seramount
Talent Solutions for Better Workplaces

From Coursework to Careers

Bridge the Gap Between Employer Needs and Student Preparation

Forage

INTRODUCTION

Employers have expressed concerns about the "job-readiness" of new college graduates for years. However, a growing divide has emerged between what employers expect from new college graduates and how prepared those graduates are for the demands of the job market.

This divide has widened as millions of students who experienced major pandemic-related disruptions are now entering the workforce. Colleges report significant challenges in making up lost ground for students who suffered COVID-19 learning loss and reduced social development.

Conversations with employers across industries reveal a common concern: Many college graduates are entering the workforce without the technical skills, professional presence, or understanding of workplace dynamics needed to succeed. Many new graduates are struggling to apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings and are unsure how to interact with managers, clients, and peers. In fact, **40 percent**[1] of employers say these graduates are unprepared to enter the workforce.

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At the same time, the **shrinking working-age population**[2] means employers find themselves competing for early-career talent sourced from a smaller, less skilled labor pool. As a result, employers have a vested interest in helping to bridge the career readiness gap as a means of securing a stable pipeline of early-career talent in an increasingly competitive labor market.

Compounding the issue is a persistent mismatch between students' confidence in their career readiness and the skills employers say those students lack.

Many students may overestimate their job abilities, which contributes to a disconnect between how prepared they feel and what employers are actually observing in the workplace. This highlights a gap not just in preparation but in students' self-awareness and expectations.

Part of the employment challenge lies in how students are learning about the realities of their chosen career paths and what it means to be prepared. Many commit to a career path with limited exposure to the day-to-day responsibilities of their future roles. The good news for employers is that students are choosing their majors early and, when available, actively seeking skills-based learning experiences that better align with career success in their chosen profession.

To close these gaps, employers will have to explore opportunities to engage with students earlier in their educational journey and help them prepare for the demands of different roles. By doing so, they can help shape students' understanding of what it takes to succeed in different industries and provide the applied learning experiences students value most. This early engagement not only helps address the mismatch in both student skills and confidence but also increases the likelihood of organizations hiring graduates who are truly prepared to contribute from day one.

To better understand how students are approaching the transition from college to career and where employer engagement can make the greatest impact, Forage surveyed over 2,000 college juniors and seniors. The findings point to several important insights for employers looking to strengthen their talent pipelines.

INSIGHT 1

Students May Be Overconfident in Their Career Readiness

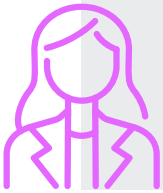
Forage's survey revealed that nearly three-quarters (72%) of college juniors and seniors feel very or extremely confident that they are on the right path to landing a job aligned with their career goals. Similarly, 70% believe they have a strong understanding of which jobs or career paths will be a good fit for them. Even more striking, 88% of students feel their coursework is adequately preparing them for entry-level roles in their chosen fields.

72% On track to getting a job aligned with their career goals

70% Strong understanding of which jobs/career paths are the right fit

88% Coursework is adequately preparing them for entry-level roles in their fields

But this confidence doesn't always reflect reality. While students are optimistic, many employers report that graduates struggle to apply classroom knowledge to real-world scenarios and often seem unsure of how to interact with managers, clients, and peers. These concerns **have real implications**:[3] in 2025, one in eight hiring managers say they plan to avoid hiring recent college grads altogether. Additionally, 33% cite a lack of work ethic among new graduates, and 55% say they had to fire a recent college hire in 2024. In one striking example of misaligned expectations, nearly 1 in 10 hiring managers reported that a candidate brought a parent to a job interview.



1 in 8 say they plan to avoid hiring recent college grads

33% cite a lack of work ethic among new grads

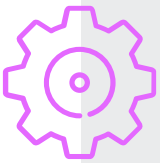
55% say they had to fire a recent college hire

1 in 10 reported a candidate bringing a parent to an interview

Research has shown that student confidence is often shaped more by **perception than experience**[4]. Many students may base their assumptions about career readiness on classroom instruction, speaking with their family, or anecdotal information from peers and professors. This approach can be misleading, as it doesn't necessarily reflect the demands of the modern workplace. When students step into a professional environment for the first time, they may find themselves overwhelmed by the pace and cultural norms of full-time work.

Internships and apprenticeships remain popular and effective ways to bridge the gap between the classroom and careers. However, **the demand for this kind of experiential learning far outstrips the supply**.[5] Not every student who wants an internship can get one, and students who are already working or caring for family members may be unable to fit an internship into their schedule. Employers, too, often lack sufficient staff to fully manage or grow internship programs.

An alternative model that is increasing in popularity among both employers and students is the use of virtual job simulations that allow students to perform tasks modeled on actual job responsibilities in a flexible, scalable format that requires little employer supervision.



Because simulations are created by employers who recruit early-career talent regularly, they focus on the **exact skills** and **competencies** companies want to see in new hires or internship candidates.

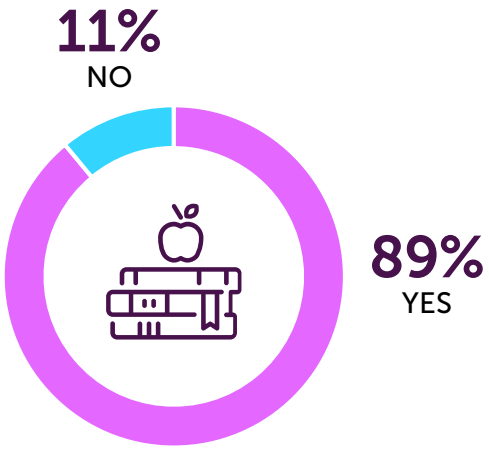
Students who participate in employer-designed "hands-on" experiences show measurable gains in both confidence and readiness. This form of learning benefits students by grounding their confidence in experience rather than assumption. As a result, they arrive at job interviews with a clearer understanding of the role and are better equipped to demonstrate core competencies to prospective employers. Employers, in turn, gain access to candidates who are not only interested in their industry but also familiar with some of the nuances of the job.

INSIGHT 2

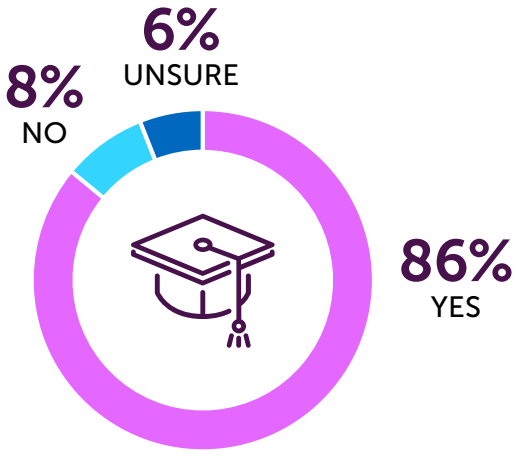
Most Students Commit to Career Paths Early in College

The idea of undecided liberal arts students exploring a range of academic interests is becoming less common. Today's students are making career decisions early and deliberately. Nearly 90% of survey[7] respondents chose their major with a specific job or career path in mind. Only 11% of students chose their major while still undecided on their career path.

When you selected your college major/program of study, did you have a **specific job or career in mind**?



At this time, is it your goal to find a job **specifically related to your major/program of study** after graduation?



It's a positive sign for employers that many college students are choosing their majors early and expressing interest in careers that align with their field of study. This focus creates an opportunity to engage students sooner with tailored experiences, mentoring, and skills development that directly support workforce needs. When students are more intentional about their career paths, employers are more likely to hire graduates who are motivated, better prepared, and more likely to stay in their chosen industry.

This early commitment presents both a challenge and an opportunity for employers. The challenge lies in reaching students before they have solidified decisions that lead them toward other organizations.

There is a valuable opportunity to engage students early in their academic journey, especially if that engagement helps provide clarity and direction and sets more **realistic expectations** about the field.

To build a stronger talent pipeline, employers must move beyond the traditional approach of recruiting seniors and instead connect with students who are already committed to pursuing careers in their chosen discipline.

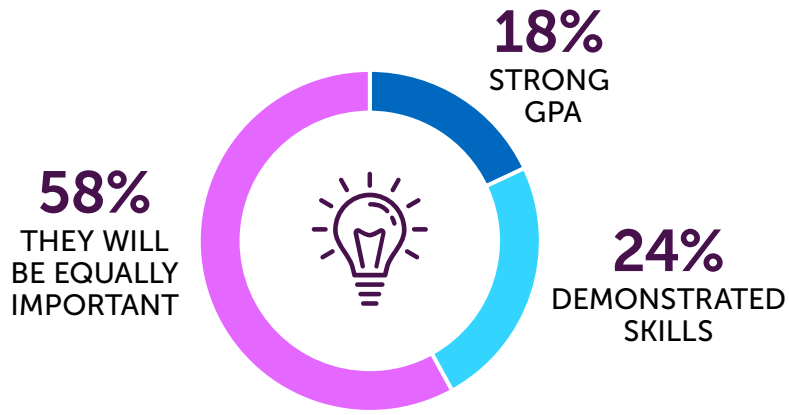
INSIGHT 3

Students May Be Undervaluing the Importance of Skills-Based Learning

When asked which factor would play a greater role in helping them secure employment after graduation, students rated "demonstrated skills" (24%) only slightly higher than a strong GPA (18%). Additionally, 58% of students believe that GPA and demonstrated skills will be equally important in helping them land a job after graduation.

Employers, meanwhile, appear to be placing less value on GPA as a predictor of success when hiring new graduates. Instead, **hiring managers are focusing more on an applicant's practical skills**[6] and career competencies.

When getting a job/starting a career after graduation, which of the following do you think will be **more important**?



This finding signals a meaningful shift in how students view the purpose of higher education. Academic achievement is still important, but it isn't enough on its own. Students are increasingly looking for opportunities to gain practical experience, whether through internships, cooperative education programs, or job simulation activities. In fact, more than 70 percent of students[10] said it was important for them to understand the day-to-day tasks required of entry-level employees—a clear sign that students are actively seeking career clarity as they prepare for life after college.

70%+ of students said it was important for them to understand the **day-to-day tasks** required of entry-level employees

At the same time, employers are also placing greater emphasis on skills-based hiring. More than half[7] of those who adopt this approach use it consistently, especially during the interviewing and screening process. Skills-based hiring often involves tools such as competency-driven job descriptions, structured interview rubrics, and both internal and external skill assessments.

To enable skills-based hiring to succeed, employers will likely need to expand the learning experiences they offer that mirror real-world work environments. Job simulations are one way to do this, offering a scalable and inclusive method to connect with students who can engage with the simulations at a time and place of their choosing. Although traditional internships remain valuable, they can be difficult for students to access due to limited availability, geographic constraints, and scheduling conflicts—particularly among students who are balancing a full course load with full- or part-time jobs. Job simulations, by contrast, can be completed online at any time of day or night, creating more equitable access for students who might not otherwise have these opportunities.

Beyond skill development, simulations help students make more informed career choices.

By experiencing the day-to-day responsibilities of a specific role, students can assess whether a career path or company aligns with their interests while also revealing potential gaps they may need to fill through coursework and other learning opportunities. This can reduce turnover in entry-level positions and lead to greater job satisfaction for both new hires and the organizations that employ them.

What Can Employers Do Differently?

To better prepare students for the workforce and build stronger talent pipelines, employers need to take a more intentional approach to early engagement through strong campus relationships. One effective strategy is to partner with platforms like Forage to create job simulations that reflect real roles for early-career talent within their organizations. These simulations help students understand what specific jobs involve while giving employers a chance to shape the skills students focus on as they prepare for those roles.

Employers that invest in job simulations see real benefits. Data from Forage shows that companies using these tools are **four times**[8] more likely to hire early-career candidates who completed a simulation compared to those who did not. This is because simulations tend to attract students who are already interested in the work, allow those students to demonstrate their fit, and reduce onboarding time by familiarizing future hires with company tasks and expectations.

4x Companies using these tools are four times more likely to hire early career candidates who **completed a simulation**

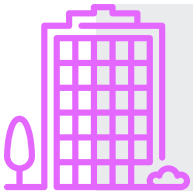
In addition, simulations enable employers to expand their reach and diversify their talent pools. Because simulations are available online, they draw students from a wide range of institutions, geographic areas, and backgrounds. This creates opportunities to connect with promising candidates who might otherwise go unnoticed and to identify colleges where students are engaging with the job simulations in large numbers. Employers may decide to make these schools a focus for on-campus recruiting.

To make the most of these tools, employers might also build stronger partnerships with universities that are committed to promoting job simulations to students early in their academic journey, ideally by the end of their first year. This early connection can influence a student's career direction, build brand loyalty for employers, and create a clearer path to future employment.

What Can Colleges Do Differently?

Colleges and universities play a critical role in preparing students for successful careers. By promoting and integrating online job simulations, internships, apprenticeships, and job shadowing into coursework and career services, institutions help students explore a wide range of industries and roles. This exposure not only enhances students' job readiness but also reinforces the overall value of the institution's academic programs and career support services.

Prospective students and their families are placing greater emphasis on return on investment when selecting a college. Findings from a **recent survey of over 12,000 college students**[9] by education company EAB found that 30% selected "opportunities for internships and other experiential learning" as among the most important factors that influenced which college they chose. A similar percentage (28%) ranked "demonstrated job success for graduates" as one of the top factors.



30% of college students rank opportunities for **internships** as an important factor influencing college choices

Institutions that can demonstrate strong outcomes after graduation and a clear connection between classroom learning and career paths are better positioned to attract and retain students. Highlighting partnerships with employers signals a strong commitment to career preparation and can help colleges stand out in a competitive admissions environment.

In addition, colleges that track and analyze student engagement with job simulations can gain valuable insights into career interests, skill development needs, and shifting trends. These insights can guide curriculum design, development of new academic programs, advising approaches, and employer partnerships, helping institutions create a more responsive and future-focused educational experience.

SUMMARY

The transition from college to career is a critical juncture in a student's life and a pivotal opportunity for employers. Too often, employers express frustration with the readiness of recent graduates while missing the chance to be part of the solution. By investing in early engagement, offering on-demand skills-based learning opportunities, and leveraging scalable tools like job simulations, employers can help close the readiness gap and build a better-prepared and more capable workforce.

Creating experiences that mirror the realities of the workplace can help employers move from passive recipients of talent to active co-creators of the future workforce. The result is a more aligned, efficient, and equitable system—**one where students, colleges, and employers thrive.**

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Talent Solutions for Better Workplaces

Next-Generation Recruitment for the Next Generation

Innovative Job Simulations to **Scale** Your Organization
Internally and Externally from Early Talent Through Mid-Career

What Are Job Simulations?

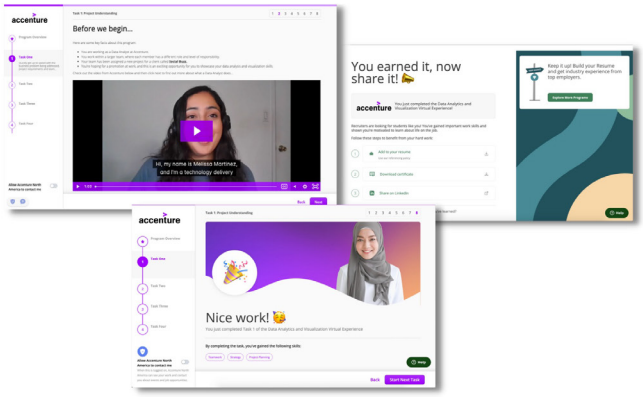
Self-paced online learning programs that simulate the work performed in different roles at different companies through interactive hypothetical tasks.

Scalable
Unlimited participation

Data Driven
Performance tracking

Inclusive
No barriers to participation

Always on
Available on demand 24/7



Fast Track High-Potential Talent

Use job simulations to surface high-intent candidates that are **more likely to receive and accept an offer**.

Educate at Scale

95% **of Foragers had a higher understanding of a role** after completing a job simulation

Save Time

40%+ **Recruiting time saved** by turning to Forage as a trusted source

Hire Better

3.3x **More likely to get hired** compared to traditional applicants

10M
Active Candidates

125+
Employers

300+
Job Simulations

BCG Walmart Red Bull Deloitte. BANK OF AMERICA

Visit **seramount.com/forage** for more information and to book a demo!

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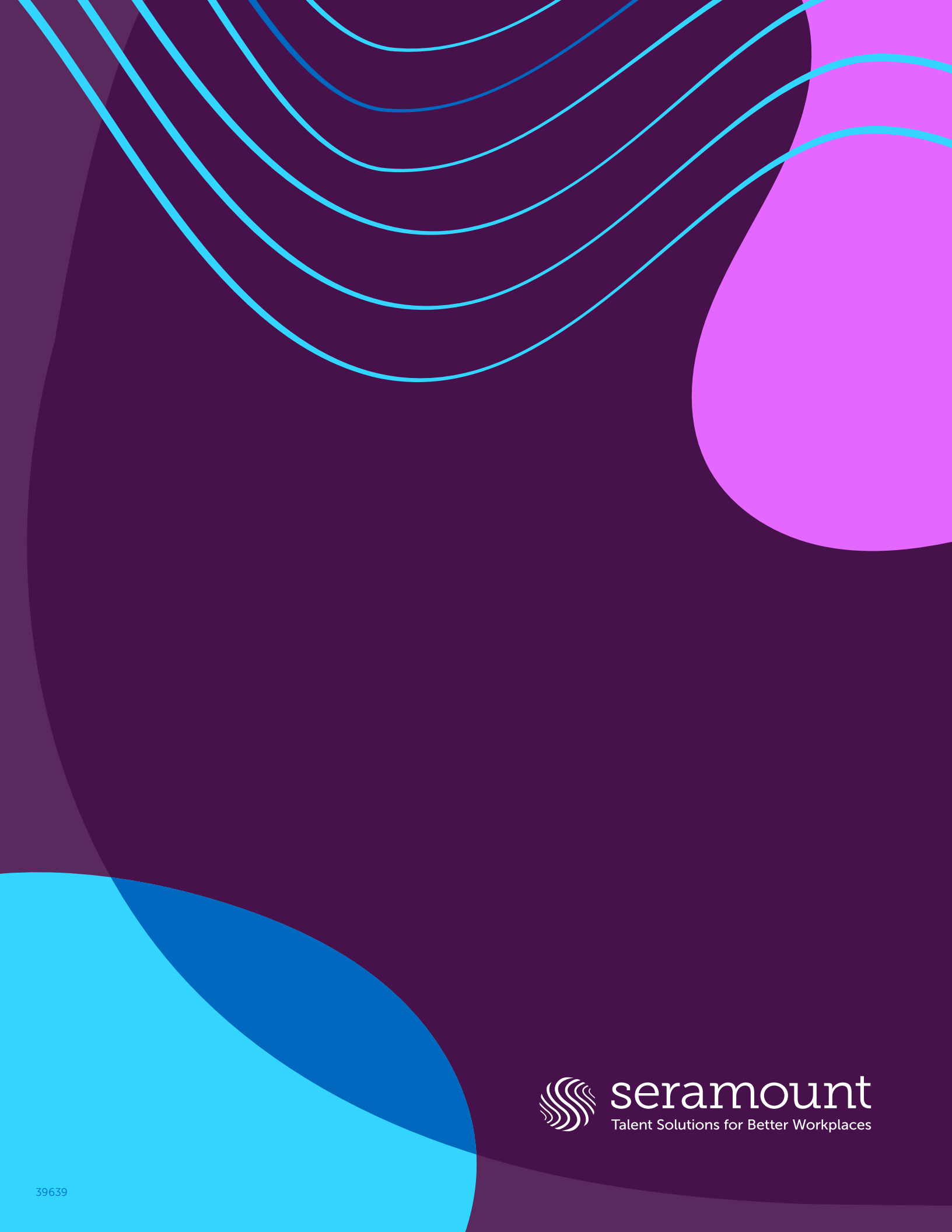
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