

Recruiting 4.0: AI and Talent Acquisition at Unilever

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Unilever is a global consumer goods company that employs around 120,000 people worldwide. Every year, the company receives around 250,000 applications for graduate and early-career roles (Unilever, 2026), making the management of candidate volume increasingly complex and resource-intensive. For many years, the recruitment process followed a traditional structure. Applications were screened manually through CV reviews, followed by telephone interviews and face-to-face assessments. This process could take up to four months, requiring a great deal of administrative effort from recruiters. Differences in evaluation criteria across regions also created inconsistencies in candidate assessment. Furthermore, the company recognized that a heavy reliance on CV screening might unintentionally favor certain educational backgrounds or professional trajectories (Bogen & Rieke, 2018).

At the same time, younger applicants expected faster digital interactions with employers. Candidate experience has become a key element of talent attraction and employer branding.

In response, Unilever redesigned its recruitment process, incorporating artificial intelligence-based tools, reflecting the growing relevance of AI in human resource management (Tambe et al., 2019). The first major change was eliminating CV screening for graduate roles. Candidates were instead asked to complete a series of online, neuroscience-based games designed to assess their cognitive abilities, attention levels, risk tolerance, and problem-solving skills. These games generated behavioral data, analyzed using machine learning algorithms.

Candidates who advanced to the next stage completed an asynchronous video interview. AI software evaluated the content of their responses, their speech patterns and certain non-verbal indicators, producing structured competency scores aligned with the company's leadership framework. Shortlisted candidates then proceeded to a final stage involving human managers, who made the hiring decision supported by the information generated through the digital system.

Following implementation, the company significantly reduced time-to-hire and the administrative workload of the early screening phases. The digital process enabled the organization to handle high volumes of applicants in a standardized way. It also transformed the interaction between candidates and the company, providing an innovative, technology-driven recruitment experience, illustrating the shift from administrative to more strategic HR functions discussed in the literature (Minbaeva, 2021).

However, the introduction of AI-based recruitment tools also required internal adjustments. The HR department had to establish oversight mechanisms and periodically review how the algorithms were functioning, particularly considering increasing regulatory attention to high-risk AI systems in recruitment processes (European Commission, 2024). Managers also had to interpret algorithmic outputs as decision-support tools rather than as automatic hiring decisions. Integrating artificial intelligence thus became a central component of Unilever's recruitment and talent attraction strategy, combining digital efficiency with human evaluation in the final stage of the selection process.

Sources

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Questions about the case

1. In what ways does the AI-based system described in the case study modify the traditional stages of recruitment and selection?

2. How can eliminating initial CV screening affect talent attraction and diversity?
3. What advantages and potential risks does artificial intelligence introduce into candidate evaluation?
4. How might a fully digital recruitment process influence employer branding and the organization's ability to attract talent?
5. How should HR managers balance artificial intelligence and human judgment when making selection decisions?