



ICIMS 

# Workforce Report

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Our data and insights lead to  
your recruiting success.

March 2026 – Spotlight on frontline hiring

# The big picture

## Leaders are turning the dial up on headcount, just as candidates are starting to pull back.

In February 2026, job openings increased 10% over last February, while applications plummeted 14% month over month. Employers could be expanding capacity faster than recruiting teams can fill it, creating a pressure point that is only getting more complicated.

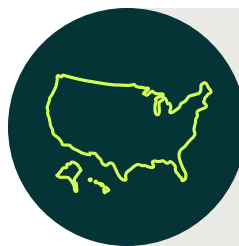
**Our EMEA data** shows the possibilities when you focus on execution: openings dropped 3%, but hires jumped 9% month over month as teams cleared backlogs and accelerated decision-making.

Meanwhile, **frontline hiring** shows a mild recovery from the sharp slowdown in the last quarter of 2025. Openings are up 8% while hiring remains flat, all while application volume decreased to 1%.

Strategically, the move now is to treat hiring like a high-intent pipeline, not a volume game.

**We encourage leaders to tighten their focus on roles that move the business**, then strip friction out of the experience with fast responses, mobile-first apply flows and simple schedules and pay details. With the right tools in place, recruiters can shift their time toward proactive outreach and re-engagement with warm talent, so every qualified applicant is handled with speed and personalization. This will turn constrained interest into measurable hiring velocity.

## TOP FINDINGS



**A steady start in the U.S.**, with an increase of 5% in hiring year over year.



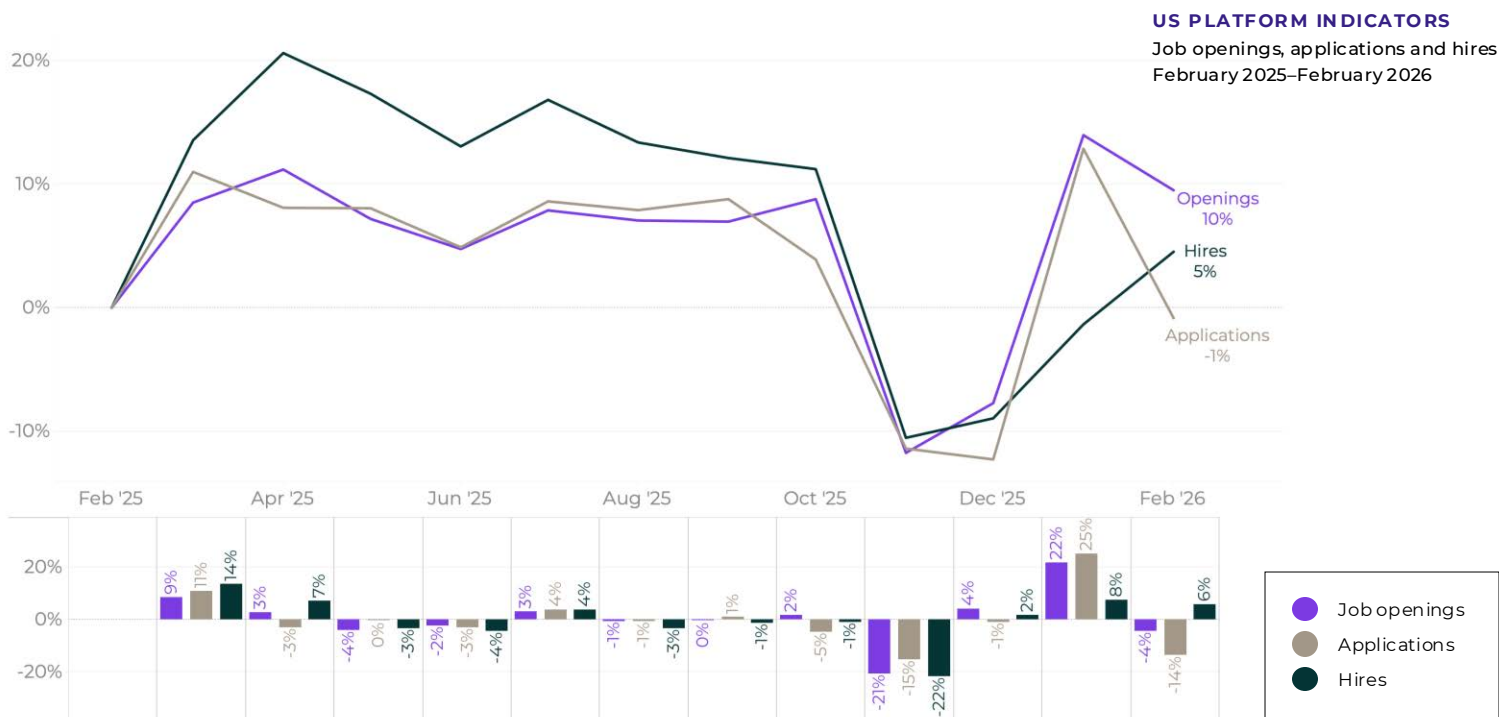
**Manufacturing leads frontline openings at 10%**, while hires have only increased 3%.



**Frontline hiring has slowed** since its peak in October of last year.

**ICIMS Insights Workforce Reports** monitor monthly labor market activity based on hundreds of millions of applicants and millions of users. Organizations can use this data as a measuring stick to anticipate and adapt to ever-changing workforce dynamics.

# Demand is rising—but candidates are pulling back



**ICIMS INSIGHTS QUICK TAKE:** Hires are closing the gap with openings.

## MARKET UPDATE

In February, **all three talent market indicators continued to rebound from the volatility seen at the end of last year**, but they are recovering at different speeds. Openings reported at +10% on the rolling 12-month index, showing the strongest momentum of the three measures.

Hires moved upward, reaching +5%, while the month-over-month increase of 6% shows that hiring teams are gradually converting demand into filled roles. We still see that growth rate trails openings, which is a cautionary trend.

Although this gap closed a bit in February, openings are still outpacing hiring, showing **employers continue to expand headcount capacity faster than recruiting teams can convert candidates through the funnel**. This imbalance may create mounting pressure on recruiting efficiency and suggests that unfilled demand could carry

into the coming months if hiring velocity does not continue to improve.

Applications declined in February, with a sharp -14% month-over-month drop. This signals a notable cool-off in candidate engagement versus January, even as employer demand improved. This drop may reflect **signs of candidate fatigue**, as the gap between job openings and actual hires continues to widen.

## STRATEGY

With openings rising and applications dropping, **employers need to focus less on pulling in more candidates and more on converting the ones they have**. Speed, personalization and a sharper candidate experience are key. Tighten interview steps, re-engage warm leads and use data to target best-fit talent. The companies that move the fastest will have a better chance of acquiring top talent.

# EMEA's quiet shift: Demand eases, hiring accelerates



## ICIMS INSIGHTS QUICK TAKE: EMEA hiring picks up as application volume drops.

### MARKET UPDATE

**EMEA entered February with softer demand but stronger hiring execution.** Openings fell 3% month over month, a measured step down that suggests hiring plans are being trimmed, not halted, as leaders work through budgets and line headcount up with revenue. Even so, the 12-month index rose to 9%, pointing to a tactical adjustment rather than a broader slowdown.

On the supply side, applications dropped 14% month over month, representing a **significant pullback in candidate interest**. Pipelines are tightening just as many teams gear up for spring hiring, meaning fewer candidates per open role and more pressure on recruiters to generate demand rather than rely on inbound flow.

Hires rose 9% month over month, pushing the rolling 12-month index to an increase of 12%. **Hiring outpacing openings and applications signals stronger funnel velocity: faster decisions, better calibration and some backlog clearing from earlier in the year.** Maintaining February's hiring pace will require sharper pipeline execution and favorable economic conditions to encourage organizations to continue hiring at this pace.

### STRATEGY

**Use this window to sharpen execution, not to add steps.** Concentrate on removing friction for already-engaged candidates while increasing targeted re-engagement and outbound sourcing so critical roles stay fed, even as inbound interest thins.



## Frontline hiring: From surge to slow burn

**Frontline jobs are still driving a large share of US job creation**, but employers report persistent difficulty filling and keeping these roles even as overall labor market momentum cools, according to our data. Many organizations are shifting from broad-based expansion to selective hiring and redeployment, trying to balance wage inflation, margin pressure and service expectations without overcommitting on headcount.

Voluntary quit rates in leisure and hospitality remain among the highest of any industry.

**Frontline-heavy sectors continue to see annual turnover that can reach 70–80%**, effectively forcing leaders to “rebuild” large portions of their workforce every year, according to HRDive.com. This constant replacement cycle drives up acquisition costs undermines productivity and customer experience. It also blunts the impact of investments in training or technology on the front line.

According to the **ICIMS State of Frontline Hiring Report**, 91% of frontline hiring managers say filling roles is urgent, yet more than half of candidates abandon applications before completion, and 32% drop off at the interview stage. Meanwhile, candidates surveyed said they often abandon the application process (60%) due to the length of the application, pay transparency and job qualifications.

**For CHROs**, the mandate is to reframe frontline hiring and retention as core levers of business continuity and growth rather than a series of disconnected requisitions.

**For boards and CXOs**, that means asking different questions: Do we have a credible strategy to staff critical frontline roles under multiple economic scenarios? And have we modernized the candidate experience and scheduling model enough to compete for workers who now expect flexibility, predictability and clear advancement pathways?

The organizations that win this cycle will be those that treat frontline labor as a strategic asset, not as a commodity that can always be replaced on demand.

# Frontline hiring: From surge to slow burn



**ICIMS INSIGHTS QUICK TAKE:** Openings are up but candidates lose interest.

**Frontline hiring is finally moving again, but it is not a full recovery.** Openings and hires are both back in positive territory year over year, which suggests employers have turned up the “demand” dial and are actively rebuilding their frontline teams. Applications, however, are trending negative month over month, so there are more roles to fill than qualified people applying. The net effect: your requisition volume looks healthy, but each individual hire is harder to win.

Beginning in Q4 2025, frontline hiring experienced a sharp disruption, followed by a partial rebound in January. We saw small gains in December, followed by double-digit gains in January for openings and application volume. While this is a typical seasonal trend, we see February trending below the previous year’s levels, indicating a pause in frontline hiring activities.

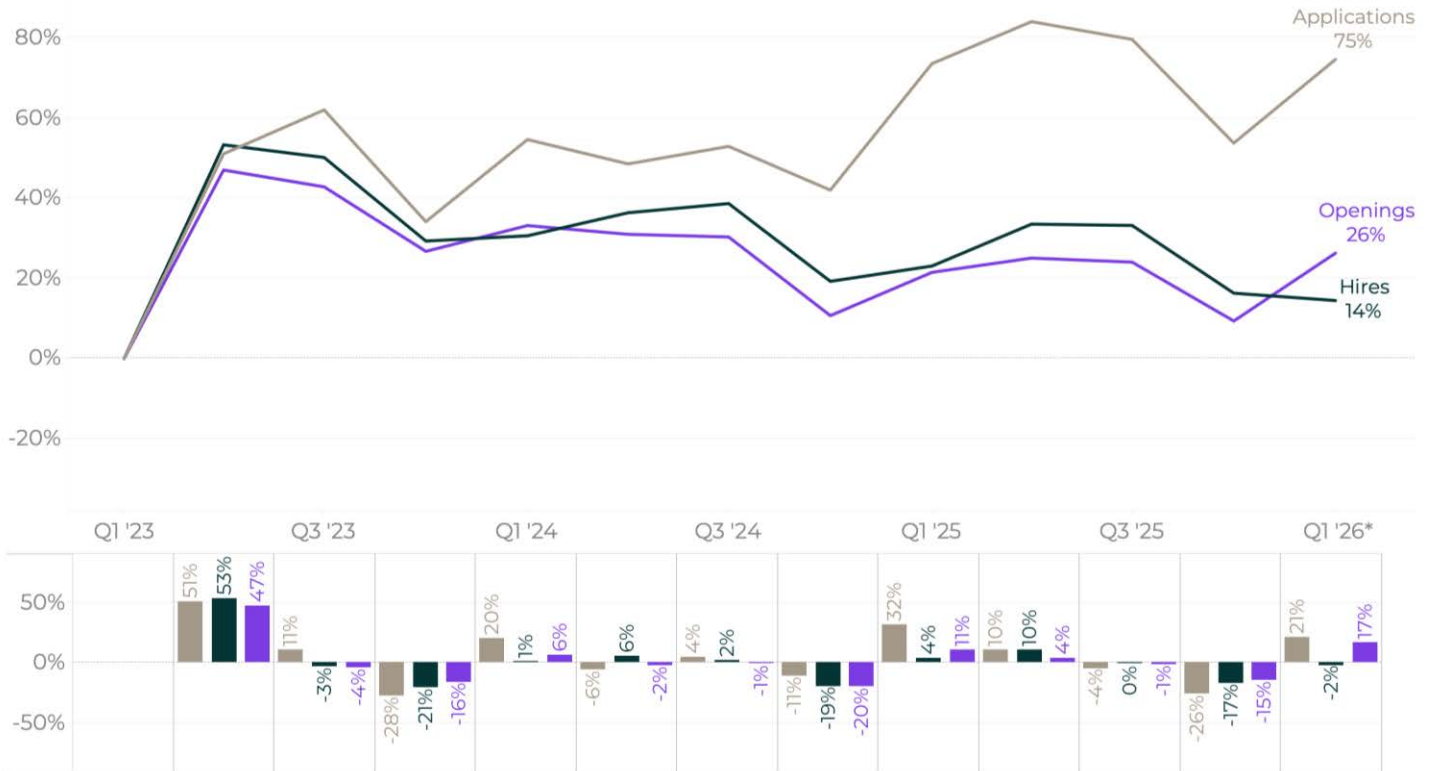
## STRATEGY

**Frontline hiring has shifted from a volume problem to a conversion and quality problem.** You can’t assume that posting more roles or turning on another channel will flood the funnel the way it did a few years ago. Instead, the advantage will go to organizations that treat frontline hiring like a sales motion: tighter targeting, better messaging, faster response times and a sharper understanding of why a candidate would choose your role over the one down the street. In this environment, doing “more of the same” isn’t neutral. It signals you could be falling behind.

# Frontline applications stay strong

What used to be a race for applicants is now a race to see who can move the qualified ones through the fastest. As openings increase, organizations should prioritize streamlining processes to remove bottlenecks.

Frontline job activity: Q1 2023 – Q1 2026\*



\*Data for Q1 26 is based on projections leveraging the first two months of data.

“Applications continue to outpace hires, showing that the challenge is not finding candidates, it is turning them into employees fast enough. If openings continue to increase, this could cause a serious strain on recruiting organizations fighting for top talent.”



**TRENT COTTON**  
Head of Talent Acquisition Insights & Analyst Relations, ICIMS

## Each sector tells a different story

Frontline hiring sits at the center of the labor market, touching almost every major sector. In this month's report, the data shows that each sector's hiring story looks very different.

### Frontline job activity: February 2025 vs. February 2026



In **manufacturing**, employers are still leaning into growth, with openings up about 10% even as applications fall roughly 10%. That gap is starting to bite: hires are inching forward, but at only about a 3% gain, suggesting plants are struggling to convert a shrinking pool of candidates.

**Retail** tells a different story: demand has barely ticked up, with openings hovering just above flat and applications down close to 8%. Hires have slipped into negative territory, signaling that many retailers are quietly pulling back on staffing plans or finding it harder to persuade workers to take front-of-house roles.

**Healthcare** looks like the steadiest of the four — openings and applications are both slightly positive, and hires are up about 1% — but even here, the modest gains hint at a market that's more constrained than the headlines suggest.

**Leisure and hospitality** remain the most fragile part of the frontline economy. Openings are up about 7%, but applications are down roughly 10% and hires are down about 3%. After years of churn and burnout, many workers are reluctant to return, leaving hotels, restaurants and venues with more shifts than people to cover them.

These trends suggest that the **frontline recovery is less a surge than a fragile balancing act between need and willingness to work.**

# The Container Store: Prioritizing velocity and experience

Danny Rojas, Senior Manager of Talent Acquisition at **The Container Store**, knew the business needed more than just “faster hiring.”

According to the [ICIMS 2025 State of Frontline Hiring Report](#), 91% of frontline hiring managers report urgent hiring needs, yet 62% say candidate quality is their biggest challenge. Speed alone isn't enough. Hiring requires precision.

The Container Store needed a centralized, modern talent acquisition engine that could unify workflows, scale across channels, and protect the quality of each hire.



## 8 days

application to offer

## 30%

year over year growth  
due to more  
streamlined hiring

## 95%

decrease in  
manual interview  
scheduling time spent

## FROM INSIGHTS TO IMPACT

# Tailored takeaways

Whether you lead people, run operations or shape strategy, you can use these insights to align teams, reduce friction and move faster on your goals.

## FOR THE Talent Leaders

- **Build a standing “always-on” slate for your top 10 frontline roles**, with predefined profiles, sourcing channels and interview loops so that recruiters never start from zero.
- **Turn your ATS into a prospecting engine**: segment past applicants by role and quality, then require recruiters to source a set percentage of hires from this warm pool each quarter.

## FOR THE CHROs

- **Treat candidate experience and hiring velocity as core people KPIs**, reviewed alongside engagement and retention, not as “recruiting-only” metrics.
- **Partner with Finance and Operations** to align frontline hiring plans with real demand signals, avoiding whiplash between over-hiring and hard freezes.

## FOR THE CXOs

- **Reframe frontline hiring as a growth and customer-experience lever, not just a cost center**, and hold leaders accountable for conversion, not just requisition volume.
- **Invest in the tech and process changes that remove friction** — mobile-first apply, automated scheduling, simple offers — so the organization stops bleeding talent it has already attracted.

## BEST PRACTICES SPOTLIGHT

# Unmasking fraud in talent acquisition

**Fraud is becoming an urgent challenge in recruiting.**

Our [Unmasking Fraud in Talent Acquisition](#) white paper gives TA leaders a clear playbook for tackling recruiting fraud. It includes today's fraud trends and tactics, from bad actors and AI-assisted applications to misrepresented experience and large-scale rings. We provide practical best practices plus an overview of how ICIMS' current and upcoming capabilities help you prevent fraud across the hiring lifecycle.



“Fraud continues to challenge an already complex process.

**Gartner predicts 25% of all applicants will be fake by 2028.** This resource is a practical guide to address this growing concern in recruiting.”



**TRENT COTTON**  
Head of Talent Acquisition  
Insights & Analyst Relations,  
ICIMS

# Want more great insights?

## ICIMS State of Frontline Hiring

Frontline roles are the backbone of our workforce, but hiring for them continues to be challenging. Based on fresh data from over 2,000 frontline workers and hiring managers across healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing and retail, our [State of Frontline Hiring Report](#) uncovers why companies are struggling to fill roles.

## ICIMS State of the CHRO Report

The role of HR has never been more strategic. Learn how 1,000 CHROs and chief people officers are navigating the shift and how 500 CIOs see HR navigating TA tech in the [ICIMS State of the CHRO Report](#).

## ICIMS Talent Experience Report

Explore what candidates want right now and how talent acquisition pros are delivering those experiences in our second annual [Talent Experience Report](#).

# About ICIMS

ICIMS is the talent acquisition platform that unites the strengths of enterprise software with the transformative power of AI.

Workforce data is vital to driving business forward.

## ICIMS Insights provides data that is:

- Current
- Cross-industry
- Dual-focused on employer and job seeker intentions and activity

## Data derived from:



**3.1M+**  
global platform users



**691M+**  
candidate profiles



**~243M**  
applications



**5M+**  
hires



**Data  
Breakthrough Awards:**  
2025 Business  
Intelligence Solution  
Provider of the Year

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