

THE MONSTER IN YOUR FUNNEL

The Frankenstein's monster that could be killing your early talent strategy, and why the highest return investment sits before the application ever opens.

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You're investing more in the middle of the funnel and converting less. The fix is upstream.

Early talent teams are spending more than ever on mid-funnel technology: assessment platforms, video screening, psychometric tools, chatbots. Yet completion rates are falling, offer reneges are rising, and candidate experience keeps getting worse.

The tools aren't the problem. They're being asked to fix something they can't reach. The highest return investment in early talent isn't another screening layer. It's building genuine brand relationships with students before they apply.

The technology budget isn't the issue. Where it sits in the funnel is.

The disconnect, at a glance

7%

What employers say. Of 54 early talent leaders surveyed by Handshake, just 7% named candidate experience as a top recruitment challenge. It sits near the bottom of their list.

WHAT STUDENTS SAY

Themes coded from open-text responses of students surveyed by Handshake. Students name several at once, so together the concerns about the experience of applying add up to 196%.

196%

No feedback on rejections		62%
Poor communication or ghosting		55%
Unclear job descriptions		28%
Too much AI in the process		22%
No salary or process transparency		18%
Lengthy or complex applications		11%

Combined weight tied to the experience of applying

196%

10%

The headlines say there aren't enough jobs, and early talent teams have limited control over this. Students know the number has decreased. However, only 10% of students name a lack of roles as their main issue. What they are actually telling us is that the bigger problem is the experience of applying for those roles, and that is something early talent teams can control.

1 The real issue starts at the top of the funnel

Early talent teams are facing the same pressure: too many applications, not enough resources, not enough time. If you spend more than ten minutes on LinkedIn you would assume the answer is the latest shiny new tech. An assessment platform here. An AI screening tool there. A psychometric layer on top. A chatbot to handle the FAQ volume. And somewhere lost under the integration tickets and vendor contracts is the student. Your candidate.

The middle of the hiring funnel, where candidates move through assessment, screening and interview, has become Frankenstein's monster: a dozen platforms bolted together, each externally hosted and each requiring resources to implement. Every one was bought to solve a problem, but few talk to each other.

And yet the investment keeps flowing in the same direction. More tools. More automation. More hurdles between a student and someone who works there. Meanwhile, somewhere on a campus right now, a brilliant future hire is forming their first impression of your brand halfway through an automated assessment. At IHR Manchester, over 100 early talent leaders raised rising offer reneges again and again. Employers are investing more in a process that is converting less.



The Handshake team at IHR Live Manchester, where offer reneges came up again and again.

Application volume isn't a screening problem. It's a brand problem.

Think about what it feels like to be a student entering the 2026 graduate market. Our Network Trends Report, which surveyed over 10,000 students across Handshake's platform of more than a million, found 66% feel pessimistic about their career prospects. More than a third don't feel confident they'll secure a graduate role at all. They're not applying to your role because they've researched your culture or feel a genuine pull toward what you do. They're applying because they're scared, and volume feels like safety.

Nearly half expect to submit over 21 applications before securing a role. More than a quarter expect to send over 40. That volume first behaviour isn't laziness. It's a rational response to uncertainty, and part of that uncertainty is caused by employers doing less to build relationships with students before asking them to apply.

Building a stronger employer brand won't stop students applying in high numbers. What brand investment does is change the quality of who is in that volume. The students who know your organisation, who have met your people and understand where the role leads, still apply alongside everyone else, but they show up differently. They're prepared. They're engaged. They complete your process. And when the offer comes, they accept it. The goal isn't a smaller pipeline. It's a pipeline where the right candidates are genuinely invested when they arrive.

That's the candidate your mid-funnel tools were designed for.



Building the relationship early at Durham University.

2 Frankenstein's tech stack

Nobody built this monster on purpose. The teams investing in these platforms got into this work because they care about students. They'd rather spend time on campus having real conversations. But the mandate pulls the other way. Do more with less. Scale the process. Prove the ROI. In that context, a platform that promises to filter five thousand applications efficiently isn't cynical. It's rational.

To be clear, the tools themselves aren't the problem. Assessment platforms, video screening and AI assisted interviews add real value when used with candidates who are prepared, informed and genuinely engaged. What fails is how and when they get deployed.

DO THE MATHS

If a student applies to 40 or more roles, that's feasibly 20 assessments. At two hours each, that's 40 hours of assessment time on top of studies, other applications and part-time work. A full day visiting an employer's office carries the same time cost as completing four assessments. Students default to digital not because they prefer it, but because the time economics leave them no choice.

A candidate applies and, within minutes, receives an automated invitation to complete a two hour online assessment, one that was never flagged in the job description. The anxious candidate completes it immediately, unprepared, in whatever headspace the email finds them. They don't pass. Nobody will ever know whether that candidate, given context, preparation time and a human touch point, might have been exceptional.

One student we interviewed applied, received the link straight away, and completed it on the spot because waiting felt worse than being underprepared. He didn't progress. The question worth sitting with: was that a signal about his capability, or a signal about the experience you designed?

Another worried that AI video screening would flag his eye movements as suspicious, so he fixed his gaze rigidly on the camera and barely blinked. He didn't progress either, not because of the technology, but because a process gave him no context.

Same tool. Different context. Different outcome. Given to a candidate who has met your team, an assessment produces a fair signal. Given to one of forty applications submitted this month, it produces noise dressed up as data.

These accounts came from qualitative interviews with students across the Handshake network in 2026. They're not edge cases. They're a pattern, and it shows up in the numbers: 22% cite too much AI in the process, and 18% get no transparency on salary or process at all. These aren't fringe complaints. They're structural.

3 Shiny, expensive, aimed at the wrong problem

Every platform in the stack made sense individually. The demo was impressive, the case studies compelling, the integration manageable. The promise was always the same: efficiency, signal quality, time saved. And each arrives with the same assumption, that the problem is volume management. Too many

candidates, not enough ways to filter efficiently. "Too many applicants" is employers' single most cited recruitment challenge, at 46%. But that framing accepts the volume spike as permanent. It isn't. It's a consequence.

If you're receiving thousands of low intent, AI polished applications from candidates who have never encountered your brand, adding another screening layer doesn't fix the pipeline. It adds friction to an already daunting process. The tools don't integrate well with each other or your core systems. They create data that lives in silos, owned by third parties and inaccessible when you need it.

Even if the tools worked perfectly they still couldn't fix the pipeline, because the volume flooding into them isn't just high. It's wrong. No screening tool, however sophisticated, can manufacture intent that wasn't there when the application was submitted.

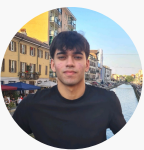
Take a student who has never encountered your brand and applied only because they were scared and you came up in a search. Your assessment platform can't convert them into a great hire. They don't know why they're there, don't have a reason to care, and will drop out at the first point of friction. The tools were built to filter signal from noise. The problem is that the pipeline arriving at them is almost entirely noise.

Honesty, at every stage

One theme came through more consistently than any other. Students don't just want more human contact. They want honest, clear communication at every stage. Does this role use AI screening? Did a human read my CV? How many stages are there?

And if you're not using AI, say so clearly and early. For a cohort already anxious about being screened out by an algorithm, one line of transparency can be the difference between a completed application and an abandoned one. These are not confident, self directed applicants browsing an exciting market. They're stressed young people navigating real uncertainty, many working part-time alongside their studies. Meet them where they are.

This is where renege and brand perception collide. Employers rank candidate experience low among their challenges, at 7%, behind even location and systems implementation. Students rank it first by a wide margin. You cannot fix what you've placed at the bottom of the list. Offer acceptance is not a closing problem. It's a relationship problem that started months earlier.



Yousuf, hired through Handshake for an internship at Barclays, put it simply. Asked what made him so invested in the role, he didn't mention the job description or the salary. It was personal outreach from the recruiter. It made him feel seen. So when the offer came, there was no hesitation. Not a campaign. Not a platform feature. A recruiter who reached out like he mattered.

Yousuf Rizwan

2nd year BSc Computer Science, University of Liverpool · Hired by Barclays through Handshake

5 The ROI that holds across every market

There will always be a new platform, and the pressure to adopt, integrate and optimise isn't going away. But the underlying dynamic hasn't changed. Students choose employers they trust, and trust is built through connection. A strategy built on brand and intentional top of funnel engagement lowers application volume by raising intent, reduces mid-funnel drop-off and improves offer acceptance. In a market this pessimistic, that reputation is a competitive advantage.

A renege carries a cost that compounds. It isn't just the empty seat. It's the sourcing cycle spent finding the candidate, the assessment hours spent evaluating them, and the time lost reopening the role after the strongest remaining candidates have accepted elsewhere. A late renege costs more to absorb than

an early conversation would have cost to prevent.

This isn't an argument to strip out the stack. It's an argument for weighting the same budget differently: less on filtering candidates at the point of maximum disengagement, more on building intent before the application opens.

CASE IN POINT · BCG

Through intentional top of funnel engagement, Handshake influenced candidates at Boston Consulting Group that didn't add to the volume problem. They converted through it. Their share grows at every stage.

14%

of all applications

32%

of all interviews

35%

of all hires

Building a strong employer brand on Handshake is how BCG sourced applicants that were 3× more likely to receive an offer compared to their overall pipeline.

BUILD THE PIPELINE

If completion rates are lower than they should be, if offer acceptance isn't where you need it and reneges are rising, is that a tools problem or a pipeline problem?

The tools were built for a candidate who arrives informed, engaged and already bought in. The highest return investment isn't another screening layer. It's building the relationship before the application opens.

Reach early, reach right

Verified high intent students across 250 universities, before your window opens. Targeted outreach, not broadcast posting.

A human face, early

Virtual events and campus presence that put a person on your brand before a student ever sees an assessment link.

Expert assist

Limited capacity? We manage the platform for you. Messaging, events and branding tools that make any team feel bigger.

A pipeline that converts

Volume that arrives at your mid-funnel tools already engaged, already informed and already invested.

The monster doesn't need to be rebuilt. It needs the right candidates walking through the door.



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