

# State of Recruitment 2025–2026

A comparative study of senior hiring, candidate expectations, and AI adoption across India

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# Note from our Founder

As people responsible for leadership hiring, we have both an opportunity and a duty to treat recruitment as a discipline, not a transaction. Every senior hire changes a team's direction, culture, and performance. That makes the process itself a measure of how seriously we take people, decisions, and trust.

Over the past year, a clear shift has emerged in what candidates and organisations expect from each other. Senior professionals are making fewer impulsive moves. They are asking for clarity early, and they notice misalignment fast. Hiring teams, in turn, are under pressure to move with pace while still being fair, consistent, and accountable.

In 2024, we published the first State of Recruitment report to capture what leadership hiring looked like on the ground. This edition builds on that work, because the stakes continue to rise. AI is beginning to change how recruitment runs, from sourcing to screening to coordination. Used well, it reduces effort and improves speed. Used poorly, it creates distance, confusion, and decisions that are difficult to explain.

We have a responsibility to lead the way in integrating these tools thoughtfully. That means ensuring transparency about where AI is being used, maintaining human judgement at critical stages, and staying accountable for the outcomes we deliver.

Technology can support better decisions, but it cannot replace ownership of them.

I will leave you with something I have emphasized time and again: leadership hiring works when we treat it as a system requiring discipline, clarity, and accountability. The organisations that succeed are the ones that understand this and act on it consistently.



“ The market will continue to evolve. Our responsibility is to ensure recruitment evolves with it, in ways that serve both organisations and candidates well.

**Ankur Agrawal**

Founder, The LHR Group

# Introduction

Over the past year, recruitment across India has entered a more complex phase. Hiring has not slowed uniformly, nor has it accelerated in a predictable way. Instead, organisations are navigating longer decision cycles, more discerning candidates, and growing expectations around speed, clarity, and fairness.

At the same time, AI and automation are beginning to reshape how recruitment work is done. While adoption is rising, its impact remains uneven, and questions around trust, governance, and human judgement are becoming increasingly central.

This report brings together perspectives from hiring leaders and candidates to understand how recruitment has evolved over the last year, what pressures are shaping today's hiring outcomes, and what organisations must do differently in the year ahead.

## How to read this report

Each section has been framed as a single question. We have presented what hiring leaders and candidates shared with us using percentage-based findings to highlight patterns. Wherever responses pointed to the same issue from different angles, we have connected them to surface the underlying insight.

We have translated insights into clear conclusions for readers. Every section closes with “**What this means**”, so the data leads into a practical takeaway on what talent leaders can strengthen in the year ahead.



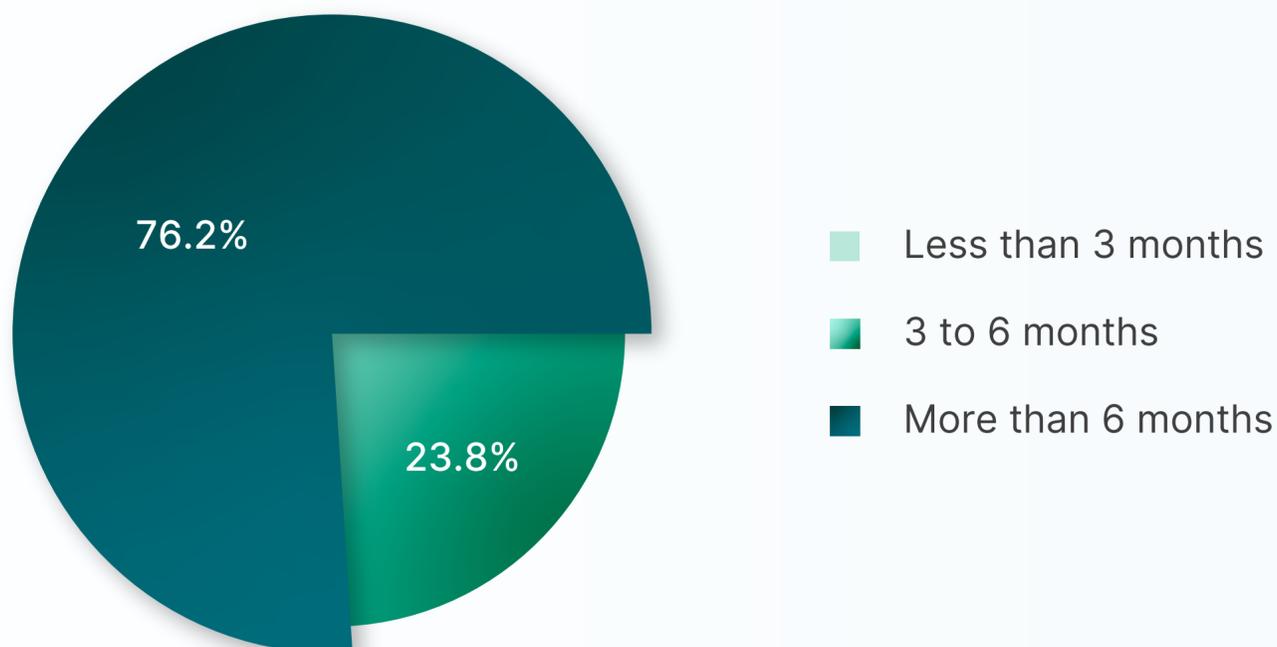
# Executive Summary

Six themes emerge from the shifts observed over the past year and will shape senior hiring in 2026:

- 01 Senior hiring cycles remain long, but unpredictability has become the bigger risk.
- 02 Recruitment processes break down more often due to ambiguity than capability gaps.
- 03 Candidates are increasingly evaluating organisations beyond compensation, with growth clarity emerging as a decisive factor.
- 04 Trust and transparency now play a central role in how recruitment experiences shape the employer brand.
- 05 AI is widely adopted in parts of the hiring process, but confidence in its fairness and governance remains mixed.
- 06 The next 12 months will require talent leaders to balance speed with control, automation with accountability, and efficiency with human judgement.

# 1. How long does senior hiring really take, and what slows it down?

Senior hiring continues to follow extended timelines, with most leadership roles requiring multiple months to close.



**76.2%** of hiring leaders report that senior roles typically take **3–6 months** to close, while **23.8%** indicate timelines of **2–3 months**.

While extended timelines are not new, the nature of delay has changed.

Hiring cycles today are less constrained by sourcing challenges and more affected by internal alignment, stakeholder availability, and late-stage uncertainty. As hiring processes extend, the risk of candidate dropouts, expectation drift, and recalibration increases.

What emerges is a shift from speed as a competitive advantage to predictability as a strategic requirement. Organisations that manage timelines proactively, communicate clearly, and reduce ambiguity at critical stages are better positioned to close senior roles successfully.

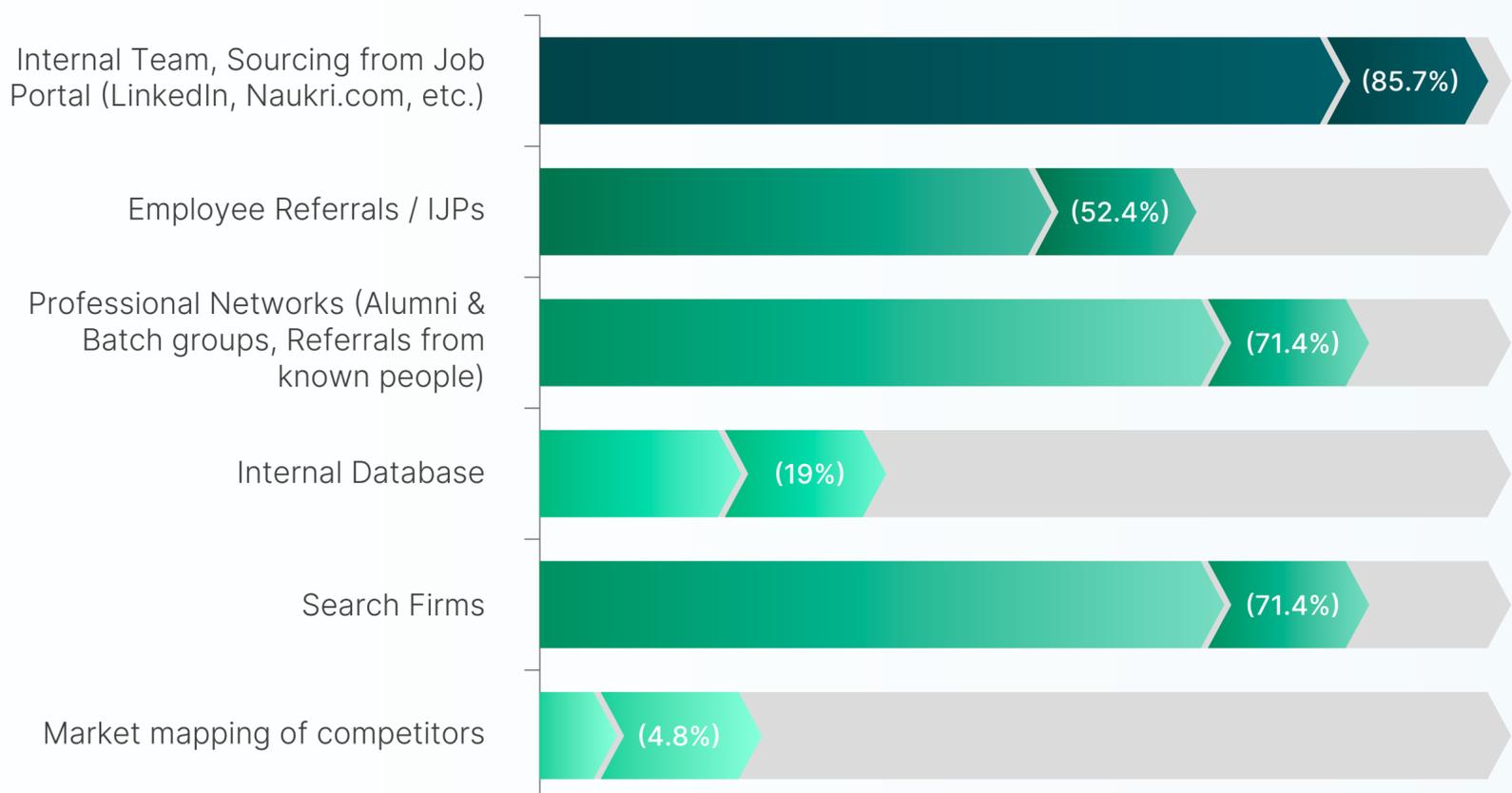
## What this means

Extended hiring cycles are not inherently problematic. Unmanaged hiring cycles are.

## 2. Where do recruitment processes break most often?

Process breakdowns rarely occur at the point of sourcing. They occur later, when clarity weakens.

Across organisations, senior talent is most commonly sourced through **Internal teams & Job Portals (85.7%)**, **Professional networks (71.4%)** (With **search firms** also at **71.4%**, closely following the top mix.)

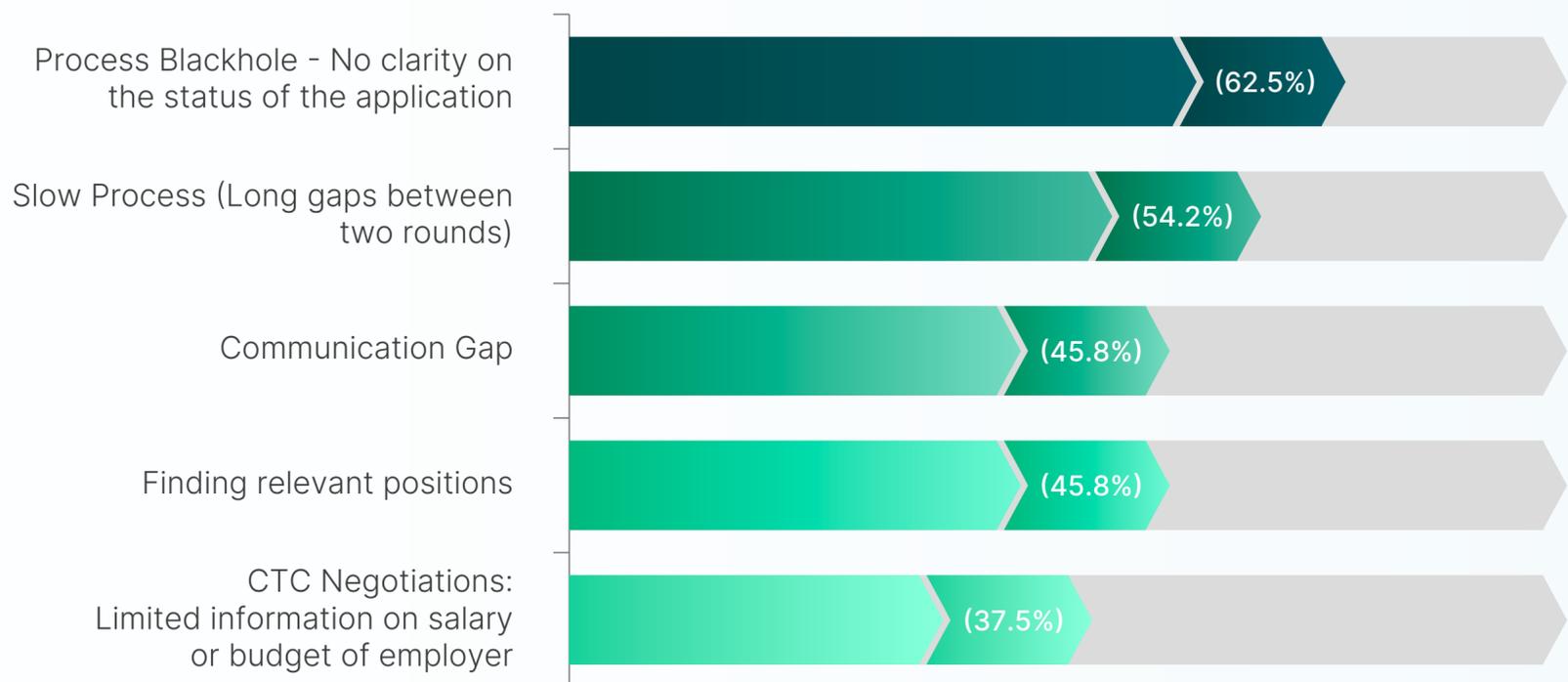


Despite strong sourcing pipelines, friction most often appears deeper into the process.

From the candidate perspective, the strongest frustration is the **process blackhole: 62.5%** cite lack of clarity on application status or closure. This is closely followed by **communication gaps (45.8%)** and **slow processes with long gaps between rounds (54.2%)**.

From an organisational perspective, these breakdowns are often driven by capacity constraints, competing priorities, or unclear ownership. From a candidate perspective, they are experienced as silence, uncertainty, or loss of momentum.

This gap between intent and experience is where trust erodes. Candidates do not necessarily expect rapid outcomes, but they do expect transparency.



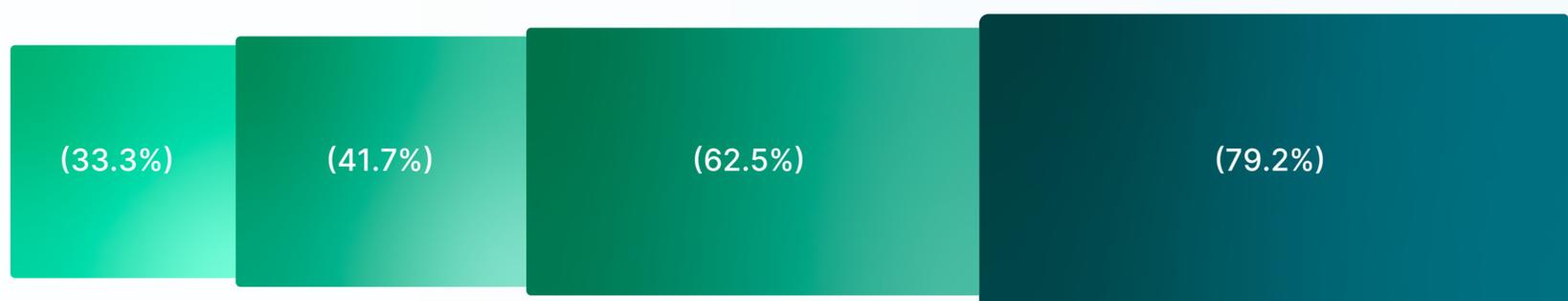
## What this means

Recruitment credibility is built through clarity, not courtesy. Silence is interpreted as disinterest, regardless of intent.

### 3. What do candidates value beyond compensation, and where do organisations misjudge it?

Compensation remains important, but it is no longer the only differentiator in senior hiring decisions.

When asked what they expect beyond compensation, candidates prioritise:



- Clear Growth Pathway - Well-laid out promotions with timeline (79.2%)
- Work-Life Balance (62.5%)
- Wellness Benefits - mental health days, vacation days, family cover, etc. (41.7%)
- Continuous Up-skilling and Training Programs (33.3%)

A recurring tension emerges when organisations emphasise role responsibilities while candidates seek clarity on progression, impact, and long-term relevance. Where this alignment is missing, offer acceptance becomes fragile.

Further reinforcing this, **76%** of candidates either did not get a fair chance to understand culture during recruitment (**62%**) or felt that what was portrayed differed from reality later (**14%**).

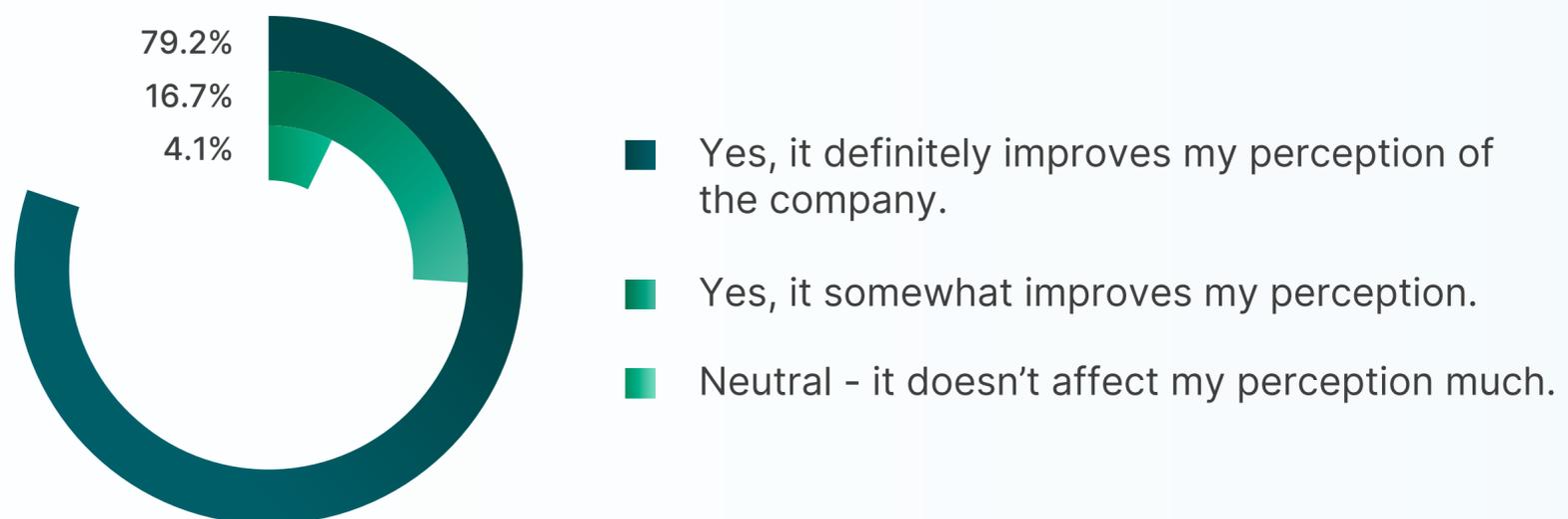
#### What this means

Candidates are not rejecting roles. They are rejecting uncertainty about the future.

## 4. How is trust being shaped through the recruitment experience?

The recruitment process has become a powerful signal of organisational maturity.

**95.9%** of candidates say a smooth, transparent recruitment process improves their perception of an employer (**79.2% definitely, 16.7% somewhat**), even if they are not



### Candidates increasingly assess:

- How structured the process feels
- How feedback is handled
- Whether communication is timely and honest
- Whether expectations remain consistent throughout

Positive experiences strengthen the employer brand, even when outcomes are negative. Conversely, unclear or misaligned processes can damage perception, regardless of role attractiveness.

Trust, once lost during recruitment, is difficult to recover later in the employment lifecycle.

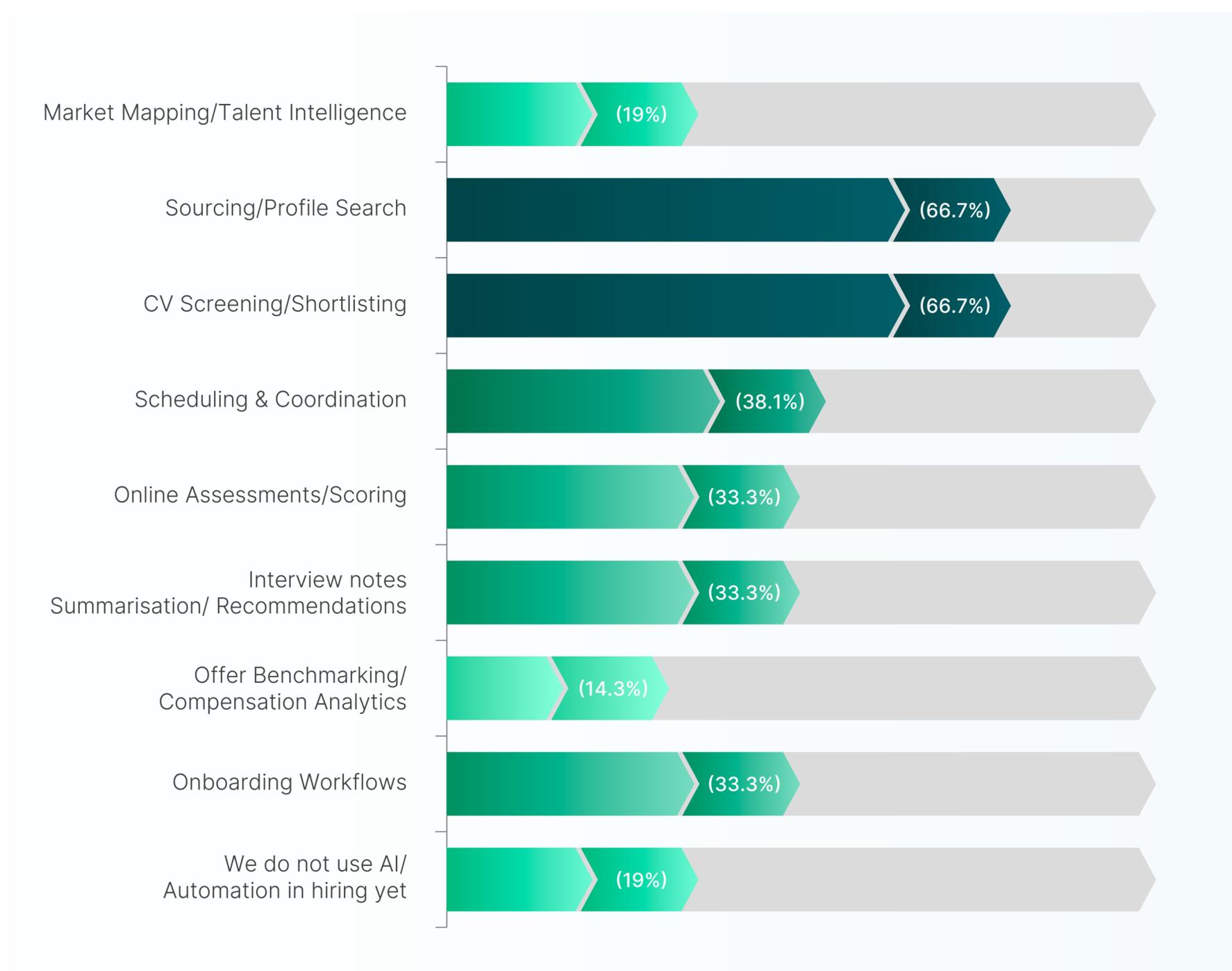
### What this means

Recruitment is no longer just a hiring function. It is a brand and governance function.

## 5. Where is AI actually being used, and what impact is it having?

AI and automation are most commonly applied to specific stages of the hiring process.

Organisations report using AI primarily for **Sourcing/Profile Search/CV Screening & Shortlisting (66.7%)**



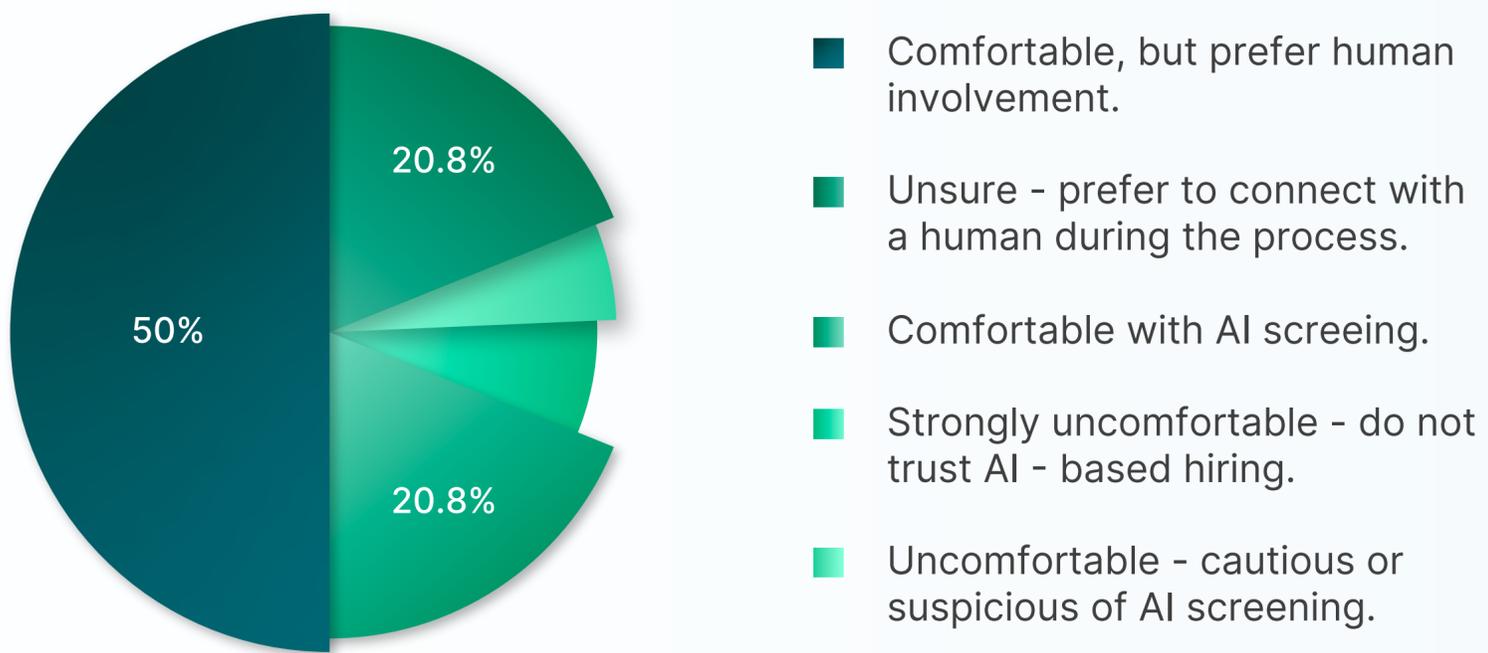
These tools have delivered tangible benefits in reducing manual effort and improving throughput. The most reported benefit is **time and bandwidth savings (60%)**.

However, adoption remains largely tactical rather than transformational. **55%** report AI usage as isolated experiments in a few roles, and **25%** report no meaningful change yet.

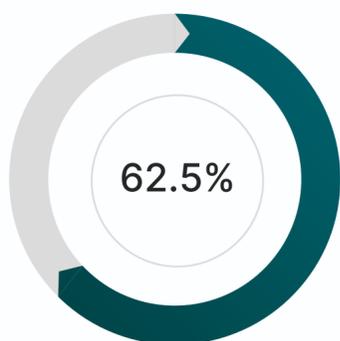
Confidence remains mixed. Only **35%** feel very confident that their organisation is ready to use AI in a fair, compliant, and brand-aligned way. **50%** are somewhat confident, and **15%** remain unsure.

## From the candidate perspective:

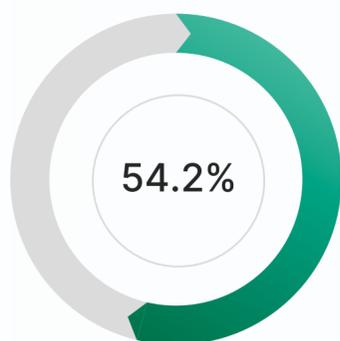
**70.8%** are comfortable with AI being used in hiring in some form (**50%** comfortable but want human involvement, **20.8%** comfortable with AI screening).



Trust expectations are explicit: **62.5%** want clear communication on where AI is used.



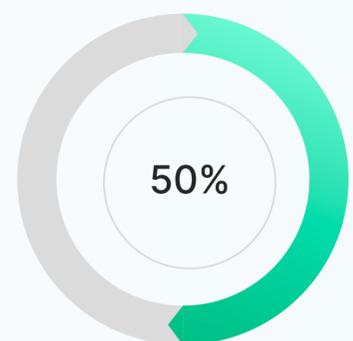
Clear Communication that AI is being used and where



Option to Appeal or Seek Feedback if rejected

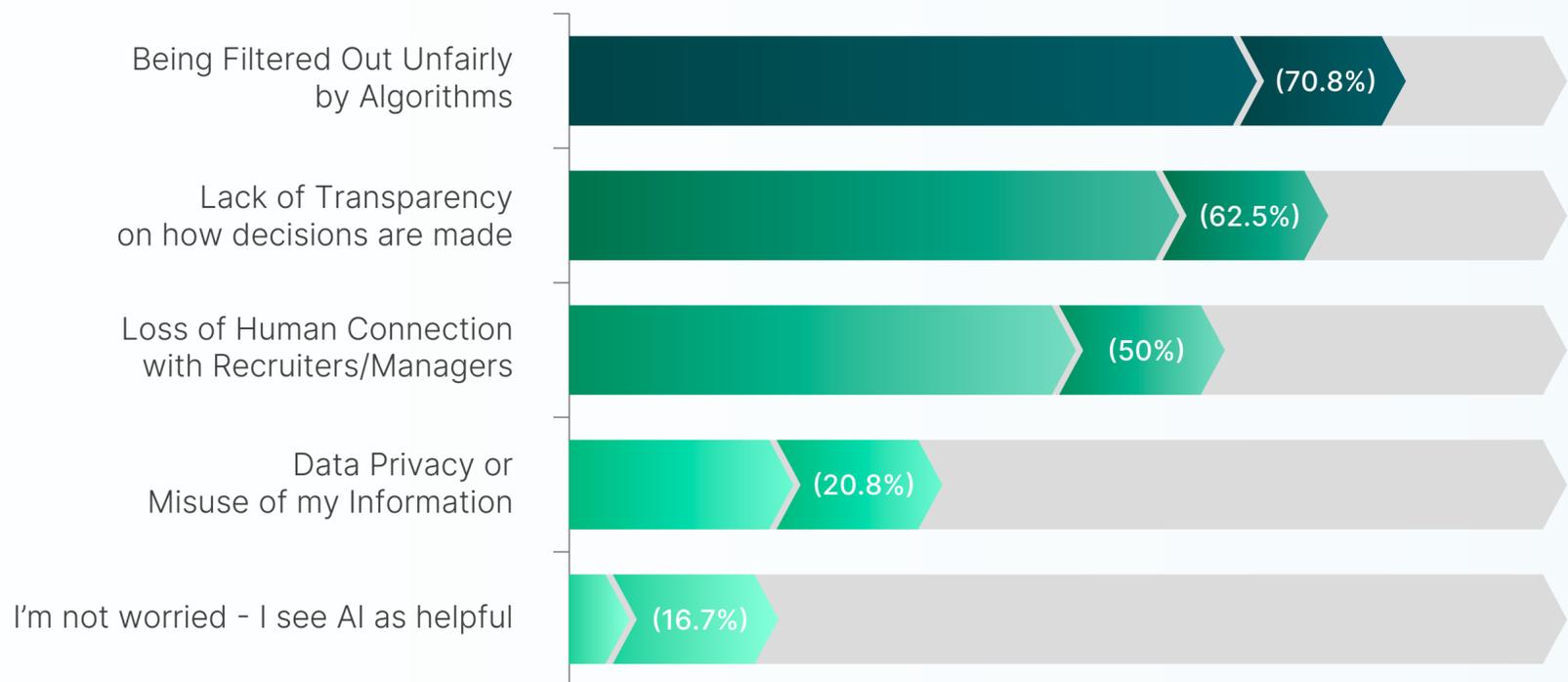


Simple Explanation of what the Tool looks for



Human Review for all rejections

Risk perception remains high: **70.8%** worry about being filtered out unfairly, and **62.5%** worry about lack of transparency.



From a candidate perspective, AI-driven processes are acceptable when they are transparent and complemented by human judgement. Opacity, perceived bias, and lack of recourse remain key concerns.

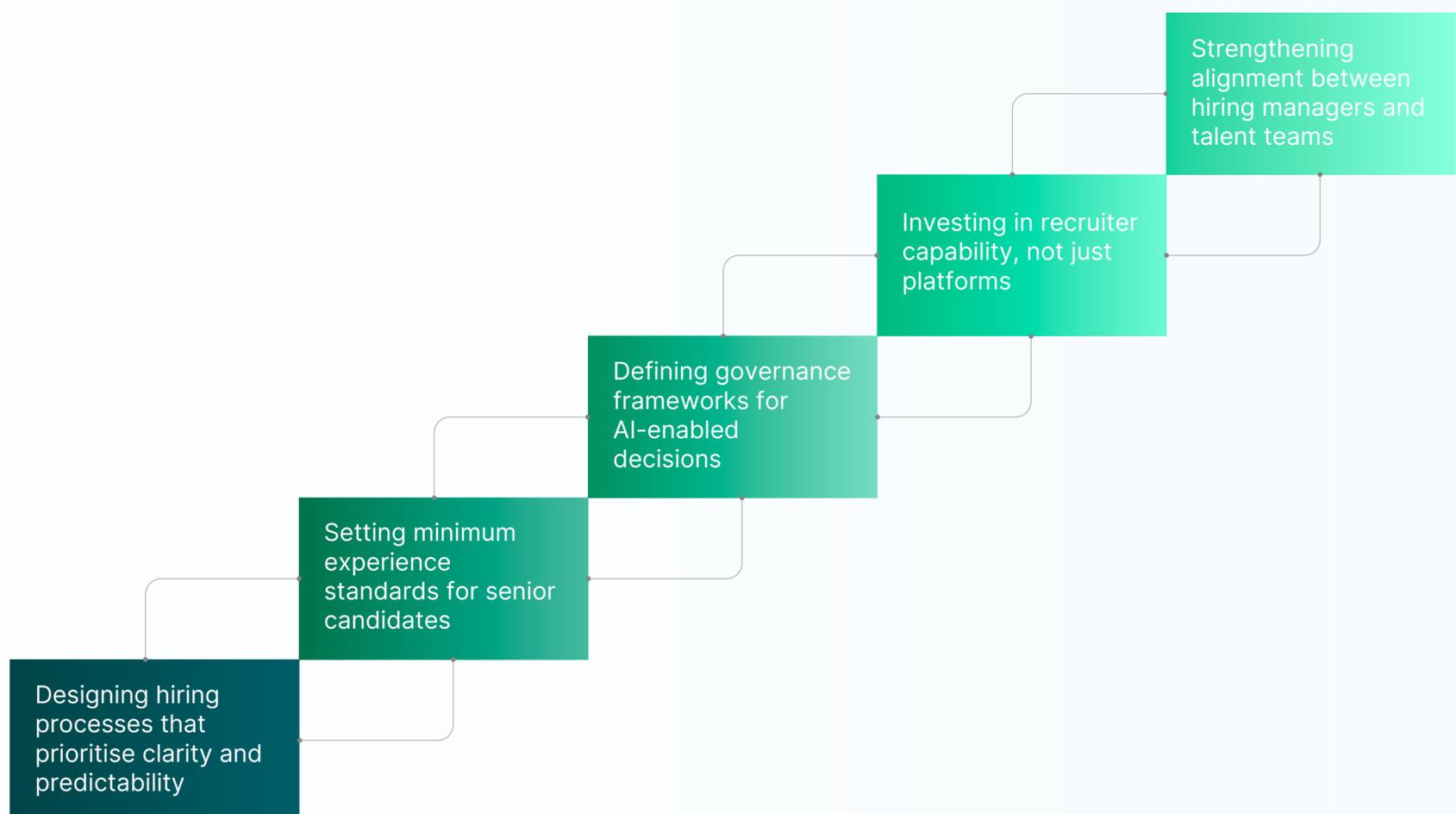
### What this means

AI is improving efficiency, but trust is becoming the limiting factor to scale.

## 6. What should talent leaders do in the next 12 months?

The next phase of recruitment leadership will be defined by how organisations integrate technology with process discipline and human accountability.

Based on the patterns observed, five priorities stand out:



Organisations that succeed will be those that treat recruitment as a strategic system rather than a transactional function.

### What this means

The future of hiring belongs to organisations that balance speed with confidence, and automation with judgement.

# Closing Perspective

This year's insights point to a simple truth. Recruitment outcomes improve when organisations treat hiring as a system and not merely a series of transactions.

Three principles stand out:

## 01 Design for predictability.

Longer cycles are manageable when candidates know what to expect and when.

## 02 Protect trust through the process.

The experience between rounds matters as much as the interviews themselves. Silence, late changes, and unclear feedback weaken confidence quickly.

## 03 Use AI with accountability.

Automation can reduce effort and improve throughput, but it also raises expectations around transparency and decision ownership.

Recruitment will keep evolving. The organisations that lead will be the ones that combine process discipline with human judgement. They will move with speed, without losing credibility.

# About the study

The State of Recruitment 2025–2026 is a comparative view of year-on-year shifts in senior hiring and candidate expectations across India, with a focused lens on how AI is beginning to influence recruitment practices.

Insights in this report are drawn from two surveys covering:

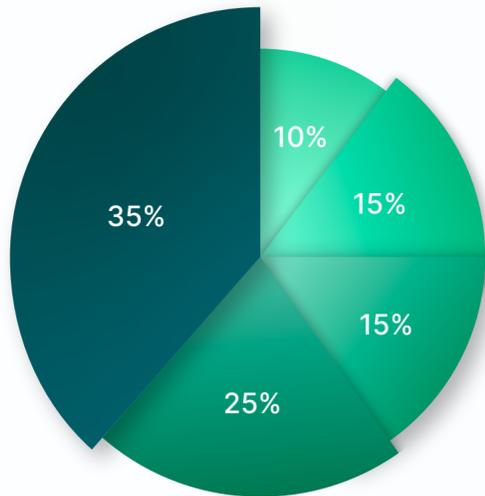
**Hiring leaders** involved in senior hiring (₹50 LPA and above)

**Candidates actively** navigating recruitment processes across industries

To help readers interpret the findings in context, the charts on the next page summarise the participant profile across **seniority**, **industry**, and **experience bands**. All figures are presented in percentage terms, and responses have been anonymised.

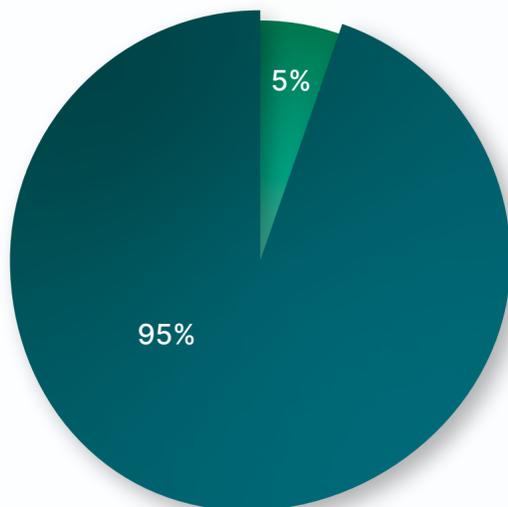


## Seniority mix



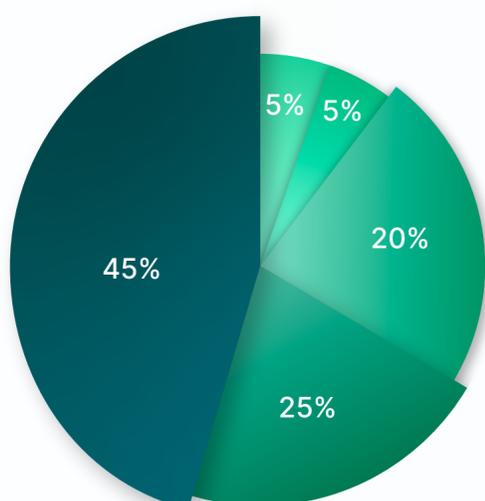
- Head HR / Head of Talent
- Other leadership roles (Founder, Sales leader, HR exec/DGM, etc.)
- Director
- VP / SVP / AVP
- CHRO / CPO / Chief Talent

## HR/TA experience



- More than 8 years
- 4-8 years

## Organisation type



- Large Indian company / conglomerate
- MNC
- VC/PE or fund-backed startup
- Private org
- Startup

# Connect with us

At The LHR Group, we work at the intersection of senior talent and business outcomes. Whether you are building leadership benches or navigating your next move, our teams are here to support.

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Senior and upper mid-management hiring with a focus on role clarity, process rigour, and high-conviction closures.



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