



ODIN CAREERS

Hampshire & Surrey Hiring Snapshot

Autumn 2026

What businesses across Hampshire, Surrey and the wider South East are actually experiencing.

Hiring conversations often focus on whether vacancies are increasing or decreasing.

But vacancy numbers only tell part of the story.

This snapshot looks at what businesses are actually experiencing: how active hiring is, where they expect demand to emerge, what is making recruitment difficult and what those findings might mean for employers over the next 6-12 months.

I asked businesses across Hampshire, Surrey and the wider South East about their current hiring activity, recruitment challenges and expectations for the year ahead.

Rather than simply reporting the numbers, I've looked at the patterns between them and what they might tell us about the market.



50% of businesses are still hiring steadily or seeing activity pick up



69% say finding candidates with the right skills is a recruitment challenge



31% expect their overall headcount to increase over the next 6-12 months



56% are finding salary expectations challenging

The wider UK labour market has cooled, but that hasn't necessarily made skilled recruitment easier.

UK vacancies have fallen to 702,000, while CIPD research continues to show employers struggling to attract suitably skilled candidates. Our local findings reflect that same tension.

Sources: ONS, September 2026 | CIPD, 2026

HIRING HASN'T STOPPED. IT HAS BECOME MORE SELECTIVE.

The responses don't point to one straightforward hiring market.

Some businesses are continuing to recruit. Others have paused or slowed down. Most expect headcount to stay broadly where it is.

But even where hiring is happening, finding the right people remains difficult.

That combination is where the interesting part of the data starts.

The current hiring picture.

The market is cooler, but there isn't one South East hiring market.

The responses are almost exactly split down the middle.

Half of the businesses surveyed are hiring steadily or seeing activity pick up. The other half have seen hiring slow or have little or no recruitment activity at present

CURRENT HIRING ACTIVITY: 50/50

6.3% | **43.8%** | **6.3%** | **43.8%**

Hiring is picking up

Hiring is steady

Hiring has slowed

Little/no hiring currently

Local findings in the wider market

The wider UK market has cooled. ONS data shows vacancies have fallen to 702,000, while employer hiring intentions remain cautious.

But fewer vacancies don't automatically mean easier recruitment. CIPD research continues to show employers struggling to attract the right skills, despite a softer overall labour market.

Our findings point to the same tension locally.

Half of respondents are still hiring steadily or seeing activity pick up, while 68.8% say finding candidates with the right skills is a challenge.

- The picture is therefore less about whether “there are jobs” or “there are candidates” and more about whether the right candidates are available for the specific roles businesses need to fill.

WHAT I THINK THIS TELLS US.

If the wider market slowdown were being experienced uniformly by these businesses, we might expect to see a clearer concentration of reduced or paused recruitment.

That's not what this snapshot shows.

Half of respondents reported that hiring was steady or picking up, while the other half reported that recruitment had slowed or was limited. This points to a mixed picture rather than a consistent regional trend.

A slowdown in hiring doesn't necessarily mean it's easier to find the right person. Businesses may be recruiting less overall, but when a vacancy does arise, finding someone with the right skills at a salary they can realistically offer can remain a challenge.

That makes broad statements such as “the market is quiet” a poor basis for decisions about an individual vacancy.

The relevant question isn't: “Is the hiring market busy?”

It's: “What does the market look like for the particular people we need?”

HEADCOUNT EXPECTATIONS SUPPORT

Looking ahead 6–12 months:

- **31.3%** expect headcount to increase
- **62.5%** expect headcount to stay roughly the same
- **6.3%** say it is too early to say

The majority aren't planning significant headcount growth.

But nearly a third are.

To me, that suggests caution rather than inactivity.

Businesses are still prepared to hire where there is a clear need, but adding headcount appears to require more consideration.

A note for employers:

When every additional hire needs to make sense, getting the brief, salary and candidate market right before starting a search becomes more important.

The cost of getting a recruitment decision wrong is harder to absorb when there isn't a large hiring programme behind it.

- That distinction matters because a business can be operating in a cautious market and still find its particular talent pool highly competitive.

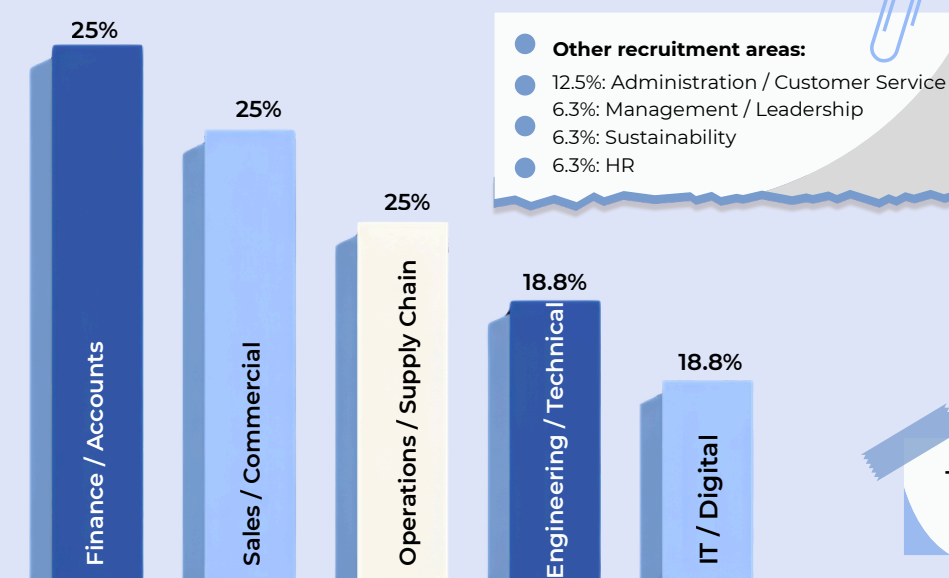
Where will the hiring be?

The interesting thing isn't which function comes out on top. It's how fragmented the demand is.

There isn't one dominant hiring category emerging from the responses.

Finance, Sales, Operations, Engineering, Manufacturing and IT/Digital all feature in businesses' recruitment plans for the next 6–12 months.

EXPECTED RECRUITMENT AREAS



*Respondents could select more than one area, so percentages do not total 100%.

What I think this tells us

This doesn't look like a market being driven by one particular hiring trend.

It looks more like businesses are recruiting around specific commercial needs.

That is an important distinction.

A business looking for an experienced Finance specialist is solving a very different talent problem from a manufacturer looking for an engineer, or a company trying to build out its sales team.

So although regional hiring data can tell us whether confidence is improving or falling, it can't necessarily tell an employer how difficult its own vacancy will be.

The market needs to be read at role level, not just regional level.

This is one reason broad hiring headlines can be misleading for employers. A market can be quieter overall while a particular technical, specialist or business-critical talent pool remains highly competitive.

That's particularly relevant for niche, technical or business-critical positions.

A company may only need to make one hire this year and still have a very difficult recruitment problem if the relevant candidate pool is small, passive or already being approached by competitors.

A vacancy doesn't have to be high volume to be difficult

This is where I think the data becomes more useful for businesses.

37.5% of respondents aren't currently expecting to recruit. That means recruitment may not be a constant activity for many of these businesses.

But when a vacancy does appear, it may be important precisely because there aren't ten other hires happening alongside it.

If the role is difficult to fill, waiting until it becomes urgent reduces the options available.

Understanding the market earlier doesn't necessarily mean recruiting earlier.

It can simply mean knowing:

- Who is available?
- What are they likely to expect?
- Is the salary competitive?
- How large is the realistic talent pool?
- What would make someone move?

Those answers are much easier to work out before a vacancy becomes business-critical.

The recruitment challenges businesses are facing.

The biggest problem isn't necessarily getting applications. It's getting the right people.

68.8% say finding candidates with the right skills is a recruitment challenge.

That was the clearest finding in the survey.

RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES

*Respondents could select more than one challenge.



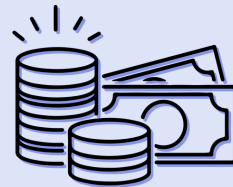
Finding candidates with the right skills: 68.8%



Candidate withdrawal: 12.5%



Counteroffers/candidates staying put: 18.8%



Salary expectations: 56.3%



Finding enough suitable candidates: 43.8%

The finding I find most interesting.

Look at the difference between:

- **68.8%** struggling to find the right skills
- **43.8%** struggling to find enough suitable candidates

and just **12.5%** identifying too many unsuitable applications as a challenge.

That doesn't suggest the main problem is simply "we need more applications." It suggests something more nuanced.

Application volume and candidate availability are not the same thing.

A business can receive 100 applications and still not have one person who genuinely fits the requirement.

A CV can look relevant without the candidate having the depth of experience, motivation, salary expectations or practical fit needed to make the hire work.

That distinction is particularly important when recruitment is cautious.

If a business only needs one person, the quality of the shortlist matters far more than the size of the inbox.

This isn't unique to the businesses in this snapshot. CIPD's latest UK-wide research found a similar pattern, with more employers reporting increases in unsuitable applications than increases in suitable ones.

WHAT BUSINESSES TOLD US

The qualitative responses reinforce this.

Respondents raised concerns around candidates applying without reading the job description or essential requirements, salary expectations not aligning with market value, and CVs being heavily tailored to vacancies.

One respondent commented:

"Candidate expectations are not aligned with market value."

There were also frustrations around candidates wanting to establish salary expectations before progressing to interview.

Salary is part of the problem too

I don't think the useful conclusion here is simply "candidates want too much." There can be a genuine gap between what an employer is prepared to offer and what the relevant candidate pool expects.

Sometimes that may come from candidates benchmarking themselves against a different part of the market.

Sometimes the employer's salary range may no longer attract the experience they are looking for.

Either way, the problem becomes expensive when that gap is discovered halfway through a recruitment process.

The salary conversation belongs much earlier in the process.

• The issue isn't necessarily application volume.
• It's relevance.

These comments don't prove that candidates are universally unrealistic, but they do point towards a recurring theme:

The employer and candidate aren't always starting from the same understanding of the opportunity.

Before advertising, it is worth asking:

- What can we realistically pay?
- What level of candidate does that attract?
- What experience is actually worth paying more for?
- Where could we flex the role if the market doesn't support the original brief?

That is more useful than simply finding out the salary doesn't work after three interviews.

Looking ahead: What I think the findings mean for employers

Taken individually, none of the findings are particularly surprising.

Businesses are cautious. Some are hiring. Skills are difficult to find. Salary causes friction.

But when you put the findings together, a clearer picture emerges.

The market is cooler. It's also less forgiving.

1

HIRING DECISIONS ARE BEING SCRUTINISED

62.5% expect headcount to stay roughly the same, while only 31.3% expect it to increase.

That suggests many businesses aren't looking to build headcount for the sake of it.

When a hire has to justify itself, there is less room for a vague brief, an unrealistic salary or a long recruitment process that produces little.

My takeaway: the recruitment process needs to start with understanding why the role exists and what a successful hire actually needs to achieve.

2

MORE APPLICATIONS WON'T NECESSARILY SOLVE THE PROBLEM

68.8% are struggling to find the right skills, compared with only 12.5% reporting too many unsuitable applications.

That is a significant difference.

The data suggests that candidate quality and relevance are a bigger issue than application volume.

My takeaway: if a vacancy isn't producing the right people, the answer isn't automatically to advertise it in more places. The problem may sit in the brief, salary, target talent pool or approach to sourcing.

3

THE MARKET NEEDS TO BE JUDGED AT ROLE LEVEL

Recruitment demand is spread across Finance, Sales, Operations, Engineering, Manufacturing, IT and other functions.

There isn't one obvious "hot" category.

My takeaway: employers need to understand the market for their specific role rather than relying too heavily on broad statements about whether hiring in the region is up or down.

A quiet overall market doesn't automatically mean an easy hire.

4

THE GAP BETWEEN EMPLOYER AND CANDIDATE EXPECTATIONS MATTERS

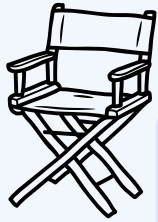
56.3% identified salary expectations as a challenge.

Combined with the qualitative comments, that suggests there can be a disconnect between what businesses believe a role is worth and what the relevant candidates expect.

My takeaway: salary benchmarking shouldn't be an afterthought. Neither should the candidate proposition.

If someone is already employed and not actively looking, there needs to be a reason for them to seriously consider moving.

So, what does all of this mean?



DIRECTOR'S TAKE

For me, the biggest takeaway isn't that hiring is increasing or decreasing.

It's that businesses are making more deliberate recruitment decisions, while the cost of getting those decisions wrong remains high.

The wider market has cooled. But the businesses in this snapshot aren't simply saying "there are plenty of candidates now". They're telling us something more nuanced.

The challenge is increasingly about finding the right person, at a realistic salary, for a role that has been properly defined.

That means the most valuable recruitment work often happens before the CV arrives.

It's not about generating more CVs.

It's about closing the gap between the person a business thinks it needs, the person the market can realistically provide, and the person who will actually say yes.

That, to me, is the real story behind this snapshot.

Before advertising, it is worth:

- Understanding the market.
- Testing the salary.
- Separating essential requirements from preferences.
- Knowing whether the relevant talent is actively applying or needs to be approached.
- And being honest about what the business can realistically attract.



RECRUITMENT ISN'T NECESSARILY EITHER/OR

62.5% of respondents use a mixture of in-house and external recruitment support.

That suggests external recruitment isn't necessarily replacing internal hiring teams.

For many businesses, it is being used selectively: when internal resource is stretched, when a role is specialist, when the candidate pool is difficult to reach, or when a business needs another perspective on why a search isn't producing.

My takeaway: the most useful external recruitment support should complement an internal team rather than compete with it.

IF I WERE HIRING RIGHT NOW, I'D START WITH THESE FOUR QUESTIONS:

Is the role genuinely needed, or simply overdue for review?

Which requirements are non-negotiable, and which are preferences?

Is the salary capable of attracting the experience we actually want?

Are we expecting the right person to find us, or do we need to find them?

If those four questions have clear answers, recruitment becomes much easier to diagnose.
If they don't, adding more applications rarely fixes the underlying problem.

About this snapshot.

Recruitment is personal.

This snapshot was created to understand what businesses across Hampshire, Surrey and the wider South East are actually experiencing, rather than relying on broad national hiring headlines.

The responses came from business owners, senior leaders, HR/People professionals, hiring managers and operational decision-makers across a range of sectors and company sizes.

The businesses represented ranged from small organisations through to companies employing 10–250 people. Manufacturing and engineering featured strongly, alongside a broader mix of sectors.

METHODOLOGY

Responses were collected during September and early October 2026. Businesses were based across Hampshire, Surrey and the wider South East.

The survey covered:

- current hiring activity
- recruitment challenges
- expected recruitment areas over the next 6–12 months
- headcount expectations
- recruitment approach
- observations on the current hiring market

Some questions allowed respondents to select more than one answer.

This is a snapshot of the businesses who responded, rather than a statistically representative study of the entire South East.

Wider market context: ONS labour-market data and CIPD employer research referenced in this report were used to provide national context alongside the local survey findings. These sources are not directly comparable with the Odin Careers survey, but are included to help put the local responses into context.

Sources: Office for National Statistics, Vacancies and jobs in the UK: September 2026; CIPD, Labour Market Outlook: Summer 2026; CIPD, Resourcing and Talent Planning 2026.

ABOUT ODIN CAREERS

Generalist by choice. Local by nature.

Odin Careers supports businesses across Hampshire, Surrey and the wider South East with commercial, technical and non-technical recruitment.

The recruitment process doesn't start with a job advert.

It starts with understanding **what the business actually needs, what the market looks like and whether the opportunity is realistic.**

Sometimes that means helping with a difficult-to-fill role.

Sometimes it means giving an internal team an extra pair of eyes.

Sometimes it means challenging the brief, testing the salary or helping a business understand why the obvious route isn't producing the right candidates.

And sometimes it simply means knowing who to speak to when the right person isn't easy to find.

I work as an extension of an internal team rather than trying to replace one.

One right introduction is worth more than ten rushed ones.

If you're finding a role harder to fill than it should be, I'm always happy to compare notes.

