

*Handshake Early Talent Awards 2023*

Your game  
plan for winning  
early talent

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# Winning with Gen Z for your competitive edge

The annual Handshake Early Talent awards recognize employers with best-in-class early talent engagement. Award-winning teams go above and beyond in recruiting, engaging, and hiring the next generation of leaders, and accelerating Handshake's mission of helping people launch their careers—regardless of experience, connections, where they go to school, or luck.

## Why early talent?

Investing in early talent today will pay dividends for years to come.  
By hiring talent 0-5 years post-grad, you're:



Securing in-demand skills that will give you a competitive advantage and driving retention to keep those skills in house



Balancing budget cuts while efficiently scaling your workforce with the right mix of virtual, in-person, and hybrid recruiting and school events



Filling the tech talent pipeline to keep pace with global digital transformation



Building relationships with students throughout their college careers



Deepening diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) commitments to meet expectations of what job seekers, investors, employees, and communities want to see



So, you want to win early talent—and win an [Early Talent Award](#) while you're at it?



# Assessing performance with a proven methodology

Handshake's data insights engine reviews activity across employers on the platform annually. Each of the Early Talent Awards criteria maps to an important outcome for employers and demonstrates an engaging early talent recruiting program. To measure success, Handshake has identified four key focus areas for employers looking to build enduring competitive advantage.

Early Talent Award winners are evaluated on their early talent recruitment and engagement activity, not by their company size, hiring volume, or self-nomination. This reduces bias in the selection process and means employers across industry categories and company sizes are eligible to win.

The metrics in this guide will help you not only strengthen your early talent recruiting program to win with in-demand Gen Z talent, but also help you achieve the best outcomes for students.

## Success metrics

1

**Gen Z brand resonance:**<sup>1</sup>  
creating an employer brand that appeals to next-gen leaders

2

**Engagement:**<sup>2</sup>  
engaging in strategic outreach to target talent segments

3

**Event participation:**<sup>3</sup> connecting with students through recruiting events (virtual and in person)

4

**Relationships:**<sup>4</sup>  
building relationships with ideal candidates earlier, throughout their college careers and the academic year

<sup>1</sup> Total job views compared to total applications

<sup>2</sup> Unique clicks per distinct message recipient on Handshake

<sup>3</sup> Ratio of career fair or event registrants to attendees and percentage of 1:1 sessions that were filled

<sup>4</sup> Off-peak messaging and messaging to freshmen and sophomores

# Gen Z brand resonance

## HOW IT'S MEASURED

Ratio of total job views compared to total applicants

## BENCHMARK

The top 10 employers ranking highest in Gen Z Brand Resonance saw an average of 1 to 3 job views per referred application. In comparison, non-winning companies had an average of 200 views per referred application, meaning only one in 200 job seekers applied.

**A strong employer brand can capture early talent's attention**—even if it's a brand they've never heard of before. Employers across industries have an opportunity to stand out with in-demand Gen Z talent, but the right strategy is key. The way you present your company on career platforms, your website, and at events all impact the perception of your brand.

Want to resonate with Gen Z? Here are a few ways to better showcase your brand. You can either win a candidate over—or turn them off—from the start.

A job description is often a candidate's first impression of your organization. Make sure your job posts:

1

**Use a relevant job title**—treat potential job titles like keywords

2

**Focus on skills, coursework, and certification—not experience**—most recent grads have fewer than three years of experience

3

**Use inclusive language**—remove industry jargon and gendered words

4

**Exclude rigid requirements**—such as GPA cut off, limited application windows, and additional documents

5

**State compensation and benefits**—Gen Z is looking for stability and these job seekers see salary transparency as critical to DEI





Displaying salary or salary ranges in a job post is the most compelling factor that attracts Gen Z to apply. In a recent study by Handshake, 95% of respondents said salary range in a job description aids their job search.<sup>5</sup> Head to our blog for more best practices about writing job descriptions for early talent.

<sup>5</sup> Handshake User Survey. (2023). What Students Want.

## Highlight your culture, DEI programs, and values

Your company's brand should give early talent insight into your values and overall employee experience so candidates can decide if their own goals align. Your DEI efforts show candidates that you value their uniqueness and embrace an inclusive work atmosphere.



Duolingo's dedicated careers page for students provides insight and information tailored to first-time job seekers. Real employees describe reasons to join Duolingo, such as "impact," "mission," "innovation," and "culture," are all incredibly important to Gen Z. [Learn more →](#)



# Engagement

## HOW IT'S MEASURED

Unique clicks per distinct message recipient on Handshake

## BENCHMARK

The top 10 employers ranking highest in Engagement saw message engagement rates as high as 36%, compared to the average rate of 21% for non-winning companies.

Handshake findings indicate that employers that build relationships 1-on-1 through messaging and video see up to 16x more applications than employers that don't. But who you message and where you message students are just as important as what you say.

### Personalize your message

According to a Handshake survey of more than 1,500 students, **89% said they want to receive messages** directly from potential employers. Use Handshake Campaigns to build better relationships with candidates and to personalize messages using variables that automatically populate a student's first name, major, and institution name. Check out recruiting message templates for inspiration.



### Gen Z told us they are more likely to open an email from a potential employer when:<sup>6</sup>

1

They are familiar with the company or brand

2

The content includes a thorough job description and salary information

3

The subject line and content relate to a recent interaction with the employer

<sup>6</sup> Handshake User Survey. (2023). What Students Want



According to 3x Early Talent Award winner UnitedHealth Group, students are most likely to respond to relevant messages that are personalized, contain relevant job opportunities, spell out the recruiting process, and clarify if a response is needed.



# Event participation

## HOW IT'S MEASURED

Ratio of career fair or event registrants to attendees and percentage of 1:1 career fair sessions filled

## BENCHMARK

The top 10 employers ranking highest in Event Participation saw 179-468 average attendees per employer-hosted event and 96-99% of 1-on-1 sessions filled at virtual career fairs. Non-winning companies had an event participation average of 10 attendees, and a 1-on-1 session fill rate of 45%.

**Hiring events are one of the most impactful ways for students to engage with your brand.** But it's not enough to offer free pizza and hope students show up —Gen Z wants to connect with you at both in-person and virtual events. Here are a few ways you can drive attendance and build excitement.

## Tailor event content to students by year in school

Customize your programming to students by where they are in their college-to-career journey. The Walt Disney Company offers a range of events, including hands-on support like resume and interview prep, to invest in early talent long term—starting in students' first and second years.

## Participate in multi-school virtual fairs

The institution a candidate attends doesn't come close to telling their full story. And for smaller teams without the headcount to visit dozens of different events, virtual fairs are a force multiplier. You can target candidates through multi-school and niche fairs, where candidates may be looking to work in specific industries or use specialized skills.



### Event types early talent prefers to attend:

1

Virtual, general info session

2

In-person, general info session

3

Dinner or lunch

4

Alumni panels





*"Our Virtual Career Series are virtually-run networking events where students across the country can learn more about the firm. Since we can't physically have people at every great university out there, these events have helped us reach new candidates interested in the great opportunities KPMG provides. And, since all students have access to the same information before applying, it helps level the playing field for everyone."*

—Shelby McNary  
University Recruiter Team Lead  
KPMG



## Host your own events, and get creative with themes

A recent Handshake survey found that 87% of early talent job seekers prefer attending an employer-hosted event before applying to a job.<sup>7</sup> Pick a theme for each session and create interactive content that helps students explore career opportunities.

For example, Early Talent Award winner Liberty Mutual offers a variety of engaging event types, like skill-building experiences, DEI and mental health conversations, and tactical support.



<sup>7</sup> Handshake User Survey. (2023). What Students Want.

# Relationships

## HOW IT'S MEASURED

Always-on, year-round messaging to all students and messaging to freshmen and sophomores

## BENCHMARK

The top 10 employers ranking highest in relationships average 85-95% of messages sent to freshmen or sophomores and 84-99% of messages were sent during off-peak months. On average, non-winning companies sent 14% of messages to freshmen or underclassmen and 46% of messages during off-peak months.

Companies that are proactive in engaging early talent—year-round, and not just during seasonal recruiting sprints—have an advantage in meeting their recruiting goals. Here are some Early Talent Award-worthy tips for building strong student relationships.

### Nurture early talent before and after applying to a job

86% of students said they would like to remain in contact with an employer after they accept a role. When you think about hiring a student in the fall for a job to start that next spring or summer, a lot of time will pass before their start date. In a competitive market, **nurturing your candidates will reduce ghosting or job reneging.**



### What types of messages does Gen Z want to receive from a potential employer?<sup>8</sup>

1

To learn about their job search

2

To learn about a job opportunity

3

To learn about the company

4

To learn about different roles and career paths within the company

5

To be introduced to people in relevant roles

<sup>8</sup> Handshake User Survey. (2023). What Students Want.

## Reach out to first- and second-year students

Don't wait to connect with students until they're ready to graduate—it could be too late. Engage with first-year students, not about specific job openings, but to create brand affinity and start building relationships. Tailor your engagement with second and third-year students through employer-hosted events such as offering resume writing workshops, building out your mentorship programs, and exposing them to various career paths at your organization.



**Learn more about how students explore careers and engage with employers on Handshake →**

## Nurture relationships year-round

89% of Gen Z students and recent alumni say they want to receive proactive messages from employers<sup>9</sup>. **By engaging with students outside of peak fall and spring sprints**, you can recruit students who may be busy with: classes, internships, or part-time jobs. Loosening application windows and rigid deadlines, offering internships throughout the year and not just during the summer, and keeping your brand top of mind can demonstrate your commitment to meeting early talent where they are.



*"We were able to extend 85% more offers before October 15th than in previous years. We took several steps including posting our requisitions sooner, utilizing Handshake to encourage applications from students before the peak fall season, and holding virtual events to build consideration and desire with these candidates so that we could process them through our funnel with greater efficiency."*

—[Danny Combs](#),  
Director, NA Talent Acquisition  
Commercial and Employment  
Branding & Initiatives  
Procter & Gamble



<sup>9</sup> Handshake User Survey. (2023). What Students Want

# Engage Gen Z today to win tomorrow

Now that you have the ingredients to build or refresh your early talent program, reference this guide for tools to attract, target, and engage candidates for the scale you need—and work toward becoming a top destination of Gen Z this year.

By striving for success with Handshake's Early Talent Award criteria and benchmarks, you can build a robust early talent pipeline—one that engages the job seekers of today and the graduates of tomorrow—to solve the biggest challenges facing employers today.

## **Are you on track to win top talent?**

Contact us for an Early Talent Program Review

[employers@joinhandshake.com](mailto:employers@joinhandshake.com) • [joinhandshake.com/employers](https://joinhandshake.com/employers)