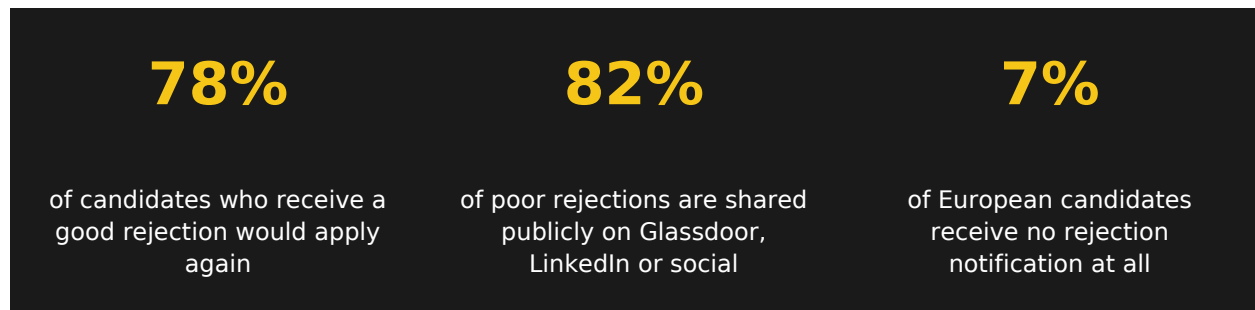


HR RESEARCH SERIES 2026 - REPORT R35 OF 10 (EXTENDED)

Candidate Rejection: Doing It Right 2026

How to say no without damaging your employer brand, the practices that turn rejected candidates into advocates.

Candidate rejection is the most frequent hiring communication, for every person hired, many are rejected. Yet most organisations invest enormous effort in the experience of the candidates they hire and almost none in the experience of those they decline.



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A well-handled rejection creates a net-positive brand interaction. A poor rejection, or no rejection at all, creates an active brand detractor. This report provides the complete framework for rejection communications that protect brand equity while treating candidates with respect.

Why most rejections fail

Rejection failure	Prevalence	Candidate impact	Brand impact
No communication (ghosting)	7% of cases	Highly negative, active detractor	Glassdoor reviews, social media posts
Generic 'moved forward with others'	61% of rejections	Neutral to slightly negative	Forgettable, no advocacy created
Delayed (>14 days)	38% of rejections	Negative, candidates left in limbo	Disorganised process perception
Rejection after extensive process, no feedback	12% of rejections	Very negative	Active detractor, Glassdoor review likely
Timely, specific, respectful	14% of rejections	Positive, advocacy created	Best employer brand outcome

The rejection communication framework

- **Timing:** within 5 business days of decision for early stage, same day for final stage, never more than 14 days from application.
- **Tone:** warm but honest, not falsely effusive, not clinical.
- **Reason:** specific enough to be useful, not 'we found stronger candidates' but 'we prioritised candidates with direct B2B SaaS sales experience.'
- **Next step:** 'apply for future roles', 'we will keep your details for 12 months', or specific feedback for the search.
- **Personal touch for final stage:** a phone call, not just an email.

Rejection by stage

Stage	Standard	Timing	Format	Feedback?
Application (not shortlisted)	Timely + brief + warm	Within 7 days	Email	Template by rejection reason
After CV screen	Timely + specific	Within 5 days	Email	Reason referenced
After first interview	Prompt + specific + reason	Within 2 days	Email or call	Specific feedback if requested

Stage	Standard	Timing	Format	Feedback?
After technical assessment	Prompt + assessment feedback	Within 2 days	Email with feedback	Assessment feedback standard
Final stage (not selected)	Personal + specific + appreciative	Same day as decision	Phone call + email	Detailed structured feedback

Template rejection messages that work

The rejection template that generates the best candidate NPS: 'Hi [Name], I wanted to let you know we've decided to move forward with a candidate whose background more closely matched [specific requirement X]. I was genuinely impressed by [specific thing from application] and this was not an easy decision. I'd encourage you to apply for future roles, please feel free to connect with me on LinkedIn. Best, [Name].' Specific, honest, human.

Measuring rejection quality

Metric	Current EU average	Best-in-class	Improvement action
Rejection response rate (% notified)	93%	100%	Automate, no application unacknowledged
Time to rejection	18 days	<7 days	Stage-based automation triggers
Rejection NPS	-12	+34	Specificity of message, personal touch at final stage
Re-application intent	38%	78%	Quality of rejection communication is the primary lever
Candidate advocacy (would recommend)	31%	67%	Final-stage feedback, respectful process

Forward outlook 2026-2030

The EU AI Act gives candidates rejected by AI screening a legal right to meaningful explanation in 2026. Rejection-quality NPS becomes an employer brand tracking metric alongside Glassdoor by 2027. AI-generated personalised rejection feedback at scale reaches commercial maturity by 2028. By 2030, ghost rejection becomes legally actionable in most EU jurisdictions.

Built for what's next.

tenperzent.com is the AI-native ATS designed for European hiring in 2026 - GDPR by default, EU AI Act compliant, free to start, €79/month to scale.

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