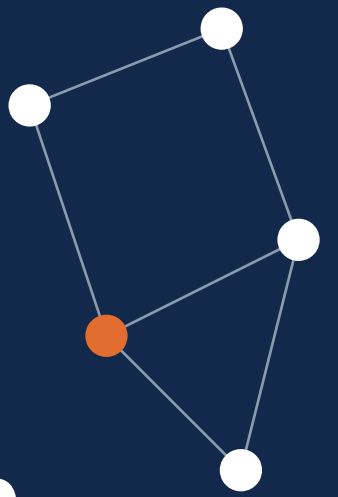
ATC 2026

Fearless Forecast 2026: From Recruiter to Architect of the Agentic Future

Kevin Wheeler | ATC | 13 to 14 October 2026



Dying Assumptions

WHAT WE ASSUMED	WHAT IS TRUE NOW
~~A job is a stable unit of work~~	**It may not be**
~~An applicant is a human being~~	**We can no longer assume that**
~~Candidate information is scarce~~	**AI makes it abundant and less trustworthy**
~~Humans perform the work~~	**Increasingly humans and agents perform it together**
~~Recruiting begins when a vacancy occurs~~	**Prediction may make vacancies visible months before they happen**

The Stories We Tell Ourselves

“We’re piloting AI. We’re fine.”

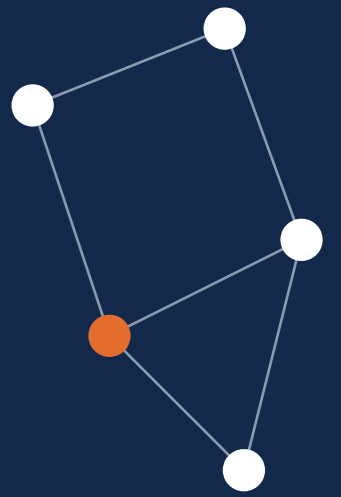
A pilot is not a plan. Your competitors are rebuilding the whole workflow.

“Relationships can’t be automated.”

Most of what we call relationship work is follow up. Agents already do it.

“Hiring managers will always need us.”

They need answers. They won’t care who or what gives them.



AI Is the New Hierarchy

What it takes over. What people still own.

AI Is the Factory, Moved Into the Office



It standardizes

Breaks knowledge work into repeatable steps.



It measures

Tracks every task. Taylor would love it.



It concentrates power

Fewer layers. More control with whoever runs the system.

AI Can Replace Coordination. It Cannot Inherit Accountability.

AI TAKES OVER

- First round candidate matching and resume parsing
- Synthesizing and routing transactional information
- Calendar scheduling and logistics management
- Initial technical tests and structured FAQ response flows
- Generating standard outreach messages and job spec drafts

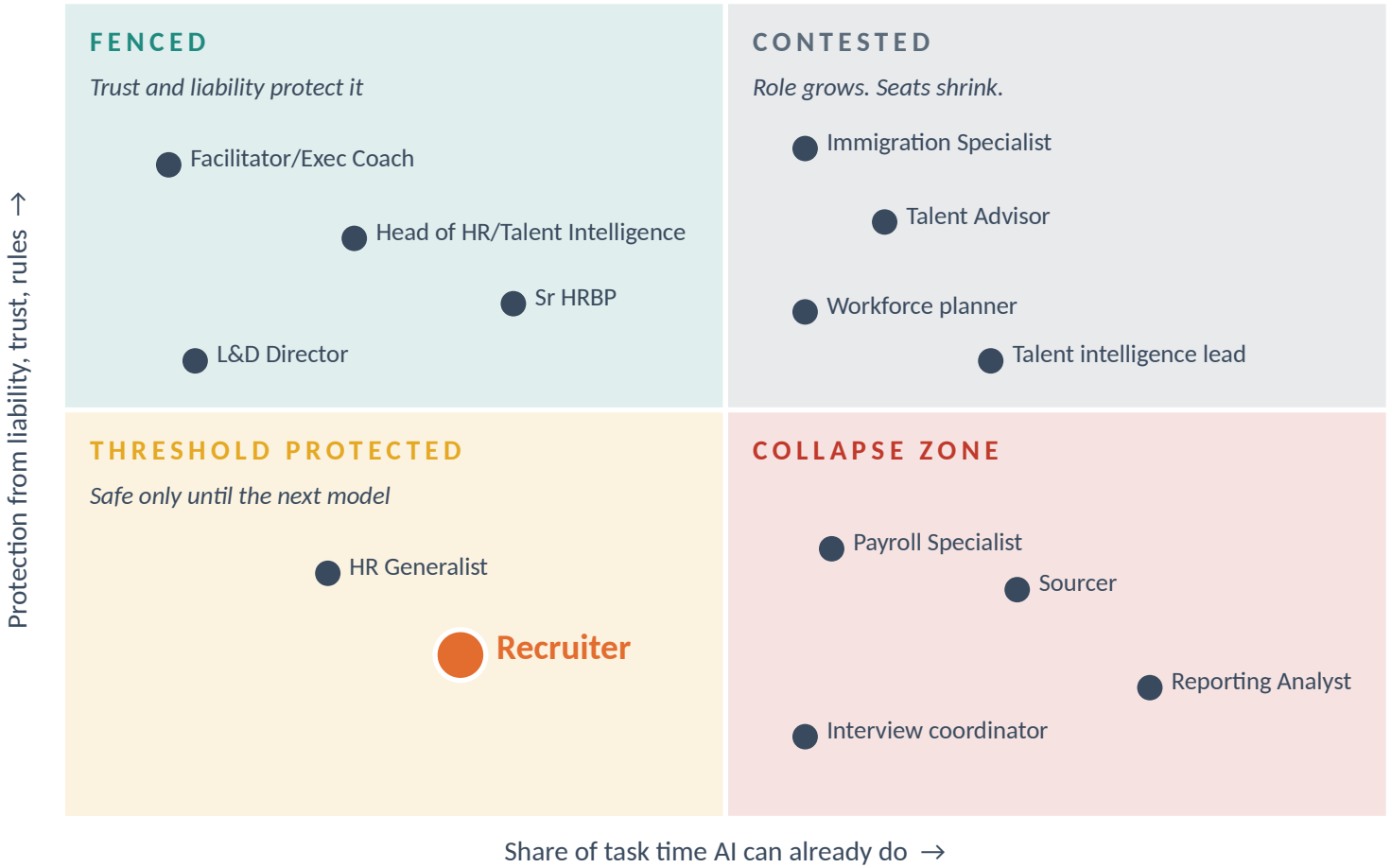
STILL OURS. FOR NOW.

- Formulating the right business problem before searching
- Edge case judgment when historical data provides no clear answer
- Building trust, emotional safety, and mutual alignment
- Taking moral, ethical, and legal ownership of outcomes
- Synthesizing unexpected connections across distinct disciplines

Automation can take over the task but cannot replace judgment.

How much of the work AI can already do, and what still protects it.

Find the Recruiter



Recruiter

Bottom half. No fence. Safe only until the next model.

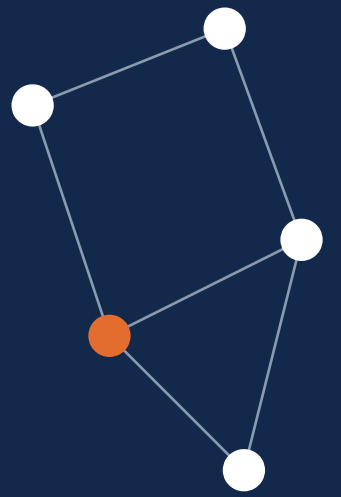
Sourcer, coordinator

On the line or already past it.

Planner, intelligence

The roles that grow. Not the ones most of us hold.

Source: BHIL, Exhibit 2. Simplified. Positions approximate.



What Will We Become?

Tomorrow’s Recruiter

The Capability Architect

Designs & advise on how work gets done by combining people, skills, technology and agents.

WORK
Break jobs into tasks, outcomes, and decisions. Decide what should be human, automated or shared

CAPABILITY
See the skills and capabilities the business will need before a req appears

RISK
Map shortages, knowledge risk, automation exposure, and demographic pressure

TRUST
Decide where human attention, judgment and accountability are worth paying for

Diagnose work → Choose the resource → Design the system → Monitor the outcome

Talent Risk Map Creator

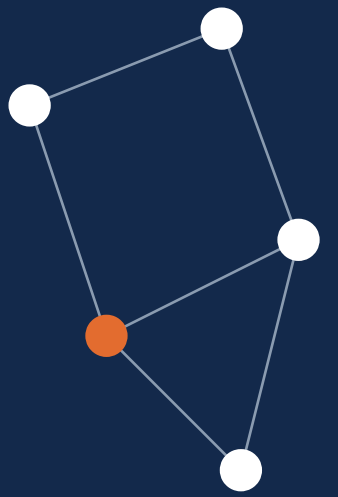
- Where are we becoming dangerously dependent on scarce skills?
- Where could automation eliminate significant amounts of work?
- Which critical capabilities are concentrated in too few individuals?
- Where is demographic change likely to create shortages?
- Where are we losing knowledge faster than we are replacing it?

Talent Advocate

Human attention becomes a scarce resource that must be deliberately allocated.

- Senior candidates still expect access to senior leaders.
- Employees facing major career transitions want human conversations.
- Candidates rejected expect explanations.
- The talent function identifies where human attention creates trust.

The question becomes: where does a human create trust that an agent cannot?



Forecast: 2027 to 2028

The future rarely arrives all at once. It shows up in small signals that are easy to miss.

Small Signals That May Predict the Future



Watch budgets, not statements.

Where the money moves is where belief actually is.



Watch the second instance.

The first company doing something strange is an experiment. The third is a trend.



Watch what stops happening.

The junior req that quietly disappears matters more than any tool launch.



Watch the exceptions.

Who’s hiring differently and winning? That’s where the next model hides.

Three Futures for TA in 2028

20%

Stall

A bias scandal or tough regulation slows everything down. Agents stay assistants. TA headcount barely moves.

BASE CASE

55%

Grind

Agents quietly take over all scheduling and screening. TA teams shrink by a fifth to a third. Advisors rise.

25%

Snap

One big name proves agent run hiring works. Rivals copy within a year. Early movers cut TA in half.

SIGNPOST **Which is your CFO already budgeting for?**

Deepfakes and the Collapse of Candidate Signals

THE SIGNAL BREAKS

Resumes, cover letters, and video interviews can all be generated. The applicant may not be a person.

THE DEFENSES

Liveness checks. Verified credentials. Bot farm detection in assessments.

WHAT GAINS VALUE

Referrals, verified work history, live simulations, and in person final rounds.

PREDICTION

Most large employers verify identity before the first interview.

75%

By end 2027

Agent to Agent (A2A) Hiring

THE SHIFT

The Apply button is dying. Candidate agents talk to employer agents.

ALREADY HERE

Candidates use AI to apply at scale. Employers use AI to screen at scale. Nobody is reading.

GOES FIRST

Screening, pay calibration, and scheduling. No human emails.

PREDICTION

A candidate side negotiation agent gets real traction.

40%

By end 2028

Agents Hiring People Directly

Upwork, the world's human and AI-powered work marketplace reports

- AI agents arriving on Upwork to try to hire humans for tasks they cannot finish
- Businesses are showing up with work started in AI, seeking human experts to make it usable

PREDICTION

This becomes normal for some tasks.

50%

By end 2028

AI Moves From Tool to Labor Substitute

The question is no longer who to hire. It’s whether to hire.

- For every piece of work: a person, an agent, or both?
- Entry level goes first. Early career workers in AI exposed jobs are already losing ground.
- Cut juniors now and there’s no mid level talent in 2029.
- Hiring volume holds. TA headcount doesn’t.

PREDICTION

Recruiters per hire drop a quarter at big firms. Req volume holds.

65%

By end 2028

Digital Twins: Who Owns Your Best People?

THE PITCH

Why hire another top recruiter when you can scale the one you have?

THE CATCH

Twins reproduce patterns of past behavior. They cannot inherit a person's judgment, and they grow stale unless they continue to learn.

THE FIGHT

Your best person quits. Who owns their twin? The company or the person?

PREDICTION

First public dispute over who owns a leaver's AI twin.

50%

By end 2028

Talent Becomes a Strategic National Resource

Recruiters need to understand immigration, location strategy, labor arbitrage, security rules, data residency, and national talent pools. Not just where candidates live.

CLOSER TO HOME

From 10 December 2026, businesses covered by the Privacy Act must say in their privacy policy when automated systems help make decisions that significantly affect people. Hiring tools are in scope.

PREDICTION

First public Australian complaint over automated hiring.

45%

By end 2027

Long Shots: My Edgiest Calls

25%	**A Fortune 500 firm has no recruiters.**	Hiring managers and agents run the whole thing. A small advisory team sits on top.
35%	**A big employer stops taking resumes.**	Work samples and verified credentials only. The resume becomes a fraud risk, not a signal.
45%	**Bots outapply humans.**	An ATS vendor reports most applications now come from AI agents, not people.
30%	**A CHRO loses their job over AI hiring.**	A biased or rogue hiring agent goes public. Someone senior pays for it.
30%	**Staffing firms sell agents, not placements.**	A global staffing firm swaps placement fees for agent subscriptions.

What Would Prove Me Wrong

Graduate hiring rebounds.

If junior reqs climb back to 2023 levels, the labor substitute story is wrong.

Recruiter ratios hold.

If big firms keep recruiters per hire flat through 2027, agents are mostly hype.

Agents stall at screening.

If nobody runs end to end agent hiring at scale, the ATS stays the work surface.

Regulators hit pause.

One landmark bias ruling could freeze agent hiring for years. That is my Stall scenario.

Candidates walk away.

If top talent refuses AI screened processes, humans win back the front door.

Imagine 2028

A company needs another recruiter. The CHRO has three choices:

Human recruiter

$145,000

fully loaded

Generic recruiting agent

$12,000

a year

Specialist executive search agent

$38,000

a year

What matters: What can it do? How reliably? At what cost? Who is accountable?

That's a labor market for agents. Nobody will call it one.

Hands up. Which one does your CFO pick?

Illustrative figures, USD.

What to Do in the Next 90 Days

1

Audit the work

List your team's tasks. Mark what agents can already do. Be honest.

2

Run one hire with agents

End to end. Measure speed, quality, and cost. Learn before you're told to.

3

Get in front of the money

Sit down with finance on agent budgets. Whoever owns that budget owns TA's future.

4

Check your tools

Know which hiring tools make or shape decisions. The December disclosure rules apply.

In Summary: Evolution of the Recruiting Model

The evolution of the recruiting model

From local generalists to specialized teams—and potentially back to generalist ownership

Recruiting model	Organization of the work	Principal constraint
Earlier, predominantly local recruiting	One recruiter handled the whole process	Personal time, local reach, and access to information
Recruiting supported by digital platforms	Larger teams could divide sourcing, screening, scheduling, and recruiting responsibilities	Coordinating people, systems, and candidate volume
Recruiting supported by capable AI	One recruiter could again oversee the whole process, with software performing many activities	Judgment, exception handling, and accountability

Conceptual comparison; the AI model is a forecast, not an established employment outcome.

Named the Best Business Book of 2024
by the American Book Fest's 21st Annual Best Book Awards



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