Forage

The Great Disconnect

Between early talent, employers, and educators — and the successful pursuit of a career

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Executive Summary

Entering the world of work is daunting for early talent. With only a short window to explore and prepare for their career paths, guidance from educators and employers is key. But is everyone on the same page? In late 2021, we conducted a global study to better understand how aligned early talent, employers, and educators are on what it takes for early talent to successfully pursue a career. We learned that **1 in 3 students did not know what they needed to do** — and this led to four key areas of misalignment:

1 Timing

Employers and educators recommend that early talent take steps to become employable from their first year at college. Students, however, only consider taking those steps midway through college — and they become increasingly uncertain as they progress in their education about what the correct steps are.

2 Engagement

While employers highlight the importance of extracurricular activities for showcasing consistent interest in a particular industry or role, students believe their limited time is better spent pursuing relevant industry experience.

3 Intent

Both employers and students want a human approach to the hiring process, but their preferred markers of authentic intent are misaligned.

4 Skills

Employers value candidates who can illustrate how their general skills translate to the workplace — but without access to those workplaces, students struggle to know what employers want, and instead agonize over gaining job-specific technical skills.

Employers, as the gatekeepers to the workforce, are uniquely positioned to solve this misalignment and create an environment that empowers the next generation of talent. Based on our findings, we recommend:

Creating an instructive and accessible source of truth that lets candidates know with specificity what they should be doing — and when. Open-access and online frameworks enable employers to do this, while opening their doors and demystifying what it takes to successfully secure a role.

Creating open-access opportunities for students to develop technical skills through preskilling: a scalable solution that enables early talent to contribute faster and gain career awareness, improving organizational efficiency and business outcomes.

Creating opportunities to align on engagement and intent through positive friction, a method used by large global employers incorporating a mutually beneficial "hurdle" in the application process that candidates overcome to demonstrate engagement and intent, and build skills.

There's a disconnect between early talent, employers, and educators. College students lack the confidence and career awareness to pursue the roles of their dreams. Employers have particular desires and expectations of how candidates should prepare to secure a role. Educators are caught in the middle — acting as both teacher and career counselor, often unable to bridge the gap.

We call this **The Great Disconnect.**

A Cohesive Early Talent Ecosystem?

Early talent have walked the same pathway for decades: go to school, build skills and knowledge, and then enter the workforce.

You would expect this well-trodden route to be optimized — a well-oiled machine refined over time to effectively serve all. But the world of early talent is complex. On one end, you have students navigating diverging paths and roadblocks toward unclear destinations. At the other end, you have employers seeking to engage the best candidates to pursue them as their ultimate destination. And in the middle of most pathways, you have educators seeking to enrich early talent as they pursue their careers.

As three distinct stakeholders with differing perspectives, we wanted to better understand just how aligned early talent, employers, and educators are. To do this, we conducted a monthlong study of nearly 10,000 global participants with the hope of gaining a clearer picture of the current state of early talent recruiting.

We learned that while the paths in the early talent ecosystem might be well-trodden, there's misalignment about what needs to happen for early talent to successfully pursue a career.
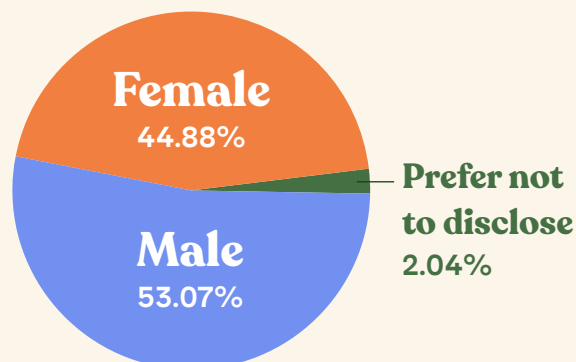
About the Study

In November 2021, we conducted a series of surveys and interviews comprising:

- A quantitative study of 9,636 global participants across 140 countries, being either students or recent college graduates

- A series of 30-minute to 1-hour qualitative interviews with 30 students, 10 professors and career center professionals, and 10 employers
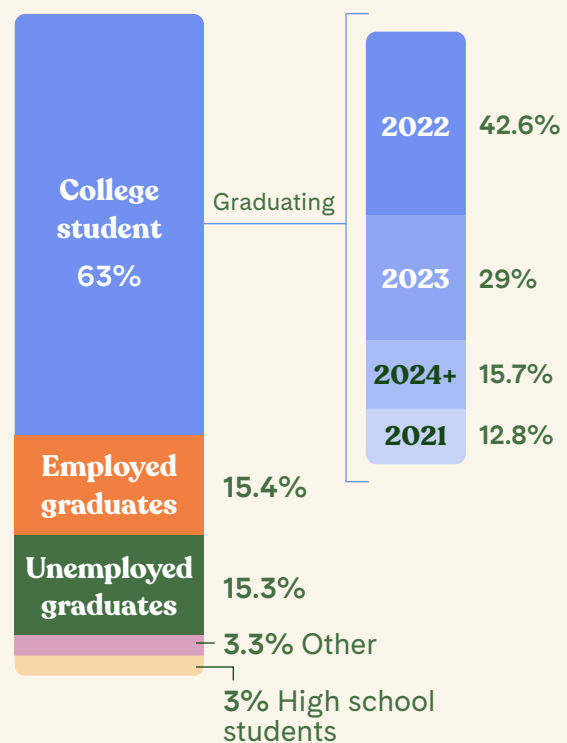
All qualitative study participants were based in the United States or the United Kingdom. The employers were large, global companies ranging from 3,500 to 250,000-plus full-time employees and represented industries such as law, consulting, financial services, and technology.

Gender:

Female 44.88%
Male 53.07%
Prefer not to disclose 2.04%

Participant Demographics

Career stage:

College student 63%

Graduating
2022 42.6%
2023 29%
2024+ 15.7%
2021 12.8%

Employed graduates 15.4%

Unemployed graduates 15.3%

3.3% Other

3% High school students

Applied for an internship or graduate position?

Yes 60.2%   No 39.9%

Why Is There a Disconnect?

> "
>
> In my first year I was so focused on getting good grades and doing well academically. When I was doing my resume, I had a lot to put in the 'education' section, but then I noticed I was spending 80% of my time on only 20% of my resume — and I had nothing else to put in the remaining 80%. I realized I had to start getting experiences outside of the classroom.

Employers and educators strive to provide early talent with as much career information as they can. Whether it's career services, campus events, or networking sessions, many initiatives exist to help early talent understand what it takes to be a successful candidate. **Yet 1 in 3 students in our study stated they were "very unclear" on what they needed to do to set themselves up for career success.**

How clear are you on the steps you need to take to have a successful career?

19% Very clear

49% Somewhat clear

32% Very unclear
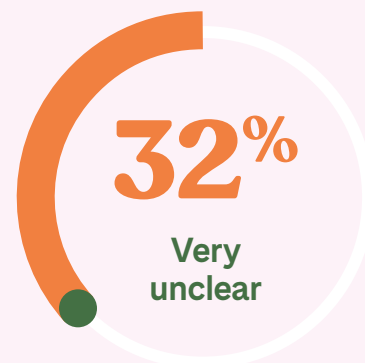
3 Reasons Students Struggle

The guidance from employers and educators comes in many forms and from many sources — and this can create confusion. Our study found that early talent feels overwhelmed by what they view as a lack of clear or consistent advice on what will actually get them hired.

1

Students don't know what to trust or where to begin

The students we surveyed found it difficult to locate a single source of truth on what employers really want. This uncertainty crept into what early talent identified as the top three barriers to preparing a successful job application:

Lack of opportunity to gain relevant industry experience

71%

Confusion on where to start and what they should do

64%

Lack of awareness of available job opportunities

49%

2 Students have an inconsistent experience

Because early talent often don't know where to begin, most obtain career advice through various uncoordinated and unvetted means. They rely on career centers, their network, social media, or online searches — or all of the above. No student has the exact same experience or access to information. The only point of consistency we found was the medium used, with **nearly 79% stating that self-guided online searches were their primary way of accessing information.**

Consequently, we observed a common thread in the student interviews of "stumbling" across a key piece of information or "by chance" being given useful guidance from a friend. This led to varying confidence levels about whether they're doing the right things to get hired.

This is a problem. The early years of college are critical for students to set themselves up for success when applying for jobs. **Individuals who aren't clear about what they need to do risk losing valuable — and limited — time that could be spent focusing on the areas that truly matter for employers.**

Nearly

79%

of students turned to self-guided online searches as a primary way of accessing information

3 Educators sometimes lack relevant expertise and connections

We learned that educators tend to believe it's most effective for students to get career development advice directly from employers, such as through networking and mentoring opportunities. In fact, educators wanted less reliance on career centers, even though both employers and students unanimously identified career centers as a critical resource.

Our interviews further showcased that while 56.4% of students will seek advice from faculty or staff at their institution, the staff themselves often acknowledge they have either not worked in the private sector, have not been through the internship or graduate recruitment process, or have not done so for many years. As a result, educators either avoid providing advice or try to bring in industry speakers or alumni to fill the information gap. This strategy is unsustainable, however, because it depends heavily on the educator's individual connections.
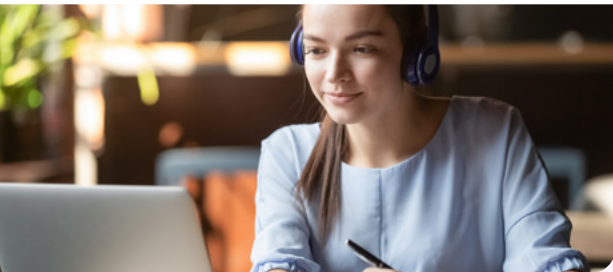
Where Is the Disconnect?

We found that the uncertainty and lack of clarity experienced by early talent today created four key areas of disconnect:

1 Timing

When early talent should start taking steps to become employable

2 Engagement

The need to demonstrate consistent engagement throughout their studies

3 Intent

The importance of showcasing intent, and how to show it

4 Skills

The complex role of skills, and how to effectively translate them during the application process

1 Timing

Employers and educators both emphasized the importance of thinking early about potential career paths.

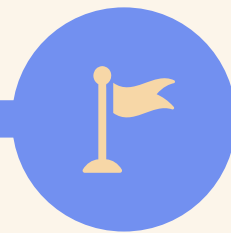## Employers believe students should consider career paths early (and often):

Year 1
First-year college students should start exploring different career paths.

Year 2
Second-year college students should narrow their options and research specific companies.

Year 3+
By the end of the second year, students should know where they want to go in their career.

> **Each semester, students have to do a small amount of professional or career development to match their growth.**
>
> **— Career Success Coordinator, U.S. East Coast College**

Educators agreed that from their first year, early talent should start building soft skills, researching companies, and stress-testing their resume. They unanimously recognized it was important to do additional work outside of the classroom to become hireable.

Students wait too long to build experience

While students think about their career from a young age, they do not necessarily think about the steps they need to take to become employable. We found that while over 50% began thinking about their career before they started college, 40% said they would start seeking ways to enhance their employability from only their second year at college. **In a competitive job market with a relatively short time frame to build credentials, this slight misalignment can have a disproportionate impact on early talent.** Further, we observed that as students progressed through college, they became increasingly uncertain about what the necessary employability steps really looked like.

We asked our study participants, who were at various career stages, to picture themselves as a first-year college student and tell us how clear they were about what they should be doing to get a job after graduation.

40%
of unemployed graduates felt unclear

39%
of employed graduates felt unclear

30%
of unemployed college students felt unclear

12%
of high school students felt unclear

2 The Need for Consistent Engagement

Extracurricular activities matter to employers

Employers want to see early talent showcase their engagement with the relevant industry or role throughout their studies — primarily through extracurricular activities. In particular, the employers we interviewed recognized the importance of taking part in:

- Relevant clubs and societies

- Development opportunities such as bootcamps, hackathons, and case competitions

- Initiatives that set students apart from others, showcasing self-motivation and passion for the relevant area of work (e.g., creating podcasts or startups)

Educators recommend pursuing a variety of experiences

Educators took a slightly broader view of important extracurriculars. While employers want to see these activities align with the relevant industry, educators believe it is important to be "well rounded," encouraging students to get involved in as much as they can. They believed students needed to engage in a lot of additional work outside of the classroom to become hireable.

> **"**
> **A lot of students think if they just get the degree they will get the job.**
>
> — Career Success Coordinator, U.S. East Coast College

Students know they need to do *something* — but what?

Students, however, have mixed views on the importance of extracurriculars. When asked to identify the top three most important factors to make their application stand out, only 13% included extracurriculars. Hiring signals that consistently outranked included evidence of skills and work experience, with **half of the participants believing relevant industry experience was key to getting a job.**

> **Maybe I should have started applying for jobs years ago, no one really tells you!**
>
> — Marketing Student (U.S.)

In practice, this means students are expected to explore and choose a particular career path (something most adults continue to grapple with), showcase consistent engagement with that path, juggle classwork while keeping their grades up, and (ideally) gain work experience (paid or unpaid) — all within a few years. This is a tall order, to say the least.

> **Good isn't good enough anymore.**
>
> — Marketing Student (U.S.)

3 The Importance of Showcasing Intent – and How to Show It

In a world of one-click applications, the importance of candidate intent has never been greater. Our employer interviews resounded with the desire for a human approach from candidates. They want to see them building relationships with not just the business, but also the recruiters themselves. It can be as simple as attending company events with a prepared set of questions or sending a follow-up email. Employers don't want to be just another application — they want authenticity and genuine interest.

> " We get thousands of applications – but we can see who has come to our events, who we know have stood out and already have feedback from the business.
>
> — **Financial Services Recruiter (FTE 250,000+)**

Students and employers want the same thing

Although students also want a human approach, nearly 50% of our study participants identified connecting with recruiters as one of their biggest challenges. Students get frustrated with the radio silence after submitting an application, breaking their confidence and creating disenchantment with the employer and the job application process.

It's unsurprising, then, that only 31.6% of students we surveyed identified company recruiters as a potential avenue to explore when seeking information about a particular role.

We also learned that students struggle to showcase intent in a way that resonates with employers.

Notably, employers identified attendance of their events as a strong indicator of intent, yet only 3% of students identified this as an important deciding factor when hiring. They assume the events are generic and that recruiters don't place significant weight on them. Students, therefore, invest less time in them.

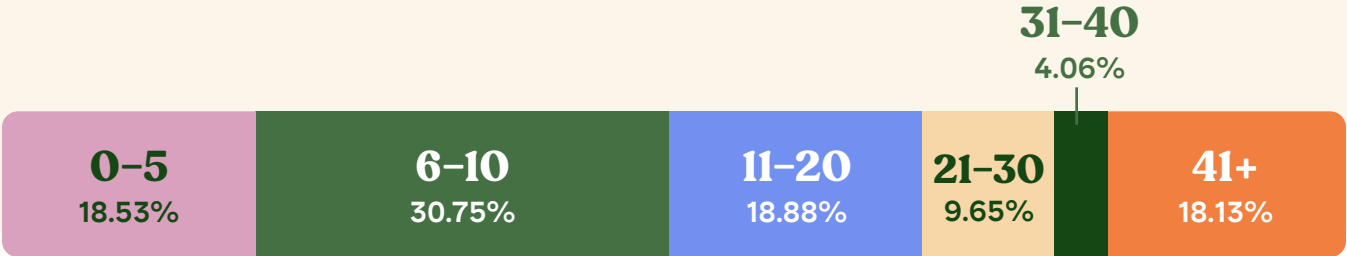Additionally, our student interviews indicate that early talent believes they must use "hot words" — or key phrases from an employer's website or value statements — to get attention and bypass an employer's applicant tracking system (ATS). Yet, the employers we interviewed did not place much weight on the use of the terminology found in their respective websites or value statements. In other words, **one of the primary methods students use to show authentic intent is unlikely to make an impression on employers.**

A quantity-over-quality approach is ineffective — for everyone

Employers want to see authentic interest from early talent, but students are largely unaware of how to communicate this in ways that will resonate with recruiters. Marooned by this knowledge gap, students believe they must instead take a quantity-over-quality approach to job applications in order to be successful. This approach restricts the time applicants would otherwise spend communicating authentic intent, which runs counter to what employers are actually looking for from early talent.

"
I was told it was about the power of numbers.

— Business Student (U.K.)

Number of jobs students apply for

31–40
4.06%

0–5	6–10	11–20	21–30		41+
18.53%	30.75%	18.88%	9.65%		18.13%

4 The Complex Role of Skills, and the Importance of Effectively Translating Them

The importance of skills permeates this study — particularly for students.

We asked students what they thought employers would consider to be the deciding factor between two candidates with identical resumes.

Forty-two percent said evidence of technical skills. Further, nearly 60% believe evidence of technical skills is the most important thing to make their application stand out. In contrast, fewer than 6% thought attending a company event was important.

Students view skills as key to getting a job

We asked students to select the top three most important things that will make their application stand out:

57.5%
Evidence of technical skills to perform on the job and understand the role

48.4%
Evidence of soft skills such as communication and teamwork

38.9%
Relevant (paid or unpaid) work experience

27.7%
Evidence of commitment to the company and why interested

25.5%
High GPA

20.5%
Leadership positions

14%
Existing connection with a recruiter or referral

13.8%
Attend certain college

13.4%
Participation in societies and extracurricular activities

12.6%
General work experience

11.5%
Certain major/minor

6.9%
Volunteer work

5.8%
Attendance of company event or seminar

The role skills play in the early talent journey is complex. Here are four reasons why.

1 Students want to bridge the skills gap, but they don't know how

Early talent is aware of the growing global skills gap. They know employers are after skills that are not readily available in the market. The problem? The vast majority of students feel that traditional education cannot adequately equip them with the skills they need. In fact, according to another study we completed in 2021, only 14% of students believe college provides the skills necessary for workplace success. As a result, students are increasingly looking for ways to gain skills beyond traditional educational frameworks.

Only 14% of students believe college provides the skills necessary for workplace success.

> " It is an unfortunate problem within the hiring process across the industry that there is an expectation that you already know what you're doing.
>
> — Economics Graduate (U.S.)

2 The opportunity catch-22

The opportunity to gain relevant technical skills is viewed as one of the most challenging things to achieve, particularly due to the perception that it's only accessible to a select few who have connections or education from an elite institution. **But early talent also feels trapped by the perception that there's a catch-22: To gain experience that provides essential skills, you frequently need experience.**

Uncertainty makes it difficult to make informed decisions

Given this catch-22, many students seek to build skills through volunteering or extracurriculars. However, they don't know exactly what types of skills employers are after and whether they're doing the right things to gain those skills. In our study, only two of the students we interviewed clearly understood what skills they needed to set themselves up for the job application process — as a result, they were able to be strategic with what activities they undertook.

> "
>
> **It's so difficult to understand what the roles are like – when they say we are hiring analysts – what does that actually mean?**
>
> **— Finance Graduate (U.S.)**

Misalignment in transferability

Our employer interviews regularly recognized the importance of general work experience and that skills relevant to the workplace can come from anywhere. Students, however, don't think employers place significant weight on general work experience. In a competition between a candidate who completed an internship in data analytics versus a candidate who worked in retail, students assume the candidate with the internship will land the data analytics role. However, the reality is that employers may show preference for the candidate with retail experience if they can demonstrate relevant transferable skills.

Students face the further challenge of showing how their general skills translate to an employer's specific workplace without the awareness of the actual skills and tasks that the employer wants to see. Without this information and without the relevant work experience, being able to translate skills becomes a significant hurdle.

We asked students:

What's most important to get a job?

39% Relevant work experience (paid or unpaid)

12.5% General work experience

> "They train you when you are hired — but not having certain skills is a disadvantage when applying for a job. It is so frustrating when I see a job requiring a certain skill set, but I never learned those skills and so am disadvantaged when applying.

— Chemistry Student (U.S.)

Recommendations

While our study uncovered four areas of disconnect between employers, educators, and early talent, this knowledge provides an opportunity. The early talent landscape is evolving rapidly, particularly with the entrance of Gen Z, and employers are uniquely positioned to drive real changes that let every stakeholder win. How? Here are our three recommendations.

1

Create an instructive and accessible source of truth for early talent

Nobody is better placed than the employer to describe what they do, why someone should work for them, and what they need to do to get there. Accordingly, employers can play a pivotal role in reducing early talent's confusion and uncertainty.

How? By developing a single source of truth that is:

Specific, instructive, and timelined:

Let candidates know what they should be doing — and when. What traits will lead them to stand out? How early should they think about career exploration, and how can they start? What does a successful graduate at the company look like, and how did they get there?

Easy to find, access, and understand:

This talent generation discovers, learns, and seeks connections online — being the prominent voice that reaches them here is paramount to guide untapped self-starters, especially those without access to traditional sources of career information.

Able to emphasize engagement and intent:

Candidates don't know recruiters want a human connection or that events matter — and, by and large, this generation avoids direct engagement like this (see item above). Letting candidates know that they're a welcome and noted presence to recruiters tells candidates to invest time where it is appreciated, rather than in ATS-hacking CVs and quantity-over-quality applications.

While third-party channels like career services remain critical distributors of information, a single, comprehensive source of truth ensures consistency with what third parties communicate on behalf of employers.

Create opportunities for early talent to gain industry experience and technical skills

We learned that early talent feel immense pressure to build relevant skills and experience, yet face a catch-22 of needing experience to get experience. Employers can alleviate the stress by increasing their access to opportunities to gain industry experience and technical skills. Again, nobody is better placed than employers to provide the skills early talent need for success in the workplace. But how can they do this in a **way that is scalable, effective, and cost-conscious?**

Virtual job simulations offer that solution — and are wholly unburdensome for employers. By providing the opportunity to immerse themselves in simulated work that feels real, candidates can understand a day in the life of an employer's actual workplace. Virtual job simulations are:

- Approximately four to six hours long and self-paced

- Online 24/7/365

- Open-access, eliminating barriers to entry and enabling scalability

- Distributed by educational partners

We call this process preskilling.

Preskilling doesn't just help early talent build skills and experience, nor does it only offer hiring signals for employers. Early talent who preskill contribute faster, increase organizational efficiency, and improve business outcomes. It's a win-win for new talent and employers.

Enable early talent to use positive friction to showcase engagement and intent

Rather than leave early talent guessing on how best they can showcase engagement and intent, employers can provide leverage through positive friction. Positive friction creates a hurdle that a candidate overcomes as part of the application process. It not only mitigates the application surge caused by one-click applications, but also provides a positive, skill-building experience for the candidate along the way — regardless of the outcome. The objective isn't to create a more daunting candidate experience, but rather to provide an opportunity to channel their engagement with a particular industry or role in a way that shows authentic intent.

Traditional internships are a form of positive friction, providing an informative experience for early talent and often acting as a determinant for full-time employment. Unfortunately, the traditional internship model is not scalable.

Large global employers are using virtual job simulations as the solution to this.

Early talent can self-select to take part in these workplace simulations. If they then proceed to apply for a position, the employer has a clear and notable marker of intent. Who could have more intent than a college student who chooses to apply for a role after spending four to six hours — on top of everything else they do — experiencing an employer's specific workplace? And it's mutually beneficial for candidates; even without a job secured, virtual job simulations provide transferable skills that can set them up for success elsewhere.

Goodbye, "hot words," hello, positive friction!

There's a Great Disconnect
— But Also Reason for Radical Hope

Students, educators, and employers all want the same thing: for early talent to be prepared to succeed in the workplace. But the early talent ecosystem is currently designed in such a way that creates a disconnect between all parties involved. This causes confusion and leaves positive intent from every stakeholder untapped.

But there's hope.

With closer engagement between early talent and employers, and open-access opportunities providing early talent with the ability to preskill, showcase engagement, and signal authentic intent to employers, we can create an interconnected early talent ecosystem that aligns and benefits everyone.

> " College doesn't teach you the skills that are applicable to the job. Companies have their own way of doing things, but it's okay because they can bridge that gap.

— Psychology Student (U.S.)

Meet Forage.

We provide candidates, regardless of their circumstances, with the means to experience what it's like to work at some of the world's top employers like BCG, Citibank, or GE. Our virtual job simulations empower students to find their right career fit, while enhancing their skills and work-readiness along the way.

For companies, it flips the hire-then-train model. It allows them to use workplace-specific training (rather than generic industry training), en masse, as a recruiting tool. In doing so, they build a diverse network of current or future candidates and leverage high-fidelity signals to nurture, engage, and hire the best-fit talent (who are conveniently preskilled in the role before they even start!).

By being open-access and virtual, company partners like JPMorgan, EA, and SAP benefit from:

- A 24/7/365 virtual campus presence through Forage's university relationships

- Moving away from merely describing what they do, to illustrating what they do in an interactive simulated environment — helping them stand out from their competitors

- Immediate and far-reaching goodwill by opening their doors to help train the workforce of the future and level the playing field

Contact us to learn more at theforage.com.