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Recruiting Benchmarks Report 2026

Drowning in Applicants, Starving for Talent

Index

A Note To Our Readers

Welcome to Joveo's Recruiting Benchmarks Report 2026.

If you lead talent acquisition or recruitment marketing, you probably experienced two hiring realities at once this past year. Some roles attracted more applicants than your team could realistically screen. Others stayed stubbornly hard to fill, even with sustained spend and effort.

This split is real, and it's structural. Yet most benchmarks still describe the labor market as if it moves in one direction, at one speed, for everyone. That makes it difficult to translate macro headlines into decisions that fit your hiring context.

This report focuses on where conditions diverge – by role type, experience level, and talent pipeline dynamics – and what those differences mean for cost, volume, and hiring outcomes. We also share how employers are responding differently depending on which labor market they're operating in.

As you read, anchor the findings in your specific hiring reality. Whether you are filtering through hundreds of applications for a software developer role or struggling to surface candidates for licensed practical nurse positions, the goal is to help you see where your results differ from broader patterns and decide what to do about it in 2026.

- Kshitij Jain (KJ), Founder and CEO, Joveo

A Cooling Market, Unevenly Felt

Early in the year, job growth remained positive and employer sentiment was cautiously optimistic. By mid-year, significant data revisions raised questions about the accuracy of earlier reports. By December 2025, the economy was adding roughly 50,000 jobs per month – down sharply from the 2024 monthly average of 186,000, with nearly all net growth concentrated in healthcare and hospitality.

Headline indicators showed cooling. The number of job openings declined from 8 million in November 2024 to 7.1 million in November 2025. The ratio of job seekers to open roles sat at approximately 1:1, with 7.5 million unemployed individuals competing for 7.1 million openings. This represents a significant cooling from the labor shortages of previous years. At the national level, this appeared to signal easing pressure for employers to hire. However, at the role level, it did not.

The relief employers expected from a cooling market did not arrive evenly. In fact, we saw the labor market split into two.

Here’s the split

Market A: The Flood.

White-collar, remote-capable roles saw application volume explode – often to the point where manual screening became practically impossible for your recruiters. Your team wasn’t struggling to attract candidates. They were struggling to breathe.

Market B: The Drought.

Frontline, licensed, and location-dependent roles saw almost no change in difficulty to hire. Candidate supply remained structurally constrained. The macro headlines were irrelevant because you can’t create more nurses, more electricians, and more CDL holders.

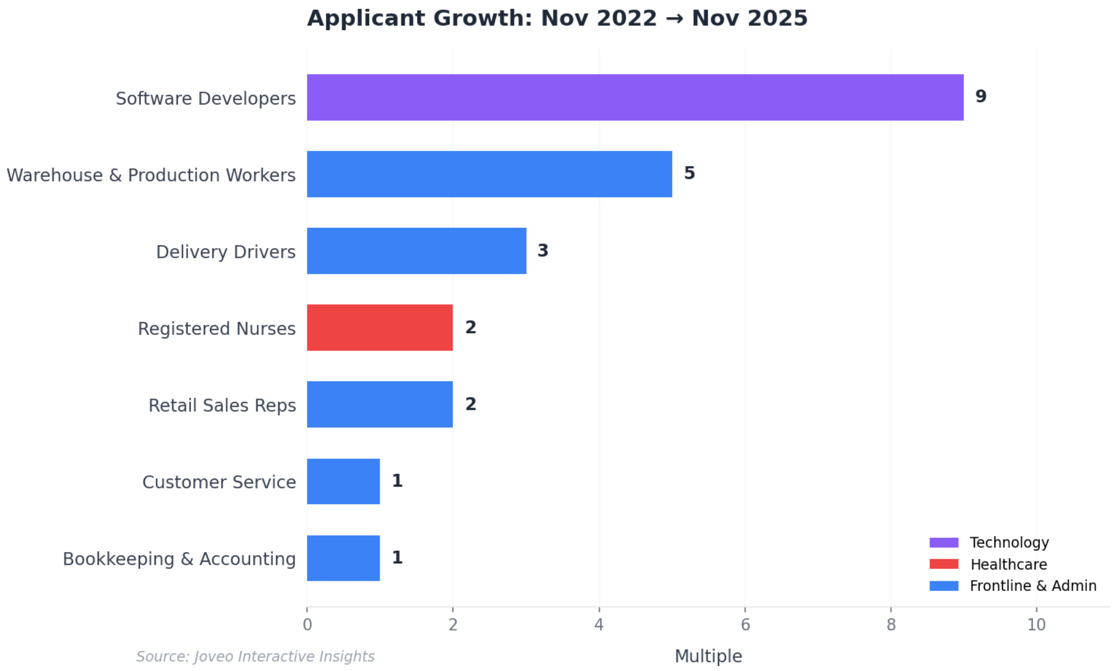
This report examines that divergence. Drawing on recruitment data from Joveo’s Interactive Insights across 16 major occupations and all US states, this report examines how differences in role type, experience level, and pipeline conditions showed up in two structural fractures: the widening gap between flooded and supply-constrained talent pipelines, and the rising experience thresholds employers are using.

We close with guidance on how to respond to each condition differently – because running the same hiring process across both markets is suboptimal.

Part 1

The 9x Applicant Avalanche

Across Joveo's Interactive Insights data, application volume per job increased by up to 9X (based on the occupation) from November 2022 to November 2025.

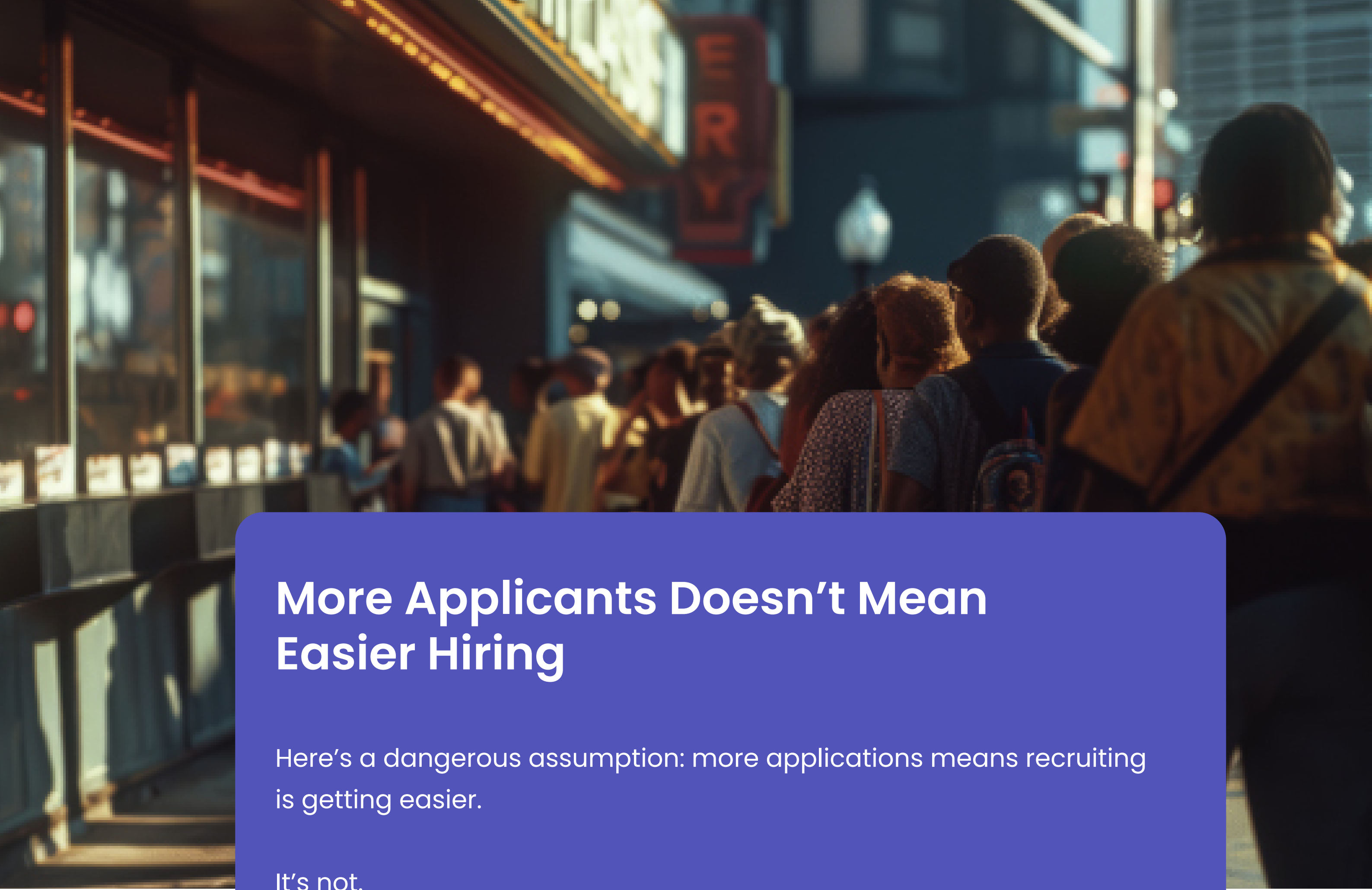


Let's talk about how we got here:

- **Easy apply.** One-click submissions, auto-filled profiles, and platform-native "easy apply" buttons reduced the effort of applying to near zero.

- **AI-assisted mass applications.** Candidates are now using AI and automation tools to apply to hundreds of jobs simultaneously. The applications look legitimate. However, the intent behind them is often nonexistent.

- **Talent sources that optimize for volume.** Many talent sources are designed to maximize applications, not quality. They're doing exactly what they're built to do – and it's making your job harder.



More Applicants Doesn't Mean Easier Hiring

Here's a dangerous assumption: more applications means recruiting is getting easier.

It's not.

And if you're using cost-per-application (CPA) as your primary success metric in flooded roles, you're optimizing for the wrong thing. CPA varies widely by application type. In roles like software development, Easy Apply drove CPA as low as $3, while 5+ page forms pushed it to nearly $40 – a twelvefold increase.

Lower CPA doesn't mean easier hiring. The side effect of low CPAs is often more applicant noise, not more screened candidates. Volume rises, but signal quality collapses.

Recruiters who once reviewed a few dozen applicants per opening are now managing hundreds. Under time pressure, most evaluate the first wave of submissions, make a hire, and never reach the rest of the pile. The best candidate might be applicant #87 – but no one sees them.

"A full pipeline isn't a healthy one; an unfiltered pipeline is just a drain on productivity. Volume without precision is a slower way to fail."

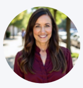
– Yelena Cooke, Director of Customer Success, Joveo

More applicant volume can also mean an extended time-to-fill. Larger organizations – those receiving higher applicant volumes per role – experienced longer time-to-fill distributions than smaller firms, despite having greater recruiting resources.

This shifts the TA team's strategic focus from talent attraction and sourcing to screening.

In flooded markets, CPA is a false signal. A $15 CPA means nothing if your team can only meaningfully evaluate 50 of the 200 applications you received.

"Most TA teams don't have a sourcing problem, they have a signal problem. Volume is easy to create. Knowing where to focus and when to stop spending isn't."



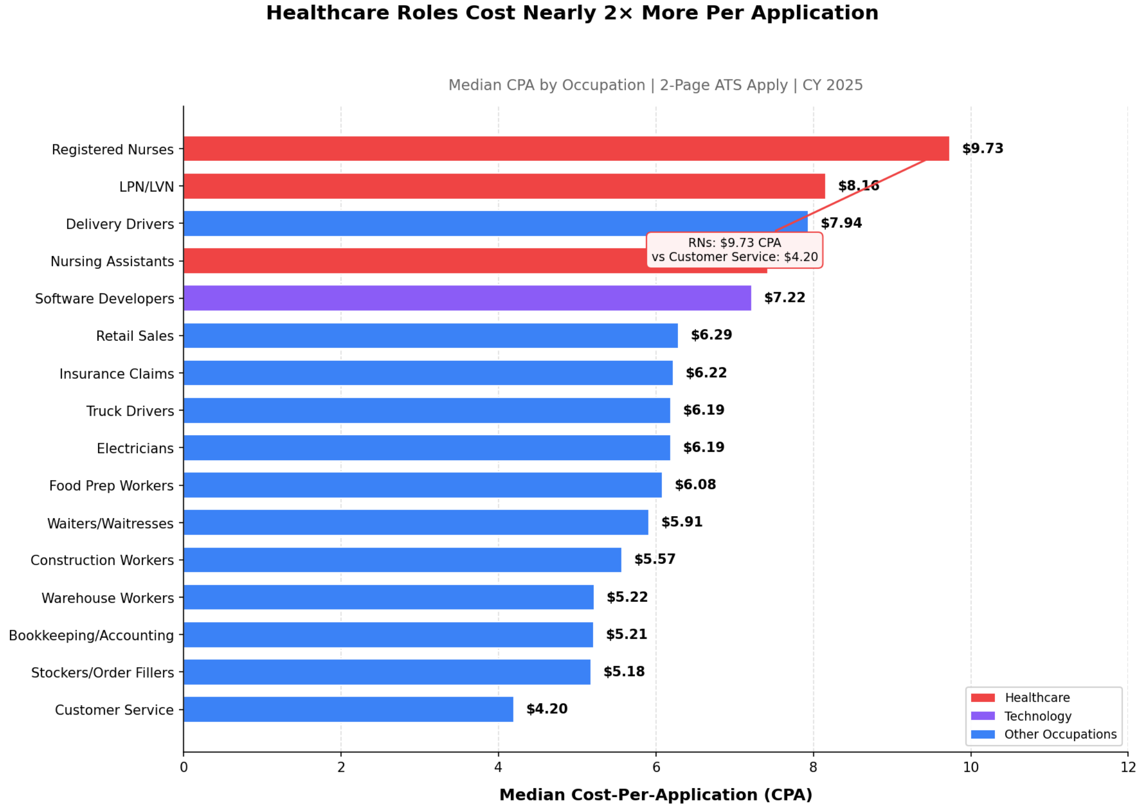
– Deb Andrychuk, VP of Strategic Growth, Joveo

Part 2

The Occupational Split

Where the Split Becomes Visible

Recruiters are not operating in a single labor market. They are operating in two distinct talent pipeline conditions at the same time – and many are using the same tools, the same processes, and the same hiring efficiency metrics (such as CPA) for both.



Source: Joveo Interactive Insights

Software developer roles consistently generated far higher applications per job than registered nurse roles. This gap persisted even when postings were run concurrently and supported by similar budgets.

In Market A (The Flood), managing application flow is the dominant challenge. It's about screening, not sourcing.

In Market B (The Drought), the limiting factor is candidate availability itself. No amount of efficiency optimization fixes a talent pool that doesn't exist.

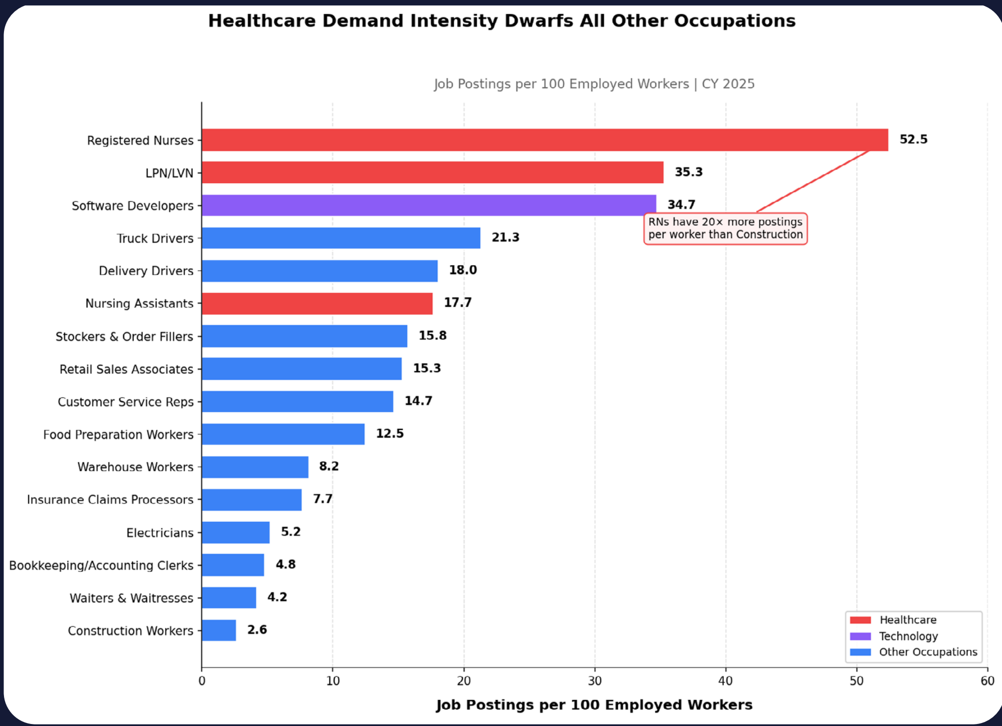
Supply-Constrained Roles Didn't See Significant Applicant Growth

In healthcare, skilled trades, and other licensed or physically bound occupations, application volume increased only marginally. Hiring remained constrained by workforce size (nationally or regionally) and credential requirements. And cooling labor market conditions did not meaningfully expand supply.

You already know this if you recruit for these roles. You've watched the headlines about a softening labor market and wondered why none of it showed up in your talent pipeline. Meanwhile, your leadership team is reading the same headlines, asking reasonable-sounding questions about why time-to-fill hasn't improved.

The honest answer is that macro indicators don't create nurses. They don't produce electricians or CDL holders. An uptick in unemployment doesn't translate into more licensed candidates in your funnel next month – or next year.

This constraint becomes clearer when hiring demand is measured relative to workforce size. Registered nurses roles, for example, saw nearly 1.4 million job postings in 2025 – far exceeding demand for many other occupations. When adjusted for employment levels, registered nurses recorded nearly 52.5 job postings per 100 employed workers, the highest demand-intensity ratio among the 16 occupations we studied.



Licensed and frontline roles maintained higher demand intensities despite overall labor market cooling. Source: Joveo and TalentNeuron Research.

What this means practically is that no amount of efficiency optimization or recruiter productivity improvement changes the fundamental math.

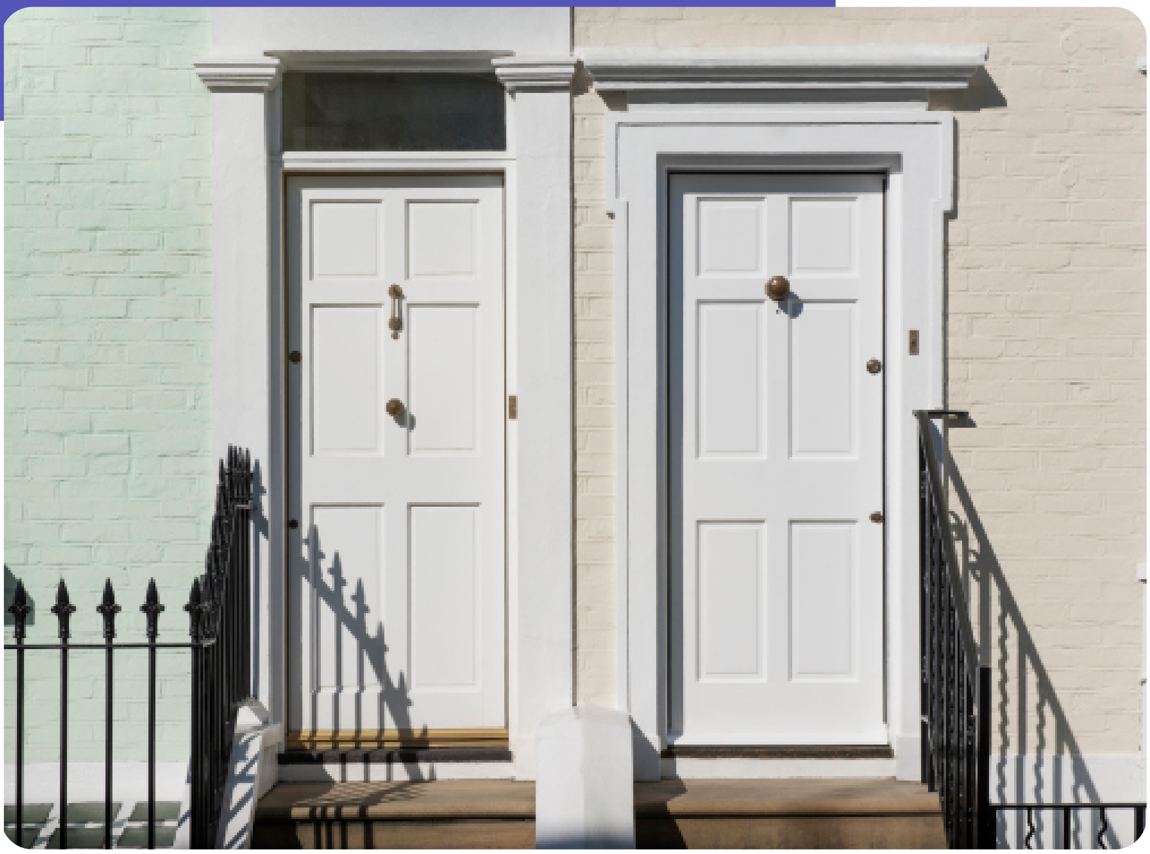
“The jobs narrative doesn’t match reality. Labor shortages in trucking, docks, and agriculture, once filled by immigrants, are colliding with mass layoffs in government and tech. White-collar workers with college debt aren’t stepping into these roles, creating a historic labor imbalance the numbers don’t reflect.”

– Chad Sowash, Co-Host, The Chad & Cheese Podcast

The talent pool isn't growing fast enough to meet demand. Treating these roles like the flooded ones – expecting volume, measuring CPA as a success metric – sets your team up to fail against targets that were never realistic.

The better question isn't "how do we get more applicants?" It's "how do we compete for the applicants who exist?"

Two Different Markets Require Two Different Strategies



Many organizations are operating in both talent pipeline conditions at once. And the uncomfortable part is that treating both with the same process actively undermines hiring outcomes in both.

The question isn't whether your process is good. It's whether you have one process or two.

In Market A (The Flood), the problem to solve is screening.

When hundreds of applications arrive per role, the challenge is not attracting candidates but identifying the right ones. Your talent attraction worked but your screening is failing.

What's working:

- AI-powered screening, interview scheduling, and interviewing to process volume without sacrificing quality
- More structured application forms that introduce positive friction early – reducing spray-and-pray submissions before they hit your queue
- Success metrics tied to screening, shortlists, or hires, not application volume
- Process designs that evaluate beyond the first wave of applications, because the first fifty applications aren't a representative sample of the full pool

What's not working:

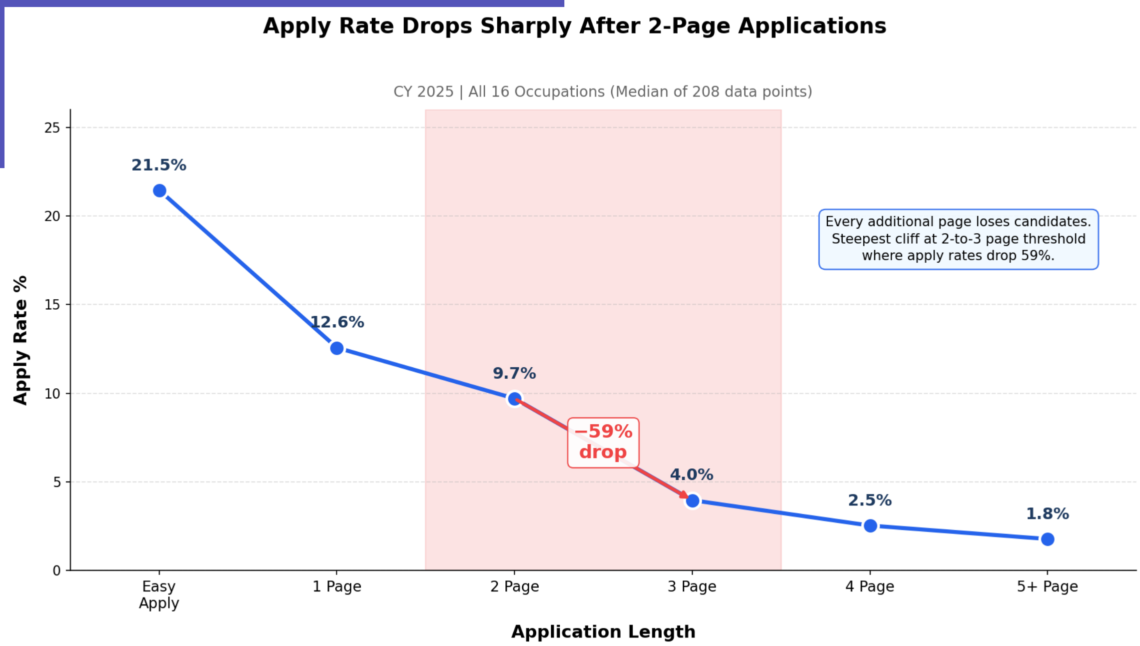
- Using experience requirements as a volume filter when what you actually need is better signal detection
- Treating declining CPA as evidence that hiring is getting easier
- Optimizing for speed without measurement of whether speed is producing better outcomes

In Market B (The Drought), the problem to solve is availability.

Here, success depends on talent attraction, not filtration. You can screen perfectly and still fail because the candidates you need aren't applying.

What's working:

- "Push" job advertising and passive candidate targeting – going to candidates rather than waiting for them to come to you
- Employer brand investment targeted at specific roles and markets (not generic corporate messaging that disappears into the noise)
- Candidate experiences optimized for speed, designed for mobile, stripped of friction that discourages serious job seekers
- Retention – every employee who stays is one fewer role that must be filled from a pool that isn't growing



Serious candidates drop off when the process drags. Fewer pages = more applies.

Source: Joveo Interactive Insights

"Time availability plays a critical role in how frontline workers search for and apply to jobs – and it's often overlooked. When hiring managers expect shift-based workers to interview during standard business hours, it creates unnecessary friction. Our data shows that modest increases in scheduling flexibility can reduce time to hire by more than 50%."

– Dan Sapir, General Manager – Enterprise, JobGet

What's not working:

- Expecting volume metrics to improve because the macro indicators suggest it should
- Waiting for the market to "correct" when the supply constraints are structural, not cyclical
- Applying the same CPA targets you use for flooded roles

Part 3

The Experience Cliff

How the Bottom Rung Moved Higher

The bottom rung of the career ladder moved higher in 2025.

Across tech and white-collar roles, Indeed data shows posting volumes stabilizing while experience thresholds tightened – roles once open to first-timers now list 2-5 years as baseline.

This wasn't a coordinated strategy. It was an emergent response to volume. And it created a structural problem that won't self-correct.

This shift coincided with a sharp rise in applicant volume in specific roles. That increase did not reflect a comparable rise in early-career openings. Instead, more candidates were competing for roughly the same number of entry-level roles.

As a result, experience requirements became a sorting mechanism. Not because the work suddenly demanded it, but because employers could afford to be more selective.

When candidate supply is abundant, hiring managers gain options they didn't have before. Requirements that would have been negotiable in a tighter market become firm.

Preferences become prerequisites. "Nice to have" quickly becomes "Required".

This is understandable behavior under changed conditions. If you're reviewing a stack of 150 applications for one role, and 49 of them have three-plus years of experience, why would you spend time evaluating the ones with zero?

Here's what that costs you:

Inflated external hiring costs.

Every role you fill externally at the mid-level costs more than hiring recent grads. And you're competing with every other employer who made the same choice.

Overtenured workforce.

Without new entry points, your team ages. Fresh perspectives disappear. Innovation slows.

The Big Stay

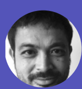
After years of high turnover, workers have grown cautious, and are staying in their current jobs longer. Economic uncertainty, fewer enticing offers, and rising hiring thresholds made stability more appealing. This shift is known as "The Big Stay."

As churn dropped, so did the number of open roles – especially those available to new or less experienced candidates.

This dynamic was reinforced by a broader cooling in labor mobility. In 2025, voluntary quits fell back toward pre-pandemic levels of around 2%. Employers cited low turnover – not budgets – as the primary reason hiring slowed, shrinking backfill opportunities. Higher experience thresholds further limited external entry. Tech postings requiring 5+ years rose from 37% to 42%, while 2-4 year roles dropped from 46% to 40%. Entry-level hiring persisted but grew more selective.

This dynamic helps explain why the labor market felt like an employer's market.

"The amount of time experienced, highly-skilled professionals are spending on the job market... I think we are still underestimating the impact that AI will have on the shape and manner of organized labor."



– Hung Lee, Curator, Recruiting Brainfood

Capability Over Credentials

We'll state the obvious: high application volume makes the quality of hire harder, not easier.

When recruiters face hundreds of applicants per role, time (not judgement) often determines which candidates are evaluated. Years of experience and specific credentials function as coarse filters under pressure, even when they are weak predictors of performance.

Some employers are responding by redefining signals. Instead of relying primarily on experience thresholds, they assess capability directly through:

- Skills-based hiring evaluations tied to near-term job performance
- Screening criteria based on what the role actually requires in the first 90 days
- Structured interviews that test learning velocity and problem solving
- Work samples that reveal how candidates approach unfamiliar problems

The real arbitrage is in capability, not credentials. A candidate who meets 70% of a role's requirements and has strong fundamentals can often learn the remaining 30% faster than it takes to find a "perfect" candidate who will accept the offer.

The constraint is whether screening systems are designed to detect potential or only to filter for checkboxes.

If you're feeling overwhelmed by candidate volume, stop pretending minimum experience requirements are a recruiting strategy. They're a coping mechanism. And they're creating a talent debt you'll pay later.

What This Means in Practice

For employers operating in high-volume markets, raising experience requirements indefinitely is a blunt instrument. Improving signal detection is more effective.

That means:

- Screening for what the role truly requires in the first 90 days, not what would be nice to have
- Using aptitude-based assessments alongside credentials
- Structuring interviews to test learning velocity and problem-solving, not just tool familiarity
- Designing hiring processes that evaluate more than the first wave of applicants
- Tracking quality of hire, not just time-to-fill or CPA

Meanwhile, candidates are adapting, too. Workers shut out of traditional entry points are turning to fractional, temporary, and gig-based work to build income and experience.

At the same time, interest in skilled trades and other AI-immune roles is rising as job seekers reassess long-term security. The experience cliff is not just a hiring artifact. It is reshaping how careers begin – and who gets access to the first rung.

The Questions That Will Shape Recruiting in 2026

The hiring market cannot be summarized by a single set of conditions.

Across this report, we showed how recruiting outcomes diverged by occupation and experience level. Some roles absorbed unprecedented applicant volume. Others remained supply-constrained even as the broader market cooled. Entry-level access narrowed not because work disappeared, but because employers could be more selective where volume allowed it.

These dynamics are not self-correcting. They persist because they reflect how different labor markets function, not short-term fluctuations.

The strategic gap is no longer about just better tools. It is about recognizing that many organizations are operating in multiple labor markets at the same time – and managing them accordingly.

For talent acquisition leaders, that recognition starts with a few hard questions.

For Talent Acquisition Leaders

- Which roles consistently flood you with applicants? Which remain supply-constrained? Are you running one process or two?

- How are you measuring hiring funnel efficiency?

- Are you measuring CPA as a success metric across all roles? Why?

- Where have experience requirements increased as a response to volume, and what does that choice cost you a few years down the line?

For Executive Leadership Teams

- Do your recruiting metrics reflect fundamentally different hiring environments, or do they collapse everything into a single average that describes neither?

- When was the last time you asked your TA team what they actually need?

- Which roles would be hardest to replace if someone left tomorrow and does your retention strategy reflect that risk?

Methodology

Data Sources

This analysis draws on recruitment data from Joveo's Interactive Insights platform and data partners TalentNeuron, Talroo, and JobGet. Data covers activity across 16 major occupations and all 50 US states, representing aggregated metrics across millions of jobs published on hundreds of job sites.

These 16 occupations make up the backbone of the US workforce, covering the roles most commonly hired across industries.

Sample Characteristics

- **Occupations covered:** 16 major occupation groups, including those in Healthcare, Technology, Retail, Warehousing, and Customer Service
- **Geographic scope:** All US states
- **Time period:** 12-month rolling period

Metrics

- **Apply rate:** Completed applications divided by total clicks on job advertisements, expressed as a percentage
- **Cost-per-click (CPC):** Total job advertising spend divided by total clicks
- **Cost-per-application (CPA):** Total job advertising spend divided by total completed applications
- **Cost-per-hire (CPH):** Total job advertising spend divided by confirmed hires

Note on Variability

This report showcases aggregated metrics across millions of jobs published on thousands of job boards as well as search engines, social media, and destination sites. Individual recruitment advertising performance is dependent on additional factors, including but not limited to application complexity, compensation and benefits, and employer brand.

Labor Market Context

Economic indicators and labor market trends were sourced from Joveo's data as well as the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), including unemployment rates, job openings (JOLTS), quit rates, and hiring rates. These provide contextual framing for talent acquisition performance trends.

Data Exclusions

Duration-based job postings, slot-based advertising, and organic (non-paid) traffic were excluded from this analysis. Geographic and occupation-specific benchmarks reflect paid job advertising performance only.

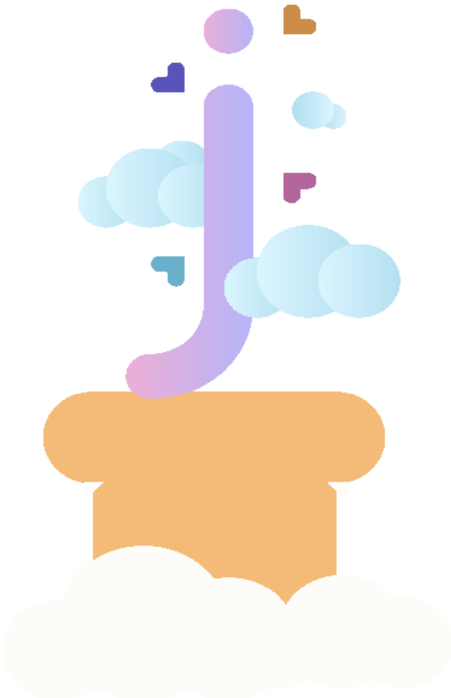
Glossary

- **Apply rate:** The percentage of job ad clicks that result in completed applications. A key conversion metric for understanding candidate intent and application friction.
- **Cost-per-application (CPA):** The amount of job advertising spend required to generate one completed application. Calculated as total spend divided by total applications.
- **Cost-per-click (CPC):** The amount of job advertising spend required to generate one click on a job advertisement. Reflects competitive intensity and targeting efficiency.
- **Cost-per-Hire (CPH):** The amount of job advertising spend required to generate one hire. The most complete measure of recruitment efficiency, though subject to lag between application and hire date.
- **Click-through-rate (CTR):** The percentage of ad impressions that result in clicks. Used primarily in search and social recruitment campaigns to measure ad relevance and creative effectiveness.
- **Easy apply:** One-click application functionality where candidate profiles are submitted directly without completing full ATS forms. Generally produces higher apply rates but lower quality profiles than long-form applications.
- **Job postings index:** A measure of job advertisement volume relative to a baseline period. Used to track hiring demand trends over time.
- **Long-form/ATS apply:** Applications requiring candidates to complete full applicant tracking system forms, typically including work history, education, and screening questions. The application type analyzed throughout this report unless otherwise specified.

- **Quits rate:** The percentage of employed workers who voluntarily leave their jobs in a given period. A key indicator of labor market fluidity and worker confidence.

About Joveo

As the global leader in AI-powered, high-performance recruitment marketing, Joveo is transforming talent attraction and recruitment media buying for the world's largest employers, staffing firms, RPOs, and media agencies. The Joveo platform enables businesses to attract, source, engage, and hire the best candidates on time and within budget.



Powering millions of jobs every day, Joveo's AI-led recruitment marketing platform uses advanced data science and machine learning to dynamically manage and optimize talent sourcing and applications across all online channels, while providing real-time insights at every step of the job seeker journey, from click to hire.

For more information about Joveo's award-winning platform and solutions, visit [www.joveo.com.](http://www.joveo.com) joveo

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