

Research Report

# Gen AI

Meets

# Gen Z

The Role of Gen AI in Early Careers Job  
& Internship Searches & Applications



PeopleScout in association with the University of Bristol Careers Service



University of  
**BRISTOL**

# Foreword

The recruitment media today is full of speculative predictions about how, when and why people are using Generative AI (Gen AI) tools to find jobs. This makes it hard to understand what is really going on and for employers to have confidence they understand their applicant pool.

Building on our recent research with YouGov, which challenged popular narratives by uncovering low adoption rates of Gen AI amongst the general UK population, we now turn our focus to Gen AI usage amongst early career job seekers. This report examines the behaviours, attitudes, and experiences of a group often assumed to be at the cutting edge of technology: Gen Z graduates.

Partnering with the University of Bristol Careers Service, we surveyed university students looking for internships or jobs. The results are both surprising and significant.

While many more early career job seekers actively use Gen AI for their job search and applications, a significant minority consciously abstain with a range of reasons. Also striking is the communication gap – employer communication with candidates about Gen AI is much less frequent than it should be, and large numbers of candidates are not revealing their use of it within the application or assessment process.

This report offers insights that can help employers form sensible action plans for their recruitment and assessment processes to ensure they continue to find the right people for their roles using cost-effective and fair methodologies, despite the potential threats that unmanaged Gen AI use could bring. Our objective in sharing this research is to equip organisations with more confidence to embrace Gen AI thoughtfully and responsibly, maintaining a recruitment environment where evolving technology is used to contribute positively to successful matches between job seekers and organisations.



**Amanda Callen**  
Psychology Lead

# Introduction

The recruitment landscape is awash with opinions and speculation about how Gen AI is transforming job applications and assessments. With rapid technological advancements and evolving adoption patterns, reliable data becomes obsolete quickly, making it challenging for organisations to accurately assess the risks Gen AI poses to their recruitment processes and determine appropriate responses.

Through our previous collaboration with YouGov, our report, [The AI-Enabled Applicant: How Candidates Are Really Using Gen AI in Recruitment](#), established a baseline understanding of Gen AI usage in the UK across the general population, revealing surprisingly modest adoption rates that contradicted much of the prevailing narrative.



Building on this foundation, we partnered with the University of Bristol Careers Service to examine whether UK-based early career job seekers – largely made up of Gen Z, a demographic often assumed to be at the forefront of technology adoption – demonstrated different behaviours and usage patterns, focusing on three key areas:

- The decision to use Gen AI (or not)
- What parts of job seeking Gen AI is used for
- The frequency and nature of communication about Gen AI by both employers and job seekers

This targeted research provides definitive evidence that Gen AI has indeed become a significant and active tool for the majority of early career job seekers, with 69% leveraging these technologies across various aspects of their job search and applications – a rate nearly four times higher than the general population (18%).

The study uncovers three critical insights that challenge assumptions and highlight urgent areas for employer action:

- 1.** Gen AI usage is concentrated in the early stages of recruitment. Of those who did use it, 84% are using it for CVs and applications and 78% for pre-application research.
- 2.** Nearly a third (31%) – a significant minority – consciously abstains from using Gen AI, primarily due to ethical concerns about cheating (85%) and fears of penalisation (75%).
- 3.** There is a profound communication gap, with 36% of job seekers receiving no guidance about Gen AI usage from any of the employers they engaged with, creating confusion and inconsistency in the application process.

These findings underscore the urgent need for employers to adopt proactive, transparent strategies to engage with Gen AI in recruitment, ensuring equitable opportunities for all applicants regardless of their technology choices.



# Key Findings



## High Adoption:

69% of early career job seekers leverage Gen AI in their job search, significantly higher than the general population.



## Primary Use Cases:

Most utilise Gen AI for pre-application research (78%) and CVs/applications (84%), focusing on tailoring materials, improving language, and matching skills.



## Motivations:

Users seek to expedite processes, present their “best self,” maintain competitiveness, and boost confidence.



## Reasons for Non-Use:

A notable 31% abstain, citing they felt it was cheating (85%), a fear of penalisation (75%), or they simply felt they didn't need it (65%).



## Employer Communication Gap:

Over a third (36%) of job seekers hear nothing about Gen AI usage from any employers they engage with, leading to significant confusion.



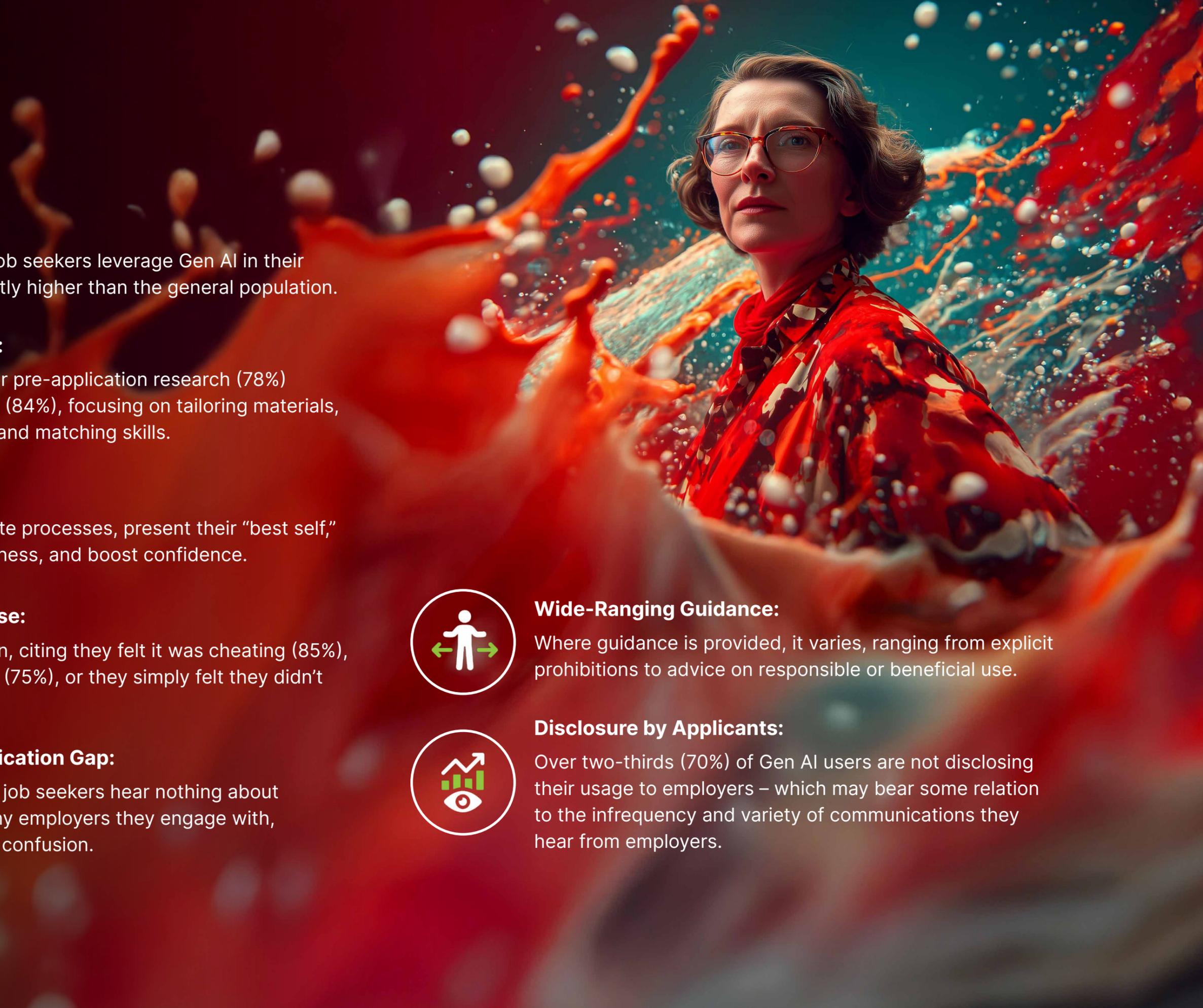
## Wide-Ranging Guidance:

Where guidance is provided, it varies, ranging from explicit prohibitions to advice on responsible or beneficial use.



## Disclosure by Applicants:

Over two-thirds (70%) of Gen AI users are not disclosing their usage to employers – which may bear some relation to the infrequency and variety of communications they hear from employers.



# Gen AI & the Early Career Job Search

## High Adoption Rates Among Early Career Job Seekers

Our research confirms that Gen AI usage among early career job seekers significantly exceeds that of the general population.

**While only 18% of all job seekers use Gen AI in their job search, a substantial 69% of early career job seekers are leveraging these tools.**

This indicates that for this demographic, Gen AI is a significant component of their job seeking strategy.

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*“Tailoring my CV and cover letter for each job takes around half an hour to 45 minutes without the use of Gen AI, time which I cannot afford to lose.”*

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The high adoption rate suggests that early career job seekers view Gen AI as a competitive necessity, with many using it to expedite the application process, present their ‘best self,’ to employers, and improve their confidence.

## How Early Career Job Seekers Use Gen AI

Although volumes are higher amongst early career job seekers, the balance of how they are using Gen AI across the recruitment process is very similar to the patterns we found in the general population.

Our survey indicates that those using Gen AI find it's most useful at the early stages of the process, whilst usage drops significantly during later stages like interviews and online assessments.

### Pre-Application Activities (78% usage):

75%

Researching roles, organisations, or sectors

51%

Searching for opportunities

58%

Finding opportunities that matched skills or experience

*"Gen AI was most useful during the pre-application stage, particularly for tailoring my CV and cover letters, generating practice interview questions, and improving my answers based on my genuine experience."*

### CV and Application Support (84% usage):

83%

Improving or editing style and language in CVs or application forms

66%

Matching genuine skills or experience to job requirements

59%

Better describing genuine skills and experience

*"[Gen AI was most useful for] tailoring my CV to specific jobs and articulating how my skills/experiences are applicable in each job."*

Use of Gen AI drops significantly during later recruitment stages, with only 18% using it for video or live online interviews and 20% for virtual assessment centres. Early career job seekers are making discerning choices about how they use Gen AI and are maximising its benefits for preparation and presentation tasks.

*"Gen AI was least useful during online assessments or virtual assessment centres where responses had to be more spontaneous and heavily relied on personal judgment or live interaction."*

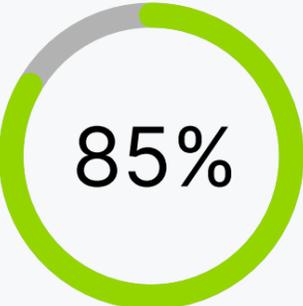
*"Gen AI does not know me as well as I know myself, so it was least useful in generating ideas for questions about why I am suited for the role."*



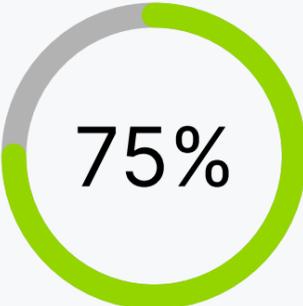


# A Significant Minority Consciously Abstains

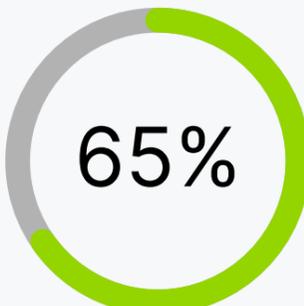
Despite high overall usage, 31% of early career job seekers consciously choose not to use Gen AI in their job search. This abstention is driven by clear reasons that employers must consider:



**Ethical concerns:**  
85% believe using Gen AI is cheating



**Fear of consequences:**  
75% worry about being penalised or disqualified



**Perceived lack of necessity:**  
65% simply feel they don't need it

This group represents a significant talent pool that may include 'future stars' who could be unintentionally disadvantaged in recruitment processes designed without consideration for those who opt out of Gen AI usage for ethical or personal reasons.

*"AI is having devastating impacts on the environment, and it is irresponsible to use or encourage the use of it."*

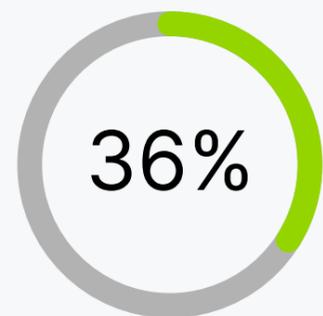
### Notable reasons given for not using Gen AI:

- Not needed
- Using it would be cheating
- Fear of being disqualified if found out
- Wanted to present a fully authentic version of themselves
- Using it is bad for the environment
- Didn't want to be considered for a job they weren't suited for

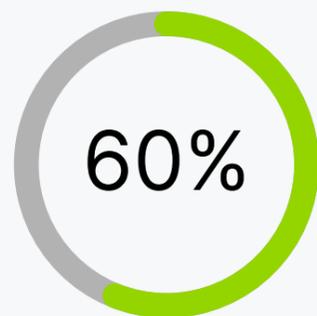
## Communication Gap Creates Confusion and Inequity

Despite the growing presence of Gen AI in the early careers job market, a notable portion of job seekers report hearing nothing from potential employers about whether and how they should use these tools. This silence leaves many applicants guessing, creating inconsistencies in the application process and opportunities for misunderstanding.

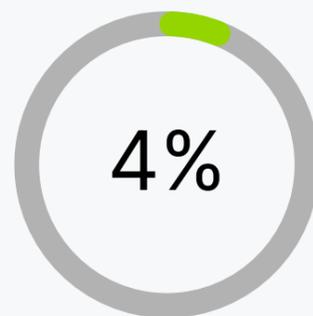
The data reveals a concerning pattern:



**36%**  
**received no communication**  
from any organisation about Gen AI usage

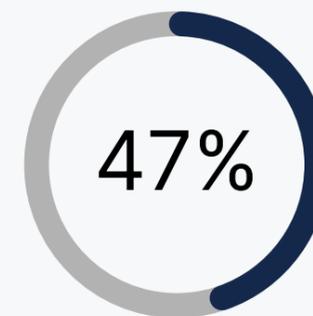


**60%**  
**heard from only one or some organisations**  
they applied to (but not all)

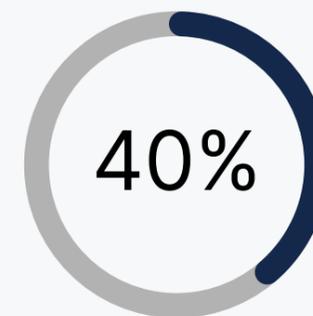


**4%**  
**received communication**  
from all organisations

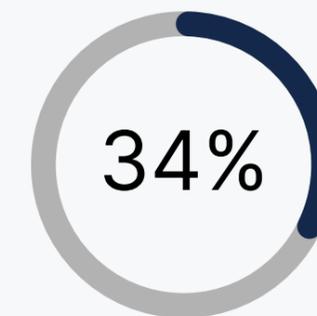
When guidance was provided, it varied dramatically across organisations:



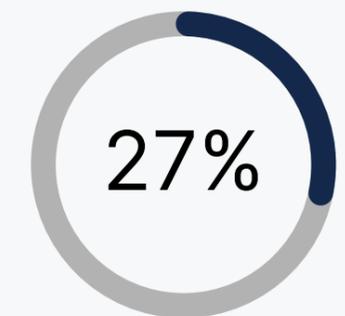
**47%**  
Nearly half (47%) were explicitly instructed not to use Gen AI



**40%**  
Four in 10 (40%) received guidelines for responsible use



**34%**  
One-third (34%) were advised on how Gen AI could help them perform better



**27%**  
27% were asked to disclose their usage during the application

This inconsistency creates a challenging environment for job seekers, with many keeping their Gen AI usage private (70%). Of those who did not disclose, over two-thirds (68%) were not given the opportunity to disclose, while 46% kept their use of Gen AI quiet due to silence or ambiguity from employers. A quarter (24%) feared penalties or disqualification for their usage.

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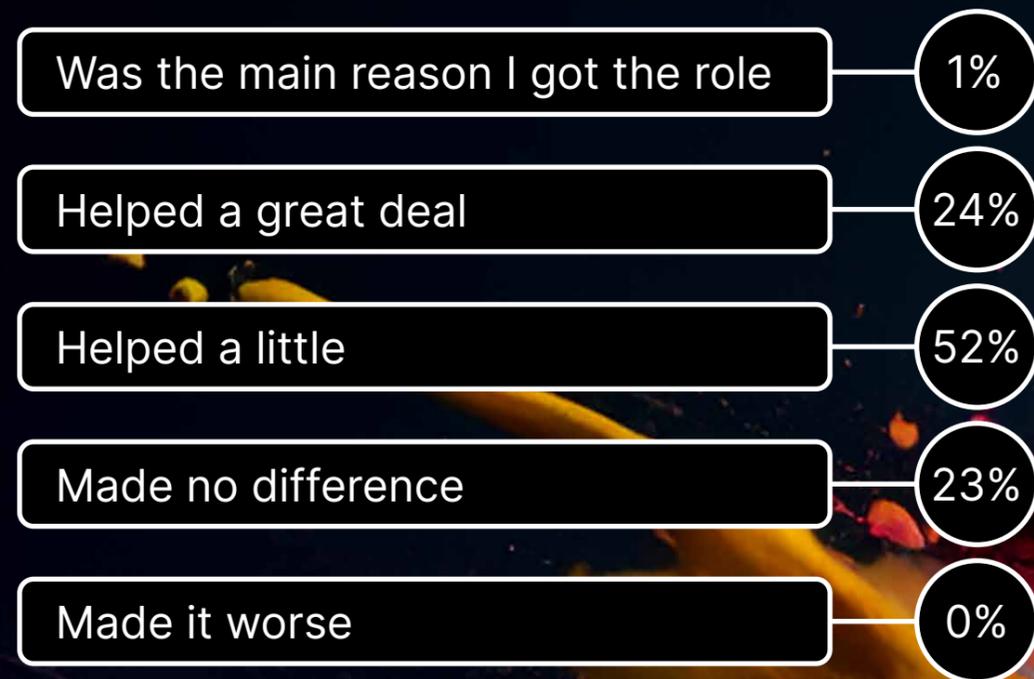
*“There wasn’t an organisational policy on AI that I could find, and they did not ask.”*

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## Impact on Recruitment Outcomes

Despite widespread usage, only 1% of successful candidates considered Gen AI the main reason they secured their role. However, three-quarters reported that it helped them: 24% said it 'helped a great deal' and 52% said it 'helped a little'. This suggests that while Gen AI provides incremental benefits, it is not replacing human input and oversight of job seeking and applications.



## Implications for Employers

Contrary to hype and media exaggerations, current Gen AI usage among early career job seekers does not reflect a labour market landscape of widespread cheating or misrepresentation. Rather, these tools are often used judiciously to improve how applicants present themselves during the process.

There has always been a risk of job seekers misrepresenting themselves to secure an interview or assessment. As Gen AI's capabilities grow, this risk changes in nature and potential scale, so employers must manage these risks carefully to prevent hiring mismatched candidates and losing better-suited talent. Adjustments to assessment methods may prevent these disruptions and safeguard recruitment spend, productivity, and long-term employee retention.

## The Urgent Need for Clear Communication

The research highlights a critical gap in employer communication that negatively impacts hiring outcomes. Organisations should move beyond silence or inconsistent messaging to provide clear, upfront guidance about Gen AI usage expectations. This communication should address:

- Whether and how Gen AI may be used during different stages of the application process
- Guidelines for responsible and ethical usage
- Disclosure expectations and processes

- Consequences for inappropriate usage
- How Gen AI is being used by the employer in recruitment and assessment processes

By providing clear guidelines, employers can:

- Set expectations for ethical and effective Gen AI usage
- Level the playing field for disadvantaged applicants or those who opt not to use Gen AI
- Preserve the integrity of assessments, ensuring high hire quality and pipeline resource efficiency

## Ensuring Equity in Recruitment Processes

Our survey suggests there is a significant proportion of early careers job seekers who are not using Gen AI. Employers must consider how their processes might unintentionally disadvantage the significant minority of applicants who choose not to use Gen AI for ethical or personal reasons. Employers risk excluding these individuals despite strong qualifications, particularly when they are competing against candidates who are using Gen AI to enhance their application materials.

Potential process design changes can ensure equal opportunities for all applicants, including:

- Clear communication about Gen AI policies
- Assessment methods that are less susceptible to Gen AI enhancement
- Recognition of different approaches to application preparation



## Reviewing Assessment Vulnerabilities

While current usage patterns don't support allegations of widespread misrepresentation, employers should proactively review their processes to identify potential vulnerabilities as Gen AI capabilities continue to evolve. Navigating this complex landscape effectively often requires specialised expertise and support. Working with a talent partner with deep assessment expertise can provide crucial advantages in maintaining recruitment integrity while achieving business objectives.

The PeopleScout Assessment team's Gen AI Opportunity & Risk Assessment Audit offers organisations a systematic review of their assessment processes through the lens of generative AI influence. This comprehensive audit identifies vulnerabilities and opportunities at each decision point in your candidate journey, providing granular insights into where use of AI tools might compromise validity or where they could potentially enhance outcomes. By stress-testing each element of your assessment methodology with scientific scrutiny, the audit helps you make informed decisions about where protective measures are most needed.

The value of this approach lies in its independence and psychological expertise. Rather than applying generic solutions, the resulting recommendations allow you to focus resources on the most critical points of vulnerability while potentially leveraging appropriate AI applications that align with organisational values and objectives. This balanced perspective helps employers decide whether to accept, prevent, or adapt to candidates' use of Gen AI tools based on evidence – not supposition.

[LEARN MORE](#)



# Future Exploration and Monitoring of Gen AI's Role in Recruitment

As Gen AI adoption continues to grow and evolve, we are committed to monitoring and reporting on its use amongst both the general population and the early careers cohort through ongoing surveys. Our goal is to track how the usage rates, activities, and motivations evolve over time.

Key areas of exploration will include:

- Understanding more about the individuals who choose not to use Gen AI
- Uncovering any demographic patterns or distinctions in approaches to the technology
- Investigating real-world data to identify potential evidence of Gen AI use during the hiring process. This includes analysing any notable changes in test and interview scores that could suggest Gen AI-related disruptions to assessment validity or fairness.

By continually examining these trends, we aim to provide actionable insights for adapting recruitment practices in line with technological shifts, ensuring that hiring processes remain fair, efficient, and aligned with organisational goals.





# Conclusion

Our research provides definitive data on the high adoption rate of Gen AI by early career job seekers, particularly in the preparatory and application phases. It also uncovers a significant segment of applicants who consciously choose not to use these tools for ethical or practical reasons. Most importantly, it highlights a profound gap in employer communication, leading to ambiguity and inconsistency in the application process and a negatively impacted candidate experience.

While we feel that Gen AI is currently not being used for widespread misrepresentation, its growing presence underscores the need for informed approaches that secure recruitment processes. Employers must move beyond any inertia created by uncertainty and adopt proactive, transparent, and adaptive strategies to engage with the potential impact of Gen AI. This involves providing clear guidelines to applicants, reviewing assessment vulnerabilities, and ensuring equitable opportunities for all applicants, regardless of their Gen AI choices, to safeguard the integrity of recruitment outcomes.

## Take Control of AI's Impact on Your Recruitment Process

**Don't leave your assessment integrity to chance in the age of Gen AI. To learn more about how PeopleScout can help or to schedule your Gen AI Opportunity & Risk Assessment Audit, get in touch.**

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