



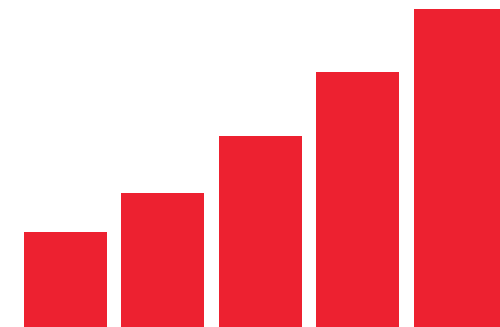
# RECRUITING & HIRING TRENDS REPORT **2026**

What to Expect From Recruiting, Skills Testing, and AI in Hiring for 2026

EmployTest

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# About EmployTest

EmployTest has helped organizations hire with confidence since 2006. More than 6,000 clients, including corporate teams, nonprofits, staffing agencies, and government organizations, have relied on our assessments to make smarter hiring decisions. Our reach spans every U.S. state, every Canadian province, and 17 countries across six continents, giving us a broad view of how hiring needs continue to change.

We deliver over 60,000 assessments annually through three flexible testing platforms. These include validated skills tests, aptitude measures, and behavioral assessments that can be used as-is or customized to fit specific roles. Whether a team needs to confirm basic office abilities or evaluate more specialized skills, the platform is built to support those decisions clearly and consistently.

EmployTest works for organizations of all sizes. Flexible pricing allows small teams hiring a few people a year, as well as large groups with frequent openings, to access the same reliable tests without being locked into enterprise-level costs. This makes structured, skills-based hiring attainable for more teams, not just high-volume employers.

What sets EmployTest apart is our focus on making testing practical and easy for HR teams. We help organizations choose the right assessments, guide them through setup, and provide straightforward score reports that hiring managers can interpret quickly.

Candidates benefit too; they get a fair opportunity to show what they can actually do, not just what's on their résumé.

With a mix of strong customer support, flexible tools, and a long track record across industries, EmployTest continues to serve as a trusted partner for teams that want a more accurate, consistent, and fair way to evaluate talent.

**To learn more, visit [EmployTest.com](https://EmployTest.com).**



# Executive Summary

Hiring teams are heading into 2026 with one clear concern: they aren't confident in applicants' real skills. It's the top challenge in this year's survey, even ahead of applicant volume or recruiting costs.

Nearly **three out of four respondents** said verifying the accuracy of applicants' skills is one of their toughest obstacles. Even when applicants look strong on paper, many HR teams worry they can't know if someone can actually do the job.

Most respondents still plan to hire in 2026, with the biggest needs in administrative, customer support, sales, and finance roles. Many also expect to add people in software, data, and AI-focused jobs as companies continue shifting toward tech-enabled work.

To make better decisions, **79% already use pre-employment tests**. They rely on assessments to improve the quality of hire, reduce early turnover, and bring more consistency to their process. Those who aren't testing mainly worry about cost or whether the tools will work for them.

AI is part of the conversation as well, though adoption varies. **Three-quarters of respondents** expect at least some AI skills from new hires, especially in everyday productivity tools.

But when it comes to using AI in their own hiring systems, many teams are cautious. Concerns around transparency, privacy, and fairness continue to slow adoption.

Taken together, the data paints a clear picture: hiring teams want more certainty, less guesswork. They're looking for evidence that a candidate can perform, tools that help them compare applicants fairly, and processes that stay efficient even when resources are tight.

**This report breaks down the survey findings and highlights where HR teams can make the biggest improvements as they plan for 2026.**

# Introduction

The 2026 Recruiting Survey was designed to gain insight into the challenges HR teams face as they plan for the year.

We reached out to professionals across different industries, company sizes, and job levels: from HR coordinators to senior leaders, to get a clearer view of how hiring is changing and what challenges are rising to the surface.

While the last few years have brought major shifts in recruiting, one theme remains constant: employers want better ways to identify people who can truly do the job.

This survey helps illustrate why that need has become stronger. Respondents shared their biggest hiring obstacles, the roles they expect to fill next year, how they're using (or not using) pre-employment tests, and where AI fits into their process today.

The data reflects a mix of organizations: large nonprofits, professional services firms, retail groups, healthcare teams, tech companies, and public-sector workplaces. Most of them continue to hire steadily, even as budgets tighten and expectations rise.

This report walks through the key findings, explains what they mean for HR teams, and offers practical takeaways for improving hiring decisions in the year ahead.

The goal is simple: give employers a grounded, data-driven look at where hiring stands today and what they can do to build a more confident, consistent, and skill-focused hiring process.

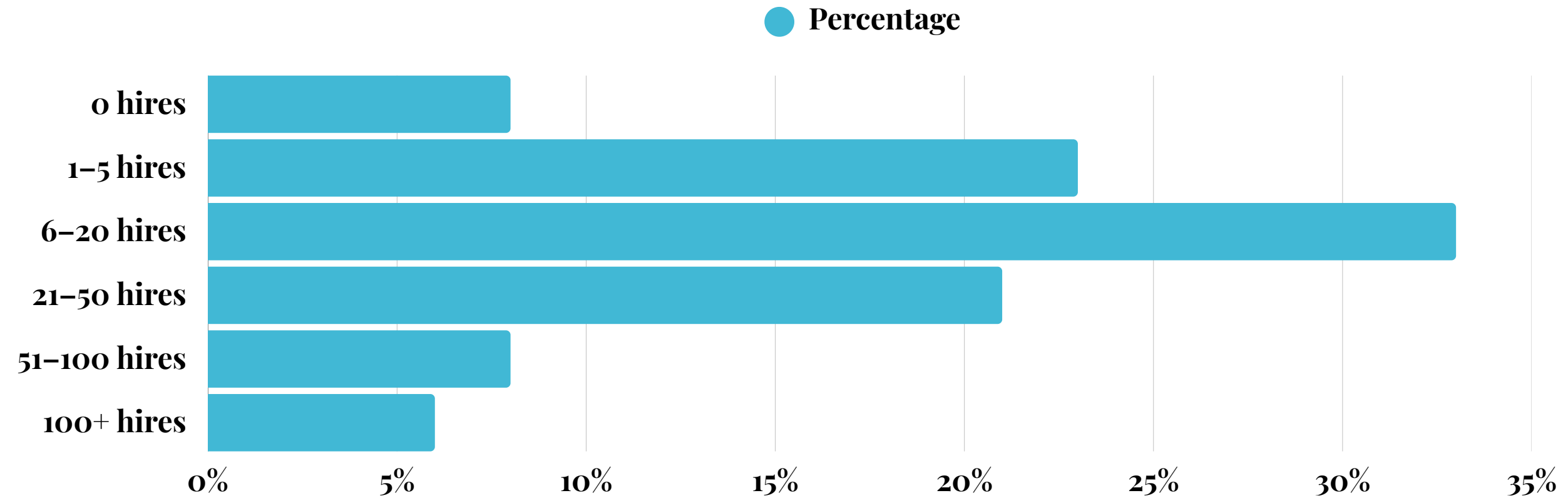
# Hiring Challenges



Hiring managers and HR pros revealed that **confidence in the accuracy of applicants' skills** earned the highest average rating, making it the most pressing challenge this year. This slightly outranked concerns such as low applicant volume and recruiting costs, which also scored high across respondents.

Interestingly, the participants gave the "Amount of Time Before Hiring Decision" a concerning average rating of 3.5 on a 1-5 scale. This edged out the other challenges like "Confidence in Applicants' Skills" and "Recruiting Costs," which were rated at 3.4 each.

# Hiring Plans for 2026: Visual Stats

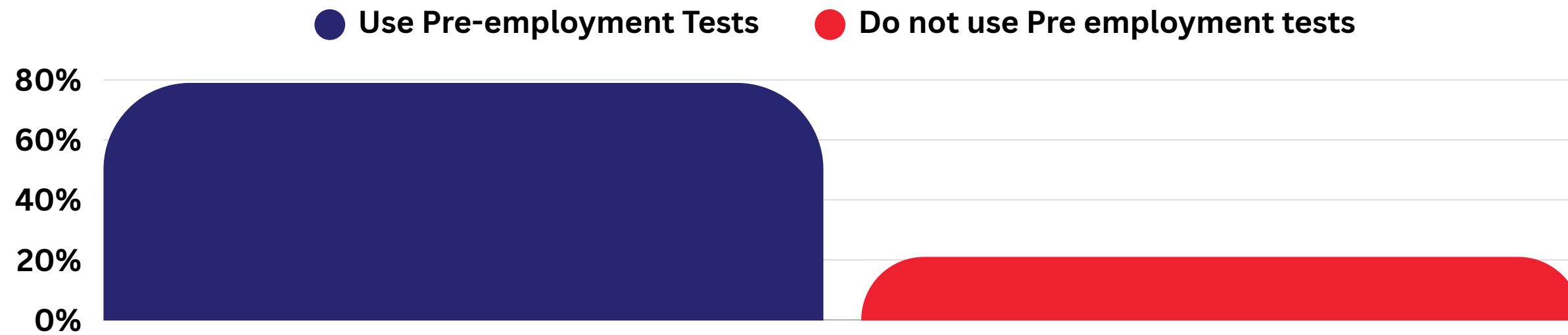


**Most HR Managers and employers expect to hire in 2026. The largest group plans to bring on 6–20 new employees, followed closely by those hiring 21–50. Only a small portion reported zero hiring plans.**

**When asked which roles they expect to fill, the strongest demand was for administrative and office positions, followed by customer support, sales, finance, and operations roles.**

**Several teams also noted plans to hire for software, data, or AI-related positions, showing a growing need for technical and digitally skilled talent.**

# Use of Pre-employment Tests



Pre-employment testing has become a standard part of the hiring process for most organizations. Survey results show that **79% of respondents currently use some form of skills testing with candidates.**

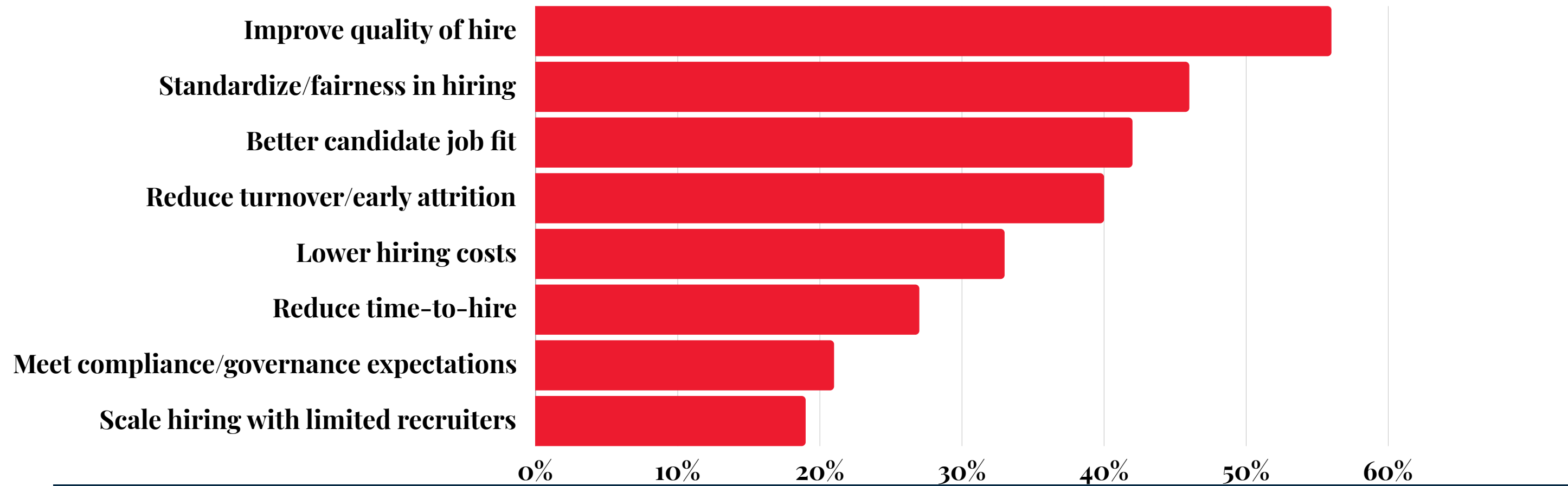
Only **21% of companies do not use any pre-hire assessments.**

Of those not using assessments, the top barriers were:

- **Cost of tests** – (8%)
- **Lack of evidence/ROI** – (4%)
- **Legal or compliance concerns** – (4%)
- **Previously used unreliable tests** – (2%)
- **Tests viewed as time-consuming to implement** – (2%)
- **Use of in-house assessments instead** –(2%)

For these teams, the hesitation isn't about doubting the value of skill verification. It's about cost, confidence in the tools, or workflow fit. The data suggests that with better guidance, clearer results, and budget-friendly options, more organizations would be open to adopting structured assessments in the future.

# Top Goals for Using Pre-Employment Tests



When respondents were asked about their top goals for using pre-employment tests, a clear pattern emerged.

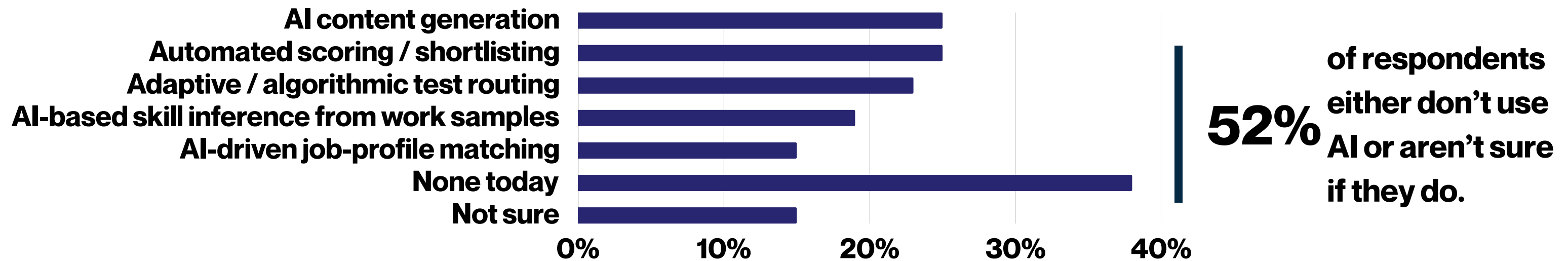
The obvious main reason is to improve quality of new employees, with several related outcomes close behind.

Smaller but still important goals included reducing time-to-hire, meeting compliance or governance expectations, and scaling hiring with limited recruiting staff.

Together, these responses show that HR teams see testing as a way to get clearer evidence on skills and fit, while also building a more consistent and defensible hiring process.

# AI Features Used Today

The survey data reveals the following viewpoints around adoption of AI tools among recruiters:

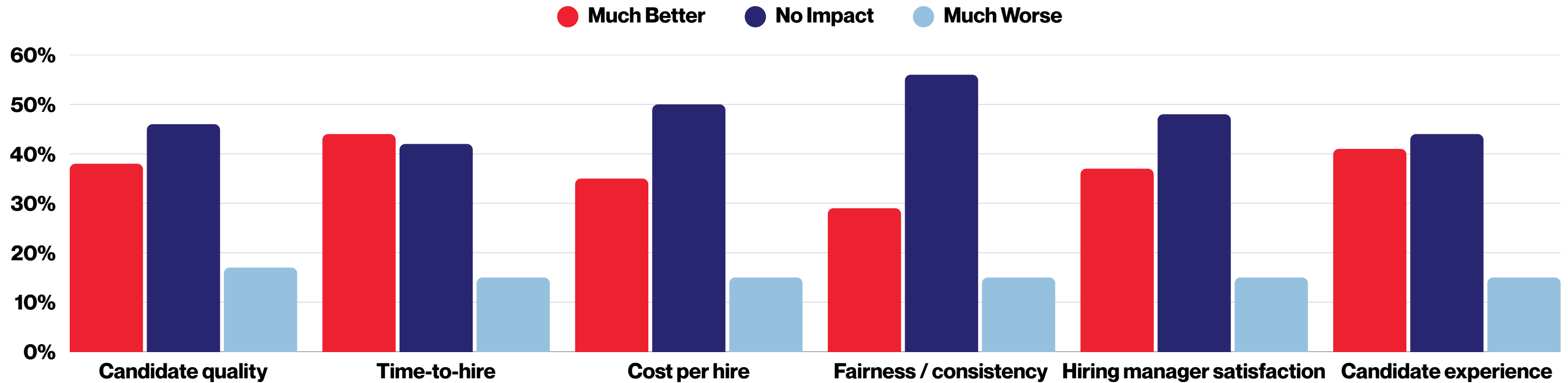


Survey results show that **AI is being used in hiring, but mostly in simple, practical ways.** The most common features in use today are AI-generated content and automated scoring or shortlisting (both used by 25% of respondents).

Slightly fewer teams use adaptive test routing (23%), AI-based skill inference from work samples (19%), or AI-driven job-profile matching (15%).

At the same time, adoption is far from universal. Over half of respondents either don't use AI at all or aren't sure whether their tools include it, which shows that many teams are still evaluating how, or if AI fits into their hiring process.

# Expected Impact of AI on Hiring

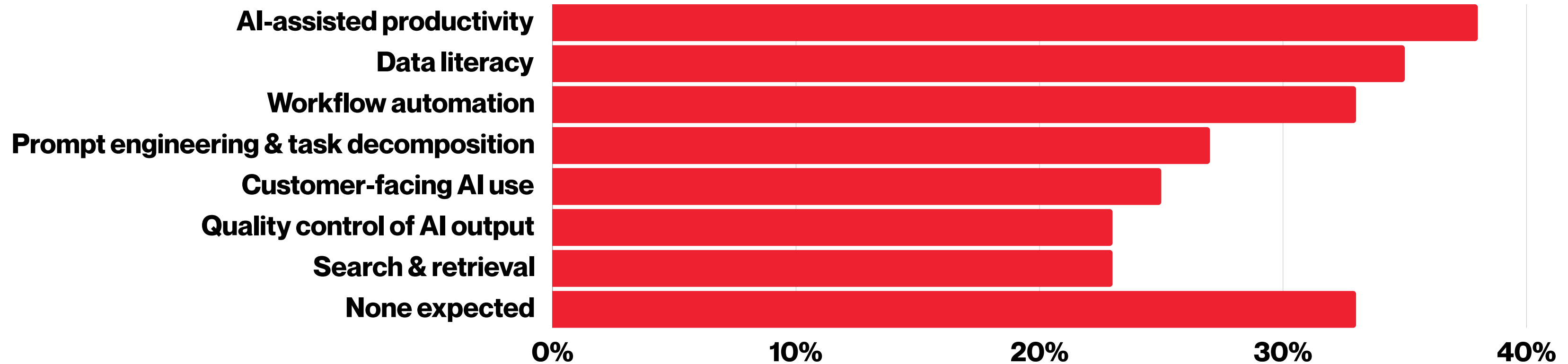


The strongest confidence appeared around time-to-hire, where most respondents believe AI will make the process faster. Improvements are also expected in **candidate experience, cost per hire, hiring manager satisfaction, and candidate quality.**

However, many respondents still believe AI will have no major impact on most metrics next year. This was especially true for fairness and consistency, where many respondents selected “No Impact,” the highest “neutral” rating in this group.

A smaller portion expect negative outcomes, though concerns were present across all categories. Overall, the data suggests that HR teams see potential in AI but expect changes to be gradual rather than transformative.

## AI Skills Expected From New Hires



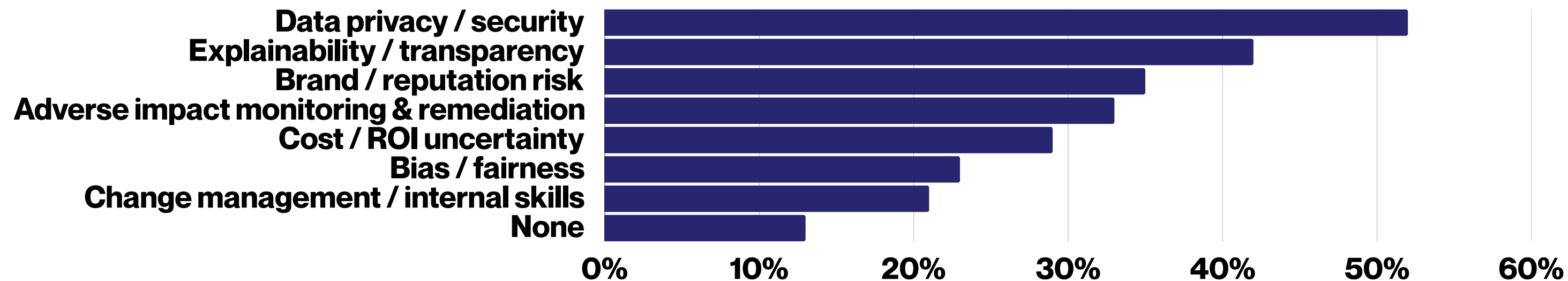
The most commonly expected skill was **AI-assisted productivity in office tools, such as generating content, summarizing information, or drafting communication in Docs, Sheets, email platforms, or CRMs.**

Close behind was data literacy, including the ability to read charts, interpret basic statistics, or understand AI-generated outputs.

Other frequently selected skills included workflow automation, prompt engineering and task breakdown, customer-facing AI use, and quality control of AI output, such as fact-checking or spotting errors.

33% of respondents said **they do not expect any AI skills from new hires at this time.**

# Top Concerns About Using AI in Assessments



The most common concern was data privacy and security, selected by the largest number of respondents. This was followed by explainability and transparency, chosen by most respondents, reflecting worries about how AI systems make decisions and whether those decisions can be justified.

Other frequently cited concerns included brand or reputation risk, adverse impact monitoring, and cost or ROI uncertainty.

Respondents also noted challenges related to change management and bias or fairness issues, highlighting the need for clear oversight when integrating AI into hiring workflows.

A small group of respondents reported no concerns, suggesting that while the majority remain cautious, a portion of teams feel comfortable with AI's current direction.

Overall, the responses show that organizations are open to AI but want clearer safeguards, better transparency, and more predictable outcomes before relying on AI-driven assessments more fully.

“Talent isn’t limited to enterprise-sized companies, and testing shouldn’t be either. Our job is to make sure every employer has access to the same level of clarity and confidence in their hiring.”  
— Ken Crowell, CEO of EmployTest

# Interpretation of Key Findings

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## **Hiring Teams Still Struggle to Trust Applicant Skills**

The biggest challenge this year wasn’t getting enough applicants; it was knowing whether those applicants actually have the skills they claim.

Most respondents rated “confidence in applicants’ skills” as a top concern. With AI tools making it easier for anyone to create polished resumes, hiring teams are relying more on testing to see real ability, not just good writing.

## **Testing Remains a Stable Part of the Hiring Process**

Despite tight budgets, nearly eight in ten organizations still use pre-employment tests. The reasoning is simple: teams want better hires, fairer decisions, and fewer early exits.

Testing gives them a consistent way to compare candidates, and that stability matters when hiring feels unpredictable.

## **AI Skills Are Becoming the New Baseline**

A major shift this year is the rise of AI expectations. About two-thirds of companies say at least some of their 2026 hires need AI-related skills.

These aren’t advanced technical skills; they’re everyday abilities like using AI in documents, email, or workflow tools. It’s becoming as essential as knowing Excel used to be.

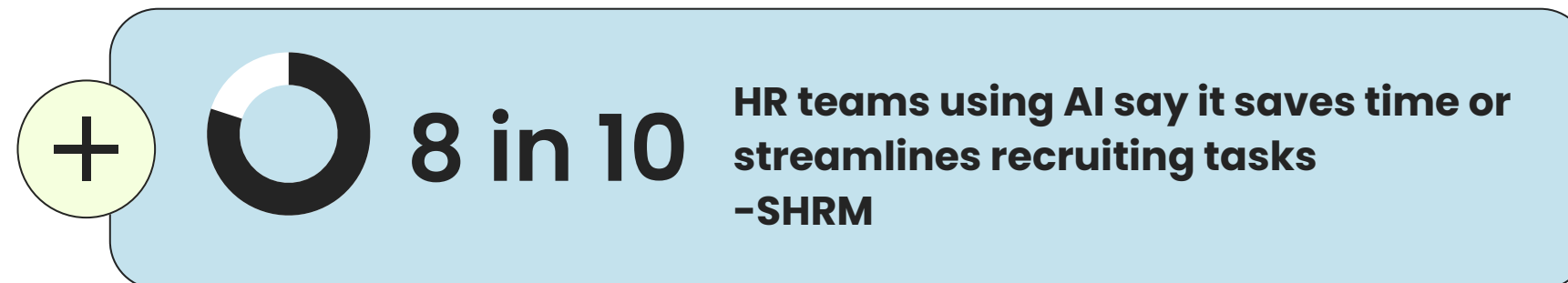
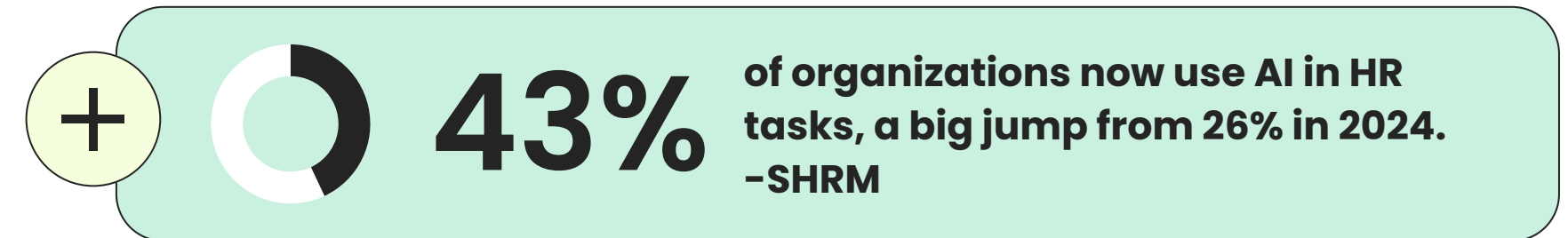
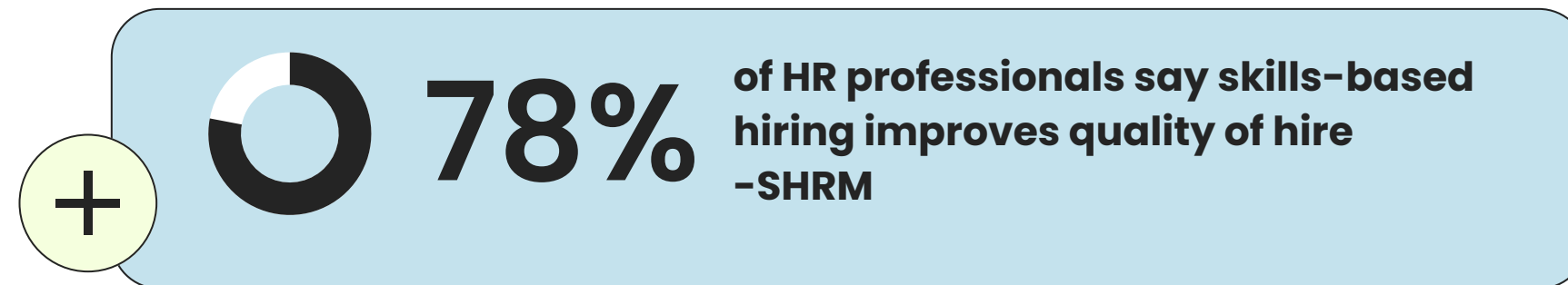
## **Hiring Challenges Look Different by Company Size**

Smaller organizations feel the impact of a bad hire immediately, so they lean heavily on testing to reduce risk. Mid-sized companies often face too many applicants and need ways to sort them quickly.

Larger employers are interested in AI but must balance it with compliance and internal policies. Across all sizes, the common theme is wanting clearer, faster ways to identify true skills.

**The biggest challenge we hear from hiring teams is simple: they can’t trust what’s on a résumé anymore. Skill verification is becoming non-negotiable.”**  
— Ken Crowell, CEO of EmployTest

## Comparison with Existing Research and Industry Benchmarks



These findings align with the survey's early data showing that employers are using tests primarily to strengthen hiring decisions and reduce guesswork.

External research also points to a growing reliance on a structured assessment plan to manage applicant quality, especially in high-volume roles.

The research also mirrors the survey's results on AI: companies are interested in small, practical AI tools, but most are adopting them slowly due to concerns around fairness, accuracy, and transparency.

Overall, the external research matches what our respondents reported: teams want more confidence, more consistency, and fewer assumptions in their hiring process. That's why the use of pre-employment testing, and careful use of AI are becoming common hiring practices across industries.

**“Across industries, the pattern is the same: teams want faster decisions, clearer evidence, and less guesswork. That’s where testing and responsible AI really shine.”**  
— Ken Crowell, CEO of EmployTest

# Pre-employment Testing and AI: Projected Impact on Hiring



**The data suggests that pre-employment testing will continue to play a central role in hiring decisions in 2026.**

Most respondents use assessments to confirm skills before interviews or final hiring steps, and many expect testing to carry even more weight as applicant skill confidence remains a major challenge.

AI is also expected to reshape parts of the hiring process, though adoption is still cautious. While a portion of respondents already use features like automated scoring or adaptive routing, many are waiting for clearer proof around fairness, consistency, and ROI before expanding usage.

Still, most HR teams believe AI will help reduce time-to-hire and improve efficiency if implemented responsibly.

Together, skills testing and AI-assisted tools are positioned to strengthen how organizations evaluate talent, offering more consistent, evidence-based decisions during a time when skill verification is becoming increasingly important.

# Implications for the HR Practice

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**The 2026 results highlight several steps HR teams can take to improve hiring outcomes:**

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**Use assessments earlier in the process.**

Skill confidence was the top challenge this year. Introducing short, role-relevant tests before interviews can help filter qualified candidates sooner and prevent delays later.

**Align tests with the skills roles require.**

Administrative, customer support, operations, and tech-enabled roles dominate 2026 hiring plans. Incorporating digital literacy, problem-solving, and AI-assisted productivity skills can help teams assess job readiness more accurately.

**Strengthen fairness and consistency.**

Standardized testing helps reduce guesswork and ensures all candidates are evaluated with the same criteria, especially when resumes vary widely in quality or when AI-generated applications are becoming common.

**Adopt AI in small, low-risk pilots.**

Many teams are curious about AI but cautious. Starting with features like automated scoring or test-item generation allows HR to test impact without overhauling their process.

**Support hiring managers with clear, simple insights.**

Concise score reports and guidance on interpreting assessments help managers make faster, more confident decisions.

**Protect limited hiring budgets.**

A mix of general skills tests and targeted assessments can stretch testing budgets further while still improving quality of hire.



**“Good hiring starts with measuring the skills that matter most. When tests reflect real job duties, hiring outcomes improve immediately.”**

**— Ken Crowell**

# Conclusion

The survey shows a hiring landscape that isn't getting any easier, but it is getting clearer. Teams are under pressure to fill roles quickly, yet the real challenge isn't speed. It's confidence. Employers are struggling to tell who actually has the skills to do the job, and that uncertainty slows everything down.

That's why pre-employment testing continues to play a central role: it gives hiring teams clearer evidence and helps create fair, consistent decisions at a time when résumés alone aren't enough.

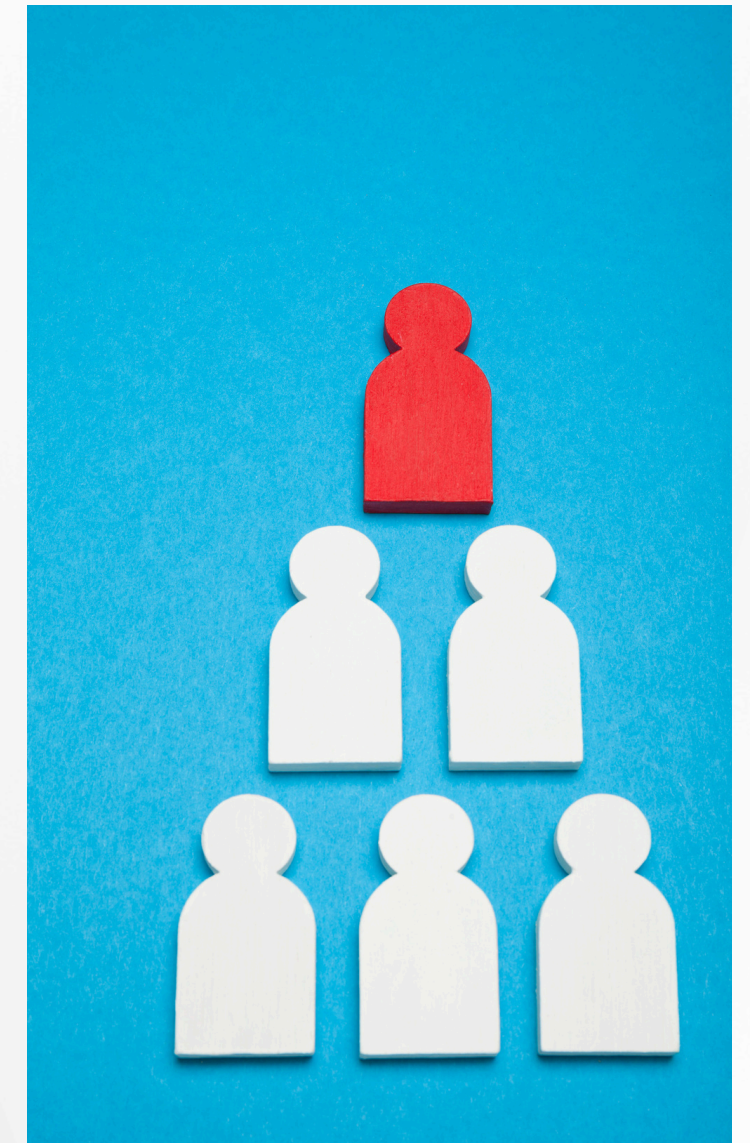
AI is also beginning to influence how organizations hire, though adoption is careful and measured. Most HR teams see the potential for AI to reduce manual work and speed up parts of the process, but they want transparency, data privacy, and clear safeguards before relying on it more heavily.

This cautious optimism suggests that AI will grow in recruiting, but responsibly and in stages.

Looking ahead to the next 12 months, the combination of validated skills assessments and thoughtful AI use offers HR teams a practical way to hire with more confidence.

Organizations that focus on skill verification, fairness, and clear evaluation standards will be better positioned to make stronger hiring decisions, even as roles evolve and technology continues to shape how work gets done.

To learn more, visit [EmployTest.com](https://EmployTest.com) or follow us on socials.



# EmployTest Comparison Ratings and Unique Value Proposition

*EmployTest is rated 4.7 stars out of 5 on Capterra's Pre-Employment Testing Software (137 reviews).*

"Ease of Use" and "Customer Service" are just two of the reasons EmployTest stands out.

- EmployTest is dedicated to offering **reliable, budget-friendly, and flexible** assessment services while ensuring top-notch quality.
- EmployTest empowers HR teams with high-quality validated assessments, with test customization options unlike any in the industry.
- EmployTest offers valuable resources to assist HR Teams in creating the business case to upper management for the use of pre-employment testing including an **ROI Calculator, planning tools** and **free test samples**.

**"Essential part of the recruiting process"**

The ease and accessibility of administering test sessions. I have not received any complaints from candidates that take the tests.

-Alex  
Management Consulting



**"Very reliable tool for HR Recruitment"**

Not only is the product of great quality, but the level of customer service and partnership I receive from my Rep at Employ Test is of the highest standard.

It is easy to navigate from the employers' and candidates' perspectives.

-Amy B.  
HR Recruiter

