

UK Employers Demand 'Unicorn' Hires Amid Tighter Budgets

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Half (53%) of UK employers are holding out for 'unicorn' hires – candidates who perfectly match job requirements rather than investing in potential talent. Indeed, fewer than a fifth (17%) say they are willing to train new recruits.

The new research from global talent solutions partner [Robert Walters](#) shows how these selective hiring approaches could cause businesses to put their long-term growth on the line.

Daniel Harris, Director of Robert Walters London & South East comments: "As economic pressures mount and budgets remain tight, leaders are increasingly prioritising 'safe' hires who can guarantee instant value. However, this short-term thinking could put the next generation of UK talent at risk."

Scarcity Mindsets

Continuing economic uncertainty, increased tax obligations, and rising running costs have left three-quarters (75%) of business leaders with reduced hiring budgets compared to last year, with 40% reporting significant cuts.

The price of making the wrong hire has also skyrocketed. 65% of the UK employers say reforms in the Employment Rights Act like reduced qualifying periods to unfair dismissal protection and other day-one rights are causing them to rethink hiring strategies like increasing interview rounds and extending probationary periods.

Indeed, impacts from the reforms are already being felt, the period of July to September 2025 noted a [significant uplift](#) in Employee Tribunal claims – with the figures indicating the number of claims

outstanding has increased +11% from 2024.

Daniel comments: “Employers are tightening their safety nets by applying greater scrutiny and guardrails to hiring decisions. This, in turn, is raising the stakes for professionals, placing more pressure on them to hit-the-ground-running and deliver immediate results.”

Abilities of attraction

Despite the strong demand for top talent, employers will need to offer above-market salaries to attract them. Robert Walters [2026 Salary Survey](#) indicates that year-on-year pay rises for mid-level staff in Accounting & Finance and Technology are sitting relatively flat at around 4%, with slightly higher but still incremental increases for Legal Services professionals coming in at approximately 3-6%.

“Stricter cost bases are also influencing wages and, in turn, employers’ abilities to secure ‘unicorn’ hires. While in-demand areas such as senior security roles or risk and compliance leadership may represent outliers, when adjusted for inflation, yearly wage increases for many professional roles in 2026 seem to signify market stabilisation rather than any real growth,” Daniel observes.

Talent Turn-off

With more pressure being placed on recruitment processes, hiring timeframes are also increasing. 77% of UK professionals say they’ve noticed the length of hiring processes increase over the past 12 months.

Research from [Smart Recruiters](#) found that the average time-to-fill in the UK stands at 40 days – trailing behind the likes of the US (35 days) and Australia (32 days). While less than 5% of candidates are invited to interview rounds.

Indeed, half (49%) of UK professionals admitted to Robert Walters that not hearing back about a role a week after applying is a serious deterrent to pursuing it.

“Employers hold many of the bargaining chips in the current hiring market, giving them the confidence to demand more. However, interviews are a two-way process; many top professionals pursue multiple opportunities simultaneously and quickly disengage when hiring timelines are slow,” Daniel adds.

Daniel concludes: “We are already seeing the ripple effects of reduced investment in early-careers talent play out, in a trend that will continue to thin out UK talent pools for years to come.

“For businesses to build strong teams capable of achieving long-term success and not just quick wins, they must strike the balance between hiring top talent and also investing in the skills and abilities that support sustained business growth.”