



# Bridging the Recruitment Gap

Report by  
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## About the team



**Kelly Drewery** is a Business Psychologist and Director of Talent Glue. Kelly has been a Business Psychologist for more than 20 years, working with a variety of well-known brand name employers across many industry sectors. She established her Cambridge based consultancy, Talent Glue, ten years ago and gets involved in all things to do with organisational behaviour.

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**Claire Angus** is an experienced recruitment consultant. She is the Head of the Recruitment Gateway at Cambridge Network and organises jobs fairs for Network members and jobseekers. Her focus, understanding and appreciation of the local jobs market means she is very well placed to support employers and candidates through the whole recruitment process.

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**Katherine Wiid** supports workers and employers with recruitment and retention. She provides people managers with skills, self-awareness, and a sounding board to become confident recruiters and motivators of teams. Katherine's extensive recruitment and behavioural experience ensures that her clients are in sync with how people's minds work.

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## About the research

Throughout 2022, we have been running focus groups and surveys with recruiters, workers, and job candidates in the Cambridgeshire region to understand their current experiences of the recruitment market. Many of those involved have come from organisations in key local industry sectors including pharmaceuticals, life sciences, professional services, engineering, and technology.

We would like to say a huge thank you to all those who took time to participate in discussions and honestly sharing their experiences in recent times. We'd also like to offer a special thanks to Martin Bond at A Cambridge Diary for the fantastic photography used throughout this report

If you are interested in discussing this research or exploring how to improve the recruitment process in your organisation, please contact any of the team above.

## Is there a gap in the recruitment bridge?

It's a thing of beauty and one of the most photographed sights in Cambridge. During a recent visit, it struck us that the Mathematical Bridge at Queens College is perhaps currently a good metaphor for our local recruitment market. A popular myth is that University staff and students attempted to take the bridge apart and put it back together but were unable to work out how to hold the structure together. They were obliged to resort to adding nuts and bolts to avoid breaking it<sup>1</sup>.

In some ways, employers and workers can be seen as on opposing sides of the river. Employers have been advertising more jobs this year. There's rapid wage growth for already higher earners too. Employers have been forced in many sectors to ratchet up salaries to compete. Top workers have a chance to negotiate as employers scramble to recruit them. It could be easy to conclude that power has swung towards a workers' market – where there are more jobs than workers.

Yet at the same time, you may know people who have either left their job or are looking to make a move. The lure of better pay and more hybrid working is a tricky offer to ignore if your employer 'requires' you to fully return to the office. The damaged psychological contract means the market is filled with passive candidates – people quietly, regularly checking the jobs market. Surely this makes it an employer's market – the one where there are more candidates than jobs?

On one side of the river, employers have a pile of nuts and bolts (vacancies) and struggling to find candidates with the right skills, experience, and attitude. On the other side, workers are like the timber planks (seeking the right roles for their valuable skills). Hence, we ask the question '*is there a gap in the recruitment bridge?*'

To help explore what we have been observing, we've divided this report into six key stages of recruitment. We have explored each of these stages with both employers and candidates to see perspectives from both sides of the bridge. If you are facing any recruitment and retention challenges currently, we have included some questions in each section of this report to help you reflect on each stage. We conclude with some thoughts about where you can go next as a recruiter or worker.



<sup>1</sup> This myth is actually not true. Queens' College records show that fastenings were in William Eldridge's original design based on a voussoir arch. Although held up based on a state of gravitational compression on the whole structure, fastenings are required. When it

was first built, iron spikes were driven into the joints from the outer side, where they could not be seen from the inside of the parapets, explaining why bolts were thought to be an addition to the original.

## Workforce planning



Workforce planning is the first stage of recruitment and sometimes skipped over if a job replacement feels urgent. Think of it as being a bit like the structural design of the timbers of the Mathematical Bridge which makes it both self-supporting and an efficient structural use of timber. Workforce planning is essential to having enough people to productively meet longer-term business goals.

Business owners have been reporting it's tricky to plan more than a few months ahead due to volatile supply chains, economic uncertainty, changing consumer behaviour, and loss of some skilled workers from Brexit or early retirement. As a result, they may be delaying decisions about business/ market direction, experiencing pressure to downsize office space and/ or feeling ambiguous about the impact of implementing longer-term hybrid working practices.

Workers' expectations have changed. Where and when current employees are willing to work has quietly shifted and recruiters feel it's difficult to plan for further unknowns with new recruits. This includes practical examples such as nearly half (44%) of recruiters finding it harder to work out where people could be physically based to do their job. Are current employees likely to need the desks? Will new recruits be attracted to an office seemingly empty of workers?

*Fig 1: Some Impacts of uncertainty on people throughout the organisation*



*Fig 2: Survey responses around workforce planning*



The resulting impact on workforce planning for managers and HR alike is that it has become a reactive, short-term activity. One in four recruiters (25%) are saying it's now harder to know what types of people to target in the market for the roles they are recruiting for.

At the same time, this uncertainty is being felt by workers. Half (51%) of workers responding to our survey report finding it harder to know what employers want. Four in ten (39%) workers are finding it more difficult now to find job roles that suit their skills. Many are mid-career workers with 31% saying that the impact of the uncertain market is making it harder for them to feel confident in their abilities.

### Questions to ask yourself at this stage

1. Can this team and job be better shaped to meet our goals? What flexibility does the team offer so we can look at different types of candidates?
2. Are we clear about the 'new in post' skills that employees and potential recruits would need to have? What can or can't be developed on-the-job?
3. Is there anyone in the current workforce who could be stretched into this post? Who is the closest? What would it take to develop them, and over what period of time?
4. For workers, what are my most valuable skills and capabilities and who needs these currently?

## Recruitment process



Over the years, the nearly 300-year-old Bridge has had various repairs, mostly due to rotting timber<sup>2</sup>. Fixes were added, parts removed or replaced, and then in 1905, it was rebuilt to reflect the original design. The pandemic-enforced shift to online recruitment in recent times has perhaps caused processes to have fixes added or parts removed.

We've noticed some recruiters have quickly embracing the change and have been fully redesigning their processes. They have a faster, leaner process that is impressing candidates. Others have avoided redesign but found benefit from moving more online such as team managers becoming more accessible and flexible. Others report a slow-down in the pace of their process and losing good candidates as a result.

*"The pace of it, having to recruit fast and taking what is available, I constantly worry - have we got the right people?"*

HR Manager

Recruiters are thinking more explicitly about how they position their employer brand and their 'deal' in the market. As with other higher cost-of-living cities, recruiters in Cambridge have noticed candidates applying for jobs here who are based further away and, at the same time, are also competing with London employers for candidates based here. They are having to respond to the demand for hybrid working.

The employer brand matters to attract suitable applicants. Job candidates are demanding hybrid working, flexible hours and more flexible contracts. At the same time, the impressiveness of the physical workplace has mattered less in recruitment. Instead, focus has been on the online touchpoints that candidates have with the potential employer. The smoothness of the process such as the transparency around closing dates, choice of interview dates/times, the follow up from each stage of selection, all matter in how the employer is being evaluated.

Turnaround time to process candidates is shorter.

Some candidates are only on the market for as little as 10 days. Recruiters are having to be more proactive and streamline their processing of applications to help them quickly access the best candidates. The online nature of processing applications, such as online interviews, means one in six (16%) recruiters feel they are better able to process candidates in a timely way. However, some are feeling the pace can be too fast to be effective and there is some panic recruitment in the system.

For local workers, they are also seeing the impact of the competitive pace set by some employers and they are expecting a faster process. As a result, one in four (24%) candidates are saying that some recruitment processes they have experienced are simply taking too long and they're inclined to drop these opportunities. That said, employers in Cambridgeshire are faring relatively well on retaining candidates through their processes; global research indicates 78% of candidates are willing to drop out due to slow processing<sup>3</sup>.

### Questions to ask yourself at this stage

1. Who are we competing with for the people we need? Do we need a SWOT analysis to better understand our position as a potential employer for our target recruits?
2. How can we make our adverts as attractive as possible to meet the expectations of potential candidates?
3. How can we make it as fast and lean as possible for us and for the candidate? Do we need all the stages of our recruitment process?
4. For workers, how quickly can I respond to a new opportunity? Am I regularly checking opportunities?

<sup>2</sup> Taken from the Queens' College website, retrieved Aug 22. <https://www.queens.cam.ac.uk/visiting-the-college/history/college-facts/mathematical-bridge>

<sup>3</sup> Brown, J. (2022). Three-quarters of jobseekers drop lengthy recruitment processes, survey reveals. *People Management Online*. Aug 22.



## Selection



Back to our Bridge's fixings. Originally, the fastenings were hidden under the bridge but replaced in the 1905 build by nuts and bolts that were visible on both sides. Hence, people believed the bridge's structure had to be newly bolted together. We could try to point out here how the bolt choices link to selecting new recruits, but we'll leave that pleasure to your imagination as the reader.

Volume aside, seven in ten recruiters (68%) find it harder now to attract the right quality of applicant. Recruiters report that job vacancies seem to fall into one of two opposing camps – one that generates way too many applicants or one that generates way too few. Where there has been a high volume of applications, recruiters have found it tricky to process everyone. The shift to fully online selection activities has various benefits such as being cheaper and more efficient, especially for recruiting managers. However, a recent national research study has found 57% of recruiters are using degree qualifications as a filter to reduce the number of candidates even though this may not be an explicit requirement of the job<sup>4</sup>.

Where there has been a very low volume of applicants, recruiters have had to relook at the requirements and how the job is advertised. They have been questioning whether the degree is a necessary requirement or whether they focus attention on transferable skills. Although the latter can be time consuming to evaluate, suitable people can be found.

Around one in six recruiters cite that assessing candidates for fit with the team/culture as being the trickiest part (18%). Where there might have been a meet-the-team element to the selection process, there have instead been more one-to-one conversations.

*"There don't seem to be enough candidates to fill the roles. Maybe we need to rethink what a good candidate is".*

Inhouse recruiter

Current selection processes have left many candidates feeling a bit cheated or misunderstood. Four in ten candidates (38%) feel their value and skills are currently not being properly assessed by potential employers. A significant risk is that new bias is emerging in the selection process. Reasonable adjustments that might have been made for face-to-face selection may be different online. For example, some recruiters report that they need to take extra care with neurodiverse candidates who may struggle with novel elements of online interviews.

Bias that can appear in online interviews might be caused by a need to act fast (online interviews tend to be shorter, back-to-back and lack the wraparound chat when arriving or leaving). Unconscious bias can also appear where there is a lack of meaning in the connection between the interviewers and candidate. With limited information about the candidate, interviewers may be more prone to judge unusual online behaviours.

### Questions to ask yourself at this stage

1. Do we need to review all the elements of our recruitment process to ensure it is all essential and lean? How are we assessing each capability?
2. What are the most complex or rarest capabilities needed for this role? Are we clear about essential vs desirable requirements?
3. Where might there be bias in our selection processes? Who might this affect?
4. For workers, how do I come across online? What do I need to support me to come across well? How can I build rapport with the interviewer in the time available?

<sup>4</sup> Brown, J (2022). More than half of employers still use degrees to screen job applicants, research finds. *People Management Online*, Aug 22.

## The employment deal



A bugbear of many candidates is in the quality of the initial job advert. To do this well, successful recruiters seem to be doing three key things. Firstly, they are advertising the salary range; 42% candidates say adverts are not giving enough salary information and the lack of transparency is putting them off considering a role. Secondly, they are clear about how flexible the jobs are; 32% feel there is a lack of adequate information about flexibility in terms of hours and location. And thirdly, they offer adequate information about specific demands of the job; 21% want more info to simply help them know whether they can do the job.

Half of recruiters (47%) are finding it more difficult to negotiate a suitable deal with candidates. Recruiters report navigating an offer has been more complex in recent times. Those who are doing it well are clear about what can be negotiated for each vacancy. They are segmenting roles in their organisation into different groups – there is not a blanket policy for all workers. Some roles require people to work specific hours or be in a specific location; where this is not needed, competitive employers are offering flexibility as part of the deal. They have reviewed this deal for their current workforce as well as for potential recruits.

The increasing cost of living has been front of mind for many candidates whilst the salary hikes are causing headaches for employers trying to balance attracting new recruits with fair pay for current valued employees. Some local recruiters have reported finding they are now competing with employers in London. Candidates have found they can command London salaries and commute only one day a week. This has had an additional impact on the competitiveness of local salaries.

*“What’s keeping me awake at night? Staff retention due to increasing pay rates offered by other businesses, Staff being poached by competitors, or losing candidates to competitors that throw money at them. Keeping up with salary hikes. We are in a niche industry and cannot compete with big brand names like Google and cannot compete on the same level.”*  
HR Manager

How can an employer attract workers in this market if they have limited cash? The smart things that recruiters can do to help attract candidates are personal and threefold<sup>5</sup>:

1. Create the space to discuss whether the role and company is the right for the candidate
2. Openly considering them for other roles if the current vacancy isn’t right
3. Get to know the individual – what motivates them, what they want from an employer

### Questions to ask yourself at this stage

1. Are our job adverts offering all the information that help candidates choose us? Can we advertise the salary range? If not, what can we say so people understand more about the level of the role?
2. What quartile do we aim to be in with our salaries? Are we keeping track of this in the market? What might this mean for salaries of current workers
3. Do we create enough space to engage properly and personally with candidates?
4. For workers, how can I gain a sense of the people I might be working with?

<sup>5</sup> Just for those wanting to fully embrace our metaphorical story, the simple compression-based design by William Etheridge required no bending of wood, which would weaken the material. In comparison, other similarly designed bridges

use a series of levers, fulcrums and bending timber. These have subsequently had to be modified using Etheridge’s principles around compression to improve their strength. The best designed employment deals focus on knowing what matters most to people and getting these elements right.

## Onboarding



Think of your onboarding like aerodynamics. Go with us for a moment. The Bridge has been pieced together and you have a solid crossing. The last thing you want is a gust of wind blowing things off course before you reach the other side. There are numerous side-winds at play currently that are testing retention before people have even arrived on Day One.

It seems the market is currently prone to gazumping, ghosting, gazundering, and people being blown off the Bridge. A candidate accepts an offer, then seemingly doesn't. A third (36%) of recruiters are finding increased attrition in the onboarding of their new recruits. Some candidates are receiving generous counter offers from their current employers who are keen not to lose them.

Employers who are successfully onboarding report that they are focusing on the social aspects: primarily, meeting and connecting with other team members. This process is starting from the point of offer. Some companies are offering Keeping In Touch (KIT) days similar to those offered to employees on maternity leave. These days are used to introduce the new recruit during team meetings when people might all be physically together. In smaller organisations, this time has also been used to expose recruits to the culture and brand more explicitly.

By Day One, the challenges of getting set up online and accessing managers and leaders as part of induction have become smoother for many. However, half (49%) of recruits are finding it harder to understand how to get things done. Recruits have reported it being more difficult to reach the expected pace and productivity (47%), bond with team colleagues (63%) and getting adequate exposure to the culture and brand (84%).

The effort that is required to manage a tailored onboarding as a recruiter is significant enough that some local employers have created a dedicated role in the Talent Acquisition team specifically for this area of work.

*Fig 3: Recruiter responses identifying what has become harder during onboarding*



For any areas that have been identified as weaknesses during the selection stage, there could be a development goal set as part of onboarding. This would help the recruit meet the required pace and productivity more easily.

### Questions to ask yourself at this stage

1. How would we rate all the different touchpoints that a candidate may experience of us through the recruitment and onboarding process?
2. How can we make a social onboarding experience that helps people understand our culture?
3. How do we help recruits get up to speed and address any weaknesses that have appeared in the selection stage?
4. For workers, how can you use the time before you start to help you get up to speed socially with your new team? Can you seek feedback from your interview to help establish your strengths and areas for development in the role?



## Retention and development



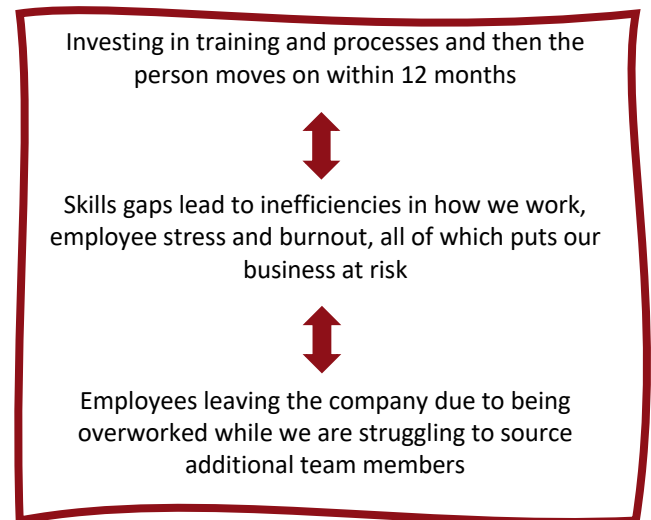
In the Mathematical Bridge's design, a replacement timber could be removed and replaced without disturbing its neighbours. However, this is where our metaphor doesn't fit with the Bridge. This slide-and-replace design just doesn't fit the experience for many teams where numerous vacancies have created pressure on current workers. They report experiencing reduced resilience, emotional burnout and overstretch. The psychological contract of current workers has shifted. People may have muddled through the last couple of years but it's now time to ensure people's jobs are designed for more flexible or hybrid working.

One in five (20%) recruiters report finding it more challenging than two years ago to retain new recruits in their first year. Three in four (73%) are finding it harder to network with people outside of their direct team. 'Stay' conversations matter i.e. encouraging people to stay who might otherwise be a flight risk.

A recent social media trend labelled #quietquitting reflects a reduced corporate citizenship behaviour amongst workers. For example, doing the requirements of the role, meeting core accountabilities and no more. This is a strip back of the significant extra effort that highly engaged workers might have offered their employer ten years ago. There are mixed views about which behaviour is better for productivity.

Why might this change of behaviour be happening? Four in ten (40%) workers are finding it more difficult to access opportunities for learning and development. A third (35%) of new recruits don't feel the employer takes time to develop them in line with the job. Hybrid working is reducing the visibility of the casual social network inside the organisation that could generate new opportunities for people. One in five (20%) employers admit there is lower visibility of the career paths and mobility within the organisation in the last couple of years.

*Fig 3 Destructive reasons some employers have for not investing in developing people*



### Questions to ask yourself at this stage

1. Do we have a recruitment sieve? Are people staying or leaving within the first year?
2. How can we generate a sense of team belonging? And what about connecting with people beyond the team?
3. How are we supporting people to be mobile within the hybrid organisation? How can we ensure the organic conversations and networking happens?
4. For workers, what do you need in this new work environment to function at your best? The world may be very different to the last time you started a new job.

## Rebuilding your bridge

### For employers...

So, if you are feeling your recruitment bridge is a bit wobbly, what actions could you take based on our research?

1. **Make it a human experience.** Our core theme emerging from these research findings is the importance of human touchpoints in the recruitment process. Candidates warm to employers who offer social contact from the early stages onwards. What touchpoints do you have with candidates to ensure:
  - a. regular contact with the candidate
  - b. they develop an early sense of team belonging
  - c. they have exposure to the culture of the organisation?
2. **Make it lean.** There is also clear evidence that a streamlining of the recruitment process is valuable. The pace in the market means that talented people are making judgements about employers based on the speed of their response. If you haven't already, it might be a useful exercise to map your recruitment process and identify which stages take the longest.
3. **Make it social.** Ensure all stakeholders in the recruitment and retention process are invested in it. With such quick turnarounds in the job market, every person needs to be working to the same design and aligned with each other and the process.
4. **Make it smart for the longer-term.** As you look at candidates, rather than applying a 'yes/no' filter, ask yourself the question – *what would it take to get each candidate to become a 'yes'?* If there are patterns in the gaps, what could you offer during onboarding to help close the gaps. Could you have an onboarding programme that helps people develop in line with the core requirements of the job?

### For workers...

What are our research findings with fellow local workers suggesting you could do during your active, or passive, job search?

1. **Know your worth.** Not your salary, but in terms of knowing which of your skills, capabilities, and experience matter right now for employers. Do some research on local companies and think about their challenges. How might you be able to help?
2. **Make it lean.** Like employers, you may want to find a way to be quick in responding to opportunities. Check regularly for opportunities as some don't appear for long. Know the process, deadlines and follow up on progress in a timely way. Have some ready drafted text that you might include in application forms. Prep some interview responses. The last thing you want is to be unprepared for a recruiter calling you five minutes after you've emailed your cv over.
3. **Make it social.** Network to find out about potential opportunities. There are online networking opportunities, such as Cambridge Network's Recruitment fair, to make new contacts. Also 'make it social' by passing on opportunities you hear about to other people. In a fast-paced market, people will appreciate you sharing an opportunity with them. Once you've gleaned all the opportunities for your own situation, create a habit of doing another search and find three opportunities that might be of interest to other people you know. They may well return the favour.
4. **Map out what you need to onboard and function effectively in a hybrid workplace.** Although your role might be based on location, there are likely to be people with whom you are deal who are remote much of the time. Proactively plan your own onboarding programme to ensure you get the opportunity to meet your key stakeholders in the first few weeks. Find out the days that people from other teams are generally in the office for meetings and match them where you can so you can informally connect face-to-face.