



TEAMPlaybook

The Reality of Recruitment in 2026: What's Really Happening & What Leaders Are Doing Differently



TEAMPanel: South West & Wales January 2026

Introduction

Why This eBook Exists

This is not a trend report.

It is not a prediction of what might happen next.

It is a reflection of what recruitment business owners, solo recruiters and partners are seeing right now, on the ground, in conversations with clients, candidates and teams.

In January 2026, a group of recruitment leaders came together for a South West regional panel session. The discussion was candid, practical and, at times, uncomfortable.

That was the point.

This ebook distils the most important themes from that session so you can:

- Sense-check where your business really is
- Understand what is quietly holding agencies back
- Identify practical changes that actually make a difference

If something in this ebook makes you pause, feel defensive, or slightly uneasy that is usually where the opportunity lies.



Chapter 1

The Market: Something Has Shifted

There was clear agreement across the room.

January 2026 does *not* feel like 2025.

There is more movement. More intent. More positivity. But this matters only for agencies that have adapted.

The strongest message was simple:

Do not try to make 2026 look like 2025.



The agencies seeing momentum are not waiting for the market to return to what it was.

They have:

- Changed how they go to market
- Pivoted parts of their offering
- Let go of approaches that no longer work

Leader reflection

Ask yourself honestly:

- What are we still doing out of habit?
- What would we stop if we were starting this business today?



Chapter 2

AI and Automation: Helpful or Harmful

AI is no longer optional in recruitment.

But misuse is everywhere.

The panel was clear:

- More tools do not equal better results
- Chasing shiny technology without a strategy creates noise
- Automation without authenticity erodes trust

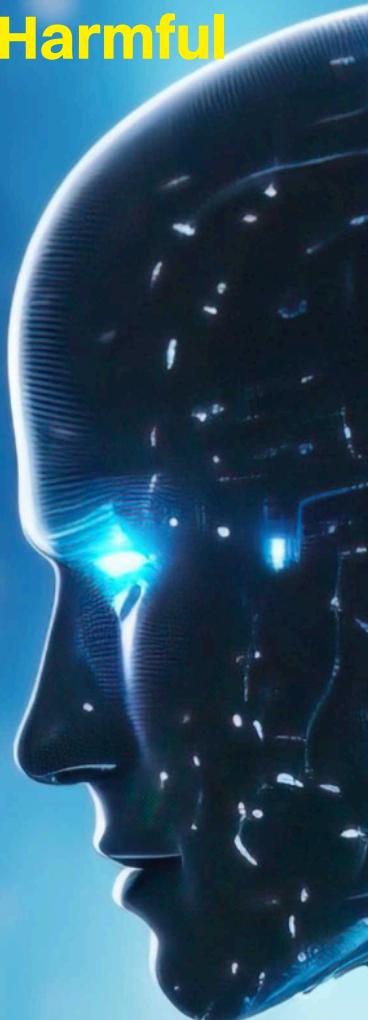
The agencies using AI well are not trying to replace human interaction. They are:

- Using fewer tools, not more
- Designing clear workflows
- Protecting their voice, tone and relationships

Technology should support conversations not replace them.

Leader reflection

- Which tools genuinely save time?
- Which ones just add complexity?



Chapter 3

Cyber Risk: The Threat Most Leaders underestimate

Cyber security came up as a serious concern.

Not because agencies are careless but because many assume they are too small to be a target.

That assumption is wrong.

- Solos and small agencies are regularly targeted
- Often as a route into larger client organisations
- A breach is a reputational issue, not just an IT problem
- Having software in place is not the same as being protected.

Security only works when it is properly configured, monitored and understood.

Peace of mind is part of professionalism.

Leader reflection

If a client asked how secure your systems are, how confident would your answer be?



Chapter 4:

What Agencies are Doing Differently

Several clear pivots emerged from the discussion.

Capacity and resource

Founders are stepping away from doing everything themselves.



- Offshore and outsourced support is being used to remove bottlenecks
- Leaders are protecting their time for revenue-generating and strategic work



What Agencies are Doing Differently

Markets

Some agencies are:

- Exploring international opportunities
- Accessing higher margins and faster hiring cycles

Positioning

Others are evolving their offer:

- Adding consultancy or advisory services
- Moving away from purely transactional recruitment

The common thread is **intentional change**.



Chapter 5

What Still Works - Even Now

Despite everything changing, certain fundamentals keep winning.

Across the room, the same points came up repeatedly:

- Delivery matters more than promises
- Exclusive and retained work protects margin and focus
- Face-to-face conversations accelerate trust
- Picking up the phone still works
- Convenience is not the same as effectiveness.

Leader reflection

Where have you prioritised speed or ease over quality?



Chapter 6

The Fastest Win Most Agencies Miss

Reactivating existing relationships.

A simple exercise was shared:

- Compare last year's client list to this year's
- Identify who dropped off
- Assign ownership and call them

Warm relationships consistently outperform cold outreach.

Yet many agencies chase new logos while ignoring people who already trust them.



Chapter 7

What Quietly Holds Agencies Back

This section resonated deeply with leaders in the room.

Common patterns included:

- Doing everything yourself
- Poor workflows and no contingency planning
- Over-reliance on one key person
- Adding tools without ownership or governance

One line captured it perfectly:

Just because you can do everything does not mean you should.

Your time has a value. **Protect it.**



Chapter 8

Humans Matter More Than Ever

Technology has changed recruitment.

People have not.

The panel discussed:

- Generational differences in communication preferences
- Ongoing fear of rejection and confidence issues
- Clients changing their expectations

The answer is balance:

- Use modern tools
- Keep human conversations
- Educate rather than resist change

Recruitment remains a people business.



Chapter 9

The Panel

This session brought together lived experience from across recruitment, finance, tech and the solo community.

Tracey Clay

Founder. Pivotal Business Partnerships

South West Regional Director for TEAM.

Recruitment business owner with experience across corporate and independent recruitment.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/traceyclay/>

Anthony McCormack

Founder. Macstaff

Solo recruiter specialising in construction, manufacturing and engineering. Divisional Director for the TEAM Solo community.

LinkedIn:

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Chapter 9

The Panel

Kan Mallawathantri

Founder and CTO. Avensys Tech

Microsoft 365 solutions partner supporting recruitment businesses to get more value, security and scale from the tech they already pay for.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/kan-avensystech/>

Stewart Roberts

Founder. MAYACHI

Non-Executive Finance Director for recruitment agencies. Specialist in back office, funding, margins, profitability and exit planning.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/stewartroberts78/>



Chapter 10

Final Reflection

This ebook is not about shortcuts.

It reinforces three truths:

- Fundamentals still win
- Relationships still matter
- Community provides perspective

If parts of this ebook made you uncomfortable, that is usually where the work is.



Chapter 11:

Wrap-Up & Next Steps

Do not try to change everything.

Instead:

1. Pick one area to improve
2. Sense-check your thinking with peers
3. Learn from people who have already solved the problem you face

You are not meant to build this business alone.

The strongest leaders rarely do.



TEAM HQ

Contacts

**Andy Dunne: MD (Strategy & Partnerships)**

Joined in 2023 after seven years as a member running his own solo recruitment business. With firsthand agency experience, he focuses on innovation, service, and collaboration to ensure members have the tools and support to succeed in a changing market.

Lauren Marsden - Head of Sales

First point of contact for new members. Helps recruitment founders - whether solo or scaling - cut costs, grow faster, and connect with 500+ like-minded business owners. Also helps members connect with peers in a trusted network & community.

**Cindy Hare - Partnership Support**

With over 26 years in recruitment, including senior leadership roles and running her own agency, she brings a wealth of experience to support and grow our network. Helps new members share over £6M in jobs each year, save thousands on job boards and access legal support

Created by Jahisha Thomas

