

The Most (and Least) Searched Staffing Trends for 2026

What People Care About and What It Means for Staffing

No one can predict the future, but the proof is in the pudding based on what actual staffing practitioners and adjacent stakeholders are looking for, interested in, and studying.

For the staffing industry, search trends can reflect what clients, candidates, and competition are actively thinking about before deals are signed, placements made, and strategic decisions executed.

Here's how it works: A quick note on methodology and the meaning of the word "index"

Google keeps an inventory of the search volume for all significant terms and topics via [Google Trends](#). For all the staffing industry topics below, we analyzed the U.S. search volume and trends patterns over the last five years.

Google reports a weekly search index score for each term from 0 to 100. 100 reflects the peak popularity for a keyword over the last five years.

For example, "candidate fraud" reached peak search popularity (100) in January of this year. Just one year ago, in January 2025, it had an index score of 9, meaning it had only 9% of the search volume it receives now. **Candidate fraud** wasn't top of mind last year; it sure is now.

This report tracks **15 search terms** across five sections: broad industry demand, healthcare market cycles, candidate behavior, recruiting technology challenges, and workforce structure shifts. Read on to see the top trends by section, or check out the top five staffing industry search takeaways below.

5 KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

Interest in staffing agencies across all segments is on the rise

After three consecutive years of revenue contraction (2023, 2024, and a shallower 2025), the industry is showing signs of life. Google search interest in "staffing agencies" just hit a five-year high, with IT staffing and commercial staffing both showing dramatic breakouts in search interest. This aligns with SIA growth forecasts across the industry; buyer and candidate interest is growing, even if the industry is still waiting for the revenue numbers to catch up.

2

Locum tenens continues to lead the pack, with a rationale that gets stronger by the day

In what was a fairly down-market 2025 for the staffing industry, locum tenens still had arguably the best year of any staffing sub-vertical, and the volume of people looking for information on it confirms that. Search interest in locum tenens just hit an index of 100 for the first time in five years. This makes sense given the well-publicized and pervasive shortage of physicians and advanced clinicians in the U.S., with the AAMC projecting a shortage of up to 86,000 physicians by 2036. Additionally, systemic obstacles like burnout and administrative obstacles continue to stress the system, and annual residency caps of 11,000 slots mean that a sizeable number of willing students won't have the opportunity to practice.

3

Candidate fraud has gone from fringe risk to mainstream operational threat

AI has reduced the time it takes to build a convincing fake applicant profile (resume, credentials, deepfake video) to just 70 minutes. Forty-one percent of contingent workforce program managers already report experiencing fraud challenges. For staffing agencies, a fraudulent placement doesn't just waste time; it damages the client relationship and can permanently affect reputation and revenue. Large buyers of labor engage with staffing agencies for two primary reasons: to get high quality talent and to reduce risk. The act of submitting fraud actors flies in the face of both of those obligations. Just two years ago, candidate fraud was barely searched. Now it's all anyone in the staffing industry can talk about.

4

The AI recruiting hype cycle is over, and now it's time to make sense of outcomes

Search interest in AI recruiting tools peaked at index 100 in mid-2025, then cooled sharply. Is it disillusionment or a sign of market saturation? Maybe both. Sixty-seven percent of organizations already use AI in recruitment, and adoption continues to grow, driven by a combination of investor pressure, unit economics, and FOMO. The market has moved from shopping mode to execution mode, and the challenge is now making the tools actually deliver on their marketing promises. So far, most staffing firms report that many of their operational challenges have actually gotten more difficult than they were the year prior. Something to noodle on...

5

There are plenty of candidates. Skilled and validated ones are the scarce resource.

The surge in "candidate sourcing" searches isn't about empty pipelines. It's a signal-to-noise crisis. AI has flooded every application channel with volume that looks like top talent but isn't. AI-generated and edited resumes make everyone look like the best thing since sliced bread, and make it increasingly difficult for recruiters to determine who is actually truly capable of doing a job, and to what degree comparatively. The agencies winning in 2026 are the ones with a deep understanding of candidate quality and capability that no AI-generated resume can replicate or obfuscate.

A three-year downcycle for staffing is showing signs of turning around, and Google search results reflect that.

While search interest in "staffing agencies" never really receded, it's now accelerating. IT staffing searches surged dramatically in late 2025 after years of flatness, consistent with SIA's March 2026 assessment that IT staffing is "finally poised for modest gains." Commercial staffing emerged as a mainstream search term for the first time, and there are multiple possible reasons for this.

First, focus on the manufacturing and skilled trades sectors has increased dramatically in the past year from both a buyer perspective and a talent perspective, as people look to blue-collar work as something that cannot be disintermediated by AI. Second, also related to AI but from a different lens, is the massive investment in data center infrastructure that is fueling construction and its corollaries. The latter is feeding not just industrial staffing but also sub-segments of IT as well.

Per SIA, the U.S. staffing market contracted again in 2025 (by roughly 3%), making it a three-consecutive-year downturn on the heels of an unprecedented COVID-induced reset. But both SIA forecasts and search interest suggest that the upturn is right around the corner. Let's cross our fingers.

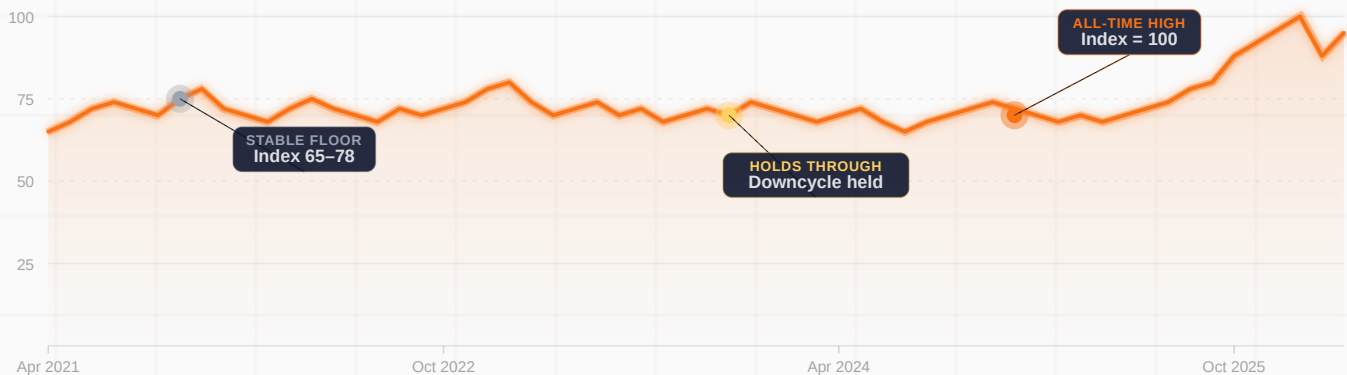
1.1 Staffing Agencies

1.2 IT Staffing

1.3 Commercial Staffing

Search Term: Staffing Agencies

Search Trends Overview: Trending up



-10%

US staffing industry revenue fell in 2024, but broad buyer search interest held at index 65–80 throughout, never reflecting the revenue decline (SIA)

+10%

SIA projects cumulative U.S. staffing market growth from 2025–2030, with 2026 expected to be the first meaningful up year after years of contraction

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

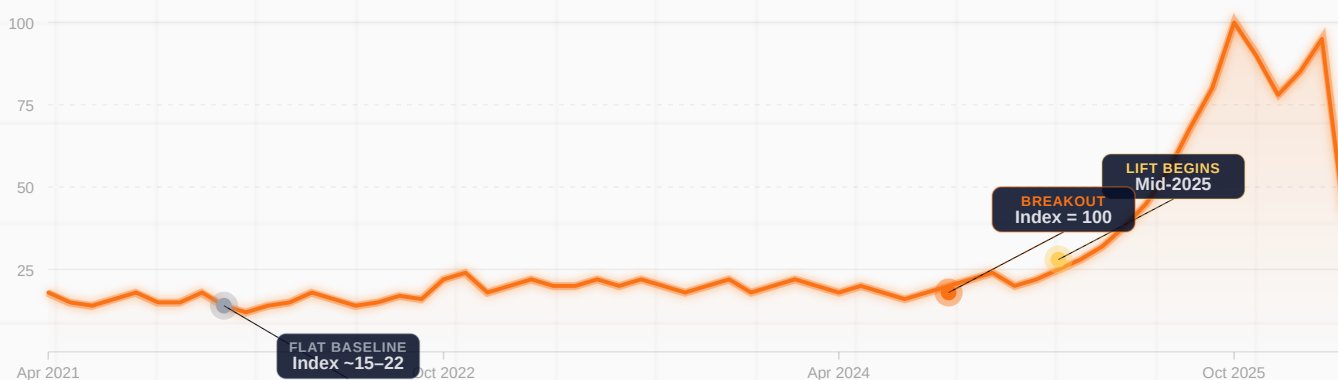
Staffing's a big ship. That makes it hard to sink and also hard to turn on a dime.

While most search terms we talk about in this report have had big swings up and down, the search demand for staffing agencies has been Steady Eddie throughout. Employers have been cautious about hiring, but haven't turned their back on staffing agencies at any point.

In 2026, a rising search demand suggests that hiring intent has shifted from passive to active. The timing aligns with various analyst forecasts that suggest that 2026 and 2027 will see a return to growth for the broader staffing and temp labor service markets, especially now that companies have a slightly better sense of the shape of their digital transformation investments.

Search Term: IT Staffing

Search Trends Overview: **Breakout after a long plateau**



-6%

IT staffing revenue contracted in 2024 to \$38.5B ([SIA, 2025](#))

+2%

IT staffing posted modest gains in YoY hours billed so far in 2026, according to the [SIA Bullhorn Indicator](#)

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

Three flat years, then a sharp break as companies get off the bench

IT staffing revenue fell 6% in 2024 to \$38.5 billion, with the number of firms qualifying for the SIA largest IT staffing firms list shrinking from 66 to 57 companies. It's easy to attribute this contraction to companies shedding talent after over-hiring during COVID, but that oversimplifies a bit. The private sector zeitgeist around AI reached a fever pitch last year, coupled with a one-two punch of inflation, tariffs, broadscale macroeconomic uncertainty, and low quits. Beyond that, companies in many cases took a wait-and-see approach to digital transformation and AI investment and/or restructuring, not understanding the

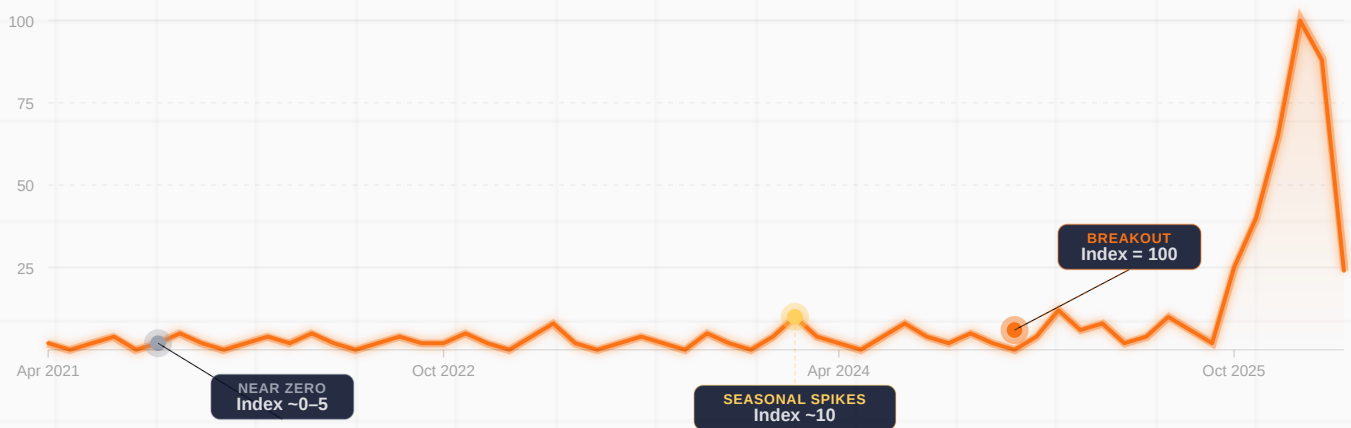
outcomes or productivity impacts that operationalizing AI would yield, but also being unwilling to be left out in the cold should they stick to the tried-and-true manual processes of yesteryear.

The result was hiring paralysis. In late 2025, search demand exploded. Organizations that paused IT project investment while they researched and rapidly iterated on AI rollouts and formalized their strategic planning are now picking those plans back up, and they need tech talent to bring them to life.

Operational change management is a herculean challenge for any enterprise, making the timeframe to execution long and somewhat fraught.

Search Term: **Commercial Staffing**

Search Trends Overview: **Emerging from near zero**



-9%

Commercial staffing revenue fell 9% in 2024 (SIA)

New

"Commercial staffing" was previously too niche to register in Google Trends. The search surge signals a new class of buyers actively researching for the first time

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

Who will thrive among the robot overlords? LI firms, maybe.

Commercial staffing (industrial + office/clerical) fell 9% in 2024 per SIA, despite a lot of talk around the perennial renaissance of American manufacturing being always around the corner. The reality is that manufacturing was in a stronger growth position in 2022-2024 than it is now, due to the chilling effect of tariffs and inflated materials prices. However, the notable exception here is data center expansion and the realization of manufacturing investments that were first forged years ago, and that's driving a lot of interest in certain sub-sectors.

While we don't know who exactly is searching for the term "commercial staffing," which is an underused

term given the many synonyms used in staffing and its adjacent industries, we can assume it's buyers or investors considering how inaccessible that term is to the general candidate population. In other words, it's too inside baseball to be a common applicant term.

That bodes well for light industrial and commercial staffing, that is in a positive position, like healthcare, to benefit from a skilled labor shortage and increasing job demand. We don't know what impact AI will have on jobs yet though plenty of folks wax poetic about it. What we do know is that skilled tradespeople and healthcare workers have a pretty obvious physical moat.

Part 2: Healthcare Staffing Market

The healthcare staffing market had the most dramatic five-year arc in the industry: a pandemic-fueled boom, a sharp multi-year correction as firms grappled with what "normal" looks like when it's not all hands on deck, and now early signals of recovery.

These next three search terms trace that arc at different levels of the market: broad healthcare staffing (the macro view), travel nursing (the segment that both peaked highest and fell furthest), and locum tenens (the physician staffing segment that held steady through the correction and is now accelerating in growth and demand).

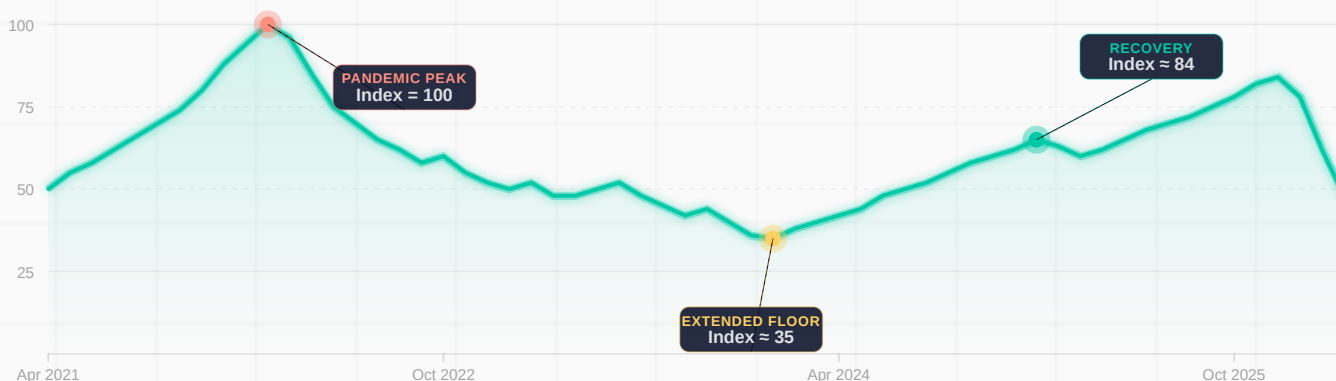
2.1 Healthcare Staffing

2.2 Travel Nursing

2.3 Locum Tenens

Search Term: Healthcare Staffing

Search Trends Overview: Recovering after a sharp correction



-65%

Search interest fell from pandemic peak (100) to extended floor (~35) over 2.5 years of correction

\$14.2B

US travel nursing market size in 2025. Down from peak but still twice its 2019 value (SIA)

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

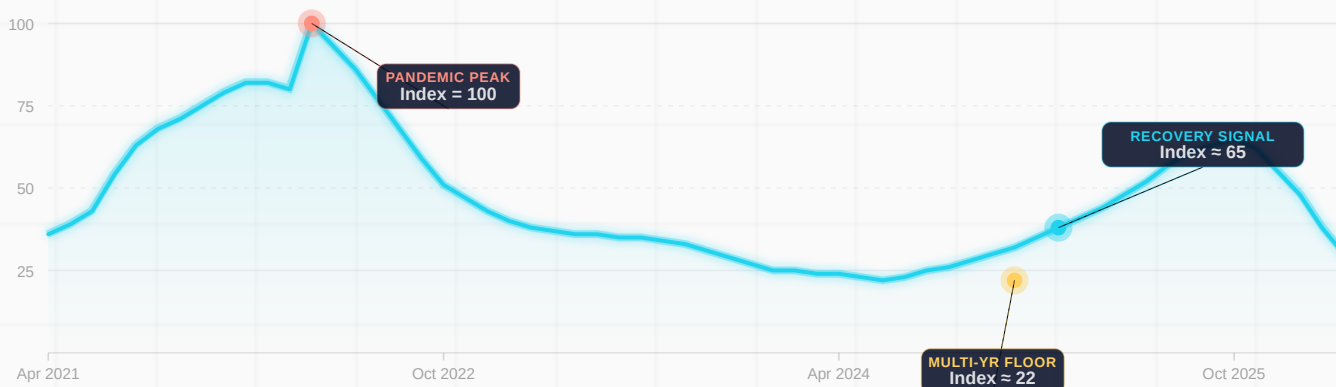
Up, down, and all around

The broad "healthcare staffing" search term tells the full market cycle in one line. It peaked in volume with travel nursing in early 2022 during the height of the COVID pandemic, when bill rates were high and hospitals relied heavily on healthcare staffing agencies to get as many clinicians to the bedside as possible as quickly as possible, then tracked the correction downward as hospitals rebuilt internal capacity and cut contract labor budgets. The hospital systems themselves went through a massive crisis as elective surgeries all but disappeared during the pandemic and facilities operated at a loss. As they return to stability now, the need for healthcare staffing agencies to provide highly qualified and specialized talent to a) appeal to the needs of the facilities and b) overcome the reputational damage that was done during the high bill rate days of COVID is increasing.

Unlike travel nursing, search traffic for healthcare staffing as a broad umbrella term didn't drop that far, and it's recovering faster. That's because it aggregates multiple market segments: travel nursing, locum tenens, per diem nursing, healthcare at-home, and allied health are all contributing to the recovery signal simultaneously. The composition of the market returning looks different from what left: more locum tenens, more allied health, more per diem, and a leaner travel nursing segment focused on sustained demand rather than crisis pricing.

Search Term: **Travel Nursing**

Search Trends Overview: **Rebounding from multi-year lows**



-72%

Search interest fell from pandemic peak (100) to multi-year floor (~28) by late 2024

+130%

Search rebound in late 2025, with interest climbing from the floor of ~28 to a high of ~65

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

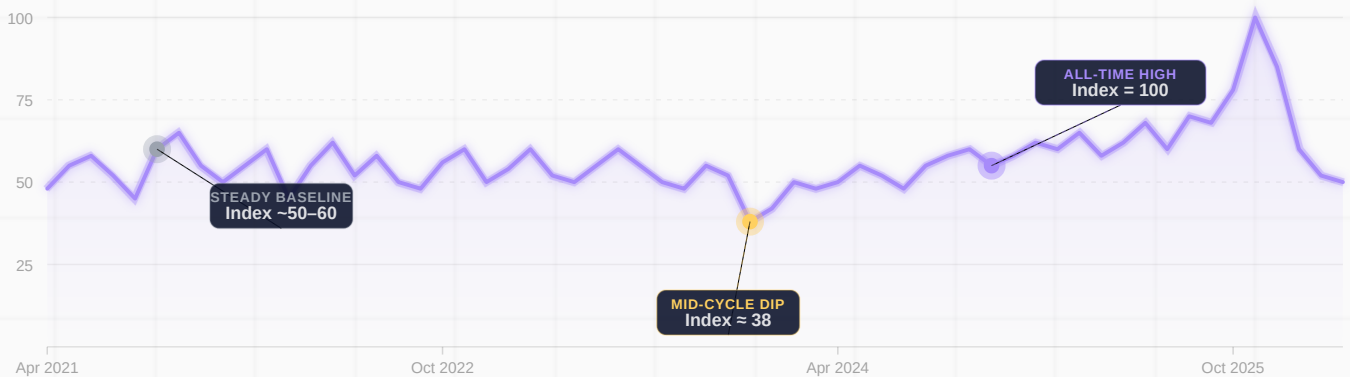
The search rebound for travel nursing is a leading indicator worth watching

Search interest climbed 130% off the floor in late 2025 before cooling in early 2026. That kind of move in search volume typically leads the actual market by 6 to 12 months; it's the canary in the coal mine if the canary actually enjoyed being inside a coal mine, which we imagine most canaries don't. The structural case for travel nursing never went away: 33% of U.S. nurses are nearing retirement age, and the BLS projects only a 9% increase in registered nurses by 2030, which would be not nearly enough to close the gap. Healthcare workers are burning out and policy is not incentivizing rural facility expansion or democratization of care access. Furthermore, the increased costs and penalties associated with H1-B visas and only recent retrogression have created unforeseen obstacles to bringing in skilled international clinical talent, only adding to the stresses on the system.

Federal legislation mandating nurse-to-patient ratios, if passed, would re-price the healthcare staffing market almost overnight. Whether that happens remains to be seen. For agencies, the window to rebuild travel nursing pipelines and reposition their relevance to health systems may already be open. The agencies that maintained relationships and compliance infrastructure through the correction are now positioned to move quickly as demand returns, as they're able to operate efficiently without burdensome overhead.

Search Term: Locum Tenens

Search Trends Overview: At an all-time high



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

Everybody loves locums: the segment that just keeps growing

Locum tenens has been the healthiest segment in healthcare staffing over the last several years, and Google trends back it up. Unlike travel nursing, which has seen margin compression from MSP-driven business, fluctuating demand, walkbacks of policy that would have increased staffing volumes and provider-to-patient ratios, and increased competition and consolidation eat into revenue post pandemic, locum tenens continues to thrive.

When we interviewed Dr. John Mehall for our Ref Around the Edges podcast in 2025, he spoke to the compelling nature of locum tenens work amidst a burned-out, scarce, and overburdened physician population. Not only is locums work lucrative, but it bypasses the primary complaint that many physicians have, which is that they spend more time doing administrative work, onboarding, and "pajama time" than they do actually providing direct patient care and interaction. As no one has ever entered medicine because they enjoyed spreadsheets, this underscores the structural freedom that locums offers -- an opportunity to be in the action without doing all the admin stuff.

Part 3: The Candidate View of Staffing

This section covers three search terms that illustrate the ever-evolving candidate view of the job market and staffing agencies: ghost jobs, remote jobs, and quiet quitting -- that last one probably brings back some pandemic-era memories.

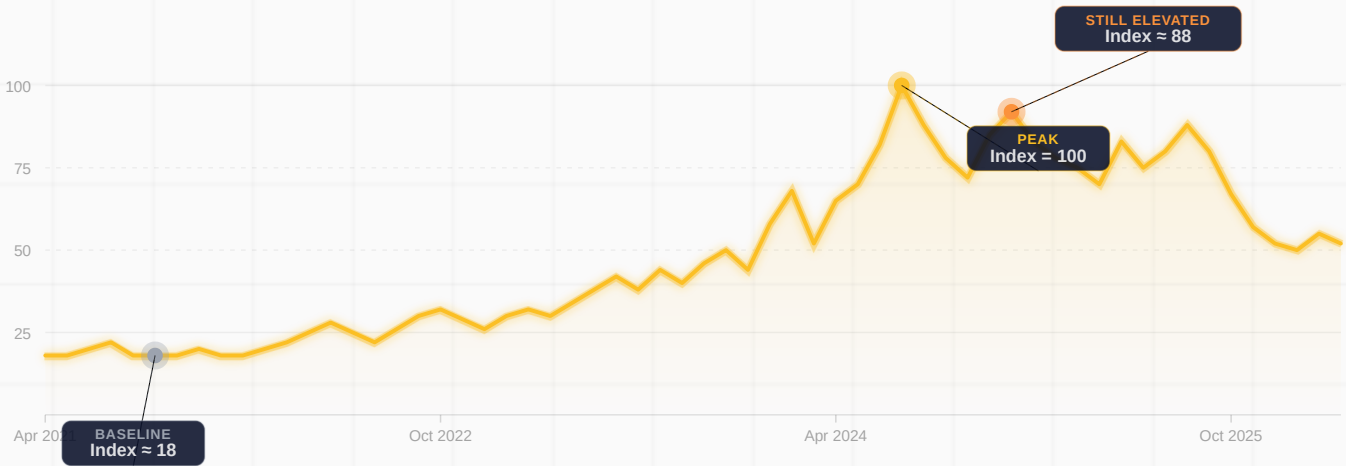
But alas, quiet quitting is over. We're not sure what to call it, but people are...loud staying, we suppose. The quit rate is low, layoffs fluctuate but aren't making a dent in the overall numbers, and productivity remains high due to automation and AI augmenting human capacity, combined with those humans working harder because they want and need to keep their jobs, at least on the perm side of the equation. In other words, jobseekers are in it to win it, but it's tough out there.

Interest in remote work has never faltered, even as listings for remote jobs shrink and more candidates swarm every open role. Adding to the labyrinthine nature of the job market these days is the term "ghost jobs," in which companies or agencies post a rec for a role they don't plan to fill, either because they want the applications for data purposes or they just want to look like they're growing.

Signal, meet noise.

Search Term: Ghost Jobs

Search Trends Overview: Mainstream and staying there



27%

of US LinkedIn listings estimated to be ghost jobs that will never be filled ([ResumeUp.AI, 2025](#))

30%

of all job openings in mid-2025 never resulted in a hire, per [JOLTS/BLS data](#)

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

Boo! We're not getting back to you.

Ah, the ghost job. The phantom posting. The translucent veil of jobseeker frustration that has only recently been acknowledged in search and news.

For years, staffing agencies and companies have posted purportedly open roles to build candidate pipelines without necessarily having active job orders behind them as a fairly standard sourcing practice. It's good for agencies and hiring managers to know who's out there and who may be a fit for a role now or into the future. Or sometimes, an order is filled but the company or agency forgets to take down the listing.

But the practice of posting "ghost jobs" that are all smoke and mirrors, simply for the purpose of making a company look like they're busier and growing faster than they are, has reached a fever pitch to the chagrin of jobseekers everywhere.

Staffing agencies actually have a unique opportunity to capitalize on the growth of the ghost job by being explicitly transparent in their role postings, and appeal to the humanity of jobseekers with empathetic messaging that makes it clear that the rec is a) active, b) legitimate, and c) timely. This is a space in

which timeboxed temp assignments can be a breath of fresh air to candidates who are being ignored in so many mediums.

Search Term: Remote Jobs

Search Trends Overview: **Structurally elevated, never corrected**



3x

Increase in remote job search interest since April 2021, which has barely subsided as companies return to the office

20%

of LinkedIn listings are remote or hybrid, but they receive 60% of all applications ([LinkedIn / CNBC, 2025](#))

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

Remote job supply is shrinking; demand is not.

During the pandemic, remote jobs burst into the scene as the new normal for knowledge workers, and overnight, going into the office every day became as stale for a sizeable chunk of the non-essential workforce as those almonds we left in our desk before lockdown. Obviously this shift didn't apply to healthcare personnel, grocery workers, delivery drivers, or public works professionals, which in some ways was a harbinger of things to come. If where knowledge workers performed their jobs could be so easily and immediately turned on its head, perhaps how they performed their jobs was soon to follow...

But keeping people out of an office had a lot of downstream consequences -- on restaurants, retail, transportation, commercial real estate, collaboration, onsite training, and recruiting. Remote listings have been shrinking since 2023 as companies tighten work-from-home policies, while search demand has stayed near its all-time high. Why? Because if a job can be done remotely at all, chances are the candidate for that job wants to do it remotely.

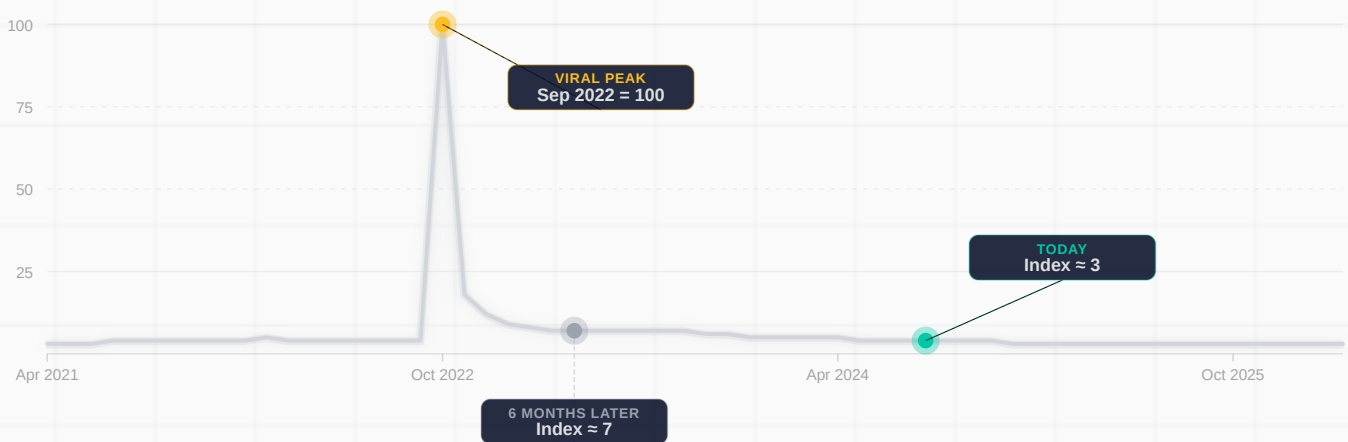
That gap between supply and demand creates a frustrated, restless candidate pool. Candidates are

actively looking for jobs with flexibility and staffing firms to help them land those jobs. Even for clinical roles, which can rarely be done remotely, healthcare candidates are increasingly looking to automation and better onboarding technology to simplify their experience and allow them to move faster and more seamlessly into new assignments -- a byproduct of a rapid digital transformation that was stress-tested in 2020.

The continued interest in remote work suggests that staffing firms that can offer flexibility as well as unobtrusive and thoughtful candidate experiences will enjoy a competitive advantage regardless of whether the roles they recruit for can be done remotely or not.

Search Term: Quiet Quitting

Search Trends Overview: **A viral spike that burned out fast**



8 wks

From zero to index 100, making it the fastest rise of any major workforce trend in Google Trends history

~3

Current 2026 index, effectively zero. The term has left the cultural conversation.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

After the pandemic, "quiet quitting" quietly quit.

"Quiet quitting" went from non-existent (because it's a made-up term) to the most-searched workforce phrase in America in about eight weeks in late 2022, driven by a viral TikTok and a media cycle that ran with it, and then it crashed just as fast. By early 2023 it was essentially gone. But when it was real, it was really real. Gallup research, for instance, showcased the worst job engagement numbers in a decade as that term gained steam, with employees doing the minimum to keep their jobs and paychecks. This phenomenon didn't come out of left field. The pandemic upended so many expectations around work and life, coupled with social movements around justice, equality, and human rights, alongside a very healthy job market (if you forget the 11.8 percent unemployment we saw in April 2020).

Search data in 2025 and 2026 tells a meaningfully different story. Professional and IT candidates are actively job hunting. Among some segments of the jobseeking population, especially in marketing and creative fields, there simply aren't enough jobs for the math to math. The talent market has shifted back toward employer power in many sectors. There are dozens of feature stories on professional and in some cases executive talent reskilling into trades roles, or pursuing temp and gig work to maintain access to pay and benefits.

For staffing agencies serving IT and professional segments on either the perm or contingent side, this is both an opportunity and a challenge. On one hand, there is more highly qualified talent on the market than at any point since 2021. On the other hand, AI-generated resumes from desperate jobseekers trying to get through screening agents means that finding those top candidates is harder for recruiters than ever before.

Part 4: The Impact of Technology on Staffing and Recruiting

An AI arms race is reshaping the front lines of recruiting, and it's making the job harder, not easier.

Candidate fraud has exploded, driven almost entirely by AI-enabled deepfakes, synthetic identities, and proxy applicants at a scale and level of sophistication that traditional screening wasn't built to handle.

Candidate sourcing searches have surged because finding genuinely qualified, validated talent has become incredibly difficult as AI floods pipelines with noise and low-quality carbon copies poorly imitating what it means to be special. This uncomfortable approximation of human personality is enough to make an actual recruiter's spidey senses tingle, but not enough to get flagged by ATS screening.

AI recruiting tools had a frenzied year of search (and purchasing) popularity in 2025, then normalized as the market moved from "what tools should we adopt?" to "how do we make the ones we have actually perform as we want them to?" These trends are connected: AI is both the cause of new recruiting problems and the tool being deployed to solve them, with varying degrees of success.

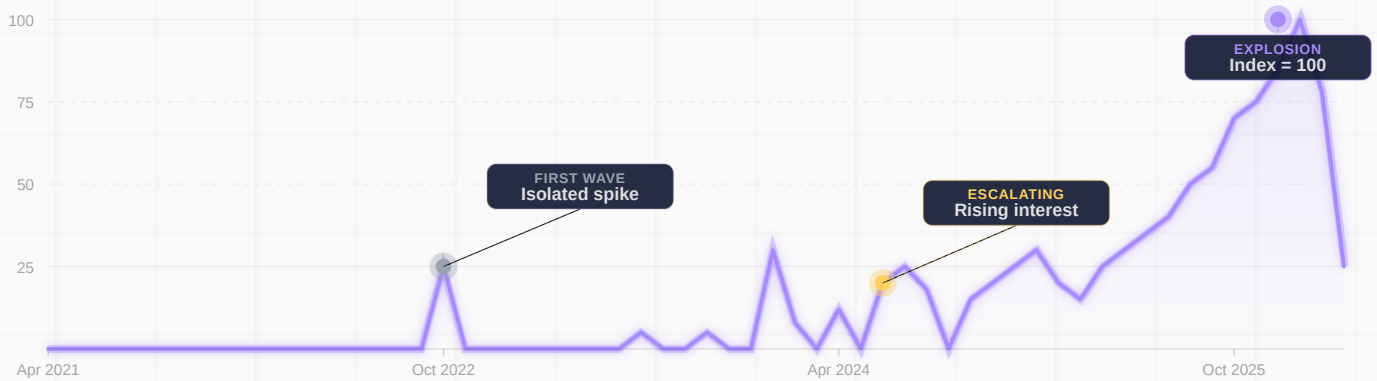
[4.1 Candidate Fraud](#)

[4.2 Candidate Sourcing](#)

[4.3 AI Tools for Recruiting](#)

Search Term: **Candidate Fraud**

Search Trends Overview: **Exploding in real time**



41%

of contingent workforce program managers reported experiencing challenges with candidate validation and fraud ([SIA 2025](#))

17%

of hiring managers reported encountering suspected deepfake interviews by end of 2024, up from just 3% the prior year ([Checkr](#))

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

Candidate fraud has grown from an inconvenience to an existential crisis in staffing.

Candidate fraud isn't new to the staffing industry. Recruiters have long taken average candidate resumes and made them look a little bit better than average. And lying about one's career achievements and embellishing one's skills and qualifications is not exactly a niche concept. It's the very reason RefAssured was started in the first place -- to prevent performance fraud.

But boy, what a year. The ubiquity of generative AI has made creating a convincing fake applicant profile trivially easy for almost anyone. The threats now include AI-generated resumes that perfectly match job descriptions, real-time deepfake video filters used in interviews, proxy applicants who pass the interview and then hand off the actual job to someone else, and synthetic personas assembled from stolen identity fragments. And the actors committing this fraud are also much scarier than in years past. Before, a candidate trying to circumvent a visa limitation might attempt to fabricate an identity, or someone might use another person's ID to pass a drug screen. These were single candidates acting on their own behalf. Now we have organized crime rings in North Korea and other geographies colluding to execute sophisticated, pervasive espionage and infiltrate Fortune 500 enterprises, hospital systems, and governmental agencies. It's a whole new world out there, with much higher stakes.

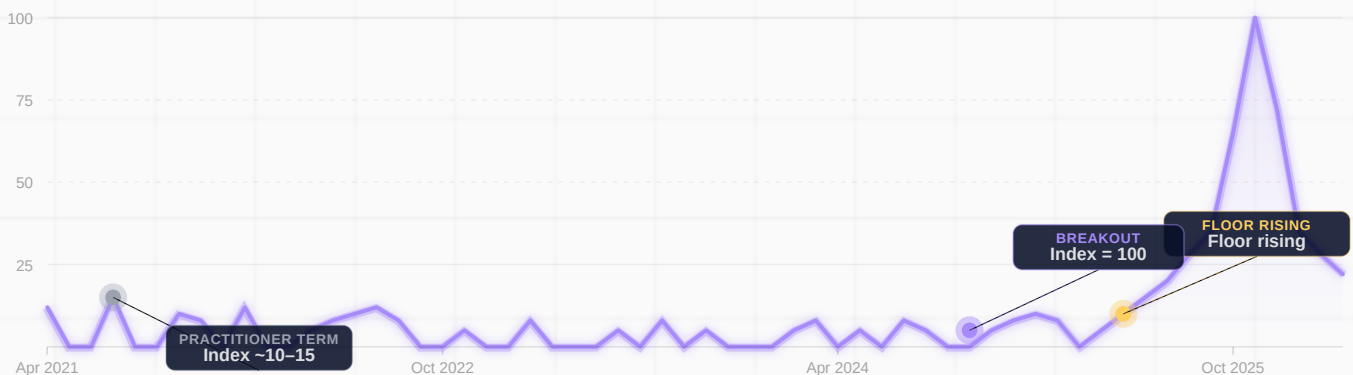
For staffing agencies, whose primary obligation to clients is to place high-quality talent and reduce risk, the consequences of submitting a fraudulent candidate have never been more severe. Sending fraudulent talent into the placement pipeline, even if they don't end up going on assignment, damages the client relationship, creates liability, and can permanently affect your agency brand. Imagine the conversation with a client if you have to claw back revenue or pull an associate before they're deployed on assignment because you discovered they're a threat actor. Or worse, imagine them actually making it

to the worksite.

The search volume and interest around candidate fraud as a term tracks almost perfectly with ChatGPT's public release and the democratization of deepfake tools. This is an arms race, and right now, the only way to beat the threat actors at their own game is with tools purpose-built for the job.

Search Term: Candidate Sourcing

Search Trends Overview: **Surging as the problem gets harder**



45%

surge in application volume on LinkedIn since widespread AI adoption — 11,000 applications submitted per minute, many AI-generated

50%+

of corporate recruiters report burnout from AI-driven application flood

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

In a sea of candidates, sourcing the right ones for a job is harder than it looks.

The term "candidate sourcing" is having a moment. It's possible to read the "candidate sourcing" search surge as a talent scarcity signal. But outside of healthcare staffing, for which the talent shortages are well documented, candidate scarcity isn't the problem.

In IT, professional services, and commercial segments, the candidate pool is large; the quiet quitting era is over, the market has shifted back toward employers, and people are actively searching for new assignments and work. And for commercial and light industrial roles, more college-age and entry-level workers are exploring career pivots into skilled trades professions that may offer increased job security against AI-driven structural disruption.

There are plenty of fish in the sea. But some of those fish that seem like salmon from a distance are

actually tilapia and screening tools can't tell the difference. After all, as Leo Lionni once famously said, "Fish is Fish."

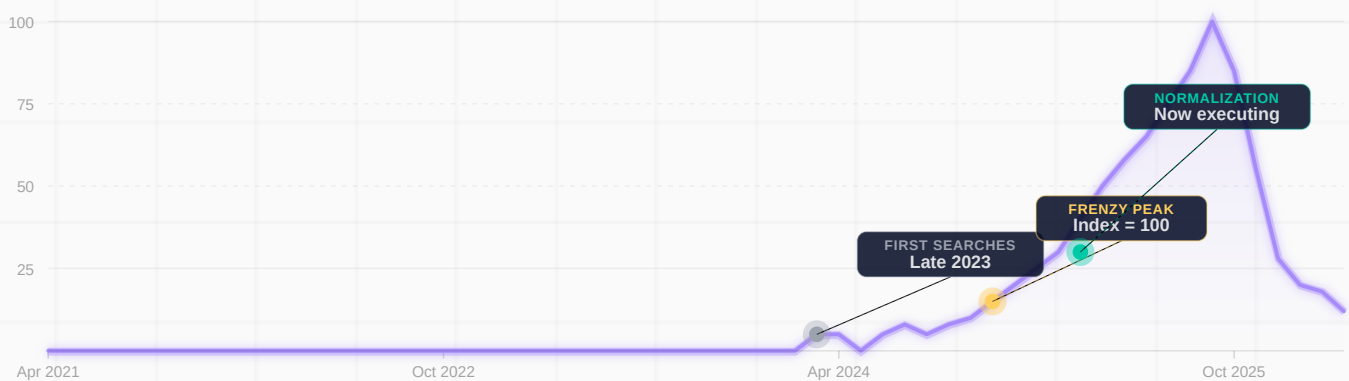
The sourcing problem in 2025-2026 is a quality, verification, and validation problem. AI has flooded every application pipeline with perfectly keyword-matched resumes from AI tools, cover letters that read as authentic but are templated rinse-and-repeat nonsense, and applications from candidates who may not exist in the form their application describes. And not all of this is due to nefarious intent. A candidate may use a resume editing tool with the best of intentions but not realize that the end result makes them seem like they led a complex project when all they did was attend a meeting or two. It's disingenuous for sure, but not always malicious.

The sourcing surge tracks directly with recruiters and agencies actively looking for better methods to find quality talent that can do a job well: sourcing from networks and known connections rather than job boards, using reference checks for validated past performance insight from real human beings, re-engaging and redeploying candidates already in an agency's pipeline, and building verification steps into initial screening.

For clinical roles, especially locums, and for elite engineering roles and a handful of skilled trades, there's a genuine scarcity of talent. But for everyone else, the scarce resource is trustworthy signals in a noisy market. Agencies that have deep, verified candidate relationships have a structural advantage that almost nothing can replicate.

Search Term: AI Tools for Recruiting

Search Trends Overview: **Peaked, now normalizing**



67%

80+

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

Moving from hype to outcomes: is it disillusionment or market saturation?

In 2024 and 2025, once ChatGPT hit the consumer mainstream and company valuations correlated directly with their perceived AI "nativeness," spurring exit multiples that seemed to defy the logic of feasible math, there was a mad dash to leveraging AI tools and operationalizing them rapidly.

From an investor perspective, companies in all sectors had to either a) become AI companies as far as what they were offering their customers externally for valuation purposes or b) prove that they were investing in AI internally to increase revenue and productivity per employee and operate more quickly at lower margin. The latter would likely involve restructuring in some capacity, either to eliminate internal talent that was deemed superfluous, or to bank resources towards more profitable pockets for future growth. This had both a positive and a negative impact on staffing agencies, who could either benefit from increased or decreased demand depending on their specialty talent segment and existing degree of diversification across staff augmentation/delivery and adjacent consulting and services.

And then the volume around "AI tools for recruiting" started to cool down a bit.

The search pullback doesn't mean that the market has lost faith in AI. Far from it. Adoption is high: roughly two-thirds of organizations now use some form of AI in recruitment, and that number continues to grow. The frenzied search for AI tools peaked when every staffing firm in the industry was simultaneously trying to evaluate the landscape at once, roughly mid-2025. We're now firmly into the second phase of the transformation process, which is generating outcomes and operationalizing the existing investments.

And that's the hard part. Lots of people can buy a car but it doesn't do much good unless you also know how to drive it and fit everyone in there comfortably.

The agencies winning in this environment are the ones who build workflows where AI translates meaningfully to recruiter output, and can navigate the biggest hurdle to AI or any type of technology adoption: internal change management. Winning hearts and minds and creating comfortable, workflow-native experiences are much greater challenges than finding a solution that has the slickest tagline.

Meanwhile, the AI arms race has created a new paradox: AI sourcing tools find more candidates, but AI-assisted applications make those candidates harder to evaluate on an apples-to-apples basis, which means trustworthy performance validation at the point of contact matters more than it ever has.

Part 5: Shifts in Workforce and Labor Delivery Models

Staffing service delivery is complex, and the models that appeal to large buyers of labor have shifted in popularity over the past decade depending on the segment in question. In IT we've seen greater emphasis on statement of work, whereas VMS and MSPs have dominated healthcare staffing delivery, almost to the exclusion of direct service models, which creates a set of unique margin compression and speed-related placement and operational challenges for healthcare staffing agencies specifically.

Consolidation has also factored into this, with some larger healthcare staffing agencies also acting as MSPs, and growing M&A activity to unlock economies of scale for niche providers.

Employer of record (EOR) and recruitment process outsourcing (RPO) providers have increased in popularity with large buyers of labor running contingent workforce programs as a direct reaction to increased compliance risk, operational complexity, and globalization. And then there's "gig" or staffing platforms, which are starting to look an awful lot like staffing agencies themselves, wrapped in fancy tech paper.

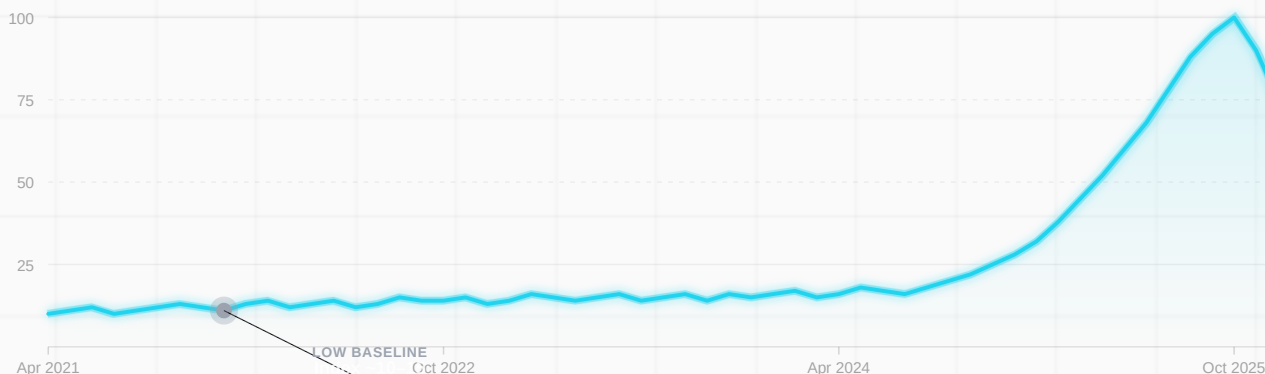
5.1 Employer of Record

5.2 Gig Economy Jobs

5.3 Recruitment Process Outsourcing

Search Term: Employer of Record

Search Trends Overview: Steady rise, then a sharp peak



\$6.8B

Estimated global EOR market size in 2025, projected to grow at double-digit rates through 2030 (SIA)

Tariffs

The late-2025 spike likely tracks with companies evaluating global workforce restructuring in response to US trade and tariff policy uncertainty

EOR reduces risk and complexity and takes the burden off the client.

Employer of Record services solve a specific problem: a company wants to hire someone in a new country (or state) without setting up a legal entity and navigating local employment law, payroll tax, and benefits compliance. It's programmatic workforce management versus pure staff aug and sourcing, and many larger staffing agencies already provide EOR services, including Randstad, Adecco, Kelly, and more.

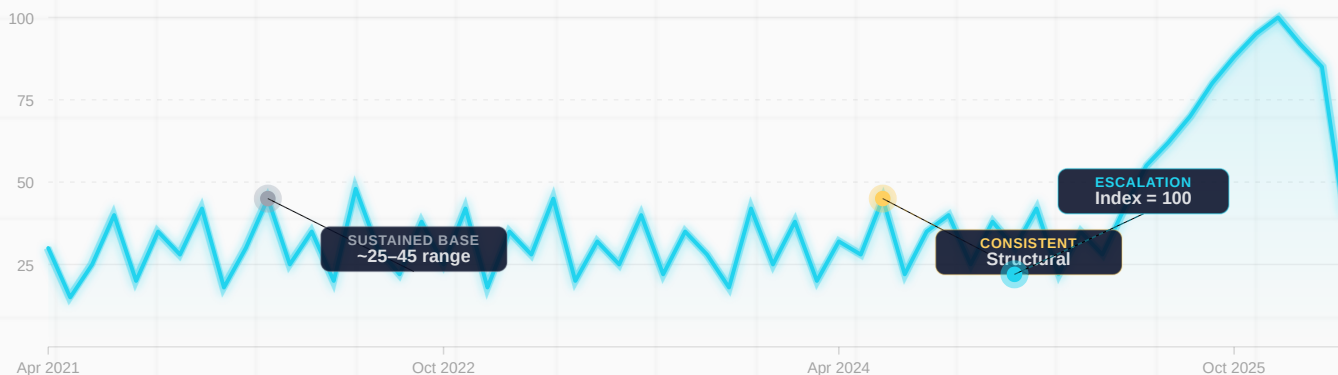
The search growth reflects the continued rise of global distributed contingent work and, more recently, companies looking for workforce flexibility in response to economic and trade policy uncertainty, but ultimately, it's really about creating simplicity and consistency for the client and the worker by having a stable intermediary absorb risk and streamline benefits, compliance, and payroll for talent.

The popularity of EOR does however signal the same trend we're seeing with hospitals and healthcare facilities' reliance on MSPs -- companies want reduced risk and a "front end" to navigating complexity. Why manage a bunch of staffing agency suppliers when a buyer could work with just one MSP? Why take on internal compliance risk and float payroll when an EOR can do it? Why keep up with changing international regulations when another entity has the resources to stay abreast of those?

Buyers are actively exploring ways to reduce the friction and risk of workforce expansion through a contiguous, streamlined experience. Agencies that emphasize experiential cohesion and create extensibility on the front end are better positioned regardless of which delivery model is in question.

Search Term: Gig Economy Jobs

Search Trends Overview: Perennially high, now at peak levels



~36%

64M

of U.S. workers participate in the gig economy in some form (Upwork, 2023)

Americans did freelance or independent work in 2023 (Upwork, 2023)

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

This is a worker signal, not a buyer signal, and it's been consistent for five years.

Gig work was all the rage for twenty years as Uber and Instacart reshaped how work is delivered and ushered in a new era of the independent contractor, and resulting policy changes in turn. In the past several years, companies themselves have reduced their use of the term "gig economy" or "gig work" primarily because it feels almost cliché and tired now, considering that gig was always just a hip synonym for temp IC work.

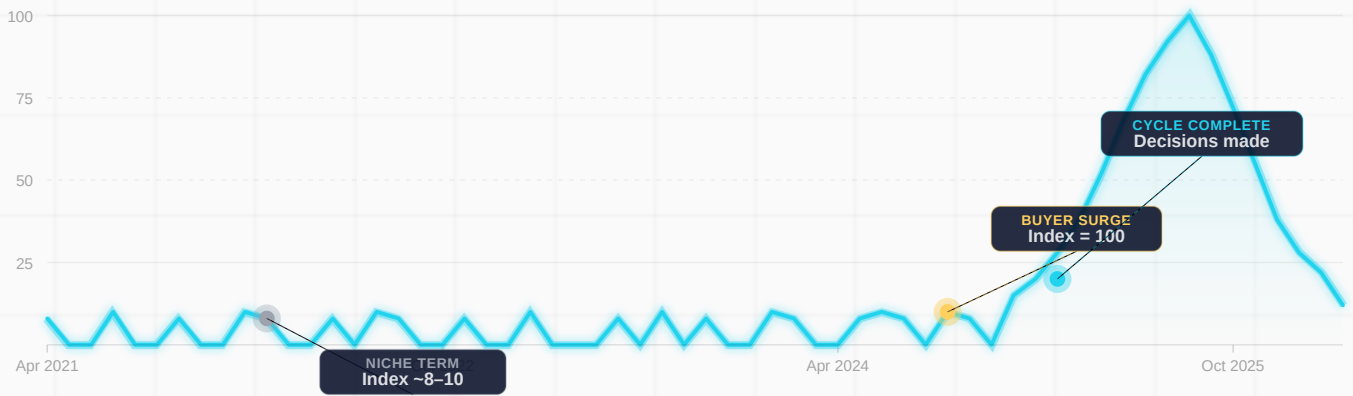
But no one told the candidates, who are as excited about gig work as they have ever been. Perhaps even more now that permanent roles are so hard to come by, and full-time opportunities scarce.

Interest in gig economy jobs has long been high, but the late-2025 escalation to 100 likely reflects a combination of economic anxiety (tariff uncertainty, a cautious job market for permanent roles) and the rising cost of living that makes having multiple jobs, or gigs, necessary for many people just to make ends meet.

The important distinction for staffing is the user intent: this term is primarily searched by candidates, not employers. In other words, a lot of people are looking for work and they're willing to be creative and flexible in how they perform it. Agencies that can offer flexibility, technology that helps improve the candidate experience, from mobile onboarding to shift scheduling to day pay and benefits portals, are competing directly for this workforce segment against platform companies like Uber, Fiverr, and Instacart.

Search Term: **Recruitment Process Outsourcing**

Search Trends Overview: **A quiet term that suddenly surged**



20%

CAGR projected for the global RPO market through 2030, reaching nearly \$70B (SIA)

30–40%

Cost savings companies typically report when switching from staffing agencies to RPO for permanent hiring

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR STAFFING

RPO is growing fast, driven by a buyer desire for efficiency and strategic workforce program management.

The popularity of RPO is really a reflection of large buyers' desire to unlock economies of scale in hiring, and to create consistency and uniformity in a way that ultimately reduces costs.

Why did RPO search demand explode in 2025? One obvious reason is that clients want more than pure staff augmentation, but also workforce process optimization, technology implementation and consultation, and total talent management. Another is that the RPO model, as it has matured and more providers have emerged, has become more accessible to a broader set of companies. Even mid-market businesses can now benefit from on-demand and project-based RPO models at starting costs that previously only large enterprises could justify.

Additionally, as hiring demand for permanent roles is expected to increase in 2026, companies that froze their internal TA teams during the economic downcycle are now evaluating whether to rebuild them or outsource them. Outsourcing allows for easy and painless flexing up and flexing down, either due to cyclical demands or simply as a matter of choice, in a way that building an internal team does not.

RPO providers are increasingly offering hybrid temp/perm models, and staffing agencies are increasingly offering RPO-adjacent services. The staffing agencies most at risk in light of the growing popularity of various delivery modalities are those with no clear competitive moat beyond filling job orders or having the "best people" in a way that they cannot actually prove with evidence.

Staying in one's lane, so to speak, used to be enough in staffing, but as these search terms come and

go, what doesn't change is the need to navigate complexity, deliver more than just the basics, and differentiate on quality, risk reduction, value, and strategic partnership.