

7-Eleven Uses Conversational AI to Make Store Hiring Fast and Convenient



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A Convenience Store Pioneer with a Growing Global Presence

The 7-Eleven brand is a global leader in the convenience store space, with more stores than any other retailer in the world. Since opening its first store in Dallas, Texas, in 1927, 7-Eleven has introduced 24-hour stores, coffee to go, self-serve soda fountains, and other retailing concepts, staying true to its founder's vision to "give the customers what they want, when and where they want it."

The 7-Eleven brand has more than 84,000 stores in 20 countries, including the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia, and Australia. 7-Eleven, Inc., is based in Irving, Texas, and operates, franchises and/or licenses more than 13,000 stores in the United States and Canada. In addition to 7-Eleven stores, 7-Eleven, Inc., operates and franchises Speedway®, Stripes®, Laredo Taco Company®, and Raise the Roost® Chicken and Biscuits locations. 7-Eleven, Inc., also actively supports the advancement of female leaders through its partnership with the Network of Executive Women (NEW) and was recognized as one of PRWeek's Best Places to Work 2023.¹

Complex Acquisition Drives a Big Shift in TA

The \$21-billion acquisition of Speedway² (Marathon Petroleum Corporation's convenience store arm) amid the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a massive increase in 7-Eleven's portfolio. The operating merger added 3,800 new corporate-owned stores, presenting an HR integration challenge.

One New Company, Two TA Approaches

Postacquisition, 7-Eleven found itself balancing two distinct talent acquisition (TA) approaches: Speedway's decentralized approach, with more than 300 field recruiters working directly with store leaders, and 7-Eleven's lean corporate recruiting approach, where the team was only tasked with supporting the small portion of stores that were not franchised. The remaining 90% of franchise stores managed their hiring processes independently.

1 "Best Places to Work 2023: 7-Eleven," PRWeek, December 5, 2023.

2 "7-Eleven completes Speedway acquisition of 3,800 convenience stores," Michael Browne/Supermarket News, May 17, 2021.

Summary

Challenge

- Unifying recruitment approaches, processes, and talent acquisition systems while sunsetting legacy solutions following the Speedway acquisition.
- Shifting recruitment responsibilities from field recruiters to store managers.
- Decreasing time to hire in a hypercompetitive market.

Solution

- Strategically overhauled 7-Eleven's recruitment approach with automation and conversational AI.
- Introduced "Rita," a conversational AI assistant that automated 95% of the company's high-volume store-level recruitment process.
- Provided extensive communication, training, and support for store-level leaders to adopt their new recruitment responsibilities effectively.

Results

- Reduced time to hire by more than 50% (from 10-plus days to less than 3 days) in the first year.
- Saved an estimated 40,000 hours per week in recruitment tasks across stores.
- Saved millions of dollars in operational costs, with 85% of applicants scheduled in less than an hour.
- Completed a phased rollout with minimal disruption to the stores.

Not having a unified approach made it impossible for the company to introduce cutting-edge tools that would help speed up time to hire. "The recruitment model was very different because there wasn't much to support at the store level on the 7-Eleven side," said Rachel Allen, 7-Eleven's Senior Director of Talent Acquisition. "Once we completed the acquisition, we were trying to figure out the best of both and what we should use in certain places."

Restructuring TA Teams to Meet Evolving Business Needs

After a 2022 decision to eliminate the store recruiter role and shift recruitment responsibilities directly to store leaders, 7-Eleven recognized the need to completely reorganize its TA team—streamlining operations to ensure a seamless candidate experience while enabling store leaders to do the hiring. The previous store recruiter roles reported directly to the regional head of HR, whereas a centralized TA team brought recruitment under one umbrella.

The newly established TA team consists of a leaner field recruiting team, a Store Support Center (SSC) recruitment team, and an operations team responsible for budgeting, reporting, recruitment, branding, marketing operations, and maintenance and support of the TA tech stack. “We genuinely believe philosophically that store leaders have accountability and ownership of labor optimization and bottom-line dollars,” Allen said. “So, it wasn’t a reorganization to save money. It was a business decision.”

Revamping the TA Tech Stack

The restructuring was a significant change for the TA organization, leading to various tech-related challenges. Some TA tech solutions were easily configurable and could support the transition to a new, decentralized operating model for TA, where store leaders would own hiring. For other systems, such as Workday, it took a notable investment of time and budget to get out of the recruiter-centered configuration, and still, the outcome was not as user-friendly as 7-Eleven had anticipated. But with an average of 140,000 hires each year in the United States and Canada alone, the company was committed to sunsetting legacy approaches, repositioning some of the remaining tech stack, and introducing new TA solutions to support store leader needs.

“*When we decided that stores would be doing the hiring, we realized we needed to set up our store leaders with more user-friendly technology to support their high-volume hiring needs.*”

Rachel Allen, Senior Director of Talent Acquisition, 7-Eleven

Leveraging AI to Support High-Volume Hiring

7-Eleven embarked on a strategic overhaul of its TA technology, sunsetting the legacy applicant tracking systems (ATSs) and moving to one ATS across all brands while seeking an alternate solution for high-volume store-level recruitment.

The company turned to Paradox, which specializes in conversational AI for recruiting. Speedway partnered with Paradox immediately before the acquisition but had not yet leveraged its full potential. The tech solution was initially envisioned as a tool to automate interview scheduling for store managers, but discussions with the vendor led 7-Eleven’s TA team to roll out the platform as an end-to-end ATS solution by the end of 2022. “The initial installation of the platform wasn’t really automating anything,” Allen said. “It helped with the candidate experience, but there was a lot more we weren’t using at the time.”

Adopting Generative AI for Interview Scheduling and More

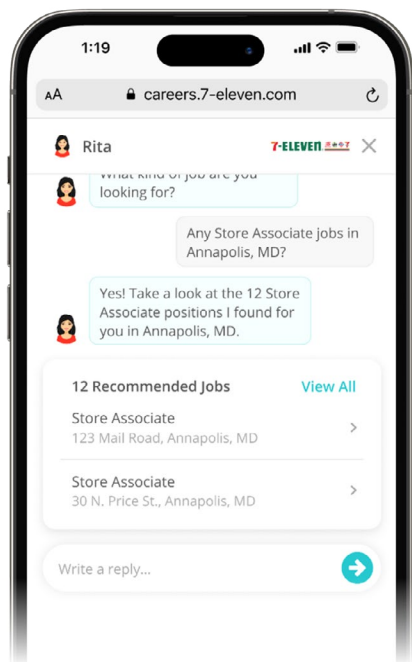
7-Eleven embraced the new ATS approach powered by conversational AI technology and created Rita, a digital assistant that screens, schedules, and communicates with candidates on their mobile phones 24/7 (see Figure 1 on the next page). Rita’s text-to-apply functionality works seamlessly behind the scenes, without store leaders needing to send documentation, respond to questions, or manually schedule interviews.

7-Eleven store leaders get notified only after a new interview is scheduled so they can prepare for it. Moreover, 7-Eleven managers can open and close jobs immediately with a single click on the ATS mobile app (see Figure 2 on the next page).

Adapting the Rollout Approach to Ecosystem Challenges and Hotspots

In recognition of the challenges store leadership faced during the summer months—dubbed the “100 days of summer” because of high store traffic, holidays, and seasonal hiring—7-Eleven took a tactical pause on the platform’s full-scale rollout.

Figure 1: Recruitment Assistant Rita's Conversation Environment

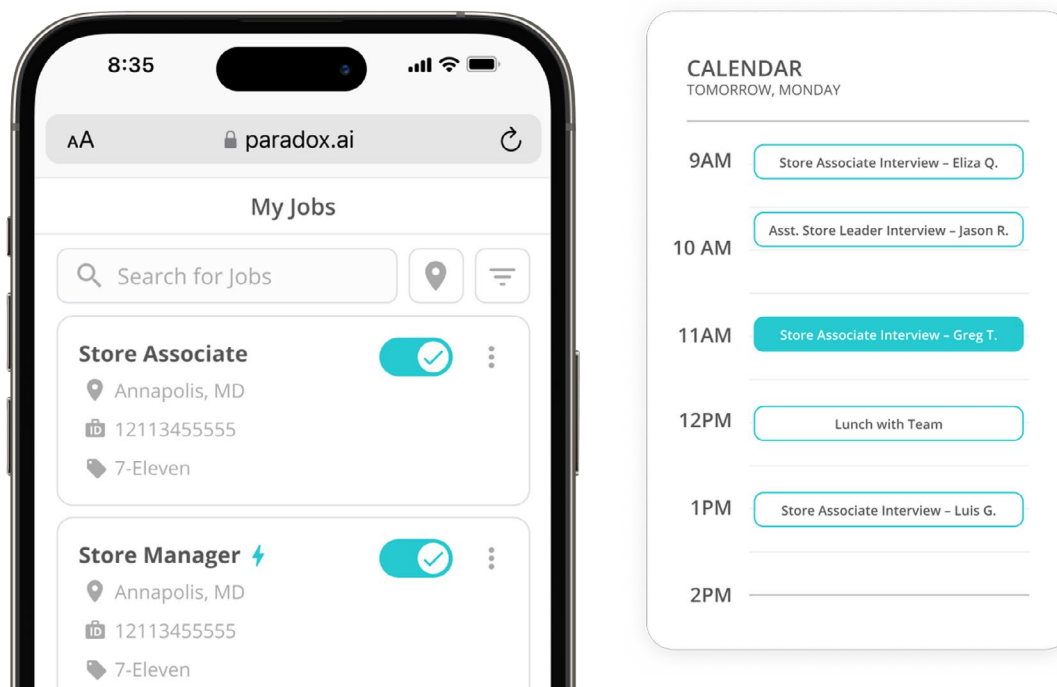


Source: 7-Eleven, 2024

The new ATS solution and AI-powered assistant were piloted at 60 7-Eleven and Speedway stores in Orlando, Florida, during the summer of 2023, providing high-touch support and using feedback to make changes in preparation for broader implementation. Following the critical summer months, 7-Eleven rapidly implemented the new system across its eastern, western, and Canadian regions. "It was large volumes per rollout, and we did it all in a matter of weeks," Allen explained.

The store leaders who participated in the rollout continuously received extensive communication from the TA team and collaborated closely with area leaders who supported stores in each local market. Additional online and phone-based training was provided in every region, followed by continuing weekly office hours and a dedicated ATS support hotline. As a result, store leader adoption was seamless, according to Allen. "There was no pushback," she said. "In fact, there was pull—'When do we get it? When's my turn? We want it!'"

Figure 2: 7-Eleven's ATS User Interface for Store Leaders with Job Postings (Left) and Scheduled Interviews (Right)



Source: 7-Eleven, 2024

Results: Significant Savings

Implementing Rita across its corporate-owned stores led to immediate, impactful results for 7-Eleven. Time to hire dropped by more than 50% (from more than 10 days down to only 3 days total), and there was an estimated weekly savings of 40,000 hours in recruitment tasks. This time savings allowed for a smooth transition from a large field recruiting organization to store managers owning the end-to-end hiring process—resulting in millions of dollars in savings and the ability to redeploy resources elsewhere in the business.

The smooth rollout and significant time savings resulted in positive feedback from store leaders, the CEO, and other senior executives and have enhanced 7-Eleven's employer brand and overall operational efficiency. It also fulfilled 7-Eleven's promise to support store leaders as the TA model shifted to a radically different approach, prioritizing efficiency, effectiveness, and tech enablement.

“ We delivered on the promise we made . . . I was very proud of the organization as a whole that we stopped and thought long-term—what's actually going to work rather than forcing a solution just because it's there. ”
Rachel Allen

Next Steps: Expanding to Franchisees

The success of the corporate store implementation has paved the way for a pilot program with franchisees. Introduced during 7-Eleven's annual conference, the program could enable individual franchisees to enter agreements directly with Paradox and coordinate their own training and support. Doing so can extend Paradox's benefits across the 7-Eleven brand and help fulfill another promise: continued support to all stores as the company's legacy ATS is phased out.

“ We're still going down the journey of integrating everything and moving down this path of figuring out how we work as one for the family of brands, but we have consistency across different processes and technologies. ”
Rachel Allen

Lessons Learned

7-Eleven's strategic approach to overhauling its TA structure and technology supported store leaders as they took on new hiring responsibilities. Lessons learned that may inform efforts in other organizations include:

- **Take a business-driven approach to TA organizational restructuring.** HR teams are not service delivery partners but an integral part of the business. They should be structured in ways that make the most sense to the company. Adopting centralized/decentralized approaches to how TA operates should depend more on what the business is trying to achieve and less on what has been the case historically or what systems are currently in place.
- **Be clear about the problem AI can solve.** Knowing exactly what problem you are solving is your best bet when introducing high-end AI solutions to the organization. Making a solid business case around the costs of operating in legacy infrastructure versus the costs of adopting modern solutions helps decision-makers see the value of introducing AI.
- **Be flexible with rollout approaches and sensitive to the ecosystem.** Trying to push an aggressive implementation timetable during the company's busiest time of year (in this case, the summer months, which are workload-heavy for the entire convenience store sector) reduces excitement and deters end-user buy-in.
- **Keep your promises.** Delivering a new system to empower the TA team is one thing. Ensuring the new system solves managers' problems and everyday challenges without introducing more complexity is entirely different. Working closely with operations to coordinate communications around the upcoming system is a vital part of that. Even more significant, the solution should be tailored to meet end users where they are and offer the channels and functionalities they need to perform at their best.

About the Authors



Josh Bersin

Josh founded Bersin & Associates in 2001 to provide research and advisory services focused on corporate learning. He expanded the company's coverage to encompass HR, talent management, talent acquisition, and leadership and became a recognized expert in the talent market. Josh sold the company to Deloitte in 2012 and was a partner in Bersin by Deloitte up until 2018.

In 2019, Josh founded the Josh Bersin Academy, a professional development academy that has become the "home for HR." In 2020, he put together a team of analysts and advisors who are now working with him to support and guide HR organizations from around the world under the umbrella of The Josh Bersin Company. He is frequently featured in publications such as *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, *HR Executive*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *CLO Magazine*. He is a popular blogger and has more than 800,000 followers on LinkedIn.



Stella Ioannidou

Stella is the senior director of research and Global Workforce Intelligence Project leader at The Josh Bersin Company. In this role, she conducts empirical research on a variety of topics related to the skills economy, talent intelligence, and HR technology. Stella has almost 20 years of experience across several industries, including banking. Prior to joining The Josh Bersin Company, Stella was the HR transformation leader for Deloitte, where she led large-scale HCM implementations and designed frameworks for talent acquisition and performance management for the public sector. Stella holds master's degrees in engineering, information systems management, business administration, and lifelong learning. Stella lives and works in Greece and is pursuing her PhD in talent intelligence. She is a certified project manager, change management practitioner, lean six sigma green belt, and ICAgile HR professional.

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