

# The State of Candidate Experience

At the end of November 2019, the RL100 came together in Crewe for a Resourcing Leaders Summit, which had a specific focus on resourcing strategy. On Day 1, Simon Wright (Managing Partner @ TMP) deep dived into candidate experience and provided RL100 members with some fascinating data and insight to relate back to their own processes.

Candidate experience is clearly an important subject, but one that has been discussed for a number of years, without much apparent traction being made. TMP wanted to shed some light on whether things had improved for both candidates and employers.

This feels particularly relevant given the current strength of the UK labour market, with unemployment at its lowest point for 45 years and, despite a recent dip, more than 800,000 vacancies in the economy.

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**Given that talent is at such a premium, are employers doing all they might when they take candidates through their process?**

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Such a challenge is perhaps exacerbated when you consider the sense of concentration in that just 19 job roles make up 37% of all positions advertised by FTSE 100 companies, and more than 600 other jobs making up the rest.

Given such a clear and stubborn war for talent, attracting the best candidates is of massive importance. However, ensuring that such people have a positive experience of an employer's recruitment process is even more relevant. When you consider that many organisations want both unicorns and diversity in their talent pipelines, candidate experience is hard to ignore as an extension of an employer's value proposition.

There is clearly much focus around the recruitment funnel. However, this is often perceived through the lens of the employer – how many candidates will it reject at each stage? Increasingly, however, there is power and choice in the hands of the candidate. So, is the experience they encounter during this funnel likely to see them remain in the process or exit it?

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**By focusing on how to select people out of the process, does this encourage talented candidates to take this decision out of the hands of the employer?**

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TMP invested in both their own very topical research comparing the perceptions and experiences of both candidates and hiring organisations, to understand just how close such perceptions are. At the same time, they have some key learnings from other pieces of relevant and parallel insight pieces.

The purpose of TMP's research was to understand the extent to which misalignments exist between what candidates want from such a process and what employers feel they are providing.

## Starting alignment

It's interesting to understand that candidates and employers have a similar perception about what they seek to extract from the process. Both realise that the experience a candidate undertakes will have a clear influence on whether an individual remains keen on the role and the employer, to the extent that they will accept an offer. This is clearly a theoretical standpoint before a candidate begins this journey.

What you learn during the recruitment process is just as important as what they learn about you.

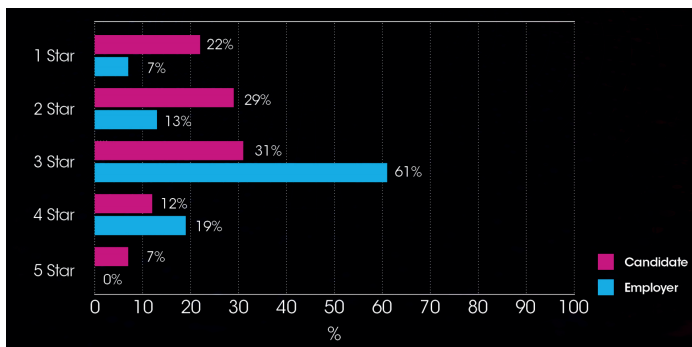
The way in which a candidate is treated through the recruitment process will ultimately effect whether they want the job or not

For good reason, TMP talk about the experience economy. People are willing to invest in experiences – the sorts of experiences that appear on the likes of Instagram in their millions. This, however, raises the bar. We expect much more as customers and participants – Disney has built a huge business through over-delivering on the experience that visitors encounter. This is the landscape and the expectation. Employers need to understand – particularly given the competition we have touched on regularly through this conference, in which great talent has a great deal of choice – that the people with the skills and behaviours they want to hire have increasingly high expectations of what they want to see during the recruitment process.

From TMP's research, a meagre 5% of some 1,700 people who had experienced candidate journeys recently would rate the experience they had gone through as excellent. If we equate this back to the concept that talent acquisition effectively operates as the sales and marketing function of HR, then delivering an excellent customer experience to just 5% of all its consumers would be unlikely to lead to commercial success.

A more anecdotal polling by TMP of around 100 early career recruiters found that all had reviewed their candidate experience within the last 24 months and half had done so within the last year. Whilst this instinctively feels positive, just half of this audience felt that their new and revised candidate journey could be judged as good or better – just a year or two after they have reviewed this whole process. We might question what the process was before the review and why after a review just half of such an audience consider it a positive experience for graduate applicants.

Research from 2018 by Talent Board also points to the underwhelming perceptions both employers and candidates have of the experience the latter are put through. Interestingly, although the overall picture feels bleak from both camps, there are some significant differences.



51% of candidates give the experience either one or two stars and another 31% award it three. Whilst employers tend to be more generous, their overall conclusion focuses on the mediocre – some 61% allocate the experience they provide as being worth three stars and none of them would award it with the maximum five stars – in contrast to an interesting 7% of candidates.

What is perhaps more surprising, particularly given that both employers and candidates view the experience as so important, is the lack of engagement employers have with candidates. If employers attach so much importance to the experience they are providing and yet currently do not attach a stellar rating to their own process, it feels counter intuitive that they are not engaging with such candidates in order to understand how to improve things. And yet this is what is currently happening. 80% of employers feel they do not have the time to ask candidates for feedback on the process they have just been through. And of those 20% who do ask for feedback, just 12% action this to improve their candidate experience. Similarly, although new joiners are a captive audience for their new employer, only 30% are surveyed to establish their views on the process they have just been through.



Perhaps it is no surprise that candidate experience continues to provoke such debate if so little feedback is sought from those people undergoing such an experience.

And this feels something of a waste for employers keen to optimise the experience they put in front of candidates.

Just a third of all candidates surveyed recalled being asked for feedback on the experience they had come through. Frustratingly, 90% of those asked had indeed provided feedback on such a process.



Furthermore, not only are they happy to give of their time and insights, such a request from an organisation actually improves the perception candidates have of them as an employer. Such questioning suggests that an organisation values its candidates and, by extension, its employees.

Talent acquisition is too busy to ask the questions that will help improve the process they are presenting to candidates. Not only that, the simple act of asking such questions will enhance their employer brand. By asking an individual about their feelings on such an experience, by definition we attach value to what they have to say. Their views are worthy of consideration is what such communication is saying.

## How does being asked for feedback make you feel towards an organisation?



Again, we are living in an immediate feedback culture. Leaving an airport, a retailer, a utility, even the GP, an individual will be asked to provide feedback on the experience and service they have just encountered. We are used to this, yet seldom appear to make use of it even though the information provided has real and actionable value.

If we revert back to the Druckerism of ‘if it’s not measured, it’s not managed’, then it appears again that as an industry, we could attach more importance to applying metrics to the candidate experience. Whilst 43% of employers bring up candidate feedback either formally or informally, they do not apply tangible metrics to such conversation. For 18% of employers, such matters are only deemed worthy of conversation if there is a specific issue or complaint. For just 6% of organisations are such metrics discussed in a formal manner, form part of the recruiter’s dashboard and have an influence on salary and bonuses. (A quick headcount during the session itself provided broadly similar statistics, with just one organisation tying remuneration into candidate feedback).

## Is candidate experience aligned to recruiter performance?

When is it discussed?

**43%**

discuss formally and informally, but there are no defined metrics.

**18%**

don’t discuss unless there is a problem that is brought to their attention

**6%**

discuss in formal reviews. It’s measured and incorporated into recruiter dashboard. There are monetary incentives (salary, perks and bonus)



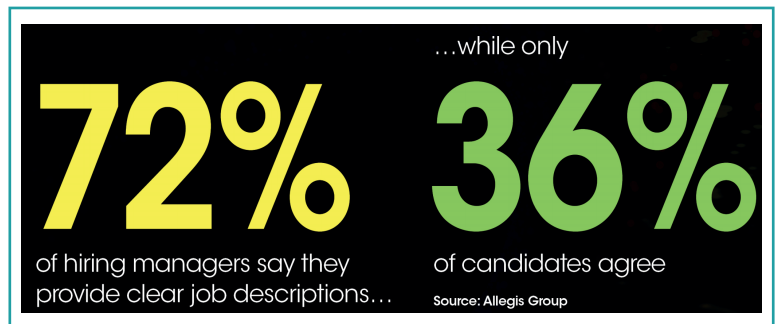
Learnings from the much quoted Virgin Media case study, which saved some £4m as a result of improving the candidate experience in the light of customer cancellations following negative impressions of being an applicant, appear not to be heeded. Particularly, if just 4% of employers either incentivise or penalise recruiters on the feedback provided by candidate audiences

Clearly, there is much to any organisation's candidate process. Both employer and candidate are looking for different things from different parts of the process. This begins with an exploratory phase, when both sides are seeking more information about the other. If such initial soundings are positive then there can be 20 or more different phases to go through, some providing real richness of touch, others perhaps less so. And it is for each organisation to both understand this process and to apply 'moments of magic' where they will make the most difference to a candidate and the experience they are undergoing.

Each organisation faces the challenge of the impel/repel balance – educating candidates sufficiently that they can make informed decisions as to whether this is the right destination for their careers. Similarly, each organisation has to decide the balance between the use of technology and the use of human interaction and at what stages of such processes. Each employer needs to understand when to emphasise the human connection and when to optimise efficiencies through the use of, for example, chatbots.

If we consider the basics of candidates making informed decisions, then the job description plays a key role in this. Again, this feels like a significant misalignment.

Exactly twice the number of hiring managers feel they provide clear job descriptions as candidates who feel this is what they receive. This research, from the Allegis Group, feels deflating. It feels problematic for the overall experience, if only a third of candidates applying for a role have a clear idea about the demands and opportunities of such a position.



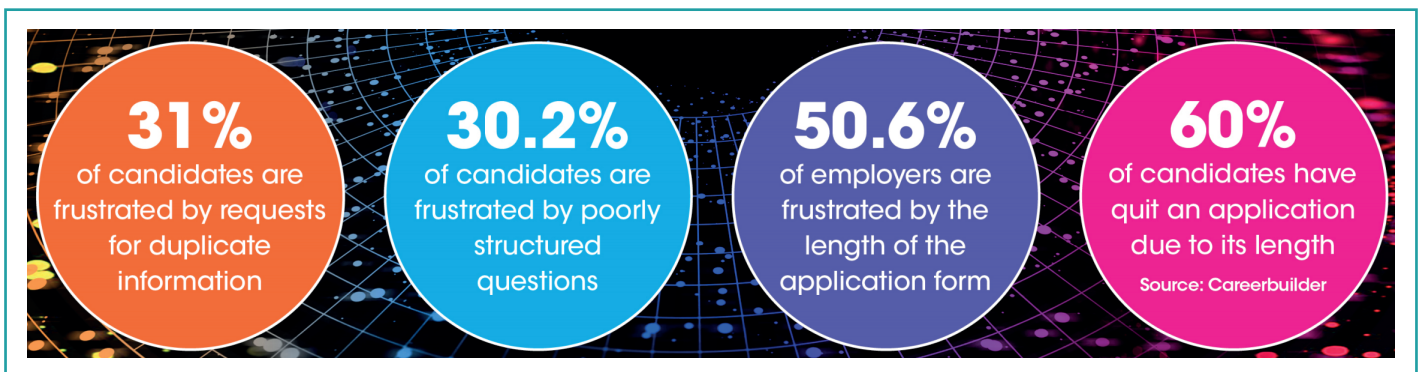
How can they truly make a confident decision on whether the role is right for them if they are operating in such ambiguity?

Perhaps because there are so many different phases to the candidate journey, there can be a sense of over-engineering. As an industry, whilst we are trying for moon-shots, many candidates have some very basic needs of the process. According to research from LinkedIn, for example, the number one obstacle in the application process is, very simply, candidates not understanding what it is like to work for an organisation.

This is backed up too by statistics from CareerBuilder who suggest that more than three quarters of candidates simply want to know what their day to day working life will look and feel like. Perhaps we are over-complicating the process or perhaps such a straightforward objective is harder to picture and articulate than we might think.

It can be very easy for employers to make assumptions – perhaps given the nature of their core business – about candidates and their knowledge of the roles. If such organisations do not invest, however, in research – actually spending time talking to those who love the job as well as those who have prematurely left them – then their understanding of what inspires their people remain assumptions and guesswork. Given how close we can get as recruiters to our organisation, its brand and its roles, we can construct internal bubbles – with candidates inhabiting a world outside of such bubbles. Again, this is about honestly opening up roles, job descriptions, careers, even organisations, so that candidates can make an informed choice.

If we then progress from the job description, through engagement to the application form, again, this can be fraught with issues and frustrations for candidate audiences. If we think that candidates are also consumers, and consumers who are used to increasingly slick and efficient processes and experiences, then it is little wonder they are frustrated by having to input the same or similar data about themselves on multiple occasions during the application. This is perhaps doubly so if they have come from a source, such as LinkedIn, which already houses much professional information about them. Employers need to ask themselves how their application process compares to the likes of Amazon and PayPal in terms of efficiency and time.



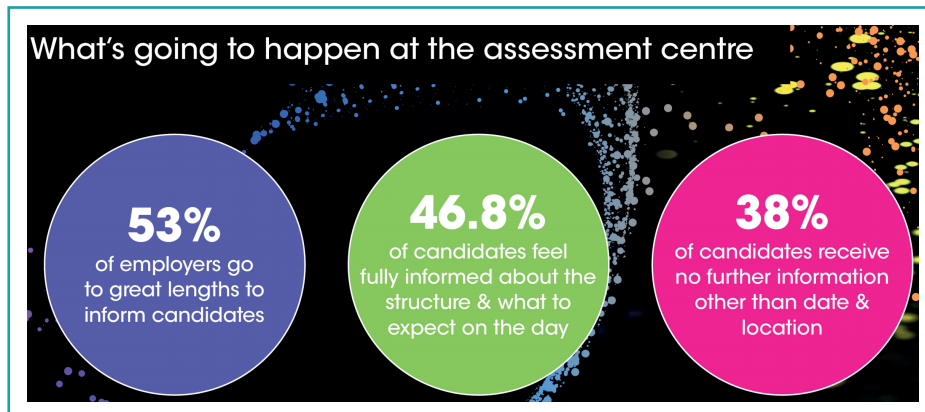
Again, it is vital that employers interrogate their application form from the perspective of the candidate. Questions that an employer might take for granted can make little or no external sense or be worded clunkily in the mind's eye of candidates. And, interestingly, both employers and candidates would be happy to see a shorter application form. Many such forms are the length they are because they have always been that way. They remain so because no one questions their length and validity.

If candidates have a finite patience as regards application forms, then their views on employer feedback and on-going communications are even more demanding. Perhaps this is no surprise – to get this far, they have given of themselves. They expect something back in terms of a value exchange.

Once again, the employer brand and reputation of an organisation is at risk. Candidates want to see their time and effort rewarded with a response from a potential employer. They want feedback and they want this to be timely. Just 24% of people are kept reminded about the next stages of their candidate journey. As a result, many do not know what to expect or how best to prepare themselves. This is another example of where design thinking should be applied. Those organisations that apply objective design principles to their candidate journey will be better able to reach out positively in tough, crowded talent marketplaces, rather than adopting an insular approach which suits employers more than candidates.

## Online tests and candidate preparation

There is an interesting but not entirely surprising lack of candidate enthusiasm for online testing during their candidate experience, with just half of all those involved feeling comfortable about such a process. However, much of this lack of enthusiasm is down to communication and preparedness. They do not know what to expect. The more that employers can walk in the shoes of candidates and understand some of these ambiguities, the better placed they are to communicate and open up the process.



Looking at the TMP data to the left, it feels like another sizeable misalignment between what employers think they are providing for candidates and what such candidates feel they are receiving.

Whereas more than half of all employers feel they have provided a comprehensive breakdown of what a candidate might expect from such a session, a full 38% of those attending feel they get the barest of logistical details and nothing else. Again, those recruiters who have recently undergone the candidate experience themselves, with all the doubt, ambiguity and tension that this involves, will have a better understanding of what a candidate is going through.

## Line manager influences

One of the starkest conclusions to come out of this research was the influence of individuals, and particularly hiring managers, during the interview process. For 93% of candidates, such individuals influence what they think of that organisation. They become the face, the window and the employer brand of the employing organisation – for better or worse. This is a major responsibility and perhaps one that not all hiring managers are aware of. It is worth asking the percentage of hiring managers within an organisation that are true ambassadors for that employer.

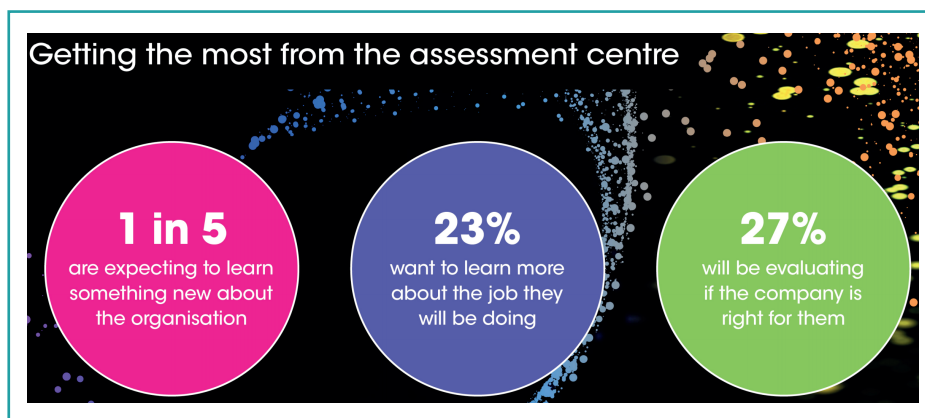
(There is an irony that the average tenure of any line manager is nine months. This means that despite the significant influence they are likely to have during the interview process, they are likely to have moved on either before that individual joins or soon after).

The interview itself can throw up any number of frustrations. For all those organisations beginning to prepare candidates for the next stage in terms of what to expect, there are many who do nothing of the sort.

Nearly a third of employers are concerned by candidates who turn up unprepared for an interview – they are likely, however, to be those employers who do not, in turn, forewarn those candidates about what they might expect.

From the candidate's perspective, they too have issues. Some 41% have come across interviewers who appear ill-prepared for the session. And 20% have been kept waiting for an interview or had an interview cancelled at the last moment. This feels entirely counter-intuitive in the current talent landscape. If talent is in demand, it seems ill-advised at best to treat them with such an apparent lack of consideration and respect. The employer brand of such organisations is unlikely to improve as a result. Much responsibility around this rests with talent acquisition – if we assume that those turning up late – or not at all – for interviews are likely to be hiring managers, then the role of TA is around education. Educating line managers about the tightness of the labour market and candidate supply.

As far as the assessment centre process is concerned, both employers and candidates have their objectives. And these objectives do not always align. Again, just under a quarter of candidates still, even at this relatively late stage in proceedings, want to find out more about the job they have applied for.



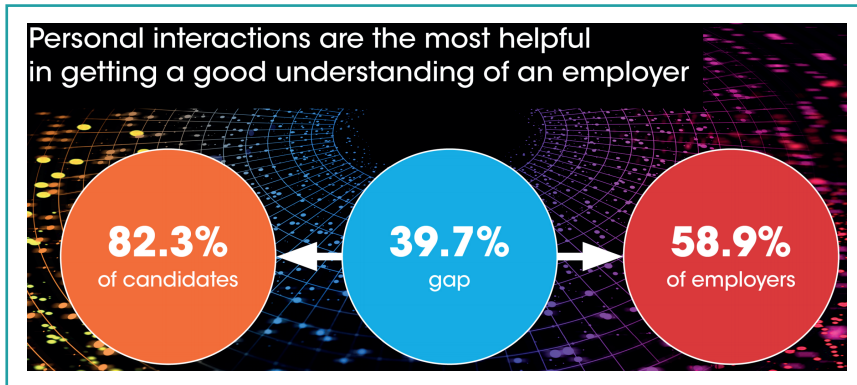
27% of those attending the assessment centre will be observing how current employees at the organisation interact with each other. What sort of impression do they get about the culture by the way people behave and communicate with each other? Is this the sort of working environment they could see themselves in or just the opposite?

Insightfully, this was not something picked up by employers, who perhaps do not realise the extent to which they and their organisation are on show. They feel they are analysing the candidate, rather than this happening the other way around. This is one of the last phases of the process or funnel – it would be costly from many perspectives to unnecessarily lose people through a lack of external insight.

Increasingly, we are seeing organisations extend their employer brand into scenarios such as assessment centres. These need no longer be predictable, generic sessions, but employers are increasingly looking to use them as an extension of their culture and working environment.

(Anecdotally, TMP referenced a banking client of theirs. At the bank, space is at a premium. As a result, it is not unknown for role plays to take part during the working day and using colleague workplaces. On a regular basis, a colleague might come back from a break to find an interviewee in their space – it is not unheard of for such situations to prompt tetchy conversations between the employee and interviewee. We can probably guess the impression the candidate gets of the working culture and how people interact within the organisation).

## Personal relationships



Not surprisingly, there is clear water between candidate expectations of the personal interactions they want to encounter during the process and the value attached to this by employers, as the diagram to the left suggests.

Here we can see a significant gap of nearly 40 percentage points. We need to understand that the candidate is an individual, perhaps unsure about the role, the company, the next step, what the next phase in the process is all about. They are looking for human interactions to provide support, reassurance and guidance during this journey. Potentially, employers spend increasingly more on automating the process they provide. They are investing in an ATS, online tests and potentially a chatbot. It can be easy for such people, in the company of an organisation and colleagues they understand to take such knowledge and insight for granted.

## Sealing the deal

Interestingly, TMP's research suggested that even after the potentially 20 stage process, some 80% of candidates retain some doubts about their potential career move. This can be exacerbated by notice periods.

The table below which shows what factors puts off candidates wanting to start is fascinating and aligns with various other important strands covered by the conference. If we remember some great examples of leadership – positive reinforcements of strengths – this ceases to happen post offer. Whilst employers will usually provide feedback to those people they have rejected, they rarely let the successful candidates know why they have been chosen. Think what sort of positive start this would make to an individual's career with a new employer.





What is also surprising is the lack of ‘keep warm’ initiatives that employers send out post offer letter. Particularly at a time when counter offers may be circulating from a candidate’s current organisation, silence from the hiring organisation may come over as complacent. The last point too touches on a lack of communication. New joiners may be overwhelmed about the expectations they feel they are likely to encounter – particularly in the absence of reassuring voices from their new employer. Similarly, if a candidate has interviewed with one organisation, it is not entirely unheard of for them to be talking to others. They don’t join until they walk into the building.

## Providing feedback

There is a clear gap between those candidates requesting post interview and assessment centre feedback and those actually receiving it. TMP’s data suggests that 64% of people do make such requests, and yet six in ten receive nothing back from those organisations they have interviewed with. This despite them potentially spending up to two days getting so far in the process. Equally damning was the finding that of those 40% who do receive some form of feedback, just four in ten of those felt it was useful and actionable.

The nature of such feedback and the medium in which it is delivered is also influential. This was a fascinating element of the research. Whilst the more personal the feedback – such as that delivered over the phone by the hiring manager tends to result in a much higher rating of the interview process, it can be more nuanced. TMP’s research also suggested that phone calls delivering such feedback could be overwhelming and did not allow the recipient to take on board and process the feedback and perhaps to question and probe it. People welcomed having some form of record that they could go back and refer to such feedback. (Interestingly, this did prompt comment from the audience – there were concerns that email feedback could be used by candidates in potential legal proceedings).

Whilst people rarely welcome negative news from an interview, they do prefer it to be developmental. They do not want to hear platitudes or standard, generic messages. They want to hear how they might improve for their next candidate experience. Not knowing where they have come up short is likely to result in similar outcomes.

The importance of word of mouth recommendations or referrals was communicated clearly. If candidates come through the process with feedback, this is a huge influence on whether they would recommend that organisation as an employer to others. Regardless of whether their process has had a positive outcome or otherwise. Feedback means they are more than likely to be positive employer brand advocates of your organisation. Provide no feedback and the opposite is going to happen. If talent acquisition is truly the sales and marketing side of HR, this feedback represents an appropriate opportunity.

## To conclude...

...it is vital that a candidate experience is regularly reviewed and reviewed with the candidate in mind. Does such a process educate, inform, excite and engage? How too does it compare with the competition? If your candidate was speaking to your competition, how would they evaluate your process next to that of your rivals? Is your process constructed with the external market, and the talent shortages that inform it, in mind?