



The Early-Career Engagement Playbook

Lessons from Award-Winning Teams

An analysis of the strategies, benchmarks, and best practices behind high-performing early-career programs.



Introduction

Today's early-career candidates expect more than an offer letter and a start date. They expect real communication, chances to build relationships, and a clear picture of what it's like to join an organization. Early-career engagement no longer begins on Day One—it begins the moment an offer is accepted.

To recognize organizations leading the way, Abode launched the inaugural **Early-Career Engagement Awards**, celebrating teams that have developed exceptional strategies for engaging interns and early-career talent across five key areas: keep-warm strategies, community building, preventing reneges, mentorship and buddy programs, and internship conversion.

The awards also offer a rare look at what high performers have in common. This report analyzes award-winning applications, combining benchmark data with qualitative insights to surface the practices, themes, and trends behind today's strongest early-career programs—whether you're building a new program or refining an established one.



Table of Contents

Introduction	02
Chapter 1	Keep-Warm Strategies 05
Chapter 2	Community Building 11
Chapter 3	Preventing Reneges 17
Chapter 4	Mentorship & Buddy Programs 22
Chapter 5	Internship to Full-Time Conversion 27
Conclusion	Final Recommendations 32
About Abode	34

About This Report

This report draws on applications from more than 50 organizations recognized in the inaugural Abode Early-Career Engagement Awards to identify what high-performing early-career programs do differently. Quantitative survey responses were aggregated into benchmark data across five award categories:



Open-ended responses were then analyzed collectively to identify recurring themes, emerging trends, and shared best practices.

Throughout this report, you'll find three types of insights:



Benchmark Data:

The strategies, participation levels, and performance metrics most commonly reported by award winners.



Emerging Themes:

Patterns drawn from qualitative analysis of award applications.



Practical Recommendations:

Actions talent acquisition and university recruiting teams can apply.

Featured organizations illustrate broader trends. The findings reflect award-winning practices rather than industry-wide averages.



Chapter 01

Keep-Warm Strategies

The period between offer acceptance and Day One is one of the most underused stages of the early-career experience. Award-winning teams don't treat it as a waiting period: they use those weeks to build excitement, reduce uncertainty, and start integrating new hires. Their keep-warm strategies go well beyond staying in touch, combining practical information, relationship-building, and early exposure to culture in a structured engagement journey.

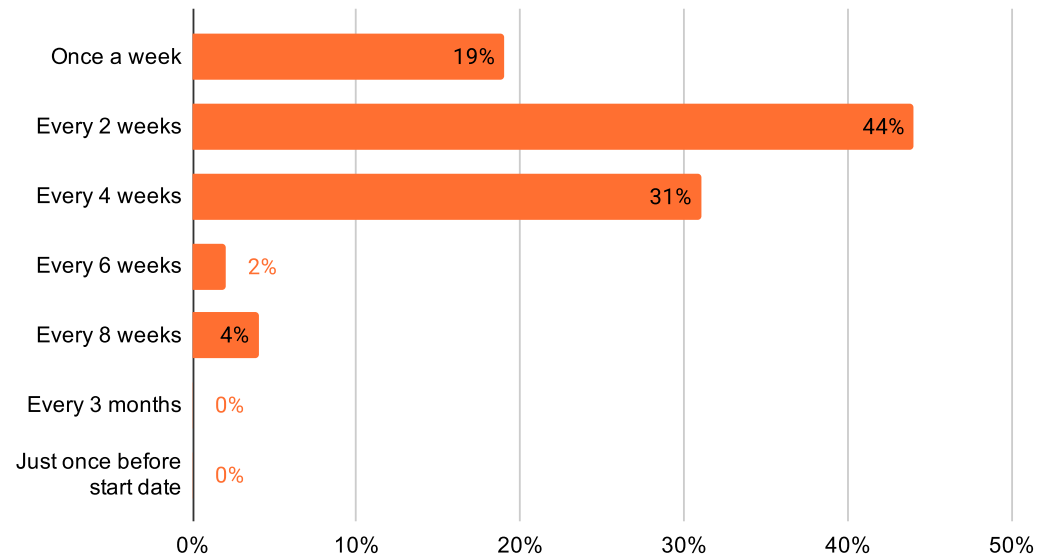
The Numbers Behind High-Performing Programs

Communication Cadence

Most award-winning teams contacted new hires at least every two weeks leading up to their start date, with nearly half reaching out on a biweekly basis. Overall, three-quarters maintained communication every two to four weeks.

How often were you in touch with new hires leading up to their start date?

Frequency of communication



The Numbers Behind High-Performing Programs

Creating a Multi-Touch Engagement Experience

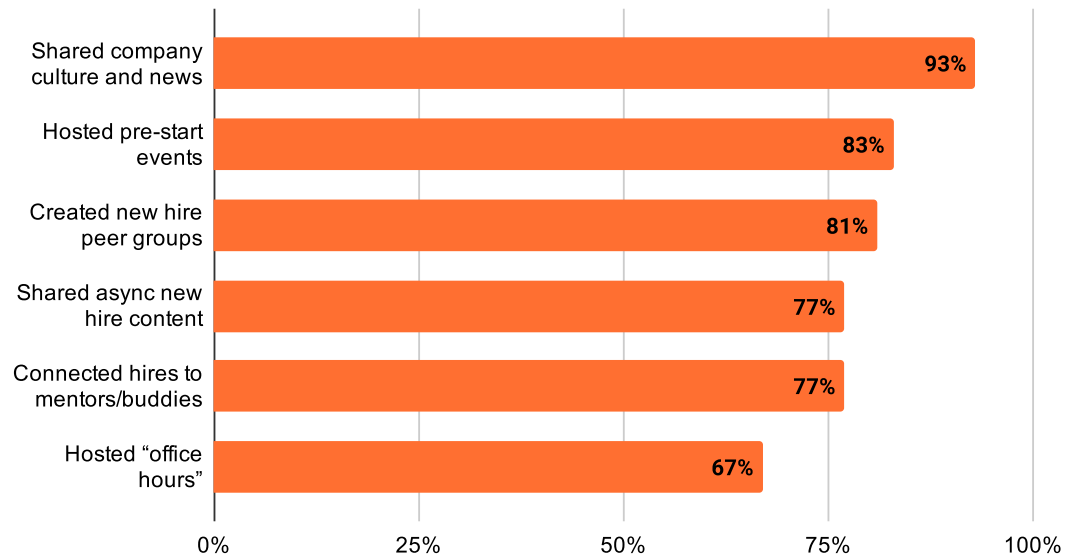
Regular communication is only part of the equation.

Sharing company news and culture content was the most common keep-warm activity, followed closely by pre-orientation events and community forums that connected incoming hires with one another. Many organizations also provided professional development resources, introduced new hires to mentors or buddies, and hosted office hours to answer questions throughout the pre-boarding process.

The strongest programs layer these activities rather than relying on a single touchpoint.

Which of the following ways did you engage with new hires prior to their start date?
Select all that apply.

Ways to connect



The Numbers Behind High-Performing Programs

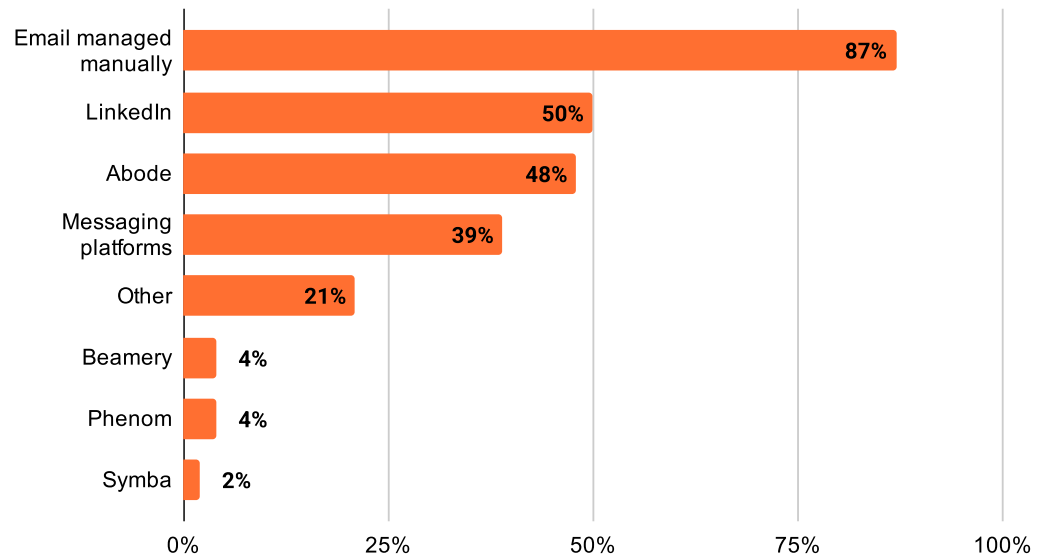
Expanding Beyond Email

Email was the most widely used communication channel, but many organizations also incorporated platforms such as LinkedIn, Abode, and messaging tools to complement traditional outreach. Others supplemented their communication strategy with virtual meetings, phone calls, and additional recruiting platforms.

The most effective strategies aren't defined by a single platform but by meeting candidates where they already are.

Which tools or platforms do you use to engage candidates between offer acceptance and start date? Select all that apply.

Platforms for keep-warm



Lessons from Award-Winning Teams

1. Reduce Uncertainty Before Day One

The strongest programs don't just maintain contact; they help candidates feel prepared. Award-winning teams proactively share practical information, set expectations, and make room for questions through pre-start webinars, manager introductions, and centralized resource hubs. The goal isn't more communication; it's replacing uncertainty with confidence.

In Practice



Royal Caribbean Group hosts an **office preview before interns start**, so they can practice their commute and tour the workplace.

2. Employee Experience Starts at Pre-Boarding

Award-winning organizations treat the period between acceptance and Day One as an extension of onboarding rather than a waiting period. They introduce culture, facilitate networking, and build relationships months in advance, often through structured engagement calendars of learning opportunities, leadership sessions, and milestone-based communications that build momentum into Day One.



MongoDB uses **Abode as a central hub** where interns can access onboarding resources and connect with fellow interns well before Day One.



Sanofi hosts **virtual pre-start sessions** on relocation, parking, dress code, logistics, and introductions to future teammates.



eBay uses Abode to replace disconnected emails with a **structured pre-start journey** featuring milestone-based updates, curated resources, swag, engagement tracking, and cohort forums.

3.

Personalize the Moments That Matter

Meaningful engagement comes from moments that make candidates feel seen. The strongest programs standardize most of the experience, then add personal touchpoints, such as recruiter outreach, hiring manager check-ins, buddy introductions, and custom welcome messages, where human connection matters most.

In Practice



PlayStation creates **customized acceptance graphics** and personalized communications celebrating each intern's decision to join the company.



Ferguson complements company-wide programming with **location-specific breakout sessions**, so conversations reflect where interns will actually work.

Chapter Takeaways



Keep candidates engaged with a consistent communication cadence.

Regular touchpoints beat long stretches of silence.



Treat pre-boarding as an extension of onboarding.

Use the time before Day One to introduce culture, build relationships, and prepare new hires.



Focus on quality—not just quantity—of engagement.

Meaningful communication reduces uncertainty and builds confidence before Day One.



Chapter 02

Community Building

Community begins the moment an offer is accepted. Award-winning organizations help new hires build relationships with future teammates, mentors, program leaders, and fellow interns weeks or months before they arrive, which reduces uncertainty, encourages collaboration, and helps people show up already feeling like they belong.

The Numbers Behind High-Performing Programs

Choosing the Right Community Platform

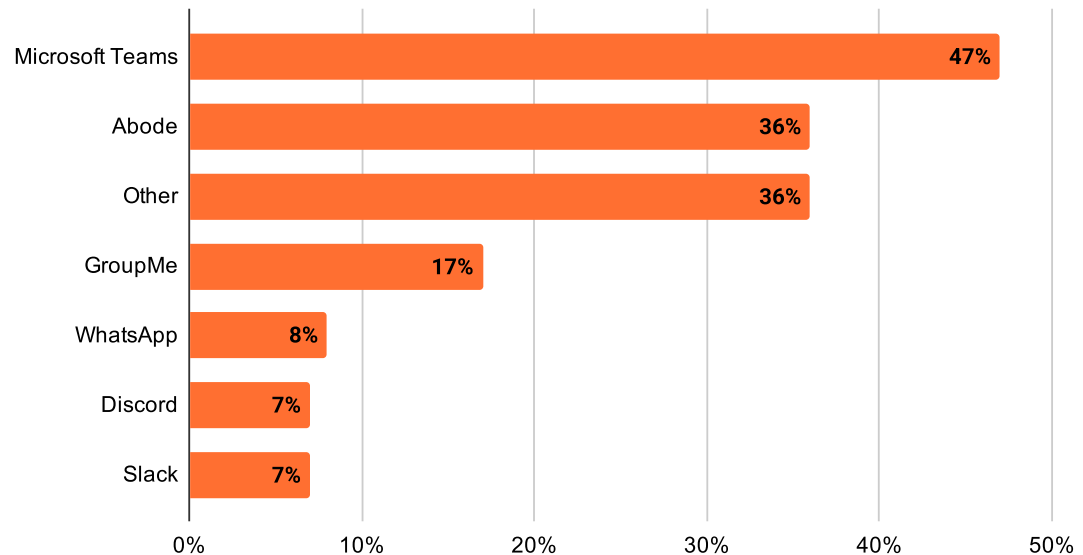
Award-winning teams favor tools that support ongoing conversation rather than one-way communication.

Microsoft Teams emerged as the most commonly used platform for hosting community forums, followed by Abode and a variety of other collaboration tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, and LinkedIn. Smaller numbers of organizations reported using platforms like GroupMe, WhatsApp, Discord, and Slack.

There is no single best platform. What matters is one centralized space where conversations, introductions, and resources live before Day One.

What platform(s) did you use to host a community forum for incoming new hires?

Community platform



The Numbers Behind High-Performing Programs

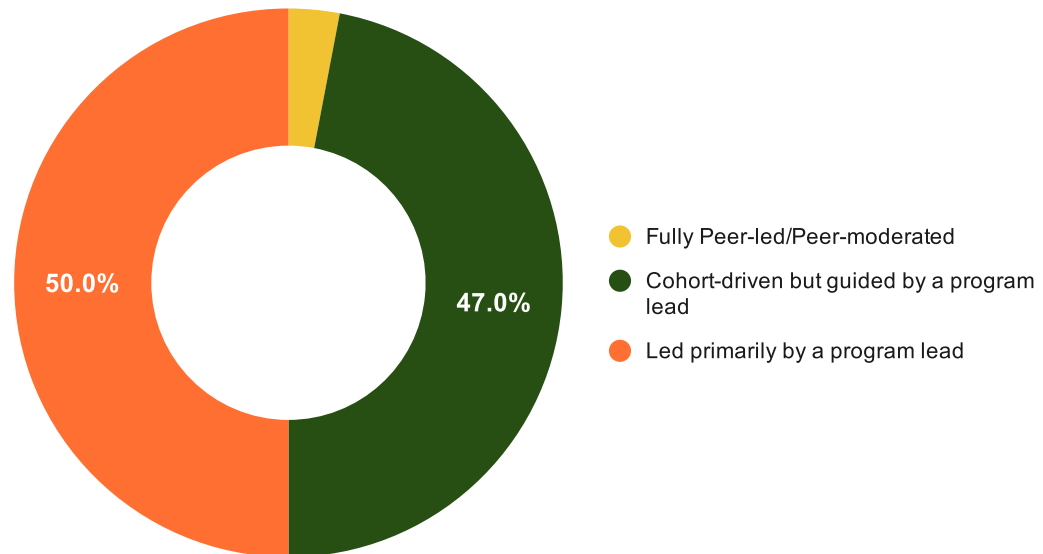
Communities Benefit From Active Facilitation

Nearly every award-winning organization reported that program teams play an active role in guiding community discussions. Some primarily lead conversations themselves, while others encourage cohort-driven interactions with ongoing support from program leaders. Very few organizations rely on entirely peer-led communities.

The strongest communities balance structure with autonomy.

How was engagement primarily driven in your community forum?

Moderation of forum



The Numbers Behind High-Performing Programs

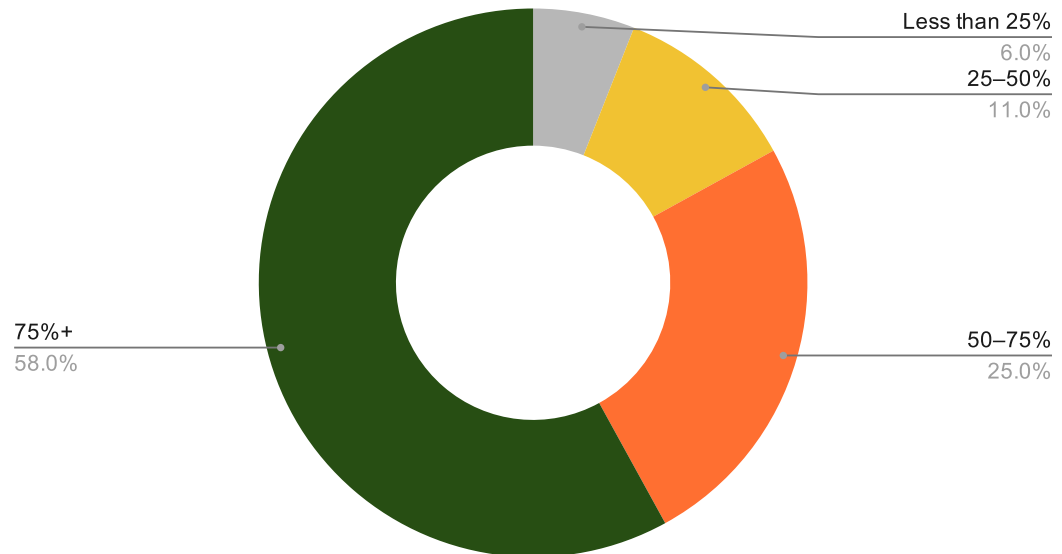
Design for High Participation

Most award-winning organizations reported that at least three-quarters of their incoming cohort actively participated in community forums or events before Day One. Only a small percentage experienced minimal participation.

When organizations facilitate actively and offer multiple ways to interact, new hires show up.

Approximately what percentage of your incoming cohort actively participated in the community forum or events?

Participation in forum



Lessons from Award-Winning Teams

1. Strong Communities Feel Personal

The strongest organizations create ways for new hires to genuinely get to know one another before the start date: virtual meet-and-greets, accepted-student events, cohort introductions, and informal networking. A dedicated online space keeps those conversations going long after the events end.

2. Belonging Extends Beyond the Cohort

A strong community includes more than peers. The most effective programs connect incoming hires with former interns, mentors, employee resource groups, managers, and senior leaders through networking sessions, alumni panels, and leadership events, building support networks across the organization rather than only within the cohort.

In Practice



StepStone Group grouped interns by location and function in GroupMe, then added intern panels and informal meet-and-greets so **relationships formed before Day One.**



Humana combines in-person information days with monthly Connect Calls featuring senior leaders, intern alumni, Employee Resource Groups, and social activities that introduce interns to multiple communities across the company.



Brown Gibbons Lang & Company (BGL) **created an intern yearbook** featuring photos and fun facts about each incoming intern, hosted a virtual meet-and-greet, and shared an opt-in contact list.



Inmar Intelligence uses Abode alongside virtual coffee chats, manager welcome messages, and LinkedIn engagement to introduce interns to teammates and peers across locations and functions.

3.

The Best Communities Blend Structure With Authentic Connection

The best programs provide enough structure to spark conversation without over-engineering it. Teams facilitate introductions, discussion prompts, networking events, and Q&A sessions while leaving interns room to shape conversations, ask questions, and build genuine relationships themselves.

In Practice



Dolby Laboratories created a Discord community with structured introductions and interest-based channels, giving interns **dedicated spaces to connect over shared hobbies** while conversations evolved naturally.



MongoDB uses **Abode** to guide **engagement** through discussion prompts, cohort introductions, and event registration while leaving interns space to connect on their own.

Chapter Takeaways



Build a dedicated space for connection.

Create one centralized space where new hires can interact and start forming relationships before Day One.



Actively facilitate early engagement.

Balance program-led guidance with authentic peer-to-peer connection.



Measure participation—not just membership. Judge community health by how actively hires engage, not whether a forum exists.



Chapter 03

Preventing Reneges

As competition for early-career talent has intensified, the window between acceptance and start date has become decisive. Award-winning organizations treat reneging as an engagement challenge rather than a recruiting metric, focusing less on incentives and last-minute outreach and more on experiences that keep candidates connected, informed, and excited throughout the journey.

The Numbers Behind High-Performing Programs

Benchmarking Renege Performance

What counts as a good renege rate varies widely by industry, role type, and market, and the organizations in this benchmark span a diverse range of recruiting environments.

Across award-winning organizations, the median reported renege rate was **7%**, with the top-performing **10%** reporting rates as low as **1%**. At the other end of the distribution, the bottom **10%** reported renege rates of **15%**, illustrating the wide range of outcomes even among organizations recognized for excellence.

These findings build on Abode's [Anti-Renege Playbook](#), which found that the industry average for early-career renege rates typically falls between **7%** and **10%**, while organizations using Abode's platform averaged closer to **2%**—demonstrating the impact of intentional post-offer engagement.

We found no consistent relationship between industry or program size and renege performance, though teams hiring for software engineering and other highly competitive technical roles faced greater offer competition than those hiring for business or operations roles. Read these benchmarks against your own recruiting environment rather than a single universal standard.

Renege Rates

Average Renege Rate Across All Winners: 7%

Performance	Renege Rate
 Top 10% (Lowest Renege Rates)	1%
 Top 25%	4%
 Median	7%
 Bottom 25%	10%
 Bottom 10% (Highest Renege Rates)	15%

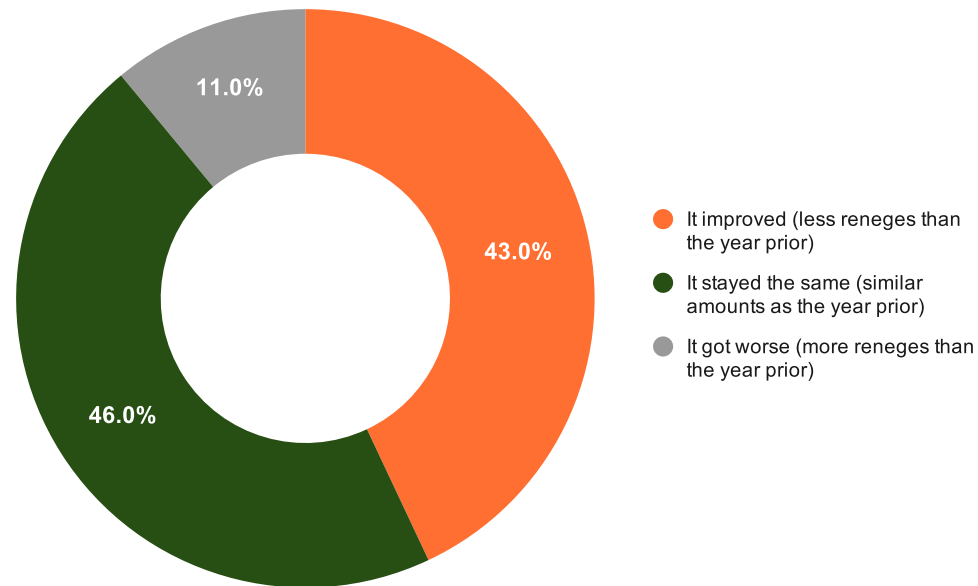
The Numbers Behind High-Performing Programs

Renegade Rates Are Holding Steady—or Improving

Nearly nine in ten award-winning organizations reported that their renege rate either stayed the same or improved year over year. Only 11% experienced an increase in reneges during the most recent recruiting cycle. Among those that did, technology and software companies accounted for half of the group—a reminder that recruiting conditions remain especially competitive for organizations hiring technical talent.

How did your renege rate compare to the previous recruitment season?

Renege trends



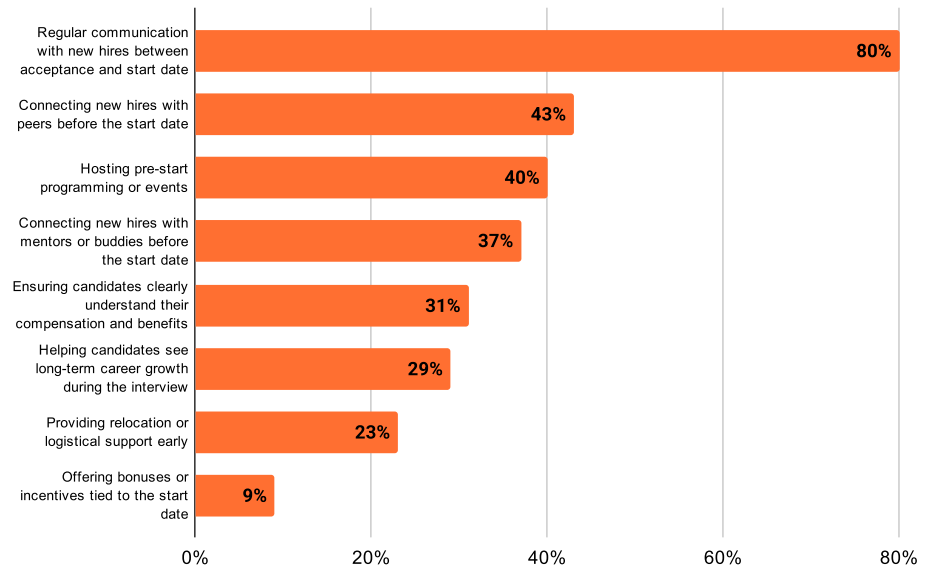
The Numbers Behind High-Performing Programs

Consistent Communication Leads Every Renege Prevention Strategy

Regular communication was by far the most commonly cited strategy for preventing renegees, with **80%** of award-winning organizations identifying it as one of their top contributors to success. Many organizations also credited connecting new hires with peers (**43%**) and hosting pre-start events (**40%**) as important ways to strengthen commitment before the start date. Others pointed to helping candidates better understand long-term career growth opportunities (**29%**) or compensation (**31%**). Only **9%** of organizations cited start-date bonuses or financial incentives, suggesting that meaningful engagement and relationship-building play a much larger role in preventing renegees than transactional rewards alone.

What are the top 3 strategies you credit toward keeping your renege rate low? Select all that apply.

Renege prevention factors



Lessons from Award-Winning Teams

Several organizations shared valuable qualitative context but preferred not to be named, given the sensitivity of renege and recruiting outcomes, so this section focuses on recurring themes rather than individual examples. The consistent message: preventing reneges is rarely the result of a single initiative.

1. Consistent Communication Creates Confidence

The most frequently cited strategy was regular communication between offer acceptance and Day One. Rather than waiting for candidates to surface concerns, the strongest programs built structured touchpoints that answered questions proactively and reinforced the decision to join.

2. Relationships Strengthen Commitment

Candidates are more likely to follow through once relationships are already forming. Introducing new hires to future teammates, managers, mentors, and fellow interns builds belonging and turns the post-offer period into the start of the employee experience.

3. Transparency Reduces Uncertainty

Clear, timely information reduces uncertainty. Setting expectations about onboarding, first-day logistics, and career opportunities, delivered at the right moments rather than all at once, gives candidates confidence in their decision.

Chapter Takeaways



Start engaging candidates immediately after they accept an offer. Use the post-offer period to strengthen commitment rather than waiting for Day One.



Build confidence through communication, relationships, and transparency. Consistent touchpoints and early connections keep candidates informed and excited.



Meaningful engagement has a greater impact than transactional incentives. Award winners credit thoughtful pre-boarding, not financial rewards, for commitment.



Chapter 04

Mentorship & Buddy Programs

Strong mentorship does more than help new hires survive their first few weeks. Mentors, buddies, career coaches, and peer advisors give early-career employees trusted people to turn to as they build confidence and settle into their roles. The most effective programs extend well beyond onboarding, building layered support systems that evolve alongside employees.

The Numbers Behind High-Performing Programs

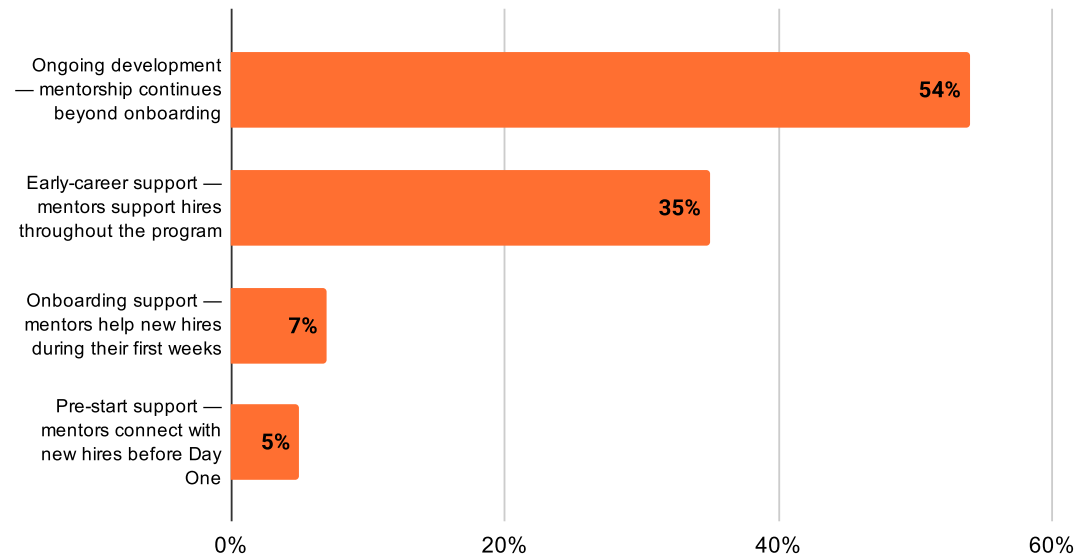
Mentorship Extends Beyond Onboarding

More than half of award-winning organizations reported that their mentorship programs continue beyond onboarding to support long-term career development. Another **35%** extend mentorship throughout an employee's first several months on the job. Fewer than one in ten organizations limit mentorship solely to onboarding or pre-start support.

The strongest programs treat mentorship as an ongoing resource that evolves with an employee's needs.

How would you describe the scope of your mentor/buddy program?

Mentorship scope



The Numbers Behind High-Performing Programs

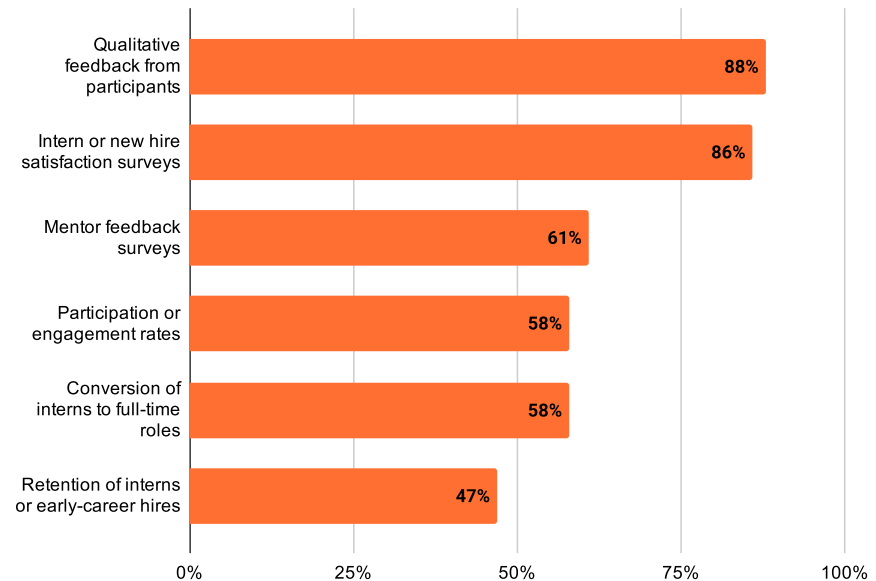
High-Performing Programs Measure Mentorship as a Long-Term Investment

Award-winning organizations most commonly measure success through qualitative participant feedback (88%) and satisfaction surveys (86%). Many also gather feedback directly from mentors (61%), while others monitor participation rates (58%), internship conversion rates (58%), and retention (47%).

Combining participant feedback, mentor insights, engagement data, and longer-term talent outcomes lets teams refine programs continuously rather than judging mentorship on a single metric.

How do you measure the success of your mentor/buddy program?
Select all that apply.

Measuring Success



Lessons from Award-Winning Teams

1. Build Multiple Layers of Support

The strongest programs pair interns with combinations of buddies, peer mentors, managers, career coaches, ambassadors, and senior mentors, so different relationships cover everything from day-to-day questions to long-term career development.

2. Former Interns Make Exceptional Mentors

Award-winning organizations increasingly look to former interns to mentor the next cohort. Having recently navigated the same experience, they answer questions credibly, normalize challenges, and build confidence, creating a continuous cycle in which alumni return as buddies, ambassadors, and mentors.

In Practice



Mondelez International **pairs every intern with three dedicated support roles:** a manager focused on performance, a mentor focused on career development, and a buddy who helps interns navigate workplace culture and day-to-day questions.



Klaviyo reported that more than 40% of former interns who are now full-time employees volunteered to become mentors, leading the company to **build a dedicated mentor portal** to support the growing program.



Fidelity Investments used **Abode's matching tool** to pair more than 700 summer interns with associates across the enterprise, prioritizing matches in the same region so interns built local communities alongside one-on-one mentoring.



THE GARRETT COMPANIES

The Garrett Companies pairs every intern with a mentor who previously completed the internship program, plus an alumni panel during onboarding so **interns learn from employees recently in their shoes.**

3.

Invest in Mentors— Not Just Mentees

Mentors need preparation too. Rather than assuming experienced employees already know how to mentor, award-winning organizations invest in mentor training, structured matching, orientation sessions, and practical resources so the experience is consistent across a cohort.

In Practice



ADM equips managers and buddies with guidebooks, newsletters, and formal training before interns arrive to create a consistent experience across the program.



Akamai encourages interns to identify what they hope to gain from mentorship, then **intentionally matches them with mentors** whose experience and expertise align with those goals, creating more meaningful mentoring relationships.

Chapter Takeaways



Extend mentorship beyond onboarding.

Treat mentorship as ongoing guidance that lasts well into an employee's early career.



Create multiple sources of support.

Combine managers, mentors, buddies, and peers to meet different developmental needs.



Invest in the mentor experience.

Preparation, resources, and support for mentors produce stronger, more consistent relationships.

A smiling woman with long brown hair is sitting at a wooden desk. In front of her is a laptop, a glass of water, and a notebook. The background is a blurred office setting.

Chapter 05

Internship to Full-Time Conversion

Internship programs exist to cultivate long-term talent, not just fill immediate hiring needs. Conversion begins long before a full-time offer is extended: every project, relationship, coaching conversation, and leadership interaction shapes whether interns can picture a future with the organization. High conversion rates are earned through intentional program design, not a strong final presentation.

The Numbers Behind High-Performing Programs

Understanding Internship Conversion Performance

Extension rates are heavily influenced by program design. Many organizations intentionally hire underclassmen who aren't yet eligible for full-time offers, so a lower extension rate is an expected outcome rather than a sign of program quality.

Across award-winning organizations, the average offer extension rate was **62%**, with the median performer extending offers to **69%** of interns. However, because extension rates are closely tied to recruiting strategy, offer acceptance provides a clearer picture of program effectiveness. Across all award winners, **81%** of interns who received full-time offers accepted them, with the top-performing organizations achieving acceptance rates above **90%**.

Organizations differ in when and how broadly they extend offers, but interns who receive them overwhelmingly choose to return.

Average Offer Extension Rate Across All Winners: 62%

Performance	Offer Extension Rate
★ Top 10% (Highest Offer Extension Rates)	84%
● Top 25%	76%
■ Median	69%
● Bottom 25%	56%
● Bottom 10% (Lowest Offer Extension Rates)	36%

Average Offer Acceptance Rate Across All Winners: 81%

Performance	Offer Acceptance Rate
★ Top 10% (Highest Offer Acceptance Rates)	93%
● Top 25%	92%
■ Median	84%
● Bottom 25%	70%
● Bottom 10% (Lowest Offer Acceptance Rates)	68%

The Numbers Behind High-Performing Programs

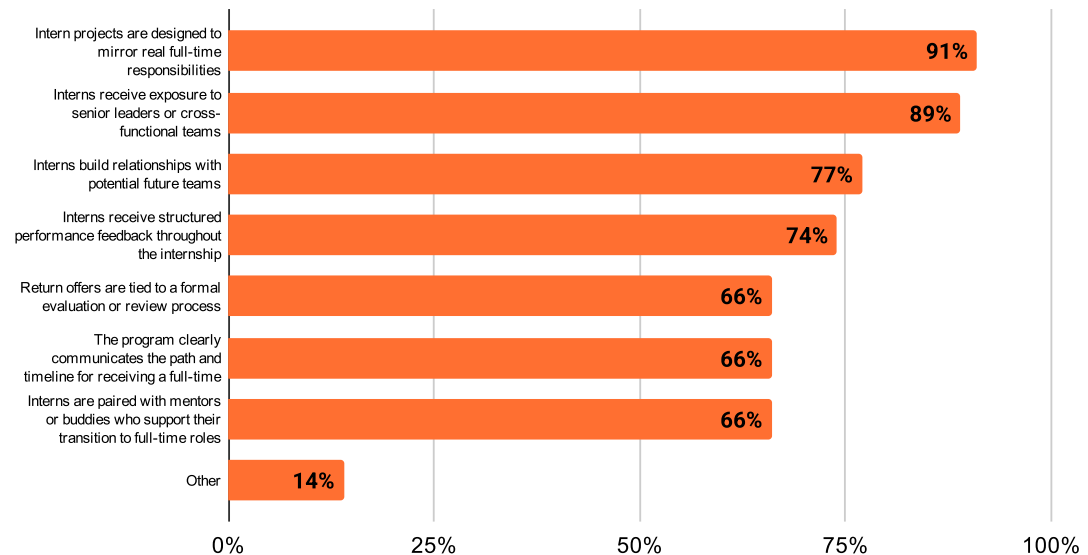
Meaningful Work Drives Conversion

The most commonly cited contributor to successful conversion was assigning interns projects that mirror real full-time responsibilities (91%). Organizations also emphasized exposing interns to senior leaders and cross-functional teams (89%), fostering strong team relationships (77%), providing structured performance feedback throughout the internship (74%), clearly communicating the path to a full-time offer (66%), and helping interns understand available career paths (66%).

Award winners combine meaningful work, development, and relationships so interns understand both the role and the long-term opportunity.

What aspects of your internship program contribute most to successful full-time conversions?

Internship conversion success measurements



Lessons from Award-Winning Teams

1. Treat the Internship as a Preview of the Full-Time Experience

Award-winning organizations design internships to mirror the responsibilities and expectations of full-time roles. Instead of observational work or isolated projects, interns get real ownership, business-critical responsibilities, and measurable contributions, so by the end they know whether the role is the right long-term fit.

In Practice



Milwaukee Tool built its internship around a “real work, real impact” philosophy, **giving interns ownership of business-critical projects** with executive visibility and clear deliverables that mirror full-time roles.



Lithko Contracting designs its internship to mirror the experience of a full-time Project Engineer by giving interns meaningful project responsibilities, hands-on field experience, regular feedback, and real ownership from Day One.

2. Expose Interns to the Broader Organization

High-converting programs extend far beyond an intern’s immediate team. Award-winning organizations create opportunities to interact with senior leaders, colleagues across functions, employee resource groups, and development programs, helping interns picture a long-term future rather than a single summer.



Guardian Life combines meaningful project work with leadership panels, executive speakers, and cross-functional networking that **helps interns envision long-term careers** across the organization.



CrowdStrike reinforces its “One Team, One Fight” culture by connecting interns with executive leaders, industry experts, and multiple early-career programs before and during the internship, so **interns feel part of the mission** rather than summer participants.

3.

Successful Conversion Is Earned Through Continuous Investment

Award-winning organizations don't wait until the end of the internship to evaluate performance. Ongoing coaching, skill development, relationship-building, and visible growth throughout the program help interns succeed and give organizations more confidence in full-time hiring decisions.

In Practice



Atria anchors its internship around structured midpoint and final evaluations before culminating in Future Voices, where interns deliver **TED-style presentations to executive leaders**, including the CEO.



HPE combines business-aligned projects with regular manager check-ins, coaching, and development conversations so **interns receive continuous support** rather than waiting for a final performance review.

Chapter Takeaways



Design internships that reflect full-time work. Give interns real responsibilities, ownership, and business impact.



Help interns see a future beyond their immediate role. Leadership exposure and cross-functional relationships make the long-term path visible.



Invest in development throughout the internship. Continuous coaching and structured feedback improve both the experience and conversion.

The background image shows a blurred office scene. Two people are seated at a desk. The person in the foreground is seen from the back, wearing a dark blue shirt and large headphones. The person in the background is a man with glasses and a beard, wearing an orange hoodie, looking at a laptop. On the desk, there are two laptops, a smartphone, and a small potted plant. A desk lamp with two glass shades is visible in the upper left corner.

Conclusion

The inaugural Early-Career Engagement Awards demonstrate that exceptional early-career programs are built through intentional design. Across every category—from keep-warm strategies and community building to mentorship, renege prevention, and internship conversion—the strongest organizations shared a common philosophy: meaningful engagement begins long before an employee's first day and continues throughout the earliest stages of their career.

Recommendations for Early-Career Programs

1.

Early-career engagement starts before Day One.

The strongest organizations use the time between offer acceptance and start date to reduce uncertainty, build excitement, and begin creating a sense of belonging.

2.

Relationships are the foundation of every successful program.

From peers and mentors to managers and senior leaders, meaningful human connections help new hires feel supported, confident, and engaged.

3.

Great experiences are intentionally designed—not left to chance.

Award winners replace ad hoc emails with structured engagement journeys built on centralized communication, measurable touchpoints, and technology that scales personalization.

4.

The strongest organizations continuously measure and improve.

The strongest organizations use the time between offer acceptance and start date to reduce uncertainty, build excitement, and begin creating a sense of belonging.

5.

Small improvements across the entire journey create lasting impact.

From peers and mentors to managers and senior leaders, meaningful human connections help new hires feel supported, confident, and engaged.

Award winners replace ad hoc emails with structured engagement journeys built on centralized communication, measurable touchpoints, and technology that scales personalization.

About Abode

Abode is the talent engagement platform built for the moments that shape a career. Recruiting and HR teams use Abode to run early-career programs — from offer acceptance through internship conversion — plus mentorship, leadership development, and high-volume hiring at scale. Learn more at abodehr.com.

Get More Helpful Resources:

The 2026 Campus Recruiting
Experience Report

The Anti-Renege Playbook

