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**nature**  
careers

**Hiring In Science  
Survey Highlights:  
How Industry  
Labs Are Building  
Stronger Teams**

July 2025

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# Foreword

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## David Payne

Managing Editor,  
Nature Careers



In a rapidly evolving scientific landscape, the way we hire and who we hire has never been more important. From emerging technologies to shifting candidate expectations, recruitment in STEM is undergoing a transformation. As organisations compete globally for the best minds, hiring managers must not only navigate a complex and competitive talent market but also rethink long-standing practices.

At Nature Careers, we are committed to equipping the scientific community with evidence-based insights into the world of work. That's why we partnered with Thinks Insight & Strategy to conduct our first global survey of hiring managers in science. With over 1,000 responses from academic and industry lab leaders, this report sheds light on how recruitment strategies are changing—from the increasing use of AI tools to screen and select candidates, to the growing emphasis on soft skills and team fit as well as the differing perceptions of candidate quality across sectors.

The results provide a valuable overview of recruitment in STEM. They also raise timely questions about what we value in a candidate, how we assess potential and what more can be done to ensure the right people find the right roles. Whether you're recruiting for a biotech startup, a research institute or a global corporation, staying ahead means staying informed.

I hope this white paper provides you with valuable insights and offers useful guidance on your own hiring practices.


# Lab leaders in industry are more likely than colleagues in academia to view the job candidate pipeline as strong and improving, finds *Nature's* first global survey of hiring managers in science.

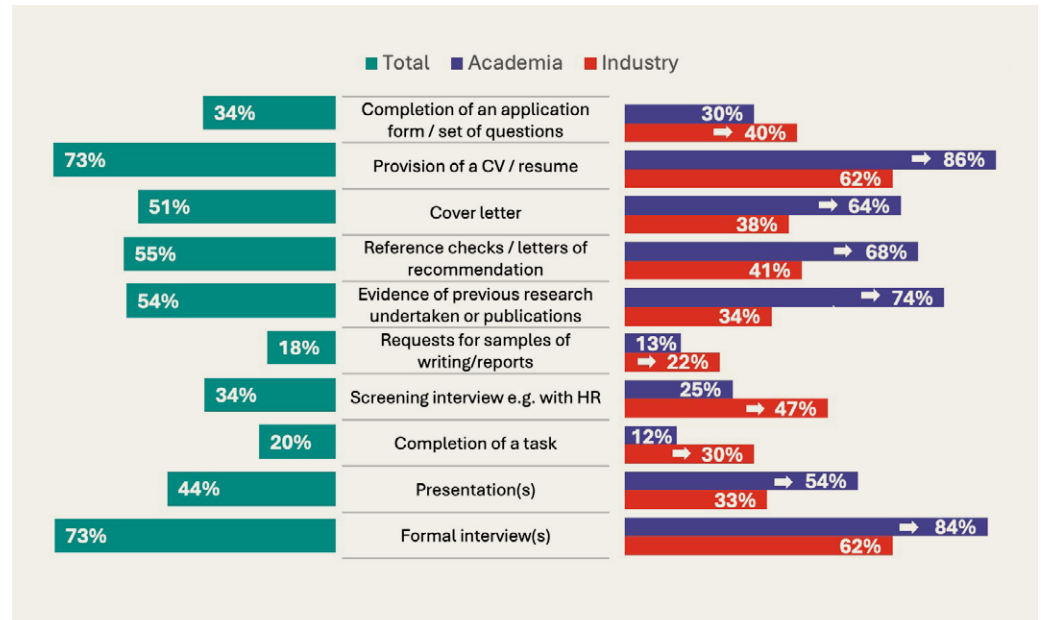
The journal's careers editorial team collaborated with London-based research agency *Thinks Insights & Strategy* to survey more than 1,000 lab leaders, in June 2024, with one in three respondents working in industry.

The survey consisted of 25 questions covering preferred recruitment channels, how hirers screen and shortlist candidates, the adoption of artificial intelligence as a recruitment tool, and overall impressions about the calibre of applicants, including missing skills.

## Elements involved in hirers' application processes

**Q1. What do job applications for roles at your workplace usually involve?** Base: All respondents: total sample (n=1,134), Academia (n=563), Industry (n=381).

 Indicates a significantly higher result between academia and industry sub-groups only (at 95% confidence level)




# Recruitment channels: Channels and tactics that drive successful hires

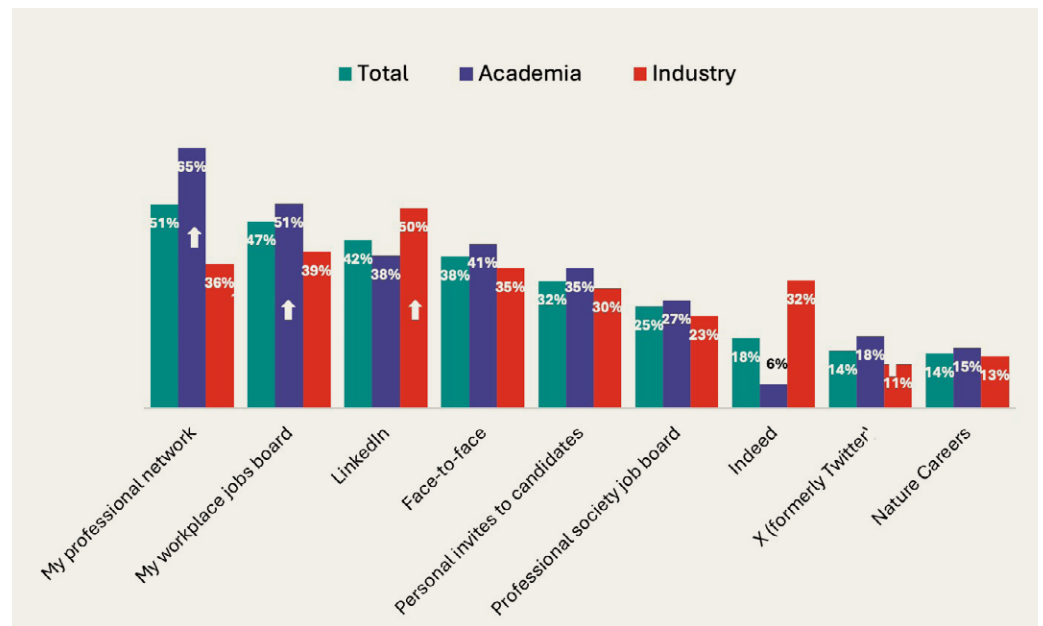
LinkedIn scores highly for industry recruiters, with 50% overall using it to recruit, compared to 38% in academia. A similar figure (46%) reported always or frequently targeting specific candidates when they were recruiting talent, demonstrating the importance of cultivating a wide professional network. Across all sectors, using LinkedIn seems to be particularly prevalent in India (51%) and China (61%).

One hirer described having an acute awareness of skill gaps in their team, making it easier to know who to target when they are recruiting to plug the gap. Just 3% of hiring managers in industry say they never target specific candidates when a vacancy arises.

## Preferred recruitment channels

**Q2. What channels do you most prefer using for recruitment for research roles?** Base: **All respondents** (n=1,134), Academia (n=563), Industry (n=381), US (n=232), UK (n=114), India (n=85).

 Indicates a significantly higher result between academia and industry sub-groups only (at 95% confidence level)



**“I recruit mostly by giving talks at conferences, it helps give people a better understanding of the essence of my lab.”**

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## Unsolicited requests: Do they lead to opportunity or frustration

Despite being more likely to target specific candidates than their academic colleagues, industry hirers receive fewer unsolicited requests than their colleagues in academia. In academia, 47% report receiving these weekly or monthly, compared to 35% in industry, (and 7% report never receiving them).

When asked about their perceptions of unsolicited applications, industry hirers expressed a generally positive view, with 51% describing them as effective. However, frequency matters, when these messages are received weekly or more often, 17% of respondents reported finding them excessive or unwelcome. In most cases, speculative applicants are directed to current job openings or encouraged to subscribe to an email list. Notably, 61% of industry hirers say they respond to unsolicited requests, compared to 54% of those in academia.

How do hirers in industry decide whether or not to respond? If there's a current vacancy (55%), if the message is personalised to them (29%), or if applicants demonstrate a knowledge of the workplace and the type of research being conducted (48%).

At a live webcast held in November 2024 to discuss the survey findings, panelist Eileen Parkes, an oncology researcher whose lab is based at the University of Oxford, UK, said she typically gets more than 10 a week, including PhD applications, admitting with some regret that the sheer volume prevents her from responding to all of them.

"I never thought I'd be the person who didn't respond," she adds, "but I just get so many." Most applicants, Parkes says, demonstrate knowledge of what her research group does. But what is often missing, she adds, is what motivates them. "I want to know what excites them, what makes them want to do science. And make sure you get what motivates you in the first sentence."

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## Cover letters: Their divided role in industry hiring

Industry hirers are less likely to request cover letters than colleagues in academia (38% compared to 64%). Unsurprisingly, those that do use them to judge a candidate's ability to communicate effectively and professionally, as one respondent points out. Another reports looking for evidence of confidence and relevant knowledge.




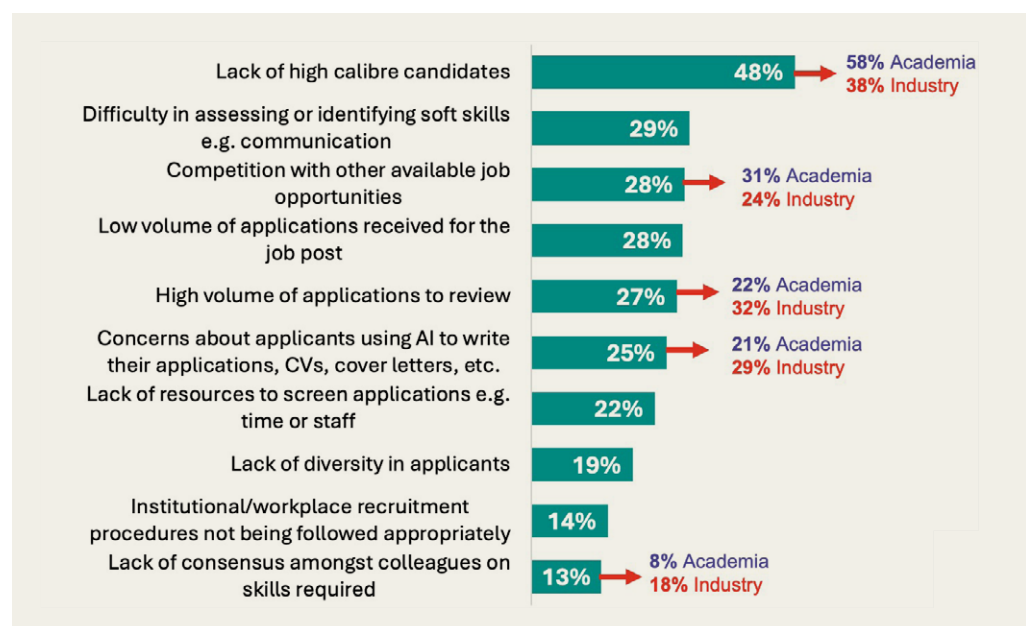
# Screening candidates: What industry looks for in a standout candidate

What makes a high-calibre candidate, and why do industry hirers feel more positive about them than colleagues in academia? 58% of academics say this is the most difficult aspect of screening candidates, compared to 38% in industry. Reflecting on the previous 12 months, 73% of industry hirers overall describe the quality of candidates as high, with 44% agreeing that the quality is better now than in previous years. Academic respondents were the least optimistic, with only one in five expressing a positive view. Furthermore, just 46% believed the quality of candidates had been high over the past year.

## Difficulties faced when screening applicants

Q12. What are the biggest challenges you face when screening applications? Base: All respondents (n=1,134).

 Indicates a significantly higher result between academia and industry sub-groups only (at 95% confidence level)




**“I care more about the person because we have the skills in the lab, they need to be humble and teachable.”**

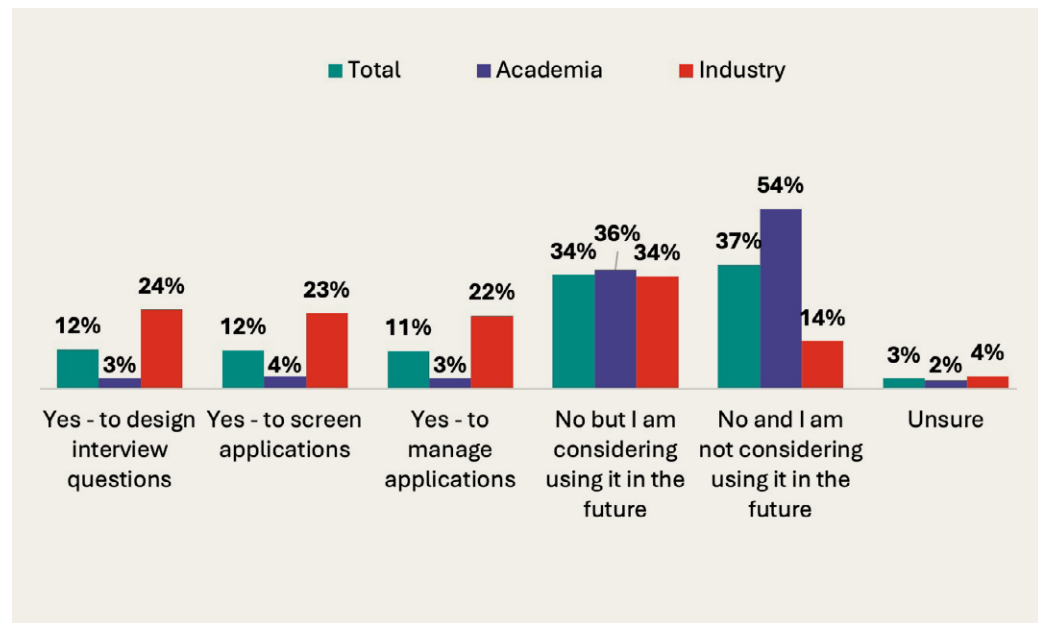
# AI-generated applications: AI's growing role in science recruitment

Almost one in three (29%) industry hirers worry about applicants using artificial intelligence to write CVs and cover letters. Around one in five (21%) in academia share this concern. But overall recruiters in industry are more likely to embrace the technology, with one in four using it to draft interview questions and screen applications. They are around five times more likely than colleagues in academia to use the technology for this purpose. How about future use of the technology as it becomes more widespread? 54% of hiring managers in academia have no plans to use it. Just 14% of industry colleagues share this view.

## Uses of AI in the application process

Q13. Do you use AI in the application process? Base: All respondents (n=1,134), Academia (n=563), Industry (n=381).

 Indicates a significantly higher result between academia and industry sub-groups only (at 95% confidence level)



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## Interviews: Revealing the candidate from the application

One industry respondent describes their disappointment when interview candidates deliver a strong CV but then struggle to talk about their science when they are interviewed for a vacant post. Industry hirers overall, however, are more positive than their colleagues in academia about problem-solving, creative thinking, communication and other so-called “soft skills” that interviews can be good at gauging. Industry hirers are 9% less likely than academic colleagues to say a lack of high calibre candidates are a challenge at the interview stage. 52% of academic hirers listed this as one. What does success at interview look like? For one industry respondent it was seeing people give “a really good seminar, answer questions well, understand the work they’re doing.” Humility and evidence of strong team player skills were also seen as important.




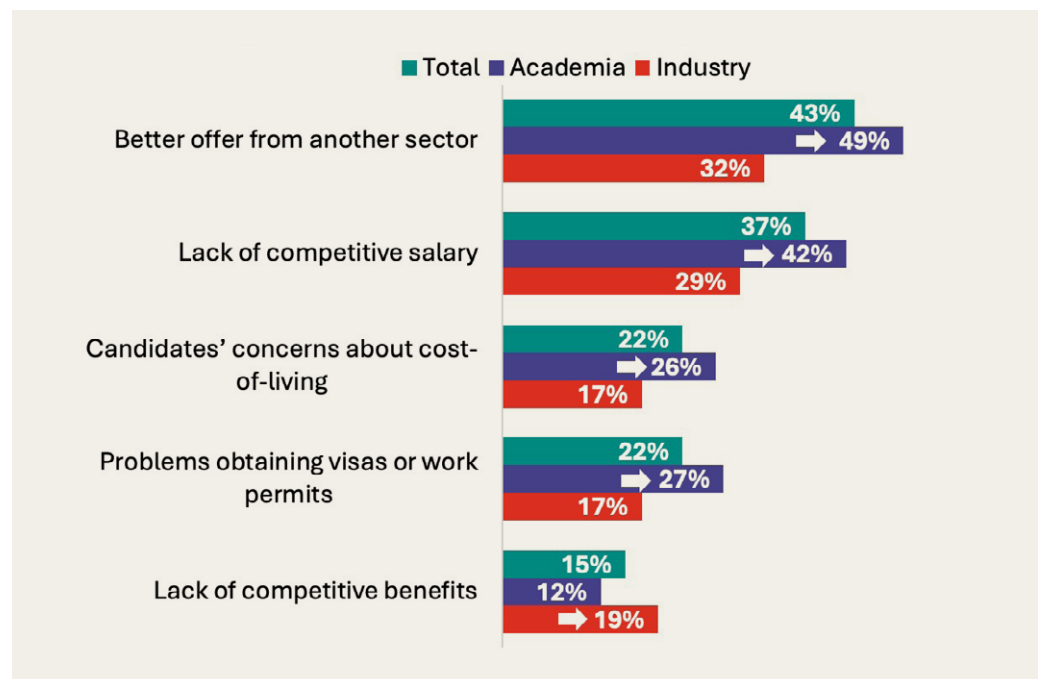
# Benefits: The benefits that matter in a competitive market

In a competitive market it's important to list benefits such as paid holiday leave, flexible working arrangements, health insurance, parental leave and professional development. Academia appears to have the edge here and are more likely than industry colleagues to include them, according to the survey. Academic hirers are also significantly more likely to say that they offer conference or event attendance (50% compared to 27% of those in industry). But academic employers are also more likely to lose candidates to competitors or other sectors because they can't compete on salary and other perks. This includes visas, listed by 27% of academic hirers, compared to 17% in industry. Hirers in academia are significantly more likely to struggle with a lack of high calibre candidates (57%) than those in industry (36%).

## Top 5 most common reasons for losing out on candidates

Q20. Have you ever lost out on a candidate you wanted to offer a job to for any of the following reasons? Base: All respondents (n=1,134).

 Indicates a significantly higher result between academia and industry sub-groups only (at 95% confidence level)



**“It’s annoying when you desperately want somebody but other universities are going after them. It makes you realise that the competition is so high.”**

- Academia


# Negotiations: How candidates and employers navigate the offer stage

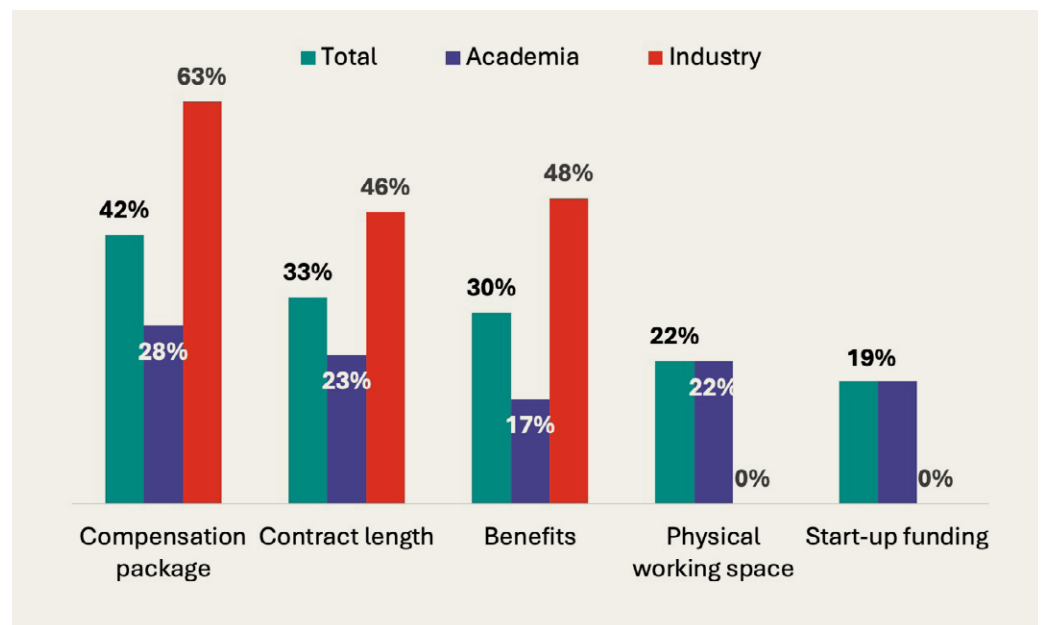
Perhaps unsurprisingly, candidates for industry roles, (conscious that their prospective employer isn't reliant on grant funding) are more likely to negotiate the terms of job offers. 63% of hirers say candidates want to discuss a compensation package and 48% benefits. This compares to 28% and 17% in academia, respectively. This isn't to suggest that academic employers are complacent. One reports: "I think there is a crisis. We are not treating postdocs well enough. That message is getting round to young people. And they're thinking 'why should I do this'. We must do better in the terms and conditions and most of all thinking about them and their future."

## Elements of the job offer candidates frequently negotiate

Showing NET: Frequently (always/often)

Q19. Do candidates typically negotiate any of the following once you have offered them a role? Base: All respondents (n=1,134).

 Indicates a significantly higher result between academia and industry sub-groups only (at 95% confidence level)

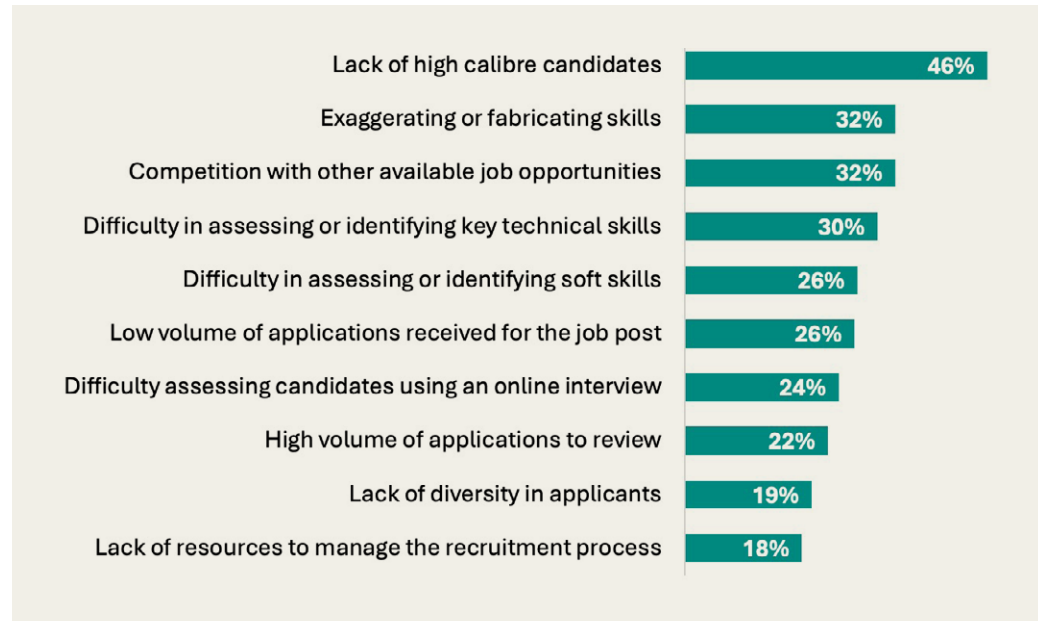


**"I think there is a crisis. We are not treating postdocs well enough. That message is getting round to young people. And they're thinking 'why should I do this'. We must do better in the terms and conditions and most of all thinking about them and their future."**

A lack of high calibre candidates is described as the main challenge currently facing hirers, with certain soft skills missing (e.g. creative thinking, problem-solving), as well as lacking enthusiasm and passion. Academia is more likely experiencing this than hirers in industry. Qualitatively, they feel it is harder now to get the candidates they want. Moreover, in industry, the quality of candidates is felt to be strong and improving, whilst those in academia disagree.

## Top 10 main challenges faced during the recruitment process

Q22. What are the main challenges you face during the recruitment process overall? Please select your top 5. Base: All respondents (n=1,134).



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## Industry leads but challenges remain

The findings from *Nature's* first global survey of science hiring managers paint a clear picture: industry recruiters are navigating today's competitive talent landscape with greater confidence, agility and optimism than their academic counterparts. With stronger candidate pipelines, higher adoption of AI tools and more targeted recruitment practices, corporate lab leaders are better positioned to attract high-calibre scientists. Yet, challenges remain, particularly around soft skills, communication and aligning applicant motivations with organisational goals. As the demand for scientific talent intensifies, understanding these evolving hiring trends is essential for organisations aiming to stay competitive, build strong teams and shape the future of research and innovation.

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To find out more about the survey, go to:  
[nature.com/collections/bcbcigeaia](https://www.nature.com/collections/bcbcigeaia)  
[recruiter.naturecareers.com](https://recruiter.naturecareers.com)



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