



Email outreach for recruiters: 2026 benchmarks and best practices

Insights from 15M emails to
improve your sourcing



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Executive summary

This report analyzes 6.2 million email sequences and 15.5 million messages sent through Gem in 2025, providing data-driven benchmarks and best practices for recruiting outreach.

Key findings:

Sequence length: 4 is the magic number

The optimal sequence length is 3–4 emails, with diminishing returns beyond that.

Wednesday afternoons win for open rates.

Wednesday at 3 pm (candidate local time) yields the highest open rates at 65.8%. The 9 am–4 pm window is consistently strong.

Personalize subject lines with tokens:

3–5 word subject lines with company + first_name + title tokens achieve the highest open rate at 71.7%, 10.4% higher than no tokens.

Follow-ups move the needle.

Sequences that reach stage 3 see open rates climb to 74.9%, reply rates more than double to 16.3%, and interested rates hit 9.2% — up from 5.6%.

Send outreach on behalf of hiring managers:

Sequences that introduce SOBO at Stage 2 or later see significantly higher open and reply rates.

Tailor email length to company size.

Short emails work best for large, well-known enterprises (51–100 words, 23.7% reply rate), but SMBs need longer messages to maximize response rates.



Part 1: How many emails to send and when to send them



Your first email does the heavy lifting. Make it count.

Across all 6.2 million sequences analyzed in 2025, we observed the following overall engagement rates:

Each metric represents a step in the engagement funnel: open rate (did the candidate open the email?), reply rate (did the candidate reply?), and interested rate (of those who replied, how many expressed genuine interest?).

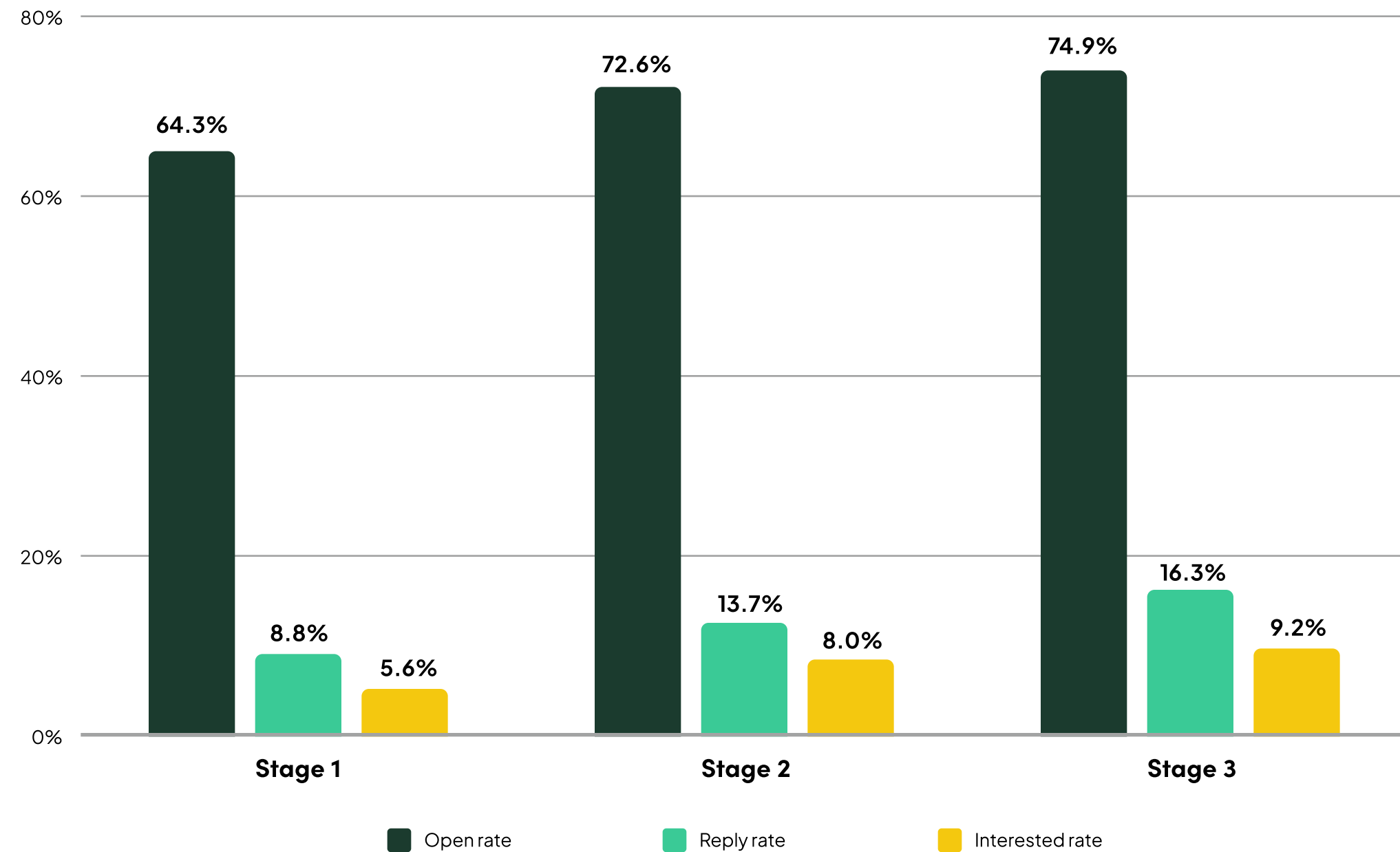
Note: The interest rate is calculated as the percentage of sequences that received a reply marked "interested" by the recruiter out of the total sequences sent.

Overall benchmarks:

Metric	2025	2024	Change
Open rate	75.3%	76.6%	-1.3%
Reply rate	16.9%	22.6%	-5.7%
Interested rate	9.4%	12.1%	-2.7%

Cumulative engagement by stage in 2025:

Metric	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Open rate	64.3%	72.6%	74.9%
Reply rate	8.8%	13.7%	16.3%
Interested rate	5.6%	8.0%	9.2%



Persistence pays off – open, reply, and interested rates all climb with each follow-up, so don't let your sequence stop at stage 1.

Send emails on Wednesday at 3 pm for the best shot at an open.

Timing matters. We analyzed when candidates are most likely to open emails by converting all send times to the candidate's local timezone. The results show clear patterns.

Best day and hour:

Best day: Wednesday (avg. 63.1% open rate) vs. 62.1% average

Best hour: 3 pm local time (avg. 65% open rate)

Strong window: 9 am–4 pm consistently performs well (65.7–65.8%)

Quick opens: 54% of opens happen within the first hour

Schedule your first email for Wednesday at 3 pm in the candidate's local timezone. If Wednesday doesn't work, Tuesday and Thursday are nearly as effective. Avoid weekends unless targeting specific roles that show weekend engagement patterns.



Send tech outreach mid-week during business hours (Tuesday-Wednesday, 9 am-4 pm). Target non-tech candidates on Friday afternoon or Sunday morning when they have time to browse.

Tech roles include engineering, data science, product management, and design. Everything else falls under non-tech.

Late-night emails (10pm-midnight) get buried by morning inbox overload. Early weekday mornings (6-7 am) catch candidates before they're ready to engage with outreach.

Think of these as your performance guardrails. The "best" thresholds (68.5% for tech, 69% for non-tech) represent the open rates you should target when timing your outreach. The "worst" thresholds (61.7% for tech, 59.2% for non-tech) are your red flags. If you're consistently hitting these numbers, your timing is off. We calculated these by looking at the top and bottom 10-day-hour combinations with enough volume to be statistically meaningful, so you're seeing real patterns.



Tech roles: Best and worst send times

	Average open rates	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Best send times	69%+	9am 12pm 1pm 2pm 3pm	9am 10am 1pm 2pm 3pm	9am 10am 12pm 1pm 2pm 3pm 4pm	9am 1pm 4pm	9am 2pm	9am	-
Worst send times	<62%	7am 11pm	11pm	10pm 11pm	10pm	6pm 7pm 8pm 9pm 10pm 11pm	-	-



Non-tech roles: Best and worst send times

	Average open rates	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Best send times	69%+	9am 2pm 3pm 4pm	9am 11am 1pm 2pm 3pm	9am 10am 11am 12pm 3pm 4pm 5pm	9am 4pm	2pm	-	11am
Worst send times	<59%	-	-	7am	6am 11pm	6pm 7pm 8pm 9pm 10pm	4pm 6pm	-



Space follow-ups 4–5 days apart. Don't wait too long to follow up.

Successful sequences in 2025 are moving faster than ever – the median gap between emails dropped from 6 days to just 4–5, suggesting candidates respond better to timely, consistent outreach.

Email spacing:

Email 1 → 2: Wait 4 days (median)

Email 2 → 3: Wait 5 days (median)

Note: These are medians from successful sequences. The trend is toward faster follow-ups compared to 2024 (previously 6 days for both intervals).



Part 2: What to say in your subject lines



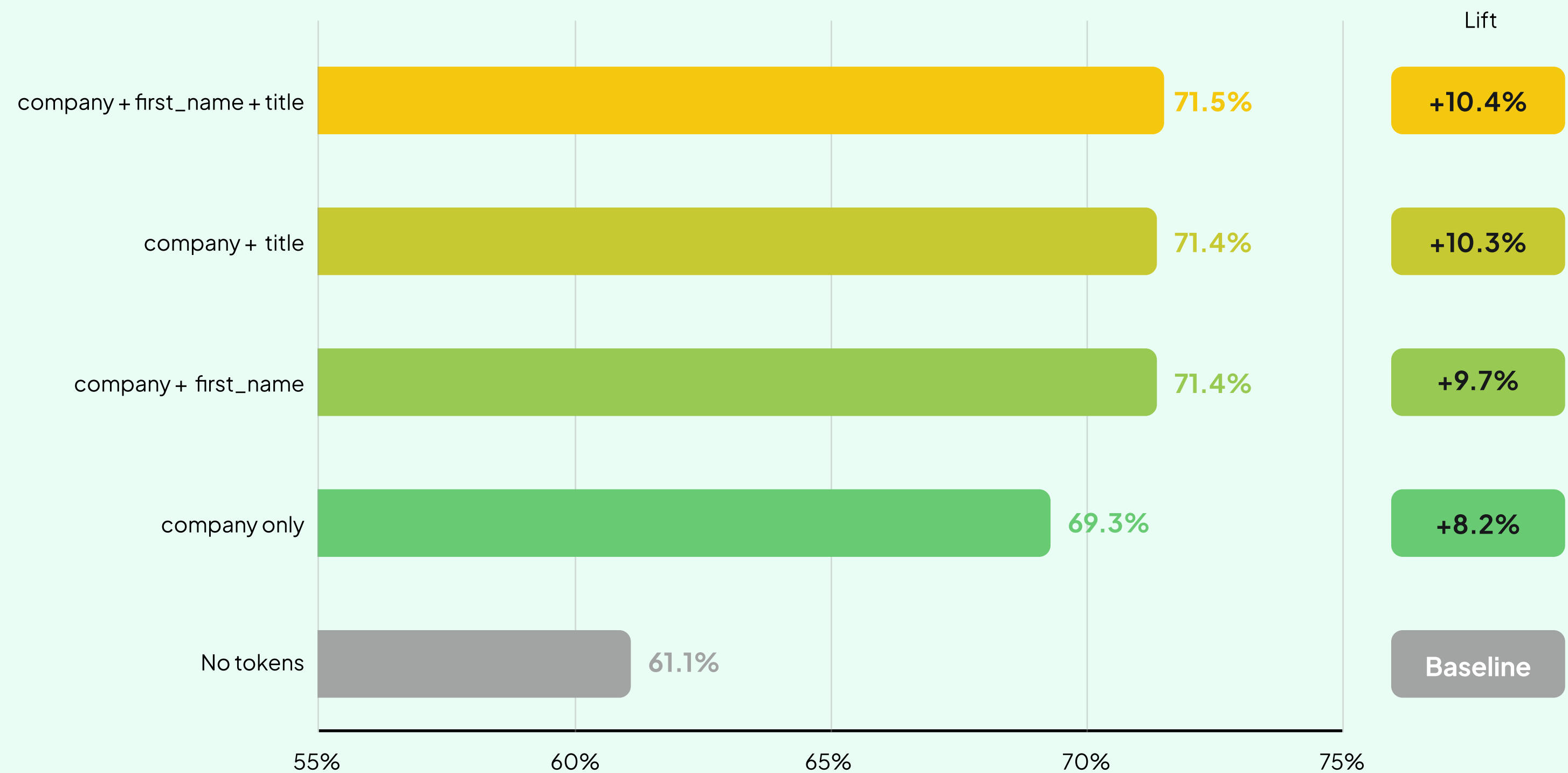
Personalize subject lines with name, company, and title to boost open rates

Subject lines are your first impression. Our analysis of millions of subject lines reveals what works and what doesn't.

Key insight: Using all three tokens together (company + first_name + title) delivers a 10.4 percentage point lift over no personalization. This is one of the highest-impact optimizations you can make.

Using tokens in subject lines

Personalization tokens (like {company}, {first_name}, {title}) significantly improve open rates. The best combination uses all three tokens together.

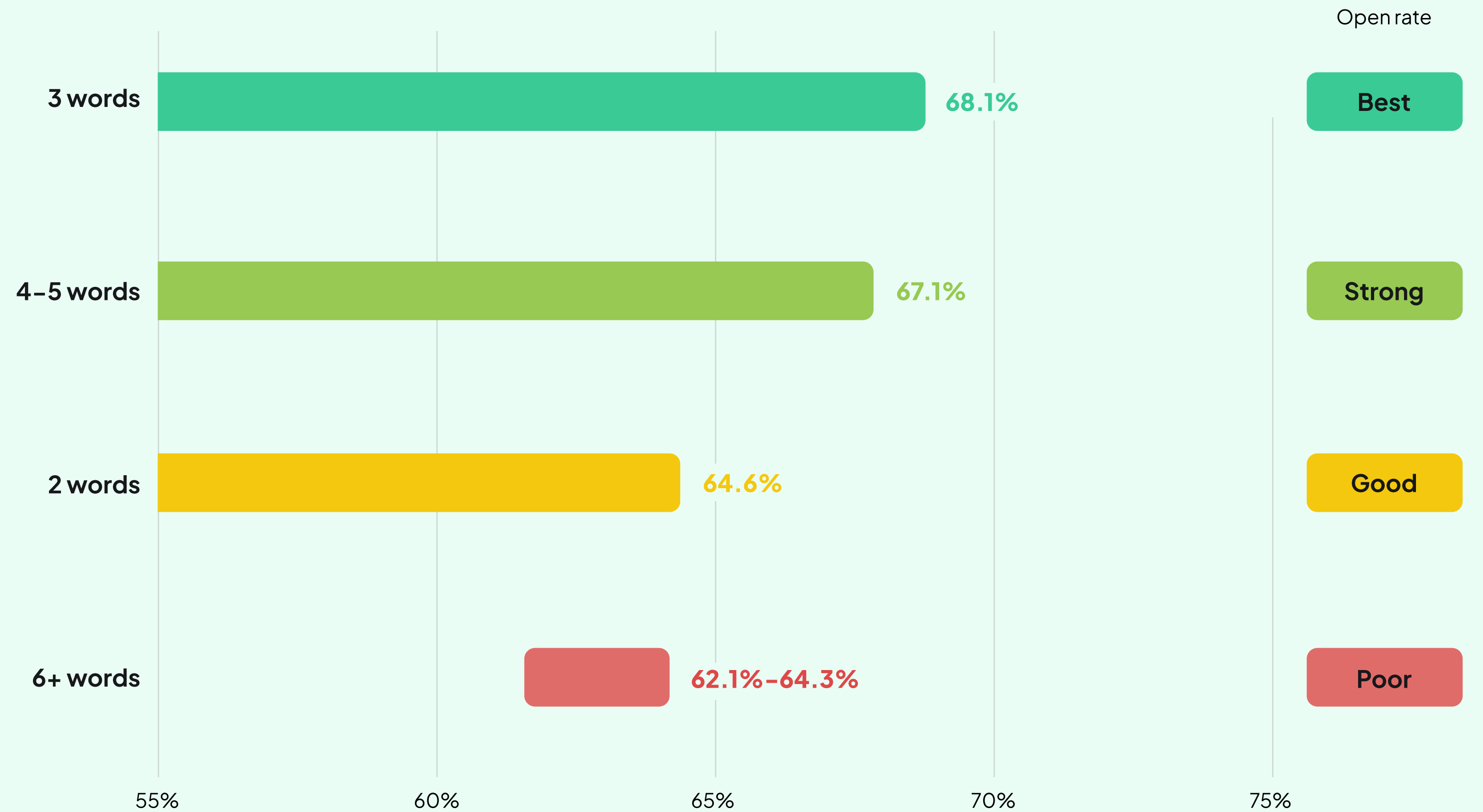




Keeping subject lines short

Shorter is better. The optimal subject line length is just 2 words, achieving a 71.7% open rate.

Aim for 2-5 words in your subject line. Examples: "{first_name} @ {company}", "Quick question, {first_name}", "{company} {title} opportunity"





Best performing subject lines: Real examples

Personalization matters, but not all personalization works equally. These examples show how the top-performing token combinations translate into actual subject lines you can use.

On this page you see the top-performing subject lines from Gem customers in the last year. Some of the noteworthy trends include appealing to the candidate's career growth, asking questions, and highlighting specific aspects of the opportunity (or simply using the word "opportunity" also seems to work well!). Winning subject lines find the right balance between including relevant details while keeping the messaging concise.

Our customers' best-performing subject lines (70+% open rates)

Appeal to the candidate's values:

- Career growth
- Business impact opportunity
- Business trajectory

Ask questions:

- {company} - Your application: Can you chat?

Highlight the opportunity

- {company} - An exciting new {title} opportunity for you!
- {company} {title} role
- {first_name}, grow your {title} career at {company}!
- {first_name}, 10x growth needs a 10x {title}
- head of growth @ {company}
- {first_name}, own the pipeline at {company}
- {title} opportunity at {company}



General approaches to winning subject line strategies

When it comes to crafting your subject line, there are a few tips and tricks you might want to experiment with. Many of these suggestions, like appealing to curiosity and mentioning mutual connections, are proven copywriting tactics that are based on principles of human psychology.

Best practice	Why it works	Example
Appeal to the candidate's values	Today's candidates crave connection and purpose	"Elevating talent acquisition together"
Be verb-forward	You're helping candidates visualize what success will look like in the role	"Play a pivotal & impactful role as our machine learning expert"
Ask questions	You're placing recipients in an instant dialogue with your email	"Want to join the next unicorn?"
Mention mutual connections	Having a common connection minimizes risk	"{name} recommended I reach out to you"
Indulge in a little flattery	Compliments leave the candidate wanting more	"Come be {company's} expert marketer"



Part 3: How to leverage your team with SOBO



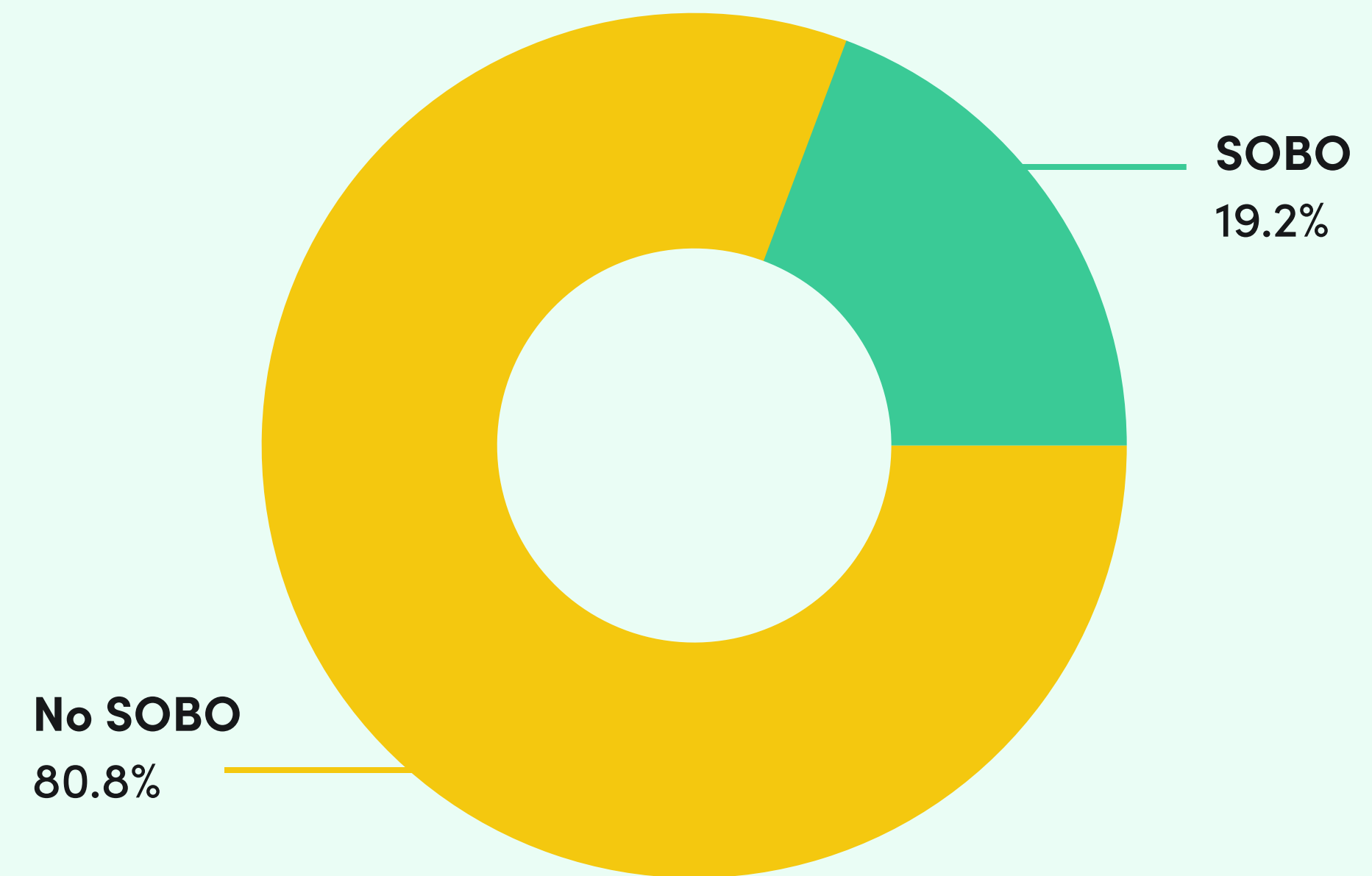
Use SOBO in follow-ups to boost open and reply rates.

SOBO allows you to send emails from another person's email address (typically a manager or senior team member). Our analysis reveals important insights about when and how to use this feature.

Nearly 1 in 5 outreach sequences sent through Gem include a message sent on behalf of someone else. Our data shows that 19.2% of sequences use send-on-behalf-of (SOBO) – typically a hiring manager or executive – and the results speak for themselves.

Sequences that include SOBO outperform those that don't across both open and reply rates, yet over 80% of sequences still don't use SOBO at all – representing a significant untapped opportunity for recruiters looking to improve outreach performance.

Overall sequences sent: SOBO vs No-SOBO





Use SOBO after stage 1

When candidates don't respond to early outreach, switching to Send-on-Behalf-Of (SOBO) in follow-up stages consistently improves both open and reply rates – and the effect compounds the later you introduce it in a sequence.

In 2025, recruiters who used SOBO after an unanswered stage saw relative open rate lifts of 7.5% to 10.4% across follow-up stages, and relative reply rate lifts of 23.6% to 61.3%.

To be clear, these are relative lifts: a reply rate jumping from 6.04% to 9.74% represents a 61% relative improvement, but still a modest absolute gain.

Initial stage	Was there a response?	Using SOBO in follow-up stage
Stage 1	No	+7.5% open rate +23.6% reply rate
Stage 2	No	+10.4% open rate +61.3% reply rate



SOBO works best as a strategic re-engagement tool. If a candidate hasn't opened or replied, putting a hiring manager's name in the "from" field can be the nudge that gets them to pay attention – and the data suggests that nudge gets more powerful the deeper into a sequence you go.

Recommendations:

- Introduce SOBO in later stages for maximum impact
- Ensure SOBO messages are personalized to compensate for the authenticity gap
- Track your team's SOBO performance separately to identify best practices





Part 4: The email itself – what to say and how to say it



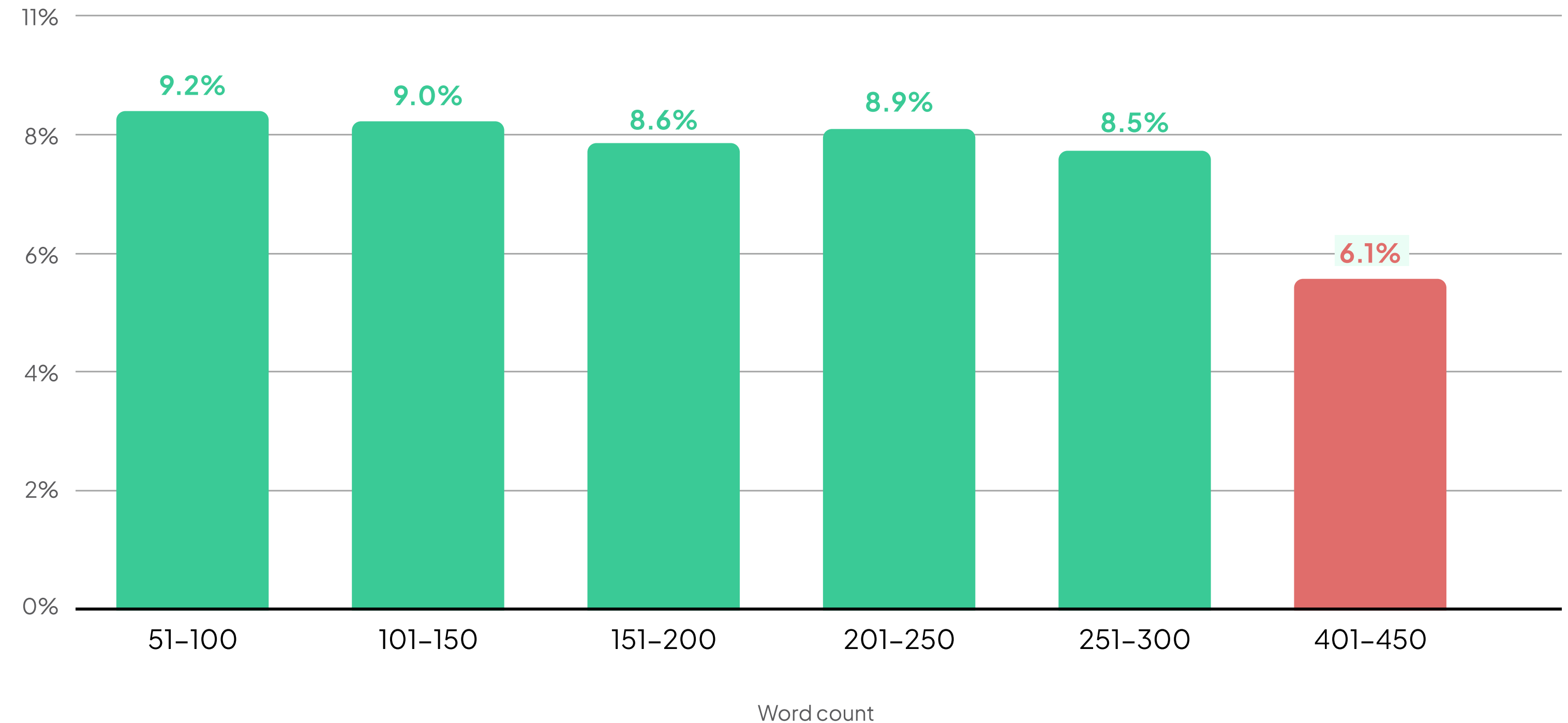
Match email length to company size — shorter for enterprise, longer for SMB.

The length of your email body matters, but the optimal length varies significantly by company size. Well-known enterprise companies need less explanation — candidates already know the brand and just want the role details. Lesser-known or early-stage companies need to work harder to sell the opportunity and make a compelling case for why candidates should care.

Overall email body length performance

Across all company sizes, 51-100 words perform best with a 9.2% reply rate. However, this masks important differences by segment.

Reply rate by email body length:





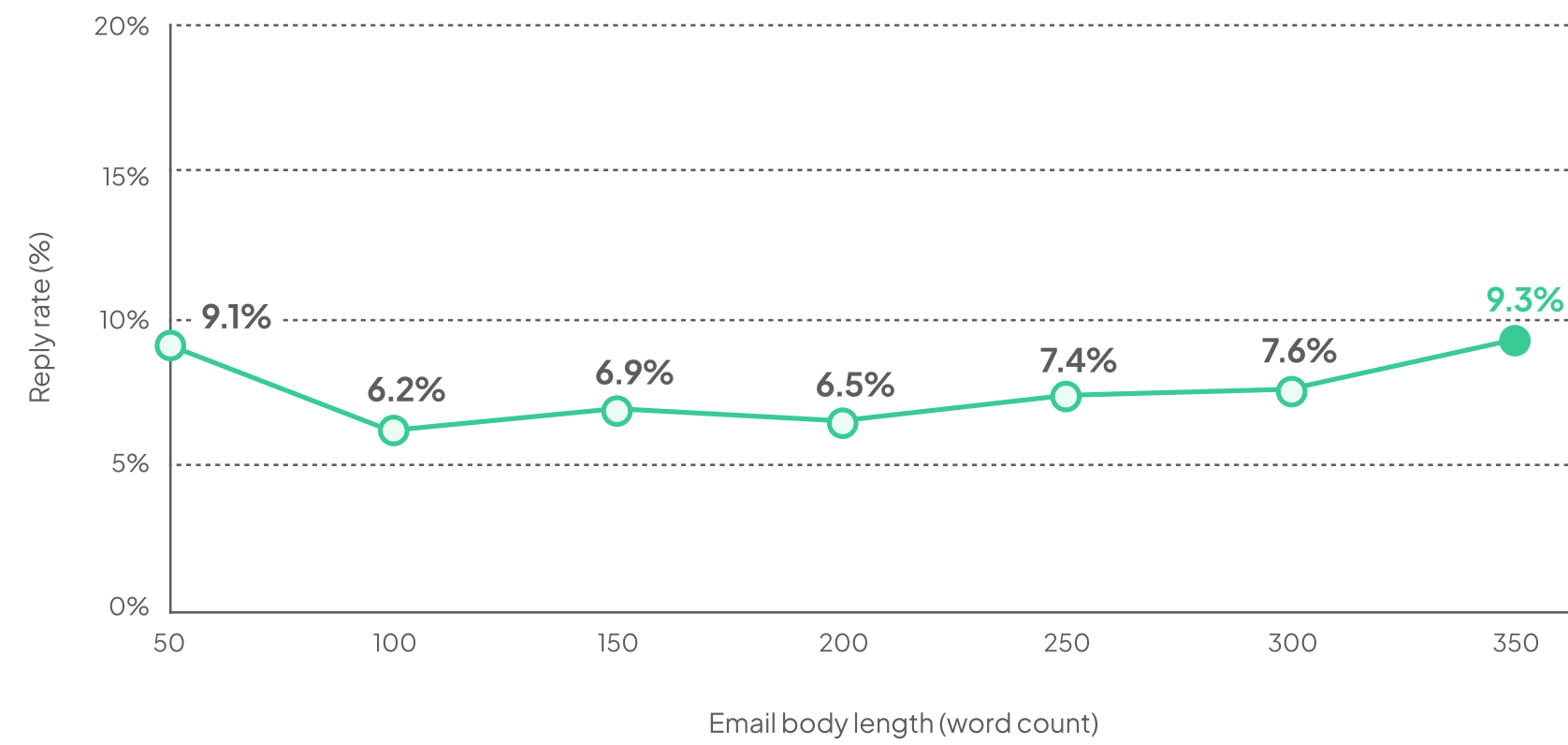
Body length by company size

The optimal email length varies dramatically by company size. Enterprise candidates respond best to emails under 150 words – reply rates drop sharply from 23.7% at 100 words to 2.8% at 500 – while MME recipients are more tolerant of length, with rates staying relatively stable between 9–11% across all word counts. For SMB, the longer the better, so focus on relevance over brevity.

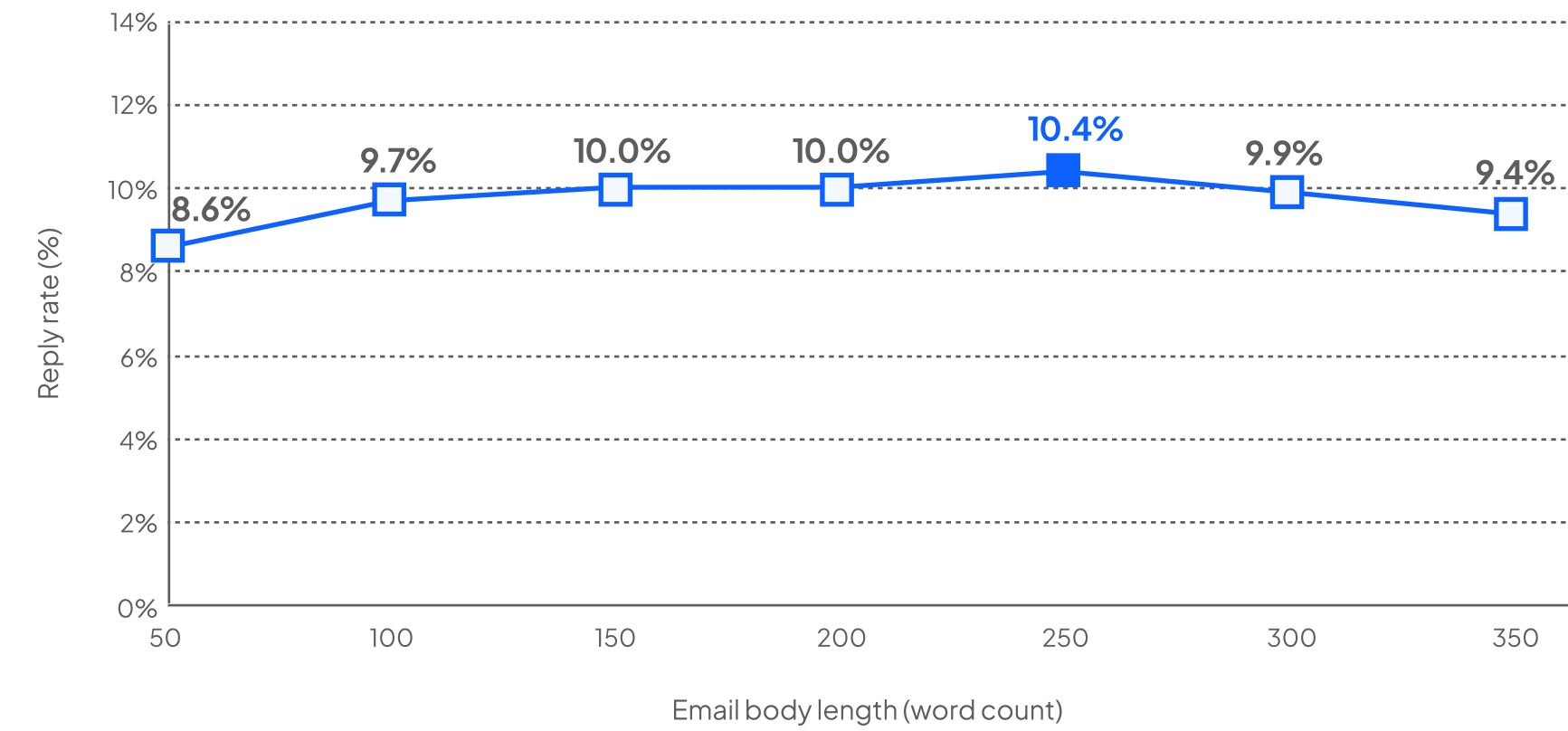
**One size does NOT fit all.
Tailor your email length
to your company size.**



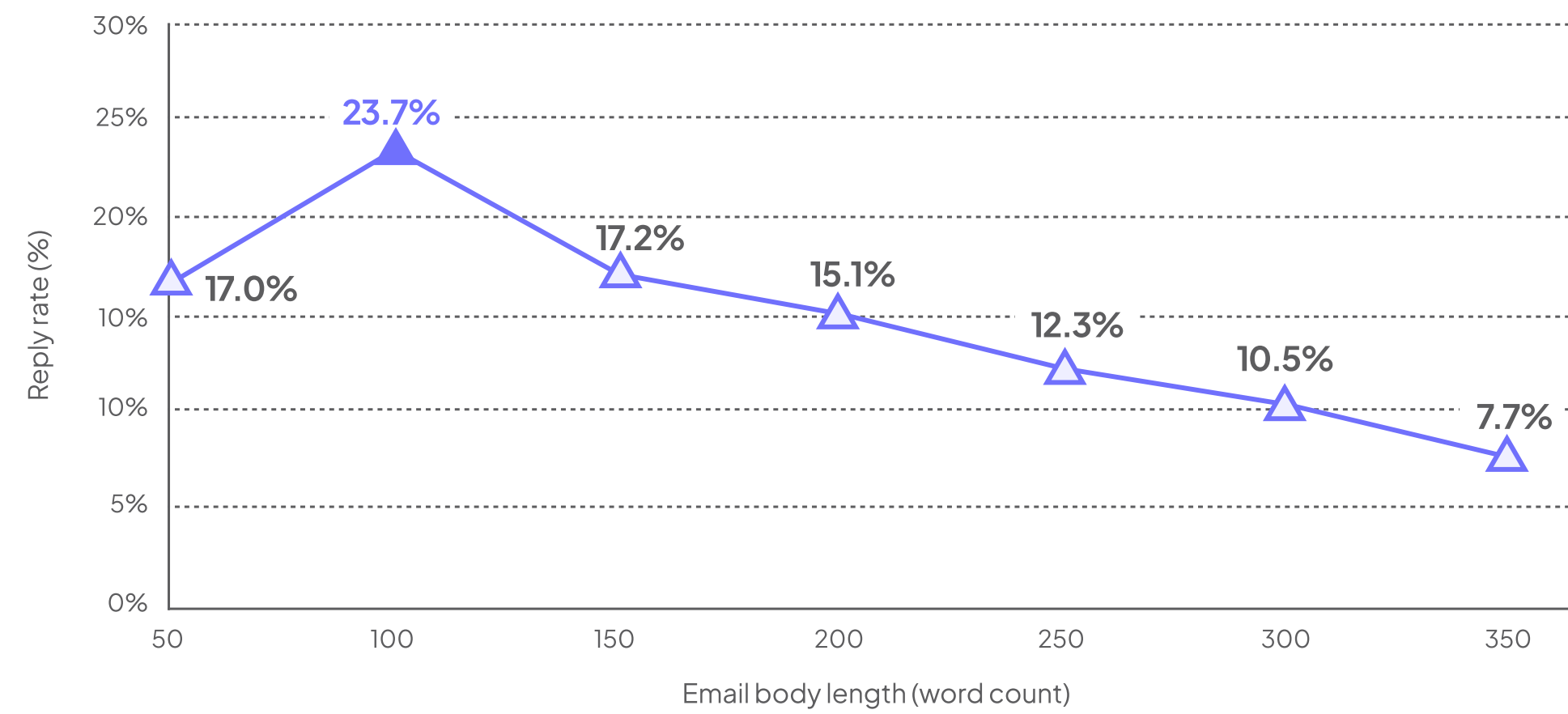
SMB: email body length vs reply rate



MME: email body length vs reply rate



Enterprise: email body length vs reply rate





Part 5: Using data to optimize your outreach strategy



These benchmarks provide a starting point, but the best teams continuously test and optimize their outreach. Here's how to make data-driven decisions about your recruiting outreach.

Always be testing

Use these benchmarks as your baseline, but don't stop there. The most successful teams run continuous experiments to find what works for their specific audience.

What to test:

- Subject line variations (tokens, length, tone)
- Email body length for your specific segments
- Send times for different job roles
- Sequence length (3 vs 4 vs 5 emails)
- Email spacing intervals
- SOBO vs non-SOBO for specific scenarios



Outreach analytics checklist

Use this checklist to ensure you're tracking the right metrics and making data-driven improvements:

Track open, reply, and interested rates by sequence template

Measure the impact of email body length on reply rates

Monitor performance by company size segment

Track time-to-first-open and time-to-reply

Analyze send time performance for your specific audience

Monitor sequence completion rates

Compare SOBO vs non-SOBO performance on your team

Identify your top-performing templates and replicate them

Review subject line token usage and performance

Set up monthly reviews to spot trends and opportunities

Remember: These benchmarks represent aggregate data across millions of messages. Your specific results will vary based on your industry, roles, and approach. Use this data as a guide, but always validate with your own testing.



2025 Key metrics at a glance

Overall performance 2025 vs 2024

Open rate 75.3% 2024: 76.6%	Reply rate 16.9% 2024: 22.6%	Interested rate 9.4% 2024: 12.1%
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Sequence performance 2025 vs 2024

Optimal length SAME
3-4 emails
2024: 4 emails

SOBO usage & impact 2025 vs 2024

Usage rate 19.2% 2024: 21.9%	Key takeaway: Reply and interest rates increase when SOBOs are used in follow-up stages. SOBO works best as a strategic re-engagement tool.
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Send times 2025 vs 2024

Best day CHANGED Wednesday 2024: Tuesday	Best hour SHIFTED 3pm 2024: 8am	Email 1→2 spacing FASTER 4 days 2024: 6 days	Email 3→4 spacing FASTER 5 days 2024: 6 days
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Subject line 2025 vs 2024

Best length SHORTER 2-5 words 2024: 3 words	Best tokens SAME co + fn + title 2024: co + fn + title	Token impact + 0.2% +10.4% 2024: +10.2%
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Body length 2025 vs 2024

Overall best SHORTER 51-100 words 2024: 101-150 words	Enterprise best SAME 51-100 words 2024: 51-100 words	SMB best SHORTER 350 words 2024: 401-450 words
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How Gem can help

Gem is the only AI-first all-in-one recruiting platform. It brings together your ATS, CRM, sourcing, scheduling, and analytics — plus 800+ million profiles to source from — with AI built into every workflow. By eliminating the headaches of juggling multiple tools, Gem helps customers boost recruiter productivity by up to 5x while saving 30-50% on technology costs. Over 1,000 organizations — from startups to industry leaders like Zillow, DoorDash, and Asana — trust Gem to fuel their growth. With an industry-leading 4.8/5 rating on G2, Gem is the platform recruiters actually love to use.

With Gem, you can experience the power of a truly connected recruiting platform — one consistent interface, unified data, smarter AI recommendations, and simplified permissions.



Cut costs through consolidation

Replace your scattered recruiting tools with one AI-powered platform for ATS, CRM, sourcing, scheduling, and analytics. Reduce spend on expensive sources of talent and eliminate redundant point solutions.

Maximize recruiter productivity

Get up to 5x efficiency gains with AI built into every workflow — from sourcing talent and reviewing applications to scheduling interviews and managing candidates. With all products working better together, recruiters spend less time switching systems and more time building relationships.

Unlock data-driven recruiting

Get access to analytics across the recruiting funnel without complex BI tools. From pipeline metrics to hiring forecasts, Gem helps you make data-driven decisions and demonstrate impact.

Use AI that actually works

Get better results from AI that learns from all your recruiting data. With insight into every candidate touchpoint and interaction, Gem AI makes smarter decisions about who to engage and how.

Work with software built for recruiters

Use a platform designed around how recruiters actually work, not a collection of technical features. Quick implementation, intuitive workflows, and clear analytics make Gem the solution teams actually use and trust, earning us an industry-leading 4.8/5 rating on G2.



Thank you.

Gem is the AI-powered recruiting platform
recruiters actually love to use.

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