three days?

And think about the status it could give recruitment within the organisation.



Recruitment would no longer be seen simply as a function responsible for finding employees.

It would become an important contributor to brand reputation, customer relationships and potentially commercial performance.

That could change how budgets are allocated.

It could change who gets involved in recruitment strategy.

And it could change how seriously the organisation treats the experience of unsuccessful candidates.

There's a phrase in marketing that I've always liked: customer lifetime value.

The principle is that a customer shouldn't be judged simply by the value of an individual transaction, but by the relationship they may have with the business over time.

Recruitment has never really developed an equivalent way of thinking about candidates.

Perhaps it should.

Because somebody who applies for a job today might become an employee next year, a customer for the next twenty years, an advocate for the brand or somebody who recommends the organisation to dozens of other people.

What is that relationship worth?

We don't know.

And we won't know until we start measuring it.



Why do we have Employer Brand Managers, but so few people responsible for the candidate experience?

Which brings me back to the question that inspired this paper.

Why do we call you an Employer Brand Manager when perhaps you should be called a **Candidate Experience Manager?**

Now, I know that will upset a few people.

And I should make something clear. I'm not suggesting that everyone working in employer branding should immediately change their job title, or that creative communications, research and attraction strategies aren't important.

They are.

But I think the industry's priorities have become unbalanced.

We've created specialist roles responsible for communicating what an organisation is like to work for.

We have Employer Brand Managers, EVP Specialists, Talent Attraction Directors and Heads of Recruitment Marketing.

We commission agencies to create employer brands, design campaigns and produce recruitment communications.

But who is responsible for the actual experience of applying for a job?

Who owns the journey from the first visit to the careers website through to the final outcome?

Who makes sure that the experience reflects the values we're so enthusiastically advertising?

Quite often, responsibility is spread across multiple departments.

Marketing looks after the brand.

HR looks after recruitment.

IT looks after the technology.

Procurement buys the ATS.

Hiring managers conduct interviews.

And someone in resourcing operations manages the process.

Each department is doing its own job, but nobody necessarily owns what happens to the person trying to move between them.

I suspect that's one of the fundamental reasons candidate experience is so frequently overlooked.

It doesn't belong neatly to any one department.

But that's exactly why it needs somebody responsible for it.

A genuine Candidate Experience Manager wouldn't simply be concerned with making the careers website look attractive or ensuring applicants receive automated emails.

They would have responsibility for understanding what people actually experience.

They would regularly apply for jobs through their own systems. They would examine where candidates struggle, where they abandon applications and where communication breaks down.

They would work with accessibility specialists to make sure the recruitment journey is genuinely inclusive.

They would challenge job advertisements that hide salaries or fail to explain working patterns.

They would work with recruitment teams to make rejection more considerate and feedback more useful.

And they would collaborate with marketing and customer experience colleagues to understand how candidate interactions influence the wider reputation of the organisation.

Importantly, they would have the authority to make changes.

Because there's little point appointing somebody to improve candidate experience if they can't challenge the systems, policies and behaviours that create poor experiences in the first place.

I think this could become a very significant leadership responsibility.

Particularly in organisations with large recruitment volumes and consumer-facing brands.

Imagine a major supermarket appointing a Director of Candidate Experience whose remit included recruitment communications, careers technology, accessibility, assessment, rejection and the relationship between candidate satisfaction and customer loyalty.

That would be an interesting role.

And an important one.

Because the organisation would finally be acknowledging that people who apply for jobs are an audience worth understanding and valuing, regardless of whether they're employed.

The more I think about it, the more convinced I become that candidate experience deserves to sit alongside customer experience as a strategic business responsibility.

Not because the two are identical.

But because they involve the same people.

And those people don't suddenly stop being customers when they decide to apply for a job.



Perhaps the most valuable person in your recruitment process is the one you don't employ.

There's one final thought I'd like to leave you with.

Imagine two candidates applying for the same job.

Both are well qualified. Both are enthusiastic.
Both invest considerable time in the process.

One is successful.

They receive an offer, accept the job and begin working for the company.

They're delighted.

The other candidate is unsuccessful.

But instead of receiving a generic rejection email, they're given thoughtful feedback. The recruiter thanks them personally for the time they've invested and explains why another candidate was a stronger match.

The conversation is warm and respectful. The candidate is encouraged to consider future opportunities, and the company makes it clear that their interest was genuinely appreciated.

They're disappointed, naturally.

But they leave with a positive impression.

A few weeks later, they're telling a friend about the experience.

"I didn't get the job, but I've got to say, they were really good. Lovely people. Proper feedback. I'd definitely apply again."

The friend happens to be looking for a job.

They apply.

They get it.

Meanwhile, the original candidate continues buying products from the business, perhaps tells other people about the experience and remains open to working there in the future.

Now, contrast that with the alternative.

The candidate is ghosted.

After several weeks of silence, they realise they've been rejected.

They tell their partner how appallingly the company treated them. They write a negative review and mention the experience to friends.

If the company sells consumer products, perhaps they choose a competitor next time.

And when somebody asks whether it's a good place to work, they have a fairly straightforward answer.

"Don't bother. They don't even have the decency to reply."

Two candidates.

The same recruitment decision.

Completely different outcomes.

And that's really what this entire paper has been about.

I'm not suggesting that employers should offer jobs to people who aren't suitable.

I'm not suggesting we should abandon assessment, ignore qualifications or employ people simply to avoid disappointing them.

And I'm certainly not suggesting that every rejected candidate is going to stop buying your products.

What I'm suggesting is that the way we make people feel has a value.

A human value, certainly.

But potentially a commercial value as well.

We know this instinctively when dealing with customers.

We've built enormous industries around understanding customer experience, customer loyalty and the emotional connections people develop with brands.

We know that how people are treated affects what they think about a business.

We know that experiences influence recommendations.

And we know that relationships can be strengthened or damaged through the smallest interactions.

Yet recruitment has somehow managed to operate for decades without fully embracing the same principles.

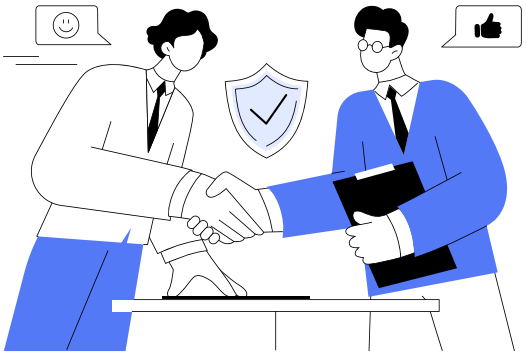
I find that extraordinary.

Because, in my experience, the emotional investment people make when applying for jobs can be significantly greater than the investment they make when purchasing products.

Nobody's life is going to change dramatically because they couldn't buy a particular television.

But getting or losing out on a job can affect someone's entire future.

And that should make us think very carefully about how we treat them.





A final word, after 35 years.

When I look back over my career, I sometimes wonder how many millions of people have interacted with the recruitment campaigns and careers websites we've created.

It's an extraordinary thought.

Millions of people, each with their own ambitions, worries, talents, circumstances and dreams.

Some will have got the jobs they wanted.

Many won't.

Some will have become loyal employees. Others will have gone on to wonderful careers elsewhere.

And some, I'm sure, will remember their recruitment experience for reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with whether they were successful.

They'll remember how they were treated.

That's what stays with people.

I still think about that conversation with our CTO at Sainsbury's.

Two point two million visits a month.

At the time, it felt like an astonishing number. It still does.

But what really struck me wasn't the traffic.

It was the realisation that these were people with a relationship to the organisation that went far beyond applying for a job.

They were customers, candidates, parents, friends, colleagues and members of communities.

And they were all forming opinions.

I've spent a lot of time since then trying to persuade employers to appreciate the true significance of that.

Sometimes I think we've made progress.

Careers websites have become more sophisticated. Accessibility receives far greater attention. More organisations are investing in skills-based assessment, and technology offers extraordinary opportunities to improve communication and remove unnecessary administration.

But in other respects, I worry that things are getting worse.

Application volumes are increasing. Artificial intelligence is creating new pressures, and recruitment teams are becoming more focused than ever on efficiency.

And somewhere in all of that, the individual human being can become remarkably easy to overlook.

We've become very good at counting applicants.

Perhaps it's time we became better at appreciating them.

I don't think we need another complicated framework or another industry initiative to make this happen.

I think we need a fairly simple change in perspective.

We need to stop thinking of recruitment as a process that exists purely to find employees.

And start recognising it as one of the most important interactions an organisation has with the outside world.

We need to think about the careers website as a significant brand and customer experience platform.

We need to think about the ATS as a system that should serve candidates as well as recruiters.

We need to make rejection a thoughtful, constructive and dignified experience.

And we need to recognise that somebody who doesn't get the job is not somebody who no longer matters.

Quite the opposite.

They might be a future employee.

They might be a loyal customer.

They might become an advocate for your organisation.

Or they might be someone who never speaks positively about you again.

Much of that depends on how you treat them.



So perhaps it's time for HR directors to have a different conversation.

Not simply about how many people we can attract, how quickly we can process applications or how much we should spend on employer branding.

But about the experience we create for every single person who expresses an interest in working for us.

Because the real test of an employer brand isn't how beautifully we describe our values.

It's how we behave when somebody wants to be part of our organisation and we have to tell them no.

And if you remember only one thing from this paper, I'd like it to be this.

You don't have to give somebody a job to give them a good experience.

You just have to remember that they're a human being.

And after 35 years working in recruitment, I still find it remarkable that we need reminding.



How Genius can help

Genius is a creative communications, recruitment technology and insight partner specialising in the complete candidate and employee journey.

Through **Genius Intel,** we help organisations understand audiences, candidate behaviour, recruitment performance, employer reputation and journey friction.

Through our **employer-brand and creative work**, we discover and articulate credible employer stories that people can recognise and believe.

We create careers websites and recruitment experiences that combine concept, storytelling, accessibility, clear UX and measurable performance.

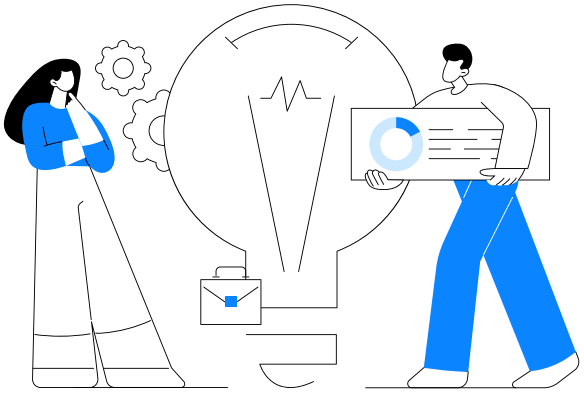
Through **iQ, our skills-first enterprise ATS**, we help organisations move beyond CV assumptions and towards evidence of capability, judgement and job readiness.

Through **AndMe**, we transform onboarding from administration into a personal experience that begins after the offer and builds confidence, connection and belonging before day one.

We do not believe talent transformation starts with a product.

It starts with understanding where you are.

Then we help you get somewhere **better**.



Genius

Great communication connects people to purpose.

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This paper combines personal recollections and opinions with independently published research. Figures from candidate surveys describe the particular respondents and time periods studied; they are not necessarily representative of all UK jobseekers or employers.

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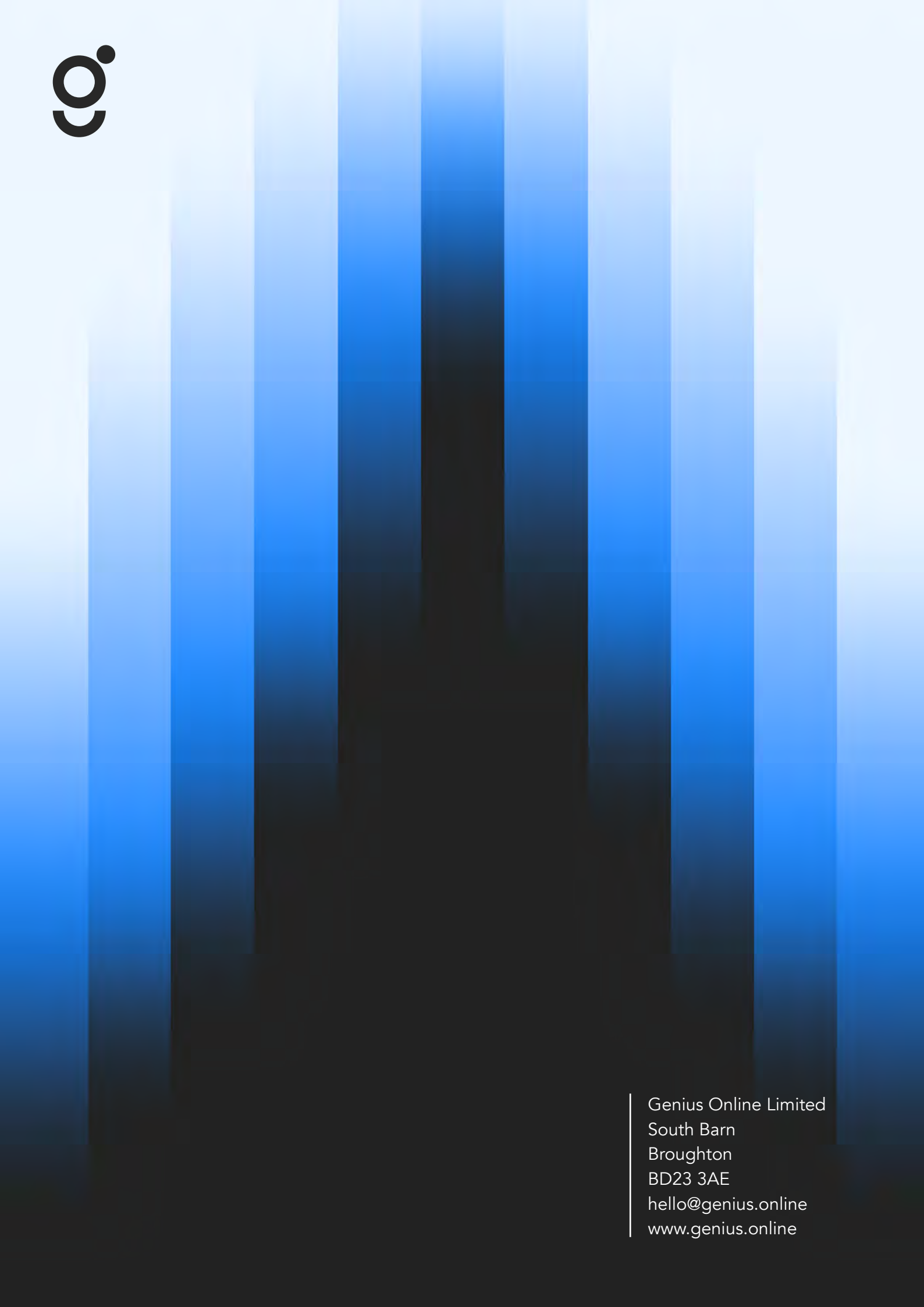
Every touchpoint on the candidate journey matters.



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