



Navigating COVID-19:

How to Recruit Early Talent from Home

As the global pandemic known as COVID-19 continues to impact people and businesses around the world, many of us are adjusting to an increasingly digital way of living.

Whether it's utilizing video conferencing to work remotely, entertaining ourselves with streaming services instead of going out, or simply building and maintaining connections via social media and other digital outlets, most of us have embraced a digital lifestyle during this uncertain time.

For employers and recruiters who rely on relationship-building, navigating an entirely digital landscape can be a new experience or may require an upramp in virtual recruiting practices. Know that you're not alone—half of Handshake employers recently surveyed say they're still evaluating how COVID-19 has affected their entry level hiring plans.

That's why we put together this guide chock-full of tips to make your transition to digital as smooth as possible, and ultimately, to enable your teams to recruit effectively online.

Chapter 1: How do I do my best work from home?

Working from home is a popular perk for many employees, but for others, it can be hard to adjust to having to work where you live. Start with these tips to set up a productive remote office from home:

- **Dedicate a space in your home where you'll work.** This helps add structure while also separating your workspace from the rest of your home.
- **Make sure you have all the tools you need,** whether it's a strong internet connection, reliable phone, collaboration tools, or a noise-canceling headset.
- **Leverage collaboration and project management tools** such as Slack and Asana to stay connected with your manager, teammates, and projects.
- **Try to maintain your routine as much as possible.** Do you go for a run and cook breakfast normally before work? If so, keep it up! This will help normalize your day and minimize disruption due to these changes.
- **Check in on yourself.** This is a challenging time, with a lot going on. Make sure you take breaks throughout the day and do mental health checks to ensure you're taking care of yourself, too.

Recruiting may be a highly personal career, but many of your relationship-building experiences can be replicated from home.

Much like how you use social media to stay connected to friends and family, you can use recruiting platforms like [Handshake](#) to connect with candidates digitally. Reach out to early talent on a personal level, host online events and interviews, and proactively communicate how you're going to be there for candidates during this time.

Chapter 2: Can I build relationships with candidates online?

The short answer is of course!

While you do have a job to do, it's important to take a step back and consider the situation. During this difficult time, many people (students and candidates included) feel uncertain. In fact, a survey conducted by the Ivy Research Council shows that 45% of students have a very or extremely high level of concern stemming from COVID-19.

Keep these sentiments in mind when you communicate with recruits. It's important to be empathetic and genuine. Let talent know that you are there to clarify any questions they may have or be their resource regarding how your company is handling COVID-19.¹

With so many businesses temporarily closing their doors and government-mandated regulations on social distancing, students and potential candidates are understandably worried about the status of their summer internships, if or how they will be recruited, and how they'll interview for jobs. Make sure you address these concerns in your outreach and provide all the information they need to feel informed and at ease when it comes to how you're approaching this pandemic.

¹ <https://www.ivyresearchcouncil.com/>



In addition to feeling like you care about their concerns, students want to feel like your outreach is personal; they want to know that they're not just one of hundreds.

Not only has Handshake has found that 82% of college students and recent graduates actually prefer learning about your company via online communications, but 95% want to engage with employers that send personalized messages, too.

At Handshake, we've even noticed an increase in student engagement with employer campaigns relating to events and job postings. Personalization truly is key. There are so many ways to personalize your outreach, but common ways include using the candidate's name and personalizing your message based on attributes such as major or university.

Another great way to communicate with students and candidates is to reach out to those who have already shown interest in you. Have any already signed up for your upcoming info session? Or maybe they registered for your now canceled in-person event but want to remain in touch virtually? Either way, they're telling you they're interested, so let them know you are, too. We'll dive further into this in chapter four.



Chapter 3: How do I distinguish my employer brand digitally?

Much like how students carefully craft their online presence, resumes, and cover letters to appeal to employers, you, too, must develop your early talent employer brand. In the eyes of potential candidates, your organization is a reflection of your values, culture, and who you truly are as a company. If you're perceived as a trustworthy company that is empathetic during times like these, you can increase your stream of qualified candidates.

So, how do you build a meaningful employer brand?

The first thing to consider is that these are not typical times. Employers who are actively addressing COVID-19 risk being perceived as unempathetic, so make sure you acknowledge the current state we're in and let candidates know how you're addressing it. Next, be authentic and genuine in your outreach.



Be sure to include information on how you are now recruiting (virtual interviews, virtual recruiting events, and more), the status of your internship program, how you're approaching the shift to digital recruiting, and anything else that potential candidates may have questions about.

This gives early talent insight into how your company reacts to the needs of candidates and employees during trying times. If working from home is one of your company perks or you offer employees stipends to purchase supplies needed to work from home, you can highlight that, too.

Here are a few more general tips to help you build a solid employer brand online:

- **Highlight the values that your employees love.**

Consider why your employees love working for your organization and include anything that makes you unique. Are you known for your employee resource groups (e.g., Black Women Engineers, Women Who Code, LGBTQ groups, and more)? Think of this as your chance to show candidates why they should work with you.

- **Be authentic.** Increasingly, Gen Z is focused on being authentic and true to themselves. They expect the same from a company they're going to work for. Don't try to be something you're not.

- **Show early talent that they can grow with you.**

Candidates may enter your company in an entry-level role, but they aren't hoping to stay there throughout their career. According to Handshake's [Campus to Career report](#), 75% of students think they should be promoted within a year, and they're motivated to get there. Show them that they can grow at your company and move into varying roles as their career progresses.

- **Tell them about your culture and how you give back.** Gen Z candidates want to work for companies that make a difference. Social issues are important to them, and to appeal to this, companies should highlight any efforts that make a difference. For example, do you give employees time off to volunteer, donate to organizations that advocate for social change, or participate in corporate giving campaigns?

- **Offer a behind-the-scenes look of what it's like to work at your company.** Any company can say it does good, has a great company culture, and allows for growth opportunities, but can you actually show candidates that you do? Post employee reviews, share pictures from company events that highlight your culture or post a video showing a day in the life of employees from varying fields. Walk the walk.

- **Highlight mentorship possibilities that would allow them to learn from others in their desired field.** [Handshake Ambassadors](#), a Premium feature, enables you to add non-recruiters to your profile for candidates to connect with. Instead of sending your ambassadors to in-person career fairs, candidates can engage with your ambassadors fully online.

This leans into students' desires to hear about experiences from someone who looks and sounds like them. If you're looking to hire female engineers, for example, you may want to pair candidates with some of the female ambassadors on your engineering team or who are involved in your Women in STEM employee resource group.

By being authentic, telling students and candidates what they want to know about your company and how it's handling COVID-19, and connecting them with ambassadors, you are giving candidates the best inside look at your organization. This will make you stand out among competitors. If you're struggling to develop your employer brand, consider the above, but also think about what stands out about the companies you love and borrow some inspiration from them, too.



Chapter 4: How do I make my events or interviews virtual?

As everything is going digital amid COVID-19 concerns, it's crucial that recruiters adjust to a new way of doing things. This includes changing the way they communicate with talent, building a great employer brand, and making the switch to digital. Adopting a more virtual way of doing things is especially important when it comes to events and interviews.

Trademark events that have historically provided a groundswell of diverse talent, such as NSBE, are being canceled. But instead of canceling your highly-anticipated recruiting events, employers have the opportunity to shift their in-person events to digital.

According to findings from a recent survey on Handshake, 43% of employers plan on adopting or increasing virtual events, including info sessions, panels, Ask Me Anything (AMAs), and office tours, during this time.

The best part about a virtual event is that students actually want you to host these. Thanks to recent insights from the Ivy Research Council, we know that more than 8 in 10 students prefer some kind of virtual engagement over none at all. Show them you're listening.

Not sure how to set up a digital event? Handshake's got you covered. Here are a few things to consider when setting up, managing, and following up after your virtual event:

- **Set your goal and find your speakers.** Why are you hosting an event? Once you figure this out, you can identify hosts who will help you achieve your goal. If you want to show potential candidates what it's like to work there, consider having a panel of employees from a variety of backgrounds instead of an HR leader talk about culture.
 - **Identify the type of event you want to host.** Are you looking to inform candidates about your company? Or maybe you want to give a behind-the-scenes look at your office or typical workday? Make sure you prepare based on the event. For example, if you're hosting a FAQ session, invite a diverse panel of employees who can answer an array of questions. This is also an opportunity to tap into underrepresented groups. You can create a tailored webinar or event for women in tech, for example, for students from HBCUs, for Latinas, or whichever group you're trying to engage.
 - **Choose your live stream platform.** With [video conferencing companies being overloaded](#) by the exponential increase in usage, you may want to consider alternate platforms like Facebook Live or Instagram TV. Just be sure to test the platform and get comfortable with using it before you actually host your event.
 - **Get the word out.** If no one knows about your event, none of the above matters. Once you've identified your target audience, promote your event within this group and communicate clear instructions on how to join. Connect with your audience via [one-on-one messaging](#), or if you're a Premium employer partner, via [the Campaigns function in Handshake](#). Then share your event on social media (though this won't be as targeted), or reach out to candidates who've previously expressed interest.
- A huge bonus to hosting a virtual event is that students who may not have been able to attend an in-person event due to cost or distance, are now able to attend, which increases your talent pool. And the benefit of sharing your Handshake virtual event page outside of Handshake ensures only early talent with a ".edu" email address join.
- **Don't forget post-event follow up.** To keep candidates engaged throughout the recruiting process, make sure you follow up. This can be as simple as a thank you note with a recording of the event or more personalized outreach that hones in on getting to know them, setting up an interview, or encouraging candidates to reach out with questions.



Virtual events are a great way to maintain engagement and keep your company top of mind for students and potential candidates. Virtual interviews are the next step. Nearly 9 in 10 employers recently surveyed say they are adopting or increasing virtual (video) interviews given the situation with COVID-19. For those students who have participated in a virtual interview, many say it was a positive experience.

If you find candidates who you'd like to get to know better by interviewing them, but are unsure of how to conduct an interview remotely, we have good news for you: it's very similar to an in-person interview.

While you may not be able to shake a candidate's hand, nearly everything else will be almost identical to an in-person interview. You'll still dress professionally, make eye contact with the candidate, and open the interview with standard niceties such as asking how they're doing. After this, make sure you address the elephant in the room: COVID-19. Showing genuine empathy and asking a candidate how you can help clarify any questions they have on how your company is handling everything goes a long way.

After this, conduct your interview the same way you would as if the candidate were sitting in your office.

Make sure you're in a quiet place with minimal distractions and a neutral background. Keep in mind that your candidates may have roommates or pets and be flexible with distractions on their end.

At Handshake, our recruiting team is delivering creative ways to replicate the in-person interview experience. We produced a virtual office tour and share this video in our outreach to candidates so they have an opportunity to see what our workplace is all about.

When the interview kicks off, candidates are greeted by a friendly recruiting coordinator to help address tech issues. We've received positive feedback from candidates that this helps start the conversation on a supportive note. Plus, if a technology issue comes up, it's much easier for a candidate to troubleshoot that early on than risk something going awry during the interview.

For the last 20 minutes of our virtual interviews, a familiar recruiter joins in to conduct a quick debrief and answer any remaining questions a candidate might have. Our relationship with candidates doesn't end there; we remain in touch every step of the way, whether it's by email, phone, or a virtual video meeting.



Chapter 5: Can internships be virtual?

As of March 27, the majority of employers with intern programs are still evaluating whether to make changes. A very small minority have canceled their programs, or pivoted to remote internships (less than 10% at this point in time).

Considering recent and rapid shifts in events, it's understandable many of you are still looking for the right direction to go.

Students have significant concerns around the status of their summer internships and whether they'll be canceled. Meanwhile, insights from the Ivy Research Council shows that 89% of students pursuing a summer 2020 internship would prefer a virtual internship over a canceled one. Internships are a great way to gain practical experience and a soft entry into the workforce. They are often important to employers in developing their future leaders.

As such, it's important that you let students and candidates know how you're handling internships during this time. If you do choose to host a virtual internship program, there are quite a few things to take into consideration:

- **First, you'll need to set expectations with your interns** about how the program is going to work, what tools they'll need, how often they're expected to attend virtual meetings and engage with the team. After all, they can't be successful, if you can't provide them with all the necessary tools they'll need to do their best work.
- **Prepare interns at least 4-8 weeks before they start**, including setting expectations across the org and departments, creating a consistent comms strategy, building a strong community early on through outreach, and getting them familiar with your company and culture.
- **Think about the collaboration tools they'll need**, including a video conferencing platform, messaging app, and productivity tracker. Many aspects of a digital internship will revolve around software made to manage remote teams.
- **Create the same culture you have in the office digitally.** Creating a culture can be difficult when everyone is working remotely, but there are indeed ways to get your culture across to interns virtually.
- **Prepare interns for a virtual onboarding.** Make sure they have what they need to start and don't overlook any fundamentals like equipment, including workspace and technology, HR paperwork like I-9s, and company swag, etc.
- **Find creative ways to engage your interns virtually.** Create digital coffee sessions and lunches to offer opportunities for interns to get to know one another and folks in your organization. Cisco Webex does a great job of this by starting and ending video meetings with catch ups, funny stories, and jokes.

They also host virtual baby showers or birthday parties, introduce their kids or pets to the team, and so much more that gives potential team members a great idea of the culture there. Consider and plan creative ways to put your culture on display.



Your interns are trying to get an idea of what it would be like to work at your company, but they're also there to work on projects and gain valuable experience. This is where organization becomes invaluable.

Another important factor to consider is how you will provide feedback to interns. Will this be a weekly video meeting, a one-on-one phone call, or a group meeting where everyone comes together to provide feedback on shared projects? Be sure to clearly communicate the process with interns prior to onboarding.

We know this is uncharted territory for many employers out there, but with some planning and the proper tools, running a digital internship program is manageable and a great opportunity to show interns why they should work for you post-graduation.

Learn more in our [Guide to Hosting a Virtual Internship](#).

We know that this is a transformative time for a lot of companies trying to navigate this new landscape. We're here to help organize the chaos and provide you with all the resources you need. If you want more information on how to manage the transition to all-digital, check out our [Going Digital](#) resource hub, updated weekly with fresh content, insights, and on demand videos to help you recruit effectively from home.

Just remember: create a plan, stay organized and be empathic towards students and candidates. We are all in this together.



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