NEOGOV



Shifting From Quantity to Quality

Top 5 Public Sector Hiring Trends of 2026

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The Hiring Market Leading Into 2027

Heading into 2027, the public sector hiring market is entering a new, distinct phase. For years, job openings soared as agencies raced to fill post-pandemic vacancies, but candidate activity did not initially keep pace. HR strategies centered on recruitment tactics to attract qualified candidates and compete with the private sector.

Now, the market is shifting from a quantity to quality mindset as job postings decline and rising candidate interest concentrates around fewer opportunities. Individual job postings are receiving more applications than in years past, but views-to-application conversion rates have slightly declined in 2026—which may indicate that candidates are eyeing job openings with more discernment before choosing to apply.

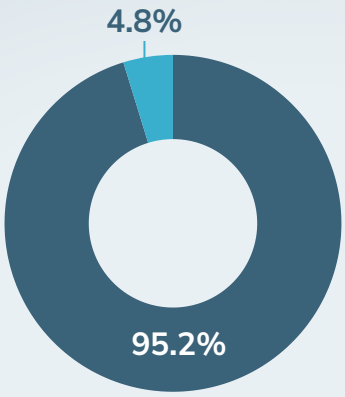
When they do invest time to apply, candidates are expecting more from employers. Salary transparency, fast processes, and clear communication are the leading expectations of job seekers in 2027. Any friction in the application process can reflect poorly on candidates' perceptions of an agency and public sector employment in general.

Employers' use of AI brings a new set of hiring challenges going into 2027. As agencies adopt AI-assisted tools to support hiring, they must carefully balance operational efficiency with the critical need to build trust with apprehensive candidates.

Meeting these evolving demands requires a strategic pivot toward more precise hiring approaches: measuring qualified yield, diagnosing funnel constraints, clarifying total employment proposition, managing candidate expectations, and maintaining oversight of consequential decisions.



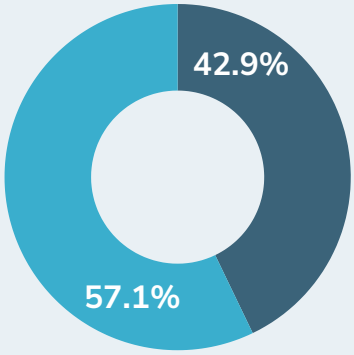
Figure 0.1
The Public Sector Hiring Market Timeline, 2021-2026
Sized for explanation, not accuracy



2021-2023: Job-posting peak

Job posting volume expanded much faster than total applications, spreading candidate activity across a larger number of openings.

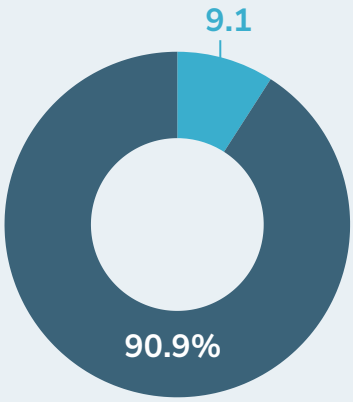
Job Postings Applications



2024-2025: Application-volume peak

Total applications continued to rise while job volume declined, increasing the amount of candidate activity directed at each opening.

Job Postings Applications



2026: Applications-per-job peak

Job postings declined faster than applications and views, concentrating more candidate activity around each remaining opening. Applications per job reached a six-year high, even as view-to-application conversion softened.

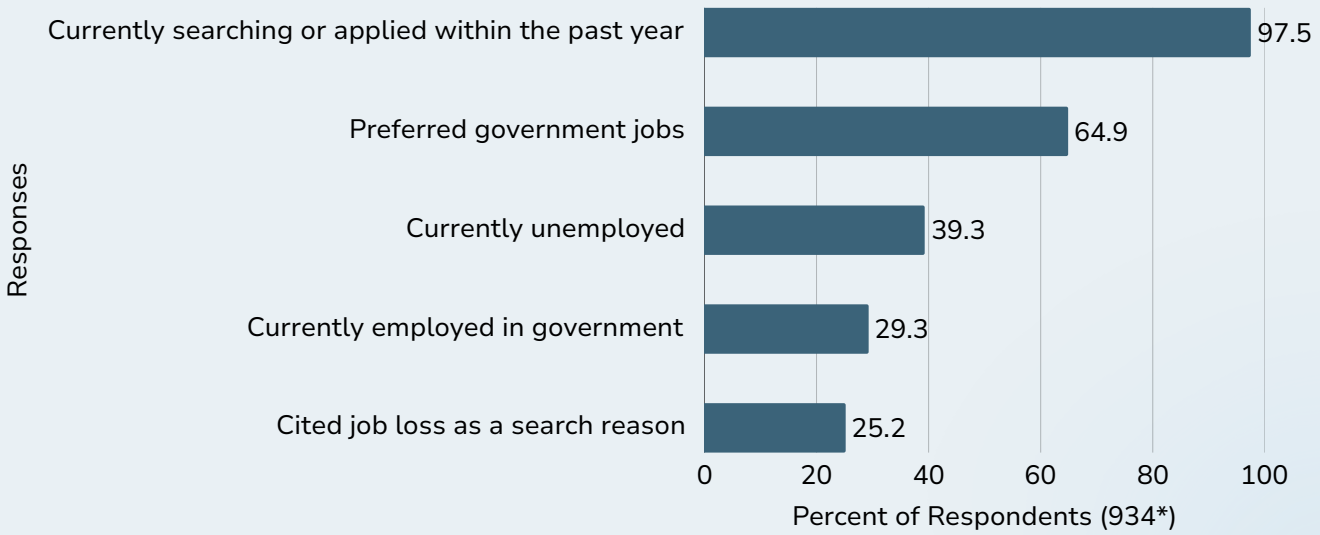
Job Postings Applications

Methodology

This report draws on survey responses from 934 GovernmentJobs.com job seekers and the analysis of a fixed cohort of aggregate requisition data from NEOGOV customers live before 2021, excluding internal jobs. The customer data represented in this report reflects fiscal years spanning from July 1 through June 30. For this report, "time-to-hire" is measured as the amount of time a job posting is requisitioned to the time the job posting is closed out.

Of the candidates who responded to the job seeker survey, 97.5% were either actively searching for a public sector role or had applied to one within the past year. Nearly 40% of respondents were unemployed, and a quarter of job seekers cited job loss as a reason for their search.

Figure 0.2
2026 GovernmentJobs.com Job Seeker Survey Profile
*Valid response bases may vary by question.



The customer and survey datasets are complementary but not linked by candidate, job, occupation, posting, or agency. Customer data shows observed hiring activity over time; survey results provide current context about candidate preferences and experiences. Survey findings may suggest possible explanations for customer data patterns but do not establish causality.



The Top 5 Public Sector Hiring Trends at a Glance

01

Fewer Openings Are Concentrating Candidate Pressure.

Application volume is a poor predictor of how long a requisition remains open. Agencies need to determine whether a role is constrained by reach, conversion, candidate supply, qualification yield, process complexity, or staff capacity before choosing a solution.

02

"Hard-To-Fill" Is No Longer One Problem.

Job postings declined 12.9% from 2025 to 2026, while applications declined only 5.7%, pushing applications per job up 8.3%. Eligible candidates per job opening increased 4.4%, but ineligible applications per job increased 10.8%, shifting the challenge from generating volume to managing screening load and qualified yield.

03

More Attention Doesn't Guarantee More Applications.

Views per job increased 12.8% from 2025 to 2026, while view-to-application conversion declined 4.0%. The divergence may reflect more selective candidate decision-making, but the clearest implication is that visibility alone is insufficient: agencies must communicate duties, qualifications, and total value clearly enough for the right candidates to assess fit.

04

Faster Hiring Doesn't Always Feel Faster to Candidates.

Average time-to-hire declined from 101.2 days in 2021 to 72.7 days in 2026 (a 28.2% decrease). Yet 92.4% of surveyed job seekers expect a next-step update within four weeks, showing that agencies must manage two hiring clocks: operational requisition efficiency and candidate-visible progress.

05

AI in Hiring Requires Clear Boundaries and Human Accountability.

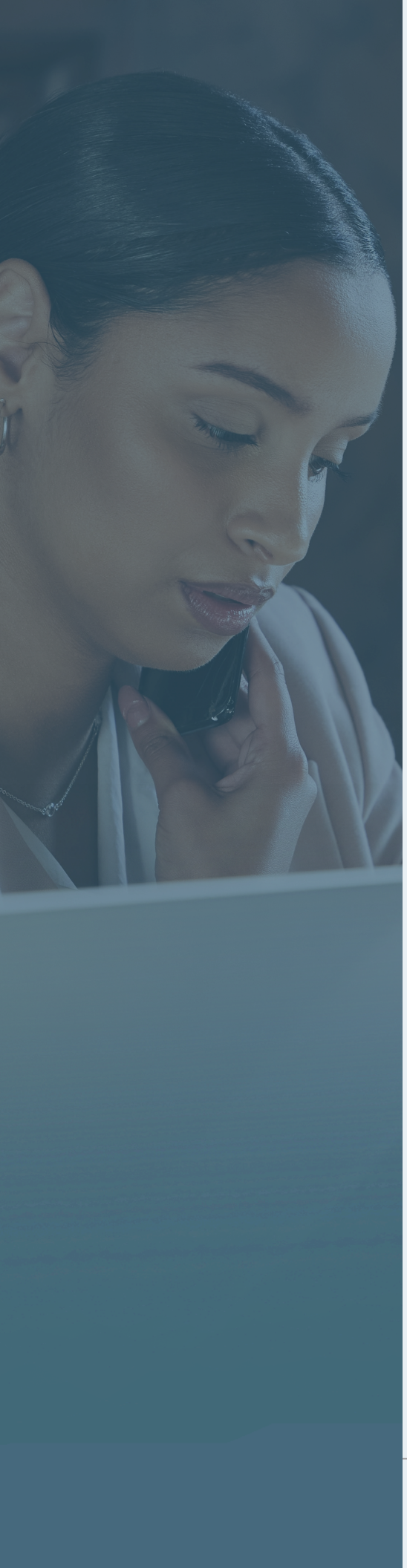
Rising application and communication demands are strengthening the case for workflow automation and AI-assisted tools. But 51% of survey respondents said employer AI would make them less likely to apply, creating a need for oversight, disclosure, and human review.





Trend 1

Fewer Openings Are Concentrating Candidate Pressure

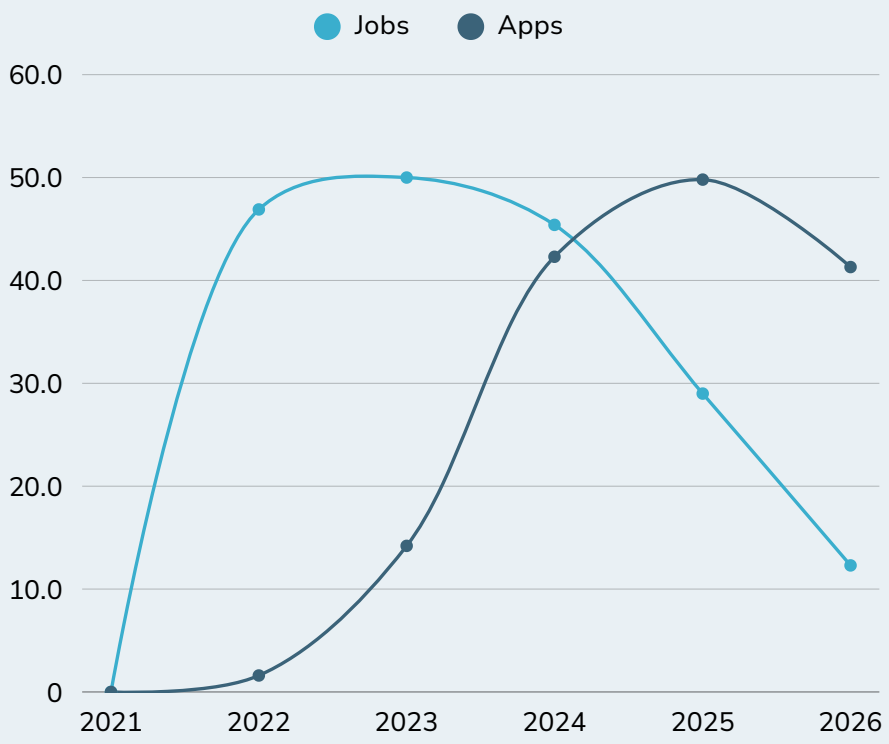


Compared with 2021, job postings grew by 12.3%, applications are up 41.3%, and applications per job increased 25.8% from 2021 to 2026. But over the past year, public sector employers have been posting fewer jobs, yet receiving more applications for each one—creating more pressure for job seekers and hiring managers alike.

While both job postings and total applications declined from 2025 to 2026, the drop in postings (-12.9%) outpaced the decline in applications (-5.7%) by more than double. As a result, candidate activity is now concentrated around fewer opportunities, driving an 8.3% increase in applications per job.

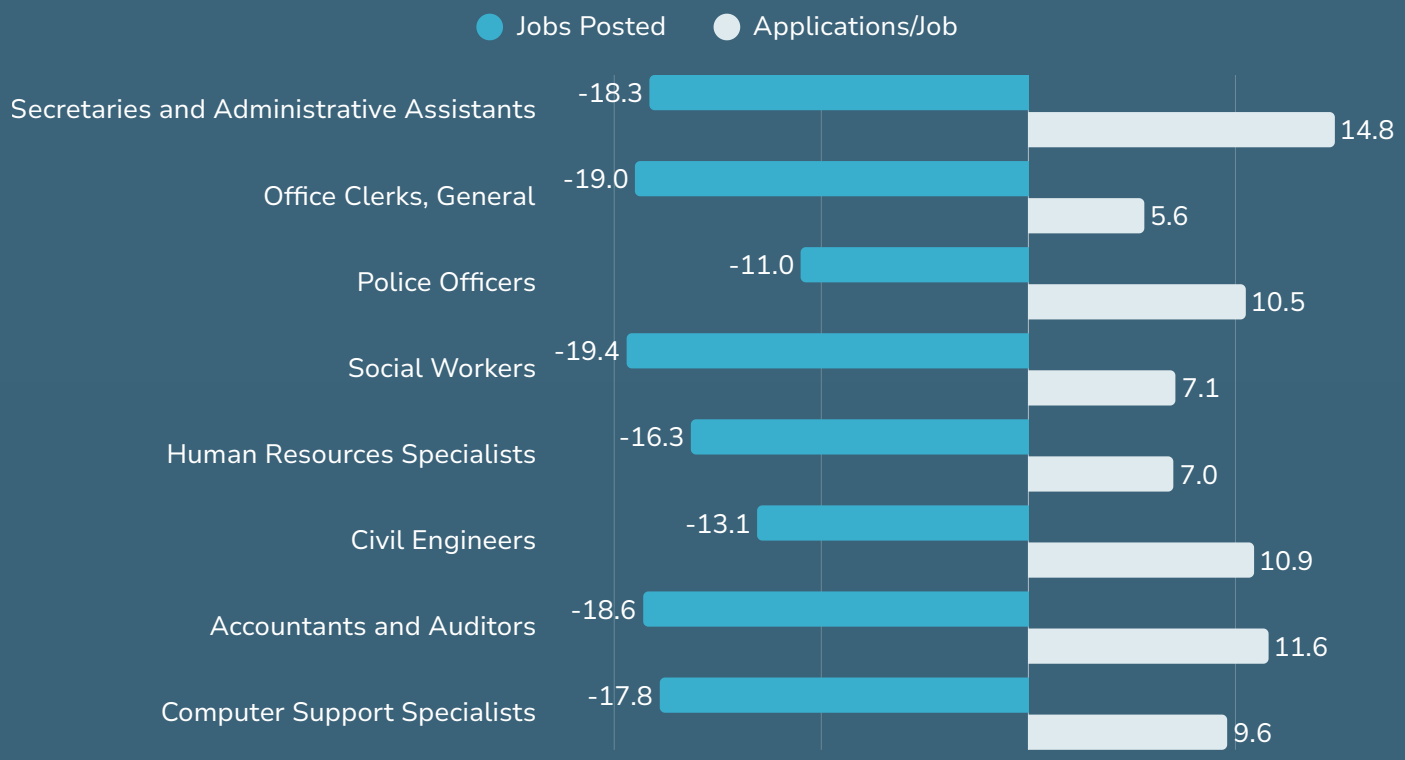
For job seekers, this means more applicants competing for each opening. For agencies, it means more applications to screen and more candidates to communicate with.

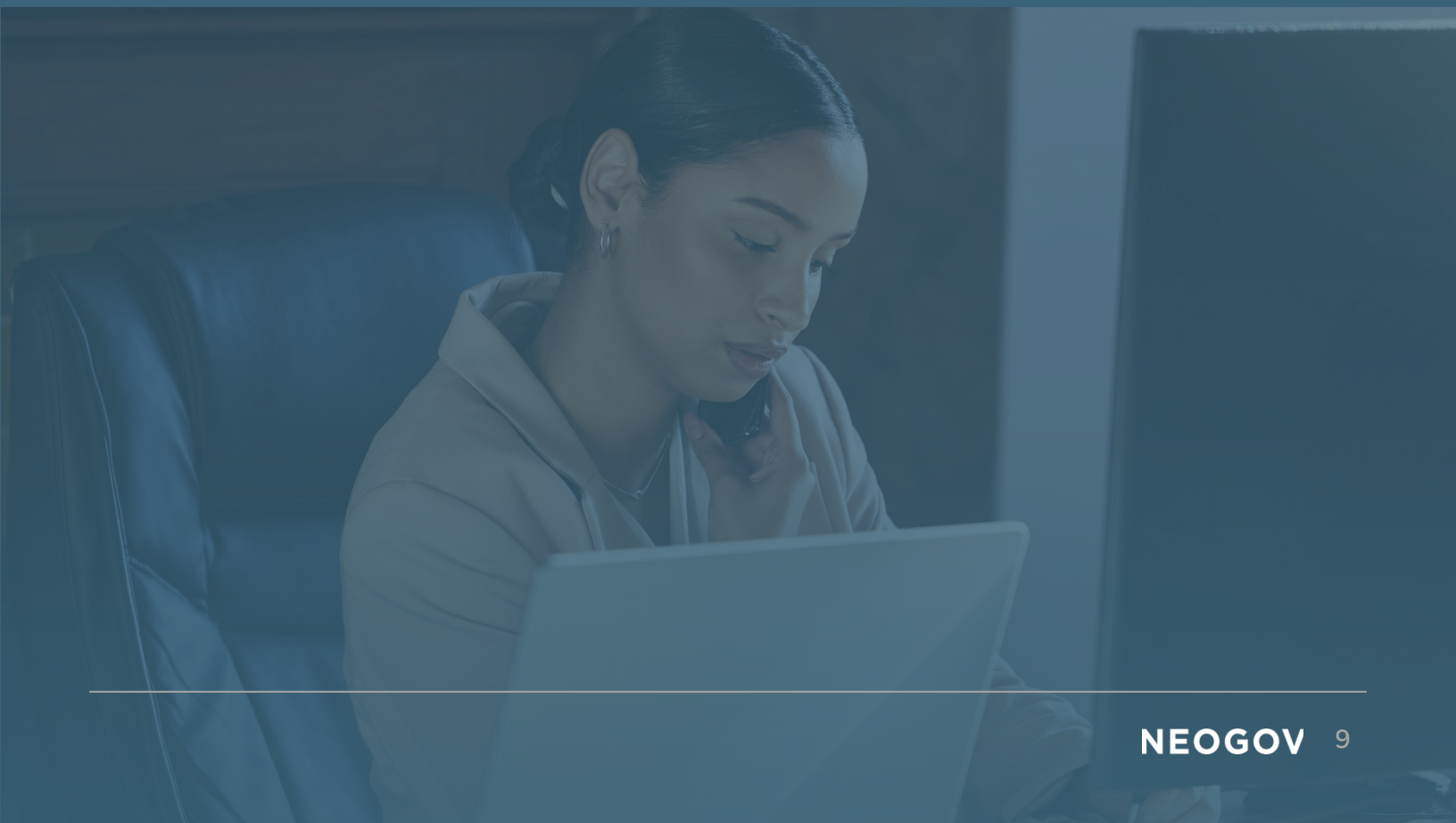
Figure 1.1
Overall Jobs vs. Applications, 2021–2026

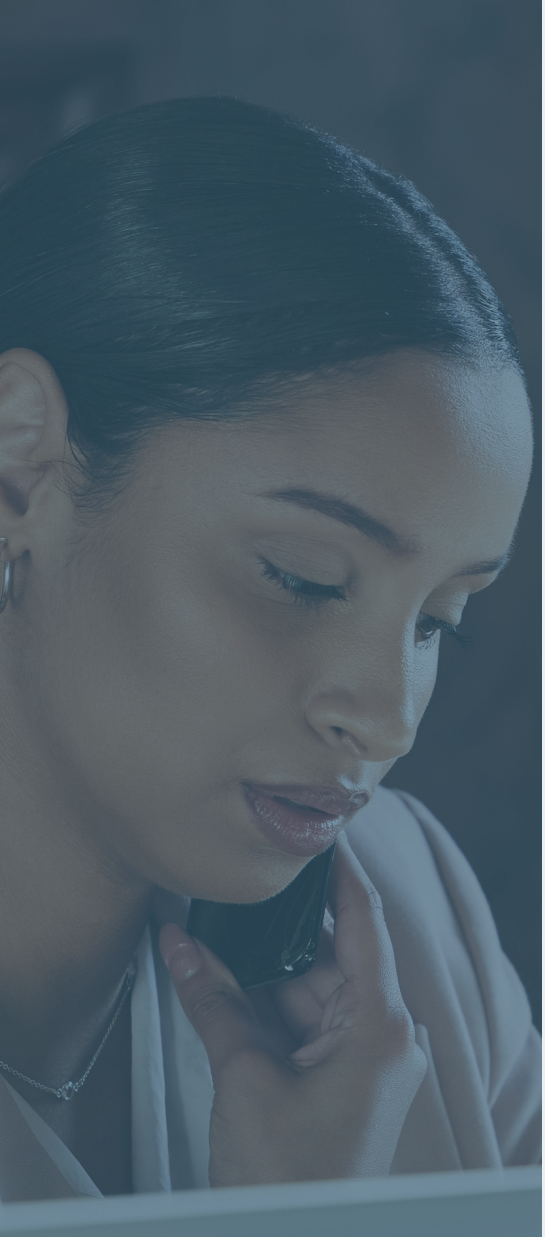


Additionally, certain occupations are experiencing more compression than others. There are fewer job openings for administrative assistants (-18.3%), office clerks (-19%), social workers (-19.4%), and accountants and auditors (-18.6%), yet an increase in applications for those roles year-over-year.

Figure 1.2
Jobs, Applications, & Time-to-Hire per Occupation, 2025–2026







More applications per opening also complicates screening for employers. As activity centers on fewer opportunities, agencies are processing more qualified—and unqualified—applicants per post. Although agencies saw a 4.4% increase in eligible candidates per job this year, that's contrasted by a more significant 10.8% jump in ineligible candidates per job, meaning hiring managers are spending more time reviewing low-fit applications in their search for qualified talent.

> *State and local HR leaders describe the same shift from the inside: more applicants, but the same systems and staff to move them. The teams finding success are targeting where candidates get stuck. Pennsylvania found that just its interview stage made up nearly half of total hiring time. To address this bottleneck, the HR team added phone screens for high-volume roles and set clearer response expectations for hiring managers. This adjustment resulted in the state cutting the average hiring timeline from about 90 days to 54*
>
> – **Caitlin Lewis,** *Work for America Executive Director*

Read for HR leaders' perspective

When considering the rising number of ineligible candidates per job alongside job seeker responses to why, if ever, they stopped filling out an application before completing it, a potential explanation comes to light. The leading reason candidates selected is that they realized they weren't qualified (34.3%), which could indicate that job postings aren't defining the duties of the role clearly enough for candidates to self-evaluate their fit. As they continue further through the application process, additional details may be revealed through supplemental questions or required documents that give candidates better insight into their fit for the role.

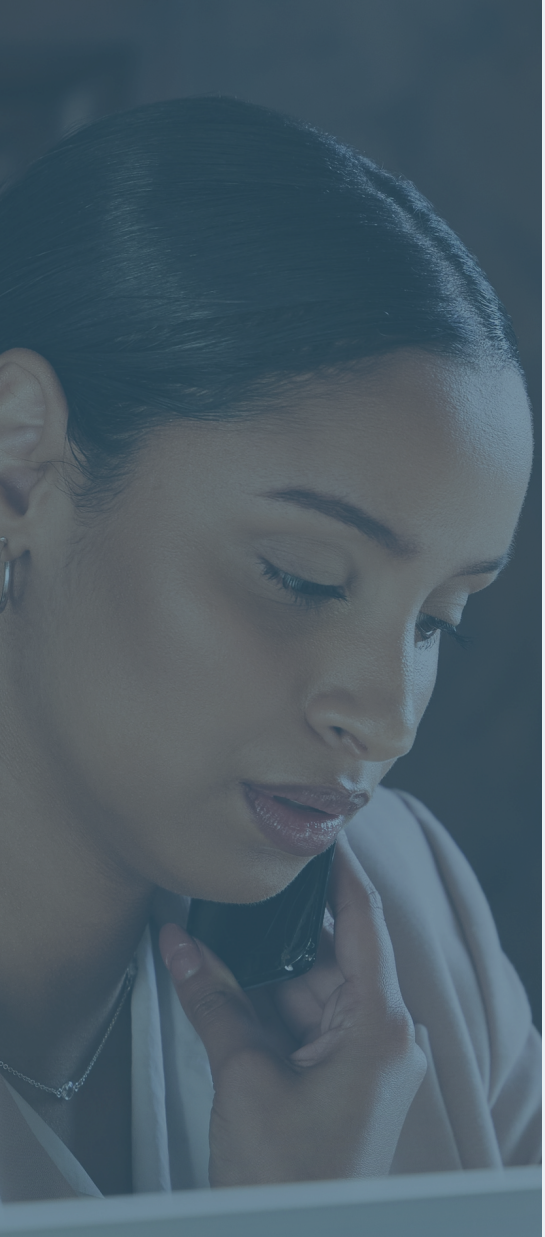
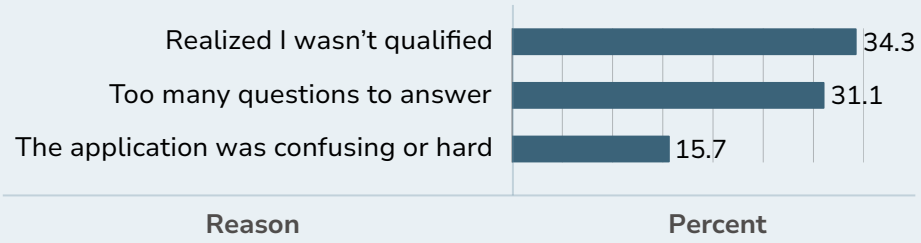


Figure 1.3
Top Reasons Job Seekers Stopped Before Completing an Application



Who is Applying to Public Sector Jobs?

Today's public sector applicant market contains candidates searching under very different conditions. Nearly all respondents (97.5%) were actively searching or had applied to a job within the prior year. But some candidates were searching under more urgent circumstances than others.

The Urgent Searchers

Among the survey respondents actively searching and applying, 39.3% were unemployed and 25.2% cited losing a previous job as a reason for searching. Unemployed respondents were more likely than employed respondents to use general online job boards, report no sector preference, and use AI during their search.

The Selective Browsers

The market also consists of more selective employed candidates. Private sector respondents were especially likely to seek better salary and benefits and career growth, while current government and public safety workers frequently wanted better pay, healthier culture, and greater flexibility without abandoning their preference for government work.



What This Means for Agencies

The average opening now attracts both more eligible candidates and more ineligible applications than it did in 2021. Application volume alone is therefore no longer a sufficient measure of recruiting performance. Agencies need to understand how much of that volume becomes eligible talent, how much screening work each opening creates, and whether the process can remain timely and communicative as applicant pressure rises. They also need to evaluate whether their job postings clearly state the qualifications required for each role so candidates can easily determine whether they are a good match.

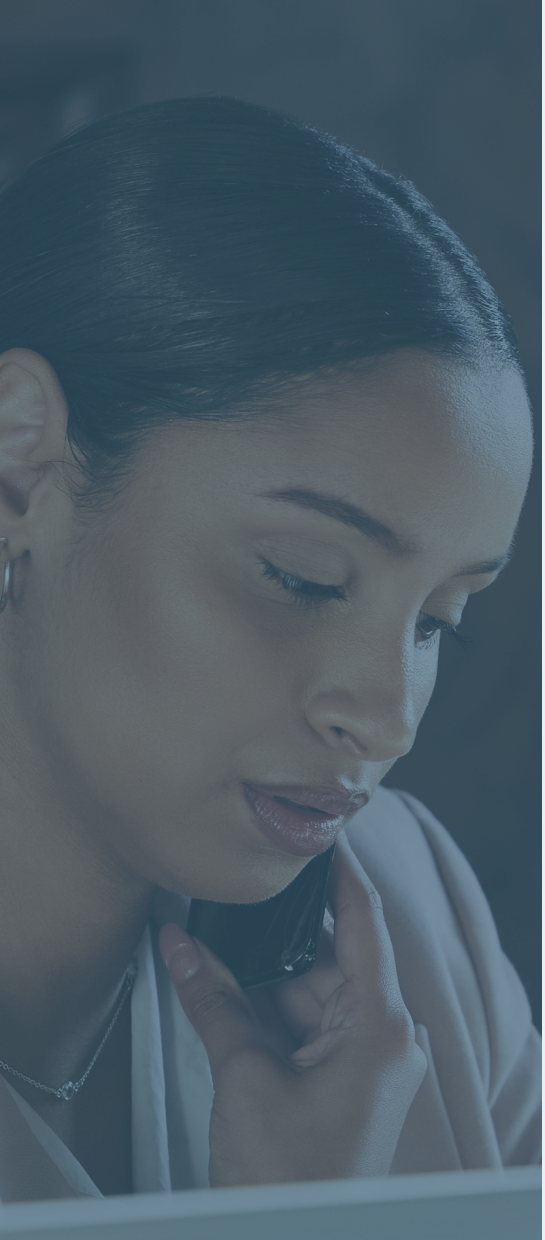
Strategies for Agencies in 2027

Strategy 1 — Reframe hiring success around qualified yield, not raw volume

Adjust hiring goals to reflect candidate eligibility, not application volume. Build a role-level scorecard that tracks applications per opening, eligible candidates per opening, application-to-eligible conversion, ineligible applications per opening, eligible-to-referred conversion, and candidate withdrawal where available. Establish a baseline for each department or occupation and review it annually rather than relying on an agency-wide average.

Use the measures together to diagnose the real problem:

- Applications rise while eligibility falls: Review qualification clarity, source quality, and screening design.
- Applications and eligibility are both low: Focus on candidate reach and the competitiveness of the opportunity.
- Eligible volume is strong but requisitions remain open: Investigate downstream process or capacity constraints.
- Referral remains strong but hiring outcomes lag: Examine interviews, offers, withdrawals, or approvals.



Strategy 2 Forecast hiring capacity from applicant load, not requisition count

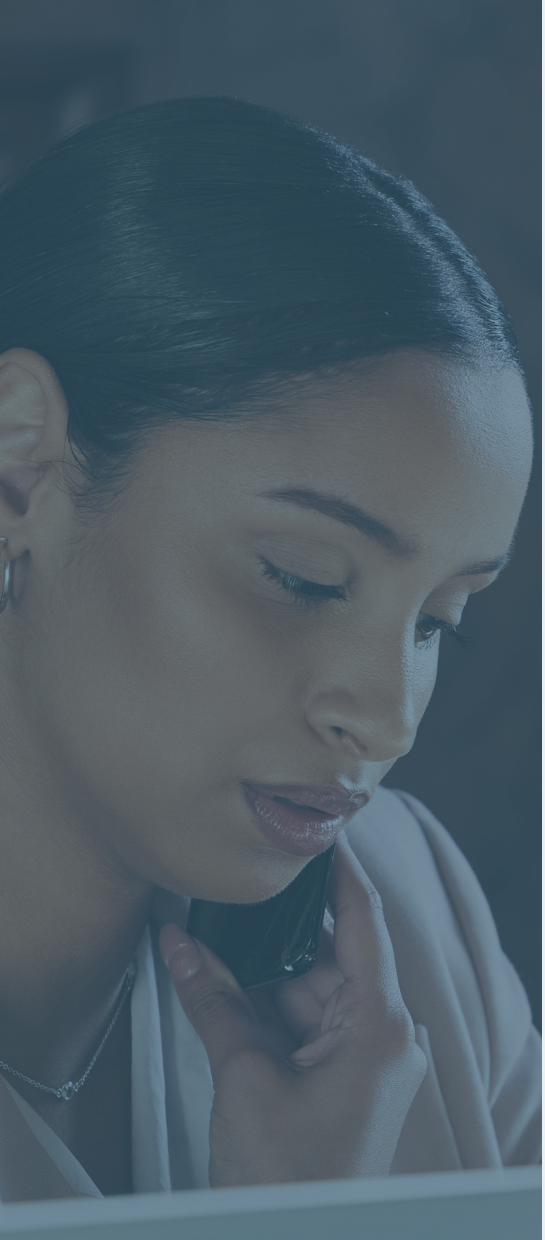
Plan recruiter and hiring manager capacity around expected applicant volume and screening complexity. Use recent applications-per-job data to forecast how many applications each upcoming requisition is likely to generate. Combine that estimate with the time required for minimum qualification review, hiring manager review, testing, and candidate communication.

First steps to take:

- Identify who owns the first eligibility review.
- Agree on a job-related screening rubric with HR, the hiring manager, and relevant subject-matter experts.
- Reserve review capacity on the calendar rather than waiting for applications to accumulate.
- Set a regular review cadence, such as daily or twice weekly during peak periods.
- Define escalation rules for aging applications.
- Prepare communication templates and status-update triggers in advance.
- Use automated acknowledgments, reminders, scheduling, and status notices for routine touchpoints while retaining human review for eligibility and selection decisions.

Prioritize this approach for:

- High-volume administrative and customer service roles
- Seasonal hiring
- Public safety roles
- Frequently reopened jobs
- Multi-vacancy requisitions
- Continuous recruitment
- Roles with historically low eligibility rates



Strategy 3 Separate true requirements from preferences and trainable qualifications

Revise job postings and applications to help candidates assess fit before submitting. This helps reduce uncertainty and wasted time by distinguishing true eligibility requirements from qualifications that are preferred, substitutable, or attainable after hire.

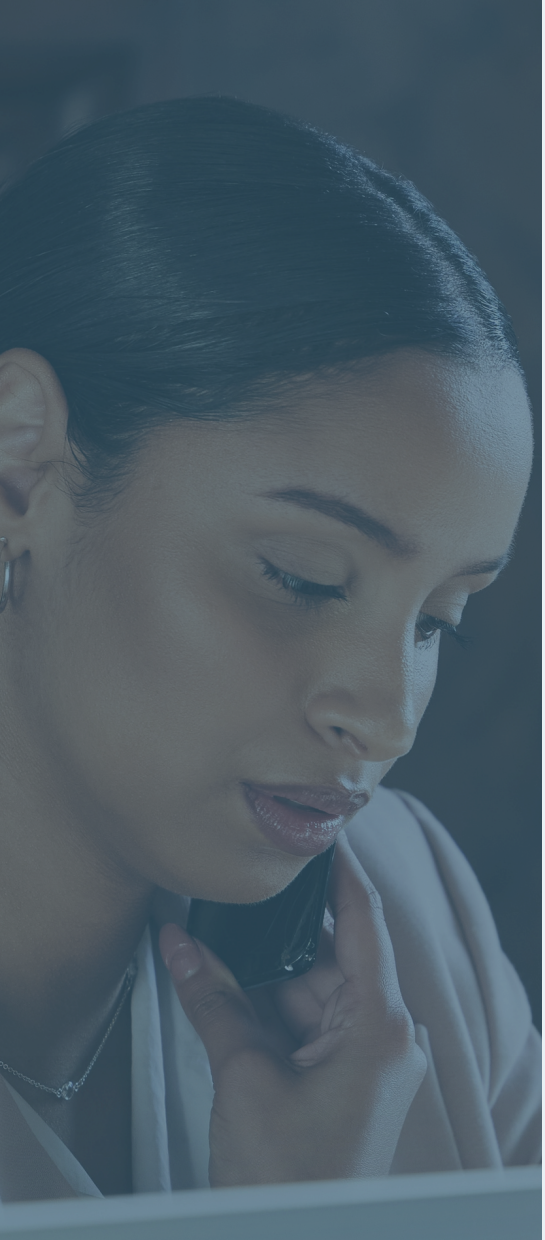
HR and the hiring manager should review every qualification before publishing a posting and place it into one of five categories:

1. Required at application
2. Required by appointment or start date
3. Preferred but not required
4. Equivalent education or experience accepted
5. Can be learned, completed, or certified after hire

These distinctions should be stated explicitly in the posting rather than left for candidates to interpret. Examples include:

- "License required at the time of application."
- "Certification must be obtained within six months of hire."
- "Four years of relevant experience may substitute for the degree requirement."
- "Experience in government is preferred but not required."
- "Training will be provided after hire."

This approach allows candidates to answer a fundamental question before they invest time in an application: Do I actually qualify? It can also help agencies avoid unintentionally discouraging candidates whose experience is relevant but does not follow a traditional public-sector career path.



Before publishing, HR and the hiring manager should ask:

- Is every listed minimum qualification actually necessary to determine eligibility?
- Are preferred qualifications clearly separated from required qualifications?
- Is government experience truly necessary, or simply customary?
- Can relevant private-sector, nonprofit, military, volunteer, apprenticeship, or educational experience qualify?
- Are degree requirements necessary for successful performance of the role?
- Can experience substitute for formal education, and is that equivalency clearly explained?
- Are licenses or certifications required by law or policy, or could they reasonably be obtained after hire?
- Are candidates being screened out for capabilities that could be learned through onboarding or training?

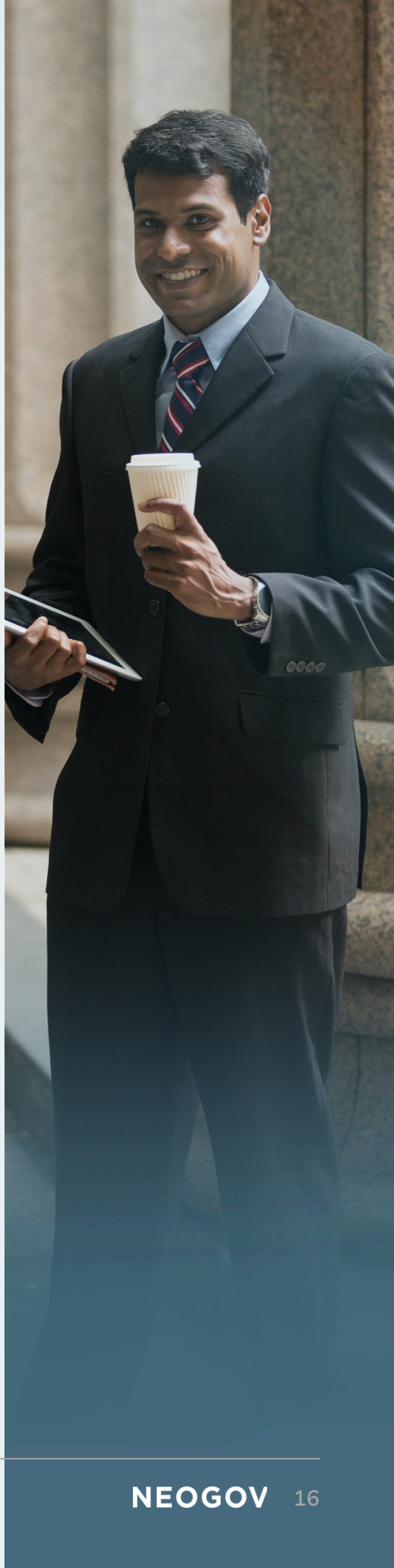
The goal is not to lower hiring standards.

The goal is not to lower hiring standards. It is to make those standards more precise so qualified candidates can recognize themselves as qualified and unqualified candidates can self-select appropriately.

Rising applicant pressure does not affect every job equally. As more candidates vie for fewer open jobs, agencies must distinguish roles that lack applicants from those that attract plenty of interest but remain difficult to process or close—the focus of Trend 2.

Trend 2

“Hard-to-Fill” Is No Longer One Problem



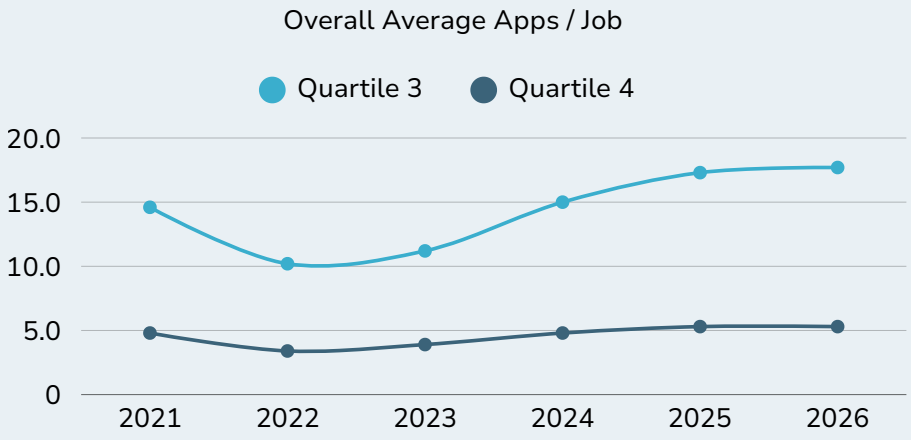
"Hard-to-fill" is no longer a label reserved just for roles with few candidates or those with lengthy hiring timelines. It is less useful as a single label than as a prompt to diagnose where a role's hiring funnel is breaking. Hiring challenges are emerging across both occupations and individual jobs, which makes diagnosing a hard-to-fill role more difficult.

In 2026, candidates applied to a wider variety of occupational categories, but this recovery is not evenly distributed. The average for the bottom quartile of jobs increased by 10.4% from 2021 to 2026, but overall candidate activity remains concentrated in the most popular, high-interest positions.

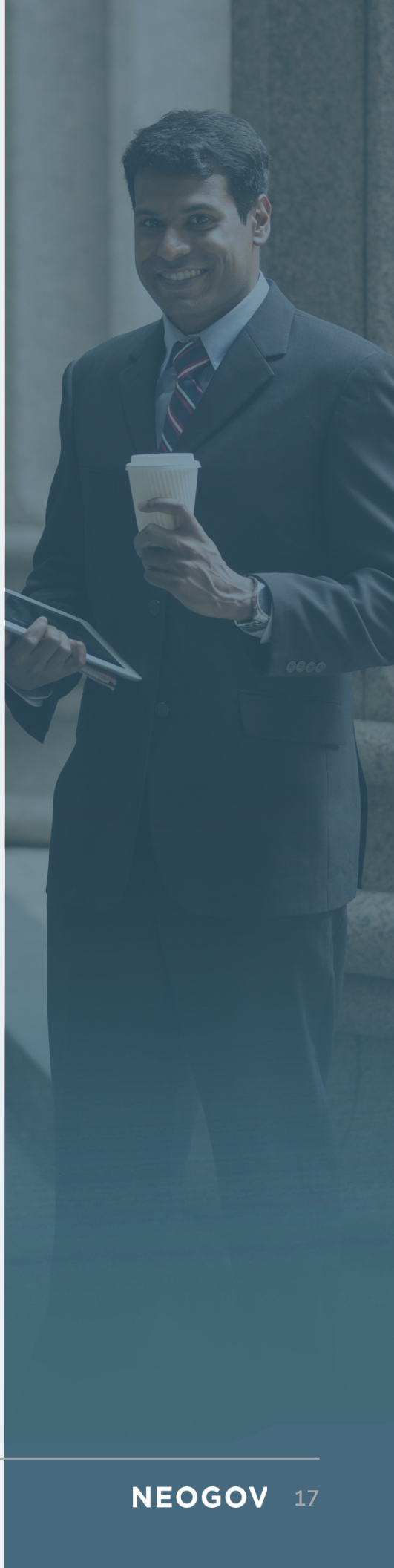
Comparatively, from 2025 to 2026:

- Top-quartile applications per job increased 9.6%
- Quartile 2 applications per job increased 5.2%
- Quartile 3 applications per job increased 2.3%
- The bottom quartile applications remained flat

Figure 2.1
Average Applications Per Job by Quartile, 2021–2026



Application volume alone offers little help in diagnosing which roles are hard-to fill. Just because a role attracted large numbers of applications, that did not mean its time-to-hire would be faster than low-activity jobs. The data suggests there are at least four different conditions defining hard-to-fill roles, all with different root problems, characteristics, and recommended solutions.



Four Hiring Conditions Agencies Need to Diagnose

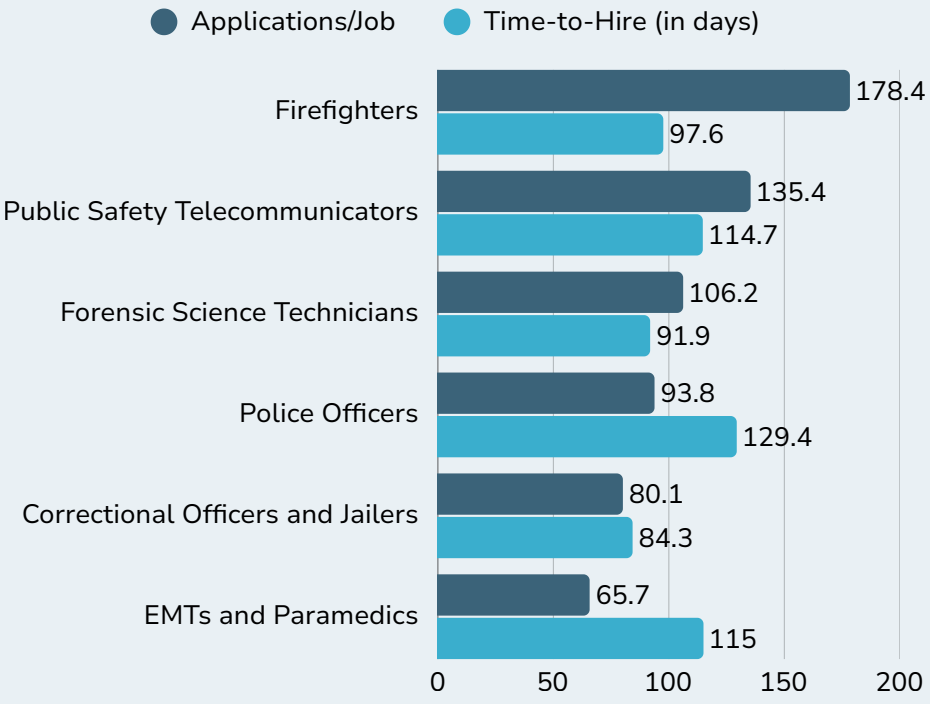
High candidate interest, long time-to-hire

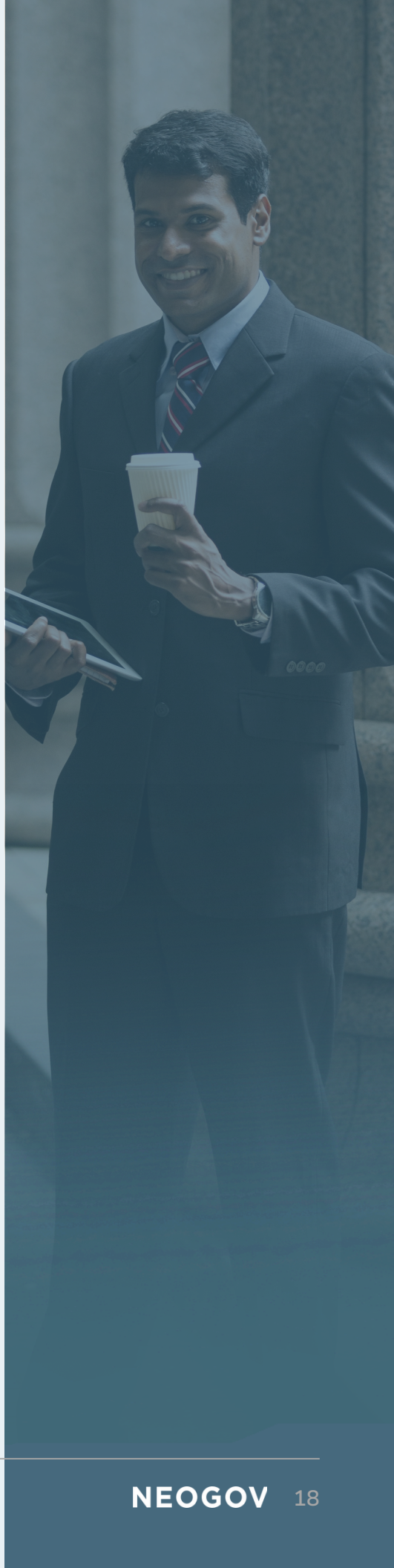
Roles with high application rates and long hiring cycles make up this category. They receive substantial application activity, but their requisitions remain open longer than many other categories.

Possible explanations for this include:

- Multi-stage assessments
- Physical or medical standards
- Background investigations
- Credential verification
- Eligibility lists
- Scheduling and approval handoffs
- Limited recruiter or investigator capacity
- Multi-vacancy or continuous-recruitment requisitions

Figure 2.2
Applications Per Job and Time-to-Hire by Occupation, 2026

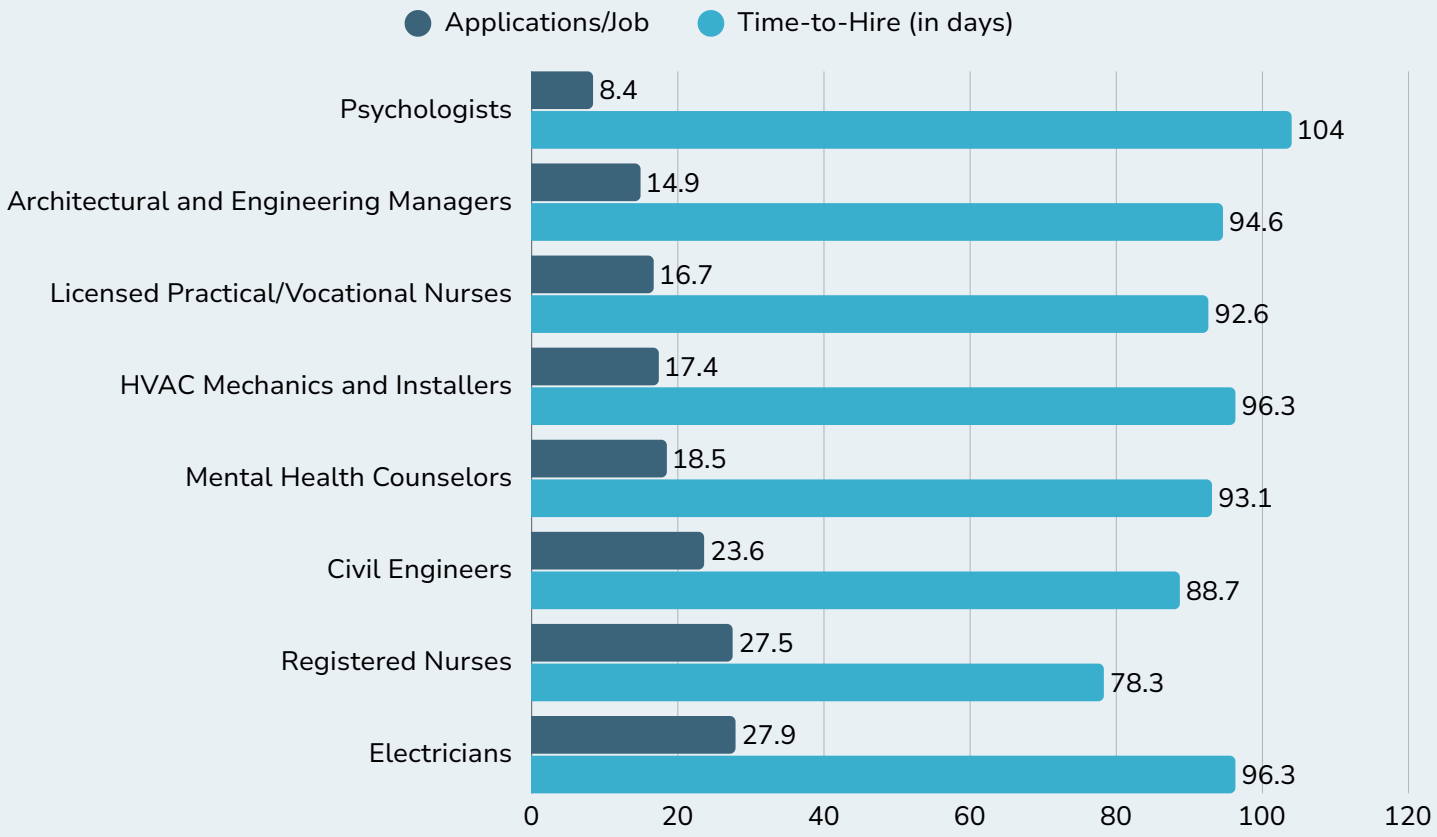




Low application activity, long time-to-hire

This category is characterized by relatively few applications per opening and also a long time-to-hire. These roles may face both an external candidate-supply constraint and an internal process constraint. Roles with specialized credentials, licenses, or experience requirements, like psychologists and architectural and engineering managers, may also be harder to fill due to competitive pay, location requirements, schedule and limited flexibility.

Figure 2.3
Applications Per Job and Time-to-Hire by Occupation, 2026

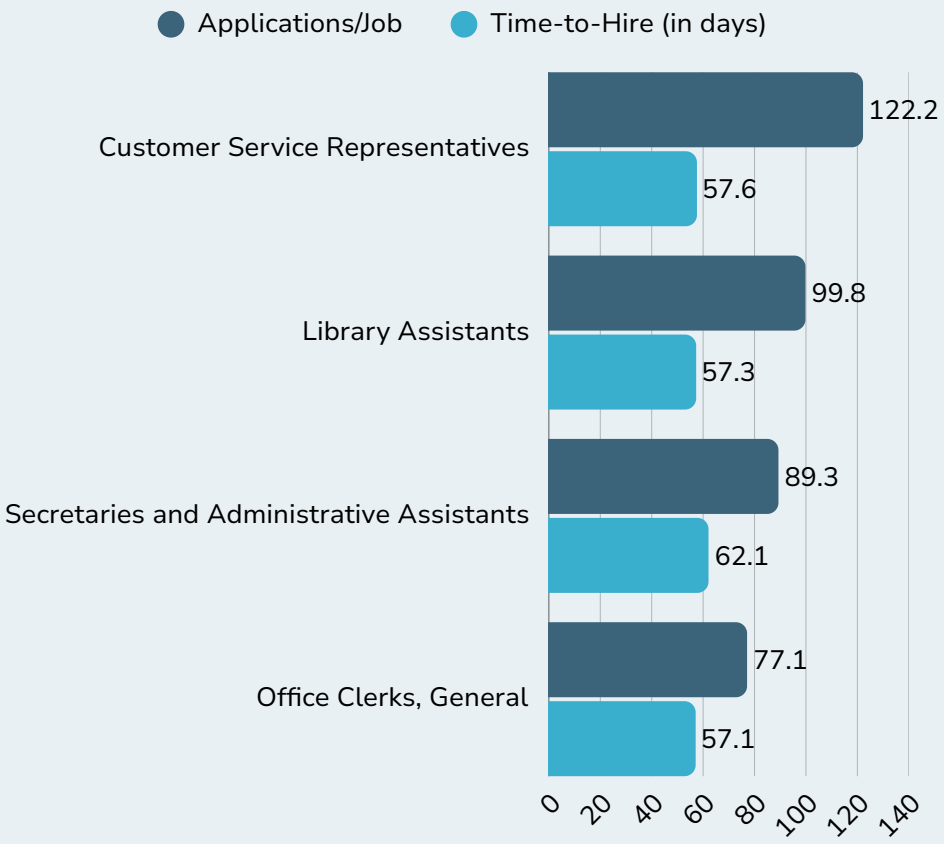


High candidate interest, short time-to-hire

Roles with high application-per-job rates and shorter hiring timelines are not necessarily hard to fill. Compared with the other examples, they attract substantial interest and close relatively quickly. Their primary risk may be operational, such as:

- High screening volume
- Review workload
- Candidate communication at scale
- Uneven qualification yield
- Hiring-manager capacity
- Avoidable applicant burden

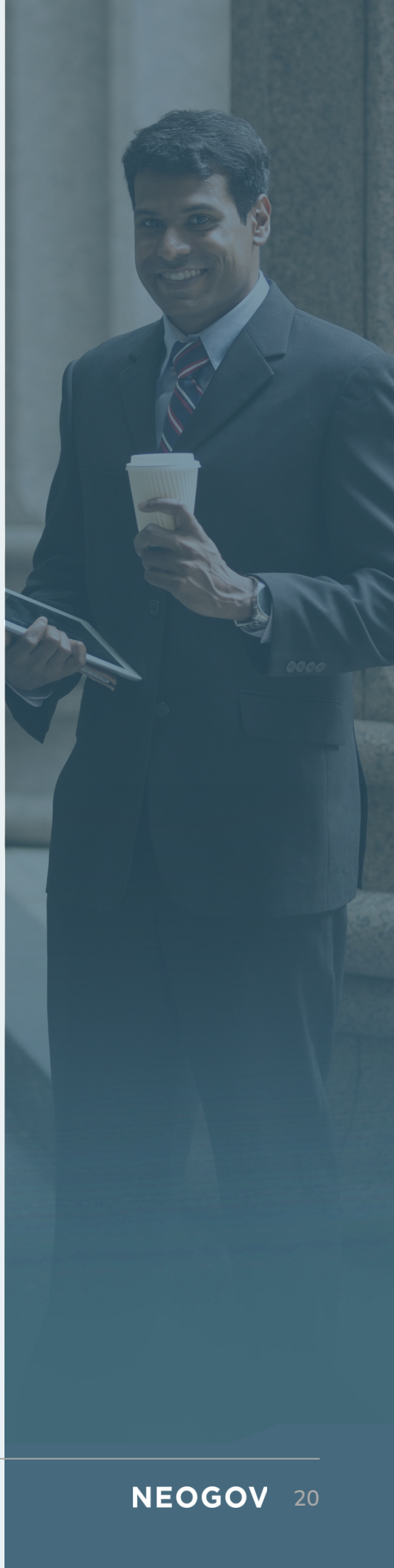
Figure 2.4
Applications Per Job and Time-to-Hire by Occupation, 2026



Low candidate activity, short time-to-hire

Some roles with low application volume and shorter hiring timelines may attract a small, specialized pool but still move efficiently when viable candidates apply. A lower application count is not automatically a weakness if the candidate pool is highly qualified and the requisition closes successfully. The strategic questions are:

- Does the role consistently produce enough viable candidates?
- Is the shorter cycle sustainable?
- Would broader sourcing improve outcomes or only create more low-fit volume?
- Is the pool too dependent on one channel, geography, or source?



What This Means for Agencies

Roles are hard-to-fill for a variety of reasons, not just because there's a lack of candidates or timelines are long. Agencies need to diagnose precise reasons why individual roles perform poorly by first identifying where the hiring funnel is breaking.

A role may suffer from:

- **Insufficient reach:** Too few candidates see the opening.
- **Weak conversion:** Candidates see the role but do not apply.
- **Limited applicant supply:** The role receives relatively few applications.
- **Qualification uncertainty:** The agency may be receiving applicants, but the current occupation-level data cannot show how many meet eligibility.
- **Process complexity:** Strong candidate activity does not translate into a short requisition cycle.
- **Capacity constraints:** HR staff, hiring managers, investigators, or panel members may not have enough time to move candidates efficiently.

Then, consider what solution to implement. **The appropriate response depends on the condition:**

- Low reach with healthy conversion calls for better distribution.
- High reach with weak conversion calls for a review of the offer, qualifications, and posting.
- High applications with a long cycle calls for process and capacity analysis—not automatically more advertising.
- Low applications with a long cycle requires both an attraction strategy and an internal-process review.
- High applications with a shorter cycle may be a volume-management challenge rather than a hard-to-fill problem.



Strategies for Agencies in 2027

Strategy 1 — Build role-specific hiring playbooks around the actual constraint

Create a one-page hiring playbook for every high-priority or repeatedly difficult-to-fill role. Begin by assigning the role using its views, conversion, applications per job, eligibility where available, and time-to-hire. Then document the most likely constraint, the intervention, the accountable owner, the candidate communication plan, and the measures that will determine whether the approach worked. **A practical playbook should include five elements:**

01 Current funnel profile

- Views per job
- View-to-application conversion
- Applications per job
- Eligibility rate, if available
- Time-to-hire
- Withdrawal and offer acceptance, if available

02 Primary working diagnosis

- Reach
- Conversion
- Applicant supply
- Qualification yield
- Process complexity
- Staff capacity

03 Intervention plan

- Sourcing
- Posting of EVP changes
- Qualification review
- Process redesign
- Communication cadence
- Staffing or reviewer capacity

04 Ownership

- HR or talent acquisition
- Department leader
- Hiring manager
- Background or credential-review team
- Finance or classification partner, where needed

05 30-,60-, and 90-day measures



Strategy 2 Audit the requisition funnel before investing in sourcing spend

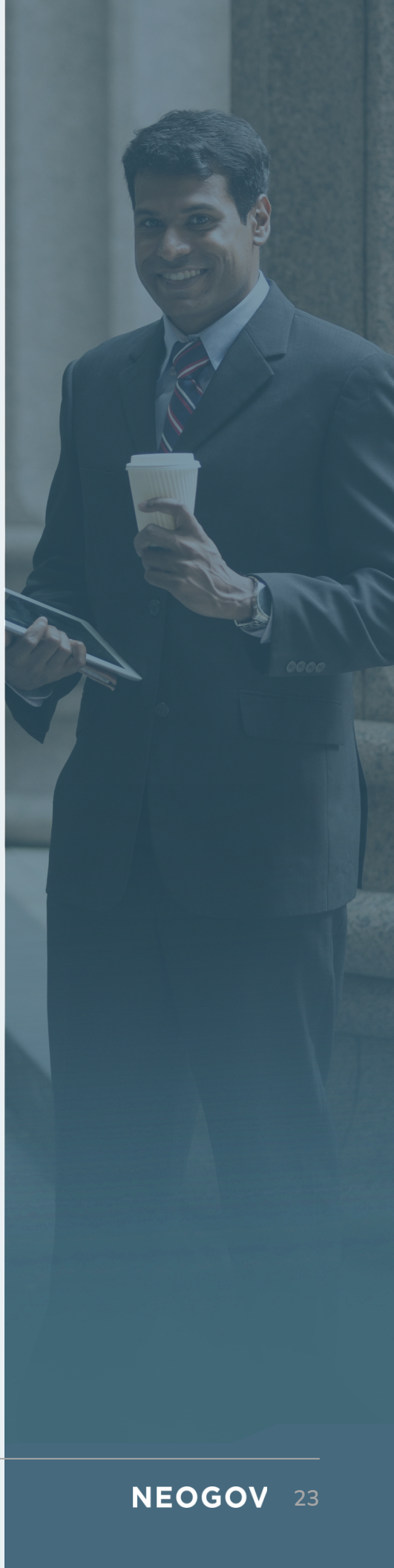
Conduct a funnel diagnosis before increasing advertising or sourcing investment. HR and the hiring department should review reach, conversion, applicant volume, and requisition-cycle data before deciding that more exposure is the answer.

Use a simple decision framework:

Observed condition	Likely priority
Low views, healthy conversion	Increase distribution and targeted sourcing
High views, weak conversion	Improve pay visibility, posting clarity, flexibility, qualifications, or EVP
Hgh applications, long requisition cycle	Addres screening, assessments, approvals, scheduling, or stafing capacity
High applications, long requisition cycle	Address screening, assessments, approvals, scheduling, or staffing capacity
Low applications, long requisition cycle	Run attraction and process interventions together
High applications, shorter cycle	Protect quality and communication; do not automatically add volume
Low applications, shorter cycle	Confirm that the narrow pool is sufficient before intervening

Before approving more sourcing spend, ask:

- Are candidates seeing the role?
- Are viewers applying?
- Are applicants meeting minimum requirements?
- Is the hiring process slow before or after receiving applications?
- Are candidates withdrawing during the process?
- Is the offered pay or schedule competitive?
- Are hiring managers and required reviewers available?



Strategy 3 Put persistent double-bind roles into workforce planning

Elevate repeatedly low-application, long-cycle occupations into the agency's workforce-planning process before 2027 budgets and staffing plans are finalized. Review each role with HR, finance, department leadership, and operational stakeholders to determine whether the constraint is temporary or structural. **For each occupation, assess six levers:**

01 Compensation and classification

a. Is the salary range competitive?
b. Has the classification kept pace with market responsibilities?
c. Can hiring incentives, progression steps, differentials, or loan support be considered?

02 Qualifications and pathways

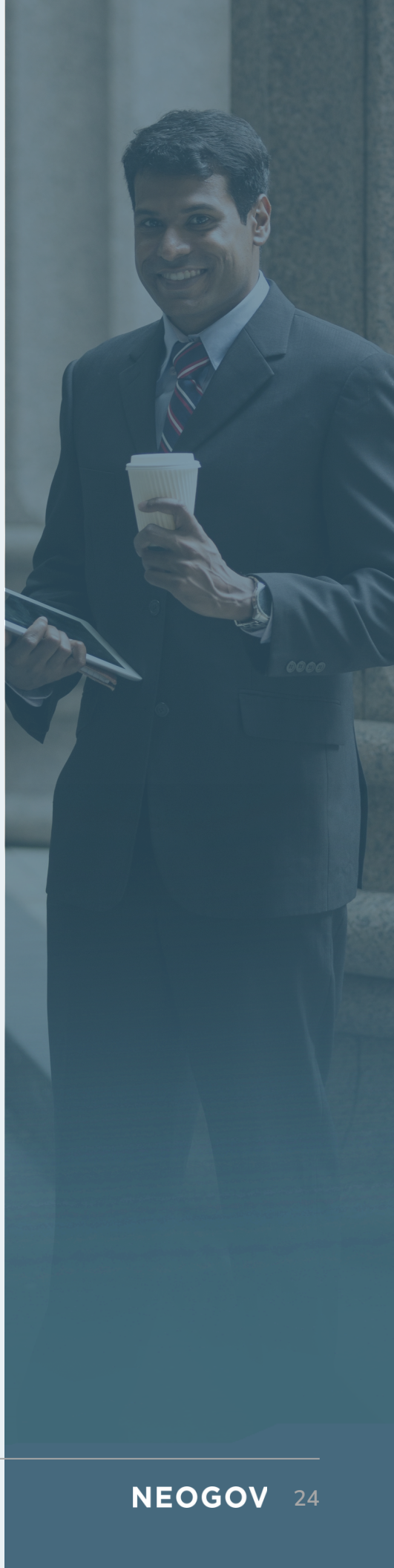
a. Are all requirements essential?
b. Is equivalent experience permitted?
c. Can candidates complete credentials after hire?
d. Can the agency create trainee, apprenticeship, fellowship, or bridge classifications?

03 Schedule and location

a. Can hours become more predictable?
b. Can shifts be redesigned?
c. Can some duties be performed remotely?
d. Can the search geography be expanded?
e. Can relocation assistance or regional partnerships help?

04 Pipeline development

a. Which schools, professional associations, unions, academies, or community organizations reach the required talent?
b. Can internships, apprenticeships, or clinical placements become feeder programs?
c. Can internal employees be developed into the role?



05 Hiring-process design

a. Which approvals or assessments are mandatory?
b. Which steps can occur concurrently?
c. Where does the requisition sit idle?
d. Can interview, credential, or background capacity be reserved in advance?

06 Retention and service continuity

a. Is recurring hiring difficulty partly driven by turnover?
b. Can workload, management, schedule, or development changes reduce repeat vacancies?
c. If supply cannot be improved quickly, what service-delivery or succession plan is needed?

Once an agency determines whether a role is constrained by reach, conversion, applicant supply, or process complexity, the next question is whether **the opportunity itself is clear and compelling enough to turn candidate attention into action.**





Trend 3

More Attention Doesn't Guarantee More Applications



Public sector job openings are receiving more views, but a smaller share of candidates chose to apply from 2025–2026. In the latest year, views per job increased while conversion declined. NEOGOV's data suggests this isn't because there's less interest in government work; one plausible explanation is that candidates are becoming more selective in the roles they apply to.

Figure 3.1
Views to Application Conversion Rate

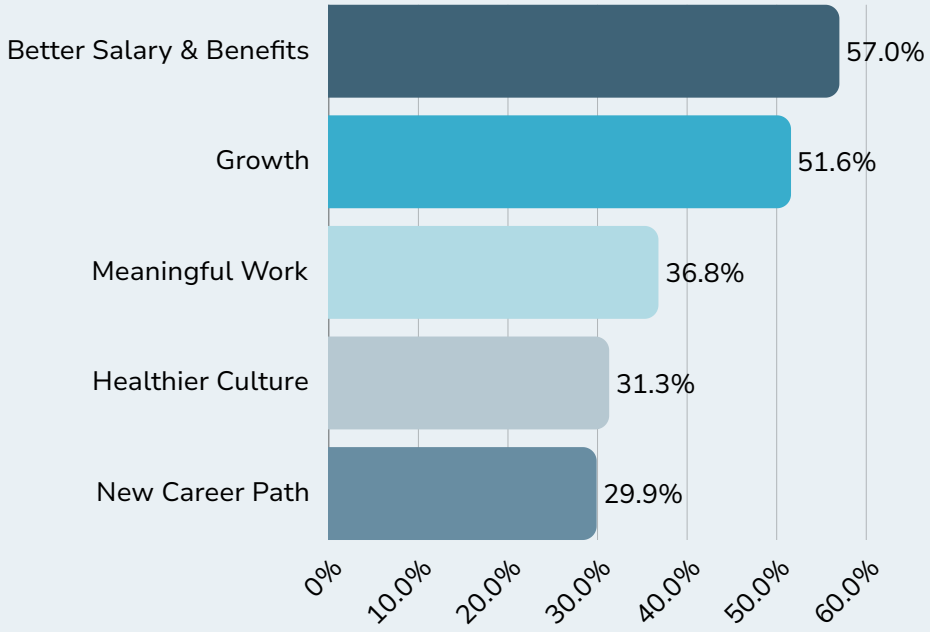
Views	2025	2026	Percent Change
Views-to-application conversion	2.43%	2.34%	**-4.0%**
Views per job (average)	2,094.9	2,362.2	**12.8%**

The job seeker survey provides useful insights into what candidates are evaluating during that decision. Respondents emphasized salary, benefits, clear duties, growth, flexibility, security, culture, and meaningful work—suggesting that visibility alone is unlikely to compensate for missing or uncompetitive information.

Job seekers want to understand the entire employment proposition before investing time in the application, but what's deemed valuable to one candidate may not hold as much weight for the next. Candidates are coming to public sector work for many reasons, including better salaries and benefits (57%), growth opportunities (51.6%), more meaningful work (36.8%), and a healthier work culture (31.3%). As such, what they're looking for in a job will differ, so job descriptions must be clear and comprehensive to convert more of the right viewers into informed, qualified applicants.



Figure 3.2
Why Candidates are Searching for New Jobs



Clear duties is the top most important element of a job description among job seekers (85.8%), followed by salary range (77.1%) and career growth opportunities (52.3%). These are important signals for public sector agencies seeking to improve views-to-application conversion numbers for low-performing job postings. Just because a role has weak application activity, that may not mean it needs more distribution—rather, it may need a stronger offer or clearer posting.

This is demonstrated in Figure 3.4, which compares how occupations can reach the same application outcome through different mechanisms. From 2021 to 2026, legal jobs received more attention but converted fewer views into applications (-40.8%), while food service occupations converted a smaller audience more effectively (+28.2%).

Figure 3.3
Most Important Job Description Elements

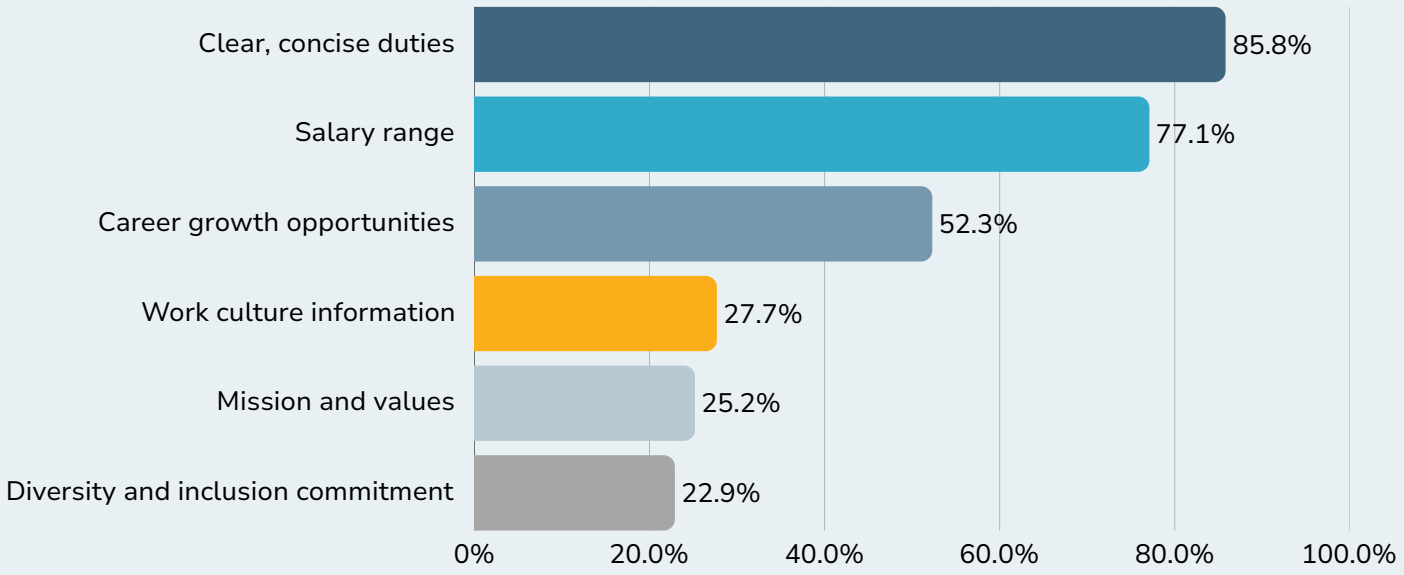
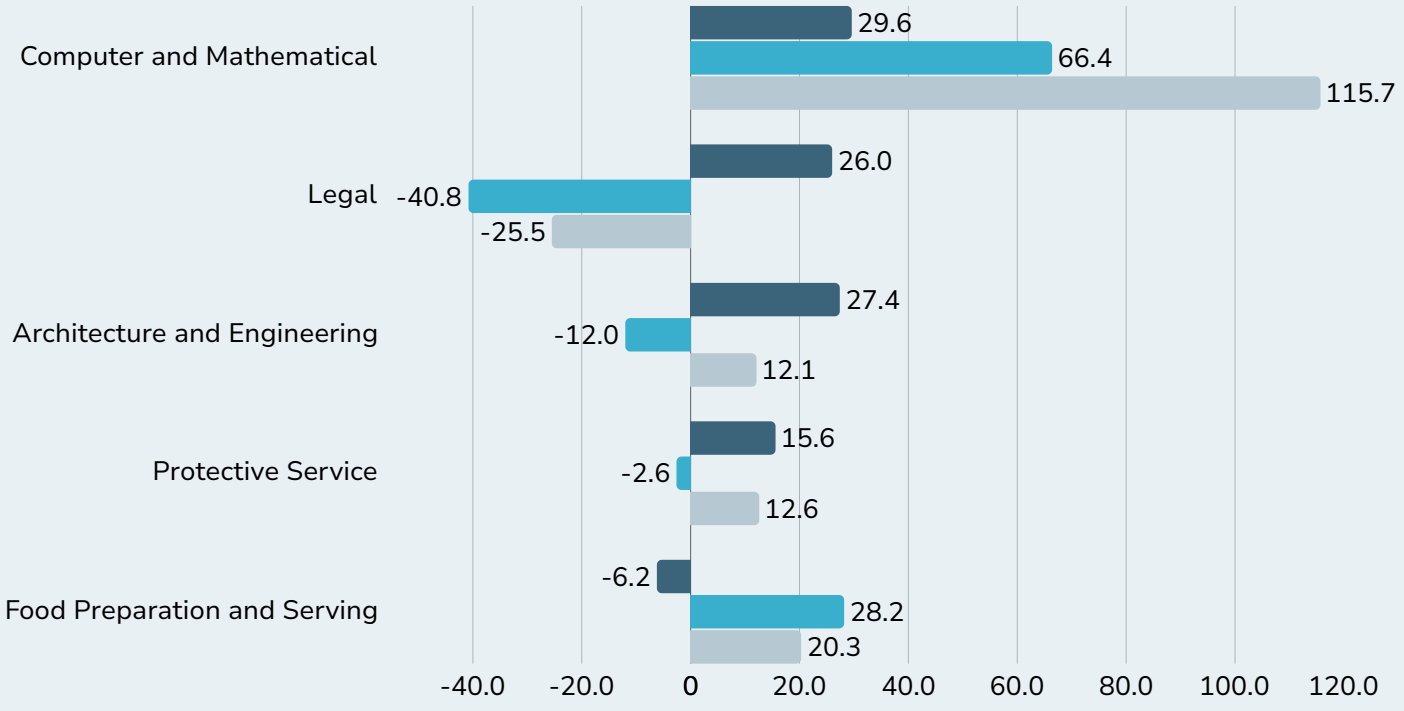


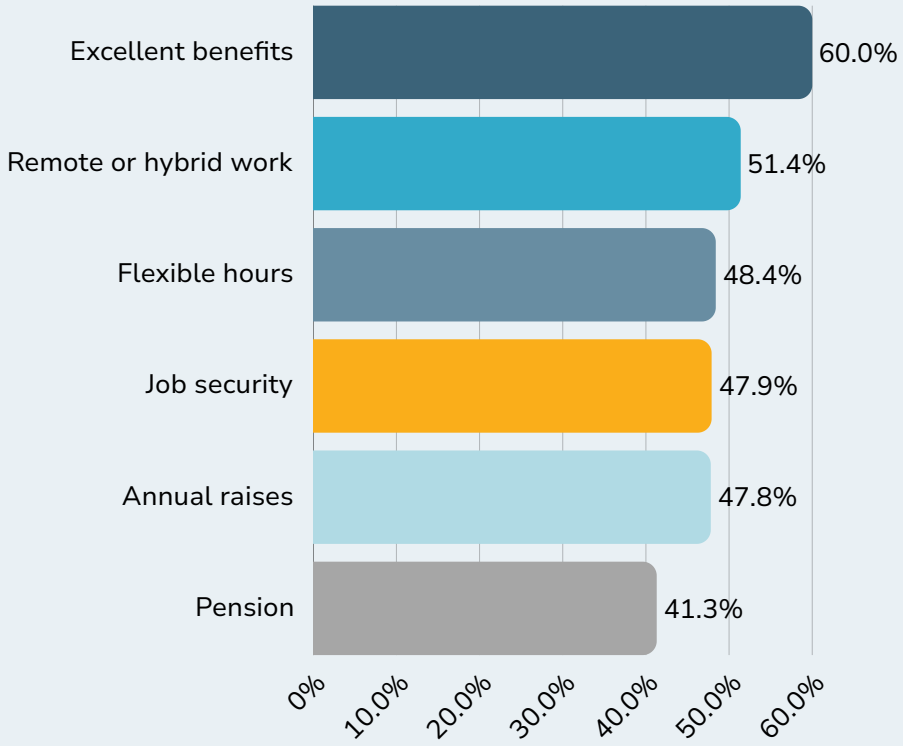
Figure 3.4
Sample of Views, Conversion, and Applications Change by Occupational Group, 2021–2026





One of the most critical elements impacting candidate interest is salary transparency. Half of respondents to the job seeker survey are deterred from applying to postings with no salary listed. Many candidates, however, will sustain interest in a role if salary expectations aren't met if the position offers excellent benefits, remote or hybrid options, flexible work hours, or strong job security. But there is a limit: below-average pay deters 62.3% of job seekers from applying.

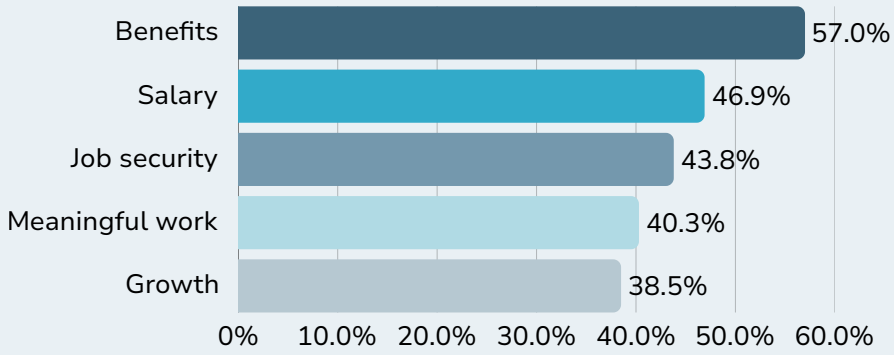
Figure 3.5
What May Offset Lower Salary



The strongest public sector offer reflects a total value package. Job seekers indicate the most important elements of a job description include clear, concise duties (85.8%), salary range (77.1%), and career-growth opportunities (52.3%). Information about work culture, mission and values, and diversity and inclusion commitments is important for about a quarter of survey respondents and could serve as key differentiators.



Figure 3.6
What Makes the Public Sector Appealing



Five Candidate Groups for Tailoring the Public Sector Offer

The survey analysis surfaced several overlapping candidate groups. These are not mutually exclusive; they show how different career situations and priorities can coexist within today's public sector applicant market, giving agencies a glimpse into job seeker motivations.

Figure 3.7
Five Public Sector Candidate Groups

Candidate Lens	What Distinguishes the Segment	Recruitment Implication
Mid-career Optimizer	Pay, security, advancement, development, flexibility	Present the role as a long-term career move, not merely an opening
Private Sector Switcher	Strong pay and growth expectations; interest in government	Compare total rewards and make progression visible
Public Sector Insider	Still government-oriented, but seeking better culture, pay, and flexibility	Compete on agency experience, not only sector benefits
Career Changer	Wants mobility paired with security and training	Explain transferable skills, pathways, and post-hire development
Flexibility Seeker	Values transparency, schedule control, PTO, and efficient processes	Define exactly how, when, and where work can be performed



What This Means for Agencies

The latest increase in candidate views did not produce a proportional increase in applications. From 2025 to 2026, views per job increased 12.8% while view-to-application conversion declined 4%. While that doesn't prove why candidates chose not to apply, it does make the quality of the opportunity and the information presented in the posting more important, beyond clearly stating the job duties.

The survey shows that candidates evaluate a total value of practical and aspirational elements before deciding whether to apply: duties, salary, benefits, growth, security, flexibility, culture, and mission. As such, an employer's value proposition shouldn't be framed as a series of trade-offs, such as choosing mission over money, stability over growth, benefits over flexibility, or a pension over professional development. Different candidate segments place different weights on these elements, but many expect several of them to work together.

The strongest messaging positions public service as a complete package that combines fair pay, comprehensive benefits, long-term security, career advancement, flexibility, and meaningful mission-driven work. The goal shouldn't be to attract the largest possible number of applicants, but to help the right candidates determine quickly whether the role meets their needs, whether they qualify, and whether the agency is an employer they can trust.



Strategies for Agencies in 2027

Strategy 1 **Audit and rebuild high-view, low-conversion postings**

Start with high-view, low-conversion roles and rebuild the posting around candidate decision information. Identify occupations where views per job are healthy or increasing but applications per view are flat or declining. For each role, bring together HR, the hiring manager, and compensation or classification staff to review whether the posting answers the candidate's essential questions within the first screen or section.

Put the full employment proposition in the posting. Include decision-critical information about the role, its impact, compensation, growth paths, flexibility options, location expectations, and qualifications to improve application conversion.

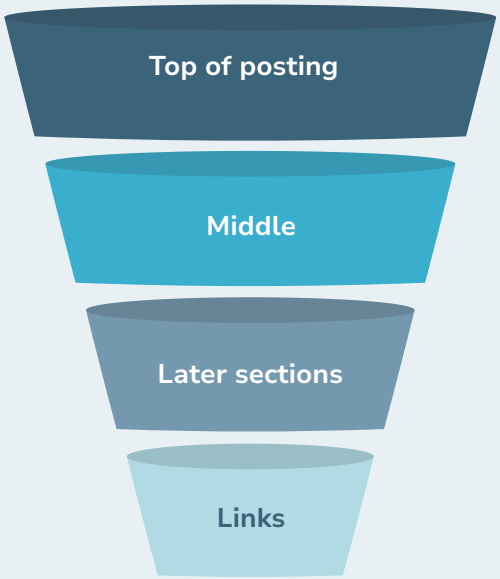
Prioritize:

- Salary range
- Work location
- Schedule and shift expectations
- Remote or hybrid eligibility
- Core job duties
- Required qualifications
- Equivalent experience
- Benefits and retirement
- Career path and development
- Mission and community impact



For each job posting, use a layered structure:

- **Top of posting:** Decision-critical information
- **Middle:** Responsibilities and qualifications
- **Later sections:** Benefits, culture, mission, and agency detail
- **Links:** Full policy or benefit details that would otherwise make the posting unwieldy



Strategy 2 Make job fit transparent before the application begins

Meeting the minimum qualifications does not necessarily mean a candidate will want the job. Candidates also need enough information to determine whether the position fits their compensation expectations, schedule, location, working preferences, career goals, and personal constraints before they begin a potentially lengthy application. Agencies should therefore make the practical realities of the job easy to understand before candidates click apply.

Begin with high-volume roles, positions with high application abandonment, or jobs that generate many applicants but relatively few viable candidates. Review whether a prospective applicant can quickly answer questions such as:

1. What will I actually do in this role?
2. What will I be paid, and where am I likely to fall within the range?
3. Where and when will I work?
4. Are there schedule, travel, physical, or availability requirements I need to consider?
5. What does this opportunity offer in terms of stability, development, and advancement?



Job postings should **prominently display the information most likely to affect a candidate's decision** to proceed, including:

- Salary range and, when possible, how starting pay is determined
- Work location and reporting expectations
- Remote or hybrid availability
- Standard work schedule
- Evening, weekend, rotating shift, overtime, on-call, or emergency-response expectations
- Essential duties and a realistic description of day-to-day work
- Physical or environmental working conditions
- Travel requirements
- Background, security, driving, or residency conditions
- Whether the position is permanent, temporary, seasonal, grant-funded, or otherwise time-limited
- Benefits or employment features that meaningfully distinguish the opportunity
- Training and professional-development opportunities
- Promotional or career-path opportunities
- Major steps or expectations in the hiring process, when known

The posting should prioritize information candidates need to make a decision rather than simply reproducing an internal job description. Long lists of formal responsibilities should be translated into a clear picture of what the employee will actually experience.

Before publishing, ask:

- Could a candidate understand the day-to-day nature of the job within a few minutes?
- Are any significant schedule, location, travel, or physical requirements buried in the posting?
- Could a candidate begin the application only to discover later that the salary, shift, location, or working conditions do not meet their needs?



- Does the posting explain what makes the opportunity attractive beyond the job title itself?
- Are growth, training, benefits, or career pathways visible enough to influence a candidate's decision?
- Is the most decision-critical information presented before the candidate begins the application?

The objective is to help candidates answer a different question from qualification screening: Do I actually want this job? Providing that information upfront can reduce avoidable application abandonment, improve candidate self-selection, and increase the likelihood that applicants who complete the process are genuinely interested in the opportunity.

> *A woman in Tucson who grew up on food stamps now helps her city use AI to make benefits easier to reach. A police officer in Allentown joined the force after helping a stranger in need. When governments recruit with stories like these, alongside a clear explanation of the practical benefits, candidates can finally picture themselves in the job.*
>
> – ***Caitlin Lewis,*** *Work for America Executive Director*

Strategy 3 **Translate flexibility into specific, role-appropriate options**

If remote work, flexible hours, or hybrid schedules aren't possible, conduct a flexibility inventory and communicate exactly what is available for each role. Rather than using vague phrases such as "flexible workplace," identify which aspects of the job can genuinely vary. Possible options include:



01 Location flexibility

a. Fully remote
b. Hybrid with a specified number of on-site days
c. Multiple eligible work locations
d. Remote administrative duties within an otherwise on-site role

02 Time flexibility

a. Flexible start and end times
b. Core working hours
c. Compressed workweeks
d. Part-time arrangements
e. Job sharing
f. Seasonal schedules

03 Shift flexibility

a. Shift bidding
b. Self-scheduling
c. Choice among available shifts
d. Predictable rotations
e. Advance schedule notice
f. Reduced mandatory overtime
g. Shift-swapping procedures

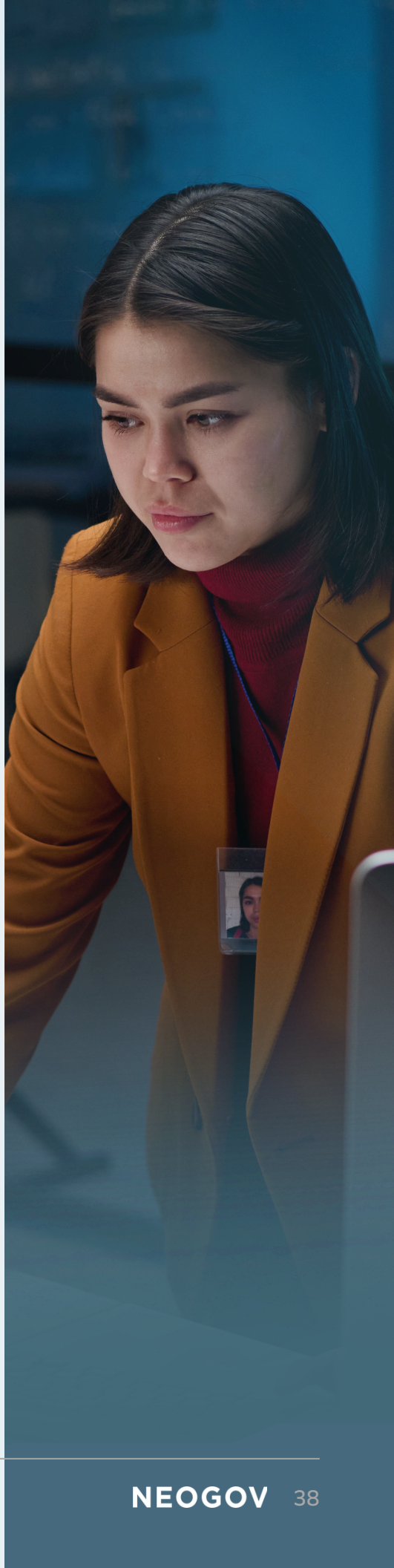
04 Leave and workload flexibility

a. Above-average paid leave
b. Personal or wellness days
c. Predictable leave approval
d. Phased return arrangements
e. Professional development time

A clear and compelling opportunity may convert a viewer to applicant, but candidates continue evaluating the employer long after they click apply. The hiring process itself is a reflection of how an organization communicates, manages, and respects its people.

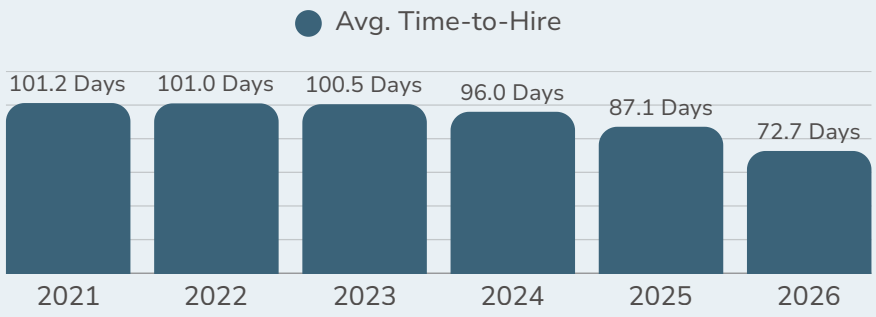
Trend 4

Faster Hiring Doesn't Always Feel Faster to Candidates



Public employers have made significant progress improving hiring speed in the past few years. Since 2021, the average time-to-hire, defined as the number of calendar days from requisition creation to requisition closure, declined by 28.1%. In the last year alone, this timeframe decreased by 16.5%, making the average time-to-hire time 72.7 days across NEOGOV's public sector customer cohort.

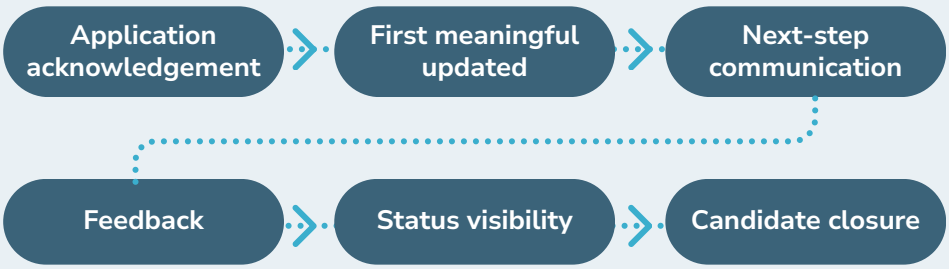
Figure 4.1
Average Time-to-Hire from 2021–2026

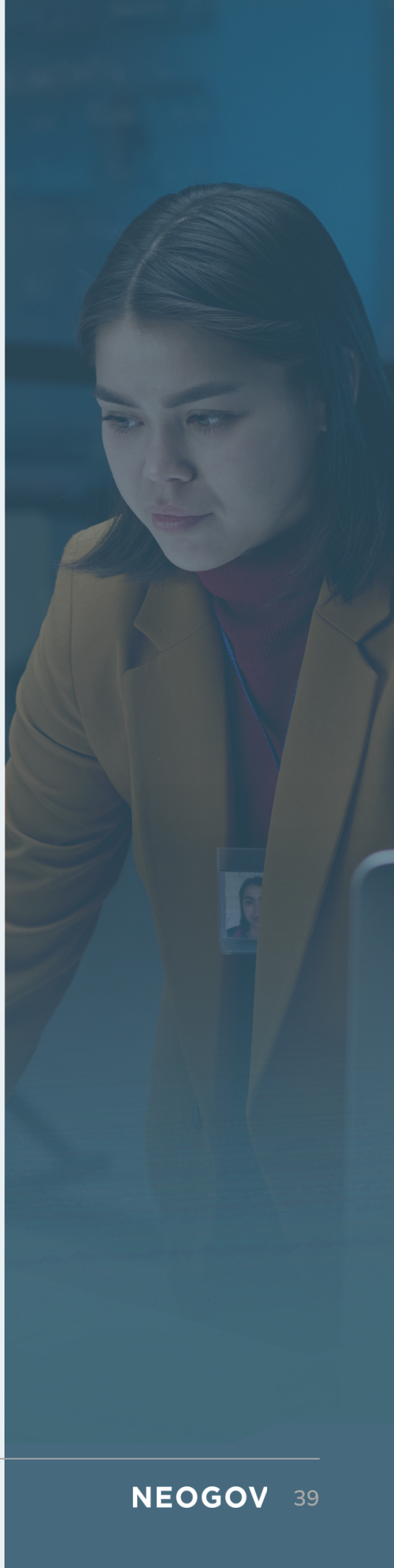


Although agencies have improved their end-to-end requisition lifecycle, more than four in five surveyed job seekers (81.5%) still want a faster process. Faster closure does not eliminate the need to acknowledge candidates, explain stages, provide updates, and close the loop.

Candidates don't experience hiring speed as one end-to-end clock; rather, they perceive it based on time spent waiting for an employer to acknowledge and review an application, communicate next steps, and schedule the next interview. Even if a requisition closes faster overall, candidates can still experience long gaps between updates, when given no explanation of next steps, or within a process that feels impersonal or opaque.

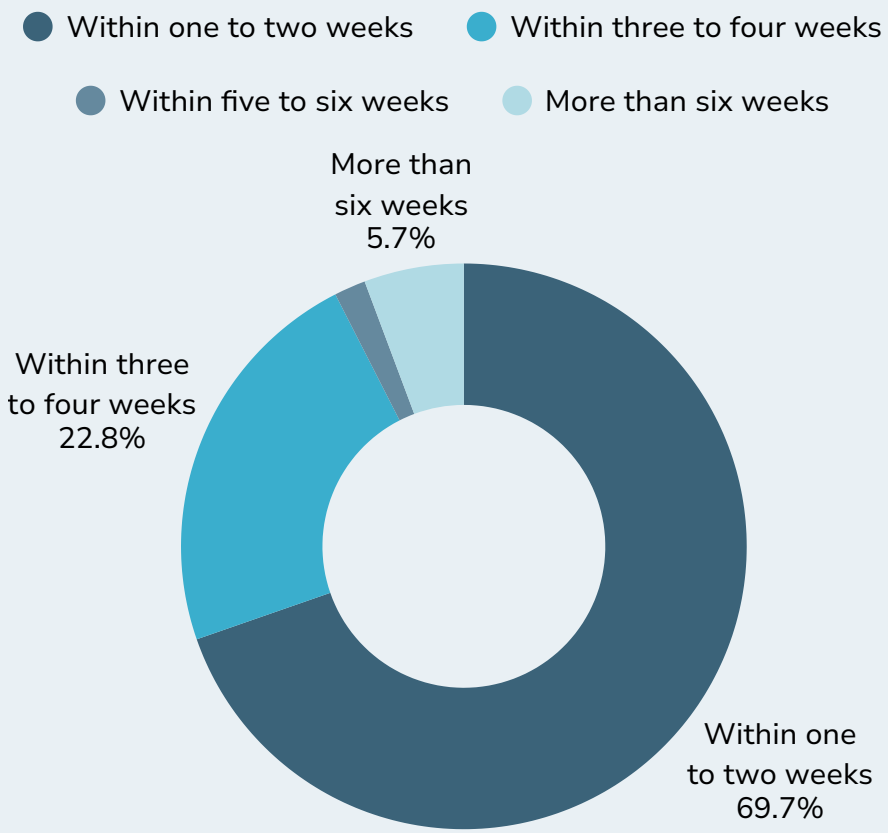
Figure 4.2
The Candidate Experience End-to-End Clock





Visible movement in the hiring process and timely communication from the employer are primary factors influencing how a candidate perceives an agency. Employer communication during the hiring process weighs most heavily on brand perception. Nearly 70% of job seekers expect a next step communication within one to two weeks, and 92.4% expect a next step within four weeks.

Figure 4.3
How Long Candidates Expect to Wait to Hear Back from Employers



Consistent, timely communication is the most frequently selected influence on agency reputation (65.6%), and it's becoming a baseline candidate expectation going into 2027. Many candidates use an employer's communication practices to infer things about an agency, such as organizational quality, management consistency, respect and culture, and commitment to follow through. Alongside communications, candidates evaluate employee reviews, process length, and their own application experience when forming an opinion of an employer.

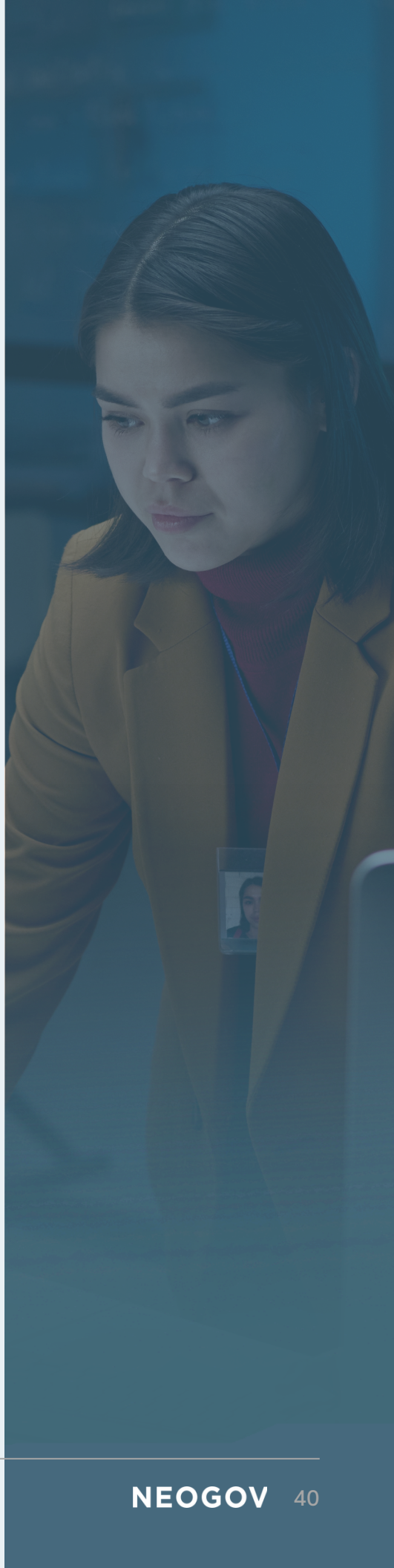


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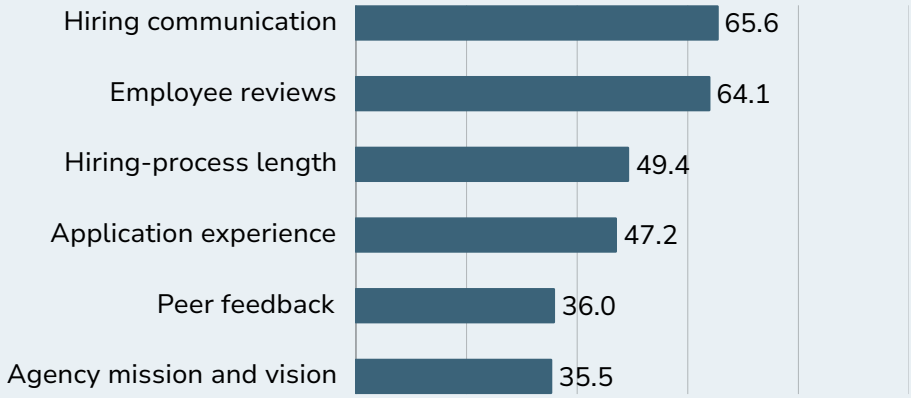
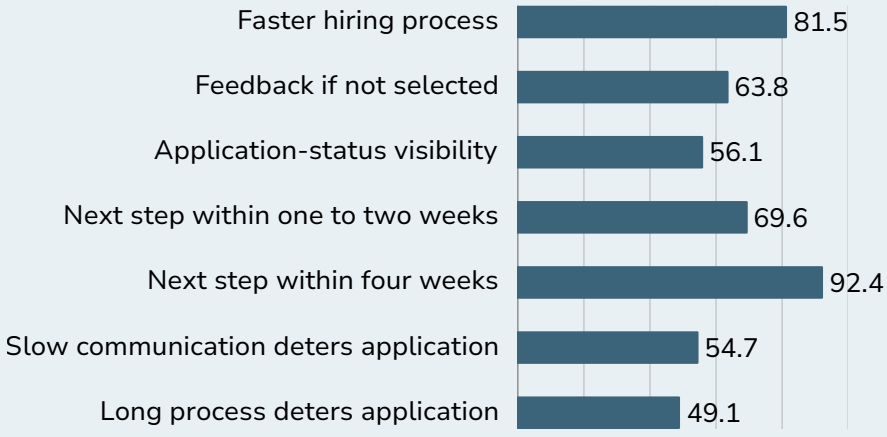
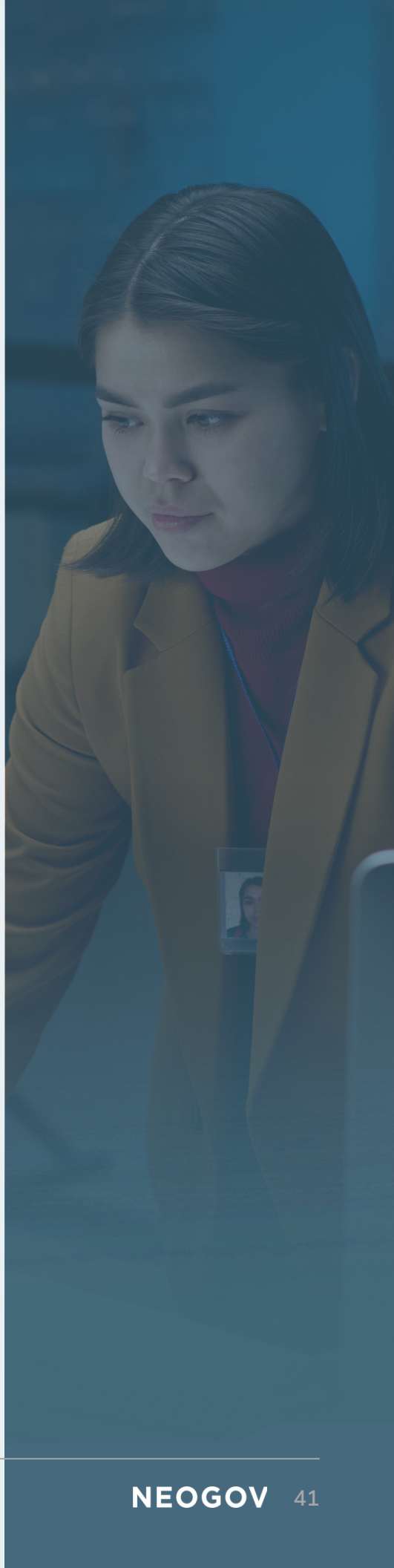
Figure 4.4
Factors Influencing Candidates' Perception of Agencies



A candidate's experience during the application process can have ripple effects through hiring and beyond. This is especially true if a candidate felt friction at any point during the application process. Long processes, slow communication, no listed salary, and employer use of AI can influence how candidates perceive the agency as a whole, and even influence how candidates view government work-life balance and the broader public sector employment experience.

Figure 4.5
What Candidates Mean When They Ask for Faster Hiring





What This Means for Agencies

Public employers have made measurable progress reducing the time from requisition creation to closure. But operational efficiency and candidate responsiveness are not interchangeable. Candidates judge the experience through shorter intervals: when the application is acknowledged, when they receive the next meaningful update, whether they can see their status, and whether the agency closes the loop.

Going into 2027, candidates expect fast processes and, at the very least, clear communication from the employer. Poor communication with candidates alone can have lasting impacts on an agency's reputation, which attach to how candidates perceive public service as a whole.

This makes communication both a process responsibility and an employer brand signal. An agency may not be able to eliminate every assessment, background check, approval, or civil-service step. It can still explain the process, set realistic expectations, provide updates during unavoidable waiting periods, and prevent candidates from interpreting silence as disinterest or dysfunction. The goal for 2027 should be to reduce avoidable operational delay while also reducing candidate uncertainty.

> *When St. Louis mapped its hiring process, it found nearly 100 steps across 52 departments and long stretches where candidates heard nothing at all. Silence costs cities good people, yet most cities we work with have no system for staying in touch with candidates between steps. Regular updates keep candidates engaged and show them what it will be like to work there.*
>
> – **Caitlin Lewis,** *Work for America Executive Director*



Strategies for Agencies in 2027

Strategy 1 — Establish a candidate communication service standard

Create a candidate communication service standard that defines what candidates should hear, when they should hear it, and who owns each touchpoint. The standard should distinguish an automatic acknowledgment from a meaningful progress update and establish a maximum period during which an active candidate receives no communication.

A practical service standard could include:

- Immediate or same-day acknowledgment of a completed application
- A process overview explaining anticipated stages
- A first meaningful update or next-step communication within one to two weeks where operationally feasible
- No active candidate left without an update for more than four weeks, even when a decision has not been reached
- Stage-specific notices after eligibility review, interview decisions, assessments, or background milestones
- Prompt closure when a candidate is no longer being considered
- A defined level of feedback appropriate to the stage and agency policy



Strategy 2 Map the candidate journey by occupation

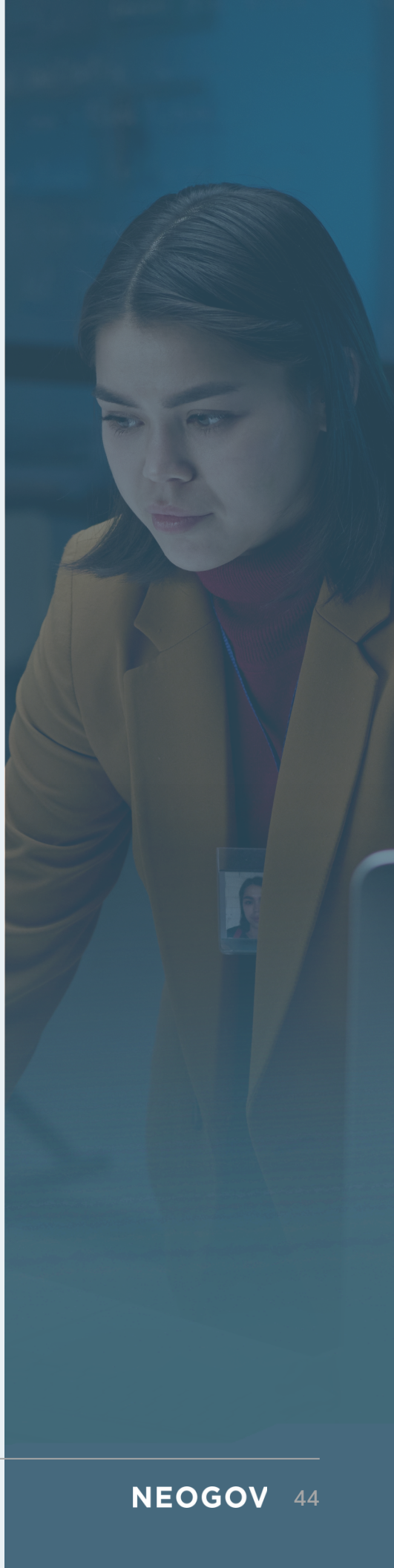
Review candidate experience by occupation and process complexity, and tailor the content and timing of communications to the actual stages that candidates encounter. Agencies should maintain a baseline communication standard across roles but develop occupation-specific journey maps for processes that differ substantially.

For each priority occupation, map:

- Requisition approval
- Posting
- Application acknowledgment
- Minimum-qualification review
- Eligibility or referral
- Assessment or examination
- Interview
- Background, credential, medical, or reference steps
- Conditional or final offer
- Requisition closure

At each stage, document:

- Expected duration
- Mandatory versus discretionary steps
- Candidate action required
- Internal owner
- Communication trigger
- Likely source of delay
- Escalation rule



Strategy 3 Automate routine communication while preserving human ownership

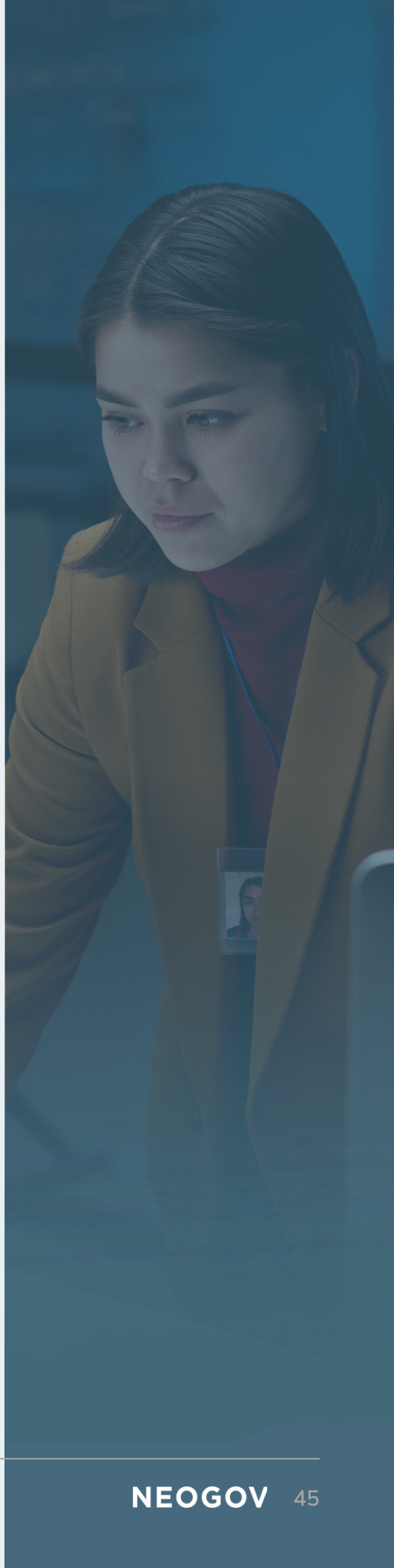
Use trigger-based automation for routine communications, while reserving human contact for consequential or sensitive moments. Configure messages around real workflow events rather than sending generic updates on an arbitrary schedule. **Appropriate automation elements include:**

- Application acknowledgment
- Confirmation that required materials were received
- Reminders to complete a step
- Interview scheduling and confirmation
- Notice that review is continuing
- Status-change notification
- Assessment instructions
- Background-document reminders
- Nonselection closure
- Contact information for questions or accommodation requests
- Preserve human touchpoints

Human communication should remain when:

- A candidate advances to a consequential stage
- An interview or assessment requires explanation
- A process is significantly delayed
- Information is missing or disputed
- A conditional offer is made
- A rejection requires individualized context
- A candidate requests clarification or review

Greater application volume and stronger communication expectations create a compelling case for workflow automation and AI, but agencies must weigh the operational gains with candidate trust. Not every automated process requires AI, and the closer technology moves toward screening or selection decisions, the more candidate trust matters. Candidates are already judging whether hiring feels transparent, fair, and human, so clear boundaries and human accountability are central requirements for any automated process.





Trend 5

AI in Hiring Requires Clear Boundaries and Human Accountability



The case for increasing hiring process capacity and selectively using AI is strong. Public employers are processing substantially more applications per opening than they did in 2021. In the last year alone, the number of ineligible applications per opening grew faster (+10.8%) than the number of eligible candidates per opening (+4.4%). Candidates also expect timely progress, status visibility, feedback, and clear communication.

Of those who responded to the job seeker survey, 55.7% do not use AI at all and 44.3% use AI at least sometimes in their job search and/or application process. Candidates commonly use AI to help them improve writing, compare their background with requirements, prepare application materials, and find and research opportunities.

Figure 5.1
Job Seeker AI Use During the Job Search and/or Application Process

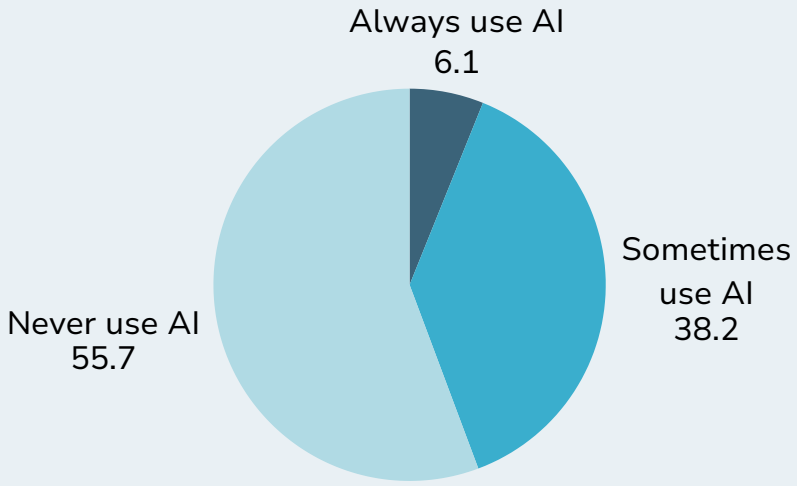
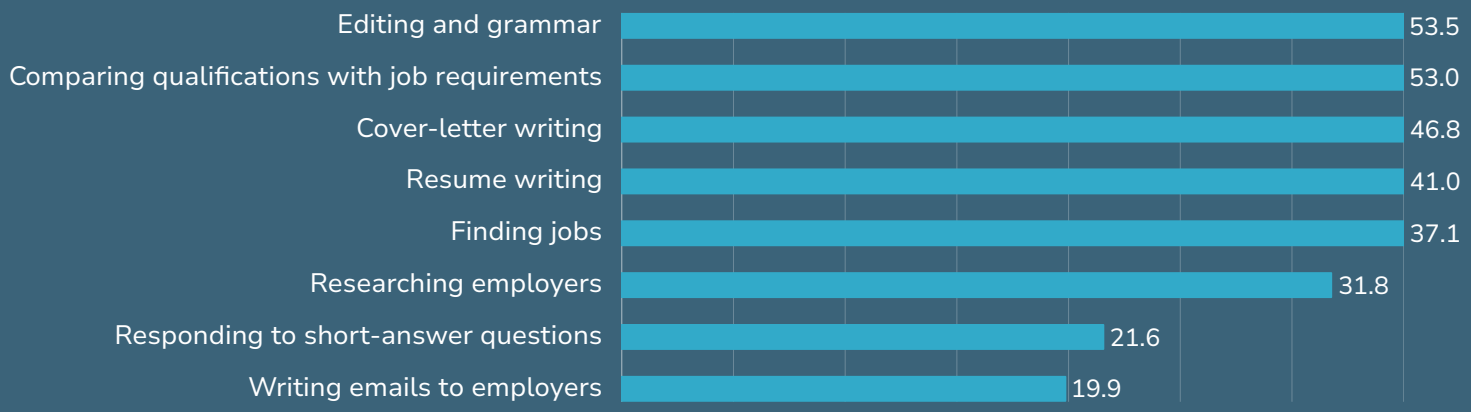
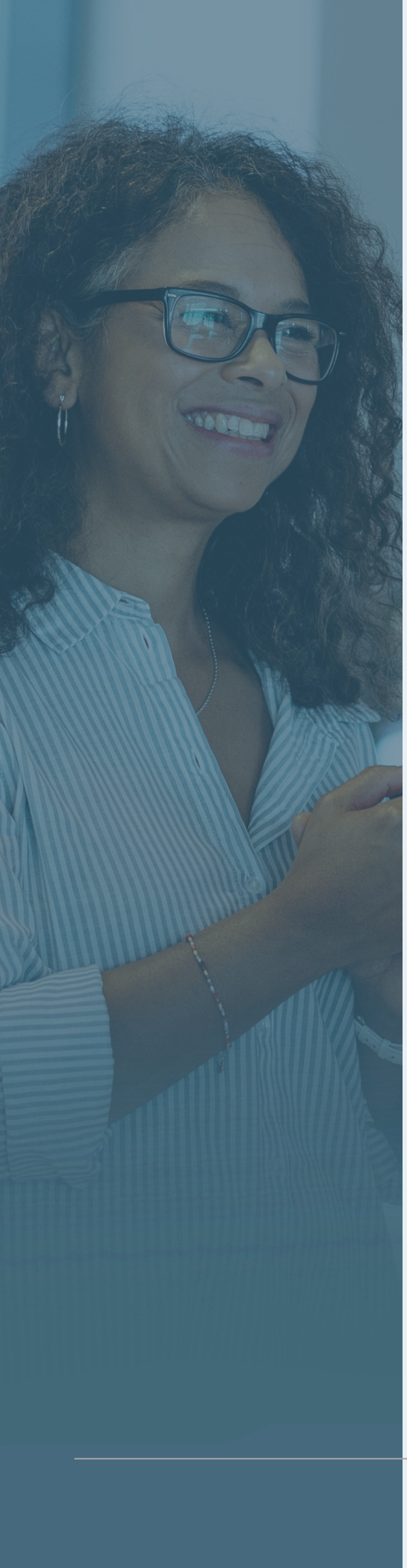


Figure 5.2
How Job Seekers Use AI in the Job Search / Application Process





Respondents' perceptions of an employer's use of AI in the hiring process was nearly evenly divided between deterrence and no difference. Half (51%) of surveyed job seekers say employer AI would make them less likely to apply, while 49% said it would make no difference. This is more true of those who do not use AI compared to AI users—57.5% of candidates who don't use AI would be less likely to apply if the employer used it—but concerns persist among all job seekers, regardless of AI use.

Figure 5.3
Candidate AI Use Compared to Deterrence by Employer AI Use

Personal AI Use	Less Likely to Apply
No AI use	**57.5%**
Uses AI sometimes	**43.9%**
Always uses AI	**36.4%**

Some of these concerns may be driven by how candidates perceive AI affecting hiring decisions and outcomes. Candidates' own AI use is largely assistive and under their control. Their reaction to employer AI may differ because the employer's use can affect access to an opportunity and may be less visible or controllable. Employer AI may be perceived as affecting choices around candidate screening, ranking, interviews, eligibility, and rejection.

Candidates who already perceive the hiring process as burdensome or opaque are more inclined to express concerns around employer AI. This supports a graduated governance approach: the more directly a tool affects a candidate's opportunity or employment outcome, the greater the need for transparency, validation, human accountability, and recourse.

Candidate reaction to AI also appears connected to broader process experience. Among respondents who cited excessive questions or a confusing application as reasons for abandoning an application, 55.9% said employer AI would make them less likely to apply, compared with 46% of other respondents. When the surrounding hiring process already feels burdensome, opaque, or impersonal, an agency's existing communication and process credibility may influence how candidates interpret its use of AI.

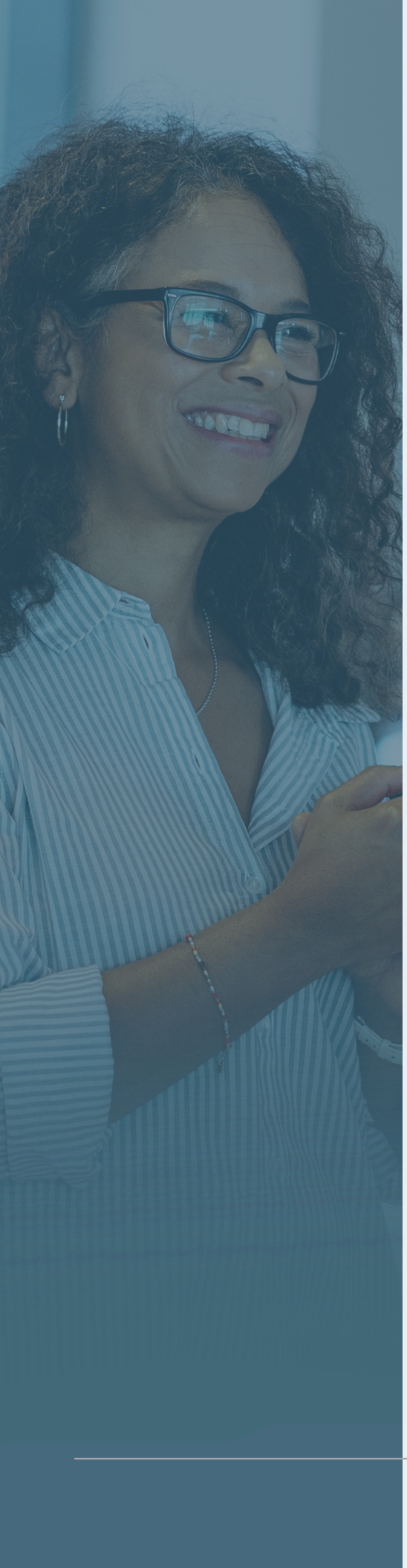


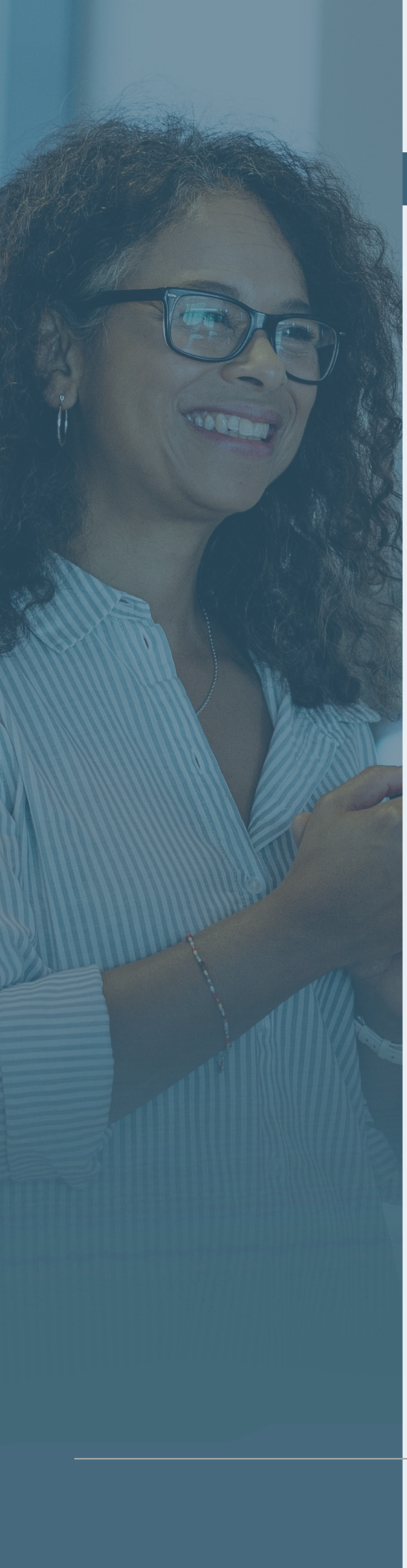
Figure 5.4
Three Levels of Hiring Automation & Recommended Oversight

Level	Use type	Examples	Recommended Oversight
Routine workflow automation 01	Executes administrative actions based on defined triggers; may not require AI	Acknowledgments, reminders, scheduling, status notices, document routing	Accurate triggers, accessible messages, human contact option, delivery monitoring
Assistive AI 02	Organizes, summarizes, or drafts information for human use	Candidate-information summaries, missing-document flags, draft communications, interview-note organization	Human review before use, accuracy testing, documentation, override capability
Consequential AI 03	Influences access, advancement, ranking, or selection	Screening recommendations, scoring, ranking, eligibility recommendations, automated rejection, evaluative chatbot interviews	Disclosure, validation, bias and adverse-impact review, documented human decision, audit trail, correction and appeal process

What This Means for Agencies

Growing application and screening pressure makes workflow automation and AI-assisted tools increasingly attractive to public employers. But not all forms of automation should be treated equally. While the question for agencies isn't whether to use AI, they should ask where it can be used to improve efficiency while maintaining trust with candidates. Agencies should evaluate whether they can use AI transparently, responsibly, and with clear human accountability.

The survey shows that candidates commonly use AI to assist with tasks they control, including editing, qualification comparison, and application preparation. Nevertheless, 51% would be less likely to apply if they knew an employer used AI to automate parts of hiring. The practical implication is to match oversight to consequence. Routine, reversible workflow tasks can be approached differently from systems that score, rank, screen, or reject candidates. As technology moves closer to an employment decision, agencies should increase transparency, validation, human review, documentation, and candidate recourse.



Strategies for Agencies in 2027

Strategy 1 — Prioritize low-risk workflow automation first

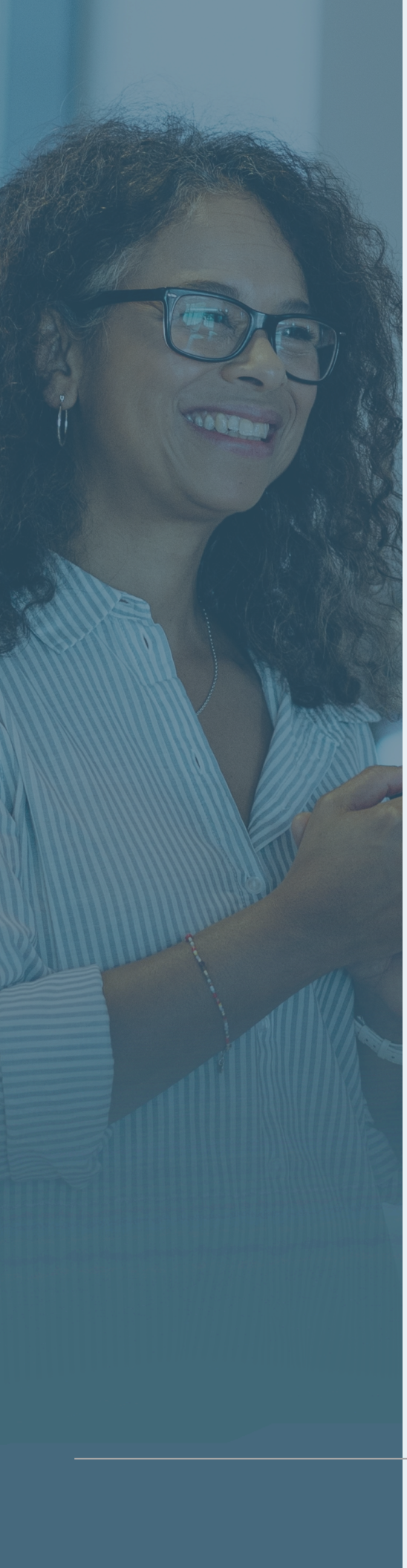
Begin with routine workflow tasks that are repetitive, rules-based, reversible, and do not determine candidate eligibility or selection. Before adopting AI for evaluation, identify administrative points where applicants or staff experience unnecessary waiting and determine whether standard workflow automation can solve the problem.

Strong initial use cases include:

- Application acknowledgments
- Confirmation that required materials were received
- Reminders to complete an application step
- Interview scheduling and confirmation
- Assessment instructions
- Background-document reminders
- Status-change notices
- Notices that review is continuing
- Nonselection closure
- Contact and accommodation information

For each message or action, define:

- Workflow event that triggers it
- Information source
- Responsible business owner
- Approved language
- Expected timing
- Human escalation path
- What happens when data is missing or contradictory
- How delivery failures are handled



Strategy 2 **Disclose AI use in plain language and at the right time**

Tell candidates when AI materially affects the hiring process, what it does, and what role humans retain. Disclosure should occur before the relevant AI-enabled step—not only after a decision has been made. A practical disclosure should explain:

01 Where AI is used

- Application review
- Interview support
- Document processing
- Communication
- Assessment
- Ranking or recommendation

02 Why it is used

- Administrative efficiency
- Information organization
- Decision support
- Candidate communication

03 What information is evaluates

- Resume information
- Application answers
- Interview responses
- Credentials
- Other submitted materials

04 What the output affects

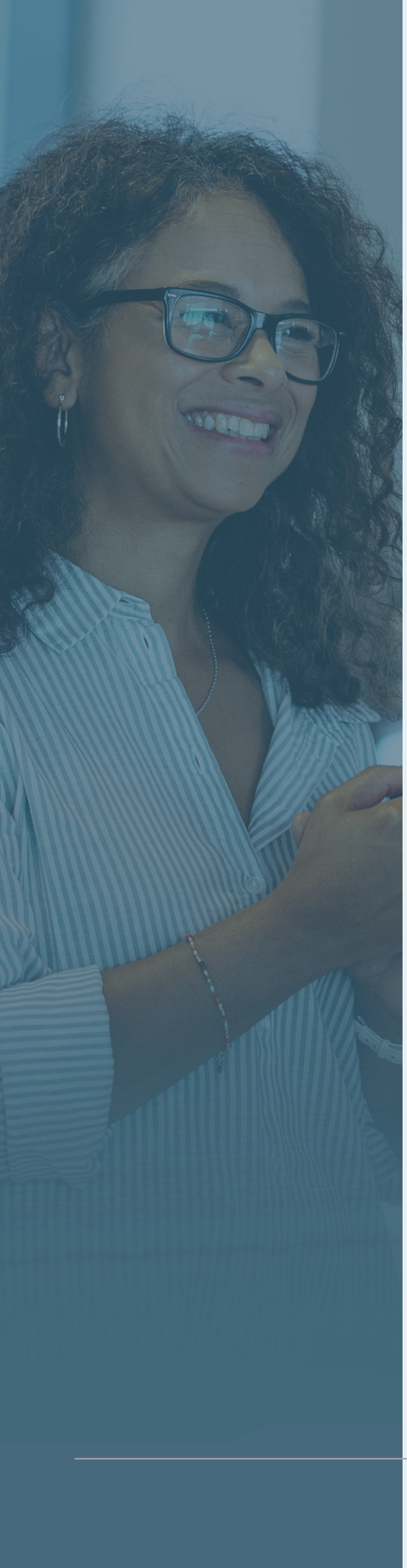
- Administrative routing
- Eligibility review
- Candidate ranking
- A recommendation to a reviewer
- Selection

05 Where human review occurs

- Who reviews the output
- Whether the system can make a final decision
- Who is accountable for the outcome

03 What information is evaluates

- Who reviews the output
- Whether the system can make a final decision
- Request human review
- Who is accountable
- for the outcome
- Challenge a material error



The final wording should match the actual process. Do not claim that a human reviews every output unless the workflow guarantees it. **An example disclosure structure may look like:**

Example Disclosure Statement

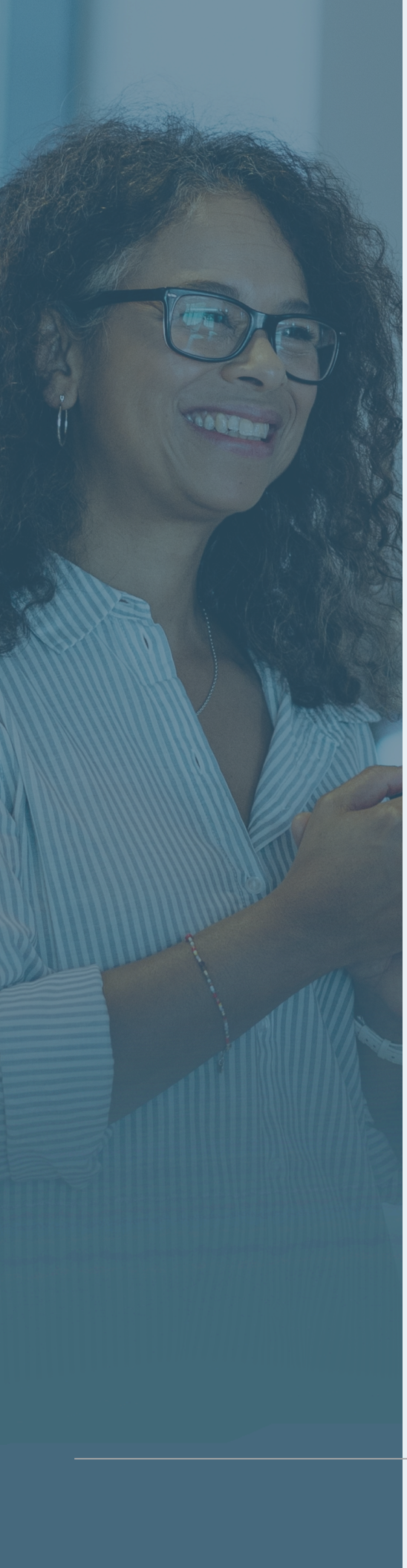
This agency uses an AI-assisted tool to organize application information for review. The tool does not make the final hiring decision. A designated HR professional reviews the information and remains responsible for determining whether candidates advance. Candidates may contact [role or office] to correct inaccurate information or request human review.

Strategy 3 — Preserve human accountability for consequential decisions

Assign a named human decision owner for any AI use that influences eligibility, ranking, screening, interviewing, rejection, or final selection. AI may assist with information processing, but responsibility for the employment decision should remain traceable to an authorized agency employee.

At a minimum, require:

- Human review before a consequential adverse decision
- Ability to inspect the information and reasoning used
- Ability to override or reject the system output
- Documentation of the final decision
- Clear criteria for when manual review is required
- Audit logs showing system and human actions
- A correction or appeal process for material errors
- Periodic review of performance and candidate outcomes
- Define prohibited or restricted uses



Agencies should also determine whether any use case should be prohibited, paused, or require executive review, such as:

- Fully automated rejection without human review
- Undocumented ranking models
- Tools that cannot explain the factors influencing an output
- Systems trained on unsuitable or unverified data
- Interview-analysis tools using poorly validated behavioral or emotional inferences
- Technology that cannot support accommodation or accessibility needs

> *Agencies should start by mapping their pain points and finding where AI can help most. Updating job classifications or running a compensation study means sorting through huge amounts of data, and AI is great at that. Deciding who will thrive on a particular team is human work. Agencies that know the difference will get the most out of the technology.*
>
> – **Caitlin Lewis,** *Work for America Executive Director*

Public employers entering 2027 need to manage more candidate activity without treating efficiency as the only measure of success. The strongest approach is to automate routine work, apply AI selectively, increase oversight as consequences rise, and ensure candidates always know where technology and human accountability intersect—or take over completely—in the decision-making process.

Shifting From Quantity to Quality in 2027

Public sector employers are entering 2027 with more applications and viewing activity per opening than they had in years prior—but not with a simpler hiring environment. Job volume has retreated from recent peaks, application pressure is rising, and the additional activity is producing both more eligible candidates and more ineligible applications to process.

Beneath those system-wide changes, hiring conditions vary considerably. Some jobs need greater reach. Others receive attention but fail to convert viewers into applicants. Some attract few candidates and remain open for long periods, while others generate substantial volume but still face complex downstream processes. Candidates also expect clearer job information, visible progress, and responsible use of automation.

The agencies best positioned for 2027 will not necessarily be those that generate the most applications. They will be those that can identify which candidate markets they are reaching, where each role's funnel is breaking, how candidates experience the process, and which interventions improve both hiring outcomes and trust.



90-Day Action Agenda

First 30 days: Diagnose

Identify the agency's highest-priority occupations based on hiring volume, recurring difficulty, vacancy risk, and service impact.

Establish a baseline for views, conversion, applications, eligibility, referrals, and average time-to-hire. Assign each role to a working diagnostic condition—such as low reach, weak conversion, low supply, declining qualification yield, or process complexity—and map the candidate journey from application acknowledgment through closure.

At the same time, inventory current workflow automation and AI. Distinguish routine administrative automation from assistive and consequential uses, and document ownership, human review, candidate disclosure, and correction processes.

Days 31–60: Redesign

Develop role-specific hiring playbooks for the highest-priority occupations.

Rewrite high-view, low-conversion postings so salary, schedule, location, duties, qualifications, growth, flexibility, and role impact are clear and easy to find. Simplify application steps that add burden without improving screening quality while preserving legitimate legal, civil-service, licensing, and operational requirements.

Create a candidate communication service standard that defines acknowledgment, meaningful updates, status visibility, and closure. Then, establish clear automation and AI-use classifications to ensure oversight and accountability as technology moves closer to eligibility, ranking, rejection, or selection decisions.

Days 61–90: Implement and measure

Launch a small portfolio of redesigned postings, role-specific process changes, and routine communication automations.

Measure leading indicators such as view-to-application conversion, eligibility rate, candidate withdrawal, and candidate status inquiries. Continue tracking total applications, but evaluate them alongside eligible application yield and processing workload.

For each pilot, decide whether to scale, redesign, extend, or stop. Because many requisitions will not complete within 90 days, schedule a six-month review of requisition closure, offer acceptance, candidate outcomes, staff capacity, and AI-governance performance.

Conclusion

The public sector hiring market leading into 2027 is being shaped by uneven candidate attention, rising screening pressure, changing conversion dynamics, and a growing expectation that hiring be both efficient, transparent, and trustworthy. Moving from quantity to quality means using the right diagnosis before selecting the solution:

- ✓ Qualified yield instead of application totals alone
- ✓ Role-specific strategies instead of one hard-to-fill label
- ✓ Clear total value instead of generic employer branding
- ✓ Candidate responsiveness alongside requisition speed
- ✓ Stronger oversight as automation moves closer to employment decisions

Agencies that make those shifts will be better positioned to attract the right candidates, manage their capacity, and turn applicant interest into a durable public sector workforce.



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