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The breadth of enterprise recruitment

What the hiring process contains once an organisation passes a certain size, where the elapsed time goes, and what that time costs. Written for heads of talent acquisition and the executives they report to.

SHIVA MARAN · HIREWAND
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Ask different practitioners what recruitment is and you will get different answers: sourcing, screening, assessment, or compliance, depending on where each person has spent their career. Inside a large organisation it is all of these and more. A single hire passes through eight phases, involves seven or more functions, and can require forty or more discrete steps between a manager identifying a need and a new joiner completing their first week.

In this paper I walk through that process end to end, using a professional salaried role in a mid-to-large organisation as the reference case, and an organisation hiring about two hundred people a month as the volume case. I then ask where the elapsed time goes. The finding that matters most is a simple one: the work involved in a hire amounts to a few days of effort, while the process consumes two to three months of elapsed time. The difference is waiting: for approvals, for panel availability, for feedback, for signatures, and for external parties.

That waiting has a cost. The employer carries a cost of vacancy for every day the role stays open; the candidate market penalises slow processes with withdrawals, which push the organisation back to the start of the process; and recruitment services firms lose margin directly. The steps most responsible for the delay are routine ones, such as budget confirmation, approval routing, interview scheduling, and post-interview feedback, none of which requires skill and all of which routinely take days.

I recommend nine changes, most of which are process design decisions rather than technology purchases: measure from the request rather than the posting; instrument waiting time at every stage; run approvals in parallel with escalation windows; pre-authorise predictable hiring; treat the intake meeting as the specification; treat scheduling and feedback turnaround as first-class problems; run pre-start activities concurrently; publish the cost of a day; and design separately for each hiring mode. One caution runs through all of them: my observations come from a small number of organisations, and yours will differ. Measure where your own elapsed time goes first, and let that measurement decide which of these changes to make.

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SECTION 1

Introduction

1.1 Scope and audience

This paper describes recruitment as it operates inside organisations that have passed the point where hiring can be handled informally. My subject is the full width of the process: every phase from the first identification of a need to a completed first week, the functions involved in each, the volumes each handles, and the elapsed time each consumes. I have written it for heads of talent acquisition, HR leaders, and the finance and business executives who fund and depend on hiring. No technical or statistical background is assumed, and specialist terms are defined at first use and again in Appendix A.

The reference case throughout is a professional salaried role in a mid-to-large organisation. Where I give volumes, I use an organisation hiring about two hundred people a month at a ratio of one hundred candidates considered for every one hired. Both cases are illustrative. I chose them because they are common, not because they are universal, and Section 5 sets out how the picture changes for other kinds of hiring.

The evidence comes from published benchmark and survey material, listed in the references, together with what we have observed directly in client workflows at Hirewand. The direct observations come primarily from one large enterprise, and I flag them as such wherever they appear. Much of the published material originates in the United States; Appendix B discusses where that matters for readers in India and elsewhere.

1.2 Why the process is rarely seen whole

There is an old parable about several people, each unable to see, who describe an elephant by touch: one holds the leg and reports a pillar, another the trunk and reports a snake, a third the ear and reports a fan. Each description is accurate for the part being touched and wrong for the whole. I keep returning to that parable because it describes precisely how our profession talks about its own subject.

Practitioners describe recruitment according to the segment in which their careers were built. Speak to somebody who came up through a staffing or search firm, and recruitment is a sourcing problem, with everything before sourcing treated as administration and everything after it as paperwork. Speak to somebody with a technical background, and it is a screening problem: how to evaluate a large volume of applicants efficiently. Speak to somebody who has sat on hiring panels, and it is an assessment problem, with the rest of the process treated as logistics around one judgement. Speak to somebody from HR operations, and it is a governance problem: consistent records, defensible decisions, right-to-work evidence, and the documentation now attached to automated decision tools.³⁹ Figure 1 summarises the four positions.

THE STAFFING BACKGROUND "Recruitment is sourcing." Correct that supply is the constraint in scarce markets. Incomplete because a found candidate who waits eleven days for a first interview is not a hire.	THE TECHNICAL BACKGROUND "Recruitment is screening." Correct that volume must be reduced. Incomplete because in one large study the interview stage, not the application stage, was where most candidates were lost.¹⁶
THE HIRING TEAM "Recruitment is assessment." Correct that fit decides value. Incomplete because most organisations never check whether their assessment predicts performance.³⁶	HR OPERATIONS "Recruitment is governance." Correct that a hire is a regulated event. Incomplete because a defensible process that takes ninety days loses the candidate to a process that took twenty.

Figure 1. Four accurate but partial descriptions of recruitment, each drawn from one professional background. None is false; each describes one phase and presents it as the whole.

Each of these descriptions is accurate about the phase it names. The difficulty is structural rather than personal. Careers are built inside one segment. Software is bought by segment, and the market is organised into hyper-specialist categories that each address one phase. Metrics are also segmented: a sourcing team is measured on pipeline, a coordination team on scheduling, and no one is measured on the elapsed time from the moment a need is identified to the moment a person starts.

The technology estate shows the consequence. Industry research, reported second-hand through vendor analysis, puts the average organisation at roughly sixteen HR and recruiting applications, with around two thirds running on platforms that do not connect to one another and roughly a quarter average adoption across what has been purchased.³⁰ Analyst work from Aptitude Research, also reported second-hand, puts a typical enterprise talent acquisition team at seven to twelve separate tools involved in one hiring process.³¹ Around six in ten recruiting teams run three or more tools alongside their primary applicant tracking system.³² Survey work attributed to SHRM suggests organisations run more than twice the number of HR technology modules they did five years ago, with a large share barely used.⁴³ No organisation set out to run sixteen systems; sixteen systems is what accumulates when each tool is bought to solve one phase in isolation.

None of this is an argument against specialists. Specialists are the reason each individual phase is now performed well. It is an argument that most organisations hold no single representation of the whole process, and that the cost of that missing representation is paid in elapsed time. The remainder of this paper sets out what that representation contains.

SECTION 2

The process end to end

2.1 Why there are so many steps

Once a company passes a certain size, recruitment stops being a single activity and becomes a workflow with governance attached to it. One of our clients, a single large enterprise, runs between forty and forty-eight discrete steps for a standard professional role, from the moment a manager decides a role is needed to the moment the new joiner completes their first week. I want to be clear about what that number is and is not. It is one company, observed directly. It is not a benchmark. Your organisation may run thirty steps or sixty, the balance between the phases will be different, and the places where the time is lost will be different too. The published process guides in the references describe workflows of comparable depth,¹²¹⁰ but the only count that matters for your organisation is your own.

The steps are not bureaucracy for its own sake. Almost all of them exist because something once went wrong without them. Budget checks exist because departments once hired past their headcount. Compensation band checks exist because internal pay equity was once disturbed by a single generous offer. Right-to-work checks exist because the penalty for omitting them is severe. Bias audits and candidate notification steps now exist because regulators in some jurisdictions require them.³⁹ Each control is justifiable on its own. It is the accumulation that no one planned.

2.2 Eight phases

The workflow can be grouped into eight phases. Figure 2 sets out, for each phase, the activities that may appear in it, the functions involved, an indicative overall duration, and the monthly volume handled under the volume case described in Section 1.1. The durations are illustrative. They are drawn from published benchmarks for the corresponding phase and

are intended to show the shape of the process, not to be quoted as measurements. Your own durations, once you measure them, will replace this figure.

PHASE 1

Demand and authorisation

TYPICAL OVERALL

5 to 10 days

MONTHLY VOLUME

~200 requisitions raised and approved

POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES

- Need identified, whether planned or unplanned
- Hiring request raised with justification
- Role validated against approved headcount
- Budget availability confirmed
- Salary band and internal equity check
- Approval routed through the management chain, and the requisition released

STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

Hiring manager, workforce planning, finance, reward, and leadership approvers.

PHASE 2

Sourcing

TYPICAL OVERALL

2 to 5 days to launch, then continuous

MONTHLY VOLUME

~20,000 candidates entering consideration

POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES

- Job description finalised and published to the career site and job boards
- Internal posting window opened
- Paid advertising configured and set live
- Referral campaign issued
- Suppliers briefed and requisitions allocated
- Talent pools and prior applicants re-engaged
- Outbound target lists built and outreach sequences run

STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

Recruitment, sourcing, recruitment marketing, and external suppliers or vendors.

PHASE 3

Screening

TYPICAL OVERALL

3 to 8 days

MONTHLY VOLUME

~20,000 reviewed, narrowing to ~2,000 screened

POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES

- Application intake and de-duplication
- Eligibility and knock-out checks
- Resume review and shortlisting
- Recruiter screen scheduled and held
- Screen notes summarised and candidate handed to the hiring team

STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

Recruitment, coordination, and the applicant tracking system.

PHASE 4

Evaluation

TYPICAL OVERALL

10 to 20 days

MONTHLY VOLUME

~800 assessed, narrowing to ~500 interviewed

POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES

- Assessment or work sample issued through an external testing tool
- Assessment completed by the candidate and results reviewed
- Panel availability collected and interviews scheduled
- Interview cycles conducted, often across several rounds
- Scorecards submitted and a debrief held to reach a decision

STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

Hiring manager, interview panel, coordination, the candidate, and external assessment providers.

PHASE 5 Offer TYPICAL OVERALL 4 to 10 days MONTHLY VOLUME ~230 offers made to secure 200 acceptances POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES – Final candidate selected from the shortlist – Compensation proposal built – Offer approval routed through the required approvers – Offer letter generated – Verbal offer made and negotiated – Offer signed and returned STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED Hiring manager, reward, finance, leadership approvers, recruiter, and the candidate.	PHASE 6 Pre-hire clearance and documentation TYPICAL OVERALL 3 to 7 days, longer when contested MONTHLY VOLUME ~215 candidates cleared and documented POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES – Screening initiated and candidate consent captured – Employment and education verification – Right-to-work and identity checks – Regulated checks: licences, credentials, and testing where required – Discrepancies adjudicated and any dispute window observed STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED HR operations, external screening providers, and the candidate.
PHASE 7 Post-offer follow-up TYPICAL OVERALL notice period, commonly 2 to 6 weeks MONTHLY VOLUME ~215 accepted candidates kept engaged to start POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES – Start date agreed against the notice period – Regular contact maintained through the notice period – Counter-offers and second thoughts managed – Early paperwork and pre-joining steps completed STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED Recruiter, hiring manager, and the candidate.	PHASE 8 Onboarding TYPICAL OVERALL 3 to 10 days around the start date MONTHLY VOLUME ~200 new joiners onboarded POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES – Equipment, accounts, and access provisioned – Payroll, benefits, and contract records created – Day one, induction, and probation scheduled STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED IT, HR operations, and the hiring manager.

Figure 2. Eight phases of enterprise recruitment for a professional salaried role, with the activities that may sit inside each, the functions involved, an indicative overall duration, and the monthly volume for an organisation hiring around two hundred people a month at a hundred-to-one consideration-to-hire ratio. Durations are illustrative: they are drawn from published benchmarks for the corresponding phase and describe shape, not measurement. Volumes are illustrative, derived from the stated hiring rate and ratio. ¹²⁵²⁰²²

2.3 Volume through the phases

Each phase also carries a volume, and the volumes are not constant. On the volume case, roughly twenty thousand candidates enter consideration each month and the number narrows sharply at every phase until two hundred reach a start date. Figure 3 draws the same month as a funnel. The two endpoints follow from the stated ratio; the intermediate counts are an illustrative reconstruction of a typical shape and should be replaced with an organisation's own conversion data where available.

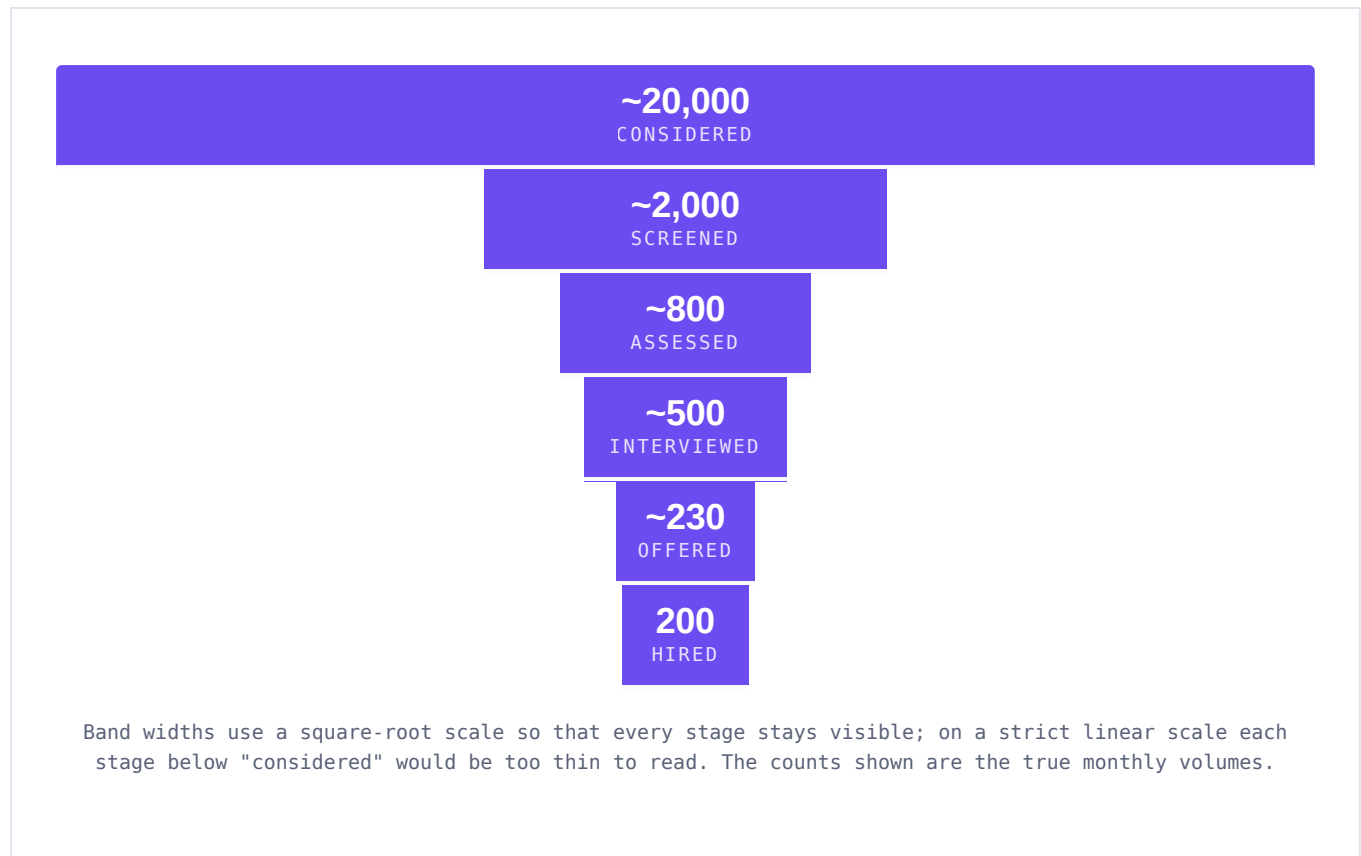


Figure 3. One month drawn as a funnel: roughly twenty thousand candidates are considered to make two hundred hires, a hundred-to-one ratio. The largest volume is handled at the top, between consideration and screening, which is where automation and screening tools do most of their work. The later stages handle small numbers of candidates but carry the greatest cost and delay for each one. The two endpoints (20,000 and 200) follow from the stated ratio; the intermediate counts are an illustrative reconstruction of a typical shape.

The shape has a practical consequence. The early phases handle very few requisitions but touch a very large candidate volume, which is where screening tools and automation do most of their work. The later phases touch small numbers of candidates but consume the most elapsed time for each one. Any process change therefore has to be weighed against the volume it affects as well as the days it saves. A change that removes one day from screening affects two thousand people a month; a change that removes one day from offer approval affects two hundred, but each of those two hundred is a candidate the organisation has already decided it wants.

2.4 Two observations from the phase model

The first is that no single function is present for more than a fraction of the workflow. The hiring manager is absent through most of the middle. The recruiter is absent through much of the beginning and much of the end. Finance appears briefly, in two separate phases, and each appearance is capable of adding a week. This is why the whole is

rarely seen: no participant is present for enough of it to form a complete picture, which is the structural condition described in Section 1.2.

The second is that the activities most often described as trivial are the ones that sit on the longest durations. A budget confirmation is a lookup, not a skilled task. It is also, routinely, three days. Section 3 explains why.

SECTION 3

Where the elapsed time goes

3.1 Working time and waiting time

Two clocks can be run on any piece of work. **Touch time** is how long the work takes while somebody is doing it. **Lead time** is the elapsed time from the moment the work becomes available to the moment it is handed on. The ratio between them is called process cycle efficiency, and it is usually far lower than the people inside the process expect.³⁵

A familiar office example makes the point. A loan application may involve eight minutes of underwriting work and six days of lead time, because it sat in three separate queues on the way.³⁴ The underwriter is not slow. The queues are slow. The same pattern is well documented in manufacturing, where value-adding time is typically a single-digit percentage of total lead time and the remainder is spent waiting,³³ with practitioner guidance often citing material that waits for up to ninety-five percent of its time in the plant.³⁵

Recruitment has the same shape, and the reason it is rarely described this way is that the profession measures totals rather than states. Time-to-fill is reported as a single number. That number is the sum of touch time and waiting time, and the waiting dominates. Figure 4 draws the eight phases of Figure 2 to elapsed time, with the working portion of each phase shown as a solid band.

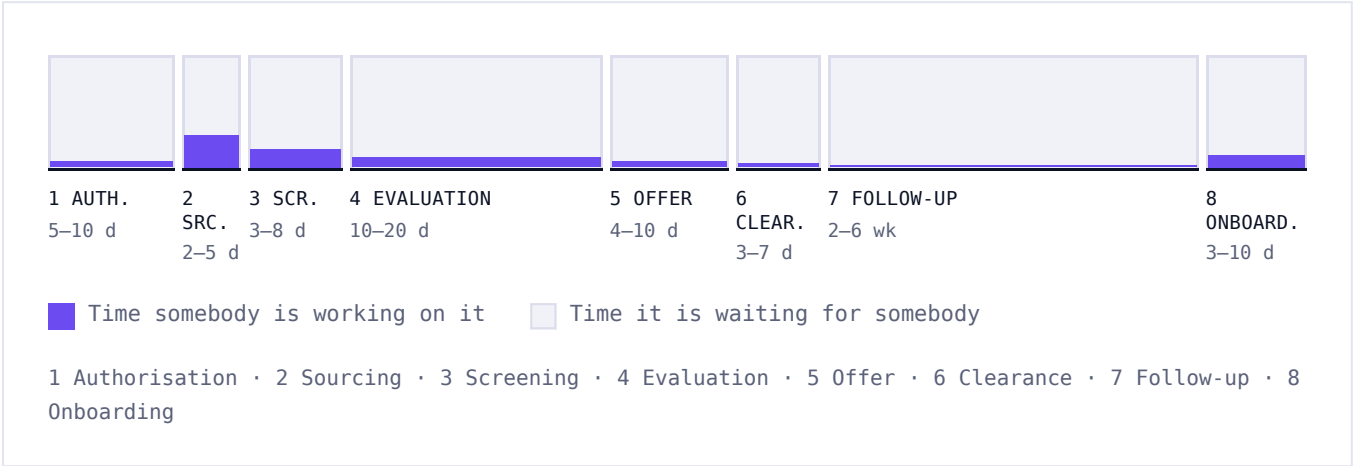


Figure 4. The same workflow drawn to elapsed time. Width is calendar duration; the solid portion of each column is the share of that duration in which work is being performed. The proportions are illustrative, not measured; on these assumptions a single hire consumes on the order of four to five working days of effort spread across two to three months of elapsed time.

If the proportions in Figure 4 are even approximately correct, the usual improvement effort is aimed at the wrong target. Making a recruiter twenty percent faster at screening improves a small part of the working portion and changes almost nothing about the overall duration.

What follows is simply where we saw the time go in the workflows we observed. I am not offering it as a complete theory of hiring delay, and the balance will be different in your organisation. Treat the list as a guide to where to look. The only reliable way to find your own delays is to measure your own process, stage by stage, and then read this list against what your numbers show.

3.2 Where we saw the time go

APPROVALS THAT RUN ONE AFTER ANOTHER

A requisition typically passes three to five approvers, each with a different inbox, a different backlog, and a different sense of urgency about the role.³ Published vendor figures put average requisition approval at three to five business days at mid-size companies, with delays beyond ten days associated with a marked increase in overall time-to-fill.⁵ Around forty percent of companies report hiring delays caused by requisition approval handling.^{3 4}

The effect compounds because the approvals are sequential. If each of four approvers responds within one working day eighty percent of the time and otherwise takes three days, the expected duration of the chain is between five and six days, and roughly one chain in five will take more than a week. No individual approver is slow. The chain is slow because the steps run one after another rather than together.

DECISIONS THAT WAIT FOR A MEETING

A compensation committee that meets on Thursdays turns a ten-minute decision into anything between one and seven days, depending on when the request arrives. A board that approves senior appointments monthly can add up to four weeks to a role that is otherwise ready. Guidance on approval design consistently identifies over-engineered chains and missing delegation paths as the cause, and recommends automatic escalation to a backup approver within twenty-four to forty-eight hours.⁷

HANDOFFS BETWEEN SYSTEMS

Every transition between owners is usually also a transition between systems, and each one is a point where a record can stop moving. Research in the contracting context, reported second-hand, found that a substantial majority of contract delays came from manual handoffs such as printing, scanning, and emailing rather than from the decision itself.²⁹ The offer phase is the most exposed to this, because it involves the largest number of stakeholders of any part of the workflow.⁹

REQUIREMENTS THAT CHANGE MID-SEARCH

Disagreement about what the role requires does not appear as delay at the point it occurs. It appears two or three weeks later as a rejected shortlist. Gartner research, reported second-hand, indicates that when hiring managers are not aligned on requirements, organisations are substantially more likely to change the requisition mid-search, and that mid-search change is associated with a large increase in time-to-fill.¹² A meaningful share of approved requisitions are also cancelled or frozen as priorities shift.⁵

CLOCKS THAT BELONG TO SOMEBODY ELSE

Background screening is usually quick. Many standard packages complete within one to three business days and comprehensive packages within three to five,^{20 21} but the long tail is controlled by courts, universities during vacation periods, and former employers that no longer exist.²¹ The notice period is the largest external clock of all. In the United States data cited here, a majority of new hires wait two to three weeks before starting and a substantial minority wait more than a month.²² In India, notice periods of one to three months are common for salaried roles, which makes the post-offer phase proportionately longer and the risk of withdrawal during it correspondingly higher (see Appendix B).

MEASUREMENT THAT STARTS TOO LATE

This last one hides all the others. If measurement begins when the job is published, the demand and authorisation phase is invisible, and a report showing forty-five days may describe a process that has already consumed sixty.³ Improvement effort then concentrates on the visible half, which is precisely where the specialists already work and where the remaining gains are smallest.

3.3 The routine steps that consume the most time

Figure 5 isolates six steps that no one would describe as difficult and shows, for each, the work involved against the elapsed time typically consumed. In every case the work is a matter of minutes and the delay is a matter of days.

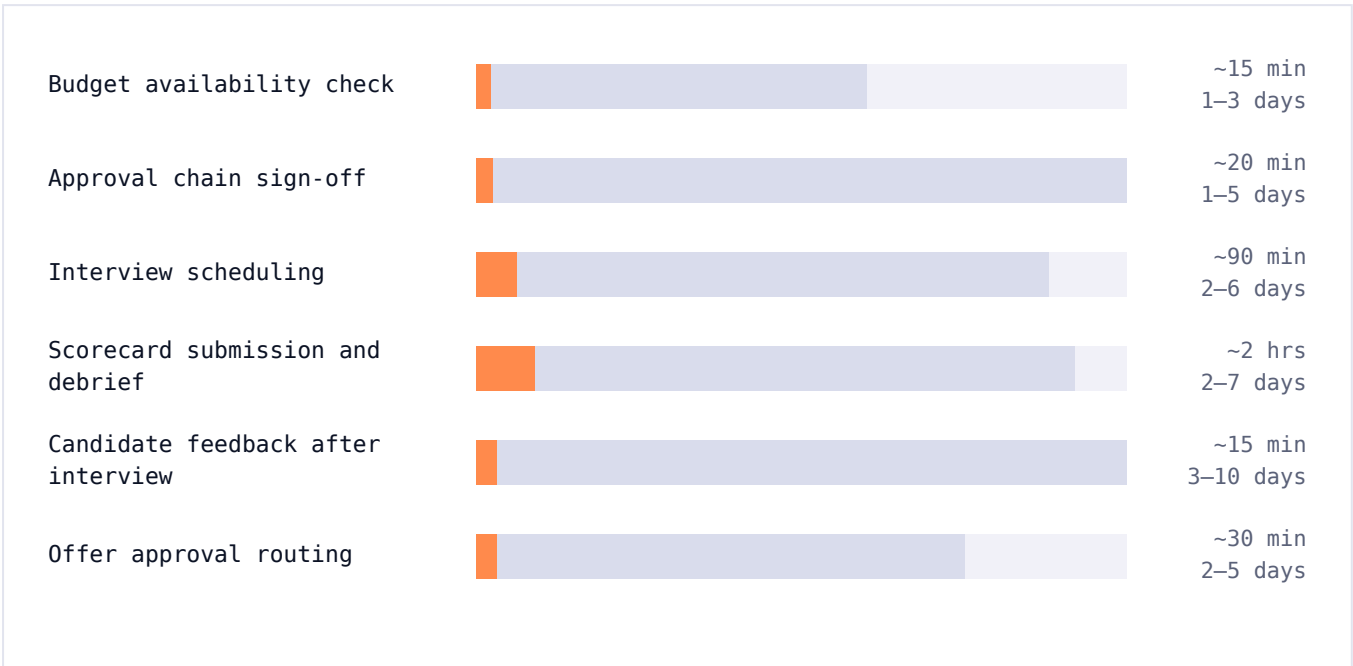


Figure 5. Six routine steps, showing the work involved (solid amber) against the elapsed time typically consumed (pale bar). Figures are illustrative, assembled from the phase benchmarks in Figure 2. These are the steps where a change to how the process is organised removes days rather than minutes. Candidate feedback after an interview is among the most damaging, because it is where strong candidates lose interest and withdraw.

The gains available in these steps are larger than any improvement to the skilled steps, and they are usually easier to obtain, because they require a change to how the process is organised rather than to how well anyone performs. Which of them applies to you is, again, a question your own measurements answer. Section 6 sets out the changes.

What the delay costs

Elapsed time is worth measuring because it carries a cost, and that cost is incurred every day whether or not it is recorded. Most organisations can quote cost-per-hire accurately and cannot quote **cost of vacancy**, the value lost for each day a role remains unfilled, at all.²⁶ The difference matters. Cost-per-hire is a one-time expense; cost of vacancy accrues continuously for as long as the role stays open.

4.1 Cost of vacancy for the employer

The standard calculation is straightforward. Take the annual value the role produces, divide by working days, subtract the salary not currently being paid, and add whatever it costs to cover the work in the interim.²⁶ Published vendor ranges commonly place a vacant professional role somewhere between four and ten thousand US dollars a month, with revenue-generating positions well above that.²⁵ Sector-specific analyses go considerably higher: one energy-sector estimate uses revenue per employee per day against an average sixty-seven day fill time, and notes that project delays in that sector can run into six figures per day.²⁷ A technology-sector analysis works from roughly five hundred US dollars a day in lost productivity for an unfilled engineering role, before any downstream project impact.²⁸ The absolute figures will differ by market and role; the structure of the calculation does not.

4.2 The effect on candidate availability

This is the cost that compounds. Delay does not only postpone the hire; it lowers the probability that the hire happens at all, because strong candidates do not wait. Figure 6 and the points below summarise the reported evidence.

APPROVAL DELAY	CANDIDATE MARKET	SUNK COST AT EXIT
5–6 days	42%	75–90%
A budget confirmation and an approval chain, each individually taking minutes of work, routinely consume most of a working week before a single candidate has been contacted. ³⁵	Share of candidates reported to withdraw because interview scheduling took too long, a step that involves no judgement about the candidate. Reported second-hand from a scheduling vendor survey. ^{19 18}	Proportion of full cost-per-hire already spent by the time a candidate withdraws between offer acceptance and the first day, which is where most candidate withdrawals occur. A vendor estimate. ²²

Figure 6. Three reported figures from three different parts of the workflow, each showing how a routine step affects cost or the probability of a completed hire. Sources are vendor and analyst surveys; sample sizes are not always stated.

- Average time-to-hire across industries is reported at roughly forty-four days on widely cited benchmarking data, in a market where strong candidates are frequently unavailable within two weeks.^{15 19}
- In a survey of more than two thousand United States hiring managers, the great majority reported that hiring takes longer than it did two years earlier, and the bottlenecks they named were internal: application evaluation, interview

scheduling, and reference checking.¹⁵

- The interview stage is reported as the single largest point of candidate loss, ahead of application abandonment, with scheduling friction the next largest.¹⁶
- A large share of candidates wait more than two weeks for feedback, and roughly half of companies consider their own interview process too long.¹⁸ Survey data suggests a quarter of candidates lose interest within a week of silence and nearly half within two.⁴⁴
- Candidate withdrawal without notice is now concentrated at the end of the process: a substantial share of disappearances occur between offer acceptance and the first day, and surveys put the rate of accepted offers that are later declined (the **renege** rate) in the range of ten to twenty-four percent.^{22 23 24}

Taken together, these figures point to a single conclusion. A five-day delay early in the workflow does not simply add five days at the end. It also raises the chance of losing the candidate at every later stage, and a lost candidate does not cost five days. It costs the full elapsed process a second time, plus everything already spent on the first attempt.

4.3 Cost for recruitment services firms

For a staffing or recruitment services business the same delays appear on the revenue line directly rather than through a productivity estimate.¹¹ For contract placement, unfilled time is unearned margin: a role at a modest hourly margin represents a specific, calculable sum lost every week it stays open, and across a book of open requisitions the daily figure becomes material.²⁵ A contract signature delayed by three business days on a single placement removes several hundred dollars of billable revenue that is never recovered.²⁹ For permanent placement, a client who fills the role internally or through a competitor means the margin is not delayed but lost.²⁵

There is a second-order effect that matters more over time. Longer fill times reduce the number of requisitions each recruiter can carry in a year, which caps capacity independently of headcount.⁴⁴ Because clients evaluate agencies substantially on speed, persistent delay erodes the relationship even when the cause sits on the client side. The more sophisticated services businesses now present a cost of vacancy estimate at job order intake and negotiate mutual service levels alongside it: feedback within forty-eight hours of submission, interviews within the same week, offers within a defined window after final interview.²⁵

4.4 The case for slower hiring

Speed is not the only variable, and a paper that argued only for speed would be making the same partial-view error described in Section 1.2. Peter Cappelli's critique of modern hiring, published in Harvard Business Review, is that organisations have optimised heavily for volume and cost while almost never checking whether their selection practices predict the quality of the resulting hire.³⁶ He also identifies the structural shift beneath this: for decades most vacancies were filled by internal promotion and lateral movement, and the move to external hiring is what created the volume in the first place.³⁶

Both positions are correct at once. A process that is slow because it is deliberating carefully is spending time on something valuable. A process that is slow because a requisition sat in an inbox is spending time on nothing. The purpose of measuring the two clocks separately, as Section 3.1 recommends, is to tell them apart. Nothing in this paper argues for shortening the deliberation. It argues for removing the inbox.

Several processes, not one

The phase model in Section 2 conceals a further complication. An organisation does not run one recruitment workflow. It runs several, and they have different shapes, different bottlenecks, and different economics. Applying one design to all of them is a common and expensive error: the rigour appropriate to a senior technical hire is pure friction on a warehouse role, and the speed appropriate to a warehouse role is negligence on a senior technical hire.³⁷ Figure 7 summarises five modes that typically run concurrently.

HIRING MODE	DOMINANT CONSTRAINT	WHERE THE DAYS GO	WHAT BREAKS FIRST
High volume	Throughput and application completion	Top of funnel; scheduling at scale	Application length and response speed ^{16 38}
Professional salaried	Panel availability and decision latency	Evaluation and offer approval	Feedback turnaround and interview count ¹⁸
Executive	Scarcity, confidentiality, governance	Authorisation, search, board sign-off	Batching around committee cycles ²
Contingent and contract	Immediate availability	Submission, client feedback, paperwork	Contract execution and onboarding admin ²⁹
Internal mobility	Manager willingness and visibility	Posting windows and release negotiation	The absence of a shared record ⁴²

Figure 7. Five hiring modes that typically run concurrently inside one organisation, each with a different failure point. The matrix is a synthesis of the cited sources rather than a single study. Segmenting the process by role complexity is a recurring recommendation in high-volume practice.³⁷

The parallel worth drawing is with supply chain management, which went through this transition earlier and more publicly. Procurement functions long ago learned to describe materials by lead time, source resilience, and switching cost rather than by unit price alone. The talent equivalent is now an established line of argument: treat skills as supply with different lead times and different sources, and plan accordingly.⁴² The insight that transfers most directly is not any specific technique. It is the habit of drawing the whole chain before improving any link in it.

What reduces elapsed time

The nine changes below are the suggestions we put to the client described in Section 2.1, after mapping their workflow and looking at where their elapsed time went. They appear in rough order of likely impact for that organisation. This is deliberately not a technology list. Most of the changes are process design decisions that cost little, and the reason they were not already in place is the reason such changes are rarely in place anywhere: no single owner had visibility over enough of the workflow to propose them. For each change I name the function that would own it and the measure that would show whether it has worked.

I share them as a worked example, not a prescription. Every company will have its own bottlenecks, and the only reliable way to find them is to measure your own process first, stage by stage, and then improve the steps your numbers point to. What returned days for this enterprise may return nothing for you, and the reverse.

CHANGE 1 – START THE CLOCK AT THE REQUEST, NOT JUST THE POSTING

Measure from the moment a manager raises the need, and report the pre-posting and post-posting halves separately. This single change makes the demand and authorisation phase visible, and it is frequently the largest untouched reserve of days in the whole workflow.³

Owner: Talent acquisition leadership, with finance. **Measure:** days from request to posting, reported monthly.

CHANGE 2 – INSTRUMENT THE WAITING, NOT JUST THE WORKING

Track time-in-state for every step: hours from interview to scorecard, days from submission to feedback, days from selection to offer approval. Conversion rates between stages identify where candidates are lost; elapsed time in state identifies why.¹⁰

Owner: Recruitment operations. **Measure:** median and ninetieth-percentile time-in-state for each step.

CHANGE 3 – MAKE APPROVAL CHAINS PARALLEL AND BOUNDED

Route approvers concurrently rather than sequentially wherever the checks are independent. Set an escalation window of twenty-four to forty-eight hours with a named backup approver. Resist chains longer than three or four people, and distinguish replacement hires from new headcount so that routine backfills do not consume executive attention.⁷

Owner: HR operations, with finance. **Measure:** days from request to approved requisition; share of approvals escalated.

CHANGE 4 – PRE-AUTHORISE WHAT IS PREDICTABLE

Roles inside an agreed workforce plan and inside an agreed salary band do not need to be re-argued.⁶ Aligning headcount plans with finance before the quarter opens is consistently associated with shorter fill times.² Approval should be the exception path rather than the default.

Owner: Workforce planning, with finance. **Measure:** share of requisitions released without individual approval.

CHANGE 5 – TREAT THE INTAKE MEETING AS THE SPECIFICATION

Most late-stage disagreement is early-stage ambiguity that was never written down. Three must-haves, two trade-offs, and one deal-breaker, recorded and attached to every panel invitation and every debrief, is enough structure to prevent the requirement drift that produces mid-search requisition changes.^{13 12} Organisations that do this well treat the recruiter as an advisor with the standing to challenge an unrealistic brief, not as an order processor.¹⁴

Owner: Recruiter and hiring manager jointly. **Measure:** share of requisitions changed after posting.

CHANGE 6 – TREAT SCHEDULING AND FEEDBACK TURNAROUND AS FIRST-CLASS PROBLEMS

Scheduling involves no judgement about the candidate and consumes an outsized share of elapsed time and of candidate loss.^{16 17} Self-service availability, interview windows held open by the panel, and a standing rule that scorecards and candidate feedback are due within a fixed number of hours will together return more days than any sourcing improvement.

Owner: Recruitment coordination, with hiring managers. **Measure:** days from shortlist to first interview; hours from interview to scorecard; days from final interview to candidate feedback.

CHANGE 7 – RUN THE PRE-START ACTIVITIES IN PARALLEL, NOT JUST IN SERIES

Screening providers already run checks concurrently where they can. The same logic applies internally: onboarding setup, payroll, and access requests do not need to wait for the last verification to clear, and post-offer contact should begin within the first day or two after acceptance rather than at the end of the notice period.^{21 22} In markets with long notice periods this is the phase in which the most accepted candidates are lost.

Owner: HR operations, with IT. **Measure:** renege rate; days from offer acceptance to first structured contact.

CHANGE 8 – PUBLISH THE COST OF A DAY

Elapsed time is treated as free because it is never priced. A cost of vacancy figure presented at intake, for internal stakeholders as much as for external clients, changes the conversation from "the role has been open for a month" to a number that finance recognises.^{25 26}

Owner: Talent acquisition leadership, with finance. **Measure:** cost of vacancy reported per open requisition.

CHANGE 9 – DESIGN THE PROCESS FOR EACH MODE, AND DESIGN FOR THE EXCEPTION

Segment by role complexity rather than running one workflow for everything.³⁷ Accept also that at scale the exception is routine: the disputed background check, the counter-offer, the approver on leave. A workflow that performs well only on the clean path will spend most of its time off it.

Owner: Recruitment operations. **Measure:** time-to-fill reported separately by hiring mode.

A NOTE ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND REGULATION

The current generation of AI tools is effective at reducing touch time: drafting descriptions, summarising screens, parsing applications, generating scorecards. In the terms of Figure 4, that improves the narrow solid band and does little to the width of the bar. The larger opportunity is in the waiting: chasing approvals, resolving panel availability, detecting a requisition that has not moved in four days, keeping a candidate engaged through a notice period. These are coordination problems, and coordination is where the elapsed time is spent.

Automated decision tools also now carry regulatory obligations that belong on the process map as steps in their own right. New York City requires an annual independent bias audit for automated employment decision tools, with a public summary and advance candidate notice, and the European Union's AI Act classifies recruitment and selection systems as high-risk, with documentation, logging, and human oversight duties that phase in from 2026.^{39 40} Readers should confirm the current status of each regime, since implementation dates have been subject to amendment. In India, candidate data handling falls under the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023. These are not a separate compliance exercise running alongside the workflow. They are additional steps inside it, with their own owners and their own elapsed time.

6.1 Ownership

Almost every change above sits between two functions rather than inside one, which is precisely why such changes persist unmade. The emergence of recruitment operations as a named discipline, responsible for designing the process, owning the technology, and holding the data and the standards rather than for filling any individual role, is the organisational response to this gap.⁴¹ Where that function does not yet exist, the recommendations in this section need a named owner at leadership level, because no phase owner will propose them unprompted.

SECTION 7

Conclusion

Recruitment inside a large organisation is wider than any one of its practitioners describes it. It spans eight phases, involves seven or more functions, and can require forty or more steps for a single hire. Each phase is performed by specialists who are, in the main, good at it. The process is nonetheless slow, because the elapsed time is dominated not by the work inside the phases but by the waiting between them.

That waiting is concentrated in routine steps: budget confirmation, approval routing, scheduling, feedback, signatures. None of these requires skill. All of them routinely consume days, and each day has a cost that the employer, the candidate market, and the services firm all pay in different currencies. The remedy does not lie in making the specialists faster. It lies in mapping the whole process, measuring the elapsed time at every stage, and giving someone responsibility for the joins between the phases rather than for the phases themselves.

The nine changes in Section 6, which began as suggestions to a single client, are the place to begin, and the order matters. The first two, measuring from the request and instrumenting the waiting, come before everything else, because our observations come from a small number of organisations and the pattern in yours will be its own. Measure first, find where your elapsed time actually goes, and then optimise those steps. Most of the remaining changes cost nothing to implement once the measurement has told you which of them you need.

Author's note

This paper grew out of work at Hirewand, where our attention is on the connections between the phases described above: the coordination layer that lets specialist tools work together across a hiring workflow without the record stopping at each handoff. I would welcome correspondence from readers whose own data confirms or contradicts the figures presented here.

shiva.maran@hirewand.com

APPENDIX A

Definitions

Requisition

The formal, approved record that authorises a role to be filled. Most organisations do not permit sourcing to begin until a requisition exists.⁸

Time-to-fill and time-to-hire

Time-to-fill is the elapsed time from a requisition being opened (or, in this paper, from the request being raised) to an offer being accepted. Time-to-hire is the elapsed time from a specific candidate entering the process to that candidate accepting an offer. The two are often conflated in published statistics.

Touch time

The time during which somebody is actively working on a step.

Lead time

The elapsed time from a step becoming available to it being completed and handed on, including all waiting.

Process cycle efficiency

Touch time divided by lead time, expressed as a percentage. A low figure means most of the elapsed time is waiting.

Cost of vacancy

The value lost for each day a role remains unfilled, usually estimated from the role's contribution to revenue or output, less the salary not being paid, plus the cost of interim cover.

Renegade

A candidate accepting an offer and subsequently declining it or failing to start.

Hiring mode

A category of hiring with its own process shape and economics, such as high-volume, professional salaried, executive, contingent, or internal mobility.

Recruitment operations

The function responsible for the design of the hiring process, its technology, its data, and its standards, as distinct from the recruiters who fill individual roles.

APPENDIX B

Method, sources and limitations

PROVENANCE OF FIGURES

Figures in this paper fall into four classes, and each is labelled at the point of use. *Measured* figures come from a named study with a stated sample. *Reported* figures are vendor or analyst statistics whose sample and method are not always published; most of the percentages in Sections 3 and 4 are of this class. *Illustrative* figures are my reconstruction to show the shape of a process: the phase durations in Figure 2, the intermediate funnel counts in Figure 3, the proportions in Figures 4 and 5. *Observed* figures come from our direct client work: the forty-to-forty-eight step count in Section 2.1, which comes from a single large enterprise and should not be read as a benchmark for any other organisation.

SOURCE MIX

Of the forty-four references, one is a peer-reviewed or editorially reviewed publication (Cappelli, Harvard Business Review). The majority are vendor, agency, and practitioner publications, several of which report analyst research (Gartner, SHRM, Aptitude Research, Aberdeen, HR.com, Cronofy, Deloitte) second-hand. Where a load-bearing claim rests on such a second-hand citation, the text says so. Readers requiring the primary studies should consult the originating analyst.

GEOGRAPHY

The published evidence is predominantly from the United States, and currency figures are given in US dollars as published. Two divergences matter for readers in India. First, notice periods: the cited data shows most US hires starting within two to three weeks of acceptance, whereas one-to-three-month notice periods are common practice for salaried roles in India. This lengthens the post-offer phase considerably and increases exposure to counter-offers and withdrawal, which is why Change 7 in Section 6 deserves more weight in the Indian context than the US evidence alone would suggest. This observation is drawn from market practice rather than from the cited sources. Second, regulation: the bias-audit and AI-system obligations cited are US municipal and European Union instruments; in India, candidate data handling is governed by the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, and I have not attempted a survey of Indian employment regulation here.

LIMITATIONS

The phase model and the volume case describe one kind of hiring in one kind of organisation, and the direct observations behind them come primarily from a single large enterprise. Section 5 sets out how other modes differ, but does not quantify them. The elapsed-time proportions in Figures 4 and 5 are assembled from phase-level benchmarks rather than measured within one organisation. This is why the central recommendation of the paper is to instrument waiting time directly: every organisation should replace these illustrative figures with its own before deciding what to change.

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All figures cited above are attributed to the publications below. Where a publication is itself reporting research from a third party — SHRM, iCIMS, Gartner, Appcast, Greenhouse, Aptitude Research, HR.com, Robert Half, Cronofy, Aberdeen or Deloitte — that attribution is noted in the text.

- 1 [Pin – The Recruitment Process: 8 Stages From Plan to Offer \(2026\)](#)
- 2 [Pin – The Hiring Process: 8 Steps From Job Req to Day One \(2026\)](#)
- 3 [Skillfuel – Job Requisition Bottleneck: Why Hiring Delays Start Before Candidates Apply](#)
- 4 [Cflow – Job Requisition Approval Automation](#)
- 5 [Hyring – Job Requisition: What It Is and How the Process Works](#)
- 6 [CandorIQ – Headcount Request Approvals: How HR and Finance Structure Hiring in 2026](#)
- 7 [Foundire – How to Build a Requisition Approval Workflow](#)
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- 9 [RecruitBPM – How to Build Approval Workflows for Requisitions and Offers](#)
- 10 [Cadient Talent – Recruitment Process Optimization Framework for Enterprises](#)
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- 28 [Itentio – The Hidden Cost of a Slow Tech Hire \(cites Deloitte, Forbes\)](#)
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- 40 [The Hire Hub – AI Hiring Compliance in 2026: Local Law 144 and the EU AI Act](#)
- 41 [Pin – Recruitment Operations: A Complete Guide for TA Leaders in 2026](#)
- 42 [Page Outsourcing – How to Run Talent Strategy Like a Supply Chain](#)
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