

herfuture.

THE 2025 STATE OF WOMEN IN STEM CAREERS: ENTERING, ADVANCING & THRIVING

UNFILTERED TRUTHS FROM **285** WOMEN IN TECH & ENGINEERING



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Preface

In this whitepaper we share the voices of 285 women in STEM. Voices that are too often overlooked in conversations about the future of work. We bring together the perspectives of 285 women in technology and engineering, spanning students, early-career professionals, and seasoned leaders. Their voices reveal not only how they navigate career growth, but also how they weigh opportunities, assess potential employers and reflect on their experiences as women in tech.

The findings go beyond individual experiences: they uncover the patterns, motivators, and barriers that influence women's participation in tech and engineering at every stage. By listening closely to these stories, we highlight what it truly takes to attract, retain, and empower women in STEM, and why organizations that get this right stand to gain a more innovative, inclusive, and future-ready workforce.

About HerFuture

HerFuture is the largest community for women in STEM, bringing together early and mid to senior level talent. We are committed to empowering women in tech by partnering with companies to create opportunities for success across every stage of their journey.

Our global community connects through our mobile app and at events organized throughout the year in collaboration with leading multinational corporations, engineering firms, global banks and smaller companies alike. HerFuture members benefit from access to job opportunities, events, inspiring content, and role models. This whitepaper sheds light on the challenges they face, while also identifying what they need to succeed in building fulfilling careers in the industry.



HerFuture was founded by sister duo Micky and Linky. Having experienced firsthand what it's like to be among the few women in the classroom and the office, their mission is to shatter every ceiling and help more female talent break into STEM. Their personal journey is what inspired HerFuture, a platform dedicated to driving change and lasting impact by creating a more inclusive tech world.

Research, Methodology & Demographics

What is your age group?

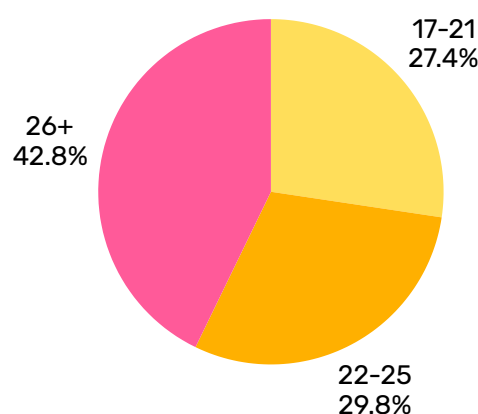


Image 1: Age distribution

What is your highest obtained degree, or the degree you are currently pursuing?

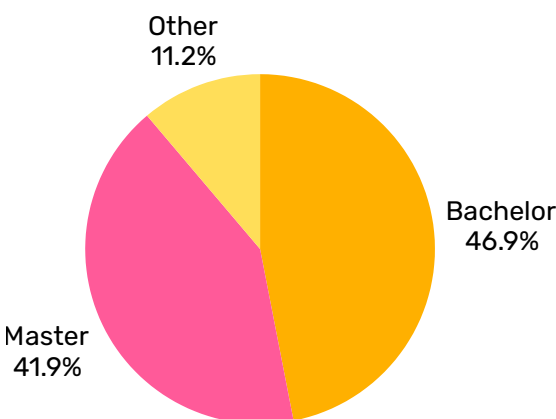


Image 2: Degree distribution

Our research involved a qualitative and quantitative survey of 285 women in STEM, complemented by interviews with both young women entering STEM and senior women with established careers. Most respondents come from a STEM background, including Engineering, Computer Science, or Data Science. Most major universities of the Netherlands are represented, including University of Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Delft University of Technology, Eindhoven University of Technology, Tilburg University, and Utrecht University.

If you're currently studying, which year are you in?

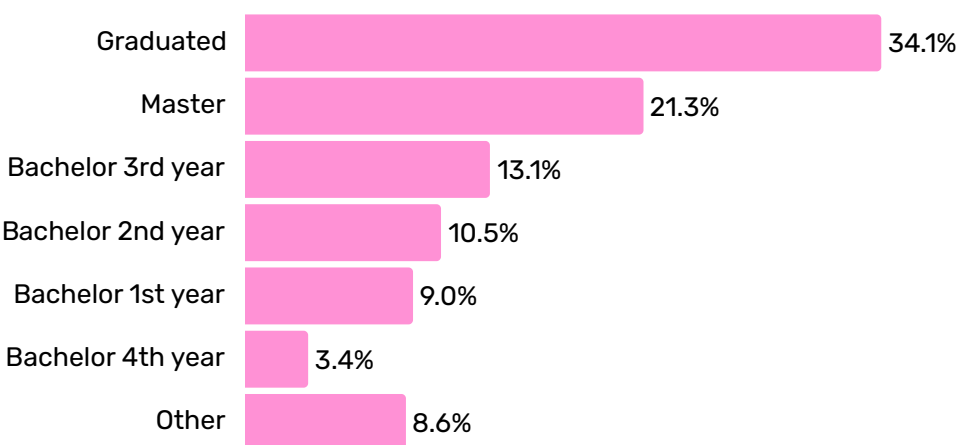


Image 3: Current stage of study or status

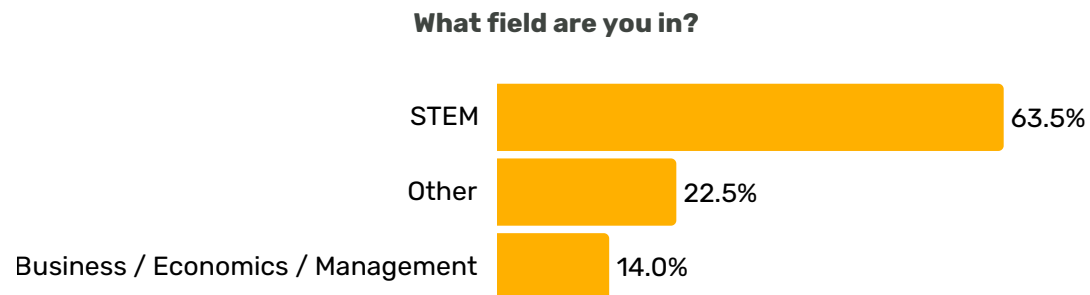


Image 4: Field of study

The survey gathered insights on career expectations, challenges, and aspirations, using a structured questionnaire with both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Conversations with young women highlighted the excitement and uncertainty of starting out in tech, while senior women reflected on lessons learned around resilience, mentorship, and systemic change.

By integrating insights from both young women and senior professionals, the research provides a comprehensive view of the experiences and challenges women face in STEM and what they value most in their careers and employers.

Most survey respondents were based in the Netherlands, though the group also reflected a wide range of other nationalities, such as Spain, France, Norway, India, and the United States.

What is your nationality?

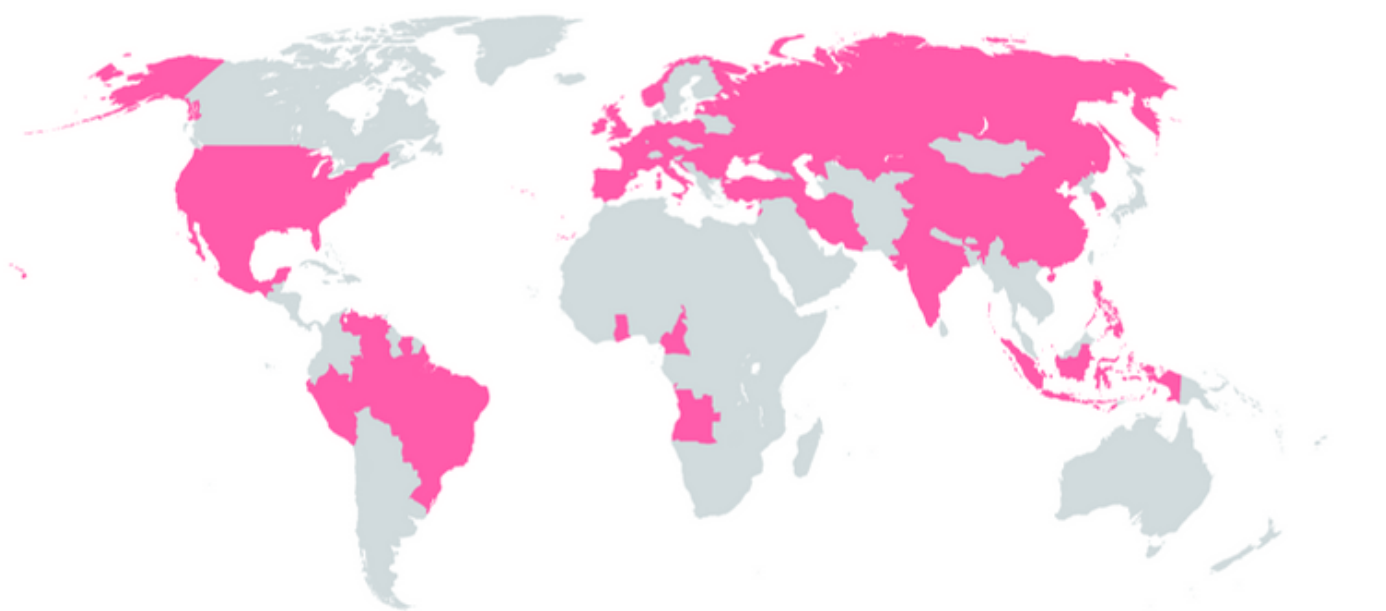


Image 5: Nationalities represented in the survey

Voices from Senior Women in Tech

To complement the survey results, we conducted in-depth interviews with senior women working in technology and engineering across the Netherlands. They included software engineers, engineering managers, founders, and executives. These women spoke candidly about their journeys: the barriers they faced, the support that made a difference, and the motivations that kept them going. They also reflected on what companies can do to accelerate progress, and what they would tell the next generation of women entering STEM.

Their experiences reveal not only the personal determination it takes to succeed, but also the cultural and structural changes needed for lasting equality.



Barriers and biases

Nearly every woman we spoke to had a story about being underestimated. From the first days of university to boardroom meetings years later, the assumption that women are less technical or less capable has followed them. An engineering manager described how even today, people sometimes react with surprise: *“As a female engineer, people look at you and ask, ‘Are you really that technical?’ That mindset needs to change.”*

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“I realized I had to adapt, sometimes even act as a mother figure, even though I was younger than them, in order to be included and accepted.”

A full-stack engineer remembered how this bias showed up during her studies. Older students, often responsible for tutoring or grading, openly questioned her achievements. *“They would ask, ‘Did you really do this yourself? Which guy helped you?’ It made me so self-conscious. I knew I was capable, but those comments stayed with me.”*

Others shared how, once they entered the workplace, they carried an invisible burden to work harder than their male peers. A cloud service manager reflected on her first role after graduation: *“I had to prove myself more than the men because I was the only woman in the team of twenty. The expectations were higher. Once I proved myself, I realized companies do want women in IT. But still, you should be judged on your skills, not your gender.”*

For some, the barriers were more overt. One engineering manager recalled being the only woman in her company and being asked to make coffee during a meeting. Instead of complying, she turned the request into a lesson: *“I stood up, took everyone to the coffee room, and showed them how the machine worked. Then I went back into the meeting and said, ‘I would love to have a cup of tea, please.’ That was my way of saying I am not here to serve, I am here to contribute.”*

You might be a great developer, but if no one speaks for you when decisions are made, you remain invisible. That is why sponsorship is so important, it ensures you are seen and heard.”



Bias did not only come from male colleagues. This same engineering manager described how some female colleagues questioned her rapid progress and suggested she was being favored. *“I had to stand back and explain myself, because they did not accept me right away. I realized I had to adapt, sometimes even act as a mother figure, even though I was younger than them, to be included.”*

Several women pointed out that bias has deep roots in cultural expectations. An engineering manager reflected: *"In the old days, women were supposed to bear children and take care of the home. That image has stayed, even in the age of AI. It is not a problem with women, it is a societal mindset."*

These expectations often pushed women to overperform. *"Because of bias, we end up working ten or twenty times harder just to prove ourselves. And still, sometimes you are invisible, while your male colleague, who does less, is more visible. That is exhausting."*



"My teacher asked why I wanted to do the harder track. She suggested I take the easier one, and I listened."

Some women also remembered how subtle decisions during school years shaped their opportunities. One management trainee recalled being discouraged from pursuing advanced math: *"My teacher asked why I wanted to do the harder track. She suggested I take the easier one, and I listened. Later, I realized that meant I could not apply for the technical programs I wanted. Luckily, I switched tracks, but I almost lost my chance to study engineering. That one decision, made at 15, nearly closed doors for me."*

Feeling Valued and Supported

Despite the barriers, the interviews also revealed the power of supportive environments. Women repeatedly emphasized how much difference it made to have managers who noticed their contributions, provided feedback, and offered growth opportunities.

A software engineer at a global travel platform described how her manager's regular check-ins built her confidence: *"He notices things I do not always see in myself. He will say, 'You did this really well, keep it up,' and it motivates me. He also finds projects that challenge me and help me grow. That makes me feel valued."*

Others spoke about the impact of learning and awareness programs. A software engineer explained how she took several trainings on communication and problem-solving. *“It made me aware of the different personalities on my team, how they think, and how they communicate. That really helped me understand the barriers I faced and how to navigate them.”*

Mentorship and sponsorship also emerged as essential. Mentorship provides encouragement to share ideas and navigate uncertainty. Sponsorship ensures that women’s work is recognized in decision-making spaces. An engineering manager explained: *“You might be a great developer, but if no one speaks for you when decisions are made, you remain invisible. That is why sponsorship is so important, it ensures you are seen and heard.”*



Support did not always come from the workplace alone. Several women credited their families as their first mentors. One engineering manager described how her father prepared her for a career in a male-dominated world: *“He told me, ‘I am throwing you in the big ocean, but you will swim back, and we will be here for you.’ That support at home made me fearless at work.”*

These stories highlight that while barriers persist, the right support, whether from managers, mentors, sponsors, or family, can tip the balance and empower women to thrive.

Staying Motivated

When asked what kept them motivated to stay in tech, the women gave varied answers, but all were rooted in a love of growth and problem-solving.

For some, it was the constant challenge. One software engineer explained: *“Every month I work on something new, and it feels like a breath of fresh air. The dynamism and the constant learning keep me motivated.”*

Others spoke about their deeper sense of purpose. An engineering manager reflected: *"I love asking what is next, what is coming for the future. I read constantly, challenge myself, and want to bring something to humanity. That hunger to improve life for others is what keeps me here."*

Some found motivation in fairness and equality. Being treated without higher expectations or patronizing attitudes was a sign that they were in the right environment. A cloud service manager put it simply: *"Do not expect more from women than from men. Treat us equally. That is the real motivation to stay."*



Key insight

- *Normalize representation. Aim for "women in tech" to become simply "people in tech." Visible role models move the needle.*
- *Barriers are cultural, not capability. Persistent assumptions about technical ability and "who looks like an engineer" still surface. Confidence gaps are often a response to bias.*

What Companies Can Do

The women we spoke to offered a wealth of ideas for how companies can better support female talent. Many began with education, emphasizing that girls need encouragement early. A management trainee explained: *"If girls in high school choose a study profile that is not tech related, they lose the option later on. It is important to make them aware at 14 or 15 that tech is exciting and full of possibilities."*

Others argued that outreach should start even earlier. A cloud service manager noted: *"We should inspire girls at 10 or 12 years old, not wait until they are finishing a degree. By then, it is too late for many. We need to catch them when they are curious and open-minded."*

At the organizational level, mentorship and sponsorship programs were seen as critical levers. As one engineering manager described: *"Mentorship helps women see their blind spots. Sponsorship ensures their work is recognized in rooms where decisions are made. Companies should invest in both."*

"Do not patronize women. Open the boardrooms. Not to fill a quota, but because women are capable of being there."

Pipeline building was another recurring theme. A senior engineering manager stressed the importance of recruiting directly from universities and offering internships: *"We should not hire someone because she is a woman, but we should make sure the pipeline is equal. If half the candidates are women, half the hires will be too."*

Leadership opportunities also matter. Several argued that representation at the top should never be about quotas, but about capability. As one engineering manager argued: *"Do not patronize women. Open the boardrooms. Not to fill a quota, but because women are capable of being there."*

Finally, they reminded companies that everyday management practices matter. Recognition, feedback, and fair treatment are not small gestures. They are the foundation of a workplace where women feel valued.



Advice for the Next Generation

Perhaps the most powerful part of these interviews was the advice women wanted to pass on to those just starting out. Their words carried both encouragement and hard-won lessons.

An engineering manager urged women to let go of perfectionism: *"Be curious, be bold. Even if you do not tick all the boxes, apply anyway. Do not let perfectionism hold you back."*

"Take your chair with you. No one will bring it for you. And stop saying sorry in every sentence."

A full-stack engineer echoed this: *"Trust your own skills. You are probably smarter than you think you are. Working in tech is fun, so go for it."*

Others emphasized the importance of visibility and confidence. One engineering manager advised: *"Take your chair with you. No one will bring it for you. And stop saying sorry in every sentence."*

A senior engineering manager wanted to reassure younger women that balance is possible: *"You do not have to choose between career and family. If you know what you want, you can have both."*

One engineering manager reflected on the mentors who shaped her path: *“My supervisor during my PhD was a role model. She showed me that women can lead at the highest levels and still stay true to themselves. That gave me courage.”*

Together, these stories offer a powerful message: women belong in tech, their skills are invaluable, and their confidence is their greatest asset.

“Women belong in all places where decisions are being made.”

Hopes for the Future

Although the interviews were filled with accounts of barriers and struggles, they ended on a note of optimism. The women we spoke to want a future where their presence in tech is unremarkable, where women in tech is simply tech. *“I hope it becomes normal for women to work in tech,”* said one full-stack engineer. *“I do not want to be treated as special just because I am an engineer.”*

Others stressed that the real challenge is inspiring girls earlier. *“The real issue is not that companies will not hire women,”* explained a cloud service manager. *“It is that too few girls choose science. We need to inspire them at 10 or 12 years old, before stereotypes set in.”*

The ultimate vision is a world where inclusion is seamless. As one senior engineering manager put it, *“We do not talk about men in tech. One day I hope we will not need to talk about women in tech either.”*



Key insights

- *Representation and real allies. Visible women leaders shift confidence and access.*
- *Culture over quotas. Set equal expectations, open decision rooms because of capability, and respect different communication styles.*
- *Managers make the difference. Frequent check-ins, specific recognition, and well-chosen stretch projects drive growth and belonging.*

The Job Hunt Reality Check

Career values: Does impact matter?

Research revealed that respondents value both practical needs and personal fulfillment when choosing a future job. As shown in Image 6, financial security and work-life balance rank highest, highlighting the importance of stability and flexibility early in a career.

What do you value most in a future job?

- 1 Financial security
- 2 Work-life balance
- 3 Making a positive impact
- 4 Fast career progression

The influence of a company's mission or social impact varied widely among respondents. For some, it was essential: *"That's my number one priority, I would not like to work for a company that's against what I stand for and my values."* Another said, *"I would say a 10/10 these days. For our generation I want to work for something meaningful, because you only have limited time and you want to use it in the right place."*

Image 6: Top priorities in a future job

Others placed more weight on gaining experience, especially early in their careers. *"For me it does not matter a lot, because I want a job at this moment,"* one explained, while another added, *"When I first start I just want work experience, but later I want to find a job that impacts society more positively."* Some respondents described a middle ground: *"If I would rate this then I would give it a 7. I wouldn't turn down a job if the company isn't aligned with my goals unless it's absolutely evil."* Others stressed authenticity, noting that values must be reflected in practice.



Key insights

Many women said a company's mission matters most when it aligns with their values, though early in their careers gaining experience often takes priority. Education gave them theory, but many felt underprepared for real-world skills like networking, CV building, and applying knowledge in practice.

Educational support

To what extent do you feel your education has prepared you or is preparing you for the job market?

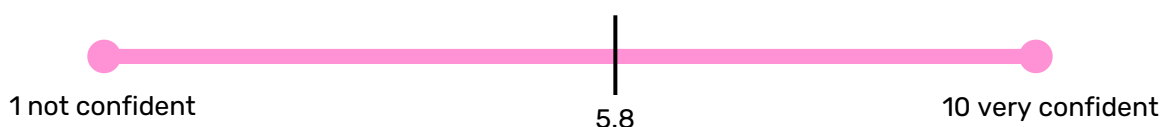


Image 7: Perceived preparation for the job market through education

Students shared mixed views on how well their education prepared them for the job market. Some felt well supported, particularly when schools provided practical exposure. One student explained, *“At our university, we have mock interviews, career fairs, and workshops where we look at our CVs. To that extent I feel my education is helping me a lot.”* Another added, *“I have a software project instead of a thesis, which really helps because you get to work with a client and in a professional team.”*

More often, however, respondents felt their studies were too theoretical. *“I am from a research university and I feel like it’s very theory based. They gave us an introduction to many things but not in depth, which made me feel like I lack certain skills,”* one noted. Another shared, *“I don’t feel that it has prepared me enough. It was all very theoretical and I don’t feel prepared when it comes to assessing my own technical skills for when applying to jobs.”*

Several emphasized the importance of internships and real-world practice. *"If you have the opportunity to do an internship, which I didn't have, I think that's invaluable,"* one reflected. Another explained, *"I just finished my bachelor's and I am learning a lot of theory but there are not many real-life experiences with companies yet. My final answer is: no, I don't feel prepared."*

Others described education as useful for developing general problem-solving or teamwork abilities, while recognizing gaps in practical skills. As one put it, *“Most of the things I use at work are not things I learned throughout my studies. They’re more concepts, like how to think and how to tackle problems.”*

Overall, students valued when their education connected them to employers through projects, networking, or mock interviews. But many felt that the lack of internships, applied practice, and career preparation left them only partly ready to step into the job market.

Confidence in finding the right job

Students expressed a wide range of confidence levels when asked to rate how prepared they feel to find the right job or internship, from as low as 2 to as high as 9. Some felt optimistic: *"My confidence is pretty high. I think it would be an 8, because it was quite easy for me to find an internship."* Another added, *"I would say quite high, probably a 9. Due to the education from my university and networking events, we have a lot of opportunities to find a job and build the skills needed in the job market."*

Some students rated their confidence low, often due to limited experience or uncertainty about direction. One shared, *"I would give myself a 2, because I've never worked in the industry and don't have experience yet."* Another added, *"If confidence means knowing exactly where I thrive and want to stay long term, I'd say 3 or 4, since I'm still figuring that out."*

Others placed themselves in the middle, balancing optimism with doubt. *"Probably a 5, even though I'll soon finish my master's. The job market feels uncertain,"* one explained. Another noted, *"I'd rate it a 7. I've had ups and downs in job hunting, but I believe that attending workshops and networking will eventually get me there."*

Do you feel fully confident in starting your first full-time job or internship?

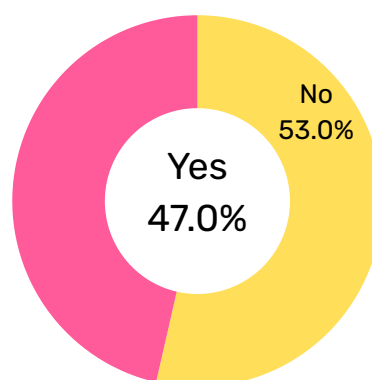


Image 8: Percentage feeling confident to begin their first role

Have you ever decided not to apply for a job or internship because it made you feel unqualified or insecure?

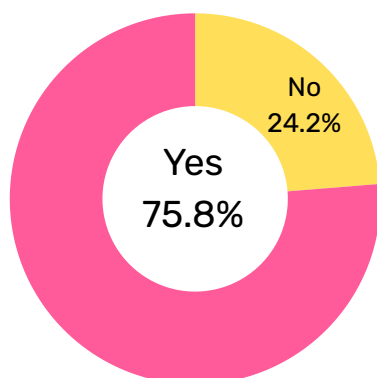


Image 9: Share of respondents who felt unqualified to apply

Just under half felt fully confident about starting their first job or internship, and 75.8% had at some point decided not to apply for a role because they felt unqualified. For some, the barrier was psychological: *"Imposter syndrome is something I've experienced many times... Sometimes you miss out on a job that could have been a wonderful opportunity, simply because you didn't feel like you were good enough."*

Doubts and insecurities when applying

75.8% of respondents indicated that they had hesitated or even decided against applying for jobs or internships because they felt unqualified or insecure. A common reason was the extensive list of requirements often included in job descriptions. When a role asked for multiple years of experience or a broad set of technical skills, many participants doubted their abilities – especially at the start of their careers. As one student shared: *“When I look at graduate roles, the requirements often feel sky high. It sometimes makes me question whether I’m experienced enough to apply.”*

“Sometimes I feel like it’s better not to apply, because what if I can’t give them what they expect of me?”

At the same time, many described how their confidence grew as they gained more experience. While some admitted to avoiding roles that initially felt out of reach, they also recognized the opportunities missed by not applying. As one respondent put it: *“You’ll miss out on opportunities if you say no every time you think you’re not good enough. Just apply – and if it’s not the right fit, the company will let you know.”* Another added: *“There’s really no harm in trying. Every interview builds experience, and feedback can be so valuable for improving.”*

“Receiving feedback on how to improve would be incredibly helpful in landing the right job.”

For some, feelings of insecurity were also tied to gender or identity. A few women said they were more likely to second-guess their qualifications compared to their male peers. Others said it was hard to know whether to apply if they only met part of the listed criteria, and wished job descriptions were clearer about what was truly important. A respondent stated, *“Sometimes I feel like it’s better not to apply, because what if I can’t give them what they expect of me?”*

“You’ll miss out on opportunities when you say no every time you think you’re not good enough.”

Several students connected this hesitation to their stage of study or career. A first-year student explained, *“I feel like no one’s going to choose someone who is so fresh and doesn’t have any experiences.”* Another reflected on missed opportunities during their bachelor’s: *“I was really uncomfortable with myself, especially when it came to my professional product knowledge. I didn’t really have internship opportunities, so during my master I want to find an internship first.”*

Overall, the fear of not being good enough was a common concern, particularly when entering the job market. Many women recognized that overcoming this hesitation is important for growth and opportunity. At the same time, they expressed uncertainty about how to take that step with confidence.

Confidence gaps at the starting line

What do you feel you are still missing to feel confident in starting your first full-time job or internship?



Image 10: Skills and support still needed for confidence in first role

Building confidence to apply often came down to two main areas: **skills and networks.**

Many respondents said that practical experience, whether through projects, internships, or learning directly from professionals, was key. One explained, *“Having some hands-on experience makes me feel more confident, because it helps me understand how things really work.”* Others stressed the value of guidance from professionals: *“To get some knowledge or experience from other professionals in this field.”*

Skill development was another common theme. Respondents mentioned both technical abilities and soft skills such as public speaking, self-presentation, and knowing how to market their strengths. As one put it, *“I think if I knew how to market the skills I have right now... I would be more confident in showing why I’m a good fit.”* Another added, *“If I get more practice in the skills that are required in job descriptions, I would feel more prepared.”*

Equally important was the way companies approach hiring. Students emphasized the confidence boost that comes when employers are open to potential rather than expecting candidates to be fully qualified from the start. One participant explained, *“When companies accept people who don’t have enough experience and are willing to teach them, that would push me to apply.”* Others highlighted the importance of a growth mindset: *“Making sure you can learn the skills instead of already being a pro in it.”*

Finally, networks and early connections played a significant role. Meeting recruiters, attending events, or simply having a contact inside a company helped reduce uncertainty and made students feel more secure. One respondent said, *"Having networked, maybe knowing someone you can send a message to... that would really help."* Another shared, *"If I have connections within the company, I feel much more secure, because then I also know what is really happening in the workplace."* Casual conversations with recruiters were also valued for easing nerves: *"Having a conversation with them before the interview would make me feel more confident, because then I would know them a little bit and could prepare better."*



Key insights

Informal chats or early conversations with hiring staff are seen as helpful for easing nerves and preparing better. Networking and early contact with employers were seen as powerful confidence-builders.

Networking and early contact with employers were seen as powerful confidence-builders. Students emphasized that meeting companies at events or having someone they could reach out to made the application process feel less intimidating. One noted, *"Simply going to events, talking to multiple companies, and them knowing who you are before you apply... that would really help."* Others highlighted the value of informal conversations with recruiters, with one explaining, *"Having a conversation with the interviewer beforehand would make me feel more confident, because I would know them a little and could prepare better to see if the company is the right fit."*

Several respondents pointed out that confidence is not only about technical expertise but also about how you present yourself. One participant explained, *"More skills in public speaking and better self-confidence in how to present yourself, because that affects a lot on how people view you."* At the same time, many students said they feel most confident when their skills align perfectly with the job requirements. Since this rarely happens in practice, it creates a paradox for students: they often hesitate to apply unless they are convinced there is a 100% match, even though employers often times do not expect applicants to tick every single box.

The Soft Skills Gap

Many students and recent graduates recognized that while soft skills are essential in the workplace, they are not always emphasized in their education. Based on the data, networking and negotiation skills (21.6% and 13.9% respectively) are seen as the soft skills respondents feel least prepared for in their first job. Presentation and public speaking (11.7%) and initiative (11.2%) are also commonly mentioned, highlighting areas where confidence can be improved. Communication (10.5%) and professionalism (9.5%) follow closely, while receiving and applying feedback (8.6%), time management (8.0%), and teamwork and collaboration (5.0%) are less frequently cited, but still contribute to the overall sense of underpreparedness.

“I don’t think my network is big enough yet. I am putting myself in places where I can meet and connect with people, but that’s still the main skill I need to develop.”

Which soft skills do you believe are expected in your first job, but don’t yet feel prepared for?

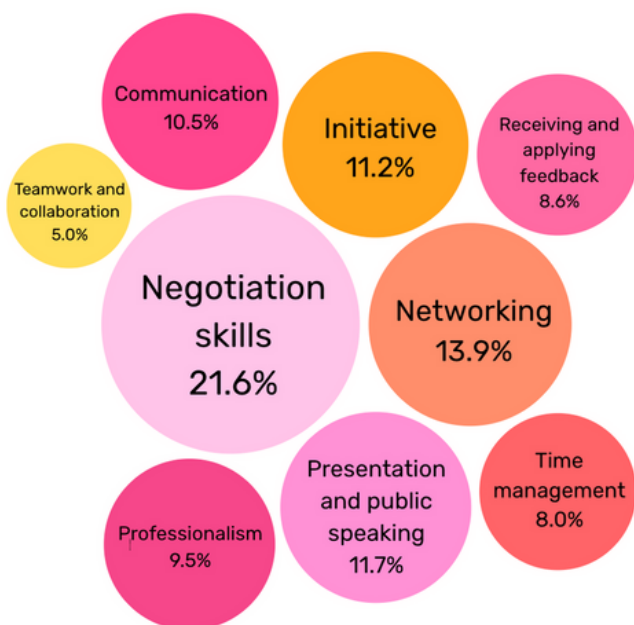


Image 11: Soft skills respondents feel underprepared for in their first role

Networking came up repeatedly as a challenge. One student admitted, “I struggle to start conversations or know what to say, and that makes networking difficult, even though I know it’s important for my career.” Another explained, “I don’t think my network is big enough yet. I am putting myself in places where I can meet and connect with people, but that’s still the main skill I need to develop.”

Public speaking and presenting were also seen as areas for growth. “Being more comfortable with myself and public speaking is something I still need to work on,” one respondent said. Another added, “Mostly presenting your work, like talking with clients, understanding their needs, and explaining how to improve the product, that’s the part I feel least prepared for.”

Professional behavior in workplace settings was another theme. One student reflected, *“Maybe being professional. I wouldn’t even know what to wear, how to write proper emails, or how to behave in different environments like a corporate versus a startup.”* Others mentioned difficulty with giving feedback: *“I have no problem receiving feedback, but I’m not very good at giving it, even if it’s meant to help others.”*

Finally, several respondents stressed that these skills are rarely taught during their studies. *“You don’t learn networking in university,”* one said. Another pointed out that classroom projects do not fully replicate real-world practices: *“It’s totally different when you do something in a company compared to doing a project in university.”*



Key insights

Many women felt less confident in soft skills. Networking, public speaking, and professional communication were the most common gaps, along with giving or receiving feedback. The transition to work often felt less about missing hard skills and more about building confidence in how to connect and communicate.

What types of support would helped you most in preparing for your internship or job?

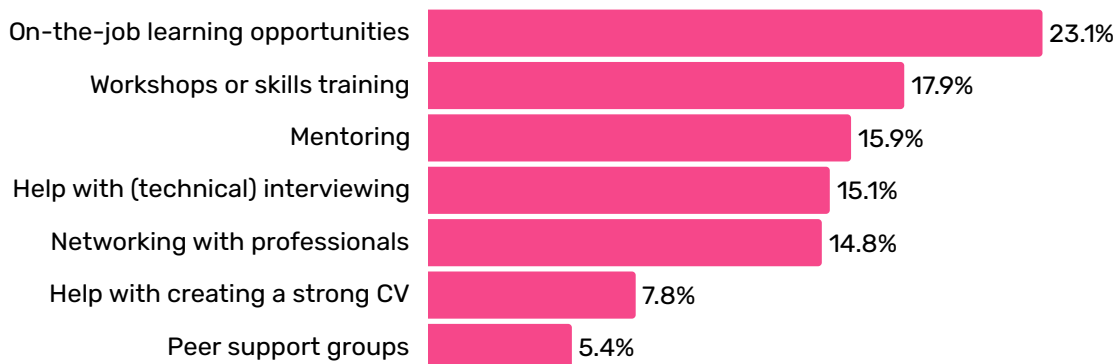


Image 12: Most helpful forms of support for job or internship preparation

Respondents emphasized on-the-job learning, workshops, and mentoring as the most valuable support for preparing for their first roles. Other aids like interview prep, networking, CV help, and peer groups were mentioned less often but still seen as useful for building confidence.

What Women Want from Employers

Developing soft skills is important, but it is just one piece of the puzzle when starting a career in tech. How women perceive a workplace, the support it offers, and the culture it fosters can significantly influence both their confidence and career decisions. The presence of mentorship, clear communication, opportunities for growth, and inclusive practices can help women apply their skills effectively while continuing to build competence. These factors also shape preferences for the types of organizations they want to join, from large corporates to startups or mission-driven institutions, highlighting that confidence, skill development, and workplace environment are closely intertwined in early career choices.

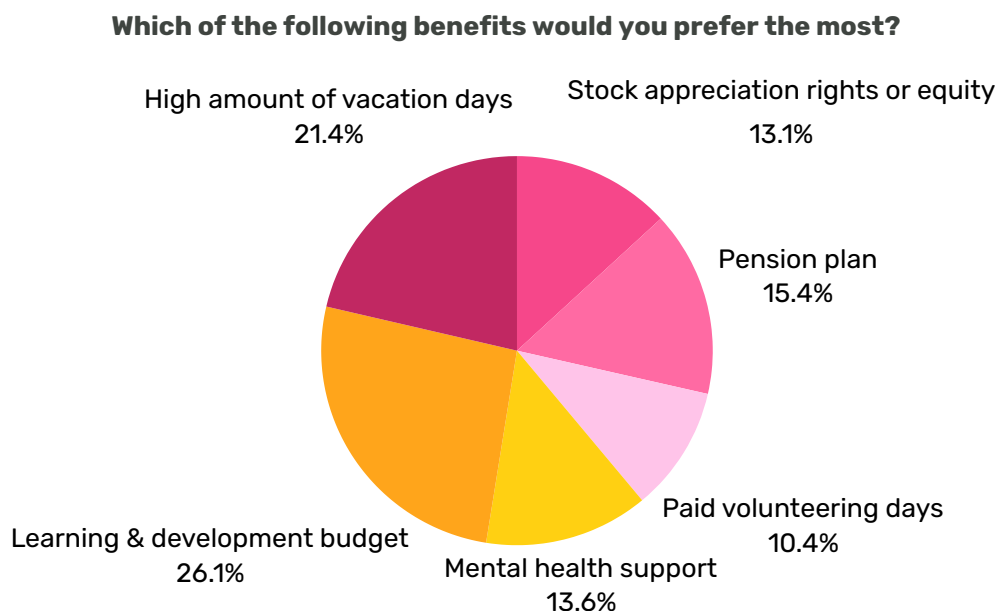


Image 13: Most attractive job benefits

When it comes to secondary workplace benefits, respondents placed the greatest value on a learning and development budget (26.1%), highlighting how important continued growth and upskilling are when entering the tech industry. This was followed by a high amount of vacation days (21.4%) and a pension plan (15.4%), reflecting priorities around rest, balance, and long-term financial security. Mental health support (13.6%) also stood out as a key factor, while stock appreciation rights or equity (13.1%) and paid volunteer days (10.4%) showed that financial empowerment and opportunities for purpose-driven work are also part of what young women are looking for in an employer.

Preference for Corporate Environments

Many students saw corporate settings as the best place to start their careers, citing stability, career growth, and structured learning opportunities. One explained, *"I would like to work at a corporate company because it feels like a good environment to build my career."* Another highlighted, *"Big tech corporations have more ongoing projects, better development plans, and mentoring opportunities. They also offer more security and room for growth."*

Several respondents emphasized that corporates often invest more in training and onboarding than smaller organizations. *"At corporate companies, the training programs and mentorships are more developed compared to startups,"* one said. Others noted the appeal of networking: *"Corporate might be a great place to start, since you can meet a lot of people and it's easier to switch companies later."*

Interest in Startups and Scale-ups

Startups were also attractive to many, especially for the exposure and flexibility they offer. A student explained, *"In a startup you have more freedom and contact with leaders, while in a corporate it's more like 'you do this.' As a graduate, it's best to gain as much experience as possible, so a startup might be a good starting point."*

Others valued the chance to grow alongside a company. *"For me the most important things are personal development and making a positive impact. That's why I prefer a startup, where I can wear multiple hats and explore opportunities as the company grows,"* one said. Another added, *"I prefer a medium-sized startup – not too small, so it's diverse enough, but not too big that you can't try different things."*

What type of organization would you most like to work for?

- 1 Corporate
- 2 Startup
- 3 Non-profit
- 4 Government

Image 14: Workplace preferences

"The most important things are personal development and making a positive impact."



Key insights

Many women in STEM see corporate environments as the best starting point, valuing mentorship, training, and stability. Startups and non-profits also appeal for their growth opportunities, impact, and flexibility. Clear development programs and inclusive cultures are decisive factors in choosing where to build a career.

Some students expressed interest in non-profits for their mission and impact. One respondent shared, *"I would prefer to work for a non-profit or a startup before a corporate. The positive impact they have is very appealing."*

What STEM women look for first in a job posting

What would help you make a better decision about where to apply for a job or internship?

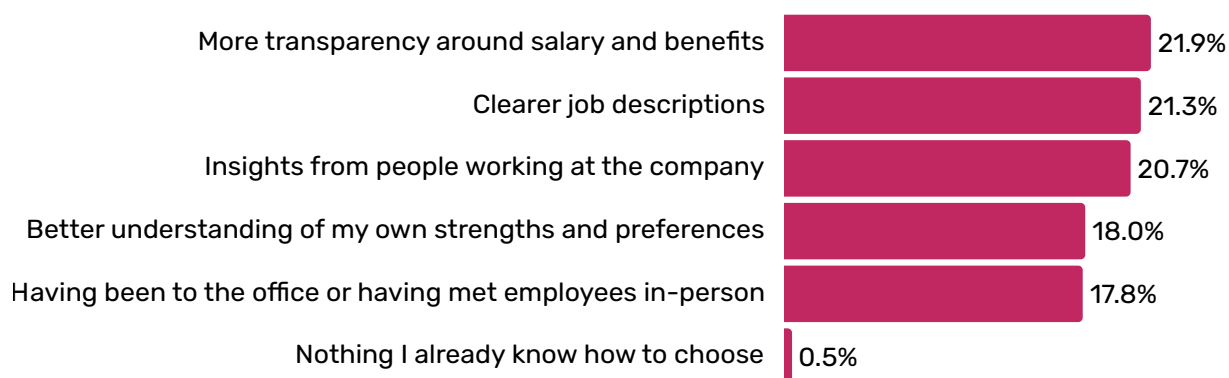


Image 15: Factors supporting better job or internship decisions

"As a young professional, I really value mentorship, so that's one of the first things I notice."



The data revealed that transparency around salary and benefits, clearer job descriptions, and insights from people already working at the company were the three most voted factors, nearly tied in importance. As one respondent explained: *"I look at their posting and if it's well structured, because I think that tells something about how things are done in that company. If the post is not well-structured or informative it already demotivates me."* For many, the quality of a job post serves as an early indicator of the company's organization and even the supportiveness of future managers.



Key insights

When deciding whether to apply, women in STEM pay close attention to how a job is presented: clear, structured descriptions, fair pay, benefits, and growth opportunities signal whether a company is serious about valuing its people. Culture, diversity, and work-life balance matter just as much as the role itself.

“I look up the employees first, because it gives me a sense of whether the company is diverse enough in terms of gender and cultural background.”

Company culture and personal development opportunities also weigh heavily. Many pay close attention to whether the organization invests in its employees through mentorship, training, or growth paths. *“For me as a young working professional, I do really value some mentorship, especially from your manager.”* Others also look for diversity in the team and inclusive hiring practices. It is not just about who the company claims to be, but who is actually working there. As a respondent noted, *“Growth opportunities, diversity in the team, and personal development. The company’s culture is just as important to me than the role itself.”*

Close behind were a better understanding of personal strengths and preferences and firsthand impressions, such as visiting the office or meeting employees in person. Only a small number of respondents felt they already knew how to choose without additional information.



Some take a more logistical approach: whether a job offers remote work, where it is located, and if it fits into their current lifestyle. *“I prefer to look at it this way: does the job fit into my life, rather than trying to make my life fit into the job.”*

“I prefer to look at it this way: does the job fit into my life, rather than trying to make my life fit into the job.”

Overall, the findings show that the decision to apply is rarely impulsive. Instead, it is a layered evaluation. Balancing salaries, a company's structure, logistics, and growth potential determine not just whether the candidate is right for the job, but whether the job is right for the candidate.

Barriers to applying and missed opportunities



Image 16: Importance of diverse leadership and role models rated

Opinions about a workplace are formed well before applications are made. Several women shared that overly demanding or unclear job postings can be discouraging. One explained, *"Most of the time I feel discouraged when they ask for too much experience or knowledge in too many areas. Women often try to meet all the requirements, and if we don't, we hold back from applying."* Another added, *"Whenever the job description is unclear and I reach out for clarification but never hear back, it makes me feel like the company is unapproachable."*

The tone of job postings also matters. *"Some postings have an excluding tone, like 'we are looking for a very specific person and if it's not you then don't even apply.' It makes you feel like a number, not a person,"* one participant noted. Others pointed to listings that highlight responsibilities but not rewards: *"If they only mention things like having a nice office, it's not worth it."*

Representation was another factor. As one respondent shared, *"If I see that most employees are male or only male, I would feel discouraged. It makes me wonder how they haven't found women suitable for these roles."* Another added, *"When I look at the leadership board and see only white middle-aged men, it feels like a very alpha environment, and that would not be for me."*

"I think I would be discouraged from applying if I saw that the company's employees were mostly, or only, men."

Even seemingly small signals shaped perceptions of exclusion. For example, outdated or poorly designed websites gave the impression of weak organization. *“If the company’s website is old or confusing, it tells me they lack good management skills, and that stops me from applying.”* one participant explained. Others pointed to negative past experiences: *“As a dental assistant, I often felt underappreciated. If a company gives off the same vibe, it discourages me from applying.”*

Overall, women felt excluded when companies projected a lack of inclusivity, undervalued employees, or failed to communicate clearly and respectfully in their hiring process.

Inclusive Hiring Starts with the Job Posting

Creating a sense of inclusion begins long before a new hire’s first day: it often starts with the job posting. Subtle details in the way roles are presented can encourage a wider pool of candidates to apply or, unintentionally, limit interest. By intentionally designing job postings with inclusion in mind, companies can reach a broader, more diverse talent pool and make a positive first impression on potential candidates. Early cues can quietly shape whether someone feels welcome or whether they decide to walk away before ever hitting “submit.”

What makes a place feel truly welcoming

Feeling welcome often comes down to the people and the environment that is created. The data shows that the strongest factor is a supportive and open team culture, chosen by most respondents as the element that makes them feel included. This aligns closely with many of the personal reflections we gathered, where warmth, openness, and shared enthusiasm were described as key ingredients of the ideal workplace. As one respondent recalled: *“It is great to be around people who are likeminded and seem to have the same goals as you, so that’s what makes me feel welcome.”*

Flexibility, work-life balance, and opportunities for growth were also highlighted as signals of a company’s genuine care. When newcomers are given space to grow and supported in balancing personal and professional commitments, workplaces become more approachable and motivating.



What makes you feel welcome in a workplace?



Image 17: Factors that create a welcoming workplace

In our qualitative interviews, women highlighted three recurring themes: inclusive environments, supportive people, and opportunities to connect. Many experiences of belonging came from the people themselves. One participant explained, *"I feel most welcome when people are extroverted and open. Since I'm in a male-dominated field, it means a lot when people are genuinely happy to have women around."* Mentorship and guidance were also important: *"At my first job, I had a good mentor who helped me build confidence and take on new tasks, which made me feel really valued."*



Key insights

Across all examples, a friendly and approachable atmosphere, diverse representation, and genuine interest in new perspectives stood out as the most powerful ways to make women in STEM feel welcome.

Several pointed to HerFuture's role in creating a welcoming environment. One said, *"I would say HerFuture. I felt welcome because my perspective as a fresh graduate was seen as a positive, not a drawback."* Another described the Grand Summit, HerFuture's premier annual event: *"It was a very nice and welcoming event. I liked that it was both educational and social: you could chat, have dinner, and connect in a casual but informative way."* A third added, *"I really love this event. Maybe also because it's all girls. It makes you want to connect with more people and the conversations flow easily."*

Finally, companies that actively showcase their culture helped build a sense of belonging even before women applied. As one explained, *"In the job description or on the career page, I check if they mention social events or team activities. If they are actively building their culture, that makes me want to be part of it."*

Questions applicants wish they could ask

The One Question Before Applying: What's It Really Like to Work Here?

When asked what single honest question they would want to ask a company before applying, women focused on the human side of work: culture, expectations, and values often left out of polished job descriptions. *"Is the work a team effort or is there a strong hierarchy structure?"* one asked. Others wanted clarity on what kind of people succeed: *"What kind of personality are you looking for, not just the qualities?"* Clear role expectations were also a priority. One explained, *"For my first job, I'd want to know the expectations for a junior role so I can improve myself."* Another added, *"What do you expect from a starter – what soft and technical skills, and on what timeline?"*

Diversity and Representation

Many women said their first question would be about representation. *"What is the percentage of women that work there and how diverse is the company?"* one asked. *"Others focused on inclusion in daily practice: 'How will you approach new co-workers from another ethnicity or nationality?' and 'What is your attitude towards minorities, specifically racial minorities?'"* Candidates wanted to understand the lived experience within the team and how people from different backgrounds are treated, rather than relying on promotional statistics. As one respondent explained, they valued *"true diversity, not just numbers used for branding."*

Growth and Development

"Do employees grow in the company? When they enter, do they come out as different people, or do they stay where they are?" one asked. Another wanted to know, *"How do you push employees to develop (both personally and technically) so they can eventually move up in the company?"*

Fairness and Recruitment Practices

Some questions reflected concerns about fairness in hiring. One participant asked, *"Are you really screening CVs, or are they just glanced over?"* Others wanted to know how companies assess candidates: *"How do you decide who fits the job? I know it's not allowed to reject someone based on race or sexuality, but sometimes I do feel like that happens."*

Work-Life Balance and Flexibility

Finally, workload and flexibility were common concerns. *"How many hours do I need to work, and how strict are you about being in the office?"* one asked. Another admitted, *"I want to ask about work-life balance, but I'm always afraid it will make me seem unmotivated."*



Key insights

Ultimately, most respondents' concerns boiled down to one central question: Will I be respected, supported, and able to grow here? Clear, honest answers to this can strongly influence a candidate's decision to apply or walk away.

Money Talk

Salary transparency: to apply or not to apply?

When asked if they would apply for a job without a listed salary, most women said yes, but with hesitation. Many saw applying as the only way to create an opportunity. *"I would still apply, because if I don't apply, I don't even have a chance,"* one explained. Another added, *"If it's my first job, I know I can always ask in the interview, so I'd still apply."* Some framed it pragmatically: *"It's common for salaries not to be mentioned, but I'd make sure to ask later in the process."*

Would you apply to a job if the salary is not mentioned?

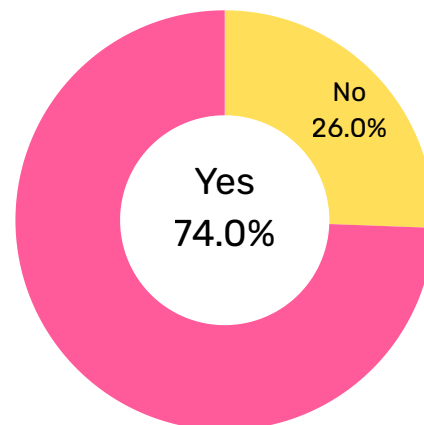


Image 18: Willingness to apply without salary details

Average expected monthly internship compensation

€701

Average expected annual salary for a first full-time job

€44.815

Others admitted they would apply but felt uneasy. *"I would definitely be less likely to apply, because salary is one of the first things you need to know, to pay rent and manage cost of living,"* one participant said. Another echoed, *"I'm not doing it only for the money, but you need money to live well. If two jobs are the same, I'd choose the higher-paying one."* A smaller group said they would not apply at all without knowing pay, unless it was for short-term internships or purely for experience.

Despite many being willing to apply, nearly all agreed that salary transparency matters. One respondent put it simply: *"If the job description mentions salary, I trust the company more."* Another added, *"It's not necessarily about the amount, but about honesty. If they are not upfront, I look for another job."* Several women pointed out that transparency also saves time: *"It helps me decide whether the job is for me, and it saves time for both sides."*



Key insights

Even if some women apply without salary details, most expect transparency. Clearly stating pay ranges builds trust, signals fairness, and makes roles more attractive to top talent.

“Having transparency on the wage would help me decide whether this job is for me, it saves time on both sides.”

Even those willing to apply without salary information said they preferred transparency, as it built trust and set clear expectations. *“I think it says a lot about what your life is going to look like. It’s important, but not the most important thing,”* one explained. Others emphasized that pay is only part of the story: *“Salary is not everything. You also need work-life balance, opportunities to grow, and a supportive culture.”*

Overall, while salary was not always the top priority, most agreed that having pay information upfront made the process more honest and efficient. Even when it did not prevent someone from applying, the lack of clarity created doubts that could lower a company’s appeal.

Breaking the Cycle

“HerFuture made me realize that when there are many women in one place, we thrive to become our best selves.”

The findings of this whitepaper highlight a clear truth: the challenges women face in entering tech are not only individual but systemic. Breaking the cycle requires more than identifying barriers. It means creating spaces where women feel seen, supported, and empowered to pursue their ambitions. This is where HerFuture plays a transformative role.



Many women in the HerFuture community describe the impact of being part of such a network. *"HerFuture made me realize that when there are many women in one place, we thrive to become our best selves."* Others emphasize how the community has broadened their horizons: *"I'm truly grateful to HerFuture, not only for the networking opportunities but also for introducing me to so many more companies and career paths than I would have discovered on my own."*



For some, the value lies in inclusion and safety. One woman shared, *"I'm naturally more introverted and don't often push myself out of my comfort zone. However, at HerFuture events, I feel comfortable and safe engaging in conversations. It's a space where I can genuinely share my thoughts without hesitation, and that means a lot to me."* Others highlight long-term growth: *"HerFuture has been so much more than events or the app alone. It is a long-term strategy for personal and professional growth. It is not just about attending a single event and getting an internship; it is about ongoing learning and support that prepares you for these opportunities when they arise."*

One computer science student explained how events such as CV reviews and casual meetups with recruiters gave her a much clearer sense of hiring practices. Beyond that, she discovered a range of local companies she had never encountered online, realizing that meeting employees face-to-face offered valuable insights. For her, HerFuture turned uncertainty about the job market into practical knowledge and valuable connections.

"I'm truly grateful to HerFuture, not only for the networking opportunities but also for introducing me to so many more companies and career paths than I would have discovered on my own."



Key insight

Breaking the cycle requires visibility, encouragement, and access, not only to opportunities, but also to one another. A strong sense of community is essential.

An Open Letter to the Industry

As the co-founder and CEO of HerFuture, I have had the privilege of hearing the unfiltered voices of women in STEM. In this whitepaper, you've heard them too. These are not statistics: they are real stories of ambition, resilience, and frustration. Women who want to contribute, lead, and innovate, but who are too often held back by barriers that should no longer exist: unclear entry points, lack of representation, limited networks, and doubts about their own confidence.



Their words are a wake-up call. The challenges they describe are not abstract problems of “the pipeline”: they are lived experiences that continue to push talent away. Every time a woman hesitates to apply, questions whether she belongs, or leaves the field altogether, the industry loses out on potential, creativity, and leadership.

The message from these women is clear: the barriers are real, but so are the solutions. Women want visible role models, inclusive cultures, access to networks and opportunities to grow with confidence. The responsibility for change cannot rest on women alone. Employers, universities, and industry leaders all have a role to play in building environments where ambition is met with opportunity, where diversity is valued not just in numbers but in practice, and where women are encouraged not only to enter tech and engineering but to thrive, lead, and shape its future.

The next decade does not have to look like the last. If we commit now, we can build an ecosystem where women in STEM are not only entering the field, but thriving, leading, and shaping the future of technology itself.

The question is no longer whether women are ready for tech: it's whether tech is ready for women.

Micky Chen
co-founder & ceo, HerFuture

A Letter from the Next Generation

By Charlotte Tan, BSc Artificial Intelligence graduate



I am just beginning my career in tech. Like many women whose voices are captured in this whitepaper, I enter the field with ambition and determination, but also with the awareness of the barriers that stand in my way, and without the confidence that comes with experience. These are not abstract issues, they are the everyday hurdles that shape how ready I feel to take the first step. They are questions I face right now as I look for my first opportunities.

What gives me confidence is knowing that change is possible. When companies are transparent, inclusive, and open to growth, women like me can bring our full potential to the table. These simple but powerful shifts can unlock so much talent that is currently being overlooked.

I hope the industry listens to our generation. We're ready to bring creativity, skills, and new perspectives to the future of tech. We want to learn, to contribute, and to lead. The real question is whether the industry will choose to create the conditions where we can do so.

Because if it does, the future of tech won't just make room for women like me: it will be stronger *because* of us. And that's a future I can't wait to help build.

Contact

If you have questions about this whitepaper or want to get in touch with HerFuture to get involved in the community or participate in an event, please connect with us via herfuture@minite.works.

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