



# The State of Early Career Hiring in 2026

# About Me



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CEO

RIPPLEMATCH

# We've Been Supporting Employers With Every Major Shift in Early-Career Hiring

## Market Trends

2020

2021

2022

2023

2024

2025

2026

2027

**Covid &  
Diversity Efforts**

**Mass applications &  
AI transformation**

**Skills-based,  
Human-first hiring**

## RippleMatch's Evolution



**Scaling virtual  
recruiting &  
diversity sourcing**



**Cutting through the noise  
of mass and AI-generated  
applications**



**Bringing back real  
signal with verified  
skills**

# The Entry-Level Market Now Faces a Perfect Storm: A Higher Bar for Talent and More Applicant Noise



For recent grads, job boards create a vicious circle of **mass applications** and getting ghosted



**AI is changing** the skills that employers need to hire for at entry level



Universities are struggling to support **job outcomes** in a market that's changing rapidly

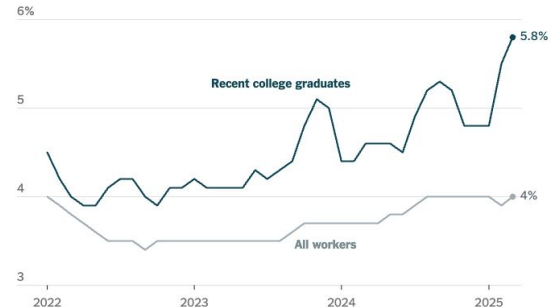
The number of applications on LinkedIn has increased over 45% in the past year.

NYT, JUNE 2025

*Goodbye, \$165,000 Tech Jobs. Student Coders Seek Work at Chipotle.*

NYT, Aug 2025

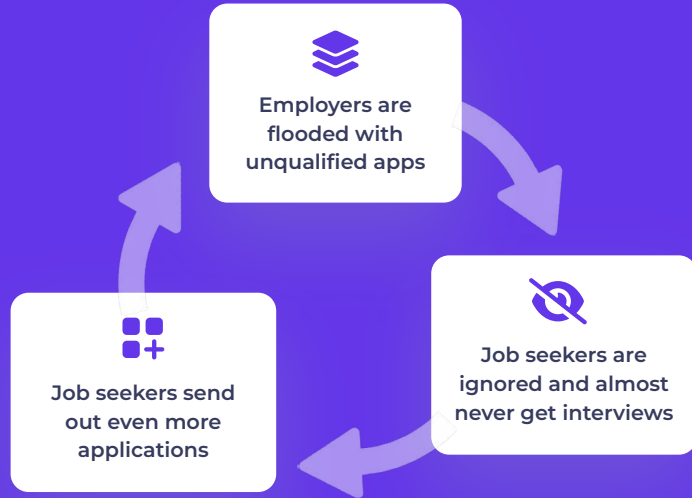
Unemployment rates



Note: Data is as of March 2025 - Source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York - By The New York Times

# Job boards don't work anymore

## Job boards don't work for early career employers and job seekers



## Early career hiring requires:



Jobseeker guidance



Different data points



Strong volume management

# A Fast-Changing Job Market + Slow-Changing Tech = Misalignment Across the Ecosystem



## EMPLOYERS

Responding by narrowing outreach: in 2025, **26% recruited exclusively from a short list of core schools**, up from 17% in 2022

Raising the bar for entry-level talent, seeking skill-based signals



## NEW GRADS

Struggling to land roles in their field despite strong educational backgrounds

Exploring gig work, part-time roles, and portfolio projects to build experience



## UNIVERSITIES

Adapting to support students with **AI fluency, skills credentials, and project-based learning**

Experimenting with new pathways for employer engagement and real-world experience

# **6 Early Career Trends for 2026**

## TREND 1

# Early-Career Hiring Rebounds — But With Higher Expectations



Hiring is picking up in 2026 after years of pullback — but companies aren't returning to mass early-career hiring. **32% of employers plan to hire more entry-level workers than other roles in 2026**



Employers want **fewer, more qualified new grads** who can contribute from day one.



"High potential" now means being **AI-ready, job-ready, and self-directed** — not just having a degree.



## TREND 2

# The Degree Is No Longer the Default Signal



The degree still opens doors — but it's no longer enough to get through them.



Employers are deprioritizing traditional proxies like GPA and school prestige.



What matters now: **evidence of skill, work ethic, and impact** — not credentials alone

### TREND 3

## AI Fluency Is the New Baseline Competency



Across functions, **AI literacy is becoming essential** — not just in technical roles.



From marketing to ops to sales, companies are looking for talent that can **use AI to work faster and smarter.**



Candidates without AI fluency are increasingly viewed as unprepared for the modern workplace.

## TREND 4

# Skills-Based Hiring Is No Longer Optional



Employers need to know what candidates *can actually do* — not just what they studied.



Hiring based on demonstrated skills, certifications, and assessments is now **a must-have**, not a nice-to-have.



Platforms that surface verified skills are becoming central to hiring decisions.

## TREND 5

# Project Work Is Becoming the New Career Foundation



More grads are building careers by **doing real work**, not waiting for someone to give them a shot.



Projects, internships, and portfolio-building experiences now carry more weight than a résumé alone.



This shift is redefining how candidates **gain experience and prove value** early in their careers.

## TREND 6

# Universities Are Shifting to Outcome-Based Student Support



Schools are responding to pressure from students and employers by focusing on **credentials that lead to jobs**.

### Expect growth in:



- Skill-specific microcredentials
- AI and career-readiness certificates
- Portfolio-building initiatives tied to coursework



Institutions are being forced to become **career enablers**, not just degree providers.

**Helping Employers,  
Candidates and Universities  
Adapt to this New Era**

# RippleMatch Brings Back Meaningful Connections and Signals to the Recruiting Process

## Employer



Desired Qualifications



Desired Experience



Locations



Desired Skills

RM

ebay

Software Engineering  
Internship



UT Austin 2025  
BA Computer Science

## Job Seekers



Experience & Education



Career Goals



Location Preferences



Verified Skills

RM

# Candidates Get a **Career Guide** That Helps Them Through Every Step From Blank Page to Offer



## Discover Pathways

Personalized career matches



### Product Manager

Best Match

Lead product strategy and cross-functional teams

\$ Salary

\$120k-\$180k

↗ Growth

15% growth



Perfect for your problem-solving skills and CS background

☆ Software Engineer

☆ Data Scientist



## Develop Skills

Level up with personalized learning



### Prompt Engineering for Product Managers

Technical

In Progress

Skill Level

Level 1 → Level 3



Essential for AI-powered development and automation



Prompt Engineering for Developers  
DeepLearning.AI • 3 weeks

Python

SQL

Leadership

Communication



## Showcase Ability

Stand out with verified skills



### Verified Skills

Proven through assessments and projects

8 verified

Technical Skills

Python

SQL

AI Skills

AI Fluency

Prompt Engineering

Soft Skills

Leadership

Communication

Problem Solving



# We Help Employers Source Based on Verified Skills and Stronger Signals



Automatically source qualified applicants for roles across your organization



Get access to candidates with **verified hard and soft skills**



Get **multi-faceted profiles** created by humans, not AI-generated resumes



Lucia Deckow

University of Colorado – Boulder • Data Science • May 2026 • GPA 3.89

96% Match

## Candidate Summary: Powered by AI

Lucia demonstrates strong **DevOps** and **Cloud** experience with hands-on work in **Azure, Kubernetes, Docker, and Jenkins**. She holds advanced AI literacy and coding certifications. Her collaborative approach and technical depth make her an exceptional fit for fast-paced engineering teams seeking infrastructure expertise.

## Certifications



**AI Literacy: Advanced**

CodeSignal



**General Coding: Expert**

CodeSignal • Top 5% Globally



**Behavioral: High Collaboration**

RippleMatch • Team Excellence

Advance →



52% of Matches Advance to Interview



0% Time Spent on Sourcing

# Institutions need end-to-end skills-to-job data, and better ways for students and employers to connect



## UPSKILLING

Help your students identify and fill skill gaps, then showcase their verified skills to employers to stand out in the job search



## JOB PLACEMENT

Help your students land more interviews and more job offers with top quality employers, with no effort wasted on poor fit positions



## ANALYTICS

Benchmark the skills of your students & identify workforce gaps; get visibility into the job search progression of your students in real time



## ENGAGEMENT

Send multi-step email campaigns to relevant students to invite to RippleMatch, promote learning opportunities or share information

**Q&A**