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HR Quarterly



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Dear HR,

Remember when you were starting out? You had all these **dreams of being a leader**, with a seat at the table, driving real change. But things haven't turned out quite like you planned. You've been stuck in a relationship that's been **holding you back**.

Over the years you've made excuses for it. "Maybe this is how it's supposed to be." "Everyone else seems to put up with it." "They say relationships take a lot of work."

But let's get one thing straight: **It's not you. It's your HR software.**

It doesn't respect your time. It takes hours and hours of manual work just to get simple things done. And then there are the empty promises. "We're always improving." Oh yeah? **When's the last time it shipped a new product for you? 2019?** Your work friends hate it, too. Sorry. They won't say it, but they find **your software inaccessible and off-putting.**

We're only bringing this up because we think you could do better. A lot better, ahem with us.

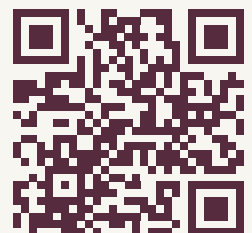
We make time for you—like, thousands of hours—automating busy work. We're constantly upgrading. Did you know we shipped 110+ products and feature improvements in the last year? We can free you up to focus on your business's most pressing challenges and give you the insights to be a strategic leader. We're not threatened by your career—in fact, **it's everything to us.**

Look. We get it. Moving on can be hard.

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



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Re-Engage Your Workforce — Now

Leverage cultural clarity to lay a durable foundation of employee engagement.

Workforce engagement has long been a key differentiator for high-performing organizations. It's the fuel that powers resilience, innovation, and growth — the foundation for success in a world where change is the only constant.

However, it's important for leaders to understand that engagement springs from more than just a single policy or initiative. It's about knowing who you are as an organization and then providing your employees with cultural clarity around the issues that matter most to them, such as flexibility, professional development, and employee recognition.


The last few years have reshaped how, where, and when work gets done. The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a new era of remote work — and many employees still want the option to work from home, even though the height of the pandemic is several years in the past. Some CEOs, including me, have found that a hybrid work environment is a practical benefit to help keep employees engaged. It provides the opportunity for face-to-face collaboration on in-office days and flexibility on remote days.

However, for industries such as health care in which remote work isn't always feasible, offering options such as shift flexibility may be the most reasonable approach. Ultimately, there's no one-size-fits-all solution, and employers must do what's best for their

organizations. Carefully evaluate which benefits align with your company's goals and always be transparent with your employees about the benefits offered.

Beyond flexibility, engagement thrives when employees feel their work isn't just a job but a stepping stone toward something greater. Whether an employee is a recent graduate eager to learn new skills or a seasoned professional looking to tackle fresh challenges, workers at every stage of their career want opportunities to develop and advance. For this to happen, employees must have honest conversations with their managers about their career goals so they can collaboratively identify growth opportunities.

Let's face it: Everyone likes to feel appreciated. Yet, many employees go extended periods of time without hearing a simple "thank you." Recognition is one of the most powerful and most easily implemented tools available to boost engagement. When we celebrate contributions great and small, we show employees how much they — and their work — matter.

The workforce has changed, and so must we. By focusing on flexibility, development, and recognition, we can build trust to power engagement. As leaders, it's our responsibility to work with our teams to create environments in which employees don't just survive, they thrive. The future of work is about more than policies and practices — it's about people. 

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

TACKLING TMI IN THE WORKPLACE

HR plays a key role in preventing and managing the effects of employees oversharing personal details with co-workers.

BY KATE FERRARA



Amid the workday's creeping deadlines, mounting paperwork, and endless meeting requests, one person seems to make it all manageable: your work bestie. This go-to co-worker — the one who knows what your sideways glance means during a meeting and how you *really* feel about your boss — might feel like the only reason you don't throw in the towel some days. However, as that friendship develops, you might start spilling personal details. But once the information is out there, there's no controlling where it goes next.

It's hard to know when being friendly turns into frequent oversharing, but the latter can increase risks for both the worker and the business.

When it comes to workers sharing

their private lives, where's the line between authentic and inappropriate — and how should HR react when it's crossed?

Balancing Authenticity and Professionalism

Encouraging workers to express their authentic selves helps build an inclusive culture, the benefits of which are clear: Employees who feel a strong sense of belonging at work are less likely to feel burned out and, therefore, less likely to be actively searching for a new job, according to 2024 SHRM research.

However, it's easy for an employee to mistake being unprofessional for being authentic. Sharing deeply personal topics such as relationship, health, or financial struggles — or discussing polarizing sub-

jects such as politics or religion — with co-workers can quickly go from innocent to unacceptable and set off a slew of concerns. Possible issues include:

- Distractions from workload priorities and diminished productivity.
- Increased workplace gossip and fractured team dynamics.
- Damaged professional reputations.
- Potential legal liabilities, such as discrimination claims, for the organization.
- Opportunities for unconscious bias — someone can't "unknow" information once it's been shared.

Even if co-workers have developed a friendship, their colleagues aren't therapists — and neither are their boss or HR. Uncomfortable employees might not know how to mitigate a co-worker's tendency for TMI, but HR should be proactive in implementing and enforcing boundaries for the good of all.

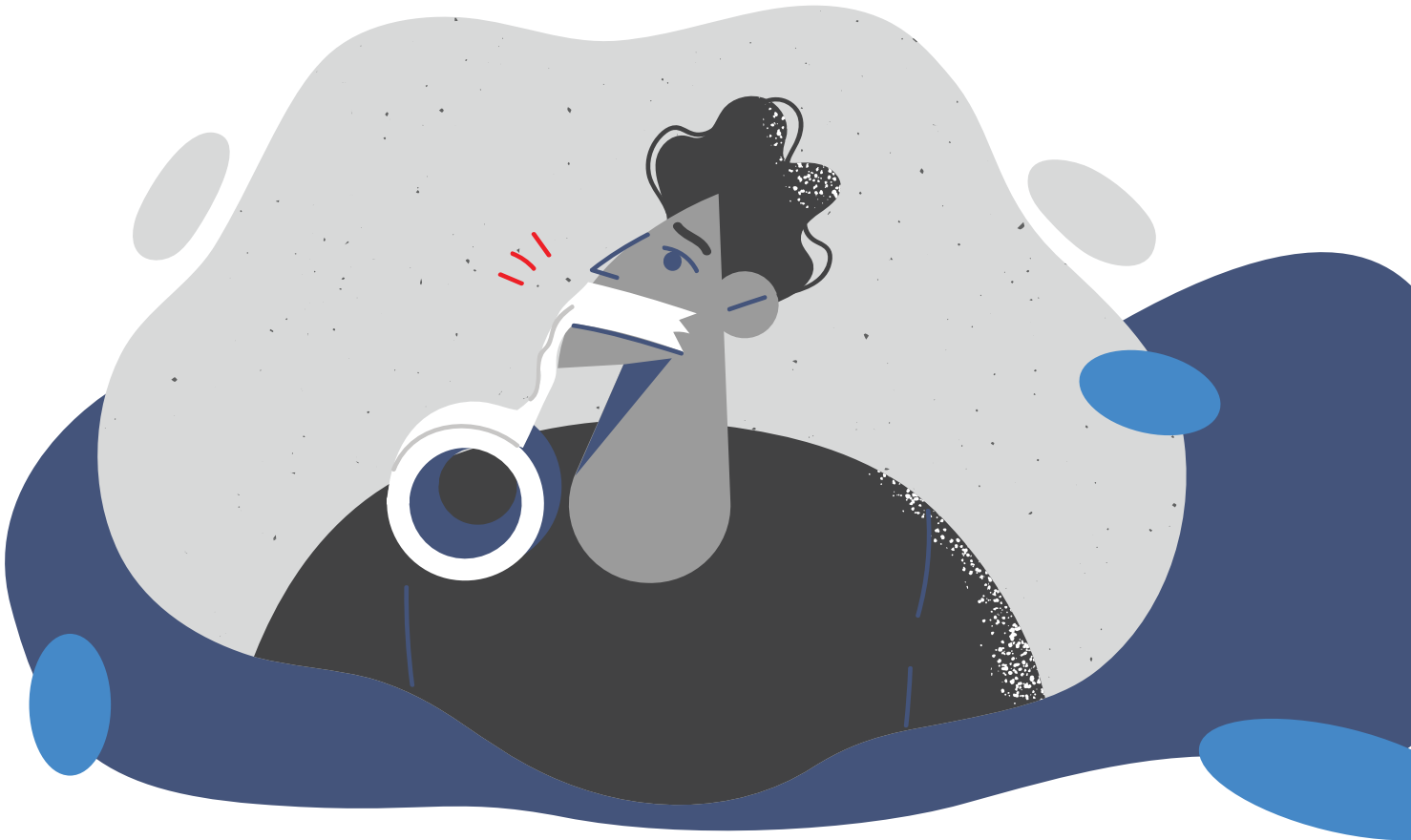
Unblurring the Lines

HR departments play a vital role in curtailing oversharing by establishing clear policies and providing effective resources.

An employee might overshare because they feel the need to explain themselves; for example, instead of requesting an afternoon off, an employee might ask for time off for a doctor's appointment and start ticking off reasons they need to see a physician in the first place.

Start by drafting a document that outlines which types of personal information employees are not required to share with their co-workers, supervisor, or HR. This might include:

- Medical conditions or history, except in circumstances such as confirming sick leave, setting up accommodations, or managing workers' compensation claims.



- Personal finances beyond what’s necessary for payroll, taxes, benefits administration, or certain legal or regulatory requirements.
- Protected class information, such as religion, national origin, gender identity, or sexual orientation.
- Details about personal relationships, political or social beliefs, or values.

HR can also caution employees against other types of oversharing, such as airing grievances about team members, venting about problems not related to work, overexplaining personal challenges, or posting private details on workplace platforms.

However, when sensitive matters inevitably arise, HR must redirect the employee to the appropriate avenues, such as providing information on employee assistance programs (EAPs) or helping them seek out qualified professionals like doctors, therapists, lawyers, or financial advisors. These resources enable employees to access the support they need without compromising their privacy.

Training Managers to Address the Issue

HR can’t be in all places at all times, so it’s key to train managers to spot the signs and handle oversharing among their teams.

- Educate managers on how your organization defines professional boundaries, providing a clear framework for what constitutes appropriate workplace conversations.
- Provide examples of oversharing behaviors, such as discussing explicit medical details, talking about fights with their partner, or divulging struggles with financial debt.
- Teach them how to tactfully redirect conversations that veer into oversharing. After acknowledging an employee’s feelings, managers should then point them toward HR or appropriate resources.
- Emphasize the importance of confidentiality and knowing when to escalate concerns to HR, as well as how to document and follow up when necessary.

Upholding a Professional and Inclusive Culture

Striking the right balance between authenticity and professionalism is vital for an inclusive, productive workplace. By implementing clear policies, offering proactive manager training, and directing employees to resources, HR can minimize the risks of oversharing, maintain employee trust, and cultivate a respectful workplace culture. [HR](#)

SHRM member Kate Ferrara is an HR manager at Alcon in Irvine, Calif.

Do You Overshare at Work?

You know how to handle employees oversharing — but what if the person who overshares in the office is *you*? Take this quiz (shrm.org/tmi-quiz) to find out if you need to curb your own propensity for dropping too many personal details.

Get top workplace insights with the Honest HR flagship newsletter and podcast at shrm.org/hr-daily

CAN MINDFULNESS BEAT BURNOUT?

Integrating mindfulness into the workplace helps HR build a culture of support, empathy, and psychological safety that's rooted in well-being.

BY MELODY BEUZELIN



ALL THINGS WORK

Mental health-related issues such as fatigue, trouble concentrating, burnout, and anxiety can't be solved by unplugging the brain and plugging it back in again.

Nearly half of U.S. workers (45%) said their career advancement has negatively impacted their mental health, according to SHRM's *The Price of Success: Navigating the Tradeoffs That Shape Career Growth 2025* report. The problem is especially pronounced for women: 52% said the experience had a negative impact on their mental health, compared to 47% of men.

Organizations are starting to understand the importance of mental

health in the workplace and look to HR for solutions on how to support their employees. What if HR could introduce a simple, sustainable approach that empowers employees to reclaim control over their mental and emotional well-being? Mindfulness offers just that — a practical, accessible solution for improving focus, productivity, and building the kind of emotional resilience required to thrive in today's environment.

"Stress results in millions of dollars in lost productivity each year," said Denise Shields, Ph.D., a leadership coach and mindfulness teacher. "Mindfulness is an evidence-based practice that has been shown to reduce stress and improve numerous health conditions for thousands of participants."

What Is Mindfulness?

At its core, mindfulness is the practice of being fully present in the moment, maintaining awareness without attaching judgment to one's thoughts or emotions.

While mindfulness is often associated with individual wellness, its impact can naturally extend into the professional setting. Marjorie Morrison, SHRM's executive in residence for mental health, recalled

her experience with an organization that embedded short mindfulness moments into its daily operations, starting team meetings with 60 seconds of breathing and offering voluntary midday guided meditations.

The results? Within six months, the company saw a meaningful drop in self-reported stress levels. "Even more compelling," Morrison said, they noted "a rise in employees reporting feeling more connected to their teams."

Measuring the Mindfulness Impact

A combination of qualitative and quantitative metrics is essential to evaluate the impact of these programs effectively.



When employees feel psychologically safe, they're more likely to collaborate, innovate, and stick around.

— MARJORIE MORRISON

Morrison suggested introducing engagement surveys that “[i]nclude well-being indicators — like feelings of psychological safety, connection to purpose, and burnout risk.”

It’s also important to pair those responses with hard data, such as absenteeism and turnover rates, as well as utilization of mental health benefits and impact surveys.

Mindfulness Is Not a Fix-All

While mindfulness offers measurable benefits such as reduced stress and better focus, it’s important to recognize that it is not a cure-all solution.

Beth Brown, director of health and well-being at ComPsych, encourages organizations to evaluate and identify possible systemic and cultural issues first.

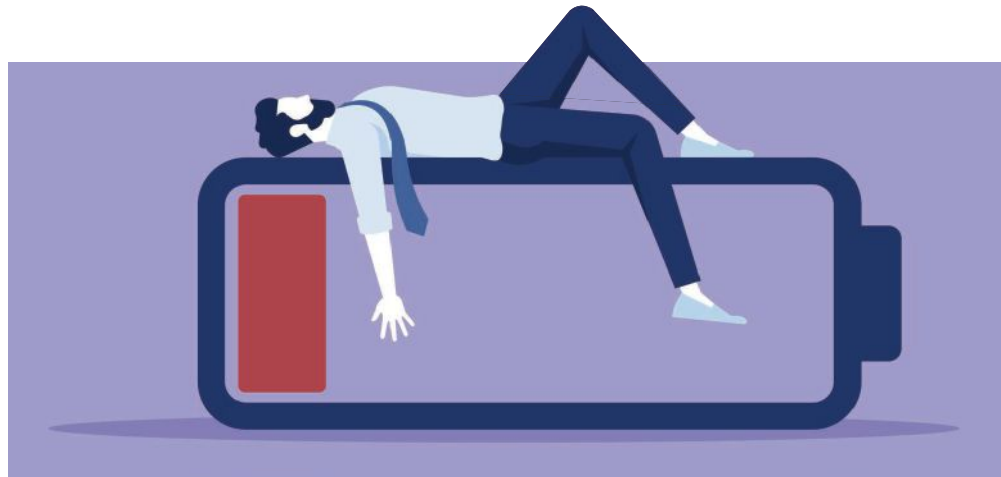
“While [well-being programs] may be well-intentioned, when workplace cultures aren’t aligned with mental health initiatives and programs, the benefits can feel performative to employees,” she explained.

To demonstrate a commitment to overall employee well-being, Brown suggests other measures, such as “reviewing rewards and compensation, appropriate delegation of workloads, flexibility policies, and more in addition to introducing any mental health and well-being efforts.”

Simple Practices

If organizations want to integrate mindfulness but have concerns about employee resistance, they should start small, suggested Tracy Teemaree Jacobsen, founder of coaching and wellness company Transformation Through Joy Method.

“Integrate mindfulness as part of the workflow — not an add-on. A few minutes before meetings or short guided breaks can reduce resistance and build a



culture of presence without disrupting productivity,” Jacobsen said.

Below are a few simple, effective ways to encourage mindfulness at work — no meditation cushions required. These practices are designed to be low-lift, high-impact, and seamlessly woven into the existing workday.

- **Start with a mindful minute.**

Begin team meetings with 60 seconds of guided breathing to help everyone transition from task-switching into focused presence. Facilitate the activity by counting down and giving clear instructions. Consider this script: Inhale through the nose for a count of four, hold for a count of four, then exhale through the mouth for a count of four.

- **Offer optional midday breaks.**

Schedule short, guided sessions — five to 10 minutes long — during the workday. These can be virtual or in-person, and might include breathing exercises, light stretching, or a body scan meditation.

- **Embed reminders into digital tools.**


Use Slack, Teams, or internal email to drop in a weekly “Mindful Monday” note or reflection prompts.

- **Provide access to mindfulness**

resources. Meditation apps, such as Calm, Headspace, and eM Life, provide on-demand access to programs that employees can explore. Consider inviting wellness speakers or hosting short virtual workshops — even a mindfulness tip section in the company newsletter can plant the seed.

Mental Health Is a Business Investment

Mental health initiatives aren’t just good for people — they’re good for business. In fact, organizations that invest in mental health support often see a measurable return on their efforts. For every \$1 spent on mental health interventions, companies can expect an average return of \$4, according to research from the National Safety Council and NORC at the University of Chicago.

“The ROI of mental health isn’t just lower health care claims — it’s better retention, higher engagement, and fewer costly mistakes,” Morrison said. “When employees feel psychologically safe, they’re more likely to collaborate, innovate, and stick around.” 

MELODY BEUZELIN is a senior content specialist at SHRM.

HOW CHRO-CTO PARTNERSHIPS DRIVE AI SUCCESS

When these leaders team up, AI becomes a catalyst for workforce transformation.

BY NICHOL BRADFORD



THE AI+HI PROJECT

Effective AI deployment requires more than technical considerations. When organizations approach AI solely as a technical initiative, they overlook valuable opportunities to enhance the employee experience and develop capabilities that create lasting competitive advantage. The strategic alliance between CHROs and chief technology officers (CTOs) plays a pivotal role in bridging technology and workforce readiness, ensuring that AI initiatives drive meaningful business transformation.

These partnerships must integrate technological possibilities and human

capabilities. While CTOs understand the architectural and infrastructural requirements of AI systems, CHROs bring insights into workforce readiness, skill development needs, and cultural implications of technological change.

This complementary expertise provides a foundation for successful implementation.

A Framework for Collaboration

Successful CHRO-CTO partnerships often involve a structured, collaborative approach built on four core dimensions:

1. Shared vision development.

Working together, CHROs and CTOs can build an aligned AI road map that integrates technological innovation with workforce priorities and organizational values.

2. Integrated implementation planning.

They can design better strategies that address technical deployment while supporting employee adaptation.

3. Skills architecture design.

They can more effectively identify, build, and deploy the skills required for AI-enhanced roles.

4. Cultural transformation management.

They can also emphasize psychological safety and trust to foster acceptance and engagement during the transformation.

This framework promotes extended collaboration, creating a holistic integration of human and technical dimensions. Effective partnerships break down silos, enabling leaders to jointly address challenges and align AI strategies via shared goals.

Trust Through Transparency

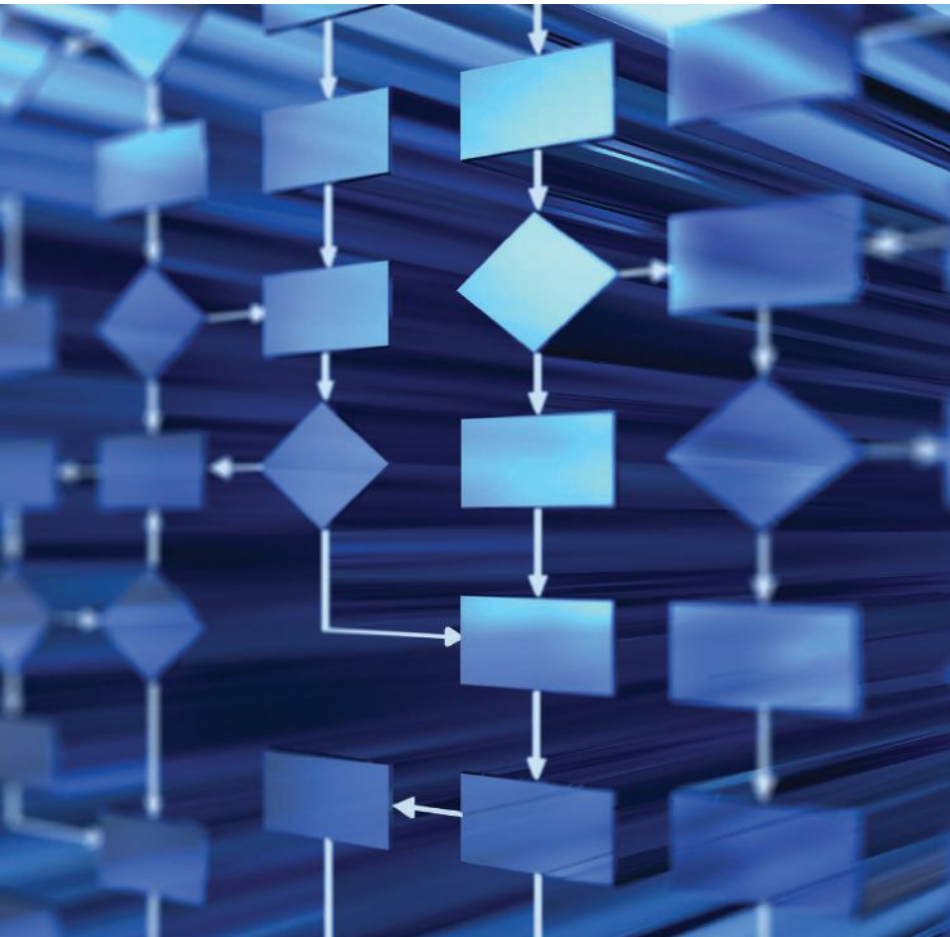
Effective CHRO-CTO collaborations cultivate trust during technological transformation. AI initiatives often provoke employee concerns about job security, skill relevance, and shifting roles. Addressing these fears requires transparent communication and proactive engagement.

Transparency involves open dialogue about both the benefits and limitations of AI, along with clear explanations of how human expertise complements machine performance. Organizations should prioritize fostering an environment where employees view AI as an enhancement to their roles, not a threat to their futures. This approach encourages employees to adopt and optimize AI-driven tools.

Another critical component is the joint creation of ethical governance frameworks for AI systems. Together, HR and technology leaders can establish guidelines for data usage, algorithmic transparency, and monitoring to ensure AI aligns with organizational values. By demonstrating a commitment to responsible innovation, organizations gain the trust of employees and stakeholders alike.

From Strategy to Execution

Translating strategic vision into practical implementation requires five main structured approaches that address both



technical and human dimensions of change:

1. Assessment and alignment:

Evaluating organizational readiness across technical infrastructure, workforce skills, and cultural factors.

2. Pilot design and implementation:

Launching small-scale AI projects to demonstrate value with minimal disruption.

3. Learning integration: Gaining insights from initial pilots to refine approaches and address challenges.

4. Scaled deployment: Expanding

successful pilots while maintaining focus on employee experience.

5. Continuous adaptation: Establishing ongoing feedback loops to assess outcomes and evolve strategies.

This structured approach enables organizations to balance innovation with risk management, ensuring AI initiatives deliver sustainable value. Starting with small-scale initiatives enables both technical and HR teams to learn and adjust while gradually building momentum for broader implementation.

Measuring Success

Effective CHRO-CTO partnerships develop multidimensional frameworks for evaluating AI implementation success. While technical outcomes such as efficiency gains remain important, broader metrics help capture the human impact of AI adoption. Key measures might include:

- Employee experience and engagement.
- Skill development progress and uptake of new capabilities.
- Adoption rates and role transformation.
- Long-term adaptability and innovation capacity.

By measuring both technical and human outcomes, CHROs and CTOs gain a comprehensive view of AI's impact. Capturing how work evolves over time provides valuable insights into sustaining progress and driving continuous improvement.

An Ever-Evolving Partnership

As AI capabilities continue to evolve, the partnership between CHROs and CTOs will become increasingly important for organizations seeking a competitive advantage. This collaboration will expand beyond implementation support to include joint responsibility for imagining how human-AI interaction can create new forms of value.

Organizations that establish strong CHRO-CTO collaboration today will be better positioned to navigate future technological change. These partnerships create adaptability that extends beyond specific technical implementations to encompass organizational capacity for continuous learning and evolution. [HR](#)

NICHOL BRADFORD is the executive in residence for AI+HI at SHRM.



THE FUTURE OF WORK IS PERSONAL

How AI is reshaping employee experiences.

BY AARON TEITELBAUM



Imagine a workplace where career growth, benefits, and learning paths are as personalized as Netflix recommendations. Artificial intelligence, automation, and digital platforms are making hyper-personalization the new standard.

Employees now expect workplace customization similar to what they experience as consumers, including AI-driven career pathing and tailored benefits.

“Shouldn’t the place where we spend so much of our time and energy understand us better than any brand out there?” asked Andy Biladeau, chief transformation officer at SHRM.

HR leaders must balance personalization with ethical AI use, ensuring technology empowers employees rather than surveils them. Companies that strike the right balance will foster an engaged, productive, and satisfied workforce, while those that fail to do so risk falling behind.

“Younger generations have grown up with personalized experiences, from streaming services to online shopping,” said Jim Link, SHRM-SCP, CHRO at SHRM. “They now expect the same level of customization in their careers. HR leaders who fail to meet these expectations will struggle with engagement and retention.”

AI, automation, and digital platforms help companies provide customized learning paths, real-time recognition, and adaptive work schedules. However, organizations must balance scalability and ethical AI use to ensure that personalization benefits employees without bias.

The Rise of AI Personalization

Personalization matters more than ever before. A McKinsey & Company study found 71% of consumers expect personalized interactions, and 76% get frustrated when this doesn’t happen. Similarly, workers who said technology enables productivity were 158% more engaged and 61% more likely to stay in their job beyond three years, according to Qualtrics.

Revolutionizing HR Tech

Advancements in people analytics and machine learning have led to AI-powered HR platforms that transform employee experiences by offering personalized career pathing, AI-driven mentorship, and predictive workforce insights. These platforms match employees with tailored coaching opportunities based on their aspirations and skills, while automating feedback loops

4 Steps for Ethical AI Implementation

HR leaders must ensure artificial-intelligence-driven personalization is ethical and transparent by:

- 1 Assessing employee needs and expectations.** Use surveys and data analysis to determine where personalization adds the most value.
- 2 Ensuring transparency in AI use.** Communicate how AI is used in career development, performance tracking, and benefits, and allow employees to opt out of data collection.
- 3 Using AI to empower, not over-monitor.** Avoid excessive tracking of digital behaviors and ensure analytics focus on career growth and well-being.
- 4 Strengthening data privacy and security.** Implement strict encryption and governance policies to protect sensitive employee data.

to enhance performance tracking and minimize bias in promotions.

Other potential applications include:

- Individualized benefits and wellness programs that cater to employees' diverse needs, such as flexible work schedules and caregiving support.
- Customized onboarding, benefits recommendations, and real-time performance feedback.
- The identification of skills gaps, followed up by adaptive training and enhanced career progression through interactive experiences, boosting productivity and operational efficiency.

As digital platforms evolve, businesses that embrace AI-powered personalization will gain a competitive edge in employee engagement, retention, and workplace satisfaction.

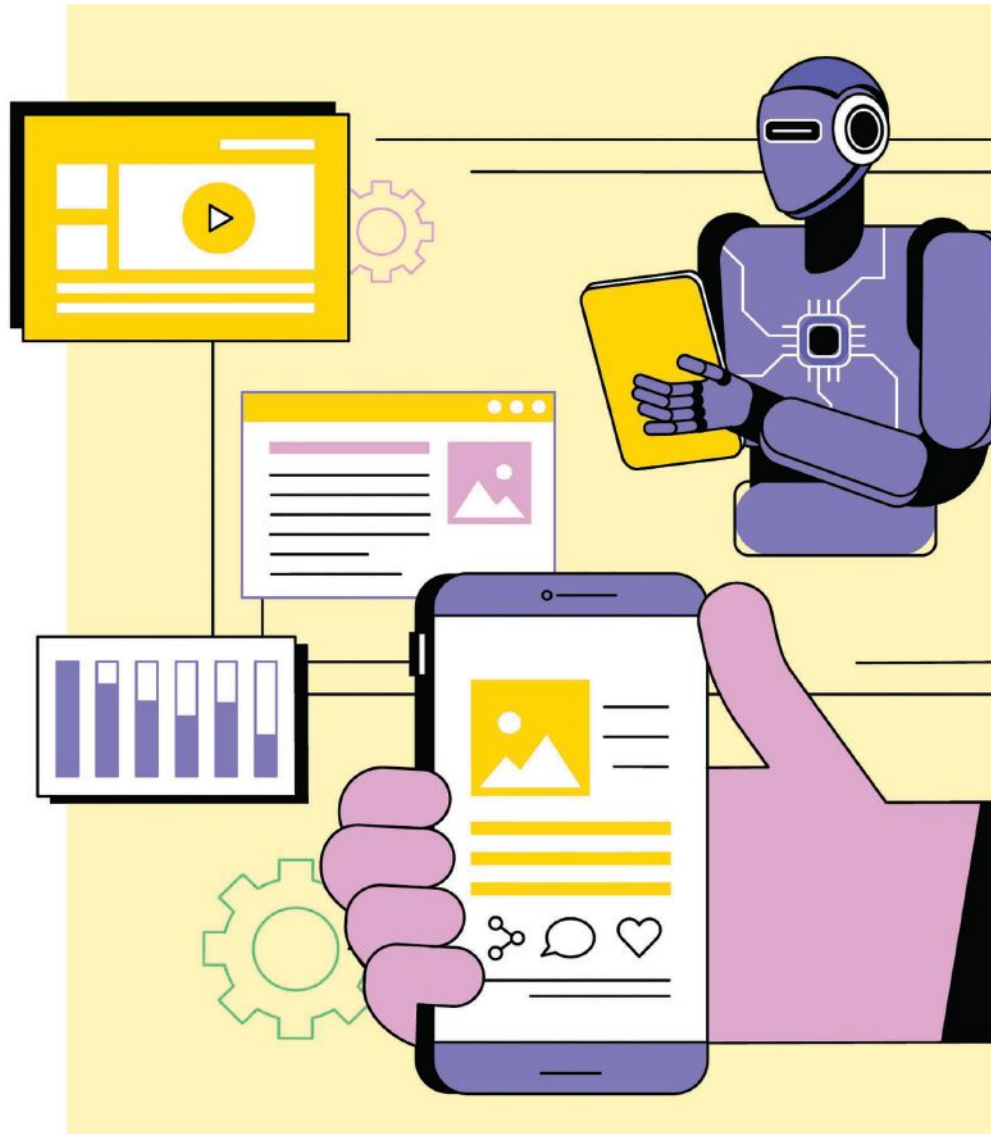
Ethical AI for Employee Empowerment

As AI reshapes work, companies must balance its benefits with data privacy to ensure the technology enhances rather than erodes trust. AI tools can optimize workflows and tailor learning, but excessive monitoring — such as tracking digital activity or using facial recognition — has raised ethical concerns. Roughly half of workers said they would leave a job if they were subjected to such surveillance, according to a survey by Morning Consult.

Additionally, AI-driven hiring and career development tools rely on historical data, which, if unchecked, can reinforce systemic biases and disadvantage certain employees. To maintain fairness and trust, organizations must implement oversight and ethical guidelines in AI-driven decision-making.

Ethical AI's Competitive Advantage

As AI-driven personalization becomes the workplace norm, HR leaders must ensure



its ethical implementation. By prioritizing transparency and mitigating bias, businesses can create a fair and inclusive environment.

However, the biggest key to success is empowering employees rather than over-monitoring them. Organizations that

strategically and ethically adopt AI-driven personalization will gain a competitive edge in attracting and retaining top talent. [HR](#)

AARON TEITELBAUM is a content lead at SHRM.



Get top workplace insights with the Tomorrowist flagship newsletter and podcast at shrm.org/tomorrowist-hrq



AN ALTERNATIVE WAY TO CURB HEALTH CARE SPENDING

Direct primary care is a growing trend in employer health plans that could help contain costs and improve outcomes.

BY MARTHA EKDAHL

SHRM® EXECUTIVE NETWORK

PEOPLE + STRATEGY

Workers are feeling the burden of soaring health care costs, and the pressure's not going away anytime soon. In the last five years alone, average family coverage premiums rose 24%, slightly outpacing inflation (23%) and cutting into the 28% increase in wages over that same period, according to KFF's 2024 Employer Health Benefits Survey. This rapid cost increase has put pressure on employees and employers alike.

However, U.S. workers do greatly value the health coverage they obtain through their jobs. And so do their bosses: 88% of employers said health benefits are of top importance, ahead of every other benefit

category, according to SHRM's just-released 2025 Employee Benefits Survey.

While employers are planning for higher expenditures, they're also investigating alternative ways to provide cost-effective, flexible health care for employees. One option gaining traction is a combination of a direct primary care (DPC) model and supplementary insurance policies.

Typically, employers offering health care coverage partner with insurance brokers to choose plans from a group health insurance provider. These providers collect premiums to cover the cost of care and perform administrative duties, such as processing claims and ensuring

compliance. When employers can't offer a plan, employees must look to the health insurance exchanges created under the Affordable Care Act or pay out of pocket.

When using a piecemeal approach, however, employers must look for solutions in multiple places. Under a DPC model, employers contract directly with primary care providers for employee care. They may also then engage with insurance brokers for supplementary coverage for specialist and hospital care, in addition to outsourcing the burden of tasks such as claims processing to third-party administrators. Depending on the employer's outlays, federal subsidies are offered in the form of tax advantages for employer-sponsored health plans.

Four Factors to Consider

When contemplating a shift to a DPC model, employers should first consider the availability of providers in their geographic area. While the number of DPC practices continues to grow, they are not ubiquitous.

Once adequate availability is confirmed, employers should consider a few DPC-specific considerations:



- 1. Covered services.** Smaller providers might only offer services related to primary care visits, such as vaccinations, annual physicals, and visits for acute conditions such as the flu or a sprained joint. However, larger providers may include labs, prescriptions, and other services in their scope of work. Establishing the extent of care allows for better cost comparison to current health care benefits.
- 2. Additional coverage.** Even when a provider offers a variety of services, specialist visits or unexpected health issues may incur additional costs. Employers with DPC offerings can offer supplementary insurance to defray such expenses.
- 3. Administrative needs.** Even larger companies can be burdened by the administrative aspects of DPC and supplementary insurance. Assembling a knowledgeable team or upskilling current HR employees

can help, as can tapping third-party administrators to handle claims and manage outflows.

- 4. Wellness benefits.** As with traditional health care coverage, employers can offer plans to accompany the DPC benefit model, allowing employees to supplement their health care through wellness practices. These benefits can include coverage for gym memberships, physical therapy, and more.

Stepping into the Direct Care Model

Employers looking to establish alternative health care approaches or update existing offerings can follow three steps:

- **Survey your employees.** Determine what your staff wants and needs before making decisions. Employers can also compare their offerings to those of industry counterparts with results from SHRM's 2025 Employee Benefits Survey.

- **Ensure compliance.** Employer health care expenditures can come with tax advantages, but it's important to consult legal, tax, and accounting professionals to help with decision-making and ensure adherence to applicable laws and regulations.
- **Pilot and prepare to modify.** Any alternative health care approach may need tweaks down the line. By planning for reviews and revisions at the start, leaders can prepare for any necessary changes to improve benefits.

While the DPC model may not be appropriate for every company, its growing prevalence means more employers can explore whether this benefit format can benefit employees (as well as the bottom line). [IR](#)

MARTHA EKDAHL is a senior content specialist at SHRM.

SOUND BITES

Insights from thought leaders featured in recent episodes of SHRM Flagship podcasts.



ALL THINGS WORK

Emphasize Internal Talent Development

“Even though we’ve had this kind of persistent labor shortage, we’re seeing a bit of a cooling-off of the labor market. Our research is showing there’s a little bit of a shift, or a desired shift, from focusing externally and bringing in all of the talent through recruiting to an internal focus around developing that talent internally.”

*James Atkinson,
Vice President of Thought
Leadership, SHRM*



THE AI+HI PROJECT

Increase Trust to Boost AI Adoption Rates

“When trust is low, people think that AI is meant to replace them. When trust is low, people feel like AI is for some people and not for other people — and if it’s for some people and not for other people, some people are going to get left behind.”

*Michael C. Bush, CEO,
Great Place To Work*



HONEST HR

Work/Life Boundaries in Action

“Boundaries are actually a form of productivity and engagement. They’re not a disconnection; they’re not a barrier. So many HR professionals feel like they have to be available 24/7. ... I don’t believe in the phrase work/life balance, but what I do believe in is work/life boundaries. When we set boundaries, we actually increase our efficiency as well as our well-being.”

*Joelle Moray,
Founder and CEO,
Integrate Wellness*



PEOPLE + STRATEGY

Implement Personalization for Employees

“Treat your employees much like you treat your customers by knowing their demographics and their preferences. ... Personalization is becoming even more critical now because we’ve got so many different generations working together. You need to have different ways to address their needs, whether it’s the benefits you provide, the way you communicate to them, or how you create opportunities for them to grow and develop.”

*Amy Cappellanti Wolf,
Chief People Officer, Dayforce*



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*Jeffrey Beeson,
Founder, Ensemble Enabler*

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HR's Role in Preventing and Managing Social Media Missteps

Your company needs a clear social media policy — and you need to enforce it.

BY APRIL BRASHER, SHRM-CP

Should HR intervene when an employee's social media presence reflects poorly on the company? It depends.

HR may need to address posts that are defamatory regarding the company or its employees — especially if they mention protected characteristics such as race, gender, and religion — or are otherwise disruptive. However, companies should take a proactive approach to handling social media concerns, rather than reacting after a problem occurs.

First, companies need to have a clear and consistently upheld policy regarding social media use. Employers should define boundaries for acceptable and unacceptable social media behavior and outline potential consequences for violations. However, under the National Labor Relations Act, an employer cannot discipline a worker for accurate social media posts about working conditions, wages, or the workplace.

When your HR department is alerted to potentially inappropriate social media use, first investigate whether the conduct violates company policy. If it does, assess the severity next. Consider potential harm to the organization, team, or other individual employees, as well as noncompliance with policies, labor laws, or legal requirements.

Your investigation might include reviewing the employee's history and role, particularly if the employee has access to confidential information. If so, the response might be different based on your organization's confidentiality clause. Immediate action, such as retraining, may also be needed in cases involving violence,

safety hazards, or discrimination.

If you determine the employee has violated policies, set up a discussion with them to explain which policies were breached. For example, if a post harms the organization's reputation or is discriminatory, you might address the impact on the brand, as well as potential legal consequences for both the organization and the employee.

Shaping Your Social Media Policy

A social media policy typically outlines expectations for appropriate behavior, professionalism, and confidentiality. It should also address sensitive company information, such as proprietary data or strategic plans. For a policy to be both enforceable and effective, employees must be properly trained on its meaning, behavior expectations, and consequences.

Your social media policy should distinguish between official and unofficial roles for social media use. It's common for only official representatives to be authorized to speak on an organization's behalf.

The policy may offer additional guidance on what an employee can post online in a personal capacity, particularly regarding sensitive or confidential information. It might encourage employees to be respectful, honest, and transparent about their individual role and to avoid posting

negative or inflammatory content. The policy may also address industry-specific and/or legal restrictions on what may be shared online. For example, an employee may be discouraged from posting about specific products or sensitive industry information to protect trade secrets and maintain the employer's competitive edge.

HR is entrusted to safeguard the company's reputation and reduce potential harm. By implementing and consistently enforcing a social media policy and reminding employees to be cautious about what they post, HR fulfills those obligations. [IR](#)

APRIL BRASHER, SHRM-CP, is an HR Knowledge Advisor at SHRM.

Got an HR question? Ask a SHRM
HR Knowledge Advisor at
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Keep Up with Compliance Obligations

Prioritization is key to minimize legal risks.

BY ALLEN SMITH, J.D.

The law constantly changes at the federal, state, and local levels — how can an HR department of one keep up? Prioritizing compliance duties may help, as well as adopting compliance strategies and tapping into available SHRM resources. In some circumstances,

however, it might be necessary to bring in additional help or expand your HR team.

“The reality of being an HR department of one is that you’re constantly triaging priorities,” said Jeremy York, SHRM-SCP, lead consultant and president of InvigorateHR in Indianapolis. “Start with what could

cause the most damage, both in terms of financial risk and employee impact.”

Triage and Plan Ahead

Employers should create a compliance calendar — a tool to help track important legal deadlines — and set aside time each

week for updates and review, York recommended. But not every update should be given the same weight.

“Focus first on changes that affect your entire workforce or carry significant penalties,” he said. For example, if there’s new minimum wage requirements and a need to update the company’s social media policy, the wage changes take priority.

“You’d rarely be wrong if you prioritized wage and hour compliance,” said Martha Boyd, an attorney with Baker Donelson in Nashville. Even with rapidly changing conditions at the U.S. Department of Labor, “plaintiffs’ lawyers are still on the hunt for good cases, and I don’t see that changing.” Misclassifying workers or failing to properly pay overtime can be expensive, she noted.

Remote work can also complicate compliance considerably.

“Just last month, I worked with a solo HR professional who discovered their company had remote workers in three states — each with different overtime and paid-leave requirements,” York said. While the HR department of one was trying to get up-to-speed on the new compliance obligations, the HR pro also had to handle an accommodation request under the Americans with Disabilities Act and conduct a time-sensitive workplace investigation.

“Compliance challenges rarely come one at a time, and they don’t wait for your schedule to clear up,” York said.

The most pressing compliance challenges for HR departments of one are managing multistate regulations when companies have remote workers and keeping up with constantly evolving leave laws, while juggling daily HR operations, York said. Consider consulting an attorney before hiring an employee in a state with laws that you are not familiar with, Boyd said.

“Growing workforces and activity in highly regulated states — for example, California, New York, New Jersey, and Illinois — often cause an HR department of one to be overwhelmed,” said Maria Rodriguez, an attorney with McDermott Will & Emery in Los Angeles.

Many capable solo HR practitioners have hired workers in, say, California or

Colorado, she said, without realizing the nuances or differences of those state laws. For example, in some states:

- HR cannot use their typical nondisclosure or noncompete agreements.
- Employers need to meet many requirements for giving employees posters or notices.
- Onerous state paid-leave requirements apply.
- State wage and hour laws may differ from Fair Labor Standards Act requirements.

“What makes it particularly challenging is that you don’t have another HR professional down the hall to bounce ideas off of or double-check your interpretation of a new regulation,” York noted.



Compliance challenges rarely come one at a time, and they don’t wait for your schedule to clear up.

— JEREMY YORK, SHRM-SCP

Compliance Strategies

Employers should develop both a compliance strategy and an annual calendar to execute that strategy, Rodriguez said. The second quarter is a good time for the HR projects that need to be done in addition to regular compliance work, whether it’s updating job descriptions or performance evaluation forms or working with vendors, she said.

Start looking ahead in the third and fourth quarters at expected legal changes for the upcoming year, making updates to policies and preparing for any operational adjustments those changes may require.

Annual training allows employers to keep up with mandated instruction and inform managers of new laws they are responsible for enforcing.

Remind managers “that their acts and communications come with strict liability for the company, and they, too, may be personally liable for certain acts and communications,” Rodriguez said.

Available Resources

Despite your lack of HR colleagues on staff, don’t try to do this completely alone. “Even as a department of one, you need a support system — whether that’s through professional associations, peer networks, or trusted advisors,” York said.

State labor department websites and updates are essential, as well, he noted.


Additionally, don’t be afraid to say “I need to research that” in lieu of an immediate response.

“Your SHRM membership is worth its weight in gold” when quick answers are needed, York added.

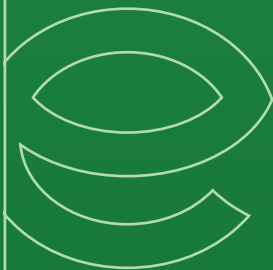
“I have also found that many HR professionals will try to crowd-source solutions by using LinkedIn or Facebook groups to get responses to their inquiries,” said Chad Sorenson, SHRM-SCP, president of Adaptive HR Solutions in Jacksonville, Fla. “I have two words for those using social media for advice: caveat emptor [buyer beware]! I belong to a number of these groups and am frequently amazed at the bad, wrong, or even dangerous advice given by others.”

Finally, avoid using internet searches or artificial intelligence as a substitute for legal advice, added Abad Lopez, an attorney with Dykema in Chicago.

An HR department of one should have outside employment counsel they trust, said David Epstein, SHRM-SCP, director of human resources and talent strategy with Mobilization for Justice in New York City. “HR should always seek legal advice on most matters to inform their decisions, when needed, especially for complex issues,” he said.

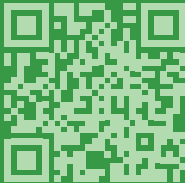
If your gut tells you the legal advice doesn’t seem right, don’t ignore that feeling, York cautioned. “Ask questions, request clarification, and, if needed, seek a second opinion.” 

ALLEN SMITH, J.D., is a content manager at SHRM.



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Seeing and hearing as we age

EXPLORING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE SENSES AND AN EXCITING INNOVATION THAT IS HERE TO HELP



MATTHEW MACDONALD
President, EyeMed Vision Care

Every day we rely on our eyes and ears to understand the world around us and ensure we never miss a moment. We focus on the road while driving, listening for horns, sirens and other sounds to alert us of potential hazards we might not be able to see. So when these senses begin to change with age, so can our quality of life.

Vision and hearing decline with age

As we get older, many adults begin to notice small changes in their vision—a condition called presbyopia, which usually starts around age 40. Age-related hearing loss, known as presbycusis, is also very common in older adults.

Progressive lenses, such as Varilux, allow wearers to benefit from multi-focal vision without resorting to glasses with visible lines, like bifocals. But there hasn't been a comparable solution for presbycusis. Many people still hesitate to use hearing aids due to comfort concerns and lingering stigma.

Vision, hearing and the brain are closely connected

Our brains are crucial in processing and understanding what's happening around us, but they don't work alone. They rely on our eyes, ears and other senses to quickly process information about our environment. But our senses lose their sharpness as we age, making it harder for our brain to notice key details.

Vision and hearing problems impact lifestyle

Staying social is not only important for our mental health but keeping our brains sharp. Those with vision and hearing issues begin to isolate themselves from social activities for fear of communication issues. If they remain untreated, those with dual hearing and vision loss are at a higher risk of developing some form of dementia.

An exciting innovation is here to help

Inspired by the way vision and hearing are so closely connected, Nuance Audio, a subsidiary

of EssilorLuxottica, combines sound engineering with smart eyewear for those with mild to moderate hearing loss. While they might just look like a sleek pair of glasses, these innovative frames are embedded with high quality microphones and micro-speakers.

How it works:

- Microphones tune into sounds coming from the direction the wearer is looking while reducing background noise.
- Audio is transferred to microspeakers and delivered directly to the wearer's ears without delay.
- Users can adjust their listening experience with the Nuance Audio app.

DIRECTIONAL MICROPHONES
Enhance speech clarity in noisy environments

OPEN-EAR SPEAKERS
Offer all day comfort without the pain and irritation caused by traditional hearing aids



FRAMES
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7 in 10 adults

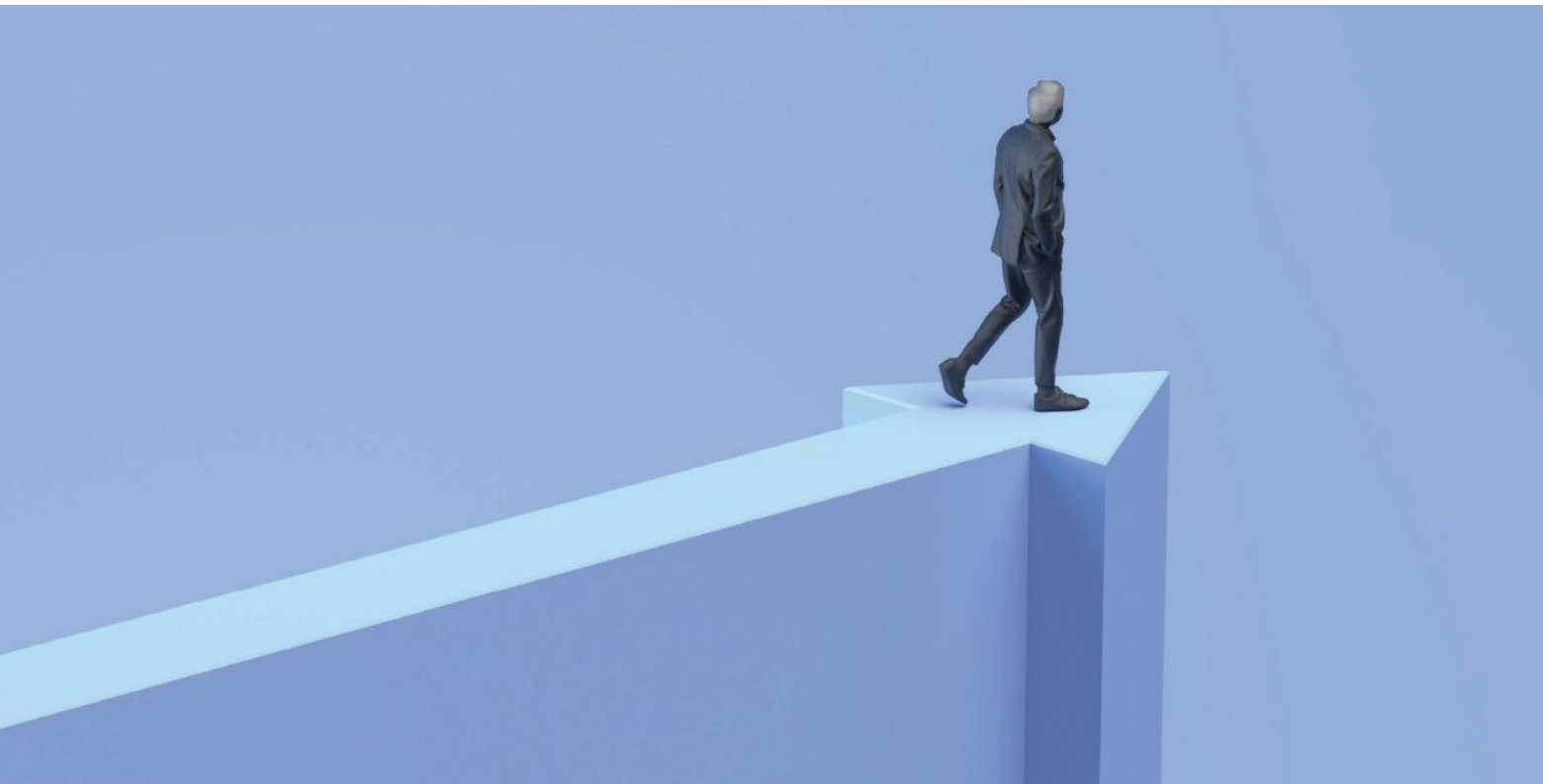
struggle to hear conversations in noisy environments

See, and hear, life to the fullest

Vision and hearing may change as we age, but that doesn't have to diminish our quality of life. Vision benefits like EyeMed combined with innovations like Nuance Audio addresses challenges in a seamless, stylish way. And the best part? Nuance Audio is covered by EyeMed vision benefits.

Ready to go deeper on the science behind vision and hearing? Download our whitepaper at eyemed.com/focusforward.

EyeMed Vision Care is a leader in vision insurance benefits. We deliver stand-out vision benefits, and an outstanding member experience across America's largest vision network. EyeMed is based in Cincinnati, Ohio. Learn more at eyemed.com.



Leveraging the Value of an Older Workforce

Employees ages 65 and older are one of the fastest growing slices of the U.S. workforce. Smart companies are paying attention.

BY SYDNEY ROSS AND JUSTIN LADNER

HR professionals often devote a significant amount of time and energy to understanding, attracting, and retaining the next generation of talent, but there's another demographic shaping U.S. workplaces today: employees ages 65 and older, who are one of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. workforce.

The country's older population has grown rapidly, and as more people continue working beyond the traditional retirement

age of 65, the modern workplace has become more age-diverse than ever. Given that more than two-thirds of organizations reported struggling to fill full-time roles over the past year, according to SHRM's *2025 Talent Trends* report, this demographic shift presents an opportunity for HR professionals.

Longevity, Education, and Opportunities

As shown in Figure 1, the fraction of

workers ages 65 and older began to increase quickly in the early 2000s. Employees in this demographic now account for around 7% of overall employment — numbering around 11.2 million workers in March 2025, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Population Survey. In fact, this upward trend in employment has survived both the Great Recession and the COVID-19

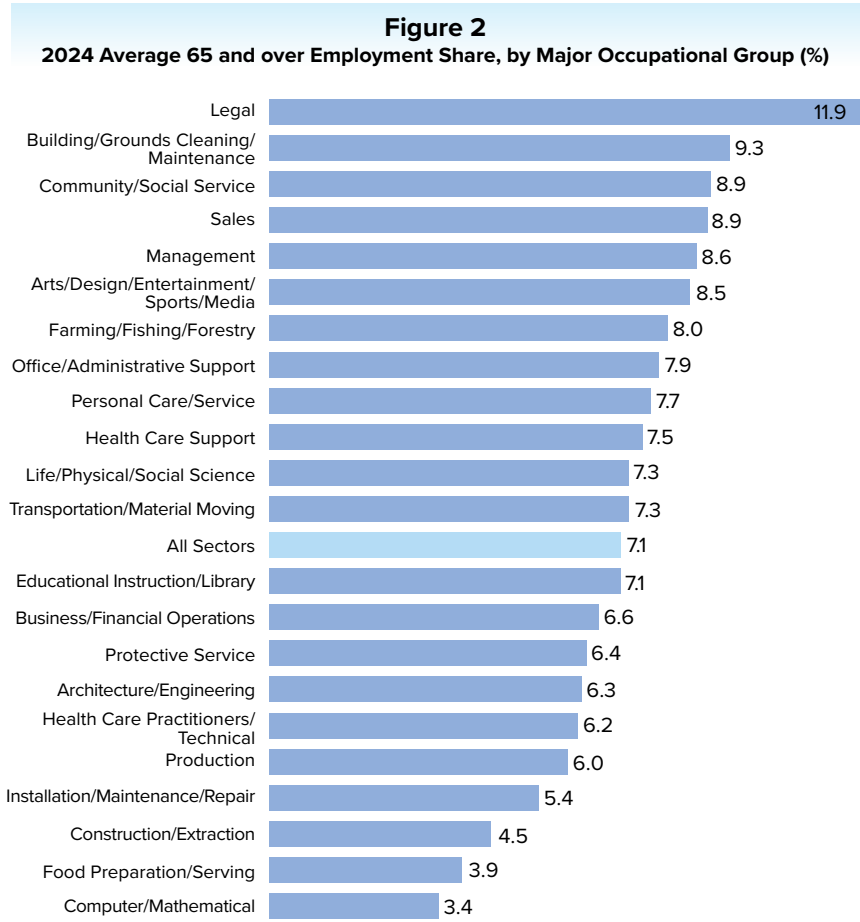
pandemic — and the workplace changes that accompanied both.

There’s no single reason explaining why older workers are remaining in the labor force longer than their predecessors. However, rising life expectancy — from around 70 years in 1960 to 78 in 2023, per World Bank data published by the St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank’s Federal Reserve Economic Data archive — is certainly a key factor.

Many older workers are simply participating in the workforce longer to save enough for a retirement that can support them comfortably through these extended lifespans. Notably, in 1983, the U.S. Social Security Administration raised the full retirement age to 67 (starting for those born in 1960), further increasing people’s incentives to extend their working lives.

Another key consideration is that older people are more educated than ever before. In 1965, only 5% of U.S. adults ages 65 and older had completed at least four years of college, but that value had increased to 33% as of 2023, per the Population Reference Bureau. This rise in educational attainment has helped individuals extend their careers and remain competitive in the job market.

Additionally, SHRM research has found that older workers are not limited to stereotypical jobs. As shown in Figure 2, workers ages 65 and older are represented in every major occupational group and are essential to employment across the entire workforce. Ranging from a high of 11.9% in legal occupations to a low of 3.4% in computer and mathemat-




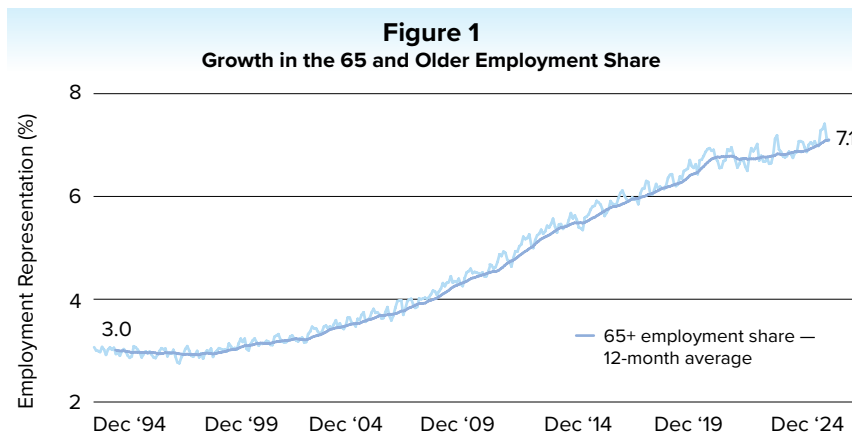
SOURCE: Average values based on January 2025 - December 2024 CPS basic monthly extract data downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

ical jobs, older workers exhibit a diverse array of skill sets that can be applied across multiple industries.

Savvy HR professionals will under-

stand that the graying of the labor force presents an opportunity to address talent shortages by increasing efforts to engage this previously underutilized talent pool. As competition for skilled workers intensifies, organizations that recognize the value of older employees and adapt to help them thrive will gain a critical edge. HR professionals and employers can start by designing age-inclusive policies, removing barriers to continued employment, offering flexible work arrangements, and leveraging intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Older workers are not a niche — they are a rising force. Organizations that understand their needs (and strengths) today will be better positioned to thrive tomorrow. 



SOURCE: December 1994 - December 2024 CPS basic monthly extract data downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

SYDNEY ROSS is an economic researcher at SHRM. **JUSTIN LADNER** is SHRM’s senior labor economist.

JUST_SUPER / ISTOCK



Why Do So Many HR Leaders Regret Technology Purchases?

Software spending has higher stakes amid HR's digital transformation.

BY DAVE ZIELINSKI

Today's human resource leaders increasingly view HR functions as digital-first operations that combine the latest technology with human expertise to create a more productive, streamlined, and business-savvy department.

Artificial intelligence, cloud, and mobile technologies can create new efficiencies, enhance productivity, and reduce

costs for human resources. HR leaders have invested in next-generation digital tools to improve recruiting and learning outcomes, to free up time for overburdened HR staff to focus on more strategic work, and to develop more accurate people data.

However, as technology providers continue to roll out innovative AI-powered

tools and HR leaders line up to purchase them, a troubling trend has emerged: Buyers are starting to admit to a high level of regret over HR technology investments.

Two recent studies suggest that buyer's remorse among HR leaders following software purchases is growing.

- The *2025 Tech Trends Report* from Capterra, a provider of software

research and reviews, found that 54% of surveyed HR leaders cited increased costs, and 47% reported productivity losses attributed to regretful purchases of software-as-a-service (SaaS) products.

- A 2025 survey from research and advisory firm Gartner found that CHROs have more regrets about their large-scale software investments than executives leading other departments or functions. The Gartner study found that after HR leaders' organizations implemented new software, 44% of those leaders had a high level of regret, and 33% had a moderate level of regret.

Brian Westfall, the HR technology analyst who authored Capterra's report, said the study defined a "regretful" decision as one that forced HR buyers to take corrective steps following a software purchase. "The most frequent remedial action was having to conduct product research a second time and find new HR software," Westfall said.

What's Causing Regret?

There's no one reason why HR leaders regret tech purchases, according to the Capterra study, but some explanations include low adoption or usage rates following software implementation, falling short of goals such as improved employee productivity, difficulty integrating new software with existing HR systems, and challenges in configuring the technology to accommodate an organization's unique HR processes.

Buyer Be (More) Aware

The study also correlated several problematic buying behaviors with post-purchase regret. Chief among them is how buyers conduct research when evaluating software solutions and third-party technology providers.

Capterra found that 9 in 10 HR leaders with buyer's remorse were likely to make purchase decisions based largely on vendor-supplied information.

"Many of these buyers take what a vendor says at face value, whether that's



If they're not investing in AI to solve a specific business problem or to address well-defined use cases, it can be like chasing a magical unicorn.

— BRIAN WESTFALL

during a product demonstration, through an advertisement, on social media channels, or by trawling the vendor's website," Westfall said.

Over-reliance on vendor information is a more recent trend driven — at least in part — by HR technology specialists' inexperience. The *27th Annual HR Systems Survey Report* from Sapient Insights Group in Atlanta found that 58% of HR professionals with technology responsibilities now have less than three years of experience — a knowledge gap that's widened in recent years.

To avoid buyer's remorse, talk to experts in the field, get recommendations from peers or user groups who have bought similar HR software, or request detailed case studies from vendors, Westfall suggested.

"HR needs to more closely vet the information vendors provide around what their systems can and can't do in terms of AI, integrations, configurability, data security, reporting, and regulatory compliance," said Stacey Harris, chief research officer and managing partner at Sapient Insights Group.

"In the past, those technologists might have learned from each other, from industry certifications, or other [impartial] sources," she said.

Keeping Up With the Joneses

Buyer's remorse may also be related to perceived pressure to invest in the latest and greatest AI tools. Decision-makers are seeking to keep pace with competitors or wanting to be known for their cutting-edge HR tech stack.

"Much of the motivation driving HR leaders to upgrade their HR technology systems has been to take advantage of new AI capabilities," Westfall said. "But if they're not investing in AI to solve a specific business problem or to address well-defined use cases, it can be like chasing a magical unicorn."

Dissatisfaction isn't usually related to features or functionality, Harris said, but rather because systems have grown increasingly complex and often can't be easily configured.

"Many features in today's software are cutting-edge, but HR leaders with buyer's remorse tend to say things like 'It's difficult to optimize all of the software's functions' [or say] that they can't access or report on data the way they'd like to, or they can't organize a system in the way their business is organized," Harris said. "In their drive to continually innovate on features, technology vendors sometimes have forgotten about making their systems easy to configure and use and to be business-relevant for HR users."

The Real Price Tag

The Capterra study also flagged underestimating the total cost of ownership in software purchases. This is a particularly

Nothing is worse than finding out down the road that the vendor's software can't actually do what you thought it could do.

— MARK STELZNER



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common problem for smaller businesses or those buying HR software for the first time, Westfall said.

“Some buyers, for example, think the subscription licensing cost is the full cost of the investment,” he explained. “But with software purchases, there are always additional costs for system setup, data migration, customization, user training, and any premium level of customer support. Overlooking those costs can lead to budget overruns and financial problems.”

Get Stakeholder Input

The composition of the team making the purchase decision can also contribute to regret. Nearly two-thirds of regretful HR software buyers were the sole decision-makers for the purchase, according to the Capterra study.

“It takes a village, especially when investing in big HR systems,” Westfall said. “HR needs the involvement of IT, managers, and employees if it wants to avoid problems like poor usability and low adoption rates that plague purchases made from a limited perspective.”

When evaluating software, consider factors such as cost, functionality, usability, data security, regulatory compliance, and compatibility with other platforms.

“Making these purchases is more complex than it used to be, in part because HR software increasingly needs to ‘play well’ with a growing variety of other platforms in a HR technology ecosystem,” Westfall said. “If you aren’t considering system integration needs at the very start of the buying process, you’ve already made a mistake.”

Software-buying teams should be both meticulous and assertive when evaluating new technologies, particularly when they involve AI, said Mark Stelzner, founder and managing principal of IA, an HR technology advisory firm in Atlanta.

“This is about going slow to eventually go fast,” Stelzner said. “You want to make sure your HR use cases for the technology are very detailed, for example, to help prove the technology provider can address them. Nothing is worse than finding out down the road that the vendor’s software can’t actually do what you thought it could do.”



However, it’s also problematic when IT has too much influence in HR software decisions.

“Oftentimes, IT leads the procurement process and HR simply becomes an order taker with low influence in the process,” said Harsh Kundulli, a vice president and HR technology industry analyst with Gartner. “That can cause problems” if the IT department has different priorities than HR.

However, this can be mitigated if HR leaders build good relationships with their employer’s chief information officer or chief technology officer, Kundulli said.

Why It Matters

These mistakes’ ramifications are amplified because, unlike function-specific software, HR applications are often used by employees across an organization, Westfall said. For example, workers increasingly use self-service HR apps to

access information about benefits, compensation, and paid time off.

“HR software is not siloed in one part of a business,” Westfall said. “So, when there are problems like an application being difficult to use, not playing well with other HR technologies, or experiencing glitches, it can cause broad operational and reputational consequences for HR.”

Trust issues also may emerge if HR rolls out a tool that’s well suited to human resources’ needs but is cumbersome for line managers or employees to use.

“That hints at HR not really considering the full employee experience when investing in new software,” Westfall said. “It can create lasting reputational damage, as well as drive up costs from purchases that have limited return on investment.”

DAVE ZIELINSKI is a business journalist who covers the impact of emerging technologies on the workplace.



How to Avoid Costly Wage and Hour Mistakes

Stay compliant in this complex area with these tips.

BY LISA NAGELE-PIAZZA, J.D., SHRM-SCP

Navigating the complexities of wage and hour compliance demands precision, expertise, and a thorough understanding of intricate regulations, especially as states and localities pass their own laws with varying requirements. How can HR professionals ensure their organizations remain aboveboard? These seven tips will help you stay on track.

I **Classify Employees Properly**
A job title alone is insufficient in determining exemption status, said SHRM HR Knowledge Advisor Katie Brennan, SHRM-CP. Misclassifying employees as exempt under the federal Fair Labor Standards Act can lead to lawsuits claiming unpaid minimum wages and overtime premiums.

Instead, an employer should determine whether the employee's job responsibilities pass the duties test for the exemption, as well as whether the employee earns a salary that meets the minimum threshold.

When in doubt, Brennan recommended, err on the side of caution by classifying an employee as nonexempt.

2 Make Deductions Cautiously

As a general rule, exempt employees must be paid their regular salary for any week in which they perform work, regardless of the number of hours or days they work, Brennan said.

However, there are a few exceptions, including when an exempt employee is absent for a full day for personal reasons and has no leave available. Exceptions also apply for partial weeks worked during the first and last week of employment and partial-day absences due to a qualifying reason under the Family and Medical Leave Act.

Employers should consider working with legal counsel to carefully review and properly apply these exceptions so they do not jeopardize the exemption for that period.

“The employer will lose the exemption if it has an ‘actual practice’ of making improper deductions from salary,” according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

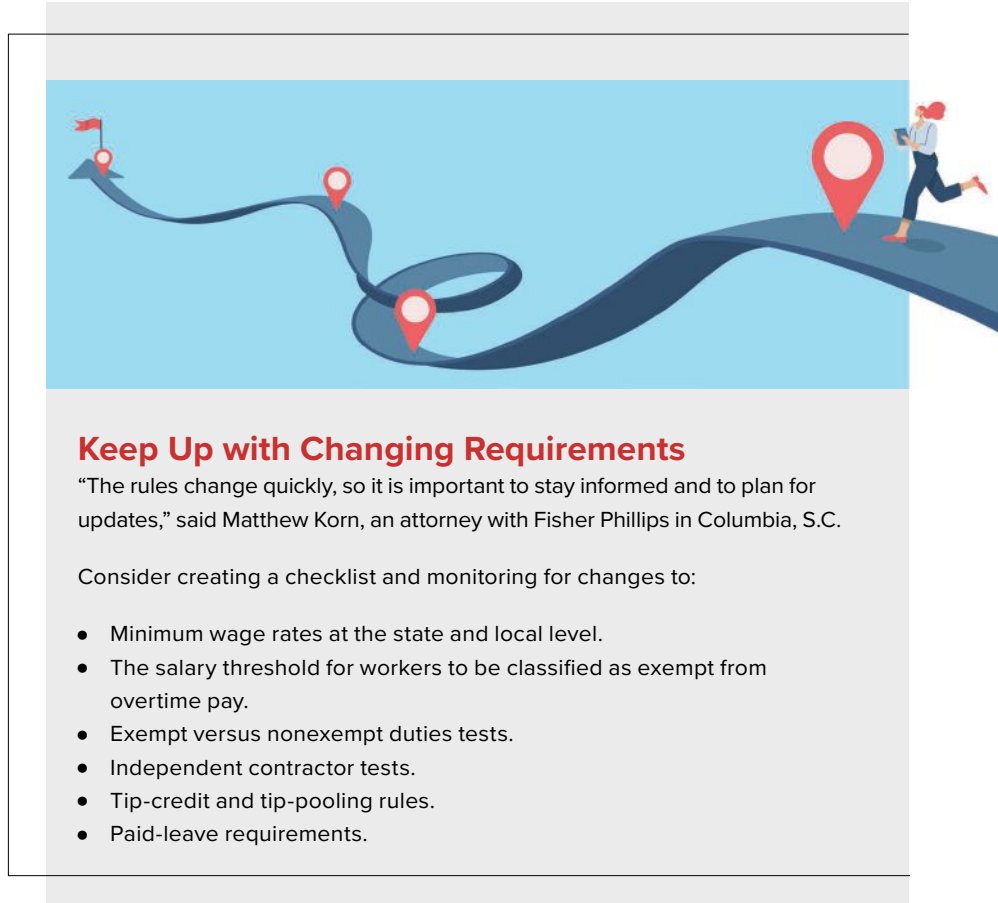
3 Calculate Overtime Accurately

Overtime for nonexempt employees must be paid at 1.5 times the “regular rate of pay” for all hours worked beyond 40 in a workweek. This isn’t simply based on the employee’s hourly rate. Rather, the regular rate is based on “all remuneration” earned from employment, including nondiscretionary bonuses.

There are some exceptions, however, on what’s included in the regular rate. Gifts such as T-shirts, as well as certain sign-on and longevity bonuses, for example, are excluded.

4 Review Classifications

Misclassifying employees as independent contractors can lead to costly claims for minimum wage, overtime pay, and other employee benefits. However, employers might have a hard time determining whether a worker is properly classified as an independent contractor or an employee, particularly because different tests apply in different jurisdictions, said Sarah Wieselthier, an attorney with Fisher Phillips in Berkeley Heights, N.J.



5 Guard Against Off-the-Clock Work

Nonexempt employees are not allowed to work off the clock. This is a particular concern with the rise of remote work and the ease of using personal devices for work.

Make sure employees record their time properly and are paid for all time worked.

6 Account for Nonexempt Travel Time

“It can be tricky for employers to understand when they are required to pay nonexempt employees for time they spend traveling for work,” Brennan said. Here are a few basic rules:

- When an employee travels away from their home community for a one-day assignment, an employer generally must pay for any time beyond their normal commute.
- When an employee goes to another city and stays overnight, the employer

must pay for the time the employee spends in transit that overlaps their normal work schedule — regardless of the day of the week. However, if an employee is driving, as opposed to riding as a passenger, all trip time should be paid.

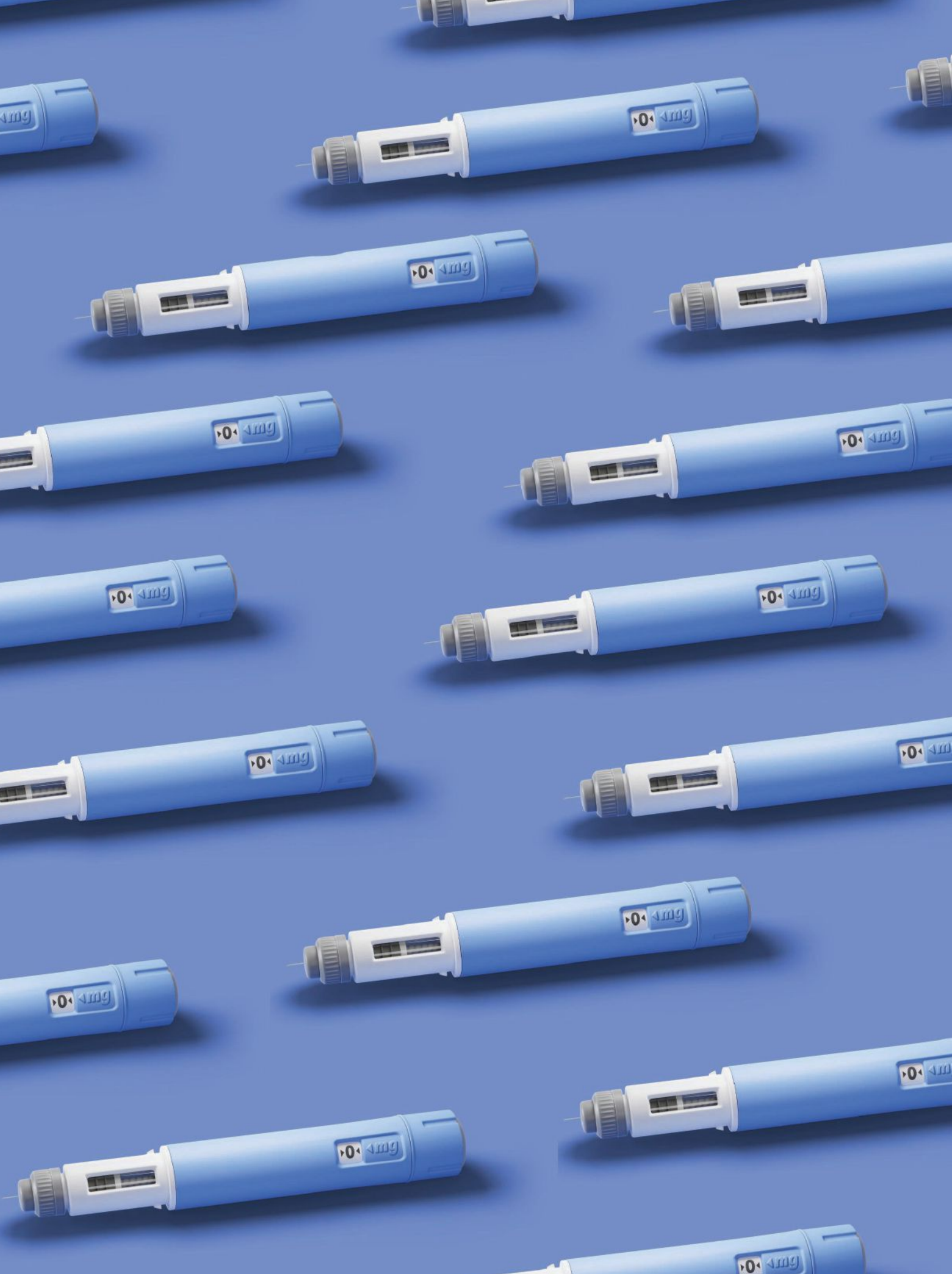
- The employer must pay for any time traveling during the workday (for example, between client sites).
- The employer does not have to pay for regular commute time.

7 Review State Laws

Although federal law generally sets the floor for wage and hour requirements, states can have stricter rules.

“Mistakes that go unaddressed can turn into big problems,” Wieselthier cautioned. [IR](#)

LISA NAGELE-PIAZZA, J.D., SHRM-SCP, is lead content counsel for Fisher Phillips in Washington, D.C.



THE GLP-1 DRUG DILEMMA

Employers weigh worker appetite against increasing costs for expanded coverage.

BY KATHRYN MAYER

The buzz around glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1) drugs exists for a reason. The class of drugs — which were initially developed and used for Type 2 diabetes management and go by brand names such as Wegovy, Mounjaro, and Zepbound — have exploded as a weight loss phenomenon, with scores of studies showing the medications’ potential to help shed unwanted pounds.

Twelve percent of U.S. adults reported having used GLP-1 drugs, according to May 2024 data by the Kaiser Family Foundation, including 6% who said they are currently taking them. In a separate report from Evernorth, the health services division of insurer Cigna, 1 in 4 people said they are considering the drugs, with many citing enthusiasm over potential weight loss and others looking to mitigate health risks.

“Even people who don’t have an interest in insurance know about GLP-1s,” said Meghan Sloan, senior benefits consultant at OneDigital, an insurance and HR consulting firm. “It’s all over the news. It’s all over social media. Celebrities are on it. People have friends taking them. It’s a conversation starter. It’s just part of our culture right now.”

Behind the scenes — along with every sensational headline, every study, and every conversation about GLP-1s — are employers and HR leaders trying to make the right decisions about covering the pricey but in-demand drugs.

The questions are plentiful: Should we cover them for weight loss? Should we include restrictions? How will the drugs impact our employees? Will this be a long-term commitment for our organization? How do we deal with the extreme costs? Should we instead focus on nonmedication weight management and other well-being programs?

For employers, these coverage considerations have been top-of-mind for years, but are even more so today, said Julie Stich, vice president of content at the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans (IFEBP), a nonprofit organization with 31,000 employer members.

“They’re trying to get a handle on how to deal with it — if they should cover them, how they can pay for them, what the long-term ramifications are, the long-term effectiveness,” Stich said.

Promise and Pressure

The potential of GLP-1 drugs has yet to be fully realized. Researchers are also investigating their utility for other medical conditions, such as kidney, cardiovascular, and liver diseases. Even when deployed as a weight-loss aid, GLP-1s can address other health markers such as elevated blood sugar, high blood pressure, and the risk of heart disease.

“There’s this understanding that this could permeate to other diseases,” Sloan said. “The potential curing — or making life a

little bit easier — for someone with a kidney condition or a cardiac issue, it almost feels like it’s a little bit of a wonder drug. I think that’s what piques people’s interest.”

While most employers cover GLP-1s for diabetes management, many — often self-insured employers that generally have more control over which drugs to cover — are debating the merits of weight loss coverage. However, the number of employers covering the drugs for weight loss has trended upward lately.

A May 2024 employee survey released by the IFEBP found that employer coverage of the drugs jumped 8 percentage points from fall 2023, with roughly one-third of companies offering GLP-1 drug coverage for both diabetes management and weight loss. Another survey from consulting firm Mercer last fall pointed to even greater interest, with more than a quarter of employers saying they were considering adding coverage for GLP-1 drugs for weight loss in 2025 or 2026.

People are looking at GLP-1s as miracle drugs, explained Seth Friedman, pharmacy and health plans practice leader at Gallagher, an insurance brokerage, risk management, and consulting firm. “The sentiment is that this is going to help in making people healthier,” he said.

GLP-1s “can help with other health issues, which is a boon for a lot of employers,” Sloan added.

The other big reason for covering the drugs: Employee appetite. The retention and attraction potential of GLP-1 coverage is a huge piece of the puzzle — perhaps bigger than most organizations anticipated. A recent Gallagher report found that 1 in 3 employees are looking for resources to aid weight loss.

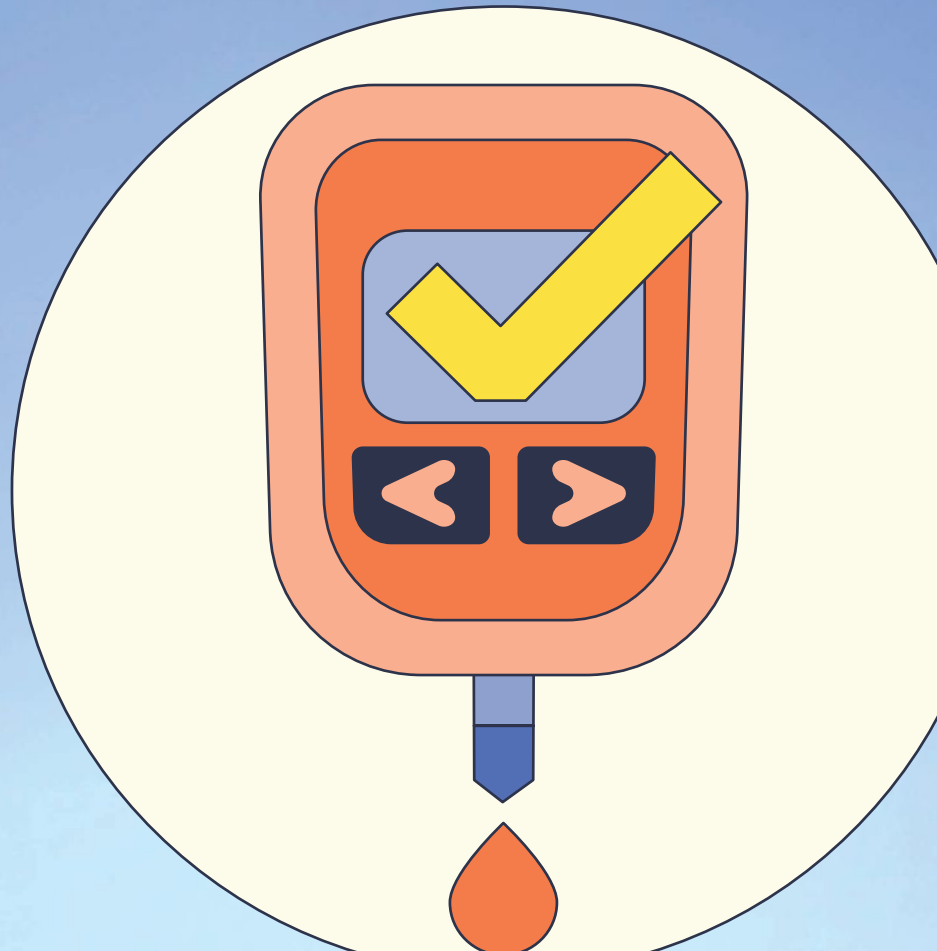
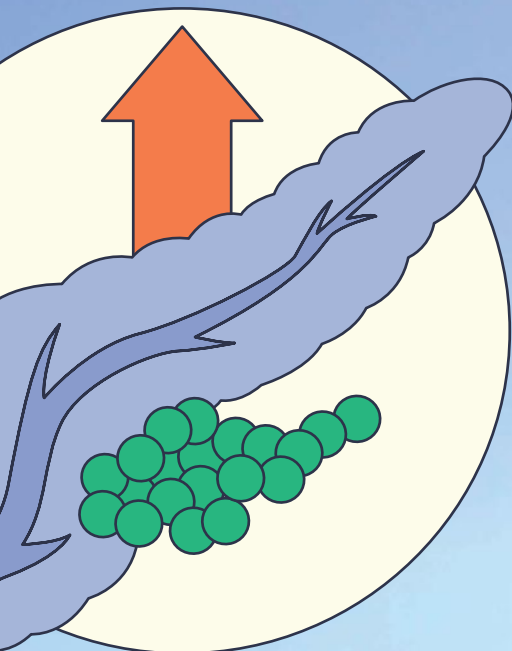


“It almost feels like it’s a little bit of a wonder drug.”

— MEGHAN SLOAN



Even when deployed as a weight-loss aid, GLP-1s can address other health markers such as elevated blood sugar, high blood pressure, and the risk of heart disease.



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“Employees are going to HR and asking, ‘Is this drug covered?’ And if it’s not, they ask, ‘Why not?’” Sloan said. The employee demand is “not going away.”

The issue is even being raised by potential employees. Friedman said job candidates are now inquiring about employer coverage of GLP-1s — the first time he’s experienced inquiries about specific medications in his 30 years as a benefits consultant. “It just shows how massive this has become,” he said.

High Cost and Other Barriers

Although there is momentum for GLP-1 drugs, obstacles persist. Perhaps the biggest is the tremendous price tag — the brand-name injectable drugs typically cost between \$1,000 and \$1,500 a month for consumers, and employers may foot 70% to 100% of that bill. Costs may ease in the coming months or years when generic and lower-cost options (including oral versions) get

developed and become approved, but for now, cost is giving employers significant pause. “This is a very big line item,” Friedman said.

Indeed, 38% of HR leaders surveyed by Accolade cited the costs associated with GLP-1s as a potential barrier to providing coverage. Meanwhile, Evernorth found GLP-1s are driving a historic rise in traditional drug spending — which include medications used to treat common health problems such as infections, high cholesterol, and diabetes — helping the category outpace spend for specialty drugs — high-cost, complex medications typically used to treat chronic conditions — for the first time. In 2024, drugs targeting weight management accounted for about half of the total increase in drug spend and equated to 6.7% of total drug costs.

The significant number of employees who might want to use the drugs complicates the cost issue, as well as the fact that GLP-1s are designed for long-term use. Studies have shown that the weight will stay off as long as someone is taking the drugs, pointing to an extensive commitment for employers — and a much higher price tag. A survey by the Business Group on Health reported that 96% of employers are concerned about the ongoing cost implications of GLP-1s.

“Employers don’t want to offer it because they don’t see an exit strategy,” Sloan said.

As a result, many employers want to know how the cost of these medications compares to potential costs from obesity comorbidities such as hypertension, heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, and some cancers, Stich said. Management of such chronic conditions is a persistent pain point for employers, translating to higher prescription drug usage and costs, reduced productivity,

“Employers don’t want to offer it because they don’t see an exit strategy.”

— MEGHAN SLOAN

more absences, and even extended leaves. Diabetes, for example, costs U.S. employers roughly \$245 billion per year in both direct and indirect costs, according to a 2023 analysis from health care provider Nomi Health.

For some organizations, spending the money on GLP-1 drugs may taper some of those long-term costs. Friedman said most employers that have covered GLP-1s continue to do so, but there are examples of organizations reversing course.

In the public sector, for instance, the state of Colorado in January said it would limit insurance coverage of the weight loss drugs for its nearly 40,000 state employees to save money as it deals with budget concerns. Mercer's survey found that 10% of employers that covered the medications in 2024 were considering dropping coverage, and 3% recently discontinued coverage or plan to do so.

"I think we'll see ebbs and flows as we continue to see what the realistic price tag is," Stich said. "It hopefully will have a longer-term positive impact financially — if this can sustain and help people overall with their long-term health. But for right now, the immediacy of the cost is big. There's still a lot of discovery left to be made in trying to wrap the employer and plan sponsors' arms around dealing with the immediate cost now and what that might mean for the future."

How to Cut Costs

Increasingly, employers are thinking carefully about GLP-1s — not just in terms of deciding whether to cover them, but about how to hold down costs when they do.

Many are looking at utilization management approaches, including prior authorization. Others are putting in place other

EMPLOYER CONSIDERATIONS FOR GLP-1 DRUGS



Gather relevant information.

Are obesity and obesity-related conditions a concern for your organization? Is there information on how many employees have obesity-related conditions? How many employees would use GLP-1 drugs? Have employees been asking about coverage? This will help get a handle on interest, usage, and potential costs.



Factor in what else GLP-1s can treat.

GLP-1 drugs are already known to help manage Type 2 diabetes and obesity, but they may offer benefits for several other health conditions such as cardiovascular, kidney, and inflammatory diseases, as well as neurocognitive disorders such as dementia. Employers also will want to keep informed about the latest research and findings regarding potential additional uses.



Assess the average age of your workforce.

Because there are multiple generations currently in the workforce, decision-makers should evaluate where they are prioritizing investments. When it comes to weight-related health issues, older workers tend to need more immediate help. "The most experienced Gen X workers may be the most highly tenured employees that are critical

to retain — while also being some of the highest cost claimants," said Nelly Rose, vice president of pharmacy consulting at benefits firm NFP. "Once the Baby Boomer generation has retired, the most complex cases for weight loss and the most at-risk for comorbid conditions will be an aging Gen X population."

restrictions, such as limiting coverage to those with a certain percentage body mass index, requiring documentation from a doctor about risk factors and patient history, or even mandating a prescription from an endocrinologist rather than a primary care physician, Friedman said.

These steps ensure that the medications are allocated to individuals with the highest health needs — and a documented clinical need — while helping employers manage costs.

“In terms of criteria for managing the GLP-1 coverage offering, ensure you have a narrow focus on the population that needs the medications versus looser criteria behind the GLP-1 trend,” said Nelly Rose, vice president of pharmacy consulting at benefits firm NFP.

Other employers are using step therapy approaches, Sloan explained, that require an employee to enroll in and complete

a program that helps them learn more about nutrition or a healthy lifestyle before they have access to GLP-1 medications. Individuals might complete courses on meal planning, physical activity, and behavioral health support as a prerequisite — programming that is designed not only to promote better health outcomes but also to encourage a deeper understanding of long-term wellness strategies.

“There are a lot of creative ways that we’re starting to see employers approach this,” she said.

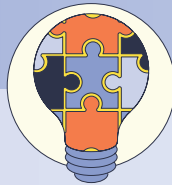
A Return to the Weight Loss Conversation

The GLP-1 drug coverage discussion is renewing focus on obesity and weight loss initiatives in the workplace. A decade or so ago, step challenges and weight loss initiatives became a fixture at many organizations; however, as wellness initiatives have evolved



Do some fiscal forecasting.

Develop financial projections on how offering GLP-1 coverage will increase employer pharmacy spend. Analyze the spectrum of spend per member per month to appropriately budget for the future, keeping in mind that it may take a few years to realize the benefits of offering GLP-1 coverage for weight loss. “We would not want any employer to begin covering this class of medications without preparing themselves for an uptick in spend,” Rose said.



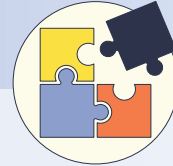
Be strategic.

Employers can implement a number of utilization management measures to curb costs, including step therapy, prior authorization, and quantity limits. Consider quantifying requirements related to body mass index or targeting specific comorbidities to place limits on coverage.



Implement a wellness program.

Healthy lifestyle choices are an essential element of driving positive outcomes with GLP-1 treatment, experts say. Employers should make sure they have weight management and wellness strategies in place in addition to providing drug coverage. This could include access to telehealth services and coaching services for diet, exercise, medication compliance, and more to ensure effectiveness and manage side effects, said Oliver Ayres, president of benefits firm Key Benefit Administrators.



Look at plan designs.

Understand if there’s a direct contracted price option from the manufacturer, said Rae McMahan, senior vice president of payor solutions at health firm Prescriptive, adding that new models may offer price relief through a direct-to-employer price. If coupons are available, ensure that employees are using them, pharmacies are processing them, and your organization (or third-party administrator or pharmacy benefit manager) is properly handling payments. “This takes coordination between all parties,” McMahan said.



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to consider aspects such as financial well-being and mental health, weight management took a backseat in employers' priorities. That's changing again.

"There's more of a sense now that being obese or overweight is a disease and that it has a lot of comorbidities associated with it," Friedman said.

Although GLP-1 medications have introduced financial and cost containment concerns for employers, they've created an opportunity from a well-being perspective, said Deb Smolensky, senior vice president and global practice leader for vitality and well-being solutions at NFP.

"Employer-employee conversations around GLP-1s can serve as a catalyst for employers to revisit the fundamentals of well-being, including nutrition, physical activity, and the concept of food as medicine," she said.

Although SHRM's *2025 Employee Benefits Survey* found that weight loss programs are trending down in popularity as of this year (now offered by 16% of employers, from 18% in 2024), experts said employers should offer these programs in tandem with GLP-1 coverage.

"It's an ideal time to reintroduce and re-emphasize these basics to employees — topics which may have been overshadowed in recent years," said Smolensky.

Several organizations are choosing to first explore alternative strategies, Sloan said, such as behavioral coaching, nutrition coaching, and other lower-cost interventions that could help shape behavior, before covering GLP-1 therapies for employees.

Others, meanwhile, are focusing on a combined strategy of pursuing weight management programs and covering GLP-1s. Some industry experts have said that organizations simply cannot cover GLP-1 drugs without also having a weight management or wellness program in place.

That's consistent with Friedman's experience: Each Gallagher client that offered GLP-1 coverage in 2025 also implemented a weight management component, he said.

Having both elements in place is imperative to meet employees' needs — and to ensure that the people who could benefit most from GLP-1s are able to get them, while others can receive help via other strategies and interventions that could also be effective.

"Employer-employee conversations around GLP-1s can serve as a catalyst for employers to revisit the fundamentals of well-being."

— DEB SMOLENSKY

Looking Ahead

Employers are expected to embrace GLP-1s in growing numbers, especially if data continues to show the drugs' positive impact on other health conditions. Meanwhile, oral variations of GLP-1s may also make it to market, which could have a significant impact on employer coverage because it would likely dramatically lessen the cost.

However, Friedman said, it's still too early to know if going all in on GLP-1 drugs will produce a healthier workforce. "It's a hope and a prayer for them that people are getting healthier," he said, "and that it's doing what it's supposed to do on the medical side." [IR](#)

KATHRYN MAYER is a senior content specialist at SHRM.

Pet Benefits Are Here to Sit, Stay in the Workplace

Employers are finding that expanding benefits to include nonhuman family members may boost more than just employee morale.

BY KATHRYN MAYER

The employee-life Instagram account of Seattle-based pet insurer Trupanion shows an office scene much different than you'll find in other workplaces: Dogs and cats lounging under chairs, on desks, in conference rooms, on laps. Treats and toys littering the office. Excitable dogs jumping up to devour their weekly Pup Cups, while their human counterparts enjoy ice cream.

What's not captured in the photos and videos, though, are the other, perhaps more valuable, pet benefits offered by the firm, including no-deductible pet insurance, a pet bereavement policy, and flexible schedules so employees can be with pets that are sick or hurt.

"These benefits are just an alignment of our mission, and they're so important to our employees," explained Brenna McGibney, Trupanion's chief administrative officer, who oversees employee benefits. "It's really about recognizing the role that pets are playing in people's lives."





While Trupanion might be an anomaly when it comes to encouraging pets at work — 6% of companies that participated in SHRM’s 2025 Employee Benefits Survey allow them — companies outside of the pet space are also leaning in on these offerings.

A decade or so ago, pet insurance was one of the only benefits in the lexicon, but the realm has widened in recent years. Think “pawternity” leave, pet bereavement, backup care, pet stipends, and more.

These options might seem excessive to some, but there’s a strong business case behind them. The availability of pet benefits is correlated with employee satisfaction, attraction, and retention, giving companies that offer them a competitive edge.

According to an October 2024 survey from The Harris Poll that asked pet owners how they would feel if their employer allowed them to bring their pets to the office:

- 93% would feel happier at their job.
- 91% would feel loyal to their employer, valued in their job, and eager to go into the workplace.
- 90% would be likely to stay longer in their current job.
- 91% would feel valued in their role.

Additionally, 58% of pet owners said employers should normalize pets at work, nearly half would welcome a pet stipend in their paycheck, and 46% said there should be leave available when you adopt a new pet.

“Think about how many times you might see someone with pictures of their pets at their desk or as the background of their cellphone,” said Daniel Stunes, manager of data monetization at SHRM, who also leads the research for SHRM’s annual benefits survey, which has asked about pet insurance since 2022. “Maybe you even see them in the room during video calls, given the number of employees that might work from home or in a hybrid manner. More and more employers may realize how important pets are to their employees and decide these types of benefits are something they can offer.”

In many cases, health care, retirement, vacation, and sick leave are standard offerings, while leave to care for a loved one is often required by law. Therefore, these offerings don’t give a company any type of competitive advantage, Stunes said. In contrast, pet benefits are a distinctive reward that may make a “company seem more appealing” to candidates.

Caring for the Whole Family

The rising trend of pet benefits has been buoyed by employees’ higher expectations for a comprehensive benefits package, along with a greater priority being placed on pets’ welfare, rising ownership costs, and employers recognizing the positive impact of pet benefits.

Even legislators are getting in on the action. New York City is considering a bill (under committee review as of May 2025) that would amend the city’s Earned Safe and Sick Time Act to allow



Pets are
**family
members,**
and they're being
treated as such.

— MEGHAN SLOAN



employees to take leave — paid or unpaid, depending on the size of the business — to care for a pet that needs medical treatment or care. At the federal level, the bipartisan People and Animals Well-Being (PAW) Act, if passed, would allow pet owners to use up to \$1,000 per year from their health savings or flexible spending accounts for veterinary care expenses or pet insurance.

Perhaps the biggest reason for the increased focus on pet benefits is the acknowledgment that employees consider their pets to be more than just animals that live in their house.

“Pets are family members, and they’re being treated as such,” said Meghan Sloan, senior benefits consultant at OneDigital, an Atlanta-based insurance and HR consulting firm.

Employees shell out more money, time, and energy on their animal companions these days than in years past. While birth rates have declined significantly in recent years, pet ownership has soared. More than 4 in 10 Generation Z and Millennial workers surveyed in The Harris Poll said they prefer having pets over children, noting that that pets are easier to care for and come with fewer financial burdens.

Beyond that, specialized benefits that support employees without children is a strategy to foster inclusion in the workplace, Stunes said.

“If someone is single and doesn’t have children, then generally all those other family-related benefits may not do much for them,” he said. “But if those individuals have pets, then offering

pet-related benefits could be a way to support those employees’ families in the same way those with a spouse or children are supported.”

Boston-based insurance company Liberty Mutual, for example, has emphasized its competitive roster of family benefits, including family leave, fertility benefits, and breast milk-shipping. However, the company also recognizes the importance of offerings for pet parents, said Verlinda DiMarino, Liberty’s head of benefits.

In addition to pet insurance and pet wellness options, Liberty Mutual offers a backup care benefit for its employees, providing up to 10 subsidized days to care for not only children or adults but also pets. The company also helps employees find care providers when needed.

“Our benefits are diverse,” said DiMarino, who has used the benefit to find a dog walker or day care for her mini goldendoodle, Charli. “There’s something for everyone in what we offer.”

Pet Insurance Gains Momentum

Pet insurance as a benefit keeps inching up in popularity — 25% of employers participating in SHRM’s 2025 Employee Benefits Survey offer the perk, up from 22% in 2024, 19% in 2023, and 14% in 2022. The employee-paid benefit is usually voluntary, meaning it’s not a cost impediment for employers but is available to employees at a lower cost than they would pay on the open market.

Pet-Friendly Workplaces: What to Consider

Pet benefits and support in the workplace are of growing interest to both employees and employers, but when it comes to creating a pet-friendly workplace, companies may want to tread carefully. While allowing dogs and cats in the office can be a boon for employee engagement and work/life integration, employers need to evaluate feasibility, manage potential liabilities, and address inclusivity.

First things first: Employers need to evaluate whether a pet-friendly policy is even viable. For instance, workplaces with tight spaces, sensitive equipment, or rigid hygiene requirements may not accommodate pets safely. Before rolling out a pet-friendly workplace policy, employers should survey employees to gauge their interest and concerns.

"Not all work environments lend themselves to being pet-friendly," said Daniel Stunes, manager of data

monetization at SHRM, who leads research for SHRM's benefits survey, which inquires about pet insurance offerings.

It's also key to address liability. Welcoming pets could expose the company to legal issues if incidents occur, such as a pet causing injury to an employee or visitor. "What if you allow employees to bring pets to work and someone gets bitten?" Stunes asked. "The company itself could run into legal issues there, as well as the employee."

That's why Trupanion, which has a pet-friendly office at its Seattle headquarters, has guidelines that require its pet operations team assess a pet before it's welcomed in the office. "The team meets with the pet and spends time with the pet to understand, 'Is it reactive? Is it OK around other dogs? Are there any issues?'" explained Brenna McGibney, Trupanion's chief administrative officer.

A clear pet policy outlining expectations, including vaccination and behavior requirements, as well as procedures for managing disputes or incidents, is vital. Additionally, legal counsel can help employers draft policies that minimize liability while establishing reasonable boundaries for pet-friendly practices.

Employers should also be considerate of employees without pets and keep in mind those with fears or allergies, the latter of which is covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act. An inclusive policy might include creating pet-free zones within the office.

McGibney cautioned that companies may need to reverse course on pet-friendly workplaces if they don't thoughtfully integrate them into existing policies. "You really need to have a formal program around this," she said.



“It used to be considered kind of a nice-to-have, and increasingly it’s becoming a must-have,” said MetLife Pet Insurance CEO Brian Jorgensen. In fact, 74% of Gen Z employees consider pet insurance a must- or nice-to-have benefit in 2025, up from 54% in 2015, according to MetLife research.

This goes back to how pet benefits can lure top talent to an organization — which is of particular note in today’s labor market, where companies report having a tough time filling full-time positions.

“Employers are really looking for meaningful benefits for attraction and retention of their employees, and pet insurance seems to come up to the top, especially with that younger workforce,” said David Hurley, director of sales for voluntary benefits and member/specialty groups at Nationwide Pet. Smaller companies are adding pet insurance offerings, too, as a response to employee requests — and in hopes of competing for talent against Google- and Microsoft-tier companies, he said.

Rising costs are driving the desire for pet insurance. The average dog or cat parent spent more than \$2,000 on their chosen animal(s) in 2024, MetLife Pet Insurance found, while figures from Seattle-based pet care company Rover showed they can expect this year to spend about:

- 11% more for veterinary fees.
- 183% more for pet cleaning supplies.
- 20% more for grooming supplies.
- 85% more for treats and chews.

Additionally, Rover found that nearly half (48%) of pet parents are concerned about the rising cost of pet care over their pet’s lifetime. The price of urban veterinary services surged by nearly 60% over the past decade and rose by 7.9% between February 2023 and February 2024, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Consumer Price Index.

“We have been seeing the inflation rate in pet health and pet wellness rise at almost double the inflation rate of other areas of the economy,” Jorgensen explained. Pet insurance — which may cover vet bills related to accidents, injuries, and illnesses — can soften the blow.

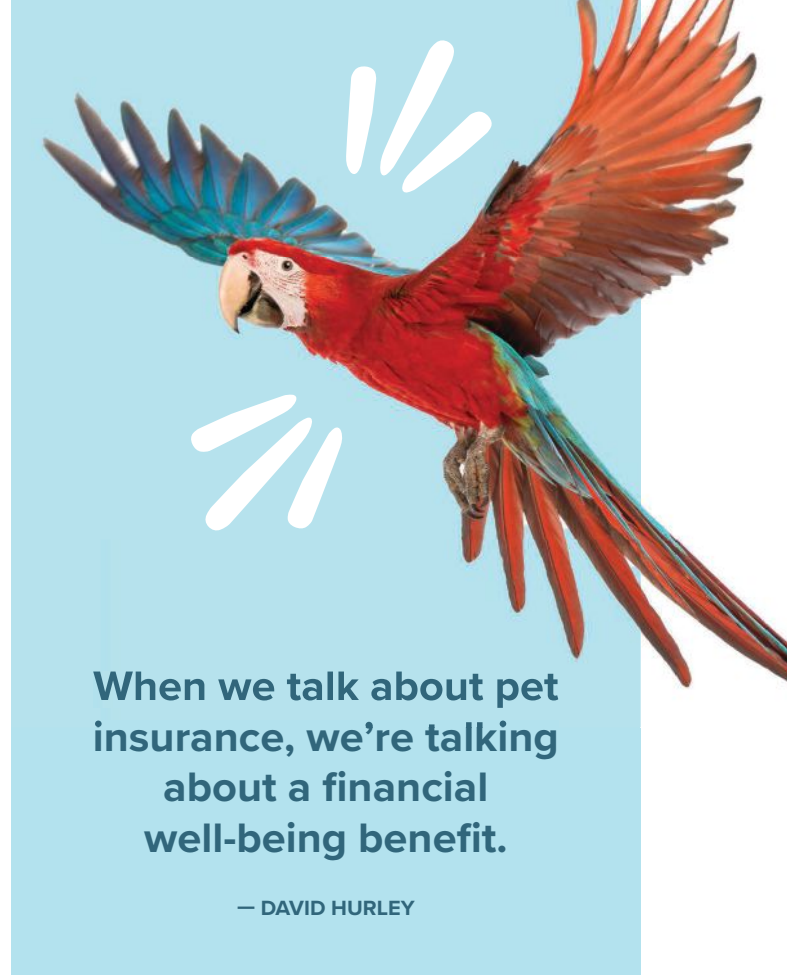
Essentially, Hurley said, “when we talk about pet insurance, we’re talking about a financial well-being benefit.”

Employees are excited about pet medical help as well, Sloan said. She recalled an open enrollment meeting a couple years ago where OneDigital was rolling out a voluntary pets benefit package at the same time it was making significant medical plan changes. “I think we spent an hour answering pet benefit questions, and about 5 minutes on medical,” Sloan said.

Compassionate Leave for Pet Loss

Workplaces are increasingly offering employees flexibility for pet-related rituals, such as vet visits, PTO to welcome a new pet, or bereavement time to grieve the loss of a nonhuman family member.

Trupanion’s policies have been a no-brainer for the company and vital for its employees, McGibney said. “If your pet is sick or there’s an issue, we allow that flexibility to take your pet to



When we talk about pet insurance, we’re talking about a financial well-being benefit.

— DAVID HURLEY


the doctor,” she said. “We try to integrate that the same way we would if it was your child.”

Additionally, the company’s policy allows employees to take up to three paid days off after the death of a pet. Just 7% of employers offer leave for pet loss, according to NFP, a global benefits consulting firm and property and casualty insurance broker. However, industry experts predict that will likely increase as the benefit becomes more well-known.

“That is a family member ... that you could have spent 10, 15 years taking care of,” Sloan said. “It absolutely makes sense to allow the employee time to deal with that loss. We’re definitely seeing more progressive employers embrace that type of benefit and leave for their employees, and I think that will be more prevalent down the road.”

Small Effort, Big Impact

For many employers, it’s not a heavy lift to implement more pet benefits. While they might not create a new pet-specific policy, they might include pet parenting duties in approved reasons for sick time. These perks not only enhance employee satisfaction and loyalty but also offer an accessible and meaningful way to attract and retain top talent in a competitive market.

“There are aspects of pet ownership that make employees happier, more productive, better able to get things done, and better citizens in the workplace,” Jorgensen said. “Let alone the attraction and retention components that come with that.” 

KATHRYN MAYER is a senior content specialist at SHRM.



One Size Doesn't Fit All





Building a Better Benefits Plan Across Generations

How to design a benefits package that reflects multi-generational expectations — and why it's important.

BY PATRICIA FITZGERALD

In the past, employee benefits packages were pretty straightforward. Health insurance: check. Sick and vacation leave: check. Retirement fund: check. A business might offer some variations within benefit categories — not just health, but dental! Not 10 days of vacation, but 12! Separate paid time off (PTO) for sick days! — but the categories themselves remained fairly consistent.

“Ten years ago, if you offered medical, dental, and vision to staff at a reasonable price, it seemed to meet most employee expectations,” said Sheri Martel, SHRM-SCP, who manages SHRM’s total rewards program, adding that attitudes were similar about PTO.

Today, however, in-demand benefits go beyond those standards. “They currently focus on total well-being, including greater support for work/life balance, mental health, and financial wellness,” she said.

Organizations have begun to recognize that robust benefits packages aren’t just a nice-to-have — they’re crucial to recruit and retain top talent. At the same time, employees have grown increasingly savvy in assessing competing job offers — and they’re asking for more. Additionally, companies must consider the priorities, challenges, and desires of workers across generations, from Generation Z to Baby Boomers.

As such, it’s safe to say that designing and administering an enticing benefits package has become a much more complex and rigorous responsibility than before.

A Changing Landscape

This trend of offering a significantly broader benefits package caught fire over the last decade, Martel said, though she admits to not knowing what or who served as the catalyst. “Let’s face it: There has always been a multi-generational workforce, and, within each generation, there have always been benefit preferences and priorities.”

Today’s expectations may be driven less by the demands of the current workforce and more by organizations’ desire to anticipate and respond to a wider range of needs. After all, job candidates don’t just look at salary when considering an offer — they

consider everything the company will provide. By demonstrating a willingness to expand compensation offerings and an interest in responding to employee requests, employers effectively opened the benefits floodgates.

But why do businesses feel the need to re-evaluate total rewards in the first place? New benchmarks set by leading-edge corporations surely played a role, as did the COVID-19 pandemic, which upended many long-standing beliefs about the workplace. The expansion of the benefits industry has meant a proliferation of offerings for employers wishing to distinguish themselves from competitors.

“We used to look at benefits in isolation, but they are critical to our ability to attract employees,” said Mary Gormandy White, SHRM-SCP, managing director of corporate training and consulting at Inside Insights. “Employers can’t have a one-size-fits-all benefits package and expect to interest prospective and current employees today.”

She sees companies of all sizes and in all sectors taking a hard look at what they offer. It sends a strong message about the company’s workplace culture, she said, and that matters to current employees and prospective candidates.

The first step is understanding where employee priorities intersect and diverge, though it’s worth noting that an employee’s preference for benefits isn’t necessarily dictated by age. Family status, cultural expectations, religion, income level, and other factors play a role, too.



“Employers can’t have a one-size-fits-all benefits package and expect to interest prospective and current employees today.”

— MARY GORMANDY WHITE, SHRM SCP

Across the Board

If HR strategists were to apply a Venn diagram to benefits that appeal to a multi-generational workforce, it would reveal considerable overlap.

For example, 79% of those surveyed — across all four working generations — in the 2025 Workplace Benefits Trends by Generation survey from Forbes Advisor prioritize flexible work options, with 64% highlighting the need for flexible parental leave.

Even when all age groups seem to agree, benefits preferences reveal differences among the generations' priorities. While all generations ranked flexibility as the No. 1 most-desirable benefit, it is more popular for Gen Z (83%) and Millennials (84%) than Gen X (73%) and Baby Boomers (76%). The research also found:

- Millennials (70%) ranked flexible PTO/vacation as the second-most-important benefit, as did Gen X (67%) and Baby Boomers (66%).
- Mental health resources came in as a close third for Millennials at 68%. However, just 57% of responding Boomers said mental health resources were important.
- 66% of surveyed Gen Zers reported flexible parental leave options as important, placing it as the No. 2 priority for the generation.
- Both Gen Z and Millennials (62% each) were significantly more likely to rank inclusion and diversity (I&D) as important than Gen X and Baby Boomers (54% each).

All generations also agree that they don't want strict limits on PTO. As such, organizations have responded with leave policies that provide greater flexibility: While 99% of organizations responding to SHRM's 2025 Employee Benefits Survey offer paid vacation leave and 95% include paid sick leave, just 6% offer unlimited/open leave. However, companies are pulling back on this offering, White said.

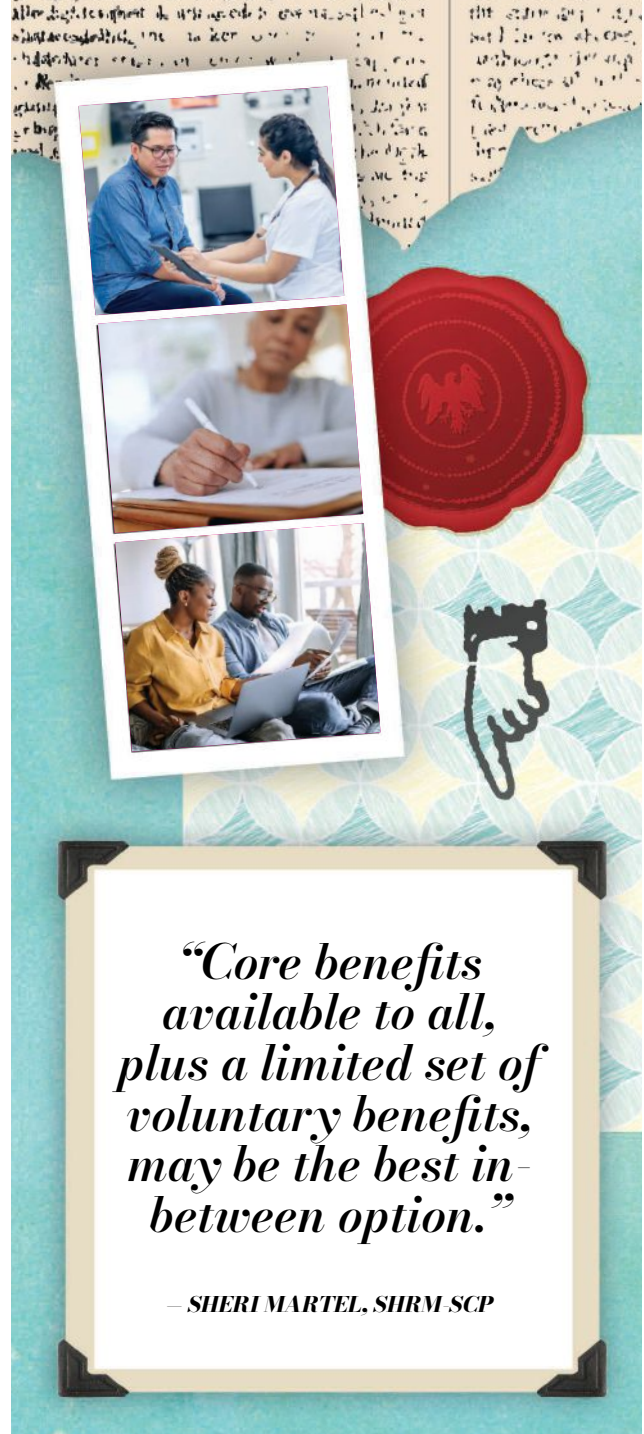
Other organizations promote niche leave opportunities, such as time off for pet owners or new grandparents. White warned that these highly targeted leave scenarios create a greater administrative burden for HR and can present a slippery slope for organizations. She would rather see a generous core leave policy supplemented by flexibility for "small necessities" time.

Balancing Customization and Complexity

Customized health benefits are highly prized, but complicated to implement.

"The days of two PPO [preferred provider organization] plans are not going to meet the needs of the entire multi-generational workforce," White said. "For example, younger employees may want a lower premium in order to limit cash outlay, along with a high deductible, because they don't anticipate needing extensive medical services. On the other hand, older employees going into their retirement also may want to reduce their financial outlay, but without compromising health care stability."

Despite the popularity of customizable plans, there are limits to how much refinement can be applied — to health care and other benefits — while keeping the packages affordable for both



“Core benefits available to all, plus a limited set of voluntary benefits, may be the best in-between option.”

— **SHERI MARTEL, SHRM-SCP**

the organization and its employees. To offer personalized options, employers must buy multiple smaller packages at a higher cost due to less enrollment.

"The cafeteria-style model of multiple plans also increases the administrative load on HR," said Martel, citing a bigger investment in time to manage a more expansive program, educate staff about the larger number of options, and ensure compliance. "Core benefits available to all, plus a limited set of voluntary benefits, may be the best in-between option."

However, White offered up a caution. "Think about the complexity of administering whatever it is that you're going to offer," she said. "Someone has to track all that, determining eligibility and making decisions. Too often, a policy leaves out the impact on the plan administrators."

Martel suggested providing a variety of benefits that focus on total well-being. “Financial and mental wellness, as well as a focus on work/life balance, will be needed for businesses to be competitive in attracting and retaining employees of all generations,” she said.

Seven Savvy Strategies

Designing and managing a benefits package that meets the needs and expectations of your diverse, multi-generational workforce is an ever-evolving challenge, but HR professionals can apply a number of tactics to their efforts:



easy to administer, and desired by employees, it may be time to discontinue them. Certainly, it’s a signal to find out more about why they’re going unused.

Assess what’s working. “I’m a big fan of looking at benefits utilization data,” White said, encouraging HR teams to regularly conduct benefits audits. “Are you offering a lot of benefits that are going unused?” Even if these are inexpensive,

Understanding the Multi-Generational Workforce

Looking at employees through a generational lens can be a revealing exercise, as long as human resource professionals guard against stereotyping. Remember, generations are defined within a 15- to 20-year span. There can be significant differences in the need states of individuals at either end of each generational spectrum.

With that in mind, there are some commonalities in the musts and wishes among those who share a life stage. Here’s how these play out for specific types of employer-provided benefits:



Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964)

Baby Boomers may be retiring, but employers must affirm their value to the organization by addressing their needs. These likely include phased retirement options, opportunities for health savings accounts that don’t expire, extended health care benefits, assistance in navigating Medicare, and estate-planning advice.



Gen X (born 1965-1980)

This generation is starting to get more serious about retirement planning and associated financial strategies, so many of them want a robust 401(k) matching program. Financial literacy programs are also considered valuable.

Gen X also contends with common physical issues related to aging, such as losses in eyesight, hearing, hair, and flexibility; perimenopause/menopause; arthritis, joint stiffness, and bone-density loss; and lowered metabolism. Many in this generation will face more daunting health concerns, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer. A vigorous health plan that helps them address their own health needs and crises, as well as those of spouses or partners, becomes a must. Additionally, whether for themselves or their parents, they are also realizing the value of planning for long-term care.



Ask and listen. Employee surveys are an essential benefits administration tool. “Make it easy for employees to be heard,” White said. Make sure everyone understands the value of their feedback, and confirm that survey questions are written to produce responses that distinguish between needs and wants. “Your employees are your best source of what’s working and what’s not,” Martel agreed.



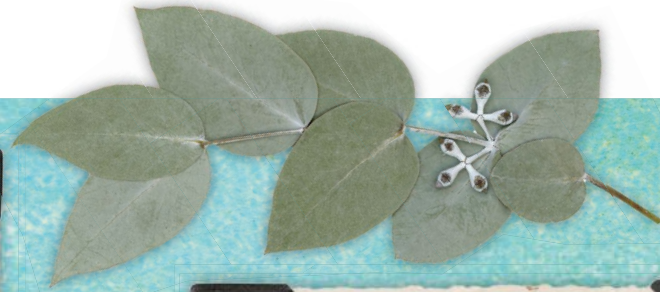
Promote your benefits. Don’t leave total rewards buried in a manual, revealed only during new employee onboarding or at an annual benefits meeting. The everyday demands of work and life can make it easy to forget about or overlook valuable benefits, especially those that aren’t particularly urgent. Work/life integration doesn’t just happen. It’s important for HR teams to remind employees to use the benefits available to them.



Millennials (born 1981-1996)

Individuals in this generation tend to be most vocal about work/life integration. This is the group at the height of child-bearing and child-rearing years, so family-related benefits such as parental leave, adoption support, and child care may be paramount. Many Millennials face the responsibility of caring for children and aging parents at the same time, requiring even greater flexibility and support. Family matters also tend to prompt greater interest in life insurance.

Financial wellness programs are also a priority as this generation grapples with saving for college, pursuing home ownership, understanding wealth management strategies, and seeking help with eradicating debt. Also, don’t overlook this group’s interest in furthering their education and career development.



Gen Z (born 1997-2012)

These early-career professionals may be especially interested in student loan repayment assistance, mental health support, and career development opportunities, including mentorships, upskilling/reskilling, and tuition assistance. However, don’t discount their interest in work/life integration programs and retirement plans, too.

“Surveys of very young Gen Zers reveal a shift of them craving stability,” said Mary Gormandy White, SHRM-SCP, managing director of corporate training and consulting at Inside Insights.

“Work/life balance is an important part of that. I also think that some younger people are seeing the fallout of their grandparents and parents not properly saving for retirement.”

Younger professionals might find savings plans more attractive than their counterparts did a decade or so earlier.

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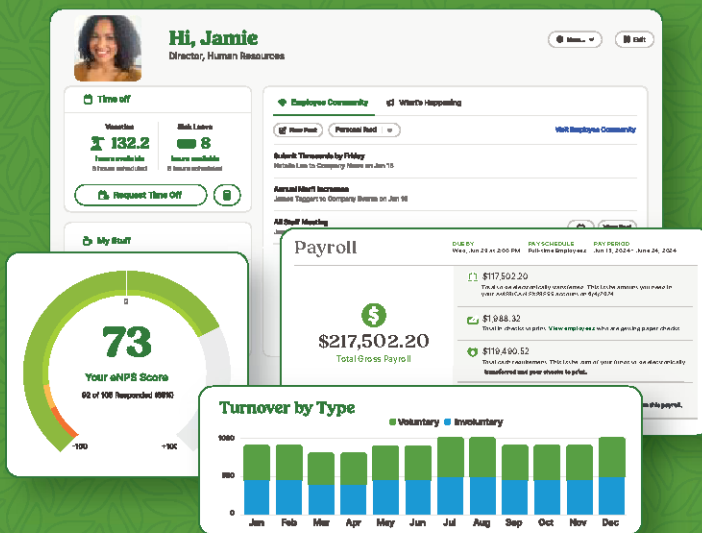
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“Fundamentally, a good variety of benefits is important to address moments that matter through all stages in life.”

— SHERI MARTEL, SHRM SCP



“We are always promoting our different benefits, encouraging employees to take advantage of programs and resources, sharing bits of information, offering webinars and events,” said Martel, who works with her colleagues to establish a strategic schedule of weekly promotions.



Take advantage of technology.

“Technology plays a large role in making benefits more accessible and customizable,” Martel said. “Digital enrollment options and self-service portals allow staff to seamlessly enroll in or modify their

benefits. Similarly, apps provide easy access to benefits information and ID cards.”

Tech can also reduce administrative burdens — and costs — for HR teams. Analytics help ensure decisions are data-driven and provide businesses with valuable industry benchmarks to ensure they remain competitive in their offerings. Additionally, it’s time to fully embrace the potential of artificial intelligence.

“I believe AI will play a much larger role in benefit platforms in the next five years,” Martel predicted. For example, employees could ask AI chatbots questions about benefits according to individual needs as part of the election process.



Exchange insights. Martel meets monthly with SHRM’s benefits vendors to discuss industry trends, review utilization data, and get advice on how best to roll out new benefits or encourage employee engagement.



Opt for inclusive. Today’s employee assistance programs (EAPs) are well suited for meeting most individual needs, so you don’t need to add benefits that serve a very limited constituency. “EAPs have changed

so much in recent years,” Martel said. “When I first started in HR, they were a small benefit, offering services employees could tap in an emergency. Now, they are much more robust, with many components ranging from concierge services to helping employees understand a medical benefits statement.”



Stay current. The world of employee benefits is constantly changing, so it’s not enough to monitor the need states of the workforce. “It’s important for HR leaders to remain up-to-date with state legislation,” said Martel, who expects to see more state-level changes in family and medical leave regulations.

Benefits That Drive Business Outcomes

As HR incorporates new offerings, it’s vital not to forget the real why behind these changes: It all comes down to the bottom line.

“There must be a balance between offering attractive benefits to all while ensuring it’s financially sustainable for the business,” Martel said. “Ultimately, companies should understand their employee population and ensure alignment between their needs and a mix of benefits that will continue to engage a productive workforce. Fundamentally, a good variety of benefits is important to address moments that matter through all stages in life.” [IR](#)

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

FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE ACT (FMLA)

REACHING A BREAKING POINT

Three decades after being signed into law, the Family and Medical Leave Act is failing America's working caregivers. What can employers and HR do to fill the gap?

ALLEN SMITH, J.D., AND KELSEY CASSELBURY





When Jessie Heath, SHRM-CP, and his husband, Joe Cole, adopted their first daughter, they had just days to prepare to become parents. “We were essentially thrown into parenthood overnight — in the best and most intense way possible,” said Heath, the director of global talent, culture, and inclusion at La-Z-Boy. “While the love was instant, the emotional whirlwind was real.”

Adding a layer of complexity, their daughter spent 45 days in the NICU in Cleveland, about two and a half hours away from their home in Toledo, Ohio.

Although Heath and Cole both qualified for leave under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), it would be unpaid. For them — as for so many other caregivers — 12 weeks without a salary wasn’t an option. Cole continued to work.

Heath, who then worked for a different company, chose to stay in Cleveland, while Cole drove back and forth weekly. The new parents struggled.

“Suddenly we were filing FMLA paperwork, coordinating with our employer’s leave vendor, and trying to produce all the right documents while also managing the very real, very raw experience of becoming a family,” Heath said. “It’s hard to explain the pressure of handling that logistical layer while you’re navigating such an intimate and emotional moment in your life.”

The cost of living in America has skyrocketed since then-President Bill Clinton signed the FMLA into law in February 1993. Today, more families consist of two working parents than in the past (41.2% in the late 1980s compared to 67% in 2023, per the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), and what you could buy with \$100 at that time now costs \$274, according to the agency’s CPI Inflation Calculator.

Most significantly, perhaps, the makeup of families and the dependents whom working caregivers are responsible for has shifted. As a result, these caregivers are shouldering more burdens than ever — and it’s up to employers to fill in the gaps where the FMLA fails those it intended to protect.

MODERN FAMILIES, OUTDATED LAWS

The 32-year-old FMLA has been revised only twice: in 2008 and 2010, both times to address military-related leave.

When it comes to qualifying for general caregiving leave, the current legislation limits people being cared for to:

- The employee’s spouse.
- The employee’s parent (biological or “in loco parentis,” meaning anyone who is acting like a parent, despite a lack of biological or legal relation).
- A biological or adopted child, a foster child, a stepchild, or a legal ward under age 18.

“CAREGIVING IS NO LONGER A SHORT-TERM OR ISOLATED RESPONSIBILITY — IT’S A LONG-TERM REALITY FOR A GROWING PORTION OF THE WORKFORCE.”

— JAMES ATKINSON

- An adult child incapable of self-care because of a mental or physical disability.

Employers have begun to recognize that this isn’t enough. Nearly 9 in 10 employers surveyed said Congress has both an opportunity and a responsibility to revise the FMLA to meet the current and future needs of work, workers, and the workplace, according to 2025 SHRM research, *The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 Reimagined*.

“Caregiving is no longer a short-term or isolated responsibility — it’s a long-term reality for a growing portion of the workforce,” said James Atkinson, vice president of thought leadership at SHRM. “Outdated leave policies that fail to address employees’ care needs risk leaving employees feeling unsupported, which can negatively impact employee retention and productivity.”

If the FMLA’s standard definition of “covered family members” were expanded, SHRM’s research found that employers would support adding the following:

- Domestic partners (65%).
- Nondisabled adult children (62%).
- Parents-in-law and parents of a spouse or domestic partner (62%).
- Siblings (61%).
- Grandparents and grandchildren (59%).
- Stepparents (57%).
- Adoptive or foster parents (51%).

This notably leaves out aunts, uncles, cousins, and close friends, as employers indicated less support for modifying the FMLA to include these relationships. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, Heath believes this is where the FMLA really misses the mark.

“You have a very limited scope of what’s inclusive of families,” he explained. “Many of us have had to create our own families.”

The lack of clarity surrounding additional FMLA provisions creates other challenges. For example:

- More than 60% of SHRM members surveyed said the term “in loco parentis” is hard to understand.
- Nearly three-quarters of respondents said it’s difficult to determine how much time an employee has taken and what’s left when administering intermittent leave.
- 59% of employers said it’s difficult to manage the coordination of FMLA leave with other types of paid or unpaid leave or salary continuation programs, such as short-term disability or workers’ compensation.

However, while a nationwide requirement for paid leave sounds good in theory, “that might be a real hardship for some employers,” cautioned Robin Shea, an attorney with Constangy, Brooks, Smith & Prophete in Winston-Salem, N.C.

Expanding FMLA coverage can — and often will — tax the company’s budget and operations, SHRM research indicated. It could increase the financial impact of accommodating FMLA leave or disrupt staffing needs, as well as potentially boost the risk of employees abusing FMLA leave.

SUPPORTING CAREGIVERS BEYOND LEGISLATION

In the absence of updated laws, it’s up to organizations to fill the gaps through empathy, flexibility, and resources for employees. Offering caregiving leave when it’s not required by law isn’t just popular but is also a critical benefit to attract and retain employees, said Matt Morris, vice president of absence and accommodation compliance at ComPsych Absence Resources and vice president of FLMA Source in Evanston, Ill.

Additionally, organizations that proactively support working caregivers experience better employee engagement than those that take a reactive approach, according to a recent SHRM report, *The Caregiving Imperative: Organizational Solutions for Supporting Caregivers and Elevating Business Performance*.



“SOMETIMES, SOMEONE JUST NEEDS TO BE SEEN OR HEARD AND GIVEN TIME TO BREATHE.”

— TINA-MARIE WOHLFIELD, SHRM-SCP

There’s also a financial stake at play: Caregivers unexpectedly miss an average of 1.2 days of work per month due to insufficient support from their organization. This translates to an average of \$17.5 billion in lost wages every month.

When Tina-Marie Wohlfield’s father entered hospice, she felt a duty as a daughter and an HR professional to support her mother in navigating the process. Wohlfield, who is SHRM-SCP-certified and the chief people strategist at Fraser, Mich.-based TIMAWO LLC, learned a lot — most notably, “We as employers need to do more.”

Wohlfield’s mother — who was still working for a private company she’d been employed by for two decades — chose to care for Wohlfield’s father through in-home hospice. That decision was questioned by a company leader who had a startling response: Her mother made the wrong choice. She should have chosen a hospice home, he told her, so it wouldn’t affect her day-to-day job — even though she was doing her best to come to the office at least part of each day and worked during off-hours to make up time.

That experience isn’t uncommon. One in 5 working caregivers surveyed reported poor treatment at work because of caregiving responsibilities, and 22% said there is a negative stigma at their organization for being a caregiver, according to another SHRM report, *Care and Careers: Navigating Caregiving and Work Responsibilities*.

Additionally, caregiving takes a toll on caregivers’ well-being, with negative effects on physical health (49%), mental health (47%), and overall quality of life (37%).

“When you go through [this situation] yourself, you see firsthand the impact of burned-out caregivers in the workplace,” Wohlfield said. “It’s mentally and physically exhausting.”

RETHINKING POLICIES, RETAINING PEOPLE

What can employers do to bridge the divide where the FMLA falls short? Strategies include:

FOSTER A CULTURE OF OPENNESS AND EMPATHY.

Nearly one-third (32%) of working caregivers surveyed by SHRM said they chose not to disclose their situation to an employer. In some ways, that might have been a better choice for Wohlfield’s mother. Because there were no productivity issues, Wohlfield explained, company leaders would have never known if her mother hadn’t alerted the organization.

When she did notify them, however, and the company leader responded harshly, Wohlfield’s mother immediately resigned — mirroring SHRM’s findings that working caregivers are often willing to leave their current job for a company that provides better support. Thankfully, someone else at the organization stepped in, refusing to accept the resignation and instead discussing ways the company could support her. “Somebody shouldn’t have to threaten to resign,” Wohlfield said.

Methods to establish an empathetic and open workplace culture include holding sensitivity training and caregiving awareness workshops for managers; actively communicating policies

STATES STEP UP WHERE FEDERAL LAWS FALL SHORT

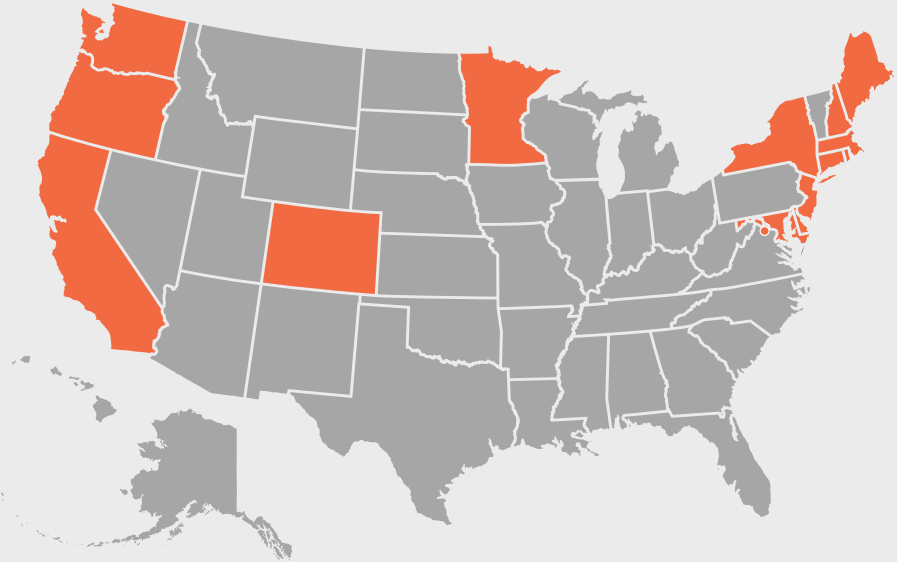
Fourteen states and Washington, D.C., have implemented their own FMLA laws that extend beyond federal provisions. These laws offer broader protections, such as expanded family member definitions and paid-leave options, helping more workers access the support they need.

“The interplay between state paid family leave and the FMLA — and any other leave provided under local law or company policy — can be quite complicated,” said Emily Harbison, an attorney with Reed Smith in Houston. The issue becomes even more complex for employers with that have workers in multiple states, she noted.

Some state laws apply to employers with fewer employees than the 50 that federal law mandates. Others don’t require employees to have worked 12 months for their current company before becoming eligible and/or have a lower threshold of hours that the employee must have worked, Harbison said.

Most significantly, some state laws allow employees to take leave for other reasons than permitted under the FMLA, and others have a broader definition of “family member.” In-laws, other relatives, or individuals with an association to the employee equivalent to that of a relative might be covered by state law, she explained.

For example, in addition to the family members covered under the FMLA, the California Family Rights Act (CFRA) covers registered domestic partners, parents-in-law, grandparents, grandchildren, siblings, and “designated persons,” said Ellen Donovan McCann, a Boston-based attorney with Littler, the nation’s largest employment law firm.



U.S. JURISDICTIONS WITH INDEPENDENT FMLA LAWS

| | | |
|------------------|---------------|------------------|
| California | Maine | New Jersey |
| Colorado | Maryland | New York state |
| Connecticut | Massachusetts | Oregon |
| Delaware | Minnesota | Rhode Island |
| Washington, D.C. | New Hampshire | Washington state |

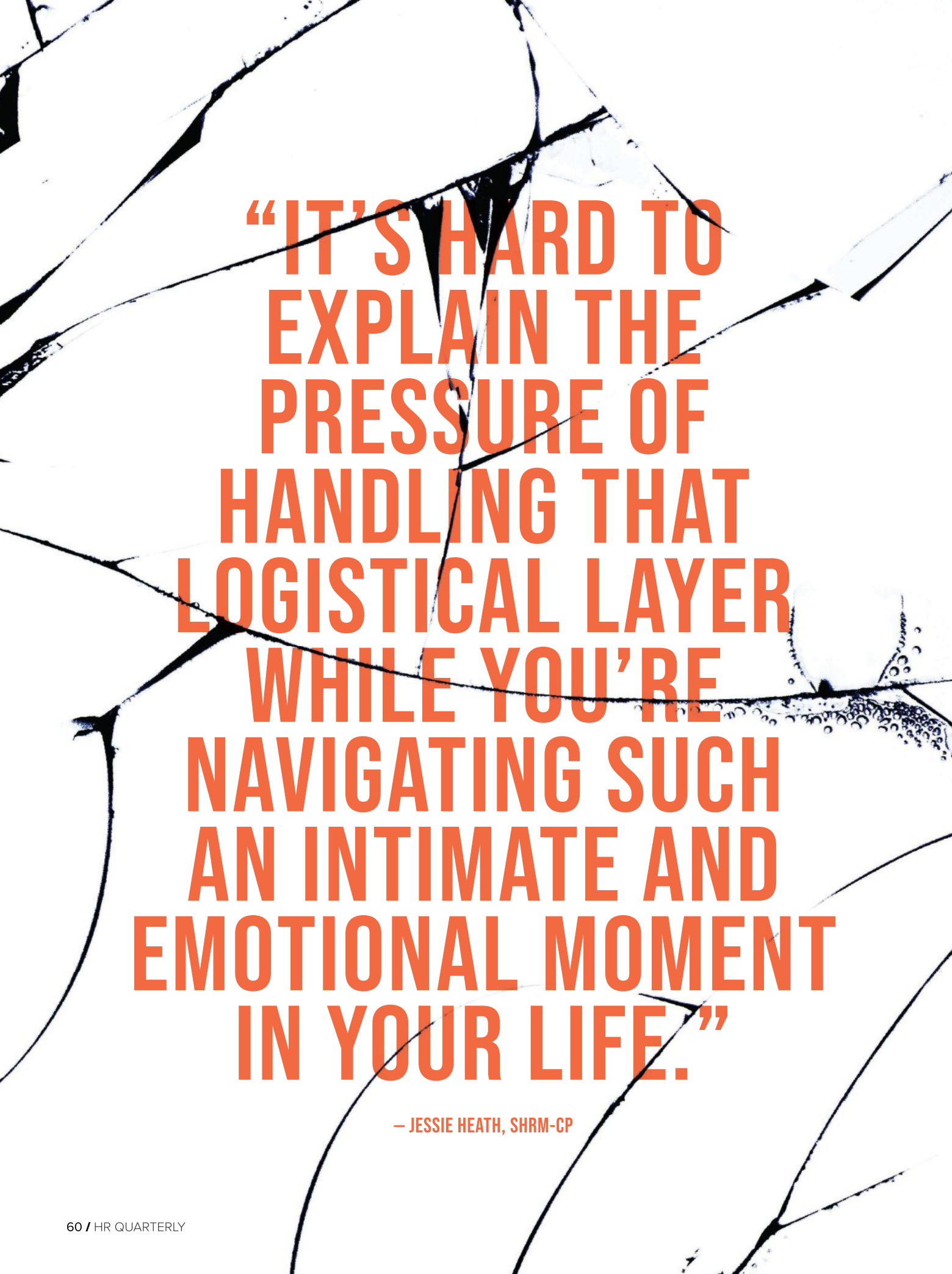
In California’s neighbor to the north, the Oregon Family Leave Act (OFLA) provides sick-child leave for an employee to care for their dependent because of a condition that requires home care, regardless of whether the illness rises to the level of a serious health condition, Donovan McCann added. OFLA sick-child leave is also available for school and child care facility closures that arise during public health emergencies. However, this leave is unpaid, unless the employee uses accrued leave, such as vacation or sick time.

Across the country, Massachusetts’ Small Necessities Leave Act provides unpaid leave for employees to participate in certain school activities for their children and to accompany

a child or elderly relative to routine medical or dental appointments, Donovan McCann said.

Leave protections can also differ within a state, Morris said. For example, New Jersey’s state FMLA protects caregiver and bonding leaves, but not leaves for the employee’s own health condition.

“While some employers may think the right or easy approach is to count all absences as FMLA if they are protected under state law, employers should exercise caution in this regard,” Donovan McCann said. “The FMLA regulations specifically state that an employer cannot deem an absence covered under the FMLA unless the law actually covers it, even if the absence is protected under state law.”



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— JESSIE HEATH, SHRM-CP

and benefits; creating caregiver support groups; and launching regular educational campaigns via webinars, emails, or lunch-and-learns to increase awareness of caregiving resources.

UPDATE AND EXPAND CAREGIVING POLICIES.

Constrained definitions of covered family members aren't the only challenge the FMLA poses to workers. The legislation never really fulfilled its objective, Heath argued, because it doesn't require employees to be paid during leave. "Most of the population is not privileged enough to take unpaid time off," he said. Additionally, the FMLA only requires up to 12 weeks of leave, a duration that might not be sufficient for a caregiver.

"Sometimes, there is no playbook for [HR] to follow," Wohlfield acknowledged. However, "trying to be flexible is really important."

Companies should regularly evaluate and update their caregiving policies, collecting feedback from employees to identify caregiving responsibilities, gaps in current company policies and benefits, and opportunities for improvement.

Employers might choose to take cues from states that have implemented broader leave laws by integrating those offerings into their own policies and procedures. However, when choosing to go beyond FMLA requirements by instituting voluntary policies or when addressing individual circumstances, employers should retain discretion to determine eligibility for and the length of leaves, said Marcy Frost, an employment attorney in St. Louis Park, Minn. If the employer must go beyond the FMLA to comply with a state or local law, the employer should carefully track the leave that is granted, she noted.

PROVIDE COMPREHENSIVE CAREGIVING RESOURCES.

Upon requests from employees, La-Z-Boy created a working parent/caregiver employee resource group (ERG), Heath said, which has grown to be the company's second largest such collective. Staff members volunteer to lead the group, bringing in guest speakers on topics such as Alzheimer's care or dealing with their own emotions as caregivers. Heath said he could have used this type of support group when adopting his daughters, "just to have someone to chat with. Someone else who understands."

Sometimes, Wohlfield said, being a caregiver comes down to project management skills. HR can help by conducting research and connecting the worker to community resources, such as organizations that can provide someone — a volunteer or a professional at a discounted rate — to sit with a loved one so the caregiver can do something as simple as grocery shopping.

ADDRESS CAREER DEVELOPMENT FOR CAREGIVERS.

More than 2 in 5 employees surveyed for SHRM's research said caregiving duties have held them back from career advancement, while 57% said a career gap due to caregiving affected their ability to get the job they want.

HR leaders should learn to check their biases against caregivers during interviews, performance reviews, or other types of evaluations, Heath said. "We often see these individuals



FMLA BASICS

The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) is a 1993 federal law designed to help employees balance work demands with family and medical needs. Key provisions include:


- Up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave in a 12-month period for employees who have worked for their employer for at least 12 months and accumulated at least 1,250 hours during the previous year.
- To qualify, an employee must work for an organization that has at least 50 employees within a 75-mile radius.
- Applicable reasons include serious health conditions, caring for a covered family member with a health condition or disability, or the birth/adoption and care of a child.
- Employers must maintain group health insurance coverage during the leave period.
- Employees are guaranteed the same or an equivalent position upon returning from leave.

differently," he explained. "We need to make sure we're thinking broadly about what they're contributing versus how much you see them or how engaged they are."

HR teams can also develop return-to-work programs, such as reskilling or transition aids, for caregivers re-entering the workforce after employment gaps or offer mentorship or sponsorship to help caregivers climb the career ladder.

'THEY'RE NOT ALONE'

The challenges faced by caregivers in the workplace highlight the urgent need for more inclusive and supportive policies. The FMLA may have been a groundbreaking step in 1993, but it no longer meets the needs of today's diverse workforce. Employers have a unique opportunity to bridge these gaps by fostering empathy, flexibility, and proactive support for caregiving employees.

"Let them know they're not alone," and that you'll do whatever's possible to support them, Wohlfield said. "Sometimes, someone just needs to be seen or heard and given time to breathe." 

ALLEN SMITH, J.D., is a content manager at SHRM. KELSEY CASSELBURY is a content director at SHRM.



COMMUNITY

VALUES

AT WORK

Jason Sutheimer reflects on his career, exploring how Midwestern values have shaped his strategic mindset and professional decisions.

BY SARA BEATTY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAIME LAWLER





Small-town values and a rural upbringing are a strong foundation for a career in HR. At least, that's the case for Jason Sutheimer, SHRM-SCP, who serves as HR business partner for the adjutant general of the North Dakota National Guard.

"Community involvement and helping each other out ... it's instilled in you at a young age, and I think that's where it started," said Sutheimer, a lifelong North Dakotan. "That's been the thing: How can we help people get to where they want to be?"

Like many in the profession, Sutheimer said HR "found" him. After earning a bachelor's degree in information systems management with a minor in computer science from North Dakota State University, Sutheimer realized he didn't have the programming skills necessary for Y2K-era tech roles.

So he pivoted. He pursued an MBA from the University of Mary in Bismarck, N.D., to build upon his business acumen. As a graduate student, Sutheimer also interned for the North Dakota Department of Transportation and oversaw its recruitment efforts while getting an introduction to the many different facets of human resources.

"What really got me excited about HR was the impact you have on the business and all the ins and outs of all the different" functions, he said.

That internship launched a decades-long career in human resources, during which Sutheimer has worked in nearly every specialty, including talent management and acquisition, employment law, compensation, and job classification.

Essential HR Skills

Sutheimer acknowledged the myriad paths one can take in the HR field but noted that certain characteristics are vital to any HR function.

"The biggest thing for me is adaptability," he said. "You have to be a well-rounded individual, and you have to be adaptable to situations."

It's also key to have a strategic mindset. "If you're not being strategic, you're just chasing your tail," Sutheimer said.

Sutheimer noted that HR involves elements of marketing, sales, employee relations, consulting, and sociology, among other disciplines. It's crucial to see the big picture and understand how these functions work in tandem.

To foster that strategic mindset, Sutheimer challenges HR pros to ask themselves *why* they're doing what they're doing and how it aligns with their organization's goals.

In his work with the adjutant general — which oversees North Dakota's emergency services and homeland security operations — he asked the talent acquisition team why it was tracking applicants. The team's rationale was to be able to make quick hiring decisions if someone reapplied to a role later. But Sutheimer pointed out that the applicant may have gained new skills and relevant experience between applications. By understanding the big picture and asking smart questions, Sutheimer streamlined the hiring process and saved his team time.

HR's Balancing Act

Over the years, Sutheimer has found the most challenging part of being an HR professional is maintaining the balance between the interests of the individual employee and the employer.

"We have talented employees, and we want to develop them," he said. "But as HR pros, we also have to focus on protecting the business, right? So you're always asking yourself, 'How can I help somebody, while protecting the ... organization?'"

Making these calls isn't always black and white. Sometimes they necessitate difficult conversations. For example, Sutheimer encourages talented employees who are not a good cultural fit for his agency to pursue roles elsewhere, both for their own professional development and to support the organization's goals.


"Being the right person to protect the agency and the employee is challenging," he said. "I think every HR professional has dealt with that."

The Value of Community

Sutheimer learned to manage HR challenges both on the job and through the SHRM community and its resources. He first became involved with SHRM during his internship when his

**"I BELIEVE WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY
TO MAKE OUR COMMUNITIES BETTER
AND STRONGER."**

— Jason Sutheimer, SHRM-SCP



**“IF YOU’RE NOT BEING
STRATEGIC, YOU’RE JUST
CHASING YOUR TAIL.”**

— Jason Sutheimer, SHRM-SCP

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supervisor introduced him to the local chapter — the Central Dakota Human Resource Association — and its networking opportunities.

SHRM “will do things for your career that you just can’t get” elsewhere, he said.

At the beginning of his career, Sutheimer said, the volunteer work he did with SHRM gave him crucial experience, bolstering his skills, resume, and job prospects. Having to ask another volunteer to step down, for example, prepared Sutheimer for similar difficult conversations he would later have in an official career capacity.

Today, as a more senior professional, Sutheimer focuses on giving back to the SHRM community that helped him along his career path.

“How do I provide these opportunities that I was given through SHRM — whether that’s the webinars or volunteering or conferences — and how can I give back to that community?” he said.

Sutheimer now serves on the SHRM Membership Advisory Council, representing the North Central Region of the U.S. He attributes his passion for this work to his gratitude for the opportunities he was given through SHRM as well as his small-town roots.

“A lot of people don’t see the value in volunteering, and I think society has moved toward that [attitude],” he said. “But I believe we have a responsibility to make our communities better and stronger. ... And if I can use my skill set and talents to do that, why shouldn’t I?”

Creating a Legacy

Sutheimer aims to make a real difference in his work with the North Dakota adjutant general. His short-term goal is figuring out how to make the organization an outstanding career option, “where people want to go, where people feel valued, and where people know that we helped them get where they want to go.”

Still 12 years away from retirement, Sutheimer is already thinking about his legacy and how he can leave the communities he’s involved with better than he found them for future generations.

“What can I do now to help these emerging professionals, these student populations, to grow and develop and become this next group of individuals who are going to push HR to the next level?” he said.

Sutheimer advises emerging HR professionals to “become more well-rounded” and develop a variety of skills because HR is a field that’s not tied to a specific degree or career track.

To the Future, for the Future

Sutheimer also anticipates significant challenges that will shape the world of work and the lives of HR professionals. Artificial intelligence, for example, has been rapidly implemented in different sectors, but Sutheimer doesn’t believe it will affect job stability.

“I see [AI] like computers,” he said. “It’s going to change the way we work, but I don’t see it taking people’s jobs.”

But the current political discourse and changes are likely to present significant challenges for HR, Sutheimer predicted.

“The back-and-forth of this political environment and the



“BEING THE RIGHT PERSON TO PROTECT THE AGENCY AND THE EMPLOYEE IS CHALLENGING.

I THINK EVERY HR PROFESSIONAL HAS DEALT WITH THAT.”

— Jason Sutheimer, SHRM-SCP

legal environment is going to be crucial for HR people to stay up-to-date on and prepare to navigate,” he added.

But like many challenges in human resources that have come before, Sutheimer believes these hurdles are not insurmountable — nor should they scare off anyone looking to enter the profession. [IR](#)

SARA BEATTY is a program specialist, Widening Pathways to Work, at the SHRM Foundation.

SKILLS FIRST FUTURE

THE POWER OF POTENTIAL

By emphasizing skills rather than where candidates learned them, skills-first employers are creating opportunities for all.

BY EMILY M. REIGART

powered by  Foundation

Skills-first hiring has emerged as a transformative approach to talent acquisition and development. The SHRM Foundation is showing the way forward after launching a skills-first pilot program in 2023 and debuting the Center for a Skills First Future (shrm.org/skills-first-hrq) this year.

The pilot featured 20 participants that tested innovative and scalable ways to prioritize candidates' abilities over traditional hiring benchmarks such as degrees, aiming to benefit people who may otherwise have struggled to find employment.

Here, representatives from retail giant Walmart, staffing agency Cornbread Hustle, and the Northern Rockies affiliate of human services nonprofit Volunteers of America (VOA) share key takeaways from the program, including whether skills-first hiring practices influenced their organizations' bottom lines.

Walmart: Degrees Optional, Opportunities Abound

"Skills-first is really about giving people credit for everything that they bring to the table," said Jennifer Buchanan, vice president of Walmart Academy, the retailer's training arm.

This means hiring managers "prioritize a candidate's skills and abilities" when recruiting, Buchanan explained. It's a shift away from traditional or credential-based hiring, which relies on a candidate's educational background, years of experience, and/or job titles to signal whether they might be qualified to fill an opening.

Skills-first hiring is a natural fit for Walmart, which has a long-standing practice of not requiring degrees for associates and many other roles. In fact, 75% of the company's managers started as hourly associates, Buchanan said.

However, the company's leadership understands that eliminating unnecessary degree requirements is just the first step in

shifting to a skills-first model. Every Walmart job description now includes a list of skills necessary for success.

Effective skill assessments are key, Buchanan said. At Walmart, psychologists and data scientists design tests to evaluate everyone from prospective personal shoppers to the senior vice president of operations. Applicants are rated green, yellow, or red. "There's a correlation between hiring 'greens' and better performance," she explained.

The company is also intentional about investing in up-skilling and reskilling employees in anticipation of their career growth.

When employees are hired or promoted to a new position, they can enroll in Walmart Academy programs such as License to Lead, which teaches leadership and soft skills, or License to Operate, which focuses on skills necessary to succeed while working in the retail stores, she explained. While many jobs don't require a degree, employees interested in positions that do, such as product managers or software engineers, can use the company's Live Better U education and tuition reimbursement benefit to earn those credentials.

**"SKILLS-FIRST IS REALLY ABOUT
GIVING PEOPLE CREDIT FOR
EVERYTHING THAT THEY BRING
TO THE TABLE."**

— JENNIFER BUCHANAN



Walmart also offers a Career Explorer tool to help workers map their skills and passions onto a career path. It identifies training opportunities and creates a personalized journey to that desired role.

These training investments pay off handsomely. “Facilities that have higher completion rates for Walmart Academy trainings have higher clean, fast, friendly scores; longer tenure; less turnover; higher retention rates; and higher net promoter scores,” Buchanan said.

She holds up Marine veteran Randall “Reece” Niblett as one of many skills-first successes. Niblett was hired for a supply chain facility, where he met his best friend and, together, they joined the associate-to-driver program. Today, they’re a team of drivers making a six-figure salary in Walmart’s private fleet.

“Everyone wins in a skills-first model,” Buchanan said. Employers can choose from “a larger, better talent pool,” and individuals benefit from increased socioeconomic mobility, she explained.

Cornbread Hustle: Second-Chance Hires and the Labor Shortage

Dallas-based staffing agency Cornbread Hustle specializes in second chances — finding meaningful work for people recently released from prison or who are in recovery from addiction.

“When I started this agency, I didn’t know that there was even a term for skills-first hiring. I just believed in it,” said Cheri Garcia, who founded the company 10 years ago.

Garcia’s script to prospective employers addresses the labor shortage, pitching the formerly incarcerated as “untapped talent.” Approximately 1 in 3 adults in the U.S. have a criminal record, and 95% of companies won’t hire the 77 million people in this category, she noted.

The idea for Cornbread Hustle grew out of a prison entrepreneurship program, where Garcia helped formerly incarcerated people “reverse-engineer [their] goals.”

Bennie was one of her first clients. He wanted to be a mural painter, and Garcia helped him land his dream job. To do so, she was straightforward in her pitch to the potential employer, noting that Bennie had spent 20 years in prison and didn’t have a degree. But he did have the right skills and a willingness to work for \$10 per hour. The company not only interviewed Bennie but hired him on the spot, she recalled.



“WHEN I STARTED THIS AGENCY, I DIDN’T KNOW THAT THERE WAS EVEN A TERM FOR SKILLS-FIRST HIRING. I JUST BELIEVED IN IT.”

— CHERI GARCIA



As of April 2025, Cornbread Hustle has placed nearly 3,000 individuals with criminal records into jobs such as welders, electricians, HVAC technicians, machine operators, and diesel mechanics, as well as warehouse roles and entry-level supply chain jobs.

During interviews, recruiters assess candidates’ alignment with Cornbread Hustle’s core values: empowerment, accountability, and transparency. “Nobody’s looking at anybody with judgment,” Garcia said. “We’re just trying to see [if they] have the skills to perform the job.”

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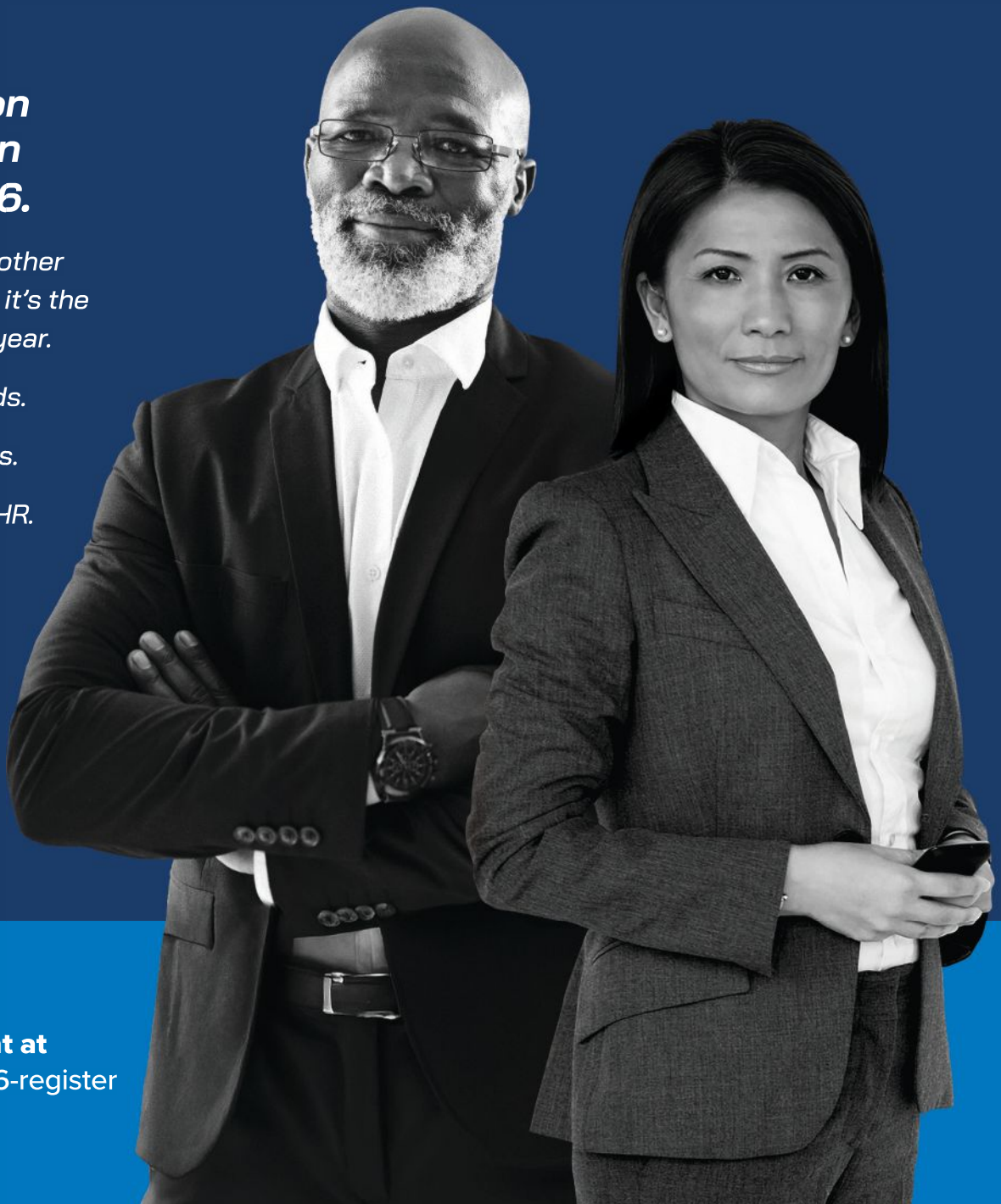
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They also make sure candidates' records are compatible with company culture — and the client's comfort level. Many employers fear a lawsuit over negligent hiring if "something bad happens," she said. However, there's no evidence this is an issue.

"Eighty-two percent of managers have said, 'Second-chance hires bring as much or more value to their company than workers without [criminal] backgrounds,'" Garcia said.

Garcia has tips for those open to hiring workers who've spent time "living in a gated community," as she refers to prison:

- Note whether your location is accessible via public transportation because many candidates might not be able to drive or may not have their own vehicle.
- Determine if you won't accept applications from those who have committed certain offenses.
- During interviews, provide hypothetical scenarios to glean insights into work ethic or character. Some answers provide coaching opportunities; others reveal red flags that prevent you from moving forward with a candidate.

VOA Northern Rockies: Potential, Not Just Credentials

Traditional talent acquisition efforts look at what people have done, whereas skills-first hiring looks at what they can do, said Chandra Cody, vice president of human resources for Volunteers of America's Northern Rockies affiliate.

This requires holistic evaluations of a person's ability to complete job functions — and if they're a good fit for company culture. In some ways, she said, "you're trying to measure someone's potential."

When shifting to a skills-first model, revise job descriptions first, Cody suggested. Talk to hiring managers about which competencies are necessary to start and which can be learned on the job. Not every skill can be nonnegotiable on day one. Instead, Cody said VOA is "very intentional" about professional development, mapping required training for new employees to ensure they'll learn required competencies.

You'll have "some tough dialogue with your hiring managers," Cody said. "Is this really required? Or is this more of a wish list item? Or even worse — is it there just because it's always been there?"

She asks: "Help me understand the 'have to.' Is it a contract requirement? What is it that they learn in that four-year program that you couldn't learn on the job?"

Once the right mix of skills is established, add them to the job description. This helps candidates to identify whether they have the right skill set, Cody explained. If they don't, the candidate is better situated to know where to develop professionally.

Cody believes that degree and experience requirements have functioned as shorthand for skills and accomplishments for older generations. These resume line items are also easily verifiable.

On the other hand, skills-first hiring requires looking at resumes and imagining how skills equate to what the candidates have experience in, she said. Candidates themselves may feel challenged by this mindset — not thinking of the less-obvious skills they've developed or how to highlight them on a resume or in a cover letter.

NAVIGATING TOWARD A SKILLS-FIRST FUTURE

A skills-first future is inevitable, says Wendi Safstrom, president of the SHRM Foundation — "which is why companies of all sizes and industries can and should adopt skills-first talent strategies."

The Foundation's Skills First Future hub was created to provide employers with free tools and resources, enabling them to develop a skills-first action plan in as little as 15 minutes.

The Foundation also partnered with SHRM's education division to develop the Skills First specialty credential. "It's crucial for SHRM's members to be experts in something so vital to the future of work," Safstrom said.

The Skills First Future hub features over 200 employer examples, like those highlighted here, showcasing organizations of various sizes, industries, and locations.

The Center for a Skills First Future was created with support from founding investors: Walmart, Charles Koch Foundation, and Workday Foundation; and in partnership with: Business Roundtable, Competency-Based Education Network, Credential Engine, Education Design Lab, Grads of Life, Jobs for the Future, Learn & Work Ecosystem Library, National Governors Association, Opportunity@Work, SkillsFWD, and U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation.

Visit shrm.org/skills-first-hrq for more than 500 tools, trainings, and resources.

Skills assessment, such as with scenario-based questions, is simpler to incorporate into interviews. However, interviewers need to be on guard for their own biases — often, the hiring manager is looking for somebody that answers the questions like they would.

Shifting to a skills-first mindset isn't always a quick or easy transition, but the work is paying off at VOA. There's been a decrease in employee turnover, which Cody attributed to improved hiring practices, as well as a rise in internal promotions. That's not incidental: Managers proactively communicate with current staff to learn about their aspirations and to map out the "skills they need to go to the next level."

This "leads to better employee engagement, dissatisfaction decreases, and turnover" rates slow, Cody said. The result is "a better workplace." [IR](#)

EMILY M. REIGART is a content lead at SHRM.



The Art of Giving Feedback

Constructive input drives growth, boosts engagement, and strengthens teams. It's vital to equip managers with the right skills.

BY APRIL BENSOSHAN

Employee feedback is a powerful tool, but managers — and even HR professionals — often get it wrong. It's tempting to ignore the need to provide input that may be perceived as criticism, but it's vital to employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention.

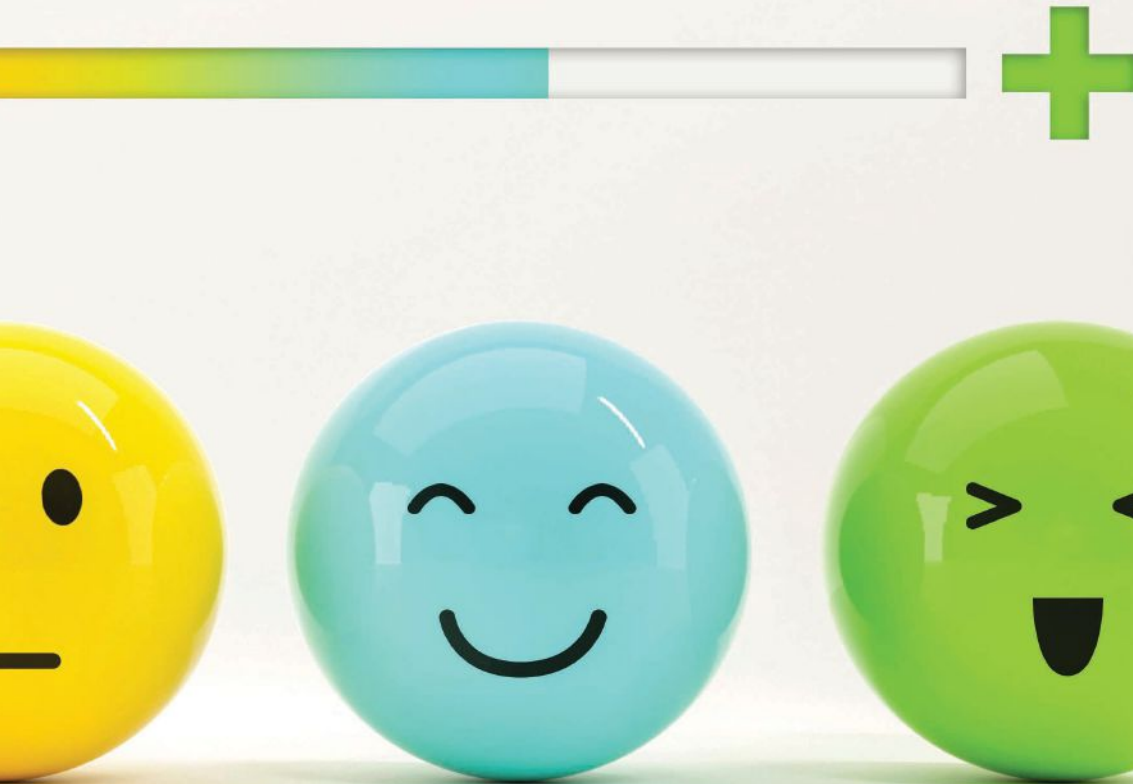
“When done effectively and often so that it's part of the culture, feedback

builds trust, strengthens relationships, and ensures that performance expectations are clear and fair,” said Catherine Mattice, SHRM-SCP, founder and CEO of California-based Civility Partners, an organizational development firm.

Research backs up the sentiment: Employees who received face-to-face feedback had a 23.4% improvement in perfor-

mance, compared with just 5.6% of those who didn't receive feedback, per a study published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*.

“On an individual level, employees who receive regular, well-delivered feedback are more likely to take ownership of their growth, feel valued, and stay engaged,” Mattice said. When feedback is



given at a team level, “it enhances accountability and, therefore, improves overall performance.”

Feedback That Builds, Not Breaks

Don’t confuse an official performance review with feedback. While the former is a scheduled, formal evaluation that takes place at regular intervals, feedback is a part of everyday conversations — a consistent, two-way dialogue that helps employees understand how they’re doing in real time.

Whether this casual feedback can be considered praise or criticism, it’s important that it be meaningful. It should be tailored to current goals and priorities, include commentary about the employee’s strengths, and last enough time to feel purposeful. That equals around 15 to 30 minutes, according to Gallup research, but only if it happens at least once a week. Otherwise, the conversations will likely

need to stretch beyond half an hour. The results are worth it — Gallup found that 80% of employees who said they received meaningful feedback in the past week were more engaged at the workplace.

How can this be achieved? Try one of these effective strategies:

The 3:1 ratio. You’ve heard of the “compliment sandwich” — bookending negative feedback between two compliments — but the 3:1 ratio focuses on giving positive input on an employee’s strengths three times more than constructive criticism.

“We subscribe to a theory of helping people feel good about getting better,” said Tim Hagen, president of Progress Coaching in Wisconsin, who uses this tactic in his workplace. “Constructive feedback should sit on its own and not be confused with other strengths, as it could send a mixed message.”

Micro-feedback. Don’t wait for annual reviews to address challenges or celebrate wins. Instead, create space for real-time, low-stakes feedback.

“Small, frequent feedback moments help employees make quick, incremental improvements and celebrate small wins,” Mattice said. “This approach eliminates the stress of big feedback conversations and prevents minor issues from escalating. It also normalizes feedback, making it feel like a natural part of workplace interactions rather than an event to fear.”

Personalized delivery. Every employee has their own communication style. “Some people appreciate direct, no-frills feedback, while others thrive with a more collaborative, discussion-based approach,” Mattice said. “Personality, level of expertise and confidence, culture, and geography all play a role.”

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Come up with a customized plan in collaboration with an employee, not for them.

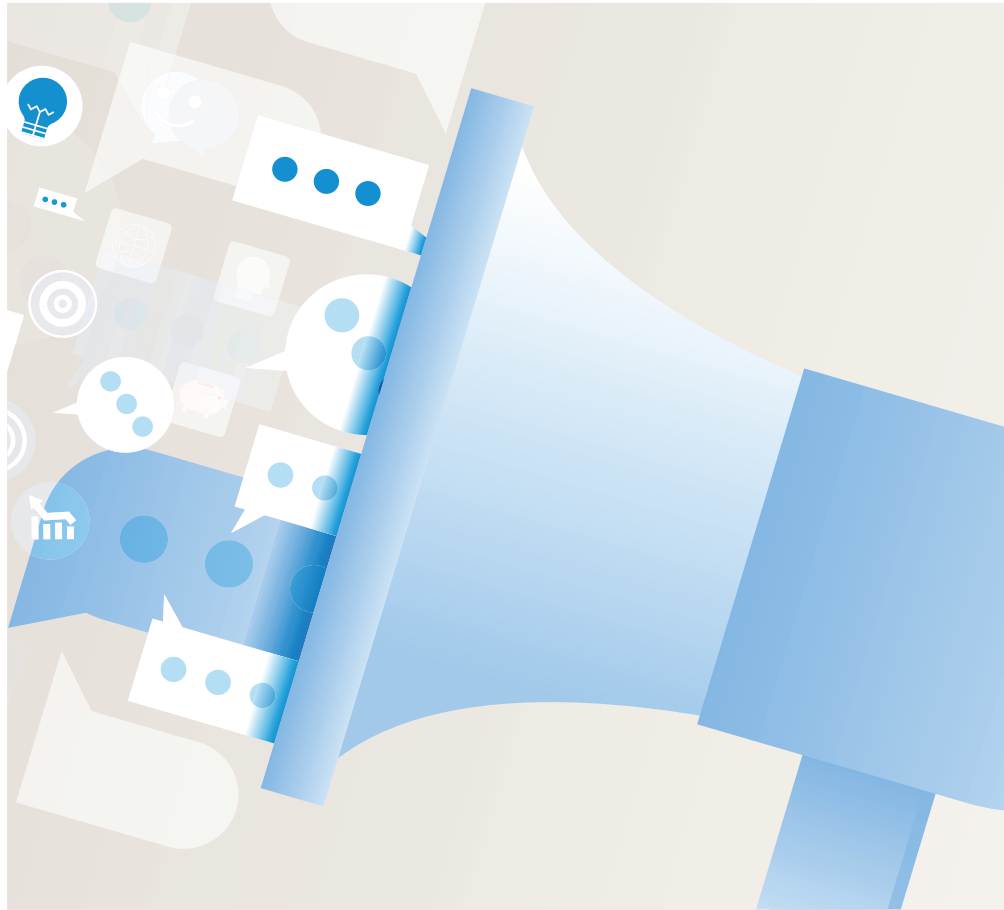
“Ask the employee what’s the best way to give them feedback — both strength-based and constructive,” Hagen said. “It’s amazing how much more receptive they become when they feel like they’ve authored the reception of their own feedback.”

Shifting to “feed-forward.” When a project goes wrong, don’t look back — look forward instead. Frame your notes to the employee in terms of what could go better next time. This future-focused approach keeps the conversation optimistic and solution-oriented. Employees are more likely to stay motivated when they walk away with clear next steps for improvement, rather than a list of what didn’t work.

Practice Makes Perfect

Giving feedback is a skill, and — like any skill — it needs to be learned and then practiced over time. As such, HR should make sure that people managers have consistent tools, clear expectations, and thoughtful training. Without a shared understanding of what good check-ins look like, delivery can vary widely across teams, leading to confusion, resentment, or missed opportunities for growth.

“Consistency starts with a clear, organizationwide feedback framework that aligns with company values and goals,” Mattice said. “The employer should define expectations for feedback, outline what good feedback looks like, and equip



managers and employees with tools and techniques to provide high-quality feedback that builds relationships.”

It’s also important to reinforce that effective input isn’t a one-way street. “Everyone, at all levels, needs to give and receive feedback from the people all around them, so everyone at all levels needs training on how to do that well,” Mattice said.

The most effective training programs include role-playing exercises and real-world scenarios. These can help managers practice giving fair reviews, even in tricky or emotionally charged moments.


“All of these exercises and activities — especially when it comes to feedback — lead to greater emotional intelligence and self-awareness, which is critical,” Hagen said. “The No. 1 tenet, to my estimation, is self-awareness: the ability to look in the mirror and truly be honest with yourself.”

Additionally, giving and getting feedback improves through repetition.

“If someone practiced getting feedback once a week for two or three minutes for 52 straight weeks, you would have a completely different employee within one year,” Hagen said.

Keep the Conversation Going

Feedback-focused conversations shouldn’t be limited to a one-time event. Instead, informal evaluations should come at a variety of times, whether that’s a quick kudos or during regular sit-downs.

Effective performance insight “should be part of an ongoing dialogue where progress is tracked and support is provided,” Mattice said. “A great feedback conversation loses value if there’s no follow-up to check on improvements, offer encouragement, or adjust expectations.” 

APRIL BENSOSHAN is a freelance writer and editor based in New York City.



If someone practiced getting feedback once a week for two or three minutes for 52 straight weeks, you would have a completely different employee within one year.

— TIM HAGEN



Work Smarter, Live Better

Climb the career ladder — while preserving your personal life — by being intentional, allocating energy, and redefining success.

BY JENNIFER LEWI

“**I** want to give my best to my career and family, but I’m drowning while trying to do it all,” Emily said. “How can I keep growing in my career when I’m barely keeping up?”

Emily (whose last name has been omitted to preserve her confidentiality as a client of the author) was having a tough time juggling

career demands and personal priorities, a challenge many people in the workforce — particularly caregivers — know all too well.

Currently working as a senior HR professional, Emily aspires to be part of the C-suite, but she’s also the mom of two young kids and the daughter of aging parents. As her career has progressed,

work demands have also intensified.

Her experience mimics the findings in SHRM’s 2025 *CHRO Priorities and Perspectives* report, which found that more than one-third (34%) of CHROs cite work/life integration and workload management as ongoing struggles.

Through coaching, Emily shifted from



chasing an elusive balance to practicing work/life integration, developing skills in intentional time management and prioritization, and understanding when to focus or to combine tasks for greater efficiency.

Finding Strategies That Work

At its core, work/life integration for professionals means:

- Your career should support the life you want.
- Your life should support the career you want.

It's not about perfect balance; it's about creating a framework where work and life complement each other. Although it's easier said than done, implementing these tried-and-true strategies can help.

Put your mental health first. No matter how motivated you are, it's critical to

disconnect from work and recharge. Stress rates are high — 31% of U.S. workers report feeling stressed by their job, according to SHRM's Workplace Mental Health in 2025 findings. This stress is primarily driven by workload, compensation, and organizational understaffing. Employees want to feel that their mental health is supported at work, with nearly one-third (30%) saying they would take a pay cut for better resources.



It's not about perfect balance; it's about creating a framework where work and life complement each other.

Incorporating even small moments of rest makes a big difference. There's power in micro-recoveries, such as pausing for two minutes between meetings or taking a few deep breaths, to improve focus and prevent burnout. For HR professionals who give so much to others, making space to recharge isn't just helpful — it's essential for sustained performance.

Emily now schedules paid time off in advance, takes guilt-free vacations (no checking email!), and incorporates short, tech-free breaks throughout her day.

Align tasks to get more done.

Pairing complementary activities enables you to integrate work into your day without adding stress. Emily does this by taking work calls during walks or chatting with her parents during her commute. She meets with her team weekly for coffee chats that allow her to get a caffeine boost. Emily also listens to industry podcasts while exercising. And networking through her professional association has allowed her to build genuine friendships alongside professional connections.

Make tough choices. Successfully integrating work life and home life requires first identifying and then focusing on what's most important to you. Emily's priorities include having weekday family dinners, attending her children's sports events, and enjoying monthly gatherings with friends. At work, she emphasizes projects that develop her strategic and leadership skills. To accomplish this, she also:

- **Releases or delegates less-important tasks.** "Good enough" is often sufficient in areas such as housekeeping, but she also shares cooking responsibilities, skips unnecessary meetings, and entrusts appropriate tasks to other people.
- **Schedules personal commitments first.** "The key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities," wrote Stephen R. Covey in his bestselling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Free Press, 1989). Emily now blocks off personal time for family vacations well in advance and builds in time for workouts and quiet breaks *before* filling her calendar with meetings.

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For HR professionals who give so much to others, making space to recharge isn't just helpful — it's essential for sustained performance.

This ensures work isn't constantly overshadowing her personal priorities.

- **Uses mornings intentionally.**

Emily wakes up an hour earlier than her family to meditate, stretch, and spend 20 minutes on professional development. This time to herself guarantees she starts the day with a sense of accomplishment.

- **Works around her energy.**

We all have peak performance hours. Emily tracked her energy patterns and found she was most productive between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m., but she experiences a slump around 3:30 p.m. Therefore, she protects her mornings for deep work while saving less strategic tasks, such as answering emails, for that afternoon energy dip.

- **Expects the unexpected.**

Without adequate buffer time, one disruption can derail an entire day. Emily sets aside daily blocks of time to handle urgent matters, preventing emergencies from throwing off her schedule.

Make fewer game-time calls.

Decision fatigue — the exhaustion that results from making too many choices — drains your energy. Planning ahead for the week's meals, outfits, or exercise options frees up cognitive resources for strategic work. Emily has also established clear guidelines for decision-making with her team members, so they understand when to exercise independent judgment and when to escalate things.

Build camaraderie at work. A sense of belonging in the workplace is crucial to job fulfillment. Employees with strong connections are 2.5 times less



Personal Reflection: Build Your Work/Life Integration Framework

If you're tiptoeing across the work/life tightrope and looking to get back on firmer ground, start by tracking your energy levels for three weeks to identify the times you're most energized and when you experience a slump. Note which activities give you the most energy, as well as other factors such as sleep, food, and stress.

With that behavioral data in hand, create a schedule based on your energy levels, top priorities, and what matters most.

To determine the latter, ask yourself:

- What are your top priorities in life and at work?
- How can you align high-priority projects with peak energy times and pair lower-priority tasks with low-energy periods?
- Which tasks or activities can you combine to be more efficient?
- Which routine decisions can you automate?
- Are there tasks can you delegate?
- Which activities, mindsets, or relationships can you let go?
- Which personal commitments do you want to protect on your calendar?
- How much buffer time can you build to accommodate the unexpected? When?
- How can you preserve your time off?
- How else can you strengthen your work/life integration?

likely to experience burnout, according to SHRM's Employee Mental Health in 2024 research series.

Redefining Success

HR professionals hold dual responsibilities: managing their own work/life integration and creating workplace environments where others can thrive.

However, success isn't about doing it all — it's about prioritizing what truly matters and aligning work and life to fuel fulfillment in both. [HR](#)

Jennifer Lewi is the founder of Design Your Next Step, an executive coaching, leadership, and career strategy firm based in Arlington, Va.

Strategic Insights *from* SHRM's 30th Employee Benefits Survey

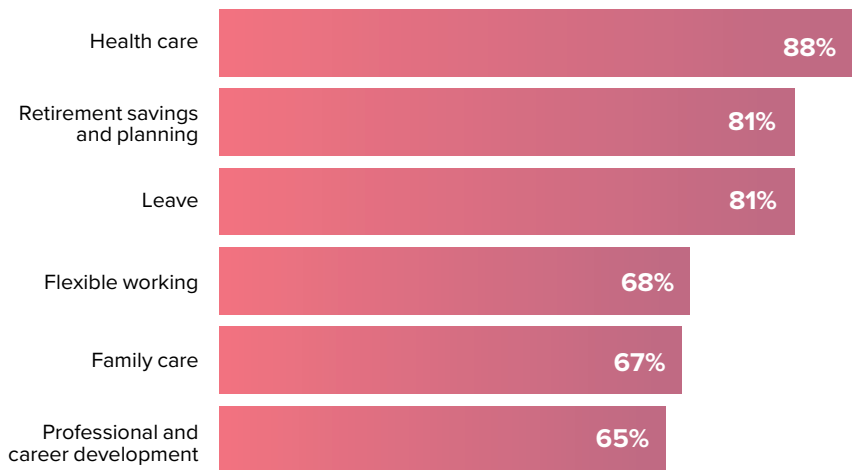
The results are in for SHRM's 30th Employee Benefits Survey, which measures the popularity and prevalence of employer-offered benefits. As organizations navigate economic uncertainty, disruptive tech, and a competitive labor market, benefits have become a strategic lever for attracting and retaining talent.

Benefits decisions reflect a company's values, priorities, and culture — making them a critical piece of the total rewards puzzle. Understanding the latest trends in benefits can provide actionable insights to guide smarter decision-making.

Explore the full report at shrm.org/benefits-hrq.

The Most Important Benefit Is ...

When asked to rate the importance of top benefits categories, employers said the following were "very important" or "extremely important" for their workforce:



Health Insurance Plans by the Numbers

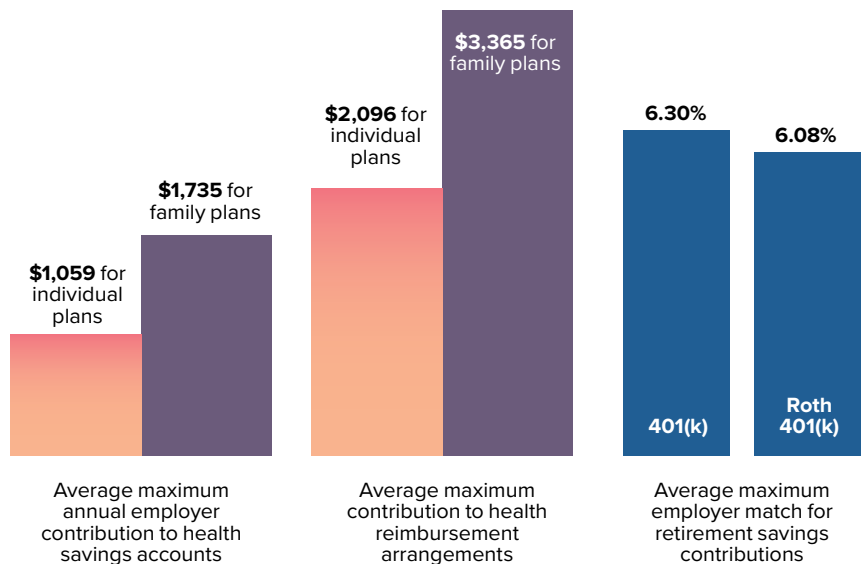
81%

of employers offer a preferred provider organization (PPO) plan.

64%

offer a high-deductible health plan (HDHP) linked with a savings or spending account.

Employer Contributions: What's the Latest?



Trending Down



Medical flexible spending accounts (FSAs): Offered by **60%** of employers in 2025, down from **63%** in 2024.



Dependent care FSAs: Offered by **54%** of employers in 2025, down from **58%** in 2024.



Paid bereavement leave: Offered by **89%** in 2025, down from **91%** in 2024.



Paid leave to care for immediate family: Offered by **31%** in 2025, down from **33%** in 2024.



Paid leave to care for extended family: Offered by **17%** in 2025, down from **19%** in 2024.

● 2025 ● 2024

Trending Up



Critical illness insurance: Offered by **53%** of employers in 2025, up from **51%** in 2024

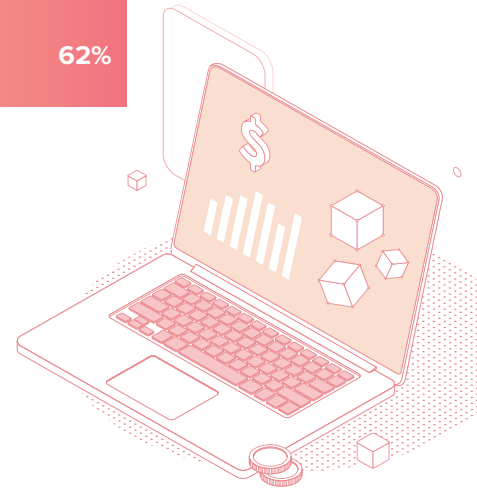
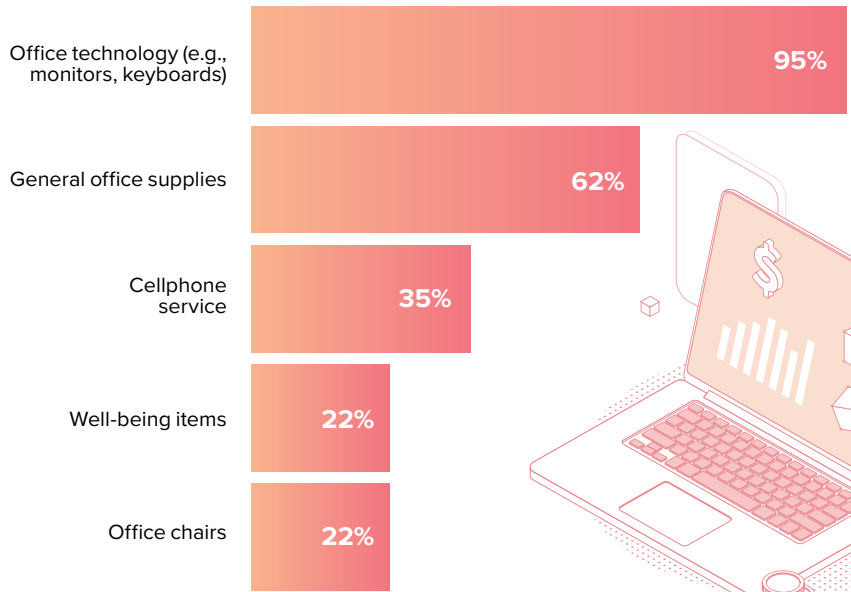


Hospital indemnity insurance: Offered by **40%** of employers, up from **36%** in 2024

● 2025 ● 2024

At-Home Office Equipment

More than half (55%) of employers provide at-home office equipment or subsidize the cost, up to an average maximum of \$888 annually. What are they most likely to cover?

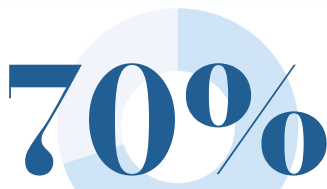


New and Notable in 2025

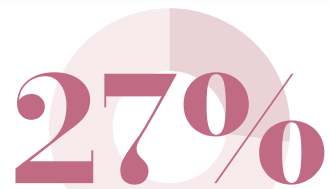
The breakout health care benefit of 2025 is GLP-1 drug coverage for type 2 diabetes and/or weight management, which SHRM asked about for the first time.

23% of employers cover GLP-1 drugs.

Fully Insured vs. Self-insured



of organizations offer a fully insured health plan.



of organizations offer a self-insured health plan.



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Career Advancement & Professional Growth: Accelerate your HR career with access to SHRM certification prep, professional development tools, and curated learning paths — designed to help you grow, lead, and stand out in a competitive field.

“HR is my passion, HR is my field, it’s my career. ... With SHRM I can be the best HR professional I can be for myself and my organization.”

— Harinika Shropshire
Human Resources Director, Louisiana Department of Education



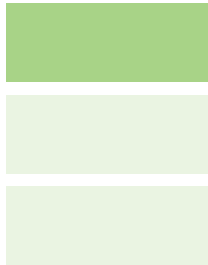
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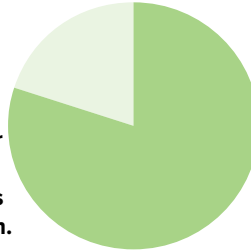


THE CAREGIVING IMPERATIVE: ORGANIZATIONAL SOLUTIONS FOR SUPPORTING CAREGIVERS AND ELEVATING BUSINESS PERFORMANCE

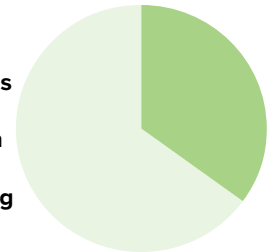
1 in 3 HR professionals said they are unfamiliar with the caregiving needs of their organization.



At least 80% of working caregivers surveyed anticipate their primary care responsibilities to be long-term.



Only 35% of HR professionals say their organization is effective at addressing long-term caregiving needs.



CARE AND CAREERS: NAVIGATING CAREGIVING AND WORK RESPONSIBILITIES

Juggling Multiple Caregiving Responsibilities



Nearly 1 in 4 working caregivers surveyed have dual or multiple caregiving roles, including those who are part of the “sandwich generation” — those caring for both children and elders.

Workers surveyed with multiple caregiving roles are significantly more likely to say it has held them back from **advancing their careers**

(52%),

compared to those with a single type of responsibility

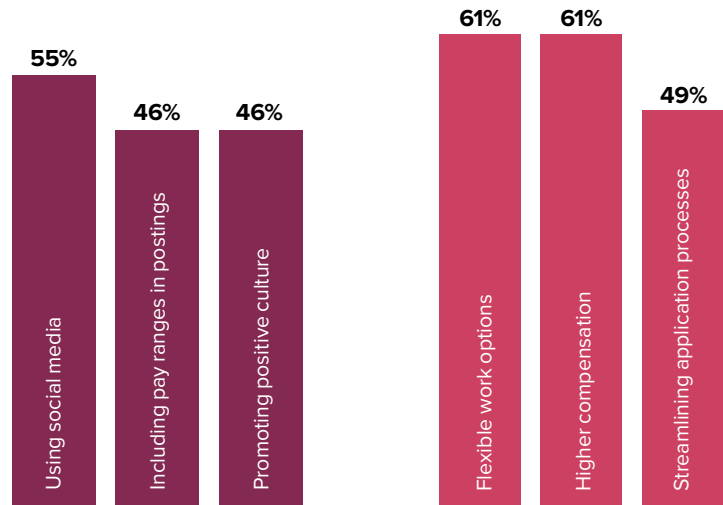
(40%).



Working caregivers surveyed reported unexpectedly **missing 1.2 days of work per month** due to insufficient caregiving support — equivalent to an average of **\$17.5 billion in lost wages every month.**

2025 TALENT TRENDS REPORT

Nearly 7 in 10 organizations reported struggling to fill full-time jobs in the past year. Their top challenges were **not enough applications (51%)**, **competition from other employers (50%)**, and **candidates “ghosting” the organization (41%)**.



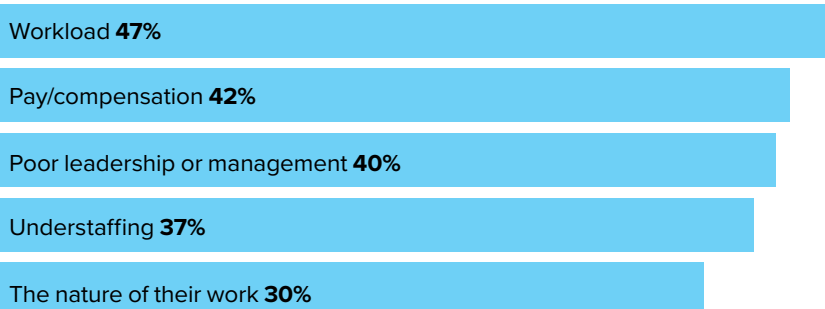
Most common recruiting strategies

Most effective recruiting strategies

SHRM 2025 INSIGHTS: WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

Workload, Pay Drive Workplace Stress

Nearly one-third of U.S. workers (31%) say they feel job stress often/always. Main contributors include:



INSIDE SHRM

ADVOCACY IN ACTION

Advocacy is more than just speaking up — it's about ensuring that the voices of HR leaders like you shape the policies that impact our workplaces and workforce.

As a SHRM member, you are already a key part of this mission, and SHRM is excited to invite you to join the organization's Advocacy Team (A-Team). This means access to advocacy opportunities, resources, and a network dedicated to advancing smart workplace policies.

Policymakers rely on SHRM to inform legislation from its inception and to shape policies that address the needs of employees and employers, and SHRM's A-Team is the core driver of positive workplace policy in action. SHRM is evolving its strategy to strengthen its influence and ensure the voices of HR professionals are heard at every level of government.

Every HR professional has a role to play. Whether you're a seasoned advocate or just getting started, there's a place for

you in SHRM's advocacy efforts. Be on the lookout for HR Advocacy in Action, your dedicated newsletter source for advocacy updates, opportunities, and ways to elevate your voice as an HR leader.

"The time to act is now. Join us in shaping the policies that impact workplaces everywhere!" said Emily M. Dickens, J.D., chief of staff, head of government affairs, and corporate secretary at SHRM.

Top 5 HR Workplace Issues in 2025

1. Regulatory changes.
2. Inclusion, diversity, and compliance.
3. AI-driven workforce displacement.
4. Workforce participation gaps.
5. Employee well-being and benefits.

State Advocates in Action



▲ On April 2, SHRM members from Georgia met with policymakers in Washington, D.C., for the annual Day Inside the Beltway Advocacy Experience to discuss key workplace challenges and policy solutions for modernizing the tax code, workforce development, and responsible AI integration.

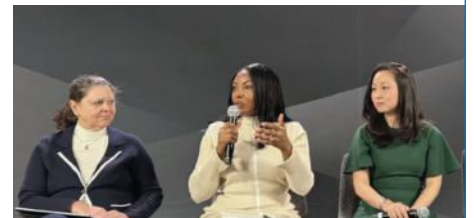
GLOBAL SHRM

SHRM's Presence Felt at the UN

SHRM continues to expand its global policy footprint, facilitating a discussion on March 10 with leadership from Mouvement des Entreprises de France (France's largest employer federation), senior officials from the U.N. secretary-general's office, SHRM members, and global policy leaders during the 68th annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW68) — the United Nations' largest gathering focused on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Additionally, on March 14, Emily M. Dickens, J.D., SHRM chief of staff, head of government affairs, and corporate secretary, participated in the U.N. Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC) event titled "Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value: Unlocking Women's Potential Across the Life Cycle." Dickens emphasized SHRM's commitment to proactive pay equity audits and transparent compensation practices as key drivers of equitable

workplaces. EPIC is produced by the International Labour Organization, U.N. Women, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.





▲ On Feb. 25, SHRM members from New York state met with legislators, key staff, and policymakers in Albany, N.Y., to ensure that HR’s voice plays a central role in AI regulation, noncompete agreements, and expanding access to untapped talent pools.



◀ Members of the West Virginia SHRM state council (WV SHRM) engaged with state senators in Charleston, W. Va., this February, securing Feb. 20 as HR Day by unanimous vote and strengthening HR’s role in policy discussions.



◀ On March 25, Paige Boughan, M.S., SHRM-SCP, legislative director for the Maryland SHRM State Council, testified before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Workforce Protections urging modernization of the Fair Labor Standards Act.

If you would like to play a greater role in SHRM’s advocacy efforts, such as testifying before policymakers on behalf of SHRM or hosting a State Advocacy Day, reach out to SHRM Government Affairs at governmentaffairs@shrm.org.

LEADERSHIP

SHRM Welcomes New Board Members

SHRM welcomed three workplace leaders in February to its 2025 Board of Directors:

- **Marlon Sullivan**, executive vice president and CHRO at Johnson Controls International
- **Maryjo Charbonnier**, CHRO at Kyndryl
- **Piyush Mehta**, CHRO and country manager for India at Genpact

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

◀ **SHRM’s First Robot Event Co-Host Takes the Stage**

Opus Futurum (Latin for “future of work”), SHRM’s first AI partner, made its inaugural public appearance in early April at The AI+HI Project 2025 in San Francisco, an intimate and immersive conference that explores the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and human intelligence (HI) in shaping the future of work in organizations.



WORKPLACE TECH

▶ Workplace Tech Startups Scale with Support from SHRM Labs

This year’s cohort of companies in the SHRM Labs WorkplaceTech Accelerator (WTA) program, chosen from an applicant pool of 570, are on a mission to advance efficient, human-centered workplace tech for today’s workforce.

Now in its fifth year, the WTA provides insights into the HR industry and as well as a curated advisory council to refine each participant’s product and strategy. The three selected companies — TransCrypts, Refresh, and Bites — each offer an innovative solution with the promise of improving functionality in HR while offering a highly engaging user experience for front-line and deskless workers.

- **TransCrypts’** blockchain platform substitutes verification workflows with instant, secure digital confirmations — potentially freeing up hours for HR staff.
- With **Refresh**, fractured HR systems are centralized into a tailored mobile-friendly hub, easing access while enabling HR professionals to personalize and segment tools and messaging.
- **Bites** transforms training content into interactive, AI-powered social-style microlearning, modernizing and optimizing content to be mobile-friendly and engaging.



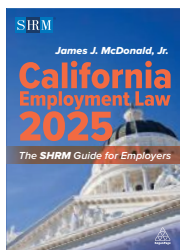
In addition to mentorship and strategic guidance, each participant receives a \$200,000 equity investment from SHRM. *Learn more about SHRM Labs and the 2026 WTA application process, opening in September, at shrm.org/labs.*

SHRM BOOKS

SHRM Books Enters New Chapter with Kogan Page Deal

SHRM Books has entered into a new agreement with independent publisher Kogan Page, strengthening SHRM’s ability to deliver cutting-edge research, thought leadership, and expert-driven resources globally.

Interested in becoming a SHRM author? Find out more at shrm.org/authorpitch.



Now available: California Employment Law 2025: The SHRM Guide for Employers.

Read this excerpt from the book’s

introduction, and then get your copy from the SHRMStore: shrm.org/CA-employment-law-25.

Why California Employment Laws Are So Difficult

All the employment laws that serve the rest of the country just fine, such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act, are not considered adequate for California. Instead, California

has its own versions of these laws — its own Labor Code, its own Fair Employment and Housing Act, and its own bureaucracies to enforce these laws. Sometimes these agencies interpret California law consistently with similar federal laws, sometimes not, and sometimes it is not really clear.

California’s wage and hour laws are among the most difficult to follow. ... That agency has written a lengthy Enforcement Policies and Interpretations Manual that contains some useful hints on what the laws mean, but courts routinely refuse to follow it because it was never subjected to public notice and comment. The same goes for the opinion letters the Labor Commissioner issues occasionally.

The courts’ refusal is sometimes a good thing because the agency’s positions are often not employer-friendly, but it leaves many employers scratching their heads as they try to figure out which interpretation of often-ambiguous laws they should follow.

Another part of the problem is the Private Attorneys General Act (PAGA). Enacted in 2004 because the legislature felt the Labor Commissioner lacked the resources to fully enforce California’s

wage and hour laws, the law deputized disgruntled employees and their lawyers as bounty hunters to extract penalties from unwary employers for violating obscure laws, some dating back to the 1800s. The penalties are supposed to be shared with the state, but no similar split is required for the attorneys’ fees recovered, so PAGA lawsuits have become lucrative ventures for the plaintiffs’ bar and an expensive headache for employers.

Unpredictable court decisions are part of the problem too. Clever lawyering by plaintiffs’ attorneys and sympathetic judges occasionally produce abrupt changes in the way California’s employment laws are interpreted.

... Another part of the problem is that California has a full-time legislature. In states with part-time legislatures, legislators typically run businesses or work in jobs when the legislature is not in session, so they have some passing familiarity with the real world of work. California’s legislators are not burdened with such distractions, so they stay busy churning out new laws. Many of these laws affect the workplace and make managing employees within the law that much more difficult.

SHRM[®] Foundation

HR Tomorrow: Building a Bold Future for HR — One Career at a Time

HR is at a turning point. As workplaces become more complex and people-focused, the demand for skilled, empathetic HR professionals is on the rise.

However, the profession is evolving. A need to embrace new technologies, become experts on emerging topics, and support the full spectrum of U.S. workers in a time of transition has created both opportunities and challenges for HR professionals across the U.S. — particularly those at the beginning of their careers.

The SHRM Foundation in 2024 launched the HR Tomorrow Leadership Program, a yearlong fellowship designed to nurture early-career HR talent and reinvigorate the profession.

Focused on those with two to four years of experience and nontraditional pathways into HR, the program offers education, mentorship, and a peer support network to help participants strengthen their leadership skills and grow their careers. The fellowship covers the cost of professional development, including SHRM conference attendance, certification prep and registration, and learning opportunities, with the goal of removing financial barriers and opening doors to those with strong potential but limited access.

Approximately “70,000 new HR jobs are predicted by 2030 in the U.S.,” said Lana Williams, SHRM Foundation program manager, who created and leads HR Tomorrow. The program “supports where we want our profession to go — toward greater opportunity, growth, diversity, and innovation.”

The inaugural cohort of 10 HR Tomorrow fellows completed the program in May 2025. The experience covered career exploring, leadership development, goal setting, and navigating workplace challenges.

For Riniya Countiss, director of career development at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, the most valuable part of

the experience was the community. “The benefit of being connected to diverse opinions and experiences when I need HR advice from outside my organization is so powerful,” she said. “I now have my HR for HR.”

Beyond peer connections, HR Tomorrow created a space for reflection and building confidence.

“This program, through intentional connection and shared experience, revealed a simple but profound truth: We are more alike than we are different,” said Dalton Johnson, senior HR generalist for the City of Missoula, Mont. “In our cohort, we didn’t simply exchange knowledge — we created a space where honesty could flourish, where self-doubt was met with encouragement, and where problems could be examined from multiple perspectives.”

The fellowship year wasn’t without its challenges. Over the course of the program, two fellows lost their jobs, but they credited HR Tomorrow with helping them navigate uncertainty and regain their footing. Two fellows landed new positions, another was promoted, two earned SHRM specialty credentials, six are studying for the SHRM-CP exam, and two are preparing for the SHRM-SCP exam. All described the experience as transformative — one that encouraged bold thinking, inspired leadership, and instilled a mindset of continuous growth.

The program also helped participants reimagine what leadership in HR can and should look like.

“By providing support and access to resources to those whose merit is clear, but who have faced barriers to entering the profession, we are building a stronger, more inclusive HR community — and a more equitable world of work,” Williams said.

Johnson agreed. “You are not just fostering professional growth; you are building the executives of tomorrow,” he said. “I leave this program not just as a recipient of [a fellowship] but as a participant in

something far greater — a movement toward workplaces that honor, uplift, and empower all who inhabit them.”

As the first cohort closes its chapter, the HR Tomorrow Leadership Program stands as a blueprint for what’s possible when emerging professionals are given access, mentorship, and support. It’s not just about accelerating careers — it’s about shaping a more dynamic and resilient future for the entire HR profession.

To learn about the program’s 2025 fellows and the HR Tomorrow Leadership Program, visit shrm.org/HR-tomorrow-hrq.

FOUNDATION NEWS

Addressing Workplace Mental Health with Hilton and Kiewit

The SHRM Foundation’s ongoing Thriving Together portfolio of work centers on creating conditions where all workers and workplaces can thrive by helping employers address wraparound challenges, support working caregivers, and create cultures of care in the workplace. The Foundation recently partnered with SHRM Thought Leadership, Business Roundtable, and Stand Together to develop and publish case studies focused on mental health support.

New case studies on Hilton and Kiewit — two of four in-depth case studies on employers who are taking solid steps to prioritize workplace mental health — were published in May. These reports are the result of six months of research and interviews and offer a deep, detailed look at what has worked for these companies, from the front line to the corner office.

The Foundation also released two webinars on the connection between civility and mental health, featuring SHRM leaders and SHRM executive in residence for mental health Marjorie Morrison.

Visit the SHRM Foundation’s Workplace Mental Health hub at shrm.org/mental-health-hrq.



Q&A: WHAT EXECUTIVE LEADER DAWN ZIER WANTS HR PROFESSIONALS TO KNOW

BY KELSEY CASSELBURY

Dawn Zier, the former president and CEO of Nutrisystem, built her career on driving business transformation and fostering growth. Now serving on several boards, she offers unique insights into evolving workplace dynamics, from redefining HR's role to navigating the rise of AI and understanding generational shifts in motivation.



How do you define the role of HR in today's business climate?

Gone are the days when HR can be viewed as an administrative function — that can be outsourced. Attracting and retaining talent is one of the top concerns of executive teams today, so they need HR generalists that understand the business strategy and can help drive the talent agenda. HR must partner closely with business leaders to drive a culture where teams are invested, have good managers leading them, and are given opportunities to grow.

What is HR's role in shaping corporate culture?

One of the most important roles of HR generalists is to constantly check the pulse of the teams and ensure the corporate culture is as the CEO intends it to be. The HR team has to walk a fine line and be truth-tellers to leadership about what is going on within the organization and how management is being perceived, while building and maintaining the trust of employees.

How does HR need to address the integration of AI in the workplace?

HR leaders need to champion the culture change that AI will bring, so it is viewed as additive and not as something that “takes

away” from the workforce. They should encourage curiosity and learning and create training forums that teach teams how to embrace AI to increase productivity. In some cases, this will replace things that humans do now, but it can also open the door for more rewarding work as people learn how to utilize AI as virtual assistants and brainstorming partners. Training, development, and retooling will need to be an investment that companies make to retain their best and brightest — and it should be led by HR.

How can HR respond to generational shifts in the workforce?

The war for talent will continue, and there must be recognition that the leaders of today are often motivated by things that the leaders of tomorrow — aka the current workforce — may not be motivated by. HR needs to understand what makes the workforce “tick” and where there are gaps. Organizations evolve as new ways of working collide with old ways, and we see the pendulum once again shifting. By partnering with the executive team and being strategic in coming up with talent acquisition and retention plans that marry performance, compensation, and generational needs, HR can ensure that their organizations have engaged, invested workforces rather than transactional ones. [\[E\]](#)

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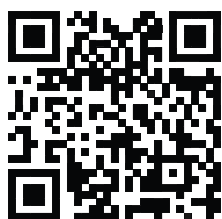
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[1] These are examples of general coverage; please review plan document for specific coverages. Some exclusions may apply. Certain coverages may be excluded due to pre-existing conditions. See policy documents for a complete list of exclusions and annual limits. [2] Guaranteed issuance means any new pets enrolling into a My Pet Protection plan are eligible for enrollment regardless of health status. Guaranteed issuance does not mean guaranteed coverage since certain exclusions could apply.

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