HOW TO IMPROVE APPLICATION QUALITY IN HOSPITALITY

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Introduction

Getting high-quality applications is essential to hiring top talent quickly – yet they remain frustratingly rare. Our latest research reveals that just 1 in 5 applications in hospitality are considered high quality, well below the UK average.

To understand what's driving this quality gap, we surveyed both recruiters and jobseekers in the UK hospitality sector. The findings reveal the cause to be due to a mix of outdated practices, misaligned expectations, and missed opportunities. But they also point to actionable steps employers can take to attract better candidates and hire more effectively.

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Only 1 in 5 applications in Hospitality are considered high quality

Hospitality employers and recruiters face unique challenges when sourcing talent.

The quality of job applications received is significantly lower than the UK average - only 18% are considered high quality, compared to 30% across all industries. This means hiring teams need to work harder to find suitable candidates in a sea of mismatched CVs.

When receiving applications, 82% of hospitality recruiters reject candidates due to a lack of relevant skills (vs 70% UK-wide), while 29% rule out candidates based on unavailability to start when required (vs 17%).

Even those who make it to interview often fall short on reliability or long-term commitment: 44% of hospitality recruiters cite this as a dealbreaker, compared to 33% in other industries.

These challenges not only slow down the recruitment process but also increase the risk of high staff turnover, making it harder to build a stable, service-oriented workforce.

What does a high-quality candidate look like in Hospitality?

With only half of applicants making it past the first stage, hiring managers must understand what defines quality.

While many fundamentals still matter, like right to work, clear communication, language skills, hospitality employers prioritise practical readiness over polished presentation or formal credentials – pointing to the strengths of the industry.

- **Complete set of application documents**
  56% of hospitality employers deem this essential, compared to 71% across all industries. This suggests a greater tolerance in hospitality for learners or less formal applications.

- **Relevance of work experience**
  Just 42% of hospitality employers see directly related experience as essential, versus 63% overall. This may reflect the sector's openness to transferable skills and a willingness to train on the job.

- **Engaging and well-structured cover letter**
  Considered essential by only 20% in hospitality, compared to 36% in other industries. This signals a lower emphasis on written self-presentation and narrative fit in the sector.

- **Professional experience at top-tier employers**
  Valued as essential by a mere 9% of hospitality employers, significantly lower than the 28% across all sectors. Prestige and prior employer brand appear to carry less weight in hospitality recruitment.

- **High quality formatting and presentations**
  Only 22% of hospitality employers consider high-quality formatting and presentation essential, compared to 35% in other industries.

These findings suggest a pragmatic approach to hiring, but also a chance to better define and communicate expectations to improve application quality. Communicating start dates and shift times can help recruiters improve application quality by setting expectations.

Employers should also consider providing training with their onboarding to make sure they aren't eliminating candidates who have the potential to learn on the job. A candidate with the right attitude, long-term commitment and availability can become an asset. This is especially true in hospitality, as 61% of candidates for roles in the sector say they would like to develop their career and learn new skills.

How are candidates evaluated and what can be improved?

Most recruiters in hospitality rely on manual methods, with 79% reviewing applications by hand (vs 63% across other sectors). This preference for hands-on screening may ensure thoroughness but can strain resources and slow down hiring.

The second method they use most is pre-application questionnaires, designed to evaluate candidates' skills, competencies, and cultural fit. These are employed by 56% of hospitality recruiters, compared to 41% in other sectors, suggesting some openness to structured assessment tools beyond the CV.

The type of documents required from applicants also shows notable differences between hospitality and other sectors. A CV is a near-universal requirement in hospitality (89% vs 78% across industries), reflecting the sector's ongoing reliance on conventional credentials.

Additionally, hospitality companies more frequently request proof of work permits, or visa documentation (51% vs 41%), likely due to the industry's higher proportion of international workers.

In contrast, proof of language proficiency is required far less often in hospitality – just 11% compared to a higher rate in other sectors despite the strong emphasis on communication in most hospitality roles.

Similarly, hospitality employers less commonly request work portfolios (9% vs 26%) and diplomas (9% vs 21%), indicating a reduced emphasis on formal or demonstrable credentials compared to the broader job market.

These present a clear opportunity to diversify evaluation tools and streamline requirements to make it easier for quality candidates to apply while reducing manual screening time.

With fewer hospitality recruiters relying on formal credentials, new technologies such as AI chatbots and pre-application questionnaires can also help candidates while improving quality of applications.

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What puts good candidates off and how to prevent it

We found that, compared to other candidates, those seeking jobs in hospitality often struggle to position themselves effectively. They are more likely to struggle with tailoring applications; 73% report difficulty deciding what to include (vs 61%). Additionally, they feel less confident about how well their key skills are represented (70% feel confident vs 81% overall).

To attract and retain the right candidates in the hospitality sector, it's crucial to understand their specific concerns and expectations – many of which differ from those in the wider job market.

1. Unclear job ads are a barrier to applying

71% of hospitality candidates reported that they find expectations in job ads unclear. This is an issue across all sectors and recruiters agree that clear job ads are the key to better applications. So, along with clear skills requirements and day-to-day tasks, including shift schedules, benefits, salary and the work environment is important to attract hospitality candidates.

2. Lack of salary information deters candidates

One of the most significant barriers to engagement is missing salary information. A majority (53%) of hospitality candidates say the lack of salary information creates uncertainty about whether a job aligns with their skills and expectations – higher than the general average of 44%. Transparent pay information not only improves candidate confidence but also helps filter out mismatched applications.
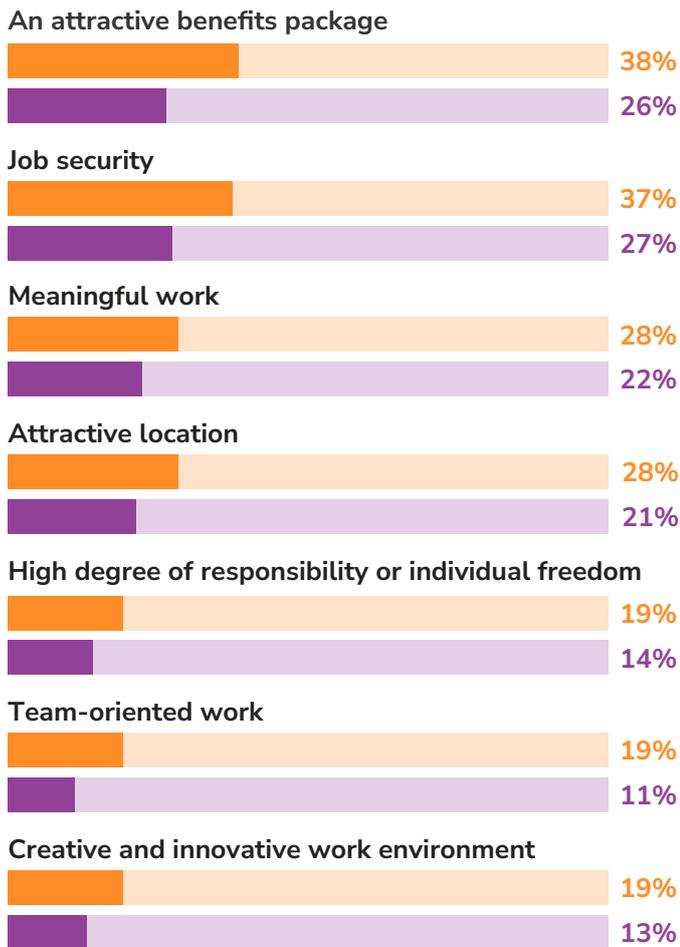
3. A poor hiring experience results in rejected offers

A smooth, transparent recruitment process is critical for keeping strong hospitality candidates engaged. Hospitality candidates are more likely to walk away from a role due to changing expectations about job responsibilities (33% vs 23%), poor communication during the process (36% vs 23%) and cultural or team misalignment (23% vs 16%).

Being upfront about day-to-day responsibilities, maintaining consistent communication, and giving candidates a realistic sense of the team and work environment early on (through video intros, job previews, or trial shifts) can elevate the hiring experience.

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What candidates value beyond pay

While 58% rank salary as their top priority – higher than the 50% UK average – other drivers also matter.

An attractive benefits package

Hospitality sector	38%
Other sectors	26%

Job security

Hospitality sector	37%
Other sectors	27%

Meaningful work

Hospitality sector	28%
Other sectors	22%

Attractive location

Hospitality sector	28%
Other sectors	21%

High degree of responsibility or individual freedom

Hospitality sector	19%
Other sectors	14%

Team-oriented work

Hospitality sector	19%
Other sectors	11%

Creative and innovative work environment

Hospitality sector	19%
Other sectors	13%

■ Hospitality sector
■ Other sectors

These findings underscore that while competitive compensation is a top priority – with 58% of hospitality workers citing salary as the most important factor, well above the average – employers must go further to stand out.

Beyond pay, candidates are drawn to roles offering work-life balance, engaging and meaningful work, and long-term security. Enhancing job offers with tangible perks, such as attractive benefits, a desirable location, and a supportive, team-oriented environment can significantly strengthen employer appeal in this highly competitive sector.

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7 strategies to improve application quality

These findings highlight key actions for hospitality employers and recruiters:

1. Be transparent about salary

Include salary details in job postings to reduce candidate uncertainty and improve application quality.

2. Write clear, targeted job ads

Crafting clear, compelling, and informative job ads that highlight required skills is essential to attracting high-quality applications and streamlining the hiring process.

3. Differentiate the essential vs desirable criteria for the role

It's important to regularly reassess what's necessary for success in a role. That means distinguishing between qualifications that are essential to perform the job and those that are simply beneficial, as well as assessing what can be taught on the job.

4. Offer realistic previews

Paint an honest picture of the role and team to improve fit and reduce early attrition.

5. Promote career progression at the start

Career development is a top motivator, so highlight growth opportunities early on. It not only attracts stronger candidates, it also helps reduce turnover.

6. Modernise candidate screening and applications with AI and automation

AI tools remain underused in hospitality and manual screening remains the preferred choice. There's untapped potential to use automation for smart CV screening, chatbots for FAQs and scheduling, and pre-assessment scoring. These tools can save recruiters time and improve the candidate experience.

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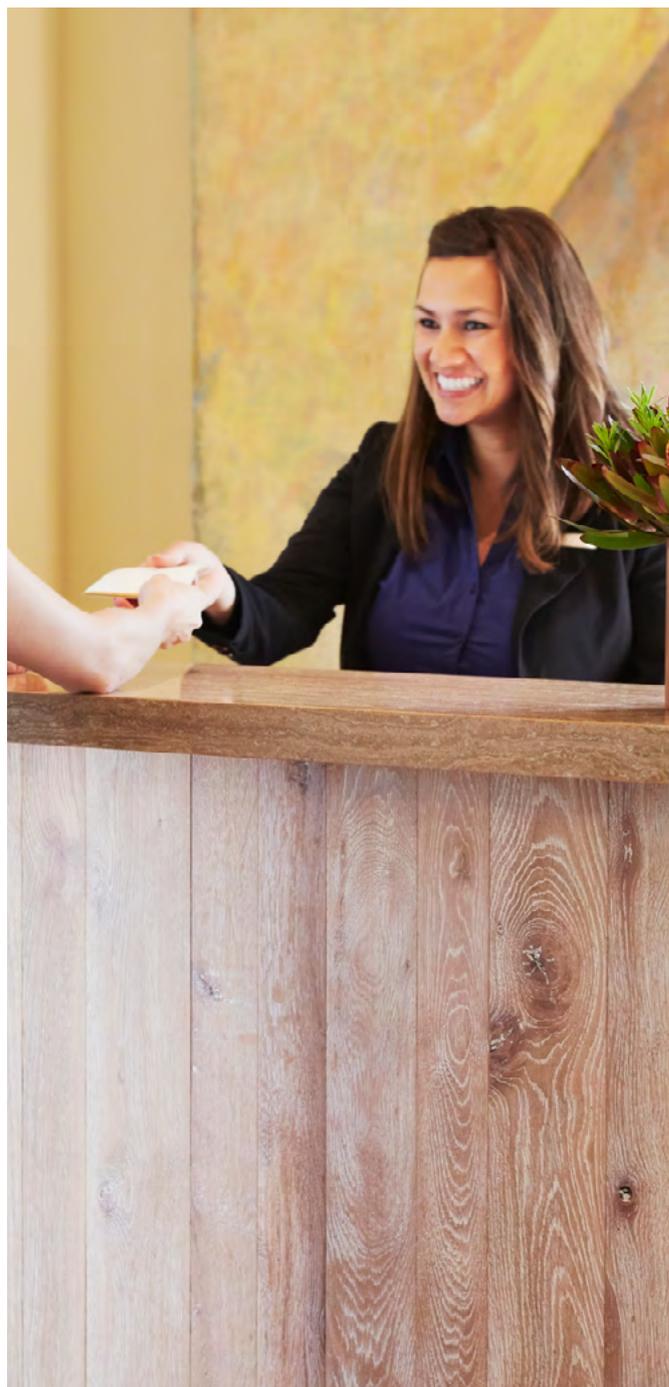
7. Use recruiting KPIs to identify potential obstacles

KPIs (key performance indicators) help recruiters spot issues in the hiring process, including job ad performance and candidate engagement.

By tracking key metrics below, you can quickly identify what's working and what's not to make data-backed changes to improve reach and application quality.

KPIs in hiring:

- Application confirmed
- Application interest
- Apply form open
- Job ad views
- Impressions

Once problems have been identified, they need to be acted upon. So, let's explore the steps you can take to solve common challenges and improve the quality of your applications.

Problem:
The impressions of my job ad are low

Solution:
Ensure your job ad can be found by search engine algorithms:
Optimise your job title. 65% of candidates search by title (e.g. Restaurant Manager and 20% by skill (e.g. Leadership)

Problem:
Candidates click "apply" but drop out before submitting their complete form

Solution:
Make sure your application process is user-friendly, and candidates can complete the process quickly, submitting the necessary information you need to assess applications

Problem:
My job ad has a good number of impressions, but few views (the number of times someone clicks to view the full ad)

Solution:
Optimise the job title and opening lines of the ad:

- Put the most important details first
- Include: position, experience, qualification, environment and area of responsibility (e.g. Junior Sous Chef for a 5-star restaurant)
- Specify location (particularly for smaller towns) e.g. "based in Reading"

Problem:
My job ad is getting views, but application interest is low (i.e. few clicks)

Solution:
Ensure the ad is well-structured and covers key details candidates care about:

- Salary range
- Requirements
- Benefits
- Flexible working arrangements
- Day-to-day responsibilities

Problem:
The applications I receive don't match the required skills

Solution:
Revisit the job requirements in the advert:

- List separate essential and desirable skills
- Focus on five key soft and hard skills that can be easily demonstrated, for example, stakeholder management or leadership

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Conclusion

Improving application quality in hospitality doesn't have to be a mammoth task. By focusing on clear job ads, pay transparency, modern evaluation tools, and purpose-driven messaging, employers can attract applicants that are a better fit while reducing costly early-stage drop-offs.

At Caterer.com, we help connect hospitality employers with quality talent faster. Whether you're refining your job ads, testing new formats, or exploring smart tools, our team is here to help you raise the bar.

Sources:

Application Quality research, recruiter & jobseekers insights – April 2025 via Opinium Omnibus, approx 624 recruiters, including at least 45 in Hospitality and 1,009 jobseekers, including at least 70 in Hospitality in the UK

Job factors research - January 31st - February 4th via Opinium Omnibus, approx. 1.200 candidates, nationally representative: weighted by gender, region and working status

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Caterer.com - the hospitality industry's hiring partner

Caterer.com makes finding the right hospitality talent simple!

Create and post a job ad in just a few clicks – and achieve maximum reach for your jobs. Our intelligent technology helps you find the best candidates for all hospitality jobs – as quickly as possible.

At the same time, we use our extensive network of industry partners to spotlight your roles to relevant hospitality candidates.

We bring the hospitality community together and host live sessions to learn from each other. We share these insights with you so you can enhance your hospitality hiring strategy.

And best of all: We support you with outstanding service from day one – and accompany you at every step.

- Innovative technology to reach & engage the right candidates to your roles, **reducing cost of hiring.**

- Aggregator partners that drive **greater reach for your roles.**

- Build your talent pipeline by reaching a vast hospitality specific audience now. We partner with key industry organisations such as The Institute of Hospitality, Springboard, HR in Hospitality, HIT Scotland, Hospitality Titans, Catering Scotland, Choose Hospitality and we deliver our jobs feed directly into some of their sites, ensuring your roles are seen amongst their extensive hospitality audiences.

- Dedicated Account Management and Customer Success support.

- We actively partner with industry bodies, charities and organisations to promote the industry as a great place to work and champion the fantastic people within it.

- Gain access to additional relevant candidate audiences, at no extra cost. All jobs on Caterer.com also appear on our sister site Totaljobs, expanding your reach into new talent pools across other sectors.

- Employer brand insights & support to help you elevate your brand.

- Regular sector insights & guidance through the Caterer.com Leadership Collaborative, an open community that pulls on joint forces to provide peer-to-peer support, insight and learning to help leaders navigate through challenge and drive team growth and development and business success.

- Access the largest specialist hospitality talent pool. With a database of **over 4.8 million profiles, each quarter an average 172k active jobseekers make over 1.7 million applications on Caterer.com, with over 4 million site visits.**

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Hiring solutions

Enhance your hiring campaigns with our portfolio of end-to-end recruitment solutions:

Equality Boost

A diverse and inclusive workforce is key to strong business performance. Engage the right people for your roles in a diverse talent pool, by widening your hiring reach and taking new approaches to candidate targeting. Equality Boost can help you:

- Deliver a tangible impact on your DE&I strategy
- Extend your candidate reach into new and diverse talent pools
- Broaden the range of skills you attract to your business

Programmatic

Find who you want, faster with programmatic targeting for a more efficient use of your high-volume hiring budget. Our sophisticated technology uses rule-based algorithms to distribute jobs to the best places throughout the entire web so you can pin-point the best candidates, quickly.

- Effortless integration with your ATS
- Only pay for the number of completed applications you receive
- Track performance in real-time and gain valuable insights to enable your campaign to be optimised quickly

Visibility Solutions

It's crucial you reach the talent you need ahead of the competition. Reach the right candidates first and build your team by targeting and attracting relevant hires. Our innovative Visibility Solutions can help you:

- Broaden the reach of your message
- Enhance your potential to grow applications
- Increase the relevancy of applicants

CV Database

Take control of your hiring and find the ideal person quickly by using our CV Database to search over 4.8 million profiles. Using our intuitive search and filters, you can easily find and contact the most relevant people for your jobs.

- Save your searches and receive an email as soon as matching candidates register or update their profiles
- Get ahead of the competition and be the first to find candidates who may not have applied to your jobs
- Receive relevant candidates directly to your inbox

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