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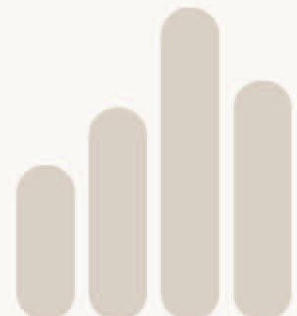
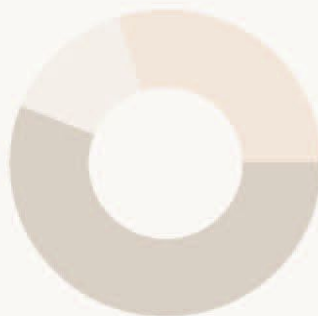
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Breaking Barriers and Building Futures

Focus on actionable solutions to empower and support women.

Women everywhere are busy in the workplace, driving innovation, leading change, and inspiring generations to come. Every day, they demonstrate resilience, determination, and bold leadership. Yet, many women still face unnecessary barriers in their professional lives — barriers we must address if we're to unlock their full potential.

Empowering women in the workplace is not simply a social imperative; it's smart business. Strong organizations and economies rely on the unique perspectives and skills women bring to the table. Across industries — from health care to technology, education to entrepreneurship — women are rewriting the rules and reshaping the business landscape. They're creating jobs, driving economic growth, and proving their leadership is essential to long-term organizational success.

When women face barriers in the workplace — spanning from unequal pay to less access to leadership roles to deep-seated biases — our organizations pay the price. We miss out on critical talent, innovative ideas, and coveted leadership.

To create truly inclusive workplaces, we must focus on actionable solutions to empower and support women, from creating policies that promote work/life integration to providing access to education and training. We must prioritize inclusion and diversity — not just as talking points, but as core values embedded in the DNA of our organizations.

This is not a solo journey. Both men and women play a critical role

in creating inclusive environments where women can thrive. This means fostering cultures where talent is recognized, effort is rewarded, and leadership is earned, regardless of gender. It means advocating for opportunities, challenging outdated systems, and above all, celebrating the contributions of women at every level.

It also means supporting and investing in women. Far too often, I've witnessed incredibly talented women hesitate to step into leadership roles because they question their readiness. I've had to encourage highly qualified women to take these roles — and sometimes even convince them — that they're more than capable of succeeding. Somewhere along the way, we're still missing the mark.

This is why mentorship is also vital to helping women thrive. When we invest in the development of women, we create a culture of growth and inclusion. It's not just about opening doors; it's about ensuring those doors remain open for future generations. SHRM-powered forces such as SHRM Linkage and the SHRM Linkage Institute are vivid examples of how smart, focused efforts can equip women with the skills and confidence they need to navigate and excel in leadership roles.

To all the women clearing hurdles and leading with strength: Your courage and determination inspire us to do better and be better. Together, we can break down barriers and build futures where everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential. ■■

Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP
President & CEO, SHRM

BALANCING BENEFITS

Empower employees to navigate personal finance challenges in a high-cost environment.

BY BRYTNEE FALLAN, SHRM-SCP



Families and individuals across the U.S. are feeling the strain as rising living costs, soaring health insurance premiums, and the growing demands of retirement planning stretch household budgets to their limits. These challenges are reshaping financial priorities and forcing them to seek smarter, more sustainable solutions to secure their future. Employees often face difficult decisions about allocating their limited financial resources to meet these obligations while maintaining economic stability.

How can HR help employees make the best choice regarding benefit expense allocations? One way is for employers to strategically develop total rewards packages based on a full understanding of employee demographics and needs.

Benefits Take a Bigger Bite Out of Budgets

It's no wonder that employees' financial stress is on the rise: In 2024, the median household income in the U.S. was \$80,610, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, but the average annual health insurance premium for family coverage was \$25,572, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 2024. During this time, U.S. households also spent an average of \$9,995 on retirement contributions and savings. Meanwhile, employees now think they need much more money to have a comfortable retirement than they did just a few years ago.

This data clearly shows the financial burden benefit expenditures can place on employees. But the good news is that through better support, communication, and education, employers can empower

employees to pick the best options and mitigate personal financial stress.

Employers' Role in Supporting Financial Decision-Making

Employers have a critical responsibility to design proactive strategies that support employees. Some cost-effective methods include providing clear and open communication regarding benefit options, improving financial education, and optimizing retirement plans.

Clear and transparent communication. Benefits education is the foundation of a successful total rewards strategy, but research finds that employers' education efforts are falling short. The majority of employees don't understand what benefits options are available, how they work, or which choices may be right for them and their families. A 2024 LIMRA survey found that just 54% of employees said their employer communicates well about benefits. And a 2023 MetLife study found that 54% of all employees said they wish they had personalized benefits recommendations, while half would feel more cared for if their employer improved its benefits communications.

Employees need to understand the actual value of the benefits offered to them, how these benefits work, and what costs they may incur. Understanding their options can also help employees make better choices for their budget. Benefit guides, vendor webinars, consultations, and regular emails exploring available benefits (and how they might improve employees' financial peace of mind) can all help employees fully understand their benefit packages.

Personalized financial wellness programs. Financial wellness and education programs equip employees to manage their household finances better, including benefit expenses. Access to



budgeting tools, financial counseling, and savings and investment education gives employees financial freedom through informed decision-making.

New SECURE Act 2.0 provisions.


The SECURE Act 2.0, enacted on Dec. 29, 2022, introduced several provisions to improve employee retirement savings outcomes. Several of the law's provisions have been rolled out, so employers should evaluate the following changes and design their plans to maximize their employees' benefits.

- **Automatic enrollment:** Section 101 of SECURE 2.0 requires 401(k) and 403(b) plans to enroll newly eligible employees automatically.
- **Emergency savings accounts:** SECURE 2.0 allows plan sponsors to introduce an emergency savings component to their retirement plans. Employers can automatically enroll non-highly compensated employees (those earning up to \$150,000 annually) in an emergency savings account,

with any contributions made on an after-tax basis. Employee contributions are limited to 3% of pay up to \$2,500 per year, with any employer match capped at \$2,500 per year. Additionally, participants can withdraw up to \$1,000 for emergency expenses without penalty before they reach age 59½. These participants have up to three years to repay the withdrawal.

- **Increased catch-up contributions:** Section 109 increases the contribution limits to the greater of \$10,000 or 50% more than the regular catch-up amounts starting in the 2025 plan years for workers ages 60-63.
- **Student loan repayment contributions:** Section 110 allows employers to make matching contributions to a retirement plan based on the amount of an employee's monthly student loan repayment, rather than the amount of the participant's contributions to the retirement plan. This can enable employees who are

paying off student loans to also save for retirement. Typically, they lag behind their peers in overall retirement contributions.

Employers have a responsibility and an opportunity to provide the support employees need to make informed decisions about their personal finances. By doing so, employers can reduce stress that inhibits productivity and overall wellness. Fostering supportive benefits environments is a critical need and should be a high priority for employers. 

BRYTNEE FALLAN, SHRM-SCP, is a Lead, Financial Strategy & Accounting Operations, and former Lead, Total Rewards, at SHRM.



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OVERCOMING CAREER-LONG IMPOSTER SYNDROME CHALLENGES

Self-doubt can feel debilitating, but it can also spark opportunities for reflection and growth.

BY MELODY BEUZELIN



ALL THINGS WORK

You're in your first few days in a new role — something you may have worked years, even decades, toward achieving. But instead of feeling excited or proud, you can't shake the gnawing thought that you don't belong — or worse, that you don't deserve it.

If this sounds familiar, you're not alone. These feelings are a hallmark of imposter syndrome, a common experience in which individuals question their competency and success.

In fact, nearly one in three U.S. workers say they often experience doubt about their professional abilities or achievements, according to research from the Survey Center on American Life at the

American Enterprise Institute.

While imposter syndrome can be challenging, specific strategies and coping techniques can help people overcome persistent self-doubt — and even learn from it. HR professionals at all career levels can extend these lessons throughout the organization.

From Entry Level to Executive Leadership

How can an individual with a proven record of accomplishments at work feel inadequate? This is the counterintuitive reality of imposter syndrome. Its reach extends far beyond the early days of a career and often continues — or even intensifies — as individuals climb the professional ladder.

“As leaders, we are constantly striving to do our best and hit our goals. We often become leaders because we care about doing a good job and making a difference,” said Jennifer Birdsall, Ph.D., clinical director at ComPsych, a global provider of mental health services. “In organizations, however, there isn't just one goal that you achieve and then are done. There are always new goals, targets, and initiatives, so the striving never ends.”

That's why “many leaders — myself

included — occasionally question ourselves: ‘Are we making a difference? Do we have what it takes?’” Birdsall added.

Turn Doubt into Growth

While imposter syndrome can feel debilitating, it isn't inherently negative. These feelings could signal that you're pushing boundaries in your role or as a leader, which reflects ambition, care, and a willingness to learn and grow, Birdsall noted. Keep pushing with some tried-and-true tactics:

Confide in Your Colleagues.

Extended internalization can turn moments of genuine reflection into feelings of isolation. Birdsall recommended looking to co-workers for support.



There are always new goals, targets, and initiatives, so the striving never ends.

— JENNIFER BIRDSALL, PH.D.

“It’s helpful to ask trusted colleagues for their feedback and perspectives,” she said. “This can affirm your strengths and identify growth areas you can work on.”

For example, if you’re feeling uncertain about a recent presentation, you might turn to someone on your team and say, “I’ve been second-guessing how I communicated some of the points, and I’d really value your take on what worked and what I could improve. I respect your perspective and think your insight could really help make me a better teammate overall.”

Reframe Your Mindset. Reframing these thoughts can also help build emotional resilience. Brennan Nevada Johnson, CEO and founder of tech public relations agency Brennan Nevada Inc., emphasizes the importance of self-compassion.

“I practice positive self-talk daily and focus on my accomplishments, no matter how big or small,” she said. “I also no longer strive to be perfect. Mistakes are OK. It’s how you grow and learn from them that helps you to become a better leader at work.”

Focus on the Facts. Frequent self-doubt can cloud judgment and undermine confidence, even with clear evidence of success. Samya France, vice president of earned media at global communications firm Edelman, suggested a logic-oriented approach.

“I’ve developed a mantra: ‘Facts over feelings,’” she said. “When self-doubt creeps in, I focus on the tangible — what I know, what I’ve achieved, and the skills I bring to the table.”

Building Confidence, Boosting Teams

Imposter syndrome doesn’t just affect individuals — it has a ripple effect that impacts team dynamics, employee engagement, and overall organizational performance. Nicole Belyna, SHRM-SCP, director, talent acquisition & inclusion at SHRM, also



noted the long-term implications. “These behaviors can stall employees’ career progression because they’re less likely to go for promotions or volunteer for high-visibility projects,” she said.

To proactively prevent these issues, HR professionals can create a workplace culture that removes obstacles affecting confidence and fosters an environment where everyone feels valued and recognized:

- **Create Peer Appreciation Programs.** Launch colleague-to-colleague recognition initiatives where employees can nominate one another for their efforts, both big and small. For example, an employee spotlight board or a dedicated Slack channel can help celebrate milestones publicly.
- **Promote One-on-One Employee Recognition.** Encourage leaders to set aside time to highlight small, daily contributions by employees, not just major victories. Managers can do this during performance reviews or regular one-on-one meetings.
- **Develop a Mentorship Culture:** According to a recent SHRM report, *Effective People Managers: The Linchpin of Organizational Success*, 54% of HR executives selected coaching and

mentoring as a skill they want their people managers to develop. Mentors who can guide, support, and provide affirming feedback are likely to build their employees’ confidence and offer them clarity in their career paths. A structured program gives employees at all levels access to role models who can validate their experiences and share their own journeys.

A supportive, inclusive culture begins by encouraging open conversations about self-doubt to normalize these experiences and reduce stigma, Belyna said.

“Start by creating an environment where employees feel psychologically safe to share ideas, ask questions, and make mistakes without fear of judgment,” she said. “This is key to reducing the fear of failure and building confidence.” [IR](#)

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PROTECTING DIGITAL PERSONAS

AI is shaking up employment contracts. Here are some fair-use considerations.

BY NICHOL BRADFORD



THE AI+HI PROJECT

Artificial intelligence is changing the way companies manage employee identities, but it has also raised serious ethical and legal questions.

By 2026, 70% of new employee contracts will include clauses on licensing and fair use of AI-generated personas, said Daryl Plummer, distinguished VP, analyst, and chief of research at Gartner. These digital personas copy how people think and make decisions, which could allow businesses to keep using an employee's skills, even after they leave.

Persona vs. Avatar

It's important to distinguish between a persona and an avatar. A persona reflects someone's thinking patterns, such as their

decision-making and problem-solving styles. For example, it could mirror how an executive prioritizes tasks. An avatar, however, only represents surface-level traits, such as appearance or voice.

Persona replication is already possible. Research from Stanford University and Google DeepMind shows that AI can mimic human decision-making with 85% accuracy. These advancements confirm the feasibility of systems that mirror complex thought processes — and add weight to Plummer's prediction.

The Legal Perspective

As the potential for digital personas grows, the focus has shifted from *if* such practices will be adopted to *how* they will proceed. Unlike employee handbooks, contracts for AI personas would require clear, enforceable terms, said Kelly Dobbs Bunting, a labor and employment attorney at Greenberg Traurig LLP in Philadelphia. These contracts will rely on transparency and ensure employees understand and agree to the terms.

While the technology may be new, Bunting said the legal principles are not. "The concept of work-for-hire clauses is already embedded in most executive

contracts," she explained. "However, we're likely to see an expansion of these contracts to explicitly cover AI-generated personas."

This shift will be influenced by state biometric privacy laws and data protection acts, such as Illinois' Biometric Information Privacy Act (BIPA) and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA). Laws designed for personal branding, such as name, image, and likeness (NIL) statutes, could also evolve to protect employee personas and ensure fair compensation when intellectual contributions are monetized.

As organizations incorporate technologies that involve employee protected data or biometric identifiers, HR teams must work closely with legal departments to ensure compliance.

Initially, digital personas may be limited to executives, but they are likely to expand throughout organizations. This creates concerns about intellectual property, vague contracts, and employees accidentally giving up control of their digital identities.

"People sign contracts without fully understanding what they're agreeing to," Bunting said. This could result in workers unknowingly losing ownership of their personas.

"It's going to take lawsuits and legislative action to define these boundaries," she continued. "Companies that act pre-emptively with transparency and fairness will be better positioned to navigate this uncharted terrain."

Risks and Benefits

The potential benefits of digital personas — efficiency, continuity, and productivity — are clear. Organizations can use this technology to preserve and replicate employees' expertise. However, these advancements create risks for

employees, including the loss of privacy and limited control over their personas.

The ability of enterprise AI systems to capture decision-making patterns and personality traits through prompts raises ownership and compensation concerns. Once integrated, this data is nearly impossible to remove, leaving workers with little control over how their digital identity is used. Without legal protections or bargaining power, employees could lose ownership of their workplace contributions.



Companies that act pre-emptively with transparency and fairness will be better positioned to navigate this uncharted terrain.

— KELLY DOBBS BUNTING

Bridging Legal Gaps with Organizational Action

As privacy protections evolve, HR must advocate for policies that align with ethical standards and emerging regulations. Steps to mitigate risks and foster trust among employees should go beyond legal requirements to address the challenges posed by digital personas:

- **Transparent policies:** Clearly explain how digital personas are created, used, and updated, then allow employees to provide feedback.
- **Voluntary participation:** Give employees the option to participate in persona programs. Offer benefits such as extra pay or control over how their personas are used.
- **Fair compensation:** Pay employees fairly for their personas, even after they've left the company.
- **Ethical guidelines:** Set rules about how personas can be used, ensuring they align with the employee's role and reputation.

- **Employee ownership rights:** Allow workers to partially own their persona or take it to another job.
- **Oversight committees:** Create teams to manage and review persona policies.

While AI personas could make organizations more productive, they must be handled responsibly. Through collaboration among organizations, employees, and policymakers, businesses can foster trust and position themselves as ethical guides, managing digital personas responsibly. [IR](#)

NICHOL BRADFORD is the Executive In Residence for AI + HI at SHRM.



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PROVING AND PLANNING FOR ROI WITH DATA-DRIVEN STORIES

If leadership can't envision it, they won't invest in it. The 4 P's can help.

BY ASHLEIGH POPERA



Strategic planning is critical in today's uncertain business landscape. However, many organizations hinder their ability to innovate by sorting departments into profit centers and cost centers. It may be easy to justify investing in departments that generate revenue while cutting those that don't, but the reality is more complex.

For example: A division may not directly bring in revenue, but it might reduce costs or accelerate earning potential elsewhere. Without investment in these areas, businesses stagnate and struggle to handle disruptions.

To beat the "profit center versus cost center" narrative, leaders need a better story.

Many departments struggle with siloed planning, in which a focus on internal objectives makes it difficult to demonstrate alignment with broader organizational goals.

"HR typically goes up to the CFO and says, 'Hey, we need to invest in this new initiative or hire these new people,' instead of putting together a really solid ROI [return on investment] analysis," said Jared Olsen, vice president of people experience at Lehi, Utah-based software company JobNimbus.

For leaders to secure strategic investments for their departments in 2025, they must learn to tell a clear, data-driven story about how those investments will lead to organizational growth.

Connecting Talent Strategy to Business Objectives

McKinsey & Company found that CEOs are 36% less likely to involve HR in strategic decision-making when they perceive a gap in HR's expertise and market insights.

"Investment requests need to be tied to a business case, and that business case needs to involve an analysis of internal and external data inputs," said Erica Young, director of digital transformation at SHRM.

However, leaders need more than data to secure budget approval. They need to weave reliable metrics into a

If leadership can't envision it, they won't invest in it.

compelling story that illustrates how investments align with big-picture objectives. If leadership can't envision it, they won't invest in it.

The 4 P's of Strategic Planning

To help leaders craft data-driven stories that align division goals with organizational growth, SHRM has identified the 4 P's essential to effective strategic investment proposals:

- **People:** Growing businesses need a human-centric strategy. Assess current skills gaps and future needs to align investments with organizational goals and foster a culture of retention.
- **Productivity:** The right talent strategy drives higher performance. Prioritize development opportunities to ensure each human capital investment drives measurable results.

3 STEPS TO EFFECTIVE STRATEGIC PLANNING

Here are three steps to redefine your division as a strategic business partner:

- 1. Diagnose:** Identify your department's direct impact on the business. Where are you today? What should you be measuring? How does this align with business objectives?
- 2. Develop:** Refine a data-driven storyline linking current results to past investments. Effectively demonstrating return on investment for strategic decisions through a compelling story is key to promoting optimal investment.
- 3. Evolve:** Articulate how future spending will help achieve your organization's current goals, using data on potential disruptions — like economic shifts, technological advancements, or policy changes — to guide your approach.

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- **Profitability:** Optimized productivity boosts profitability. Identify how investments in workforce performance and engagement can reduce costs and strengthen revenue potential.
- **Prosperity:** Leading with foresight and adaptability supports resilience and financial health. Monitor market trends and workforce predictions to position your organization for prosperity and long-term growth.

This framework is focused on HR investments, but a similar approach can help leaders in any department explain how their proposed investments relate to the business's strategy.

Bringing Data to Life

HR is traditionally excluded from strategic revenue conversations, but

the members of Olsen's HR team at JobNimbus have redefined their role in workforce planning.

To secure investments in talent strategy, they leverage SHRM's data-driven storytelling approach, aligning talent investments with economic shifts, emerging trends, and business needs.

Executives often have a handle on people and productivity. They understand the value of finding top-tier talent and building engaged teams. But investment proposals fall short when executives fail to see how plans benefit business profitability and prosperity.

In 2024, only 19% of HR executives expected to be able to increase their department headcount, according to the *2023-24 SHRM State of the Workplace Report*.

Even still, precise headcount knowledge allows Olsen's team to clearly articulate the ROI specific to employee productivity and development.

Another key metric — employee lifetime value — enables the team to directly connect talent investments to profitability.

By reframing workforce planning through the lens of the 4 P's, JobNimbus' HR team ensures each hire aligns with long-term business gains — and elevates their status within the organization. [IR](#)

ASHLEIGH POPERA is a senior specialist, B2B content, at SHRM.



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THERE'S A RISK IN DOING THINGS THE OLD WAY

Keys to sustained executive development for busy leaders.

BY JESSE STANCHAK



Human resources executives are often in charge of learning and development (L&D). But SHRM research finds that more than half of HR executives said HR leaders do not have the skills needed to succeed in the digital age.

However, 77% of HR executives said their current skill sets won't be outdated in three to five years. This data suggests they acknowledge the risk of falling behind but are in denial about the need to prioritize their growth.

What Holds Leaders Back?

"Executives get thrown 100 things that are all priorities, and everything is on fire," said Kimberly Lisiak Fraleigh, director of leadership development at Elkhart,

Ind.-based Lippert Components. She noted that, besides adding to a mountain of responsibilities, working on a new skill can be scary.

Also, "[e]xecutives have pressure to focus on short-term progress," explained Amber Vanderburg, founder of The Pathwayz Group, an international learning development company based in Tulsa, Okla. "But the fact is that if we try a new approach or skill, there will be a short dip before we catapult into a higher level of performance."

Regardless, trying is still valuable. Prioritizing development begins with acknowledging there's also a risk in doing things the way you've always done them.

5 Steps to Set Your Personal Development in Motion

STEP 1: RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF YOUR GROWTH

Some executives lean toward a servant leadership philosophy. But executives who lead themselves well are the most effective at leading others and ultimately have a sustainable impact.

If you neglect your personal development, it can limit your team's capacity because "you can't effectively build people up if you push yourself down," said Vanderburg.

Remember this mantra from Vanderburg: "I reserve the right to be better tomorrow than I am today."

STEP 2: IDENTIFY AREAS FOR SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Figuring out areas to improve may be where you stall the longest. Begin by increasing self-awareness. Try these prompts to get started:

- When was the last time you had a challenge? What skill could have helped you?
- How would you want to be described? Do any of these competencies stand out as an area for improvement?
- What skill(s) will your role need in 10 years?

Next, have your team hold up that mirror. Ask your boss, direct reports, and/or fellow department heads for feedback. Then, hold up the mirror against your organization to identify which opportunities for growth align with current needs.

STEP 3: PICK OBJECTIVES AND CRAFT A PLAN

You may identify several possibilities, but Vanderburg suggested paring them down.

"Prioritize one or two areas that you need to grow based on where your business



DNY59 / ISTOCK

is right now, what you see in the mirror, and the feedback,” she said.

Once you’ve identified your focus, set quarterly learning targets. Smaller goals with shorter time frames are more likely to be met, explained Vanderburg. This approach also offers flexibility.

If you asked for feedback, let those involved know the goals you’ll pursue. This will establish accountability and let them know you valued their input.

Next, set aside time on your calendar. Predict your energy highs and lows. Then schedule your learning for a time you know you will have fewer interruptions.

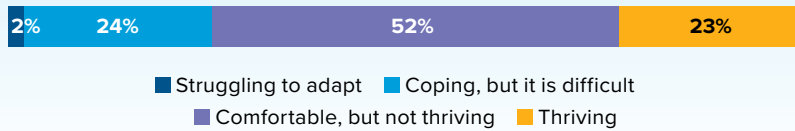
STEP 4: ORGANIZE YOUR RESOURCES

If your organization has a formal development program or offers executive coaching, start there. If your organization doesn’t have such an offering, investigate external options, including these:

- **Build your own advisory board.** List people who’ve held your role, whose work interests you, or who’ve influenced your career.
- **Take advantage of trade groups.** Associations (including SHRM) offer useful resources. Take advantage of members-only content.

HOW DO HR EXECUTIVES ASSESS THEIR LEADERSHIP SKILLS?

Leadership is more difficult in this rapidly changing business environment. Here’s how HR executives assess their own leadership skills:



■ Struggling to adapt ■ Coping, but it is difficult
 ■ Comfortable, but not thriving ■ Thriving

Source: *The Changing Face of Leadership*, SHRM, 2023.

- **Sign up for leadership conferences.** Reference the focus areas identified in your reflection and select a conference that intrigues you.

STEP 5: ACTIVATE LEARNING AND ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR PROGRESS

Your new skills are only useful if you put them into practice. If you’re uncomfortable, “try them in low-stress, controlled environments. Then, try them in higher-stress environments when you feel ready,” said Lisiak Fraleigh.

Afterwards, request input. If you’re working on active listening, ask a trusted colleague, “How did I do?”

You can also formalize your learning in reviews or during a postmortem of a project influenced by your new skills.

Also consider tracking how many of your direct reports engage in learning.

“Start a wins list, through the lens of self, team, and business/organization,” said Lisiak Fraleigh.

Recognize that acquiring knowledge represents success — not only in obtaining a new skill but in making time for your growth. [IR](#)

JESSE STANCHAK is a manager, B2B content, at SHRM.



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ALL THINGS WORK

Add Value Through Difference

“Don’t look for cultural fit. It’s something we have plenty of. Start looking for cultural add. Start looking for those experiences that may not necessarily be round peg, round hole, but could add such value from an organizational standpoint.”

*Michael Cohen, partner,
Duane Morris LLP*



THE AI+HI PROJECT

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“What I’m seeing that’s really heartening is the community that HR leaders are creating with each other. I encourage folks to reach out to peers who are thinking about how to bring AI into organizations and develop a little community of practice. They are incredibly powerful and allow you to ask, ‘How are you thinking about responsibility and AI for HR?’ I think of all the sectors, HR has the most critical questions to answer when it comes to responsibility and AI because it deals with people’s lives and livelihood. And so I would create a community of practice and discuss those critical topics.”

Kathy Pham, vice president of AI and machine learning, Workday



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*Jhillika Kumar,
CEO and founder, Mentra*



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*David Reimer, CEO,
The ExCo Group*



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*Emmanuel Yamoah,
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But when you're ready to break up with good enough, **better is waiting**.



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How to Support Employees with Mental Health Struggles

Employees are often unaware of the many benefits available to them.

BY VICTORIA NEAL, SHRM-SCP

Stress, overwhelm, and anxiety affect many workers. In SHRM's Employee Mental Health in 2024 Research Series, 30% of survey respondents said they are stressed, 26% said they feel overwhelmed, and 22% are anxious.

When employees share their mental health concerns at work, HR's first step should be to show support and listen attentively. Far too often, mental health is not taken as seriously as physical health, even though mental illness can be debilitating. It's important to dedicate time to understanding employees' concerns and then encourage them to take advantage of resources, such as a company's employee assistance program (EAP), job accommodations under certain laws, dedicated mental health days, or other relevant leave options.

Employees are often unaware of many benefits available to them through work, and they also probably aren't as familiar with employment laws and policies as HR or management. By sharing all available options, you empower employees to choose what works best for them.

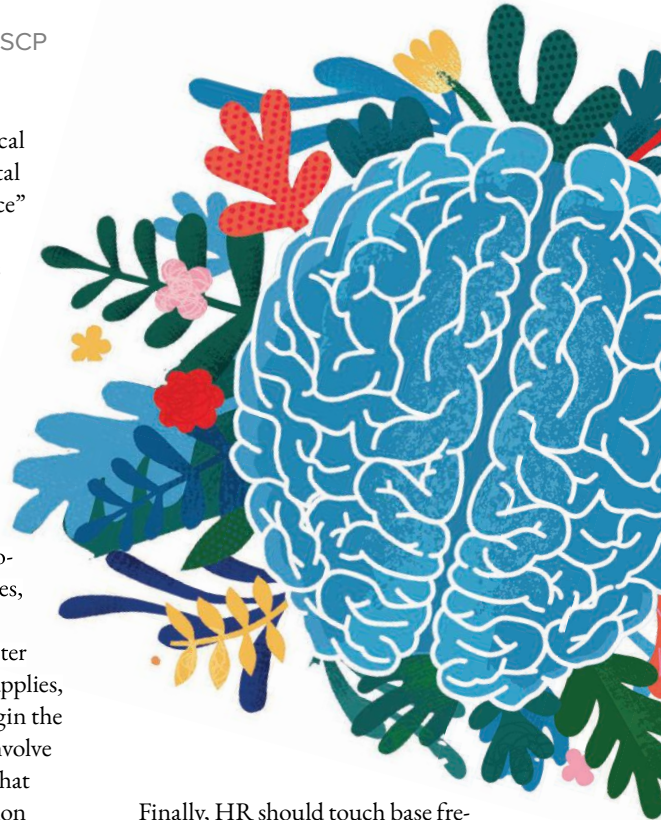
However, individual needs can vary, even when employees are experiencing similar conditions or situations. For example, one person might require time off, while another might need another accommodation, such as coming in late, to perform their job duties effectively.

If leave is necessary for medical care or recovery, employees may be eligible for protection under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and/or the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

When an employee shares medical information, including about mental health, an employer is put "on notice" — meaning they now have an obligation under the law to address the situation — and signals the possibility of coverage under these federal laws. Notice may also trigger applicable state and local laws or company policies, such as paid or unpaid leave, paid time off, and sick leave.

Not every situation requires leave. Instead, reasonable accommodation — such as extended deadlines, a low-stimulation workplace, or additional breaks — might be a better solution. In cases where the ADA applies, employers have an obligation to begin the "interactive process," which may involve requesting a medical certification that identifies the type of accommodation needed. Utilizing resources such as the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), a source of free, expert, and confidential guidance on workplace accommodations, can help identify practical solutions.

Sometimes, all an employee needs is someone to listen. However, it's wise to suggest that they also consult a trained mental health professional. HR may recommend an EAP, which many employees may not have used before or may wrongly assume is unaffordable or even unhelpful. It's important to be ready to provide clear information about the services available, as well as which costs will be covered by employees' benefits coverage.



Finally, HR should touch base frequently with all employees to stay aware of their changing needs. Anyone may face life changes or stressors that make professional mental health support beneficial. Helping workers maintain their emotional well-being is ultimately key to a healthy and productive workplace. [IR](#)

VICTORIA NEAL, SHRM-SCP, is an HR Knowledge Advisor at SHRM.



Got an HR question?
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Proactive Strategies for Mastering Workplace Conflict Resolution

*Successfully navigate disputes by
building a culture based on trust.*

BY KRISTIN FLETCHER

Benjamin Franklin once said, “Remember not only to say the right thing in the right place, but far more difficult still, to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.”

Applying this wisdom can be even

more challenging as an HR professional in a department of one.

But having these skills — along with policies and plans — is more important than ever. Workplace incivility reached record levels in 2024, according to the

SHRM Civility Index, affecting not only office morale but also productivity. With each incident of incivility they experienced or witnessed, employees lost an average of 37 minutes of productivity, the Q4 2024 Civility Index found.

Solo HR professionals must be proactive in managing conflict. By building strong networks, fostering open communication, and mastering effective mediation techniques, you can take a more strategic approach that also helps build a healthier workplace culture.

Build Your Network

When you don't have anyone to bounce ideas off of in-house, you need to construct your own circle of support.

"Solo HR practitioners may not have the capacity to handle multiple occurrences of workplace conflict, complex situations, or the bandwidth to address them if there are competing priorities," said Jeannie DiBella, SHRM-SCP, director of human resources at Manchester Community College in New Hampshire.

Therefore, the most important thing you can do is develop a network of HR pros and external resources, she said. Your peers can help, of course, but you should also consult professional mediators and an attorney for advice and legal expertise. DiBella has been involved with the SHRM Greater Nashua chapter for 17 years, providing her with an extraordinary support system.

Hope Kelly, SHRM-SCP, director of human resources at Granite State Manufacturing and director of the New Hampshire SHRM state council, also touted the benefit of support via local association chapters.

"When you become involved with state chapters, you have the ability to interact with other HR professionals that are knowledgeable about the local laws," Kelly said. "You increase your own knowledge as you build your network."

Prioritize Relationships

The ability to remain neutral is paramount for solo HR practitioners, who need to be seen as capable of treating everyone equally.

"Solo practitioners don't have the ability to turn the situation over to someone else if their relationship with one of the parties — positive or negative — may cause others to question their neutrality," DiBella said.

If you develop strong relationships with both managers and employees, you will tend to be included in whatever is going on.

"You can't always stop what you are doing, but to the extent possible, show managers and employees that they are your top priority when they need you," DiBella recommended. "Don't put off responding to messages or requests to schedule a meeting."

Build Trust

Managed conflict leads to organizational growth, change, and evolution, said Matthew Burr, SHRM-SCP, owner of Burr Consulting LLC in Elmira, N.Y., and an on-call mediator for the New York State Public Employment Relations Board.

A degree of conflict in the workplace is normal and healthy. Conflict is unhealthy when it becomes personal and emotional. A work culture where dissent is encouraged can lead to innovation, diversity of thought, better decision-making, and higher levels of trust.

The key is creating a psychologically safe workplace culture that continually fosters open communication among employees and assures them it's safe to disagree. HR plays a pivotal role in building workplace trust by providing frequent feedback systems, such as regular employee check-ins, anonymous communication channels, engagement surveys, and team-building activities.

"Employees can submit great ideas anonymously, either electronically or in writing, and we've gotten a lot of good responses for different campaigns," Kelly said. At her company, "[w]e also have a rumor-clearing chain of command, a process that has been very effective at stopping rumors before they spread."

Solo HR practitioners must also prioritize developing and nurturing relationships with employees to build a foundation of trust.

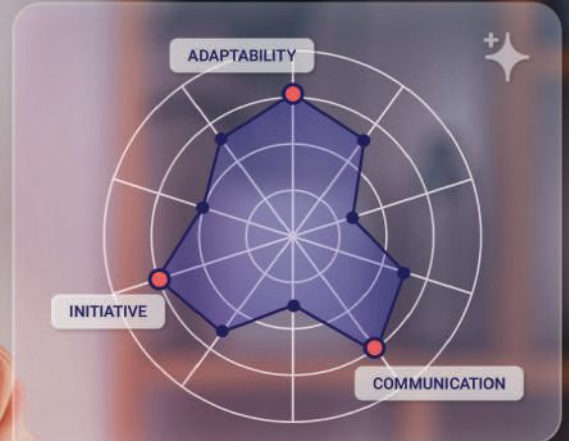
"Employees need to feel that their HR practitioner cares about them as a person so that they will feel safe when discussing concerns," DiBella said. "In order to develop strong relationships and earn trust, you have to keep information confidential."



10 Steps to Effective Mediation

1. Set ground rules. Require all parties to treat one another with respect and to make an effort to listen and understand others' views.
2. Ask each participant to describe the conflict, including desired changes, using "I" statements rather than "you" statements. Focus on specific behaviors and problems rather than people.
3. Ask participants to restate what others have said in their own words.
4. Summarize the conflict based on what you have heard and obtain agreement from participants.
5. Brainstorm solutions. Discuss all of the options in a positive manner.
6. Rule out any scenarios that participants agree are unworkable.
7. Review all possible solutions.
8. Assign implementation of solutions to participants.
9. Confirm all parties agree on the next steps.
10. Close the meeting by having participants shake hands, apologize, and thank one another for working to resolve the conflict.

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She added, “When confidentiality is just not possible, treating information as sensitively as possible is critical.”

Maintaining transparency through clear and consistent communications is also vital. HR is at the center of developing and implementing policies and procedures that are grounded in a culture of civility and psychological safety.

SHRM has several members-only workplace conflict tools available online, including a sample conflict resolution policy, a list of conflict resolution rules and steps, and a conflict resolution training PowerPoint presentation. The SHRM Civility Starter Kit is a free downloadable resource that includes conversation starter cards.

How to Use Mediation

Workplace conflict can permeate all levels of an organization and express itself in several ways, such as increased employee turnover. In addition, confusion can indicate employee resistance to decisions or changes. A general lack of respect, communication breakdowns, or an overall decrease in employee morale can also point to underlying tensions. Complaints often need to be addressed quickly, but they may require mediation to be resolved.

Mediation is an effective technique to address conflict between employees. However, it is not appropriate when there are possible breaches of the law or clear violations of organizational policy. These incidents require a full investigation, potential disciplinary action, and special considerations for unionized employees.

Before starting mediation, clarify for witnesses that they are serving as witnesses only and give them short notice, which reduces the potential for them to recalibrate their answers.

Next, conduct separate one-one-one sessions with employees in a private, neutral location, such as a meeting room or the employee’s office. Avoid having a table or large desk between yourself and the employee. This removes a physical barrier, encourages more active listening, and helps the employee feel more relaxed.

Prompt the employee to provide concrete examples of their complaint and



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ask specific questions. This helps the employee better articulate the root concerns. Advise the employee on the next steps in the process.

At the beginning of the mediation session, emphasize that HR’s role as the mediator is not to take sides, provide solutions, determine who is guilty, or enforce disciplinary measures. Rather, you are there to establish respectful communication and empower parties to seek mutually beneficial solutions.

Review the process and set expectations and ground rules for participation. Provide each participant the opportunity to tell their side of the story, uninterrupted, and maintain a neutral, impartial tone.


It’s important to keep an open mind as you gather facts. Don’t make assumptions or judgments. Keep the conversation constructive and on track.

Train Your Managers and Build Your Skills

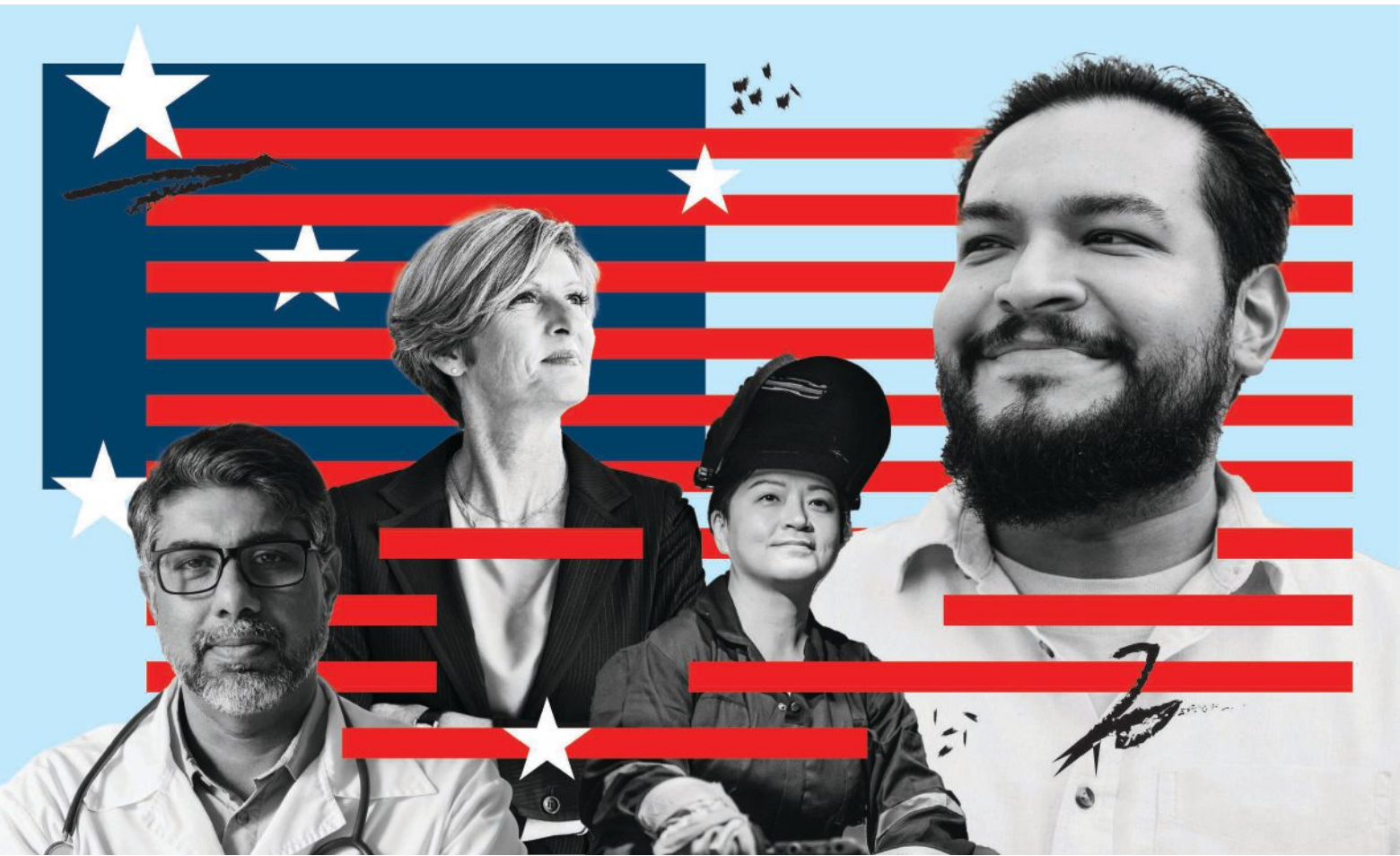
Helping managers learn how to be good leaders is crucial, DiBella said. Offer ongoing training opportunities, ensure they have the tools to deal with uncomfortable situations, and partner with them during conflict mediation.

Allow the manager to lead the discussion/intervention, when appropriate, which shows that you trust them while you are helping them develop their skills. Create a protocol for when conflict arises, including when they should include HR, along with best practices.

Finally, be sure to devote time to building your own conflict management and active listening skills. DiBella recommends LinkedIn Learning, which offers training for anyone who’s interested. HR and managers can focus on de-escalation strategies and mediation, while employees might look for training on how to be successful as part of a team. SHRM is also offering a one-day live online program on June 20 called “Conflict Mediation: Inspiring Positive Outcomes.”

“While I may be a solo practitioner, I have many wonderful HR professionals I can reach out to,” DiBella said. “I also have organizations that provide me with training and resources that help me navigate whatever situation I am dealing with. Because of this, I don’t really have to face anything alone.” 

KRISTIN FLETCHER is a senior specialist, B2C content, at SHRM.



The Growing Role of Foreign-Born Workers

Many factors have led to robust immigration, increasing U.S. workforce representation.

BY JUSTIN LADNER

Throughout American history, immigration has waxed and waned repeatedly, impacting how foreign-born workers contribute to the U.S. workforce. Although the number of immigrants arriving each year varies, in recent decades, immigration to the U.S. has typically been strong. As a result, there has been a

corresponding rise in the share of foreign-born workers in the U.S. workforce.

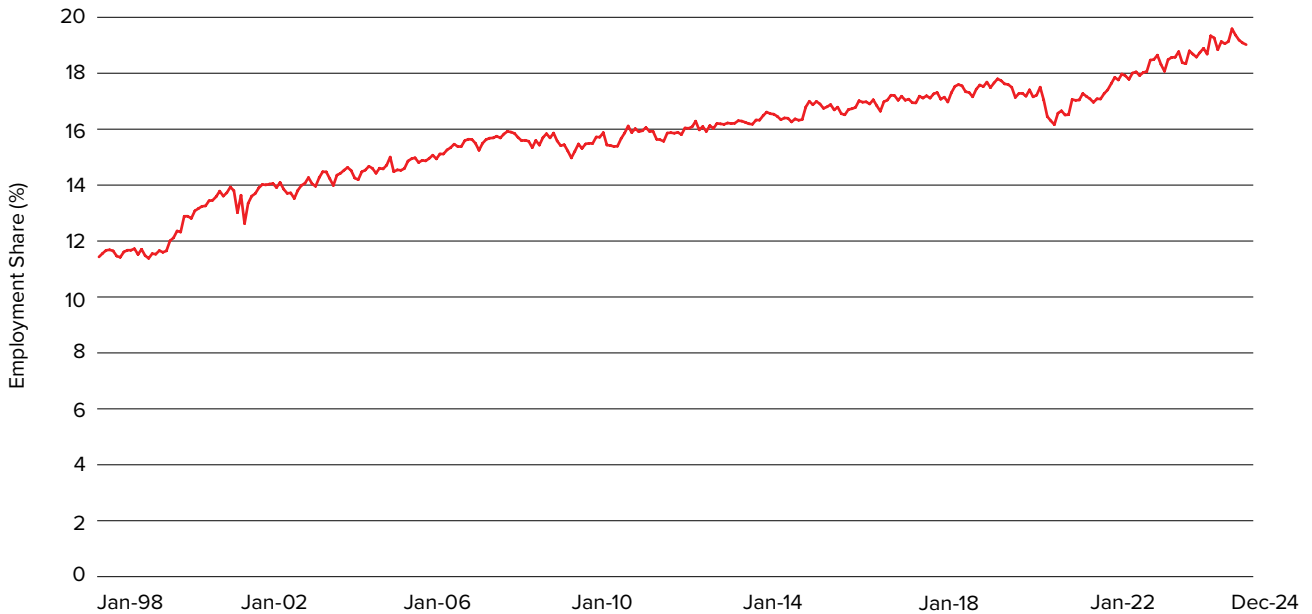
Evolving Trends in Immigration

In the 21st century, a variety of factors have led to this robust immigration to the U.S. Higher levels of immigration have

substantially increased the percentage of U.S. workers who are foreign-born. In fact, this share rose from 11.4% in January 1998 to 19.1% in December 2024, a dramatic rise in just 27 years.

Although the role of foreign-born people in U.S. employment has clearly been growing over time, it's worth noting

Figure 1
Growth of the Foreign-Born Employment Share



SOURCE: January 1998–December 2024 CPS basic monthly microdata downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipmus.org). Data is not separately adjusted.

that this growth has been uneven, largely due to shifting economic and/or social conditions in both the U.S. and in origin countries.

For example, the foreign-born share of U.S. employment rose rapidly in the early 2000s, only to reverse and stall (and even decline slightly) during the Great Recession in 2007-2009. However, the share resumed rising with economic recovery in the 2010s — until it again fell sharply in the initial phase of the pandemic. This brief lull was followed by an immigration boom. As a result, the share of U.S. workers who are foreign-born increased from 16.2% in June 2020 to 19.1% in December 2024.

Although foreign-born people have become an increasingly important source of labor in general, their representation varies substantially by occupational group. More than one-third of all workers were foreign-born (on average) in three major occupational groups in 2024:

- Building/grounds cleaning/maintenance: 39.7%.
- Farming/fishing/forestry: 39.5%.
- Construction/extraction: 35.6%.

Foreign-born workers also accounted for at least one-fifth of employment in seven additional groups — computer/mathematical, food preparation/serving, production, health care support, transportation/material moving, personal care/service, and life/physical/social science — that collectively span a wide range of skill sets.

On the other end of the spectrum, the share of foreign-born workers is comparatively low in careers such as protective service; legal; community and social service; and educational instruction and library occupations. However, even in these groups, foreign-born workers accounted for at least 1 in 12 workers, on average, in 2024.

Why It Matters

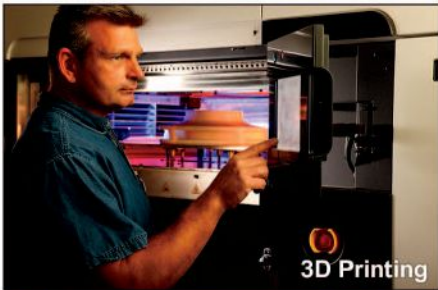
What does the growing role of foreign-born people in U.S. employment mean, and what should we expect going forward? Uncertain economic conditions around the world and changes in U.S. immigration policy make this question difficult to answer in the short term. However, looking decades into the future, it is clear that foreign-born labor will be essential to U.S. labor supply growth.

Due to the long-term trend of population aging, growth in the number of people ages 25 to 54 — commonly referred to as “prime working age” — in the U.S. has slowed considerably in the 21st century. Because prime-working-age people are an



The share of U.S. workers who are foreign-born increased from 16.2% in June 2020 to 19.1% in December 2024. Although foreign-born people have become an increasingly important source of labor ... their representation varies substantially by occupational group.

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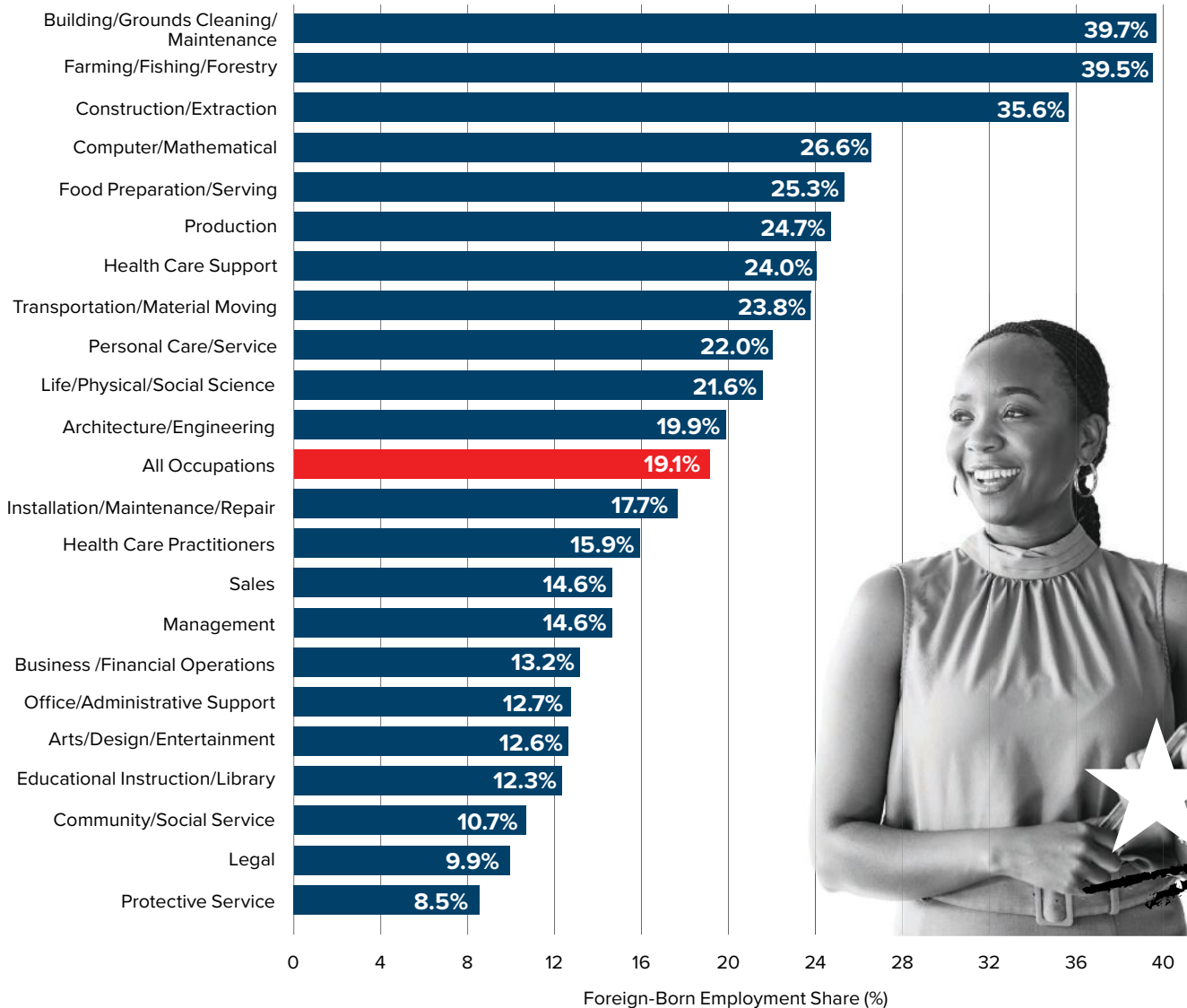


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* Apprenticeship Works is funded entirely through a \$7.1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor - Employment & Training Administration.

Figure 2
2024 Average Foreign-Born Employment Share, by Major Occupational Group



SOURCE: Calculations based on January to December 2024 CPS basic monthly microdata downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

especially prominent group in the workforce, this slowdown has also dampened labor supply growth and contributed to an ongoing labor shortage.

As fertility rates fall, the number of native-born Americans reaching prime working age is becoming increasingly insufficient to replace the flow of older Americans leaving the workforce. As such, immigration levels will play a dominant role in determining future prime-working-age population growth (and, by extension, growth in the overall labor supply). In

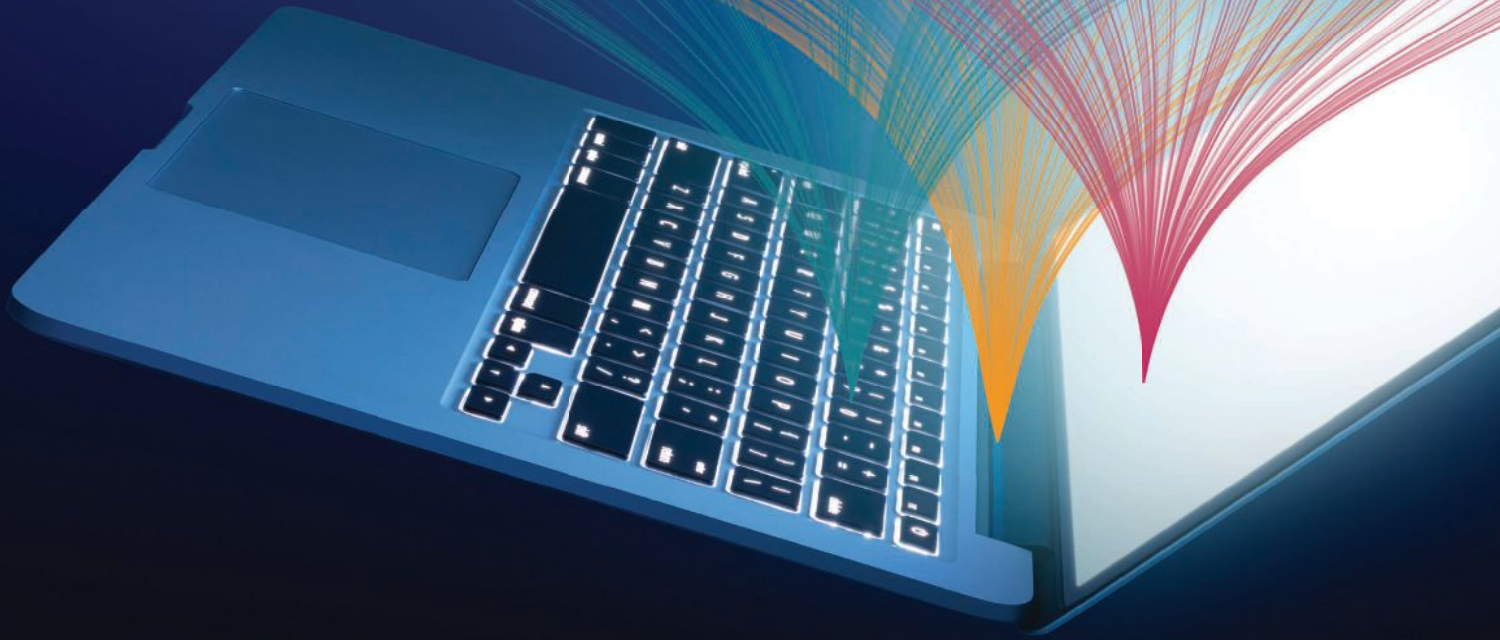
fact, the prime-working-age population is projected to decline rapidly after the mid-2030s in a no-immigration scenario.

Although conditions have improved since the wildly overheated conditions of the pandemic-era labor market, the U.S. continues to face a persistent labor shortage. As a result, attracting and retaining talent remains a fundamental challenge for HR professionals across a wide range of industries. Any long-term solution to this shortage must be multifaceted, including providing robust reskilling/

upskilling programs, adopting labor-saving technology, and tapping underutilized talent pools.

As crucial as these tools are, however, immigration remains the most readily available method for quickly increasing labor supply. For this reason, foreign-born workers are poised to play a critical and growing role in the U.S. workforce for decades to come. [IR](#)

JUSTIN LADNER is a senior labor economist at SHRM.



How Talent Intelligence Is Redefining HR with Data

AI-powered analytics make skills-based HR possible.

BY ROY MAURER

Talent intelligence tools used to analyze workforce data will be vital in redirecting the future of work away from rigid roles and toward dynamic, skills-focused talent management.

Traditional HR management systems, limited by data silos, are being

enhanced by — and may someday be eclipsed by — solutions that analyze massive amounts of employee and external workforce data to provide key insights into workers and skills.

“Talent intelligence empowers businesses to make informed decisions

regarding talent acquisition, retention, development, and engagement,” said Madeline Laurano, founder and chief analyst at Aptitude Research, a Boston-based human capital management research and advisory firm. “It provides the foresight and adaptability necessary to navigate



He contrasted it with traditional HR technology, which was built around a job-centric structure and did not effectively consider skills and employee mobility, thus falling short on delivering the tools needed to manage today's workforce.

The older systems "prevented the evolution of dynamic organizations where people are matched with the right opportunities based on their skills and capabilities, rather than solely on their job experience," Bersin said. "Talent intelligence gives companies deep understanding of an employee's skills, interests, career trajectory, geographic preferences, certifications, and technologies they know, as well as experience in leadership, industries, and types of companies."

It's also one of the fastest-growing categories of HR technology, Laurano said, with the potential to impact how organizations approach talent acquisition and management, as well as how workers take advantage of career opportunities.

"The interest in talent intelligence [technology] is clearly driven by HR leadership," she said.

A study published in 2024 by Aptitude Research found that 84% of CHROs saw talent intelligence as a top priority.

Defining Talent Intelligence

One of the fundamental challenges with talent intelligence technology has been the lack of agreement and awareness about what the term means. Only 28% of companies showed they had a clear understanding of what the technology is, according to the Aptitude Research survey.

"The simple way to think about it is the ability to use AI to analyze your people data," said Sachit Kamat, chief product officer at Eightfold, a talent intelligence

technology company in Santa Clara, Calif. "It involves collecting and unifying the people data that organizations have, including candidate and employee data, and effectively using the data to make effective business decisions. The ability for HR to see across the dozens of systems containing employee data is a complex undertaking. Talent intelligence allows you to organize this data and provide access to employees' skills and capabilities, and then to use that data to make decisions."

AI has been the key to being able to make workforce decisions at scale, he said.

Conventional HR management systems are important for maintaining HR operations, payroll, and compliance, but they typically do not deliver insights for strategic decision-making, Laurano said.

"A talent intelligence platform is a dynamic and sophisticated tool that extends far beyond the capabilities of a traditional HR system," she said. That's because the technology:

- Transforms data into actionable insights.
- Leverages predictive analytics to forecast future workforce trends.
- Uses AI and machine learning to deliver personalized insights.
- Often incorporates external data sources, such as market trends, competitor analysis, and economic indicators, to provide a holistic view of workforce opportunities and challenges.

The Use Cases for Talent Intelligence

Bersin explained that talent intelligence tech got its start in recruiting but is now being used for internal mobility, skills development, leadership assessment, and performance management.

"It can actually help determine an individual's performance by comparing internal operational data against their peers," he said. "It can also be used for pay equity analysis, organizational design, and job analysis, where an individual's or a team's skills can be compared to other jobs and other teams across the company."

When you tap into external data, Bersin added, you can perform an assessment of your company's skills and capabilities against competitors, pick up on

uncertainties and capitalize on opportunities in a dynamic business environment, ultimately paving the way for sustained growth and success."

Josh Bersin, an HR technology analyst and CEO of The Josh Bersin Co. in Oakland, Calif., said that talent intelligence technology is one of the most significant innovations to emerge from AI and will be one of the biggest disruptions to HR technology in decades.

Talent intelligence can aid in workforce planning by providing insights into future talent needs and potential skills gaps.

— MADELINE LAURANO





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"Talent intelligence is not a point solution," Laurano said, meaning it is not designed to address a sole issue. Instead, there are many use cases for it, but it is instrumental in recruiting and workforce planning.

"By analyzing data on potential candidates, such as their skills and career trajectories, organizations can identify the best-fit candidates for specific roles," she said. "This enables recruiters to optimize their search efforts, improve candidate experience, and enhance the overall quality of their hires. Additionally, talent intelligence can aid in workforce planning by providing insights into future talent needs and potential skills gaps, allowing organizations to proactively address staffing challenges and align their workforce with long-term business objectives."

The technology can also play a crucial role in talent management and retention by analyzing performance data, employee feedback, and career progression patterns to identify high-potential employees and create targeted development plans to nurture their growth, Laurano said.

Moving the Needle on Skills-Based HR

Talent intelligence technology would most benefit skills evaluation, said employers in the Aptitude Research study.

"The skills gap issue has been a topic for chief human resource officers for many years," Kamat said. "It has generally been talked about at a high level, but with talent intelligence, that conversation is brought down from the 10,000-foot level to ground zero, where skills can be precisely identified."

It can take years for an organization to build a skills taxonomy.

"Most skills and competency libraries were created manually by HR professionals," Laurano said. "This required a significant time commitment and often would face roadblocks. Building or developing a skills taxonomy is often



where companies get stuck. It can leave even the most sophisticated HR leaders feeling overwhelmed and frustrated."

Without technology to support these efforts, employers face several challenges, including having to consistently update the taxonomies to reflect changes

in the business or in the labor market; dealing with multiple taxonomies; and relying on manual updates, which are vulnerable to errors.

"Unlike the competency modeling of the past, skills are not static words associated with a job description," Bersin said. "In today's world, we need to know [the] trending skills of our competitors, emerging skills in existing roles, and various skills needed in management, sales, and other nontechnical roles."

Talent intelligence solutions are becoming the global systems of record for skills — in the company, at competitors, and in the larger marketplace, Bersin said. "This data is the lifeline of the entire skills strategy." [HR](#)



Unlike the competency modeling of the past, skills are not static words associated with a job description.

— JOSH BERSIN

ROY MAURER is a senior specialist, B2C content, at SHRM.



Attack Lawful Incivility

If incivility isn't based on a protected characteristic, it might generally be lawful — but it's still pricey. Here are ways to prevent and remedy it.

BY JONATHAN A. SEGAL

Certain instances of workplace incivility might be permitted by the law, but such behavior has enormous costs for businesses: \$2.7 billion per day, collectively, in absenteeism and reduced productivity, according to SHRM's Q4 2024 Civility Index. In an effort to shrink those costs, employer programs to prevent and remedy unlawful harassment can also go a long way toward avoiding and deterring lawful incivility, defined as abusive, hostile, disrespectful, impolite, or rude conduct that does not have a link to a protected characteristic.

Ripple Effects from Biden Administration

On Jan. 16, during the last days of the Biden administration, then-National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) General Counsel Jennifer Abruzzo wrote a memo — rescinded Feb. 14 pending further guidance — on harmonizing the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and equal employment opportunity laws.

“First and foremost, I emphasize that workplace civility rules are completely distinct from anti-harassment policies,” she wrote. Abruzzo is no longer in office.

However, promoting civility is a critical step toward preventing harassment — which is why the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's training to prevent harassment focuses on respect, akin to civility.

For these reasons, among others, any robust workplace programs designed to prevent harassment should address civility.

That is despite the puzzling case of *Stericycle, Inc.*, 372 NLRB No. 113 (2023). There, the NLRB effectively said that a work rule — even one saying “treat each other with civility and respect” — is pre-



sumed illegal if it would have a reasonable tendency to discourage employees from engaging in NLRA-protected activity, such as protesting unfair labor practices. This standard is likely to be overruled during the Trump administration.

Tell Managers What to Avoid

Consider this hypothetical: A manager yells at an employee for not meeting their expectations. If that hostile conduct is directed at the worker because of their sex, race, or another protected characteristic, then

Employer programs to prevent and remedy unlawful harassment can also go a long way toward avoiding and deterring lawful incivility.

it could be contributing to an unlawful hostile work environment. However, if the manager yells at all subordinates not meeting the manager's expectations — without regard to their sex, race, or other protected characteristics — then the conduct, while inappropriate, is generally legal.

Every responsible employer should provide training on unlawful harassment to managers and supervisors. To be effective, however, training should go beyond general labels and include specific examples of harassing conduct that managers must avoid — for example, “jokes” that make fun of, demean, or stereotype a protected group. Additionally, the employer should make clear that, even if lawful, any type of harassment is unacceptable.

As part of this management training, companies should include specific examples of uncivil conduct that must be avoided, even if there is no link to a protected group, such as yelling at an employee because they are a poor performer (and not because of any protected characteristic).

As for other employees, Abruzzo's January memo gave two suggestions for minimizing the risk of addressing civility with employees covered by the NLRA.

- **Don't require civility without explaining what it means.** Provide concrete illustrations of what incivility looks like. Specific examples teach employees about what types of conduct they should avoid.
- **Include a clear disclaimer that the work on civility is not intended to prohibit or interfere with NLRA rights.** The memo has excellent language at the end of the section on civility for employers to borrow in their own policies.

Otherwise Substantiated?

When it comes to investigations, in most organizations, the employer's ultimate finding falls within one of three categories: substantiated, unsubstantiated, or inconclusive. Where does uncivil conduct unrelated to a protected characteristic fit within this framework?

Let's say that an employee, Diane, alleges that she has been subject to uncivil

To be effective, however, training should go beyond general labels and include specific examples of harassing conduct that managers must avoid.


conduct because of her religion. Diane has encouraged co-workers to attend church with her, and her boss has told Diane to “mind your own [expletive] business and get back to work.” After looking into it, her employer concludes that Diane has been disrespected — not because of her religion but because her boss is rude to all workers. Most likely, the employer would treat the complaint as unfounded within this framework.

This finding may do more than simply diminish the legitimacy of Diane's concerns. Just having three categories of investigation results may let the manager off scot-free for inappropriate, though lawful, behavior.

For this reason, employers might consider adding a fourth category to their investigatory framework: “otherwise substantiated.”

Within this category, an employer could include investigatory findings of uncivil or otherwise inappropriate conduct, even if the behavior does not violate the employer's harassment policy because the conduct has no legal tie.

This fourth category not only allows the employer to censure incivility when there is no legal connection, but it also makes it less likely that the censure may be seen as carrying a legal admission.

Stopping incivility in the workforce isn't easy. Increasing training and adjusting investigation procedures may not end incivility in the workplace, but these steps can make it less common. 

JONATHAN A. SEGAL is a partner at Duane Morris in Philadelphia.

THE ESSENTIAL PLAYBOOK FOR NAVIGATING NEW REALITIES FOR TODAY'S WORKING WOMEN

From addressing caregiving challenges to offering tailored benefits packages, HR plays a key role in dismantling the career roadblocks women face in 2025.

BY PATRICIA FITZGERALD

Today's working women aren't the first to struggle with gender-related inequities in how they're recruited, treated, evaluated, paid, and promoted. But they could be among the last to fight these battles — *if* organizations do what's right for both their workforce and their business objectives.

HR professionals can lead the way by going beyond expressions of sympathy and applying actionable strategies with a nuanced, tailored approach.

“It’s been taboo to talk about issues like menstruation, motherhood, and child care,” said Tina Beaty, chief brand and marketing officer at SHRM. “It’s become culturally acceptable for organizations to collectively turn inward, defining ‘women’s issues’ as those that are personal to the individual. It’s a reality that no one is talking about, but we are all living.”

Organizations can no longer afford to ignore issues affecting women or see them as secondary to other priorities. Soon, women are going to be the majority in the U.S. talent pipeline.

“They are coming in droves and droves,” Beaty continued, noting that the number of working women is projected to increase by 4.65 million by 2031, according to the U.S. Bureau

of Labor Statistics. “And they are expected to control more wealth than ever before — to the tune of \$34 trillion, by some estimates — gaining more power and influence.”

THE WHAT AND THE WHY

Conversations are the first step toward systemic change. But what are those “women’s issues” that aren’t being discussed — at all, enough, or with sufficient clarity?

Motherhood and its associated physiological fundamentals are at the top of Beaty’s list because “women are responsible for continuing the human race,” she said.

Even women who don’t have children are subject to many of the same workplace misperceptions and biases as those who do. After all, mothers and nonmothers alike

THE NUMBER OF U.S. WORKING WOMEN IS PROJECTED TO INCREASE BY 4.65 MILLION BY 2031.

contend with the slings and arrows of the menstrual cycle before transitioning to a new set of physical challenges in menopause. For generations, the symptoms and treatments associated with these life stages were rarely discussed in polite company, but that's beginning to change.

MENOPAUSE

Around 17% of employers provide menopause-specific support, such as counseling and education, according to the SHRM 2024 Employee Benefits Survey while 2% offer menopause or menstrual leave above what is already covered by regular sick time. However, there's clearly a disconnect between offerings and what women want: 64% of working women are seeking menopause-specific benefits, according

to a 2023 Bank of America report, *Break Through the Stigma: Menopause in the Workplace*.

The fear factor seems to drive this disconnect. More than half of women in the Bank of America study indicated they don't feel comfortable discussing menopause in the workplace "because it feels too personal," while others expressed concerns about being perceived as "old" and being judged or disrespected by peers. This reaffirms the need for HR to take the lead in creating safe, supportive environments that encourage women to share their needs.

The report's other findings make a compelling case for greater support: Women who have access to menopause-specific benefits were significantly more likely to recommend their company as a great place to work, as well as freely promote their employer's products and services. Perhaps more importantly,

40% of respondents with access to these benefits said this support enabled them to bring their best selves to work.

CAREGIVING

Policies that support women in their frequent role as chief family caregiver are also crucial in today's workplace.

"Organizations don't acknowledge that many women have a job outside of their career. Work in the office is a *second* job," said Heather Cole, SHRM-CP, a talent acquisition and development leader in the Boston area. She noted that women with families rarely experience work/life integration the same way their male counterparts do: "Away from 'work,' we are always managing children, pets, the house."

The SHRM 2024 Employee Benefits Survey found that employers are starting to recognize this: They cited flexible working options and family-friendly benefits as two of the top five most important benefits they offer. There's still room for improvement, especially with maternity leave policies and laws, but those represent the tip of a massive iceberg.

When the rising costs of safe, quality child care mean that a mother can't afford to return to the workforce without risking financial instability, organizations can also pay a price. Consequences may include losses in knowledge base, continuity of performance standards, morale, future recruitment, and ongoing talent development. That's why Ciera Parks, SHRM-CP, founder and CEO of CWC Human Resources in Towson, Md., includes child care costs as a top problem holding back women.

Parks acknowledged that most organizations have little or no control over child care costs — which are increasing along with most other goods and services — and the issue is not new. Annual costs for full-day child care for one child ranged from \$6,552 to \$15,600 in 2022, according to data from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). The DOL also reported in 2024 that maternal employment had returned to pre-pandemic levels for most groups, but it noted that the overall employment rate of mothers with children under 13 (71.7%) remains much lower than that of fathers with children under 13 (92%).

The DOL also noted that child care availability is more limited than before, with many providers closing permanently during the pandemic. Today's child care crisis is one that organizations can't afford to ignore and should address with creative solutions to avoid devastating losses in workforce participation.

In addition, many women in their 40s and 50s — a time when they may be at the peak of their professional careers — face "sandwich generation" challenges, providing care for aging parents while also raising school-age children.

According to a 2023 New York Life Wealth Watch survey, sandwich generation adults (women and men) spend 22 hours per week providing care for aging relatives and 28 hours per week providing care for children under 18. Add in a 40-hour paid workweek, and these caregivers are carrying a punishing mental and emotional load that often requires sacrifices in

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personal wellness and professional achievements. Costs for aging adult care, such as in-home nurses or assisted living facilities, may add to financial strain, and, if unaddressed, these challenges may make it difficult for organizations to retain valuable contributors in their workforce.

Parks lamented the return-to-work mandates that are removing much of the flexibility that helped working women juggle caregiving responsibilities.

A 2019 field experiment from ResumeGo found that job applicants with EMPLOYMENT GAPS were



45%
LESS LIKELY

to receive an interview opportunity.

“Women are chronically pulled in multiple directions, with no space to care for themselves,” Parks said. “This can lead to burnout, which, in turn, typically results in declines in performance, loss of focus, and an inability to show up wholly.”

RESUME GAPS

Women can face professional consequences — including compensation penalties — when they return to the workforce after an extended period of caregiving. Too often, resume gaps of any kind are viewed with suspicion and result in scrutiny of an applicant’s personal choices that have nothing to do with their professional competencies and skills.

Even when a career gap is explained, those related to family concerns are most typically penalized during the recruitment process. A 2019 field experiment from ResumeGo found that job applicants with employment gaps were 45% less likely to receive an interview opportunity. The interview offers increased when candidates provided a reason for the break, but the callback rates were higher when the explanations were receiving training or education (8.5%) or attending to health issues (6.7%) rather than supporting family members (6.2%) or raising a family (5.8%).

OTHER INEQUITIES AND BIASES

Setting aside issues related to family, women also contend with other gender-based inequities and biases in the workplace, including:

- Double standards for performance, expectations, and behaviors.
- Disparities in opportunities for mentorship or promotion.
- Inequitable pay.

Additionally, women are often overqualified but underemployed, whether they’re working full-time or taking a career break to pursue degrees, certificates, and other educational options. “These are highly qualified women who are overlooked for promotion opportunities,” Parks explained. “They’ve checked all the boxes — are overtrained and over-webinar-ed — but are still not climbing the ladder in a way that’s equitable with men.”

Women in Leadership: Unequal Access on the Journey to the Top, a 2022 report, found that female managers were less likely than their male counterparts (40% versus 48%) to have reached their current role by being promoted internally, and only 61% of women said their manager encourages them to grow in their career, compared to 71% of men. Also discouraging: The *Women in the Workplace 2024* report from

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— TINA BEATY

Lean In and McKinsey & Company revealed that companies have scaled way back on programs designed to advance women, with only 37% offering such programs in 2024, compared with 48% in 2022.

Women are also penalized for perceived weaknesses that could be — and should be — seen as strengths.

“I will always say ‘yes’ when asked,” said Cole. “My capacity to handle more is greater, [yet] the expectations to perform just get higher — and it’s not the same for men.”

That perception extends to stress reactions. “I was told by a CEO that I was too much of an emotional responder,” Cole recounted. “What he was saying was, ‘Don’t be such a girl.’ But I refused to apologize for showing my very real, raw reactions. My reaction didn’t make me less effective or less professional.”

This disheartening litany of challenges isn’t necessarily new, “but what is new is the lens that leaders are now applying in considering how to address them,” Beaty said. “We’re finally giving these issues their due recognition.”

THE PLAYBOOK

The push for change has to start somewhere, and that place should be human resources.

“HR has so much power and influence here,” Beaty said. “HR can be the convener, creating bridges. I’m excited that we have an opportunity as a society to dismantle the rhetoric and plan for ways to support women.”

But it won’t be easy. “There is no silver bullet,” she added. “It is, however, the next level of looking at diverse thinking. It needs to be tackled one on one — everyone you interact with, whether it’s a mentee, a colleague, or a supervisor — with the commitment of saying, ‘I’m here, and we’re going to do this.’ It’s about being solutions-forward. That’s how we will create systemic change.”

HR professionals can address women’s issues in ways that will foster growth and retention, creating a culture where they can thrive. Here’s a starter guide:

COLLECT THE DATA

As always, data drives decisions. Each “why” and “how” needs to be examined through a business lens. How will these changes support the bottom line?

“Data helps to make the case for changed priorities,” Parks said. “Every leader speaks data. If you can show in data, and in dollars and cents, that this is something we need to do, most people will have interest in making it happen.”

To identify issues that affect talent development and retention, start with an employee engagement survey. “Depending on budget, it can be as formal or as informal as you want,” Parks said. Measuring turnover metrics is critical, as well: Review who left and why over the past 18 months.

The Women in the Workplace 2024 report from Lean In and McKinsey & Company revealed that companies have scaled way back on programs designed to advance women, with only

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FIND CLARITY IN POLICIES AND COMMUNICATIONS

As an HR professional, you must embody your CEO’s organizational vision, Beaty said. “Take time to articulate your tonality and be mindful of how it manifests with the benefits package, employee communications, and external messages about your brand.”

It's critical that a leader also make a documented commitment to supporting women in the workplace, such as in the form of a workplace policy, Parks said. She's found policy development to be even more important than education and training. "If it's written well — and if it's followed — your policy will be the North Star," she said.

TAILOR YOUR BENEFITS PACKAGE

A benefits package that provides overt support to women, especially for family caregiving and a woman's life stages, can be a powerful recruiting tool. While some may hesitate at the costs above and beyond standard packages, Beaty dismissed such arguments, noting that such benefits can be equated with a signing bonus or company car.

Consider the findings of the Bank of America study on menopause: The benefits most wanted by respondents were an official policy for menopause (ranked No. 1), insurance-covered hormone replacement therapy (No. 2), and access

to menopause-specific health professionals (No. 3). A cost analysis is likely to show a higher value in recruitment and retention than the price tag for these three elements.

Put your insurance broker to the test. Request information on new benefits, as well as top benefits requested by peer organizations with a similar profile.

HR teams should also avoid a one-size-fits-all mentality. "If I have a client with 67% of employees composed of women in their childbearing years, that benefits package is going to be different than what I'd recommend for a mostly male workforce in a construction company," Parks said.

TRAIN FOR CHANGE

Some organizations have looked to inclusion and diversity (I&D) initiatives to effectively address women's issues. "But many of these efforts have lost their way, and they are not producing the results anyone wants," Beaty said. "Let's leave those behind and look at creating opportunities for all to drive business forward."

If you purchased, paid, and/or provided reimbursement for some or all of the purchase price of Seroquel XR or quetiapine fumarate ER 50 mg, 150 mg, 200 mg, and/or 300 mg tablets, you could get money from a settlement.

YOUR LEGAL RIGHTS MAY BE AFFECTED

There are proposed Settlements in a class action lawsuit filed against AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals LP and AstraZeneca UK Limited (collectively, "AstraZeneca") and Handa Pharmaceuticals, LLC ("Handa") (together with AstraZeneca, "Defendants"). The lawsuit alleges that AstraZeneca and Handa unlawfully kept 50 mg, 150 mg, 200 mg, and 300 mg strengths of generic quetiapine fumarate ER (i.e., generic versions of Seroquel XR) off the market so third-party payors paid more for brand Seroquel XR and/or generic quetiapine fumarate ER than they should have. AstraZeneca and Handa deny they did anything wrong. There have been separate settlements with AstraZeneca and Handa. No one is claiming that Seroquel XR or quetiapine fumarate ER is unsafe.

Who is included in the Settlements? You may be included in the Settlements if you purchased, paid, and/or provided reimbursement for brand Seroquel XR or generic quetiapine fumarate ER and fall within the following definition: All entities that, for consumption by their members, employees, insureds, participants, or beneficiaries, purchased, paid, and/or provided reimbursement for some or all of the purchase price of Seroquel XR or quetiapine fumarate ER 50 mg, 150 mg, 200 mg, and/or 300 mg tablets, other than for resale, in Arizona, Arkansas, California, the District of Columbia, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Vermont, West Virginia, or Wisconsin, at any time from September 5, 2015, through and until December 9, 2024.

Excluded from the Class are (i) Defendants and their subsidiaries and affiliates and (ii) federal and state governmental entities.

A more detailed notice, including the full Settlement Class definition and who is not included, is available at www.SeroquelXRantitrustSettlement.com.

What do the Settlements provide? AstraZeneca and Handa will pay \$5 million and \$475,000, respectively, into a Settlement Fund that will pay (1) money to eligible Class Members that submit a timely and valid Claim Form; (2) notice and administration costs; (3) service awards to the class representatives who brought the lawsuit; and (4) attorneys' fees, costs, and expenses. The full text of the proposed Settlement Agreements are available at www.SeroquelXRantitrustSettlement.com.

How can you get a payment? If you believe you are a Class Member and want to obtain a share of the Settlement Fund, you will need to complete and return a Claim Form. The amount of your payment will depend on the amount you

purchased of Seroquel XR and/or generic quetiapine fumarate ER in 50 mg, 100 mg, 200 mg, and 300 mg strengths and the number of timely and valid Claim Forms that are filed. The Claim Form and information on how to submit one are available on the settlement website at www.SeroquelXRantitrustSettlement.com. A Claim Form must be postmarked (if mailed) or received (if submitted online) on or before **June 9, 2025**.

What are your rights and options? Do nothing: By doing nothing, you are bound by the Settlements with AstraZeneca and Handa, and you give up any rights to sue Defendants separately about the same legal claims in this lawsuit.

Ask to be excluded: You have the right to exclude yourself (i.e., to opt out) from the AstraZeneca and/or Handa Settlement(s) no later than **February 24, 2025**. If you ask to be excluded, you will not share in these Settlements, but you would keep any rights to sue Defendants separately about the same legal claims in this lawsuit. Requirements for requesting exclusion are found in Question 10 of the Long-Form Notice, which is available at www.SeroquelXRantitrustSettlement.com, including the requirement that you provide data reflecting your purchases, payments, and/or reimbursements for 50 mg, 150 mg, 200 mg, and 300 mg strengths of Seroquel XR and generic quetiapine fumarate ER.

Object to the Settlement(s): If you do not exclude yourself from a Settlement, you have the right to object to that Settlement but must do so no later than **February 24, 2025**. The Long-Form Notice on the settlement website has instructions on how to opt out or object.

The Court will hold a hearing on **April 23, 2025**, to decide whether to approve the Settlements, the plan for allocating the Settlement Fund to Class Members, a request for payment of attorneys' fees of up to 33⅓% of the Settlement Fund, plus costs and expenses, and service awards to the class representatives. You or your own lawyer may appear and speak at the hearing at your own expense. The Court may amend the deadlines in this Notice or the hearing date (and time). Check the website below for updates.

Want more information? Visit www.SeroquelXRantitrustSettlement.com, call 1-888-884-8072, email info@SeroquelXRantitrustSettlement.com, or write to the Claims Administrator at P.O. Box 5017, Portland, OR 97208-5017. The deadlines contained in this Notice may be amended by court order, so check the settlement website for any updates. Please do not call the Court or the Clerk of Court for information about the Settlements.

SHRM'S RESOURCES FOR WORKING WOMEN

Did you know SHRM offers initiatives, events, and tools to support women in the workplace?



SHRM LINKAGE

Focused on the empowerment and advancement of women in the workplace, SHRM Linkage offers unique datasets, actionable insights, and cutting-edge products to address critical talent challenges.

SHRM LINKAGE INSTITUTE

Register your team for this inspiring event, taking place Sept. 27-30 in San Diego and virtually. The immersive professional development experience will feature small-group learning, tailored assessments, and inspirational speakers, all aimed at advancing women leaders.



MEMBERS-ONLY TOOLS

Toolkit: Supporting Employees with Dependent and Elder Care Responsibilities

Toolkit: What You Need to Know About Pregnancy Discrimination and Accommodations

Policy Templates: Menopause Leave and Menstrual Leave



To make a difference, an organization needs to go beyond “simply checking a box,” as Parks described it.

However, programming that may fall under the umbrella of I&D training can effectively address some of the unique challenges faced by working women, Cole said. She noted examples including emotional intelligence, leadership, executive presence, and sensitivity training.

LEVERAGE DIFFERENCES

HR teams can champion women’s unique strengths and explore how to reframe job responsibilities in ways that take full advantage of these skill sets. For example, women often become multitasking experts by necessity.

Those with families often take on much of a household’s mental load: the invisible cognitive and emotional effort required for coordinating tasks, responsibilities, and relationships. An individual’s mental load goes beyond tasks — as those can be delegated to others — and might include keeping a running grocery list in their head, being aware of their mother-in-law’s birthday, or knowing their child needs a packed lunch for a field trip that week.

“How can organizations translate that?” Cole asked. “Maybe women can stretch in new directions and ways they never considered.”

It’s important, however, to avoid any expectation that women must do more, simply because they can. Capitalizing on a woman’s capacity for multitasking shouldn’t mean taking advantage of her time and bandwidth. But it might introduce a mutually agreeable compromise, such as allowing


her to work from home during nontraditional work hours. HR becomes the policy broker here, fostering solutions-oriented collaboration.

“The employee should feel empowered to say, ‘I am here to give 110%, but I need to integrate personal priorities at certain times,’” Beaty said. “The employer should have the awareness to say, ‘I do have a high need of your time and attention, but we can explore ways to give you that integration of work and life.’ The symbiotic relationship needs to be OK to talk about.”

THE WORK BEGINS

Workplace culture begins and ends at the top of the organizational chart. But it’s the job of the HR team to collaborate with leadership to create change.

“Know your CEO’s top three priorities,” Beaty advised. “They are probably a mix of financial and office culture.” HR professionals can apply the lens of these priorities when devising plans to address women’s issues.

While Parks is committed to fostering change, she cautioned that “some things can’t live and die in the HR bucket. If HR is the ‘owner’ of creating systemic change, it will never pick up outside the HR walls. The bigger lift has to come from everyone else. The main role for HR in these types of initiatives is to act as a facilitator and a resource, introducing the ideas to senior leaders — and anyone else who might be interested.” 

PATRICIA FITZGERALD is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.



MORE WOMEN ARE WORKING THAN EVER. WHAT DOES HR NEED TO DO NOW?

Women have reached record-high workforce participation rates, reshaping industries and gaining ground in historically male-dominated fields — but the climb is far from over.

BY ROY MAURER

IMAGES BY ISTOCK

Women have made tremendous gains in the U.S. workforce since the mid-20th century, when, decade after decade, increasing numbers of women identified having a career as equally — or even more — important as having a family.

Cut to 2024, when women in their prime working years — between 25 and 54 years old — reached their highest labor-force participation rate ever, surpassing the prior record hit in 2023.

Women now outnumber men among college-educated workers, are steadily moving to achieve parity with men at every level, and are increasing their presence in the highest-paying jobs in industries historically dominated by men.

Much of that progress has been due to changing societal expectations for women — especially wives and mothers — but credit should also be given to employers' efforts to support the advancement of women in the workplace. Yet, critical work remains.

Women remain underrepresented across senior management roles, with the disparity growing at each higher rung of the career ladder. Structural problems, such as biases and the challenge of balancing work and family, must be addressed for more women to thrive.

“This is the same conversation we’ve had for 50 years,” said Wendy Smith, professor of management at the Alfred Lerner College of Business & Economics and co-director of the Women’s Leadership Initiative at the University of Delaware in Newark. “We know the value of women and what it takes for women to be successful in the workplace, but for some reason, there are still these obstacles that prevent them from being most effective. Why can’t we get there?”

Experts agree that business and HR leaders can do more to improve organizational practices. Efforts should be made around recruiting, developing, and retaining women to ensure sustained progress and build a workplace culture that celebrates the strengths women bring to work.

Positive Data, Mixed Experiences

Today, women represent slightly less than half of all U.S. employees (47%), numbering about 80 million, compared to 90 million men, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. But women’s labor force participation is on the rise, especially among women in what are considered the prime-age working years. This is thanks, in part, to women more frequently prioritizing their careers and delaying starting families until later in their 30s or 40s, said Julia Pollak, chief economist at ZipRecruiter.

Since January 2024, about 78% of women ages 25-54 have participated in the labor force — which means either being employed or looking for work — compared with 89% of men from that age group. That number drops to 57% when all women over age 16 are included, compared to 68% of all men over age 16.

Previously, women’s overall labor force participation maxed out in 2000 before hitting a plateau, Pollak explained. It started to fall in the early 21st century but began to rise again in 2015. Then the pandemic hit, dealing working women a major setback, especially in front-line service roles such as retail, education, health care, and hospitality. Post-pandemic, however, women returned to work in full force, and now, their participation rate has well eclipsed pre-pandemic numbers.

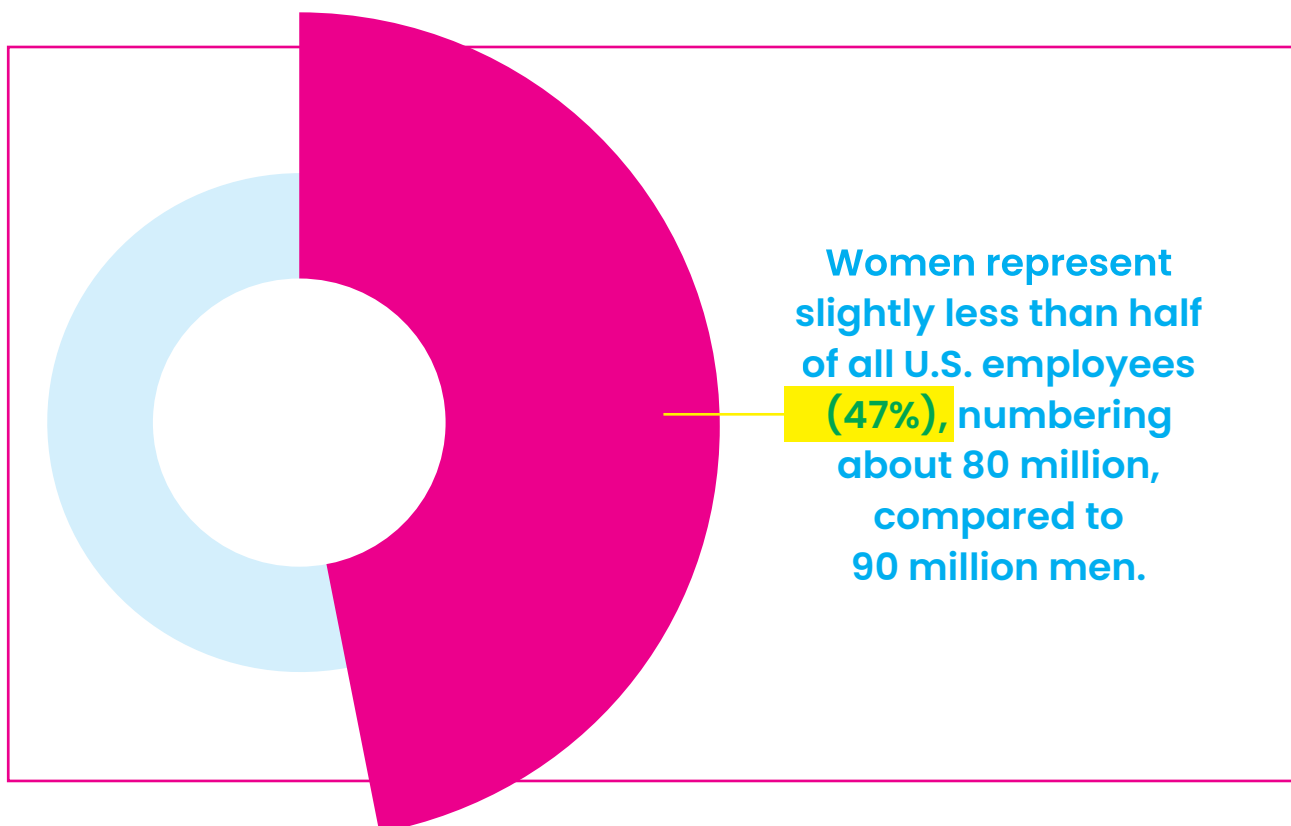
The potential for growth is high right now due to the combination of a tight labor market and demand for more talent, Pollak said.

“When you see unemployment at 4% or less, you see improvements in women’s labor force participation,” she said. “Employers cast a wider net, start actively recruiting nontraditional candidates, and offer more flexibility, creating conditions attractive enough for people on the margins of the labor force to dive into full employment.”

Pollak also pointed to future workforce trends favoring a boom for working women. “The fastest growing jobs — health care and service jobs — are dominated by women,” she said.

Women are also increasingly moving into traditionally male occupations such as IT, creating a cascading impact.

“When you go from having no women to even 10% to 15% women, it forces an HR change,” Pollak said. “Companies start



to think about how to support women in their organization. The culture becomes more inclusive. More women enter; more women are promoted and mentored and rise into leadership. In many industries, we have reached that initial tipping point.”

Megan McConnell, a partner at McKinsey & Company, noted that women’s representation has increased at every level of corporate management in the U.S. over the last decade. Women hold 29% of C-suite positions today, compared with just 17% in 2015, according to McKinsey & Company research. The numbers are even more dismal for women of color, who hold just 7% of current C-suite positions, a number that’s only gone up 4 percentage points since 2017.

“Women have made gains, but those gains are fragile,” McConnell said. “One challenge is that a lot of that progress came from external hiring instead of internal promotions. We haven’t yet cracked the code on internally promoting women.”

That’s particularly true for nonwhite women, Smith said, “and that points to structural barriers and biases.”

Barriers to Advancement

Experts point to long-standing issues including bias, sexism, and harassment as still negatively impacting women’s experiences at work.

“Male-dominated behaviors in corporate America make it harder for women to be their authentic selves at work,” said Chandra Robinson, vice president in the HR practice at Gartner.

The McKinsey & Company study found that many women are not satisfied with their career advancement because they feel they don’t get enough support from managers, said they miss out on growth and networking opportunities, and reported experiencing microaggressions at work, such as being talked over or having their ideas dismissed.

“More women than men believe that being a woman is going to hold them back in their career at some point,” McConnell said. “Many more women say that that has already happened. Women are still just as likely to be the only one of their gender in the room, especially at more senior levels, which could make them feel like they’re under additional scrutiny or not able to offer a different perspective.”

But the most pervasive obstacle to women’s career advancement in the U.S. is the lack of flexibility, which especially challenges working mothers.

“Taking care of the home and family remains the leading reason mothers don’t participate in the labor force,” said Stephanie Ferguson Melhorn, senior director of workforce and international labor policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Washington, D.C. She specifically cited the alarmingly high cost of child care. “Families often conclude it is better to have one parent remain home to provide that care, and the most common choice is the mother.”

Biological determinants and cultural norms do influence who dons the caretaker mantle, but employers also tip the scale through inflexibility, Pollak added.

“Where the option is 100% in-person work or no work and nothing offered in between, some women will drop out to raise

“Women have made gains, but those gains are fragile. ... We haven’t yet cracked the code on internally promoting women.”

— MEGAN MCCONNELL



their children,” she said. “That is why some industries remain male-dominated, even when the entry-level cohorts to that industry are more gender-balanced.”

HR’s Role in Women’s Workplace Success

HR can help foster a workplace culture that empowers women to succeed. That means championing inclusive hiring and promotions, cultivating allyship, offering flexibility and caregiving benefits, and supporting career development.

Robinson said that HR must first create an employee experience framework that recognizes employees as whole people. “Work is a subset of life, not separate from it,” she said.

Work/life harmonization is a top driver of attrition for women, though compensation certainly plays a role.

“HR can re-evaluate the company’s employee value proposition with women in mind,” Robinson suggested. They should “take a closer look at compensation, flexible work arrangements, incentives to join the organization and incentives to stay, ensuring employees have access to and are encouraged to pursue holistic well-being.”

Workplace Flexibility

The adoption of remote work is a key reason behind women’s return to the workforce since the pandemic, particularly for working mothers.

“Schedule flexibility is the area with the biggest opportunity,” Pollak said. “We’ve already seen it in some industries. Pharmacists have become a highly female occupation because the job allows for flexibility. Other industries could be organized with more flexibility in mind. Inflexible workplace culture really is an HR issue and requires creative HR solutions.”

McConnell said that flexible schedules and remote and hybrid work arrangements can benefit all working people, but particularly those with caregiving responsibilities.

“For women in ‘deskless’ frontline roles, scheduling predictability is as important as flexibility,” McConnell said. These roles include noncorporate positions with erratic schedules, such as nursing.

But flexibility can also come with pitfalls, experts caution.

“Women are more likely to take the at-home option, so be careful that you’re not leaving women behind when offering hybrid and remote work models,” said industrial-organizational psychologist Victoria Mattingly, founder and CEO of Mattingly Solutions, a workplace inclusion consulting firm in Pittsburgh. “Many times, people get rewarded because they are seen. Remote workers can be left out of in-person relationship building and collaboration, which can influence career advancement.”

Managers can avoid this by scheduling regular meetings with remote staff to get caught up and to fill them in on what is happening onsite as well as striving to keep remote employees engaged with interactions and team building.

“When you go from having no women to even 10% to 15% women, it forces an HR change.”

— JULIA POLLAK

The Power of Promotions

The single greatest factor that impedes greater gender diversity is promotion standards, according to McKinsey & Company research. These inconsistencies become concerning when you see entry-level cohorts that are split evenly among men and women, while men in later career stages are overrepresented in management.

“Companies are doing more to de-bias hiring practices and performance reviews but need to go further,” McConnell said. “Having internal mobility be much more systematic and formal would benefit women.”

McConnell recommended measuring and tracking the promotion and attrition rates for women, in addition to equipping managers to support women’s well-being, address disrespectful behavior, and push for career advancement.

“What types of protocols are you putting in place to ensure that when inequities in hiring and promotions show up, they are getting quickly identified and corrected?” Mattingly said. “Training is a good first step, but accountability and bias mitigation is needed.”

“IQ is important up to a certain point in one’s career, but EQ — or emotional intelligence — is critical the more you advance up the career ladder.”

— VICTORIA MATTINGLY

Stronger Together

Establishing strong professional networks is a key way to further employees’ growth, as well as boost collaboration, productivity, and retention. Nurturing a culture of mentorship within the workplace holds immense value and significance. “It’s been proven that women who cultivate great mentors and allies are the most successful,” Smith said.

Mentorship programs can help women navigate and accelerate their career paths. Mentored women, in turn, mentor others, creating a virtuous cycle that fosters continuous learning and development for everyone involved. A robust mentorship program can also help attract and retain more women to an organization and ensure a pipeline of well-prepared women for succession planning.

Mattingly differentiated between mentors and allies — or, to use a more updated term, active advocates.

“An ally is someone who uses their power to advocate for and support someone who is not like them — it is a largely untapped area,” she said. “As long as women’s barriers in the workplace remain a woman’s issue, it is never going to be solved. If we have more higher-placed men, we need to actively involve them in gender-equity efforts if we are ever going to see progress.”

It’s important, Mattingly said, that women not only seek those mentors who can support, advise, or guide women in their careers,

WHAT WOMEN BRING TO WORK

Studies have shown that women in the workplace help increase productivity, enhance collaboration, and improve fairness. That's because women often exhibit many workplace "superpowers," including strong communication skills, empathy, adaptability, resilience, emotional intelligence, relationship building, and inclusivity.

Of course, these qualities and skills are not exclusive to women — individuals possess unique characteristics regardless of gender. But these are often characterized as "feminine leadership traits," said Victoria Mattingly, an industrial-organizational psychologist and founder and CEO of Mattingly Solutions, a workplace inclusion consulting firm in Pittsburgh.

Wendy Smith, professor of management at the Alfred Lerner College of Business & Economics and co-director of the Women's Leadership Initiative at the University of Delaware in Newark, said teams that include women perform more effectively than those without them.

"Women tend to do a better job in the coordination and collaboration role on the team," she said. "Women pull people together, identify the pieces that each team member contributes, and figure out how those pieces fit together. That's a vital role."

Empathy is essential, too, because it creates space for others' emotions at work. Additionally, women also tend to have a deeper sensitivity and thoughtfulness around inclusion.

"IQ is important up to a certain point in one's career, but EQ — or emotional intelligence — is critical the more you advance up the career ladder," Mattingly explained. "Emotional intelligence is necessary to effectively manage people and have those tough conversations."

Women are empowered by empathy, fueled by resilience, and driven by collaboration, said Chandra Robinson, vice president in the HR practice at Gartner.

"Women must wear multiple hats, which teaches us resilience, how to navigate challenges, how to solution in adversity — the skills which are particularly key in managing crises, leading change, remaining poised, and demonstrating empathy during turbulent times," Robinson said.

“This is the same conversation we’ve had for 50 years. ... Why can’t we get there?”

— WENDY SMITH



GLOBAL WORKFORCE REPRESENTATION

Women’s labor force participation worldwide has remained flat during the last three decades, with roughly 40% to 50% of working-age women accounted for in the labor force, compared to about 80% of men, according to the World Bank. Women in some parts of the world are less likely to work in formal employment and have fewer opportunities for career progression. Women’s workforce participation is especially low in South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa.

but also sponsors, who are those who go beyond the role of simple guidance and proactively position them for advancement.

“Research shows that women are over-mentored and under-sponsored,” she said. “Sponsorship means advocating for someone to get them that promotion or critical assignment, into a strong network, or up the career ladder.”

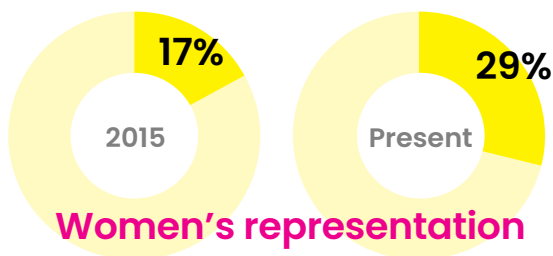
Mattingly added that she would like to see more training to arm senior leaders to be better supporters of women at work.

“There is a big mismatch between what people who say they are [advocates] are doing and what women say would be helpful,” Mattingly said. “People are becoming more aware of the issues,

but when a microaggression happens, it would be helpful if an ally takes an action in the moment.”

Microaggressions — or unconscious expressions of discriminatory views toward marginalized groups — against women in the workplace can include:

- Being interrupted by men in meetings (the McKinsey & Company study found that women are more than twice as likely as men to be interrupted).
- Being told to dress in a certain way.
- Being told they’re too sensitive to inappropriate statements or jokes.
- Being referred to using terms of endearment, such as “sweet-heart” or “honey.”
- Having the credit for their ideas or work being taken by men.




Women’s representation has increased at every level of corporate management in the U.S. over the last decade. Women hold 29% of C-suite positions today, compared with just 17% in 2015, according to McKinsey & Company research.

Beyond ‘Lean In’

It’s been valuable to push women to “lean in” — as former Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg famously wrote — and advocate for their own career advancement, Smith said. However, that effort won’t be successful unless the systems women are leaning into are changed.

“It’s not either teaching women to be better advocates for themselves or changing the organizational conditions. It has to be both,” Smith said. “Doing both reinforces each effort.”

The work of elevating women is consequential, she added.

“Sometimes, I perceive a certain wariness in moving this conversation forward,” Smith said. “The gains are not just for women, they’re for everyone. If we can raise up more women and people with diverse perspectives, we can solve our greatest problems more effectively.” 

ROY MAURER is a senior specialist, B2C content, at SHRM.

PERFORMATIVE
TO PROACTIVE:

THE NEXT ERA OF WORKPLACE ADVOCACY

Claiming to be an ally for women in the workplace is no longer enough. Instead, everyone must step up as active advocates to drive meaningful change.

BY NICK FERRARA

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY SARAH GAYDOS AND ISTOCK







Performative allyship is a relic of the past. It's time for a radical redefinition of what it truly means to stand in solidarity. Organizations must move beyond nominal, incomplete methods of support and champion the concept of — and the phrase — active advocacy instead. Standing with women workers requires a commitment to addressing the inequities women confront in the workplace.

“Advocacy means fixing systems, not putting the burden on women to lean in,” said Christie Smith, founder of The Humanity Studio, former vice president of diversity and inclusion at Apple, and author of *Essential* (Wiley, 2025).

As workplace challenges for women continue to evolve, so must the ways their leaders and peers advocate for them. Without this shift — and an acknowledgment of the barriers women face that have yet to be dismantled — efforts become demonstrative, at best.

“Performative allyship is all optics and no substance — it's the corporate equivalent of posting a hashtag and calling it progress,”

Smith said. “It fails because it dodges the real, challenging, and sometimes uncomfortable work of acknowledging and tackling systemic barriers women face.”

Women occupied only about 20% of the U.S. workforce in the 1920s, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Now, 100 years later, they account for nearly half of it and have surpassed pre-pandemic employment numbers by 2 million, per the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

As the U.S. workforce moves beyond these significant milestones, it's clear that a new model of advocacy is necessary to make further strides for women in the workplace.

NEXT-GEN ACTIVE ADVOCACY

For much of history, systemic barriers and biases, often upheld by those in positions of power, have limited women's opportunities and marginalized their contributions in the workplace. However,



some men have played a role in boosting women's participation in the U.S. workforce and improving access to education, including:

- U.S. reformer Samuel Joesph May is recognized for championing education for young Black girls in the early 1800s as well as advocating for women's suffrage.
- In 1963, then-President John F. Kennedy helped advance gender pay equality by signing the Equal Pay Act, which prohibits wage differences based on sex.
- Then-President Jimmy Carter contributed to anti-discrimination efforts in 1978 by signing the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, which prevents employment discrimination on the grounds of pregnancy or childbirth.

Despite these efforts — and others, from both men and women — women's progress continues to be hindered by underrepresentation in leadership, pay gaps, and experiences related to other demographic factors such as race.

Meaningful, results-oriented advocacy for women workers begins with curiosity and is then carried out with accountability, according to Tamla Oates-Forney, CEO of SHRM Linkage.

A strong advocate actively searches for instances of gender disparity in their workplace, such as a lack of diversity among leadership, she said, and asks themselves why these problems exist.

"Be curious as to what is going on in your organization," Oates-Forney said. "If there is a gender imbalance, seek to understand why. Once you understand why, ask yourself whether that 'why' is within your control or not."

Oates-Forney developed a new framework centered on curiosity, interest, accountability, and action (CIAA) that emphasizes action and encapsulates the steps necessary for effective advocacy.

- **Curiosity:** Search for instances of gender inequity in your organization and seek to understand why they exist.
- **Interest:** Learn about the impact of these barriers on women workers.

- **Accountability:** Identify contributors to gender equity barriers that are within your control.
- **Action:** Use your influence to develop and carry out strategies to respond to these issues.

“When one feels a sense of accountability and ownership over their advocacy, real change happens,” Oates-Forney said. “It’s not enough to just be interested or supportive.”

THE IMPACT OF INTERSECTIONALITY

The daily lives and challenges experienced by women are not monolithic. The overlap of demographic groups leads to unique perspectives and barriers.

This overlap is known as intersectionality, and it represents a frequently overlooked aspect of present-day advocacy. Women of color experience womanhood differently than their white peers, and women with disabilities have different experiences than women without disabilities. One tell of performative allyship is the omission of intersectionality, which results in disproportionately high benefits for some women while others receive next to nothing. Real-world examples include:

- In 2024, the number of white women C-suite executives was more than triple the number of women of color in those positions, according to research from McKinsey & Company.
- The Center for American Progress noted that, in 2023, the gender pay gap was nearly 20% higher for Black women, who earned 66 cents for every dollar earned by men, compared to white women’s 83 cents.



“Performative allyship is all optics and no substance — it’s the corporate equivalent of posting a hashtag and calling it progress.”

— CHRISTIE SMITH

“Allyship that ignores intersectionality is incomplete,” Smith said. “Women’s experiences aren’t one-size-fits-all — nobody’s are. They’re shaped by race, sexuality, socioeconomic background, and access to education and opportunities.”

CIAA-minded advocates should be an active part of building inclusive cultures that uplift and advocate for all women, regardless of their demographics. This includes attitudinal shifts such as respecting the experiences of others, in addition to more active decisions that will expose you to people from different walks of life.

“The best allies listen deeply, learn about other people’s experiences, and act — creating cultures where all women are seen, heard, and celebrated for who they are and what they uniquely contribute,” Smith added. “Equity is about championing every voice at the table.”

BRIDGING LEADERSHIP GAPS

Women constitute a significant share of the overall U.S. workforce and now have more formal education than men. As of 2024, nearly half of women between the ages of 25 and 34 (47%) have

“Women make up [nearly] half of the workforce.
The fact they don’t make up half of
leadership tells you there is an imbalance.”

— TAMLA OATES-FORNEY



a bachelor’s degree, compared to 37% of men in the same age range, per the Pew Research Center. Women also outpace men in holding master’s and doctoral degrees, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Despite this, the number of women in C-suite positions decreased for the first time in two decades between 2022 and 2023 from 12.2% to 11.8%, according to the S&P Total Market Index.

“Women make up [nearly] half of the workforce,” Oates-Forney said. “The fact they don’t make up half of leadership tells you there is an imbalance. Men have benefited from that imbalance for a long time, and they are still in the position of power.”

Male hiring managers’ biases frequently block more women from ascending to leadership roles, according to Oates-Forney. These biases are often unconscious, but noticing and mitigating them is key to being a CIAA-minded advocate for the contemporary woman.

Before promoting — or even hiring — women, managers sometimes subconsciously look for them to have more employment

experience to avoid accusations of affirmative action or tokenization, highlighting a clear example of gender-based hiring bias.

“They’re trying to show that they’re doing the right thing and hiring the right candidate, and sometimes they might look for even more [qualifications] just to make sure that narrative doesn’t take hold,” Oates-Forney explained.

This phenomenon may result in an environment in which men are promoted based on their potential while women are promoted based on performance, Smith added.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN ACTIVE ADVOCACY

Being an active advocate for women involves recognizing and suppressing these biases. It can start by leveraging emerging tech tools.

“Technology, specifically AI, presents an opportunity to help us level the equity field in human capital systems among all people



START THE CONVERSATION

To build workplace cultures that uphold the principles of curiosity, interest, accountability, and action (CIAA), HR professionals must spark meaningful dialogue about these problems and how they might show up in the work environment.

HR professionals “have a responsibility to advocate for inclusion in the workplace,” said Tamla Oates-Forney, CEO of SHRM Linkage. “HR must be that voice of reason. It’s not at the exclusion of men, but for the inclusion of women. Not talking about it is not OK anymore.” Here’s how to start the conversation:

- **Be the catalyst:** Identify areas of gender inequity in your work environment and bring these issues to the attention of company decision-makers.
- **Set relevant goals:** Develop strategies with key stakeholders to open doors for women employees and applicants without compromising merit.
- **Measure results:** Understand that success comes not from improvement in inclusion and diversity numbers, but in real, positive change in employee experience.

“In today’s labor market, where talent shortages are common, companies that don’t prioritize gender diversity risk losing out on top talent and failing to execute their business strategies,” Oates-Forney said. “Leaders can foster a culture of CIAA by setting clear goals for diversity, offering mentorship programs, and creating inclusive policies that empower women to thrive.”

in an organization,” said Rustin Tonn, board director of inclusion and diversity at the SHRM Colorado State Council. “Properly calibrated AI has the potential to remove bias and pay disparity.”

In the early stages of the hiring process, recruiters should evaluate a candidate’s merit by determining how relevant their resume is to the job description. Artificial intelligence can efficiently identify which candidates are most qualified based on their resumes, with potential identifying information including, but not limited to, the candidate’s name and sex/gender expression or age implications. This eliminates the chance of a candidate being disqualified during the screening process due to unconscious bias.

Using AI effectively is all about starting with a clear and specific prompt. Try out this sample AI command for determining the merit and skills of a job candidate: “Conduct a qualification analysis of the attached resume based on the competencies required in the attached job description. In this context, a qualification analysis encompasses *[insert your criteria here]*.”

“There’s no telling if the candidate is male or female, since the analysis request is based on the candidate’s competencies and examples listed on their resume against the actual job description,” said Sharmin Islam, manager of talent acquisition at SHRM.

If this prompt doesn’t give you the results you need, continue to refine it until you’ve landed on one that comes back with what you need and can be used regularly.

THE INTEGRATION OF WORK AND LIFE

Competing obligations also hinder women’s leadership representation in the workplace. Women with enough work experience to take on high-level roles may be held back by additional caregiving expectations, often related to culture-specific gender norms.

Generation X and Millennials — those born between 1965 and 1996, generally speaking — “are part of the ‘sandwich generation,’” Oates-Forney explained. “They are taking care of their children and their parents. I’m not saying men aren’t doing this, but the burden typically falls on the female.”

Creating a flexible workplace is paramount in accommodating caregiving responsibilities, as well as living out the CIAA model. Open-leave policies and hybrid or remote work options allow employees more time for their personal obligations, and advocates should consider how these work formats could grant more women workers additional opportunities to advance their careers.

Advocates in decision-making roles can accommodate women and reduce barriers to high-level roles by offering more inclusive leave policies for all parents, regardless of gender. Men spending more time as caregivers or taking paternity leave not only reduces the burden for women, but it can also reduce the penalties, both perceived and real, for women doing the same.

“We are seeking flexibility,” Oates-Forney said. “There are so many facets to our lives that we cannot neglect or ignore. We need an employer that understands our life challenges that


“Women’s experiences aren’t one-size-fits-all — nobody’s are. They’re shaped by race, sexuality, socioeconomic background, and access to education and opportunities.”

— CHRISTIE SMITH

are uniquely ours; a work environment understanding of and sensitive to these things makes it easier for women to integrate their lives into how they work and doesn’t require them to have to choose between their lives and their careers.”

CREATING SPACE FOR WOMEN’S GROWTH

Active advocates play a role in reversing the effects of longtime gender-based barriers — and performative allyship — by prioritizing truly inclusive workplace cultures that interest, engage, promote, and retain women workers. They can begin by seeking to learn from their own colleagues.

“If you have women on your team, talk to them and ask, ‘What is it like to work here? What can I do to make your experience better?’” Oates-Forney said. “Engage in human-to-human dialogue about what you can do to create an environment that would attract women, retain women, and develop women.” 

NICK FERRARA is a specialist, B2C content, at SHRM.

FROM CRISIS TO COVID REDEFINED THE



CARE: HOW D-19 WORKPLACE

It's been five years since the pandemic changed how people in the U.S. — and across the world — lived and worked. What was learned, and what has lasted?

BY KATHRYN MAYER

HMVART / ISTOCK

When COVID-19 entered the picture more than five years ago, daily life changed seemingly overnight. Face masks and social distancing became the norm. Schools shifted to virtual instruction. Museums, sporting events, concerts, restaurants, and even Disneyland halted operations.

The pandemic also unquestionably altered the workplace. Employers reacted with quick, vast actions. There was a widespread move to remote work to keep people safe. There was an influx of new types of support, including mental health benefits, more paid time off for sick leave and parenting concerns, and temporary COVID-19 aid. All aspects of life were marked by nimble, innovative, and agile changes — and the workplace was no exception.

“COVID shifted our working paradigm so significantly and so swiftly,” said Cassandra Pratt, SHRM-SCP, CHRO of Progyny, a New York City-based health care and benefits firm with roughly 620 employees.

Perhaps one of the biggest changes was a new focus on employees — one in which empathy, understanding, and meeting workers’ increasing expectations, not just the bottom line — drove decision-making. It became about treating employees as whole people, not just as workers.

“So many of us lost someone in our family due to COVID or a COVID-related issue, and there were so many complicated factors,” Pratt said. “There was a level of bereavement and sadness. You’re remote, you’re isolated, you’re experiencing health

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— CASSANDRA PRATT, SHRM-SCP

challenges, challenges with loss of loved ones. ... It made us think differently about a whole employee and employee wellness and about what we need to do to support people in our workforce.”

A half-decade later, many of those changes that shook up the workplace are still going strong, experts say. But, today, the focus for many employers is about continuing to meet those increased employee expectations while ensuring organizational needs are still being met, too.

“We want to keep these lessons, but we also have to think about what works,” said Sandy Ball, SHRM-SCP, chief people officer at Aspida, a Durham, N.C.-based insurance agency. “There has to be a balance between what employees need and what absolutely doesn’t work for the business.”

THE WHOLE PERSON

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, most aspects of workers’ lives were kept separate from the office — there was the work bucket and the personal bucket, without much overlap. The pandemic, though, shattered that illusion, with employees’ kids holding court on video calls and people talking openly about their health concerns, caregiving challenges, worries over their finances, and more.

“The number of times I’ve seen children or had my own children on a Zoom call ... pre-pandemic, [that] probably would have been appalling. ... Now, it’s sort of normal,” Pratt said. “There was such a higher visibility of the juggling acts of working families. Employers really saw the challenges their employees were facing.”

Although a focus on the whole employee and work/life integration was a growing trend in the late 2010s, the concept blew up once COVID-19 hit. It’s an ethos that has remained, said Kimberly Bell, head of health and benefits at NFP, a global benefits consulting firm and property and casualty insurance broker.

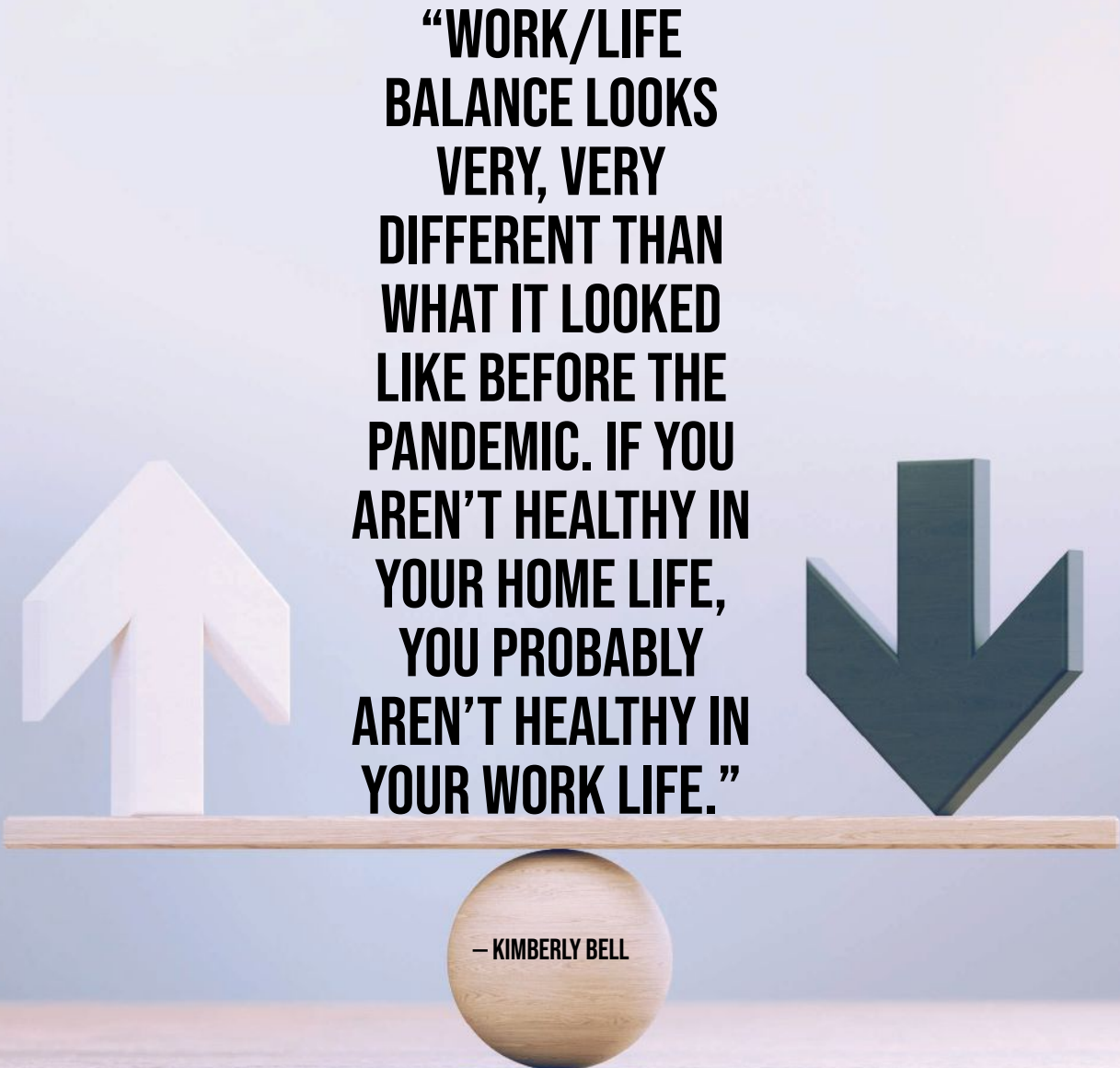
“We were home taking care of our children and our personal lives and our health while we were trying to work. It became so intertwined, where before it felt more siloed,” she said. “Now, work/life balance looks very, very different than what it looked like before the pandemic. If you aren’t healthy in your home life, you probably aren’t healthy in your work life. We’re all one person.”

Amy Mosher, chief people officer at Charlotte, N.C.-based software company isolved, agreed.

“Employee well-being is business well-being. It’s no longer an afterthought,” she said. “It’s a core part of an organization’s success. We’ve learned that when employees feel supported, engaged, and healthy, they drive better business outcomes.”

The pandemic — as well as that attitude from employers — raised employees’ expectations for what they were looking for from their companies, and scores of employers answered the call with empathy, flexibility, and timely benefits and support — a notion that has remained over the past few years.

“There’s been a real spotlight on benefits offerings, with employers stepping back and saying, ‘I’m not offering enough robust benefits in [certain] areas,’” Bell said.



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— KIMBERLY BELL

Moreover, the list of benefits that employers are offering has grown, too. In 2022, the SHRM Employee Benefits Survey, which offers a comprehensive view of the support that employers offer employees, listed some 175 available benefits. In 2024, that number rose to 216 — a 23% increase.

ENHANCED MENTAL HEALTH

One key component of that focus on employees’ well-being is mental well-being — a need that has become more visible over the past five years, experts say.

Rates of stress, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and more have increased over the past few years. In response, scores of employers have ramped up support for employees, adding or enhancing benefits including employee assistance programs, telemedicine, and a sampling of other mental health offerings. The vast majority of employers (90%) provided mental health coverage in 2024, up from 84% in 2019, according to SHRM data.

“Although mental health coverage was already very high, hovering around 85%, the fact that it jumped up to over 90% in 2022 and has basically stayed around 90% since that time really is indicative of more employers recognizing its importance,”



said Daniel Stunes, manager of data monetization at SHRM. “When a benefit already has a prevalence rate that high, it’s uncommon for there to be such a sudden, large, and sustained increase.”

The pandemic “firmly cemented in our awareness the importance of mental health benefits, one that I don’t think will ever go away,” said Julie Stich, vice president of content at the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans, a nonprofit organization with 31,000 employer members.

“We made great strides getting rid of the stigma surrounding mental illness — that you don’t have to be afraid to talk about that, and we shouldn’t be afraid to talk about that anymore, and that there’s nothing wrong with seeking help for a mental challenge,” she said. “It’s one of the best things that came out of the pandemic.”


HEALTH MITIGATIONS

Another big focus since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic is reducing the spread of physical illnesses.

Ever-vigilant measures have abated — it’s a far cry from 2020 and 2021, when organizations required face masks, vaccines, social distancing, and quarantining after illness or exposure — but there remains a strong push to not expose co-workers to illnesses.

The prevailing attitude now is, “Rather than drag yourself into the office when you’re sick and you’re coughing on everyone in sight, just stay home,” Stich said.

There seems to be more acceptance of taking sick time, even if it’s your family that’s sick. “If you have a runny nose, stay home, right? Or even if your kids are sick and everybody else in your house is sick, stay home, even if you think you could make it into



“EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING IS BUSINESS WELL-BEING. IT’S NO LONGER AN AFTERTHOUGHT. IT’S A CORE PART OF AN ORGANIZATION’S SUCCESS.”

— AMY MOSHER

the office,” Pratt said. “It’s this concept of, ‘It’s not even about you anymore, it’s about the rest of the company.’”

Fast-spreading illnesses, such as COVID-19 and flu, can have a negative impact on the workplace, affecting productivity, attendance, and engagement. They also can lead to an increase in health care costs for employers.

Aspida now tells employees not to come in with any signs of illness, Ball said. They’re allowed to work remotely if they feel well enough but should use sick time when they don’t.

Overall, Pratt said, telling workers not to come in when sick — or even when other household members are sick — is among the health mitigations that are more common now than they were pre-pandemic. Progyny has kept some of those initial mitigations in place, such as the availability and encouragement of hand sanitizer; extra, high-grade filters in

its office’s HVAC system; and regular, thorough cleaning and disinfecting practices.

Face masks are also available in Progyny’s office, and some workers continue to wear them regularly.

“People feel like that is now normalized. Whether you’re protecting somebody you know or you’re feeling sick, we talk about it regularly and we want to protect people’s health,” Pratt said, adding that masking is also important when considering workers or their family members who are immunocompromised.

“I do think people have taken that to heart,” Pratt said.

REMOTE WORK AND FLEXIBILITY

Another widespread and resilient pandemic-driven change has been the expansion of remote and hybrid working. Remote and

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hybrid work have also forced employers to adopt new technology and workflows to ensure those shifts continue to be successful.

Progyny had remote workers across the U.S. before the pandemic, but employees who lived near its New York City headquarters worked all five days in the office.

“I remember interviewing somebody eight or 10 years ago, and they told me they worked four days in the office, one day remote. And I thought, ‘That sounds nice, but also kind of crazy,’” Pratt said.

After going fully remote in the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic, Progyny has moved to a hybrid work schedule in the years since: Mondays and Fridays at home and Tuesdays to Thursdays in the office. Meanwhile, a significant number of employees work remotely full time.

Similarly, Aspida, which has roughly 200 employees, also moved to a hybrid working schedule — in which everyone needs to be in the office Tuesdays and Thursdays as well as a third day of the week of their choosing — after being fully remote in 2020 and 2021.

That flexibility can be a help for both employers and employees, Pratt said. “There’s flexibility, so people can meet their needs. But showing up on the same days, where we get critical mass, people can work face-to-face with their colleagues, have conversations, and really engage in a meaningful way.”

“Whether it’s remote work, hybrid models, or shorter workweeks,” isolved’s Mosher said, “employees have made it clear that flexibility is an expectation, not a luxury. ... Companies that embrace this shift are better positioned to attract and retain top talent.”

INCREASED EXPECTATIONS, LEARNING TO COMPROMISE

Many pandemic-driven priorities and changes have remained, but employers are still trying to figure out if they can, or should, backtrack on any of them.

Some companies have learned the hard way that employees may push back against changes. Take remote work and flexible schedules.

Companies such as Amazon gradually rolled back remote work policies, with the retail giant first saying it would let workers and their managers decide if and when workers should be in the office. Next, the company told its workers they had to return three days a week in 2023. Then, at the beginning of 2025, Amazon mandated that all corporate employees must return to in-person work five days a week. The result: Some employees have resisted the mandate, threatening to quit.

“The push and pull of return-to-office policies has been a major challenge,” Mosher said. “While some organizations have mandated full-time office returns, many employees have pushed back, reinforcing that flexibility is now an expectation.”

That can play out in other ways, too. Many organizations were flexible with parenting situations at the peak of the pandemic, for instance, but allowing an employee to simultaneously work and parent during the day may no longer fly in 2025.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- **Toolkit:** Managing Flu and Other Epidemics in the Workplace
- **How-To Guide:** How to Handle Communicable Diseases in the Workplace
- **Sample Policies:** Voluntary and Mandatory Vaccinations



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“Employees are looking for employers who can meet them where they are and that don’t force them to sacrifice their family time. That concept may have felt a little overloaded during 2020 or 2021, and maybe some organizations need to think about what works best, but we also don’t want to go back to what it was like in 2019 and 2018,” Pratt said.

Companies that listen to their employees and find a middle ground — such as hybrid working models — tend to see better retention and engagement.


Aspida now regularly collects feedback from employees — both formally, through stay and exit interviews and engagement surveys, and informally, through casual meetings.

“Once every other week or so, our CEO and I have a group of employees come in, and we just pick their brains,” Ball said. “There’s no agenda, we just say: ‘Do you have questions for us? Do you have feedback? What needs to be fixed?’”

Sometimes, that leads to changes employees want; when it doesn’t make business sense, the company may not act — but openness, compromise, and clarity about expectations are vital.

‘WE CAN’T GO BACK’

Many experts say the COVID-19 pandemic brought about positive changes — previously ignored needs were addressed, gaps were filled, a focus on the well-being of employees was renewed, and employers strengthened their ability to quickly pivot when needed. And while things may continue to — and should — shift, organizations shouldn’t forget the important lessons they learned.

“In another 12 months, people are not going to have these same needs. We always need to continue to adjust and continue to think about what employees need or expect,” Bell said. “We can’t go back.” 

KATHRYN MAYER is a senior specialist, B2C content, at SHRM.



SHOWING UP AND SHOWING THE WAY

Maggie Ruvoldt, CHRO of LEARN Behavioral, understands the importance of giving back and helping other women leaders succeed.

BY SARA BEATTY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEN JOSEPH



Early in her career, Maggie Ruvoldt spent a day shadowing a team of human resources professionals at General Electric, watching them act as the beating heart of the company. That day convinced Ruvoldt she wanted to work in HR.

“As a function, [HR has] to be experts at what we do,” but “we also have to be experts at what everybody else does,” explained Ruvoldt, CHRO of Baltimore-based LEARN Behavioral, a national organization that provides personalized, evidence-based applied behavior analysis therapy for children and young adults with autism and other special needs.

Three decades later, she has a breadth of experience in HR. While advancing her own career, she also cultivated a passion for developing women in leadership.

In 2024, Ruvoldt attended a fireside chat focusing on women’s leadership that featured Mary Margaret Frank, dean of the University of North Carolina’s Kenan-Flagler Business School — where Ruvoldt earned her MBA — and Tamla Oates-Forney, CEO of SHRM Linkage. At the time, Ruvoldt had let her SHRM membership lapse, but hearing Oates-Forney speak compelled her to renew.

“Early in my career, [SHRM] was really critical to how I met other HR folks and how I developed my initial HR skills,” Ruvoldt said. “Now with this different point in my career where I’m more focused on how to give back to communities that helped me grow ... I [decided to] renew my membership.”

OVERLOOKED SKILLS

Ruvoldt particularly values soft skills — such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability — which are among the unique strengths women bring to leadership and to the workforce. These are “by far the hardest skills for anybody to develop,” she said.

However, Ruvoldt pointed out that these qualities might not be valued at every organization, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to leadership. That said, data supports her valuation of soft skills.

Women rate higher than men in leadership skills such as taking initiative, acting with resilience, practicing self-development, driving for results, and displaying both integrity and honesty, according to 2019 research published in *Harvard Business Review*.

And yet, the same study found that women — especially those under age 25 — rated their confidence much lower than men. Additionally, despite outperforming men in many leadership capabilities, women make up just over 10% of Fortune 500 CEOs — a record high to date.

Ruvoldt said she’s dealt with “all the traditional” gender-related workplace obstacles, such as being asked to take notes as the only woman in the room and having colleagues question whether she would return to work after adopting her children. In situations like these, Ruvoldt has developed standard responses, such as suggesting a junior employee join the meeting to take notes as a professional development opportunity or asking what prompted the inappropriate question.

WOMEN ARE STRONGER TOGETHER

Women in leadership more often feel left out of key networks than their male counterparts, according to a 2021 SHRM survey. But feeling left out doesn’t mean you should give up.

Instead, Ruvoldt encourages both aspiring and current women leaders to build their own networks. She is a champion of building relationships but notes that it’s not about the number of connections you have — it’s about having people you’ll show

HOW TO IDENTIFY A POTENTIAL SPONSOR

Ruvoldt encourages women professionals to be thoughtful in identifying a sponsor, noting it’s important that they wield some influence within the company. “If your sponsor has no power, they’re not a sponsor,” she said. Below are some additional action items to consider:

- Look for someone who has already taken an interest in your career.
- Make sure the person is well respected within the organization.
- Look for someone who is in the right rooms — someone higher up the ladder on your desired career path. In a larger organization, this usually means someone in your chain of leadership.
- Identify ways you can add value for your potential sponsor. Ask yourself what you can do for them.
- Have a conversation with your potential sponsor, asking if they would consider recommending you when an opportunity arises.



up for and who will show up for you. It's essential to have people outside of your current organization whose expertise you can tap into, she said, as well as people who have already accomplished things that you may want to emulate.

Ruvoldt also emphasized the importance of women leaders seeking out those with shared identities and experiences for support. There are many ways women can advocate for one another in the workplace. Ruvoldt is a firm believer in both mentorship and sponsorship, which are two separate concepts.

"A mentor is somebody who you [can] be 100% vulnerable with," she explained. They can work within your organization or outside of it — unlike sponsors, who work within your organization. Mentors "give you career advice; they have no stake in your career game other than wanting you to be successful."

During her tenure as chief people officer at 2U, based in Arlington, Va., Ruvoldt began a "Mentoring Mondays" group to bring together women she was mentoring across the organization. It provided an opportunity for the participants to build what Ruvoldt calls a "personal board of directors" — a network specifically cultivated to give career advice and to demonstrate the potential of your own career trajectory.

Ruvoldt once experienced pushback from a male colleague related to Mentoring Mondays, as he thought men should be involved in the group as well. Her response was simply to invite her colleague to form his own group for men.

Over the years, Ruvoldt had a few mentors of her own to

"You're responsible for kicking that door open and holding it open for everybody who's coming up behind you."

show her the impact HR has on a business, to act as a sounding board, and to also be her sponsors when they worked in the same organization.

Sponsorship comes only from within your organization, but according to Ruvoldt, it's "the most important thing leaders can do. ... A sponsor is somebody who puts your name up for things. Being [a] sponsor for others is all about amplifying their voice, amplifying their accomplishments."

She pointed out that decisions about your career are made when you're not in the room, so having a sponsor is vital to anyone's growth.

Ruvoldt also acts as an advisor to women-led startups, connecting women founders with her own network and exposing them to potential funding opportunities. For example, Summer, a student loan and education assistance benefits company based in New York City, connects HR teams to programs that reduce

HOW TO ASK A LEADER FOR SUPPORT

Ruvoldt acknowledges that for many team leads, time is a precious commodity. She has a few tips for making your request for support manageable for the leader:

- Identify the leader in your organization who will be the most helpful to you in achieving your goals.
- Request a 15-minute conversation.
- Come prepared with a very specific ask (e.g., feedback on a proposal or their support of an employee resource group) and an explanation as to why you think this person would be most helpful.
- If the leader says no, ask them if they know of anyone else who could help and if they could make an introduction.

student loan debt for employees as high student loan payments have resurfaced as an issue post-pandemic.

Less than 3% of venture capital funding is awarded to women-led startups, according to PitchBook, a global data and insights company based in Seattle. That number climbs to approximately 20% when the organization has a male co-founder.

“I joined [Summer] as an advisor because mission-driven companies solving problems like these are important to me,” Ruvoldt said.

PAYING IT FORWARD

In her approach to women’s leadership development, Ruvoldt also homes in on the importance of intersectionality — the idea that discrimination varies across overlapping identities — in addressing the unique challenges faced by different groups of women.

For example, a LeanIn.org and McKinsey & Company report

found that women of color held just 6% of all C-suite roles at U.S. and Canadian companies in 2023, while white women held 22% of those roles. Ruvoldt began to incorporate intersectionality in her mentoring and sponsorship after building relationships with women who have different identities than her and realizing that this piece was missing from her approach.

It’s a continuous learning process, but “expecting people who have different lived experiences than you to shoulder the burden of teaching you is the first mistake you make,” Ruvoldt explained. “Get yourself educated as much as you can. Be curious. Be open. Hear their stories.”

Once you’ve made it to the upper echelons of the workforce, particularly as a woman, “you’re responsible for kicking that door open and holding it open for everybody who’s coming up behind you,” Ruvoldt said.

She advises aspiring women leaders to cultivate sponsors, build and maintain those relationships, and “when you do



make it into the room, make the most of it. Own the moment that you got invited to the meeting, that you're there for your expertise."

Ruvoldt reiterated the importance of networking and relationship-building. "Work is not a meritocracy, and it's never going to be," she added.

HR professionals can also be a particular help to advance women in the workforce. "Whatever your purview is, if it's benefits, if it's policies, whatever it is, look at that through the lens of across the life cycle for women ... and particularly at those moments of change," Ruvoldt said.

Working women have different needs across different stages of life that require different benefits, such as fertility coverage, inclusive parental leave policies, and menopause care. Ruvoldt advised both HR professionals and women workers to share their stories with one another to initiate these important conversations.

"Being [a] sponsor for others is all about amplifying their voice, amplifying their accomplishments."

Whether you pursue mentorship, sponsorship, or simply advocate for yourself on an unequal playing field, Ruvoldt said success is about acting on "small moments of courage" and building upon that momentum. "There's very little that, when you're doing [it] with good intention, will get you fired or in trouble or hold you back," she said. "And if it is, you're in the wrong company." 

SARA BEATTY is a specialist, B2C content, at SHRM.



Better, Faster, Stronger Together

Boost collaboration and trust with these four team-building activities.

BY BANNON PUCKETT

Pizza parties, bowling nights, and escape rooms are fun, and these kinds of recreational experiences certainly serve a purpose in the workplace.

However, the key to building long-term connections and collaboration on your team is to prioritize ongoing activities that foster more meaningful dialogue and

problem-solving — especially in a time of declining employee trust and engagement.

Consider the research: The SHRM Q4 2024 Civility Index, released in December, found that 45% of U.S. workers said their ability to trust one another will get worse or much worse in 2025. Plus, in PwC’s 2024 Trust Survey, 86% of execu-

tives said they highly trust their employees, but only 67% of employees said they highly trust their employer — a 19-point gap that’s wider than in previous years.

“The state of trust in today’s workplaces is dismal,” said Jennifer Dulski, CEO of Rising Team, citing return-to-office mandates, repeated layoffs, and overwhelmed



managers as a few contributing factors to these feelings. “Team dynamics need more attention than ever. Though we’re starting from a low point, it’s possible to build high-trust, high-connecting teams, even in a distributed or remote work environment. You just have to be intentional and consistent.”

That consistency is key: One-and-done activities are great in the moment, but they can also just be a bandage.

“Managers should develop a regular framework for collecting team feedback through group discussions and pulse surveys,” said Jay Jones, SHRM-CP, lead, talent and employee experience at SHRM. “They should have a regular cadence for sharing what they’ve done with that feedback and where the team’s heading in the future.”

No matter how your team is structured — in-person, remote, or hybrid —

trust-building activities can help people you manage address key challenges, enhance mutual understanding, and forge stronger professional relationships with one another. Here are four possibilities:

1

Strategy Workshop

Enlist your team to come up with a solution for one real, complex problem facing the organization.

- Identify the problem you’ll tackle in advance: troublesome bottlenecks, diminishing sales, talent shortages, or the like. Ask your team to submit ideas and even vote.
- Set clear goals. Should the team walk away with a set of actionable solutions? A road map? A decision on a key issue?
- Gather background data, such as metrics or customer feedback, and assign pre-reading so everyone arrives prepared.
- Begin the agenda with context setting, followed by diving deep into the problem, ideation/brainstorming, and refining/prioritizing solutions — culminating in action planning and next steps.
- Employ various tools and formats — such as whiteboards, sticky notes, small breakouts, and full-group discussions — to tap into different ways of thinking on your team.
- After the session, distribute notes and action items to set accountability and schedule follow-ups to track progress.

2

Strengths Assessment

Guide team members to reflect on their top strengths, how they contribute to team success, where commonalities and gaps exist, and what kind of support they need. These options can provide struc-



Tips for Success

- **Determine the right format:** Before choosing activities, identify your team members’ specific capabilities, needs, and challenges, so that you’re meeting them where they are.
- **Create a consistent schedule:** Work these exercises into your team’s regular activities — a half day each month, 15 minutes in your weekly team meeting, etc.
- **Establish ground rules:** Make it clear upfront that everyone can contribute ideas freely and all voices will be heard. Everything goes on the whiteboard — there’s no “no” here.
- **Ensure focus:** Structure activities so everyone can step away from their day-to-day functions and be present in the moment.
- **Capture the data:** Document your team’s responses and learnings to recall them later.
- **Avoid hybrid events:** Don’t run an activity where some people are physically in the room while others are not, as this creates an uneven playing field. Everyone should either attend in person or participate remotely.

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ture: CliftonStrengths for strength-ranking across several domains, DISC for communication and leadership styles, or Myers-Briggs for deep personality insights.

To put everyone’s strengths into action, brainstorm with your team about how to redistribute responsibilities based on these discoveries. Pair employees with complementary strengths on a project so they can learn from each other. Call out team members who use their strengths effectively. And whenever tensions arise, revisit strengths to reframe conflicts as differences in perspective versus personal issues.

3

Cross-Department Job Swap and Mentoring

To kick off a job swap, each department should create a brief overview of its key responsibilities, tools, workflows, and challenges. Participants should shadow team members to observe and ask questions before taking on small tasks. Hold a debriefing session to reflect on surprises and new ideas.

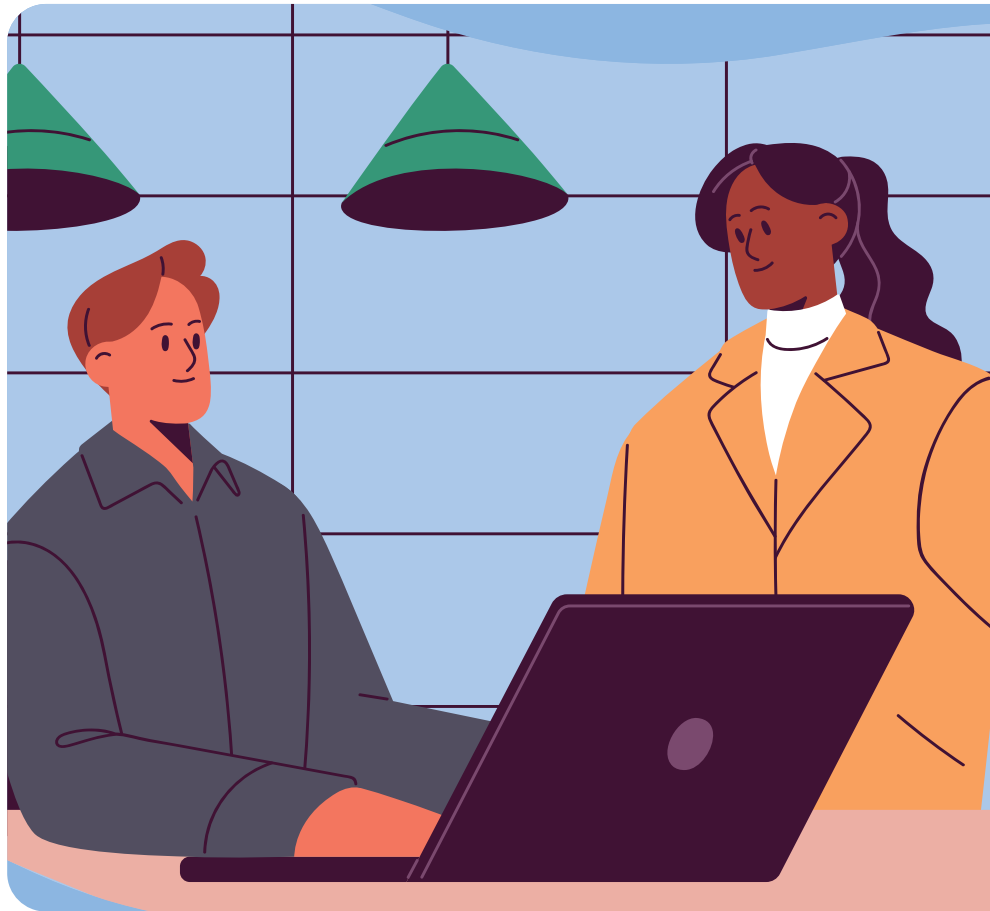
You can also pair employees from different departments for one-on-one mentoring. For example, a designer could mentor a customer care agent on creative problem-solving, while the agent shares insights about customer pain points. Each person then shares what they learned from the other.

4

“User Manual”

This is one of Dulski’s favorite exercises, which she compares to asking an appliance, “How do you best operate?” Team members answer such questions as:

- “What time of day do you work best?”
- “What are the best ways to communi-



- cate with you?”
- “How do you like to receive constructive feedback?”
- “What is your biggest work-related pet peeve?”
- “What do you need to stay productive?”

Have everyone present their answers on a slide, then bookmark the “user manual” for easy team access and revisit it reg-

ularly. Use the deck for onboarding new employees so they can quickly get to know their colleagues better, and vice versa.

Empower Your Team — and Yourself

You may wish to seek out a professional facilitator or colleague who can act as a neutral moderator. There are also several tech platforms — from Cooleaf to FullTilt to Rising Team — that do much of the work for you. But keep this in mind: Even if you decide to run these activities yourself, you don’t need to be an expert.

“Anyone can do it with the right tools and support,” Dulski said. “You’ll be practicing the skills you want to model and showing your team, ‘I care about you and want to understand you.’ Your team will view you in a different light, and, ultimately, you’ll become a better leader.” [TR](#)

BANNON PUCKETT is a lead, B2C content, at SHRM.



The state of trust in today’s workplaces is dismal. Team dynamics need more attention than ever.

— JENNIFER DULSKI



Soft Skills, Hard Results

Mastering powerful people skills requires ongoing learning and practice, but they can make or break your career.

BY KRISTIN FLETCHER

Don't let the term fool you: Soft skills are anything but soft.

Active listening. Communication. Empathy. Flexibility. Relationship building. The world of so-called soft skills, a term first coined by the U.S. Army in the 1960s, is vast. Although the workplace has become increasingly driven by technology, human-centered competencies continue to be vital.

“Soft skills are force multipliers or power skills,” said SHRM President and Chief Executive Officer Johnny C. Taylor,

Jr., SHRM-SCP. They complement and amplify hard skills — such as data analysis, computers, languages, or accounting — in addition to expanding workforce potential, he said. More strategic than technical skills, soft skills are vital to business operations.

Renaming them as power skills “better reflects the significant impact and influence these interpersonal abilities have in the workplace,” said Ciara Harrington, chief people officer at Skillsoft, a global platform for learning solutions in Nashua,

N.H. “The term ‘power’ also refers to their ability to drive change and success, rather than implying they have a secondary or ‘softer’ level of importance.”

Other HR professionals have their own preferred synonyms: Bethany Adams, SHRM-SCP, calls them “human skills.” SHRM member Kate Ferrara suggests “essential skills.” Jennifer Currence, SHRM-SCP, likes “people skills.”

To Currence, a partner at consulting firm HR Soul in Florida, the word “soft” implies they’re easy to acquire. Mastering

them, however, is a continual process involving intentional vigilance and practice.

“These are the skills that make or break careers, teams, and organizations,” said Adams, associate director of marketing and strategy for the human resource development graduate program at Villanova University in Pennsylvania. “They are what help HR professionals navigate relationships, communicate effectively, and lead with empathy.”

Why Soft Skills Are Essential

Technical skills may land you the job, but soft skills are key to longevity and advancing through the ranks. Highly transferable, the right set of strong soft skills is like a secret superpower — they can give your career durability. HR professionals need to lead by example when it comes to prioritizing proficiency in people skills, which, in turn, will advance their own careers.

“Partnering successfully with your [employees] requires the ability to build relationships, meaning you must be able to draw on your communication, coaching, mentoring, and other skills that have traditionally been labeled as ‘soft’ but are critical to your success as an HR partner,” said Ferrara, an Irvine, Calif.-based senior HR business partner at Alcon, a pharmaceutical and medical device company.

The most successful HR professionals develop advanced power skills that align with the needs of the teams they support, Harrington said. By drawing on this skill set, they can build productive, trusting relationships with leadership, challenging them to make difficult decisions that drive business outcomes. Building this level of confidence and trust takes time, she explained, but it creates a path toward faster and further career advancement for HR professionals.

This also expands your sphere of influence. “One of the most critical skills HR professionals can develop is their ability to influence without direct authority, which takes practice,” Harrington said.

The Top Three Soft Skills

Despite soft skills’ importance, 30% of candidates don’t have the interpersonal competencies desired by employers, accord-

ing to SHRM’s 2024 *Talent Trends* report. But which skills should you focus on?

Consider these: communication, emotional intelligence, and adaptability.

Communication. Think of communication skills as the ability to share clear expectations and information, Currence said. This includes providing policies that are easy to understand and consistent, as well as clearly and regularly sharing information with all stakeholders when circumstances change.

“Consistently showing up with the right information and clearly demonstrating HR’s role in helping an organization achieve their goals builds trust and credibility in relationships with business leaders,” Ferrara said.

But communication isn’t just about how you speak or write — you must also be skilled in active listening. This refers to the focused and intentional act of fully understanding, engaging with, and responding to others, and it strengthens interpersonal communication, builds trust, and fosters meaningful relationships.

Assess active listening skills by recording yourself during a conversation, which enables you to check if you were empathetically listening and giving your full attention to the speaker.



Soft skills should be an essential piece and given equal value to the traditional technical skills of a role.”

— KATE FERRARA

Emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence (also known as “EI” or “EQ”) is broadly defined as the ability to identify and manage your emotions to successfully navigate situations and manage relationships. Emotional intelligence accounts for 58% of job performance success and contributes to an average of \$29,000 more in annual earnings, according to Aura.

Emotional literacy is a facet of emotional intelligence that emphasizes cooperation and the common good. Other important and related elements include emotional agility, the ability to acknowledge feelings without being dominated by them, and emotional courage, which enables you to act in situations even when you feel uncomfortable.



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Emotional agility along with “emotional literacy and emotional courage are all must-have skills for HR,” Adams said. “They need the agility to pivot, the literacy to navigate emotions across teams, and the courage to advocate for people-centric policies.”

Adams suggested asking colleagues how you show up in emotionally charged situations. Are you reactive or agile? Do you listen with curiosity or jump to solutions? Tools such as 360-degree feedback and emotional intelligence assessments can also help pinpoint growth areas.

Adaptability. A key workplace skill, adaptability — which could also be called agility or flexibility — enables professionals to pivot effectively in response to change while maintaining productivity and focus. It fosters resilience, innovation, and the ability to manage uncertainty, making it essential for navigating dynamic work environments and achieving long-term goals.

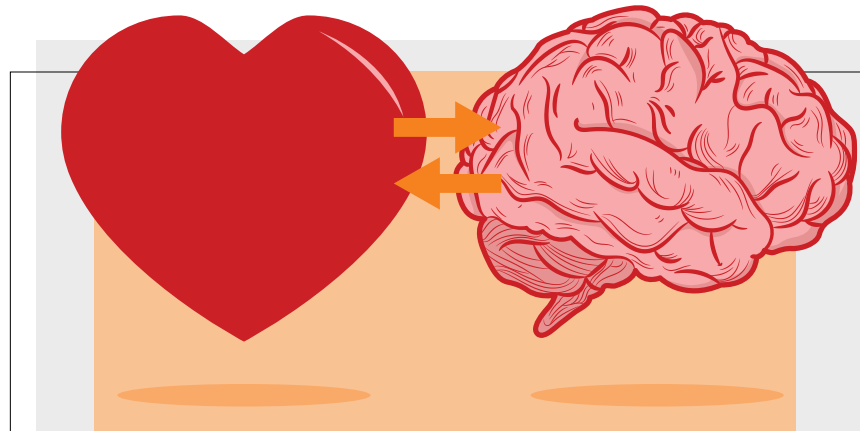
Grow this skill by always being open to new ideas, approaching challenges and opportunities with curiosity, and exhibiting patience during times of change. These traits help HR professionals adapt nimbly and effectively while maintaining a balanced perspective during transitions.

Setting Goals for Growth

Building these important skills is not a one-and-done event. At the start of each new year, Currence recommended, you should consider where you want to be by the year’s end. Then, set goals that challenge yourself to learn one new skill or to revisit a skill you want to improve. Taking courses, listening to podcasts, reading books, and attending educational events can all be part of your educational goal setting. As a SHRM member, look for conference sessions related to the skills you want to improve upon or browse on-demand webinars and eLearning courses.

Additionally, aim to expand your professional network, which will provide ample opportunities to practice your people-centered skills.

Finally, continue to reflect on your current relationships with leaders and fellow employees to determine if you could be more effective. Ask yourself: Do



Seven Tips to Build Emotional Literacy

Bethany Adams, SHRM-SCP, associate director of marketing and strategy for the human resource development graduate program at Villanova University, suggested the following guidance for building emotional literacy:

- 1 Start small.** Pick one skill, practice it intentionally, and reflect. Reflection is key — journaling, coaching, or peer discussions help track progress.
- 2 Lean into moments when you feel stuck.** If conflict feels draining, focus on emotional courage. If change feels overwhelming, prioritize emotional agility.
- 3 Make it a habit to develop your skills.** Set micro goals, such as having one tough conversation per week to grow emotional courage.
- 4 Remember, it’s not always about formal, bigger events.** Growth also happens in the seemingly insignificant daily moments.
- 5 Step into discomfort.** Courage grows when you lean into hard conversations instead of avoiding them.
- 6 When faced with a tough situation, pause.** Instead of immediately reacting, take a moment to think and identify *what* you are feeling and *why*. Naming the emotion and the reason behind it gives you space to respond thoughtfully.
- 7 Growth thrives in connection, and networks expand perspectives.** Having someone who challenges your thinking can accelerate your emotional intelligence.

they come to me for advice or seek out resources from the HR team? Do I feel like they value the support I provide? If the answer is somewhere in the middle, ask for feedback from trusted colleagues, supervisors, or friends.

It’s key to build a workplace “culture where business leaders truly see the value in ‘soft skills’ and understand that they are

essential to career growth,” Ferrara said. “When a manager works with an associate on their personal development plans, soft skills should be an essential piece and given equal value to the traditional technical skills of a role.” [HR](#)

KRISTIN FLETCHER is a senior specialist, B2C content, at SHRM.

2025 State of the Workplace

BY RAGAN DECKER, PH.D., MANAGER, EN/ES RESEARCH, SHRM

In 2024, HR departments faced the challenge of steering organizations through rapid change and political and economic uncertainty, as well as adapting to the ever-evolving nature of work and the workplace. SHRM's *2025 State of the Workplace* report delves into HR's role during this transformative period, highlighting key achievements and opportunities for future growth. Drawing on insights from 1,615 HR professionals, 238 HR executives, and 471 U.S. workers, this comprehensive review offers valuable insights into HR in 2024 while providing actionable insights to inform strategies for 2025 and beyond.



Key findings

- 1 Recruiting a Persistent but Common Challenge.** In 2024, recruiting was HR's top priority due to a talent shortage, with many viewing their efforts as ineffective. This led to heavier workloads and increased burnout among employees.
- 2 Employee Experience as a Strategic Priority.** HR prioritized employee experience, focusing on recognition and teamwork to boost retention amid labor shortages.
- 3 Leadership and Manager Development as a Catalyst for Growth and Key Priorities.** Leadership and manager development was vital for improving employee experience and retention, yet many felt organizations fell short, with a third of workers citing poor management and leadership.
- 4 Excellence in Labor Relations and HR Function Strategy and Management.** Labor relations and

HR strategy were top-performing yet lower-priority areas, valued for their foundational strength. This stability will be crucial as the regulatory and political landscape evolves in 2025.

- 5 A Call to Shift Priorities Toward Employee Engagement and Development in 2025.** HR priorities are shifting to leadership development, employee experience, and learning in 2025, moving away from 2024's recruiting focus. Workers also stressed total rewards due to economic concerns, adding challenges for HR.
- 6 Strong HR Technology Important to HR Success.** HR technology will be crucial for achieving 2025 priorities, with its effectiveness strongly linked to overall HR and learning and development success. When HR technology is more effective, U.S. workers are more likely to view their HR departments as effective.

2024's Most Effective HR Practice Area

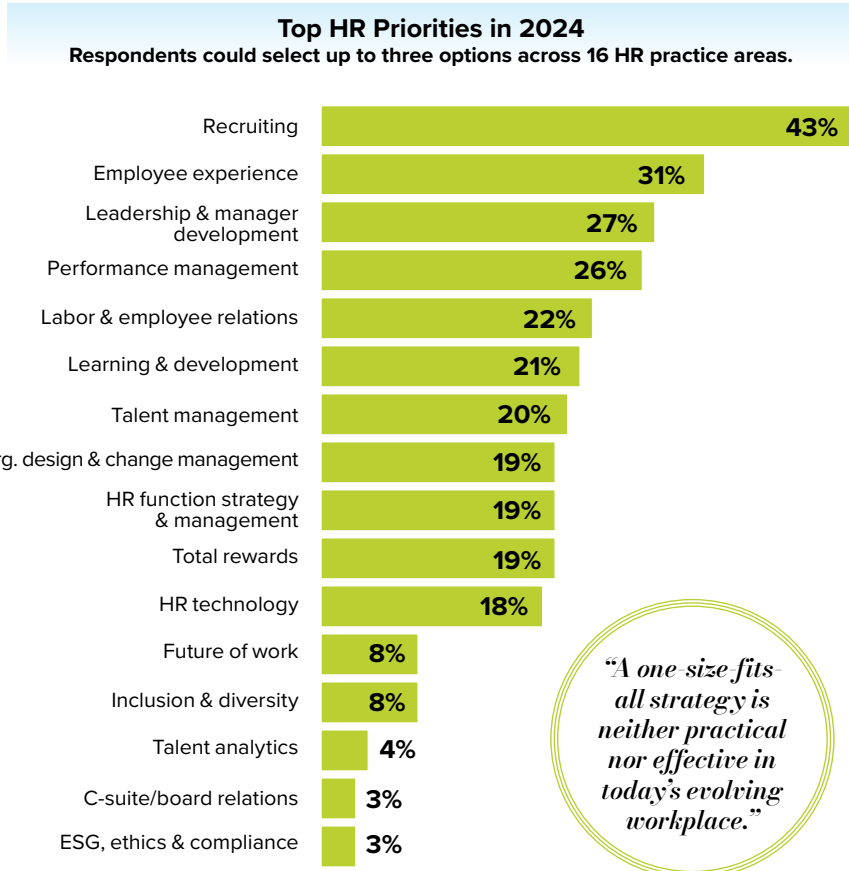
Labor and employee relations, focused on workplace dynamics and legal compliance, received the highest effectiveness ratings across HR professionals, HR executives, and U.S. workers. In a shifting regulatory and political landscape, HR must build on this strength to navigate ongoing uncertainty.

Effectiveness of Labor and Employee Relations in 2024



Remembering 2024 Priorities

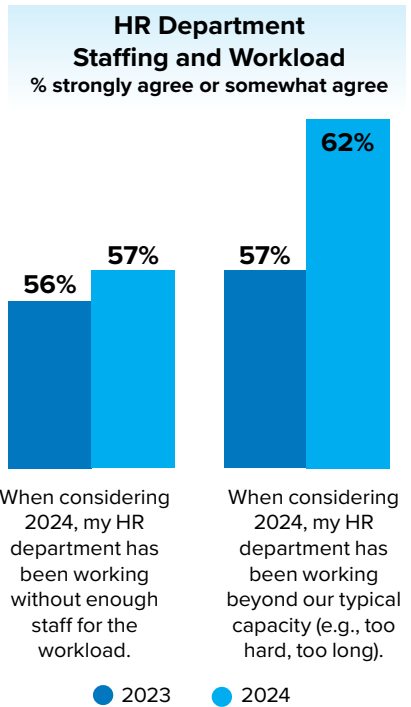
The priorities for 2024 serve as a reflection of the anticipated challenges for the year and highlight the areas HR deemed most critical to drive organizational success. HR professionals identified recruiting, employee experience, and leadership and manager development as top priorities in 2024.



“A one size fits all strategy is neither practical nor effective in today’s evolving workplace.”

Top HR Practice, Despite Persistent Challenges

HR function strategy and management was recognized as one of the most effective HR practice areas in 2024, according to both HR executives (70%) and HR professionals (57%), yet staffing and workload challenges continue to impact effectiveness.



Shifting Priorities in 2025

HR professionals and U.S. workers are aligned in identifying leadership and manager development, employee experience, and learning and development as the major priorities for 2025, signaling a shift from external recruitment to internal growth. Workers also highlighted the importance of total rewards.

Top HR Priorities for 2025		
% of respondents who indicate the following should be a top 3 priority for HR in 2025:		
#	HR PROFESSIONALS	U.S. WORKERS
1	Leadership and manager development (41%)	Total rewards (42%)
2	Employee experience (37%)	Employee experience (33%)
3	Learning and development (25%)	Learning and development (24%) Leadership and manager development (24%)



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JOBS AT RISK — U.S. EMPLOYMENT IN THE NEW AGE OF AUTOMATION (PART I)

This SHRM report identifies jobs that are already largely affected by automation. The theory is that occupations that are already highly or completely automated could shift to full displacement in the near term.

An estimated

12.6% (19.2) MILLION JOBS

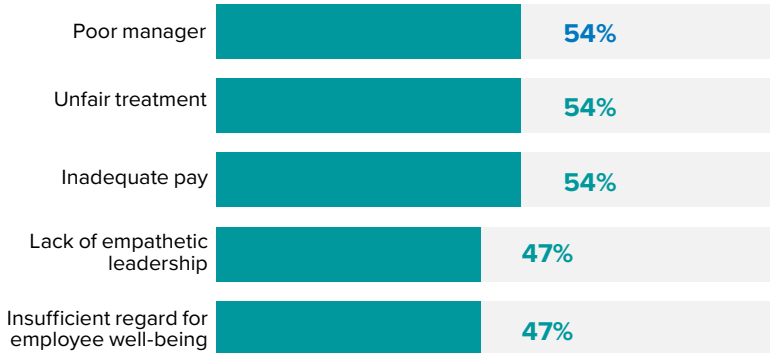
of current U.S. employment is at a high to very high risk of displacement via automation in the near term.

This includes about 3.2 million jobs (2.1% of employment) that are at very high risk because they are already completely automated.

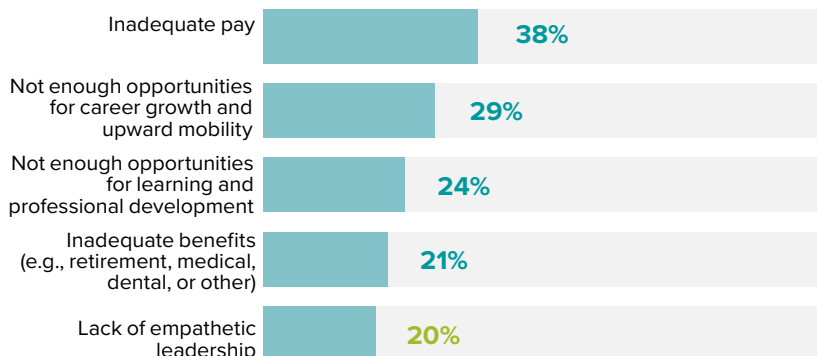
THE STATE OF GLOBAL WORKPLACE CULTURE IN 2024

Attitudes about company culture are correlated to the reasons employees said motivated them to seek employment elsewhere. Unsurprisingly, inadequate pay was a top reason for both those who rated culture poorly and those who rated culture positively.

Among Those in Poor or Terrible Culture



Among Those in Good or Excellent Culture



THE ROLE OF EMPLOYERS IN COAL-IMPACTED COMMUNITIES IN APPALACHIA

HR professionals overwhelmingly agreed that employers in the Appalachian Region have a responsibility to help coal-impacted communities and workers. Many employers also said they would welcome government resources to help them achieve this goal.

Government Resources Employers Would Find Useful for Supporting Workers in Coal-Impacted Communities



58%

Government funding to support industry-specific job skills and **training programs** for coal-impacted workers



43%

Job search assistance for coal-impacted workers



41%

Tax breaks/credits/incentives for organizations actively **recruiting** coal-impacted workers



38%

Tax breaks/credits/incentives for organizations actively **employing** coal-impacted workers



33%

Making **higher education** free to coal-impacted workers and their families

INSIDE SHRM

AWARDS AND NOMINATIONS

▶ Michael R. Losey Excellence in Human Resource Research Award

Philip Bobko, author and professor emeritus at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania, is the winner of the 2024 Michael R. Losey Excellence in Human Resource Research Award and its \$50,000 prize. The honor is named after the former president and CEO of SHRM, who retired in 2000.

“Throughout my career, HR topics have been central to much of my work — both in theory and practice,” said Bobko, whose aim has been to “measure people’s performance, their satisfaction, engagement with the work, [and] their willingness to stay with a particular organization.”

Nominations for the 2025 award open April 14 and run through



June 13. To be eligible, a nominee must have a deep track record of contributing to the HR discipline through research published in top-tier, peer-reviewed journals, as well as interactions with the practitioner community.

2024 Susan R. Meisinger Scholarship for Graduate Study in HR

Ashley Caulkins, SHRM-CP, of Dublin, Calif., is the winner of the 2024 Susan R. Meisinger Scholarship for Graduate Study in HR, named for SHRM’s president and CEO from 2002 to 2008. The scholarship, created in 2009, provides funding for first-time master’s degree students in HR with the aim of developing the next generation of HR leaders. Recipients are awarded up to \$10,000, and the scholarship is renewable for one additional year for a total of up to \$20,000. Caulkins is HR director at Seneca Family of Agencies, a nonprofit in Oakland, Calif., where she has also served as assistant HR director, workforce intelligence analyst, recruiter, and lead HR recruiter.



Submit your nomination for the Michael R. Losey Award.

2024 Workplace Impact Award

Birmingham SHRM in Alabama has been recognized with SHRM’s Workplace Impact Award for its work with untapped talent through its Second Chance Hiring Fair. The chapter expanded services from resume development and interview preparation during the fair to providing hands-on support during the event and using analytical data to strengthen this and other programs seeking to overcome employment re-entry barriers. Birmingham SHRM received \$2,500 and a crystal plaque from the SHRM Foundation, which sponsors the award.

Help Shape HR Quarterly!



Take a survey to share your thoughts on the content in *HR Quarterly* and other SHRM channels. Your feedback will guide future issues — and as a thank-you, you’ll be entered to win one of 10 \$50 Amazon gift cards.



► 2024 Pinnacle Awards

From Pennsylvania to Hawaii and points in between, SHRM chapters and state councils have been honored with 2024 Pinnacle Awards for their hard work and creativity in developing HR initiatives. These awards were presented in three categories and by chapter size. The winners were:

Serving the Professional

- Small Chapter: Northwest Louisiana SHRM
- Medium/Large Chapter: Siouxland Chapter of SHRM (Iowa)
- Mega/Super Mega Chapter: Twin Cities SHRM (Minnesota)
- State Council: Texas SHRM State Council

Advancing the HR Profession

- Small Chapter: Jefferson County Human Resources Management Association (Wisconsin)

- Medium/Large Chapter: SHRM Montgomery (Alabama)
- Mega/Super Mega Chapter: SHRM Lehigh Valley (Pennsylvania)
- State Council: Utah SHRM with collaboration from Salt Lake SHRM and Northern Utah HRA

Enhancing the SHRM Community

- Small Chapter: Four Rivers SHRM (Kentucky)
- Medium/Large Chapter: Anchorage SHRM (Alaska)
- Mega/Super Mega Chapter: SHRM Hawaii
- State Council: Southwest Central Regional Council (Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, and Utah)



Power Partner Award

SHRM Enterprise Solutions was recognized by Inc. Business Media's third annual Power Partner Awards in three categories: General Excellence, Best U.S. Power Partner, and Human Resources. The awards honor B2B organizations across the globe that have proven track records supporting entrepreneurs and helping startups grow. The SHRM Enterprise Solutions team was evaluated for its B2B world-class team training, competency certifications, consultations and other tools designed to empower HR and business leaders to continue developing better workplaces across the globe.

RLT IMAGES / ISTOCK

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

◀ SHRM CEO Addresses Education and Workforce Issues at House Hearing

SHRM President and Chief Executive Officer Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP, spoke before Congress in February at a hearing titled "The State of American Education" about the obstacles impeding the critical bridge between education and employment in the U.S. He highlighted the underutilization of untapped pools of talent and described a K-12

system that leaves students unprepared for employment. Taylor also urged Congress to reauthorize the modernized Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the nation's primary workforce development and training law.

"The education-to-employment pipeline is leaky, broken, and busted," Taylor told the House Committee on

Education and Workforce in Washington, D.C. "That said, our system is still the best in the world. Imagine what we could be if we unleashed the power of talent? This pipeline is a vital component of our efforts to mitigate the challenges of our current workplaces, to improve the lives and livelihoods of workers and their families, and to close the skills gap."



SHRM[®] Foundation

SHRM FOUNDATION RESEARCH

Reducing Turnover Through Skills-First Hiring Practices

If you live near a coast, you likely know Salt Life. The lifestyle and retail company’s recognizable logo has made it a well-known brand, especially so for having only 280 employees. Despite its success, however, Salt Life faces a common challenge: significant turnover of hourly, nonexempt retail staff.

To tackle this challenge, SHRM member Jennifer Thompson, Salt Life’s director of HR, joined the Georgia Employer Collaborative for Skilled Credentials (ECSC), a training cohort launched by the SHRM Foundation to implement skills-first hiring and advancement practices. The program, underwritten by WorkRise, a program of the Urban Institute, helped HR leaders such as Thompson widen pathways to work and address business challenges.

Together, the participating employers aimed to address one of the hardest challenges in the skills-first movement: How can small-to-midsize businesses be supported to adopt skills-first hiring and advancement practices?

The research, available on the SHRM Foundation’s Skills Hub, offers lessons on how ecosystem organizations, SHRM chapters and councils, and business leaders can support skills-first transformations:

- Organizing the right tools and providing guidance for overworked HR leaders and people managers to access what they need reduced barriers to skills-first hiring and increased implementation rates.
- Helping HR leaders and people managers

understand the first steps and providing even rudimentary support drastically improved the sense of direction employers reported and increased success.

- Simple actions, such as adjusting job descriptions and job postings to explicitly list more of the skills needed, were highly effective for employers.

Thompson followed these guidelines at Salt Life, working with store managers to launch “Grow Your Own Leaders,” an effort to relax requirements around education and experience, increase the visibility of needed skills in job descriptions, and provide behavioral question-based interview guides and training to managers. Within the year, he saw a 45% reduction in turnover and a 50% reduction in job abandonment and involuntary termination for targeted positions. She received positive feedback from the managers, who appreciated the autonomy and improved retention.

“Our leaders like to be on the cutting edge of things,” Thompson said. “We’ll be embedding skills and competency-based hiring as a core value for all of our positions.”

Another program participant, SHRM member Emily Braselton, is the HR lead for the Hall County, Ga., Library System. Braselton’s challenge wasn’t about entry-level workers; it was a looming, major retirement of the senior leaders across the library system. Braselton has plenty of tenured, skilled middle-level team members who could move up, but most of them do not have

four-year or advanced degrees, or certain key skills necessary to move into management.

“We have a lot of people who have a lot of experience, but they have little to no traditional degrees,” she said. “Our challenge was finding ways to develop our internal pool of candidates at little to no cost by building their skill sets.”

Braselton, working with the management team, developed a set of programs designed to identify existing nondegree staff members who were enthusiastic, competent candidates for management roles. Those candidates were given opportunities for on-the-job upskilling, shadowing, and tiered mentorship efforts — all culminating in a mapped management track. Over the course of the pilot, Braselton placed 50% of her first mentorship cohort in management roles, including many positions previously held by people with post-secondary degrees.

“Our next step is a big goal,” she said. “We would love to spread this model out across our industry, because our challenges are not unique.”

Through programs such as the Georgia ECSC and the launch later this year of the Center for a Skills First Future, the SHRM Foundation is working to ensure that businesses can quickly, easily, and effectively adopt skills-first practices. This allows them to be responsive to the changing ways that people are accumulating their skills and to access the widest spectrum of talent possible as they look to the future.

SHRM Calendar

June 29-July 2

SHRM25

San Diego and virtual

Sept. 27-30

SHRM Linkage Institute

San Diego and virtual

Oct. 26-29

SHRM INCLUSION 2025

Louisville, Ky., and virtual

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SHRM FOUNDATION NEWS

Executive In Residence in Mental Health

Marjorie Morrison joined the SHRM Foundation in January as its Mental Health Executive In Residence to foster the development and innovation of workplace mental health products and services.

Morrison will help SHRM and the Foundation create programs, tools, and trainings to support workplace leaders and HR professionals in promoting mental health in their organizations. In partnership with SHRM leaders, Morrison will develop innovative mental health solutions, enhance access to mental health support, advance thought leadership in workplace mental health through data-driven approaches, and foster strategic partnerships.

Morrison is a California-licensed marriage and family therapist and professional clinical counselor. She holds a pupil personnel services credential as a school counselor and psychologist and a master's degree in counseling psychology, in addition to having worked as a military family life consultant. Morrison also is the author of *The Inside Battle: Our Military Mental Health Crisis* (Military Psychology Press, 2012).

Military Community at Work Certificate

The SHRM Foundation, through the support of Comcast NBCUniversal, has launched the Military Community at Work Certificate program, aimed at empowering HR professionals in attracting, hiring, and retaining veterans and members of the military community for their organizations. The free program is open to SHRM and non-SHRM members who are HR professionals, people managers, or business leaders. Participants will earn 10 professional development credits toward their SHRM-CP or SHRM-SCP certification.

New Foundation Board Members

Melissa Anderson, Conor Grennan, and Aimee D. Peoples have joined the SHRM Foundation Board of Directors to serve three-year terms, effective Jan. 1.

- Anderson is executive vice president and chief people and transformation officer for Albermarle Corporation. She is responsible for strategic marketing initiatives and transformational efforts within the company, while overseeing all aspects of human resources, including talent, total rewards, culture, and the foundation.
- Grennan is chief AI architect at NYU Stern School of Business, where he builds generative AI (GenAI) fluency across the institution, including among MBAs, faculty, and the administration. He is also the CEO and founder of AI Mindset, a consulting company that trains professionals, leaders, and organizations on a new and effective framework for GenAI.
- Peoples serves as vice president for diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism at the National Partnership for Women & Families in Washington, D.C. She is the first person to hold this pivotal role.

Also serving on the board are:

- Camille Chang Gilmore, chair, vice president of human resources and global chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer, Boston Scientific.
- Edie Goldberg, Ph.D., immediate past chair, president, E.L. Goldberg & Associates.
- Karen Bennett, secretary/treasurer, executive vice president and chief people officer, Cox Enterprises.
- Jane Marvin, principal, Organizational Effectiveness and Change Management.
- John Ferguson, SHRM-CP, CHRO, NASCAR.
- Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP, president and chief executive officer, SHRM.
- Luciana Gómez, principal owner, Luciana Gómez Marketing Consulting.
- Mark Blankenship, Ph.D., executive vice president and chief of staff and strategy (retired), Jack in the Box.
- Subha V. Barry, president and CEO, Seramount.
- Tracy Layney, human resources executive.

Using the expertise of subject matter experts and latest research, participants will:

- Develop an understanding of the barriers to employment that veterans and members of the military community face and educate stakeholders about these barriers.
- Learn to build the business case for a workforce that is inclusive of veterans and members of the military community.
- Create strategies to attract, hire, develop, and retain veterans and military community members.



“We are so pleased to relaunch the Military Community at Work Certificate that expands the opportunity to learn and act on the invaluable contributions all military-connected talent can have in your workplace,” said Wendi Safstrom, SHRM Foundation president.

5 THINGS PRUDENTIAL'S CHARLES F. LOWREY WANTS HR LEADERS TO KNOW

BY KELSEY CASSELBURY



HR leaders are pivotal in shaping resilient, high-performing organizations. “Talent is everything,” said Prudential Executive Chairman and former CEO Charles F. Lowrey. “Therefore, [HR leaders are] everything, because they help develop and implement the talent strategy.”

But to succeed, he explained, the company’s top HR leader must first and foremost be a solid partner with the CEO. From there, Lowrey said, they must embrace five key responsibilities:

An HR leader must create a world-class HR function.

Leaders must prioritize attracting, developing, and retaining top talent, Lowrey said, while fostering strong, collaborative relationships. Those who report to the CHRO or another HR executive must also be fully aligned with leadership. An HR leader “must have the right mindset to work with both the business president and the HR business partner,” he explained. This alignment, rooted in the right mentality, ensures that HR functions as a strategic organizational partner.

An HR leader must be engaged at the board level.

A CHRO is often in front of the board, Lowrey said, and they must earn the directors’ trust. If the CEO hires or fires a senior leader, the board may look to the CHRO for perspective. “Not to question the CEO’s decisions, but to provide more context,” Lowrey explained. “They have to be above reproach and provide an objective voice that the board trusts.”



An HR leader needs to be an active member of the executive team.

It’s not enough to help with HR issues (that’s too obvious, Lowrey said). Leaders must also think through challenges, opportunities, and strategies through the lens of their experience and judgment. Lowrey led a full-scale transformation of Prudential, which included streamlining organizational design, processes, and decision-making, to improve customer experience and enhance competitiveness. CHRO Lucien Alziari has been one of the leaders of that strategy. “He was always out in front, saying, ‘We can do more,’” Lowrey said.

An HR leader must bring external perspectives.

They can’t be internally focused. Instead, Lowrey said, HR leaders must have their finger on the pulse of the profession and cultivate a flourishing network, just as Lowrey has with other CEOs. When external challenges arise, HR “needs to be able to call up their peers to ask, ‘What are you doing about this?’” he added.

An HR leader must be an advisor to the CEO.

The higher a person rises in an organization, the less feedback they get. Therefore, an HR leader “must have a courageous voice, to be able to say things that others might not, and to be a bearer of the truth,” Lowrey said. “I can’t tell you how many times Lucien has come into my office and said, ‘I think you’ve got it wrong.’” There are few people that will do that, Lowrey added, and the top HR leader has to be one of them.

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