



Updates from the Office of Economic Development

Why Entry-Level Hiring Is Getting Tougher in 2026



As we kick off 2026, the challenge for entry-level job seekers continues to deepen — particularly for recent graduates and early-career professionals. A recent **Forbes** article by **Colleen Batchelder** highlights growing challenges in the labor market that are reshaping how employers hire — and who stands to benefit.

One of the most concerning trends is the erosion of true entry-level opportunities. Positions labeled as “entry-level” increasingly require prior experience,

creating a catch-22 for new graduates and career starters trying to break into the workforce. At the same time, hiring processes have become more automated, with AI-driven screening tools often filtering out qualified candidates who may lack traditional credentials but possess strong potential.

The article also points to the rise of so-called “ghost jobs” — postings that appear active but never result in actual hiring — leaving job seekers frustrated and uncertain about where real opportunities exist. These trends have hit younger workers especially hard, with Gen Z facing heightened competition in a tightening labor market.

Recent labor market data reinforces these concerns. According to the **Federal Reserve Bank of New York**, the unemployment rate averaged 5.3 percent, and the underemployment rate rose to 41.8 percent — the highest level since 2020. Together, these figures paint a clear picture of a workforce where many individuals are either unable to find work or are working in roles that do not fully utilize their skills or meet their financial needs.

Here in Charlottesville, these national trends are not abstract — they show up daily in conversations with job seekers who are eager to work and employers who are struggling to find “job-ready” candidates. That’s why local workforce initiatives are focused on bridging the gap between potential and opportunity.

Ready to Work prepares participants with the essential employability skills employers consistently say they need most — communication, professionalism, teamwork, problem-solving, and workplace expectations. The program helps job seekers move beyond résumés and automated screening systems by building real-world readiness and confidence, positioning graduates to succeed not just in landing a job, but in keeping and advancing in one.

In addition, **Coffee & Conversations** creates a low-pressure, relationship-driven space where job seekers and employers can connect directly. These informal networking events help demystify the hiring process, reduce barriers created by online applications, and allow employers to meet motivated candidates as people — not just as applications in a queue.

For those seeking industry-specific skills and credentials, the City’s **GO Programs** offer short-term workforce training that leads to nationally recognized certifications in in-demand fields such as culinary, skilled trades, renewable energy, and healthcare. These programs provide hands-on training, job readiness support, and direct connections to local employers — creating tangible pathways into stable, entry-level employment.

Together, Ready to Work, Coffee & Conversations, and the GO workforce training programs reflect a skills-based, human-centered approach to workforce development — one that responds directly to the realities of today’s labor market and supports both job seekers and employers. Email bichej@charlottesville.gov to learn more.

Downtown Mall 50th Anniversary

2026 marks not just the 250th anniversary of America's independence, but also the 50th anniversary of the Charlottesville Downtown Mall.



In July 2026, the Downtown Mall turns 50 — and we're celebrating all year long. From remembering the original planning and design work of renowned landscape architect and environmental planner

Lawrence Halprin, whose vision shaped the Mall we know today, to highlighting the key moments and transformations that have defined the Mall over five decades, to simply enjoying classic Cville fun in the heart of downtown, this anniversary year will be a true CELEBRATION.

Stay tuned for updates, event announcements, and links to everything happening throughout this milestone year.

Coffee & Conversations Returns on February 13th



Start your morning with coffee, connections, and conversation at the next **Coffee & Conversations** event hosted by the City of Charlottesville's Office of Economic Development.

Join us **Friday, February 13, from 9:30–10:30 a.m. at City Space** for a relaxed, informal gathering designed to bring together local jobseekers, employers, and community partners. This is a low-pressure opportunity to network, share ideas, learn about current job opportunities, and explore workforce resources — all over complimentary coffee.

Coffee & Conversations is our version of a laid-back mini job fair. Jobseekers are encouraged to bring copies of their résumé, while employers and organizations should bring business cards and information about open positions or services. Whether you're actively hiring, exploring your next career move, or simply looking to stay connected to the local workforce community, this event offers meaningful conversations in a welcoming setting.

No formal presentations, no sales pitches — just authentic dialogue and relationship-building that supports Charlottesville's workforce ecosystem.

To help us plan for coffee and refreshments, please RSVP to bichej@charlottesville.gov. We look forward to seeing you there and kicking off the morning together!

From Pizza to Petals: Business Updates Around Charlottesville

Charlottesville has a few fresh updates worth sharing, new locations, new openings, and familiar favorites popping up in new places.

Natalie Dressed has officially moved and is now positioned closer to the roadside at the Millmont Shops. If you have not visited in a while, this is a great time to swing by and see what is new.

Craving island flavor? **Pearl Island** is now operating out of **B.E.A.C.O.N** Shared Kitchen on Carlton Road and is currently only available for pickup. Get your Caribbean deliciousness by ordering online ahead of time, then swing by to grab it.

Pizza lovers have a new reason to celebrate. **Popitos Pizza** has officially opened its Charlottesville location right off the **Historic Downtown Mall** on 2nd Street SW. If you have been waiting to try them locally, now is the time.

Even though the holiday season just wrapped, flowers are always in season. For all your events and party arrangements, **Flower Girl Cville** has you covered. Order your arrangements online and bring your vision to life with statement florals that can take a space from simple to stunning.

Cville Match Program Expands

The City of Charlottesville's Cville Match grant program is designed to assist emerging high-growth and expanding companies by providing matching grant funding to be used in association with a number

of federal and state programs. Recently, eligibility criteria for the program was expanded to include additional business incentive programs offered through the **Virginia Innovation Partnership Corporation (VIPC)**.



Companies are still eligible for Cville Match if they receive a **Small Business Innovation Research Program or Small Business Technology Transfer Program (SBIR/STTR)** contract through the federal government, are awarded a grant through the **Virginia Jobs Investment Program (VJIP)**, or have participated in the Virginia Economic Development Partnership's (VEDP) **Economic Gardening program (EG)** and are ready to begin implementation of strategies identified through the EG process.

To learn more about Cville Match and additional eligibility criteria, visit OED's **Cville Match website** or call (434) 970-3110.

OED Fun Fact

The holidays may be over, but your Christmas tree isn't done giving! Each year, the City of Charlottesville and Albemarle County recycle about 2,300 trees, turning them into free mulch for residents. This program keeps trees out of landfills and gives them a "second life" in local gardens.

Free Business Resources



The Central Virginia Small Business Development Center is a team of business and technical experts available to advise and assist entrepreneurs, confidentially and free of charge. They offer 1:1 assistance, curated research, access to technical experts and professionals, and timely events/training. To see upcoming SBDC events, click [here!](#)

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