

WORDS MATTER

What your job descriptions really
say about your organisation



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Job descriptions are one of the most read pieces of content your organisation produces. They're also one of the least examined.

We asked 104 people to rate 69 words and phrases from real job descriptions. What came back was a **picture of eroding trust** and a system that keeps organisations hiring people who look, think and sound like the people already at the top.

1 in 4 candidates would still apply to a role with 3+ red flags, 1 in 4 wouldn't, and the rest are looking for further evidence. **Career level creates more disagreement** than any other factor we measured. The higher up you are, the more positively you read the language.

Three themes ran through everything we heard.

- **Trust:** candidates are reading job descriptions as evidence of honesty, and most aren't convinced.
- **Exploitation:** a cluster of words signals to experienced candidates that the organisation will take more than it gives.
- **Playing the game:** candidates are working around a broken system and the best ones are often opting out entirely.

Read on for **the data, insights, and three AI prompts** you can use now.

"The best candidates self-select out of the process before it even starts – unless someone brings them in."

– Elizabeth Lauchlan, Gi Group Holding



METHODOLOGY & SCORING CRITERIA

69

Keywords from real job descriptions were shown in an anonymous electronic survey.

34 related to company culture

When candidates read these words they judge your organisation, the cultural fit to their values.

Participants rated each one on whether they would make them more or less likely to apply to a role:

Red - Less likely

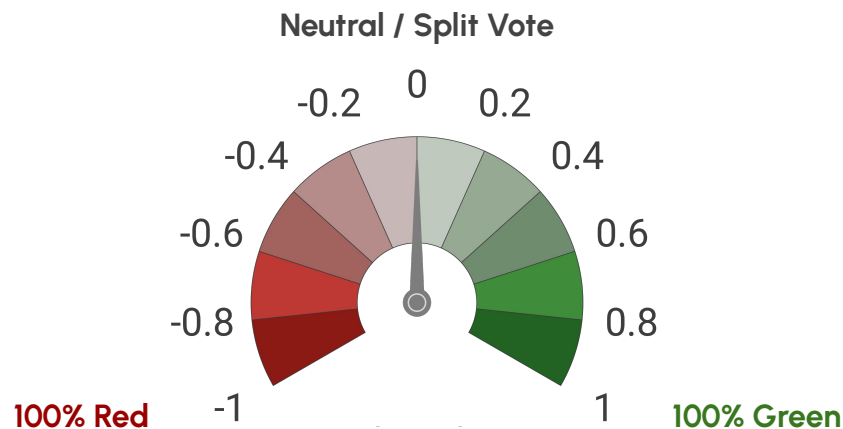
Green - More likely

Neutral - No impact

35 related to person specification

These aren't about how the candidate works, but rather about who they are as a person.

We translated responses into an aggregate score from **-1 (100% red) to +1 (100% green)**. Zero isn't always neutral, it sometimes means respondents are split.

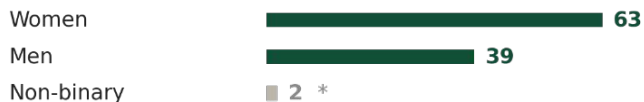


Throughout the study, we reference this score, as well as % splits of red, green and neutral flags.

THE RESPONDENTS

104 respondents across sectors, levels and axes of diversity to understand which words resonate and which create barriers.

GENDER



SEXUAL ORIENTATION



ETHNICITY



NEURODIVERGENT IDENTITY



DISABILITY



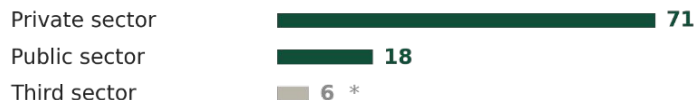
■ Included in analysis ■ Small sample — excluded from splits

* Groups with $n < 10$ are shown for transparency but not used in comparative analysis.

CAREER LEVEL



SECTOR



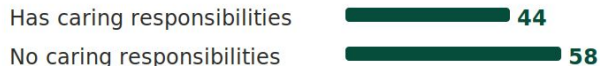
SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND



AGE



CARING RESPONSIBILITIES



DIRECTIONAL DATA & REAL VOICES



The survey data gives us a **robust directional picture** (104 respondents, consistent patterns across groups). It was a self-selecting sample and not statistically representative so we'd encourage you to read it as a strong signal rather than a definitive conclusion.

We bolstered the survey with a **qualitative layer**: formal interviews, conversations across our networks and at the **Westminster Insight Conference**. Perspectives from candidates, HR professionals, and recruiters providing depth from both sides of the hiring table. The free text responses were unexpectedly rich: **candid, specific**, and often more revealing than the scores themselves.

You can explore the data directly [on our site](#).

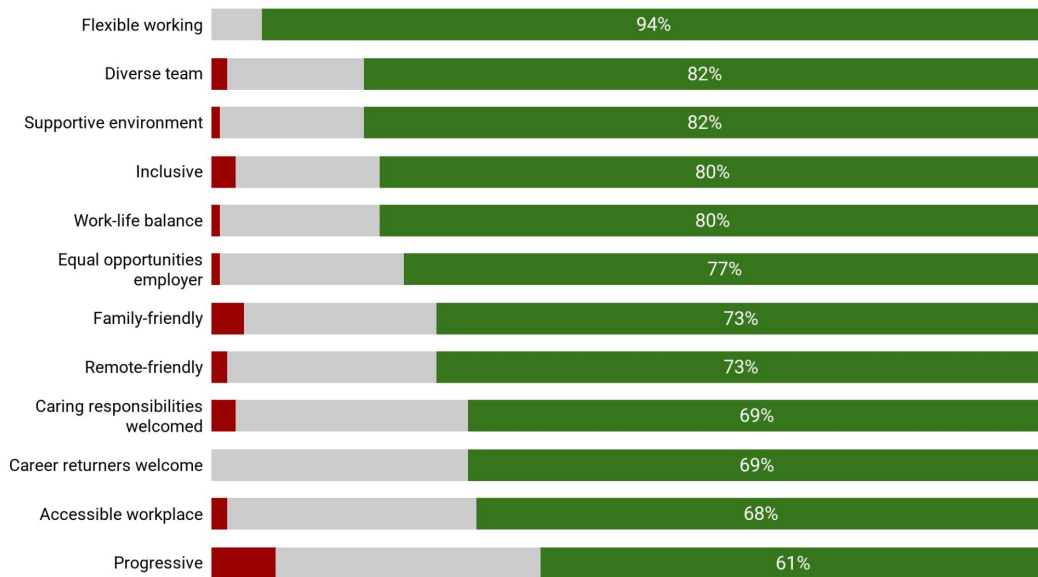
RESULTS

COMPANY CULTURE

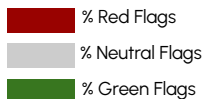
With **71% of UK professionals** saying company culture and values are essential factors when applying for a job, the language used in job descriptions has become far more than employer branding; it directly shapes candidate attraction and application intent.

Meanwhile, as **only 14% of professionals feel aligned** with their current company's culture, candidates are increasingly scanning for cultural "signals" in job ads to identify workplaces that genuinely match their values and working style.

COMPANY CULTURE: THE POSITIVES



Words shown scored **60%+ green flags** across all respondents



These words signal one thing: we trust you.

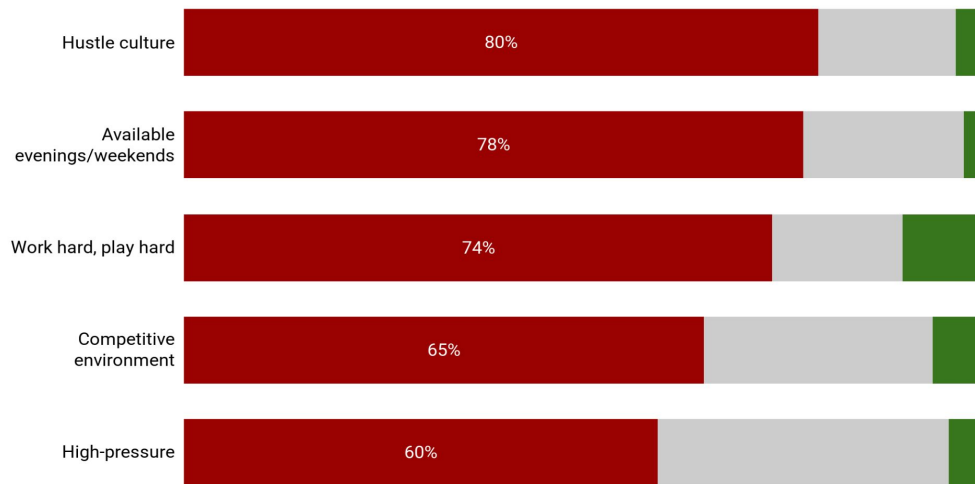
There are two clear patterns in the green flag words.

The first is about **flexibility and life outside work**: flexible working, remote-friendly, work-life balance, family-friendly, caring responsibilities welcomed. In a market where candidates have been burned by promises that didn't hold, these words are trust signals; the antidote to the exploitation pattern.

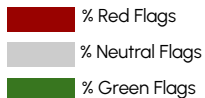
The second is about **active inclusion**: diverse team, inclusive, equal opportunities employer, accessible workplace, career returners welcome. For candidates who experience marginalisation across multiple axes, seeing several of these together is rare. These combinations tell candidates you have thought beyond the default.

Individual words matter and the **pattern they form together matters more.**

COMPANY CULTURE: THE NEGATIVES



Words shown scored **60%+ red flags** across all respondents



These say: this company takes more than it gives

Five words, all above 60% red across all respondents.

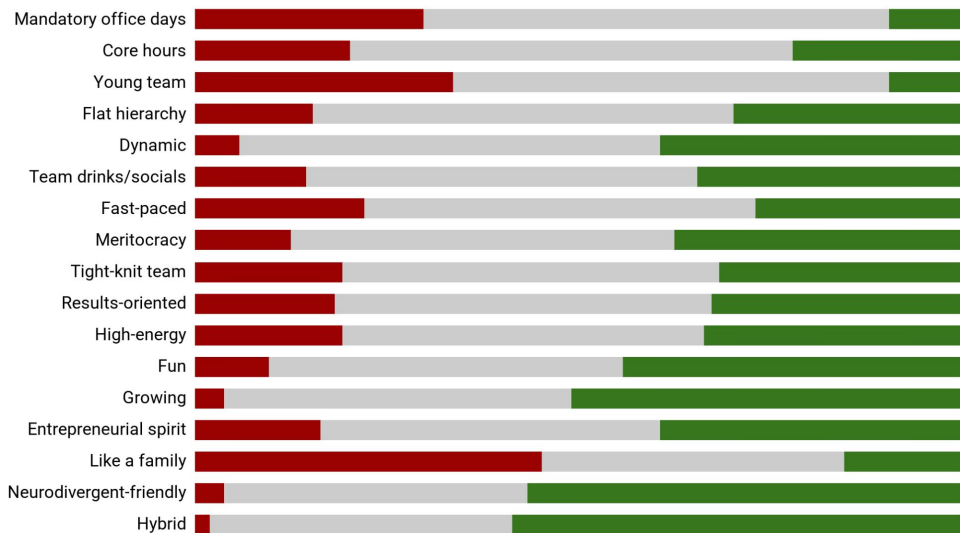
Hustle culture and available evenings/weekends are the clearest company culture red flags: 80% and 78% red respectively, with almost no green flags. Candidates have seen what these words mean in practice.

Work hard, play hard, high pressure and competitive environment complete the picture. Together these words form the **exploitation pattern**. This language signals high demands, unclear boundaries, and effort valued over output.

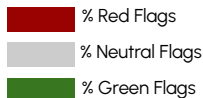
Experienced candidates recognise this immediately.

Unlike the neutral words coming up, there's no context in which these land well. If they're in your job description, take them out.

COMPANY CULTURE: THE NEUTRALS



Words shown scored **less than 60% red or green flags** across all respondents



Not all of these are truly neutral.

Some words here are genuinely neutral; candidates shrug and read on. Some are so generic they **add nothing at all**. Dynamic, fast-paced, high-energy: filler words that take up space without saying anything meaningful.

Others are **context-dependent**. Entrepreneurial spirit, fast-paced, results-oriented read differently depending on your sector, your seniority, and what else is on the page. For a startup, entrepreneurial spirit is expected, but for a FTSE 100, it raises questions.

The less obvious red flags are the most interesting. Like a family scores 45% red, mandatory office days 30%, and young team 34%.

These are the words most likely to be in your templates right now, and not because anyone actively chose them.

RESULTS

PERSON SPECIFICATION

Women self-select out of roles they're more than capable of doing. Analysis of recruitment data across four large UK organisations found that women apply for fewer and less senior positions, effectively setting the bar higher for themselves.

Half of neurodivergent adults experienced discrimination during recruitment, many rejected for subjective reasons such as communication style or team "fit".

For every candidate who self-selects out, there's no application and no data. The person spec is where your talent pipeline quietly narrows.

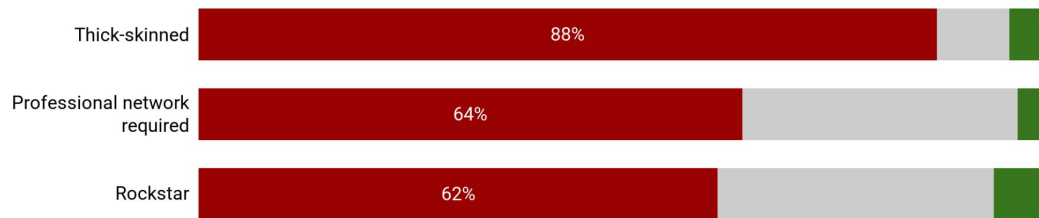
PERSON SPECIFICATION: THE FLAGS



Identity or behaviour, it makes a difference.

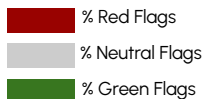
Person spec red flags land differently to company culture ones. They make candidates question whether they would be **successful in the role**, or belong at all.

The reddest flags describe a **very specific type of person**. The greenest flags (supportive, collaborative, team player, transferable skills) describe **behaviours**.



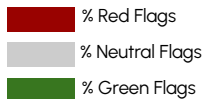
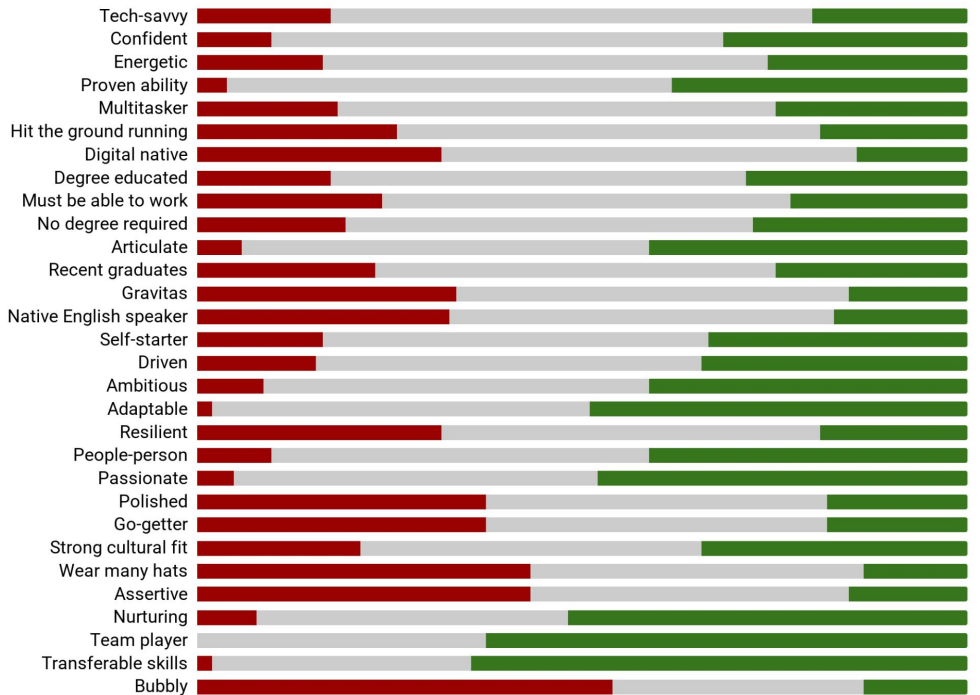
There's a second pattern. Words like rockstar, professional network required and thick-skinned also signal something deeper: that the organisation hasn't defined what success actually looks like in the role.

Candidates are asking two questions: is this role for someone like me and will this company exploit me?



Words shown scored **60%+ red or green flags** across all respondents

PERSON SPECIFICATION: THE NEUTRALS



Words shown scored **less than 60% red or green flags** across all respondents

These words rely on the wider context.

30 words sit in the neutral zone. The seniority of the role, the other words around them, and what the company's reputation already says change how these words are viewed.

Self-starter, driven, ambitious, results-oriented. These aren't red flags in isolation, but alongside hustle culture or available evenings/weekends, they start to create a pattern candidates recognise.

Some of these words are doing **more damage** than they appear. Strong cultural fit carries a 21% red flag rate. Native English speaker 33%. These are split rooms, and the candidates who flag them red are often those you most want to reach.

The overall score only tells part of the story. When you break these words down by **who's reading them**, the picture changes significantly.

RESULTS

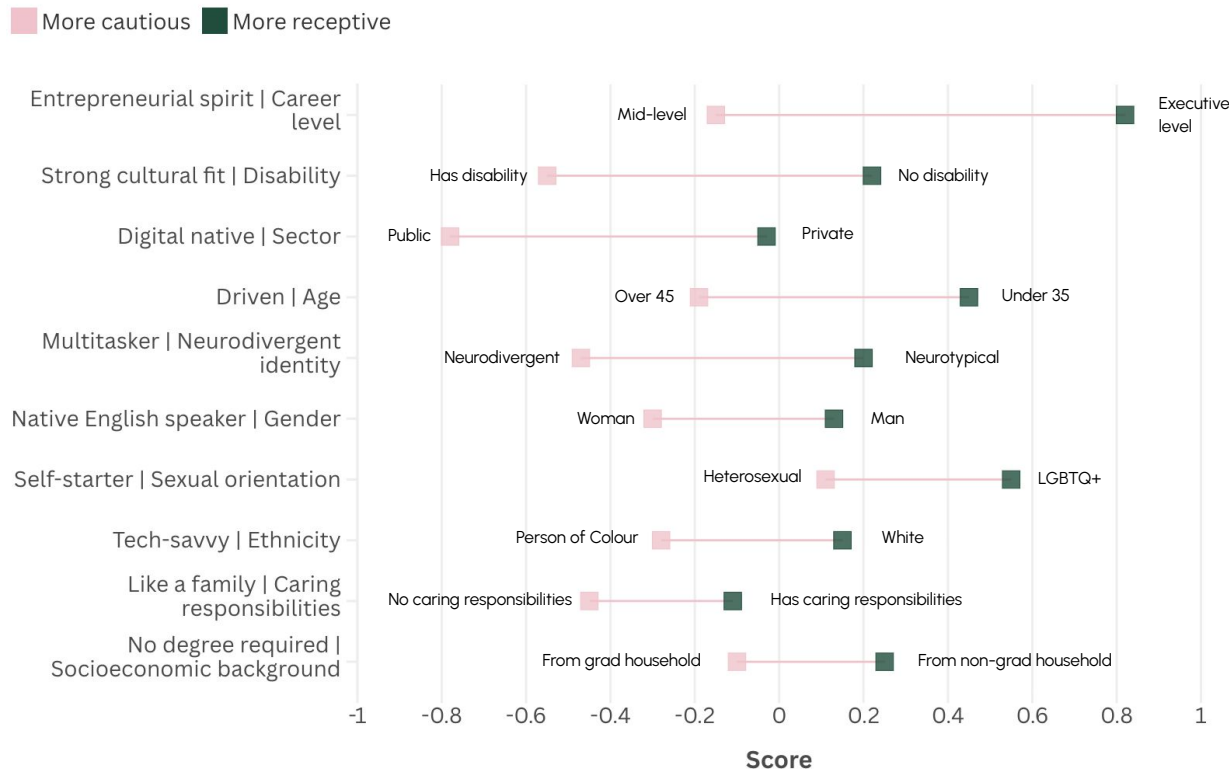
THE GAPS BEHIND THE FLAGS

The overall scores don't tell you who disagrees, or why.

When we broke the data down by sector, career level, gender, age, neurodivergent identity and more, a different picture emerged. **Words that look neutral are actually dividing your candidate pool.**

The gaps aren't random. They **reflect lived experience**: who has been marginalised, who has benefited, and whose lens is shaping the language in the first place.

SOME WORDS SEEM NEUTRAL. THEY'RE NOT



Every group has a flashpoint: a word that divides it more than any other.

Some are directly related: Multitasker divides neurodivergent and neurotypical respondents. No degree required divides by socioeconomic background.

Others are less obvious. Native English speaker splits by gender, because people who experience **one form of marginalisation tend to be more alert to others**.

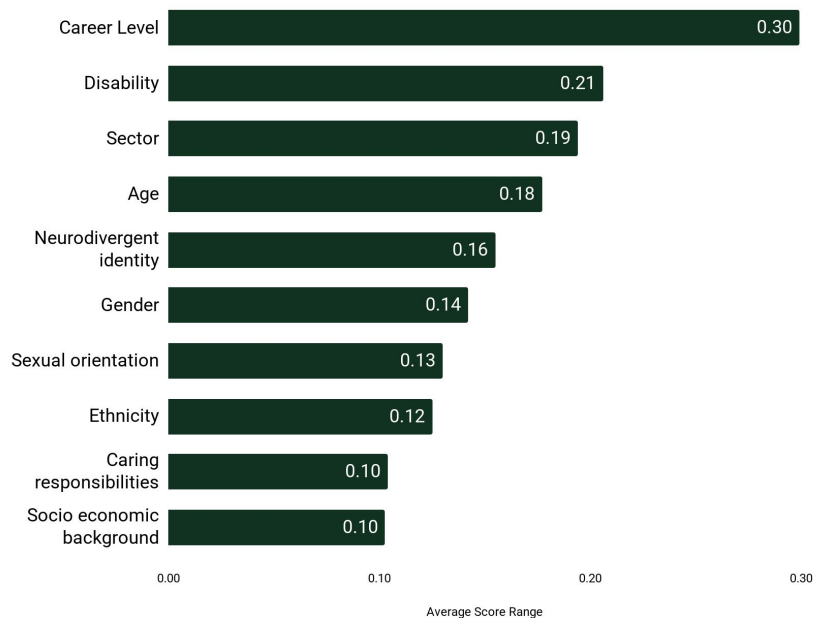
Your words are being read through lenses you may not have considered.

Of all the dimensions we measured, **career level creates the biggest gap** in how people read job description language.

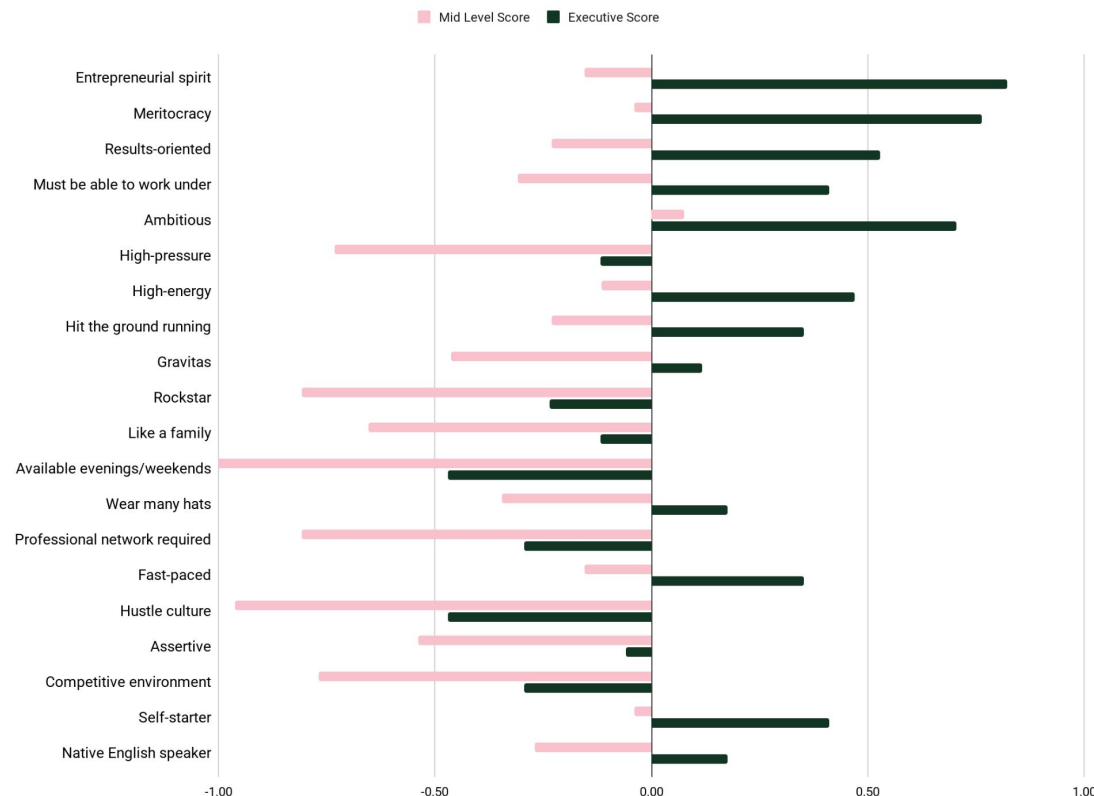
The average score gap between groups is **0.16**.

For career level it's **0.3**.

The seniority gap runs through almost every word we tested. For the most divisive words in this group, **it doubles to 0.6**.



EXECUTIVES READ LANGUAGE MORE POSITIVELY



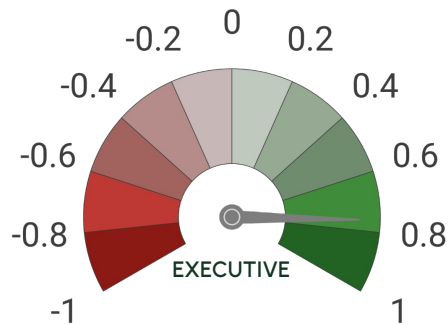
The difference for each of these words is clear: mid-level professionals read them more negatively, executive more positively.

Entrepreneurial spirit: mid-level -0.15, executive +0.82. Like a family: mid-level -0.65, executive -0.12. The lens is changing.

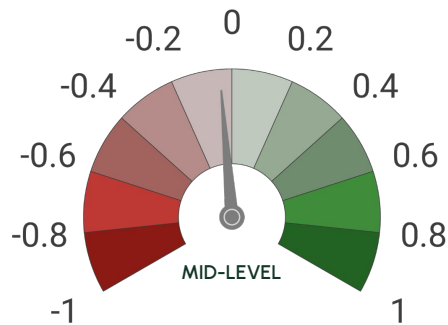
This is about **who gets to define what 'normal' looks like in a workplace**, and who has learned (sometimes the hard way) to read between the lines.

This begs the question: **Who is setting your company culture** and defining your **ideal candidates**?

MERITOCRACY: A WORD WORTH EXAMINING



CAREER LEVEL



A single word with very different readings.

Executives see meritocracy as a mark of a **fair system**: 76% green flags, 24% neutral and no reds.

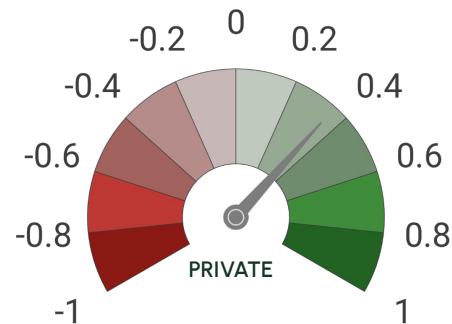
Mid-level professionals read it as a **"nothing" word**: 65% neutral flags, 19% red and 15% green.

Public sector employees viewed it **most negatively**: 44% red, 39% neutral and 17% green.

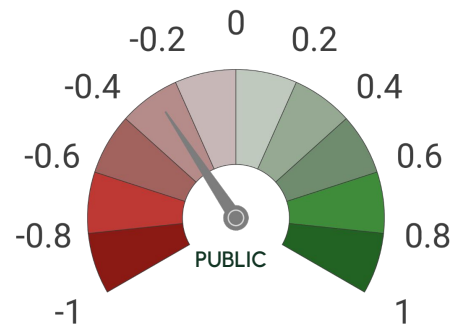
Private sector was almost **the opposite**: 7% red, 51% neutral, 42% green.

Men rated it more positively than women. Under 35s rated it more cautiously than those over 45. Neither gap was as stark as career level or sector.

The relationship to the word could signal **who has succeeded** within the system and **who feels let down** by it.



SECTOR



THEMES: WHAT THE NUMBERS DON'T SAY

TRUST

"As I used to write school reports I am well versed in the **use of euphemisms**. As a result I have become **cynical** about words in job descriptions that seem engaging but could really mean something else."

- Senior Lead, Education

EXPLOITATION

"If words like go getter, entrepreneurial or ambitious are there, it signals to me that they are going to try to **exploit my enthusiasm by underpaying me**, treating me poorly and use me for duties that they should really hire someone else for."

- Civil Servant

PLAYING THE GAME

"It's just **brutal out there, so people are doing whatever they can**....putting on their CV in tiny tiny white writing loads of key words so you can't see it...if **software is reading it** , they've got everything."

- UX Designer

TRUST

The language problem is a trust problem

There's a big difference between how an organisation wants to be seen and how it actually operates. Candidates are reading between the lines, looking for signals in reviews, coverage and what organisations choose to say (or to leave out).

Job descriptions are read as evidence of honesty. Salary transparency (or lack of it) is the clearest signal. If you won't say what you're paying, candidates assume the worst. If you promise flexible working but don't mean it, your credibility goes down.

Candidates are watching for bias: ageism, parental leave and support for carers came through loudest. They're making judgements before they've even met you.

"I would never apply to a job that didn't have a **salary band** on it. They just say competitive. Competitive in what range?"

- HR Consultant

"**Ageism** is rife in the employment market. Employers carry bias they may be unaware of."

- Marketing Lead

"I **research companies before applying**. What their website is like, who is on the board, values and culture all influence my decision to apply."

- Procurement Lead

EXPLOITATION

A pattern of having to do more, for less pay

A cluster of words are warning signs to experienced candidates. Entrepreneurial, go-getter, hustle culture, work hard, play hard. It's not about any single word, but what they signal together.

These words often sit in the green or neutral zone for executives. For everyone else, they read as a red flag. That gap reflects who has benefited from that culture and who has been burned by it.

There's a separate but related cluster worth calling out: resilience language. Thick-skinned (the reddest flag), resilient, must be able to work under pressure. Women in particular reacted strongly: not just because of what the word means, but because of what it implies you'll have to put up with.

Candidates have been here before. Squeezed budgets, scope creep, burnout dressed up as ambition. They're pattern-matching and it's hurting your talent pool.

"Any role [description] that has 2-3 jobs mashed into one...indicates the employer **doesn't know what they want** or wants one person to do the job of many."

- Advertising Lead

"They're **not going to pay you to hustle** probably. They're going to pay you the same as another company might pay you to relax, to get you to hustle."

- HR Consultant

PLAYING THE GAME

Candidates are working around the system entirely

Junior roles requiring two or more years of experience filter out exactly the people organisations claim to want. The best candidates often aren't applying at all.

AI is changing the game on both sides. Candidates use it to write cover letters, tailor CVs and game keyword filters. Organisations use it to screen those same CVs. It's an arms race where the most keywords win.

There's a theory circulating among candidates: "degree educated" requirements are appearing more often as a response to AI-written cover letters. A blunt instrument to filter out people organisations worry aren't genuinely capable. If true, it discriminates against capable people without degrees to solve a problem that better screening would fix.

"Comments where a job description encourages applicants to apply even if they **don't have the exact criteria**...is a big green flag for me."

- Financial Services Director

"People are bringing '**degree educated**' into **job specs** more because it's easier to write cover letters coherently because of AI...It's just a really **mucky setup**."

- UX Designer

SO NOW WHAT? THREE QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

1 Who is writing your job descriptions and what lens are they written through?

Increasingly it's AI. The result is language nobody has consciously chosen, but candidates are reading and judging. The seniority gap in our data shows executives read JD language more positively than anyone else. If your templates were built in their image, that lens is baked in. Mid-level candidates (your biggest talent pool) will read the same words completely differently.

2 What are you actually promising and can you deliver it?

The trust gap is more than a language problem. If your JD promises flexible working but your culture doesn't support it, you're not just losing candidates. You're hiring people who'll disengage quietly, ignore the mandate and be gone within a year. And you're putting hiring managers in an impossible position: expected to sell a culture they know doesn't match the reality.

3 Which words are you using out of habit rather than intention?

Many red flag words are in JDs because they've always been there (rockstar, thick-skinned, native English speaker) and many green ones don't make it in (career returners welcome, supportive). Nobody chose them and nobody's checking them. The candidates who are put off by these words don't apply. You never see the talent you didn't attract. That's why it's worth fixing deliberately, as long as they actually reflect how your organisation works.

You can also explore the data yourself [on our site](#).

TAKE ACTION: AI PROMPTS TO TRY NOW

THE CONTEXT

A note before you start: *These prompts will help you identify language that's deterring candidates. But better language only works if it reflects reality. If your JD says flexible working and your culture doesn't support it, you're delaying the problem rather than solving it.*

Upload this whitepaper into your AI tool of choice before using the prompts below. Claude, ChatGPT and Gemini all support document uploads. Then, add this instruction:

Use the Words Matter research in this document as context to inform all your responses.

THE PROMPTS

1 Read it as a candidate Imagine you are a mid-level professional with ten years of experience. You are more sceptical of aspirational language and want concrete information about day-to-day reality, support structures and what success actually looks like. What would make you trust or distrust this description? What questions would you want answered before applying?

2 Audit for bias Here is a job description. Identify any words or phrases that research suggests may deter candidates from underrepresented groups, and explain why each one might be problematic. Then suggest alternative language.

3 Check for the exploitation pattern Read this job description and identify whether the combination of words used suggests a high-demand, low-support culture. Don't just flag individual words, look at what they signal together.

DOES YOUR JD PASS THE TEST?

A live Words Matter webinar.

Tuesday 30th June 2026, 11am BST.

Join us for a free **online session** where we'll walk through the research findings and put the **AI prompts to work on real job descriptions.**

Sign up [here](https://dataeveryday.org) at dataeveryday.org

ChatGPT   Upgrade

 Words Matter - Whitepaper.pdf PDF

Use the Words Matter research in this document as context to inform all your responses

Audit for bias: Here is a job description. Identify any words or phrases that research suggests may deter candidates from underrepresented groups, and explain why each one might be problematic. Then suggest alternative language.

The job description:

All great stories start somewhere. Yours could start with an

Show more 

Using the "Words Matter" research as the lens, this job description contains several patterns likely to deter candidates from underrepresented groups — particularly women, neurodivergent candidates, carers, mid-level professionals, and people who have experienced exploitative startup cultures before. The strongest issues are not always single words, but combinations of language that signal intensity, ambiguity, elitism, or burnout culture.  Words Matter - Whitepaper  Words Matter - Whitepaper

High-risk phrases and why they may be problematic

"those ready to dedicate the next X years"

Why it may deter people

- Signals total commitment and long-term sacrifice before candidates know what support exists.
- Can discourage candidates with caring responsibilities, disabilities, or financial constraints.
- Research found candidates react negatively to language suggesting the organisation "takes more than it gives."  Words Matter - Whitepaper

Alternative

- "people interested in building long-term climate ventures"
- "founders committed to developing scalable climate solutions"

"There's no time for false starts"

ABOUT DATA EVERYDAY

WE BELIEVE IN DATA FLUENCY FOR EVERYONE. EVERYDAY.

Data sounds big and scary to a lot of people. Out of reach, not for them.

GREAT NEWS: AI has levelled the playing field on technical skills and jargon; data is now accessible to anyone.

WATCH OUT: Data fluency is now the skill everyone needs. Your seat at the table now depends on it.

We run workshops that give practical experience thinking about data, using it to make work better, and to prove impact. We've seen first hand that theory is nice, but capability building comes from making mistakes on real problems, in a safe space, where it's OK to course-correct.

By the end participants not only know the theory, they feel confident knowing they have a set of frameworks & practical experience applying it to their craft.



ABOUT US



SANCHIA NEILSON

Co-Founder

Helps organisations actually use their data without the buzzwords or the overwhelm.

Vice Chair at Generation Success, working to open doors for underrepresented young people entering the workforce.

Former Head of Data and DE&I Board Co-Chair at Digitas. Former VivaWomen Board Member (Publicis Groupe UK).



MANNY MORENO

Co-Founder

Builder of data teams that make insights accessible & empower better decisions across product, marketing, & sales.

Research & Insights Lead at Nothing Technology. Former DE&I Board Member. Creator of Global Data Academy.

Past guest lecturer at Kellogg School of Management, University of Miami Herbert Business School, Miami Dade College Innovation Accelerator.

DATA
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SAMSUNG



MICHAEL KORS



AMERICAN
EXPRESS



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HEINZ



DIGITAS

publicis
sapient

GSK

NOTHING (P)



MIAMI
HEAT

THE WHITE COMPANY
LONDON

ancestry



“Great session! A mix of short slides and workshop activity quickly put theory into practice”

- Team Leader

“Love the conversations and space to think and apply learnings”

- Workshop participant