



# EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCES

IN TALENT ACQUISITION

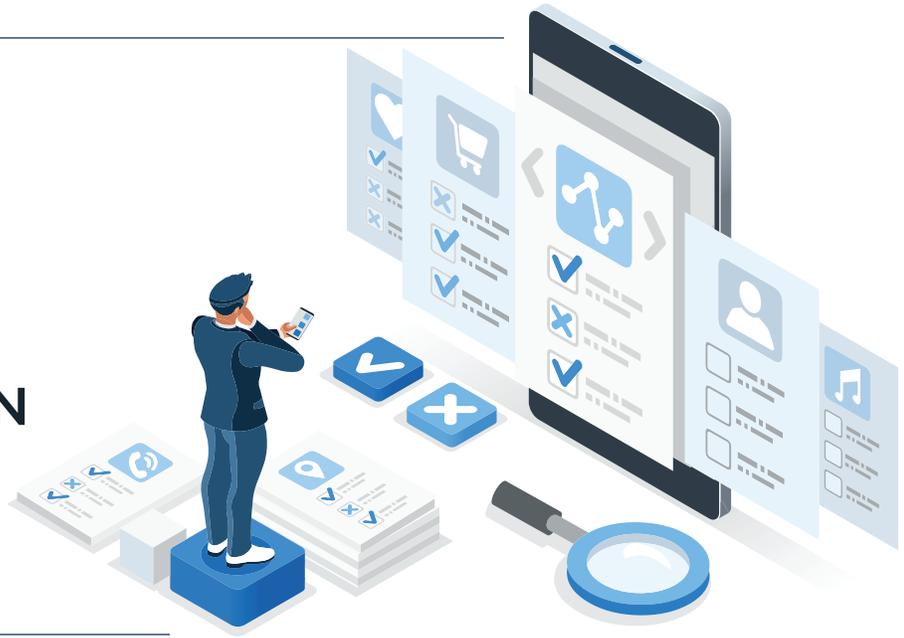
Authored by:

**Madeline Laurano** Founder, Aptitude Research  
**Kevin Grossman** President, Talent Board

This report was sponsored by  
**SYMPHONY TALENT**

## PART I

# EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCES IN TALENT ACQUISITION



Experiences define and shape our economy. Consumers are more likely to make additional purchases, refer friends, and remain loyal to a brand when they have an exceptional experience – and a negative experience can wreak havoc on a brand. According to the White House Office of Consumer Affairs study, a dissatisfied customer will tell nine to fifteen people about their poor experience, and approximately 13% of your dissatisfied customers will tell more than 20 people. Companies realize the impact that a positive or negative experience can have on their brand and business success, and have invested in dedicated roles, resources, and technology to help improve customer experiences. According to IDC, spending on customer experience technology is expected to reach \$641 billion next year.

Despite this commitment to improving consumer experiences, companies do not put the same emphasis on the candidate experience when hiring employees.



**Fifty-eight percent (58%)** of applicants who are screened out never receive a response  
*(Aptitude Research)*



**One-in-three** recruiters are feeling more burned out this year than ever before  
*(Aptitude Research)*



From job applicants who had applied over two months ago, **61%** had not heard back from the employers (2020 Talent Board Candidate Experience Benchmark Research)

Although the talent acquisition experience has improved over the past few years, it still creates frustration and inefficiencies for both candidates and employers. And while 68% of companies are committed to improving these experiences in 2021, they often fall short.

**So what exactly is an exceptional experience in talent acquisition?** How can companies create experiences that feel meaningful and personal for candidates through every stage of their journey? For many companies, improving the candidate experience starts with improving the employer experience. If recruiters do not feel motivated and supported in their roles, candidates will never have a positive impression of an employer. And ultimately the employer brand will suffer, the company will lose quality candidates, and there will be a negative impact on the business. Companies are more likely to achieve their business goals with an exceptional experience.

**Aptitude Research found that companies with positive candidate experiences were:**



**MORE LIKELY**  
to improve NPS score  
(Net Promoter Scores)



**MORE LIKELY**  
to improve employee  
retention



**MORE LIKELY**  
to improve employee  
performance

This study, based on data collected from employers and job seekers in 2020 and 2021, will explore the challenges, strategies, and technology enablers for creating and maintaining exceptional experiences in talent acquisition. We divided this report into four major sections that include:

**01** The State of  
**Exceptional Experiences**

**03** The  
**Candidate Experience**

**02** The  
**Employer Experience**

**04** The Future of  
**Exceptional Experiences**

The first section of the report will answer the following questions:

- **What is the risk of a poor experience?**
- **What is the business impact of an exceptional experience?**
- **How are exceptional experiences defined?**
- **What is the gap between candidate and employer expectations?**
- **What do companies need to do to create exceptional experiences?**

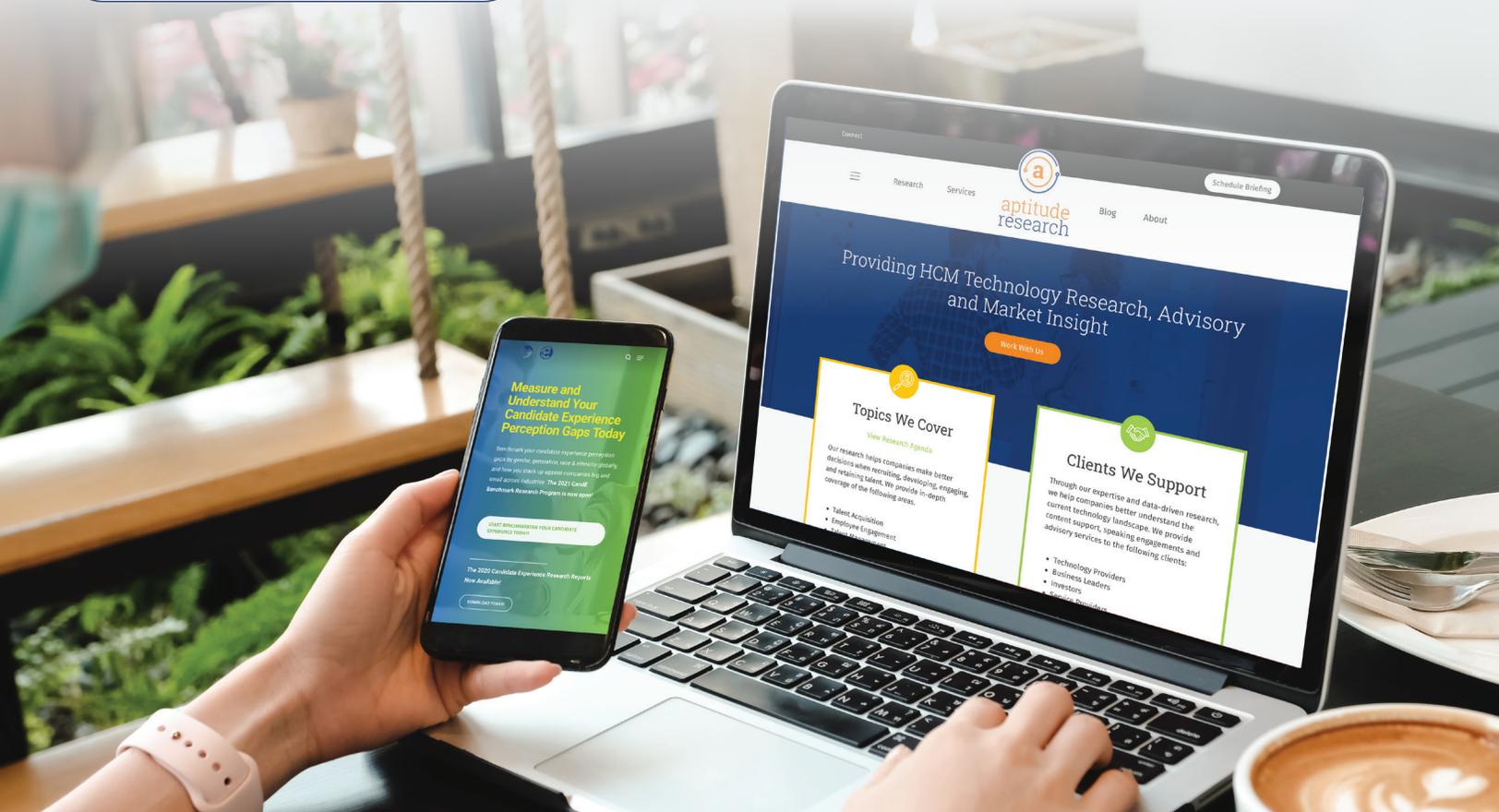


## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**Quantitative Research:** 426 responses for Talent Acquisition and HR Director level and above roles.

**Talent Board Candidate Experience Benchmark Report (CandEs):**

**Quantitative Research:** 152,000 North American candidate responses across 133 companies of all sizes and industries.



## TOP FINDINGS



### Sustaining an Exceptional Experience Takes Work:

Over 1,000 companies have participated in the Talent Board Candidate Experience Benchmark Research Program to date, but only five companies have won CandE Awards eight-to-nine times out of the 10 years since the program was founded — four North American companies (AT&T, Colorado Springs Utilities, Deluxe, and Lockheed Martin), and one in EMEA (Intel). In 2020 alone, employers had to navigate a series of external challenges including COVID-19, while also dealing with a cascade of resulting internal hurdles (budget cuts, reduced recruiting plans and talent investments, and shifts in business).



### Companies Should Start With the Employer Experience:

Candidates will not have a positive experience if recruiters are unhappy and disengaged. If hiring teams are overworked and overwhelmed, the candidate experience will be negatively impacted. Today's recruiting and hiring teams are facing an experience crisis and remote work has created additional stress. **According to Aptitude Research, recruiters spend up to 16 hours per week scheduling calls and 10 hours looking for candidates in their ATS. Additionally, 32% of recruiters surveyed are looking for other career opportunities.** Companies that want to improve their external experiences need to look internally first.



### Communication Is the Biggest Missed Opportunity:

Candidates want to understand their progress and know where they stand. Companies need to better communicate with candidates earlier in the process when they are first researching the organization, provide a process indicator during the application process, and communicate next steps post-application. Currently, 58% of candidates do not receive any response (Aptitude Research).



### Exceptional Experiences Directly Impact the Bottom Line:

A poor candidate experience impacts business performance, including brand and customer retention. Organizations that have improved talent acquisition experiences over the past year have seen improvements to NPS scores, customer retention, and employer brand. Companies that provide a more engaging and human experience see a direct impact on business performance, including a two times improvement on NPS scores.



### Companies Are Increasing Their Investment in Automation:

Automation can help improve experiences for both employers and candidates. While not new to recruiting, automated processes continued to increase this year to support leaner recruiting teams and more applications, especially with machine learning and other smart technologies. The reality is that most candidates who are interested in a job will research and apply, but never move forward. Most will have little to no human interaction and will be dispositioned automatically. Automation can help provide a fair and equitable experience, and allow companies to provide consistent communications to every candidate.

# DEFINING EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCES

According to the Talent Board Candidate Experience Benchmark Report, candidate experience is the greatest talent acquisition priority for companies in 2021 (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Talent Acquisition Priorities**



But the reality is that most companies are not clear about where to begin. **According to Aptitude Research, one in four companies are confused by what the candidate experience means at their organization and less than 50% of companies even measure the recruiter experience.** Experience is more than a gut feeling. It is a shared, connected activity that drives value for the employer and candidates.

**The Talent Board found five consistent hallmarks of an excellent candidate experience:**



### Communication:

Communication should be consistent across the hiring process, from pre-application to onboarding. Companies can use a mix of automated tools and human interaction to improve the way they attract and engage talent.

#### **Business Impact:**

*If communication with a candidate is strong, it reflects positively on the employer brand and impacts the customer experience.*



### Expectations:

Companies must set realistic expectations for when candidates will hear back and what is coming next in the process.

#### **Business Impact:**

*If expectations are met, companies build trust and loyalty with candidates that will translate to customer retention and referrals.*



### Feedback:

Incorporating feedback opportunities makes the process more engaging and personal. The feedback candidates give may be negative, but it increases their positive impressions. On the flip side, providing feedback to final stage candidates is also essential because it will let them know why they are not moving forward.

#### **Business Impact:**

*If candidates receive feedback, they are more likely to stay loyal to a brand and share their experience with friends and family.*



### Transparency:

The more transparent and accountable employers are with candidates, the better their experience will be and the more they will trust an employer.

#### **Business Impact:**

*If a company provides transparency, candidates are more likely to stay engaged and employers are less likely to lose quality talent.*



### Fairness:

Candidates that are accepted and rejected should leave feeling like they were treated fairly and equitable in the decision-making process.

#### **Business Impact:**

*If companies provide a fair, equitable and inclusive experience, they are more likely to improve diverse hiring efforts.*

Once companies define exceptional experiences, it is important to consider how those experiences translate to behaviors. Marketing departments consider if someone is willing to pay more, refer often, and engage more. HR and talent departments must also consider if someone is willing to apply more, refer often, and engage more.

**Figure 2: Customer and Candidate Behaviors**

Customer	Candidate
 <p><b>Pay More:</b> Would a consumer pay more for a good experience?</p>	<p><b>Apply More:</b> Would a candidate apply to more than one job at a company?</p> <p> According to the <b>Talent Board</b>, 91% of the responses were “likely” or “extremely likely.”</p> <p><b>Why It Matters?</b> Candidates that have a positive experience will continue to be interested in an employer and view the brand positively.</p>
 <p><b>Refer Often:</b> Would a consumer refer friends and family?</p>	<p><b>Refer Often:</b> Would a candidate refer a friend or family member for a job?</p> <p> According to the <b>Talent Board</b>, 90% of the responses were “likely” or “extremely likely” (averaged).</p> <p><b>Why It Matters?</b> Referrals are often considered the best source of hire. Companies that are able to improve the experience of candidates can improve referrals.</p>
 <p><b>Engage More:</b> Would a consumer keep coming back?</p>	<p><b>Engage More:</b> Would a candidate keep coming back?</p> <p> According to the <b>Talent Board</b>, 75% of the responses were “pretty good” or “great”.</p> <p><b>Why It Matters?</b> Candidates that are engaged continue to express interest and do research on an employer for current and future job opportunities.</p>

# THE RISK OF A BAD EXPERIENCE

Organizations investing in customer satisfaction and customer retention must put the same emphasis on the candidate. Currently, 60% of companies have an executive level customer experience role in place, but only 22% have a candidate experience role in place (*Aptitude Research*). According to IDC, spending on customer experience technology is expected to reach \$641 billion next year, while only 10% of companies have a dedicated budget for candidate experience (*Aptitude Research*). Although organizations are providing greater opportunities for candidate engagement and leveraging digital technology, most candidates are too often ignored.

The candidate experience and customer experience are so closely intertwined that focusing on one and ignoring the other creates inconsistencies and challenges in delivering exceptional experiences. Figure 3 highlights some of the different ways that a candidate experience can impact customer experience and brand.

*Impact of Experiences on Key Stakeholders*

Key Stakeholder	Why Experience Matters
<b>CEO</b>	Brand reputation, customer retention, employee retention, quality of hire
<b>CMO</b>	Consumer brand, company values, negative reviews, customer retention, customer satisfaction
<b>CHRO</b>	Quality of hire, candidate experience, recruiter experience, employer brand, first-year retention

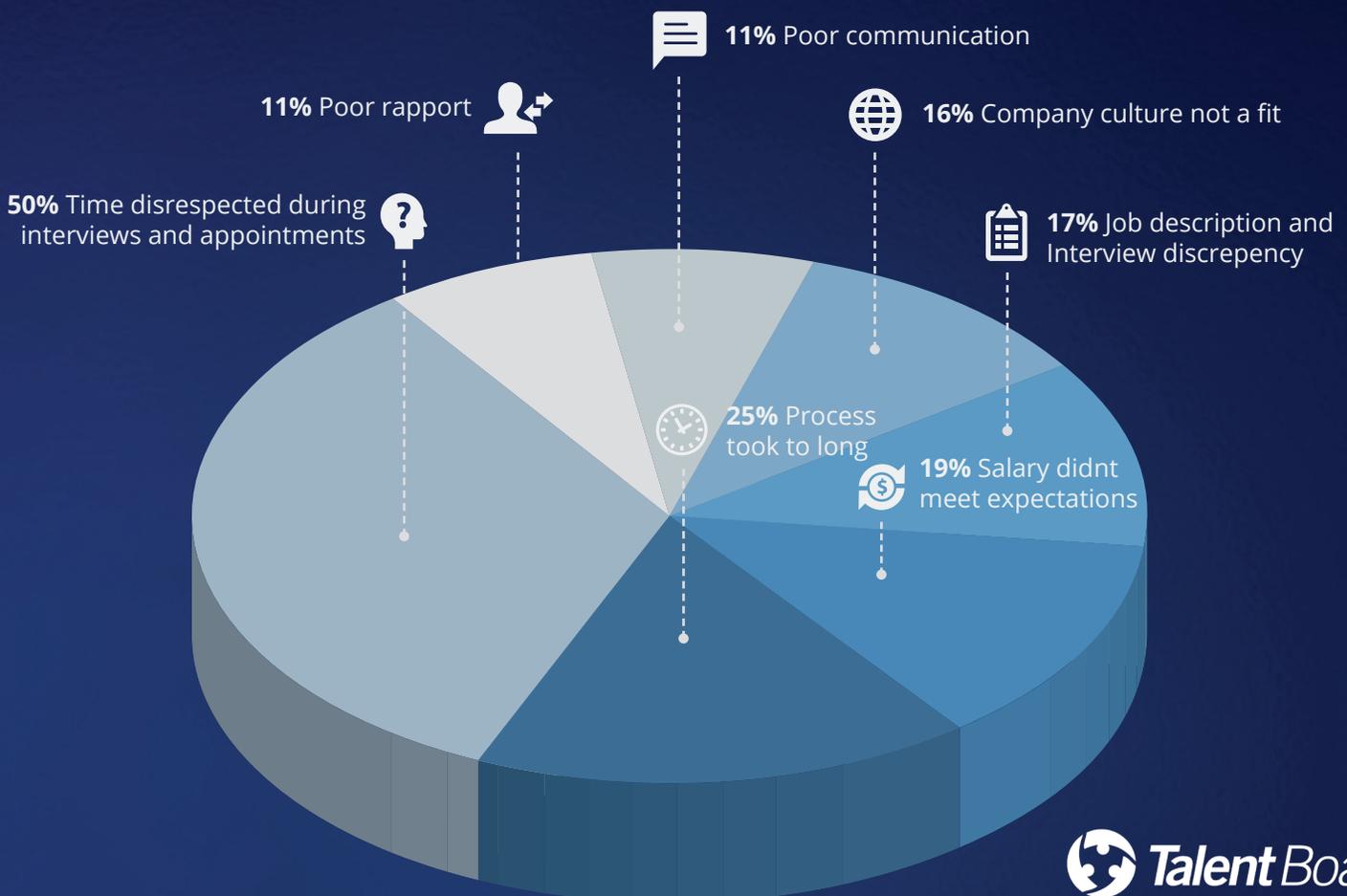
**Figure 3:** *The Impact of the Candidate Experience on Consumer Marketing*



According to The Talent Board, the candidate experience is negatively impacted when time is disrespected, the process takes too long, and the salary does not meet expectations, and these are the primary reasons why candidates withdraw from the recruiting process (Figure 4). At a basic level, candidates want to be treated like humans. In the consumer world, if a customer ordered something, they would expect to receive communication on when it would be delivered or if it is unavailable. It is a basic expectation and companies that do not provide it impact the bottom line.

In talent acquisition, the experience falls short. Candidates receive little information or insights on where they are in the hiring process. According to Aptitude Research, 78% of companies do not provide a status update to candidates. Candidates deserve to be treated with respect and fairness, and when these basic requirements are not met it is nearly impossible to gain trust.

**Figure 4:** Negative Reasons Why Candidates Withdraw from the Recruiting Process



# BUSINESS IMPACT OF AN EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCE

Aptitude Research found that companies that focus on the candidate experience achieve better business results including greater performance, retention, and revenue per employee.

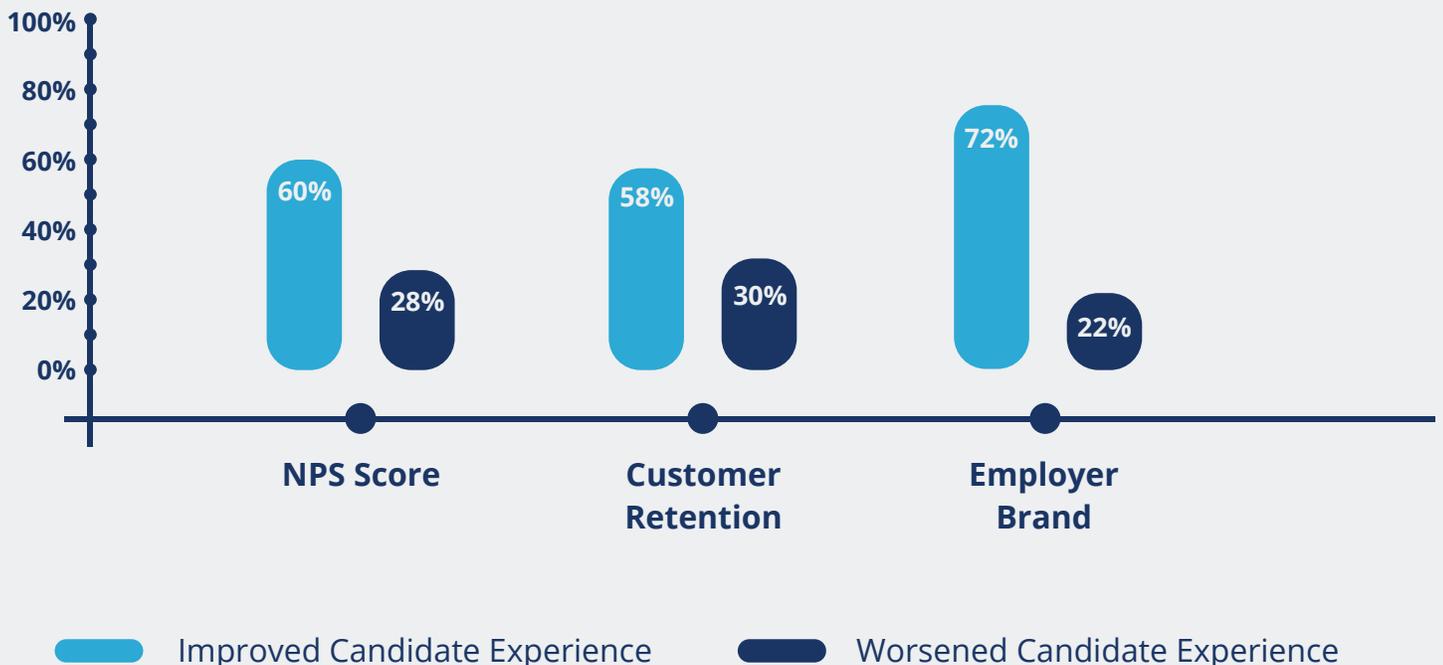
**Retention:** Companies that improved the employee experience were three times more likely to improve first year retention (*according to Aptitude Research*).

**Performance:** Companies that improve performance were twice as likely to improve employee performance (*according to Aptitude Research*).

A poor candidate experience also impacts brand and customer retention. Candidates share their experiences with their inner circles (i.e., significant others, close friends, colleagues, peers, etc.) and a negative experience directly impacts business performance. In 2020, 77% of candidates said they shared their positive experiences, and 52% shared their negative experiences (*Talent Board*).

Organizations that have improved the candidate experience over the past year have seen improvements to NPS scores, customer retention, and employer brand (see Figure 5). Companies that provide a more engaging and human experience are able to see a direct impact on business performance.

**Figure 5:** Impact of an Exceptional Experience



These exceptional experiences start to impact an organization even before someone applies for a job. Companies must consider recruitment marketing strategies to engage and nurture talent earlier in the process. Recruitment marketing is often the first impression that a candidate has with a brand and sets the stage for what that experience will be like for the entire journey (see Figure 6). According to the Talent Board, 67% percent of candidates from all companies gave a 4- or 5-star rating for the information they found on employers while doing research. If recruitment marketing is neglected by an employer, candidates are unlikely to apply for a job or to refer others.

**Figure 6:** *Recruitment Marketing's Impact on Experiences*

Recruitment Marketing	Impact on Employer Experience	Impact on Candidate Experience
 <p><b>Talent Pipelines</b></p>	<p>Recruiters can save time trying to find candidates in the ATS and create pipelines of talent that may be available for current and future jobs.</p>	<p>Candidates receive information relevant to their interests.</p>
 <p><b>Career Sites</b></p>	<p>Recruiters can share relevant information about the brand, jobs, and organization to better engage with the right talent.</p>	<p>Candidates can learn more about an employer, ask questions, and view relevant jobs and opportunities.</p>
 <p><b>Communication</b></p>	<p>Recruiters can save time by having a chatbot answer questions about a job or the organization.</p>	<p>Candidates can quickly get answers to questions on location, availability, benefits, etc.</p>
 <p><b>Campaigns</b></p>	<p>Recruiters can target the right candidates and improve conversion rates and quality of hire.</p>	<p>Candidates can learn about opportunities specific to their interests and skills.</p>

Figure 7 shows several Fortune 10 companies and the correlation between a strong customer experience, recruitment marketing experience, and business performance.

**Figure 7:** *Exceptional Experiences Impacting Business Performance*

## Walmart

### **Business Performance:**

\$524 billion in revenue in 2020.

### **Customer Marketing Experience:**

Omni-assortment, inventory speed, first-time pick rate, check-out experience.

### **Recruitment Marketing Experience:**

Over two weeks, the team isolated and eliminated friction points, such as the number of “clicks” required to apply online and transitioning from in-person to interviews over the phone. Orientation was streamlined from eight hours to two.

Recruiters were also able to fill positions quickly with technology to automate the process.

## amazon

### **Business Performance:**

2020 sales surged 38% to \$386.1 billion from a year earlier while profit roughly doubled to \$21.3 billion, or \$41.83 a share.

### **Customer Marketing Experience:**

Customer satisfaction increased and Amazon focused on contactless delivery, response times, and customer support.

### **Recruitment Marketing Experience:**

Amazon hired 427,300 employees in 10 months and shifted hiring, leveraged text to apply, and improved efficiency by reducing time to fill.



**Business Performance:**

Total revenues increased 6.6% and 5.3% for the three months and year ending December 31, 2020.

**Recruitment Marketing Experience:**

CVS hired 50,000 employees during the height of the pandemic, increased bonuses and benefits, and partnered with Marriott and others to hire furloughed employees.

**Customer Marketing Experience:**

Increased customer care programs, prescription volume, COVID-19 diagnostic testing.



**Business Performance:**

UnitedHealth Group's full year 2020 revenues of \$257.1 billion grew \$15 billion or 6.2% year-over-year, reflecting broad-based revenue growth across the businesses.

**Recruitment Marketing Experience:**

Improved career site and candidate communication, improved existing digital technology and tools to continue to support hiring across the globe.

**Customer Marketing Experience:**

Provided premium credits to customers, waived cost-sharing Medicare plans, expanded housing and resources for homeless.



**Business Performance:**

Apple announced record September quarter revenue of \$64.7 billion in 2020.

**Recruitment Marketing Experience:**

Continued to post 2,000 job requisitions each month, strengthened its talent pipelines for current and future hiring.

**Customer Marketing Experience:**

Invested in more customer support, launched Express stores to allow customers to engage with employees through plexiglass for quick service and requests.

The employee experience is continuous throughout a candidate's lifecycle. Experiences do not happen overnight, and companies must consider the intent and expectations that will influence an experience to be positive or negative (see Figure 8). For the past two years, the Talent Board has started to look more closely at candidate experience perception gaps — the differences between how employers self-assess their candidate experience journey and how candidates rate their experiences.

**Figure 8:** *Exceptional Experiences Impacting Business Performance*



**The experience journey begins by defining intentions and setting expectations.**

**Intent:** What is meant to be and what goals do candidates and employers have?

**Expectations:** What are the candidate and employer expectations?

**Experience:** What is the experience?

# INTENTION GAPS

---

Intentions are the goals and the objectives of both candidates and employers. Employers want to improve business outcomes while candidates want to be treated fairly. When these intentions and expectations do not align, it is difficult to create a positive experience.

## Employers want to achieve the following:

- **Find and Attract Quality Hires:** Employers' top priority is to be able to attract quality hires according to companies.
- **Improve Inefficiencies in the Process:** Companies are facing pressure to fill positions quickly and improve overall inefficiencies in the hiring process.
- **Compete for Talent Across Industries:** Every company is competing for engineering and technical roles. These hard-to-fill roles require companies to compete across industries for talent.

## Candidates want the following:

- **Fairness and Inclusivity in the Hiring Process:** Candidates want to be given a fair opportunity and be considered for a role.
- **Communication Throughout Their Journey:** Candidates want to understand what stage they are at and when they should expect a response.
- **Feedback on Whether They Move Forward or Not:** Candidates want feedback on how they did on an interview, screening, or assessment and if they will hear back from an employer.

The one intention shared between candidates and employers is reducing bias. According to Aptitude Research, nearly 90% of companies are concerned with reducing bias in their talent acquisition process. Yet, when talent acquisition leaders are asked what steps they take to reduce bias, most companies focus on training programs. While these programs can provide insights and education, they often just check a box in reducing bias. They do not fundamentally address the problem.

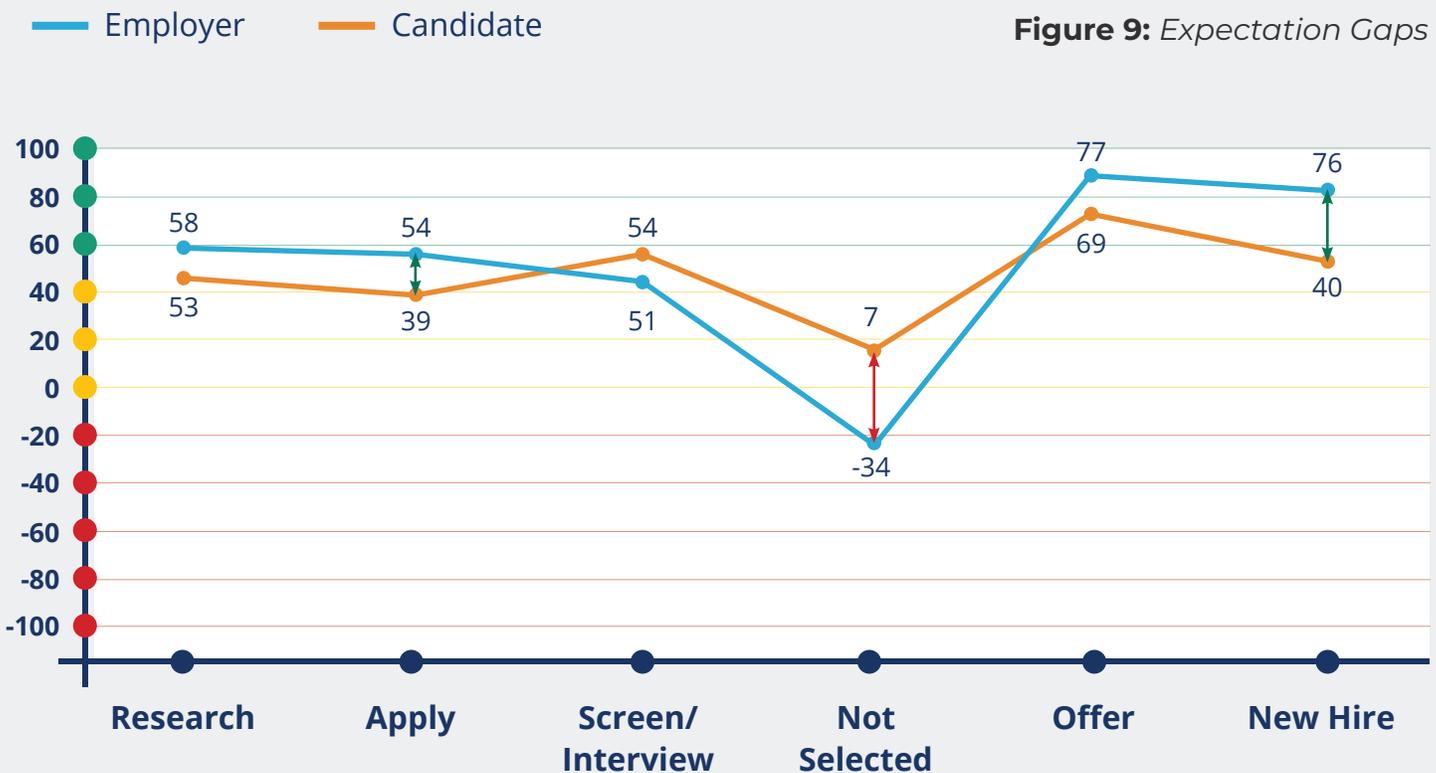
# EXPECTATION GAPS

Once companies understand the gaps in intentions between employers and candidates, they must look at the gaps in perceptions or expectations. The CandE Benchmark Research looks at expectation gaps and examines the following group results:

-  **AMAZING** (scores above 50) are loyal candidates who will most likely keep referring others based on their experience.
-  **OKAY** (scores between 0-50) are candidates who are satisfied, but may or may not be too enthusiastic about referring others based on their experience.
-  **NOT SO GOOD** (negative scores) are unhappy candidates who can damage your brand and impede growth through negative word-of-mouth.

Any NPS score above 0 can be considered OK. The global management company Bain & Co., the source of the NPS system, suggests that anything above 50 is amazing, and above 80 is world class.

When looking at the candidate journey NPS ratings from 2020 (see Figure 9), there is a negative perception gap from the research (recruitment marketing stage) to candidates not being selected. This means employers rated themselves higher than their candidates did. When looking at the offer and new hire (onboarding) ratings, the gaps levels improve.



**Figure 9:** *Expectation Gaps*

# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

---

For companies to improve experiences, they need to step back and understand their audiences, close the expectation gap, and invest in the right tools.

## ● **Understanding Your Audiences:**

Marketers face many of the same challenges recruiters face, including an influx of new technology, the need to distinguish the brand in a competitive market, and a focus on customer engagement (candidate engagement) at various stages in their journey. Marketing departments spend energy and resources trying to understand their buyer. They identify, nurture, and engage buyers in a way that builds a long-term relationship. Most organizations develop buyer personas to understand the behaviors, motivators, challenges, and preferences of buyers. The type of insight from a buyer persona and target audience can also be used to provide a more personalized experience for candidates and give recruiters the insight they need to attract, recruit, and hire top talent. Different audiences require different communication, different engagement, different strategies, and different capabilities.

## ● **Close the Gap:**

Companies must proactively work at understanding what matters to candidates and how they can help meet those expectations. Currently, there is a gap between what employers and candidates want from talent acquisition. By providing recruiting teams with the right insights and technology, companies are better able to close the gap.

## ● **Empower Recruiting Teams With the Right Technology:**

Recruiters need solutions to help them improve efficiency, create experiences, and attract quality hires. Many companies today are using antiquated recruitment technology or investing in too many disparate solutions to see the value of their technology investments. Currently, companies are using 10 or more recruitment solutions and 50% of companies are not measuring the ROI of that investment. Companies must consider the role of technology in automating talent acquisition processes and empowering recruiters to be more successful in their roles, while dignifying the experience for candidates.