omni
talent is everything

INSIGHT REPORT

Candidate Attraction Has Changed

The talent attraction strategies shaping tomorrow's workforce

An insight report for talent leaders who are receiving more applications than ever and still struggling to fill the roles that matter most. Informed by the CIPD Resourcing and Talent Planning Report 2026, produced in partnership with Omni RMS, and supported by wider UK labour market evidence.

Katie Noble
TALENT STRATEGY DIRECTOR

Executive summary

Attraction used to be a reach problem; for most employers it is now a relevance problem, and the two require very different responses. The UK market has cooled, with vacancies falling to their lowest level since early 2021. The proportion of organisations reporting difficulties attracting candidates has also declined, from 77% in 2022 to 64% in 2024 and 53% this year. Yet none of that has made hiring easier where it counts, because 52% of employers still report increased competition for well qualified talent and senior, skilled and technical roles remain the hardest to fill.

53%	52%	58%
report difficulty attracting candidates, down from 77% in 2022	report increased competition for well-qualified talent	report an increase in unsuitable applicants

What has changed underneath those headlines is the shape of the funnel. Employers are seeing far more applications and far fewer of the right ones, with 58% reporting an increase in unsuitable applicants against only 33% reporting an increase in suitable ones. The proportion citing an excessive number of applications to process has risen from 24% to 37% in two years. Generative AI has made applying almost effortless for candidates, and although technology is helping employers to manage the response, with 57% of those using it saying it helps to screen out unsuitable applications, only 13% say it does so to a great extent. The support available to recruitment teams has not grown in proportion to the volume arriving, which leaves them absorbing a problem that no amount of additional advertising will solve.

The commercial consequence is already visible. Median cost per hire has risen for the first time in several survey cycles, reversing the downward trend of previous years, and the size of the increase is notable. The median cost of recruiting senior managers and directors has risen by around three quarters since 2024, and in the private sector it has more than doubled*. Teams are spending more to process more, and converting less of it into the capability the organisation actually needs.

*Caution is required in comparing and interpreting these figures due to sample size and variation within and between sectors.

This report sets out the case for a different operating principle. Attraction should be judged not by how many people it brings in to the top of the funnel, but by whether it delivers the right people, with the right skills, in the right place at the right time. That requires employer brand, attraction, assessment and workforce planning to be designed as one connected system rather than four separate workstreams, and it requires a small number of measures that talent leaders are prepared to be held to.

Source: CIPD Resourcing and talent planning report 2026

01

Hiring has slowed, but talent shortages haven't

> "One challenge remains remarkably consistent: securing the skills and capability needed to succeed."
>
> LOUISE SHAW, CEO, OMNI RMS

The labour market backdrop is unambiguous: ONS vacancy estimates fell to 702,000 for June to August 2026, the lowest level since February to April 2021, with 2.5 unemployed people for every vacancy. Indeed Hiring Lab reports UK job postings sitting around a third below their pre-pandemic baseline, with graduate postings at their weakest for this point in the year since 2020. On paper, this should be a buyer's market for employers.

702,000
UK vacancies for June to August 2026, the lowest since early 2021

2.5
unemployed people for every vacancy

27%
made redundancies, up sharply from 17% in 2024

Source: ONS Vacancies and jobs in the UK, 2026 (statistic 1 and 2); CIPD Resourcing and talent planning report 2026 (statistic 3)

The CIPD data shows why that reading is misleading. More organisations reduced permanent recruitment (28%) than increased it (22%), 29% put hiring on hold and 27% made redundancies, up sharply from 17% in 2024. At the same time, 52% say competition for well qualified talent has increased, 53% still experience difficulties attracting candidates overall, and 44% say talent is harder to retain. Labour supply has been constrained by a number of factors including lower net migration and by continued economic inactivity linked to long term sickness, along with people choosing to leave the workforce early, so the availability of people has not translated into the availability of skills. The UK Jobs Report in August produced by KPMG and REC, reported starting salaries, have had their quickest rise since January: When pay is climbing in a market with more available candidates, it tells you the shortage isn't about people. It's about skills.

For anyone planning attraction activity, the practical implication is that market softness is not evenly distributed. There is genuine surplus at the volume and entry end of many funnels, and genuine scarcity in the technical, specialist and senior populations that carry the most organisational risk. Recognising these distinct talent challenges enables organisations to focus investment and attraction efforts where they will deliver the greatest value, adopting strategies tailored to specific workforce needs.

Acting on that distinction requires a planning foundation that many organisations do not yet have in place. Forty six per cent still describe their approach to recruitment as ad hoc, replacing people as they leave without reviewing current or future requirements, and 36% collect no workforce planning data at all. Even among organisations with 250 or more employees, only 44% collect data to identify skills gaps and 43% to forecast hiring demand. Without that visibility, attraction planning inevitably starts from the vacancies currently open rather than from the capabilities the organisation will need, which is how investment ends up concentrated in the roles that were never difficult to fill. (Read Omni's SWP paper for more information)

OMNI RECOMMENDATION

Start with insight and invest where it matters most

Begin by identifying the capabilities that carry the greatest organisational risk, then build the workforce data to see where those skills exist internally, where they are scarce externally, and where applicant supply is already abundant. Tailoring the employer proposition, attraction channels, and assessment approach to each of those talent markets creates more efficient investment, stronger candidate quality, and better hiring outcomes across the workforce.

02

More applications, does not mean better candidates

One of the most interesting findings in this year's report is also the least comfortable. Application volumes have grown, but the growth has been overwhelmingly in the wrong direction, with 58% of employers reporting more unsuitable applicants and only 33% reporting more suitable ones. Larger organisations feel this most acutely, at 61% against 52% for SMEs, which reflects both their visibility and the breadth of their advertising.

THE GROWTH IS IN THE WRONG DIRECTION

Employers reporting more applicants over the past year

58% More unsuitable applicants

33% More suitable applicants

61% of larger organisations **52%** of SMEs report more unsuitable applicants

Source: CIPD Resourcing and talent planning report 2026

> "Higher application volumes are not translating into quality candidate shortlists."

CIPD RESOURCING AND TALENT PLANNING REPORT 2026

External data explains the scale of what teams are absorbing. Greenhouse's 2026 benchmark analysis, drawing on more than 17 million applications across over 800 European organisations, found that application volumes rose by 385% between 2022 and 2025, while recruitment teams shrank by 57% over the same period. Globally, LinkedIn now processes around 11,000 application submissions a minute, a 45% increase on the previous year that is attributed largely to generative AI. The same pattern is visible closer to home, where the Institute of Student Employers reports that UK employers now receive an average of 140 applications for every graduate vacancy, the highest level since it began collecting the data in 1991, and almost a quarter have seen applications per hire rise by more than 50% in a single year. The average time to fill a role has risen by around 40% to just over 62 days, which is clear evidence that greater volume does not lead to faster or better hiring.

APPLICATION VOLUMES, 2022–2025

+385%

RECRUITMENT TEAM SIZE, SAME PERIOD

–57%

More than 17 million applications across over 800 European organisations

11,000
LinkedIn application submissions a minute, up 45%

140
applications for every UK graduate vacancy, the highest since 1991

62 days
average time to fill a role, up around 40%

Source: Greenhouse 2026; LinkedIn; Institute of Student Employers

Inside the CIPD report data, 27% of organisations that recruited report candidates making excessive use of generative AI in their applications, 35% now attempt to monitor it and three quarters of those have rejected candidates as a result. Omni's Candidate Experience Report 2026 mirrors this also with 47% of candidates stating they have used AI tools during their job search and 51% have used AI to improve or tailor their CV. The process that TA teams have traditionally relied on, a considered application written by someone who wanted this particular job, has been substantially degraded. Applying tougher criteria post application will not solve the problem, because the cost of processing has already been incurred and the strongest candidates for the role are now considerably harder to identify within a much larger field of applications that increasingly read alike.

AI ON THE EMPLOYER SIDE

27% report excessive use of generative AI in applications

35% now attempt to monitor it

3 in 4 of those have rejected candidates as a result

21% have changed assessment methods to limit candidate AI use

Source: CIPD Resourcing and talent planning report 2026

AI ON THE CANDIDATE SIDE

47% have used AI tools during their job search

51% have used AI to improve or tailor their CV

29% would consider withdrawing from an interview process due to an overuse of AI

Source: Omni Candidate Experience Report 2026

Narrowing the funnel raises a question organisations need to answer before a candidate asks it for them. Those are consequential decisions being taken, in most cases, without a written position behind them. A transparent approach sets out what acceptable use looks like, applies the standard consistently across every applicant, records the basis on which any rejection is made and gives candidates a route to respond. It also extends to the organisation's own use of technology, because criteria applied at the point of application should be role related, evidenced and capable of being explained to a hiring manager, a candidate or a tribunal. Only 15% of organisations check that the tests they use are valid, reliable and tested on diverse norm groups, which means the fairness of the early stages of selection rests on assumptions rather than evidence in the overwhelming majority of cases. This can mean that for most organisations, there is no real assurance that the first stage of selection is fair or valid.

15% of organisations check that the tests they use are valid, reliable and tested on diverse norm groups

Rejecting a candidate for their use of AI is a consequential decision being taken, in most organisations, without enough substance behind it. Twenty one per cent have already changed their assessment methods to limit candidate AI use, which suggests the issue is being managed practically while the policy question remains open. A clear and consistent approach sets out what acceptable use looks like, applies the standard consistently across every applicant, records the basis on which any rejection is made and gives candidates a route to respond. It also extends to the organisation's own use of technology, because criteria applied at the point of application should be role related, evidenced and capable of being explained to a hiring manager, a candidate or a tribunal.

What has changed

Measure (CIPD)	Then	Now
Organisations reporting difficulty attracting candidates	64% (2024)	**53% (2026)**
Reporting an increase in unsuitable applicants	52% (2024)	**58% (2026)**
Citing an excessive number of applications to process	24% (2024)	**37% (2026)**

Source: CIPD Resourcing and Talent Planning Reports 2024 and 2026.

These numbers describe an economic problem rather than a marketing one. The cost of applying has collapsed while the cost of assessing has not, so every additional unit of reach now carries a processing cost that lands on the recruitment team, the hiring manager and ultimately the candidate experience.

OMNI RECOMMENDATION

Narrow the funnel at the point of entry

Clearer role definition, accurate advert copy, visible salary information, and a small number of essential, skills-based questions will reduce unsuitable volume before it reaches the team. That is more efficient than tightening criteria later, and far more likely to surface the candidates capable of doing the role.

03

The rising cost of attracting the wrong people

MEDIAN COST PER HIRE HAS RISEN FOR THE FIRST TIME IN SEVERAL SURVEY CYCLES

£3,500

senior managers and directors, up from £2,000 in 2024

£2,000

other employees, up from £1,500 in 2024

Source: CIPD Resourcing and talent planning report 2026

Cost per hire has risen for the first time in several survey cycles, reversing the downward trend observed over preceding years, and that change in direction matters more than any individual figure. The median now stands at £3,500 for senior managers and directors and £2,000 for other employees*, with the increase driven overwhelmingly by the private sector, where senior cost per hire has moved from £2,000 to £5,000, while public sector costs have fallen from £2,500 to £1,500 in a way that reflects tightening budgets and a shift towards in house delivery as much as market conditions. These medians should be read as indicative rather than definitive, because they rarely capture lost productivity, vacancy duration, recruiter and hiring manager time or the wider operational drag of running a process for longer than intended. The commercial implication is uncomfortable: organisations are spending more to fill roles at precisely the point when application volumes are at their highest, which tells us that the additional spend is not buying additional access to the right talent. That is an attraction problem before it is a cost problem, because the money is being absorbed by processing people who were never suitable rather than by reaching the people who are.

*Caution is required in comparing and interpreting these figures due to sample size and variation within and between sectors.

> **“Rising wages, legislative changes, investments in resourcing technology and competition for niche talent may be contributing to the increasing costs.”**

CIPD RESOURCING AND TALENT PLANNING REPORT 2026

Very few organisations are in a position to see this clearly. Only 24% of those aware of their turnover data calculate the cost of it, and only 19% measure the return on investment of their recruitment processes, rising to 37% among large private sector organisations. Without those two figures, there is no credible way to argue for investment in attraction, assessment or employer brand, because there is no baseline against which improvement can be demonstrated.

24%
of those aware of their turnover data calculate its cost

19%
measure the return on investment of their recruitment processes

37%
among large private sector organisations

Source: CIPD Resourcing and talent planning report 2026

Most organisations are working without either figure, and the effect is quietly expensive. Once the cost of turnover is understood, a leaver becomes a measurable signal rather than an isolated operational inconvenience, and the decisions behind it, a rushed shortlist, an inconsistent interview, an advert that promised more than the role delivers, can be traced back and put right. Once the return on the process is understood, spend follows evidence rather than habit or long standing supplier arrangements, which is how investment shifts from campaigns that generate volume towards the assessment and employer brand work that improves the quality of who applies in the first place.

It also changes the nature of the conversation talent leaders are able to have. Talent management is now a stated CEO priority for 45% of organisations, rising to 49% in the private sector, which means the attention is available. Without cost and return figures, however, the function is left arguing for investment on the basis of workload and professional judgement, at a time when finance colleagues are scrutinising every line and recruitment budgets in the public sector and non profits are around twice as likely to fall as to rise.

45%
say talent management is a stated CEO priority

49%
in the private sector

2×
public sector and non-profit are twice as likely to anticipate a decrease than an increase in their recruitment budgets

Source: CIPD Resourcing and talent planning report 2026

OMNI RECOMMENDATION

Establish cost per hire and cost of turnover first

Before redesigning anything else, build a defensible baseline that includes recruiter and hiring manager time, advertising, technology, agency, and assessment spend. Omni can help create it, so that later improvements in application quality translate into a financial outcome the board will recognise. Use our Recruitment Cost Calculator to work out your cost per hire and cost of turnover.

04

Employer brand should attract and filter

Most organisations did something to their employer brand last year. Increasing flexible working opportunities (31%), improving the work environment (28%), improving career development options (27%), making pay and benefits more competitive (27%) and refreshing or promoting values (27%) were the most common actions, with clear sector differences underneath. Private sector employers were most likely to act on pay and benefits (30%, against 17% in the public sector and 18% in non profits), although that proportion has fallen from 34% in 2024. Public sector organisations were more likely to increase hybrid working opportunities (32%) and, alongside non profits, more likely to refresh or promote their values (33% and 37% respectively).

What few did was check whether any of it actually worked. Only 14% took steps to measure the impact of their employer brand, 13% monitored feedback from sites such as Glassdoor and social media, and just 7% actioned that feedback. Employer brand remains one of the largest areas of unmeasured spend in the talent function, which is difficult to defend in a year when recruitment budgets in the public sector and non profits are around twice as likely to fall as to rise.

14%
took steps to measure the impact of their employer brand

13%
monitored feedback from sites such as Glassdoor and social media

7%
actioned that feedback

Source: CIPD Resourcing and talent planning report 2026

The measurement gap matters more than it used to, because the purpose of employer brand has shifted. When applications were scarce, a brand that appealed broadly was an asset, and the job of employer brand was essentially to widen the field. That logic no longer holds in the market described earlier in this report, where hiring has slowed but talent shortages have not. Applications are abundant, increasingly machine assisted and increasingly uniform, while the technical, specialist and senior capabilities organisations most need remain genuinely scarce. In those conditions a brand that appeals broadly becomes a cost rather than an asset, because it draws in people who were never going to succeed and then asks the talent team to absorb the work of telling them so.

The shift required is from selling the organisation to describing the work. An employer brand built around skills and capabilities gives candidates something concrete to measure themselves against, because it sets out what the role genuinely demands, the environment in which those skills will be applied and what good performance looks like in practice. That specificity is what allows a proposition to work in both directions. It gives the people with the right capability a clear reason to engage and a sense that the organisation understands the work they do, and it gives everyone else enough honest information to opt out early and without frustration.

This is the distinction that separates the strongest employer brands from the rest. They are not simply more visible or more polished, they are more precise about capability, and they treat opting out as a legitimate and valuable outcome rather than a lost application. Applied consistently across careers content, adverts, employee stories and the early stages of the process, that precision reduces the volume of people the team has to work through and improves the quality of those who remain, which is exactly the outcome a softer market has failed to deliver on its own.

The external evidence supports treating Employer Brands as a commercial investment rather than a communications exercise. LinkedIn research widely cited across the employer brand field associates a strong employer brand with materially lower cost per hire and reduced turnover, while Harvard Business Review analysis has found that organisations with a poor reputation pay around 10% more per hire. The differentiator is not volume of content. It is accuracy, specificity and the willingness to describe the job as it actually is.

OMNI RECOMMENDATION

Test your employer brand against the decision a candidate has to make

Omni can review your EVP, careers content, advert copy, and employee stories against candidate expectations and competitor positioning, then rebuild the proposition around each priority talent segment so that it attracts and filters at the same time.

Put a measurement loop in place alongside it, i.e. reduction in cost or time to hire along with an increase in retention and time to productivity. External review sites, application quality by source, and offer acceptance are all available to you now, and none of them require new technology.

05

Let candidates rule themselves out

Despite the volume problem, the tools designed to solve it remain largely unused. Only 21% of organisations use pre application assessments and just 11% use self selection tools such as realistic job previews, against 63% that use some form of test or assessment later in the process. Organisations are, in effect, spending their assessment budget after the expensive part of the funnel rather than before it.

Source: CIPD Resourcing and talent planning report 2026

> **Despite the growing challenge of applications from unsuitable candidates, the proportion using self-selection tools (11%) or pre-application assessments (21%) remains low."**
>
> CIPD RESOURCING AND TALENT PLANNING REPORT 2026

The evidence base for self selection is long established. Phillips' meta analytic work on realistic job previews found a consistent, if modest, reduction in post hire turnover, with stronger effects where the preview is genuinely balanced and delivered before the candidate commits. The process is straightforward, because candidates who understand the pace, the constraints and the less attractive parts of a role make better decisions about whether to proceed, and those who proceed arrive with expectations that match reality.

Applied well, self selection produces a counterintuitive but commercially attractive outcome. Application numbers may fall while shortlist quality rises, screening time reduces and early attrition improves. For any talent leader still reporting application volume as a measure of attraction success, that is a difficult conversation worth having early.

> **The adoption of systems and technologies to help screen out unsuitable candidates remains limited."**
>
> CIPD RESOURCING AND TALENT PLANNING REPORT 2026

Practical interventions that reduce unsuitable volume

- **Realistic job previews.** Short, honest content covering the working pattern, the pressures and the measures of success, placed before the application rather than after the offer.
- **Skills based screening questions.** A small number of essential criteria assessed at the point of application, framed around capability rather than years of experience.
- **Transparent pay information.** Indeed reports that 58% of UK postings now include pay detail, and the direction of travel on pay transparency is only one way. Withholding it increases both unsuitable applications and withdrawal at offer.

- **Work sample and behavioural assessment.** Methods that evaluate what someone can do carry far more signal than a CV that may have been written by a model.
- **Employee stories with balance.** Content that includes the harder parts of the role builds credibility and improves self selection in a way that promotional material cannot.

OMNI RECOMMENDATION

Design attraction and assessment as a single journey

Omni can map the end-to-end experience, introduce proportionate pre-application screening and realistic previews, and align selection methods to the skills and behaviours that predict success in role. Where automation or AI supports that journey, it should be transparent to candidates, explainable to hiring managers, and reviewed regularly for fairness.

06

Measure quality, not activity

The CIPD report makes clear that the data foundations remain thin. Only 31% of organisations track time to hire, although that is up from 21% in 2024, and 33% collect candidate experience data, up from 27%. Beyond those two measures the picture deteriorates quickly, with 30% measuring performance or retention of new hires in the first year, 25% tracking conversion rates through the process and only 7% assessing whether their assessment methods actually predict success in role. Thirty six per cent collect no workforce planning data at all.

This is the point at which attraction strategy either becomes evidence led or remains a matter of opinion. An organisation that cannot see conversion by source cannot know which channels deliver capability rather than clicks, and an organisation that never validates its assessment methods cannot know whether the people it rejects would have succeeded. Both gaps are expensive, and neither is difficult to close.

The answer is not a larger dashboard. It is a small number of measures that connect attraction activity to hiring and organisatonal outcomes, reported consistently and owned by a named individual.

Moving from activity to impact: the measures that count

- Qualified application rate, defined as applications meeting essential criteria as a proportion of total applications.
- Source to shortlist conversion, reported by channel and by role family rather than in aggregate.
- Cost per qualified applicant, alongside overall cost per hire.
- Recruiter and hiring manager hours spent on screening, as a proxy for the operational cost of volume.
- Offer acceptance rate and reason for decline.
- Quality of hire, measured through performance and retention at twelve months.
- Candidate confidence and experience, captured at application, at assessment and at offer.

OMNI RECOMMENDATION

Benchmark before you build

The Omni Talent Maturity Index scores capability across the talent lifecycle, compares performance against peers, and produces a prioritised roadmap, giving talent leaders an evidenced starting position and a defensible case for investment.

07

Five priorities for the next twelve months

01 **Rebuild the employer brand around honesty rather than appeal.** A proposition that

describes the work accurately will attract fewer people and convert more of them, and it will hold up under scrutiny on external review sites. Tailor your brand, time and spend around hard to find capabilities and skills.

02 **Define your critical capabilities, not your critical vacancies.** Attraction planning should start from the skills that carry the greatest organisational risk, which is rarely the same list as the roles currently open.

03 **Move assessment earlier and make self selection deliberate.** Realistic previews, clear expectations and proportionate pre application screening reduce cost at the point where cost is created.

04 **Take a position on candidate use of AI before you need one.** Three quarters of employers who monitor AI use have already rejected someone for it, which means fairness and legal decisions are being made in most organisations without a policy behind them.

05 **Measure quality and cost, and report both to the board.** Talent management is a stated CEO priority for 45% of organisations, rising to 49% in the private sector, and that attention will only be sustained by evidence.

08

How Omni can help

Omni works with organisations across the public, private and non profit sectors to connect attraction, assessment and workforce planning into a single evidence led approach.

Talent Maturity Index.

Benchmark capability across the talent lifecycle, identify the gaps that matter and prioritise an improvement roadmap.

Talent intelligence and market mapping.

Quantify supply, competitor demand, location dynamics, pay context and candidate expectations for each critical talent segment.

Employer brand and attraction

Candidate experience and process

strategy.

Strengthen the EVP, build audience level propositions, refresh careers content and target the channels that deliver capability rather than volume.

review.

Test the journey from discovery to decision, remove friction and improve confidence, communication and conversion.

Assessment design and validation.

Align selection methods to role success, improve consistency and fairness, and evidence whether those methods predict the outcomes intended.

Recruitment benchmarking and analytics.

Establish credible baselines and practical measures that support continual improvement.

Recruitment delivery.

Apply the strategy through RPO, project recruitment or specialist search where additional capacity or expertise is needed.

CLOSING VIEW

The organisations that make progress over the next few years will not be the ones receiving the largest number of applications. They will be the ones that can explain, with evidence, why the people entering their process are the people the organisation actually needs. In a market where applications are abundant and capability remains scarce, attraction works when it delivers the right people, with the right skills, in the right place at the right time, and when the organisation is able to demonstrate that it has.

Annex: evidence and sources

Primary source: CIPD Resourcing and Talent Planning Report 2026, produced in partnership with Omni RMS, based on a survey of 1,014 UK HR and people professionals conducted by YouGov between 2 April and 2 May 2026. Note that the 2026 survey narrowed its respondent criteria to those with direct resourcing and talent planning responsibility, so comparisons with 2024 should be read with that in mind.

Supporting external sources: ONS Vacancies and jobs in the UK, September 2026; Indeed Hiring Lab UK Labour Market

Snapshot, August 2026, and Mid Year UK Jobs and Hiring Trends Report, August 2026; Greenhouse application volume analysis 2022 to 2025; LinkedIn application submission data as reported in 2026; Phillips meta analytic research on realistic job previews; LinkedIn and Harvard Business Review employer brand cost findings as cited in employer brand ROI literature.