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Temporary workers

Huge constituency of temps on assignment, survey finds

A temporary workforce roughly the size of the population of Birmingham worked daily last year to support the economy, according to the latest annual *Recruitment Industry Status Report (RISR) 2023/4*.

The finding that temporary workers make up such a large constituency of people indicates why the government should work with recruiters to ensure there are no unintended consequences from its Employment Rights Bill.

The report, which covers the 2023/4 period, shows that 1,058,300 temporary or contract workers were on assignment each day in 2023, a rise of 8.4% from 976,400 in 2022. Despite a 12% drop in total temporary placements over the year, the increase in the average assignment length, from 15 weeks in 2022 to 22 weeks in 2023, helped to offset the decrease.

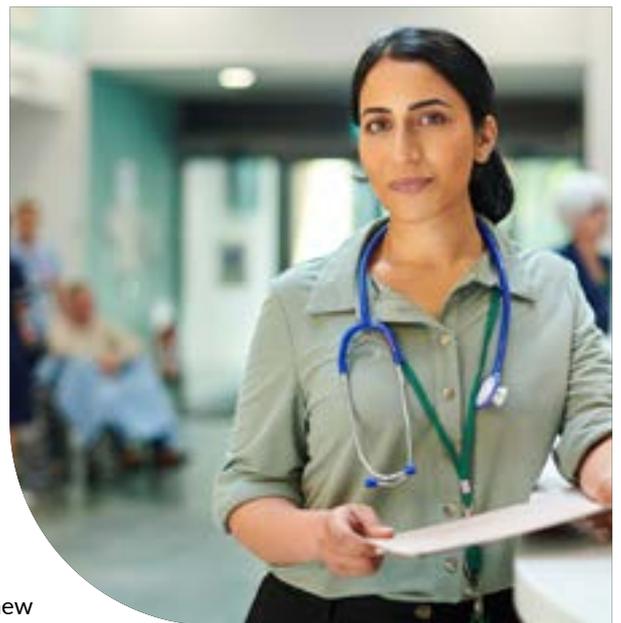
“Last year was tough for the recruitment industry, with clients holding off as they waited for lower inflation, interest rates, an election and clearer growth signals,” said Neil Carbery, REC Chief Executive. “While demand for permanent roles was strong after the

pandemic, the current figures show a dip in demand as we await economic stability.”

However, he added that the report highlights the way businesses turn to temporary labour during periods of economic and political uncertainty, while individuals increasingly opt for the flexibility that such work offers. “Our report reinforces the vital role of temporary work as we navigate a period with new regulations looming.”

RISR also reveals that the number of recruitment agencies held steady across the UK, with a less than 1% rise and fall in the regions and nations. There was growth in the wider talent sector, which offers different services to clients or employment businesses.

At the beginning of 2024, an estimated 31,247 enterprises were operating in the UK recruitment industry. This was up by 5.4% from



29,635 at the start of 2023. It marks the first increase after four consecutive years of decline. Furthermore, there was a 1.9% increase in the number of people employed in the sector between 2022-23.

The sector contributed a total of £44.4bn to Gross Value Added to the economy in 2023-24.

● The RISR report is available to read on the REC website for members only.

the view...



Welcome to 2025!
Neil Carberry,
REC Chief Executive,
sets out reasons why
the sector can thrive
this year

Last year was interesting, to say the least. Many recruitment leaders saw their resilience and entrepreneurialism tested by a market that always promised much, but didn't quite deliver for many.

At the same time, the challenge of adapting to a new Government with a big agenda created potential headwinds that will affect the UK later this year and into 2026.

But at this point we need to take a rain check.

After the November Budget – and the concerns it raised – I saw evidence of unjustified gloom. In response, you may have seen the REC saying that the market is bigger than the policies of the Government.

We can thrive in 2025. Here's why.

First, the underlying economics are stronger than they have been for some time. The UK consumer is in a better place – household balance sheets are roughly in balance. Organisations' confidence in their own businesses (rather than in the economy overall) has been rising. Inflation is under control and the UK looks politically and socially more stable than others in the G7.

These are all key points in the recipe for investment.

Second, the Government knows that only growth solves its problems. From consultations on Employment Bill issues in December, to discussions on public sector staffing, reality bites. That will draw the sting of some of the things that slowed us last autumn.

Lastly, your clients will have to face facts. The UK has one of the tightest labour markets in the world – and it is getting tighter. As specialists, we are best positioned to adopt new hiring tech and to advise firms. As our *Aim Hire* guide for clients set out, that means doing things differently. The economics of bargain-basement recruitment will no longer work – whatever hirers want to tell themselves.

What you do is strategic, high value and much needed. The underlying economics of demand is there. And there is always a market for good firms with good product and the right mindset.

It's been a long winter, but spring is close. I hope you and your business have a great year ahead.

 If you want to keep up to speed with all things recruitment then follow me on X @RECNeil



CAMPAIGNS

What our awards tell the Government

Shazia Ejaz, Director of Campaigns
at the REC

The Government has promised growth and reform of employment rules, so our recent REC Awards 2024 form part of our message to the new government about the value the agency sector adds to the economy. This message does not ignore us.

The award entries show how our members do not just find jobs for people, but fix problems with our labour force and make a difference to society. The commercial winners in business who were presented with their well-deserved gongs showcase the immense talent in our sector. But they are not the full story of the awards.

The awards ceremony showcased talented people who are making a difference for clients and job seekers. For example, in 2024 we had a new Sustainability Impact of the Year award to recognise firms leading on the green agenda and the UK's path towards Net Zero. We believe that Gattaca winning that award will inspire other recruitment firms to follow its lead.

Our survey of employers last year suggests that diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is slipping down clients' agendas. This is bad for workers and bad for these clients' businesses. Our awards can educate and inspire business and industry, while also showing the government that our sector leads difficult conversations about the importance of DEI in recruitment.

Oyster Partnership won Diversity Initiative of the Year for its Leading from the Front (LFTF) mentoring programme, which helps women to re-enter the workforce and navigate male-dominated industries. Hays won Community Impact of the Year for volunteer work, including providing paid volunteering time for good causes, such as beach clean-ups, and skill-sharing sessions in prisons.

So, behind the fun of the awards ceremony is a room of REC members dedicated to great customer service and to making their communities better. A full list of winners is on our website.

Look out for coverage of the REC Award winners in the next edition of *Recruitment Matters* magazine.



the intelligence...

The recruitment industry still has hurdles to jump in the AI revolution

Mukul Tiwari, REC Research Manager

AI has revolutionised the UK recruitment industry, offering tools to streamline hiring processes and improve candidate quality and fit. With its capacity to assist in candidate screening, generate job adverts, and reduce bias, AI is a critical part of the recruitment strategy for many UK companies.

A survey by the REC, as part of its latest annual *Recruitment Industry Status* report (RISR) shows that more than 40% of recruiters in the UK use AI in recruitment processes to automate and optimise stages such as candidate sourcing, screening and communication. A further 26% said that they plan to implement AI in the next 12 months.

REC's survey reveals a growing adoption of AI in recruitment, particularly for creating job descriptions – 90% of AI users leveraged it for this purpose to improve candidate attraction. But AI usage declines in later stages of the process, such as onboarding (7%) and interview scheduling (7%), reflecting hesitation to use AI for tasks requiring personal interaction and nuanced judgment.

This interesting and informative survey of 202 recruiters shows that AI tools are most impactful in recruitment during the early stages, with 85% finding job description tools effective for improving visibility and audience reach. Those that used AI for resumé screening (45%) and talent acquisition (39%) highlighted its



Our RISR survey shows **40%** of recruiters in the UK are using AI in recruitment processes

abilities to handle large data volumes in order to identify qualified candidates efficiently.

Again, AI tools are perceived as less effective in areas requiring personalised engagement, such as candidate experience, where only 25% of respondents found it helpful. Similarly, few were using it for interview scheduling (11%) and onboarding (8%), reflecting AI's limitations in handling the nuanced, tailored interactions that are crucial during these stages.

The feedback on AI tools in recruitment highlights significant challenges and hesitancy around their use. AI's role in assessment and testing and in interview analysis had mixed reviews – 14% found AI tools useful in assessment and testing, whereas 11% considered them unhelpful. Similarly, 9% recruiters considered interview analysis tools helpful and

6% rated them unhelpful. This reflects scepticism about AI's ability to evaluate candidates effectively. These tasks, being subjective and qualitative, raise concerns about AI's accuracy and fairness.

Additionally, AI's limitations in identifying soft and interpersonal skills are particularly concerning. This was identified as a major drawback by 68% of recruitment businesses, while 60% noted issues with detecting soft skills, reinforcing the necessity of continuing face-to-face interviews.

Notably, 61% of respondents cited a lack of trust as a key barrier to adopting AI tools in recruitment, and 31% raised ethical concerns regarding bias. While AI claims to reduce biases, AI tools have sometimes exacerbated biases instead of alleviating them.

To address these concerns, the recruitment industry emphasises the need for refinement in AI applications, with human oversight remaining critical. The REC urges the Government to establish quality assurance frameworks for AI tools to ensure adherence to ethical and DEI standards. The rapid pace of technological advancements means that swift action is needed.

AI in recruitment in the UK is having a significant impact, improving efficiency, reducing costs and enabling data-driven hiring. But barriers such as lack of trust, ethical concerns and regulatory uncertainties must be addressed to foster wider adoption.

big talking point

Strategic opportunities

The government's consultation on its industrial strategy is now closed. What is the REC's response – and how do others view it?

Growth and how to generate it has been a government priority since it came to power – growth is the carrot to the stick of its high tax budget. A new 10-year industrial strategy – 'Invest 35' – is central to setting out how it intends to achieve this. The principle has been welcomed by business leaders who have been calling for a clear direction. The document was published in October and the consultation period ended in late November. So, what do the REC and other industry bodies think of it?

The strategy raises questions about complex challenges including skills,

competition and technology adoption. The REC's response focused on the crucial elements for the recruitment industry – worker productivity, skills development and supply-side reform.

Neil Carberry, REC Chief Executive, said: "A strong industrial strategy, led by a capable Industrial Strategy Council, is needed to make up for the failed attempt under the May Government, where skills were overlooked. After a slow start in its first 100 days, a clearer direction is emerging from the new government, with promising developments to engage with."

REC urged the government to

undertake a new Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS), integrate workforce strategy across government, and reform public procurement processes and immigration policies so all sectors can access the skilled workers they need.

"By closely aligning the recruitment and staffing sector with the industrial strategy and engaging industry experts, the government can drive high-growth sectors forward, alleviate workforce shortages, and secure a resilient, adaptable workforce to support the UK's economic transformation for future generations," the REC said.



and social care professionals to the NHS, local authorities and the private sector.

NHS workforce management and procurement systems need reform. "Our industry can offer its expertise in designing and implementing solutions," the REC said. "The government should collaborate with the REC and our membership to design a market structure for temporary public service roles that prioritises value for taxpayers and service users."

Supply side reforms

On the supply side, the REC highlighted concerns that "well-intentioned" employment reforms in the Employment Rights Bill, plus increases in employer National Insurance Contributions and the living wage, risk damaging the flexible and temp labour market and reducing hiring capacity. It's vital to engage with stakeholders to ensure the strategy remains practical, the REC said.

Deregulation and collaboration between multiple bodies and stakeholders is vital to ensure that the immigration system allows businesses to access overseas talent and skills.

"By formally incorporating immigration as a strategic element, the UK can address critical labour gaps and keep the industrial strategy agile enough to meet current and emerging labour needs. Reducing the high costs of sponsoring work visas and extending visas from two to at least five years would make it easier for employers to tackle acute labour shortages where domestic talent doesn't exist," the REC said.

It called for an assessment of the impact of limiting the dependents accompanying those on health and social care visas, and a regular collaborative process for reviewing the Immigration Salary List and Salary Thresholds.

Lastly, employers need verifiable digital credentials to expedite employment checks. The REC has collaborated with Velocity Software to speed up ID checks and views this as transformative "for enhancing employee protections, reducing administrative burdens, and lowering government service costs".

The government must now consider the responses. Meanwhile the REC and others will continue to discuss the key issues and lobby for critical areas of concern to be addressed.

A flexible and skilled workforce

The REC urged the Government to recognise the value of temps and flexible working patterns. It highlighted the way that such roles increase diversity by meeting multiple needs – particularly for older workers, those with care responsibilities and with health conditions. Recruiters are ideally placed to support these workers and their employers and can offer insights.

"As the world of work rapidly evolves post-pandemic, addressing the changing needs of workers – such as engagement, progression, flexibility, and fair pay – will be key to long-term prosperity," the REC said.

The REC welcomed the focus on the professional and business services (PBS) sector as a key growth sector, saying that the recruitment and staffing industry is vital. Furthermore, the REC supports the strategy's focus on skills development. "As the UK prepares for a decade of significant economic transformation, this strategy must provide the certainty businesses need to invest, grow and create high-quality jobs," it said.

Workforce and productivity

Promoting growth via a sustainable, resilient and regionally balanced economy depends on a skilled, adaptable workforce, as well as on technology. The recruitment and staffing industry has a vital role here.

"As the government prioritises investment in critical areas... the availability of skilled talent will be essential to capitalising on these opportunities," the REC said. "Ensuring the labour market operates at its full potential is vital to maintaining the

UK's competitive edge on the global stage, and recruiters are central to achieving this."

This calls for a joined-up approach to boosting workplace productivity – something REC members are uniquely qualified to advise on, because they understand workforce needs, and the views of employers and employees. Skillsets are changing and jobs must be designed with the future in mind.

A new WERS is necessary to provide insights into skills gaps, sectors struggling to fill vacancies and specific sectoral challenges. This new research will ensure that productivity strategies are informed by today's realities.

Skills England will be crucial to developing an agile, demand-driven skills system and bridging the gap between education and industry. Prioritising short and modular training alongside apprenticeships will benefit temporary workers and those wanting to update existing skills or find a path into work.

The recruitment industry is a fundamental part of the PBS sector. It provides the talent to fill roles in growth areas and the workforce for foundational sectors, such as manufacturing, logistics and retail.

"For example, the freight sector, encompassing logistics, warehousing, and aviation, is essential to commerce and supports other sectors like retail and health, which rely on robust supply chains to operate," the REC said. "Underpinning these supply chains means having the right workforce."

Another example is the recruitment industry's role in the NHS. The REC represents nearly 500 agencies supplying clinical and non-clinical health

Common concerns

Similar issues are being raised by other industry bodies. Karan Chhabra, policy manager at the UK Warehousing Association (UKWA), says that his organisation welcomes the strategy's focus on supply chains and identifying key growth areas, "but we are disappointed that warehousing and logistics are not considered a priority. These are foundational to every sector – a crucial part of every supply chain in the UK," he says.

"We have been calling for a dedicated minister for logistics since the pandemic. We are strategic allies to the government's key growth sectors, yet warehousing and logistics are barely mentioned in the strategy. We continue to call for the introduction of a dedicated logistics minister, in order to champion the contributions of warehousing and logistics at the highest level of government policy".

The sector is grappling with talent shortages and rapidly evolving skills needs, as robotics and AI transform warehousing and logistics operations. "We welcome Skills England and reforming the Apprenticeship Levy, but providing a wider range of skills training must be done in conjunction with employers and industry," Chhabra warns.

Declan Pang, director of policy and public affairs at the Road Haulage Association (RHA), is also concerned about

what the strategy does not address. "Logistics and haulage are foundational because they enable growth. A secure and reliable supply chain is essential to the UK's competitiveness."

Skills and workforce diversity are critical issues. "We need vocational training to create opportunities for people to become HGV drivers and mechanics." Pang welcomes reform of the Apprenticeship Levy. "Few new drivers take up the HGV driver apprenticeship because it is too inflexible," he says.

Other key issues for the RHA include planning reforms that consider the need for freight and logistics to service new housing developments. Traffic congestion is a major concern – 81% of the UK's freight travels by road, yet several large road projects have been cancelled. Resetting the UK's relationship with the EU will be important given concerns about long border delays when biometric tests are introduced next year.

Net Zero requirements should also be considered in conjunction with skills and planning, Pang adds. "The sector faces deadlines for phasing out diesel trucks by 2035 and 2040, but the technology and infrastructure is not there yet," he says. "We need about 11,000 more lorry parking spaces and there is currently only one public electric HGV charging point."

legal update

Looking beyond the Employment Rights Bill

By **Melissa Mhondoro**, Solicitor and REC Head of Legal Advice

The announcement of the Employment Rights Bill overshadowed legal developments in the recruitment space in the last quarter of 2024. Understandably, attention was diverted towards the Bill and the sweeping reforms it seeks to bring, yet recruitment businesses should note the following changes and updates which came into force recently.

The Employment (Allocation of Tips) Act 2024

This act and its accompanying statutory code came into force on 1 October 2024. The act creates an obligation for hirers to have a policy on tips and aims to ensure that tips are fairly and transparently allocated by agencies and hirers. The act applies to tips paid to the hirer electronically or in cash by a customer.

Agencies have a duty to pass on a tip paid by a hirer in respect of an agency worker, subject only to deductions allowed by law and within a month after it is received from the client. Liability for failing to pay a tip passed on by a hirer will fall on the agency supplying them.

Hirers have corresponding obligations to pass on tips to an agency, without any deductions. It's important to note that an agency worker can bring claims against agencies and their clients for breaches of their respective duties under the act.

Sexual Harassment Provisions in the Equality Act 2010

A duty for employers to proactively take 'reasonable steps' to prevent sexual harassment of their employees in the course of their work came into force on 26 October. Previously, employers could defend themselves against sexual harassment claims by showing that they took 'all reasonable steps' to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace.

The Equality Act's wide definition of 'employee' means that agencies must comply both for internal staff and for the temps they supply. Hirers are also subject to this duty in relation to temporary agency workers. The Employment Rights Bill proposes to extend the duty to protect workers from harassment to third parties, so agencies will be obliged, for example, to take reasonable steps to

protect agency workers from harassment by a hirer's customers.

Regulation 22 of the Conduct Regulations and Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate (EAS) Checks

The EAS has confirmed that during inspections they will assess whether agencies supplying temporary workers have offered to provide copies of a worker's right to work (RTW) documents to hirers. Regulation 22 requires agencies to offer to provide copies of RTW documents.

The EAS has stated that an offer can be in the form of a statement included in terms of business, confirmation of checks, or general correspondence kept as a record.

Under Regulation 22(6), an agency can supply a worker if they have been unable to obtain copies of other authorisations if they have taken all reasonable steps to confirm a worker's suitability. This does not extend to RTW documents.

● For further details on these changes, REC members can contact the REC legal team on 0207 009 2100.

Ensuring umbrella compliance: a game changer

By **Sebastien Sauca**, Chief Executive Officer, SafeRec



For recruitment agencies, navigating the complexities of umbrella company compliance is a challenge. With ever-evolving legislation and heightened scrutiny from HMRC, non-compliance can lead to financial penalties, reputational damage and tax liabilities.

Now, there's a solution. SafeRec eliminates the guesswork and hassle, providing recruitment agencies with a clear path to full compliance. SafeRec technology ensures every umbrella company in the supply chain meets the highest standards of transparency and accountability at no cost to agencies.

When an umbrella company earns SafeRec Certification, it signifies adherence to the most stringent compliance measures: payslips audited at source leaving no room for manual tampering;

RTI cross-referencing for absolute accuracy; monthly HMRC tax account reviews to verify that taxes are paid to HMRC; and tailored audit reports providing assurance that all taxes for an agency's workers are correctly calculated, disclosed and paid.

SafeRec Certification gives agencies visibility and confidence in their umbrella supply chain. This not only protects against liabilities, but also elevates agencies' reputation, making compliance a selling point to clients and candidates.

SafeRec empowers agencies to grow their businesses without the fear of compliance risks. It's not just about meeting regulatory requirements – it's about fostering trust, promoting transparency, and securing a stronger, more credible, future for the recruitment industry.

DEI and sustainable employment matter

What I know



Helen Tomlinson is head of talent (UK & Ireland), Adecco Group

Worry about a fall in inclusive hiring.

REC research shows the use of diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) best practices in recruitment is declining – 21% fewer companies use name-blind CV submissions, 11.2% fewer use inclusive wording in ads, and 8.3% fewer use diverse interview panels, compared with 2022. With skills and labour shortages, this is no time to restrict access to talent. Inclusive recruitment fills today's vacancies, while preparing the UK for future challenges. It's fairer and it engages underrepresented groups and talent pools.

Diversity-driven firms work better.

A 2023 McKinsey Diversity Matters report showed that diversity-driven companies demonstrate 'a 39% increased likelihood

of outperformance for those in the top quartile of ethnic representation versus the bottom quartile'. Businesses where the executive teams are ethnically diverse, and those that comprise at least 30% women, tend to outperform others.

Candidates want strong DEI values.

Adecco Group's Global Workforce of the Future report found that 58% of candidates expect DEI to be a central corporate value – 13% chose their jobs because of the firm's approach to DEI.

You don't need to choose between profit, productivity and fair play.

A collaborative, informed approach makes it all possible. Employ with empathy and lead by example. Skills and fair work are worth fighting for.

Q&A



Abi Macleod is head of Aspire Recruitment

Why were you shortlisted for the REC 2024 Community Impact of the Year Award?

We are a profit-for-purpose agency, and we are passionate about helping jobseekers find sustainable employment. We have increased our network of specialist partners to build community engagement and the diversity of our talent pool, which has helped our clients deliver their DEI and social value commitments. All our profits are invested into our parent company, The Growth Company, which delivers flexible support, advice and training for employers and helps candidates in disadvantaged groups.

How do you benefit the community?

We are a real living wage employer and currently the only recruitment agency with

Manchester's Good Employment Charter and Merseyside's Fair Employment Status. We deliver free DEI workshops to hiring managers and training in universities and colleges to upskill young people and prepare them for the labour market. Our team also volunteers to help charities.

Does this also benefit you?

Our goals are to help employers diversify their workforce and to become the leading DEI-focused recruitment agency, delivering business benefits with social inclusion.

Every member of our team is completely invested in their work. They are aligned with our values, which include 'Do the right thing' and 'Empower people'. Half our team apprentices or doing REC qualifications.

Value capability as much as skill

Dominie Moss is the founder of The Return Hub, a leading search and advisory firm in the financial services industry.



Inclusive recruitment isn't just a passing interest for me – it's the driving force that inspired me to set up The Return Hub. Too many highly skilled, capable professionals are overlooked because their career paths don't follow a traditional trajectory. But career trajectories are changing. More people choose to pivot, take breaks, or explore different avenues in their career. Non-linear paths are not exceptions; they're the norm. Yet many recruitment practices haven't evolved, leaving organisations at risk of missing out on an incredible pool of diverse talent.

Traditional recruitment often relies on finding candidates who are already

Time out leads to an increase in valuable skills that benefit the work environment including resilience, adaptability, improved time-management, emotional intelligence and people management skills
The Return Hub

performing the same job elsewhere. This 'square peg, square hole' approach overlooks a candidate's potential – what they're capable of achieving, how they approach challenges, and the unique perspectives they could bring. Often, recruitment processes prioritise efficiency over inclusion, which can create significant barriers for candidates with non-traditional backgrounds.

Hiring managers with competing priorities including speed, familiarity and financial targets may unintentionally reinforce non-inclusive practices. As search professionals, we have the privilege of helping our clients rethink these

priorities, ensuring that their recruitment efforts are inclusive, forward-thinking and focused on long-term success.

This shift isn't just about filling roles; it's about future-proofing organisations with talent equipped to navigate today's increasingly complex business environment. Enlightened talent leaders recognise that this is a longer term investment and value the rewards this shift in thinking brings.

Changing the mindset requires more than good intentions, it demands a collective and sustained effort with recruitment at its heart. Forward-thinking organisations use skills-based assessments and scenario-driven interviews to reveal qualities such as adaptability and problem-solving. These approaches evaluate not just what candidates have done, but what they're capable of doing.

Inclusive recruitment does not end with hiring. It should be woven through the entire employee lifecycle. Companies can help individuals to thrive and deliver on their potential with a considered onboarding process. Examples of this include buddies, targeted mentorship, training and sponsorship, together with clear paths for progression and open lines of communication. Inclusive hiring is about embedding change in the organisational fabric. Recruiters that help companies take bold steps with fresh thinking and commit to the long game will set the benchmark for true inclusion and establish themselves as leaders in their fields.

The REC's *Recruiting for Returners* guide offers valuable, industry-agnostic advice for recruiters targeting this often-

overlooked talent pool and can act as a framework for recruiters and hiring managers aiming to attract talented and diverse candidates. Its insights and strategies go beyond returners and are invaluable for fostering inclusive hiring practices that unlock the full potential of the talent pool.

Inclusive recruitment isn't without challenges. It requires effort, commitment, and a willingness to rethink outdated norms. But the rewards – contributing greater innovation, resilience and a competitive edge – are worth it. By redefining talent and embracing diverse

“Diversity of thought and experience is critical for us to achieve our ambitious strategic goals. We want people who think differently, who want to do things better than they've ever been done before. Consistency, momentum, and focusing on what you can control are key to driving meaningful change”

Deborah Finlayson, chief people officer, People's Partnership

experiences, organisations can build stronger, more dynamic teams and lead the way in a rapidly evolving world of work. As recruiters, we are perfectly positioned to help shape this change.

- *The Return Hub specializes in placing mid-senior level diverse professionals who are looking to relaunch, transition or pivot their careers. They advise companies on strategies to attract, assess, hire, support and retain talent. Through their online platform, The Career Academy, they facilitate the inclusion and development of overlooked talent.*



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