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The Next Challenge for the Class of 2024: Finding a Job

Companies are hiring fewer fresh graduates and rethinking their needs for entry-level talent

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May 22, 2024 5:30 am ET



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The Class of 2024 is about to join a job market nearly as turbulent as their college years.

Employers plan to hire 5.8% fewer new graduates than they did last year, according to a spring survey of 226 employers by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. And what those bosses want from entry-level workers is changing, students and recruiters say, from years of experience to sophisticated artificial-intelligence skills. Some companies say AI is taking over part of the work fresh graduates used to do.

It's just the latest challenge for the graduating seniors who began their studies with Covid-19 lockdowns and Zoom classes and finished them amid protests that

disrupted campus life nationwide.



Daniel Cooper had a job offer rescinded after the company announced layoffs. PHOTO: LARA GUNESSEN

“I didn’t think it would be so hard to even get a screening interview,” said Daniel Cooper, a computer-engineering major who graduated from the Georgia Institute of Technology this month. The 22-year-old accepted a software-engineering job earlier this spring, but the offer was rescinded after the company announced layoffs.

Overall, the job market remains strong, and recruiting executives say new graduate-hires benefit from steady wage growth over the past

few years. But it’s taking graduating seniors longer to find white-collar roles. By April 2023, more than a third had accepted a full-time job and stopped looking further, according to research and analytics firm Veris Insights. This year, just under a quarter had.

Cooper has applied to about three dozen other software engineering jobs since his offer evaporated, resulting in two interviews but no new offers. Though he’s had eight internships, some of the job applications he’s filled out ask for years of work experience, excluding internships, he said. That puts him at zero.

Employers get picky

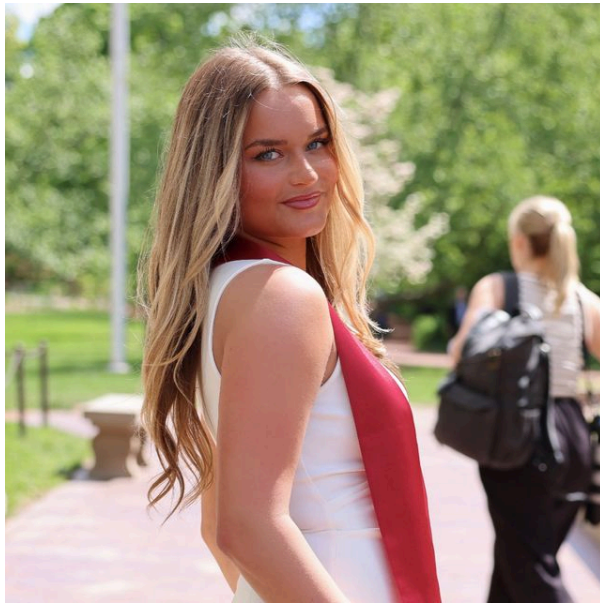
HealthEdge, an insurance-software company, is among the companies hiring fewer new graduates this year. It’s bringing on five new graduates in the U.S. compared with 20 in 2023. Overall, it’s hiring fewer entry-level employees, and a greater share of them are in India, said Stefani Coleman, who leads early-talent recruiting and programming.

Demand for such jobs, meanwhile, has been overwhelming, she added. At one point, she received about 2,000 applications within 24 hours for an associate software-engineering role.

“The market has changed so drastically,” she said.

The supply of computer-science majors continues to grow as hiring demand for software programming roles appears to be cooling. Two other major campus job recruiting sectors—consulting and finance—are also retrenching after pandemic hiring sprees.

Graduates looking for jobs must meet a higher bar because the market is already crowded with junior workers who recently lost jobs, says Jay Killough, who leads Texas Tech University’s career center.



Payton Poulston said she has been looking for a job in medical-devices sales since the start of her senior year. PHOTO: EDEN SNOWER

“Those people have experience,” said Killough, “and most employers we talk to love experienced professionals.”

Payton Poulston, who graduated from Indiana University Bloomington this month, has been looking for a job in medical-devices sales since the start of her senior year. She’s contacted people she met during her three internships. Her mother, who works at a hospital, has also been asking co-workers and others for job leads on her behalf.

Poulston has landed interviews, but no offers. The companies typically tell her they want three to five years of experience, even for jobs listed as entry-level positions.

“It might be easier to hire someone who can just come in and get the job done and know exactly how to do everything,” she said.

The AI factor

Companies are also expecting grads to come in knowing how to use AI in their work, said Mohammad Soltanieh-ha, a clinical assistant professor at Boston University’s Questrom School of Business. In class, for example, his

programming students learn how to use AI to find what's wrong with their codes as opposed to spending half a day figuring it out on their own, he said.

"It's not that the AI is taking their jobs," said Soltanieh-ha of entry-level workers. "It's somebody that knows how AI is working—that's who is going to take their job."

AI is starting to supplant some types of traditional entry-level work. Axiologic Solutions, a government technology contractor near Washington, D.C., is deploying AI to take on tasks that new graduates previously did in its human-resources department. An AI tool can send emails and training videos to new hires. A chatbot can answer many of the questions a new hire might have.

When two people recently left the HR department, they didn't need to be replaced, said Michael Chavira, the company's managing partner and co-founder. Anyone he does hire needs to have experience using AI, since he's thinking about using it in other business areas too, such as accounting.

"AI right now is making those entry-level positions—I don't want to say obsolete—but they're changing them," Chavira said.

Back to basics

Jennifer Neef, director of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's career center, said that, for now, she is encouraging computer science majors to look for tech roles in other industries. Smaller employers, as well as government agencies, will hire through the middle of summer, she said.

"I always ask students—'Who knows that you're looking for a job?' The response should be everyone," Neef said.

She has been advising students to "use a scalpel and not a machete" in contacting employers and recruiters. That means making meaningful connections, instead of spamming hiring managers with one-size-fits-all messages, and following up regularly after a first meeting. Employers want to make sure their new hires have the willingness to learn and can fit with their teams' work styles, she said.

Some career advisers are also advising graduates to refrain from opining about campus protests if asked in job interviews.



Some career advisers are advising graduates to refrain from opining about campus protests if asked in job interviews. PHOTO: BEN CURTIS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“Our advice is to be very neutral, like, ‘Yeah, that’s happening there,’” said Beth Hendler-Grunt, president of career-coaching company Next Great Step. So far, she says none of her clients have mentioned such questions coming up, though many studied at schools where protests took place.

Kali Muniz, who graduated from Texas A&M University this month, landed a job in October, after a couple of snags.

The flight simulator company where she had previously interned told her they weren’t hiring new grads because of budget cuts. She thought she had clinched an interview for a consulting job, then was surprised when she was rejected.

The job she did get—as a financial manager for the federal government—Muniz found by applying online. She included a recommendation from someone at her internship in her application.

“I don’t know if that helped me,” said the 22-year-old management major, “but I hope it did.”

—*Chip Cutter contributed to this article*

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