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Fresh graduates face a tougher job market under Trump tariffs

Fewer employers are hiring or firing as the class of 2025 seeks entry-level work



A hiring sign is displayed at a retail store in Mount Prospect, Ill., Saturday, Nov. 2, 2024. (AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh, File)

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PREMIUM

By Sean Salai
The Washington Times
Monday, May 12, 2025

High school and college graduates applying for entry-level jobs will find a more challenging employment environment this year as businesses adjust to the Trump administration's policies.

Workforce experts interviewed by The Washington Times noted that fewer employers are hiring or firing than a year ago as they monitor federal budget cuts and the White House trade war with China.

They say graduates with digital experience and above-average people skills will be more likely to find full-time work in retail management, customer service or data analysis than those who rely on a diploma alone.

"The Trump administration has had a big impact on the market," said Sheldon Arora, CEO of StaffDNA, a Texas-based health care employment agency. "Tariffs and government layoffs have caused economic uncertainty, which typically causes companies to pull back on hiring."

The U.S. unemployment rate hit a relatively low 4.2% in April, and job growth surpassed expectations. The rate of layoffs remained historically low.

The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis reports that businesses are hiring at the slowest pace since 2014. Nearly 1 in 4 unemployed workers has been jobless for more than six months, up from 19.6% a year ago.

"Employers are cautious and want to wait and see on the impact of tariffs, inflation, interest rates and overall economic indicators," said Kim Henderson, managing director at Cobalt Compass Solutions, a staffing

industry consulting firm.

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Aura Intelligence, a San Francisco-based workforce data company, estimates that openings for positions that don't require previous experience are down 7% to 10% from a year ago. Meanwhile, entry-level job listings requiring artificial intelligence skills have jumped by 30% since last year, and more than 65% of white-collar positions require internship experience.

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"What we're seeing is a job market that's still active, but with higher expectations for even the most junior roles," said Evan Sohn, Aura Intelligence CEO. "Companies are leaning into skills-based hiring, and that's creating both opportunity and friction for new grads."

The Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics estimates that a record 3.9 million teenagers are graduating from high school and roughly 2 million students are receiving bachelor's degrees this year.

Although U.S. employers have more than 7 million job openings, analysts say a growing number of entry-level listings require technical certifications and one to three years of experience.

“Lots of businesses who perhaps weren’t very tech-involved in the past, or that provide services that aren’t directly tech-related, now have increasing needs to hire tech workers because of how tech-forward the business world has become,” said Jeremy Yamaguchi, CEO of Cabana, a California-based pool service company.

High school graduates entering the job market can earn $35,000 to $42,000 annually. Apprenticeships and vocational training are pushing earnings higher in blue-collar trades with shortages of younger workers. Openings include retail, hospitality, shipping, construction and plumbing.

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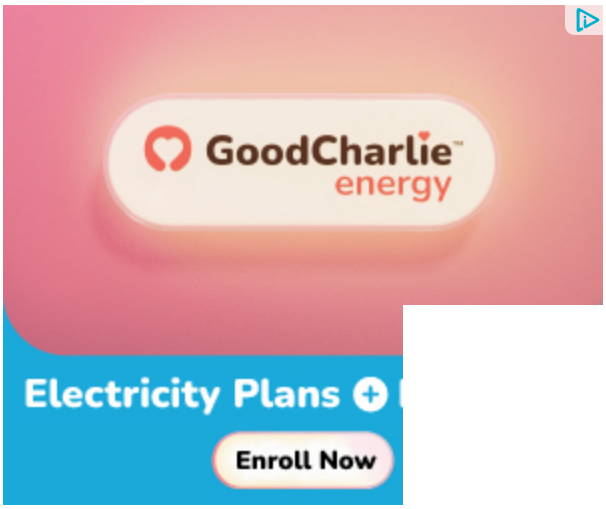
College graduates can earn $58,000 to $63,000 annually for entry-level roles such as operations analysis, sales development, health care technicians, legal support, human resources and technical support.

Requirements for these jobs have evolved faster than college curricula. Experts say cybersecurity and data analysis skills are growing in demand in the technology sector as AI automation gradually replaces lower-level administrative and data entry roles.

“The 2025 job market is cautious but full of opportunity, especially for grads who can bridge human with digital tools,” said Dallas-based workplace consultant Joshua Hart.

According to Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce, a bachelor’s degree adds an average of $1 million to an American’s lifetime earning potential. College graduates are more likely than others to work in management, health care, education, marketing and professional services.

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Experts say the problem is that college degrees cost more and mean less as the U.S. labor market tightens, recession forecasts grow and employers return to in-person work requirements.

A growing number of jobs no longer require a four-year degree.

“Grads are entering at a tough time,” said Lindsey Zuloaga, chief data scientist at HireVue, a Utah-based technology recruiting firm. “With a surplus of applicants for every open role, employers are using AI-driven applicant tracking systems to filter candidates before a human even sees a resume.”

Education leaders say most job listings still reflect the Biden administration's focus on funding technology, infrastructure and clean energy projects, adding uncertainty among employers and applicants.

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"If the Trump administration continues its push for deregulation and shifts in international trade, we could see changes in sectors like manufacturing and finance," said Mike Allen, president of Barry University, a Catholic school in Miami that graduated 2,000 students this month. "For now, the entry-level market remains more influenced by private-sector confidence and technological disruption than by administrative turnover."

The Trump administration has prioritized domestic manufacturing and trade policy to create more blue-collar jobs. It has also moved to dramatically shrink the size of the federal government, removing public service from the options for many graduates.

In a statement to The Times, the White House said tariffs are just one part of the president's "America First" agenda.

"The Trump administration is also slashing regulations, unleashing American energy, and pushing for tax cuts, including no tax on overtime and full deductions for investments in equipment," said Kush Desai, a White

House spokesman. “President Trump ushered in historic job, wage, investment, and economic growth in his first term, and he’s set to repeat the magic in his second term.”

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In a May 1 commencement address at the University of Alabama, Mr. Trump touted 350,000 jobs created under his administration and promised his tariffs would enrich the nation.

“You’re going to be very successful because now is the time to work harder than you have ever worked before,” the president said. “Push yourself further than you have ever pushed yourself before.”

Business development expert Brittany Truszkowski, chief operating officer of Grand Canyon Law Group in Arizona, said graduates shouldn’t get stuck waiting for “the perfect job.”

“Start somewhere,” Ms. Truszkowski said. “Find a company that invests in people, even if it’s not your dream role. Use that job to build real skills, work ethic, and network your way forward. Also, be coachable. Confidence is great, but humility and a willingness to learn will take you way farther.”

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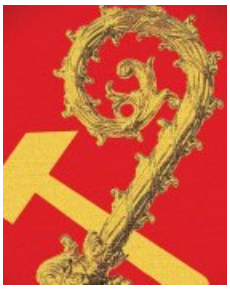
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