NRF FOUNDATION®

AI IN RETAIL
HIRING TOOLKIT

What is the purpose of this toolkit?

This toolkit explains how AI works in retail hiring: what it does, where its role begins and ends, and why applicants may sometimes get an instant reply. It provides practical strategies for each stage in the hiring process from tailoring a resume against a job description to drafting cover letters to prepping for interviews, so job seekers can use AI to their advantage. This tool demonstrates how employers use AI as a resource in the hiring process and shows how people remain at the center of the hiring decisions and relationships.

Who should use this toolkit and when should they use it?

This toolkit should be used by high school students, college students, and job seekers entering retail, along with the educators, career counselors, and workforce development professionals who advise them. It's most useful early, before the job search feels urgent, since a lot of the guidance is about building habits ahead of time — but it's also structured to work as a quick reference for anyone already mid-search.

There is no universal standard for AI use in hiring. Employers may have different expectations depending on the role or stage of the process, so be sure to follow any guidance provided in the application, assessment or careers website. AI can be a useful tool, but job seekers remain responsible for verifying that all information submitted is accurate and reflects their own experience. As AI continues to evolve, employer expectations and opportunities for its use in hiring will evolve as well. By staying informed, following employer guidance and using AI thoughtfully, job seekers can make the most of these tools as the hiring landscape changes.

Thank you to the job seekers, students, educators, and retailers who contributed to this resource's development.

About the NRF Foundation.

The NRF Foundation provides more than $1 million in retail scholarships and grants every year, engaging more than 100,000 people and more than 2,000 educational and workforce partners with our retail industry training. More than 350 retailers and industry partners support the work of the NRF Foundation to ensure that retailers have the quality talent they need for their stores, supply chain facilities and corporate offices.

The NRF Foundation shows job seekers how the retail brands they shop can become the places they work. As NRF's nonprofit 501(c)(3), our training, scholarships and opportunities help people discover promising careers in retail and develop the skills they need to succeed on day one, while ensuring that retailers have the quality talent they need for their stores, supply chain facilities and corporate offices. For more information about the NRF Foundation, visit nrffoundation.org.

Disclaimer :

Descriptions of AI in hiring throughout this toolkit are simplified for educational purposes and are not meant to be all-encompassing examples. Each employer may use these tools differently, and processes will continue to change as AI evolves. Examples in this toolkit are illustrative and do not describe or represent the functionality or practices of any particular technology provider or employer.

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What really happens after you click *Submit*.

The Applicant Tracking System.

Some companies receive thousands of applications for a single role. How are recruiting teams supposed to manage all of that information? As hiring became a primarily digital process, companies moved away from paper resumes and spreadsheets and into dedicated software called an Applicant Tracking System, or ATS.

The ATS is the central hub for a company's open roles. It collects candidate information, tracks where each applicant is in the process, and gives recruiters one place to manage everything from first application to final offer.

What recruiters actually see.

Not every company uses the same software, so it goes without saying that recruiters at different companies aren't all seeing the same ATS interface.

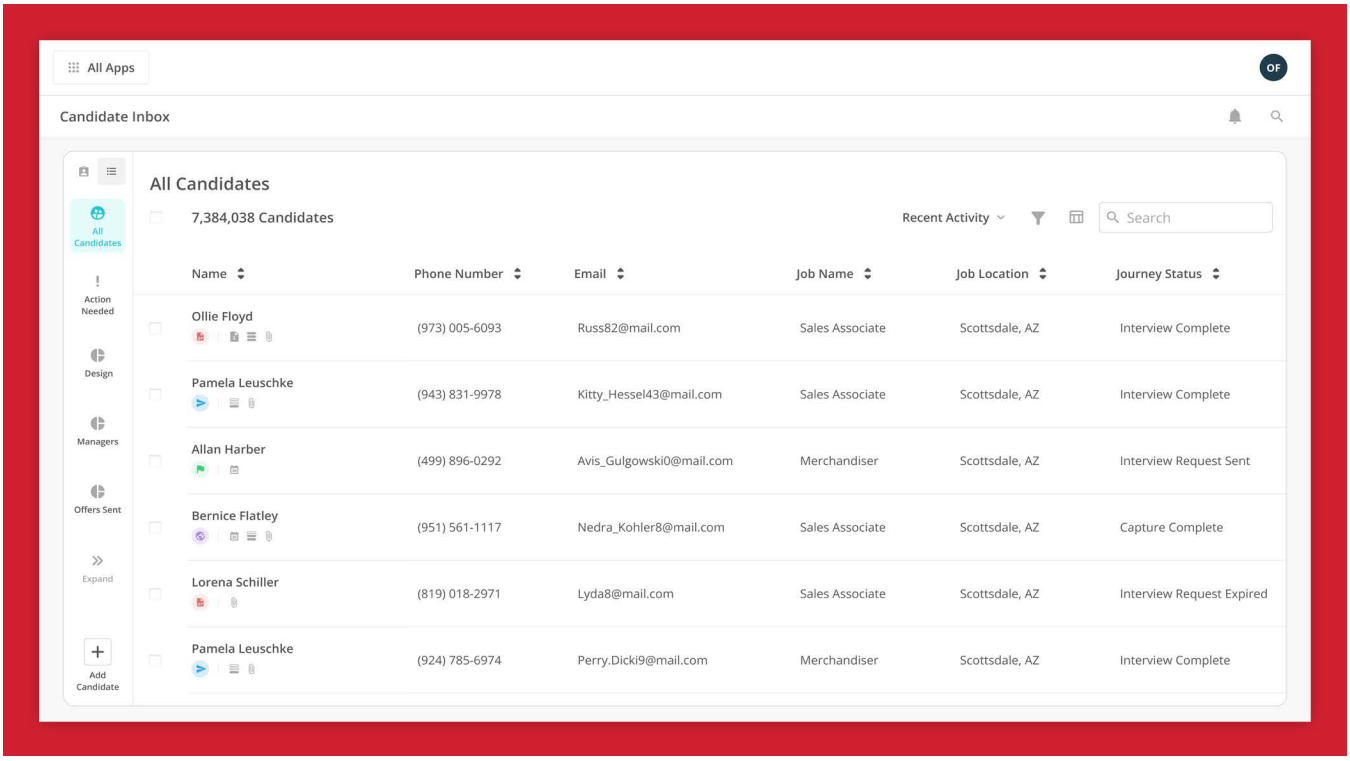
This goes double when considering AI and automation — every ATS uses these tools differently. Some platforms simply display candidates as they come in, leaving the sorting entirely to recruiters. Others use AI to surface the most relevant applicants based on how closely their experience aligns with the job requirements — flagging strong matches so recruiting teams can prioritize their time.

For a basic understanding, though, think of a standard ATS as one that sorts applicants into a few categories: those who have already met the minimum qualifications to interview, those who met some but not all of the criteria and need a closer look, and those who did not meet the necessary requirements for the role.

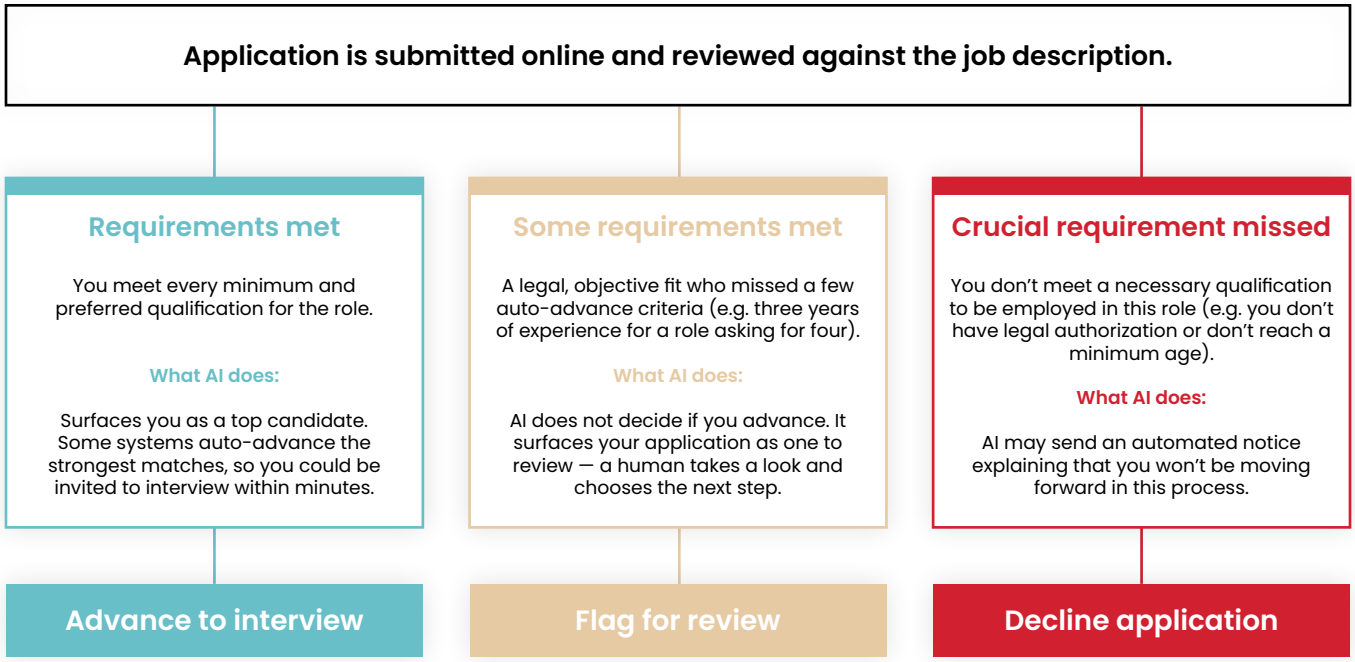
How keyword matching works.

One of the most common ways that sorting is performed is through keyword matching. The language in a job description can function as the scoring rubric behind the scenes.

If you've described a skill using different terms than the posting does, the system may not recognize the connection, even when your qualifications are a fit. This is why reading job descriptions closely and reflecting the language in



How AI might handle mass applicant volume within the ATS.



This simplified workflow is more common in frontline and entry-level corporate roles, and is not used by all hiring teams. The extent to which employers use automated screening or advancement varies and is subject to applicable law and employer policies

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your resume can often be the difference between being surfaced and being overlooked.

This also explains something that surprises a lot of candidates: receiving an interview invite just minutes after submitting an application.

Just as AI can flag candidates who don't meet requirements, it can also advance candidates who meet all of them, for some companies skipping manual review entirely. In those cases, the system moves quickly since the match is clear.

Key Takeaway: Every company uses AI differently, but you should always look to match language in your resume to the job description.

Where recruiters are most valuable.

The middle scenario is where human judgment matters most. If you're a borderline candidate — say, a role requires four years of experience and you have three — your application is likely to land in a review queue. That's where a recruiter reads through the materials themselves and makes a judgment call based on the full picture.

How much automation a company uses tends to vary by size and role type. Large organizations with high application counts often have more of the process automated. Smaller companies may still have a recruiter reviewing applications individually from the start.

Regardless of how automated the process is, employers should keep humans in the loop to oversee hiring decisions. AI should be there to help recruiting teams spend less time on administrative sorting and more time connecting with candidates.

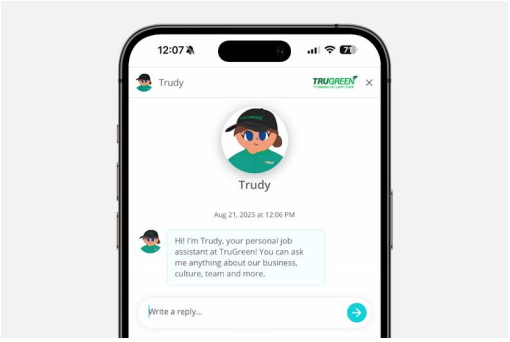
> **I'll go to LinkedIn and see that 2,000 people clicked apply on one job. I know it's not feasible for one recruiter to meticulously look through all those people.**
>
> **Zoe M**
> Class of 2026

Where else you *might* encounter AI in the hiring process.

1

The career site.

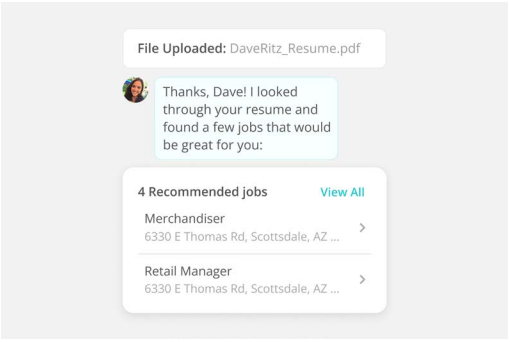
Many retailers' career sites use AI-powered chatbots to answer questions about open roles, benefits, and requirements, at any hour of the day. This matters more than you might expect — roughly 35% of applications are submitted outside traditional business hours.



2

The application.

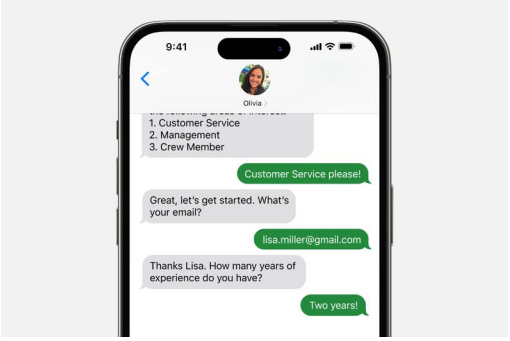
Conversational AI can replace long application forms with short text exchanges. No login required, no lengthy page loads. The whole process typically takes about three minutes — and you'll never have to upload your resume and then fill out a form with the same information again.



3

Screening.

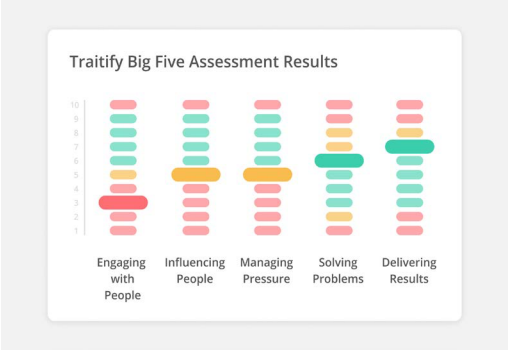
Some companies use chatbots or agents to ask a few targeted questions about your availability, work authorization, or a specific requirement for the role. Based on your responses, you could be quickly advanced, routed to a recruiter for review, or notified that you don't meet the requirements.



4

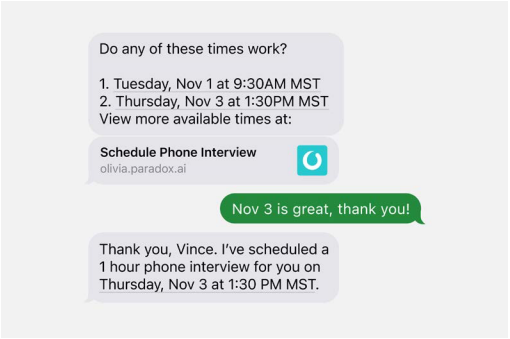
Assessments.

An application could include assessments such as a skills test, personality profile, or situational judgment exercise. These tools are designed to surface authentic responses. Trying to guess the "right" answers typically produces worse results than being straightforward.



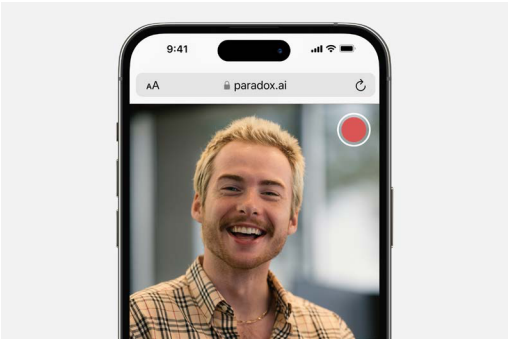
5 Interview scheduling.

Coordinating calendars across multiple interviewers is one of the most time-consuming tasks in recruiting. AI can handle it automatically — syncing availability, sending you available times, confirming the interview, and managing any rescheduling.



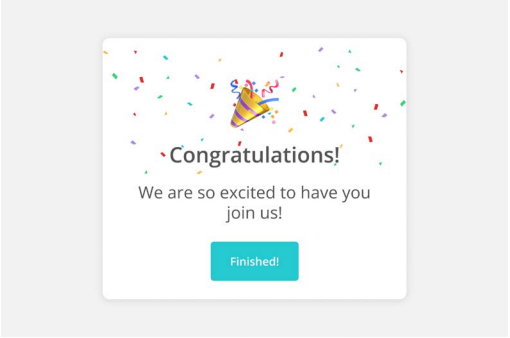
6 The interview.

Here, AI is most commonly used for transcription. One-way recorded interviews, where you respond to pre-set questions on your own schedule, are also increasingly common. AI is generally not scoring your facial expressions — that use of the technology has become far less common.



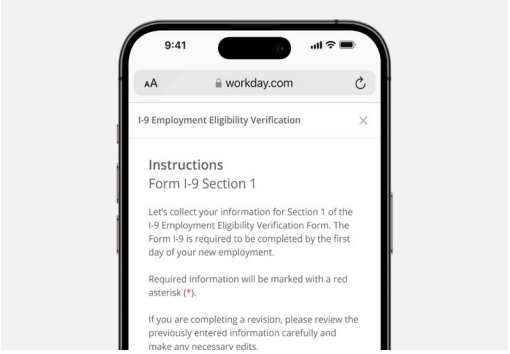
7 The offer letter.

Occasionally, the offer arrives the same way the application started: through a text or email. You can review the details, ask questions, and accept the job directly in the conversation, without the need for email back-and-forth. The intent is to close the loop as efficiently as the process opened it.



8 Onboarding.

Once you accept the job, the same text or email thread may become your onboarding hub. Tax forms, I-9 documentation, and required new-hire paperwork might be sent directly through the conversation — ready to complete from your phone before your first day.



Automation varies by hiring profile.

The role that you're applying for often dictates how much automation you will encounter in the hiring process. Think about it from the employer's side. A large retailer hiring hundreds of associates has very different needs than a corporate team filling a single manager role.

The higher the application volume, the more automation tends to be involved — because there simply isn't enough recruiter bandwidth to personally review every application.

At the same time, **more complex roles typically require more human judgment**. A corporate position might involve several rounds of interviews, a recruiter screen, and a structured assessment. A frontline role might go from application to offer entirely over text or email.

You can usually tell where a role falls before you ever have to press submit.

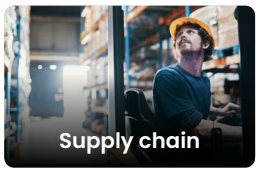
A five-minute text-based application with no login required is a signal you're on the high-automation end. Screening and scheduling could be handled by AI, and a recruiter may not enter the picture until much later.

A process that asks for a cover letter, references, and a lengthy multi-page form up front tends to have more human touchpoints built in from the start, even before you factor in interviews.

Neither end of that spectrum is necessarily better or worse. But knowing where your target role falls can help set your expectations — how quickly you might hear back from the company, how many steps to anticipate, and where a human is most likely to get involved.

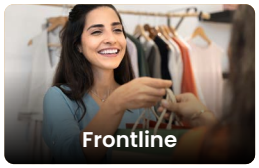
Key Takeaway: The type of job you're applying for usually tells you how much AI will be involved, so pay attention to the application to know what to expect.

The following process illustrations are examples. The actual level of automation used varies by employer.



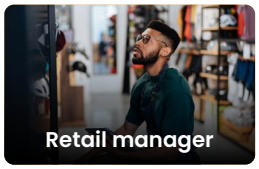
Apply → Screen → Recorded Interview → Complete Application → Offer → Onboarding → Start

E.g. Warehouse Associate, Material Handler



Apply → Screen → Schedule Interview → Complete Application → **Interview** → Offer → Onboarding → Start

E.g. Store Associate, Cashier



Apply → Screen → **Review** → Schedule Interview → Complete Application → **2–3 Interviews** → Reference → **Offer** → Onboarding → Start

E.g. Store Manager, Merchandising Manager



Source/ Apply → Screen → **Review** → Schedule Recruiter Screen → **Recruiter Screen** → Schedule Interviews → Complete Application → **3–5 Interviews** → **Offer** → Onboarding → Start

E.g. Intern, Entry-level

Black = automation (some companies might use AI) | **Red = Human**



Keeping a human in the loop.

Regardless of how automated a company's process is, AI should not autonomously make final hiring decisions. That holds true even at companies with highly automated processes: The further into the process you get, the more human involvement you usually see.

That design is intentional. The goal of most AI in hiring isn't to remove the human element — **it's to free up recruiters to focus on the conversations that require their judgment.**

When a system handles scheduling coordination or initial application review, a recruiter gets back time they would have spent on administrative work. Which means that by the time you're sitting across from a hiring manager, they've had space to actually focus on getting to know you.

And that shift is part of what makes networking more valuable than it's ever been.

If recruiters are spending less time on admin and more time on people, the connections that get you in front of those people matter more.

When someone inside the company advocates for your application, it gets treated differently — flagged for a closer look, routed to a recruiter's attention, or simply seen sooner than it might have been otherwise.

A referral doesn't guarantee anything. But it introduces you to a human who now has the time to actually engage.

Key Takeaway: AI may help with scheduling and initial screening, but employers should maintain human oversight over hiring decisions.

> **The value of a referral has increased in the last 10 years. If someone puts your name in, there's a human advocating for you past the algorithm.**
>
> **Kecia H**
> Director, MBA Career Center

Exercise #1: Where does your job search stand?

Think about any active applications or recent rejections. Use this table to identify where the process broke down — or where you don't have enough information yet.

Company + Role	Stage	Why did it break down?	Next steps

The gameplan.

Look at your 'Why did it break down?' column. Do you see a pattern? If most applications stalled at the ATS stage, your resume may need keyword work. If they stalled after the screen, it may be interview prep. Use the rest of this guide to target the right fix.

> **I track everything in Excel. If I don't hear back in two weeks, I follow up.**
>
> **Sarah S**
> Class of 2027

How candidates should (and shouldn't) use AI.

Where AI helps: job matching.

AI can help expand your target list before you start applying. Upload your resume to an AI tool, describe the kind of work you're looking for, and ask it to surface job titles or industries you might not have considered.

If you need help getting started, visit the career sites of companies you admire and see who they're hiring for.

Where AI helps: tailored resumes.

Once you have a role in mind, the job description becomes your guide. As stated in the previous section, some employers use ATS keyword scoring to rank applications — and the job description can serve as the scoring rubric.

AI can help you compare your resume language against each role's description, identifying places where your actual experience isn't in the terms the employer is scanning for.

A practical way to approach this: keep a baseline resume (a full version of your experience) and tailor it for each application. Don't just swap a few words, but go line by line. Every bullet should connect to something in the job description, using the same phrasing as the company.

The word "refine" is key here. **Create your first draft yourself, then use AI to highlight experiences that match the job requirements**, put numbers behind your accomplishments, or tighten language that's vague.

If you helped reduce wait times at checkout or trained a new team member, AI can help you frame that in a way that's compelling to a hiring manager.

> **The second I started tailoring my resume to match the job description exactly, I started to get interviews.**
>
> **Sarah S**
> Class of 2027

Resume bullet points before and after AI tailoring.

Buying Analyst Job Description:

- Analyze weekly sell-through rates across product categories to identify trends and opportunities
- Partner cross-functionally with inventory planning and store operations to support assortment planning
- Develop and present trend analysis and category recommendations to senior leadership

Before AI tailoring

- Pulled weekly sales reports and flagged slow-moving items for the buying team
- Met regularly with inventory and marketing teams to align on seasonal priorities
- Built a PowerPoint with category performance data for the end-of-quarter review

After AI tailoring

- Tracked weekly sell-through rates to identify underperforming categories
- Partnered cross-functionally with inventory planning to support assortment reviews
- Presented trend analysis to senior leadership, influencing three product category expansions

Job seekers always should review what AI suggests and ensure it is an accurate description of their true work and experience.

After you have AI edit a draft of your resume, **it's important that you take the time to review the document to ensure there are no mistakes**. The same principle applies to cover letters. Start with your own voice — what you actually want to say about why you want this role. Then use AI to sharpen the structure.

Cover letters are one of the few places your voice comes through directly — and companies who request cover letters want to hear that unique perspective.

What AI shouldn't do is write your resume and cover letter from scratch, and it definitely shouldn't fill in experience you don't have. Fabricated details might get you through an ATS. They won't help your interview.

Where AI helps: interview prep.

Before your interview, AI can be one of the best practice partners you'll find. Use it to research the company (its values and recent news) so you're walking in with context. Before you repeat anything AI tells you about a company in an interview, confirm it against the company's own site.

Then run a mock interview. Ask it to go one question at a time. Answer out loud. Ask it to rate your response and flag the weak ones. Run those again. Ask it what questions are worth asking the interviewer. Think of it as a knowledgeable friend you can drill with at 11PM the night before.

When the interview starts, put AI away. The entire point of the conversation is for the company to get to know you, and for you to get to know them. If you've done the prep work, you won't need AI to do well.

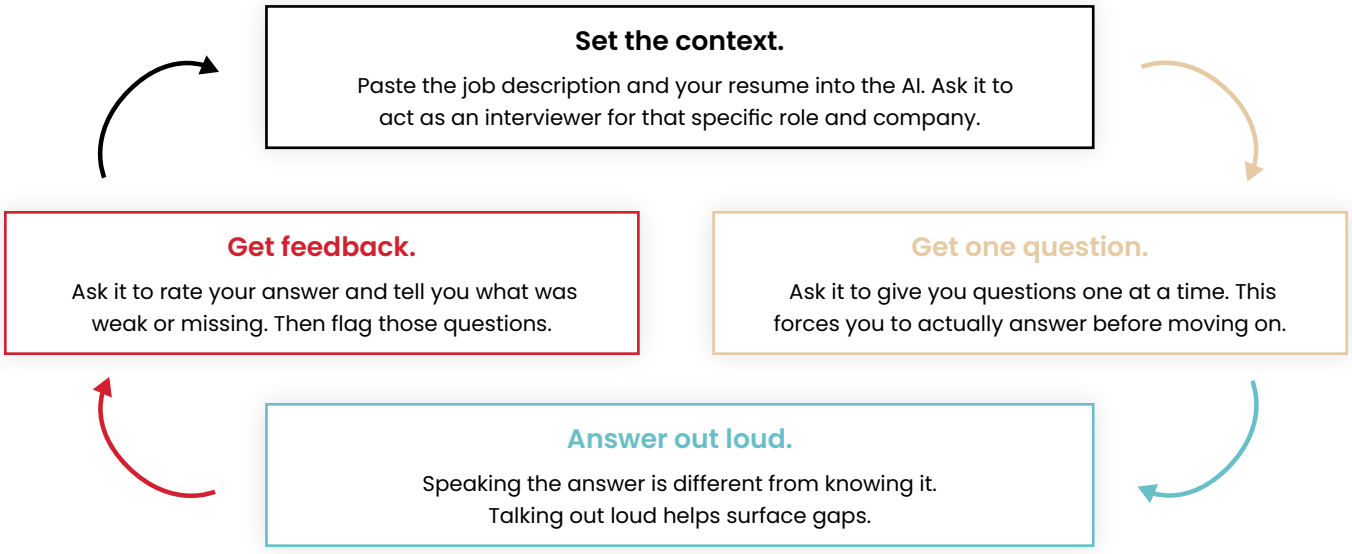
Using AI during the interview can be a reason some companies do not progress a candidate forward in the process.

Reading answers off a screen is more apparent than most candidates expect — experienced interviewers recognize what a natural answer sounds like. They know what it doesn't sound like, too.

Key Takeaway: AI is a great tool for finding jobs, tailoring your resume, and practicing for interviews. But it should never replace your own voice or experience.

> **The virtual interview is all about figuring out how to make a connection across a screen.**
>
> **Ashlee C**
> Director, Undergraduate Career Programming

The mock interview loop.





Where to avoid AI.

There's a version of using AI in your job search that works against you, not because the tools are bad, but because the context is wrong.

The clearest case is written assignments. If a company sends you a take-home exercise, skills test, or written prompt, read the instructions.

Many are explicit that AI shouldn't be used, because they're trying to understand what you can do, not what AI can produce. Using AI anyway may be treated as a violation of the employer's assessment rules and could result in disqualification.

Cover letters and direct outreach are two of the few places your voice comes through, which also makes them the most detectable place to rely on AI. Technically polished, buzzword-heavy language that says nothing specific is a pattern recruiters recognize without a detection tool.

Start with what you actually want to say, then use AI to clean the structure if needed. It should sound like you thought about it, because you actually did.

And again, you shouldn't prompt AI during the actual interview to ask what to say aloud to the recruiter, as this often disqualifies a candidate entirely.

The better question isn't whether AI will get you caught. It's whether getting through a screen is worth showing up unprepared for what comes next.

Key Takeaway: Employers have different policies on AI, so carefully review job postings, application materials, and career sites for any instructions related to AI use.

> **I'm all about the people and the relationships. I would never use AI for a thank-you note or a personal email to a recruiter, because that's coming from me.**
>
> **Gabbi M**
> Class of 2026

Exercise #2: Tailoring your resume.

It's time to put these principles in action. Pick a real job description that you want to tailor a base version of your resume towards, and follow this step-by-step guide to have AI help suggest edits. **Note:** Review the tool's privacy/data-use practices and remove unnecessary personal or sensitive information before uploading your resume.

Give this prompt to an AI tool you have determined is appropriate to use:

Act as both the applicant tracking system and the recruiter for this job. Score my resume the way an ATS would scan for keywords, then evaluate it the way a recruiter would for tone, credibility, and fit. Be honest and specific rather than encouraging. I'd rather know what's weak now than find out in an interview.

Job posting: [paste]. My resume: [paste].

1. Give me a match score out of 100 based on how closely my resume's language lines up with the posting, and briefly explain what's driving the score up or down.
2. List the specific keywords, skills, and requirements in the posting that my resume is missing, underemphasizing, or wording differently than the employer does.
3. Identify which of my bullet points could be strengthened with a number or measurable result (time saved, volume handled, percentage improved), and tell me what's missing.
4. Flag anything in my resume that reads as vague, inflated, or unsupported by specifics.
5. Point out any bullet points that don't clearly connect to a requirement in the posting.
6. Give me the 5 changes that would most improve my match score without adding any experience, skills, or results I don't actually have.

Do not rewrite my resume or write any new bullet points for me. Show me what to fix and why, so I can rewrite it myself in my own words.

Reflection

Looking at the feedback you got, what changes do you plan to make to your resume.
Did you find any suggestions that you would have to correct for accuracy?

This exercise does not predict any particular employer's ATS. The score is simply an AI-generated comparison intended to identify areas for review.

How to stand out and get the job.

Start before you think you need to.

High schoolers should aim to secure a local frontline retail job before the summer, since their peers will be looking for similar jobs at the same time. To help accomplish this, try and work part-time during the fall or spring (even just three hours a week) to have a job to return to once school is out.

In college, most students don't start thinking seriously about the job search until junior year. By then, the students who started early have a head start you can't fully make up.

If you're a freshman or sophomore, you have an advantage most of your peers don't: time. **Go to the career fair even if you're not eligible for an internship yet.**

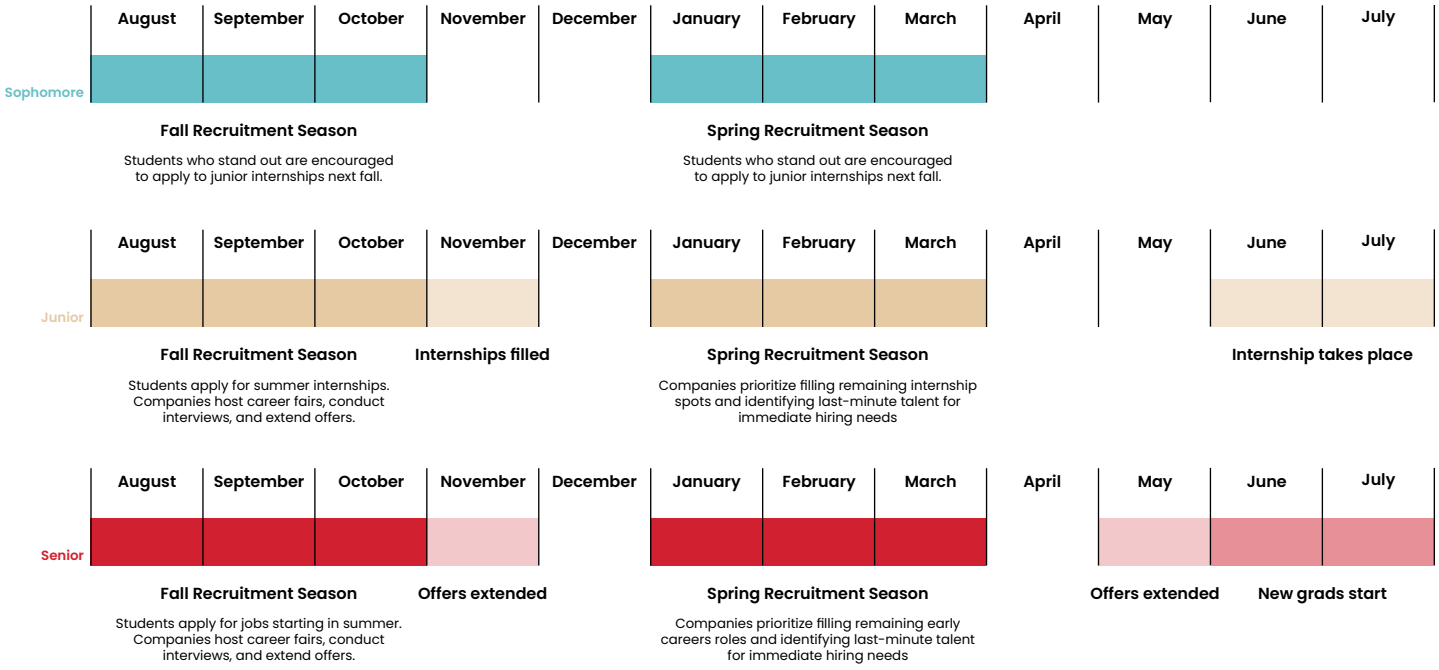
You'll meet the people who recruit for your target companies, learn what roles they actually offer, and find out which retailers don't come to your school — which tells you it's on you to research their hiring timeline directly.

In the meantime, keep working in retail. It will teach you customer service, store operations, and how inventory and trends actually work. None of this is just resume filler. It's a signal, to a recruiter and to any AI reading your resume, that you're genuinely invested in a retail career, not applying broadly and hoping something sticks.

Then go one step further: pick a few dream companies, find 5-10 people who work there on LinkedIn, and send a short note asking for advice, or just to connect. You're not competing with anyone for that recruiter's attention right now, because everyone else is still waiting until junior fall.

> **If you can network during your freshman or sophomore year, you have to do it. Don't leave anything up to chance.**
>
> **Zoe M**
> Class of 2026

College hiring timelines by year.





Be memorable.

Rule number one for any face-to-face moment with a recruiter: **don't let it be the only time you interact with that person**. Meeting someone once means you get two to three minutes to make an impression. Meeting them three times turns that into 10 or 15 minutes over time.

It shows commitment, and it takes the pressure off any single conversation.

At career fairs, it's helpful to remember that you're likely speaking to a person having their 200th conversation of the day. Put yourself in their shoes: How would you want that conversation to feel? Be warm. Ask real questions. Take the time you're given, but don't overstay your welcome.

The follow-up is where most people leave value on the table. Reference something specific from the conversation ("What you said about X really stuck with me") and send it as a personal note. The goal is to be memorable and knowledgeable, not just prepared.

This same instinct works even without a career fair. If an online application disappears into silence, walking into the store and asking for the manager still works, especially at the frontline level.

None of this replaces putting in the work on paper. But when a recruiter has already had a real conversation with you, an application that might otherwise get filtered out on the numbers alone tends to get a second look instead.

Key Takeaway: Consistent contact with a company or recruiter makes you memorable and can help your application get a second look.

> **The success rate students have with companies that they meet in-person is so much higher than the companies that they apply to with a cold resume.**
>
> **Kecia H**
> Director, MBA Career Center

Exercise #3: Getting ahead of the curve.

Use the following criteria to rate your readiness to apply for three different jobs. Where do you notice you're consistently ahead of the curve? Where do you need to spend more time?

Job 1:

I've identified a target company I want to work for.

I know (or have researched) when those companies typically open internship, peak season, or full-time applications.

I've connected with at least one person at a target company — even just on LinkedIn, even if we've never talked.

I've had a real conversation with someone at a target company (a call, a career fair, in-store, an info session)

I've followed up with someone I met, and referenced something specific from our conversation.

I have some kind of experience that shows I'm genuinely invested.

Job 2:

I've identified a target company I want to work for.

I know (or have researched) when those companies typically open internship, peak season, or full-time applications.

I've connected with at least one person at a target company — even just on LinkedIn, even if we've never talked.

I've had a real conversation with someone at a target company (a call, a career fair, in-store, an info session)

I've followed up with someone I met, and referenced something specific from our conversation.

I have some kind of experience that shows I'm genuinely invested.

Job 3:

I've identified a target company I want to work for.

I know (or have researched) when those companies typically open internship, peak season, or full-time applications.

I've connected with at least one person at a target company — even just on LinkedIn, even if we've never talked.

I've had a real conversation with someone at a target company (a call, a career fair, in-store, an info session)

I've followed up with someone I met, and referenced something specific from our conversation.

I have some kind of experience that shows I'm genuinely invested.

Frequently asked questions about AI.

Is AI reading my resume before a human does?

Possibly, but the degree varies. Some companies use AI to automatically advance candidates who meet all requirements or decline those who don't meet legal minimums. Others use the ATS only to organize applications for a human to review. Either way, your resume is often being evaluated against the job description before a recruiter looks at it, which is why keyword alignment matters.

Can companies really detect if I used AI to write my cover letter?

Detection tools exist, but experienced recruiters don't need one — technically polished, buzzword-heavy language is a recognizable pattern. Beyond detection, a cover letter that sounds like everyone else's doesn't help you stand out. Instead, start with your voice and use AI to refine it.

Can I use AI in the job application process?

Generally, yes — using AI to prepare, like refining your resume or practicing interview answers, is widely accepted. Once you're in the actual interview, using AI is often discouraged or prohibited. All that being said, policies vary by company, so it's worth confirming before you rely on it.

How can I look up a company's AI policies?

Start with the job application itself. Some employers disclose whether AI is restricted or not during the process. You can also check the company's careers site for any stated guidelines, and pay attention to instructions from recruiters, since policies vary by employer and aren't always public.

Should I mention in my application that I used AI to help write it?

Not necessary, and in most cases not expected. Using AI to refine your resume or tailor your application is increasingly standard.

Frequently asked questions about the job search.

If I don't hear back in two weeks, should I follow up?

Yes! A brief, professional follow-up after two weeks is appropriate. Restate your interest and ask if there's an update on timing. That being said, don't spam a recruiter; following up more than once rarely changes the outcome.

Does it actually help to walk into a store and ask for a manager?

For frontline retail roles, yes — more than most candidates expect. Many store managers have direct hiring authority and can move quickly when someone makes a strong impression in person. Come in during a non-peak hour and have a brief pitch ready.

How many jobs should I be applying to each week?

There's no magic number, and quantity without tailoring isn't a strategy. A handful of well-tailored applications to roles you're actually qualified for will outperform dozens of generic ones, especially since generic applications are exactly what AI keyword-matching filters out first.

Should I customize my resume for every single application?

You don't necessarily need to rewrite completely, but the language in your bullets should reflect the specific terms in each job description. Keep a strong baseline and adjust per application.

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