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The State of Talent Acquisition in Professional Services

Insights from Banister International leadership and a seasoned talent acquisition leader on what is changing, what remains consistent, and where the industry is headed.

The talent acquisition landscape is evolving every day. Advances in AI, data platforms, and sourcing techniques are reshaping how organizations are measuring success. While these advancements can support large-scale entry level bulk hiring, they are clogging the supply chain, making it increasingly difficult to find the right candidates. AI can help improve the hiring process, but it can't replace the high-touch, low-volume recruiting approach.

This introduction of these new tools is not any different from what occurred with the introduction of Monster and CareerBuilder in the 1990s. Recruiting moved from finding a job in a newspaper to online job boards, resulting in an explosive increase in applicants. The same issue presents itself today, more volume does not necessarily mean better candidates.

Today, many candidates use AI to create “perfect” resumes. At the same time, some organizations use AI to screen candidates at the beginning of the hiring process. Qualified candidates are now caught in the middle and are losing faith in the hiring process. According to Fortune, hiring managers are facing their

own challenges. Applicant pools are flooded with AI-generated applications, while scams involving fake candidates, including North Korean IT workers, have made it harder for companies to identify legitimate applicants.¹

To better understand the current state of talent acquisition, Banister International's leadership team shares insights, personal search stories, and lessons learned from the past thirty years. We also feature insights from a highly respected talent acquisition leader in the professional services industry about the future of talent acquisition.

This report explores:

- 1 The Current State of Talent Acquisition:** How technology, AI, data, and candidate expectations are reshaping talent acquisition, and how organizations are approaching strategic hiring, passive candidates, relationship capital, workforce planning, and leadership succession.
- 2 Five Best Practices of High-Performing Talent Acquisition Teams:** The practices that help organizations align talent acquisition with business strategy, proactively build relationships, build trust with candidates, measure hiring success beyond time-to-fill, and use technology effectively.
- The Future of Talent Acquisition:** How technology is changing the way organizations approach productivity, sourcing, and interviews while strengthening rather than replacing human judgment in the hiring process.

The Current State of Talent Acquisition

In the past decade, talent acquisition has become increasingly technology-driven, evolving into a function measured by metrics such as time-to-fill and cost-per-hire. While these metrics provide valuable insight into efficiency, they often overlook the most important measure of all: the value a hire brings to the organization. As a result, the long-term impact of the hire, which has always been difficult to quantify, can become secondary to the speed and cost of making the actual hire.

Now more than ever, there is a surplus of tools available to support the hiring process, including AI, data platforms, LinkedIn automation, and new sourcing techniques. While these tools can create efficiency, they also can create noise. Candidates have disclosed to us that they are now receiving more messages, emails, texts, calls, etc., than ever before and it's hard to vet through what is a legitimate opportunity. Organizations are stuck monitoring a slew of candidates that aren't even viable candidates as these new tools are making nearly every candidate have the "perfect" resume.

¹"Indeed CEO says the job market is stuck in a 'vicious cycle' if 1,000 qualified candidates can't get hired: 'Something's wrong.'" *Fortune*, September 21, 2026.

The biggest challenge for talent acquisition moving forward is uncertainty, which can slow decision making even when there is an urgent need for hiring. Organizations balancing new advancements with caution, while continuing to evaluate how changing market conditions and evolving technologies will affect workforce planning and actual headcount needs.

The new talent landscape

Many organizations are becoming more selective with hiring while continuing to seek access to top talent. They remain cautious about adding headcount, but also still prioritize candidates who can generate revenue, bring specialized expertise, or provide a clear strategic advantage. Organizations are now starting to leverage AI to automate high-volume, entry level recruiting needs. This allows talent acquisition teams to spend more time on strategic hiring needs, building candidate relationships, and reaffirming partnerships with recruiting firms that can identify high-potential talent.

Candidates aren't more selective now because the market has drastically changed; they're more selective because they can now verify information in five minutes that once required a warm introduction to uncover. Ten years ago, a partner at a law firm evaluating a lateral move only used to have the firm's pitch, a Chambers ranking, and their personal network used to know. Information was scarce, so the firm did most of the persuading. Now there is more information at our fingertips than ever before.

Two-way relationships create long-term competitive advantages. However, many organizations are slow to give feedback and forget to sell themselves as they believe they are the prize.

We saw this firsthand with a client who had been interviewing for a practice group for over six months. Toward the end of the process, the practice group received an offer from another firm (not through us), and we immediately informed our client. Despite knowing the group had another offer, our client took more than three weeks to secure the necessary approvals. The practice group didn't feel prioritized and accepted the other offer. The client lost a \$2MM fee because they underestimated the group's value. Within 30 days, a smaller less-known firm recruited the practice group and acquired \$37MM in revenue.

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Passive candidates

Most of the “desired” candidates are not actively looking for new opportunities. The challenge, therefore, is not only identifying who fits an opening, but also making a compelling enough case for someone to leave their current situation. This is why having strong communication skills, accurate candidate data, and active relationship building are the most essential elements of recruiting.

Too often, recruiting has become transactional. If a candidate does not fit a particular role, the interaction usually ends once the recruiter deems that they are not beneficial to them in that instance. The candidate may also never hear from that recruiter again, even if they are in an active interview process. This is what differentiates good recruiters from transactional ones. A good recruiter maintains communications regardless and keeps the candidate informed, regardless of the type of feedback they receive from the hiring manager. AI may continue to make candidate data more accessible, but it cannot replace the personal relationships that make candidates willing to consider a new opportunity. Recruiters who fail to capitalize on their ability to be personal, responsive, and relationship-driven risk becoming replaceable by AI.

Relationship capital

The strongest talent acquisition teams aren’t necessarily those with the largest recruiting teams. Rather, the strongest teams are the ones who have invested in building real relationships with prior candidates, giving them broader awareness of who to contact when a new opportunity arises.

Companies without relationships are nothing more than a CRM. Relationships require trust, and trust unlocks access to better information. When a two-way relationship is in place, both the candidate and the client are more likely to be candid about motivations, concerns, timing, compensation, and potential obstacles, all information that determines a successful search.

We saw the value of relationship capital firsthand with a firm where we had previously placed a partner reached out before the search was even approved. Their senior real estate partner was planning to retire in 18 months but did not want the retirement made public. The firm needed to identify a successor who could ultimately absorb his book of business. The search was never public and was conducted entirely confidentially. A few months earlier, we had spoken with a partner at a competing firm who was not actively looking for a new opportunity but had indicated that he would be open to conversations if the opportunity was the right fit.

Neither side would have found the other without the relationships that were already in place. The firm could not advertise the position without revealing the planned retirement, while the candidate was not actively exploring new opportunities. Our existing relationships allowed us to connect the two discreetly and proactively.

Reputation alone might open the door in a search, but it rarely closes the deal. It creates credibility and attention, but alone, rarely buys actual trust. Candidates still want to know the full picture of the actual day-to-day work looks like, who they will be working with, and what the culture is like, and what this opportunity means for their career.

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Workforce planning

Companies should start thinking more strategically about future talent needs rather than waiting to recruit when the role becomes open. The best teams regularly evaluate where they are vulnerable, where succession planning is needed, and where technology may change the type of talent required. Waiting until there is an urgent vacancy puts organizations at a disadvantage.

For example, a mid-sized firm had one attorney handling all its ERISA and employee benefits. She was the only attorney who could do this line of work and supported three of the firm's largest corporate clients. She gave notice and was gone in two weeks. The firm began the search immediately, but it took over two months to get a qualified candidate to the offer stage and another two weeks to get the offer approved. During that two-week approval window, the candidate accepted another offer, and they had to restart the search.

By the time the position was filled, the search had been open for six months. During those six months, two of the three clients moved their benefits work to another firm. The firm hadn't done anything wrong; they just didn't think about the effect on the business unit if that role became vacant unexpectedly. Without plans for critical roles, organizations can quickly find themselves reacting to a talent gap too late.

Leadership succession

Many companies wait too long to understand their future talent needs. Also, a lot of organizations don't focus on the talent they already have in house. Leadership succession should be an ongoing process that includes identifying future leaders, developing internal talent, and knowing where external talent may be needed.

For example, we recently placed a candidate with a client we have worked with for more than 15 years. The hiring manager was intentional about looking beyond the immediate role, identifying someone who could be promoted within 12 to 18 months. Just as importantly, the candidate was expected to bring expertise that could elevate the existing team by training and developing employees in their current roles. That ability to strengthen the broader team was a key consideration in the hiring decision.

Five Best Practices of High-Performing Talent Acquisition Teams

Organizations with strong talent acquisition teams move with discipline and urgency. Organizations that struggle to hire strong talent often make two common mistakes. First, they become too invested in one candidate too early in the hiring process and stop considering other options. If the preferred candidate chooses another opportunity, the search effectively starts over. Second, they allow the hiring process to lose momentum. Delays can cause candidates to question the organization's level of interest and commitment, weakening engagement on both sides.

Despite the tools and data that have advanced the mechanics of recruiting, the fundamentals of search have remained consistent, regardless of organization's size or industry. At its core, search is built on reputation, trust, and relationships. High-performing talent acquisition team follow five practices:

**1**

Align talent acquisition with business strategy

The highest performing talent acquisition teams do more than just fill the position. They influence workforce strategy by understanding the actual business challenge the organization is trying to solve and aligning the right talent to address it. Every successful search should begin with the business challenge, and not with finding someone who matches the job description. This alignment between talent and business needs leads to better stronger partnerships with leadership, stronger talent, and greater long-term impact for the organization.

Specialization creates better outcomes. Deep industry knowledge and functional expertise will hold the most capital. High-performing talent acquisition teams build their teams around experts in the specific industries and functions they serve. This allows them to better understand the market, identify relevant talent, and assess candidates against the specific challenges and requirements of an organization.

**2**

Proactive relationship building

Rather than waiting for the "perfect" candidate to appear, the best recruiters are proactive and build relationships daily, before an opportunity arises. They understand that even if the candidate is not the right fit for that open mandate and might not bring revenue in that instance, the conversation can create value in the future. Building these relationships allows the recruiter to have crucial information about the candidate's career goals, aspirations, and geographic preferences for future searches.

The best recruiters track candidates over long periods of time, keep up with their LinkedIn activity, and continuously update their database. Candidates need to be ready to make the move, but proactively building relationships and fostering those relationships overtime can result in effective long-term talent pipeline.

The fundamentals of recruiting have not changed. The goal is still finding out the best way to stand out to candidates, whether that happens through a call, text, email, LinkedIn, or a referral. Regardless of the process used to get a candidate's attention, recruiting will always stem from a genuine connection.

3

Build trust

Trust remains the foundation of search. It's critical to communicate and work hand-in hand with candidates. The best organizations move candidates through the hiring process transparently. They communicate clearly, provide timely feedback, and make candidates feel wanted, valued, and heard.

Employer reputation plays a significant role in the candidate's decision to accept a position. According to LinkedIn Talent Solutions, 96% of candidates research a potential employer's reputation before switching jobs.² A prestigious organization name and higher compensation model cannot always overcome a poor reputation.

We saw this firsthand with a senior real estate associate who had two offers. The first was from a highly ranked national firm with \$40K more in base compensation, with a 2,000-hour requirement and a compensation structure where bonus eligibility started above target. The second offer was from a mid-sized regional firm with a lower base salary, a 1,850-hour requirement with pro-bono work counting toward it, and a credit for work she originated.

She chose the second offer, and her decision was because of something that occurred during the interview process with the larger firm.

At the larger firm, during the interview process, three different people described the practice group differently, and no one could tell her to whom she would report.

At the smaller firm, the partner who she would work with walked her through his book of business, showed her which clients she would be taking over, and explained the matters she would be responsible for upon potential hire.

The smaller firm could clearly articulate the candidate's future at the company, while the larger firm could not. However, the larger firm assumed its reputation and higher compensation would outweigh the candidate's interview experience.

²*Future of Talent Report: Beyond Hiring: The Rise of Talent Orchestration*, LinkedIn, 2026.

4

Measure success beyond time-to-fill

Many organizations evaluate their internal talent acquisition teams and external recruiter's partners primarily on time-to-fill metrics. While speed is important, especially as a vacant role creates anxiety and pressure across the business unit, a fast hire does not always mean the right hire. Organizations should focus on the metrics that reflect quality, speed, and long-term outcomes. The goal is not simply to track activity, but to understand what is driving success and where the process may be creating unnecessary obstacles.

Success should be measured across the full hiring process: time to offer, offer-to-acceptance ratio, candidate experience, counteroffers, and retention.

5

Stay proactive with technology advancements

Great leaders understand how to proactively adopt new technology without losing sight of the original practices that drive successful recruitment.

Great recruiters use AI as another tool in their toolbox. They use it to help to identify potential prospects, organize data, record and summarize candidate calls, research target markets, and maintain data hygiene. With these tasks being taken care of externally, recruiters can focus on what they do best: building new relationships.

Looking Ahead: The Future of Talent Acquisition

The future of talent acquisition will likely be shaped by the combination of technology, relationships, and long-term workforce strategy. Technology will continue to change how organizations identify, engage, and evaluate talent, but the fundamental of recruiting continues to remain the same. While new technology may create new efficiencies in recruiting, the importance of building authentic relationships will never be replaced. Companies are now expected to leverage these technological advancements as significant investments are being made in tools and teams designed to drive productivity, reduce headcount where applicable, and increase profitability. As Hisayuki Idekoba, CEO of Indeed, explained, he hopes that "all of recruiters' manual tasks will be automated" within five years. "AI should take on more of that work so recruiters can get back to building connections with the right match," he said.³

These changes are already influencing how organizations are approaching the talent landscape. To better understand how these changes are playing out, we spoke with Larry Brand, a seasoned talent acquisition leader and Operating Partner at One Rock Capital Partners. Brand shares his perspectives on the future of talent acquisition, including how organizations are adapting to changing technology, evolving candidate expectations, and new approaches to productivity, sourcing, and the interview process.

³"Indeed CEO says the job market is stuck in a 'vicious cycle' if 1,000 qualified candidates can't get hired: 'Something's wrong.'" *Fortune*, September 21, 2026.

Using new tools to improve productivity

One of the most significant benefits of using AI has been the amount of time it saves on administrative tasks, analysis, and modeling. AI can't do the final product, but it gives a strong starting point and allows our teams to run the initial scenarios and analyze data much more efficiently and quickly.

We also use AI for development and modeling around customer behavior, which has been helpful in identifying early signs of indication that we may be at risk of losing a customer. This allows us to intervene earlier in the process, rather than waiting until the customer has already made the decision to leave.

Accelerating the sourcing process

LinkedIn Recruiter has incorporated new AI tools into its recruiter seats that support our hiring process. We're seeing more recruiters use those tools to identify potential candidates for job searches and improve candidate matching. While these candidates may not always be the exact match, this new technology provides a strong starting point and allows an initial slate of potential candidates for review in three to four days. Previously, it would usually take five to 10 days to see an initial slate of candidates.

The interview process

Our hiring team is now on the lookout for candidates who may be using AI to prepare for interviews, especially as we are conducting more first-round interviews remotely. Sometimes, we come across candidates who seemed like a great fit during the virtual interview, but as they advance to the next round and we go much deeper with them, we're uncertain how they even made it to the second round. We're looking for certain buzzwords or highly polished answers that go beyond the candidate's level of knowledge. We're also paying closer attention to whether the candidate possesses the skills and qualifications listed on their resumes, as we have been seeing these discrepancies more frequently.

Interview recording and note-taking platforms have helped my team and me with the hiring process. I'm no longer constantly having to look down and take notes down during an interview, allowing me to give my full attention to the candidate and get through all my questions while AI captures and organizes the conversation. Later, I can use that information and compare across multiple candidates and have AI identify areas where candidates are strong and where they may have gaps.

We're not using AI to make the hiring decision. We're using it to strengthen our hiring decision.

The future of talent acquisition will likely be shaped by the combination of technology, relationships, and long-term workforce strategy.

Conclusion

Even with the advancement of technology, which is inevitable, most of crucial hires to an organization are the ones that are confidential and can't be filled with just accessible data alone. You can't rely on posting the job or a database to find the right person. It comes down to relationships that have been built over years.

Technology can help us find and research candidates, but it can't replace picking up the phone and calling someone who already knows you, trusts you, and is willing to have a confidential conversation. At Banister International, our CEO has more than 10,000 contacts in his phone and has kept the same phone number since he started his recruiting career in 1993. Just last month, a candidate he placed 20 years ago texted him to ask for help for his next CEO role.

Relationships are the foundation of recruiting. 

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