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Recruitment Red Flags: How to Spot the Warning Signs Before You Hire

How Time Pressure, Optimism, and Bias Can Blind Even Experienced Leaders to Performance Problems

Why Even Experienced Leaders Make Bad Hiring Decisions

In government, every hiring decision carries weight. Leaders are under pressure to fill roles quickly, deliver outcomes, and keep projects moving – often with limited time and resources. But speed, optimism, and unconscious bias can cloud even the most experienced manager's judgement.

A polished resume or confident interview performance can mask deeper issues. And in a world where AI-written applications are increasingly common, it's becoming harder to separate genuine capability from well crafted digital polish.

"Poor hiring decisions drain time, trust, and create drag on team performance."
Elizabeth Kingston,
CEO, Kingston Human Capital

The Real Cost of a Bad Hire

A poor hire isn't just a setback – it's a compounding cost. Research suggests that a mis-hire can cost between 30% and 150% of the individual's salary, and that figure doesn't include the loss of morale, productivity, and trust within the team.

In government environments, where integrity, performance, and accountability are non-negotiable, one wrong hire can undo months of progress and damage credibility with internal and external stakeholders.

Time lost   **Team impact**   **Rework costs**

The New Challenge: AI-Written Applications

Artificial intelligence is reshaping how candidates present themselves. Tools like ChatGPT can now:

›› Rewrite resumes to match job descriptions
›› Generate selection criteria responses
›› Add buzzwords and corporate language to sound more senior
›› Search and auto-apply for advertised positions

The result? Applications that look impressive but don't always represent the person behind them. Even more concerning is the emerging use of AI-assisted interview tools – apps that listen to live interview questions and generate real-time responses for candidates to read aloud. While this is still a developing trend, it signals a shift that hiring managers need to anticipate.

"Using AI isn't the red flag – misrepresenting experience is."
Michelle Bassett, Director, Kingston Human Capital

Common AI Red Flags

›› Overly polished, generic language ("seasoned professional," "spearheaded initiatives")
›› Perfect STAR responses that don't align with the candidate's background
›› Claims like "transformed workflows" without context or measurable outcomes
›› Phrases copied directly from your job advertisement
›› Inconsistencies between LinkedIn, CV, and cover letter tone
›› A mismatch between written capability and in-person communication
›› Limited understanding of public sector values, processes, or terminology

Hiring Smarter in the AI Era

Despite technological shifts, sound recruitment decisions still rely on human discernment – the ability to read between the lines, validate information, and assess authenticity. Effective hiring requires curiosity, structure, and a consistent process. Here are five principles that help government leaders make confident, evidence-based hiring decisions.

1. **Read for Alignment, Not Perfection.** Don't skim resumes – read for coherence. Review every element – CV, cover letter, selection criteria, and online profile – for consistency in timeline, tone, and detail. Look for alignment between what's claimed and what's demonstrated, rather than being distracted by flawless formatting or corporate language. Ask yourself: *Does this application reflect a real person, or a well-trained prompt?*

2. **Validate Early.** Short, structured phone screens before formal interviews save significant time and resources. Use these early conversations to clarify experience, motivations, and any gaps. They often reveal authenticity – and quickly highlight when an application's polish doesn't match the person behind it.

3. **Interview for Depth.** Move beyond surface-level questions and explore four key dimensions of fit:

    ›› **Motivation:** Why this role, and why now?
    ›› **Technical Skill:** Can they apply knowledge, not just describe it?
    ›› **Communication:** Do they explain ideas clearly and with genuine understanding?
    ›› **Leadership & Interpersonal Skills:** How do they respond to feedback, manage conflict, and contribute to a team environment?

    These dimensions reveal not just what someone can do, but how they think, connect, and perform in real situations.

4. **Test in Real Time.** Practical assessments separate capability from presentation. During in-person interviews, consider running a short applied exercise relevant to the role – such as reviewing a briefing note, interpreting data, or preparing a brief presentation. This approach exposes real communication skills, critical thinking, and judgment under pressure – qualities no AI can replicate.

    > **"To reveal real capability, ask them to show you – not just tell you."**
   > *Elizabeth Kingston, CEO, Kingston Human Capital*

5. **Check References Thoroughly.** Reference checks are not administrative – they are investigative. Speak directly with supervisors who have observed the candidate's performance. Ask probing questions about outcomes, teamwork, resilience, and integrity. Reference conversations often confirm what interviews only suggest.

Case Study: Smarter Hiring in Action

A Queensland Government team recently redefined its recruitment process to focus on authenticity and performance. Here's what they implemented:

1. Over 1,000 applications were received for a high-demand project role.

2. Our consultants shortlisted applications using transparent, evidence-based criteria.

3. Shortlisted candidates were invited to complete a small pre-interview task related to the role.

4. Interviews included:

    ☐ Time to prepare and present a response to a real-world scenario
    ☐ A short presentation and follow-up questions
    ☐ An unseen question designed to assess problem-solving and composure

5. Referees (including at least one direct supervisor) were contacted to validate observed skills and behaviour.

6. Final verification steps included qualifications, work rights, and background checks.
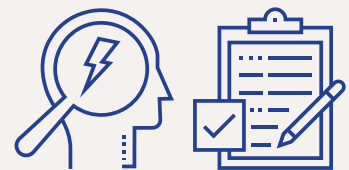
The result? Candidates who appeared strong on paper but couldn't demonstrate capability under pressure were filtered out early – leaving a shortlist of proven, authentic performers.

Six Classic Red Flags: Attitude and Cultural Fit

Beyond AI-written resumes, many red flags appear in mindset and behaviour. After assessing more than 10,000 candidates across 400+ government projects, our consultants have identified six common warning signs that often signal deeper challenges with performance or cultural alignment.

① **Focused Only on Themselves.** Candidates who centre discussions on pay, leave, or flexibility rather than purpose, contribution, or outcomes often reveal a transactional mindset rather than genuine public service motivation.

② **Lack of Genuine Interest.** When candidates haven't researched your department or role and ask no meaningful questions, it often signals low engagement and weak alignment with mission or values.

③ **Too Polished, Too Perfect.** Rehearsed answers without reflection or vulnerability may indicate a lack of self-awareness or an unwillingness to learn.

④ **Vague or Buzzword-Filled Answers.** Candidates who speak in generic terms like "stakeholder engagement" or "collaboration" but can't explain specifics may lack true experience or accountability.

⑤ **Victim Mindset.** Applicants who blame past teams or leaders for challenges – without acknowledging their role or growth – often struggle with resilience and conflict.

⑥ **No Evidence of Growth.** When someone never references learning from feedback, adapting to change, or developing new skills, it's often a sign of stagnation.

"Don't ignore the quiet red flags – they're often the first signs of a deeper issue."
Michelle Bassett, Director, Kingston Human Capital

Two Emerging Red Flags to Watch

As work and recruitment evolve, two additional patterns are becoming more common:

⑦ **Short Tenure Across Multiple Roles.** Frequent moves (less than 12 months each) without clear reasons can signal adaptability issues, underperformance, or misaligned expectations. Always clarify the "why" behind transitions.

⑧ **Unprofessional or Inconsistent Online Presence.** Misalignment between online profiles and resumes – or inappropriate content – can reveal professionalism gaps and potential reputational risk.

Final Thought: Hire for Reality, Not Rhetoric

AI and digital tools will continue to evolve – and candidates will keep finding ways to polish their presentation. But the edge for government hiring managers remains human: judgement, discernment, and the ability to test for truth over polish.

✓ Don't be dazzled by perfect resumes.
✓ Test capability early – before and during interviews.
✓ Validate every claim with evidence and references.

"The wrong hire costs more than time. It costs momentum."
Gerard Kerr, General Manager – Executive Recruitment, Kingston Human Capital

Recruitment is both an art and a science. Intuition matters – but it must be supported by structure, process, and data. When something feels off, don't dismiss it. Investigate, assess, and confirm.

Let's Talk

At Kingston Human Capital, we partner with Queensland Government leaders to design evidence-based recruitment processes that reveal authentic capability. We deliver end-to-end recruitment projects, leadership coaching, and process redesigns that protect your outcomes – and your team's credibility.

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