



2026 EMEA REPORT

Inside the Candidate Experience

Back to Basics: AI is the Question Everyone
is Asking. Communication is the Answer
Nobody is Acting On.

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Introduction

The story of candidate experience in 2026 is not, at its core, a story about artificial intelligence. It is the same story we have been telling for over a decade – just accelerated.

In 2010, research by PeopleScout found that only 5% of candidates rated their experience as excellent. In 2023, that number had crept up to fewer than two in ten. In 2026, despite widespread investment in hiring technology, that figure has barely moved. The tools have changed. The fundamental breakdown in communication has not.

What has changed is the context. Candidates are navigating a hiring environment that feels less transparent. They suspect AI screening at higher rates and are adapting their behaviour more actively in response. At the same time, employers are seeing application volumes rise and quality decline and are responding by automating more.

AI has not created the communication failures that define today's candidate experience. But it has made them more consequential.

49% of EMEA candidates believe employers are probably or definitely using AI to screen their applications, yet 63% say none of the employers they applied to mentioned AI at any point.

This report draws on two sources of evidence: a survey of over 500 job seekers across the UK, Poland, Spain, Germany, and France; and PeopleScout's Candidate Experience Index, an objective audit of hiring processes across more than 20 industries, scored against 40 key experience indicators from the perspective of a real candidate. Together they tell a consistent story – one of a self-reinforcing loop that only employers have the power to break.

A Note on the Global Context

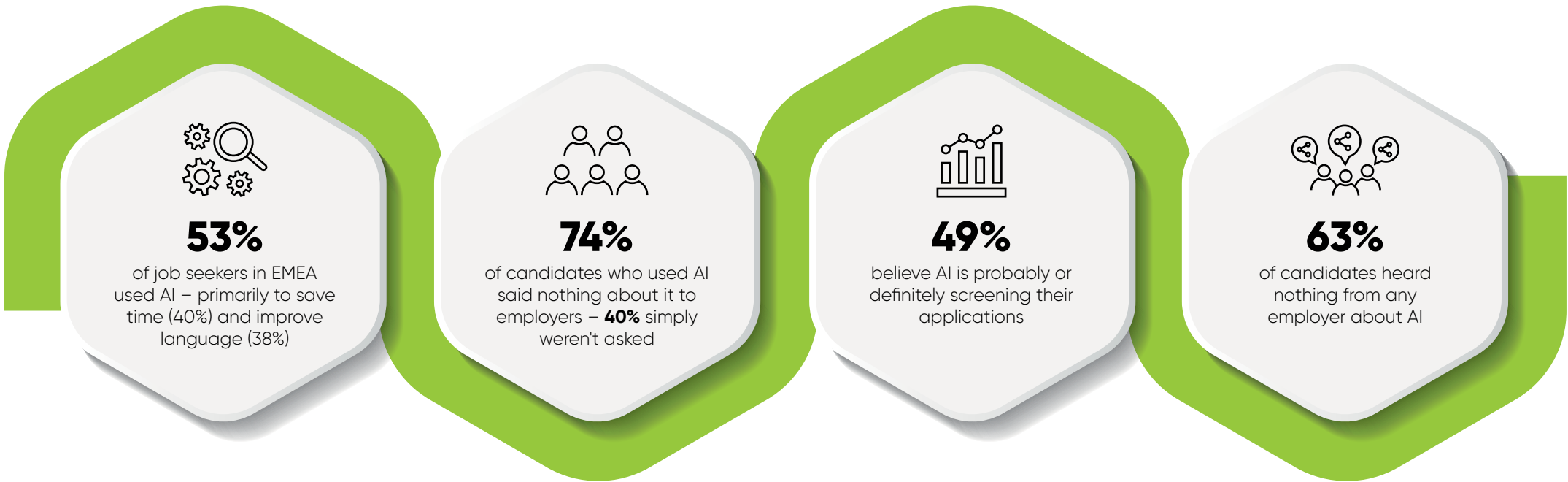
Where relevant, this report references findings from PeopleScout's 2026 Global Inside the Candidate Experience report, which covers 10 markets and more than 1000 respondents.



Key Findings

The Mutual Silence

AI is being used on both sides, but no one is talking about it.



The Ghosting Problem

Most applications disappear into silence.



- 63% felt frustrated or discouraged after being ghosted
- 37% would tell others not to apply after a bad experience
- 40% would stop purchasing from that company



Not being ghosted is the exception, not the rule.

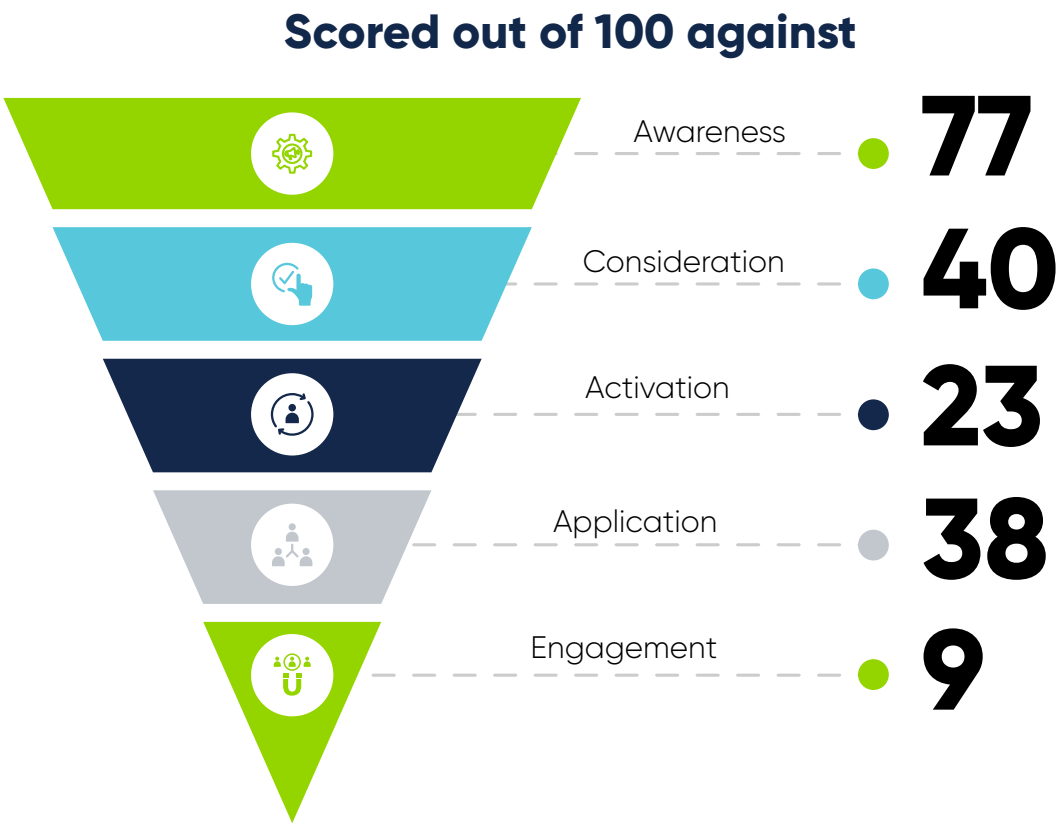


Confidence In Human Review



How Employers Perform in PeopleScout’s Candidate Experience Index

PeopleScout’s Candidate Experience Index is an objective audit of an organisation’s hiring processes scored against 40 key experience indicators from the candidate’s perspective.



Engagement covers everything after a candidate applies: acknowledgement, next steps, rejection communication, specific feedback. The automated acknowledgement is close to universal. Everything after it is not.

What Candidates Actually Want

The top three priorities amongst EMEA job seekers – respect for their time, a transparent process, honest feedback – are Engagement-stage commitments.

Priority	EMEA Avg. (out of 5)
Employer respects my time	4.34
Process is transparent	4.28
Clear feedback if rejected	4.21
Fair assessment regardless of background	4.12
Guaranteed human review	4.10
Application is quick (5–10 min)	3.87
Demonstrate skills (work sample)	3.45

What Candidates Are Experiencing

The Hiring Loop

Over half of EMEA candidates (53%) used AI tools in their job search. Across all five markets, the picture is consistent: candidates are primarily using AI to save time (40%) and improve their language (38%). Only 3% say their primary motivation was getting past screening systems.

AI use cases among AI users in EMEA



The data shows us that candidates are generally not trying to game the system but are using AI as a rational adaptation to a process that has stopped rewarding genuine effort. Consider what the data tells us about the environment EMEA candidates are navigating:

- 63% were ghosted – received no response – in more than half the roles they applied for. In the UK and Poland, it’s as high as seven in 10 candidates; Germany is the notable exception at 38%.
- Nearly half suspect they are being screened by algorithms, yet 63% heard nothing from employers about AI at any point.

In that environment, the rational candidate response is not to invest more carefully in each application. It’s to invest less and to use AI to do it faster. Candidates have been trained, by consistent and repeated employer behaviour, to treat applications as low-investment transactions rather than the beginning of a professional relationship.

This is the loop the data describes.



The Mutual Silence

Three-quarters of AI-using candidates did not disclose their use to employers. The dominant reason (40%) was not fear of consequences; it was simply that nobody asked. A further 6% say the organisation did not mention AI, so neither did they, a direct connection between employer silence and candidate silence.

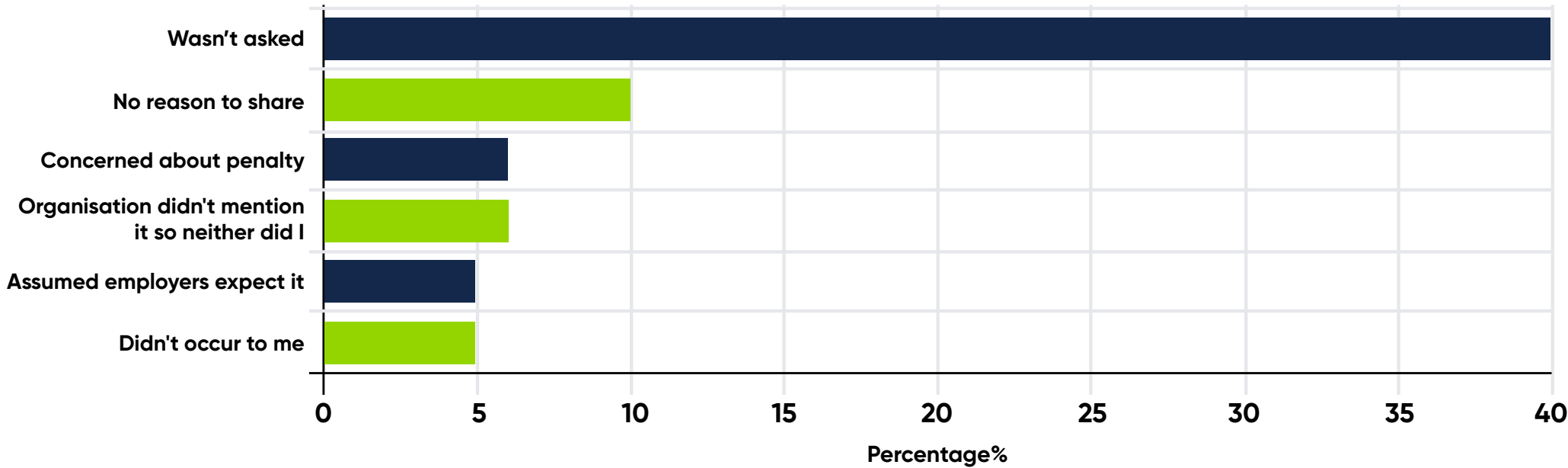
When it comes to employer communication, Poland leads EMEA on the proportion of candidates who received some AI communication from at least one employer (47%). Germany leads on consistency – 13% of German candidates say all the employers they applied to mentioned AI, the highest rate in EMEA. Both markets point toward more proactive employer postures on AI, but through different mechanisms.

The UK remains the least transparent market, with 75% of candidates reporting complete employer silence.

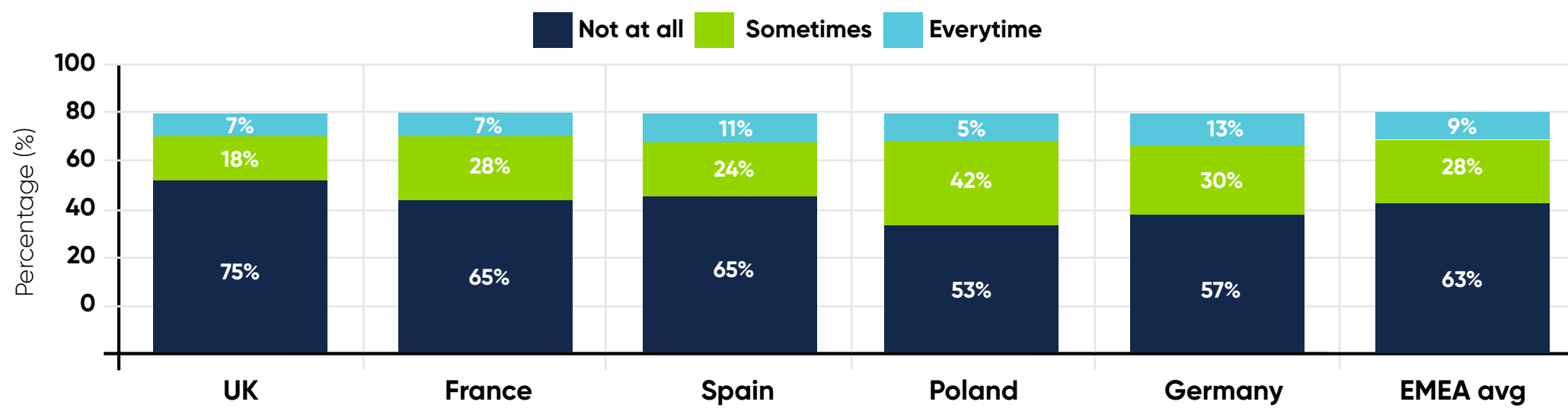
This is not a picture of candidates deliberately concealing wrongdoing. It is a picture of a hiring environment where neither party has established clear expectations, and where silence on both sides has become the default.

Germany shows what changes when employers communicate. It is among the highest in employer AI transparency in EMEA, the lowest ghosting rate (38%), and the highest positive experience rate (47%) in the region. The effect is measurable: when employers say something, candidates are less frustrated, more confident in the process, and more positive overall. Germany is the clearest evidence in the EMEA dataset that the basics work.

Non-disclosure reasons in EMEA



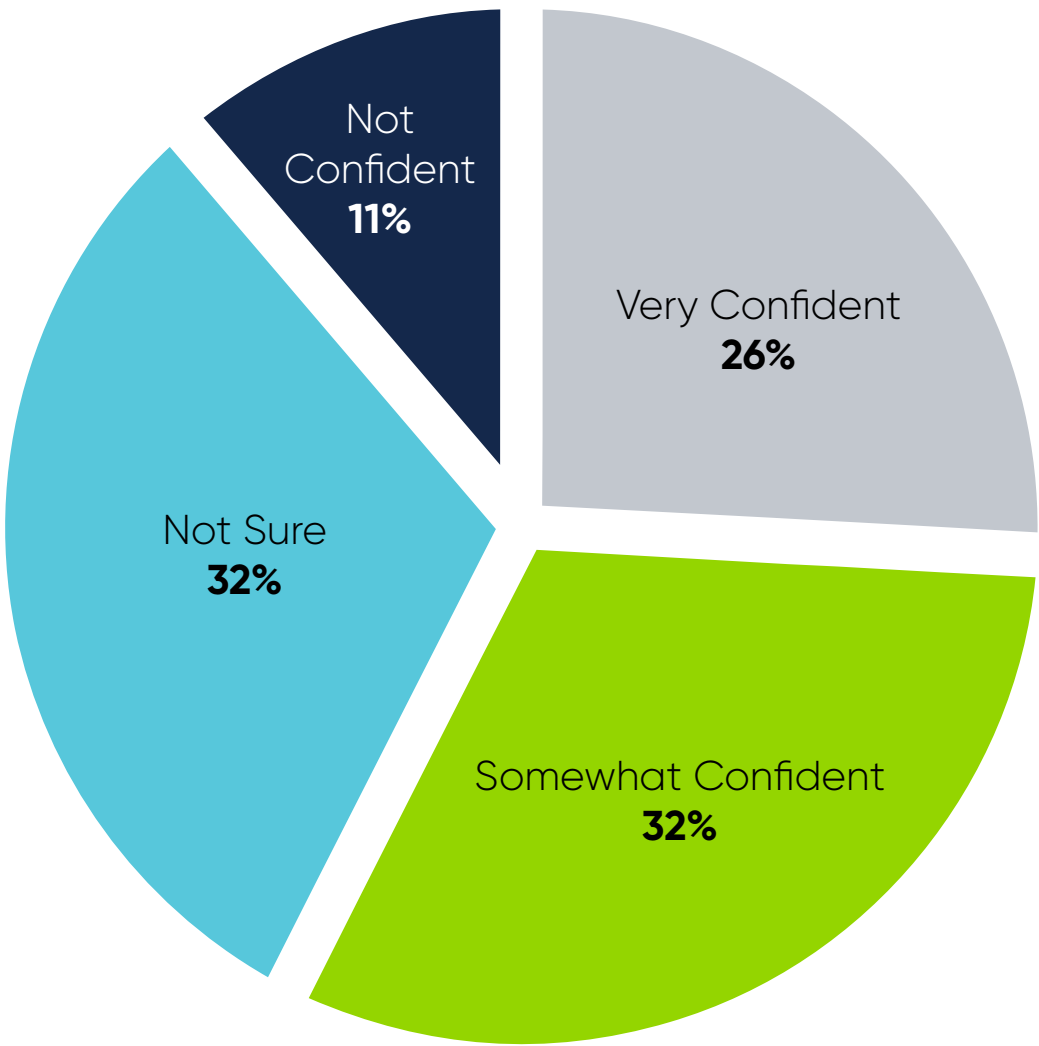
Frequency of employers mentioning AI



The Confidence Gap

The mutual silence produces a measurable downstream effect. Only 26% of EMEA candidates are very confident a human reviewed their application. A further 32% are simply not sure.

Overall Candidate Confidence in Human Review



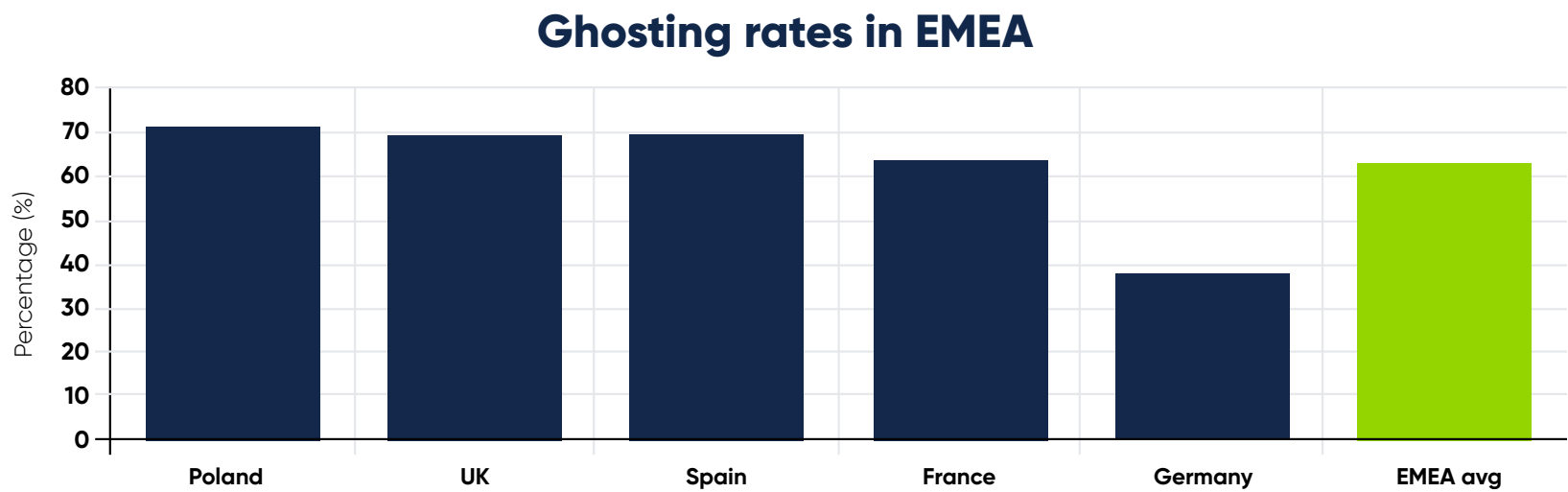
Among candidates who suspected AI screening, only 20% were very confident a human reviewed their application. Among those with no suspicion, 60% were. The gap is not caused by AI. It is caused by silence about AI.



The Ghosting Problem

All this lack of transparency culminates in something more basic and more damaging: being ignored entirely.

Across EMEA, 63% of candidates were ghosted in more than half their applications. Just 7% say they were never ghosted at all. So, not being ghosted is the exception, not the rule.

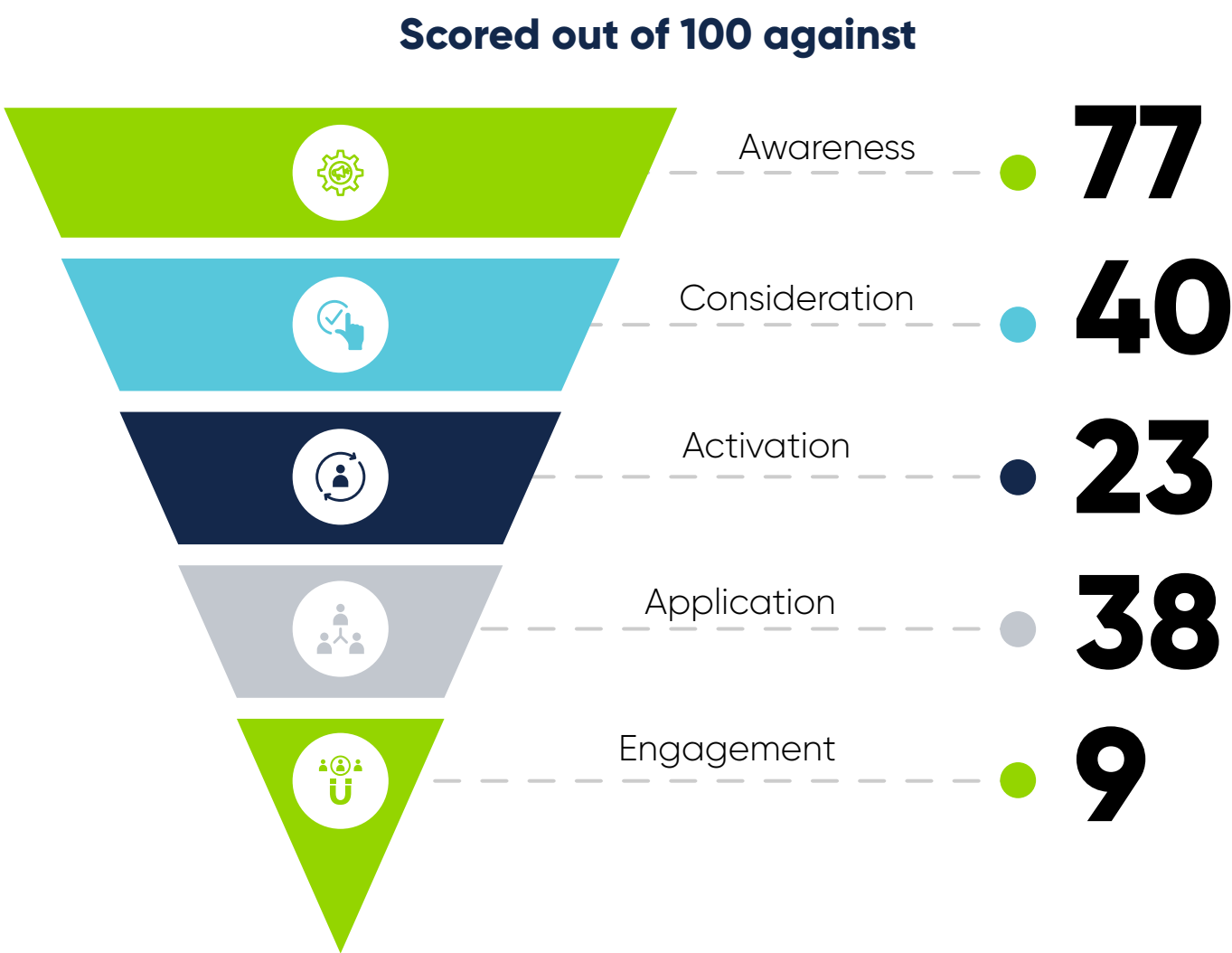


The consequences extend beyond frustration. Among candidates with a negative experience, 35% say they would tell others not to apply to that company. Forty per cent say they would stop purchasing from it. In Germany, 53% would avoid purchasing – the highest figures of any market in this study. For consumer-facing businesses hiring at scale, this is not a candidate experience metric. It is a revenue protection metric.

Trend: From January 2026, new legislation in Ontario, Canada is addressing ghosting, requiring employers to notify interviewed candidates of their hiring decision within 45 days or face penalties. It is the first jurisdiction to formalise what most candidates have long considered a basic professional courtesy. It is unlikely to be the last.



What the Candidate Experience Index Shows



The candidate survey tells you what EMEA job seekers are experiencing. The Candidate Experience Index shows you why – scored against 40 key experience indicators across five stages of the pre-interview hiring journey, assessed from the perspective of a real candidate across more than 20 sectors.

The two datasets tell the same story.

Candidates told us employers are easy to find but hard to engage with. The Index confirms it. Awareness scores 77 – organisations are broadly findable, career pages are mobile-enabled, the basic infrastructure of attraction is in place. But findable is not the same as compelling. The Index drops off at Consideration which scores just 40. Candidates who arrive at careers pages ready to be persuaded find insufficient material to make a decision. Culture, values, flexible working, real employee stories: absent from the majority of sites assessed.

Candidates told us the application process works but feels impersonal. Application scores 38 – functional but rarely positive to go through. Activation scores 23 – candidates who want to apply can’t find clear guidance on what the process involves, how long it will take or what they will be assessed on.

Candidates told us that most applications disappear into silence. Engagement scores 9. This stage covers everything that happens after a candidate submits: acknowledgement, next steps, rejection communication, specific feedback, asking candidates for their view of the experience. The automated acknowledgement is close to universal. Everything after it is not.

The 63% ghosting rate in the survey and the 9% Engagement score in the Index are not two separate findings. They are the same finding, measured from two different angles.

AI Works Best on a Solid Foundation

Organisations across every region are investing heavily in AI and automation. AI has real and measurable value in hiring – it handles volume, reduces time-to-hire, and brings consistency to screening. But the data reveals a mismatch between where that investment is going and where the damage is being done. Most AI investment is concentrated in stages that are already performing well, like Awareness which scores 77.

The stage actively damaging employer brands, driving candidates away and eroding the return on that investment is Engagement, which scores just 9. The communication failures at this stage are not an AI problem.

The basics matter because AI works best when it is built on a foundation of clear communication and a process candidates trust. Without that foundation, AI screening produces diminishing returns—candidates invest less in their applications, candidate quality declines, and the efficiency gains at the top of the funnel are offset by brand damage at the bottom.

Getting the fundamentals right will boost your AI investment.

Five basics that outperform most AI investments



A careers page that answers: what is it actually like to work here? (missing from the majority of organisations assessed)



A clear statement of how AI is used in your screening process (only a third of EMEA candidates say an employer provided this)



An automated acknowledgement within hours of application (most organisations already have this)



A personalised or personal-feeling message within 48 hours (rare across every market in this study)



Specific feedback at every rejection point (near absent in the Candidate Experience Index)

What Candidates Actually Want

When we asked job seekers across EMEA to rate (out of five) what matters most to them in a hiring process, the results were both clear and striking in what they reveal about the current state of hiring.

Priority	EMEA Avg.	UK	Poland	Spain	France	Germany
Employer respects my time	4.34	4.39	4.43	4.38	4.13	4.36
Process is transparent	4.28	4.37	4.26	4.49	4.19	4.05
Clear feedback if rejected	4.21	4.17	4.28	4.25	4.22	4.16
Fair assessment regardless of background	4.12	4.45	4.06	4.12	3.81	4.15
Guaranteed human review	4.10	4.20	4.08	4.20	4.11	3.92
Application is quick (5–10 min)	3.87	4.02	3.82	4.01	3.72	3.73
Demonstrate skills (work sample)	3.45	3.47	3.38	3.53	3.47	3.40

Two things stand out.

The top priorities are not about speed or technology. They are about being treated with respect. Transparency. Acknowledgement. Honest feedback. A fair process. These are reasonable expectations, and they are precisely the things the Engagement score of 9 tells us most organisations are currently failing to provide.

The market-level differences reflect specific anxieties about AI. UK candidates place fair assessment at the top (4.45). In a market where 75% of employers say nothing about AI, concern that algorithms may be making unfair decisions runs high. Spanish candidates lead on process transparency (4.49) – the highest single score in the table, from the most AI-aware market in EMEA. Polish candidates lead on wanting their time respected (4.43). In a market where 71% are ghosted in most of their applications, basic courtesy has become the primary ask. Germany is instructive in a different way: it scores transparency and guaranteed human review lower than any other EMEA market (4.05 and 3.92 respectively). This could be the result of employers already communicating more openly about AI and process.

The top three priorities amongst EMEA job seekers are Engagement-stage commitments, the lowest scoring segment of the Candidate Experience Index.

What To Do About It

Many of our conversations with talent acquisition leaders about candidate experience arrive at the same question: what technology should we invest in next? It is an understandable question. But the data in this report points to a more fundamental one: is your hiring process built on a communication foundation that helps us maximize that technology investment?

AI tools, automated workflows and ATS upgrades deliver real value when they sit on top of a process that candidates trust. When they don't, the efficiencies AI creates can be offset by employer brand damage, lost revenue and reputational cost at a scale that erases the efficiency gains. The five recommendations that follow address the foundation that ensures your technology investment pays off.

1. Know where you stand

As the old adage goes, you cannot fix what you cannot measure. Internal metrics like time-to-fill and offer acceptance rates tell you how the process performs for you. They do not tell you how it performs for candidates. An objective, stage-by-stage assessment of your hiring journey, benchmarked against sector peers, identifies not just where performance is weak but which specific gaps are costing you most in drop-off, brand perception, and talent quality.

Candidate Experience Index – See how your recruitment process compares to peers across every stage of the candidate journey. [Request your bespoke report.](#)

2. Say something about AI

Of all the actions available to EMEA talent acquisition leaders right now, this is the one that costs least and signals most. In a region where 63% of candidates say none of their employers mentioned AI at any point, the organisations that communicate openly will immediately distinguish themselves from the majority that say nothing.

A transparency statement does not require legal review or policy sign-off. It requires a decision about what to say and where to say it: how AI is used in screening, what role human judgment plays, and what candidates can expect to hear and when. That statement belongs in job postings, on your careers page, and at every stage where AI touches the process. The data is precise about what changes when employers do this – candidate confidence in human review is measurably higher where employers communicate openly than where they say nothing.

3. Fix the follow-up

The 63% ghosting rate is not caused by inadequate technology. Most of the organisations in this study have an ATS or CRM that is capable of sending an email. The problem is that most haven't decided that sending that email is non-negotiable.

Consider implementing a minimum engagement standard – automated acknowledgement within hours, personalised message within 48 hours, specific feedback at every rejection. Measure compliance with the same rigour as time-to-fill. The business case is straightforward: 37% of candidates with a negative experience will tell others not to apply. Forty per cent will stop purchasing from the company. This is brand protection, not HR housekeeping.



4. Close the Consideration gap

The drop from Awareness (77) to Consideration (40) is the sharpest fall in the entire Index and the most addressable. Candidates arrive at careers pages ready to make a decision and cannot find the information they need to make it. Culture, values, flexible working, career development pathways, and real employee stories are absent from the majority of sites assessed.

The Consideration gap is both a content problem and an experience problem. Candidates need to be able to navigate to what matters to them, not wade through corporate messaging to find it. A careers page that works tells candidates what it is genuinely like to work there, maps the journey they are about to go on, and makes explicit how AI fits into that journey. An employer brand that addresses AI directly – not as a legal disclaimer but as a genuine statement of values and process – builds the kind of trust that converts engaged visitors into committed applicants.

The audit question is simple: can a candidate who has never heard of your organisation understand within five minutes what it is genuinely like to work there, how they will be assessed, and what role AI plays? If the answer is no, you are losing candidates at the stage that has the most to gain from targeted investment.

PeopleScout's Talent Advisory team works with organisations to identify the highest-value communication gaps and implement practical improvements that measurably improve candidate satisfaction and conversion. [Learn more.](#)

5. Use assessment to restore fairness

In every EMEA market, fair assessment ranks among the top three candidate priorities. In the UK it is the highest-scoring attribute of any market in our study (4.45). This is not a coincidence. In a hiring environment where more than half of candidates suspect they are being screened by algorithms they cannot see, the desire for a process that evaluates genuine ability is acute and growing.

Evidence-based, skills-focused assessment addresses this directly. It provides a signal of genuine capability that is harder to game than a keyword-optimised CV. It gives candidates confidence that the process is designed to find the best person, not filter the most applications. And when introduced with clear explanation of its purpose, its scope, and how it connects to the role, it does something the rest of the hiring process is currently failing to do: it demonstrates that the employer has thought carefully about fairness.

Assessment Works by PeopleScout – Evidence-based assessment frameworks that are transparent, equitable and predictive of job performance. [Learn more.](#)



Conclusion: Back to Basics

AI adoption is growing across every market. The employer response has largely been silence.

That silence has consequences. Two-thirds of candidates are ghosted in most of their applications. Only a quarter (25%) are confident a human reviewed what they submitted. And candidates are responding by investing less time and effort in each application and using AI to do it faster.

The employers that will build genuine competitive advantage in EMEA talent markets are not those investing most heavily in AI technology. They are those who build the foundation that makes AI investment worthwhile: a hiring process that communicates clearly, treats candidates as people, and earns the trust that high-quality applications require.

That foundation is not theoretical. The data shows exactly what it looks like in practice. It is a careers page that tells the truth about what it is like to work there – that maps the candidate journey, reflects the organisation's values, and addresses AI directly rather than leaving candidates to guess. It is an employer brand that owns the conversation about AI in hiring rather than avoiding it. It is a follow-up standard that candidates can rely on. It is an assessment process that candidates experience as an opportunity to demonstrate genuine capability, not another filter to optimise around.

None of these require a technology overhaul. All of them require a decision – at leadership level – that the candidate experience is a commercial priority, not an HR metric. Organisations that make that decision will not just see better experience scores. They will attract better applicants, generate better quality applicants, and build the employer brand that makes every subsequent campaign more effective, more efficient and more human.

The basics work. The data proves it.

Curious to see how your organisation's candidate experience stacks up? Request your Candidate Experience Index report.

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