How to Lose a Candidate in 10 Days

It's not you, it's your hiring process.



Zinc



Introduction

It's no secret that today's job market is a little...strange.

We've heard from lots of companies that they're slowing down hiring in response to global politics, weaker business outlooks, and economic uncertainty. But at the same time, the roles they *are* hiring for are more important than ever — whether that's because of business-critical gaps, new skills, or growing revenue in a tough year.

If you are hiring, you're looking for The One in a field flooded with potential candidates. The same economic uncertainty affecting companies is affecting candidates, whether that means layoffs or fierce competition for open roles.

So what's a hiring team to do?

We asked 1,000 HR pros how they're feeling about hiring right now, from AI and screening all the way through to onboarding and retaining employees. The result:

How to lose a candidate in 10 days.

Aside from the obvious HR implications of romantic work entanglements (please don't write us up), today's hiring processes reminded us of some of our favourite rom-com moments: missed connections, ghosting from both sides, and, of course, what comes after the happy ending.

We've broken down the candidate journey into ten key steps that you can't afford to get wrong in today's tight hiring market, complete with data and expert insights to back it up.

Then (because we couldn't just stop there), we included ways to automate, optimise, and simplify each stage, so you can find the perfect hire in a sea of CVs.



Charlotte Hall

Charlotte Hall
Co-founder, Zinc

DAY ONE

Pull a bait and switch

The solution to your day one problem is simple: Make sure the job is as advertised.

Unlike in classic rom coms, there are no “meet cutes” in hiring. In modern dating and in job hunting, connection often begins with a swipe — and everyone’s got a checklist that they’re looking for.

Job seekers are no different.



HOW TO KEEP YOUR CANDIDATES

A transparent, consistent job posting makes the best first impression on candidates and lets them filter out jobs that aren’t a perfect match.

In particular, AI is great for repeatable, templated tasks like writing job descriptions consistently. Here’s how:

1. Build your employer brand GPT

Ever wanted to delegate writing job postings? We have great news. Follow ChatGPT’s instructions for building out a custom GPT, then plug in any brand voice guidelines, previous job templates, or other key rules for you need it to follow.

2. Have a set process for getting hiring manager info

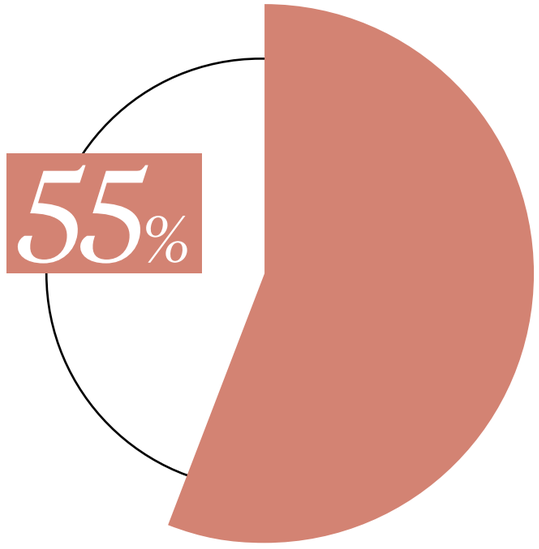
Standardising your hiring process, whether it’s a templated doc with key questions or a set agenda for an in-person meeting, gives you all the info you need without having to go back and forth.

If you’re sick of taking meeting notes, Zinc’s talent team is a big fan of Granola. Whether it’s an in-person meeting or video call, Granola automatically transcribes and summarises your conversation so you don’t miss the important details.

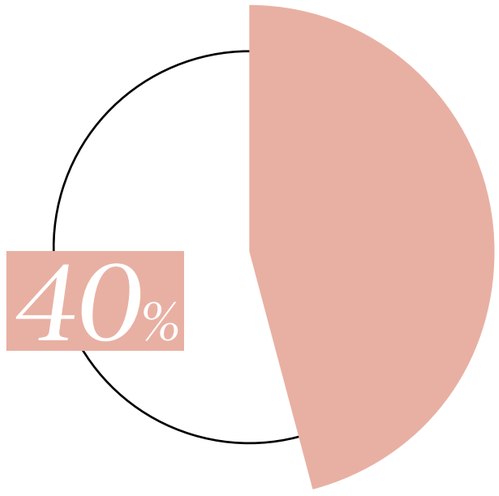
3. Delegate and delete from your to-do list

Take your meeting notes, along with any role specifics, and plug it into your custom GPT. It’ll produce a consistent, easy-to-follow job ad that’s aligned with what candidates want and what your team needs.

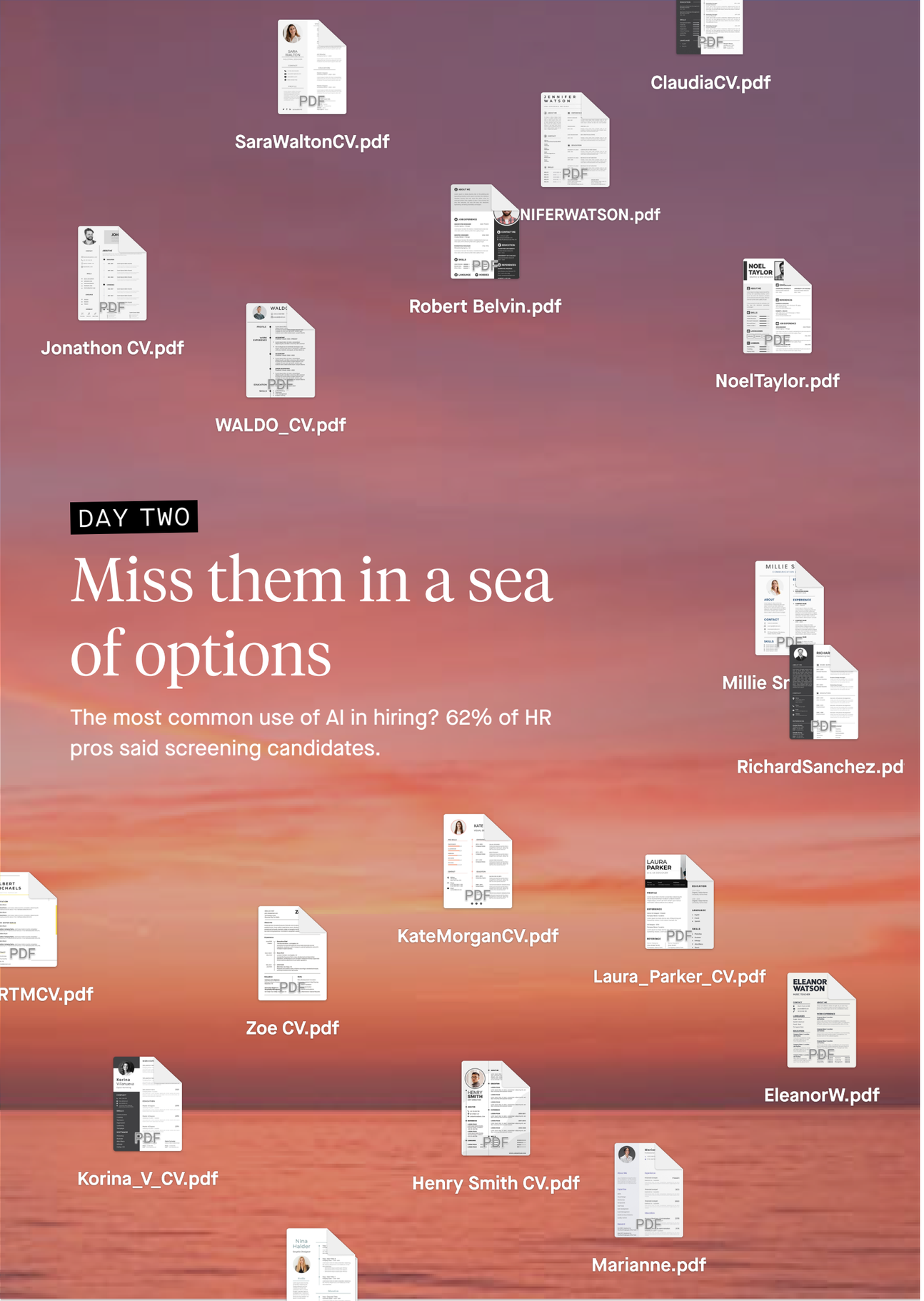
If you set the expectation for transparency and clear communication from the beginning of your hiring process, you’re more likely to end up with high-quality hires and happy candidates who fit the job spec.



of HR respondents said they used AI to write their job descriptions.



of them also said they’ve had candidates drop out of the hiring process because the job wasn’t as advertised.



"The EU AI act means there needs to be a human in the loop for final decision making as recruitment is deemed "high risk". Most firms are limiting AI to facilitate decisions, but AI won't finalise a decision."

TALENT ACQUISITION DIRECTOR, MASTERCARD

More candidates + fewer open roles = more CVs sent in for each job role.

And even as new AI tools promise to save talent teams more time, candidates are using AI to send in more applications, faster. No talent team wants to be part of the next Workday-esque headline, so you're stuck balancing two realities:

1. **AI-powered tools can sift through lots of data quickly,** making conclusions and spotting patterns in an overwhelming flood of CVs
2. **AI reflects real-life biases** and can make mistakes that can have costly consequences

As Max Curtis, Zinc's Talent Lead, put it, "Every CV is a person. If AI isn't set up correctly and it's screening people out for the wrong reasons, it's totally unethical. But it does have massive potential to speed up screening."

HOW TO KEEP YOUR CANDIDATES

AI screening tools are only as good as the human oversight that you're able to provide. If a candidate applies with an inflated job title, an AI screening tool is likely to reject them. But it doesn't know that in a few months, you might be hiring for a more senior role — and you'll want this candidate in your talent pipeline.

"Until AI becomes more sophisticated, that sort of stuff is going to happen," said Max.

Lauren Brown, Zinc's Talent Associate, agreed: "I'm a bit wary of complete AI screening tools, but more and more new things are going to come out."

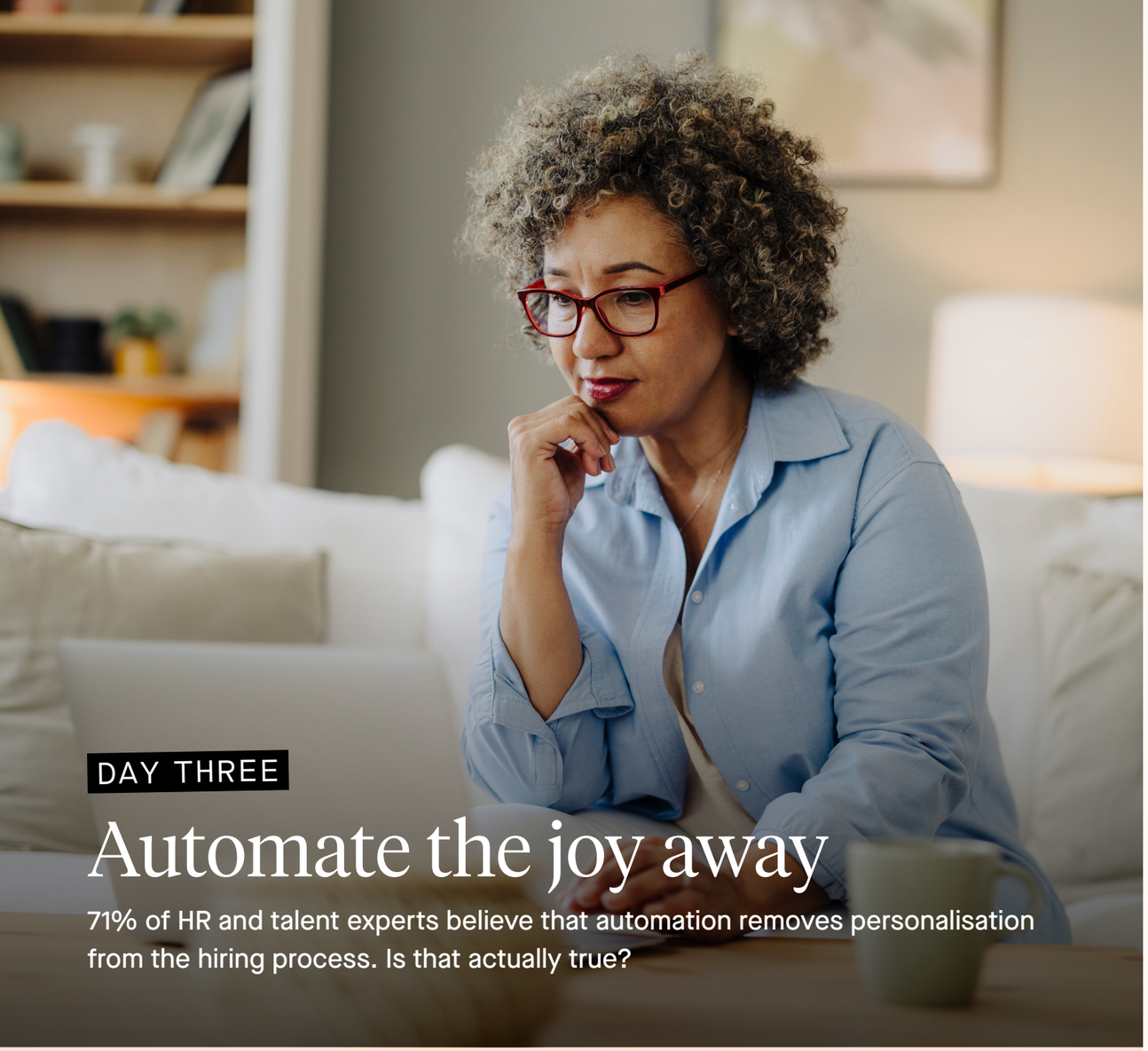
If your team is measured on time to hire, screening is the first place you can cut time out of the process. **Here's how to do it well:**

Keep it human

AI screening tools can save time, but there's no replacement for a TA pro's gut feeling. Whatever tool you implement, use the extra time to add more personalisation to later stages of the funnel, and engage with candidates meaningfully.

Make sure you're checking in

Good relationships are built on clear communication and reasonable expectations — your AI screening tool is no different. If you're using it to analyse CVs, look closely at what it rejects and schedule in regular time to review results. If you're asking questions, see if the answers are indeed a good predictor of interview performance or if you need to refine.



DAY THREE

Automate the joy away

71% of HR and talent experts believe that automation removes personalisation from the hiring process. Is that actually true?

"We're hiring people, because a big part of Zinc is culture. And right now, you can't assess culture without having a chat and meeting someone."

MAX CURTIS, TALENT LEAD AT ZINC

ZincGPT

How do I automate my hiring process?

Candidates don't want to feel like they're just being pulled through the process by a robot. Automation has its place, but when it steps in at the wrong moment it can turn hiring into a cold, transactional exchange.

Here's how to avoid common automation pitfalls and make candidates feel valued.

1. **Warm up your rejection emails —** Missing names, mismatched subject lines, bad timing, and messy templates make candidates feel like an afterthought. QA your early-stage templates, and personalise at the end of the process.
2. **Connection first, assessments second —** If you haven't had an actual conversation with a candidate, it's a lot harder to convince them that a two-hour take-home assessment is worth doing. Introduce assessments once you've built a rapport, and explain why it's important. Or make them short and snappy, something they can complete in less than 20 minutes.
3. **Blend automation with human review —** AI can feel like a lifesaver when you're staring down hundreds of applications for one role. But use screening to prioritise CVs, not reject them. Keep a human in the loop for promising outliers, ensuring automation doesn't close any doors too early.
4. **Timing is everything —** Make sure your systems aren't automatically sending out candidate surveys before candidates get a final decision. For extra credibility, pair them with a personalised note to show you value their feedback.
5. **Sync your systems —** Make a list of all the automated messages you send to candidates and when. Are there places where they overlap? Candidates should never receive conflicting or duplicate messages, so stay aligned to build credibility.

Good response

Ask Zinc anything

AI can make mistakes. Check important information first.

The good news? You can pretty much use AI and automation however you want.

The bad news? You can pretty much use AI and automation however you want.

DAY FOUR

Ignore automation entirely

Over half (58%) of HR respondents said they spent too much time updating candidates. We've got great news for them.

In the rom-com world, avoiding hard conversations is never a good thing (see: all that time they wasted in *When Harry Met Sally* instead of just talking about their feelings). And neither is avoiding automation and AI tools.

We get it. It can be tempting to stick to tried-and-true. And 15% of the people we surveyed said they didn't use AI at all, proving that there's room for choice.

But ignoring automation leaves you at risk of drowning in repetitive admin while your candidates are ghosted, delayed, and left on read. Candidates are using AI to write CVs, browse job applications, and even deepfake their way through interviews — so it's important to keep up.

Automation isn't a cure-all, but it's not your enemy. When used right, it can have a big impact on your ability to focus on the parts of your job you actually like (because we're confident it's not sending update emails).

59% of respondents use ChatGPT to write final stage interview questions or candidate tasks

47% use AI to progress candidates through the hiring funnel

37% use AI to reject candidates

> “In scale-ups, things move quickly, and great candidates often come in second place just because the timing or exact fit wasn’t right.”
>
> DECLAN PACKER, HEAD OF TALENT ACQUISITION AT NUMAN

HOW TO KEEP YOUR CANDIDATES

When we asked other talent pros for their take on automation opportunities most companies are overlooking, they came back with some top-tier answers.

Declan Packer, Head of Talent Acquisition at Numan, highlighted how automation can help re-engage high-quality candidates that weren’t quite right for past roles.

“In scale-ups, things move quickly, and great candidates often come in second place just because the timing or exact fit wasn’t right,” he said. “Having an automated way to flag, track, and re-surface these ‘near-miss’ candidates when similar roles open would be a game-changer.”

“Plus,” he added, “it’s a much better candidate experience. You’re showing people that you really saw their potential, even if they didn’t get the first role, and that can really strengthen your employer brand over time.”

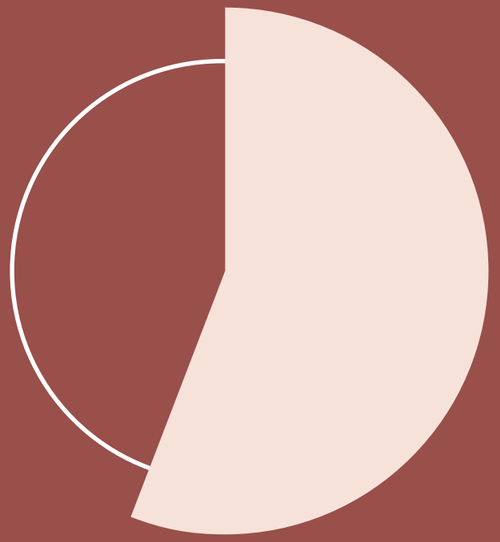
Less work, stronger candidates? Sounds like a win to us.

Alicia Riley, Head of People at ThanksBen, said: “From hiring to onboarding, we automate the transition from our ATS to HRIS.”

“The transfer pulls candidates into our onboarding workflow, which in turn triggers emails being sent and notifications for other onboarding tasks. The people function are notified as part of that, too, so we know when they’ve made a hire.”

Opportunities for implementing workflows, automation, and AI abound. **If you don’t know where to start, though, here’s a quick cheat sheet you can share with your team.**





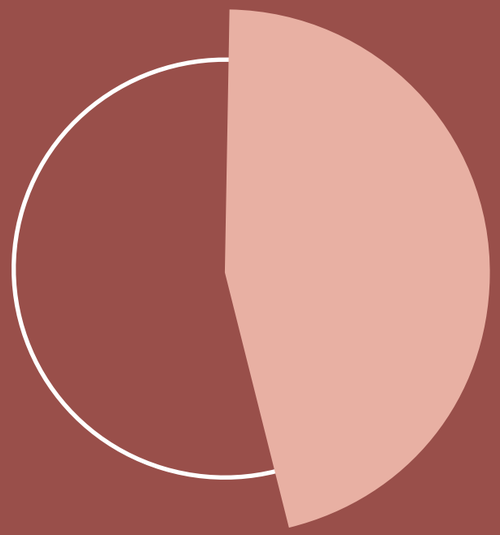
56%

of recruiters who believe that if you can't compete on salary, a big benefits package won't make up for it.

Half of respondents said that they put a higher salary on job ads to encourage more applications.

46%

of recruiters do think that a comprehensive benefits package can offset a lower salary range.



DAY FIVE

Make money the plot twist

When money problems get involved in romance, it almost inevitably blows up — like in *10 Things I Hate About You*, when Julia Stiles finds out that Heath Ledger was bribed to date her. Or in *Leap Year*, when Amy Adams finds out that her perfect fiance isn't enough for her.

Salary transparency isn't required by law in the UK, but almost 70% of UK job postings included salary information in 2025. Studies have shown that including pay information closes 18% of the gender pay gap and leads to more applications from qualified candidates (which after all, is the goal).

Which brings us to the interesting part: 56% of recruiters believe that if you can't compete on salary, a big benefits package won't necessarily make up for it.

Just like in the movies, candidates appreciate clear, open and honest communication. But, our survey also found that 44% of recruiters do think that a comprehensive benefits package can offset a lower salary range.

One report even found that personalised benefits and total rewards frameworks are becoming more important to candidates, especially as they look beyond salary towards perks like flexible working, healthcare benefits, parental leave, and more.

So what's a hiring team to do?





The key takeaway here is obvious: be honest.

HOW TO KEEP YOUR CANDIDATES

It's important to remember that the half of our respondents who said a benefits package *would* offset a lower salary were once candidates, too. It's safe to assume many of your candidates will think the same. The benefits (pun intended) aren't immediately apparent, but they are there.

Whatever your approach, be honest with candidates from the beginning. Be confident in what you're offering, and be prepared to make the case to your candidate about why it's your best offer. If everyone's on the same page from the beginning, you're off to a good start.

There can also be legitimate reasons for not adding salary to a job posting. Alicia gave us the ThanksBen perspective: "As a startup grows, roles develop and that needs to be reflected in your levelling."

"When we're hiring new roles, it's not always clear right away where they're going to sit and we've needed to be more agile to attract the right talent for the team. It needs to be an agile process, but one that reflects pay equity," she said.

She did add that tracking pay bands was essential though. "Pay bands are incredibly important for preventing inequality and gender pay gaps. We always keep a close eye on our pay bands to make sure our team are where they should be, and we frequently benchmark them."

A good **total compensation** approach sets you apart from your competitors, especially if you offer a benefit that isn't widely available in your sector.

As the market changes and more regulation around **pay transparency** comes into effect in the EU, candidates will start to expect good benefits and be turned off if they're missing.

Solid benefits are good for **employee retention** — which means you have to **hire less.**

Salary sacrifice schemes can increase the **take-home value** of benefits for employees.

Diverse benefits help you meet **the needs of diverse employee groups**, strengthening your business as a whole.

Benefits help build a **work culture** that gets people excited to work for your company.

Benefits that support **employee wellbeing** can help manage **risk and burnout.**

Rising cost of living means that **benefits take on a greater value** to candidates.

If all else fails? Hire quickly.

The more you can speed up your time to hire, the more you can compete in a crowded candidate market for the most qualified employees. Just make sure your candidate experience doesn't suffer — which is easier said than done.

DAY SIX

Ghost them like a bad date

We asked 100 people why they've ghosted a candidate. 20% said the candidate wasn't qualified, 20% said they ran out of time, and 9% cited internal changes.

"Forgot."

"Lack of communication."

"They're completely unqualified for the job e.g. unable to work in the UK."

"They were weird."

"Because it's part of the process."

"Too many candidates to tell the terrible ones no."

"There were better candidates who were more qualified."

"Occasionally, but not intentionally! Too many candidates in the process."

"A role was cancelled at the last minute and I didn't have time to update all the candidates properly."

"I'm busy, they're unsuitable. It's bad manners, but I lose interest in them if I don't see the next step."

"It wasn't intentional, but rather a result of limited time and resources."

"Most times it's because we've decided to go with another candidate or the roles has been put on hold."



At the other end of your inbox, every application represents a person. The vast majority of HR and TA experts told us that if you're ghosting candidates in 2025, you're an outlier among your peers.

In rom-coms and in hiring, disappearing without closure leaves someone stranded. It's bad for your brand, business, and future pipeline.

HOW TO KEEP YOUR CANDIDATES

The big reasons for ghosting? Lack of time, unsuitable candidates, and shifting priorities.

This is where automation shines. Even a quick "thanks, but no thanks" email can close the loop.

Aim for less personalisation at the start of the process, and more towards the end. It's likely your ATS has ways for you to auto-send rejection emails, or you can always blind copy candidates onto the same email.

Some people argue that automated rejection emails remove personalisation (and if the Reddit threads are to be believed, a lot of candidates don't like them). But especially when you're screening at the beginning of the process, it's a way to close the loop — no matter how strange or unsuitable the candidate might be.

And if the candidate is strong but not right for the role, you've just added another name to your company's talent pool — but only if they've had a good experience with your company.

DAY SEVEN

Take your sweet time to hire

70% of respondents said they had been ghosted by a candidate.

84%

of respondents said it took them longer than a month to make a senior hire

16%

said it took them over two months

> “Each click you save by continuing to chip away at process improvement over time all adds up to a quicker time to hire. It’s not always about the big projects.”
>
> CHARLOTTE EGAN, TALENT ACQUISITION OPTIMISATION & DATA MANAGER AT JOHN LEWIS PARTNERS

It’s a lot more likely that you’ve received radio silence from a candidate you were excited about. Which is a bummer, but there’s not much you can do about it.

Or is there?

84% of the people we surveyed said it took them longer than a month to make a senior hire, and 16% said it took over two months. The bigger the company, the longer the hiring process.

When candidates did tell them why they were dropping out, it was mostly because they’d found a better offer elsewhere. **But a full quarter of candidates said that it was because the hiring process was too slow.**

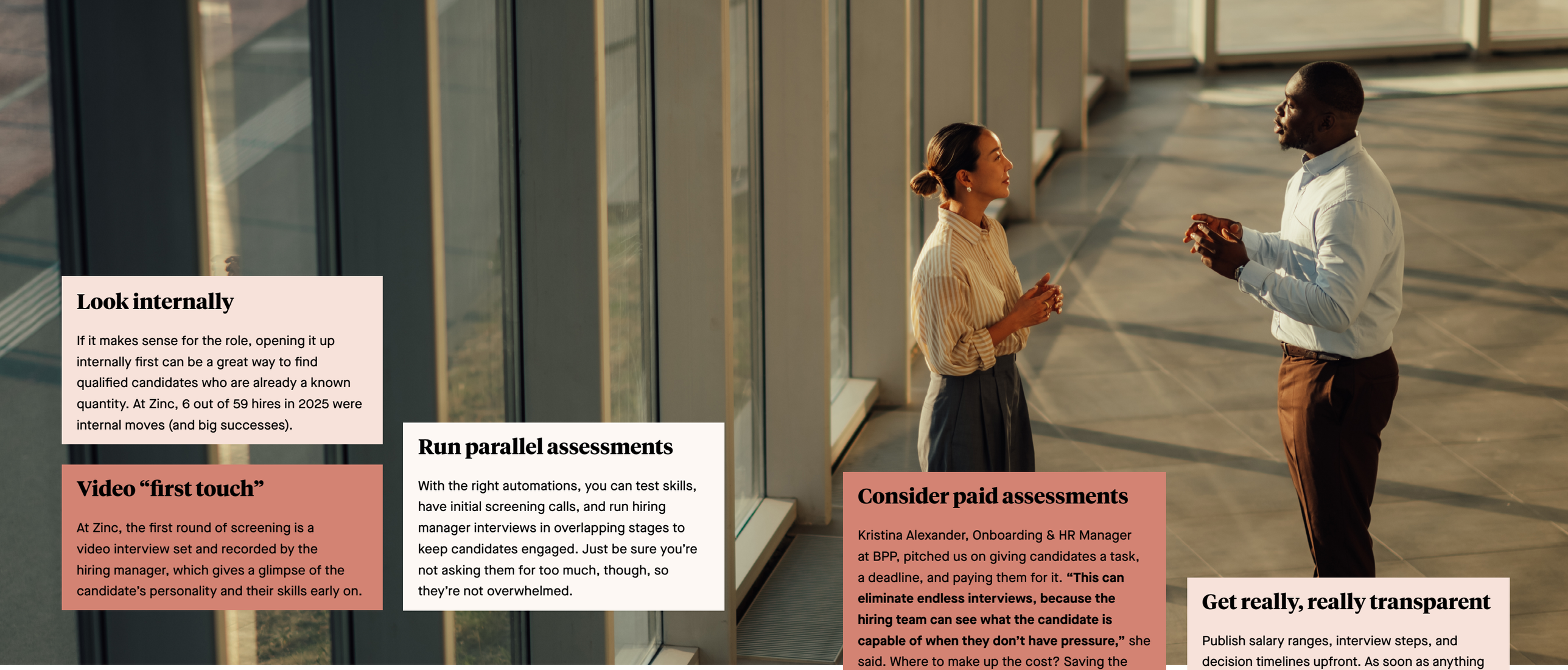
We know it’s easy to make junior hires — just under two-thirds of them happen in less than three weeks. But for business-critical senior roles, it’s even more important to get it right the first time round and not waste time.

HOW TO KEEP YOUR CANDIDATES

As we learned on day five, if you can’t win on benefits and salary, you can win on speed. Which feels like a bit of a paradox — going fast and getting a high-quality hire?

Too often the hiring process feels like an unnecessary movie montage of infrequent check-ins and delayed decisions. There are obvious ways to make it faster and improve candidate experience while you’re at it, but what about the hidden gems? Speed isn’t just from automation. It’s from cutting bottlenecks, being transparent, and making your process as efficient as possible.

The bonus? All the tactics on the next page won’t just help with your time to hire. They’ll improve candidate experience, keep hiring managers happy, and make your life easier. Win!



Look internally

If it makes sense for the role, opening it up internally first can be a great way to find qualified candidates who are already a known quantity. At Zinc, 6 out of 59 hires in 2025 were internal moves (and big successes).

Video “first touch”

At Zinc, the first round of screening is a video interview set and recorded by the hiring manager, which gives a glimpse of the candidate’s personality and their skills early on.

Run parallel assessments

With the right automations, you can test skills, have initial screening calls, and run hiring manager interviews in overlapping stages to keep candidates engaged. Just be sure you’re not asking them for too much, though, so they’re not overwhelmed.

Consider paid assessments

Kristina Alexander, Onboarding & HR Manager at BPP, pitched us on giving candidates a task, a deadline, and paying them for it. **“This can eliminate endless interviews, because the hiring team can see what the candidate is capable of when they don’t have pressure,”** she said. Where to make up the cost? Saving the time of stakeholders who don’t have to block out their calendars for interviews.

Get really, really transparent

Publish salary ranges, interview steps, and decision timelines upfront. As soon as anything changes, let candidates know, to eliminate drop-off and set expectations.

Gamify your employee referrals

Most companies offer £££ in return for successful referrals. But what about other perks? If you can’t afford to hand out cash, consider extra vacation days, charity donations, or other fun perks.

Train your team

Have a cross-functional pool of interviewers from teams across the business who can jump in when the hiring manager isn’t free and keep the process moving along. Be sure to provide training and support so they’re not going in blind.

Don’t wait for the debrief

Schedule time immediately following each interview for a 15-minute debrief to get interviewer feedback right away — not in 48 hours.

> “Really cross-examine and continue to revisit those parts of the process that have the highest amount of repeated tasks. There are lots of hidden time-saving gems.”

CHARLOTTE EGAN, TALENT ACQUISITION OPTIMISATION & DATA MANAGER AT JOHN LEWIS PARTNERS



DAY EIGHT

Use a bad background checking provider

75%

of respondents said they’ve had to delay a hire because of slow background checks. Yikes.

Look — we couldn’t leave out the background checks. After all, it’s one of our favourite things in the world, second only to that scene in *10 Things I Hate About You* where Heath Ledger is serenading Julia Stiles during her sports practice.

You know what a bad background check looks like. You’ve probably even been on the wrong side of one once or twice, too. And if you’re in a field where there’s fierce competition for qualified candidates, you’ve probably had a candidate drop out because their checks were taking too long.

We’re not going to say we were excited to see this stat, but we weren’t surprised, either. Traditional background checking is slow, clunky, and manual, for you and your candidates.

Most old-school providers run checks thanks to a small army of support workers, who might even be based overseas. At Zinc, we’ve built our platform on the belief that automated is best — if it’ll take manual time from our team, we don’t build it.

HOW TO KEEP YOUR CANDIDATES

You need a solid background checking process — if only so you don't end up like the person who told us that they ghosted a candidate because they found out he was a serial killer (true story).

When it comes to a great background checking process that's speedy for candidates, we're obviously biased. But if you're looking for a new provider or deciding if you should keep your checks in-house, here are a few things to keep in mind:

Your investment	IN-HOUSE	3RD-PARTY
	• Will you need to hire or train new team members? • What software will you need? • How much will the tech cost? • What's the time investment?	• Does the provider charge per check or with a subscription model? • Are there any hidden fees for training or integrations? • How much time will you save?
Candidate experience	• How will your team prioritise candidate experience? Can they?	• What options for branding or personalisation are there? • Does the platform make a good first impression on candidates?
Scalability	• If your hiring grows or slows, will you have to adjust team size? • Do you have the right resources for global expansion, if needed?	• Can the provider flex with your business needs? • Do they have the capacity for all your checks, globally?
Accuracy and efficiency	• How long will it take your team to run checks? • If something goes wrong, what's the plan to fix it?	• Do they have a proven track record of accuracy? • Are they truly automated or just hiding behind a large support team? • Does it empower your team?

"Month two of my career in screening: One of our dream candidates shows up in a terrorist training camp photo, and the other turns out to be on the 'FBI's Most Wanted' list. I've never looked at a CV the same way since!"

DAVID COLE, HEAD OF REGULATORY AFFAIRS AND POLICY, ZINC



DAY NINE

Think the story ends at happily ever after

In *Two Weeks Notice*, everything is going (sort of) well at Sandra Bullock's new job with Hugh Grant — until, of course, values collide and burnout surfaces. She takes the job to preserve a local community centre, but he hires her for her no-nonsense opinion on everything from his stationery to legal issues. Their personalities clash, sparks fly, and she quits. That story, of course, has a happy ending. But if a new employee discovers that the job they've just joined isn't the one that they were sold during the interview process, it can have consequences: a gap where you need a key skill, wasted time, and a damaged employer brand. Especially if Hugh Grant isn't there to charm them into staying.

Onboarding is essential. And more than 800 of our respondents know it! But the trouble comes when the interview process isn't aligned with onboarding, employee expectations, or hiring manager requirements.

So what's a plucky young environmental lawyer to do?



82%

of respondents were happy with their onboarding process

40%

have had a candidate leave in the first six months because the job wasn't as advertised

At Zinc, the onboarding process is deliberately designed to protect the time of new employees and help them get to know the company. For the first two weeks, employees focus specifically on onboarding — no role-related tasks allowed.

"It's a very self-sufficient onboarding process," said Sophie Mann, Zinc's People Partner. "Which means that people can go about it in a way that makes sense for them."

This level of autonomy might not be right for every company, but it's something that consistently sets new employees at Zinc up for success after their first two weeks.

Other companies take different approaches: Think of Zapier's focus on onboarding remote employees and using their product, or AirBnB's focus on "belonging at work" in line with core values.

Whatever you choose to focus on, it should be reflected in the entire candidate experience, from application to onboarding.

Onboarding agenda

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI
1 New employees get a a **Notion page** with tasks broken down by onboarding day.	2 They schedule in **meet the team** sessions across the entire business. `Meet Marketing` `Meet Account Management` `Meet Tech`	3	4 `Meet Maggie` They meet their **Zinc mentor**, a buddy from a different team who helps them problem solve and learn more about how the company works.	5 They're given **role-specific resources** to read and absorb.
6 `Ash customer call` They sit in on **customer calls**, learning about pain points and Zinc's solutions.	7	8 `Send checks` `Fill out references` They're assigned **tasks** to complete in the **Zinc product**, like sending checks and filling out references.	9 `Lunch and learn` At the end of the two weeks, they give a **lunch and learn** about a topic of their choice: Something that stuck out from their onboarding, skills from a past job, or ideas for improvement.	10 We ask them for **feedback** once the two weeks is up, and collect it for implementation. `Fill feedback form`

The pressure is high. 70% of HR and talent pros feel like they can't make a bad hire.

If you're feeling it – it's time to go back to basics.

DAY TEN

Forget why you're doing this in the first place

What makes you feel confident that you've made a good hire?

Maybe they smashed that one answer out of the park, or the hiring panel absolutely raved about how well-spoken they were. It could be a great reference, unique educational background, or just a gut feel.

In uncertain economic times, hiring can feel make or break (especially when you've got hiring managers pinging you with constant requests for updates).

Instead of pulling *The Holiday*-style hijinks and running away from your problems like Kate Winslet fleeing to Los Angeles, it's time to refocus on why you're doing this in the first place.

HOW TO KEEP YOUR CANDIDATES

The fastest way to lose your candidates is to lose trust in yourself, and in your process.

Honestly? We haven't got a step-by-step solution for this one, or clever quick fixes. Because you're the expert.

You got into HR or talent acquisition to work with people. You've probably been doing it for a while, and know all the ins and outs of what could go wrong and where you stand to improve. At the end of the day, you need to do two things:

1. **Work with people**
2. **Trust your process**

Sometimes, you just have to take a chance. "I've hired people and thought they would be amazing, but they haven't stuck around very long," said Lauren. "But I see people that weren't an obvious fit that we hired and they've absolutely thrived."

"I'm constantly motivated by the diversity of the people I get to speak with and ultimately work with. I'm always learning, and there's nothing more fulfilling than seeing someone thrive and grow after you've helped bring them on board."

DECLAN PACKER, HEAD OF TALENT ACQUISITION AT NUMAN

END CREDITS

Getting to the happily ever after

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a hiring team in possession of an open role is bound to run into a few hiring hiccups. There's always another role, employee turnover, and more admin to get to.

The good news is that you know a good candidate experience when you see it, and there are countless ways to get there that align with your organisation's processes, values, and people.

The big questions to ask yourself:

- If I was a candidate, how would I feel about our process?
- Is what we're doing right now leading to the outcomes that we want?
- What's one change I can make tomorrow to keep improving?

The number one rule of a rom com is that there has to be a happily ever after. That doesn't always happen in hiring, **but if you look for it, we have a sneaky feeling you'll find that great candidate experience is all around.**

If you're looking to turn your candidate experience from hijinks to hassle-free, we'd love to chat.

Get in touch with our team to learn more about how Zinc's automated background checking solution integrates with your HR tech stack and helps you provide the best candidate experience possible.

