

Summary of Advice from Recruiter + Hiring Manager Roundtable | October 21st, 2025

This session brought together recruiters and hiring managers to discuss what happens behind the scenes during hiring, from initial application through final selection. The panel provided practical, candid advice on how candidates can strengthen their applications, communicate more effectively, and stand out in a competitive market.

Speakers:

- Joshua Jutton, Talent Acquisition Leader, Fujifilm Biotechnologies
- Bradley McMillan, Senior Recruiter & Owner, RPM ReSearch
- Alice Pilo, Associate Principal Scientist and Director of Biologics Analytical R&D, Merck
- Cameron Coates, Senior Staff Talent Acquisition Specialist, R&D, Illumina

Key Takeaways

- Tailor everything: Customize each resume to the job and use the company's own language.
- Prioritize clarity: Keep resumes organized, concise, and impactful, especially in the first third of the page.
- Prepare deeply: Practice behavioral questions and interview responses well in advance.
- Network actively: Reach out professionally and leverage connections to increase visibility.
- Show authenticity: Positivity and individuality help candidates stand out.
- Keep improving: Maintain a master resume or professional journal detailing all your skills and accomplishments, and continue developing communication and technical breadth.
- Don't get discouraged: Rejection often reflects timing and competition, not ability.
- Do not pay a recruiter a fee yourself. Reputable recruiters are paid by companies.

1. Understanding the Hiring Process

- Applications typically enter an applicant tracking system (ATS) such as Workday. Recruiters screen for alignment with job requirements before forwarding selected candidates to hiring managers.

- Hiring managers may receive 50 or more applications at a time, often in condensed packets. They look for resumes that are streamlined, easy to navigate, and that highlight relevant qualifications.
 - The process often includes a phone or video screen (around 30 minutes), followed by a panel interview involving multiple team members.
 - Large companies sometimes use internal referrals or recommendations to identify promising candidates.
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2. Tailoring Applications

- Candidates should customize each resume to the position, using key terms from the job description. Recruiters often scan for those specific keywords when shortlisting applicants.
 - Applicants should avoid sending a generic resume to multiple roles. Spending effort on a few high-quality, well-targeted applications is more effective than mass-applying.
 - Even small customizations-such as emphasizing skills directly related to the posting-can improve success rates.
 - Over-reliance on AI screening systems is a misconception; most organizations still have recruiters manually review applications, but keyword alignment still matters.
 - Keyword alignment to the job description is important - using the employer's wording increases the chance of a match during initial screening. However, the idea that AI will auto-reject most candidates is a misnomer for many large organizations; human review still dominates, and privacy rules often prevent fully automated auto-rejection.
 - Do not apply to multiple roles with similar materials – this is often seen by the same individual within the company and creates a bad impression. Better to submit around five carefully tailored applications than 20 generic ones.
 - Current market conditions were described as employer-favoring (less candidate-friendly) at the time, so persistence and networking are important.
 - Timing matters - recruiters often do not know what roles will open months ahead; being in a candidate pool (i.e., being kept on file following an unsuccessful application) or following up can help when roles appear.
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3. How to Format CVs and Resumes

- The first third of the resume is high-value real estate; it should contain the most relevant and impressive information.

- A strong executive summary functions as an elevator pitch, concisely explaining what the candidate does and why they are distinctive. It should be written clearly and confidently but not waste space on obvious statements like “I’m seeking a position in...”. Long paragraph-form summaries are discouraged.
 - Candidates can maintain a long-form “master” resume or journal—even up to 30 pages—containing all accomplishments and experiences. Each application can then be pared down to a tailored, concise version emphasizing relevance.
 - Recruiters and hiring managers appreciate clear organization and formatting. Information should be condensed and easy to find.
 - Including a single personal line (e.g., a hobby or brief personal interest) can help candidates stand out and show personality, but it should not dominate the document.
 - Keep core competencies bullets short and limited - suggested around six bullets, possibly in two columns to save space. Long sentences and paragraphs get lost.
 - Examples of equipment/technical items that can be listed in core competencies (for lab roles) include specific instruments such as LX3 and Hamilton liquid handlers - these should be included if relevant.
 - If a role requires on-site presence or local candidates, put relocation willingness at the top of the resume (e.g., "willing to relocate") so it is visible on first glance.
 - A specific article called the "Keystone Resume" was mentioned as a practical resource for creating multiple, tailored resumes:
<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/revolutionizing-your-resume-insights-keystone-resume-mcmillan-qyzse/>
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4. Cover Letters

- Cover letters are rarely prioritized; most recruiters focus on the resume first and do not have time to read cover letters.
 - If included, a cover letter must be error-free, well-written, and tailored to the correct company. Submitting a generic or mismatched cover letter (e.g., addressed to a different employer) creates a very negative impression.
 - They are useful mainly when providing specific context that is not obvious from the CV—such as explaining a relocation, a career transition, or a cross-disciplinary move.
 - If a cover letter is not used, the resume’s executive summary can effectively serve as the introduction.
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5. Preparing for Interviews

- Candidates should prepare thoroughly—roughly three hours of preparation for each one-hour interview is a good benchmark.
 - Preparation should include practicing examples of behavioral questions, such as:
 - “Tell me about a time you made a mistake.”
 - “Describe a situation where you had to do something you weren’t trained for.”
 - “Share an example of resolving workplace conflict.”
 - Having well-thought-out stories ready reduces stress and helps candidates respond clearly and confidently.
 - Prepare and rehearse behavioral examples (conflict, mistakes, learning, untrained tasks) so answers are ready and concise; many candidates who could get the job fail to present themselves well because they did not practice.
 - For virtual interviews, being on camera correlates with a higher pass-through rate; practice being on camera to build comfort.
 - Applicants should practice concise, “elevator pitch”-level explanations of their work—enough to show expertise without overwhelming detail.
 - On interview answers about mistakes - honesty and showing learning/response is the desirable approach.
 - The STARCH (sometimes referenced as "starch principle") structure was recommended for explaining transferable skills or examples in interviews and written communication:
 - Situation - describe the context
 - Task - describe what was to be accomplished
 - Action - list the specific actions taken
 - Result - give the outcome
 - Change - note what would be done differently
 - Examples built using STARCH should be concise - aim for 1 to 3 minutes when spoken - and show why a skill is transferable.
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6. What Hiring Managers and Recruiters Look For

- Beyond technical qualifications, recruiters and hiring managers seek candidates who appear motivated, collaborative, and adaptable.
- A positive, professional demeanor can strongly influence perceptions. While the process aims to be objective, hiring decisions still depend on personal impression and fit within the team.
- Candidates are evaluated on both hard skills and soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving.
- The ability to translate deep technical expertise into accessible, big-picture language is highly valued.

- Recruiters often act as a candidate’s “resume with a pulse” - they supply conversational notes, behavioral/communication assessments, and explain relevance to hiring managers. Recruiters may ask candidates to update their resume to better match a role and will present both what is on the resume and what is not. Recruiters may also proactively source candidates (search databases, LinkedIn, publications) rather than only work from submitted applications.
 - Recruiters and hiring managers consider what is on the job description and what is missing from a CV - they look for experience that should logically accompany a candidate’s background but may not be shown. Showing impact (saved time, saved money, improved processes) strengthens a recruiter’s case for a candidate.
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7. Communicating and Networking

- Networking remains one of the most effective job search strategies. Many roles are filled through connections or referrals rather than cold applications.
 - Reaching out to recruiters or employees on LinkedIn is encouraged, as long as messages are polite and concise. Sharing your resume directly can sometimes lead to internal referrals.
 - Reach out to company recruiters or employees on LinkedIn with a polite, concise message and the resume; internal employees and recruiters often will pass along resumes to hiring teams.
 - Persistence matters—candidates should not get discouraged by rejections. The current market favors employers, but hiring conditions fluctuate over time.
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8. Applicant Eligibility and Role Targeting

- Companies are often willing to consider candidates who are near completion of their PhD, especially when a graduation date is set.
 - Flexibility varies by organization, but strong candidates can sometimes negotiate start dates around expected graduation.
 - For PhD holders or postdocs without industry experience, consider applying for roles aligned to demonstrated skills; sometimes a step back or base-level industry role is necessary to build relevant experience. Postdoc years are useful if used to build applicable skills; they do not automatically translate into senior-level industry standing.
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9. Certifications, GLP, and Language Precision

- Early-career candidates are encouraged to gain exposure to regulatory and quality standards (e.g., GLP experience in preclinical research) to broaden their qualifications.
 - In some fields, board certifications or specific credentials can be more valuable than academic titles in certain contexts - example given: sitting for DABT toxicology boards can be highly valuable, possibly more so than a PhD or postdoc for certain roles. Seek GLP lab experience early if relevant.
 - If a role requires GLP (Good Laboratory Practice) experience, do not use hedging phrases like "GLP-like" - that undermines credibility. Use precise and honest wording.
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10. Maintaining a Professional Journal

- Keeping a career journal or record of achievements is highly beneficial. This helps track experiences for future resume tailoring and provides reflection on growth over time.
 - Maintain a professional journal (weekly or biweekly) documenting projects, assumptions, accomplishments, lessons learned - then translate those entries into resume bullets and interview examples. This helps build the long-form resume and provides material for STARCH-style stories.
 - Journaling can improve clarity, writing, and long-term professional storytelling.
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11. Using AI and Technology

- Many large organizations restrict the use of public AI tools like ChatGPT due to data privacy concerns.
 - Some have internal AI systems designed for proprietary use.
 - Candidates should be aware that while AI may support parts of the process, human review remains central.
 - Many organizations restrict use of public AI tools due to data privacy concerns; some have internal AI tools. Candidates should be aware of these policies when referring to AI skills or outputs.
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12. Miscellaneous Advice

- Positivity and professionalism leave lasting impressions in interviews.
- Bringing personality into interviews helps establish connection and memorability.

- Hiring decisions are often influenced by perceived “fit” with team culture as much as technical competence.
 - Guidance on where to place relocation willingness and equipment lists on a CV.
 - Mention of the "Keystone Resume" article and that the speaker intended to post the LinkedIn/article link in chat.
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