

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do modern business practices (such as hybrid work arrangements) introduce barriers to hiring, re-entering, and retaining “hidden workers”? What are the best approaches for overcoming these barriers?

INTRODUCTION

Within America’s increasingly competitive talent pool lies a large, underutilized, and greatly unsupported population: “hidden workers.” These are individuals who are willing and able to work but possess one or more barriers that contradict with employers’ profiles of a “viable” candidate, therefore struggling to find full-time employment.^[1] (More information on potential barriers can be found in Appendix 1.) The term “hidden workers” encompasses a broad range of individual circumstances but can be generalized into a few categories: older workers; caregivers of children or elders; the formerly incarcerated or recovered substance users; those with physical or mental health issues; military veterans who lack civilian licenses or certifications; and immigrants or refugees who lack regional language skills.^[1] Though these workers may seem unfavorable from a more traditional recruiting perspective, organizations which actively hire hidden workers are less likely to face talent shortages and more likely to close skills gaps, proving that supporting them is both a strong moral objective and a strong business case.^[2] This executive summary seeks to identify key ways in which hidden workers are disproportionately challenged by modern business practices, highlighting how employers may actively work to mitigate the adverse effects of said practices while supporting hidden workers throughout the hiring, re-entering, and retention processes.

KEY ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS

Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS): Applicant tracking systems and other similar tools are utilized to vet the applicant pool for a given job opening by comparing application materials (such as resumes and cover letters) against desired parameters (such as keywords, work experience, and more). However, according to a Harvard Business Review survey, a vast majority of employers (88%) believe that these systems eliminate qualified, high-skills candidates from applicant pools, and almost all employers (94%) believe that they eliminate middle-skills candidates.^[3] This is, in part, due to the fact that these processes often use proxies for skills that are difficult to measure (e.g., college education serves as a proxy for work ethic and self-efficacy), meaning that they exclude candidates who do not match predetermined criteria but could still perform well, especially with training.^[3] (More information on the extensive use of filter criteria can be found in Appendix 2.) This adversely affects hidden workers, who may possess the skills needed to perform a job despite not having a college degree, having an employment gap, and so on.

Employers can work to mitigate this issue by shifting from negative filters to affirmative filters: use language, experiences, and proxies that are inclusionary rather than exclusionary. For example, instead of using “college degree” or “similar job experience” as requirements, use “cumulative five years’ experience” or “multiple experiences working in team settings.”^[3] Furthermore, employers can focus on filtering employees by 6-8 “minimum skills” needed to perform the job

rather than one preferred skill—a process likely to be more inclusive and highlight well-rounded candidates.^[2]

Hybrid/Remote Work and Culture: Hybrid and remote working conditions are often touted as great solutions for creating more equitable work opportunities, and this is largely true: they can mitigate accessibility needs, alleviate the need for transportation, allow for greater personal flexibility (such as the ability to care for family or attend to personal medical needs throughout the workday), and so on.^[4] However, it is important to recognize that hybrid and remote work are not one-size-fits-all solutions and can aggravate other equity issues. Chiefly, not all people may have a sufficient or comfortable work environment outside of the office, and not all people can afford to purchase needed resources (such as WIFI, computer equipment, etc.) up-front, even if reimbursement is offered. Furthermore, working out of office limits workplace visibility and interactions with coworkers, which could exacerbate feelings of isolation.^[4] In terms of hybrid work specifically, some employee groups may be disproportionately challenged by irregular schedules: they can make finding needed aid (such as childcare or transportation) more difficult and worsen feelings of anxiety associated with a lack of routine.

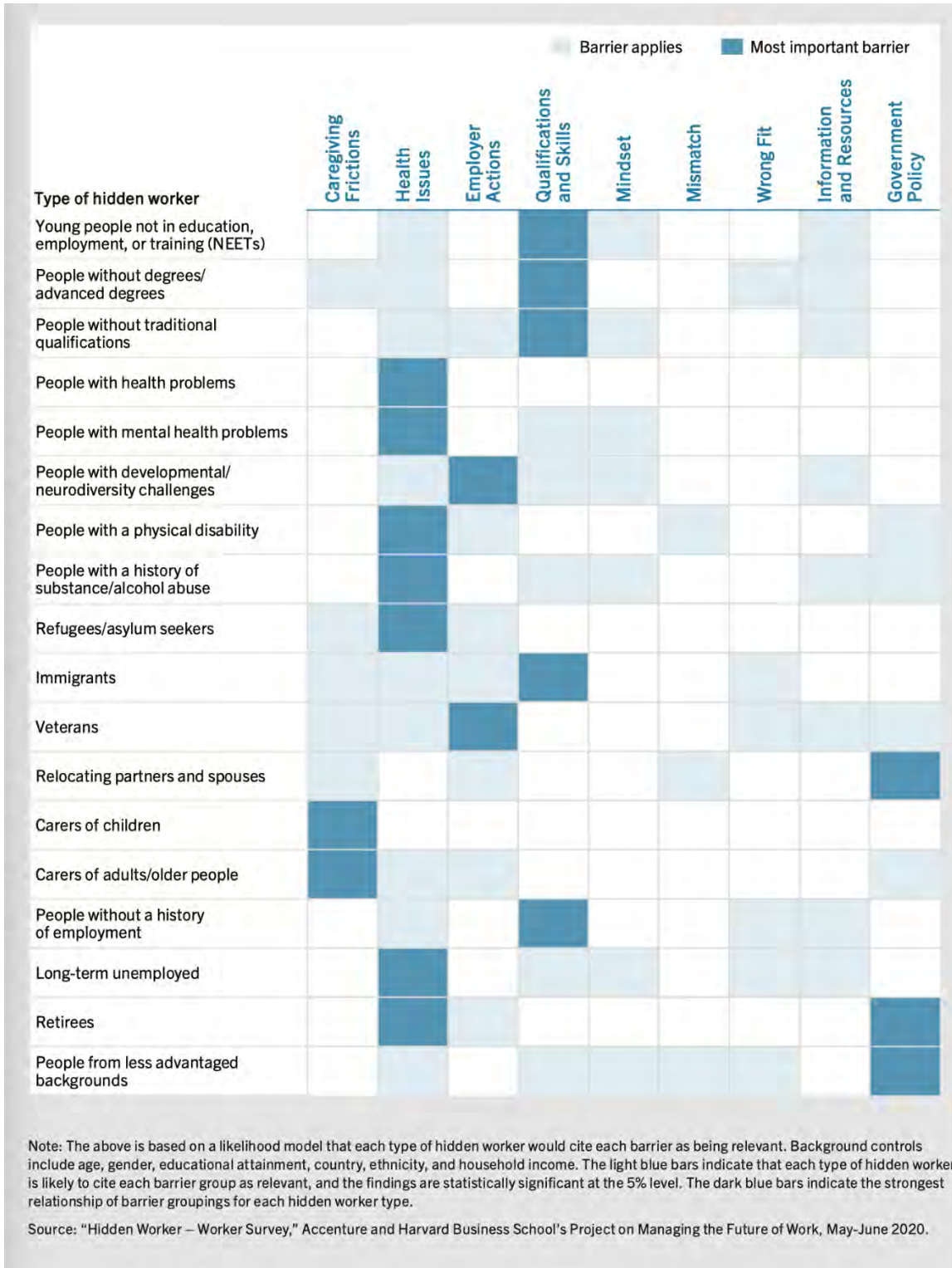
Rather than just offering hybrid and remote working options, employers should provide opportunities for flexible work whenever possible. Allowing an employee to choose their own hours can improve equity and work-life balance and help to alleviate feelings of burnout.^[5,6,7,8,9] It is notable that flexible working is the most frequently cited helpful on-the-job support by hidden workers.^[3,10] (Lists and rankings of helpful support actions can be found in Appendices 3 and 4.) Employers can and should work to mitigate other negative impacts of hybrid and remote work by prioritizing communication at all levels. Team leaders should embrace vulnerability and empathy, instigating genuine communication about feelings, wants, and needs; and the organization should prioritize taking action to recognize feelings and fulfill wants and needs without judgment wherever possible.^[5,11]

Culture, Support, and Accommodations: Organizational culture has a huge impact on all people-related initiatives, and supporting hidden workers is no exception. Because hidden workers may come from a variety of backgrounds and possess a breadth of experiences, leaders should work to establish an environment that is learning-oriented and healthily challenges personal assumptions: ask rather than assuming, acknowledge what you do not know, be cognizant of cultural differences, and assume positive intent.^[11] It is also important to note that intentionally including hidden workers is not purely corporate social responsibility—it is a return on investment—and leaders should highlight this where appropriate.^[3] Hidden workers are often discouraged by their previous job-seeking and employment experiences, so openly praising their individual value and usefulness will help to boost their morale and sense of belonging.^[3]

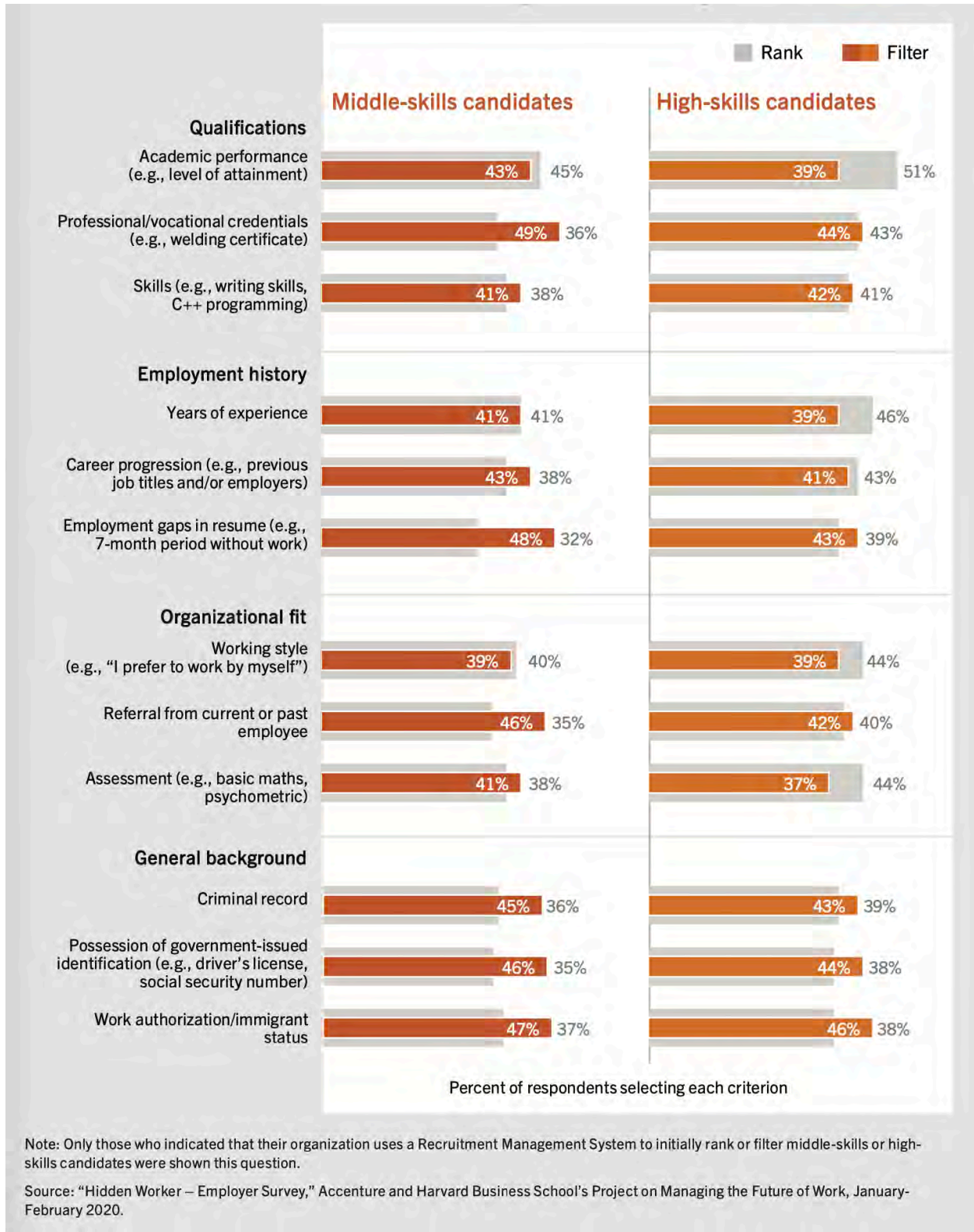
In creating a healthy culture, it is also critical for leaders to understand that some people are more likely to be vocal about their needs than others, and some are more likely to be discriminated against for their needs than others.^[12,13] (This relates to the construct of “intersectionality.”)^[14] By actively demonstrating vulnerability and empathy, acknowledging difficult situations, openly communicating about needs, and spreading awareness of accommodative resources, leaders can help to mitigate and destigmatize these differences.^[5,11,13] In many cases related to accommodations and accessibility, the aphorism “a rising tide lifts all boats” holds true: many accommodations (such as those tied to universal design practices)^[15] often prove beneficial to everyone in an organization, not just those who explicitly need them.

APPENDICES

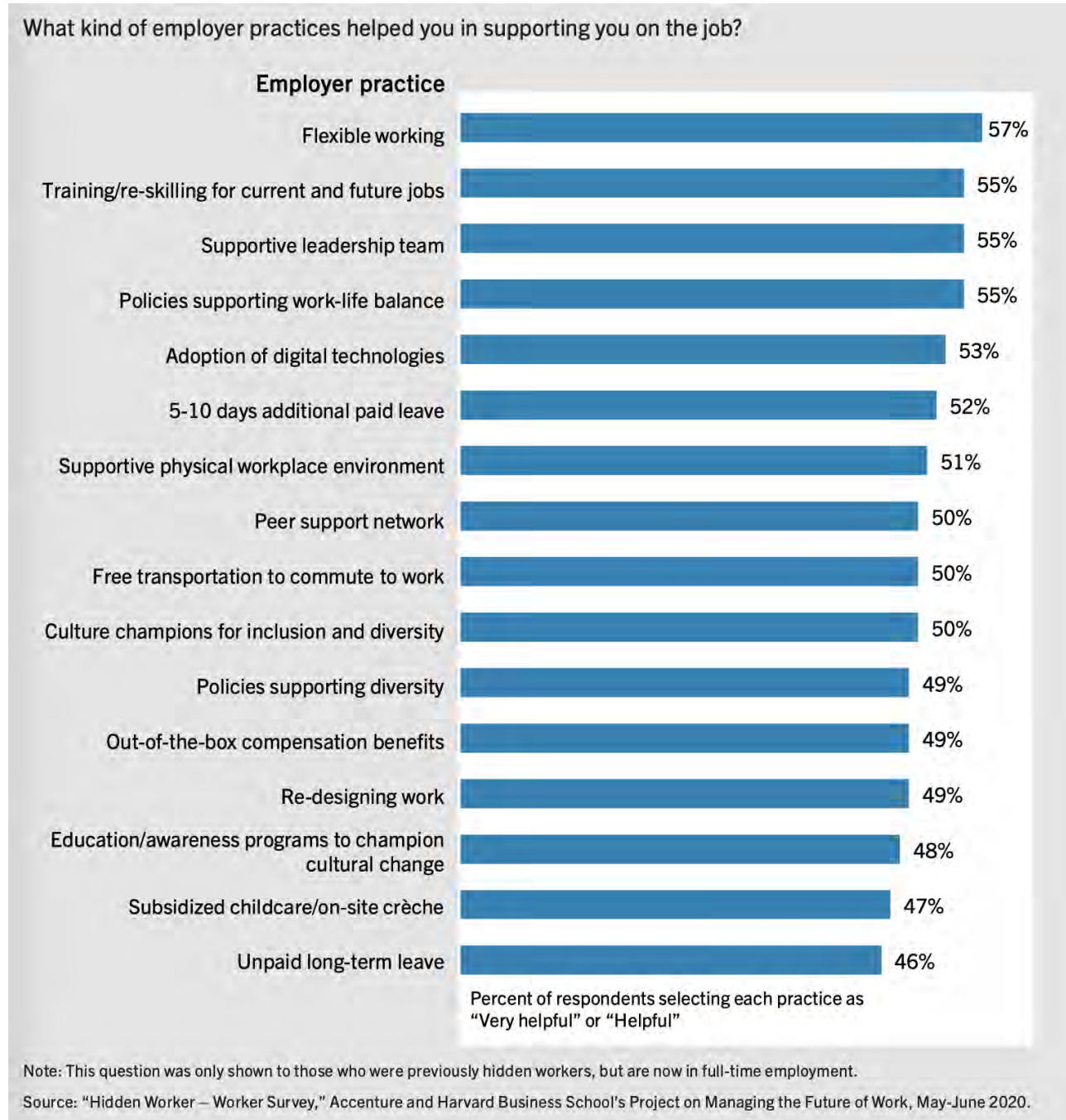
Appendix 1: Barriers that impact different types of hidden workers.^[3,10]



Appendix 2: Extensive use of criteria by employers to rank and filter job seekers.^[3,10]



Appendix 3: On-the-job support by employers critical for hidden workers to succeed at work.^[3,10]



Appendix 4: Employer practices that helped hidden workers find employment.^[3,10]

<p>What kind of employer practices helped you in finding work during the hiring phase?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy job application process • Jargon-free and easy-to-understand job descriptions • Link to good information and advice on jobs • Employers sourcing candidates in non-traditional ways 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showcasing diverse talent in the company • Networking events
<p>What kind of employer practices helped you in finding work during the application phase?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work experience/internship/work shadowing • Not requiring academic qualifications and/or work experience • Apprenticeships • Considering other forms of experience • No pre-employment assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview training • Option to voluntarily self-identify on the job application • Not having background checks • Not having drug testing policies
<p>What kind of employer practices helped you in supporting you on the job?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible working • Training/re-skilling for current and future jobs • Supportive leadership team • Policies supporting work-life balance • Adoption of digital technologies • 5-10 days additional paid leave • Supportive physical workplace environment • Peer support network • Free transportation to commute to work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies supporting diversity • Re-designing work • Out-of-the-box compensation benefits • Education/awareness programs to champion cultural change within the organization • Subsidized childcare/on-site childcare • Unpaid long-term leave

Note: Only previous hidden workers answered this question.

Source: "Hidden Worker – Worker Survey," Accenture and Harvard Business School's Project on Managing the Future of Work, May-June 2020.

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