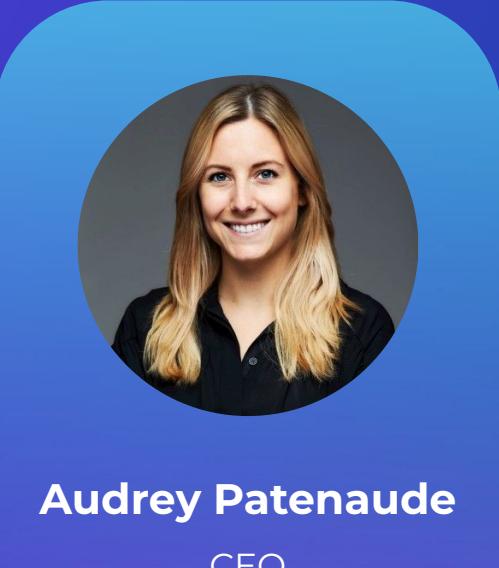




The State of Early Career Hiring in 2026

About Me

A circular portrait of a woman with long, blonde hair, smiling. She is wearing a dark, button-down shirt. The portrait is set against a blue gradient background that transitions from light blue at the top to dark blue at the bottom.

Audrey Patenaude
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



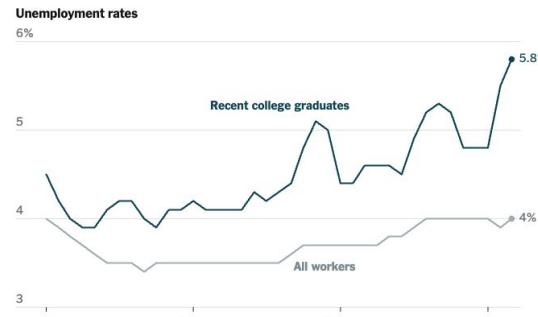
Universities are struggling to support **job outcomes** in a market that's changing rapidly

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

NYT, JUNE 2025

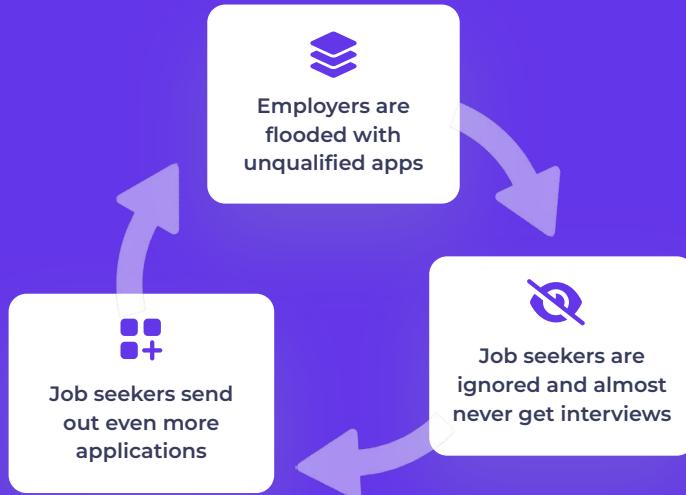
Goodbye, \$165,000 Tech Jobs. Student Coders Seek Work at Chipotle.

NYT, Aug 2025



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



Job Seekers



Experience & Education



Career Goals



Location Preferences



Verified Skills



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 8 verified

Proven through assessments and projects

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