

Driving Digital Recruiting in Higher Education: A Guide to Automation and AI

Introduction

Recruiting in the higher education sector has long been characterized by a very particular set of challenges and opportunities. Shallow talent pools, unpredictable fluctuations in funding, bureaucratic hoops to jump through and increased competition from both the private sector and other universities make hiring for your higher education institution anything but straightforward.

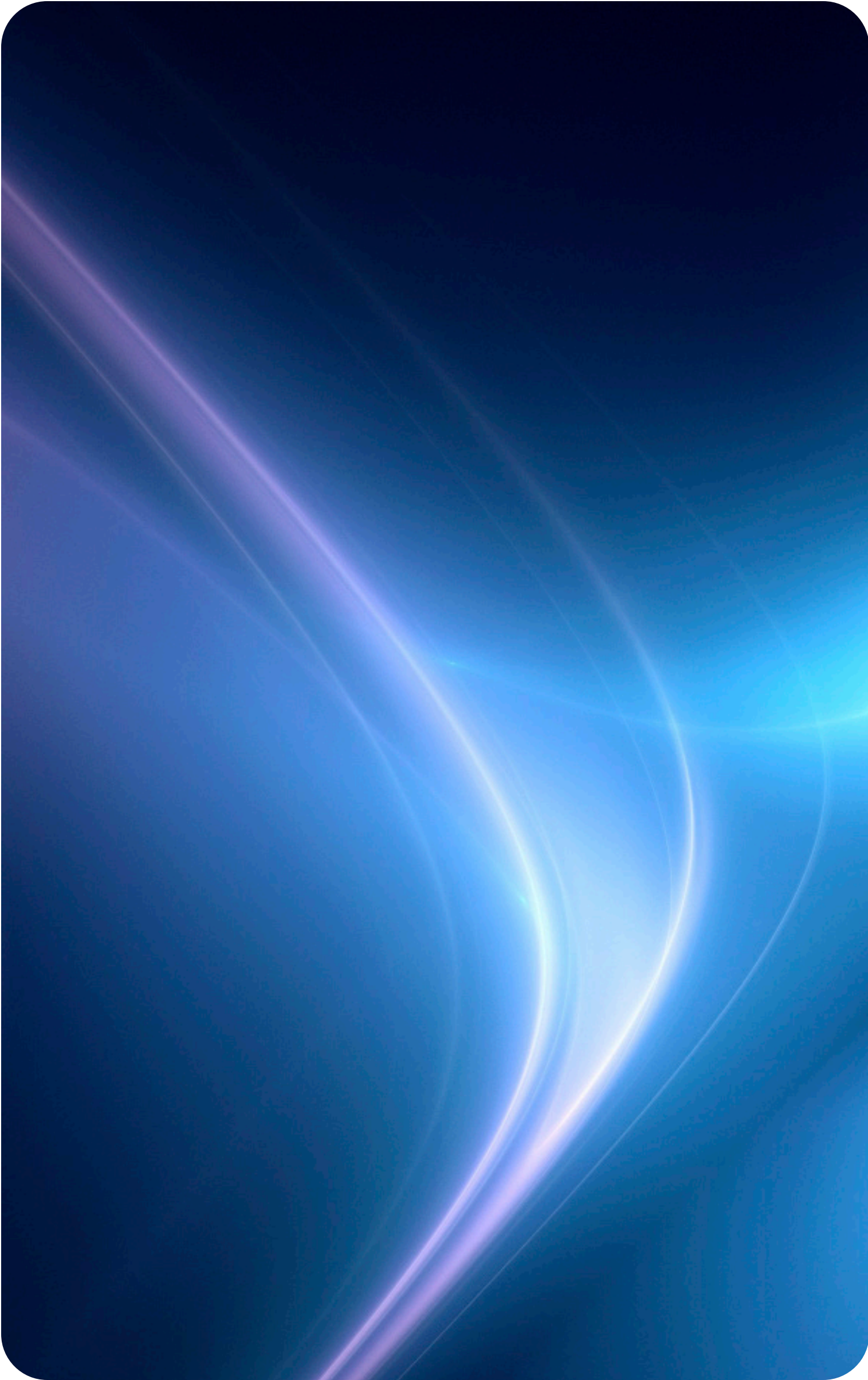
However, there are also advantages that can be exploited, some of which are almost unique to the higher education sector, where success is not measured by what you or your organization earns but rather by what you contribute.

When pitted in a lopsided battle against corporate giants for the finest minds, recruitment teams have found success in appealing to people's passions and sense of belonging rather than just their pockets. Leveraging this advantage requires insight and nuance. Doing so at scale requires automation.

Whether engaging talent through customizable career sites showcasing campus culture, preventing in-demand candidates from being poached amid a lengthy hiring process, or pulling up and sharing DEI statistics with top brass, the increased efficiency and improved stakeholder

experience offered by automation can be, for many university and college recruitment teams, truly game-changing.

From heads of faculty to student support officers, canteen staff and post-doc researchers, bringing the right people into your community requires the human touch. By automating the burdensome admin that can tie recruiters down, you free them to perform the personalized, value-added tasks that really make a difference.



Strategic Automation in Higher Education

Historically, software automation has focused on increasing the efficiency of existing processes in order to lower costs. This singular aim gave rise to the all-encompassing Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems that dominate corporate software budgets to this day.

However, the challenges specific to the higher education sector call for automation that goes beyond mere efficiency savings and must instead support agility and innovation to meet the needs of an evolving talent landscape.

The need for agility makes it essential to focus on automation that can optimize new services quickly, change outcomes and help you to outperform competitors as demands change. This is the objective of digital transformation.

While there is no question that automation is a worthwhile investment, it is critical to identify the areas where it can have the most significant impact.

Improving automation for payroll will save money but will not put you ahead of your competitors.

Deploying automation together with new technologies, such as machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI), expands capabilities and may even support the creation of new services as needs evolve.

In this e-book, we'll look at the role automation and AI play in HR transformation in higher education institutions, specifically recruiting.

We'll also analyze these advancements as part of modern technology-enabled business models, such as the platform approach to digital service delivery. Understanding the shift to such models is essential for HR teams that are serious about successfully driving meaningful change in their organizations.

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Moving with the Times: The Case for Cutting-Edge Automation

Since the days of hanging a sign and waiting for prospects to appear to the introduction of the online database, recruiting has evolved in lockstep with technology. Long gone are the days when recruiters would merely publish a vacancy and wait for applications to pour in.

Today, you want your teams to spend their time:



Building an employer **value proposition** and promoting your employer brand.



Connecting with passive candidates and **building talent pipelines**.



Analyzing data to demonstrate program performance.



Delivering a **standout experience at scale**.



Advertising **job opportunities**.



Helping **new hires adapt**.

All of this now needs to be done at a scale that was not previously imaginable and doesn't always feel possible.

Whether looking to bring in faculty or support staff, recruiting teams are often left with an excessive number of resumes to screen, interviews to schedule and phone calls and emails to manage, preventing them from meeting key talent objectives on time. Couple this with a faculty recruiting process that will likely include numerous stakeholders and even the hardest-working recruiters will struggle if their technology is now failing to deliver.

While old-school recruiting is no longer an option, newer scalable marketing-oriented recruiting that can help you thrive in the “attention economy” seems beyond your grasp.

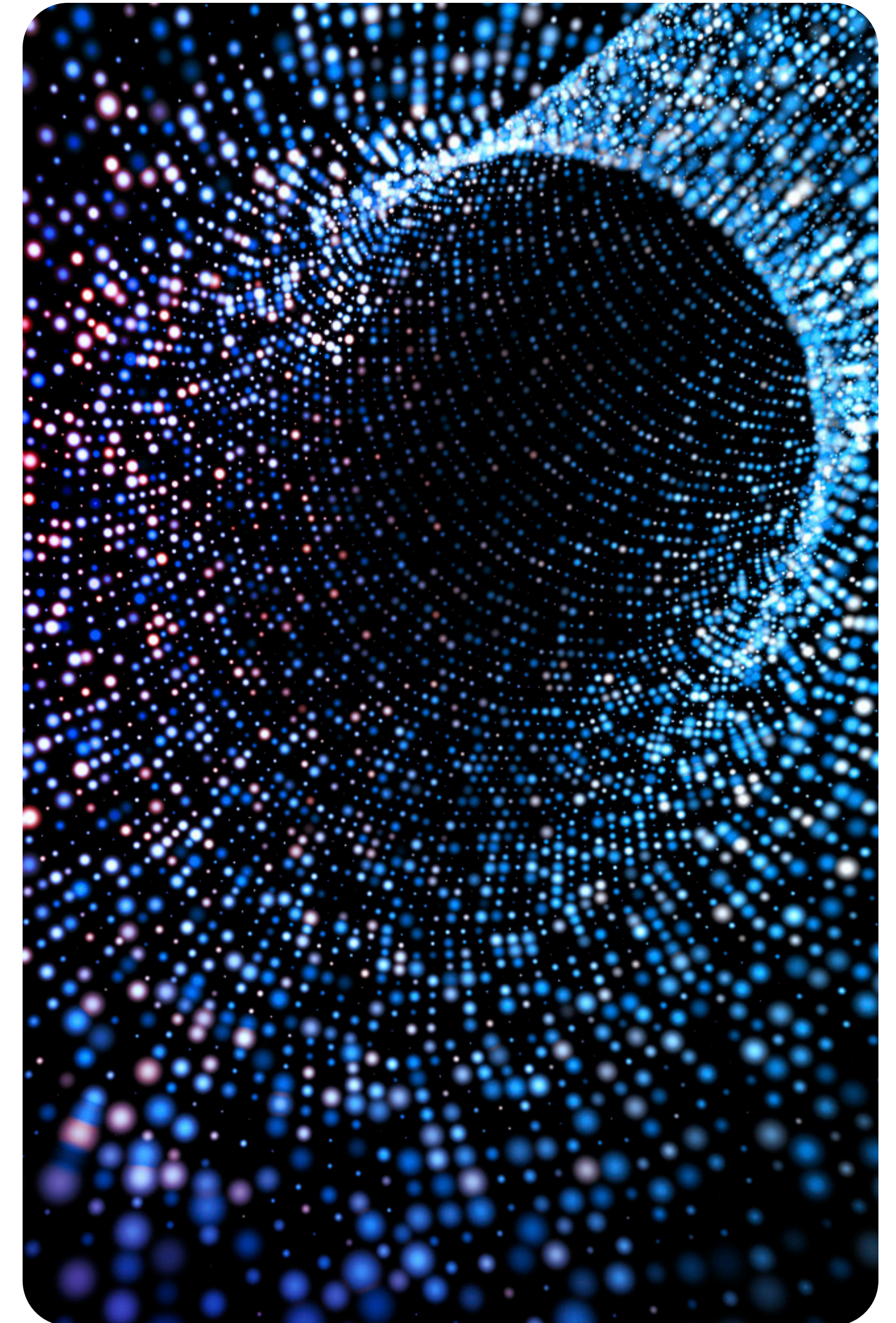
On top of that, new trends such as the consumer internet have given rise to elevated expectations and the demand for enhanced candidate experiences. Teams are dealing with volume and competition as the balance of power has shifted to favor candidates.

Many recruiting teams are finding that they still can't deliver the desired user experience despite having squeezed what they could from outdated legacy ERP solutions before replacing them with a tangled toolbox of mix-and-match solutions.

At this point, many higher education institutions realize that they have exhausted all ROI, automation and efficiency gains from their legacy recruiting systems. This is because legacy automation does not support the modern marketing-based practices of high-powered recruiting. Nor does it support digital service delivery and agility.

This is what we have learned from most customers who come to Avature. The automation provided by their current technology does not enable them to effectively search, screen and communicate with candidates at scale, let alone create digital experiences that help them outperform competitors in an increasingly tight market.

The shortfalls of their existing automated systems have become a strategic risk that cannot be ignored. The best alternative is to research, learn about and evaluate new technology.



An Iterative Approach

Automating intelligently means recognizing that it is an ongoing process. As soon as it delivers results, it's time to identify the next optimization opportunity and your technology must be flexible enough to keep up. This agile mindset must also permeate your workforce if you are to be truly successful.

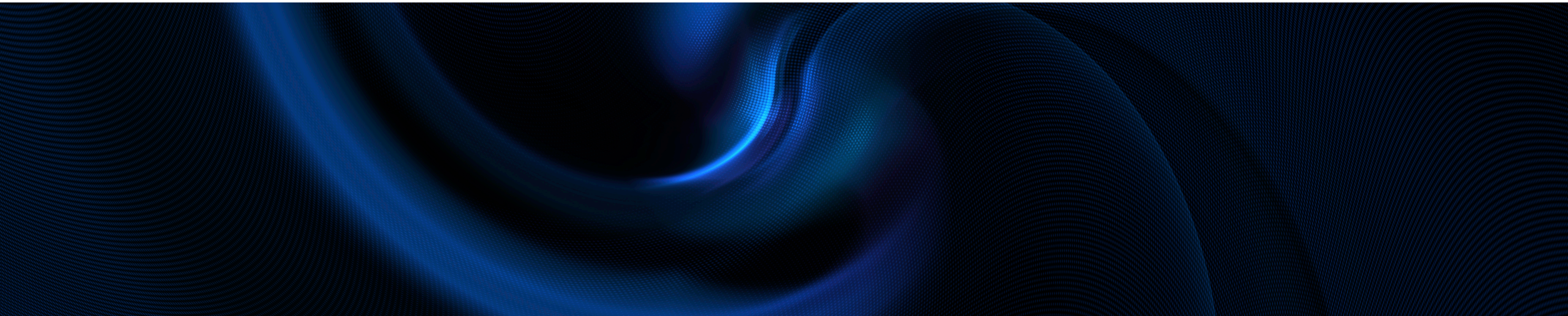
Unsurprisingly, the organizations setting the bar for this approach hold their managers accountable, evaluating their ability to leverage technology and advance their automation capability to get ahead of the pack.

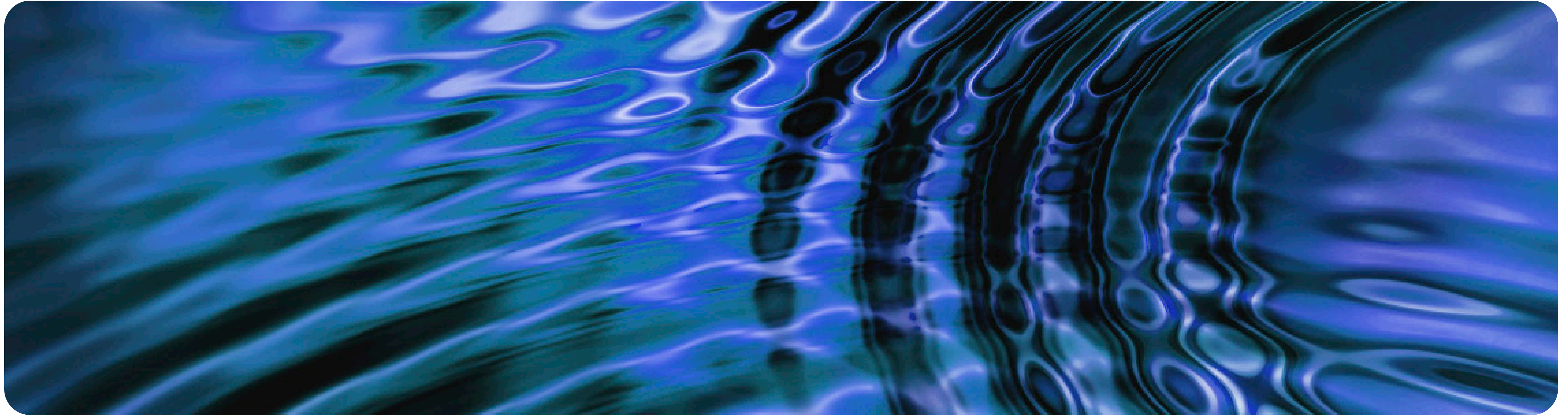
As you focus on providing continuous improvement, new technologies can help drive further efficiency, value and scalability. That is certainly the case for AI, especially as skills define a new talent framework. Some of the most forward-thinking companies are already transitioning to a skills-based approach that wouldn't be possible at scale without AI-based automation.

As we said earlier, cobbling different solutions together doesn't solve the critical deficiencies of ERP systems because data ends up scattered across multiple, disconnected places.

Instead, adopting a platform approach and finding the right partner can support process evolution and ensure that new technology, such as AI, is incorporated into the platform in an organized way so that it scales and delivers ROI without disrupting operations.

It's for this reason our customers driving the most profound digital and HR transformations favor the platform approach Avature enables, as it allows them to deploy a cohesive set of best-of-breed solutions that use a single database.





The Ripple Effect

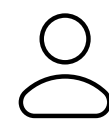
Beyond the traditional objectives of cost reduction and time savings, automation and AI in recruiting today should provide your recruiters with customized experiences and tools that allow them to perform better and deliver a higher quality of service.

Empowering HR teams is unlike any other productivity-enhancing effort: it ripples through the entire organization. That is why organizations with strong HR capabilities outperform their peers.

In the following chapters, we will highlight the recruiting use cases where AI-based automation

delivers the most value for our customers in the higher education sector. You will learn the attributes to look for in a successful platform, best practices for its effective implementation and how to set the right expectations for your technology partner.

Let's jump in.



Angela Baker

Sr. Business Analyst & Technical
Administrator, University of Colorado
Boulder

“Since implementing Avature, we’ve been able to achieve many benefits across the board. Things like **more robust data mining and compliance, better candidate care and happier end users**, since now people feel they have a system that really supports their needs.”

Workflow:

The Automation Powerhouse

Legacy system automation focused on forcing customers to fit their recruiting processes into a single workflow. Why? Because it's a lot easier to build a system with one workflow than it is to build a system that allows users to create any number of unique workflows.

Twenty years ago, a single online workflow seemed innovative if it worked in a browser. That was in the post-and-pray era, before CRM, before recruiters honed their marketing skills.

Today, a single workflow is a straitjacket that prevents higher education institutions from using a role-by-role approach to recruiting and prevents an application from becoming a platform.

The legacy view of automation forced a lot of off-system workarounds, especially for higher education institutions with unique processes, but regulatory changes have since made these workarounds highly risky.

Staffing in higher education institutions stands out from other sectors because of the exceptional need for specifically qualified professionals, thorough background checks, and commitment to representing the diverse community they serve, all the while embodying the academy's core values in the face of public scrutiny.

When recruiting and managing staff, higher education institutions must weigh these factors carefully, while remaining efficient enough to fend off competitors poaching the best talent.

Additionally, recruiters need to be free to work differently in different markets to reach their goals.

Communications, approvals, notifications and data updates all need to be different when recruiting for faculty or administrative roles, particularly when we want an expansive process scope to be automated.

One size has never fit all. More than ever, higher education institutions need technology that adapts to their specific needs as they evolve, not software that forces them to adapt to its limitations.

When presented with flexible data models and fully customizable workflows, recruiters can configure a system that truly fits their processes and automates away the burden of highly repetitive tasks.

“At the university, the offer letter generation process is critical because we have numerous hire types. With a simplified offer form and conditions for the workflow step, we **made it very simple for the recruiters.**

They only have to focus on serving the candidate and filling in the form and the right offer letter gets attached to the candidate and we’re able to send it out as an email. That has **definitely saved us a lot of errors and manual tasks.**”

Crafting Stakeholder Experiences with Portal Apps

CHROs of higher education institutions consistently identify poor collaboration as a barrier to efficient recruiting. Thus, implementing technology that makes it easier for stakeholders to review candidates, provide feedback and move them to the next step can significantly speed up the overall recruiting process.

This is where portal apps come in. These highly intuitive branded web applications provide users with the access necessary to carry out specific platform processes and update data only as instructed.

When designed with user experience in mind, they significantly reduce the need for training while ensuring compliance because users are given the information relevant only to the task at hand within the platform environment.

Let's take hiring managers (HM) as an example.

Nobody is a full-time HM, and they tend to juggle recruiting-related tasks with an already intense schedule. When you consider that a recent CUPAHR survey¹ reported filling empty posts was the most difficult challenge facing supervisors in the higher education sector, then the need for smooth, effective tools only increases.

If you can't give HM access to a user-friendly portal app, you're forced to depend on traditional channels, like email, or ask them to log in to your ATS, which is time-consuming, overly complex, and can interfere with their primary tasks. Furthermore, recruiters are best utilized when spending their time focusing on finding and engaging talent instead of chasing HMs.

Picture a head of faculty logging into a simplified portal that displays their pending tasks at a glance, and then completing them in just a few clicks.

Enhancing their experience can drive recruiting efficiency by enabling swifter action on their end and reducing needless back-and-forth with recruiters.



All in all, the experience enabled by portal apps can give more time back to recruiters and hiring managers to strengthen their partnership by streamlining:



Handoffs

Through automated notifications and step changes that keep every stakeholder in the loop and aware of their pending tasks.



Scheduling

By allowing interview participants to provide their availability and having the platform find a matching slot.



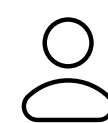
Process optimization

By displaying relevant metrics about response time, candidate approval rate and conversion rates.

Along the same line, HR executives are better served with a bespoke portal rich in real-time dashboards showing key metrics about program efficiency.

A fully customizable portal simplifies their view of the enterprise application, leading to improved response times and faster optimization.

“For the hiring managers, we have everything in **one beautiful portal**. They know exactly which section they have to go in order **to see candidates, to assess candidates** to screen candidates or even at the end of the process to initiate the approval of the whole process.”



Peter-Alexander Weprich

Senior HR Solutions Analyst, European Central Bank



Industry Leaders in Action

When faced with the monumental challenges brought on by the Great Rehire, one top US university looked at its team of four to six recruiters and saw they were in desperate need of support. Not only was the scale of the job more than the team could manage alone, but the shift in candidate expectations had added an extra layer of difficulty to an already tough task.

However, by working with the team, the university was able to identify areas where efficiency could be improved through automation.

New requisitions would now trigger job-specific workflows for faculty or administrative roles. The use of role-specific knockout questions for auto dispositioning, meanwhile, helped the TA team prioritize qualified candidates in high-volume cases.

Automated email notifications and user-friendly portals kept candidates, approvers and hiring managers in the loop and the process moving, while a new offer letter generation process, using preconfigured dynamic templates, helped save recruiters time and put offers in the hands of candidates before any competitors could do the same.

The results were spectacular. Despite a 47% increase in the number of openings from the previous year, this small team managed to achieve 37% increase in new hires while reducing time-to-fill.



Career Sites: An ATS Workhorse

While less likely to be the case for faculty staff, for other roles your career site may be your candidates' first point of contact with your employer brand.

A higher education institution prides itself on the community it creates and its passionate sense of purpose. Therefore, your career site should leverage this to drive the highest number of quality applications.

Measuring this is not by no means trivial.

Figuring out what maximizes conversion can take more work. If you could get to the bottom of this, you would probably discover that automation plays a significant role in visitors' behavior.

Style and brand are critical on today's web elements of the websites of today; the more control you have over them, the better.

You need a certain degree of automation to maintain identity over an extended period of time.

The landscape of the internet is constantly evolving. Websites designed five years ago look like sites designed five years ago. Today, shadows are out, big fonts are in, and transitions are different.

Content is essential for SEO and generating reader interest, especially in the attention economy. As bandwidth and performance have improved, video content has taken over websites. However, adding and removing content from a webpage is only easy if you have the tools to do it. In this context, content management automation is essential.

Robust content management systems (CMS) that facilitate updating content on the fly remove any reliance on your vendor or technical teams to make changes.

In turn, this eliminates associated costs and delays in doing so.

You may or may not need control over page layout since it will not change that often. However, full control of the website design may be helpful for HR organizations with big digital support teams.

Regarding access controls and processes, most applications require workflow and user accounts with permissions. This brings us back to portal apps. Career sites are big portal apps where lots of processing needs to take place. Some companies view them as part of the ATS, while others choose to separate them. If you have a legacy ATS, you probably have no choice but to separate them.

In that case, you're going to need a big integration, leading to a loss in agility at a critical stage of recruiting.

AI can be used everywhere and we talk about it below as a stand-alone capability in enterprise applications, but in the context of career sites, what are the most relevant AI features?

In the quest to deliver enhanced personalization and candidate experiences, AI can offer visitors:



Intelligent recommendations of jobs based on a candidate's skills, location, work experience, career preferences and past behavior on the site.



Dynamic content that adapts as the candidate interacts and navigates.



Live search providing an intuitive Google-like search experience through dropdown options that complete the search string.

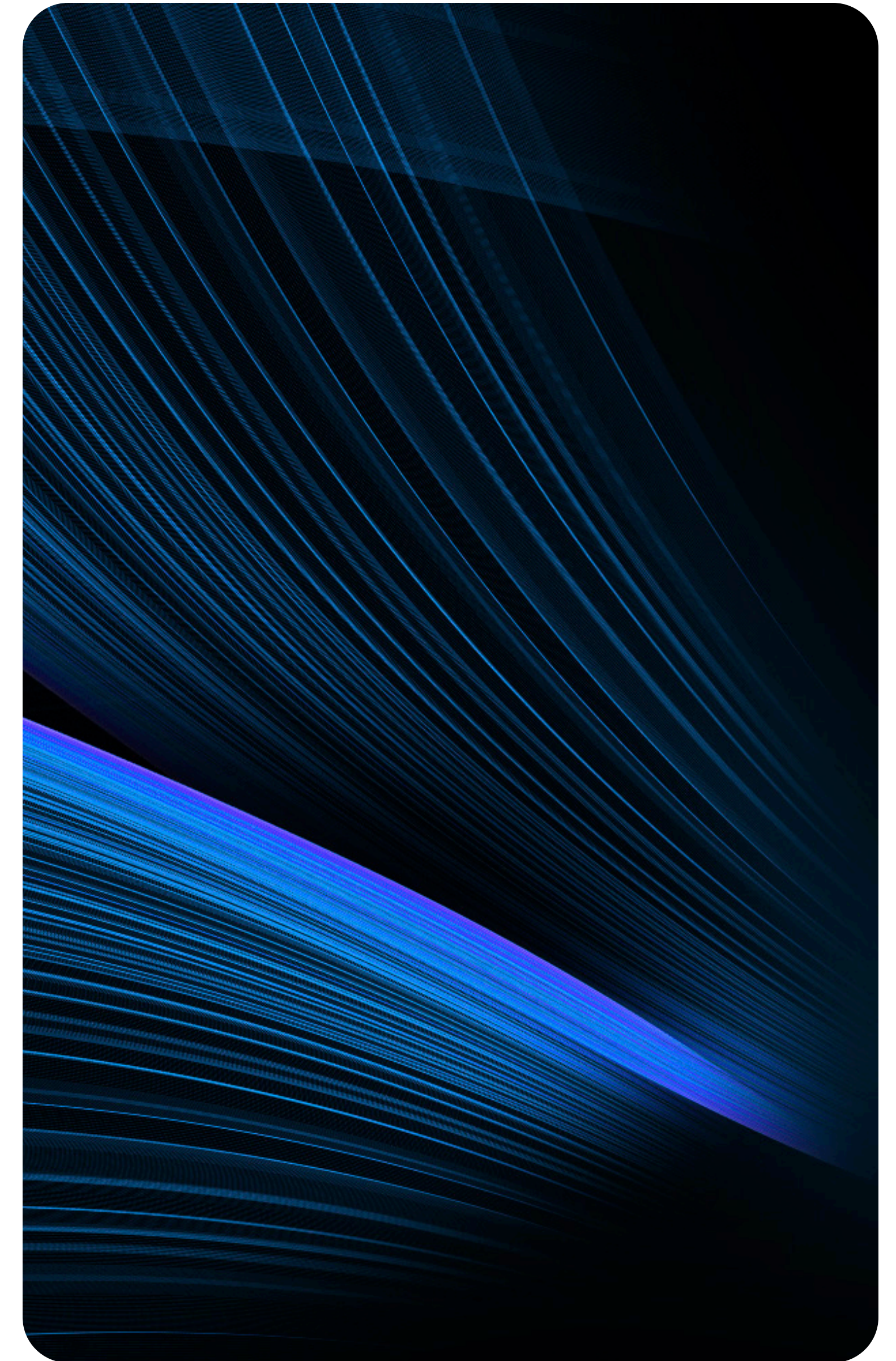
When the career site experience resembles the consumer experience, you're more likely to meet candidate expectations.

Chatbots are another valuable and frequent application of AI in recruiting, mostly used to answer predefined questions that commonly arise when candidates navigate a career site.

Being able to address common questions in real time can encourage application submission.

Finally, there is the issue of performance, which takes on an extra dimension when referring to career sites.

Demand may be hard to predict, but you will need to know your site's benchmarks and performance curve and make sure that no matter what you do, you stay within market-acceptable response times for your expected traffic.



The Application Process

The prevailing idea within the Avature community is that the candidate experience starts at the career site and ends when it transitions into an employee experience.

The application process represents an essential part of this journey. While drop-off rates will vary across industries and organizations, lengthy and tedious processes that fail to prioritize the applicant's experience will consistently work against you.

Granted, some jobs require a lengthy application process, but the question is, does the candidate need to do all this in one sitting? The correct answer is 'not always'. Heads of Faculty are more likely to expect a more detailed process, and janitors are probably more comfortable with a short on-your-feet application process.

You are not taking advantage of automation if your automation dictates a one-size-fits-all

application process. Hard-coded application processes are complex to optimize and can only be changed through a software development life cycle.

In contrast, applications configured from building blocks (think workflow engine) are easy to reconfigure. This is why your career site applications should be an extension of the workflows used to process candidates: flexible and highly configurable.

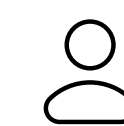
In our experience, the colleges and universities with the highest conversion rates focus on delivering bespoke application experiences for different audience segments, whether faculty or administrative staff, and with increased granularity depending on the role and contract type.

Additionally, they remove the requirement for manual data entry early on when possible, by letting automation and AI parse personal details,

work history and skills from resumes and social media profiles.

Any gaps can be filled later in the hiring process. In fact, the best recruiters see these as opportunities for engagement—a chance for conversation that can clarify doubts while bringing applicants closer to your organization.

“Avature really allows you to create conditions that alter the workflow to **get the output you need.”**



Jeffrey Stitt

Senior System Configuration Specialist,
University of Colorado Boulder

Communication

With 80% of the respondents to an HR Dive study² saying they wanted faster response times from recruiters and 61% of candidates stating they have experienced recruiters who vanish³, even after an interview has taken place, communication is the primary cause for a negative candidate experience.

This is another pain point that can be alleviated with automation.

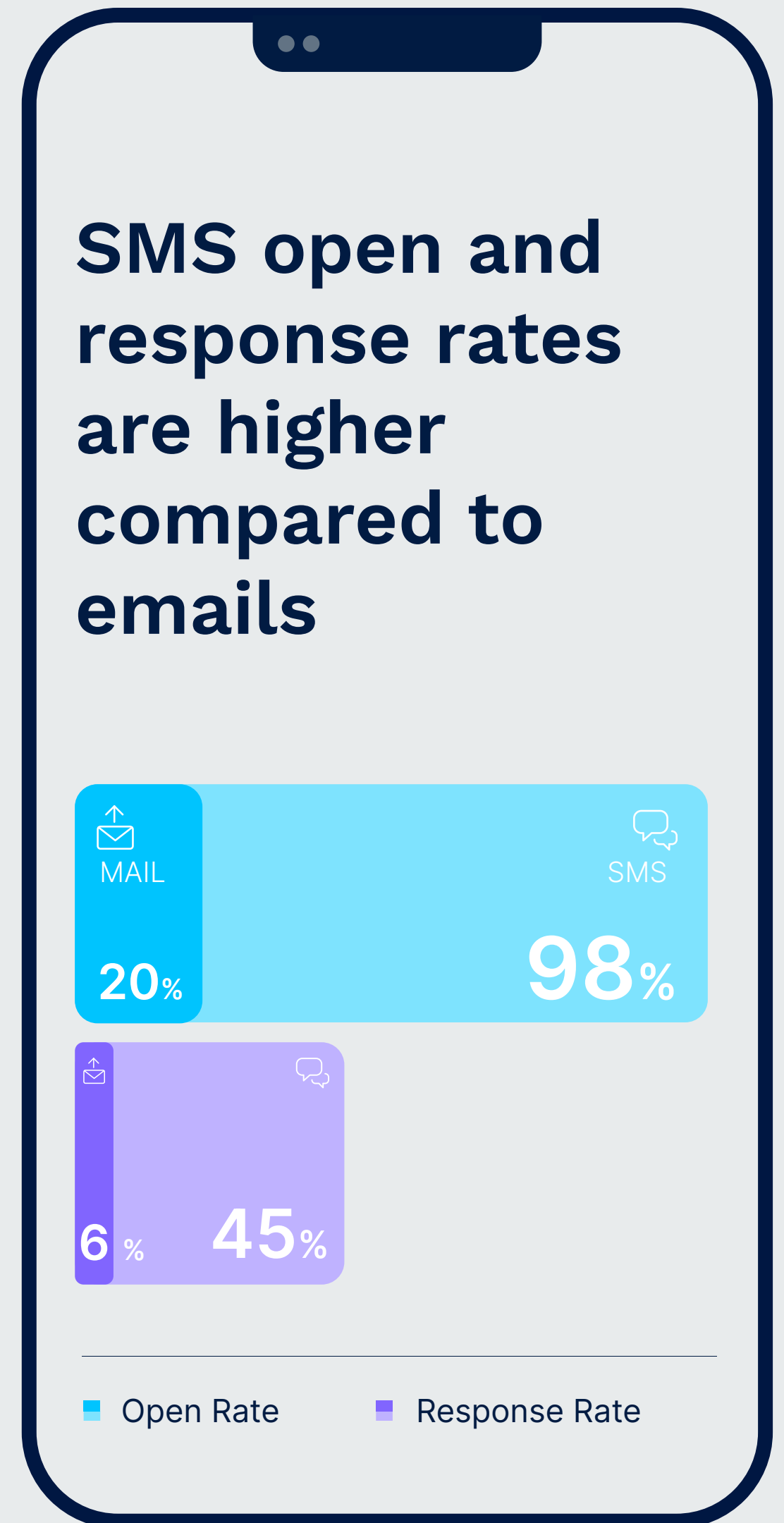
The most successful institutions tap into configurable workflows to set up pre-defined, tailored communications for candidates moving through different recruiting processes to ensure transparency without burdening recruiters with setting reminders or sending emails or messages.

The candidate experience can be further enhanced by asking candidates about their preferred communication channel and using it to keep them in the loop.

For example, SMS open and response rates are as high as 98% and 45%, respectively, compared to 20% and 6% for emails.⁴

This isn't to say that your communication strategy should omit email communication.

However, it reinforces the importance of choosing a platform that pairs flexible automation capabilities with SMS, WhatsApp and other messaging integrations to leverage the effectiveness of mobile communication.

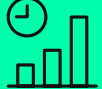


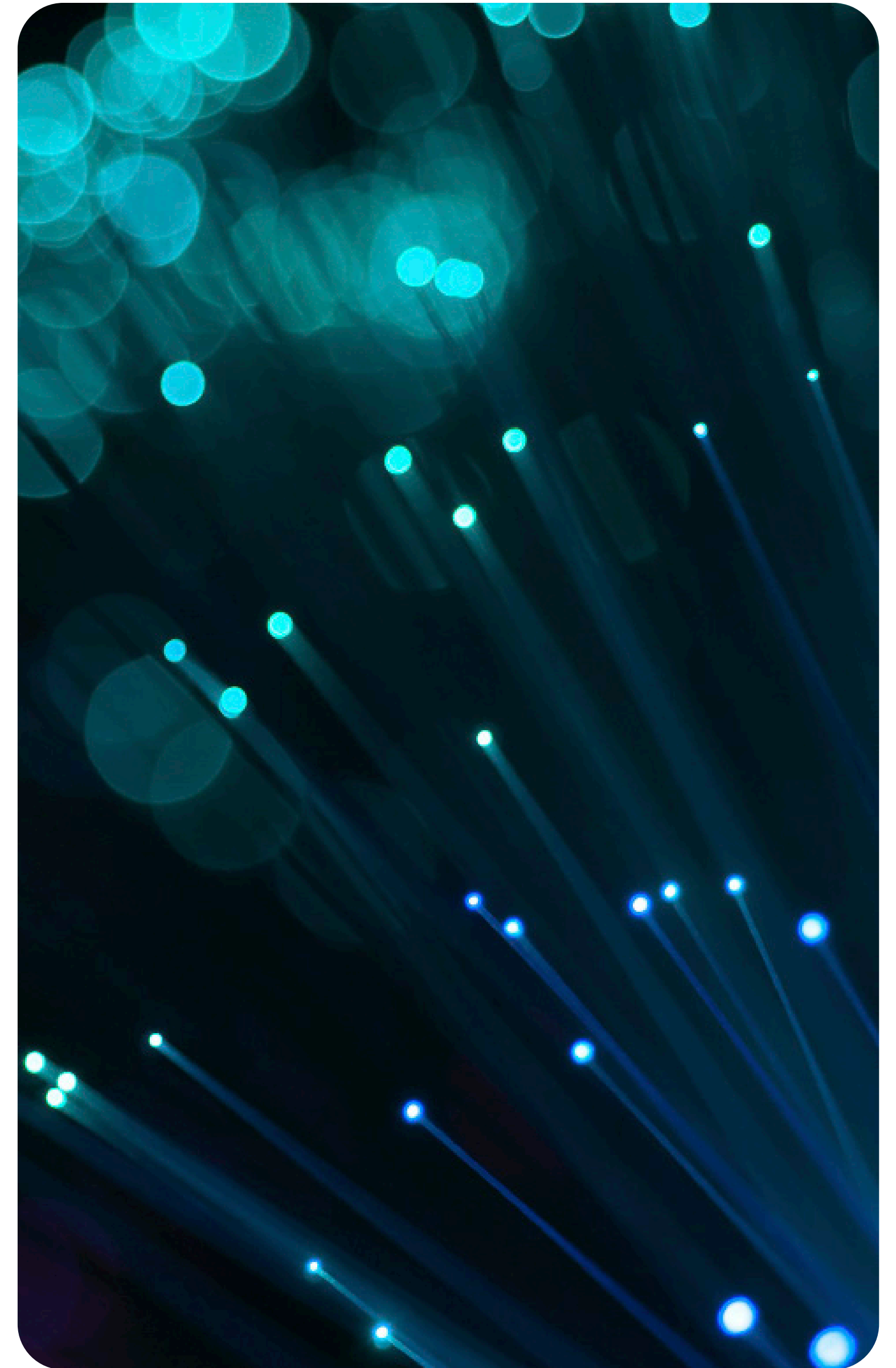
Elevating the User Experience With AI

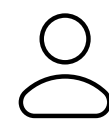
The majority of common HR challenges revolve around time-consuming, routine tasks. No matter how complex, if you can define the rules to execute an HR task, you can automate it using a configurable workflow engine and scheduled actions. However, when faced with a more strategic HR challenge for which it's hard to define rules, that is when AI can be a game-changer.

AI systems are predictors. The real question is: how can you tap into AI's predicting capability to boost automation? AI can be deployed systematically to multiple tasks throughout your recruiting processes, from increasing engagement to informing users of critical data and trends.

We recommend you use AI to enhance the user experience (and not filter out candidates) through:

-  Semantic search for candidates to find jobs on your career site more efficiently and for recruiters to compensate for a lack of domain expertise when searching for talent within your database.
-  Semantic matching for recruiters to tap into lists of recommended, qualified candidates for a job or for candidates to be presented with personalized recommendations on career sites.
-  Chatbots to enhance the career site experience by providing predefined answers to FAQs in real time or links to matching opportunities upon entering a job title.
-  Generative AI to assist recruiters when writing job descriptions or as a virtual assistant when they have questions.
-  Predictive analytics to give recruiters insights into historical data and improve their ability to forecast and execute searches for specific job types or hiring managers.





HRIS

SaaS Analyst, Leading US university

“Newly released reporting features even utilize Avature’s proprietary AI algorithms to help clients **identify and vet existing candidates in the system, even if they haven’t applied to the job.**”

Finding the Right Technology Partner

When choosing the right technology, most buyers understand the importance of doing due diligence on the vendor. The following are some of the aspects our customers have highlighted as essential when deciding which recruiting system to invest in:

✓ Analyze the vendor's customer base

Give more weight to vendors with customers similar in size and complexity to your organization. View it like you're joining a community.

Regardless how good the demo looked, if you don't share characteristics and challenges with the other members, you will be alone to deal with any issues.

✓ Study their roadmap

Your vendor should have a one-year and longer-term roadmap. Look beyond the document and review the changes they actually introduced to the system over the past twelve months.

This is essential to understanding if they will grow with you and continue to adapt their products and services as the market and your needs evolve.

✓ Assess security

HR deals with sensitive information, so it's essential to understand your vendor's approach to security. Check if they comply with your security standards by providing them with a security questionnaire and following up with an InfoSec meeting. You might also want to look for Security Operations Center (SOC) audits performed by accredited third parties and ISO certifications.

✓ Understand their long-term strategy

Knowing a vendor's history is a good predictor of their future, so you should understand how they got to where they are.

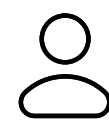
Find out if they've changed their strategy in the past few years, if they've expanded or pulled out of markets, if they usually sell to small companies and are now targeting bigger clients and if the founders are still in the company.

There is no correct answer to these questions, but they impact the partnership's longevity and quality.

✓ Learn about ancillary services

You're looking for a partner with a continuous improvement mindset that aligns with yours. So, as you assess your current processes and define new ones, you should be supported by consultants knowledgeable in configuration, who will help create a solution that supports your strategic objectives.

Beyond that, you should ask about training, since any solution can go to waste without adoption. Lastly, think long-term: What happens if there's an issue after going live? Will the vendor be able to provide assistance around the clock and in multiple languages?



Director HRIS & Analytics
Leading US university

“When we were doing the RFP analysis, one of the key things that stood out for us with respect to Avature was the value for money. **The amount of configuration and functionality Avature came with, along with pricing, was really competitive.** They outdid all the other vendors that we were looking at. It was a no-brainer for us, we had to go with Avature.”

Conclusion

When automation targets only efficiency, it can quickly enter a spiral of diminishing returns. There are limits on how much can be eked out of a process.

But when the building blocks of automation — configurable workflows, portal apps, and semantic engines — are paired with a focus on continuous improvement, automation becomes a competitive

capability that can win new employees and create a lasting impact.

Beyond the technology itself, understanding the opportunities, benefits and limitations of automation is now a key function of effective HR. It entails a deep understanding of the strategic direction of the college or university and how recruitment fits into that, and it requires a vision

of what you want to build and how to get it up and running without disrupting operations.

Furthermore, leaders in higher education recruitment must consider how to scale it to evolve over time, since consistent optimization will be essential in continuing to ensure your educational institution attracts and recruits the very best talent.

Sources

¹ CUPA-HR (2023). Higher Education Employee Retention Survey.

² HR Dive (2022). Need for speed: 80% of candidates want faster response times from recruiters.

³ PwC (2019). The future of recruiting.

⁴ Gartner (2019). The Future of Sales FollowUps: Text Messages.



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