

# THE CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE 2013

blackbridge

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HR people

Personnel  
Today







## Introduction

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*As recruitment professionals, we had noticed a growing amount of evidence – anecdotal, but evidence nevertheless – that suggested the experience of many jobseekers was some way short of meeting even modest expectations.*

We commissioned independent research into candidate experience, from RBI Insight. This research, which examined the experience and opinions of nearly one thousand HR professionals, confirmed our suspicions and, worse still, added further concerns.

We hope that this research, and consequent debate, helps to build a lasting approach to improvements in this too-often-overlooked area. Our firm intention is to work with clients, candidates and other stakeholders alike to share awareness of the issues and – crucially – to facilitate improvements.

On a broader scale, the research reveals a common perception that recruitment standards have eroded significantly in the last few years. Whether this is because employers and agencies are controlling costs by over-automating, being pressured to hire too quickly or simply bad communicators remains to be discussed.

Thank you for taking an interest in Candidate Experience 2013.

We hope it will prove to be the beginning of a journey that proves beneficial to all.

*Candidate Experience 2013 is brought to you by:*

**Better Placed HR** – *a recruitment partner with a vested interest in making the candidate experience as good as possible from all perspectives.*

**Blackbridge** – *a people communications organisation which believes strongly in the importance candidate experience plays in ‘downstream employer branding’.*

**Personnel Today** – *the leading HR journal which is providing editorial support to highlight the issues and create industry-wide debate.*

## Background

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*The recruitment market is an ever changing place reflecting changes in society, in consumer markets, in skills and education markets and trends affecting sectors or functions.*

Since the stock market crash and recession in the UK there has been a perception that there has been a seismic shift and tantalising glimpses that the main protagonists in the market have struggled to adapt to this.

- Candidates are more itinerate, are making more applications and are demanding more information on company culture and role satisfaction
- Recruiters are under more pressure to hire at pace and reduce further costs out of the system through automation and outsourcing
- Agencies, because of the above, are under pressure to supply a list of candidates at the right cost with limited consultation on the more in depth elements of the role.

It is against this background that Better Placed HR, Personnel Today and Blackbridge collaborated to better understand the affect that the changes to the economy have had on the HR recruitment market through the eyes of the candidate and what conclusions and recommendations could be drawn to improve the market for all the protagonists involved.

# Methodology

During June and July an email was sent to a sample of members of Personnel Today Jobs inviting them to take part in a survey with a £1,000 prize offered as an incentive to complete.



Personnel Today Jobs are conducting a survey in association with Better Placed HR and Blackbridge about your personal experiences when applying for jobs and we would be very grateful if you would spare a few minutes to complete a short online questionnaire. The results will be published on PersonnelToday.com in the coming weeks.

[Take part in our survey here](#)

It should only take around 5 - 10 minutes to complete and as a thank you for taking part, you will be entered into a prize draw for £1,000 cash. If you wish to be entered into the prize draw, just leave your contact details at the end of the survey.

All your answers will be treated as strictly confidential and will be viewed in aggregate, statistical form only.

Thank you for your time,

The Research Team at **Personnel Today Jobs**

995 HR professionals responded to the survey providing a robust sample from which some meaningful data could be drawn. There were 30 questions in the survey all designed to obtain an objective view of how candidates have experienced the recruitment process over the past five years.



## Candidate Experience Survey

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Thank you in advance for your time and co-operation.

Which of the following best describes your job seeking status?

- I am a jobseeker, actively looking for a job
- I am a browser. I look at jobs, but I'm not actively applying
- None of the above



[Next >>](#)

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## Executive Summary

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*From the 995 survey respondents a number of evident trends have emerged:*

There is a wide gap between the expectations of job candidates and what potential employers are delivering.

1. Quality of communication appears to be the defining factor between an outstanding and poor candidate experience.
2. Recruitment consultants are responsible for 60% of applications (76% for those looking to earn £80k plus) and yet are overall less likely to communicate with applicants.
3. However, given this, three out of four respondents are still likely to use recruitment agencies again.
4. The standard of direct and 3rd party recruitment has declined over the last five years.
5. Four key threads emerged.
  - *Better communication*
  - *More personal contact*
  - *More honesty*
  - *Clear and open feedback*

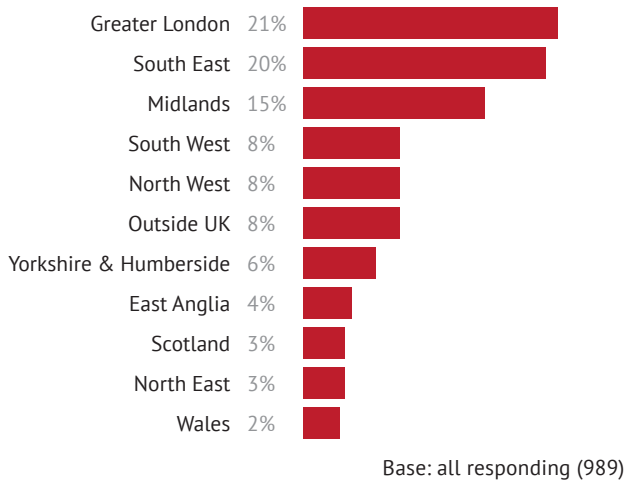
This report attempts to make sense of those trends and what they say about how well recruiting businesses and agencies are delivering against candidates' application expectations.



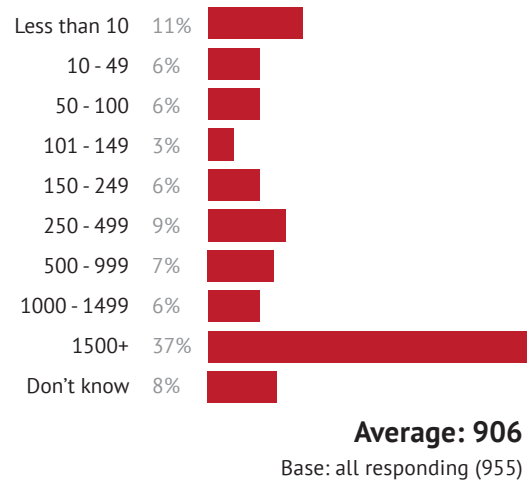
# Demographics

The 995 respondents to the survey come from a broad cross-section with each geographical region, organisation size & type and role level, gender & age range broadly represented.

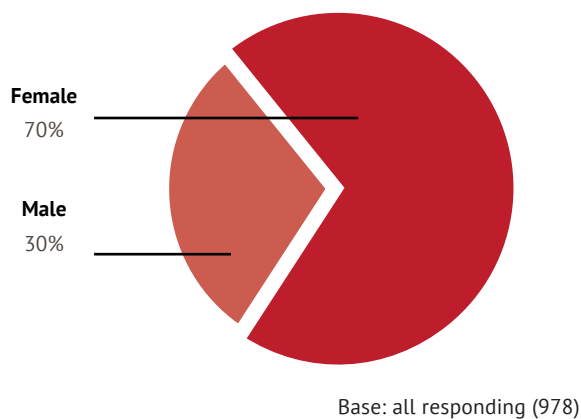
## Region



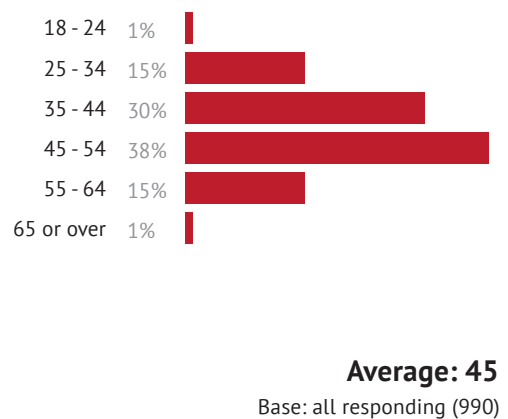
## Number of employees with your organisation



## Gender

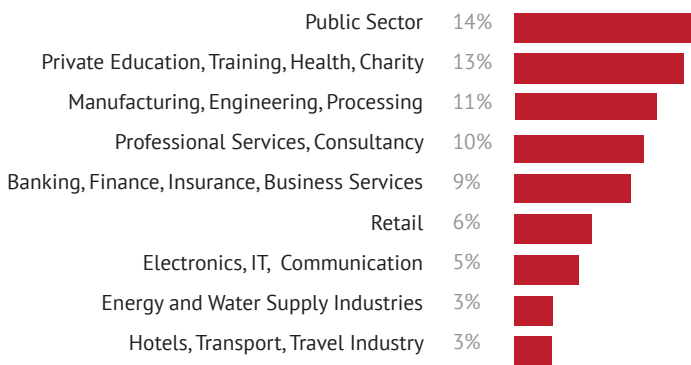


## Age



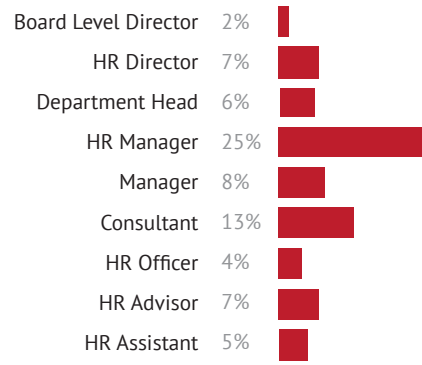
# Demographics 2

### Industry Sector



Base: all responding (967)

### Status within the Organisation



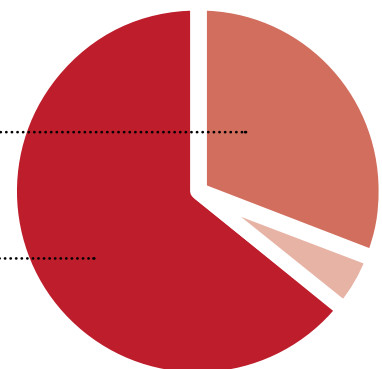
Base: all responding (976)

Of the 995 respondents 64% were actively looking for a job and 31% were browsing but not actively applying.

### Q: Which of the following best describes your job seeking status?

- I am a browser. I look at jobs, but I am not actively applying**  
31%
- I am a jobseeker, actively looking for a job**  
64%

Base: all responding (996)



**Q: How long have you been actively looking for a job?**



59% had been looking for less than six months and 20% for more than a year and overall were applying for a broad selection of roles focused on the £20,001 to £60,000 p/a with a mean of £49k p/a although again, there was a representative sample from across the salary range.

**Salary brackets of jobs interested in applying for**

**Q: In which salary bracket are the jobs you are potentially interested in applying for?**



# Process or Communicate?

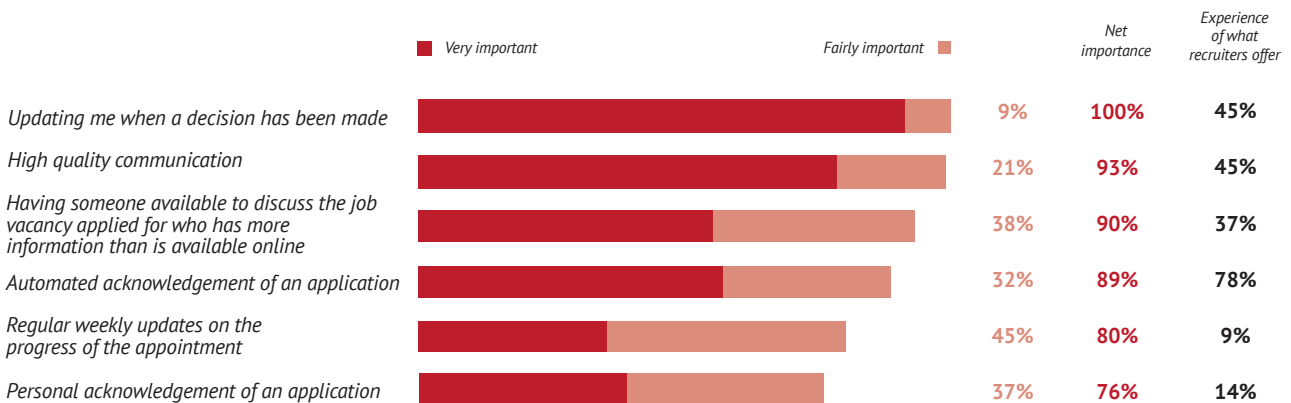
The survey looked at every stage of the recruitment process to examine what candidates expect and whether organisations are delivering against these expectations. It is clear that at many points in the process, candidates' minimum expectations are not being met especially where the expectation is built around receiving a regular flow of specific, personal communication rather than feeling that they are being processed through an automated system.

Understandably, 100% of applicants expect to be updated on when a hiring decision has been made but their experience is that this happens in less than half (45%) of occasions indicating that recruiters are simply not delivering the basics of the role. Candidates also stressed the importance of high quality communication throughout the process, with 93% of respondents rating it as very or fairly important versus only 45% experiencing it.

## Percentage of respondents who believe the following are important (Very important / Fairly important)

**Q: How important are each of the following when applying for a job, in terms of what would you expect from the company offering the vacancy?**

**Q: In your experience, what do recruiters generally offer candidates interested in applying for jobs with them?**

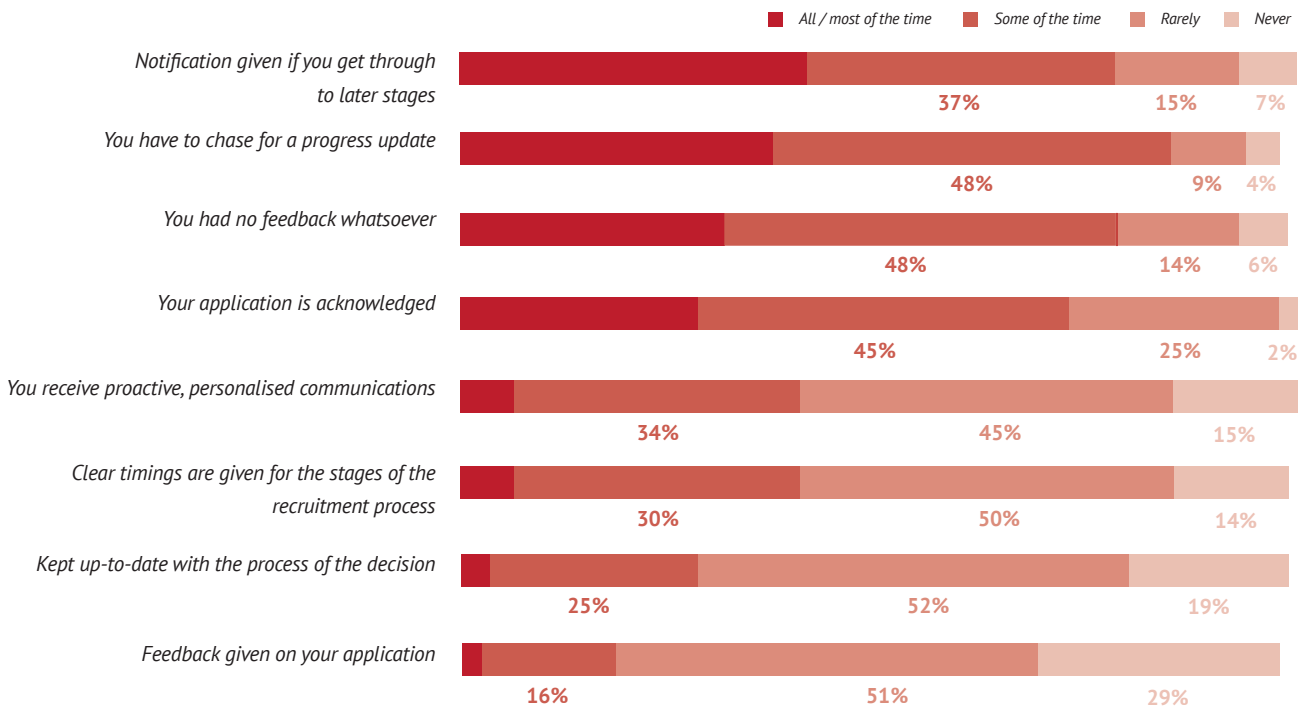


Base: all responding

Recruiters are succeeding in nearing expectations against automated response - the fourth highest expectation. But against the remaining factors (having someone to discuss the vacancy that has more information than the online profile, providing regular weekly updates on progress and giving personal acknowledgement of application) the gaps in expectation versus delivery are very wide.

### Response during recruitment process

**Q: When you apply for jobs, how frequently does the following happen?**



Base: all responding

*The majority of the anecdotal commentary received backs up the issues that personalised, specific communication and feedback are key to delivering against candidates' expectations even though the news is neutral or bad.*

**“Regular updates on progress, and robust feedback if not successful at shortlist or interview. It would also be great to have a good feel for the culture of an organisation to see if it would be a good fit to the candidate. Offering interview/assessment centre practice and techniques especially where the candidate may not have had recent interview experience.”**

*- Browser, Midlands, £20-£40K*

**“Personalise and bespoke where time permits”**

*- Browser, Greater London, £60-£80k*

**“Personal contact and, most importantly, feedback both positive and negative”**

*- Active jobseeker for more than a year, outside UK, £100k+*

**“Communicate, communicate, communicate. Good or bad news, we just want to know”**

*- Active jobseeker, less than 6 months, North West, £40-£60k*

**“Engage and be empathetic”**

*- Browser, South West, £60-£80k*

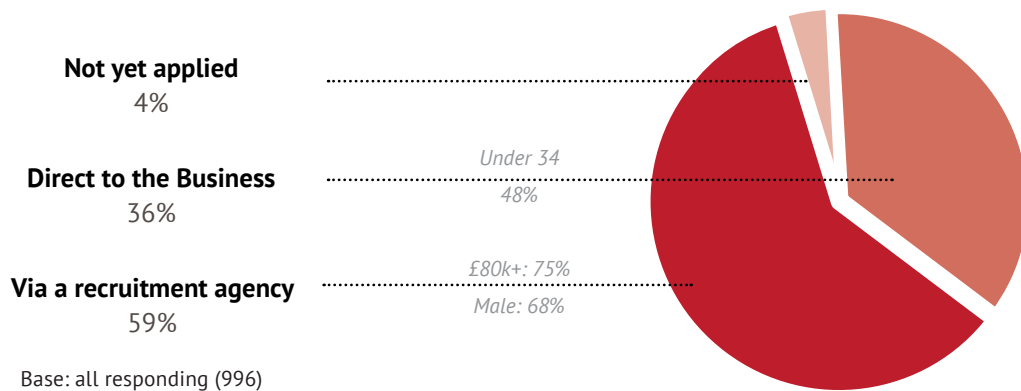
This feedback highlights the issues for recruiters of increasing pressure of time and resources and the increasing presence of automation within the recruitment process. As organisations have adapted to the post-recession world they have, in many cases, reduced the size of recruitment teams and increasingly procured Applicant Tracking Systems that automate responses. Whereas this is supposed to ensure that everyone is acknowledged it appears that candidates are now reacting to the processed, systemised nature of these automatically generated emails and are demanding something more personal to back it up.

Organisations wanting to appeal to the very best talent and leave a positive impression of their brand and culture need therefore to invest in the candidate experience and provide better, more tailored forms of communicating with their successful, rejected and unsuccessful candidates.

# Agency or Direct?

The 'battle' between recruitment agency and in-house recruitment team is as old as the recruitment market itself and the survey examined to what degree the experience is different dependant on what route is taken by an applicant i.e. either via an agency or direct to the business.

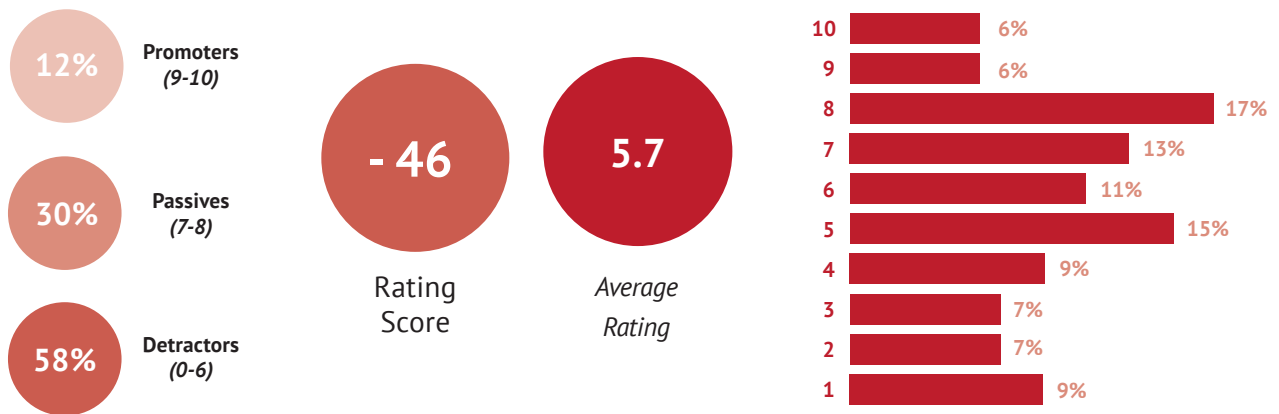
**Q: How did you apply for the last job application you submitted?**



The survey results indicate that recruitment agencies are less likely to communicate well with candidates who apply via them rather than those who apply directly to businesses but in all cases, whatever method is used to apply, candidates expect better communication from all parties. Communication direct from businesses was more likely to be automated and therefore less personal. Getting more detail direct from the business was also more tricky.

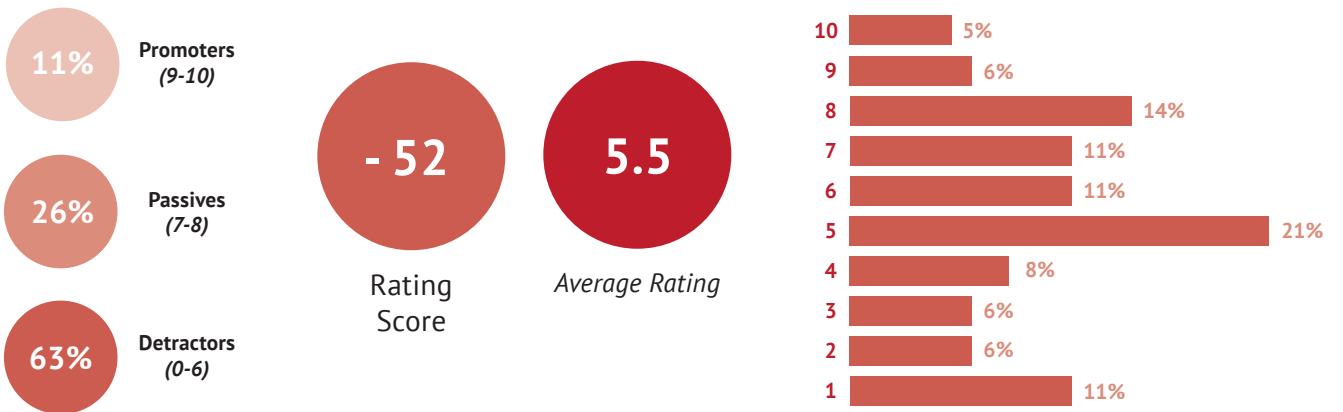
### Recruitment Process Rating - Overall

Q: How would you rate the recruitment process offered by the company to which you last applied for a job vacancy?



### Those who applied direct

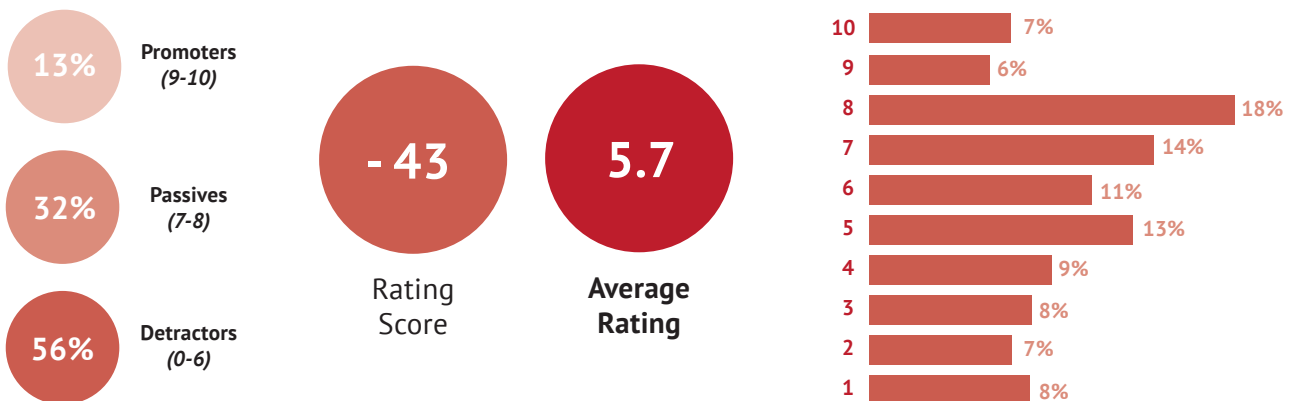
Q: How would you rate the recruitment process offered by the company to which you last applied for a job vacancy?





### Those who applied through recruitment consultants

Q: How would you rate the recruitment process offered by the company to which you last applied for a job vacancy? &  
 Q: What sources do you usually use to find out about a new job...?



Our respondents indicated that agencies score consistently below direct hiring when it comes to getting feedback or information. This is also true when keeping candidates up to date about application progress or during the recruitment process. However agencies do score higher than direct applications; when briefing candidates prior to interviews, but this is the exception. In all cases the differences in score between direct and agency is marginal.

The qualitative commentary supports the fact that smaller, HR specialist agencies tend to score better than larger, generic agencies. There is a perception among the respondents that agencies that treat candidates as a client or valued individual are the ones that come closest to meeting candidate expectations; those that view candidates without this personalised concern score less positively.

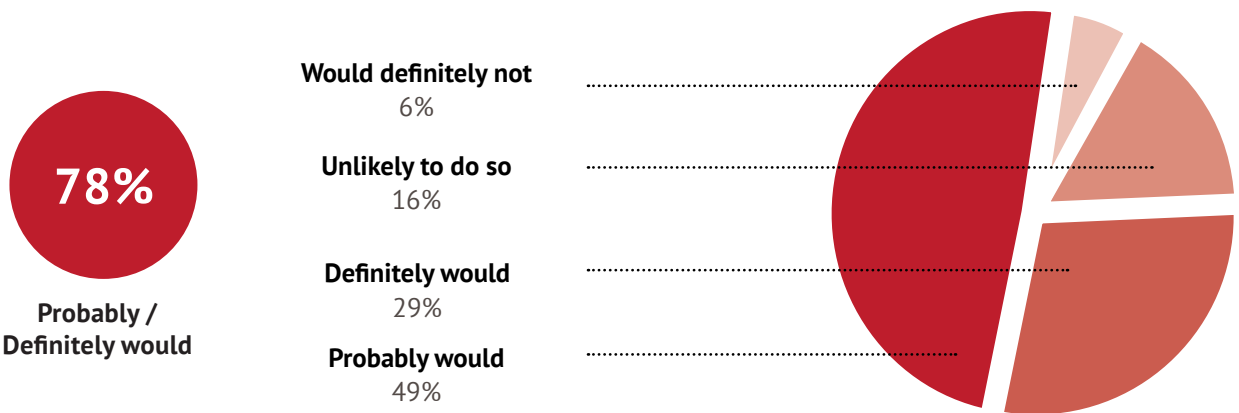
The outcome indicates that agencies who see themselves as consultants, working with individuals and businesses to really understand requirements, who treat their candidates as important and see their role as representing their client, are more likely to build loyalty and trade on their reputation in a market like HR. The net promoter score for specialist consultant is higher than for generic agency and overall the experience is viewed as more positive.

*Despite this the survey also indicated that three out of four candidates would use agencies the next time they are in the job market.*

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Clearly this indicates that, despite their concerns, agencies are still seen as an important route for people to apply for jobs. However in a tightly knit community like HR where today's candidates are tomorrow's hiring controllers and consultants, it is critical for agency owners to address the issues raised in this survey.

**Q: If you have used a recruitment agency to look for a job in the last year, would you use them again?**



There is a clear message in this report for all recruitment agencies and consultants to address how they communicate progress, brand, acceptance and rejection to their candidates or they do risk their longer-term reputations and that, over time, candidates will move increasingly to miss out agencies in favour of applying direct. If, and it is a big if, direct hiring teams can improve their own performance in communicating to candidates.

## Recruitment Process Rating

**“They were very efficient, they provided me with plenty of information prior to the interview and kept me updated throughout the process.”**

*- Definitely would, Browser, Greater London, Department Head*

**“They were proactive, knew sector and were professional”**

*- Definitely would, Active jobseeker, Scotland, HR Director*

**“It appears that many of the jobs I’m interested in are advertised solely through agencies.”**

*- Definitely would, Active jobseeker, Wales, Department Head*

**“Unfortunately we have to depend on agencies to get the next contract role however LinkedIn is becoming a more useful tool.”**

*- Probably would, Browser, South East, Benefits Manager*

**“Some companies only recruit through agencies”**

*- Probably would, Active jobseeker, South West, HR Board Director*

**“One of only a few specialist HR recruiters”**

*- Probably Would, Browser, Yorkshire and Humberside, HR Manager*

**“The agency do not treat you as a client, do not follow up and make no effort to keep you informed if you are not successful”**

*- Unlikely to, Jobseeker, Greater London, HR Director*

**“Because they didn’t tell me the correct criteria for the interview which subsequently led to me not getting the job”**

*- Definitely not, Browser, Midlands, HR Advisor*

**“Prefer to go direct. Gives me more control”**

*- Unlikely to, Active jobseeker, South East, Reward Manager*

**“No personal response - not interested in me as a person”**

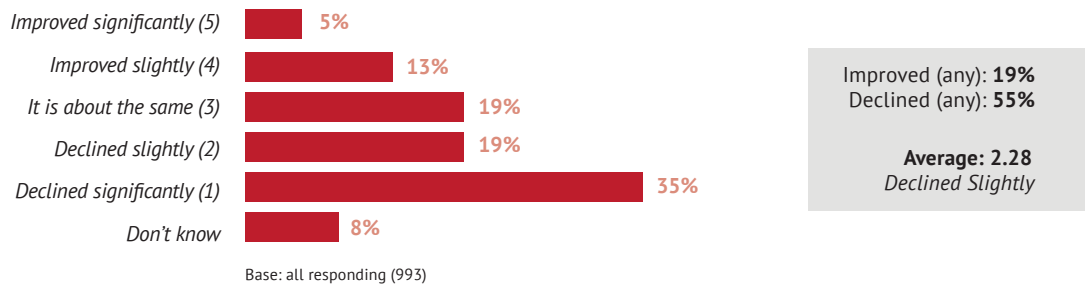
*- Unlikely to, Active jobseeker, Midlands, HR Manager*

## Efficiency or Effectiveness?

From the results within the survey it is clear that the candidates' experience of applying for a role has declined over the past five years. There are a myriad of causal factors that can be claimed for this but there are four clear themes that emerge as the ones candidates most need to see addressed by recruitment professionals.

### Standard of the recruitment process: Improved or Declined?

**Q: In your opinion has the standard of the recruitment process for jobseekers generally improved or declined over the past five years?**



**Communication** – *focus on timely, relevant and human communication to candidates*

**Personalisation** – *speak to candidates as human beings, face-to-face or by telephone, automated responses are frustrating and impersonal*

**Feedback** – *keep candidates informed of how well they have done, even if it is not positive and provide them with feedback that drives improvement and allows for development*

**Honesty** – *let people know where they are and how well they have done, not doing this wastes everyone's time and effort*

The strongest themes emerging are that the advent of automated systems and process driven ways of working may increase efficiency and reduce costs but the cost to the brand of organisations is high. Hiring organisations need to focus on walking in the shoes of their candidates and creating effective outcomes for candidates when creating recruitment processes and ask themselves what impression and experience they want to leave their candidate with and not simply focus on efficiency of process.

The concern here for the whole HR industry is that honest, personalised human communication and feedback to improve is the foundation on which a successful HR function is built and yet, seemingly, it is unable to deliver this for itself in a basic process like recruitment for its own people, let alone for generic hiring across the organisation. Beyond the usual extrapolation that can be made for markets outside of HR; these is a clear message here that HR professionals are demanding that their fellow HR professionals and partners step up to the mark and deliver what HR promises to the business to a higher standard than is currently the case.

**What could recruiters do better for candidates during the recruitment process?**

*Personalisation*

“I believe it has become more impersonal - having someone to talk to would be useful.”

“Treat candidates as human beings”

“Recruiters should try to keep the personal touch by communicating by telephone or face to face - computer-based communication is impersonal and can be frustrating.”

“Provide detailed feedback in a phone call to unsuccessful interviewed candidates.”

“Keeping them informed of their progress and providing useful feedback at the end.”

*Feedback*

*Honesty*

“Honesty, if I’m not suitable then tell me so I don’t waste my time.”

“Be honest with the candidate about their CV, application, interview skills, etc.”

“Communicate - I want to know what is happening and when.”

“Keep me updated.”

“In all aspects especially timely and relevant communications.”

*Communication*

## Summary

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*The key lessons seem to be straightforward. Neither agencies nor direct recruiters are excelling when it comes to candidate experience. And, from a distinctly low base, it seemingly would not be too hard for organisations of both types to improve.*

There appear to be four key themes worth considering when establishing any action plan:

- 1. Communication.** When are we communicating with the candidate in the process, and how appropriate and timely are those messages?
- 2. Personalisation.** Are our systems too automated? In our rush to control costs, increase efficiencies and optimise data, have we lost the idea that recruitment should essentially be about people?
- 3. Honesty.** Candidates require honesty – or at least, they say that they do. How does honesty reconcile itself with brand voice, and how easy is it to identify and share the ‘honest’ data that has contributed to the decision-making?
- 4. Feedback.** Given the time and money involved, are there any ways in which we can deliver feedback that might help an individual candidate improve?

Naturally, all this takes work. (It probably requires significant financial investment, too.)

But one has to wonder: even with the most impressive attraction materials, the sleekest website and a presence in a range of social media channels, can an organisation that treats applicants badly really claim to have a good ‘brand’ and, furthermore, seriously expect to attract the kind of talent that will aid its success?



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