



EXECUTIVE BRIEF

The best of both worlds— hiring quality candidates and providing an engaging candidate experience

Today's employers aren't just competing for employees. They're also competing to get candidates. However, in many ways, the traditional balance of power has changed, and job seekers often have leverage during the hiring cycle for a variety of reasons, including:

- **Plentiful jobs and low unemployment**—With so many jobs to fill and a relatively low number of job seekers, employers struggle to find a pool of qualified candidates to interview for positions. As of March 2022, unemployment in the U.S reached the lowest level since 1968, with the rate of new layoffs and firings remaining low compared to pre-pandemic averages.¹
- **High quit rates**—Current employees feel more confident about leaving their jobs. In a recent survey, a third (31%) of 700 professionals interviewed say they would quit their job even if they didn't have another one lined up.²
- **High candidate dropout rates**—A surprising number of candidates change their minds and drop out of the application/interview process before the employer can extend an offer. Primary causes being an overly lengthy hiring process, or a poor interview according to the Talent Board's 2021 Candidate Experience Benchmark Research Report.³

It's no surprise that in this environment, employers are giving the candidate experience unprecedented attention. For many HR professionals, the era of drawn-out hiring cycles and hours-long assessments and testing remains a painful memory. Similarly, many of today's job seekers can recall a time when employers didn't always follow up an interview with a phone call. Instead, they were left with copy-and-paste rejections. The actual candidate experience was an afterthought, if it merited consideration at all.

Times have changed. Employers now find themselves in a state of talent FOMO—fear of missing out on the best available candidates for a position. Now, they are reengineering the candidate experience to help them win the war for talent.

But are employers now in danger of focusing too much on the candidate experience at the expense of the talent hired? In the rush to move a candidate through the process, are employers sacrificing quality? How can employers find a balance between the two?

The candidate experience can also be a deciding factor in job offer acceptance. Just because candidates don't drop out of the process doesn't mean that they won't use their experience as a factor in their final decision. If a candidate has multiple offers, the experience with an employer can tip them one way or another.

Finally, even though an employee's candidate experience happens early in their relationship with an employer, it's an important factor in retention. Those early interactions often set the tone for the overall employee experience. When considering leaving for another offer, an employee may compare their early experience as a candidate with their current experience with a new prospective employer. In other words, the quality of the candidate experience and their first days on the job continue to resonate, and play a role in the employee's satisfaction. First days on the job used to mean in-person introductions, lunch with the team, and tech support coming to you with a computer and a phone. In an increasingly remote world, HR and hiring managers need to stay closer to the new hire to help them through the onboarding process, especially within the first 90 days on the job, which are the most critical for the new hire experience.

Many talent acquisition strategies include offering sign-on bonuses, even at the entry level, that are paid out before a candidate starts (with a clause that they must pay it back if they leave within a matter of months).

Creating positive experiences for candidates

The most obvious reason companies want to deliver a great candidate experience is to eliminate drop-off during the hiring process. They don't want their interviewing and vetting cycles to sour candidates on future employment. **Because most hiring has been done virtually, hiring managers are sending video tours of offices and encouraging future colleagues to reach out and welcome employees before they start on the job.**⁴ Beyond 2022, we will see more organizations reinventing employee onboarding processes.

There are other compelling reasons for maintaining a quality candidate experience. For example, candidates are often customers. They don't compartmentalize their experiences as job seekers and consumers. Treating candidates poorly or indifferently may jeopardize the relationships you have with them as customers.

Also, the way you treat candidates is an essential element of your brand. Candidates will talk about your organization and their experience, and that discussion becomes part of your brand image. It can either tarnish or strengthen your brand's credibility, which is a direct reflection of company culture.

What do candidates want from their experience?

As the quality of the candidate experience takes on more importance, more organizations are now asking how they can better meet the candidate's expectations.

The “table stakes” for recruitment

First, prospective employers need to do a good job on the basics—the “table stakes” that are the absolute prerequisites in making a good impression. At the top of the list are confidentiality, security, and privacy. The interview/hiring process is one where the candidate is expected to provide highly sensitive, personal information. If a candidate doesn’t have the confidence that a prospective employer will protect that data (and at a minimum conform to legislative standards such as the EU’s GDPR or California’s Consumer Privacy Act), they simply won’t engage with an organization. Candidates also expect a basic level of respect. They assume they’ll receive fair and unbiased consideration and that an employer will make decisions using consistent criteria.

Finally, as with a consumer experience, the details matter in the candidate experience. For example, 50% of candidates apply for jobs on mobile devices, but not all job sites are designed as “mobile first.” Poor design and hard-to-use sites will frustrate candidates and give them a reason to look elsewhere.

Welcoming new hires before they even start

To make a candidate’s shortlist, the employer needs a way to stand out. They must differentiate themselves by providing a strong and unique candidate experience. Accuracy of job descriptions is a key component here. The description of the job opening needs to clearly reflect the duties to be performed. A surprising number of prospective employers don’t do a good job on this.

Also, communication throughout the process is essential. Candidates want to know if they’re being considered or declined—and why. They want to know who they’ll speak with throughout the process and how long the process will take. And they expect an efficient process. They won’t wait for an employer that takes too long to complete the process and make a decision.

Another key element: Candidates want the opportunity to showcase their skills and achievements. They want the chance to put themselves in a positive light, even though they know they may not get hired. They want to experience empathy from an employer and not be treated as commodities to be sorted through. They also appreciate frank, honest feedback on their performance during the process, even when they don’t make it to the next stage.

The more clearly an employer can set expectations, simplify the process, and provide transparency throughout, the more they’ll stand out from companies who are always keeping candidates in suspense and guessing about their status.

Hiring for quality in a world of high candidate expectations

If presented with an either/or choice, the typical employer would probably choose to hire a high-quality candidate over providing a high-quality candidate experience. However, for savvy employers, it doesn’t have to be an either/or world. They can strike an effective balance.

Obviously, a good candidate experience that yields only low-quality hires is bad for business. Likewise, an overly rigorous candidate experience can force out high-quality candidates with multiple employment options. How can employers achieve the best of both worlds?

First, employers must think strategically about their approach to hiring, not tactically. Too many will make mistakes such as requiring a unique assessment for each application or job need. They may get targeted, short-term results from this approach, but the methodology isn’t scalable. They also miss out on insight into how a candidate may perform in other roles—or sacrifice visibility into how a candidate’s career could progress, once hired.

Instead, employers need a more data-driven, science-based approach where one assessment can be used for multiple roles and purposes. They can compare a candidate's results against multiple performance profiles to zero-in on the optimal patterns for success in a range of jobs—not just the role that the candidate initially interviews for, but open roles in the organization that the candidate is likely to be most successful in. At the same time, they can provide the candidate with a less burdensome, respect their time by asking them to complete a single assessment for a more streamlined experience.

Achieving this science-based approach requires services that leverage data science and machine learning to sort through a vast amount of information and isolate those key candidate attributes that truly matter. But it also requires some effort upfront to ensure the smartest possible use of the data gathered. Key tasks include:

- **Defining success**—Assess current employees to understand their inherent behavioral tendencies and the success criteria unique to your company.
- **Identifying patterns**—Recognize the factors that predict performance to develop a role-specific evaluation framework.
- **Refining profiles**—Create the ideal profile based on data from current employees and the analysis of machine learning to reflect the needs of the organization and the job.
- **Discovering talent**—Review internal and external talent pools to identify candidates who may have otherwise been overlooked.

Even in highly competitive hiring markets, employers don't have to choose between a high-quality candidate experience and high-quality candidates. Today's more innovative employers use machine learning and talent science to develop a more efficient hiring process that helps them find the best possible candidates sooner. This streamlined, data-driven approach is also a win for job seekers. It gives them valuable feedback they can use to clarify their own goals, while creating a more transparent process with well-defined expectations and next steps—resulting in a more positive experience that sets an employer apart.

¹ Emily McCormick, "Jobless claims: Another 166,000 Americans filed new claims last week," Yahoo News (finance.yahoo.com), April 7, 2022.

² Korn Ferry, "Talent shortage moves to a chronic problem in 2022," (kornferry.com) October 25, 2021.

³ The Talent Board, "The 2021 Candidate Experience (CandE) Global Research Reports," (thetalentboard.org), 2021.

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