



## REJECTION ANALYSIS

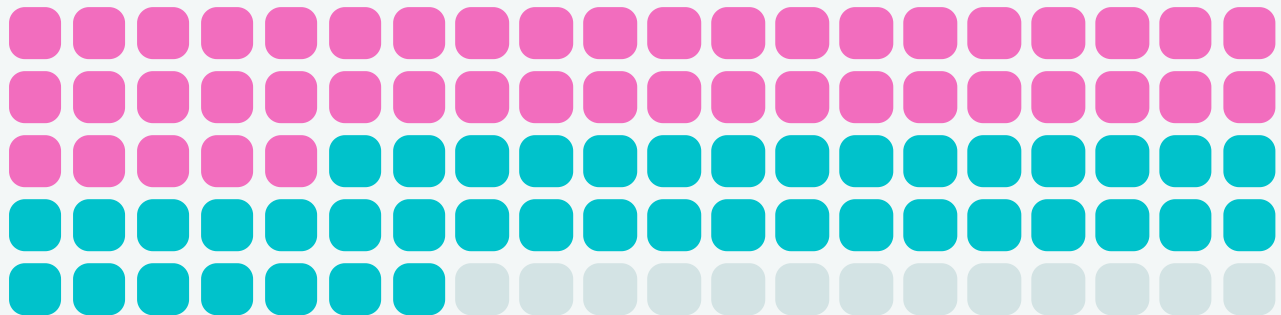
# Rejected.

## Why Candidates Are Turned Down

We pulled apart 1,100+ real rejection reasons from startup and scaleup marketing hires to find out what actually gets candidates turned down — and it's rarely what they're told.

## Where the door closes

Share of all rejections, by stage. Each square is roughly 11 rejections — tap a stage to isolate it.



**45%** CV / presentation

**42%** First interview

**13%** Later stages

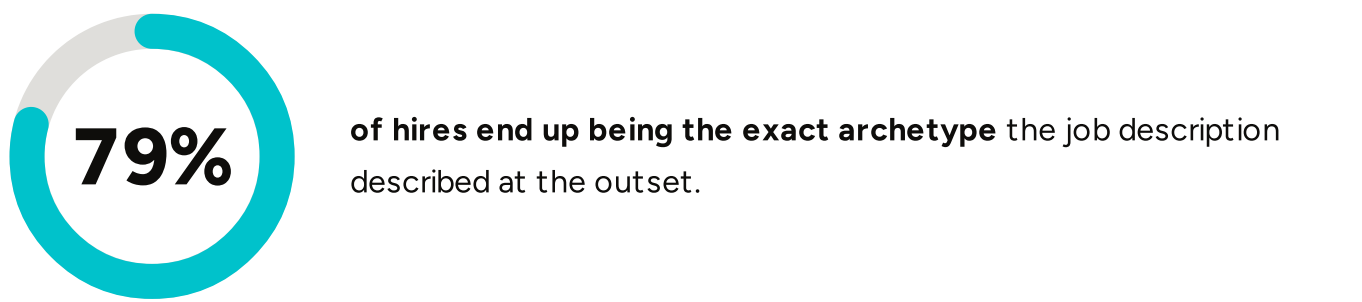
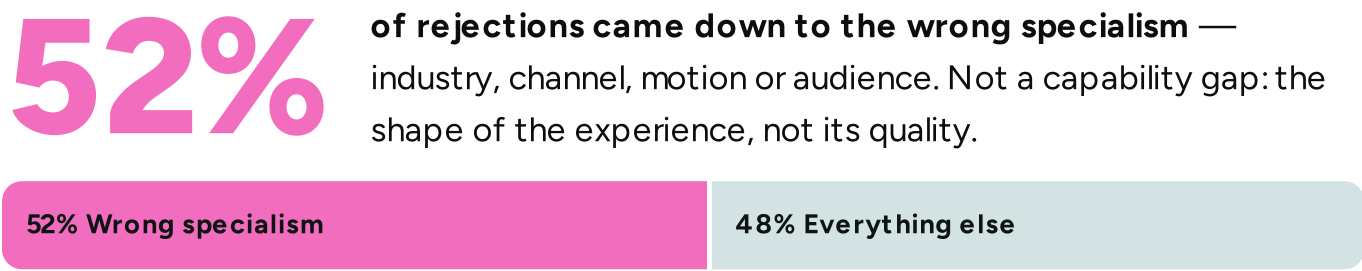
"Later stages" is the remainder after CV and first interview. Source: Example Recruitment research

Every marketer who's ever been turned down for a role — which is to say, every marketer — has wondered why. Most never find out. In the research behind this report, the majority of candidates were told nothing more than "lacks skills or qualifications," or, more often, told nothing at all.

So we went looking for the real reasons. We analysed over 1,100 rejection reasons across 65 marketing roles at startup and scaleup companies, from seed through Series A and B, sourced via a recruiter membership platform we belong to. We excluded our own roles and anonymised everything else.

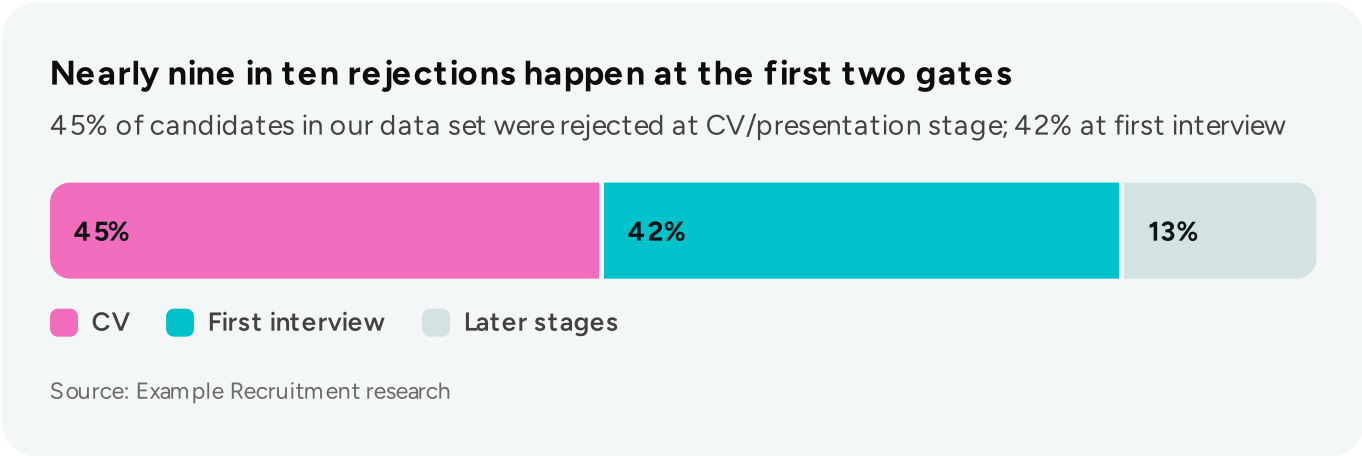
The headline finding: most rejections are about the shape of a candidate's experience, not its quality. Of those given a reason, 52% came down to the wrong specialism — industry, channel, motion or audience — rather than any capability gap. Further down the funnel, rejections shift to interview performance, and a lack of concrete answers shows up again and again, across every type of organisation. Hiring managers, meanwhile, are drawn to "peacock" candidates with stellar universities or unicorn employers — who then go on to perform worse once they're actually in the room. What hiring managers really want is depth, ownership, and close alignment to where the company is right now. The

result: 79% of hires end up being the exact archetype the job description described at the outset.



STAGE ONE · THE CV SCREEN

The Bluntness of CV Selection



That split is instructive on its own — the great majority of rejections happen before a candidate has said a word. The reasons cited at CV stage cluster around a small set of

archetypes: wrong specialism, wrong industry, no experience at the hiring company's size, too senior, too junior, job-hopping history, and insufficient pedigree.

Wrong specialism · #1

Wrong industry

No company-size experience

Too senior

Too junior

Job hopper

Insufficient pedigree

Potentially the single biggest indicator of the market we're in right now: hiring managers are rejecting candidates who are attempting to bridge disciplines — growth marketers moving to product marketing, or vice versa. This isn't a market where candidates can make that bridge externally, and we don't see that changing. If the bridge is ever going to happen, it needs to happen inside a company first.

**Growth marketing**



**Product marketing**

Moving between disciplines is being rejected at CV stage, in both directions.

## REJECTION REASON #1

# Wrong Specialism, Wrong Channel

## IN THEIR WORDS



not a marketer. has been a BDR

— HIRING MANAGER



too much of a PMM archetype

— HIRING MANAGER



their content marketing xp is great. But we need more of a marketing manager. We could outsource content marketing but not management

— HIRING MANAGER

Within that broad theme sits a narrower, harsher one: channel depth. Where a role is built around a single channel, hiring managers test for expert-level mechanics — and reject anyone who's merely competent.

#### IN THEIR WORDS



Core Meta mechanics weren't at their fingertips. Placed the learning phase at campaign level (it's ad set level), and acknowledged they were assuming rather than certain. For a role where Meta is the primary channel, we need that depth

— HIRING MANAGER



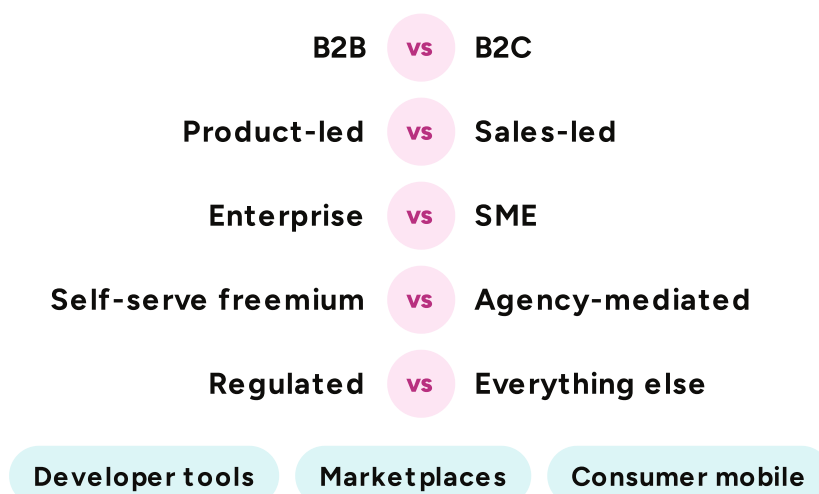
we're looking for someone who is personally deep in AI Twitter/X, posts or studies the space because they genuinely enjoy it, and has a strong instinct for what spreads

— HIRING MANAGER

#### PATTERN MATCHING

## Wrong Audience, Wrong Industry

Hiring managers are pattern-matching for an archetype. They want to see that a candidate has already done the specific job they'll be doing — not merely that they're capable of doing it. The dividing lines we see repeatedly: B2B versus B2C, product-led versus sales-led, enterprise versus SME, self-serve freemium versus agency-mediated, regulated industries versus everything else, developer tools, marketplaces, consumer mobile.



## IN THEIR WORDS



no b2c or marketplace growth experience

— HIRING MANAGER



their SaaS companies are all sales-led or agency-mediated. There's no millions-of-users freemium base anywhere, which is where our entire bridge problem lives

— HIRING MANAGER



Tons of difficulty in translating their b2c experience into the b2b world with concrete examples, and it was clear they don't have much experience with the sales motion

— HIRING MANAGER

This theme dominates product marketing conversations especially, and it's also one of the stronger rejection reasons at later stages, once interviewers start testing whether a candidate can actually translate their experience rather than just describe it.

## COMPANY SIZE

### "They Haven't Worked at a Company Our Size Before"

The large majority of companies in our data set are startups and scaleups, and they're looking for candidates who've already operated in that kind of environment. It's not just reluctance to take a punt — it's also that the candidate is viewed as a "presentable asset" to investors.

## IN THEIR WORDS



they are very experienced, but mostly at big corporates. We are looking for someone with startup experience and the corresponding mentality. We have had bad luck with people coming from big corp world

— HIRING MANAGER



never working at a tech start-up is not a bet I can take with the current role scope and will prioritize someone who knows the level of ownership and speed in a start-up and can start running

— HIRING MANAGER



3 years at [a large retailer] is a negative signal for us. We're a 40-person company, we're looking for people with founder energy

— HIRING MANAGER

## STAGE TWO · IN THE ROOM

# Post-Interview Rejections

Once we isolate rejections that happen after interview, hiring managers get considerably more explicit. Post-interview, the most common failure categories are: wrong experience, poor interview performance, culture/attitude/work style, logistics (location, office policy, visa), seniority, history (job hops, gaps, credibility), and — a newer entrant — not being "AI native."

Wrong experience

Poor interview performance

Culture, attitude & work style

Logistics: location, office policy, visa

Seniority

History: hopper, gaps, credibility

Not an AI native · **new**

At CV stage, hiring managers are working from a quick read of a profile, or a recruiter's submission. Post-CV, that same test runs again through live questions — and the most common way to fail it is having the right words on the CV, but no stories to back them up. One candidate with "six years at a well-known consumer company" couldn't describe a

single growth experiment. Another, whose CV said B2B, couldn't translate their B2C experience into a sales-led motion when asked to on the spot.

#### IN THEIR WORDS



they lacks growth marketing experience; they couldn't cite an example of their paid or organic growth marketing experience

— HIRING MANAGER



Their meeting showed some yellow/red flags around relevant B2B and startup experience. They stayed in the theory vs digging into specifics

— HIRING MANAGER



Other candidates walked us through the specific scoring models and routing mechanics they'd built, and that's where the comparison landed

— HIRING MANAGER

#### THE MOST COMMON FREEHAND REASON

## No Concrete Examples

Not giving concrete examples is, by a distance, the most common freehand rejection reason in our whole data set. Hiring managers ask how a candidate actually did something, and get a framework back instead — a generality of what a good marketer should do — and end up disappointed.

**“Not giving concrete examples is by far and away the most common rejection reason we've seen — and this is straight from the hiring managers' own freehand notes.”**

#### IN THEIR WORDS



i really tried to give them a chance and asked my questions in a lot of different ways to get a concrete answer on how they led messaging and positioning, unfortunately every answer was very generic/ canned

— HIRING MANAGER



Answers were consistently surface level and hard to pin down — when pushed on specifics like a single product adoption metric, they kept circling without landing anywhere

— HIRING MANAGER



Very basic answers, couldn't drill down into specifics, too many buzz words

— HIRING MANAGER

## DELIVERY

### Long-Windedness

The next two biggest interview failures are about delivery: answers taking too long, the candidate wandering and never reaching the point, the interviewer running out of patience. We also repeatedly hear from founders and senior marketers that they're testing how a candidate thinks — whether they diagnose before prescribing, reason from first principles, handle a live calculation, or frame a problem clearly. Instead, candidates often jump straight to tactics, repeat back what the interviewer just said, or make elementary errors under pressure.

## IN THEIR WORDS



they clearly have a lot of experience, but were thinking more in terms of tactics and deployment rather than taking the time to diagnose problems and think about them from first principles

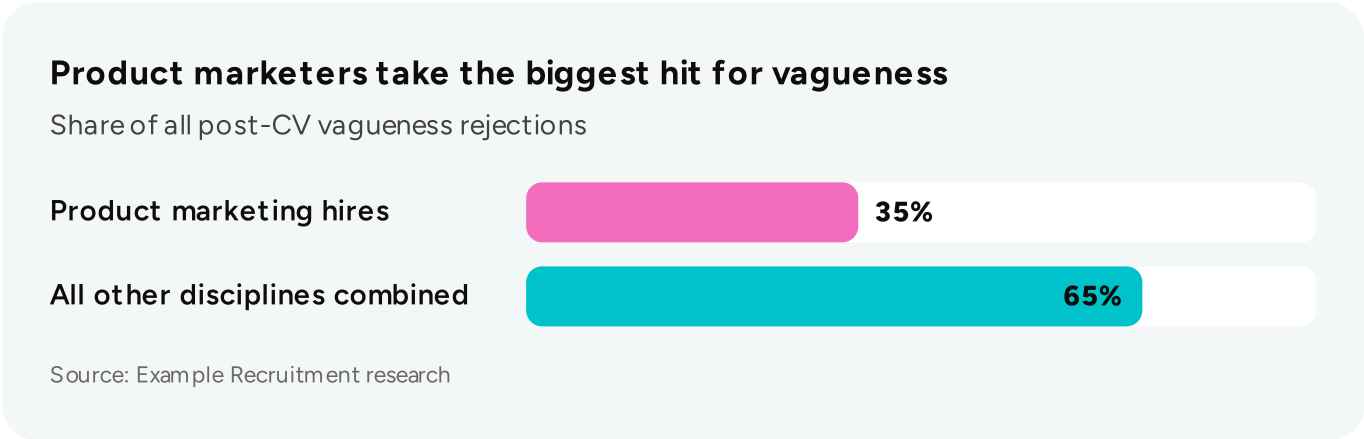
— HIRING MANAGER



Couldn't execute basic commercial math live, very little gtm basics/instincts, no allocation framework for the main question

— HIRING MANAGER

When we slice vagueness rejections by discipline, product marketers come out worst: 35% of all post-CV vagueness rejections were product marketing hires. Some of the comments read almost identically — candidates who "struggled to articulate what insights drove their messaging decisions" or kept "defaulting to generic frameworks." One hiring manager noted he was trying to get more specific while the candidate was, if anything, becoming less so. It may partly be a definitional problem: expectations of what product marketing actually is often don't match what the candidate in the room has actually done.



DEPTH

## A Lack of Ownership

Closely tied to the previous failure, but distinct: here the candidate can produce a number or a concrete example, but the hiring manager is testing whether they actually owned it — and whether they can go deep enough on it to be convincing.

IN THEIR WORDS

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Struggled to articulate what insights actually drove their messaging decisions — kept defaulting to generic frameworks without real substance

— HIRING MANAGER

//

Could not give a real answer around what they report on, They could not talk about pipeline, meetings, stage 1, etc, They use demos as a goal setting?, Number of leads - big red flag

— HIRING MANAGER



He presents as a generalist who has 'done everything,' but the role needs someone who can create a repeatable SQL engine. Probe for a single channel he has truly owned end-to-end

— HIRING MANAGER

## FROM THE NOTES

### Did They Really Say That?

Some candidates simply aren't very good — that's a fact we can't dodge. Some have an off day, and some hiring managers are unforgiving. But we've also collected a fair number of rejections from hiring managers who were, shall we say, not in the mood.

## IN THEIR WORDS



Lacking creativity and a strong POV - their answers were hedging, always answers with 'it depends'

— HIRING MANAGER



There was a degree of overconfidence that made me question how easy they'd be to work with day to day

— HIRING MANAGER



Extremely poor interview; they kept talking and wouldn't let me step in to ask questions

— HIRING MANAGER



reading off the screen 50% of the time, did not meet the bar

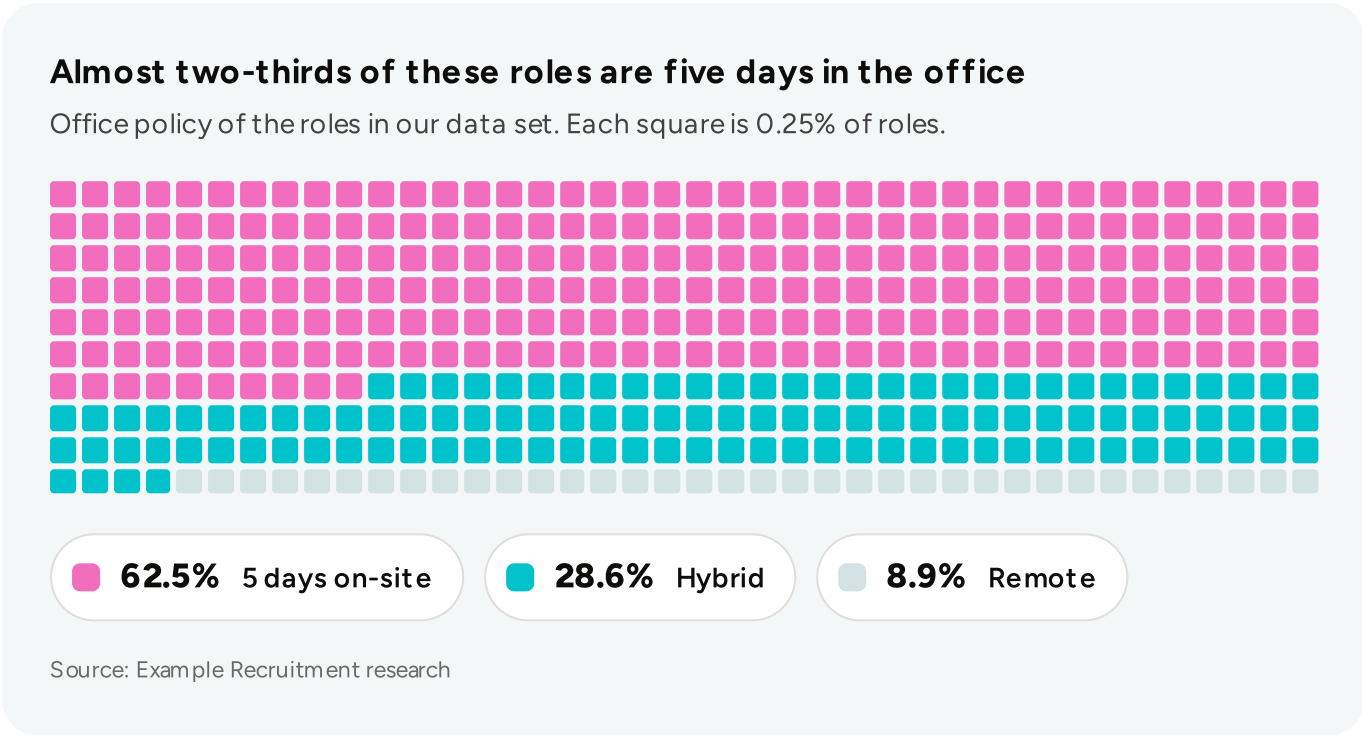
— HIRING MANAGER

## LOGISTICS

### Be Careful What You Ask For

Startups and scaleups tend to shy away from candidates who ask too much about working hours early in a process, and the prevalence of on-site roles is narrowing the

talent pool further. There's a time and a place to raise these questions — raising them too soon has, in our data, put hiring managers off.



IN THEIR WORDS

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Asked too many questions about work-life balance, Did not show enough speed

— HIRING MANAGER

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She seemed very hesitant on our 5 day in-office policy, specifically wanted to work hybrid and that is not consistent with our culture

— HIRING MANAGER

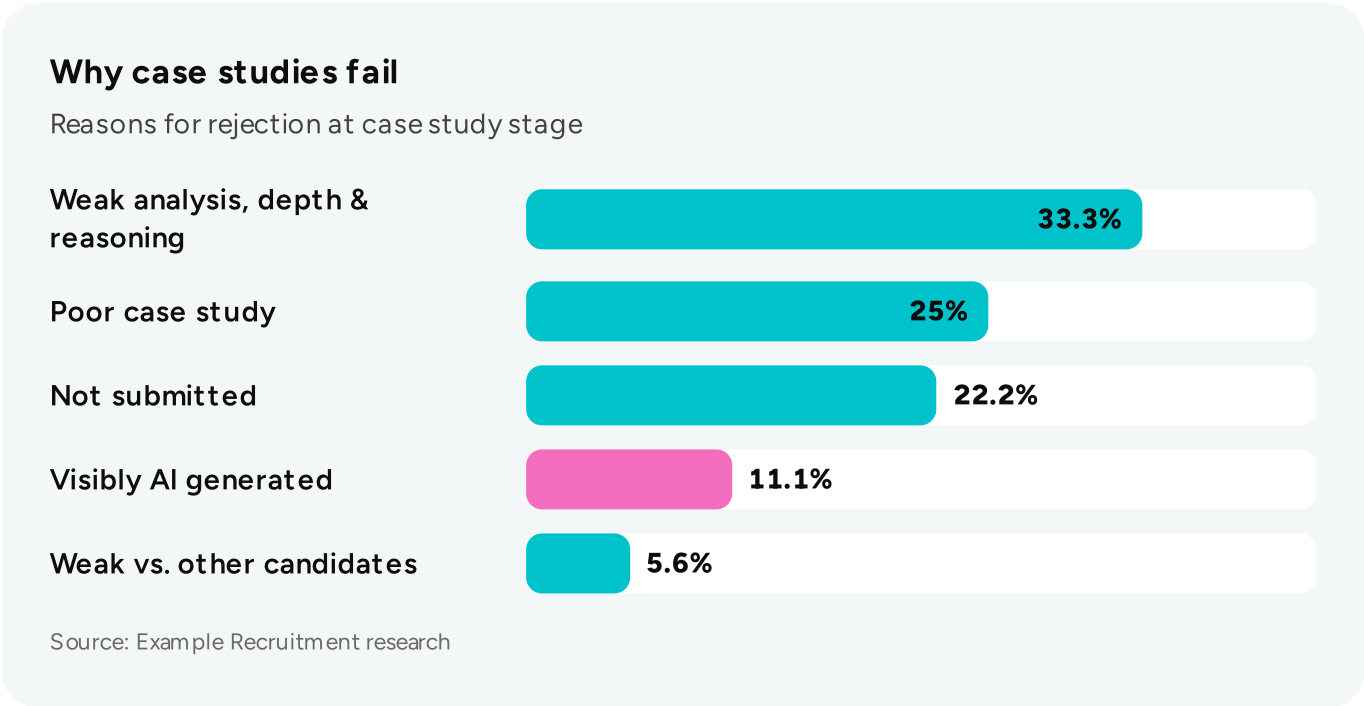
STAGE THREE · THE ASSIGNMENT

## Case Study Rejections

64

candidates made it as far as a case study or assignment. **Half of those were rejected on the work itself.**

Of the 1,100+ rejections we analysed, 64 candidates made it as far as a case study or assignment stage — and half of those were rejected on the actual work itself. Two patterns dominate: the work was thin, high-level, or listed everything without prioritising anything; or the work was visibly AI-produced. The rest come down to submissions that were late, incomplete, or never handed in at all, usually because the candidate had already mentally moved on.



IN THEIR WORDS

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The case study was too thin — they outlined the right frameworks at a high level but didn't go into the analytical depth we'd expect for this level

— HIRING MANAGER

//

Very fast and thorough, but we asked for thought process, not a list of every possible detail. Definitely AI assisted, heavily, hard to see the thinking

— HIRING MANAGER



Made the small-sample error the case is built to catch, Muddled on Paid Search: never connected zero closed-won to the 7–9 month sales cycle

— HIRING MANAGER

## THE PEACOCK EFFECT

# Beneath the Data

Some candidates get through more, but fail more. Candidates from a "top" university, or from a unicorn startup the hiring company rates, get past the CV screen far more often — only 32% of their rejections happen at CV stage, versus 48% for everyone else. In other words, two-thirds of the time these candidates are rejected only after meeting the hiring manager, versus around half for everyone else. Once they're actually in the room, the advantage disappears: founders and hiring managers open the door for candidates who look great on paper, then turf them out quickly once it's clear that logos and degrees don't guarantee personal ownership.

## Pedigree gets you in the room. It doesn't keep you there.

When candidates are rejected, where does it happen?

### High-pedigree candidates

top university or rated unicorn

32%

Two-thirds

### Everyone else

48%

Around half

■ Rejected at CV stage    ■ Rejected after meeting the hiring manager

**70%**

of high-pedigree candidates get  
through the CV stage



**60%**

of those are then rejected at first round

Source: Example Recruitment research

## THE OTHER SIDE

### On Hiring Managers

Here's the other side of it: their filtering is working. We're in a candidate-heavy market, but every role is being hired for with a high bar, and the true addressable candidate pool for any single startup or scaleup role is genuinely tight — often in the low teens, especially given how many roles are on-site. That tightness puts real pressure on hiring managers, who receive more candidates than they can meaningfully assess. Once the "peacock factors" — top university, unicorn competitor — are stripped out, hiring managers do a genuinely good job of filtering to the right archetype: in 79% of the roles we assessed, they found the precise archetype they wanted at the start of the process.

What matters for candidates is understanding exactly what hiring managers are looking for — not a surface reading of the job requirements, but a real understanding of the

company's position right now, its challenges, and where the role fits into those challenges. Hiring managers are looking for two things, in this order:

- 1 Have you already demonstrated the relevant skill in a similar environment, for a similar challenge?
- 2 Can you articulate the actual change you made at the company?

At this level, nobody wants to take a bet. That's why the filters are strict at CV stage and the scrutiny is rigorous at interview stage — the imperative to get the hire right is significant, and the cost of getting it wrong is huge.

## Stats to Remember

### STATS TO REMEMBER

#### Six numbers to take into your next process

**45%**

of rejections happen on  
CV alone

**52%**

of rejections are on  
shape of experience

**70%**

of "high pedigree"  
candidates get through  
CV stage

**60%**

of high-pedigree  
candidates who get  
through are rejected at  
first round

**20%**

of rejections are actually  
candidate-led

**79%**

of hires were the precise  
archetype from the JD

## ACTIONS & INSIGHTS

### Actions & Insights: If You're Applying for Roles

A reminder before the advice: we work with NYC- and London-based startups and scaleups. That's a different world to large corporates, and this whole data set is drawn exclusively from it — so the advice that follows is oriented exclusively towards it too.

Be targeted. If you're in B2C, stick to B2C roles — if you're in B2B, well, you know how it works. You might assume this is advice for a candidate-heavy market — it is not. In many cases, hiring managers end up with one or two candidates at final stage simply because they're efficient at weeding out anyone without the experience, background and pedigree they want. That's all it is. They make a very quick, and often quite correct, call on how closely aligned you are to the role. And if you're being put forward by a recruiter, your recruiter ought to be putting you forward as someone who's genuinely aligned to the role — if you suspect you're not a match, ask them why. It's a fair question, and they're making a judgement call that may draw on more than what's written in the job description you've read.

## ACTIONS & INSIGHTS

### Actions & Insights: If You're Interviewing for Roles

This feels like interview 101, and just because there are a few bad apples, we shouldn't have to teach the others how to fall from the tree. But there's an extensive data set here, and the patterns are undeniable. Sometimes we're not on our best day. Sometimes we're in multiple processes at once. Sometimes a role simply isn't given the priority it deserves. And sometimes the candidate genuinely isn't the right person, full stop. But remember the following.

Before your next interview, tick these off:

- ☐ Come armed with concrete examples
- ☐ Show depth, but learn to 'nutshell' things

- ☐ Be specific — avoid vague answers
- ☐ Do your research on the company
- ☐ Know your metrics, and know exactly what you owned
- ☐ Demonstrate real knowledge of your channels
- ☐ Align on logistics early, but avoid work-from-home talk too soon
- ☐ Just don't use AI for your presentation. They know.

## METHOD

# About This Report

The data behind this report was pulled from a recruitment marketplace platform we're members of, and it's been completely anonymised to protect identities — yes, we used AI to scrape it, because who wouldn't. None of the candidates mentioned were ever put forward by us; this data was available to every member of the platform.

We're headhunters, operating in the New York and London startup and scaleup space, specifically for SaaS and FinTech companies. As a former marketer of 20 years — CMO, Marketing Director, Digital Agency MD, SaaS Marketer — we've always believed recruitment is a marketing job. Understand your market, understand your clients, build the right messaging for the right person at the right time, and you succeed. That's the theory behind how we built Example: a marketing-led recruitment agency, no job boards, no spray-and-pray, headhunting the people our clients actually need. We know our market inside out, we run a private Discord for our top candidates, and when we come to them with a role, it's with the consideration of a former marketer.



**Example Recruitment** — marketing-led headhunters for SaaS and FinTech startups and scaleups in New York and London.

Read the live report and get in touch at [theexample.co/reports/rejected-why-candidates-are-turned-down](https://theexample.co/reports/rejected-why-candidates-are-turned-down)