Bridge of Hope Careers® MSL

Discover the high-potential talent your business can't afford to overlook

Hiring for grit



Talent is harder to find than ever. But while businesses compete for candidates, they're overlooking a proven source of potential: **system-impacted individuals.**

Shaped by adversity, this group has tenacity, resilience, and a hunger to succeed. And yet, hiring processes often shut them out.

It's time to rethink what makes a great candidate and start hiring for the trait that matters most:

grit.

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Why it's time to rethink recruitment



Why hire for grit?

Talent is tough to find.

You've probably felt it: the struggle to fill roles, retain employees, and build teams that thrive under pressure.

It's a challenge every industry faces. But what if we told you there were a group of candidates, up until now overlooked, who are proven to be amongst the most resilient, adaptable, and motivated groups in the workforce.

Introducing system-impacted individuals.

These are people whose lives have been shaped by societal systems – such as the care or justice system – as well as neurodivergent individuals whose needs have not been properly supported.

System-impacted individuals have faced barriers that most cannot imagine. And in doing so, they have developed one of the most valuable traits recruiters can look for: grit.

Grit is the ability to sustain passion and perseverance for long-term goals – even in the face of setbacks. It fosters tenacity, focus, and a hunger to beat the odds. In fact, research by psychologist Angela Duckworth shows grit is one of the strongest predictors of success, beating credentials, experience, and even IQ.

Furthermore, system-impacted hiring generates social value, reducing inequality and unemployment, and helping individuals contribute to society.

But hiring systems are built to filter out complex backgrounds – not value them. Automated rejections, background checks, and ingrained bias mean these gritty, high-potential candidates never make it past the first stage.

That's why we've written this whitepaper. Our research has investigated the barriers system-impacted individuals face – so you can take the steps needed to start hiring for grit.

Methodology

Our survey included 226 individuals of working age – around half were system-impacted, while the rest faced no significant barriers to work (our control group). Respondents included people with experience of the justice system, the care system, neurodivergence, and, for some, more than one of the above.

Questions explored recruitment barriers, preferred job-search channels, communication preferences, emotional triggers, and practical steps employers could take to retain them in the workforce.

By balancing quantitative insights with qualitative stories, we hoped to build a rich picture of the barriers facing system-impacted talent – and how businesses can overcome them.

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The barriers holding system-impacted candidates back

Being system-impacted significantly affects work

82%

of system-impacted respondents believe their background or neurodivergence has cost them a job.

This is most true for our multi-impacted respondents: 100% felt restricted while job hunting, while being nearly twice as likely (1.68x) to be unemployed but actively seeking work. Furthermore, these challenges don't end once they are employed – 70% say they continue to face barriers at work.

"Having to 'relive' a part of my life I have otherwise put behind me is shameful and embarrassing. I am losing optimism and confidence in my ability to rejoin the workforce every day."

Survey respondent
(Neurodivergent & Justice-Impacted)

Alternative recruitment channels are preferred

57% of multi-impacted individuals avoid using LinkedIn to find work.

LinkedIn was particularly divisive, with barrier-facing candidates citing issues with trust, privacy, and invasiveness. Respondents seeking work preferred methods based on ease, accessibility, and trustworthiness, with some preferring job centres.

"LinkedIn is awful to use and highly invasive... I don't want people snooping on me like that..."

Survey respondent (Neurodivergent)

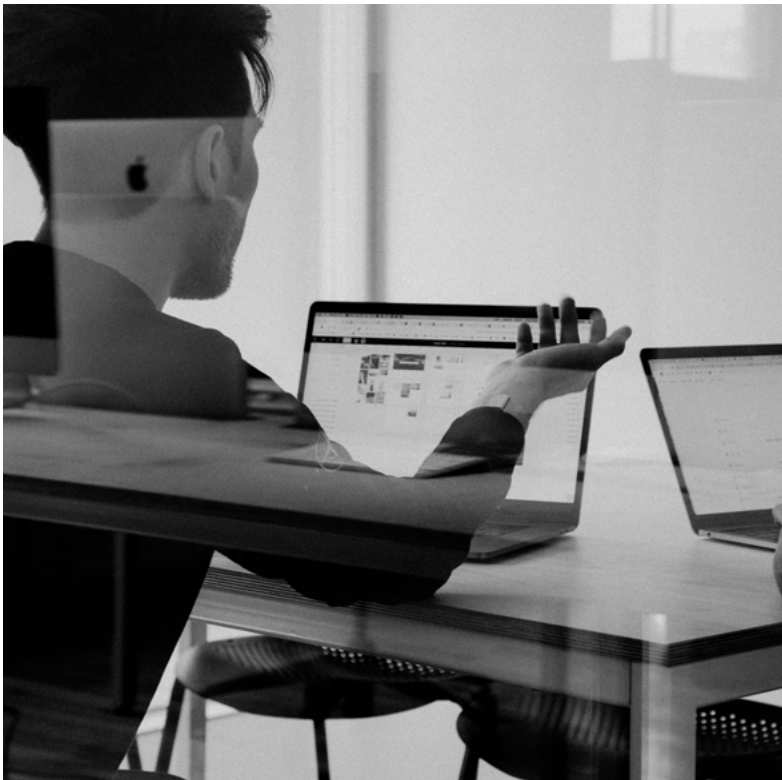
No network to provide support

21% of multi-impacted individuals rely on personal contacts – less than half the average for all UK workers.

1/3 of UK workers find employment through their network (StandOutCV, 2025). Yet access to personal networks is consistently low for our respondents. Nearly half (43%) say they lack people to support them when applying for jobs, making access to job coaches and mentors a critical need.

"I am not good at asking others for help"

Survey respondent (Justice-impacted)



Disclosures result in negative responses

60%

of system-impacted respondents who shared their background with an employer received a negative response.

Disclosure can feel like a major risk, with many recalling negative responses that eroded trust and discouraged future transparency. Employers aren't clear in their policies, causing frustration later in the recruitment process when candidates discover their background prevents them from progressing.

"... I thought I was in a safe space to share but the reaction to me being in the care system was so bad that I left not long after and never shared again."

Survey respondent
(Neurodivergent & Care-Experienced)

Inclusivity attracts talent

87% of system-impacted respondents said a "friendly and supportive team" is important/very important to them when choosing a job.

Acceptance and a supportive environment matter most to respondents, with 80% also valuing meaningful work. They highlighted employers who offered flexibility, assisted with forms, or simply showed kindness – demonstrating how empathy and support create true inclusion.

"There were zero judgments when I spoke about my ADHD. They embraced my talents and asked what can be done to help."

Survey respondent
(Neurodivergent)



Rejection processes are deeply frustrating

59%

of system-impacted respondents said frustration was their dominant feelingduring job searches.

We found frustration didn't come from just rejection itself, but from poor feedback practices. Respondents reported businesses lacking honesty, clarity, or refusing to offer any feedback whatsoever – leaving candidates unsure if they were rejected due to their skills, or their background.

"Same old thing, one goes through the process but knows the outcome before it happens. People are judgemental and stuck in their own world unknowingly."

Survey respondent (Justice-Impacted)

Audience key findings

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NEURODIVERGENT

15-20% of the UK population are neurodivergent, roughly 1 in 7 people

Respondents struggle most with explaining their background and asking for support, with many lacking reliable networks. These challenges make navigating applications, interviews, and workplace adjustments particularly stressful.

57% lack reliable network support

95% struggle to explain their background and needs

69% struggle to ask for support or adjustments

JUSTICE-IMPACTED

Over 12 million people in UK with criminal record, 1 in 4 of all employable age people

Respondents experience anxiety around legal restrictions and disclosing their background. Uncertainty over eligibility, combined with challenges in explaining their history, create significant barriers.

63% struggle to explain their background and needs

53% struggle with legal restrictions

50% struggle to ask for support or adjustments

CARE-EXPERIENCED

39% of 19 to 21-year-old care leavers are NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), compared to 13% of all 18-24 year olds

This group often face gaps in guidance and mentorship, and find it difficult to explain their background. Limited support increases the difficulty of accessing opportunities and understanding workplace expectations.

42% struggle with network access

42% struggle to explain their background and needs

33% struggle to ask for support or adjustments

MULTI-IMPACTED

Those facing multiple barriers encounter the most severe challenges, particularly around explaining their background, navigating legal restrictions, and requesting support. These overlapping difficulties compound stress and reduce confidence in applying for roles.

93% struggle to explain their background and needs

71% struggle with legal restrictions

64% struggle to ask for support or adjustments

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How to hire for grit

Connect

Provide opportunities for candidates to build genuine relationships across the candidate journey.

1. Meet candidates where they are. Leverage alternative channels such as job centres, which are seen as a trusted and accessible route for many candidates, on top of traditional channels such as LinkedIn and Indeed.

2. Show that support doesn't stop at the job ad. Many candidates want access to professional guidance, so connecting them with job coaches or mentors, even temporarily, can make a huge difference in making them feel seen, supported, and set up for success.

3. Keep the connection alive, even after rejection. Redirect candidates to other roles, training, or opportunities within your organisation, and consider creating Applicant Resource Groups where people can share experiences, advice, and encouragement.



Communicate

Keep lines of communication open, encouraging continuous dialogue and providing considered, timely feedback.

1. Provide candidate-specific feedback. Even brief feedback reassures individuals that their background was not a factor in the decision. This directly addresses the frustration many expressed about the "total lack of clarity" and employers' unwillingness to offer "any feedback whatsoever."

2. Refine how you communicate. Respondents showed a clear preference for email and phone contact, finding these methods more comfortable and accessible. In contrast, they were less keen on in-person meetings outside of formal interviews or assessments.

3. Keep the conversation going. Once candidates are in a role, keep an open dialogue and actively support them, ensuring they never feel their background holds them back. What you learn from them could strengthen your entire organisation – after all, your customers may be system-impacted too.



Clarify

Pre-empt questions and prioritise clarity and transparency in all communications.

1. Eligibility criteria should be clear. Be upfront about all requirements, including DBS checks and mental health disclosures, from the start. Unclear or hidden criteria can be deeply frustrating, discourage candidates from future applications, and even damage your reputation as an employer.

2. Be responsive to questions. Provide contact details and encourage candidates to proactively reach out with any questions or clarifications about the role.

3. Show who you are from the start. Whether it's your mission, your team culture, or what the job entails, be upfront and consistent with what candidates can expect from the role.



Candidate journey recommendations

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AWARENESS

1

Use traditional methods (Indeed, LinkedIn, company websites), while making sure to **advertise through job centres as well** – a key job discovery method for justice-impacted and dual-barrier facing respondents.

Employers who are able to connect candidates with **job coaches & mentors,** even if temporarily, are likely to achieve higher employee preference.

INTEREST

2

A friendly & supportive team is the most important factor for barrier-facing talent when choosing an employer. **Highlighting team culture, and incorporating team members into the interview process** will help show these candidates your friendly team culture.

The **opportunity to take on meaningful work** must also be clearly emphasised to attract these talent groups.

APPLICATION

3

Clearly communicate eligibility requirements (eg DBS checks, disclosure requirements for mental health histories, and more). Unclear eligibility criteria will discourage applicants from these groups.

Respond to disclosures with empathy and understanding. Nearly 2/3 of barrier-facing respondents who have previously disclosed their background to an employer have received a negative response, which discourages transparency.

SELECTION

4

Contact candidates through emails and phone calls primarily. Barrier-facing respondents were not keen on in-person meetings for general contact outside of interviews & assessments themselves.

ONBOARDING

5

Offer **candidate-specific feedback,** to at least assure barrier-facing talent that **their background is not the reason for their rejection.**

Redirect candidate interest to other roles, courses and helpful avenues. Connecting candidates to each other through **'Applicant Resource Groups',** for example, could help candidates build networks.

RETENTION

6

Introduce the successful candidate to the team as soon as possible, to showcase a friendly and supportive team culture and help with smooth team integration.

Constantly improve ways of supporting these talent groups once in the role. Many are in employment, yet still report feeling the impact of their background "very heavily or often" in their life and in work.



Conclusion

We believe employment isn't just a pay cheque: it's belonging, dignity, and a sense of purpose. Yet for system-impacted individuals, the path is blocked by systems never designed with them in mind.

This is especially true for multi-impacted individuals. Our research shows that when barriers intersect, their effects don't just add up – they compound, creating challenges that are far more complex and harder to overcome.

Overall, our research has been both sobering and hopeful. Sobering, because the barriers facing system-impacted individuals remain significant. Hopeful, because their powerful stories reveal the gritty qualities that we know the modern workforce needs.

When it comes to hiring these individuals, it's striking how modest the solutions are.

The barriers holding people back aren't structural impossibilities – they're human oversights. Responding promptly to questions, giving constructive feedback, providing information upfront – small changes that, when made, have a huge impact.

And the business benefits don't stop at the candidate. Hiring system-impacted individuals contributes to businesses' social value and DE&I commitments, helping them contribute to society, and build a reputation for doing good.

So now is the moment for employers, policymakers, and partners to act. To break down the barriers. To see candidates for their potential, not their past. And to welcome on board some of the most courageous, ambitious, and resourceful candidates in today's workforce.

"I am proud of my lived experience, and see it as a strength, not a setback. By focusing on solutions and overcoming barriers, I know we can break down the stigma attached to employing people with experiences like mine."

Survey respondent
(Justice-Impacted)

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FOR EMPLOYERS

Hire for Grit Toolkit

Findings & Recommendations one-pager:
A useful resource with all the findings and recommendations from theis report mapped on the candidate journey.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Angela Lee Duckworth – Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance

Lisa Quast – Why Grit Is More Important Than IQ When You're Trying To Become Successful

GOVERNMENT & POLICY GUIDANCE

DBS eligibility guidance:
Provides employers with information on which roles require a Basic, Standard, or Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, helping ensure compliance with safeguarding law.

Care Leaver Covenant:
A government initiative that enables public, private, and voluntary sector organisations to pledge support – such as apprenticeships, work experience, or discounted services – to help care leavers transition to independent living.

Access to Work:
Offers practical and financial support to individuals with disabilities or health conditions, including grants for specialist equipment, support workers, and workplace adjustments, to help them start or stay in employment.





Co-authors

Bridge of Hope is a UK-based social enterprise dedicated to breaking down barriers to work. They connect system-impacted candidates with inclusive employers. By championing the skills and resilience that accompanies lived experience, Bridge of Hope empowers individuals who have faced systemic challenges to access meaningful employment and build lasting careers.

MSL is an award-winning global public relations firm focused on building influence to deliver meaningful impact on business and the world. The Employee Experience team specialise in helping businesses connect, attract and retain talent and to build their brands from the inside-out.

Contact us

Got a question, comment, or looking for advice? We'd love to hear from you.

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