

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

The Untrained Decision

Why hiring manager capability is the most overlooked investment in your talent strategy, and what the best organisations are doing about it.

A briefing for HR directors and talent leaders responsible for hiring manager capability and interview quality.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hiring managers make the final call on almost every hire an organisation makes, yet most have never been trained to do it. Fewer than four in ten receive any formal interview training before they start interviewing, and the cost of getting it wrong is severe: a failed mid-level hire can cost in the region of £132,000, and roughly half of new hires do not last eighteen months.

This briefing sets out why that gap exists, why the training most organisations already run fails to close it, and what the organisations getting this right are doing instead: building capability that is continuous rather than one-off, grounded in a shared definition of what good looks like, and reinforced over time rather than delivered once and forgotten.

Hiring manager capability is one of the highest-leverage, lowest-cost investments available to any talent function. It has simply been sitting in plain sight.

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The Hidden Cost of an Untrained Decision

A single hire can take months to land. There's the brief, the sourcing, the agency spend, the careers site, the employer brand, the screening, the scheduling and the shortlist. Every bit of that effort funnels down to an hour or two in a room, where one person carries the final say. The hiring manager. For most organisations, that person has had little or no training in how to do the thing the entire process has been building towards.

The figures here are a little slippery, so they're worth treating with some care. Some research suggests fewer than four in ten hiring managers receive any formal interview training before they start interviewing. Other studies put it considerably lower. The precise number matters less than the direction of travel, which is hard to dispute. A clear majority of the people making your final hiring decisions have been left to work it out as they go.

We've spent the best part of a decade investing in almost every part of hiring except this one. The technology has improved. The sourcing has improved. The employer brand has improved. The last decision, the one that actually determines who joins, who stays and what your teams become, has been left largely to instinct. That's the gap this report is about, and the reason it's becoming harder to ignore.

Everything funnels to one room

Picture the journey of a vacancy. Marketing shapes the advert, talent acquisition sources and screens, procurement may have negotiated the agency rates, and HR owns the policy and the compliance. By the time a candidate reaches a final interview, a dozen people and several systems have already done their part. Then it comes down to a manager who hires perhaps two or three times a year, doing it alongside a full-time job they're actually measured on.

For everyone outside the talent team, hiring is an occasional event rather than a craft. A manager might run a recruitment process once or twice a year, often under pressure, usually with a role to backfill and a team feeling the gap. They bring deep knowledge of the job and the team, which matters enormously. What they often lack is any grounding in how to assess fairly, how to probe

for evidence rather than rapport, or how to tell the difference between a candidate who interviews well and a candidate who will do the job well. Those are learned skills, and we rarely teach them.

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What It Costs When We Get It Wrong

A poor hire is one of the few things in talent that genuinely stops a board in its tracks. The Recruitment and Employment Confederation's most recent estimate puts the cost of a failed mid-level hire at around £132,000 once you account for lost productivity, management time and the cost of hiring all over again. Research suggests roughly four in ten hires turn out to be poor fits. Most employers admit they have made a bad hire at some point, yet a surprising share still believe it cost them nothing, which tells you how much of the damage tends to stay hidden.

£132k

estimated cost of a single failed mid-level hire

4 in 10

hiring managers receive any formal interview training

~50%

of new hires don't make it past eighteen months

~1/3

productivity a poor performer can cost a small team

The damage that never reaches an invoice is often the worse of the two. A poor performer in a small team can drag departmental productivity down by something like a third. Strong performers notice, they start carrying the extra load, and in time they start looking elsewhere. The more revealing figure, though, is about why hires fail in the first place. One well-known study found that almost half of new hires do not last eighteen months, and that the overwhelming majority of those failures come down to attitude, motivation and fit rather than any lack of technical skill.

Sit that next to how managers tend to interview, and the problem comes into focus. Most untrained interviewers screen hardest for the technical, because that is the part they understand and can talk about with confidence. The very things that predict whether someone stays and thrives, the harder-to-read questions of motivation, behaviour and fit, are the things they were never shown how to assess. We are losing people for reasons our training, where it exists at all, does not even cover.

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Why the Usual Training Doesn't Stick

Plenty of organisations do run hiring manager training, so it would be unfair to suggest the effort isn't there. The trouble is the shape of it. The standard model is a single session, a half-day workshop or an e-learning module, delivered once, after which the manager returns to the day job. Adult learning research has been clear on this for years. Without reinforcement and a chance to apply it, most of what's learned in a one-off session fades within weeks. Awareness goes up, while behaviour stays roughly where it was.

There is a second, quieter reason it fails to stick, and it sits in the incentives. In most organisations a hiring manager is measured on how quickly they fill a role. Time-to-fill dominates. The quality of their interviewing, the consistency of their scoring against other interviewers, the experience they give candidates, these are rarely measured and almost never tied to how a manager is judged. You can train someone all you like, but if the only thing the system rewards is speed, speed is what you'll get.

The organisations seeing a genuine return tend to treat capability as something they build and maintain over time, rather than something they deliver once and tick off. Leeds Trinity University is a good example of what that looks like in practice.

CASE STUDY**Leeds Trinity University | Higher Education**

We designed and delivered a full inclusive recruitment workshop for their hiring managers, built around structured selection, objective criteria and stronger questioning technique, and underpinned by a behavioural framework and competency question bank we created with their own stakeholders. They asked us to build a follow-up refresher, called *Refining Your Hiring Lens*, that reinforces the core principles and keeps managers up to date on changes in legislation and the growing role of AI in hiring. It now runs alongside the original workshop.

OUTCOMES

- A refresher workshop, *Refining Your Hiring Lens*, now runs alongside the original programme
- AI literacy built into the refresher rather than treated as a separate topic
- HR reported simply less noise from hiring managers about the process afterwards

The AI paradox

There is a reason this is becoming urgent rather than merely sensible. As AI absorbs more of the mechanical work of hiring, the sourcing, the screening, the scheduling and the first-pass sift, the part left to the human carries more weight than ever. AI can move a process along, though it can only ever accelerate the process it is given. Point it at a well-designed, well-run hiring approach and it makes a good thing faster. Point it at a broken one, and it simply helps you make poor decisions at greater speed. The quality of the thinking at the sharp end still rests with a person.

There is a candidate-side twist worth naming too. Candidates now use AI to prepare, to rehearse answers and to polish their responses. A manager who has never been trained to probe beyond a smooth surface answer is more exposed than ever to a confident, well-coached candidate who may not be the strongest fit. Getting past the rehearsed answer to the real evidence underneath has quietly become a core part of the job, and it happens to be precisely the skill that goes untaught. The better programmes have started to treat AI literacy as part of hiring manager capability, which is why we built it into the Leeds Trinity refresher rather than leaving it as a separate technology conversation.

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Where It Actually Breaks Down

When hiring goes wrong, the symptom is usually visible long before the cause. A pipeline stalls. Good candidates drop out late. The recruitment team and the hiring manager end up frustrated with one another. Underneath those symptoms sit two problems that training, done properly, is well placed to solve.

The first is the relationship between recruiters and hiring managers, which is more strained in more organisations than most leaders would care to admit. Surveys consistently find that a majority of recruiters feel hiring managers do not really understand recruitment, while a similar majority of hiring managers feel recruiters do not really understand the roles they are filling. Each side optimises for something different. Recruiters are pushed towards speed and process, managers towards the perfect candidate and the avoidance of risk. Without a shared structure to work within, those instincts collide.

Trowers and Hamlins came to us with exactly this picture.

CASE STUDY

Trowers & Hamlins | Legal Services

Candidates were dropping out before the end of the process, and the recruitment team had little real influence over how hiring managers ran their part of it. We built a tailored half-day programme that gave managers a clearer process to follow and a proper grounding in their legal and ethical obligations, then followed it with a hiring manager guide, created with their stakeholders, that set out best practice in a single, usable reference.

OUTCOMES

- A tailored half-day programme covering process, plus legal and ethical obligations
- A hiring manager guide, co-created with stakeholders, as an ongoing reference
- A shared way of working that closed the friction between recruiters and managers

The second problem sits further upstream, before anyone interviews anyone. A great deal of what looks like poor interviewing is really a failure to agree what good looks like in the first place. If a manager cannot articulate the outcomes a role needs to deliver, no amount of polished questioning technique will rescue the decision. Recent research has started to call role clarity the single most overlooked driver of hiring success, and that rings true with what we tend to see.

USS is a good illustration of getting the order right.

CASE STUDY

USS | Pensions & Financial Services

Before we built any training, we worked with them to create a behavioural framework, a clear and shared definition of what they were actually hiring for. The training came afterwards and was built on top of it. The current phase takes it further, with a suite of bite-sized interventions that let managers pull out the specific part of the process they need help with, rather than sit through the whole thing again.

OUTCOMES

- A behavioural framework built and agreed before any training was designed
- Training built directly on top of a shared definition of role success
- A current phase of bite-sized interventions targeting specific process stages

Capability rests on clarity. Train people to interview well against a vague picture of the role, and all you have really done is teach them to be confident about the wrong things.

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What Good Actually Looks Like

If there is a pattern across the organisations getting this right, it is that they stop thinking about hiring manager training as a course and start thinking about it as capability built into how the business hires. A few things tend to be true of them.

- They make it continuous, with reinforcement designed in, because they understand that one session will not hold.
- They build structure into the act of interviewing itself, shared scorecards, agreed criteria, evidence-based scoring and a common question bank, so consistency does not depend on individual talent or memory.
- They start upstream, defining what good looks like before training anyone to assess for it.
- They hold managers accountable for the quality of their hiring and not only its speed.

West Midlands Trains shows what this can look like at scale.

CASE STUDY

West Midlands Trains | Rail & Transport

They came to us with inconsistent recruitment practices across the organisation and a clear goal, to equip every hiring manager to strip bias and bad habits out of the process. We built it in two phases, starting with a half-day grounding in recruitment and interviewing best practice through an inclusivity lens, then, because the first phase landed so well, adding a set of tailored exercises for the probing and assessment stages.

OUTCOMES

- **Eighty hiring managers trained across the organisation**
- **Every manager rating the training as very good or excellent**
- **A two-phase programme extended once the first phase proved its value**

The outcome worth dwelling on, though, is a quieter one. After we had delivered the inclusive recruitment workshop and refresher at Leeds Trinity, their HR team reported that there was simply less noise from hiring managers about the process. That small phrase carries a lot of weight. When managers are confident and capable, they stop resisting the process and start working with it, the arguments fade, the escalations drop, the recruiter's job gets easier, candidates get a better experience, and the quality of decisions goes up. Less noise is the sound of capability taking hold.

Where to start

None of this requires a wholesale transformation or a large budget, which is part of what makes it such a missed opportunity. Hiring manager capability is one of the highest-leverage, lowest-cost improvements available to most talent functions, and it has been sitting in plain sight all along.

If you want a sense of where your own organisation stands, a few honest questions tend to surface the truth quickly.

- When did your hiring managers last receive any real training in how to interview and select, and was it a one-off or is it ongoing?
- What are they genuinely measured on when they hire, speed, quality, or only the former?
- Who owns the standard of what good looks like in a role before the first interview is even booked?
- When a manager and a recruiter disagree, do they have a shared structure to fall back on, or does it come down to who pushes hardest?

Where the return is

The organisations pulling ahead have recognised something fairly simple. Every bit of investment in hiring, the technology, the brand, the sourcing and the rest, still passes through a human being in a room, and they have chosen to make sure that person is ready for the moment. That is where the return is. It always has been.

We spend a good deal of our time helping organisations build exactly this kind of capability, from structured interview training and behavioural frameworks through to the refreshers and reference guides that make it stick. If any of those questions gave you pause, it is probably a conversation worth having.

