



Welcome back to ***The Shortlist*** from Belvedere Recruitment.

Over the last eight editions, we've been pulling at some uncomfortable threads in the hiring market:

- More applicants don't solve talent shortages.
- The perfect candidate is disappearing.
- Nobody trusts job descriptions anymore.
- AI doesn't create competitive advantage by itself.
- Confidence is becoming a currency.
- Indecision is becoming a career risk.
- Clarity is becoming a competitive advantage.
- And judgement is becoming priceless.

This week, after spending time at RecFest on Wednesday and speaking with people across the talent ecosystem, one question kept coming back.

Not loudly.

Not dramatically.

But quietly, underneath a lot of the conversations about AI, productivity, tools, and the future of Talent Acquisition.

If AI does the junior work, who becomes senior?

That is the question.

Not “will AI replace jobs?”

We have asked that one to death.

The more interesting question is:

What happens when AI starts replacing the work people used to do before they became good at their jobs?

Because that is where the story gets much more uncomfortable.

And much more important.

The RecFest vibe check

One of the strongest feelings from RecFest was that AI has moved into a different phase.

Less panic.

Less theatre.

Less “look at this shiny thing.”

More practical.

More operational.

More embedded.

The conversation has shifted from:

“What can AI do?”

to:

“Where does AI actually help?”

and, increasingly:

“What might we lose if we use it badly?”

That is a healthier conversation.

It is also a harder one.

Because the first wave of AI excitement was about productivity.

Faster sourcing.

Faster scheduling.

Faster note-taking.

Faster research.

Faster outreach.

Faster everything.

And let's be honest, some of that is genuinely useful.

Nobody in Talent Acquisition is sitting there wishing they had more admin.

Nobody is nostalgic for manually coordinating six calendars across three time zones while someone's Outlook decides to have a personal crisis.

Automation has a place.

A big one.

But here is the problem.

Not all slow work is pointless work.

Some of it is developmental.

And that distinction is about to become very important.

The work nobody misses

Think about the beginning of a career.

The first draft.

The messy spreadsheet.

The research pack.

The meeting notes.

The basic analysis.

The candidate screen that goes slightly wrong.

The presentation that takes four hours to build and five minutes for someone senior to dismantle.

Nobody puts these moments in a career highlight reel.

Nobody says:

“Delighted to announce I have reformatted 86 slides and discovered a new level of emotional resilience.”

But this is where something important happens.

A junior analyst learns which number looks wrong.

A graduate learns which question should have been asked.

A new recruiter learns that the candidate who looks perfect on paper may be completely wrong in reality.

A young marketer learns that polished content can still say absolutely nothing.

A future leader learns, slowly and sometimes painfully, how judgement is built.

The task was never just the task.

It was training.

And now, many of those tasks are becoming some of the easiest things to automate.



The productivity paradox

This is the bit we need to be honest about.

A company introduces AI.

Work gets faster.

Research gets summarised.

First drafts appear in seconds.

Admin disappears.

Routine analysis is automated.

Output increases.

On paper, productivity improves.

And in many ways, it does.

But then comes the second-order question:

If junior employees no longer do the work that taught previous generations how to think, where exactly will their judgement come from?

Because judgement does not arrive with a job title.

It is not magically unlocked when someone becomes "Senior Manager".

It is built through exposure.

Through repetition.

Through correction.

Through seeing enough messy situations to recognise patterns.

Through getting something wrong, understanding why, and doing it better next time.

If we automate the messy middle too aggressively, we may accidentally remove the training ground.

That does not mean preserving pointless work.

Nobody becomes better because they spent midnight fixing line spacing in PowerPoint.

But there is a difference between removing low-value work and removing developmental work.

The uncomfortable part is that many organisations may not yet know which is which.

Talent Acquisition has changed too

This is where the conversation becomes especially relevant for TA.

Talent Acquisition used to be judged mainly on whether it could find people.

Now it is being pulled into something much bigger.

Workforce planning.

Capability building.

Talent intelligence.

Candidate experience.

Internal mobility.

Early careers.

AI adoption.

Employer trust.

Decision quality.

Hiring system design.

This is no longer just about filling vacancies.

It is about understanding how organisations build capability over time.

And that means TA has to ask better questions.

Not just:

"Where do we find this person?"

But:

"Why do we need this person?"

"What capability are we actually building?"

“What work should AI do?”

“What work should humans still learn by doing?”

“Are we hiring experience because we need it, or because we stopped developing it?”

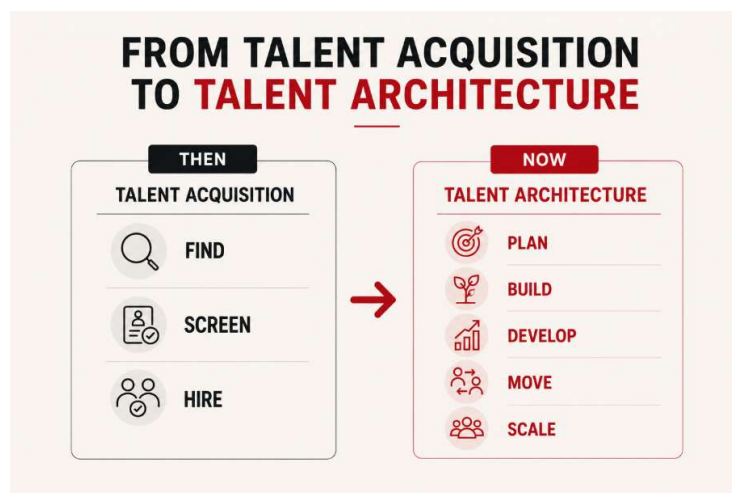
That is a very different job.

It is also a more strategic one.

The future of TA may not be Talent Acquisition at all.

It may be Talent Architecture.

A function that helps organisations understand not only where talent comes from, but how talent gets built.



The missing first rung

For decades, the career ladder looked relatively simple:

Junior → Mid-level → Senior → Leader

Each stage carried more complexity, more autonomy, and more responsibility.

But AI does not necessarily enter neatly at the top of that ladder.

It often enters at the bottom.

The repeatable work.

The structured work.

The first-pass work.

The work with enough pattern to automate.

Which means the future career ladder may begin to look less like this:

Junior → Mid-level → Senior

And more like this:

??? → Mid-level → Senior

That question mark is not a technology problem.

It is a workforce design problem.

A succession problem.

A capability problem.

And, increasingly, a recruitment problem.

Because employers still want people who can:

- think critically
- exercise judgement
- work independently
- challenge assumptions
- understand context
- communicate with influence
- navigate ambiguity
- use AI intelligently
- and make decisions without being spoon-fed every answer

All reasonable.

But these are not beginner skills.

They are usually built through practice.

So if organisations reduce junior hiring, automate junior tasks, and then continue demanding experienced talent, eventually the maths becomes awkward.

You cannot keep buying experience from a system that has stopped producing it.

The Ashby data makes this even more interesting

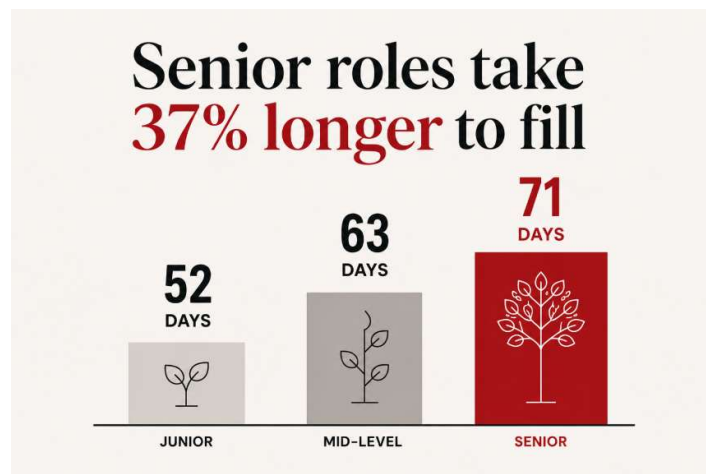
Ashby's latest Recruiting Operations Benchmark analysed more than 54 million applications and 93,000 jobs.

One of the standout findings was that hiring performance is not usually shaped by one single bottleneck.

It is a system issue.

Small delays across application review, scheduling, feedback, decision-making, and offer approvals compound into bigger delays.

Another finding: senior roles take significantly longer to fill than junior roles.



Which makes sense.

Senior roles require more judgement.

More context.

More alignment.

More stakeholder confidence.

But this also makes the junior pipeline question more urgent.

If senior roles already take longer to fill today, what happens in five or ten years if fewer people have been given the chance to become senior in the first place?

That is the hidden risk.

Not that AI removes work.

But that AI removes the development pathway beneath the work.

Two companies. Two futures.

Imagine two organisations.

Company A automates aggressively.

It reduces junior hiring.

Pushes routine work to AI.

Keeps teams lean.

Buys experienced specialists when needed.

For the next three years, it looks efficient.

Very efficient.

Probably gets praised for it.

Company B also automates.

But it keeps junior pathways.

It redesigns early-career roles around:

- supervised AI use
- client exposure
- live problem-solving
- structured feedback
- decision reviews
- shadowing
- progressively harder judgement calls

For the next three years, Company B may look less lean.

Now move the clock forward ten years.

Which company has built more leaders?

Which one has deeper institutional knowledge?

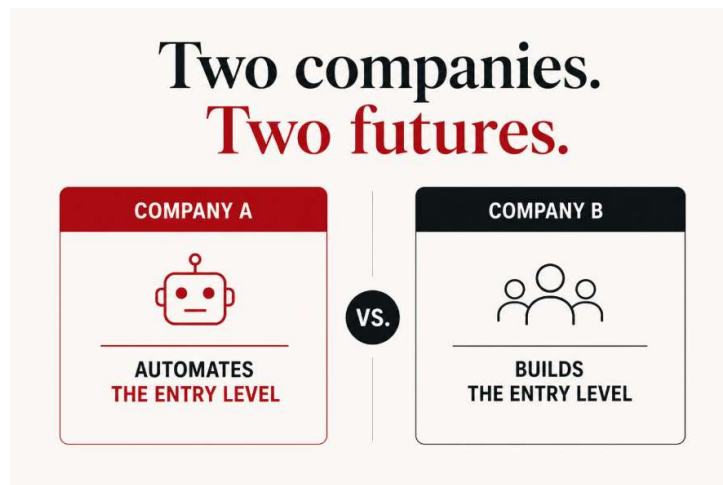
Which one has stronger succession?

Which one is less dependent on buying senior talent at inflated market rates?

And perhaps the most uncomfortable question:

If every company behaves like Company A, where does Company A plan to buy experienced talent from?

That is the question nobody should ignore.



This is not anti-AI

Let's be clear.

This is not an argument against AI.

AI should remove pointless administration.

It should improve access to information.

It should help people work faster.

It should reduce friction.

It should make recruitment better.

But better does not simply mean faster.

Better means more thoughtful.

More human where it matters.

More deliberate about what people still need to learn.

Maybe junior employees will learn faster because AI gives them better access to knowledge.

Maybe entry-level roles will become more interesting because repetitive work disappears.

Maybe the first rung is not disappearing at all.

Maybe it is changing shape.

But if that is true, organisations cannot leave the redesign to chance.

What this means for candidates

For candidates, especially early-career professionals, the message is blunt:

You cannot rely on the old career ladder being there in the same way.

The first rung may be narrower.

It may look different.

It may require more initiative.

You will need to show not just that you can do tasks, but that you can learn, question, reason and adapt.

AI fluency will help.

But judgement will matter more.

The strongest candidates will be the ones who can say:

"I know how to use AI."

And then add:

"I also know how to challenge it."

That second sentence is where the value is.

What this means for employers

For employers, the message is equally blunt:

Do not complain about a shortage of senior talent in five years if you are quietly removing the entry-level pathways that create it today.

If you want judgement, you need exposure.

If you want leadership, you need development.

If you want capability, you need pathways.

And if you want people who can operate in ambiguity, you need to give people opportunities to experience ambiguity before the job title says "senior".

This is not just an HR issue.

It is a business continuity issue.

A succession issue.

A workforce planning issue.

And yes, a recruitment issue.

Because the future of hiring may not only be about finding finished talent faster.

It may be about helping organisations understand how talent gets built.



The Belvedere view

Across the UK, Poland and Hungary, we see the same tension appearing in different forms.

Banks want *higher* risk, data and transformation capability.

Fintechs want commercially minded technologists.

Shared services and GBS centres want people who can move beyond process execution into automation, judgement and business partnering.

Start-ups want people who can operate with ambiguity from day one.

Everyone wants people who can think.

But fewer organisations are asking:

What are we doing today to create the talent we will desperately search for tomorrow?

That question belongs to recruitment.

But it also belongs to leadership.

To HR.

To learning and development.

To workforce planning.

To every organisation currently celebrating efficiency gains without examining what may have quietly disappeared with the work.

The question worth asking

Maybe AI will not destroy the career ladder.

Maybe it will force us to redesign it.

But redesign requires ownership.

It requires TA to become more strategic.

It requires leaders to think beyond this quarter's productivity gains.

It requires candidates to take more responsibility for learning.

And it requires organisations to stop pretending that experience appears from nowhere.

So here is the question:

If AI removes the first rung, who reaches the top?

And if we do not yet have a convincing answer, maybe that is the workforce conversation worth having.

This is Issue #9 of The Shortlist.

And if the market is teaching us anything right now, it is this:

AI may remove some of the work traditionally given to junior employees.

That work was not always valuable in itself.

But some of it was how people learned.

If organisations reduce early-career pathways while continuing to demand experienced talent, they risk creating the very capability shortage they are trying to solve.

The future of recruitment may depend not only on finding talent.

But on understanding how talent gets built.

Over to you.

Are we freeing the next generation from low-value work, or quietly removing the experiences that taught previous generations how to become experts?

We would genuinely like to hear where you stand.

If this resonated, follow Belvedere and share it with someone navigating hiring, early careers, leadership, or workforce transformation right now.

You probably already know who that person is.

And if there is a contradiction, workplace trend or future-of-work challenge you would like us to explore in future editions, let us know in the comments.

We genuinely read every message.

The Belvedere Team

Growing globally. Rooted in Poland, Hungary & the UK.

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