

The Essential Guide to Candidate Experience

Gemma Dale; Tim Scott



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The advertisement features a black header with the CMO Inspired Conference logo on the left, which consists of a green speech bubble containing the letters 'CMO'. To the right of the logo, the text 'INSPIRED CONFERENCE' is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below this, in smaller white capital letters, is the date and location: '25 OCTOBER | DE VERE BEAUMONT ESTATE | OLD WINDSOR UK'. The main body of the advertisement is a collage of images. The top image shows a large, white, classical-style building with many windows, surrounded by green trees and a fountain in the foreground. Below this are several smaller images showing people at a conference: a woman speaking at a podium, a man presenting to a group, and a large audience seated in a hall. At the bottom of the advertisement, a black banner contains the text 'Join Over 100 Chief Marketing Officers & Digital Innovators' in a green, sans-serif font.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tim Scott

Tim is a UK HR professional and Chartered Fellow of the CIPD with over twenty years of generalist experience in roles across the private, public and voluntary sectors. Alongside his “day jobs”, he has co-written a number of books about HR and management, including the successful “Putting Social Media to Work” series. A self-confessed social media convert, Tim is active on Twitter (as @TimScottHR) and also writes for a number of publications and sites.

Tim is currently People Director at Fletchers Solicitors, a leading law firm in the North West of England. He has previously worked as an independent HR consultant and been Head of People & Organisational Development for a national UK charity, where his team won the Charity Times’ prestigious “HR Management” award.

Throughout his career he has worked closely on people and productivity issues with senior managers and developed people-focused HR teams. A firm believer that there is no such thing as best practice in people management, he has focused on designing and implementing business-appropriate practices, often in organisations which previously had little or no dedicated HR leadership. He says his career aim is simple: to improve people’s experience at work.

Gemma Dale

Gemma is an experienced HR Director, a Chartered Fellow of the CIPD, and a regular speaker and writer on a variety of HR topics including employee engagement, flexible working, wellbeing and social media.

Gemma co-founded The Work Consultancy where she focuses on policy development, content creation, wellbeing and training. Prior to The Work Consultancy, Gemma held a variety of senior HR roles including leading significant organisational change projects and HR transformation. Gemma is a qualified mediator and coach.

Gemma describes her HR philosophy as being all “about doing good people stuff.” She is an award-winning blogger at www.hrgemblog.com, and regularly writes for a variety of HR publications. Along with Tim Scott, Gemma is the co-author of several books on HR and social media, including the ‘Putting Social Media to Work’ series. Gemma is on twitter as @HR_Gem.

A qualified Personal Trainer and wellbeing coach, Gemma also writes a fitness blog and has published a book on weight loss.

INTRODUCTION

Let's start at the beginning. Just what is meant by the term “candidate experience”?

Put simply, the candidate experience is everything that happens between a potential new recruit engaging with your organisation in a way that leads to them becoming a candidate (most often, seeing a job advertisement) through to the conclusion of the process. For some, this might be the day that they join your organisation as a member of staff. For others, it will be the point at which you conclude their application with a “thank you, but no thanks” communication.

Candidate experience incorporates your employer brand; the external perception of your organisation as a place to work. It encompasses all of the recruitment processes you undertake, from application forms to psychometric tests to the interview itself. Each and every communication and interaction. At its most simple, candidate experience is the way that you make people *feel* during recruitment and selection.

Why is candidate experience so important? There are several reasons.

Firstly, candidate experience is about your company reputation. In an age of increasing transparency, candidates, successful or otherwise, will share their experiences on review sites, or simply talk about it on social media. Today, most candidates don't just respond to a job advert and then head off to an interview when offered. They will peruse employer review sites, they will check out relevant social media feeds – they will do their research way beyond the corporate website. They will form an opinion of an organisation from this vast array of data – and the interview process will either confirm or deny those first impressions.

Of course, for many organisations, job applicants may also be consumers, inextricably linking the consumer brand and the employer brand. Even unsuccessful candidates can be an advocate for your brand if you provide them with the right kind of experience.

But it's not just about reputation. It's also about engaging talent in a competitive market. The second reason why candidate experience is so important is that, for the successful applicant, the candidate experience is the start of the process of employee engagement. People's experience of the recruitment and selection process is a window into your organisational culture; its overall experience provides an insight to an applicant on what it will be like to work for you every day, should they accept. A poor candidate experience may directly impact on whether someone chooses to accept or reject a job offer. When they do accept, the steps before their actual start date can either reaffirm that decision – or call it into question. Put simply, offering a poor candidate experience is – at best - a missed opportunity for businesses.

Finally, providing a good candidate experience is the right thing to do. Can you remember the last time you were looking for work? Talk to many people and they will describe job hunting as a fairly miserable experience. All too often, the effort required of a candidate is vastly disproportionate to the time taken to consider their application. We will explore the detailed problems more in the next chapter. But in our view, how you treat your job applicants says much about you as an organisation. Where people take the time and trouble to apply for a role with your organisation, so should the organisation take the time and trouble to make this a human and fair process, with the experience of the candidate right at its heart.

The purpose of this book is to guide HR professionals, recruitment practitioners and hiring managers alike in how to create great candidate experience. What is it? How do you know you have achieved it? How do you understand and measure it?

Let us begin.

1 THE PROBLEMS

Remember the saying that you only have one opportunity to make a first impression? Your recruitment process *is* your first impression. More than that, it is an insight into culture. How you treat your candidates says much about how you treat your employees. For those who are successful, the candidate experience is the first step to their whole employee experience with you organisation – it is your first opportunity to create a connection – that elusive thing called employee engagement for which all organisations strive.

Does your recruitment rhetoric match the reality? Most organisations say a fair amount on their corporate websites about what it's like to work for them. They take active steps to manage both their employer and consumer brands. But how close is this to what it is like to work there, in the everyday? Does the process live up to the hype?

As we noted in our introductory chapter, candidate experience is often, in our experience, overlooked or simply done badly. There remain still organisations that believe, or at the very least certainly act, like job applicants are disposable. Like they should be grateful to be considered as a future employee. That hiring organisations have all of the power in the relationship. This attitude is outdated and misguided.

There are common complaints that we see and hear about from job applicants:

- Unnecessarily complex and overly long application processes
- The “application black hole” (e.g., no feedback on whether or not you are being considered)
- This statement: “if you haven't heard from us in 14-days, please assume you have been unsuccessful”
- An absence of useful feedback (or any feedback at all)
- Communication delays
- A lack of personal contact
- Awkward selection methods
- Irrelevant interview questions

Applying for jobs has been described to us as exhausting, confusing, even soul-destroying. Applying for work can be emotive. For those who are already out of work or facing redundancy, the stakes are high. So much depends on success and therefore continuing to have an income. For most applicants, failure is statistically more likely than success. By its very nature recruitment and selection asks people to demonstrate that they are better than someone else, to justify their career decisions and prove themselves. An unsuccessful application can feel deeply personal, like a rejection of the entire self. For others, there are even greater challenges. The barriers facing disabled applicants are especially high, as are those who need to work flexibly, or who just don't do themselves justice at interviews.

From an organisational perspective too, the stakes are high. Recruitment is expensive. Getting it wrong is even more expensive. Attracting the right sort of talent at the right time can be a challenge, whatever the organisation, however strong their employer brand.

We believe that, quite simply, recruitment is too important to be done badly. And it doesn't have to be.

2 THE CHALLENGE

We believe that many of the typical approaches to recruitment and selection are fundamentally broken. Many organisations are recruiting using the same approaches and methods that they did twenty years ago. We write about work frequently, and recruitment is the topic that is guaranteed to get the greatest response from our readers. Their experiences of looking for work are overwhelmingly poor. They cite many of the problems we discussed in the earlier chapter.

Too often, the recruitment experience focuses on what works for the recruitment team or the hiring manager. It isn't about what works for the candidate. The candidate is not at the heart of the journey.

So our challenge is simple: we must do better.

We must undertake recruitment and selection like it is the present day – not twenty years ago. Our processes should reflect the modern candidate journey.

We must put feelings and experience before process and procedure.

We must put the candidate at the heart of recruitment and selection – not the hiring manager or the recruitment manager or the organisation.

We must make candidate experience great. In the next chapter, we'll attempt to define just what this means.

3 WHAT A CANDIDATE WANTS

What does a candidate really want anyway? This isn't all that difficult. From our own experiences of applying for jobs, we know that what candidates really want is to be communicated with, to have useful feedback, to have helpful information.... to be engaged and treated like you matter. To be treated as an individual.

Let's start with some practicalities. We suggest these things:

- If, like many companies, you are using an internet-based Applicant Tracking System (ATS), candidates would like it to be easy to use. Make sure it has as few steps as possible. Don't require people to complete information that is already on their CV
- Candidates don't want to have to create a specific account for your recruitment system, with complicated passwords that meet your IT Department's security requirements. Most likely, they want to apply for one job and only one job
- Candidates would like the ability to engage with the recruiter. Just for question or two. Provide a live chat, an email address or even a Twitter handle. This is especially true once they have been made an offer – candidates will want and need an easy point of contact for questions and information
- Candidates don't want to complete unnecessary steps in a process. It should be the job of the recruiter to make it easy to apply for a role – and to robustly challenge and then remove aspects of that process that fail to add value
- Candidates would really like their time not to be wasted by advertising jobs that don't really exist, or haven't yet been fully thought through
- Candidates very much want an email (or some kind of communication) to tell them that they aren't being considered
- Candidates don't want to have to give you loads of personal information at the first stage, even if it is handy for you to collect it all at once
- Candidates would like to have an idea about the type of process they will be engaging with
- Candidates want useful, constructive feedback that they can take on board for future applications
- Candidates want to be able to ask about flexible working
- Candidates who are already employed, want you to remember that and be considerate about it. They may not be able to get time off to pop in and see you tomorrow morning at 10.30am sharp
- Candidates want to feel like that process is a fair one. More on that coming up

There is nothing too unexpected in this list; what is surprising is how few companies manage to achieve this list.

4 PRINCIPLES OF GREAT CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE

We believe that there five principles of great candidate experience. These first four are:

1. Transparency of process
2. Communication
3. Honesty
4. Fairness

Let's take each of these one at a time.

Transparency of process. This simply means being clear throughout the process exactly what that process is going to be. It's fairly straightforward. If there are going to be multiple interviews, assessment centres, online tests or presentations, advise candidates at the earliest possible stage in the process. Although we advise strongly against fixed interview dates, if this is your approach, be clear about those too.

Also be clear about your timelines, and when people should be expect to hear from you.

Most importantly of all, be transparent about your appointment criteria. This could be through sharing your essential and desirable criteria. It may be about your decision making process. It should definitely about being able to explain to someone why they didn't get the job. Feedback, feedback, feedback.

Of course, transparency isn't just about your process, it's about your culture too. Candidates want to know that your culture is right for them. Provide all the information that you can. Use your careers site, your recruitment system, social media – share your employer brand. Tell your stories, paint a picture of what it is like to work for you. Bring it to life with real people and real stories. At the interview stage, take a tour, don't just use your best offices at the front of the building. Transparency supports candidate experience. It also increases your chance of the right hire – and of finding someone who might stay past the (inevitable) probation period.

Communication. From the perspective of a candidate, gaps in communication are extremely frustrating. Saying “no” is fine(ish). “It is going to take longer than we expected” is fine too. A complete absence of communication is not. Tell people when they are going to hear from you. If that changes, update them. For the most part, the method of communication

doesn't matter that much. An impersonal bulk email isn't optimal, but if that is all you have time to do, then that will work just fine and is most certainly better than nothing at all. After all, these days most ATS's will automate this process on your behalf – there really is no excuse at all if a click of a button can communicate immediately.

If you have made a promise to your candidates (we will be in touch by Friday, you will get a call to give you more feedback), then make sure you keep it. It is that simple.

Honesty. Are you honest with your candidates? Really honest? It is all too easy to rely on “*we have received candidates whose skills more closely match those of our job description*” and similar. It might be palatable to both give and receive, but isn't much use to a candidate for their next application.

If someone messed up their interview, tell them. If someone failed to demonstrate relevant skills, tell them. If they did great, but someone did better, tell them why and how. If they gave lousy responses to your questions, tell them that too. It might not be easy, but it is the right thing to do. At the same time, it's okay to say that a vacancy is on hold, cancelled or just taking its time to progress. Most candidates just want to know where they stand (also see communication, below).

Fairness is a funny thing. It's a nebulous concept, seen differently from everyone's perspective. What amounts to, or even feels like, fairness for one person won't for another. We would like to draw on a concept from our industrial relations education; ‘felt fair’. Put simply, this just means the extent to which something feels fair in the workplace, whether this is the outcome of a dispute, a disciplinary sanction, the decision in a grievance hearing. It's about someone feeling, at the end of a process and taking everything into account, whether inside, something feels fair. In a recruitment sense this might be that even a disappointed, unsuccessful candidate feels that they went through a fair process, had the opportunity to put their best self forward and was treated decently throughout the process. Achieving a felt fair candidate experience will by its very nature require principles numbers one, two and three to be satisfied. A candidate who feels that they have been treated fairly won't be posting negative reviews on review sites, they won't stop being a customer or service user, and they will apply again in the future for other opportunities.

The fifth and final principle is recruitment is **feeling**. For those that design process or policy, there is a key question to ask at every stage of that design: *how would this make someone feel?* This is an idea that we will repeatedly return to throughout this book, and in our challenge to create better candidate experience. We don't always talk about feelings in the workplace. But they are at the heart of work – and engagement in particular. Recruitment with feelings. Sounds ok, doesn't it?

5 INTERNAL V EXTERNAL CANDIDATES

Whether a candidate is internal or external, an organisation should always strive to provide the best possible candidate experience that it can.

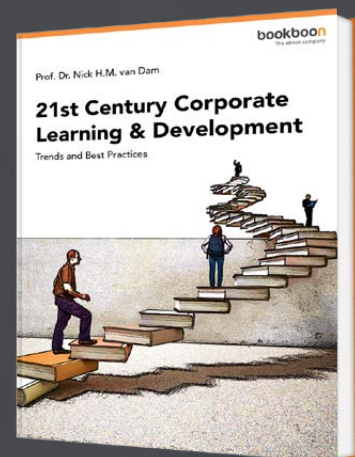
When it comes to internal candidates, the risks of failing to do so are somewhat different. With the external candidate it is mostly around brand and reputation. With the internal candidate it's about engagement.

Those elements discussed in our chapter on the principles of great candidate experience apply equally to internal and external candidates; transparency, communication, honesty and fairness. Perhaps the most challenging issue when it comes to external candidate is the unsuccessful applicant. Badly handled, this may lead to a loss of engagement right through to the employee continuing their search for their next opportunity somewhere else.

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Our recommendations for dealing with unsuccessful internal applicants is wherever possible, make the message face to face. It needs to be personal. Whilst feedback should always be provided, with the internal candidate this needs to focus on any skills or experience gaps in order that the individual knows exactly what to do should they wish to be considered for future opportunities. Where possible, this can be linked up with conversations between their manager regarding a personal development plan, and even your learning and development team to discuss specific solutions. There are many ways that internal candidates can continue to be engaged following an unsuccessful application, many of which rest with their immediate manager. Make sure that they know what they need to do.

6 WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

First things first. If you want to create a great candidate experience, you need to understand your starting point - and then where you want to get to.

Here are our recommended steps.

Step One: Apply for a job at your own organisation. Any job will do. This might sound like an odd suggestion but follow each and every step that you expect an applicant to take. Upload every document. Provide the personal information. Ask yourself:

- How long did it take me?
- Was all the information provided strictly necessary to assess the application?
- Is the process about the organisation – or the applicant?
- Is every part of it strictly necessary?
- How did it make me *feel*?

We are always surprised to find out how few recruiters or hiring managers have ever done this – and it is always our first suggestion. Challenge every part of the process – is it good enough? Is it sending a message you really want to give?

Step Two: check out what people are saying about you on social media and review sites. Put in place a plan for responding to reviews – both positive and negative. There is more advice in the later chapter on managing social media.

Step Three: speak with recent starters. Either do a survey or get some people together and run a focus group. Ask for honest feedback. What went well in their recruitment process? What did not? What did they need more of, or less? What would have made it better? How did the overall experience make them feel? Based on their experience, would they recommend you as an employer to a friend? Ask them to rate the overall process on a scale of 1-10 and then work out the average. This will give you a candidate experience Net Promoter Score. Anything less than 6, and you have got a problem. Between 6-8 is okay, above 8 is awesome – keep doing what you're doing!

As well as helping you understand where you are today, this will give you something to measure your progress against in the future. Repeat this exercise every six months.

Step Four – check if you are committing any of these ultimate sins of candidate experience:

1. Using a statement similar to this: *if you haven't heard from us within 14 days please assume that you have been unsuccessful*. This is our view, is unacceptable. If someone has taken the time to follow your process and engage with your organisation, the very least that you can do is send them a proper rejection email after their application has been assessed. Failing to do so is lazy and rude. Automate it if you have to, make it short, but do it.
2. Fixed interview dates before you have even advertised. Many candidates will have existing jobs and commitments. Failing to be flexible may just mean you miss out on the best possible talent just because they are on holiday or have an important meeting in their existing job. This is frankly, ridiculous and only succeeds in harming both your organisation and the candidate.
3. Failing to provide feedback post-interview. Again, if someone has taken the time to attend an interview, providing some feedback is simply the right thing to do. In our experience, this is often poorly undertaken. Organisations either take the cop out approach (on this occasion we have seen more suitable candidates – possibly true but there will always be something more useful you can say) or managers just don't bother. The poor recruiter can sometimes be stuck in the middle between hiring manager and candidate with nothing useful to say.
4. Interviews that don't start on time. Just plain rude.
5. The requirement to provide excessive information at an early stage. Some recruitment systems require candidates to provide a range of information that an organisation simply does not need until they become a future employee. It may be convenient for you to collect it all in one go, but it is time consuming for the candidate, and excessive from a data protection point of view.
6. Job descriptions masquerading as recruitment advertisements. Repeat after us. Your job description is not your recruitment advert. Ever. Your job description is a list of everything someone is required to do. Your advert should be about selling the job, selling the company and the opportunity. Do not copy and paste!
7. Over-long application processes. One of us recalls spending four hours working on a job application which required almost essay-length answers to a number of questions without even getting an interview. This isn't necessary and isn't fair on a candidate who may be completing multiple applications. Only ask for what you need to determine if a candidate makes the first stage. You can ask for more input as you go along.
8. Stupid interview questions. You get extra marks here if the question is unrelated to the job in hand. Questions such as *"If you were a kitchen appliance, what would you be?"* simply have no place in a decent selection process. Unless you can determine what a good answer looks like, unless the question measures something relevant to the job rather than just how quickly a candidate can come up with an interesting response to a daft question, don't ask it.

9. Complete automation. There are organisations with whom you can go through an entire process without engaging with an actual human. You are required to create an account (why?), set up complicated passwords, upload information electronically, long back in to see if you have an interview, confirm your attendance via a button..... With no one to ask any questions of or talk to. You *can* automate all sorts of stuff, but this doesn't necessarily mean that it is the right thing to do.
10. A lack of information on pay and benefits. There used to be a school of thought that you should never ask about the salary or the associated benefits at an interview. We say this is old hat. This is why people go to work after all. There is no point getting to offer stage and then the preferred individual realising that your pension contributions are half of their current employers and turning you down. Provide plenty of information as early as possible.

7 DEFINING GREAT - THE THREE STAGES OF RECRUITMENT

Once you know where you are, it's possible to plan for change. Great candidate experience means optimising every single stage of the process.

Stage One: Advertising – candidate attraction

For the purposes of this book, candidate attraction is the point from which a potential candidate engages with your employer brand through to the completion of their application for a particular role.

Candidate experience starts, usually, with an advertisement. Sometimes it starts even earlier; a potential future employee may be aware of you as an employer or be familiar with your brand. They will have formed an impression about you. But the real engagement begins when there is a specific advert, whether that is on your website, a job board, social media or an old-school print advert. The job description is instructive in its own right. It might just give you an insight into the culture at your place. Engage enough interest, and the job advertisement should turn an interested browser, or one of the so-called passive candidates, into an active applicant.

Application processes will of course vary from the simple “send a CV and a covering letter” through to a recruitment system requiring not just biographical information but the answering of detailed questions or assessments.

Never underestimate the impact of your recruitment system on the candidate. Whether you are using an ATS or simply email and spreadsheets, the process you put people through speaks volumes about your organisation – it has the power to make the experience good, bad or indifferent.

Great processes at this stage often include:

- A simple and short application process. Wherever possible, this should be mobile enabled
- Great content about what it is like to work at your organisation, either on your careers website, your social media channels or in specifically designed material just for candidates
- Prompt acknowledgement of application (automation is fine)
- An indication of timescales

- Status updates
- A user-friendly recruitment system or approach
- The availability of a full job description
- A call to action to maintain interest – this could be provision of more corporate information (“check out our careers website”), a suggestion to follow brand social media (“keep in touch with us via Twitter!”) or regular updates on progress
- Contact details for additional information (even if it is just a generic recruitment email address)

Stage Two: Selection – candidate management

Candidate management begins with the receipt of the application to the communication of the decision – whatever that may be.

The interview process is a fundamental part of Stage Two. We have therefore dedicated the whole of the next chapter to it and its impact on candidate experience. Outside of the interview itself there is plenty that an organisation can do to support great candidate experience.

Great processes at this stage often include:

- An honest overview for the candidate about what it is like to work at your organisation
- Promptly arranged interviews
- Provision of relevant, useful information for the candidates in advance of the interview
- Keeping in touch with the candidate between stages, especially when timescales change
- A named point of contact within the recruitment team for questions – not just automated updates
- Appropriate briefings on further stages. If there is going to be an assessment centre, exactly what format will it take, how long will it last, what can the candidate expect? Ensure that the candidate knows how to be successful
- Preparation. Development of appropriate interview questions, planning for the stages in the process, ensuring that interviewers have all of the information they need in advance of the meeting
- Effective interviewers with developed skills in assessment and decision making

Candidate management also includes turning people down; it is an inevitable part of the process. How you manage rejections can depend on the stage in the process. At the early stages, an automatic, standardised email is acceptable. Once someone has engaged to the extent of attending interviews, undertaking assessments or completing presentations then

they deserve something significantly more personal. The best approach is undoubtedly a telephone call, with the offer of detailed feedback. More tips on this soon.

Stage Three: Offer to start – candidate conversion

Once the offer has been made and the paperwork issued it could be assumed that the recruitment process is done. It's a filled vacancy on the spreadsheet. But the candidate experience is far from over. It continues until the successful individual walks through the door as a real life employee – and beyond. One common problem is that the person gets forgotten in the intervening period. Sometimes there is plenty going on – the hiring manager is organising the induction and ordering the IT equipment. An email has gone round the office to say that someone is joining – but the individual themselves need to be kept in the loop.

Great processes at this stage often include:

- Personal contact from the hiring manager - quickly. Formal offers and paperwork may be organised by HR but also ensure that the individual has contact details for their boss and receives some sort of welcome message at an early stage
- Welcoming offer paperwork – issued as quickly as possible. A named contact for questions. Straightforward paperwork to complete – again, with a welcoming tone of voice. Don't send out a stack of policies for your new starter to sign unless you absolutely have to
- Regular contact from the hiring manager. A quick email to check in will be fine
- An opportunity to meet colleagues, or come into the office prior to the start date
- The provision not just of formal paperwork but useful information for the new employee from where to park to the best place to get coffee
- The opportunity to have access to useful information pre-start date. Some people will like to read and review relevant documents, policies and the like – but this must not be compulsory! Remember that many new starters will be finishing off work in their current job too

The candidate experience during this time should reinforce their decision to join the organisation. Combined with a great day one, week one, month one welcome and induction, your best candidate experience will be concluded.

The bits in between

What happens in reception.... stays in reception. The first physical experience of your organisation might just be your reception area. What does it say about your organisation? Will there be a warm greeting? Is there somewhere to get a drink? Is there some handy reading material about the organisation? Does the receptionist know that there are interviews taking place? First impressions count.

Also, consider what you send to candidates when they have accepted your offer. One memorable example shared with us was an organisation that issued a starter letter and contract of employment, along with ten policies (all to be individually signed of course) that detailed all the various ways in which the new starter could be fired. This isn't even that unusual. Many companies take the opportunity to send rules and regulations, from IT use to bullying and harassment. Whilst in HR we understand why, if your policies are excessively formal and talk too much about gross misconduct, discipline and dismissal, well, this is hardly getting the experience right. What you send to confirm the job offer should, as with all of the activities at Stage Three – reinforce the decision to accept the job. It should welcome the individual, tell them what will happen next, manage expectations and try to answer their main questions. The formalities do need to be addressed – but think about how and - equally as importantly – when.

8 GREAT INTERVIEWS

The interview is probably the primary tool used to make a selection decision. There is evidence to suggest that perhaps it should not be; interviews, and indeed interviewers, are fallible and prone to error and bias. But that is an argument for a whole other book; for now we just accept that we use them extensively, and they will have an impact on the experience of the candidate.

Before the interview even begins – look at the basics. Does the candidate know where to go and who to ask for? Have you told them what to expect in terms of format, and how long it might take? Does the candidate have a copy of the full job description? Get this stuff right before the candidate even walks through the door.

We feel that we can't talk about interviews without mentioning competency based interviewing. Many organisations have invested a great deal of time and resource in developing their own specific organisational competencies. These are then used for a whole range of reasons including most often, assessing performance and during recruitment and selection.

If you haven't come across the term, you may have come across the practice. Competency based interview questions are those that ask for real life examples of when you have done something, based upon the prescribed competencies for the role. They go something like this: *“Can you give me an example of when you have worked as part of a successful team?”* The idea behind competency based interviews is that interviewers will be able to satisfy themselves that potential employees have the experience needed to do the job. Only there is a problem. They fundamentally ignore the importance of context. Past experience does not necessarily predict future performance. The ability to succeed in any given organisation can be attributed to many factors over and above the individual employee's personal abilities.

There is no guarantee, even with the best (or highest scoring) answer in the world that scores that a candidate will be able to replicate what they did in a previous organisation under a different set of circumstances. Context is everything. The team, the culture, the management, the resources available. Unless these are identical, then the answer is largely irrelevant. Another key problem with competency based interview questions is that people know how to answer them. They can be practiced, and it isn't all that hard to make something up either as they are often so generic. Competency based questions assess people in the past, not the now or the future. They tell you nothing about someone's potential to do a good job other than their ability to find a good example in the moment.

If you currently use competency based questions, consider replacing them with the much more human strengths based type. They allow you to get to know the real individual. And that is who you are hiring. Strengths based interviews allow you to get to know the person in front of you. What gets them motivated? What they like doing, and dislike too. Assess potential. You are also much less likely to get some sort of pre-prepared, scripted, generic reply. They allow candidates to bring their real self, not their example interview one.

In recent years we have also seen a rise in use of unusual interview questions. Google have something to do with this, being famous for their quirky interview questions. But Google are a particular type of company, seeking to appoint a particular type of mindset which does not translate to many others. Let us elaborate.

- If you were a kitchen appliance, which would you be and why?
- Which celebrity would play you in a movie about your life?
- If you could be any animal, which animal would you be?
- What is the best way out of a locked room?



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We have no words for interview questions like these. They should be avoided at all costs, both for practical and candidate experience related reasons. Practically, you should not ask any question in an interview unless you are able to qualify what a good answer would contain. Questions should be related to the role, and help you decide if the candidate is suitable for it. Such interview questions fundamentally challenge the notions of fairness and of feeling. On leaving such an interview, would a candidate know that they had done performed to the best of their ability? Would they feel that they had a fair opportunity to demonstrate their best self and what they can bring to the role? Probably not. These questions might indicate whether someone can think quickly on their feet, or whether they can come up with an amusing or clever answer, but they will do nothing for your candidate experience – or your likelihood of hiring the right person for your organisation.

So now that we have talked about what to avoid, what does make a great interview that in turn will result in great candidate experience?

Good interviews have the following in common:

- The hiring manager isn't the one doing all (or even most) of the talking
- The same format is used for all interviews
- The interviewer takes care to present the organisation positively and sells it to the candidate
- Questions are concise and precise
- The interviewer takes time to put the candidate at their ease in order to get the best out of them
- The candidate is given the opportunity to ask questions.
- The interviewer is an effective and attentive listener, capable of building rapport during the interview
- They start on time and don't run over
- The interview is aligned with the candidate's expectations (the process should have been clearly explained)
- There aren't more people in the room than there needs to be (large panel interviews can be daunting and just aren't necessary – not *everyone* needs to be involved in the decision)
- The candidate gets the space to put forward their reasons why they are a great candidate. This can simply be achieved by asking them else they would like to say about themselves on their career
- The interview isn't any more formal than it needs to be
- Useful and clear notes are written up after each interview, which will enable effective feedback

- Appropriate steps are taken to avoid bias or the ‘horns and halo’ effects
- The interviewer has fully prepared for the interviews included developing appropriate and relevant interview questions and planned the interview structure
- Prior to the interview, the interviewer has also fully reviewed the candidate information
- Above all, they result in the appointment of the right person at the right time, given the particular context

The competence and knowledge of the hiring manager are critical during the interview stage. We will explore more on this topic later.

9 OTHER RECRUITMENT METHODS

Whilst the interview is still the most often used method of recruitment and selection, it is far from the only one.

Tests

There are a whole range of tests that you can require candidates to complete. These range from aptitude tests, psychometric tests, personality tests, job specific assessments and through to that old standby the in-tray exercise. There are benefits and disadvantages for the various methods. Their purpose should be to supplement the rest of the selection activity and decision making; but beware – they must be used properly to be effective. Tests should never be used as a standalone decision making tool.

From a candidate experience perspective, ensure that if you are building tests into your recruitment and selection process, you do the following:

- Use reputable tests that have an appropriate evidence base
- Ensure that those involved in the process are suitably skilled to interpret the results
- Explain to candidates why and how you are using them – including how they will be used in the decision-making process
- Make sure that the test isn't a surprise – if you are going to ask people to do them (eg when they attend your premises) make sure that they are aware in advance
- Provide candidates with the time to do them properly
- Use technology where possible; many tests can be completed online allowing candidates to do them in their own time
- Provide a copy of the output / results as part of the process
- Don't allow hiring managers to devise their own tests without specialist support

Assessment Centres: We will be up front on this one. We are not big fans. Assessment centres allow organisations to process multiple candidates all at once. They aren't however particularly great for candidate experience. Many people dislike them intensely. They push people far outside of their comfort zone, force candidates into a competitive situation, and they can be just plain awkward. Candidates will rarely be their true selves, conscious of every word and action. They may also demand a high time input from the candidate, making it difficult for those that are working. Assessment centres can often be more about the company than the candidate. It might speed the recruitment process up a little, but

at what cost? We know of candidates for senior roles that have gone to assessment centres and bumped into people they know professionally. We know too, of introverts that have found this aspect of the process so off-putting, and were so convinced that they are unable to perform well in such circumstances, that they dropped out of the process entirely.

If you are going to use assessment centres, be sure that you are assessing the skills you are seeking. Consider individuals' potential sensitivities, and always be mindful always of the potential diversity issues that can arise (more on this coming up later).

10 JUST SAY NO

After the interview, the decision making. Declining unsuccessful candidates isn't the nicest part of the process, but it is a vital part of candidate experience. An unsuccessful candidate can still be a brand advocate for you, and might consider future applications if you handle in right.

A few tips on saying no:

- Do it promptly. It makes practical sense to confirm the acceptance of your preferred candidate before dealing with rejections, but once this has been finalised don't put off telling the other applicants
- Be constructive – and sensitive. For some, this will be a very upsetting message; it is routine for a recruiter, but rarely for an individual
- Consider your method. Depending on the number of applications you might not be able to make a personal call to everyone. In these circumstances, email is fine but review the content and tone of the communication. Make it human, and as noted above, make it sensitive
- Offer feedback and make arrangements for this. It might not be the right thing to do to provide it there and then if you make a phone call – the candidate will still be processing the answer. So arrange to call back at a convenient time
- Be polite – thank people for their efforts and time. Make arrangements for keeping in touch where appropriate. End things on a positive note wherever possible

There is one final point to note: when you offer to provide feedback, make sure it actually happens. We know of many examples where individuals have asked for it and organisations have promised it – but have then failed to deliver. Don't let this happen. Close down the process with dignity and respect. You never know: they might come back a second time having taken all your feedback on board and blow you away...

11 TECHNOLOGY

As with much of work, technology and automation is becoming ubiquitous. Recruitment is no different; recruiting technology is getting more and more sophisticated all the time. Automated decision making, search algorithms, chat bots, video... The landscape is developing and will continue to do so. Our observation about recruitment technology is simple; embrace it where it adds value, but never lose sight of the candidate experience and the particular impacts upon it as a result of technology.

When you use a recruitment system, consider not just its functionality or the extent to which it speeds up a process, but its impact on the candidate and their experience of applying for a role.

Where technology and automation adds value, embrace it. But not everything can or should be tech-ed up. Recruitment is after all a human endeavour; never, ever lose sight of how it might make someone feel.

Oh, and for goodness make sure that whatever technology you use is mobile enabled. That is where most people start their job search these days.

12 SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Some candidates will need special considerations during the recruitment and selection process. Adjustments must be made to allow candidates with disabilities to fully participate. This could include everything from access issues to the building in which interviews are taking place, to the conditions for undertaking tests or assessments. The simplest approach is to ask people explicitly what they need to enable them to participate fully in the process – and then make sure you provide it.

However, it isn't just about disability. Some individuals find the typical approach of hiring extremely difficult. The interview itself is to some extent a test of social skills – we reflect on the handshake, the eye contact, the conversation; all activities that are especially challenging to neurodiverse candidates such as those on the autistic spectrum. There are many roles where the skills required to be a successful interview candidate are not needed in the actual job and it is important to give this some careful consideration before following the time-worn path of most recruitment processes.

It is increasingly common too to find that some candidates want to talk about flexible working opportunities. Often framed as something just for parents, savvy organisations have realised that offering flexible working is a talent opportunity: it attracts and retains talent as well as being a key driver of employee engagement and wellbeing. Our advice is simple; consider it, advertise that you consider it, and train your managers on the benefits.

A truly great candidate experience takes into account the needs of each individual, and provides equally the opportunity to shine.

13 RECRUITMENT AGENCIES AND CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE

It would be impossible to write a book that focuses on recruitment without talking about recruitment agencies. Our own personal experiences of working with recruitment agencies, as both candidates and clients, is very much mixed.

There are two primary ways to engage with recruitment agencies when hiring permanent staff. The first is retained search. Often used for senior roles, this involves working with one agency and isn't success based – typically companies will pay around a third of the fee on placing the role, a third when the CV's land, and the final amount when the successful candidate is appointed.

More common is the contingency approach. This is when an agency will undertake a search for a client, who will only incur a fee should they hire an individual.

Unfortunately, there are some elements of both approaches that can be problematic when working towards ensuring a first class candidate experience.

In neither situation do you truly own either your employer brand or the candidate experience. You have no control over the agency or the way that it manages their (NB: not “your” at this stage!) candidates. Contingency recruitment is even more problematic. Where a company uses more than one agency, it is in the interest of the agency to be quick – which might not always be what the client or candidate needs. The fact that the agency doesn't get paid unless the client hires their candidate can sometimes generate poor behaviours – and these may not serve the candidate experience well.

If you do work with recruitment agencies, it is important to ensure that they are working effectively, promoting your organisation as you would wish them to, and the candidates are receiving all of that stuff that we talked about in great candidate experience, including timely communication, useful feedback and a felt fair process.

It's also a good idea to do your own internal monitoring. Many agencies will happily provide you with statistics about how many vacancies they have helped you with and their success ratios – challenge them instead to provide you with a Net Promoter Score, or better still, ask their candidates for feedback yourself.

Candidate experience must consider every route into your organisation if you want a truly holistic and consistent approach.

14 THE ROLE OF THE HIRING MANAGER IN GREAT CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE

So far, we have been focusing on the principles and the process. In some organisations these functions, and the early stages of candidate attraction, are often dealt with centrally by a HR department or dedicated recruitment team. However, there is one area that is absolutely critical to the candidate experience: the hiring manager.

Candidate experience is heavily influenced by the initial process including the advertisement and the application and what happens before an interview, such as the communication process, but then most of the time the hiring manager takes over. And if the manager can't deliver on experience, all that process work, all that communication work, all that advertising spend, will have been a waste of time.

There are several aspects of this to think about. The behaviour of the hiring manager during their contact with the candidate, the questions asked, their ability to build a rapport are just a few. For candidate experience, little things can make a difference. The greeting at reception, body language, offering a drink, the information provided, allowing for questions, putting someone at ease (or not). All of these may appear obvious, but are often missed in practice.

Many organisations will offer some sort of training in how to recruit staff. Some make it compulsory before a manager can have any involvement with a recruitment and selection process. Some however, do nothing at all.

Where training is provided, it may not necessarily cover candidate experience. There might be some tips and hints about good practice, equality and diversity considerations, preparing in advance of the interview and so on, but candidate experience is not covered specifically, or sufficiently. Hiring manager training must include a broad understanding of the principles of candidate experience, its importance in general and the specifics of creating it.

The specific hiring manager responsibilities in relation to candidate experience are:

- Providing an interview experience that aligns with the principles of positive candidate experience and the good practice detailed in our earlier chapter
- Effective, fair decision making
- Communication of that decision making
- Provision of constructive, useful feedback
- Keeping in touch with successful candidates and the arrangement of an effective and engaging induction

It might be useful to ask hiring managers to reflect on their skills and competence around recruitment. Do they understand what makes great candidate experience? Do they understand the impact of social media? Have they any awareness of how the recruitment landscape has changed in recent years? What would help them provide a better experience? What more do they need to improve their skills?

One of the biggest complaints we hear about recruitment experiences is the lack of feedback. When it is offered it often does not materialise. When it does, it is so generic as to be of little value, and the effort taken to provide it is not commensurate with the effort put into the process by the candidate throughout their application. If you are a hiring manager, this is your responsibility. If you work in HR or your recruitment team, make the case to the hiring manager, provide the tools and then hold them to account. If necessary, provide them with a copy of this book!

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15 A WORD ON INDUCTION

As we noted earlier, the process immediately on the run-up to the successful hire joining your organisation is absolutely part of the candidate experience. The transition from successful applicant to employee is critical – get it wrong and you will soon be hiring all over again, as well as incurring more costs. Whilst strictly-speaking outside the scope of this little book, we wanted to take the opportunity to say a few words about great induction and joining all of these early experiences together.

First things first. *Keep. In. Touch.* This is even more important when there is a lengthy period between the offer and the start date. This is often overlooked, but new starters will inevitably have questions to ask, or may even be nervous and in need of reassurance. This is very much the responsibility of the individual's new manager – so make sure that they know it. At the very least email contact should be provided; telephone or even a face to face meeting is better. Induction doesn't start on day one – it starts from the formal offer of employment.

An effective induction will help to ensure that a new employee settles in well and gains an understanding of the organisation and its culture as soon as possible. It should also ensure that they have the opportunity to quickly become an effective member of the team.

Effective induction includes:

- The basics – provision of equipment, system access, security passes, health and safety information, organisation charts / structures, building orientation – and any other information the member of staff needs to get up and running
- An overview of the 'big picture' – including strategy, vision, values and long-term plans for the organisation and department
- Key policies and procedures and any mandatory training that needs to be completed
- Meetings with key individuals, colleagues and stakeholders
- Regular meetings with the manager to check in, provide feedback and set / review initial objectives
- Provision of role specific information including a clear job description and summary of responsibility and duties
- Team priorities and projects
- Provide a buddy or mentor
- A learning and development plan

The new starter should know exactly what to expect when they arrive. The learning process should then continue over the early weeks and months; induction is not a one-off event. Finally, don't try to do too much too soon – it is all too easy to overwhelm someone.

A great induction will be the final element in great candidate experience.

16 MEASURING SUCCESS

Now you have put all this work into your candidate experience, it is time to understand if you have made the improvements for which you were aiming.

Of course, there are plenty of ways in which recruitment effectiveness can be measured. “Time to hire” and “cost per hire” are typical key performance indicators for recruitment teams. It is also possible to measure manager satisfaction, leavers within year one, or probation success (if you must have a probation period of course).

To give you a true picture of your candidate experience, consider a range of qualitative and quantitative data.

We have already discussed the idea of a candidate experience Net Promoter Score (NPS). This should form the basis of your candidate experience measurement. This should be a regular exercise. For even more richness of information, consider running a workshop and get some new starters together to discuss their experiences – and how they can be improved (they can always be improved, whoever you are and whatever you currently do).

Here are some other ideas in order to measure your on-going efforts.

Voluntary leavers in the first year of employment. How many people are resigning in their first year of employment? Where are they going? Why are they leaving? Exactly when are they leaving? Although there is a general trend towards shorter job tenure, people who are leaving quickly are sending you a message – especially those who leave within the first few months, who probably never stopped looking for work someplace else. It could be that there is a disconnect between the rhetoric of your employer brand and the reality of working at your organisation. It could signal a poor induction process, where those new starters haven’t become sufficiently engaged with who you are and what you do. Equally, it could be a management issue, or even a pay and rewards one. This is where your exit interviews will come into their own. An online questionnaire isn’t enough – sit down face to face with people and aim to truly understand why they are moving on.

Stay interviews. Many companies do exit interviews. Few do a great deal with the information that contain or the feedback provided. Stay interviews flip the situation on the head; instead of trying to understand why people leave, seek to understand why people stay. What is it that they like about your organisation? Talk to them, especially those that have been with you for around a year. Aim to build up a picture of why people work for you – and in particular, what it was like to join your organisation. Ask: how could we have made it better for you? What would make your job easier? What didn’t we tell you when you interviewed with us that we should have?

Performance of new starters: This is really more of a recruitment effectiveness measurement than a candidate experience one, but it is part of the overall picture, and something that in our experience, few recruitment teams do. Once hired, the issue of performance moves over to the manager or the HR team. But the performance of an employee in their first year of employment can tell you a great deal. How many pass probation? If you have performance ratings, what scores are they receiving? Are any of them finding their way into formal capability proceedings? Initial performance in a role is not necessarily indicative of longer-term performance as employees will need to build their knowledge and apply the skills you have recruited in a whole new context. However, you will be able to draw some conclusions, especially when patterns become evidence, about whether your recruitment and selection process (and the experience provided within it) is working as well as it should.

Engagement Surveys: Many organisations conduct some sort of employee engagement survey. The more sophisticated will be able to provide their analysis in a range of ways. It may be possible to isolate the answers provided by those within a particular length of service range. This will therefore tell you the average engagement of people in their first year of employment, which can be compared with the average of all staff. Taken on its own this measure will only be broadly indicative, but combined with some of the other measures described here, you will begin to build a picture of how people feel when they start to work for you.

Hiring Manager Satisfaction: As the title suggests, this is about the extent to which a manager is satisfied with the overall recruitment and selection process. Again, this measure is more about their satisfaction with the support provided by the team helping their recruit, but they may have ideas for improvement useful to providing great candidate experience, so ensure that you talk to them too.

We can't conclude this chapter without issuing a word of caution about recruitment metrics; beware of unintended consequences. Focusing on just one or two metrics can drive the wrong behaviours. Time to hire is important, but not at the expense of quality. Focus too heavily on this, and you risk forcing those involved in the process to compromise on candidates. This is why we love NPS as an approach – it is hard to have too good an experience.

17 SOCIAL MEDIA AND CANDIDATE EXPERIENCE

We believe that this area is of such importance that it deserves its own chapter. In recent years we have seen the increasing rise of review sites, where candidates, successful or otherwise, post reviews about their experience of either working for or applying to work at your organisation. Reviews are anonymous, and organisations can respond but not remove them.

We are always surprised to find organisations who still haven't claimed their Glassdoor profile, and are oblivious to their reviews or are failing to respond to them. It is a missed opportunity, especially to correct or address negative or inaccurate views.

If you don't 'own' your employer Glassdoor profile, then claim it immediately. You don't need to pay for the premium service; for most the free account will do just fine. Check out where people are talking about your company and respond accordingly. When it comes to review sites, the conversation is happening anyway, so you might as well be part of it.

Here is a fact. Sometimes, you will get candidate experience wrong. Someone will slip through the net and won't get the outcome communication. The manager who did the interview won't be around to provide feedback. A candidate will be forgotten about in reception. Human error is a real thing. Sometimes, in our social and digital age, this will find its way onto social media. Even if you don't make a mistake and have provided the best possible candidate experience, a disappointed candidate may still feel that it wasn't fair or be so unhappy that they turn to social media.

In our increasingly connected world, a bad experience will travel further. Social media means that the risk of providing poor candidate experience is greater than ever before.

Dealing with negative reviews is crucial. Our advice is simple; apologise, and offer to take it off line – with a named individual. Deal with issues as soon as they arrive. Monitor sites for comments – set up alerts where possible.

Some organisations don't want to engage on social media. Some don't know how to. But as many recruiters realise, social media is a powerful tool. It can help you build your employer brand, share your culture and drive applications to your career site or ATS. It is a powerful method for advertising opportunities, keeping in touch with future talent or alumni, and can connect you to the right candidate at the right time. Potential candidates will research organisations on social media before they even make the decision to apply for a role; what they find can make a difference between them making that application..... or not.

Social media isn't just about the recruitment team; hiring managers have a role to play too. They should be encouraged to share vacancies in their network as a minimum. Social media and its potential as a recruitment and branding tool is, simply, huge – and the subject of a whole other book.

For now, if it isn't already, make sure that your recruitment team is social. They need a basic understanding of the benefits, the risks and the platforms. The minimum acceptable standard is monitoring and responding to what appears on review sites. As well as managing your reputation, they are also a valuable tool for the continued improvement of your candidate experience.

TOP TIPS

We are nearly at the end of this little book. With the aim of bringing this all together, here are our top tips and best dos and don'ts if you want to improve the candidate experience for your organisation (and avoid poor practice along the way):

1. Train your hiring managers. Cover candidate experience as a principle, and great interview practice as a specific.
2. The application black hole. Don't allow one to develop. Always provide closure on a process, whether the message is a positive one or not.
3. Your job description is not your recruitment advertisement. Not if you want to make your organisation attractive at least.
4. Don't advertise vacancies where the needs of the role aren't fully understood. Fishing trips of the 'let's just test the market' variety are not fair on candidates.
5. Refuse to include unnecessary steps in your process. Robustly remove steps that do not add value.
6. Time how long it takes to apply for a job at your organisation. Look to reduce it. Note – if the answer is more than 30 minutes, it is too long as a first stage.
7. Feedback, feedback, feedback. Always provide it. If necessary, and to help the hiring manager reflect and focus, provide a standard form for your managers to use to help them collect their thoughts.
8. Review all of your standard written communications. Even rejection emails can be human. Tone matters.
9. After the offer has been made, don't forget the new starter. Make sure that the contact in the intervening period isn't just the formal paperwork – train your hiring managers on this too. Keep in touch, always.
10. Ask yourself; what else can we do to make our candidate experience even better? Keep asking it. Measure it, use the data as a benchmark and aim to keep improving it.

And finally..... we have said it before in this little book, and we will say it again. There is never, ever an acceptable excuse for not providing feedback when it is asked for. If people have taken the time to apply, research, complete tests, write a presentation and/or attend an interview, then they deserve some of your time in return.

AND FINALLY.....

We hope you enjoyed this little book, and have found a few practical tips for improving candidate experience in your organisation. Good luck with your next steps.

If you want to connect with us, you will find us on Twitter as [@HR_Gem](#) and [@TimScottHR](#).