Riipen

State of
The Employer

20 25

Contents

Introduction

For nearly a decade, our mission has been to dismantle traditional barriers to collaboration for students and learners, as well as employers, ensuring that emerging talent can develop career-relevant skills and that businesses, particularly Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), can access the innovation required for growth. The State of The Employer 2025 is our annual research project, designed to rigorously quantify the value of this model, contributing actionable data and strategic guidance to the broader conversation about the future of work, skills development, and economic resilience.

This report is structured around three major themes that address the end-to-end employer journey, from initial interest to long-term hiring impact. '**Part 1:** The employer landscape' establishes who our partners are and what core motivations, like the urgent AI skills imperative, drive their engagement. '**Part 2:** Students as changemakers' quantifies the measurable impact of projects on business operations, financial health, and organizational culture. Finally, '**Part 3:** From projects to payroll' analyzes how project engagement directly translates into talent acquisition, future hiring intent, and net job creation.

The findings within are derived from a comprehensive survey of hundreds of employers who have used the Riipen platform. To ensure our analysis yields high-fidelity insights, we segmented the data across critical organizational variables. Key comparison groups used throughout this report include company size (count of employees), Net Promoter Score (NPS) Category (Promoters vs. Detractors), and hiring status (employers who extended a job offer vs. those who did not). This segmented approach allows us to determine precisely where the model delivers the highest value, and where policy and program support can be most effectively targeted.
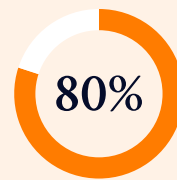
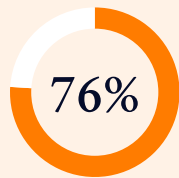**This is the future of work—and we're just getting started.**

Key findings
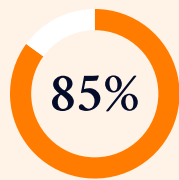
85% Employers are overwhelmingly small businesses (85%+) seeking primarily to find "fresh ideas" (56%).

80% Wage subsidies are a powerful lever, with 80% of employers who did not hire stating that a subsidy would have enabled them to do so.

76% Engagement with Riipen projects delivers tangible business results, with 55% reporting a direct financial impact and 76% enhancing their own mentorship skills.

45 Overall Employer NPS is a "Great" 45, driven by high satisfaction from those who hire (NPS 72) and participate in programs like FuturePath (NPS 72).
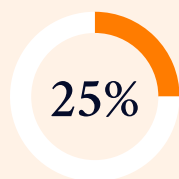
25% The Riipen Project-Based Learning Platform is a significant, emerging talent pipeline. 25% of employers made direct job offers.
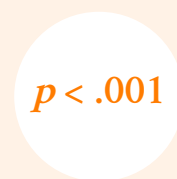
$p < .001$ Statistical analysis ($p < .001$) confirms that Riipen projects drive net-new job creation, significantly exceeding the hiring that would have occurred otherwise.

The SME innovation engine

The 2025 State of the Employer report reveals a landscape dominated by small businesses (85%+) who turn to project-based learning not just for capacity, but for innovation, with 56% citing the search for "fresh ideas" as their primary goal. This partnership model delivers immediate, tangible value beyond the project deliverables themselves. Employers report significant operational benefits, with 55% citing a direct financial impact and 76% reporting that the experience enhanced their own internal mentorship capabilities.

A proven pipeline for job creation

Beyond immediate project outcomes, the platform has matured into a robust talent pipeline that drives verified economic growth. Statistical analysis ($p < .001$) confirms that Riipen projects drive net-new job creation that significantly exceeds hiring that would have occurred otherwise, with 25% of employers extending direct job offers to students they worked with. This success drives exceptional satisfaction; while the overall Employer NPS is a "Great" 45, it surges to 72 among those who hire or participate in intense, long-term programs like FuturePath.

Unlocking future potential

Crucially, the data identifies a powerful lever to further accelerate this job creation: wage subsidies. Among the employers who did not hire, 80% indicated that access to a wage subsidy would have enabled them to do so. This finding underscores that while the talent connection is strong, financial support remains the critical catalyst for converting project-based experiences into permanent employment for the SME sector.

The employer landscape: Who they are & what they need
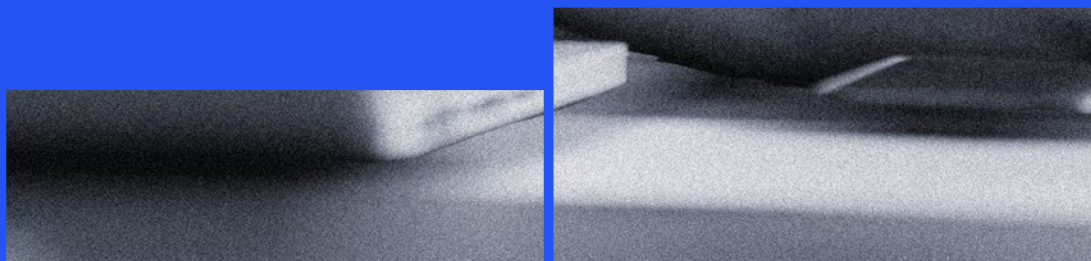
A profile of the Riipen employer

This report quantifies the value of modern Project-based learning (PBL) by examining the experiences, motivations, and outcomes of employer partners, specifically the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that form the backbone of the North American economy.

The unique value of PBL lies in its ability to meet the needs of resource-constrained organizations where they are, creating an accessible and scalable model that works. Our 2025 survey reflects this high accessibility, demonstrating that the large majority of our respondents fall into the core SME demographic: **85% of surveyed employers are small businesses**, a vital demographic that traditional models often fail to reach.
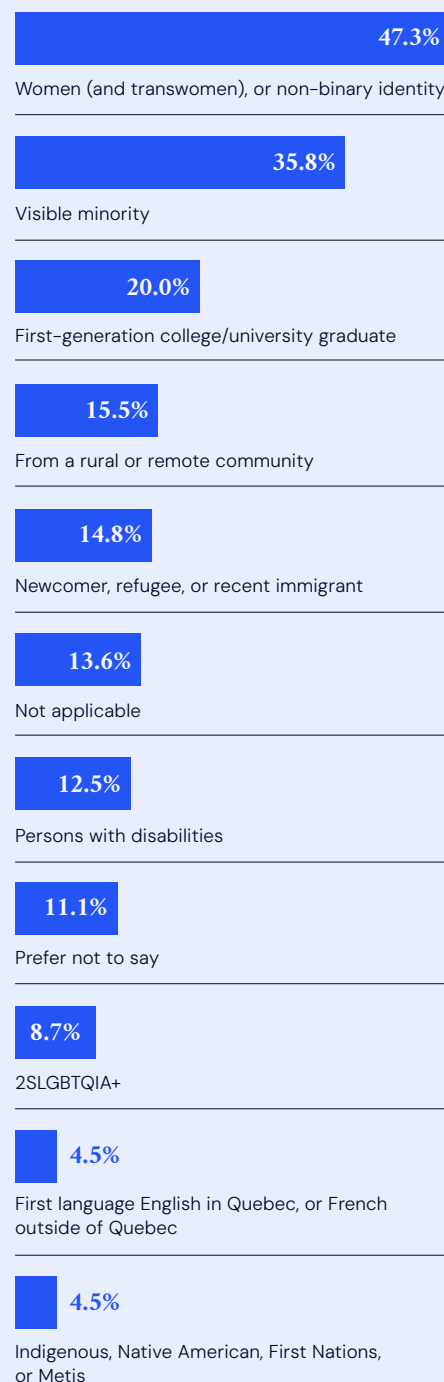
The Riipen PBL model has translated directly into a high degree of satisfaction and strategic adoption among participating employers. **The average Net Promoter Score (NPS) for all surveyed partners is 45,** and it climbs significantly among the most committed partners, rising to 72 for employers who have either extended a job offer or are enrolled in an intense, long-term program (FuturePath).

Respondents also represent a diverse leadership landscape, closely aligning with Riipen's existing employer base. The most frequently reported leadership characteristics among participating companies include identifying as a Woman (or transwoman) or non-binary identity (47%), belonging to a Visible Minority (36%), and being a First-Generation college or university graduate (20%). **PBL clearly resonates strongly with a generation of diverse founders and leaders who are often themselves pioneering new paths in their careers.**

These findings demonstrate that the accessible nature of project-based learning, when executed efficiently and with minimal administrative overhead, delivers a valuable, high-ROI solution for the SME imperative.

Riipen employers represent a diverse leadership landscape.

Characteristic	Percentage
Women (and transwomen), or non-binary identity	47.3%
Visible minority	35.8%
First-generation college/university graduate	20.0%
From a rural or remote community	15.5%
Newcomer, refugee, or recent immigrant	14.8%
Not applicable	13.6%
Persons with disabilities	12.5%
Prefer not to say	11.1%
2SLGBTQIA+	8.7%
First language English in Quebec, or French outside of Quebec	4.5%
Indigenous, Native American, First Nations, or Metis	4.5%

The SME imperative

The need for a flexible talent solution is driven by the severe resource constraints and volatile economic factors that SMEs uniquely face. Before delving into why they partner with students (Chapter 1.3), it is vital to understand why the traditional hiring model fails SMEs, forcing them to seek innovative solutions.

40%

of business owners are primarily motivated by the desire for independence and control over their time.

(BDC et al., 2025)

The defining challenge for SMEs

For Canadian entrepreneurs, the defining challenge is navigating a volatile economy while protecting their independence. The BDC's State of Entrepreneurship Report indicates that 40% of business owners are primarily motivated by the desire for independence and control over their time (BDC et al., 2025). However, this desire for autonomy is severely tested by key challenges, including rising input costs (31%) and a shortage of qualified labour (21%)—challenges that acutely impact the profitability of smaller operations.

For many years, the primary challenge of expanding PBL has centered on employer capacity. While large corporations have dedicated HR and talent teams to manage traditional co-ops and internships, SMEs (defined as companies with fewer than 500 employees) face resource constraints that often make these models inaccessible.

Research from the Canadian Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) ecosystem consistently finds that small businesses face the most significant barriers to participation (CEWIL et al., 2024). They struggle not because they lack the need for talent, but because complex logistics, administrative burden, and high time commitment prevent them from competing with larger firms.

Innovation is not optional

However, the speed of talent and skills disruption, especially driven by Artificial Intelligence (Chapter 1.4), means that sitting on the sidelines is no longer an option. Smaller businesses are major players in upskilling, using training and on-the-job mentorship as a core strategy to adapt. To maintain competitiveness, SMEs must find flexible, accessible avenues to innovate and connect with emerging talent.

This fundamental gap—high need for talent and innovation, coupled with low capacity for traditional hiring models—is precisely what drives the primary motivations detailed in the next chapter.

Primary motivations: why they partner with students

To understand the impact of project-based learning, we must first understand the "why." What is the primary driver that brings an employer to the Riipen ecosystem?

Research on Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) shows that employers participate for a few key reasons, chief among them being to "access emerging talent" and "build talent pipelines," followed by the benefits of "increased productivity and capacity" and "access to innovative and creative ideas" (CEWIL et al., 2024a).

Our findings reflect this, but with a unique and important distinction that highlights the nature of our SME-driven ecosystem.

The top goal: A need for fresh ideas

When employers first join **Riipen, they are driven primarily by a need for innovation.**

The #1 goal for employers is "Find fresh ideas or solutions for our business challenges," cited by 56.1% of all respondents.

This motivation is even more pronounced for the smallest businesses. For small teams, students are not just potential future hires; they are a vital, on-demand source of new perspectives and scalable R&D, helping them tackle problems that would otherwise be deprioritized.

The #2 goal: Building a talent pipeline

The second most common motivation aligns perfectly with traditional WIL benefits: "Identify and evaluate emerging talent for future recruitment" (15.1%).

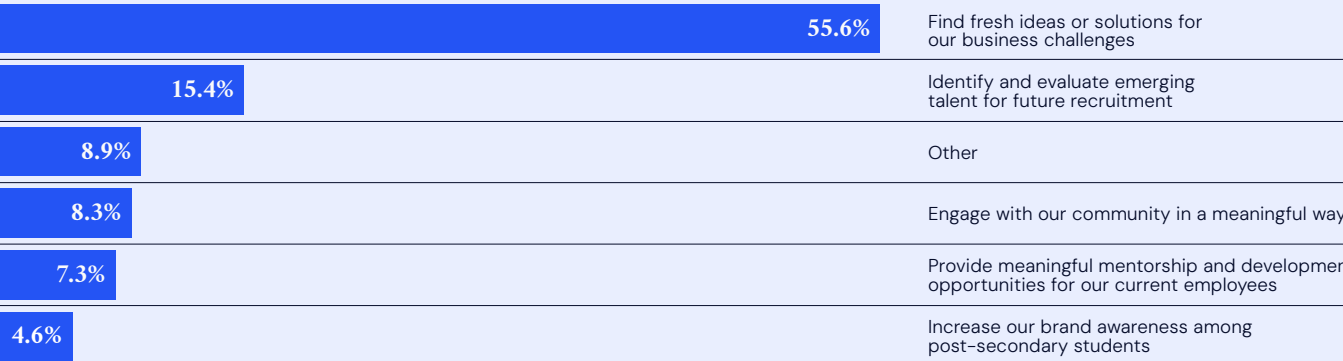**While 15.1% is the average, this motivation is, unsurprisingly, much stronger among employers who ultimately converted a** project into a job. For employers who extended an offer, 23.4% stated that talent identification was their secondary goal from the start. **Furthermore, as company size grows, so too does interest in recruitment, with 25.6% of companies with 11–50 employees stating that it is their secondary goal.** This demonstrates a clear intent: a significant portion of employers who hire are utilizing the platform as a strategic, long-term talent-sourcing tool.

Meeting employer expectations

Crucially, the platform is delivering on these initial goals. When asked how well their first projects met their primary goal, 80.0% of all employers reported their needs were "somewhat to completely" met.

This sense of fulfillment was strongest among employers who successfully identified and recruited talent. **Of the group who extended a job offer, 40.7% stated their goals were "completely" met, well above the 28.6% average.** This demonstrates a straightforward and successful pathway: employers who join with the intention of hiring effectively use projects to find, vet, and onboard new talent.

When employers first join Riipen, they are driven primarily by a need for innovation.

| Percentage	Category
55.6%	Find fresh ideas or solutions for our business challenges
15.4%	Identify and evaluate emerging talent for future recruitment
8.9%	Other
8.3%	Engage with our community in a meaningful way
7.3%	Provide meaningful mentorship and development opportunities for our current employees
4.6%	Increase our brand awareness among post-secondary students

The AI skills imperative

The widespread adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer a future-tense proposition; it is a present-day reality reshaping the labor market. The Stanford HAI Index Report highlights that business adoption of AI is accelerating significantly, moving from an experimental tool to a core driver of business value (Maslej et al., 2025).

This transformation extends far beyond the tech sector. Research from Lightcast shows that **half of all job postings requiring AI skills are now outside of IT and computer science occupations** (Lightcast, 2025). The OECD AI Observatory confirms this, noting that AI is "reshaping the task composition of many jobs and the skills required to perform them." This creates an urgent, workforce-wide demand for new competencies, from AI literacy and prompt engineering to data analysis and ethical oversight.

The AI skills gap

This global trend is reflected clearly within the Riipen employer ecosystem. Despite being composed primarily of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), our employers are acutely aware of this shift.

76.2%
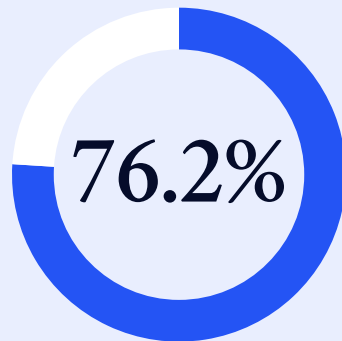
When asked about their focus for the next 12-24 months, **76.2% of employers state that recruiting or developing people with AI-related skills is a moderate to high priority.** This signals that for a majority of businesses, the AI skills gap has moved from a distant concern to an immediate strategic challenge that must be addressed.

Bridging the gap

For these resource-constrained SMEs, tackling this complex skills gap requires a creative and accessible strategy. Project-based learning is emerging as a critical solution.

We asked employers who prioritized AI skills how they leverage student projects to support their goals.

The number one use case is Innovation & R&D, where organizations explore new AI applications or solve specific business problems (34.1%). This was followed by Team Development, which aims to provide mentorship opportunities for current employees to develop their own AI-related leadership and technical skills.

While 42.4% had not yet considered using student projects and the Riipen platform as part of their AI strategy, the data from those who had was compelling.

85.8%
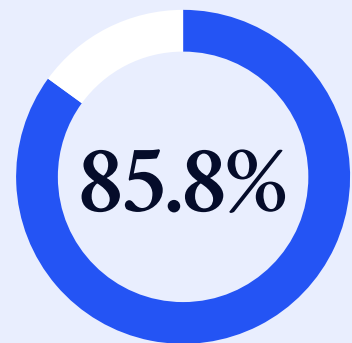
Of the employers who are actively using the platform to achieve AI-related goals, over 85.8% found it valuable. More significantly, more than half (55.7%) of this group rate the platform as "very" to "extremely" valuable in helping them achieve their AI business and talent objectives.

These findings show a clear and growing opportunity. As AI integration becomes a standard business practice, project-based learning provides a vital, high-ROI pathway for employers, especially SMEs, to innovate, access next-generation talent, and bridge the critical AI skills gap.
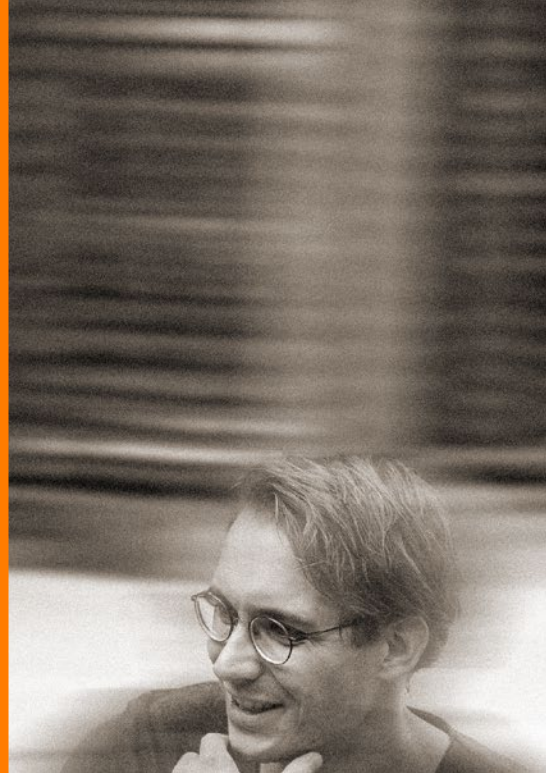
Part 2

Students as changemakers: The impact on business

Driving efficiency and financial performance

While Chapter 1 outlined the motivations that bring employers to the platform, this chapter explores the tangible outcomes they experience. National research on Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) identifies key benefits for partner organizations, including "increased productivity and capacity," "access to innovative and creative ideas," and the "development of supervisory and mentorship skills" (CEWIL et al., 2024a). Our survey data overwhelmingly supports these findings, painting a picture of a partnership that delivers multifaceted value.

The top 3 benefits: A mix of business and social value

When asked to select the top three benefits they experienced, employers identified a powerful combination of operational, strategic, and social impacts:
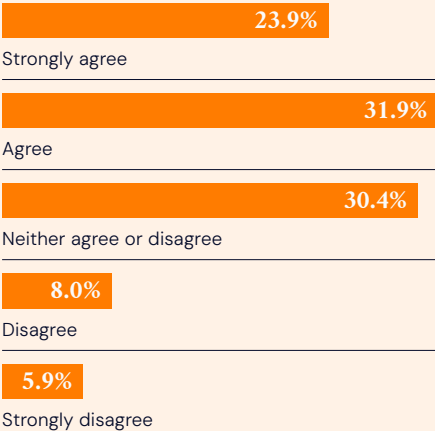
1. **Access to the creativity, knowledge, and skills of post-secondary students.**

2. **Allowed me to give emerging talent opportunities to learn and grow (give back).**

3. **Ability to address short-term workflow pressures.**

It is clear that employers are receiving a holistic return on their investment of time and mentorship. They are not only advancing their business goals but also fulfilling a desire to contribute to the next generation of talent.

The financial bottom line

Beyond these top-ranked benefits, the impact is demonstrably financial. **Over half of all employers (55.3%) reported that their participation had a direct, positive financial impact on their business.**

Over half of all employers (56%) reported that their participation had a direct, positive financial impact on their business.

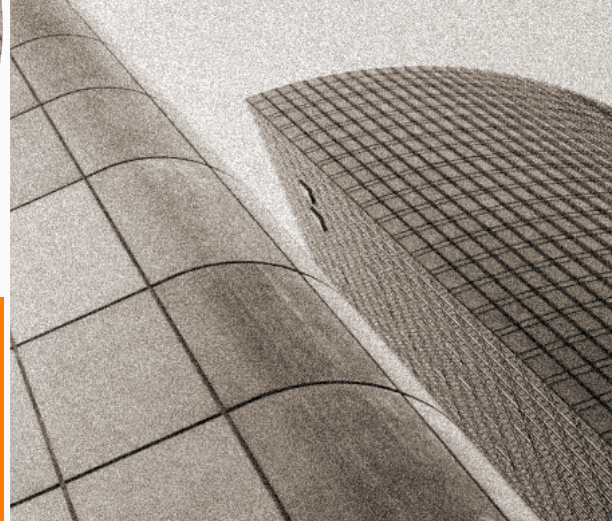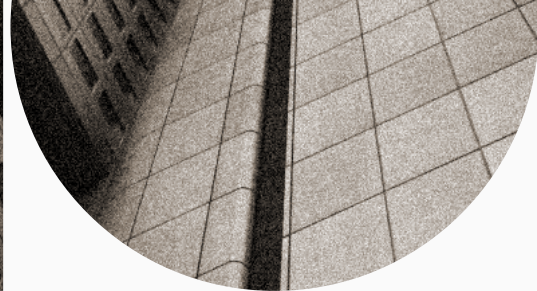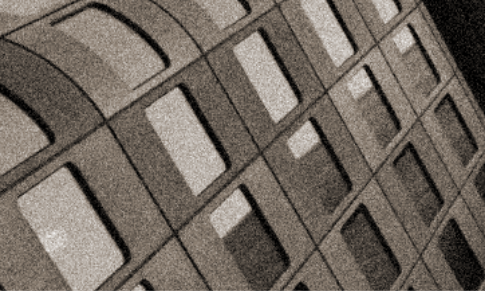|	
23.9%	Strongly agree
31.9%	Agree
30.4%	Neither agree or disagree
8.0%	Disagree
5.9%	Strongly disagree

This finding is even stronger among the most engaged and successful employers. The rate of positive financial impact climbs to 66.7% for medium-sized businesses (11–50 employees), 71.8% for NPS Promoters, and 73.6% for employers who extended a job offer.

This data shows a clear correlation: **employers who are more invested in the process (Promoters) and those who successfully convert talent (extended an offer) are the most likely to see a direct financial ROI from their engagement.**

What are the top three benefits you gained from working with students on Riipen?

Benefit	%
Access to the creativity, knowledge and skills of post-secondary students	51%
Allowed me to give emerging talent opportunities to learn and grow (give back)	45%
Ability to address short-term workflow pressures	33%
Opportunity to identify new talent for future hiring needs	27%
Helped me focus on high-value activities to drive more growth, revenue, or impact	26%
Helped me develop or use processes to be more efficient	23%
Enhanced productivity and service delivery	19%
Helped me develop connections or resources to drive research and development	17%
None	13%
Made my organization more competitive	11%
Other	6%

Efficiency and productivity

In a landscape defined by rapid technological disruption, the ability to adapt and innovate is paramount. The BHER "Skills Working Group Report" (2023) identifies disruptive technologies and automation as key drivers of change. For many SMEs, exploring new tools and workflows is a luxury they cannot afford (Business + Higher Education Roundtable [BHER] & Business Council of Canada, 2023).

Project-based learning offers a low-risk, high-reward model for this type of innovation. As noted in Chapter 1.3, employers are actively using student projects for "Innovation & R&D" to tackle their AI-related goals. This focus translates directly into measurable improvements in the process.

Efficiency gains
A key outcome of integrating student projects is a tangible improvement in process efficiency.

However, this benefit is felt most acutely by the most engaged and invested partners. When we examine FuturePath employers, the figure rises to 81.3%, closely followed by NPS Promoters at 79.6%. The impact is also highly pronounced among scaling companies; 75.7% of medium-sized businesses (11–50 employees) reported efficiency gains, as did 76.9% of employers who eventually extended a job offer. This suggests that when employers invest the time to scope meaningful projects, students return that value by streamlining operations.

Productivity boosts
These efficiency gains naturally cascade into direct boosts in team output.

62.4%
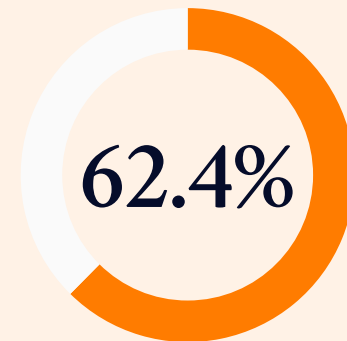
62.4% of all employers stated that student projects helped their organization become more productive.

60.9%

Overall, 60.9% of employers reported that Riipen projects helped their organization utilize resources more effectively.

Much like efficiency, productivity is strongly correlated with engagement depth and organizational size. Among employers who extended a job offer—arguably the ultimate validation of a student's contribution—78.7% reported productivity gains. This high rate is mirrored by NPS Promoters (79.1%) and FuturePath employers (78.1%), with medium-sized businesses again seeing a significant lift (73%).

Developing the next generation of mentors

Beyond the immediate impacts on capacity and competitiveness, partnering with students acts as a powerful catalyst for internal organizational change. The experience of integrating project-based learning improves not only what employers can do but how they do it, fostering a more engaged, people-focused culture.

The impact of project-based learning extends beyond processes to people, acting as a catalyst for developing a more supportive and engaged organizational culture. This shift is not just a "nice-to-have "; it is a tangible business outcome that creates a more resilient, adaptable, and attractive organization.

Opening doors: A shift in mindset

73.3%
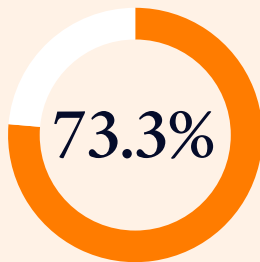
The experience of a single project has a profound impact on an organization's broader perspective, with **73.3% of all employers agreeing that their experience on the platform has made them more open to other ways to work with students.**

This change in perspective is deeply correlated with project success: 88% of employers who extended a job offer became more open, as did 85.7% of NPS Promoters and 81.1% of medium-sized businesses (11–50 employees).

This newfound openness translates directly into future action. A positive experience solidifies project-based learning as a repeatable, strategic part of an employer's talent and innovation pipeline.

82.6%
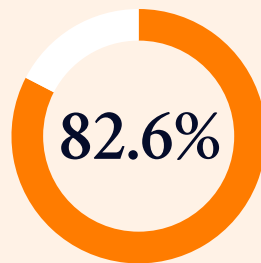
An overwhelming **82.6% of employers, on average, report they are "likely to work with students in the next 12 months."**

This intent is highest among those who have already seen success, rising to 92.3% for employers who have extended a job offer. For those not planning to hire in the next 12 months, this figure drops to 70%, and for NPS detractors, it falls to 49.2%. This highlights that a positive experience is a critical driver of a sustainable, long-term talent strategy.

Developing better mentors

A recent BHER report, "Skills and Strategies for Quality Hybrid Work", highlights that modern work demands new social and emotional skills for all employees, particularly managers (Future Skills Centre [FSC] & Business + Higher Education Roundtable [BHER], 2024). **These skills—empathy, active listening, and trust—are the foundation of effective mentorship.**

Engaging with students provides a direct and practical training ground for essential competencies, with a significant **72.5% of employers agreeing that working with students in Riipen projects helped them "adopt a more student-centered approach to mentorship," such as providing actionable feedback, encouraging student autonomy, and adapting communication styles.** This benefit was even more pronounced for 88% of employers who extended a job offer, 84.4% of FuturePath employers, 82.3% of NPS Promoters, and 81.1% of medium-sized businesses (11–50 employees).

Defining impact: The "student-centeredness" score

To further quantify this holistic transformation in an employer's mindset, we created a composite "student-centeredness" score. This metric provides a single, holistic measure of an organization's cultural shift towards viewing students as valuable, strategic partners. By creating this score, we can track this positive shift year-over-year and across different programs, capturing how student-centered an organization becomes through its engagement.

This score aggregates employer responses to three key "People-First" dimensions. First, it measures **cultural shift** by asking if employers have become more open to other ways of working with students (Q12), identifying the move from skepticism to valuation. Second, it **tracks strategic adoption** by gauging the likelihood of working with students in the next 12 months (Q13), capturing the transition to a repeatable talent pipeline. Finally, it assesses **internal capability growth** by determining if the employer has adopted a more student-centered approach to mentorship (Q14), marking a development in their own management style.
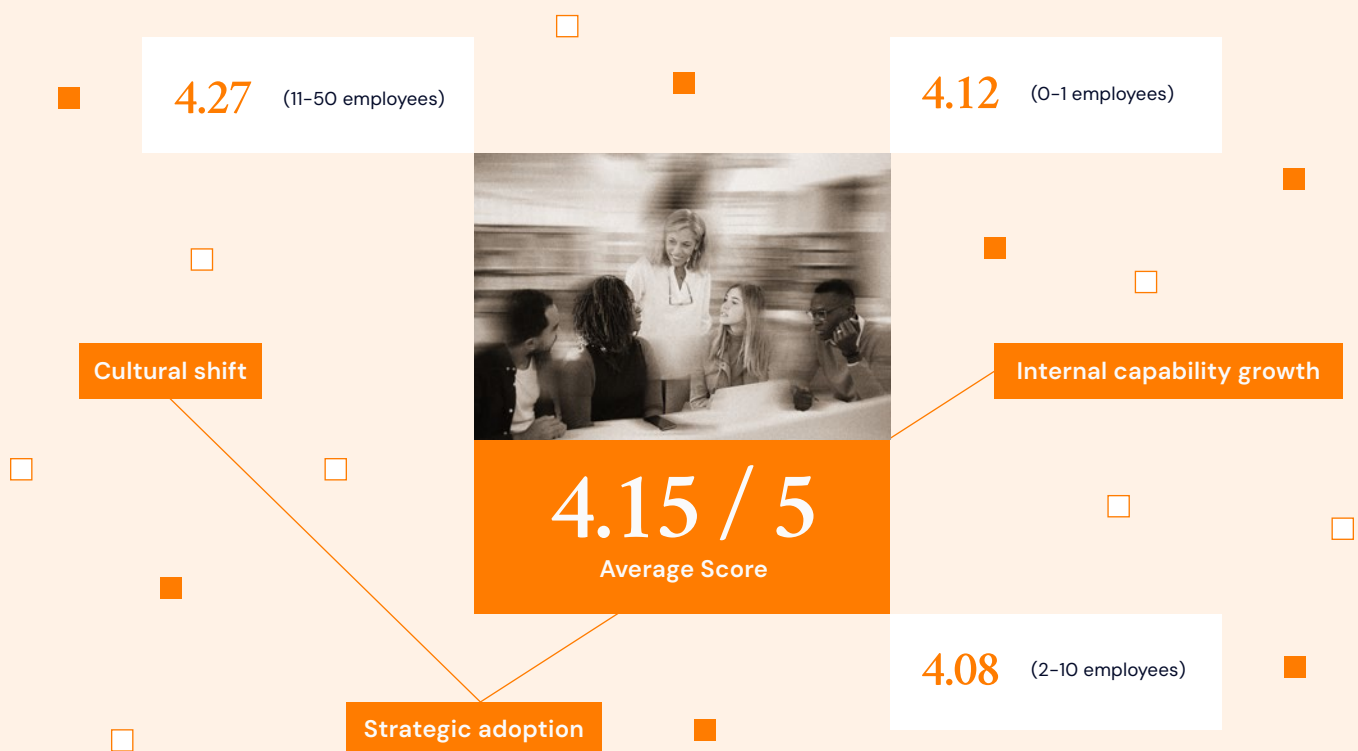
Composite metric results

Across all employer segments, the results revealed a consistently high level of engagement and cultural alignment. Organizations with **11–50 employees** led the way with an average score of **4.27/5**, followed closely by those with **0–1 employees** at **4.12** and those with **2–10** employees at **4.08.** While there are minor numerical differences, the data tells a story of uniformity rather than disparity.

A universal shift

Crucially, statistical analysis (ANOVA) confirms that the variations between these groups are **not statistically significant**. This is a powerful finding, indicating that the "student-centered shift" is not a function of organizational resources, infrastructure, or headcount. A solopreneur is just as likely to adopt a student-centered mindset as a leadership team in a 50-person firm. The impact of project-based learning on employer culture is universal, accessible, and deeply felt across the entire SME spectrum.

4.27 (11–50 employees)

4.12 (0–1 employees)

Cultural shift

Internal capability growth

4.15 / 5
Average Score

Strategic adoption

4.08 (2–10 employees)

Part 3

From projects to payroll: The hiring pipeline

The 2026 hiring outlook

For SMEs, the ability to staff, scale, and secure talent is a direct measure of business health. Our data shows that while most employers plan to grow their teams in the coming year, project-based learning is already functioning as a proven, strategic recruitment tool that translates into full-time employment.

Planning for growth

66.3%
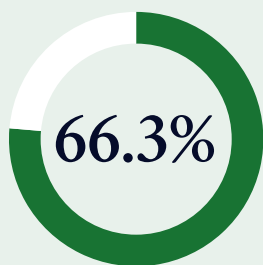
Despite the volatility noted in the BDC State of Entrepreneurship Report, **the majority of Riipen employers are actively planning for expansion, with 66.3% planning to hire within the next year**, though this intent varies significantly by the size of the organization, reflecting capacity and stage of growth: medium-sized businesses (11–50 employees), with more established infrastructure, demonstrate the highest level of hiring confidence and need, with 81.9% planning to grow their teams.

This commitment to hiring underscores the critical demand for talent that exists, especially as businesses seek scale.

A proven pathway to employment

The most compelling proof of value is the number of partners who successfully convert a short-term project engagement into a long-term job offer. Project-based learning minimizes hiring risk by allowing employers to assess skills, attitude, and fit over an extended period.

24.8%
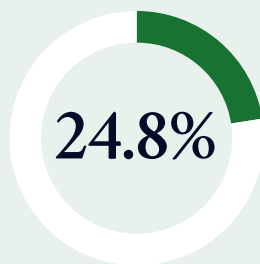
In fact, 24.8% of all employers extended a job offer (internship, part-time, or full-time) to a student they worked with. It is worth noting that this 24.8% conversion rate represents the aggregate of all Riipen engagements, including academic courses and experiential learning, where neither the student nor the employer was explicitly seeking an employment outcome.

If we were to isolate the data to exclude students not yet entering the job market and employers not actively recruiting, we strongly hypothesize that the conversion rate would be even higher, highlighting an even stronger ROI for hiring-focused partnerships. This direct conversion rate is significantly higher among mid-sized companies. The hiring success rate rises sharply to 40.5% for companies with 11 to 50 employees.

For nearly half of the medium-sized employers, the use of student projects is not merely an exercise in innovation or mentorship; it is a validated, primary strategy for talent acquisition.

The power of wage subsidies

For SMEs, the primary barrier to expanding their talent pipeline is rarely the quality of the candidate; it is the immediate financial risk and administrative capacity required for a formal hire. While project-based learning effectively addresses the recruitment risk, strategic wage subsidies act as the critical catalyst that turns a positive engagement into a permanent job.

Subsidies as a conversion enabler

Subsidies are a critical enabler for overcoming the financial hurdle of the initial hire, particularly for organizations that operate on thin margins.

The data is unequivocal: **among employers who did not offer a job immediately following a project, a staggering 80.6% said they would have done so if a subsidy were available.**

This demonstrates that the challenge is often temporary, related to capacity and liquidity, rather than a lack of long-term need for talent. This conversion power holds true even among the most dissatisfied segment of the sample, demonstrating the strength of the subsidy mechanism: 60% of NPS Detractors stated that a subsidy would have led them to hire.

Dramatically increasing future hiring

When scaling the impact across the entire surveyed base, the availability of a wage subsidy substantially increases the proportion of employers ready to commit to future hiring within the next 12 months. **The 66.3% of employers currently "planning to hire" jumps to 78.6% when asked how a wage subsidy would affect their plans, if they could access one.**

This 12.3 percentage-point increase in hiring intent underscores the significant role that strategic government funding, such as the Government of Canada's Innovative Work-Integrated Learning Initiative, plays in bridging the gap between talent identification and job creation within the crucial SME segment. Subsidies enable small businesses to rapidly convert the innovative capacity gained from student projects into sustainable, long-term employment opportunities.
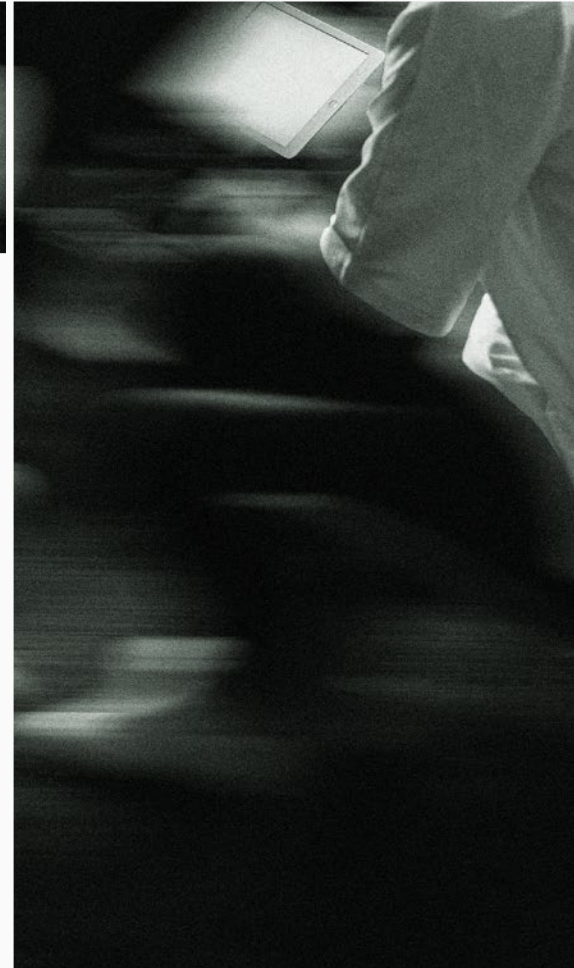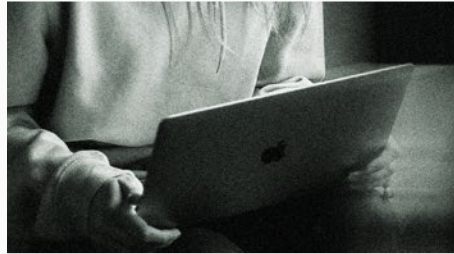
Calculating the Riipen FTE Impact

For the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that form the backbone of our economy, hiring is often a catch-22: they need more hands on deck to grow, but they lack the time and resources to recruit effectively while managing daily operations. This "capacity trap" often results in conservative headcount growth or total stagnation.

However, our data suggests that engaging in Project-Based Learning (PBL) helps employers break this cycle. **By integrating student talent into their workflows, organizations are not just getting a temporary productivity boost—they are building the operational bandwidth required to scale their permanent teams.**

To quantify this "Riipen Effect," we asked employers to estimate two figures: their actual growth in Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) since joining the platform, and their projected growth had they never used Riipen. The difference reveals a tangible net gain in organizational capacity.

The growth gap

The results illustrate a clear divergence between the status quo and the "Riipen-enabled" trajectory. **Since integrating Riipen learners into their ecosystems,** employers reported adding an average of 2.63 FTEs to their teams. When asked to estimate their hiring trajectory *without* the support of Riipen's talent pipeline, that average dropped to **1.89 FTEs.**
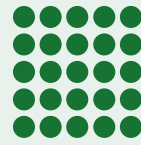
2.63 FTEs
With Riipen's talent

1.89 FTEs
Without Riipen's talent

The net gain: +0.74 FTE

The gap between these two scenarios represents a **net gain of ~0.74 FTE per organization.**

$$\sim 0.74 \text{ FTE}$$

While three-quarters of a role might appear modest for a large corporation, for a micro-business (0-1 employees) or a small team (2-10 employees), this is a transformative shift. It effectively means that using Riipen allows a small business to operate with nearly one additional full-time person's worth of output. This added capacity is often the critical margin needed to move from "surviving" to "scaling."

Breaking the "zero growth" barrier

The most compelling story, however, lies in the median values. For the typical employer in our sample, the median estimated growth without Riipen was 0 FTEs. This confirms a stark reality: without intervention, the default state for many of these businesses is hiring stagnation.

However, for those same employers, the median actual growth with Riipen was **1 FTE.** This shift from zero to one is significant. It indicates that **Project-Based Learning acts as a bridge, allowing employers to validate the need for a role, de-risk the hiring process, and generate the economic activity necessary to justify a new full-time hire.**

The data also withstands statistical testing. We performed a Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test, which affirms (at $p < .001$ significance) that **working with students through the Riipen platform drives hiring volume that would not otherwise exist.** This suggests that access to engaged talent and the opportunity to work with them enables companies to validate talent more quickly and at lower risk, empowering them to expand their teams beyond their original constraints.

For many SMEs, the default trajectory is stagnation. **Riipen changes the calculus.** By unlocking a net gain in capacity, it provides the momentum required for employers to move beyond maintaining the status quo and actively grow their workforce.

Conclusion

The data presented throughout this report confirms that accessible, project-based learning has transcended its traditional role as a specialized educational benefit. It has become a strategic, scalable solution for modern SMEs. By decoupling experiential learning from the administrative burdens of lengthy, fixed-term models, project-based learning uniquely serves the SME imperative, proving itself to be an indispensable engine for innovation, workforce culture change, and quantifiable job creation.

The project-based imperative: A three-part ROI

Our findings confirm that engaging student talent delivers a holistic, three-part return on investment for SME partners:

1. The strategic ROI: Innovation and agility

The initial driver for engagement is not recruitment, but a fundamental need for fresh ideas and solutions (51% of employers) to navigate a rapidly changing landscape of skills. Project-based learning effectively positions these resource-constrained firms to tackle critical challenges, such as the AI Skills Imperative. **With nearly three-quarters (76.2%) of employers prioritizing AI skills in recruiting and employee development, projects offer a vital mechanism for infusing next-generation capabilities and exploring R&D without major capital investment** (Chapter 1.4).

2. The financial and cultural ROI

The positive experience translates directly into tangible business value and permanent cultural change.

Financial impact
More than half of all employers (55.3%) reported a direct, positive financial impact on their business. This rose to 73.6% for employers who extended a job offer, confirming a clear financial payoff when the partnership is successfully converted to talent acquisition (Chapter 2.1).

Cultural transformation
The experience fosters a highly desired "People-First Culture," with 72.5% of partners adopting a more student-centered approach to mentorship (Chapter 2.2). This results in a powerful feedback loop, driving overall satisfaction as evidenced by an average Net Promoter Score (NPS) of 45, which increases to 72 for employers who actively extended offers.

3. The talent pipeline ROI

The project serves as the lowest-risk, highest-ROI recruitment funnel available to SMEs, converting engagement into future employment:

Proven conversion
24.8% of all employers extended a job offer (rising to 40.5% for medium-sized businesses), establishing the model as a primary talent acquisition strategy (Chapter 3.1).

The subsidy multiplier

Crucially, policy intervention is the final catalyst for unlocking jobs. **A staggering 80.6% of employers who did not hire confirmed they would have if a subsidy were available** (Chapter 3.2). This proves that financial support directly addresses the core liquidity barrier faced by SMEs, turning tentative intent into committed employment.
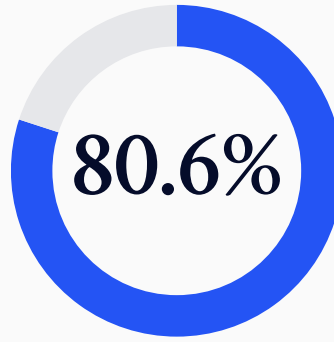
The way forward: A call to action for scalable talent growth

The findings of this report paint a clear picture of the modern talent ecosystem: projects are the pipeline, and engaged SMEs are the engines of job creation.

To secure sustainable job creation, the focus must shift from simply enabling access to actively scaling organizational capacity and maximizing financial leverage. The success of the ecosystem is driven by the internal transformation of the employer, which demands a commitment to scaling organizational capacity and cultural change. Replicating best practices, such as scaling mentorship training and implementing "student-centered" cultural shifts, as achieved by the most successful partners (Chapter 2.2), is a clear path forward.

Finally, public stakeholders must commit to simplifying access and guaranteeing consistent funding streams, directly addressing the liquidity barrier faced by SMEs and maximizing the conversion power of every project.`

To learn directly from other SMEs about how they successfully integrate project-based learning to secure talent and drive innovation, we invite you to connect with one of our featured employer champions. Reach out to us at impact@riipen.com to be introduced to one of these organizations and hear firsthand how they are building the workforce of tomorrow.

Appendix

Author credits and acknowledgements

Authored by Benjamin Palmer, MEd, and edited by Reshma Gouravajhala, PhD, from Riipen's Impact and Research team. We can be reached at impact@riipen.com with questions, comments, and collaboration opportunities. We extend our sincere thanks to all colleagues who supported the survey and report.

Riipen's Impact and Research team works to advance actionable research and strategic guidance for Riipen's internal teams and the broader project-based learning community.

Suggested citation.
Palmer, B., & Gouravajhala, R. (2025). State of The Employer (Report No. 2026-01). Riipen.

Methodology

The findings in the "State of The Employer 2025" report are based on a comprehensive survey conducted in October 2025. The survey was distributed electronically to employers who have used the Riipen platform to host one or more project-based learning experiences. The primary goal of this research is to understand the composition of the employer ecosystem, their core motivations for engaging with student talent, and the tangible impacts these projects have on their business operations, talent pipelines, and overall growth.

A total of 524 employers responded to the key Net Promoter Score (NPS) question, which serves as a primary benchmark for overall sentiment. Response counts for subsequent questions vary, as not all questions were mandatory. All percentages and findings presented in this report are based on the total number of responses received for that specific question. To uncover deeper and more nuanced insights, the data was analyzed across several key segments, including:

• Company Size: (e.g., 0-1, 2-10, 11-50 employees)
• NPS Category: (Promoters, Passives, and Detractors)
• Hiring Status: (Employers who extended a job offer vs. those who did not)
• Future Hiring Plans: (Employers planning to hire in the next 12 months)
• Program Participation: (e.g., Employers participating in the FuturePath program)

In addition to this segmented analysis, further statistical testing was conducted. A composite variable to measure "student-centeredness" was created by averaging employer responses to questions 12, 13, and 14. A one-way ANOVA was then performed to test for statistically significant differences in the mean "student-centeredness" scores across "Company Size" groups. Similarly, one-way ANOVAs were used to analyze the responses to the Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) questions (Q15 and Q16) in relation to company size.

This segmented and statistical analysis enables a detailed comparison of how different employer groups experience the Riipen platform, the challenges they face, and where they find the most value.

Questionnaire

1. Thinking back to when your organization first joined Riipen, what was the primary goal you hoped to achieve? (Please select the one that was most important at the time).

   a. Find fresh ideas or solutions for our business challenges.

   b. Identify and evaluate emerging talent for future recruitment.

   c. Increase our brand awareness among post-secondary students.

   d. Provide meaningful mentorship and development opportunities for our current employees.

   e. Engage with our community in a meaningful way.

   f. Other.

2. And still thinking back to that initial period, how well did your first project(s) on Riipen meet that primary goal?

   a. Completely met our needs.

   b. Mostly met our needs.

   c. Somewhat met our needs.

   d. Slightly met our needs.

   e. Did not meet our needs at all.

3. What are the top **three** benefits you gained from working with students on Riipen?

   a. Helped me focus on high-value activities to drive more growth, revenue, or impact.

   b. Helped me develop or use processes to be more efficient.

   c. Helped me develop connections or resources to drive research and development.

   d. Allowed me to give emerging talent opportunities to learn and grow (give back).

   e. Enhanced productivity and service delivery.

   f. Made my organization more competitive.

   g. Ability to address short-term workflow pressures.

   h. Opportunity to identify new talent for future hiring needs.

   i. Access to the creativity, knowledge, and skills of post-secondary students.

   j. None.

   k. Other.

4. How much of a priority is it for your organization to recruit or develop people with AI-related skills over the next 12–24 months?

   a. A critical priority.

   b. A high priority.

   c. A moderate priority.

   d. A low priority.

   e. Not a priority.

5. *[ONLY if the respondent selects "A critical priority," "A high priority," or "A moderate priority"]*
   In what ways does your organization leverage student projects on Riipen to support its AI strategy?

   a. Recruiting: To identify and recruit emerging talent with key AI skills (e.g., machine learning, data analysis).

   b. Innovation & R&D: To explore new AI applications or solve specific business problems.

   c. Team Development: To provide mentorship opportunities for current employees to develop their own AI-related leadership and technical skills.

   d. We have not yet considered using Riipen for our AI strategy, but are open to it.

   e. We do not see a role for Riipen in our AI strategy.

   f. Other (please specify).

6. *[ONLY if the respondent selects "Recruiting," "Innovation & R&D," or "Team Development"]*
   How valuable has the Riipen platform been in helping you achieve your AI-related business and talent goals?

   a. Extremely valuable.

   b. Very valuable.

   c. Moderately valuable.

   d. Slightly valuable.

   e. Not valuable at all.

7. Using Riipen projects has helped my organization become more efficient.
   Efficiency is defined as how well you use your resources (such as time) to get a task done.

   a. Likert.

8. Using Riipen projects has improved my organization's productivity.
Productivity is defined as the amount of work you can get done in a certain amount of time.

   a. Likert.

9. Using Riipen projects has made me more open to other ways to work with students.
(ex. In-class projects, remote internships, micro-internships, competitions, hackathons, business pitch presentations, contract work, guest speakers, etc.).

   a. Likert.

10. I'm likely to work with students in the next 12 months.

    a. Likert.

11. I have adopted a more student-centered approach to mentorship (e.g., providing actionable feedback, encouraging student autonomy, and adapting my communication style).

    a. Likert.

12. To what extent did your experience using Riipen enhance your overall mentorship and leadership skills when working with students?

    a. To a great extent.
    b. To a large extent.
    c. To a moderate extent.
    d. To a small extent.
    e. Not at all.

13. Did you offer any students you worked with a job offer (internship, part-time/full-time, contract employment)?

    a. Yes.
    b. No.

14. Would you have given job offer(s) if you had resources/funding that subsidized the cost?

    a. Yes.
    b. No.

15. Since you started using Riipen, what is your best estimate of how many new Full-time Equivalents (FTEs) were added to your organization? (regardless of whether they are Riipen learners, other recent graduates, or neither).

    a. Numeric.

16. Over the same period of time, what is your best estimate of how many of these FTE's you would have added if you hadn't used Riipen at all?

    a. Numeric.

17. Are you planning to hire in the next 12 months?

    a. Yes, I'm planning to hire.
    b. No, I'm not planning to hire in the next 12 months.

18. How would having a wage subsidy affect your hiring plans?

    a. A wage subsidy wouldn't change my hiring plans.
    b. I'd hire more employees than planned if I had a wage subsidy.
    c. Not applicable.

19. The outcomes from our Riipen projects have had a direct, positive financial impact on our organization, either through generating new revenue or creating cost savings.

    a. Likert.

20. Which of the following demographic groups is the leadership of your organization (founding employees/ executives/ etc.) a member of?

    a. From a rural or remote community.
    b. Newcomer, refugee, or recent immigrant.
    c. Women (and transwomen), or non-binary identity.
    d. Indigenous, Native American, First Nations, or Metis.
    e. Visible minority.
    f. Persons with disabilities.
    g. First-generation college/university graduate.
    h. First language English in Quebec, or French outside of Quebec.
    i. 2SLGBTQIA+.
    j. Not applicable.
    k. Prefer not to say.

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