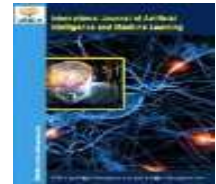




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# Human-AI Collaboration in Talent Acquisition: An Intelligent Systems Approach to Recruitment Transformation in Indian Startups

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### Abstract

The Indian startup ecosystem is incredibly fast-growing and competitive. There is a high demand for skilled humans. As these businesses expand, conventional recruitment processes become ineffective, leading to prolonged hiring cycles and operational inefficiencies. Biases can remain hidden, and this ambiguity can suppress flexibility and productivity. The potential for Human-AI integration in recruitment is largely untested, and while significant, the ethical implications of fully automated recruitment processes remain to be seen. This research explores the transformation of recruitment from a talent acquisition perspective through Human-AI Collaboration, arguing that combining technology with human reasoning leads to more successful recruitment processes. This research employs a qualitative multiple-case study methodology to explore Talent Acquisition (TA) transformations in Indian startups. The study contributes to understanding how Indian startups and scale-ups utilize and adapt to this phenomenon and how it evolves with environmental complexity.

The results illustrate a division of labour in Human-AI Collaboration. AI tools are used in early recruitment stages, such as resume screening, candidate sourcing, and matching candidates to job descriptions, which help manage high application volumes in the Indian market. In contrast, human recruiters handle complex activities such as candidate management, relationship-building, cultural-fit assessment, and maintaining fairness in the recruitment process.

The findings highlight that innovation in startup recruitment should be human-centred, with artificial intelligence complementing rather than replacing human input. Human involvement remains essential for ethical practices, positive candidate experience, and protecting organizational reputation. This study is grounded in the Indian startup context, contributes to knowledge on digital transformation in human resources and offers practical recommendations for responsible AI use in recruitment.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Human-AI Collaboration, Talent Acquisition, Indian Startups, Collaborative Intelligence.

## 1. Introduction

Currently, talent acquisition is undergoing a transformation as AI-based tools become increasingly popular, and human-AI collaboration is becoming the standard approach to creating recruitment frameworks (Black and Van Esch 2020; Malik et al. 2021). For Indian startups, the problem is especially relevant due to their resource shortage, rapid development, and tough competition for talent (Mukul and Saini 2021; Harsch and Festing 2020). Possessing the ability to recruit and attract entrepreneurially minded individuals could prove crucial for the success of any startup.

So far, Indian startups have operated through an informal talent acquisition strategy, which has involved personal connections between entrepreneurs and their recruits, referrals, hiring through LinkedIn, and collaborations with incubators (Mukul and Saini 2021). While it ensured the maintenance of culture, such an approach proved quite restrictive, limiting access to a diverse talent pool. After exceeding the scope of connections made by the founders of a company, this kind of recruiting was bound to fail (Shore et al. 2018; Kaul, 2021). With India developing into a strong digital economy, thanks to Startup India, an advanced venture capital industry, and many IT specialists, the professional recruitment system became a must to compete with multinational companies' HR departments (Black and Van Esch 2020; Priyanka et al. 2023). The use of AI technologies became the remedy. Intelligent applicant tracking systems enabled the scanning of thousands of resumes within minutes; conversational AI supported communication with applicants at the preliminary stage of the interview process; automated video interviews helped assess candidates; and performance prediction contributed to expert analysis of candidates (Nawaz 2019; Rajagopal et al. 2024). However, the complete automation of the hiring process appears not to be very efficient. First, the AI algorithm is likely to reproduce existing biases, as it operates on prior experience (Raghavan et al. 2020;

Pena et al. 2020). Second, because hiring in India is often determined by one's origin, caste, gender, and university (Kulkarni et al. 2011), this is another source of risk. Finally, certain peculiarities of the entrepreneurial mindset, cultural fit, and cognitive flexibility cannot be measured by AI (Harsch and Festing 2020; Malik et al. 2021).

This study seeks to explore how five Indian startups across various industries address this dilemma with Human-AI collaboration in talent acquisition and how such a strategy is conceptualized, operationalized, and managed in practice. Using a multiple-case study approach, the paper explores the specific organisational conditions under which Human-AI collaboration in talent acquisition generates a sustainable competitive advantage for Indian startups. It provides a contextual and empirically grounded contribution to the literature on talent acquisition, which up until now has largely focused on well-established corporations in advanced economies.

### Research Objective

To analyse how the level of AI adoption and quality of human interventions collaboratively influence talent acquisition.

### Literature Review

**Human-AI Collaboration in Startups for Transforming the Role of AI in Talent Acquisition**-Currently, there is an extraordinary change taking place in the TA process in startups with the help of the application of artificial intelligence in conjunction with the need for human-AI collaboration (Jabeen et al., 2025). However, artificial intelligence poses threats in its hiring processes, whereby biased data could be passed from one person to another without the ability to detect any emotional undertones of the candidate (Shehab 2026; Stuss and Fularski 2024). This brings collaborative intelligence into play where both human and AI work together, leading to better, faster, and more ethical hiring (Kim et al. 2024; Wilson and Daugherty 2018).

**Transformation of Talent Acquisition by Human-AI Collaboration in Startups: The Advantages of Using AI** - Rapid and efficient talent acquisition is important for startups, which makes AI solutions such as resume screening, prediction analysis, and chatbots very useful (Madanchian et al., 2023; Pankajakshi & Tanuj Kumar, 2025). However, AI by itself will result in biased recruitment and does not have emotional intelligence (Shehab, 2026). Therefore, what is needed is the application of Collaborative Intelligence, whereby AI conducts administrative screening to reduce the burden on human recruiters, leaving the latter with the task of ensuring fairness and using their judgment to select candidates (Wilson & Daugherty, 2018; Kim et al., 2024; Srilalitha et al., 2025).

**Challenges and Considerations in Implementing AI in the Transformation of Talent Acquisition through Human-AI Collaboration in Startups** - The use of AI for recruiting in startups is faced with algorithmic biases arising from imbalanced training datasets (Köchling and Wehner 2020), opaque black box methods, privacy issues (London 2019; Shehab 2026), and the loss of cultural intuition from humans (Nugraha et al. 2024). The combination of people and AI brings about an ideal balance between efficiency and empathy which calls for HR professionals to acquire digital competencies (Arslan et al. 2022). Human-AI collaboration in recruiting is possible only if HRs within organizations acquire digital skills and adopt transparent governance models that will ensure algorithmic fairness and legal compliance (Jaiswal et al., 2022; Shehab, 2026).

### Methodology

This study employs a qualitative multiple case study design following the frameworks of Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2018), both of which are well-established as appropriate methodological choices for exploratory, process-oriented research in novel or under-studied organisational contexts. The multiple case method proceeds through “replication logic”—treating each case as an independent empirical site that either confirms or disconfirms patterns identified in preceding cases—thereby building theoretical generalisability from within-case analytical depth rather than from statistical sampling (Yin 2018; Siggelkow 2007). This is particularly apt for the present study, given the limited prior empirical literature on human-AI collaboration in Indian startup recruitment and the importance of capturing the process dynamics and institutional specificities that characterise this phenomenon.

Primary data were collected through five semi-structured interviews. Respondents were purposively selected to represent variation across sectors, organisational ages, and depths of AI adoption. Interview protocols were informed by constructs drawn from the literature on AI-enabled recruitment (Black and Van Esch 2020), dynamic talent management capability (Harsch and Festing 2020), collaborative intelligence (Wilson and Daugherty 2018), and HR role transformation (Malik et al. 2021). Table 1 provides a summary profile of each case.

**Table 1: Profile of Startups Selected for Primary Data Collection**

| Case No. | Name of Startups                 | Year of establishment | Role of Respondent | Product/Service/Nature of business                             |
|----------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| CS-1     | Creative Code Production Pvt Ltd | 2021                  | Founder            | Image and video processing company.                            |
| CS-2     | Adcerogen Group                  | 2022                  | India Head         | Conglomerate in the pharmaceutical and energy sectors          |
| CS-3     | Konverse AI                      | 2017                  | Founder & CEO      | Technology / SaaS                                              |
| CS-4     | Work Ryt Tech Pvt Ltd            | 2022                  | CEO and Co-founder | Consulting firm                                                |
| CS-5     | AltDRX Pvt Ltd                   | 2021                  | Co- Founder        | FinTech Start-up, Investment Banking, Real Estate & Technology |

## Case Studies

### CS-1: Creative Code Production Pvt. Ltd.

Creative Code is an innovation startup that combines the realms of technology and creativity, requiring both skill sets, which traditional platforms lack. The founder of Creative Code used artificial intelligence for monitoring purposes to bring together freelancers, bootcamp students, and open-source programmers who were not being considered by the algorithms, actively expanding the recruitment funnel (Black and Van Esch 2020). All forms of evaluation, including portfolio assessment, cultural compatibility, and testing, are performed only by humans.

### CS-2: Adcerogen Group — Pharmaceutical & Energy Conglomerate

Adcerogen went through three phases for using AI technology: excitement about automation, realization of gender discrimination in algorithms, and ultimately guided automation. The breakthrough at Adcerogen is the formation of the Human Accountability Committee (HAC) composed of HR professionals and the diversity officer, which will evaluate and, if needed, disapprove of any automated shortlists, representing the human-in-the-loop approach to recruiting.

### CS-3: Konverse AI— SaaS / Conversational Commerce

The Konverse AI case study shows how an Indian startup falls into a classic resource trap – high demand for talent combined with a lack of brand awareness or sufficient compensation to attract people. In such a scenario, the first sign of AI credentialism became evident with the use of its freemium ATS, which favoured elite institution graduates compared to self-taught developers who were more productive. The founder reacted pragmatically by using AI outputs as a kind of initial filtering mechanism and then personally reviewing all mid-percentile applications.

### CS-4: Work Ryt Tech Pvt. Ltd. — AI for Retail & Consulting

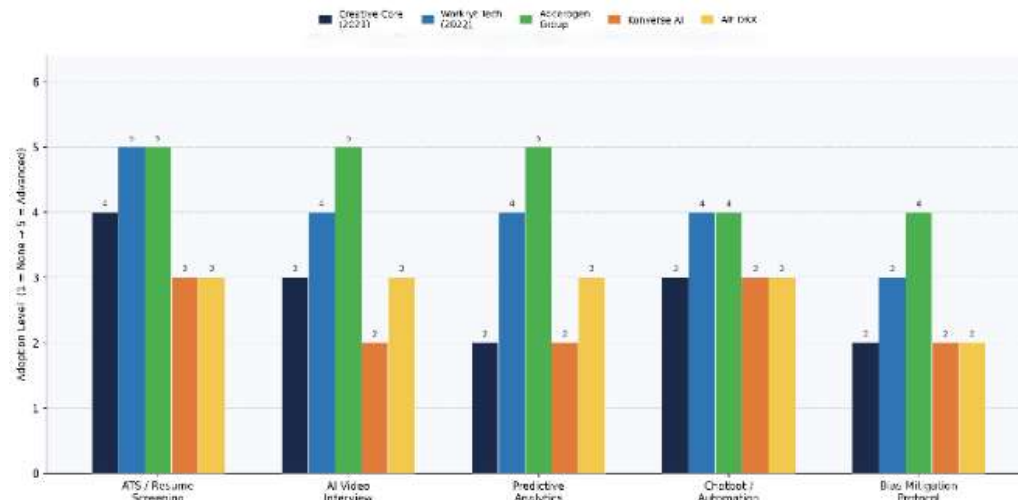
Work Ryt is an example of an AI solutions provider that also uses AI technology to streamline the recruitment process. Its co-founder provided a candid view on what happens behind the scenes of commercial recruitment platforms that rely heavily on AI algorithms. In contrast to those companies, Work Ryt uses AI not to assess but to provide candidates with a smooth and responsive user experience to become brand differentiators. The final decision on hiring remains with the founders.

### CS-5: AltDRX Pvt. Ltd.— FinTech, Investment Banking & Real Estate

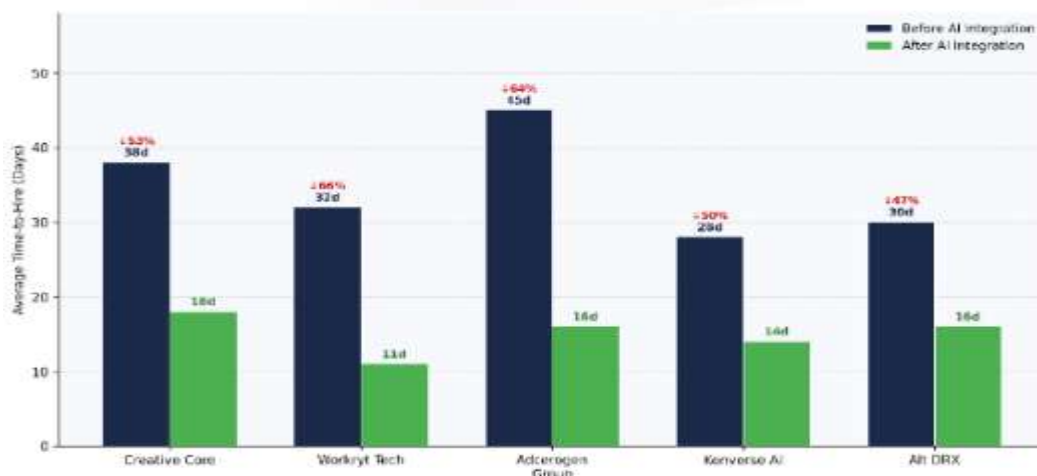
In contrast to the previous case studies, AltDRX provides an example of very little usage of AI in recruitment. The decision to mandate AI use was made without involving HR staff, resulting in professional resistance and less effective shortlists. The need for fintech companies to hire people capable of thinking quantitatively and relationally, as well as being familiar with regulations, demonstrates the limitations of AI tools. The case directly affirms Malik et al.'s (2021) finding that Human-AI collaboration in HR succeeds only when practitioners are positioned as co-designers rather than passive implementers.

## Comparative Analysis

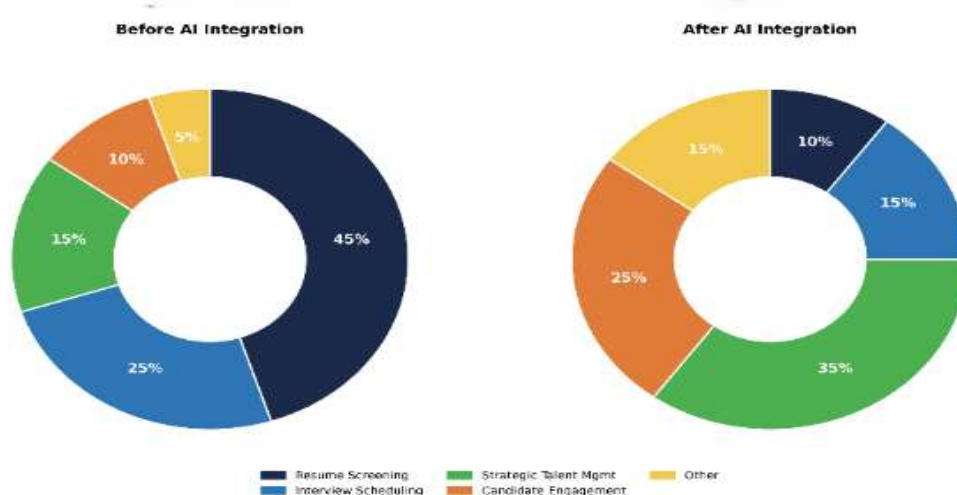
Cross-case comparison, done by following the replication approach advocated by Yin (2018), demonstrates noteworthy similarities but also interesting differences in the five cases. The comparative analysis proceeds based on four crucial dimensions: level of maturity in adopting AI, type of human-AI partnership, bias and measures against it, and change in HR function direction



**Figure 1: AI Tool Adoption Levels Across Interviewed Startups (1=None, 5=Advanced)**



**Figure 2: Average Time-to-Hire Before and After AI Integration (Days)**



**Figure 3: HR Team Time Allocation — Before vs. After AI Integration (Composite Across Cases)**

**Table 2: Cross-Case Comparative Analysis Matrix**

| Dimension                          | CS-1<br>Creative<br>Code          | CS-2<br>Adcerogen          | CS-3<br>Konverse<br>AI        | CS-4 Workkryt                  | CS-5 Alt DRX                              |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Sector                             | Creative<br>Tech                  | Conglomerate               | B2B SaaS                      | AI – Retail                    | Tech-Adjacent                             |
| AI Maturity<br>(1–5)               | 3                                 | 5                          | 2                             | 3                              | 3                                         |
| Primary AI<br>Tools                | ATS + NLP                         | ATS + Video +<br>Analytics | Freemium<br>ATS               | ATS + Chatbot                  | AI Video<br>Interview                     |
| Bias<br>Incident                   | Yes<br>(geographic)               | Yes (gender)               | Yes<br>(credential)           | No (pre-empted)                | Not Clear                                 |
| Mitigation<br>Strategy             | Human<br>portfolio<br>review      | HAC<br>Committee           | Founder<br>manual<br>override | AI excluded from<br>evaluation | Founder/Co-<br>founder manual<br>override |
| Human-in-<br>Loop                  | Stage 2<br>onward                 | All stages<br>(HAC)        | Manual<br>override            | All eval. Stages               | Absent/informal                           |
| Time-to-<br>Hire<br>Reduction      | ~53%                              | ~64%                       | ~50%                          | ~57%                           | ~47%                                      |
| HR Role<br>Shift                   | Admin →<br>Creative<br>evaluation | Screening →<br>Strategic   | Referral →<br>Structured      | Admin →<br>Brand/Experience    | Deskilled (top-<br>down)                  |
| Cultural<br>Fit:<br>Human-<br>led? | Yes (always)                      | Yes (always)               | Yes<br>(always)               | Yes (always)                   | Yes (always)                              |
| Candidate<br>Experience<br>AI      | Low                               | High                       | Low                           | High                           | Low                                       |
| Overall<br>Model                   | Creative<br>Gating                | Governed<br>Automation     | Founder<br>Override           | Experience-<br>Driven          | Imposed<br>Automation                     |

All five cases converge in their appreciation of the role of AI in streamlining operations such as speeding up hiring processes, reducing administrative workload, and handling applicant flow in the talent acquisition process. None of the studied cases employed the AI system as a tool for candidate evaluation. Also, none of the cases allowed candidates to be hired through AI alone without human supervision. Allowing for the marked diversity in the organisations' settings, sectors, sizes, and levels of digitalisation, such a convergence lends strong inductive credibility to the "guided automation" model as the normative standard of human-AI cooperation in startup recruiting in India.

The five startups in question show a definite efficiency-governance trade-off as depicted in Table 2 and Figures 1,2 and 3. In Figure 1, Adcerogen is rated 5 and shows the highest AI maturity. Adcerogen benefits from a 64% time-to-hire reduction (Figure 3) due to its Human Accountability Committee. Workkryt Tech is not far behind, showing approximately 57% reduction with a low level of technology adoption.

Creative Core and Konverse AI have introduced a moderate level of adoption, and both show reductions of 53% and 50%, respectively, because of founder oversight. Alt DRX, with a low level of adoption, shows a time-to-hire reduction of 47%. This supports the finding from Table 2, which indicates that the level of governance (or oversight) is more paramount to recruitment outcomes than technology intensity (or AI)

## Findings and Discussion

The results of research in all the companies show without any shadow of doubt that human involvement alongside the use of artificial intelligence in talent acquisition is necessary for success in this endeavour rather than relying solely on AI to perform the job. As depicted in Figure 1 below, the level of adoption of artificial intelligence varies between companies with the highest being Adcerogen at level 5 while the least

is Konverse AI at level 2 and others are moderately involved (Level 3). Further, according to Malik et al. (2021), effective governance plays a pivotal role in the success of the AI implementation and not adoption itself.

The figures show that AI adoption significantly lowered the time taken for hiring in all the companies, but with different magnitudes, with 57 per cent for Workkryt and 47 per cent for Alt DRX. As confirmed in this case, the adoption of AI led to a great increase in efficiency in terms of saving time (Black and Van Esch 2020; Nawaz 2019). On the contrary, in Alt DRX, where the decrease is the least, despite adopting the AI technology, it shows that how the task is done plays a critical role in its success (Harsch and Festing 2020). Figure 3 clearly shows how, post-adoption of the technology, there was a remarkable shift in HR time allocations from administrative screening activities to talent management, as predicted. According to Table 2, the bias mitigation measures implemented in companies such as Adcerogen have been very instrumental in enhancing success, while Alt DRX performed poorly due to a lack of governance (Raghavan et al. 2020; Wilson and Daugherty 2018).

## Conclusion

The current multiple case study investigated five different Indian startups that include creative technology, pharmaceutical and energy conglomerate, software as a service (SaaS), an AI consultant for retail clients, and fintech firms and how Human-AI collaboration is used by them to transform their hiring process. It was found that the use of AI has already brought significant benefits to operational efficiency in each case, with the average time to hire employees reduced by 47% to 64%. All respondents agree that the use of AI needs to be complemented by human supervision to ensure proper cultural fit and relational assessment, which cannot be done otherwise. Moreover, it should be mentioned that Human-AI collaboration will be efficient only depending on the right governance, empowerment of practitioners, and process-related decisions rather than on the tool itself.

From a practical perspective, the current study implies that the main investment needed for using AI in talent acquisition will have to be organizational rather than technological. It means that the necessary thing to do is to invest in the professional development of HR practitioners and provide them with skills to critically evaluate AI-based algorithms, correct them if necessary, and make unbiased hiring decisions. For the researchers, the current study provides some ways for future research. First, it is necessary to investigate how the guided automation model changes at different scales. Second, a comparative analysis of different bias mitigation architectures depending on governance type should be conducted. Finally, the candidates' experience dimension should be analyzed. India is an innovative and AI-ready startup ecosystem that provides a good ground for such studies.

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