



90% of US Hiring Managers Say One Thing Speeds Up the Process — And Most Candidates Don't Use It

New survey shows referrals build trust, accelerate decisions and give candidates a clear edge many overlook.

OKLAHOMA CITY, April 8, 2026 — A referral may be the closest thing to a “shortcut” in today’s job market, and a new Express Employment Professionals-Harris Poll survey shows just how powerful that endorsement can be. A striking 90% of U.S. hiring managers say employee referrals make hiring more efficient, and 91% say a strong internal reference can open doors that would otherwise stay closed.

Yet despite its impact, most job seekers aren’t tapping into it.

A referral does more than boost visibility. It fundamentally changes how hiring managers perceive a candidate.

- 89% trust candidates’ stated skills more when someone recommends them.
- 80% prioritize interviewing referred candidates over equally qualified non-referred applicants.
- 76% believe referred candidates perform better on the job.

In a crowded labor market, a single name can be the difference between getting noticed and getting overlooked.

But while referrals can be a deciding factor for hiring managers, job seekers rarely recognize their value. Only 40% believe a referral helps them stand out, revealing a significant disconnect between how influence is perceived on each side of the hiring process.



Referrals Work When Relationships Are Real

Hiring managers value referrals, but they also value authenticity.

- 93% have been contacted by former colleagues after long periods of no communication.
- 38% say it happens all the time or often.
- 68% are less likely to provide a reference if the only time someone reaches out is when they need one.
- 66% consider whether the person maintained the relationship over the years before agreeing to help.

The power of a referral doesn't begin when a candidate needs a job. It begins long before that through trust, history and genuine connection.

The Strength — And Limits — of a Referral

Even with its undeniable impact, hiring managers are realistic about the boundaries of a referral.

- 91% say a reference doesn't always mean the candidate is the right fit.
- 49% strongly agree.
- 70% worry that relying on referrals can limit team diversity.

Referrals open doors, but they don't replace a true assessment of skills, culture or potential. They accelerate opportunity, not guarantee it.

"Referrals have always carried weight, but what this data shows is that they carry responsibility too," said Bob Funk Jr., CEO, President and Chairman of Express Employment International. "The strongest recommendations come from relationships built on consistency and genuine connection, not convenience. When people invest in each other over time, they create opportunities that no algorithm can match. A referral isn't just a name on an email. It's trust earned through showing up. That's what moves careers forward."

Discover more research and real-world workforce trends from the America Employed series at [ExpressPros.com/Newsroom](https://www.expresspros.com/newsroom).

Survey Methodology

The Job Insights survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals from Nov. 3 to 19, 2025, among 1,002 U.S. hiring decision-makers.

The Job Seeker Report was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals from Nov. 7 to 20, 2025, among 1,003 adults ages 18 and older.

For full survey methodologies, please contact Sheena.Hollander@ExpressPros.com, Director of Corporate Communications & PR.

If you would like to arrange for an interview to discuss this topic, please contact Sheena.Hollander@ExpressPros.com, Director of Corporate Communications & PR.

About Robert (Bob) Funk Jr.

Robert (Bob) Funk Jr. is the Chief Executive Officer, President and Chairman of Express Employment International, a global staffing franchisor founded and headquartered in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He leads a portfolio of workforce solution brands, including the flagship Express Employment Professionals franchise, along with several affiliated brands serving specialized markets. The Express franchise brand is an industry-leading, international staffing company with franchise locations across the U.S., Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

About Express Employment Professionals

At Express Employment Professionals, we're in the business of people. From job seekers to client companies, Express helps people thrive and businesses grow. Our international network of franchises offers localized staffing solutions to the communities they serve across the U.S., Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, employing more than 11 million people globally since its inception. For more information, visit ExpressPros.com.