The Invisible Candidate: Experience, Recruitment, and the Growing Separation Between Capability and Recognition

Adam Tugwell | 6 November 2026



A headline caught my attention recently.

A successful six-figure IT professional had reportedly found himself working as a supermarket delivery driver after struggling to secure another comparable role. The article was framed as a story about older workers, the jobs market, and the increasingly difficult experience of finding employment later in life.

It would be easy to interpret this as another story about artificial intelligence, technological disruption, or age discrimination.

It may contain elements of all three.

However, I suspect something deeper is taking place.

The question that interests me is not why so many experienced people appear to be struggling.

The question is why so many capable people increasingly find themselves invisible to the systems responsible for recognising capability.

The two things are not necessarily the same.

The Assumption We Rarely Examine

Much modern thinking about work assumes a relatively straightforward relationship between capability and opportunity.

If an individual is capable, they will eventually be recognised.

If they are recognised, they will secure employment.

If they secure employment, they will create value.

This assumption sits quietly beneath many discussions about meritocracy, recruitment and career progression.

Yet for many people, particularly those with substantial experience, this relationship increasingly appears to be breaking down.

People leave organisations with decades of experience, extensive operational knowledge, proven records of delivery, crisis management experience, technical expertise and leadership capability.

Then struggle to obtain an interview.

The capability remains.

The opportunity disappears.

This should immediately raise a question.

If capability remains unchanged, what exactly has changed?

Recruitment Is Not Primarily About Capability

Most people assume recruitment is principally concerned with identifying the best candidate.

In practice, recruitment is often concerned with something else.

Risk.

Recruitment is a process that sits between uncertainty and accountability.

Every appointment carries risk.

Every failed appointment creates consequences.

Every hiring decision may eventually need to be justified.

As a result, recruitment systems increasingly favour defensible decisions over uncertain ones.

This distinction matters.

A defensible decision is not necessarily the same thing as the best decision.

A recruiter who recommends an unconventional candidate takes a risk.

A recruiter who recommends the candidate who ticks every box acquires protection.

If the appointment succeeds, everyone is happy.

If the appointment fails, the recruiter can point towards the specification.

The candidate possessed the required qualifications.

The candidate possessed the required experience.

The candidate passed the required assessments.

The candidate satisfied the stated criteria.

The process was followed.

Responsibility becomes attached to the process rather than the outcome.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, this changes behaviour.

The objective subtly shifts.

Instead of seeking the best possible candidate, the system begins to seek the least risky candidate.

The Rise of the Proxy

Modern organisations cannot directly measure many of the things they care about.

They therefore rely upon proxies.

A proxy is simply a representation of something else.

Qualifications are proxies.

Assessments are proxies.

Competency frameworks are proxies.

Interview scores are proxies.

Job titles are proxies.

Years of experience are proxies.

Keywords on a CV are proxies.

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these things.

The problem emerges when we begin treating proxies as if they are the thing they represent.

A qualification is not knowledge.

A certification is not competence.

A competency score is not judgement.

A job title is not capability.

A CV is not a person.

Yet increasingly, decisions are made on the basis of these representations rather than the realities they are intended to reflect.

The result is subtle but profound.

Recruitment stops asking:

Can this person do the job?

And starts asking:

Does this person match our representation of someone who can do the job?

Those are very different questions.

The Experience Problem

This creates an interesting challenge for experienced candidates.

Many of the most valuable capabilities that experience develops are exceptionally difficult to measure.

How do we quantify:

- judgement?
- practical wisdom?
- patience?
- resilience?
- operational awareness?
- crisis management?
- recognising weak signals?
- balancing competing priorities?
- understanding unintended consequences?
- knowing when established procedures are likely to fail?

Most organisations depend heavily upon these capabilities.

Yet most recruitment systems struggle to capture them.

By contrast, qualifications, certifications and recent technical skills are comparatively easy to measure.

As a result, the forms of value that mature experience often provides become increasingly invisible.

The irony is striking.

The very capabilities organisations frequently rely upon during difficult periods become among the hardest capabilities for the recruitment system to recognise.

Why Older Candidates Can Feel Risky

Age discrimination undoubtedly exists.

But I suspect it often manifests through more complex mechanisms than are commonly acknowledged.

A younger hiring manager may have little difficulty evaluating a candidate with a relatively conventional career path.

The signals feel familiar.

The experiences feel relatable.

The expectations feel understandable.

The same manager may encounter a candidate with thirty years of experience and face a different problem entirely.

How should that experience be interpreted?

What are the candidate's expectations?

Will they be satisfied?

Will they stay?

Will they challenge existing practices?

How easily will they integrate?

Can somebody with significantly greater experience be effectively managed?

None of these questions necessarily arise from prejudice.

Many arise from uncertainty.

Unfortunately, uncertainty itself becomes a form of risk.

And recruitment increasingly seeks to minimise risk.

In such an environment, experience can paradoxically become a disadvantage.

Not because it lacks value.

But because it introduces complexity.

The Financialisation of Value

There is another factor that receives far less attention.

Many professions operate within an increasingly financialised economy.

Value is often determined by relationships to profit, growth, revenue generation or capital allocation.

This produces extraordinary variations in compensation.

Certain professions attract exceptionally high salaries.

Others attract comparatively modest earnings despite providing functions essential to society.

This tells us something important.

Salary is not a measure of human value.

It is a measure of economic valuation within a particular system.

These are not the same thing.

The six-figure professional and the care worker occupy different positions within the economic architecture.

The market prices those positions differently.

That pricing tells us something about economic structures.

It does not tell us how much either individual contributes to society.

The distinction matters because stories about highly paid professionals becoming unemployed can easily become stories about status.

Yet status and economic independence are not the same thing.

The Difference Between Poverty and Status Loss

One of the mistakes frequently made in public discussion is conflating financial decline with poverty.

They are related but distinct phenomena.

A person moving from a six-figure salary to a modest income may experience a substantial loss of status, identity, certainty and expectation.

That experience can be deeply significant.

However, poverty begins somewhere else.

Poverty begins when independence becomes unsustainable.

When people can no longer reliably meet their essential needs through their own resources, dependency begins to emerge.

This distinction is important because it changes the nature of the discussion.

The issue is not merely whether incomes have fallen.

The issue is whether people retain the means to sustain independent lives.

Some individuals earning comparatively modest wages remain independent.

Others earning multiple times as much discover that their financial position is far more fragile than they imagined.

Income alone does not tell us where vulnerability truly exists.

The Hidden Cost to Organisations

There is another side to this story that receives remarkably little attention.

Recruitment systems do not simply affect candidates.

They affect employers.

Every filtering mechanism excludes people.

Every screening stage removes possibilities.

Every requirement narrows the field.

The organisation only ever sees the shortlisted candidates.

It never sees those who were filtered out.

This creates a serious blind spot.

Excellent candidates may disappear before any meaningful conversation occurs.

The reasons may be entirely procedural.

A missing qualification.

An unconventional career path.

Experience acquired outside an approved pathway.

Work completed under a different job title.

The employer never discovers what was lost.

The candidate never knows they were excluded.

The recruiter never receives evidence that a mistake occurred.

The opportunity simply disappears.

Invisible losses are particularly dangerous because they leave no evidence behind.

Why AI May Not Be the Main Story

Artificial intelligence will undoubtedly affect employment.

It already is.

However, there is a danger that AI becomes the explanation for changes that were already underway.

Long before generative AI appeared, organisations had begun moving towards:

- automated filtering;
- keyword matching;
- competency frameworks;
- compliance-driven recruitment;
- risk reduction processes;
- increasingly measurable forms of assessment.

The trajectory was already established.

AI may accelerate these tendencies.

It may scale them.

It may automate them.

But the underlying dynamics predate AI.

The problem did not begin with AI.

AI may simply be arriving at a moment when these systems have already become heavily dependent upon proxies.

The Invisible Candidate

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this discussion is its human dimension.

Many people experiencing these difficulties blame themselves.

They assume the problem must be a personal failing.

Perhaps they are too old.

Perhaps their skills are outdated.

Perhaps they should have made different choices.

Sometimes individual factors undoubtedly play a role.

But there is also something larger occurring.

Many individuals are discovering that capability and recognition have become increasingly separated.

The ability to perform valuable work and the ability to satisfy modern systems of evaluation are not always the same thing.

Understanding this distinction does not solve the problem.

But it does help explain why so many capable people increasingly struggle to make sense of experiences that appear fundamentally irrational.

Their capability has not necessarily diminished.

The system's ability to recognise it may have.

Conclusion

The most interesting question raised by stories of experienced professionals struggling to find work is not whether older workers face challenges.

Nor is it whether AI is changing the labour market.

Nor even whether qualifications are becoming more important.

The deeper question is this:

What happens when the systems responsible for identifying capability become increasingly dependent upon representations of capability instead?

The answer matters because this is no longer simply a recruitment issue.

It touches education, management, governance, public policy and organisational decision-making.

It concerns the relationship between reality and representation.

Between judgement and procedure.

Between capability and recognition.

And until we begin examining that relationship more closely, many of the most capable people in society may continue experiencing a strange and growing sense of invisibility.

Further Reading

Can Meaningful Change Still Be Delivered Today?

Explores capability externalisation, human value externalisation, proxy authority, proxy sovereignty, judgement displacement and agency. Provides much of the conceptual framework underlying the arguments presented here.

Link: https://adamtugwell.blog/2026/11/01/can-meaningful-change-still-be-delivered-today/

The Architecture of Modern Poverty: Independence, Economy, and the Basic Living Standard

Examines poverty as the loss of independence rather than simply a shortage of income and introduces the concepts of the Independence Threshold and the Basic Living Standard.

Link: https://adamtugwell.blog/2026/10/24/the-architecture-of-modern-poverty/

Related Themes

- Capability Externalisation
- Human Value Externalisation
- Proxy Authority
- Proxy Sovereignty
- Judgement Displacement
- Financialisation and Measurement
- Agency and Participation
- The Recognition Problem in Modern Systems

Author's note:

This piece is not an argument against qualifications, recruitment processes or technology. All have legitimate purposes. The question is whether the tools designed to help recognise capability are gradually becoming substitutes for the capability they were originally intended to identify.

Further Information

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