Enhancing public sector recruitment

A candidate-centric action plan

Jobs Go Public

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Foreword

As a recruitment partner to the public sector for over 25 years, Jobs Go Public has long understood the hurdles of talent acquisition. Our commitment to helping clients connect with good people remains undeterred, especially in the face of the challenges that have presented themselves in 2023.

Public sector hiring managers and HR teams are contending with substantial budget constraints. The declaration of section 114 notices and the suspension of recruitment in some areas signify the depth of these challenges, stressing the urgency for innovative solutions to attract and retain top-tier talent.

We know that hiring managers in the public sector struggle to compete with private sector counterparts when it comes to remuneration, and this has become even more challenging during a period of high inflation. Hirers are having to reimagine recruitment, placing the candidate at the heart of their strategies.

Given these challenges, the existing workforce shoulders a burden of increasing workloads and faces the risk of burnout. Steps need to be taken to mitigate a potential surge in turnover which would exacerbate staff shortages.

The aim of this whitepaper is to provide a candidate-centric view of the recruitment process from start to finish, outlining the experience candidates expect during their job hunt.

By enhancing recruitment processes and championing an exceptional candidate experience, organisations within the public sector can put themselves in the best position to better secure the talent needed to maintain crucial public services.

At Jobs Go Public, we strive to support the sector in mitigating risks to staffing and fostering practices that set a new standard in talent acquisition.

David Marshall
Founder of Jobs Go Public

Key findings

89%

of candidates would **recommend a career in the public sector**

2 in 3

candidates research employers **using a search engine**

57%

of candidates abandon an application with **too many irrelevant questions**

1 in 3

public sector jobseekers have adopted AI in their job hunt

½ of candidates

would like to **receive interview questions before their interview**

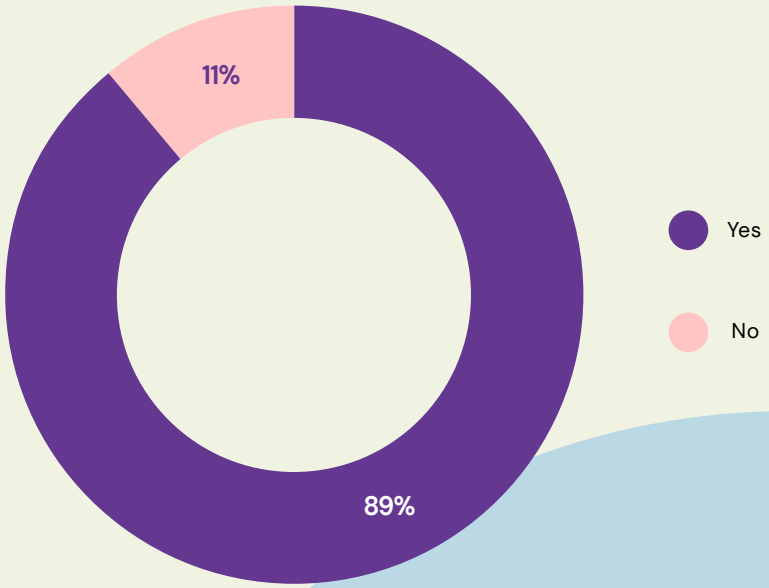
1 Do people still love to work in the public sector?

The public sector is facing marked challenges this year as the UK economy sits on the brink of a recession. This has placed a great deal of strain on public services and their budget.

As of the time of writing, an estimated 26 councils are at risk of declaring bankruptcy in the next two years[1]. Yet, despite these challenges, most employees who work in the sector are still champions of their work.

We asked jobseekers visiting **jobsgopublic.com** to tell us if they would recommend a career in the public sector, and **89%** of our respondents **said yes** (Figure 1.1).

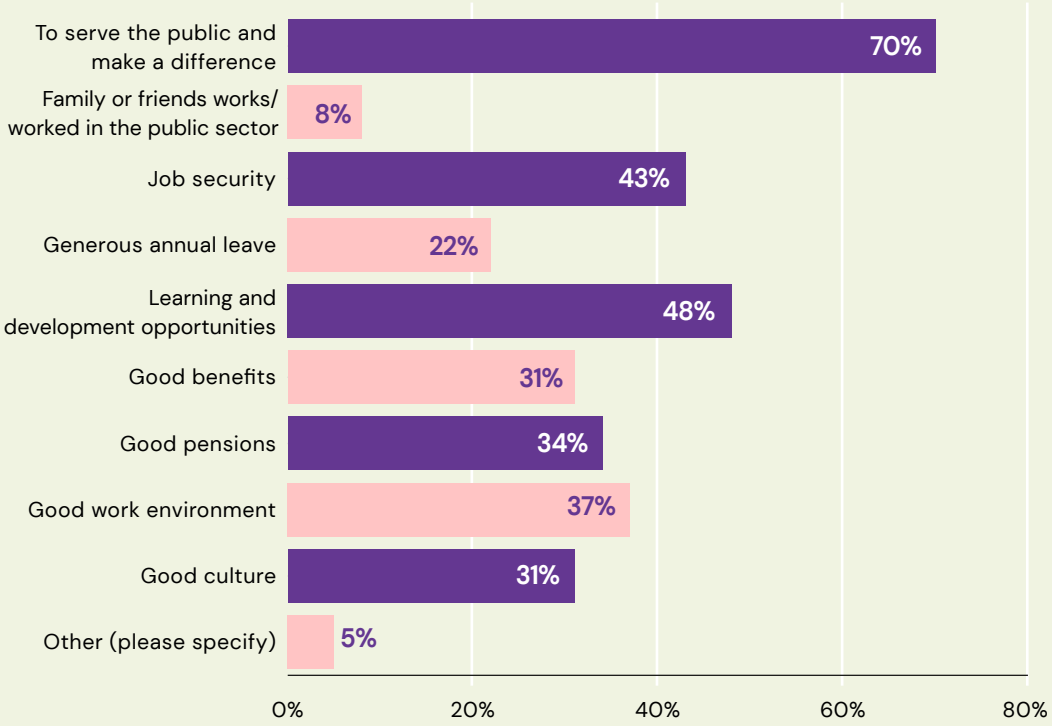
Figure 1.1 **Would you recommend a career in the public sector to your family or friends?**



1 https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/aug/28/at-least-26-english-councils-at-risk-of-bankruptcy-in-next-two-years

When we asked these respondents about their reasons for working in the public sector, most indicated that it relates to their values. As can be seen in Figure 1.2, **70% of our respondents** said they do their jobs to serve the public and **make a difference.**

Figure 1.2 **Why do you like working in the public sector?**



Just under half of respondents valued the opportunity for **career progression,** stating learning and development opportunities as the second most popular reason for working in the sector.

In general, benefits and related incentives took less precedence with only one third of candidates citing this as a reason they work in the public sector.

Among the respondents who selected the "Other" option, common themes included:

- Public sector organisations are often local and easy to travel to
- Candidates were seeking a change from the more "cut-throat" culture of private organisations
- There is more emphasis on inclusivity
- They felt that working with the public is the right thing to do.

Among the remaining respondents who said that they would not recommend a career, the reasons given followed some common themes. A quarter of candidates who selected this option stated that the salaries offered by the public sector are off-putting.

Just under one fifth of these candidates also said that they dislike the bureaucracy of working in a government organisation, and one fifth also felt that with the current economic climate there was no room for career progression.

Filling skills gaps with career development

Many of our clients talk to us about their challenges with succession planning. However, this data suggests that there are many employees seeking support with upskilling who feel that the opportunities to progress don't exist.

Raising awareness of the ways employees can access learning and development opportunities should therefore be a priority for public sector employers. This will ultimately benefit all parties, as upskilling internal staff can help to reduce costs for recruiting more senior employees and reduce turnover.

2 The ideal employer

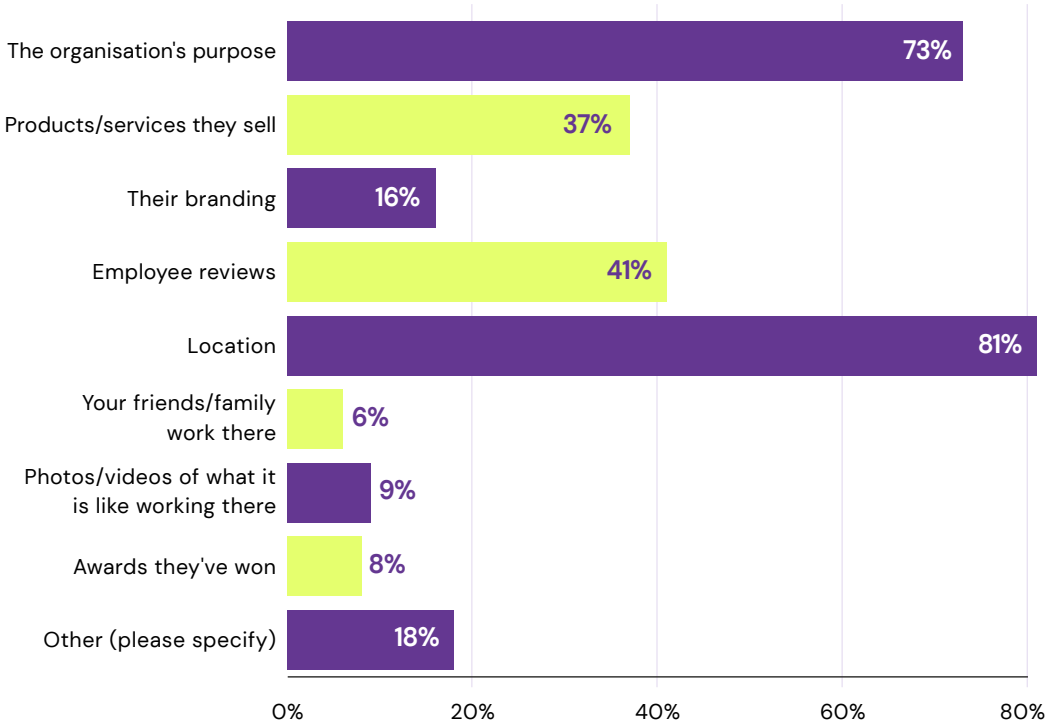
To attract jobseekers in a competitive job market, an organisation needs a unique Employer Value Proposition (EVP). The key to developing an EVP that works is understanding what motivates candidates to apply for a role with a particular organisation.

2.1 What draws candidates to a company?

We asked our respondents to tell us what factors draw them to a company when they are searching for jobs.

The two largest draws for a company itself among respondents were its **location** (81% of respondents) and its **purpose** (73% of respondents). As can be seen in Figure 2.1, this is followed by 41% of candidates stating that good **employee reviews** of an organisation draw them to look at the employer's job offerings.

Figure 2.1 **What draws you to an organisation when considering job opportunities?**



This data demonstrates that candidates often seek out a common set of values with their employer. As seen in section 1, this is reinforced by the fact that public sector employees do their jobs because they want to make a difference.

The emphasis respondents place on feedback from prior/existing employees is also noteworthy, demonstrating the importance of building a strong employer brand.

What is Employer Value Proposition?

Your Employer Value Proposition is everything you can offer to an employee that makes you worth working for. In an increasingly competitive and busy job market, it is important to develop a strong EVP to stand out from other employers.

For the vast majority of jobseekers, your EVP will be the first impression they get of your organisation during their job search.

The key components of EVP include:

- Compensation
- Organisational culture
- Development and progression
- Benefits packages
- Workplace environment

To find out more, you can read our guide to developing a unique EVP in the public sector here.

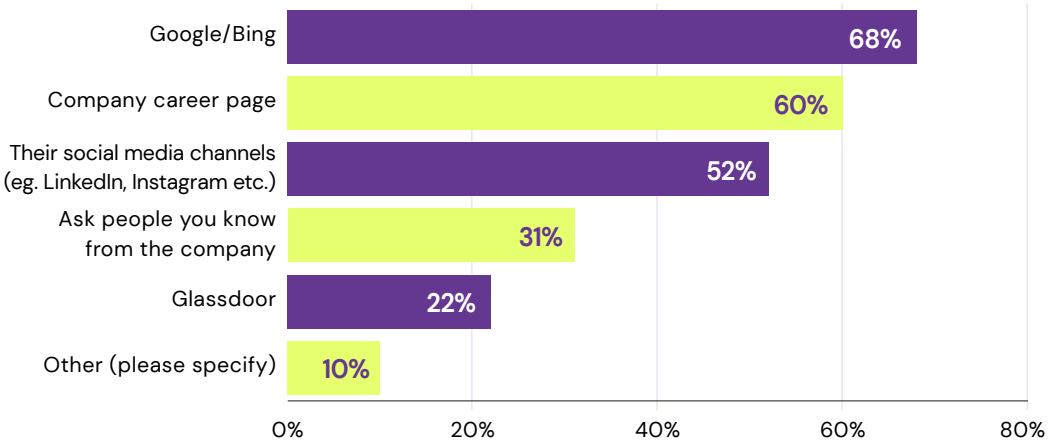
2.2 Employer branding

EVP is not enough to attract candidates by itself. You also need to be able to communicate your proposition with your employer brand. Therefore, we need to understand how candidates like to find out information about a company.

Where do public sector candidates seek out employer information? According to Jobs Go Public's users, most employer branding starts with a Google search.

In fact, **68% of candidates** head to a search engine such as Google or Bing when they want to find out about a company (Figure 2.2). This is closely followed by the company's **careers page** (60% of respondents) and **social media** channels (52% of respondents).

Figure 2.2 **Where do you look for information about an organisation when applying for jobs?**



When considering the demographics of our respondents as we will outline in section 8, this fact may be surprising. Our survey covers a wide range of generations, with a slight skew towards Generation X and Baby Boomers. This demonstrates that sources such as social media are consistent regardless of the age of candidates.

Respondents who selected "Other" also included the following sources as places they do research:

- Adverse media searches
- Companies House
- Financial accounts
- Trust sites (e.g. Trust Pilot)
- Blogs
- Professional publications
- Speaking to professional networks and recruiters

It is clear from this feedback that public sector jobseekers seek out a wide range of information when choosing what jobs to apply for. This demonstrates the importance of not relying on your job adverts alone to appeal to candidates and taking a proactive approach to building an employer brand, particularly online.

Proactive recruitment marketing

Employers need to pay close attention to the potential of Search Engine Marketing when it comes to candidate attraction. Using proactive forms of recruitment marketing such as paid search ads, social media posts about your work culture and careers sites will ensure you capture prospective employees' attention.

Get in touch with our team to see how we can help you to develop your employer brand.

2.3 EDI (neurodivergent candidates)

A further solution to overcoming skills shortages is to foster a more diverse workforce and consider if your recruiting processes support a more inclusive experience. A neurodiverse workplace where every member of the organisation can thrive is important to introduce a wide array of skills and strengths into your teams and create a great employee experience for all.

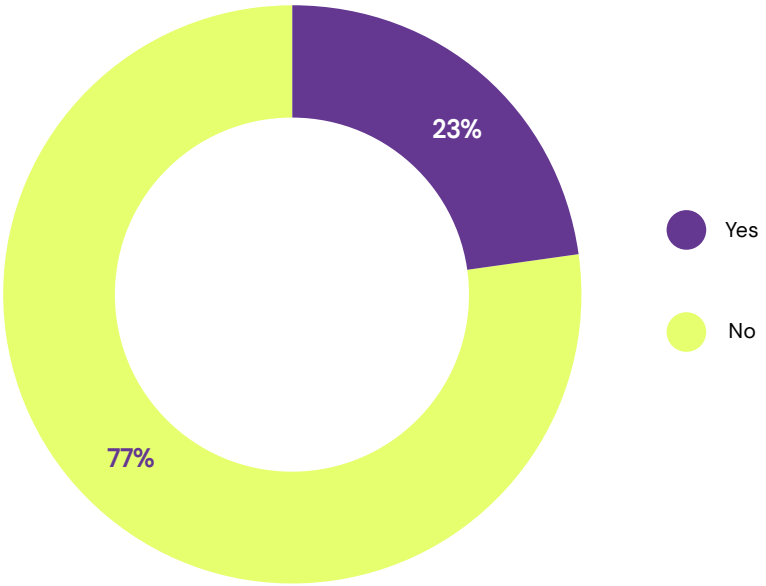
For the scope of this study, we chose to explore the hiring process from the neurodivergent candidate's perspective. Further study of candidates with protected characteristics will be needed in the future to form a complete picture.

Who are neurodivergent candidates? "Neurodivergent" is a term used to describe a person whose brain works or develops differently from what is considered "typical". Some common conditions under the neurodivergent umbrella include Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Dyslexia.

However, it is important to note this is only a small picture of neurodivergence, and some people in the community may consider themselves disabled, while others do not. Although not a medical classification, the term "neurodivergent" serves to replace language such as "abnormal," which has been historically harmful to members of the disabled community.

We asked our candidates if they consider themselves to be neurodivergent, and **just under one quarter** of respondents **said yes** (23% of total survey respondents).

Figure 2.3 **Do you consider yourself as a neurodivergent jobseeker?**



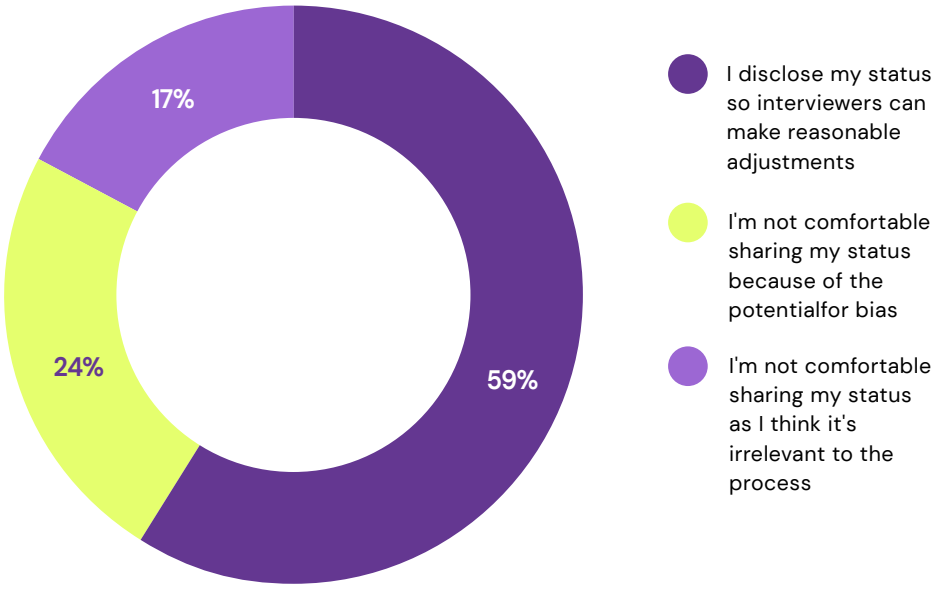
Of respondents who were comfortable to answer, **59%** of our neurodivergent candidates stated that they **do disclose their status to employers to seek reasonable adjustments** in interviews (Figure 2.4). However, **a quarter** of respondents stated that they are uncomfortable sharing their status due to **fear of bias**, and **17%** consider their status as **irrelevant to the application process.**

This suggests we still have a way to go in our workplaces to help candidates who need extra support to feel comfortable seeking adjustments or overcoming barriers to their employment.

This data is important because neurodivergent groups such as Autistic adults are largely underrepresented in workplaces. Indeed, the Office for National Statistics found that only 1 in 5 Autistic people are employed in the UK (figures for undiagnosed adults may vary)[2].

2 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/outcomesfordisabledpeopleintheuk/2020

Figure 2.4 **Which statement best describes you?**



We also asked our neurodivergent respondents how they'd like to see employers create an inclusive environment during the hiring process. Interestingly, the responses themselves were diverse and showed a wide variety of opinions about inclusive hiring practices.

The most common theme was that the hiring process needs to be **more neurodivergent friendly**, with **20%** of neurodivergent respondents mentioning this topic. This entails accommodations such as providing candidates with information about the interview environment (such as the office layout), providing interview questions before the day, or using clear and direct language in job adverts and application environments.

The second most common theme mentioned by **14%** of our neurodivergent respondents was that there needs to be more emphasis on a **candidate's transferable and soft skills** before ruling candidates out based on their experience. Candidates from the disabled community are often at a disadvantage compared to abled peers due to a cycle of bias, making experience and formal qualifications more difficult to attain.

Skills-based hiring is a topic we have previously **explored on our knowledge hub** – this is a method which focuses on competencies and transferable skills over formal qualifications and sector-specific experience. Skills-based hiring helps to upskill your workforce by focusing on a candidate's potential over the opportunities they may have had access to.

This benefits everyone in a job market where candidates are particularly hard to secure due to high levels of competition with other employers and recruitment budget squeezes.

We also received feedback about ensuring that employers provide **proof of concept** when stating that they are inclusive and disability confident. **7% of neurodivergent respondents** stressed that employers should state explicitly how you make your organisation inclusive, rather than just saying that it is.

This not only benefits your employer brand by building trust, but ensures that neither the jobseeker or hiring manager's time is wasted by the organisation not being the right environment for a prospective employee further down the line.

Finally, when approaching the topic of reducing bias, there was no one size fits all approach among respondents. **10%** of neurodivergent candidates stated that they wanted to be **asked about their status** (not just provided a tick box on an application form). However, **6%** suggested that forms of **blind recruitment** or avoiding asking for EDI monitoring information was more appropriate.

Making hiring more inclusive

To ensure public sector workplaces can benefit fully from a diverse staff, we need to build inclusive environments for everyone to thrive.

Information about the steps you take as an employer to support staff and be inclusive need to be easily accessible to candidates. As we saw in section 2.2, candidates frequently seek out information about a company on careers sites.

Making information about your EDI policy clear and accessible on a branded company careers site will strengthen your employer brand and build trust with employees who need extra support in the workplace.

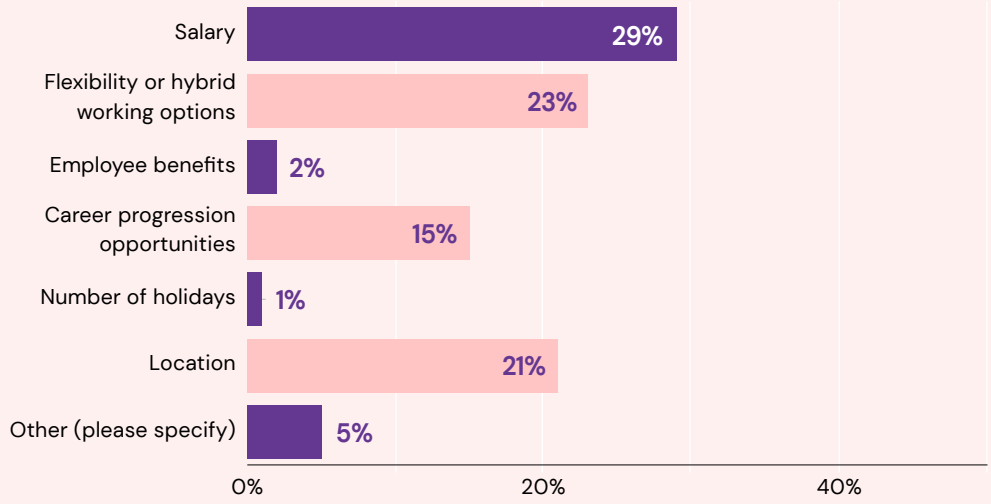
3 The ideal job

Moving from the employer to a more granular level, it is also important to understand what draws candidates to click "apply now" on a job advert itself. This means we need to know what factors appeal to candidates about vacancies.

3.1 Why do candidates apply for jobs?

We asked our respondents to pick their top motivation for applying for a job when they see a vacancy listing. The responses were relatively broad, with just under **one third** of candidates focusing on **salary** (29% of respondents), around **one quarter** looking at whether a role offers **flexible or hybrid working** (23% of respondents), and **one fifth** being drawn to the vacancy listing's stated **location** (21% of respondents).

Figure 3.1 **When it comes to deciding which job to apply for, which of the following is at the top of your list?**



It is noteworthy that salary is taking more of a precedence in job seeking at this current moment in time. This is unsurprising given the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. However, flexibility and work-life balance are still important factors to jobseekers which have prevailed from the change in work culture that was afforded to office-based staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is particularly important to bear in mind considering current debates in the private sector about remote and hybrid working. A recent study of CEOs by KPMG found that almost two thirds of UK CEOs are predicting that workers will be back in the office 5 days a week by 2026[3]. Further, 4 in 5 of the CEOs surveyed suggested that time in the office will impact which employees will secure promotions and bonuses.

Our data suggests that this increasingly negative bias towards hybrid working could deter candidates from applying for jobs while seeking to maintain the level of flexibility that has become more commonplace since the pandemic.

Themes that also frequently appeared for candidates who selected "Other" as their top draw to a job included:

- An opportunity to take on a challenge
- The chance to affect change in an organisation
- If the role is part time, the expected shift patterns are stated
- The job advert mentions the organisation's purpose.

Fostering work-life balance for public sector staff

In a period where the public sector is extremely constrained for budget, we need to be mindful of people's work-life balance. Increasing workloads and pressure to maintain public services mean that staff mental health is now more important than ever.

We need to remember when considering EVP and what draws candidates to apply for roles that salary is not the only draw for a job – and workplace flexibility may become an important competing factor against private sector employers in the coming years.

3 https://www.theguardian.com/money/2023/oct/05/two-thirds-ceos-think-staff-return-to-office-five-days-a-week-survey-finds

3.2 Job adverts

Now we have explored what factors of a role itself might convince a candidate to apply, we also need to understand what makes a good job advert.

Your vacancy listing is the first impression a prospective employee is going to have of what your role entails and why they should apply for it. If the advert is not well written or is missing important information, you may potentially lose out on the perfect fit for your role.

With budgets for recruitment shrinking for the rest of the 2023/24 financial year, public sector employers cannot afford to miss out on relevant jobseekers. That is why it is extremely important to get the job advert right first time.

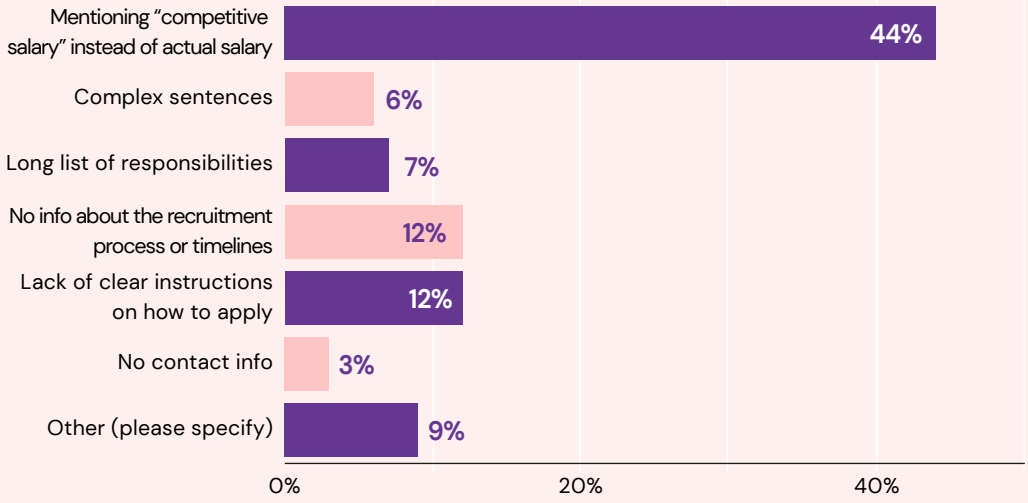
To get a better understanding of what current jobseekers are looking at in adverts, we asked our respondents what common advert features deter them the most from applying for a role.

The main feedback we received was that candidates are put off by adverts which mention **"competitive salary",** with **44%** of respondents selecting this option (Figure 3.2). The next most popular answers were a **lack of information about the recruitment timeline** (12% of respondents) and a **lack of information about how to apply** (12% of respondents).

A further 9% of respondents opted for "Other", citing reasons such as:

- The job advert is not using clear and concise language, or uses too much jargon
- The advert or job description does not include enough detail about daily responsibilities
- No easy way to apply
- Day to day job expectations listed outstrip the seniority of the role
- Adverts for part time roles do not include shift patterns.

Figure 3.2 **Which of these factors puts you off a job advert the most?**



We also asked candidates in a free response question what information they would like to see more often in job adverts. Among the answers we received we identified some common themes:

- Part time roles should include shift patterns
- Full time roles should state the expected business hours (e.g. 9 – 5:30pm, not just 37.5 hours per week)
- Whether the role is hybrid, and if so how many days are staff expected to be on-site
- The expected interview date and start date for the role
- A description of what the job actually entails day-to-day

- What the possible career progression opportunities at the organisation may be
- Part time roles should include the hourly salary rate, rather than the FTE.

What makes a great job advert?

Your job advert is often your only chance to market your role to potential new hires, so it is important to make it enticing and stand out from the crowd.

Our top five tips for nailing your job advert are:

1. Use headings and clear formatting to make your advert easy for everyone to read.
2. Avoid complicated language or jargon that candidates and staff outside your team will not understand.
3. Ensure your salary, expected working hours and hiring timeline are signposted.
4. Communicate your Employer Value Proposition and where candidates can find out more information.
5. Include instructions on how to apply and who to contact to discuss the role.

If you are struggling to get started, be sure to download your free copy of our job advert template on Jobs Go Public and start attracting top talent.

4 The application process

A hugely important element of attracting top talent is the experience a candidate has in your application environment. In an online job market candidates can find multiple listings in their field of expertise with a Google search, so it is very likely that jobseekers are applying for multiple roles at once.

A fantastic user experience (UX) helps jobseekers to stay in your application pipeline right through to the moment of submission. This ensures you do not lose any relevant candidates before you have the chance to speak to them.

4.1. Application user experience (UX)

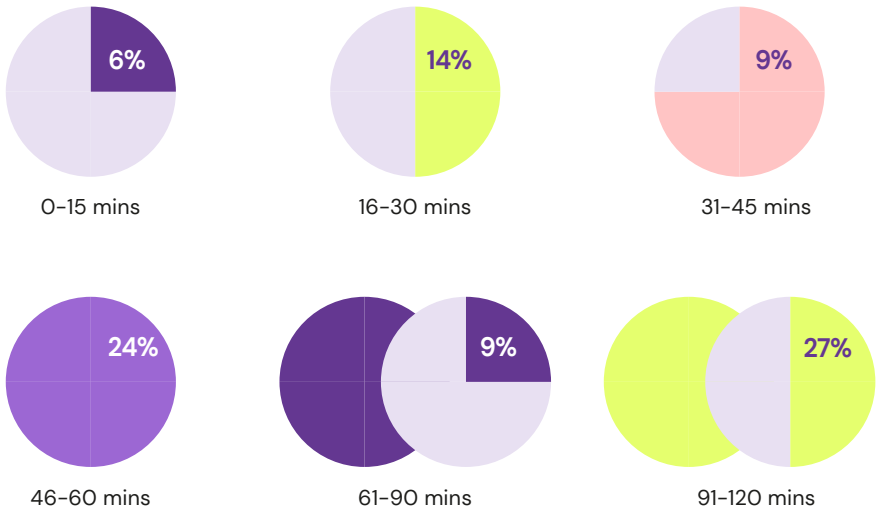
UX describes the journey a user takes when interacting with a service or product that has been developed for them. Understanding what motivates a candidate to complete an application form is extremely important for creating a UX which enables hiring managers to shortlist as many fantastic candidates as possible.

In a recruitment environment, this starts with the length of your application form. We asked our respondents how much time they were willing to spend completing a job application.

The average amount of time Jobs Go Public users indicated they were willing to spend on applications was around **70 minutes.** However, taking a more granular approach to respondents' answers, the answers were very broad.

For example, just under a **third** of respondents said they would spend between **1.5 to 2 hours** filling in an application. **One quarter** said they would spend between **45 minutes to 1 hour.** Only **6%** of candidates wanted to be able to apply in less than **15 minutes** (Figure 4.1).

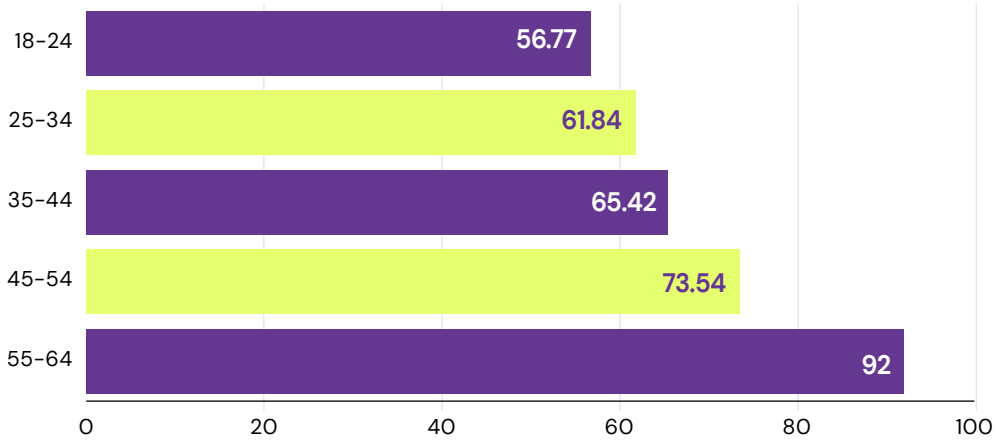
Figure 4.1 **How long are you willing to spend on a job application?**



These figures may come as a surprise as speedy application processes such as one-click apply become more common in job board environments. Interestingly, this public sector data may be constrained by age group, with the average amount of time a candidate is willing to spend on an application increasing from by age bracket from just **under an hour for 18-24 year olds** to **over 1.5 hours for 55-64 year olds** (Figure 4.2).

This indicates a preference in jobseekers over the age of 45 towards more traditional methods of application, such as more detailed questionnaires and cover letters. It is important to note that two thirds of respondents in our survey were over the age of 45 (see section 8). More representation from the 18 to 44 age brackets may be required in future research to form a fuller picture of candidates' UX expectations.

Figure 4.2 **Average number of minutes users would spend on a job application by age group**



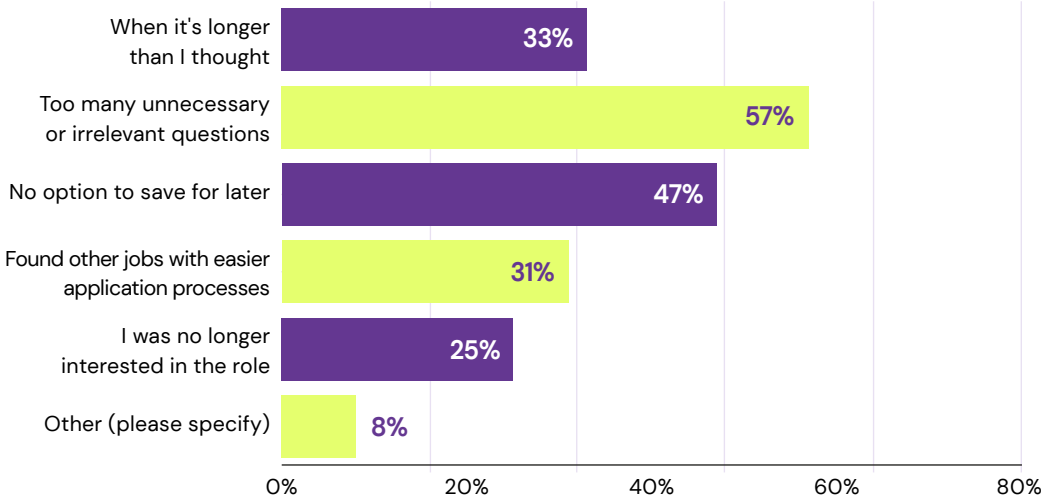
We also asked our respondents to tell us why they may opt to abandon an application form before completing it. 57% of candidates said they would abandon an application with too many unnecessary questions for the role described in the job advert (Figure 4.3).

Just under half of respondents also stated that they would abandon an online form that they could not save their progress on, and a third said they would leave a form which was taking longer to fill in than initially expected.

Common themes among respondents who selected "Other" included:

- Too many long-form free text questions
- Asking a candidate to repeat information that is easily found in their CV
- Asking a candidate to manually list individual qualifications, school exams, and employment history (especially those expected to be written in a CV)
- Not having an option to click an "easy apply" button
- The application form being broken or having poor grammar, especially if the role is in a field like IT.

Figure 4.3 **What prompts you to abandon a job application? Select all that apply.**



It is clear when taking this feedback in conjunction with the data in Figure 4.1 that the issue is more nuanced than candidates simply being willing to spend over an hour on application. Candidates need to see that the UX of the application environment is worth spending their time on.

What makes good application UX?

Candidates are seeking their application environment to give them the best opportunity to sell themselves and provide more detail about why they are relevant to the role.

Poor UX may be construed as a poor representation of your organisation and as such may put the candidate off completing their application. Make your application forms worth spending the time for candidates by avoiding these three common application UX mistakes:

1. Do not ask candidates for information you should expect to find in their CV.
2. Do not forget to proofread and test your application questions before expecting candidates to answer them.
3. Do not ask questions in your form which are irrelevant to the experience and skills needed for the role.

4.2. Are CVs dead?

In recent years think pieces on the future of recruitment have been heralding the end of CVs in the application process. Indeed, half of recruiters are in support of moving to alternative methods of hiring[4].

From reducing unconscious bias in hiring[5] to cutting down swathes of irrelevant applications,[6] it appears that CVs are currently considered a potential roadblock for many recruitment challenges. Some application environments are already overcoming this issue with new methods, such as applying for jobs using your LinkedIn profile.

Whilst these articles typically have a private sector focus, these alternative methods may also serve to aid the public sector. One of the issues we explored in section 2.3 was how blind recruitment may aid making hiring more inclusive.

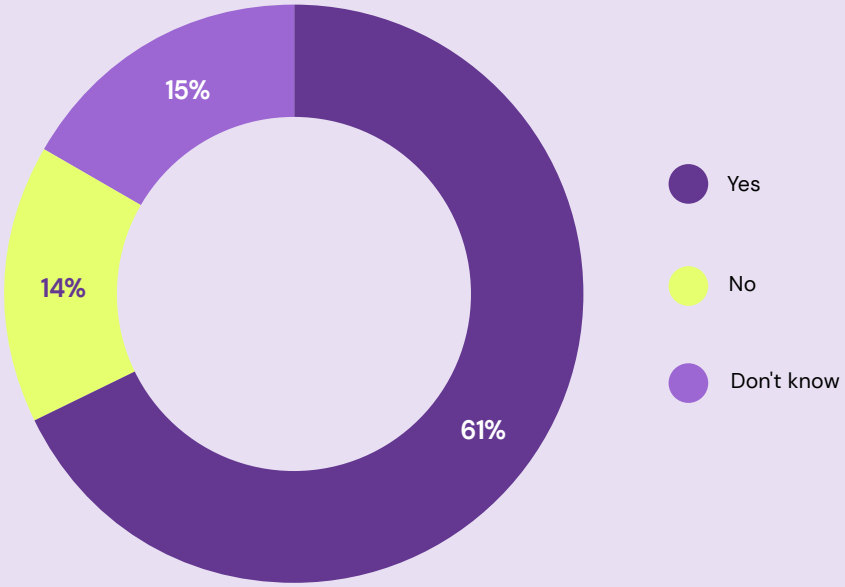
As hiring managers seek new ways to reduce bias, our clients have been increasingly asking candidates to submit anonymous CVs. However, alternative methods such as anonymised application profiles may also solve the problem of bias in hiring.

We asked candidates for their views on CVs to get their perspective on the hiring process. Among our respondents, CVs still appear to be the preference for candidate screening.

68% of our respondents said their **CV represents them well** as a job candidate (Figure 4.4). Only **15%** of candidates said **it does not**, with the remaining selecting "Don't know."

4 https://www.managementtoday.co.uk/will-2023-year-cv-binned/leadership-learning/article/1809685
5 https://techround.co.uk/guides/expert-predictions-for-recruitment-in-2023/
6 https://www.thehrdirector.com/features/recruitment/why-cvs-will-soon-be-removed-from-the-tech-recruitment-process/

Figure 4.4 **Do you think your CV represents you well as a candidate?**

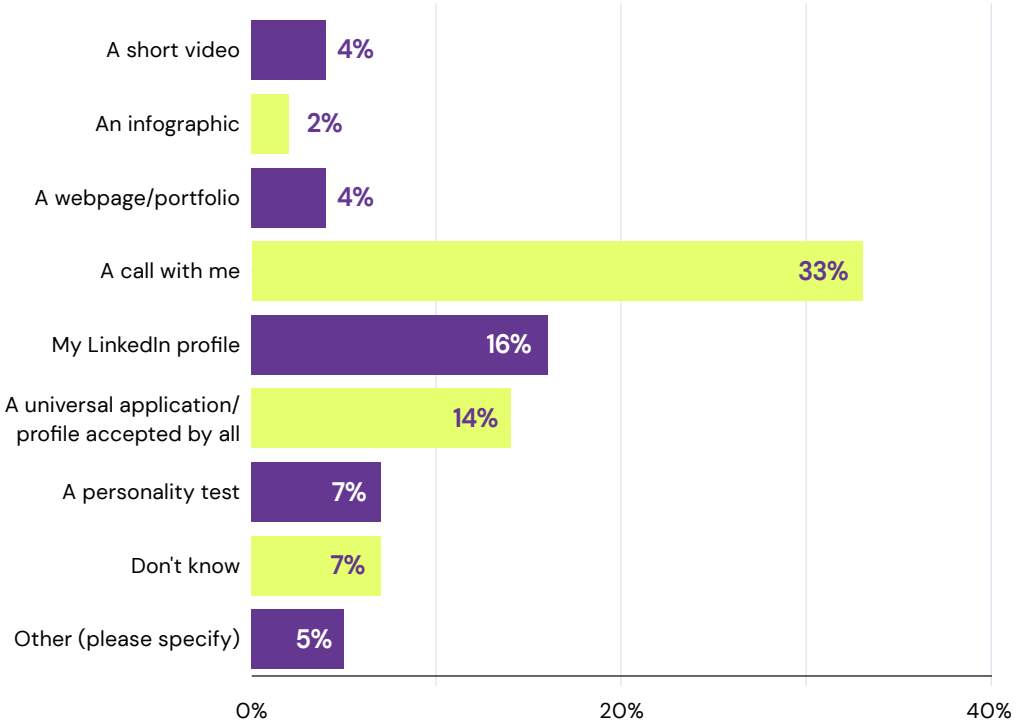


If candidates had to select an alternative application method to using CVs, a third of candidates said they would prefer a call with the hiring manager (Figure 4.5). 16% said they would opt to apply for a role with their LinkedIn profile, and 14% stated that they would like a universal online profile that every employer would accept. Most of the respondents who selected "Other" said they would not want to ditch their CV at all.

While CVs still seem to be the most popular form of self-advertising for a job, the responses to this question suggest there is a potential theme among jobseekers for wanting employers to get to know them as a person before making a judgement through a more personal interaction than a CV.

The further preference for LinkedIn or a universal profile also shows that candidates lean towards a quick and easy way to apply by sharing a basic set of information at the touch of a button.

Figure 4.5 **If you could replace CVs, which of the following would you choose to summarise who you are?**



Are CVs on their way out?

For the time being, candidates appear to still be attached to CVs as their preferred method of being screened for roles. From an application UX perspective this means public sector jobseekers will likely be slower adopters of alternative forms of application method.

As employers seek to find new ways to minimise bias in recruitment, improve inclusivity, focus more on skills-based hiring and reduce applications from irrelevant candidates, jobseekers will need to be supported to adjust to new methods.

This may include clear information in job adverts about how to apply for your roles when using alternative methods, or signposting relevant training materials such as our candidate guide on how to anonymise your CV.

4.3 The use of AI in job searches

With the 2022 release of OpenAI's chatbot ChatGPT, a topic that has been prevalent online this year is generative artificial intelligence (AI). Generative AI is an AI model which can create content such as written copy, images or art independently. Generative models work through experience: they use intelligent machine learning to take datasets they are previously exposed to and apply this knowledge to new situations.

This has become a popular theme of discussion in the recruitment industry, as hiring managers and jobseekers alike weigh up the pros and cons of employing the aid of AI in recruitment/application processes.

Research by Gartner suggests that almost two thirds of HR professionals are already adopting generative AI in their hiring processes to write job posts and engage with candidates.[7] This has helped over half of early adopters to reduce the time needed to hire.

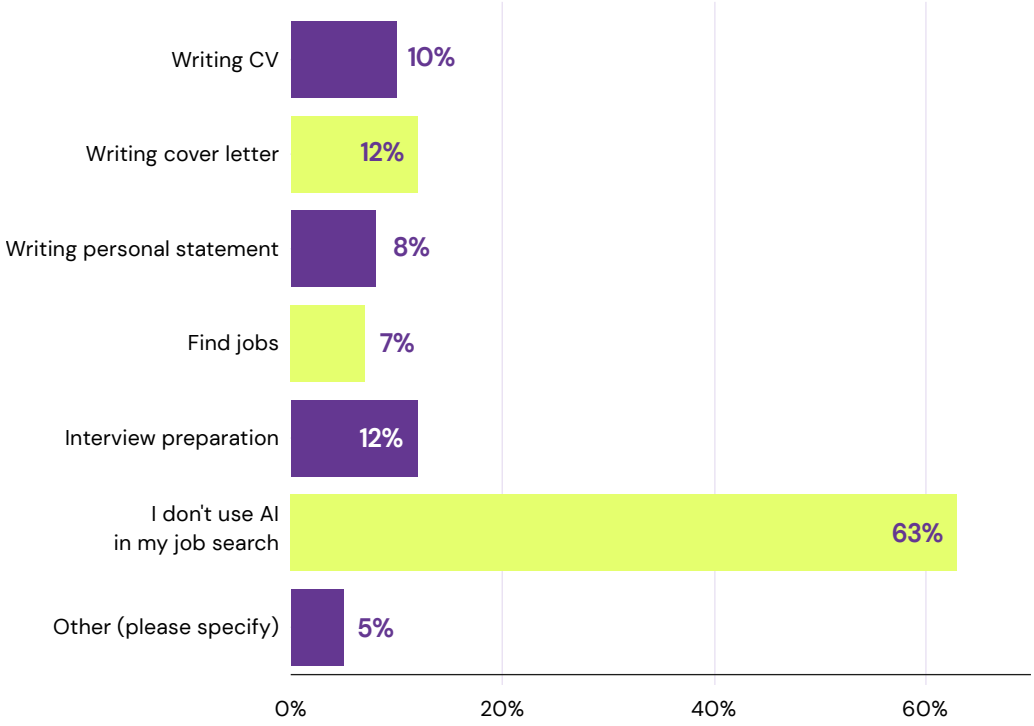
Some of the ways in which jobseekers can utilise AI to streamline their job search include improving their CV, writing personal statements, or creating document templates. To see how popular this technology is becoming in the public sector,

we asked our candidates if they were using AI for their job search, and if so what for.

Just under two thirds of respondents stated that they have not used AI in their job search, suggesting that public sector jobseekers are conservative adopters of this new technology (Figure 4.6). This appears to match general private sector trends among jobseekers, with FlexJobs finding only one quarter of jobseekers are currently using AI in their job hunt.[8]

7 https://www.gartner.com/peer-community/oneminuteinsights/applications-generative-ai-hiring-process-tpd
8 https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/how-to-use-ai-to-find-next-job-tips/

Figure 4.6 **If you have started using AI tools like ChatGPT in your job search, which of the following do you use it for?**



Among respondents who do make use of AI, the most popular option was for drafting cover letters (12% of respondents), or preparing for potential interview questions (12% of respondents). Candidates who selected "Other" also indicated that the tools were useful for checking the formatting and grammar of their application materials, suggesting the technology was being utilised more as a quality assurance tool.

Is the use of AI in job applications a threat?

While tools like *ChatGPT* are powerful for streamlining the application process, there are risks that come with this method, such as a lack of personal touch or inaccurate representation of a candidate's skills.

As a result, many large organisations are preparing to detect AI-generated applications, with three quarters of HR professionals surveyed by Gartner suggesting they have already started or are planning to train staff in this area.

While it does not currently look like there is a large threat of public sector candidates adopting this technology in the immediate future, this is likely to become more prevalent in the coming years.

ResumeBuilder found that 70% of candidates who used *ChatGPT* in their job applications reported a higher response rate from employers. The increasing popularity of automating shortlisting with Applicant Tracking Systems in the private sector has produced a culture among jobseekers of jobhunting becoming a numbers game. This is leading many frustrated jobseekers to seek more creative ways of getting their applications seen by hiring managers.

As such, employers will need to be aware and prepare for the potential effects of AI-generated applications. This may include training candidates how to use AI tools appropriately, or training staff to recognise CVs and application forms generated by a chatbot.

5 Interviews

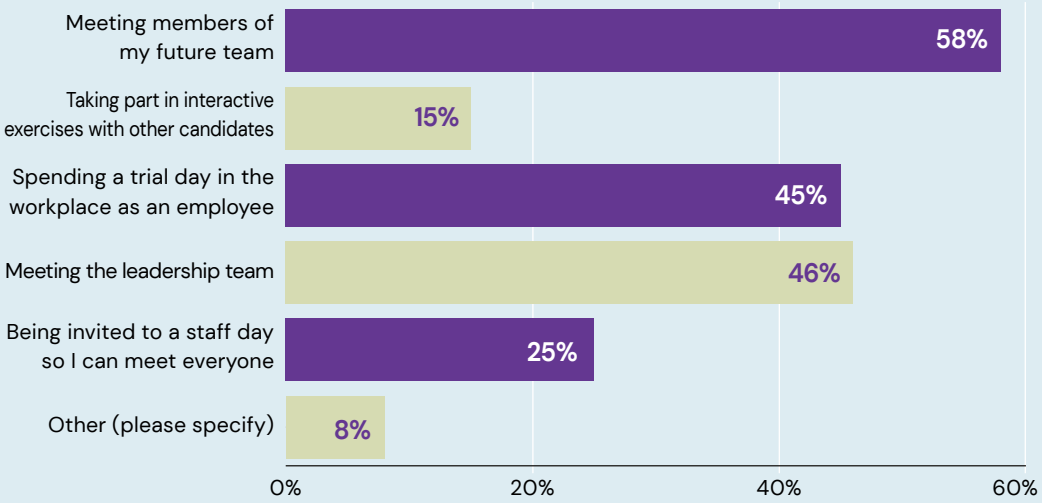
Interviews are a crucial element of the candidate experience. For most jobseekers this is the first chance to get a more personal idea of the organisation they may end up working for.

While candidates need to make an impact to secure the role, it is also important that employers make a good impression. At this point both the employer and jobseeker have invested a significant amount of time into the recruitment process.

The interview stage gives candidates a small lens into your organisation's culture, and with strained recruitment budgets and teams, public sector employers cannot afford to lose top talent because of a poor interview experience.

We asked our respondents what they would like to see as part of their interview experience. For candidates who get invited to interview, the most common thing people reported wanting to experience was **meeting members of their potential team**, with **58%** of respondents selecting this option (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 **Which of the following do you want to experience during the hiring process?**



46% of respondents also wanted to **meet the organisation's leadership team**, and **45%** found the idea of a **trial day** valuable. This data is indicative of the importance of showing off your employee experience so that prospective hires can see what it is like to actually work for you. Further, candidates are also given a fair opportunity to show their own capabilities in a less high-pressure environment than an interview panel.

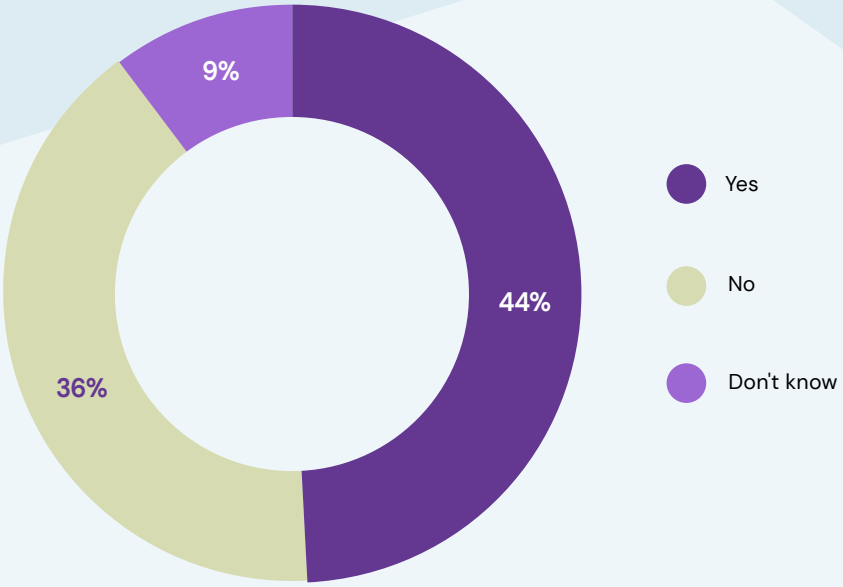
Candidates who selected "Other" also made the following suggestions:

- An opportunity to visit the workplace location itself (particularly if the work is a frontline role)
- The chance to speak to existing staff or the person vacating the role being advertised
- Transparency about how many other candidates are shortlisted or have been invited to interview
- The process should be simplified rather than have more factors added (ie. reserve these activities for the onboarding stage).

With the emphasis on making the hiring process more inclusive, a common topic of debate is whether candidates should receive a copy of interview questions before the interview itself.

We asked our candidates whether they would like to receive questions in advance, and around **half** stated that they think candidates **should receive them before** (Figure 5.2). However, **two fifths** of respondents said **"No",** and 10% said "Don't know".

Figure 5.2 **Do you think that candidates should be given interview questions in an advance of an interview?**



At this stage in time it appears that candidates do not have strong preferences one way or the other; receiving questions in advance is not a universal expectation about public sector jobseekers. However, given our earlier finding that hiring needs to be more accessible for neurodivergent candidates (section 2.3), this should be considered as a reasonable adjustment at the least.

Why should public sector employers consider providing questions in advance?

For candidates who require more support with social communication or struggle with common body language expectations such as making consistent eye contact, interviews can be an extremely stressful process.

Neurodiversity among the public sector workforce is beneficial because neurodivergent employees can bring unique skills and problem-solving abilities to the team.

Not only does this foster a more productive workforce, this also ensures that the public sees people who represent all of their communities involved in delivering public services.

Allowing candidates the time to process the questions they will be asked in an interview can help interviewees to more clearly communicate why they are good for the job. This ultimately benefits all parties by making the hiring process more accessible and helping people with beneficial skills to overcome initial barriers to employment.

6 Feedback

The final topic we explored with Jobs Go Public users was feedback provided during the hiring process. Feedback is important for both employers and jobseekers – candidates can use feedback to ensure they improve their applications in the future, while employers should take feedback on board to improve the candidate experience for new hires and continue to attract talent.

This reciprocal exchange can also help to build positive relationships between the two parties, with the potential to keep unsuccessful candidates in your talent pool and reach out to them with future, more relevant opportunities.

6.1 Candidate feedback

As a jobseeker, receiving feedback from a potential employer creates a lasting impression. In today's noisy, fast-paced job market, candidate feedback is a rare commodity, with many hiring managers even opting to ignore or "ghost" job applicants who are unsuccessful. In fact, a survey by Arctic Shores suggests as few as 7% of businesses provide feedback to rejected candidates.[9]

9 https://techround.co.uk/news/companies-fail-to-give-feedback-with-talent-influx/

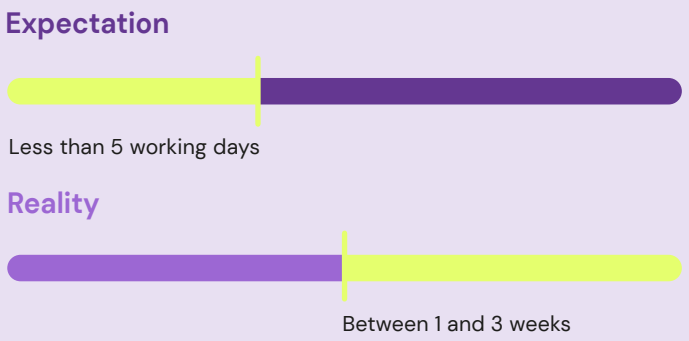
This is more of a problem than employers may realise. Feedback plays a role in your employer brand. Receiving information about why you may have been unsuccessful in your application allows you to understand what to improve in future applications. As such, rejected candidates will feel that the time spent applying for your vacancy or preparing for your interview was still a valuable exercise.

An unsuccessful candidate is much more likely to recommend applying for your roles if they had an experience which has benefitted them in some way. Conversely, a candidate who spends time writing a cover letter, filling in your application form, or preparing for an interview only to hear nothing – is much more likely to share negative feedback about your organisation.

Public sector organisations such as local councils are often competing for the same skilled talent in their area. It is important to remember that this element of candidate experience could be the difference between securing the perfect new hire and losing them to a neighbouring authority before you can even grab their attention with a job advert.

To understand how candidates currently experience feedback from public sector employers, we asked Jobs Go Public users how quickly they usually hear back from hiring managers, in comparison to how quickly they expect to hear back (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1 **How quickly do candidates hear feedback from employers?**

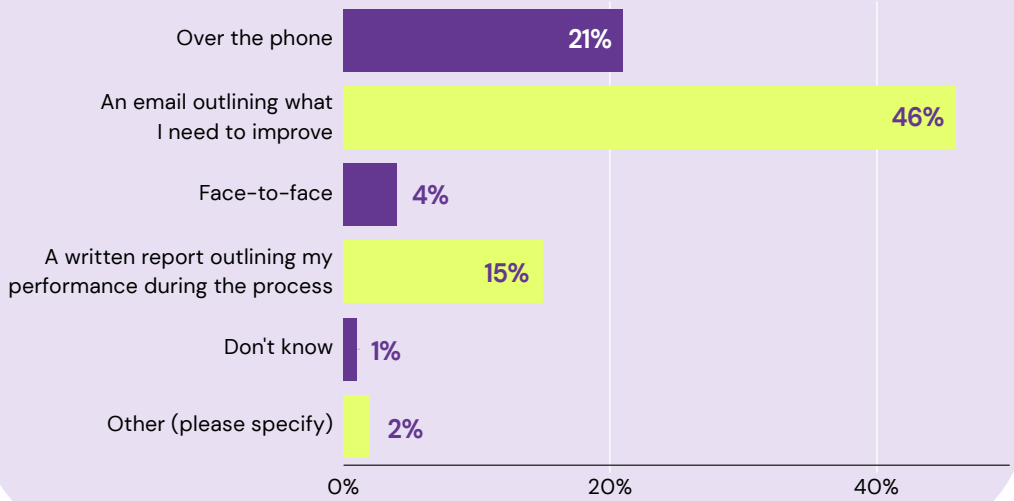


71% of respondents reported wanting to hear if they had been shortlisted **within 5 working days** of submitting their application. However, the reality is often much longer. On average respondents reported **waiting for up to 3 weeks** to hear back from hiring managers.

Only **one fifth** of respondents reported that they typically hear back **within 5 days**. However, **12%** stated it often takes **longer than 3 weeks,** and **8%** reported **never hearing** from hiring managers at all. This suggests that there is still room for improvement among public sector employers when it comes to matching candidates' desired feedback experience.

When we asked candidates how they would prefer to receive their feedback, the most common answer was through an email from the hiring manager outlining the reason they were unsuccessful (**46% of respondents**). **One fifth** of respondents preferred to be spoken to **over the phone,** while **15%** said they would like to receive a **more formal written report** (Figure 6.2). Among the few candidates who selected "Other", their preference was not to receive feedback because they did not find it useful (2% of respondents).

Figure 6.2 **What is your preferred method of receiving your application/interview feedback?**



This data generally indicates that most candidates do not expect detailed or time-consuming forms of feedback, however they do value understanding why their application may have been unsuccessful.

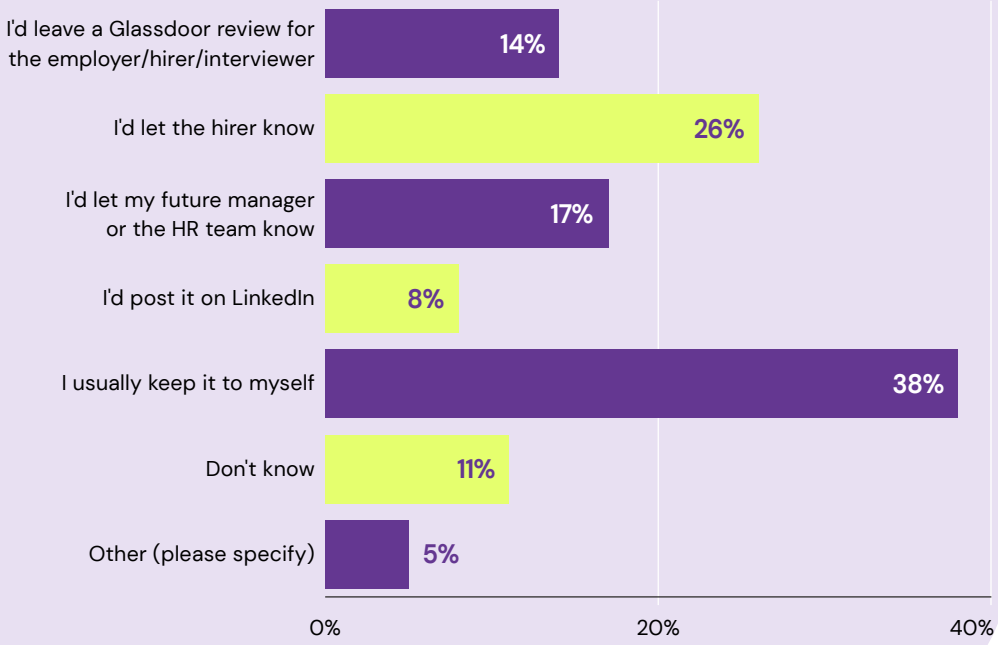
6.2 Employer feedback

We also asked candidates about their preferred methods of providing feedback to employers whose jobs they have applied for. This is particularly important for understanding the impact your candidate experience may have on your talent acquisition, as well as your employer brand.

Interestingly, **38%** of our respondents stated that they generally **keep feedback about their experience to themselves** (Figure 6.3). However, this means that **62%** of public sector candidates do **value sharing their feedback.**

A quarter of respondents stated that they would share their feedback **with the hiring manager** for the role. A further **17%** stated that they would reach out to the **organisation's HR team** directly.

Figure 6.3 **If you want to share your feedback about the hiring process, where would you voice it?**



Although much fewer in number, **14%** of respondents also reported they would go public with their feedback and leave a **Glassdoor review** of the organisation. This was echoed in responses left under "Other", with respondents stating they would share on channels such as their **social media**, among their **professional network**, **Indeed reviews** or even in **blogs**.

The power of negative feedback needs to be borne in mind when it comes to these applicants. As explored in section 2.2, the majority of candidates are seeking information about your EVP on online sources such as search engines and social media. It may only take a potential applicant to discover a few negative reviews of your candidate experience to put them off applying for your role or going through with an interview.

Do not underestimate the power of feedback

There is a clear window of opportunity in the public sector to forge the way in creating a fantastic candidate experience through providing consistent feedback to applicants.

Providing feedback allows you to:

1. Build trust and relationships with candidates.
2. Foster a positive candidate experience that feeds into your employer brand.
3. Provide an opportunity for candidates to give their own feedback and improve your candidate experience even further for future job applicants.

Regret management can be a time-consuming task. Our expert resourcing team are equipped to help. With over 20 years of experience working with candidates in the public sector, we can aid you in providing a seamless candidate experience.

Get in touch with the team on our **website** to request your consultation.

7 Conclusion (employer checklist)

This paper has explored multiple facets of the candidate experience, all of which are crucial to attracting top talent. From your employer brand and how you market your roles, to the experience candidates have of your application and interview processes - each element has a role to play in successful public sector recruitment.

The factors we have explored are intertwined and have bearing on each other, making it important to get the balance right. Doing so creates a self-sustaining ecosystem, as candidates who have a positive experience will feed this information back to their networks, boosting your employer brand and helping to attract future talent.

Despite the challenges the public sector is facing in the current economic climate, it is clear candidates still champion working for the public sector. The values public sector staff hold are an extremely important part of why these candidates choose to work in organisations such as local government and education.

However, salary, career progression and bureaucracy are becoming more of an issue for talent attraction and retention. Employers also need to focus more on upskilling internal staff to overcome skills gaps and contend with the challenge succession planning.

To help you master your candidate experience, we recommend the following actions:

Candidate experience checklist:

1 Develop and promote your organisation's EVP

Candidates do their research about you as an employer when applying for your roles. This means your recruitment strategy needs to go beyond the job advert and become more proactive.

If you are unsure of where to start, **speak to our team** about how you can use recruitment marketing to build your employer brand and promote your EVP.

2 Review your hiring processes to ensure they are inclusive

There is no one size fits all approach to inclusive hiring, but our research has shown neurodivergent candidates are frustrated by hiring processes which do not allow them the opportunity to showcase their skillset.

Job adverts, applications and interviews need to be accessible to all candidates to tap into the potential of a diverse workforce. Moreover, candidates need to see they can trust employers, so ensure information about workplace inclusion practices is easily available to jobseekers.

3 Think like a candidate when you write your job adverts

Our research has provided valuable feedback about what candidates want to see in job adverts. The most crucial elements jobseekers are looking for include the salary, transparency about the recruitment process and communication about the responsibilities of the role. Clear and accessible language is also important.

For help getting started with your job adverts, you can download our free job advert template **here.**

4 Review your application UX

While we have shown that public sector candidates are willing to spend over an hour on their job applications, we have also seen that the application environment has a large bearing on whether candidates will complete the process.

Ensure all your prospective candidates submit a full application by avoiding candidate bugbears such as long forms asking for irrelevant information and proofreading your questions.

5 Prepare your staff for the future of hiring processes

Public sector candidates currently appear to be conservative in taking up new technologies for their applications, such as alternatives to the CV and generative AI.

However, as these hiring processes become more commonplace in the private sector, public sector jobseekers will likely follow suit. Ensure you are prepared for the future by raising awareness of these new technologies among your hiring managers and HR staff.

6 Use the interview stage to promote your culture

Feedback from our respondents has shown that candidates are seeking more transparency from employers in the interview stage. Use this opportunity to introduce prospective hires to your teams and show them more of what the job will be like.

Moreover, consider the value of providing interview questions to candidates in advance. Not only will these interview experiences build trust in candidates, they will also help to make your hiring practices more inclusive and fair.

7 Make time for candidate feedback

Our research has shown that public sector jobseekers would like to hear feedback about the success of their application via email within a working week of applying for the role. While this timescale may not always be attainable for busy hiring managers, feedback plays an important role in a candidate's impression of your organisation – and taking the time wherever possible to provide it will set your organisation apart from the many employers who do not.

8 Audience breakdown

The results of this research are based on a sample of 311 active Jobs Go Public users who responded to our candidate experience survey during the months of August and September 2023.

Feedback came from a diverse range of age brackets, with the highest represented group being candidates aged between 45-54 (Figure 8.1).

Moreover, 4 in 5 respondents in the survey are or have recently been active in the job market. 52% of the respondents were employed but looking for a new job, and a further third were unemployed but actively seeking employment (Figure 8.2). Therefore, the feedback we received is largely representative of the expectations of candidates currently seeking employment in the public sector.

Figure 8.1 **Number of respondents by age group**

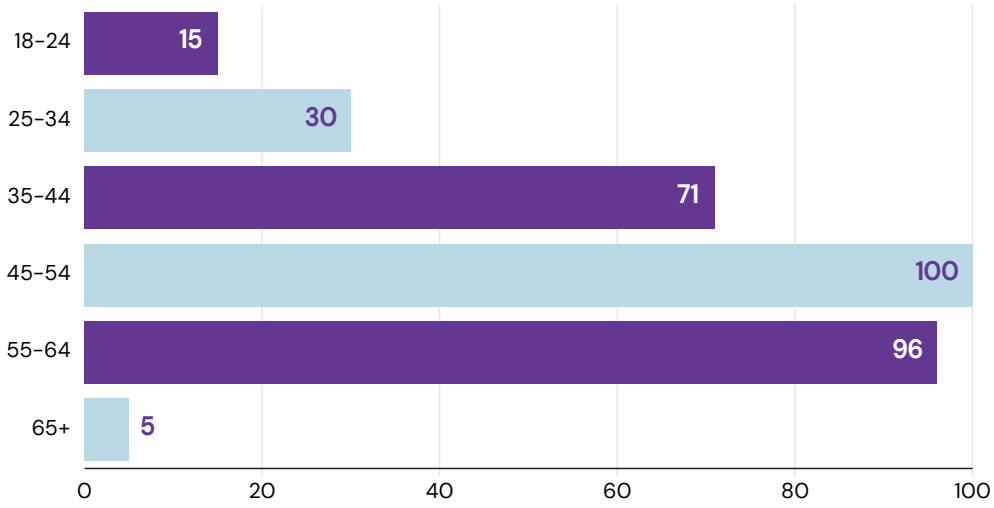
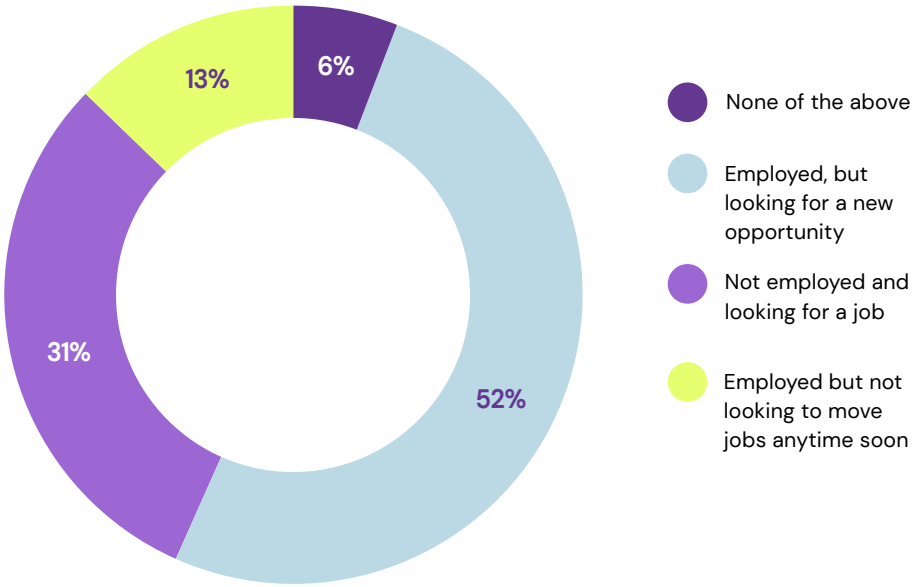


Figure 8.2 **Respondents' current employment status**



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