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The increasing role of automation in the recruitment process is beyond doubt.

From pre-screening CVs and interview scheduling to chatbots, there are a whole host of ways automation has, and continues to, change the face of recruitment. But is the continued march towards an automated process what candidates want? And in a tight labour market is it right for your organisation?

The ultimate goal is to create a process which is both efficiently automated and humanly personalised, one which finds the perfect balance for accessing, engaging and retaining talent.

The question is, how do recruiters achieve that balance?

When looking to find the answer, it is important to remember some fundamentals of the talent acquisition process:

- Candidate experience is key in many cases, those looking for work are your customers
- Jobseekers want a streamlined process that offers the right blend of automation and human touch
- In a candidate-driven market, recruiters cannot afford to alienate any talent with the 'right potential' from applying for a role
- Jobs need to be more accessible to ensure companies are more diverse
- The cost of acquisition must be considered, including both the transactional cost of the hiring process and the cost of re-hiring

The role of **automation** in the recruitment process

Recruitment automation refers to the use of technology to improve the hiring process, including automating tasks such as tracking applicants, reviewing CVs, the scheduling of interviews and automated responses at different points in the recruitment process.

Adding automation to the process comes with a host of benefits, ultimately enabling recruiters to hire the best candidates in less time.

Automation can simplify almost all the steps involved in the recruitment process from sourcing to onboarding, creating a seamless, efficient experience for both recruiter and candidate.

By using automation tools, organisations can save time and free up resource to concentrate on other parts of their role. They can also reduce the risk of human error and provide valuable data.



Benefits of automation

- Cost savings: By reducing the need for manual tasks, organisations can save money and reduce the amount of time it takes to hire
- Improved candidate experience:
 Automation brings a seamless and efficient candidate experience throughout the recruitment process
- Increased productivity: By freeing up time, automation allows HR and hiring managers to focus on higher-level tasks
- Increased efficiency: Automation streamlines the recruiting process across candidate sourcing, CV screening and interview scheduling
- Reduction in human error: Using automation leads to fewer mistakes and improved data collection



Ben Park, the Senior Vice President of Technology at intelligent automation consultancy Tquila Automation, said automation has, and continues to, drive improvements across the recruitment lifecycle.

He said automation outcomes can invariably be categorised as either improvements to the candidate experience or – more traditionally – to the operational efficiency of the recruitment firm or talent acquisition team doing the hiring.

"An 'improvement' may be subjective," Ben added.
"A cost saving realised by those recruiting may
manifest as a degraded end-user experience by the
candidate, so it is critical to consider both angles
when using technology to drive business outcomes.

"Despite this, we are already seeing automation dramatically improve everything from intelligent conversational agents used for candidate attraction to natural language processing used to read CVs and machine learning used to rank them, to AI solutions for identity verification during the final stages of vetting.

"The sheer volume of solutions on offer is huge, is continuously growing, and becoming increasingly capable as the technologies that sit behind them evolve and mature."

Reed Talent Solutions' Managing Director for Contingent Workforce Solutions, Julie Hinchcliffe, said automation can increase productivity, expediate candidate selection, accelerate the hiring process and reduce costs.

If done correctly, it can also improve a candidate's experience and boost an organisation's brand and employee value proposition.

Julie said: "From applicant tracking and recruiting people through social media to skills assessment, interviewing scheduling and background screening there are a host of ways automation can be successfully implemented into your recruitment process.

"Automation can speed up the hiring process and help attract the right candidates, who are given a smoother hiring and onboarding experience."



Automated systems will follow orders put in place by humans, thus freeing people up from repetitive

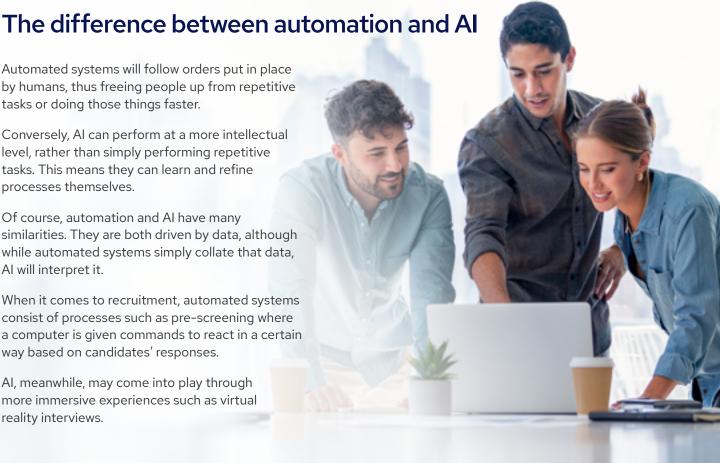
Conversely, AI can perform at a more intellectual level, rather than simply performing repetitive tasks. This means they can learn and refine processes themselves.

tasks or doing those things faster.

Of course, automation and Al have many similarities. They are both driven by data, although while automated systems simply collate that data, Al will interpret it.

When it comes to recruitment, automated systems consist of processes such as pre-screening where a computer is given commands to react in a certain way based on candidates' responses.

Al, meanwhile, may come into play through more immersive experiences such as virtual reality interviews.



Where does automation sit within the recruitment process?



The drawbacks of automation

Bias: One of the biggest potential drawbacks of utilising any AI or automation is the risk of introducing bias into the process.

While AI, on one hand, can reduce the risk of human bias, it is also programmed and set up by humans. If the algorithms used are not carefully designed, you can also be at risk of the automation containing bias.

For example, Amazon famously trained an AI to scan CVs and rank them based on suitability for the role, but only succeeded in introducing bias into its systems as the data it was using was based on a history of male-dominated recruitment.

A bias against women was eventually discovered, resulting in the technology being scrapped.

Data privacy issues: While automated processes come with the advantage of being able to collect and process large amounts of information, this also brings potential issues around data privacy.

It is imperative organisations are open and transparent about the data they are collecting and how it will be used, as dictated by the Data Protection Act.

The impersonal touch: Chief Executive of TALiNT Partners, Ken Brotherston, said there can be an assumption automation has improved the recruitment process, when it hasn't always done so.

He said while back-office processes around recruiters or employers managing data better and finding improved ways of sourcing talent have helped, the external impact has been much more mixed.

Ken points to the use of automation in volume hiring, where he said tools like LinkedIn's Easy Apply have been introduced: "It's like when a whale eats krill. It just opens its mouth and sucks in as much krill as it can.

"And that's what a lot of volume hiring systems are designed to do, suck in as many candidates as possible.

"What you have to do then is process them – and that's what it feels like for candidates, being processed."

The deeper a candidate gets into the recruitment process, the higher the level of feedback they receive should be.

Ken said: "If you have several interviews, and particularly if you go to an assessment centre, you should get some meaningful feedback in return for having made that investment of time."



Where does human interaction come in?

Despite all the obvious benefits of automation, it is also true that the human element remains imperative to finding and recruiting the right candidates.

Hiring managers and recruiters have skills which add real value to the process and cannot simply be replicated by technology.

Candidates remain more likely to trust a recruiter who, or an organisation which, communicates with them, offering help and guidance. This allows jobseekers to have any questions answered and provides a platform for a strong relationship to ensure the candidate's needs are met at every stage.

There are two central reasons why human interaction remains a vital part of the recruitment process:

People still like to speak to people

During any recruitment journey, a candidate's personal circumstances can dictate that they need a more personal touch.

Ben Park said: "This might be their first job and they've never applied for a role before. Or they may be an executive who's been approached about a CEO hire.

"In both these situations, a human approach is the correct one for much of the engagement and is required because, at least for now, automation will not be able to provide the necessary support, guidance or degree of personalisation required to do justice to the process."

Sometimes, a set of circumstances may simply be too complex for automation to provide answers via a natural conversation.

Human expertise cannot be replicated

People possess a degree of interaction, often based on personal experience, that an AI or automated system may never replicate.

Ben said: "An AI may be trained with all the data on the internet, but it will never possess the expertise of a recruiter with 20 years' experience, and arguably never will.

Ken Brotherston said while there are some amazing assessment tools available, they are only as good as how they are used.

"You need to understand what you're trying to assess, and I think that's still a very human process," he said.

He used the example of ChatGPT, which he compared to a bridge which will get users 80% of the way really quickly – much faster than a human could.

"But a bridge that only gets you 80% of the way, isn't a bridge," he said. "You still need that human to close the gap."



What do candidates really want?

A Reed Talent Solutions survey of 1,000 people aged 18 and over who earn £30,000, or more, and had started a new job, at a new company, in the last 12 months, highlighted a series of findings that both challenged and reinforced preconceptions around the use of automation and human interaction in the recruitment process.

Key findings included:

- One in five of those surveyed didn't apply for their role digitally
- Almost half of respondents have withdrawn from a job application process in the past 12 months, with many saying it was too slow or did not contain enough information
- Only 13% of candidates booked their interview via an online system/calendar
- 72% of people said they were frustrated at not being able to speak to someone about the job they were applying for
- Two-thirds (66%) of respondents said they received no form of feedback regarding their application



Meeting expectations

- 50/50 The split between those called prior to an interview, and those sent an email with further information (21% said they received both)
- Almost half of respondents (49%) said they had received a phone call offering them a job, with 35% saying they received an email or text
- When it came to onboarding information, more than half (52%) of people said they had been given a link to online information with 35% saying they were told to access it via an app – only 13% of respondents received it as a hard copy

While there was an even split between respondents who were called prior to an interview and those who received an email, what was notable was that 21% received both – an action which could be seen as being resource heavy for the recruitment team or hiring manager.

The survey also revealed 35% of candidates had multiple interviews (40% had a single interview), something which dependent on the role may not be necessary and can often extend a process. In the current labour-tight market this may lead to the loss of talent as a result of an elongated time to hire.

It was striking that 495 candidates out of the 1,000-strong sample group said they had not received any form of interview feedback at all – a situation Reed Talent Solutions' Managing Director for Contingent Workforce Solutions, Julie Hinchcliffe, highlights is "disappointing but not surprising".

Julie said: "It is the single biggest complaint we receive from candidates and is often the biggest reason for candidate dissatisfaction."

When it came to the job offer stage, our survey showed 49% of professionals received a phone call to inform them, with 35% getting an email or a text message.

However, Julie noted that the figure of 12% of people who felt they had received an automated response "implies it lacked personalised content".

"The job offer should be the best bit and excite the candidates," she said. "To have come this far you want them to accept the offer, so maybe work needs to be done to ensure that when offers are automated, which I don't think is an issue, they are designed to be personal to maintain candidate engagement."

The survey also found that when it came to onboarding information, such as contracts, 87% of respondents were either sent this online or via an app.

It also revealed that 21% of candidates attended an assessment centre in a group environment and 70% of those were in-person, something Julie said clearly demonstrated how "that element of the process has definitely swung back to favour in-person assessments post-Covid".

She added: "What I would say here is we are seeing some changes in the market regarding assessment centres.

"Equality, diversity, inclusion and belonging (EDIB) is a factor as assessment centres aren't fully inclusive, and there is some debate over whether we are alienating people, and not getting the best from them in a group environment."

Challenging expectations

- One-in-five respondents said they didn't apply for their role digitally
- Almost half of those surveyed said they had withdrawn from an application process in the last 12 months
- Only 13% of candidates said they had booked an interview via an online system/calendar – although 60% said self-scheduling should be automated

The fact that a fifth of candidates didn't apply for their role digitally suggests that people are still potentially dropping in CVs or getting jobs via word of mouth even in the current tech-savvy world of work.

The survey also showed almost half of those surveyed had withdrawn from the application process - a figure which has major implications for recruiters and organisations looking to bring in talent.

Impacts would include increased costs of acquisition and transactional costs, as well as wasted time and effort resulting from losing one in every two candidates from the process.

Of those who had withdrawn, 43% said they had not been well enough informed about the role at the beginning of the process, blaming a lack of information on factors such as salary, hybrid working and the working environment. Forty per cent of respondents said the process had been too slow.

Julie said: "If you flip that on its head, if we as the employers and recruiters had to ensure there was someone available to take those calls and have those conversations it would be a huge resource burden at the top end of the funnel."

Our survey also revealed that only 13% of candidates said they had booked an interview via an online system/calendar, a number Julie called "low".

"This is where we get the greatest buy in with the use of a chatbot," she said.

"The chatbot includes an online calendar with live availability. As an example, we ran a volume campaign for one client and had 300 applicants for a role and wanted to take 175 through to pre-screen.

"If we'd had to call, leave messages and call again to book in availability it probably would have taken up to six days.

"Instead, we sent 175 candidates the chatbot message to self-schedule and 150 pre-screens were booked within 24 hours, the majority within four hours of us sending the chat.

"Not only does that save a huge amount of resource, it also improves the engagement of the candidate. They can open a link and complete it at their own leisure and by self-scheduling there is definitely greater commitment, and we have seen a significant increase in turn up rates."



The use of chatbots

Our survey looked in-depth at the use of chatbots in the hiring process, with the results revealing strong usage throughout the process.

Chatbots were well received by those who used them, and wanted by those who didn't.

In all, 41% of respondents had encountered a chatbot during the recruitment process, with 28% saying the tool had been used to schedule either an interview/test or a self-assessment and 23% for skills testing.

A huge 87% of those who had used a chatbot believed it had improved the process, while of the 590 people who said they hadn't used one in the recruitment process, 41% said it would have been helpful.

While our research suggests more work is needed, the use of chatbots in the recruitment process is already becoming more prevalent. Bots – as our survey shows – can improve customer engagement, providing information in bite-sized chunks based on user input. They are a readily available resource, removing the need to send off emails, search through a host of online FAQs or spend time waiting on a phone line to talk to a person.

Chatbots can answer most candidate questions related to the recruitment process and can outline your expectations – leaving recruiters to focus on other tasks.

By taking over some candidate inquiries, Bots can have a positive effect on satisfaction levels boosting people's opinion of your brand.

Another essential benefit of chatbots is their costsaving capabilities. Implementing a chatbot is much cheaper than hiring an employee or using existing resource to deal with repetitive tasks.



The younger generation are frustrated with automation

Perhaps the most surprising revelation from our research was that Gen Zs, those born after 1996, are more likely to prefer human interaction in the recruitment process.

The majority (77%) said they felt frustrated with not being able to speak to someone directly - in comparison, only 64% of Gen X (born 1965-80) and Boomers (born 1946-64) felt the same.

The research also showed Gen Zs are more likely (60%) to pull out of the recruitment process, with the most common reasons being the process was too slow (45%) and that they would rather deal with a real person opposed to automation (37%).

In comparison, less than a half (46%) of the Gen X and Boomer generation said they had withdrawn their application early, with the top reasons being the process was too slow (51%) and that they weren't fully aware of the job description and salary (31%). Only 16% of this generation withdrew due to automation.

Julie Hinchcliffe said businesses need to reconsider how they use automation to attract the next generation of talent.

"We all assume the younger generation prefers technology and its convenience – but in reality, the human element is so important," she added. The research also showed that less than a third of Gen Z (31%) and Gen X (24%) candidates said they wanted more automation in the recruitment process. Again, this was significantly different from the answers provided by the Boomer generation, where nearly half (47%) said they wanted more automation.

Julie said: "Automation can help some recruitment processes, making them faster and easier for both the candidate and the employer. If done well, you won't lose talent by implementing automation, but what is key, is ensuring the time it takes between encountering automation and hearing back from a person is kept to a minimum. The longer you leave it, the more disengaged the candidate will be.

"Those hiring also need to make sure candidates are given all the information they may desire throughout the process – from salary to the working environment – as without speaking to someone, if the information is not there, they are likely to be frustrated.

"In a market where attracting talent is more of a competitive sport than a walk in the park, businesses need to regularly assess and evaluate their recruitment processes to ensure they're as inclusive as possible."



What is the right answer?

Oltimately, it is clear a blend of automation and the human touch is the best way forward. Automation has transformed the recruitment process and will continue to play a huge role in the future, but it should not replace the role of human interaction entirely.

Recruitment is a people industry, with human involvement essential for building relationships and creating a positive candidate experience.

While certain tasks will benefit from automation, saving time and money, it is nothing without the personal touch, which brings intimate communication, empathy and relationship building.

With our survey showing almost half of respondents had withdrawn from the application process, it is clear many organisations have more work to do when it comes to finding the perfect blend of automation and human interaction.

This is also demonstrated by other key findings:

- 60% of people felt the level of automation in their most recent recruitment process was greater than in previous processes – automation in the recruitment process is growing and it is here to stay
- 58% of people felt the use of automation made the process faster
- 58% would like to see the same amount of automation or less, and almost one third of people would like to see more human interaction



Designing the recruitment process around the needs of your organisation

Whatever blend of automation and human interaction you decide on will need to be aligned to the needs of your organisation.

Smaller companies may be able to rely more on a manual process, but automation becomes increasingly necessary, and beneficial, as recruitment volume increases.

Regularly evaluating your company's recruitment process will make sure it remains effective and efficient.

Ken Brotherston, from TALiNT Partners, said organisation's need to be dynamic to find the ideal solution.

"Imagine you're driving a car," he said. "Would you say is there an A1 speed to drive the car?

"No. You're always looking at the conditions and determining what the right speed is."

The health of any talent pipeline and strategy will change over time. For example, many organisations have made progress when it comes to gender diversity but they may still be struggling when it comes to ethnic diversity, or employing people with disabilities.

Automation should target tasks and activities which take place in a process, specifically those which attract no additional value through being done by a real person or where that value is offset by benefits such as speed or accuracy.

Ben Park of Tquila Automation said: "Generally, this will leave those tasks and activities that do appear to have some intrinsic value in being human-driven.

"These will always be subjective, and industry specific, but in recruitment - and from a candidate's perspective - are likely to centre around those that involve conversational engagement or the inherent need to feel like they are being listened to, understood and/or otherwise valued as a candidate."

Ben said while there is no simple answer, some levels of engagement will be more suitable for automation than others. But he added that there "should always be a route through to a human if required".

The most important thing is that the candidate experience should be seamless and, if possible, frictionless. The processes which shape a candidate's journey should not put synthetic barriers in place that block human engagement.

Ben said: "The design of the processes that support the candidate journey, and equally the design of the automation solutions in place across this journey, must also take into consideration the need for the 'human in the loop' to avoid this being an afterthought in the rush for value release through automation technologies."

Reed Talent Solutions' Julie Hinchcliffe said knowing when to implement automation or human interaction is key to achieving a recruitment process which finds the perfect balance for accessing, engaging and retaining talent.

"Achieving that perfect blend can really change the recruitment experience for potential candidates," she said.

"If people leave you feeling heard, valued and respected for their time in the recruitment process, they are much more likely to want to accept a job offer, or even try for another job with you in the future if unsuccessful."

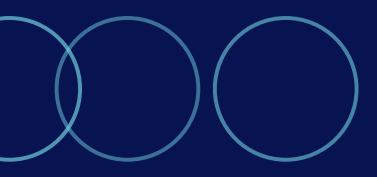


Automation, human interaction and inclusion

Organisations that find the right mix of automation and human interaction can also find benefits when it comes to inclusion and diversity.

Using automation with proper human oversight can remove some unconscious bias, helping companies create a more diverse workplace.

By deleting personal details such as age, gender and ethnicity from candidate profiles and CVs, automation can help create a fairer system and increase the diversity of shortlists.



Say hello to recruitment 4.0

The next generation of hiring, with technology used to automate time-consuming and repetitive processes, is already upon us.

Recruitment 4.0 aims to build on databases built by job seekers to make each step of the candidate journey simpler and faster.

It sets out to improve the sourcing, screening and interview stages which are key elements of recruiters' roles through the use of automation, but without completely removing the human element.

The admin-heavy processes which can hold up the candidate journey should be automated, while the efficiency of the selection is improved, and levels of professionalism raised.



Leading insurance provider outsources volume hiring for personal advisors

The challenge

Our client, a leading global health insurance provider, engaged Reed Talent Solutions to support its volume hiring, recruiting regular intakes of personal advisors.

Our client has a very strong brand and is seen as a destination employer, however, faced with challenging market conditions, tight timescales, and a continually high volume of vacancies, they had problems meeting intake targets, which lead to shortfalls in headcount for personal advisor roles. Our client was conscious that they could not let this impact their customer service levels, so required an immediate solution.

They said: "Our challenges were resource led, this meant that our time to hire was too long and we were losing candidates to faster recruitment processes, we were looking to overhaul our existing method."

Our client identified that they needed a recruitment process outsourcing (RPO) partner they could trust to deliver high-quality candidates and help transform their recruitment process to get volume hiring back on track.

In addition, they wanted to ensure the RPO solution delivered a best-in-class candidate journey, maintained their employee value proposition (EVP), increase the diversity of their workforce, and provided comprehensive management information (MI).

The solution

The service delivered by us is underpinned by a core team of expert recruiters and talent attraction specialists that scales up and down in line with our client requirements.

The team works hand-in-hand with market-leading applicant tracking technology, supporting automated workflows and communications, and provide detailed MI for the client across each stage of the recruitment process.

Understanding the root causes of the challenges faced by our client was vital to ensuring our service delivered against their requirements. As part of the solution design process, we carried out several client alignment activities, including workshops, a time and motion study, and 'as-is' and 'to-be' process mapping.

Key areas focused on include

- Understanding the personal advisor role, through a 'day in the life of' exercises
- The end-to-end recruitment process, candidate journey, and identifying bottlenecks and potential points of failure
- Understanding assessment tools and their effectiveness, and undertaking interview shadowing
- Understanding the EVP
- Partnering with our client's recruitment marketing team to make sure we represented the client with the correct tone of voice

Following completion of the solution scoping and design process, the Reed Talent Solutions team was able to make recommendations on how best to deliver the service transformation:

CASE STUDY

Access to talent: To meet the required numbers for each intake, more candidates were needed at the top end of the funnel. In addition to managing all online job board advertising, we recommended direct engagement of the Reed Talent Solutions candidate database, engagement of welfare-to-work programmes, and a renewed focus on referrals.

Candidate journey: We identified high numbers of candidates who were not starting or not completing the online psychometric testing stage. To combat this, we engaged with the online testing provider to understand the issue and put in place new candidate communications that clearly signposted the recruitment journey and what to expect at each stage. We also automated reminders supported by our RPO helpdesk, to prompt and help candidates with any technical issues.

Matthew Rushton, Solutions Manager at Reed Talent Solutions, said: "Using our applicant tracking system (ATS), we built a 24/7 automated recruitment process, with human expertise introduced where it adds most value, and with visibility and control across each step supported by management information.

"Because we can report on each stage of the recruitment process, we spotted an early problem surrounding the psychometric test and candidate attrition rates. At this stage, we took a proactive approach and partnered with our client and the test provider to resolve this issue, working to produce a process that improved communication with candidates and ensured they remained engaged throughout. This saw a 30% increase in test uptake and a 25% increase in end-to-end completion of the tests."

Assessing for potential: We recommended replacing the competency-based assessment with a situational judgement exercise, transferring the focus on having prior experience in a similar role to matching candidate's strengths and capabilities with the requirements of the role. This significantly increased the pool of applicants for consideration as well as helped with recruiting a more diverse workforce.

Making the hiring decision: Our recommendation was to transfer the final interview and hiring decision away from our client's managers to our recruitment team. This would result in a quicker and more straightforward recruitment process for applicants – vital in a highly

competitive and fast-moving job market, and would significantly reduce the time required by our client's hiring managers on recruitment activities.

This last recommendation was a big step for our client to agree to, as it meant putting complete trust in Reed Talent Solutions to both represent their employer brand to applicants and to make hiring decisions that would result in high-quality hires.

We collaborated on interviews, with our team initially shadowing our client's line managers, allowing us to understand how they positioned the vacancy and then inviting the managers to peer review our interviews, providing confidence in our ability to deliver a robust, high-quality process.



CASE STUDY

The results

Since going live with the services, our client, a leading insurance provide has been extremely pleased with the outcomes and the way in which the recruitment service has been transformed.

The RTS team:

- Delivered against the initial target of recruiting I5O hires over a I2-week programme while increasing new hire diversity by 28%
- Reduced time to hire from 25 to 18 days
- Generated an increase in candidate applications of 68%
- Created four days of efficiencies across the recruitment process through process optimisation and introduction of automation
- Our client has reported a higher level of engagement during the candidate induction process, which they are attributing to the quality of the recruitment process
- The client's line managers have saved approximately I,OOO hours of time by Reed Talent Solutions conducting the interviews and making hiring decisions

 IO% of successful candidates have been placed from welfare-to-work programmes

Our client said: "We knew we had selected a partner who was set up for success. The Reed Talent Solutions team met all milestones throughout the implementation and managed risks extremely well. We set ambitious timescales and we are extremely satisfied that the team met them.

"Reed Talent Solutions were meticulous in mapping our 'as is process', and upon review they suggested areas of improvements via the introduction of automation which cut four days out of our existing recruitment process.

"One thing that has stood out from the Reed Talent Solutions team is their ability to pivot their service to deliver our needs.

"They have continuously reviewed and analysed their process to find improvements and how this could improve the candidate's engagement and journey."

The project was successfully concluded with all requirements being met within timescales and to service level agreements. This has led to an expansion of the service and the partnership continues.

Webinar

Reed Talent Solutions' recent webinar,
'Getting the right mix: Blending automation
and human interaction to enhance the candidate
experience' explored how to find the perfect
balance between an efficiently automated and a
humanly personalised recruitment process to
keep candidates engaged, manage resource and
ensure inclusivity.

▶ Watch the on-demand webinar FREE here



Deborah Shakespeare, Analytics Sales Manager, Microsoft



Ben Park, Senior Vice President of Technology, Tquila Automation



Ken Brotherston, Chief Executive, TALINT Partners



Julie Hinchcliffe, Managing Director of Reed Talent Solutions' Contingent Workforce Solutions

