

THE ERA OF

REJECTION

BY ARIANNE COHEN

✕ THE PROBLEM

AI-powered applicant-tracking systems reject billions of job candidates.

✕ WHY IT MATTERS

Even if people are hired, their self-esteem (and production) can drop dramatically.

✕ THE SOLUTION

Return to human-centered screening, which improves hiring and reduces the sting of rejections.

With job rejections reaching unprecedented levels, even hired candidates can suffer emotional harm. Are we creating a despondent workforce?



Alan's confidence was fairly low when he stepped away from his C-suite marketing role. Leaving the job felt like the only option to him. "It simply wasn't sustainable anymore," he told his career coach, Gustavo Imhoff, owner of Transformative Journeys Ltd. "It had taken a real toll on my mental health."

If only he knew that the mental harm was just beginning. He found a polished-looking CV template and began applying for marketing leadership roles. First he responded to 10 job postings. Then 20. Then 30. Then 40. Month one came and went. As he sat in his home office, the silence was broken only by his keystrokes and the occasional automated rejection email.

According to Imhoff, Alan was already feeling fragile: After years in an exhausting job, he was swiftly draining his savings. He worried whether he'd be able to cover his bills, yet struggled to pick up the phone to network. Every incoming rejection landed as a verdict on him—his personality, his abilities, his career. "That's the part of job hunting that people underestimate," says Imhoff. Every "no" is received by the candidate as something wrong with *them*. "Job hunting right now really tests your sense of self," he says. And for Alan, each week added more rejections, ghostings, and emotional harm.

Rejection is a part of life, but what happens when the pounding to your psyche never seems to stop? Back during the Great Recession, a job applicant sent out one or two applications a day, each manually—and, in the worst-case scenario, racked up a couple dozen rejections in a month. Today some candidates apply to 20 to 30 jobs per day and accumulate 500 rejections monthly, amid a sea of blurry rebuffs and depressing ghostings. One leading AI-application platform rejected 1.1 *billion* applicants over a seven-year period. A single company's system

"There's this **real fear** that maybe hirers are seeing the *real* them."

can cause psychological damage and motivational issues that experts say can persist even when a job offer comes in.

"It's this black hole," says Ofer Sharone, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst who studies job rejection. "In the US, people tend to see the process as a reflection of something deeper about themselves." Most job applicants, he says, rationalize the situation at first—there are too many applicants, and not enough jobs—but slowly, "there's this real fear that maybe hirers are seeing the *real* them."

The totality of all this rejection has no historical precedent,

“They are starting their jobs as survivors, feeling exhausted and depleted.”

and leading business psychologists say it’s causing a similarly unprecedented magnitude of harm. This year, the average job search will last 6.6 months, according to a 2026 survey by United Way; for millennials and boomers, it will drag on a bit longer—to an average of 7.2 and 7.4 months, respectively. For tech workers, the average is 9.7 months, meaning that many are weathering rejections for a year or more. The typical applicant will send in 63 job applications, spending 44 minutes per application—and land just five interviews. That’s 58 rejections, without interacting with a human.

To be sure, not everyone falls into the depths of the rejection blues. Some people shift gracefully from laid-off to unemployed to employed. But psychologists and managers are noticing an increase in certain underlying psychological tendencies, as well as poor coping skills in the workforce. Beyond the individual harm, there may be an irony in all this: Firms are paying the price of their own high-volume rejection processes—which leave many new employees scarred, emotionally exhausted, and tentative because they fear falling into the black hole again. And as more post-rejection distress seeps into corporate hallways, HR leaders say they have little choice but to dramatically rewrite the rules of applying. Or at least try to.

HOW JOB SEARCHES BECAME MASS REJECTION EVENTS

The concept of mass rejection is not entirely new. The Depression era saw thousands of hopeful employees waiting outside factory gates for a dozen jobs. But that rejection was collective: A hopeful worker was turned away once, alongside many others.

Once the economy recovered, many workers expected to work for the same company for their entire lives. From the 1950s to the 1980s, applying for a job was perceived as manageable because it was a once- or twice-in-a-lifetime task. A job search meant buying the Sunday paper, typing cover letters, mailing résumés, and weeks of waiting. The ensuing rejection letters would say, We

will keep your résumé on file, which was true—firms had literal filing cabinets. A job seeker sent out a dozen or two dozen applications, not hundreds. Once hired, sure, they encountered other, milder rejections: They might be overlooked for a promotion here and a raise there, but that would be only a couple of rejections over a few years—for someone who was still employed.

The process began to change when recruiting shifted from paper to the internet. The job board Monster, then called Monsterboard.com, launched in 1994. Though no one appreciated it at the time, employers were dependable about responding and, often, providing feedback. “It was very anxiety reducing,” says Sharone, author of *The Stigma Trap: College-Educated, Experienced, and Long-Term Unemployed*. “You can organize your life around the second-round interview or next set of applications.” With the advent of one-click applications in the 1990s and aughts, applicants could apply more often, and while rejections soared during the pandemic, the process for many people was manageable, albeit depressing.

Now head into 2022, when gen AI appeared and automated both applying and hiring—increasingly removing humans from the loop. This is the point at which applying for jobs became, quite literally, inhumane. Ask Bradley Hankins, who has been searching for an operations leadership role in Alabama for two months. He submits six to 10 applications daily. “I try to be selective, but even closely matched applications often receive no response at all,” he says. When he does hear back, it’s an automated rejection. “The most frustrating part is not necessarily being turned down,” he says. “It’s investing time in tailoring an application and then receiving no indication that a person ever reviewed it.”

That lack of human communication is damaging, says organizational psychologist Cathleen Swody, managing partner at Foster Talent Consulting. Humans are wired for feedback and the pursuit of behaviors that yield rewards; few of us are capable of remaining upbeat in the face of a black hole of no rewards. Absent any clear feedback or explanation, she says, “our brains fill in the gaps—with self-criticism and judgement.” Candidates experience a negative spiral, which quickly lowers their confidence and can lead them to falter in their other job-seeking efforts, like networking and interviewing. “After weeks or months of rejection, they come across as flat and underengaged, because they’re half-expecting to be rejected,” says Swody.

Swody advises applicants to remind themselves

FEEL THE STING—AND MOVE ON

Some applicants weather a dozen rejections a week—and still enjoy their weekends. Others climb into bed and stay there. Psychologists point to five common negative reactions and how to respond.

THE PROBLEM

WHY

THE ANTIDOTE

“My job is my identity.”



Your self-worth is built on your professional life, so rejections feel like attacks on your identity. Ouch.

Learn to perceive yourself based on internal traits and values unrelated to work, like kindness and family.

“I’m unemployable.”



You’ve internalized and globalized a rejection.

Externalize and specify: “The hiring manager chose someone with an MBA and 10 years more experience.”

“They ghosted me, because I’m a schlub with no future.”



When you hear nothing, you fill in the blank with the most personally damaging hypothesis.

Remind yourself of the likely reality: Hiring managers are inundated with résumés right now.

“I absorb every rejection as a personal wound.”



You experience minor rebuffs and critiques as deeply personal rejections, and overreact accordingly.

Respond to precisely what was said (“Your interview skills could use improvement”) not to your translation (“I’m terrible at this and they hate me”).

“I’m still thinking about the rejection from three weeks ago.”



You replay and re-analyze rejection—behavior that’s associated with mental-health challenges.

Stop ruminating. Let yourself feel the sting—and move on.

WHY IS REJECTION SO PAINFUL?

We all understand why one perfectly talented and skilled job candidate might receive hundreds of rejections. Yet why is it so hard to gracefully endure the process? It turns out that in other countries, the job market is not quite so brutal on candidates’ mental health. In Israel, for example, hiring is generally seen as based on qualifications, professional experiences, and skills—to a fault, says Sharone, who has studied both the US and Israeli job markets. Cover letters are rare. In the US, of course, “it’s a chemistry game,” he says. “People think that what really matters is making employers like the person behind the résumé.” Networking, a tiring and painful process for many, becomes mandatory.

Repeated job-search rejections tend to distort how accomplished and talented people see themselves—and how they may perform at their next job. Some begin internalizing the voice of the job descriptions, so much so that their own voices begin to disappear. “It’s a kind of professional-identity whiplash,” says Golda Inquito, founder of career-advisory firm The Talent Treehouse.

Meanwhile, months of being ignored have

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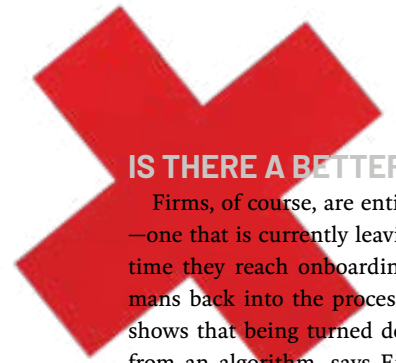


“Early in the hiring process, **filter in** rather than filter out candidates.”

“Early in the hiring process, we want to filter in rather than filter out candidates,” to gather as big a qualified funnel as possible, says Karena Man, senior client partner in the Technology and Digital practice at Korn Ferry. This means catching traits like potential, which might be hidden amid a candidate’s unorthodox mid-career pivot, or experience in two unrelated fields that together are useful. Humans are excellent at reading those signals. For instance, if an applicant grew up working at the family restaurant, a human will immediately grasp that they likely understand more about customer service than most retail executives. But a bot will reject the applicant’s résumé due to their lack of formal customer-service experience.

reshaped candidates’ attitudes toward employers. This is particularly true of early-career workers, who already tend to see the system as broken and impersonal, and cast a cynical eye on the corporate world, says career-transition researcher Berrin Erdogan, professor of management at Portland State University. Long before onboarding, the candidate already sees their relationship with their employer as transactional, she says: “They are starting to look at their job as only a paycheck.”

When an American applicant finally does get hired, they often have weathered months of capricious-seeming AI screenings, cold rejections, and ghostings. “They are starting their jobs as survivors, feeling exhausted and depleted,” says Erdogan.



IS THERE A BETTER WAY?

Firms, of course, are entirely in control of the hiring process—one that is currently leaving new hires as basket cases by the time they reach onboarding. Researchers advise bringing humans back into the process early and often, as emerging data shows that being turned down is more hurtful when it comes from an algorithm, says Erdogan. “The dynamic is especially problematic with AI-driven video interviews,” she says.

Human screening happens to align with best hiring practices.

Though the problems of the job-application process are systemic, Sharone notes, their roots can be narrowed down to the 15 seconds of consideration that most applicants receive. If he could wave a magic wand, he says, he would have employers spend more time reviewing applications. “We already know that who works in the organization is everything. So don’t you want to invest more in a process that leads you to bring in the best people?”

As for Alan, he did indeed survive his job search. His first task with Imhoff, his career coach, was not retooling his résumé, but retooling his self-talk and self-perception. “No one is going to bet on you if you don’t feel you’re worth the bet,” says Imhoff. Together, they reshaped his résumé to give it a point of view. Alan landed a couple of interviews, and began hearing back about genuinely exciting opportunities. Within two months, he landed a role that met his compensation needs and promised a reasonable work-life balance. He took the leap.

Hiring experts note that this moment—when the candidate’s rejection crisis is seemingly over—will require extra attention. Once a job is accepted, relationship building must commence immediately, long before onboarding. “If an organization remains distant or bureaucratic during this transition, the initial cynicism can turn into disengagement,” says Erdogan. Think warmth and human contact, with intentional investment in relationship building. In an era of rejection, it may be the wisest next step for employers. ■

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