


Passive Talent Outreach:

The Anatomy of a Great Cold Recruiting Email





An ideal average
response rate
to cold outreach
falls somewhere between
30% & 50%

6 Essential Elements of a Cold Outreach Email

If you're in the business of sourcing, you're probably also in the business of tracking response rates. According to Senior Recruiter Ariana Moon at Greenhouse, **an ideal average response rate falls somewhere between 30% and 50%**. At Gem, our users fall into that optimal range, with an average reply rate of 35% for 3- and 4-stage sequences. This is an achievement; but we're always trying to figure out how to help our users see even better numbers. With around 80% of the workforce considered "passive" talent, it's no small feat to prompt engagement—let alone action—in talent that's content enough just where they are. But the right cold recruiting template, along with a few best practices, might help create that spark with talent who didn't think they were looking—and you'll see that reflected in your response rates.

On the following pages we discuss the six essential elements of a great cold outreach email for recruiting. (We'll focus on that first email here; your follow-ups will demand different strategies.) As you read, keep in mind that we use the word "template" loosely. You're reaching out to inspire a response and initiate a relationship; and you know your target candidate—what they want to hear, and how they want to hear it—better than we do. So think of your outreach as an expression of curiosity and excitement at the possibilities—with *some* structure in place—rather than a formal letter.



The Subject Line

To ensure that your subject line shows on mobile screens, keep it to fewer than

45 characters

You Won't See a Response From a Prospect Unless They First Open Your Email...

And you'll only see an open if you offer them a good reason to do so. Given your outreach is competing with the 120 other emails your recipient will receive that day, we recommend your subject line do at least one of the following to stand out:

Flatter the recipient. Studies have shown that even overtly manipulative flattery is remarkably effective. That's because compliments trigger reward centers in the brain. Subject lines that appeal to the ego ("Are you our next top-tier data scientist?") will leave recipients wanting more of the resulting "mini-high," prompting them to click in.

Personalize. This often goes hand-in-hand with flattery. Showing you did your research as early as the subject line—by mentioning a mutual interest or a recent accomplishment ("Loved your recent Medium article!")—shows them they're important enough to have done the work for. But even mentioning prospects' names ("Liz, are you our next VP of Sales?") or locations can be enough to get them to click.

Spark their curiosity. Curiosity releases dopamine, which is associated with motivation—in this case, the motivation to clarify what is ambiguous, uncertain, or partial ("How we do things differently at [company]"). Remember, you're reaching out to top problem-solvers who already possess an instinct for inquiry. So leverage that instinct.

Mention a referral or shared connection. If you have a connection, refer to it as soon as possible. It's an instant endorsement; it piques curiosity (see above); it gives you a jumping-off point for conversation; and it minimizes the sense of risk associated with a career change.

Play with, and test, other strategies as well (humor, questions, appealing to values). Just notice we said nothing about length. That's because our data shows there's no real correlation between subject line length and open rates.

Of course, mobile clients account for somewhere between 24% and 77% of email opens; so ensure your subject line is short enough that prospects see the whole of it on their phone screens (fewer than 45 characters).

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Paragraph 1*

*And by “paragraph,” we mean just a few sentences!

Warm up your cold email

by explaining why you reached out specifically to them about this role

Tell Them How You Found Them... and Prove You Did Your Homework

Your outreach strategy begins long before you sit down to write that email. It begins with research. That means checking out social profiles on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. It means discovering work samples online—through Dribbble if they’re designers, Medium or personal blogs if they’re writers, GitHub if they’re engineers, and so on. Most prospective candidates leave digital footprints in multiple places. Find them.

What’s their past and current work experience? What projects have they undertaken, and what roles have they played in those projects? What skills do they possess? What awards have they won? What do they do outside of work (charitable work, hobbies, side projects)? What do their career goals—and life goals—appear to be?

With this information in hand, use your opening paragraph to do two simple things: 1. Introduce yourself and tell them how you found them; and 2. Explain why you’re sending *them* an email—of all the people you could have reached out to. This is where your “cold” email gets warmer.

With automation, basic personalization (name, location, day of the week, job title, company) can occur at scale and in bulk. At Gem, we recommend using a token at the end of your first paragraph to further customize initial outreach—especially for harder-to-fill roles. After all, the further your outreach strays from the generic, the more likely you are to drive engagement.

Personalization

I’ve just spent the last hour on your GitHub and LinkedIn profiles, and called our CTO Erika over to show her the most recent debugging feature you published on GitHub. Needless to say, Erika’s thrilled: We’re actually working on a similar project—and in Haskell, which it looks like you’re programming in!



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Paragraph 2

According to LinkedIn

Prospects most want to hear these things about your open role:

- Career trajectory
- Expectations, responsibilities, and workload
- What “a day in the life” looks like

Tell Them Who Your Company Is, What It’s Doing, and What Role You’re Looking to Fill

Believe it or not, this will be your shortest paragraph. If the prospect is familiar with your organization, a company description will be superfluous. If they *aren’t*, a detailed explanation will only sound like a variation of all the other company descriptions flooding their inbox. As in marketing, a good rule of thumb is to use “you” more often than “I” or “we”: This email is about *them*, after all. Tell them your company name and, if you’re not well-known, what industry you’re in. The more important part is how the open role supports the company’s mission and contributes to the company as a whole. Identify 2-3 details that would appeal to their interests. (You know what would appeal; you’ve done your research.) Use strong verbs: “build,” “lead,” “define,” “reinvent.” Mention impact. Leave the rest for them to research on their own... or to write you back and ask about.

Company & Role

Zen/zo is 3 years old; we just closed our Series B (\$18 million); and we’ve seen 100% YOY growth so far. We’re undergoing an early rebrand, and we’re looking for a Brand Marketing Manager who’d be willing to take the reins and move us in a new direction. For the next few years, we’re focusing our business strategy on growing our customer base, particularly through events and paid campaigns. We’ve got some ambitious goals and a fantastic team ready to chase them.



4

Paragraph 3

Examples of EVP content include:

- A video of your female VP of sales describing what it's like to work on such a gender-equitable team
- Third-party content (i.e. a recent article about your series B funding or your newest product feature)
- A blog post by an employee describing their career trajectory at your company

Mention a Facet (or Two) of your Employee Value Proposition (EVP)

The **Employee Value Proposition (EVP)** is the unique set of benefits employees receive in return for the experience, skills, and other contributions they bring to your company. It's what makes working for you worth their time and effort. But prospects need to be convinced you're worth their time long before they sign that offer letter. Why would they respond to you *now*? What makes you different than their current employer from the perspective of employee experience?

Whether it's a flexible work schedule, gym memberships, tuition benefits, intellectual stimulation, personal development opportunities, working with the best talent in your field, or company culture, you probably offer quite a few things that collectively make up your EVP. Don't list them *all* here. Again, you've done your homework: mention the elements that would be most compelling for them. If you're reaching out to multiple people for the same role, you might stress different elements for each person.

Ultimately, this paragraph will be answering the question—from the prospect's point of view—What's in it for me? Asking yourself “so *what?*” at the end of every sentence will help you know what to cut and what to keep. If the benefit isn't self-evident, make it so. If you discover there isn't one, let that sentence go.

EVP

What it's like to work on the eng team:

- No product managers. You'll own and drive the product from start to finish.
- Tons of growth opportunity as we expand from a team of 6 to 20+ by the end of the year.
- Write meaningful code that supports our users in experiencing financial freedom.
- Flexible environment (most of our team works from home at least once a week).



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The Call to Action

Getting prospects on the phone is the goal;

then you can have the real dialogue about their career aspirations

The Most Compelling Outreach in the World Won't Be Complete Without a Call to Action

After all, if your prospect doesn't know what to do next, they're less likely to take *any* action... even if they're interested.

Your goal with this initial outreach should be to get prospective candidates on the phone so you can have the real dialogue there. (If you're asking them to send on a resume or apply for your job online, we'd recommend a different call to action.) Tell them you want to have a conversation about what they'd want in their next opportunity rather than pitch them a job. Tell them you want to find out if your position is truly aligned with their aspirations. Asking if they're open to hearing more about the role is a low-commitment question. Then suggest the conversation—whether over the phone, over coffee, at the office, etc.

That said, remember the likelihood that your recipient will be reading your email on their phone. Going into their calendar and pitching you some times may be more than they're willing to do. One strategy worth experimenting with is to tell them when you plan to call them ("I'll try catching you by phone this Thursday at 1:30"), and ask them to reply only if there's a time that's better for them. The less energy they have to expend, the better.

CTA

I'd love to tell you about our plan to open up a new market this year and about how we see experimentation and autonomy as central to a world-class sales team. If that sounds interesting to you, feel free to schedule a 30-minute intro call with someone on our TA team [here](#). And if we discover it's a ring you'd like to throw your hat into, I'd love to grab a coffee with you.



6

The Signature

Aim for a 1-minute-or-less read time

It helps to include bullet points and break up the messaging into digestible paragraphs

Your Signature Should Hold Every Bit of Information Your Prospective Candidate Needs to Get In Touch With You, to Learn More About the Company, and to Get Details On the Position

Include your name and job title, and link to your LinkedIn profile so recipients can verify your humanity. Include your pronouns (she/her, they/them, etc.) as a way of affirming your allyship and showing that your company values diversity. Include the name of your organization and link to your About page or Careers page. If you've piqued their interest at all, your signature should make it easy for them to find out more.

Signature

I look forward to talking to you,

[Chris Haskins](#)

Recruiting Manager, [XYZ Financial](#)

(he/him/his)

Keep in mind that this is your initial outreach (ideally you'll have up to three follow-ups); so it will contain more information than the other emails in your sequence. Still, it's possible to include all these elements—how you found them, why you want them, what the role is, and what your company can offer them in return for their skills—in a message that takes less than a minute to read. Remember, the point is to generate enough curiosity to get them to respond. Anything more than that is probably too much.



Examples of Great Email Outreach

Remember, we're using the word "template" loosely here. Though the following cold outreach examples employ different strategies, they all have two things in common:

1

They make the recipient feel unique and uniquely spoken to.

2

They include **"motivating factors"**—the elements likely to prompt a response.

→ If you're using Gem for outreach

you can use analytics to determine your strongest subject lines and message content. This includes tracking which links are getting clicks—and which clicks prompt replies—to get a sense of what your most compelling content is.

→ Motivating factors

might range from employee value propositions, to referrals and mutual acquaintances, to messages directly from hiring managers or the CEO.

Flattery

Subject: Looking for our next Haskell **Expert in Chicago**

Hi, Javier!

My name is Chris and I'm working alongside our CTO, Erika, at XYZ Financial to find some of the best back-end engineers to grow our current team. **I've just spent the last hour on your GitHub and LinkedIn profiles, and called Erika over to show her the most recent debugging feature you published on GitHub. Needless to say, Erika's thrilled: We're actually working on a similar project—and in Haskell, which it looks like you're currently programming in!**

Personalization

XYZ Financial is an account aggregation technology looking to make big waves in fintech. Last year we opened our second engineering hub in Chicago, raised \$47M in funding, and we're on track to double in size by next year. Our next few hires will be critical, as they'll shape the engineering culture of our new office.

What it's like to work on the eng team:

- No product managers. You'll own and drive the product from start to finish.
- Tons of growth opportunity as we expand from a team of 6 to 20+ by the end of the year.
- Write meaningful code that supports our users in experiencing financial freedom.
- Flexible environment (most of our team works from home at least once a week).
- Tackle technical challenges across internal tooling, guest experience, authentication, and data.
- Work on a collaborative team of top developers who are forward-thinking, creative, and product-focused.

EVP

Do you have time to jump on a call this week? I'd love to hear more about your background, your current projects, and your career aspirations... and of course, tell you more about our company.

Call to Action

I look forward to talking to you,

Signature

Chris Haskins
Recruiting Manager, XYZ Financial
(he/him/his)

Curiosity Sparking

Subject: What's Your Next Career Move, Brian?

Hi there Brian,

Personalization

My name is Kelly Arnone and I'm the CEO at X App. I discovered your profile on LinkedIn this week while looking for a Sales Ops Manager for our fast-growing sales team. It led me to both your articles on sales team leadership on Medium. I'm really impressed by the thought and consideration you've put into running your teams.

Flattery

Curiosity Sparking

If you're getting a lot of emails about career opportunities these days—and you probably are—I imagine you're not hearing much from CEOs directly. But I attribute the success we've seen so far at X App in part to my dedication to finding the best talent, putting them in the same room, and watching them thrive. That's why I commit so much of my own personal time to sourcing and outreach.

EVP

I'd love to tell you about our plan to open up a new market this year and about how we see experimentation and autonomy as central to a world-class sales team. If that sounds interesting to you, feel free to schedule a 30-minute intro call with someone on our TA team [here](#). And if we discover it's a ring you'd like to throw your hat into, I'd love to grab a coffee with you.

Call to Action

Signature

I look forward to getting to talk to you soon, Brian,

[Kelly Arnone](#)
CEO, X App

With Gem, sourcers can send on behalf of hiring managers and executives without having to get them directly involved. SOBO tends to increase reply rates: after all, talent is more likely to engage when they think they're speaking directly with a company's CEO.

Flattery

Subject: Great Talk at Last Month's Marketing Summit

Hi there Jasmin!,

Personalization

This is Nicole Waller writing; we met briefly at the Bay Area Marketing Summit a few weeks back. I'm still thinking about the talk you gave about building humor into your company brand—in fact, once the video went live I shared it with our marketing team, who loved it. Our company, Zen/zo, is undergoing an early rebrand right now; and we're looking for a Brand Marketing Manager who'd be willing to take the reins and move us in a new direction. Ultimately, we're looking to implement a lot of what you spoke about when it comes to brand personality in our new strategy. **Needless to say, I can't think of a better person to do it!**

Flattery

Zen/zo is 3 years old; we just closed our Series B (\$18 million); and we've seen 100% YOY growth so far. We've also got a pretty impressive portfolio of customers, including Airbnb, Zillow, Twilio, and Pinterest. For the next few years, we're focusing our business strategy almost entirely on growing our customer base, particularly through events and paid campaigns. We've got some ambitious goals and a fantastic team ready to chase them.

Here are a few more links about our company and what we're up to:

- [A day in the life of a Zen/zo marketer](#)
- [Marketing values and principles](#) (We're working on clarifying these values for ourselves; so feel free to ask questions. My personal favorite is "discerning experimentation")
- [A blog post by our Director of Marketing, Sara, about diversity at Zen/zo](#)
- [Our matching gifts page](#) (We match employee donations to local nonprofits and keep a public running tab on where that money has gone)

EVP

I'd love to hear more about your approach to branding and what your career goals are. **I'll save us some back-and-forth and give you a call at 12:30 this Thursday—but if that time doesn't work for you, send me another that works, and I'll be sure to reach out.**

Call to Action

Signature

[Nicole Waller](#) (pronouns: she/her)
Recruiter, [Zen/zo](#)

Gem is an all-in-one recruiting platform that integrates with LinkedIn, email, and your Applicant Tracking System (ATS). We enable world-class recruiting teams to find, engage, and nurture top talent. With Gem, recruiting teams can manage candidate pipeline with predictability.

To learn more and see a demo, visit
gem.com