



Preparing the Next Generation of Talent: How NFTE’s Entrepreneurship Education Addresses Emerging Employer Needs



Recent findings from the Britebound Center for Career Navigation Employer Survey paint a complex picture of how employers view Gen Z workers. Employers frequently describe young people as creative, technologically fluent, collaborative, and motivated by purpose-driven work. At the same time, many employers report challenges related to communication, adaptability, professionalism, resilience, and problem-solving. Together, these findings point to a growing disconnect between the skills young people are developing in traditional educational settings and the capabilities employers increasingly value in the modern workforce.

These concerns emerge at a moment of significant economic and technological change. As artificial intelligence, automation, and rapid innovation continue reshaping industries, employers are placing increasing value on distinctly human capabilities such as communication, creativity, initiative, collaboration, and the ability to navigate ambiguity. Technical knowledge remains important, but employers increasingly seek workers who can adapt quickly, solve problems in dynamic environments, and continuously learn alongside changing technologies. Yet many students still have limited opportunities to practice these skills through authentic, real-world experiences before entering the workforce.



Staff from EverBank volunteer at a Southeast NFTE event.

Entrepreneurship education offers one promising response to this challenge. At organizations like the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), students learn through applied experiences that mirror the realities of modern work: identifying problems, developing ideas, collaborating in teams, pitching solutions, responding to feedback, and adapting when plans change. Through this process, students build an entrepreneurial mindset grounded in communication, initiative, resilience, creativity, and agency. These experiences help prepare young people not only to launch businesses, but also to become adaptable contributors and leaders across a wide range of career pathways.

About NFTE

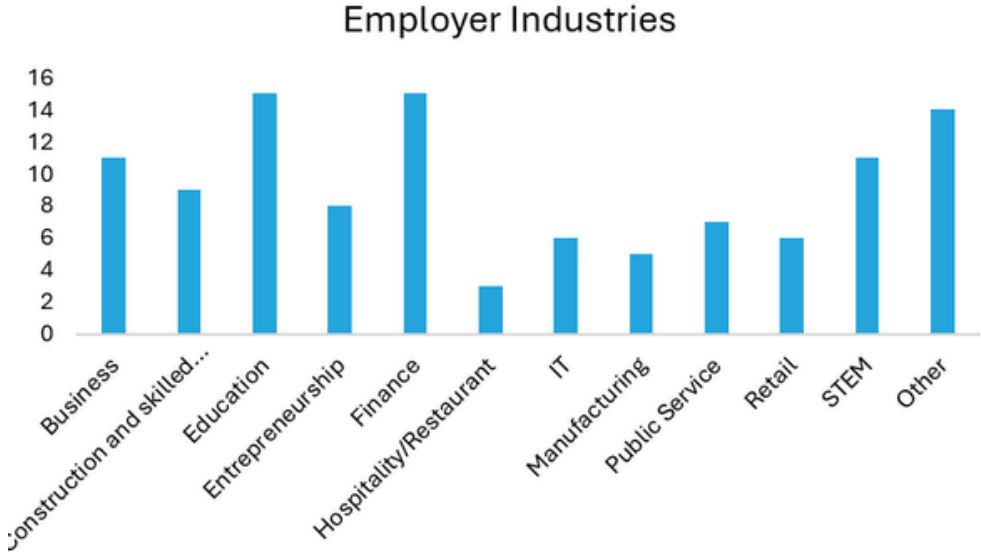
The Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) is a global education nonprofit that empowers partners to integrate entrepreneurial education across curricula and equips youth in under-resourced communities with the skills, connections, credentials, and real-world experiences needed to lead change and own their futures. Since 1987, NFTE has reached more than a million learners worldwide.

This policy brief examines findings from the Britebound Center for Career Navigation Employer Survey alongside NFTE’s entrepreneurship education model to explore how employer expectations for young talent are evolving. It highlights the growing importance of durable skills, mentorship, and real-world learning experiences in workforce preparation and outlines policy actions that can strengthen career readiness pathways, expand economic opportunity, and better align education systems with the changing demands of the future economy.

Methodology

In the spring of 2025, an online employer survey was co-designed by a cross-sector coalition of youth and workforce development organizations, including Jobs for the Future (JFF), Britebound, Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), and Junior Achievement (JA). The survey was distributed through each organization’s national employer networks to capture perspectives across multiple industries and organization sizes. A total of 117 employers completed the survey, representing a 39 percent completion rate, providing insight into how employers currently engage Gen Z talent and where gaps persist between education and workforce readiness.

Of those who responded, nearly half (47%) were small organizations (<100 employees), while 25% employed over 1,000 staff. Most responses came from Education, Business, STEM, and Finance sectors.



Respondents span a diverse range of industries, with the strongest representation from Education, Finance, and STEM.

Key Findings

Finding 1: Employers are highly enthusiastic about engaging Gen Z, but their readiness to support them effectively is limited.

For most employers, Gen Z represents a meaningful share of their workforce—up to one quarter. Employers express strong interest in supporting these young workers: 85% are interested or very interested in helping Gen Z navigate their careers, and 94% agree that employers should play an active mentor or coach role. However, their capacity to deliver on this expectation is mixed. While 65% of employers have onboarding or mentoring

programs, most rate them as only moderately effective. Those without structured programs frequently cite insufficient internal capacity as the primary barrier. This reveals a clear gap between employers’ desire to mentor Gen Z and their ability to provide the high-quality guidance young workers need.

Employers report high levels of interest in finding, hiring, retaining, and guiding Gen Z employees, with a majority indicating they are “very interested” or “interested” across all areas. Interest is strongest in supporting young workers’ career navigation, highlighting a clear demand for better structures to guide early-career talent.

	Very interested	Interested	Possibly interested	Not at all interested	Responses
FINDING more high-quality Gen Z employees? Count Row %	25 47.2%	16 30.2%	12 22.6%	0 0.0%	53
HIRING more high-quality Gen Z employees? Count Row %	22 42.3%	17 32.7%	13 25.0%	0 0.0%	52
RETAINING more high-quality Gen Z employees? Count Row %	22 43.1%	18 35.3%	11 21.6%	0 0.0%	51
GUIDING Gen Z employees in the navigation of their careers more effectively? Count Row %	28 52.8%	17 32.1%	7 13.2%	1 1.9%	53

NFTE’s approach directly addresses this gap. Mentorship and coaching are core to the NFTE experience: each year, NFTE engages more than 1,200 industry experts who volunteer as coaches, advisors, guest speakers, and competition judges. These volunteers help students strengthen ideas for their business, refine their presentations, and expand their exposure to different career pathways. The impact of these relationships can be long-lasting. In a 2021 alumni study, 35% of alumni reported they were still in contact with a NFTE volunteer years after completing the program. Among alumni who launched businesses (n=141), more than 52% maintained those mentor relationships. These findings underscore how powerful early connections with mentors, coaches, and industry experts can be in shaping young people’s career trajectories. Programs like NFTE—which build structured, meaningful mentorship into the learning experience—can provide the kind of enduring support employers want for Gen Z but often lack the capacity to offer on their own.

This gap between employer willingness and employer capacity highlights the need for models that can provide consistent, high-quality mentorship and real-world learning experiences at scale. As J.D. LaRock, President and CEO of NFTE, explains, “The future success of the next generation depends not just on what students know, but on whether they have opportunities to build confidence, agency, and purpose. When young people are given the opportunity to solve real problems, take ownership of their ideas, and connect with mentors, they don’t just learn skills—they begin to see themselves as contributors in the economy. That shift in identity is what ultimately drives long-term success.”

Finding 2: Employers recognize Gen Z’s strengths but report significant gaps in durable skills

Employers consistently described Gen Z as tech-savvy, creative, and socially aware—assets that bring fresh energy to the workplace. One employer explained: “Our Gen Z folks are very engaged and quick to seek feedback. They draw connection between their work and how it contributes to the bigger picture, and take full ownership of their work. They are tech savvy and resourceful.” At the same time, they repeatedly cited

challenges in communication, resilience, problem solving, adaptability, and follow-through. One employer described challenges working with Gen Z employees: “Some behavioral challenges with social norms when adjusting from academic environments to the work environment. This can be knowing the correct avenue of communication and what level of professionalism is appropriate, working across other generations v only peer to peer, but most apparent is the ability to build relationships without the use of technology.” These “durable skills” such as communication and collaboration are central components of the entrepreneurial mindset that NFTE intentionally cultivates through explicit instruction and project-based learning. In FY25, 58% of NFTE students demonstrated measurable growth in these competencies, as captured by NFTE’s validated Entrepreneurial Mindset Index (EMI).



A group of professionals volunteer at a NFTE event.

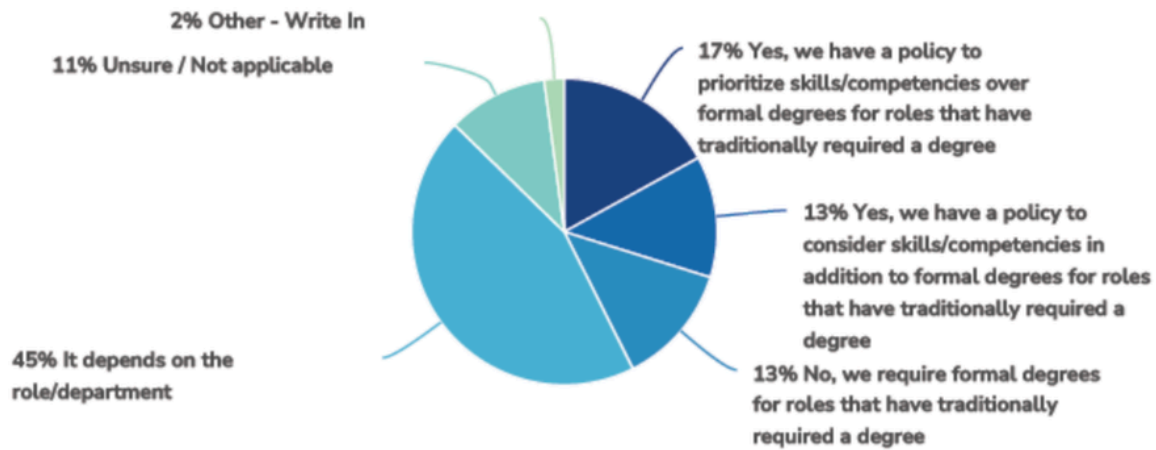
Employers also reported difficulty retaining Gen Z workers, noting that many young employees seek purpose, rapid advancement, and workplace flexibility. As one employer explained: “Challenges I see are the willingness to start from the beginning and remain patient in the process of getting to a goal. It is not always a quick process to get the ideal job, and I see opportunities passed on too often. You can learn from every single opportunity, even if it is not the “dream.” Employers described Gen Z talent as eager to grow but often lacking clear direction or missing opportunities to build experience within their organizations. Entrepreneurship education plays a powerful role here as well. By guiding students through the process of generating an idea, evaluating its feasibility, and advocating for its implementation, NFTE helps young people build agency, purpose, and ownership—qualities that can translate into strong “intrapreneurial” behavior inside organizations.

NFTE’s impact on students’ sense of agency is well documented. A prior study (2004) found that NFTE students showed significantly stronger gains in internal locus of control compared to peers in a control group, indicating that they felt more capable of shaping their own futures by the end of the course. This is especially critical for the predominantly low-income and minority youth NFTE serves—students who often grow up in high-risk communities with limited opportunities to practice agency and purpose in their education and lives.

Finding 3: Skills Over Degrees — Employers Are More Open to Non-Degree Pathways When Skill Signals Are Clear and High-Quality

Employer responses indicate a growing openness to hiring young workers through non-degree or skills-based pathways, a trend that aligns with national shifts in talent development. Nearly half of employer respondents reported that degree requirements “depend on the role,” and around one-third already have formal or partial skills-based hiring practices in place. Employers emphasized that the most persuasive indicators of a non-degree candidate’s potential are hands-on experience through specific internship or apprenticeship programs for nontraditional candidates, candidates sourced from trusted providers, and clear, validated measures of skill.

As Julie Lammers, President & CEO at Britebound, explains: “Skills-based hiring is gaining momentum, but as survey results show, employers still seek trusted signals that candidates have the competencies to meet their needs. Organizations like NFTE are essential because they equip young people with the real-world experience, validated skills, and social capital that open doors. That connection between talent and opportunity is what will power the future workforce.”



Employers show growing openness to skills-based hiring, with many indicating that degree requirements depend on the role. While some organizations prioritize or consider skills alongside degrees, a smaller share still require formal credentials, highlighting variability in how skills-based practices are applied.

NFTE’s model aligns strongly with this shift. Through project-based learning, students generate tangible artifacts—business plans, pitch decks, financial models, and prototypes—that demonstrate a wide range of competencies valued by employers embedded within authentic, work-like experiences. Moreover, NFTE’s entrepreneurship courses are designed to teach the foundational knowledge, skills, and competencies that align closely with the ESB exam, an industry-recognized credential in entrepreneurship and small business management that can signal to employers that students have demonstrated specific skills.

However, employers also emphasized that the success of non-degree pathways depends heavily on the clarity and quality of skill indicators. They expressed the strongest confidence in candidates who can demonstrate their abilities through validated assessments, industry-aligned credentials, and work-based learning experiences. This underscores a critical challenge in the current education landscape: while schools, community organizations, and alternative training providers increasingly offer non-degree pathways, the quality and consistency of these credentials vary significantly.

The survey findings reinforce the need for policy frameworks that promote high-quality skill signals—including portable digital credentials, standardized competency assessments, and expanded access to work-based learning—so that employers can reliably interpret what young people know and can do.

Policy Recommendations

Embed Entrepreneurial Mindset and Durable Skills into Graduation Requirements

A growing number of states and districts are reimagining what it means to be “ready” for career and life beyond high school by adopting Portrait of a Graduate frameworks that elevate durable skills such as communication, adaptability, and problem-solving alongside academic knowledge. According to the Education Week, at least 17 states have adopted Portrait of a Graduate policies to guide statewide visions of student success in college, career, and life, and many more districts have localized versions of these frameworks rooted in community and employer expectations.² These efforts reflect a broader policy shift away from seat time and toward competency and readiness outcomes that align closely with what employers are signaling they need from young talent.

1 Atwell, M. N., & Tucker, A. (2024). Portraits of a graduate: Strengthening career and college readiness through social and emotional skill development. ERIC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED641286.pdf>

2 Stanford, L. (2023, December 11). More states are creating a “portrait of a graduate.” Here’s why. Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/more-states-are-creating-a-portrait-of-a-graduate-heres-why/2023/12>

To embed entrepreneurial mindset and durable skills into graduation requirements, policymakers should integrate these competencies into state standards, accountability systems, and diploma pathways so that students earn recognition for demonstrable mastery—not just credit accumulation. For example, Washington State’s “Profile of a Graduate” work includes reviewing state education policy and graduation requirements through the lens of key competencies that align with postsecondary success and employment readiness.³ States might also allow performance-based demonstrations (e.g., project portfolios, real-world problem solving, or applied learning artifacts) to satisfy diploma criteria, and districts can align curriculum and assessment tools to ensure equitable access to these experiences. North Carolina’s Portrait of a Graduate initiative also shows how state-level durable skills definitions can be aligned with labor market needs through research linking those competencies to employer priorities.⁴ Such policy actions reinforce durable skills as essential outcomes and help schools systematically cultivate entrepreneurial thinking before graduation.



EY staff volunteers pose with students at a NFTE event in New England.

Strengthen Skills-Based Hiring Through Trusted Skill Validation Strategies



Students and Citi staff participate in a Midwest NFTE event, 2026.

State governments are increasingly adopting skills-based hiring policies that remove restrictive degree requirements and focus on competencies demonstrable through credentials, assessments, and work experiences. The National Governors Association reports that more than half of U.S. state and territory governments have issued policy directives encouraging skills-based hiring, particularly by eliminating bachelor’s degree requirements for many public sector roles. States including Maryland, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts have taken steps to drop degree requirements in government job descriptions to broaden access and improve talent pipelines.⁵ This reflects a broader shift documented in national advocacy circles, where calls for state policies that support alternative and quality non-degree credentials are gaining traction as part of workforce development strategies.⁶

3 Washington State Board of Education. (2024). Profile of a graduate charts. <https://sbe.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/Profile%20of%20a%20Graduate%20Charts.pdf>

4 Brown, C. (2024, July 16). Portrait of a graduate aligns with what employers look for, analysis says. EducationNC. <https://www.ednc.org/07-16-2024-portrait-of-a-graduate-aligns-with-what-employers-look-for-analysis-says>

5 National Governors Association. (2025, February 6). Empowering progress: Harnessing skills-based strategies to drive public sector excellence. <https://www.nga.org/publications/empowering-progress-harnessing-skills-based-strategies-to-drive-public-sector-excellence/>

6 National Skills Coalition. (2024). Examples of state progress: Charting a course. <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Examples-of-State-Progress-Charting-a-Course.pdf>

However, skill signals must be clear, credible, and interpretable for employers to meaningfully adopt skills-based hiring. States can strengthen policy frameworks by supporting development and recognition of high-quality non-degree credentials tied to industry standards, validated assessments, and portable digital credentials that transparently signal what learners can do. National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) has created a Nondegree Credential State Policy Framework that highlights how legislators across education and workforce sectors are addressing credential quality, signaling value, and employer recognition to ensure non-degree pathways lead to clear career opportunities.⁷ Pairing skills-based hiring directives with investments in credential quality frameworks, labor market information systems, and employer engagement strategies will make it easier for learners—especially those without traditional degrees—to demonstrate readiness in ways that resonate with employers.



A student showcases her business at the 2025 NFTE National Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge in New York City.

Expand Funding for High-Quality, Structured Mentorship and Coaching Models



(Pictured left to right) David Alpage, Dr. Virnitia Dixon, Ken Houseman, Anthony Selvaggio, and Isis Swaby serve as judges during the final competition at the 2025 NFTE National Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge in New York City.

willingness and employer capacity highlights the need for public investment in intermediary-led models that can ensure mentorship quality, consistency, and equity at scale.

Employers consistently express a strong interest in mentoring and coaching young workers, yet many report limited internal capacity to design and sustain effective mentorship programs. Research shows that structured mentorship models—those with clear expectations, trained mentors, and ongoing program supports—are significantly more effective than informal or one-off interactions. According to the National Mentoring Resource Center, programs that include mentor training, defined goals, and continuous oversight are more likely to produce positive outcomes for youth, including improved social, emotional, and career readiness skills. This gap between employer

⁷ National Conference of State Legislatures. (2024, February 27). Nondegree credential state policy framework.

https://documents.ncsl.org/wwwncsl/Education/Nondegree-Credential-State-Policy-Framework_vf.pdf

⁸ MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership. (n.d.). Public funding for mentoring programs. <https://www.mentoring.org/policy-agenda/public-funding-for-mentoring>

Existing federal education and workforce funding streams provide viable pathways to support these models, but mentorship is often underleveraged within them. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) allows for career coaching and supportive services that can be structured around mentorship relationships,⁹ while Perkins V explicitly supports employer engagement and career-connected learning within CTE pathways.¹⁰ ESSA similarly provides flexibility for states and districts to invest in student supports that strengthen college and career readiness.¹¹ Policymakers can strengthen impact by explicitly encouraging these funds to support long-term, employer-connected mentorship programs, prioritizing investments in intermediary organizations that recruit and train mentors, manage matching, and sustain relationships over time—rather than isolated career talks or short-term engagements with limited developmental value.



Students and EY volunteers come together during a NFTE Capital event.

Conclusion

As Jeff Bulanda, Vice President of the Britebound Center for Career Navigation at the Jobs for the Future, notes, “Preparing the next generation of talent means giving young people intentional opportunities to practice initiative, problem-solving, and real-world communication, while also receiving clear guidance about how those skills connect to future pathways. Entrepreneurship education, paired with strong career navigation, helps students build both the capabilities and the clarity they need to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing economy.”

Employer trends are consistent: durable skills, intrapreneurial dispositions, and structured mentorship and support are essential for preparing Gen Z for career success. NFTE’s entrepreneurship education model addresses these needs by equipping young people with the mindset, skills, and experiences valued by today’s employers.



A student showcases her business at the 2025 NFTE National Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge in New York City.

Policymakers can amplify this impact by supporting entrepreneurship education, expanding skills-based pathways, and strengthening partnerships between schools and employers—ensuring that all young people have access to the tools they need to thrive in the future economy.

⁹ U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. (n.d.). Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wioa>

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. (n.d.). Perkins V. <https://cte.ed.gov/legislation/perkins-v>

¹¹ U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). <https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/laws-preschool-grade-12-education/every-student-succeeds-act-essa>

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