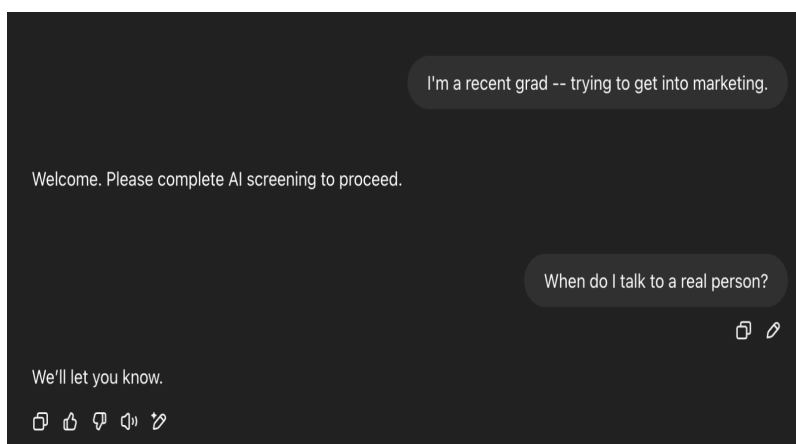


## Before You Meet a Hiring Manager, You Have to Beat the Algorithm

Gen Z job applicants are adjusting to a world where bots view their resumes first.

By Sofia Marcus | May 6, 2025



Visual by Sofia Marcus

American University (AU) senior Maggie Troast entered the school’s career center virtual waiting room hoping to put her tuition money to good use.

With a job offer from Teach for America – a nonprofit that recruits recent graduates to teach in high-need schools – the literature major expected tailored guidance on other entry-level positions.

Instead, the advisor shared her screen, opened ChatGPT, and typed: *“What to do with a degree in literature?”*

“Nothing that came up was in any way entry level or something I hadn’t already come across,” Troast said. “Half the reason I was on that call for so long was because she kept using ChatGPT.”

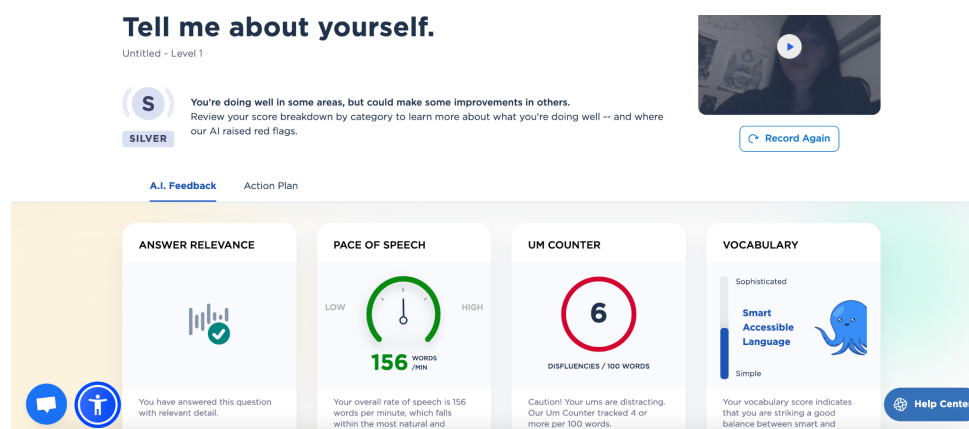
Darby MacDurmon, another AU senior, had a similarly impersonal experience. As part of her psychology capstone course, she used [Big Interview](#) – an AI-powered mock interview tool.

“It felt like I was being judged before I even started,” MacDurmon said. “It gave me scores on my vocabulary and tone, but I didn’t know what to do with it.”

Their experiences reflect a growing reality for Gen Z job seekers: bots now stand between them and hiring managers. From resume scanners to AI-powered mock interviews, automation is now embedded into nearly every stage of the hiring process – often before a human ever sees a name. This shift is changing how young people write resumes, prepare for interviews, and even see their own value. As companies and universities lean into these tools, students are left navigating a system that can feel impersonal, inconsistent, and competitive. For a generation raised on personalization, the job search can feel strangely cold.

## When the Job Search Starts with a Bot

Big Interview, used in some AU courses and recommended by counselors, simulates interviews and analyzes delivery. But it doesn't always help.



Darby MacDurmon's screen showed automated feedback after completing a mock interview on Big Interview (Courtesy of Darby MacDurmon).

"It felt weird being judged by a robot," MacDurmon said. "I wasn't sure if I did something wrong or if it didn't like how I talked."

Tools like Big Interview are just one piece of a much larger shift: companies now filter resumes using AI to scan for specific keywords.

A 2024 [CV Genius survey](#) found that 80% of hiring managers discard AI-generated applications outright, raising pressure on students to get every detail right.

Even well-meaning advice can miss the mark. Some AU students have watched career advisors use ChatGPT to generate options they could have Googled themselves.

“There is a time and a place for AI,” Troast said. “That was not the time, the place, or the method to go about it.”

Christina Sincere, a career advisor at AU, says the issue isn’t AI – it’s how it’s used.

“We try to be strategic with it,” she said. “We know that people are going to use [AI]. So how do we use it in the most ethical and appropriate way possible?”

According to Sincere, students sometimes bring in resumes written entirely by ChatGPT. She advises them to not outsource their voices.

“It’s really important that this is you on the page, not a computer,” she said.

Instead, she suggests using AI to analyze job descriptions, identify gaps, and fine-tune language – not to write from scratch.

“If the job description [lists] InDesign, and it’s not on their resume, it’s not in their cover letter – we’re just not even calling it out specifically,” she said.

Thomas Vick, a technology hiring and consulting expert at the staffing firm [Robert Half](#), agrees.

“AI should be used as a tool, not a substitute for humans during the recruitment process,” he said in an emailed statement.

While AI can help match candidates to job postings, he emphasized that it can’t assess qualities like communication, creativity, or grit.

“Assessing and selecting talent requires knowledge about a candidate’s communication skills, attitude, and determination level, which cannot always be identified by AI tools,” Vick said.

Some systems even use knockout questions – filtering candidates out based on graduation year, zip code, or checkbox answers. That can leave qualified students disqualified without ever speaking to a person.

## Turning AI Anxiety into Self-Advocacy

Beyond logistics, this new system is wearing students down.

According to a 2023 [WorkTango report](#), 59% of Gen Z and Millennials worry AI will eliminate jobs, fueling anxiety and self-doubt.

Ariel Hennig Wood, a career coach at [Canada Career Counseling](#), says that fear is valid – but reframing it is key.

“There’s so much we have to innovate,” she said. “And I think there’s no better group of individuals than our Gen Z employees to come in and say, ‘Hey, I’ve got great ideas.’”

She advises students to clarify their “individual value proposition” – the unique mix of passions, skills, and perspectives that algorithms can’t replicate.



“You’re becoming the answer to [the company’s] problem,” she said.

For those feeling stuck or ghosted, Wood stresses the importance of reconnecting with people, not just platforms.

“Don’t forget that humans hire humans,” she said.

To help students reflect on their strengths, Wood offers a free online Career Mindset Quiz. Users answer 13 short questions and receive a profile like “Explorer” or

“Thriver” with tailored suggestions.

☐ [Take the quiz here](#) or scan the QR code below to find out your career mindset.



Scan me!

These reflections are part of a larger conversation: Are Gen Z applicants being seen for what they're capable of – or being filtered out too soon?

### **The Pitch That AI Can't Write**

Jeff Martin, CEO of [University Recruiters](#), says Gen Z job seekers are often overlooked for the wrong reasons.

“I have zero [clients] that care about GPA,” he said. “What they care about more than anything is the grit, the guts, and the attitude.”

Martin works with both job seekers and employers. He sees fierce competition among entry-level candidates, many of whom bring similar credentials to the table.

“The biggest issue is competition,” he said. “Your resume is nothing. It's not about this piece of paper with all these bullet points. It's about, ‘I'm willing to work hard.’”

Soft skills, he says, are the real differentiators.

“If someone can't communicate, I don't care if it's a financial role – if you're not good at chatting, they don't want you,” Martin said. “I think people need to practice their pitch. Not the pitch of what [they] studied. No. Who are you? Why are you going to work hard? Why?”

While Martin hasn't seen AI dominate entry-level hiring yet, he cautions that overreliance on automation could cause companies to miss out on promising candidates.

"Sometimes it's the story that outshines the resume," he said. "Bullet points don't tell you that."

At [Handshake](#), a Gen Z career platform with over 17 million users, Chief Talent Engagement Officer Valerie Capers Workman sees both rising awareness and rising concern.

"98% of Class of 2025 students say they're familiar with GenAI tools, such as ChatGPT, compared to 61% of the Class of 2023," she said in an emailed statement.

But familiarity doesn't always equal confidence.

"62% of this year's seniors have shown concern about the impact of GenAI," Workman said.

"Notably, computer science and humanities majors have shown the most concern, possibly due to increased speculation around the impact of AI on entry-level programming roles."

Workman emphasizes that knowing how to use GenAI effectively can be a strength – but only if it's done with purpose.

"GenAI's output is only as strong as the input you provide," she said. "Recruiters want to connect with candidates who have clearly researched the role and company."

She warns against mass applying and encourages students to get specific.

"My strongest piece of advice for students is to be intentional," she said. "Focus on producing quality applications over quantity."

For Gen Z, standing out isn't about abandoning AI – it's about using it wisely and remembering, as Ariel Hennig Wood puts it, that humans still hire humans.

## **How to Beat the Algorithm Without Losing Yourself**

For students navigating this maze, strategy is everything.

Thomas Vick says individuality matters more than perfection. “Employers are ultimately seeking resumes that reflect authenticity, genuine skills, individuality, and a clear, personal communication style.”

Jeff Martin encourages students to practice telling their story – not just listing their skills. And Christina Sincere adds that talking to real people still matters.

“You get jobs by talking to people,” she said, quoting a mentor’s favorite phrase. “[For] a lot of students, the misconception is, ‘all I need to do is fill out a bunch of applications and something will happen.’ That isn’t always the case. It is really important to network – think of it more as relationship building.”

When combined with intentionality and reflection, even a few well-crafted prompts can help Gen Z stand out in a digitized field.

### **□ Before You Submit: A Gen Z Job Seeker’s Checklist**

- I tailored my resume using keywords from the job description
- I mentioned specific tools or platforms listed in the posting (e.g., InDesign, Salesforce)
- My cover letter sounds like me, not ChatGPT
- I used GenAI to reflect, not replace, and it helped me refine my language or identify gaps
- I practiced answering likely questions out loud
- I reached out to at least one person connected to the company or role
- I have a clear answer to “Why this role?” and “Why me?”

### Source List

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