

ICIMS 

# Workforce Report

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Our data and insights lead to  
your recruiting success.

May 2026 – Spotlight on entry-level hiring

# The big picture

## Leaders are pushing for growth just as talent markets start to shift.

In the U.S., employer demand is rising fast, but supply is not. Openings continue to climb, while applications and hiring lag. Time to fill has improved through the first months of the year but with just 31 applicants per opening on average in April, teams are moving faster without solving the pipeline problem. The result is a growing backlog of open roles.

EMEA is a different story. Openings and applications are nearly flat year-over-year, but hiring is accelerating. Time to fill has decreased from its peak in January and applicant volume is steady at 42 applicants per opening in April. Employers are not adding more to the funnel. They are getting more out of what they already have.

Employer demand for early career talent is rising quickly but candidate interest is moving in the opposite direction. The result is a growing disconnect that is making it harder to build junior pipelines. Part of the challenge is perception.

In this market, it is no longer a volume game. The advantage now comes from conversion and execution. Leaders should consider a focus on skills-based hiring to expand their talent pool, move faster with clearer decisions and make better use of existing candidate pipelines.

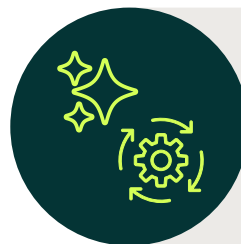
## TOP FINDINGS



**U.S. demand is outrunning supply**, with an increase of 15% in openings while applications are down 10%.



**In EMEA, there are fewer roles as application volume wanes.** Hiring is 9% above the baseline as application drops to 1% below April of 2025.

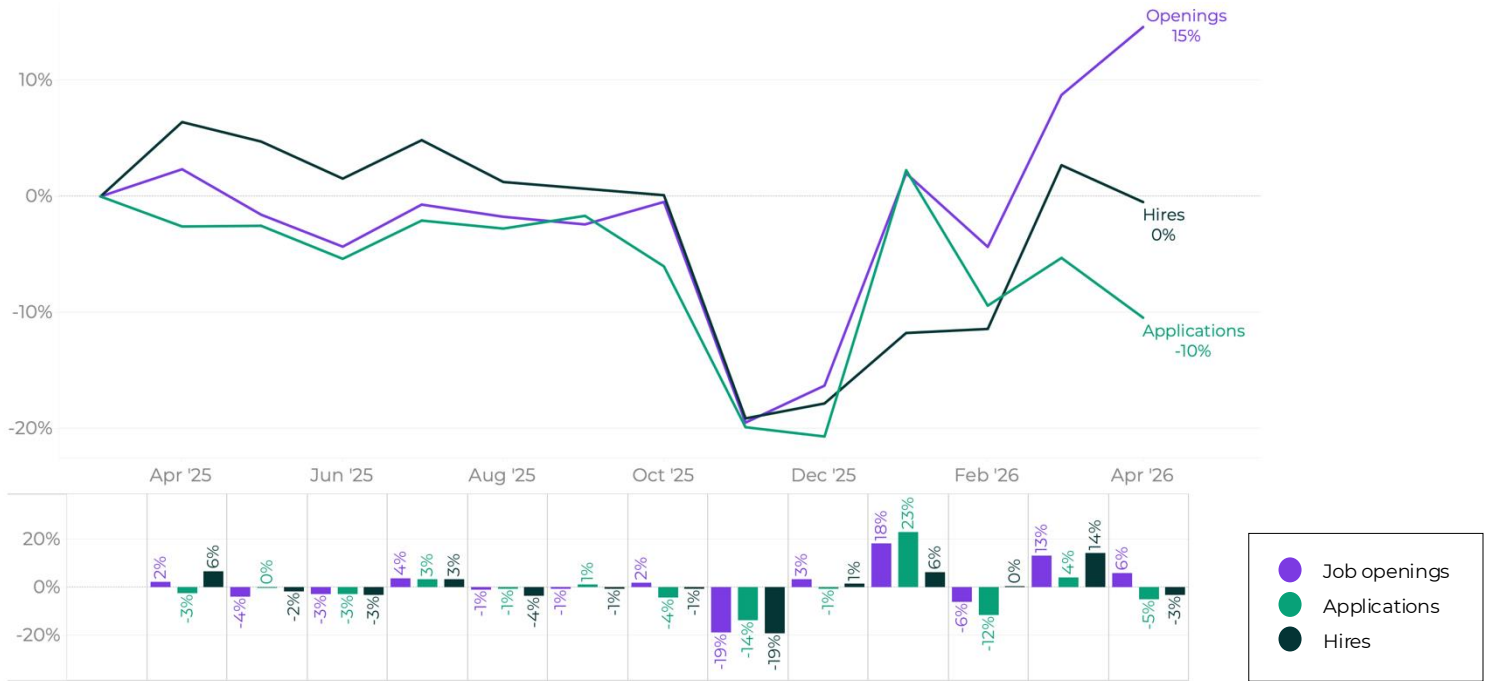


**74% of job seekers** believe AI and automation is reducing the number of entry-level roles available in the market.

**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.

# The gap between supply and demand widens

US PLATFORM INDICATORS | Job openings, applications and hires | March 2025–April 2026



**ICIMS INSIGHTS QUICK TAKE:** The gap between hires and openings continues to widen.

## MARKET UPDATE

The latest data reveals a stark disconnect between employer demand and talent supply. In April 2026, job openings surged, hitting a 13-month peak of 15% above baseline (March 2025). However, candidate activity is moving in the exact opposite direction. After a brief spike in January, application volume has declined to 10% below the baseline.

The result? Hiring velocity has completely stalled, flatlining at 0% growth. Following a volatile end to 2025 and a brief hiring bump in March 2026, we are now looking at a market where companies are eager to hire but are struggling to attract the applicant volume needed to fill those open seats.

The increased gap between hiring and growth in openings is a concern as recruiting teams fight to keep up. This would not be as great a concern if application volume were commensurate with the growth in openings. The data shows there will be added pressure on recruiting teams to find new ways to attract talent at the top of the funnel.

## STRATEGY

The playbook must change. With application volume down 10%, recruiting teams can no longer rely on a large top-of-funnel to carry them. Conversion is what matters now. That means getting serious about the candidate experience. Speed, transparency and clear communication can materially influence candidate conversions.

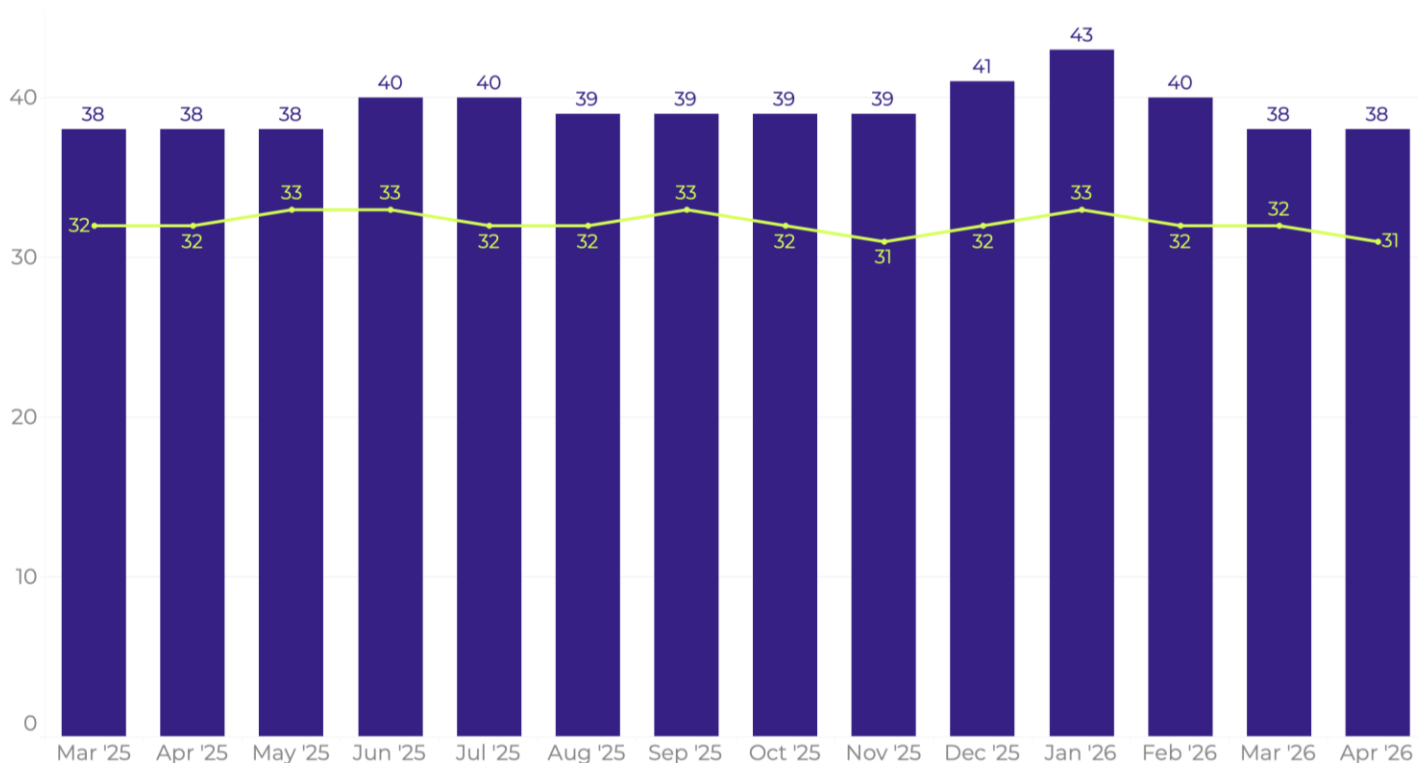
The 15% increase in openings with flat hiring points to a different problem. The requirements may not match the market. This is where skills-based hiring starts to matter. When you focus on potential and trainability, not just past titles, the talent pool opens quickly.

When external supply tightens, the smartest move is to look inside. Internal mobility is a hiring strategy. Companies that invest in upskilling and internal mobility may be better positioned to fill open roles..

# Speed is up, supply is not

Time to fill is dropping, signaling a return to hiring momentum. But with applicants per opening mostly flat on average for over a year, every company is chasing the same limited pool of talent.

US TIME TO FILL AND APPLICANTS PER OPENING | March 2025–April 2026



● Time to fill
 ● Applicants per opening



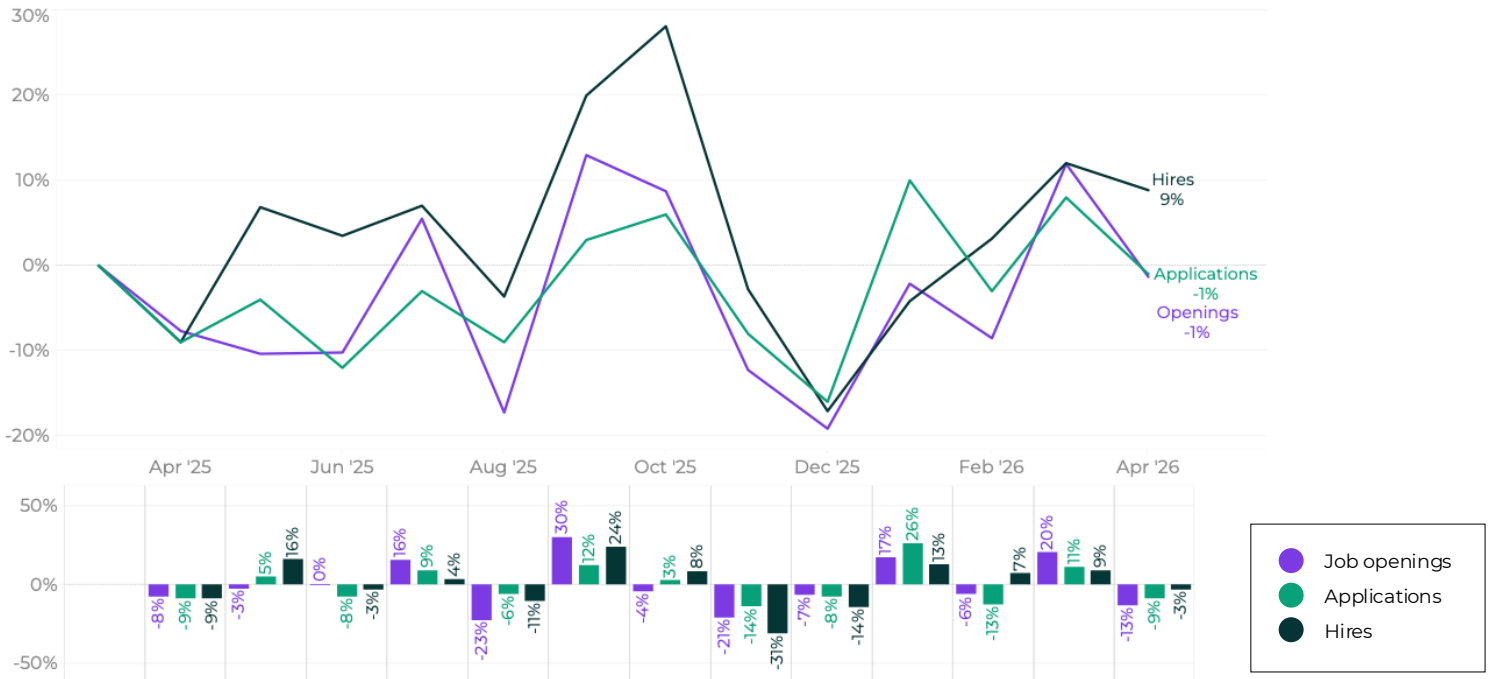
“This is what a constrained talent market looks like. Demand is rising, supply is flat and the only lever left is how well you execute inside your own process. With only 31 candidates per role, every breakdown in your process is costing you real hires.”



**TRENT COTTON**  
Head of Talent Insights,  
ICIMS

# Doing more with less: EMEA increases efficiency

EMEA PLATFORM INDICATORS | Job openings, applications and hires | March 2025–April 2026



## ICIMS INSIGHTS QUICK TAKE: EMEA openings and application volume decline.

### MARKET UPDATE

In EMEA, hiring is outpacing the market. Openings and applications in April 2026 were both nearly flat at -1% below baseline (March 2025), but hires were up 9%. That spread points to a more efficient recruiting engine, as teams are turning the same volume of demand and candidate interest into more hires through streamlined workflows and better candidate-to-role matching.

This efficiency has followed a turbulent period. Following volatility at the end of 2025 and a sharp spike in candidate activity in early 2026, the influx of net-new applicants has cooled, yet employers are now moving candidates through the funnel faster and closing requisitions more quickly than they are opening new ones.

### STRATEGY

When hires outpace both openings and applications, Leaders should consider how to capitalize on this momentum.

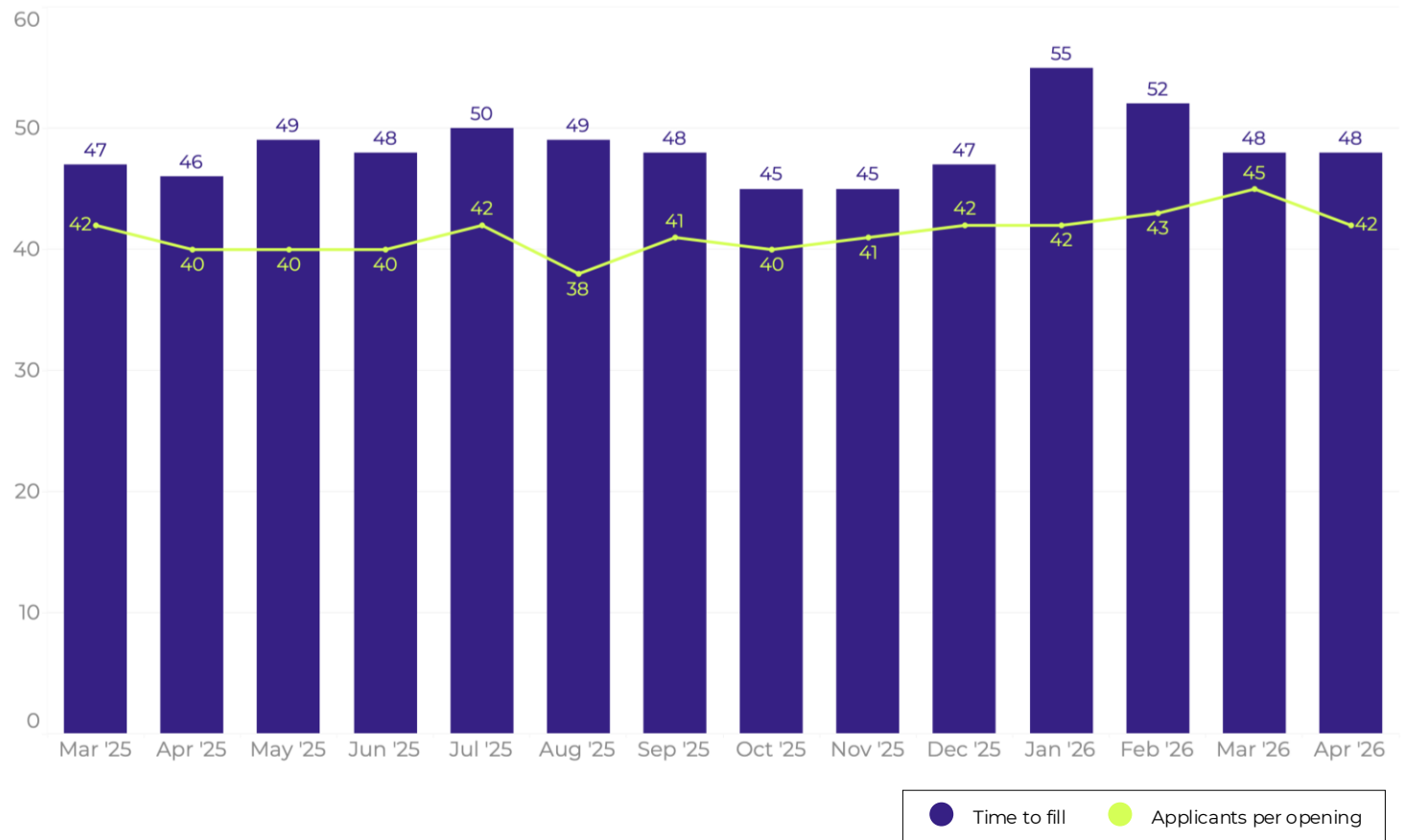
Because you are successfully clearing out your pipeline and converting candidates to hires, you will soon need to restock your talent pools. Consider how to proactively deploy targeted recruitment marketing campaigns now so you are not caught empty-handed when business demands shift and new openings eventually rise.

You did the arduous work to secure top talent in a stagnant market. Now you need to keep them. Ensure a smooth transition from candidate to employee so your new hires stay engaged, integrated and productive for the long haul.

# Fewer roles in EMEA, fierce race for talent

With fewer roles in the EMEA market and fewer candidates per opening, the advantage shifts to companies that can focus on priority hires and move them through the process without delay.

EMEA TIME TO FILL AND APPLICANTS PER OPENING | March 2025–April 2026



“While dropping time to fill from 55 to 48 days is a win, 48 days is still a long time to keep candidates waiting. CXOs must relentlessly challenge their teams to optimize the interview process, remove unnecessary steps and empower hiring managers to make swift decisions.”



**TRENT COTTON**  
Head of Talent Insights,  
ICIMS

## Entry-level hiring

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**Hiring has entered a new era. Economic uncertainty, rising skepticism and rapid advances in AI are reshaping how candidates think about work, risk and opportunity.**

To understand what talent wants now, ICIMS surveyed 1,000 job seekers across the U.S.

The data shows a sharper view of the pressures shaping candidate behavior and the tradeoffs candidates are making as they look at their next move. While economic and technological pressures continue to shape the workforce strategy of organizations, candidates are adapting the way they engage the market for jobs while also taking a look inward to find ways to keep relevant skills in a rapidly changing job market.

This report looks at how candidates are responding to a labor market that feels less predictable, more competitive and increasingly influenced by technology. It highlights where current hiring practices are uncoordinated with what talent values and where employers are unintentionally raising the bar for candidates while lowering the experience.

The employers that win in this environment will be the ones that understand what matters most to talent before they ever open a requisition. They will treat hiring as a strategic system, not a series of transactions and they will use data like this to challenge old assumptions about how people find, choose and stay with a company.

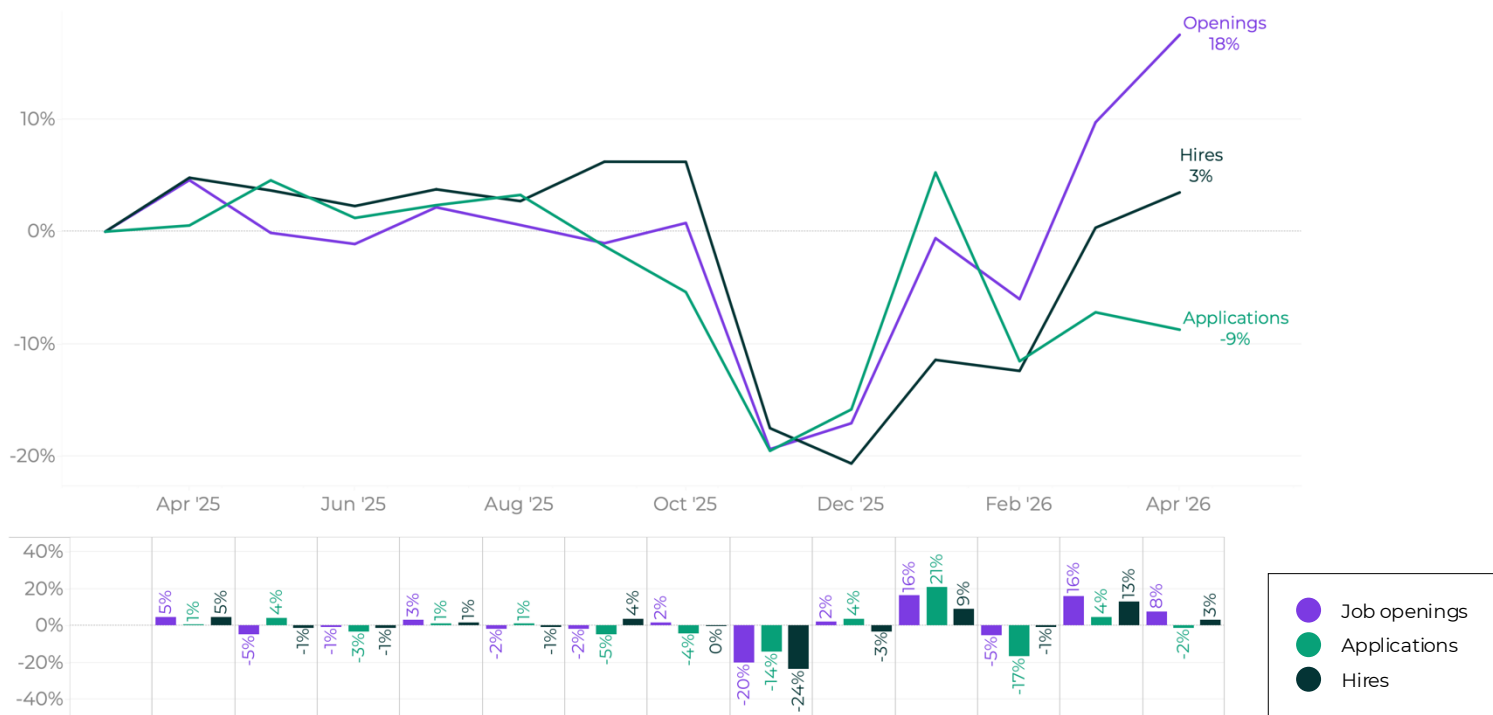
**If you lead Talent Acquisition:** You cannot afford to fly blind. Use this data to pressure-test your hiring funnel, upgrade how you communicate with candidates and push for the tech and headcount you need, not the bare minimum you have learned to survive with.

**If you are a CHRO:** This is a talent strategy problem. Treat these findings as an early warning system for how your employer brand, internal mobility programs and workforce plans need to evolve.

**If you sit in the C-suite:** Hiring is no longer a back-office function. It is a leading indicator of whether your growth plans are realistic. Read this report with one question in mind: “Are we giving our teams the conditions they need to compete for the talent that will make our strategy real?”

# Is the market hot for entry-level talent?

**ENTRY LEVEL PLATFORM INDICATORS** | Job openings, applications and hires | March 2025–April 2026



**ICIMS INSIGHTS QUICK TAKE:** The entry-level market is hot, but the application volume is not.

## MARKET UPDATE

The entry-level market is clearly out of balance. Employer demand for entry-level talent has accelerated, with openings in April 2026 now sitting 18% above baseline (March 2025) but candidate activity is not keeping up. After a brief increase in January, entry-level application volume has declined again and is now down 9%, signaling a continued pullback from entry-level candidates.

The downstream impact is starting to show. Requisitions continue to build while hiring struggles to keep pace, with entry-level hires up only 3%. Organizations may be making a concerted push to strengthen their entry-level pipelines, but limited applicant flow could slow the progress.

Without a meaningful increase in candidate activity, filling these roles will remain a challenge despite strong demand.

## STRATEGY

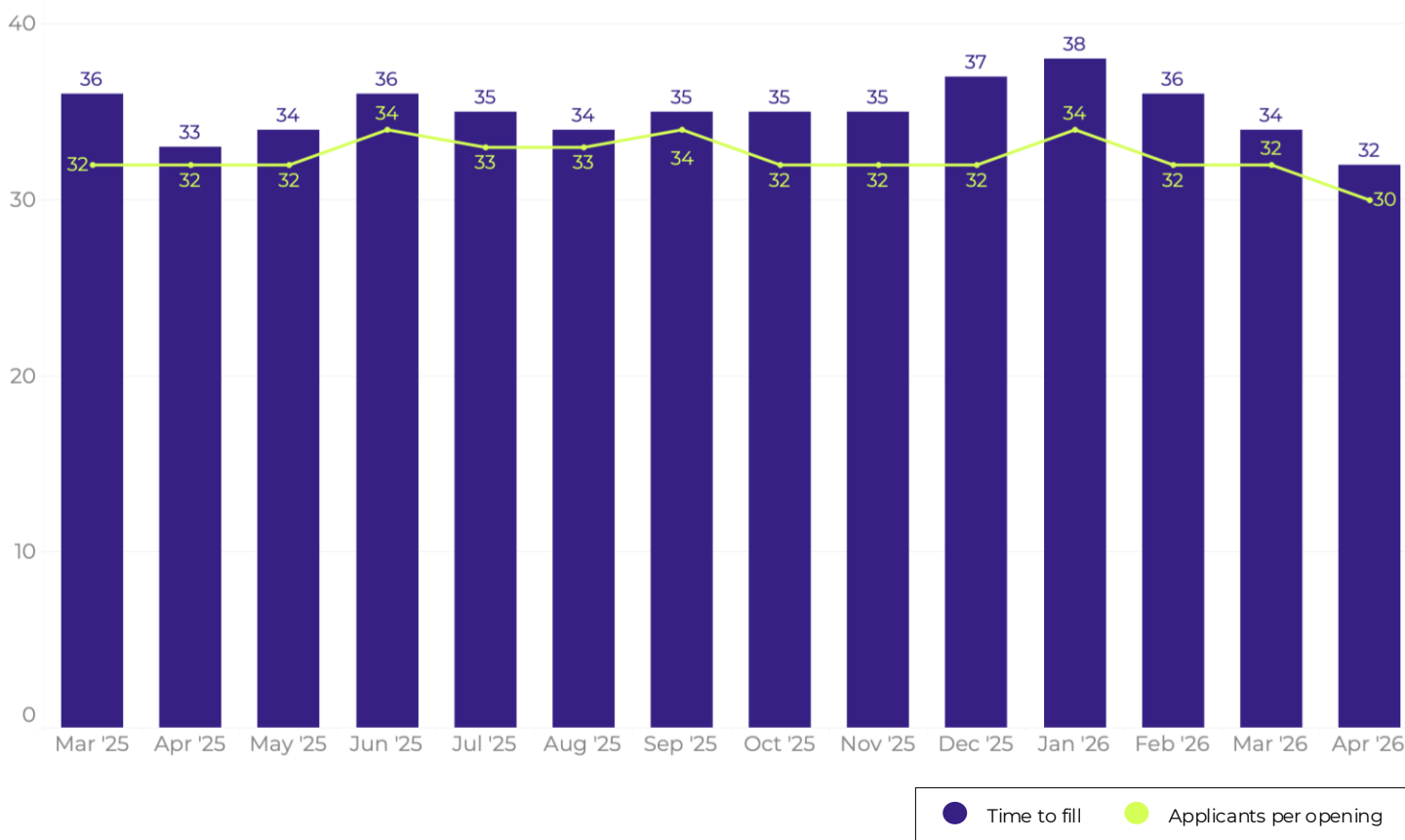
Entry-level candidates are evaluating opportunities carefully. To convert your limited applicant pool into hires, highlight clear career paths, mentorship programs and organizational stability right from the start to prove your company is the best place for them to build their future.

With entry-level applications down 9%, you need to remove unnecessary barriers. Reconsider requiring years of previous experience for entry-level roles and hire based on skills and a candidate's trainability and potential to instantly widen the available talent pool.

# Faster decisions, shrinking candidate pools

With less entry-level candidates per opening, the advantage shifts to companies that can focus on priority hires and move them through the process without delay.

ENTRY LEVEL TIME TO FILL AND APPLICANTS PER OPENING | March 2025–April 2026



“Since January 2026, the decrease in time to fill is worth paying attention to. In entry-level hiring, speed matters because candidates do not stay on the market for long. As applicants per opening continue to decline, organizations will need to get more intentional about rediscovering and reengaging top talent already in their pipelines.”

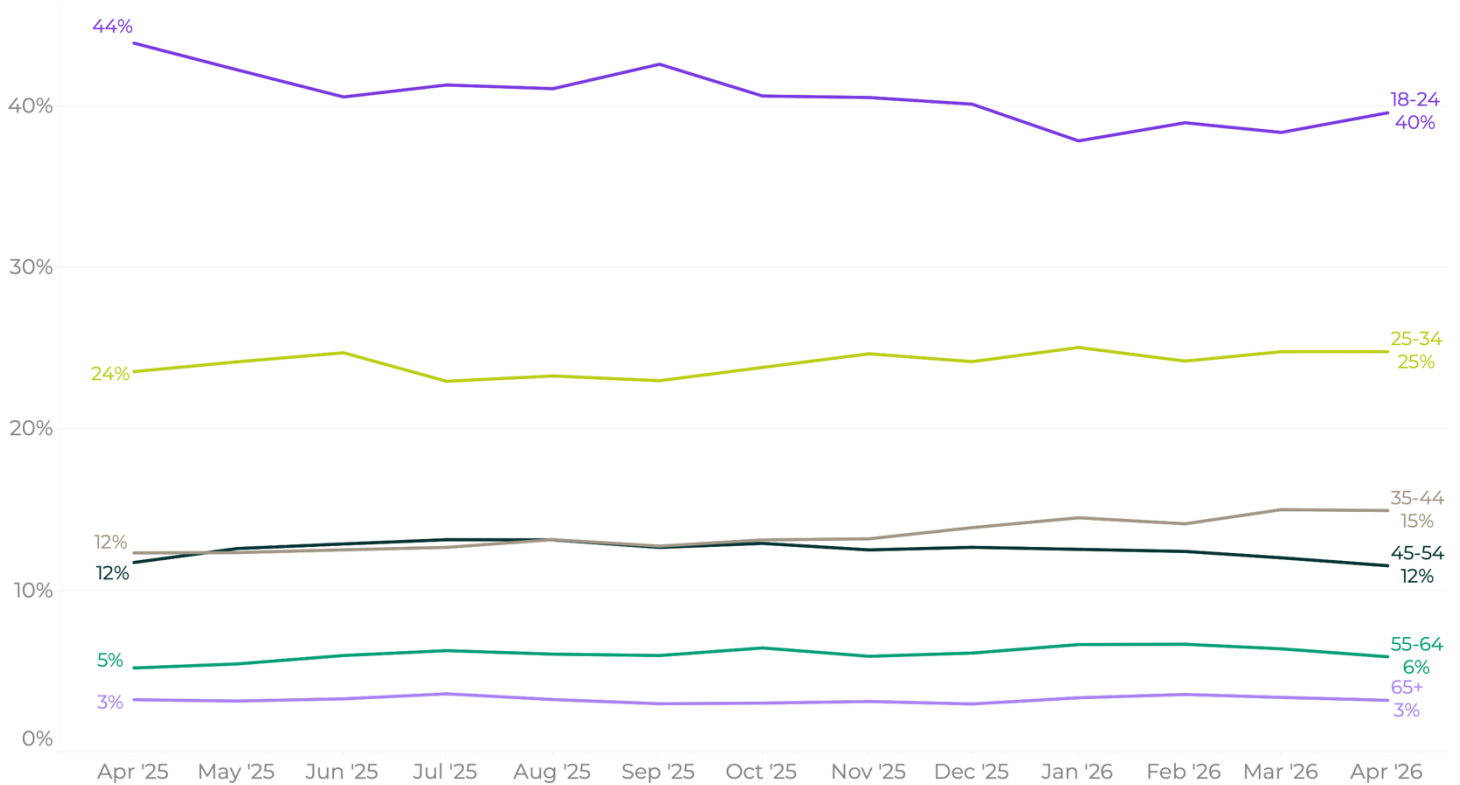


**TRENT COTTON**  
Head of Talent Insights,  
ICIMS

# The multi-generational job hunt

Today's job hunt is a truly multi-generational landscape where ambitious younger workers are applying right alongside experienced veterans. As Gen Z application volumes normalize from last year's peak, mid-career candidates are stepping in to fill the gap.

## APPLICATION DEMOGRAPHICS: April 2025–April 2026



**The makeup of the applicant pool is shifting.** Over the last 12 months, the youngest demographic of job seekers (18-24) has seen their share of total applications drop from a dominant 44% in April 2025 down to 40% in April 2026.

Meanwhile, seasoned professionals are making their move. The 35-44 age bracket grew its footprint from 12% to 15% of all applicants over the same period.

Older talent is highly competitive as well, with candidates 45 and older comprising 21% of the total applicant pool in April 2026. Driven by a tough market and delayed retirement plans, older generations are staying in the labor market longer and actively searching for better compensation and stability.

When early career application volume dips and experienced professionals flood the market, your messaging needs to adapt.

Gen Z wants seamless applications and strong brands, but older workers prioritize salary transparency, robust benefits and career growth to protect their financial future. Ensure your recruitment marketing speaks directly to the varied priorities of a multi-generational workforce.

As mid-career application volume rises, you have a prime opportunity to bring seasoned leadership into your ranks. Equip your TA teams with robust assessment tools and processes to evaluate this influx of experienced professionals and move them swiftly through the funnel.

When evaluating candidates from four different generations for the same open roles, relying on years of experience is an outdated metric. Shift your focus to skills-based hiring to level the playing field and identify the best fit for your organization regardless of age.

# Biggest frustration: The application black hole

**Despite rapid advancements in AI-driven hiring technology and automation, the most significant pain point for job seekers boils down to a lack of basic communication.**

Candidates consistently describe the “black hole” experience as the absence of updates, feedback or acknowledgment after applying. In 2025, 48% of job seekers cited lack of communication as their biggest frustration and while that number dipped slightly in 2026, it still led all complaints at 38%. Technology may be transforming how companies source and screen talent but it has not solved the most visible breakdown in the hiring process: *keeping people informed*.

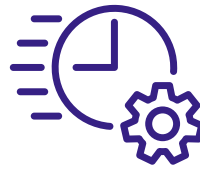
What makes this gap more striking is that it is not a complex problem. Job seekers are not asking for personalized video messages or real-time recruiter access. They want simple signals that they have not been ignored: confirmation that their application was received, clarity on timelines and updates when decisions are made. Instead, too many hiring processes still leave candidates guessing, creating friction at the exact moment companies should be building trust.

**Why it matters:**

This lack of communication is a major liability for employers. Hiring efficiency and communication are critical "brand moments."

Job seekers want clarity and they notice when it is missing. Failing to meet these basic communication expectations risks candidate drop-off and lasting brand damage. In a market where application volume is declining, employers cannot afford to let candidates languish in the dark. Speed, transparency and communication must serve as the foundation of a positive candidate experience.

**THE STAKES**



**59%**

of job seekers say companies now expect entry-level applicants to already have mid-level experience

**THE PROBLEM**

**#1 ENTRY-LEVEL FRUSTRATION:**  
“Not hearing back after applying.”



**DOWN 10 POINTS YEAR-OVER-YEAR,** progress but **4 in 10 candidates** still disappear into the void.

**Every silent inbox is a brand impression you can't take back.**

# Entry-level job seekers have a trust problem

## INSIGHT

**Trust in AI-driven hiring is slipping as entry-level candidate skepticism accelerates.** Candidates early in their careers are showing clear signs of skepticism as AI becomes more embedded in hiring decisions. Only 22% of entry-level job seekers (ages 18 – 24) say they are open to AI in the hiring process. At the same time, 37% say they do not trust AI in hiring at all, citing its impersonal nature as the primary concern.

This growing distrust is not happening in a vacuum. Nearly 78% of entry-level job seekers believe that the increased use of AI is reducing the number of available roles, with one-third saying the impact is significant. As a result, AI is not just shaping hiring experiences, it is reshaping early career decisions. Half of entry-level candidates report they have already changed or are reconsidering their career paths due to AI-driven disruption.

A new friction point is also emerging in how candidates experience the hiring process itself. Early-stage automation is creating a perception that decisions are made too quickly and without sufficient human context. For candidates, the issue is not the presence of AI, it is the lack of transparency around how it is used and how decisions are made.

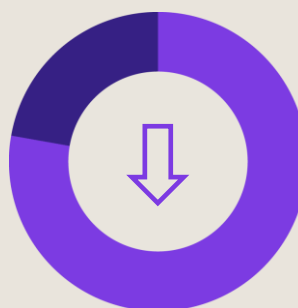
This creates a widening gap between employer intent and candidate experience. Organizations are investing in AI to drive efficiency and scale, but candidates often experience it as opaque and impersonal.

## STRATEGY

**Make AI visible.** Clearly communicate where automation is used, reinforce that humans make final decisions and audit early-stage screening to avoid over-filtering strong talent.

Pair AI efficiency with transparency and recruiter enablement so technology builds trust instead of eroding it.

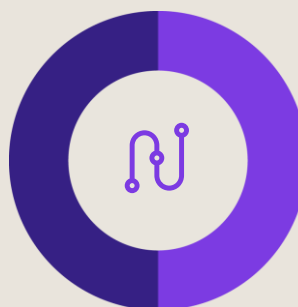
## GEN Z & AI: Navigating the Future of Work



**78%**

see AI reducing entry-level opportunities

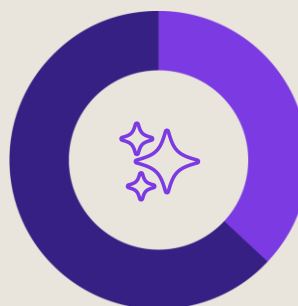
33% feel the impact is significant, 45% see it as moderate reduction



**50%**

are reconsidering their career paths

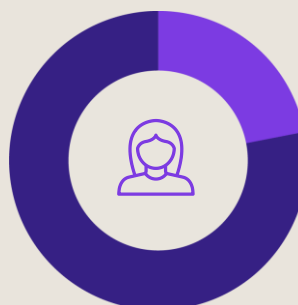
Half of Gen Z has already changed or is currently rethinking their future due to AI



**37%**

don't trust AI-driven recruitment

Skepticism stems from the process feeling too impersonal for early career candidates



**22%**

accept AI only with human oversight

Acceptance is conditional on humans retaining final decision-making power

# Is AI is raising the bar and shrinking the job pool?

In 2025, 6% of all job seekers cited a lack of entry-level jobs as their top issue. In 2026, that rose to 8%. At the same time, 40% of all job seekers believe technical and AI-related skills now outweigh soft skills for junior roles.

In 2026, 78% of entry-level job seekers (ages 18 – 24) believe increased AI usage is reducing the number of available roles, with 33% saying the impact is significant. This perception is translating into broader concern about how companies are structuring early-career hiring.

More than half (58%) of entry-level job seekers believe organizations are hiring fewer entry-level employees because of AI, while 59% say employers now expect candidates to enter the workforce with mid-level experience. Together, these data points suggest that entry-level talent sees AI not just as a screening tool, but as a structural barrier to breaking into the workforce.

External labor market signals reinforce this anxiety. The unemployment rate for recent college graduates swelled to roughly 5.7% in the fourth quarter of 2025, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, while the overall unemployment rate during that time was closer to 4.2%. This gap highlights how early-career workers are carrying more of the risk in a cooling but still competitive labor market.

## ICIMS ADVICE

**Use this as a signal to rebalance, not retreat.**

Map where AI touches entry-level hiring and what decisions it influences. If automation only cuts cost and time without creating paths for candidates to prove themselves, it is shrinking your bench instead of building it.

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**74% of all job seekers** believe AI automation is reducing the number of entry-level roles available.

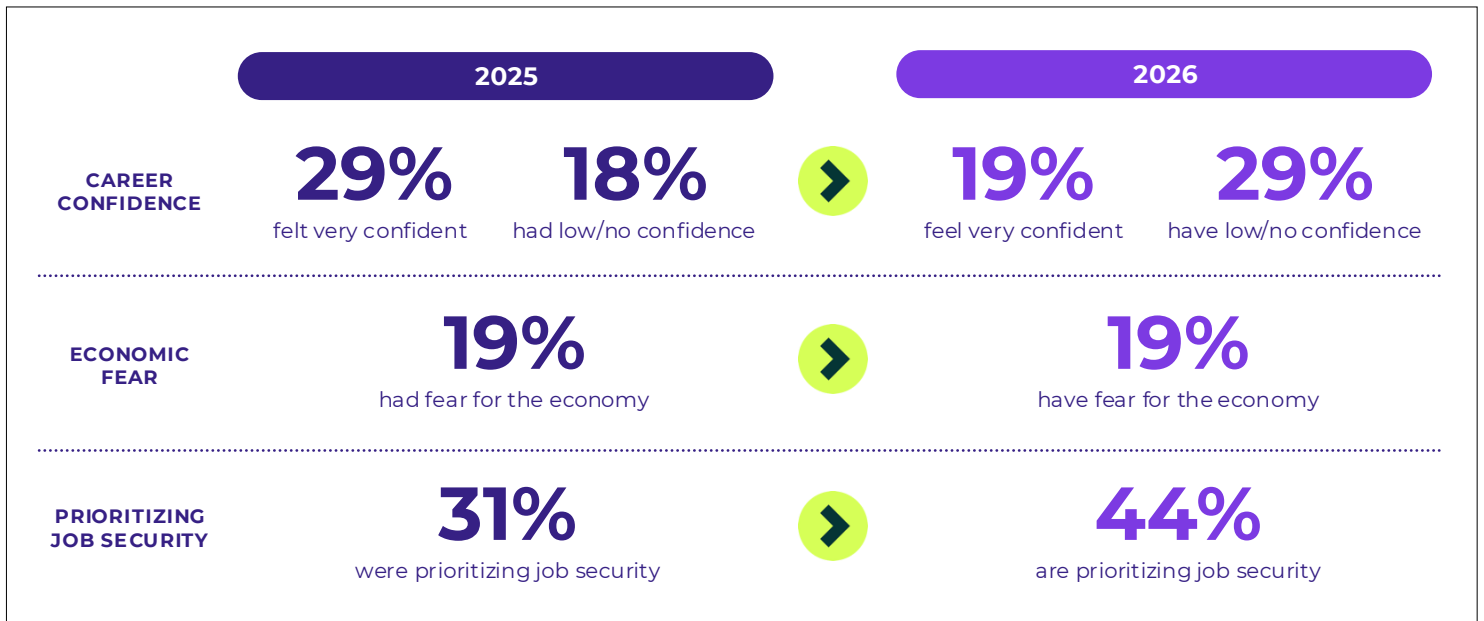
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**51% of all job seekers agree** that companies are hiring fewer entry-level employees because of AI

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**54% of all job seekers agree** that companies now expect entry-level candidates to already have mid-level experience

# Career confidence is waning



## ICIMS INSIGHTS QUICK TAKE:

As worker optimism cools, the focus shifts towards job security from 2025 to 2026.

**The combination of technological disruption and a shifting market is taking a measurable toll on candidate optimism.** In 2026, only 19% of entry-level job seekers feel "very confident" about their careers. Nearly three in ten (29%) say they feel "not very confident" or "not confident at all."

This slipping confidence is heavily influenced by a competitive entry-level landscape. While 19% cite economic uncertainty as their biggest worry, their top concerns are rooted in breaking into the workforce: 23% are most worried about not having the right experience or skillset, and 20% are concerned there are simply not enough entry-level jobs available. Recent national surveys from Gallup show a similar collapse in overall job market confidence, with just 28% of U.S. workers saying it is a good time to find a quality job in late 2025, down from about 70% in mid-2022.

**Why it matters:** When candidates are anxious about the economy and their career prospects, they become highly risk-averse.

Passive candidates are harder to pry away from their current roles. Active candidates begin to evaluate opportunities through a lens of self-preservation instead of ambition.

That anxiety directly reshapes candidate priorities, which helps explain why 44% of entry-level job seekers cite job security as a top factor when applying for roles. Employers that only sell culture or mission, without addressing the foundational need for stability, will struggle to win over top early-career talent.

### STRATEGY

To attract cautious and anxious talent, employers should address economic fears head-on. Talent acquisition teams should actively highlight organizational health and stability, lean into transparency about compensation and benefits, and clearly map out long-term career growth paths that de-risk the move for the candidate.

**The message you need to send is simple:** joining your company is exciting as well as a safe, strategically sound bet on their future.

# Candidates are upskilling to survive

The rapid integration of AI and a highly competitive job market have prompted entry-level candidates to take their career development into their own hands rather than waiting on the sidelines.

When asked how they are changing their job search approach in 2026 due to AI advancements and increased competition, 33% of entry-level job seekers report they are applying to a broader range of roles or industries. Another 30% say they are actively learning new AI skills, while 29% are fighting fire with fire by using AI tools to support their own applications and career planning.

Entry-level candidates are also turning to more traditional methods to stand out. Nearly three in ten (29%) are dedicating more time to networking, and 26% are pursuing additional education or certifications.

In fact, 23% of entry-level job seekers cite not having the right experience or skillset as their absolute biggest concern about the job market right now. They know the bar is rising, and they are doing the hard work to adapt. Candidates who proactively teach themselves AI skills, broaden their industry horizons, or pursue certifications demonstrate the exact adaptability and growth mindset that modern companies desperately need to navigate technological disruption.

## How Gen Z are adapting to the new future of work:

**30%** Learning new AI skills

**29%** Using tools for career planning

**33%** Applying to broader range of roles & industries

**29%** Networking more

**26%** Pursuing additional education or certificates

**23%** Lacking right experience or skillset as top concern

## 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

- **Emphasize conversion over volume.** Refine the candidate experience with transparent, fast and frequent communication to help ensure the limited leads you get do not drop out.
- **Rewrite the entry-level playbook.** Early career openings have surged 18% but applications have dropped 9%. To fix this massive supply and demand imbalance, stop requiring years of experience for junior roles and embrace skills-based hiring to immediately widen your available talent pool.

## FOR THE CHROs

- **Lean into skills-based development.** Candidates are actively upskilling to survive a tough market, with a quarter learning new AI tools. Harness this ambition by providing robust internal training and mentorship programs that reward adaptability, increase retention and create a future-ready workforce. This strategy may become your competitive advantage as application volume cools.

## FOR THE CXOs

- **Deploy AI strategically.** AI can drastically accelerate your hiring velocity, but candidate suspicion is high. Thirty-four percent of all job seekers (and 37% of entry-level job seekers) feel it is too impersonal. Ensure your technology investments empower your teams to move faster while maintaining the authentic human connection required to close high-value hires.

# 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](#).

## The Definitive Guide to AI Adoption in Talent Acquisition

69% of companies are using AI to hire. Only 18% use it throughout the recruiting process. Find out where your team stands. Get the full [Definitive Guide to AI Adoption in Talent Acquisition](#).

# 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



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2026 Overall Data Science Solution of the Year

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