



# Cadence Bank Podcast: In Good Companies

## Season 3, Episode 3: Workforce: The Next Generation

We're on the cusp of a new generation of workers. Young people entering the workforce today are, by and large, digital natives. They've spent their formative years navigating COVID, and this new world of remote work is the only one they've ever known. Like every new generation, they'll have different values, different expectations and different approaches to their careers. So how do you appeal to the next generation of workers?

In a tight labor market, this talent pool presents a huge opportunity for companies. But with young workers in high demand, you've got to stand out. Understanding what students and graduates want from their employers can give you a big leg up. So, what do young workers value? How can employers attract them? And what do they need to succeed in your workplace?

To answer these questions, we turned to Linda Johnson, director of employee relations for the Career Center at Culverhouse at the University of Alabama. Linda has been helping college students and companies connect for 15 years. She sees both perspectives. Together, we explore why young workers are a valuable resource, the most effective recruiting methods, and what you can do to help these employees succeed once they're inside your company.

So join us as we search for the fountain of youth in a podcast for the ages!

### Episode Transcript:

[00:00:00] **SFX:** Intro Music in

[00:00:00] **Linda Johnson:** Linda Johnson: I think the first thing is students want to add value right away. They want to see what they're doing brings value to their department. They want to personally feel valued by the employer or by their manager. I think that's really important, and they want to understand the culture of the company. They want to understand what sets that company apart. I think they have a lot of questions aside from knowing salary and benefits and all that, which they're really curious about as well. But I think the biggest thing is providing value, letting them know what they're doing and how that relates to the end goal for the department.



[00:00:16] **Patrick Pacheco:** I'm Patrick Pacheco and you're listening to Season Three of *In Good Companies* from Cadence Bank, the podcast where we share our wealth of knowledge to help you navigate the opportunities ahead. Because that's what Cadence is all about: the expertise and flexibility to do business on your terms. We're empowered to help, whether it's through our podcast or any of our more than 400 locations across the South and Texas.

[00:00:00] **SFX:** Intro Music out

[00:00:41] **Patrick VO:** This May, millions of young people will graduate from college.

[00:00:45] **SFX:** *Pomp & Circumstance* playing underneath

[00:00:47] **Patrick VO:** Some of them will go on to further education, some will backpack through Europe, others will move back in with mom & dad to figure things out. Most of them, though, will enter the workforce. They'll become our colleagues, employees-- maybe even bosses.

And these graduates are a little bit different than ones that have come before. We're on the cusp of a new generation of workers. Many of them were born after the year 2000. They've spent their formative years dealing with social media, navigating COVID, and this new world of remote work is the only one they've ever known.

In a tight labor market, this young talent pool presents a huge opportunity. But it also requires an updated approach. So, what do these young workers expect from employers? What do they value? And how can you set them up for success--both in your company and their careers?

To find these answers, I needed someone who sees both the student *and* employer perspectives.

[00:01:49] **Linda Johnson:** Sure. Thank you for having me. I'm Linda Johnson. I'm the director of employee relations for The Career Center at Culverhouse, at the University of Alabama.



[00:01:56] **Patrick VO:** Recruiting is big in Tuscaloosa. After all, you don't build a legendary college football program without finding the right talent. And Linda is kind of the Nick Saban of the career center.

[00:02:09] **Linda Johnson:** I basically recruit recruiters, so I recruit companies to come and hire students. I work with, largely with HR recruiters, convincing them to come and recruit at Alabama.

[00:02:21] **Patrick VO:** Linda is passionate about Alabama and its students. She actually attended the University herself, and after a career in HR, she returned to her alma mater. She's spent the past 15 years connecting students and companies, giving graduates a headstart on their professional journey. It's a job she really loves.

[00:02:41] **Linda Johnson:** After my first year here on campus, the dean asked me, "What surprised you?" And it was just the curiosity of the students. They want to know everything. They want to know the why's, they want to know the how's. And so what that kind of did for me, was it made me ask myself some of the same questions. Is there a better way to do something? Is there a better, a different way to take on a task? So it really is a fun environment to work in.

[00:03:05] **Patrick VO:** Part of that job is to convince companies *why* investing in young talent is so important.

[00:03:11] **Linda Johnson:** The short answer is because it's their future. Those are the people who are going to be leading their companies down the road, and what better time than to get them in now and learn from the experts in the field right now in your organization and let them see how they manage their business and learn from them, and then carry on the culture. I think it is so critical that companies recognize what these short-term strategies and hiring these great students are going to do for them in the long term.

[00:03:47] **Patrick Pacheco:** So I'm assuming that some businesses are probably hesitant, you try to go get a business to come recruit, and they probably express some hesitation about hiring college students because they're young, they don't have experience. What do you tell them that, well, here's what you're missing. Here's the benefit that you'd have to hiring brand new college students, freshly minted workers.



[00:04:04] **Linda Johnson:** Well, you can mold them. They don't come to you with any bad habits from any other employer. And so, I mentioned they're curious, they inject a lot of enthusiasm into what they do because they're excited about what they're learning. So I think it provides you with an opportunity to really bring some newness and excitement into your workforce when you have these entry level students.

[00:04:33] **Patrick Pacheco:** So every generation brings something a little different to the workforce and the young people that are graduating now are Gen Z, kind of first to start their careers. How does their skillset differ from other students that you've seen before? Is it really that different? Is there something different they bring to the job, attitudes about work? What's it like with the students today?

[00:04:54] **Linda Johnson:** Well, I think one thing that is different is just their ability to adapt. I think what we've just been through with Covid, and just the circumstances of how we transitioned from a university setting to that has really helped the students be more adaptable. I think it's a positive of what they've transitioned through. It's made them more adaptable.

[00:05:18] **Patrick Pacheco:** It's an interesting group. I have two young kids, they're 17 and 13, they like to talk and they'll sit in groups and talk. Things that I'm just now starting to do; now you go to a dinner party and you sit around and discuss life. They're doing it when they're 13 years old. So they seem to be a little more advanced than we are in many respects. So adaptability: a strong suit. What is something they tend to struggle with?

[00:05:47] **Linda Johnson:** I think structure, because they're used to structure. So if you think about a student's school life up to this point, they know exactly what subject they're taking and when, they have a syllabus, so they know what's going to be taught that day. They know what's going to be covered that day. They know when the test is going to be, they know when the deadlines are. They know when the semester is finished. They know what they're going to take the next semester. I mean, there's all of that structure that's built into their school life. So when they start working, they want some structure. They want to understand what those expectations are. They want to know what that career progression looks like.

We talk a lot to our recruiters about what their needs are. And so we are focused on, well, how can we better prepare our students for the workplace? And one of the things that resonates over and over with what recruiters tell us and what we need to do is we need to help students



develop soft skills. We know academically the student is very well-prepared, but what about the communication skills? And what about just understanding problem solving, and how to work in teams? And how to plan personal financing right out of college?

So we have developed in the business school here a program for every business student called UA Business LEAD. And that is a curriculum for freshman, sophomores and juniors. And it really deals with these competencies that recruiters tell us they need in our students. The curriculum was built so that we can have speakers, we can have recruiters, we can have alums come in with this real life experience and talk about networking or talk about how to develop a mentoring relationship with someone and really give students good information about how to develop professionally. It's made a huge difference, I think, in our students in their preparedness to start their careers. I think about one of them, I asked the student one time when she got back from her internship over the summer, I said, well, you know what surprised you about the internship? And she said, I mean, you work all day. And you just think about that, it's such an honest answer. But they think they're busy, and they are busy when they're in school, but they have a class at 9:00 and then they don't have another one until 11:30, and then they have a group meeting at 2:00. I mean, there's this ebb and flow to what they experience.

[00:08:18] **Patrick Pacheco:** I'm sure she was telling you that, "Ms. Johnson. I want to make sure you understand: they're making us work all day." In case they're doing something wrong there. [Laughter]

[00:08:25] **SFX:** Music transition

[00:08:26] **Patrick Pacheco:** What expectations do you see your students have with regard to employers? I don't know that we had a lot of expectations when we graduated or when I graduated. It was much more, I just wanted a job and I would do whatever they told me I needed to do. I didn't know that I could have expectations of my employer, but I think they do now. And what are those that you're seeing?

[00:08:45] **Linda Johnson:** I think the first thing is students want to add value right away. They want to see what they're doing brings value to their department. They want to personally feel valued by the employer or by their manager. I think that's really important, and they want to understand the culture of the company. They want to understand what sets that company apart. I think they have a lot of questions aside from knowing salary and benefits and all that,



which they're really curious about as well. But I think the biggest thing is providing value, letting them know what they're doing and how that relates to the end goal for the department.

[00:09:25] **Patrick Pacheco:** Are students asking questions, on a more global level, about DEI or what the company does in the ESG space? Is that something that they're asking?

[00:09:34] **Linda Johnson:** They are, yeah. I mean, some are even asking questions like, how many women do you have in executive roles or what's the average age? I mean, they're curious about all of that. Yes.

[00:09:45] **Patrick VO:** You may assume that these digital natives are only looking for remote work. But this generation also values in-person connection.

[00:09:53] **Linda Johnson:** They want both. They like the idea of being in an office environment and having peers there and getting to know people, and being in that office environment, but they also want to have some flexibility. So if they can work from home one day a week, particularly Friday, let me just say, they would like an opportunity to be able to work from home a day or two a week. But being in an office environment for the most part, I think is still really important to them. That's a question they always ask, is this in person? Will it be remote? Will it be hybrid? That's important to them. And the other part of that is just knowing the city, knowing where the job is going to be located, and if they're not from there, what's attractive about living in Dallas or what's attractive about living in Nashville? So I think that's important. And with our student body, 60% of our students are from out of state, so our students tend to relocate a little bit more than other state universities. We want to keep great talent right here in Alabama, but I think our students are a little bit more flexible about where they go. So that location piece is really important for them.

[00:11:10] **Patrick Pacheco:** So one of the themes we've explored here recently on the show is the tight labor market and the opportunities it's creating for employees and the difficulty it's creating for employers. Is the tight labor market ringing true for students as well? Are they able to leverage that and how are they leveraging that?

[00:11:29] **Linda Johnson:** Yeah. There are a lot of opportunities for them, right now. We probably have 4,700 jobs for business students right now posted in our database that we call Handshake. That's kind of a job board for our students. So one of the things that's really



interesting is that recruiters are looking at recruiting earlier and earlier, and they're also wanting to connect with younger students.

[00:11:57] **Patrick VO:** To reach the younger generation, you have to go through their preferred channels of communication.

[00:12:03] **Linda Johnson:** It is interesting to see what appeals to students. I mean, we really have been pushing out things on social media. I mentioned Instagram live, but also an Instagram takeover. So a company can just take over our Career Center Instagram and they can tour the students around their office or have them talk to other people that are in those jobs and all that. I think they're embracing a lot of that and they're really wanting us to help them figure out what some new ways that are going to attract these students to them.

[00:12:33] **Patrick VO:** But just because the messenger is new, doesn't mean the message has to change. Businesses should stay true to who they are, even if they're not part of a hot, new industry.

[00:12:39] **Linda Johnson:** I think it's just a matter of those people telling their story. I think everybody has a good story to tell and getting the right people from the company to come to campus, getting the right people into the classroom to tell their story and to engage with students is where they're going to have success.

[00:12:56] **Patrick VO:** With a tight labor market, companies have to stand out to attract talent. But students aren't looking for glitz and glamour--they're prioritizing connection. And the most successful companies have adjusted their strategy accordingly.

[00:13:10] **Linda Johnson:** They're on campus. That's the number one thing. When I look at the list of our top companies from last May, all of them were very active on campus. They are looking at this recruiting function as one where they're building relationships with students, and students want to have a relationship. I mean, that's in their DNA. They want to have this relationship. So recruiters that are doing the best jobs and are in those top employers for us, they're very present on campus. They're doing a lot of different kinds of events.

Another change that I've seen over the last few years is that they're really wanting to engage students in smaller groups, so that they get to build that relationship easier. When I first



started, it was all about the numbers. Let's get a company in front of 70 or 80 students at a time and talk about their opportunities and talk about their company. But now, they want to sit around a lunch table with 8 or 10 students and really get to know them, and the students really get to know them and what their company's about. So I think the ones that are really doing a great job are engaging that way with students. They may also be engaging by providing some projects for students to do in the classroom. They may be hosting students at their office. We can take students to visit, but they're ever present. You see them on campus, students get to know the recruiter or get to know the alums, and they're the ones having the most success.

[00:14:45] **Patrick VO:** With students in such high demand, maintaining that connection is even more important.

[00:14:51] **Linda Johnson:** The other thing that's interesting with this group that we've seen recently is that students are accepting a job, but they're continuing to look. So we've got these statistics that say students are renegeing on these jobs at a much higher rate than ever before. So it boils back down to building, I think, a relationship with the student and it doesn't end when they accept the job. They've got to continue to engage the student, with their company and with other individuals who are coming to keep them interested and all so that they can hopefully reduce the opportunity that they'll change their mind. It goes back to those are the ones who are coming to campus and engaging. Those are the ones who are getting to know the students, who are coming in and having coffee chats or having a breakfast or having lunches, coming to the career fair, taking part in the mock career fair, taking part in the mock interviews. They're doing all these things to engage with our students. So I think those are the kinds of things set them apart and they're able to really get to know the student and know if they're going to be a good fit or not, because that's usually what recruiters are trying to figure out.

[00:16:11] **Patrick VO:** But companies aren't just changing their recruiting methods. They're changing who they recruit, and what they recruit for.

[00:16:18] **Linda Johnson:** When I started in this role, it seemed like the target was juniors and seniors, we're looking for juniors and seniors. They're ready to graduate, we've got full-time jobs. This is who we're interested in targeting. And now they're more interested in targeting younger and younger, and looking at their internship program as a way to fill their full-time jobs. They're targeting their recruiting efforts onto the internship recruitment, by focusing and filling those internship positions now. You've had a student there in almost a 12-week interview





because they've been with you for a summer and you know that they're going to do a great job and that they're a good fit. And equally, the student knows they're a good fit. So it increases the likelihood that they're going to accept the job for one. And secondly, you won't have as much turnover in the long run.

[00:17:20] **Patrick VO:** As recruiting starts younger, it carries more risk. Sophomores might not even know their major, let alone what career they want. Internships are a way to mitigate that risk, on both sides.

[00:17:33] **Linda Johnson:** I think companies are really looking at that internship, and if they're not, they should look at it, as I mentioned that three month interview. It really is such an important experience for students because it does help them see, this is something I like to do long-term or this is not. And either way, that's a win for the student. If they finish the internship and realize this is not the best fit for me, then that's a success for them and it's a success for that company because they may have done a great job and the company may have wanted to hire them, and if the student accepted and knowing it really wasn't the right thing, then that's going to create some turnover down the road. But the internship is the lowest risk, I think, for the employer, and it is a low risk for the student.

You play at the level of your practice. I think we may have heard that somewhere before. And so we want to give them an opportunity to really practice.

[00:18:25] **Patrick Pacheco:** So the practice is how you play, that seems to be a common theme at Alabama?

[00:18:31] **Linda Johnson:** Yes. Yes, it is. Roll Tide.

[00:18:35] **SFX:** Music transition

[00:18:36] **Patrick VO:** Once you get a young person in the door, it's important to set them up for success, whether it's an internship or a permanent job.

[00:18:46] **Linda Johnson:** I would really recommend to the recruiters that they create a plan of what they would need them to do. Outlining exactly what you expect of them. And then I think it's important that the company really identifies the right manager to work with the intern



because a couple things are going to happen, the student, the impression they're getting of their experience is going to follow them back to campus. So another student's going to say, "Hey, how did your experience go, how'd your internship go?" And they're going to either have really, really good things to say, which is going to help your brand on campus, or they're going to have some difficulties, or they're going to have some things that weren't as pleasant to share. So I think having a good manager or a good department in place to help lead the student, but also having it really outlined about what they're going to do, and again, the value that that's going to serve for the company.

And then secondly, give them feedback. Take time to really say, you know what, you did this really well. Here's a way you might want to look at this particular task differently. Just that feedback to reinforce what they're doing is really, really important. And they'll appreciate that. That helps them feel valued. That goes back to when I was talking about earlier, if you're investing and taking time to give them that feedback, they feel the value personally, which is something that's important to them. Creating an environment where they feel like they can excel, they feel like they can promote and achieve some of the things that they want to achieve right where they are. So again, it's that career progression, it's the feedback, it's all of those things that probably brings the student to them to begin with, but then keeps them there in the long run.

[00:20:27] **Patrick VO:** If the prospect of young talent is intriguing to you, but you don't know where to start, find your local Linda.

[00:20:35] **Patrick Pacheco:** I'm sure there's a lot of companies out there that listen to this and they start rethinking, maybe we should pay a little more attention to this talent pool. Any advice you give a company that's looking to really make a move into campus recruiting and bring in young talent?

[00:20:49] **Linda Johnson:** Start. Go ahead and start. This summer is a great time to plan what you want to do for the fall. And that's one of the things that I can do and our team here can do is work with the recruiter or work with the company to design what that recruiting strategy would look like, based on who they want to target and based on what their needs are. We do that needs analysis up front and then try to customize that strategy for the company.

[00:21:13] **SFX:** Music transition



[00:21:14] **Patrick VO:** No generation is a monolith. But these trends are significant, and companies that understand how to attract and keep young talent will have an edge in this tight labor market. Eventually, many of your employees, colleagues and customers will come from this generation. Would you rather figure them out then or get a head-start now?

And it's not just about tomorrow--it's about today. These graduates are adaptable, digitally-savvy and enthusiastic. They can provide a lift to your entire team. So, consider the benefits an infusion of youth could have for your business. Invest some time with a university--engage students and create relationships. Once they're at your company, give them structure--outline what you want them to accomplish and how it will bring value to the business.

If you do that, you'll be well-positioned for what comes next. Because the kids really are the future.

[00:22:11] **Linda Johnson:** I am excited every day about the students that are leaving this university and graduating with these degrees because I think they're really going to have a huge impact on our world, and it really is an exciting place to be, and it's even more exciting to see them succeed in their career. So I appreciate the folks like you and your organization that hire our students and that are giving these opportunities to these talented students.

[00:22:38] **Patrick Pacheco:** We love to do it, and I know other employers do as well. And it's always fun to realize that you may be looking at the next President of the United States or the next Bill Gates, or whoever's sitting across the table trying to get a job. So you can learn a lot from the students if you can open your mind and realize they can teach you as much as you can teach them.

[00:22:54] **Patrick VO:** Thank you to Linda Johnson, who did the University of Alabama proud.

[00:22:59] **Patrick Pacheco:** Thank you very much for being on with me.

[00:23:01] **Linda Johnson:** Oh, you're welcome. Thank you. And Roll Tide.

[00:23:03] **Patrick Pacheco:** [fading out over music] Again with the Roll Tide. Hook 'Em Horns!



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[00:23:47] [Outline](#): Disclaimer