

Expectations and Realities: Preparing the Next Generation of Talent for the World of Work



75TH ANNIVERSARY

SHRM

BETTER WORKPLACES
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Handshake

Each new generation brings fresh ideas, perspectives and expectations into the workplace, and today's emerging professionals are no exception. Setting students and new graduates up for success in their first jobs is a critical goal for every organization. Given this, SHRM and Handshake conducted a joint survey to explore the skills emerging professionals need, how employers evaluate emerging talent, and what emerging professionals are looking for in an employer.

Who are emerging professionals?

Emerging professionals are individuals who are in the early stages of their career, typically with less than three years of experience in their chosen field. They include students about to graduate and recent graduates from university, college or another educational program.



Key Findings

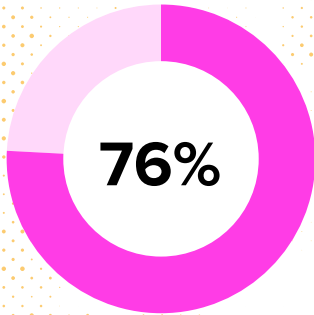
Based on surveys of HR professionals, students and early-career employees, we identified the following bright spots and areas of opportunity:

- **Emerging professionals are generally well prepared for the workforce.** Seventy percent of HR professionals say early-career hires are prepared to succeed in their organizations within the first year.
- **Adaptability and willingness to learn and data analysis skills are among emerging professionals' key strengths.** Almost 90% of HR professionals say their organization looks for adaptability and willingness to learn in early-career hires, and close to 70% say emerging professionals commonly exhibit these traits. Additionally, more than 70% of emerging professionals report at least some experience with data analysis, which is a skill that nearly 6 in 10 employers are seeking from this group.
- **Emerging professionals have an opportunity to demonstrate stronger work ethic and reliability.** Despite nearly 2 in 3 emerging professionals saying they have extensive experience demonstrating a strong work ethic and reliability, only 1 in 4 HR professionals say emerging professionals applying to their company commonly have this skill.
- **Interview performance is the top factor organizations consider when hiring emerging professionals.** Seventy-nine percent of HR professionals say interview performance is "very important" in hiring decisions for entry-level roles, while 75% rate relevant work experience as "very important." By contrast, only 7% of HR professionals say an applicant's school or alma mater is a very important factor.
- **Employers tend to underestimate the importance of job stability in attracting emerging professionals.** When asked how important certain benefits are in evaluating a job opportunity, nearly 7 in 10 emerging professionals named guaranteed hours or job stability as a "very important" factor. Yet, only 7% of HR professionals think that job security is in the top three benefits emerging professionals value most when choosing a job.
- **Opportunities to learn and grow are crucial to retaining emerging professionals.** About a third of emerging professionals expect to stay at their next or current job for four years or more, but twice that many would stay four years or more if given consistent opportunities to build in-demand skills.

Workplace Readiness: Are Emerging Professionals Well Prepared for the Workforce?

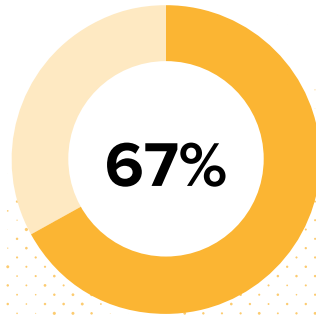
Confidence in emerging professionals' overall workforce readiness is generally high. Seventy percent of HR professionals say emerging professionals who join their organization are ready to succeed within the first year of employment. Similarly, more than 75% of current college students believe they have the skills they need to succeed in the workforce from day one. And although recent college graduates have a slightly more measured outlook, 67% say they were well prepared in retrospect.

Current students



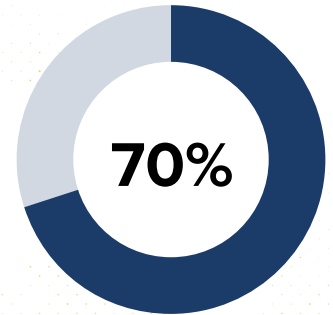
"I have the skills I need to succeed in the workforce from the start."

Recent graduates



"I had the skills I needed to succeed in the workforce from the start."

HR professionals



"Emerging professionals are prepared to succeed at my organization within the first year."



The Skills Employers Seek in Emerging Professionals

When asked about the skills their organization looks for in emerging professionals, HR professionals were most likely to name broad foundational soft skills such as adaptability and willingness to learn, strong work ethic and reliability, and communication. These skills significantly outranked more specific skills such as project management skills, multilingual abilities, and leadership skills.



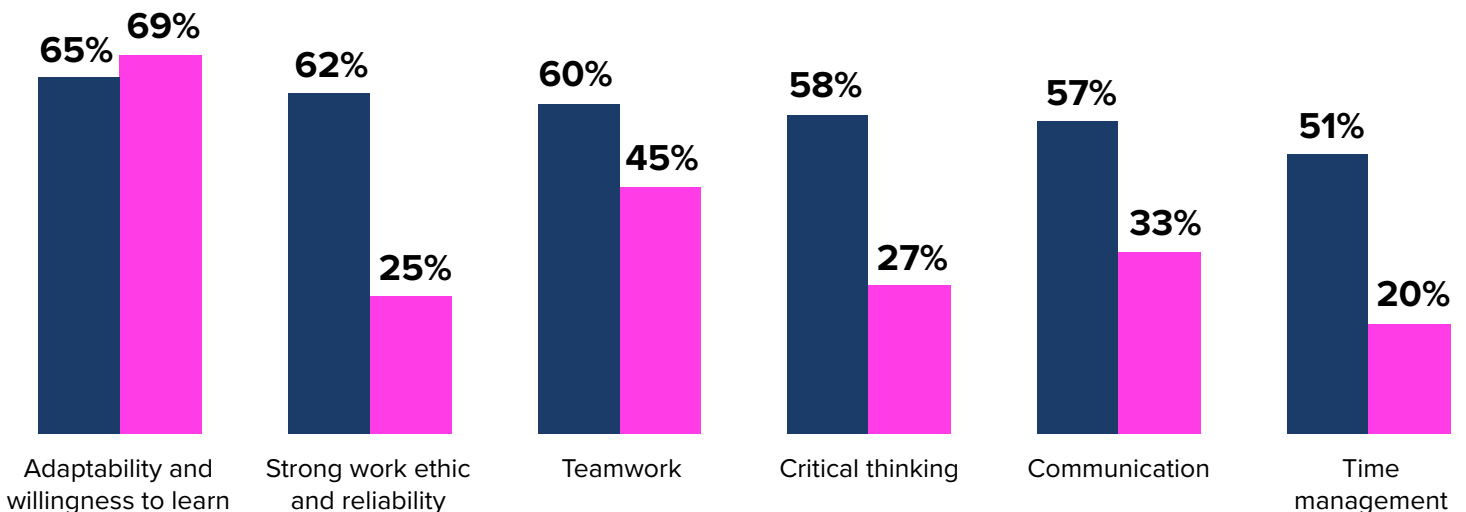
The Top 6 Skills Employers Seek in Emerging Professionals



Emerging Professionals' Strengths and Opportunity Areas Among the Top 6 Skills Employers Seek

■ Share of **emerging professionals** who say they have extensive experience with this skill

■ Share of **employers** who say emerging professionals commonly have this skill



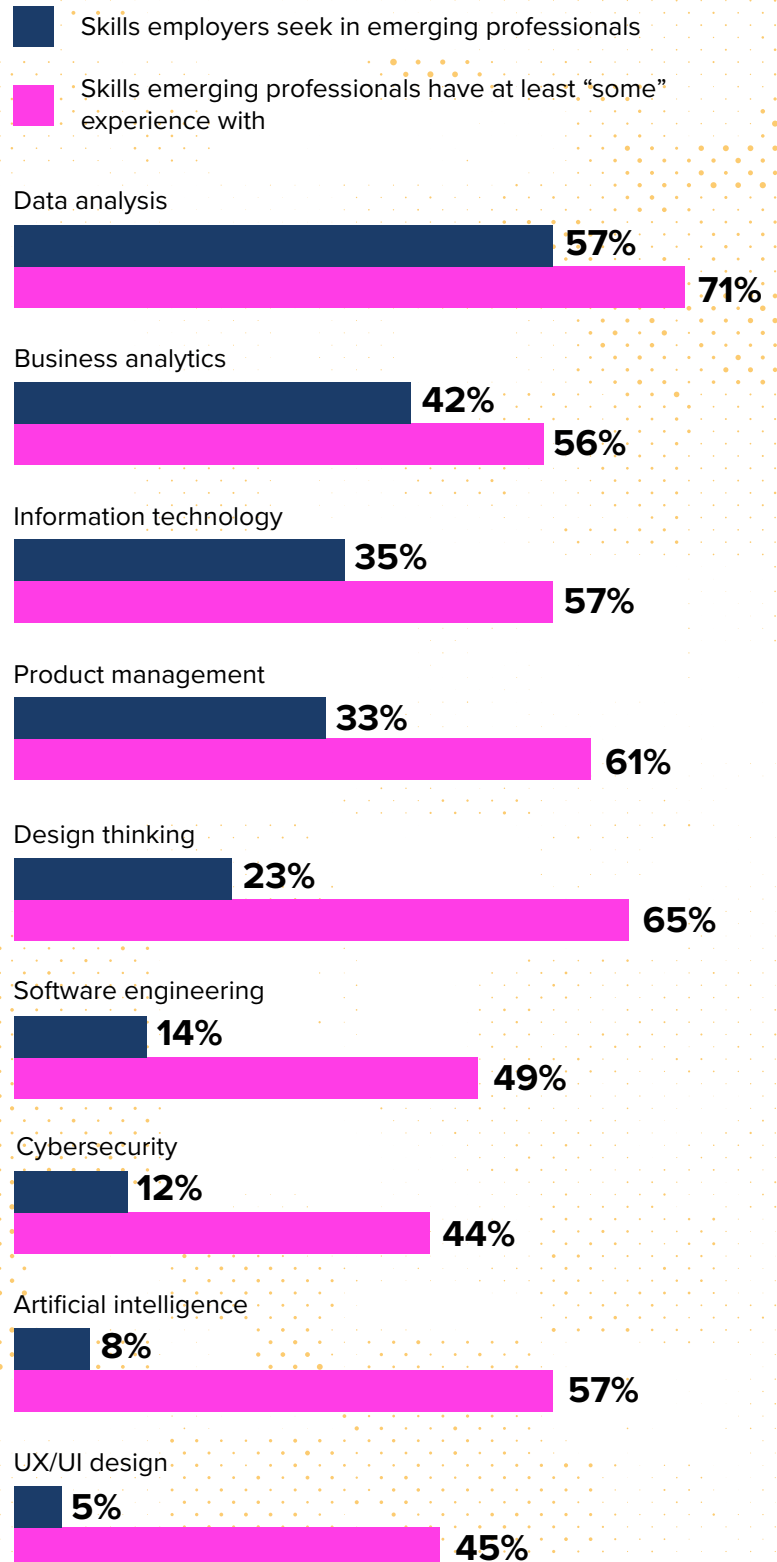
Where Emerging Professionals Shine: Adaptability, Teamwork and Trending Technical Skills

Emerging professionals are ready to contribute certain key skills to their workplaces from day one. The first is adaptability and willingness to learn, which is the top skill organizations are seeking from this group. Close to 7 in 10 HR professionals say adaptability and willingness to learn are among the most common skills they see in early-career candidates, and more than 6 in 10 emerging professionals say they have extensive experience with this skill. The second is teamwork: 6 in 10 emerging professionals say they have extensive experience working in teams, while more than 4 in 10 HR professionals say this is a common skill they encounter in emerging talent.

In addition to these foundational soft skills, emerging professionals bring critical technical skills to their first jobs. We asked HR professionals and emerging professionals about a subset of nine trending technical skills—“hard” skills that are gaining increased attention among employers, ranging from broad skills like data analysis and product management to role-specific skills like software engineering and UX/UI design. Of these skills, we found that data analysis was the most in-demand, with 57% of HR professionals saying they seek this skill in emerging professionals. Notably, this was also the most common skill among early-career candidates, with 71% saying they have at least some experience in this area.



Employers' Demand for and Emerging Professionals' Experience with Trending Technical Skills



Where Emerging Professionals Can Improve: Reliability, Communication and Time Management

Communication, work ethic and reliability are all key skills for emerging professionals. Although very few emerging professionals say they lack experience with these skills, these are among the areas where HR professionals are most likely to say early-career candidates fall short. For example, 62% of emerging professionals believe they have extensive experience demonstrating a strong work ethic and reliability, but only 25% of HR professionals say they commonly see this skill among emerging professionals who apply to their open positions. This misalignment could reflect a gap between the standards set for students during their educational journey and the expectations they face in professional settings.

Critical thinking, communication and time management are also areas where emerging professionals may consider bolstering their skills to enhance their overall workplace readiness. While over half of emerging professionals say they have extensive experience with these skills, only a third or less of HR professionals say these skills are common among the emerging professionals who apply for positions at their organizations.

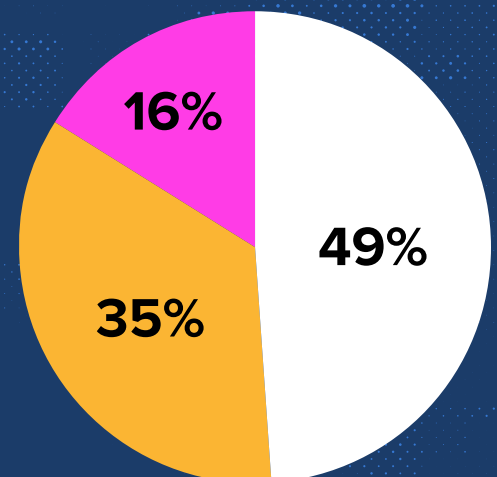


Hire for attitude, train for skill?

HR professionals are most likely to say their organization weighs experience and attitude equally when evaluating emerging professionals. But for those who favor one over the other, attitude is twice as likely to win out over experience.

With regard to the philosophy of “hire for attitude, train for skill,” which of the following best reflects your organization’s approach to hiring?

- Experience and attitude are considered equally
- Attitude usually or always wins out
- Experience usually or always wins out



Landing That First Job: How Emerging Professionals Can Set Themselves Apart During the Hiring Process

When asked for input on how early-career candidates could improve their applications and interview performance, HR professionals were most likely to point to communication. Specifically, emerging professionals could highlight their skills more effectively and ask more thoughtful questions. And although emerging professionals are optimistic about their communication skills overall, they recognize that they have room to grow in specific areas. Less than half, for example, are confident in their ability to communicate their skills and experience in interviews.

HR's top **job application** advice for emerging professionals



Highlight experience and qualifications more effectively.



Highlight skills more effectively.



Customize application for each organization/job.

HR's top **interview** advice for emerging professionals



Prepare more thoroughly (research the organization/role).

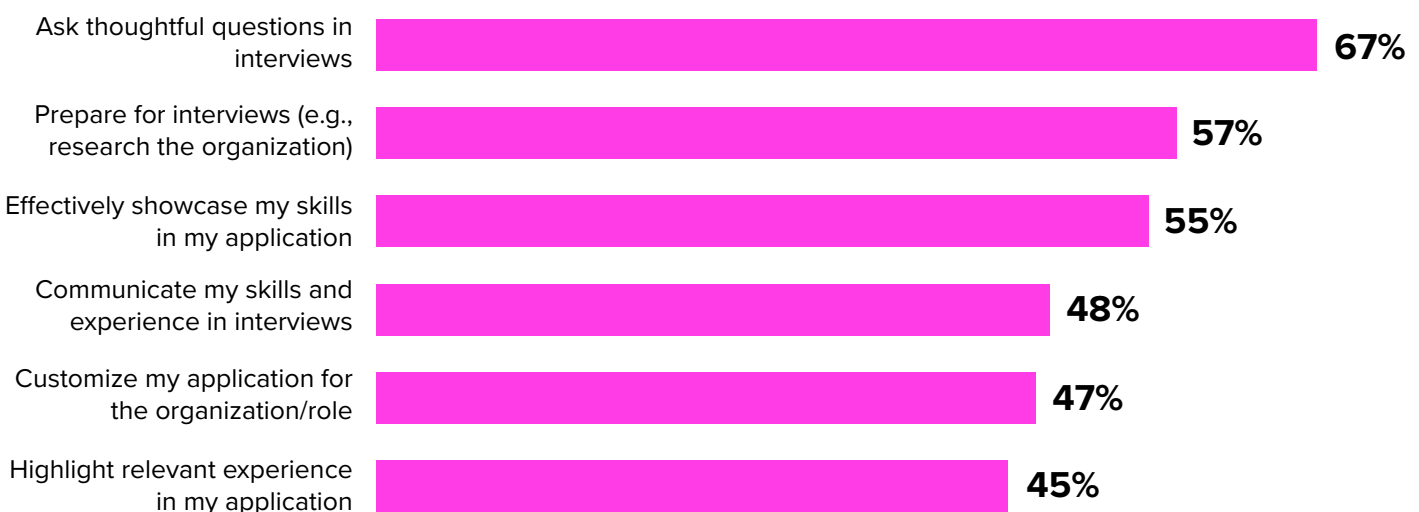


Communicate skills and experience more effectively.



Ask more thoughtful questions.

Emerging Professionals: "I Am Highly Confident in My Ability to ..."



What Employers Look for When Hiring: Interview Performance and Relevant Experience

Organizations weigh several factors when evaluating emerging professionals for employment, but two considerations rise to the top: performance in interviews and job-relevant experience. Seventy-nine percent of HR professionals say interview performance is “very important,” and three quarters say the same of relevant work experience. By contrast, most HR professionals say their organization places little weight on where an applicant attended school, their GPA, the academic honors they earned, or their extracurricular activities.

Emerging professionals have a general understanding of what matters to employers in hiring decisions. However, they underestimate the importance of interview performance, which they rank below relevant work experience and academic major on the list of factors they believe are “very important” to employers. Emerging professionals also overestimate the importance of their school or alma mater to employers, with a majority assuming this is “very important” in hiring decisions.



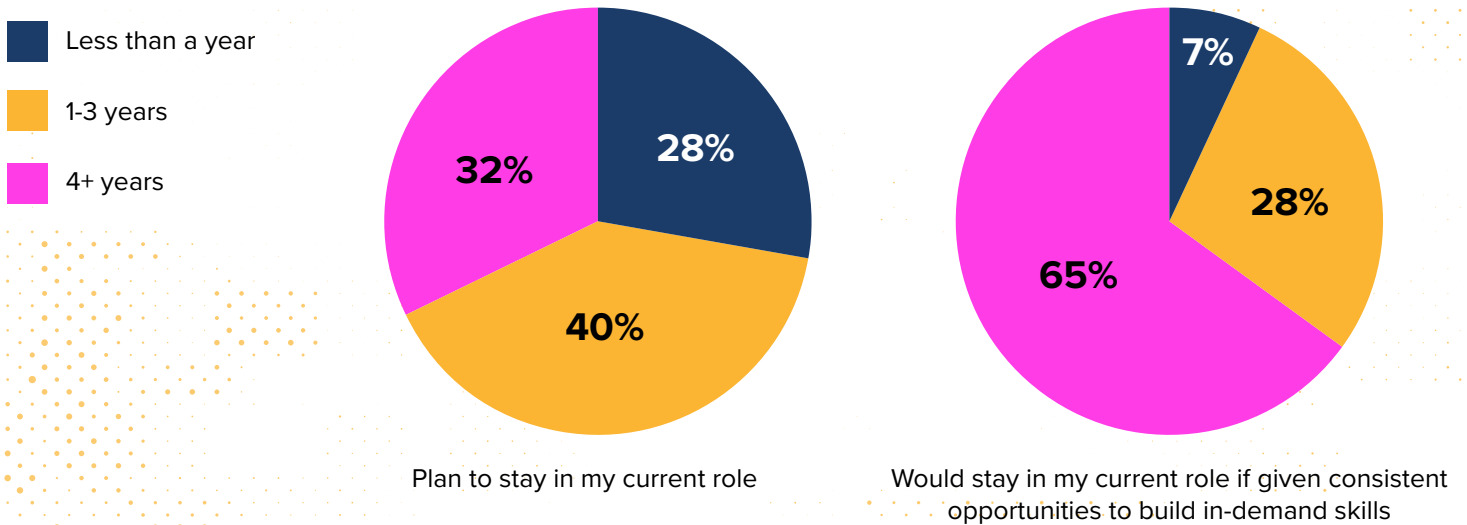
Top factors	Percent rating “very important”	
	HR professionals	Emerging professionals
Performance in interviews	79%	61%
Relevant work experience	75%	69%
Internship experience	47%	69%
Major or field of study	43%	64%
Bottom factors		
School attended	7%	51%
Volunteer experience	6%	34%
GPA	5%	44%
Extracurricular activities	4%	33%
Academic honors	2%	35%

What Emerging Professionals Want in a Job: Stability and Growth Opportunities

Emerging professionals approach the hiring process with their own set of criteria and priorities. Chief among these is job stability, which 69% of emerging professionals say is “very important” when evaluating a potential employer. Other key considerations include professional development opportunities, retirement benefits and a flexible schedule.

In addition to being among the top factors that motivate emerging professionals to apply to a job, professional development opportunities are critical to retaining early-career talent. About a third of recent graduates plan to stay in their current job for four or more years, but twice as many—almost two thirds—would stay four or more years if given consistent opportunities to build in-demand skills.

Professional Development Opportunities Have a Big Impact on Early Talent Retention



Many employers recognize the importance of professional development opportunities for attracting and retaining emerging professionals; 43% of HR professionals believe this is one of the top three factors emerging professionals consider when evaluating a job. However, HR professionals tend to underestimate the importance of job stability and retirement benefits—less than 10% selected these as one of the top three factors they think emerging professionals value most.

By contrast, HR professionals often overestimate the importance of remote and hybrid work. Remote and hybrid work options tied with professional development opportunities as the third most-selected factor among HR professionals but was not among the top five factors rated “very important” by emerging professionals, with only 39% of emerging professionals rating this factor “very important.”

HR Professionals:

What do you think emerging professionals value most when choosing a job? Select up to 3.

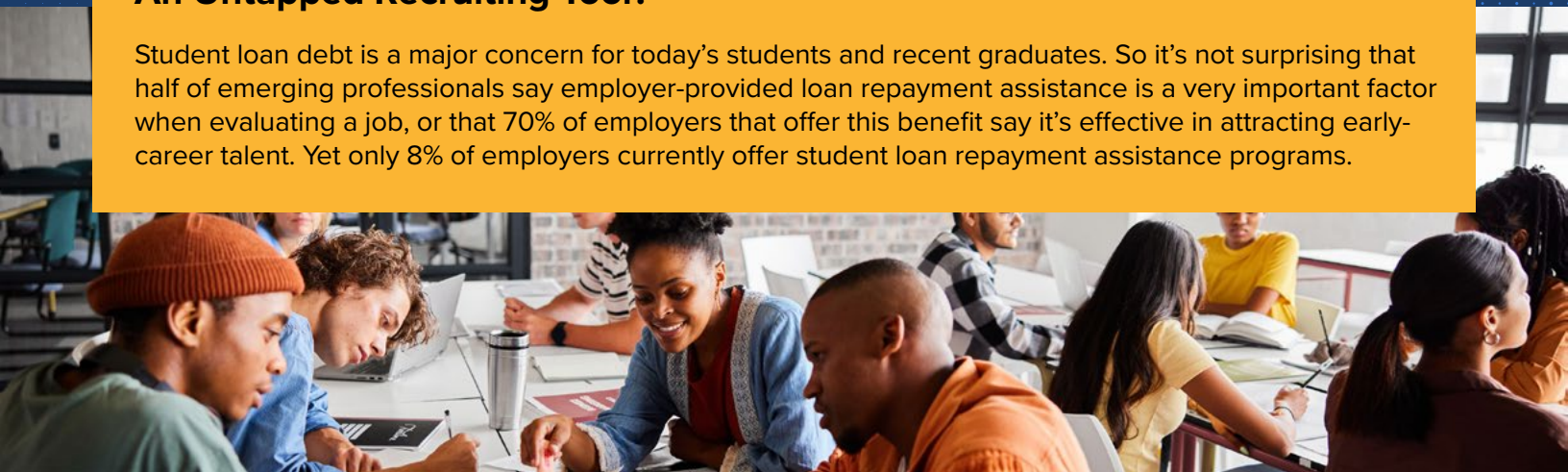
Emerging Professionals:

When evaluating a job opportunity, how important are each of the following to you?

Percent selecting in top 3 (top 5)		Percent who say “very important” (top 5)
Competitive salary/wages (58%)	1	Guaranteed hours or job security (69%)
Flexible work schedules (50%)	2	Professional development opportunities (66%)
Professional development opportunities / Remote or hybrid work options (43%; tie)	3	Retirement benefits (63%)
Generous vacation time and paid time off policies (18%)	4	Flexible work schedules (62%)
A diverse and inclusive workplace (8%)	5	Competitive salary/wages / A diverse and inclusive workplace (59%; tie)

An Untapped Recruiting Tool?

Student loan debt is a major concern for today’s students and recent graduates. So it’s not surprising that half of emerging professionals say employer-provided loan repayment assistance is a very important factor when evaluating a job, or that 70% of employers that offer this benefit say it’s effective in attracting early-career talent. Yet only 8% of employers currently offer student loan repayment assistance programs.



Recommendations for Employers and Emerging Professionals

Based on these findings, we see several areas of opportunity for employers to better attract, develop and retain emerging professionals, and for emerging professionals to set themselves up for success.



Employers should consider:

- **Actively encouraging candidates with the most important core skills to apply**, even if they don't check every box. In particular, emerging professionals may not always realize how valuable adaptability and willingness to learn are to potential employers. By specifically calling out adaptability as a core qualification, employers can encourage applications from early-career candidates who are ready and eager to learn.
- **Being transparent about how hiring decisions are made**. Our data shows emerging professionals tend to overestimate the weight that some factors—such as the school they attended—carry in hiring decisions, and to underestimate the importance of others, such as interview performance. Understanding what matters most will help emerging professionals better focus their efforts in the application and interview process, giving the employer a more accurate assessment of the applicant's fit and leading to higher-quality hires.
- **Emphasizing job stability and development opportunities in outreach to emerging professionals**, including in recruiting materials, career events and interviews. In particular, highlighting job stability can give employers a competitive edge, given that many employers underestimate the importance of this factor for emerging professionals. Robust professional development programs can give employers a boost not just in recruiting but also in retaining top-performing early-career hires.



Emerging professionals should consider:

- **Highlighting adaptability and willingness to learn in job applications and finding opportunities to demonstrate a strong work ethic and reliability during the hiring process.** Adaptability and willingness to learn are areas where employers' needs are a strong match for emerging professionals' skills, and early-career candidates shouldn't hesitate to emphasize them as core strengths. On the other hand, work ethic and reliability are top skills employers seek but say they do not commonly see in emerging professionals. Emerging professionals who take special care to demonstrate these skillsets during the application and interview process have an advantage.
- **Investing more time in preparing for interviews.** Interview performance is one of the most important factors in hiring decisions, a fact that some emerging professionals overlook. Emerging professionals can set themselves up for success in interviews by crafting and rehearsing a succinct summary of their background and qualifications, thoroughly researching the organization and role, and preparing thoughtful questions for the interviewer.
- **Asking questions about benefits.** Employers aren't always aware of the benefits that matter most to emerging professionals, so they may not highlight the most critical benefits in recruiting materials and interviews. Before making a decision on any job offer, emerging professionals should take time to understand and consider the full benefits package, including key factors like job stability and professional development opportunities.

Methodology

Emerging professionals: A sample of 2,122 current students and recent college graduates was surveyed between July 6, 2023, and August 8, 2023. All respondents were located in the United States and were either currently enrolled in a higher education institution/continuing education program (two-year community college program or four-year college or university) or had graduated within the past three years.

HR professionals: A sample of 1,180 HR professionals was surveyed through SHRM's membership between July 12, 2023, and August 7, 2023. To qualify, respondents had to indicate that their organization hires emerging professionals.