

The Guardian Jobs guide to staff retention

A concise guide to how charities can help keep their best talent on board and recruit the right staff first time

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About this guide

We interviewed a panel of recruitment experts and directors of small and medium-sized charities to find out the common challenges they face in the recruitment process.

With their insights and advice, we have compiled this five-part handbook to help other charity directors improve their processes and avoid some of the common pitfalls.

The guide is comprised of two features exploring the challenges faced and potential solutions, as well as three practical tools to help you attract and interview candidates.

We know recruiting can be a high-risk venture for charities and getting it wrong can be costly. We hope this guide can help you get it right first time, everytime.

Top five challenges that charity directors face when recruiting

We interviewed a panel of expert recruiters and charity directors to find out what recruitment challenges are most keenly felt in the charity sector.

Here are their top challenges, along with some of the suggestions they gave for overcoming them.

1 I don't have much recruitment experience, or enough time to dedicate to it

Smaller charities often don't have a dedicated recruitment team – or recruit frequently enough to gain much experience. As such, the hiring process can feel frustrating and risky.

What can you do?

1. Give it the time to get it right. Recruitment is both difficult and time consuming. Commit to giving it the dedicated time that it needs: proper preparation can save you time (and money!) down the line.

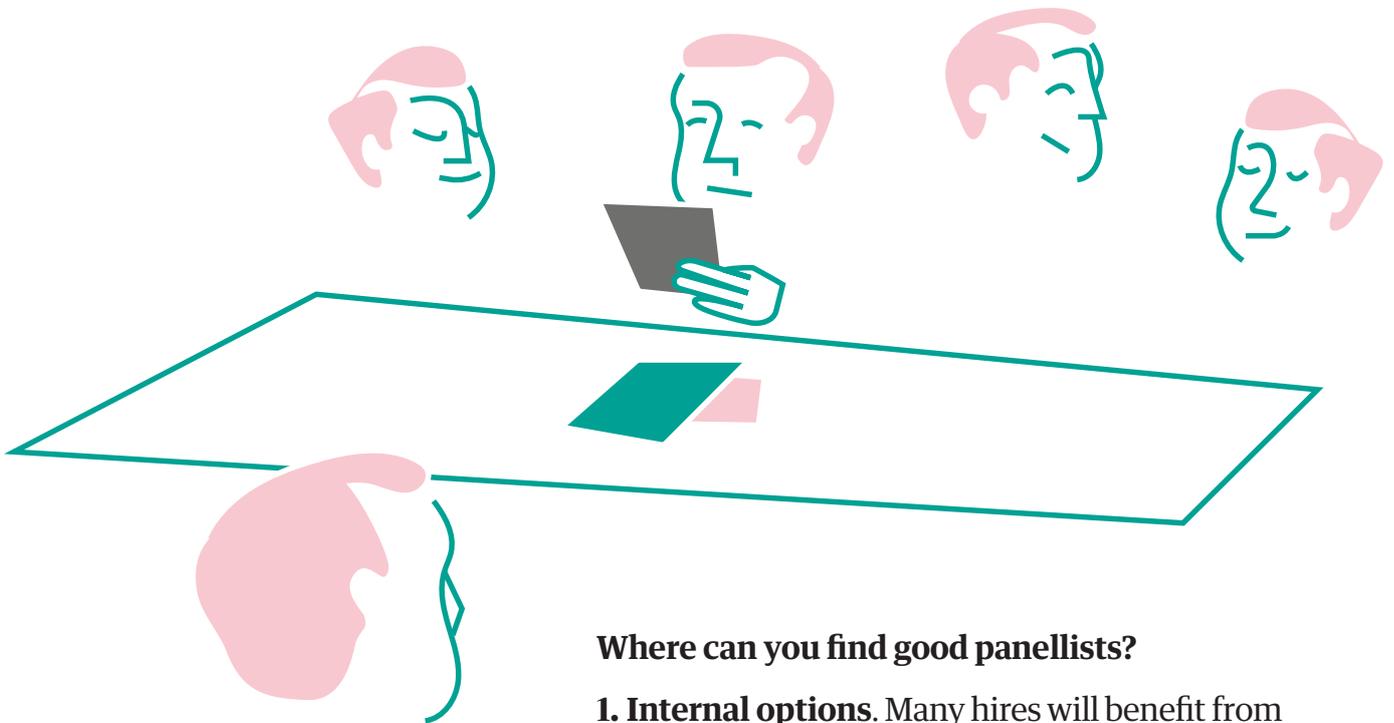
2. Give and get. Pool experience with local charities. Offer your support wherever you can and ask for reciprocal help.

3. Don't reinvent the wheel. There is a plethora of resources out there to help you with the recruitment basics, so focus your time and effort on the bits that are truly unique to your organisation.



2 We struggle to pull together an effective and diverse interview panel

Organising an interview panel that includes a diversity of backgrounds and experience is hugely valuable in making good hires, but it can be a challenge in smaller charities.



Where can you find good panellists?

1. Internal options. Many hires will benefit from including a line manager or close colleague in the process. Look around your charity for someone who could provide useful insight.

2. Personal network. You will likely know appropriate people with significant amounts of recruitment experience: can you ask them to volunteer a day of their time for interviewing candidates?

3. Local charities. Other charities may also have great people who would be willing to volunteer their time to sit on your interview panel: either as a senior generalist (e.g. trustee, director) or role specialist (e.g. fundraiser, nurse, etc).

3 We need to find people who will live our values

The requirement for candidates to be a personal and cultural fit at the organisation is particularly important within the third sector. Everyone who works at a charity needs to be an ambassador for their work and values.

Things to consider:

1. Accessibility. Is your application process accessible to a range of applicants? What could you do to further level the playing field? For example, consider using application forms rather than CVs to filter candidates.

2. Diversity. Is the process susceptible to hidden bias? For example, assess whether the application process includes personal information that could be vulnerable to the recruitment teams' subconscious prejudices.

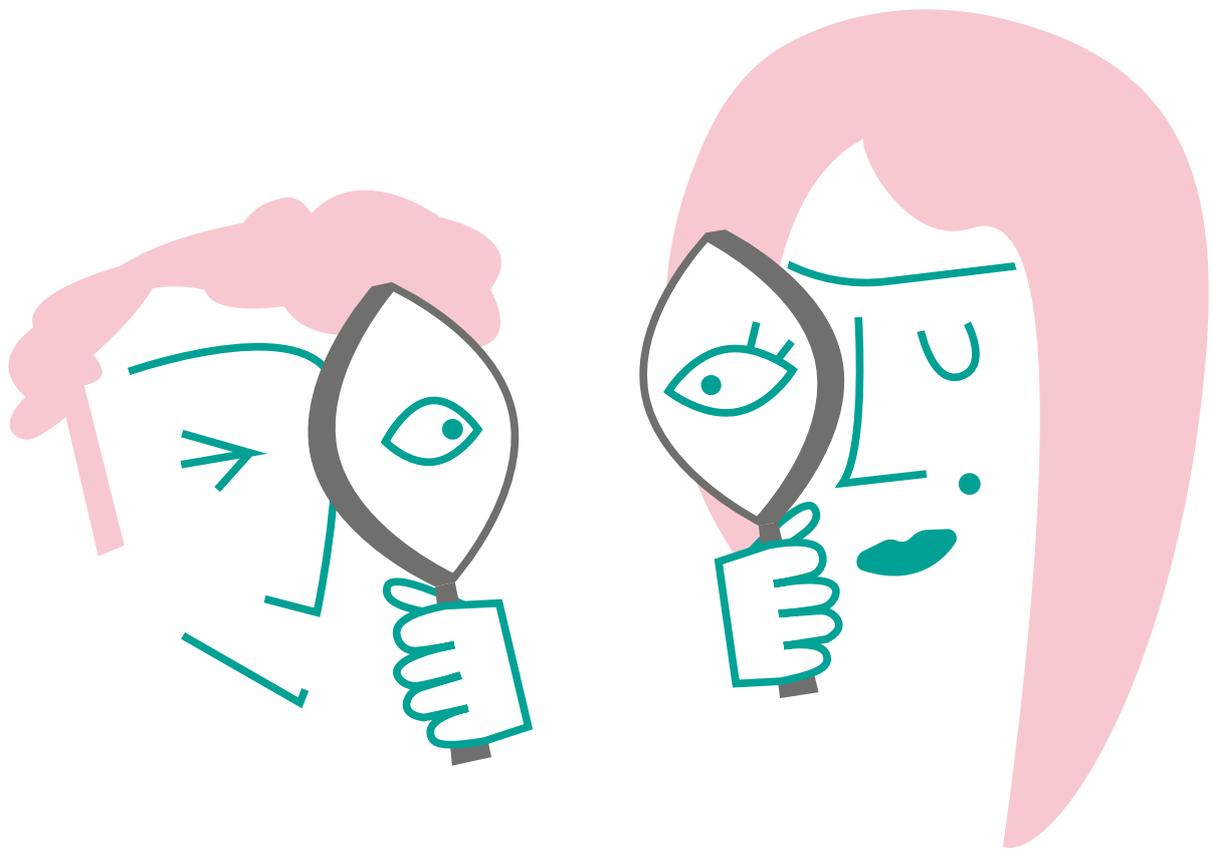
3. Openness. Are you making it clear enough that you are an open, accepting and diverse employer? Don't assume candidates already know.



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We want to encourage applications from within and outside of the charity sector

Many third sector organisations are keen to extend their search into the private sector to gain access to a larger pool of high quality candidates. However, charities often offer lower salaries and have some negative preconceptions to combat.



How can you better engage private sector candidates?

1. Avoid jargon and industry specific terminology. Charity employers often use language that can be off-putting to those outside of the sector. This includes the use of unnecessarily niche job titles and descriptions.

2. Opportunities. Many charity roles offer a unique breadth of exposure to different projects and roles within the organisation - a prospect that many candidates would find incredibly appealing.

3. Choose advertising carefully. Ensure that the channels you use for advertising are accessible and widely used by candidates both in and outside of the third sector.

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We struggle to attract some applicants because we can't offer the salaries that big city firms can

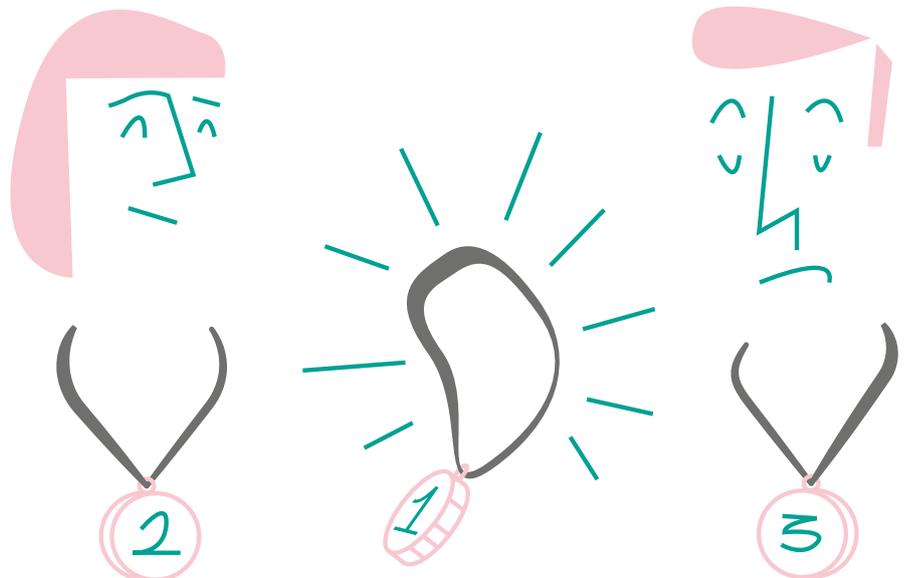
It has always been the case that charities are not able to offer the same salaries as the private sector. It is important for charities to compete in other ways, without relying exclusively on a candidate's belief in the mission.

Things to advertise:

1. Location. The ability to work locally can be a huge benefit to many candidates – and the reduction of travel costs can help counteract lower salaries.

2. Flexibility. Candidates are increasingly looking for irregular and/or part-time work. This is particularly true of freelancers who may be looking for some stability and parents looking for a better work-life balance.

3. Be realistic. Never risk being dishonest about the reality of the role in an attempt to recruit new talent: it always causes resentment and poor retention in the long run.



How do small charity directors overcome their recruitment challenges?

A charity is only ever as good as the people working in it so when it comes to recruitment, the pressure is on.

Nowhere is this more keenly felt than in small and medium-sized charities. Every person makes a huge difference to your mission and is an investment that takes up precious funds. Unlike larger organisations however, you often don't have access to HR teams, expertise or fancy processes to help you make the right decision - nor the vast budgets to buy it in.

So how do these charities manage? We asked a panel of small charity directors to discuss the challenges they face around recruitment - and how they overcome them.

Quantity and quality

While there are more than [32 million people working in the UK](#), many small and medium-sized charities struggle to get the quantity and quality of candidates they would like to respond to their job vacancies. "We have challenges filling positions," says Karen, chief executive of Live Inclusive, a disability charity in South Yorkshire. It's not just getting the number of applicants that can be tough, she says, but also attracting those with relevant experience.

It's important to establish the right recruitment procedures to help you attract talent and make sure any hidden potential doesn't slip through the net. Gus Alston, director and chief executive of Kentish Town City Farm, writes the job specification and advert, and prepares the interview himself. But he also enlists support from his trustees for most hires (particularly for senior roles), as well as colleagues from his local charity consortium. "They're normally very quick to provide assistance - there's a good community of 'give and get'," he says.

It's not just you who benefits from the recruitment process being simple - your applicants will too. Many small charities require a CV and covering letter application. [This approach usually works best if you do not expect many applications. Others might design an application form to make the shortlisting process a little easier as you can quickly check applicants against your specification.](#)

If you choose the latter, you must ensure it is user-friendly - a lesson Jonny Boux, director of Inspire! Education Business Partnership learned the hard way. "We didn't have a very good application form - tried to get too much too soon, which was really too cumbersome and long-winded," he said. "It was putting people off applying." He suggests tapping into your networks, other charities and trustees to get an idea of what might work.

You also need to get the job advert absolutely right. It's important to be really clear with candidates so they understand what they are applying for, but also to sell your organisation. "The job advert is your opportunity to present the organisation professionally. It's likely the first real impression the candidate will have of your organisation," says Gus Alston.

He advises to look at what others have written in job adverts for similar roles, before fine tuning your presentation. "Little details can make a big difference," he says. "That includes things like a proper quality logo on the job advert that fits properly in its frame, properly formatted text etc."

A competitive edge

One detail on the job advert that can be challenging for small and medium-sized charities is the salary. Traditionally, many charities have struggled to compete with the private sector on remuneration packages. Adam Petrie, director of communications and marketing, at Shooting Star Chase believes that's changing, however. "The gap between commercial and charity salaries is closing and candidates need to know this," he says.

In fact, he believes there are more career development opportunities in small charities. By virtue of them being so "lean", employees get a lot of responsibility across different areas of the organisation - you just need to make sure potential candidates understand the benefits of that. "It's important to shout from the rooftops that a charity will give you the chance to juggle a lot more projects," he says.

Be careful not to assume that project or fixed-term work necessarily deters potential applicants too. Gemma Juma, director of Link Age Southward, a small charity that coordinates volunteers to support the older people in their local community, says that committing to flexible working can help to attract candidates who live in your area.

The big decision

Once candidates have applied, the sifting process begins. Finding the perfect recruit is one of the biggest challenges facing small charity directors: get it right and you could have a brilliant asset, as well as an injection of enthusiasm and excitement into your team. Get it wrong and, even if they leave a few months down the line, you face an expensive recruitment process again.

The job specification is the first hurdle to get right. It's important that you don't write it in isolation, says Jonny Boux. He advises that you share it with at least three to four people in the organisation to help you make sure it hits the mark.

A strong interview panel is also helpful. It can be a good idea to enlist the support of your board when interviewing potential candidates, especially if they have a particular specialism. But this can be tough for some small and medium-sized charity directors who struggle to put together an experienced and diverse interview panel.

If this is the case, you can look both within and outside your charity. Many directors suggest having people from across the organisation on the panel - not just those who are directly involved in the hire. You can also invite a director or operations manager from a similar organisation to support you.

Some charities have been known to [train their service users to interview candidates](#), while others find values-based recruitment - where you hire candidates who fit the values and behaviour of your organisation - particularly helpful. Jonny Boux worked with his team to set their core values which they now test applicants against at interview stage. "Hiring with values is right at the top of the priorities list," he says. "I wouldn't hire anyone who had strong capability but didn't demonstrate the values."

As well as being explicit about values in the application stage, Gemma Juma asks values-based questions at interview. These include:

- "Which of the values do you most strongly identify with?"
- "What would you do if you were offered the job?"
- A reflective question about poor performance and growing from it.

Recruitment is a high-risk decision that can leave small and medium-sized charity directors feeling anxious, worried and isolated. But it is also a brilliant opportunity to find someone who could add a huge amount to your aims and impact - it's just important to learn from each other on how you do that.

Identifying your ideal candidate – worksheet

Many of the charity directors we spoke to admitted that they can sometimes find it difficult to clearly articulate the abilities and characteristics of their target hire.

This can manifest itself in several ways, from the inability to produce accurate and engaging job descriptions, to finding it difficult to compare the relative strengths of candidates, and the development of long-term retention issues.

This resource is specifically designed to help your organisation begin the recruitment process with a clear and shared vision of who you are trying to recruit.

Answers generated from this worksheet can be dropped in as assessment criteria to the following candidate scoring sheet, and can also be used to filter CVs and applications.

You can also use this exercise to reflect on the current state of the organisation and identify areas for improvement and training.

Tips before you get started

- 1.** Avoiding charity buzzwords throughout the process will increase your chances of appealing to people both inside and outside the third sector.
- 2.** Involving all key stakeholders in this process will ensure that nothing gets missed and that all perspectives are incorporated.
- 3.** It is essential not to discriminate on the grounds of gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, or health. Avoid any inappropriate requirements, e.g. “must have x years’ experience” or words such as “dynamic” or “mature”.
- 4.** Reading other organisations’ job specifications can be a useful place to start and will help you better define exactly what you are looking for.
- 5.** If you are hiring to re-fill an existing role, think carefully about your existing staff. Are you looking for a carbon copy, or is this an opportunity to fill a gap?

Competencies

Which specific skills and abilities are needed to perform the role? Think about typical projects they'll be completing to help you come up with requirements. Be clear and realistic in your interpretation of what is 'essential' and what is 'nice to have'. Essentials are normally things that employees can't learn on the job, and need to be able to do 'from day one'.

Essential	Nice to have

Values

Culture fit is vital in achieving a great hire. What are your company's core values that the candidate needs to match? Are some more important than others for this role, and are there any extras that you need to add?

Company values	Role specific values

Qualifications & experience

Think about the essentials (e.g. nursing, accounting or legal qualifications) before being too prescriptive in terms of past experience and qualifications. Many employers make the mistake of trying to second-guess how candidates gain their skills. Also think whether their path may be different depending on the background of the candidate. Is it important they've worked (or volunteered) in your sector before?

Qualifications	Necessary or nice to have

Experience	Is alternative experience acceptable? If so, what would be similarly appropriate?

Organisational structure

How does this role fit within the organisation as a whole? Be realistic in your summary of the opportunity to avoid causing resentment in the future. How will this person affect the structure of the team?

Line manager	
Seniority	
Job title	
Opportunities for promotion	

Other

Are there any other attributes or characteristics essential to the role?

Attributes	How important is this to the role?

Practicalities

And don't forget the basics, as all of these details will be required to create an attractive job advert.

Working hours	
Unsociable hours (evenings and week-ends)	Yes / No
Flexible hours	Yes / No
Full time / Part time	(__ hours/days per week)
Contract type / length	Permanent / Fixed Length (__ months)
Start date	
Salary	£ __k per year / £ __. __ per hour
Other benefits	

Charity interview questions – cheat sheet

The questions below have been recommended by a panel of experienced recruiters and charity directors. They are split into sections that reflect the common parts of an interview and we have included some commentary on key points to help you think carefully about the process.

Remember: no set of interview questions is ever perfect, and you will need to tweak these questions slightly to make sure they match the tone and style of your organisation, but they should be a great starting point.

Introductory questions

These initial questions will give the candidate a chance to “warm up” and start speaking in open terms about themselves.

- Tell us about yourself.
- Why did you leave / are you leaving your last / current job?
- Why do you want this job / what attracted you to this role specifically?

Our panel says: “With this question, you’re looking for a candidate that knows precisely why they’re interested in your organisation. General comments about wanting to move into the sector and/or the location show a lack of specific interest”.

- What are your greatest strengths / weaknesses?
- Why do you think you’re a good fit for the role?

About the organisation

Asking candidates about your organisation gives you the chance to check that they've researched your organisation and know what they're applying for.

- What do you already know about our organisation?
 - From what you know already, what would you change/improve about our organisation?
- Our panel says:** "You're looking for someone who can help you improve and grow: this is an opportunity for your candidate to show they can help."
- Why do you think our organisation is important?

Competency questions

These first questions will specifically relate to the skills and competencies required for the role. It's likely that you'll want to use at least one question per core skill.

- Can you give us a specific example of a time that you demonstrated your ability to [competency]?
- How would previous managers describe your abilities to [competency]?
- What is your greatest achievement related to [competency]?
- How could your skills in [competency] benefit the charity?
- How would you deal with [relevant scenario]?
- Which skills do you think you can offer the organisation that other candidates may not?

Values questions

If they're not publicly available, you should start by sharing your values with the candidate and giving them a short opportunity to think about them.

- Do you think other people would describe you as [value] - and if so, why?
- Which of these values do you identify most strongly with, and why?
- How important do you think these values are to our organisation's success?
- Is there a value that you think is important, that isn't mentioned within ours?
- How do you handle [failure/difficulty/setbacks/change]?

See below

- How do you work best with other people?

These two questions reflect values that all our interviewers mentioned and said were important: cooperation and resilience.

Wrap up

- Is there anything that you would have liked to show us today that you haven't been able to so far?
- What do you think our concerns might be about hiring you?
- What are your goals for the future?
- What would you like to ask us?

Our panel says: "It's really important that recruitment is a two-way process, so make sure you give the candidate opportunities to talk to you about their questions and any concerns they have".

Practical questions

In addition, there are a number of practical details that you'll probably want to check off during the interview. They may include information related to:

- Relocation
- Travel
- Working hours
- Flexible working
- Full-time / part-time options
- Working holidays / weekends
- Salary

'Whacky' questions

Here are a few examples of what we mean by this:

- Which magic power would you have?
- If you were a fruit, what kind would you be and why?
- What animal would you be?
- If you could work from anywhere in the world, where would you go?

Opinions vary on whether there is a place for questions like these in an interview process. It is really up to you, but we think you should at least bear two things in mind if you're considering it:

1. Answers that rely heavily on the interpretation of the interview panel are vulnerable to subtle preconceptions and subconscious prejudices.

2. All questions should fairly test the interviewee on a trait that is directly relevant to the role (e.g. their ability to think creatively or analytically).

What next?

- 1.** Make a note of the interview questions you like the most, and see if you can come up with ways to augment or improve them.
- 2.** Ensure you always have your interview questions prepared in advance so everyone on the interview panel knows what to expect.
- 3.** Keep a note of which interview questions work well and provide the most useful answers - and make sure you use them again in the future.

Candidate scoring template

About this template

Some employers will choose to assign a specific question to each of the scoring criteria below, and score the candidate as the interview progresses.

Others may prefer to use the document to reflect on a candidate immediately after the interview has finished.

As all recruitment processes are slightly different, we recommend taking the core elements of this template and tailoring it to create your own.

Scoring

Interviewers should rank the candidate's performance against each given criteria. Numerical rating is as follows:

Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	Average	Above Average	Exceptional
1	2	3	4	5

Weighting

In advance of the interview, members of the panel should agree on how important each of the criteria are.

This will ensure that results can be fairly interpreted after the interviews have taken place.

It is very rare that all criteria are equally important, so you should try to assign each level of importance at least once.

Quite Important	Very Important	Essential
C	B	A

Note: do not include criteria that are less than 'quite important' - this will unnecessarily distract the focus of the interview.

Candidate name

Notes

Competencies

Competencies	Priority	Candidate score

Values

Values	Fit?	Comments

Does this candidate embody the values that are important to your organisation?

Overall

Would you recommend this candidate for the available position?

Strong no	No	Maybe	Yes	Strong yes
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Things to follow up on

Agreed salary

Notice period / available start date