

Always-on recruitment

How technology can make hiring
faster, fairer, and more flexible in retail
and hospitality

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



Foreword

Retail and hospitality leaders need to hold service standards while controlling costs. Technology can take on routine work, so teams have more time for customers and guests. Recruitment is where that starts.

Before a candidate works a single shift, they know how long you took to reply, how clearly you explained the role, and whether anyone was there when they had a question.

We partnered with KAM Insight to survey 538 UK retail and hospitality employees, including 354 recent applicants and 232 people involved in hiring. The findings show where recruitment breaks down, where technology can help, and where people still matter most.

Both groups see the case for automating routine administration. 87% of candidates are comfortable with AI sending updates and reminders. Hiring teams want automation first for checking that applications are complete (37%).

Both groups also draw clear limits. 64% want a person when discussing pay, shifts or contract terms. 78% say a person reviewing important decisions would make the process feel fair.

The most popular model, chosen by 41%, uses automation for simple tasks and people for important conversations. That split should be designed in from the start: AI assists, a human decides.

Technology should remove delay, repetition and paperwork, while people stay accountable for every hiring decision. With 84% of candidates having abandoned an application, every delay removed is a candidate more likely to stay.

This paper sets out the evidence that candidates and hiring teams are ready for AI-assisted recruitment, with clear boundaries, and four principles for getting it right: fast, fair, flexible and human where it matters.



Paul Watson

VP for Hospitality
Sona

Sona.

METHODOLOGY

The findings in this white paper come from a study conducted by KAM Insight for this report. KAM surveyed 538 UK retail and hospitality employees online, from junior to senior roles. Over 70% work on site, in a venue or in-store. Some questions went to sub-groups: 354 recent job applicants and 232 respondents involved in hiring.

What candidates want from recruitment

90%

say knowing the expected shifts or working hours is important when applying.

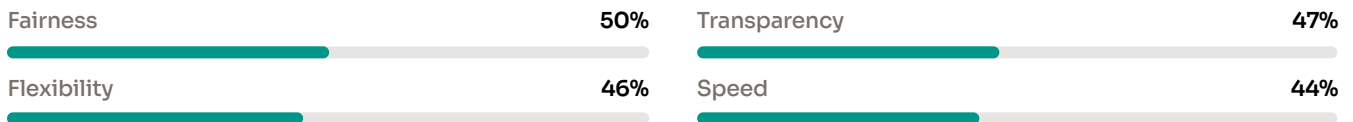
89%

say knowing when to expect a decision is important.

26%

have abandoned an application because the role's pay or hours were unclear.

Fairness is the quality most associated with an ideal process (50%), followed by transparency (47%), flexibility (46%), and speed (44%).



Candidates want the basics to work: clear information, realistic expectations, and access to help. Pay and shift patterns need to be visible before people invest time in an application.

Timelines and updates then shape whether the process feels organised and respectful.

Speed matters, but it does not define the ideal experience on its own. Fairness, transparency, and flexibility rank alongside it. Efficiency adds value when candidates understand the process and feel assessed on the job itself.

More than one in four (26%) have walked away from an application because the pay or hours were unclear. Missing information can cost employers potential candidates before the recruitment process has even properly begun.

Friction is costing employers candidates

84%

have abandoned a job application for at least one reason.

46%

name long application forms among the things they dislike most about applying for jobs.

39%

dislike waiting for responses, and 37% dislike being ignored or ghosted.

36%

Among recent applicants, 36% waited longer than expected for an update, and 28% did not know what the next stage would be.

Frustration changes behaviour. Lengthy processes, difficult forms, and unclear pay or hours are among the leading causes of drop-out.

Communication is a recurring weakness. Recent applicants report delays, uncertainty, and a lack of response.

In a labour market where candidates may be pursuing several roles at once, each unnecessary delay gives another employer time to move first. Removing delay and ambiguity improves the candidate experience and can protect conversion through the recruitment funnel.

“Designing a hiring process around the specific role is vital, so that every step is engaging and relevant to what you need to assess. Without that, employers risk candidate drop-out and losing the buy-in needed for a successful hire.”



Rachel Masing

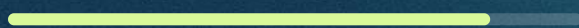
People Director
Pool House

Recruitment needs to work around shift workers

44%

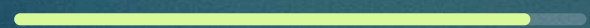
are most likely to have time to apply on a weekday evening or late at night.

84%



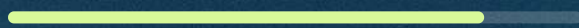
would find it useful to apply at any time of day or night.

90%



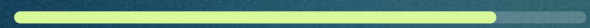
would find it useful to choose an interview time online.

83%



would find it useful to reschedule an interview without calling.

84%



value completing initial screening outside office hours.

Many retail and hospitality employees do not work a conventional day. More are free to apply in the evening or late at night than in any single daytime slot.

Availability can also change from week to week. A process limited to office hours creates barriers for the workforce it is meant to reach.

Candidates respond well to practical flexibility: applying at any time, arranging interviews online, and completing early stages outside office hours. These features give candidates control over routine tasks and reduce the need to make calls during shifts, breaks, or caring commitments.

For employers, a process available 24 hours a day widens access without asking recruitment teams to work outside normal hours.

Fairness is something candidates need to see

86%

say questions that are directly relevant to the job would make recruitment feel fair.

81%

value being able to explain their experience in their own words.

79%

say assessment based on skills, rather than CV quality, would increase fairness.

78%

say having a person review important decisions would make the process feel fair.

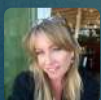
Candidates link fairness to visible features of the process: relevant questions, clear assessment criteria, opportunity to explain their experience, and decisions based on the skills the role requires.

Consistency supports fairness, but it is not enough on its own. Candidates also want context and accountability.

The findings point to a clear division of labour. Technology helps employers ask consistent, job-relevant questions and organise evidence. People keep responsibility for consequential decisions and exceptions.

Where automation plays a part in assessment, employers should explain how. Candidates should be able to see the basis for a decision, as well as the outcome.

“To keep recruitment fair and maintain genuine trust, human oversight has to stay at the heart of the process, ensuring AI is only used to handle admin tasks rather than making final hiring calls. Employers also need to show complete transparency—letting candidates know when technology is being used and giving them easy ways to reach a real person if they feel their experience has been missed.”



Amanda Smyth

People Director
ETM Group

Human when it matters

41%

prefer automation for simple tasks and people for important conversations, the most popular model overall.

64%

mainly want a person when discussing pay, shifts or contract terms.

58%

mainly want a person for an initial interview and 55% for personal circumstances or adjustments.

87%

would give a score of 7–10 for their likelihood of applying to an employer offering a fast, mobile-friendly, always-available process with access to a person when needed.

Candidates do not frame recruitment as a choice between people and automation. They distinguish routine transactions from moments that call for judgement, reassurance, or a real conversation.

Scheduling and initial screening divide opinion more evenly. That makes them credible areas for automation, or for letting applicants choose. Interviews, personal circumstances, and employment terms are different: candidates want dialogue and context at these points.

The strongest model is a responsive one. Technology handles simple tasks efficiently, and a person is available at the moments that matter. Done well, automation frees time for better human interaction.

Candidates accept AI when the benefit and boundaries are clear

87%

are comfortable with AI sending application updates and reminders, and 86% with it checking whether an application is complete.

49%

worry that AI might misunderstand their answers, and 49% that it might overlook relevant experience.

45%

are concerned that AI could make unfair or biased decisions.

52%

say clear notice of AI use would increase their comfort. 39% want a person to review any rejection, and 35% want the option of human help.

Acceptance of AI depends on the task. Candidates are broadly comfortable with practical, low-risk support.

Concerns arise when technology is expected to interpret people or influence who progresses.

Trust therefore depends on visible boundaries. Employers should tell candidates when AI is involved and offer a route to question information or ask for help.

The case for AI is strongest when its benefit to the candidate is immediate and easy to understand: less repetition, faster answers, and more flexibility.

“With considered human guidance, rather than helping us reject more quickly, AI could help us spot patterns and achievements of a candidate that demonstrate potential success in the role.”



Rachel Masing

People Director
Pool House

Compliance should not become the final hurdle

23%

have had to provide the same information more than once during right-to-work, reference or background checks.

18%

were unsure which information or documents to provide, and 18% had difficulty uploading or submitting documents.

91%

would find it useful to see their progress, and 91% would value reminders about anything still outstanding.

89%

would find it useful to speak to a person if they needed help.

The candidate experience does not end at interview or offer. Pre-employment checks can bring a new round of repetition, uncertainty, and disconnected systems, just as both sides want the person to start work.

Candidates want the same things at this stage as earlier in the process: clear information, visible progress, and help when something goes wrong.

Secure document submission, immediate confirmation, and a clear view of progress can reduce uncertainty without weakening compliance.

The value placed on access to a person shows that exceptions matter. Technology should make the standard journey easier, while people resolve individual cases quickly and with care.

Hiring teams see pressure at both ends of the funnel

41%

Among respondents involved in hiring, 41% face too many applications to review,

40%

while 40% struggle with too few suitable applicants.

32%

see applicants abandon applications, and 28% find it difficult to schedule interviews around shifts.

Hiring teams most often want automation to check application completeness (37%), answer applicant questions (32%), and schedule interviews (31%).

Check application completeness

37%

Answer applicant questions

32%

Schedule interviews

31%

They still expect people to lead interviews (55%), make final hiring decisions (48%), and decide who progresses (47%).

Lead interviews

55%

Make final hiring decisions

48%

Decide who progresses

47%

Hiring teams face a quantity problem and a quality problem at the same time. They can have more applications than they can review, yet too few suitable candidates. Abandonment and scheduling difficulties cause further losses from the funnel.

Their preferred uses of automation closely match what candidates find useful: checking completeness, answering questions, and arranging interviews. These are high-volume tasks where faster administration benefits both sides.

Better reporting is also needed. 41% want clearer information on which sources produce suitable applicants, 36% on which sources lead to hires, and 30% on why candidates withdraw or stop responding.

“It’s a daily reality in hospitality that job boards generate high volumes of generic, mismatched CVs while high-calibre applicants remain scarce. Smarter screening workflows, targeted digital channels and clear upfront role information can shift the focus from volume to quality, giving managers a shortlist of genuinely viable candidates to interview.”



Amanda Smyth

People Director
ETM Group

A framework for 'Always-on' recruitment

The research points to four principles for recruitment that work better for candidates and employers in retail and hospitality.

01

Fast

Confirm applications immediately, share timelines, and send updates before candidates have to chase.

02

Flexible

Let people apply, complete early stages, and manage interviews around shifts, caring responsibilities, and changing availability.

03

Fair

Use relevant, consistent assessment. Explain how decisions are made. Keep people accountable for important outcomes.

04

Human when it matters

Automate routine administration. Make a person available for sensitive and consequential moments.

Key takeaways

Retail and hospitality employees are not asking employers to choose between technology and a human recruitment experience. Rather, they want a process that is clear, responsive, flexible and fair, with access to a person when the conversation or decision genuinely requires it.

For employers, friction in recruitment is a conversion issue as much as a candidate-experience issue. Every unnecessary stage, delayed response, or unsuitable interview time is another chance to lose someone who may have been right for the role.

Flexibility is especially important for a shift-based workforce; 44% are most likely to apply on a weekday evening or late at night. Letting people apply, screen and book interviews outside office hours widens access, without asking hiring teams to work outside them.

Both groups want automation for routine work. 87% of candidates are comfortable with AI handling practical tasks such as sending updates and reminders. Hiring teams want automation first for checking that applications are complete (37%).

People matter most when the stakes are highest. 64% want a person when discussing pay, shifts or contract terms, and 78% say a person reviewing important decisions would make the process feel fair. Where AI is involved, say so: 52% say clear notice would increase their comfort.

Used this way, technology removes delay and repetitive administration. However, design the approach from the start, using AI to assist and people to make the decisions. This will provide a recruitment experience that is fast, flexible, fair and human where it matters. It will give candidates fewer reasons to leave the process, and hiring teams more time for the conversations that count.



Jo Lynch

Account Director
KAM Insight



About Sona

Sona is the AI platform for frontline enterprises. It helps large organisations run more efficient operations and deliver better service, with scheduling, HR, payroll and compliance in one platform.

Sona ATS is built into that platform. It carries one candidate record from careers page to a cleared-to-work first day, with scoring that shows its working and a person who makes every decision.

Headquartered in London, with a growing presence in New York, Sona is backed by N47, Felicis, Northzone, Gradient, and others.

To walk your own vacancy through Sona ATS, or to find out more visit sona.ai



About KAM

KAM is a specialist hospitality, food and drink insight consultancy that helps operators, suppliers and investors better understand their customers and make smarter commercial decisions. Through insight-led consultancy, bespoke consumer research and market intelligence, KAM helps clients identify opportunities, improve performance and respond to changing consumer behaviour.

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