Employer Views on Work-Based Learning:

What They Value and What Would Help Them Scale

strada INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK

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Students who participate in work-based learning (e.g., internships, apprenticeships, co-ops, clinicals, practicums)[1] earn more after graduation and are more likely to land jobs that make full use of their degrees.[2] Yet student demand for work-based learning outpaces the supply. Fewer than half of graduating seniors at public four-year colleges and universities complete even one paid WBL experience before they finish their degree,[3] even as a growing share of students actively seek one out.

Nearly every employer that offers WBL calls it worthwhile, yet most college students have not had a paid WBL experience by the time they graduate. What would it take for employers to scale WBL opportunities so that every learner had the opportunity to have a structured experience that connects what they learn in the classroom to the workplace?

To answer this question, Strada Institute for the Future of Work surveyed 2,500 executives and senior leaders responsible for hiring and talent decisions in two waves, October 2025 and March 2026. The individuals surveyed are responsible for hiring at the entry level of every size and across a full span of industries. We asked them how much they value college students' WBL experience, what motivates them to offer it, how much of their workforce it currently reaches, and what stands in the way of expanding their WBL offerings.

Key Findings

Work experience is the factor employers value most[4], even for entry-level hires.

When hiring entry-level roles, employers are more than three times as likely to prioritize a candidate with work experience to one distinguished mainly by GPA and academic awards.

Employers call WBL a valuable investment, almost unanimously.

Among employers that offer it, 96 percent describe WBL as somewhat or very valuable. WBL is widespread among employers. Four in five employers (81 percent) offer some form of WBL, proof that WBL is a viable, scalable lever, not a niche practice.

WBL learning programs typically are less than 5 percent of an employer's U.S. workforce (headcount).

While a leading minority of employers (29 percent) host WBL participants equal to 5 percent or more of headcount, the majority host 4 percent or less.

Several barriers stand in the way of employers' efforts to expand WBL.

Resource and operational constraints — the cost of stipends and wages, supervisor time, and administrative burden — are the most-cited barrier to expanding WBL (71 percent), followed by business-environment and return-on-investment concerns (58 percent) and difficulty finding candidates with the right baseline skills (50 percent).

Three kinds of support from educators, intermediaries, and policymakers are most valued by employers.

Resource and operational support, such as financial incentives (tax credits, wage subsidies, training grants), and program design and talent-fit support, such as vetted candidate pipelines, tie as the most-cited categories, each named first or second by 58 percent of employers, followed by business considerations and demonstrated ROI (47 percent).

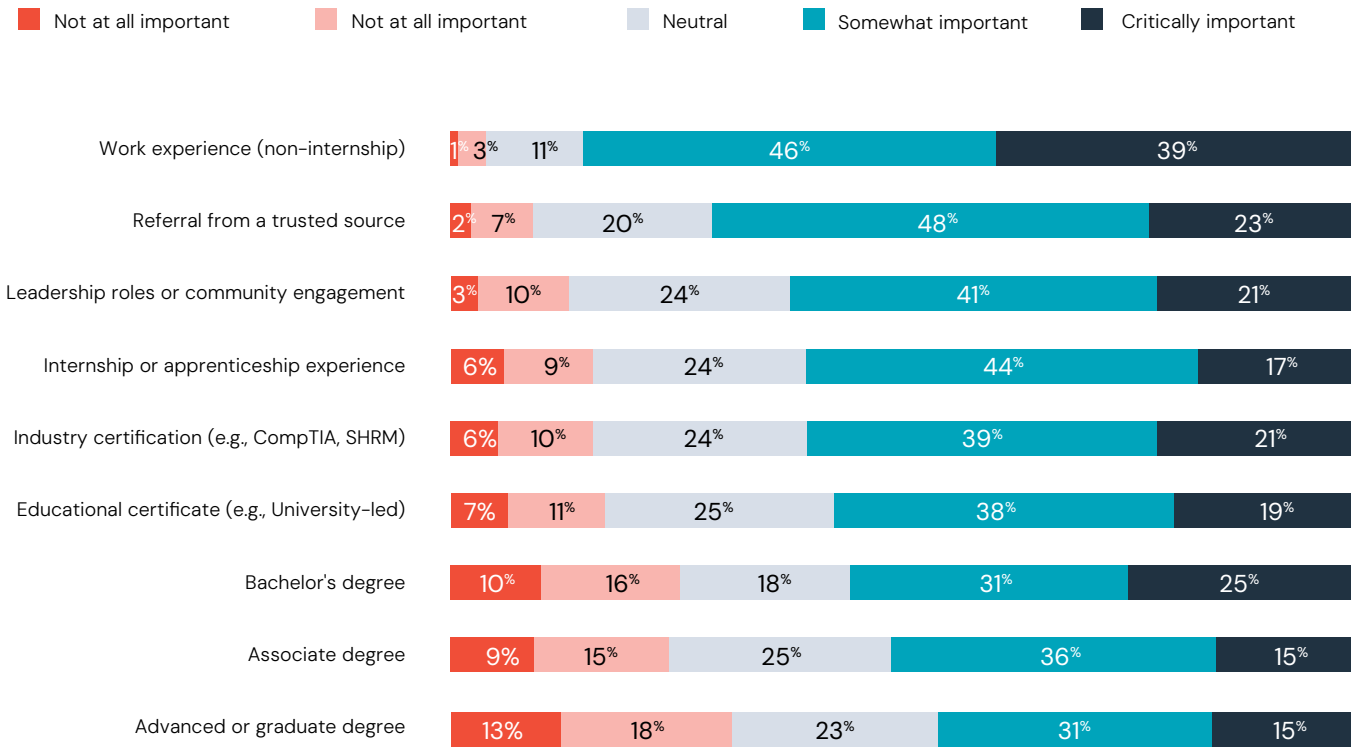
METHODOLOGY

The surveys were conducted in October 2025 (n=1,003) and March 2026 (n=1,498) and included employers who hire at the entry level. All participants had direct, supervisory, or ultimate responsibility for hiring and held a human resources professional title or a CEO or equivalent title (Partner, President, General Manager). The data are nationally representative by industry and organization size. Analyses in this report draw on different combinations of the two survey waves; each figure notes which subset of data was used.

Work Experience Matters Most, Even for Entry-Level Hiring

Relevant work experience matters most when employers evaluate job candidates. Asked to rate a range of factors used to evaluate entry-level candidates, 85 percent of employers called work experience the single-most important factor measured, ahead of every academic credential tested. Internship or apprenticeship experience specifically was rated important by 61 percent of employers.[5]

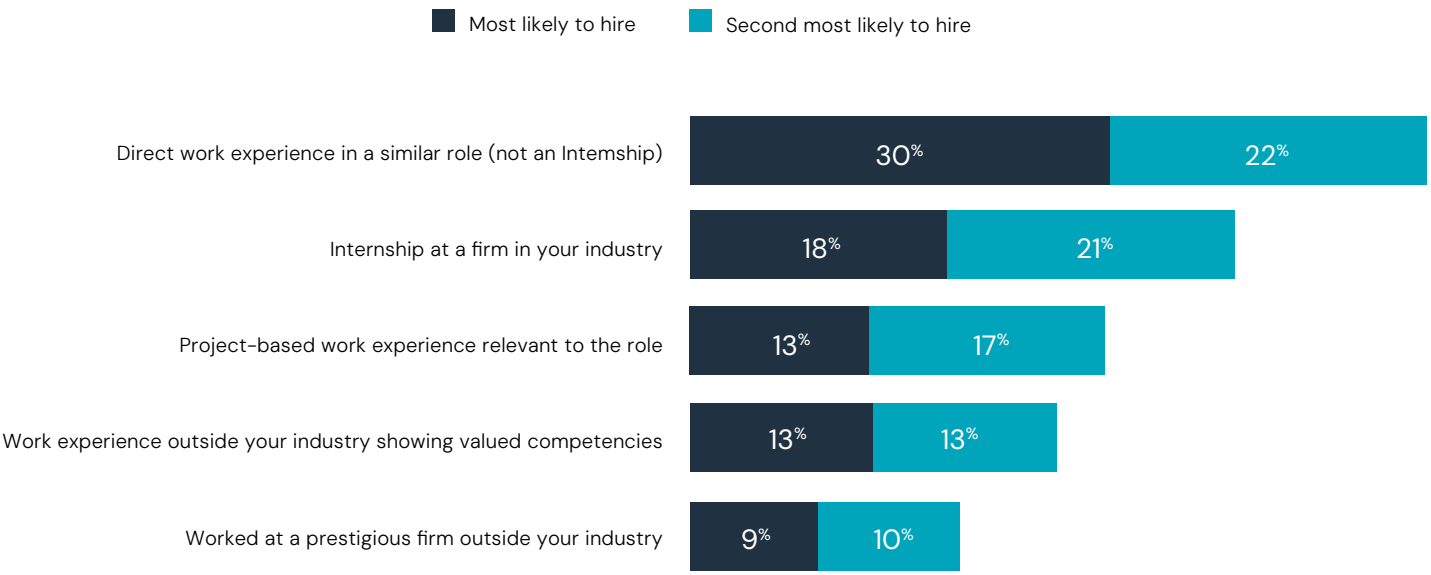
Figure 1. Important Factors When Hiring Entry-Level Candidates



Base: Data from the March 2026 survey, weighted (n=1,498). Survey question: "When evaluating entry-level jobs, how important are the following factors?"

When evaluating four-year college graduates, employers value work experience over academic performance by a wide margin. Ranking candidate profiles for roles that require a bachelor's degree, employers preferred candidates with work experience, whether gained through a direct work experience from a regular job, an internship in the employer's industry, or a project-based work experience over candidates distinguished mainly by a 4.0 GPA and academic awards, who were ranked in the top two just 16 percent of the time.

Figure 2. Most Preferred Candidates When Hiring Baccalaureate-Level Candidates



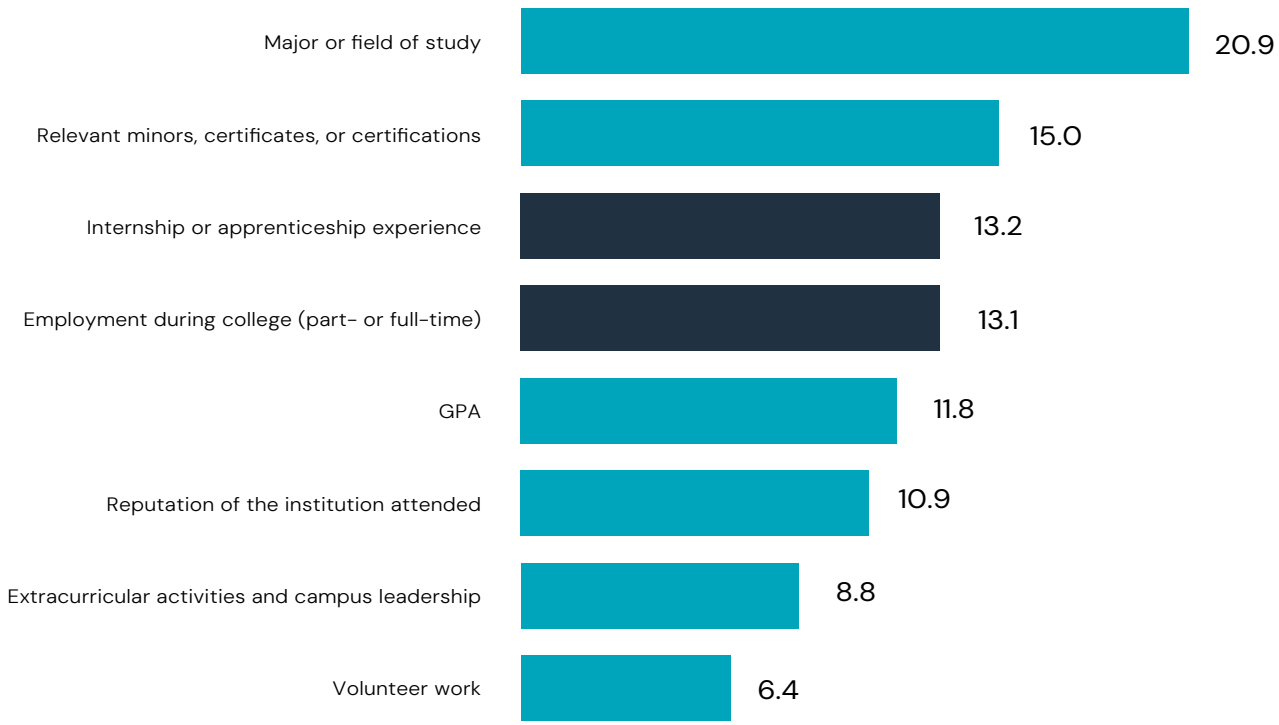
Base: Data from the March 2026 survey, weighted (n=677; limited to employers hiring baccalaureate-level or higher-level candidates). Survey question: "Imagine you are looking to fill a typical entry-level professional role in your organization. Among seven candidates, all of whom have a four-year college degree, which of these would you be MOST likely to hire?"

Employers do not appear to favor structured WBL (i.e., internships and apprenticeships) over work experience acquired through a regular job. Asked to allocate 100 points across factors that matter in assessing four-year college graduates for entry-level roles, employers valued internship or apprenticeship experience and employment during college almost identically (just over 13 points each), suggesting they care more about a candidate having real-world experience than about how that experience was structured. GPA, institutional reputation, extracurricular leadership, and volunteer experience all ranked lower.

Together, these results suggest employers treat academic credentials and work experience as complementary rather than competing signals. Major or field of study received the most points of any single factor (20.9 of 100), suggesting it sets a baseline threshold expectation of preparation, while work experience — in multiple forms — adds practical value on top of it.

> **Work-based learning allows our new hires to be a lot more efficient with their work output at a much faster rate.**
>
> - CEO OF A SMALL CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

Figure 3. Relative Importance of Factors Assessing College Grads for Entry-Level Positions



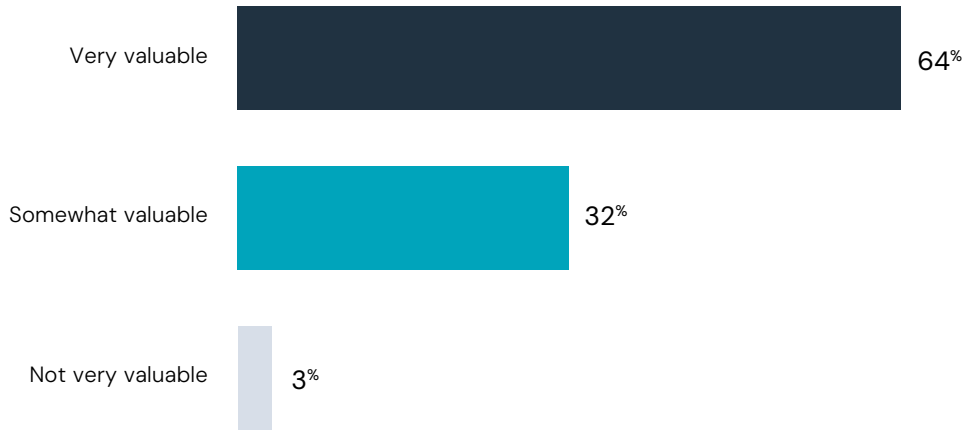
Base: Data from October 2025 survey, weighted. N=403 (employers who indicated they hire entry-level professionals). Employers allocated 100 points across factors according to relative importance; points sum to 100. Survey question: "When screening college graduates for entry-level positions, how important, on average, are each of the following factors in the assessment?"

Employers Highly Value WBL

Employers overwhelmingly describe WBL as a sound investment. Asked how valuable the resources invested in WBL programs are for their organization, 96 percent of employers that offer WBL called it somewhat or very valuable. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) called it very valuable, twice the share who called it merely somewhat valuable (32 percent).

> **Work-based learning is helpful in creating a reliable pipeline of pre-vetted, skilled talent that reduces overall hiring and training costs.**
>
> - CEO OF A LARGE TECH COMPANY

Figure 4. Employers' Perceptions on Value of Investing in WBL Programs [6]

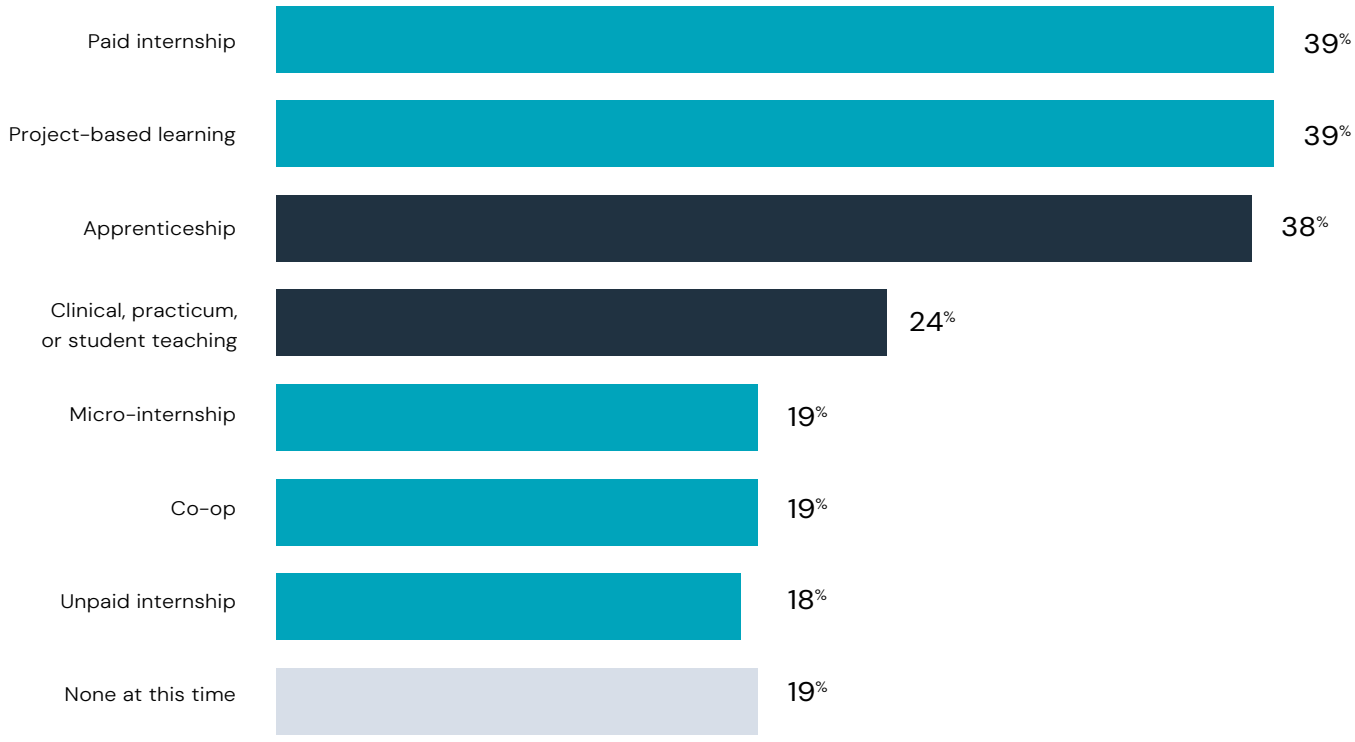


Base: Data from the October 2025 survey, weighted (n=818; limited to employers that provide WBL opportunities). Survey question: "Overall, how valuable is the investment of resources in work-based learning programs (e.g., internship, apprenticeship, co-op) for your organization?"

Four in Five Employers Offer Some Form of WBL

Employer offerings of WBL are generally broad. Eighty-one percent of employers offer at least one of the following work-based learning opportunities: internship, co-op, project-based learning, apprenticeship, or clinical, practicum, or student teaching (Figure 5).

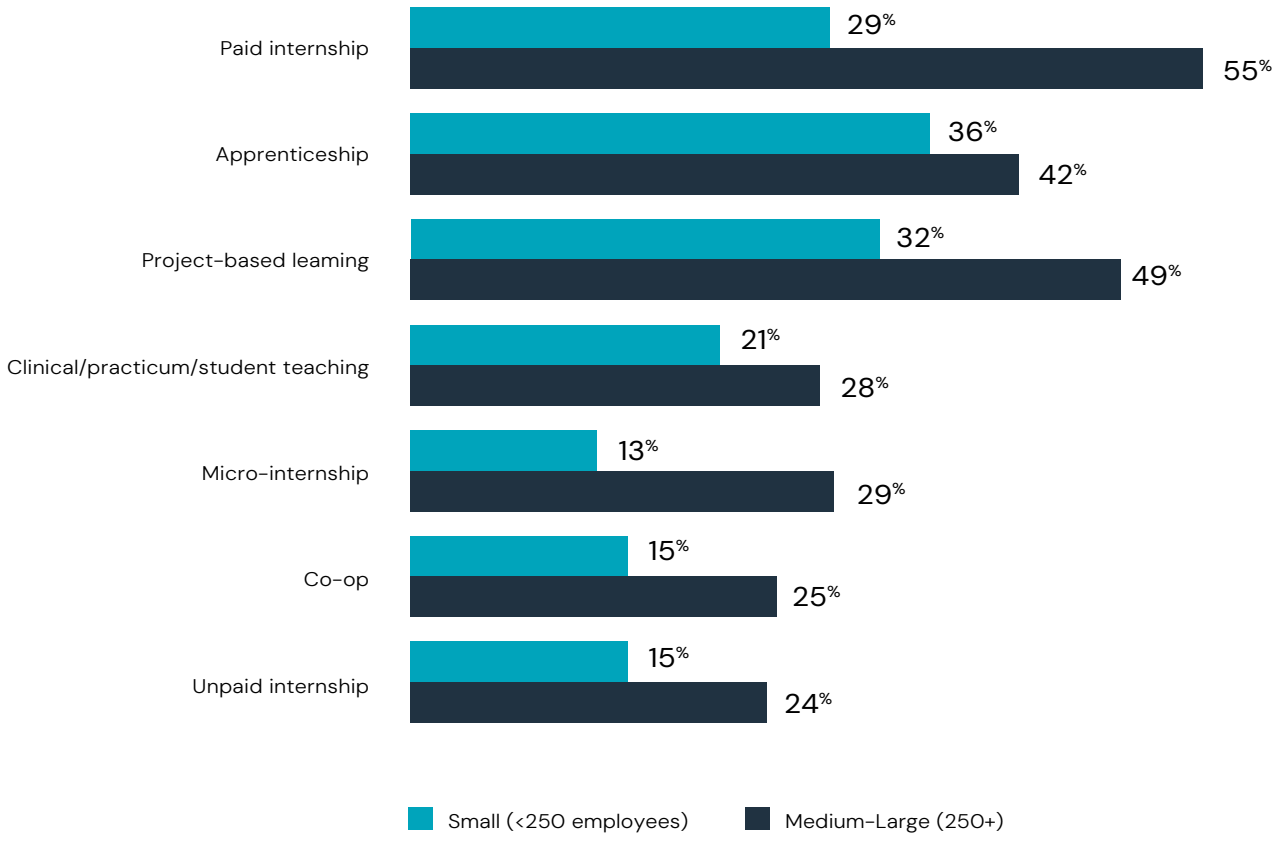
Figure 5. Share of Employers Offering WBL by Model



Base: Data from the March 2026 survey, weighted (n=1,498). Survey question: "Does your organization offer any of the following work-based learning opportunities?"

Large employers are more likely to offer WBL, but the type that is offered varies more by industry than size. Medium and large employers (250-plus employees) more frequently offer WBL than smaller employers across nearly every WBL format. Paid internships show the largest gap: 55 percent of medium-large employers offer them, versus 29 percent of small employers.

Figure 6. Employers' Offering of WBL Opportunities, by Organization Size



Base: Data from the March 2026 survey, weighted (n=1,498). Survey question: "Does your organization offer any of the following work-based learning opportunities?" Employers who answered "None at this time" comprised 14–15 percent of employers and were omitted from the chart for clarity.

Whatever type of WBL an employer chooses, however, depends more on industry than headcount: 53 percent of construction and natural resources employers offer apprenticeships, while relatively few in that industry (31 percent) offer paid internships, compared with 56 percent in information and technology and 46 percent in finance and administrative services. Education and health employers gravitate toward field-specific formats, with 41 percent offering clinical, practicum, or student-teaching placements, more than any other WBL type in that industry, a choice that reflects licensure requirements more than employer preference.

Figure 7. Employers' Offering of WBL Opportunities, by Industry

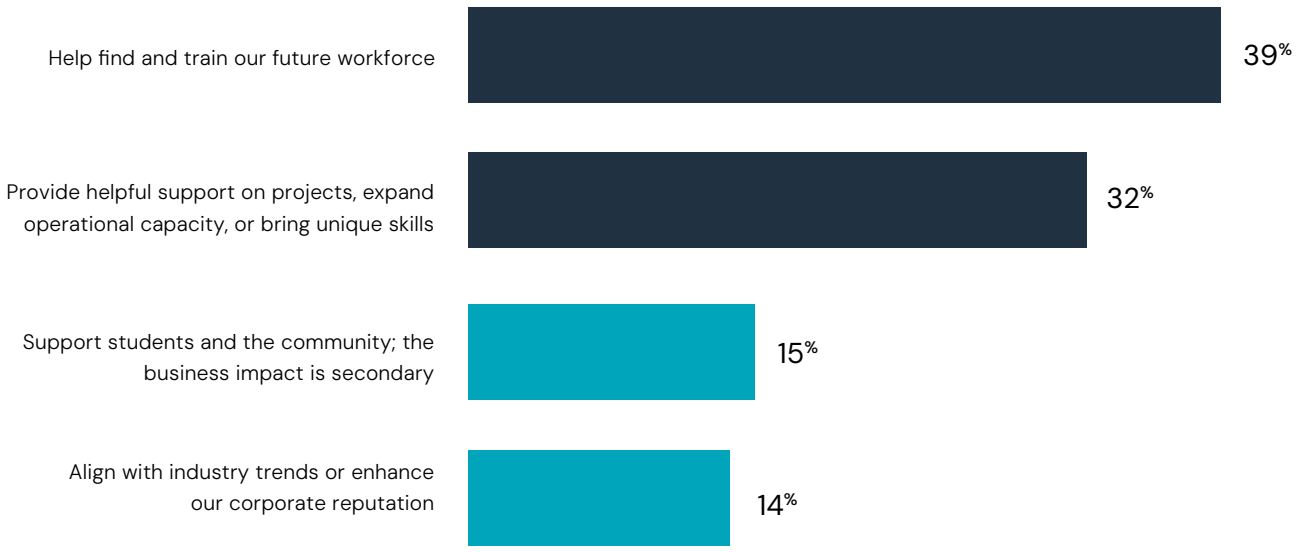
	APPRENTICE-SHIP	PROJECT-BASED	PAID INTERNSHIP	CLINICAL PRACTICUM	MICRO INTERNSHIP	CO-OP	UNPAID INTERNSHIP
Construction and Natural Resources	53%	39%	31%	16%	16%	11%	12%
Manufacturing	50%	47%	45%	26%	23%	26%	20%
Finance & Administrative Services	40%	40%	46%	22%	23%	20%	20%
Information & Technology	38%	57%	56%	18%	31%	25%	21%
Trade & Transportation	37%	31%	50%	19%	17%	16%	16%
Hospitality & Leisure	34%	27%	29%	16%	11%	14%	15%
Health, Education & Social Services	31%	36%	33%	41%	16%	20%	21%

Base: Data from the March 2026 survey, weighted (n=1,498). Survey question: "Does your organization offer any of the following work-based learning opportunities?"

Business Need, Not Community Impact, Drives Employer Interest in WBL

Internal business requirements, rather than community impact, are the primary drivers for WBL. Roughly 4 in 10 employers (39 percent) offer WBL opportunities to cultivate and prepare their upcoming talent pool, while nearly a third (32 percent) do so to bolster project support and operational bandwidth. Just 15 percent of organizations prioritize community impact as their lead motivator, underscoring that WBL is a fundamental element of business strategy, not just a corporate social responsibility initiative.

Figure 8. Primary Reason for Organization to Offer WBL

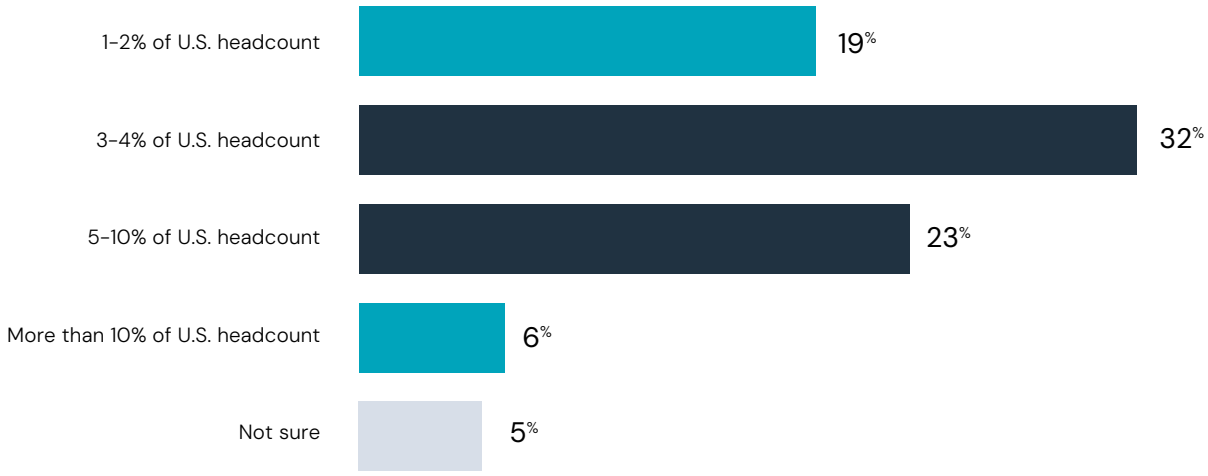


Base: Data from the March 2026 survey, weighted (n=1,226). Survey question: "If you had to choose one, which of the following most accurately describes the primary reason your organization offers work-based learning? We participate in these programs primarily to ..."

For Most Employers, WBL Programs Represent a Small Share of Their Workforce

While WBL is widespread among employers, the size of WBL programs is typically less than 5 percent of their total U.S. workforce. Thirty-two percent of employers report that WBL participants represent 3–4 percent of their employees. For 29 percent of employers, WBL participants comprise 5 or more percent of their headcount.

Figure 9. WBL Share Relative to Headcount



Base: Data from the March 2026 survey, weighted (n=1,498). Survey question: "What percentage of your U.S.-based headcount does your organization host annually in work-based learning (WBL) slots (e.g., interns, apprentices, clinical trainees)?"

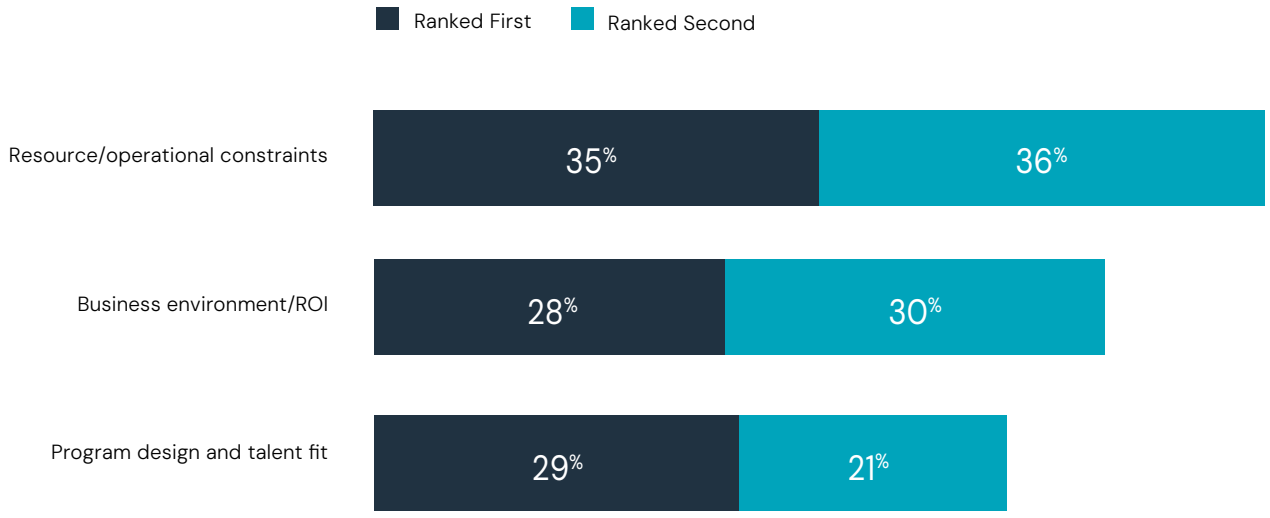
Across industries, sectors, and company sizes, the pattern is remarkably consistent. Employers overwhelmingly cluster in the range of WBL participants representing 0–4 percent relative to their headcount across industries and employer sizes.[7]

While industry context matters, expanding WBL will require broad solutions across industry sectors. This is not a niche challenge confined to a single sector.

What Stands in the Way, and What Would Help Employers Expand WBL

A consistent set of structural barriers stands in the way of employers expanding WBL. Grouping the specific barriers employers name into three categories, resource and operational constraints — the direct costs of stipends, wages, and insurance, the internal staff time needed to supervise participants, and the administrative burden of paperwork and compliance — by far are the most commonly cited, named first or second by 71 percent of employers. Business environment and ROI concerns follow at 58 percent, spanning market volatility, industry-specific instability, and the difficulty of making an internal business case or securing leadership support. Program design and talent fit is named by 50 percent of employers; although it ranks third as a category, it contains the single-most cited barrier of all, the difficulty finding WBL candidates with the necessary baseline skills (36 percent).

Figure 10. Primary Barriers to Increasing the Number of WBL Opportunities

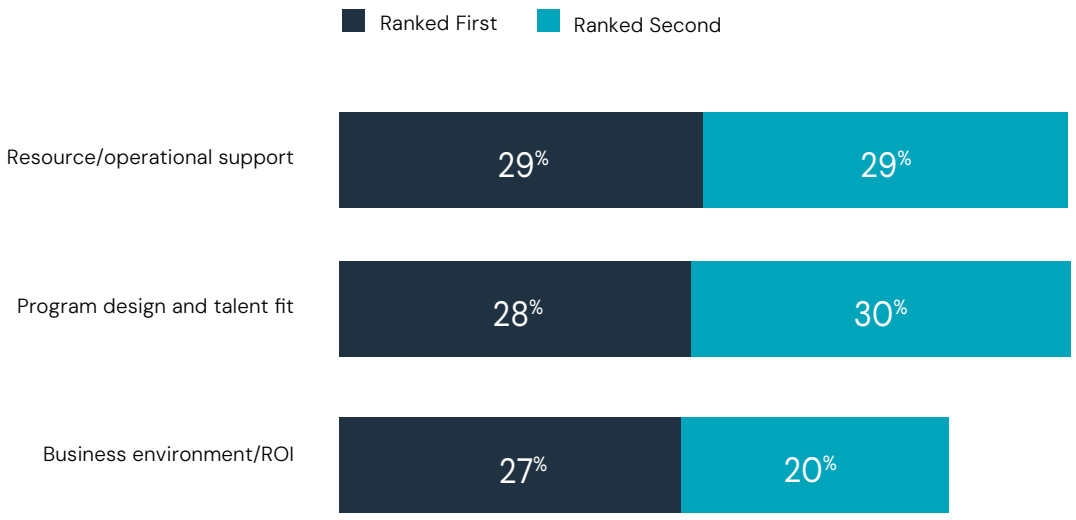


Base: Data from the March 2026 survey, weighted (n=1,498). Survey question: "What are the primary barriers to increasing the number of work-based learning (WBL) opportunities you offer?" Barriers are aggregated into the three categories shown; see Appendix for detailed list.

Employers' proposed solutions map directly onto the barriers they name. Grouped the same way, resource and operational support and program design and talent fit tie as the most-cited categories of solutions, each named first or second by 58 percent of employers. The first category is driven chiefly by financial incentives such as tax credits, wage subsidies, and training grants, along with turnkey help managing administrative burden. The second is driven by access to a vetted shortlist of pre-screened WBL candidates, closer alignment between curricula and the technical skills employers need, and a bigger role in co-designing training programs. Business environment and ROI factors follow at 47 percent, split between demonstrated ROI data that can help employers build the internal business case and increased demand for entry-level talent. That last driver is the one employers rank first more often than any other single item (16 percent), a reminder that WBL commitments ultimately follow business needs.

> **"I view it as a very useful program because it helps us to potentially find great future employees with the specific skill sets we need.**
>
> – HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER AT A SMALL HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATION

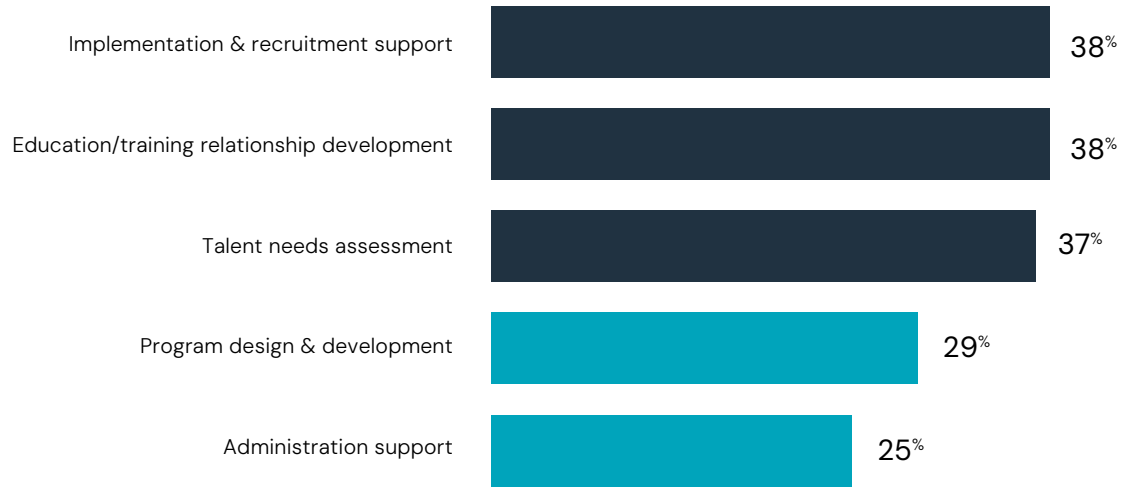
Figure 11. Primary Drivers to Increasing the Number of WBL Opportunities



Base: Data from the March 2026 survey, weighted (n=1,053; limited to employers who provide WBL opportunities to less than 5 percent of their U.S. headcount). Survey question: "What would be the primary drivers for your organization to host a number of work-based learning (WBL) slots equivalent to at least 5 percent of your U.S. headcount?" Drivers are aggregated into the three categories shown; see Appendix for detailed list.

Holding costs aside, what employers value most is practical help getting a WBL program off the ground. Offered a menu of potential nonfinancial supports (e.g., from WBL intermediaries), 38 percent rated implementation and recruitment assistance (i.e., drafting job descriptions, sourcing candidates, and training the supervisors who will oversee participants) as the most valuable, alongside help building relationships with education and training providers (38 percent) and talent needs assessments (37 percent).

Figure 12. Valued Support Services to Increase WBL Opportunities, Holding Costs Aside



Base: Data from the March 2026 survey, weighted (n=1,498). Survey question: "Holding costs aside, which of the following support services would be most valuable in helping you expand your work-based learning (WBL) programs?"

EMPLOYER INTERMEDIARIES CAN DELIVER VALUABLE SUPPORT TO SCALE WBL

Employer intermediaries are organizations that work closely with employers to build and manage WBL initiatives. They can help employers overcome the exact barriers identified above by providing the specialized capacity needed to launch, implement, and scale programs, support that matters most for small and midsize businesses that lack the staff, resources, or expertise to manage WBL on their own.

To learn more, explore Strada's Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries,[8] which outlines five core functions intermediaries can provide to help employers scale WBL.

> **The greatest benefit is getting a return on our investment. And when we hire quality employees, we benefit from that in the long run.**
>
> — HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR AT A LARGE HEALTHCARE NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION

Recommendations for Employers, Educators, and Policymakers

In answering the question of what it would take for employers to scale work-based learning so every learner has access, the survey results indicate that there is no one answer or silver bullet solution that will address all challenges employers face. Due to the complexity and diversity of the employer landscape, getting to scale will require a concerted effort of multiple stakeholder groups testing different solutions. The insights from this survey add to a growing body of research and help clarify which solutions may warrant the field's greatest attention and investment.

Making WBL both widespread and available at a meaningful scale will require more than individual employer action. It will require coordinated commitments from four groups, each addressing a different piece of what employers say is standing in their way.

Employers: Assess and evaluate your portfolio of early talent programs.

Meaningful scaling of WBL slots will look different for every business. If relevant work experience is the single-most important factor when evaluating entry-level job candidates, employers should assess their existing early talent programs and consider how well their current portfolio is positioned to prepare future talent for their organization and industry, more broadly. Business leaders should identify core challenges their talent strategy can help solve and select metrics to measure progress against those challenges over time (e.g., retention, engagement, productivity, etc.).[9]

With those business needs in mind, targets for WBL growth can be established and treated as a workforce-planning goal. No single ratio of WBL offerings will fit every employer, but establishing a baseline is the necessary first step toward responsible growth. As AI reshapes entry-level work, demand for candidates who arrive with experience is likely to grow, not shrink[10], which makes this benchmarking exercise more urgent, not less.

Educators and Intermediaries: Build the vetted pipelines and support employers say they lack.

Candidate quality is the most-cited individual barrier for employers, and implementation support is their most-valued nonfinancial form of support. Educators and employer intermediaries can respond directly by providing employers with pre-screened candidate pools, preparing supervisors and mentors, assisting with program design, and managing the administrative work employers say they are not equipped to handle alone.[11] This support matters most for small and midsize employers, who lack the internal capacity that larger organizations already have.

What remains an open question is which signal work experience actually sends. Is it a proxy for job-specific competence, or for something more general: reliability, time management, the ability to navigate workplace norms and social dynamics? Employers' preference for experience hints that the signal may be more about demonstrated

workplace readiness than about task-specific skill-building. Untangling this is a natural next step for future waves of research, and it matters practically: if the signal largely is about professional and interpersonal competencies, institutions can cultivate much of it without a formal internship placement.

Educators and Intermediaries: Prepare all students for WBL, not just those who already are well-positioned.

If institutions respond to employer demand for fit only by better marketing their strongest candidates, the students least likely to already have a foot in the door — first-generation students and students in programs without established employer pipelines — risk falling further behind rather than catching up. A more durable response is to build the underlying competencies broadly, before the internship search begins. As institutions revisit general education requirements, a credit-bearing course in workplace readiness is one concrete way to close the fit gap for students who don't arrive with informal preparation already in hand.

Policymakers and Funders: Underwrite the startup costs of scaling, not the ongoing program.

Employers indicated that financial incentives such as tax credits, wage subsidies, training grants, and similar incentives, will drive program expansion. Public support can help to scale WBL by concentrating on the initial cost of testing and standing up a program, where the barrier to entry is highest, and can have the greatest impact when targeted at small and midsize businesses, nonprofits, and high-growth-potential industries with limited capacity to absorb startup costs on their own. Policymakers and funders also can consider funding pooled training methods that support multiple employers and help to reduce the cost of training for employers across a state or region.

Industry Associations and Sector Partnerships: Tailor the playbook to each industry's WBL model.

The barriers to scaling WBL are universal, but the preferred format is not: apprenticeships dominate in construction and manufacturing, while paid internships dominate in information and technology and finance. Associations, sector partnerships, and employer-facing intermediaries should convene employers around their specific early talent needs and the right WBL model(s) to address those needs. Multi-employer groups can help by spotlighting examples from peer organizations with highly valued WBL programs, connecting their employers to education and training providers, identifying financial support that matches their industry's constraints, and providing industry benchmarks and WBL data analysis.

Appendix

Figure A1. Percentage of U.S.-Based Headcount Organization Hosts Annually in WBL Slots By Industry

	0%	1%-2%	3%-4%	5%-10%	More than 10%
Construction and Natural Resources	15%	16%	31%	25%	7%
Manufacturing	10%	23%	33%	21%	10%
Trade & Transportation	19%	16%	31%	25%	4%
Hospitality & Leisure	25%	15%	27%	20%	5%
Health, Education & Social Services	14%	19%	32%	25%	6%
Finance & Administrative Services	12%	20%	35%	22%	7%
Information & Technology	10%	25%	36%	23%	5%

What percentage of your U.S.-based headcount does your organization host annually in work-based learning (WBL) slots (e.g., interns, apprentices, clinical trainees)? | Weighted; n= 1,498.

Figure A2. Percentage of U.S.-Based Headcount Organization Hosts Annually in WBL Slots By Employer Size

	0%	1%-2%	3%-4%	5%-10%	More than 10%
250 or more employees	7%	19%	36%	27%	7%
Fewer than 250 employees	20%	18%	30%	21%	5%

What percentage of your U.S.-based headcount does your organization host annually in work-based learning (WBL) slots (e.g., interns, apprentices, clinical trainees)? | Weighted; n= 1,498.

Figure A3. Primary Barriers to Increasing the Number of WBL Opportunities Ranked by Employers

Category	Barrier	Ranked 1st	Ranked 2nd	Ranked 1st or 2nd
Resource/ Operational Constraints	Direct Financial Costs: Stipends, wages, or insurance for the learners	14%	13%	26%
	Internal Capacity/Staff Time: Lack of supervisors to mentor and train learners	13%	11%	24%
	Administrative Burden: Excessive paperwork, legal requirements, or compliance tracking	8%	12%	19%
Program Design and Talent Fit	Candidate Quality: Difficulty finding students with the necessary baseline skills	22%	14%	36%
	Design Challenges: Difficulty identifying relevant WBL models (e.g., apprenticeships vs. internships) and understanding how to effectively apply them within your specific organizational context	7%	7%	14%
Business Environment/ ROI	Strategic Alignment: Difficulty demonstrating a clear business case or securing necessary leadership support	9%	10%	18%
	Market Uncertainty: Volatility in the current economic landscape making long-term talent investments or headcount commitments difficult to justify	10%	10%	20%
	External Market Factors: Economic downturn or industry-specific	9%	10%	18%

Base: Data from the March 2026 survey, weighted (n=1,498). Survey question: “What are the primary barriers to increasing the number of work-based learning (WBL) opportunities you offer?”. Percentages may not sum due to rounding.

Figure A4. Primary Drivers to Increasing the Number of WBL Opportunities

Category	Barrier	Ranked 1st	Ranked 2nd	Ranked 1st or 2nd
Resource/ Operational Constraints	Financial Incentives: Access to direct offsets such as tax credits, wage subsides, or training grants to lower cost of participation	14%	13%	27%
	Operational Constraints: Regardless of incentives or other supports, our current size or business model cannot support internships equivalent to 5 percent of our U.S. headcount	8%	9%	18%
	Administrative Outsourcing: A "tumkey" solution to manage logistical burdens as such paperwork, legal compliance, and/or registration	7%	7%	15%
Program Design and Talent Fit	Streamlined Recruitment: Access to a vetted "shortlist" of pre-screened candidates who meet our organization's minimum baseline qualifications	11%	12%	23%
	Curriculum and Skils Alignment: Greater assurance that educational programs are teaching the specific technical skills required by our organization	10%	11%	21%
	Collaborative Program Design: The authority to co-design training curricula alongside educators to ensure graduates are "job ready"	7%	7%	14%
Business Environment/ ROI	Demonstrated ROI: Access to industry-specific data proving that WBL improves long-term retention and reduces overall recruitment	11%	11%	22%
	Increased Entry-Level Demand: An internal shift in business needs requiring a higher volume of entry-level talent	16%	9%	25%

Base: Data from the March 2026 survey, weighted (n=1,053; limited to employers who provide WBL opportunities to less than 5 percent of their U.S. headcount). Survey question: "What would be the primary drivers for your organization to host a number of work-based learning (WBL) slots equivalent to at least 5 percent of your U.S. headcount?"

Endnotes

1 WBL refers to structured experiences that connect classroom study to the workplace, including internships, apprenticeships, co-ops, clinical or practicum placements, and project-based learning.

2 Nichole Torpey-Saboe, Elaine Leigh, and Dave Clayton. "The Power of Work-Based Learning." (Indianapolis and Washington, DC: Strada Education Foundation, March 2022). strada.org/reports/the-power-of-work-based-learning

3 State Opportunity Index 2025: Connecting Education with Opportunity. (Indianapolis and Washington, DC: Strada Education Foundation, 2025). strada.org/state-opportunity-index

4 The survey is limited to employers who hire at the entry level.

5 Employers also value relationships: 71.1 percent rated a referral from a trusted source as important when evaluating candidates. This may reflect the value of WBL indirectly, insofar as work-based experiences are one setting in which students build the kinds of relationships that referrals rely on.

As Strada's previous research on social capital in WBL found, internships and apprenticeships help students build networks of professionals who have observed their work and can vouch for them, opening doors both within the organization and throughout their careers (Internships and Beyond, July 2025).

6 See Appendix for employers' perceptions of the value of investing in WBL programs by industry and organization size.

7 See Appendix.

8 Scaling Work-Based Learning: A Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries. (Indianapolis and Washington, DC: Strada Education Foundation, January 2026). strada.org/news-insights/framework-for-effective-employer-intermediaries

9 Maximizing the Value of Internships: Advice from Employers. (Indianapolis and Washington, DC: Strada Education Foundation; and Washington, DC: UpSkill America, March 2026). https://www.strada.org/reports/maximizing-the-value-of-internships-advice-from-employers

10 Andrew R. Hanson. "Entry-Level Hiring in the AI Era: What Employers Are Thinking (and Doing)." (Indianapolis and Washington, DC: Strada Education Foundation, May 2026). https://www.strada.org/news-insights/entry-level-hiring-in-the-ai-era-what-employers-are-thinking-and-doing

11 Scaling Work-Based Learning: A Framework for Effective Employer Intermediaries. strada.org/news-insights/framework-for-effective-employer-intermediaries

INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK

Strada Institute for the Future of Work conducts actionable research and provides technical assistance to strengthen pathways to opportunity for individuals and expand talent pipelines for employers. The Institute's work with state leaders enables them to leverage education and employment data to improve labor market outcomes for individuals, employers, and regions.

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