

The Emerging New Rules for Getting Hired

By Don Sutherland

A newly-published [New York Times opinion piece](#) describes a troubling reality: the traditional pathway from college to career is breaking down. Employer concentration has reduced competition for workers, while the once-reliable job ladder has stalled. The result is a labor market that feels fragmented, opaque, and increasingly unforgiving to new graduates.

In the emerging new labor market, the winners may not be the most experienced. They'll be the most visible, capable, and connected.

Yet undergraduates can begin building alternative pathways long before graduation through what might be called “shadow mobility.” Shadow mobility involves creating access to opportunities outside formal hiring channels. Rather than relying solely on job boards, students can embed themselves in industry communities such as Indie Hackers, Marketing Millennials, and Product School, where practitioners share insights, surface opportunities, and make referrals in real time. Consistent participation through asking thoughtful questions, sharing work, and building relationships transforms students from anonymous applicants into recognized contributors with access to hidden job markets.

At the same time, students can move beyond credentials and toward capability. The most resilient graduates are those who build portable skill stacks developed through project-based work that produces tangible outputs. By documenting these projects into a public portfolio, students can clearly demonstrate how they solve specific problems and the value they create, effectively bypassing experience-based barriers that often exclude new graduates from consideration.

Finally, artificial intelligence provides a powerful lever for acceleration. Tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude enable students to dramatically increase the speed and quality of their work, allowing them to take on more complex tasks and demonstrate impact beyond their experience level. By documenting how they use AI to improve workflows and outcomes, students can reposition themselves not as entry-level labor, but as force multipliers. The job ladder may be weakening, but opportunity has not disappeared. Those who adapt early can still climb.