

The ATS

Roadmap Reset



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INTRODUCTION

The Roadmap Math No Longer Works

Talent acquisition platforms are being asked to do more than any single product roadmap can absorb. The pressure is not coming from a downturn in demand. It is coming from the opposite direction. Aptitude Research found that **34 percent of companies are increasing investment in their applicant tracking system** and **56 percent are holding steady**. Nine out of ten buyers are funding the category at the same level or higher than last year. Money is not leaving the ATS. And... **1 in 4 companies are looking to replace their ATS this year**.

Despite this high demand:

82%

of companies say their ATS has significant gaps.

22%

believe the ATS alone can support talent transformation.

28%

are satisfied with the ATS decision they made.

That combination is unusual. Buyers rarely keep funding a category they have doubts about. They are doing it here because the ATS remains the system of record for hiring and the anchor of the recruiting workflow. Replacing it is expensive and disruptive. So, companies keep paying, keep expecting more, and keep filling the gaps with tools bought elsewhere.

For platform providers, this is the most important market signal available right now. Demand is not the constraint but the ability to deliver is. Every quarter a capability sits on a roadmap waiting for engineering time is a quarter a customer solves the problem with someone else. The next competitive advantage will not come from shipping the longest list of features. It will come from knowing which capabilities to own, which to embed, and how to deliver both without asking recruiters to leave the platform.

This report examines what the data says about where those gaps sit, why the traditional build or buy framing no longer fits, and how platform teams can evaluate embedded delivery as a strategic option rather than a fallback.

How the Market Arrived Here

The current pressure on platform roadmaps is the product of four distinct waves — each of which solved the previous one's problem and created the next.

WAVE ONE

Workflow & Compliance

Early platforms standardized the hiring process and ensured regulatory defensibility. The value proposition was control. Success meant a clean audit trail and a consistent path from requisition to hire. This wave built the foundation that every subsequent one has been layered onto.

WAVE TWO

Best of Breed

Specialists emerged to deliver depth in areas the system of record treated as secondary. Assessment, video interviewing, sourcing, and recruitment marketing all became categories in their own right. Buyers gained capability and inherited an integration problem that has never fully been solved.

WAVE THREE

CRM & Pipeline

Candidate relationship management moved the conversation upstream. Companies stopped waiting for applications and started building pipelines. The market response was mixed. Aptitude Research found buyers split between standalone CRM providers and CRM delivered through the ATS, with a meaningful share running no CRM at all.

WAVE FOUR

Intelligence & Automation

The current wave applies AI to matching, ranking, content generation, and decision support. It raises expectations faster than any previous wave, because the capability is visible to buyers in consumer products long before it appears in their hiring stack.

Each wave added expectations without removing any. A platform in 2026 is expected to deliver the compliance rigor of wave one, the functional depth of wave two, the pipeline capability of wave three, and the intelligence of wave four. No roadmap absorbs four decades of accumulated expectation through internal build alone.

This is the structural reason the build-or-buy framing has stopped working. It was designed for a market where capability expectations grew incrementally. They no longer do.

Research Methodology

Quantitative Research:

Online survey of TA and HR VP Level, Recruiters/ Sourcers, and IT Professionals.

Company Sizes:

18%	250–999	22%	1,000–5,000
28%	5,001–10,000	32%	10,000+

SURVEY RESPONDENTS

358

Total Respondents

Data collected

Q1 - Q3 2026

Evolution of the ATS

1

WORKFLOW & COMPLIANCE

Early ATS platforms focused on standardizing hiring processes and ensuring regulatory compliance.

2

RISE OF BEST OF BREED

Specialized tools emerged, offering advanced features tailored to specific recruitment needs.

3

CRM+ATS

Integration of Candidate Relationship Management (CRM) systems enhanced candidate engagement & pipeline building.

4

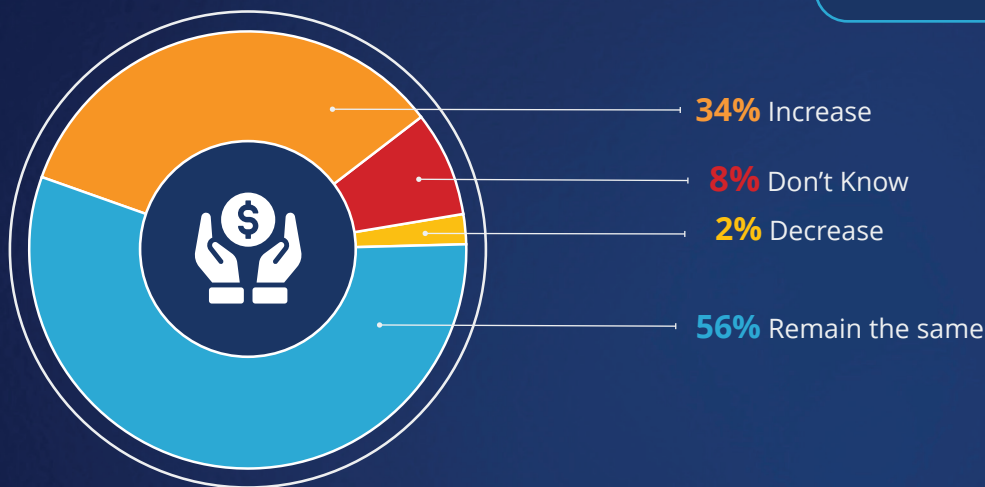
INTELLIGENT & AGENTIC ATS

AI-powered platforms now automate and optimize recruiting with data-driven insights and predictive analytics.

Investment Is Steady. Confidence Is Not.

The ATS market is active. It is often where companies begin a broader talent acquisition transformation, and spending patterns reflect that.

Figure 1: *Investment in the ATS Market*



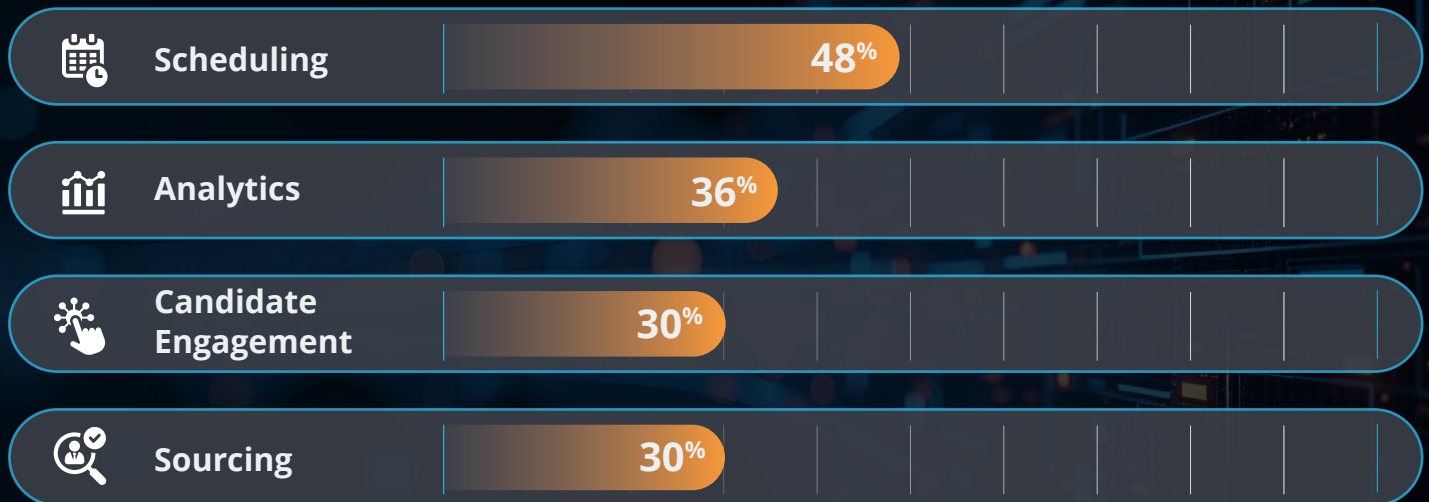
Underneath that stability, the market is moving. One in four companies is replacing the ATS this year. Nearly half are actively evaluating their current system for additional capabilities. That second number matters more than the first — most companies are not looking to leave. They are looking for more from what they already have.

A buyer who wants to replace the platform is a competitive loss. A buyer who wants additional capability from the platform they already run is a growth opportunity — and there are roughly twice as many of them. The question for product and partnership teams is straightforward: when that buyer asks for more, does the platform have an answer that ships this quarter, or an answer that ships eventually?

Where Expectations Outpace Delivery

The gaps buyers report are specific, and they cluster in a revealing pattern.

Figure 2: Reported gaps in the ATS



Scheduling leads at 48 percent. Analytics follows at 36 percent. Candidate engagement and sourcing tie at 30 percent. Look at where these sit in the hiring workflow. Almost none of them are core applicant tracking. Requisition management, compliance, stage progression, and record keeping are largely solved. Providers built those capabilities well and buyers are not complaining about them.

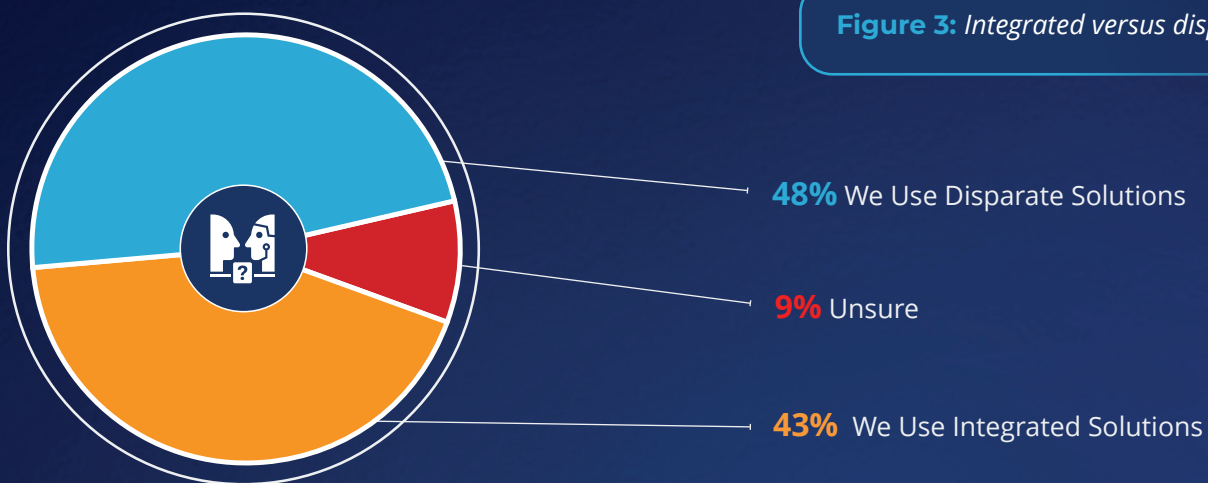
The gaps sit at the edges. Sourcing and engagement are upstream of the application. Scheduling and analytics wrap around the pipeline rather than living inside it. These are the places where the recruiter leaves the ATS to get work done and then comes back. That distinction is the strategic insight in this data. The gaps are not failures of core product. They are the natural boundary of what a system of record was designed to do. Closing them from scratch means building an entirely new category of capability inside a platform optimized for something else.

It also explains why buyers keep funding a product they find incomplete. The core works. The perimeter does not. And the perimeter is exactly where hiring outcomes are decided, because a role is won or lost in attraction and screening long before it reaches the offer stage.

A platform that closes the perimeter without disrupting the core changes its own position in the buying conversation. It stops competing on tracking and starts competing on outcomes.

The Integration Tax

Aptitude Research found that 48 percent of companies use disparate solutions and 43 percent use integrated ones. Companies are split with no clear winner. Among enterprise organizations, 54 percent are managing multiple ATS platforms at the same time.



That split is often read as a preference. It is closer to a compromise. Buyers who chose disparate tools did so to get depth of functionality. Buyers who chose integrated suites did so to get connectivity. Neither group reports being satisfied, which is why overall satisfaction sits at 28 percent.

The cost of the disparate approach is rarely on the invoice. It shows up as recruiter context switching, as data that has to be reconciled across systems, as reporting that requires manual assembly, and as onboarding time for every new tool added to the workflow. Integration with existing systems is consistently among the top frustrations companies report with their HR technology.

This is the tax buyers are paying, and it is the tax platform providers are best positioned to remove. Every capability a customer adds outside the platform weakens the platform relationship. Every capability delivered inside it strengthens the relationship and increases the switching cost in the provider's favor. The integration tax is not primarily a buyer problem to solve. It is a provider opportunity to capture.

Build, Buy, or Embed

Platform teams have historically framed capability decisions as a binary. Build it or acquire it. Both options are slow and both consume the scarcest resource a platform has, which is engineering capacity aimed at differentiation.

There is a third path that has matured considerably. **Embedded delivery** means a capability is surfaced inside the platform, under the platform brand, in the platform interface — while the underlying infrastructure is operated by a specialist partner. The recruiter never leaves. The customer relationship stays with the platform. The engineering cost is a fraction of building from scratch. The decision is not which option is better; it is which option fits which capability. A simple test helps.

Does this capability differentiate the platform in a competitive deal?

If a buyer chooses the platform because of this capability, build it. Differentiators are worth roadmap time, and outsourcing them hands over the reason a customer picked the platform in the first place. Core workflow, data model, and the recruiter experience layer almost always belong here.

Is this capability expected rather than chosen?

Some capabilities do not win deals but their absence loses them. Scheduling is the clearest example in this dataset. Nearly half of buyers report a gap, and virtually no buyer selects a platform because its scheduling is excellent. These are table stakes, and embedding is usually the fastest way to reach parity.

Does this capability sit outside the platform's core competency?

Job distribution, media buying, video and creative generation, assessment science, and identity verification each require specialist expertise, ongoing vendor relationships, and continuous optimization. A platform can build a version of these. Very few can build a version that stays competitive against companies whose entire business is that one capability.

How quickly does the market expect this?

Speed to delivery is its own form of differentiation. A capability that ships in one quarter through a partner and one that ships in six through internal build are not the same product decision, even when the end state looks similar. Six quarters of customer patience is not a resource most platforms have.

The strongest platform roadmaps apply this test explicitly and revisit it. Capabilities move between categories over time. Something embedded today may become a differentiator worth building tomorrow, and a partnership structured well should make that transition possible rather than block it.

What Embedded Looks Like in Practice

Embedded delivery is easiest to understand at the top of the hiring funnel, where the gaps in this research concentrate and where the specialist requirement is highest.

A connected top of funnel spans several stages that most platforms touch partially and few own end to end.

Job content creation	Turning a requisition into job content that performs across channels, with language that reflects the employer brand and the role.
Distribution	Placing that content across job boards, aggregators, social, and programmatic networks, with budget directed to channels producing qualified applicants.
Attraction	Converting job content into formats native to the channel — including video and image creative for social platforms where text listings do not perform.
Screening	Applying consistent criteria to inbound applicants so recruiters spend time on the shortlist rather than the pile.
Interviewing	Coordinating scheduling and structuring the interview so evaluation is consistent across candidates and interviewers.
Scoring	Producing a defensible, comparable assessment that feeds the hiring decision and the record of it.

Each of these is a discipline with its own vendors, its own optimization problem, and its own rate of change. Programmatic media buying alone is a full business. Very few platforms would choose to build a media buying operation, and yet distribution performance directly determines whether their customers fill roles.

Embedded infrastructure lets a platform offer the full sequence without operating any of it. The recruiter experiences one workflow. The platform owns the interface, the brand, and the customer. The specialist operates the machinery underneath.

The alternative most buyers live with today is a recruiter who writes the job in the ATS, posts it through a separate distribution tool, runs social ads through a third system, screens in a fourth, schedules in a fifth, and reconciles the results by hand. That is the integration tax in its most literal form.

SECTION 07

The Provider Business Case

Embedded partnerships are usually evaluated as a product decision. They are more accurately a commercial one — and the case rests on four effects.

Roadmap relief

Engineering capacity is the binding constraint for nearly every platform in this market. Embedding a capability that would otherwise take multiple quarters returns that capacity to work that differentiates. This is the most immediate benefit and the easiest to quantify internally.

Expansion revenue

Capabilities delivered through the platform can be monetized through the platform. Buyers have already demonstrated willingness to pay for enhanced functionality and deeper insight, and they are currently paying for it somewhere else. Bringing that spend inside the platform relationship converts a competitor's revenue line into an expansion line.

Retention

One in four companies is replacing the ATS this year. Nearly half are evaluating for additional capabilities. Platforms that can answer the capability question hold customers who would otherwise enter an evaluation cycle. Every capability delivered inside the platform is one fewer reason to look outside it.

Competitive positioning

The market has spent a decade framing ATS selection as best of breed versus integrated suite, with depth on one side and connectivity on the other. Embedded delivery collapses that tradeoff. A platform that offers specialist depth inside an integrated experience is competing on a dimension its rivals have not yet occupied.

How to Evaluate an Embedded Partner

Not every partnership is structured in the platform's interest. Platform teams should press on six points before committing.

Brand & interface control

Does the capability appear as part of the platform, or as a visible third party inside it? Anything that surfaces another company's brand in the recruiter workflow weakens the platform's position with its own customer.

Data ownership

Who holds the data generated by the embedded capability, who can act on it, and what happens to it if the partnership ends. This is the single most common gap in partnership agreements and the most expensive one to discover late.

Revenue model

Revenue share, wholesale pricing, and referral models produce very different economics and very different incentives. A model where the platform sets end pricing generally aligns better than one where the partner does.

Depth of capability

The partner should be meaningfully better at this than the platform would be building it. If the embedded version is roughly what an internal team would produce in a quarter, the partnership is adding coordination cost without adding capability.

Implementation & support

When the embedded capability fails, the customer calls the platform. Support boundaries, escalation paths, and response commitments need to be defined before the first incident rather than during it.

Exit & transition

A well-structured partnership includes a path to bringing the capability in house if it becomes a differentiator. Partnerships that make that transition impossible are not partnerships — they are dependencies.

The Buying Conversation Has Changed

Platform teams should expect the evaluation itself to look different from the one they were built to win.

For years, buyers judged an ATS on workflow automation. The questions were about configurability, compliance coverage, and how many steps a process took. Success was measured in efficiency. Those questions still get asked, but they no longer decide deals, because most credible platforms answer them adequately.

Three criteria have moved to the front.

1**Intelligence**

Does the system produce insight or only records? Buyers want to know what the platform can tell them that they did not already know. Real-time analytics, predictive signal, and matching that goes beyond keyword search are now baseline expectations rather than premium features. The 36 percent of buyers reporting an analytics gap are asking this question and not getting a satisfying answer.

2**Experience**

Does the platform improve life for the recruiter and the candidate? This is where the integration tax becomes visible in an evaluation. A buyer running a demo notices every point where the workflow leaves the platform — and a competitor with an embedded alternative will make sure they notice.

3**Adaptability**

Can the platform evolve with the buyer? This is the criterion that most directly rewards an embedded strategy. A buyer asking whether the platform will keep pace is really asking about delivery velocity. A partnership model that lets a platform add capability in a quarter is a better answer than a roadmap slide, and buyers have learned to discount roadmap slides.

The practical implication for product and partnership teams is that the evaluation now tests the ecosystem rather than the feature set. The platform that can demonstrate breadth of connected capability inside one experience is answering all three criteria at once.

What Platform Teams Should Do Now

Four steps translate this research into action.

Audit the roadmap against the differentiation test

Sort every planned capability into build, embed, or defer. Most teams find that a meaningful share of committed engineering work sits in areas where they will never be the best provider.

Map the gaps customers are solving elsewhere

Every tool a customer runs alongside the platform is either an integration to strengthen or a capability to absorb. Both are revenue conversations.

Model the commercial case before the product case

Embedded capability has an expansion-revenue profile that internal build does not. That case is usually stronger than the engineering-savings argument, and it reaches a different set of decision makers.

Structure partnerships for control

Brand, interface, data, pricing, and exit terms determine whether an embedded capability strengthens the platform relationship or dilutes it.

CONCLUSION

Demand Already Expressed

The data in this report describes a market in an unusual position. Investment is steady. Satisfaction is low. Buyers are not leaving — but they are not content either.

Eighty-two percent report gaps. Only 22 percent believe the ATS alone can support talent transformation. Nearly half are evaluating their current platform for more. Read from the buyer's side, those numbers describe frustration. Read from the provider's side, they describe demand that has already been expressed and is currently being met by someone else.

No roadmap will close that distance through build alone. The math does not work, and the gaps that buyers report sit precisely in the areas where specialist depth matters most and where a system of record has the least natural advantage. The platforms that win the next cycle will be the ones that decide deliberately where to differentiate and where to embed — and then deliver both inside a single experience the recruiter never has to leave.

The advantage is no longer the longest feature list. It is the strongest ecosystem, delivered as one product.



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