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WINTER 2022

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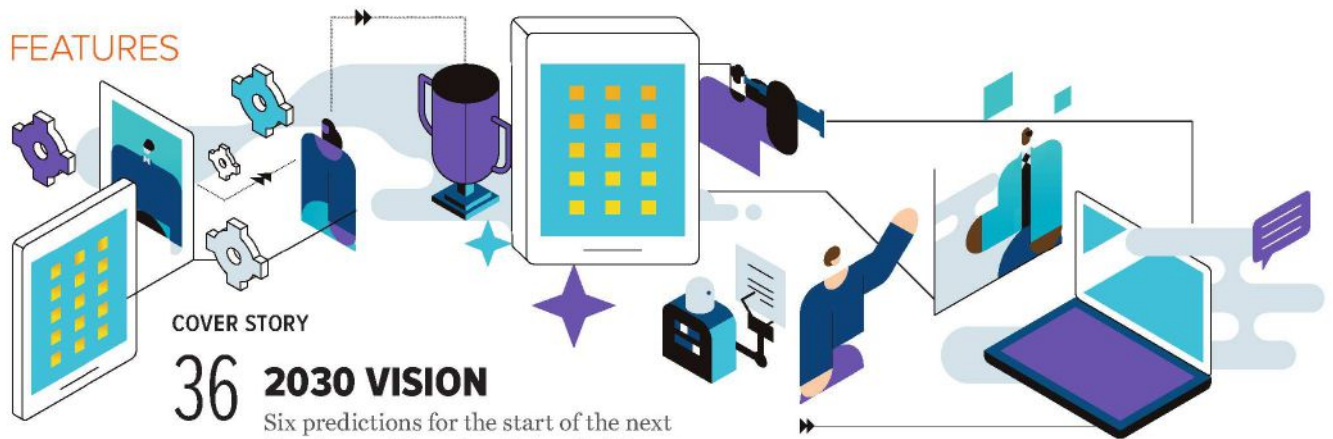


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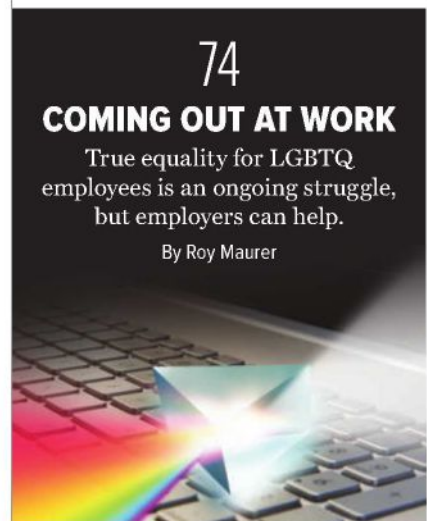


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FROM THE CEO

REDEFINING OUR APPROACH TO MENTAL WELL-BEING

By Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP

As workers reassess their priorities in the wake of the pandemic, mental well-being has climbed up their lists. In fact, more than one-third told the Society for Human Resource Management they would choose mental health benefits over higher pay. Yet fewer than one-third of HR professionals—the “people people”—say offering mental health resources is a high priority for their organizations.

The specter of an economic slowdown looms large over the current business landscape. Employers seek strategies to survive and thrive in the face of economic headwinds. They are looking to workers to be more productive and more efficient.

However, there is a temptation to push employees to work harder—to “grin and bear it.” This runs counter to everything we’ve learned about the importance of mental health and the well-being of workers.

For employees to perform at their best, they must be at their best mentally. Sacrificing mental well-being is just not sustainable. It may produce results in the near term, but it eventually leads to diminishing returns as workers burn out and disengage. Unless we fully address mental, physical and overall well-being, workers won’t have the agility, stability and resiliency to endure economic instability and workplace challenges.

Our businesses aren’t insulated from people’s individual struggles. For years, we believed in the myth of compartmentalization, wherein you come to work and leave your home life behind—as if work and life don’t impact each other. But in reality, life is a part of work and work is a part of life. Whatever we experience in life can, and likely will, impact our work ecosystem in some way.

For people whose lives are unraveled by battles with anxiety, depression or addiction, the line between life and work is blurred at best and sometimes nonexistent. Rather than be blindsided by it, we would do well to get ahead of it—to invest in our workers’ mental well-being. As my friend Arianna Huffington, founder of Thrive Global, told me recently, “When employers prioritize mental health, they are also doing what’s best for business.”

It’s not just our workers who face mental health hurdles. As caregivers, their children’s and even aging parents’ struggles become their struggles. In December 2021, the U.S. surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, issued an advisory highlighting the urgent need to address the nation’s youth mental health crisis. “Mental health challenges in children, adolescents and young adults are real and widespread,” Murthy emphasized.

These children aren’t dealing with mental health issues in a vacuum. Undoubtedly, these mental health challenges impact their families, including their parents, who care for them. Ultimately, those parents carry these burdens into work. Could we blame them for being distracted and disconnected throughout their workday?

Addressing mental health at multiple levels means meeting workers where they are. At a base level, this involves offering the tools and techniques to manage stress. Workers also require access to comprehensive resources—up to and including coverage of diagnosis and treatment—to meet their mental health needs.

The investment in mental health isn’t just the right thing to do for people. It makes good business sense. According to the World Health Organization, every dollar invested in scaling up treatment for depression and anxiety leads to a return of \$4 in better health and ability to work.

As we eschew the negative stigma surrounding mental health, we give workers permission to preserve and protect their mental wellness. Organizations should be committed to developing workplace cultures where mental wellness is prioritized—where workers are empowered to pursue self-care. [HR](#)




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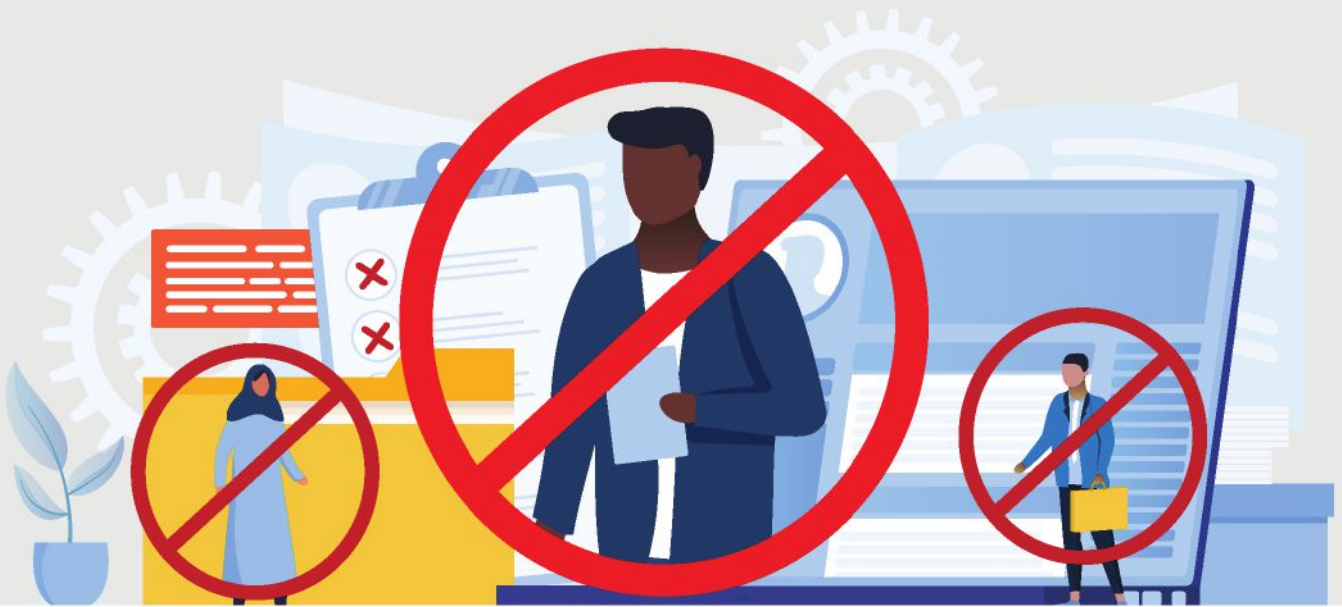
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ALL THINGS WORK



NEW RULE COULD LIMIT USE OF INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS

A U.S. Labor Department proposal is aimed at protecting workers under the FLSA.

By Leah Shepherd



The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has issued a proposed rule that could make it harder for employers to classify workers as independent contractors under the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA).

The DOL wants to rescind a 2021 rule that focused on whether workers are economically dependent on an employer or in business for themselves. That rule gave greater weight to two core factors—control over the work and opportunity for profit or loss—in determining the status of independent contractors.

Under the new proposal, employers would return to using a totality-of-the-circumstances analysis weighing six factors equally, which aligns more closely with recent court decisions, according to the DOL.

“We have seen in many cases that employers misclassify their employees as independent contractors, particularly among our nation’s most vulnerable workers,” U.S. Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh said when announcing the new rule in October. “Misclassification deprives workers of their federal labor protections, including their right to be paid their full, legally earned wages.”

The 2021 rule, which remains in effect, made it easier for employers to classify workers as independent contractors, rather than employees.

Under the FLSA, employees are entitled to minimum wage, overtime pay and other benefits. Independent contractors aren’t entitled to such benefits, but they generally have more flexibility to set their own schedules and work for multiple companies.

The proposed rule directs employers to include exclusivity as a consideration, but it acknowledges that simply having multiple jobs doesn’t weigh in favor of independent contractor status. Under the newly proposed rule, the DOL identifies six factors for employers to consider. They are:

- The opportunity for profit or loss.
- The amount of skill required for the work.
- The degree of permanence of the working relationship.

- The worker's and employer's investments in equipment or materials required for the task.
- The nature and degree of control over their time and work.
- The extent to which the service rendered is an integral part of the employer's business.

"With the proposed rulemaking, the pendulum shifts more toward a pro-employee definition of employment, [but] it does not swing all the way in that direction," says Scott Mirsky, an attorney with Paley Rothman in Bethesda, Md. "This is some good news for companies who use independent contractors, since the DOL agreed that it did not have the authority to adopt an 'ABC test' for use with the FLSA, which would have been devastating to businesses who use the independent contractor model."

States such as California and Illinois use the ABC test, under which a worker is considered an employee unless the employer proves that:

- The worker is free from the control and direction of the hiring entity.
- The worker performs work that is outside the usual course of the hiring entity's business.
- The worker is customarily engaged in an independently established trade, occupation or business.

GIG WORKERS IMPACTED

The proposed rule could have the biggest impact on ride-hailing companies, delivery services and other industries that rely on gig workers.

"For the gig economy, this will mean that employers will have a harder time classifying [workers] as independent contractors," says James Evans, an attorney with Alston & Bird in Los Angeles.

The National Retail Federation opposed the rule change, calling it unwarranted and unnecessary.

"The current rules clearly define the difference between employees and independent contractors, providing much-needed legal certainty for employers, employees and independent contractors alike," said David French, senior vice president of government relations for the National Retail Federation in a statement issued by the organization. "The changes being proposed by the Labor Department will significantly increase costs for businesses across all industries and further drive already-rampant inflation."

The rule isn't expected to go into effect until sometime next year and could face legal challenges.

Leah Shepherd is senior legal editor for SHRM.



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WHAT DRIVES WORKERS CRAZY?

The pet peeves that topped the list in a recent SHRM Research Institute survey of 507 U.S. workers include co-workers who:

74%	Don't wash their hands after using the restroom
64%	Take credit for others' work
61%	Block access to information or someone in authority
47%	Break company rules or policies intentionally
47%	Have poor personal hygiene
46%	Don't clean up their work areas
43%	Come to work sick
38%	Perform personal hygiene tasks at work

TOP-PAYING HR POSITIONS FOCUS ON EMPLOYEE SUPPORT



Employees expect a supportive organizational culture, which is boosting pay for some HR professionals, according to recent research.

Payscale, a compensation data and software firm, found that:

Organizations are investing in training programs and professional development. Training Administrator II tops the list of jobs with the fastest wage growth, with a 21.7 percent increase in pay. Professional Development Manager III and Learning Manager are first and third on the highest-paying jobs list, with median pay of \$308,000 and \$214,000, respectively.

Nontraditional HR positions in areas such as wellness promotion and diversity management have grown in importance. As a result, wages for these positions have also grown in recent years. This shift reflects the breadth of expectations employees now hold for their employers.

Payscale's *Top Jobs and Skills in HR Wage Report* analyzed salary profiles completed between July 2021 and July 2022 by 37,859 HR professionals throughout the U.S. Executive-level professionals were excluded from the survey.

"As we see the market continue to shift in the direction of being more candidate- and employee-driven, we're seeing that reflected in the roles that companies are hiring for and the value placed on positions that either previously did not exist or were considered 'back-end' type roles," says Lexi Clarke, Payscale's vice president of people.

These positions, for instance, may focus on providing professional development and career opportunities for employees, she says. In addition, "we're seeing newer positions rise in prominence, such as Wellness Program Administrator, Diversity Manager, E-Learning Specialist and

Internal Communications Writer, that can help boost employee engagement and retain key talent."

Also worth noting, Clarke says, is that the position of Compensation Manager III ranked in the top five of the highest-paying positions.

"Compensation is a critical aspect of the employee life cycle and intricately connected to talent acquisition and business growth," she says, as these professionals are responsible for developing the organization's compensation strategy, setting pay structures and managing pay equity.

As the Great Resignation continues to hit organizations hard and a slowing economy stokes recession fears, HR roles have proved more critical than ever to a company's success. But these positions are susceptible to turnover, the report noted, forcing employers to pay a premium for certain roles and skills.

—Stephen Miller, CEBS

HIGHEST-PAYING HR JOBS IN THE U.S., 2021-2022

Pay for the positions below is derived from national medians, which means they will be higher for some locations and lower for others. The size of the organization can also impact these numbers, as larger companies tend to have a more stratified hierarchy.



Rank	Job Title	Median Pay
1	Professional Development Manager III	\$308,000
2	Human Resources Business Partner Manager III	\$223,000
3	Learning Manager	\$214,000
4	Compensation Manager III	\$203,000
5	Talent Manager, HR II	\$196,000
6	Organizational Development Manager II	\$175,000
7	Labor Relations Manager II	\$174,000
8	Human Resources Information Systems Manager III	\$170,000
9	Human Resources Manager III	\$161,000
10	Workforce Development Manager II	\$160,000
11	Recruiting Manager III	\$160,000

Source: *Top Jobs and Skills in HR Wage Report*, Payscale, 2022.

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How would you describe yourself as an HR professional?



I'm more of a specialist, passionate about one topic.



I'm more of a generalist, interested in lots of different things.



Compliance is my jam! I love making sure people are safe and protected in a world where rules and regulations are constantly changing.



I love culture! Building teams and selecting the right people for roles is my passion.



I am an equity champion! Ensuring my organization is diverse, equitable and inclusive sets my soul on fire.

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MORE EMPLOYERS MAY END UP ON OSHA'S SEVERE VIOLATOR LIST

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is stepping up efforts against employers that repeatedly put workers at risk.

The federal agency is expanding its criteria for placing employers on its Severe Violator Enforcement Program (SVEP) list, which means more employers could be added to the list and face the negative consequences that entails. The expanded criteria also are expected to affect a wider group of industries.

"The Severe Violator Enforcement Program empowers OSHA to sharpen its focus on employers who—even after receiving citations for exposing workers to hazardous conditions and serious dangers—fail to mitigate these hazards," said Assistant Labor Secretary Doug Parker when releasing the new criteria.

Employers placed on the severe violator list face mandatory follow-up inspections and are listed publicly as severe violators. Top company officers at large employers receive warning letters, and OSHA issues

press releases about the severe violations, says Peter Spanos, an attorney with Taylor English in Atlanta. Follow-up inspections can lead to penalties, depending on the type of violations.

In addition, "the company's OSHA log of workplace-related injuries must be submitted to OSHA on a quarterly basis, instead of being available just during inspections," Spanos says.

Prior to Sept. 15, an employer could be included on the SVEP list if it had willful, repeated or failure-to-abate notices involving:

- A fatal or catastrophic incident.
- Incidents that exposed employees to hazards related to the release of a highly dangerous chemical.
- Incidents that exposed employees to hazards OSHA designated as "high emphasis."

With the new criteria, OSHA has broadened the qualifying hazards to include all safety and health hazards in the workplace—not just "high emphasis" hazards and highly dangerous chemical hazards.

Employers that commit two or more willful or repeated violations or receive two or more failure-to-abate violations are now pulled into the program regardless of the OSHA standard at issue, notes Taylor Johnson, an attorney with Keller & Heckman in Washington, D.C.

"Previously, the SVEP list was dominated by construction and manufacturing companies," says Scott Williams, an attorney with Burr & Forman in Birmingham, Ala. "OSHA's broadening of the nonfatality/catastrophe criterion will broaden the program's scope, and additional industries may fall within its parameters."

Once an employer is on the SVEP list, it can take three years to be removed, according to OSHA.

An employer may reduce time spent in the program to two years if it consents to a settlement agreement that includes the use of a safety and health management system that adheres to OSHA's Recommended Practices for Safety and Health Programs.

—Allen Smith, J.D.

U.S. JOB SEEKERS WANT GREATER PAY TRANSPARENCY

28%

of 2,000 U.S. job seekers surveyed said they are frustrated by the lack of salary clarity (including large salary ranges) in job ads.

33%

said they wouldn't attend a job interview before knowing the salary the employer is willing to offer.

54%

said they declined a job offer after they found out the salary.

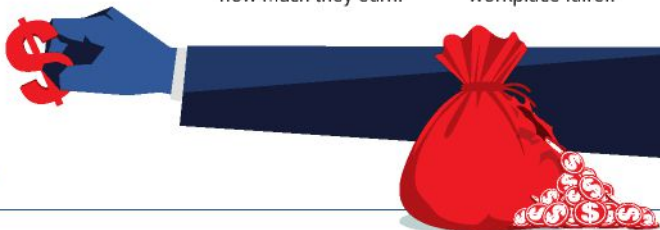
86%

said they are open to allowing their colleagues to know how much they earn.

73%

said they think more salary transparency would make the workplace fairer.

Source: Adzuna, September 2022.



H-2B VISAS TO DOUBLE IN FISCAL YEAR 2023



The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has doubled the number of temporary work visas used in the seasonal hospitality and landscaping industries to help employers deal with ongoing labor shortages over the next year.

DHS will provide an additional 64,716 H-2B temporary worker visas for the federal 2023 fiscal year, which began Oct. 1, on top of the 66,000 H-2B visas already available each fiscal year. The visas will be split evenly between the fall/winter and spring/summer seasons.

The H-2B visa increase includes an allocation of 20,000 visas to workers from El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti and Honduras to expand legal pathways as an alternative to illegal migration.

The remaining 44,716 extra visas will be available to returning workers who received an H-2B visa, or were otherwise granted H-2B status, during one of the last three fiscal years.

“At a time of record job growth, this full-year allocation at the very outset of the fiscal year will ensure that businesses can plan for their peak-season labor needs,” Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said in a written statement in October.

Representatives of the tourism and travel industries have praised the action.

“This visa release is critical to filling the workforce gap faced by seasonal employers, and bravo to DHS for understanding the harm caused by the delays in previous releases,” says Gray Delany, executive director

of the Seasonal Employment Alliance in Washington, D.C. “Employers should get their workers on time from this release.”

Mayorkas also announced the creation of the H-2B Worker Protection Taskforce, which will focus on protecting U.S. and foreign workers, including ensuring that employers first seek out and recruit U.S. workers for the jobs to be filled, and that foreign workers aren’t exploited or abused by employers.

Current regulations require employers seeking H-2B workers to certify that there aren’t enough U.S. workers available for the offered positions and that employing H-2B workers won’t adversely affect the wages and working conditions of U.S. workers.

—Roy Maurer

BOOKSHELF

CHECK OUT THESE NEW SHRM TITLES

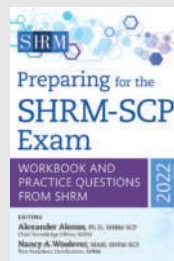


NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY: AN A-Z GUIDE FOR WELL-BEING

By Peggy Lanum

This book is a quick reference for busy people who want to increase their resiliency and well-being. Tapping into her experience as a business consultant and executive coach, Peggy Lanum dives into the fields of neuroscience, psychology and biology, distilling big ideas into accessible “brain hacks.”

Whether your goal is to become a more effective leader, discover the key to finding balance in your personal world or find inspiration on getting “unstuck” in uncertain times, this book empowers curious readers with clever and rigorous resources and fascinating data as a modern guide to daily life. It will help you overcome uncertainty in life and business and instill a sense of possibility and hope.



PREPARING FOR THE SHRM-SCP EXAM: WORKBOOK AND PRACTICE QUESTIONS FROM SHRM

By Alexander Alonso, SHRM-SCP, and Nancy A. Woolever, SHRM-SCP

This popular workbook is designed to help candidates prepare for the SHRM Senior Certified Professional (SHRM-SCP) exam, which assesses the competency and knowledge of experienced HR professionals who are working primarily in strategic roles.

The workbook includes 40 questions from past exams, giving certification candidates exposure to the types of items they will encounter on the actual exam as well as providing feedback on their responses. It also offers guidance about each question’s difficulty level.

The workbook is co-authored by Alexander Alonso, SHRM-SCP, SHRM’s chief knowledge officer, and Nancy A. Woolever, SHRM-SCP, SHRM’s vice president of certification operations.



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ASK AN EXPERT

DEALING WITH LOSS

What should we do when an employee dies?



When HR professionals learn of an employee's death, they should inform company executives and reach out to the employee's emergency contact for confirmation.

Find out how much information the family wants the employer to share about their loved one's passing. Some family members might not want to release the cause of death but may be comfortable with the employer letting staff know that the employee died "after a long illness," for example.

Before sending a companywide e-mail, ask the deceased employee's manager or department head to first inform those who worked closely with the deceased about the situation. Ideally, this would be done in person or by phone.

Provide time and space for employees to process the loss. Understand that colleagues will react differently. Some co-workers might need time off, for example, while others may want to talk out their feelings. Employers often invite a grief counselor in to help employees explore their emotions. Individual counseling sessions may be available via an employee assistance program.

Other possible employer actions include matching workers' contributions to a charity in honor of the deceased employee, planting a tree, giving time off to attend the employee's funeral or having a virtual memorial so remote employees can participate.


In addition, HR must administer the final paycheck and benefits for the deceased employee. Typically, an uncashed paycheck issued prior to the employee's death should be canceled, and a new check should be issued for the same amount in the name of the employee's estate or beneficiary. Final wages paid in the year of an employee's death aren't subject to federal income tax withholding (FITW), but they are subject to taxes under the Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA) and the Federal Unemployment Tax Act (FUTA). However, wages paid in the year after an employee's death are not subject to FITW, FICA or FUTA taxes.

Follow state law to

determine how to treat the deceased employee's unused vacation days, paid time off or other accrued leave. The estate or beneficiary should be issued a Form 1099-MISC with "other income" listed in Box 3 for the gross amount paid for unused leave.

Employers should also meet with the employee's beneficiaries to explain what benefits they are eligible to receive and the process for administering claims.

Terminate the employee's health insurance as of the date of death, and inform any dependents enrolled in the employer's health plan that they can continue coverage under COBRA. Also, notify them of any remaining flexible spending account funds that are available to them.

Finally, follow standard termination procedures to collect company equipment and end network access. 



John Dooney, SHRM-SCP, is an HR Knowledge Advisor for SHRM.



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MIND THE GAP

How to conduct a skills gap analysis.

By Michael A. Tucker

One of the most critical functions that solo HR practitioners can perform for their employer is to determine what skills their workers have and what skills they will need in the future.

Conducting a skills gap analysis can help ensure the organization is ready for whatever changes and challenges lie ahead.

“It’s the process an HR person uses to identify specific skills required to perform a certain task or role within an organization and then compare those skills against the actual skills employees have,” says Jennifer Dole, director and principal analyst for 3Sixty Insights, a consultancy based in Boston.

By comparing existing skills to those the company needs to remain competitive in the future, HR professionals can identify the gaps and

work to close them, explains Anna Langford, SHRM-SCP, president of Langford Top Ten Consulting in Louisville, Ky.

“We live in a world of dynamic economic, environmental and geopolitical conditions, and they’re altering traditional business models and practices,” Langford says. “New capabilities are required to adapt to new dynamics and compete in the marketplace.”

The analysis will prompt essential management questions, expose latent staffing problems, and map out a path to increased efficiency and productivity. In today’s ever-changing workplace, it should top your must-do list.

There’s no perfect time to perform a gap analysis because every business is different. But many HR professionals recommend a yearly evaluation, or when new positions

are created or new people come on board. For the analysis to be effective, they suggest that new hires be given about six months to acclimate to their roles and that HR take time to fully understand the mission and idiosyncrasies of the organization.

Launching a gap analysis can be a nail-biting affair: HR folks are already busy with day-to-day tasks, managers are worried about productivity, and employees may approach the exercise with suspicion.

Having a thorough understanding of the organization’s goals and providing extensive communication to all stakeholders will help minimize these challenges.

A gap analysis “should not be the first time that expectations and feedback are given to an employee. It should be in addition to regular conversation, regular feedback,” says Rebecca Edwards, SHRM-SCP, CEO and principal consultant of Infinite HR of Charlotte in North Carolina. “You want to be upfront and establish that this is a way to identify their development plan.”

DIVE IN

Conducting a skills gap analysis can be broken down into these key steps:

Consult with senior leaders and managers. What are the business goals? What are the trends in the industry? What skills will workers need to keep up with those trends?

Examine current staff functions and skills. Review HR records that contain accident and safety reports, exit interview notes, and performance evaluations. Conduct individual interviews with staff and managers, as this may reveal a need for new training.

Gather feedback from employees through surveys, questionnaires and self-assessments, and study manager reports of their direct observations of employees and employee written work samples, if available. →



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‘People are afraid that the skills gap analysis will reveal weaknesses, as opposed to building strengths and fixing weaknesses.’

ANNA LANGFORD, SHRM-SCP

“You want to make sure you have the right people in the role,” says Ann Wang, SHRM-SCP, director of human resources for the Solar Energy Industries Association in Washington, D.C. Monitoring that “will help you know if your organization and the roles are moving in the right direction, and if any tweaks need to be made.”

Wang values the information gained from individual interviews with employees.

“It gives me a different perspective and adds the human factor,” she says.

Reviewing employee surveys and supervisors’ direct observations of employees doing their work can also shed light on the situation.

“It gives insight into what goes on day-to-day and in the moment,” Wang says.

Decide how to close the gaps.

Companies often can address skills gaps by encouraging employees to pursue continuing education and certifications and by promoting cross-training within the enterprise.

However, in some specialized areas, HR professionals may need to recruit talent from outside the organization.

Implement the plan. Keeping your budget in mind, determine what training resources will be employed to close the gaps. Plan to provide time off for employees while they’re learning new skills.

Measure and report the results. Give staff opportunities to use their newly acquired skills.

“That’s what I love to see at the end—a stronger employee,” Edwards says. In addition to fortifying the company, she adds, “you have someone who feels good about their com-

pany investing in their professional development. It’s a win-win.”

Repeat. Completing a skills gap analysis, HR consultants say, should become a part of the culture, whatever the timing or methods. Continue to update your organizational skills inventory.

“You cannot be satisfied with ‘one and done,’” Langford says.

“You need to make sure you have an ongoing strategy to maintain this process.”

TECHNOLOGY HELPS

A skills gap analysis can take up to a year to complete, depending on how extensive it is, so consider what tools can help make the process easier.

“You need to gather lots of information to make an accurate assessment,” Dole says, “but you don’t have to reinvent the wheel to do an effective analysis.”

That’s because HR professionals can leverage technology to help design and carry out part or all of the assessment. It can be costly and you need to be wary of inflated claims, but the payoffs are considerable.

“The [HR] platforms are providing employees the opportunity to inventory the skills they have [and to] see the skills gaps and the development opportunities—whether it’s taking a course, finding a mentor or taking on a short-term project,” Dole says. “And these technologies are showing possible career paths. So [technology] is very much empowering the employee who wants to build skills.”

As always, figure out your goals, timeline and budget before you shop for high-tech solutions, which can

pair nicely with old-school methods such as record analysis, surveys and interviews.

COMMON MISSTEPS

One of the obstacles that HR professionals often face when beginning a skills gap analysis is their own procrastination. “Some organizations should have started years ago, but they haven’t,” Edwards says.


HR practitioners also can run into trouble if they aren’t willing to look beneath the surface, Wang says.

People who hold the same titles in organizations don’t always perform the same functions, for example. To discern if there are differences, question employees and their supervisors to gather details on what skills are needed to complete their duties. It’s also a good idea to conduct outside research on similar positions.

Finally, don’t ignore employees’ fears that their jobs are on the line. Communicate what you’re doing and why. Let them know how it will help them and the company.

“People are afraid that the skills gap analysis will reveal weaknesses, as opposed to building strengths and fixing weaknesses,” Langford says.

She adds that conducting this type of assessment can be a boon professionally. “I learned next-generation practices, future trends, technologies. It was an amazing learning experience and really helped me understand

our future as an organization,” Langford says. “That always makes you that much more valuable.” 



Michael A. Tucker is a freelance writer based in Alexandria, Va.

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LEGAL TRENDS

HOW TO AVOID A WORKPLACE RETALIATION CLAIM

Tips for avoiding retaliation claims, the most common type of claim filed with the EEOC.

By Lisa Nagele-Piazza, SHRM-SCP

Human resource professionals know complying with workplace anti-discrimination laws is important. Equally important is ensuring that employees who complain about perceived discrimination are not retaliated against for doing so, even if the underlying claim is never proved.

Why is this so important? Retaliation is the most common type of claim filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

“Oftentimes, an employee will be discriminated against first because of a protected characteristic,” says EEOC Commissioner Keith Sonderling. “Then, once they have exercised their right to complain of discrimination or participate in the EEO process, retaliation claims can occur.”

According to the agency’s data, more than half of all charges filed in fiscal year 2021 included a retaliation claim—making it essential for employers to have sound practices in place to prevent retaliation and document the reasons for disciplining and firing employees.

“Employers should seek to be as consistent as possible in applying their employment policies,” says Stephen Gee, an attorney with Fisher Phillips in Detroit. “If an employer has to deviate from a past practice, it should consult with legal counsel to ensure the deviation is justified.”

What are some best practices to avoid retaliation claims? Here are four tips for employers.

RECOGNIZE WHAT QUALIFIES AS PROTECTED ACTIVITY

The EEOC—as well as other federal, state and local agencies—enforces laws that protect employees and applicants from discrimination based on a variety of characteristics, including age, disability, national origin, race, religion and sex. These laws also make it unlawful for em-

ployers to retaliate against workers for bringing such claims.

“Participating in a complaint process is protected from retaliation under all circumstances,” according to the EEOC. Notably, the complaint doesn’t have to be formal to be protected. “Other acts to oppose discrimination are protected as long as the employee was acting on





‘Employers should seek to be as consistent as possible in applying their employment policies.’

STEPHEN GEE

a reasonable belief that something in the workplace may violate EEO laws, even if he or she did not use legal terminology to describe it,” the agency says.

An employee’s protected activity can take many forms. Examples include:

- Filing an EEO charge, complaint or lawsuit.
- Serving as a witness or answering questions during an EEO investigation.
- Reporting employment-related discrimination or harassment to a supervisor.
- Declining to follow directives that would result in discrimination.
- Refusing sexual advances or intervening to protect others from sexual harassment.
- Requesting an accommodation for a disability or religious practice.
- Asking managers or co-workers about salary information to uncover potentially discriminatory wages.

“Employers may mistakenly believe that only full-time, current employees have protections against retaliation,” Sonderling notes. However, these protections apply to job applicants; current full-time, part-time, probationary, seasonal or temporary employees; and former employees covered by EEO laws, regardless of citizenship or work authorization.

Additionally, employees are protected from retaliation when they complain about perceived discrimination against co-workers.

TRAIN SUPERVISORS ON COMMON PITFALLS

Why are retaliation claims so common? “There are a multitude of reasons,” Gee says.

Perhaps a manager has been inconsistent in applying and enforcing the company’s employment policies. Or maybe a supervisor took an employee’s discrimination allegation personally and identified the employee for a subsequent layoff.

“For several reasons, retaliation can be a knee-jerk reaction,” Sonderling explains. No one wants to be accused of wrongdoing. So when an applicant or employee engages in protected activity, such as filing an EEO complaint, it’s natural to take it personally, he says.

Also, an untrained supervisor may see employees who complain as causing problems for the organization and may attempt to deter employees from continuing to participate in the complaint process—or even decide to fire them to remove the “problem” entirely.

“Unfortunately, employers may not realize or remember in the moment

that these actions may be unlawful and constitute retaliation under EEO laws,” Sonderling notes.

Retaliation claims are also so prevalent because retaliatory conduct “encompasses a broad range of actions,” he says. Maybe supervisors simply don’t understand what conduct is retaliatory.

Supervisors should recognize that they cannot punish an applicant or employee for participating in the EEO process. This includes participating in an employer’s internal EEO complaint process.

Supervisors and managers may also make the mistake of thinking that only firing an employee counts as retaliation. Sonderling cautions, however, that retaliatory conduct includes much more. For example, retaliation may include the following actions:

- Work-related threats, warnings or reprimands.

DISCIPLINING FOR LEGITIMATE REASONS

Although employers are prohibited from retaliating against workers for engaging in protected activity, employees can still be disciplined or fired for legitimate reasons. Before taking adverse action, employers should ensure the decision is:

- Not based on the worker’s age, disability, national origin, race, religion, sex or other protected category.
- Not based on the worker’s decision to oppose or report discrimination, or to participate in an investigation or lawsuit.
- Consistent with the company’s disciplinary policy or justified when deviating from the policy.

Employers should consider documenting employment decisions to help defend against possible discrimination charges. —L.N.-P.

- Lowered ratings on performance evaluations.
- Transfers to less prestigious or less desirable positions or worksites.
- Closer scrutiny of the employee's work than of other employees' without a legitimate reason.

ESTABLISH A PROCESS FOR HANDLING COMPLAINTS

Employers should consider assigning a designated management official, in-house counsel or an HR staff member to review proposed employment actions and ensure they are based on legitimate nondiscriminatory and nonretaliatory reasons, Sonderling recommends.

Additionally, management and human resource professionals should be trained on how to properly and proactively respond when employees raise concerns about potential EEO violations, such as

asking clarifying questions and seeking additional information to ensure they fully understand the employee's concern.

"Training can also help ensure that discipline and performance evaluations are motivated by legitimate, nonretaliatory reasons," Sonderling says.

CREATE AND FOLLOW CONSISTENT PRACTICES

Consistency is key. Failing to apply policies evenly can lead to perceptions that certain workers are being singled out for filing a complaint or participating in a workplace investigation, Gee explains.

"Employers should ensure they have a strongly written anti-retaliation policy that is communicated to all staff," he recom-

mends. Employers should also clearly inform employees that retaliation is prohibited and that they should report any perceived retaliatory behavior immediately. All complaints should be promptly and thoroughly investigated, he adds.

Sonderling says policies should be written in plain language and should include the following:

- Examples of retaliatory actions.
- Proactive steps to avoid actual or perceived retaliation.
- A reporting mechanism for raising concerns about retaliation.
- A clear explanation that employees may be disciplined or fired for engaging in retaliatory behavior. **HR**



Lisa Nagele-Piazza, SHRM-SCP, is legal content counsel for Fisher Phillips in Atlanta.

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TECH TALK

MISSING THE MARK

Rolling out a new platform on time and on budget is great—but it doesn't mean much if employees don't use it.

By Dave Zielinski

Many organizations deem implementation of a new HR technology platform a success if the project comes in near budget and follows the projected timeline with few technical or integration headaches along the way.

Yet those two common measures of success—cost and time—overlook a major factor that increasingly determines the fate of any new HR platform: whether employees actually use it once it has been installed.

A study by HR advisory and research firm Josh Bersin Co. found that a whopping 42 percent of respondents rated their HR technology implementations as having failed or not been fully successful two

years after installation. For the purposes of the study, which took into account survey responses from 700 global HR professionals and qualitative interviews with more than 20 company leaders, failure was defined as most employees refusing to use the new HR platform or seeing little benefit in its features or functions.

HR technology experts say adoption is an often-overlooked but critical measure of a new technology's return on investment. "If the new system isn't being used at a high level by employees, it's very hard to describe it as a successful technology launch," says Joe Atkinson, vice chair and chief product and technology officer for PwC.

Stacey Harris, chief strategy officer and managing partner for research and advisory firm Sapient Insights Group in Atlanta, says many organizations don't focus enough on driving adoption once new HR platforms are implemented. "What we've found in our research is that most companies are more likely to manage the project budget than they are to manage adoption of new technology implementations," she says.

Sapient's 2022-2023 HR Systems Survey found that only 25 percent of organizations even track adoption rates for new HR technologies. "When you're not even tracking adoption, it's difficult to know if a





‘Those who get high adoption don’t simply implement a new HR technology platform and think they’ve crossed the finish line.’

KATHI ENDERES

system implementation has been successful or not,” Harris says.

One reason why adoption of new HR technologies lags, Atkinson maintains, is because many organizations think the heavy lifting is over once they reach the go-live stage of system implementations.

“Too many companies just assume adoption is going to happen,” he says. “But any successful implementation requires thinking care-

fully about the change management communication and preparation of the organization to accept and adopt a new technology. While that may be a well-understood problem, it’s not a problem that’s typically well-executed upon.”

STAY THE COURSE

Kathi Enderes, senior vice president of research with the Josh Bersin Co., which is based in Oakland, Calif.,

says HR technology implementations shouldn’t be thought of as one-time “projects” but rather as continuous technology transformations. While the initial implementation is a step in the right direction, Enderes says, it’s only a beginning because the technology needs of workers usually change over time.

“Those who get high adoption don’t simply implement a new HR technology platform and think

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they've crossed the finish line," she explains. "They constantly work at listening to their end users, seeing how they're using a new system and collecting feedback on the user experience. They're on a constant

journey to ensure the technology works well not just for HR staff but for employees and managers who use systems for things like self-service, as well."

Atkinson says organizations

have two choices when it comes to boosting adoption: They can blame employees for not embracing new platforms or apps they've just spent large sums to purchase and install, or they can take more responsibility for ensuring workers have a great user experience with the technologies.

"Blaming employees has been the playbook for many companies for years," Atkinson says. "But rather than simply mandating [that workers] use new systems, companies should be evaluating whether the new platforms they select and install are making employees' work lives easier or their tasks more efficient. Workers now look at corporate technology the same way they do consumer technology. They simply won't use tools that aren't intuitive or don't have a great user experience."

HOW DESIGN THINKING CAN BOOST TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION

Experts say a key factor in improving how the workforce receives newly introduced HR technology is incorporating the voice of those who will actually be using the new systems into the selection and configuration of those platforms. That practice, known as design thinking, involves choosing or building technology solutions with employees' needs and preferences top of mind.

"Companies that get high adoption start with involving employees and line managers in the selection and design of these systems upfront," says Kathi Enderes, senior vice president of research for the Josh Bersin Co., an Oakland, Calif.-based HR advisory and research firm. "They don't just try to sell new technologies to employees after they've chosen and implemented them. You've already missed the boat if you do that."

Enderes cites McDonald's as an example of an organization that builds the voice of employees into HR technology decisions. For example, by surveying workers and developing different user personas, McDonald's realized in the process of replacing an aging legacy platform that the recruiting, payroll and self-service needs of corporate employees and managers were far different from those of front-line retail managers and workers, Enderes notes.

"McDonald's included input from focus groups of franchise owners and front-line managers in their system selection, design and rollout," she says. "Because those groups felt their voices were heard and incorporated, it improved their desire to begin using new HR technologies once implemented."

A study by research and advisory firm Gartner also highlights the importance of engaging in design thinking to boost technology adoption. Experts say that process should include creating personas of different end-user segments to better understand their unique technology needs, challenges and preferences.

"It's important to integrate end users' preferences, fears and expectations into HR technology decisions to align with how a tool fits into their critical or daily workflow design," the authors of the Gartner study wrote. —D.Z.

WHICH STRATEGIES WORK BEST?

Organizations typically rely on time-honored strategies to get employees to begin using newly implemented technologies. Having top leaders and line managers stress the importance of using new systems, delivering team trainings that help employees master the nuts and bolts of new tools, and creating "ambassadors" in the ranks who can spread the word about the value of apps or platforms are all common approaches.

But some experts say achieving the kind of adoption that justifies large investments in new technology platforms often requires embracing more-creative strategies.

A 2022 survey by PwC on HR technology practices, for example, found that two nontraditional tactics proved effective but underutilized in boosting adoption of new HR systems: use of incentives and use of gamification techniques. The idea is that if workers can be convinced through these tactics to engage with new technologies in



‘Workers now look at corporate technology the same way they do consumer technology. They simply won’t use tools that aren’t intuitive or don’t have a great user experience.’

JOE ATKINSON

the short term, they’ll have enough positive experiences to stick with the systems for the long haul.

Eighty-five percent of the survey respondents said they believe offering incentives—such as spot bonuses, extra time off or professional development opportunities—is an effective way to encourage employees to start using new systems, but only 44 percent reported actually using this strategy.

Similarly, 82 percent said they believe gamification is a good way to boost adoption, yet only 25 percent reported using the method.

The survey included responses from 688 HR leaders in the U.S.

“Leadership communication, change management and user training are all table stakes for adoption of any new technology,” Atkinson says. “But if you want to get a higher level of adoption—in the 80 percent to 85

percent range within six months to a year of implementation—you may need to consider more-creative adoption techniques.”

PwC itself has used gamification strategies to successfully encourage employee use of new technology platforms. When the company introduced a new customer relationship management system, for example, it created a game called Client IQ to help boost usage. Salespeople

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‘People want to know why they should start using a new platform or application, or how it will improve their daily work lives.’

RANIA STEWART

playing the game enter client information, summaries of conversations with prospects, or other sales-related data into the platform and receive a Client IQ score based on their performance.

“There’s a leaderboard that tracks who has the highest Client IQ scores based on the quality of information employees enter into the new platform,” Atkinson says. “It gives our people a way to measure their engagement personally as well as creates some competition between peer groups. Everything driving scores are activities and actions we want employees to perform using the new technology. It had a very positive impact on platform adoption.”

MAKE IT EASY

Atkinson says the PwC survey also found that providing mobile access to HR apps was key to adoption—especially in light of many organizations moving to remote and hybrid work arrangements in recent years—but that achieving higher rates of mobile usage requires more than mere access.

“Providing access and creating a great mobile experience are two very different things,” Atkinson says. “It’s not unusual for employees to connect to an enterprise app through their mobile device and have a lousy experience. The formats aren’t right, the visuals are off, and the workflow isn’t intuitive. Too often, organizations focus only on creating access to apps but development teams don’t focus on optimizing the mobile experience, as well.”

A 2022 study by research and advisory firm Gartner found that the

three most effective strategies for improving adoption of new HR technologies were ensuring that systems are easy to use, that new platforms or apps help employees get their work done more quickly and more accurately, and that new tools are well-integrated with technology and equipment that employees already use on the job.

Two factors that had lower impacts on adoption rates, the study found, were access to assistance from peers and access to a network of individuals who were using the same HR technology. It appears that employees are more likely to base their usage patterns on their own experiences with new systems rather than on the experiences of peers or influencers such as power users.

THE IMPACT OF PROXIMITY

The Gartner study found that the proximity of new platforms—the ability to easily access HR apps or systems within the flow of daily work without having to repeatedly log off and on to systems—has a significant impact on adoption rates.

“As hybrid and remote work becomes more prevalent, the importance of how HR platforms and tools integrate with employees’ daily workflows increases, too,” the authors of the study wrote.

Zachary Chertok, research manager of employee experience for IDC, a research and advisory firm in Boston, says that when new technologies are integrated into an organization’s broader operational framework, rather than siloed within given

departments, the odds of adoption increase significantly.

“If you deploy a new system that solves a problem for one corner of the organization without evaluating how it fits into the broader tech stack, you can limit adoption,” Chertok says. “There is research showing that some employees engage with as many as 20 different organizational technologies in a single day. But without single sign-on to those various platforms or delivering new applications within the flow of employees’ daily work, the technology experience will be far from optimal and adoption will be impacted.”

Rania Stewart, senior director analyst in Gartner’s HR practice, agrees that proximity is important. “Our research shows a greater willingness by employees to try applications or tools that are close to where they perform their work every day,” she says.

Stewart adds that companies seeking to encourage greater adoption of new HR technologies will need to have an answer for employees who ask, “What’s in it for me?”

“People want to know why they should start using a new platform or application, or how it will improve their daily work lives,” she says. “You also need to look at whether adoption motivators are more organization-centric or employee-centric. Will the new tool make employees’ jobs easier

or more efficient, or will it simply benefit the company from a cost savings or another perspective?” **HR**

Dave Zielinski is a freelance business journalist in Minneapolis.



Q&A

LIVE AN EARNED LIFE

Marshall Goldsmith, a leading executive educator and coach, says you should not assess your value based on outcomes.

Marshall Goldsmith believes his mission in life is simple: to help successful people achieve positive, lasting change in their behavior—not just for themselves, but for their teams and organizations, too.

As a leading executive educator and coach, Goldsmith has spent the past four decades helping CEOs, professional athletes and other high achievers gain a better understanding of how and why their beliefs trigger negative behaviors—and how overcoming those limiting beliefs can yield even greater success.

Traveling the world, Goldsmith engages high fliers through both large-group presentations as well as one-on-one coaching sessions, serving as a sounding board and wise counsel and asking the questions that help his clients focus on changes that make them more effective leaders and better people.

Goldsmith holds a doctorate from the UCLA Anderson School of Management and has taught management practice at Dartmouth College's Tuck School of Business. He has also authored or edited 51 books that have collectively sold more than 3 million copies worldwide.

His latest book, *The Earned Life: Lose Regret, Choose Fulfillment* (Penguin Random House, 2022), provides practical advice and exercises to help readers understand how to lead lives unbound by regret and move beyond short-term careerism to find true fulfillment in their careers.

What is the “earned life”?

We live an earned life when the choices, risks and effort we make in each moment align with an overarching purpose in our lives, regardless of the eventual outcome.

This definition is very non-Western in that it is not heavily focused on outcomes. My definition is more aligned with the *Bhagavad Gita*, the ancient Hindu text that includes insights on the ethical and moral struggles making up human life, and which stresses [to] never assess your value as a human being based upon outcomes, because one never has complete control over outcomes and [because] achievement of outcomes only brings limited, short-term satisfaction.

The great Western disease is “I will be happy when ...” The reality is that only one book always ends with “and they lived happily ever after”—a fairy tale. Happiness and peace can only come from the inside, not the outside.

What is your coaching approach?

I practice stakeholder-centered coaching, which involves a very clear discipline of using confidential feedback and follow-up.

Can you provide an example of one of your coaching successes in the business world?

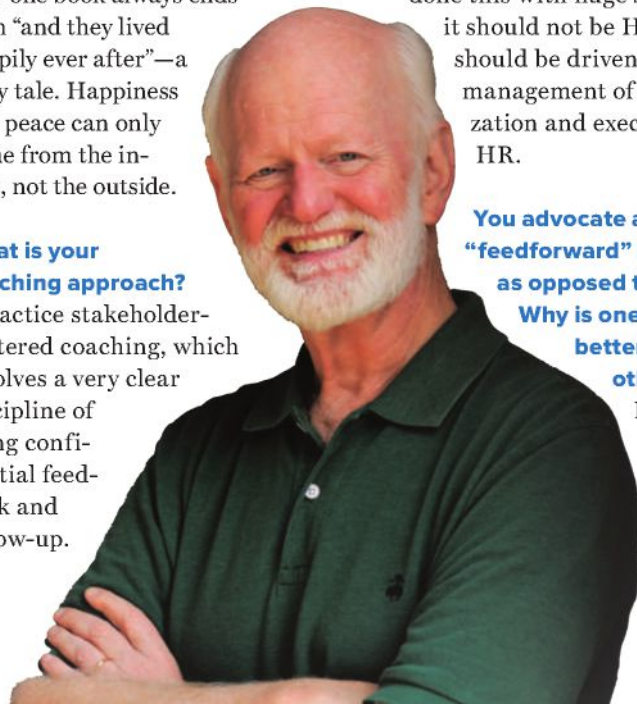
One of my wonderful clients was Hubert Joly, the incredibly successful CEO who led the turnaround of Best Buy. Hubert received confidential feedback from his key stakeholders, selected his most important areas for improvement, followed up with them on a regular basis and kept getting better. Perhaps even more important, he led by example and publicly asked stakeholders across the company to help him become a more effective leader. He then encouraged every associate in the company to do the same thing.

Can—and should—improving interpersonal skills and empathy be an HR-driven, organization-wide program?

Improving interpersonal skills for leaders can definitely be an organizationwide program. We have many examples of organizations that have done this with huge success. But it should not be HR-driven. It should be driven by the line management of the organization and executed through HR.

You advocate a “feedforward” approach, as opposed to feedback. Why is one so much better than the other?

I love feedforward. When leaders ask for face-to-



‘The great Western disease is “I will be happy when ...” The reality is that only one book always ends with “and they lived happily ever after”—a fairy tale.’

face feedback, their stakeholders are often too intimidated to tell the truth. But when stakeholders are asked to provide feedforward—ideas for the future—their psychological reaction is invariably more positive. I have practiced feedforward in courses involving hundreds of thousands of participants from many countries around the world. Participants almost always find it to be positive, useful, helpful and even fun.

Why do so many people, including high achievers, often have trouble asking for help, and can organizations put policies in place to address that?

We have been conditioned by society to communicate, “I have willpower. I don’t need help. I can do it on my own.” This is nonsense. How many of the top 10 tennis players have coaches? Ten. They ask for help not because they’re losers, but because they’re winners. My clients

not only ask for help, they publicly ask for help. They are not ashamed to ask for help.

The Earned Life suggests that executives become specialists, mastering a specific expertise within their field. Should HR executives move beyond being generalists?

This strictly depends on the individual’s career goals. Being an HR generalist is still a very specialized occupation. If your goal is to maximize impact within an organization, being an HR generalist is a great path. If your goal is to have impact across organizations, developing an expertise or specialty within your field will give you a much higher probability of success. [HR](#)

Interview by David Ward, a freelance writer based in North Carolina.

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ARE SHORTER WORKWEEKS GOOD FOR BUSINESS?

It's time to adopt better and more-efficient ways to work.

By Jack Kelly

It may seem counterintuitive, but abbreviated workweeks are good for employees, customers and the bottom line. The traditional schedule of working 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., five days a week, isn't necessarily the best model. It's time to adopt broader workplace innovations—including shorter workweeks.

The pandemic made people realize there are better and more-efficient ways to work. Companies looking to capitalize on this revelation are providing employees with four-day workweeks, flexible schedules, and the autonomy to work where and when they want—either as digital nomads or in hybrid work arrangements.

The pandemic also led to rising levels of employee stress, anxiety and burnout. Prolonged, unrelenting pressures can lead workers to experience emotional, mental and physical exhaustion. If employees feel depleted, they cannot perform their jobs to the best of their abilities and are more likely to become jaded and disengaged. Instead of forcing a person to be chained to a computer for an arbitrary time period, organizations can help relieve workers' stress and free them to do their best work by offering shortened workweeks, among other things.

A shortened workweek does not mean there will be less worker output. When employees have freedom, they feel appreciated and respected—and they are engaged. According to research from 4 Day Week Global, a nonprofit coalition that advocates reduced working hours, 78 percent of employees with four-day workweeks reported being happier and less stressed.

Moreover, 63 percent of businesses using the four-day model find it easier to attract and retain talent, according to the research. Companies that invest in worker health and well-being can also expect employees to take fewer sick and mental health days.

Iceland, Scotland, Belgium, Spain and other countries, as well as some global companies, have instituted four-day work-

weeks on a trial basis. The results have been encouraging. Employees not only have maintained the same or higher levels of productivity over fewer hours, but also have reported increased job satisfaction, teamwork, work/life balance and company loyalty.

Iceland's trial of the shortened workweek, run by the Reykjavík City Council and the national government, has been an overwhelming success. Worker well-being flourished across a range of indicators, including perceived stress, burnout, health and work/life balance. As a result of the trial's positive results, 86 percent of Iceland's workers now work reduced hours for the same pay or will gain the right to do so.

In Japan, which is known for having high expectations in terms of work ethic, Microsoft Japan offered its 2,300 employees shorter workweeks. The company's Work-Life Choice Challenge 2019 program gave employees the opportunity to "choose a variety of flexible work styles, according to the circumstances of work and life." Management wanted to see if there would be a corresponding increase in productivity and morale. The results? Workers were both happier and 40 percent more productive.

U.S. Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., introduced a bill last year that would have reduced the standard workweek from 40 hours to 32 for companies with more than 500 employees. Takano said at the time that "pilot programs run by governments and businesses across the globe have shown promising results, as productivity climbed and workers reported better work/life balance, less need to take sick days, heightened morale, and lower child care expenses because they had more time with their family and children."

There's little doubt that workers value shorter workweeks—and that can be good for U.S. business.



Jack Kelly is CEO and founder of New York City-based Compliance Search Group and WeCruit, which he started in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic to help people in need find jobs. He is a senior contributor for *Forbes*.

YES

The problem is the way work is done, not the number of hours worked.

By Tashia Mallette, SHRM-SCP

Employers have a tremendous opportunity to transform the future of work, but they should think twice about shortening the workweek.

The truth is, achieving a meaningful workplace transformation could be a heavy lift, as Industrial Age practices and mindsets still exist today. Outdated beliefs and personal biases about in-person work and productivity surfaced prominently during the pandemic as organizations literally lost sight of their employees and struggled to define measures of success for their displaced workforces.

But the pandemic also gave many workers the ability to work remotely or in a hybrid capacity for the first time. The McKinsey & Co. American

Opportunity Survey found that 58 percent of respondents can now work remotely at least one day per week. That puts employers in a unique position to help meet their employees' needs for work/life balance—without shortening the workweek and worrying about decreased productivity or the effect on the bottom line.

Programs that support work/life balance typically provide big returns in retention, attraction and engagement that will help employers compete for workers. Employees consistently rank these programs highly. In a recent Forbes Health-Ipsos monthly tracker poll, workers said work/life balance is the second most important aspect of their job, just below financial security.

Better work/life balance can also reduce the devastating effects that chronic stress has on employees' physical and mental health, regardless of how many hours they work. The prevalence of work-induced stress accelerated by the pandemic will only increase further if employees are required to do the same amount of work in less time.

Work-related stress is a symptom of deeper organizational design problems. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health suggests that employers act to reduce causes of stress by routinely reviewing workers' job designs, workloads, schedules, roles and responsibilities.

Company leaders might also consider replacing the output-based productivity work model, which is a relic of the Industrial Age. Deloitte and other consultancies suggest that organizations use an outcome-centric approach to drive effectiveness, efficiency and empowerment across the organization.

As part of that, managers would shift from micromanaging the how, when and where work is performed to ensuring the work gets done. When that happens, studies show, employees feel more empowered and productive. The time managers spend managing output can be reallocated to activities such as coaching and development. There never seems to be enough time in the day, and shortening the workweek could further limit the valuable time managers have for themselves and their staffs.

The 40-hour workweek also provides an important platform for employers to help enrich the lives of their employees and communities through company-sponsored initiatives centered on diversity, equity and inclusion; volunteerism; and humanitarianism. According to research from America's Charities, 71 percent of surveyed employees say it is imperative or very important that they work at an employer where the culture is supportive of giving and volunteering. Employers that offer these types of programs experience higher levels of engagement and retention as employees find meaning and purpose through work.

Shortening the workweek may reduce employers' ability to offer these programs during paid work time. That would likely cause a reduction in employee participation, and worthy causes could experience a drop in awareness, funding and volunteers.

There are many ways to give workers what they need. Employers would be wise to consider whether shorter workweeks are really necessary. [HR](#)

NO



Tashia Mallette, SHRM-SCP, is the founder and principal chief people officer at HR Exchange Group, a Los Angeles-based consulting firm providing fractional chief people officer services to companies experiencing rapid growth or transformation.

As offices reopen and workers head back to their desks, providing for the needs of pets at home is a top concern.

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Pets have long been a mainstay of American life, but in 2020, pet ownership reached unprecedented highs. Faced with abrupt lockdowns, curtailing of ordinary activities, and long months spent working from home, both families and individuals rushed to adopt furry companions.

Now that restrictions are lifting and a return to in-person or hybrid work has begun, those new pet parents are keenly aware of their responsibilities to their four-legged family members. For some, the idea of leaving a pet alone all day for the first time since bringing them home is a source of real anxiety. So, in addition to arranging for doggie daycare, walking, pet-sitting and other services, many are also turning to pet insurance as a responsible way to guard their pets and themselves against the expense of unexpected accidents and illnesses.

“Nationwide has welcomed an unprecedented number of new pet health insurance members over the last year,” said Nationwide’s Chief Pet Officer, Heidi Sirota. “Being home with our pets all day every day has strengthened the human-animal bond we have always enjoyed. Many pet owners are recognizing the importance and

11
million

U.S. households
added a pet in 2020¹

value of protecting their companions with medical insurance, just as they do for the rest of their family.”

With the well-being of pets on employees’ minds as they enter a new cycle of change, it’s an opportune time to enhance your company’s benefits portfolio by adding Nationwide pet insurance at no cost to your company. Nationwide is the first and largest provider of pet health insurance in the U.S. and is offered as a voluntary benefit by half of Fortune 500 companies and more than 8,600 employers and associations.

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“With nearly 70% of U.S. households owning at least one pet, many employees may be faced with unplanned pet health expenses,” said Sirota. “Offering pet insurance as a voluntary benefit provides pet-owning employees financial relief to get the care their furry family members need.”

To learn more about adding pet insurance from Nationwide to your voluntary benefits portfolio, visit petinsurance.com/hrmag or call **877-280-8873**.

¹MARS Petcare, “Better Cities for Pets 2020.” ²Some exclusions may apply. Certain coverages may be excluded due to pre-existing conditions. See policy documents for a complete list of exclusions.

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Six predictions for the start of the next decade—and how to get ahead of the game.

By Tamara Lytle
Illustrations by blindSALIDA

The coronavirus pandemic was an ugly reminder of just how hard it is to predict and prepare for the future. Yet that doesn't mean HR leaders shouldn't think ahead, especially when there are some absolutes. Older workers are retiring, and the digital revolution continues. It's not too soon to start thinking ahead to the next decade. Here are six predictions for 2030 and how to prepare for them.

NEW GENERATIONS WILL TAKE OVER

By 2030, every Baby Boomer will be 65 or older. As most of them leave the workforce, they'll be replaced by the smaller Generation Z (those born in 1997 or later).

Boomers entered the workforce at a time of hierarchical cultures, when a job was simply about the work. Members of Generation Z, on the other hand, are crying out for their companies to match their values and speak out on issues such as the environment and diversity, equity and inclusion. That has sparked companies to take on activist roles, though this can be tricky, especially with polarizing topics.

"You won't make everyone happy," says Art Mazor, global human capital practice leader for Deloitte in Atlanta. But HR can help companies weigh the risks of speaking out on hot-button issues and can explain those decisions to employees.

Millennials and members of Generation Z want "to be authentically recognized at work," Mazor says. They also want their jobs to provide a sense of purpose and belonging, flexibility, and continuous career development. They'll change jobs if they don't feel they're learning enough or finding a sense of purpose at the company, he says.

But Peter Cappelli thinks companies are unlikely to prioritize employee career growth. The George W. Taylor Professor of Management and director of the Wharton Center for Human Resources at the University of Pennsylvania notes that the percentage of jobs filled from within has dropped from 90 percent in the 1980s to about 30 percent now. In addition, average tenures have



declined and time spent on training workers has fallen to about half a day per year.

"I don't see where [companies] are willing to spend the money to change that," Cappelli says. "They're missing an opportunity. When they end up hiring from the outside, they end up paying more in salary and performance is worse."

The younger generations place a high priority on work/life balance, too, Mazor says. (Also, work/work balance: 43 percent of Generation Z workers and 33 percent of Millennials have side hustles or two full-time jobs, according to Deloitte.)



'You've got to convince people why they need to do the work, and it's not just "because you're paying me to do it."'

AMY ZIMMERMAN

Amy Zimmerman, chief people officer at Relay Payments Inc. in Atlanta, sees a disconnect between Boomers who are comfortable working 10- to 12-hour days and younger workers who prefer to work fewer hours. Managers need to focus more on results with those younger workers, she says. Gone are the days of command-and-control, fear-based management.

“[Younger workers] work differently,” says Zimmerman, whose company is a payment platform for the trucking and logistics industries.

Amid the current talent shortage, Zimmerman tells recruiters to make sure their outreach efforts leave candidates wanting to work at the organization. That means, for example, pitching them on why their work at the company would matter. This approach should continue after they’re hired, with managers striving to motivate them by making the company’s mission clear.

“You’ve got to convince people why they need to do the work, and it’s not just ‘because you’re paying me to do it,’” Zimmerman says.

2 DIGITAL TRAINING WILL BECOME A NECESSITY

More than half of HR professionals (53 percent) report noticing at least one basic skill or knowledge gap among applicants in the past 12 months, according to the 2022 *Talent Trends Report* from the SHRM Research Institute. The gap cited most frequently was basic computer skills (35 percent).

Korn Ferry predicts that by 2030, 85 million jobs around the world will go unfilled because there aren’t enough skilled workers. Growing those skills from within amounts to self-preservation for companies.

HR needs to change its recruiting and hiring practices and build digital skills among current employees, says Suneet Dua, products and technology chief revenue and growth officer at PwC.

Every department, not just IT, will need workers who are familiar with artificial intelligence, “big data” and quantum information (an intersection between computer science and the quantum mechanics of the physics world).

“HR leaders are stuck in yesterday’s world,” Dua says. Generation Z workers already are interested in lifelong learning, he adds, but all ages need to embrace it.

PwC followed its own advice three years ago in looking at the digital literacy and skills of all 53,000 of its U.S. workers. A “gamified” app asked workers whether they knew about and used alternate reality, virtual reality, big data and more, with prizes awarded for high scores. Workers then took a course to learn more and could post a badge on LinkedIn when they passed. The goal was to get everyone to score at least 250 out of 600. (The average before the training course was around 150 to 175, Dua



‘HR leaders are stuck in yesterday’s world.’

SUNEET DUA

says.) The company offered a week off for everyone in early July if the goal was met. It was.

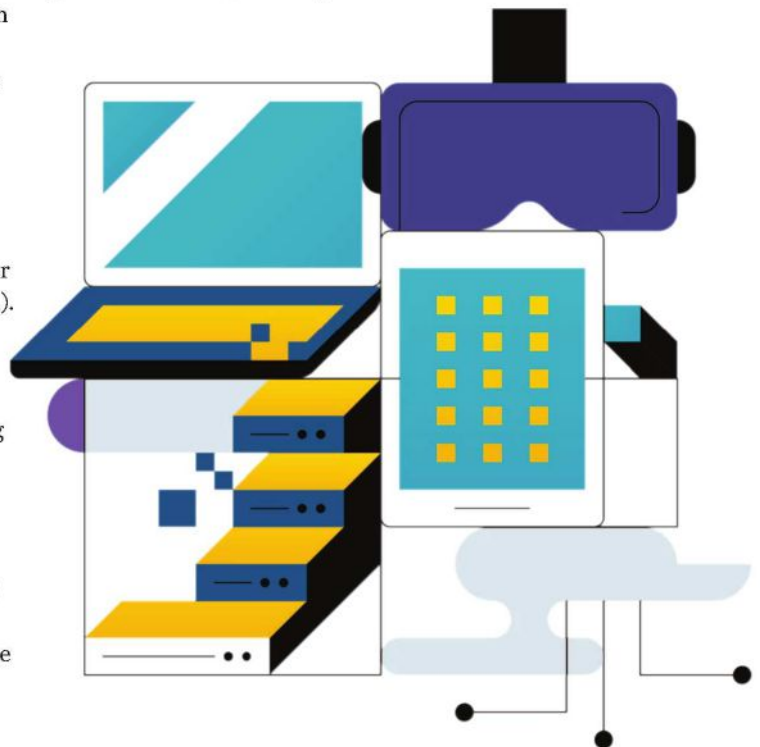
Dua says the operation helped PwC identify the most technically savvy employees. Those workers, dubbed “digital accelerators,” were asked to train others and given financial rewards for doing so.

PwC also started offering apps companywide that were developed by employees who found efficient solutions to common challenges, including tracking their hours by the state they were working in and the client they were serving, as well as how to organize dinner orders for teams working late.

“These are the things we did to get the big tanker of PwC moving into the digital world,” Dua says.

HR leaders need to know that starting small on moving employees toward digital skills is better than doing nothing.

“Some CEOs and HR leaders think they have to eat the elephant in one bite,” Dua says.





4 TEAMWORK WILL BECOME THE NEW GAME PLAN

Scrum, sprints and squads will be widespread as employers draw workers from all over the company and even from outside the organization to work on projects. “We’re breaking away from hierarchical ways of working and putting people into these newer constructs,” Mazor says.

The new structure means HR will need to reimagine incentive programs and performance reviews because employees may not be working for their usual supervisors. For example, Zimmerman says she moved away from annual performance reviews and now focuses on continuous feedback from whomever is supervising the employee, an approach that works better in a project-based environment.

Putting together effective project teams will be a key for company success, says Jeanne Meister, executive vice president of Executive Networks, a San Francisco-based membership organization for senior HR leaders. She expects

3 PEOPLE EXPERIENCE DEPARTMENTS WILL EMERGE

No, that’s not the HR department. It’s a new team that focuses on employees’ lived experience and their development, says Keahn Gary, a senior manager and innovation and disruption strategist at Cognizant, a global IT services and consulting firm in Los Angeles.

So why isn’t that a job for HR?

“HR, in its current state, is there to protect the company,” Gary says. “Their purview is more along the lines of ‘How do we get employment to happen?’ rather than ‘How do we get work to happen?’”

The current talent shortage has prompted business leaders to look more closely at employee experience, a topic that Gary feels has been shortchanged. “We’re way

too focused on shareholder return,” she says. “We have to stop looking at employees as cost centers and look at them as an investment.”

HR departments, she says, have had 100 years to work on employee experience and development but have shown little inclination to focus there. And middle managers have too much on their plates to handle employee development.

A people experience department would have the staff to focus on the lived experience of workers and to make sure companies keep working on improvements for employees, says Gary, whose company has 330,000 workers globally. She compares the relationship between HR and this new department to the similar but different roles of accounting and finance within the corporate structure.



‘We’re way too focused on shareholder return. We have to stop looking at employees as cost centers and look at them as an investment.’

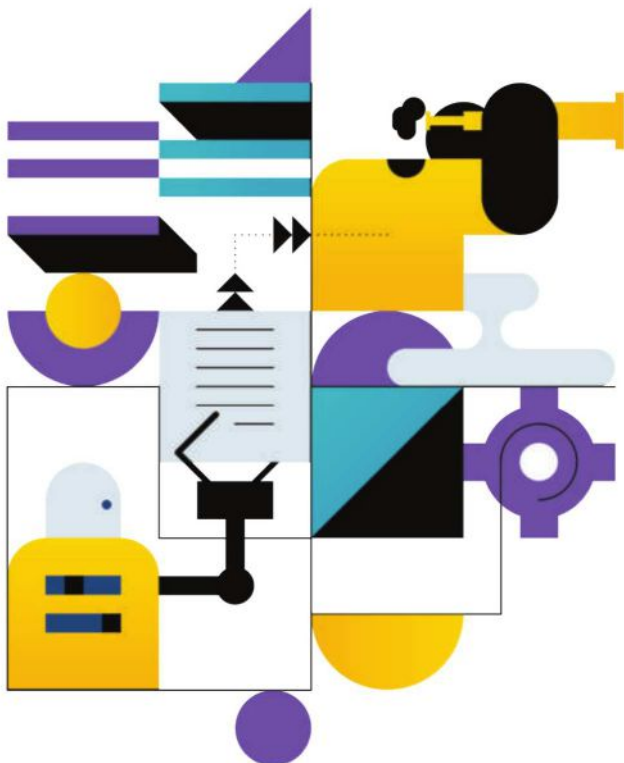
KEAHN GARY

more companies to create internal talent marketplaces to facilitate that goal.

Mazor adds that just as applicant tracking systems can help find people with the right skills for hiring, talent marketplaces can be used to find short-term help from outside and inside the organization. A manager needing a data scientist for a project, for instance, might be able to find a consultant (or an employee from a different department who has extra time) instead of hiring a full-time employee.

Such a talent marketplace offers two benefits, Meister says: Workers will be able to see what projects are coming up that might help their career growth, and companies will save money and avoid headaches by improving retention. “Career development is going to be a requirement to get and keep workers, especially Generation Z,” she notes.

Not everyone is a fan of the project team concept, however. Cappelli says it can be unpopular because it undercuts the centralized power of management. Finance departments, for instance, hate teams that are empowered to spend what they need to get the job done, he says.



5 ROBOTS WILL TAKE ON MORE WORK, BUT HUMANS WON'T BE LEFT BEHIND

Forty-two percent of HR professionals say their organization plans to continue using, expand upon or develop workplace automation over the next five years, according to the SHRM Research Institute's 2021 Workplace Automation Survey.

Automation and artificial intelligence will continue to evolve to take on repetitive tasks both companywide and specifically within the HR department. Machines can sort through heaps of resumes, handle payroll and more. That frees up HR professionals to work on more-engaging projects, such as strategic planning.

The trick is to use automation to take over drudgery, not to eliminate positions. “Start fundamentally rethinking how your HR department is set up,” says Florian Pollner, a partner with McKinsey & Co. who is based in Zurich. “Automate to the max so you can focus on the human.”

“HR needs to make a mindset shift from ‘data automation is evil,’” Pollner adds. “If you don't see data as our best friend ... you're not doing your job.”

Data science can make predictions of how similar a potential job candidate is to the type of people already

in the company who are successful, Cappelli says, so those algorithms will be increasingly useful.

Automation is also being used to monitor employees, and that could become more popular as people work remotely. “Tattleware,” Cappelli points out, can monitor how often a person’s mouse is moved, what’s on their screen and what’s written in e-mails.

Mazor says these monitoring tools can benefit the company if they help measure productivity, but HR also needs to ensure they aren’t overly intrusive.

“More than 1 out of 4 companies purchased new technology during the pandemic to passively track and monitor their workers,” he says, and 95 percent of IT leaders have monitored employees more often since the public health crisis began.

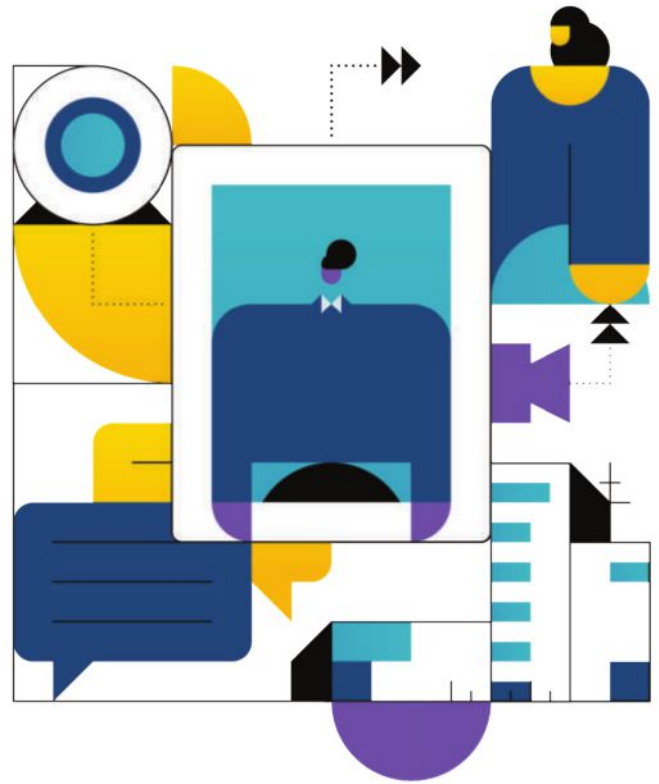
While some workers are concerned that their jobs will be replaced due to automation, many appear to be positive about the prospects: More than half of U.S. workers (58 percent) say they feel confident their organization can train them properly so they can use workplace automation effectively at their job, according to the SHRM Research Institute survey.

HR leaders can help their companies keep up with needed training and evolving technology. “The ways of working change much faster [than they used to],” Pollner says.



‘HR needs to make a mindset shift from “data automation is evil.” If you don’t see data as our best friend ... you’re not doing your job.’

FLORIAN POLLNER



6 PHYGITAL WILL BE THE NEW NORMAL

During the pandemic, companies discovered that many employees, especially knowledge workers, could be productive while working from home. Employees also liked this arrangement, and close to half of all U.S. workers (48 percent) are definitely looking to work remotely for their next job, according to an April SHRM survey.

“Hybrid work is here to stay,” Meister says. “It’s a perk. People have lived with it for two and a half years. Try taking a perk away.”

HR’s job is to figure out how to design that perk in a deliberate way. “You have to ask yourself, ‘When does proximity matter, and what is the role and purpose of the office?’” Meister says.

HR will need to set up rules, such as establishing that workers must live within commuting distance of the corporate office and must go in at certain times.

A stunning 58 percent of U.S. job holders can work remotely some or all of the time, according to McKinsey & Co. And 87 percent of those with a choice opt for remote work. Based on various studies, McKinsey estimates that the number of remote workers has increased by at least one-third and possibly as much as tenfold since 2019.

Kastle, which tracks the number of workers using its digital keys to swipe into office buildings, says office occupancy was at 43.4 percent just after Labor Day.

Being in the office can be beneficial for deep thinking and creative tasks, such as new-product design, culture-building events like celebrating milestones, and other strategic collaborations.

Zimmerman says the competitive world of sales provides an example of how working in close proximity can be energizing.

“There is no replacement for hearing someone on the phone grinding away, making the pitch. You can’t get that at home,” she notes.

Companies that want workers to show up need to set clear expectations, such as by having team leaders decide on specific collaboration hours and days that everyone is in the office or available. That way, Meister says, workers won’t show up in the office and find a ghost town that makes the commute seem pointless.

HR can be a trusted resource for both management and workers and can zero in on hybrid goals without emotion.

Pollner expects employees will end up working in corporate offices two or three days a week because companies have learned that schedule helps maintain corporate culture. But the combination of physical and digital (phygital) work routines creates a need for up-graded tech tools. Companies need to think about how to mimic some of the upsides of in-person connections by using virtual communication, such as Slack or chat features that allow colleagues to throw around ideas and have side conversations.

But even top-notch digital tools don’t replace the social bonding that comes from in-person work or the creative ideas that can be sparked when you run into a co-worker in the hallway, Mazor says.

Another potential concern of hybrid work is equity. Leaders need to ensure that remote workers don’t feel excluded when many of their colleagues are onsite, Pollner advises, and HR must ensure that workers whose jobs can’t be done remotely don’t feel they’re being treated unfairly, compared to those who can work offsite.

One of Mazor’s consumer products clients looked beyond office workers when designing for remote work. It surveyed factory workers and found that some, such as quality monitors, could work remotely and appreciated the flexibility.

Differences in geography, race, gender, personality (such as introversion) and work styles all need to be considered for hybrid setups to be effective.

“There is an opportunity to think more broadly about inclusivity, and HR has the opportunity to lead and drive



‘There is an opportunity to think more broadly about inclusivity, and HR has the opportunity to lead and drive awareness.’

ART MAZOR

awareness,” Mazor says. “HR leaders can help business leaders shape dynamic approaches.”

The rise of hybrid work will likely lead to smaller headquarters, especially as real estate leases expire, giving companies the ability to move. Meister expects companies to opt for more satellite offices that are spread out geographically so employees have somewhere to go when they have a task to accomplish in person, such as onboarding, team brainstorming, training or digging into more-focused work.

“We’re starting to see many of our clients shift to space for people to collaborate that may not require all people coming to the same space in the city,” Mazor says. It may not be as easy as jumping out of bed and rolling into a Zoom meeting, he notes, but regional offices can remove some of the friction of longer commutes.

As companies move into a permanently hybrid future, HR will have a role in helping workers see the benefits of coming to the office.

HR can help companies sort out their real estate requirements, Gary says, by working with team leaders to find out what features to incorporate into future offices to best serve day-to-day needs. That sort of strategic planning can help companies design offices that are optimized for the type of work that will be done there. [HR](#)



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Tamara Lytle is a Washington, D.C.-based freelance writer who covers business, government, politics and other issues.

Rethinking *Rewards*

Employers are expanding
the concept of benefits
beyond traditional offerings.

By Joanne Sammer





What's considered an effective rewards strategy has evolved in recent years. Companies used to brag about their health and retirement benefits, but those have become table stakes. If an organization is going to be competitive as an employer, it must go well beyond the traditional benefits package.

Employers faced with a persistently tight labor market have been looking for every advantage to attract, retain and engage workers. To remain competitive, business leaders need to seriously consider what current and prospective employees need and value. In the process, they're likely to find that what qualifies as an employee benefit is rapidly changing.



‘Benefits are the most important thing employees look for in addition to culture and work purpose.’

NICK SHAH

Verizon is one employer that’s approaching benefits differently these days. “Our focus is on integrating employee benefits with life to make work easier and better for everyone,” says Sam Hammock, CHRO of the New York City-based telecom giant with about 120,000 employees.

Other organizations set a different base line. “Quality health care, retirement, parental leave, maternity/paternity leave and generous paid-time-off policies should be foundational in benefits packages,” says Loubna Bribine, HR manager for SES-imagotag, an electronics company headquartered in Nanterre, France. Once those benefits are in place, she says, employers should think about what else they can offer to meet the needs of a variety of people and lifestyles at the company.

“The pandemic started a lot of conversations acknowledging that employee well-being is a critical business need,” says John Bremen, managing director with consultancy WTW in the Chicago area.

To get a sense of the growing value of benefits, consider how employers responded in the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court’s June decision overturning federal protections for abortion access. In a very short time, major employers, including Walmart, Bank of America and Disney, announced they would provide financial support to employees who have to travel to another state to access reproductive care.

“It sends a message when employees see their employer take the initiative and get ahead of something like this,” says Michael Khamis, a vice president of HR and benefits at consulting firm Segal in Los Angeles.

AN EXPANDING PERSPECTIVE

The importance of employee benefits is growing, and the C-suite is paying attention. “Our executive team talks about benefits quarterly,” Hammock says.

At many organizations, this has rarely been the case. Employee benefits discussions in the past have typically focused on the cost of health insurance. For their part, employees and job candidates also tend to take employee benefits for granted and focus instead on compensation.

“Unless an employer is in the top percentile for benefits, just offering slightly more than median has been a hard sell when salaries dominate” employee and candidate concerns, says Stacey Carroll, president and principal consultant with HR Experts on Call in Seattle.

Yet smart and targeted investments in employee benefits can yield results, especially when the employees value the benefits. “Everyone focuses on compensation, but there are other levers to pull that really matter to employees,” Hammock says.

Verizon has made selective and targeted changes to employee compensation, but it has also adopted a benefits strategy that emphasizes maximizing choice. “We are building a range of benefits to serve employees where they are in life,” Hammock says.

To that end, Verizon now offers a stipend that employees can use to purchase personalized benefits that meet their unique needs, such as pet insurance, elder care assistance, yoga classes and telehealth.

At the same time, Verizon, like a growing number of employers, is expanding the definition of “benefit” to include the tangible and intangible elements of what an employer offers, including flexibility regarding where and how employees get their work done.

“The power of giving employees the choice of where to work with flexible work arrangements is key,” Hammock says. “Some never want to be in the office and some need the engagement and collaboration that can happen in the office, but most of them just want to be trusted to make that choice themselves.”

As employers look for the right benefits for their workforces, it’s important to take a thoughtful and balanced approach. “Historically, employers have tended to throw the latest ‘hot’ benefits into the mix without considering the consequences,” says Jennifer Loftus, national director with consulting firm Astron Solutions in New York City. “Employers need to do some analysis first, because not all benefits are right for every organization.”

For example, when Netflix and other companies announced they were offering unlimited paid time off to

71%

of employers feel the deteriorating mental health of the workforce is having a negative financial impact on their company.

Source: *Future of Benefits Report*, The Hartford, 2022.

their employees, many employers rushed to follow suit without considering whether unlimited paid time off was appropriate and workable for their workforces.

“Benefits should not be fixed and [should] change, but employers also should not just react to the latest trends,” Carroll says.

KNOW YOUR WORKFORCE

So how does an organization determine what benefits to offer and how to allocate spending? It depends. But one thing is clear: The more insight an employer has into its workforce, the more likely it can develop meaningful benefits programs for those workers.

Health care staffing company IntelyCare has leveraged a deep understanding of its workforce of about 50,000 health care professionals to create a customized approach to benefits. “Many of our nurses are working additional shifts for a specific reason,” such as paying off debt or saving money for a home purchase, says David Coppins, the Quincy, Mass.-based company’s CEO and co-founder.

In response, the company customized many of its employee benefits to support those goals. For example, the company offers savings plans and access to advantageous interest rates on mortgage loans. IntelyCare’s newest and most popular benefit is the option for employees to access their pay within 15 minutes of completing a shift.

“Even though not all of them have used it, 75 percent of the workforce signed up for this benefit,” Coppins says.

Recognition is another key part of this customized benefits strategy. The company offers bonuses and opportunities to move up various levels based on performance. “Each level offers something new,” such as financial incentives or access to better shifts, Coppins says. This is coupled with consistent positive feedback on employee performance whenever it is warranted. “This is a big change because nursing often has somewhat adversarial relationships [between nurses and] management, so we emphasize our respect for their work,” he says.

Of course, offering these targeted benefits is only the starting point. Coppins also makes sure benefits investments are helping the company achieve its goals. So far, the news is positive: Employee retention levels have almost doubled, and there has been a 40 percent increase in engagement, as measured by how many shifts individuals are taking per month.

WHEN IN DOUBT, ASK

Because Verizon has thousands of employees in every demographic group, its benefits have to cover many bases. “We have young professionals early in their careers, employees who are parents and long-tenured employees,” Hammock says. “Our focus is on whether we have the benefits that provide the choices” that can meet the needs of this very diverse group.

To that end, Verizon conducts quarterly employee

INCREASING BENEFITS USE

Offering an array of employee benefits is not enough. Employers also need to make sure employees know what benefits are available and, more importantly, help workers feel comfortable using them.

The first part of this equation requires frequent communication throughout the year. Sharing information about employee benefits only during the open enrollment window is no longer enough. There are too many details for employees to absorb in a short period of time, particularly when an employer has expanded and refined its benefits offerings to appeal to the entire employee population.

The second part—making it OK for employees to use their benefits—requires action from leadership. Consider paid-time-off and leave policies. It’s one thing to offer a generous vacation allowance and paid family and parental leave. It’s another to make sure employees have the opportunity to fully use these benefits.

“It’s important to make sure employees have time to relax away from the high-pressure work environment” and to take care of family needs, says Donna Miracle, chief operating officer with consulting firm HR Strategy Group in Ellicott City, Md. “If people don’t disconnect, what’s the point of offering [time off]?”

Miracle urges company leaders, rather than HR, to take charge of this effort. She knows of one company that monitored paid time off and leave utilization and then followed up with employees who were not using what was available. HR can support this type of initiative by measuring benefits utilization on a monthly or quarterly basis to help leaders hold individual managers accountable if their team members are not taking time off.

“This sent the message that employees didn’t have to be connected all the time,” Miracle says. Within a year, the company saw encouraging results with increased employee tenure and less turnover and burnout. “The environment is different, and there is the feel of a cultural change,” she notes. —J.S.



engagement surveys and supplements those findings with feedback through other channels, including focus groups. As is the case for many companies, employee attrition at Verizon has been higher than normal amid the pandemic, and the company is looking for ways to increase retention.

For company leaders, the public health crisis led to a broader perspective on what mental health and wellness means for many workers. For example, in addition to offering traditional mental health support such as employee assistance programs and access to therapy, Verizon significantly expanded its support for caregivers. With people working remotely, “sometimes mental health means that you just need to get out of the house,” Hammock says. “We provide backup care at any time for employees with any kind of caregiving responsibilities.”

Global companies may also need to act on employee feedback based on geography. With offices in 15 countries, SES-imagotag has discovered differences in employee benefits preferences across various regions and offices. So, when company surveys indicated that employees in North America value more downtime, the company acted to meet this need by closing all of its offices in this region during the U.S. Thanksgiving holiday week.

This decision also meshed with the company’s strategic needs. Since SES-imagotag is a supplier of electronic shelving systems for the retail industry, this break presents a good opportunity for employees “to spend time with their loved ones so they can come back rested and ready for the holiday season,” Bribine says.

SES-imagotag’s survey data also showed that employees want to have a positive impact on their communities. Therefore, to support community involvement, the

company matches up to \$500 in charitable contributions and introduced two paid volunteer days per year. “We also provide local opportunities to employees who are looking to volunteer but don’t know where to begin,” Bribine says.

BUILDING A DASHBOARD

Maintaining a full workforce in the health care industry is difficult even in the best of times. And due to the pandemic, the past few years have not been the best of times.

For Paul Dann, executive director of NFI North Inc., a nonprofit health care agency based in Contoocook, N.H., meeting that challenge meant determining why people were quitting—and finding ways to address those issues.

The agency, which has 400 employees and serves patients in Maine and New Hampshire, developed a dashboard to measure longevity by position and to identify when people were most likely to seek other opportunities. “We found that people are most likely to leave during the second and third years,” Dann says. The key reasons turned out to be the relationship with their manager, not understanding the value of employee benefits and unhappiness with pay levels.

The agency was able to quickly address the compensation issue by increasing the starting hourly rate and offering hiring and retention bonuses. It took longer to increase management training and leadership development to start to improve relationships. That left the last issue: employee benefits.

NFI North began by communicating about the value of its retirement plan and the 5 percent of pay that the agency contributes on employees’ behalf. Then, it looked for new programs that would appeal to employees.



MUST-HAVE BENEFITS

New programs and strategies adopted by employers during the pandemic provided a glimpse of what’s possible in employee benefits. To remain competitive, employers know they have to provide employees with health care and retirement plans. The opportunity to stand out as an employer comes from offering other, targeted benefits.

Out of necessity, employers continue to invest in new employee benefits programs to support workers and help them address the challenges they face in their personal and professional lives. Although specific wants and needs will differ for each employee, these benefits have become must-haves for workers considering new job opportunities over the past two years.

Source: Employee Benefit Trends Study, MetLife, 2022.

That required adopting a much broader definition of employee benefits. For example, at employees' request, the agency created a shared sick-leave bank to which employees can donate some of their sick leave and from which they can draw time off if needed.

However, the main focus was helping employees build a stronger work/life balance by giving them more control over when and where they work. As a health care agency, NFI North had given little thought to remote work. However, after analyzing specific jobs, the agency found that at least some of the work could be done remotely.

"We outfitted everyone whose position allows for remote work with the necessary technology so that they can work remotely up to three times a week," Dann says.

At the same time, the agency gave employees the option to compress their normal, full-time hours into a four-day week instead of five, as long as they spend at least two of those days in the office. "Although it seems simple," Dann says, "this represented a real paradigm shift for us."

GROWING PROMINENCE FOR BENEFITS

As more employers are learning, a greatly expanded definition of employee benefits is required.

"Right now, benefits are the most important thing employees look for in addition to culture and work purpose," says Nick Shah, founder and CEO of Peterson Technology Partners in Park Ridge, Ill. "Most people are looking for the whole package—a company culture of learning, growth with flexible work conditions, and cutting-edge, cool work to do—that will keep them motivated in the long term."

Senior executives who seize this opportunity to re-define employee benefits can generate lasting value for their organizations.

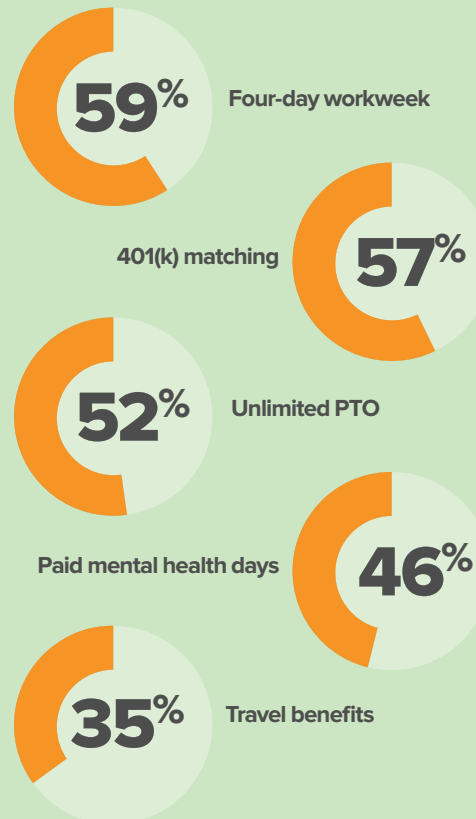
"Employers need to rethink everything about rewards, including where and how people work and how they build and develop a career," HR Experts on Call's Carroll says. "Employees want a new model that's flexible and personal."

Finding the right mix of benefits also gives employers a powerful story to tell current and prospective employees. Segal's Khamis recalls the recent #showusyourleave viral movement launched by theSkimm media company that gave companies an opportunity to highlight their parental-leave policies.

"This can be an important tool for engagement and an opportunity to make people aware of what employers offer," he says. "That may require a better story for

GREENER PASTURES

The top benefits and perks that employees say would motivate them to apply for a job with another company.



Source: *Benefits' Big Impact on Employee Experience (2022-2023)*, isolved.

benefits so you can raise your hand and be confident saying, 'Yes, we have the goods.'

It's important to start the conversation about what this type of approach to benefits would look like, not only now but in the future. "It's a good idea to look at employee demographics," Bremen says. "What will the employee population look like three, five or 10 years from now—age, gender, number of dependents, marital status and so on." This is what will drive and shape employee benefits in the future.

HR cannot do this alone. Carroll notes that organizations are most successful in making strategic adjustments when these discussions include perspectives from people outside HR. Organizations that are least successful are not having these conversations at all. [HR](#)

Joanne Sammer is a New Jersey-based business and financial writer.



WHAT BENEFITS CAN EMPLOYERS OFFER TO IMPROVE RETENTION? FIND OUT AT [SHRM.ORG/BENEFITS-TO-IMPROVE-RETENTION](https://shrm.org/benefits-to-improve-retention)

‘We Are Safe’

Some U.S. companies are stepping up to hire refugees—and reaping the benefits of higher retention rates.

By Theresa Agovino

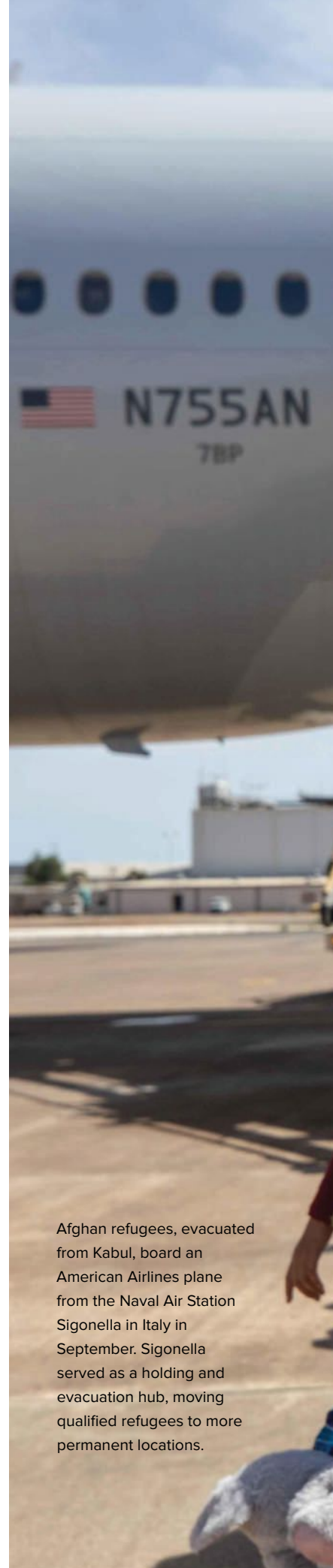
The 6-year-old girl didn't understand why she had to rise in the middle of the night to travel to the Kabul airport and stand outside the gates for hours in a jostling, desperate crowd, only to be forced to return home again. She didn't understand why her family was turned away from the airport two more times, including once having to flee tear gas thrown by the guards. “She was traumatized,” explains the girl's father, who was enduring the worst stress of his life and fearing that his family would be forced to live under Taliban rule. His daughter kept asking why they had to travel at night and who were the Taliban she kept hearing about. After the third time the family failed to enter the airport, the man said to his three daughters, “I am sorry I couldn't save you.”

But eventually, he succeeded. His former American employer arranged transportation to the airport for its workers to get on a plane.

“We will stay alive. We are safe,” the father recalls telling his daughters. (Like the other Afghan refugees interviewed for this article, he didn't want his name, his location or the name of his former employer disclosed, to protect family remaining in Afghanistan from retribution from the Taliban.)

Afghan refugees, evacuated from Kabul, board an American Airlines plane from the Naval Air Station Sigonella in Italy in September. Sigonella served as a holding and evacuation hub, moving qualified refugees to more permanent locations.

MCZ ANDREA RUMPLE / U.S. NAVY / ALAMY LIVE NEWS





COMPANIES PLEDGE AID

That was August 2021. Now the 32-year-old is living on the Eastern Seaboard and working as a business analyst at Accenture, which is among the companies that have increased efforts to hire and aid refugees. The intense news coverage of people trying to escape the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, followed by Ukrainians fleeing the war in their country, has pushed more U.S. companies to either start or expand their refugee hiring efforts.

In September, some of the country's largest companies, including Pfizer, Amazon and Marriott International, pledged to hire a total of more than 22,000 refugees over the next three years. The initiative is the brainchild of the Tent Partnership for Refugees, a nonprofit that mobilizes the business community to assist refugees. And in the aftermath of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, a who's who of business and political leaders launched Welcome.US, a coalition to help refugees settle in their new country.

It's not just the tragic stories and images that are driving such initiatives. Military veterans often encourage their employers to hire Afghan refugees. Many of these veterans served in Afghanistan and want to aid those who risked their lives so the U.S. military could carry out its mission. And with the ongoing worker shortage and low unemployment rate, many companies are desperate for dependable workers and are more open to the idea of hiring refugees to help address the talent gap.

THE LOYALTY OF REFUGEES

People who are grateful to be safe are typically more loyal to their employers. In fact, refugees tend to stay

at their companies longer than the average worker, according to a 2018 study of 26 businesses in various industries conducted by the Fiscal Policy Institute and funded by Tent. Nearly 75 percent of those companies reported higher retention rates for refugees than for other groups of employees.

In certain industries, the statistics are particularly striking. For example, the annual turnover rate for refugees in meatpacking companies was 25 percent, compared with 40 percent in all other industries. And in both the hotel and manufac-

enrolling their children in school and communicating effectively with co-workers.

EXPECT CHALLENGES

"This isn't easy," says Mindi Cox, chief marketing and people officer for O.C. Tanner Co., a Salt Lake City-based software company. "If you're serious about enriching your teams and your culture with people with such a diversity of experience, there are going to be some exceptional lengths you have to go through to make sure that it works."

That can include arranging transportation for workers, creating buddy systems and establishing prayer rooms, among other things. These days, it also means paying more attention to refugees' mental health. Cox says refugees who fled violence in their countries have been distressed by coverage of the war in Ukraine. "There was all kinds of trauma coming out [in employees] from the images of the war," Cox says. O.C. Tanner brought in a mental health professional to discuss post-traumatic stress disorder with refugees and how to address it.

Refugee trauma extends beyond images on TV. A few years ago, an earthquake in Utah unnerved some of the Bosnian refugee employees at O.C. Tanner because it reminded them of what they endured during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s.

"People were calling and saying, 'I can't come in,'" Cox recalls. The company helped them access the appropriate mental health benefits to address their feelings.

VETERANS LEAD THE CHARGE

Some military veterans who watched the U.S. departure from Afghanistan in 2021 were moved to ask their



turing sectors, the turnover rate for refugees was seven percentage points lower than for other employees.

Companies with a long history of hiring refugees caution that while it is worth the effort, the process can be difficult. Many Afghan refugees speak English and are familiar with American customs because they worked with U.S. organizations. But that's not the case for all Afghan refugees—or many of the refugees from other countries. Some are unskilled and can't read or write in their native languages. They may not understand U.S. culture and may need help with basic tasks, such as getting to work, filling out insurance forms,



‘We tell employers to invest in [refugees] because they are going to be here for the long haul.’

JINA KRAUSE-VILMAR

employers to embrace hiring refugees. Greg Anderson, a senior managing director and chief operating officer for HR at Accenture, says he received calls during the withdrawal from veterans saying, “What can we do?”

Accenture’s initiative to hire veterans has informed its newer program to employ Afghan refugees, according to Anderson. People from both groups often don’t have job responsibilities and resumes that easily fit into the parameters laid out in employment ads by most U.S. companies. So, when Accenture began hiring veterans, he notes, it started to

look at underlying skills and how they could be applied to different roles.

“We had to develop that bridge,” he says. “And what we found is that the bridge is very helpful in this [refugee] situation.”

TIME COMMITMENT

Even if a company is willing to hire refugees, matching the person with the correct job takes time and effort.

“It can be challenging to find the right fit,” says Diane Woolley, senior vice president and CHRO at White Plains Hospital in New York. She says one of the hospital’s HR direc-

tors will typically sit with refugee candidates for hours, going through their experience and discussing what kinds of jobs might interest them.

The hospital receives candidates from Hearts & Homes for Refugees, one of the hundreds of nonprofits that work with refugees across the country.

When Hearts & Homes referred 41-year-old refugee Haroon to the hospital, he was initially confused. “I thought only doctors worked at hospitals,” says the father of four.

In October 2020, he began working as a patient technician, organizing and cleaning operating rooms. Last

WHO ARE REFUGEES?

Refugees are individuals who have crossed international borders and are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin due to being persecuted, or having a reasonable fear of persecution, because of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. It can take years to gain refugee status in the United States.

People outside the U.S. seeking refugee status must register with the United Nations high commissioner for refugees, whose agency investigates the claim.

The U.S. chooses the refugees it accepts and sets limits on the number of refugees it allows into the country each year. Before being accepted, refugees are screened by various government authorities, including the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Defense.

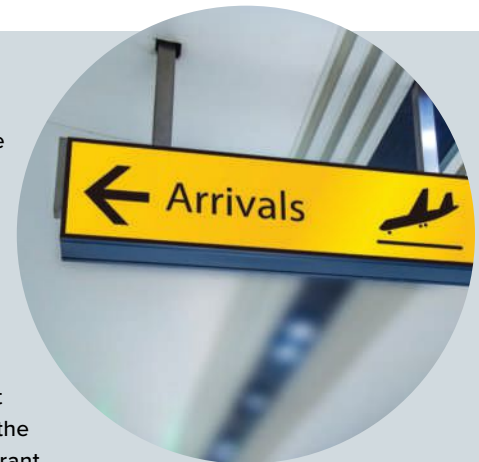
Individuals already in the U.S. who meet the definition of a refugee can claim asylum and must file an application with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a division of the DHS. However, if the person is going through the deportation process, the individual must file an application

with an immigration judge at the Executive Office for Immigration Review, part of the Department of Justice. These asylum seekers also go through government screenings.

People fleeing Afghanistan over the past year were largely let into the country on Special Immigrant Visas. This visa category was established in 2006 to help Iraqis and Afghans who worked with U.S. troops, diplomats and aid workers, because their association with these Americans put their lives at risk.

Refugees who are accepted into the U.S. are referred to one of nine resettlement agencies, which help them find housing and employment. Those partner agencies work with hundreds of other nonprofits to help refugees acclimate to their new lives.

U.S. employers that are interested in hiring refugees can contact any of the nine resettlement agencies, as well as the Tent Partnership for Refugees, Upwardly Global and Welcome.US. —T.A.



SEE A LIST OF RESETTLEMENT AGENCIES AT
[SHRM.ORG/RESETTLEMENT](https://shrm.org/resettlement)

A REFUGEE FAMILY AFFAIR

Life has come full circle for Par Law.

Nine years ago, she arrived in the U.S. after living in a refugee camp in Thailand since birth. She couldn't speak English and didn't understand American culture. Now, the 25-year-old is a community liaison at Tyson Foods Inc., where she assists other refugees at the company who speak Karen, a language used in Thailand and Myanmar, and helps them navigate life in the U.S. Law's job entails everything from translating at employees' doctor appointments to enrolling their children in schools.

"It feels good to give back to the community," says Law, whose family moved to the U.S. when she was 14 years old. "I felt like I didn't belong here for a long time. It takes a long time to learn things."

Law became a U.S. citizen in September and now says, "I feel like I belong here."

Tyson has played a significant role in the American story for the entire Law family. Law's parents have worked at the company for eight years, and her brother has been employed there for 11. Law attended the University of the Ozarks on a scholarship provided by Tyson and has been working at Tyson since last year.

"I wanted to work at Tyson. My friends and family work there," says Law, who, along with her family, works in a poultry plant in Clarksville, Ark.

Refugees have been a source of labor for Tyson for decades, and the company is adding new benefits to help them acclimate.

"Refugees and immigrants have come into the meatpacking industry because it's a great entry-level manufacturing job," says Garrett Dolan, senior manager of community investment at Tyson. "Where can someone come and get a job when they may not speak the language or have a technical degree?"

More than 50 languages are spoken at Tyson plants. At one plant alone, employees speak at least 25 different languages. Hundreds of interpreters float around Tyson plants to facilitate communication. The company also offers English classes to employees, as well as courses in financial literacy and computer skills.

Earlier this year, Tyson expanded its service to help workers renew their employment authorizations and apply for citizenship from seven to 40 facilities. In 2021, it launched a pilot program in three locations to provide day care for the children of all employees, not just those who are refugees.

"The immigrant populations are very excited to take advantage of it because when they come here, they don't have the family network," Dolan says. "You can't drop kiddo off at grandma's if there's a problem." —T.A.



Par Law became a U.S. citizen in September. 'I feel like I belong here,' she says.

year, he was promoted to anesthesiology technician; in that role, he prepares and cleans the machines. Now he is considering becoming a nurse.

"I am so happy here," Haroon says. "There is just so much freedom."

Prior to coming to the U.S., Haroon never considered a career in health care, having worked in administrative roles for the United Nations and for a U.S. military contractor. He started receiving death threats from the Taliban in 2014, and it took six years for him to receive a Special Immigrant Visa to come to the U.S.

Most of the Afghans who arrived over the past year also have such visas, which are given to those whose lives are in danger from working with U.S. organizations.

COMMUNICATION HURDLES

Frank Fumich opted to hire Afghan refugees for a simple reason: "I needed workers," he says. Most of the positions at his airline catering company entail physical labor and don't require any special skills. An acquaintance suggested he hire a refugee, and he has ended up hiring eight Afghan men so far.

"Communication is the biggest challenge," says Fumich, CEO of Express Catering Inc. in Arlington, Va. All the Afghan employees either speak or understand a bit of English, but they largely communicate through translation apps. If there is difficulty conveying instructions, Fumich calls one of the employees' uncles to translate. (It's not uncommon for family members of refugees to help out in this manner.)

Initially, Fumich says, some of the men didn't understand that they were required to work certain hours, and sometimes they would try to leave midshift. He also didn't realize how much assistance they would need.

Fumich gave an employee a car but had to get it back when the worker decided to leave. The man had been a good worker, Fumich recalls, and then just started missing shifts or



‘There is a feeling that happens when the work isn’t just about getting the work done, but the work is about elevating people.’

MINDI COX

leaving early. He suspects the employee might have been struggling with some personal issues, but the language gap made it difficult to determine what was going on.

Fumich made a car loan to one employee and co-signed a lease for another so the man could move closer to the airport. He also started a GoFundMe campaign to help an employee pay his rent in advance and purchase furniture for his apartment.

“I hope they appreciate it and that they’ll be good employees,” Fumich says. “They are good workers. I’m pleased.”

UNDEREMPLOYMENT AND UNTAPPED TALENT

Refugees are typically very grateful to have found a job and to be out of the dire circumstances they escaped. But they also often miss the stature they held in their former jobs and communities.

Wahid and his wife work for a different catering company. He says they are happy to have jobs they can perform without speaking English. Yet, at times, they grow depressed. Wahid holds a bachelor’s degree and worked for the education department in Afghanistan before accepting a post with a contractor for the U.S. military. His wife was a high school teacher. They are both trying to learn English and move into professional jobs.

“This is not me,” he says through an interpreter, adding that some of the other employees at the catering company are engineers and former military officials. “I am disappointed. But this is where I work right now.”

Underemployment is a problem in the refugee community, says Jina Krause-Vilmar, president and CEO of Upwardly Global, a New York City-based nonprofit that helps refugees and immigrants with college degrees and professional experience find jobs that match their qualifications.

Krause-Vilmar says 45 percent of recently arrived immigrants have at least a bachelor’s degree, yet U.S. employers often assume that refugees come from “poor countries” with subpar education systems that don’t prepare them for work.

That’s one reason why companies may not consider hiring refugees. Another is that they don’t understand how the immigration system works and don’t realize that anyone with refugee status is allowed to legally work and live in the U.S. without any additional visa requirements.

INVITING CONVERSATIONS

Krause-Vilmar says many employers fail to delve into refugees’ backgrounds to determine how their talents can best be used to benefit the organization. Upwardly Global runs a series of programs for both refugees and employers to help close that gap. Of course, a refugee who was a doctor or lawyer can’t start practicing their profession in the U.S. without meeting certain requirements, and that can take years. However, there is no reason why a medical doctor should be working on an assembly line when so many medical institutions need skilled workers.

“We tell employers to invest in


them because they are going to be here for the long haul,” Krause-Vilmar says. She adds that hiring refugees helps employers meet their workforce diversity goals while bringing in quality talent.

Cox of O.C. Tanner says employers should ensure that each refugee employee has a career path, just as they would for any other worker. Managers should have conversations with employees about their goals and look out for those who show any special potential or aptitude.

Refugees who are just grateful to be employed may be more reticent to discuss their ambitions and may need more encouragement to speak up, Cox says. They may also be more reluctant to report any problems, so it’s vital to ensure they understand workplace rules and to keep lines of communication open.

“You want to invite conversations,” Cox says. “You don’t want to inexplicably say to someone who is grateful that ‘your job is to keep your head down.’”

Hiring refugees can also create an overall sense of purpose at a workplace that goes beyond fulfilling basic business goals. Employees increasingly say that is very important to them.

“There is a feeling that happens when the work isn’t just about getting the work done,” Cox says, “but the work is about elevating people, that your organization has decided that this is an endeavor that is worth some extra effort.” 

Theresa Agovino is the workplace editor for SHRM.

Alcama started out as a management consultant, but her work on an initiative to globalize Deloitte's recruiting process drew her to HR.





MUCH — MORE THAN A — TITLE

Tricia Alcamo's personal challenges have shaped her empathetic leadership style as FanDuel's chief people officer.

By Novid Parsi
Photography by Adam Lerner



hen Tricia Alcamo describes her employer, FanDuel Group, as “a hyper-growth company,” she isn’t exaggerating.

The spark for that growth occurred in 2018, when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a federal law that banned commercial sports betting in most states. Soon after, Flutter Entertainment, a global sports betting and gaming operator, merged with FanDuel.

Today, the New York City-based company’s portfolio includes gaming, fantasy sports and sports betting brands. FanDuel employs roughly 3,000 people—2,500 of whom have been hired since the start of the pandemic nearly three years ago. “That stat blows my mind,” Alcamo says.

To help lead the HR function at the growing company, FanDuel hired Alcamo as its chief people officer in April 2022. “As we hit that mark of 3,000 employees, we start stepping into the territory of what a larger organization needs—the scalable and global offerings that are different for a company of this size,” Alcamo says.

For example, Alcamo hired individuals for key senior roles the organization didn’t previously have, such as Corinne Bilerman as vice president of talent and development and Keita Young as head of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Alcamo and her team of 80 (and counting) also led the creation of more-robust programs for leadership development and employee recognition. As the company increases the number of managers among its ranks, the new leadership development pro-



gram will help them become more effective and inspirational in their roles, Alcamo says.

With the new recognition program, executives will acknowledge workers’ accomplishments across the company, and a tech platform will enable peer-to-peer recognitions and make the process less ad hoc.

“We live the company’s principle of ‘we say thank you’ every day,” Alcamo says. “But as we’re growing, we have to come up with ways to amplify those ‘thank-yous’ across the company.”

PUSHING THROUGH HARDSHIP

Even as FanDuel quickly hires people for technology, engineering, compliance and other positions,

Alcamo maintains a leadership approach that sees and treats employees based on more than simply the roles they fill.

“Tricia wants us to bring our whole selves to work, and she does the same,” Bilerman says.

As Alcamo puts it, “We’re all much more than our titles.”

Alcamo’s outlook has been shaped by her own life experiences. In 2014, she was diagnosed with cancer. At the time, she was a divorced mother of two kids ages 5 and 7. She underwent cancer treatment, including chemotherapy, for the subsequent 18 months. For Alcamo, it was crucial that her children witnessed her persistence and perseverance through adversity.



“Empathy for people, who have much more going on than you see on the surface, is a hallmark of my leadership.”

Colleagues such as Keita Young (center) point to Alcamo's innate ability to trust and learn from her teammates as one of her strongest management traits.

“I had two young kids, and it was important that I was still working as much as I was able—that they see me wrap a scarf around my head, put on high heels and go to work,” Alcamo says. “It was a signal to them that it would be OK, that as long as Mom still put on high heels and went to work, we'd get through this.”

She also credits the support of American Express, her employer at the time: “American Express gave me the ability to craft a path through that incredibly difficult time and supported me in every way,” she says. “That shaped who I am as a leader. Empathy for people, who have much more going on than you see on the surface, is a hallmark of my leadership.”

Alcamo's people-focused management style convinced FanDuel's CEO Amy Howe that she had found the right person to head the company's HR operations.

“I was looking for a chief people officer who listens, who can work collaboratively across the organization, has real empathy for employees and, importantly, can get stuff done,” Howe says. “I saw this in Tricia during our first discussion.”

GAINING CLARITY

Alcamo developed her ability to get stuff done at an early age. Her homemaker mother and her father, a college professor and textbook author, represented the first generation in their families to attend college.

“Both my parents came from very humble backgrounds—they grew up with very little means in the Bronx,” says Alcamo, who was raised on Long Island.

Her parents instilled a strong work ethic in Alcamo and her two older siblings. At age 11, Alcamo took her first job delivering newspapers on her bicycle. At age 14—“the minute I could get my working papers and not work in the rain”—she got a job in a retail stockroom.

Both of Alcamo's parents died of cancer—her mother when Alcamo was 15 and her father when she was in her 20s. For all its challenges, Alcamo's own illness also focused her attention on going after the kind of job she wanted most.

“It gave me clarity that I think was not there before,” she says. While Alcamo rose through the ranks during her almost 14 years at American Express, ultimately becoming vice president, she yearned to head an entire human resource function.

In 2016, she left American Express and joined Spectrum Enterprise, a provider of fiber technology, as vice president and later group vice president of HR, working directly for the company’s president.

“For the first time, I was responsible for developing and delivering the HR strategy for the business,” Alcamo says.

At Spectrum Enterprise, where she worked for close to six years before joining FanDuel, Alcamo noticed that relatively few women held senior-level roles. So she launched a program to develop female leaders that helped increase the number of female vice presidents at the company.

Alcamo considers that program

one of the top accomplishments of her HR career, which began in 1998. But she didn’t start out in HR.

LOVING THE WORK

After earning a bachelor’s in English from Princeton University in 1996, Alcamo joined Deloitte as a management consultant. “I wanted to be in business but didn’t exactly know what that meant,” she says, “so management consulting was a perfect fit.”

Two years later, Deloitte tapped Alcamo to help with an initiative to



Alcamo has played a key role as FanDuel moved from remote work to a hybrid approach in which teams decide when they will come into the New York City office to collaborate.

globalize the company's recruiting process and make it more competitive. For Alcamo, it was a defining moment.

"I just fell in love with this work that was people-focused but also tied closely to the company's strategic imperative," she says.

After a few months, Alcamo returned to client-focused consulting but knew her heart was in HR. After she voiced her professional passion to a mentor at Deloitte, the organization created a recruiting-focused

role for Alcamo in order to keep her with the organization.

A few years later, a mentor posed a simple question to Alcamo: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Alcamo knew the answer: chief people officer for a large company. The mentor wrote the names of four companies with strong HR reputations on a paper napkin and handed it to Alcamo. The mentor then advised her to find someone she knew at one of those companies to try and land a job.

Alcamo took that advice. She reached out to someone at American Express and joined the company in 2002, taking on an HR manager role for the first time.

LEADERSHIP TRAITS

As her career progressed, Alcamo gained valuable insights along the way. For one, she learned to surround herself with strong people leaders and trust them to lead their own teams. "As I began leading leaders, trusting my team to lead became more and more important," she says.

Bilerman has seen that firsthand. "Tricia lets her team use their exper-

tise to figure things out and make recommendations. She's interested in learning from the experts on her team," she says.

As Bilerman helped create FanDuel's new leadership development program, she recognized and appreciated that Alcamo didn't simply dictate a course of action—though she might have.

"She could have said, 'I've done this before; let's do that here,'" says Bilerman, who has known Alcamo since 2006 when they both worked for American Express. "But she listened to our ideas and then said, 'I've done something like this before, and here's one piece that's helpful to bring in.'"

Other leadership traits of Alcamo stand out among her colleagues.

"Once in a while in meetings, Tricia would reference nautical terms and sailing, so I had to ask, 'Where is all of that coming from?'" Howe says. "She told me she was a competitive sailor and she is teaching her kids to sail. I knew she was the right person to captain the FanDuel ship."

Competitive sailing requires focus and stamina, Alcamo says, "and those are tied into how I operate at work."

FanDuel will need Alcamo to help skipper not just its burgeoning employee population but also the still-evolving workplace. In 2022, FanDuel transitioned from remote work to a team-based hybrid approach in which teams decide when they come into the office to collaborate.

Alcamo predicts the where, when and how of work and collaboration will continue to evolve—whether it's in person, virtual, synchronous, asynchronous or various hybrid models.

"We've only scratched the surface of what the future of work looks like," Alcamo says. "HR has a role in leading that conversation." [HR](#)

Novid Parsi is a freelance writer based in St. Louis.

"I just fell in love with this work that was people-focused but also tied closely to the company's strategic imperative."

THE RIGHT MIX

A robust corporate culture isn't about perks. It's about how people are treated.

By Kate Rockwood

Illustrations by James Boast



When Italian pasta giant Barilla acquired a 178-employee Canadian pasta manufacturer last year, the employees at the smaller company were understandably concerned about what roles they would play in the new, massive organization.

Would they be forced to change their way of doing business? Lose their seniority? Lose their jobs altogether?

It might have been easier for Barilla, with its 8,000 employees,

to simply absorb the smaller Catelli staff without considering the differences in their workplace cultures. But that's not the message Barilla wanted to send.

"The most critical aspect was ensuring that these employees didn't feel lost in the mix—that they weren't just a number in this transition," says Laura Birk, vice president of

HR at Barilla America Inc., headquartered in Northbrook, Ill.

Barilla executives also admired how Catelli, previously a competitor, did business. It made sense to explore what pieces of the Catelli culture Barilla might want to incorporate into its own. And, at a time when companies are finding it tough to hire skilled employees, especially in manufacturing, Barilla wanted to keep as many Catelli employees as possible, Birk says.

As a result, Barilla's HR team worked hard to make the new employees feel welcomed and respected, relying on lessons learned from previous culture-building work at Barilla plants in New York and Iowa.

Immediately after the merger was announced in February 2021, Barilla's leaders held a town hall meeting with the new employees to answer questions. They also made key announcements to set a tone of fairness. For example, they said they would conduct an equal pay analysis for the new employees and financially invest in the Montreal plant they'd acquired from Catelli, the first major investment in the plant in 20 years.

"Addressing tough change questions—Will I lose my job? How will my position change?—proactively demonstrated our culture of transparency and feedback," Birk says. "I'm proud to share that we were able to keep retention high and turnover low during and after the merger."

Mergers are naturally a time when thoughts about a company's culture come to the forefront. But even absent a merger, workplace culture has become a focus for employers. It has taken on even greater importance since the pandemic



hit and the Great Resignation sent millions of employees heading for the exits in search of better pay, benefits and workplace flexibility. Meanwhile, 72 percent of executives are worried that the increase in remote work will take a toll on company culture, Mercer's 2022 Global Talent Trends Study found.

Company culture is truly the DNA of an organization—what it values, what it believes in and how willing it is to meet its own standards in day-to-day operations. While no company will ever be 100 percent consistent with its stated cultural values, and not every idea will be a winner, there are steps organizations can take to create and maintain a culture that makes the company a desirable place to work.

WHY CULTURE MATTERS

Too often, company culture is considered ancillary—the cherry on top of the “real” company objectives, or the fun perks and benefits that lure in top talent. But company culture shouldn't be separated from key business goals, according to Birk.

“An engaged, inclusive workforce is one and the same as a more productive workforce,” she says.

According to Sophie Theen, author of *The Soul of Startups: The Untold Stories of How Founders Affect Culture* (Wiley, 2022), a company that prioritizes its culture is one that “nurtures its employees, is committed to its mission and is resistant to challenges. It's a longtime sustainable company, not one that is just here for the good times.”

Culture, then, is not merely the vibe that exists as employees perform their jobs. Instead, it's the

nexus of what the company values and how those values drive performance and boost return on investment for the organization over the long run. And it's critical in attracting and retaining employees. A 2022 FlexJobs survey found that 62 percent of people who had recently quit their jobs said they did so because of a toxic culture.

“Simply put, culture is the workplace experiences that both shape beliefs and drive actions and results,” says Dustin Staley, managing director of health care at Culture Partners, a 50-employee consultancy based in California.

As a result, organizations need to

think in ways both human-oriented and business-centric.

“To shape culture, you need to create clarity around the most critical organizational results you'd like to achieve,” Staley says.

Companies hoping to reduce turnover should dive into what drives employee retention—and what drives employees away—and adjust benefits, workflow policies and management approaches accordingly. Organizations aiming for a greater variety of perspectives will want to evaluate their hiring practices and decide if a more diverse collection of internal voices could shake up the way key decisions are made.



CULTURE COUNTS

How U.S. company culture stacks up.

66% of executives believe culture is more important than a company's business strategy or operations model.

ONSITE

REMOTE

HYBRID

37% of onsite employees say their company culture has improved since the pandemic, compared with **45%** of remote workers and **44%** of hybrid workers who say the same.

Source: 2022 Organizational Culture Research Report, Quantum Workplace.



‘Words on paper or the lobby wall mean nothing if they are just words.’

SUSAN HOSTETTER, SHRM-CP

The bottom line is that “culture is not an add-on,” says Jason Barger, author of *Breathing Oxygen: How Positive Leadership Gives Life to Winning Cultures* (Amplify, 2022). “Culture is everything—the greatest competitive advantage organizations have to retain, attract and develop talent.”

WHAT’S THE GOAL?

The first step to define company culture is for an organization to determine its philosophy. The natural starting point is identifying the organization’s deepest values. There’s a good chance most organizations have already defined their values through mission or values statements or even in job ads.

If an organization doesn’t have a list of company values, now is the time to create one. These values should outline how the company wants to treat its employees, how the company wants to be perceived as a brand, how employees are expected to represent themselves and how employees should feel working for the company.

Ideally, this would be a joint effort, with employees contributing ideas. Small task forces, town hall meetings or quick pulse surveys can all help employers gather employee feedback. More involvement means more buy-in, says Susan Hostetter, SHRM-CP, executive vice president for human resources at TAB Bank in Ogden, Utah. It also helps close the divide between what company leaders *think* employees want and what they actually want.

In addition, organizations should set goals for constant improvement. Goals can range from foundational to more-ordinary day-to-day ideals, and they should include the specific steps necessary to achieve them.

Barilla, for example, set a goal to promote better work/life balance for its employees. To help achieve that, the company established a Digital Day—a day when the company ensures employees have the techni-

cal help and tools they need to make hybrid work more effective. While Barilla provides support in this area year-round, once a year it becomes the day’s entire focus.

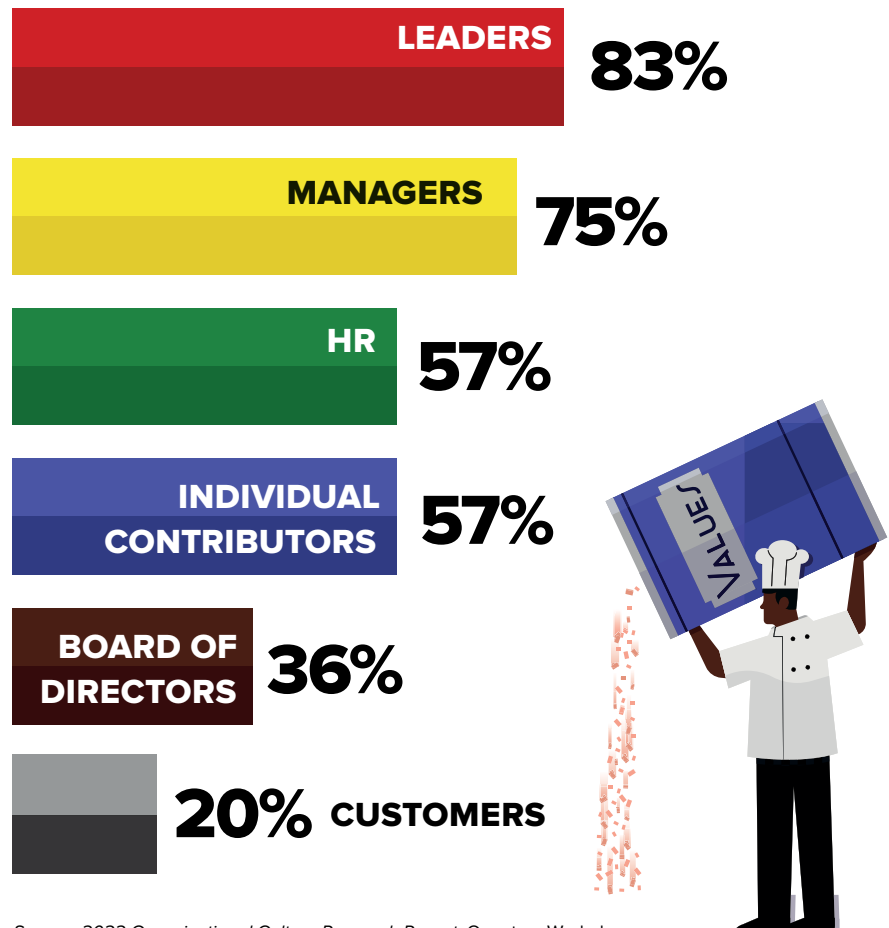
Of course, it’s also critical for companies to back up any words with actions. If workers are constantly being pinged with questions while on vacation, an organization’s “time off means time off” policy won’t ring true. A company’s real culture is reinforced every day based on the dozens of cues that management sends to employees, all of which teach them how to exist within the organization.

“Company culture isn’t created by offering free lunches or ping-pong tables,” Hostetter says. “It is how employees feel within the social norms at the company—what behavior is acceptable and understood by employees.”

For their part, employees say the top three areas where they experience their company’s culture are the mission or values statement, employee recognition or celebrations, and the approach to employee performance, according to Quantum Workplace’s *2022 Organizational Culture Research Report*. Something as simple as announcing promotions

WHOSE JOB IS IT?

Who do U.S. employees think is responsible for creating company culture?



Source: 2022 Organizational Culture Research Report, Quantum Workplace.



‘Building a corporate culture requires a combination of immense patience and relentless dedication.’

LAURA BIRK

and lateral transfers can help with employee retention, Hostetter says.

“If employees know their growth is within their control, they will seek opportunities within your organization to expand and they won’t have to leave the organization,” she adds.

It’s up to companies to decide which signals they most want to send about their culture and how they can be consistent across the organization. For example, if they want to send the message that they prioritize their employees’ mental health and time away from the office, they need to reinforce that belief in writing and policies. That could be as simple as requiring every manager to designate a “support” employee (or themselves) as backup when another employee is on vacation.

Inconsistency is among the major barriers of workplace culture creation. If one manager maintains an easy, relaxed vibe during team meetings while another demands detailed status reports and chides those who have fallen behind, a unified company culture doesn’t exist. Company culture can and must leave room for different work styles, but top leadership needs to be clear about what types of behavior are encouraged and what kinds are unacceptable. Or, as Hostetter puts it, “Words on paper or the lobby wall mean nothing if they are just words.”



THE ROLE OF HR

One of the greatest misconceptions about corporate culture is that creating and maintaining it falls within HR’s exclusive purview—a “soft skill” that exists outside the realm of strategy and workflow. This is patently untrue, Staley says. Culture shifts should not be HR’s sole responsibility.

“HR leaders should engage [company] leaders to own culture management,” he says, since the ultimate benefit of a robust culture is a stronger company as a whole.

But Staley also acknowledges that HR professionals should play a major role in shaping workplace culture and reinforcing it through employee interaction and management coaching. HR can think of itself as a driver of management buy-in, drawing a clear link between culture preservation and greater business success. HR also greatly influences company culture by ensuring that company systems—hiring practices, promotions, rewards programs, evaluations—are fair and match the company’s intended culture, Staley says.

“They should also be looking for any systems that contradict the intended culture and voicing necessary adjustments,” he adds.

Another essential task for HR: Gathering intel from folks on the ground. HR leaders should regularly solicit feedback, listen to that feedback, assess feedback trends, create action plans to address the input, and

close the loop by telling employees how the company reacted or plans to react to their feedback, Hostetter recommends. Employees want to do their jobs well and want to be heard, she adds. Ask them what they need and they’ll be happy to share.

“The worst thing to do is ask for feedback and then do nothing with it,” she says.

MERGING CULTURES

Mergers and acquisitions can create complex challenges when it comes to culture creation. Barger points out that doing nothing and hoping for the best is never the answer.

“When nothing proactive is done, the culture that wins out is the one that came into the merger with the greatest clarity and alignment on how they operate,” Barger says.

If processes and values don’t match up between the merged organizations, it can lead to confusion and mass departures of talent.

That’s why culture should never be left to chance. Staley learned this lesson firsthand when Culture Partners worked with a health care tech company that purchased a smaller organization.

“The purchasing company had a strong company culture,” Staley says. “But they recognized that the smaller company also had a strong culture with strengths they did not have, and vice versa. For example, the smaller organization was more nimble and able to pivot. They were able to bring



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THE COST OF BAD CULTURE

Poor work culture contributes to employees' decisions to leave, according to survey results from 9,464 workers in 12 countries. Employees who have actively looked for a new job include:



64%

of those who rated their workplace culture as "poor."



43%

of those who rated their culture as "average."



22%

of those who rated their culture as "good."

Source: 2022 Global Culture Research Report, SHRM.

the best of both cultures together and create a stronger culture overall."

During the merger between Barilla and Catelli, Birk and other leaders relied on employee resource groups (ERGs) to help new employees feel welcomed and get to know their co-workers. These employee-led groups are usually formed around a shared background or interest such as gender, race, location, hobbies or volunteer activities. Barilla's ERGs are very popular—60 percent of salaried employees are actively involved in one, Birk notes.

At the first town hall meeting with former Catelli employees, Barilla leaders explained how the company's ERGs worked and how to get involved in one.

"We're consistently providing forums for community bonding," Birk says.

REMOTE-WORK CHALLENGES

While it might seem that working in separate locations could weaken a strong workplace culture, that's not a given.

When a company has a strong, positive culture, having remote employees usually doesn't make it more challenging to sustain the company values, Then says. For example, if a company has transparency and honesty at its core, employees can

continue to speak and share freely even in a virtual setting.

The challenge, then, is creatively shifting approaches to maintain the existing foundations of that culture. Sometimes doing so is as simple as making time for small talk.

"We try to take a few minutes at the beginning of a team meeting to share personal stories, like we would when we were gathering in a room waiting for everyone to arrive," Hostetter says. "We all need to remember that we are human and want to feel connected to others."

Birk acknowledges that it may be easier to fall through the cracks when working remotely, and says this calls for companies, including HR leaders, to work harder to keep employees engaged. That's especially key considering disengaged employees in the U.S. are 3.8 times more likely than engaged ones to cite company culture as their reason for leaving a job, according to the Quantum Workplace report.


"When I'm in the office, it's easy for me to sit next to someone at lunch who is new or might still be building relationships," Birk says. "I can't do this when I'm at home. That's why with hybrid and remote work, it's more important than ever to have employees involved in programs that

promote and facilitate connections with colleagues."

At Barilla, that involves affiliation groups for employees of color and those who identify as LGBTQ+, along with informal Microsoft Teams channels for employees to chat about everything from books to family vacations. It may not be an office happy hour, but it does help foster connections.

Top leaders are expected to participate in social programming events, as well. This fall, Barilla America's president, Jean-Pierre Comte, jointly hosted a Hispanic Heritage Month event with an employee of Puerto Rican descent to talk about Puerto Rican heritage and cooking.

At the end of the day, as with any major managerial change, crafting a strong and successful company culture takes time, collaboration and a willingness to be honest about the state of the organization.

"The biggest takeaway and the biggest challenge are one and the same: Building a corporate culture requires a combination of immense patience and relentless dedication," Birk says. "It happens in progressive steps, and there are no shortcuts." 


Kate Rockwood is a freelance writer based in Chicago.

F A R & W I D E

In their search for talent,
small companies find
internship programs help
attract future employees.

By Jennifer Thomas





It's hard to believe a town of 14,082 people an hour's drive from Wichita, Kan., the nearest big city, would be a natural draw for aspiring young accountants.

But that's exactly what's happened in McPherson, Kan., thanks to an 85-employee public accounting firm's internship program. This year, the company has roughly one intern for every five employees.

Leaders at fast-growing Swindoll, Janzen, Hawk & Loyd (SJHL) are doubling down on internships as a way to grow their talent pipeline, cement relationships with local colleges, and boost the geographic and economic diversity of their staff. And so far, they have an impressive track record.

The company has attracted interns from Japan, Africa and Russia and has watched former interns soar in their post-graduation careers. But perhaps the greatest testament to the program's success is that some participants stay long enough to take on full-time leadership roles.

"Two of our current partners were interns for us," says Tamie Prieb, SHRM-CP, SJHL's marketing and HR manager.

Transitioning stellar interns into star employees is especially useful in today's tight hiring market. Many employers are struggling to find skilled labor, and while the rate of people quitting their jobs has slowed, it's still sky-high. In August 2022, 4.2 million people left their jobs, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported. That compares to 3.5 million per month just prior to the pandemic.

In 2020, the public health crisis caused more than half of employers to cancel their internship programs, according to a survey by Glassdoor. Now, more than two years later, internships are making a comeback. When queried earlier this year, 200 large companies said they were planning to boost their intern hiring by an average of 22.6 percent in 2022, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers' (NACE's) *2022 Internship & Co-op Survey Report*. Internships can be an especially important resource for smaller companies that feel the pinch of staff shortages even more acutely than larger organizations do.

Yet smaller businesses can face obstacles to attracting interns. After all, they don't have the huge marketing budgets of the bigger guys. They also might lack the bandwidth to run an internship program. But in most cases, it's worth trying to overcome these challenges to get a program going.

“Small businesses may be surprised that they can gain a great relationship, hire their next employee and change the trajectory of their business with interns,” says Stefanie B. Lomax, SHRM-CP, president and CEO of strategy at HRPro4You in Laurel, Md. “It’s a great way to grow.”

BUILD A FRAMEWORK

To get a successful internship program up and running, employers should first focus on two things: enabling slow, smart growth that gives companies time to train their interns, and putting a support system in place before the first intern walks through the door.

Interns should be treated like any other new employee, which means they should take part in the onboarding process. That way, they can learn the basics, such as how to access the company’s network and use their equipment, says Latha Ramesh, vice president of talent and culture at NetImpact Strategies Inc., a 300-employee IT services and consulting company headquartered in Falls Church, Va.

Because this might be an intern’s first office job, it’s a good idea to be thorough, Ramesh advises.

“So many of the processes and benefits are new and require explaining,” she says.

It’s also important to designate a point person—or point people—to officially oversee the internship program. One mistake SJHL made early on was assuming that team members would ask interns directly to help with tasks when needed. That didn’t happen.

“Everyone had access to the interns, but they didn’t grab them,” Prieb says.

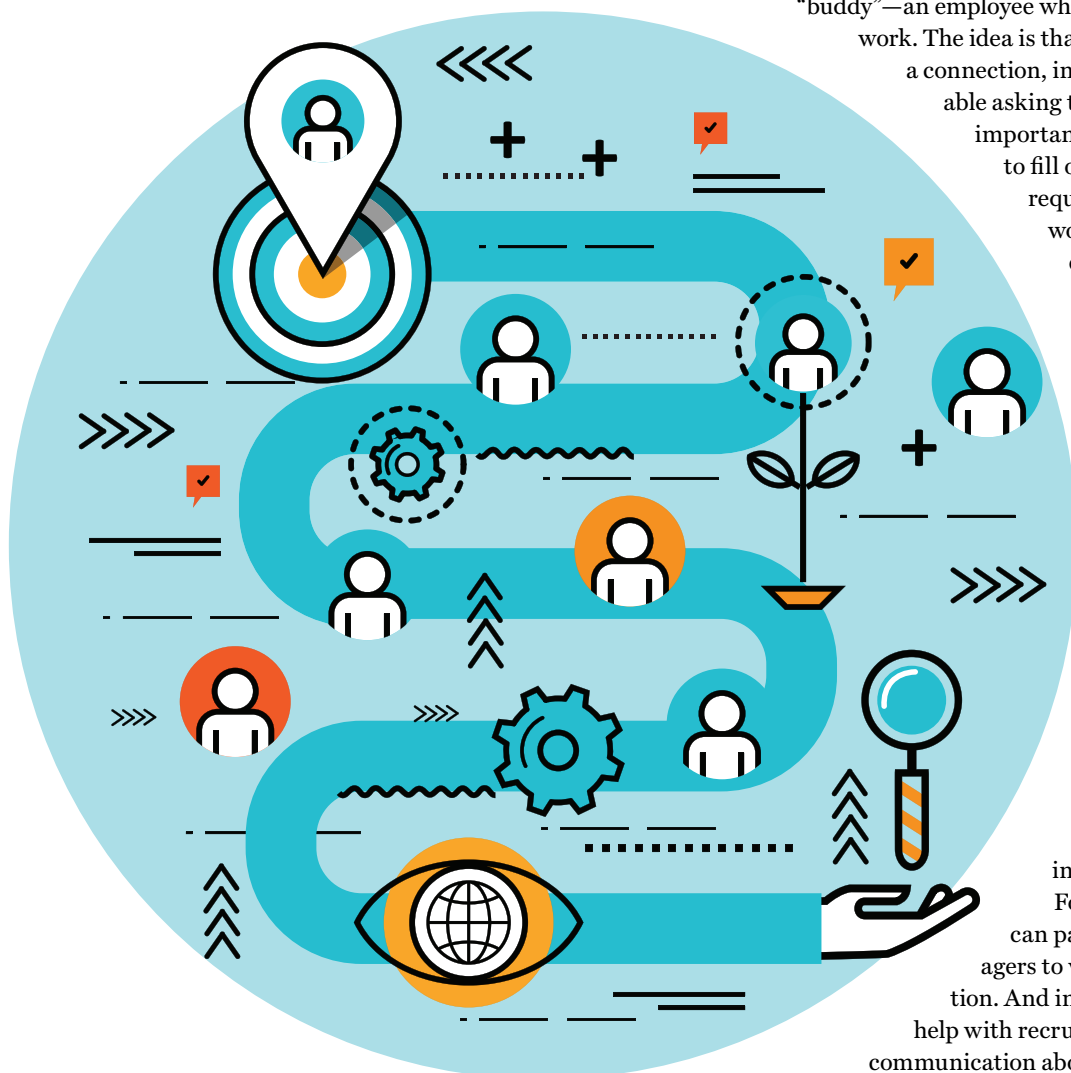
Once the leadership team realized it needed to have a formal process in place for assigning work to the interns, it assigned a staff member to be responsible for recruiting interns and overseeing the program. She matches each intern to one SJHL manager who assigns the intern work and takes charge of the intern’s development. That match is based on an intern’s skill set, interests and personality, as well as the needs of each department or manager.

SJHL also now pairs each intern with an onboarding “buddy”—an employee who doesn’t assign them work. The idea is that after the two establish a connection, interns will feel comfortable asking their buddy small but

important questions, such as how to fill out their time sheet or request a trash can for their workspace—two real-life examples Prieb shared.

Depending on how many interns a company has, and the size of the staff, it’s also critical to not overburden any one employee with program oversight, says John Bates, SHRM-CP, talent supervisor for INTRUST Bank, based in Wichita, Kan. He recommends appointing several team members to take ownership of different aspects of the internship program.

For example, recruiters can partner with hiring managers to work on intern selection. And internal marketers can help with recruiting tools and external communication about the program. It’s also





important to choose managers who have previously shown an interest in mentoring and career development coaching to work with the interns, Ramesh says.

BE CREATIVE

To compete against companies with bigger marketing budgets, more name recognition and potentially more-attractive locations, smaller companies need to be flexible and creative with their internship outreach.

At SJHL, that has meant thinking younger. While most companies target college juniors and seniors for internships, the company expanded its outreach to include college freshmen and sophomores and sometimes high school students.

Being flexible with timing can also pay off. Few accounting firms look for interns over the summer months, so focusing its attention on its summer internship program gives SJHL a chance to snap up young talent sooner and train them ahead of the busy accounting season.

“Even if they can’t help us during that busy season, you keep in contact with them,” Prieb says. “Maybe they’ll think of you later.”

Colleges can be powerful internship partners. In addition to having a steady supply of young talent, they’re

Interns and employees at accounting firm Swindoll, Janzen, Hawk & Loyd in McPherson, Kan., enjoy a fun activity on the first Friday of every month.

eager to place their students in quality internships. Forging partnerships with colleges can be done in many ways.

NetImpact Strategies, for example, has relationships with university recruiting partners both near and far

from its office. The company also posts internship opportunities on Handshake, an internship

and entry-level-job recruiting app used by many college students and schools. Meanwhile, SJHL employees often volunteer to help local college students with mock interview training. One staff member even taught at a local college for an entire semester and then donated her stipend back to the school.

“Treat the college like you’re building a client,” Prieb says.

Companies should also boast about what sets them apart from competitors. SJHL, for example, includes a mentorship program as a value-add to its internship program. In addition, each intern walks away with professional headshots.

Highlighting the specific upsides of interning at a smaller organization is also a good idea, especially since many students intentionally seek out such opportunities, Prieb says.

“A true benefit of interning with a small business is you

‘Small businesses may be surprised that they can gain a great relationship, hire their next employee and change the trajectory of their business with interns. It’s a great way to grow.’

STEFANIE B. LOMAX, SHRM-CP



get to see more,” she says. “You may get to do outsourced accounting ... [and] work with a client. If you go to a big company, you’re in a very specific department and don’t get the full grasp of everything else.”

OFFER MEANINGFUL WORK

Before interns walk in the door, companies should have a plan outlining their work assignments and how they will be exposed to different aspects of the business. Be sure to give them “real” work, not work that feels like an afterthought. Also, involve them in staff and client meetings.

At INTRUST Bank, many managers assign interns a capstone project that they work on for the length of their internship.

“The project gives them real-world experience researching and developing a recommendation that is then presented to their management team at the end of the program,” Bates says. “And it provides an excellent resume and portfolio boost.”

Not every task or project an intern works on needs to be high-level, though. Filing paperwork or doing data entry is just fine from time to time, Lomax says. But even

REMOTE INTERNSHIPS THE PROS AND CONS

The pandemic prompted some companies to transform their internship programs to virtual experiences—and there are advantages and disadvantages to doing so.

One of the big upsides of remote internships, especially for smaller employers, is a wider and more diverse pool of candidates to draw from. For students, eliminating the need to relocate can make an internship financially feasible. Otherwise, the expenses can be a sticking point, since about half of employers don’t offer relocation assistance to interns, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers’ (NACE’s) *2022 Internship & Co-op Survey Report*. And an intern’s pay or stipend often doesn’t come close to covering living expenses in costly cities.

Still, only 2.2 percent of employers surveyed earlier this year said they planned to offer fully virtual internships in 2022, NACE reported. Instead, nearly half (46.8 percent) planned on offering hybrid internships that blend virtual and in-person experiences.

Fully virtual internships certainly aren’t for everyone. Research from Glassdoor found that 70 percent of students with remote internships in 2021

didn’t enjoy the experience. Many said they found it tough to communicate and connect with their employers, which is why it takes a lot of planning to make a remote internship program work.

Latha Ramesh, vice president of talent and culture at NetImpact Strategies Inc., an IT services and consulting company based in Falls Church, Va., has worked with both hybrid and remote interns. To ensure that interns get the most from a remote or hybrid program, she recommends that companies:

- Require participants to keep cameras on during online meetings so they can see each other.
- Include remote interns in social events, whether in person or online.
- Schedule regular meetings to check on interns’ progress and answer questions.

At accounting firm Swindoll, Janzen, Hawk & Loyd, based in McPherson, Kan., business leaders decided that a fully remote internship isn’t

ideal. Some of their interns are onsite for their entire internship, while others’ work locations vary depending on the season.

“What really works for us in this small town is to have interns start in the summer in person, and then we set them up to work remotely for us starting in the fall,” says Tamie Prieb, SHRM-CP, the firm’s marketing and HR manager.

That arrangement offers the best of both worlds. The company can train and connect with its interns in person, but by offering a remote portion of the internship, it’s able to hang on to more of its interns in the fall. —J.T.



then, companies need to explain to interns why the work is important.

“If they’re working on documents that need to be filed or organized, what are the documents for? Why do those specific documents exist, and how are they used in the business?” Lomax says. “Creating a more meaningful experience helps put the work they’re doing in context and provides them with a better opportunity to ask questions and understand the business need for what they’re there to do.”

While companies don’t have to ensure that every second of an intern’s day is planned out—after all, occasional slow times are part of the real working world—it’s important to identify work that can be done when there’s a lull. SJHL created an online spreadsheet where managers can list lower-priority projects, Prieb says, so interns looking for something to do can scroll through and grab something.

“It’s OK to think through projects for interns that are due at a later date,” she says. “Your nice-to-have project is great for an intern.”

At the end of the day, the more opportunities an intern has for development and networking, the better.

“If you offer internships where interns don’t know what they will do from day to day, are only given menial tasks to do or end up fending for themselves, no one wins and top talent will avoid your program,” Bates says.

GATHER FEEDBACK

A successful internship program is one that benefits both the company and the interns. Small businesses can use interns to augment their staff and make connections with talented potential employees. Ideally, interns walk away with a “better understanding of their chosen career path options, industry connections and knowing what it’s like to work in a professional environment,” Bates says.

To continue to improve the program, get feedback from interns, managers, and even recruiters or college partners. Poll managers and interns about whether the time and energy they invested in the program was worth it, Bates advises. What was done well? What could be done better? As the internship comes to an end, ask managers what they see as the next step.

“Do they plan to extend the internship? Make a job offer? Consider the intern for a future role?” he says.

Calculating how many eligible interns were hired as full-time employees is a common method used by HR professionals to prove a program’s benefits to business leaders. In 2021, the average conversion rate for interns was 51.8 percent, according to NACE. To determine the



‘If you offer internships where interns don’t know what they will do from day to day, are only given menial tasks to do or end up fending for themselves, no one wins and top talent will avoid your program.’

JOHN BATES, SHRM-CP

conversion rate, divide the number of acceptances by the number of eligible interns (those graduating and looking for full-time work) and multiply by 100.

Businesses that find they rarely want to hire their interns, or that have interns who rarely accept their job offers, likely have a problem.

It’s also smart to stay in touch with former interns as a way to encourage them to return. SJHL sends care packages to current and former interns during their college midterm exams. This personal approach can set small businesses apart and help them compete for interns and employees.

At the same time, even if an intern doesn’t wind up eventually working for the organization, an internship program can still be a boon for a company of any size.

“At the very least, you are helping support early talent in your community,” Bates says. “And if you do it right, you’re creating advocates at universities and in the community about your company and your internship program.” [IR](#)

Jennifer Thomas is a freelance writer based in Chicago.

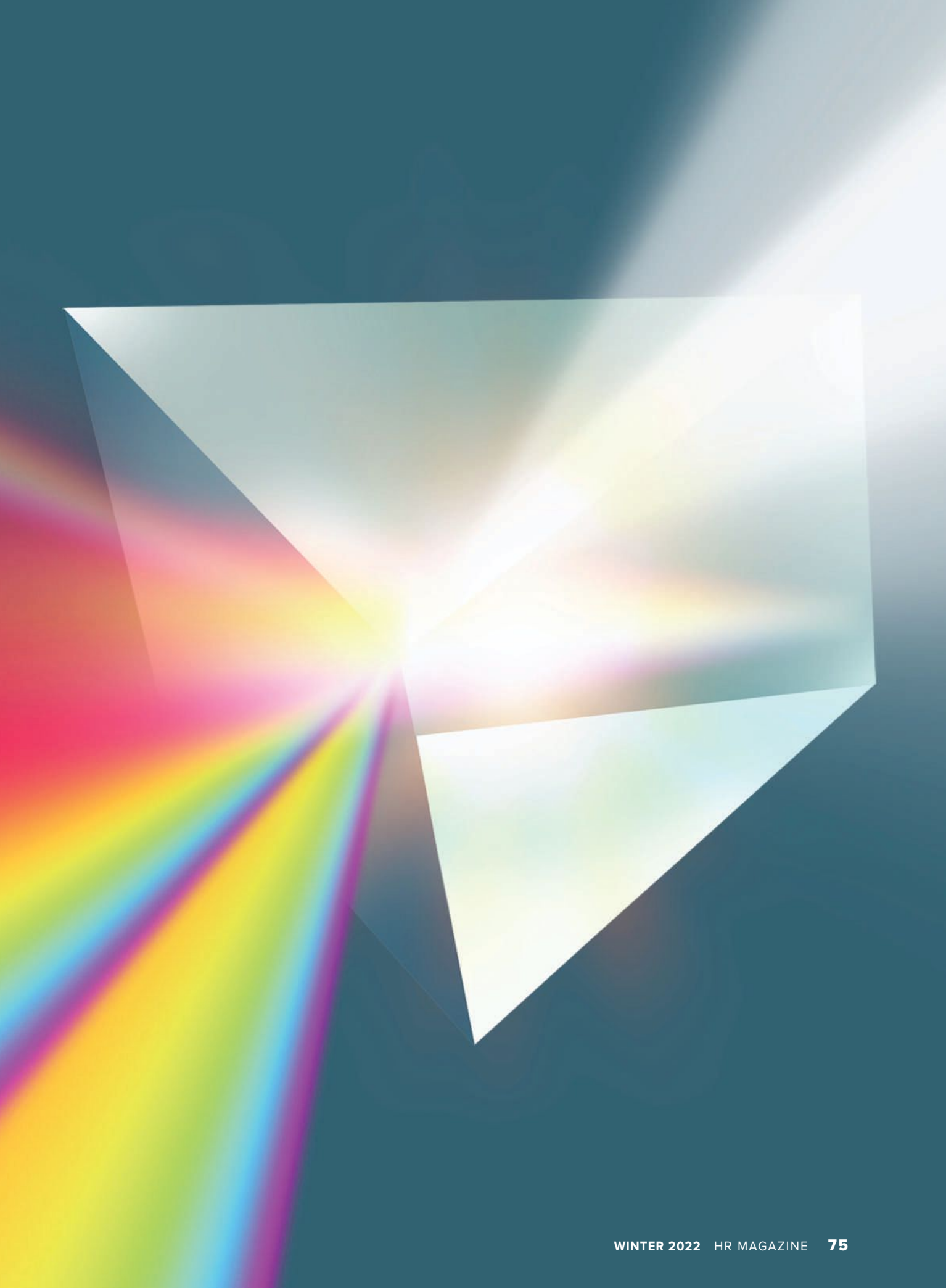


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COMING OUT AT WORK

True equality for LGBTQ employees is an ongoing struggle, but employers can help.

By Roy Maurer



I'm going to tell them that I'm gay, thought Jeff Nally, SHRM-SCP, as he neared the final step in the hiring process for a job he really wanted. It was 2002, and Nally had been working in human resources for about a decade when he applied to be the director of HR for one of the largest air filter manufacturing companies in the world. The company was based in the Midwest, with locations across rural America, and exhibited what Nally considered to be a conservative culture.

As Nally had proceeded through several rounds of interviews and assessments, he hadn't received any signals that he would be welcomed as a gay man, but he hadn't gotten any indications that he would be discriminated against, either. Now the job was his, conditional upon an informal meeting with

the president of the company, to be had over breakfast at a local diner.

"I thought to myself, 'I'm going to be honest,'" Nally says, recalling the moment he sat down across from the older, austere military veteran. "As I introduced myself, I said, 'Before we order breakfast, I want you to know that this is my family.' I showed him a picture of me and Bob, the man who is now my husband, and our adopted son. I said, 'These are the most important people in my life. I really do want this job, but if who I am and who I love is going to be a problem, then we can have breakfast and talk about something else, but it's not my intent to put myself in an uncomfortable position.'"

The older man looked at the picture,

Mikal Kelaidis says he was worried for years that revealing his true self at work would hurt his career.



grinned and handed it back, saying, “I promise you this is not going to be a problem. You and your family are welcome here.”

“It was total relief, like a big weight had been lifted,” Nally says. “And I felt confident that even though I knew I would have to keep coming out as I began leading HR at the company, that the president had my back and supported me. And that promise turned out to be true.”

Nally knows that not all coming-out stories go as well as his did.

“I have learned from listening to others how big a risk it was for me to do what I did,” he says. “Everyone who has told me about coming out at work has shared the universal fear and hope we feel in that moment. It’s the same whether people are coming out at major inflection points in their career or in micro ways every day.”

A PERSONAL PREDICAMENT, DESPITE PROGRESS

Great strides have been made for LGBTQ equality in the workplace in the two decades since Nally, now the chief coaching officer and CHRO at CoachSource, a leadership coaching company in Franklin Lakes, N.J., made his decisive stand at the diner.

The U.S. Supreme Court made discrimination against workers based on their gender identity or sexual orientation illegal in June 2020. On the corporate level, employers are more supportive than ever of the LGBTQ community. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) counted 842 employers achieving a perfect score and 1,271 companies actively participating in its 2022 corporate equality index, which benchmarks participants on their LGBTQ-inclusive

benefits, policies and practices. When the report was launched in 2002, there were 300 participants and just 13 organizations were awarded top scores.

But absolute equality for LGBTQ employees is an ongoing struggle, and coming out at work is an exhausting, everyday reality for those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, nonbinary or queer.

“Things have changed so much for the better over the last 20 years that I’ve been in the workforce,” says Mike Spinale, SHRM-SCP, vice president of people at Blue Lava, an information security management platform in Menlo Park, Calif. “I’ve only been met with acceptance. But while my anxiety has waned over the years, it is still there, even today. I still size people up when I meet them and try to determine if they’re going to be OK with me being gay. I wonder, ‘Will they think differently about me?’ or ‘Will my career be adversely affected?’”

Similar fears previously kept Mikal Kelaidis, currently a sales development manager at Limble CMMS, a maintenance software company in Salt Lake City, caught between two identities: “a work Mikal and a home Mikal.”

Out to friends and family a decade ago, Kelaidis was worried that being his true self at work would hurt his career.

“I just had a fear that people have biases they can’t control, and I didn’t want there to be any reason, consciously or subconsciously, that I was held back or not promoted,” he says.

Having left an in-person work environment and bounced around in remote, contract jobs during the pandemic, Kelaidis was forced to face his fears again when he accepted a

7.1%

of Americans identify as LGBTQ, according to a 2021 Gallup poll, though the percentage is higher for Generation Z (20.8%) and Millennials (10.5%).



‘I must decide on the spot when someone asks, “What did you do over the weekend?” whether to include my wife in my response or not.’

DIANA ELLSWORTH

Drawing on their personal experience, Katrina Kibben founded a consultancy that focuses on removing bias from the candidate experience.



full-time, onsite role at Workstream, a hiring platform and mobile app designed for the hourly workforce, in early 2022.

“I was nervous but excited,” he says. “I wasn’t sure if I would, again, keep my identity hidden and try to keep my personal life and work life separate or just remove the mask and speak truthfully.”

Being hidden takes a personal and professional toll.

“It’s hard when everyone else gets to talk about their wife, or their husband, or an engagement, and you just smile and nod even though you have someone you love at home, too,” Kelaidis says. “The nagging fear of getting exposed creates a very busy inner monologue that kept me from bonding or creating deep, meaningful relationships with the people I work with, and, in hindsight, impacted my performance and overall happiness.”

Kelaidis’ fate was decided in a moment, when his new manager at Workstream, in their first one-on-one, asked about any relationships in his life. Without thinking, he opened up about his partner.

“Telling the truth was vulnerable and scary, but I knew it was the right thing to do,” he says. “And it felt really good. There is no more work Mikal and home Mikal. There is just Mikal.”

CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES

Despite the prevalence of corporate commitments to inclusion and increasing societal acceptance of LGBTQ people, 46 percent of LGBTQ individuals remain closeted at work, according to the HRC.

One reason is because coming out is often an act of tremendous personal courage. And prior to coming out, first accepting and understanding one’s own sexual orientation or gender identity is a gradual process.

Katrina Kibben, who now identifies as transgender and nonbinary, first came out as gay to their mother in 2001, at the age of 16. The CEO and founder of Three Ears Media, a consultancy in Longmont, Colo., focused on removing bias from the candidate experience, Kibben is an in-demand speaker and out and proud influencer. But they spent their early career in sales and marketing roles, covering the truth about who they were. →

HOW EMPLOYERS CAN BE ALLIES

Getting to true inclusion for LGBTQ employees requires much more than an anti-discrimination policy in the handbook or rainbow branding each year for Pride month.

Companies can make big changes, such as implementing inclusive benefits and policies for LGBTQ employees and intentionally recruiting for LGBTQ representation. HR can also take smaller steps like including personal pronouns in communications and HR systems and providing employee training to decrease the frequency of microaggressions such as automatically asking women about husbands or boyfriends and men about wives or girlfriends. Other steps include the following:

Show support. Whether large or small, visible expressions of support let everyone know that you back your LGBTQ employees. “Symbols and signals are really important,” says Jeff Nally, SHRM-SCP, chief coaching officer and CHRO at CoachSource, a leadership coaching company in Franklin Lakes, N.J. “Even having a rainbow flag flying all year round or having the workplace marked as a safe space with an LGBTQ symbol speaks volumes.”


Employers can sponsor Pride events, partner with relevant nonprofits, be conscious about how people are represented in marketing materials, and encourage LGBTQ employees and allies to share their stories.

Mikal Kelaidis, a sales development manager at Limble CMMS, a maintenance software company in Salt Lake City, adds that any messaging expressing understanding of or allyship with LGBTQ workers is helpful, whether it’s on social media, in company branding or in the employee handbook.

“When talking to candidates, recruiters can speak to how the company supports LGBTQ employees, along with diversity and inclusion in general, by tying that support to values,” he says.

‘BEING PART OF A SUPPORTIVE GROUP AT WORK LIKE AN ERG IS A HUGE LIFELINE FOR MANY IN THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY.’

ELLA SLADE



Nally says organizations that are truly successful at achieving inclusion consistently demonstrate their support—at town halls and quarterly business updates, as well as in everyday interactions with employees. “Little things mean a lot,” he says. “But they’ve got to be more than just tokens. They must be backed up by action.”

Commitments to inclusion must be more than surface level, agrees Mike Spinale, SHRM-SCP, vice president of people at Blue Lava, an information security management platform in Menlo Park, Calif. “Make the steps to be included on the HRC’s [Human Rights Campaign’s] corporate equality index. Be an advocate for legislation like the Equality Act, which would amend the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual orientation and gender identity in employment.”

Empower affinity groups. They go by various names, but employee resource groups (ERGs) for LGBTQ employees and allies are a central element of an inclusive workplace.

“Being part of a supportive group at work like an ERG is a huge lifeline for many in the LGBTQ community,” says Ella Slade, who leads worldwide LGBTQ inclusion activities at IBM. “Being able to tap into a community of other LGBTQ people is so important.”

Liberty Mutual’s Pride@Liberty ERG was founded in 2014 and has more than 3,500 members. “The group engages members through programming topics like career development and the unique lived experiences of LGBTQ people of color,” says Ron Oppenheim, director of marketing at Liberty Mutual and national co-chair of Pride@Liberty. The group’s podcast, called Proudcast, amplifies their stories and highlights how the LGBTQ community intersects with others, he says.

Data-sharing platform Splunk’s ERGs are so effective because they’re well-funded from the top, says Tony Vincent, senior manager of global partner strategy at the San Francisco-based company and leader of its Pride group. Splunk’s Pride ERG focuses on social support of the LGBTQ community and also helps with sourcing talent, leading trainings and making recommendations to leadership, says Roldy Leyva, chief diversity officer at Splunk. All the ERGs welcome allies, and each one has a C-suite sponsor.

Jon Muñoz, chief diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) officer at strategy and technology consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton in McLean, Va., says much of the company’s progress on LGBTQ inclusion—which includes accomplishments

‘IF THE MANAGERS AREN’T MODELING INCLUSIVE ACTIONS AND AREN’T FOSTERING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, THEN DE&I GOALS WILL NOT BE MET.’

BRYCE CELOTTO

such as being recognized for 12 consecutive years with a perfect score on the HRC corporate equality index—began with the creation of resource groups in the 1990s.

The company’s LGBTQ resource group is “aligned with the firmwide DE&I strategy and action plan, provides support to the talent acquisition function, builds support and programming for engagement and retention, does volunteerism outreach, manages some external partnerships, and stays very involved in support of the community overall,” Muñoz says.

ERGs can be valuable resources to support LGBTQ employees, but only if they’re resourced and funded and ERG leaders are given the autonomy they need, says Bryce Celotto, founder of Swarm Strategy, a DE&I consulting firm in Charlotte, N.C.

“The companies that treat ERGs as social clubs or add-ons without the appropriate budget can do more harm than good and increase the level of burnout among employees trying to support the community,” he says. “They must be treated as real organizational priorities.”

Provide education. Many people want to be allies of their LGBTQ colleagues but may have questions and feel curious to learn more. And some business leaders are still wondering why it matters if someone can bring their authentic self to work.

“The ‘why’ must be addressed before the ‘what’ and the ‘how,’ ” says Josh Saterman, CEO and founder of Saterman Connect, a consulting firm in New York City that supports HR leaders with DE&I strategies, professional coaching and leadership development.

“So when someone on the team comes out, team members can feel more comfortable and prepared to move from bystander to upstander,” Saterman says. “Education provides moments of recognition and acknowledgment that are powerful. Creating a welcoming, inclusive environment begins with education.”

Celotto adds that making sure middle managers—the people responsible for the day-to-day implementation of DE&I practices—are held accountable for modeling a culture of inclusivity is what often gets lost. “You can have leadership buy-in, trans-inclusive health care and the best ERGs, but if the managers aren’t modeling inclusive actions and aren’t fostering psychological safety, then DE&I goals will not be met.”

Offer inclusive benefits and policies. This is often where the rubber meets the road—where commitment to inclusion goes beyond well-meaning statements and symbols.

“A foundational piece to supporting the LGBTQ community is providing benefits tailored to include LGBTQ employees,” Oppenheim says. “When we consider policies at Liberty Mutual, we recognize that families come in a variety of forms. From health insurance benefits such as gender-affirming care or adoption and surrogacy benefits that do not require a medical diagnosis of infertility, to parental-leave policies that are inclusive of all, our policies reflect the multidimensionality of our employees and their relationships and families.”

Muñoz proudly shares that Booz Allen’s milestones of inclusion go back decades: a full suite of benefits for LGBTQ employees in 1997, family-leave programs for LGBTQ families in 1998 and gender transition benefits in 2010.

Associated Bank, Wisconsin’s largest bank holding company, headquartered in Green Bay, is another HRC perfect score recipient. The gender transition support Associated provides was critical to Elizabeth Byers, a product analyst and assistant vice president at the company, who underwent gender-confirmation surgery in December 2021.

“When I was on the cusp of coming out at Associated back in 2018, I was apprehensive, nervous and scared,” Byers says. “I didn’t know of anyone else who had ever come out as trans at Associated and wasn’t exactly sure how it would go. It was the biggest leap of faith I’ve ever taken.”

Byers’ fears evaporated as she was greeted with “open arms and smiling faces,” she says. The company supported her throughout her transition journey, which was especially consequential during a difficult post-surgery recovery.

“Associated has been there for me through every struggle and every success and assured me that I would have the time and space to take care of any post-op requirements I would need to fulfill,” she says.

Coming out at work can be formidable. But breaking through that pivotal moment carries a payload of fulfillment for both the individual and the organization, measured in well-being, productivity and retention.

“It’s truly liberating to be out at work—to be myself,” says Natasha Getler-Porizkova, brand inclusion leader at LivingHR, an HR services firm in Tampa, Fla. “If you work at an organization that does not approve of or is not accepting of you being out, then you’re in the wrong place. There are a lot of organizations that create safe spaces for LGBTQ employees and will accept you with open arms.” —R.M.

Kibben says what often keeps LGBTQ people in the closet is “the perception that these dimensions will make it harder for people to love us. I was silenced by choice. For my safety, for my mental health, I tried my best simply to pass, to pretend to be whatever people thought I was.”

Kibben still has a nagging fear in the back of their mind that people may not like them because of who they are. “I constantly worry,” they say. “I wonder if I’ll be safe every day. I wonder if a stranger can know all of me and still care about me.”

Coming out is especially challenging for junior employees, transgender workers and women, according to research conducted by management consulting and research firm McKinsey & Co. since 2020.

“For employees below the level of senior manager, it feels like a riskier proposition to come out if the organization has not made them feel absolutely confident that it is safe and career-friendly to be out,” says Diana Ellsworth, McKinsey’s diversity, equity and inclusion work leader in Atlanta. “With less of a track record of career success, they may be particularly attuned to not do anything that is perceived as career-damaging.”

At age 18, Bryce Celotto came out as transgender before starting work at a nonprofit in Washington, D.C., in 2011. Now the founder of Swarm Strategy in Charlotte, N.C., a company focused on justice, equity, diversity and inclusion, he explains that the challenge for junior employees in today’s work environment is usually not fear of acceptance among peers, but whether their employer will support them.

“Junior workers are thinking, ‘Will my manager have my back?’” he says. “The systems and structures that exist in workplaces, especially in more corporate settings, may make junior workers feel they have to prove themselves more or that it’s harder to get recognition, and if they come out, they may be treated differently or may not get the best projects or won’t get the respect they deserve.”

Ellsworth adds that for women, “who already potentially face certain microaggressions or more-explicit discrimination, layering on another dimension of diversity, like being gay, is likely influencing whether to make themselves known in that way.”



“There is a hesitation that coming out at work may tokenize you,” Natasha Getler-Porizkova says, “like being gay becomes your defining characteristic.”

**MORE
THAN
1 IN 4**
LGBTQ
employees
are not
broadly out
at work,
according
to McKinsey
research.
Nearly half of
respondents
reported
having to
come out at
work at least
once a week.
About 1 in 5
had to come
out multiple
times a week,
and 1 in 10
had to come
out daily.

Natasha Getler-Porizkova didn't feel intentionally closeted in 2017 at her first corporate job as a digital marketing coordinator at the AT&T Performing Arts Center in Dallas. But at 22 years old and as the new employee at the bottom of the organizational chart, she was reticent to talk about her personal life.

"There is a hesitation that coming out at work may tokenize you, like being gay becomes your defining characteristic," she says. After six months on the job, she was brainstorming with her team about ways to promote an upcoming musical about a young lesbian discovering her sexuality. "I threw out several ways to reach the target market—the lesbian community—and someone teased, 'Natasha, are you trying to tell us something?' In that moment, on the spot, I felt uncomfortable, with all eyes on me, but I answered, 'Yes. I date women.'"

Getler-Porizkova, now happily married, has been proudly out in her professional life ever since, and currently works to unify digital marketing with diversity, equity and inclusion advocacy.

AN ONGOING PROCESS

McKinsey also found that transgender employees feel less consistently that they can be their authentic selves at work, compared with others in the LGBTQ community. Trans employees are less likely to be out at work, and they feel less safe and more excluded and discriminated against than their cisgender gay and straight colleagues, research shows.

According to the HRC, the main reasons for not being out at work include fear of bullying and discrimination, fear of being stereotyped or tokenized, not wanting to make others uncomfortable, and concerns over losing relationships and career advancement opportunities.

"Members of the LGBTQ community experience a set of microaggressions more frequently than others do," Ellsworth says. "Examples include being asked to be

a representative for a group of people like them, hearing derogatory comments or jokes about people like them, and needing to correct others' assumptions about their personal lives."

Some company policies can also be overtly exclusionary, such as not offering transgender-inclusive health care coverage or not offering parental leave for adoption.

Another cross to bear for LGBTQ employees is the necessity to come out repeatedly. Nearly half of the respondents in the McKinsey research reported having to come out at work at least once a week, 20 percent felt they had to come out multiple times a week, and 10 percent said they had to come out daily.

"People need to understand that coming out is an ongoing process," says Brian McComak, founder and CEO of Hummingbird Humanity, a New York City-based consulting firm that cultivates inclusive workplace cultures and leadership. "It is not a one-time event but is repeated many times throughout a career, sometimes several times a day. It's something that those of us who have an invisible story to tell make a choice about sharing with each new employer, each new colleague, client or customer we meet. It's exhausting to pretend to be someone you're not."

The decisive moment is often driven by casual conversation, Ellsworth says. "I must decide on the spot when someone asks, 'What did you do over the weekend?' whether to include my wife in my response or not. It is psychologically draining to be constantly coming out."

McComak first came out at 21 years old in a service-industry job but went back in the closet when he entered the corporate world as an HR professional a few years later. "At lunch on my first day, someone asked me if I had a girlfriend. A simple question, but it sparked a series of internal deliberations: Is it safe to come out? Will they accept me? Will it affect my job? I chose to say 'no,' but kept the truth hidden."



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Brian McComak first came out at age 21 in a service-industry job but briefly went back in the closet when he entered the corporate world a few years later.

He did come out a week later, after his new manager casually mentioned his husband. “‘Wow,’” McComak thought. “‘He just came out to *me*.’ Feeling safe to do so, I came out to him.”

Kibben tried coming out at one job where they felt safe, but it felt awkward because colleagues assumed the “Stacy” they mentioned they were dating was a man. So they stayed hidden overall, and instead started to come out slowly to closer friends at the company.

“People started to meet my partner and know that she was a woman,” Kibben says. “And it wasn’t an issue. They were incredible. It was my own assumptions that made me not

feel safe. And that’s how it usually happens. It often isn’t blatant harassment; it’s people assuming pronouns or gendering your anniversary card. It’s a million signs that tell you that they want you to be the way they think you are. And as humans, we’re built to want to fit in, especially at work.”

At their next job, Kibben decided to come out on the first day. “Very casually, I just mentioned ‘my girlfriend’ and waited for a reaction,” they say. “Counting the seconds, holding my breath—and my manager was very welcoming. I later got married while I was there, and the company threw me a wedding shower.” →

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HR'S RESPONSIBILITY

Tony Vincent, senior manager of global partner strategy at Splunk, a data-sharing platform based in San Francisco, was able to navigate his career while hiding who he was for 15 years before he decided to come out. "I was constantly in protective mode," he says. "That part of my brain was always on alert when interacting with colleagues."

At age 37, during the hiring process with a previous employer in Arlington, Va., Vincent decided he'd had enough. "What drove me in that moment was that I fundamentally got tired of having to hide who I was. I got tired of constantly dropping or changing pronouns. Instead of saying 'he and I,' I would say 'we' or 'I.'"

As part of the benefits negotiations, Vincent asked for medical coverage for his partner. The company, a managed security services provider, agreed to create a work-around to do so, even though domestic partner benefits policies were illegal in the state at the time.

"These stories underscore the importance of organizations to make really clear that coming out is not only baseline safe but welcomed, encouraged and celebrated," Ellsworth says. "If people are coming out on a daily or weekly basis, it is incumbent on the organization to help reduce that anxiety. When employers create a welcoming environment, they are not only enabling their employees to come out once, but they are also reducing the burden on their repeated coming-out experiences."

Representation and visibility are powerful drivers of broader acceptance, and HR has a unique, compelling relationship with both employees and the organization. Because of its position, many LGBTQ advocates believe HR should go beyond its duty to create a safe, supportive environment for employees to come out at work—and be real models of change.

"If you're an HR professional who is LGBTQ and it is safe to do so, I would encourage you to be out at work," Nally says. "Being out at work can help others feel seen and heard—not only that they will be accepted, but that they can also be successful. Being out is a powerful accelerant to achieving diversity and inclusion."

Kelaidis agrees that visibility is important



'If you're an HR professional who is LGBTQ and it is safe to do so, I would encourage you to be out at work. ... Being out is a powerful accelerant to achieving diversity and inclusion.'

JEFF NALLY, SHRM-SCP

because people who are closeted may be wondering if it's safe to come out. "Being out has led to me feeling more empowered to try and create more visibility and communication and to bring the issue out into the open and be a face for it."

Vincent felt this higher motivation when he came out more than 20 years ago. "I realized that yes, coming out would relieve me of the terrible stress I'd been carrying around for years," he says, "but I also was aware that it was the only way forward for my community. Acceptance for all begins with people like me coming out." [IR](#)

Roy Maurer is an online writer/editor for SHRM who focuses on talent acquisition and labor markets.

**NEARLY
40%**

of all McKinsey survey respondents said they had rejected a job offer or decided not to pursue a position because they felt that the hiring company was not inclusive.



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MANAGING PEOPLE

ADDRESSING JOB INSECURITY

How managers can help employees cope with layoff fears.

By Lisa Rabasca Roepe

Earlier this year, companies were scrambling to hire enough employees to fill open positions. Now, with concerns that a recession may be near, many of these same organizations are considering staff layoffs.

Companies in the financial technology and cryptocurrency sectors are rescinding employment offers, and some organizations, including Tesla, JPMorgan Chase, Netflix, Peloton, Redfin, Re/Max, Shopify and Coinbase, have announced plans to reduce their workforces.

Experts are expecting layoffs to bleed into other industries. In fact, a PwC survey of 722 U.S. executives in August found that 50 percent of respondents were planning staff reductions.

“Headlines can cause anxiety in the workforce as people see, in real time, cost increases and layoffs,” says Bjorn Reynolds, CEO of Safeguard Global, a payroll platform based in Austin, Texas. Although companies are continuing to add talent each month, employees may become increasingly concerned if they keep hearing and reading about a possible recession, he notes.

Rumors of potential layoffs tend to rattle employees and can impact productivity, even if they aren’t true. Almost 80 percent of U.S. workers fear they will lose their jobs if there’s a recession, according to a June survey of more than 1,000 employees conducted by staffing firm Insight Global. A separate June survey of more than 1,000 employees conducted by software firm ResumeLab

found that 58 percent of respondents believed they would lose their jobs this year.

“Rumors are often more damaging than layoffs themselves, and this is especially true in organizations where there have been layoffs in the past,” says Danielle Beauparlant Moser, an executive consultant with ManpowerGroup Talent Solutions in Raleigh, N.C.

Layoff rumors can impact workers’ ability to trust management, says Melanie Peacock, SHRM-SCP, associate professor of human resources at Mount Royal University’s Bissett School of Business in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. “Rumors signal that employees aren’t trusting their managers, so they create their own stories and truths.”

Here are six ways people managers can respond to employees’ layoff fears.

ACKNOWLEDGE WORKERS’ ANXIETIES

A potential layoff is just one of many concerns employees have right now. Workers are worried about inflation; the increased cost of living; and illnesses such as COVID-19, monkeypox and even polio.

“It’s important to acknowledge their challenges and find ways to support staff,” Reynolds says.

Karla J. Shugart, SHRM-SCP, knows firsthand how failure to address workers’ concerns can have a negative impact on staff. Shugart worked in HR at two different universities during the 1990s. During her tenure at each



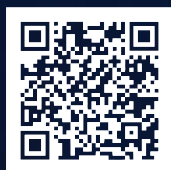
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school, concerns about staff downsizings surfaced. The universities handled these situations very differently, says Shugart, now senior director of associate experience for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma in Durant. One approach was better received than the other.

The Florida university where she worked held weekly meetings, during which staff could ask questions and HR openly shared information. “There were very few rumors or speculation, and employees appeared to be calm and not frightened,” she recalls.

In contrast, the HR director at the Washington state university where she worked didn’t want to hold staff meetings until HR had all the information about the pending staff reductions. This approach caused rampant rumors and distrust, Shugart says.

“The perception was that HR knew what was going on but wasn’t providing information, so everyone assumed that whatever was happening was bad,” she says.

BE TRANSPARENT

Often, employees have no idea if their company is financially stable because leaders don’t share such information, according to Jill Santopietro Panall, SHRM-SCP, owner of 21Oak HR Consulting in Newburyport, Mass.

“Management doesn’t have to open the entire ledger to everyone, but they need to give employees a good sense of the overall financial picture so they know if their fears are accurate,” she says. Be honest and let staff know whether the company is expected to have a successful year or if difficult times are ahead, Panall advises.

If business returns are solid, Reynolds similarly recommends letting employees know about the company’s strong position in the marketplace.

When staff reduction rumors are unfounded, managers should ask senior leaders to send an e-mail letting workers know layoffs aren’t being planned, Peacock says.

However, leaders shouldn’t promise that there will never be layoffs.

“No one can ever promise that, and you could inadvertently create a legal obligation,” she says.

Further, managers should avoid telling staff that it’s “just a rumor” without first checking with senior leaders and HR because if the company does end up laying off staff, employees’ trust in the company and in management will erode even further, Peacock says.

MAINTAIN COMPOSURE

Remember that the manager sets the tone, so be careful not to show panic, Panall says.

“If you, as a manager, don’t know what’s going on with the bigger picture, you need to find out,” she notes.

If layoffs are, in fact, planned, Peacock recommends talking with senior leaders about

acknowledging workers’ concerns in an e-mail that recognizes staff reductions are a likely outcome. The e-mail should provide a timeline as well as information about the assistance the company will provide, such as severance pay or career counseling services to those who lose their jobs, she says.

PROMOTE CROSS-TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Despite fears of a recession and possible layoffs, some companies still say they can’t hire enough people or keep up with demand for certain goods. Managers can help shift employees into much-needed positions by advocating for cross-training, Moser says.

“It’s cheaper to redeploy existing staff than to find new talent,” she notes.

If senior leaders are open to it, let staff know of the plans, Moser says. Then find out what skills employees are interested in learning and give them stretch assignments that connect them with other departments.

HIGHLIGHT WHAT EMPLOYEES CAN CONTROL

Remind staff that it’s wise to always have an updated resume and LinkedIn profile and to maintain a professional network, says Nancy Halpern, leadership coach and founder of Political IQ, a New York City-based consulting firm that diagnoses political dysfunction in organizations. If staff reductions are planned, help workers see the possibility of a layoff as a bump in the road of a long career, remind them that there will be other opportunities and provide job-search help if possible.

“Be as honest as you can be, and let your staff know you care about them and their careers,” Moser says.

ACKNOWLEDGE ANY LAYOFFS

When a layoff occurs, managers often don’t address with their direct reports what happened. Even if only one person was let go, it’s important to acknowledge the individual’s contributions and that the team is smaller, Peacock says. Just be sure to consult senior leaders and HR first to understand what information you are allowed to share and to ensure your communications are aligned.

“The people left behind often have survivor syndrome,” Peacock says.

Do they seem depressed or worried? If so, consider meeting with staff individually to ask broad questions, such as whether they have any concerns about their workload or if they’re worried about what’s happening with the company, she advises.

“When staff is laid off,” Peacock says, “you can’t ignore it and think that people won’t notice.” [IR](#)



Lisa Rabasca Roepe is a freelance writer in the Washington, D.C., area.

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YOUR CAREER

IS GOING BACK TO SCHOOL WORTH IT?

Most HR jobs don't require more than a bachelor's degree. But that doesn't mean you won't benefit from additional education.

By Rita Zeidner

Bob Oberstein was in his late 60s when he decided to go back to school. After working in labor relations for more than 40 years, Oberstein realized he needed more training to fulfill his dream of starting a business that would help others settle workplace disputes.

To shore up his knowledge of workplace rules, he enrolled in Tulane University's online Master of Jurisprudence in Labor and Employment Law program. After receiving his diploma in 2020, he hung out his shingle as an independent arbitrator, mediator and workplace investigator.

"I have lots of friends who moved to Florida to retire, but that wasn't for me," says Oberstein, who is now 73 and runs his business out of his home in Edmonds, Wash. "I plan to work for as long as my health holds out. This is Act 2 of my career."

Most HR-related jobs don't require education beyond a bachelor's degree, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. But that doesn't mean you won't benefit from going back to school. Regardless of where you are in your career, expanding your knowledge in areas such as HR analytics, workplace law and emerging technology will make you better at your job and may help you land a more desirable position.

But which path is right for you? Here are the stories of several HR professionals who dramatically improved their career prospects by earning an additional degree or credential.

MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMS

For anyone wishing to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to



become an HR leader, particularly in a large organization, there may be a case to be made for earning a master's degree in HR, business or a combination of the two. Curricula for these programs typically include courses in finance and accounting, as well as data analysis, human capital management and organizational strategy.

There also are several law-related master's programs like Tulane's that may be useful to HR professionals who want to specialize in workplace compliance or labor-management relations, even though these degrees

don't qualify graduates to give legal advice or practice law.

Most master's programs take two to four years to complete and can cost anywhere from \$20,000 to \$200,000, depending on the school, the type of program, and whether the courses are taught in person or online. Programs with online courses tend to be more affordable than in-person programs and are less likely to require an entrance exam. The only entrance requirement for many online master's programs, besides the ability to pay tuition, is a bachelor's degree. →

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But given that master's degrees are rarely required for a career in human resources, perceptions of their value vary widely.

Oberstein maintains that earning his degree was instrumental in getting his business off the ground. Besides expanding his expertise, he says, it has helped to allay the concerns of potential clients who might otherwise worry that he's biased in favor of labor or management. The degree, he says, "lends to the parties' perception of credibility."

In some industries, having a master's degree is the cultural norm, even if it's not technically a job requirement.

Kris Greening had worked in HR for 15 years and held a senior HR professional certification when she was hired to head the HR department of a community college in Arkansas. Still, she quickly realized she would need a postgraduate degree to be taken seriously by her colleagues in academia.

"Most high-level administrators and almost all faculty have graduate degrees," she says. "To be seen as an equal, it was beneficial to me" to complete a master's degree program.

Greening used benefits available to her as the spouse of a military veteran to help cover the tuition for a Master of Business Administration degree through Capella University's online program. Lessons learned through the coursework, she says, made her a more valuable member of the college's management team. And she recouped some of her out-of-pocket costs when she received a raise of several thousand



dollars per year after completing her degree.

The MBA also opened the door for Greening to teach college classes, which she finds fun and which provides an additional income stream.

Not all employers are impressed by master's degrees, however. Melanie

MAKING THE RIGHT DECISION

Considering a return to school? Here are five tips to help you figure out your next steps:

Define your goals. Think hard about your career goals and whether you actually need more schooling to accomplish them. Are there other ways to acquire the knowledge or skills, such as working in a different department in your organization, switching jobs or volunteering? Get input from colleagues, your supervisor and instructors to find out which path is right for you.

Talk to recent graduates. Seek proof that any program you're considering is worth the time commitment and financial investment. Ask administrators at any schools you have your eye on to put you in touch with recent graduates who can talk specifically about what they got out of the program, particularly in terms of pay increases and expanded opportunities.

Compare costs versus benefits. Look closely at how long it will take to recoup the cost of your schooling. Is a degree that costs \$50,000 worthwhile if it will bump your annual pay by only \$5,000? Are there other benefits of the program that help justify the cost? If not, it may not be a wise investment.

Be mindful of your career level. Make sure any program you consider is appropriate for where you are in your career. If you are a midcareer professional, you'll want to avoid programs designed for people right out of college. Likewise, don't choose a program geared toward midlevel managers if you're just starting out.

Ask your employer to help pay. You may not have to finance your continuing education entirely out of your own pocket. Many employers have education assistance programs and will cover all or part of your tuition, even if the classes aren't related to your current job. If your organization doesn't have a formal assistance program, present a convincing business case for why your employer should invest in your schooling. —R.Z.

Shong Helm, director of HR for Crown Health Care Laundry Services LLC, an 1,800-employee commercial linens company in Pensacola, Fla., says she has been underwhelmed by some of the job applicants with newly minted master's degrees who have applied for HR jobs in her shop.

Some candidates assumed, incor-

'Most high-level administrators and almost all faculty have graduate degrees. To be seen as an equal, it was beneficial to me.'

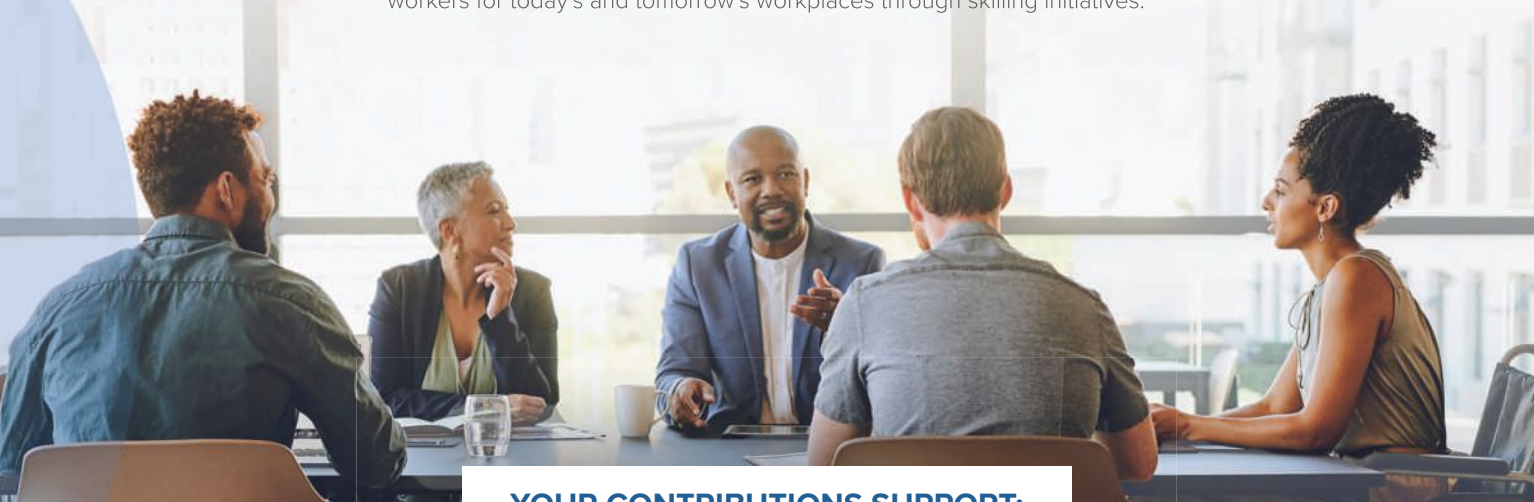
KRIS GREENING



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‘My career was stalled in middle management prior to taking these courses. I’m now in a senior leadership position where the CEO considers me his business partner.’

ANN PICCIRILLO



rectly, that their postgraduate degree automatically qualified them for middle-management jobs and the pay that goes with them. But some degree-holders didn’t make it past the first interview because they couldn’t answer basic questions about Title VII or the Fair Labor Standards Act.

“Master’s [degrees] are a dime a dozen and not worth the investment,” Helm says. “If you want more training, get a certificate.”

SKILLED CREDENTIALS

Earning a professional certificate can be a relatively quick and affordable way for HR professionals to boost their skills. This option generally requires taking a few short classes and, in some instances, passing an exam or completing a project. Costs for a certificate in an HR-related field generally top out at about \$3,000.

About one-third of human resource professionals have earned certifications offered through the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and other HR-related organizations, according to a survey by Payscale that found a link between HR certification and higher pay. The size of the pay bump, however, varied depending on the credential, industry, work location and job level.

Some HR professionals say they have benefited from earning certificates with a broader business focus.

Hoping to land an executive-level HR position, Ann Piccirillo enrolled in Harvard Business School’s online leadership certificate course in 2021 and is now working toward a certificate in business strategy from

the school. She started getting calls from recruiters once she added her certificate and coursework to her LinkedIn profile, and she believes having the certificate led to an offer for a position in the C-suite at a New Jersey-based outsourcing firm.

“My career was stalled in middle management prior to taking these courses,” Piccirillo says. “I’m now in a senior leadership position where the CEO considers me his business partner.”

But some people hoping their certificate will wow a future employer may be disappointed. While many prestigious schools, including Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Virginia, market this option as an affordable, timesaving way for professionals to build their skill sets, some employers have been slow to embrace certificates and other skilled credentials, according to recent SHRM research.

Job seekers holding a professional certificate may also come up against a technical obstacle since the automated applicant tracking systems many employers rely on to screen candidates don’t always recognize credentials, though vendors of these systems say that barrier is being addressed.

A LAW DEGREE

To practice law, you must go to law school. The majority of lawyers get their degrees studying full time for three years after completing their undergraduate studies, although a four-year night school program also is an option.


A law degree requires a lofty financial investment. In 2021, the average cost of law school was \$205,744, including nearly \$46,000 for annual tuition alone, according to the Education Data Initiative. Meanwhile, the average annual salary for an employment lawyer is about \$93,000, according to Salary.com.

Christine Walters, SHRM-SCP, says she “fell in love” with the HR profession in college and held several HR jobs after graduating. But a law degree was the ticket to the kind of labor and employment work that really interested her. After passing the bar exam in the mid-1990s, she ran a sexual-harassment-prevention program at Johns Hopkins University and taught college-level HR classes.

For the past 20 years, she has headed up her own HR consultancy in Maryland, helping employers avoid HR-related problems and providing legal assistance when things do go wrong. She also has written a book for managers on maintaining positive employee relations.

“The law degree has opened up all sorts of opportunities in HR,” Walters says.

Tuition costs have soared since Walters attended law school. But even back then, she worked two jobs after passing the bar to help pay off her student loans.

“I didn’t see it as a sacrifice,” she says, “because I was doing what I wanted to do.” 

Rita Zeidner is a freelance writer in Falls Church, Va.



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DATA WATCH

IS QUIET QUITTING REALLY HAPPENING?

Yes, and HR should respond by focusing on people managers.

By Alexander Alonso, SHRM-SCP

It does not matter who you are. If you are in the world of work, talent issues have hit you from all angles and with a ferocity never before encountered—or, at least, that's what people would have you believe.

Today's labor market, like the weather, is often described in extreme terms. I recently learned from Andrew Siffert, senior meteorologist for global insurance broker BMS Group, that his research shows two facts: First, ecological changes have resulted in more-frequent weather anomalies, and second, our perception of these anomalies has increased as words like “catastrophe” and “disaster” have become part of the news cycle.

Over the past two years, numerous reportedly alarming workplace issues have developed. For instance, the Great Resignation morphed into the Great Reshuffle and then the Great Regret. And recently, the era of quiet quitting was described by many pundits as a new workplace problem, while others said we were just putting a new label on the old issue of disengagement. I knew only one source could provide clarity: HR professionals.

In mid-August 2022, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) conducted a survey of 1,200 HR professionals with the aim of understanding quiet quitting in numerous workplaces. Here is what the survey found:

- **Quiet quitting is real.** Fifty-one percent of human resource professionals indicated that quiet quitting was a concern, with approximately 36 percent of those

surveyed saying it was actively occurring in their workplaces.

- **Culture is a problem.** When asked why quiet quitting was happening, 60 percent of respondents whose organizations were experiencing it pointed to the post-pandemic culture. Two hypotheses were shared by these HR professionals regarding the cause of their cultural problems: diminished people management capabilities and an inability to maintain culture in a virtual environment.
- **Younger workers are at risk.** The survey found that 72 percent of HR professionals had witnessed quiet quitting among younger workers, with hourly workers being the most likely group to exhibit behaviors associated with quiet quitting.

None of these findings surprised me. But there was something that astonished me: 28 percent of HR professionals are witnessing quiet quitting from front-line people managers. This is a new wrinkle in the war for talent, as it underscores the value of people managers remaining engaged.

Too often, we focus talent efforts on hiring individual contributors and arming departments with the best assets. But what happens if people managers start quitting quietly—or noisily? Most HR professionals

28% of HR professionals said they have witnessed quiet quitting among front-line people managers.

Source: Voice of Work Research Panel survey, SHRM, August 2022.

do not have a plan for this. That is because people management has been overlooked in the pandemic. Organizations are not focusing on this MVP level of talent, but doing so would provide the biggest bang for their buck.

My take? Quiet quitting is real, and quiet quitting among managers is particularly problematic. HR practitioners should focus their efforts on this key workforce demographic. People managers are the instrument of culture, and culture cannot survive without talented people managers.

In the spirit of not-so-quiet quitting, I am stepping away as the author of this Data Watch column to focus on books and research. I want to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my thoughts

over the past several years. Hopefully, I helped make SHRM your go-to resource for all things work. [HR](#)

Alexander Alonso, SHRM-SCP, is chief knowledge officer for SHRM.





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For more data and details, visit shrm.co/tfaw-winter22



*Source: Workplace Culture Supplemental Research, SHRM, 2021.

THARSEO AWARD WINNERS ANNOUNCED



The SHRM Foundation has announced the winners of its second annual Tharseo Awards, which recognize business leaders and others who are boldly changing the workplace and the world.

The name of the awards program comes from the Greek word meaning “courageous, confident and bold.” The program highlights leaders who are at the forefront of innovating and shaping the work experience. This year’s awards and recipients are listed below.

CEO of the Year: Bob Chapman, chairman and chief executive officer of Barry-Wehmiller, a St. Louis-based global industrial equipment and engineering solutions company.



Bob Chapman

Chapman transformed Barry-Wehmiller using a unique blend of strategy and culture called Truly Human Leadership. Today, Barry-Wehmiller is a thriving \$3.5 billion organization of 12,000

team members who experience a caring culture and do meaningful work that honors their dignity and unique talents. Chapman has also launched a nonprofit that offers empathetic listening training to communities, a consulting business to transform organizational cultures and leadership approaches, and numerous initiatives with K-12 schools and business schools to teach Truly Human Leadership skills to young people—tomorrow’s business leaders.

Policy Transformer of the Year (awarded posthumously): The late U.S. Rep. Jackie Walorski, R-Ind.

Walorski served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 2012 until her death in a car crash in August. While serving as a House Ways and Means Committee member, Walorski helped introduce bills that supported workers and Americans with disabilities during the COVID-19



Jackie Walorski

pandemic. Throughout her career, she championed legislation to increase access to mental health services and better support Americans with caregiving responsibilities.

Ram Charan HR Innovation

Award: Kausik Rajgopal, executive vice president for people and sourcing at PayPal, based in San Jose, Calif.

Rajgopal leads PayPal’s HR, procurement and real estate teams and oversees strategies on global workforce planning, spending/supplier relationships and PayPal’s approach to real estate future-of-work initiatives. He brings a unique blend of expertise in human resources, technology and payments. Before joining PayPal, Rajgopal was a senior partner at McKinsey & Co., leading its HR, procurement and other functions for global companies in various industries and sectors.



Kausik Rajgopal

 [Learn more at tharseo.shrm.org](https://tharseo.shrm.org)

SHRM ACQUIRES LINKAGE INC., CEO ACADEMY



SHRM has acquired Linkage Inc., a global leadership development company committed to advancing women and accelerating the use of inclusive practices by leaders and organizations.

SHRM also has purchased CEO Academy, a high-level intensive learning and networking experience for CEOs.

Both additions demonstrate SHRM’s commitment to leadership development and position the Society as the go-to global organization for all things work, workers and the workplace, says Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP, SHRM president and chief executive officer.

For more than 30 years, Boston-based Linkage has been changing the face of leadership by impacting organizational effectiveness and equity. SHRM members will gain access to a highly credible partner with research-based leadership development programming designed to solve organizations’ talent challenges,

including how to retain and advance female leaders and how to develop inclusive leaders and cultures.

“Linkage brings with them best-in-class learning experiences from facilitators, coaches and consultants, along with tools for immediate application, resulting in measurable impact on their leaders and businesses,” Taylor says.

Similarly, the acquisition of CEO Academy will allow SHRM to provide more resources and tools to business executives, which will enable their organizations to excel and to optimize the CEO/CHRO relationship.

CEO Academy offers two-day programs delivered in close partnership with the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and McKinsey & Co. In its 22nd year, the academy attracts some of the most successful chief executives and board leaders in the country.



SHRM EDITORIAL STAFF RECOGNIZED

The SHRM editorial team won several national awards for its work this year.

The articles and awards include:

- “A Sense of Belonging,” by Theresa Agovino and Andrew Deichler. Published in the summer 2021 issue of *HR Magazine*, the feature article on transgender employees won a gold Excel award from the Software & Information Industry Association as the nation’s best feature article on diversity and inclusion.
- “The Color of Money,” by Michael A. Tucker and Lisa Nagele-Piazza. The feature article on pay equity, which appeared in the spring 2021 issue of *HR Magazine*, won a Dateline award in the business category from the Washington, D.C., chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists.
- “Asian-Americans Seek More Respect, Authority in the Workplace,” by Theresa Agovino. The June 2021 feature article in the *All Things Work* e-newsletter won a Dateline award in the newsletter feature category.
- *All Things Work*, a weekly e-newsletter from *HR Magazine*, won “Best Association Newsletter” awards from Trade, Association and Business Publications International and Association Trends.
- *HR Magazine* was recognized with an APEX Award as the nation’s best association magazine by Communication Concepts.

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STUDENT CHAPTER ADVISOR HONORED

Michele Swift, Ph.D., SHRM-SCP, faculty advisor of SHRM's student chapter at Oregon State University (OSU) in Eugene, Ore., is the winner of the 2022 Student Chapter Advisor Impact Award from the SHRM Foundation.



Swift is a senior instructor and assistant school head for management, entrepreneurship and supply chain in OSU's College of Business. She teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in HR management.

As the chapter's faculty advisor since 2017, Swift increased SHRM membership and conference attendance among students and obtained college funding to help seven students attend the SHRM Annual Conference & Expo 2021. She also invited HR professionals to speak at chapter meetings, arranged resume workshops, organized a student conference, helped students network, and provided them with job leads and references.

Swift also serves as college relations director for the Northwest Human Resource Management Association, a SHRM professional chapter for which she oversees the planning of the HR Leaders of Tomorrow student conference. In addition, she volunteers in a college relations capacity for the Lane County HR Association, a SHRM chapter in Eugene.

Swift received a \$1,000 cash award and \$1,000 toward travel and housing for the SHRM Annual Conference & Expo 2022, as well as complimentary conference registration.

Swift received her doctorate in business administration from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Prior to entering academia, she worked in HR and HR systems consulting for more than 10 years.



LISTEN UP

Whether you listen on your commute, while you exercise or just when you need time to unwind, SHRM podcasts deliver HR ideas and insights in an entertaining way.

In SHRM's latest series, HR Storytellers, leaders from the world of HR share their stories about an event or a conversation that made a difference in their careers.

Other podcast programs available from SHRM include the following:

- *Honest HR* offers interviews with HR professionals on how they are overcoming challenges in their work and helping their companies thrive.
- *People + Strategy*, from the SHRM Executive Network, delivers in-depth conversations with CHROs and other HR leaders.
- *All Things Work* features conversations with a wide range of experts who focus in each episode on a single compelling topic impacting the world of work.

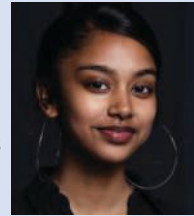
SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS NAMED

The SHRM Foundation announced the winners of the new Cheslie C. Kryst Memorial Scholarship, which recognizes HR students who demonstrate a commitment to mental health and well-being in the workplace.

Scholarship winners receive \$10,000 each. The scholarship is funded by ManpowerGroup.

The winners are:

Maria Sharmin, a junior majoring in HR management at Temple University in Philadelphia. As an intern at the Free Library of Philadelphia, Sharmin hosted Zoom self-care workshops for immigrants to boost mental health awareness. After graduation, she wants to become a diversity, equity and inclusion manager.



Melissa Weiner, who is in the second year of her master's program in strategic HR management at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. As an undergraduate, Weiner served as a wellness coordinator for her sorority and volunteered with Girls Inc.'s after-school program. She currently works as an HR specialist at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's diversity, outreach and employee services division in Washington, D.C. She also is an active fundraiser for the Washington, D.C., chapter of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

The scholarship is named for Kryst, an attorney, former Miss USA, SHRM speaker and friend of SHRM who died by suicide in January at age 30.



Learn more about scholarship opportunities at shrmfoundation.org



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Simplify employment verifications - eliminate interruptions with QuickConfirm.



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All Data. All Employees. All Rewards. All Countries. One Platform.



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Pay, Schedule and Manage Hourly Workers Easily.



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MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

DARYL MUHAMMAD, SHRM-CP

HR business partner,
Spire Inc., St. Louis

When Daryl Muhammad was young, he had the seed of service to others planted in him by his father.

His dad was a public servant for East St. Louis, Ill., where he served as a precinct committeeman, city treasurer and head coach of his son's baseball team. Watching how his father supported, served and mentored others inspired Muhammad to get his bachelor's degree in psychology so he could help people by understanding their behaviors. He also developed an interest in business, so his college advisor introduced him to the field of industrial organizational psychology. That led to his career in human resources.

Muhammad's father died earlier this year, but that seed of service to others that was planted early on has taken root. In addition to serving the workforce at his company, Muhammad helps others in the profession as director of diversity for the Missouri State Council of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and as a member of SHRM's National Together Forward @Work Task Force.


WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR GREATEST CHALLENGE?

Pushing myself from the comfort of being an introvert in the background to being a leader in the forefront. The transformation came about 10 years ago when I was asked to present awards for a black-tie fundraiser for a previous employer. The experience was both gut-wrenching and liberating. From then on, I was able to propel myself into various leadership positions, speaking engagements and presentations.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY IN YOUR SPARE TIME?

My biggest joy is spending time with my wife and son. I am an avid Marvel Cinematic Universe fan, again inspired by my father, who introduced me to Marvel comics. Fitness is a big part of my life, particularly strength training, and studying VSK JiuJitsu.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE BUSINESS BOOK?

Stephen R. Covey's *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness* (Free Press, 2005). It focuses on empowering the individual with choice and helping them find their voice regardless of the situation or circumstance. This book is a continual reference for me in building trust and collaboration with all levels of employees. 

KEEP IT WEIRD!

In HR, we often say we want people to bring their authentic selves to work, but do we really mean it?

By Steve Browne, SHRM-SCP



My wife and I traveled to Austin, Texas, this past summer, where I was fortunate to be part of the Austin SHRM Annual Conference. We extended our trip so we could spend some time exploring the city.

Austin has a very cool vibe, and it felt like my kind of town. There was art and music everywhere. Murals adorned countless buildings, with styles ranging from traditional to modern to abstract. The music flowed freely through the air, and it changed with every step you took. You heard folk, rock, country and bluegrass all combining to create a symphony of eclectic tunes that provided a soundtrack as you toured the various neighborhoods.

As we wandered into our first small, local shop, a drink coaster quickly caught my attention and I picked it up without hesitation. It wasn't only the tie-dye pattern that was eye-catching. (Anyone who knows me well knows that would have been enough!) The message also resonated with me the moment I read it.

It was an instant purchase.

You see, one of Austin's slogans as a city is "Keep Austin Weird." It's everywhere you look. A friend who is a resident of the city told me the slogan came about as local shops fought to keep big-box stores from coming in; the concern was that these stores would crimp the cool Austin culture and drive the smaller competitors out of business. The local shops won out, and the slogan stuck.

I feel this message can help with how we practice HR. We often say we want people to bring their whole selves to work, but we don't really mean it. That may sound harsh, but if you step back and review the ma-

jority of the actions that HR takes, the function is not built to encourage individuality. If someone were trying to "keep things weird," we would probably attempt to get them back into the fold. We tend to view those who express themselves openly as people we have to "deal with."

This has to stop. We need to understand that every person is wonderfully different and unique. They have their weird already wired in. It's not something they create; it's how they live. Weird doesn't mean abhorrent behavior. We've made this assumption for far too

long, and it has never been right. HR spends too much time trying to confine, control and conform, and it's exhausting.

I'd rather learn how each employee I work with is unique. I'd rather see how I could encourage all workers to amplify their strengths and see how their approach and perspectives bring new angles to the work we have in front of us.

I would also love to see HR embrace its own weirdness and breathe life, empathy, grace and a people-first approach into all we do. We have the chance to live this

mantra and move away from traditional approaches that are worn out.

The drink coaster I bought in Austin has taken its rightful place on my desk at work and serves as a visible reminder to embrace weirdness. What can you do in your work to "keep it weird"? [HR](#)

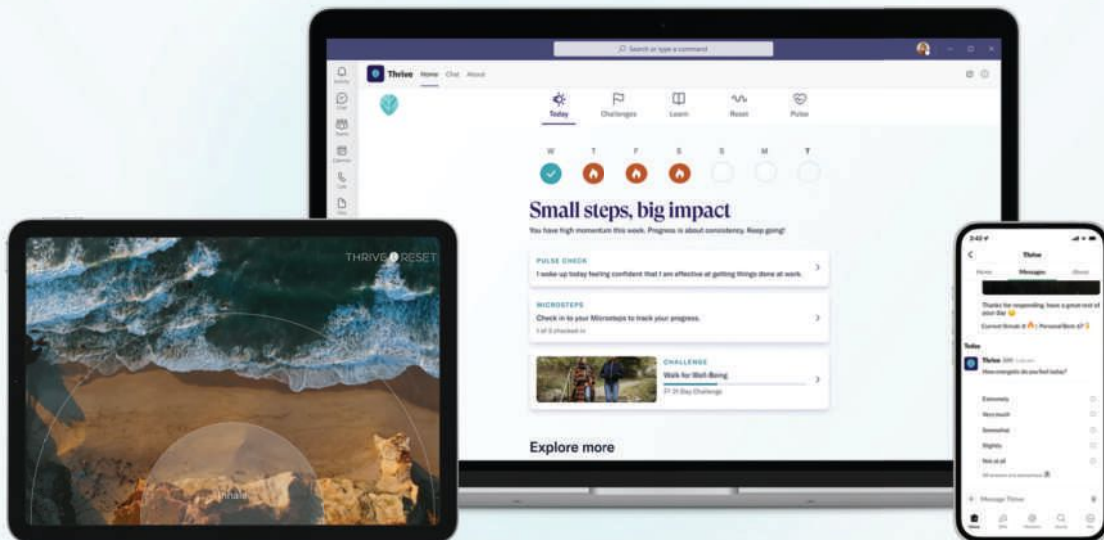
Steve Browne, SHRM-SCP, is chief people officer for LaRosa's Inc., a restaurant chain in Ohio and Indiana with 11 locations. The author of *HR Rising!!* (SHRM, 2020) and *HR on Purpose!!* (SHRM, 2017), he has been an HR professional for more than 30 years.





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less. Sound like your mother, less. Nag employees, less. Hand-hold,

less.  **Stare at blank performance review templates, less. Stay**

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 **Fill out**

forms, less.

deadline looms, less. Try to remember what employees did last

March, less. Be frustrated, less. Toss and turn, less.  **Scramble**

at the last minute,  **less. Smile through the pain, less. Hold**

your tongue, less. Smh, less. Avoid conflicts, less. Draw blanks,

less. Get unhappy calendar alerts, less. Wait till the very, very last

minute,  **less. “Ummmm, yeah,” less. Manage toxicity, less.**

Feel undervalued, less. Performance review season is now painless.

Angst,

Have



taste in

way, way less.

less.

super tedious

Panic as the