

Rethinking Early Talent Hiring in the Era of COVID-19

What College Students Need Now

April 2020



In a matter of weeks, the US college grad hiring forecast shifted from what was supposed to be the best market in 50 years to the worst since the 2008 recession.

Economic downturns aren't new, but this time, the practice of employers engaging with in-person campus visits came to a screeching halt. This shift has left HR departments and talent acquisition leaders in crisis mode, uncertain on how they'll recruit students or fill their early talent pipeline, with several major decisions to make as they adjust recruiting strategies for the remainder of the year.

The current employer sentiment on college grad hiring is neutral to positive, hinting at a strong desire to return to normal and a desire to maintain momentum if possible.

To offer our support in these rapidly changing and uncertain times, we put together [a list of 500 companies](#) that are still hiring candidates now.

We reached deep into our network and combined quantitative data with qualitative insights from across our early talent ecosystem to produce this report, **Rethinking Early Talent Hiring in the Era of COVID-19: What College Students Need Now.** We hope that these findings help you write a playbook for effectively recruiting early talent during this time.



"I know school should be my biggest concern, but my biggest concern right now is maintaining relationships with people that I'm not gonna be able to see for a while. And trying to utilize technology to be able to video chat them."

—Sophomore, April 2020

Key Findings

01

How are students prioritizing their career search amidst all the change and stress?

- Students are still finding time to engage, but they are balancing the job search with other concerns like family, physical health, and mental health.

02

Are candidates changing their career priorities and plans? What new trends are emerging with early talent?

- Students want personalized proactive outreach from employers. Regardless of how uncertain students are about the future, they want to stay connected with employers.

03

How are candidates navigating the virtual world, in terms of both searching for roles and the nature of those roles being virtual (at least for now)?

- Applicant volumes are in flux across sectors with increased interest in nonprofit, pharma, and healthcare.
- Students' location preferences have remained the same, but they are more open to gig work.

04

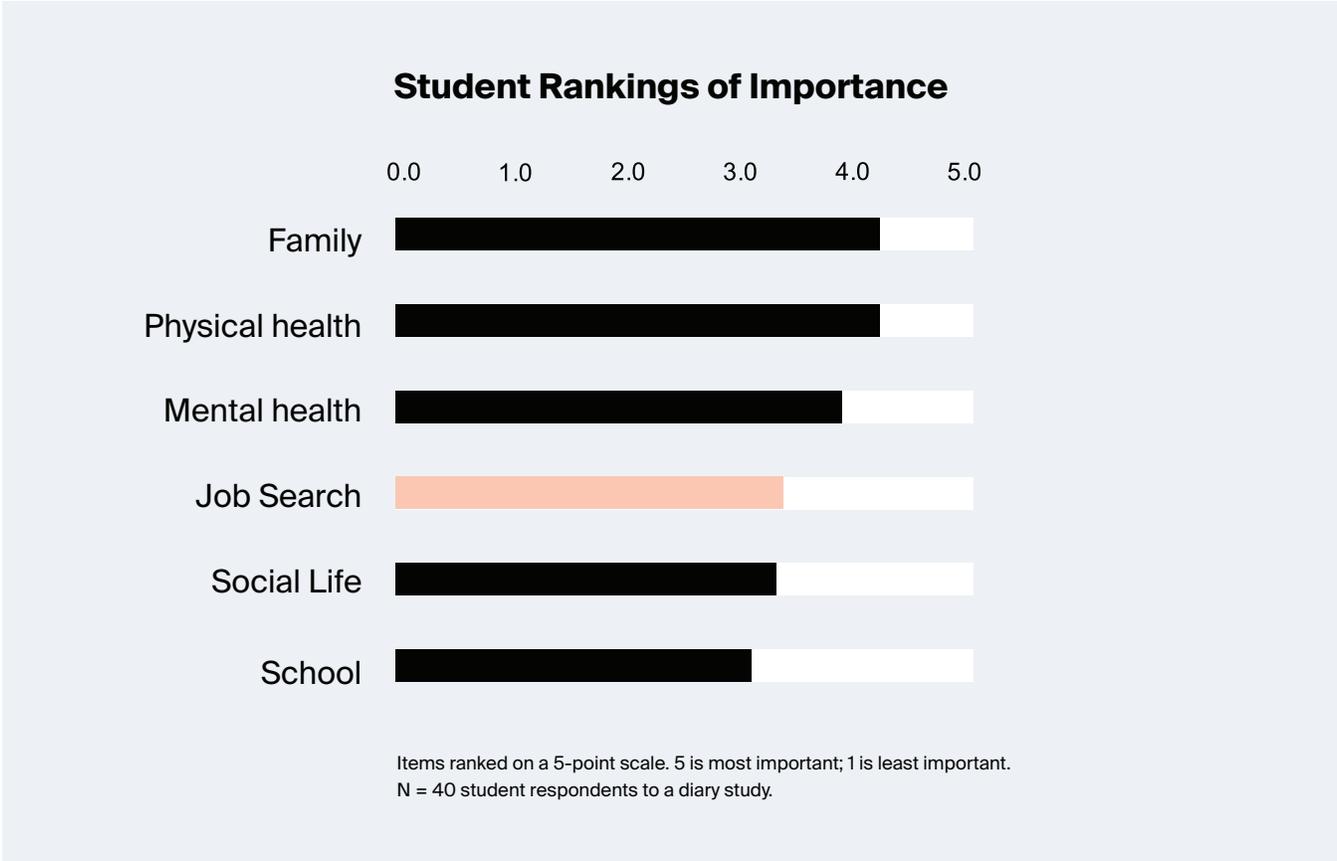
What are effective ways to reach students and build an authentic brand and relationships with them virtually?

- Students are quickly switching to digital recruiting and are looking for support from their universities and connection with employers.

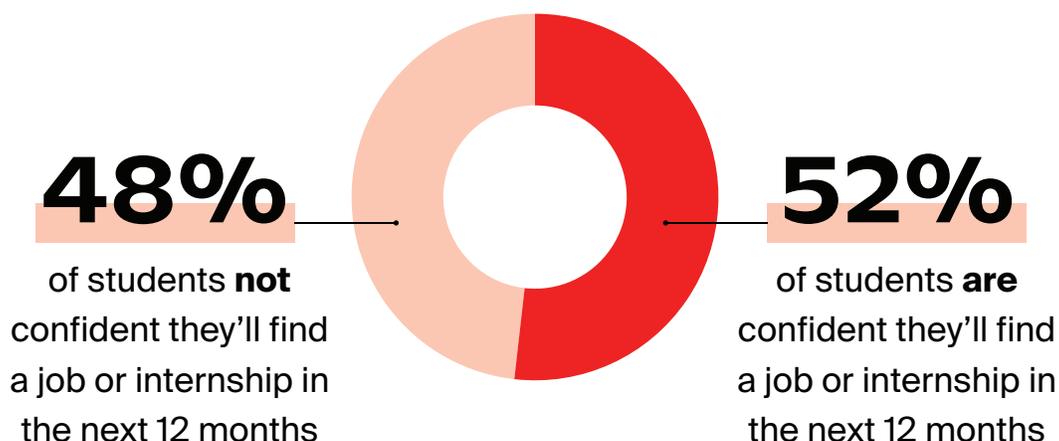
How are students prioritizing their career search amidst the change and stress?

The nation has a lot on its collective mind right now, with students experiencing an added layer of anxiety about their job search since many left campus to shelter back home. Students are responding to COVID-19 by prioritizing what’s immediately in front of them—family and their own health.

While more than 3 in 4 students say getting a good job quickly is one of their top three concerns, finding a job is not top of mind in the immediate term. As the nation gets a handle on mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 in our communities, we expect these attitudes to change rapidly.



Meanwhile, COVID-19 has left students evenly divided between pessimism and optimism about their future employment opportunities. Fifty-two percent of students surveyed say they are confident they'll find a job or internship in the next 12 months, while the other 48% say that they're not.



This sentiment changed quickly as the novel coronavirus progressed into a national pandemic. Employers can be a calming influence for students by reaching out and letting them know which jobs are still available.

Employers that are still hiring can win hearts and minds with simple outreach to students who are not confident in their future work opportunities. College students and alumni want reassurance—they're open to hearing from employers and want to know the roles you're still hiring for. Above all, students want to be contacted personally and proactively.

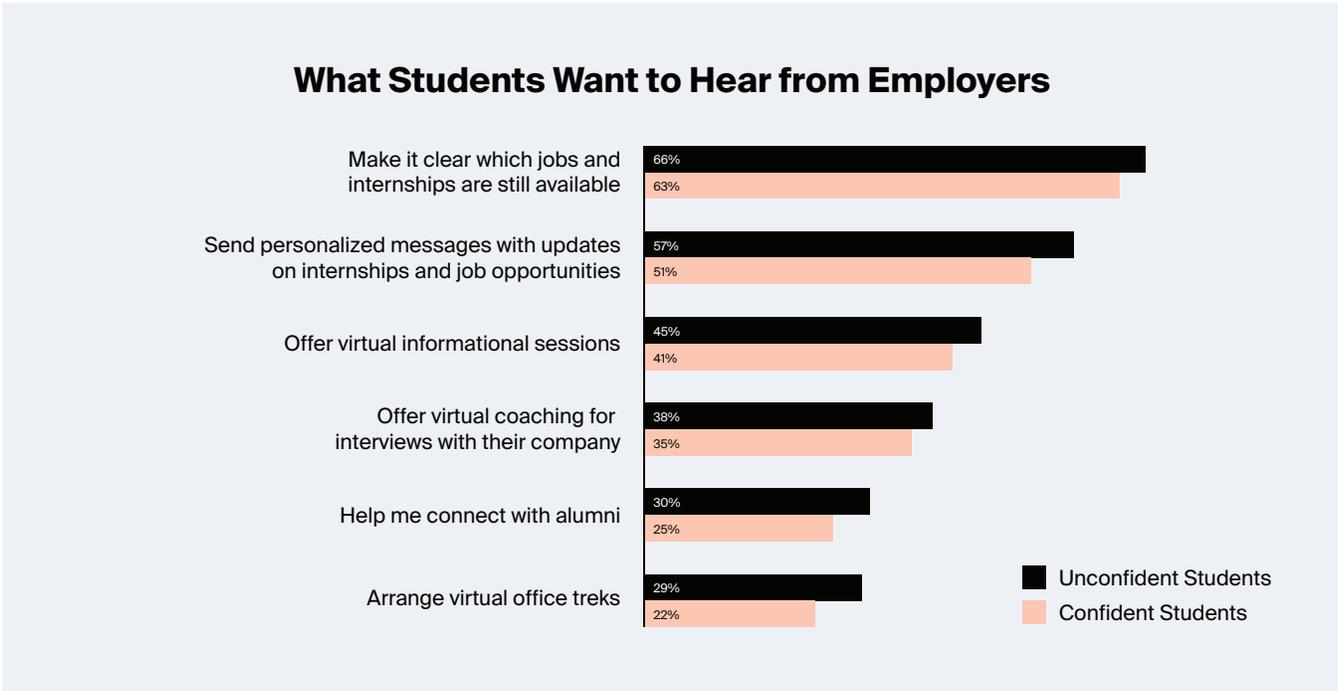
If you're freezing hiring or are in a "wait and see" period, employers can take this opportunity to ramp up their employer brand and nurture qualified candidates for when they're ready to hire again. When students opt to follow your company on Handshake, for example, they'll receive alerts when you post new jobs in the future.

Helpful tip: Personalize your messages to thousands of students at scale with Handshake Premium.

Whether confident about the future or not, students still want to hear from employers.

Every 2 in 3 students wants to know which roles are still open. Simple gestures can go a long way in communicating with candidates during these unprecedented times. By hosting a virtual event, companies can engage qualified early talent through a “behind-the-scenes” look into their culture, employee panel, or info session.

For those students who are still actively searching for jobs, it’s game on. Student attendance for virtual events on Handshake jumped by more than 50% in March 2020, compared to February, and with nearly 60% of students viewing jobs on Handshake, we’re seeing that students are still continuing to apply to jobs and engage with employers.



As students rapidly move their career search online, employers can turn to the web to find the most qualified talent. Handshake is a proven partner students already rely on and trust when it comes to finding their next job. Students on Handshake are so hungry to hear from employers that they engage with direct messages 4x more often than B2B email¹, and 2x more often than LinkedIn InMail².

¹ <https://www.campaignmonitor.com/resources/knowledge-base/what-is-the-average-b2b-email-open-rate/>
² <https://emfluence.com/blog/use-linkedin-sponsored-inmail-next-campaign#ref>

Are candidates changing their career priorities and plans? What new trends are emerging with early talent?

Students are still logging on to talent networks like Handshake, but the number of applications employers are receiving vary from industry to industry. Certain sectors are posting fewer jobs—notably [hospitality \(-74.2%\)](#), [energy \(-54.6%\)](#), and [transportation \(-53.6%\)](#)—contributing to this disparity.

When it comes to business and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors, these candidates are still applying to the same sectors as before the pandemic. While overall industry preferences have shifted slightly, we're noticing that certain roles generate more interest from students during this time.

Most Active Majors

Students with these majors were most active on Handshake in the past four weeks:

1. Business
2. Social Sciences
3. Engineering
4. Computer Science
5. Civics & Government

These interests may be aligning with the demand for top talent to respond in the fight against COVID-19.

19%

increase in students interested in Respiratory Therapy



15%

increase in students interested in Emergency Medical Technicians and Paramedics



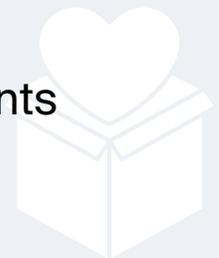
32%

increase in students interested in postal services work



17%

increase in students interested in volunteering

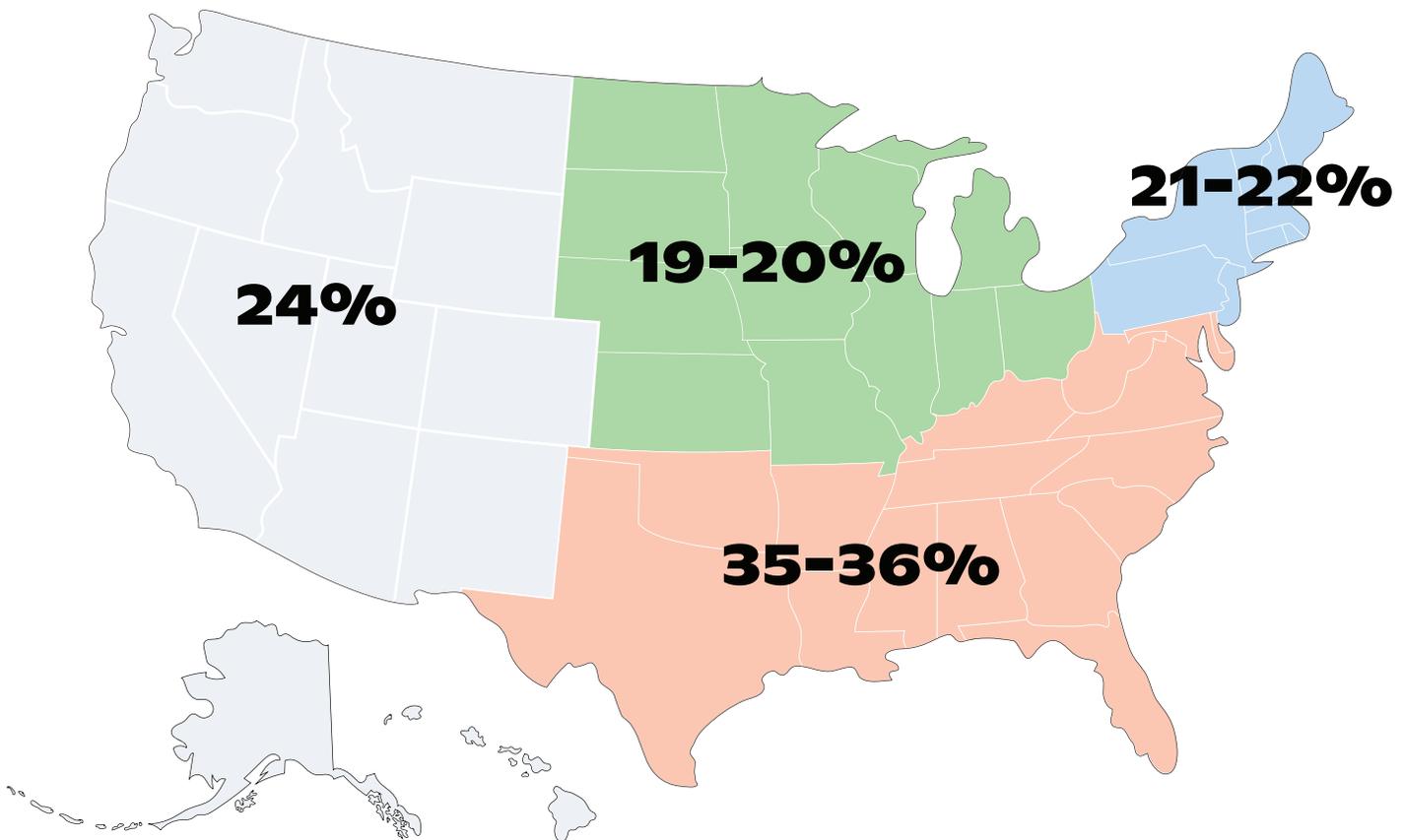


While certain roles are generating more interest from students, sentiments regarding job location and relocation remain unchanged.

We have seen no impact on any regions where students would be willing to work. In fact, students are just as open to relocation as they were prior to the pandemic.

Employers on Handshake can be confident that they can continue to search for students across geographies to find the right candidates to fill their roles.

Applications by Role Location



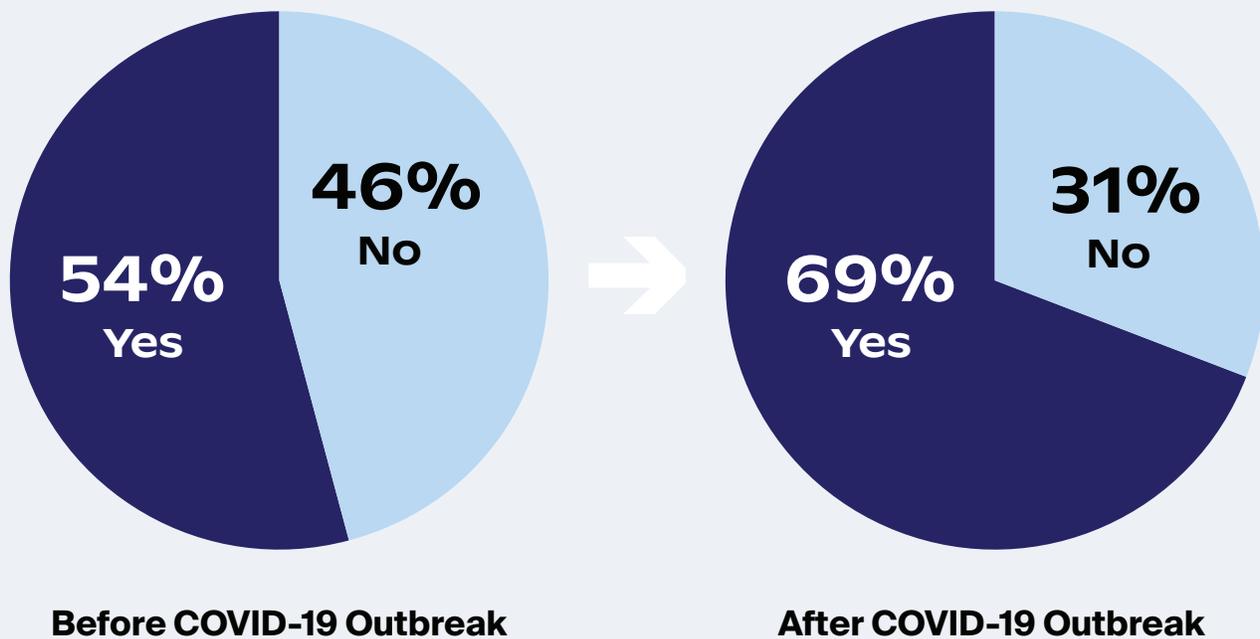
Source: Handshake network data from February 10 to March 30, 2020

With 61% of seniors open to considering a job in the gig economy, students are prioritizing income generation in the face of COVID-19.

We're seeing more openness from students to accepting part-time contracts, freelance, or gig work rather than hold out for a full-time role.

Students across all classes agree, with **7 in 10 underclassmen saying that they would consider a job in the gig economy.**

Would you consider taking a job in the gig economy?



61%

of seniors would consider a job in the gig economy

70%

of underclassmen would consider a job in the gig economy

How are candidates navigating the virtual world, in terms of both searching for roles and the nature of those roles being virtual (at least for now)?

Providing opportunities for recent graduates entering the workforce is more relevant than ever. It's also more urgent as students face an economic downturn that could become a recession, reminiscent of the anxieties graduating millennials experienced in 2008.

Students are proactively raising their hands to ask for help, and career advisors are their natural first choice. Now, they need help from employers, higher education institutions, and other students in the digital job search—from how to stand out online to connecting with recruiters virtually to finding employers with open jobs.

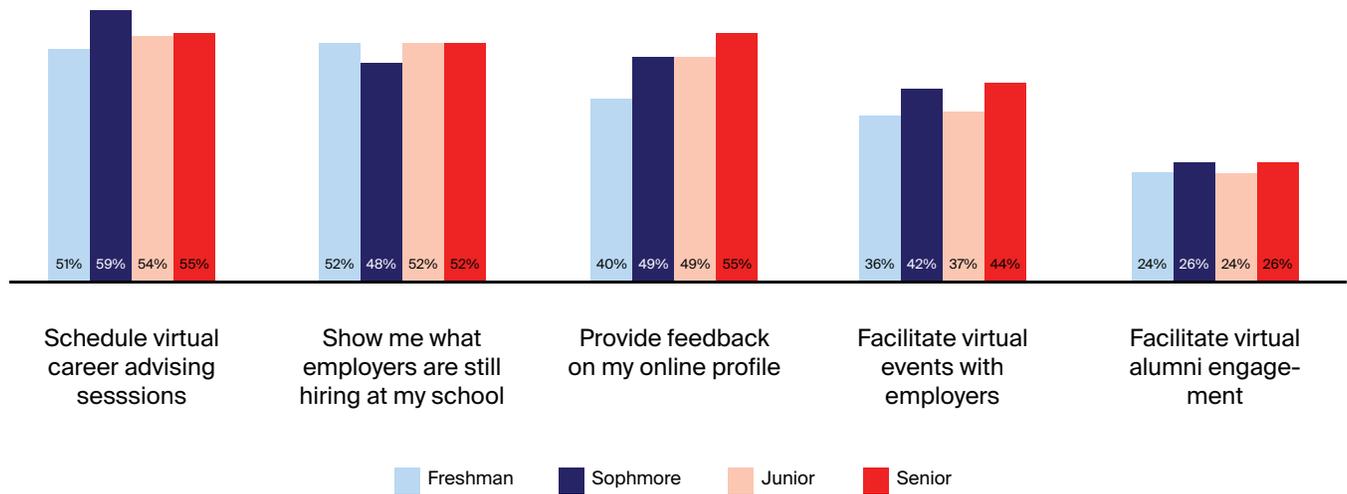
69%

of **all students** want their career center to help facilitate interactions and communications with employers

74%

of **seniors** want their career center to help facilitate interactions and communications with employers

Starting a career search for the first time can be daunting as it is. **Nearly 100% of the students we surveyed say they want their university career services to ramp up online job searches during this time, and they also want to meet with employers—especially those still hiring from their school.** Here's what they told us they need help with most:



Campuses are closed, and employers aren't traveling. This leaves the class of 2020 more dependent than ever on their university career centers. The digital natives behind Gen Z pioneered the adoption of online social platforms like TikTok and Snapchat, but now they need help from universities in leveraging professional networks such as Handshake and LinkedIn. They also need help connecting virtually with employers that are still hiring.



Without access to on-campus resources and processes, students are focusing on crafting their digital presence. While it might not be a top priority, the job search remains top of mind for students who are currently conducting a range of key activities online.

	Plan to network in the coming weeks	Plan to update their online profiles in the coming weeks	Plan to attend a virtual recruiting event
Seniors	44%	59%	20%
All Students	41%	51%	41%

In our current situation, an employer's digital brand is considered even more impactful than before. It's critical for employers to put their best foot forward, whether that's by refreshing your company page to include your response to COVID-19, enabling a dynamic employer brand, or highlighting your corporate culture through a virtual event.

For a generation that grew up with phones in their hands and the world's knowledge at their fingertips, working remotely isn't a foreign concept.

Today's students are willing and enabled to do so. In fact, 84% of students surveyed would consider a remote job or internship, and 3 in 4 students say that they are set up and able to do a remote internship from home. The main question then is: are employers set up to help new grads succeed?

What are effective ways to reach students and build an authentic brand and relationships with them virtually?

Employers are embracing digital in a big way: shifting from in-person to digital approaches during one of the historically busiest recruiting seasons of the year to connect with students about available roles. We've seen **26x more virtual interviews year over year**, and **virtual career fairs and events promoted on Handshake are up 9x and 3x respectively from 2019 to 2020.**

The majority of events being hosted on Handshake—80%—are now virtual. We expect that trend to continue into the fall, especially if campuses remain closed.

237%

increase in virtual events*

2500%

increase in virtual interviews*

257%

increase in messages sent**

825%

increase in virtual career fairs*

*Source: Handshake platform data, March 30, 2020-April 13, 2020 (planned events) as compared to April 1, 2019-April 27, 2019

**Source: Handshake platform data, March 9, 2020-April 13, 2020 (planned events) as compared to March 11, 2019-April 8, 2019

Handshake is here to help during this time of unprecedented change. Whether you're an employer learning how to navigate the shift to digital, a student looking to become the best possible virtual candidate, or a school wanting to help students thrive in a digital world, we will support you every step of the way.

Report Methodology

- **Handshake platform data**

Handshake has the largest early talent network with over 6M active students. We leveraged our platform to supplement survey data to uniquely pair what students and employers are saying with how they're behaving.

- **Student survey**

We ran a student survey connecting with 1,000 current students about how COVID-19 has impacted their education, their lives, and how they view the future.

- **Employer survey**

We also ran an employer survey that connected with those active on the Handshake platform, specifically recruiting and specialized in early talent.