Theirworld
Education builds tomorrow

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Business Coalition for Education

The missing link between education and employment:

Global youth perspectives on getting into work

2026

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Youth perspectives on employment

Across the world, concerns are growing about how young people transition from education to work.

Around one in four young people globally are not in employment, education or training (NEET).[1] In OECD countries, the figure is around one in eight.[2] In the UK, more than one million young people are now NEET – the worst figures in more than a decade[3] – and in the US, just under five million young people aged 18–24 are neither in education nor work.[4]

At the same time, business leaders are facing a rising talent crisis.

The World Economic Forum identifies skills gaps as the main barrier to business transformation in the next five years.[5] In the UK, three-quarters of businesses struggle to find the skills they need[6] and in the US, 69% of employers report difficulty finding talent.[7]

Something isn't adding up. How can businesses struggle to find talent while millions of young people struggle to find opportunities?

Two things stood out as we looked at the debate.

First, there is a lot of talk about young people, but not necessarily with them. Through our work with young people worldwide, including our network of 10,000 trained Global Youth Ambassadors, we know young people not only provide valuable insights into the challenges they face but can also offer potential solutions.

Second, most of the debate is taking place on a country-by-country basis. However, businesses increasingly operate across borders, technology is reshaping work globally, and workforce challenges are often shared across markets.

So, in response, Theirworld surveyed over 5,000 young people across Brazil, India, South Africa, Spain, the UK and the US. We wanted to understand their experiences transitioning from education to work, the barriers they face – and the support they believe will make a difference.

What surprised us most wasn't that young people identified skills challenges; it was how consistent their answers were.

We expected young people in different countries to tell different stories. Different economies, education systems and labor markets should produce different experiences, right? Instead, we kept hearing the same thing.

Across countries, work experience emerged as one of the clearest missing links between education and employment. Young people told us employers want more experience than they have. And they consistently identified apprenticeships, internships, work placements and business-led training as among the most effective ways to help them succeed.

This led us to conclude that by providing more avenues for young people to gain experience, businesses stand to gain not only by supporting young people but also by building their talent pipelines, improving retention and lowering recruitment costs.

Of course, we couldn't do this research without considering the impact of AI. The data was clear: AI is already making it harder to access entry-level jobs and opportunities. This will likely only worsen if we don't take immediate action.

This report examines young people's insights across six countries on entering work and how businesses can help bridge education and employment gaps to access future talent for growth.

We also provide practical recommendations for business leaders, such as: building more routes into work; proactively developing new talent and protecting the first rung of the career ladder from AI.

Because when more young people successfully transition into work, businesses gain access to future talent, communities become stronger and economies grow.





Justin van Fleet
President, Theirworld

Young people are ready for work

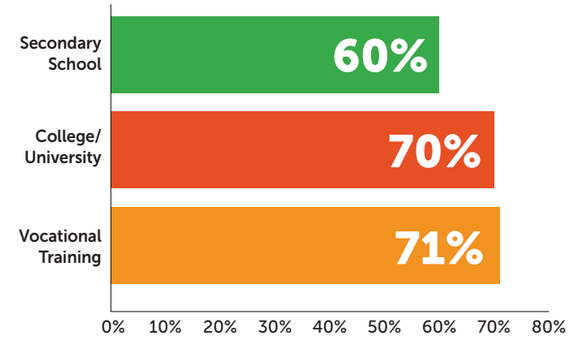
Young people are more ready for work than they are often given credit for. Across the six countries surveyed, almost two-thirds (64%) said **they felt prepared to work in their chosen field.**

Confidence also rises with education and training. Six in 10 (60%) young people whose education ended at secondary school said they felt prepared for work, rising to 70% among those who completed university/college and 71% among those who completed vocational education or training.

These findings reinforce the value of post-secondary education and training. They also challenge the assumption that university or college is the only effective pathway into employment. Young people who completed vocational education felt just as prepared to enter the workforce as those who followed a university or college route, highlighting the important role multiple pathways can play in preparing them for work.

Further education and training boost young people's confidence about work

Further education and training lift preparedness from 60% to around 70%.

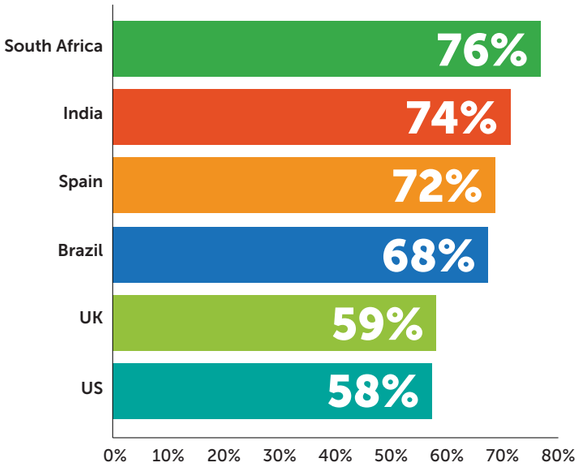


Base: Young people aged 18–24 across Brazil, India, South Africa, Spain, the UK and the US.

Source: Theirworld Global Youth Survey, 2026.

Where do young people feel most ready for work?

Most young people feel prepared for work (64% overall), but confidence differs between countries.



Base: Young people aged 18–24 across six countries.

Source: Theirworld Global Youth Survey, 2026.

What's holding them back? The experience paradox

If young people feel ready to work, what is holding them back?

Across the six countries surveyed, one challenge emerged more consistently than any other: experience.

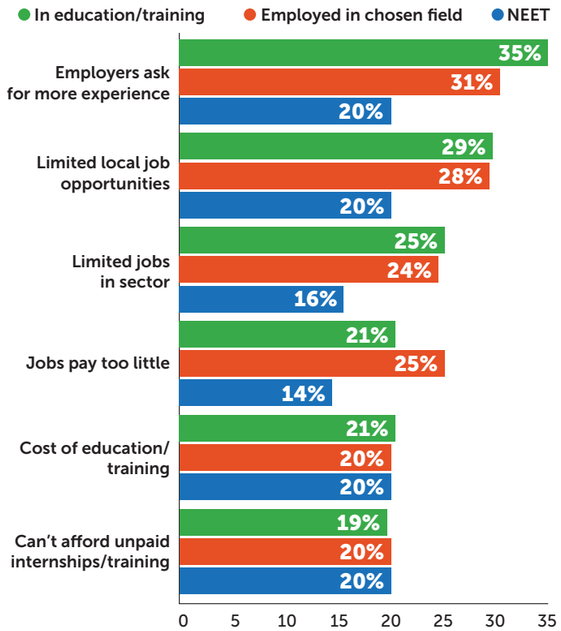
More than a third (35%) of young people currently in education or training said they were **worried that employers asking for more experience than they have could prevent them from securing a role in their chosen field.** This concern appears well-founded. Among those already working in their chosen career, almost a third (31%) said **a lack of experience had been a barrier when they were looking for work.**

This is particularly striking because it is not limited to young people who are struggling to enter the workforce: young people who have successfully entered their chosen career are looking back and identifying the same challenge.

The picture was slightly different for unemployed young people who were not in education or training (NEET). While one in five (20%) identified **a lack of experience as a barrier to working or training in their chosen career,** they were just as likely to cite **the cost of education or training** (20%), **limited local job opportunities** (20%) and an **inability to afford unpaid internships or training opportunities** (20%).

Taken together, the findings suggest that experience is one of the most consistent barriers facing young people moving from education into employment. But for some young people, the challenge is not simply gaining skills or experience: it is being able to afford access to them.

For those in education and work, experience is the biggest barrier

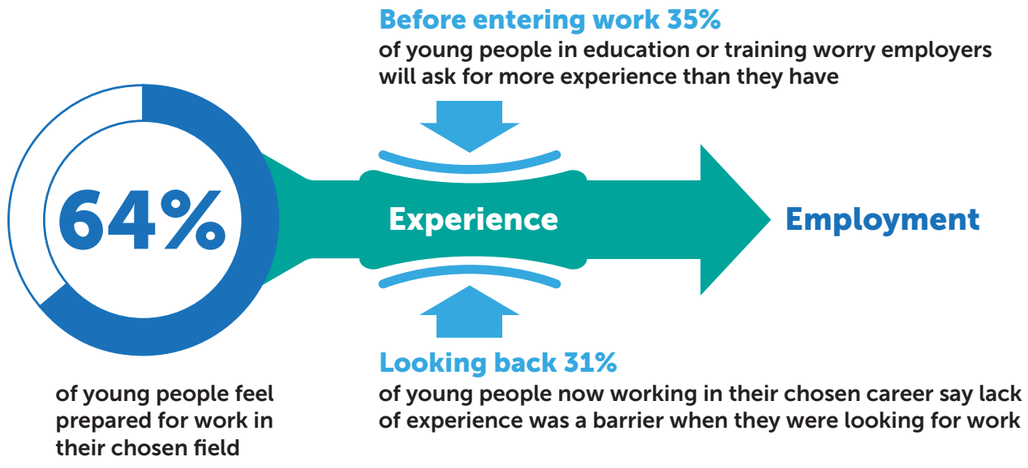


Base: Young people aged 18–24 across six countries; currently in education/training, working in their chosen field, or not in education, employment or training (NEET), as indicated.

Source: Theirworld Global Youth Survey, 2026.

The experience paradox

Young people feel ready for work. But experience is getting in the way.



Base: Young people aged 18–24 across six countries. Bases vary by question.

Source: Theirworld Global Youth Survey, 2026.

What young people want – work where learning continues

Young people are not just identifying barriers. They are also identifying solutions.

Across the six countries surveyed, young people consistently pointed to employers as having a critical role to play in preparing the next generation for work.

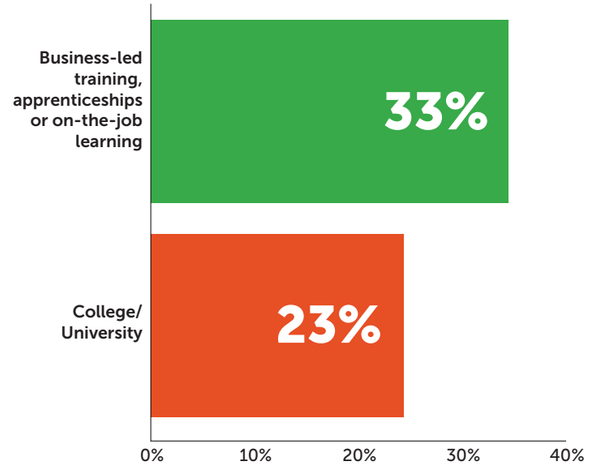
When asked which type of organization or programs best suited to prepare young people for employment, a third (33%) **selected business-led training, apprenticeships or on-the-job learning**. This comes ahead of colleges and universities, where just under a quarter (23%) of young people think these provide the best preparation.

The message became even clearer when young people were asked how businesses should support employment opportunities. The two most popular responses were **scholarships, internships and apprenticeships** (39%) and **job training programs** (39%). More than a third (36%) also wanted employers to **offer entry-level roles that prioritize learning and development,** while a third (33%) supported **hiring practices that look beyond formal education or degrees.**

The implication is clear: if businesses want access to future talent, they need to take a more active role in helping to create it.

The workplace is the next classroom

When asked what best prepares them for work, young people put business-led learning ahead of colleges and universities.



Four ways young people want business to open the door to work

Young people see business playing an important role in helping them build skills, gain experience and get into work.

39%
Open more ways in
Scholarships, internships and apprenticeships

39%
Build skills on the job
Job training programs

36%
Make entry-level jobs places to learn
Entry-level roles prioritizing learning and development

33%
Look beyond degrees
Look beyond formal education or degrees

AI risks removing the first rung of the career ladder

Young people are already thinking about how artificial intelligence could affect their future careers. Across the six countries surveyed, nearly a third (31%) said **they worry the job they are qualified for will be replaced by AI**. Almost one in five (18%) said **they have already found it harder to secure entry-level jobs because of AI** – and this rises to 24% among young people in India.

These findings matter because experience emerged as one of the most consistent barriers facing young people throughout the research. If AI reduces some of the entry-level opportunities that have traditionally helped young people gain experience, it raises an important question: where will future experienced workers come from?

AI risks removing the first rung of the career ladder

Young people are already concerned about the impact of AI on jobs and entry-level opportunities.

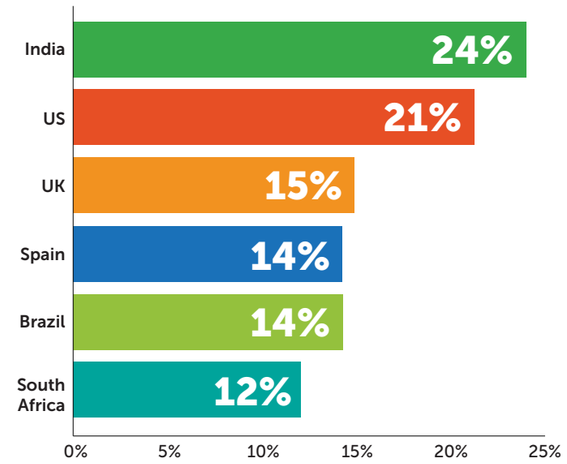
31% **of young people surveyed worry AI will replace jobs they are qualified for**

18% **of young people surveyed say AI has already made it harder to secure entry-level jobs**

Base: Young people aged 18–24 across six countries (all respondents).
Source: Theirworld Global Youth Survey, 2026.

AI is already making it harder for some young people to secure entry-level jobs

Across the six countries surveyed, 18% of young people say they have already found it harder to secure entry-level jobs because of AI, rising to 24% – or nearly one in four – in India.



Base: Young people aged 18–24 across six countries.
Source: Theirworld Global Youth Survey, 2026.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Build more routes into work – not just graduate schemes.

Our findings show young people who complete vocational education or training feel just as prepared for work as those who complete university or college. Yet many businesses still concentrate early-career recruitment around graduate pathways and degree requirements.

Businesses should create more routes that allow people to build skills while working or studying, rather than requiring them to complete their education first and enter work afterwards. These can include apprenticeships, paid training pathways, employer-recognized certifications and micro-credentials linked to real workforce needs and routes into employment.

Major employers are already moving in this direction. Companies including IBM, Aon, General Motors, Walmart and ExxonMobil are looking beyond traditional degree requirements and adopting skills-based hiring approaches. Aon, for example, runs a two-year apprenticeship program with City Colleges of Chicago, where apprentices spend one day a week in class and four at work.[8]

The potential gains are not limited to a wider talent pool. Research from the Burning Glass Institute and Harvard Business School found that, among companies leading on skills-based hiring, non-degree hires had retention rates 10 percentage points higher than their colleagues with degrees.[9]

Walmart reports a similar business benefit from Live Better U, which offers eligible employees company-funded education, including degrees, certificates and skilled trades programs. Participants leave the company at a rate four times lower than that of non-participants and are twice as likely to be promoted, helping Walmart retain employees and build talent from within.[10]

Recommendation 2:

Give young people experience before asking for it.

Our findings reveal a clear paradox. More than a third of young people in education or training worry that employers will ask for more experience than they have, and even among those already working in their chosen career, almost a third say lack of experience was a barrier when looking for work.

Businesses can help break this cycle by opening up the workplace earlier. Structured internships, mentoring and job-shadowing programs give young people direct exposure to how organizations work, what different roles involve and what employers expect – before a vacancy is even advertised.

For employers, the benefits are twofold. First, earlier workplace exposure can create a direct pipeline into recruitment. In the US, recent data from the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that organizations running in-person internships made full-time job offers to an average of 72% of interns.[11]

Second, the benefits of mentoring for those who act as mentors are well established. Mentors report greater job satisfaction and organizational commitment than employees who do not mentor. Businesses can therefore open workplace experience to young people while creating meaningful development and engagement opportunities for existing employees.[12]

Businesses do not have to build these programs alone. In the UK, The King's Trust works with major employers including TK Maxx, showing how specialist partners can offer programs at scale. Its partnership with TK Maxx and Homesense has helped more than 15,000 young people develop vital skills and access education, training and career opportunities since 2013.[13]

One note of caution, however: where opportunities involve substantive work or a significant time commitment, they should be paid. Our own findings show that one in five unemployed young people outside education or training cite being unable to afford unpaid internships or training as a barrier. Unpaid opportunities risk reinforcing the very experience gap businesses are trying to solve by restricting access to those who can afford to work for free.

Chapter 5

Recommendation 3:

Don’t wait for job-ready talent. Help build it.

Young people want businesses to play a bigger role in preparing them for work. They told us they see business-led training, apprenticeships and on-the-job learning as some of the best ways to build the skills they need. For employers facing persistent skills shortages, the opportunity is clear: businesses cannot rely solely on schools, colleges, universities or the external labor market to produce the talent they need.

Companies should start with the roles and skills they struggle to find, then work backwards. The first step can be as simple as partnering with a training provider or workforce organization that already reaches potential talent.

Google Career Certificates are designed to foster job-ready skills in high-growth fields. The Google Career Certificates Employer Consortium then connects certificate holders with more than 150 US companies, including Verizon, Walmart and Google. Google also runs a UK consortium, with participating employers including the BBC, BT and John Lewis, which consider the certificates when recruiting for relevant roles.[14]

Theirworld’s Youth Skills Accelerator offers another route. It connects employers with youth-serving organizations across the US, giving businesses access to organizations already reaching and preparing potential talent in their area. Over the past four years, the Accelerator has reached more than 250,000 young people a year.[15]

One simple model worth replicating is the Accelerator’s three-day Leadership Lab, recently piloted in New York City with Dell, HP and Stellantis. It brings businesses and youth organizations together to co-create practical solutions to workforce challenges.

Where skills gaps are more persistent, businesses can go further and help shape the training itself. In the US, SAP asked Theirworld’s Business Coalition for Education to identify a partner for its Educate to Employ program, leading to a partnership with Per Scholas. Together, they are training young people in skills linked to employment opportunities across SAP’s partner and client ecosystem.[16]



Recommendation 4:

Protect the first rung of the career ladder from AI.

Nearly a third of young people surveyed worry that AI will replace jobs they are qualified to do. They have good reason to be concerned: many of the tasks AI is taking over are those that traditionally help young people get a foot in the door, learn on the job and build a career.

This creates a risk for business too. If companies use AI to remove entry-level work, where will future managers and leaders come from?

Businesses need to look carefully at how AI is changing junior roles: which tasks are disappearing, which are changing and, crucially, how young employees will gain the experience they once built by doing them.

McKinsey argues that entry-level jobs should be redesigned around learning and development, rather than leaving junior employees with whatever work AI cannot do. That could mean involving them in real business problems earlier and giving them responsibility for asking the right questions, checking AI-generated work and deciding when and how it should be used. McKinsey warns that companies which sharply reduce entry-level hiring risk weakening both their talent pipeline and future leadership capability.[10]

The skills young people need will change too. As AI takes on more routine work, human judgment, critical thinking and the ability to check the quality of AI-generated work become more valuable. The answer is not simply to teach every young person "AI skills". Business needs people who can work with AI, question what it produces and make good decisions about how it is used.[11]

Intel's AI for Future Workforce program offers one practical example of business helping education providers respond to this shift, with curriculums designed to build applied AI capabilities for employability.

For business leaders, the question is not just what work can AI do? It is how will we develop the people we need next if the first step into work disappears?

Building the future workforce together

Young people are the future workforce, but they are also the entrepreneurs and innovators our economies will depend on. Yet they cannot participate in the future of work if they cannot make the transition into work in the first place. As I've said before, securing a job takes more than skills and study – it takes exposure, connection and confidence.

That is what makes the report's finding on work experience so important. It identifies a tangible, near-universal barrier and offers practical ways businesses can start to address it.

At HP, we're not waiting for job-ready talent. We're helping people build the skills and capabilities they need to adapt as work changes, and we've set an ambition to accelerate the Future of Work for 150 million people by 2030. That means helping to build the future worker not just for HP, but for businesses around the world that will need skilled, experienced people to grow in an increasingly technology-driven economy.

Doing this successfully means investing in multiple skills pathways. **HP LIFE** makes more than 30 practical business and digital skills courses available free to anyone, anywhere – from AI and digital skills to communication, finance and preparing for work. And through our **Future of Work Accelerator**, we invest in organizations developing solutions to the barriers that prevent people from participating in the future of work.

One of those organizations is Extern, which connects students with real projects for businesses. Its model gets right to the heart of one of this report's recommendations: **give young people experience before asking for it**.

Now, together with Theirworld, we are taking another step. From São Paulo to Johannesburg, from digital and AI skills to entrepreneurship, we're backing five organizations around the world to **test and scale different routes into work**, reaching more than 120,000 young people by the end of 2027.

Crucially, this is about more than reach. We want to learn what works and what businesses can contribute – whether that is technology and digital learning, expertise and mentoring, or helping organizations better understand a rapidly changing employment landscape.

The future workforce is not something business can simply wait for. We all have a role in building it. For leaders asking how they can play their part, joining our Global Business Coalition for Education is a great place to start. There, you'll meet other business leaders, share ideas and learn from what's working – and connect with organizations already creating solutions at scale.



Michele Malejki

Global Head of Social Impact, HP Inc. and Executive Director, HP Foundation

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Methodology

Mortar Research carried out a survey targeting 18–24 year olds in the USA, UK, India, Brazil, Spain and South Africa. The sample was nationally representative of gender and region.

The survey asked respondents about their experiences with finding employment and the skills they felt were important for this.

Respondents were incentivised and each provided opt-in consent in line with MRS and GDPR guidelines.

This survey was taken by a total of 5,046 respondents on both mobile and desktop devices. The study ran from 21st August to the 25th of August 2025.

Multi sourced approach
The different recruitment methods used alongside the supplier blend removes any potential single source bias.

Quality control
Measures in place on both a supplier and respondent level. These include Geo IP tracking and digital fingerprint checks to ensure that there is no duplication or link manipulation.

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